

Campaigns and campaign funding

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Voters determine the outcome of an election campaign through the ballot box; they are campaign participants not contestants. Likewise interest groups, which use the heightened activity of an election campaign to promote their views to voters and candidates, cannot be described as contestants; media outlets, too, are significant campaign participants. Only political parties contest a campaign with the goal of being elected; this is what distinguishes them from other social organisations. In Australia, only the two major parties, the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia, campaign with a realistic expectation of winning a parliamentary majority to form government; indeed in every Federal election contest for one hundred years, one of those parties has campaigned as the incumbent against the other which campaigned as the largest opposition party¹. Accordingly, of all campaign participants, these two parties are the most active campaigners, the most visible and voluble campaign communicators, the biggest spenders - and the biggest recipients of private donations and public funding. They campaign on a national basis with an interest in every contest in every electorate in both houses of parliament; they receive the heaviest media coverage. Election campaigning - planning them, contesting them, paying for them - has become their predominant occupation and rationale. Election campaigns in Australia are, at heart, a contest between the two major parties.

Against this background of two-party stability, campaign practices have changed markedly. Consider the 1946 Federal election campaign, in which Gil Duthie, the Labor candidate for the semi-rural Tasmanian seat of Wilmot, sought to unseat the sitting Liberal member. Duthie drove his car around the electorate for six months before the election, meeting sixty to eighty people each day and handing them a pamphlet showing his photograph, Labor's rural policy and a statement of his personal convictions. When the election proper was called, Duthie launched his campaign with a public meeting at Latrobe attended by 180 people, and

¹ That is, including the non-Labor predecessors to the Liberal Party, and excluding half-Senate elections and by-elections. The statement holds true for most State election campaigns as well.

over the next 25 days until polling day held 33 more meetings as well as travelling up to Launceston, in the neighbouring electorate, to appear at Labor's "big" public meeting alongside Prime Minister Ben Chifley. Duthie won in an upset. "This was long before the competition of TV," he noted in his memoirs (Duthie, 1984).

Contrast this with the 2007 Federal election campaign, in which another Labor candidate Maxine McKew, took on another sitting Liberal member: Prime Minister, John Howard, in his Sydney suburban seat of Bennelong. On one level, it may seem the campaign basics have not changed. McKew spent nine months before the election building her profile in Bennelong by doorknocking and meeting with community groups: "old people's homes, kindergartens, the Epping Quilters Group, basically anyone who asks her" (Saville, 2007, p. 47). But important differences are quickly apparent, not least in the identities of the candidates: Duthie, male, a young obscure church minister and McKew, female, a well-known television news personality. Where Duthie could deliberately avoid the newspapers to build his insurgency in secret, McKew's campaign received extensive media coverage throughout 2007, in part generated and facilitated by her media profile and media skills. Duthie worked alone or with the fragile resources of the party branch network; McKew was supported by a full-time campaign staff, a spouse who was a retired Labor Party campaign professional, and squads of volunteers from outside the electorate dressed in purple tee-shirts bearing her name. Duthie had to leave Wilmot to be seen with the Prime Minister; McKew hosted regular visits by Opposition leader Kevin Rudd and other front benchers. Compared to 1946, campaigning in 2007 was less a night-time activity of public meetings than a day-time quest for evening news coverage. In 1946, Wilmot's "winnability" was largely unknowable and, other than by reference to previous voting results, a subjective judgement; Duthie felt he had a chance because his eyes and ears told him so, but there was no science to it and neither party's head office seems to have paid the seat much attention. In 2007, Bennelong's marginal status was known to all, through regular polling conducted by the media and the parties, supported by intensive demographic analysis; on the "Mackerras pendulum", measuring seat changes that would occur from a given uniform two-party preferred swing, Bennelong marked the point at which the Howard Government would fall. Awareness of this marginal status drove McKew's entire strategy, indeed her candidacy. Fundamentally, where Duthie's campaign was an opportunistic gamble, with little at stake beyond his own livelihood, McKew's candidacy was part of a nationally planned and coordinated strategy of assault on the Prime Minister and his

Government, backed by the resources, personnel and marketing skills of the entire opposition party organisation.

