

## RESEARCH NOTE

THE MASS MEDIA, ELECTION  
CAMPAIGNING AND VOTER RESPONSE

## The Australian Experience

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## ABSTRACT

Focusing on 'capital-intensive politics', election campaign advertising in the 'paid' and 'unpaid' media is analysed for its impact on voters, as part of a suite of influences commonly seen to affect voter behaviour. The Australian experience from the 1990 federal election campaign supports a 'modest impact' thesis, that campaign news, advertising and related activities reported in the mass media are significant among a number of secondary determinants operating beneath a primary, partisan influence on how most people vote. However, identification of subsets of voters – committed, wavering and swinging (changing), stable, volatile – shows that media-related influences impact differently on each subset, both absolutely and in the degree to which they act in a reinforcing or persuading role.

KEY WORDS ■ Australia ■ election campaigning ■ electoral behaviour ■ mass media

In a situation where contemporary election campaigns are increasingly dominated by national television, radio and press coverage, the financial resources required by political parties to mount such campaigns are considerable, and increasing. A whole new body of literature focusing on 'capital-intensive politics' (Axworthy, 1991) has developed to analyse election campaign advertising in all its forms and its impact on voters. Some of this research on the effects of the 'new-age' forms of campaigning and election advertising has been discouraging in that it suggests little significant impact on election

outcomes (Joslyn, 1984). Others, however, argue that the effects may be understated (Bartels, 1993) and of critical importance in marginal seats (McAllister, 1985: 500). Certainly, research at the local constituency level indicates that the more a party spends on advertising, relative to its opponents, the more votes it wins (Johnston, 1985; Forrest, 1991; Pattie et al., 1995).

While in some countries there are restrictions on election spending, in Australia, as in Canada and the USA, affordability is the only consideration (Ranney, 1983; Ward, 1993). Combined spending on campaign advertising for the 1990 Australian federal election was large at just under A\$39 million, or about A\$4 per ballot cast. Was the effort and expenditure worth while? Set against a suite of influences commonly understood to impact upon voter behaviour and drawing on a wide range of media and advertising measures from the 1990 Australian Election Study (McAllister et al., 1990), this study provides some answers to this question.

### Voter Behaviour and National Media Campaigning

Recent research presents a view of contemporary voters as actively seeking out campaign information to assist in deciding how to vote, in the context of partisanship, prior knowledge, beliefs and needs (Miller, 1991). A 'uses and gratifications' approach has been developed to understand the mass media's role during election campaigns in a variety of ways, such as strengthening weak predispositions, guiding decision-making, providing entertainment and simply informing voters of significant events. This approach leaves open the possibility that at particular elections the mass media will have a substantial and decisive influence on the result (Aitkin, 1980: 287). Although the influence of the mass media on voting is weak compared with the impact of partisanship, issues and candidate evaluations (Jennings, 1992; Lanoue, 1992), it is principally through the media that voters hear about parties, issues and candidates.

Converse (1966) proposed a U-shaped relationship between mass media exposure and voter volatility. Those most influenced by the media are either highly stable or highly volatile voters. Highly stable voters, who decide how to vote well before the final weeks of an election campaign, are seen to pay close attention to the media's coverage of the campaign because of their interest in politics. In contrast, the highly volatile group use the media as a source of new information to help their voting choice. Thus campaign advertising has a reinforcing rather than a persuading role for the stable voter but a persuading or at least guiding role for the volatile voter (Miller, 1991: 2-3). There is empirical support for this model. For most voters the role of the media is one of reinforcing rather than changing existing predilections (Keeter and Zukin, 1983; Patterson, 1980). However, party political advertising is especially important to late deciders and uncommitted voters (Cundy, 1986; Devlin, 1982; McAllister, 1992: 177-9).

A substantial minority of the Australian electorate belong to the volatile group. According to the 1990 Australian Election Study, between half of Labor and two thirds of Liberal Party supporters (to the left and right of the political spectrum respectively) had made up their minds on how to vote before the start of the election campaign. Of those who voted for the Democrats (a minor centre-left party) about half made up their minds during the last few days before polling. Further, the proportion of volatile voters appears to be increasing. Between the 1987 and 1990 elections, the proportion who decided how to vote during the campaign increased from 27 percent to 44 percent (McAllister, 1992: 175). Given Converse's model, these results are suggestive of a substantial and increasing influence of the media on election outcomes. This is relevant because the 1990 election was unusual in that the Labor Party won government with one of its lowest primary (first preference) votes ever recorded. Two minor centre-left and left-of-centre parties, the Democrats and the Greens, performed well at the polls. However, there was a media campaign by Labor aimed at Green and Democrat voters asking them to give their second preferences to Labor.

