Campaigning in the 2004 federal election: innovations and traditions

Australia’s political parties proved they were not too set in their ways to learn a few new tricks—or at least a few new campaign techniques—for the 2004 federal election on 9 October 2004. With opinion polls predicting a tight race and political commentators alleging that there were large numbers of undecided voters who were open to persuasion, the parties could not afford to be complacent about their strategies to attract voters. In response to the challenge, they added several innovative measures to their traditional voter-wooing methods. As a result, voters accustomed to facing a barrage of political messages delivered via the mainstream media and the letterbox found they had to deflect a new onslaught delivered via the telephone and the Internet.

This Research Note reviews some of the innovative techniques of the 2004 election, including tele-marketing, e-mail spam and Internet campaigning, as well as some of the traditional techniques, including mass-media advertising and direct mail.1

Innovations: tele-marketing

Academics Peter van Onselen and Wayne Errington had predicted in July 2004 that electronic phone messaging would be used in the federal election campaign, albeit in a limited way due to its ‘infancy’.2 Prime Minister John Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello proved them right, contacting voters in some electorates with a pre-recorded message urging them to support the local Liberal candidates. Recipients annoyed at the calls said they were intrusive (some calls were made to ‘silent’ numbers and to mobile phones) and costly (some recipients had to pay for the calls).

The Australian Labor Party complained to the Australian Electoral Commission that the calls did not carry the authorisation tag required of advertisements under the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 and the Broadcasting Services Act 1992. However, it appears that technology has moved faster than legislation in that the relevant sections of these Acts do not mention telephone or Internet advertising, focusing instead on published and broadcast (television and radio) advertisements. Labor also complained to the Australian Communications Authority about the calls to unlisted telephone numbers. As at January 2005, an inquiry into the access to such numbers was still under way.

Voter reaction to the pre-recorded message calls may have been more positive had the Prime Minister actually made the calls, as one reported comment revealed: At first I thought my God, the Prime Minister’s calling. But then—as soon as I realised it was a recorded message—I just hung up.3

That said, the Liberal Party later claimed that the calls had helped the Coalition win as many as six seats.4 Liberal pollster Mark Textor noted that the calls would be used in future elections because they had been so effective: ‘people appreciated the fact that they got a direct and unfiltered message from a political leader in a new, effective way’.5 At least one Liberal candidate in the ACT election (held on 16 October 2004) was reported to have opted for the strategy, ‘bombarding the home phones of 17 500 voters with pre-recorded campaign messages’ authorised by the Canberra Liberals’ divisional office.6

Innovations: the Internet

Australia experienced a huge growth in Internet use between the 2001 and 2004 federal elections: the percentage of Australians regularly using the Internet increased from 50 per cent in 2001 to 77 per cent in 2004.7 Today, more people use the Internet to obtain information about politics, and about 50 per cent of the federal members of Parliament have a functioning web site.8

Although such increases suggest that the Internet might have a useful role in campaigning, the current impact of this role should not be overstated. According to the 2001 Australian Election Study, 49.3 per cent of respondents used the Internet to seek information on politics, campaigns or issues in the news, but only 10 per cent reported looking for information on the election.9 While the results of the 2004 election study are not yet available, media reports during the campaign noted that the numbers sourcing information from political web sites appeared to be relatively small.10

On the other hand, academic Rachel Gibson has observed that ‘internet campaigning appears to have turned a corner in terms of its movement into the mainstream as an electioneering tool’.11 In the 2004 campaign, the Internet was a cheap, effective means of communicating with voters, especially for minor parties and independent candidates. The Internet provided these groups, which often find it hard to attract attention in the mass media, with a public outlet for their political views and policies at a lower cost than they would have paid for traditional advertising. This was especially important given that the vote-share of these groups gave them only a small amount of the public funding paid to parties and candidates after the election to help them cover their costs. (For example, the fall in support for the
Australian Democrats meant that the party received just over $8000 in public funding for the 2004 election, down from $2.4 million in 2001.

In addition, the Internet allowed minor parties, independents and political activists to disseminate unmediated messages to the electorate. As one lobbyist observed before the election: ‘You bypass the standard press centres and media outlets, getting your message out direct’.12

Both the Greens and the Democrats were reported to have run significant online campaigns, with the Democrats concentrating on a ‘viral’ e-mail strategy (see below).13 However, since the election, Greens adviser Ben Oquist has noted that the Internet was a tool better suited to organising and mobilising the Greens than reaching new voters.14

The Internet’s capacity to connect directly with voters also appealed to the two major parties. Both predicted in July 2004 that the Internet would ‘play a significant part’ in their campaigns.15 That said, the major parties did not appear to use the Internet as innovatively as the smaller parties or political activists and observers. Neither party utilised the Internet’s interactive potential (via chatrooms or discussion forums), and their sites contained ‘little more than electronic versions of the standard campaign brochures’.16

