

Snapshot: 2004 federal election campaign and results

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On 9 October 2004 the Coalition federal government was returned to power for the fourth time. They won an increased majority in their overall vote and in their share of MPs in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

There were five important features to this election:

- The Coalition increased their primary vote, and now have a historic majority in the Senate, with 39 of the 76 senators from the Coalition, the first time the government has controlled the Senate in 24 years.
- The minor party vote decreased overall, especially for the Australian Democrats and One Nation. The Australian Greens are now Australia's 'third' party. One new small party, Family First, emerged and won Senate representation.
- Economic issues were at the forefront of the campaign, including management of the economy and interest rates.
- Health, education, the war in Iraq, and forest protection in Tasmania were important issues that the major parties used to differentiate their policy positions.
- Social justice concerns around refugees, Indigenous issues, young people and the republic did not feature much in the campaign.

This snapshot will look at what these results mean for Australian political processes, and will explain how this result occurred based on major policy issues debated during the campaign.

In the beginning

Australian federal elections must be held every three years and, as there is no set date for the election, the government of the day has the discretion to select an election date that provides the opposition political parties and the general public with at least six weeks' notice. After much media speculation on optimum dates for the election,

Prime Minister John Howard announced the election date in late August. The brief quote below gives an indication of how the Prime Minister sought to set the agenda for the subsequent election campaign.

This election will be about trust. It will be about who is best able to shoulder the huge responsibility of keeping Australia prosperous, strong and secure. Who do you trust to keep the Australian economy strong and to protect family living standards? Who do you trust to keep interest rates low? Who do you trust to lead Australia in the fight against international terrorism? Who do you trust to keep the budget strong so we can afford to spend more on health and education?

Managing an \$800 billion economy and protecting Australia's security in an uncertain world are large, complex tasks. They demand steady leadership, experience, focus and good judgement.

(John Howard media release, 29 August 2004, available at: http://www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/media_Release1108.html).

This quote is important because it reveals that from the start of the campaign the economy (and to a lesser extent national security) was presented as a central re-election issue for the government. It also demonstrates that Mr Howard was not afraid to discuss the issue of trust in government as it related to his leadership of the country since 1996. This surprised many electoral commentators as just prior to the announcement there had been renewed debate about the Prime Minister's role in the 'Children Overboard' matter of 2001. Mike Scrafton, a former senior adviser in the Department of Defence, alleged he had informed the Prime Minister before the 2001 federal election that the 'Children Overboard' photos were not genuine. Mr Howard did not admit he had access to this information prior to the election (for more on Children Overboard see page 266–7 in *Powerscape*).

Importantly, this debate was used to generate broader discussion about the trustworthiness of the government, and what Australians really thought about politicians and government. The general consensus was that Australians held politicians in low esteem (Davis 2004, p. 3). By facing this issue head-on the Prime Minister was taking a gamble that might have further alienated Australian voters; however, it did not, and

'trust' was not used substantively in the campaign by the ALP or any other organised opposition to the government.

Another gamble for both leaders was their live televised debate on Sunday 12 September. This provided the opportunity for both John Howard and Mark Latham to demonstrate their command of policy issues and their leadership capacities. The leaders were quizzed by a select panel of journalists on campaign policy issues such as national security, health, education and economic management. Their responses were rated throughout the program by a panel of as-yet undecided Australian voters sitting in the television studio. Overwhelmingly, two-thirds of the studio-based voters supported the answers given by Mark Latham, often giving very negative responses to the Prime Minister (the transcript can be viewed at http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/sixtyminutes/stories/2004_09_12/story_1227.asp). For Mark Latham, the debate was possibly the high point in the election campaign—his youth and new ideas were demonstrated to be an asset. At other times in the campaign, and especially in the Coalition's advertising, his political inexperience was highlighted as a problem and he was argued to be an undeserving leader of the country. However, John Howard's poor performance in the televised debate did not damage his campaign overall, as he was very successful in focusing the campaign and public debate on issues of his choosing: the economy and interest rates in particular.

Major party policy issues and debate—'it's the economy, stupid'

With the Coalition setting the tone for the campaign and election debate, the ALP tried to respond on two fronts. First, they tried to convince the electorate that they were capable of managing the economy just as well as, or even better than, the Coalition. This was clearly a difficult task, with some commentators arguing that the ALP did not make a dent in the public perception of the Government's economic credibility (see Davidson, 2004). Furthermore, the Coalition made use of negative advertising to both highlight economic problems at Liverpool Council when Mark Latham had been mayor and to show that previous ALP governments had overseen interest rate rises (for an explanation of research into negative advertising, see the Parliamentary Research Brief at <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/RB/2004-05/05rb05.pdf>). It is also important to

appreciate that the topic of housing interest rates would have resonated with sections of the population that have become increasingly important as new voters for the Liberal Party: families with mortgages and slightly above-average salaries who live in the suburbs of major cities.

