

CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY REGIONAL ARCHIVES

# Strange Culture

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The Country Labor Party in the Riverina

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It has been a widely held view for some time that the Australian Labor Party has a long and rich history in the Riverina. To reinforce this view and to provide context for the Labor Party's place and importance in the region, local historians and party members frequently cite several uncontested historical facts. They draw our attention to the significance of the Wagga Wagga branch of the Australian Shearers Union (ASU) in the early labour movement, when in 1886 it was instrumental in campaigning for the eight hour working day. The ASU later amalgamated with several regional unions to form the Australian Workers Union in 1905, eventually evolving into the Australian Workers Union as it exists today. They also point out that the Wagga Wagga branch of the Australian Labor Party has had a sustained presence in the community since 1891. Perhaps most significantly, they cite the success of one of Wagga Wagga's most highly regarded former state politicians, Edgar 'Eddie' Graham, member for Wagga Wagga from May 1941 to November 1957, and a member of the Australian Labor Party. While these facts present the illusion of a strong tradition of Labor Party prosperity in the Riverina, the reality is that the local political landscape is far more conservative. Nevertheless the Wagga Wagga branch of the Australian Labor party, known today as the Country Labor Party, continues to meet more regularly than any other political party in the region, and always emerges at election time to present and support a local candidate.

A new set of facts dominate the contemporary identity of the Country Labor Party in the Riverina, painting a picture of a failing political party that is becoming less relevant with every election. The Country Labor Party in the Riverina has faced a persistent struggle to combat increasing margins and has experienced an erosion in the loyalty of its core voters. Before 1990, the Labor Party in the Riverina achieved a relatively stable 30% of the local vote, with the remainder of the votes being distributed amongst right-wing conservative parties. However, over the past two decades, the instability of the Riverina Country Labor Party vote has resulted in a steady 14% decline in its Federal vote, from 38% of the vote in the 1993 Federal Election to 20% in 2013, and a 20% decline in its State Election vote, from 30% of the vote in 1991 to 10% in 2011. Although left-wing political parties traditionally struggle in rural seats, the sharp decrease in Labors's percentage of the local vote over the past two decades symbolise a definite shift in voting patterns. My research seeks to shed light on this trend, and attempts to explain how this decline has evolved.

My research consists of two parts. I will compare and review the existing literature on this topic, in order to acknowledge the representation of the Riverina's current political landscape. I will also build upon the existing literature by introducing crucial statistical information, compiled throughout my research from Australian Electoral Commission data. To reinforce my research I also conducted oral history interviews with several key individuals involved in local politics, including an interview with:

the 2013 Federal Labor candidate Tim Kurylowicz; former NSW state Labor candidate Colin McPherson; and long-serving member of The National Party, Gretchen Sleemen. The inclusion of their unique perspectives gives valuable insight into contemporary challenges faced by the Country Labor Party in the Riverina and serves to balance the predominantly quantitative information contained within my research.

Whilst the subject of local politics may appear to be a fruitless venture, given the saturation of research in the past and the Riverina's reputation as a "bastion of conservatism"<sup>1</sup>, my research in particular raises questions about the impact of informal voting. The significance of the impact of informal voting challenges some existing views about the contemporary political landscape of the Riverina. It also provides an additional, new layer of influence which appears to have effected local voting patterns in the recent past. As the title of this paper suggests, my analysis also illuminates the unique, 'strange' and remarkable culture which has developed within the Contry Labor Party in the Riverina. By acknowledging the unique, "in depth" benefits of local micro history<sup>2</sup>, and taking the view that historians "have been slow to recognises the value of community studies"<sup>3</sup>, my research focuses exclusively on the Riverina and Wagga Wagga, reflecting any broader national themes with a local perspective.

## **Blacklow, Eather and Whitford**

Before conducting an investigation of the contemporary political landscape of the Riverina I examined the existing commentary of several prominent local historians. Labour-historian<sup>4</sup> Warwick Eather, a former Charles Sturt University academic who now resides in Shanghai, China, has published several articles about left-wing institutions in the Riverina. These include extensive histories of the Wagga Wagga Branch of the Australian Labor Party, unionism and the labour movement in the Riverina. Nancy Blacklow's *The accidental politician: Edgar Hugh Graham* provides an in-depth account of one of Wagga Wagga's most renowned local members, Eddie Graham. Graham, a New South Wales state Labor Party politician from 1941 to 1957, embodied unique

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<sup>1</sup> W, Eather. Hyteria in the Bush: Wagga Wagga and the "Anti-Communst Frenzy," 1945-60. *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 43, no.2 (1997): 332.

<sup>2</sup> For an expanded analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of local history studies see: John Tosh. *The Pursuit of History 5<sup>th</sup> Ed* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2010), 81-83.

<sup>3</sup> W, Eather. "A City to Struggle In: Wagga Wagga and Labour, 1940-75," *Labour History* 78. (May 2000): 141.

<sup>4</sup> Labour- history is a politically motivated form of history concerned with the labour movement, industrial relations and class conflict, often aligned with working- class political parties and socialist ideals.

qualities of leadership that set a defining standard for all of his successors.<sup>5</sup> These unique leadership qualities are also reflected upon by Charles Sturt University political-historian Troy Whitford, who provides an insightful account of contemporary 'bush politics.' Whitford highlights the significance of the successful National Party member for the Riverina Kay Hull (October 1998 – April 2010), and the 'rural revolt' of the mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup> Although the work of these historians appears to form a comprehensive body of knowledge, their combined work is fractured by the distinct ideological differences and perspectives from which they were written.

Political historian Troy Whitford, whose affiliations place him on the political right, presents a contemporary analysis of the local political economic landscape through the lens of The National Party and the 'rural revolt' of the mid- 1990's. Whitford frames the 'rural revolt' as central to the context of the contemporary politics of the Riverina, outlining a set of desirable leadership qualities that he believes reflects the unique representational needs of the Riverina. In terms of their political ideology and policy platform, Whitford argues that a suitable candidate for the Riverina must be "anti-globalisation, anti-free trade and anti-economic rationalist," advocating instead "a reduction of foreign ownership, the development of rural and regional communities through government assistance and [they must be] socially conservative towards immigration and multicultural programs."<sup>7</sup> By outlining these desirable leadership qualities, Whitford sets a difficult precedent for the Country Labor Party in the Riverina as some of the unique qualities he lists contradict the core values, ideology and policy platform of the Labor Party. Ultimately, Whitford's viewpoint places conservative right-wing politics as a normative mode of representation for the electorate, barring the forces of the left from as an alternative, suitable political party for the needs of the electorate.

