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Unravelling the Referendum: An Analysis of the 2023 Australian Voice to Parliament Referendum Outcomes Across Capital Cities

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 Australian Voice to Parliament Referendum presented a pivotal moment in the nation's democratic landscape. Despite support for Indigenous well-being, the referendum did not secure the necessary approval, prompting extensive analysis of its outcome. This paper employs an ecological approach to scrutinise the referendum's dynamics, exploring six hypotheses derived from public discourse. Findings reveal multifaceted influences on voting behaviour. Economic concerns, exemplified by the cost-of-living crisis, seemingly diverted attention from constitutional reform. Conversely, culturally diverse communities demonstrated heightened empathy towards Indigenous issues, aligning with the yes vote. Lower levels of education correlated with support for the no vote, potentially highlighting the impact of political knowledge on decision-making. Moreover, religious conservatism and political partisanship emerged as influential factors, with Christian values and party affiliations shaping voting patterns. These findings underscore the complexity of referendum dynamics, emphasising the importance of effective messaging and understanding diverse socio-political contexts in shaping public opinion.

1 | Introduction

Within the machinery of democratic governance, referendums occupy a unique and consequential role, serving to directly engage the voices of the people in critical matters of state. The 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum aimed to enable a change to the Australian Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. If passed into law, the 'Voice' would legislate a structure that would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide advice to the government and parliament on issues that were likely to impact on the lives of Australian Indigenous people and communities.

The impetus for the referendum began in 2017 when representatives of First Nations people met and produced the Uluru

Statement from the Heart, which called for a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution. At the time, the ruling conservative Liberal/National Party coalition rejected the notion of a referendum to make the necessary changes. However, following the election of the Australian Labour Party in 2022, the new Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, announced that Australians would have their say in a referendum to include an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.

In Australia, for a constitutional change to be passed, the referendum vote needs to be approved by a 'double majority' comprising a national majority of electors from all states and territories, together with a majority of electors in a majority of the states (i.e., at least four of the six states). Historically, attempts to amend the constitution in Australia have resulted in many more rejections than approvals. Since 1901 of the 44 constitutional

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referendums presented to the Australian voting public, only eight have reached the required threshold, with the remaining being defeated. Following the 14 October 2023, vote, the Voice to Parliament referendum did not meet the required test and hence was not passed. Of the 17,671,784 enrolled voters, approximately 90% cast a vote with 39.9% casting a yes vote and 60.1% casting a no vote (Biddle et al. 2023).¹

The outcome of the referendum was in contrast to social surveys that have found that Australians generally support improving the well-being of the country's Indigenous population (Levy and McAllister 2022; Markham and Sanders 2020). This contrast became starker when social commentary began to unpack the possible reasons for the overwhelming no-vote and the uneven support for the yes-vote. Commentators began to analyse the results looking at why some areas tended towards a no vote, while others tended towards a yes vote. Spatially, commentators were quick to point out the distinct patterns that appeared to have emerged. Within the capital cities, these included distinct clusters of yes votes within inner and near inner-city locations, with no votes dominating outer suburban locations.

Associated with the rudimentary spatial analysis, questions began to be asked that focused on the socio-demographic make-up of the electorate and how different 'types' of voters impacted on the outcome. The various questions and explanations were wide-ranging but can be distilled into six narratives.

During the campaign leading up to the referendum, a common theme in the media related to the argument that for many Australian voters, the referendum and what it stood for was not front-of-mind due to everyday issues being seen as more important. This can be labelled the narrative around 'concern with everyday issues rather than the referendum' where it was argued that the 'voice to Parliament can't compete with cost-of-living crisis in voters' minds (Chowdhury 2023). Prosecuting this argument, commentators suggested that in cases where voters are more concerned about everyday issues such as the cost of living, they may be less concerned with bigger-picture issues and vote to maintain the status-quo (i.e., vote no). Furthermore, as suggested by Biddle et al. (2023, 60) people were

less inclined to support a change to the constitution that would result in benefits to one group over another, and that people were angry with the government for focusing on what is seen as a niche issue when more pressing issues are being ignored

Such a narrative is aligned with a range of empirical research which has reported that anxiety may stimulate preferences for protective policies (Albertson and Gadarian 2015) and drive voters to consider their choices more carefully (MacKuen et al. 2007) or that voters move towards the status quo under times of threat (Bisbee and Honig 2022).

