

## Foreign-born voters and their families helped elect Turnbull in 2016. Can they save ScoMo?

Written by Andrew Jakubowicz, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Technology Sydney

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At the 2016 federal election, a small but significant vote cast by foreign-born Australians and their families [helped elect the Liberal Party](#). The voters backed conservative minor parties in typically Labor-leaning electorates, and their preferences flowed to the Liberals.

Electoral pundits made little of this phenomenon at the time, and the media were not particularly interested. But in the wake of a similar [voting pattern in the same sex marriage plebiscite in 2017](#), the search is now on to find the elusive “ethnic vote”.

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## Who are these voters and where do they live?

The two largest collectives of non-English speaking groups are Chinese-Australians, and people from the Indian subcontinent including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. These “ethnic groups” are already multicultural, multilingual and politically diverse.

Mandarin remains the dominant Chinese language, followed by Cantonese, then other smaller groups – mainly from Malaysia and Indo-China. Among those from the subcontinent, Hindi still trumps Punjabi, and there are at least another four or five language groups, each with over 40,000 speakers.

Pockets of Chinese-Australians concentrated in key swing seats in NSW and Victoria were mainly responsible for the surprise outcomes in 2016. That included [Reid, Banks and Barton](#) in NSW, and Chisholm in Victoria. Three of the four went to the Liberals, but on demographic grounds and political trends at the time, all could have been delivered to Labor. (While Barton stayed Labor, the swing to the Liberals was significant.)

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In 2019, we could see a similar pattern emerge in these seats again, as well as in Moreton in QLD, Hotham in Victoria, and Parramatta, Greenway and Bennelong in NSW.

Australia has over 300 ancestries, 100 religions and 300 languages, so invoking a category like “ethnic” does not lead in a particular direction – especially given the divisions and diversity within cultural groups and language communities.

And this population diversity has been shifting as newer groups have accelerated their presence, and older groups have passed on. The foreign born population now have a growing number of Australian-born children, although many may not yet be able to vote.

### How are the parties targeting them?

The main ethnic communities lobby group, the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia ( [FECCA](#) ), has produced [a policy wish-list](#) and is seeking responses from the parties.

Among the majors, only the Greens have a [clearly articulated multicultural policy](#) , having put a [proposal for a Multiculturalism Act](#) with subsequent implementation and rights machinery to the Senate over a year ago.

The [ALP still sits on its hands on the legislative option](#) , possibly fearing that supporting such a move might trigger negative reactions from working class and more racist voters.

Their [policy](#) now includes a “body” named Multicultural Australia, with a string of commissioners across the country. It will probably come under Tony Burke as minister, focusing on citizenship and access issues. In this, it is a variant on the 1990s [Office of Multicultural Affairs](#) . This was once part of the Hawke/Keating prime minister’s office, but was abolished by John Howard as soon as he could.

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Labor has committed more funds for community language schools and criticised delays in processing citizenship applications, as well as the high level of English required to pass the test. Former Senator Sam Dastyari [has argued](#) that opening up parental reunion is a major offer to a range of ethnic groups needing older family members to do caring work. This move, as one of this author's informants said, would really "win the

[Desi](#)'s heart", and probably many other ethnic groups as well. The idea has prompted a [hostile response](#) from the Coalition.

While Liberal leader Scott Morrison reiterates the old Turnbull mantra of Australia being the most successful multicultural country, the government's lacklustre Multicultural Advisory Council no longer seems to have a web presence other than [one](#) which promotes integration and Australian values.

The [Liberals](#) propose a system of aged care "navigators" to help people with limited English survive the aged care system, while also injecting funds into start-up businesses run by migrants.

Conservative think-tank the Institute for Public Affairs retains as its second policy demand of any Liberal government [that Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act be abolished](#). The Liberals took this into 2013 and 2016; Morrison has said it's not on for 2019, though the right of the party is still committed.

### What role will they play in the election?

Ethnic communities are not necessarily either cohesive or unanimous in their political viewpoints, unless something particularly touches on their "ethnicity".

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Recent anti-Chinese sentiment reflected in [media headlines](#) about alleged corruption of Australian political parties by wealthy Chinese residents may be doing that among Chinese communities. Many Australian Chinese think that Labor is much more sensitive to these issues than the Coalition, and Liberal Party Chinese figures have voiced these concerns in public gatherings.

Although they can be very interested and involved in politics, [Chinese Australians have tended to hold back from active political engagement in the past](#)

. Indians, by contrast, bring some knowledge of English and, coming from a Westminster democratic system, tend to be more directly engaged – as party members for example. The Greens are particularly open to south Asian members; so, it seems, is the Christian Democratic Party (CDP).

While there are many conservative and religious parties across the country, only NSW has the CDP. It's offering a "multicultural" array of candidates, and directing preferences to the Liberals. The party was key in funnelling support from East Asian intensive electorates in 2016.

After unsuccessful discussions over a number of elections as to whether a socially conservative alliance might be formed between Muslims and Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Daoist and non-religious groups, [something like the alliance appears to have been launched in Sydney](#) . Reportedly "targeting Labor seats that had a high no vote in the same-sex marriage survey", it could put some further some punch behind the Christian Democratic Party even though it's not directly affiliated. The CDP is also targeting the Pacific communities in its [campaign of support](#) for Christian footballer Israel Folau.

Meanwhile, parties of the far right are competing to present their anti-multicultural agendas. In Lindsay, neo-Nazi Jim Saleam represents the Australia First Party, while across the country, right-leaning parties tussle for the xenophobic vote. That includes Rise Up Australia, Shooters Farmers and Fishers, Australian Conservatives, Australian National Conservatives, Pauline Hanson's One Nation and United Australia Party.

Although these parties may preference the Coalition, they may prove to be one force that drives ethnic communities towards the ALP.

**Read more:** [How the major parties' Indigenous health election commitments stack up](#)

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## Election day and beyond

Election day will provide the proof for many of the claims about ethnicity, voting, influence and ideology. It's highly likely that the senators elected from the right will run a unity ticket against multiculturalism in the new Senate.

This year may well prove the last flash of a mainly White Australian election, with its defenders doubling down on the right, while the centre takes on a multi-coloured hue, and the left is ever more rainbow. A lot of the knowledge that we may glean from the election process will only be learned in its aftermath, picking through small details and trying to form a pattern of explanation.

It has taken the Australian public sphere the best part of three years to work out what happened with cultural diversity and its complexities in 2016. We may well have just as long to wait this time around.

*Andrew Jakubowicz does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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