

ABC COVERAGE OF THE 2004 FEDERAL ELECTION

The ABC covered the Federal Election on television, radio and online with some 170 separate editorial teams in capital cities and in regional and rural Australia. These teams range from sole reporters in remote locations to the editorial staff of ABC local radio in capital cities, to national teams, in programs such as the *7.30 Report*, as well as online journalists for abc.net.au. Covering a federal election is the most extensive single editorial project undertaken by the ABC.

Program strands kept records of their interaction with candidates and party officials and, in particular, the voice or line content of each candidate during the six-week campaign. The output of each strand is assessed for fairness and balance. This appraisal is undertaken both by an internal monitoring group (the Election Coverage Review Committee (ECRC)) and an external research company. The ABC has engaged external monitoring for state, territory and federal election coverage since 1998.

ABC election coverage is regulated by the Corporation's legislative requirement to be accurate, impartial and objective in the gathering and presentation of news and information.

The ABC's *Charter of Editorial Practice* outlines these expectations. During an election the ABC commits to equal coverage and treatment of government and opposition and coverage of other parties and independents on the basis of news value.

MONITORING

The ABC establishes a monitoring group (ECRC) to assess coverage as the campaign progresses. Each editorial team assesses share of voice of each party (by candidates and party officials). An external research company (Rehame) was contracted to also assess party share of voice.

Over the six weeks of the campaign across all platforms, Rehame found the ABC's election coverage provided 44.6% share of voice to the Coalition and 43.5% share of voice to the Australian Labor Party - a difference of 1.1%.

By media platform the distribution was:

Cumulative Share of Voice: 29 August-9 October 2004

	Coalition	ALP
Television	47.9%	42.0%
Radio	43.0%	41.9%
Online	42.9%	46.6%

[Source: Rehame]

The Greens received 4.4% share of voice averaged across all platforms and the Democrats received an average of 3.5%.

Rehame observed:

These results demonstrate an even balance in the ABC's media coverage for the duration of the 2004 Federal Election campaign.

The trend (5.9%) on ABC Television towards the Coalition was principally influenced by reporting on the 7pm ABC TV News in each state and territory. International events, on which incumbent Ministers commented more extensively than Shadow spokespeople, included the Beslan massacre, the Jakarta Embassy bombing, the alleged kidnapping of two Australians in Iraq, the visa granted to Khalid Mohammed, and the threatened Al Qaeda attack on Australia outlined in the Zawahri tape. These events while occurring during the election campaign were not all necessarily election related.

The trend (3.7%) reported by Rehame for ABC Online towards the ALP contrasts with the internal ABC record, which shows 44% line space to the comments of Coalition candidates and 43.5% to candidates of the ALP.

A difference in methodology accounts for these contrasts. Rehame caught comments online that were contained within quotation marks whereas the ABC internal analysis included paraphrased reporting of the comments of candidates as well as direct quotations.

Principal daily national election coverage programs achieved high levels of equity in terms of share of voice for candidates from parties with the capacity to form government. *AM*, for example, with nearly four hours of candidates speaking, achieved a share of voice of 48% for the Coalition and 48.3% for the ALP. *PM*, with nearly four and a half hours of candidate speech, achieved 45.7% for the Coalition and 45.8% for the ALP. On ABC TV the current affairs programs had a wider variance with the *7.30 Report* having 48% share of voice to the Coalition and 43.6% to the ALP.

With nearly 50 hours of candidate voice time, NewsRadio had 43% to the Coalition and 42.1% to the ALP.

Research is also undertaken on party favourability. Favourability measures how party spokespeople use their airtime whether to speak favourably about their party and policies or to speak unfavourably about other parties and their policies. The ECRC uses this external research to assess whether coverage of a party has been unduly positive or negative. There may, however, be good editorial reasons for such outcomes as, for example, a candidate or party may have been in difficulty over a particular issue or event.

Cumulative Favourability: 29 August – 9 October 2004

Party*	Television %	Radio %	Online %
Coalition favourable	34.5%	33.6%	32.1%
Coalition unfavourable	15.4%	12.0%	18.9%
ALP favourable	28.8%	30.9%	28.2%
ALP unfavourable	12.4%	8.8%	13.1%

* Other parties make up residual [Source Rehome].

The ECRC also engaged Newspoll to assist with its work. Newspoll found that among those who have an opinion, community perceptions remain heavily weighted towards: the ABC being unbiased in its reporting of news and current affairs; and not biased in favour or against particular federal political parties.

COMPLAINTS

Complaints from listeners and viewers in the 2004 campaign amounted to 993 contacts (telephone, email and letter). This contrasts with the 2001 Federal Election when 1542 contacts were received.

PARTY ELECTION BROADCASTS

The Liberal and National Parties, the Australian Labor Party, the Greens, One Nation, the Democrats and the Australian Progressive Alliance qualified for and completed party election broadcasts on ABC TV and Local Radio.

Party policy launches were also broadcast for the Government and Opposition.

CONCLUSION

The ABC's coverage of the 2004 Federal Election was extensive, comprehensive and competent. Overall, the editorial expectations of accuracy, impartiality and balance were met.

It was unprecedented, to my knowledge, in ABC federal election coverage that, for the 2004 campaign, no written complaints were received from the campaign headquarters of any party.

MURRAY GREEN
Chairman, Election Coverage Review Committee

1 December 2004