The second narrative to emerge relates to views that 'multicultural support offers hope for a Yes outcome' (Gunstone 2023). This narrative around *multi-cultural empathy* suggests that multi-cultural communities have empathy for Indigenous issues

and the message behind the voice to Parliament and hence are more likely to vote yes. Alluding to the potential empathy impact on the referendum outcome Jakubowicz (2023) noted the support received for the Black Lives Matter movement by members of various ethnic groups arguing that

These events may have heightened the awareness in immigrant communities of the prevalence of racism in Australia. They may also have enhanced empathy for Indigenous people's struggles, and potentially, support for the Voice.

(para 24)

Such a view is supported in the academic literature where it has been suggested that understanding an issue through the perspective of ethnic minorities or other disadvantaged groups can reduce the impact of prejudice towards these groups (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000) and by extension increase support for policy issues impacting these groups.

A third narrative relates to the link between voting behaviour and human capital. Following the referendum outcome some social commentators focused on the link between low levels of human capital and the likelihood of supporting the no campaign. Television presenter Waleed Aly opined that 'the biggest dividing line seems to have been education' and that 'if you were in a seat with high levels of tertiary education, Bachelor or Post you were at the very top end of the Yes vote. If you had the lowest levels of socio-education you were at the low end of the Yes vote' (Collins 2023). Within the political science literature, there is a range of empirical material that has investigated the links between education and political engagement and motivations. A number of researchers have found that the broader education curriculum and school experience can influence political attitudes and awareness and help create politically informed and engaged voters (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Hillygus 2005; Mishra et al. 2023; Schofer et al. 2021), or provide important social capital and social networks which aid and encourage greater engagement and participation (Evans et al. 2021; Mishra et al. 2023; Putnam 2000).

The fourth narrative relates to headlines such as 'Voice Referendum: Old-fashioned racism driving "No" campaign' (Duffield 2023). Some posit that the referendum has tapped into 'a deep well of historical racism' which has outweighed other considerations (Anderson et al. 2023). Indeed, racism was an important issue in the 1967 Referendum where Australians voted to remove an exception that had the effect of allowing the Commonwealth to legislate in relation to matters of 'race'. In the aftermath of the 1967 referendum, it was suggested that there was a strong inverse relationship between the percentage of electors agreeing with the proposals and the ratio of Aboriginal to European populations (Mitchell 1968). As such it was thought that the no vote was influenced by a proximity or contact hypothesis (Bennett 1985; Ray 1983) whereby voters living in communities with higher numbers of Indigenous people were more likely to vote no.

A fifth narrative relates to the link between conservative views and political voting behaviour, and in particular the reported links between the no campaign and conservative politics

(Butler 2023). The conservatism and status-quo nexus has been well established in the voting patterns of Australians. During the 1967 referendum, it was argued that the no vote was driven in part by conservatism, with rural electoral sub-divisions that were thought to be more conservative voting against change (Bennett 1985). Similarly, with reference to climate change policy, Colvin and Jotzo (2021) analysed the 2019 Australian Federal election and found that conservative voters were more likely to vote to maintain the status quo on climate change policy rather than vote for change. Within the broader political science literature, researchers have investigated the links between conservatism and voting for the status quo. For example, researchers including Jost et al. (2017), Federico and Malka (2018) and Thorisdottir et al. (2007) have found that typically, people with a strong desire to diminish insecurity and minimise uncertainty tend to be drawn to the political right (i.e., conservatives), which prioritises stability and hierarchy and increases the likelihood of voting for the status quo. With reference to these links, Thorisdottir et al. (2007, 179).

