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An Examination of the Policy Content of Scott Morrison's and Anthony Albanese's 2022 Federal Election Campaign Materials

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This Research Note reports on an analysis of the speeches, media releases, opinion pieces, and transcripts of the utterances of both major party leaders, Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese, during the 2022 federal election campaign. We undertake a reflexive thematic analysis of these documents to identify the key messages of the two campaigns.

Election campaigns provide a convenient and concentrated snapshot of the policy packages on offer by the major parties. It is through campaign rhetoric that voters can see what policy initiatives are being put forward and which are being resisted. Promises to introduce new policies or reverse or ameliorate those of the other party provide a clear picture of where the parties stand and what their policy focus and priorities will be if they win government. Although cynics might suggest that governments regularly fail to deliver on election promises, we take the position that it would be hugely problematic for Australian democracy if election campaigns could not be taken seriously as an indicator of the intentions of the parties and their values priorities.

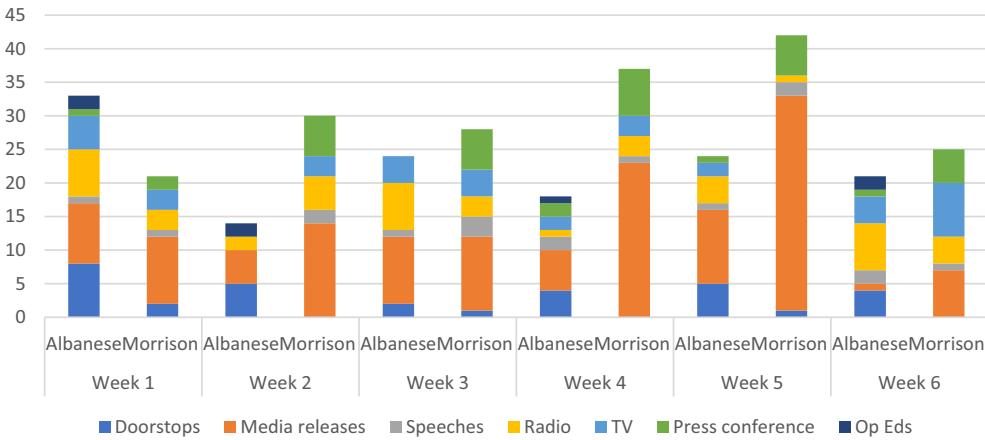
In the context of the 2022 election, Biddle and Jackman found that “policy views appears [sic] to have been important in predicting voting choice”; in other words, policy positions mattered in this campaign.¹ We set out to identify the themes and areas of policy given prominence by the leaders of the two major parties during the 2022 campaign. It quickly became apparent that the Australian Labor Party was running what could be characterised as a traditional, Labor campaign with a strong focus on social supports and improving the lives of working people. The Morrison campaign on the other hand positioned the Coalition as superior managers of the economy. While the latter provided indications of supporting health-related funding, overwhelmingly it articulated policies that preserved the status quo. In terms of the election outcome, Labor's emphasis on climate change particularly appears to have contributed to voters switching from the Coalition to Labor.²

Method

We focused on examining the topics raised by the two major party leaders during the 2022 federal election campaign. On each day of the election campaign, we downloaded from their official websites the transcripts of all their speeches, interviews, and doorstops, along with media releases, and, in Albanese's case, opinion pieces written

¹ Nicholas Biddle and Simon Jackman, *Research Note: Policy Priorities and the 2022 Australian Federal Election Result* (Melbourne, VIC: ANU Centre for Social Research & Methods, 2022).

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Figure 1 Comparison of Leaders by Document Type and Week of the Election Campaign

for the mainstream media.³ The materials that comprise the focus of our analysis were publicly available and published on both leaders' campaign websites (anthonyalbanese.com.au and liberal.org.au). Given the likelihood that these sites would be ephemeral and more difficult to locate in the future, we captured all the content on an external server with a stable (doi:10.17632/hdz6cypk9d.1).