Whitford also places greater emphasis on the persona and style of an individual political candidate over their party politics. This is evident in his account of National Party member for the Riverina, Kay Hull, and the popularity she maintained throughout the 'rural revolt' of the 1990's. Whitford argues that during the 'rural revolt' in regional Australia "there was a growing sense that the National Party had failed the country" through its failure to challenge its larger Coalition partner against issuing policies based on economic rationalism which were at odds with the needs of their natural (rural) constituents."<sup>8</sup> The 'rural revolt' was a period of regional disillusionment with the Liberal National Coalition over 'economic rationalism', a term which encapsulates a range of "economic planning and

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Blacklow. *The accidental politician: Edgar Hugh Graham* (Wagga Wagga: fourW press. 2005): 10.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Blacklow and Troy Whitford, ed., *Where the crows fly backwards: notions of rural identity* (Mt. Gravatt: Post Pressed, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Whitford and Blacklow, *The Crows*, 129.

policy making that have at their core a normative assumption that 'the state' should retreat from economic society."<sup>9</sup> However, not all members of the National Party were subject to the intense scrutiny set against the National Party. Kay Hull (member for the Riverina from October 1998 till April 2010) maintained her popularity through the turbulence of the 'rural revolt' by displaying her devotion to the people of the Riverina rather than reflecting the party line of The Nationals. According to Colin McPherson, Hull is best remembered for opposing Prime Minister John Howard on the matter of the sale of Telstra in 2003, and for being instrumental in assisting the Wagga-based airline Regional Express to avoid financial collapse.<sup>10</sup> Whitford places great emphasis on the importance of Hull's personal leadership style to her popularity in the Riverina despite, the backlash against her own political party. The same reasons attributed to Hull's popularity by Whitford mirror those of the revered Eddie Graham, who Nancy Blacklow describes as a man who "knew and understood the needs of country people."<sup>11</sup> Blacklow also points out that Graham was popular because of "very effective pork-barrelling which brought many benefits to his electorate."<sup>12</sup> Eddie Graham and Kay Hull were thus, popular for similar reasons. Interestingly however, Hull was also deemed popular by Whitford for the same reasons he attributes to the sharp rise in popularity experienced by controversial, populist One Nation Party leader, Pauline Hanson, during the 'rural revolt.' Whitford points out that both Hull and Hanson stood as alternatives to the mainstream political parties through their shared appeal as being somewhat outside of the normal political arena. He emphasises that Hanson and Hull both possessed unique qualities that were presented through their "real life experience", and acknowledges the significance of their use of rhetoric of their rural identity, their representation of populist Australian values, their exploitation of the sense of political alienation within their respective communities and their adoption of a style of leadership that represented the "people's voice."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time Whitford points out that the Australian Labor Party's attempt to capitalise on the intense scrutiny of The National Party during the 'rural revolt' came only in the form of a rhetorical

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<sup>9</sup> Nick Economou, "The Regions in Ferment? The politics of regional and rural disenchantment: political strain and tension in the bush is continuing to be demonstrated at the ballot box. (Australia)." *Alternative Law Journal* 26, No. 2 (April 2001): 69.

<sup>10</sup> Colin McPherson, *interviewed by* Liam Lander, "The Contemporary History of the Labor Party in the Riverina," (17 December 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Blacklow, *accidental politician*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 128-129.

shift.<sup>14</sup> He argues that the name change to 'Country Labor', under which Labor candidates in rural seats became affiliated, came about because the new title "seemed palpable to regional constituents".<sup>15</sup> This rhetorical name change was insufficient however, for the Country Labor Party to fully capitalise on the backlash against The National Party. More importantly, the Country Labor Party "failed to maintain a policy platform that could have distinguished itself from its city cousins the Australian Labor Party... [and] was [unable] to sustain a maverick role within the ALP".<sup>16</sup> In addition to its disappointing policy platform, Whitford points out that Country Labor suffered apparent difficulty in endorsing suitable rural candidates which "only led to further criticism that Country Labor was nothing more than a marketing gimmick."<sup>17</sup> He believes that if the Country Labor Party is to be successful in the Riverina, it must adopt an attitude and identity more akin to the "old Labor Left", which is comparably far more conservative than the contemporary progressive form of the Australian Labor Party.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, the Country Labor Party shows no sign of retreating into conservatism, with the 2013 federal candidate, Tim Kurylowicz, placing the National Broadband Network at the forefront of his policy platform.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that Whitford, if given the opportunity, would criticise Kurylowicz (who is not from Wagga and with an educational background in the arts) for his 'unsuitable credentials', as he did for the previous candidate, Robyn Hakelis. Whitford states that Hakelis, who had a "graduate Law degree (with Honours) from Sydney University," had no established local profile, given that she moved to Wagga Wagga two years before running as the Country Labor candidate in the 2010 federal election.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, Warwick Eather, presents a radically different and more complex view of the political landscape of the Riverina. With a focus on working-class themes, Eather gives a more socially balanced representation of the past, often including in his work the unique perspective of women and minority groups in the Wagga Wagga community, which provides a contrasting alternative to the predominant, conservative viewpoint. However, as a lens through which to observe the past, labour-history is problematic as it is underwritten by the conflict between "Left and Right... and

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<sup>14</sup> Troy Whitford, "Country Labor: A Few Sheep Short in the Top Paddock or all foam, no beer" (Conference Paper), in *Hard Labor: the crisis of social democracy in the Australian states*, Deakin University, 5 November 2011.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Blacklow and Whitford, *The Crows*, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Kurylowicz, *interviewed by* Liam Lander, "The Contemporary History of the Labor Party in the Riverina," (16 December 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Whitford, *Country Labor*, 5.

tends to emphasise political radicalism.”<sup>21</sup> Such powerful themes form the basis of Eather’s writings and are highlighted by the titles of his work such as; *Hysteria in the Bush: Wagga Wagga and the Anti-Communist Frenzy 1945 - 75*, *A city to struggle in, Wagga Wagga and Labour 1940-1975* and *‘Exterminate the Traitors’: The Wagga Wagga and District Trades and Labour Council, Trade Unionism and The Wagga Wagga Community 1943-60*. All of these works demonstrate a focus on extreme and extraordinary circumstances. The prevalence of radical themes consequently erodes the objective value of Eather’s body of work, which is also inherently flawed as a result of his personal social and political motivations. Additionally, the value of Eather’s work is complicated by the grand neo-Marxist concepts of power and class- domination throughout his writings. The centrality of such powerful concepts strongly conflicts with Eather’s stated intent to provide a unique historical account Wagga Wagga’s political history under its own terms, rather than fit it into pre-existing sociological frameworks of understanding.