[T]here is a special resonance or match between motives to reduce uncertainty and threat, and the two core aspects of right-wing ideology, resistance to change and acceptance of inequality

The final narrative relates to *political party alignment*. Throughout the referendum campaign, clear political party lines were evident with the conservative coalition largely supporting the no vote, while the ruling Labor party, together with independent and green party members of parliament leaning towards the yes-vote. Opinion surveys leading up to the referendum supported this narrative, with voters for the major parties (labor and the coalition) falling in line with the stated party views. Reviewing a number of opinion polls (Markham and Sanders 2020, 17) note that

in 2018 and 2019, levels of support for a Voice among committed Coalition voters fell below 50%, likely due to the unsupportive positions of Coalition Prime Ministers.

Interestingly, they also note

this move among Coalition voters could well have been in the opposite direction had their leadership chosen a supportive position on a Voice, at which point a national majority vote in a referendum would have been very likely

The suggestion of party partisanship in voting outcomes in the referendum should not come as a surprise given the existing literature on the impact of party policy position on the opinions of citizens. Deriving from early work by Campbell et al. (1960) who referred to political elites/parties as ‘an opinion-forming agency of great importance’ (p. 128), arguments have focused on understanding the ways in which citizens use prompts about the position of their preferred party as an information shortcut to reach an informed opinion (Lupia 2006, 2018; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012) or citizens simply follow the ‘party-line’ of their

choosing to remain consistent with their identify and stay loyal to the partisan group (Huddy et al. 2018). Although there appears to be significant debate regarding the strength and veracity of such linkages (Slothuus and Bisgaard 2021), there is a significant body of research literature which supports, to a greater or lesser extent, such opinion forming linkages (Barber and Pope 2019; Chong and Mullinix 2019; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Peterson 2019; Slothuus and Bisgaard 2021; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010).

While these diverse arguments have represented the mainstream discussion of the referendum outcome, we have only just begun to see an emerging academic literature addressing the referendum outcome. A recent report by Biddle et al. (2023) undertook an analysis using survey data and reported findings that go some way to adding empirical rigour to the public debate. Interestingly, in the context of the arguments set out above, the authors undertook an analysis of outcomes at the electoral district level and found that districts with higher proportions of Indigenous population, higher proportions of people born overseas, and districts held by the coalition or green/independent candidates were more likely to return a no-vote. Conversely, districts with higher levels of individuals with a bachelor's degree or with incomes equal to or lower than the median were more likely to record a yes vote.

This current paper adds to the empirical literature by presenting an ecological-based analysis of the referendum outcome, focusing on the association between voting outcomes at small spatial levels across the major capital cities and a range of socio-economic and demographic variables that capture the essence of the arguments put forward within the public discourse.

2 | Data and Approach

Across the literature, analysis of voting outcomes has been undertaken using several approaches ranging from the use of general and specialist surveys (Biddle et al. 2023; Cameron and McAllister 2019a, 2019b), voting exit polls (Larcinese et al. 2013) and aggregate-level ecological data (Baum 2023; Keir 2009; Stimson and Shyy 2009). The current paper is set within an ecological approach and uses aggregate spatial data to present an analysis of the Voice to Parliament referendum outcome focusing on the percentage of voters casting a no vote given a range of independent variables.

The use of aggregate spatial data in this type of analysis raises interesting methodological issues. The first relates to the level of aggregation chosen. Considering the data used in this paper, various levels of aggregation could theoretically be used, ranging from small spatial units representing small communities to spatial units representing electoral boundaries. The current paper uses Australian Bureau of Statistics Statistical Local Area 2 (SA2). SA2s represent a community that interacts together socially and economically. In large cities, they generally represent one or a few small suburbs (ABS 2016). The use of SA2s provided a unit of analysis that allowed relatively straightforward linking of polling booth data to spatial units and was at a level that the data being proposed was readily available.

