The Opinion-Agenda Linkage:

How Letters From the Public to the Prime Minister Impact the Policy Agenda

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Many of the empirical chapters have been presented as conference papers at domestic and international conferences in 2022 and 2023. An early version of Chapter 6 was published as *"Dear John…": Letters from the Public to Prime Minister Howard,* with the John Howard Prime Ministerial Library (Casey, 2022). I am the sole author, and it has been substantially revised for inclusion in this thesis. An early version of Chapter 5 was presented at a conference with Intifar Chowdhury. I am the lead author of that paper and have substantially revised the material for inclusion in this thesis.

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Abstract

Every year, the Australian prime minister (PM) receives around 150,000 pieces of correspondence. The proportion of Australians who report contacting a politician is increasing, with similar patterns evident across the world. Between 1996 and 2000, Australians wrote pleading for the government to intervene in the humanitarian crisis in East Timor, others argued against a second Sydney airport at Badgerys Creek, and avid gardeners sought funding for Australia's bid to host the World Horticultural Festival. People write to politicians seeking to have an influence and to make a difference – this link between the public and political leaders is crucial for democracy.

Political leaders have an existential need to understand the breadth and depth of public opinion. How much does any particular issue matter? Will it change people's votes? For that reason, public opinion polls that only identify where the majority opinion sits may not be as useful for political leaders, because they do not disclose issue salience or intensity. Unprompted expressions of opinion (such as phone calls, correspondence and protests) may therefore be particularly valuable for political leaders to understand what matters to their constituents. This may mean that political leaders are responsive to the opinion expressed by the 'attentive public', as it may indicate that the individual's electoral behaviour can be influenced.

To investigate whether political leaders are responsive to opinion expressed by the attentive public, I examine letters sent from the public to the Australian PM, Mr John Howard, for the period 1996-2000. I develop a dataset of the topic and volume of letters to Mr Howard, on a fortnightly basis, coded consistently with the Comparative Agendas Project (which provides an internationally consistent coding system for policy agenda research). I compare the topics of the letters to the topics of Mr Howard's speeches, interviews and press releases ('speeches'), to see if these are congruent with, or responsive to, the topics of the letters. In addition, I investigate an alternative proposition, whether the letters are responsive to Mr Howard's speeches and other government actions, which would demonstrate that the political elite are setting the public agenda. I also rely on extensive interviews with Mr Howard and senior staff in the prime minister's office (PMO), and detailed archival research, to understand how these letters were used by Mr Howard and his staff.

My study finds that there are two broad types of letters. First, letters expressing an opinion, and second, letters seeking help/information. The first group of letters are predominantly written by partisans, who are unlikely to change their vote. Given the Australian electoral

system (compulsory voting; preferential voting; and majoritarian electoral system), this means there is little incentive for political leaders to be responsive to this cohort. My study also finds no evidence of statistically significant links between the topics of the letters and the topics of Mr Howard's speeches, in either a responsiveness, or elite agenda-setting direction. However, when analysed qualitatively, for the vast majority of topics, the letters are a response to an announcement by the government, usually opposing a new government decision.

I contribute to scientific knowledge in two important ways. First, by analysing the topics of the letters, I open a new empirical domain for the study of public opinion and responsiveness, to better reflect how the public actually expresses that opinion and how the political elite actually engage with that opinion. Second, I contribute to the responsiveness literature, by helping to identify circumstances in which political leaders are less likely to be responsive. This reflects our existing understanding that institutions and political systems change the level of responsiveness to mass public opinion. The overarching conclusion is that understanding the role letters (and other forms of public opinion) play in creating the linkages between the public and political elite will improve our understanding of responsiveness and the way democracy functions.

List of Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACF	Autocorrelation Function
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AES	Australian Election Study
AFE	Average Feature Entropy
AIC	Akaike Information Criteria
ALP	Australian Labor Party
AOPA	Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association of Australia
APAP	Australian Policy Agendas Project
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APSC	Australian Public Service Commission
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
ANU	Australian National University
BIC	Bayesian Information Criteria
CAP	Comparative Agendas Project
CASA	Civil Aviation Safety Authority
CSES	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DLO	Departmental Liaison Officer
ESB	English Speaking Background
EU	European Union
FOI	Freedom of Information
G20	Group of 20
GST	Goods and Services Tax
IOC	International Olympics Committee
IVF	In-Vitro Fertilisation
LDA	Latent Dirichlet Allocation
MCU	Ministerial Correspondence Unit (within PM&C)
MP	Member of Parliament
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NLA	National Library of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
NESB	Non English Speaking Background
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares regression
PM	Prime Minister
PM&C	The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PMD	The Prime Minister's Department
PMO	The Prime Minister's Office
PS	Postscript
TOST	Two one-sided t-tests
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSW	University of New South Wales
USA	United States of America

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Chapter 1 Introduction

> *Dear Mr Howard…*
>
> *Please apologise to the stolen generations[1]… This is the defining issue of our generation. It is a matter of decency….*
>
> *PS You once stood under our Hills hoist when collecting Melanie from a Sunday School pool party we organised. I can't sense the same decency now. I want to. What happened?[2]*

Introduction

On 6 November 1997, Mr Robin Ford[3] decided enough was enough, and he needed to express his views to the Australian prime minister on Indigenous[4] reconciliation, an issue he considered "the defining issue of our generation" (NAA: M4326, 496). He was not alone. The prime minister, Mr John Howard, received more than 22,000 letters on a range of Indigenous issues between March 1996 and December 2000;[5] promoting reconciliation, opposing cuts to Indigenous services, or expressing concern about Indigenous deaths in custody. This letter was one of 170,000 letters received by Mr Howard that financial year (PM&C, 1998a). However, we do not know who writes these sorts of letters. What happens to those letters? Do they have any impact? Political leaders need to be (or at least be seen to be) responsive (to some degree) to public opinion if they seek to be re-elected.

The literature shows that people seek to express their political opinions in a variety of ways, most importantly through the ballot box. Between elections, voters express their opinions through protests, letters to the editor, communal action, and by contacting their representatives. Each of these actions is an attempt to be heard, to change policy, change political opinion and change the distribution of benefits in society. Political leaders seek to listen to this range of public opinion. They know that their electoral future depends on, at least to some extent, listening to, engaging with, and responding to, this opinion. However, there is

---

[1] The "stolen generation" refers to the generation of Indigenous Australian children who were subject to the Commonwealth government policy of removing "part-Aboriginal" children from their parents. This went on from around 1910 until the 1970s, and impacted between 10% and 33% of Indigenous children.

[2] National Archives of Australia (NAA): M4326, 496.

[3] When quoting letters, I have used the author's name as per the original letter (rather than pseudonyms) because the letters are public documents in the National Archives of Australia. Ethics approval for use of personal letters was given by the ANU Ethics Committee, ref 2021/101.

[4] Language and terminology around Australia's first peoples has changed since the period covered in this research. I adopt the terminology "Indigenous" except when directly quoting. During the period covered in this research, the term "Aboriginal" was more common.

[5] Data access limitations mean that my study is limited to the end of 2000, rather than Mr Howard's full term as prime minister. See Chapter 3 for more details.

no clear, unambiguous monolith of ‘public opinion’ which is easy to understand and follow. Instead, every decision is likely to be endorsed by some, opposed by others, and probably totally ignored by even more. Even knowing who supports or opposes the decision, doesn’t necessarily translate to voting behaviour, making the incentives to be responsive distinctly unclear. How intensely do these potential voters hold their views? Is a specific issue important enough to change their vote? While these questions are likely to guide political actions, the academic literature has struggled to find a way to adequately measure opinion intensity in the context of responsiveness research.

While there is extensive research on elite responsiveness to public opinion, both in Australia (Martin et al., 2014) and internationally (Breunig et al., 2022; Dassonneville et al., 2021; Hakhverdian, 2012; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Manza & Cook, 2002; Page, 1994; Stimson et al., 1995; Thomas, 2011), there are no answers to the questions I posed above. These questions are what this thesis seeks to address. This is important because through understanding the extent that these letters have (or have not) affected/influenced the political agenda, we can better understand what drives elite responsiveness and whether political leaders are responsive to those with the loudest voices, or the median voter.

I argue that letters from the public provide a practical measure of issue intensity (Hill, 2022) that helps political leaders understand which issues are provoking the greatest intensity of feelings for voters, which may in turn translate to the issues that influence voting decisions. This helps political leaders address the intensity problem (Dahl, 2006). However, I find that the people who participate in politics in this manner are disproportionately partisans; are unlikely to change who they vote for; and are less likely to occupy the political centre. In countries with voluntary voting, this group may be important, because responsiveness to this cohort may impact their willingness to turn out and vote. However, Australia’s compulsory voting and compulsory preferential system, significantly reduces the institutional incentives to be responsive to this particular cohort.

Individuals have been writing to their leaders for centuries. Initially conceived as “petitioning the king,” there is evidence of such activities as far back as the 11th century, and was established as a “right” as early as the Magna Carta in 1215 (Smith, 1985). By 1680, the House of Commons had resolved that people had the absolute right to petition for the redress of grievances, as this was fundamental to individual liberty (Smith, 1985). This right made its trans-Atlantic passage via the first amendment to the US Constitution, which established a right to “petition” separately from the right to “speech”. While not explicitly included in the

Australian Constitution, parliamentary privilege covers the provision of information by a constituent to their parliamentary representatives, for the purposes of their parliamentary duties, which includes writing letters to your representative (Macreadie & Gardiner, 2010). Similarly, the Australian implied right to freedom of political communication has been held to include private mail by members of the public, where they are expressing a political opinion (McLoughlin & Jose, 2017). This makes letter-writing an important institutional aspect of Australian democracy.

Historians have identified that this genre of writing letters to leaders exists across countries, time periods and regime type – people wrote to absolute monarchs, dictators and other authoritarian leaders as well as democratic leaders (Lyons, 2015). In the Australian context people have been writing to our political leaders for as long as our Australian and colonial archives have records (including, in 1846 a group of Palawa[6] men who wrote to Queen Victoria to complain about the appointment of a particular superintendent (Bongiorno, 2022)). A radio address in 1932 sought to explain the role of the Prime Minister's Department (PMD), including the importance of correspondence from members of the public:

> *It is the target aimed at by correspondents from almost every country in the world who are of an inquiring turn of mind regarding Australian affairs, and knowledge seekers within Australia direct inquiries to the prime minister not only upon matters that come within the ambit of his control but also on subjects ranging from single tax to the blow fly pest; all of which necessitates at least a courteous reply* (NAA: A1209, 1957/6043).

With this background, I examine the relationship between the volume and topic of letters and the topic of Mr Howard's speeches. I find, across a range of different modelling approaches, no evidence of a statistically significant relationship between the letters and the speeches. However, the qualitative data indicates that the individual topics of the letters are mainly driven by government announcements, although this is not evident in the quantitative data. I then explore the unquantifiable impacts that letters can have. I find that the letters were part of the melange of public opinion that Mr Howard heard, and that it was the individual letters, rather than the volume of letters, which have an impact.

This research, therefore, is concerned with understanding who writes these letters, why they write them, and how political leaders engage with them. In doing so, it seeks to extend current thinking about political responsiveness.

[6] Palawa are the Indigenous people of the Australian state of Tasmania.

Section 1.1 of this chapter sets out the motivation for the current research. Section 1.2 explains the problem that this research seeks to address, and my argument. Section 1.3 gives an overview of the methodology and finally, section 1.4 runs through the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Motivation

The idea for this research developed slowly over my 15-year public service career, which preceded my academic career. I joined the public service as a graduate in the Department of the Prime Minster and Cabinet (PM&C), in 2005. Mr Howard was prime minister, and I worked across a range of areas and policy issues. One of the first types of ‘products’ that I was taught was ‘ministerial correspondence’ – writing letters back to members of the public, who had written to the prime minister. As a young, eager, idealistic public servant, keen to change the world, this hardly seemed like a glamourous job – especially as most of the time, I was required to use standard words. Well before I had started as a public servant, I was already aware of the cynicism that public servants display towards letters from the public, from years of watching *Yes Minister:*

> *James Hacker: What's an official reply?*
>
> *Bernard Woolley: It just says "The Minister has asked me to thank you for your letter"; then we say something like "The matter is under consideration", or even, if we feel so inclined, "under active consideration."*
>
> *James Hacker: What's the difference?*
>
> *Bernard Woolley: Well, “under consideration” means we've lost the file; “under active consideration” means we're trying to find it (Jay & Lynn, 1980).*

While I do not recall losing files, as my career developed, I saw the range of functions these letters can play in public policy, politics and public administration. I read and responded to letters from people in desperate need of help, such as parents who couldn’t afford to buy school supplies after the abolition of the Schoolkids Bonus ("Parents will lose schoolkids bonus regardless of who wins the election," 2016). Some of these letters were heart-rending, and I occasionally wondered about putting a personal cheque into some of the responses. Other letters revealed darker parts of Australia, including letters claiming that halal certification funded terrorism (Hussein, 2015). In other instances, letters complaining about problems with their Centrelink (social welfare) payments resulted in individual problems being found and addressed.

There were also the very rare occasions where a letter would prompt genuine policy discussions and proposals for policy change, particularly when the letter identified an unintended consequence of a policy. I also saw the impact that a high volume of letters, and other forms of public opinion, could have on ministerial offices, which often appeared to be the 'politician's syllogism' – "Something must be done, this is something, therefore we must do it" (Jay & Lynn, 1988). I was concerned about who that benefitted. It appeared that certain groups (such as self-funded retirees), who had the resources (time, money and political capital) to write letters were getting more political attention, notwithstanding their actual needs. On the other side, there were groups who may have been in greater objective need (such as homeless unemployed youths), who were not writing letters, usually because they lacked the necessary resources. It appeared to me that the lack of letters impacted on governments' willingness to act. While unsurprising and reflecting the consistent findings of the political participation literature (Verba & Nie, 1987; Verba et al., 1978; Verba et al., 1995), I was normatively concerned.

Over the course of my career, I spent thousands of hours reading thousands of letters. These experiences led me to wonder who is actually writing to the prime minister? What are they writing about? What impact do they have? While I had a range of personal experiences and anecdotes, there were no quantitative studies of these letters. In some ways this is surprising, given the importance ministers appeared to place on these letters and the amount of time public servants spent on them. On the other hand, reliable data has previously not been accessible, making detailed research impossible.

My experience and exposure to public opinion made me, unashamedly, a 'democratic elitist', with low expectations of the quality of public opinion, or the ability of the public to work through policy issues (Converse, 2006; Levy, 2018). The opinions expressed in these letters were often unsophisticated and intolerant, reflecting base conspiracy theories. I considered the public service (of which I was a part) to be the result of assignment of responsibility to govern to "the wisest and most virtuous… who will then serve as independent trustees" (Krouse, 1982, p. 524). This isn't to say that I consider this to be the normatively best political arrangement, merely that it is the only realistic option in modern large and complex societies (Best & Higley, 2010). These issues about whether, normatively, political leaders should be responsive to the type of public opinion that I saw, feeds into broader normative debates about the quality of public policy and public administration. To what extent should political leaders be responsive to public opinion? Are political leaders becoming too 'knee-jerk' in their responsiveness? These normative questions also drove me towards this empirical investigation, hoping that

I would find that political leaders were sufficiently ‘wise’ to not “yield to the impulse of sudden and violent passions” (Hamilton et al., 1961, p. 379).

When I turned to the literature, I discovered that political scientists had mostly ignored these letters. There are some studies on these letters by historians (Lyons, 2021); historical qualitative studies (Sussmann, 1963); or popular books (Laskas, 2018). However, there was nothing quantitative, or anything that sought to link the topics of letters into broader political or institutional systems, or theoretical frameworks such as public opinion, political participation or responsiveness. It is these frameworks that I engage with in this thesis.

1.2 Research Gap, Puzzle and Argument

This thesis seeks to provide both a descriptive and causal contribution, in that I seek to answer both a ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions (Gerring, 2012). The central research gap is a lack of knowledge about letters from members of the public to political leaders. This creates, to begin with, a vital descriptive gap in political science. The lack of descriptive knowledge of both how letters are managed within PM&C and PMO, and what the letters are about, hampers our ability to develop causal explanations, which means our first step needs to be some level of descriptive analysis (King et al., 2021). This is a significant gap in our knowledge, given: the volume of letters; the time and effort that people take to write; letter-writing is likely to be the most common way of direct communications between people and their representatives; and the existing international research that shows that legislators pay attention to letters from their constituents (Dexter, 1956; Henderson et al., 2023; Kingdon, 1967; Miller & Stokes, 1963).

Letters, unlike opinion polls, play an important function in a democratic system of government. Dahl (1997, p. 109) lists “effective participation” as one of the criteria of polyarchy. He suggests that “one must have an adequate opportunity… for expressing his or her preferences… citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities for placing questions on the agenda.” This makes the study of letters particularly important, as it helps us to explore the issues that the public wants to put on the agenda. The sheer volume, and niche issues, which come through in the letters demonstrate the “variety of minorities” that vie for attention, consistent with the assumptions of polyarchy (Dahl, 2008, p. 132).

The second gap is an understanding of who writes these letters. While the Australian Election Study (AES), and similar international surveys, regularly ask whether individuals have contacted a government official (Cameron & McAllister, 2020), it generally does not break down this data by the type of contact (expressing a political opinion vs seeking

help/information). This is important, given these two categories are theoretically very different (Claggett & Pollock, 2006; Verba & Nie, 1987). Understanding who writes these letters is similarly a significant gap, for the same reasons given above, and also given the importance of understanding the different voice that different segments of the community have (Schlozman et al., 2012).

This then leads to the final research gap that this research seeks to address – what impact do those letters have on policy? Significant work has been done (mainly internationally) on the impact of mass public opinion on government action, including the rhetorical agenda, the legislative agenda and government budgets (see Chapter 3 for references). However, much less work has been done on the impact of different segments of public opinion. These research questions are summarised in Table 1-1. Together, these empirical questions have significant normative implications.

Table 1-1 Research questions

Core research question	**How do letters from the public to the prime minister impact the public agenda?**
Sub-question 1	Who writes letters to the prime minister?
Sub-question 2	What are the letters to the prime minister about?
Sub-question 3	How does the prime minister engage with the letters?
Sub-question 4	What impact do the letters have on policy?

Source: Author

This research puzzle is one small cog in the overall system of democratic representation and responsiveness and quality of democracy research. The policy linkage between the public and the representative are merely “one component” of the broader representative relationship (Eulau & Karps, 1977, p. 247). Other key aspects, including descriptive representation and symbolic representation, while important, are beyond the scope of this research. My focus is on the policy linkage.

Much of the empirical responsiveness literature does not specifically address the normative questions about responsiveness. Sabl (2015, p. 346) criticises much empirical responsiveness research as assuming that “responsiveness [is the] key marker of democratic quality,” and that more responsiveness is automatically better, while Hänni (2017) notes that a focus on responsiveness to the majority, or median voter, risks creating tension amongst minorities. There are certain policy areas that, normatively, should have some level of immunity to responsiveness. These would include those areas that are foundational to democratic processes, but also individual and minorities rights (e.g., religious, ethnic, linguistic or gender

diverse communities). This is not to say that responsiveness *per se* is not a normative good, but rather "to prize a certain amount of responsiveness… is not to say that the more responsiveness the better." (Sabl, 2015, p. 348). As Madison suggested, policy should reflect the "cool and deliberate sense of the community" (Hamilton et al., 1961, p. 384), which would mean that any level of responsiveness should be measured in years, rather than fortnights. Thus, it may be considered normatively appropriate for Mr Howard to ignore the fortnightly winds of change evident in the correspondence.

To the extent that Mr Howard, or any representative, deliberately discounts or ignores public opinion, they could be regarded as exercising some level of "trustee" style of representation (Bowler, 2017). Yet, even here, the letters may contribute to other important aspects of democracy, even without any level of responsiveness. Accountability to the public requires that leaders communicate with the public about their actions - "the representative has an obligation to explain" their actions (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 516). Thus, the letters and the responses provide evidence of this accountability and explanations (also called "democratic listening"), which in turn can enhance legitimacy of the system, and acceptance of decisions that the constituent did not support (Dobson, 2012; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017; Fenno, 1978; Grose et al., 2015).

My argument is that, generally speaking, political leaders are likely to be responsive to expressions of public opinion that convey a high intensity of feeling, because this provides an indication of the likelihood that that issue could impact the voting behaviour of the person expressing that opinion. I argue that letter-writing conveys significantly greater intensity of feeling than opinions expressed through opinion polls, because of the different costs involved in each form of political participation. This should create an incentive to be responsive to these letters. However, notwithstanding the general incentives for political leaders to be responsive to this form of public opinion, I argue that Australian political leaders have limited political incentives to be responsive to the volume of the letters. This is because these letters are unlikely to either come from, or represent the views of, the median voter; instead, they come from partisans, whose votes are highly unlikely to change.

The Australian political context of compulsory voting; compulsory preferential voting; and single-member electorates;[7] all combine to ensure that this letter-writing cohort is not a high political priority. Given that Australian political leaders do not need to worry about motivating

[7] Not all electoral systems across Australia are single-member electorates or have compulsory preferential voting. However, the House of Representatives is single-member electorates and voters are instructed to number all boxes.

their base to turnout and vote, they are instead incentivised to be responsive to the median voter, who is more likely to change their vote between the major parties. Therefore, it is unlikely that Australian political leaders will be responsive to this cohort of the public.

The findings open a range of areas for further work. In relation to the topics of the letters, further research is needed about why some high-profile political issues generated significant mail, while others of apparently equal significance and profile, generate very little mail. Why do economic issues, that regularly top opinion polls on 'Most Important Issue' attract so few letters? Similarly, why do some niche, minor issues, which had very limited media coverage generate comparatively high volumes of letters? In relation to the absence of responsiveness, this study is focused solely on one prime minister in one jurisdiction. As such, I cannot rule out that these findings are unique to Mr Howard. Comparative studies, both across time involving other prime ministers, and across jurisdictions would provide a more robust test of my findings. Similarly, this study does not include letters to local representatives, ministers or shadow ministers/leader of the opposition, or consider why individuals may choose to write to one part of government or another. My study is also limited to the responsiveness of the prime minister's agenda. It is possible that the volume of letters had other impacts, perhaps in the substance of the policy, even if not reflected in the prime minister's speeches.

Another unexplored aspect is the impact of the rise of email and social media, which is radically transforming citizen-initiated contact (Thomas & Streib, 2003). The Australian prime minister did not have a publicly advertised email contact until late 2000, thus almost all of the period in this study excluded email contact. It is possible that the dynamics of citizen-initiated contact has changed. Certainly, the underpinning theoretical assumption that writing a letter demonstrated a level of intensity of feeling may not be valid in relation to email. Mr Kevin Rudd was the first Australian prime minister with a Twitter or Facebook presence, in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Over the 15 years since, social media has developed in a very different manner to 'traditional' letters and emails. I would suggest that writers of letters and emails continue to expect a response, they expect a dialogue. While people on social media who tag or mention a political leader do not necessarily expect a response from political leaders (Tromble, 2018) - it is a monologic shout, notwithstanding the technology's inherent dialogic capabilities. Throughout my public service experience, there was never any expectation of engaging with, or responding to, social media posts.

There are also two areas that this study largely ignores. First is the role of the public service in reading and drafting responses to these letters. My own experience aligns with the findings

in Chapter 8, that individual letters could identify a lacuna in a policy, or a genuinely unintended outcome. More research could be undertaken to explore when and how these letters can lead to substantive policy changes. Second, is the experience of the letter-writer themselves – do they feel like their letter made a difference? Why do they choose to write on a particular topic, and at a particular time? How dependent are they on being activated by interest groups? Are they satisfied with the response that they received? How does this differ between people who write to express a policy opinion compared to those who write to seek help/information on a particular personal issue?

1.3 Case Selection and Methodology

The detailed methodology is set out in Chapter 3. Here, I briefly outline my case selection and methodological approach to addressing the research question.

The case selection is Australia, during the period 1996 to 2000 (with one exception, relating to the AES, explained below). Australia is a federal system, with a parliamentary system of government, with the House of Representatives being elected on a single-member electorate basis (Farrell & McAllister, 2006). During the period under study, the Australian political and economic landscape was stable, with consistent growth, low unemployment and low inflation (Cater, 2015). Mr Howard was prime minister from 1996 until 2007, making him Australia's second longest-serving prime minister. The Australian party landscape is stable, with two major party groupings. The first is the social-democratic Australian Labor Party (ALP), which was formed in the 1890s and has held government for approximately a third of Australia's history. The non-ALP groupings coalesced around the Liberal Party of Australia (Liberals), which was formed in 1944, and the agrarian National Party of Australia (the Nationals). Since 1946, the Liberals and the Nationals have maintained a near-permanent coalition, and in Australian political parlance they are simply referred to as 'the Coalition'.[8] Since the Liberals were founded, the Coalition have held government for approximately 60% of the time. Since Mr Howard left office, no prime minister has served more than four years.[9] This makes Mr Howard's period particularly well suited to analysis, as there are no changes of government, or changes of prime minster, to account for. The research period also excludes the significant change in communication methods brought on by email.

[8] Throughout this thesis I will refer to 'the Coalition', except when quoting.

[9] These statistics in this paragraph were accurate at the time of writing, in February 2024.

I take a mixed methods approach, first a detailed quantitative study of the relationship between the volume of letters per subject and Mr Howard's speeches, interviews and media appearances on those subjects. The main independent variable is the volume of letters per topic per fortnight, based on regular briefs that Mr Howard received from PM&C, from the National Archives of Australia (NAA). This is the first time such data has been available, allowing me to address this research puzzle in a detailed, thorough manner. The main dependent variable is the topics of Mr Howard's speeches, which I have topic modelled against the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) codes. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and binary logistic regression is used to model the relationships between the two, along with Spearman and Pearson correlations.

Second, a qualitative study, based on interviews with Mr Howard, key staff within the PMO and within PM&C and detailed archival research to track how ministerial correspondence was managed and moved through PM&C and the prime minister's office. This aspect of the research allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the causal mechanisms that may, or may not, cause a relationship between the volume of letters and Mr Howard's speeches. It enables detailed process training of how both the letters, and the briefs, were seen and used within Mr Howard's office.

Finally, the AES (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a; Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al., 2019; Jones, McAllister, & Gow, 2019; McAllister et al., 2022) and similar existing datasets are used to further study the types of people who write to political leaders to express a political opinion. This is used to explore hypotheses about the level of political incentives Mr Howard had to respond to the letters.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The thesis examines who wrote to Mr Howard; what they wrote about; how Mr Howard and his office engaged with those letters, including whether they impacted the public agenda. The thesis is structured as follows.

In Chapter 2, I set out my theory, connecting this study to broader theories of democracy, explaining the normative importance of the study, drawing from diverse literature on public opinion, political participation and responsiveness. While democracy necessitates a clear link between public opinion and policy, the Schumpeterian focus of liberal democracies necessitates that all policy choices are mediated through choice of leader/party (Schumpeter, 1987). In translating policy preferences to voting behaviour, voters need to determine the level

of salience and intensity of each policy preference. This, in turn, means that responsiveness will also be mediated by leaders' expectations of the weight/intensity that voters place on any particular issue, and the leaders' expectations of how that will translate to choice of leader. To do this, leaders rely on political opinions that are expressed by voters. I then focus on different forms of political participation and theorise that writing to express an opinion is different to writing to seek help/information and develop hypotheses about these two different groups.

Chapter 3 concludes the exploration of theory and existing literature, drawing linkages between democracy, representation, and responsiveness. I show that letters could and should matter in democratic responsiveness, because these letters provide clear evidence of a level of intensity from a segment of the population that is clearly actively engaged and participating in politics. Given the importance to political leaders to understand the salience and intensity of issues, letters provide a useful insight for political leaders. This all points to the possibility of finding some level of responsiveness between the letters and the public agenda. However, this chapter also comes to the theoretical conclusion that Mr Howard had limited political incentives to be responsive to the volume of the letters he received, regardless of broader political incentives to be responsive to public opinion. This is because these letters are, theoretically, unlikely to either come from, or represent the views of, the median voter. The Australian political context means that Australian political leaders are incentivised to be responsive to the median voter, rather than their own political flanks.

I outline the research methodology for this thesis in Chapter 4. This chapter sets out the data sources used in this research. There were a range of data sources that I rely upon for different purposes. First, the material sourced from the NAA, which includes the briefs that contained the fortnightly quantitative analysis of the letters; a range of original letters; and other documentary material that allows me to provide a descriptive analysis of how letters from the public were managed by the prime minister and PM&C. Second, the speeches, which were sourced from existing online datasets; third, the interviews; and finally, the AES. I go through each of these in turn, setting out how the data was obtained, and the methods relating to that data.

In Chapter 5, I present my results by turning to the AES and I examine who writes letters to political leaders to express a political opinion, and who write letters seeking help/information. I find that swing voters are in the centre of the political spectrum; but people who contact politicians to express an opinion are disproportionately unlikely to be in the centre of the political spectrum and are unlikely to change their vote. While those who write seeking

help/information are (unlike opinion letter-writers) much closer to the general population and are closer to the political centre. Therefore, there is a political incentive to respond to this group.

I provide descriptive findings about the history and development of ministerial correspondence systems and processes in PM&C in Chapter 6. I then focus specifically on the Howard government, and show how correspondence was managed, both as an overarching system, ensuring that Mr Howard had visibility of the trends in the volumes and topics, but also examine how individual pieces of correspondence were managed, and were engaged with by Mr Howard or the PMO. This uncovers a previously hidden channel of public opinion, and already begins to show which types of letters were almost immediately ignored, and which were being seen by Mr Howard and his office, and thus had the greatest likelihood of having an impact. I then introduce the topics of the letters themselves, showing that the issues raised differ significantly from what is usually identified as the public's top priority through public opinion polls or surveys. This stark difference between what the public at-large prioritises and the topics of the letters further reduces the incentive to be responsive to these letters.

In Chapter 7, I analyse the topics of Mr Howard's speeches. I then test a range of hypotheses designed to examine whether there was any linkage evident between the topics of the letters and Mr Howard's speeches. First, I examine cross-sectional congruence at quarterly intervals between the first quarter of 1996 and the end of 2000. Using both Pearson and Spearman correlations, the average cross-sectional correlation is close to zero. I find little support for the proposition that, on a cross-sectional basis, Mr Howard's speeches were responsive to the topics of the letters. I then examine whether there is evidence of time-series responsiveness between the letters and Mr Howard's speeches, using both fortnightly and quarterly data. Despite a range of modelling approaches, I am unable to find any support for the hypothesis that the volume of letters on a particular topic impact the topics of Mr Howard's speeches.

I then examine whether the letters are responsive to Mr Howard's speeches, or elite agenda-setting in Chapter 8. Despite a range of modelling approaches, I am unable to find any support for the hypothesis that the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches impact the likelihood of letters being received on that topic. I then look qualitatively at a range of specific topics mentioned in the letters and find that the vast majority of specific topics were in response to announcements by the government – the topics were responsive to elites, rather than the other way around. Finally, I look at other impacts that these letters could have had, including impacting substantive policy; providing a solution to a specific issue; helping political leaders to lead (or

manipulate) public opinion, and as a core part of the democratic linkage between the public and their leaders.

I draw together the findings and discuss their implications in Chapter 9. I suggest that the null findings from the quantitative study can be read as broadly consistent with the existing responsiveness literature: responsiveness decreases when the political incentives decrease (whether because of distance from the next election; electoral margin; or because of the nature of the particular group expressing the opinion), supporting the contingent model of responsiveness (Manza & Cook, 2002). This chapter links these findings back to the normative questions that arise in the earlier chapters and recognises the limitations of this research and identifies areas for future research. My thesis emphasises that to improve our understanding of responsiveness, we must continue to explore other types of public opinion. In doing so, it makes both empirical and methodological contributions to the scholarly discussion of a topical concern during an era of ongoing uncertainty about the democratic linkages between the public and government.

Chapter 2 Democracy, Public Opinion and Participation

> *What is the function of the public in a modern democracy… A hundred million voters have a staggering number of opinions about an incredible number of subjects. Under what circumstances do these opinions become important? (Schattschneider, 1961)*

Introduction

To properly understand the role of letters, and how they impact the policy agenda, I need to engage with a wide variety of theoretical frameworks. This chapter is the first of two chapters that set out the theoretical approaches that I engage with; explains why they are relevant to the study of letters; and how they further our understanding of the broader question of "how do letters to the prime minister impact the policy agenda"?

The overarching theoretical framework, which demonstrates why letters could and should matter, is democratic responsiveness. This includes consideration of the nature of "public opinion" and how letters fit into the theoretical concept of "public opinion". However, before we can get to the concepts of public opinion and responsiveness, I explore the linkages between democracy, representation, political equality, protections for the minority and responsiveness, and its impact on the quality of democracy.

The first step in the ultimate process of responsiveness is the decision of individuals to express their opinion by contacting (in this case) the prime minister. This is an act of political participation, which requires us to understand what political participation is, and what drives it. This will enable us to answer the question of who writes, whether this is a representative subset of the general population; and if it is not representative, how this first step skews the voices that are reaching political elites. Normatively this matters, because if those who participate are not representative of the general public, that may impair the transmission of opinion to government, and thus potentially distort the level of responsiveness to public opinion; or what part of the public is benefiting from political elite being responsive. Finally, the incentives for political leaders to be responsive to the letters will, in part, be dependent on their perspective of who is writing.

It is also important to understand how the opinions, as expressed in the letters, relate to other measures of public opinion. Do the letters display a similar pattern of opinion as mass opinion? Is the opinion representative? Normatively this matters, because if the opinion being expressed is not representative of the general public, that may again distort the transmission of opinion

to government. The incentives for political leaders to be responsive to the letters will, in part, be dependent on whether the letters reflect broader opinion.

Thus, three theoretical areas need to be explored – political participation; public opinion; and responsiveness. However, there are also a range of other factors that can influence both the political agenda and political opinion. First, the system is endogenous, with feedback effects from the political agenda, back to public opinion. Second, external events (and the media coverage of them) can have an impact on both the underlying opinion and directly on the political agenda. This chapter addresses participation theory, and the next chapter addresses public opinion and responsiveness.

2.1 Democracy Necessitates Responsiveness

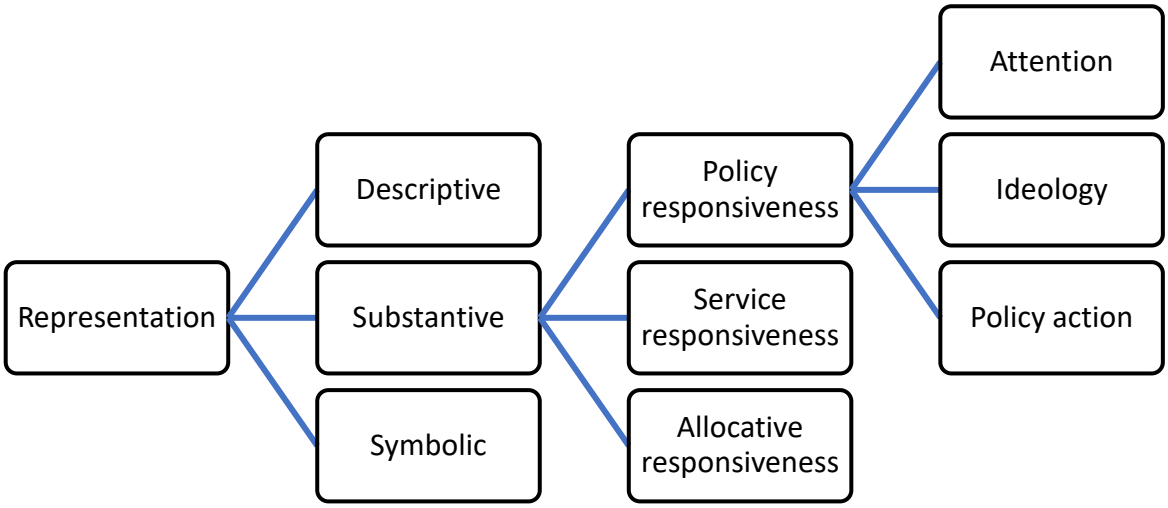
Before I move into those specific theoretical frameworks, I set out the core principles of democratic theory, and demonstrate why these letters are important to help understand the quality of democracy. Responsiveness is at the heart of representation - "responsiveness… [is a] form of… representation" (Lax & Phillips, 2012, p. 148) and Wlezien and Soroka (2021) suggest that descriptive representation; roll-call voting and policy outcomes are all part of democratic responsiveness.[10] These arguments hark back to Pitkin's central definition of representation as "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 154-155). As Russo (2020, p. 314) suggests, "the relationship between political representation and responsiveness is now taken for granted", but there is some degree of conceptual confusion between the two terms of 'representation' and 'responsiveness.' (Beck, 2021). This conceptual confusion is, in part, due to the range of component parts of representation (Eulau & Karps, 1977; Mansbridge, 2003).

My differentiation between representation and responsiveness (Figure 2-1) builds first on Pitkin (1967), who identifies the difference between substantive and descriptive representation, and then on Eulau and Karps (1977), who break down substantive representation into policy; service; allocative and symbolic (which is effectively the same concept as symbolic responsiveness in Pitkin (1967)). As I explore in the next chapter, what Eulau and Karps (1977) call policy responsiveness covers a range of different concepts. Thus, policy responsiveness

[10] This points to the multifaceted nature of both responsiveness and representation. Citizens can gain both representation and responsiveness through their local member of parliament (Petter, 2021) as well as the PM, or Parliament as a whole, depending on how representation and responsiveness is conceptualised and measured.

is only “a starting point” (Miller & Stokes, 1963, p. 49) or “one component” (Eulau & Karps, 1977, p. 247) of representation.

Figure 2-1 Policy responsiveness is a subcomponent of representation



Source: Derived from Pitkin (1967) and Eulau and Karps (1977)

While accepting the normative necessity for responsiveness, the appropriate level of that responsiveness is unclear. Often called the “trustee/delegate” debate, some would suggest that a representative is a delegate of the people - “a ‘mere’ agent, a servant, a delegate, a subordinate substitute” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 146). This approach prioritises responsiveness. Others suggest that a representative should be a “trustee” and prioritise their own “discretion and judgment” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209), because the mass public are too busy or uneducated to develop informed opinions. Therefore, it could be normatively beneficial to rely on the skills and competence of the representatives (Krouse, 1982). However, even trustee representation still requires a close connection between the governed and their representatives (Schlozman et al., 2012). Nevertheless, without this normative grounding, the empirical question of whether the letters had any impact becomes moot.

While there are competing definitions of democracy (the definition used does not impact on this research), all definitions revolve around some form of collective self-rule (Beckman, 2021) and political equality, which requires that the views of each member of the ‘demos’ is taken equally into account (Dahl, 1997; Waldron, 2012). In practice, this is usually operationalised

through elections and (directly or indirectly) choosing a leader[11] on a one-vote-one-value basis, with the opinions of the majority being regarded as the choice of the demos. Conceptually, this includes Athenian-style direct democracy,[12] as well as the breadth of democratic systems across the globe.

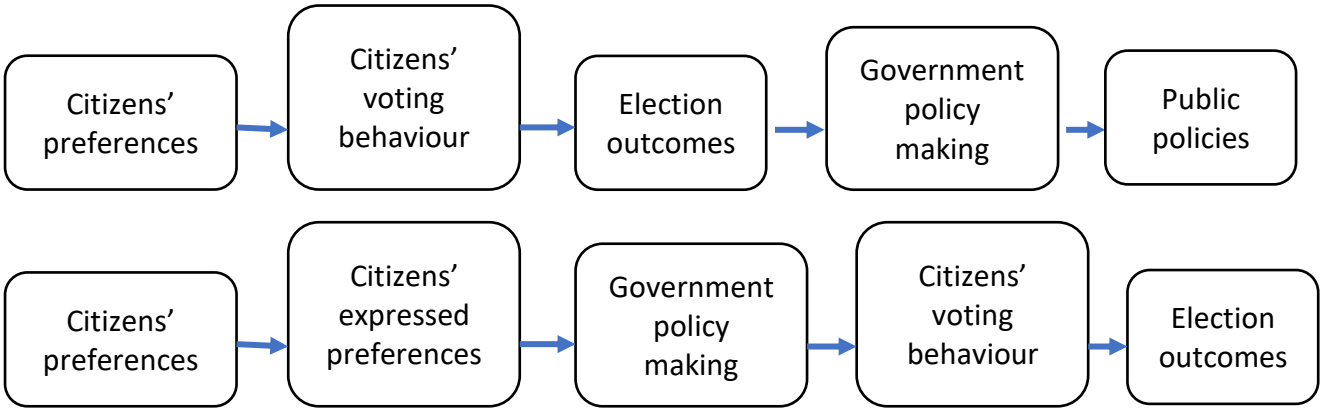
Free and fair elections create the institutional mechanism for the people to exercise control over their government. Through periodic elections the public can change their representatives in order to choose representatives that align with their preferences (Weissberg, 1976). The ability to choose representatives does not ensure that the public policy outcomes will necessarily reflect public opinion. The chain that creates the linkage between public policies and public preferences can fail at any point of the chain which connects the 'demos' to the government. For example, voting behaviour may not accurately reflect their policy preferences if they have insufficient information about party policies (a break in the chain at the first link in the upper part of Figure 2-2). Similarly, the nature of the electoral system and government formation may lead to a break in the chain between voting behaviour and election outcomes. Elections alone are insufficient to ensure popular control of the government, because elections need to have sufficient levels of contestation and participation (Dahl, 2008), including ensuring people have sufficient civil liberties to be able to meaningfully participate meaningfully (including through the sharing of information about politics, policies and candidates) (Manin et al., 1999).

Democracy, therefore, requires not just that the people choose their leader, but that the leader reflects, in some way, the opinion of the public. It is this linkage between the will of the people, and the actions of the leaders that provides democracy with legitimacy (Dahl, 1997). The two linkage mechanisms are demonstrated in Figure 2-2. In the upper section, the public influence public policy via election outcomes.

[11] In party-centric democracies, the focus is on choosing a party, rather than direct choice of leader. While there is significant debate about the increased personalisation of politics in traditional party-centric systems, the core issue is around balancing multiple views on multiple issues into a single vote.

[12] Setting aside issues around who was included in the Athenian 'demos'.

Figure 2-2 The electoral connection and the rational expectation connection between opinion and policy



Source: Author, adapted from Dassonneville et al. (2021)

Elections should create an incentive for representatives to change their behaviour between elections. If elected representatives need to win elections in order to remain in office, they will rationally act in ways that are likely to win them votes – which equates to being responsive to the demands of their constituents (Downs, 1957). This alternate path (rational expectation) is set out in the lower part of Figure 2-2. If elections do not create an incentive to reflect (in some way) public opinion, then fundamentally the people lose control of their government.

Thus, there are two drivers of responsiveness – elections, which have the capacity to change the leader; and rational anticipation of those future elections, driven by representatives' concern about potentially losing office (Stimson et al., 1995). Whether a new leader is elected, or the incumbent changes behaviour/position to remain in office, the threat of leadership turnover should result in greater policy alignment between the public and the leader, as leaders win "by competing with one another for the support of the non-leaders… non-leaders have the opportunity to switch their support away from the incumbent leaders to their rivals" (Dahl, 2017, pp. 273, 283).

Neither election, nor rational anticipation can generate responsiveness to the majority across all issues. In both models, a key question then becomes whose preferences and which preferences are responded to? If responsiveness is to align with the democratic principle of political equality, then government policy should reflect the will of the majority, or the will of the median citizen (Bochsler & Hänni, 2017; Downs, 1957; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Rosset et al., 2017).[13] While elections do achieve some form of responsiveness by allowing the public to change leaders and representatives, it is unlikely that a change of leader will result in

[13] While comparative responsiveness research has considered the difference between the median citizen and median voter, that is less of an issue in Australia, given compulsory voting. Therefore, this difference does not need to be considered as part of this research.

responsiveness across all policy domains. This can be demonstrated through this example. If responsiveness operated on an issue-by-issue basis, all three of the below proposals would succeed:

Table 2-1 Example of public preferences on sample policies

	Proposal 1	Proposal 2	Proposal 3
Voter A	YES	YES	YES
Voter B	YES	YES	YES
Voter C	YES	YES	NO
Voter D	NO	YES	YES
Voter E	YES	NO	YES

Source: Adapted from Waldron (2012)

However, as elections are usually a choice between parties and/or leaders, rather than a plebiscite[14] on individual proposals, each of the above five voters must translate their policy preferences to leader preferences. This is reflected in a modified version of this matrix (Table 2-2), where Leader 1 supports all of the proposals, while Leader 2 opposes all of the proposals.

Table 2-2 Example of choice of leader based on issue intensity

	Proposal 1	Proposal 2	Proposal 3	Leader vote
Leader 1	YES	YES	YES	
Leader 2 (elected)	NO	NO	NO	
Voter A	YES	YES	YES	Leader 1
Voter B	YES	YES	YES	Leader 1
Voter C	YES	YES	NO	Leader 2
Voter D	NO	YES	YES	Leader 2
Voter E	YES	NO	YES	Leader 2

Source: Adapted from Waldron (2012)

Even in this simplified model, where there are only three issues under consideration, the answer is not simple. Voters A and B support all three issues, and therefore back Leader 1. For voters C, D & E, they need to decide whether the support for two issues should equate to supporting Leader 1 (which would mean voting for a leader who opposes their preference on one issue), or if the issue that they oppose is sufficiently important to them to sway their vote. In the table above, each of these voters decided that the issue they opposed was their most important issue, and therefore voted for Leader 2, resulting in Leader 2 being elected and all three proposals not proceeding. Whether or not this policy outcome would be considered

[14] In this context, plebiscite refers to any vote on a specific policy issue, as opposed to a referendum to change the constitution.

normatively democratic, the procedures involved in determining the outcome were democratic, with each voter having one equal vote in the selection of their leader.

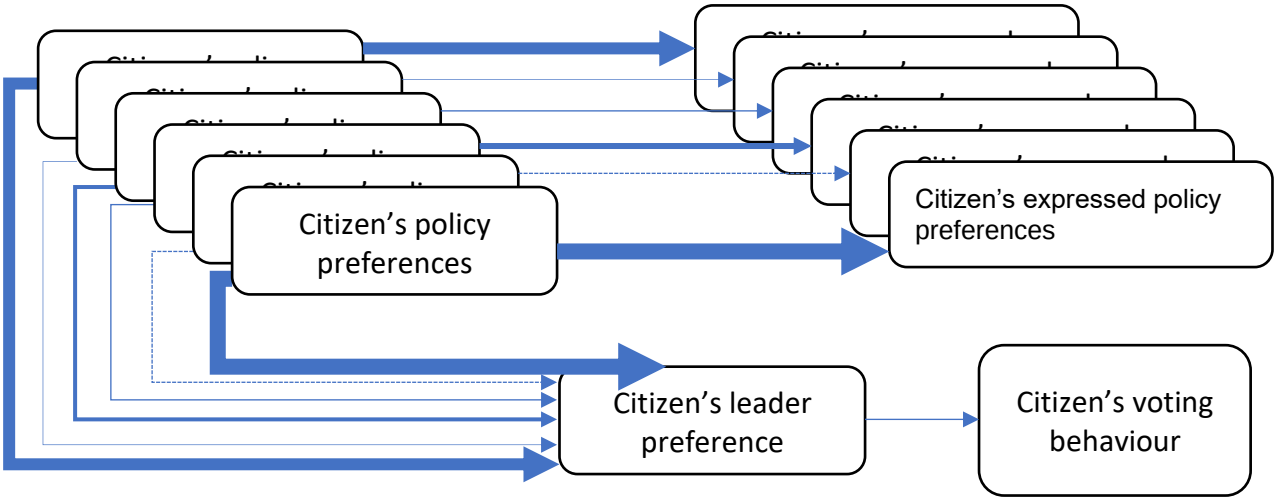
This paradox is particularly acute where the policy or interest involved is something of particular concern or interest to the minority, while not being particularly relevant to the majority. As Dahl (2006, p. 90) asks "[w]hat if the minority prefers its alternative much more passionately than the majority prefers a contrary alternative? Does the majority principle still make sense?". If political equality is paramount, then the majoritarian principle must override any other concerns, as political equality effectively equates "most preferred" to "preferred by most" (Dahl, 2006, p. 90), and ignores the "intensity problem" (Kendall & Carey, 1968, p. 7)

While the principle of political equality could be interpreted to mean that majority public opinion requires issue-by-issue responsiveness, and thus reject the above outcome as non-democratic and rejecting that the 'intensity problem' is a problem at all. This approach prioritises the issue over the leader/party, and in doing so reduces the agency of political leaders, assuming that leaders' main function is to carry out the pre-determined will of the people. While some participatory democrats may seek ongoing engagement of the entire electorate across policy issues, elections in modern liberal democracies reverse this prioritisation, and instead focus on choosing the leader rather than deciding the issues. (Kellerman, 1968; Kendall & Carey, 1968; Schumpeter, 1987). Thus, democracy becomes "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1987, p. 241). The principle of political equality, set out earlier, is therefore not focussed on each individual policy, but rather on the choice of leader, with the majoritarian requirements of democracy satisfied by the choice of leader, rather than the choice of policy outcomes. This allows us to find that the outcome in Table 2-2 as normatively democratic, because the choice of leader was democratic, and provides leaders with both the agency and discretion to determine public policy.

This means that at election time, individuals are forced to mediate their policy choices through leader choices. This translation of policy preference to leader preference is a crucial intermediating factor in how responsiveness operates, and thus how democratic theory operates. The above example shows that there is not a perfect connection between individuals' opinions and their voting behaviour. Which, in turn, will impact leader's rational expectations, and therefore impact on levels of responsiveness. The 'perfect connection' is not possible, as

elections are not multiple plebiscites on every issue imaginable, providing specific instruction to leaders on the exact policies to be implemented over the next electoral period.

Figure 2-3 Translation of policy preferences to voting behaviour is mediated through leader preference and opinion intensity



Notes: Different arrow thicknesses demonstrate different issue intensities. Source: Author

This intermediation is stylised in Figure 2-3, with the different arrow thicknesses demonstrating the different issue intensities each individual voter may place on each policy preference, and thus how much weight will be placed on translating that policy preference to their singular choice of leader. In the inter-election period, a similar process occurs, with leaders using citizens' expressed policy preferences to estimate how that policy preference will impact on leader preference and voting behaviour at the subsequent election.

This simplification also ignores the increasing "personalisation" of politics, where individuals' voting choices are also driven by their assessment of the character of individual candidates as policy preferences (McAllister, 2015). This further dilutes the link between policy preferences and election results, as more factors need to be weighed up in making their final voting choice. This complex idea was perhaps better expressed in a letter to Mr Howard, where a Mr Roberts berated Mr Howard, reminding him:

> *That one party gets more votes than another party in an election in no way says that the majority of the population were in favour of any particular policy espoused by that party (NAA: M4261, 102 Part 4)*

This communication of preferences and intensity in the inter-election period is beneficial for both voters and leaders as it helps inform ongoing policy responsiveness. Thus, rational

expectation is similarly mediated by intensity, rather than merely an equal count of preferences.

Focusing on intensity, rather than majority, may not be undemocratic, because most citizens do not care about any issue in particular. This process effectively results in ongoing compromises between largely indifferent majorities and passionate minorities. This occurs because on a large number of issues, most people are largely indifferent, with the majority effectively acquiescing to competing minority interests, which results in not majority rule or minority rule but “minorities rule” (Dahl, 2006). As most citizens will deeply care about a small minority of issues, this allows different minorities to form, and influence policy, according to the issues that matter most to them.

Thus, responsiveness is likely to be mediated by leaders’ expectations of the intensity that voters have on any particular issue, and how that will feed into their choice of leader, rather than a simple ‘headcount’ of views. In other words, sometimes political leaders will be deliberately responsive to the majority; sometimes deliberately responsive to a minority; sometimes will deliberately ignore public opinion in favour of their own views; and sometimes ‘noise’ or other errors in the chain of transmission will result in different outcomes. However, for any form of responsiveness to work, citizens must express their policy preferences, and express their intensity of feeling for those preferences.

The more that we understand how politicians are responsive to different groups helps us to understand how democracy and accountability operate. For example, if we find that responsiveness is primarily driven by mass opinion polls, this would show that the political system broadly reflects principles of political equality and majoritarianism. On the other hand, if we find responsiveness to particular cohorts, or particular types of public opinion, that may demonstrate that the political system more closely reflects Dahl’s polyarchy.

This section establishes that responsiveness is necessary for democratic control of the government and that responsiveness operates through both elections and political leaders’ rational expectations of election outcomes. Given that elections are based around a choice of party/leader (rather than choices of policies) each voter must internally weight/prioritise competing issues in deciding how to cast their vote; therefore, provided opinions and priorities are expressed to political leaders, political leaders are incentivised to be responsive based on those weights/prioritisations. I now turn to considering the first of the component part of responsiveness – political participation.

2.2 Different Forms of Letter-writing

In this section, I first theorise about who is likely to write these letters. I argue that writing to seek help/information is a different form of political participation to writing to express an opinion (the letters that are represented in my dataset). Then, looking specifically at opinion letter-writers, I develop a theory that shows the level of responsiveness to these letter-writers is likely to be low. This low-responsiveness is rational because the types of people that engage in this type of activity are unlikely to be swing voters and are more likely to be highly partisan. This means that the probability of them changing their electoral behaviour is limited.

As detailed above, democracy requires a level of responsiveness between the public policy and public opinion. However, public opinion can only be heard when it is expressed. One of the main ways of expressing public opinion is through political participation, and the quality of a democracy is often linked to the levels of political participation (van Deth, 2021), and whether that participation is meaningful and powerful. Those that argue for expanding the volume and type of participation often point to the intrinsic benefits associated with participation – that participation (particularly working with others) breeds further participation, and that in turn can improve democratic functioning (Pateman, 1970). Second, because (as noted above) voting alone is insufficient to convey the necessary detailed information to elites (Elstub, 2018), other forms of participation allow the individuals to have greater influence over government. Thus, while some forms of participation may allow people to “have a voice,” that does not provide any assurance that their voice will be “heeded” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

To the extent that letter-writing can have an impact on policy and political outcomes, the volume of letter-writing, as a form of political participation, could be a measure of the quality of democracy (Geissel et al., 2016). Greater political participation should make the system more responsive, and help individuals (particularly minorities) to protect their own interests (Teorell, 2006). My focus, therefore, is on participation as an instrumental act, where citizens “attempt to make the political system respond to their will” (Teorell, 2006, p. 789), with Verba (1996) regarding participation as the mechanism to achieve representation. This means that participation matters because those who participate are those whose voices are heard. If those who participate are different/not representative of the entire electorate, it is possible that policy will be skewed towards those who participate.

First, we need to establish what ‘political participation’ is, and how letters fit into political participation. Over time, there has been a wide range of definitions of political participation (Scaff, 1975; Schwartz, 1984; Teorell, 2006; Uhlaner, 1986; van Deth, 2021). The foundational

definition of participation, proffered by Verba and Nie (1987, p. 2), is “acts that aim at influencing the government, either by affecting the choice of government personnel or by affecting the choices made by government personnel”. This definition presupposes (as I accept above) a representative/responsive democratic system as its normative goal, rather than a participatory or deliberative democratic system. Flowing on from this definition, Verba and Nie (1987) initially identified four ‘dimensions’ of participation, namely the level of “conflict,” “initiative”, “scope,” and “cooperation.” Based on these four dimensions, they identified four types of participation — voting, campaign activity, communal activity and particularised contacting. Since then, the definition of participation has been questioned, challenged and expanded, based on expanded definitions of the political and in particular, new avenues of participation opened up by the internet and consumer activism (Chowdhury, 2021; Evans & Stoker, 2016; Goldfinch et al., 2009; Lee & Schachter, 2019; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; van Deth, 2021).

Letters from the public or other forms of contacting government officials or elected representatives are regarded as a core part of “conventional” political participation. Contacting is an important aspect of political participation because it conveys significantly more information to the political elite and decision-makers compared to voting. These letters are a unique type of political participation, because the form of participation hides two different substantive types of participation. Verba and Nie (1987) considered that “citizen-initiated-contacts,” was a substantively different form of participation, which deserved recognition as its own form, because:

> *The most distinctive characteristic of citizen-initiated contacts concerns the scope of the outcome… The individual participant takes the initiative in contacting a government official and, most important, he decides what to contact about, [which]…. ensures that the subject matter of the participatory act is salient and important to the individual (Verba & Nie, 1987, p. 52)*

Depending on the scope of the desired outcome, this one method (letter-writing) could sit in two different ‘modes’ of participation. First, contacts could sit in the ‘communal act’ mode of participation, along with a range of other group-based activities, if the desired outcome of the contact is broad and collective (‘general referent’), particularly when the contact was triggered by involvement in community action or an interest group. In these cases, the letter writing may only form one part of broader political campaign (Karpf, 2010). In these cases, ‘contact’ is merely an example/method of this broader mode of participation. Similarly, Milbrath (1981) identified a “communicators” mode of participation, based on activities such as “send messages of support to political leaders;” “send protest messages to political leaders” and

“make my views known to public officials” (Milbrath, 1981, p. 203). What ties these together is that the participants usually have a high level of interest in politics and are seeking to engage for the purpose of changing a policy.

