

# Dancing with the Panda: Chinese Australians and the 2022 Australian election

XIANG GAO

*The Chinese and broader Asian electorate in Australia has been historically fragmented. However, in the 2022 election Chinese Australian voters played a significant role in the defeat of Scott Morrison's Coalition as they swung toward Labor and independents in several constituencies. This occurred in the greater Sydney area, such as in Reid and Bennelong, as well as in Melbourne's Chisholm and Perth's Tangney. This article investigates Chinese Australians' voting patterns in the 2022 election. It argues that Chinese Australian voters, like many Australians, were concerned about Morrison's personal style and attitudes toward climate change. In this election Chinese Australians shared additional displeasure over the Morrison government's approach towards the Australia–China relationship and the changing Pacific strategic environment. Nevertheless, these attitudes do not suggest that Chinese Australian voters represent a monolithic voting bloc in the Australian electorate. There are diverse dynamics that have been manifested in Chinese Australian communities' attitudes towards key election issues, from local government to foreign policy. While Chinese Australians favoured Labor's overall multicultural and more inclusive approach, it may be too simplistic to generalise that the Chinese Australian electorate can be characterised as a traditional 'ethnic vote' in which ethnic communities are heavily influenced by issues related to their countries of origin and culture rather than their duties as Australian citizens.*

KEY WORDS: Australia–China relationship; ethnic based politics; Chinese ancestry; Chinese Australians' voting patterns

## Introduction

From racially motivated anti-Chinese riots in the Victorian goldfields, the Commonwealth's Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, Cold War containment and Whitlam's diplomatic détente to the recently deteriorating Australia–China relationship, successive Australian governments have been anxious about China and the Chinese presence in Australia. The concern underscores the significance of the historic relationship that China and Chinese migrants have had with the continent. Trade links with Canton (and then Hong Kong) were important across the western Pacific since the foundation of the colonies. With the arrival of significant immigrant populations in the gold rushes and the establishment of Chinatowns in major cities, Chinese migration served as a justification for the exclusionary and racist White Australia Policy. This policy was initially premised on racism and pseudo-science that underpinned a notion of 'Anglo-Saxon race patriotism' but which was later justified on ideology and the fear of communism emanating from Mao's revolutionary People's Republic of China (PRC) (Lowe, 1999: 154). This concern faded from the 1960s, which saw the replacement of the White Australia policy, the end of the Vietnam War and the start of Chinese integration into the world community. Since the 1980s, successive Labor and Coalition Governments welcomed Chinese business and immigration, and China has

become Australia's leading trading partner and a major source of overseas investment. Today approximately 1.39 million individuals or 5.5 per cent of the Australian population are ethnic Chinese (Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS 2021i).

Many of these Chinese migrants have become Australian citizens and have had an increasing importance in the electoral calculations of political parties and candidates. While Chinese Australian voters initially leaned in a pro-Labor direction in the 1980s-90s, since the early 2000s voting patterns and attitudes of the community were similar to English-speaking Australians such that these voters were not considered to be a traditional ethnic voting bloc (Jiang 2016). Instead, individual voter preferences and attitudes were manifested in Chinese Australian communities' experiences and attitudes towards key election and public policy issues, from local government to foreign policy. For example, in 2016 the top ten electorates by Chinese language split their representation between the Liberals (five seats) and Labor (four seats) and the Greens (one seat) (Bowe 2019). Yet at the same time, Chinese voters' political attitudes and participation also reflect their backgrounds and interests as a non-English speaking minority. In some instances, these interests and shared attitudes

have caused them to become a significant voting bloc or key constituency in some electorates (Bowe 2019). The increased sense of political efficacy and the fact that these Chinese Australian voters often are found in a number of key marginal seats have brought issues that are more specifically valued by the Chinese Australians community to a higher salience.