2.1 | Data

The dependent variable is the percentage of voters who cast a no vote. Data for individual polling booth outcomes was obtained from the Australian Electoral Commission and geocoded to match Australian Bureau of Statistics SA2 boundaries. Data was then extracted using QGIS so that each SA2 was given a total for the number of no votes cast at a polling booth within the SA2 boundary and the total number of formal votes. In cases where SA2s contained more than one polling booth, the sum of no and total formal votes was obtained. This data was then used to calculate the percentage of no votes.²

To analyse the links between the referendum outcome and the various narratives that have emerged, several independent variables are included in the analysis (Table 1). Narrative one (everyday issues) is considered using an indicator of financial resilience developed by Baum and Mitchell (2023).³ The Financial Resilience Barometer is an index that measures financial resilience for SA2s. Lower scores on the index indicate that an SA2 has lower levels of financial resilience (higher financial vulnerability). Narrative two (multi-cultural empathy) is considered using the percentage of overseas-born people. Narrative three (education divide) is considered using the percentage of people in a SA2 working in a low-skilled occupation. This is taken to be a broad measure of human capital that accounts for both formal education and informal education such as life experience. Narrative four (proximity thesis) is considered using the percentage of the population within a SA2 who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the 2021 census. Narrative five (Conservatism) is considered using two proxy variables, the percentage of households who own their home outright and the percentage of people who identify as Christian. Malloy (2017) has shown that voters who hold Christian values tend to be more conservative in their views, while analysis of Australian Federal election outcomes by Cameron and McAllister (2019a) and Cameron et al. (2022) shows

that to varying degrees, home-owners tend to favour conservative political parties. Narrative six (political party) is considered using the percentage of votes during the 2022 Federal Election for the Liberal/National Party in a given SA2 and was constructed using data for individual polling booth outcomes, geocoded to match Australian Bureau of Statistics SA2 boundaries.

2.2 | Analytical Approach

In considering the questions in this paper, an approach that takes account of the continuous nature of the dependent variable and the potential for spatial autocorrelation introduced using spatial data was required. Spatial autocorrelation refers to the statistical dependence between observations in space, meaning that nearby observations tend to have similar values. In particular, the failure to account for spatial autocorrelation jeopardises the validity, accuracy and reliability of the model's estimates. With this in mind, the analysis used in this paper consisted of running basic Ordinary Least Squares regression and then expanding the analysis to consider the impact of the spatial data using a Spatial Lag Model, which considers spatial dependence in the dependent variable itself, and a Spatial Error model, where the spatial dependence is thought to exist in the error terms (i.e., unobserved factors influencing the dependent variable at nearby locations are correlated). As an additional step, and prior to running the spatial models, several diagnostic tests (Moran's I and Lagrange Multipliers) were undertaken to justify the extension of the basic Ordinary Least Squares model into the spatial realm. Further details of these tests and the spatial modelling approaches used are available in the publications by Anselin (2013).

An important decision guiding the use of spatial models is the choice of spatial weights. Spatial weights play a fundamental role in determining the interdependence or connectivity

TABLE 1 | Independent variables and associated narratives included in the analysis.

Hypothesis	Variable	Measure	Source
1. Everyday issues	Financial resilience	Financial resilience barometer	Baum and Mitchell (2023)
2. Multi-cultural empathy	Overseas born	Per cent overseas born	Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Population and Housing
3. Confused about issues	Human capital	Per cent of people in low skilled occupations	Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Population and Housing
4. Proximity thesis	Indigenous population	Per cent of people identified as aboriginal or Torres Straits Islander	Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Population and Housing
5. Conservatism	Homeowners	Per cent of household who own their home outright	Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Population and Housing
	Christian religion	Per cent of people who identify as being Christian	Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census of Population and Housing
6. Political party	Political party	Per cent of support for Liberal/National candidates	Author calculated
City control variable	City	Dummy variable accounting for city	Author calculated

TABLE 2 | Descriptive statistics for continuous variables.

