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The 2007 Federal Election: Exit Poll Analysis

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Preface

This report presents a summary of the findings of an exit poll commissioned by Australian Policy Online (APO) during the 2007 Federal Election Campaign which saw the Australian Labor Party return to government after 11 years of a Liberal National Party government. APO commissioned Swinburne University of Technology's computer-assisted telephone interviewing facility to conduct a phone poll of voters on the day of the 2007 Federal Election.

One of the key concerns in the polling was to assess which issues mattered most to voters during the election. As the following report makes clear, both global warming and industrial relations were key issues for voters who took part in this poll.

We would like to thank the following for their contributions to this research: John Armitage from *Auspoll*, Gordana Bruce, Brian Costar, Michael Gilding, Murray Goot, Michael Gordon from *The Age*, and Jan O'Leary.

◇ Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, when AGB McNair last surveyed voters as they left polling booths on election day, no exit polling has been carried out in Australia. To understand why voters voted as they did, political scientists and commentators have three main sources: late pre-election opinion polling, leaked details of party research, and the results of the long-running Australian Election Study (AES).

Each approach has its shortcomings for researchers:

- The pre-election polls suffer from the fact that, until votes are cast, we cannot be certain what the outcome will be.
- Although party research—often selectively leaked—can be very revealing, as was the case when research by Crosby Textor for the Liberal Party was published (and later withdrawn under threat of legal action), it is generally not available to researchers.
- The strength of the AES, on the other hand, is also to some extent its weakness. It is based on a long, detailed questionnaire which gathers an enormous amount of information. Because the survey takes half an hour or more to fill in, it is unrealistic to expect a full cross-section of the population to respond.

An exit poll has much to recommend it. Potentially it has two key advantages to compensate for the problem that it is less detailed and more rushed than a poll like the AES. First, it has the potential to include a more representative sample of the total voting population. The second derives from the fact that it can be administered during the few hours between the time a vote is cast and the time the election result is known. This means that voters' responses to questions are untainted by a knowledge of the result—knowledge that might lead them to mis-state their vote and consciously or unconsciously distort the views that lay behind it, or—if the result was not to their liking—may discourage them altogether from participating due to embarrassment associated with having voted for the 'losing side'.

For these reasons, APO commissioned Swinburne University of Technology's computer-assisted telephone interviewing facility to conduct a phone poll of voters on the day of the 2007 Federal Election.[1] The details of the poll are presented in Appendix B. Meanwhile, backed by the significantly greater resources of Sky News and the Seven Network, Auspoll was collecting three sets of exit data, using over 100 telephone interviewers. They wished to predict the election result before the polling booths closed (which they did with remarkable accuracy), to pick the results in the key seats of Bennelong and Eden-Monaro, and to ask their respondents which issues were important in influencing their vote.

The age profile in the APO Exit Poll sample was somewhat skewed towards older voters, a feature of most phone polls, especially those done to a tight deadline. As is well known, older voters are more likely to be at home, and to answer the phone. Despite this, the two-party preferred vote among the 704 respondents was close to the election result. Support for Labor was 53.8 per cent (versus the AEC's final count of 52.7 per cent) and for the Coalition 46.2 per cent (versus 47.3 per cent).

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[1] Some researchers might regard this as a 'day-of-the-election' poll, rather than exit poll per se, since the latter generally ask voters questions as they leave the polls.

◇ The Issues

When asked how important they judged various issues, respondents fell into two clear camps. Those who voted Labor regarded as very important some of the key issues of the day. The following percentages show what proportion of ALP voters felt these issues were 'very important' (with AES figures, which are reasonably comparable, shown in brackets):

- **industrial relations** (and Work Choices): 73 per cent (63 per cent);
- **global warming**: 71 per cent (66 per cent);
- **water**: 62 per cent (72 per cent).

In addition, two of the 'staples' of Labor's electoral appeal were also judged very important:

- **education**: 74 per cent (77 per cent); and
- **health**: 73 per cent (83 per cent).

On the other hand, among those who voted for the Liberal-National Party Coalition, the results were more subdued, with fewer issues standing out. Leadership was seen as very important by 65 per cent of LNP voters. Health was judged very important by 63 per cent and water also came in at 60 per cent. The issue of interest rates, which played such a large role in the 2004 campaign, was judged as very important by only 42 per cent of LNP voters.

In their analysis of the 2007 Australian Election Study (AES), Bean and McAllister [2] showed that health was top of the list for Labor voters (and for LNP voters as well). Water and global warming were also high on the AES roll-call for ALP voters, and industrial relations came in next. On a different set of questions—which measured how closely voters' views were aligned to the policies of the major parties—Bean and McAllister noted: 'Labor's largest advantage was on the issue of global warming . . . followed closely by the environment more broadly and then education.'

