

# The Analysis of Regional Electoral Change: The Case of the South–West of Western Australia

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This paper attempts to develop a tentative framework for the description and analysis of regional political change and applies it to the case of the South West statistical region of Western Australia. The framework, which is an elaboration of Johnston's systems model of the operation of the electoral process, emphasises the dynamic interaction of four main sets of components—the nature of electoral law and its implications for representation, the changing pattern of electoral boundaries, the changing demographic structure of the region and its traditional voting habits and the changing nature of political parties and political party competition. The overall discussion is set within an assumed political process whereby political parties are in conflict to achieve power, and once in power aim to manipulate electoral law and regional policy in order to remain in power.

In order to provide a context for the discussion, the first section of the paper describes and evaluates some of the models developed by social scientists to account for electoral change. Thereafter, the changing nature of electoral representation in the study region is analysed. The third section discusses the pattern of traditional voting habits in Western Australia, and some aspects of the changing pattern in the South West region. Electoral redistributions from 1966 are then evaluated and it is concluded that they tend to favour the political party in power. The final section presents a detailed analysis of locational change in electoral behaviour in the region. It is concluded that, in general, conservative voting in recent years is in decline, but that there are significant intra-regional variations in the pattern of electoral change.

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An earlier version of this paper was presented on December 16 1987 at a joint research seminar between the Centre for Australian Studies, Otemon-Gakuin University and the University of Western Australia, held at Kyoto University.

## Models of Regional Electoral Change

The principal aim of this section of the paper is to present a tentative framework for the description and analysis of regional electoral change in liberal democratic societies. While the study of electoral change has been one of the main research directions in electoral geography since the late 1970s (Taylor, 1985, 244), studies have tended to be fragmentary, have been insufficiently concerned with explanation (Bodman, 1982), and have not been conducted within an overall coherent framework. On the other hand, the study of electoral change has been important in political science and political sociology since the 1960s and valuable insights have been gained into the changing nature of individual electoral choice (for example, Butler and Stokes, 1969; Rokkan, 1970; Crewe and Denver, 1985; Rose and McAllister, 1986). There are at least three explanatory models relevant to the process of electoral change which arise out of this literature—the homogenisation model, conflict models and the role of the state. Each of these will be briefly outlined bearing in mind that any theory of political change built around data from only one electoral system is likely to be of limited value (Rokkan, 1970, 239).

According to the homogenisation model, the process of political change is resulting, not in a divergence of interests, but in a convergence and to a continued minimisation of conflict. In particular, this view argues that, due to social structural change, traditional cleavages evident in certain Western industrial societies are becoming less politically important (Kemp, 1978, 348). In Britain, for example, three-quarters of all voters no longer subscribe to a party loyalty traditionally determined by class of family (Rose and McAllister, 1986, 1). In addition, local and regional political differences are becoming less marked due to an inexorable 'nationalisation' process (Warde, 1985, 192–3). However, the evidence for the impact of any 'homogenisation' on local and regional political loyalties is somewhat mixed (Rose and McAllister, 1986, 76).

There are at least three variants of conflict models which purport to explain the nature of political change. One of these is Rokkan's 'developmental' model based on electoral mobilisation, party competition and national integration (Rokkan, 1970). For example, the history of Norwegian politics from the late

nineteenth century has been interpreted as a four-stage process of the *incorporation* of citizens into the electoral process, their *mobilisation* in electoral contests, their *activation* into direct participation in public life and the entry of nationally organised parties into municipal elections through a process of *politicisation* (Rokkan, 1970, 227). In the Rokkan model, conflicts are identified along two principal dimensions—functional and territorial. The functional spectrum consists of networks of organisations which range from economic through to cultural, while the territorial spectrum ranges from local to national (Rokkan, 1970, 50).

In contrast to Rokkan's multi-dimensional conflict model, is the model which suggests that the overriding cause of change is the effect of social class. Regional patterns of political change according to this view are to be interpreted solely as class effects (Warde, 1985, 197–8). For example, some commentators have argued that Labour's loss of three consecutive elections in 1951, 1955 and 1959 in Britain was attributable to a process of 'embourgeoisement'—that is, working class voters became more affluent, they became more 'bourgeois' and hence were more likely to vote Conservative. However, the Labour wins of 1964 and 1966 ran counter to this possible explanation (McLean, 1976, 53), although some further support for it was found in the 1974 general election (Johnston, 1981).

One of the principal difficulties with the Rokkan and embourgeoisement models of electoral change is that they are derived from a social structural paradigm which postulates a set of unchanging social-political relationships 'frozen' in time. Voter alignments are seen to directly reflect social structures and thus as social structures change, so do voter alignments, but in a 'glacial' fashion (Crewe, 1986, 2–6). Over the past decade, the 'rock-like' stability of these relationships has been challenged partly as a consequence of a growth in secularisation, secondly, as a result of the fact that service industries are replacing manufacturing industries in terms of relative importance, and thirdly because of the growing trend of urbanisation. One of the postulated outcomes of these changes is not homogenisation but the growth of 'post materialist' values, Voters who espouse this position are sympathetic to a reforming left but keep their distance from the 'established' left and include members of women's groups, 'green' organisations and regional autonomy movements. The growth of this new political cleavage is based on a conflict of values rather than on a conflict of material interests. Thus, a value conflict model has been proposed to account for changes

to the political party system (Crewe, 1986, 16).

Despite the concern with a variety of aspects of overall electoral change, political scientists and political sociologists, in general, have not given due regard to *regional* electoral change and associated social, economic and political processes which might explain that change (Warde, 1985, 192). In particular, one of the major limitations is the failure to adequately take into account the role of governments in the process of electoral change and its association with political power. One of the important changes initiated by the state in many liberal democratic societies, for example, is the generation of new groups of workers in state bureaucracies (Blake, 1985, 3). The present inquiry thus take as its point of departure Johnston's simplified systems model of the electoral process (Johnston, 1979, 21-3). The model comprises four sets of inputs into the electoral system (electoral law, constituencies or electoral districts, the geographical distribution of voters and the political actors) and one principal output—the power to make decisions (Figure 1). Clearly, the nature of electoral law will, at least theoretically, determine all aspects of the conduct of any election—which groups can vote, how they can vote, when they can vote, how much their vote is worth, how the election campaign can be conducted, and so on. In the Japanese case, there are two laws which govern these issues—the *Public Offices Election Law* which determines the number of electoral districts and the number of members in each district and the *Public Funds Control Law* which places a theoretical limit on election campaign expenditure. Both laws have been the subject

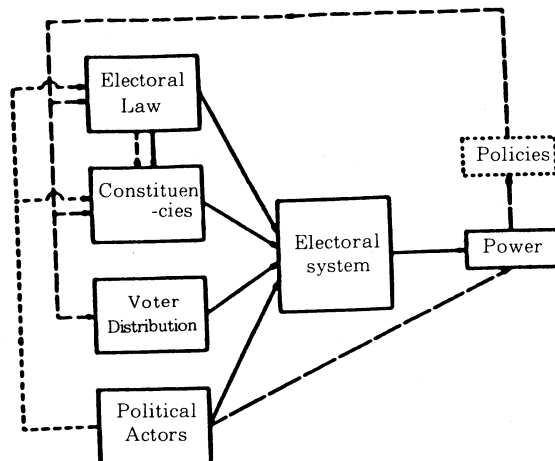


Figure 1 Johnston's Systems Model of the Electoral Process

of public scrutiny and even constitutional debate in recent years. In Western Australia, the two laws which have determined the conduct of State elections for the past 40 years are the *Electoral Act* (which essentially determines who can vote) and the *Electoral Districts Act* (which outlines the regional pattern of representation and the procedures for changing electoral boundaries). Both of these laws were recently drastically amended in order to provide a more equitable system of electoral representation after the 1989 WA State election.

The pattern of constituencies or electoral districts so determined by electoral law is thus an input into the electoral system in many liberal democratic societies and is therefore to a varying degree associated with political power. In the final analysis, the extent to which the geographical pattern of electoral districts is associated with political power will depend on its interaction with a third input, the geographical distribution of voters. Clearly, from the viewpoint of political power, it is in the interests of the fourth input, the political actors—the candidates, political parties and their financial supporters—that the outcome of the interaction between the geographical pattern of electoral districts and the geographical pattern of voters is in their favour. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, in Western Australia and elsewhere, changes to the pattern of electoral districts tend to favour the political party in power (Rumley, 1985). However, it is the overall interaction of the four inputs which cause the output—political power for an elected government (Johnston, 1979, 23).

