



'Voices of' Franchise is a Trend

Publish Date:

December 2021

The fear the “Voices of” independents are striking into the Coalition can be measured by the [tone of the language](#) Scott Morrison has used to attack them. While in Queensland this week, he described them as “the voices of Labor” backed by “big financiers” from “down there in the southern states”.

That’s a lot of attention from the Prime Minister for an assortment of community activists who as yet have displayed a talent for getting publicity from sympathetic journalists but who have no policies to speak of.

In their own words, the “Voices of” independents [“want science-based Climate Action, Integrity in Politics, and Social and Economic Resilience”](#) (the capital letters are theirs). Which could mean anything. The Liberals, Labor, and the Greens could say exactly the same thing because they’re simply slogans.

The reality of these “grassroots” (as they call themselves) “Voices of” independents is somewhat different from how they present themselves.

As Vern Hughes, an acute observer of such activities has recently written in *The Spectator Australia*, far from being “a loose network of locally driven Independent candidates”, the “Voices of” movement is, in fact, a highly structured and organised “franchise” controlled by a small group of professionals possessing such a narrow range of social and occupational experiences they make the Liberals and Labor “look like ‘rainbow coalitions’ in comparison.

Nonetheless, the “Voices of” movement does pose a threat to the Liberal Party at next year’s federal poll and there are scenarios in which it could hold the balance of power after the election.

The Liberals, though, have a much bigger problem than just some independents targeting their seats at the 2022 federal election. Left-leaning independents will be a problem for the Liberals in [affluent electorates](#) with highly educated voters, not just at the next election, but at every election for the foreseeable future. The touchstone issue for these independents this time is supposedly “climate change”.

But at the election after the next it will be something else, and after that something else again. The issue is not the issue. And if the “Voices of” independents don’t run, there’ll be others calling themselves something equally ridiculous like the “Real People from” or the “Spirit Within” independents.

In Australia, such independents are a manifestation of long-term trends reshaping democratic politics around the world. Many have written about it, but one of the best descriptions of the phenomenon is by the French economist Thomas Piketty (of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* fame) and two academics in a research paper, *Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies, 1948-2020*, published in May this year. That work has been expanded into a book published this week, *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities*.

The original paper had more than 100 pages of statistical analysis, and *Political Cleavages* weighs in at 650 pages, but the argument is quite simple.

“In the 1950s-1960s, the vote for democratic, labor, socialist, social democratic, and other left-wing parties in Western democracies was ‘class-based’, in the sense that it was strongly associated with the lower-income and lower-educated electorate. It has gradually become associated with the higher-educated voters, giving rise in the 2010s to a remarkable divergence between the effects of income (economic capital) and education (human capital) on the vote: high-income elites continue to vote for the ‘right’, while high-education elites have shifted to supporting the ‘left’. This separation between a ‘Merchant right’ and a ‘Brahmin left’ is visible in nearly all Western democracies.”



Why this is happening is the subject of a great deal of debate, but the fact that it is happening is undeniable.

Piketty and his colleagues speculate that one of the explanations for better-educated voters turning left is “the increasing prevalence of identity politics” as material interests are outweighed by a commitment to personal values. Interestingly, they comment that “leftwing parties, which were once seen as defending greater equality of access to the education system, have increasingly been viewed as parties defending primarily the winners of the higher education game”.

The Liberals may succeed in holding off the “Voices of” independents at the next election. But for how long the Liberals can keep doing so is an open question. As is how long it will take for the Liberals to realise their once “heartland” inhabited by the wealthy and well-educated is now no longer their heartland.

Original Link:

<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/voices-of-franchise-is-a-trend-20211215-p59ho0>

Originally published in:

The Australian Financial Review