Election campaign advertising comes in two main forms, in the 'paid' media, as political advertising bought by the political parties, and in the 'unpaid' media, as news and media events during the election campaign (Lloyd, 1990). The 'unpaid' media tends to attract substantially more attention than paid advertising, especially among those watching, reading or listening 'often'. During the 1990 campaign, more voters reported exposure to news and information compared with political advertising: 79 percent of voters watched election news on television 'often' or 'sometimes', compared with 65 percent for advertising. In the print media, 60 percent of voters followed the campaign 'often' or 'sometimes', but only 38 percent paid the same amount of attention to political advertisements. Radio was the least used news medium, with 51 percent of voters listening to election campaign news 'sometimes' or 'often'. It must be emphasized, however, that 'attention paid to' is not the same thing as 'influence on'. Attentiveness as such may simply reflect the entertainment quality of the messages and the particular predispositions of voters (Aitkin, 1980: 292).

The message conveyed in paid advertising is generally regarded as sharper than news reporting, with a potentially greater impact on voters. Nevertheless, many media researchers argue that the significance of paid advertising is small, and that only unpaid advertising, particularly TV news, has a real impact on voters (Diamond and Bates, 1984; McAllister, 1985). More importantly, partisanship and interest in politics have significant mediating effects, resulting in an often selective approach by voters towards evaluating and absorbing election campaign advertising and news. Selectivity is arguably less of an issue for campaign events such as television debates between major party leaders, party political launches and opinion polls, given the high proportions of voters who watch or pay attention to these aspects of electioneering.

Different forms of mass media are used in different ways and may have quite distinct political consequences (McAllister, 1992: 176). For example, Patterson (1980) notes that in the USA, newspapers are used much more for political information and analysis, especially by those most interested in politics. Lloyd (1990: 109) notes that in Australia some radio listeners are frequently exposed to current affairs programmes with often more substantial political components than either television current affairs programmes or news broadcasts.

Party political schedules and activities in Australia are necessarily orientated towards television as the most pervasive medium (Ward, 1991), a primacy which is also a feature of British and American elections (Harrison, 1989; Morgan and Shanahan, 1992). For the 1990 Australian federal election campaign, broadcasting (of which the bulk of expenditure was for television) absorbed nearly half the A\$39 million spent and the print media less than a quarter (Australian Electoral Commission, 1991).

Several other aspects of media coverage of elections also warrant attention. Opinion polls appear to have an impact on the campaign in a variety of ways, with voters variously subject to 'bandwagon' (McAllister, 1992) and 'underdog' (Goot, 1993) effects; national and regional campaigns may change strategies and intensities and candidates' confidence will change in accordance with the latest opinion polls. Importantly too, journalists interpret day-to-day campaign events in the light of the polls. Among voters, attention paid to opinion polls is said to depend on political interest (McAllister, 1992: 179–81). During the 1990 election campaign, of the 18 percent of voters who had little interest in politics, the overwhelming majority (three out of four) said they took no notice of opinion polls. Yet, of the 36 percent with a strong interest, only one in five said they paid much attention to the polls during the election campaign. Generally, there is little agreement about their impact on voter choice (Skalaban, 1988).

The televised debate between leaders is becoming a regular feature of both Australian and American election campaigns. That between Prime Minister Hawke and Opposition leader Peacock in 1984 was seen as important in what was a close-fought contest (Lloyd, 1990: 94). The 1990 debate between the same two prime ministerial aspirants was seen as 'electrifying', in terms of both volume of follow-up media coverage and relative perceptions of the party leaders, media and public opinion (Lloyd, 1990: 97). The debate was watched by 56 percent of voters and the consensus was that Labor (Hawke) 'won' (McAllister, 1992: 178–9). Research indicates that 'winning' debates has the desired impact on voting choice (Schrott, 1990), particularly among voters with low levels of political knowledge (Lanoue, 1992).

Official party campaign launches, traditionally designed as formal statements of party policy, are now aimed at a mass television audience to mark the beginning of the formal election campaign. Lloyd (1990: 100) observed that during the 1990 campaign the party launches were largely eclipsed by

the debate. Nevertheless a third of the electorate watched both major party launches; a substantial 44 percent watched one or the other. But although party launches do have a substantial profile in the electorate, their impact on voter choice remains unexplored.