Meanwhile, ‘bloggers’ and their weblogs attracted as many, if not more, visitors to their sites than did the party sites. In the first week of September, two anti-Howard sites ranked above the Liberal Party web site in terms of traffic, although this had reversed by mid-September.17 These sites reflected activist focus on Howard. One journalist observed that anti-Howard sites had ‘sprouted like cyber-mushrooms’ whereas it was ‘almost impossible’ to find a site devoted to Labor leader Mark Latham (‘either for or against’).18

At first glance, a drawback of Internet campaigning is that it relies on voters choosing to visit a political web site. However, this down-plays the impact of ‘viral’ campaigning via e-mail, in which the web sites of parties and other political players are forwarded from person to person in an ever-expanding network of recipients. While the non-party sites often appear to contain simple satirical comment aimed at all sides of politics, undoubtedly they also reflect a harder, underlying political message. Examples during the 2004 campaign included the sites inviting voters to re-shape Howard’s face or to throw him ‘overboard’ and the site inviting visitors to manipulate the party leaders’ hairstyles.19

E-mail also proved to be a pro-active channel for the dissemination of information to voters. Political parties are exempt from the anti-spam legislation prohibiting commercial operators from sending unsolicited e-mails, which means that they are able to ‘spam’ voters’ e-mail accounts. Howard and at least three other senior government members reportedly used Howard’s son Tim’s Internet company, Net Harbour, to send spam e-mail to their electorates.20 An Australian Communications Authority probe found that the company had not breached the Spam Act 2003 because a registered political party had authorised the sending of the messages.21 In response to criticism that the e-mail breached ‘the spirit if not the letter’ of the anti-spam laws, Communications and IT Minister Helen Coonan said the exemptions existed ‘to protect political and religious free speech’.22

Traditions: advertising

In addition to the innovative measures outlined above, parties and candidates also utilised tried and true methods to woo voters in the 2004 campaign. Media reports claimed that the major parties spent more than ever on mass-media advertising and direct mail.

Changes to the Commonwealth Electoral Act in 1998 removed the requirement for political parties to disclose details of their campaign expenditure. In the absence of such information, it is impossible to know exactly how much the parties spent on their 2004 campaigns and, in particular, how much they spent on the most expensive item: advertising.23 Media reports of the combined totals, which ranged from a low of $19.3 million for the Liberal, National and Labor parties to a high of $30 million for the Liberal and Labor parties, were estimates based on interviews with advertising agencies and ‘media buyers’.24 (A separate Parliamentary Library Research Brief examines this issue in detail.)

To an extent, the major parties’ advertising followed the established pattern: the amount of advertising increased steadily over the course of the campaign, with a blitz in the final few days before polling day, and many of the advertisements were negative.25 The latter drew criticism that Australia was moving to an ‘Americanised’ style of campaigning, understood to be shrill and uncivil campaigning primarily based on negative or ‘attack’ advertising. However, academic Sally Young has shown that, historically, Australian election campaigns have had high levels of general negative advertising, targeting policies, parties and the like, and these levels have been higher than those of the United States.27

Where the 2004 election campaign pattern differed somewhat to earlier campaigns—and could be seen to reflect Americanised negative, ‘presidential’ campaigning—was in the increased personal focus of the negative advertising. While personal attacks were not new to the 2004 campaign (see, for example, the 1996 advertisements targeting then Labor leader Paul Keating), they played a more significant role, especially for the Liberal Party. The Liberals’ ‘L-plate Latham’ advertisements successfully turned the focus from the economy to Latham’s inexperience in managing the economy.28

After the election, Labor put some of the blame for its loss on the Coalition’s negative advertising campaign, with Latham lamenting that his ‘greatest misjudgement was in believing that the positive party would win’ and Queensland premier Peter Beattie complaining that the Labor Party was ‘too nice’. Labor reportedly alleged that about 80 per cent of the Coalition’s advertising budget was spent on advertisements attacking Mark Latham, whereas only about
25 per cent of Labor’s advertisements mentioned Howard.\textsuperscript{31} Such comments and claims discount that Labor also utilised personal attack advertisements, targeting Howard, Costello and Eden-Monaro Liberal candidate (and sitting member) Gary Nairn.\textsuperscript{32}

**Traditions: direct mail**

Direct mail continued to be an important campaign tool, especially in the marginal electorates. The media estimated that the two major parties spent $5 million each on this method of wooing voters. A 2001 study found that such spending was justified because direct-mail and letterbox-drop literature was the primary source of policy information for 41 per cent of those canvassed.\textsuperscript{33}

Today, the power of direct mail for parties lies in the parties’ ability to send it to specific voters. Errington and van Onselen have discussed the sophisticated national databases that the major parties now maintain in order to build profiles of voter interests and target party messages accordingly. They noted in 2003:

> Databases are all about helping political parties ensure that their messages are relevant to the recipients. The big parties are already spending less money on broadcast advertising and diverting their resources towards more targeted campaigns.\textsuperscript{34}

In the 2004 campaign, the parties’ databases allowed direct mail to be targeted in terms of both topics and recipients, such that one MP described direct mail as the ‘Rolls-Royce form of voter contact’.\textsuperscript{35} Or, as a columnist observed: ‘Direct mail is where the major parties get the loudest bang for their buck’.\textsuperscript{36}

The problem for some political commentators, however, was that sitting MPs were able to use taxpayer ‘bucks’—in the form of parliamentary printing and mail allowances—to pay for their direct mail. In the pithy words of one journalist: ‘These “information to electors” pieces are pure political advertising, paid for by those being canvassed’.\textsuperscript{37} Former Victorian Liberal Party president Michael Kroger was cited as saying that the benefits of incumbency (including staff, office and phone as well as printing and mail allowances) were worth $1.5 million to an MP over three years.\textsuperscript{38} Incumbents also have access to information and research services.

