

The success of the micro-parties in 2013

By James Page

One of the surprising results from the 2013 federal election in Australia has been the success of the micro-parties, notably in contesting the Senate. There is no exact definition for micro-party, although this is generally taken to denote a political party with no relevant parliamentary representation, and thus a political party with little or no resources. The success of the micro-parties in 2013 in Australia offers some important lessons for political campaigning.

The first lesson is on the importance of having a good online presence. In some ways, the internet has democratized political campaigning, in that the internet has diminished the fundamental advantage that major political parties enjoy. Increasingly, voters are going to the internet for information, and if a political party can project a good image and good information, then voters will be attracted. Social networking is important, with some 11 million Australians currently active users of social networking. However in addition to this a micro-party and indeed candidates need a good basic website.

The second lesson is on the importance of engaging members. There are a number of ways this can be done, but central amongst them would be having regular meetings and good newsletters. In the internet age, meetings often have a symbolic significance. It is not so much how many attend, but the fact that meetings are held can be highlighted on the internet. Appearance is important, and the fact that a political party is having meetings gives the appearance of activity and dynamism. Engaging members is also important in attracting and retaining members, especially important considering the threshold of 500 members, without which a party will not remain registered.

The third lesson, especially relevant for the Senate, is the importance of negotiating good preference deals. The way that micro-parties can be elected due to preference deals remains something of a controversial issue. There is an argument (for instance, as set forth in 'Directly chosen by the people' in Online Opinion on 11/1/2013 by this author) that such arrangements are contrary to the intent of the Australian Constitution. However until such time as there is either the political will to change this system, or until such time as some person or body can fund an appeal to the full High Court of Australia on this issue, it is likely such preference deals will continue, and it makes sense for micro-parties to make use of this system.

The success of the micro-parties has also debunked some of the central myths of political campaigning in Australia, at least for the Senate. Traditional wisdom holds that it is important to have official campaign launches, to have HTVs (how-to-vote cards), to have campaign workers staffing polling booths, and indeed to have numerous House of Representative candidates, in order to raise party profile. Traditional political campaigning has also involved activities such as door-knocking, leafleting and letter-boxing. All of these measures are expensive, both in time and money, and the success of the micro-parties in 2013, who by necessity only engaged minimally in the above activities, suggests that these are not indeed as central to political success as has been the case in the past.

Rather it would seem that an effective and logical way to raise political profile with limited funds is to use innovative methods, such as direct advertising on the electronic media, and in particular on radio. There is some empirical evidence to support this. In the 2010 Senate election, the Queensland Division of the Australian Democrats directed very limited funds towards radio advertising, and in particular towards community radio stations located in and around Rockhampton, in Central Queensland. An analysis of the returns reveal that the highest percentage vote for the Australian Democrats in Queensland was within the Division of Capricornia, centred around Rockhampton, and a regional area not known for Democrat support. Admittedly, this was not enough to get the Senate candidate over the line in 2010, but it is indicative of the effectiveness of such use of funds.

The success of the micro-parties has also debunked the idea that it is crucial for a micro-party to have a high profile candidate, although having a high-profile candidate does mean it is easier to garner publicity, especially given that established media outlets are often very wary of giving publicity to candidates. However, having said the above, rather than a high-profile candidate, it is probably more important to have a candidate who is personally and professionally capable, which is what ought to happen, in order that he/she can perform effectively as a politician, and in order that he/she can manage the tensions which inevitably arise in any political party.

The issue of profile inevitably raises the perennial question of how to attract media attention. Here too, however, the internet is changing everything, although we often don't realize this, as we are in the middle of this revolution. In Australia, as indeed throughout the world, traditional news media outlets are in decline. Journalism schools refer to such news media as "old media", with more interactive and participatory outlets on the internet constituting the "new media". For aspiring politicians and political parties, a large part of the solution for establishing profile may be as simple as writing, arguing the case as to why it is important to elect themselves and their party, and publishing this online, through e-journals and other means.

There has been some concern that it is too easy to organize a political party in Australia. In effect, all that one needs is 500 members; a constitution; a secretary, who deals with correspondence; a registered officer, who confirms candidates to the AEC; and a party agent, who supplies annual financial returns to the AEC. Is the threshold of 500 too low? I think not. Given that there is widespread political disengagement, and given even the major political parties face declining political membership, the figure of 500 members is a reasonable one.

There are some aspects of Australian democracy which do give rise to serious concerns. However, when one looks at the rise of the micro-parties, I believe it is heartening that election to political office does not require massive funding and massive resources, and in this regard it can be indeed argued that the rise of the micro-parties reflects a healthy democracy. The success of the micro-parties may even prove to be something of an antidote to the widespread political cynicism within the Australian community, and more Australian citizens may dare to become involved in the political process.

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