Nevertheless, Eather describes the Riverina's traditional preference for conservative candidates as a “conservative hegemony, “attributing the persistent struggle of the Left to the electoral “dominance of the [local] ruling elite”.<sup>22</sup> With a controlling presence on the various municipal councils, Eather argues that the domination of the political elite was absolute, especially as their families also comprised “all of the local charitable, civic and social bodies.”<sup>23</sup> However, in attributing the persistent struggle of the Labor Party to get endorsed candidates elected to a conservative hegemony within the local communities, Eather has neglected to acknowledge significant historical instances in which the Labor party has been highly successful. Eather gives only passing consideration to Eddie Graham, dismissing his significance as a highly successful, long-serving Labor party representative for Wagga Wagga by the fact that he was “more importantly... stridently anti-communist” and thus, anti-left<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, while the body of Eather’s work on the political history of the Riverina can be criticised for the powerful theoretical and ideological influences within his work, it offers a strong, alternative viewpoint which contrasts with the economic form of political history offered by Whitford.

There is also an impassioned sense of frustration and alienation throughout Eather’s work. Given his status as an outspoken and progressive left-wing academic in the conservatively-inclined Wagga

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<sup>21</sup> Tosh, *Pursuit of History 5<sup>th</sup> ed*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 144.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>24</sup> Eather, *Hysteria*, 333.

Wagga community, it is likely that Eather's experience of alienation was in fact a lived reality that has to some extent framed his political leanings. Although in this context Eather is discussing the anti-communist hysteria of the cold-war in Wagga Wagga, he states that the "overt conservatism of rural people, their reluctance to accept change of any description, be it political or social, the dominance of the traditional power elites in rural communities, and the small population made it nearly impossible to set up alternative networks."<sup>25</sup> He continues that "activists, be they communist, trade unionist, feminist or political, were, as Andrew Moore has shown, 'more effectively ostracised – and isolated – in rural society than in the city where such people were more likely to have extensive support networks, as well as class and community interaction.'"<sup>26</sup> Although the addition of this personal and emotive layer of influence corrodes the objective value of Eather's work, it lends unique insight into the attitudes of left-wing progressives within the Wagga Wagga community. It is indicative of a spirited sense of determination and an identity characterised by a righteous struggle against what is viewed as conservative domination. The sense of impassioned frustration within Eather's work is the first clue in unravelling the nature of the strange culture of the left in the Riverina, a community where the left have been marginalised "an innate political conservatism."<sup>27</sup>

Through a comparison of Eather and Whitford, a larger picture of the contemporary issues which face the Country Labor Party can be identified. Firstly, it is clear that the overwhelming preference amongst Riverina voters for right-wing candidates has remained unchanged into the twenty-first century. As highlighted by Whitford's account of the 'rural revolt', this is due to the unique representational needs of the Riverina as a rural seat. It is also clear that a historical pattern has also emerged in the desirable leadership qualities of highly regarded local politicians such as Eddie Graham and Kay Hull, despite their party affiliations. Although these similarities do share an overwhelmingly conservative bias, it is clear that at the forefront of these desirable qualities is a strong connection to the Wagga Wagga community and a proven understanding of local issues. This requires that the candidate have an established local profile, often built up through business ownership, a position in a local institution or local council public office. Ideally, candidates should present a policy-platform which proves their understanding and affinity to the Riverina, not one which aligns purely with a party platform.

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<sup>25</sup> Eather, *Hysteria*, 331.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Moore. "Tyranny of a Small Town." *Australian Studies* 17 (April 1992): pp. 28-29. Cited in Eather, *Hysteria*, 331.

<sup>27</sup> Eather, *A City to Struggle in*, 145.



With this in mind it is easy to see how Eather described the political landscape of the Riverina as hegemonic. Today, the local branch of the Country Labor Party consists of long-serving Labor stalwarts and a handful of younger idealists who between them display various levels of optimism towards Labor's election prospects. In the face of the current political environment, the geographical isolation of the Riverina and the small but relatively stable portion of the local vote to which it appeals, the members of the Country Labor Party in the Riverina seem to have abandoned any real hope of winning an election. Instead, a anomalous and unique culture has developed within the local branch which has come to resembles more of rural social body than a political entity. United by the experience of repeated electoral defeat, members appear to demonstrate a somewhat detached, but shared sense of determination to continue campaigning in the Riverina. According to former Labor state election candidate Glenn Elliot-Rudder, "there is no glory in Labor candidacy in the Riverina, you do it for the 30% of voters who vote Labor."<sup>28</sup> Although the prospect of winning an election has largely been abandoned, there are significant contradictory instances in the recent past which suggest that the Country Labor Party is capable of threatening the conservative domination of the Riverina. The remarkable election results earned by Federal Labor candidates Pat Brassil in 1993 and state candidate Col McPherson (1995 - 2003) seem to have been forgotten. Nevertheless the local party members in the Riverina take pride in small victories and possess a determined resilience in the face of expected electoral defeats.

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<sup>28</sup> *Stated by Glenn Elliot-Rudder, at Wagga Wagga Country Labor Branch meeting, (17 January 2014).*

## The Statistics

Statistics alone cannot tell a story, but they do indicate trends and patterns that emerge over time.. Examining the statistical data of two decades of voting in the Riverina, in conjunction with what has been identified as the core representational needs of the electorate, provides a comprehensive picture of The Riverina's political landscape. Although there are limitations to the extent to which this methodology can explain the patterns that have emerged, some general conclusions can be drawn. For example, information gathered appears to indicate that some aspects of the local political landscape are more important than others in the minds of local voters.