Two types of content can be identified within this material: the carefully prepared utterances in the form of speeches, media releases and opinion pieces, and a more spontaneous format in relation to the press conferences, doorstops, and interviews where the transcripts were lightly edited. The dates covered were 11 April to 20 May inclusive. We stored these by both media type and date of issue. It is worth noting the differences in the mix of the media and public engagements by the two leaders with Albanese's campaign conducting more doorstops and writing opinion editorials, compared with the Morrison campaign that emphasised engagement with the press through media releases and press conferences on the campaign trail (Figure 1).

Applying reflexive thematic analysis,⁴ the authors identified the key messages from each item and entered these into an Excel spreadsheet to allow for later sorting by subject matter. Reflexive thematic analysis is based in a constructionist epistemology which focuses on the "meaning and meaningfulness"⁵ of the text rather than on simply counting word occurrence. It is an interpretivist methodology that involves an active role on the part of the researcher. Themes are not predetermined or imposed but do require the analytic intervention of the researcher. They

do not passively emerge from either data or coding; they are not "in" the data, waiting to be identified and retrieved by the researcher. Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the

³ The Morrison campaign did not publish any opinion pieces during our data collection period.

⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 2022).

⁵ David Byrne, "A Worked Example of Braun and Clark's Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Quality and Quantity*, Vol 56 (2022), pp. 1391–412, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>

data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves.⁶

In our case, we were interrogating the data to see if the two party leaders were presenting campaign manifestoes that reflected programs of initiative and resistance. As part of this approach, we neither pre-determined the categories for the topics covered, nor shoehorned both leaders' utterances into the same set of topic groupings. Although this might diminish the scope of strict comparability of the two datasets, it allowed us to be guided by the data in order for the leaders' emphases and messages to be discerned from the analysis.

Our analysis was initially inductive as we sought to extract the main messages and policy issues that the two leaders were conveying throughout the campaign. We began with semantic coding of the data, particularly in the case of Albanese's material which was presented with key topics listed at the top of each item. We later revisited the data more deductively, as it became clear that they could potentially be understood within the context of the uniquely Australian initiative-resistance thesis⁷ recently re-specified by Botterill and Fenna.⁸ Our approach also became more latent as we looked beyond the explicit meaning in the words themselves to analyse the underlying implications for policy and politics. Although the presentation of Albanese's media items included key words and highlights at the beginning, a thorough reading of the material was undertaken to pick up any issues that Albanese's office had not highlighted. The media materials for Morrison were similarly organised in a logical manner with each item classified into its relevant category, however unlike Albanese's materials, no key words or highlights were provided in these documents. The materials for both parties provided the location of all media events and identified other speakers who appeared alongside the two leaders, often other candidates running for office, although occasionally also including some industry spokespeople or community leaders.

The resulting spreadsheet was then sorted to measure the frequency with which particular topics were addressed in order to identify the key emphases of the leaders. The process we used to decide when to include a topic was not merely a literal count of word frequency but when the topic in question was significant in the context of the entry. We also only registered the topic once per document. Some degree of grouping was necessary to pick up synonyms and closely related topics and their announcements, for example, for Albanese the Health topic included "stronger Medicare" and "Urgent Care Clinics" as well as announcements of specific investments in medical facilities. The list of topics and their groupings are in the online datafile where we have stored the documents that we analyse here. Judgement was inevitably exercised in the groupings that were employed; another researcher may have constructed alternative groupings. The top six most frequently occurring topics were then pulled out on the basis that they constituted the most important messages that the two leaders were seeking to convey. This categorisation was an easier process for

⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, Vol 11 (2019), pp. 589–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

⁷ A discussion of this thesis is beyond the scope of this research note; however, we believe that it provides a valuable framework for considering Australian policy debate.

