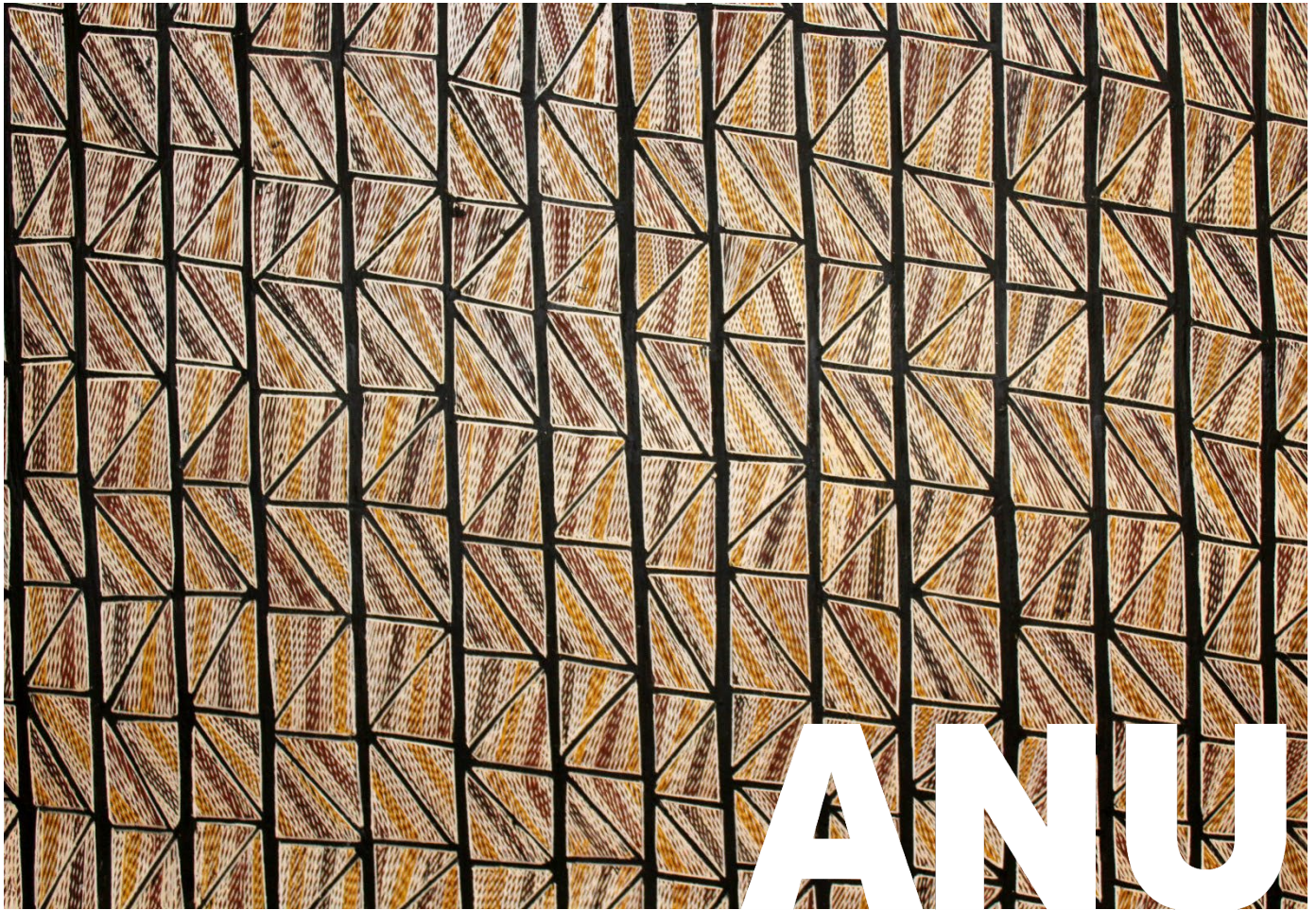




Australian
National
University



INDIGENOUS ELECTORAL POWER IN THE
2022 FEDERAL ELECTION: A GEOGRAPHIC
SNAPSHOT OF LATENT POTENTIAL

F. MARKHAM AND B. WILLIAMSON

Centre for
Aboriginal Economic
Policy Research
ANU College of
Arts & Social
Sciences

CAEPR TOPICAL ISSUE NO. 2/2022

Series note

The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) undertakes high-quality, independent research to further the social and economic development and empowerment of Indigenous people throughout Australia.