According to Whitford, "there are enough historical examples that should be encouraging Labor to seriously campaign in rural and regional electorates."<sup>29</sup> Aside from Eddie Graham, whose term as member for Wagga Wagga concluded over half a century ago, there have been two instances in the Riverina where Labor has significantly narrowed its margin. In 1993 Federal Labor candidate Pat Brassil was narrowly defeated by National Party candidate Noel Hicks, by only 4% (see appendix A). Michael McCormack, the current sitting member for the Riverina and then editor of the Wagga Daily Advertiser, predicted the narrow outcome of the election, stating that "Mr Brassil, who is also Wagga's mayor... could top the primaries yet be tipped out on preferences."<sup>30</sup> Brassil's campaign attracted the attention of the then Minister for Trade and Overseas Development, John Kerin. On a campaign visit to Wagga Wagga, Kerin stated his belief that Wagga voters would turn to Labor candidate Pat Brassil after decades of conservative voting "because of his long association and support for Wagga" and because of his "record and profile."<sup>31</sup>

Brassil's local profile as the mayor of Wagga Wagga, and Michael McCormack's former position as editor of the Wagga Daily Advertiser, confirms the importance of established local profile in Whitford's analysis. However, there were several unique factors that contributed to the success of Brassil's campaign, including specific beneficial circumstances not typically afforded to the Labor campaigners in the Riverina. Firstly, in this instance both The National Party and the Liberal Party presented candidates, splitting the conservative vote in half (see appendix A). In the following 1996 Federal election, the sole right-wing National Party candidate, Noel Hicks, experienced a 27.7%

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<sup>29</sup> Whitford, *Country Labor*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Michael McCormack, "Brassil Faces Tough Task" (Editorial), *The Daily Advertiser*, March 6 1993, Wagga Wagga, p.2.

<sup>31</sup> Shane Wright, "John Kerin Lends Support to Labor's Riverina Campaign," *The Daily Advertiser*, March 1 1993, Wagga Wagga, p.3.

swing in his favour (See appendix A). This was largely attributable to him being the only conservative candidate on the local ballot, picking up the local Liberal Party vote and consolidating the overall preference for right-wing parties into a single block. This consolidation was repeated again in 2001, 2004, 2007 and 2013, when The National Party was the sole right-wing party on the Riverina Ballot, claiming a decisive victory on each occasion. This has effectively ensured the continued right-wing domination of the Riverina by preventing Country Labor from winning Federal elections due to the division between the Coalition parties. Furthermore, in a typical Riverina campaign, Labor's budget is dwarfed by that of the running conservative party, as pointed out by the 1991 state candidate John Burch, who claimed that the budget of his opponent Joe Schipp's campaign was three times greater than his own.<sup>32</sup> This budget disparity has continued to widen to this day mainly as a result of the repeated success of the Liberal National Coalition. However because of his high profile and real prospect of winning, Brassil's access to campaign funds in 1993 was greater than previous or subsequent candidates.

In the 1999 state election, Country Labor Party candidate Col McPherson was narrowly defeated by the current sitting member Daryl Maguire, by only 1% of the vote (see appendix B). Again this was due to both the Liberal Party and the National Party placing candidates on the Wagga ballot paper. Labor's near victory was also influenced by the right-wing party vote being further fractured by the first appearance of the One Nation Party on the Wagga ballot paper, which claimed 7.3% of the vote. The result was, before preferences: Labor 24.11%, Liberal 23.27% and The National Party 20.45%. This demonstrates that only in extra-ordinary and advantageous circumstances can Country Labor threaten the hold of the conservative parties in the Riverina.

Over the past two decades, Labor's state election vote in the Riverina has not risen above the 33.97% Col McPherson attained in 1995. Additionally, Labor's federal election vote has not surpassed Pat Brassil's achievement when he earned 34.13% of the vote in 1993. Labor's last 'high' in the Riverina was 29.10% during the momentum of the 'Kevin 07' campaign. Today, Country Labor's popularity is at an all-time low in the Riverina.

State Labor candidate Glenn Elliot-Rudder suffered a -12% swing in the 2011 New South Wales election. Elliot-Rudder claimed only 22.2% of the vote after preferences, almost losing Labor's second place in the two-party preferred result to independent Dr. Joe McGirr, who took 31.5% of the primary vote. The electoral downturn during the 2011 state election was part of a "statewide drubbing", with Elliot-Rudder blaming "leadership and ministerial scandals which have damaged

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<sup>32</sup> Jilea Carney, "ALP Supports its Local Candidates," *The Daily Advertiser*, May 23 1991, Wagga Wagga, p.8.

Labor's reputation".<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, McGirr became the greatest threat to Maguire's hold on Wagga Wagga electorate. Despite McGirr's "left wing background,"<sup>34</sup> his policy platform was squarely centred on delivering a new base-hospital for Wagga Wagga, believing that he had the best chance of achieving his goal through standing as an independent.<sup>35</sup> This not only highlights the importance of creating a policy platform that demonstrates an understanding of the issues and needs of the electorate, but also shows that it is essential for a candidate appear to have the capacity to enact change. This is reflected in the nickname 'Daryl do-little' given to Maguire for his "perceived lack of action representing his electorate."<sup>36</sup> An entirely different set of circumstances, however, has impacted Country Labor in the Federal arena.

Federal candidate Tim Kurylowicz received only 20.43% of the vote in the 2013 Federal election, the lowest percentage for Country Labor in the last two decades. However, Kurylowicz held out against the sweeping anti-Labor sentiment, only suffering a 1.8% drop from the previous 2011 federal election where Riverina Labor candidate Robyn Hakelis experienced a -8.3% swing from 29.10% in 2007. Furthermore, the 59.18% of the vote claimed by Michael McCormack in 2013, although slight, was 3.39% less than in 2007, which was the last Federal election where The National Party was the sole coalition party on the Riverina ballot. The relatively strong performance from Kurylowicz, as demonstrated by the comparatively small swing against Labor, and the slight decline in The National Party's vote, demonstrates the impact of a rising phenomenon in Australian Federal election voting: the informal vote.

