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Leadership Change, Policy Issues and Voter Defection in the 2010 Australian Election

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Leadership change formed the backdrop to the 2010 Australian federal election, with the replacement of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister by Julia Gillard, the country's first female Prime Minister. This article uses the 2010 Australian Election Study to examine patterns of voter defection between the 2007 and 2010 elections. The results show that the predominant influence on defection was how voters rated the leaders. Julia Gillard was popular among female voters and her overall impact on the vote was slightly greater than that of Tony Abbott. Defectors from Labor to the Greens disapproved of Kevin Rudd's dismissal from office. Policy issues were second in importance after leadership, particularly for those moving from the Coalition to Labor, who were concerned about health and unemployment. Overall, the results point to the enduring importance of leaders as the predominant influence on how voters cast their ballot.

Keywords: Australian elections; leadership change; voter behaviour

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Each election is different, but the Australian federal election held on 21 August 2010 had a number of characteristics that set it apart from its predecessors. First, Labor's popular Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, was dismissed from office by his own party just two months before the election was held. This was the first time that Labor had dismissed a Prime Minister during their first term in office. Second, Rudd's replacement was Julia Gillard, who made history by being Australia's first female Prime Minister. And third, despite the Labor government's successful navigation of the global financial crisis, Labor failed to win an overall majority and the election produced the first hung parliament since 1940. After 17 days of tense negotiations, Labor eventually formed a minority government with the support of four independents and the Greens.

Any one of these characteristics would have made the 2010 election distinctive, but the combination of all three makes the election unique. Nevertheless, the preoccupation with leadership change hides an essential continuity with previous elections. Like previous election campaigns in Australia and internationally, the parties' activities were dominated by stage-managed events, involving the party faithful and organised around sound bites designed to appeal to the mass media (for a review, see Semetko 2007). Voters responded by seeing fewer differences between the major parties,¹ and by supporting minor parties in increasing numbers. Indeed, minor parties and independents received 18.4 per cent of the first preference vote in the House of Representatives, their best performance since 2001. The Greens, who made up the bulk of the minor party vote, won their largest vote ever, securing 11.8 per cent of the lower house first preference vote (see Miragliotta 2010).²

This article outlines the background to the election and examines the dynamics of the campaign. Several explanations for the outcome are tested. The data come from the 2010 Australian Election Study (AES) survey (Bean et al. 2011), a national survey of public opinion conducted immediately after each federal election.³ In addition, we examine the longer term trends with respect to some of the key factors in the election, in order to place the election within a long-term political perspective. The article is mainly concerned with the attitudinal factors that influenced the vote in the 2010 election; an analysis of the socioeconomic factors that underpinned the vote for the major parties can be found in Bean and McAllister (2011).

The Flow of the Vote

Labor won the 2007 election with a comfortable majority and recent electoral history would have suggested that the party should have secured a second term

¹In the 2010 Australian Election Study (AES), 26 per cent of the respondents thought there was a 'good deal' of difference between the parties. In the 1993 AES the same figure was 44 per cent.

²In the 2001 election, the first that the Greens fought as a national party, they won 5.0 per cent of the lower house vote, 7.2 per cent in 2004, and 7.8 per cent in 2007.

³The AES is a mail-out/mail-back survey conducted among voters in all states and territories. In 2010 an online option was available to the survey respondents, and an additional sample was collected online in order to correct for an under-representation of younger voters; the overall response rate was 41.9 per cent. The data are weighted to reflect population parameters for gender, age, state and vote, giving a final sample size of 2,061. Full details of the survey methodology can be found in McAllister and Pietsch (2011, Appendix B).

without much difficulty. Throughout the early part of 2010 and with an election due by the end of the year however, the two major parties were almost neck-and-neck in the polls. This close race changed on 27 April 2010 when the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, announced that the government would delay the implementation of its planned Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) until 2012 (Pietsch and McAllister 2010). The legislation to implement the CPRS had previously been rejected in the Senate, creating the potential for a double dissolution election. Various groups had argued that there should be an election on the issue, and Rudd's announcement that he would delay the CPRS rather than call an election on the issue was condemned by environment groups and popular movements such as *GetUp!*.

Figure 1 shows that in the Newspoll survey immediately preceding the decision, Labor's support stood at 43 per cent; following the announcement of the delay in the CPRS, Labor support dropped to 35 per cent (Newspoll 2010a). Labor support remained at that level until Kevin Rudd was replaced by Julia Gillard as Labor Prime Minister on 24 June. Most of the defections from Labor went to the Greens, and Figure 1 shows clearly that after April 2010, while the Coalition vote remained relatively stable, the Green vote increased, peaking at 16 per cent in May 2010. The patterns of support in Figure 1 also demonstrate that the abandonment of the CPRS marked a turning point in Labor's fortunes, and made it unlikely that the party would win the election outright. The decision also marked the start of a major decline in Rudd's popularity, and was a key reason for his replacement as Prime Minister by Gillard.

The election was called on 17 July, just over four weeks after the leadership change. There had been widespread speculation that the election would be called soon after Gillard became Prime Minister, in order to capitalise on the short honeymoon period that every new leader enjoys. In the Newspoll survey

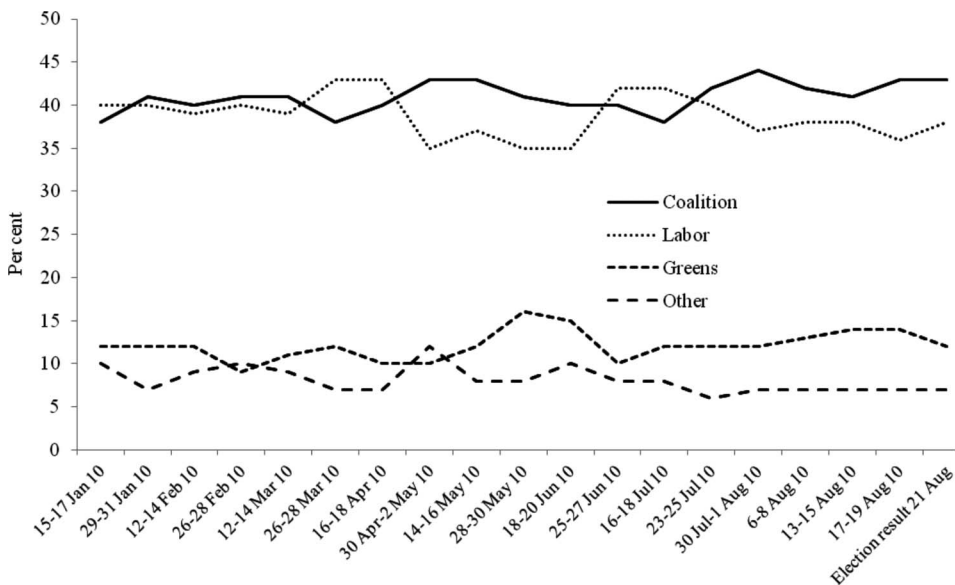


Figure 1. Voting Intention, January–August 2010.