In the 2022 election, voters of Chinese ancestry played a significant role in the defeat of Scott Morrison's Coalition as they swung their vote towards Labor and independents in several constituencies. This occurred in the greater Sydney area where the Coalition could ill afford to lose, such as in Reid and Bennelong, and in Melbourne's Chisholm. Additionally, the Perth electorate of Tangney swung to the ALP. This article investigates the role that Chinese Australian voters played in the 2022 Australian election. It argues that Chinese Australian voters, like many Australians, were concerned about Morrison's personal style and attitudes toward climate change. In this election, some Chinese Australians shared additional displeasure over the rocky state of the Australia–China relationship and the changing Pacific strategic environment. Yet these attitudes should not suggest that Chinese voters necessarily represent a coherent ethnic voting bloc within the Australian electorate. While Chinese Australians overall supported Labor's multicultural and inclusive approach, it may be too simplistic to generalise that the Chinese Australian section of the electorate can be characterised as an 'ethnic vote' in which the ethnic communities are heavily influenced by issues related to their country of origin and culture rather than their identity as Australian citizens.

### **The plural nature of Chinese Australian voters**

Politicians and political parties across a range of democratic countries have long appreciated that immigrant groups can be a ready source of votes. Ethnic-based politics, particularly at the local level, have historically been a place where immigrant groups were provided the space to politically organise and mobilise according to their needs and interests. Unlike the United States and Canada, however, in Australia, which experienced its first large wave of non-English speaking immigrants after WWII, immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds have generally tended not to engage in ethnic-based politics or vote as a bloc (Wisconsin 1973: 132-5). This is also the case with Chinese voters, though less than other immigrant communities (Gao 2020). In contrast to some other immigrants, Chinese Australians initially tended to be pro-Labor in the latter part of the last century. Many of these voters benefited from the Hawke/Keating Governments' support of multiculturalism, increased emphasis on Australia's Asian ties and efforts to facilitate

the settlement of Chinese students after Tiananmen Square, and as such were sympathetic to Labor. Later, despite the rise in anti-Asian sentiment exemplified by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party and the Coalition's initial hesitance to disavow explicitly some of One Nation's anti-immigrant or anti-Asian positions, they have tended to vote less as a bloc and more in line with their underlying structural position in the economy, class structure and/or their individual predilections.

With the rapid increase of Chinese migration since the turn of the century it is unsurprising that political parties and politicians would see these ethnic voters as a source of potential votes. This trend is magnified by the concentration of Chinese Australian voters in several urban seats that have been considered crucial by both parties to secure a parliamentary majority. Yet this task has been made more difficult by the diversity within the community. Pan-Chinese ethnic appeals that centre on China and the PRC-Australian relationship tend to be moderated by the fact that many Chinese Australians are not from the PRC. As of 2018, of the Australians who report Chinese ancestry, 59 per cent were born outside mainland China (ABS 2018). Other ethnic Chinese settling in Australia come from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the 'Nanyang' countries of Southeast Asia (e.g. Singapore and Malaysia) (Sigler et al. 2018). Approximately 677, 960 of the 1.39 million ethnic Chinese were born in Mainland China (ABS 2021j). More importantly, political attitudes of Chinese Australians have increasingly resembled the general Australian population such that ethnic-based appeals can have little traction (Gao 2020: 156-163). This is not to say that specific discrimination against Sino-centric issues will not be of concern to the Chinese Australian community in a particular election or when public policy more generally is deemed important.

Like other Australians, Chinese Australians are sensitive to discrimination. In the Lowy Institute's 2022 study, one in five Chinese Australians (18 per cent) reported they had been physically threatened or attacked because of their Chinese heritage (Lowy Institute 2022: 10) or had experienced the dominant Anglo majority's complaints directed against the Asian migrant community or China generally (Lowy Institute 2022: 7). For example, in the 2019 New South Wales election Labor leader Michael Daley complained about 'our kids' fleeing Sydney stating that 'they're being replaced by young people, from typically Asia, with PhDs' (ABC News 2019). He later issued an unequivocal apology in the face of a significant loss of support in electorates with large Chinese populations (Davies 2019). This statement was seen as contributing to NSW Labor's defeat in the 2019 election. Chinese Australians' sensitivity is also evident in their higher level of trust in the Chinese government to 'act responsibly

in the world' and their higher level of 'confidence in Chinese President Xi Jinping', compared to the rest of the Australian population (Lowy Institute 2022: 25-6).

