

Anger rises as regions shrink and cities grow, report finds

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Rural and remote parts of the country have shed up to a third of their population and turned away from the major political parties, new figures show, despite Australia adding 2.3 million residents in the past six years.

An analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, released yesterday, shows despite strong population growth across every major city since 2012, many parts of the country lost thousands of people as the mining and agricultural sectors deteriorated.

The combined populations of the nation's capitals grew by 1.8 million between 2012 and 2018, with Melbourne alone adding almost 700,000 residents while Sydney swelled by 553,000.

Over the same period, however, 31 per cent of the population of the old West Australian mining area of Meekatharra disappeared, while on the Gulf of Carpentaria almost 28 per cent of Nhulunbuy's 4520 residents left.

Stubbornly high levels of unemployment, limited educational opportunities and a growing technological divide have driven younger residents, in particular, away from outlying areas towards the cities. At this year's federal election, many of these communities showed their frustration with the lack of economic opportunity by punishing the major political parties at the ballot box.

University of Queensland political expert Chris Salisbury said many rural and remote areas were seeking political alternatives as younger people grew frustrated and left and remaining residents aged. "The major parties are not seen to be providing the answers and these answers are largely economic," he said. "It's economically driven migration and economically

driven desperation to give support to other political actors."

The bureau's figures show that despite strong overall growth across NSW, parts of the state have depopulated.

Since 2012, the outback town of Broken Hill has lost 6.6 per cent of its population, or 1239 people. Almost 140 of those left in the past 12 months, taking its total population down to 17,734.

Across the far west of the state, populations are falling. The Bourke-Brewarrina population is down by 9.3 per cent since 2012, the Walgett-Lightning Ridge population has fallen by 9.7 per cent while Nyngan-Warren has lost 5.6 per cent of its residents.

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The largest single drop of a major population centre was the north-western town of Gunnedah, where the population fell 10.5 per cent in six years to stand just above 4000.

In Broken Hill, a traditional Labor stronghold, one in every four votes went to a Liberal Democrat, independent or United Australia Party candidate at this year's election.

The population of the town of Corowa, near the Victoria border, fell more than 4 per cent during this period.

At this year's election, independent Kevin Mack gained one in every five votes cast, while sitting member Sussan Ley suffered a 12-point drop in her primary vote.