Source: <http://www.newspoll.com.au>.

immediately prior to the change of leadership, Labor support stood at 35 per cent of the first preference vote; in the poll immediately following the leadership change, Labor support gained seven percentage points, to 42 per cent (Newspoll 2010b). In the first two weeks of the election campaign Labor led the Coalition in the first preference vote. However, Labor's repetitive emphasis on the slogan 'moving forward' proved unpopular with voters; for example, in her election announcement, Gillard repeated the phrase no less than 24 times in five minutes leading to the criticism that she was talking down to voters.⁴

By early August Labor was again trailing in the polls. This prompted a change in Labor tactics, with the discarding of the 'moving forward' slogan and instead Gillard proclaiming that 'it's time for me to make sure that the real Julia is well and truly on display' (*Australian* 2010b). Gillard suggested that she would discard professional campaign advice and instead 'people should expect to see a different style of campaigning from this point' (*Herald Sun* 2010). Figure 1 shows that the change in tactics produced no improvement in Labor's poll ratings. Not least, the Liberals were able to argue that if this was 'the real Julia' then the previous one had been a fake. In his post-election assessment of the campaign, the Labor secretary, Karl Bitar, nominated the way in which the change in tactics was handled as one of his party's most obvious political mistakes (Bitar 2010).

The result of the election was largely in line with the predictions of the opinion polls from early August onwards, which showed a Coalition advantage in the first preference vote of about 7 per cent, which equated to a two-party preferred vote of 50 per cent each for Labor and the Coalition.⁵ The election result gave Labor 50.1 per cent of the two-party preferred vote and the Coalition 49.9 per cent; both parties secured 72 seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives. The balance of power was held by six crossbenchers, and after 17 days of negotiations, four of them declared their support for Labor, thereby allowing Labor to form government. In the Senate, the Greens gained four seats giving them the balance of power in the upper house.

The turnover of the vote between the 2007 and 2010 elections in Table 1 shows that the Coalition was the most effective party in retaining the support of voters between the two elections.⁶ A total of 86 per cent of Coalition voters in 2007 also reported voting for the Coalition in the 2010 election. Of those Coalition voters who defected from the Coalition, half reported voting Labor, and half voted Green or other. Labor managed to retain the support of 70 per cent of its 2007 voters, with 14 per cent defecting to the Coalition and 12 per cent defecting to the Greens. This is the highest level of defections from Labor since the AES commenced in 1987, and higher even than the figure of 26 per

⁴Don Watson, Paul Keating's former speech writer, commented that Gillard was speaking as if 'training a dog' and treating voters like 'imbeciles' (Watson 2010).

⁵The final Newspoll survey of the campaign (Newspoll 2010a), conducted between 17–19 August, predicted a two-party preferred vote of 49.8 per cent for the Coalition and 50.2 for Labor, which was within 0.1 per cent of the actual result.

⁶There are well-documented problems in using recalled vote in surveys (see, for example, Wright 1993), mainly associated with the saliency of the election for the respondents. Since the 2007 election represented the election of a new government and was therefore of higher saliency, in this case the level of error may therefore be reduced lower than would otherwise be the case. In addition, the distribution of the recalled vote closely matches that recorded at the election.

Table 1. The Turnover of the House of Representatives' Vote, 2007–10

	2007 Vote				
	Lab	Lib–Nat	Green	Others	Non-voter
<i>2010 Vote</i>					
Lab	70	7	23	12	38
Lib–Nat	14	86	4	29	30
Green	12	3	66	15	30
Others	4	4	7	44	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	(958)	(830)	(118)	(48)	(60)

Note: 'In the federal election for the House of Representatives on Saturday 21 August, which party did you vote for first in the House of Representatives?' 'In the last federal election in 2007, when Labor was led by Kevin Rudd and the Liberals by John Howard, which party got your first preference then in the House of Representatives election?'

Source: 2010 Australian Election Study.

cent defections in 1990, when Labor also suffered a significant vote shift to the Greens (McAllister 2011, Figure 1.5). By contrast, the Greens retained the vote of two-thirds of their 2007 supporters, the highest figure the party has recorded since it began to contest elections.

A large part of Labor's problem in the 2010 election – as in every election since 2001, when the Greens first became a significant part of national elections – was a two-way pattern of defections among those who had voted Labor in the previous election. Labor lost votes to the Coalition on the one hand, and to the Greens on the other. By contrast, the Coalition parties had to deal just with defections primarily to Labor. As in past elections, most of the Green votes returned to Labor through preferences. For example, when asked the eventual destination of their House of Representatives vote in 2010, 73 per cent of Green voters said that their vote returned to Labor, 10 per cent said that their vote went to the Coalition, and 17 per cent did not know. This is almost exactly the same pattern as occurred in 2007, when Green voters said that 75 per cent of their votes eventually went to Labor.⁷ Thus, while around one in 10 voters cast a ballot for the Greens, around three out of every four of those votes eventually ended up with Labor, thus minimising the overall defections from the party.

The Election Campaign

The issues that were debated during the campaign revolved very much around the economy, border protection and climate change, with each benefiting one or other of the parties. Labor sought to capitalise on the relatively strong performance of the economy during the global financial crisis (GFC). The government attributed this strong performance to its stimulus package, which

⁷A further 12 per cent said that their vote went to the Coalition, and 12 per cent didn't know. In 2004, 78 per cent of the Green vote went to Labor, 8 per cent to the Coalition, and 14 per cent didn't know.

Table 2. Attitudes towards Turning Asylum Seeker Boats Back, 2001–10

	2001	2004	2010
Strongly agree	37	29	30
Agree	25	26	22
Neither	18	18	19
Disagree	12	17	17
Strongly disagree	8	10	12
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(1,967)	(1,715)	(2,057)

Note: 'Here are some statements about general social concerns. Please say whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of these statements ... All boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back.'

