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## THE 1980 AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL ELECTION

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The electoral rolls had approximately 9 million voters registered for the Australian federal election held on Saturday, 18 October 1980. 502 candidates contested 125 House of Representatives seats and 182 candidates stood for the 34 of the Senate's 64 seats up for re-election. The Liberal/National Country Party coalition government was going to the polls with a seat total of 87, compared with the Australian Labor Party's meagre total of 38, and in the Senate the Lib/NCP had 19 Senators up for re-election, the ALP 14, with one Independent Senator from Tasmania also standing again. 16 Lib/NCP Senators, 2 Australian Democrat Senators and 12 ALP Senators will remain in office until 1984.

Opinion polls taken during 1980 had shown the Government and Opposition to be commanding roughly equal voter support, but the Government was generally tipped to retain office, though with a reduced majority. Despite the favourable poll figures, it was felt that the ALP lacked sufficient support out in the electorate to give it an election night victory, and the Prime Minister's polling day announcement aroused little interest. Two out of three voters said that they expected the coalition to be returned, no major issues divided the political parties, the economy was subdued but stable, and less than one in four electors said they were taking a great deal of interest in the forthcoming election.<sup>1</sup>

Some interest did centre around the likely campaign performance of the new Labor leader, Mr Hayden, who had succeeded the charismatic former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. There was also evidence of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's growing electorate unpopularity, but by and large the marginality of politics to the majority of Australian electors

was at its most evident a fortnight before the formal polling day for the 1980 federal election.

### The Party Policy Speeches

These were delivered on 30 September by the Prime Minister, and on the following night by the Labor leader. Mr Fraser officially opened the Liberal campaign at Moorabbin Town Hall in the heart of Melbourne's wavering 'sand-belt' seats, stressing that the Government was standing on its record of economic management. He put forward a long list of what were described as 'small' promises — an increase of \$500 in the home savings grant for families, tax deductibility of the cost of home insulation, \$10 million for a homeless persons' assistance programme — and promised only one big ticket item, namely, an undertaking to build a railway from Darwin to Alice Springs at an estimated cost of \$420 million. The Government's first task according to the Prime Minister was

'to maintain responsibility in economic affairs because without that all else fails . . . continued economic responsibility demands restraint in Government expenditure.'<sup>2</sup>

Along with this budgetary prudence, said Mr Fraser, went a need for broad-based programmes of national development, rejection of irresponsible union actions, assistance to rural industries and growth in productivity. Only when these goals had been achieved could a government provide welfare assistance to those in need: only when our national security had been safeguarded in an increasingly dangerous world could Australians be optimistic about the future in a progressive, free and independent Australia.

As one commentator pointed out, the low-key Liberal policy speech

suggested a party supremely confident of an easy election night victory, content to follow docilely a leader whose two earlier resounding electoral successes had made him unassailable. The policy speech was a television presentation of simple staccato sentences, lacking explanation, qualification and even argument, and as such its contribution to campaign dynamics was symptomatic of the climate in which the 1980 election campaign opened.

The Labor Party offering was delivered by Mr Hayden in his Brisbane home city in the Greek Community Centre on the following night. In a way, the style differences between the two presentations in widely separated geographical venues proved to be an indication of the varied voting pattern that was to characterise the 1980 election, with its lack of national uniformity and divergent state swings. With the goal of providing

'a more equal, a fairer and a better Australian society than we have known in the last five years,

the Labor leader pledged his party to the

'task of restoring equality of opportunity and national pride to our country and dignity and fair play to all our people.'<sup>3</sup>

Labor's ideological commitment was underpinned by traditional election promises to give an across the board tax cut, set up a \$180 million unemployed programme, increase family income supplementation, spend more on education, and so on. He capped off the party's policy speech by making a promise to sell the two Boeing 707 aircraft bought specially by the Fraser Government for Prime Ministerial travel overseas.

'Those aircraft have become a divisive symbol of Mr Fraser's gross self-indulgence at the public expense and his Government's double standards ... we do not need them ... and will

sell them as soon as possible.'<sup>4</sup>

It is a paradox of Australian politics that pledges of more equal shares in the nation's wealth by one political party inevitably become a debate about their costs, often degenerating into squabbles about simple accountancy. Labor's 1980 election policy was overtaken by this fate almost immediately, despite Mr Hayden's sincere, polished delivery of its compassionate message, and policy costs became a key issue in what had been almost a non-issue election. Throughout the campaign each leader accused the other of misleading the electorate about the cost of their respective election promises in what became known as the 'cost war on policies', simplistic media advertising driving home their messages. Australian election campaigns rarely stir the political blood and the 1980 experience was no different.