The Auspoll Exit data also took a slightly different approach to election issues, asking respondents which issues were most important to them in their voting decision. The top five issues, in descending order, were: health and hospitals; the economy; the environment and climate change; industrial relations; and education.

Overall, the various sets of data produce comparable results, with Auspoll and the AES inclined to emphasise the 'staples' and the APO Exit Poll inclined to emphasise the 'topical' issues. Of course, not all the questions were comparable, nor were the methodologies identical.

What about industrial relations? Where the APO Exit Poll seems to place it near the top, the others relegate it lower down the list. When Bean and McAllister undertook a multivariate analysis of their AES data, they found that industrial relations was indeed a major issue in shaping the election outcome. In the following analysis, we also employ multivariate analysis and arrive at similar results.

The advantage of a multivariate analysis is that it provides researchers with an indication of the 'net effect' of various factors. A regression model, for example, controls for confounding effects, such as age or gender, which might be influencing the outcome. In this way, it allows us to discern whether various factors—such as particular election issues—have an important net effect on the result.

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[2] Bean, C. and McAllister, I. (forthcoming 2008), 'The Tale of the Rabbit-less Hat: Voting Behaviour in 2007', in M. Simms, ed., *Australian Federal Election Book, 2007*, API Network.

◇ Multivariate analysis

In this section we model the election outcome by fitting a multivariate model to the APO Exit Poll data. We also fit models to several sub-groups. The outcome variable we model is voting for Labor compared with the LNP, and the model we fit is a logistic regression. The details are shown in Appendix A, and the key findings are discussed in this section. In our discussion we make use of 'odds ratios', which measure the odds of voting ALP over LNP in a group comparison, where the comparison is between those who regarded the issue as 'very important' and those who regarded it as 'not important'.[3]

Overall, the issue with the greatest impact among Labor voters was industrial relations. Those who regarded this as very important (compared with not important) were 11 times more likely to vote ALP rather than LNP. The next most important issue was global warming, with an odds ratio of nearly 5. Refugees and prices also featured, with odds ratios of about 3 for each. Finally, the Iraq war was also a factor, with those who considered it very important more than twice as likely to vote ALP than LNP. The full set of issues included in the model are shown in Figure 1.

On the other hand, those issues which had the least impact among Labor voters were leadership, tax, jobs and immigration. Those voters who felt leadership to be very important (compared with not important) were only about one quarter as likely to vote ALP, compared with LNP. Those who rated tax as very important had an odds ratio

of voting ALP versus LNP of only a third. For jobs and for immigration the odds ratios were 0.41 and 0.48 respectively, meaning that these voters were half as likely to vote ALP rather than LNP if they felt these issues were very important.

The two sub-groups which we looked at were those voters who changed their vote compared to last time (the 2004 election) and those voters who only made up their mind during the course of the election campaign. Clearly, both subgroups were smaller in size (161 and 224 respectively) than the full sample of 704. Some 73 per cent of the vote-changers were people who switched to voting for the ALP, so clearly this group matters.

Among these vote-changers, global warming was decisive, followed a long way behind by industrial relations, education and jobs. Those who made up their mind during the campaign regarded industrial relations as the foremost issue. Both Iraq and refugees were the next most important issues for them, closely followed by global warming.

The multivariate analysis just reported is difficult to compare with other studies because the range of control variables is quite limited in the APO Exit Poll data. The key demographics of age and gender, as well as state of residence, are included. But variables such as education, occupation, religion, ethnicity and income are absent. This means that comparisons with most of the earlier AES studies by Bean and McAllister or Goot and Watson are not viable[4].

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[3] The table in Appendix A shows coefficients, but conversion of these to odds ratios is straightforward: one simply takes the exponent of the coefficient. For example, the coefficient for a voter in Victoria was -0.07, which gives an odds ratio of about 0.3, meaning that a Victorian voter had *reduced* odds of voting for the ALP. They were less than one third as likely to vote ALP compared with a person living in NSW. On the other hand, a person who felt global warming was very important had a coefficient of 1.51, which converts to an odds ratio of about 4.5, making them nearly 5 times as likely to vote ALP compared with someone who didn't regard global warming as important. An odds ratio over 1 mean increased odds (and the coefficients in Appendix A are positive) while an odds ratio under 1 means decreased odds (and the coefficients in Appendix A are negative).

[4] For example, the Bean and McAllister article cited above, and M. Goot and I. Watson (2007) 'Explaining Howard's success: Social structure, issue agendas and party support, 1993-2004'. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp.253–276.