Sources: 2001, 2004, 2010 Australian Election Studies.

involved spending over AU\$50 billion on infrastructure development and giving a cash 'tax bonus' to eligible taxpayers (Makin 2010). In total, the stimulus package amounted to 2.6 per cent of GDP during the 2008–10 planning period, double that of the next highest spenders among the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Wettenhall 2011, 79). In addition, the government was able to argue that the Australian banking system had been better regulated than its overseas peers, therefore avoiding the spectacular banking failures and near-failures that had occurred in many other countries.

Labor, however, did not benefit from the emphasis during the campaign on border protection and climate change. The Rudd Labor government elected in 2007 introduced a number of asylum seeker policy reforms. First, the government abolished temporary protection visas for asylum seekers which meant that asylum seekers, if granted refugee status, could apply for a permanent visa. Second, children were no longer allowed to be detained. Third, the government abandoned the so-called 'Pacific Solution' for asylum seekers, whereby refugees were detained on small Pacific islands while their claims were processed, rather than being permitted onto the Australian mainland, where they had access to legal redress if their claims were rejected.

The Coalition argued that it was the 'Pacific Solution' that drastically reduced the number of refugees arriving by boat: between 2002 and 2008 a total of 18 boats arrived, carrying 301 people. However, with the change in policy, between 2008 and the end of 2010 a total of 202 boats carrying no less than 10,940 people arrived in Australian waters to seek asylum (Phillips and Spinks 2011). This is a level of illegal arrivals matched only by the period following the end of the Vietnam War. On the whole, the majority of Australian voters have preferred tougher asylum seeker policies. For example, since 2001, Table 2 shows that a majority of voters have consistently favoured turning asylum seeker boats back. In the 2010 AES, for example, 52 per cent favoured turning the boats back, while just 29 per cent disagreed, and 19 per cent had no view.

Climate change policy has traditionally held an electoral advantage for Labor. The previous Howard Liberal government had refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which committed developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by 5 per cent below 1990 levels in the period between

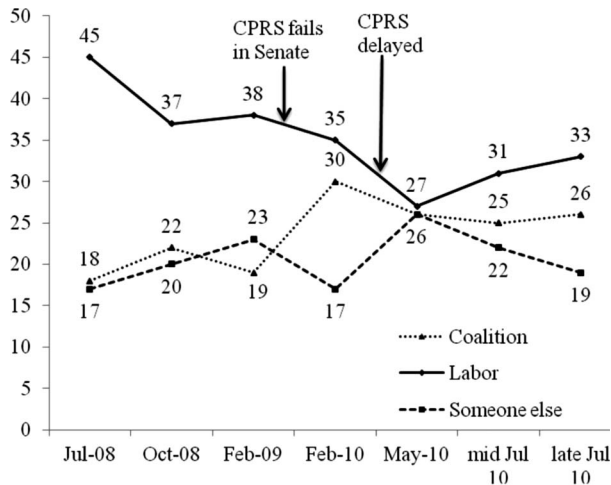


Figure 2. Best Party to Handle Climate Change, July 2008–July 2010.

Note: ‘Which one of the (Labor Party, Liberal and Nationals Coalition or someone else) do you think would best handle the issue of climate change?’

Source: Newspoll, <http://www.newspoll.com.au>.

2008 and 2012. However, the 2007 AES showed that there was widespread public support for ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, with 67 per cent saying yes and just 8 per cent saying no.⁸ One of the first acts of the Rudd Labor government was to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. However, finding a domestic policy solution that would reduce greenhouse emissions proved more difficult. Following a protracted process of consultation, including a major report led by an economist, Ross Garnaut (Garnaut 2008), the Rudd Labor government decided to postpone until 2012 any decision on legislation to limit carbon emissions (Macintosh, Wilkinson and Denniss 2010). Labor’s equivocation on how to approach climate change policy undermined its natural advantage on the issue and opened the way for the surge in Green support that occurred in the 2010 election.

The extent to which the decision to delay the CPRS harmed Labor’s position as the preferred party on the issue is illustrated in Figure 2. In mid-2008, 45 per cent of voters regarded Labor as the best party to handle the issue, compared to just 18 per cent who took the same view about the Coalition. This declined to 35 per cent following the failure of the CPRS to pass the Senate, and declined further, to 27 per cent, in May 2010 shortly after the announcement of the delay in the CPRS. While support for Labor’s position on climate change increased slightly in the remainder of 2010, it is clear that Rudd’s prevarication on the issue significantly harmed Labor’s standing within the electorate.

The election campaign was also overshadowed by leadership change, in the form of the replacement of Kevin Rudd by Julia Gillard as Prime Minister. While Rudd remained moderately popular with voters, albeit declining from a

⁸The Environment Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, had argued in Cabinet that the Howard government should ratify the Kyoto Protocol, saying that it would not harm Australia economically (*Australian* 2011).

Table 3. Labor's Leadership Change

	All	Labor Partisans	Coalition Partisans
Strongly approve	5	5	5
Approve	21	32	11
Disapprove	37	38	33
Strongly disapprove	37	25	51
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(2,042)	(753)	(808)

Note: 'Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Labor Party handled the leadership change in June of this year, when Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd?'

Source: 2010 Australian Election Study.

high level in 2008 and 2009, his support within the Labor caucus weakened significantly during 2009 and 2010. The erosion of caucus support had its origins in the abrupt turnaround in climate change policy noted above, but also in the way in which he introduced the proposal for a resources tax on the mining companies. In particular, the resources tax resulted in a damaging public dispute with the major mining companies, who funded a AU\$22m media campaign to oppose the tax. In response, the government mounted its own media campaign, contradicting Rudd's own 2007 election commitment to depoliticise government advertising, which Rudd had previously characterised as 'a long-term cancer on our democracy' (*Australian* 2010a).

Rudd also maintained a highly centralist leadership style, which focused on the micro-management of all aspects of policy and eschewed regular consultation with key ministers (Aulich and Evans 2010; Stuart 2011). As soon as Labor's prospects of winning the forthcoming election began to recede, many in the Labor caucus wanted to install someone with a more consensual leadership style (Cassidy 2010; Howes 2011). The opportunity arose when Rudd's Chief of Staff began canvassing backbench opinion on support for Rudd, a move that incensed Julia Gillard, his deputy, who had until then remained a loyal supporter. Once it became clear to Rudd that he did not have sufficient support to win a leadership ballot, he resigned, with the promise of a senior ministerial position if Labor won the election.