Since 1993, the rate of informal voting in the Riverina has steadily increased by 4.55%. Peaking in 2004 with 4.16% of the Riverina vote being declared informal, rates decreased in the 2007 Federal election to 3.78% but experienced a dramatic increase to 5.76% in 2011 and 6.97% in the 2013 Federal election (see appendix C). This has mirrored what has occurred on a national basis, with the national average of informal voting increasing by 2.94% to a total of 5.91% of the Federal vote being declared informal in 2013. However, a study of informal voting conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission in 2011 reveals that "there are many factors that could influence a voter to intentionally

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<sup>33</sup> Ken Grimson, "Wagga has lost faith in Labor," *The Daily Advertiser*, March 27 2011: <http://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/740508/wagga-has-lost-its-faith-in-labor/>

<sup>34</sup> Patrick Wood, "Former independent candidate Mathew Hogg hands the baton to Dr Joe McGirr," November 3 2010: <http://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/737927/former-independent-candidate-matthew-hogg-hands-the-baton-to-dr-joe-mcgirr/>

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Wood, "Maguire faces challenge," *The Daily Advertiser*, October 18 2010: <http://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/737231/maguire-faces-challenge/>

<sup>36</sup> Ashleigh Gleeson, "Daryl Do-Little ignored vicious online attacks," *The Daily Advertiser*, October 2 2012: <http://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/376048/daryl-do-little-ignores-vicious-online-attacks/>

or unintentionally cast an informal vote and it is not possible, in many cases, to accurately quantify or even separately identify the impact these factors might have."<sup>37</sup> The study also concluded that "English language proficiency and the number of candidates [on the ballot paper appears] to be the strongest predictors of informality rates."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in an analysis of informal voting in the 2004 Federal election Lisa Hill and Sally Young identify that "although some informal votes are undoubtedly protest votes, the majority are not."<sup>39</sup> Hill and Young attribute high levels of informal voting to "the interaction between low levels of literacy, numeracy and English language competence and a complex voting system rather than disaffection or lack of political interest."<sup>40</sup> However, applying these conclusions to informal voting in the Riverina raises some significant questions.

Tracking the number of candidates on the Riverina ballot suggests an inconclusive relationship between the number of candidates and rates of informal voting. In 2007 only 5 candidates appeared on the Riverina Ballot, up from 4 in 2004 where informal voting rates were higher. However, the number of candidates on the Riverina Ballot dramatically increased with the presence of micro-parties, to 9 in 2010 and 10 in 2013, which parallels a significant increase in informal voting rates (see appendix A and C). Since 2007, the Riverina has been introduced to candidates aligned with micro-parties such as The Citizens Electoral Council, the Liberal Democrats, Family First, the Christian Democratic Party, the Bullet Train For Australia Party, the Democratic Labor Party, Katter's Australia Party, the Palmer United Party and the Rise Up Australia Party, each struggling to breach 5% of the vote. Nevertheless, it is difficult to explain the discrepancy in informal voting rates in the 2007 Federal election, although it is possible that the decreased rates of informal voting in 2007 may have been due to higher levels of political engagement with the sentiment of Labor's 'Kevin 07' campaign and the likelihood of a subsequent change in government. However, to call this anything other than speculation would be foolish without a more in depth analysis. Breaking down the statistics to look at each polling-booth is required before any conclusions on informal voting in the Riverina, of substantial objective value, can be drawn. It is worth noting however that the informal voting rates of the state divisions within the Riverina (Wagga Wagga and Murrumbidgee) display an entirely different downward trend in informal voting. Most notable is the informal voting rate in Wagga

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<sup>37</sup> Australian Electoral Commission, "Analysis of Informal voting: House of Representatives, 2010 Federal Election," Research Report Number 12, March 29 2011: p. 4:  
[http://www.aec.gov.au/About\\_AEC/research/paper12/files/informality-e2010.pdf](http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/paper12/files/informality-e2010.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Hill, Lisa and Sally Young, "Protest or Error? Informal Voting and Compulsory Voting," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 3, (September 2007): 515-521. <http://www.tandfonline.com>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 515.