The ALP also tried to focus on other issues they believed were important to the electorate and to differentiate their policy positions from the government. For example, consolidation of government provision of health services through Medicare was an important plank in the ALP campaign. Their Medicare Gold was planned as an extension of Medicare to cover all hospital costs for the elderly. This was seen as an attempt by the ALP to win more of the 'grey vote', a traditional Coalition constituency. There was also a proposed grandparenting allowance and an increase in the aged pension (Lewis and Maher, 2004).

The ALP also attempted to win over voters concerned with environmental issues. They did this by recruiting high-profile environmental activist Peter Garret as a candidate before the election, and by promising to protect more of Tasmania's old growth forests. However, this second tactic backfired on them, when their policy was seen to be at the expense of forestry jobs. The ALP subsequently lost two seats in Tasmania, Bass and Braddon, the first ALP seats to fall on election night and a predictor of their further woes. Some commentators went as far as labelling it as the defining issue in the ALP's loss (see Harvey, 2004). However, this hypothesis is not as convincing in light of the overwhelming success of the Liberal party's economy-based campaigning that would have appealed to economically disadvantaged Tasmanians. After the election, Latham recognised that the ALP has yet to convince the electorate that they are able to manage the economy as well as the Coalition, thereby conceding that they had been unable to shift the focus of the election away from economic issues:

Certainly in the key area of economic policy we need to do better. We need to improve our economic policies and credentials to give us stronger capacity in the future to combat concerns in the electorate or the strength of any Government scare campaign on issues like interest rates.
(Mark Latham doorstep interview, 11 October, available at: <http://www.alp.org.au/media/1004/dsifl110.php>).

There was no substantial moral or social agenda in the election campaign; social justice concerns about refugees or the situation of indigenous Australians were not debated. One commentator, Judith Brett, argues that appeals to individual self-interest led the campaign and that this was part of a distinctive and new moral agenda that the government has been successful in implementing since 1996 (see the *New Matilda* commentary site at: <http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetailmagazine.asp?ArticleID=284&CategoryID=27>). Other groups of voters were ignored altogether in the campaign. For example, the distinctive economic and social situation of young voters was not addressed throughout the campaign as voters were being targeted primarily in terms of their identity as family members and/or home owners.

Media and the election campaign

Advertising is crucial in today's polished election campaigns. It was estimated that throughout the campaign about \$40 million was spent on political advertising, the two major parties having spent \$10 million each on television advertising alone, followed by about a \$1 million on radio advertising (Canning, 2004). It is more difficult to estimate the totals spent on leafleting, but letters sent directly to voters and a variety of printed advertising material saw voters living in marginal seats bombarded with major and minor party campaign material. Such direct mail is increasingly important in Australian election campaigns and is targeted to specific issues within electorates, as well as providing examples of increasingly aggressive and personal attacks by parties against one another. One advertising veteran labelled the 2004 election as one of the most aggressive since the mid 1970s (Canning, 2004, p. 13).

Beyond the aggressive direct mail there was a concerted effort against the government by an assortment of groups. This included the Not Happy John group, spurred on by the publication of journalist Margo Kingston's book of the same name and the active support of John Valder, a former Liberal Party president. There were also the roving rodents: people dressed up in rat's costumes who heckled the Prime Minister throughout the campaign. These were inspired by allegations that Liberal Senator George Brandis had referred to the Prime Minister as 'a lying rodent'.

On-line criticism of both major parties was virulent throughout the campaign particularly through individual blogging sites and commentary sites such as Crikey.com, Australian Policy On-Line, Australian Review of Public Affairs, Online Opinion, the new site New Matilda, and the youth-oriented Election Tracker. The internet was an exciting forum for active debate and the 2004 election was possibly the pinnacle of alternative discussion of electoral politics.

The other presence throughout the campaign—aside from mainstream media commentary, advertising and alternative media—were the ubiquitous opinion polls predicting the election outcome. One week before the election, the polls predicted a variety of results: a safe Coalition win (AC Nielsen); too close to call (Morgan); and an ALP win (Newspoll) (Hartcher, 2004). Opinion polls are important for focusing attention and enate on the election campaign. However, the polls that the public can access are only the tip of the iceberg as the major parties conduct significant polling throughout the campaign, especially in the important marginal seats. Despite their importance, polls only measure opinion at a particular point in time, and during the 2004 election clearly either a small but significant proportion of the voting population changed their minds closer to election day or the polls are less accurate predictors than they seem (for more discussion of opinion polls read the Discussion Box on pages 298–300 of *Powerscape*).