As noted by Jia Gao, there are three elements that need to be considered when examining Chinese Australians' voting patterns (Gao 2020: 162-3). First, while Chinese migrants initially voted predominantly for Labor, this is no longer the case, and voting patterns have moved towards a more interest-based and ideological model of voting preference. Second, changes in the socio-economic status of Chinese migrants have led to a change in the political inclinations and shifting political allegiances across the Chinese Australian population as a whole, as well as in contested marginal districts:

These changes have, unfortunately, been disregarded by those who view Chinese migrants as 'others', and those who have no real knowledge about the community. The misunderstanding resulting from this unfamiliarity has, for years, been haunting the mainstream elites with notions that Chinese Australians are natural supporters of left-leaning ideas, including the Chinese ruling party (Gao 2020: 162).

Finally, there has been a misconception that the earlier pro-Labor bent of Chinese migrants was the result of a high level of Labor Party activity in the community and the conscious cultivation by Labor to mobilise this ethnic vote. Instead, Gao argues that the higher level of political activity and recruitment by Labor masks the underlying plurality of party preferences in the Chinese Australian population (2020).

### **Chinese Australian voters in 2022 election**

Scott Morrison led the Coalition to a defeat in the 2022 Australian federal election, winning 58 seats (42 Liberal and/or LNP and 16 National) in a 151-seat chamber, and the lowest proportion of seats in the House of Representatives since the Liberal Party first contested the 1946 election (Curtis 2022). The stewardship of the national economy and public health featured alongside a low unemployment rate, economic recovery and low COVID-19 mortality as the Coalition's major planks in its re-election bid. Nevertheless, Morrison's tenure and policy suite had been controversial. The AUKUS defence pact resulted in a diplomatic rift with France over an earlier submarine deal. The increasing tensions with China, the government's slow responses to fire and flood and the climate target discussion associated with them, and the treatment of female MPs and government employees combined with a general ambivalence to or distaste for Morrison's personal character to make a Coalition victory difficult (BBC News 2022). Given the circumstances, a

Labor victory was anticipated. Though the Labor Party won with an outright majority of seats in the House of Representatives (77 of 151), the election has witnessed the rise of independents and the Greens at the cost of the two major parties. In the Senate, the crossbench, especially the Greens, can potentially shape the policy agenda and outcomes, as neither the Coalition nor the Labor Party commands a majority. As such, the 2022 election reflects a growing diversity of views and interests in the parliament.

According to the 2021 census, 1.39 million Australian residents identify themselves as having Chinese ancestry, about 5.5 per cent of the population (ABS 2021i). Given this population size and the location of Chinese Australian voters who were eligible to vote in the 2022 federal election, Chinese Australian voters are not numerous enough to determine the election's outcome, except for those electorates where 10-20 per cent of voters have Chinese ancestry, namely Chisholm, Reid, Banks, Parramatta, Kooyong, Tangney, Deakin and Bennelong (Fang et al. 2022). For example, both Reid and Chisholm had swings of over 8 per cent toward the Labor Party, a swing much higher than the national average of 3.66 per cent (Fang et al. 2022). Chinese Australian communities, like the rest of the country, were concerned about issues such as health, climate change, education, COVID-19 policy and the economy (Nicholas et al. 2022). What appeared more salient about this voting group was the great amount of attention it paid to the Morrison government's China policy and Australia China relations. Though there has been no substantive policy difference towards China since Labor took power, the Coalition government's rhetoric, as a part of the Australian response to the increasingly assertive Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been poorly received by many Chinese Australian voters, especially when such rhetoric had the potential to encourage expression of racism (McGuirk 2022).

### *National public opinion polls of Chinese Australian voters*

There is little data on the political views or opinions of Chinese Australian voters. Some polling indicative of the views of Australian Chinese voters has been done by Media Today Group, a major Chinese media outlet in the Australian market which polled Chinese Australians prior to the elections in 2019 and 2022. In 2022 Media Today Group introduced the survey as the largest national poll targeting solely Chinese Australians. The group solicited participants widely through various platforms, such as WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging and social media app, and participants self-selected to participate; participation was encouraged using \$35 discount vouchers. These polls suggest a significant shift of support between the two major parties but a relatively stable trend as to the issues of concern — save for China–Australia relations.