The manner of Rudd's replacement, in spite of his modest (and declining) popularity, found little public support. Table 3 shows that there was considerable sympathy for Rudd's predicament with just 26 per cent of the AES respondents approving of the way in which he was replaced by Gillard, while 74 per cent disapproved. Women were generally more likely to disapprove than men, as were residents of Rudd's home state, Queensland. The Rudd dismissal remained an issue throughout the election campaign. Early in the campaign he was hospitalised for a minor operation, and rejoined the campaign for his own electorate of Griffith. However, following a request from Gillard, he then campaigned nationally for Labor.⁹ However, he was linked to a series of damaging leaks about earlier cabinet discussions which revealed Gillard's

⁹As Rudd put it: 'I cannot for one stand idly by and watch Mr Abbott try to slide into office by default' (*Australian* 2010c).

Table 4. The Main Election Issues

	First and Second Mentioned issues (2007 in Parentheses)		Party Closest to Own View			
	First	Second	Labor	Coalition	No diff., don't know	(Labor–Coalition)
Health, Medicare	23 (+2)	21 (+4)	36	27	37	(+9)
Economic management	21 (na)	12 (na)	27	37	36	(–10)
Education	13 (+2)	13 (–1)	41	24	35	(+17)
Global warming	8 (+1)	5 (–4)	33	22	45	(+11)
Taxation	7 (–4)	9 (+2)	27	33	40	(–6)
Interest rates	7 (0)	8 (+2)	19	29	52	(–10)
Refugees, asylum seekers	6 (na)	9 (na)	21	38	41	(–17)
Environment	5 (–3)	7 (–3)	33	20	47	(+13)
Unemployment	3 (+1)	5 (+2)	30	23	47	(+7)
Resources tax	3 (na)	4 (na)	28	33	39	(–5)
Industrial relations	3 (–13)	3 (–5)	36	27	37	(+9)
Population policy	1 (na)	4 (na)	20	25	55	(–5)
Total (N)	100 (1,911)	100 (1,887)				

Note: 'Still thinking about the same 12 issues, which of these issues was most important to you and your family during the election campaign? And which next?' 'Still thinking about these same issues, which policies – the Labor Party's or the Liberal–National coalition's – would you say come closest to your own views on each of these issues?'

Sources: 2007, 2010 Australian Election Studies.

opposition to a parental leave scheme and more funds for pensioners (*Australian* 2010d).

The voters saw the main issues that mattered to them during the election campaign mainly in terms of health and Medicare, the management of the economy, and education. The remaining issues, ranging from global warming to population policy, attracted substantially less than one in ten mentions. Even the resources tax, which had been such an emotional topic in the run-up to the election and had helped to undermine Kevin Rudd's prime ministership, attracted just 3 per cent mentions as a first-mentioned issue, and 4 per cent as a second-mentioned issue. Moreover, there was relatively little change between the two elections in the distribution of the issues that mattered to voters. Health and education both increased slightly in importance compared to 2007, reflecting a long-term trend. As the economy has generally performed well, first-order economic issues such as unemployment, interest rates or taxation have all declined in importance, while the importance of second-order economic issues such as health and education has increased markedly.

The second part of Table 4 shows which of the two major parties the voters preferred on each of the 12 issues. The respondents saw the largest differences between the parties on education, the management of the economy, and industrial relations; the smallest differences emerged on population policy and interest rates, with more than half seeing no difference between the parties or saying that they did not know. Labor enjoyed the largest advantages on education (17 percentage points), the environment (13 points) and global

Table 5. The Televised Leaders' Debate

	All	Labor Partisans	Coalition Partisans
Gillard much better	10	19	2
Gillard better	27	44	10
About equal	40	33	43
Abbott better	18	4	35
Abbott much better	4	0	10
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(1,959)	(753)	(764)

Note: 'Did you watch the televised debate between Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott on Sunday 25 July? From what you saw or what you heard or read about it, who do you think performed better in the debate – Gillard or Abbott?'

Source: 2010 Australian Election Study.

warming (11 points), while the Coalition was preferred on refugees and asylum seekers (17 percentage points), and economic management and interest rates (10 points each). These differences provide a succinct measure of the extent to which particular issues benefited one or other party. They show that, overall, no single party dominated the issue agenda; across the 12 issues, 29.3 per cent favoured Labor and 28.2 per cent favoured the Coalition. In summary, then, the issue agenda did not favour one or other party.

Many of the policy issues canvassed during an election campaign are raised in the now traditional leaders' debate. Leaders' debates have been a feature of every federal election since 1990.¹⁰ The 2010 debate between the two party leaders, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott, took place on 25 July; the format followed the pattern of all of the debates that have been held from 1998 onwards (for an account, see Senior 2008). First, just one debate was held, rather than two as occurred in 1993 and 1996. Second, the debate involved the two major party leaders and excluded the Greens. Third, the debate took place barely a week after the election had been called, and almost four weeks before polling day. This is a pattern established under the Howard Liberal government, and was designed to accommodate John Howard's consistently poor performance in the debates.¹¹ Labor was happy to continue this conservative approach since, as the incumbent party with a new leader, they had more to lose than the Liberals if their leader performed poorly.

The formal, stylised debates that have characterised recent elections have attracted fewer and fewer viewers. In 2004, just 35 per cent of voters said that they watched the debate between John Howard and Mark Latham, the lowest figure that has been recorded since 1990. This compares with 71 per cent who said that they watched at least one of the two debates between Paul Keating and

¹⁰The first debate was held in 1984 between Bob Hawke and Andrew Peacock. Hawke was generally regarded as having performed badly in the debate and he refused to debate John Howard in 1987. Debates have been held continuously since 1990 (see McAllister 2011, Chapter 9; Senior 2008).

¹¹Howard participated in five debates, four as Prime Minister and one as opposition leader. He was viewed by voters as having lost all four as Prime Minister, winning only the 1996 debate with Paul Keating, when he was the challenger (McAllister 2011, Table 9.6).

John Hewson in 1993. In 2010, 47 per cent reported watching the leaders' debate, almost the same proportion as watched the 2007 debate. Table 5 shows that voters were more likely to see Gillard as having won the debate, with 37 per cent saying that she performed better in the debate, compared to 22 per cent who said that Abbott performed better. Yet, four out of every ten voters saw the debate as a draw.¹²

Labor partisans were more likely to see their own leader as the winner of the debate compared to Coalition partisans. A total of 63 per cent of Labor partisans considered that Gillard had performed better, compared to 45 per cent of Coalition partisans who thought that Abbott had performed better. There was also a significant gender effect in how the leaders were rated in the debate. As Australia's first female Prime Minister, and therefore the first woman to appear in a leaders' debate during a national election, Gillard gained disproportionately more support among women. Among women, 42 per cent thought that Gillard had performed better, compared to 32 per cent of men. There was a smaller gender effect for men supporting Abbott, amounting to five percentage points. In the final section we evaluate the effect of the debate on the vote, net of other factors.