⁸ Linda Courtenay Botterill and Alan Fenna, "Initiative-Resistance and the Australian Party System," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol 66 (2020), pp. 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12639>

Albanese's material as he appeared to have a very clear set of messages to which he adhered closely throughout the campaign.

Albanese led a highly positive campaign, focusing on Labor's plans rather than on criticising the Morrison government. A search of his documents shows that criticisms of Morrison and his government were overwhelmingly in response to journalists' questioning rather than the main message Albanese was delivering. For Morrison, the topics that rose to prominence concerned the argument that the coalition were superior managers of the economy. The campaign also appeared to contrast with the larger big picture policy announcements of Labor's approach in favour of a more scattered range, which targeted issues in specific electorates. There were also more negatively targeted entries with four media releases alone directly criticising Labor over economic issues.

Overarching Coverage of Themes Across the Two Campaigns

For Albanese, there were 134 data items (i.e., separate documents on his website) across the forty days of the campaign. We identified 716 topic mentions covered by these documents, of which the 6 most frequently raised over the whole campaign were as follows:

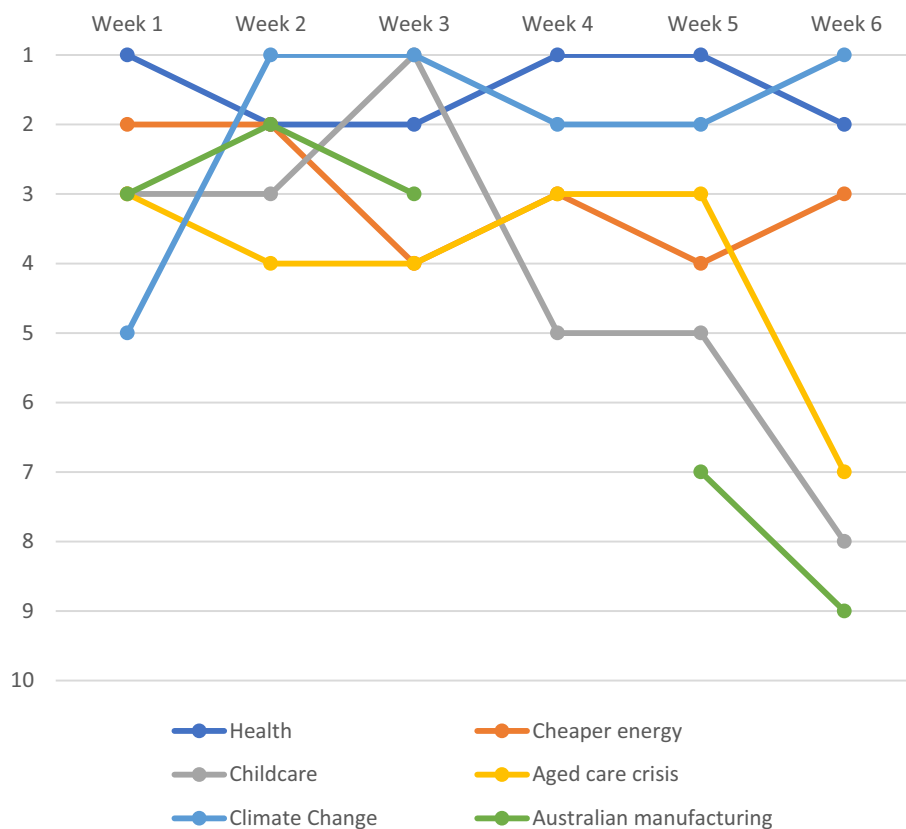
- (1) Health (83 occurrences).
- (2) Climate change (58 occurrences).
- (3) Childcare (57 occurrences).
- (4) Australian manufacturing (41 occurrences).
- (5) Cheaper energy (38 occurrences).
- (6) Aged care crisis (32 occurrences).