The 2019 poll indicated participants would vote for the Coalition (63 per cent) by a wide margin over Labor (27 per cent). In 2022 this margin essentially reversed, with 74 per cent of voters favouring Labor to 18 per cent for Coalition. The top priority election issues in 2019 were the economy and taxation, followed by Australia–China relations, health, income and social welfare; in 2022, Australia–China relations became the primary concern, overtaking the other five items that still remained high on the list (Sohu News 2019). In 2022, 62 per cent of the 7,322 survey participants wanted to see that Australia and China ‘agree to disagree’ and ‘improve the bilateral relations’ and 25 per cent supported the option to ‘fully restore the bilateral relationship and resume Australia’s honeymoon period with China’, while only 11 per cent of participants believed that the Australian government should ‘uphold the current government [Morrison’s] stance and protect Australian national interest’ (Media Today Group 2022). Defence, infrastructure and the environment have consistently been the least concerning matters for Chinese Australian voters in both 2019 and 2022 according to the survey (Media Today Group 2022).

This survey appears to confirm that the Coalition’s fierce rhetoric towards China is a vote-losing stance in the Chinese Australian community. Indeed, the results even concur with some negative assessments concerning the Chinese communities’ commitment to Australian values as only 11 per cent of participants supported a statement to protect and promote Australian national interests in Australia–China relations. However, the reliability of this data is open to question. First, the self-selected polling method undermines the validity of the overall survey results. Second, the surveys do not provide the full account of diverse groups and communities with Chinese heritage. Though 68 per cent of the survey participants have lived in Australia for more than 10 years, only 0.53 per cent of participants were born in Australia. Additionally, the survey was conducted in simplified Chinese characters, which means that it is likely that the majority of participants were the first generation of immigrants to Australia from mainland China. As such, second and subsequent generations of immigrants and immigrants with Chinese ancestry from outside the Chinese mainland, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, may be insufficiently represented in the results. Lastly, the questionnaire also solely emphasised attitudes on ‘ethnic-related’ issues (e.g. the likelihood of supporting candidates who were ‘friendly to Chinese community’ and candidates ‘with Chinese or Asian background’) and Australian government’s China policy, which does not bring other salient domestic issues or attitudes into the focus.

A better measure of Chinese Australian effects on the 2022 election involves an investigation of some

marginal divisions where the Chinese Australian voters have affected the election results. Interpreting the data pertaining to these particular divisions has limitations given the lack of local exit surveys, but there can be little doubt that the Chinese Australian voters’ attitudes impacted the election outcome.

#### *Reid, inner-west Sydney, NSW*

The inner-western Sydney seat of Reid was a Labor stronghold until it was lost to Liberal candidate Craig Laundry in 2013. This Coalition strength continued when the Liberal Party maintained a margin of 3.2 per cent at the 2019 election. The 2022 election, however, witnessed a two-party preferred (2PP) swing to Labor of 8.4 per cent to produce a Labor margin of 5.2 per cent (Green 2022a). In the 2021 census, 23.2 per cent of Reid residents identified themselves as having Chinese ancestry, much higher than New South Wales generally (7.2 per cent) and nationally (5.5 per cent) (ABS 2021b). When comparing the results from the Australian Electoral Commission’s 52 polling places for Reid against the demographic data, it is evident that many voting districts that witnessed a large swing to the Labor Party included a high proportion of voters of Chinese heritage (Australian Electoral Commission 2022a). For example, in Burwood, there are 32.8 per cent of residents with Chinese ancestry (ABS 2021c). Across the three polling places in Burwood, the highest swing to Labor was 11.74 per cent (Australian Electoral Commission 2022a). The polling booth in Wentworth Point North, which has 31.6 per cent Chinese ancestry, recorded a 13.4 per cent swing to Labor (ABS 2021d). Chinese Australians make up 43.2 per cent of the population in Rhodes where the polling booth documented an 11.67 per cent swing towards the Labor Party (ABS 2021e).