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
No vote (%)	9.49	85.20	52.41	13.65
Financial resilience	96.20	2181.00	1170.92	481.98
Overseas born (%)	4.9	82.85	34.17	13.96
Indigenous population (%)	0.00	24.88	2.02	2.51
Human capital (%)	3.07	32.33	14.12	4.51
Homeowners (%)	2.22	55.71	27.5	9.80
Christian (%)	11.76	75.67	42.38	9.22
Liberal/National party vote (%)	0.00	73.98	35.61	17.77

TABLE 3 | Diagnostics for spatial dependence.

Test	Value	<i>p</i>
Moran's I (error)	18.10	0.000
Lagrange multiplier (lag)	432.59	0.000
Robust lagrange multiplier (lag)	136.17	0.000
Lagrange multiplier (error)	301.49	0.000
Robust lagrange multiplier (error)	5.06	0.02

between different geographical units within a spatial analysis. The choice of spatial weights encapsulates the essence of relationships among these units and is generally based on contiguity or distance. In building the analysis, several different spatial weights were used. For the final analysis, a queen contiguity-based spatial weight matrix is employed. Queen contiguity-based spatial weights define neighbours as entities that share any common boundary point, rather than exclusively sharing an edge or border. In other words, two geographic units are considered neighbours if they share any part of their border, even if it is just a single point.

3 | Findings

For reference, Table 2 provides the basic descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis, while Table 3 provides the results of the spatial autocorrelation diagnostics tests. There is strong evidence of spatial dependence in the dependent variable (spatial lag) and the error terms (spatial error). The highly significant values for the Lagrange Multiplier lag (432.59) and Moran's I (18.10) indicate that both spatial lag and spatial error autocorrelation are present in the data. The Robust Lagrange Multiplier tests for both spatial lag and spatial error further reinforce this, but the stronger significance of the Lagrange Multiplier lag and Moran's I tests suggests that spatial lag effects may be more prominent. Given these diagnostics, it is likely that a Spatial Lag Model or a Spatial Error Model would provide more accurate and reliable results than a standard OLS model,

as both types of spatial autocorrelation appear to influence the dependent variable.

The results of the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), Spatial Lag Model (SLM) and Spatial Error Model (SEM) reveal the relationships between the dependent variable and the explanatory factors (Table 4).

Across all three models, the coefficient for financial resilience is small but statistically significant. This consistent inverse relationship suggests that higher financial resilience is associated with a decrease in the percentage of voters casting a no vote. The adjustments for spatial effects in both the SLM and SEM slightly reduce the magnitude of the coefficient compared to the OLS model. This robustness to spatial corrections indicates that the relationship between financial resilience and the dependent variable is likely direct and not heavily influenced by spatial dependencies.

In the OLS model, the proportion of overseas-born individuals in the population is significantly and negatively associated with the dependent variable. However, this relationship weakens in the spatial error model ($p=0.065$) and becomes entirely non-significant in the spatial lag model. These findings suggest that the initial relationship observed in the OLS model may be partially driven by spatial autocorrelation or unobserved geographic factors. The diminished significance in the spatial models implies that the explanatory power of this variable is mitigated when accounting for spatial dependencies.

Human capital exhibits a significant and positive association with the dependent variable in all three models. Although the coefficient is highest in the OLS model, it decreases slightly in the SLM and SEM. This decline suggests that part of the observed relationship is influenced by spatial factors. Nevertheless, the consistent significant coefficients highlight human capital as an important factor, even after accounting for spatial effects.

The proportion of the Indigenous population shows no significant relationship with the dependent variable across any of the models. Homeownership is negatively associated with the dependent variable in all three models, but the coefficients are not statistically significant.

The proportion of the population identifying with a Christian religion is positively and significantly associated with the dependent variable in all models. The coefficients remain relatively stable across the models, suggesting that this relationship is both strong and robust to the inclusion of spatial corrections.

