

Democracy, communication and money

Dr Sally Young
Media and Communications Program
The University of Melbourne

Communication is vital to democratic politics in general—and to elections, in particular. A central ideal of democratic theory is that political candidates should provide enough information about themselves, their ideologies and programs for citizens to make an informed choice at the ballot box. The media of course, acts as a conduit for such communication and indeed, most Australians today will learn about, and participate in, politics largely through the media.¹

Communication is considered crucial not only to democratic theorists concerned about the nature of public discourse and the state of our democracy, but also to the pragmatists—political parties and politicians. For them, effective communication with voters (particularly, swinging voters in marginal seats) is the key to electoral victory and those who can communicate best will do best. In a system of mediated politics, this means that those who have the money to pay for expensive communication forms—such as television advertising and direct mail—are inordinately advantaged.

Politicians once used armies of party members to conduct the ‘ground war’ of the campaign and relied on ‘meet-and-greet’ methods such as individual contact, door-knocking, street-corner meetings and town-hall meetings. But today, in Australia, ‘electioneering is big business. The two major parties spend over \$30 million, hire a host of professionals and focus on market research, television advertising, direct mail and new technology’.²

TV advertising

The two major parties in Australia spend up to \$30 million on advertisements during federal elections and up to 70% of their campaign budgets are devoted to television advertising alone.³ Overall, their spending on broadcast advertising has risen 900% between 1974 and 1998. But since the introduction of the public funding system in 1984, the Australian public has largely borne these costs.⁴ In 1995, Australian politicians legislated to double the amount of public funding available for their campaigns. This

¹ Sally Young, ‘Why Australians Hate Politicians’, in G. Patmore and D. Glover (eds), *For the People: Labor Essays 2001*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, p.171.

² Sally Young, ‘A Century of Political Communication in Australia: 1901 to 2001’, *Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Annual Conference*, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 9-11 July 2003, p.1.

³ Sally Young, ‘Spot on: The Role of Political Advertising in Australia’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol.37, no.1, March 2002, p.81.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.84.

allowed them to increase their spending on television advertising at the next election by 38 per cent (or \$5.8 million).⁵

The major parties have established a system that provides them with public funding to purchase expensive forms of electoral communication, such as TV advertising, while having to face only scant regulation on the use of that funding. In Australia, there are no legislative constraints, for example, upon either the volume of advertising or the amount that Australian parties can spend purchasing campaign advertising on commercial television.

Government advertising

Government advertising is a separate sub-set of political advertising which is only open to incumbent governments. In recent years, this has become one of the greatest benefits of incumbency. Federal and State governments are using their ‘incumbency advantage to fund massive, publicly-funded “government information” campaigns’.⁶

In 1999, the federal government was ranked ninth out of the top 50 advertisers in Australia ‘below big commercial advertisers such as Telstra, Coles-Myer, Unilever Australia, Nestle, Woolworths, Toyota and McDonalds’. ‘But by 2000, the federal government was the top spending advertiser in the country’. It spent over \$160 million and in 2001, was still on top, exceeding the nearest big advertiser (Coles-Myer) by \$30 million.⁷

Government advertising reveals how Australian politicians are so ‘hooked on’ advertising that they continue to use it as a communication method long after an election has been won. It is also an example of how incumbents can misuse public resources for expensive pseudo-election campaign activities.

Direct mail

‘Direct mail’ refers to letters, postcards, newsletters and glossy pamphlets that are personally addressed to, and sent to the homes of, individuals. They carry a targeted message to recipients who have been selected on the basis of gender, neighbourhood, personal interests, or some other criterion.⁸ Direct mail is used commercially but also politically and when used in Australian politics, mail is targeted to recipients by using information recorded on the major parties’ databases. These databases can identify

⁵ See David Tucker and Sally Young, ‘Public Financing of Australian Election Campaigns’, in G. Patmore (ed.), *Labor Essays 2002: The Big Makeover: A New Australian Constitution*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2001, pp.60-71.