Winning the election

The results of the 2004 federal election, in Table 1 below, saw the ALP receive one of its lowest House of Representatives primary votes ever. The consolidation of the Liberal/National primary vote was likely a result of both further inroads into the ALP's traditional constituency in the suburban electorates of big cities and the decrease in votes for the Australian Democrats and One Nation. Both of these minor parties decreased in vote to a point of electoral insignificance and neither party won any lower or upper house seats. The increase in the Greens' vote and their consequent increased parliamentary representation led to that party being anointed Australia's new 'third party'.

Table 1: National results

Party	House of Representatives	HOR Swing %	Senate
Australian Labor Party	37.6%	-0.21	35%
The Liberal Party	40.5%	+3.39	17.7%
Liberal/Nationals	-	-	25.7%
The Nationals	5.9%	+0.28	1.4%
The Democrats	1.2%	-4.17	2.1%
The Greens	7.2%	+2.23	7.7%
One Nation	1.2%	-3.15	1.7%
Family First	2%	+2%	1.8%

Source: adapted from Australian Electoral Commission website at: www.aec.gov.au

The two-party preferred result in Table 2 shows that the Coalition secured an increased majority of the overall vote. This is also reflected in Tables 3 and 4, which show the proportion of MPs sitting in both chambers of parliament. The Coalition increased its majority of MPs in the House of Representatives to maintain its capacity to pass legislation through this house of parliament.

Table 2: Two party preferred result

Party	Votes	Percentage %	Swing %
Liberal/National Coalition	6,179,130	52.75	+1.80
Australian Labor Party	5,535,705	47.25	-1.80

Source: Australian Electoral Commission website at: www.aec.gov.au

This election also saw the emergence of Family First, a new, smaller, conservative party that, despite winning only a small proportion of the overall vote, was able to win a senator in Victoria. In that state, Family First got only 1.88% of the vote but secured a Senate spot after receiving preferences from all parties (with the exception of the Greens), including the ALP and the Democrats..

After the election there was a lot of media discussion about how this happened. The primary answer is that as the vast majority of Australian voters (up to 95%) only allocate a single-party preference ‘above the line’ on their senate ballot paper, leaving it up to the parties themselves to determine how preferences are distributed. Parties must register their preference allocation with the Australian Electoral Commission prior to the election, and the distribution of preferences is usually based on strategic negotiations parties make with one another about ‘swapping’ preferences. However, most voters do not access these listings and are therefore unaware of where their vote may go. This lack of transparency in preference deals became controversial after Family First were elected in Victoria, despite the fact that the Greens had 8.7% of the vote and thus received the largest minor party share of the vote.

Table 3: House of Representatives Results 2004

Party	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	National	
									2004 Election	2001 Election
ALP	21	19	6	5	3	3	2	1	60	65
Liberal	21	16	17	10	8	2	0	0	74	68
Nationals	6	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	12	13
Country Liberal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Independent	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
TOTAL	50	37	28	15	11	5	2	2	150	150

Source: Australian Electoral Commission website at: www.aec.gov.au

Table 4 also shows that, for the first time since 1981, the Coalition has a majority of MPs in the Senate, meaning that if the Liberal and National Party senators always vote in agreement on legislation the government will be able to pass proposed legislation through the Senate unaltered. This has led commentators to speculate that the federal government will seek to implement more of their policy agenda and revive reforms previously thwarted by the Opposition. This includes the sale of Telstra, further deregulation of the

industrial relations system and the relaxation of foreign and cross-media ownership laws. However, the Prime Minister cautioned that:

It is a very good outcome but I want to assure the Australian people that the government will use its majority in the new Senate very carefully, very wisely and not provocatively. We intend to do the things we have promised we would do, but we don't intend to allow this unexpected but welcome majority in the Senate to go to our heads. (Prime Minister John Howard quoted in Davis and O'Loughlin, 2004)

Table 4: State of the full Senate from 1 July 2005

Party	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	TOTAL
ALP	5	4	4	4	5	4	1	1	28
Liberal	5	6	5	6	6	6	1	-	35
National	1		2	-	-	-	-	-	3
Democrats	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	4
Country Liberal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Green	1	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	4
Family First	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
TOTAL	12	12	12	12	12	12	2	2	76

Source: Australian Electoral Commission website at: www.aec.gov.au

The 2004 election was a resounding win for the Coalition government and this next term will be an important one for the implementation of a new policy agenda. In terms of understanding the election campaign and the election result, it is worth reflecting on social commentator Hugh Mackay's (2004) analysis. He argued that the election was not won during the campaign alone but had already been decided by a *majority* of Australians who felt that their economic and the national security were taken care of by the current government, and they were not convinced that it was time for a change to an ALP government with a new and untested leader.

References

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