Even by the standards of recent election campaigns, the 2010 campaign was a lacklustre affair. Both parties eschewed any detailed discussion of policy and announcements were designed to minimise risk and maximise their utility for the mass media. This is what Lindsay Tanner, a former Labor minister, has referred to as 'focus groups, spin, presentation, look like you're doing something, announceables nonsense' (Tanner 2011, 37). Voters responded to the election campaign by showing less interest. In principle, the emergence of two new leaders and the policy debates over the previous year, on climate change, the mining tax and how to address the GFC, should have generated much public interest. In practice, the reverse was the case and the AES found that just 34 per cent said that they had a 'good deal' of interest in the election, compared to 40 per cent in 2007. A total of 68 per cent said that they 'cared a good deal' who won the election, the second lowest figure since 1987 (McAllister 2011, Figure 4.2).¹³

The Party Leaders

The trend towards the personalisation of politics, a shift that has been fuelled by the mass media and assiduously promoted by the parties, means that the party leaders represent a key element within the election campaign. A charismatic leader can draw support away from their opponents, rally the faithful, and effectively communicate the party's policy message. Equally, a lacklustre leader can harm the party's election prospects. While the popularity of a leader is not the sole determinant of an election outcome – for example, Paul Keating won the 1993 election for Labor with some of the lowest prime ministerial poll ratings ever recorded (McAllister 2011, 248–49) – an unpopular

¹²These estimates are for all voters. Separating out the estimates just for those who said that they watched the debate produces no substantive difference in the perceptions of who performed better.

¹³The lowest figure since 1987 was 65 per cent in 2001.

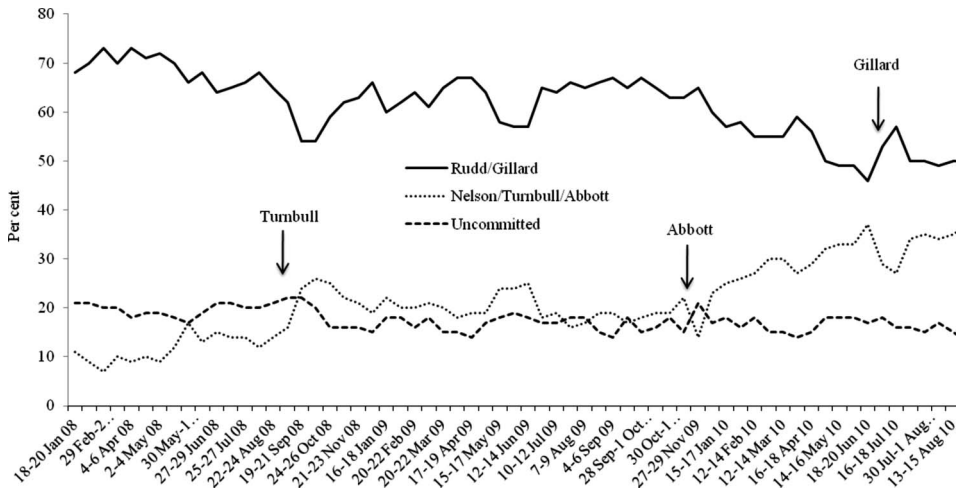


Figure 3. The Popularity of the Major Party Leaders, January 2008–August 2010.

Note: The question was: ‘Who do you think would make the better prime minister?’

Source: <http://www.newspoll.com.au>.

leader is unlikely to win an election unless faced by an equally unpopular opponent.

The parties have responded to these changes by ruthlessly replacing leaders who consistently rate poorly in the polls and who fail to deliver electoral success. For example, between 1983 and 1996, when the Liberals were in opposition, they had five leaders¹⁴ with an average tenure of just 28 months. During Labor’s lengthy period in opposition between 1996 and 2007, their four leaders¹⁵ were in office for an average period of just 32 months. These are periods of tenure which barely cover one election cycle. It would appear that the pattern of replacing an under-performing leader is now well established in both of the major parties.

Since 2007, the Liberals have experienced considerable leadership turmoil, with Brendan Nelson lasting just 10 months as leader, and his successor, Malcolm Turnbull, lasting just 15 months. Nelson suffered from some of the lowest poll ratings ever recorded by any party leader. He had also only narrowly won the Liberal leadership by three votes against Turnbull in 2007, and he was unable to broaden this narrow support base due to his poor performance. Turnbull’s equally short period as leader was dramatically brought to an end by the ‘Ozcar affair’, when he accused Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan of using their positions to advantage a friend (see Simms 2009; Singleton 2010). Turnbull’s allegations were subsequently found to have been based on forged documents, fatally undermining his leadership (see Crabb 2009).

¹⁴Namely: Andrew Peacock (1983–85, 1989–90), John Howard (1985–89, 1995–2007) and Alexander Downer (1994–95).

¹⁵Kim Beazley was leader twice in this period, between 1996 and 2001, and then again between 2005 and 2007. The other leaders were Simon Crean (2001–03) and Mark Latham (2003–05).

Table 6. Gender Differences in Leaders' Popularity (Means)

	(All)	Male	Female	(t-test)	(N)
Julia Gillard	(4.89)	4.45	5.32	(6.486, $p < .000$)	(2,038)
Kevin Rudd	(5.01)	4.80	5.22	(3.112, $p = .002$)	(2,028)
Tony Abbott	(4.26)	4.48	4.04	(3.198, $p = .001$)	(2,032)
Bob Brown	(4.10)	3.75	4.45	(5.433, $p < .000$)	(2,021)

'Using a scale from 0 to 10, please show how much you like or dislike the party leaders. If you don't know much about them, you should give them a rating of 5.'

Source: 2010 Australian Election Study.