⁶ Sally Young, ‘Killing competition: Restricting Access to Political Communication Channels in Australia’, *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, vol.75, iss.3, May-June 2003, p.14.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of direct mail, see ‘Bush’s Brain and Howard’s Election’, Background Briefing, ABC Radio National, 12 October 2003; available online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s967376.htm>>.

particular issues of interest to individual voters. Such information is gathered by staffers in electoral offices—for example, when a constituent telephones, writes or drops in. It is then used in the creation of personalised letters or cards which are sent out at a later date.

In recent election campaigns, the major parties have spent less on television advertising and more on direct mail. Prior to 1997, I would have been able to pinpoint exactly how much was spent on each of these forms of communication as this was information the parties were required to disclose on the reports they submit under the funding and disclosure provisions policed by the Australian Electoral Commission. However, changes to those disclosure rules in 1996 mean that the parties no longer have to reveal precisely how they spend the public funding they receive. So although we know that in 2001, the ALP received \$14,917,024, and the Coalition a total of \$17,337,543, in public funding to support their campaigning,⁹ we can no longer tell how they chose to spend that money.

We do, however, have media reports and leaks from advertising agents which claim that in 2001, the parties spent around \$15 million *each* on direct mail.¹⁰ We can surmise then that direct mail has experienced phenomenal growth in Australia in the last few years because in 1996, when the parties were still required to disclose their spending habits, Labor reported that it spent just under \$2 million on direct mail while the Coalition spent just under \$3 million.¹¹

The parties have increased their spending by so much because they consider direct mail to be a highly valuable method for political persuasion. And, like advertising, because of the high priority they attach to it as a communication method, they are 'loathe to confine it only to election campaigns'. By using the perks of office that an MP receives, incumbents are spending far more on mail, newsletters and other types of promotional material whilst in office. They are using increased parliamentary entitlements, printing and communications allowances and new office equipment to do it.

In 2001, printing allowance for MPs was set at a maximum of \$125,000 per annum when most MPs were spending only \$37,287 per year.¹² This new 'cap' encouraged MPs to spend more rather than less. In August of this year, the federal government tried to increase printing entitlements again to \$150,000 per year which would have meant a total of \$22.5 million in printing entitlements for the House of Representatives. This motion was defeated in the Senate where even Greens leader Senator Bob Brown acknowledged

⁹ Australian Electoral Commission, '2001 Federal Election Funding Payments', available online at: <http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/how/funding_payments/2001_payments.htm>, created 2002 (accessed 31 October 2003).

¹⁰ See Young, 'Killing competition', p.15

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Australia, Senate, 20 August 2003, *Debates*, Parliamentary Entitlements Amendment Regulations 2003 (no. 1): Motion for Disallowance (Senator Murray), p. 14170; available online at: <http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/view_document.aspx?id=895441&table=HANSARDS>.

that ‘whether we like it or not, glossy materials in letterboxes work. They influence people. They create votes ...’¹³

Conclusion

Australian politicians believe that TV advertising and direct mail are key means of persuading citizens and winning votes. Incumbents are now being given massive advantages in their ability to afford these favoured method of political communication through government advertising and parliamentary entitlements.

Money has become central to the process of political (and electoral) communication in Australia. There is now an emphasis on ‘permanent’ campaigning. Campaigns are played out throughout the election cycle. The major parties plan their next campaign immediately on the cessation of the last one. All of this—the mediated nature of modern politics, the changing use of new technology to communicate, the permanent campaign—has increased the major political parties perceived need for money to finance their communication exercises. Increasingly, this money is coming from the public purse but with little debate about how citizens want to communicate with their representatives.

¹³ Australia, Senate, 20 August 2003, *Debates*, Parliamentary Entitlements Amendment Regulations 2003 (no. 1): Motion for Disallowance (Senator Brown), p. 14168; available online at: http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/view_document.aspx?ID=895437&TABLE=HANSARDS.