Support for the Liberal/National Party shows a weak positive relationship in the ordinary least squares model but becomes non-significant in spatial models. This pattern suggests that the initially observed relationship in OLS may have been spurious, driven by spatial autocorrelation or omitted variables that are better accounted for in the spatial models.

The city-specific dummy variables included in the models provide insight into variation across metropolitan regions, with Adelaide serving as the reference category. The coefficients on the dummy variables for Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and

TABLE 4 | Regression results, non-spatial and spatial models, percentage no-vote by selected independent variables.

	Ordinary least squares			Spatial lag model			Spatial error model		
	Coefficient	SE	p	Coefficient	SE	p	Coefficient	SE	p
(Intercept)	43.05	3.91	0.000	8.680	3.12	0.005	35.12	4.00	0.000
Financial resilience	-0.01	0.00	0.000	-0.003	0.00	0.000	-0.004	0.00	0.000
Overseas born	-0.14	0.02	0.000	-0.033	0.02	0.065	0.010	0.03	0.722
Human capital	0.78	0.10	0.000	0.396	0.08	0.000	0.547	0.09	0.000
Indigenous population	-0.03	0.16	0.865	0.058	0.12	0.630	0.157	0.14	0.263
Homeowners	-0.11	0.08	0.157	-0.018	0.06	0.759	-0.031	0.07	0.644
Christian religion	0.40	0.08	0.000	0.267	0.06	0.000	0.469	0.07	0.000
Liberal/National party	0.01	0.00	0.054	0.002	0.00	0.463	0.001	0.00	0.721
City (Adelaide contrast)									
Sydney	-2.21	1.03	0.032	-1.522	0.78	0.052	-5.473	2.44	0.025
Melbourne	-8.22	0.92	0.000	-3.117	0.72	0.000	-10.304	2.39	0.000
Brisbane	-2.00	1.01	0.047	-1.255	0.76	0.100	-3.450	2.54	0.174
Perth	2.69	1.05	0.010	0.719	0.79	0.365	0.699	2.69	0.795
Hobart	-12.29	1.62	0.000	-4.564	1.26	0.000	-11.082	4.23	0.009
Darwin	13.02	2.21	0.000	4.867	1.69	0.004	8.559	4.29	0.046
Canberra	-11.14	1.18	0.000	-3.953	0.94	0.000	-16.532	2.99	0.000
Spatial error term (W_No) ^a				0.62	0.02	0.000			
Lambda ^b							0.72	0.02	0.000
Log likelihood	-4852.52			-4540.23			-4565.46		

^aThe spatial error term is highly significant, indicating that unobserved spatial heterogeneity plays a substantial role in explaining variations in the dependent variable.

^bThe spatial lag parameter (Lambda) is significant, demonstrating that outcomes in one region are strongly influenced by outcomes in neighbouring regions. This highlights the interdependent nature of spatially distributed outcomes.

Canberra are consistently negative and significant across both non-spatial OLS model and the two spatial models, suggesting that compared to Adelaide, the polling booths in these cities exhibit lower percentage no votes. For the dummy variable accounting for Brisbane, a weak negative relationship is observed in the ordinary least squared model, but this effect becomes non-significant in the spatial models, suggesting that spatial effects may dilute the outcome on the no-vote for polling booths located in Brisbane. In contrast to these negative associations, the coefficients on the dummy variables for Perth and Darwin are positive. In the case of Perth, only the coefficient in the OLS model is significant, while for Darwin the coefficients in all models are significant.

4 | Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has considered the link between the outcomes of the 2023 Australian Voice to Parliament Referendum and various narratives that emerged at the time around these outcomes. Specifically, using voting outcomes at the aggregate SA2 and

targeted independent variables, the paper has applied a socio-ecological approach to consider six narratives relating to voting outcomes that emerged within the broad public debate following the resounding support for the no case.