#### *Chisholm, eastern Melbourne, Victoria*

Liberal candidate Gladys Liu won Chisholm in 2019 with a slim 0.5 per cent margin. In the 2022 election, Australian Labor Party candidate Carina Garland took the electorate with a 6.9 per cent swing, leaving her with a 6.4 per cent margin (Green 2022b). Chisholm residents with Chinese heritage make up 28.9 per cent of the population of the electorate, considerably higher than Victoria generally (6.6 per cent) (ABS 2021f). Cross referencing the election results from 51 polling places in Chisholm and the electorate’s demographic composition, we see that the greater swing towards Labor (Australian Electoral Commission 2022b) occurred in those polling booths where the Chinese Australian population was relatively higher. For example, in Box Hill the Chinese Australian population constitutes 39 per cent (ABS 2021g). Among the four polling places in Box Hill the swing to Labor varied from 5.91 per cent to 10.98 per cent (Australian Electoral Commission 2022b). The largest Labor swing occurring

in one of the seven polling places in Glen Waverley was 11.83 per cent, and similar to Box Hill, 38 per cent of the population in Glen Waverley area identified themselves as having Chinese ancestry (ABS 2021h).

The analysis of the Australian Electoral Commission's results and the census data in Reid (NSW) and Chisholm (VIC) reveal a positive correlation between the swing to the Labor Party and the population size of Chinese Australians in those electorates. This positive correlation is further supported by the national election results and census data (Table 1). However, the statistics available do not provide a firm answer to whether Chinese Australian voters have formed a voting bloc that can sufficiently influence the election outcomes in the marginal areas or to what extent the Coalition's policy rhetoric towards China has been a 'turn off' for voters of Chinese heritage. Chinese Australian voters have diverse political views. The Chinese mainland immigrants who gained asylum under Hawke after Tiananmen Square tend to hold negative opinions of the PRC while maintaining the lingering gratitude and appreciation towards the Labor Party (Sohu News 2019). In contrast, the more recent mainland immigrants tend to be more sympathetic or even supportive to the PRC leadership. At the same time these newer migrants have class and other significant differences that make them less likely to favour Labor; many migrated with considerable funding, investment or skills, and have been attracted to the Coalition's promotion of small business and middle-class notions of owning property (Sohu News 2019). People migrating from Hong Kong and Taiwan (together approximately 11 per cent of ethnic Chinese) have been concerned about the recent Chinese government's crackdown of the democratic movement in Hong Kong, its assertive behaviour in the cross-strait relations and the implications of Taiwan's future (ABS 2021j). Ethnic Chinese people from Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, have more mixed feelings towards China, also shared by many other Australian businesspeople: many enjoy the business opportunities brought by China's economic rise, while being wary of China's increasingly repressive political environment and the pressure on businesses (Sakkal 2022).

Despite these caveats it is nevertheless evident from the brief review of the data above that the matter of Australia–China relations was an important election issue for Chinese Australian voters, a circumstance that was widely covered by the media before the election and in its immediate aftermath. Many voters expressed their concern over the 'anti-Asian hate' fuelled by the Coalition's language that did not sufficiently distinguish the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese government from Chinese Australians (Rachwani 2022). Major media outlets have attributed many Chinese communities' rejection of Liberal Party candidates to the Morrison government's

China policy. Nevertheless, as a diverse ethnic group with different countries of origin and generations of immigrants, Chinese Australian voters have grown increasingly sophisticated in their voting choices and patterns. A simple dichotomous single-issue explanation is insufficient and does not account for some switch to independents and Greens in the 2022 election. Put another way, the Chinese–Australian relationship was one factor in voting decisions, and an important one, it seems, but was unlikely to be the only issue that swung large numbers of Chinese Australian voters towards Labor, independents or smaller parties. ABC News conducted a series of interviews among various Chinese communities from February to May 2022. Chinese voters voiced their interest in aged care, climate change, education, economic recovery, a diverse and inclusive Australian government and society (Zhao et al. 2022). Across the primary election issues (such as cost of living, aged care and climate change) there is significant congruence between the second and subsequent generations of Chinese Australians, on the one hand, and the rest of the country (Zhao et al. 2022). Some of the interviewees in these ABC interviews stated that the matter of Chinese–Australian relations was an 'underlying issue' but not a 'make-or-break reason' for them to change votes towards the Greens and independents (Fang et al. 2022).