Naturally, having achieved political power, a governing political party or parties will wish to retain it at subsequent elections. In essence, in order to remain in office, an elected government is faced with two major sets of options. The first is to change the geographical pattern of electoral districts in order to ensure future electoral success. The most overt form of boundary manipulation, gerrymandering, can be implemented by adopting any one of three strategies. First, by drawing electoral boundaries to maximise the impact of one's own supporters. Second, by concentrating opposition support into a small number of districts. Third, by dividing up regional concentrations of opposition strength and adding them to regions of more numerous sympathetic support (Johnston, 1979, 172–80). The first of these strategies has recently been favoured by the Social Credit Provincial Government in British Columbia in Canada when, in a two-stage process, it deleted some opposition districts and thereafter created a

number of dual-member districts in regions of majority Social Credit support (Rumley, 1987).

The second more commonly adopted option to maintain political power is simply to create policies designed to win electoral support. Such policies may well be universally applicable (for example, an overall reduction in taxation), or may be targeted to particular groups (for example, an increase in welfare payments) or may be targeted to certain regions (for example, the offer of large-scale economic development). There has been considerable research interest for some time in the ways in which governments manipulate the economic geography of regions for potential electoral gain (Prescott, 1969, 376). Indeed, this practice seems to be an almost ubiquitous component of liberal democratic systems. However, it seems that the art of pork barrelling is especially well-developed in the United States and has taken a variety of forms, including the awarding of defence contracts to certain regions rather than others (Johnston, 1980). Individual economic inducements to vote in a particular direction, on the other hand, have included cash payments and even gifts. For example, in the March 1983 Chiba Prefectural Assembly election, it was alleged that the 'market price' for votes based on gifts of sea tangle and table top lighters was between Y 2000 and Y 5000 (*Japan Times*, 10/4/83). In the case of Western Australia, the State Labor Government-sponsored programme of economic development in the South-West is partially based on a crude model of the relationship between development, urbanisation and electoral behaviour. The underlying assumption of this model is that the more highly urbanised the population, the greater the probability of ALP support.

In summary, then, any attempt to explain regional electoral change from the viewpoint of political power is obliged to evaluate the role of governments, first from the perspective of any likely manipulation of electoral law, and, second, from the viewpoint of regionally-based policies designed for electoral gain, especially in marginal electoral districts. In addition, underlying this is a changing geographical distribution of voters all of whom possess varying class and value interests.

## Changing Territorial Patterns of Electoral Representation

In the Western Australian context, there are at least three basic considerations relating to the electoral system which need to be borne in mind in any analysis of the changing territorial pattern of electoral representation. First, the number of registered voters contained within electoral districts generally relatively small. For the State as a whole, the average enrolment per parliamentary representative ranged from 8,169 in 1965 to 15,495 in 1986. The average in 1986 for the very similar electoral system of British Columbia in Canada was 25,652. Furthermore, the average number of registered voters per representative in the Japanese House of Representatives district of Kyoto 1 in 1980 was 133,775, more than ten times the WA average. For the South West region, however, the average ranged from inly 5,556 registered voters in 1965 to 10,493 in 1986 (Table 1).

A second basic consideration is that the Western Australian electoral system (like that of British Columbia and Japan) suffers from a severe malapportionment (Rumley, 1982 a). That is, there is a significant variation by electoral district in terms of the number of registered voters. What this means, among other things, is that the 'value' of a vote is a function of residential location, and, in WA varies especially between metropolitan and non-metropolitan districts. What it also means is that some districts are easier to win than others, all other things being equal, and this can have important implications for politi-

Table 1 Electoral Representation in the South West of WA. 1965-86  
(numbers of registered voters)

Electoral District	1965	1968	1971	1974	1977	1980	1983	1986
Blackwood	5091	5666	6081	—	—	—	—	—
Bunbury	6186	6398	7423	7943	8775	9476	8874	9202
Collie	5309	5652	5803	7713	8176	8854	8631	9410
Mandurah	—	—	—	—	—	—	9323	12390
Mitchell	—	—	—	—	—	—	9769	11636
Murray	5525	6651	8270	8346	8721	9533	9311	11234
Vasse	5408	5779	6661	8352	8772	9981	9205	10820
Warren	5168	6175	6673	7399	8745	9210	8217	8758
Wellington	6203	5849	6835	8420	8392	9141	—	—
Avg for SW	5556	6024	5964	8029	8597	9366	9047	10493
Avg for WA	8169	8806	10532	11712	12057	12995	13070	15495
SW % WA avg	68.0	68.4	56.6	68.6	71.3	72.1	69.2	67.7
% WA MLAs	14.0	13.7	13.7	11.8	10.9	10.9	14.0	14.0

(includes Dale)

cal party competition and for government attempts to directly influence the result via locally-directed investment.

The third consideration is that the WA electoral system is compulsory. Eligible voters are compelled to enrol, and, once enrolled, are compelled to vote. To a certain extent, therefore, changes in the number of registered voters in a district give some indication of regional economic well-being, especially if district boundaries are comparable from one election to the next, and assuming, of course that the electoral rolls are accurate and reliable sources of data. There is some doubt on the latter, however, especially prior to 1985 after which enrolment procedures were modified to facilitate cross-checking at Federal and Municipal levels with the introduction of joint rolls and full adult franchise at the local level. Comparison of census and enrolment data for the 1977 State election, for example, revealed that four of the six electoral districts in the South West region (Bunbury, Collie, Vasse and Warren) possessed enrolment percentages in excess of one hundred. At that time, percentage enrolment in the region ranged from 96.5 per cent in Murray to 104.2 per cent in Vase (Rumley, 1980).

Over the past years, which encompasses eight State elections from 1965, there have been some interesting changes both to the overall parliamentary representation of the South West region and to the internal territorial allocation of that representation. With regard to overall parliamentary representation, it is clear that from 1965 to 1980, the relative importance of the region had declined. In 1965, the region boasted 14 per cent (or 7) of the total number (50) of State Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). By 1980, the region was represented by only 6 members (or 10.9 per cent) in a Legislative Assembly of 55 members. However, following the 1982 electoral redistribution, the total number of representative in the region increased to 8 (including the district of Dale), and it thus reverted to its relative position at 1965 (Table 1).

The changing internal pattern of territorial representation can be accounted for by three main sets of interrelated processes. First, there has been an overall decline in strictly 'rural' representation in the region. This led to the eradication of the district of Blackwood after the 1972 electoral redistribution (Figures 4 and 5), and to the removal of Wellington in 1982 (Figures 6 and 7). Second, has been the growing regional importance of the main towns of Bunbury and Mandurah. The growth of Bunbury and associated suburbanisation resulted in

creation of the new district of Mitchell after the 1982 redistribution (Figure 7). In addition, for the first time, Mandurah achieved separate electoral representation. The growth of Mandurah, of course, is directly connected to the third process—the increasing direct impact of Metropolitan Perth upon the South West region. For example, commuting from Mandurah is not uncommon and the geographical expansion of Metropolitan Perth has ensured that parts of the electoral district of Dale (which takes in the eastern third of the Shire of Murray) are, in effect, outer suburban (Figure 7).

Even though the internal territorial pattern of electoral representation has changed since 1965, there has been a consistent and, at times, significant variation in the degree of internal electoral 'fairness'. For example, the electoral population of South West districts is significantly higher in some districts and lower in others. A simple index of electoral fairness can be computed by expressing the difference between the largest and smallest electoral populations as a percentage of the average for the whole region. An index of zero would thus indicate perfect equality. The average index for the eight elections from 1965 to 1986 was in excess of 20 per cent, with very significant inequalities being demonstrated especially in 1971 (41 per cent) between Murray and Collie and in 1986 (35 cent) between Mandurah and Warren (Table 1). Interesting, both smaller districts have been won consistently by the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The fairest pattern was evident for the 1977 election with an index of 7 per cent and there was actually an increase in 'fairness' following all electoral redistributions in the region save the one in 1982 when the index increased by 5 per cent.

Overall, from 1965 to 1986, the region has enjoyed a significant degree of over-representation measured in terms of the average size of district electoral populations. In all eight elections the average electoral population of South West districts has never reached three-quarters of the State average. Indeed, in 1971, the average size of district was almost half of that for WA and ranged from 56.6 per cent in that year to 72.1 per cent in 1980 (Table 1).

Generally, the average electoral population in the South West districts has increased, although there was a marginal fall from 1968 to 1971. In addition, the average size of districts has increased in the election following an electoral redistribution. This is so for the 1966, 1972 and 1976 redistributions. The decline in

Table 2 Percentage Electoral Population Change.  
1962-86

Electoral District	62 - 5	68 - 71	77 - 80	83 - 6
Blackwood	-1.4	7.3	—	—
Bunbury	5.9	16.0	8.0	3.7
Collie	0.2	2.7	8.3	9.0
Mandurah	—	—	—	32.9
Mitchell	—	—	—	19.1
Murray	4.7	24.3	9.3	20.7
Vasse	4.2	15.3	13.8	17.5
Warren	-4.9	8.1	5.3	6.6
Wellington	11.1	16.9	8.9	—
Avg for SW	2.8	12.9	8.9	15.6
Western Australia	7.0	19.6	7.8	18.6

the average electoral population for the 1983 election is the only such case immediately following a redistribution and, not coincidentally, follows the 1980 'peak' in relative over-representation noted above. The likely rationale for this is that the conservative State government decided to add one representative to the region on the basis of perceived self-interest and the fact that the relative size of South West districts had reached a significantly above average level of 'tolerance' compared with the State as a whole.