So it is apparent that election campaigning in Australia has changed; over sixty years, it would be surprising if it had not. In a contemporary Australian campaign, party leaders and local candidates typically perform a repertoire of orchestrated public activities around set themes and messages, in pursuit of favourable media coverage - while, behind the scenes, centralised professional campaign managers deploy sophisticated and expensive marketing technologies of research and advertising to track the attitudes of key constituencies and to target them with appropriate messages of persuasion or reassurance. In this model, the campaign proper - the 33-day minimum period that must elapse from the issue of writs to polling day - now serves as the final public act of a much longer, virtually continuous and more subterranean preparatory process in which parties formulate policy platforms, pre-select candidates, raise funds, engage consultants and campaign teams, and conduct market research all of which contribute to the development of their electoral strategies and key messages.

The transformation to this model has resisted scholarly agreement as to its characteristics, timing, causes and consequences. This chapter opens with an overview of the evolving study of Australian election campaigns before discussing what seem the key elements of this dynamic environment: the relationship between changing campaign practices and the media and marketing revolutions; the relationship between these changed campaign practices and party organisations; and the possible implications of this contemporary campaign style for democratic elections.

The study of Australian election campaigns

Campaigns were once thought by Australian political scientists to be relatively unimportant and uneventful, since for most voters their choice at the ballot box tended to be pre-determined by economic circumstances and family socialisation. But voters' partisan affiliations have eroded in the post-war years; Australians who say they "always" vote for the same party declined from 72 per cent in 1967 to 45 per cent in 2007 (McAllister & Clark, 2008). This forced, or encouraged, parties to develop new ways of building electoral majorities beyond their traditional core constituencies. Over broadly the same period, Australia experienced a series of rolling revolutions in communications technologies, from the advent of television through to internet-based social networking; associated with this, the commercial marketing industry refined and

expanded their toolkits of consumer-oriented market research and advertising. Taken together these developments – many emerging from the United States but variously adapted to local electoral circumstances – dramatically changed the external environment within which campaigns operate, offering parties dramatically new ways to communicate their political messages creating new arenas for the campaign contests and even placing pressures on core political functions of policy formulation and leader selection. In adapting to these new circumstances and exploiting their opportunities, campaign organisations have become more expert, more professional, in their methods and personnel, shifting the parties' internal power relationships while also dramatically increasing the financial cost of campaigning. Operating within "minimal" regulatory restrictions (Plasser & Plasser, 2002, p. 151), Australian campaigns impose a heavy financial burden on taxpayers while generating, through their continuing reliance on donations from individuals, corporations and interest groups, obvious conflicts of interest and the risk of corruption.

All this has encouraged political scientists in Australia and abroad to bring Australian election campaigns under closer scrutiny. Given the centrality of elections to Australian democracy, this scrutiny is well deserved: changed campaign practices have potentially far-reaching consequences not only by influencing the selection of those who will occupy the institutions of executive government, but also perhaps at the systemic level by modifying norms of democratic accountability and the relationship between citizen and state.

The literature is rich and diverse. Campaign documentation by Australian journalists and scholars at state and Federal level dates back to the 1950s (Goot, 2007). These include scholarly collaborations that – with their mix of institutional and behaviourist perspectives on, typically, the parties, the states and territories, various voter groups, key issues, the (usually, print) media and so on – contain some gems but that are uneven and fragmented in their treatment (Clive Bean, McAllister, & Warhurst, 1990; Clive Bean, Simms, Bennett, & Warhurst, 1997; McAllister & Warhurst, 1988; Penniman, 1977, 1979, 1983; Simms & Warhurst, 2005, 2000; Warhurst & Simms, 2002). Alongside this qualitative coverage, quantitative analysis of campaigns was transformed in 1987 with the inauguration of the Australian Election Study series of post-election voter surveys, providing an unparalleled time-series on political behaviour during election campaigns (McAllister & Clark, 2008). Journalist contributions have also produced valuable insights, notably the 'insider' genre pioneered in Australia by Oakes and Solomon in 1972 in the wake