Figure 1: Issues regarded as 'very important' for those voting ALP in 2007 Federal Election
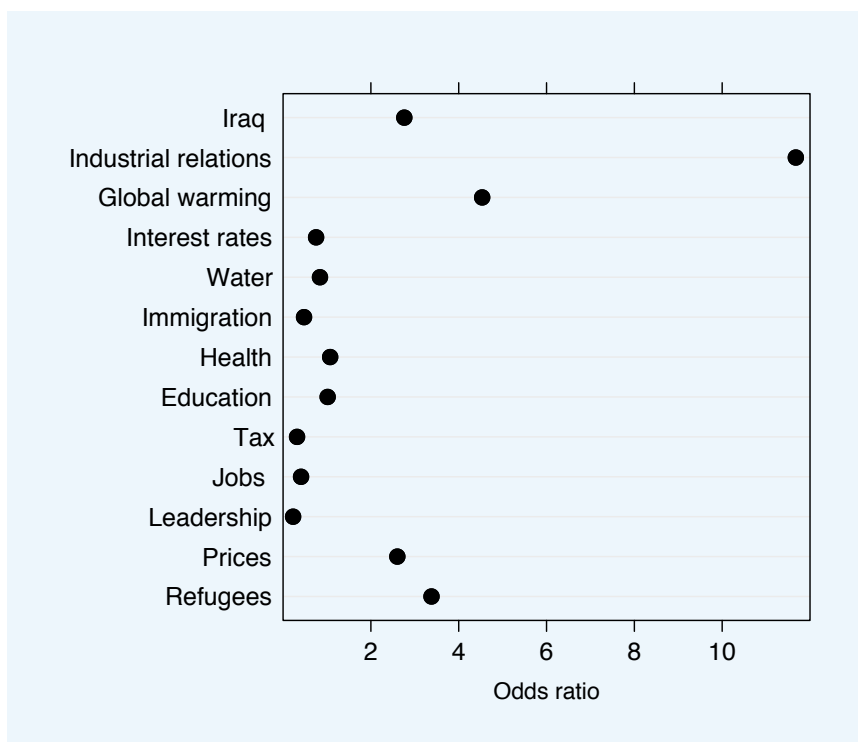
Source: Logistic regression results shown in Appendix A, converted to odds ratios.
Population: All respondents to APO Exit Poll.

Neverthless, as a kind of reality check, particularly given the small sample sizes for these groups, it's worth briefly comparing these results with what would be produced using comparable AES data. In that survey, the vote-changers numbered 402 and those who made up their mind during the campaign numbered 455. The AES largely confirms the APO Exit Poll, with a few variations. Like the APO Exit Poll, the AES showed most of the vote-changers were shifting to the ALP (74 per cent) and that global warming was foremost among their concerns. Indeed global warming and industrial relations (with odds ratios of 5 and 4, respectively) were well ahead of any other issues. When it came to those voters who made up their mind during the campaign, the decisive issue was overwhelmingly industrial relations, followed some way behind by global warming and then health.

In summary, the various survey results

are largely consistent and point to the overwhelming importance of industrial relations in the vote for Labor at the 2007 Federal election. The environment also mattered—particularly global warming—and was more influential when it came to shifting voters away from the Coalition. Even here, however, industrial relations was still influential, helping detach from the LNP those blue-collar voters who had drifted across to Howard over the last decade (as Bean and McAllister also show in their analysis). Interestingly, while the industrial relations issue had been bubbling away for the best part of two years prior to the election, our analysis also suggests that it came to the boil during the 2007 election. The way this issue was handled by the parties clearly influenced some voters who only made up their minds in the last few weeks before polling day.