Electoral population change, then, is the official reason used by Western Australian governments for changing the map of electoral boundaries. In reality, however, the maintenance, division and removal of electoral districts is a highly partisan activity, even with a system of neutral electoral commissioners (Rossiter and Johnston, 1981). The percentage electoral population change among South West districts can only readily be determined for those elections which were contested on the same electoral boundaries. In general, the average change for South West districts has been less than that for the State as a whole, apart from 1977-80. This was especially the case for 1962-5 when the average South West was less than half of that for Western Australia (Table 2). Some districts (Blackwood and Warren) registered negative change from 1962-5, while others (Wellington) showed an increase in electoral population in excess of the rate for the State. Murray grew at a faster rate than WA from 1968-71 as did Vasse from 1977-80.

From 1962 to 1986, there were only two electoral districts in the South West region which were consistently below the average electoral population growth—Collie and Warren (Table 2). Although they have been held by the ALP through-

out this time period, they have become increasingly marginal in recent elections. On the other hand, rapid population growth associated with a larger urban centre appears to have favoured the ALP. This is the case in the relatively recently created districts of Mandurah and Mitchell, both of which registered above average electoral population growth (Table 2).

### Regional Patterns of Electoral Behaviour

One of the features of Western Australian electoral politics in recent years is that there has been a consistent electoral bias in favour of the conservative parties—that is, these parties have generally obtained a greater share of the number of elected representatives than they would have obtained on a proportional basis. This has been especially evident for Legislative Council elections (Rumley, 1982 a). One of the principal reasons for this is that conservative support tends to be stronger in non-metropolitan electoral districts whose electoral populations are significantly lower than the Western Australian average. In other words, the geography of voting habits coincides with the malapportionment effect in Western Australia.

From 1965–86, the South West region has generally been a region of conservative voting habits, and, because of the malapportionment effect, has contained electoral districts which, from a population viewpoint, are therefore easier to win. Up to 1980, the Liberal Party had won every district save for Collie and Warren at every election from 1965. However, in the two elections since 1980, the Liberals have only managed to win two of these districts—Murray and Vasse (Figure 6). In other words, there has been an important shift in the nature of political party representation in the region which has been brought about by the interaction of four sets of factors—the changing population structure in the region associated in part with a slowly changing set of political attitudes, the changing structure of political parties, the changing nature of electoral boundaries and the effect of State government policy.

Studies of voting habits in Western Australia using both individual and aggregate data have shown that they can be explained at least in part on the basis of demographic characteristics (Rumley, 1979). In particular, variables descriptive of aspects of social class are a necessary although not sufficient basis

Table 4 Demographic Characteristics and Voting Behaviour in WA (aggregate correlations)

Variable	ALP			Liberal		
	1977	1980	1983	1977	1980	1983
Professional Occups.	-0.1	-0.1	-0.26	0.6*	0.47*	0.46*
White Collar	0.22	0.18	0.08	0.44*	0.34*	0.22
Manufacturing	0.64*	0.61*	0.56*	-0.03	-0.06	-0.27
Agricultural	-0.7*	-0.63*	-0.6*	-0.4*	-0.37*	0.09
Mining	0.19	0.11	0.11	-0.03	-0.06	-0.12
Unemployed	0.47*	0.43*	0.53*	-0.04	0.02	-0.3*
Income > \$15,000	-0.59*	-0.59*	-0.36*	0.16	0.03	0.36*
Tertiary Education	-0.21	-0.2	-0.34*	0.55*	0.42*	0.47*
Australian-born	-0.45*	-0.46*	-0.57*	0.1	0.04	0.23
Overseas-born	0.58*	0.56*	0.57*	0.05	0.12	-0.23
Catholics	0.6*	0.49*	0.48*	-0.24	-0.17	-0.31*

\*significant at the 0.005 level or less

upon which to begin to explain geographical variations in electoral behaviour (Rumley, 1982 b). The principal voter cleavages voters in WA State in recent years have been based on occupation, income, education, birthplace and religion (Table 4). In particular, those supporting the left-of-centre Australian Labor Party (ALP) tend to be of lower socio-economic status compared with supporters of the conservative Liberal Party. Whereas professional and white collar workers would tend to vote Liberal, those employed in manufacturing would tend to support the ALP. On the other hand, those employed in agriculture would strongly tend to vote against the ALP (Table 4).

For the South West region as a whole, over the past forty years there has been a significant occupational structural change (Figure 2). For example, the percentage of the workforce employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing has declined from 35 per cent in 1947 to about 15 per cent in 1986. In addition, the percentage employed in manufacturing has remained constant at 16 per cent in 1947 and 16 per cent in 1986. While mining has also remained fairly stable over recent years, there has been a general proportional increase in employment in public administration, defence and community services (from 6 per cent in 1947 to 18 per cent in 1986) and in wholesale and retail activities (from 9 per cent in 1947 to 17 per cent in 1986).

The regional decrease in the relative importance of primary employment, the relative stability in manufacturing and mining and the growth of the public as well as private tertiary sector have been reflected in the overall decline in conservative electoral representation. In short, there are relatively fewer voters to

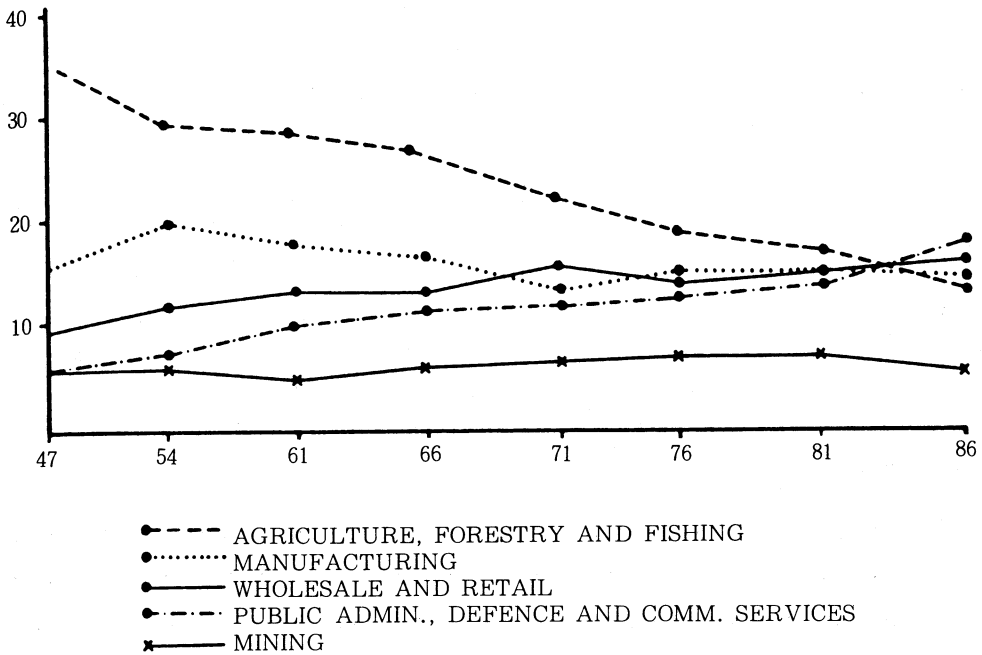


Figure 2 Structural Change in the South West Economy  
(% workforce employed in industrial categories)

vote against the ALP. Indeed, in Murray in 1965 and in Blackwood from 1965 to 1971, the ALP did not even pre-select a candidate. Furthermore, in 1968, the Liberal candidates in Vasse and Wellington were elected unopposed. Thus, the occupational structural change in the region has been mirrored to a degree by an increase in electoral competition from the ALP.