For more than 30 years, CAEPR has aimed to combine academic and teaching excellence on Indigenous economic and social development and public policy with realism, objectivity and relevance.

CAEPR maintains a substantial publications program, including Research Monographs, Discussion Papers, Working Papers and Topical Issues.

Topical Issues present a broad range of documents relating to contemporary issues and debates, and are produced for rapid distribution to enable widespread discussion and comment. Papers in this series are peer reviewed by academics affiliated to CAEPR.

All CAEPR publications are available in electronic format for free download from CAEPR's website:

<https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au>

CAEPR is located within the Research School of Social Sciences in the College of Arts & Social Sciences at the Australian National University (ANU). The Centre is funded from a range of sources, including ANU, the Australian Research Council, industry and philanthropic partners, and Australian state and territory governments.

As with all CAEPR publications, the views expressed in this Topical Issue are those of the author(s) and do not reflect any official CAEPR position.

Associate Professor William Fogarty
Acting Director, CAEPR
Research School of Social Sciences
College of Arts & Social Sciences
The Australian National University May 2022

Topical Issue No. 2/2022

DOI [10.25911/05QA-0R43](https://doi.org/10.25911/05QA-0R43)

For a complete list of CAEPR publications, see <https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications>

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
Research School of Social Sciences
College of Arts & Social Sciences
The Australian National University

Front cover image:

Terry Ngamandarra Wilson, Gulach (detail), painting on bark, private collection © Terry Ngamandarra, licensed by Viscopy, 2016

Suggested citation:

Markham, F. & Williamson, B. (2022), *Indigenous electoral power in the 2022 federal election: A geographic snapshot of latent potential* (Topical Issue No. 2/2022), Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University. <https://doi.org/10.25911/05QA-0R43>

Francis Markham is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), Research School of Social Sciences, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Australian National University.

Bhiamie Williamson is a Research Associate and PhD Candidate at CAEPR.

Indigenous electoral power in the 2022 federal election: A geographic snapshot of latent potential

F. Markham and B. Williamson

Abstract

Comprising only 3.3% of the Australian population, Indigenous people are often assumed to have limited electoral power outside of the remote Northern Territory. This short paper reveals the geography of the Indigenous population focusing on federal electoral divisions where the Indigenous population is significant, not in absolute terms, but in relation to the vote margins in the 2019 federal election. It describes a geography of electoral divisions where the Indigenous population is large in comparison to electoral margins, including in divisions beyond remote Australia. It suggests that Indigenous communities could wield significant electoral power if they mobilised the large cohort of non-participating eligible Indigenous vote. This currently latent electoral power may assist Indigenous communities to lobby for policy changes.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Ben Raue for providing geographical concordances for the 2021 electoral redistributions in Victoria and Western Australia.

The authors thank Julie Lahn and Morgan Harrington for their comments on a draft of this manuscript.

No funding was received for this project. Neither author is a member, employee or officeholder of any Australian political party.

Acronyms

AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
ANU	Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
ERP	Estimated Residential Population
VEP	Voting eligible population

Contents

Series note	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Acronyms	iv
Tables	v
Questioning the narrative of Indigenous electoral powerlessness	1
Methods and data	1
Enrolment, Turnout and Informal Voting	1
A Geography of Unrealised Indigenous Voting Power	3
Conclusion	4
References	5

Tables

Table 1	Estimated enrolment rate by Indigenous status and state, June 30, 2021	2
Table 2	Estimated national turnout among enrolled voters for Indigenous and all voters, 2013 and 2016 federal elections	2
Table 3	2019 federal electoral margin for selected Commonwealth electoral divisions, Indigenous voting eligible population and estimated number of potential additional Indigenous voters	3

Questioning the narrative of Indigenous electoral powerlessness

In this Topical Issues paper, we draw attention to the latent potential of Indigenous electoral power in the upcoming 2022 federal election. Our analysis leads us to conclude that across Australia, there exists 10 electorates where Indigenous voters could potentially determine the outcome of the election.