#### **Discussion: Chinese Australians as a voting bloc?**

Immigrant populations and voters often exhibit some reluctance to socialise with democratic politics in their new countries (White et al. 2008). Local citizens sometimes interpret immigrants' cultural and social organisations and political activity as a threat to local power structures and democratic politics. Given the historic anxiety that China and Chinese migrants have had in Australia, the increased presence of Chinese voters and political influence has led to perceptions that ethnic Chinese are seeking to influence Australian politics in a manner contrary to Australian national interests or values. This perception is underscored by widely publicised media reports that Chinese donors gave just over \$12.6 million to the Australian political candidates/parties between 2000 and 2016, representing 79.3 per cent of all foreign donations, despite the fact that overall foreign donations are a small portion of total donations. In 2015–16, foreign donations were 2.6 per cent of total donations to political parties, and in the seven election periods from 1998–99 to 2016, foreign donations have only amounted to between 0.03 per cent and 6.13 per cent of all donations (Gomes 2017). A more extreme version of this thesis is that some Chinese community members facilitate corruption (debasing Australian political processes) or are CCP 'agents' wanting to exert influence in Australian politics. For example, Clive Hamilton writes that a systematic Chinese government campaign of espionage and influence peddling is leading to 'the erosion of Australian sovereignty' (Welch 2018). These concerns

**Table 1:** Election results and swings in seats where residents recorded higher proportions of Chinese ancestry than the national average (5.5 per cent)

| Commonwealth Electoral Division | Residents with Chinese ancestry (%) | Liberal Party swing (%)<br>Nat. av. -5.74 | Previous Party 2019 | Successful Party/candidate 2022 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Banks NSW                       | 20.0                                | -5.7                                      | Liberal             | Liberal                         |
| Barton NSW                      | 19.0                                | -7.3                                      | ALP                 | ALP                             |
| Bennelong NSW                   | 28.8                                | -7.9                                      | Liberal             | ALP                             |
| Bradfield NSW                   | 24.5                                | -15.3                                     | Liberal             | Liberal                         |
| Fowler NSW                      | 12.9                                | -12.9                                     | ALP                 | Independent                     |
| Parramatta NSW                  | 14.8                                | -6.3                                      | ALP                 | ALP                             |
| Reid NSW                        | 23.2                                | -10.4                                     | Liberal             | ALP                             |
| Chisholm VIC                    | 28.9                                | -7.7                                      | Liberal             | ALP                             |
| Deakin VIC                      | 13.0                                | -6.2                                      | Liberal             | Liberal                         |
| Kooyong VIC                     | 19.0                                | -6.5                                      | Liberal             | Independent                     |
| Higgins VIC                     | 10.1                                | -5.8                                      | Liberal             | ALP                             |
| Hotham VIC                      | 14.8                                | -8.1                                      | ALP                 | ALP                             |
| Menzies VIC                     | 26.7                                | -8.8                                      | Liberal             | Liberal                         |
| Swan WA                         | 8.3                                 | -12.7                                     | Liberal             | ALP                             |
| Tangney WA                      | 16.5                                | -11.3                                     | Liberal             | ALP                             |

Source: 2021 Census Data, Australian Bureau of Statistics; 2022 Seat Summary of House of Representatives, Australian Electoral Commission.

seemingly increased with several high-profile scandals (such as Sam Dastyari and Huang Xiangmo) (Lo 2017), the larger influence China now exerts over the Australian economy, the recent deterioration of China–Australia relations, and the PRC’s foreign policy moves in the Pacific Island region. There is also a perception that Chinese businesspersons would use corrupt methods to secure requisite governmental development or business permits. For example, in July 2022, the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption held a public hearing on whether former Hurstville and Georges River councillors accepted kickbacks and other illicit favours to support various developments between 2014 and 2021 (Shams 2022). It is unlikely that these perceptions and incidents, which can segue into racist discourse and discrimination, will significantly tamp down Chinese Australians’ political participation in the long term. However, in certain instances, they may be used as a wedge or as a means of political parties’ undermining the support for a candidate who benefits from significant Chinese Australian support in their particular electorate.