of US journalist Teddy White's *Making of the President* series. These expose the contrast between the campaign perspectives of voters and of the campaign organisations - though such insights are crucially contingent on the motives, partisan or personal, of their journalists' doorkeeper sources within the campaign (Jackman, 2008; Marr & Wilkinson, 2004; Oakes & Solomon, 1973; White, 1961 et seq; Williams, 1997). Since the 1972 campaign, newspapers have also provided critical data in the form of published opinion surveys, shaping 'horse race' news coverage and influencing perceptions of campaign issues and leaders (Goot, 1983; Mills, 1999). These records provide, with some gaps, a solid foundation of data and documentation from each campaign. But analysis of how Australian campaigns have changed across time, and comparison of those changes with other jurisdictions where similar developments have taken place, remain works-in-progress.

The relationship between changing campaign practices and the media and marketing revolutions

Australian voters saw the first television campaign broadcasts in 1958, and by 1969 TV had become their preferred medium for campaign news – a dominance it has never relinquished.² (McAllister & Clark, 2008; Rawson, 1961, p. 115 ff.) This reach is irresistible for campaign organisations, who compete for favourable TV coverage not just by enabling televising of campaign set pieces – such as the Prime Minister's announcement of the election date, the leaders' policy speeches, other policy announcements, and the leaders' debates – but actually by designing every daily campaign event explicitly to facilitate television coverage. Campaigners talk of this as "earned" or "free" media, as opposed to "paid media" (advertising); they tightly control news reporters' access to campaign news and judge the success of each day by whether they have "won" the evening news – that is, secured coverage consistent with their message. Tiffen noted two decades ago the "unacknowledged irony" in the media coverage of election campaigns: "The media pretend they are reporting a campaign which exists independently of them, when in fact the primary purpose of those campaign activities is precisely to secure favourable news coverage. ...

² Indeed, the AES may underestimate television's campaign reach by not counting those voters who absorb campaign information without 'following campaign news' e.g. by watching non-news programs with political coverage. See also (Denemark, Ward, & Bean, 2007) .

News is not incidental or extraneous to the process of electioneering, but its central arena" (Tiffen, 1989, p. 127). In Stromback and Kaid's terms, Australian election campaigns are not only "mediated" (that is, the mass media provides the principal channel for political information for most people) but also substantially "mediatised" where "political actors ... adapt ... to the predominant news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of, in order to be competitive in the struggle to capture people's attention" (Stromback & Kaid, 2008, p. 3). Thus for example, in Australia's compulsory voting system where not all voters receive their political information from news programs, campaign organisations seek to disseminate their message through via light entertainment TV shows such as "Sunrise" and "Rove Live" (and, on radio, "breakfast crews" and talk-back).

Beyond the broadcast media, campaign organisations are ever ready to trial political applications of emerging media. There is some evidence that Australian parties have been slow to develop websites, though this is likely to change. But the major parties have invested heavily in building computerised data bases - combining census data, voting records and intelligence from their own canvassing - which drives direct mail. Voters can visit party websites and receive campaign emails on their PCs, receive SMS messages on their mobiles, pick up their home telephone to hear an automated campaign message, and find direct mail in their letter boxes, any or all of which might contain apparently personalised campaign message from the local candidate or requests for donations. In all this, a high value is placed on complementarity of messaging across all channels for maximum efficiency; Labor's "Kevin07" campaign set a new highpoint of coordinated image building (Australian Centre for Public Communication, 2008; Chen, Gibson, & Geiselhart, 2006; Gibson & Ward, 2003; Jackman, 2008; Loughnane, 2004; van Onselen & Errington, 2004).