In considering the outcomes of the analysis presented in this paper, several limitations should be kept in mind. Several of the independent variables served as proxies for the narratives being considered. For instance, the use of homeownership rates and Christian religion identity as measures of conservatism may be open to criticism. However, in the context of the available data, more suitable proxies used by other research, such as expressed political views, were unavailable. The use of a given spatial unit of analysis raises the issue of the modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP). In essence, MAUP relates to the fact that the use of different aggregate spatial boundaries may result in different modelling outcomes, therefore raising potential bias and validity concerns (Wong 2004). In the case of the SA2s used in this paper, while a smaller spatial unit could have been used (SA1), there was a trade-off between the use of this level of spatial aggregation and data availability.

For instance, the Financial Resilience Barometer (Baum and Mitchell 2023) is only available at the SA2 level, negating the use of a lower level of aggregation.

From a methodological point of view, the results suggest that spatial dependence plays an important role in understanding the variation in the percentage of 'No' votes. The Spatial Lag Model, which accounts for spatial spillover in the dependent variable, appears to provide the best fit to the data, as it yields the lowest AIC and higher R-squared values. While the OLS model provides useful insights, the spatial models offer a more nuanced understanding of how neighbouring areas influence voting behaviour.

Importantly, the findings reported in this paper add to the growing body of work that has attempted to understand the referendum outcomes (Biddle et al. 2023; Carson et al. 2024; de Villiers 2024; McAllister and Biddle 2024). Based on the outcomes of the regression analysis, several of the narratives regarding the referendum outcome can be considered. It appears that for voters in many areas, day-to-day issues including the cost-of-living crisis impacted voting outcomes. This was a common agreement during the lead-up to the day of the referendum vote and in the aftermath of the successful no vote. As individuals grappled with rising expenses, housing affordability challenges and stagnant wages, their attention and priorities shifted towards immediate concerns affecting their livelihoods. Amidst such economic pressures, the discourse surrounding constitutional reforms, including the proposed Voice to Parliament, became less important for many voters. With limited resources and bandwidth to engage with complex political issues, individuals may have been less inclined to actively engage in the referendum process or to support constitutional changes, instead focusing on more immediate economic matters. Consequently, the referendum's outcome reflected a populace preoccupied with day-to-day survival, impacting the level of engagement and ultimately shaping the decision-making process regarding the Voice to Parliament vote.

Even prior to the referendum day, the cultural diversity of Australian communities was expected to have an impact on the voting outcome and, in particular, in garnering support for the yes vote (Gunstone 2023). In communities where diversity thrives, there is often a heightened awareness of the importance of inclusivity and representation. Members of culturally diverse communities recognised the value of a Voice to Parliament as a mechanism for ensuring Indigenous voices are heard and their perspectives are represented in the decision-making process. Moreover, individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds potentially have firsthand experiences of marginalisation or discrimination within the existing political framework, making them more receptive to reforms aimed at addressing systemic inequalities. Therefore, the acknowledgment of diverse voices and the desire for more inclusive governance structures likely propelled support for the 'yes' vote among culturally diverse communities during the referendum.

There is significant debate around the associations between political knowledge, awareness and engagement and education (Hillygus 2005; Mishra et al. 2023; Schofer et al. 2021), with many arguing that lower education or human capital is

associated with lower levels of engagement and political knowledge, which in turn results in voters being unable to cut through political spin and arguments or simply not engage fully with voting processes. In the context of the referendum results, and the findings of the analysis, low levels of human capital in certain communities may have contributed to support for the no vote. In communities where access to education and information is limited, individuals may be less equipped to fully understand the implications and benefits of constitutional reforms such as the Voice to Parliament. Without sufficient knowledge and understanding of the proposed changes, residents may be more inclined to stick with the status quo out of fear of the unknown or scepticism towards unfamiliar political structures. Additionally, low levels of human capital can correlate with socioeconomic challenges, such as unemployment or poverty, which lead individuals to prioritise immediate concerns over broader constitutional issues. As a result, communities with limited human capital may have been more susceptible to misinformation or disinformation campaigns that framed the referendum in a negative light, ultimately influencing their decision to vote no.