One important component of electoral success or failure in Western Australia is the preferential electoral system. In general, it appears that the preferential system has worked in favour of the conservative political parties. Added to preferential system is the role played by the so-called 'minor' political parties which generally are fairly conservative. In the South West region, some of the minor parties have been crucial to the election outcome. For example, the preferences of the farmer-based Country Party (CP) candidate who ran in Wellington in 1971 helped to elect the Liberal candidate in that district. The preferences of the anti-communist Democratic Labor Party (DLP) were crucial in the election of a Liberal in Wellington in 1971. Furthermore, National Alliance (a coalition of minor parties) preferences decided the outcome of the election in Murray in 1971. The only election in the region from 1965-86 which has been decided by

Table 3 Electoral Behaviour in the South West. 1965-86  
(% total votes cast)

Electoral District	1965		1968		1971		1974		1977		1980		1983		1986	
	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB	ALP	LIB
Blackwood	Unopp.		※	44	※	29	—		—		—		—		—	
Bunbury	47	52	43	52	44	42	49	49	45	54	44	48*	50	44	53	43
Collie	59	38	53	40	78	16	55	20	60	38	Unopp.		64	※	51	18
Mandurah	—		—		—		—		—		—		46*	47	55	37
Mitchell	—		—		—		—		—		—		56	42	59	39
Murray	※	61	45	53	42	37*	44	42*	39	59	40	58	39	55	39	58
Vasse	29	70	Unopp.		37	31*	26	58	24	66	24	67	30	58	36	62
Warren	51	39	54	40	69	23	50	30	54	42	61	37	59	30	50	45
Wellington	35	69	Unopp.		38	41*	39	38*	38	59	39	57	—		—	

※ no candidate pre-selected

\* candidate won on preferences

the preferences of an Independent candidate was the first one for Mandurah in 1983 (Table 3). In addition, the only minor party which as yet has not had a significant impact on an electoral result in the South West is the essentially urban-based 'post materialist' Australian Democrat Party which emerged this decade and which contested Bunbury in 1980 and 1983 and Mandurah in 1986.

The role of the minor parties in terms of who gains power in Western Australia cannot be overemphasised. From 1965-86, whenever the conservative parties have formed the government, it has been in the form of a coalition - Liberal (the 'senior' partner) plus the 'country-based' farmers' party. While the latter party has always shown a tendency toward fragmentation, competition between the coalition partners for the country vote has maintained a high degree of intensity. The combination of a coalition of conservative interests with a preferential electoral system has made it very difficult for Labor to achieve considerable electoral success in a conservative region.

However, within the South West region, clearly the pattern and intensity of electoral support has also varied considerably among districts (Table 3). The major centre of Bunbury, for example, has continually been a highly contested and marginal electoral district. In 1974, for example, it was won by the Liberal candidate by a margin of only 48 votes. For the five elections from 1965 to 1980, the district of Bunbury was held by the Liberals, but in 1983 and 1986 it has been held by Labor. Although it has been consistently held by Labor, another district which can be considered to be marginal after the 1986 election is

that of Warren. The coal mining and farming district of Collie has also been traditionally Labor, but it too became marginal following a strong vote for the farmer-based National Party (28 per cent) in 1986. The 'marginalisation' of both Collie and Warren to a significant degree reflect unfavourable local economic conditions coupled with a gradual change in traditional voting habits.

The 'safest' district in the region is the Liberal-held seat of Vasse, which, since the 1971 election has averaged a vote in excess of 60 per cent for the Liberal Party. The two newest districts, Mandurah and Mitchell, have both been held by Labor since their creation, with the latter being fairly safe. The degree of State government investment into the South West region legitimised through the *South West Development Authority Act* 1984, is locally acknowledged as one of the major explanations for the strength of the ALP vote in these new districts, and its prospect was one of the prime reasons why marginal Bunbury swung to the ALP in 1983. It is designed primarily to attempt to increase the relative importance of the manufacturing sector as well as the proportion of public employees in the South West and to facilitate the urbanisation process in order that traditional regional bases of political support can be eroded.

### Political Impact of Electoral Redistributions

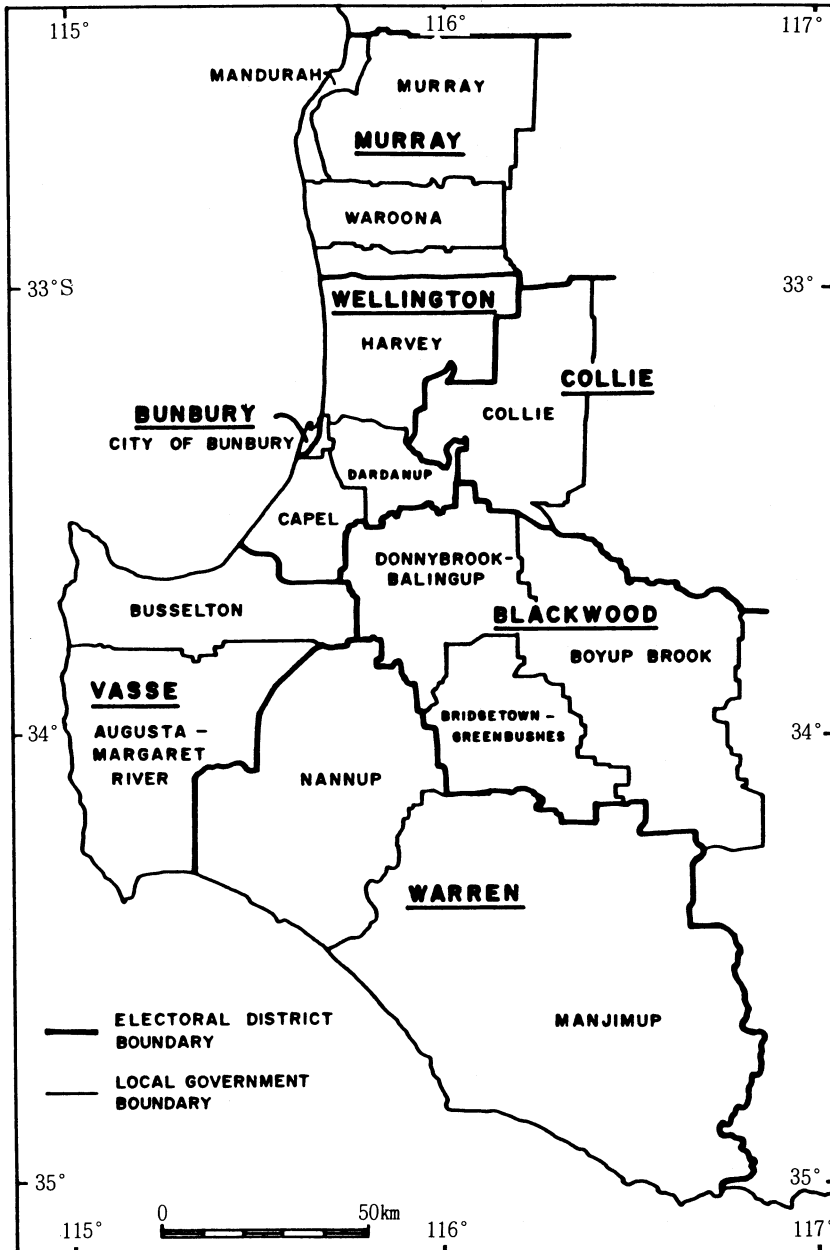
As was noted above, electoral redistributions invariably favour the political party in power. It should be emphasised that this phenomenon is not restricted to any particular political party but is common to parties of all ideological persuasions. Furthermore, there can be no such thing as an 'apolitical' redistribution since, in territorially-based electoral systems, it is the pattern of electoral boundaries which determines who will govern. Electoral redistributions are thus potentially an important component of the changing regional expression of political party strength. It is therefore of crucial importance to evaluate all possible alternative methods for delimiting electoral boundaries in an electoral system in order that as fair a solution as is possible is adopted (Rumley, 1985). In this regard, it is especially important to identify the political impact of the chosen solution and to determine the specific advantages bestowed upon the political party or parties in power.

From 1965-86, the South West enjoyed four major electoral redistributions-

1966, 1972, 1976 and 1982—three of which were undertaken when the Liberal–Country Party coalition was in power and the other (1972) was presided over by the Labor government during its term of office from 1971–4. For the 1966 electoral redistribution, the total number of MLAs in WA was increased by 1 to 51. For the South West, the number and names of all districts remained unchanged. On the face of it, the redistribution had little impact on the territorial pattern of representation. In the main, that pattern, which had derived from the 1961 redistribution, had used LGAs as ‘building blocks’. Thus, Vasse comprised the LGAs of Busselton and Augusta–Margaret River, Warren consisted of Nannup and Manjimup, and so on. In some cases, however, local government boundaries were not coincident with those of electoral districts. For example, the southern boundary of Murray was delimited in 1961 south of the Waroona Shire boundary (Figure 3). As was noted earlier, in WA ostensibly population changes determine the need for an electoral redistribution, usually based on some constrained notion of regional equality. Given some desire to use population size and population trends and the notion of using LGAs as building blocks, then it appeared to be perfectly reasonable to extend the boundaries of those districts which had lost population from 1962–5—that is, Blackwood and Warren (Table 2).