#### Election Issues

What did the Australian electorate perceive to be the issues shaping the 1980 election campaign? The table below sets out the results of a survey based on a national sample of 2000 respondents interviewed by Age-Poll at the beginning of the campaign, and then a week before polling day.

Table 1 (opposite) clearly reflects the strong link between party, values and beliefs and voting in the Australian electorate; the ALP voters were much more likely to choose unemployment and social welfare as key issues, whereas Liberal supporters selected ability to manage the economy and inflation.<sup>5</sup>

With hindsight, the percentage shift in support from unemployment as an issue (Labor supporters first choice) to inflation (Liberal supporters first choice) during the campaign was a pointer to the final Liberal victory on polling night. Voters were indicating greater support for the Labor party a week before polling day when asked which party they intended to vote for on Satur-

Table 1 Election Issues 1980

Issues seen as MOST important	Total Pre-campaign %	Mid-campaign %	Mid-Campaign		Aus. Dem. Voters %
			Liberal Voters %	ALP Voters %	
Unemployment	28	23	12	33	19
Ability to manage economy	18	19	24	12	29
Pensions and social services	14	15	9	21	8
Inflation	12	15	18	12	17
Development	6	6	7	5	6
Quality of leaders	6	6	8	4	8
Strikes and union power	6	6	11	2	4
Taxes	6	6	5	7	6
Petrol prices	3	3	2	4	2
Defence and foreign policy	2	2	4	*	*
N	101 (2000)	101 (2000)	100 (686)	100 (951)	99 (173)

\* indicates less than 1 per cent

Source Age-Poll September/October 1980  
conducted by Irving Saulwick and Associates

day, but a value shift to Liberal preferred issues was already under way.

The Liberal advertising campaign in the last week also re-inforced this value shift. A series of full-page newspaper advertisements and television messages stressed the threat of increasing inflation inherent in Labor's unemployment and tax cut program with headlines like

'We Can't Afford Labor's Bill' over the leader's portrait  
'Labor's wealth tax threatens the unwealthy family' captioning a picture of average suburbia  
'Could your family afford Labor's 20 per cent inflation?' along with a price tag of \$2.20 on a dozen eggs

Furious at the emotionalism of the advertising, Labor officials threatened legal action for its misleading content, but with the message delivered to the electorate it was too

late, and 1980 became the election where a hypothetical egg price was a key issue. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the war between Iraq and Iran, the Kampuchean atrocities scarcely reached the headlines or touched the Australian electorate and the political parties' campaigns, nor was the question of alternatives in Australian foreign policy ever canvassed.

#### The Campaign

The dull campaign was suddenly enlivened at the half-way point when opinion polls conducted in the first week in October recorded a significant voter support shift to the Labor Party. The petrol price issues appeared to be working against the government, along with Labor's promised tax cuts, and pollsters began to give the ALP a chance of reaching the 51.5 per cent of votes it needed to have a show of winning the election. The

poll results caused the Prime Minister to switch his efforts from Queensland to Victoria where the Government's support was lowest, and he went 'walkabout' in Bourke Street to cheers and jeers from the crowd on 13 October in the Melbourne City Square.

Mr Hayden admitted he was on a 'high' but exhorted his supporters not to become over-confident as a result of the poll figures. Clearly they pushed the Government into stepping up its campaigning in the last few days before polling day, harping on the likelihood of the ALP introducing a wealth tax to pay for its programmes, and promoting a scare campaign on the inflation issue. Labor on the other hand wound down its campaign in the last week, leaving the headlines to Australia's unpopular Prime Minister, a tactical error in the volatile electorate of the 1980s where a growing percentage of voters do not make up their minds about which party to vote for until polling day.

The opinion polls published midway through the 1980 election campaign also appear to have had a significant effect on the outcome. Mr Fraser's nerve held despite the persistent drift away from the Government recorded by the polls up to a week before polling day, and he even used their findings to hammer the theme that a Labor government was a return to socialist government and recycled Whitlam policies. He turned possible defeat into victory on 18 October, leaving him unchallenged and his reign secure.

#### **Minor Parties and the Senate**

The National Country Party has been the only minor party in Australia ever to play a significant role in the House of Representatives. Today its leader is the Deputy Prime Minister, and its members hold five Cabinet posts despite a seat total of only 18 seats in the lower House. Its share of the vote was down from 10 per cent in 1977 to 8.7 per cent in 1980, but the Prime Minister and the

present NCP leader (Anthony) remain close friends, it seems likely to retain its power in the coalition.