Alternatively, if the scope of the desired outcome is narrow, and focussed more specifically on the individual or their family, it is considered “particularised contact”, which became Verba and Nie’s forth mode of participation - a stand-alone mode, which only includes these sorts of particularised service requests. These participants are often not actively involved in politics generally (Milbrath, 1981), and are seeking to change an administrative decision, rather than a higher level public policy.

Next, I analyse the literature on the determinants of political participation in general, before turning to how these generalised approaches work in the context of these two forms of contacting politicians. At the broadest level, the two key determinants of political participation, resources and incentives (Teorell, 2006). These factors play out differently depending on the type of political participation that is being considered. Resources can include any type of resource that might be needed or used to participate in politics, including the time it takes; the costs; or the social capital/civic skills needed to participate (often conceived as political interest and political efficacy).

For most forms of political participation, the ‘baseline’ model is socio-economic status (Verba et al., 1978), which incorporates most of these resources and has consistently been found to determine a large proportion of the variation in political participation (Bean, 2012; Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Verba et al., 1978). Those with a higher socio-economic status are more likely to have both the resources, as well as the sense of civic duty to participate (Brown, 1982). Thus, the best determinant for participation is likely to be socio-economic status. Theoretically, this is likely to be relevant for both forms of letter-writing, as writing a letter requires time, sufficient English-language literacy, and the knowledge of how to engage effectively with a political leader. Without these resources, engaging in any form of letter-writing is likely to be difficult.

The other key determinant is the balance between incentives and cost. The greater the cost of the particular form of participation, the greater the incentives need to be to overcome that cost. This has become particularly evident with new forms of participation, where the cost (time/effort/money) of participation is reduced. For example, the cost of signing an e-petition is much lower than participating in a protest. In this context, the cost of hand-writing a letter, paying for the postage, and taking the letter to a post-box is much higher than simply signing a form-letter provided to you by an interest group, where they then also take care of the

envelope and postage. The higher cost associated with the participation is likely to mean that the individual has a higher level of issue intensity. Conversely, where the costs to participate are lower, it is likely to mean that the sender has a lower issue intensity. Thus, political leaders are likely to judge the level of issue intensity based on the costs associated with the chosen form of participation (Gause, 2022; Hill, 2022).

People also need a reason/incentive to participate, which differs based on both the individual and the form of participation. In Australia, the legal requirement to vote provides sufficient reason for that form of participation, but more generally, that could include psychological factors around trust in government, or group identity, or perceived partisan duty. It can also relate to more specific desires, such as to impact a particular policy area (generalised) or a particular individual need, such as problems with a pension payment, or a visa problem (particularised). This aligns with the scope of the outcome that Verba and Nie (1987) considered, which led them to find that particularised contact was a unique mode of participation. Thus, the different types of reasons/incentive to participate is the driver of the difference between these two forms of letter-writing. Those writing to express an opinion are responding to a systematic, political/policy issue. On the other hand, people writing to seek information/help reflects a combination of systematic need (such as lower income; elderly; migrants), but also reflect "idiosyncratic needs," (Zuckerman & West, 1985, p. 124), or idiosyncratic failures of the existing support and service systems.

This has been called the "needs awareness model," which suggests that particularised contacting is driven by two factors. First, that the individual has a subjectively identified need. Some of these needs will be distributed across socio-economic status, such as fixing a pothole, or issues with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). Other needs are more likely to congregate in particular socio-economic groups, for example visa issues are more likely to be in migrant communities, or social security and welfare issues are more likely to be felt amongst the elderly and lower socio-economic status groups. However, need alone is insufficient. Thus, the second part is that people also require an awareness of who to contact, as well as the other financial and attitudinal resources to make the contact – which is skewed towards higher socio-economic status groups.

This may make it harder to systematically explain particularised letter-writing, because it isn't necessarily a subjective 'political' act (Schwartz, 1984). Instead, it could often be regarded a complaint about a particular service provided (or not provided), where the state happens to be the service deliverer. In this sense, particularised contact may have more in common with

customer complaints than traditional political participation. Marketing research indicates that similar factors often determine complaint behaviour, including socio-economic status and knowledge of how to complain (Cai & Chi, 2018; Grønhaug & Gilly, 1991). The knowledge required for particularised contact is different, based on having a sufficient personal need, and knowing who and how to contact. The knowledge required for generalised contact is higher, requiring sufficient knowledge about both the particular policy issue and the positions of the various political actors – in practice, it is likely to involve some level of partisan/political involvement or awareness.

This aligns with existing theory both on types of participants and types of participation. Marcus (1988, pp. 34, 35) suggests a division in participants between “partisans” and “spectators.” He suggested that partisans are “likely to be intense in their positions,” whose role in the political system is to mobilise others but are unlikely to change their votes. Spectators, on the other hand, are not disengaged, and are able to be mobilised and “open to persuasion”. Similarly, Scaff (1975, pp. 454, 455) suggests that difference between “instrumental” participation, which is focussed on the “protecting one’s rights and advancing one’s interests” and “interactive” participation which is instead functions to encourage “cooperation… and settlement of disputes… based upon the individual’s identification with the common interests of the community.” Scaff argues that that there are different drivers for these two types of participation. While instrumental participation is driven by a desire for power and influence, interactive participation is driven by political knowledge and virtues. All particularised contact is likely to fit into the “instrumental” category, as it is usually about obtaining personal benefit, and advancing personal interests, and is not inherently related to political matters (Milbrath, 1981). This means that this particularised contact is only weakly related to other forms of participation (Milbrath, 1981). On the other hand, generalised contact is likely to be a mix of instrumental and interactive participation, depending on the specific issues. As interactive participation requires political knowledge and virtues (which Scaff did not see as a pre-requisite to instrumental participation), this also implies that political knowledge and partisanship is likely to be a differentiating factor between these two cohorts.

While classic representation theorists argue that “the constituency that a representative reacts to is the constituency that he or she sees” (Fenno, 1977, p. 883), I argue that leaders’ incentives to be responsive to a particular expression of opinion is linked to both the opinion being seen, but also the likelihood of the individual who expressed that opinion changing their electoral behaviour - mediated by the leaders’ perception of this likelihood. Therefore, the key determinants that are investigated are partisanship and ideology – factors which theoretically

are linked to opinion-letter writing, rather than help/information letter writing. If letters are mainly written by partisans (even if they are seen), depending on the institutional context, it will reduce the incentive for responsiveness, because of the reduced likelihood of a change in electoral behaviour. However, this is dependent on leaders' perceptions of the likelihood of this potential change (Hill, 2022). Thus I also need to explore leaders' perceptions of partisanship, as misperceptions may impact on the level of responsiveness (Broockman & Skovron, 2018).

2.3 Empirical Findings and Hypotheses Building

Having set out my theoretical approach I now turn to examine the existing empirical findings. Current research on letter-writing at the national, or comparative level either focuses on "generalized contact" (Bean, 2012; Dubrow et al., 2022; Tranter & Smith, 2021), or fails to disaggregate "contacting" into its two subcomponents. While studies of "particularised contact" have mainly been at local government (town council/county) level, with fairly small sample sizes (Traut, 1993; Hirlinger, 1992; Sharp 1982; Jones, 1977). Given the service-orientated nature of local governments, these findings are unlikely to be generalisable to national-level participation.

There is, however, some older literature that explicitly examines both types of contact. Zuckerman and West (1985) explicitly look at both forms of contacting, treating each as separate dependent variables. Their cross-country analysis finds socio-economic status, education, and political factors (such as efficacy and political networks) were all significant for generalised contact. However, they find the patterns of particularised contact to be "weaker and less clearcut" (Zuckerman & West, 1985, p. 123), with different relationships for socio-economic status in different countries. They find that people who are politically active were more likely to engage in particularised contact, but the link is not as strong as for generalised contact. More recently (although using 1987 data) Traut and Emmert (1995) found that their models had very little explanatory power for particularised contact, but there were statistically significant link with political ties and political awareness. For general referent contacting, these factors were also relevant, along with socio-economic status and ideology. They note that general reference contacting is a "vehicle for expressing abstract beliefs about the role of government… [a] symbolic expression of political beliefs" (Traut & Emmert, 1995, p. 257).

While there is significant research on political participation in Australia, including contacting/letter-writing (Bean, 2012; Evans & Stoker, 2016; Goldfinch et al., 2009; Martin,

2012; McAllister, 2011; McAllister & Makkai, 1992; Reichert & Print, 2017; Wilson & Western, 1969), the only Australian research that separates these two forms of contacting are Bean (1989), Bean (1991b) and Bean (1991a) (all relying on the same data from the 1984-85 Australian National Social Science Survey). These articles uses factor analysis to support Verba and Nie (1987), that these two forms of letter-writing are conceptually different, and places general-referent letter-writing in the "communal activity" mode of participation. He suggests that personalised contact "can hardly be predicted in any systematic way at all" (Bean, 1989, p. 463). He finds only two variables (political interest and region of residence) to directly influence particularised letter writing, while education, strength of ideology, and political efficacy all had an impact on communal activity (including generalised referent letter-writing).

Among the literature that separately explores the determinants of these different types of letters, there is a broad consistency in the findings. First, that general referent contacting has a lot of similarities to other forms of political participation – it is driven by a mixture of both socio-economic factors and orientation towards politics, including interest in politics, political networks, and political efficacy. Second, that particularised referent contacting is harder to pin down, with models less able to explain patterns of contacting. All find political interest and efficacy to be relevant, but that most other factors struggle to demonstrate consistent linkages.

There is a separate literature that only analyses particularised contacting of local governments, such as town/county councils. As noted above, this may have limits in generalisability, given the very different dynamics and drivers of political participation at this level (McDonnell, 2020, 2023). Hirlinger (1992) focused on one city and found support for a needs-awareness based model for particularised contact, while finding political efficacy as the key driver of generalised contact. However, his analysis is also hampered by a very small sample size (n=332). Traut and Emmert (1993) analyse survey evidence from three Florida cities in 1985. They compare a straight socio-economic status model and a need-awareness model and suggest that particularised contact is driven almost entirely by subjective perception of need (measure by evaluation of the quality of government service delivery), while generalised contact was driven by broader socio-economic, political and psychological attitudinal factors.

Finally, there are a range of studies that explicitly or implicitly treat these two separate concepts as interchangeable (Boulianne, 2023; Dubrow et al., 2022; McDonnell, 2023; Pankaew et al., 2022; Sharp, 1982; Stockemer & Rapp, 2019). This conceptually blurry approach compromises the validity of the measure. Given the theoretical arguments that these are different concepts, and the empirical findings that supports this, the findings of these articles

may need to be re-examined. This is a significant gap, given the ongoing significance of 'contact' as a form of participation, and ongoing research that demonstrates that political leaders pay attention to the opinions of those who contact them (Henderson et al., 2023).

Having set out my theory and existing research on this topic, I turn to my hypotheses. These hypotheses are based on the theories set out above, that people who write to express an opinion are engaging in interactive participation (Scaff, 1975); are partisans (Marcus, 1988); and are already politically aligned, engaged and motivated. Conversely, people who write seeking help/information are a different cohort to those who write expressing a political opinion. This cohort is broadly equivalent to the rest of the electorate, on these factors, and are therefore spectators (Marcus, 1988), engaging in instrumental action (Scaff, 1975). To set the context and test the level of responsiveness that might be expected in the Australian context, I focus on identifying whether those who write to express an opinion differ from those who write to seek help/information. I do this by setting out two groups of hypotheses, the first relating to people who write opinion-letters (H1-3a), and the second relating to people who write to seek help/information (H1-3b):

> *H1a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.*
>
> *H1b: People who write to seek help/information will have a similar left-right position to those who do not write to seek help/information.*
>
> *H2a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be partisans compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.*
>
> *H2b: People who write to seek help/information will have the same level of partisanship as those who do not write to seek help/information.*
>
> *H3a: People who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.*
>
> *H3b: People who write to seek help/information are no more nor less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to seek help/information.*

Table 2-3 Summary of hypotheses relating to 'who writes?'

		Write to express an opinion (compared to those who do not write to express an opinion) (a)	Write to seek help/info (compared to those who do not write to seek help/information) (b)
	Incentive for responsiveness		
H1	Distance from median	+	0
H2	Partisanship	+	0
H3	Change/consider changing vote between the major parties	-	0

Notes: + means that the hypothesis suggests that those who write will demonstrate a higher level of the variable;
- means that the hypothesis suggests that those who write will demonstrate a lower level of the variable;
0 means no relationship is posited.
Source: Author

In Chapter 5, I first test these hypotheses based on bivariate analysis, to determine the incentives for responsiveness. While researchers would seek to control for socio-demographic or other factors, from the perspective of political leaders, their interest is whether the writers' votes are at stake. I then turn to multivariate analysis to test whether these same hypotheses hold once controlling for other factors traditionally considered in political participation research.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I first explain the normative importance of studying different forms of public opinion and demonstrate the linkage from democratic theory through to responsiveness, public opinion and political participation. I emphasise the challenge of combining traditional 'majority rule' concepts of democracy with the 'intensity problem,' which can come to a head when a minority has an intense preference. This forces political leaders to balance not just majority/median public opinion (as traditionally measured in opinion polls), but also the intensity of each person's opinion and the impact that the opinion will have on their vote. This aligns with long-standing debates about democratic theory, most clearly articulated by Dahl (2006), but also studied empirically in relation to other forms of intensity-based participation, such as protests Gause (2022), and formally modelled by Hill (2022). The important expansion that this chapter provides is to extend this theoretical framework to letter-writing, which has previously been largely ignored by political scientists. Given the large proportion of people who engage in this form of political participation[15] and that the literature shows that political representatives listen to diverse forms of public opinion (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019;

[15] See Chapter 5 for details.

Hooghe & Marien, 2012), the implications of this is to provide an opportunity to better understand the different linkages between public opinion, policy and government actions.

I then turn to considering political participation, as the avenue through which the public can express both their opinion and the intensity of that opinion. I set out my theoretical framework, existing empirical findings and my expectations about the first of my core questions, “Who writes?” and sought to link the question of who writes to the broader question of what impact the letters have. I suggest that the people who write letters to express a political opinion are disproportionately partisan, and on the political extremes, while those who write to seek help/information are much closer to the political centre. These differences are a result of the existing, but largely dormant, theoretical recognition of the two different modes of political participation that are encompassed within ‘contacting a politician.’ This matters because if these two types of contacting are motivated by different drivers, and are thus conceptually different, operationalising both these concepts through the one survey question does not make methodological sense. The implication is that it should also serve as a suggestion for other major electoral studies to include questions in their surveys which allow clear disaggregation between types of contacting.

The literature recognises that responsiveness is one aspect of representation, and that democracy requires responsiveness. Modern liberal representative democracies mediate policy responsiveness through choices of leader, or party. This forces voters to weigh issue intensity in determining their electoral behaviour. In turn, this means that political elites’ incentive to be responsive is driven by their expectations of electoral behaviour. This is driven by a combination of their perception of issue intensity, and their perception of whether the person expressing the opinion is likely to change their electoral behaviour based on that issue. This is crucial to answer the central question of this thesis, as it will help us understand how political elites manage this balance between being responsive to the majority, versus responsive based on intensity. As noted by Hänni (2017), most traditional literature on responsiveness focuses solely on the majoritarian perspective on democracy, creating gaps in our knowledge that should be addressed.

In the next chapter, I look at how this form of political participation helps to create public opinion, and through that, create political responsiveness. As part of this, I also explore how Australian-specific institutional arrangements (compulsory voting; preferential voting; and majoritarian electoral system) combine with my theory of ‘who writes’ to significantly alter any expectation of responsiveness.

Chapter 3 Theorising Responsiveness

> *To understand representation, we must attend to mechanisms. How do politicians gather information to estimate the public's preferences? (Henderson et al., 2023, pp. 632-633)*

Introduction

In the previous chapter, building on political participation literature, I set out my theory about the first core question, "Who writes?" That chapter explains that there are two theoretically distinct modes of contacting – the first being "general referent" contacting, where the contact expresses a policy opinion and seeks a broad policy change (e.g. climate change, funding cuts to the public broadcaster, or changes to trade policy). The second is "particularised referent," where the contact is seeking a specific outcome for the individual (e.g. issues with their pension, visa problems, or complaints about a pothole) (Verba & Nie, 1987). I then theorised that writers of general referent letters were likely to be highly politically active, partisans, and unlikely to change their electoral behaviour. This is an important precursor to the questions being addressed in this chapter.

In this chapter, building on responsiveness literature (Beyer & Hänni, 2018; Soroka & Wlezien, 2005; Wlezien, 1995), I set out my theory about what impacts the letters could have, including why the public agenda should be responsive to the topics of the opinion-letters, and then explain the existing empirical findings. I set out theoretical explanations of how policy and public opinion interrelate and looking at its potential bi-directionality. I demonstrate that while the linkages between democracy and responsiveness is broadly accepted within political science, further analysis and nuance is needed, to account for the possibility of non-majoritarian drivers of responsiveness between elections.

This chapter shows that, theoretically, inter-election responsiveness may also be driven by the intensity of opinion (regardless of its majority/minority status), rather than majority opinion *per se* (Gause, 2022; Hill, 2022; Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023). The chapter demonstrates that responsiveness research needs to be broadened beyond mass opinion polls, to include other forms of public opinion, such as letters. This is important because improving our understanding of responsiveness to different types of public opinion and different forms of expression of public opinion, will in turn, help us to understand how political leaders choose to prioritize the different democratic values of political equality and the protection of people in the minority. Finally, this chapter looks at the other impacts that these letters can have, and other ways political leaders can engage with these letters.

3.1 The Concept of Responsiveness

In the last chapter, I explored the difference between representation and responsiveness. This section sets out the existing theories around political responsiveness to public opinion. In doing so, I draw out key themes and identify strengths and weaknesses in the arguments and set the stage for additional hypotheses. Across the literature, there is significant confusion around whether, when and how political elites respond to public opinion. The confusion around this field is due to the diverse ways researchers have analysed this topic, including the diverse nature of public opinion and the difficulty in measuring and operationalising public policy. This section will survey this state of the art and the diverse operationalisations of the same underlying concept of responsiveness to public opinion.

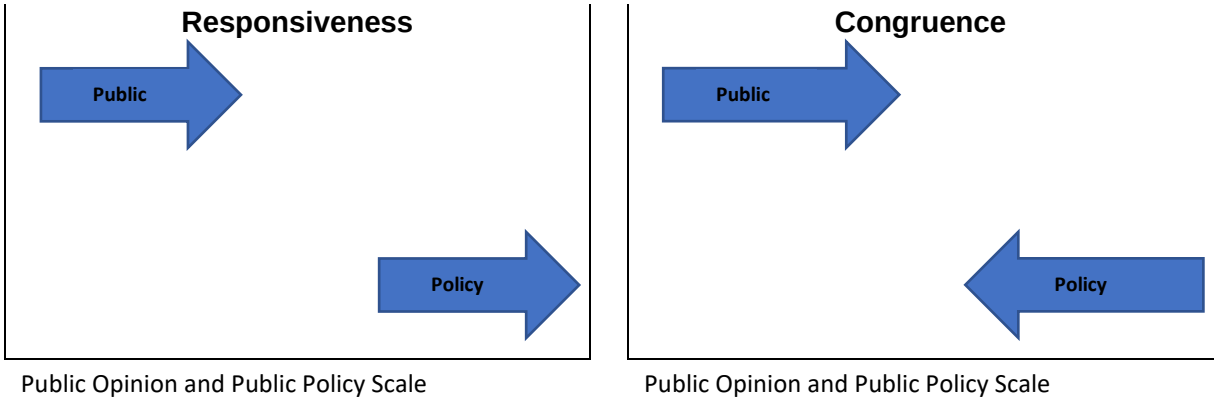
There has been a multitude of ways the relationship between the public and their representatives has been studied, leading to significant definitional and conceptual confusion (Beyer & Hänni, 2018; Dalton et al., 2011; Eulau & Karps, 1977). While all explore the extent to which governments, politicians and political parties effectively represent the interests of citizens, depending on whether they are cross-sectional, or longitudinal; and whether they are focused on election results or other measures of public opinion, different, overlapping and inconsistent terminology has been used. As Eulau and Karps (1977, p. 241) noted, responsiveness is a "complex, compositional phenomenon that entails a variety of possible targets in the relationship between representatives and represented." As such, it is not possible to address every aspect of this concept. This research, which mainly focuses on the impact of change in the expression of public opinion on Mr Howard's public agenda, sits in the tradition of 'responsiveness' research, because it mainly focuses on change over time.

As set out in the previous chapter, the relationship between public opinion and policy is achieved in several different ways, and while the result may appear similar – that policies and public opinion align with each other – there is a significant theoretical distinction between these cases, which needs to be drawn out. Before I can explain the importance of the theoretical difference, it's important to first describe these different relationships. First, the alignment of public policy and public opinion, is usually referred to as "congruence," and is measured as a point-in-time alignment between public opinion and policy. If the representative is, at a single point in time, significantly further to the left of the distribution of citizens, we can say that the representative does not hold congruent views to the citizens.

This differs from "responsiveness", which refers to some change in public policy caused by a change in public opinion. While these two concepts are inter-related, there are significant

conceptual differences that need to be explored, as “congruence” can be achieved in several different ways. The first way to achieve congruence is through the public electing elites whose views align with their own. In these circumstances, congruence occurs without any change in public opinion, and without any responsiveness. By changing leaders to those with the same opinion, congruence has been achieved. The second way congruence can come about without responsiveness is when the public’s opinion is shaped by elites, as leaders “mobilis[e] consensus.... and persuad[e] the public” (Martin et al., 2014, p. 515). This is particularly likely to be the case when new issues emerge or, where the public has not previously considered the issues. The citizens move to be closer to the representative. The next option is that leaders happen to have the same/similar views as the public on the issue at hand. This is more likely where the representative(s) are descriptively representative of their constituents, and thus more likely to approach issues and problems in a similar way. Thus, only when these routes do not work, and politicians and the public end up with differing opinions, can responsiveness then be involved.

Figure 3-1 Responsiveness vs congruence



Source: Adapted from Beyer and Hänni (2018)

The difference between congruence and responsiveness is clear in Figure 3-1. On the left side, we can see the public and policy both moving further to the right. This is responsiveness that still leaves policy incongruent with public opinion. On the right, we can see the public moving to the right, and policy moving to the left. This is non-responsive but has resulted in the policy being more congruent with public opinion than previously. It is often difficult to determine how congruence has been achieved – through responsiveness; change in public opinion led by political leaders; or change in both due to an external third factor (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005). These existing empirical difficulties necessitate new approaches to responsiveness analysis, that better identifies the causal linkages, and brings to light inputs into the policy process that have previously been hidden.

From a theoretical perspective, while we may consider the final point-in-time alignment of public opinion and public policy an important democratic outcome, it is insufficient to demonstrate democracy, if this has come because of the 'manipulation' of public opinion by the political elite. Therefore, the process by which such alignment comes about is just as important as the end outcome. For responsiveness to occur, the literature identifies that there are certain pre-conditions that must be met:

- The public must have an opinion that is capable of being understood.
- That opinion must be transmitted to the political leaders.
- The political leaders must want (or have an incentive) to be responsive to that opinion.[16]

The first pre-condition, while beyond the scope of this thesis, is the subject of significant debate (Converse, 2006; Weissberg, 1976). The second pre-condition is often assumed, left unstated or unproven in many studies on responsiveness. These studies tend to focus on the impact of opinion polls on public policy, without considering the causal chain between the public forming an opinion and elites' actions. I have identified five steps (Table 3-1), all of which are theoretically necessary (but not sufficient) to achieve responsiveness.

Table 3-1 The steps necessary for political responsiveness

Step	Evidence used in mainstream responsiveness studies	Evidence proposed to be used in this research
1) People have an opinion.	Results of opinion polls.	The individuals chose to write a letter about a policy.
2) People express that opinion and the intensity of that opinion.	Results of opinion polls.	The individuals chose to write a letter about a policy.
3) That opinion is accurately transmitted to elites.	Implicit assumption that elites read the opinion polls and/or that the same opinion is transmitted in other (unspecified) ways.	The individuals chose to write to the prime minister, and that PM&C briefs the prime minister on key topics.
4) The elites correctly hear the opinion and hear the intensity.	Implicit assumption that elites read opinion polls and/or that the same opinion is transmitted in other (unspecified) ways.	1) Briefs provided to the prime minister. 2) Interviews, which allow for explication of the mechanism, and exploration of the tendency.

[16] This relates to the trustee/delegate issue, considered in the previous chapter.

5) Elites decide whether, and how much, to react	Regressions, which provide evidence of a tendency, which implies the existence of a mechanism.	1) Regressions, which provide evidence of a tendency, which implies the existence of a mechanism. 2) Interviews, which allow for explication of the mechanism, and exploration of the tendency.

Source: Author

Three broad theories on policy responsiveness to public opinion have been identified. First, drawing on Manza and Cook (2002), the "large effects" theory argues that there is a "high degree" of responsiveness to public opinion. This is supported by quantitative studies and case studies in selected domains. The theory rests on the assumption that "political elites derive benefit from pursing policies that are (or appear to be) in accord with the wishes of citizens" (Manza & Cook, 2002, pp. 632-633). Therefore, self-interest drives the high degree of responsiveness. Second, the "small effects" theory, which rests on an assumption that either "the policy preferences of most citizens are either nonattitudes… or they are so weakly held or sufficiently contradictory as to permit manipulation by elites," (Manza & Cook, 2002, p. 644) and/or that elected officials have sufficient autonomy from the public (potentially because they regard themselves as trustees (Butler & Nickerson, 2011)) that any correlation of public policy and public opinion is not due to responsiveness. This school of thought also suggests that public opinion is often directed by elite opinion, and thus any "responsiveness" is in the reverse direction to that proposed by the large effects school. They also suggest that low levels of responsiveness may be because politicians lack access to suitable data on most issues that come before them for decision.

There are no strong theoretical or normative arguments that should lead us to reject the idea of reverse causality. Indeed, having accepted Downs (1957) proposition of rational ignorance – that it is rational for voters to be broadly ignorant about most political issues – it would be extremely odd to then expect political elites to simply follow the opinions of an ignorant public. Thus, there are likely to be some areas where representation runs from below, and others where representation runs from above, with political elites leading and shaping the agenda and substantive policy – often called "elite agenda setting" (Druckman, 2016, p. 822). This creates a "wedding of leadership and popular control" (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005, p. 511). In "representation from below", we would expect to see responsiveness by elites to public opinion, while in "representation from above", we would expect to see the opposite. This research will also test these competing theories, by examining whether there is

responsiveness in the 'reverse direction' – that Mr Howard's public agenda shaped public opinion.[17]

While shaped as competing theories, it is highly unlikely that a single theory can capture all the different opinion-policy dynamics. The studies that find a large effect often suffer from sample selection bias or over-aggregation, while those that find minimal impact may overlook issue salience. To address this Manza and Cook (2002) suggested a "contingent effects" model, which helps to reconcile these approaches, where "[u]nder some conditions and with some kinds of issues, the relationship between public opinion and policy is strong; under other conditions or with other issues, it is weak" (Manza & Cook, 2002, p. 651). Therefore, a key challenge is to work out which conditions and which issues are likely to generate strong links between opinion and policy, and what conditions/issues are likely to generate weaker links.

One set of conditions that are likely to be relevant are institutional factors, that change which voters are the pivotal voters and this then impacts the degree of responsiveness that may be present. Political leaders are responsive to their pivotal voters (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008), and different electoral structures influences who the pivotal voters are and the way parties and candidates behave and position themselves in an election (Cox, 1990; Downs, 1957; Reilly, 2019; Singh, 2019). Executives in parliamentary systems tend to be less responsive, because the executive is directly accountable to the parliament, and only indirectly accountable to the public (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). Further Australian-specific factors combine to drive a clear Downsian incentive to move towards the median voter. First, compulsory voting incentivises parties to focus on conversion of swing/median voters, rather than mobilisation of their base (Bugarin & Portugal, 2015; Karp et al., 2008; Singh, 2019). Second, majoritarian/single member electorate system leads to a two major-party system (Duverger, 1959), which incentivises parties to be more centrist (Calvo & Hellwig, 2011; Cox, 1990) and to be responsive to the broader electorate, rather than their own partisan supporters/members (Ezrow et al., 2011). Third, the alternative vote system also encourages parties to appeal to the centre/median voter, rather than the extreme (Reilly, 2019).

Importantly, this is context- and electoral system-specific. In the USA, changes in election outcomes are often more dependent on mobilising parties'/candidates' base than convincing uncommitted voters (Hill, 2017). Similarly, the direct-election of the president increases clarity,

[17] These two potential directions of causation broadly algin with "mass-elite" linkage theory, which similarly posits "top-down" and "bottom-up" linkage mechanisms (Gabel & Scheve, 2007; Steenbergen et al., 2007; Telle et al., 2022). This literature also considers the role of political parties in creating these linkages (Dalton et al., 2011) and considers whether declining political party engagement may negatively impact these linkages (Dassonneville & McAllister, 2020). However, the mediating impact of party is beyond the scope of this study.

transparency and accountability, increasing the levels of responsiveness compared to parliamentary systems (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). This will change the incentive structures around these two groups of letter writers. In Australia, this means that politicians and political parties are more likely to be responsive to public opinion coming from the centre, or swing voters. This leads to the subsequent question of whether the letters are coming from this political centre, which would increase the incentives for responsiveness, or whether they are coming from one, or both, ends of the political spectrum – which would decrease the incentives for responsiveness.

3.2 Types of Public Opinion

In the previous section, I set out my theory about responsiveness and representation, and that the level of responsiveness is likely to depend on, inter alia, the political and electoral structures in each system, which will determine which cohort of voters are likely to be pivotal. Associated with this is another condition that I suggest is likely to drive the strength of the link, namely the type of opinion being expressed. If the likelihood of responsiveness is, in part, contingent on the voting calculations about the individual or group expressing that opinion, it recognises that there must be different types, or measurements of public opinion. This section goes through a range of issues with opinion poll centred public opinion and responsiveness research, exploring issues both with the conceptual understanding of public opinion and its current operationalisation. I then explain why the opinion-poll centric approach needs to be refined, and how my research contributes to this, by using a more refined concept of public opinion.

While public opinion has been called “one of the most nebulous concepts in democratic theory” (Herbst, 2011, p. 302), in modern times the opinion poll has become the main source of public opinion research. None of this is to question the value of the representative opinion poll, but rather a call to supplement that with deeper, more textural analysis of public opinion, in order to better understand the dynamics of the relationship between public opinion and public policy. In modern liberal democracies, public opinion is now centred on the idea of aggregating individual claims, with the will of the majority being equated to public opinion.[18] This public is usually equated with the entirety of the potential electorate, consistent with majoritarian notions of political equality, where a representative survey is designed on a one-person-one-voice

[18] This is, in part, justified through the “wisdom of crowds” argument in Condorcet’s jury theorem (Sabl, 2015). However, others suggest that Condorcet’s theorem only applies if voters are expressing their judgment on “the common good” or a collective interest, rather than the reconciliation and aggregation of conflicting individual preferences (Grofman & Feld, 1988).

reflection of the entirety of the public (Lee, 2002). This view of public opinion "so predominate[s]… that it is frequently taken for granted," (Fuchs & Pfetsch, 1996, p. 4) and reflects the "sovereign status" of opinion polls (Lee, 2002, p. 75).

Even if we accept that the correct operationalisation of public opinion is mass opinion on a one-person-one-opinion basis, there are still significant issues with relying on opinion polls for the purposes of responsiveness research, most significantly, the assumption that the opinion measured in the polls is transmitted equally to all political leaders.[19] Most responsiveness studies make an unstated assumption that the opinion measured in the polls is accurately transmitted to political leaders. As Althaus et al. (2011) argue, we too often assume that the relevant causal information has been transmitted to, and heard by, the relevant individual or group. In response, they call for researchers to bring "description back in" (Althaus et al., 2011, p. 1076) to confirm that the relevant information has in fact been transmitted, to ensure that the potential causal link is actually present. This is shown in Butler and Nickerson (2011), which establishes the importance of transmitting the opinion to political leaders.

With the exception of experimental studies (Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Sevenans, 2021), the literature does not provide evidence that the opinion that is the independent variable has been accurately transmitted (or even transmitted at all). There appears to be an assumption that either political leaders would have seen the polling results; or the polling results reflects public opinion that would have bubbled up equally to the attention of relevant political leaders. Martin et al. (2014) briefly acknowledge this issue, but appear to simply assume that what politicians hear will broadly match what is in the polls:

> *What the most important issues (MII) are will emerge through media coverage, poll data and the concerns expressed by people directly to politicians. How these might be biased in one way or another is one issue, but we are concerned here with whether government responds to the public's views as revealed in poll data.(Martin et al., 2014, p. 502)*

If responsiveness requires political leaders to have seen the polling results, this would mean that the independent variable is not public opinion itself, but rather the polling, and the level of responsiveness may depend on the level of media coverage of the poll. In most articles, there is no consideration about whether the political leaders had seen, or were aware of, the polling. It seems unlikely that the causal relationship is based upon politicians having seen and internalised these polls. This means that the causal nexus relies on an unsafe assumption that

[19] I put aside any discussion about the accuracy of the polls *per se*, which is extensively considered in separate literature.

the public opinion seen by political leaders matches the public opinion being measured; however, the research does not identify how this occurred, or measure the accuracy of the transmission of opinion. It also seems unlikely, as each political leader is exposed to very different opinions in their local community (Soontjens & Sevenans, 2022). If we are not prepared to simply dismiss the lack of evidence of transmission of opinion from the public to leaders, we need to turn to other forms of public opinion, where it is more likely that leaders have been exposed to that public opinion, in order to address the causal black box that is assumed away by much of the responsiveness research.

The reliance on opinion polls to study public opinion and responsiveness is problematic, both normatively and empirically. It both pre-determines what can be studied, and which public opinion is valued (Lee, 2002). While understanding the aggregative opinion of the entire electorate is important, particularly in relation to elections, referenda or plebiscites where the ultimate decision is made on the basis of political equality (Blumer, 1948), most policy decisions in liberal democracies are not taken on the basis of one-voice-one-value.

Every voter is likely to have varying intensities, interest and knowledge in each policy issue. While everyone is free to engage across policies and answer opinion polls on whatever issue the pollster chooses, the usefulness and relevance of opinions of individuals with no engagement in a topic is likely to be low. In addition, if political leaders know that someone's vote is unlikely to be influenced by that topic, they have little incentive to be responsive to that public opinion. This effectively leads to separate publics for each topic, made up of that sub-set of the masses that are concerned, knowledgeable, impacted or involved with that issue (Rosenau, 1961). While some have sought to create objective boundaries around issue-publics for each issue, based on those who are "greatly concerned and well-informed" about the relevant issue (Rosenau, 1961, p. 27), such a dichotomous boundary is of limited use and difficult to implement, as the concept is continuous rather than dichotomous. Thus, the only way to operationalise it is subjective - the relevant public for each issue is those who are sufficiently concerned and informed to choose to engage on the issue, because "unprompted mentions of a single topic are indeed a strong sign that an issue is important to a person" (Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023, p. 18).

This requires that different forms of operationalising public opinion are necessary, to help explore the relationship between the public's demands and government policy. If the study of public opinion is simply mass opinion, it ignores the reality that political elites sample the public mood in a variety of different ways; it ignores the intensity problem; and ignores the institutional

incentives to listen more closely to the pivotal voters in that system. Political leaders often reject opinion polls as a primary source of public opinion (Herbst, 1998). Thus, by privileging opinion polls, we conflate the concept (public opinion) and its operationalisation (opinion polls). In order to better empirically understand the linkages between the public and government, we need to use a "more differentiated concept of public opinion" as well as "a far broader range of sources," which will then allow us to "discern the conditions in which different forms of public opinion matter and conditions in which they do not," rather than merely defaulting to mass opinion polls (Entman & Herbst, 2001, pp. 219, 223).

Therefore, V. O Key's circular definition of public opinion is actually useful – public opinion is "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" (Key, 1961, p. 14). This aligns with the functional definition of public opinion, that "the function and role of public opinion is determined by the part it plays in the operation of society" (Blumer, 1948, p. 543). If the purpose of public opinion research is to discover the impact that public opinion has on policy making and policy-makers, then a key factor is which public(s) and which opinion(s) the policy maker considers. As set out above, there are structural incentives which change which publics and which opinions are likely to matter most for each issue and in each electoral system, based on how they weigh/translate their issue opinion into leader opinion. This means that the one-person-one-voice approach of opinion polls is unlikely to be able to paint the full picture of how responsiveness operates.

This section shows that the term "public opinion," which is mainly equated with mass opinion polls, requires a significantly more nuanced approach, in order to empirically analyse the responsiveness of political elites – that by only using mass opinion polls we may be failing to identify other forms of public opinion that is influencing policy. This brings together the theory across this chapter and the previous chapter, that shows that, first, voters' electoral behaviour must balance their views across a range of policy issues, using some sort of internal measure of intensity. Second, rational anticipation of voters' electoral behaviour is likely to influence government policy making. Third, that rational anticipation requires political leaders to listen to a range of public opinions and understand the intensity of those feelings. Fourth, that one way of identifying those opinions with a high degree of intensity is through public opinion expressed through active political participation, such as letters to leaders, petitions and protests. Therefore, there is a strong theoretical basis to suggest that political leaders may be responsive to this sort of public opinion (such as letters) because that represents the high-intensity opinion that may be more likely to influence electoral behaviour.

3.3 Empirical Findings and Hypotheses Building

Having set out my theoretical approach, I now turn to examine the existing empirical findings. Current literature on congruence and responsiveness is extensive and cannot be fully addressed here. Excellent coverage of the issues is available in Beyer and Hänni (2018). In this section I review some of the key themes in the existing responsiveness literature as it relates to my research, and the different ways the theoretical constructs examined above have been operationalised. There are significant differences in the operationalisation of both the public opinion side of the ledger, and the policy side of the ledger.

There are three different ways that public policy has been operationalised in the literature. First, ideology, which is usually focussed on a general left/right split, based on Downs (1957) that political views can mostly be simplified to a single dimension. For example, Stimson et al. (1995) focusses on a single continuum of preferences for a larger/more active government vs a smaller/passive government in the USA. Similarly, Hakhverdian (2012) uses an overall measure of policy mood in the United Kingdom (UK). In a similar vein, Wood and Lee (2009) use quantitative text analysis to convert US presidential speeches into a liberalism index. The advantage of this approach, focusing on the overall public mood, is that it accepts that most of the public will not have sufficient information on particular policy issues/proposals, but that citizens may have sufficiently informed views to have a broad ideological direction (Manza & Cook, 2002).

The second way of operationalising policy is to focus on policy action. This attempts to reflect changes in policy substance. The main ways this is measured are budgetary allocations (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Soroka & Wlezien, 2005; Wlezien, 1995) and roll-call votes in legislatures without strong party control (Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Gause, 2022; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Sevenans, 2021).

The final approach of analysing the responsiveness is to focus on the policy agenda or political attention. This operationalisation focuses on “whether the policy priorities of the public — those issues that members of the public consider to be the most important ones facing the country — are reflected in the activities of” government (Jones & Baumgartner, 2004, p. 2). This matters because if government is not being attentive to the issues that the public consider important, there has been a breakdown in the link between the public and their leaders, and reflects a failure of democracy (Dahl, 1997; Held, 1997). There are a range of ways that this can be measured, including key speeches by heads of government or heads of state, for example the State of the Union in the USA, the Queen’s/King’s Speech in the UK, the prime

minister's Opening Speech in Denmark (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Jennings & John, 2009); parliamentary questions (Bevan & John, 2016); and legislation (Bevan, 2019; Dowding et al., 2016; Dowding & Martin, 2017; Flavin & Franko, 2017; Jones, 2016; Martin et al., 2014). Each of these studies analyses the proportion of time, words, hearings or legislative agenda allocated to each topic. This works on the assumption that paying attention to an issue reflects the actual policy prioritisation. However, this is not uncontroversial, as it is important to recognise that this is not the same as substantive policy action. It is possible that significant attention may be paid to a policy area, with limited action — or vice versa (Dowding et al., 2011). Nevertheless, it is an accepted approach in responsiveness studies. Each of these approaches have distinctive strengths and weaknesses, and thus all are required to help paint a complete picture of responsiveness.

This research focuses on this third operationalisation, the policy agenda. The policy agenda is an important concept because "[p]olicy actions cannot be taken unless attention is directed at the matter" (Jones & Baumgartner, 2004, p. 2), and setting the agenda is a vital part of a democracy - Dahl (1997) suggests that without democratic control over the policy agenda, a polity cannot be considered democratic. As such, this is a necessary (but not sufficient) first step to achieving congruence or responsiveness in policy action. The conflict over what issues are on the agenda is often as important as the substance of the specific policies (Schattschneider, 1961), and competing leaders and parties will often seek to emphasise different policy agenda as much as policy positions (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008).

Having looked at the different ways policy is operationalised, I now turn to look at the multiple ways that public opinion has been operationalised. While opinion polls have become the main source of public opinion in responsiveness studies; other sources of public opinion may be equally relevant to considering responsiveness. By giving primacy to aggregate/majoritarian perspectives of public opinion, we are unable to empirically consider whether other forms of public opinion are having an impact on policy or on the public agenda. There is, however, some limited study of responsiveness to specific sub-cohorts of the electorate, such as co-partisans (Eshbaugh-Soha & Rottinghaus, 2013; Soontjens & Sevenans, 2022). These still focus on opinion polling, rather than other expressions of opinion. While Manza and Cook (2002) recognise that political leaders are likely to be influenced by other forms of opinion than just mass opinion, including activated public opinion, they were unable to operationalise this concept. The difficulty in operationalisation has hampered the empirical study in this area.

As set out above, the literature recognises that the current empirical approach has a range of weaknesses, some of which this study attempts to address. These weaknesses are, first, whether the relevant opinion has actually, and accurately, been transmitted to the political elite; and second, the intensity of that opinion. These factors are worthy of further consideration.

First, the difference between actual public opinion and perception of public opinion. As noted above, most responsiveness research presumes that political leaders' perception of public opinion matches the researcher's measurement of public opinion. If the transmission or perception is incorrect, even if political leaders seek to be responsive, it will fail because they are responding to an incorrect perception of public opinion. Although political leaders may seek to be responsive, their perception is often inaccurate (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Sevenans et al., 2022; Walgrave et al., 2023). This makes transmission of the public opinion to political elites a crucial step in ensuring responsiveness (Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Sevenans, 2021). By only measuring responsiveness based on those issues in opinion polls, we ignore a large range of smaller issues that are not the subject of opinion polls. These smaller issues may nevertheless be extremely important to certain segments of the community. While 60 years old, the concern by one US congressman that "You're here to represent your people but you don't know what they want" is likely still valid (Butler & Nickerson, 2011, p. 72). Within my dataset, some issues (e.g. native title and the location of Sydney's second airport) are likely to have been the subject of opinion polls. But many others are too specialist or specific to have been polled (e.g. establishing a social security treaty between Australia and Germany). This thesis seeks to address both of these issues, by focusing specifically on a measure of public opinion that the relevant political elite did see.

Second, intensity of opinion is often unexamined in traditional responsiveness research, even though "differences in the level of responsiveness related to the salience, coherence, structure, and intensity of citizens' attitudes… are likely to matter greatly" (Manza & Cook, 2002, p. 652). This is an acknowledged limitation in the literature (Manza & Cook, 2002; Martin et al., 2014; Wlezien & Soroka, 2021). There are some that seek to address this issue, by using other forms of opinion, such as protest (Gause, 2022). Hill (2022) identifies a range of specific instances where political elite were knowingly and deliberately responsive to an intense minority, rather than a less-intense majority. The two studies closest to mine that seek to use correspondence as part of a study of responsiveness are Rottinghaus (2007) and Rottinghaus (2023). Rottinghaus (2023) finds that American President Johnson was not responsive to the incoming mail on civil rights, and instead it was the president's rhetoric that impacted the volume of mail. Next, Rottinghaus (2007, p. 376) finds that President Johnson's rhetoric on the Vietnam war

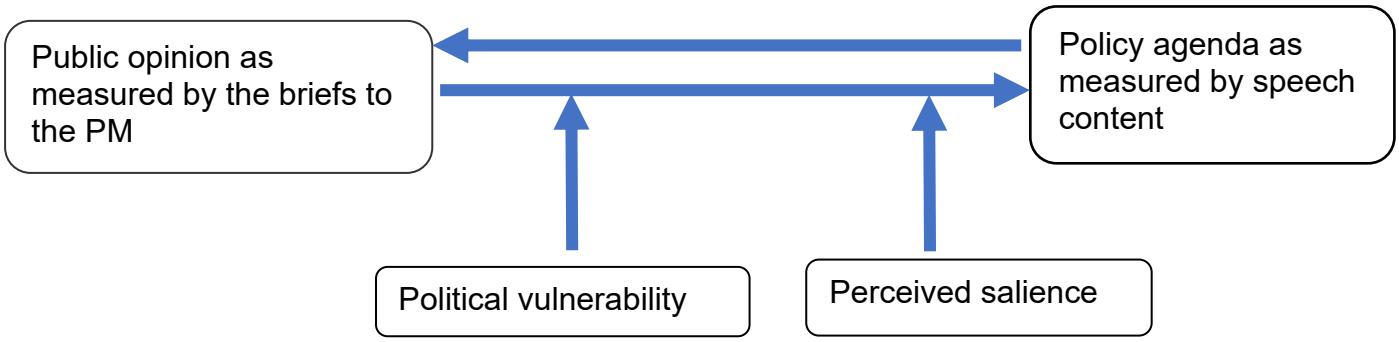
was responsive to hawkish “mail-gauged opinion” but not to dovish mail, or opinion polls. Rottinghaus (2007) suggests that this reflected President Johnson’s understanding of which groups were likely to vote for him. Overall, these findings align with my theory that political elites are likely to be responsive to a form of public opinion that expresses the intensity of the opinion, particularly when they consider that this opinion could be converted into votes.

The theory set out above gives me a solid basis for arguing that political leaders should be responsive to the issues and opinions in letters from members of the public. While congruence will tell us whether political leaders are paying attention to the same issues as the letters at the same time (Alexandrova et al., 2016), responsiveness will help explore the causal relationships. The congruence can be measured both as repeated cross-sections, and as topic-specific time series analysis. Thus, the congruence hypotheses are:

> *H4a: There will be cross-sectional congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard’s speeches.*
>
> *H4b: There will be time-series congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard’s speeches.*

Next, regarding responsiveness, I have demonstrated that a key determinant is the anticipation of the public's electoral behaviour, which is, in turn, influenced by issue intensity. Therefore, given issue intensity is related to the resources invested by the individual (mainly money and time), (Gause, 2022; Hill, 2022; Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023), sending a letter demonstrates a greater investment of resources. It demonstrates that their vote may be swayed by the issue contained in the letter. Contrary to opinion polls, these letters help us identify the existence of “issue publics” — those groups of people who are particularly “psychologically invested” in a topic (Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023, p. 5). This is likely to force leaders to engage with, and consider the importance of, these views. Leaders need to take into account different public opinions to the extent that they consider that those publics and those opinions have substance to them, or “backing” (Blumer, 1948, p. 545) — i.e. the capacity of those views to lead to a loss of votes and a loss at the next election. Research in Belgium shows that members of parliament “believe in the effectiveness of writing a letter” (Hooghe & Marien, 2012, p. 548), showing that the recipients of the letters do believe they have “backing”. Thus, to the extent that political elites believe that the opinion expressed in these letters have “backing,” we should expect the normal operations of responsiveness to be present. This theory leads to the following model (Figure 3-2):

Figure 3-2 Potential bi-directional relationship between public opinion and policy



Source: Author

Where the public agenda is responsive to public opinion, the arrow is moving left to right, mediated by political vulnerability (measured by Newspoll) and the perceived salience (the proportion of letters that are pro-formas compared to individual letters).

> *H5a: Following an increase in the volume of letters on a particular topic, there will be an increase in the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on that topic* (arrow goes left to right).

The theory posits that one driver of responsiveness is politicians' rational desire to avoid defeat at the next election. This should mean that the greater the risk of a loss of power, the greater the likelihood of responsiveness (Hakhverdian, 2012; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008).

> *H5b: Responsiveness will increase when the government's poll ratings decrease.*

This vulnerability is subjective (i.e., it is dependent on the politician's perspective of their likelihood of defeat at the next election) and is therefore difficult to measure. However, two objective proxies for this can be identified, first proximity to an election; second closeness of opinion polls. Unfortunately, given that there is only one pre-election period in my dataset (the lead-up to the 1998 election), it is not empirically possible to test whether responsiveness increases in the lead-up to an election. Thus, this is measured solely by reference to opinion polls.

The literature also considers how the salience of an issue impacts on responsiveness. Martin et al. (2014, p. 501) point out that "[s]alience is important for the obvious reason that policy should be considered most responsive to public opinion if government acts on the issues that are most important to voters." Manza and Cook (2002) also identify that different levels of responsiveness are related to the salience of an issue and the intensity of public opinion on that issue. The fact that individuals have chosen to write to the prime minister on a particular

issue already demonstrates that the issue has salience for them. However, the data also allows me to differentiate between people that have written individual letters, and those that simply signed form letters (identified as “pro-formas” in the dataset). If we assume that an issue has greater salience for an individual if they chose to write an individual letter, compared to signing a form letter, we can also analyse whether issues with higher proportion of letters (higher salience) were more likely to lead to responsiveness.

> *H5c: Responsiveness will be higher for topics with a higher perceived salience.*

There are also a range of studies that show that in some circumstances, public policy can lead public opinion, as Rottinghaus (2023) identifies. This is particularly likely to be the case for subjects/topics with lower levels of salience, issues that are new to the political agenda, or where external events have driven the agenda (Manza & Cook, 2002). Based on this:

> *H6: The more Mr Howard speaks about a topic, the greater the likelihood of there being letters on that topic in the following fortnight (arrow goes right to left).*

3.4 Qualitative Impacts of the Letters on Policy

The theoretical framework I outline above demonstrates that there may be political incentives to be responsive to these letters, because of the intensity of feeling of the letter-writers. I quantitatively operationalise that by looking at whether Mr Howard incorporated those issues into his public agenda. However, there are other ways that leaders may engage with/respond to the letters, or other impacts that the letters may have, that may not be captured in this quantitative operationalization. In this section, I explore these other avenues.

First, as I discuss in the previous chapter, there is a group of letters, and letter-writers, who are not writing with the purpose of changing the political agenda or changing public policy. Rather, their particularised contact is designed to achieve “service responsiveness” (Eulau & Karps, 1977, p. 243). The same drivers of responsiveness set out above are likely to apply to these cases, however the responsiveness would not be able to be identified in my quantitative data. The incentive to provide this responsiveness is likely to be larger than being responsive to the opinion-letters, for two reasons. I expect that the cohort of letter-writers seeking a direct service are more likely to be closer to the median voter, and are more likely to be swing voters, than those who write letters seeking a change in policy. In many of these cases, the

responsiveness is low cost for the political elite. Because the request is specific and particular to the individual involved, it is unlikely to involve expending political capital by deviating from a previous policy position or creating losers in other parts of the community. Thus, while I am unable to measure the level of service responsiveness, I expect to find evidence of this in my qualitative research.

Second, the letters may impact on policy or the political agenda separate from the quantum of letters. Instead, individual letters may have an impact, because the narrative storytelling brought a human face to the otherwise statistical arguments (Gooch, 2018; Small et al., 2013), and generated an emotive/affective response. Political psychology work has shown that humans (including political elite) are not fully rational. Their decision-making processes are limited both by bounded rationality (Simon, 1950), as well as other emotional drivers. Earlier in this chapter I focused on the volume of letters. However, political elite do not only engage with the correspondence in a quantitative manner, but they also read individual letters. Given that these letters often contain deeply emotional, personal stories, there is scope for these emotive stories also to have an impact (Trevisan, 2017). Political psychology shows the impact that stories, narratives and emotions can have on decision-making, with cognition and emotions intertwined both unconsciously and consciously as political decisions are made (Demertzis, 2014). Narratives can change people's minds, as voters are able to connect with an issue when it is told as a narrative (Gooch, 2018). The same can be expected of political leaders. Therefore, while I am unlikely to be able to identify it in the quantitative data, I expect to see evidence of this in the qualitative data.

Third, the letters can be used by leaders not to respond to public opinion, but to shape public opinion. From this perspective, leaders value public opinion not to be responsive, but to determine how to shape their message and win public support for their existing policies (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Traditional responsiveness theory reduces the agency of political leaders, implicitly assuming they prioritise retaining office over policy goals. This fails to consider in what circumstances political leaders may choose to prioritise their own policy positions (Müller & Strøm, 1999). Political leaders may only be responsive to the extent that they feel it is needed to avoid electoral punishment, allowing them to pursue their own policy objectives as much as possible (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). To do this, they use sources of public opinion to identify where they can focus on their own policy goals; where they need to be responsive; and where they can shift public opinion towards their own goals. They can shape public opinion by constructing "perceived majorities" (Entman & Herbst, 2001), using the letters as evidence that public opinion is behind you. This can result in people relying on a

‘consensus heuristic’, believing that public opinion is settled (Schmitt-Beck, 2015); and those opposing may be more reluctant to express opposition. The perception that the prime minister speaks for the nation makes their claims around the reality of public opinion more powerful. However, as with the previous points, this is hard to identify quantitatively, but it may be evident in the qualitative material.

Finally, and returning to Pitkin’s foundational definition of representation, there is a recognition that representatives can (at times) knowingly act contrary to the interests/wishes of the represented, provided that a “good explanation” is provided (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). Mansbridge (2003, p. 515) suggests that this “good explanation” is an integral part of “anticipatory representation,” where the representative seeks to represent “future voters” — namely the opinion of voters at the next election. This requires dialogic communication between voters and the representative. On that basis, responsiveness can include both listening (“actions taken to stay informed about citizen sentiments”) and explaining (“actions taken to provide a credible justification for policy decisions”), even when the final policy act is not in line with public opinion (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p. 743). The research indicates that listening and explaining improve political legitimacy (Dobson, 2012; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). This aligns with Fenno’s perspective that where political elite are not responsive, they attempt to shape the public’s evaluation of them using interpretation, description and justifications for their behaviour, which in turn builds their own legitimacy as representatives (Fenno, 1978). While this is similar to the previous use (‘shape public opinion’), listening and explaining is not about shaping public opinion, instead it is about legitimisation.

This section theorises that there are other ways that letters from the public may have an impact on the political elite, including service responsiveness, generating an emotive/affective response; third, using the letters to shape public opinion; and finally listening/explaining.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the theoretical review of existing literature to derive suitable hypotheses to answer the research questions posed in this thesis. While the relationships between public opinion and various aspects of government actions have been extensively studied relying on opinion polls, the leading theories on responsiveness provide little guidance on what we would expect to see from other forms of public opinion, such as these letters, because we have limited evidence to understand if, and how, these relationships manifest through other forms of public opinion.

To address this gap, I theorise that letters could and should matter in democratic responsiveness, because these letters provide clear evidence of a level of intensity from a segment of the population that is clearly actively engaged and participating in politics (Gause, 2022; Hill, 2022; Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023). Given the importance to political leaders to understand the salience and intensity of issues, these letters are a useful data source because they help address the causal black-box that is often dismissed by much of the responsiveness research (Althaus et al., 2011). Unlike opinion polls, I can show that this form of public opinion was transmitted to, and seen by, the political elite. This is crucial to answer the central question of this thesis, as it points to the possibility of finding some level of responsiveness between the letters and the public agenda. Using these theories, I set out my hypotheses relating to both congruence and responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters. However, other Australian-specific institutional arrangements for the House of Representatives (compulsory voting; preferential voting; and majoritarian electoral system) combine to significantly dampen any expectation of responsiveness.

I then explore other impacts that the letters could have, including theorising how individual letters could help the writers get direct assistance; help to prompt new policy thinking through narrative and emotion; how the letters could be used to shape public opinion; and finally, as a tool for listening and explaining to enhance democratic legitimacy.

The implications and importance of this is that by better understanding what drives responsiveness (and congruence) we can help address Dahl's intensity problem - what if the minority prefers its alternative much more passionately than the majority prefers a contrary alternative? Does the majority principle still make sense? If we see responsiveness to the topics of the letters, it would show government being responsive to intensity of feelings, rather than necessarily the majority or median position.

The next chapter discusses the data sources and methods that I use to test the hypotheses in these last two chapters. Then the subsequent chapters test these hypotheses. Chapter 5 investigates who writes these letters. Chapter 6 look at how the letters were managed within PM&C and the PMO. Chapter 7 tests the various hypotheses around responsiveness, while Chapter 8 covers the elite responsiveness hypothesis, and further qualitative evidence.

Chapter 4 Data and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter sets out the data sources I use in this research and develops an approach to test my hypotheses empirically. To conduct the analysis, I use a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods. There are four main data sources:

1. Archival and other documentary data;
2. Speeches;
3. Interviews; and
4. Australian Election Study and similar datasets.