Throughout the period following the 2007 election and leading up to the 2010 election, Figure 3 shows that Kevin Rudd maintained a very substantial advantage over Brendan Nelson and then his successor, Malcolm Turnbull, as preferred Prime Minister. Rudd's popularity declined after his election in 2007, as would be expected, but the decline was much less than has been the case with other Prime Ministers (McAllister 2003). Until Tony Abbott replaced Turnbull, neither Turnbull nor Nelson had attracted more than one in four voters who viewed either leader as their preferred Prime Minister. Tony Abbott's accession to the Liberal leadership brought a rise in public support, peaking at 37 per cent in mid-June, just prior to Rudd's replacement by Julia Gillard, and peaking again in the days immediately before the election. In the last Newspoll survey before the election, 50 per cent preferred Julia Gillard as Prime Minister and 37 per cent preferred Tony Abbott (Newspoll 2010a).

The greater popularity of Gillard over Abbott is also reflected in the 2010 AES. Using a 0 to 10 thermometer scale, Gillard scored a mean of 4.89, compared to 4.26 for Abbott. By contrast, Kevin Rudd was more popular than any of the other party leaders, perhaps reflecting some popular sympathy for the manner of his dismissal, scoring 5.01 on the scale. The leader of the Greens, Bob Brown, was the least popular of the party leaders, at 4.10.¹⁶ There was a significant gender effect in support for all four of the leaders in Table 6. As the first female Prime Minister, Gillard received substantially stronger endorsement among women voters, as did Kevin Rudd. Tony Abbott was more popular among male voters, while Bob Brown was more popular among women. These are substantial aggregate effects, and in the final section we evaluate the impact of gender on the vote.

These results show the popularity of the leaders judged one against the other, but there is also the question of their relative popularity compared to past leaders. Both Gillard and Abbott were less popular than any of the recent leaders who had preceded them – with the exception of Paul Keating. For example, John Howard's rating varied between a low of 5.14 in 2007 and a high of 5.73 in 2001. Even Mark Latham scored 5.05 in the 2004 election, significantly more than Gillard's rating in 2010. Abbott was the least popular opposition leader since Andrew Peacock in 1990. By the standards of recent political history, then, neither Gillard nor Abbott were particularly popular, so

¹⁶The leader of the Nationals, Warren Truss, was slightly ahead of Brown, with a mean score of 4.12. Pauline Hanson was consistently the least popular leader in all of the AES surveys, scoring 2.34 in 1998 (see McAllister 2011, Table 9.1).

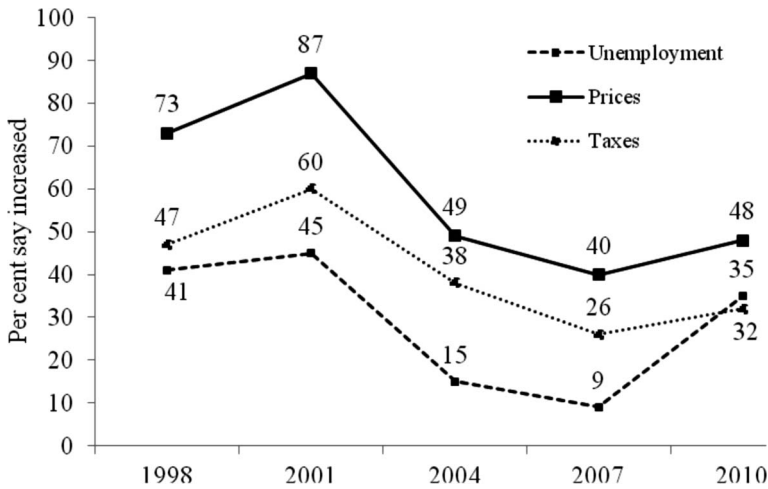


Figure 4. Perceptions of Economic Changes Since Previous Election, 1998–2010.

Note: ‘Thinking back to the Federal election in 2007, when Kevin Rudd won against John Howard, would you say that since then the following have increased or fallen?’

Sources: 1998–2010 Australian Election Studies.

we would expect that as a consequence, neither leader would have gained a particular electoral advantage over the other. In the next section we examine the effect of the economy on the vote.

The Economy

The Australian economy has grown consistently since the recession of the early 1990s. Since September 1991, the economy has grown in each successive quarter, with the exception of three quarters. This is the longest period of sustained economic growth for at least a century and exceeds that experienced by any other developed country (Battellino 2010). The economy also weathered the global financial crisis with relatively few difficulties. In the 2008–09 financial year the economy grew by 1.2 per cent, the highest of any OECD country. The January 2010 unemployment rate of 5.3 per cent was lower than that of any major advanced economy, with the exception of Japan, and remained below 6 per cent during the whole period of the GFC.

Voters have responded to these benign economic conditions by maintaining their concern with health and Medicare rather than with the management of the economy, as Table 4 illustrated earlier. To an important extent, then, the Labor government had not received any substantial credit from voters for navigating through the GFC. In part, this is because Australian voters tend to view economic conditions as being contingent on international factors rather than on government policy (Mughan 1987). Many voters may have felt that the resources boom, fuelled by the spectacular economic growth of China and India and therefore something out of the government’s control, saved Australia from being unduly affected by the GFC.

Since 1998 the AES has been tracking whether voters considered that unemployment, taxes and prices had increased or decreased since the previous

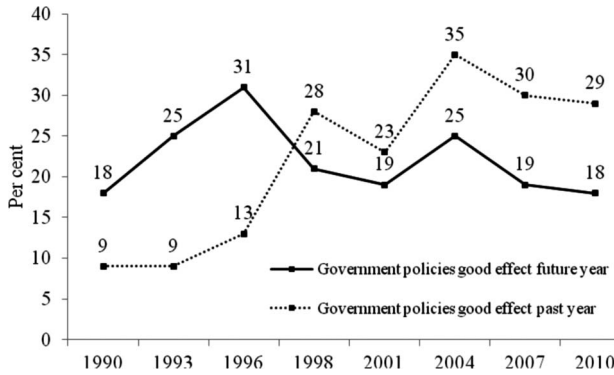


Figure 5. Government Effect on the Economy, 1990–2010.

Note: ‘Compared with 12 months ago, would you say that the Federal government’s policies have had a good effect, a bad effect, or that they really have not made much difference to the financial situation of your household? And what effect do you think they have had on the general economic situation in Australia as a whole? Compared to now, what do you think the financial situation of your household will be in 12 months time? And what do you think the general economic situation in Australia as a whole will be in 12 months time?’