However Mr Anthony campaigned before an even more apathetic audience in the 1980 election than did his city counterparts. He insisted that he could find no evidence of a rural swing against the government, but the distance between country and city has been widening in Australia over the last decade. The coalition's handsome win in the face of the adverse opinion poll findings, and the personal friendship between the two leaders puts the question of the NCP's future on the shelf for the moment, but a leadership change in either party could well allow sectional Liberal Party antagonism to the NCP's share in government to spill over.

The election also saw the once powerful DLP finally disappear as a significant political force in Victoria. Led by the son of one of its founders (ex-Senator McManus) it contested the Senate and fielded candidates in 12 marginal seats in Victoria, campaigning strongly on family welfare proposals. Its main strategy was to direct its preferences to Labor candidates where sitting Liberal members had refused to support its stand against abortion, a tactic which proved critical for the sitting Liberal member in Macmillan in Victoria. For all its success in that seat, it seems unlikely that the party will ever again command sufficient electoral support to be an effective political force. It must now be regarded political history.

Equally interesting was the fall in the Australian Democrat vote from 9 per cent in 1977 to 6.5 per cent in 1980. Although the Democrats led by Senator Chipp were aiming at the Senate, and did in fact win a balance of power position, so that the fall in their electoral support was not critical, the drop in their votes was a most interesting aspect of the 1980 election. Senator Chipp sees his party's goal as that of being Australia's parliamentary

watch-dog, dedicated to ensuring that elected governments keep their promises —

'In other words,' he said, 'we will keep the bastards honest.'

Party policy is to make the Senate into a proper house of review, discouraging the practice of drawing Cabinet members from its ranks so that Senators can stand somewhat apart from party discipline in the interests of responsible government. It is a laudable democratic goal, and if the Australian Democrats were to achieve it, the Senate would become even more powerful. Such a development may yet be the most significant consequence of the 1980 federal election.

#### The Media

The media's most influential part in the 1980 federal election was the prominence it gave to the publication of the results of opinion polls taken mid-way through the campaign. In the welter of statistics and percentages showing the swing away from the Government, few commentators paused to evaluate the significance of the survey figures they were quoting, nor did they appear to grasp their messages at a sufficiently professional level to understand their meaning.

The simplistic conclusion by journalists that a 52 per cent majority for Labor a week before polling day meant that the Liberal government would be defeated quite overlooked the truism that elections are won by electorates and not percentage shares of the national vote. A national swing to one party derived from survey findings is rarely transferred uniformly to all electorates, and it is misleading to translate such a survey finding into seats that can be won and lost. Nor did there appear to be any awareness in media reports of the relevance of standard statistical error to their conclusions. A variation of 2 per cent either way is to be expected in surveys using sample sizes common to most national opinion polls, i.e. from 48 to 52 per

cent for example, but victory for one party and defeat for another falls within that standard error range. Misleading presentation of poll results in an election campaign by the media, perhaps for the purpose of enlivening an otherwise issue-less election can only be regarded as anti-democratic.

There is also growing concern about election advertising costs. Labor's total budget for 'media placement' in the 1980 campaign, according to the party's secretary, David Combe, was \$913,000, a Liberal party spokesman said that their national media spending had been around \$2 million, and the Australian Democrats' total advertising budget had been only \$41,000 according to Senator Chipp.<sup>6</sup> For the major parties the cost of their media campaigns has escalated enormously over the past decade, and the amount of money involved, together with a lack of any real control over the content of political advertising is a matter for considerable concern.

#### The Election Result

Election night was a triumph for Mr Fraser. The swing to Labor was considerably less than that predicted by the opinion polls, and the coalition was returned with an eventual majority of 25 seats in the House of Representatives, although it no longer controls the Senate. The Labor Party gained 12 seats. One of the most interesting aspects of the result was that the increased Labor vote was a gain at the expense of the minor parties;<sup>7</sup> the Liberals' share of the vote in 1977 and 1980 remained roughly the same.