In this chapter I describe each of these in turn, setting out how the data was obtained; how it was measured; and then the methods of analysis relating to that data. Where necessary, limitations of the data are discussed. Since I collected my own data, I provide significant detail on how the data was collected; how it was coded and how I ensured the validity and reliability of the data.

This thesis provides both a descriptive and causal contribution, in that I answer both the what and why questions (Gerring, 2012). In this case, the lack of descriptive knowledge of the what of letters to leaders hampers our ability to develop causal explanations, which means the first step needs to be some level of descriptive analysis (King et al., 2021). I choose to pursue this study of responsiveness to letters from members of the public through a case study of a single prime minister in a single country. I recognise that such a study may have limited generalisability. However, the benefit of focusing on a single country and single prime minister is that I can bring additional levels of detail, allowing for in depth description and analysis (Gerring, 2007). This is particularly the case given that this is the first study of its kind, focusing on letters to political leaders. This means that significantly more descriptive analysis is required, and this description itself is a significant contribution. While my focus is on providing a particularised account of how Mr Howard's office managed and responded to letters from the public, it is set in a broader, generalised account of how mail was handled in PMOs and PM&C, in order to help identify the level of generalisation that can be made about these findings.

This descriptive analysis relies on extensive archival research and interviews, enabling me to process-trace the transmission of public opinion to the prime minister, getting inside the "decision-making black-box" (Page, 1994, p. 28).

4.1 Archival and other Documentary Data

There are three types of material used from the NAA. The first are the regular briefs to the PM on the volume and topic of correspondence. The second are the actual letters from the public and the responses from the prime minister or the PMO, and the final are other pieces of documentary evidence about how ministerial correspondence was managed. In this section I introduce each of these in turn.

The first new dataset contains details of the volume and topics of letters to Mr Howard, from when he became prime minister in March 1996 until the end of 2000. I coded these against a modified Australian Policy Agendas Project (APAP) codebook (Dowding & Martin, 2017). There are 21 major codes, with each major code having a series of minor codes,[20] Table 4-1 provides the list of major codes and the abbreviations that are used throughout this thesis. Given the importance of this new dataset, I set out in detail how the raw data was collected, measured, and transformed, to provide assurance of the robustness of data.

Table 4-1 Policy agenda codes (and abbreviations)

Macroeconomics
Civil rights, minority Issues, and civil Liberties (civil rights)
Health
Agriculture
Labour and employment
Education and culture (education)
Environment
Energy
Transportation
Law, crime, and family issues (law)
Social welfare
Community development, planning and housing issues (housing)
Banking, finance, and domestic commerce (banking)
Defence
Space, science, technology and communications (science)
Foreign trade
International affairs and foreign aid (international affairs)
Government operations
Public lands, water management, colonial and territorial Issues (public lands)
Indigenous
Immigration and refugees

Source: Adapted from Dowding and Martin (2017)

[20] The minor codes were not used in this research.

Mr Howard become prime minister on 11 March 1996. Almost immediately after he became prime minister, he started receiving regular briefs from PM&C setting out the total volume of mail received in the previous fortnight, as well as identifying the individual topics where he had received at least 30 items of correspondence. Under the *Archives Act 1983*, material enters the "open access period" on 1 January of the year, 20 years after the documents' creation. Thus, as my archival research was undertaken in 2021 and 2022, I could access material created up until 31 December 2001.[21] I sought to obtain the complete population of these briefs, not just a sample. The complete population for the relevant "open access period" is likely to be around 140-150.[22] I was able to access 69 briefs for the period 22 March 1996 to 15 December 2000, and no briefs from 2001. If I limit my sample frame to March 1996 to December 2000, I expected around 115 briefs. A further nine have been identified in the NAA, but I have not been able to obtain access, due to national security concerns around other material in that file. This means that there are likely to be another approximately 35 briefs within the time period under examination, that I have not been able to locate. It appears that this omission is mainly random, as no pattern has been identified to when briefs are missing.

These briefs are mainly located in the NAA series M4326, *Ministerial correspondence of John Winston Howard as Prime Minister*. At the time of research, this series contained 1,512 separate items, one for each date that Mr Howard was prime minister, with each item titled "PM [date]: [topics/issues covered in the correspondence]," and represent the paperwork that Mr Howard dealt with on that day. They were located by searching the NAA's RecordSearch tool, within series M4326, for the terms "ministerial correspondence," or "mail." An example of these briefs is included in the Appendix.

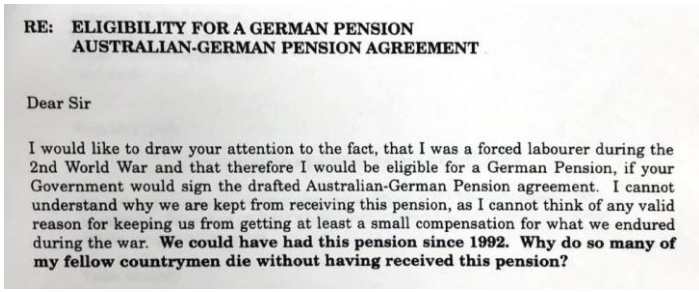
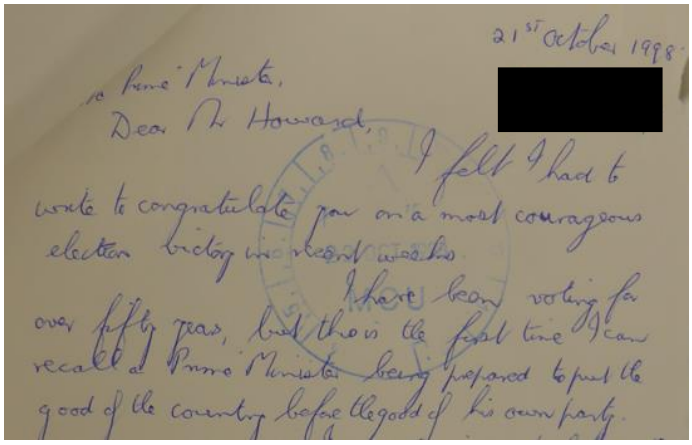
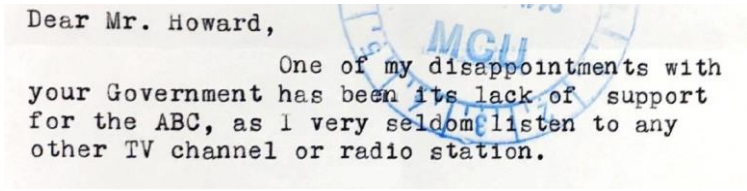
The measurement approach was based on CAP. This project set out various guidance and advice for coding the political agenda (Bevan, 2019). It has been validated and is used in dozens of countries, across extended time periods, and across various aspects of the political agenda, including legislation, political rhetoric, budgetary expenditure, legislative committee business, and public opinion (Baumgartner et al., 2019). Thus, it provides a robust basis for measurement, and facilitates comparisons, across time, across countries and between empirical domains. I manually coded the original topics (a complete list of which is included in the Appendix) against the amended Dowding and Martin (2017) APAP codebook. The Australian codebook has already been tested and is used extensively (Dowding et al., 2010;

[21] I also sought access to the briefs for the remainder of Mr Howard's period as prime minister through a freedom of information request to PM&C. This request was refused by PM&C (FOI/2021/096 refers).

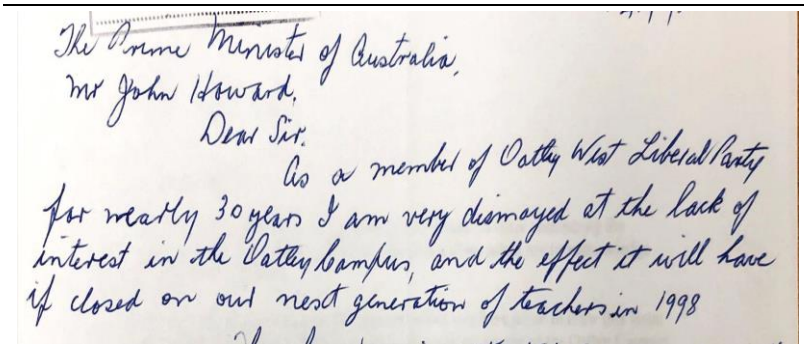
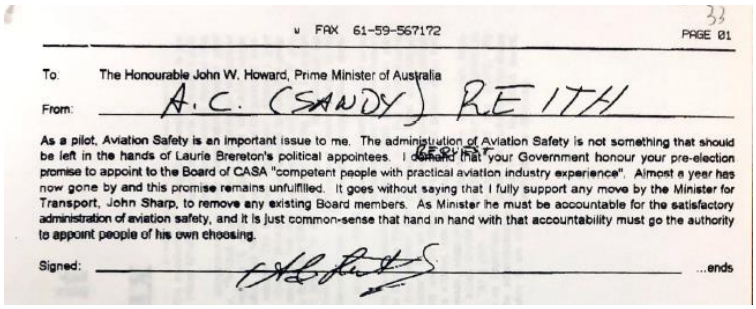
[22] An exact number is not possible to determine, as some briefs covered a longer period, no briefs were provided over Christmas, and occasionally briefs mention that previous briefs were missing due to IT issues.

Dowding et al., 2011; Dowding & Martin, 2017; Halpin et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2014). I added two additional topics, by splitting topic “labour, employment and immigration” into a stand-alone “immigration” topic, and splitting topic “public lands, water management, colonial and territorial issues” into a stand-alone “Indigenous affairs” topic. These changes were made consistent with the overarching policy of the CAP codebook, which is designed to ensure interoperability and comparability across CAP projects (Bevan, 2019). Examples of how the letters were initially coded by public servants in PM&C, and then how I subsequently code them are in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2 Sample letters and coding decisions

Letter text	How it was coded in the brief	How I coded it
 RE: ELIGIBILITY FOR A GERMAN PENSION AUSTRALIAN-GERMAN PENSION AGREEMENT Dear Sir I would like to draw your attention to the fact, that I was a forced labourer during the 2nd World War and that therefore I would be eligible for a German Pension, if your Government would sign the drafted Australian-German Pension agreement. I cannot understand why we are kept from receiving this pension, as I cannot think of any valid reason for keeping us from getting at least a small compensation for what we endured during the war. **We could have had this pension since 1992. Why do so many of my fellow countrymen die without having received this pension?** Source: NAA: A4326 1999/866	Australian-German pension agreement (pro-forma)	Social welfare
 21st October 1998 Dear Mr Howard, I felt I had to write to congratulate you on a most courageous election victory in recent weeks. I have been voting for over fifty years, but this is the first time I can recall a Prime Minister being prepared to put the good of the country before the good of his own party. Source: NAA M4326 666	Election Congratulations (letter)	Government operations
 Dear Mr. Howard, One of my disappointments with your Government has been its lack of support for the ABC, as I very seldom listen to any other TV channel or radio station. Source: NAA M4261 103 Part 3	Cuts to the ABC[23] – Anti (letter)	Science

[23] The ABC is the public-funded broadcaster.

 The Prime Minister of Australia, Mr John Howard, Dear Sir. As a member of Oatley West Liberal Party for nearly 30 years I am very dismayed at the lack of interest in the Oatley campus, and the effect it will have if closed on out next generation of teachers in 1998 Source: NAA M4261 103 Part 2	Proposed Closure of St George Campus at Oatley - Anti (UNSW campus) (letter)	Education
 FAX 61-59-567172 PAGE 01 To: The Honourable John W. Howard, Prime Minister of Australia From: A.C. (SANDY) REITH As a pilot, Aviation Safety is an important issue to me. The administration of Aviation Safety is not something that should be left in the hands of Laurie Brereton's political appointees. I demand that your Government honour your pre-election promise to appoint to the Board of CASA "competent people with practical aviation industry experience". Almost a year has now gone by and this promise remains unfulfilled. It goes without saying that I fully support any move by the Minister for Transport, John Sharp, to remove any existing Board members. As Minister he must be accountable for the satisfactory administration of aviation safety, and it is just common-sense that hand in hand with that accountability must go the authority to appoint people of his own choosing. Signed: ...ends Source: NAA 4326 215	CASA Board and aviation safety (pro-forma)	Transportation

Once a critical mass of fortnightly briefs had been collected and coded, a random 50 per cent sample of the topics was taken and coded by three coders to determine inter-coder reliability (O'Connor, 2020). Krippendorf's alpha was used to establish inter-coder reliability and a threshold level of 80 per cent is considered sufficient (O'Connor, 2020 and Mikhaylov 2012). Coding resulted in an alpha of 0.819, after which I coded the remaining briefs.

Where errors were identified in the briefs, for example when the "previous fortnight" figure did not match what was actually reported in the previous brief, these were not changed, because the brief represents the expression of public opinion that was seen by the prime minister. As such, what the prime minister saw, and thus understood public opinion to be, is the independent variable, rather than the actual number of letters. Where possible, I have interpolated the missing data. For each unique topic, the briefs provided data on mail received in the current fortnight, mail received in the previous fortnight, and total mail received on that topic to date. This means that where only one or two fortnights' data were missing, it is possible to precisely determine the missing data. Where more than two fortnights' worth of data was missing, linear interpolation was used to calculate the 'total mail' for each topic for the missing fortnights. No data was extrapolated.

The method of analysis is primarily quantitative. I use descriptive statistics to provide insight into the pattern of volume and topics of letters. This high-level data is useful to provide a snapshot of overall trends in the volume and topic of mail. To explore the relationship between

the speeches and the letters, Spearman and Pearson correlations, ordinary least squares (OLS) and binary logistic regression are calculated. The nature of the dependent variable differs in each chapter, as such different types of models and transformations are used. Details of the models I apply are set out in the relevant chapters.

This data source has a range of strengths and weaknesses. First, because the data is sourced from briefs provided to the prime minister, it allows for the study to address a significant previous weakness in responsiveness studies which rely on public opinion polls (see Chapter 3). Second, as an administrative data source, rather than a survey, it should contain the full population, rather than a sample, which is particularly useful for cohorts that are either hard to find, or are a relatively small proportion of the total population (Hotz et al., 1997). It therefore avoids issues with selection bias, response bias or other issues with the survey design (Penner & Dodge, 2019). Finally, it provides a unique fortnightly measure of public opinion, whereas most responsiveness research is restricted to annual measures. Together, these provide a unique advantage to this data source.

There are also several weaknesses in this dataset, relating to availability of the briefs; the type of data included; and finally potential errors in the dataset. First, availability is restricted by the *Archives Act 1983*, which prevents access until at least 20 years after the record's creation. It then can impose additional restrictions related to national security concerns. Availability also depends on whether each prime minister wanted this type of information, and whether it was appropriately stored and archived. This limits this study to 1996-2000, because I am not able to locate a consistent series of these briefs for previous prime ministers, and the recordkeeping for these briefs from 2001 forward became more ad hoc. A further limitation is that no details are available about the identity of the sender. Nor is any data included on letters sent to other ministers, shadow ministers, or individual Members of Parliament (MPs), or where there were less than 30 letters on a particular topic in a particular fortnight. While these are limitations, it does not create problems for this study, or introduce any significant risks of error or measurement noise.

At each stage of the process, errors may creep in. I am not able to access the original correspondence, and as such I cannot confirm the reliability and validity of the topic classifications undertaken by PM&C. It is possible that different staff members applied different subject titles to ostensibly similar letters, resulting in misclassification (Mikhaylov et al., 2012). As there were no pre-defined topics, where a letter did not clearly fit into an existing topic, staff at PM&C were able to create a new topic. This is likely to remove the risk of topic drift. Because

all individual topics are then coded against the APAP codebook, difference topics like “Wik Decision” and “Native Title” [24] still end up being coded as the same topic. Finally, even if errors were made, for the purpose of this research, that is not relevant, as I am seeking to understand how Mr Howard was responsive to public opinion as expressed through the briefs. While these issues may have created some minor measurement noise, I do not consider any of these weaknesses to be significant.

The next data source is original correspondence, and their responses, some of which were retained in the NAA. There is not a systematic archiving of all incoming and outgoing correspondence by PM&C — the records show that most incoming and outgoing correspondence is systematically destroyed by PM&C, under the relevant disposal authority from the NAA, which allows for letters “from the public of a routine nature” and their responses, to be destroyed after two years (NAA, 2000, p. 163). However, some letters are retained, where Mr Howard read the letter or personally responded, or where the incoming and outgoing letters are retained in the papers of Mr Howard’s staff members. This systematic bias in what letters are retained means that they are not a random or representative sample of the incoming letters. Nevertheless, these letters provide a valuable insight into the types of letters that were seen by Mr Howard himself, as well as other letters with which the PMO engaged. I use some of these letters that are retained, to illustrate issues throughout the research, and triangulate other sources of information.

The final documentary data source is a range of other documentary evidence, some of which was already public, such as the annual reports of PM&C, from 1978 to the present day. Others are newly uncovered in the NAA, including a series of internal PM&C guidance on handling ministerial correspondence. The archival material also provides a valuable point of triangulation with the views expressed in the interviews — the archival record was contemporaneous, usually written with the express understanding that it would remain private (Fried, 2012).

[24] The *Wik* decision (*The Wik Peoples v State of Queensland & Ors* (1996) 187 CLR 1) was a major Indigenous land rights case in the High Court of Australia. In Australia, Indigenous land rights are often called “native title”.

4.2 Speeches

The second new dataset contains details of Mr Howard's speeches, interviews and media engagements (together referred to as "speeches"), from when he became prime minister in March 1996 through until the end of 2000, similarly coded against my modified APAP codebook, using a seededLDA topic model (Watanabe & Zhou, 2020).[25]

The data are the approximate six million words, across more than 2,000 media events between Mr Howard's election in March 1996 and the end of 2000. To collect these data, I use the speeches archive at www.pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au and catalogued by Sherratt (2019). This dataset does not include most of Mr Howard's speeches during election campaigns, due to caretaker conventions (PM&C, 1998b). Eighty-eight additional speeches and transcripts from the 1998 election campaign period are available from the Trove database, maintained by the National Library of Australia (NLA). This results in a broad coverage of media events, including media interviews, press conferences, speeches and media releases (Table 4-3).

Table 4-3 Media events by type

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Communique	0	0	0	0	1
Broadcast	0	0	0	1	0
Doorstop	0	0	7	1	27
Interview	71	158	237	242	195
Joint Statement	0	0	0	0	1
Media Release	77	99	78	86	81
Message	0	0	0	0	1
Press Conference	16	33	4	0	12
Speech	88	117	124	140	192
Statement in Parliament	3	0	0	1	0
(Total)	255	407	450	471	510

Note: 1996 is part-year only. Categories are determined by pmtranscripts.gov.au.
Source: Sherratt (2019) and Trove.

The speeches are first compiled into a *Quanteda* (Benoit et al., 2018) corpus and cleaned (rectifying obvious errors in dates, removing duplicates or blank transcripts). The data is then segmented between Mr Howard and journalists/interviewers/callers. Normal stopwords, numbers, symbols, punctuation and URLs are removed, along with other high-frequency words

[25] This departs from the traditional CAP coding methodology, which does not allow for units of analysis to be coded against multiple topics. However, speeches are generally coded at the sentence or sub-sentence level (Baumgartner et. al., 2019), which results in each speech having a distribution of topics, much like the result of my approach.

that are not topic-specific, such as “journalist,” “prime,” “minister,” and specific names of journalists.

The measurement approach for the speeches is to develop a topic model using the seededLDA package (Watanabe & Zhou, 2020), which is increasingly being used in social science (Curini & Vignoli, 2021; Fernandes, 2023; Levorato & Sguazzini, 2024; Macanovic, 2022). A seededLDA model uses latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA), which is a probabilistic topic modelling technique that uses the frequency and probability of words appearing in the same document, to allocate documents to topics (Blei et al., 2003). A key drawback of traditional latent Dirichlet allocation is that it is not possible to pre-determine topics. This drawback is addressed in the seededLDA methodology, by incorporating a seed-word dictionary into the model, helping to ensure that the topics identified by the model align with prior theoretical topics (Watanabe & Zhou, 2020).

The seed-word dictionary (see the Appendix the complete dictionary) is based on the modified APAP codebook, following the process set out in Watanabe and Zhou (2020). The dictionary is finetuned using Average Feature Entropy (AFE), which results in discarding words that would likely appear in other subjects or relied on context to enable them to be put into a relevant topic.[26] The next step in the measurement process is to determine the settings for the three seededLDA model hyperparameters (alpha, beta and seed-word weight). Alpha and beta are kept at the default, and weight is set at 0.2, as that results in the lowest standard deviation between model runs (further detail is set out in the Appendix).

Watanabe and Zhou (2020) suggest that careful seed-word design is the most important validation method. I also adopt a range of post-hoc validation methods from Wesslen (2018) and Curini and Vignoli (2021). Consistent with Curini and Vignoli (2021), I identify the documents with the highest and lowest scores in each topic, and ensure that these documents confirm with expectations. For example, the document with the lowest score for environment was about tax and the budget, while the highest was about water salinity. This confirms the validity of that topic. All topics are analysed in a similar fashion. Where inconsistencies are identified (for example, a series of documents on *Wik* and native title were scoring high on civil

[26] For example, while the word “higher” only appears in the APAP codebook under “education”, however by itself, the word “higher” is not uniquely related to education and matched a large number of unrelated subjects (such as “higher growth”, “higher productivity” and “higher wages”). Similar issues are encountered with “perform” (which belongs in the “education” topic) and “road” (which belonged in the “transportation” topic, but actually appears in relation to international “roadmaps”).

rights, and low on Indigenous), the reasons are identified and fixed (in the above example, an error in the dictionary). Three topics continued to be problematic on this analysis:

- Civil rights;
- Housing; and
- Science

Further analysis of the science topic shows that it meets predictive validity, with peaks associated with the multiple tranches of the privatisation of the government-owned telecommunications provider (Telstra). Analysing the civil rights topic shows that after the seed-words and associated derivations, the words with the highest phi[27] are common words across all documents, (such as “view” “issue” “sort” “point” and “make”). Similar patterns occur with the housing topic, with words like “party” “labor” and “election” featuring heavily. This contrasts with other topics, where words with high phis continue to be relevant and clearly linked to the topic. Thus, the background noise means that no discernible patterns are evident in the civil rights and housing topics. As such, these topics are not used in any further analysis.

In addition to these practical validation methods, the ‘word intrusion test’ in the Oolong package (Chan & Saltzer, 2020) are run on the models. Predictive validity is addressed by seeing whether external events can explain sudden shifts or changes in topics over time (Chan & Saltzer, 2020). This is done by looking at the timeline of Mr Howard’s prime ministership, set out by the NAA. In his first two terms, the major issues identified include:

- Port Arthur massacre (April 1996)
    - The data shows that the law topic is barely mentioned prior to the Port Arthur massacre, which then leads to a major peak. The peak lasts around six months, before returning to the previous levels.
- *Wik* native title case (December 1996)
    - The data shows a tripling in the level of discussion on Indigenous affairs topics in late 1996 (aligning with the decision of the High Court of Australia) and remaining prominent until mid-1998 (when legislation was passed), after which it drops off significantly.
- Goods and Services Tax (GST) (August 1998)
    - The data shows an increase in discussion on macroeconomic matters from around June 1998, leading into the release of the details of the GST package in August 1998. The high level of attention on macroeconomics continued until around June 1999, aligning with the passage of the relevant legislation, before reducing to a ‘new normal’ level.
- East Timor (August/September 1999)
    - The data shows a spike in both the international affairs and defence topics in late 1999, aligning with the crisis in East Timor.

[27] The phi scores as the probability of a particular word being associated with a particular topic.

Thus, predictive validity is established, as the model does show increases in these topics in the relevant time periods.

The method of analysis is primarily quantitative. In the initial instance, I use descriptive statistics and provide insight into the pattern of volume and topics of speeches. To explore the relationship between the speeches and the letters, Spearman and Pearson correlation coefficients and OLS and binary logistic regression are used. The nature of the dependent variable differs in each chapter, as such different types of models and transformations are used. Details of the model used are set out in the relevant chapters.

This data source also has a range of strengths and weaknesses. Unlike other studies of responsiveness, which generally focus on major/headland speeches, such as annual budget speeches; the State of the Union; or speeches from the throne, this study includes every media appearance, interview or speech that Mr Howard gave. This allows me to identify more immediate changes, as well as identify issues that may only have appeared briefly on the political agenda. Unlike the major speeches, which are carefully crafted and scripted, many of the speeches in this dataset are press conferences, interviews, or talkback radio, where journalists or members of the public asked questions of Mr Howard, directly influencing his agenda.[28]

Consistent with Jennings and John (2009), only those topics where the proportion of both letters and speech topics is above 2% are included in the analysis. As a result, foreign trade; banking; immigration and refugees; and defence are removed. As I indicate in this chapter housing and civil rights are also not included due to concerns with their validity. This leaves 15 topics within the analysis.

[28] Separately analysing the major speeches is an area for future investigation. It is not done here, because there are insufficient major speeches in the 1996-2000 period covered in the letters. However, should the letters dataset be able to be expanded to cover a longer time period, this would be a fruitful area of investigation.

4.3 Interviews

The next data source is nine semi-structured interviews with key informants, namely Mr Howard and senior members of his PMO, all of whom agreed to be identified by name. In addition, one interview was conducted with a former junior public servant, who was in the area of PM&C that opened the mail and managed this process during the relevant years.[29]

My interviews have two core purposes. First, to establish the facts around how ministerial correspondence and the ministerial correspondence briefs were handled within PM&C and the PMO. Who saw what? When? This is important as it enables a thorough descriptive analysis of how the ministerial correspondence system operated and enables a process tracing of how the public opinion was transmitted from the public through to Mr Howard and the PMO. The second purpose is to understand how Mr Howard and the PMO interpreted and reacted to both the ministerial correspondence and the briefs, to understand how they "view[ed them] and the meaning that they attribute to [them]" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 19). Both interviews and archival research "can provide excellent leverage for causal inference" (Page, 1994, p. 28). In this research the interviews are particularly important to understand whether Mr Howard and the PMO hear this form of public opinion and understand under what conditions they may decide to react (steps 4 and 5 in Table 3-1).

There are three problems that interview data can present. First, with the representativeness of the sample; second with the type and quality of information obtained; and finally the accuracy of reporting (Bleich & Pekkanen, 2013). My sample frame is based on those people who were involved in writing/preparing the briefs in PM&C, and then those people within Mr Howard's office who saw/read the brief, which ensures the appropriateness of the data (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). Given that many of the people who worked in Mr Howard's office have now retired, the biggest challenge was locating them. Once located, my response rate was very high, including a 100% response rate from former political advisers in Mr Howard's office, and three out of four former public servants who I approached in Mr Howard's office also agreeing to be interviewed. The one respondent that declined cited their ongoing senior public service role. However, this actor held a similar work-role as others who I interviewed, where there was

[29] Ethics approval for the interviews was granted by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (2021/101) and informed consent was received by providing a Participant Information Sheet ahead of time, and asking for a signed consent form to be returned prior to the interview commencing. No significant ethics risks were identified, or emerged during the research. Copies of both the Participant Information Sheet and consent forms are provided in the Appendix.

little variation in the description of the way Mr Howard's office functioned, and how the mail was managed.

Both the high response rate and the lack of variation in respondent accounts supports the contention that I achieve saturation in category 2 (political staff) and category 3 (public service staff) (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). The hardest category to get interviews is former PM&C staff — those who worked in the Ministerial Correspondence Unit (MCU), processing the mail and developing the brief. This does mean that the analysis relating to the PM&C internal processes is not as comprehensive. However, this is mainly factual information, and the interviewee has no self-interest in deliberately distorting information. Finally, for key information I triangulate the data with media reporting, archival sources, or other documentary evidence.

The value of any interview depends on the interviewees' willingness to be open, honest and frank about their experiences (Mikecz, 2012). This can be challenging with political elites, because they often have personal agenda to push, such as expanding on their legacy (Tansey, 2009). This risk is mitigated, however, first in respect of Mr Howard as he is able to craft his own legacy through his own books and media presence. My research is unlikely to impact the broader public's perception of him. Second, in relation to the former staff, the majority have retired from public life, reducing the likelihood of having a political agenda. Further, to the extent that the interviews are about process, there is little opportunity for a political agenda to be advanced. I also compare the views of separate groups of interviewees, those who were predominantly Coalition staff members, compared to those who were predominantly public servants. This helps to reduce the risk of active misrepresentation (von Soest, 2023) by interviewees.

Table 4-4 List of interviewees by political status and seniority

	Junior	**Mid-level**	**Senior**
Predominantly public servant	Mr Frank Leverett Public Servant 1	Mr Stephen Brady Mr Malcolm Hazell	
Predominantly Coalition	Mrs Bronwyn Morris	Mr Tony Nutt	Mr John Howard Mr Graeme Morris Mr Arthur Sinodinos

Notes: Prior to becoming Mr Howard's Chief of Staff, Mr Sinodinos spent most of his career in the public service and then went on to be a Senator and Minister in a Coalition Government. Thus, while at the time, his perspective was likely to be that of a public servant, given his later career, I classify him as predominantly Coalition, because the risk of bias or misrepresentation is the same as those who were employed in the PMO as Coalition staff. Consistent with APA citation style, quotes from research participants do not have an in-text citation. Where the person being quoted is not clear from the body of the text, or where the interview is the source of a factual matter, I have provided the interviewee's name in brackets afterwards.
Source: Author

One issue that is apparent is that the time that has elapsed since the events (between 20 and 24 years) had impacted people's memories. However, on matters of fact around how ministerial correspondence or the brief was handled, there are no substantive areas of disagreement between interviewees.

The final area of risk is that interviewees might demonstrate social desirability bias. However, it is unclear in which direction (being responsive, or non-responsive) would be regarded as socially desirable (Sevenans, 2021), as high levels of responsiveness could instead be seen as pandering (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). This risk is mitigated through the ability to triangulate responses both across interviewees (given the reduced risk of social desirability bias from the predominant public servants, who are less likely to have political agenda), but also with the quantitative data. Some interviewees are quite direct, or even rude, about letter-writers, which demonstrates that social desirability bias is not relevant in those cases. All interviewees agreed to be recorded, and I did not notice any hesitation, anxiety or lack of willingness to talk freely due to the recording (Zuckerman, 1972). All interviews were transcribed as soon as possible afterwards. Interviews are then hand-coded using an inductively derived coding frame, by subject and theme. Further details of my interview method are set out in the Appendix.

4.4 Australian Election Study and Similar Datasets

One weakness of the dataset of the letter volume and topics is that no information is available about the individual letter-writers. To address this, I use Australian Election Studies, which are representative surveys of the national electorate, carried out immediately after each national election. I use data from four different AESs, 1993 (Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al., 2019); 1996 (Jones, McAllister, & Gow, 2019); 1998 (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a) and 2022 (McAllister et al., 2022). 1993 and 2022 are used to identify the type of people who were writing to Mr Howard. The surveys ask detailed questions on voter behaviour, attitudes to specific policies and demographics. Further details are in Table 4-5.

Table 4-5 Details of the Australian Election Studies used in this research

Year	N & response rate	Letter writing question	Comments
1993	3,023 (response rate 62.8%)	Have you or anyone in your family living here ever contacted your local Federal MP or anyone in his or her office? [IF YES] Was it…(circle as many as apply) … to express an opinion? … to seek information? … to seek help on a problem you had?	
2022	2,436 (response rate 43.1%)	Over the past five years or so, have you done any of the following things to express your views about something the government should or should not be doing? - Contacted a politician or government official by email - Contacted a politician or government official either in person, or in writing [IF YES] Did you contact a politician or government official to … express an opinion? … seek information? … seek help on a problem you had?	The follow-up question about the type of contact was only asked on the online version (82% of total completions).

Source: McAllister et al. (2022) and Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019)

Given there has been a change in wording to the introductory question (in 1993, the question was limited to contact with their Federal MP, and there was no time limit, while in 2022, the question was broadened to any "politician or government official" and restricted to a five year time period), it isn't possible to compare the proportion of people who have contacted a politician, however similar models can still be fit to determine if there has been any changes to the determinants of participation. The AES surveys conducted between 1996 and 2019 either did not ask about contacting a politician, or where they did, failed to disaggregate between the different modes of contact, which is theoretically important. Therefore, even though these two points in time are not within Mr Howard's prime ministership, these surveys are the best source of data. Where findings are consistent between both 1993 and 2022, that should give us sufficient confidence that they would also be found during the Mr Howard's term in office.

I also use the 1996 AES (Jones, McAllister, & Gow, 2019) and 1998 AES (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a) to analyse the top issues that motivated vote choice in those two elections. I also use a series of other data sources, including the annual Roy Morgan surveys of most important issues, source from Martin et al. (2014) and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES, 2015) to identify how centrist Australian voters are. More details of these data sets are provided in relevant chapters.

The method of analysis is quantitative. Initially, I used descriptive statistics to provide insight into the pattern of political participation and contacting political leaders. Correlations and logistic regressions are also used to explore the correlates of political participation. Details of the model used are set out in the relevant chapters.

Chapter 5 Who Writes to the Prime Minister?

Introduction

In this chapter, I address the question of "What incentive did Mr Howard have to be responsive to the opinion letters?". Within this broad question, there are a range of sub-questions that need to be considered, including: Who writes? How do the two types of writing (expressing an opinion and seeking information/help) relate to each other and to other forms of political participation? What are the differences between people who write these two types of letters, and those who do not write? Finally, what was Mr Howard's office's perception of who wrote?

These questions are important for several reasons. First, as set out earlier, the theory expects that the Australian political system is likely to drive voters and parties to the political middle. Parties and candidates are therefore incentivised to prioritise voters in that middle ground, or the median voter, rather than on their own political flanks. To understand the level of incentive to respond to the letter-writers, we need to know whether these letter-writers are close to the median-voter or are on the political flanks. Then, regardless of the findings of that first question, we need to know how Mr Howard and the PMO viewed the letter-writers, because if they were perceived as in the political middle, that incorrect view may itself drive responsiveness. Second, if political leaders are responsive to the letters, understanding who these letter-writers are helps to address the broader question in the literature of "to whom" is government responsive (Hänni, 2017; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008)? This in turn contributes to the normative debates around the quality of democracy.

In this chapter I demonstrate that Mr Howard was incentivised not to be responsive to opinion letter-writers. First, I show that, in the period under study, Australian voters were one of the most centrist in the world. Second, using bivariate analysis, I show that people who contact politicians to express an opinion are disproportionately unlikely to be in the centre of the political spectrum and are unlikely to change their vote. While those who write seeking help/information (unlike opinion letter-writers), are much closer to the general population and are closer to the political centre. This creates a political incentive to respond to this second group, but not the first. I then turn to multivariate analysis to better understand what factors influence who writes, and why they write, which tests hypotheses H1a – H3b. Finally, I use interview data to show that while Mr Howard and the PMO were concerned about public opinion, they did not regard themselves as pure "delegates" (in the sense of trustee/delegate dichotomy), and were aware of different drivers of correspondence, and had a broadly accurate

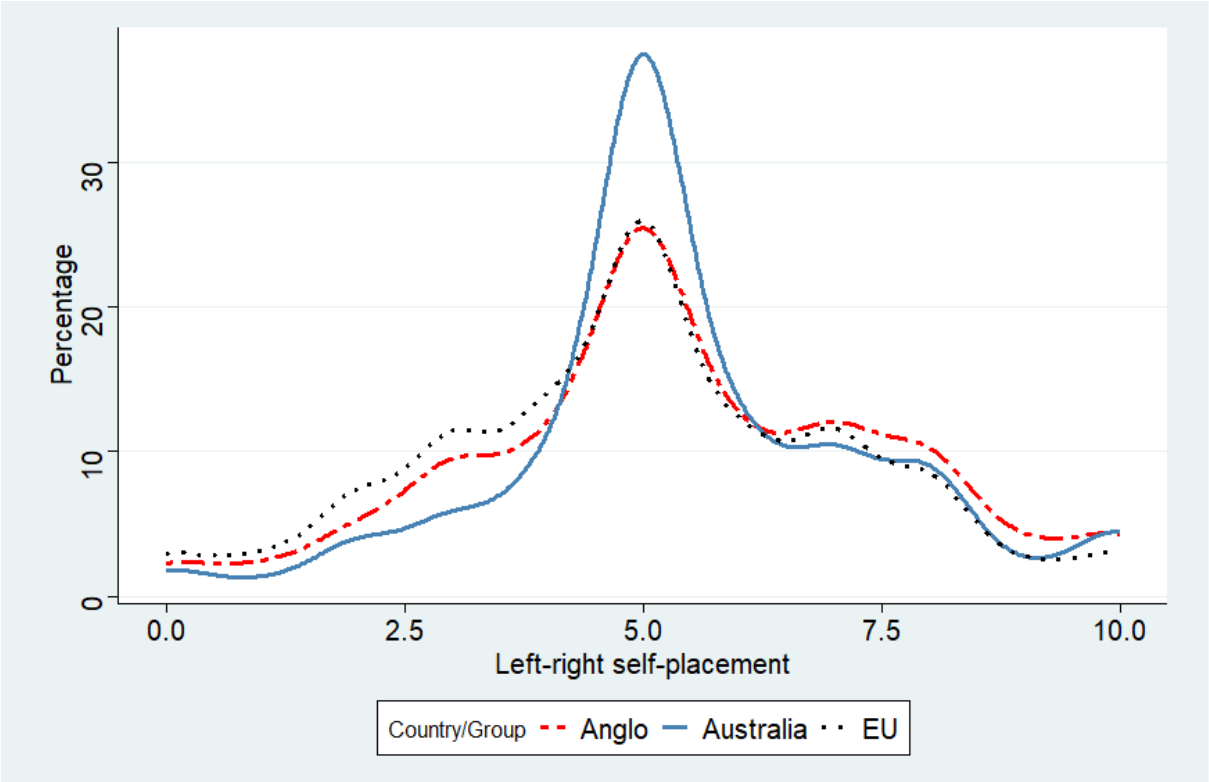
perception of the types of people that wrote letters, which influenced their attitudes to the opinions expressed in the letters.

Throughout this chapter, I focus on the potential for voters to swing between the two major parties/coalitions (the centre-left ALP and the centre-right Coalition). As set out in Chapter 3, the nature of Australia's compulsory voting and compulsory preferential voting system means that the political benefits (cost) for Mr Howard of people moving their vote from (to) a minor party on the right to the Coalition are minimal. The main benefit (costs) for Mr Howard is from voters moving from (to) the ALP to the Coalition. However, that is a very small group, with approximately 10% of respondents indicating that they either change their vote between major parties since the previous election, or seriously considered changing their first preference vote during the election campaign (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a; Jones, McAllister, & Gow, 2019). This makes it particularly important for Mr Howard and his PMO to accurately identify whether being responsive to those expressing an opinion could potentially result in a vote gain (loss).

Before moving into the main parts of this chapter, in Chapter 3, I suggest that, given the institutional and structural incentives in the Australian political system, Australia was likely to be a highly centrist polity. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES, 2015)[30] shows that more than 35% of Australians placed themselves at the middle of the left-right spectrum, far higher than comparable countries in the European Union (EU) or other Anglo countries (Figure 5-1).

[30] Module 1 is used, as that uses Australian data from the 1996 election, which was the first election that Mr Howard won. This is the only CSES module that covers the time-period of my research.

Figure 5-1 Left-right self-placement (by country)



Notes: Anglo countries are Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the USA. EU countries based on membership at time of CSES wave 1 data collection - Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. Data weighted by polity demographic. No difference in result was identified for unweighted data, or sample weighted data.
Source: CSES Module 1 (CSES, 2015).

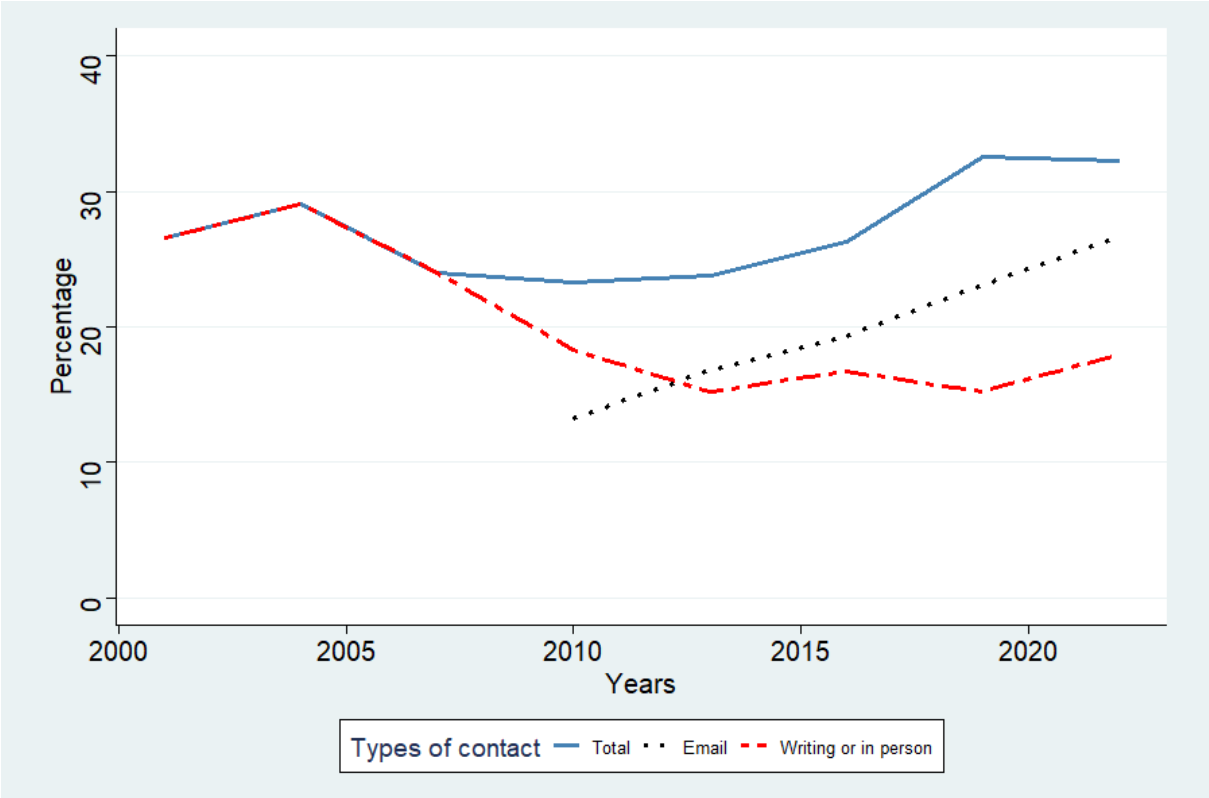
As set out in Chapter 3, this distribution is what is theoretically expected in a two-party, majoritarian system (Benoit, 2006; Duverger, 1959). This unimodal distribution encourages political leaders to seek votes from the political centre (Downs, 1957). After demonstrating that Australian political leaders and parties have a significant incentive to respond to the political centre, I now turn to look at who the letter-writers were.

5.1 Letters as Political Participation

The data available at the NAA does not provide details of the letter-writers. However, the AES (Cameron & McAllister, 2020) contains sufficient data to enable an analysis of the political views and social backgrounds of people who write opinion letters. In this section, I provide demographic information about letter-writers, both those who are expressing an opinion and those who are seeking help/information. I then test the hypothesis set out in Chapter 2 relating to the political placement and partisanship of the opinion letter-writers. By understanding the types of people who write these letters, it will help to understand the incentives that political leaders have to respond to the letters.

Since 2001 the AES has asked respondents if, over the past five years, respondents have "*contacted a politician or government official either in person, or in writing, or some other way"* to "*express your views about something the government should or should not be doing*. In 2010, the additional option of "*contacted a politician or government official by email*" was added. The AES shows that the proportion of people who have contacted a politician or government official has been slightly increasing since 2001, fluctuating between 23% and 32% (Figure 5-2). While the CSES does not provide repeated cross-sectional analysis,[31] in wave one (conducted in Australia in 1996), 16% of Australians reported contacting an MP in the previous 12 months,[32] slightly above the average of other democratic countries (13%) (CSES, 2015). This demonstrates that Australia's pattern of contacting government officials appears to be broadly similar to the rest of the world.

Figure 5-2 Percentage of people contacting government officials (2001 – 2022)



Sources: AESs 2001 – 2022 (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019b; Bean, McAllister, Gibson, et al., 2019; Bean, McAllister, & Gow, 2019; Bean et al., 2017; McAllister et al., 2020; McAllister, Bean, et al., 2019; McAllister, Makkai, et al., 2019; McAllister et al., 2022).

As set out in Chapter 4, most surveys do not ask respondents whether they contacted a politician to express an opinion, or to seek help/information. This restricts my ability to

[31] Questions on this form of political participation were only asked in wave 1 and wave 2, and the wording changed significantly between those waves.

[32] This is not comparable to Figure 5-2, because the question in Figure 5-2 is "over the past five years or so".

differentiate between the two theoretically different types of contact. However, both the 1993 and 2022 AES asked about the purpose of the contact.[33] At the same time, there has been a change in wording to the introductory question — in 1993, the question was limited to contact with their Federal MP, and there was no time limit. That was changed in 2001, which broadened the scope to any "politician or government official," but restricted the time period to the previous five years. This means it is not possible to directly compare the proportion of people who have contacted a politician; however, analysis can still be undertaken to determine the type of people who undertook these modes of political participation. As set out in Table 5-1, between 1993 and 2022, there has been a significant shift in the types of contact, from only "seeking help/info" to only "expressing opinion". This raises questions beyond the scope of this research, but it may reflect that the increased availability of government information online has reduced the need for this type of contact.[34]

Table 5-1 Changes in types of contacting behaviour over time (percent)

	Express opinion only	Seeking help/info only	Both	n
1993	14	72	14	(700)
2022	52	31	17	(685)

Source: McAllister et al. (2022) and Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019).

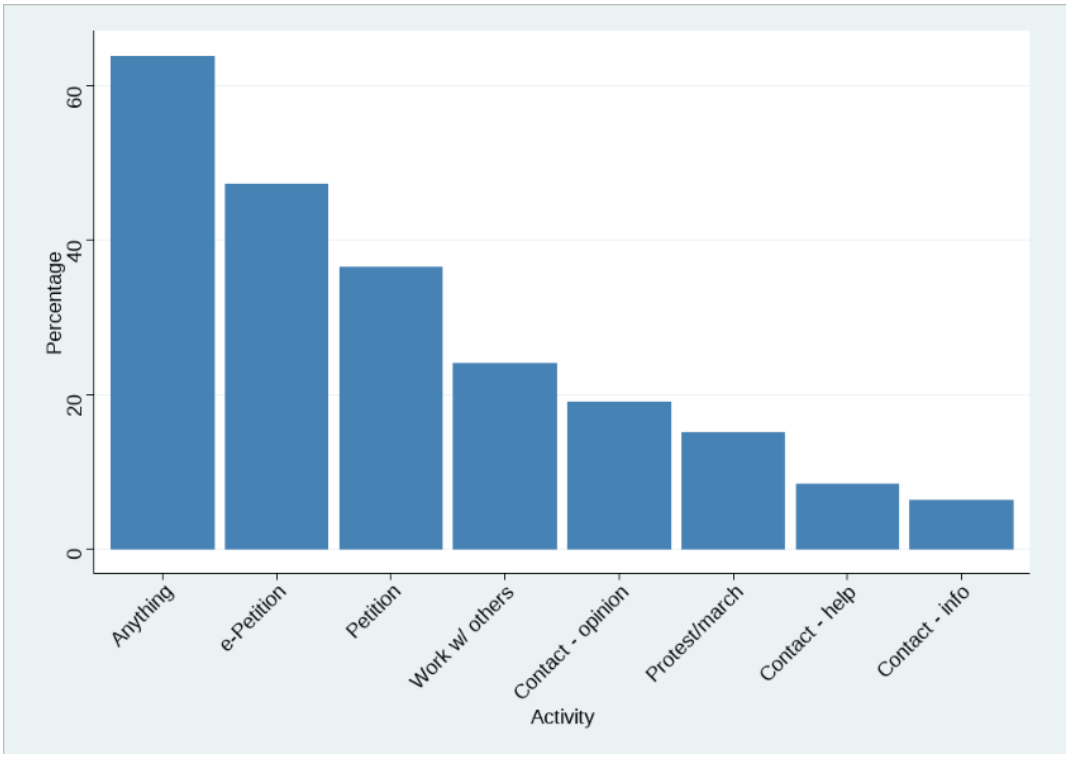
In 2022, these questions are part of a battery of questions about forms of political participation, including "taken part in a protest, march or demonstration," "worked together with people who shared the same concern," "signed a written petition," and "signed an online or e-petition." In 2022, almost two-thirds of respondents report undertaking at least one act of political participation in the previous five years[35] (mean 1.64 activities), with signing an e-petition being the most common (Figure 5-3), while contact (seeking information or help) is the least common.

[33] Question wording is provided in Chapter 4.

[34] For example, in 1901, Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, received a letter from a lawyer complaining that he was "not able to obtain the acts passed by the Commonwealth Parliament" (NAA: A8, 1901/218/39). Now, all legislation is readily accessible online.

[35] Unlike many international surveys, the AES does not ask about voting as a form of political participation, given Australia's compulsory voting.

Figure 5-3 Percentage of Australians undertaking different types of political participation (2022)



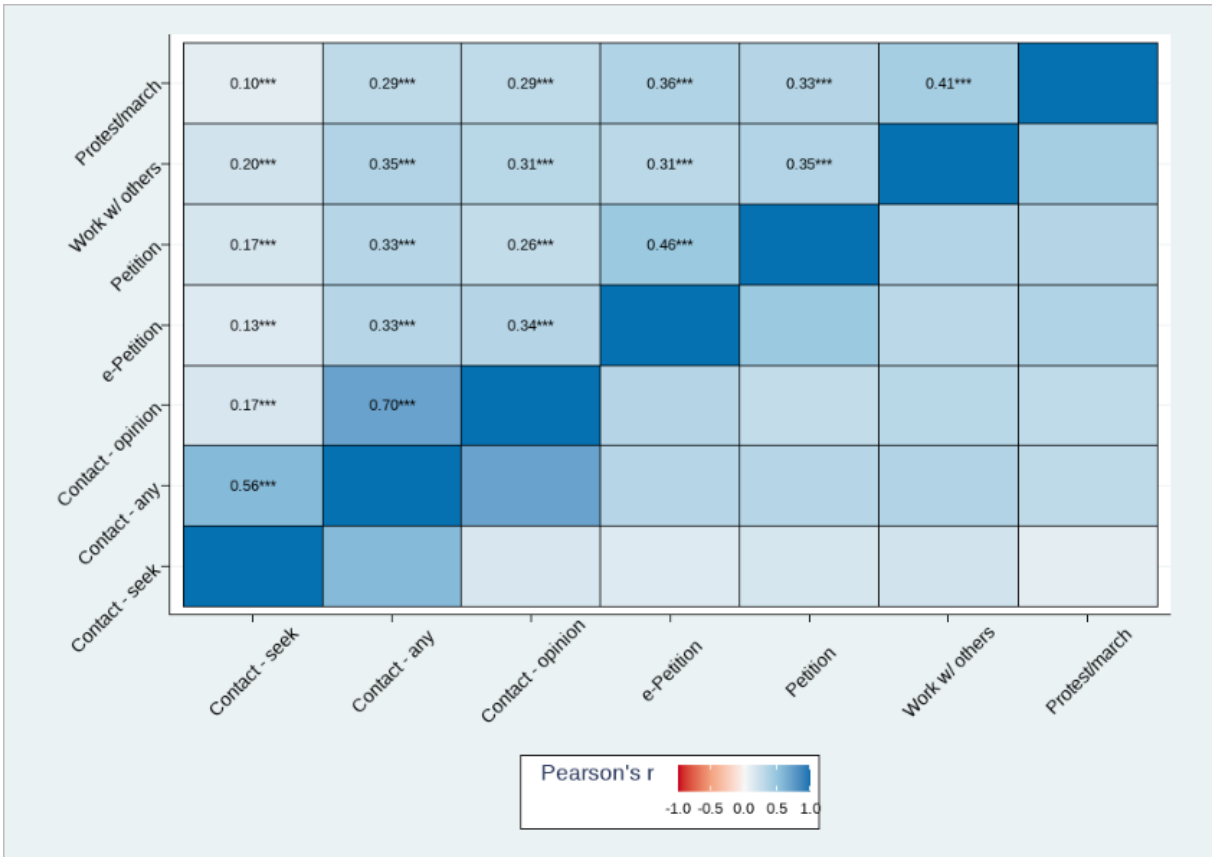
Source: McAllister et al. (2022), n=2,508

However, political participation is “not one-dimensional and cumulative, but fragmented and specialised” (Newton & Giebler, 2008, p. 2). Thus, even though Figure 5-3 could appear to show a steady increase from particularised contact, through protest/march, then contacting to express an opinion, etc, the theory suggests that different people engage in these different forms of participation. To understand how these different forms of participation relate to each other, I undertake a correlation analysis. As can be seen in Figure 5-4, the correlation between contacting to express an opinion and contacting to seek help/information is very low (0.17). Similarly, the correlation between contacting to seek help/information and the other forms of political participation are the lowest across the correlation matrix, with all being below 0.19. This demonstrates that writing to seek help/information is quite a different form of political participation.

However, the correlation between contacting to express an opinion and other traditional forms of participation is higher (0.27 for petitions, 0.34 for e-petitions, 0.31 for working with others; and 0.29 for attending a protest/march). These correlation figures are similar to the correlations between these other forms of traditional political participation, because all of these activities are seeking to change policy, and broadly align with the ‘general referent’ concept of Verba and Nie (1987). These findings are consistent with earlier Australian research (Bean, 1989, p.

457; 1991b), which uses factor analysis techniques to confirm that contacting "about a community problem" is broadly similar to other forms of political participation, while contacting "about a personal problem" is separate.[36]

Figure 5-4 Correlation of different forms of political participation (2022)[37]



Note: *p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001* Pearson's correlation used, with pairwise deletion. No substantive differences are found with listwise deletion.
Source: McAllister et al. (2022), n=2,508.

The next section analyses these two groups, to test my hypotheses (H1a – H3b) regarding to which groups Mr Howard has more of an incentive to be responsive.

[36] While the text of the questions differs slightly, the underlying concept is the same.

[37] This analysis cannot be replicated for 1993, as the questions about other forms of political participation were asked in a separate part of the survey and asked about willingness to undertake the activity, rather than whether the respondent had actually undertaken the activity.

5.2 Who Writes Letters Expressing an Opinion?

I now compare the 'express opinion' group to the rest of the electorate, first in a bivariate manner, to test hypotheses H1a, H2a and H3a, that:

> *H1a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.*
>
> *H2a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be partisans compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.*
>
> *H3a: People who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.*

I then undertake multivariate analysis to see whether these factors hold, once controlling for the usual determinates of political participation. For each of the variables in these hypotheses, I start by not controlling for any other factors, because I am not looking to determine the causes of contacting, but rather, from the point of view of the prime minister and the PMO, were the letter-writers people whose vote could change? To test this, I analyse the following variables from the 1993 and 2022 AES, and a summary of the findings are in Table 5-2, with more detailed analysis below.

Table 5-2 Summary of findings (bivariate analysis) — opinion letter-writers are not swing voters.