The messages were very clear from the outset and were raised consistently throughout the campaign. The only notable exception, particularly given the Voice referendum in 2023, was that the first mention of Indigenous issues did not occur until 24 April. Over the course of the campaign, we counted ten separate mentions of Indigenous issues, eight of which related to the Uluru Statement from the Heart or an Indigenous voice to Parliament. This relatively low level of emphasis given to this issue contrasts with the urgency with which it was promoted in the lead up to the referendum; elements of the Australian electorate may have been taken by surprise by the priority given to the constitutional change.⁹ In addition to the top six messages listed above, prominence was given to very traditional, progressive Labor issues such as wages, job security, and education and training. In some weeks, these were raised more frequently than the six that were most mentioned in total over the whole campaign (Figure 2).

It should be noted that the Labor leader tested positive for COVID-19 in the second week of the election campaign and was in isolation until 29 April. This did not appear to have a significant impact on his involvement in the campaign with the quietest week in terms of number of outputs posted to Albanese's website occurring in Week 4 (52 items compared with the maximum of 163 in the final week of the campaign).

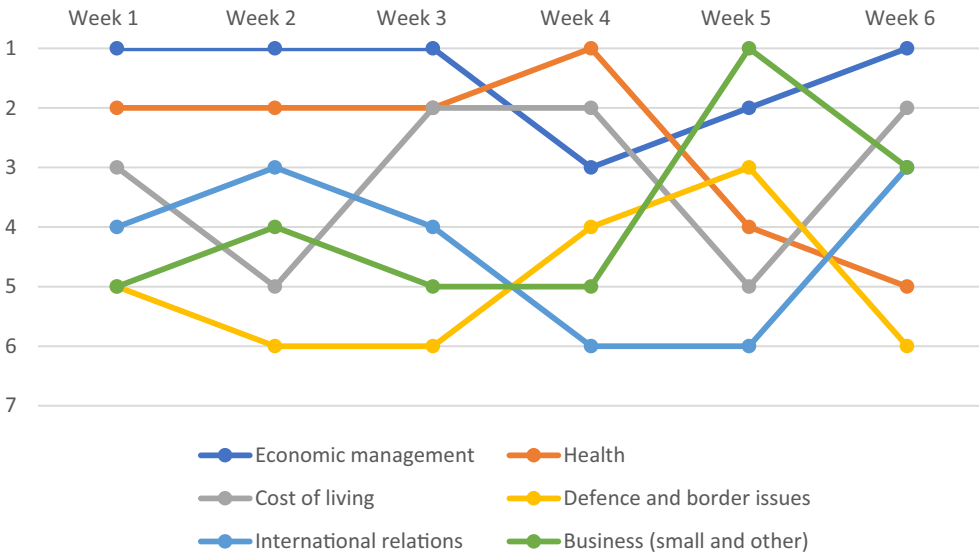
The messaging was refined over the course of the campaign with institutional responses to the issues raised — such as the establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia, the proposal for a Full Employment Summit, and the Powering Australia Plan — being

⁹ Linda Courtenay Botterill, "Selling the Unsellable? Values Priorities and Persuasion in the 'Yes' Campaign," in *"We Had All the Best Songs": Perspectives on the Voice Referendum*, eds, Paul Pickering and Matt Qvortrup (Canberra: ANU Press, 2024 forthcoming).

Figure 2 Albanese' Top Six Campaign Topics in Rank Order by Week

announced later in the campaign. The Robodebt Royal Commission received only two mentions, in a media release and then a doorstep in Week 3 of the Campaign on 30 April. There was a noticeable dip in Albanese's activity in Week 4 of the campaign and it then picked up again in the final two weeks. It is worth noting that although the six issues listed above were the most frequently mentioned across the campaign, in some weeks other issues rose to prominence and there was a shift in the most prominent from week to week. Climate change moved from the fifth most mentioned issue in Week 1 to the most mentioned in Week 6. In contrast, the aged care crisis slipped from third to seventh over the campaign. Note that the break in the series for Australian manufacturing is due to there being no mentions of that topic in Week 4.