The 1980 election voting pattern (Table 2, page 8) thus reflects a return to major party voting by the Australian electorate in the lower House. At the same time there was a trend towards splitting votes between the H of R and the Senate so that minor parties and an Independent now hold a balance of power position in that chamber. We could well see a return to its 1960 role for

**Table 2** H of R Vote in 1977 and 1980 Federal Elections

	ALP %	Liberal %	NCP %	Aust. Dem. %	Other %
1977 election	39.6	38.1	10.0	9.4	2.9
1980 election	45.4	37.5	8.7	6.5	1.9
Change	+5.8	-0.6	-1.3	-2.9	-1.0

Source: National Times 26 October 1980 viz. Professor D. Aitkin

the Australian upper house as a consequence, reflecting the electorate's changing perspective on the distribution of parliamentary power.

Australia also voted in 1980 as six states rather than as one nation as Table 3 illustrates.

Moreover the increase in the ALP vote from electorate to electorate varied from 8.5 per cent to 0.8 per cent, making it clear that local issues and local candidates also contribute to election figures in defiance of uniformity. Electorally, Australians are becoming more volatile by the decade, more willing to split their party vote between the lower and upper houses, and more diverse in their perceptions of candidates and issues. The political scene will become correspondingly more unpredictable in the next decade.

#### Post-Election Survey

A post-election survey carried out in Melbourne on the Sunday following polling day aimed at giving substance to some of the changes taking place in Australian politics. A sample of voters who had indicated in an earlier interview that they intended to vote for a party different from their 1977 choice

were re-interviewed on the morning of 19 October, along with another sample of voters who had indicated their intention to remain loyal to their 1977 party choice.<sup>8</sup>

There were 124 respondents in all, and the sample appeared to be adequately drawn in political terms, since 39 per cent of them said they had voted ALP in 1977 (Australian percentage was 39.6 for Labor) and 52 per cent of them said they had voted ALP in 1980 (the Victorian percentage was 51 per cent) 38 respondents said they intended to change their vote in the 1980 election (swingers) and 85 respondents said they intended to vote for the same party (stable). The survey questionnaire aimed at testing the continuing validity of conclusions arrived at in earlier surveys carried out on the morning after polling day,<sup>9</sup> and also sought to identify those factors which in 1980 affected the election outcome.

Previous research had found that swinging voters find it difficult to decide which party to cast their vote for, and this was confirmed in the 1980 survey. Almost half the sample of swingers found deciding on a party difficult, but for

**Table 3** State and National Voting Percentages 1980 Election\*

	NSW %	Vic %	Qld %	S.A. %	W.A. %	Tas %	ACT %	NT %	Aust %
ALP	50.3	50.8	46.9	49.3	46.7	47.1	58.4	49.6	49.7
Lib/NCP	49.7	49.2	53.1	50.7	53.3	52.9	41.6	50.4	50.3
Increase in ALP vote 1977-80	2.7	6.3	4.9	0.6	6.8	3.3	4.1	2.1	4.3

\*calculated on two-party preferred vote

Source: National Times 26 October 1980

three-quarters of the stable voters the choice was a clear one. Moreover 1980s swingers were again late deciders, 44 per cent of them making up their minds less than a week before polling day, and 15 per cent leaving the decision to polling day itself. Only 16 per cent of the stable voters said they had finally made up their mind in the week before polling day.

The swinging voters again expressed dissatisfaction with the parties as an important reason why their decision was a difficult one, but added two additional reasons in 1980. These were anti-Fraser, and the difficulty of understanding the issues confronting electors in 1980, both of which were almost as important as party dissatisfaction. The return to mainstream party voting and the decline of the minor party vote in 1980 in the H of R election seems to be a consequence of reduction in dissatisfaction with the parties as a reason for finding a choice difficult and the emergence of the two additional reasons. Anti-Fraserism would lead to a strengthened ALP vote in the lower House and a split Senate vote, and issue difficulty to a desire to see major party government in the lower House but a strengthened Senate able to debate issues more widely and thoroughly, and perhaps ensure that an unpopular Prime Minister and over-powerful lower House government were checked.

Both swinging and stable voters were equally concerned with the party record in casting a vote in 1980, but swingers were more likely to see living standards and stability in government as the most important issue, while unemployment was more important for stable voters. Liberal party policy, stressing the party's record of stable government and halting inflation would have appealed more to swingers than Labor's stress on unemployment programs. And the Liberal party's media campaign in the last week, with its emphasis on increased taxes under Labor, the

wealth tax, and increasing retail prices (eggs) was also obviously highly relevant to swinging voters who rated taxes and petrol prices as more important election issues than did stable voters. Labor's failure to counter the Liberal campaign thrust just before the poll<sup>10</sup> with its emphasis on issues important to swinging voters was obviously significant to swingers who left their party choice until the last few days.