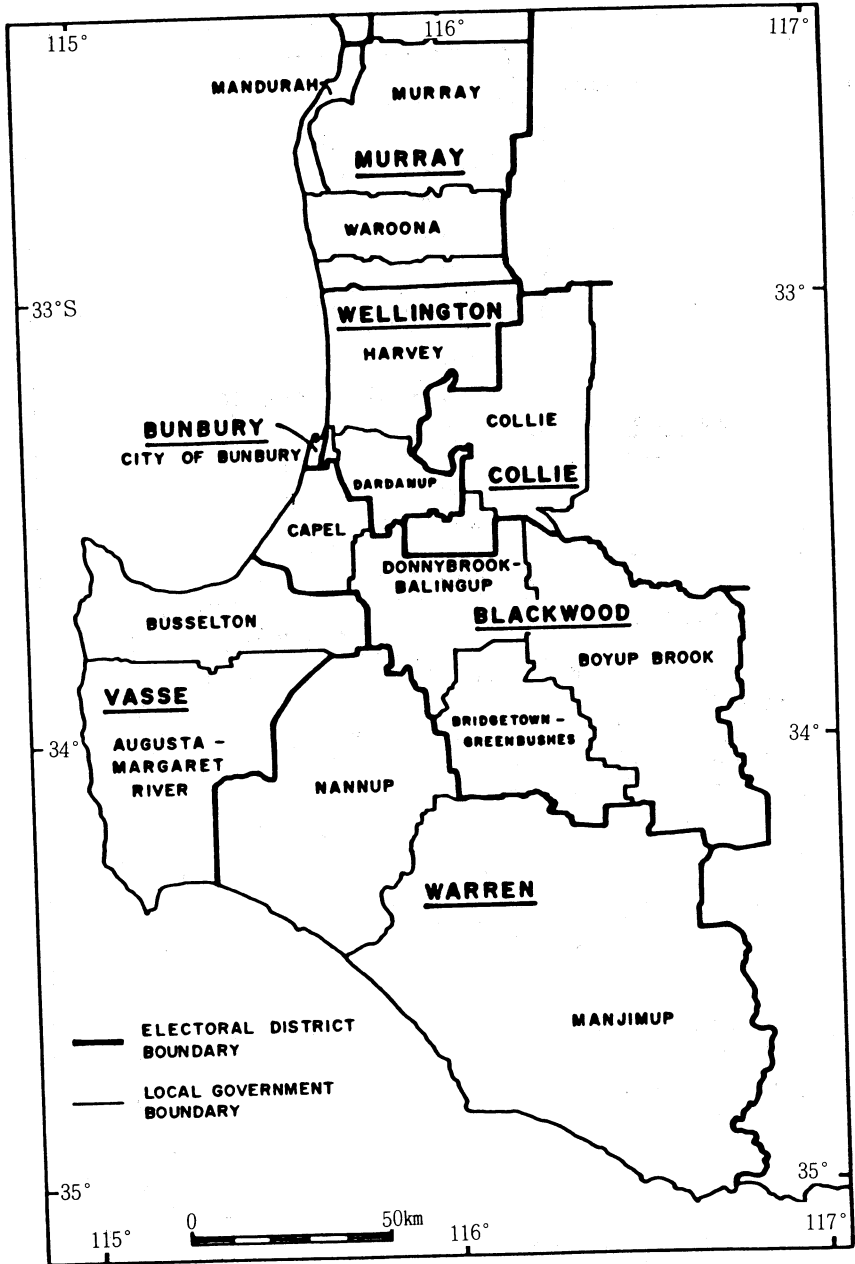
Even though the Liberal member for Blackwood was elected unopposed in the 1965 State election (Table 3), the district had been marginal prior to the 1961 redistribution and contained strong Country Party (CP) support (48 per cent) at the 1959 election. The redistricting options available to the senior coalition partner were few. Either Blackwood’s electoral population could have been bolstered with the addition of a ‘country’ Shire (thus increasing the chances of a CP victory) or it could be ‘strengthened’ by the addition of an LGA in which Liberal support was well-known. Needless to say, the latter option was preferred, and the Shire of Capel (which yielded 64 per cent for the Liberals in the 1965 election) was excised from Wellington (the district with the largest electoral population) and added to Blackwood (Figure 4). However, in the event, the addition of Liberal support was to no avail, as the district was won by the CP in any case in 1968 with a narrow majority.

The addition of the conservative Shire of Denmark to Labor’s Warren to bolster its population, although giving the Liberals a two per cent initial advan-



ELECTORAL DISTRICTS 1961 REDISTRIBUTION  
(1962 AND 1965 ELECTIONS)

Figure 3



ELECTORAL DISTRICTS 1966 REDISTRIBUTION  
(1968 AND 1971 ELECTIONS)

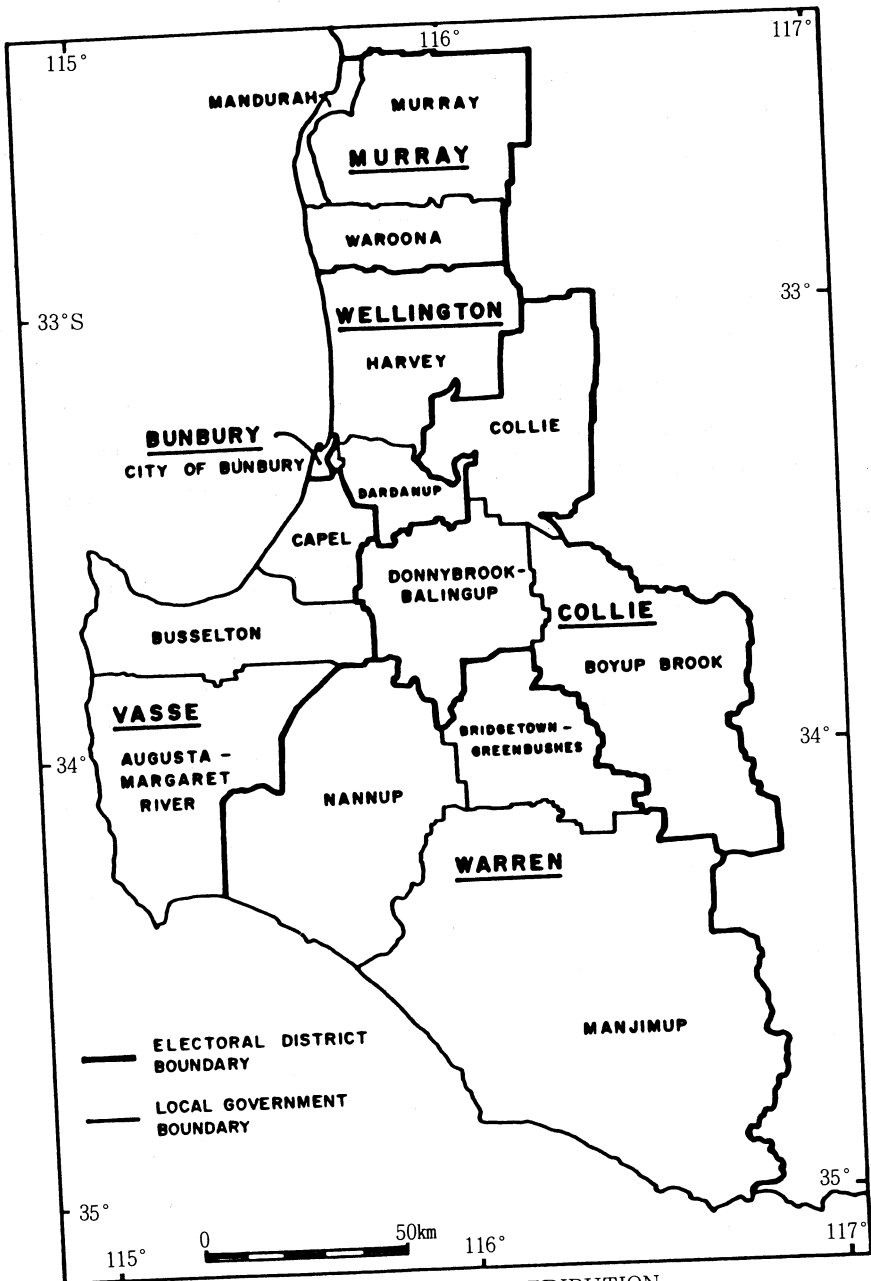
Figure 4

tage did not alter the final result when Labor retained the seat at the 1968 election.

The electoral redistribution of 1972 is interesting since it is the only one during the time period considered in this paper which has been presided over by a Labor government which had come to power in the 1971 election. It is also unusual in the sense that it did not lead to the creation of any new electoral districts in the State, only a 'rearrangement' of districts delimited in 1966. However, as far as the South West region was concerned, electoral representation was reduced by one MLA with the removal of the conservative district of Blackwood (Figure 5).