The adaptation by campaign organisations to new communications technologies has been accompanied by the rise of a commercial marketing industry which, too, has provided campaign contestants with new opportunities and methods. The crucial developments were the emergence and refinement of techniques of market research and television advertising. Parties use quantitative surveys, based on random samples of broad populations, and qualitative research, based on guided conversations with small 'focus groups' of voters deemed of particular demographic relevance. The campaign organisation interprets this information to explore strategic campaign opportunities, test campaign

policies and messages, and track campaign effectiveness; it provides campaigns with a new and robust capacity to understand and respond to the needs and wishes of voters. In particular, by using market research to drive their television advertising, campaigns achieved a decisive breakthrough. Before market research, party advertising was largely indiscriminate propaganda; with market research, campaigns can track shifting opinion in the electorate and, via television and other advertising, target appropriate messages. Television advertising is versatile, affective and pervasive; parties use 15- or 30-second spots to build their leadership image, articulate their values and attack their opponents. (Mills, 1986; Young, 2002, 2004). While demonstrating the impact of advertising on voting behaviour is difficult, TV advertising is regarded as a particularly useful campaign tool in isolating core concerns and concentrating public attention on them, whether in a positive frame (such as the mood for change in Labor's "It's Time" jingle of 1972) or negative (such as the Liberals' highlighting the inexperience of Opposition Leader Mark Latham in 2004).

In a minimally regulated campaign environment, there are few restraints on party advertising³. The Commonwealth Electoral Act requires ads to carry the name and address of the person "authorising" them, and the Broadcasting Services Act imposes a three-day blackout prior to polling day during which advertisements cannot be broadcast. Legislation to ban untruthful, misleading or deceptive political advertising was passed in 1983 and promptly repealed in 1984 as unworkable. Legislation to ban political advertising during election campaigns was passed in 1991 but overthrown by the High Court which found it breached an implied freedom of political communication. (Mills, 1986, pp. 175-177; Young, 2004, pp. 174-178)

Whatever its effect on voters, TV advertising is the most expensive item in the electoral contest, and the cost has increased steeply at each election. In 1974, the two major parties spent around \$1 million on television advertising; in 1996, the last year for which they were required

³ And these reflect a "pre-modern" campaign mode: "The current provisions of the [Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918] regulating campaigning are based on the predominant styles of campaigning in 1918, such as public meetings, newspaper advertising the distribution of printed leaflets and flyers and soapbox public addresses" (Australian Government. Special Minister for State, 2009)

to provide such information, this had risen to some \$14 million. By the time of the 2004 election, reports filed by broadcasters and publishers show the two major parties spent \$31.7 million on all advertising, out of a total estimated electoral expenditure of \$41.4 million (Australian Electoral Commission., 2004, p. 28; Australian Government. Special Minister for State, 2008, pp. 11-12).

The adoption of commercial marketing techniques by political campaigns suggests a new paradigm for the campaign contest. In political marketing, voters are regarded as consumers; the electorate is a marketplace in which rival products or brands compete for the buying choice made at the ballot box. The leading scholar of political marketing, Barbara Lees-Marshment, suggests that to succeed in this environment, "Parties use modern technology and marketing techniques to understand what voters want. Moreover they adopt the market-oriented concept: they focus on satisfying voters' demands". This market-oriented concept – the British Conservative Party under Thatcher and the Labour Party under Blair are cited as examples – involves a cycle of responsiveness starting with campaign promises and culminating in policy delivery in government; the ideal market-oriented party does not attempt to change what people think but, importantly, seeks to deliver what they want. Lees-Marshment suggests a sales-oriented party persuades voters to support their policies, compared with old-fashioned product-oriented parties that push their ideological or class interests without regard to voter wishes. (Lees-Marshment, 2001, pp. 28-30, 2009a). Scholars have applied political marketing perspectives to parties and campaigns in the United Kingdom (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Wring, 2005), the United States (Knuckey & Lees-Marshment, 2005; Newman, 1994; O'Shaughnessy, 1990) and elsewhere including New Zealand (Lees-Marshment, 2009b; Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005); but some small studies aside, a comprehensive political marketing treatment of Australian elections awaits (O'Cass, 2001).