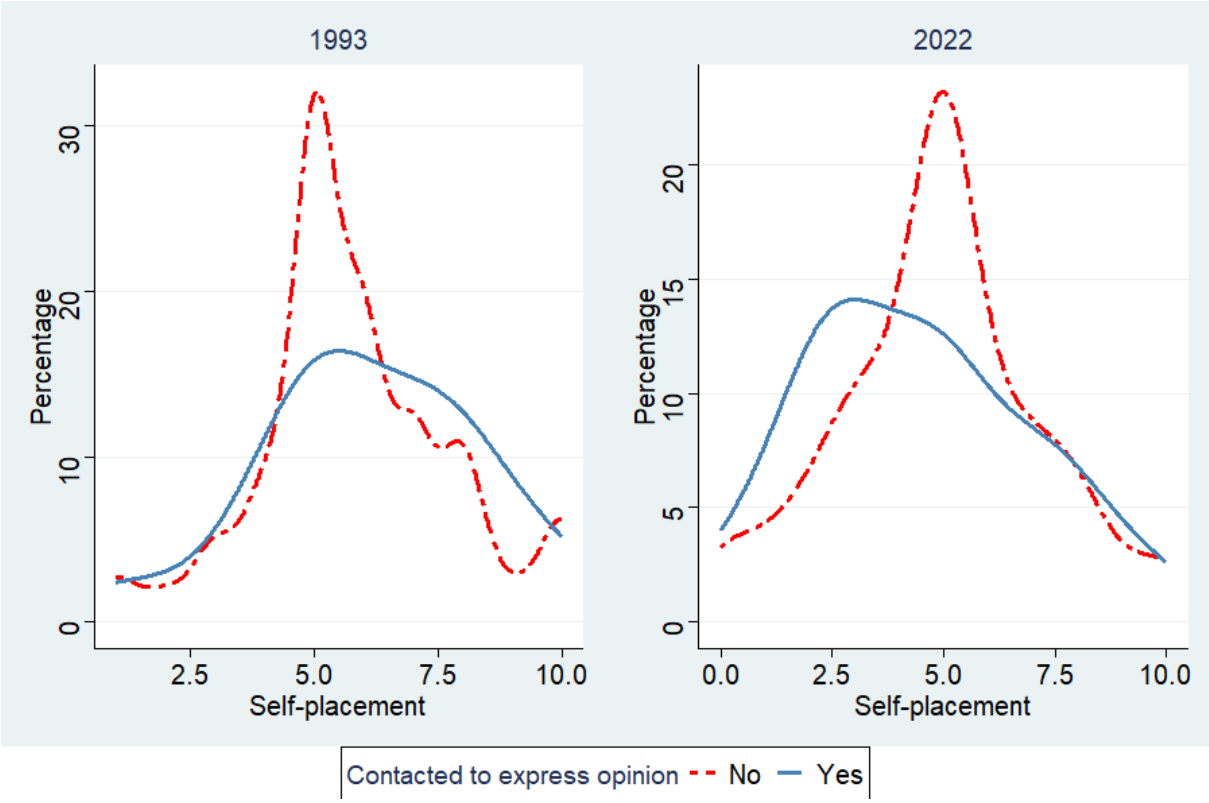
Hypothesis	Variable	Findings	Summary
H1a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Left-right self-placement	Those who have written to express an opinion: - 2022: A third less likely to place themselves in the political centre, compared to those who have not written (p<0.001). - 1993: 20% less likely to place themselves in the political centre, compared to those who have not written (p<0.001).	Supports hypothesis
	Self-placement compared to parties (only 2022)	Those who have written to express an opinion are 28% less likely to place themselves between the two major parties, compared to those who have not written (p<0.001).	Supports hypothesis
H2a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be partisans compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Level of partisanship	Those who have written to express an opinion: - 2022: 35% more likely to a "very strong supporter" of their political party and 33% less likely to not identify with any political party, compared to those who had not written (p<0.001). - 1993: 75% more likely to a "very strong supporter" of their political party and 13% less likely to not identify with any political party, compared to those who had not written (p<0.001).	Supports hypothesis
H3a: People who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	When did you decide how you would definitely vote in this election?	Those who have written to express an opinion: - 2022: 26% more likely to have decided how they would vote "a long time ago," compared to those who have not written (p<0.001). - 1993: 37% more likely to have decided how they would vote "a long time ago," compared to those who have not written (p<0.001).	Supports hypothesis
	During the campaign, seriously considered changing how they would vote	Those who have written to express an opinion: - 2022: Half as likely to have considered changing their vote between major parties (p<0.001). - 1993: Not statistically significant, but pointing in the hypothesised direction, 40% less likely to have considered changing their vote between major parties (p=0.2).	Weak support
	Changed vote since previous election	Those who have written to express an opinion: - 2022: Not statistically significant, but pointing in the hypothesised direction, 30% less likely to have changed their vote between major parties since the last election (p=0.11). - 1993: 60% less likely to have changed their vote between major parties since the last election (p<0.05).	Weak support

Notes: 'Self-placement in political centre' is those respondents who put themselves as 4, 5, or 6 on a 0–10-point scale. 'Self-placement between parties' is those respondents who put themselves between where they placed the ALP and the Liberal Party. I use the Liberal Party, rather than the Coalition, because the AES asks people to place the Liberal Party and National Party separately. As the Liberal Party is the leading member of the Coalition, I have focused on where respondents have placed the Liberal Party. The Liberals and Nationals were considered as one major party for the purposes of H3a.

Source: McAllister et al. (2022) and Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019).

To test hypothesis H1a, that people who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion, I look at how respondents placed themselves on a left-right scale. As can be seen in Figure 5-5, Table 5-3 and Table 5-4, in both 1993 and 2022, those who contacted to express an opinion were significantly less likely to be in the centre of the political spectrum, compared to the rest of the electorate.

Figure 5-5 Left-right self-placement, by contacting to express an opinion (1993 & 2022)



Sources: Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019) and McAllister et al. (2022)

In both years, those who contacted a politician to express an opinion were significantly less likely to place themselves in the centre (self-placement of 4, 5 or 6), compared to those who had not written. In 2022 (Table 5-3), only 35% of those who contacted a politician to express an opinion placed themselves in the centre, while 52% of the rest of the electorate placed themselves in the centre. In 1993 (Table 5-4), 47% of those who contacted a politician to express an opinion similarly placed themselves in the centre, compared to 59% of the rest of the electorate. In both years, this was a statistically significant difference.[38] As a robustness check, I compare the distance from the median voter (self-placement of 5 in both years) between these two groups. In both years, there was a statistically significant difference

[38] $p < 0.001$ for both 2022 and 1993.

between the two groups,[39] with those who had written to express an opinion placing themselves further to the political extremes than those who had not written (Figure 5-6).

The data also shows that it is people from the opposite side of the government of the day that disproportionately write to express an opinion. In 1993, when Mr Keating lead the ALP government, it was those on the right (self-placement of 7, 8, 9 or 10) who were over-represented in the opinion letters (44% of those who expressed an opinion were from the right, compared to 32% of the population at large). While in 2022, when Mr Morrison lead a Coalition government, it was the left (self-placement of 0, 1, 2, or 3) who were over-represented (41% of those who expressed an opinion were from the left, compared to 29% of the population at large). This is also likely to reduce responsiveness, given that this cohort is the furthest from the government of the day, and thus least likely to vote for them in a future election.

In 2022, the AES also asked respondents to place the major parties on the same left-right scale. This allows me to look at whether respondents placed themselves between the two major parties, or on one of the flanks (either to the left of the ALP or the right of the Liberal Party).[40] Table 5-3 shows that while around 70% of the total electorate considered themselves in between the two major parties, only 51% of those who wrote to express an opinion similarly placed themselves between the major parties — a roughly 30% reduction. All of these provide consistent support for hypothesis 1a, that people who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion. As such there is limited political benefit in being responsive to this cohort's issue priorities, in the Australian institutional context.

[39] $p < 0.000$ for 2022; $p < 0.005$ for 1993.

[40] I am using the Liberal Party in this instance, rather than the Coalition, because the AES specifically asks people to place the Liberal Party and National Party separately. As they are the leading member of the Coalition, I have focused on where respondents have placed the Liberal Party.

Table 5-3 Political characteristics of opinion letter-writers (2022)

Characteristic	Didn't write an opinion letter	Opinion letter writer	p-value
Self-placement in political centre			<0.001
Centre	52%	35%	
Not centre	48%	65%	
Self-placement between major parties			<0.001
Between parties	71%	51%	
Not between parties	29%	49%	
When decided how to vote			<0.001
A long time ago	42%	53%	
Any other time	58%	47%	
Considered changing vote			<0.001
1. No	72%	66%	
2. Between majors	6%	3%	
3. Between majors & other	21%	31%	
Changed vote since last election			0.11
1. No	73%	75%	
2. Between majors	10%	7%	
3. Between majors & other	17%	18%	
Partisanship			<0.001
1. Very strong support	17%	23%	
2. Fairly strong support	42%	49%	
3. Not very strong support	24%	16%	
4. Do not identify with a party	18%	12%	
	n=2,032	n=476	

Notes: p values are from Pearson's Chi-squared test. 'Self-placement in political centre' is respondents placed themselves as 4-6 on a 0–10-point scale. 'Self-placement between parties' is respondents who placed themselves between where they placed the ALP and the Liberal Party. 'When decided how to vote' is a binary, with 'any other time' combining the five other response options. The results are substantively the same when run with the original six categories. 'Considered changing vote' combines the questions of who the respondent said they voted for with 'Was there any time during the election campaign when you seriously thought you might give your first preference to another party in the House of Representatives?' 'Changed vote since last election' combines the questions of who the responded said they voted for, with who they said they voted for in the 2019 election. For these questions, the Liberals and Nationals are considered as one major party. Source: Author analysis of McAllister et al. (2022)

The second hypothesis in this section (H2a) is that people who write to express an opinion are more likely to be partisans compared to those who do not write to express an opinion. This is important because partisanship is a leading determinant of voting patterns (Marks, 1993). In 2022 (Table 5-3), of the people who wrote to express an opinion, almost a quarter identified as a “very strong” supporter of their party, compared to only 17% of the rest of the population. Similarly, only 12% of letter-writers said they had no party identification, compared to 18% of the rest of the population. A similar pattern is evident in 1993 (Table 5-4), further demonstrating that people who write letters expressing an opinion are strongly attached to their political party, reducing the incentive for Mr Howard to be responsive, given the Australian institutional context. These findings provide support for this hypothesis.

The next hypothesis (H3a) is that people who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion. This is tested against three variables in both 1993 and 2022. First, when respondents decided how to vote. This indicates those people who are “potentially available for conversion” (McAllister, 2003, p. 22). Those people who indicated that they decided how to vote “a long time ago” are not “available for conversion,” and therefore there is less electoral incentive for Mr Howard to be responsive to their issue priorities. In both years, people who wrote were more likely to have made up their mind how to vote “a long time ago.” In 2022, while 42% of non-letter-writers made up their mind how to vote “a long time ago”, amongst those who had written to express an opinion, it was 53% (Table 5-3). A similar pattern was evident in 1993 (Table 5-4). While 41% of non-letter-writers had made up their mind “a long time ago,” it was 56% amongst those who had written to express an opinion. These findings support the hypothesis.

Table 5-4 Political characteristics of opinion letter-writers (1993)

Characteristic	Didn't write an opinion letter	Opinion letter writer	p-value
Self-placement in political centre			<0.001
Centre	59%	47%	
Not Centre	41%	53%	
When decided how to vote			<0.001
A long time ago	41%	56%	
Any other time	59%	44%	
Considered changing vote			0.2
1. No	80%	84%	
2. Between majors	10%	6%	
3. Between majors & other	10%	10%	
Changed vote since last election			0.031
1. No change	78%	84%	
2. Between majors	10%	4%	
3. Between majors & other	12%	12%	
Partisanship			<0.001
1. Very strong support	16%	28%	
2. Fairly strong support	41%	45%	
3. Not very strong support	27%	14%	
4. Do not identify with a party	16%	14%	
	n=2,824	n=199	

Notes: p values are from Pearson's Chi-squared test. 'Self-placement in political centre' is respondents who put themselves as 4-6 on a 0–10-point scale. 'When decided how to vote' is a binary, with 'any other time' combining the five other response options. The results are substantively the same when run with the original six categories. 'Considered changing vote' combines the questions of who the respondent said they voted for with 'Was there any time during the election campaign when you seriously thought you might give your first preference to another party in the House of Representatives?' 'Changed vote since last election' combines the questions of who the responded said they voted for, with who they said they voted for in the 1990 election. For both these, the Liberals and Nationals were considered as one major party.

Source: Author analysis of Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019).

The second variable is whether the respondent seriously considered changing their vote during the election campaign, which would demonstrate that they self-identify as a voter that is open to conversion. In 2022, 6% of those who didn't write an opinion letter considered changing their vote between major parties, but amongst those who wrote to express an opinion, it was half

that, at around 3% (Table 5-3). In 1993, there was a similar pattern, (Table 5-4), but it was not statistically significant. This provides some support for the hypothesis. The final variable to test this hypothesis is whether the respondents said that they changed their vote since the previous election. People who wrote to express an opinion are less likely to report having changed their vote between major parties, compared with the rest of the electorate. In 1993 (Table 5-4), 10% of the electorate changed their vote between major parties between the 1990 and 1993 elections. Among those who had written to express their opinion, it was only 4%. In 2022, there was a similar pattern (Table 5-3) but it was not statistically significant.

Overall, all three variables provide reasonable levels of support for the hypothesis H3a that people who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion. Along with the other two hypotheses, they all consistently point to the conclusion that the people who write to politicians to express an opinion are not representative of the broader electorate — they are ideologically more extreme; they are less likely to change their vote; and they are more partisan. While the hypotheses are tested using 1993 and 2022 data (which is not within the period being examined), the consistency of their findings provide some degree of confidence that a similar pattern would be likely during the 1996-2000 period being examined in the thesis. As such, given the Australian electoral system, this depresses any incentives to be responsive to this cohort. The impact that this has on incentives to be responsive is institutional and context dependent. A similar distribution of opinion letter-writers in a voluntary voting system would likely lead to a different set of incentives for political leaders.

However, this bivariate analysis does not control for the range of other factors that are known to influence political participation. As set out in Chapter 2, there are three broad categories of factors that impact on levels of political participation (including letter-writing). The first are socio-demographic, and include age, income, gender, birthplace and education-levels. The second are the factors identified in existing political participation research, including internal efficacy and external efficacy; interest in politics; satisfaction with democracy; and trust in political institutions. The final group are those that I focus on here, being direct measures of likelihood of the individual changing their vote between the major parties. As shown above, each of these ‘likelihood of changing vote’ measures shows that those people who write to express an opinion are statistically significantly less likely to change their vote, compared to the general population.

In order to develop a model, an exhaustive best subsets approach was taken, using both Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) to compare models (Zhang, 2016). In each case, the BIC models are rejected as being too parsimonious, and therefore unable to address the research questions. Models 1 and 2 in Table 5-5 include all the theoretically suggested predictors, for 1993 and 2022 respectively. This shows that many potentially important factors have no statistically significant impact on whether a person wrote a letter or not, including age, gender and strength of party identification — which are broadly consistent with earlier findings in Australia (Bean, 1989, 2012). Some of these factors are removed in Models 3 and 4, which adopt the best subsets approach, but retained the demographic controls.

Table 5-5 Who writes to express an opinion? (1993 and 2022)

	Model 1: express opinion - 1993	**Model 2: express opinion - 2022**	**Model 3: express opinion - 1993**	**Model 4: express opinion - 2022**
Predictors	**Odds Ratios**	**Odds Ratios**	**Odds Ratios**	**Odds Ratios**
Intercept	0.27 *	0.32 *	0.24 **	0.24 **
Left-right - distance from median	1.04	1.08 +		1.13 **
Considered changing vote between major parties	0.69	0.73		
Changed vote since last election between major parties	0.55	0.74	0.51*	0.75
Voted for incumbent	0.64 **	0.82	0.70 *	0.78 *
Strength of party identification - Low	0.73	0.87		
Interest in politics - Low	0.57 *	0.43 ***	0.55 **	0.39 ***
Gov't can't be trusted	1.04	0.87		
External efficacy - Join a party (Neutral)	0.43 **		0.37 ***	
External efficacy - Join a party (Low)	0.31 ***		0.34 ***	
Internal efficacy - Well qualified to participate (Low)	0.74		0.62*	

Predictors	Model 1: express opinion - 1993 Odds Ratios	Model 2: express opinion - 2022 Odds Ratios	Model 3: express opinion - 1993 Odds Ratios	Model 4: express opinion - 2022 Odds Ratios
Internal efficacy - Well qualified to participate (Neutral)	0.70		0.60*	
External efficacy - Say in what gov't does (High)	1.14			
External efficacy - Say in what gov't does (Neutral)	0.81			
Gender - Male	0.77	0.85	0.77	0.82
Education - University	1.00	1.87 ***	0.91	2.11 ***
Age	1.00	1.00	1.01	1.00
Birthplace - Overseas, ESB	1.06	0.82	0.93	0.87
Birthplace - Overseas, NESB	0.54	0.60 *	0.55	0.56 **
Income Q2	0.74	1.12	0.83	1.19
Income Q3	0.98	1.44 +	1.08	1.53*
Income Q4	1.21	1.27	1.43	1.32
Satisfied with democracy - satisfied		0.60 ***		0.63 ***
External efficacy - Difference who's in power (Low)		0.78		
External efficacy - Voting makes a difference (Low)		0.89		
External efficacy - Voting makes a difference (High)		1.40		
Observations	1,750	1,747	2,287	2,077
R^2 Tjur	0.06	0.10	0.06	0.10

+ p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Notes: Left-right - distance from median is calculated as the absolute value from the median. 'Considered changing vote' combines the questions of who the respondent said they voted for with 'Was there any time during the election campaign when you seriously thought you might give your first preference to another party in the House of Representatives?' 'Changed vote since last election' is determined by combining the questions of who the respondent said they voted for, with who they said they voted for in the previous election. For both these factors, the Liberals and Nationals are considered as one major party.

‘Strength of party identification’ is a binary of the 3-point partisanship scale, combining “very strong” and “fairly strong”. ‘Interest in politics’ is a binary of the 4-point scale, combining “some,” “not much” and “none,” which splits the population roughly evenly. ‘Gov’t can’t be trusted’ is a binary of the 4-point scale, combining the two low trust answers, and the two high trust answers. The efficacy factors are 3-point scales, reduced from the original 5-point, combining the lowest two, and the highest two. In all cases when the number of categories is changed, as a robustness check, I confirm that the results were substantively similar when run with the original categories. Birthplace - Overseas, ESB defined as New Zealand; UK; Ireland; USA; South Africa; and Canada (McAllister et al., 2022). Sources: Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019) and McAllister et al. (2022).

These models show that once these additional factors are included, many of the factors I initially focus on are no longer statistically significant, but still point in the hypothesised direction. This reduces the support for my hypotheses (Table 5-6) and instead supports the traditional political participation literature that political participation is driven by interest in politics, satisfaction with democracy; internal and external efficacy; and certain socio-economic factors such as education.

Table 5-6 Summary of findings (multivariate analysis)

Hypothesis	Variable	Findings
H1a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Left-right self-placement	Supported for 2022. Not supported for 1993.
H2a: People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be partisans compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Level of partisanship	Not supported for 2022. Not supported for 1993.
H3a: People who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	During the campaign, seriously considered changing how they would vote	Not supported for 2022. Not supported for 1993.
	Changed vote since previous election	Not supported for 2022. Weak supported for 1993.

Source: Author analysis of Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019) and McAllister et al. (2022)

This section shows that this cohort of letter-writers are highly engaged, with a strong sense of external efficacy, but dissatisfied with the government — they are registering a protest, believing that it will have an impact, even though they themselves are unlikely to change their vote between major parties. From Mr Howard’s perspective, it does not matter that many of the hypotheses were not supported once other factors are included, because the fact remains that these letter-writers are significantly less likely to change their vote, compared to the rest of the community. This point is a crucial step in my argument that the level of responsiveness to these letters is likely to be low, as there was limited political incentives for Mr Howard to be responsive.

5.3 Who Writes Letters Seeking Help/information?

Next, I look at the other group of letter-writers, those who are seeking help/information. For this cohort, the hypotheses all mirror the previous cohort, based around the theory that this group is closer to representative of the broader electorate and are motivated to write because of a specific need, not because of political engagement. As such there is a greater incentive for political leaders to be responsive to this group.

> *H1b: People who write to seek help/information will have a similar left-right position to those who do not write to seek help/information.*
>
> *H2b: People who write to seek help/information will have the same level of partisanship as those who do not write to seek help/information.*
>
> *H3b: People who write to seek help/information are no more nor less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to seek help/information.*

As with the previous section, I start by not controlling for other factors, because I am seeking to establish from the point of view of the prime minister and the PMO, were the letter-writers people whose vote could change? To test this, I analyse the same variables from two AESs. A summary of the findings is in Table 5-7, with more detailed analysis is below. I then undertake multivariate analysis to see whether these factors hold, once controlling for the usual determinates of political participation. To test the hypotheses in this section, I first tested to see if there is a statistically significant difference between the groups. However, failure to reject a statistically significant difference is not the same as finding statistical equivalence. Therefore, where I cannot reject the null hypothesis that the two groups are not significantly different, I use equivalence tests (Cribbie, 2023; Lakens et al., 2018; Shishkina et al., 2018; Wellek, 2002), to test the hypotheses that two groups are equivalent, with the null hypothesis that there is a substantial relationship between variables.

Table 5-7 Summary of findings (bivariate analysis) — help/info letter-writers are swing voters

Hypothesis	Variable	Findings	Summary
H1b: People who write to seek help/information will have a similar left-right position to those who do not write to seek help/information.	Left-right self-placement (numeric)	Those who have written to seek help/information are statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate (2022 $p<0.01$) (1993 $p<0.01$)	Supports hypothesis
	Self-placement compared to parties (only 2022)	Those who have written to seek help/information are statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate (2022 $p<0.001$)	Supports hypothesis

H2b: People who write to seek help/information will have the same level of partisanship as those who do not write to seek help/information.	Level of partisanship	Those who have written to seek help/information: 2022: are statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate (p<0.05) 1993: are NOT statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate.	Mixed results
H3b: People who write to seek help/information are no more nor less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to seek help/information.	When did you decide how you would definitely vote in this election?	Those who have written to seek help/information are NOT statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate (both 1993 and 2022).	Does not support hypothesis
	During the campaign, seriously considered changing how they would vote	Those who have written to seek help/information: 2022: are statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate. 1993: are NOT statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate	Mixed results
	Changed vote since previous election	Those who have written to seek help/information are statistically equivalent to the rest of the electorate.	Supports hypothesis

Notes: 'Self-placement in political centre' is those respondents who put themselves as 4, 5, or 6 on a 0–10-point scale. 'Self-placement between parties' is those respondents who placed themselves between where they placed the ALP and the Liberal Party. The Liberals and Nationals were considered as one major party for the purposes of H3b. P values in this section are from the equivalence tests, so p values of < 0.05 indicate that the two groups are statistically equivalent, with an equivalence threshold of Cohen's d = +/-0.25. For categorical variables, a test of equivalence based on Shishkina (2018) and Cribbie (2023) is run and a Cramer's V threshold of 0.1 is used.

Source: McAllister et al. (2022) and Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019).

The first hypothesis (H1b) is that people who write to seek help/information will have a similar left-right position to those who do not write to seek help/information. In 2022, while there is a slightly lower proportion of letter-writers in the political centre (46% vs 49%), there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups (p=0.35). However, this is insufficient to allow us to reject the null hypothesis that the two groups are different. To do this, equivalence testing based on Cramer's *V* was undertaken (Shishkina et al., 2018),[41] which confirmed that the null hypothesis that the relationship between the categorical variables is substantial can be rejected.[42] As such, a negligible relationship between writing to seek help/information and left-right self-placement can be concluded.

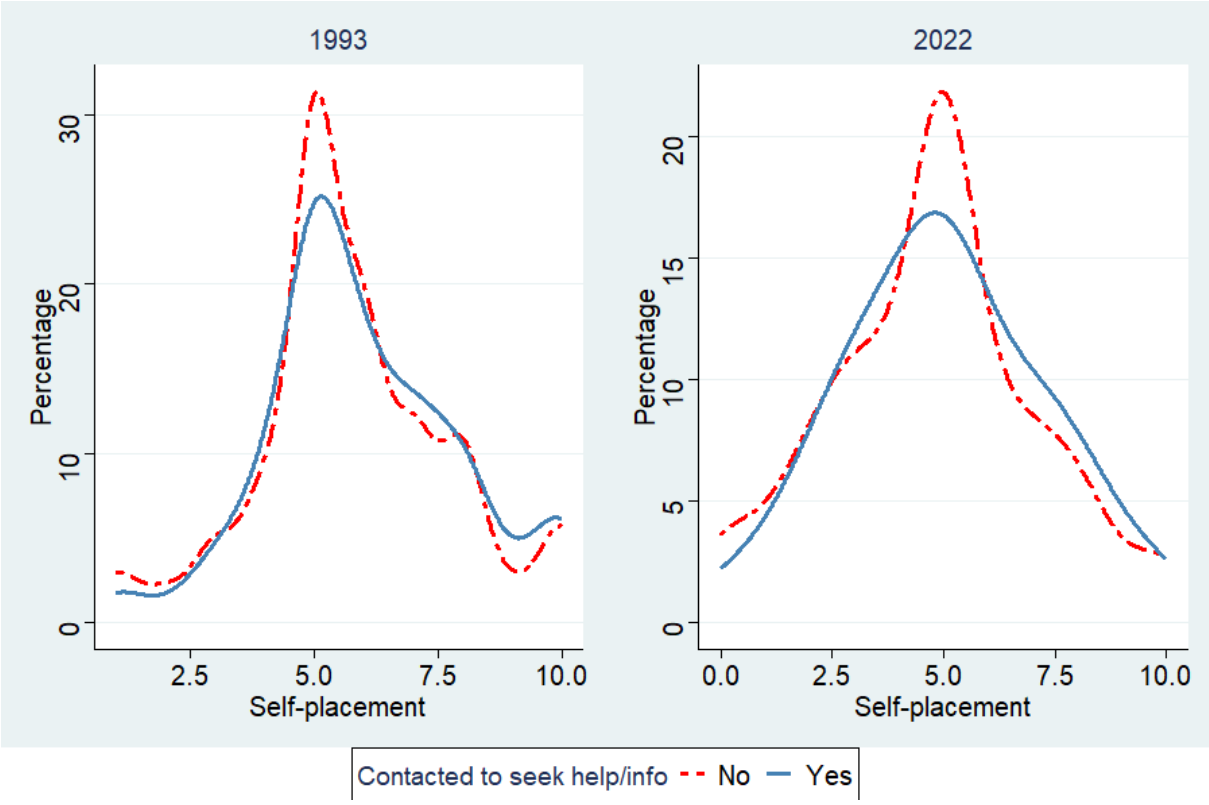
A similar pattern emerges in 1993, with 59% of the electorate placing themselves in the centre, compared to 56% of those who wrote seeking help/information. Again, this is not a statistically

[41] A Cramer's *V* threshold of 0.1 is used throughout this chapter.

[42] This variable was also tested using the 0-10 scale as a continuous variable, rather than the factor variable (left/centre/right) that has been used up until now. This confirmed the two groups' equivalence (p<0.01), with a equivalence threshold of Cohen's d = +/-0.25.

significant difference (p=0.18), and an equivalence test similarly finds that a negligible relationship can be concluded.[43] Both these findings support the hypothesis that people who write to seek help/information are not less likely to be in the political 'middle' than the rest of the electorate. This is also evident by comparing Figure 5-5 and Figure 5-6, which show that those who contacted to seek help/information followed a broadly similar left-right distribution as the rest of the population, while those who wrote to express an opinion skewed heavily away from the centre. As a robustness check, I also compare the distance from the median voter (self-placement of 5 in both years) between those who wrote to seek help/information and the rest of the electorate. In both cases, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups,[44] with those who had written to seek help/information placing themselves in practically the same position to those who had not written.

Figure 5-6 Left-right self-placement, by contacting to seek help/info (1993 & 2022)



Sources: Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019) and McAllister et al. (2022)

The next variable to test this hypothesis is self-placement compared to parties (which is only available in 2022). Sixty-eight percent of respondents placed themselves in the middle of the major parties and 65% of people who wrote seeking help/information similarly placed

[43] An equivalence threshold of Cohen's d = +/-0.25 was set. A TOST confirms the groups' equivalence (p<0.01)

[44] p = 0.89 for 2022; p = 0.24 for 1993.

themselves in the middle, which is not a statistically significant difference (p=0.45). The statistical equivalence of these two groups is confirmed by the equivalence test,[45] providing further support for the hypothesis.

The next hypothesis (H2b) is that people who write to seek help/information will have the same level of partisanship as those who do not write to seek help/information. In 2022, 20% of people who wrote seeking help/information considered themselves “very strong supporters” of their party, compared to 18% of the rest of the electorate, which was not a significant difference (p=0.3). This is confirmed by the equivalence test.[46] In 1993, 23% of people who wrote seeking help/information considered themselves “very strong supporters” of their party, compared to 15% of the rest of the electorate, which is a significant difference (p<0.001). As such, I have mixed support for this hypothesis.

The final hypothesis in this section (H3b) is that people who write to seek help/information are no more nor less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to seek help/information. As with the previous section, this is tested against three variables. First, when people decided how to vote. Among those who wrote letters seeking help/information, 48% decided how to vote a long time ago, compared to 41% of the rest of the population (1993). This is a significant difference (p<0.001), and as such does not support the hypothesis. In 2022, the figures were 48% and 44%, respectively, which was not a significant difference (p=0.2). The equivalency tests for 2022 provided mixed results, with the TOST result failing to reject the null hypothesis that there is a significant relationship. As such, this variable did not support the hypothesis.

The second variable is whether the respondent considered changing their vote between the major parties. Of those who wrote seeking help/information, the proportions who considered changing their vote between major parties were 7% and 6% (1993 and 2022, respectively), compared to 10% and 6% (1993 and 2022, respectively) of the rest of the population. In the data for 1993, there is a statistically significant difference at the p<0.1 level, but not in 2022 (p=0.7). When equivalency tests are performed for 2022, a negligible effect is found, supporting the hypothesis. In addition, in 2022, while not statistically significant, those who had written were more likely to have considered changing their vote between major parties than the rest of the population, potentially making this cohort particularly important to political leaders. The final variable is whether the respondent changed their vote since the previous

[45] An equivalence threshold of Cohen’s d = +/-0.25 was set. A TOST confirms the groups’ equivalence (p<0.001).
[46] An equivalence threshold of Cohen’s d = +/-0.25 was set. A TOST confirms the groups’ equivalence (p<0.05).

election. Of those who had written seeking help/information, the proportion who had changed their vote since the last election was 11% and 8% (2022 and 1993, respectively), compared to 9% and 10% (2022 and 1993, respectively). In each case the difference is not statistically significant (p=0.3 and p=0.2). When equivalency tests are performed for both years a negligible effect is found, supporting the hypothesis.

Overall, two of the three variables provide support for hypothesis H3b that people who write to seek help/information are no more nor less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to seek help/information. Along with the other two hypotheses, they all point to the conclusion that the people who write to politicians to seek help/information are broadly similar to the rest of the electorate, from the perspective of their political alignment and potential to change their vote. As such, given the Australian electoral system, there are incentives to be responsive to this cohort.

Having undertaken bivariate analysis, which, as set out above, is the relevant analysis from Mr Howard's perspective, I now turn to multivariate analysis. Taking the same approach as the previous section, models 1 and 2 in Table 5-8 include all the theoretically suggested predictors. Like the findings above, this shows that many potentially important factors have no statistically significant impact. These factors are removed in Models 3 and 4, which adopt the 'best subsets' approach, while maintaining both the demographic controls and the same variables as above, to enable comparison.

Consistent with those who write to express an opinion, those who are interested in politics are significantly more likely to write for help/information, as are those with a higher level of external efficacy, and those with a university education (2022 only). However, in contrast with those who write opinion letters, party political factors are not relevant — 'voting for the incumbent;' 'changed vote since last election;' nor left-right orientation are all not significant.

Table 5-8 Who writes to seek help? (1993 and 2022)

	Model 1: seek help - 1993	Model 2: seek help - 2022	Model 3: seek help - 1993	Model 4: seek help - 2022
Predictors	**Odds Ratios**	**Odds Ratios**	**Odds Ratios**	**Odds Ratios**
Intercept	0.62	0.05 ***	0.84	0.09 ***
Left-right - distance from median	0.97	0.94		0.95
Thought of changing vote between major parties	0.89	1.28		
Changed vote since last election between major parties	0.76	1.19	0.81	1.34
Voted for incumbent	0.89	1.03	0.88	0.98
Strength of party identification - Low	0.88	0.94		
Interest in politics - Low	0.66 **	0.53 ***	0.63 ***	0.52 ***
Gov't can't be trusted	1.02	1.28		
External efficacy - Join a party (Neutral)	0.70 *		0.62 ***	
External efficacy - Join a party (Low)	0.73 +		0.57 ***	
Internal efficacy - Well qualified to participate (Low)	0.61 **		0.61 ***	
Internal efficacy - Well qualified to participate (Neutral)	0.64 **		0.63 **	
External efficacy - Say in what gov't does (High)	1.33 +			
External efficacy - Say in what gov't does (Neutral)	1.16			
Gender - Male	0.90	1.29 +	0.84	1.20
Education - University	1.00	1.33 +	0.95	1.33 +
Age	1.00	1.01 *	1.00	1.01 *
Birthplace - Overseas, ESB	1.08	1.13	1.06	1.23
Birthplace - Overseas, NESB	0.80	0.64	0.86	0.72

Predictors	Model 1: seek help - 1993 Odds Ratios	Model 2: seek help - 2022 Odds Ratios	Model 3: seek help - 1993 Odds Ratios	Model 4: seek help - 2022 Odds Ratios
Income Q2	0.80	1.51 *	0.84	1.40 +
Income Q3	0.85	0.94	0.86	0.86
Income Q4	0.94	1.61 *	0.95	1.39
Satisfied with democracy - satisfied		0.88		0.92
External efficacy - Difference who's in power (Low)		0.91		
External efficacy - Voting makes a difference (Low)		1.28		
External efficacy - Voting makes a difference (High)		1.41		
Observations	1,750	1,747	2,287	2,077
R^2 Tjur	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03

+ p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Notes: Left-right - distance from median is calculated as the absolute value from the median. 'Considered changing vote' combines the questions of who the respondent said they voted for with 'Was there any time during the election campaign when you seriously thought you might give your first preference to another party in the House of Representatives?' 'Changed vote since last election' is determined by combining the questions of who the respondent said they voted for, with who they said they voted for in the previous election. For both these factors, the Liberals and Nationals are considered as one major party. 'Strength of party identification' is a binary of the 3-point partisanship scale, combining "very strong" and "fairly strong". 'Interest in politics' is a binary of the 4-point scale, combining "some," "not much" and "none," which splits the population roughly evenly. 'Gov't can't be trusted' is a binary of the 4-point scale, combining the two low trust answers, and the two high trust answers. The efficacy factors are 3-point scales, reduced from the original 5-point, combining the lowest two, and the highest two. In all cases when the number of categories is changed, as a robustness check, I confirm that the results were substantively similar when run with the original categories. Birthplace - Overseas, ESB defined as New Zealand; UK; Ireland; USA; South Africa; and Canada (McAllister et al., 2022).

Sources: Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al. (2019) and McAllister et al. (2022)

The analysis also shows that there are some differences between 1993 and 2022. It is not clear what is driving the change over time, but both 'express opinion' and 'seek help' results appear to indicate that the socio-economic patterns of political participation are changing, with income and university education only showing statistical significance in 2022. While temporal change is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is consistent with the theory that as class-based political and party cleavages decline, the impact of socio-economic status on political participation will increase (Bean, 2012).

The consistent finding is that people who write are interested and engaged in politics, with sufficient internal and external efficacy for them to feel like it is worthwhile participating. However, beyond that, the two groups differ in relation to their level of attachment to a political party (whether they changed their vote since last election); the level of 'protest' in their

participation (whether they voted for the incumbent); and how far from the median voter they are. These differences align with the theoretical framework put forward in Chapter 2, because seeking help/information (unlike other forms of political participation) is often not related to the politics of the day, the party in power, or seeking changes to high-level policies. Instead, it often relates to public administration or decisions of street-level bureaucrats, which is less likely to be party political. It reflects the purpose, rationale, and incentive to engage in the participatory act. The impact of these differences in the Australian context is that while there is limited incentive to be responsive to the opinion-writers, there is a clear political incentive to be responsive to those letters that are seeking help/information - they are potentially persuadable voters, and whose requests/demands are likely to be more easily met, compared to those that are writing to express an opinion.

5.4 How did Mr Howard View the Letter-writers?

The overarching question driving this chapter is 'what incentive did Mr Howard have to be responsive to the opinion letters'? The previous sections provide quantitative evidence of who wrote, it shows opinion letter-writers are partisans and unlikely to change their vote. Rationally, that reduces the incentive to be responsive. These quantitative findings are unlikely to matter if Mr Howard and the PMO were either not concerned about public opinion, or not aware of the type of people writing, and therefore did not take that into account. As set out in Chapter 3, one of the drivers of political actions is the perceptions of political elites. Thus, misperceptions of public opinion could lead to a failure in responsiveness, or drive responsiveness to a particular cohort or segment of the community. If Mr Howard and the PMO thought that the opinion letter-writers were representative of the median voter, or where capable of being converted from one major party to the other, then there would have been an electoral incentive to respond — notwithstanding the quantitative findings above. To analyse this, I use both the text of individual letters and the interview data.

Both Mr Howard, and his office, were very focused on ensuring that they were aware of the breadth of public opinion, particularly hearing directly from people "who wanted to raise issues with him" (Mr Sinodinos).[47] Interviewees confirmed that talkback radio was particularly important, which Mr Howard did almost every Friday morning (Mr Howard, Mrs Morris, Mr Sinodinos). However, while Mr Morris thought that Mr Howard "had a good smell" for public opinion, Mr Howard did not regard himself as a "delegate". Instead, he said his focus was on

[47] Consistent with APA citation style, quotes from research participants do not have an in-text citation. Where the person being quoted is not clear from the body of the text, or where the interviews are a source of a factual matter, I have provided the interviewee's name in brackets afterwards.

"mak[ing] sure that I was alive to" public opinion and "work[ing] out public opinion before" a policy was announced, so that he could appropriately shape and tailor his message.

Mr Howard talked about being aware of the "different tributaries" of public opinion and both Mr Howard and the PMO were aware that the people writing to express political views were by-and-large partisans. In my interview with Mr Howard, he recalled:

> *Most of the people who wrote to me, I think were government opponents... you started to get quite a number of people saying look 'I've always voted Liberal… I'm one of your greatest supporters but...' you take a bit of notice of that but you also begin to smell a rat and think 'Well they are not really supporters of mine at all, that's just a way of trying to get my attention'.*

Most interviewees recognised that the people who wrote about policy issues were rarely swing voters, but were actually people at either end of the political spectrum — multiple interviewees suggested that Coalition voters were a key demographic in the letters (Mrs Morris, Mr Sinodinos), while Mr Howard thought that the main demographic was people who opposed the government. Mrs Morris, whose role included ministerial correspondence within the PMO, thought that a lot of the letter-writers "were Liberal voters who were frustrated… Or Liberal voters who were concerned about the outcome of the next election". Former Chief of Staff Arthur Sinodinos agreed, saying "I think many were from the prime minister's patch for want of a better description. I've no doubt about that". Example letters, which support this perspective, include:

> *I am a Queenslander and one of the conservative parties [sic] loyalist supporters, but I have to say that based on the liberal party's [sic] reaction to the success of One Nation… I am about to completely give up on you after voting Liberal for 33 years…For god [sic] sake listen to the people…You have someone in Pauline Hanson who has expressed what we all feel…* (NAA: M4898, 10)
>
> *This is not a letter from a Labour [sic] voter, an eccentric or a person of feeble mind it is a letter from a Liberal voter of some fifty years standing…. (signed) A discusted [sic] Liberal voter (NAA: M4898, 10)*
>
> *As a former strong Liberal/National supporter I have now abandoned your Party — a thing I never thought would happen (NAA: M4898, 1)*
>
> *As a Liberal voter all my adult life, I write to strongly notify my disappointment… (NAA: M4898, 10).*

While writers like this felt frustrated about the Coalition government, they were unlikely to vote for the ALP, and were more likely to move to the right, such as One Nation (which would have likely still seen their preferences flow back to the Coalition).

People who self-identify on the left who were also significantly overrepresented in the mailbag. As Mr Tony Nutt (former Principal Private Secretary to Mr Howard) said:

> *you know there's a lot of people that never vote Liberal or National, and would always have strong views which were not supportive of the government [and] would never be supportive of the government.*

Other interviewees suggested that other forms of public opinion were more important. Mr Morris noted that he asked the receptionists to record the topics from when people called the prime minister's office to complain — he felt that was more representative, and "not to be so orchestrated" as letters. He said that tracking phone calls enabled him to differentiate between the issues that the journalists were concerned about, versus those that "the mums and dads" were concerned about. This disaggregation between the media and "mums and dads," shows Mr Morris' assumption that the issues and concerns of the elites and ordinary Australians were different, and his interest was in the latter.

These show that, given Mr Howard and the PMO had a variety of methods of hearing public opinion, and particularly tapping into the views of uncommitted/swing voters, using these issue-based letters is unlikely to be a useful source of information.

5.5 Conclusion

Understanding other forms of public opinion requires us to identify whose opinion is being expressed. To do this, this chapter combines quantitative evidence from the AES, with qualitative evidence from the interviews with Mr Howard and PMO staff, and archival data. Through this evidence, I find that letters expressing an opinion come from a politically active and partisan portion of the population who are less likely to change their vote between major parties. This aligns with a range of existing political participation research, that shows that people who participate in politics are more likely to be politically engaged and interested (Goerres, 2009; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; McAllister & Makkai, 1992; Teorell, 2006). However, I expand this literature by distinguishing between these two types of letter writing, and on direct measures of swing voting. By doing this, I identify a significant difference between the two groups of letter-writers, which significantly changes the political incentives to be responsive. As explained in Chapters 2 and 3, responsiveness is mediated by political

vulnerability, therefore what impact these findings have on political incentives and responsiveness depends on how the institutional context shapes political vulnerability to each cohort of voters.

As set out in Chapter 2, the existing literature inadequately addresses the conceptual difference between these two cohorts (Hirlinger, 1992; Sharp, 1982; Traut & Emmert, 1993), but by demonstrating their differences, I show the importance of separating out these two conceptually distinct methods of participation. The implications are that election studies should ensure that their question set is adequate to capture these different forms of participation.

How this channel of public opinion can then influence policy also depends on Mr Howard's and the PMO's subjective understanding of who was expressing these voices. The interviews show that Mr Howard and the PMO actively monitored public opinion, and were very aware of the type of people who wrote to express political opinions and indicated that this impacted their inclination to be responsive.

These data support, or partially support, all six hypotheses considered in this chapter, which demonstrate that Mr Howard's political incentives to be responsive to the topics expressed in the opinion-letters was low. However, there is a different story when we look at people who write letters seeking help/information. While this group is still older than the general population, more likely to have a university education, and feel they have a higher level of political efficacy, they do not come from a particularly partisan segment of the community and are just as likely to change their vote as the broader population. That makes this group significantly more important to Mr Howard than people who wrote to express an opinion. This provides important context for the analysis in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 6 Letters to Leaders — what did Mr Howard see?

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explore the question of who writes? And what incentives that creates? I find that there are two distinct types of letters and letter-writers. First, letters that express an opinion, and second letters to request help/information. These two cohorts differ in important ways that impact on leaders' incentives to be responsive. Most significantly, those who write to express an opinion are highly partisan, on the political extreme, and less likely to change their vote. I also show that Mr Howard's office knew this. In the Australian context, this reduces the incentives to be responsive to their opinions.

In this chapter, I provide historical details on the ongoing role that ministerial correspondence plays for Australian prime ministers, and how ministerial correspondence was managed within PM&C and the PMO. I show how these letters provided a constant stream of public opinion to PMOs, helping them keep on top of the public mood. I provide an analysis of the volume of letters, both during Mr Howard's period in office, and going back more than 40 years. I find that the per-capita volume of letters has been broadly steady from the early 1980s (when the data first became available) until the mid-2000s, after which a slow decline commences.

Next, I explore the topics of the letters themselves, showing that the issues raised differ significantly from what is usually identified as the public's top priority through public opinion polls. This stark difference between what the public at-large prioritises and the topics of the letters further reduces the incentive to be responsive to these letters. I also find that most issues appear to be no more than flash in the pan, with most topics only registering a small number of letters and only appearing for a small number of fortnights.

Understanding the volume, topics and patterns of the letters provides a new way of measuring public opinion of different segments of the community, that both directly reflects levels of intensity, and was directly conveyed to political elites. In doing so, this chapter both addresses our knowledge gaps in the transmission of public opinion to political elites and improves our understanding of the extent to which that transmission is potentially distorted or biased. It builds on the "hidden world" of elite/citizen interactions (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019, p. 597), which may raise further normative concerns because this interaction is hidden from the public, and depending on the letters' impact, may further privilege certain elements of the community over others.

6.1 Letters to Leaders and the Australian Context

Mr Hazell reflected that letters are "one of the major points of contact between [a political leader] and the public at large… he might never ever meet these people, but they would have met him through correspondence." The importance of managing letters from the public was emphasised by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC), in their advice to public servants, which advised that these letters are:

> *a significant area of work for many departments… The importance of correspondence cannot be underestimated. Replying to correspondence gives a Minister the opportunity to communicate directly with their constituents, and Ministers take replying to correspondence very seriously. (APSC, 2021)*

Despite the importance of these letters, there has not been any systematic study of them. This research is not a history of ministerial correspondence in Australia, nevertheless, I identify some key historical points that allow us to recognise some common themes and consistencies, as well as comprehend how things have changed over time.

There appears to be an ongoing tension between the need to provide a genuinely human response, avoiding too much bureaucratese, while also assuming that many letters are a waste of time, not worthy of substantive consideration. This tension is probably best summarised by former secretary of PM&C, Sir Geoffrey Yeend, who said "so much correspondence could be improved by the phrase 'thank you for writing,' even when we don't" (NAA: A463, 1966/149), while another former PM&C secretary Frank Strahan complained about the "sheer waste of valuable time and paper" in responding to the letters (Strahan quoted in Weller et al. (2011, p. 40)). In 1955, Ronald Mendelsohn, a senior officer in PMD, expressed concern about a "tendency to promise consideration of matters… when no real consideration is intended… we should not inform correspondents that their ideas will be examined if they are not to be examined" (NAA: A463, 1966/149) which could have inspired the *Yes Minister* quotes in my introductory chapter. A few years later, however he noted that:

> *officers should always remember that the person that they are addressing is a human being with needs and fears, not an abstraction on a file… sometimes a little human sympathy is really the only thing we have to give. We should not withhold it (NAA: A463, 1966/149).*

The first Handbook on Correspondence Procedures, which was put together in the 1950s (NAA: A463, 1966/149) shows that letters from members of the public usually only received an acknowledgement from a departmental officer, with the letter then being forwarded to the

responsible minister for a substantive reply (NAA: A463, 1966/149). The next substantive step was the establishment of a dedicated MCU within PM&C in 1972-73. A detailed description of its role was provided in the 1981-82 Annual Report, and broadly sounds very similar to its role under the Howard government:

> *to manage the increasing work load in such a way that the prime minister either sees or is kept informed of all incoming correspondence. Approved procedures ensure that certain kinds of mail are put before him each day, while other letters are summarised and recorded in daily, weekly and monthly reports. The Ministerial Correspondence Unit prepares replies to the bulk of the correspondence received, or refers letters to other ministers for reply direct on behalf of the Government. Although the prime minister himself signs replies to many letters, it is not practicable for him to reply personally to all (PM&C, 1982).*

By this point, we can see a couple of notable changes from the 1950s procedures. First, the prime minister personally signing more responses, rather than the letters being referred to relevant portfolio ministers. This reflects the expansion of the role and influence of the prime minister and their department (Weller et al., 2011). Second, as technology continues to improve, statistical analysis and reporting is being provided to the prime minister. There are repeated references to the provision of regular statistical reports to the prime minister on "issues of significance that have attracted correspondence" (NAA: A463, 1986/2605), including in Annual Reports, internal pamphlets promoting the work of the MCU to PM&C staff (NAA: A463, 1986/2605) and in Ministerial Correspondence Handbooks. I have located copies of statistical reports for prime ministers Hawke and Howard, and my interviewee, Mr Hazell, who was also staff member of Mr Fraser (PM, 1975-1983) has similarly confirmed such briefs were provided, and FOI research confirms such briefs were provided to more recent prime ministers (HayGroup, 2009).

The incoming government briefing in 1983 for new prime minister, Mr Hawke (NAA: A463, 1984/164) set out how correspondence had been managed under the previous government, including the provision of a weekly analysis of the volume and topics. It also noted that responses are usually signed by staff in the PMO. However, the prime minister could provide any "such directions as you may wish to issue" about the handling of mail. By 1986, however, it was clear that most incoming letters and responses were never seen by the prime minister or their office. The MCU released a pamphlet to explain their role (NAA: A463, 1986/2605), and it indicated that MCU prepares responses to around 80% of letters, with the remaining being sent to subject-matter branches of PM&C for them to manage. This means that most

letters were never seen by political advisors or subject-matter experts, severely limiting the ability of these letters to have any impact, beyond their inclusion in statistical summaries.

The technological innovations continued to impact both on the correspondence itself and how it was managed. Mr Howard was the first prime minister to have a publicly available email address, in late 2000. Email was first mentioned in the 2002-03 Annual Report, and by 2005-06, PM&C reported that email accounted for more than a quarter of all correspondence, and had increased to a third by 2008-09 (HayGroup, 2009). In the 2021-22 Annual Report, PM&C reported that they are developing an artificial intelligence tool to “analyse and report on the themes of incoming ministerial correspondence” to enable better reporting and analysis on the topics of the letters and the “identification of emerging policy issues” (PM&C, 2022, p. 69). The Annual Reports demonstrate an ongoing attempt to streamline, automate and systematise this large volume of work.

Further technological changes and challenges have emerged in recent years, as prime ministers have also established a presence on a variety of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter/X. Australia’s 26th prime minister, Mr Rudd (2007-2010 and 2013) was the first Australian prime minister to establish a presence on Facebook (2009) and Twitter (2008), which provided another method for members of the public to contact their leader. While this period is beyond the scope of this research, I touch on the impact that this these technological changes are having in my final chapter.

Another trend is the significance of campaign mail, which was described in PM&C’s first Annual Report in 1979 as “standard letters or cards sent in large quantities about some contentious issues” (PM&C, 1979, p. 25). From that first year that PM&C reported on the volumes of ministerial correspondence, campaign mail represented approximately 40% of the mail that the prime minister received. While this data is not available for every year, this proportion appears to have increased over time, with more than 50% of prime ministerial mail being campaign mail by 2000. The increasing workload that campaign mail generated seems to have been increasing faster than PM&C was able to handle it. An internal memo in July 1985 (NAA: A463, 1985/2076) notes that the relevant senior advisor was “less than impressed with the disorder that campaign records are in,” and instructing that “[m]aterial is not to be stored in heaps on the floor, on window ledges or over ventilation ducts or outlets” (NAA: A463, 1985/2076). To help address this increase workload, PM&C was able to use the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation’s (CSIRO) word processor,

but only “for urgent work,” and where needed employees of the Koomari Sheltered Workshop were used to “fold, insert and seal envelopes” (NAA: A463, 1985/2076).

6.2 Ministerial Correspondence Processes under Mr Howard

In the section above, I discuss the role of letters more generally, showing how PM&C has had an ongoing struggle to appropriately manage the volume of letters. In this section, I explain how ministerial correspondence to Mr Howard was managed by the PMO and PM&C.

Most of the mail was received and opened by PM&C, but some did come directly to the Parliament House office, or one of the PM’s Sydney offices. Mr Hazell said that this that created security risks. In such cases, it was usually sent to PM&C, unopened. There, all the mail was scanned, opened, processed and logged. When the x-ray identified something suspicious, the item would be opened in a dedicated secure box “like a science lab” (Public servant 1). The importance of precautions was evident during a period of repeated potential anthrax attacks ("Embassy packages confirmed harmless," 2005). Despite these precautions, impacted staff were still often locked down, when an item was opened on a table and white powder spilled out and potentially exposed staff. Public Servant 1 recalled that in the 3-5 National Circuit building (which PM&C occupied until 2007) this became a particular issue, because of the lack of a dedicated, secure mailroom resulted in staff being locked down in a room without a proper toilet, and only a few bottles of water and some old ‘Time Out’ magazines.[48] These incidents usually required the fire brigade to attend, and after examining the scene the firefighters would usually take a decontamination shower in the building’s courtyard, which they recalled was “a popular spectator sport,” particularly amongst some female staff.

The rigour of these security handling processes increased over time, particularly as Australia hosted major international events (such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ Forum and the Group of 20 (G20) Leaders’ Forum) and as the perceived terrorism threat increased. These checks created logistical hassles for the staff’s day-to-day operations. Public servant 1 recalled that one day security protocols were triggered when someone sent a birthday card with a battery “so when you open it, it sings a song, but a battery pack in an envelope looks like a trigger,” and trying to x-ray cricket bats for the PM’s XI cricket game — but the x-ray machine couldn’t fit the cricket bats.

[48] This was rectified in the move to PM&C’s current premises, at 1 National Circuit, which included appropriate air-locked facilities for scanning mail, including proper toilets, etc (Public-Servant-1, 2023).

Within a few months of the 1996 election, PM&C submitted a revised Ministerial Correspondence Procedures Handbook to the PMO, allowing Mr Howard and the PMO the opportunity to shape how PM&C managed and responded to their incoming correspondence. That Handbook (NAA: M4261, 11 Part 1) notes that most letters were handled by MCU, without any involvement of policy staff in PM&C, or the PMO. These letters received standard responses, or referrals to other ministers. Other letters were generally referred to the relevant policy branch to draft a response. The Handbook also notes the importance of responding to letters from children, that they should "receive a substantive reply" and that they "should receive no lesser priority than other correspondence". (NAA: M4261, 11 Part 1). Mrs Morris recalled that letters to children would usually be signed by Mr Howard personally, because it had "some special impact… the child is thrilled, but the parents are thrilled too."

Explicitly political letters were referred directly to the PMO, for them to respond. Mrs Morris recalled that these letters may have provided suggestions for political advertising, or other letters where it was not appropriate for public servants to respond. Consistent with this evidence, the letters in the NAA that were referred to the PMO include letters about election commitments or suggested election campaign ideas (NAA: M4261, 102 Part 4). Almost all letters, other than pro-formas, received a response signed either by a politician, or a member of the PMO. Responses to members of the public were usually signed by the relevant senior advisor in the PMO. In contrast, responses to letters that MPs wrote on behalf of a constituent, were signed by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister.[49] This provided a steady stream of letters from members of the public to the PMO to help them gauge the public mood.

From this stream of correspondence, a small number were provided to Mr Howard. As well as VIPs and personal friends, a selection of "general rep" correspondence was also identified by the Departmental Liaison Officers (DLOs) and the senior advisor (government) for Mr Howard to read.[50] Coalition donors, or other high-profile community members, could also lead to a more detailed engagement with the letter. When businessman Sir Peter Derham wrote to the PM seeking changes to proposed amendments to corporations' law, he got a detailed response from both the PM and the treasurer (NAA: M4326, 423). Similarly, when businessman Mr Joseph Gutnick wrote to the PM about revoking the citizenship of alleged war criminal Mr Konrad Kalejs, the PM received a detailed brief from PM&C, before personally responding to Mr Gutnick (NAA: M4326, 1020). In both cases, the correspondent did not get

[49] Parliamentary secretaries are junior ministers.

[50] DLOs are mid-rank public servants, working in the PMO, to facilitate the flow of paperwork between PM&C, the PM and PMO. The senior advisor (government) was a political appointee, who supervised the DLO.

the outcome that they desired. However, the identity of the correspondent resulted in the matter getting onto the PM's desk. The impact of individual letters is considered in Chapter 8.

Having shown how individual letters were managed, I now move on to what statistical analysis was provided to Mr Howard. Each fortnight, PM&C would provide a brief to the PMO, setting out the statistics on the volume of mail and the top topics. Chapter 4 provides more details on how these were located in the NAA. All briefs provided by PM&C to the PMO were initially given to one of the DLOs and then the senior advisor (government), who was responsible for managing the flow of all paperwork through the office. From March 1996, when Mr Howard was elected, through to around November 2000, this brief was addressed to the prime minister, and he saw it almost every fortnight. Almost all my interview subjects recall seeing these briefs (Mr Brady, Mr Hazell, Mr Howard, Mr Leverett and Mr Nutt). Many of these briefs have a large 'tick,' which Mr Hazell advised was Mr Howard's way of confirming he had seen the brief. Mr Howard's occasional annotations on the briefs, and Mr Brady's recollection that he occasionally talked to Mr Howard about these briefs provide further evidence that he engaged (at least to some extent) with this information. This provides a clear causal process observation (Beach & Pedersen, 2013) that demonstrates a potential for a relationship between the letters and the speeches, because it confirms that Mr Howard was aware of this public opinion.

However, both Mr Hazell and Mr Nutt also indicated that, while Mr Howard and others in his office did see the brief, Mr Howard's engagement with it was often fleeting, suggesting they were a "30 second" item. The declining significance attached to these briefs is evident in the documentary record, from late 2000, the brief ceased being addressed to the prime minister and instead were addressed to Mr Hazell, who was senior advisor (government). From this point, these briefs were only shown to Mr Howard on an 'as-needs' basis. This is evident on a number of these briefs which were not addressed to the prime minister, but someone had hand-written "PM — See over" or "PM to see attachment" or stamped "SEEN BY PRIME MINISTER" often with a particular topic highlighted (NAA: M4326, 1232, 1277 and 1371). At the same time, the number of people who routinely saw a copy of this brief was reduced. This severely weakens the proposed causal mechanism between the letters and speeches, because if Mr Howard (or the relevant staff) were not aware of this information, it ceases to be possible for this information to have an impact on the speeches. It also demonstrates the limited importance that Mr Howard and his office placed on this information. This would not support the hypotheses 5a – 5c, that Mr Howard's speeches were influenced by the letters.

