The Australian Green Movement: A Sustainable Future?

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Judging from the history of the rise and demise of the DLP, Australian Democrats and One Nation Party, what are the strengths, weaknesses and prospects for the future of the Australian Greens in the Federal Parliament?

Ultimately a political party's image and basis for support is critical to their long term survival.[1] Throughout history minor parties within the Australian political system have found it difficult to maintain their support base over time and thus sustain long periods of success.[2] Such difficultly can be attributed to several factors including, but not limited to, their narrow message, the media's treatment and the organisational structure of minor parties and several institutional challenges.[3] Consequently, minor parties often quickly vanish from the political landscape.[4] Such a trend is exemplified by the rise and demise of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), Australian Democratic Party (Democrats) and the One Nation Party. As a result of this trend, there is significant interest surrounding the future of the Australian Greens Party (Greens) in the Federal Parliament.

This essay analyses the strengths, weaknesses and future prospects of the Greens in Federal Parliament in light of the history of its predecessors. Consequently, it will examine two main issues. First, the Greens ability to establish and maintain a strong support base. Second, this essay will discuss the organisational structure of the Greens including its leadership and decision making processes and how their structure may impact the party's future prospects.

Establishing and Maintaining Dedicated Electoral Support

In terms of establishing and maintaining electoral support, one of the major strengths of the Greens is that it is a grass roots party with strong community backing. Unlike the Democrats and One Nation, the Greens are an organic party and hence have developed over a significant period of time and out of several grass root community campaigns.[5] Therefore, the Greens were not established in accordance to the personal beliefs of an individual but rather in accordance to the will and beliefs of a community.[6] This has been an important aspect in distinguishing the Greens from One Nation and the Democrats and has arguably enabled them to capture wider community support and establish a strong dedicated member base.[7]

However, whether having strong member support will translate into long term election success is debatable. It can be argued that unlike the Democrats, who could never attract a distinct social base of support and strong party identifiers,[8] the Greens' grass roots heritage has and will allow them to further attract committed party members and identifiers and thus enable them to maintain strong levels of political support for a longer period of time.[9]

On the contrary, Charnock argues that the Greens' position on the political spectrum has weakened their ability to obtain durable electoral support. [10] The Greens are part of the leftwing bloc of politics and can be labeled as more radical (or left) than the Australian Labor Party (ALP).[11] Charnock argues this is a weakness as it limits their ability to focus their policies on 'mainstream Australia' and thus present a viable option to the Australian public to replace the ALP and become a major party or at least a lasting third party in the Senate.[12] A slight parallel can be drawn here with One Nation, who placed themselves more right than the Liberal Party of Australia (LPA) and thus due to their narrow message and focus were unable to capture widespread support and establish themselves as a long term

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force in Australian politics.

Charnock further argues that by placing themselves more left than the ALP, if the Greens were to attempt to appeal to wider society and thus broaden their message to encompass more mainstream and center policies, they would run the risk of isolating their original leftwing voter base, one of the party's major sources of political support.[13] Thus, it is evident that the Greens face a key issue in terms of balancing the need to attract larger support for future progress and sustaining the support of continuing supporters.

Additionally, the 'green' classification of the party could also be a weakness in regards to attracting new supporters.[14] Woodward argues that although the party's classification was significant in its establishment, as it enabled them to be attractive to a community highly concerned about the environment, the Greens' enduring brand and name could result in widespread misconceptions that they are a single-issue party by voters who are not aware of their policies or not interested in politics in general.[15]

The Australian Electoral System and the Role of Minor Parties

Moreover, another weakness of minor parties in general includes their capacity to overcome the several institutional barriers which limit their ability to establish themselves and sustain electoral success.[16] Consequently, like their predecessors, the most significant challenge faced by the Greens is arguably overcoming the limitations of the Australian electoral framework.[17] Preferential voting combined with the requirement that a candidate win an absolute majority in an electorate to determine seats in the House of Representatives has meant minor parties have found it difficult to gain representation in the lower house of parliament.[18] Conversely, proportional voting for representation in the Senate has enabled minor parties to easier win seats in the upper house.[19] Thus, it can be argued that minor parties play a more advisory role in Federal Parliament and are heavily reliant on holding a balance of power in the Senate to remain relevant in the political landscape.

This in turn can affect their ability to attract voters and maintain their support base due to three main reasons. First, as Duverger states, the 'rational voter' is reluctant to vote for their preferred candidate if they believe they are unlikely to win.[20] Thus, it is evident that one of the weaknesses of minor parties such as the Greens is their inability to overcome the perception that they are unlikely to win and accordingly successfully penetrate the support base of major parties. This is emphasised by the fact that from 1967 to 2007, an average of 28.8 per cent of individuals who identify with a minor party voted Labor or Liberal in Federal elections.[21]

Second, the long term impact of the rigid electoral framework is that voting behaviour has become more predictable in favour of the major parties.[22] Charnock argues that although the levels and strength of party identification with the major parties has decreased from 90 to 80 per cent in the period from 1987 to 2007, this is not large enough.[23] Hence, minor parties such as the Greens have found it difficult to gain key seats in parliament and further their policy goals.