Taken together, these changing practices suggest that Australian campaigns have undergone a broadly similar transformation to those in other liberal democracies. Some scholars have identified a generalised three-stage process of campaign professionalisation: from a traditional "pre-modern" campaign characterised by public meetings and partisan appeals through a "modern" phase with the rise of television to a "post-modern" stage of media fragmentation in a volatile electorate. At each stage of development, campaign spending and capital intensity rises, campaign periods lengthen, and partisan logic is replaced by "marketing

logic" (Farrell, 1996; Plasser & Plasser, 2002). There is some parallel with the three political marketing phases noted above, though political marketers emphasise that over time parties' market orientation can regress as well as progress. These generalised yardsticks are useful but should be applied with caution: they attempt to segment an essentially seamless process of campaign evolution and broader social change, and they contains several anomalies. For example "pre-modern" campaigners made extensive use of consultants, mass-media newspapers, radio and cinema consultants (Kaldor, 1968); "post-modern" campaigns still require localised face-to-face contact and word of mouth communication (Saville, 2007, p. 44; Ward, 2003). In the words of one current Australian campaigner, the 'air war' of national centralised television advertising must be backed by a 'land war' of boots-on-the-ground campaigners in key electorates (Personal communication). Finally the likelihood of continuing innovation rising from digital and internet applications must render any statement about "post-modern" campaigning more interim than final.

The relationship between changed campaign practices and party organisations

Statements about the impact of technological change on election campaigns risk missing a vital element. New technologies do not, obviously, apply themselves to campaigns; they need to be applied. Campaign organisations have busied themselves with identifying new media channels or marketing techniques, trialling their potential applications, acquiring the skills and resources to deploy them, appraising the results and building on proven successes. They do this creatively and energetically because of their overriding desire to win the electoral contest against an opponent who may – or may not – be exploring the same opportunities. They also organise themselves so as to maximise their efficiency - centralising and professionalising their personnel, coordinating their resources in a united effort, and removing obstacles to success – in the belief that this too will maximise their chances of winning. Thus there is a two-way change process underway, with parties adopting new campaign practices and being changed as they do so.

Thus in the "pre-modern" campaign stage referred to above, party members were influential in local candidate selection and policy formation while volunteers were valuable campaign assets – handing out leaflets, doorknocking, and funding campaigns through donations and

subscriptions. In the “post-modern” phase, party organisations minimise policy debate and impose external candidates on local party members in the interests of electability; they may use polling data to procure a change of policy or even leadership. From being reliant on idealist/ideological volunteers and class-based organisational funders, parties have become organisations with high campaign costs reliant on corporate donors and, through public funding, the taxpayers. Instead of volunteers, the parties require technical specialists, often drawn from commercial marketing and skilled in market research, advertising and data base management. This has shifted the internal power arrangements of parties, with members and grass-roots supporters losing influence to the party organisation (Katz & Mair, 1998; Sorauf, 1968; Ward, 1991). In Panebianco’s apt term, these new campaigners are the ‘electoral-professionals’, associated with the broader transformation of parties from mass-member organisations in the immediate post-war years, through the catch-all model in the 1970s to the post-1980s emergence of a possible cartel style party (Katz & Mair, 1995; Marsh, 2006; Panebianco, 1988, p. 264).

Again, particular care needs to be taken in applying the broad-brush comparative models of party change to specific Australian conditions. Unlike in the United States where the “post-modern” campaign and the rise of campaign consultants has been linked to the demise of the party (Dulio, 2006; Sabato, 1981), Australian parties remain at the strategic and operational heart of Australian campaigns – employers of, not supplanted by, external specialist consultants; advertising is centred not on candidates but on the party leader and is developed by the central party organisation. For their part, consultants work almost exclusively within one or other party sphere, so opportunities for “gun for hire” autonomy are limited; in any event, in the relatively small Australian political community, reliance on commercial clients appears to be a financial necessity. While drawing on expertise from US consultants, Australia’s parties appear to have been early adopters and adapters of new campaign practices at state and federal levels (Blewett & Jaensch, 1971; Mills, 1986); indeed, Australians have from time to time been exporters of campaign skills to the United Kingdom (Glover, 2008; O’Reilly, 2007) and New Zealand (Hager, 2006, pp. 152-167).