One impact of such perceptions is that political parties have been cautious about making explicit appeals to Chinese voters for fear of being labelled ‘pro-Beijing’ (Tobin and Power 2019). At the same time, this very insecurity and potential discrimination arising from such perceptions and the concomitant perceived need for ensuring political support have made the Chinese community a major source of campaign funding (Tobin and Power 2019). And where Chinese Australian candidates have been nominated, they are often placed by parties

in unwinnable divisions. This avoidance of ‘pro-Beijing’ attitudes can also spill over into ‘tokenist’ campaigns and tropes in an attempt to sway the Chinese Australian electorates in their favour. For example, the tokenist campaign strategy is evidenced in the 2019 federal election when Labor sought to highlight its commitment to multiculturalism and its opposition to the repeal of Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act in those electorates with significant Chinese Australian voters (Hutcheon and Hui 2019). From this perspective, the attempts to attract Chinese Australian voters using such issues as multiculturalism and migration assume that these are the only issues that Chinese Australians, as ‘ethnics’ and ‘migrants’, care about. Accordingly, the view is not attuned to the nature of the Chinese Australian community as a whole (Lo 2019), and, to that extent, it can degrade political discourse.

Perhaps the more salient question about the influence of the Chinese Australian vote in the 2022 election is whether Chinese Australians constitute a cohesive ethnic voting ‘bloc’ where individuals vote overwhelmingly in favour of a particular party, or according to a set of ‘ethnic’ issues (or in response to commonly felt discrimination) or vote for ethnic Chinese candidates without concern for political party in a consistent manner. Ethnic voting has essentially two characteristics. First, it is evident where ‘[m]embers of an ethnic group show an affinity for one party or the other which cannot be explained solely as a result of other demographic characteristics’ (Wolfinger 1965: 896). Second, where members of an ‘ethnic group will cross party lines to vote for or against a candidate

belonging to a particular ethnic group' (Wolfinger 1965: 869). Ethnic bloc voting exists when a large proportion of the ethnic electorate votes for a particular party, issue or ethnic candidate (Hass 1987: 665). Ethnic voting has long been associated with politics in many democratic states and has been studied both for its persistence (Parenti 1967) and for the lessening of the behaviour across generations (Glazer and Moynihan 1963). In many cases the existence of bloc voting is difficult to discern (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2011).

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine fully the individual-level and important structural conditions that can impact (either advantageously or disadvantageously) Chinese Australian individuals from political participation. Moreover, there is a paucity of data for Asian Australians and Chinese Australians on voting behaviour. Nevertheless, data relating to the 2022 election and previous federal elections provides for some tentative conclusions. First, it is unlikely that the Chinese Australian community is an ethnic voting bloc despite it having some significance in marginal seats. The Chinese Australian community is too diverse and fragmented for ethnically based appeals to have traction across electoral cycles. Indeed, recognising these ethnic differences among Asians is an important aspect of effective outreach, as Scott Morrison learned to his detriment when he experienced backlash after he greeted a Korean voter with a Chinese salutation while campaigning in 2019 (Folley 2019). This is particularly true given the early Australian embrace of multiculturalism as a governmental policy compared with other democratic countries. Nevertheless, this cross-community agreement may not be reflected in primary votes for a particular party, and instead, it tends to be diminished by socio-economic and individual factors. As such, an ethnic Chinese candidate is not an assured winner in a district with a large Asian or Chinese population, as is evident from the fortunes of the Hong Kong-born Liberal candidate Gladys Liu in the Chisholm electorate in Victoria.

The diverse nature of the community is exemplified by Foreign Minister Penny Wong. Wong is a long-time labour rights attorney who immigrated to Australia from Malaysia. As a senator she has not hesitated to embrace and emphasise her Chinese heritage when discussing certain policies, but she has emphasised her Malaysian heritage as well. At the same time, she has used her immigrant experience to emphasise the diversity of the Australian experience and culture within a common system of Australian norms and experiences. She told journalists on her recent visit to her hometown of Kota Kinabalu as Foreign Minister:

This story [overcoming adverse conditions and immigration] can be told by so many Australians. We have so many Australians who were born overseas or whose parents were born overseas,

who have connections with South-East Asia and other countries around the world... (Dziedzic and Barker 2022).