Sources: 1990–2010 Australian Election Studies.

election. As Figure 4 shows, since 2004 a minority have believed that these measures of poor economic performance have increased. In 2001, for example, at the time of the 2000–01 economic slowdown, 45 per cent believed that unemployment had increased. By contrast, in 2007, at the height of the resources boom, just 9 per cent took that view. Of course, that proportion increased in 2010 although the absolute increase in unemployment was relatively small.¹⁷ Compared to previous periods, voters see relatively few changes in the economic conditions that could affect their everyday living standards.

Another indicator of the changing economic sentiments of the electorate is how far voters view government policy as having influenced economic conditions over the past year, and their expectations of the government’s impact on the economy over the future year. Figure 5 shows that in the 1990s voters generally saw the government as increasingly likely to have had a positive effect on the economy over the previous year, but they were much more optimistic about the government’s impact in the coming year. From 1998 onwards, with better economic performance, that relationship has reversed, and voters were more favourable to the government’s impact on the economy over the past year. Better economic conditions clearly caused voters to change their views about the government’s impact on the economy, and to attribute some of the growth to government policies. Voters however were less optimistic about what impact the government would have in the future year.

Between 2007 and 2010 – with the global financial crisis intervening – there was virtually no change in public opinion towards the government’s effects on the performance of the economy. The Labor government’s response to the GFC, in the form of the massive stimulus package, helped to dampen the effects

¹⁷In January 2009 the unemployment rate stood at 4.5 per cent; it peaked at 5.7 per cent in mid-2009, and fell back to under 5 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010).

of the crisis on the domestic economy. However, this clearly did not benefit the government electorally, to the chagrin of many Labor strategists. Part of the explanation may have been the trenchant opposition to the package by the Liberals, who argued that it was too large and that it would take many years to pay off. Tony Abbott, for example, asked ‘why do you need a program that lasts longer than the First World War to save jobs in a crisis that lasted, in its intense phase, for just eight weeks?’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2010). Another explanation may have been that voters had not directly experienced the crisis that Labor claimed to have avoided; as Karl Bitar, the national secretary, argued, ‘We protected people’s jobs which they didn’t lose and we kept Australia out of a recession we didn’t feel the impact of’ (Bitar 2010).

Australia’s favourable economic performance since the early 1990s has meant that the economy has rarely been a central concern for voters. Unemployment was last a serious concern for voters in the 1993 election, and interest rates in 1990. Taxation has not been a major concern since 1998, when the Liberal government proposed the introduction of the goods and services tax. In principle, the GFC and the associated worries over unemployment and stagnant economic growth should have made the economy a central issue in the 2010 election. However, the resources boom reduced the GFC’s impact on the broader economy. As a result, the economy had relatively few electoral consequences in 2010, either positive or negative, for the major parties. In particular, Labor gained little credit for the policies it put in place to deal with the crisis, and the Liberals did not have to propose an alternative suite of policies. In the final section we examine the net effect of the leaders on the vote.

Evaluating the Explanations

There were, therefore, a variety of factors working to influence the outcome of the 2010 election. Most obviously, the positions of the parties on the policy issues that were discussed during the campaign and voters’ evaluations of the party leaders were likely to have been major factors. The previous section has suggested that how voters viewed the economy was likely to have been a minor influence. Other factors, such as leadership change and the issue of the timing and manner of Kevin Rudd’s replacement with Julia Gillard may well have influenced which party voters decided to support. This section evaluates the relative importance of these factors on the probability that a voter changed their vote between the 2007 and 2010 elections.

Since our interest is in those voters who shifted their votes, we seek to identify the reasons why certain groups of voters defected from their choice at the previous 2007 election. In the flow of the vote presented earlier in Table 1, we identified three main movements of voters: from Labor to the Coalition; from Labor to the Greens; and from the Coalition to Labor. In order to evaluate why these voters changed their preference, Table 7 calculates three logistic regression equations which predict defection.¹⁸ This approach provides a more direct

¹⁸The independent variables in Table 7 are coded as follows. Issues: 5 = issue extremely important and prefers Labor, 4 = issue quite or not very important and prefers Labor, 3 = no difference, 2 = issue quite or not very important and prefers Coalition, 1 = issue extremely important and prefers Coalition. Leaders’ debate: 5 = Gillard much better, 4 = Gillard better, 3 = no difference,

Table 7. Evaluating the Explanations

	Parameter Estimates (Standard Errors)		
	Labor to Coalition	Labor to Greens	Coalition to Labor
<i>Issues (prefers Labor policy)</i>			
Health, Medicare	—ns—	—ns—	.50** (.21)
Management of the economy	—ns—	—ns—	.58* (.27)
Education	-.35** (.13)	-.35** (.11)	—ns—
Global warming	—ns—	—ns—	.67* (.34)
Environment	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Taxation	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Interest rates	—ns—	—ns—	.49* (.26)
Refugees, asylum seekers	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Environment	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Unemployment	—ns—	—ns—	.65** (.28)
Resources tax	-.31* (.14)	—ns—	—ns—
Industrial relations	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Population policy	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Gillard better in leaders' debate	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Disapproved of Rudd dismissal	—ns—	.52** (.20)	-1.11* (.50)
<i>Leaders' Ratings</i>			
Gillard	-.39** (.10)	-.23** (.07)	.55** (.22)
Rudd	—ns—	-.21** (.07)	—ns—
Abbott	.32** (.08)	—ns—	-.27* (.15)
Brown	—ns—	.42** (.07)	-.40* (.17)
<i>Economy</i>			
Performed better past 12 months	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Government good effect on economy	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Economy better next 12 months	.61* (.27)	.47* (.20)	—ns—
Government good effect on economy next 12 months	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Unemployment increased since 2007	—ns—	—ns—	-1.10** (.41)
Prices increased since 2007	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Taxes increased since 2007	—ns—	—ns—	.97* (.44)
<i>Controls</i>			
Gender	—ns—	—ns—	—ns—
Age	—ns—	-.02* (.01)	—ns—
Constant	3.47	-3.03	-8.04
Nagelkerke R-squared	.65	.37	.75
(N)	(805)	(779)	(768)

**significant at $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Logistic regression analysis showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting voter defection in the specified direction. See footnote 18 for details of coding. Only effects for variables significant at $p < .05$ or better are shown.

Source: 2010 Australian Election Study.