The cost of this new campaign style, and the rate of cost increase, means that if the two major parties wish to continue to dominate campaigning by competing with each other, they face a constant urgent need for funds. They meet this in a variety of ways. Over the three years leading up to

the 2004 elections, the ALP's income was \$151 million and the Liberal Party's \$133 million. Around 60 per cent came from investments, loans and subscriptions by party members and affiliates (including, in the case of the Labor Party, union affiliation fees). Donations by companies and individuals, which are largely unregulated save for disclosure over a certain amount, constituted about 20 per cent. Taxpayers contributed another 20 per cent through the public funding system (Australian Government. Special Minister for State, 2008, p. 12). Public funding was introduced in 1984; for each vote they receive in elections for the House of Representatives and Senate, parties are paid an indexed sum; at \$2.10 per vote, their 2007 Federal election results earned the two major parties \$40 million in total. Public funding was designed to prevent corruption arising from excessive reliance on private donations, promote fair elections by funding all parties on an equal formula, and promoting transparency. The reality is, in the words of a recent Australian Government Green Paper, parties have simply integrated this new funding into their campaign budgets to support bigger and longer campaigns, without significantly reducing their reliance on private funds (Australian Government. Special Minister for State, 2008, p. 13 and 37).

The permissive and arguably generous rules on funding, along with the loophole-ridden rules on donation disclosures, suggest that in this respect at least, Australia's major parties may have worked as a cartel in line with the predictions of Katz and Mair. That is, they appear to have used their privileged positions within the executive and parliament to secure state resources in a way that protects their position from likely competitors, i.e. smaller parties. In addition to public funding, these resources include MP entitlements for printing and postage, used to fund direct mail; the state also bears the costs of maintaining the electoral roll, which is made available to parties for their data bases; compulsory voting rules save parties the cost of mobilising their supporters (Gauja, 2008; Johns, 2006; Katz & Mair, 1995; van Onselen & Errington, 2004).

The possible implications of this contemporary campaign style for democratic elections

The evolution of this modern campaign model has been accompanied at every stage by an emerging critique of its problematic implications for democratic practice. Critics see it as inimical to voter deliberation and, in particular reference to negative advertising, as a breeder of voter cynicism and disengagement. They observe that the research/advertising

toolkit is financially out of reach for minor parties. They portray candidates as more skilled in campaigning and fundraising than in meeting the policy and leadership challenges of elected office; their professional campaign advisers are characterised as unaccountable manipulators of public opinion. And they regard with dismay and suspicion the ever-rising cost of electioneering, skewing the contest in favour of the well-funded who are, by consequence, at risk of corruption from anonymous donors. (Sabato, 1981, p. 337; Young, 2004; Young & Tham, 2006).

Legislative responses have had a mixed success rate: public funding has not levelled the playing field for parties, disclosure laws have not made private donations transparent, and bans or regulations surrounding advertising have failed. These outcomes perhaps highlight the conflict of interest faced in this area by legislators who are also partisan candidates. But they also suggest the inherent difficulty of regulating a contest that must remain robust and essentially unfettered, and that rewards parties and candidates for campaigning in a self-interested rather than altruistic fashion. A better way forward may lie with regulatory intervention aimed at creating new spaces and vehicles for voter deliberation – rather than restricting those that exist – and doing so by linking reforms by parties to their conditional receipt of public funding. For example, making candidate debates mandatory, requiring the participation of minor party leaders, and placing their organisation in the hands of a nonpartisan or multiparty panel would further strengthen this important and influential campaign event (Senior, 2008). Free broadcast time, as already provided by the ABC, could be provided by commercial broadcasters as a requirement of their licences. Limits on total campaign expenditure, or even on broadcast advertising alone, would help equalise the contest between large and small parties and reduce the fundraising burden on parties – without, arguably, imposing an unconstitutional limit on freedom of speech (Cass & Burrows, 2000).

More generally, the new campaign style is not without its own, intriguing, democratic potential. If political marketing indeed encourages parties to deliver on their campaign promises, then political outcomes are likely to improve and political efficacy increase: opportunities will emerge for well organised and articulate citizens to press their demands on vote-seeking parties. Unlocking the interactive nature of opinion polling and social networking is likely to create new opportunities for citizen influence in election campaigns. At the same time the new campaign model, with its precepts of organisational discipline, target group mobilisation, and key

messaging, is already being taken out of its commercial and partisan contexts and productively adopted by civic organisations pursuing their policy goals in broader governance networks.

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