Apart from the obvious political rationale for this change, the rate of population growth was also a factor. From 1968–71, the rate of population increase in three of the South West districts—Blackwood, Collie and Warren—was significantly below the regional average which itself was well below the WA rate (Table 2). Although Collie had the lowest electoral population and the lowest population increase in the region, it was decided to enlarge rather than remove it. Interestingly, at the 1971 election Collie emerged as one of the strongest Labor districts in the State (Table 3). The Labor vote in Warren also increased markedly at the 1971 State election but not in the same proportion as in Collie. Most of conservative Blackwood was therefore 'safely' apportioned to these two districts. Needless to say, those LGAs containing the strongest conservative support in 1971 (Boyup Brook and Donnybrook—Balingup) were added to the strongest Labor district (Collie), with the other LGA (Bridgetown—Geenbushes) being attached to Warren. Consequently, not only had a safe conservative district been removed and its conservative support 'diluted' into contiguous Labor districts, but that, in addition, those districts contained the smallest electoral populations in the region in 1974 (Table 1). Furthermore, the other component of the former Blackwood – the conservative Shire of Capel – was harmlessly added to the already conservative stronghold of Vasse (Figure 5). This gave Vasse the largest electoral population at the 1974 election (Table 1).

The other major change brought about by the 1972 electoral redistribution was the adjustment of the boundaries of the districts of Murray and Wellington. From 1968–71 both of the districts had grown at a faster rate than any others in the region (Table 2). Indeed, as was noted above, the 'fairness' index had



ELECTORAL DISTRICTS 1972 REDISTRIBUTION (1974 ELECTION)

Figure 5

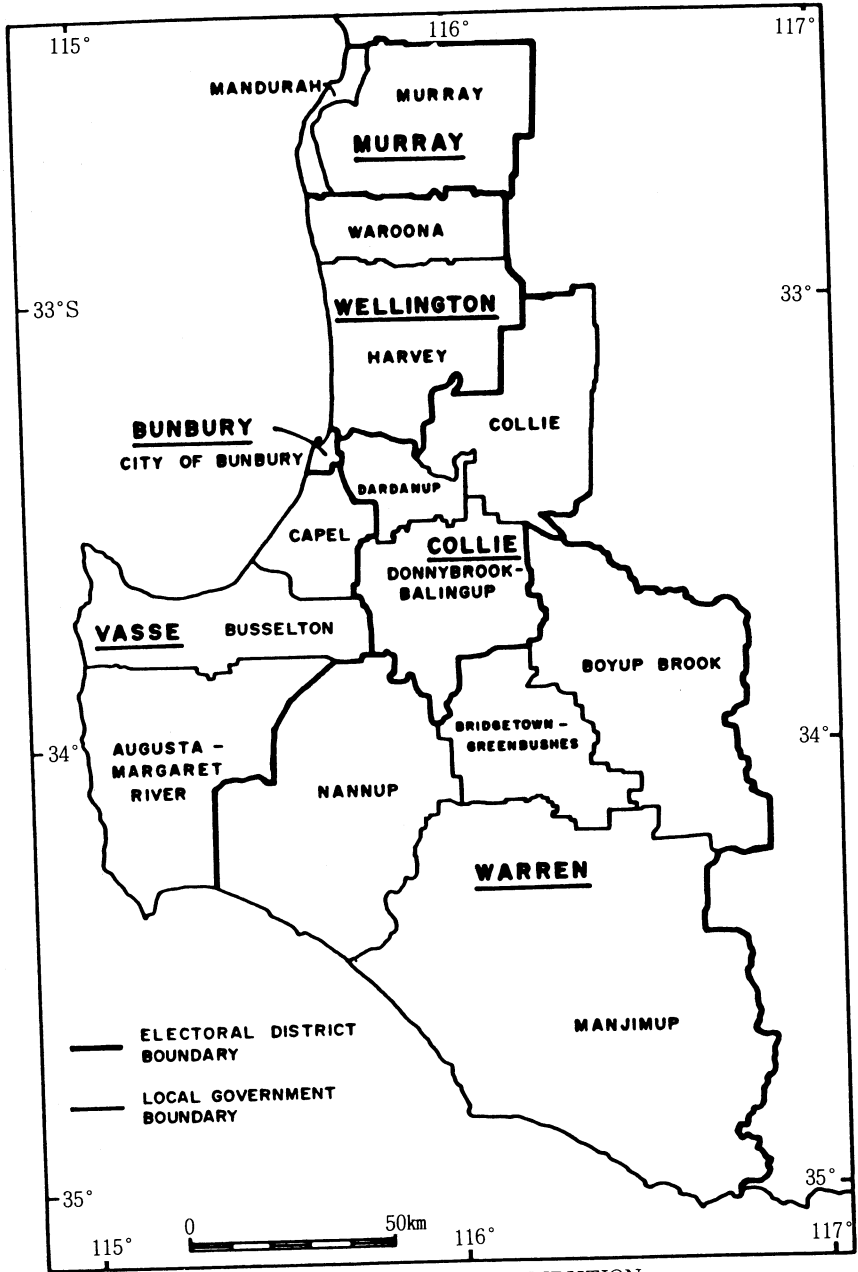
reached a peak of 41 per cent in 1971, with the district of Murray containing the largest number of voters, almost 2,500 greater than the smallest district of Collie (Table 1).

From a situation in 1965 where the ALP did not nominate a candidate in Murray, the political complexion of the district changed markedly with the economic development programme of the 1960s, such that, at the 1971 election, the Liberal Party had to rely on preferences to retain it (Table 3). The adjustment of Murray's northern and southern boundaries tended to 'marginalise' the district further.

Although the Liberal candidate was unopposed in Wellington in 1968, the continued growth of Bunbury spilled into the south west corner of the district. The seat was made even more competitive for the 1971 election by the inclusion of both CP and DLP candidates, but was retained by the Liberals. The minor shift of its northern boundary and the growth of Bunbury meant that for the 1974 election, Wellington contained the largest electoral population in the region. This meant that, in effect, there were a great many 'wasted' conservative votes.

This was to change after the coalition regained government after the 1974 election, since the 1976 redistribution which followed was the fairest of all four redistributions on the basis of electoral population at 1977 (Table 1). In particular, the electoral populations of the two smallest (Labor) districts of Collie and Warren were 'topped up' with conservative voters from Dardanup and Boyup Brook respectively (Figure 6). In addition, the Labor vote which was relatively high in Bunbury in the 1974 election was reduced as its boundaries were extended into Dardanup Shire. With the loss of Dardanup, Waroona was added to Wellington from the growing Murray district.

In one sense, it appeared that the 1977 election was something of a watershed for the South West region. The two main political parties had consolidated their electoral position to the point where overall marginality had almost been minimised (Table 3). Changing economic circumstances and associated differential regional population growth were to change that position thereafter. To a degree, 'consolidation' continued through to the 1980 election in all districts save Bunbury which had become more marginal. As was pointed out earlier, one of the reasons for this increase in marginality was the introduction of a new minor party into South West electoral contests—the Australian Demo-



ELECTORAL DISTRICTS 1976 REDISTRIBUTION (1977 AND 1980 ELECTIONS)

Figure 6

crats—and thus the Liberals had to rely on preferences for victory.