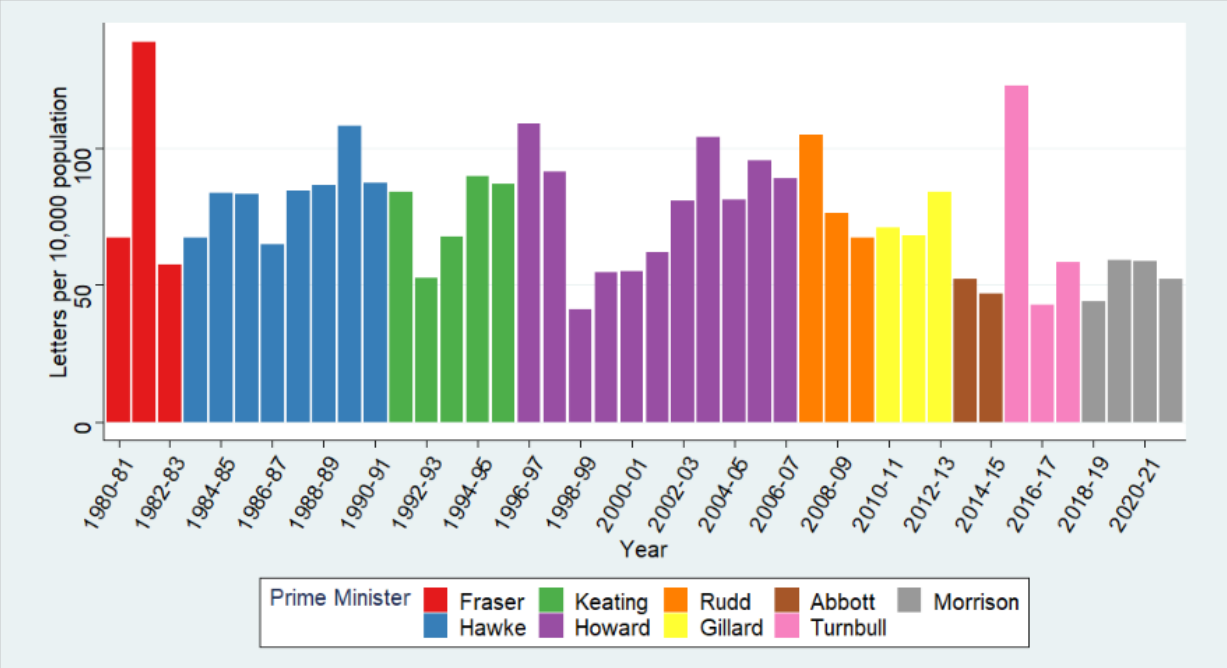
6.3 Volume of Letters

While this research is not designed to be comparative across prime ministers, it is important to put Mr Howard's mailbag in the context of other prime ministers. This helps to understand whether his mailbag is similar to others, and therefore impacts on the degree of generalisability of this research. Since 1979, PM&C's annual reports (PM&C, 1979-2022) provided data on the volume of ministerial correspondence. That annual report stated:

> *The department has an important role in the handling of the very large volume of mail received by the Prime Minister each year (some 65 000 items in 1978-79 of which about 26 500 items were 'campaign' mail…) (PM&C, 1979, p. 25).*

These figures include all mail received by PM&C on behalf of its ministers. This may create slight discontinuities, as certain functions have moved in and out of PM&C over the years. For example, between 2014 and 2019, Indigenous affairs responsibility sat within PM&C, which means that data for those years includes letters to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs.

Figure 6-1 Annual volume of letters per 10,000 population[51]



Notes: Letter volume divided by the population (/10,000) for the June quarter of each year.
Source: PM&C Annual Reports and ABS 3105.0.65.001.

Given the significant changes in population since 1980, all figures have been adjusted to the number of letters per 10,000 people, using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. The

[51] The first two years of data (1978-79 and 1979-80) appear to be incorrect, as they are both significant outliers, and have been removed from the data.

number of letters per 10,000 people has fluctuated between approximately 50 and 100. There does not appear to be any noticeable increase with the introduction of the ability to email to the prime minister (in late 2000).[52] While the 1996-97 per-capita volume is one of the highest across the 40+ years that data has been released (due to the impact of letters in response to the Port Arthur massacre and subsequent gun control debate), over Mr Howard's full term, the average volume of letters per 10,000 people is roughly similar to other prime ministers, as can be seen from Table 6-1 and Figure 6-1.

There are no statistically significant differences in the volume of letters between ALP and Coalition PMs ($p=0.24$), election years and non-election years ($p=0.22$), or early in a prime minister's term and later in that term ($p=0.64$). However, the recent decline in the volume of correspondence has created a statistically significant difference when comparing Messiers Abbott, Turnbull, and Morrison (post 2013) to earlier prime ministers ($p<0.05$). The reason for this is unclear and is worthy of further investigation, but may indicate a decline in traditional political participation, in favour of newer, internet-enabled forms of political participation (Chowdhury, 2021; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Mr Howard's annual volume is broadly similar to other prime ministers. During the period under study, he received more than 500,000 letters. The number of letters Mr Howard received per fortnight varied significantly, from a low of around 2,000 letters, up to a maximum of more than 21,000 letters, with a mean of around 5,500 letters per fortnight (Figure 6-2).

Table 6-1 Average letters volume per 10,000 people - per prime minister

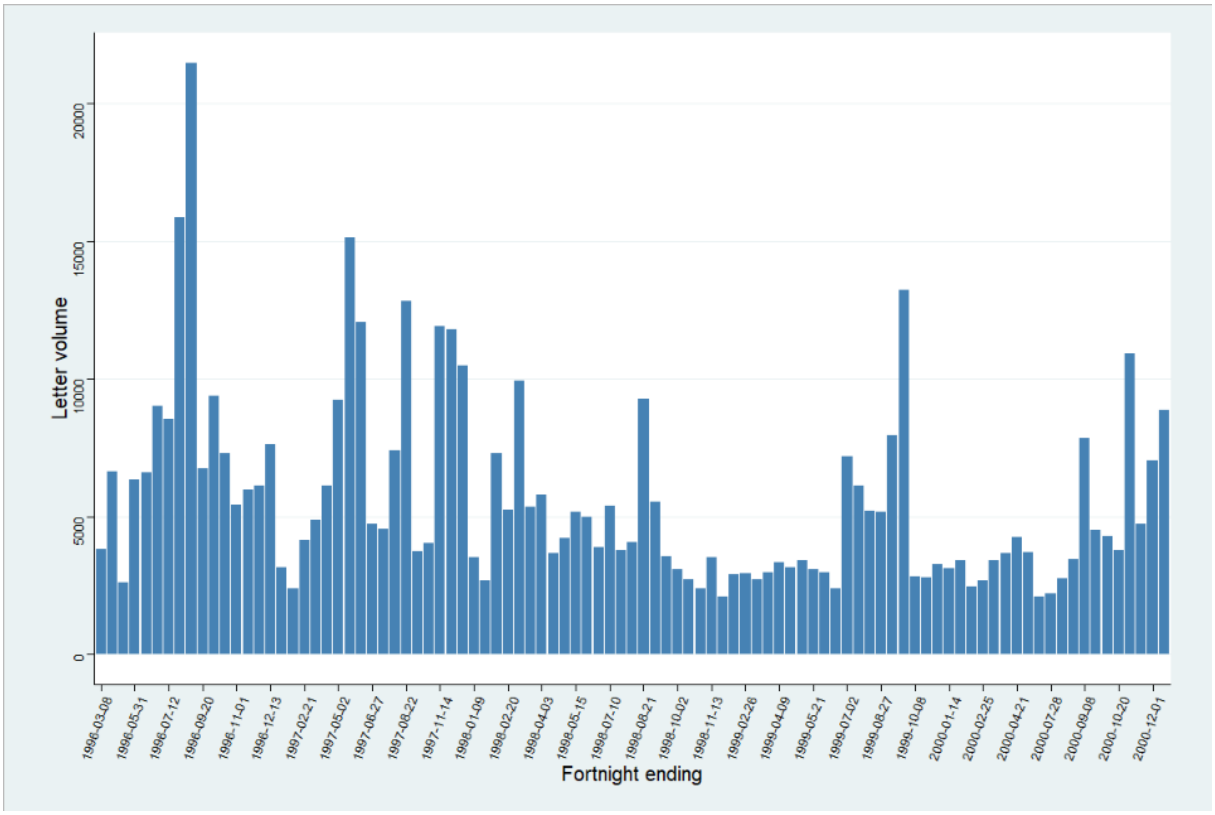
Prime minister	Average
Fraser	88
Hawke	83
Keating	75
Howard	80
Rudd	78
Gillard	74
Abbott	49
Turnbull	75
Morrison	53
Coalition	73
ALP	79
(Total)	76

[52] These figures do include emails to the Prime Minister, but not comments on social media.

Notes: Mail volume divided by the population (/10,000) for the June quarter. Mr Hawke and Mr Keating were each assigned half of 1991-92. Mr Howard and Mr Rudd were each assigned half of 2007-08.
Source: PM&C Annual Reports and ABS 3105.0.65.001.

There is no obvious pattern, or seasonal trends (such as a decline over the December/January period). Instead, the peaks (August 1996, May/June 1997, November/December 1997, and September 1999) can all be traced back to a specific topic/issue, including childcare; chicken meat imports; global warming; and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, and subsequent Australian-led United Nations (UN) intervention, which I explain further in the next section.

Figure 6-2 Letters per fortnight to Mr Howard (1996 – 2000)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261.

6.4 Topics and Types of Letters

In Chapter 5, I show that opinion letter-writers are more likely to be partisans, reducing the incentive to be responsive to them. Even if the people are not representative, if the issues they raised are representative of the broader electorate, then any responsiveness to broader public opinion would also be responsiveness to this subgroup, and vice-versa. It would also reduce any normative concerns about responsiveness to this cohort if their policy priorities were like the broader electorate. Therefore, in this section, I analyse the topics of the opinion letters, before showing that these do not align either with public priorities as measured by opinion

polls, nor with the issues that mattered at election time. Finally, I look at the remaining approximately 50% of the letters that were not classified into a topic, either because they were "particularised contact" or because the issue did not generate sufficient mail.

There are different ways to consider what are the top topics. First, which topics appeared most regularly. This demonstrates the durability of the topic, or whether it was a flash in the pan. Table 6-2 shows that some topics stayed in Mr Howard's mailbag for multiple years, with issues around the second airport in Sydney remaining prominent for 2.5 years, while cuts to the ABC, and uranium mining remained prominent for almost two years. However, these are the exceptions, with most topics appearing for only one or two fortnights (median was two fortnights, and the 3rd quartile was five fortnights). If an issue is likely to disappear from the mailbag in the next few fortnights, it is likely a demonstration that the issue is of relatively low salience/intensity, which reduces the incentive to be responsive. This is even more the case for topics dominated by pro-formas, where the cost of participation is the lowest.

Table 6-2 Top topics of the letters — by number of fortnights

Topic	Number of fortnights
Alternative site for Sydney's second airport - Pro	65
Cuts to the ABC - Anti	45
Uranium Mining - Anti	45
Wik Decision	42
Reduction in Family Day Care funding - Anti	37
Development at Hinchinbrook Island - Anti	31
East Timorese refugees	24
Future of Tibet	21

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261.

The second way of identifying top topics is by looking at the total number of letters. This demonstrates the number of direct contacts on a topic. Using this method, childcare tops the list, with more than 33,000 letters, followed by the second airport in Sydney with nearly 30,000 (Table 6-3). However, after these first few high-profile topics, most topics registered less than 500 letters (median 461).

Table 6-3 Top topics of the letters — by total volume

Topic	Total letters
Reduction in Family Day Care funding - Anti	33,656
Alternative site for Sydney's second airport - Pro	29,538
Cuts to the ABC - Anti	26,401
East Timor - Human Rights	17,950

Uranium Mining - Anti	14,226
Benchmark pricing principles to blood glucose strips - Anti	14,194
Global warming - Anti	14,107
Tax treatment of capital gains	12,256
Guns - Pro PM's stand	11,483
Public school funding	10,486

Notes: includes both pro-formas and individual letters. Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261.

While all these issues were reasonably high-profile during Mr Howard's term in office, further down the list were several niche issues, that attracted no media attention but still received many hundreds of letters. For example, Mr Howard received almost 300 letters calling for the negotiation of an Australia-Germany pension agreement, which would have allowed people in Australia to receive certain German pensions (NAA: A463, 1999/866). Similarly, almost 400 letters were received seeking government support for Australia's bid to host the World Horticultural Festival. Neither of these issues attracted any media attention — the letters appear to be an attempt by relevant interest groups to get the issue on the agenda. It appears to show that politically active citizens pay attention to a broad range of specific topics, rather than just the 'headline' topics often asked about in opinion polls — consistent with the findings in Ryan and Ehlinger (2023, p. 18) and their suggestion that "unprompted mentions of a single topic are indeed a strong sign that an issue is important to a person."

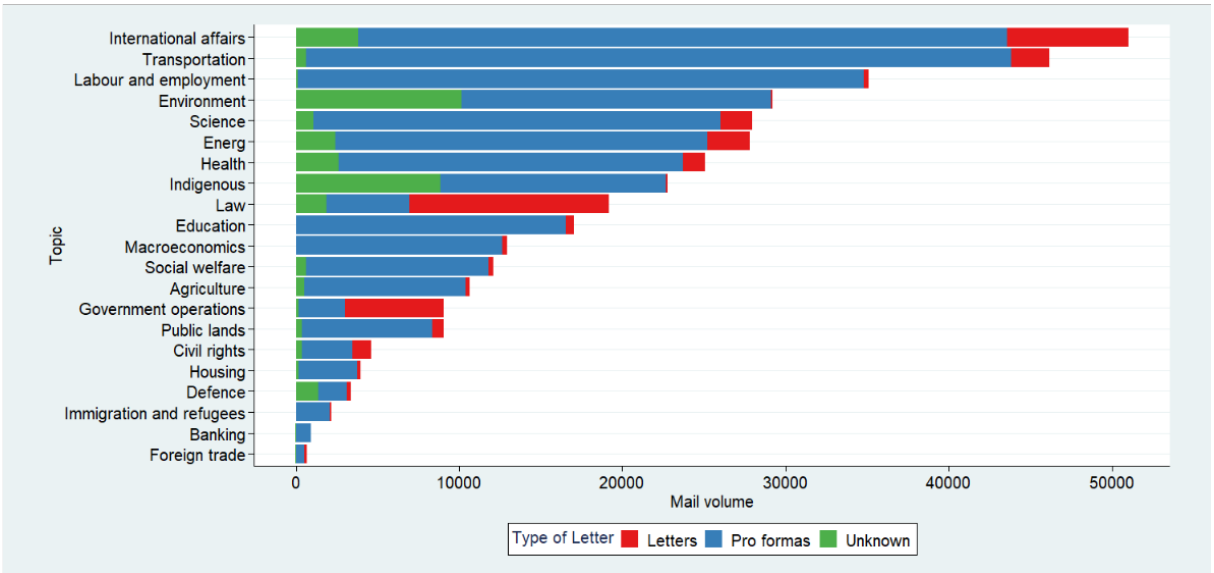
The concerns expressed in the letters are specific, not general. While the topic "benchmark pricing principles to blood glucose strips" easily fits within the category of "health", we do not know whether this person would be equally concerned about other health issues, or whether they would have ticked "health" in an opinion poll about Most Important Issue, or what issue influenced their vote. It may be that the specificity of the topics of the letters reflects the "particularistic nature of citizens' policy concerns" (Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023, p. 34). To that extent, these findings align with Ryan and Ehlinger (2023), who similarly find very specific policy concerns in their study. As I suggest in Chapter 3, there are issue-publics that are focussed on a wide range of issues, often beyond the public eye. These issues often do not attract much mainstream media coverage and are unlikely to be picked up by most opinion polls. Given the inability to identify these issues through traditional methods of studying public opinion, this reinforces the importance of using other methods of measuring and analysing public opinion, as I theorise in Chapter 3.

There are also several policy areas that were highly salient during the period under study, which do not appear in the dataset. These include the privatisation of government-owned telecommunications provider, Telstra; the introduction of the GST; major industrial relations

reforms in 1996; and the waterfront industrial relations dispute in 1998. The sale of Telstra, for example, was opposed by up to two-thirds of voters and was a significant factor in the 1996 election (Goot, 1999). Similarly, the GST was the defining issue of the 1998 election (McAllister, 1999). It is unclear whether the absence of these in the briefs is because there were less than 30 letters received on these topics per fortnight, or they were somehow managed separately — however no evidence of this was uncovered in the archival records.[53] This raises a separate question, beyond the scope of this research, about why some high-profile political issues generated significant mail, while others of apparently equal significance and profile, generate very little mail.

To compare topics over time, and across jurisdictions, these original topics are then coded into 21 high level topics, consistent with the APAP. Figure 6-3 shows the total mail volume, by topic, broken up by individual letters and pro-formas. This demonstrates the significance of pro-formas, as well as the impact of the high-volume topics identified above. The top three topics align to three of the top four individual topics - international affairs (East Timor), transportation (Sydney's second airport) and labour & employment (family day care).

Figure 6-3 Top topics of the letters by APAP topic



Notes: The "unknown" code is a result of the inconsistencies in the "total" and "previous fortnights' in the briefs, set out in Chapter 4. Letters on the *Wik* case (Indigenous) were never separated out by individual letter or pro-forma. They are all coded as "unknown".

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261

The topics change significantly from year-to-year, with very few issues remaining in the agenda throughout the period under study (Table 6-4). While labour and employment is a major topic

[53] I have located briefs for 9 of the 10 fortnights following the announcement of the GST on 13 August 1998, and none of them mention the GST, or any separate mechanism for managing letters on the GST.

in the first two years, it is barely visible beyond that. Similarly, law is prominent in 1996, but then disappears. There are a few issues that remain prominent in most years, international affairs, transportation and Indigenous are all significant contributors across most years.

Table 6-4 Topic ranks of the letters — per year

Topic	Overall rank	1996 rank	1997 rank	1998 rank	1999 rank	2000 rank
International affairs	1	5	16	2	1	4
Transportation	2	4	7	1	3	3
Labour and employment	3	1	3	12	14	14
Environment	4	8	4	11	5	7
Science	5	3	2	16	6	11
Energy	6	10	6	3	9	13
Health	7	14	1	7	12	5
Indigenous	8	17	5	5	14	2
Law	9	2	13	14	10	9
Education	10	7	18	8	2	16
Macroeconomics	11	13	20	19	13	1
Social welfare	12	16	10	4	8	6
Agriculture	13	15	8	13	4	10
Government operations	14	6	11	9	11	17
Public lands	15	12	9	6	14	15
Civil rights	16	9	21	15	14	17
Housing	17	11	12	19	14	17
Defence	18	18	14	18	7	8
Immigration and refugees	19	20	19	10	14	12
Banking	20	19	17	17	14	17
Foreign trade	21	21	15	19	14	17

Notes: Rank is determined by total volume of letters (including pro-formas). Where nil letters were received, the topic was ranked equal last.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261.

I now turn to look at how these results compare to traditional measures of public opinion. In this section I use two different surveys, first an annual measure of most important issues, which Roy Morgan regularly asked during the relevant years.[54] Second, I look at various AES surveys. The 1996 (Jones, McAllister, & Gow, 2019) and 1998 (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a) surveys allow for a direct comparison between the topics of the letters and the topics that voters identified as most important (but these surveys do not allow for a breakdown by opinion letter-writers). The 1993 (Jones, McAllister, Denemark, et al., 2019) and 2022 (McAllister et

[54] The question was “Thinking about Australia as a whole. In your opinion, what are the THREE most important things the FEDERAL GOVERNMENT should be DOING SOMETHING ABOUT?” (Martin et al., 2014, p. 503).

al., 2022) surveys allow for a comparison between people who wrote opinion-letters and those that did not.

The annual Roy Morgan polls found that the economy, health, education and social welfare consistently ranked as the most important issue (Martin et al., 2014).[55] While recognising that there are only five years in the study (1996-2000), there is no evidence of any correlation between the issues in the letters and those identified in public opinion polls (Table 6-5), with Spearman rank correlations close to zero, and no statistically significant results.

Table 6-5 Correlation between letter topics and opinion polls

Year	Spearman's rho
1996	-0.30
1997	-0.11
1998	-0.11
1999	-0.07
2000	0.41

Notes: No statistically significant results found at $p < 0.05$. Correlation measured by comparing rank of MII for relevant year and letter topic rank (n=18). A similar analysis was undertaken on the proportions, rather than ranks, using Pearson correlations, and the findings are similar, with no years having a statistically significant relationship.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 and Martin et al. (2014)

Across the five years, the top three topics in the mail were international affairs; transportation; and labour and employment. In the opinion polls, on average they ranked 12th, 11th and 6th, respectively (Table 6-6). Internationally, foreign affairs is rarely a focus of public opinion (Lindeboom, 2012). This is reflected in Australia in the opinion polls (it ranks 13th, 13th, 13th, 12th and 8th in public opinion polls, only once getting more than 1.8%), which makes its prominence in the letters (it ranks 5th, 12th, 2nd, 1st and 3rd across the five years) particularly interesting. While raising a series of important research questions (which are beyond the scope of this research), it points to the lack of significance of the topics of the letters in the broader public opinion ecosystem.

Table 6-6 Most common topics in the letters compared to most important issue in opinion polls

Topic	Rank (total number of letters)	Rank (Most Important Issues)
International affairs	1	12
Transportation	2	11
Labour and employment	3	6
Environment	4	7

[55] Martin et al. (2014) collapsed defence into international affairs and collapsed Indigenous into public lands. As I used this data, I have followed this approach. The available data does not allow for disaggregation between letter-writers and others.

Science	5	=last
Energy	6	=last
Health	7	2
Indigenous	8	10
Law	9	5
Education	10	3
Macroeconomics	11	1
Social welfare	12	4

Notes: Martin et al. (2014) collapsed defence into international affairs and collapsed Indigenous into public lands. As I used this data, I have followed this approach. Only the top 12 topics in the letters are included, resulting in the skipping of certain ranks in the MII.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 and Martin et al. (2014).

Looking now at the AES, while the categories in the AES are not the same as used for the letters, some comparisons can still be made. I first look at the 1996 and 1998 AESs and compare those surveys to the topics of the letters. In the 1996 election, the top three issues[56] were "Health and Medicare" (25%), "Taxation" (18%) and "Unemployment" (13%) (Jones, McAllister, & Gow, 2019). Following the election, the top issues in the letters were day-care funding, changes to gun laws, and cuts to the ABC. While the AES question is backwards looking, the complete lack of overlap between the top election issues and the letters following the election supports the data above that the letters are not reflective of mass public opinion.[57] In the October 1998 election, the top three issues were "GST" (42%), "Taxation" (23%) and "Health and Medicare" (10%) (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a).[58] In the letters that year, the top issues were Sydney's second airport, the establishment of a global whale sanctuary, the future of Tibet, and uranium mining. Thus, across both election years, and annual opinion polls, there is a consistent pattern of economics (GST/taxation/unemployment) and health as the two most significant issues — neither of which made the top five issues in the mailbag.

As indicated in section 4.4, the AES in 1996 and 1998 did not ask respondents about the reason for letter-writing. In 1993 and 2022, the AES asked respondents whether they wrote a letter expressing a political opinion. In both 1993 and 2022, there were statistically significant differences between people who had written to express a political opinion and those who had not, in which issues were important to their vote. In 1993, business taxes, education and the environment were important to the vote of opinion letter-writers than non-letter-writers.[59] The

[56] The question is "which of these issues has been most important to you and your family in the last 12 months?"

[57] As the Port Arthur massacre had not happened at the time of the election, issues around law/crime and gun control are highly unlikely to have featured in the AES.

[58] The question is "which of these issues was mist important to you and your family during the election campaign?"

[59] On the other 11 issues that the AES asked about, there was not statistically significant difference.

differences were even more significant in 2022, where there were statistically significant differences in nine of the 11 issues asked about.[60]

Together, the two different sets of AES data and the Roy Morgan Most Important Issue data consistently point towards the issues identified in the letters being significantly different from the most salient political issues in the broader electorate. While this may further reduce the political incentives to respond to the issues identified in the letters, it may also reveal another layer of public opinion that existing research is missing (Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023) — that by asking the same closed-ended questions about researcher-determined topics, we may be missing out on a large number of discrete, smaller issues which may also be impacting political behaviour.

The above analysis is limited to those letters about major topics — which accounted for approximately 50% of the total mailbag. The other 50% were made up of an unknown number of smaller policy issues; and particularised contact. Based on those letters I have been able to locate[61] and the interviews, there are several themes that need to be considered.

First, there was a steady stream of particularised contact, or requests for personal assistance; and a random miscellany of other issues — many entirely outside the control of the prime minister, or the Commonwealth Government. These letters could vary from routine issues such as a visa issue for an elderly parent, social security problem, fixing a pothole, to (as Public servant 1 recalled) asking the prime minister to ensure that a television station continues to show their favourite program, or exempting funeral processions from red light cameras, which piqued sufficient interest that PM&C called the author for further information:

> *We feel there is no respect for the deceased and their families, and funeral corteges have been around way before these red light cameras were introduced… The problem with society today is that there is no respect for anything or anyone anymore. Gone are the days where if you saw a funeral cortege you would stand and face the hearse and dip your hat (if wearing one) and pay your respects.* (NAA: M4261, 30 Part 2).

Another sought Mr Howard's signature on a philatelic first day cover to commemorate the 1998 Constitutional Convention. The correspondent said he was building a collection "of such signed envelopes which I am building into a permanent historical record (***a social history of***

[60] Non-writers said they were more concerned than opinion letter-writers about taxes; health/Medicare; managing the economy; COVID; cost of living; national security. Opinion letter-writers were more concerned than non-writers about the environment; refugee and asylum seekers; global warming. There are no statistical significant differences for immigration and education.

[61] As detailed in Chapter 4, the majority of incoming correspondence from members of the public were destroyed.

Australia), display and teaching aid" (bold in original). Mr Howard duly obliged (NAA: M4626, 484). There were also a few letters suggesting names for a new Governor-General, when Sir William Deane retired in 2001 (NAA: M4261, 210 and M4898, 10). New national anthems were also suggested:

> *Many races, changing faces, hand in hand to meet our goal*
>
> *May we play the game of life, by such rules and laws that be fair and just for one and all* (NAA: M4261, 143)

While these are 'political' in the sense that they are seeking a benefit, or a change in the law, or to influence the distribution of resources in society, they are often not partisan-political, or identifiable on a left-right continuum. In that sense, they support the quantitative findings from the previous chapter, that those writing to seek help/information are less partisan.

A second theme that emerged in these letters was 'giving election advice'. One person wrote in Texta or similar thick pen "If there WAS NO [sic] New TAXES ON FOOD (KEEP THE EXISITING) YOUD [sic] ROMP IN." (Capitalisations in original, NAA: M4261, 102 PART 4). While another wrote "as I warned you and Mr Anderson prior to the last attempt to 'sell a GST…'" (NAA: M4261, 102 PART 4), and a third "If you don't want to loose [sic] this election — put together a T.V. advert't [sic] to explain in detail how your GST works" (NAA: M4261, 103 Part 3). This category of letters was sufficiently large that Mrs Morris identified one group of writers as "Liberal voters who were concerned about the outcome of the next election," particularly around the GST. Again, this supports the findings in the previous chapter that opinion letter-writers were partisans, and unlikely to change their vote.

A third theme was the level of intimacy assumed in the letters. People disclose details of their childhood sexual abuse (NAA: M4326, 1143), or the "horror of watching my daughter's trauma as she slowly, despairingly, distressfully [died]" (NAA: M4898, 10). Public servant 1 recalled writers sending the prime minister suicide notes. Whoever read these letters, whether it be the prime minister, or a junior public servant, must have recognised the connection that the writer sought with their leader, and the trust that is being placed in that relationship.

The next theme was how the letter-writers sought to express the intensity of their feelings, and seek attention for *their* issue, cause, or problem. This could either be through the text of the letters ("the stupidity of Mr Howard's government" (NAA: M4326, 989), "We are fed up," (NAA: M4898, 10) or "express my disgust" (NAA: M4898, 10)), or by not sending letters, but instead sending "things". Interest groups would seek to find other ways to draw attention to their issue

or express a higher degree of intensity than would be evident from just form letters or postcards. These campaigns could often cause significant disruption for PM&C staff. In response to the war in Iraq, a range of grassroots environmental and peace groups advocated for people to send Mr Howard uncooked rice, quoting Romans 12:20:

> *'If your enemies are hungry, feed them'. Romans 12:20. Please send this rice to the people of Iraq - do not attack them. (Commission, 2003; Info; Peace, 2004)*

This caused problems for the staff in the mailroom, as each of these envelopes would need to be opened in the secure box. Public servant 1 recalled that "There was a special bin in the mail room, just for the rice…. I was like, 'what's this bin for?' And they're like 'the rice' I was like 'the what?'" Another campaign that stuck in my interviewee's memory was farmers "sending Howard the shirts off their back. Literally….where they'd written often very angry comments." PM&C would inform Mr Howard's office about the volume of shirts coming in, and a standard response would be sent: "thank you for your kind comments… You know the government's doing great things. Blah blah."

While the junior public servants who had to open and dispose of the rice and shirts clearly recall this campaign almost 20 years later, none of my interviewees in Mr Howard's office mentioned either of these campaigns.[62] Nor could I find any mention in Mr Howard's speeches, or anywhere else in the parliamentary record. I could only identify one passing mention to the Iraqi rice campaign in the media (Kingston, 2003). Another campaign, driven by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association of Australia (AOPA), calling for pilots to send faxes to the PMO calling for changes to how CASA was operated. While AOPA claimed that "it had a hot line to PM's office," (NAA: M4632, 215) an internal PMO memo revealed that "no action [was] taken by the PMO to monitor" the number of faxes received, or to respond to them (NAA: M4632, 215). While the interest groups behind these campaigns sought to demonstrate the intensity of feelings, I did not identify any evidence that the nature of these campaigns resulted in any additional attention being given to them, at the political level. While there is a lack of research about the idea of sending 'things' to political leaders, it is consistent with my theory that letters are designed to display issue salience and issue intensity.[63]

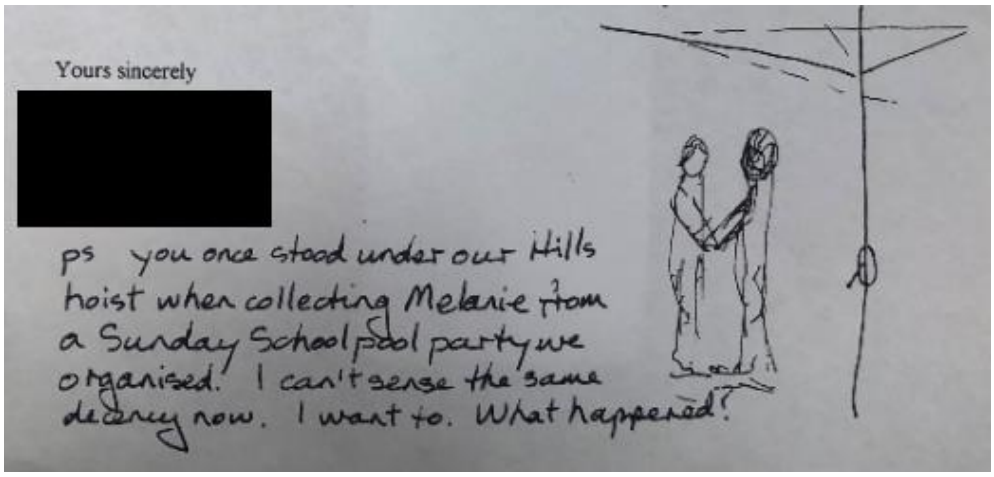
[62] Because of the order in which the interviews were conducted, I was not able to explicitly ask about these campaigns.

[63] Other examples including posting menstrual products to politicians in Canada (Scala, 2023); the USA (McNamara, 2016); and Australia (Gander, 2014), and posting bricks to politicians in the USA (Hulse, 2006).

Given the volume of letters, correspondents would take a range of approaches to try and ensure that *their* letter received appropriate attention. People marked their envelopes "PERSONAL" and highlighted it repeatedly. Three university students (seeking support to become astronauts) addressed their letter to the PM's official residence in Sydney, Kirribilli House, rather than Parliament House, and started it with:

> *This letter is for the Prime Minister, and we ask that it be passed on to him directly and not redirected to an alternate minister or portfolio. We… have a right to communicate with the Prime Minister*

And then concluding, in bold, "We anticipate meeting with you to discuss our proposal further". While they did not get the financial support they requested, they did get a response from Mr Howard, rather than being "redirected." Another letter, proposing a series of tax reforms, included "I hope that this letter will arrive to you unopened because of its private contents and sensitivity" (NAA: M4326, 151). Other writers called on real or imaginary networks and obligations (Lyons, 2015), starting their letter by 'staking a claim', based on being a "member of the Naval Association" (NAA: M4898, 10) or "Chairman of the Liberals for Rockhampton" (NAA: M4898, 10) or "member of the Oatley West Liberal Party for nearly 30 years" (NAA: M4898, 10) or "prominent local citizen and long standing Medical Practitioner" (NAA: M4898, 10). Others opened by demonstrating that they were a significant donor — "[a]t the Higgins 200 Club lunch in Melbourne last week" (NAA: M4326, 423). Another writer, at the end of a typed letter calling for an apology to the stolen generation, added a hand-written post-script:



Source: NAA: M4326, 496

While this did succeed in getting the letter onto Mr Howard's desk, he got the same form response as other writers on the topic.

Other attempts at establishing a connection, or getting attention, included owners of small country hotels or cafes inviting the prime minister for “a cuppa”. One wrote, two days before the 1998 election invited him and Mrs Howard for a counter lunch:

> *I realize how busy you and your wife are now — with 2 days to go until the election…. My husband and I own a small hotel in [REDACTED] and we work very hard to run the business… We would like to invite you to our hotel for a counter lunch…. I can recommend the cutlets on Mondays. They are very nice…. PS: Ring me and let me know your [sic] coming so I can organize a quiet corner for you. (NAA: M4326, 666)*

However, they received standard responses.

Finally, there were also almost 5,000 letters wishing the prime minister luck heading into the election, or congratulating him after the 1996 and 1998 elections. Often these were hand-written, on elaborate stationery:

> *The Boyes family including our 4 month old grandson (Ewan) wish you all the best for tomorrow. We will be out on booths tomorrow working for a coalition win which is the only situation for our great country. God bless and thank you for your honesty and devotion to your high office. (NAA: M4326, 666)*
>
> *You have done best for this country and her people, we are proud to have… a honest and down to earth person to run this beautiful [country]. (NAA: M4326, 666)*
>
> *Win or lose… you have displayed immense courage to the convictions you hold and have steadily refused to be compromised or humiliated by your opponents. (NAA: M4326, 666)*
>
> *[I] am so proud of all you have achieved… you showed remarkable leadership with commendable results. (NAA: M4326, 666)*

These letters do not neatly fit into any of the categories, as they are not seeking to influence policy, or address a personal problem. Instead, these are “expressive writers,” who “seemed more concerned with the gratifications they got from the act of writing itself — such as the pleasant sensation that they were more conscientious citizens than most” (Sussmann, 1959, p. 207).

In summary, these letters are spread across political opinions; requests for help/information; and ‘pen-pal’ type letters to a friend, mentor, or celebrity. The letters on political issues bear little resemblance to issues identified in opinion polls, often because they are niche issues, relating to small groups. They represent a more nuanced perspective on public opinion,

allowing us to understand the specific issue of concern, their perspective, and the intensity of their views, in a way that opinion polls are usually unable to do. The letters also provide an insight into democratic culture, demonstrating what this group of the public expect their relationship to be like with their political leaders.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter explores a previously unexamined aspect of public opinion — the topics of letters to the prime minister — and compares it to existing measures of public opinion.

This contributes to the literature in a variety of ways. Extensive research has shown that political leaders engage with public opinion in a variety of different ways (Henderson et al., 2023; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Walsh, 2013), therefore it is necessary to explore those other channels of public opinion. Despite this pressing empirical gap, this is the first quantitative study of a prime minister's mailbag. It shows that the issues raised by letter-writers differ significantly from those that are usually perceived as driving voting decisions or identified in opinion polls on most important issues. These findings reinforce existing research about the differing political priorities of different segments of the community (Schlozman et al., 2012; Verba & Nie, 1987), and the risks associated with different segments of the community participating in politics at different levels, potentially skewing the voice that is heard by political leaders, and subsequently skewing public policy.

These findings raise a range of further research questions, about why some high-profile political issues generated significant mail, while others of apparently equal media profile, generate very little mail. Why do economic issues, that regularly top opinion polls on most important issue attract so few letters? Similarly, why do some niche, minor issues, that had very limited media coverage generate comparatively high volumes of letters? It may be that if the main objective of opinion letter-writers is to get their issue on the agenda, there is little reason to write about macroeconomics — political leaders don't need letters to focus on the economy — governments can't not pay attention to macroeconomics. Therefore, maybe writing letters is used as a tactic to increase the attention paid to issues, that otherwise do not necessarily make the mainstream agenda.

Chapter 7 Were Mr Howard's Speeches Responsive to the Letters?

Introduction

The previous chapter answers the questions of 'what people write about' and 'how the letters are managed'. This demonstrates that the letters had the capacity to influence Mr Howard, because he saw summaries of the volume and topics of the letters every fortnight. I then explore the topics of the letters and show that they differ significantly from traditional measures of public opinion, but that the topics were mainly flashes in the pan that appeared in Mr Howard's mailbag but disappeared within a few fortnights.

In this and the following chapter, I address the question of whether the letters had any impact on the content of Mr Howard's speeches. As set out in Chapters 2 and 3, responsiveness to public opinion is a core requirement of democracy. While existing research focuses on responsiveness to the majority, or to the median citizen, less research considers responsiveness to the activated, or attentive public on a particular policy issue. Theoretically, such a link should exist, because choosing to express an opinion on a particular issue demonstrates a level of intensity of feeling that means that an issue is more likely to influence a person's vote. This matters because it helps us to understand whether political leaders are responsive to those who participate and raise their voices — regardless of whether they are in the minority or majority.

There are a range of different ways the relationship between public opinion and the political agenda can be conceptualised and measured. I first examine cross-sectional congruence, before looking at time series congruence and then responsiveness. My findings suggest there is no statistically significant linkage between the topics of the letters and the topics of Mr Howard's speeches and raises questions about other research that relies on the broad CAP topics. It indicates that Mr Howard was knowingly ignoring this segment of public opinion. This sets the stage for testing whether there is a linkage in the opposite direction, or what other linkages may be evident in the data.

7.1 What did Mr Howard Talk About?

Before undertaking the quantitative analysis, I briefly analyse what Mr Howard talked about in his public speeches. This provides context, enabling a comparison between the descriptive findings of what the letters were about, with what Mr Howard was talking about. As set out in Chapter 4, the speeches have been drawn from a dataset maintained by PM&C and Sherratt

(2019), as well as from the Trove database maintained by the NLA. Some descriptive statistics are included in Chapter 4.

Before analysing the speeches in detail, I compare the number of events and speeches to other prime ministers, to see whether these figures are consistent with other prime ministers. This research uses more than 2,000 media events, including doorstops, interviews, media releases and speeches (which I collectively referred to as 'speeches'), covering the period of his election in March 1996, through to December 2000. For this period, the annualised average was around 440 speeches per year. This is consistent with the remainder of his term as prime minister but is slightly below his successors. Figures for his predecessors are less reliable; prior to late 1997, the PM&C dataset is dependent on availability of hardcopy records. Table 7-1 shows the annualised average of media events, by prime minister.

Table 7-1 Annual average number of media events by prime minister

Years	Prime minister	Average annual media events
1983-1991	Hawke	264
1991-1996	Keating	372
1996-2007	Howard	500
2007-2010 & 2013	Rudd	623
2010-2013	Gillard	689
2013-2015	Abbott	688
2015-2018	Turnbull	596

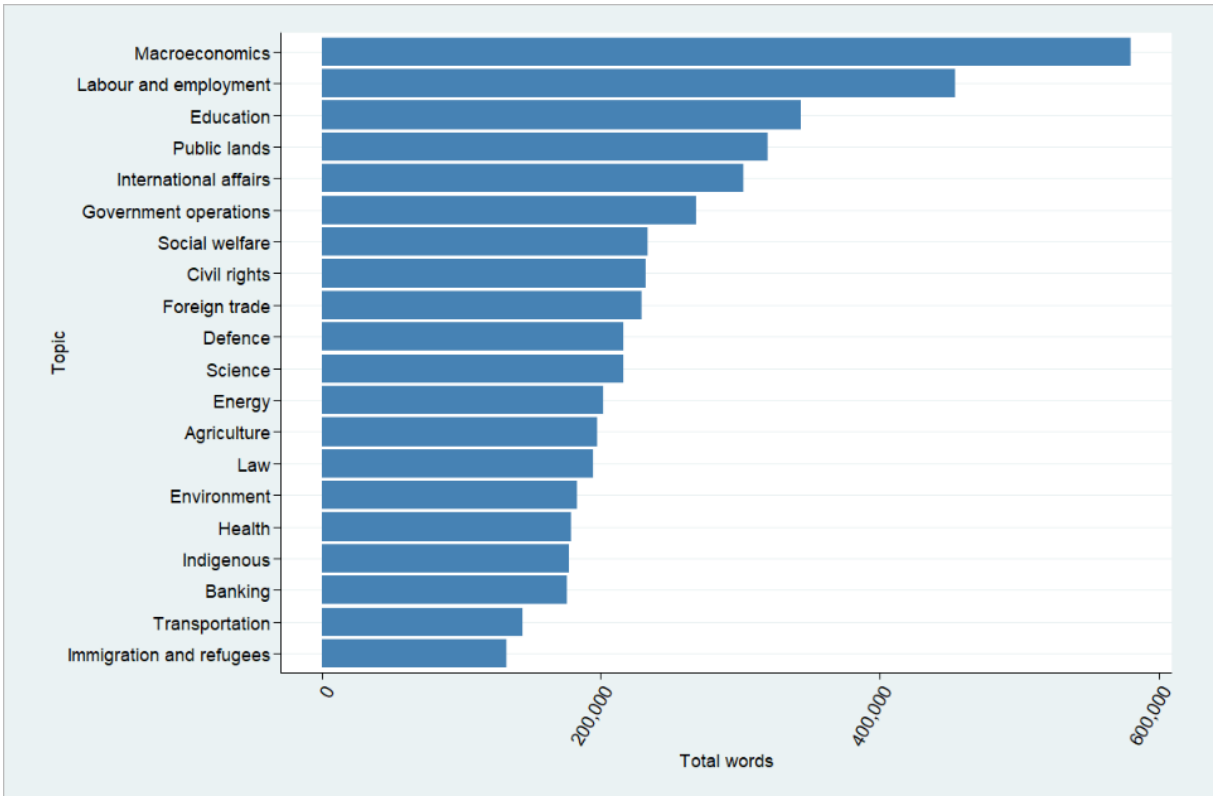
Note: Total media events reported, divided by years in office (exact number of days used to calculate part-years in office).
Source: Sherratt (2019)

The documents themselves vary from media releases of less than 100 words on re-appointment of departmental secretaries, or the death of Mrs Maria Theresa Salisachs-Rowe Samaranch (the wife of then International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Mr Juan Antonio Samaranch) to 13,000-word transcripts of radio interviews. All of these are relevant because the fact that the prime minister decides to use his time, and draw media and public attention to an issue, demonstrates what he considers important. His media events are almost equally balanced between those where he had a high-level control over the content as no questions are taken (media releases, speeches, communiques and statements etc), versus those where he has less control, as he takes questions from journalists or members of the public (interviews, doorstops and press conferences). Interviews were Mr Howard's most common form of media event, and within that around 150 were talkback radio interviews.

Figure 7-1 shows the total words spoken by Mr Howard, broken down by topic, allowing us to see what broad topics Mr Howard put on the public agenda. Comparing this to Figure 6-3,

which sets out the same data for the letters, it is already evident that Mr Howard spoke about very different topics compared to the letters. It also shows that the topics in his speeches were a lot more consistently spread.

Figure 7-1 Topics of Mr Howard's speeches



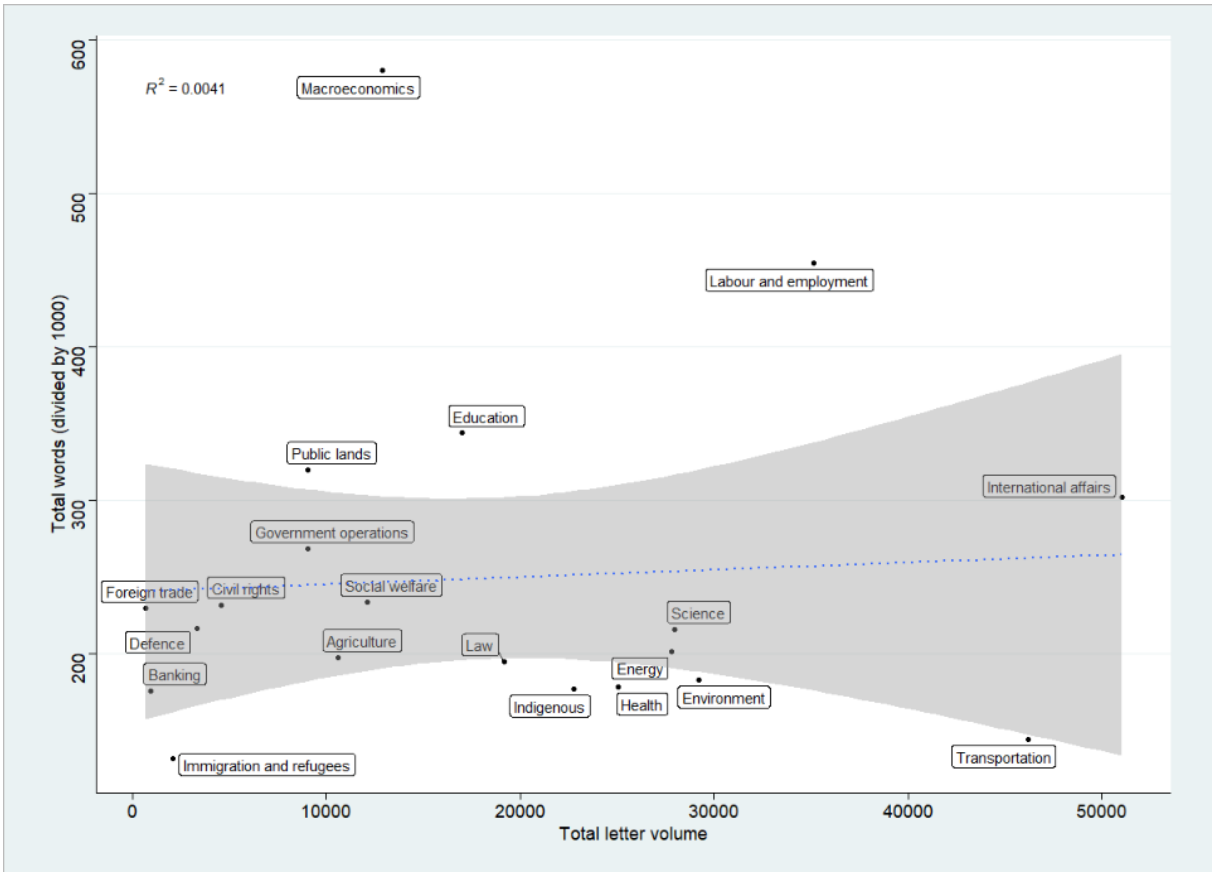
Note: Total words per APAP topic across all Mr Howard's media events, from March 1996 to December 2000. Coded using the seededLDA package.
Source: Sherratt (2019) and Trove.

The topics are broadly consistent across the years in this study, apart from key topics which had identifiable increases associated with major policy debates. For example, the macroeconomic topic experienced a significant surge in 1998, aligning with the debate around the introduction of the GST, and Indigenous Issues saw a surge in 1997, aligning with debate around the *Wik* High Court decision, and subsequent legislation. Overall, however, Mr Howard's agenda is much more stable than the letters.

I first look at the overall relationship between the letters and the speeches. Figure 7-2 shows that, overall, there is very little relationship between the volume of letters and the volume of words in Mr Howard's speeches dedicated to that topic. The line of best fit shows a slight positive slope, but it has an r^2 of 0, indicating that there is no relationship. While no relationship appears evident at this high level, it is still possible that relationships could be identified within

individual topics, or at particular cross-sectional time points. In the next section, I provide a more detailed analysis of the interactions between the speeches and the letters.

Figure 7-2 Overall relationship between speeches and letters



Note: Total letter volume per APAP topic, compared to total number of words in Mr Howard's speeches on that topic, across March 1996 to December 2000.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

7.2 Were the Letters and Speeches Congruent at Different Points in Time?

As set out in Chapter 3, there are a range of different ways that the linkage between public opinion and the political agenda is examined. I start by examining congruence, which explores the point-in-time consistency between public opinion and the political agenda. It does not presume any causal connection, merely that the issues that are considered a priority by the public are equally prioritised by the government. In Chapter 3, I hypothesise that:

> *H4a: There will be cross-sectional congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard's speeches.*

The cross-sectional analysis looks at the relative priority that letter-writers place on a particular issue at a single point in time, and compares that to the relative priority Mr Howard attaches to those issues at the same point in time (Alexandrova et al., 2016). This analysis allows for the identification of changes in the level of congruence over time. I examine 19 quarters, from the second quarter of 1996, through to the fourth quarter of 2000. I compare both the rank of the topics (Spearman) and the proportion of the topics (Pearson) in the letters and the speeches for the same quarter. Overall, there is no evidence of contemporaneous correlation between the letters and Mr Howard's speeches (Table 7-2), and no evidence of any change in the level of congruence across the time periods studied. There were two quarters with a statistically significant Pearson correlation, and one quarter demonstrates a statistically significant Spearman correlation.

Table 7-2 Cross-sectional correlations between letters and speeches

Quarter	Spearman (ranks)	Pearson (proportionate)
1996.2	0.20	0.33
1996.3	0.11	0.50
1996.4	0.56*	0.50
1997.1	0.23	0.65**
1997.2	0.11	0.41
1997.3	-0.44	-0.32
1997.4	0.12	0.50
1998.1	-0.35	-0.13
1998.2	-0.08	-0.18
1998.3	-0.14	-0.17
1998.4	0.36	0.10
1999.1	-0.31	-0.31
1999.2	-0.20	-0.30
1999.3	0.24	0.74**
1999.4	0.34	0.09
2000.1	-0.30	-0.30
2000.2	0.07	0.03
2000.3	0.00	0.44
2000.4	0.42	0.07
Average	0.05	0.14

Note: Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p <0.01, * p<0.05. Quarters are based on calendar years (Q1 is March quarter, Q2 is June quarter, etc). Spearman correlation of the rank of the letters compared to the rank of the speeches across 15 topics. Pearson correlation of the proportion of letters by topic, and speeches by topic, across 15 topics. Kendall's tau is also computed for the ranks, and no significant difference is identified.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

A closer look at the three quarters that demonstrate statistically significant correlations brings into question the validity of relying solely on the correlation statistics. Some of the Pearson

correlations are driven entirely by outliers, but also those outliers are spurious, caused by the vagaries of the coding system. In quarter 1 1997, the correlation (Pearson correlation of 0.65, $p < 0.01$) is driven by the science topic. Opposition to proposed funding cuts to the public broadcaster (the ABC) dominated the mailbag. In that period, Mr Howard's focus was on the privatisation of Telstra and reforms to the telecommunications regulatory system. The coding system places broadcasting and telecommunications in the same high-level topic, and that has driven the correlation, creating a spurious correlation. If the science topic is removed, the correlation drops to -0.12, with a p value of 0.68.

There is one quarter within my period of study where there is a clear congruence between the topics of the letters and the topics of the speeches. In quarter 3, 1999 (Pearson correlation 0.74, $p < 0.01$), international affairs dominated both the mailbag and the speeches (almost 13,000 letters were received on East Timor). More than 8,000 letters arrived in the fortnight ending 24 September 1999 — the second largest influx of mail across the period of this study. This issue also dominated Mr Howard's interviews and speeches, with 51 speeches referencing East Timor in September 1999 alone, and lead to one of the largest increases in his attention across any topic in the period under study — from 4% of his speeches in the second quarter of 1999, jumping to 11% in the third quarter of 1999. This was driven by a major external factor — a regional security crises.

A referendum in East Timor on independence from Indonesia on 30 August 1999 precipitated a major breakdown in domestic security, which also threatened regional security, necessitating Australian military intervention (White, 2008). The military threat from Indonesia, and the potential that Australian Defence Force personnel could be deployed lead to the issue becoming one of the most salient issues in the public's mind — it was the largest issue on talkback radio in late September 1999, and the fourth largest talkback topic across all of 1999 (Ward, 2002). With massive attention on the issue, there was also a large majority of Australians supporting military intervention. Two opinion polls in September 1999 reported more than 70% of Australians supported the deployment of peacekeepers (Booth, 2017; McDougall & Edney, 2010). Importantly, there was a similar level of support across both ALP and Coalition supporters (Booth, 2017), and the content of the talkback calls revealing that support for military intervention was driven by both humanitarian and national security concerns, which resulted in cross-societal support for military action.

A number of researchers have suggested that public opinion played a direct role in Mr Howard's decision on East Timor (Booth, 2017; McDougall & Edney, 2010). Defence and

security analyst Hugh White wrote (White, 2008, p. 81) that "[a]ll of the government's actions… took place against a background of great public concern, and strong public expectations that the government would 'do something'". Others suggest that the massive surge in public opinion (which included large protests) "create[ed] panic" in the government (Booth, 2017, p. 103). However, it does not show any systematic relationship between the letters and the speeches.

Turning now to the Spearman rank correlation, there is only one quarter with a statistically significant correlation — the 4th quarter of 1996, which shows a positive correlation of 0.56. However, this quarter appears to be a one-off, and was driven by the topics that have spurious correlations. First, the science topic, which is discussed above, and second the labour and employment topic. The letters were focused on a campaign about family day-care. However, in the speeches, this topic was driven by workplace relations — with major changes in workplace relations laws commencing in late 1996 with the *Workplace Relations Act 1996*. It is a co-incidence that these two issues happen to have occurred at a similar time, resulting in similar patterns in the speeches and letters. All other quarters demonstrating no statistically significant correlation, and an average across the time periods of close to zero.

This section rejects the hypothesis that there will be cross-sectional congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard's speeches. Across the 19 quarters studied, there was a close to zero correlation between the letters received in a quarter, and the speeches of that same quarter. The only instance where there was a significant overlap between the letters and the speeches was due to the political and military crisis in East Timor. While these results show the absence of the "static notion of rhetorical priority correspondence" (Alexandrova et al., 2016, p. 616), they do not tell us anything about whether the public, through the letters, is having any effect on Mr Howard's speeches. This is addressed in the next section.

7.3 Were the Letters and Speeches Congruent for any of the Topics?

Having shown that there is no evidence of a cross-sectional congruence between the letters and Mr Howard's speeches, I now consider whether there was a congruence within each topic, across time. As I do in the previous section, I compare the same time period. As set out in Chapter 3, I hypotheses that:

> *H4b: There will be time-series congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard's speeches.*

I use the correlation between the proportion of letters and proportion of speeches by topic in the same quarter, I find statistically significant correlations across three topics (labour and employment; law; and science).