A fourth narrative expressed both during the referendum campaign and in the aftermath was that voter conservatism may have influenced the no vote. Given the significant variable presented in the analysis, a case could be made that religious values associated with Christianity in certain communities could have influenced support for the 'no' vote in the Voice to Parliament referendum. Within Christian teachings, there may be an emphasis on traditional authority structures and societal order, which aligns with the status quo upheld by the existing political system. Some adherents may view proposals for constitutional reform, such as the introduction of a Voice to Parliament, as potentially disruptive to established norms and values. Additionally, interpretations of religious teachings regarding governance and authority may lead individuals to prioritise a centralised decision-making process rather than endorsing decentralised power structures proposed by the Voice to Parliament.

A final narrative relates to the impact of political partisanship in impacting voter behaviour. Given the distribution of yes and no outcomes across communities in seats held by competing political parties, the views espoused by different members likely played a significant role in shaping support for the 'no' vote in the Voice to Parliament referendum. In many cases, individuals' voting decisions are heavily influenced by their allegiance to a particular political party rather than the merits of the referendum itself. Party leaders and officials may have framed the referendum as a partisan issue, aligning their messaging with their party's stance and urging supporters to vote in line with party interests. This could lead to widespread opposition to the proposed reforms among supporters of parties that officially opposed the Voice to Parliament, regardless of the individual's personal views on the matter. Additionally, partisan media outlets and campaign strategies may have further reinforced party lines, making it difficult for voters to consider the referendum objectively. As a result, political party partisanship likely contributed to a significant portion of the 'no' votes cast in the referendum.

The outcome of the voice to parliament referendum reflected an intricate combination of factors which played into the strategies

for both the yes and no camp. Taken at face value, the outcome is in contrast with the general high level of support that Australians show towards improving the well-being of the Indigenous population (Levy and McAllister 2022; Markham and Sanders 2020). But understanding the outcome is not as simple as considering voters viewpoints around Indigenous issues per se. The findings in this paper suggest that there were a myriad of complex factors that swayed the referendum outcome. For example, the suggestion that a large number of voters were more concerned about day-to-day issues says a lot about the inability of the yes campaign's messaging to cut through other issues that individuals were living with on a daily basis. The importance of conveying the appropriate message in political campaigns cannot be overstated. Messages are the primary means through which candidates and parties communicate their policies, values and visions to the voting public. Crafting messages that resonate with voters' concerns, aspirations and values is essential for building trust and garnering support for a particular outcome. Moreover, the way messages are framed and delivered can shape public perception, influence voter behaviour and even define the entire narrative surrounding an issue. Effective messaging requires careful consideration of the target audience, an understanding of prevailing sentiments and attitudes, and the ability to convey complex ideas in a clear, concise and compelling manner.

The 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum was set to be a significant turning point in Indigenous relations within Australia. The defeat of the referendum has been seen by many as a serious blow to the mission of improving the lives of Indigenous people across the country. Understanding the outcomes of the referendum vote has been a common thread within the popular media and commentary since the results were announced. Until now, much of the discussion has been based on supposition and rudimentary consideration of the data. This paper contributes to the growing literature on the referendum outcome and provides a sound empirical frame for meaningful discussion.

Author Contributions

Scott Baum: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis. **William Mitchell:** conceptualization, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, investigation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ Of the 15,895,231 voters who cast a vote, 155,545 recorded an informal vote, represent <1% of all votes.

² The data for each polling booth excludes postal votes. Postal votes accounted for around 10% of the total formal votes. Depending on the area, this may result in some under or over estimation in the data and should be kept in mind when considering the outcomes.

³ Although indicators such as the ABS's SEIFA could have also been used, these do not specifically measure financial stress in the way that the Financial Resilience Barometer does, and hence were not considered.

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