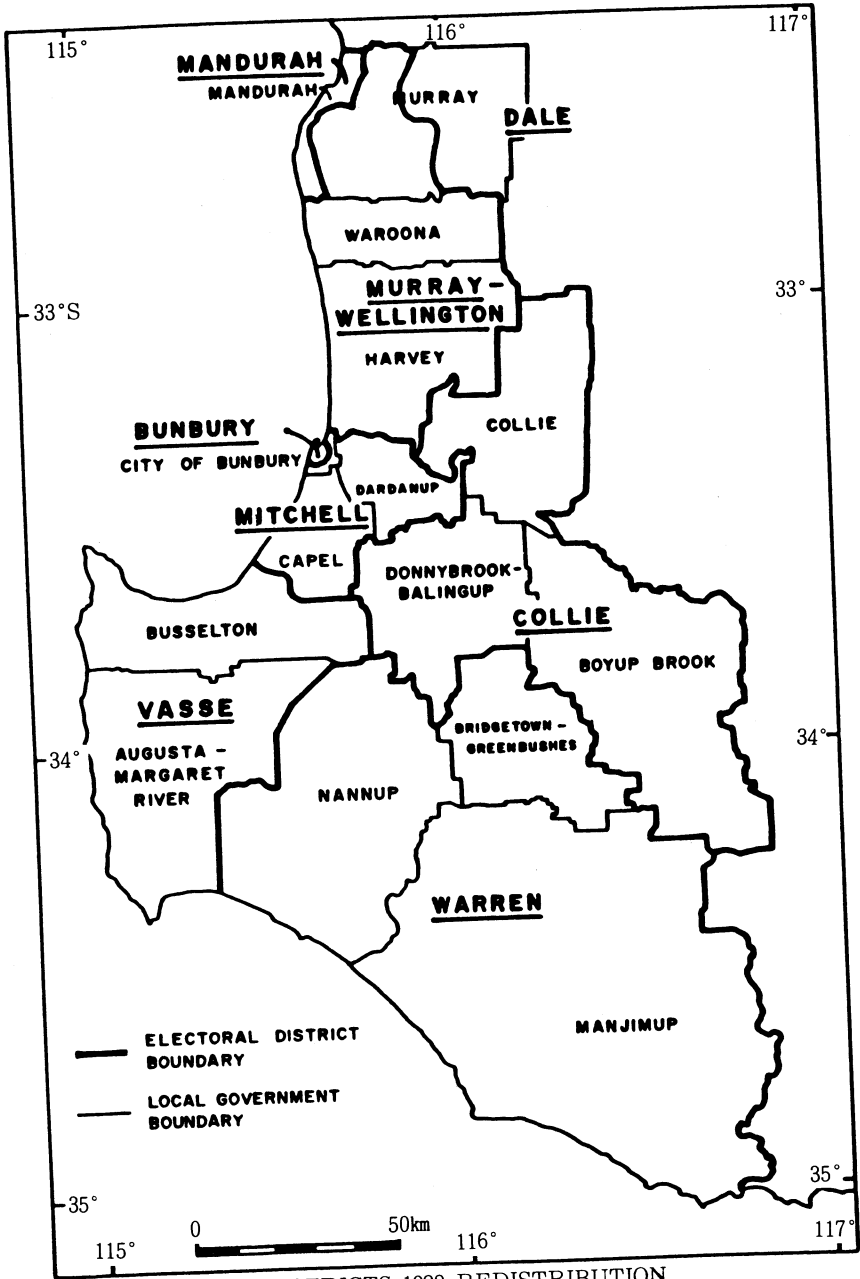
The 1982 electoral redistribution led to the addition of two new electoral districts to the WA Parliament, one of which was added in the South West region. Differential population growth especially around the main regional settlements of Bunbury and Mandurah contributed to the decision to create a new district of Mitchell surrounding Bunbury, as well as a new district of Mandurah.

The boundary between the electoral districts of Bunbury and Mitchell was carefully drawn such that the electoral population of the former actually fell (Table 1). Mitchell, on the other hand, became the largest district with an electoral population finely balanced between conservative Shire interests in Dardanup and Capel and suburban Bunbury voters. To create what appeared to be a new Liberal district of Mandurah required the restructuring of Murray, and part of the remainder was combined with the former Wellington to produce a peculiarly-shaped but safe Liberal district of Murray-Wellington (Figure 7). One of the other reasons for the odd shape was the need to 'catch' electoral population in Dale consequent upon the outward spread of peripheral non-Metropolitan districts as the Metropolitan zone boundary was extended.

Both Warren and Collie, on the other hand, were returned to their 1972 boundaries (Figures 5 and 7).

## The Geography of Electoral Change

In order to try and bring together the detailed pattern of intra-regional electoral change as a consequence of the processes of social and economic change combined with the effects of government decisions discussed above, the voting trends over the eight elections from 1965-86 were analysed by polling place. Naturally, there was some difficulty in precise comparison over the twenty-year period since some polling places were discarded and others were created. It was therefore decided to confine the analysis to the polling places used in the 1986 State election. Electoral data for the Legislative Assembly from the 88 polling places were analysed over the eight elections in two principal ways. First, the average vote per polling place in the South West was computed from 1965-86 for the two major political parties for each election. Second, the patterns of majorities at each polling place were extrapolated into trends, classified and



ELECTORAL DISTRICTS 1982 REDISTRIBUTION  
(1983 AND 1986 ELECTIONS)

Figure 7

mapped.

To a certain extent, the mean party vote by polling place will be a function of the number and location of places actually contested by the competing political parties. Nevertheless, it is clear that, apart from the impact of minor parties which contributed to the fall in the average Liberal vote from 1965 to 1971, there has been a gradual decline in average conservative voting since 1977 (Figure 8). The mean Liberal vote per polling place in 1977, for example, was 61.6 per cent, and this had gradually fallen to 52.1 per cent by 1986. ALP voting, apart from the 'anomaly' in 1968 when only 31 polls were contested, started to increase from 1974 in the region and by 1983 and 1986 had almost reached the level of 1971 when Labor had previously held office (Figure 9). Thus, overall, even though in recent elections voting trends have been swinging away from the conservatives, there is still a strong 'residual' reluctance to vote Labor in sufficient number at a sufficient number of polling places. From the viewpoint of place rather than people, therefore, the South West region still continues to be predominantly conservative.

This point emerges even more clearly when the electoral change trend data are mapped. Polling places were classified according to whether they consistently had a majority for one party or another, and whether that majority was tending to increase, remain stable or whether it was in decline. The classification of all polling places in the region in this manner is necessarily a highly generalised procedure, since not all polling places always fit neatly into one category or another. For the most part, however, it is suggested that the map of change is a reasonably accurate portrayal of the geography of electoral change in the region (Figure 10). One thing which the map does not show, of course, is the relative importance of votes at each place in terms of winning an electoral district.

What is clear, however, is that this map of electoral change is dominated by conservative voting habits. The exceptions are located in the northern part of the region around Mandurah and across to Dwellingup, around Bunbury and Collie, and a number of settlements in Warren electoral district, plus an 'outlier' at Yallingup. All other locations have had conservative majorities since 1965.

There are some interesting intra-regional variations in the trend of majority support by polling place. For the ALP, apart from Yallingup, increasing support