The findings presented in this paper offer a counter-narrative to the popularly held view that due to minority status, last measured at 3.3% of the general population in 2016, Indigenous peoples are powerless to exert any electoral influence (e.g. Pearson, 2014). An exception to this rule is sometimes made for the remote Northern Territory seat of Lingiari (e.g. Harrington, 2022; Sanders, 2019). We do not question the minority status of Indigenous populations. However, we do question the narrative that this single national figure determines Indigenous peoples' electoral power. Rather, we argue that electoral power can be located in the overlap between the geography of Indigenous populations and so-called 'marginal seats' where electoral margins are small. Here we map this Indigenous electoral power via a brief geographical analysis of the Indigenous population in 2016 and its alignment with the 2022 federal electoral divisions to reveal the largely unrealised and potentially considerable electoral power held by Indigenous peoples.

Methods and data

We bring together national census and electoral data to geographically describe the potential of Indigenous electoral power. To create a population estimate we relied on 2016 population data as the 2021 census is not yet available. While it is possible to project recent Indigenous population figures based on intercensal estimations we have not attempted that here given difficulty introduced by the disruption to migration patterns brought about by COVID-19. We also note the rapid growth trend of the Indigenous population nationally, especially in south-eastern Australia where both high rates of partnering between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and an increased inclination to identify as Indigenous on the national census boost the Indigenous population growth rate beyond that provided for by natural increase alone (Biddle & Markham, 2018; Markham & Biddle, 2018). The rapid increase in the Indigenous population, which may be sustained in the forthcoming 2021 official Indigenous population estimates, makes our characterisation of the magnitude of the potential Indigenous electorate very conservative.

Using 2022 electoral boundaries, we first calculate the proportion of the voting eligible population (VEP) in 2016 that identified as Indigenous. The VEP is defined as those residents who are eligible to enrol to vote in federal elections, with the key criteria considered here being residency, age, and citizenship.¹ We adjust for the undercount of the Indigenous population in the Census and account for the relatively youthful age structure of the Indigenous population. We exclude non-Indigenous non-citizens from the VEP denominator when calculating the Indigenous percentage of the VEP.

Enrolment, Turnout and Informal Voting

To create a voting eligible population estimate, we rely on state-wide estimates of Indigenous enrolment rates and national estimates of Indigenous turnout rates, both sourced from the Australian Electoral Commission. Table 1 shows that Indigenous enrolment rates, that is the proportion of the eligible Indigenous voters who are on the electoral roll, are very low compared to non-Indigenous enrolment rates. On average, less than 80% of potential Indigenous voters are registered to vote, compared with around 97% of the non-Indigenous population.

¹ We do not attempt to address the disenfranchisement from voting of those serving long prison sentences in Australia, among whom Indigenous people are over-represented. We assume that all people who identify as Indigenous are Australian citizens as per *Love v Commonwealth; Thoms v Commonwealth* (2020).

The Indigenous enrolment rate is geographically variable, rising above 85% in Tasmania and NSW, but below 70% in WA and NT.

Table 1 Estimated enrolment rate by Indigenous status and state, June 30, 2021

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
NSW	86.7%	97.2%
VIC	78.6%	96.0%
QLD	78.1%	96.6%
WA	69.7%	97.5%
SA	75.0%	97.0%
TAS	88.3%	97.9%
ACT	81.1%	97.9%
NT	69.6%	92.9%
National	79.3%	96.8%

Source: Indigenous enrolment rate estimates are provided by the Australian Electoral Commission (2021). Non-Indigenous enrolment rate estimates were derived by the authors from total Australian enrolment rate estimates (AEC, 2022) and Indigenous enrolment rate estimates.

Data on Indigenous turnout are not routinely reported, but the currently published data suggests that turnout is a more substantial barrier to electoral participation than enrolment. Turnout here is defined as the percentage of enrolled voters who cast a ballot, regardless of the formality of their vote. According to published estimates from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) (2017), Indigenous turnout was just 60% and 52% in the 2013 and 2016 elections respectively, compared to a national turnout rate of above 90% (see Table 2). Our own unpublished analysis of turnout rates in some very remote locations in 2019, turnout rates were below 50%.

Table 2 Estimated national turnout among enrolled voters for Indigenous and all voters, 2013 and 2016 federal elections

	Indigenous	Total Australia
2013	60%	93%
2016	52%	91%
Total	56%	92%

Source: AEC (2017).