By comparison with Morrison, Albanese was more consistent in sticking to his core messages and communicating key policy proposals. This is suggested by the way Albanese's campaign, while engaging in fewer topics across the campaign when compared with Morrison's approach, aligned the top five themes across the campaign with key Labor initiatives. Comparatively, the same cannot be said of Morrison's themes which were more pragmatically focused and more widely spread, while simultaneously not resting on any central policy transformation. Perhaps the notable exception was the coalition's housing policy, which was a theme that only became more prominent during the final week of the campaign but did not rank as one of the top six overall themes discussed during the period (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Morrison's Top Six Campaign Themes in Rank Order by Week

For Morrison, there were 182 entries of documents that were analysed across the forty days of the campaign. A number of 784 issues were identified across the dataset we collected. The most frequently raised topics were as follows:

- (1) Economic management (105 occurrences).
- (2) Health (74 occurrences).
- (3) Defence and border issues (52 occurrences).
- (4) Cost of living (47 occurrences).
- (5) International relations (45 occurrences).
- (6) Business issues (42 occurrences).

The messages were more spread compared with Albanese's campaign given the limited number of national policy initiatives slated, with an emphasis placed on more localised funding commitments. The most significant theme articulated consistently throughout was that the Coalition were superior managers of the economy. Health also ranked as a key theme with funding arrangements for health services, training, research, and Medicare all articulated across the campaign. Kay makes the point that the future of Medicare has become something of a bipartisan issue since the 1993 federal election,¹⁰ with both sides recognising the need to balance public provision of health care with the preservation of private health insurance. Australian attitudes on healthcare endorse the current system with fairly weak pro-private attitudes and strong pro-public attitudes.¹¹

¹⁰ Adrian Kay, "Tense Layering and Synthetic Policy Paradigms: The Politics of Health Insurance in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 42, 4 (2007), pp. 579–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361140701595775>

¹¹ E. Hardie and C. Critchley, "Public Perceptions of Australia's Doctors, Hospitals and Health Care Systems," *Medical Journal of Australia*, Vol 189, 4 (2008), pp. 210–14.

Defence and border protection was another grouping of key issues leveraged with multiple funding committed in relation to the defence industry, AUKUS¹² arrangements, national security issues, as well as border protection announcements. In addition, there was also one controversial announcement made on the final day of the election campaign that Australian Border Force had intercepted a boat suspected of carrying people seeking asylum. The publicising of this event was one of Scott Morrison's final acts as Prime Minister.¹³ Defence and border protection are issues that the coalition has been known to campaign on since the 2001 election,¹⁴ and the 2022 election saw a reprise of these themes.

Cost of living was the next major theme and included mention of cost of living pressures faced principally by households and in relation to increasing rates of inflation, electricity costs, and fuel expenses. Here messaging provided by the Morrison campaign pointed to the March budget announcement regarding the reduction of fuel excise by 50 per cent for 6 months.¹⁵ International relations were also prominent throughout the campaign. The central issue revolved around China's security pact with the Solomon Islands that was signed in the second week of the election campaign on the 19th of April; the ramifications of this agreement resulted in recurring campaign discussions about Australia's geographic security within the Asia Pacific region. Albanese also picked up on this issue, with China Policy ranking seventh in his topics in Week 3 of the campaign, and announcements in relation to Pacific Policy including both defence and maritime security. Not surprisingly, business was a regular theme articulated during Morrison's campaign, with announcements and initiatives related to business commercialisation, industry funding, and small and local business. For example, one media release on 5th of May announced a plan for "A stronger future for Australian small business"¹⁶ through the introduction of a new energy advice program to help business adopt efficient technologies to reduce energy costs.

A point of contrast between the two campaigns was the extent to which Morrison was required to offer defences against criticism levelled by the press. Issues surrounding controversial candidate for Warringah, Katherine Deves as well as the candidature of Alan Tudge (who had stood aside from his ministerial duties) were recurring matters to which the Morrison campaign was compelled to respond. Unfulfilled election commitments, such as a national integrity commission and the religious discrimination bill was another set of issues raised on several occasions that required a response by the Morrison campaign.