While there remains some ambivalence about the influence of the mass media on voter behaviour (and therefore on election outcomes), several conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing review. Generally, the effect is small compared with the major influences of partisanship, issues and candidates. However, its effects are larger among particular groups of voters, which may be crucial to the final result. Furthermore, the effects of the mass media are likely to differ according to the type of political stimuli (paid or unpaid), the medium through which it is conveyed (television, the press and radio) and the particular form of communication (debates, party launches and opinion polls). This study investigates a number of questions arising from the literature about relationships between election campaign news, advertising and events on voter choice.

### Research Design, Data and Methodology

To answer the research questions, regression models were developed to test the impact of various forms of media coverage on voter behaviour, controlling for other sources of electoral support among different categories of voters for both main political parties, Labor (centre-left) and Liberal (centre-right), and for the minor centrist party, the Democrats. A first set analyses voters who *considered changing* their vote from that at the previous election. A second examines those who *changed* their vote between the two elections. In both cases, the dependent variable compares those who considered changing or actually changed (coded 1) from those who did not (coded 0). Further models assess media and other influences against the *timing* of the decision on how to vote, with the dependent variable those who decided during the nominated period (coded 1) against all others for each party (= 0).

Data for testing the models are from the 1990 Australian Election Study,<sup>1</sup> which lends itself to this investigation because it includes a wide variety of questions on the influence of the mass media. From these, measures of attention paid to and/or impact of campaign news and advertising on television and radio and in the print media, along with campaign events comprising the debate, the party launches and opinion polls were constructed (see Appendix). Control variables for social structure, partisanship, ideology, issues and candidate evaluations were also constructed. Logistic regression analysis is used to estimate the model because the dependent variables are dichotomous. In the tables of results, a pseudo  $R^2$  is included as a measure of the variance accounted for by additional variables. It is calculated as the increment in percentage of scaled deviance of the null model accounted for by the addition of mass media variables.

There is a potential problem of possible multicollinearity among the campaign measures. There may, for example, be a high correlation between paid and unpaid advertising in the electronic media simply from frequency of exposure. This and other such effects, if present, could act to undermine the stability of estimates derived from multivariate analysis. In fact, however, multicollinearity is unlikely to be a problem. Bivariate correlations between electronic media news and advertising were only moderate (Pearson  $r < .6$ ); all other inter-correlations were considerably smaller.

### Overall Impacts

Effects of mass media involvement in the 1990 election campaign are presented in Table 1. Overall, campaign news, advertising and related events, controlled for other sources of electoral support, account for the hypothesized modest role of media exposure, but one that is statistically significant in many instances. There were significant impacts on both Labor and Democrat voters who considered changing their vote during the campaign, with a 5–12 percent increment in variance accounted for (panel A). However, there was no significant impact on those who actually changed their vote to either of these parties (panel B). This suggests that the mass media had a reinforcing role for Labor and Democrat voters, but failed to persuade them to change their vote.

The next part of Table 1 (panel C) presents the increase in the explanatory power of the model according to when voters made up their minds. Among stable Labor voters who decided before the campaign began, election news, advertisements and events had a significant impact on voter choice, adding 4 percent to variation accounted for and suggesting a reinforcing role. No significant effect was found for Labor voters who decided their vote during the first weeks of the campaign. Among Labor voters who decided during the last few days of the campaign and election day itself, mass media variables had a significant effect and, indicative of a persuading role, increased the explanatory power of the model by a further 7 percent.

Among stable Liberal voters, media coverage had no significant overall effect on their decision. In contrast, election coverage and events became more important as the campaign proceeded, suggesting the growing importance of a persuading role. As to the major party vote, therefore, the mass media had more effect the later the vote decision. Although this is not direct evidence of Converse's U-shaped model, it does suggest that more volatile voters are more sensitive to the electoral influence of the mass media. It should be noted, however, that the inclusion in the models of partisanship makes the reinforcing effects of the mass media, as such, difficult to identify.