This diversity among the Chinese Australian community (and Asian Australian community more generally) suggests that parties would be better to eschew various electoral strategies that may essentialise and reduce Chinese Australians to a set of assumed stereotypical attitudes and policy preferences. Arguably Mr Morrison and the Coalition did not fully appreciate this diversity in the 2022 election.

Second, it appears that the historical preference Chinese Australian voters had had for Labor from the 1960s to the 1990s has dissipated. This is most evident in the marginal seats mentioned above. In these seats, Chinese Australian votes moved to Labor under Kevin Rudd and Gillard to the Coalition under Turnbull and Morrison back to Labor under Albanese in the 2022 election. These swings suggest that various structural factors that may have influenced these voters have changed, and that local issues and individual preferences have a greater impact on voting decisions. In addition, the strong showing of teal independents in some electorates with large Chinese Australian populations also suggests a growing willingness to vote for those candidates and positions that reflect alternative views to the major parties. For example, in Fowler, NSW, where the residents are 12.9 per cent ethnic Chinese and 18.9 per cent Vietnamese, independent candidate Dai Le, a community-based former ABC journalist, defeated former NSW Labor Premier Kristina Keneally. Teal independent Dr Monique Ryan claimed victory against Liberal candidate Josh Frydenberg, the sitting Treasurer, in Kooyong, Victoria, where 19 per cent of the population identify themselves as having Chinese ancestry (see Table 1). This signals that political parties must commit resources and tailor their messages more closely to the concerns and issues of particular electorates, which may include large numbers of Chinese Australian voters as well as other Asian voters, as these voters can and have recently oscillated among the parties and candidates.

Third, there are issues of particular interest to Chinese Australian voters that involve the Australia–China relations. These issues appear to be most salient in first generation voters who likely migrated recently from the PRC. The large majorities who disagreed with the Morrison government's approach to China, evidenced in the Media Today Group's polls, suggest the continued durability of these attitudes among first generation immigrants from the PRC. However, it is not clear whether the political behaviour is based on ideology (pro-PRC to the point of derogation of Australian interest), business, personal factors or fears of increased discrimination and potential violence due to the use of incendiary anti-Chinese rhetoric. Moreover, it is important to note that

criticisms of the Morrison Government's foreign policy and rhetoric towards PRC were not limited to the Chinese Australian communities. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, for example, stated in 2020 that he was 'puzzled' by the Coalition government's insistence on pushing China's 'buttons' as relations continued to deteriorate. Rudd noted that while many states had issues with the PRC, Morrison government's approach seemed counterproductive (Flanagan 2020; ABC News 2021). Nevertheless, it is likely that many of these attitudes exhibited by first-generation immigrants will not transfer to their Australian-born children.

## Conclusion

Chinese Australian voters do not generally vote as an ethnic voting bloc nor do they appear to be solely mobilised by ethnically politically based ethnic appeals. However, it is evident that the Chinese Australian community's vote contributed to the historic defeat of the Liberal-National Coalition under Scott Morrison in 2022. Although Chinese Australian voters are not numerous enough to determine the election's direction and results, in many electorates where 10-20 percent of people have Chinese ancestry it appears that Chinese voters, more than Australian voters generally, did turn against the Liberal Party. In Chisholm and Reid, where one in four to five residents self-identified as ethnically Chinese, the swings toward the Labor Party were much higher than the national average. It is not clear if these voters felt more strongly about the state of the economy, COVID-19, climate change and Morrison's personal governance style than other Australians, yet it does seem, in the absence of any other explanation, that some Chinese Australian voters were disinclined to support Morrison because of his rhetoric towards China and Chinese Australians. Nevertheless, the extent to which these voters were crucial to Labor's 2022 majority and whether foreign policy rhetoric and Chinese–Australian relations has become a salient issue within the Chinese Australian community in coming elections warrants further research. The diversity of the Chinese community and the larger Asian community mandates that political parties should commit resources and tailor their messages more closely to the concerns and interests of particular electorates in their future campaigns.

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#### Author

Xiang Gao is a senior lecturer and the discipline convener of Political and International Studies at the University of New England, Australia. She holds a PhD in Politics and International Relations from the University of Auckland, and an MA in International Relations and American Studies from Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies. Xiang's research interests are the politics and international relations of the Asia Pacific.