Table 7-3 Correlations between letters and Mr Howard's speeches by topic — congruence

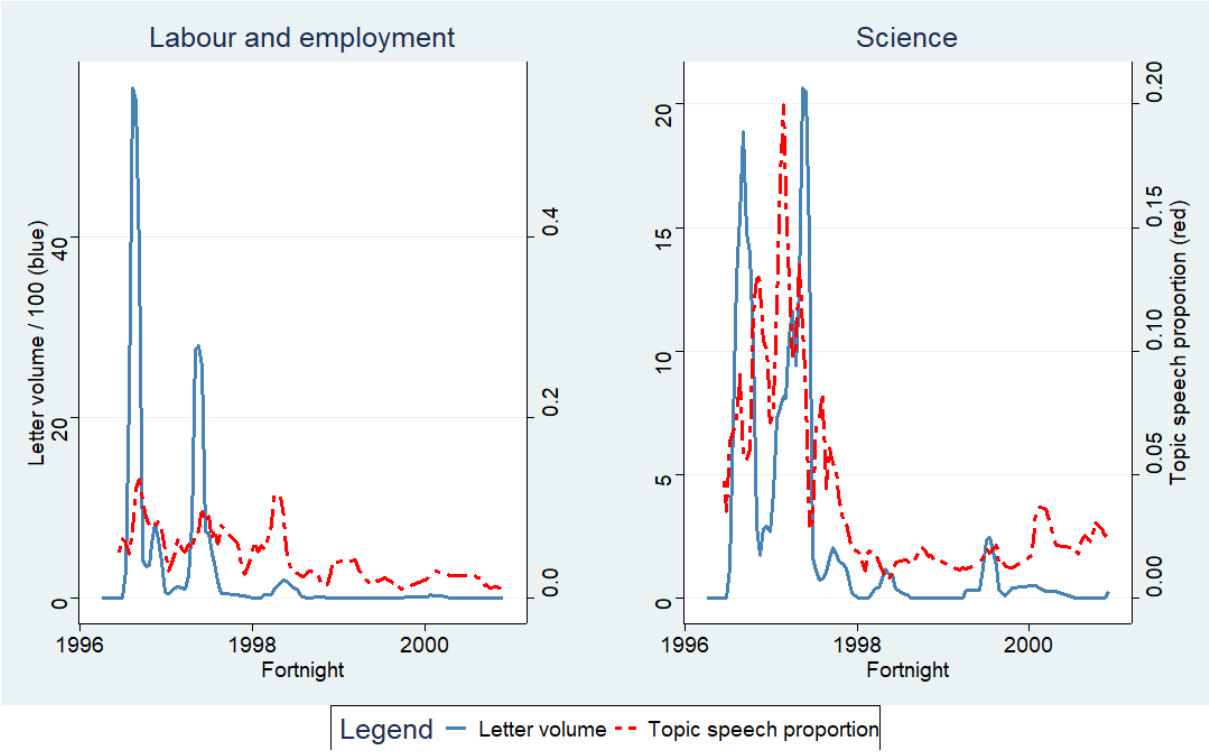
Topic	Spearman (ranks)	Pearson (proportionate)
Macroeconomics	-0.40	-0.15
Health	-0.45	-0.24
Agriculture	-0.13	0.08
Labour and employment	0.67**	0.66**
Education	0.39	0.20
Environment	0.15	0.09
Energy	-0.09	0.25
Transportation	0.04	0.01
Law	0.42	0.63**
Social welfare	-0.38	-0.14
Science	0.69**	0.95**
International affairs	0.17	0.03
Government operations	0.09	0.00
Public lands	0.42	0.33
Indigenous	0.31	0.18
Average	**0.12**	**0.15**

Note: Significance levels: ** p <0.01, * p<0.05. Spearman correlation of the rank of the letters compared to the rank of the speeches for each topic in the same quarter, across 19 quarters. Pearson correlation of the proportion of letters by topic, and speeches by topic for each topic, in the same quarter across 19 quarters. Kendall's tau was also computed for the ranks, and no significant difference was identified.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Before concluding whether this provides support for my hypothesis, I need to explore what individual topics are driving these correlations.

Figure 7-3 Comparing letter volume and speech proportion over time — labour and employment and science



Note: Data are rolling 3-fortnightly averages.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

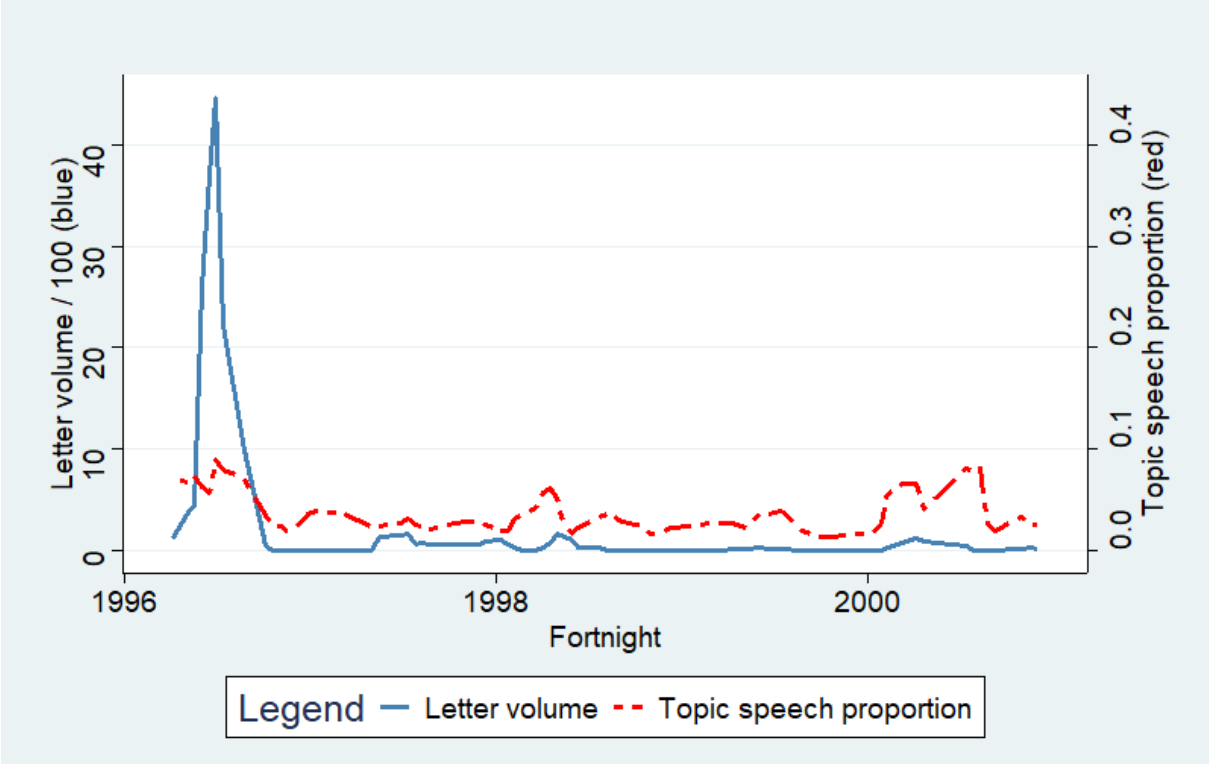
Figure 7-3 shows that both Mr Howard's speeches and the letters had peaks at similar periods for both the labour and employment and science topics, before declining. However, these findings suffer from the same problems of spurious correlations as set out above. As above, the correlation in both the science topic and the labour and employment topic are both driven by artefacts of the coding schema, rather than any genuine relationship between the letters and the speeches.

This leaves only the law topic (Figure 7-4)[64], which shows that the letters peaked in 1996, which corresponds with a higher level of Mr Howard's speeches. This topic was dominated by almost 17,000 letters on gun law reform in the aftermath of the Port Arthur massacre — Australia's worst mass killing, with 35 dead and 21 injured (Laming, 2007). This event shocked the nation. Despite vehement opposition from elements within his own party and constituency, Mr Howard reacted quickly by announcing plans to heavily restrict gun ownership. Soon after this announcement, opinion polls showed more than 90% of voters supported strict bans on automatic and semi-automatic weapons (Laming, 2007; Martin, 2013). Unsurprisingly, this led to the topic ranking first in the letters and third in the speeches (the highest rank for this topic

[64] Similar graphs for the remaining topics are in the Appendix.

in the speeches). For the remainder of the period, the topic ranked fairly low in both the speeches and the letters. While other research has shown that Mr Howard had an ongoing commitment to gun reform, he has acknowledged elsewhere that the strength of public opinion helped to ensure that his plan could overcome any resistance from the National Party and farmers' lobbies (Alpers & Ghazarian, 2019). In my interviews, Mr Hazell also recalled that "he took particular interest in what the public was saying about [gun control]. And he read a lot of them personally… it was a key issue."

Figure 7-4 Comparing letter volume and speech proportion over time — law



Note: Data are rolling 3-fortnightly averages.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

This example is consistent with the theories in Chapter 3 that political elites can use these letters to shape (manipulate) public opinion, to further their own agenda (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000), and that explanations are particularly important when individuals oppose the policy decision (Esaiasson et al., 2017; Mansbridge, 2003). When Mr Howard was talking to groups that opposed his gun reform laws, he regularly argued that the majority of the public supported his position. He argued that "the overwhelming majority of the Australian people want" (Howard, 1996b) tighter gun laws. He also argued that there was a strong intensity of feeling on the issue "I was overwhelmed by the number of people who came up to me [at the football] and said, 'for heaven's sake don't weaken your resolve [on gun reform]'" (Howard, 1996b).

Although driven by an external issue (as with East Timor, considered above), there is a clear congruence between what the public are saying through the letters, and what Mr Howard was talking about. However, with only these two topics identified I reject my hypothesis that there will be time-series congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard's speeches. Instead, it provides evidence of the broader importance of political leaders engaging with different forms of public opinion.

7.4 Regression Modelling of Responsiveness

Having analysed the congruence (measuring public opinion and the political agenda at the same time period), I now move to responsiveness, which is based on an assumption of change, or movement between periods. There are a range of different approaches in the literature to examining responsiveness, I use regression modelling and correlations (Alexandrova et al., 2016; Lindeboom, 2012; Tan & Weaver, 2009). Each of these approaches compares the volume of letters at $time_t$ to Mr Howard's speeches at $time_{t+1}$. The regression modelling is based on fortnightly data, because that is the frequency of the observations from the briefs, while the correlations are based on quarterly data. As Martin et al. (2014) notes, the exact time period is somewhat arbitrary. While most research in this area uses annual data because of the availability of data, Martin et al. (2014) notes that it is equally possible that for some areas, responsiveness may occur more quickly or more slowly. The advantage of my dataset is that it allows for hypothesis to be tested across multiple time periods.

First, I explain how the models are specified, including determining appropriate lag between the letters and speeches; how the variables are operationalised; and checking assumptions of stationarity and normality.

For the letters and briefs to have an impact on the prime minister, he, or the PMO, must have seen the briefs. The briefs include the date that they are provided to the PMO and are filed according to the date that Mr Howard saw them. On average, the briefs took between four and five days to be provided to the PMO, and then a further five to six days for the Mr Howard to consider them. This means that for letters received in $\text{letter-fortnight}_i$, on average the brief was provided to the PMO around the middle of $\text{letter-fortnight}_{i+1}$ and Mr Howard saw the brief towards the end of $\text{letter-fortnight}_{i+1}$. Thus, the speeches are divided into fortnights at a 10-day delay, as this is the earliest that this could impact Mr Howard's speeches (Table 7-4).

As explained in Chapter 3, political vulnerability is a potential mediating factor in responsiveness, which I am operationalising through the regular Newspoll survey on voting

intention. These polls were usually taken over a weekend, and then published on the following Tuesday morning. For the purposes of analysing the impact of political vulnerability on Mr Howard's speeches, these are assumed to impact the speeches in the fortnight that they are published. Table 7-4 provides some examples:

Table 7-4 Determining lags between letters and speeches

Fortnight in which letters were received (independent variable)	Average date brief would have been seen (10 calendar days)	Fortnight in which speeches may be impacted (dependent variable)	Newspoll poll end date
Saturday 9 March 1996 – Friday 22 March 1996	Monday 1 April 1996	Monday 1 April 1996 – Sunday 14 April 1996	Sunday 31 March 1996
Saturday 23 March 1996 – Friday 5 April 1996	Monday 15 April 1996	Monday 15 April 1996 – Sunday 28 April 1996	Sunday 14 April 1996
Saturday 6 April 1996 – Friday 19 April 1996	Monday 29 April 1996	Monday 29 April 1996 – Sunday 12 May 1996	Sunday 28 April 1996

Source: Author

The response variable (Mr Howard's speeches) could either be expressed as a count (the number of words per topic per fortnight), or as a proportion (the proportion of total words on each topic). I use proportion throughout, for two reasons. First, the underlying premise of CAP is that topics compete for a limited amount of space on the public or political agenda. While Mr Howard could choose to increase the number of media appearance and speeches he gave, he still had to prioritise between competing issues, so these choices are a proxy for the importance attached to those issues (Dowding et al., 2016). Second, this approach automatically controls for a range of other variables that impact on word count, including holiday periods (where word count dropped significantly), election periods (where word count increased significantly), and the annual increase in the level of media engagements (as set out in Chapter 4).

The literature has a range of different models for measuring the relationship between public opinion and policy/agenda. Part of this comes down to whether what is being measured is congruence or responsiveness. As set out in Chapter 3, the core difference between congruence and responsiveness is that responsiveness relies on the movement of public policy between time periods. Within the responsiveness literature, there are still a number of different approaches to modelling responsiveness. Beyer and Hänni (2018) identify at least two schools of thought to modelling this concept:

Equation 1: $\Delta P = f\{P^*_{t-1}\}$

or

Equation 2: $\Delta P = f\{\Delta P^*_t\}$

There is also a third approach in the literature, which does not rely on the change of policy, but still relies on comparing between different time periods:

Equation 3: $P = f\{P^*_{t-1}\}$

Where P represents policy (in this study, this would represent the proportion of the relevant topic in Mr Howard's speeches) and P* represents public opinion/preferences (in this study, this would represent the letters on the relevant topic). Within each of these equations, the actual models often add further variables, such as measures of lagged policy ($P_{(t-1)}$), party control of government, and other control variables. In equations 1 and 2, the dependent variable is the change in policy, rather than the actual policy itself. Equation 3 differs, by not requiring a change in policy, but instead considers that responsiveness has been achieved if opinion at $time_{t-1}$ impacts on policy at $time_t$.

The literature uses all three equations, with most studies not overtly considering other models, or explaining why they have chosen their preferred approach. Many articles use multiple models as robustness checks. Equation 3 is popular in the literature (Bernardi, 2014; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Rottinghaus, 2007; Wood & Lee, 2009). However, some research uses a combination of equation 1 and equation 3 within the same article (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008). More recently, Hakhverdian (2012) uses a combination of equation 2 and equation 3. The final approach is an error-correction model (Bevan & Jennings, 2014; Jennings & John, 2009; Wood & Lee, 2009), but one of the necessary assumptions of an error-correction model is that there is a long-run equilibrium between X and Y, which does not exist in my data, so this model is not appropriate for my research.

In my research, I apply equations 1 and 2; this aligns with Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) and Hakhverdian (2012). While equation 3 is also extensively used in the existing literature, including where executive speech is used as the dependent variable (Bernardi, 2014; Bulut & Yildirim, 2020; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Rottinghaus, 2007), these articles usually use annual data, which are less likely to be autocorrelated. The level of autocorrelation in my data makes this model inappropriate for this research.

As my data is a time series, it needs to be checked to see if it is stationary. I expect that the data is non-stationary and autocorrelated, because each observation (speech proportions in a relevant fortnight) is not independent, as Mr Howard continued to respond to the issues of the day, which will often remain for an extended period. Data that is non-stationary is not suitable for regression modelling, as it may exhibit spurious regressions, due to trends or seasonality (Parker, 2012). This is checked through autocorrelation function plots (ACF plots). Where the data is not stationary, appropriate transformations are needed to make the series stationary, usually through taking the first difference, or the first difference of the log. While the original, untransformed data displays significant evidence of non-stationarity, this is largely resolved once the first difference has been taken. ACF plots for all topics are provided in the Appendix.

The second key assumption in OLS regression is that the residuals are normally distributed. While the residuals initially display significant non-normality, this was largely resolved through the log transformation of the speeches. On that basis the first difference of the log transformation is considered the most suitable for modelling the speeches, this series of transformations is consistent with the time series regression literature (Ahmed et al., 2010; Cai, 2002; Stock & Watson, 1996). Q-Q plots of residuals for all topics are provided in the Appendix.

As the speeches time series data has been made stationary, the letters series should also be stationary (Parker, 2012). Unlike the speeches, the letters exhibit much lower levels of autocorrelation, with many having no statistically significant correlations with their lagged values. For those that do have some level of autocorrelation, it is largely removed in the ‘differenced’ series. On that basis, both the original and the differenced series are acceptable to use in the modelling. ACF plots for all topics are provided in the Appendix.

My research also uses public opinion poll measures of first preference voting intention. This series is highly autocorrelated, so the differenced series is used, which addressed the autocorrelation. ACF plots for are provided in the Appendix.

The final factor that needs to be considered is the impact of the mass media and external events. There is evidence that the media impacts the public agenda (Cohen, 1963; Soroka & Wlezien, 2022). However, this is not directly included in my modelling, because of the inability to access appropriate measures. While Dowding and Martin (2017) collected and APAP-coded some Australian media data, because it is designed for annual observations, it is inappropriate for use in my fortnightly-based modelling as there are insufficient observations in each fortnight. In addition, because Dowding and Martin (2017) focus solely on the front-page of the

sampled newspapers, it is unlikely to pick up the more minor, or niche topics, that were identified in the letters. While this omission could bias the results, most of the existing literature has accepted this limitation (Soroka & Wlezien, 2022). It will also be addressed qualitatively in Chapter 8.

Bringing these considerations together, to test the responsiveness hypotheses, my models for each topic,[65] are based on equation 1:

$$\text{Model 1: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta(total\ mail/100)_{t-1} + \varepsilon$$

And, based on equation 2:

$$\text{Model 2: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta\Delta(total\ mail/100) + \varepsilon$$

For each of these, the Coalition primary vote (measured by the Newspoll surveys) is also added as a mediating factor. A range of other modelling approaches and model specifications are used; however, the results were broadly similar to those presented here. More details on the other modelling approaches and their results are included in the Appendix.[66]

7.5 Were the Speeches Responsive to the Letters?

This section presents the results of the regression analysis undertaken to test the hypotheses set out in Chapter 3. It first looks at the direct effect of the volume of the letters on Mr Howard's speeches; it then looks at the interaction effect of political vulnerability (as measured by the Newspoll surveys). Second, this section looks at the correlation between the letters in one quarter, and the topics of the speeches in the following quarter.

[65] In all cases, "total mail" refers to both individual letters and pro-formas.

[66] Count-based models (such as negative binomial or Poisson models) are not considered appropriate because of the significant variation in total words (e.g. during holiday and election periods) as well as the steady increase in total words over the time period of the study.

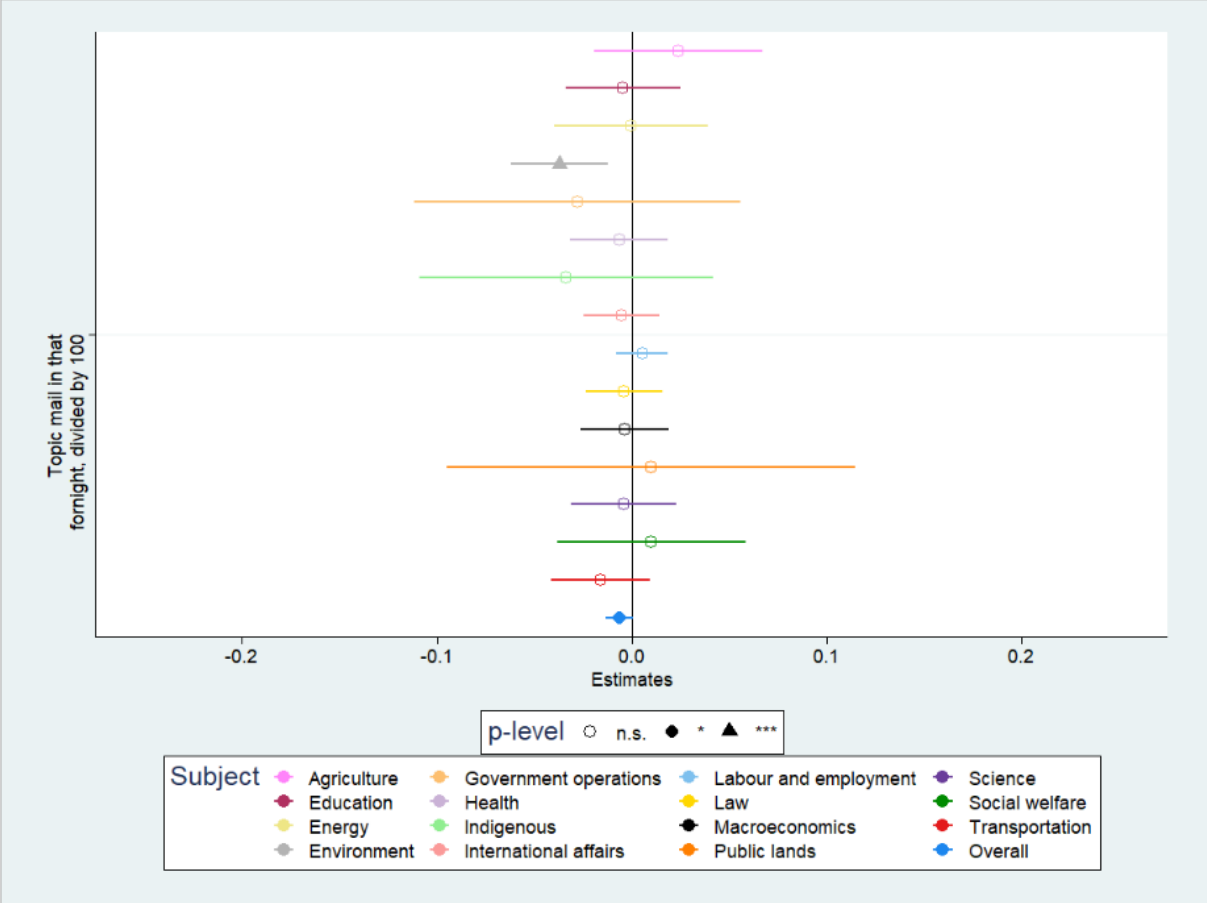
Logistic regression models are tried, for both model 1 and model 2, using the untransformed proportion of Mr Howard's speech per topic. As this model requires the responsive variable to be bounded between 0 and 1, the first-difference transformation cannot be used. Results are included in the Appendix. Using the preferred OLS modelling approach, both models 1 and 2 are also re-specified to also include:

a) an extra fortnight, to account for the possibility that it might take a more sustained volume of mail to generate responsiveness; or
b) a squared term, to account for the possibility that Mr Howard was only responsive to very large volumes of mail.

Finally, a log-transformation of the independent variable (volume of letters) was also tried, to address the skew in this variable. Results are included in the Appendix.

Hypothesis 5a proposes that following an increase in the volume of letters on a particular topic, there will be an increase in the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on that topic. To test this hypothesis, I fit model 1, then model 2, to see if there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of letters, and the topics Mr Howard spoke about. For most topics, these models result in co-efficient at or near zero. In each case, this is mainly due to the proportion of fortnights without any mail (individual letters or proformas) on a particular topic. As can be seen in Figure 7-5, the only topic to show a statistically significant impact (even if the alpha is lowered to 0.1) is the environment, while the overall model also had a small statistically significant impact.[67]

Figure 7-5 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — all topics (model 1) — coefficient plot



Notes: Model 1, regressing the change in the log of speech proportion per topic, on total mail/100, per topic, per fortnight.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

[67] Regression tables for all topics are in the Appendix.

Looking at the environment topic (Table 7-5), the model predicts that as the total number of letters received on the environment increases by 100, the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches dedicated to the environment should *decrease* by approximately four per cent, compared to the previous fortnight. This is a very small impact, given that the average percentage on the environment was 3.3 per cent, a four per cent reduction would reduce that to around 3.2 per cent. The low R^2 indicates that the number of letters explains around 10% of the total variation in the dependent variable.[68]

Table 7-5 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — environment (model 1)

	Change in Log Proportion of Speech on Environment	
	Estimate	**Confidence Interval**
(Intercept)	0.16	-0.06 – 0.38
Total mail on the Environment, divided by 100	-0.04**	-0.06 – -0.01
Observations	74	
Adjusted R^2	0.10	

Notes: * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

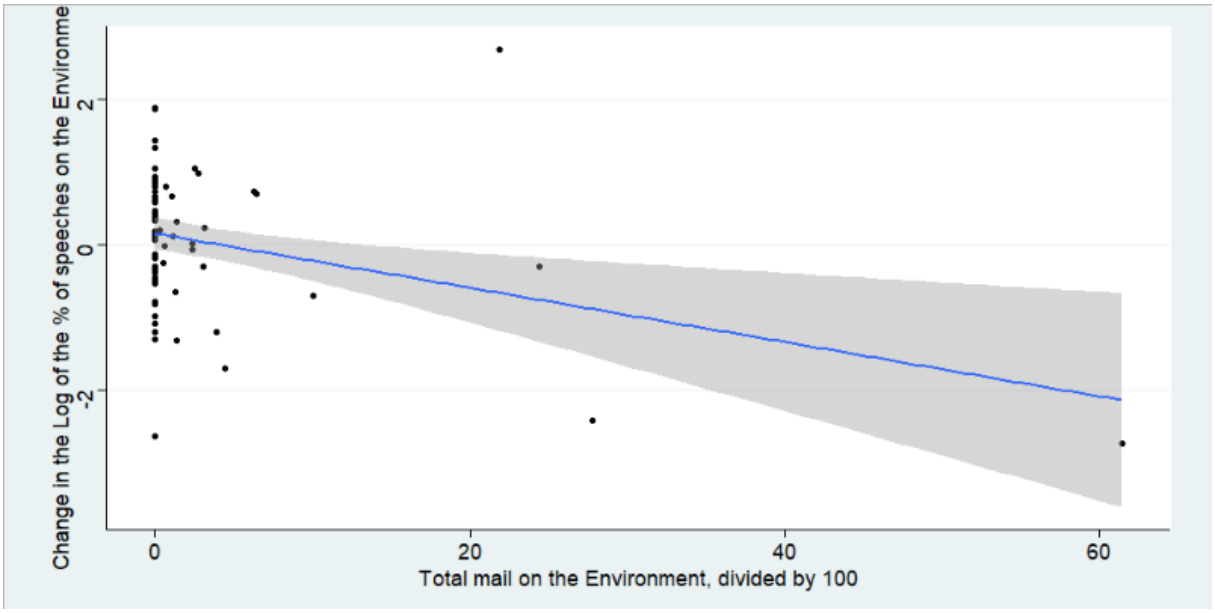
As can be seen from Figure 7-6 and Figure 7-7, this effect is driven by two fortnights, which both had more than 2,000 letters, as well as large falls in the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on the environment topic. These letters were received in the fortnight ending 14 November 1997 (6,148 letters on global warming) and 12 December 1997 (2,776 letters on global warming). These fortnights were the peak in a letter-writing campaign that commenced in late 1996, which saw almost 27,000 letters (although almost entirely pro-formas) arrive. For most of the campaign, the number of letters received remained fairly low, before a large burst of activity from November 1997 until March 1998, which aligned with the lead-up and immediate aftermath of the Kyoto climate conference in December 1997.

On the other side of the equation, Mr Howard did not particularly focus on the environment, and it ranked 8th over the five years of this study. However, it significantly rose in prominence in his agenda in late 1997 and early 1998, because of the international attention on the Kyoto climate conference. It was the second largest topic in the final quarter of 1997, the highest it ranked across the five years. The two fortnights in question correspond with speeches in the fortnights ending 7 December 1997 and 4 January 1998 respectively, and while Mr Howard

[68] There was also a zero correlation between the residuals and the independent variable, suggesting that there were no omitted variables.

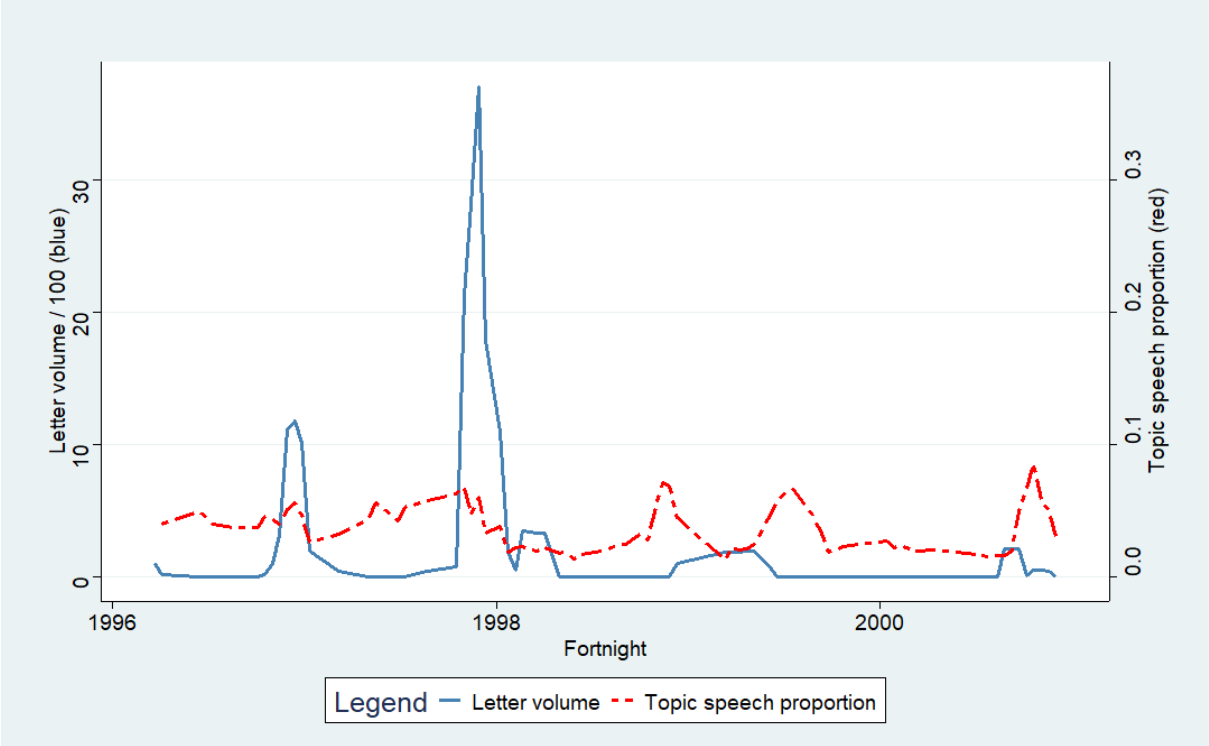
spoke a lot about the Kyoto climate conference, as soon as it finished, the topic disappeared from Mr Howard's agenda, dropping to under 3% of his speeches for most of the rest of the period under study. Thus, while there were simultaneously high levels of both letters and the speeches, they were driven by an external factor. In the absence of those two observations, the model loses statistical significance (p=0.39). As such, it does not support the hypothesis.

Figure 7-6 Responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters — environment (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Figure 7-7 Comparing letter volume and speech proportion over time — environment



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

In addition to the evidence in Chapter 5 that letter-writers are unlikely to be swing voters, I also suggest that the reason for this lack of responsiveness may be a combination of issue ownership and evidence that the public opinion coming through in the mail was significantly different to broader public opinion. The environment was the fourth biggest issue in Mr Howard's mailbag across the period in this study, and the briefs to Mr Howard only mentioned letters that were arguing for greater action — driven mainly by campaigns by Greenpeace and the Australian Conservation Foundation.[69] Yet this did not reflect broader opinion, which rarely prioritised environmental issues — only 6% of people said environmental issues were their most, or second most important issue during the 1998 election (Bean, Gow, et al., 2019a), and while the majority of the public supported signing the Kyoto Convention, this support was heavily focused amongst ALP voters and the young (who are no traditionally supporters of the Coalition) (Hogarth, 1997).

Issue ownership theory suggests that the public consider certain parties as better at dealing with certain issues, and because of that, parties and leaders will seek to focus on their "owned issues" (Walgrave et al., 2015, p. 778) to the extent possible, and minimise focus on issues owned by their opponents. Parties and leaders are therefore less likely to be responsive to issue that they do not own, and may actively seek to get the issue out of the news (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2016). Existing research finds that responsiveness can be mediated by issue ownership (Hurley & Hill, 2003). However, it is not always possible to ignore or downplay issues, and significant external events or major crises can force all parties to address an issue, regardless of issue ownership (Green & Jennings, 2019; Kristensen et al., 2023). This appears to be what happened in relation to climate change. While environment is an issue that is owned by the left-of-centre parties (McAllister & bin Oslan, 2021), including the ALP (Cameron & McAllister, 2019), the Kyoto climate conference forced Mr Howard to address the issue, at least to a limited extent. Mr Howard's government worked to 'water down' the emissions targets at the Kyoto climate conference (Davies, 2019), and he refused to ratify it, arguing that it was not in Australia's national interest (Horn, 2001).

A similar pattern is evident for the overall results (Table 7-6 and Figure 7-8), where the model is statistically significant at the $p<0.10$ level, showing that as mail on any particular topic

[69] This is not to say that there were no letters arguing for less action in response to climate change, however, it does indicate that in no fortnight were there more than 30 letters taking this position.

increases, there is a small decrease in the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on the relevant topic.[70]

Table 7-6 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — all topics (model 1)

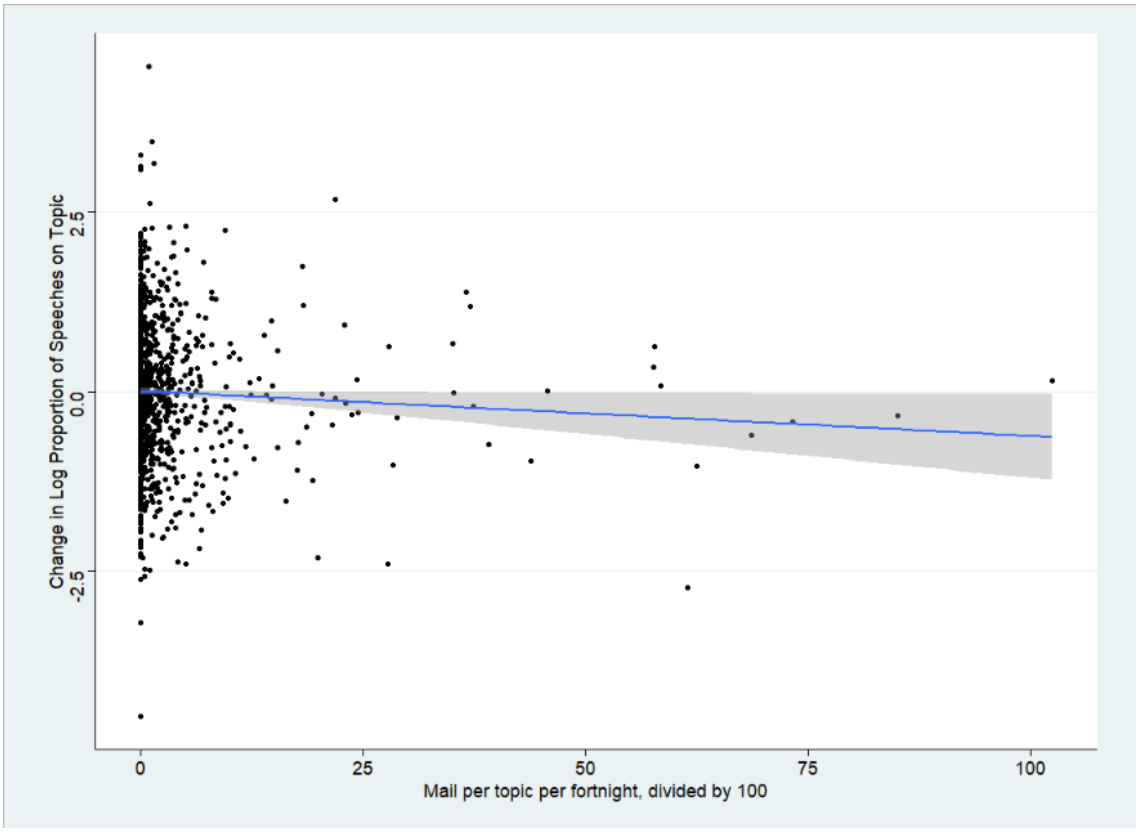
	Change in Log Proportion of Speech	
	Estimate	**Confidence Interval**
(Intercept)	0.01	-0.05 – 0.07
Total mail, divided by 100	-0.01^{+}	-0.01 – 0.00
Observations	1,175	
Adjusted R^2	0.00	

Notes: $^{+}$ p <0.1, * p<0.05 ** p<0.01
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

However, the R^2 is less than 1%, and while none of the observations have a particularly high Cooks' distance, two of the three observations with the highest Cooks' distance are the two environment fortnights discussed above. Once those two observations are removed, the model loses significance (p = 0.37). As such, this similarly does not support the hypothesis.

[70] There is also a zero correlation between the residuals and the independent variable, suggesting that there were no omitted variables.

Figure 7-8 Responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters — overall (model 1)

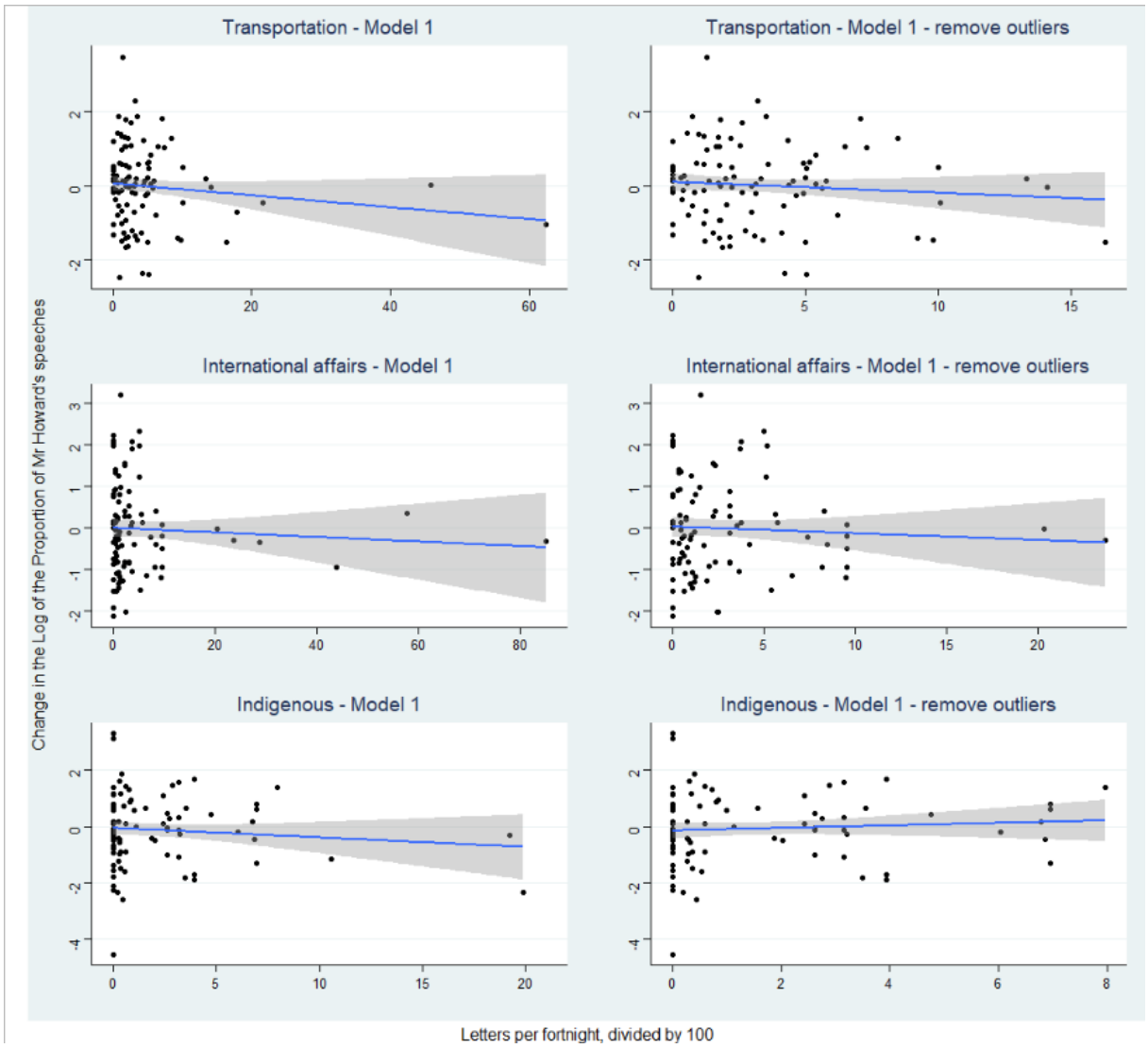


Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Similar patterns are evident in other topics. As there is limited value going through each topic in turn, I focus on the three topics that appeared across the highest number of observations (international affairs, transportation, and Indigenous). In Figure 7-9, I show the relationship between mail per fortnight and the change in the log proportion of speeches, with and without outlier observations (defined as observations outside the 2.5% - 97.5% percentile range). The removal of the outliers allows us to clearly see the lack of any strong relationship between the letters and the changes in the speeches, with the regression line close to horizontal.[71]

[71] There is also a zero correlation between the residuals and the independent variable, suggesting that there were no omitted variables.

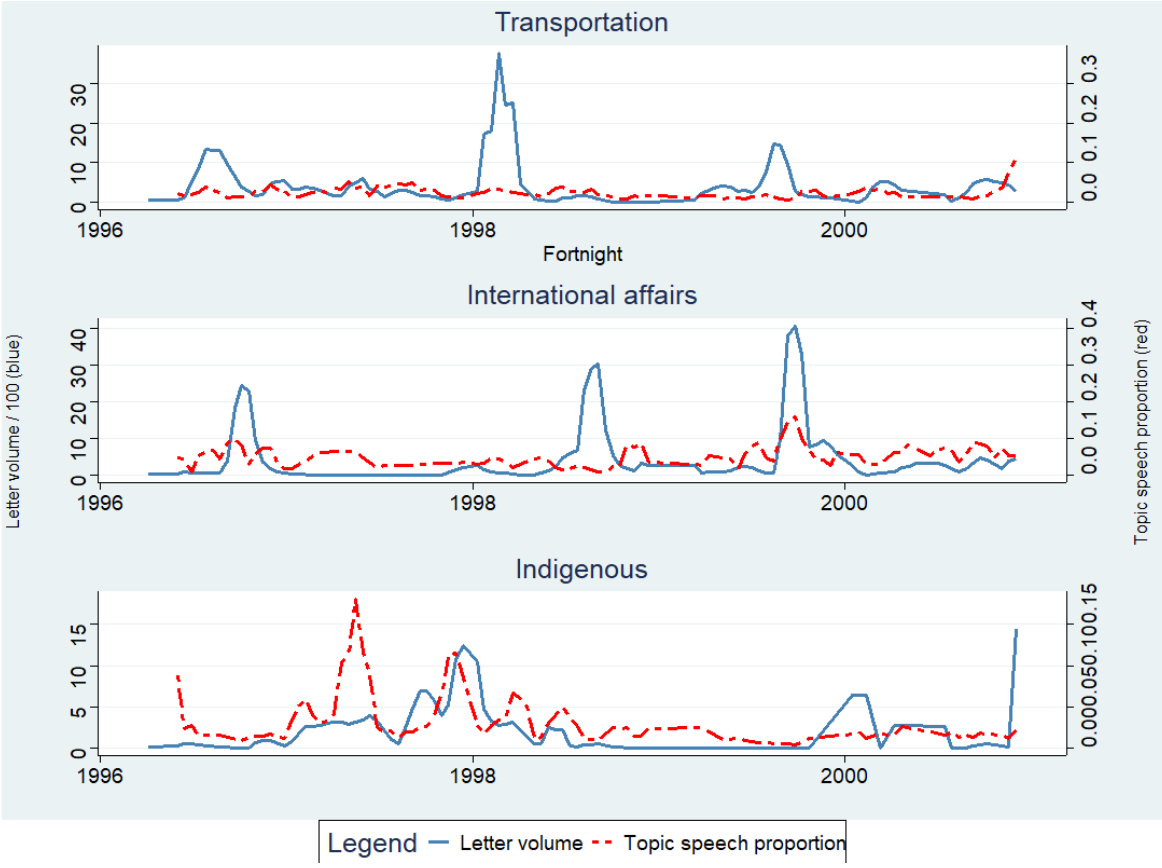
Figure 7-9 Responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters — transportation, international affairs and indigenous (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

These same topics are also shown in Figure 7-10, which shows that the spikes in the letter volumes for transportation had no discernible impact on Mr Howard's speeches. However, there are coinciding peaks for both international affairs in late 1999 and Indigenous in late 1997 and into 1998, however these were not enough to generate statistically significant relationships in the regression modelling. The international affairs peaks relate to Tibet in 1998 and then East Timor in 1999 (which created congruence, as identified earlier this chapter), while the patterns evident in the Indigenous topic is due to the *Wik* case in 1997 and reconciliation in 2000. These issues are explored further throughout this and the next chapter.

Figure 7-10 Letter volume and speech proportions — transportation, international affairs and indigenous

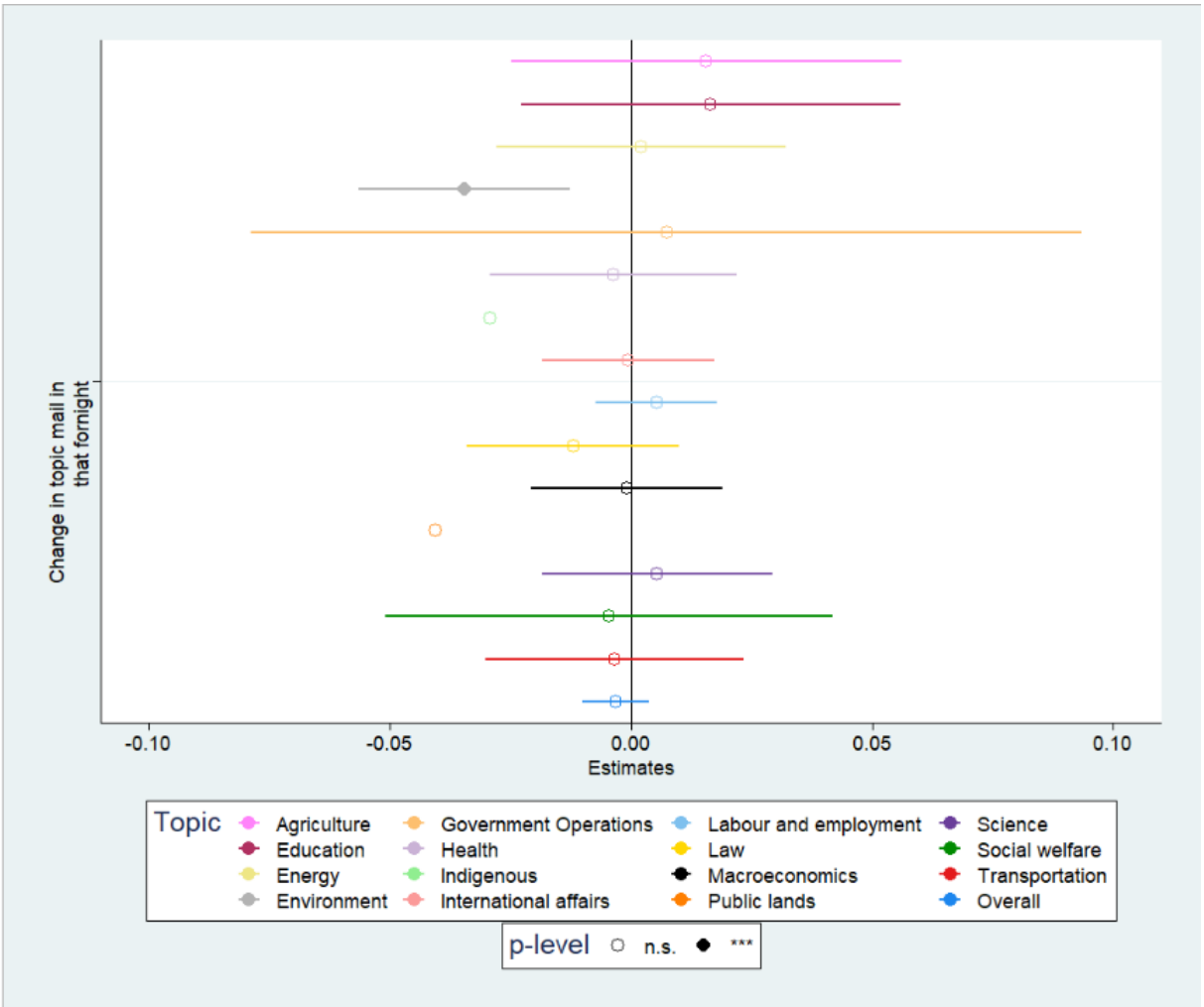


Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Before confirming that the data does not support the hypothesis, I also analyse model 2. Model 2 uses *change* in the number of letters per fortnight as the independent variable. For almost all topics, these models result in co-efficient at or near zero. As can be seen in Figure 7-11, the only topic to show a statistically significant impact (even if the alpha is lowered to 0.1) is the environment.[72]

[72] Regression tables for all topics are in the Appendix.

Figure 7-11 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — all topics (model 2) — coefficient plot



Notes: Model 2, regressing the change in the log of speech proportion per topic, on change in total mail/100, per topic, per fortnight.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Looking at the environment model,[73] Table 7-7, the model predicts that for an increase of 100 letters on the environment, compared to the prior fortnight, the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on the environment will decline by 0.03%. This is the same direction as model 1 (that more letters on a particular topic led to a reduction in the proportion of words on that same topic).

[73] There is also a zero correlation between the residuals and the independent variable, suggesting that there were no omitted variables.

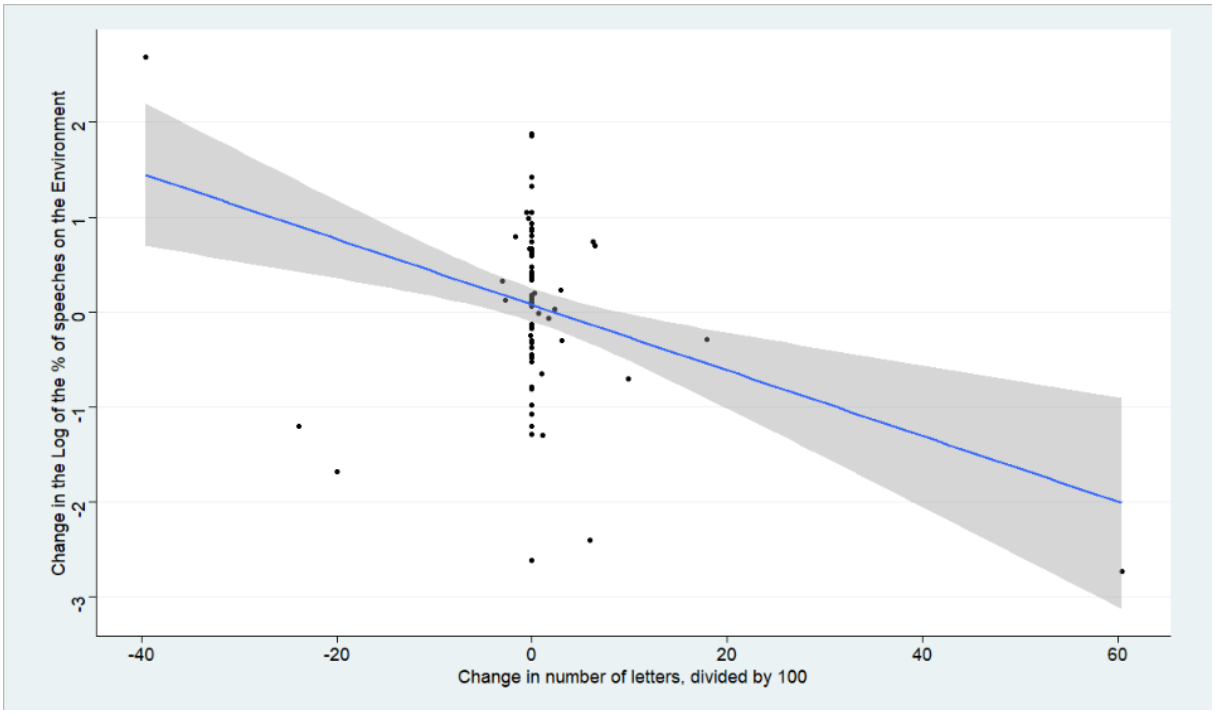
Table 7-7 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — environment (model 2)

	Change in Log Proportion of Speech on Environment	
	Estimate	**Confidence Interval**
(Intercept)	0.07	-0.13 – 0.28
Change in the number of letters (compared to prior fortnight)/100	-0.03**	-0.01 – 0.00
Observations	74	
Adjusted R^2	0.11	

Notes: * p<0.05 ** p<0.01
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

As with model 1, the low adjusted R^2 indicates that the number of letters only explains around 12% of the total variation in the dependent variable. As can be seen in Figure 7-12, like with model 1, it is driven by two consecutive fortnights, first on the extreme right showing an increase of 6,000 letters (fortnight ending 14 November 1997), and the following fortnight, on the extreme left, which showed a reduction of approximately 4,000 letters (fortnight ending 28 November, 1997). As set out above, this is due to the sudden spike of letters (the increase of 6,000, evident on the extreme right), and then a sudden drop the following fortnight (on the extreme left).

Figure 7-12 Responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters - environment (model 2)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

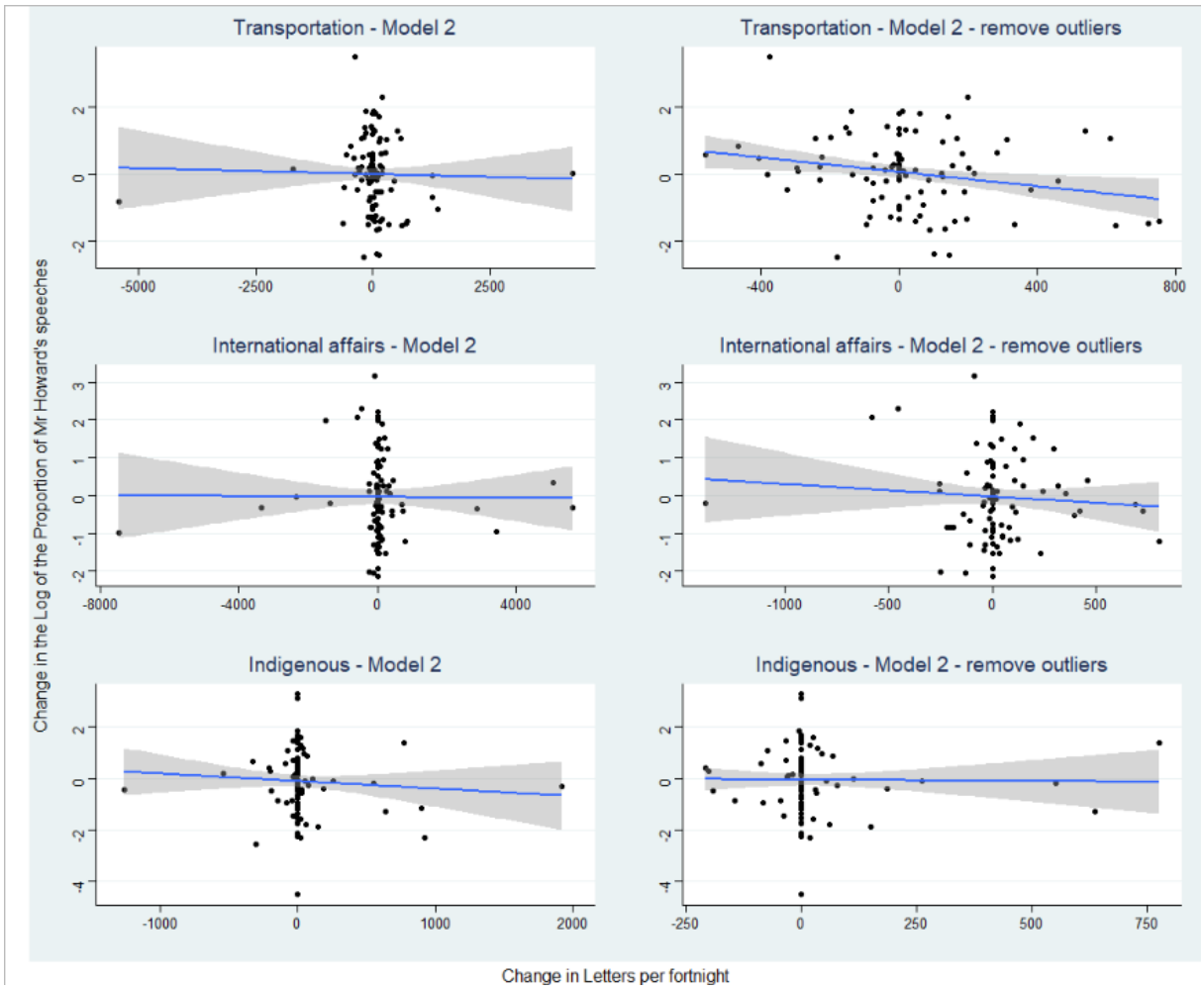
To address this sudden increase and drop-off in the volume of letters, the model was run with rolling averages for both the independent and dependent variables, for both two and three fortnights. This would allow trends to be identified, while controlling for sudden movements. In both cases, the models ceased to be statistically significant (p= 0.91 and p= 0.83 respectively). This further confirms that this model also does not support the hypothesis that an increase in the number of letters on a topic should increase the amount that Mr Howard talks about that topic.

For all the remaining topics, the regressions indicate that there is no evidence of a relationship between the change in the number of letters received on a topic, and the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on that topic in the following fortnight. To demonstrate this, the same three topics that I highlight for model 1 (Figure 7-9) are shown in Figure 7-13. For these topics, most of the observations are clustered at or near the zero on the X-axis (indicating no, or minimal, change,[74] with the change in the log proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on that topic being much more evenly spread up and down the Y-axis. Except for transportation, the trend line is very close to straight, and the confidence intervals extending across the zero line, indicating that there is no statistical relationship.[75]

[74] As is expected by punctuated equilibrium theory (Casey, 2024).

[75] There is also a zero correlation between the residuals and the independent variable, suggesting that there were no omitted variables.