◇ Appendix A

Regression results

Variables	All persons Coef	All persons SE	Changed† Coef	Changed† SE	Campaign‡ Coef	Campaign‡ SE
Intercept	-0.403	0.654	-1.961	1.674	-0.277	1.321
Sex=Female	-0.156	0.210	-0.031	0.562	-1.470	0.428
Age=25-34	0.296	0.482	1.878	1.509	0.179	0.866
Age=35-49	-0.588	0.429	0.956	1.219	-0.888	0.820
Age=50-64	-0.312	0.451	1.874	1.288	-0.507	0.912
Age=65+	-1.216	0.478	4.659	1.859	0.445	0.971
State=Vic	-0.070	0.261	0.524	0.720	0.308	0.501
State=Qld	-0.530	0.300	-1.720	0.816	-1.159	0.581
State=WA, SA, NT	-0.204	0.286	-0.641	0.737	0.018	0.539
Iraq=Fairly important	0.508	0.279	-0.306	0.740	1.035	0.528
Iraq=Very important	1.016	0.287	0.078	0.703	1.460	0.562
IR=Fairly important	0.835	0.342	-0.396	1.020	0.950	0.686
IR=Very important	2.458	0.341	1.571	1.005	2.535	0.635
Global warming=Fairly important	0.688	0.350	2.339	0.970	0.218	0.669
Global warming=Very important	1.512	0.351	4.034	1.152	1.170	0.679
Interest rates=Fairly important	0.022	0.290	1.147	0.802	0.073	0.554
Interest rates=Very important	-0.285	0.298	0.209	0.776	-0.669	0.557
Water=Fairly important	0.279	0.384	0.001	0.951	-0.225	0.740
Water=Very important	-0.173	0.370	-0.943	0.868	-1.191	0.744
Immigration=Fairly important	-0.342	0.257	-0.259	0.711	0.122	0.484
Immigration=Very important	-0.739	0.324	-0.637	0.850	-0.463	0.589
Health=Fairly important	-0.009	0.492	-2.781	1.951	1.125	1.082
Health=Very important	0.070	0.483	-2.447	1.858	1.372	1.080
Education=Fairly important	-0.553	0.438	1.723	1.349	-1.439	0.870
Education=Very important	0.015	0.425	0.870	1.122	-0.991	0.853
Tax=Fairly important	-0.803	0.296	-0.148	0.831	-0.146	0.558
Tax=Very important	-1.144	0.314	-0.318	0.919	-0.042	0.595
Jobs=Fairly important	-0.713	0.356	1.892	1.081	-1.645	0.930
Jobs=Very important	-0.893	0.361	1.520	1.047	-1.046	0.909
Leader=Fairly important	-0.553	0.427	-0.826	1.096	-0.560	0.782
Leader=Very important	-1.475	0.421	-2.340	1.039	-1.028	0.764
Prices=Fairly important	0.503	0.337	-0.084	1.008	0.927	0.682
Prices=Very important	0.956	0.336	0.150	0.908	0.354	0.630
Refugees=Fairly important	0.404	0.255	0.815	0.716	0.598	0.483
Refugees=Very important	1.218	0.317	0.421	0.825	1.440	0.594
N	704		161		224	

Source: APO Exit Poll

Notes: Outcome variable: voting for ALP rather than LNP.

Method: logistic regression.

The omitted categories (the reference groups) were: for sex, male; for age, those aged 18 to 24; for State, NSW; and for all of the issues, the 'not important' category.

Coef means estimated coefficient and *SE* means standard error. The standard error is a measure of the uncertainty of the estimated coefficients.

† Changed vote since last election in 2004.

‡ Decided how to vote during the election campaign.

◇ Appendix B

The Conduct of the APO Exit Poll

Twenty eight interviewers started phoning at midday, with the aim of collecting 1000 responses. Under the new telemarketing laws, we couldn't make any calls after 5 pm local time on a Saturday.

In developing our questionnaire we had attempted to assemble a set of questions that not only asked voters which issues (global warming, industrial relations, etc) figured most strongly in their voting decision—in other words, the sort of question being asked by Newspoll and others in the months before the election—but would also give us some sense of an overall 'mood' among groups of voters. To some extent our attempt to gauge this mood was influenced by what we could assume the parties' polling was showing. The findings of internal polling were evident in the themes coming through in campaign material: that the government had run out of ideas, that Labor was too close to the unions, and so on.

Auspoll's detailed poll also asked those two sorts of questions, one designed to test the importance of issues, the other to test the overall mood. In relation to issues, our interviewers asked respondents to rate the importance of

each of 13 issues one by one; Auspoll simply asked respondents to nominate 'two top issues' from a list of ten. On mood, where we asked respondents to nominate one statement from a list, Auspoll offered respondents an agree/disagree option on a list of ten statements.

By the time we finished phoning we had 744 completed surveys, which represented 36.96 per cent of completed calls to eligible respondents. Of these, 704 had answered all or most questions.

A total of 7825 phone numbers had been tried during the afternoon, of which 173 were fax machines, 85 business numbers and 1855 not connected. Of the remaining 5712, 1126 calls weren't answered and another 181 didn't answer repeatedly, 1266 went to an answering machine, 102 were engaged and 9 invitations to call back alter could not be followed up due to time constraints. Of the remaining group, 257 hadn't voted, 68 were not Australian citizens, 122 were too young to vote, 21 professed to have voted informal and 381 were excluded during the time we were seeking only younger voters. This left 2143 calls involving eligible respondents, 1269 of whom refused to participate and 130 of whom were excluded due to language difficulties.