For the minor-party Democrats, the effects of the mass media were significant no matter when the vote decision was made. This finding is not

**Table 1.** Log-likelihood improvement to explanation of voter behaviour by inclusion of campaign-related news, advertising and events in addition to other sources of voter support

<i>Voters</i>	<i>Model Chi<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Signifi- cance</i>	<i>Increment (%)</i>
A. For those who considered changing their vote			
Among Labor voters ( <i>N</i> = 793)	43.52	.00**	4.48
Among Liberal voters ( <i>N</i> = 725)	22.45	.21	2.75
Among Democrat voters ( <i>N</i> = 244)	35.66	.00**	10.56
B. For those who changed their vote from the previous election			
To Labor cf. all Labor voters ( <i>N</i> = 793)	23.58	.17	5.30
To Liberal cf. all Liberal voters ( <i>N</i> = 725)	28.35	.06	3.73
To Democrats cf. all Democrat voters ( <i>N</i> = 244)	23.66	.17	8.13
C. For those who made up their minds how they would vote:			
Prior to the start of the campaign			
Among Labor voters ( <i>N</i> = 793)	43.75	.00**	4.01
Among Liberal voters ( <i>N</i> = 725)	22.08	.23	2.40
Among Democrat voters ( <i>N</i> = 244)	33.32	.02*	11.68
During the first few weeks of the campaign			
Among Labor voters	19.78	.35	2.32
Among Liberal voters	28.65	.05*	6.04
Among Democrat voters	37.50	.01*	13.89
During the last few days of the campaign			
Among Labor voters	46.12	.00**	7.14
Among Liberal voters	32.23	.02*	5.28
Among Democrat voters	29.25	.04*	9.69
On election day <sup>a</sup>			
Among Labor voters	30.77	.03*	7.24
Among Liberal voters	34.00	.01*	8.63

\*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \* $p \leq .05$ ; for all analyses, degrees of freedom = 18.

<sup>a</sup> There are too few Democrats in this category.

surprising given the Democrats' small partisan base, their attraction to protest voters and the greater sensitivity of the Democrat vote to issues and candidate evaluations.

### Voter Response to Forms of Campaign Advertising

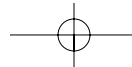
The preceding discussion has looked at the overall effects of the mass media without distinguishing between political stimuli and type of medium, and without regard to the positive or negative nature of any influence. To

**Table 2.** Effects of political advertising and related factors on those who *considered* changing their vote during the election campaign and those who *did* change their vote between 1987 and 1990 (logistic regression coefficients)

	<i>Considered change from:</i>			<i>Changed vote to:</i>		
	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Democrat</i>
<i>Campaign events</i>						
Campaign news: On TV	0.76	-0.35	-0.55	0.62	-0.26	0.09
In the print media	0.12	1.17	0.88	-0.04	-1.22	-0.77
On radio	-0.70	-0.39	-30.14	-1.44	2.20*	-1.75
Campaign advertising: On TV	0.39	0.14	-1.34	1.51	0.93	-0.92
In the print media	-0.72	-0.34	-0.87	-2.13*	1.14	0.66
On radio	1.01	0.70	20.07	1.03	-2.41*	0.57
Campaign events						
Watched TV debate [No]	-0.19	-0.01	0.60	0.53	0.43	-0.37
TV debate performance [Neither impressed]						
Hawke (Labor) better	-0.33	-0.10	-0.68	0.56	0.23	0.33
Peacock (Liberal) better	-2.01*	0.11	0.42	0.22	0.68*	-0.35
Watched TV campaign launch [Did not watch]						
That of Labor	-0.06	-0.44	2.39*	0.18	-0.43	0.14
That of Liberals	-0.05	0.56	0.36	-0.33	0.96	-2.60
That of both parties	-0.31	-0.19	1.56*	0.17	0.39	1.18
Impressiveness of party launch [Neither impressed]						
Labor more impressive	-0.22	0.37	-0.15	0.87*	-0.01	-0.48
Liberals more impressive	0.63	0.12	1.23	-0.94	0.44	-1.77
Influence of opinion polls	-0.06	-0.00	2.02*	0.06	0.84	1.08
Interest in politics generally	-0.06	0.87	1.43	-0.57	0.08	0.02
Awareness of Democrats campaign	1.77*	1.04*	1.79	0.32	0.10	2.59
Awareness of Greens campaign	-0.20	-0.31	-0.60	0.89	0.40	0.79
Grand means	.30	.25	.48	.22	.08	.72

\* $p \leq .05$ ; for all figures in italics  $p \leq .10$

*Note:* Results show if, among all Labor/Liberal/Democrat voters (the dependent variable), those who considered changing/did change their vote (coded 1, otherwise 0), were influenced by particular aspects of the electoral campaign as shown among the independent variables. Reference variables are in [square] brackets.



advance the analysis, Tables 2 and 3 present the results for specific campaign events as conveyed by television, newspapers and radio.