Even less data is available on rates of informal voting among Indigenous populations, although it is often asserted that informality rates are higher. Hill and Alport report somewhat elevated rates of informality in remote communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands (7.8%) (Hill & Alport, 2010). In the division of Lingiari in 2019, the informality rate among votes cast at remote mobile polling booths (almost exclusively in remote Aboriginal communities) was somewhat higher than among votes cast in other polling places (Sanders, 2019). However, informality rates are much higher in some other electorates with low Indigenous populations, and it may be the case that the relative contribution of informality to Indigenous non-participation has been overstated. Consequently, informality is not further examined in this paper.

In summary, the limited available evidence suggests that Indigenous enrolment and turnout rates are very low. The national-average Indigenous participation rate — defined here as the percentage of Indigenous people who are eligible to vote who are both enrolled and cast a ballot — is likely to be around 44%. While Sanders (2019,

p. 14) observes that ‘it is possible to suggest that perhaps only half of eligible Aboriginal citizens in Lingiari may be utilising their right to vote’, the data presented here indicate that this situation is far more widespread.

A Geography of Unrealised Indigenous Voting Power

In Table 3, we list 10 electorates where the number of potential additional Indigenous voters in 2016 was greater than the final vote margin in 2019 (based on the 2022 enrolment figures). In column 3, this table shows the approximate electoral margin in 2019, updated for 2019-2022 redistributions and enrolment growth to April 2022. It suggests that, for example, the 2019 federal election margin would be just over 200 votes between the major parties in the division of Macquarie. In the division of Lingiari, the margin would be just over 4000 votes. The next column shows the estimated Indigenous voting eligible population. It suggests that in the division of Macquarie, for example, around 2,800 Indigenous people were eligible to enrol and vote in 2016, while in the division of Lingiari, there were almost 40,000 Indigenous people who could enrol and vote. The ratio of electoral margin to eligible Indigenous voters (2800:200 in Macquarie and 40000:4000 in Lingiari) suggests that Indigenous people could exert considerable electoral power in these divisions.

Table 3 2019 federal electoral margin for selected Commonwealth electoral divisions, Indigenous voting eligible population and estimated number of potential additional Indigenous voters

Division	Held by party	Approximate 2019 vote margin, 2022 enrolment	Estimated Indigenous VEP	Estimated potential additional Indigenous voters
Macquarie	ALP	216	2839	1161
Lingiari	ALP	4073	39538	18382
Bass	LIB	318	2535	1029
Leichhardt	LIB	4925	20079	9063
Eden-Monaro	ALP	932	3373	1378
Lilley	ALP	674	2423	1093
Solomon	ALP	2229	7773	3613
Blair	ALP	1518	4406	1989
Dobell	ALP	1779	4622	1889
Cowan	ALP	1105	2416	1224
Braddon	LIB	2558	5538	2250
Hunter	ALP	3853	6479	2648
Gilmore	ALP	3323	5413	2213
Durack	LIB	16005	25248	12792
Kennedy	KAP	15227	15680	7077

Note: All estimates are based on 2022 electoral boundaries. Estimates of the percentage of eligible voters who are Indigenous are based on (1) our apportionment of 2016 Indigenous and non-Indigenous Estimated Residential Populations (ERPs) at the Statistical Area 2 level (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) to Statistical Area 1 level, with an adjustment made to remove the Indigenous residents aged less than 18 years, (2) pro rating of non-Indigenous ERPs between Australian citizens and non-citizens on the basis of Census data, with an adjustment made to remove the Indigenous residents aged less than 18 years, and (3) an assumption that all people who identify as Indigenous are Australian citizens. The estimate of the percentage of non-participating voters who are Indigenous is based on the application of the state/territory enrolment rates by Indigenous status (from Table 1) and the national turnout rates by Indigenous status (from Table 2) to estimated Indigenous and non-Indigenous voting eligible populations.

It might be reasonably objected that this is not an ideal measure of potential Indigenous electoral power, to the extent that most voters do not change their preferences between elections and thus potential Indigenous electoral power is already accounted for in the 2019 election results. However, much like any other group of voters, Indigenous voters can and do change their preferences between elections (Sanders, 2012). Even leaving aside the issue of so-called 'rusted on' voters, the currently unutilised potential Indigenous vote as outlined in Tables 1 and 2 reveals considerable potential for increased Indigenous electoral power. Accordingly, column 4 of Table 3 displays an estimate of the number of additional Indigenous people who would vote if Indigenous enrolment and turnout rates matched those of the non-Indigenous population ('potential additional Indigenous voters').