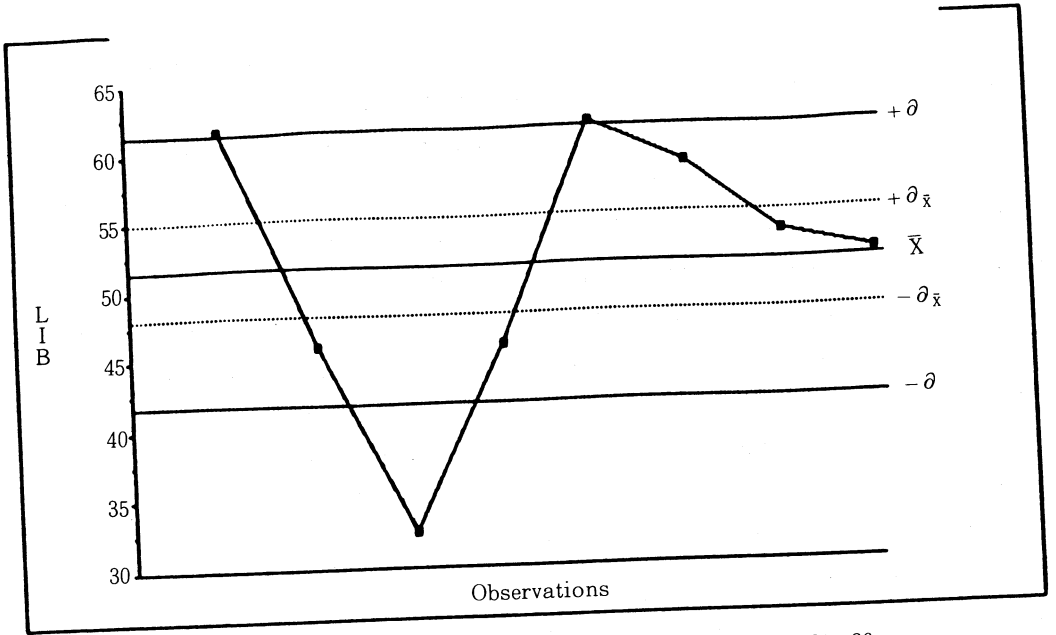


Figure 8 Mean Liberal Vote Per Polling Place 1965-86

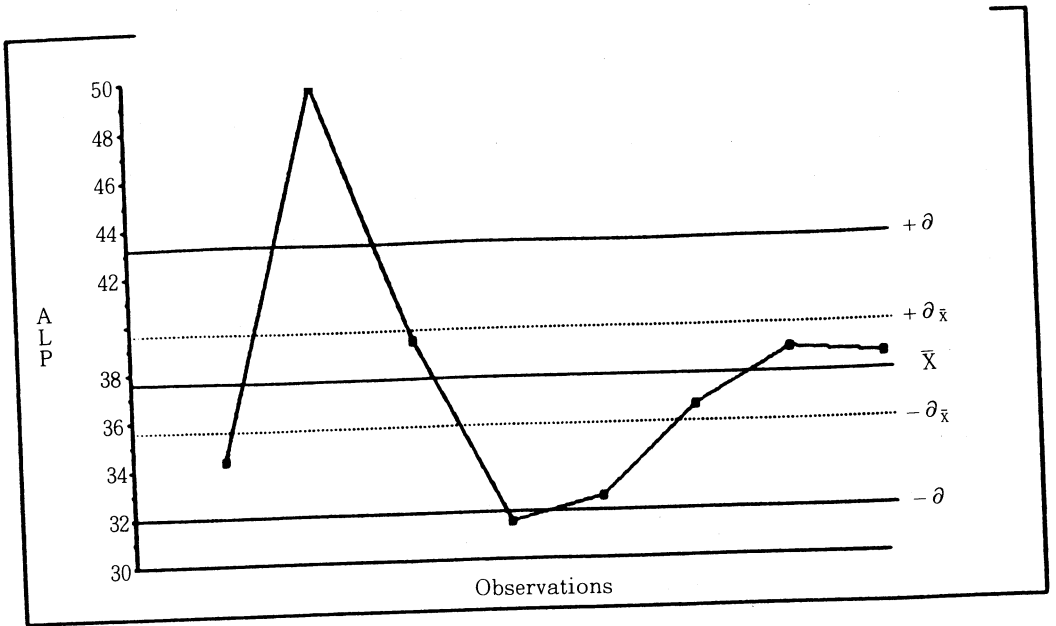


Figure 9 Mean Labor Vote Per Polling Place 1965-86

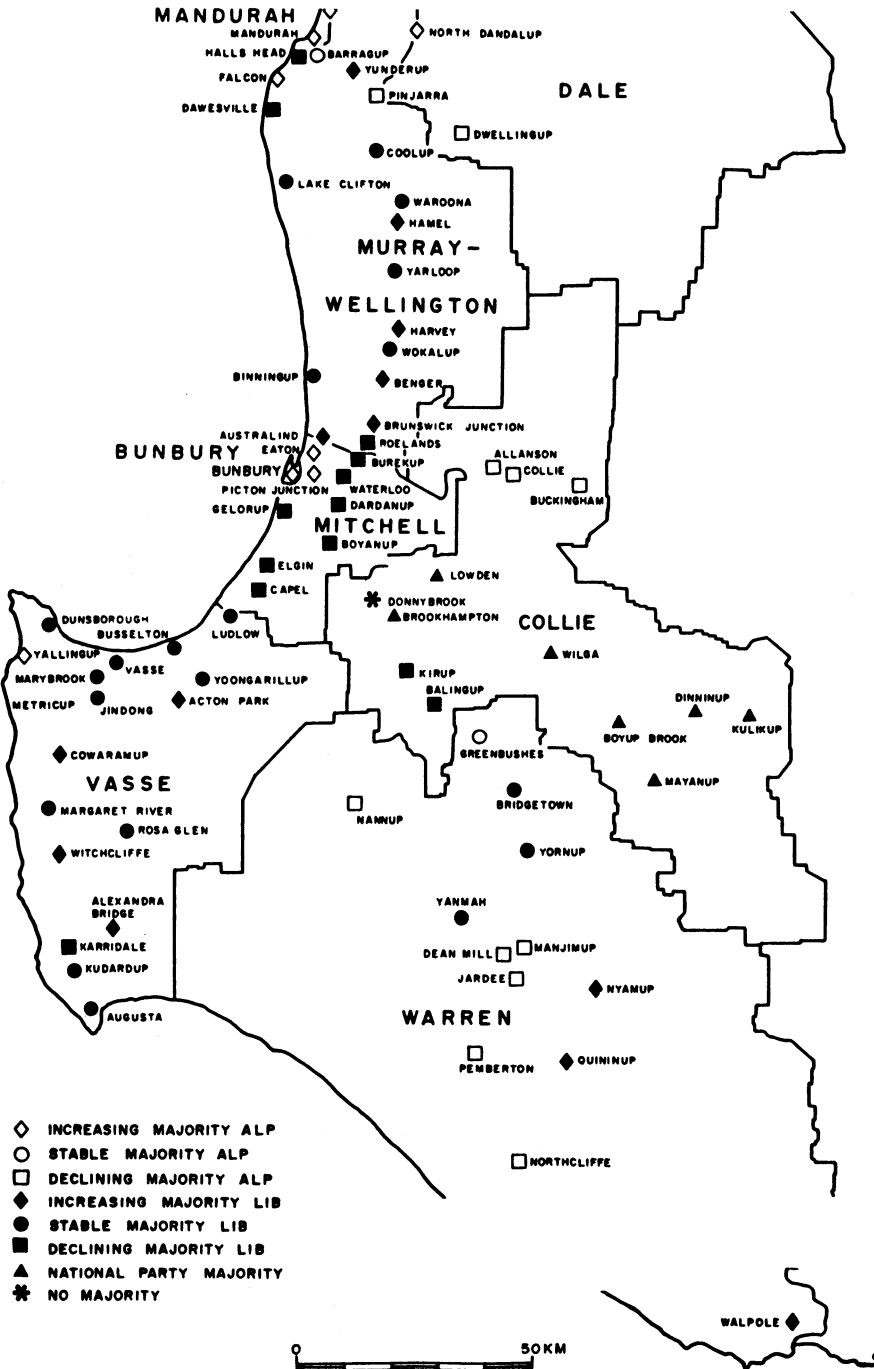


Figure 10 Locational Change in Voting Behaviour 1965-86

has been evident in and around the two largest settlements, Bunbury and Mandurah. Only two places in the region display an approximately stable pattern of ALP majority support—Barragup and Greenbushes. Several other places, on the other hand, exhibit declining ALP majorities. Almost without exception, all of these places are associated with a relative decline in employment in either the coal or in the timber industry. Declining ALP trends are therefore found in and around Collie and in many places in Warren electoral district (Figure 10).

For the Liberal Party, on the other hand, increased majorities typify a number of places, especially in the Shire of Harvey. Other increases can be found at Yunderup near Mandurah, Nyamup and Walpole in Warren, and at a few locations in Vasse. However, the major feature of the latter district is the stability in Liberal majorities.

The pattern of Liberal majority decline appears to be of two principal types. First, is the major decline close to the two main centres, but especially around Bunbury. In this case, there is almost a region of decline stretching east to Roelands and south to Capel. The second type of decline appears to be linked to the intense electoral competition with the country-based party, currently the National Party (NP). This is especially the case in the Shire of Donnybrook—Balingup and to a lesser extent in Boyup Brook. Whereas in Balingup and Kirup, Liberal majorities are declining, they have already disappeared in Brookhampton and Lowden (Figure 10). Boyup Brook, on the other hand, is dominated by National Party places.

In all of this analysis, there is only one place which could not easily be forced into a category using this classification scheme. Appropriately, the name of this place is Donnybrook. From a regional viewpoint, Donnybrook seems to be located on the edge of two 'waves of electoral change'. The first is associated with what has become known as the 'rural crisis' moving west from the wheat-belt and is evidenced by an increase in National Party support. The narrow Labor win in Collie in 1986 is clear evidence of this shift (Table 3). The other 'wave' is associated with the growing regional influence of Bunbury which is moving east and south and is evidenced by declining Liberal majorities. These two sets of regional change converge at Donnybrook, and, consequently political competition here is extremely intense. As a result, Donnybrook is in a category all of its own, and, in terms of voting trends, is a highly competitive non-major-

ity place where the interests of Labor, Liberal and National Parties all conflict, irrespective of the outcome in the host electoral district (Figure 10). For example, in the 1983 election, even though the Labor vote in Collie was 64 per cent, at Donnybrook it was 48 per cent, with a further 48 per cent voting CP. Similarly, in the 1986 election, the Collie Labor vote was 51 per cent, but in Donnybrook it was 37 per cent, with 35 per cent voting Liberal and 24 per cent NP.

## Conclusion

The pattern of regional and intra-regional electoral change in the South West of Western Australia has been described and analysed. It has been argued that the pattern of change is a consequence of four main interacting components—the nature of electoral law, the changing demographic structure of the region, the changing pattern of electoral boundaries and the changing nature of political party competition. In addition, the role of government in the manipulation of these components and in the allocation of regional resources is crucial to a complete understanding of the process of electoral change.

As far as the future is concerned, electoral law is already in the process of change for the next State election in 1989 when the outcome of this for political party representation in the South West region will become evident. Undoubtedly, the demographic structure of the region will continue to change, and, depending on the new electoral boundaries, will have a mixed impact on political party representation. On the one hand, the main centres of Bunbury and Mandurah will continue to grow, and this will likely help the ALP. On the other hand, rural problems, the declining Labor vote in Collie and Warren and the emergence of a stronger, more united National Party will have created some interesting redistricting problems. It is not unlikely, too, that support could grow for an alternative political party in the region, such as the Australian Democrats. What is certain, is that, while there are electoral districts in the region which are necessary for any political party to remain in power, then the role of government investment will continue to be important.

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