It is also likely that the mid-campaign opinion polls, showing the ALP edging towards an election victory were important for swinging voters' decisions. 9 out of 10 of the swingers in the sample expected the coalition to win the election, 9 out of 10 respondents of the whole sample remembered that the opinion polls were predicting a Labor victory in the last week. A quarter of the swingers said that the published opinion poll findings helped them decide how to vote, but only a twenty-fifth of the stable voters said they helped. The discovery by swinging voters that their expectations of a coalition election win were endangered, their preoccupation with prices, taxes and party record, the emphasis on Labor's threat to their living standards in the Liberal Party's closing media advertisements, and the swingers tendency to make their decisions on polling eve, all support the development of a late swing against the ALP back to the coalition. Overseas research has shown that publication of opinion polls appears to have little effect on final election outcomes, but this may not be the case in future, and certainly appears not to have been the case in the 1980 Australian federal election.

Another pointer for the future is the importance of television political advertising in catching voters' attention. Between 30 and 35 per cent of the whole sample said they noticed party radio and newspaper advertising, but 80 per cent agreed that television advertising caught

their attention. Only a quarter of the sample said that they did not talk about the election during the campaign, so that it seems likely that television messages are an important source of information for three-quarters of the electorate's political discussion during an election campaign. It is a sobering thought.

Finally, can we describe those voters most likely to change their party in an election? The 1980 sample confirmed earlier findings that they are much less likely to feel strongly attached to any political party, and are highly critical of party propaganda and sloganising at election times. To them, the parties and their political message lack credibility, and there is no evidence that the money poured out during elections helps to convert swinging voters into committed party supporters. Swingers appear to remain detached from the strong emotional links that bind stable party loyalists to their chosen team, even though they do not necessarily change their party vote each election.

The research showed tantalising glimpses of the swinging voter's profile, though its outlines are indisputably shadowy. They were somewhat more likely to be single (but not divorced or widowed), or if married to have 3 or 4 children under 15 years. They were considerably more likely to be male, three-quarters of the sample were between 25 and 35 (compared with two-fifths of the stable voters) and they were more likely to be employed in a lower managerial occupation on a self-stated income of more than \$13,000 p.a. Neither their type of education nor their subjective class choice were statistically significant, although they did tend to be non church-goers. The word 'mobile' comes to mind when looking at this profile (thought not socially mobile), a finding reinforced by their criticism of tradition and what they see as old-fashioned social customs, compar-

ed with more stable voters. Lower correlations were also found between the swingers in the sample and traditional social and moral values on an attitudinal scale.<sup>11</sup> Value-relativism appears to shape the swinging voter's world view.

#### Conclusion

Perhaps in the end the 1980 Australian federal election can best be summed up by the comment of one of the respondents in the post-election survey —

'I didn't know who to vote for. I was surprised at Hayden's good performance — he's a nice guy but can he run the country? Remember what happened under Whitlam.'

Initial uncertainty, an early campaign sympathy for Labor, subsequent uneasiness with their campaign image, and finally a recollection of the Whitlam years — it was enough to return Mr Fraser and the Lib/NCP to office for yet another 3 years.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Age-Poll* September 1980. Irving Saulwick and Associates. Data held in Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.
- <sup>2</sup> *Age* newspaper 1 October 1980 pp. 18-19.
- <sup>3</sup> *Age* newspaper 2 October 1980, pp. 18-19.
- <sup>4</sup> *op. cit.* p. 18.
- <sup>5</sup> David Kemp 'The Secret Ingredient in Fraser's Success' in *Journal of HSC Politics* Vol. 6, no. 1, April 1979, pp. 10ff.
- <sup>6</sup> *Age* newspaper 15 October 1980, p. 23.
- <sup>7</sup> *National Times* newspaper October 26, 1980, p. 32.
- <sup>8</sup> Survey data is held in Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.
- <sup>9</sup> Jean Holmes 'The Swinging Voter in Australia — 1977 and After' in *Journal of HSC Politics* Vol. 6, no. 1, April 1979, pp. 3ff.



- <sup>10</sup> *Age* newspaper 18 October 1980, p. 17 Article headed 'Early Warm-up to Labor's Campaign'.
- <sup>11</sup> The attitudinal scale used in the questionnaire was developed by Professor R. Bales in *Personality and Inter-personal Behaviour*

Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970. Its use in Australian political attitudes will be discussed in detail in the author's forthcoming publication *The Australian Political Culture*.

Courtesy VASST