### *On Swingers and Switchers*

Consistent with those who argue that television exposure in particular has few, if any, direct impacts on voting behaviour (Bybee et al., 1981; Wattenberg, 1982), television news coverage and advertising had no significant effects among those considering changing or those who did change their vote. On the other hand, news and advertising in the print media and radio had some significant effects (at the  $p < .10$  level). Those who more often followed campaign news in newspapers were more likely to consider changing their vote from the Liberal Party. This bears out Patterson's (1980) finding for the USA that, compared with television, newspapers are read much more for political information and analysis, especially by those most interested in politics, who tend to be more educated, Liberal voters. Voters who more frequently listened to political advertising on the radio were more likely to consider changing their vote from Labor. Similarly, voters who listened to campaign news more frequently were more likely to change their vote to the Liberal Party. Lloyd (1990: 109) notes that at least part of any radio audience is commonly exposed to current affairs programmes which often have more substantial political components than either television current affairs programmes or news broadcasts; an important segment of voters, again likely to be dominated by better-educated, Liberal supporters, is open to influence by radio news reporting. On the other hand, those who switched to Labor or Liberal were negatively influenced by advertising in the print media (to Labor) or on radio (to Liberal). It may be noted, too, that though not significant, the positive signs for campaign advertising on television and radio among those who changed to Labor, and in the print media of switchers to Liberal, are consistent with expectations about the media more favoured by each set of voters.

Analysis of the data on the debate between the major party leaders suggests that evaluations of performance can and do influence electoral choice. Voters who judged the Liberal leader Peacock's performance as better were twice as likely (the exponent of 0.68) to have changed their vote to Liberal as those who judged neither leader the winner. Similarly, voters who judged Hawke as more impressive were more likely to change their vote to Labor, although the estimate was not significant. The puzzling result is that voters who judged Peacock to be more impressive were significantly less likely to consider changing their vote from Labor. One explanation is that this reflects Labor partisans whose (non-partisan) assessment of the debate had no bearing on their vote choice.

The party launches had significant effects only for the Democrats, with those who watched the Labor launch more likely to consider changing their vote. Among Democrats who watched both party launches the impact was

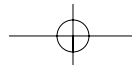
**Table 3.** Detailed effects of political advertising and related factors on those who made up their mind how they would vote before election campaign begun, during the last few days of the campaign, and on election day itself (logistic regression coefficients)

<i>Campaign events</i>	<i>Before campaign began</i>			<i>Last few days</i>			<i>On election day</i>
	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Lib.</i>	<i>Dem.</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Lib.</i>	<i>Dem.</i>	<i>Labor</i>
Campaign news: On TV	-0.23	1.03	-0.93	-0.21	-1.32	-1.66	1.54
In the print media	0.42	-1.08	-2.73	-0.63*	1.39	1.91	-0.83
On radio	0.40	0.66	1.09	1.55*	-0.86	-0.08	-0.03
Campaign advertising: On TV	-1.14*	-0.53	-0.97	1.81	1.11	1.12	-1.15
In the print media	-0.27	-0.20	-0.72	0.13	-1.33	-1.49	0.44
On radio	-0.24	-0.06	-2.34	-0.70	0.62	1.08	-1.34
Campaign events							
Watched TV debate [No]	0.37	-0.45	1.02	-0.75*	0.82*	-0.09	0.32
TV debate performance [Neither impressed]							
Hawke (Labor) better	0.40	-0.04	-0.45	0.07	-0.39	0.79	-0.71
Peacock (Liberal) better	0.51	-0.16	1.53	-0.20	0.47	0.16	-1.29
Watched TV campaign launch [Did not watch]							
That of Labor	1.36*	0.03	-1.55	-6.21	0.13	0.13	-6.19
That of Liberals	0.11	-1.28	-8.64	-0.37	1.79*	-2.34	0.23
That of both parties	-0.34	-0.60*	0.08	-0.05	0.54	1.07*	0.02
Impressiveness of party launch [Neither impressed]							
Labor more impressive	0.35	0.13	0.92	-0.28	-0.24	0.08	-0.50
Liberals more impressive	0.53	-0.06	0.06	-0.44	0.34	1.25	0.96
Influence of opinion polls	-0.50	0.37	-2.36	-0.20	0.37	1.34	0.18
Interest in politics generally	0.59	0.28	3.16*	-0.45	0.82	0.87	-1.81*
Awareness of Democrats campaign	-0.07	-0.48	-1.30	0.50	-0.19	0.76	0.38
Awareness of Greens campaign	-0.36	-0.23	-0.21	0.73	0.85	-1.00	-0.53
Grand means	.55	.67	.27	.14	.15	.32	.08

<sup>a</sup> There are too few Democrats in this category.