Discussion

Albanese's campaign in many ways had a traditional Labor focus on social democratic values. In his campaign launch on 1 May, he identified the five areas that would be the priorities of a Labor government "as we build a stronger, more productive, more resilient economy". These were

¹² Australia-UK-US trilateral security partnership.

¹³ Andrew Greene, "Scott Morrison Instructed Border Force to Reveal Election Day Asylum Boat Arrival," 27 May 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-27/scott-morrison-instructed-border-force-election-day-boat/101101464>

¹⁴ Ian McAllister, "Border Protection, the 2001 Australian Election and the Coalition Victory," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 38, 3 (2004), pp. 445–63.

¹⁵ Australian Government, Budget Paper No. 2, 2022–23, p. 15.

¹⁶ The Hon MP Scott Morrison, A Stronger Future for Australian Small Business, 2022.

- (1) A “Powering Australia Plan which will drive investment in cheap, renewable energy”.
- (2) “A future made right here in Australia”.
- (3) Investment in infrastructure “to boost productivity and create jobs”.
- (4) Jobs and training.
- (5) Care — encompassing Child Care, Medicare and Aged Care.¹⁷

In discussing the final point, he argued that “It’s only ever Labor Governments who do the big reforms, drive the big changes, reshape the economy in the best interests of people”. He wrapped up the campaign on 20 May by urging Australians to choose to vote Labor, stating that

They have a choice between a better future under Labor, a better future where they can vote for cheaper childcare, vote for ending the climate wars, vote for more secure work, vote for a government that understands that the cost of living pressures mean people are falling further and further behind, and that we need to address the need to lift wages, but also take pressure off family budgets.¹⁸

Albanese’s policy platform built on the labourist approach that Shorten had taken to both the 2016¹⁹ and 2019²⁰ elections. Like Albanese, Shorten had focused on wages, gender inequality, embraced the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and had raised childcare as an issue. He also gave prominence to climate action and, like Albanese, presented it as an economic opportunity. Falcinella argues that

While perhaps remembered mainly for his lack of popularity, a close analysis of Labor’s discourse and ideology under Shorten suggests he might be better considered as having attempted to reintroduce a more traditional, interventionist social democratic discourse on economic issues, while, on social issues, crafting a more inclusive, progressive one.²¹

An overarching theme of Albanese’s campaign messaging was that his would be, as Julia Gillard put it in a joint press conference, “a government for women”,²² again not significantly different from Shorten’s focus.

The main point of difference between the two was the almost exclusive focus by Albanese on spending initiatives whereas Shorten had also included significant economic reforms on the revenue side — notably the end to negative gearing, abolition of cash refunds for franking credits, and increases in both the capital gains tax and the top marginal personal tax rate. This package constituted “easily the most far-reaching

¹⁷ The Hon MP Anthony Albanese, Vote for a Better Future: Australian Labor Party Federal Election Campaign Launch 2022, 2022.

¹⁸ The Hon MP Anthony Albanese, Adelaide Press Conference, with The Hon Julia Gillard AC & Peter Malinauskas MP, 2022.

¹⁹ Rob Manwaring, “The Australian Labor Party’s Campaign,” in *Double Disillusion: The 2016 Australian Federal Election*, eds, Anika Gauja et al. (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018), pp. 257–76.

²⁰ Nick Falcinella, “‘Tackling Inequality’: Australian Labor Party Ideology and Discourse Under Bill Shorten,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 57, 4 (2022), pp. 368–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2022.2071211>

²¹ Falcinella, “‘Tackling Inequality,’” p. 382.