Third and following from the second point, the nature of the system means that minor parties often find it difficult to remain relevant to voters over the long term. This is due to the fact that minor parties are often heavily reliant on unstable social conditions to attract voters and thus these parties are vulnerable as the volatility of social conditions means that minor parties could lose large sections of their discontented voter support base when social conditions change again.[24] Hence, support from major party defectors is usually temporary and transient.[25] Like many of the minor parties that have come before them, the Greens were established under the romantic idea of challenging and changing the system and their success is a product of unstable social conditions.[26] However, whether the party will be able to maintain the support of discontented major party voters and thus continue their success is debatable. On one hand, increases in Greens membership over the past few elections could be viewed as indicative of their ability to retain these voters as it accentuates how individuals are willing to 'put their money where their mouth is' in support of the party and thus the Greens' future prospects may be brighter and more permanent than its predecessors.[27] This is emphasised by the fact that after the 2001 election the Greens increased their membership 217.88 per cent from 1998 levels, by 2004 it had improved another 65.82 per cent and by 2007 membership had increased 20.09 per cent from the previous election.[28]

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Conversely, the nature of the system means that a major weakness of minor parties including the Greens is their heavy reliance on holding the balance of power in the Senate to be acknowledged as relevant by voters.[29] Grattan argues the 2013 election is make or break for the Greens, describing how if they fail to hold the balance of power in the Senate they could quickly vanish from the political landscape like the Democrats.[30] This challenge to be accepted as relevant is exasperated by the need of minor parties to make deals with major parties to survive and further their agendas. The trading of preferences for policy concessions by minor parties can be a great strength as it allows them to shape legislation and ensure that parliament deals with issues they believe are important.[31] However, these concessions can result in backlash from dedicated party members and cause the electorate to become disillusioned with the minor party's message. This is emphasised by the Democrats demise after the 2004 election and the backlash resulting from their 1998 deal with the Howard government regarding the GST. Consequently, Grattan argues that although it is a positive that the Greens have attempted to distance themselves from the ALP in recent times, they still face the challenge of distinguishing themselves from the Labor brand and being able to be seen as a party that can further Australia on their own if they are to survive.[32]

The Greens Organisational Structure and Leadership

Furthermore, unlike the two major parties, the Greens internal organisational structure is not strict and professional and was derived largely from the structure of the social movements that established the party.[33] Accordingly, the Greens organisation is a key weakness of the party. Similar to the Democrats, the Greens proclaim greater mechanisms of democracy and hence the party's decision making process is open and decentralized and underpinned by the values of participatory democracy.[34] This structure has one major advantage. Namely, it is true to the Greens' socialist roots and enables the various 'factions' within the party to voice their opinions,[35] and subsequently is essential in maintaining the support of longstanding members.

However, although this type of participatory structure may indeed be a great strength in informal organisations, it is not conductive to electoral success.[36] Instead, political parties need strict organisation and stability in order to survive long term. Hence, this structure can be viewed as a weakness of the party as open and participatory decision making can accentuate the internal divisions of the various factions of a party and subsequently cause tension.[37] Drawing on the history of the Democrats and their handling of the GST one can conclude that a participatory structure causes tension because minor parties face difficulties reconciling the conflicting views of factions.[38] Manning and Rootes further this analysis emphasising how the separate agendas of the environmental and socialist wings of the Greens are conflict prone due to a lack of centralization in decision making and the difficulty of achieving adequate consensus on controversial policy issues.[39] These tensions have been exposed publicly more than once. For example, in 2003 the Queensland Greens were reported to have factionalized into two separate camps – the 'Clean Start' supporters who were committed to centralising the party's leadership and the 'Grass-roots Greens' who were committed to retaining the original participatory framework.[40] Such internal tension can greatly affect the public image of the party and also cause further dissatisfaction amongst members.[41]

Conversely, the nature of the Greens leadership is a major strength of the party. Unlike the Democrats who had numerous leaders throughout their history, the Greens were led by Bob Brown for over twenty years. Brown's lengthy leadership provided the party stability and his authority within the Greens was recognised as essential in addressing tensions resulting from factions.[42] Hence, a major reason for the Greens' success is his leadership. However, the party is arguably at a crossroads since the leadership change in 2012 and how the party reacts to this change is crucial to their future prospects.[43] Indeed, much depends on new leader Christine Milne's ability to handle the factions in the participatory framework and establish a strong media and public image.[44] Although early signs have been positive, it is too early to tell how successful she will be.

Conclusion

It is evident that the Greens will face several challenges in the future regarding their ability to balance the need to attract more supporters for future progress and sustaining the support of enduring followers. In regards to the party's voter base, the Greens differ greatly from other minor parties as they were born out of several grass roots community campaigns – a major strength. Growing membership figures over the last few elections arguably indicates that they

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have been able to establish a strong dedicated membership and core group of party identifiers, unlike the Democrats. However, much like the minor parties before them, the Greens still face several challenges and weaknesses regarding the Australian electoral framework and the party's participatory organisation. Hence, although the future prospect of the Greens does seem bright as membership is steadily growing, the party will need to professionalise their structure, deal with the change of leadership, manage their internal tensions and be able to continue to be recognised as relevant to voters if it is indeed to survive in the long term.

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