\* $p \leq .05$ ; for all figures in italics,  $p \leq .10$

Note: Results show if, among all who voted Labor/Liberal/Democrat (the dependent variable), those who determined how they would vote before or later in the election (coded 1, otherwise 0), were influenced by particular aspects of the election campaign as shown among the independent variables. Reference variables are in [square]



in two different directions, both significant: one influencing consideration of switching their vote from the party, the other of changing to support the Democrats. Those more impressed with the Labor launch were more than twice as likely to change to Labor as those who were impressed with neither major party launch. Similarly, voters more impressed with the Liberal launch were significantly less inclined to vote Democrat, a result matched among Democrats who watched the Liberals' launch.

Among other campaign events, attention to opinion polls had only marginal impact on vote choice, with those who followed the polls being more likely to consider changing their vote to Democrat. Voters with a greater interest in politics were more likely to consider changing their vote from Liberal or Democrat but this was not significantly related to actual vote change. Awareness of the election campaign of the Australian Greens had no influence on the vote for the three parties, which may cast some doubt on Bean et al.'s (1990) characterization of the 1990 election as 'the greening of Australian politics'.

Among those who changed their vote, the importance of the mass media coverage of the election campaign on the Democrats is further confirmed by the relatively large number of significant effects, compared with the much smaller number for those converting to either of the major parties. In particular, the importance to the Democrats of awareness of their election campaign was reconfirmed; those most aware were some 13 times more likely to have converted than those least aware. For those changing to Labor, advertising in the print media had a strong negative impact, while impressions of the Labor Party launch worked positively. Among Liberal converts, radio news was a significant plus, but radio election advertising a strong minus, bearing out earlier discussion about the likely importance of radio news and current affairs commentary among more educated voters.

### *On Stable and Volatile Voters*

Findings for the impacts of political advertising and related events according to the timing of the decision on how to vote provide mixed signals. Among stable voters who made up their minds before the election campaign began, all the significant impacts of campaign news and advertising were negative, not positive as anticipated. Because the analyses control for partisanship, these effects are due to the small group who voted contrary to their partisan leanings; mass media coverage reinforced their decision to vote in this way. However, this explanation only partially applies to campaign events, which, where significant, had a positive, implicitly reinforcing effect on Labor voters, but again a negative impact generally on Liberal voters. For Labor voters, the television debate, their *own* leader's performance in that debate, and their *own* party campaign launch all had significant, positive impacts – a reinforcing effect. Partisan Liberal and Democrat voters, on the other hand, were negatively influenced by their attention to the print

media, by watching the television debate and *both* major party launches (Liberals only) and, among Democrats, the opinion polls.

For voters who made up their minds in the last few days before the election, the effects of the campaign were generally positive: a persuading role. Of this group, Labor voters were positively influenced by campaign news on the radio, but those who followed campaign news in the print media, or who watched the party launches, were more likely to vote Liberal or Democrat. The debate also had positive effects for the Liberal Party, while judging Hawke as the more impressive helped the Democrat but not the Labor vote. In contrast, print media news and advertising had negative effects on Labor and Liberal voters respectively.

A possible key to understanding the impact of the media's election campaign coverage on those who did not make up their minds until election day itself is to be found in the significant lack of interest in politics, at least among Liberal and Labor voters. At best undecided, this group may also include a component of 'don't knows/don't cares' in the context of Australia's compulsory voting system. Those who judged Hawke to have won the debate were less inclined to vote Labor and more likely to vote Liberal, suggesting an element of destabilization, in this case downplaying the importance of 'winning' the debate.