²² Albanese, Adelaide Press Conference.

set of economic policy changes proposed in any election since 1993”.²³ A second important difference between Shorten in 2019 and Albanese in 2022 is that Albanese largely steered away from negative campaigning. The literature is mixed on whether negative campaigning is effective; however, Shorten clearly benefited from the so-called “Medicare” campaign that Labor ran in the latter part of the 2016 campaign.²⁴

For the most part the Liberals adopted a less interventionist line in relation to policy initiatives. This is suggested by the key overarching themes that rose to prominence during the campaign period and the paucity of significant policy change apparent in Morrison’s set of campaign themes. Economic management was the main theme presented during the campaign by the Liberals and this idea chiefly articulated that the election was a choice between “The strong economic and financial management that we’ve displayed with a strong plan for the future and a Labor Party you don’t know”.²⁵ The use of this formulation of economic management as a choice frames the issue in a way that positions the Liberal campaign and its credentials in relation to the Labor party (and its initiatives). It suggests that rather than possessing their own key economic policy initiatives, the Coalition attempted to sell itself on its capacity to manage — in an ostensibly responsible manner — popular extant initiatives: “because if you can’t keep the economy strong, you can’t pay for Medicare, you can’t pay for the National Disability Insurance Scheme, you can’t pay for the investments we need to make in newer technologies”.²⁶ This framing of economic management presents the coalition parties as moderating spending activity, and by contrast, casts Labor in a fiscally questionable light. This self-presentation of the Liberals as credentialed superior managers of the economy stems from the Coalition’s long-term upper hand over Labor in the public’s belief that the Liberals are better economic managers.²⁷ Research indicates that objective macroeconomic conditions matter little in determining electoral outcomes²⁸ so this narrative is not necessarily related to electoral outcomes for the Coalition. Nevertheless, it reinforces the notion that the Coalition plays a role in constraining and limiting the spending initiatives of the Labor party.

Election campaigns provide a concentrated presentation of the policy priorities of parties as they seek to sell themselves and their vision for the nation to the voting public. The messages are carefully crafted to present the protagonists in the best light and not to just put forward specific policy initiatives but also to present the values that will guide their decision-making if elected. These presentations assist voters in making electoral choice as few take the trouble of reading party manifestoes in detail. They rely instead on cognitive heuristics to guide their decision, a key one of which is party alignment. The stereotypes and “schemata” associated with different political parties

²³ Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, “Policies and Performance in the 2019 Australian Federal Election,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 55, 3 (2020), pp. 239–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2020.1776679>

²⁴ Andrea Carson, Aaron J. Martin, and Shaun Ratcliff, “Negative Campaigning, Issue Salience and Vote Choice: Assessing the Effects of the Australian Labor Party’s 2016 ‘Medicare’ Campaign,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, Vol 30, 1 (2016), pp. 83–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1563093>

²⁵ The Hon MP Scott Morrison, Today Show Interview with Karl Stefanovic, 2022.

²⁶ The Hon MP Scott Morrison, *6PR interview with Oly Peterson*, 2022.

²⁷ Timothy Hellwig and Ian McAllister, “Does the Economy Matter? Economic Perceptions and the Vote in Australia,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 51 (2016), pp. 236–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2015.1135306>

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

provide an accessible and common shortcut.²⁹ Our mapping of issues presented in Albanese's and Morrison's published speeches etc, revealed clear evidence of the former's policy agenda of initiative, in a traditional Labor mould, and the latter's lack of similar policy innovation. Morrison fell back on the traditional tropes of the Coalition as strong on defence and border security, and as superior economic managers whose expertise is required to ensure that popular policies already in place could be afforded. He also showed a willingness to erode earlier initiatives, such as compulsory superannuation. He sought to engender suspicion that Labor's program of progressive policies could not be afforded and would be risky: "It's a choice between a Government that knows how to manage money and a Labor Party that won't even tell you what their policies cost and run away when asked those questions".³⁰

Acknowledgement

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²⁹ Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol 45, 4 (2001), p. 951.

³⁰ The Hon MP Scott Morrison, Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce, Prepared Remarks, 2022.