In several electorates, including Macquarie, Lingiari, Bass and Leichhardt, activation of these potential additional Indigenous voters by the losing party would have been sufficient to change the election outcome in 2019. For the winning party in 2019, the activation of these potential Indigenous voters could have had the potential to sure-up vote margins in close electoral contests. There is clearly potential for the activation of previously non-participating Indigenous voters to have significant electoral importance in a number of seats. These seats are not only those with a high Indigenous population proportion like Lingiari and Leichhardt, but also includes urban electorates like Macquarie and Lilley, and regional electorates with much smaller Indigenous populations like Bass and Eden-Monaro.

Conclusion

Through geographical analysis, this brief paper has revealed the existence of considerable potential Indigenous electoral power. Our analysis of the location of the Indigenous population, in concert with a consideration of the geography of so-called marginal seats defies clichés about Indigenous electoral impotence and contributes to reframing discussions about Indigenous electoral mobilisation. It is worth noting that Indigenous electoral power will continue to grow along with predicted increase in the Indigenous population and the growing proportion of the Indigenous population who are of voting age due to the aging Indigenous population.

For political parties and/or independents, both existing and new, this analysis shows there are potential advantages to be gained by organising and mobilising an Indigenous constituency. This process would necessarily be multifaceted and include mobilising enrolled Indigenous peoples into a voting cohort, as well as convincing those non-enrolled VEP to do so and participate. Both strategies require parties and/or independents to offer policies that are relevant to Indigenous peoples aspirations and visions for the future (Hill & Alport, 2010). For Indigenous communities, this paper shows that Indigenous electoral power, while currently latent, has significant potential to be assembled in exchange for policy reform or Indigenous representation.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2016* (Cat. 3238.0.55.001). Australian Bureau of Statistics.
<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>
- Australian Electoral Commission. (2017). *Voter turnout: 2016 House of Representatives and Senate elections*. Australian Electoral Commission. https://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/research/files/voter-turnout-2016.pdf
- Australian Electoral Commission. (2021, August 31). *Indigenous enrolment rate*. Australian Electoral Commission. https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/performance/indigenous-enrolment-rate.htm
- Australian Electoral Commission. (2022, February 7). *Size of the electoral roll and enrolment rate 2021*. Australian Electoral Commission.
https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/national/2021.htm
- Biddle, N., & Markham, F. (2018). *Indigenous identification change between 2011 and 2016: Evidence from the Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset* (Topical Issue No. 1/2018; p. 16). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU. <http://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/indigenous-identification-change-between-2011-and-2016-evidence-australian>
- Harrington, M. (2022, April 14). Past policies have created barriers to voting in remote First Nations communities. *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/past-policies-have-created-barriers-to-voting-in-remote-first-nations-communities-181194>
- Hill, L., & Alport, K. (2010). Voting Attitudes and Behaviour Among Aboriginal Peoples: Reports from Anangu Women*. *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 56(2), 242–258. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2010.01552.x>
- Love v Commonwealth; Thoms v Commonwealth, HCA 3 (High Court of Australia 2020).
<https://eresources.hcourt.gov.au/showCase/2020/HCA/3>
- Markham, F., & Biddle, N. (2018). Recent changes to the Indigenous population geography of Australia: Evidence from the 2016 Census. *Australian Population Studies*, 2(1), 1–13.
- Pearson, N. (2014). *A Rightful Place: Race, Recognition and a More Complete Commonwealth*. Schwartz Publishing Pty, Limited.

Sanders, W. (2012). Winning Aboriginal Votes: Reflections on the 2012 Northern Territory Election. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 47(4), 691–701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2012.731492>

Sanders, W. (2019). *Electoral administration and Aboriginal voting power in the Northern Territory: Reality and potential viewed from the 2019 Federal election* (Working Paper No. 132). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), ANU. <https://doi.org/10.25911/5df209771dd57>

CONTACT US

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
Research School of Social Sciences
ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences

Copland Building #24
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia

T +61 2 6125 0587

W caepr.cass.anu.edu.au

ANU CRICOS Provider Number: 00120C