## Conclusion

This study of the impact of media coverage of the 1990 federal election campaign bears out the hypothesis that the *influence* of the media on voter behaviour (Aitkin, 1980) is quite different from *attention paid to* (Lloyd, 1990) these information flows. Media coverage makes a relatively small but generally significant contribution to voter behaviour as one among a suite of factors including partisan leanings, previous knowledge, beliefs and evaluation of contemporary issues. Thus the Australian experience for the 1990 federal election campaign supports a 'modest impact' thesis, that campaign news, advertising and other events covered by the mass media are significant among a number of secondary determinants on electoral choice.

Results also confirm that the effects of the mass media on voters differs among the types of political stimuli, the medium in which the stimuli are transmitted, and voter volatility. They support Miller's (1991) view of the importance of distinguishing between different components of mass media and Aitkin's (1980) emphasis on various subsets of voters. Analysis of these subsets – stable, wavering, swinging and very late deciding – shows that different aspects of media activity impact differently on each. Wavering or swinging voters more actively use the election campaign to determine how to vote, and for these subsets campaign advertising in its widest sense has an important persuading role. For the committed voter, partisanship is the dominant influence.

Some findings contrary to prevailing wisdoms have been uncovered. First, winning election debates does not automatically translate into increased electoral support. In fact the electoral impact of the debate was positive for both the Liberals and the Democrats, even though the Labor leader was considered to have 'won'. Second, the campaign launches of the major parties did not boost their respective votes. The main beneficiaries of the campaign launches, and of the campaign more generally, were the Australian Democrats. Third, little evidence was found for the reinforcing effects of the election campaign on stable voters. In fact, negative effects were found more frequently. The role of the election campaign and media coverage was indeed reinforcing, but in the opposite direction, or reinforcing the decision to vote contrary to partisan positions.

Media coverage of election campaigns deals, by definition, with contemporary issues and events. These change from one election to another. For example, that Labor won the 1990 election on the preferences of Democrat and Green voters is a major reason why this study identified so many negative campaign effects on Labor's primary vote. Given that each election campaign has a unique constellation of campaign events and media interests, the challenge ahead lies in work yet to be done on different election campaigns before any definitive conclusions can be drawn about the role of the mass media during election campaigns in Australia.

### **Appendix: Variables Used in the Analyses**

The dependent variables are scored as follows. Respondents are scored 1 in each situation context, such as 'considered changing their vote' or 'did change their vote', 'made up their minds on election day' and so on, otherwise 0, for all those who voted for each party as specified.

Following Marks and Bean (1992: 328–9), the independent variables were constructed and scored as follows. The socio-structural variables are categories for: occupation (if manager, professional, para-professional, clerical/sales, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, and a residual category for occupations not elsewhere classified to reduce discarded responses); class identification (middle or working); qualifications (tertiary, trade/professional, none); religion (Protestant and other, Catholic, none); religiosity; urban or rural; State; age (actual); sex; and trade union membership.

Partisanship was scored as 1 for party identification (Liberal, Labor, Democrat, other), otherwise 0, and categorically for strength of identification (1–3 if very strong, fairly strong or not very strong).

Ideological positions of respondents were included for general ideological alignment (categorically, as right, left or centre); attitudes to big business, trade unions, the death penalty, uranium mining and environmental groups (scored as continuous variables between 0 and 1); and postmaterialism (constructed and scored categorically for respondents as having postmaterialist, materialist or mixed goals).

Contemporary issues were derived from measures of retrospective and prospective, personal and national economic evaluations and scored as continuous variables ranging from 0 to 1, 1 being the most positive evaluation of economic conditions.

Evaluation of the party leaders, restricted in this analysis to Labor, Liberal and Democrat, was also recorded as continuous variables ranging from 0 (most negative evaluation) to 1 (most positive evaluation).

Measures relating to campaign news or advertising (how much respondents followed election news or advertising in the print or electronic media) and aspects of campaign awareness (level of interest in politics generally, the influence of the opinion polls, and level of awareness of the Democrats' and Greens' election campaigns), were all recorded as continuous variables varying between 1 (highest) and 0 (lowest). Measures for campaign events relating to the television debate and party campaign launches, and the impressiveness or otherwise of those involved, were entered as categorical variables.

### Note

- 1 The Australian Election Study (AES) was a systematic random sample of the national electorate provided by the Australian Electoral Office and distributed proportionately to all states and territories. The questionnaire, self-completed, was mailed out to respondents a day before the election and followed up with a reminder notice to the whole sample 10 days later. A second questionnaire was sent to non-respondents 4 weeks later. Altogether, 2037 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 66 percent.

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