Figure 7-13 Responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters — transportation, international affairs and indigenous (model 2)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The relationship that is evident in transportation is only significant at p=0.1, and has an R^2 of 0.03. As such, it provides very limited support for the hypothesis.

Having shown that there is no evidence to support hypothesis 5a, I now move onto hypothesis 5b, which suggests that responsiveness will increase when governments are politically vulnerable. As set out in Chapter 3, theoretically political leaders are expected to be more responsive when they are more politically vulnerable. This research uses a series of fortnightly Newspoll questions on first preference voting intention. To test this hypothesis, I use the same two base models, with the addition of an interaction term of the Newspoll results for the relevant period.[76]

[76] No alternative model specifications are used, given the consistency of the findings across the original two models.

Interaction model 1:

$$\Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta_1(total\ mail)_{t-1} + \beta_2\Delta(Newspoll)_{(t-1)} + \beta_3((total\ mail)_{t-1} * \Delta(Newspoll)_{(t-1)}) + \varepsilon$$

And

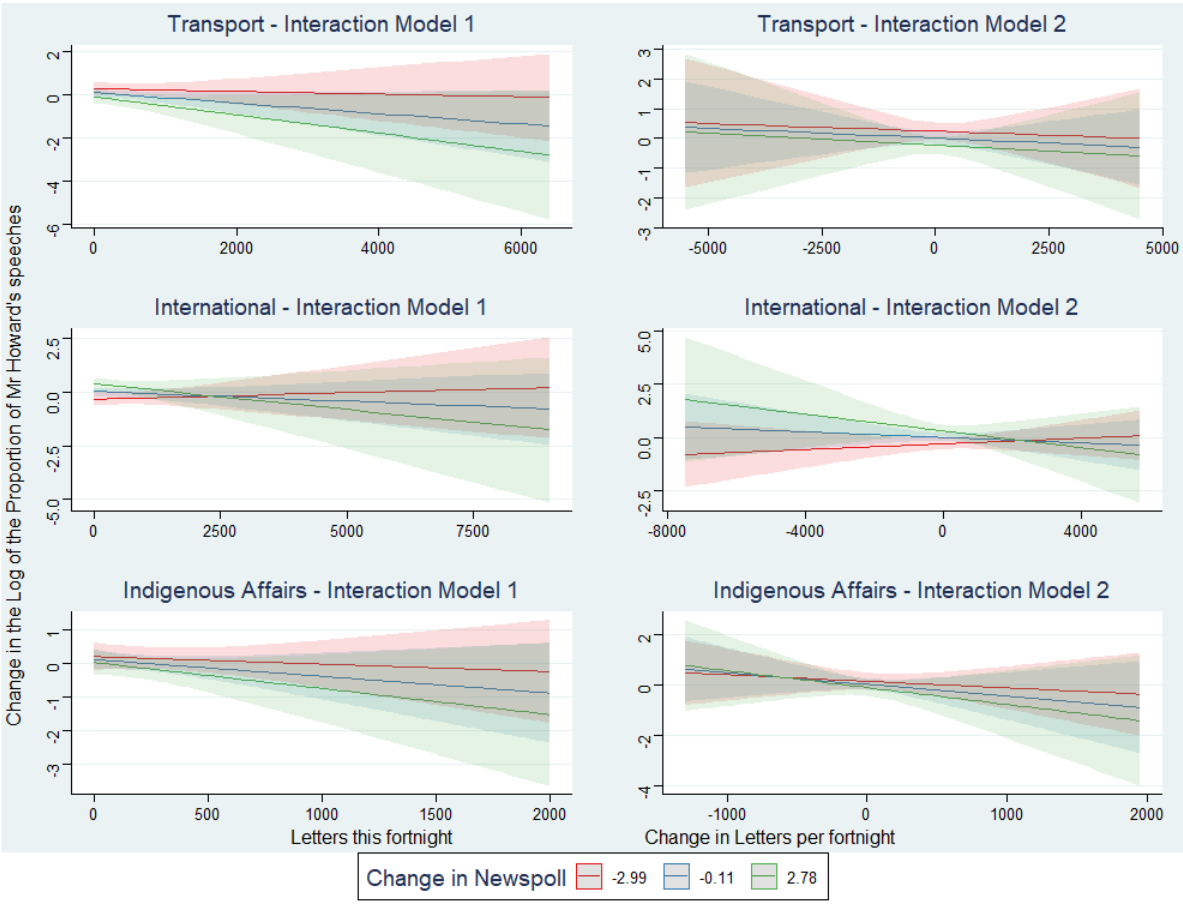
Interaction Model 2:

$$\Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta_1\Delta(total\ mail) + \beta_2\Delta(Newspoll)_{(t-1)} + \beta_3(\Delta(total\ mail) * \Delta(Newspoll)_{(t-1)}) + \varepsilon$$

There are no topics where the interaction term was statistically significant, and figures for the same sample topics are shown in Figure 7-14. While none are statistically significant, all point to an apparent increase in responsiveness when Newspoll falls, compared to when Newspoll increases, consistent with the hypothesis. However, given the lack of statistical significance, I cannot say that these provide support for my hypothesis.[77]

[77] As a robustness check, similar results are obtained when using the original Newspoll series, rather than the differenced series.

Figure 7-14 Responsiveness of Mr Howard's speeches to the letters — transportation, international affairs and indigenous (Interaction with opinion polls)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters); Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches); Newspoll.

It is possible that responsiveness takes longer than one or two fortnights, because a sustained build-up of public pressure is needed (which would require more than a fortnight or two's worth of letters to demonstrate); or because (with the exception of crises like gun reform and East Timor) it takes the government some time to consider the issue and determine whether to respond. To address this issue, I now move to quarterly data. I use Spearman rank correlation on the ranks, as well as Pearson correlation on both the proportions and first differences.[78] This analysis reflects the approach in Alexandrova et al. (2016), which looks at the correlation between public opinion at $period_t$ and policy action at $period_{t+1}$. If there is a genuine relationship between the speeches and the letters, we would expect to see that the movements (first differences) between periods should correlate — as well as the proportions/ranks.

[78] The use of first difference correlation helps to overcome any spurious correlations in the Pearson product-movement caused by autocorrelation or non-stationarity (Alexandrova et al, 2016).

Table 7-8 Correlations between letters and Mr Howard's speeches by topic — responsiveness

Topic	Spearman (ranks)	Pearson (proportionate)	Pearson (first difference)
Macroeconomics	0.27	-0.19	-0.09
Health	-0.26	-0.10	-0.13
Agriculture	-0.45	-0.26	0.25
Labour and employment	0.50*	0.56*	0.40
Education	0.55*	0.28	0.11
Environment	-0.13	-0.12	0.02
Energy	-0.07	0.42	-0.08
Transportation	0.03	-0.16	0.26
Law	0.11	0.58*	0.13
Social welfare	0.37	0.49*	-0.47*
Science	0.41	0.62**	0.87***
International affairs	0.35	0.06	-0.08
Government operations	0.09	0.09	0.00
Public lands	0.51*	0.36	0.20
Indigenous	0.51*	0.29	0.16
(Average)	0.19	0.21	0.12

Note: Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p <0.01, * p<0.05. First column is Spearman correlation between the rank of the letters compared to the rank of the speeches in the subsequent quarter, across 19 quarters (n=18). Second column is Pearson correlation between the proportion of letters by topic, and speeches in the following quarter, across 19 quarters (n=18). Kendall's tau is also computed for the ranks, and no significant difference is identified. Third column is the Pearson correlation between the change in the proportion of letters on a topic between two quarters, and the change in the proportion of speeches between the same two quarters, across 19 quarters (n=18).

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

While four topics display statistical significance using the proportion and rank, only two topics retain their statistical significance when looking at first differences. By combining the various measures of correlation, we can identify three topics where there is evidence of correlation across two of the three measures (labour and employment; social welfare; and science). As set out above, the letters within the science category are driven by opposition to cuts to the ABC, while the speeches are driven by privatisation of Telstra. A similar spurious correlation is driving the labour and employment topic, with the letters dominated by day-care, and the speeches being dominated by workplace relations reform.

Thus, the only potential area of responsiveness is social welfare, which ranked 12th in the letters, and in many quarters ranked last or equal last. The largest topic was letters supporting the establishment of an Australian rules football stadium in Tasmania.[79] In the fortnight with one of the largest number of letters on this topic (13 November 1998), the brief has this topic

[79] 20 years later, this issue is still unresolved!

highlighted, to ensure that the Mr Howard saw this (NAA: M4326, 666). However, he never mentioned this issue in his speeches.

The other main topics within this category were letters seeking funding for the building of other sports facilities; letters opposing cuts to disability services; and letters about the Aged Persons Savings Bonus. A $1,000 Aged Persons Savings Bonus was first announced in August 1998, as part of Mr Howard's plans to introduce a GST (Howard, 1998). Promotion of the Savings Bonus then became a standard part of his speeches when discussing tax reform, particularly in 2000. The letters started in September 2000, after it became apparent that most pensioners would not receive the full $1,000, due to the income and asset testing requirements (Howard, 2000c). It was raised in numerous doorstops and interviews (Howard, 2000f, 2001b), including by irate talkback callers (Howard, 2000c, 2001c, 2001g). This topic demonstrates a clear connection between the topic of the letters and Mr Howard's speeches, driven by public opinion. It is not possible to disentangle the various avenues of public opinion, and how they impacted Mr Howard in different ways. Nevertheless, the intensity of public opinion put Mr Howard on the defensive, and kept the issue on the political agenda. While this measure impacted less than 1 million people (Commowealth, 2000), out of a population at the time of 20 million, the pensioner and retiree cohorts are particularly important to the Coalition (Miragliotta, 2002; Wear, 2001).

Overall, the average level of correlation is very low, and as identified above, most of the identified correlations are spurious. However, the evidence of the Aged Persons Savings Bonus provides some level of qualitative evidence that where public opinion is sufficiently loud; reflected across the various public opinion channels; and was of concern to a key demographic, Mr Howard was forced to address the issue. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of a systemic relationship between the letters and the speeches, reinforcing the findings from the fortnightly regression analysis, above.

The final hypothesis I put forward in Chapter 3 is that responsiveness will be higher for topics with a higher perceived salience. The topics that generated the largest proportion of individual letters, compared to pro-formas (Table 7-9) were law, focusing on gun control following the Port Arthur massacre (see section 7.3) and government operations, which were the well-wisher letters before the 1998 election, and congratulatory letters after the 1996 and 1998 elections. After that, the proportion drops down dramatically, with almost all topics having less than 10 per cent of their volume being individual letters — i.e. more than 90 per cent of the volume were pro-forma letters, postcards or faxes. Given that no topic demonstrates systematic

responsiveness, this hypothesis can be rejected. However, two specific issues where I identify a level of congruence (gun reform and East Timor) both displayed a much higher proportion of letters, demonstrating the very high salience of those topics.

Table 7-9 Proportion of total letters that are individual letters, per topic

Topic	Percentage
Law	71
Government operations	68
International affairs	16
Energy	10
Public lands	8
Science	7
Health	6
Transportation	5
Education	3
Social welfare	3
Agriculture	2
Macroeconomics	2
Labour and employment	1
Indigenous	1
Environment	1

Note: Proportion of APAP-coded mail that were identified as individual letters, rather than pro-formas (unknown excluded).
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261.

Despite a range of modelling approaches, I am unable to find any support for the hypotheses in this chapter, and therefore reject them. This is not to say that Mr Howard was not responsive to the letters in other ways. I am only measuring rhetorical responsiveness. As set out in Chapter 3, this is only one form of responsiveness, and the letters may have had substantive policy impacts that would not be identifiable in this quantitative dataset.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter systematically explores the statistical relationships between the topics of letters to Mr Howard, and Mr Howard's speeches. As explained in Chapter 3, there are a range of ways to conceptualise this relationship. Consistent with the approaches in Beyer and Hänni (2018) and Alexandrova et al. (2016), I looked at both congruence (the relationship at the same point in time) and responsiveness (the relationship between time periods). I find no systemic evidence of either congruence or responsiveness. However, here the oft-used statement "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" is important to remember, and there may be other linkages that have not been uncovered in this quantitative analysis.

These findings appear inconsistent with the "general finding in the literature", (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008, p. 311) that there is a broad level of responsiveness (Alexandrova et al., 2016; Bernardi, 2014; Bowler, 2017; Breunig et al., 2022; Dassonneville et al., 2021; Hakhverdian, 2012; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Manza & Cook, 2002; Page, 1994; Thomas, 2011). Similarly, Martin et al. (2014) found responsiveness specifically in the Australian context, between opinion poll data and the legislative agenda (including over the time period studied here), and Rottinghaus (2007) found that President Johnson was responsive to the hawkish mail on the Vietnam war — but not responsive to the dovish mail. However, in Chapter 3 I argue that the contingent effects model of Manza and Cook (2002) is the most plausible, as it recognises that "[u]nder some conditions and with some kinds of issues, the relationship between public opinion and policy is strong; under other conditions or with other issues, it is weak" (Manza & Cook, 2002, p. 651). Therefore, identifying those conditions/issues that generate weaker linkages is an important contribution to the literature. My findings of a lack of a systematic relationship between the letters and the speeches contributes to this challenge by identifying conditions that are not conducive to responsiveness.

By looking more closely at the "general findings in the literature" (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008, p. 311) a range of situations are already identified where there is no, or low, levels of responsiveness. These include findings by Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008), who show that in some countries, in executive speeches (such as the Queen's Speech in the UK) the level of responsiveness is very low, with ideology, rather than public opinion driving changes in the speech content. Responsiveness is also likely to be lower where political elites consider themselves to be trustees, rather than delegates (Önnudóttir, 2014; Sevenans, 2021). Similarly, the research also shows that political elite are more likely to be responsive when there is a stronger electoral incentive — such as to co-partisans in proportional electoral systems (Sevenans, 2021); or closer to an election (Dipoppa & Grossman, 2020); or when electorally vulnerable (Hakhverdian, 2012; Soontjens & Sevenans, 2022). Rottinghaus (2007) suggests that the reasons for responsiveness to the hawks, but not the doves, was electoral vulnerability — President Johnson thought that the doves were never going to vote for him, but the hawks were potential voters that needed to be kept on side. These findings mean that lower levels of responsiveness could be expected where there are lower electoral incentives. My findings are broadly consistent with these, as my results in Chapter 5 demonstrate that there are lower electoral incentives to be responsive to these letters, highlighting the importance of institutional factors in responsiveness.

By addressing the concern of Druckman (2014), that studies of responsiveness “typically fail to account for responsiveness to ‘what type of opinion,’” I help to confirm the ‘contingent effects’ model, by suggesting that political elite (at least in Australia) are less likely to be responsive to political partisans. While this may be particular to Australian (given our unique set of institutional arrangements), it may indicate a more Downsian approach by Australian political elite.

This chapter also highlights a potential over-aggregation problem (Enns et al., 2012; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002) with the CAP framework. Across two topics (science; and labour and employment) the correlations are driven by artefacts of the coding schema, rather than a genuine relationship. This could be identified in this research because I have the underlying data (the contents of the speeches, and the exact topics of the letters). However, it is possible that similar spurious correlations are embedded in other CAP-based research, but can not be identified by the researchers.

In the next chapter, I explore the alternative causal direction, that Mr Howard’s speeches drove the letters. I also undertake more qualitative analysis of the topics of the letters, as well as the other impacts letters could have on political elites.

Chapter 8 Were the Letters Responsive to Mr Howard's Speeches?

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I show that there is no evidence of a systemic relationship from the topics of the letters sent to Mr Howard, to the topics of his speeches. I argue that this finding, while apparently inconsistent with most of the existing responsiveness literature, helps to confirm the contingent effects model of Manza and Cook (2002), by identifying a set of conditions/issues that generate weaker links.

In this chapter I first examine the reverse relationship — are the topics of Mr Howard's speeches impacting the topics of letters ('elite agenda setting')? As set out in Chapter 3, there are sound theoretical reasons to consider that political elites, like Mr Howard, set the political agenda, and the public follow that agenda. This is particularly likely to be the case on issues that the public may not know as much about, or where the public and political leaders value a trustee form of representation. I analyse this using similar statistical modelling that was undertaken in the previous chapter. Consistent with the previous chapter, I find no quantitative evidence to support this hypothesis. I then look qualitatively at a range of specific topics mentioned in the letters and find that the vast majority of topics were in response to announcements by the government.

Finally, I look at other impacts that these letters had. Consistent with the theory in Chapter 3, I find that these letters had a range of other impacts, based on their contents — rather than the quantity of the letters. This includes impacting substantive policy through the power of storytelling and emotions (Gooch, 2018; Small et al., 2013); providing a solution to a specific service delivery issue (Eulau & Karps, 1977); using the letters as a way of shaping public opinion, rather than being responsive to it (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000); and through the simple act of listening and writing a response, these letters form a core part of the democratic linkage between the public and their leaders (Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967).

8.1 Topic-level Elite Agenda Setting and Model Development

In this section, I statistically test the relationship between Mr Howard's speeches and the letters. As with the previous analysis, I test the agenda setting hypothesis in two different ways. First, regression models using fortnightly data and second correlations using quarterly data. A lag of one week is used, to test the relationship between the speeches and the letters. This is set out in Table 8-1.

Table 8-1 Determining lags between speeches and letters

Fortnight in which the speeches were made (independent variable)	Fortnight in which the letters may have arrived (dependent variable)
Saturday 30 March 1996 – Friday 12 April 1996	Saturday 6 April 1996 – Friday 19 April 1996
Saturday 13 April 1996 – Friday 26 April 1996	Saturday 20 April 1996 – Friday 3 May 1996
Saturday 27 April 1996 – Friday 10 May 1996	Saturday 4 May 1996 – Friday17 May 1996

Source: Author

Given the large number of fortnights where no letters were received on a particular topic, OLS regression is not suitable, so the response variable is transformed into a binary, if letters were received on a particular topic in a particular fortnight, the variable is coded as 1, and if no letters were received it is coded as 0. Both models 1 and 2 in Chapter 7 rely on the change in the dependent variable, therefore for this section, I use equation 3:

$$P = f\{P^*_{t-1}\}$$

The dependent variable (P) is the existence of letters in fortnight$_i$, and the independent variable (P*) is the speeches. This hypothesis is tested using logistic regression,[80] as well as Wilcoxon tests for the comparison of medians in non-normally distributed groups. Consistent with the previous chapter, the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches devoted to each topic is used. Two different models are initially fit for each topic, the first using the change in the proportion of Mr Howard's speech devoted to each topic:

$$\text{Model 1: } \ln(\Pr(Letters)) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta(speech\ proportion)_{t-1} + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \varepsilon$$

And the second using the proportion of Mr Howard's speech devoted to each topic in the previous two fortnights:[81]

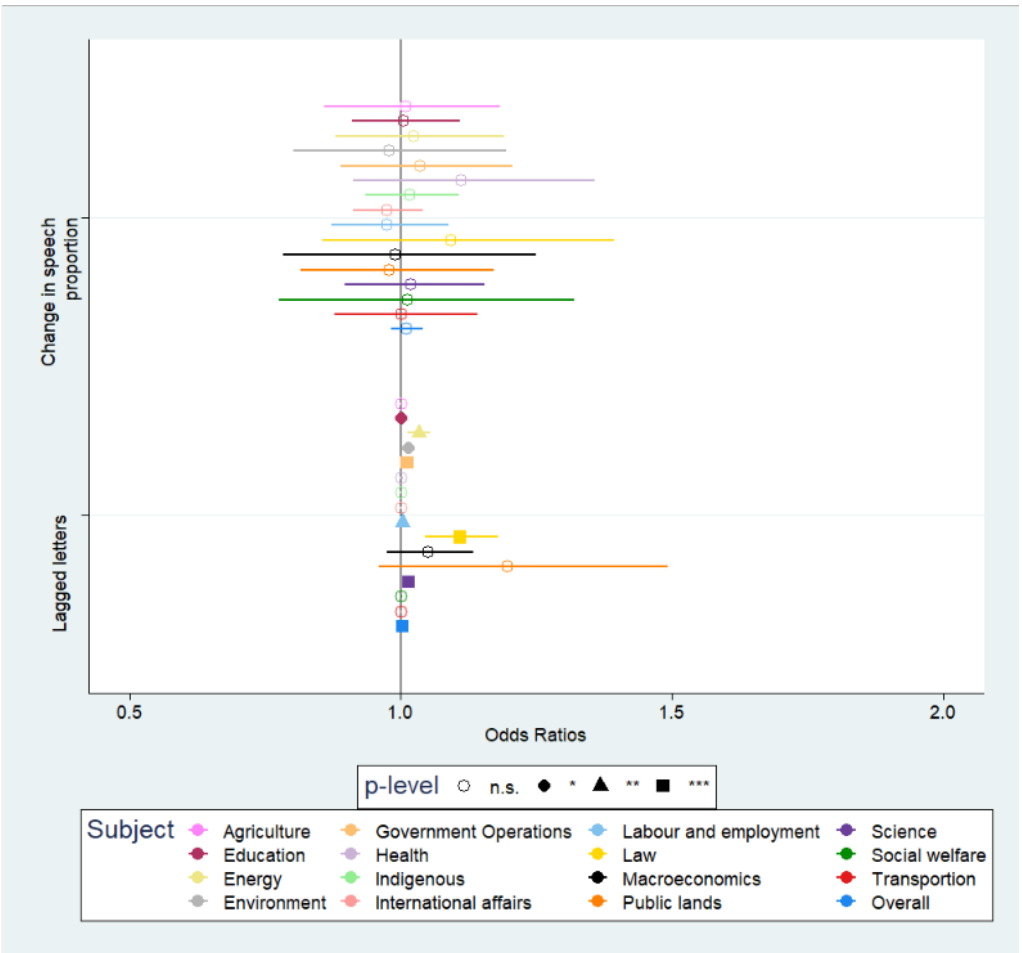
[80] OLS was attempted, but the residuals deviated significantly from normal, and this was not rectified by taking a log transformation (and adding 1, because of the number of zero observations) (see Appendix). Poisson regressions were also undertaken (prior to the binary transformation) given that the response variable is a non-normal count. However, following goodness-of-fit testing, using both the deviance test and the Pearson chi-squared test, none of the Poisson models were found to be a good fit.

[81] Initially a single fortnight was used, which indicated that some topics may have an impact (see Appendix). This was re-tested with two fortnights, which improved the results, this model was adopted.

$$\text{Model 2: } \ln(\Pr(Letters)) = \alpha + \beta_1((speech\ proportion)_{t-1} + (speech\ proportion)_{t-2}) + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \varepsilon$$

Both models include the volume of letters in the previous fortnight, to control for autocorrelation (Hakhverdian, 2012; Stimson et al., 1995). None of the topics displayed any statistical significance in model 1 (Figure 8-1).[82]

Figure 8-1 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — all topics (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

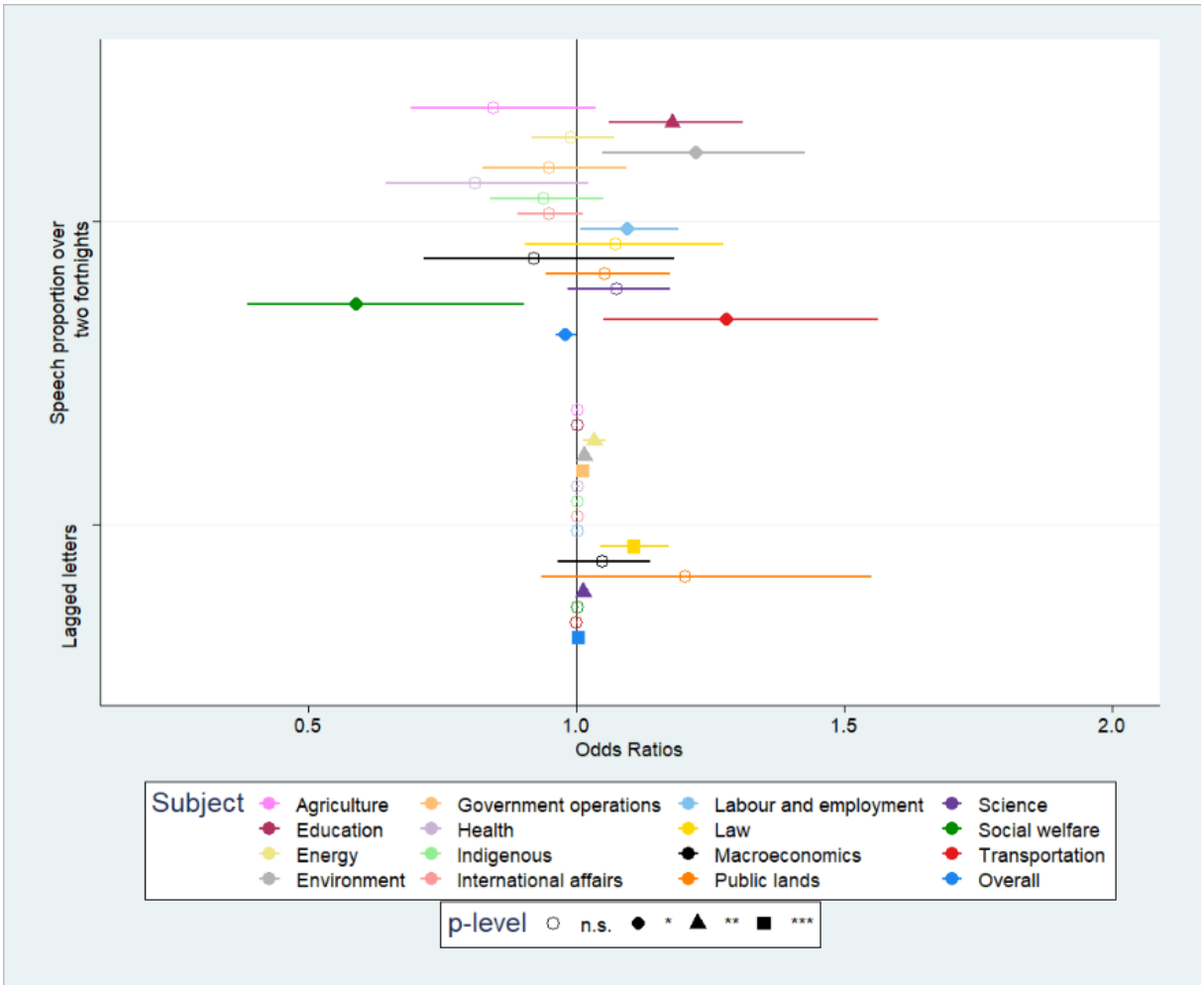
The second model, however, demonstrates that a range of topics have a statistically significant relationship between the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches over the two previous fortnights and the likelihood of letters being received in the following fortnight (Figure 8-2).[83] Consistent

[82] Complete regression tables for this model are included in the Appendix. This model was also tested with an additional squared term or including two fortnights of speeches as the independent variable, but neither changed the outcome. See the Appendix for further details.

[83] The addition of squared terms did not improve the results, more details are in the Appendix.

with the previous chapter, I now examine each of the topics that show a statistically significant relationship.

Figure 8-2 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving speeches — all topics (model 2)

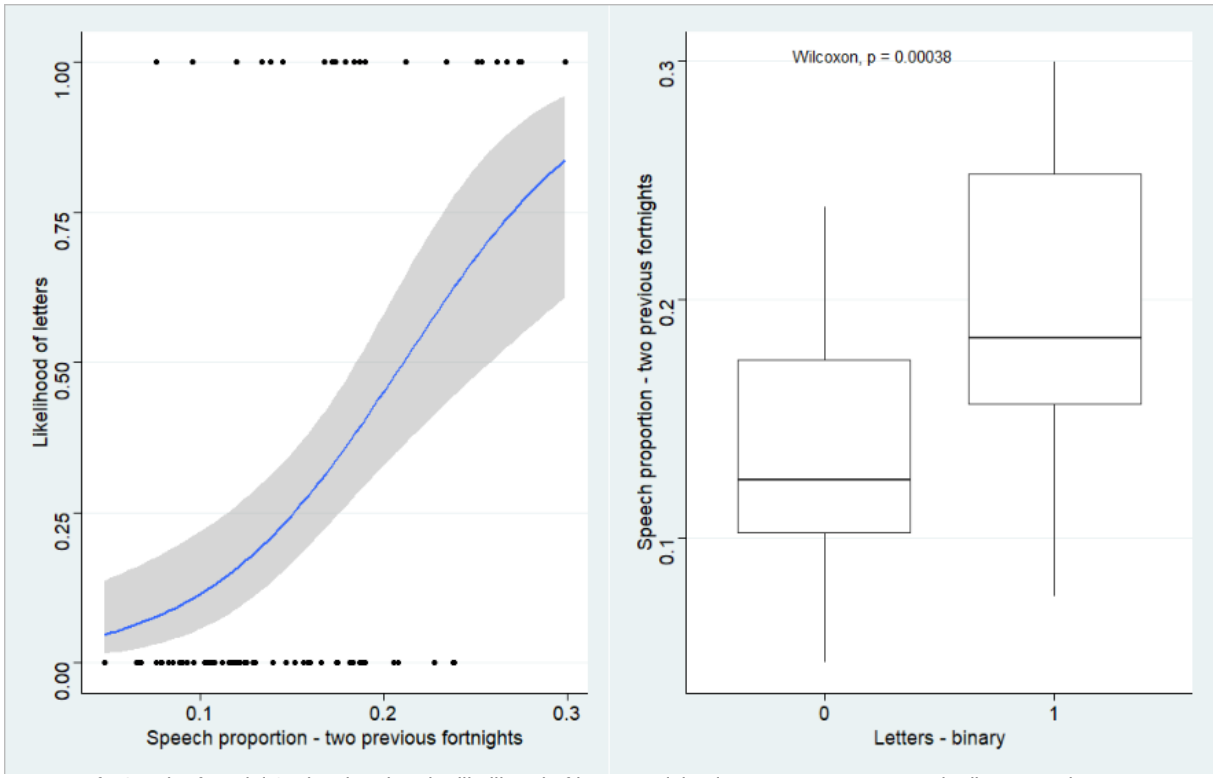


Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

As can be seen in Figure 8-3, as the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches dedicated to education increases, so too does the likelihood of receiving letters on that topic in the subsequent period. A Wilcoxon test confirms a significant difference in the median proportion of Mr Howard's speeches focusing on education between the two groups (those fortnights prior to when letters were received, and those fortnights prior to when letters were not received). There were two issues within the education topic that attracted significant volumes of letters. The first issue, "form letters commenting on the lack of public-school funding" (NAA: M4326, 844) which generated almost 10,500 letters over 12 fortnights. The letters started arriving in the fortnight ending 4 June 1999, immediately after the government's announcement on 11 May 1999 of a significant increase in private school funding (Kemp, 1999). The announcement

was controversial, with Mr Howard mentioning, or being questioned in media interviews, about this proposal five times in the subsequent few days. This case provides support for the hypothesis.

Figure 8-3 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — education (model 2)



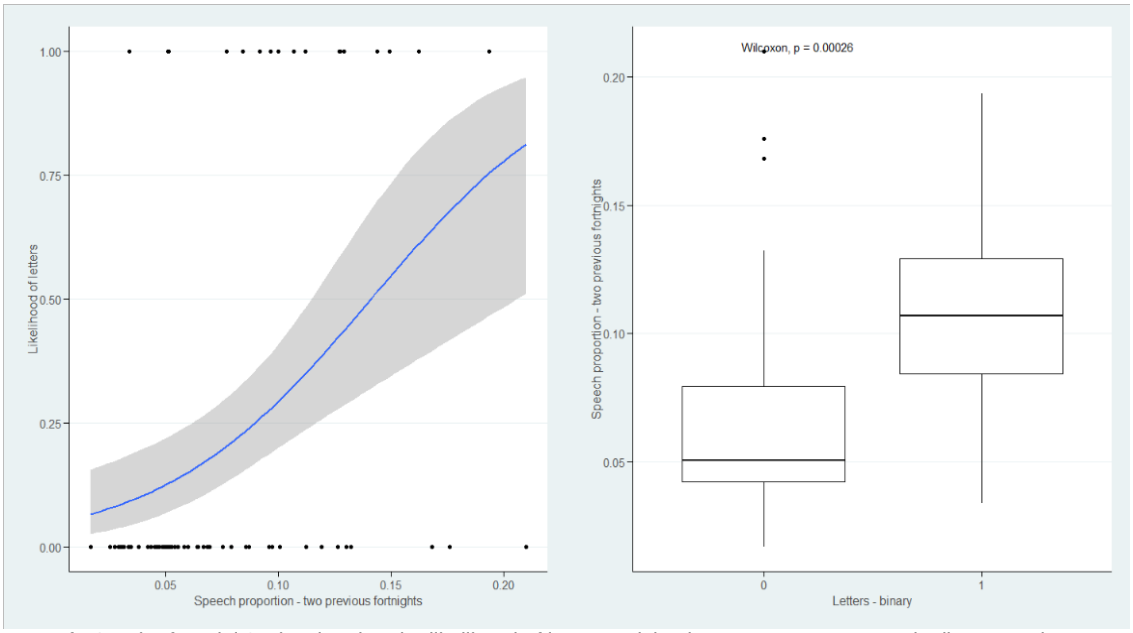
Notes: Left: Graph of model 2, showing that the likelihood of letters arriving increases as Mr Howard talks more about education. Right: Boxplot comparing the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on education split by whether letters are the received on that topic, with the Wilcoxon test for comparison of non-normal distributions.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The second issue in the letters was opposition to funding cuts to Australian universities - described in the briefs as "proposed cuts in funding for Australian university's [sic] — Anti" (NAA: M4326, 33). This issue generated around 3,500 letters over 11 fortnights, from June 1996 until November 1996. The letters followed major strikes in May 1996 at all Australian public universities over funding threats (Pockley, 1996). Following the announcement of funding cuts, Mr Howard repeatedly defended the changes while recognising that "they have been criticised in some quarters" (Howard, 1996e). This provides further support for the hypothesis that the letters are driven by Mr Howard's speeches.

The next topic is the environment, which shows that the likelihood of receiving letters increased as Mr Howard talked more about the issue (Figure 8-4). The major issue was global warming/climate change (see Chapter 7). While both the letters and speeches were generated by international events, the letters appeared later, given that Mr Howard was able to respond

within hours/days, while it would take some time for individuals to decide to write and their letter be received. This supports the hypothesis, although it raises the question of the impact of external events, which are not captured in the model. The other period where environmental issues featured prominently in Mr Howard's speeches was towards the end of 2000, becoming the fourth most common topic in the final quarter of 2000. During this period, the environmental focus was on water quality and salinity (Howard, 2000a), with the issue raised in 18 separate media events in the last quarter of 2000. Despite this focus by Mr Howard, no letters were recorded on this issue.

Figure 8-4 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — environment (model 2)



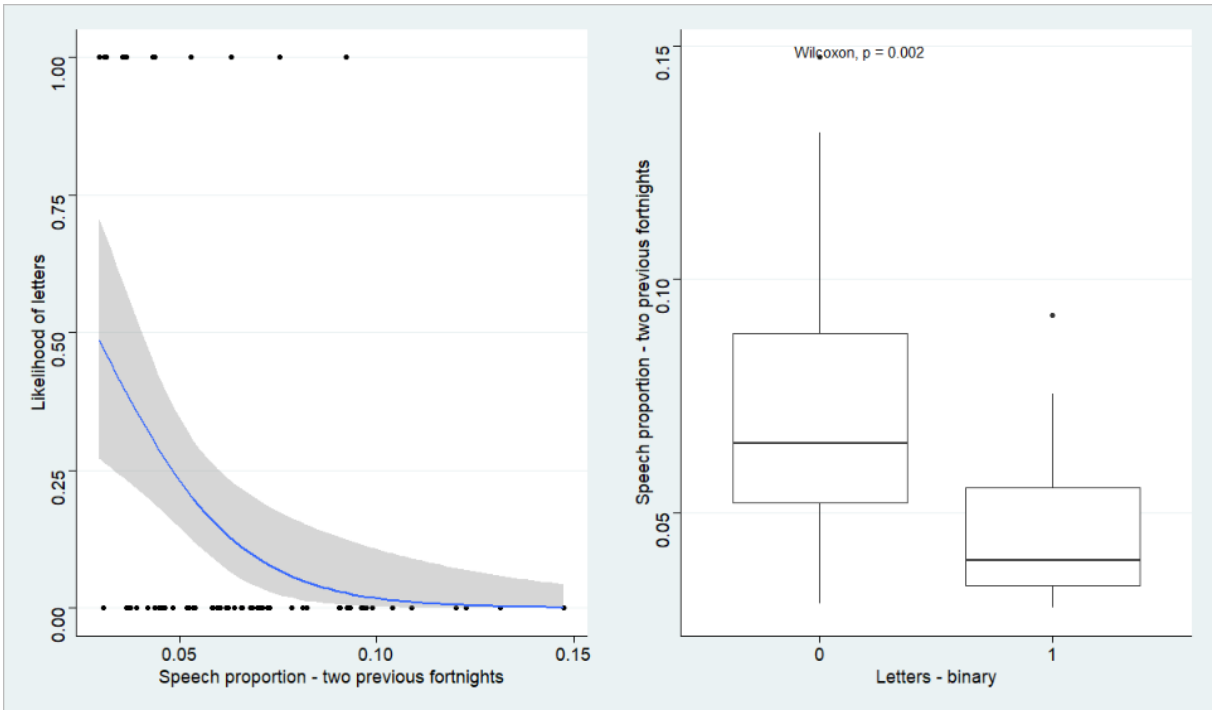
Notes: Left: Graph of model 2, showing that the likelihood of letters arriving increases as Mr Howard talks more about environment. Right: Boxplot comparing the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on environment split by whether letters were the received on that topic, with the Wilcoxon test for comparison of non-normal distributions.
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The third topic was labour and employment, which was a prominent topic in Mr Howard's speeches throughout 1996 and 1997, before steadily dropping in importance in the remainder of the period under examination. However, as set out in Chapter 7, this is a spurious relationship, driven by the vagaries of the coding system, which places family day care funding (33,600 letters over 37 fortnights) in the same APAP topic as workplace relations. As such, I do not regard this topic as providing support for the hypothesis, and no graph has been included.

The next topic is social welfare, which also displayed a negative relationship. As discussed in Chapter 7, the major topics of the letters were the Aged Persons Savings Bonus, as well as a new football stadium in Tasmania. As explained in Chapter 7, the letters on the Aged Persons

Savings Bonus were in response to problems in the implementation of a government program, and the intensity of public opinion on this topic kept it on Mr Howard's agenda, demonstrating the circularity of these issues. Overall, however, there were very few letters in the social welfare topic, which rated 12th overall, with only 12 fortnights where sufficient mail was received on this topic to have been included in the brief, it is hard to draw any conclusions. A such, this topic does not support the hypothesis.

Figure 8-5 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — social welfare (model 2)



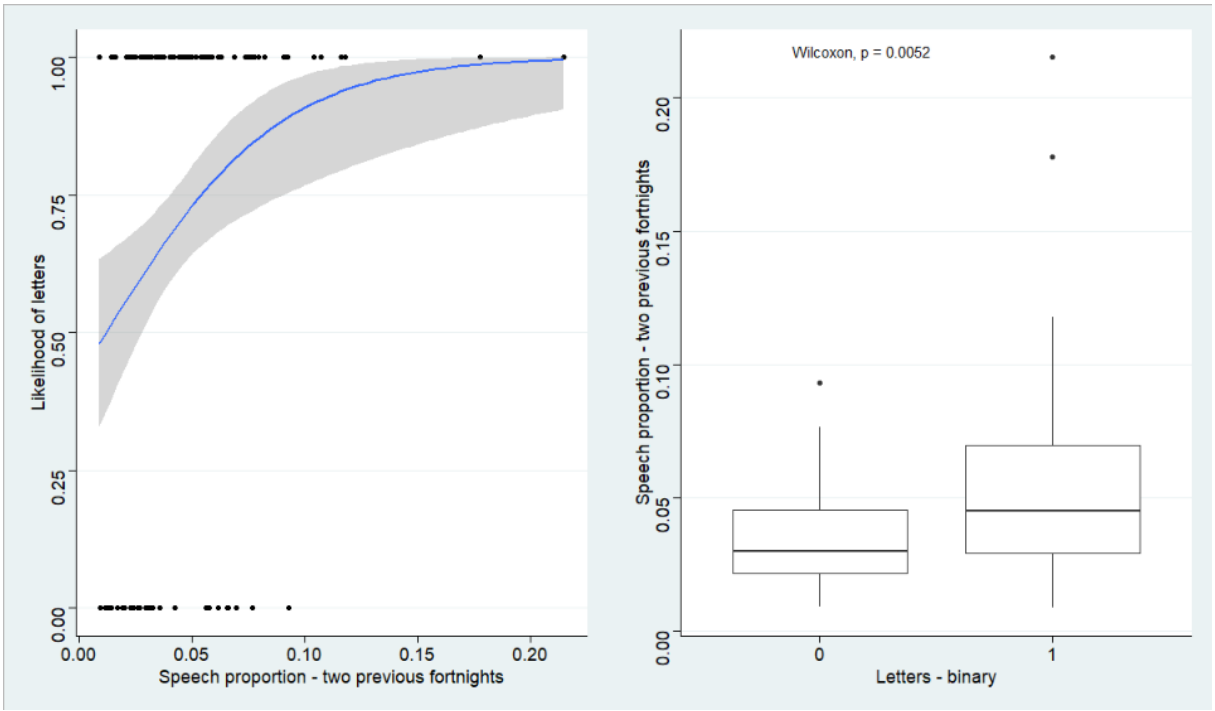
Notes: Left: Graph of model 2, showing that the likelihood of letters arriving decreases as Mr Howard talks more about social welfare. Right: Boxplot comparing the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on social welfare split by whether letters were the received on that topic, with the Wilcoxon test for comparison of non-normal distributions.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The final topic is transportation, which displays a positive relationship between the speeches and subsequent letters (Figure 8-6). The mailbag was focused on Sydney's second airport, which received almost 30,000 letters across 65 fortnights. There were also around 11,500 letters across 20 fortnights seeking additional funding for the Westgate and Princess Freeways in Victoria. However, across the four observations with the highest proportion of speeches on transportation (in August/September 1997 and December 1997/January 1998) these issues were not discussed by Mr Howard — the focus was on other infrastructure projects, including the Darwin rail link and the Jervoise Bay infrastructure development project in Western Australia. Across the period under study, the transportation topics that dominated Mr Howard's speeches were local road funding, high speed rail and inland rail, and Sydney's second airport. Except for the second airport, none of these issues were raised in the letters. I explore this

topic in more detail in the following section. Thus, while this topic provides statistical support for the hypothesis, the qualitative evidence does not.

Figure 8-6 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — transportation (model 2)



Notes: Left: Graph of model 2, showing that the likelihood of letters arriving decreases as Mr Howard talks more about social welfare. Right: Boxplot comparing the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on social welfare split by whether letters were the received on that topic, with the Wilcoxon test for comparison of non-normal distributions. While the graph appears to show that the relationship is driven by two outliers, the relationship holds and retains statistical significance (p=0.02) if those two outliers are removed.

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Overall, looking at the topics where there was a statistically significant relationship between Mr Howard's speeches and the letters, only one topic (education) provides support for the hypothesis that the more Mr Howard speaks about a topic, the greater the likelihood of receiving letters on that topic in the following period, with a second (environment) providing mixed support, given the difficulty in untangling the impact of external events, such as the Kyoto climate conference.

Having looked at the fortnightly regressions, I now examine the quarterly correlations. As set out in the previous chapter, by combining the various measures of correlation (Table 8-2), I identify only one topic, transportation, where there is evidence of a statistically significant relationship across two of the three measures. Transportation demonstrates a negative correlation of approximately -0.5, across both the rank and the first differences correlations. This means that as the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches dedicated to transportation increases (decreases), the volume of letters in the following quarter decreases (increases).

This is contrary to the hypothesised relationship. This correlation is generated because, while the topic was consistently highly ranked in the letters (due to the letters on the Sydney second airport), it remained low in the speeches almost throughout the period in the study.

Table 8-2 Elite agenda setting: correlations between letters and Mr Howard's speeches by topic

Topic	Spearman (ranks)	Pearson (proportionate)	Pearson (first difference)
Macroeconomics	-0.24	-0.05	-0.06
Health	-0.42	-0.17	0.1
Agriculture	0.04	-0.07	-0.08
Labour and employment	0.52*	0.38	-0.38
Education	0.09	-0.10	-0.16
Environment	0.40	0.34	0.32
Energy	-0.16	0.29	-0.03
Transportation	-0.51*	-0.31	-0.53*
Law	0.12	-0.24	-0.58*
Social welfare	0.19	0.03	0.09
Science	0.34	0.68**	0.18
International affairs	-0.24	-0.01	0.19
Government operations	-0.07	-0.08	-0.05
Public lands	0.19	0.02	-0.26
Indigenous	-0.09	-0.11	-0.32
(Average)	0.01	0.04	-0.10

Note: Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p <0.01, * p<0.05. First column is Spearman correlation between the rank of speeches in one quarter and the rank of letters in the subsequent quarter (n=18). Kendall's tau is also computed for the ranks, and no significant difference is identified. Second column is Pearson correlation between the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on each topic in one quarter and the proportion of letters on each topic in the subsequent quarter (n=18). Third column is the Pearson correlation between the change in the proportion of speeches on a topic between two quarters, and the change in the proportion of letters between the same two quarters (n=18).

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The average correlation is effectively zero, thus, this analytical approach does not provide support for hypothesis (H6) that the more Mr Howard speaks about a topic, the greater the likelihood of there being letters on that topic in the following period. In conclusion, despite a range of modelling approaches, I am unable to find sufficient support for the hypothesis that the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches impact the volume of letters on that topic. In the next section, I take a qualitative approach, to explore what triggered specific topics in the mailbag.

8.2 Qualitative Analysis of Topics

This chapter and the last chapter identify some topics where there is a statistical relationship between the letters and the speeches, however I am unable to find sufficient quantitative evidence to support my hypotheses that Mr Howard's speeches were responsive to the letters

(Chapter 7), or that the letters were responsive to Mr Howard's speeches (this chapter). In this section I take a qualitative approach, comparing the letters, speeches and media coverage for the top 10 topics, by volume of letters, as well as a random sample of 10% of the remaining topics,[84] to identify how these specific topics emerged. For each issue, I categorise it into one of four categories:

- Elite driven: Where the letters are a response to an action/event/decision by an Australian political elite. This includes responding to budget decisions, actions by state/territory governments, or political scandals.

- Externally driven: Where the letters are a response to an event external to the control of the government. This includes wars, natural disasters or actions by foreign governments, which forced the issue onto the Australian agenda.

- Administratively driven: Where the letters are a response to a largely administrative act of the government. I regard this as different from "elite," because it doesn't appear that the act was a deliberate decision by ministers or the prime minister to put the issue on the agenda, but rather from the ordinary operations of government.

- Citizen-driven: Where the letters do not appear to be a response to any of the above causes.

This analysis (Table 8-3) shows that of the 26 topics analysed, 16 were elite-driven, and only two likely to be citizen-driven (battery hen cages and dumping of nuclear waste). Most of the remainder are triggered by actions of the government. Below, I examine a few specific issues, designed to draw out key arguments and issues — access to in-vitro fertilisation (IVF); Aboriginal deaths in custody; dual citizenship; uranium mining and Sydney's second airport.

[84] Topics were assigned a number, and a pseudorandom number generator was used.

Table 8-3 Qualitative analysis of selected topics

	First appearance				
Topic	**Letters (f/n ending)**	**Speeches**	**Media**	**Comments**	**Source**
Deregulation of the petroleum industry	21/08/1998	Nil	20/07/1998	In July 1998, changes to the petrol industry were announced by a minister. Mr Howard was not involved (Westfield, 1998).	Elite
Proposed changes to the Nurses Federal Award – anti	23/08/1996	Nil	Nil	Part of a campaign against major workplace relations policy changes, specifically focusing on the impact on nurses (Moait, 1996).	Elite
Natural disaster regarding crop loss in NSW	01/12/2000	21/11/2000	21/11/2000	Major flood resulted in millions of dollars of crop loss (Howard, 2000d).	External
Mandatory sentencing laws	10/03/2000	14/02/2000	10/08/1998	There was a push for the Commonwealth to override Northern Territory mandatory sentencing laws following a death in custody of an Indigenous teenager (Howard, 2000g).	Elite
Whaling by the Japanese in North Pacific	08/09/2000	03/08/2001	02/07/2000	Following Japan's announcement that it would expand whaling in the north Pacific, some countries expressed strong opposition. These letters called on Australia to be more vocal in its opposition (Daly, 2000).	External
Repeal of section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948	1/12/2000	07/07/2000	19/02/2000	The Citizenship Advisory Council report was released in February 2000, but the government did not announce its decision until May 2001 (see below for more details).	Elite
Legislation on euthanasia – pro	12/07/1996	17/08/1996	08/07/1996	Government backbench MP, Mr Kevin Andrews announced he would introduce a Bill to override Northern Territory laws on euthanasia (Kline, 2002).	Elite
Election congratulations (1996)	22/03/1996	N/A	N/A		Elite
Aboriginal deaths in custody – Anti	05/09/1997	13/12/1996	ongoing	Ongoing media coverage of deaths in custody. First mention of the ministerial summit was 26/11/1996. Letters did not	Elite

				commence until after the ministerial summit (see below for more details).	
Mal Colston – Anti	02/05/1997	05/03/1996	24/02/1997	Senator Mal Colston quit the ALP to become an independent and was then embroiled in a series of scandals (Saunders & Lloyd, 2011).	Elite
IVF Programme – pro	11/08/2000	01/08/2000	28/07/2000	The letters were in support of the government's decision to amend the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act to allow states to restrict IVF to married, opposite-sex couples (see below for more details).	Elite
Battery hen cages – Anti	20/03/1998	Nil	ongoing	Ongoing low-level coverage in the media of animal rights groups (Parker et al., 2017).	Citizen-driven
Proposed sale of Artillery Barracks in Fremantle	28/07/2000	8/11/2000	25/04/2000	The Department of Defence decided the barracks were surplus to requirements and was to be sold. It appears the minister was not involved at the time (Amalfi, 2000).	Administrative
Proposed amalgamation of St George and St Vincent's hospital – Anti	12/07/1996	Nil	29/06/1996	The NSW state government decided to merge these two hospitals (Lewis, 1996).	Elite
Australian Tax Office reassessment of income tax returns – Anti	10/07/1998	Nil	13/08/1998	The ATO decided to deny tax deductions from two controversial investment schemes. The newspaper article mentions the letter-writing campaign (Pownall, 1998).	Administrative
Dumping of nuclear waste – anti	12/03/1999	17/02/1999	ongoing	While this has been an ongoing issue, there does not appear to be a specific trigger for this letter writing campaign, however the government's decision to allow for expanded uranium mining and an expansion of Australia's medical nuclear reactor were relevant (see below for more details).	Citizen-driven and elite
Reduction in Family Day Care funding – Anti	26/07/1996	21/08/1996	24/06/1996	The National Commission of Audit identified childcare as a major pressure on the budget, which then lead to major funding cuts later in 1996 (Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1998).	Elite

Alternative site for Sydney's second airport – Pro	31/05/1996	24/05/1996	ongoing	Mr Howard signalled a willingness to consider alternative sites for Sydney's second airport (see below for more details).	Elite
Cuts to the ABC – Anti	09/08/1996	19/04/1996	16/03/1996	Significant cuts to the ABC budget were proposed soon after the 1996 election. Those cuts were confirmed in July 1996 (Davies, 2022).	Elite
East Timor – Human Rights	21/08/1998	ongoing	ongoing	Two East Timorese leaders won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, prompting Mr Howard's first mention of East Timor in October 1996, however it was then an ongoing issue in his speeches (see Ch 7 for more details).	External
Uranium Mining – Anti	19/04/1996	22/03/1996	22/03/1996	Mr Howard announced a removal of the previous government's restrictions on new uranium mines (see below for more details).	Elite
Benchmark pricing principles to blood glucose strips – Anti	11/07/1997	Nil	18/07/1997	In response to proposals to reduce the subsidies for blood glucose strips for diabetics (Rehardt, 1997).	Elite
Global warming – Anti	29/11/1996	30/05/1996	ongoing	Climate change was an ongoing issue, and the letters peaked around the Kyoto climate conference (see Ch 7 for more details).	External
Tax treatment of capital gains	20/10/2000	Nil	17/05/2000	Tax changes in 2000 created problems for the listed investment company sector. That sector successfully lobbied for changes, which were announced in the 2001 budget (Commonwealth, 2001).	Elite
Guns – Pro PM's stand	17/05/1996	06/05/1996	06/05/1996	Following the mass shooting at Port Arthur in Tasmania, Mr Howard announced significant tightening of gun laws in Australia (see Ch 7 for more details).	Elite and external
Public school funding	04/06/1999	Nil	04/05/1999	New school funding measures were announced in the 1999 Budget on 11 May 1999 (see this chapter for more details).	Elite

Source: Author analysis

The first topic I analyse is access to IVF for single women and same-sex couples. This issue arose in mid-2000, when fertility specialist Dr McBain sought to provide IVF services to Ms Meldrum, who was prohibited from accessing IVF services in Victoria because she was single (Walker, 2000). Dr McBain took the matter to the Federal Court of Australia, claiming that the legislation that preventing single women from accessing IVF was in contravention of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. On 28 July 2000, the Federal Court of Australia decided that Victoria's prohibition on providing IVF services to single women constituted unlawful discrimination against Ms Meldrum, contrary to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. A few days later, on 1 August 2000, Mr Howard announced changes to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* to effectively reverse the court's decision and allow states and territories to limit IVF access to women who were married or in a de-facto relationship with a man. Mr Howard said that this "involves the fundamental right of a child… to have… the care and affection of both a mother and a father" (Howard, 2000b). The issue attracted more than 500 calls to talkback radio in the following week, the majority backing Mr Howard's position ("Keep it in the family," 2000).

The first letters arrived the same fortnight as Mr Howard's announcement. They were described in the briefs to the prime minister as "[c]orrespondence supporting the government's stance on the IVF programme and amendment to the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act" (NAA: M4326, 1137). The issue came up in his speeches 14 times in two weeks, and he then never mentioned IVF again. While the policy issue of whether single women and same-sex couples should be able to access IVF had been present for years (Stuhmcke, 1997), and the specific McBain court case had also received significant covered over the preceding months (Kissane, 2000), the letters to Mr Howard only started once he had made a policy announcement. This clearly supports the 'elite agenda setting' framework.

Deaths in custody of Australia's Indigenous peoples remains an ongoing issue and it was the subject of a Royal Commission in 1991 (Cunneen, 2001). At the time of the Royal Commission, Indigenous Australians were 17 times more likely to be in custody than the non-Indigenous population, and were 16.5 times more likely to die in custody than non-Indigenous Australians (Joudo, 2006). This, however, was not a significant issue for Mr Howard, who became prime minister in 1996 in part on a platform of wanting Australians to "feel comfortable and relaxed about their history" (Bonnell & Crotty, 2008, p. 152). Mr Howard's approach was a reaction to the former prime minister, Mr Keating, who had emphasised the importance of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians and addressing the impacts of structural racism (Brett, 2005). This meant that Indigenous issues under Mr Howard moved from the mainstream

to the margins (Brett, 2005), and thus ranked near the bottom of Mr Howard's speeches (with the exception of 1997, as he was dealing with the *Wik* High Court case).

In July 1997, the government held a ministerial-level summit on deaths in custody (Cunneen, 2007), which attracted significant media attention. Soon after that, 2,300 letters on deaths in custody arrived in September/October 1997. Apart from this brief period, the issue did not appear in the mailbag — even though 1997 was the year with the lowest number of deaths in custody during the period of study. Over the subsequent 4 years, the number of deaths increased — but without the government putting the issue back on the agenda, no more letter were received (Casey, 2024). Mr Howard did not attend the summit (Attorney-General's, 1997) or the press conference afterwards. He only mentioned the summit once in his speeches, and only mentioned Indigenous deaths in custody three times during the period under examination. Instead, the issue was dealt with by his Attorney-General, Mr Daryl Williams and his Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator John Herron. This issue was put on the public agenda by the government — albeit lower down the agenda, given the lack of prime ministerial attention. Therefore, these letters also support the elite agenda setting framework.

The question of allowing dual citizenship (the repeal of section 17 of the *Australian Citizenship Act 1948*) was an area where Mr Howard specifically identified in my interview with him as an area where he was influenced by public opinion. Australians were not able to hold dual citizenship prior to 2002, and this restriction was one of the "most contested and contentious areas" of citizenship rules (Nolan & Rubenstein, 2009, p. 35). Dual citizenship is an important issue in Australia, because of the large proportion of Australians who were born overseas and may therefore be eligible for dual citizenship (Brown, 2002) - in 2001, 28% of Australians were born overseas (Trewin, 2001), which was the third highest in the OECD (OECD, 2024). Despite the relevance of the issue for a large minority of the population, without a trigger event, it did not get onto the agenda. However, in mid-2000, the government released the Australian Citizenship Council report, which recommended changes to dual citizenship rules (Nolan & Rubenstein, 2009). While Mr Howard did not give this issue much attention (he only mentioned it twice in the second half of 2000), the government putting the issue on the agenda appears to have catalysed effected communities, and lead to more than 300 letters arriving in a short period in late 2000. However, the issue then quickly slipped from the mailbag, supporting the elite agenda setting framework.