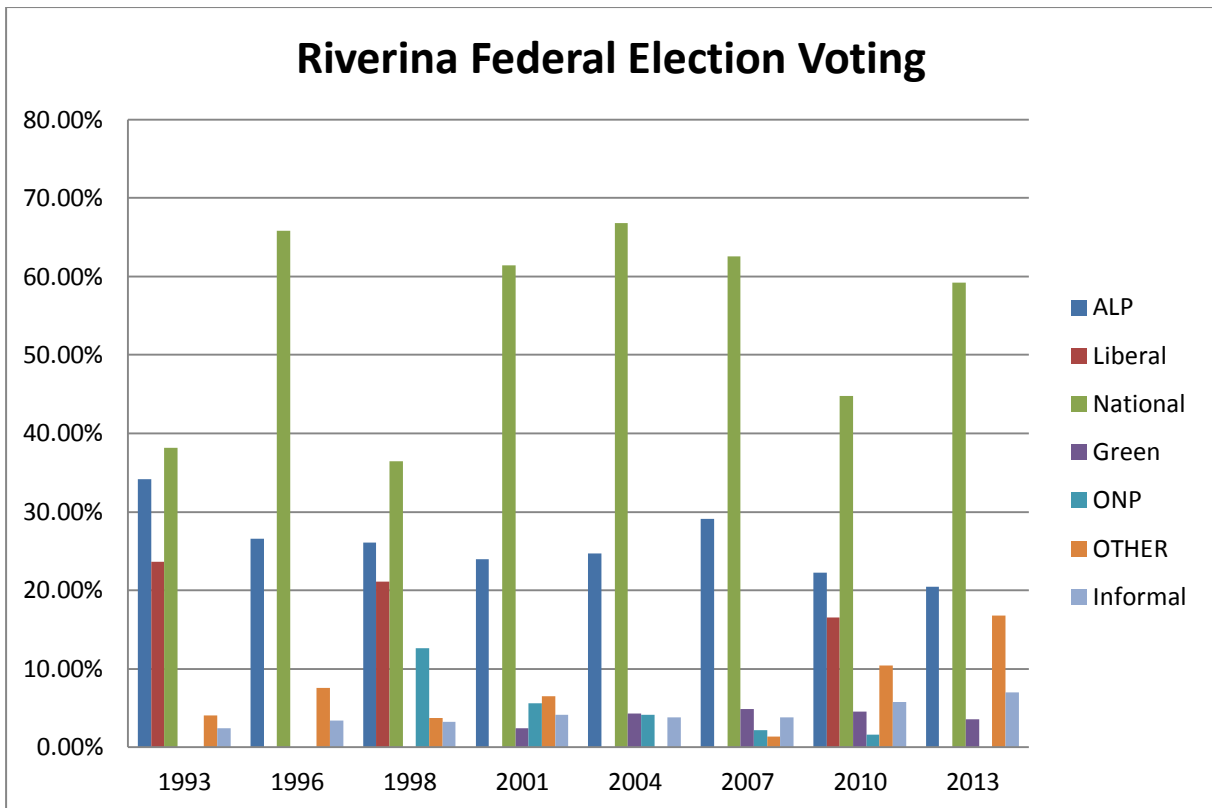
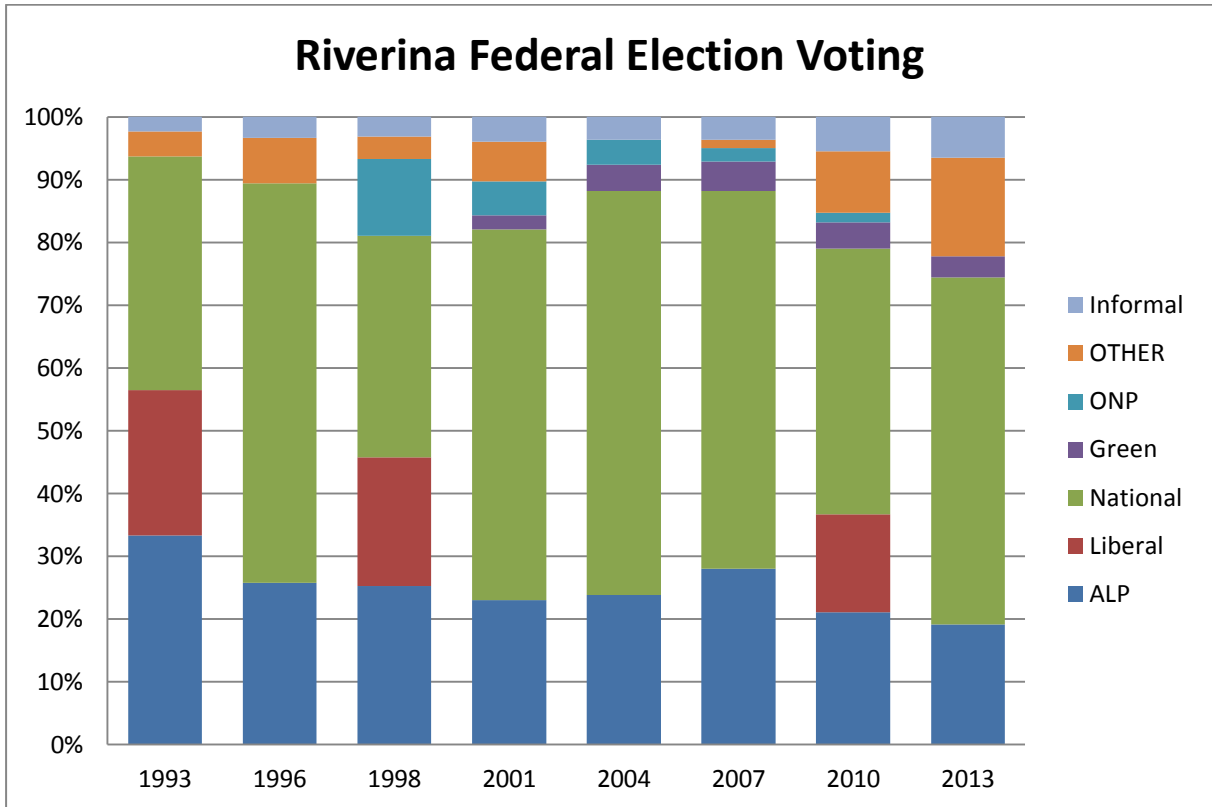
Wagga state elections which has steadily decreased 10.53% since 1991, from 9.32% in 1991 to 2.57% in 2011 (see appendix C). Nevertheless it is clear that increased rates of informal voting in the Riverina have significantly affected Country Labor's Federal election vote, as well as that of the conservative parties.

## **Conclusion**

Given the combination of disadvantageous circumstances that have prevented the Country Labor Party from threatening the domination of the Coalition parties in the Riverina over recent years, a change appears to have occurred within the shared culture of local party members and supporters. Most significantly, this combination of circumstances include the consolidation of right-wing unity amongst voters in the Riverina, by placing only one Coalition party on the local ballot, and the recent influx of micro-parties which have significantly eroded the Country Labor vote. Whether through fracturing the loyalty of Country Labor's core voters, disillusionment, voter confusion or political disengagement, the dramatic increase of micro-parties has coincided with higher rates of informal voting in this electorate. This has undisputedly impacted negatively upon the percentage of the local vote claimed by Country Labor in recent elections. However, if the impact the phenomenon of informal voting is to be fully understood, a more in-depth analysis of this factor is required. In the face of these challenging circumstances that have marginalised the left, the cultural shift within the local branch has gone from one of seriously challenging the Coalition parties at election time, to one of rebuilding its local identity, fostering a stronger progressive voice within the community and keeping the conservative representatives of the Riverina in check. Party Members are strongly encouraged to be outspoken against the actions of the right in the local media, particularly in letters to the editor of *The Daily Advertiser*. Passion, conviction and enthusiasm are the most valued qualities of Country Labor's Riverina members. The Wagga Wagga branch of the Country Labor Party has, in its own unique way, established itself as an oppositional voice to the local Coalition parties, providing an alternative viewpoint and maintaining a meaningful service to its core supporters. Although the Country Labor Party in the Riverina emerges to campaign at every state and federal election, winning an election is mostly regarded as a long-term goal. This may change, however, if a candidate with an established local profile emerges and chooses to be affiliated with Country Labor. Such a candidate would almost certainly need to deliver a locally driven policy platform, displaying a strong commitment and connection to the Riverina and a demonstrated capacity to bring about change. Federal candidate in the 2013 elections, Tim Kurylowicz, has indicated his intention to contest The National Party again in 2016 and perhaps further into the future, and intends to use his