2=Abbott better, 1=Abbott much better. Leadership change: 4=strongly disapprove, 3=disapprove, 2=approve, 1=strongly approve. Leaders' ratings are scored from 0 to 10. Economy performed better: 5=lot better, 4=little better, 3=about the same, 2=little worse, 1=much worse. Government good effect: 3=good effect, 2=not much difference, 1=bad effect. Unemployment, prices, taxation increased: 5=increased a lot, 4=increased a little, 3=stayed the same, 2=fallen a little, 1=fallen a lot. The correlation matrix was inspected for possible multicollinearity between the independent variables, but the highest inter-item correlation was 0.61, suggesting that this was not a problem in this case.

measure of why voters changed their party preferences, compared to simply modelling their vote in the 2010 election.

The results show that for voters who defected from Labor, either to the Coalition or to the Greens, leadership was the major motivation for their change. For those moving to the Coalition, an unfavourable rating of Gillard and a favourable rating of Abbott were important, with Gillard's impact being slightly greater than that of Abbott. Among previous Labor voters moving to the Greens, a favourable rating of Bob Brown was by far the most important leadership factor, with a dislike of both Gillard and Rudd being a much less important element in their decision. Although as we saw in Table 6 Brown was the least popular of the party leaders across the electorate, he held a particular attraction for Labor defectors. The campaign issues were second in importance for both groups of Labor defectors. For those defecting to the Coalition, preferring Coalition policies on education and industrial relations was important. For those defecting to the Greens, the main issue was education.

The importance of education to both groups of Labor defectors is significant, particularly those defecting to the Greens, who might have been thought to have been motivated by climate change and the environment. While explanations for this finding are speculative, the concern over education may reflect the controversial management of Labor's Building the Education Revolution, with allegations of over-spending and poor workmanship on buildings. Julia Gillard was also personally associated with the introduction of league tables for schools' performance, a policy that was strongly opposed by the teaching unions. Moreover, most teaching unions, despite their historic ties with Labor, viewed Green education policies more favourably (NSW Teachers' Federation 2010).¹⁹ Evidence in support of these interpretations is that among teachers, twice the proportion of former Labor supporters defected to the Greens compared to the electorate as a whole.²⁰

There is a different pattern among Coalition voters who defected to Labor. Among this group of voters, their evaluations of the issues rather than the leaders was the predominant motivation, with health and Medicare and unemployment emerging as significant. In each case, these defectors preferred Labor policy. Surprisingly, Coalition policies on refugees or on the resources tax did not benefit them electorally. While leadership was less of a factor among this group, a favourable view of Julia Gillard was much more important than dislike of Tony Abbott; indeed, none of the other leadership ratings are statistically significant. Was Gillard's gender a factor in attracting votes from the Coalition to Labor? The evidence suggests that it was: when the equation is estimated separately for men and women, the parameter estimate for Gillard's rating among women is more than twice the size of the same estimate among men.²¹

¹⁹For example, the NSW Teachers' Federation, in evaluating the parties' policies on education, said: 'The Greens continue to be the political party that best supports public education across a range of policy areas' (NSW Teachers' Federation 2010).

²⁰Table 1 shows that among the electorate as a whole, 12 per cent of 2007 Labor voters defected to the Greens in 2010. However, among teachers (defined as primary, secondary and tertiary education teachers), 23 per cent defected to the Greens in 2010.

²¹The estimate is 1.62 (SE = 0.85, $p = .056$) for women, and 0.62 (SE = 0.50, $p = .215$) for men.

In addition to leaders' ratings and campaign issues, several other factors were important. Disapproval of Rudd's dismissal from office was important for Labor defection to the Greens, and (to a lesser extent) approval of the dismissal motivated those moving from the Coalition to Labor. However, the issue, while important for some voters, was less important than either leaders' evaluations or their views on particular policies. There is no evidence that the leaders' debate shifted votes. Nor was the economy especially important, confirming the view that there is only a weak link between government popularity and economic performance. Finally, gender did not emerge as a factor for any of the three groups (beyond the effect already mentioned), and age had a small effect on defections from Labor to the Greens.

The results confirm the predominant influence of the leaders on the election outcome. Of the two main leaders, Gillard was the marginally stronger electoral asset, particularly in attracting former Coalition female voters. However, Gillard's advantage as an electoral attraction over Abbott was not substantial. For the Greens, Bob Brown was by far their greatest electoral asset in attracting Labor defectors. While issues were important in motivating defection, any substantial influence was confined mainly to those moving from the Coalition to Labor, where health and unemployment were the primary concerns. For Labor voters moving to either the Coalition or the Greens, education was a significant factor. In summary, longer term factors were more important than short-term influences, and leadership was more important than the election issues.

Conclusion

While the 2010 election was distinctive in a number of ways, it did not attract a high level of interest from voters, at least compared to previous elections. It has become popular to blame the media for this lack of interest and their alleged tendency to 'dumb down' policy debate (see Tanner 2011). However, in many respects it is the parties that choreograph the election campaign, and substitute low-risk, largely banal events for vigorous debate and spontaneous meetings with ordinary voters. The emphasis of the electronic media on the leader means that one slip can undermine a whole campaign.²²

The 2010 election confirms the importance of leaders in attracting defectors from the other parties. As Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard was successful in gaining disproportionate support from women who had voted for the Coalition in 2007. However, her advantage over Tony Abbott was not substantial; both leaders were not especially popular, and if either of them had faced any of the more popular leaders of past elections, then leadership could have been decisive in determining the outcome. It is tempting to speculate whether the more popular Kevin Rudd, if he had remained as Prime Minister, would have served Labor better in the election. Certainly the manner of his dismissal cost Labor defections to the Greens. Bob Brown's popularity among Labor defectors to the Greens shows how effective leadership can be in

²²The British Labour Party learnt this lesson when Gordon Brown, in the privacy of his car and not knowing that he was still being recorded, called a lifelong Labour voter he had just met 'bigoted' for her views about immigrants (Wring and Ward 2010).

motivating defection. However, for the Greens it poses the unenviable problem of putting in place a succession strategy for Brown.

As in other recent elections, the election issues were very much associated with health and education, rather than with economic management, unemployment or taxation. The strong performance of the Australian economy over an extended period, coupled with the belief that government policies can have only a limited impact on economic conditions, in effect made the economy a second-order election issue. The 2010 election was also notable for the issues that did not emerge as important. Despite the Coalition's emphasis on border protection, they neither gained nor lost votes on the issue. Labor lost a small number of votes based on its failed resources tax, but the impact was far less than many Labor strategists had feared earlier in the year. And not least, the Greens gained votes not on the environment or on climate change, but from disaffection with Labor's policies on education. Such a result may reflect a maturing of Green policies, but it also presents a dilemma in how the party can move beyond its environmental and essentially protest vote appeal.

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