**Conclusion**

Major and minor parties used a mix of innovative and traditional campaign techniques in the 2004 federal election. As a result, Australians heading to the ballot box had to run the gauntlet of tele-marketing, e-mail spam and web-site posts as well as news, advertisements and direct mail.

The innovative measures outlined in this Research Note offered multiple advantages to 2004 election campaigners:

- pre-recorded telephone messages transformed the campaign role of the humble telephone call, which previously required troops of volunteers to make calls to individual households. Answering-machines and mobile phones meant voters did not have to be at home to receive the call
- parties and candidates did not have to go door-to-door or to meetings to communicate personally with voters, thereby eliminating the need for large numbers of volunteers and saving time and resources. As noted, the message could be delivered even when the voter was not at home
- parties and candidates could communicate with the electorate as a whole or with specific groups within the electorate.

The lower resource demands of the innovative techniques (in terms of staff, equipment and costs) made them ideally suited to the smaller budgets of the minor parties and independent candidates. Of the major parties, the Liberal Party proved especially adroit at adapting its campaign techniques to fit a new age, using tele-marketing and the Internet to contact existing and potential Coalition voters.

None of this is to argue that the innovative measures were so advantageous that they replaced more traditional campaign techniques. Rather, they can be seen as additional weapons in the campaign arsenal. Traditional techniques, such as mass-media advertising, continued to play a significant role and offered their own advantages, especially when they were used in new ways. Both major parties shifted the focus of their negative advertising to the personal characteristics and credibility of the leaders, but commentators generally agreed that this strategy was more successful for the Liberals than for Labor. Databases allowed the major parties to target their direct mail more strategically, sending it to those voters most likely to be interested in their message.

In reaching out to specific groups of voters, the Australian parties have followed an American trend in which parties and candidates are spending more than ever, but on methods that more precisely target particular groups. In the 2004 United States presidential election campaign, candidates spent double what they had in 2000, but diverted this money into areas that matched their target audience, including niche cable channels and radio. One academic noted that such methods were merely ‘the beginning of a trend’, with new means of reaching voters likely to include text-messaging and cell-phones.\textsuperscript{39} After the 2004 election, Australia took a step in this direction when the Government authorised an entitlement allowing each federal MP to text up to 7000 constituents (or nearly 10 per cent of the electorate) over three years. While MPs cannot use the service for political or commercial purposes, they can use it for ‘official duties’, a loophole the Opposition has described as giving MPs ‘carte blanche to use their phone texting as they liked’.\textsuperscript{40}

**Endnotes**

10. See, for example, S. Jackson, ‘Traffic builds on election hit meter’, The Australian, 2 September 2004, which noted that the day after Howard called the election, visits to sites in the political category of Internet monitoring company Hitwise accounted for 0.153 per cent of all visits to the 450 000 sites monitored.
14. B. Oquist, ‘We are all Americans now’, Green, no. 15, Summer 2004–05.
17. See Murphy and Burgess, op. cit., and ‘Crunching the numbers’, The Australian, 23 September 2004, p. 20.
19. In a post-election example, one web site shows Howard laughing on election night and urges visitors to the site to show their anger with cartoon explosions: http://www.manbitesgod.com/games/anger_management/. The site invites visitors to send its link to their friends and also offers links to six other anti-Howard sites.
23. Non-party endorsed candidates and Senate groups are required to disclose such details.
26. According to one report, television advertising levels in the final 10 days before the electronic media blackout increased sixfold, with the two major parties spending about $7.5 million each in this period. (Political advertisements cannot be broadcast in the three days before polling day.) See Sinclair and MacLean, op. cit. For a discussion of the negative bent to election advertising, see S. Young, The Persuaders, Pluto Press, North Melbourne, 2004.
28. S. Young, ‘How the media war was won’, Sun Herald, 11 October 2004, p. 20.
29. ALP national secretary Tim Gartrell later noted that the Liberal Party’s negative campaign on interest rates, the economy and Latham’s inexperience had had devastating results. See G. McManus, ‘Labor’s huge blue’, Herald Sun, 11 November 2004, p. 29.
32. Labor’s anti-Costello ‘scratchy’ advertisement alleged that a vote for Howard was a vote for Costello, and the anti-Nairn advertisement featured him with shifty eyes and a red face.
36. Ibid.