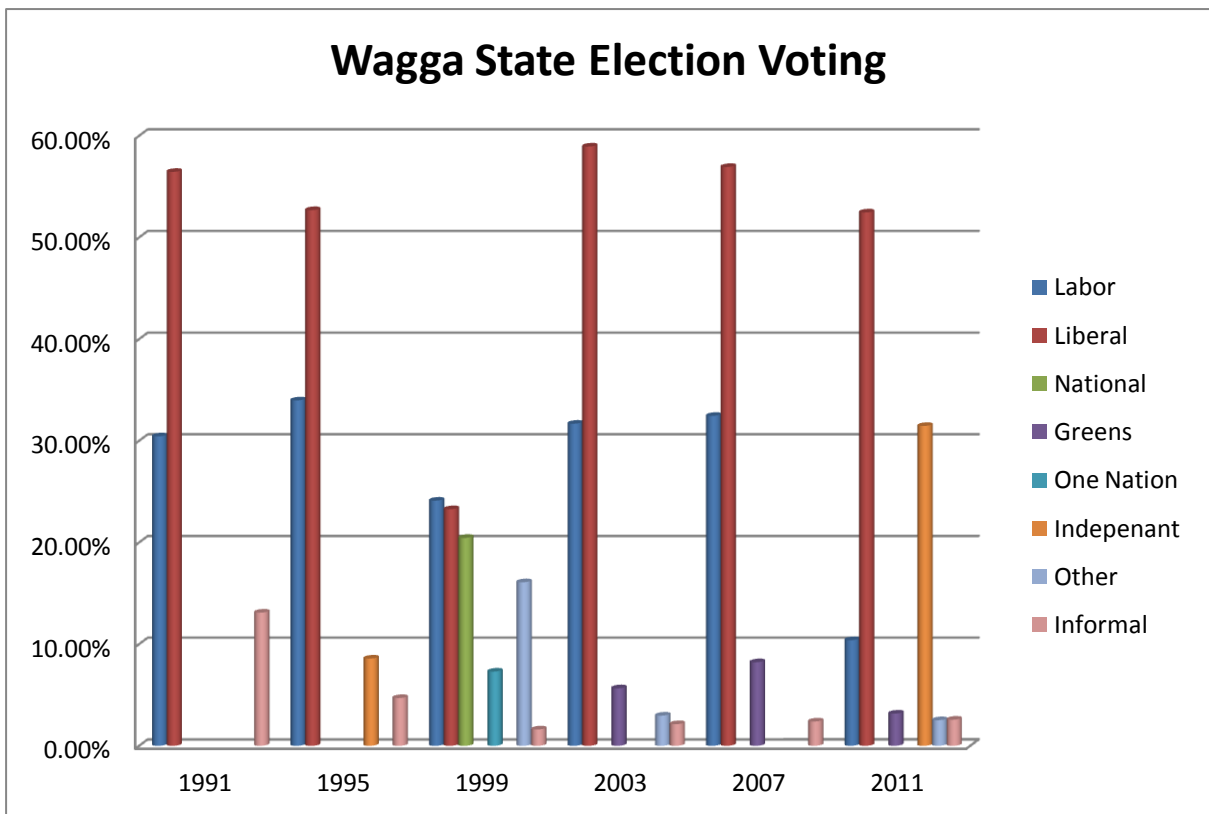
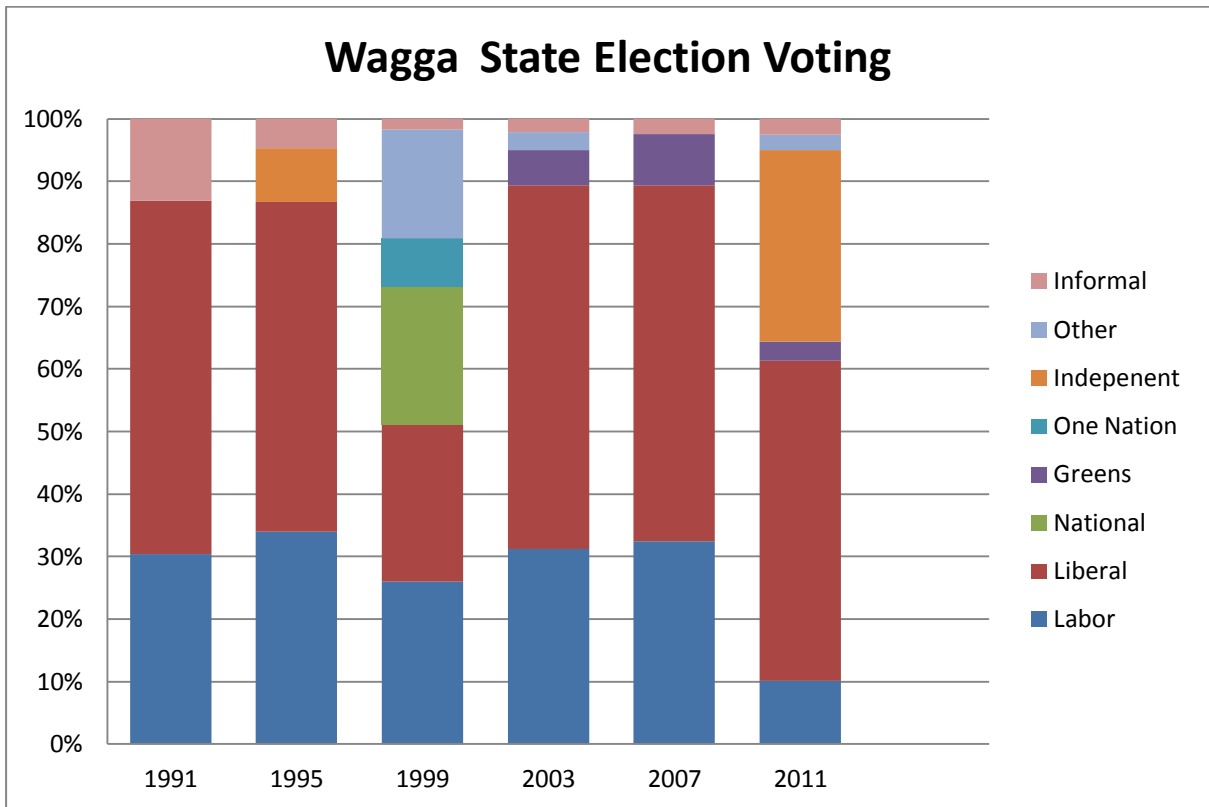
time in the interim building his local profile and establishing himself as a viable alternative in future elections. As demonstrated by the current grassroots style of political campaigning on a 'shoestring budget', it is clear that Country Labor has not lost sight of its identity or its place in the Riverina community. Despite a diminished capacity to threaten the conservative domination of the Riverina and the challenges which it faces in the contemporary political landscape, Country Labor still maintains a solid and stable volunteer support network throughout the electorate, ready and willing to continue the struggle into future election campaigns.

## Appendix A

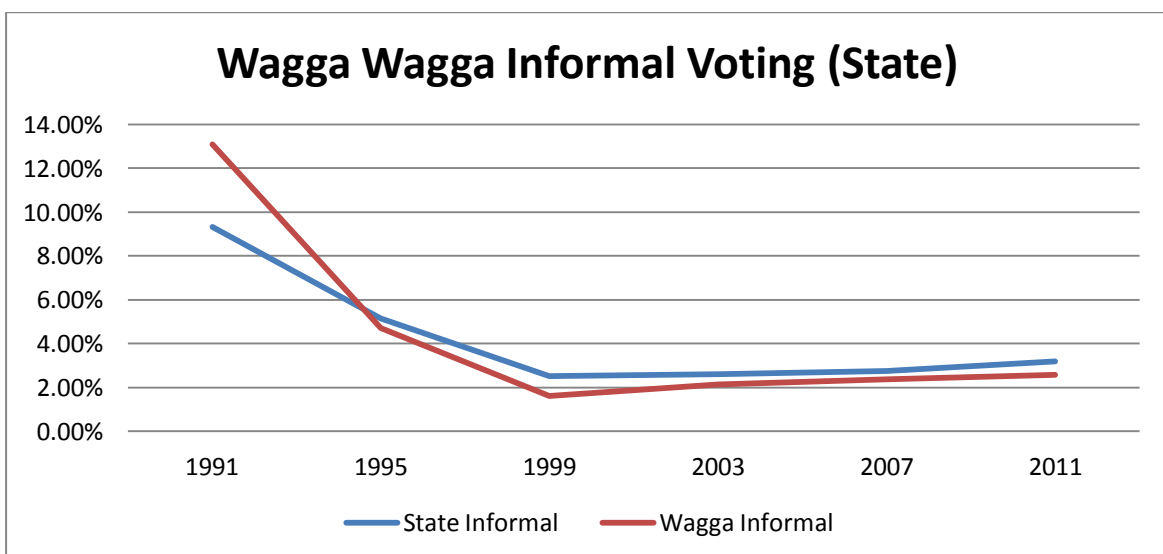
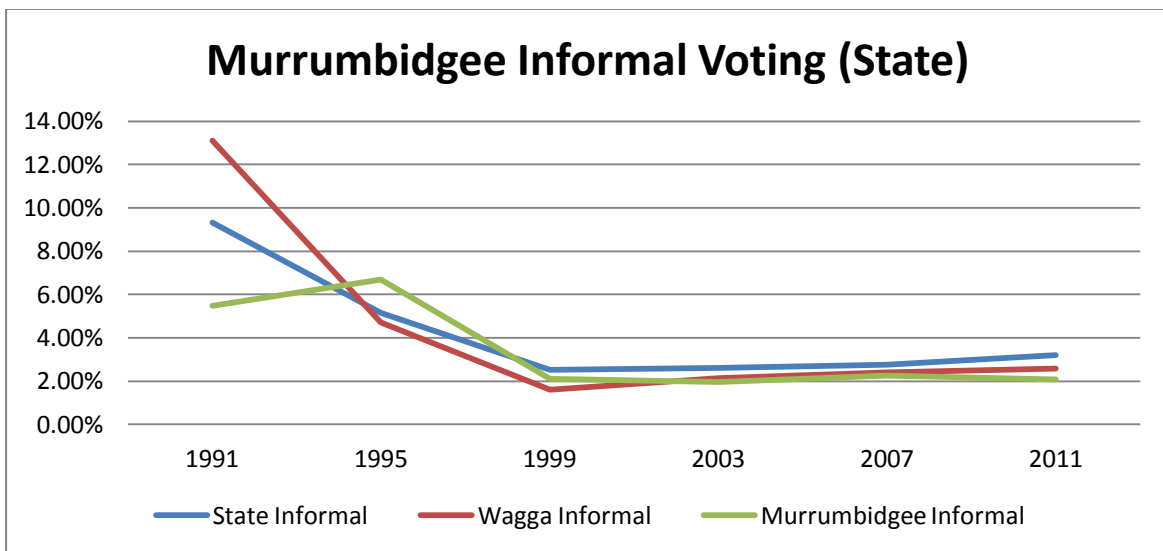
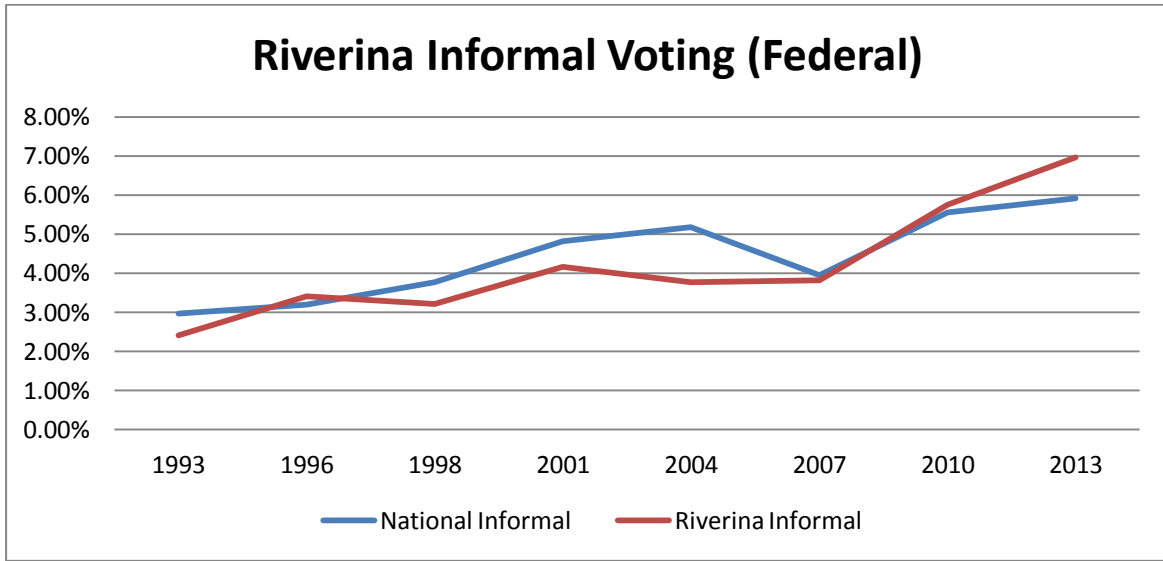




## Appendix B



## Appendix C



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