Uranium mining became a totemic issue for the environmental movement after Mr Howard committed to removing the previous ALP government's restrictions on new uranium mines

(Hintjens, 2000). Within three weeks of the election Mr Howard confirmed that he would be willing to allow uranium mining at Jabiluka in the Northern Territory, and as many further mines as the market would sustain (Howard, 1996d). By the end of April 1996, the letters opposing uranium mining started arriving, and the issue generated almost 15,000 letters (the fifth biggest topic) across 45 fortnights (the equal second most common topic). The letters and public protests continued throughout Mr Howard's first term in government, through to the 1998 election. Anti-uranium protestors attended almost all of Mr Howard's appearances during the 1998 election campaign (English, 1998), including one protest where "93 'John Howards'" were arrested ("93 'John Howards' arrested," 1998).

Mr Howard only mentioned 'uranium' or 'Jabiluka' twelve times. Nevertheless, he clearly regarded this policy change as a significant achievement, mentioning it in his 1996 "Progress Report to the People" (Howard, 1996a). Instead, the issue was mainly dealt with by relevant ministers, presumably to push the issue down the agenda. He was clearly aware of the protests, but dismissed them, saying that they "did not represent the mainstream environmental movement… and it's out of line with the views of the great majority of the Australian community" ("Federation Fund bankrolls $4m outback tourism vow," 1998). Instead, he claimed that he sought to "strike a balance… you really just have to steel yourself to make a decision on the merits of each case" (Howard, 1996d). Thus, the letters were sparked by a decision by the government, supporting the elite agenda setting framework. The intensity of public opinion, most notably the protests and civil disobedience during the election campaign ensured that the issue stayed on the government's agenda. This case demonstrates how Mr Howard balanced his perception of majority opinion with an intense minority.

The final topic I examine is the location of Sydney's second airport, which has to be one of Australia's most protracted policy issues — the first government report on the topic was commissioned in 1946 (Webb & Billing, 2003). The airport is due to open in late 2026, a mere 80 years after this first report. The ALP government had committed to building a second airport at Badgerys Creek, and construction commenced in 1992. During the 1996 election campaign, Mr Howard used aircraft noise as a "potent political weapon" (Riley, 1996). In late May 1996, shortly after the election, Mr Howard confirmed that an alternative site at Holsworthy was also under consideration (Howard, 1996c), and almost immediately the letters started arriving — by the end of June more than 200 had arrived, and they continued for four years, amassing almost 30,000 letters across 65 fortnights (making it the second largest topic by volume, and the most common topic by numbers of fortnights).

The top periods for the letters on this issue were July to September 1996, February 1998, and August 1999, and each of these can be linked back to government activities. The first spike in 1996, of around 6,500 letters, started soon after the government announced that the environmental impact statement would include both the Badgerys Creek site and the alternative Holsworthy site. This provided the first clear indication that a change of policy might be possible. The second spike in February 1998, of around 4,400 letters, came after the release of the Auditor-General's report criticising the draft environmental impact statement and the formation of "Labor Against Badgerys," which aimed to establish a letter writing campaign (Webb & Billing, 2003). The final spike in August 1999, of around 4,000 letters, appears to have been prompted by the release of the final environmental impact statement, and an announcement by the Minister for Transport, Mr John Anderson, that "the time for a decision has come" (Cummins et al., 1999).

With the Cabinet expected to consider the issue of the location of the airport by the end of September 1999, there was intense media attention, it dominated talkback radio calls in Sydney ("Transport ups, downs," 1999), and claims that the intensity of public opposition to the Badgerys Creek making the decision Mr Howard's "Waterloo" ("Airport threat to PM," 1999). When Mr Howard confirmed that the Badgerys Creek option was being deferred, he acknowledged the significance of public opinion in his decision, saying "I think people have misunderstood a number of things, including the unpopularity of Badgery's Creek as an alternative airport." (Howard, 2000e). In this case, the intensity of the opinion appears to have been an important factor. While a minority nationally, in key seats these letter-writers may have been the pivotal voters.

Across the topics I analyse, the impetus for the letter writing was consistently a government announcement. This is also consistent with the evidence from my interviews with Mr Howard and his staff. Mr Howard emphasised the importance of talkback radio as a way to communicate with the public, and in his view "a lot of correspondence would reference an interview I'd given, or something they'd heard on the radio." Similarly, he saw the correspondence as reflecting policy announcements: "I saw examination of correspondence as another way of monitoring how the policy was being received." Mrs Morris also reflected that the letters were "usually people reacting to a policy decision you've made, or some terrible political scandal that's happening at the time," and that topics and volume usually followed the news or other government announcements. As another interviewee recalled:

> *it's not just like an isolated thing where we suddenly getting mail on an item. There's probably been quite a bit of precursor around media focus on a*

> *particular issue. And then people are like seeing that and then writing in around those things (Public servant 1).*

This section provides detailed qualitative evidence that supports the elite agenda setting framework, suggesting that the public agenda is shaped by political elites, rather than the public. However, that does not necessarily provide support to my hypothesis that the more Mr Howard speaks about a topic, the greater the likelihood of there being letters on that topic, because on many of these controversial issues, Mr Howard sought to avoid addressing the issue, and instead deferred to his ministers. Nevertheless, the finding that the topics of the letters broadly follow (rather than lead) the political agenda is significant.

8.3 Qualitative Impacts of Individual Letters on Policy

In Chapter 3, I suggest that theoretically there may be other impacts of the letters, apart from influencing the political agenda through the quantum of letters. In this section, I explore the evidence for this.

During the period under study, more than 500,000 letters were received by Mr Howard. The findings in this, and the previous chapter, indicate that they had a limited impact. Does this mean that writing letters is a waste of time? That is not necessarily true — for several different reasons. First, letter-writers can have a range of motivations and expectations for contacting the prime minister. People writing to congratulate the Mr Howard on an election victory (almost 4,000 letters after the 1996 election and more than 1,000 letters after the 1998 election) are unlikely to expect any level of responsiveness in the public agenda. Similarly, those who wrote seeking help on their specific social security or tax case were not motivated by, nor would they expect, any changes to the political agenda. The outcome they are seeking (a change in their specific case/matter/dispute) would not be detectable by quantitative methods. The preceding analysis has focused almost entirely on the volume of the letters, and on topics where the writers were motivated by seeking changes in the public agenda. While approximately 40% of the mail was pro-forma campaign mail, the remaining 60% were a mixture of individual letters on a policy issue and particularised contact. I now turn to this group of letters and letter-writers.

One of the key differences between the pro-forma campaign mail and the individual letters was that the pro-formas were usually handled entirely by MCU, which produced standard acknowledgement responses (NAA: A463, 1984/164; NAA: M4261, 11 Part 1). The only engagement that the PMO, or Mr Howard, would have had with these letters was the fortnightly statistical brief — they were little more than numbers on a page. Individual letters were treated differently. In many cases, relevant advisors in the PMO responded to these letters. The DLO

and advisors would also identify a small number of letters for Mr Howard to see himself. All the interviewees, including Mr Howard, could recall specific letters, or specific issues from the letters, from up to 20 years ago. Given how memorable some of these letters were, it is likely that they could have an impact, even if only subtly or unconsciously.

In this section I briefly outline some ways in which the letters had an impact. First, I explore how individual letters could help to prompt new policy thinking; second how the letters could help the writers get direct assistance; third, how the letters could be used to shape public opinion; and finally, the role of responding (even without responsiveness) as a part of sustaining democratic legitimacy. While detailed examination of these issues is beyond the scope of this thesis, I seek to demonstrate areas for potential future research that have become apparent through this research.

First, letters could be a prompt for new policy thinking. All the interviewees identified this as a way that the letters could have an impact. Mr Nutt suggested that they could get "the juices flowing" and could lead to a request for advice or further information from the public service or other ministerial offices. He said that letters could be:

> *potentially useful in the sense of, you know, a policy idea or a representation about a debate that's going on in the wider community, then the advisor would kind of have that and would factor that into their work… where there's something interesting, something unusual, something thoughtful, something that's an innovative new idea.*

However, he noted that often these "crackerjack idea[s] usually involved [the writer] receiving government money, or getting the law changed to benefit themselves." This reveals a degree of scepticism that officials had for letters, not unlike other forms of informal feedback politicians receive.

The ability to prompt policy thinking was particularly evident where individual letters put a human face on an issue. This is a key benefit of individual letters, compared to mass, pro-formas. One example of this was changes to the family law system. In 2003,[85] Mr Howard announced a parliamentary inquiry into the family law system, which lead to changes to the legislation in 2006 to introduce a presumption of shared custody of children after a divorce (Howard, 2004b). Several other interviewees remembered the importance of letters, and other

[85] While this is outside the period of study for the letters and speeches (which is why it has not been identified earlier) this issue was specifically identified by multiple interviewees.

constituent communication, in spurring the inquiry (Mr Leverett, Mr Nutt and Mr Sinodinos). Mr Sinodinos recalled:

> *The Family Court issues were very sensitive, because often they involved particular cases being brought to light, and certainly that is one instance, where I think over time, Family Court issues played into thinking about reform of relevant family law provisions…. I can't posit a direct link, but I think the volume of that, and the cases that were coming up, and the pressure that would come also from other Members of Parliament around that and the case studies that would be brought to light and publicised, were all part of it.*

Similarly, Mr Nutt confirmed that "one of the points of stimulus" for the family law inquiry was the letters from members of the public. Mr Leverett also recalled the significance of individual letters in prompting this inquiry:

> *There was one particular [letter] where the PM actually came in and thanked us for it… it was a family law issue… There was a lot of those, a lot, a lot of phone calls and letters... and particularly men... who felt they felt aggrieved by the family court system.*

The archival record similarly confirms instances where letters got the juices flowing. A 22-year-old, Ms Kirrily Pryor, wrote to Mr Howard in 1996, with a specific suggestion about improving driver training as part of drivers' licence requirements. The idea sparked sufficient interest that it led to a request for a brief from PM&C (NAA: M4261, 6). While it doesn't appear to have led to any direct policy change, it demonstrates that the letter did manage to get the issue, albeit briefly, onto the agenda.

The ability for letters to have a potential impact on policy depends on who saw them, and how widely they were read. Thus, which letters were seen by the prime minister is an important step in the process. The letters that Mr Howard saw were a mix of letters from prominent people, whose position justified personal attention; constituents from his own seat of Bennelong; and individual letters selected by his staff. In choosing the letters for Mr Howard to see, Mr Brady reflected:

> *I wanted him to see the scale of misery that some people experienced in life… I remember one woman, wrote a letter from jail… she had something like five or six children by five or six different men, and almost all of them had hit her, you know, and she'd been the subject of such domestic violence that would have escaped most people's world… so…. I would just put a little yellow sticky saying, just you know, 'it shows how tough some people's lives are.'*

Similarly, Mr Leverett noted:

> *some that tugged at the heartstrings… or there might be something that jumped out about it, that we would actually then show the PM…. they just jump out at you as a very genuine person with a genuine problem that you know that they're not... they haven't necessarily been wronged, but they haven't been treated kindly by the system either.*

Mr Howard recalled that these individual letters could help "illustrate the strength of feeling or level of support" for, or against, a government policy, and where government policies were creating significant "personal difficulty."

One of these letters was from a 15-year-old Indigenous girl who detailed her experiences of sexual assault and asking the prime minister for a greater investment in sex and consent education in schools. The letter was shown to Mr Howard, "in light of your recent discussions with Evelyn Scott," (NAA: M4326, 1143) who was a prominent Indigenous rights campaigner, and chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Here, the letter operated as an individual case-study to support his policy thinking, as part of a broader range of policy inputs. While the response was non-committal, it led to one of Mr Howard's senior advisors ringing the girl, to talk with her about her experiences.

The next way that individual letters could have an impact is by helping the writers to get direct assistance. As highlighted in Chapter 2, the letters could lead to a resolution of an individualised problem, what is usually referred to as "particularised contact" (Verba & Nie, 1987) or "service responsiveness" (Eulau & Karps, 1977). All representatives regularly deal with these types of requests, and Mr Howard would receive these types of letters both in his capacity as member for Bennelong, as well as his capacity as PM. Mr Nutt recalled a specific letter from a former public servant, who had had problems with their public sector retirement benefits, resulting in the head of the relevant agency being asked to address the issues. He also recalled a regular stream of letters complaining about the impact of social security decisions, or immigration decisions. The main social welfare delivery agency, Centrelink, had a team of liaison officers to deal with requests from members of parliament about constituent issues (DHS, 2006). Mr Leverett recalled that "in many cases you actually direct them to something [they] didn't know about or help in some way". He continued that; it was these letters "that were of interest to the PM [because] he could see that an individual with a particular concern… could get that addressed… fixed in some way."

Mr Brady recalled that these letters could have a significant personal impact on him - Mr Howard would sometimes send personal cheques to the correspondent. While individualised problem-solving would not be quantitatively evident in Mr Howard's speeches,

or in the volume of the letters, it is a vital part of elected leaders' representative role.[86] It suggests a degree of empathy from Mr Howard on a personal basis, and may also demonstrate the emphasis that he placed on service responsiveness (Eulau & Karps, 1977).

Another way of looking at how Mr Howard engaged with his correspondence is to consider how he used it to shape public opinion, including when he specifically referenced these letters publicly. As outlined in Chapter 3, from this perspective, public opinion is important for politicians to track not in order to be responsive, but rather to determine how to shape their message and win public support (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). Mr Howard reflected that this was particularly important when initial public opinion opposed his preferred policy position. In relation to the GST, which was unpopular (Passant, 2012), Mr Howard reflected that "I was interested to see whether over a period of time, our advocacy and our explanations, were having an impact on public opinion." This indicates that while public opinion was important to him, he was less concerned with contemporaneous public opinion, but rather whether he was succeeding in shaping public opinion over time — particularly prior to the next election. This reflects an emphasis on anticipatory representation (Mansbridge, 2003). His desire was to influence public opinion (rather than reflect public opinion), which would then result in a future congruence between his policy and future opinion.

Referencing letters in his speeches can show that a leader is engaged with, and listening to, public opinion, and help to construct 'perceived majorities' (Entman & Herbst, 2001).[87] There are around 50 instances of Mr Howard referring to correspondence that he had received. In radio interviews, or other settings where Mr Howard was taking questions (such as at a community forum), he mainly used his mail to refute claims or positions put by the questioner. For example:

> *Journalist: How do you react to the number of businesses who claim that the GST has put them into bankruptcy. Do you think that's the case?*
>
> *Prime Minister:..... But I don't get the mail that the GST has put people into bankruptcy (Howard, 2001f).*

Or

[86] However, the level of service responsiveness by political executives may well differ between parliamentary and presidential systems, given that in parliamentary systems all members of the executive are also members of the legislature.

[87] Similar behaviour was evident from Mr Jeremy Corbyn who, as opposition leader, regularly quoted letters in his questions to the prime minister in the UK House of Commons (Cole, 2017; Fetzer & Bull, 2019)

> *Journalist: Prime Minister why is the perception though among the pensioners that they are worse off?*
>
> *Prime Minister:.... I get letters from pensioners containing detailed calculations that they have made indicating that they don't believe that they are worse off. So you are talking about one side of the story, the other more silent side of the story is that many pensioners don't feel that they are worse off (Howard, 2001e).*

This was also evident in the interviews, with Mr Hazell recalling:

> *he can pull out some words out of a letter he has read and say "I got this letter from so and so and I think... What he said is so true," so it meant a lot to him for his public presentation of the arguments.*

By using evidence of other public opinion to push back on media narratives, these exchanges are explicit attempts by Mr Howard to create perceived majorities, demonstrating that the caller's/questioner's position is not widely held, and therefore does not require policy changes.

In Chapter 3, I theorise that the responses to the letters (or the mere act of responding) was also an important part of the democratic linkage between citizen and representative, even if there was no substantive responsiveness (Esaiasson et al., 2017; Fenno, 1978). These concepts were identified by interviewees, who considered that the mere act of reading the letter and responding (even if neither the writer, nor the government, was going to change its position) was an important democratic act. This is particularly important for people who disagree with the government's policy position. An appropriate explanation may help them to accept (if not endorse) the policy, and thus help to maintain democratic legitimacy, as it shows that they are not being ignored or neglected (Esaiasson et al., 2017). This concept was reflected by almost all of the interviewees:

> *the very act that people are writing to you means that you can't just assert, "well, we're not going to do X or Y," you gotta explain why... Why do you think they're wrong, or why you think you can't do what they're asking you to do. So you couldn't afford to ignore just because they weren't going to vote for you. You have to be able to publicly state and defend a position (Mr Sinodinos).*
>
> *people's concerns or ideas are actually being responded to. So, you know, that in itself is important, that OK, somebody bothered to write, and they got an answer back. It might not have been 100% the answer they wanted, but they got an answer. In a democracy, that is obviously important (Mr Morris).*
>
> *most people just want to be heard. The answer in the sense doesn't matter so much. as the fact they've been able to express their concern (Mr Leverett).*

> *one of the really important roles of the letters is to be able to put down in writing, the explanation for the decision... "I've made this decision and for these reasons bang bang bang bang" (Mr Hazell).*

This is also evident in the text of the letters sent by Mr Howard or the PMO in response to these letters, particularly where the correspondent does not agree with government policy. The responses were often two pages, acknowledging that the correspondent feels differently, and setting out in detail the rationale for the government's position. On several issues, detailed policy documents, or copies of the prime minister's speeches were also included (NAA: M4898, 10 & M4326, 496).

The importance of responding was also evident in Mr Howard's talkback radio interviews, where on multiple occasions, callers either thanked Mr Howard for responding, or berated him for his failure to respond:

> *G'day, how are you? I sent you a letter a long while ago, right, for my boy and you never answered it and he's a little bit upset over it* (Howard, 2003).

Similarly:

> *I ask you prime minister, I sent you a letter and never received even a reply at all, so I'd be grateful for one now (Howard, 2004a).*

On the other side, constituents would also call in to thank the prime minister:

> *Mr Prime Minister, I am one of the persons who write a fair amount of letters to you every year and would you believe even though I write to other ministers you are the only one who answers letters — you and your department. I really sincerely like to thank you for it* (Howard, 2001d).

Interviewees also recalled this issue:

> *Prime ministers get particularly irritated if their backbenchers start saying "My constituent wrote to you six months ago and hasn't had a response". Nothing irritates a Prime Minister more than that sort of... You know 'cause that's getting that feedback in the community which makes it look as though you're not doing your job or you're not responsive, or you're not listening (Mrs Morris).*

Thus, we can see a range of other functions performed by the letters, including impacting substantive policy; providing a solution to a specific issue; and as a core part of the democratic linkage between the public and their leaders. Each of these provide a range of opportunities for further research.

8.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I show that there is no quantitative evidence to support an elite-agenda setting theory on the topics of the letters. However, a qualitative approach to the individual topics reveal that most topics are in direct response to actions or announcements of the government or external events. I then explore other impacts the letters can have, including: getting individual assistance; provoking an emotive response; shaping public opinion; and finally, the role of writing and responding (even without responsiveness) as a core part of democratic theory.

My findings, that the government has the ability to shape the topics of the incoming letters, aligns with the limited international literature on letters. In the USA, Rottinghaus (2023) identifies a relationship between President Johnson's rhetoric on civil rights and the volume and direction of opinion in letters on civil rights in the subsequent period. Similarly Rottinghaus (2012) finds that external events and presidential visibility (the number of public speeches the president gave) are both significant predictors of the overall volume of incoming presidential mail. Mr Howard's use of the letters to shape public opinion also aligns with President Nixon's use of his mail (Rottinghaus, 2008).

The findings also reveal an emphasis on communicating and explaining government policy and using the incoming letters to help shape public opinion — revealing the importance of anticipatory representation (Mansbridge, 2003) for Mr Howard. Mr Howard knowingly made decisions different from (the initial) majority opinion, including the GST (Passant, 2012); engagement with Asia (McDougall & Edney, 2010); climate change (Christoff, 2005); the war in Iraq; and workplace relations reform. At least on these issues, Mr Howard could be considered a "trustee" rather than a "delegate." In relation to the war in Iraq, he told me "there was very strong public opposition to that. I was aware of it, but I still thought it was the right thing to do." Consistent with Soontjens (2021), in these situations Mr Howard recognised the importance of explaining the policy to the public, and "stressing the fairness [and] the future benefits" (Soontjens, 2021, p. 247). As Mr Howard reflected in relation to the GST, "there were also a lot of people who were willing to listen to an argument and were happy to be persuaded."

While the previous chapter shows that there is no systematic statistical relationship between the letters and Mr Howard's rhetoric, the findings in this chapter demonstrate that individual letters, and individual stories, can have an outsized impact based on their emotional appeal. For some issues, or for some people, letter writing may be the only way to be heard. Prior to social media, certain segments of the population would have struggled to access to traditional

media and would have felt quite remote from elite power centres, particularly if they regarded themselves as marginalised — for example, the fathers that felt aggrieved by the family law system. The way people were prepared to open-up and disclose painful or difficult experiences says something about the special role of the prime minister, which has also been documented elsewhere (Bongiorno, 2022). This finding aligns with a range of literature on the importance of emotions and storytelling in policy change and politics (Demertzis, 2014; Trevisan, 2017; Welch, 1997). On the flip side, however, there is also a clear scepticism that some of these letters generated. My own experiences, explained in the introductory chapter, mean that I agree with Hyman (2000, p. 1150) that a “atypical or unrepresentative stories are problematic” or unreliable for policymaking, and raises normative questions about the best approach to policy development.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Introduction

The puzzle that drives this research is captured by key quotes from my interviews, which recognise the importance of understanding, learning and (to some extent) being responsive to public opinion:

> *I think it's true to say that Howard was interested in all avenues of public opinion… for him he was interested in all sources of potential information and how they impacted on perceptions of him, perceptions of the government, the job the government was doing... [an] early warning system on potential issues [of] concern, and so on (Mr Sinodinos)*

and

> *and you know, people say 'politicians don't listen' and 'they are isolated' … That's bullshit. Politicians in a normal week will meet more real people than most real people will in a year. It's their job… [Mr Howard] knew weeks before any opinion poll, what the electorate was thinking (Mr Morris)*

Yet on the other hand, Mr Morris also revealed a clearly dismissive attitude towards this form of public opinion - "millions of bloody letter-writers are wasting their bloody time." So, although responsiveness of executives and legislatures is extensively studied, the puzzle is what types of public opinion have a greater (lesser) impact on different forms of government action is an unresolved question in the literature.

The existing methodological approaches to responsiveness research focus (almost exclusively) on opinion polls, which implicitly assumes that political leaders weigh such decisions on a one vote - one value basis. That seems to ignore a range of factors implicit in any political decision. Political leaders are unlikely to care about the fleeting opinion of individuals who are largely indifferent to the issue. While some articles recognised this issue (Gause, 2022; Manza & Cook, 2002; Price, 2008), few explore other ways of identifying and measuring the types of public opinion that are being listened to, and responded to, by political elite. This creates a need to better examine the mechanisms of public opinion transmission and responsiveness (Dowding, 2015). My work within government lead me to believe that governments are listening to, and are (potentially) more responsive to, the public opinion expressed by letter-writers — louder voices, that actively choose to express their views, often threatening the government with a change in their vote. This is consistent with the literature, which shows that the wealthy and higher educated are more likely to participate, more likely to

express their opinion, and governments are more responsive to the demands of this group (Schlozman et al., 2012; Verba & Nie, 1987; Verba et al., 1995).

Letter-writing and other forms of contacting political leaders performs a vital role in creating a connection between the governed and the governors, going back centuries. While it has been a standard part of political participation research, it has not previously been part of responsiveness or public opinion research — mainly due to the lack of access to the necessary data. This is the first contribution of this research — the introduction of new data sources for measuring activated public opinion.

To fill this gap in the literature, this thesis asks the overarching question of: what is the role of these letters in the political system? Are political leaders responsive to the letters? The broad answer to this question is: no. This study finds some evidence that the letters are driven by government action, rather than the other way around, but individual letters and individual stories, can have an impact over time. Below, I summarise the findings of this thesis. I then discuss the contributions and implications of these findings, before examining areas for further research.

9.1 Overview of Findings

This thesis begins by examining the theoretical frameworks that are engaged with across this research. Chapter 2 sets out that democracy necessitates some level of responsiveness between public opinion and policy. However, representative democracy means that policy responsiveness is mediated through the choice of party/leader, necessitating voters weigh the policy positions of candidates against both their own policy positions and policy intensities, to cast a single vote for a party/leader, rather than multitudes of votes for policy positions. This changes the incentives for political leaders to be responsive to public opinion, based on who is expressing that opinion, and whether that opinion is likely to influence their voting behaviour (including their willingness to vote in voluntary-voting systems). This means that political leaders are more likely to be responsive to high-intensity opinions. There are clear theoretical reasons political leaders may privilege an intense minority, and I highlight the intensity problem (Hill, 2022; Kendall & Carey, 1968) and the idea of democracy as recognising different people's stakes in an issue (Brighouse & Fleurbaey, 2010), and privileging those who are directly impacted by the decision.

I argue in Chapter 3 that letters from members of the public provide an example of this issue-intensity measure of public opinion, which means that political leaders should have an

incentive to be responsive to this expression of public opinion. However, as I explain in Chapter 3, the literature also points to the institutional factors that can influence the level of responsiveness (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008). The specific Australian context of compulsory voting; compulsory preferential voting; and single-member electorates means that there is limited incentive to be responsive to this letter-writing cohort, which are likely to be overwhelmingly partisan. Chapters 2 and 3 lead to a series of hypotheses, the findings from which are summarised in Table 9-1.

Chapter 5 then explores the first research question of: who writes letters to the prime minister? I test a series of hypotheses about the types of people that are likely to write to the prime minister (Table 9-1) and I find that letters expressing an opinion come from a politically active and partisan portion of the population who are less likely to change their vote between major parties. This contrasts with those who write letters seeking help/information, who are much closer to the general population. This changes the political incentives to be responsive to the opinion letter-writers, provided that the PM and the PMO are aware that those letter-writers were unlikely to change their vote. This is my next finding, namely, that Mr Howard and the PMO were very aware of the types of people who were writing. Their attitudes to the writers were clearly coloured by this, with some interviewees being dismissive of the writers and their views. This provided an early indication that it was unlikely that Mr Howard was going to be intentionally responsive to this cohort.

Chapter 6 focusses on the second and third research questions of: what are the letters to the prime minister about, and how the prime minister engaged with the letters? I show there has long been tension within PM&C about the value of letters and letter-writers — either a “sheer waste of valuable time and paper” (Strahan quoted in Weller et al. (2011, p. 40)); or “a human being with needs and fears” (NAA: A463, 1966/149). Over time, responding to the many tens of thousands (and then more than a hundred thousand) letters addressed to the prime minister each year required PM&C to establish systems and processes. The increasing volume meant that the PM and the PMO had to become increasingly removed from the individual letters and responses, meaning that most letters were never seen by the PM or the PMO. Instead, writers received standard responses from a team dedicated to managing correspondence. Prime ministers do, however, receive regular reports on the volume and topic of correspondence, which enable them to be broadly aware of the trends in the mail. My research finds that, like other prime ministers, Mr Howard received fortnightly briefings on the volume and topic of mail, however he and the PMO attached little significance to it — and Mr Howard stopped regularly receiving these briefings in late 2000, and instead only received it on an ‘exceptions’ basis.

This provided further indications that Mr Howard and his office were not seeking to be responsive to this type of public opinion.

I then analyse the volume and topic of the letters to Mr Howard, the first detailed analysis of a political executive's mailbag. I find that there are no statistical differences in the volume of letters between ALP prime ministers and Coalition prime ministers, or between election years and non-election years, or early in a prime minister's term and later in that term. Further, I find that there was no increase in the volume of letters since the introduction of a publicly accessible email address for the prime minister (late 2000), but there is evidence of a decline in the volume of correspondence to the PM from around 2013. Then, analysing the types of letters and topics, I find that approximately 40% of all of Mr Howard's incoming letters were pro-forma or campaign correspondence, driven by interest groups.

The issues that generated the largest volume of mail were family day care, Sydney's second airport, cuts to the public broadcaster, and concern about East Timor. While these were all significant issues during Mr Howard's prime ministership, I find zero correlation between the topics of the letters and public opinion as measured through opinion polls. The letters, do however, provided an opportunity for niche issues that are not the subject of opinion polls or media coverage, to potentially get the prime minister's attention.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore the final research question of: What impact do the letters have? Across a range of different modelling approaches, there was no statistical evidence to support my hypotheses (Table 9-1) that the topics of the letters were congruent with the topics of Mr Howard's speeches, or that Mr Howard's speeches were responsive to the topics of the letters. However, there is significant qualitative evidence that major external events can drive congruence between Mr Howard's speeches and the letters. That is evident in relation to the Port Arthur massacre, the events in East Timor, and the Kyoto climate conference. The qualitative evidence also provides support to the elite agenda setting hypothesis, that the topics of letters are driven by the political elite setting the agenda.

Finally, Chapter 8 also examines the other impacts that letters can have. I find that Mr Howard and his senior staff read a handful of individual letters, to give them a better understanding of the mood expressed in the letters. Those letters could have an impact, perhaps by starting to prompt new policy thinking, with interviewees specifically citing changes to the family law system and dual citizenship as issues where individual constituent stories (including from letters) helped shape policy thinking. Mr Howard also used the letters to help shape public opinion, using the letters as a way of rejecting the premise of journalists' questions.

In response to the core research question, the findings point to a very limited impact of letters on the public agenda, with no statistically significant linkages, and active derision of some of these letter-writing campaigns from interviewees. Instead, any impact is likely to be ad-hoc, based on their story-telling or emotional appeal, and the luck of the draw of whether the prime minister or his senior staff read it.

Table 9-1 Summary of findings by hypothesis

Research question	Hypothesis number	Description	Finding	Chapter
Who writes letters to the prime minister?	H1a	People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be further from the median voter compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Supported	5
	H1b	People who write to seek help/information will have a similar left-right position to those who do not write to seek help/information.	Supported	5
	H2a	People who write to express an opinion are more likely to be partisans compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Supported	5
	H2b	People who write to seek help/information will have the same level of partisanship as those who do not write to seek help/information.	Partially supported	5
	H3a	People who write to express an opinion are less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to express an opinion.	Partially supported	5
	H3b	People who write to seek help/information are no more nor less likely to change, or consider changing, their vote between the major parties, compared to those who do not write to seek help/information.	Partially supported	5
What impact do the letters have?	H4a	There will be cross-sectional congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard's speeches.	Not supported	7
	H4b	There will be time-series congruence between the issues addressed in the letters and the issues addressed in Mr Howard's speeches.	Not supported	7
	H5a	Following an increase in the volume of letters on a particular topic, there will be an increase in the proportion of Mr Howard's speeches on that topic.	Not supported	7
	H5b	Responsiveness will increase when governments are politically vulnerable.	Not supported	7
	H5c	Responsiveness will be higher for topics with a higher perceived salience.	Not supported	7
	H6	The more Mr Howard speaks about a topic, the greater the likelihood of there being letters on that topic in the following fortnight.	Not supported quantitatively, supported qualitatively	8

Source: Author analysis

9.2 Discussion and Contributions

This thesis makes several important contributions to the literature and advances our understanding of the relationship been public opinion and public policy in a number of significant ways. Almost 20 years ago, Goot (2005, p. 201) said that "[t]he study of what Australian politicians or their advisors understand by 'public opinion' has hardly begun." Since then, while studies of perceptions of public opinion and responsiveness to public opinion has proliferated in Europe and the US, there remains very limited understanding of public opinion beyond opinion polls in Australia. This research goes a long way to addressing this gap.

First, by analysing the topics of the letters, I open a new empirical domain for the study of public opinion and responsiveness. While others examine the volume of mail (Rottinghaus, 2012), or mail on particular topics (Lee, 2002; Rottinghaus, 2023), this is the first study that provides a thorough understanding of the volume and topic of letters to a political executive. Like the study of protests (Gause, 2022), this helps to broaden the study of public opinion to better reflect how the public actually express that opinion and how political elite engage with that opinion. It allows researchers to better understand Key's definition of public opinion — "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" (Key, 1961, p. 14).

This analysis allows us to better understand the large range of issues that the public care about, which reinforces the existing findings around the importance of issue publics (Converse, 2006; Ryan & Ehlinger, 2023). As I find in Chapter 4, the range of issues that the public are attending to are diverse and particularistic. Many of the issues were high profile and could have been identified by pollsters, such as whaling by the Japanese, which was occasionally the subject of opinion polls by both newspapers and researchers (Brereton, 2015; Freeman & Kellert, 1992). However, there are also many issues that, as Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) note, are easy for pollsters, researchers and journalists to miss, for example the letters requesting funding for the Sunshine Coast Convention Centre and Performing Arts Complex, or calling for Australia to sign a social security treaty with Germany. This demonstrates the importance of a broad approach to the study of public opinion. Even if these issues are insufficient to change an individual's vote, this study helps explicate the breadth of issues that the public are concerned about.

Second, I contribute to the comparative responsiveness literature, by applying existing methods to a new empirical field of public opinion. While there is no statistical evidence of responsiveness, null findings can still provide important additions to our understanding and help advance the discipline (Munafò & Neill, 2016). The null findings across Chapters 7 and 8 provide important additions to our understanding of responsiveness. Finding a lack of responsiveness does not lead us to falsify theories of political responsiveness (Dowding, 2015). Instead, it leads us to reexamine the model, modifying it to address the new findings. This is precisely what Manza and Cook (2002) do by suggesting a contingent model of responsiveness — that in some circumstances, we would find responsiveness, and in some circumstances we would not. They set the discipline a challenge of finding those circumstances that drive responsiveness and those that don't. It is in this framework that I situate my findings, helping to identifying those circumstances and situations where responsiveness is not expected to be found.

These null findings should not be taken to mean that Mr Howard was not responsive to the public or was not aware of what the public was saying. Indeed, Mr Howard's prime ministership was dogged by claims that he was "the most knee-jerk, poll-reactive, populist prime minister in the last 50 years" who "consistently fashioned himself and his behaviour to suit public opinion" (Marr and *The Age* quoted in Goot (2005, p. 190)). Similarly, Miragliotta (2002) described Mr Howard as "sensibly flexible" on policy matters, and with reference to petrol prices, Mr Howard said "I was plainly wrong in not understanding some of the concerns held by the Australian people about the price of petrol" (Miragliotta, 2002, p. 122). Others have identified a range of issues where Mr Howard's policies were congruent with majority opinion, and just as many policies where Mr Howard appears to have knowingly opposed majority opinion (Goot, 2005). Instead of the letters, Mr Howard used other sources to tap into public opinion. Mr Howard identified talkback radio as his preferred method of listening to public opinion:

> *[talkback] was a more immediate way of finding out public opinion because what people thought was people do ring radio stations, Australians are not the least bit reluctant to take advantage of talkback radio and I found it a very effective way, not only of communicating something I wanted the public to hear, but also a very effective way of finding out what the public was thinking*

Talkback radio represents an alternative way of operationalising the concepts of "attentive public" and "issue publics," and measuring the intensity of opinion to which I use in this research. Talkback radio can "provide an excellent, unstructured outlet for public discourse… [and] let callers… express themselves in their own words" (Herbst, 1995, p. 270). Thus, in

many ways, it provides a similar potential as letters for an expression of public opinion, directly linked to the level of intensity. Mr Nutt also reflected that gaining an understanding of public opinion was an “iterative process in which everything goes into the pot.” Mr Brady recalled during parliamentary sitting weeks, Mr Howard would spend Monday talking with backbenchers, gauging public opinion — “with his mind free from having been the head of government, and he could be the politician.” All of this demonstrates that Mr Howard did consider nuanced approaches sampling public opinion, and that the opinion of the attentive public could matter.

In Table 3-1, I set out the necessary steps for responsiveness to occur, and highlighted that in much of the existing research, a number of the steps are simply assumed to occur (most importantly that the opinion is transmitted to the elites, and that the elites correctly hear that opinion). In this study, I provide evidence to address these steps that other studies simply assume have occurred. I show that people have an opinion; it is expressed; it is transmitted; and it is heard and interpreted. However, the chain of responsiveness is broken because the elites (in this instances) made an active decision not to react to this form of public opinion. Importantly, I can show why Mr Howard made this decision — he was aware of the political incentive structure, and that these letter-writers were not his ’pivotal’ voters. These findings reinforce the importance of improving our understanding of the institutional impacts on political incentives and political elites’ subjective understanding of their political incentives — which groups of voters they consider to be ‘pivotal’. This will help us understand the final step in this responsiveness chain.

The ability to demonstrate that the opinion was expressed, transmitted and heard by the political elites is an ongoing problem for responsiveness researchers, who generally rely on an assumption that the public opinion heard by political elites matched the public opinion they were measuring. However, given the emerging evidence that political elites systematically misinterpret public opinion (Broockman & Skovron, 2018), it is increasingly important for researchers to clearly establish what opinion was actually transmitted and heard by the relevant elite. This is a significant feature of this research.

Finally, the research demonstrates that both Mr Howard and the PMO had two very different attitudes towards the letters and letter-writers. There was a clear respect for the role that these letters played in the democratic process, as well as the importance of communication, explanation and justification. While many (Dobson, 2012; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017; Fenno, 1977; Fenno, 1978; Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967; Soontjens, 2021) emphasise these

processes in relation to individual members of the legislature, these same concerns also motivated Mr Howard and demonstrated a focus on anticipatory representation, by seeking to shape future public opinion, rather than necessarily respond to contemporaneous opinion. However, at the same time, Mr Howard and the PMO also demonstrated extreme scepticism about the value of the letters (and even the sanity of the letter-writers).

9.3 Normative Considerations

I started this thesis by expressing my personal concern about the impact that these letters could have and identified myself as a democratic elitist. I identify the normative questions of what should be the level, speed or limits of responsiveness (Sabl, 2015), and how should democracy balance responsiveness to a (potentially apathetic) majority versus an intense minority — best captured in Dahl's intensity problem (Dahl, 2006). For me, the quantitative findings of a lack of responsiveness, and qualitative findings that Mr Howard and his staff deliberately ignored (in Mr Morris's words) the "complete ratbags" are welcome, as they appear to show that Mr Howard did not "yield to the impulse of sudden and violent passions" (Hamilton et al., 1961, p. 379).

Given Martin et al. (2014) found that the Australian legislative agenda is broadly responsive to mass public opinion, together these findings may help to confirm the theoretical expectation that the institutional arrangements in Australia favour responsiveness to the median voter. Indeed, as highlighted above, during Mr Howard's leadership many claimed he was overly responsive. Goot (2005) shows that these criticisms have been flung by both journalists and academics at a range of Australian politicians, implicitly stating that being (too) responsive is a negative, and that a good leader is driven by principle and conviction. Since Mr Howard's retirement, he has since been re-framed as a "conviction politician" (Brent, 2021). These two interpretations of responsiveness reflect the inherent tensions between the majoritarian and liberal principles, which I highlight in Chapter 2.

Another normative question also emerges, namely the extent to which individual stories and narratives, and the emotions that they evoke, should be relevant to policymaking (Newman, 2017). Having trained as a public servant, (while I recognise that policy can never be purely 'objective' and value-free) my normative approach to policymaking has always been to strive towards a rationalist, evidence-influenced, understanding of the issues (Newman, 2017). My experience, however, was that too often ministers, and political staff could be influenced by the individual stories in the letters, resulting in policy driven by outliers, rather than the average experience of an effected cohort. These concerns have been reinforced by the findings of this

thesis, supporting the existing research on the importance of individual stories in policymaking (Hyman, 2000). Recent research shows how interest groups are now actively 'story-banking' (Trevisan, 2017; Trevisan et al., 2020; Vromen, 2017) to be able to identify the 'best' story to prosecute their case in each situation, which risks further exacerbating the focus on (potentially unrepresentative) stories and anecdotes.

9.4 Limitations and Areas for Further Research

Throughout this thesis, I recognise a range of areas where my findings raise further questions or are hampered by a range of limitations. In this section, I seek to bring them together, both in recognition of the limitations of my research, but also to map out a future research agenda.

While this is a single-country case study, which does restrict its generalisability (Pepinsky, 2019), nevertheless, I would suggest these findings are likely to be generalisable within Australia, both across time and subnational governments. The findings point to the need for similar studies in other countries, given the specific set of political incentives faced by Australian political leaders, which may not be faced by leaders in other countries. Given my theory set out in Chapter 2, it is highly likely that these specific null findings would not generalise to countries with different institutional incentive structures. Instead, the level of responsiveness to letters (or other intensity-based forms of public opinion) would depend on each country's incentive structures. This is not a weakness in my study, but rather a call for testing of my theories in different institutional settings. The lack of systematic research or data collection on these issues in other countries makes comparative research not currently possible. Thus, this research provides specific methodological advances, associated with the use of letters from the public as a way of measuring public opinion and identifying issue-publics, which could be used in other countries.

As noted in Chapter 6, Mr Howard stopped regularly seeing the briefs in late 2000. This resulted in it becoming much harder to locate these briefs in the NAA from that point forward. This has restricted this study to the period of 1996 to 2000. Similarly, I was unable to extend this study back in time, as I was not able to locate any of these briefs for Mr Keating, potentially due to the unintentional destruction of some of his records (Casey & Black, forthcoming). I sought to extend the study forward, through a freedom of information (FOI) request to PM&C, to access these briefs both for the remainder of Mr Howard's period in office, and for the

periods of Ms Gillard's and Mr Rudd's periods in office. Both requests were refused by PM&C, because no such records could be located (FOI/2021/096 and FOI/2021/097 refers).[88]

Other areas to expand this research agenda include:

- Why do the topics of the letters differ so markedly from more traditional measures of public opinion, including surveys of most important issues, and election surveys asking which issues drove vote choice? Similarly, why did very high-profile political issues during Mr Howard's period in office (e.g. GST, workplace relations changes and sale of Telstra) generate so few letters? If letter-writing is mainly about changing the agenda, then it could be that issues that are already sufficiently high-profile may not generate letters.

- From whom do citizens seek representation? We have no knowledge or visibility of letters sent to other members of parliament, including relevant ministers or local members of parliament. Are those letters on similar topics? Are those parliamentarians responsive through their discretionary parliamentary (including parliamentary questions) and extra-parliamentary activities?

- How do the writers feel about the responses that they receive? How does it impact trust in government and political institutions? What impact can responses have on voting behaviour?

- What drives the overall volume of letters? The downward trend in volume that I found (Chapter 6) appears to be inconsistent with the AES findings (Chapter 5) of a slight increase in the proportion of respondents reporting that they had contacted a politician.

- How do public servants engage with these letters? In what circumstances are the letters used to inform policy development and analysis? In what circumstances do the writers receive the individual help, information or assistance that they request?

[88] This raises further questions, given that there is clear evidence that the briefs did exist, it is unclear why they could not be found/located.

- How does issue ownership impact on both the topics of letters, and how political leaders engage with and respond to the letters. Are they more likely to respond to letters on an issue that their political party owns?

A further significant area of research is the impact of changing communications technologies. While beyond the scope of this research, it would be remiss to not address the impact of these technologies, and how that might impact the generalizability of this research. During the period of my research, Mr Howard did not have a publicly advertised email address, however in 2001 Mr Howard reflected that “the revolution in communications… has also lead to a vast increase in direct contact by constituents” (Howard, 2001a). The Australian prime minister did not get a Twitter or Facebook presence until 2008 and 2009, respectively. The internet and social media are seen as transforming politics, political participation, and political communication. There are two separate factors here, first email has almost completely replaced the physical letter, and second, the use of social media.

While email has largely replaced the physical letter, this has not been a simple one-for-one replacement, and there is conflicting evidence about what impact these technologies are having on citizen-representative engagement, and to what extent the Internet, email and social media are replacing physical letters and other forms of political participation (Casey & Rottinghaus, forthcoming). Research in the USA indicates that email has led to an explosion in the volume of letters to members of Congress (Glassman et al., 2013), but as I show in Chapter 6, there has not been a similar increase in letters to the Australian prime minister.

It has also become increasingly easy for interest groups to drive large volumes of emails as part of a broader campaign (Vromen & Coleman, 2011). Well organised interest groups can now drive their members to deliver hundreds of thousands of near identical emails to political leaders in responsfe to a call-to-action (Shulman, 2009), relying on the same “logic of numbers” that has traditionally underpinned petitions (Halpin et al., 2018, p. 429). This means that they perform a similar role to the pro-formas that are discussed throughout this research. While some argue that this has led to concerns that this “Internet-enabled deluge [of] low-quality [and] insubstantial comment[s]” creating a “nuisance factor” (Shulman, 2009, p. 25 & 27), but their purpose is not content/quality, but rather a demonstration of quantity. If there is an overall increase in volume of such bulk communication, it is likely to further reduce the impact of this form of political participation, because as the ease/cost of participation drops, it similarly reduces the level of intensity that is communicated.

Separately, Twitter/X and other social media has now become the dominant presence in the Habermas-ian 'public sphere'. To that extent, social media now fulfills many similar functions of a letter to the editor of the newspaper (Cooper et al., 2009). There was significant discussion of how Twitter/X's interactive and dialogic functionality could "usher in a radical transformation in the way citizens connect with and influence their government" (Grant et al., 2010, p. 579). However, many of the touted benefits of Twitter/X are very similar to those of ministerial correspondence (e.g. unmediated, unstructured, a measure of issue intensity and an ability to identify hidden/niche topics), and much of my findings from the preceding chapters may apply equally to Twitter/X. However, we do not know if social media posts that seek to engage with/respond to the prime minister are analysed/catalogued in a similar manner. Does the prime minister receive regular briefs on these issues?

The key difference is that emails (like traditional mail) continue to be a private, dialogic form of communication. Individual emails continue to be individually logged, managed and responded to, in the same way that traditional mail was managed. To that extent, the impacts identified in Chapter 8 are likely to continue. Social media posts, like letters to the editor or calls to talkback, are aimed at the public sphere, rather than aimed directly at a particular political leader. Political leaders who are "@-ed" in social media posts by members of the public rarely respond (Spierings et al., 2019). The overarching conclusion is that improving our understanding the role letters (and other forms of public opinion) play will improve our understanding of responsiveness and the way democracy functions.

I started this thesis with an impassioned plea from Mr Robin Ford, calling on Mr Howard to apologise to the "stolen generations" (NAA: M4326, 496). Five and a half months later, Mr Howard provided a long response to Mr Ford:

> *I apologise for the delay in replying. Your views on an apology to indigenous people have been noted…. Thank you for bringing your concerns to the attention of the government. (NAA: M4326, 496).*

Whether the response was enough to persuade or assuage Mr Ford, I do not know. Nevertheless, he was heard, and participated in the dialogue between the public and their leaders. An important democratic right and for that, we should all be thankful.

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Appendix A Appendix to Chapter 4

Example Brief

In section 4.1, I explain how the data for the letters was gathered from briefs to the prime minister. Below is an example of one of those briefs (NAA: M4326, 895).

Figure A-1 Example brief

Series	M4326	Control Symbol	895

26+37

DEPARTMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET

Prime Minister
(for information)

3/10

Tony O'Leary (Press Secretary)
Malcolm Hazell (Senior Adviser)

Via e-mail

Executive
Division Heads

ANALYSIS OF MAIL REGISTERED BY MCU 13 SEPTEMBER TO 24 SEPTEMBER 1999

Total mail received this fortnight 13251

Total mail received previous fortnight 7958

Attached are statistics on topical issues where more than thirty items on a particular subject were registered in the Ministerial Correspondence Unit within the fortnight.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR SIGNATURE FROM 13 SEPTEMBER TO 24 SEPTEMBER 1999

The following indicates the number of documents submitted for signature during the above period.

Prime Minister	54
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister	0
Parliamentary Secretary to Cabinet	58

Naomi Walters
Assistant Adviser
Ministerial Correspondence Unit
29 September 1999

Series	M4326	Control Symbol	895

	Topical Issue	Previous Fortnight	This Fortnight		Total (Cumulative)
			Letters	Proformas	
1.	Alternative site for Sydney's second airport – pro	454	0	255	27475
2.	Public school funding	626	0	249	10360
3.	Future of Tibet	6	0	39	4792
4.	East Timor	2881	4259	4029	12900
5.	East Timor – Human Rights	2	0	30	32
6.	Universal declaration of Human Rights	0	0	78	3036
7.	World debt cancellation in the year 2000 - pro	4	0	77	433

1. Correspondence regarding an alternative site for Sydney's second airport.
2. Form letters commenting on the lack of public school funding in the last budget.
3. Postcards promoting negotiations between China and Tibet.
4. Letters and postcards commenting on government assistance for the people of East Timor.
5. Postcards requesting immediate protection of human rights for the people of East Timor.
6. Form letters requesting the government reaffirm Australia's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
7. Form letters requesting the government cancel world debt loans of the poorest countries by the year 2000.

Source: NAA: M4326, 895

Complete List of Original Topics

In section 4.1, I explain that the briefs set out the topics of the letters. Below is a complete list of the original topics, before being coded against the amended Australian Policy Agendas Project codebook.

Table A-1 Complete list of original topics

Topics	
10 Alternative points on Native Title	International Year of the Volunteer proposed for 2001 - Pro
Abolish diesel rebate for mining - Anti	Investment Superannuation Funds
Abolition 2000 Global Network - Pro	IVF Programme - pro
Aboriginal Deaths in Custody - Anti	Japanese whale hunting in Southern Ocean
Aboriginal reconciliation	Koalas endangered by proposed airport change - Anti
Accommodation for the Elderly in Cobar - Pro	Landmines - Anti
Aerial Cables - Anti	Laws regarding entrance to Nursing Homes - Anti
Aged Persons Savings Bonus	Legal Aid for Asylum Seekers
Air New Zealand takeover of Ansett Airlines	Legislation on euthanasia - Anti
Alternative site for Sydney's second airport - Pro	Legislation on euthanasia - Pro
Amendments to Native Title Act - Anti	Live Sheep Trade - Anti
Apology to the stolen generation	Lower fuel excise
Armenian Genocide Day - Anti	Lucas Heights nuclear facility - anti
ATSIC cuts	Mal Colston - Anti
Australian native wildlife	Malaku Islands
Australian Tax Office reassessment of income tax returns - Anti	Mandatory Sentencing Laws
Australian television content	Manning Valley NSW
Australian-German pension agreement	Ms Pauline Hanson's maiden speech - Anti
Australians with disabilities	Ms Pauline Hanson's maiden speech - Pro
Ban on long line fishing - Pro	NATO attacks on Yugoslavia - Anti
Battery hen cages - Anti	Natural disaster regarding crop loss in NSW
Benchmark pricing principles to blood glucose strips - Anti	Northern Territory's Rights on the Terminally Ill Act 1995 - Pro
Book Bounty Scheme - Pro	Nuclear reactor Lucas Heights - Anti
Broadcasting of New Zealand produced film and television shows in Australia - Anti	Nuclear weapons abolition convention
Canberra bashing - Anti	Nuclear weapons non-proliferation
Cape York World Heritage - pro	Open skies - Anti
CASA Board and aviation safety	Optional Protocol to CEDAW
Centenary Federation funding - train rails	Pig Meat Imports - Anti
Centre for Australian achievers	Plans to restrict provider numbers for new doctors - Anti
Changes to Australia's education system - Anti	Political prisoners in Indonesia

Topics	
Changes to Family Law & Child Support Scheme	Pork meat imports
Changes to the criminal justice system - Anti	Possible removal of the Bounty (Fuel Ethanol) Act - Anti
Chicken Meat Imports - Anti	Preservation of Cantonment Hill site
Childcare funding	Prisoners of conscience in Tibet
China's invasion and occupation of Tibet - Anti	Private obstetrics
China's missile tests- anti	Privatisation NSW Adult Migrant English Service - Anti
Closure of Leichhardt Medicare office - Anti	Proposal to fix interstate rail lines
Closure of Medicare offices - Anti	Proposal to sell government information technology services - Anti
Common Youth Allowance - Anti	Proposed amalgamation of St George and St Vincent's hospital - Anti
Commonwealth dental health programme	Proposed changes to the Nurses Federal Award - anti
Commonwealth State Disability Agreement	Proposed changes to the structure of superannuation - Anti
Commonwealth Youth Allowance - Anti	Proposed Closure of St George Campus at Oatley - Anti (UNSW campus)
Creation of a NSW forest reserve system - Pro	Proposed Cuts to the 1996/97 Refugees and Humanitarian Programme
Cross Media Ownership Law - Pro	Proposed sale of Artillery Barracks in Fremantle
Cuts to ATSIC - Anti	Public and community housing - Pro
Cuts to Community Services budget - Anti	Public school funding
Cuts to the ABC - Anti	Queensland land clearing
Deregulation - magazine distribution	Queensland Native Vegetation Act 1999
Deregulation of the petroleum industry	Queensland nursing home subsidies
Development at Hinchinbrook Island - Anti	Racism in Australia - anti
Dick Smith Resignation - Anti	Radio Australia
Diesel fuel rebate scheme	Reconciliation - Give it a hand
Domestic Violence - anti	Reduction in Family Day Care funding - Anti
Drug laws - Anti	Redundancy entitlements - Textile Workers - pro
Dumping of nuclear waste - Anti	Regional Forest Agreement - Anti
East Timor - Human Rights	Removal of tax exemption
East Timorese refugees	Repeal of Section 17 of the Australian Citizenship Act 1948
Election congratulations (1996)	Republic - Anti
Election congratulations (1998)	Request for assistance for the Tamil people -pro
Erosion of Medical Services outback Australia - Anti	Request for Federation Funding - Sunshine Coast Convention Centre and Performing Arts Complex
Euthanasia / X-Rated Videos	Request for implementation of steel industry policy - Pro
Fair Trading Report - Pro	Request for Medicare Office - Sunbury
Freeze on fuel excise	Sale of Launceston Airport - Anti
Funding cuts migrant women - Anti	Selling of wool stock pile - Anti

Topics	
Funding Cuts to Australian Universities - Anti	Separation of Aboriginal children from their families - Anti
Funding Cuts to Disability Services - Anti	Sexuality Discrimination Bill - Anti
Funding cuts to family resource centre - Anti	SkillShare - Anti
Funding for Australia's Tourist Commission - Anti	Sorry coupons
Funding for overseas aid - Pro	Stolen generation
Funding of Catholic schools	Tariff reductions within the car industry - Anti
Future of Tibet	Tasmania's multi-purpose AFL stadium - Pro
Genetically engineered foods	Tax treatment of capital gains
Global warming - Anti	Therapeutic Goods Regulations (Amendments) - Anti
Global whale sanctuary - Pro	Timber Industry Strategy, Central Highlands - Anti
Gold Card for WWII veterans - pro	Trusts being taxed as companies
Gold Medical Health Card - Pro	Uniform gun laws - Pro
Government and commercial interests in the ABC	Universal declaration of human rights
Government cuts to the public sector - Anti	Universal declaration of human rights - Australia's standing
Granting of East Gippsland woodchip licences - Anti	Upgrading of Princes & Westgate Freeways
Greenhouse gas emissions	Uranium Mining - Anti
Greenhouse gas emissions - Anti	Use of Federation Funds to finance sporting facilities
Guns - Anti PM's stand	Victoria's additional road funding
Guns - Pro PM's stand	Violence in Sri Lanka - Anti
Herron Report into the tobacco industry - Pro	Whaling by Japanese in North Pacific
How to vote cards - Pauline Hanson	Wik Decision - Anti
Human rights for prisoners in Lebanon and Syria	Wik Decision - General
Human rights in Burma - pro	Wik Decision - Pro
Import of fruit - Anti	World debt cancellation in the year 2000 - pro
Importing of uncooked fish products - anti	World Horticulture Festival
Income support for women on Bridging visas	World's refugees and Australia's reputation
International Criminal Court	X Rated Videos - Anti

Dictionary for seededLDA model

In section 0, I explain that the speeches are coded using a seededLDA topic model, which requires a seed-word dictionary. Below is the final dictionary that was used for topic modelling.

Topic	Words
Macroeconomics	macroeconom*, econom*, inflation*, monetary, treasury, budget*, debt, deficit*, tax*, manufactur*, gst, recession
Civil rights	rights, ethnic*, raci*, sex*, gender*, handicapped, freed*, religio*, privac*, foi
Health	health*, healthcare, drug*, pharaceutic*, medic*, ambula*, disease*, mental*, rehab*, prescrip*, prescrib*, tobacco, cigar*, alcohol*
Agriculture	agricultur*, trade, farm*, food, animal*, crop*, pest*, domesticat*, fish*
Labour and employment	labour*, pension*, unemploy*, union*, wage*, superann*, childcare, parental, employment, employee
Education	education*, student*, universit*, school*, vocat*, cultur*, tuition, scholar*, teach*, TAFE, galler*, museum*, music
Environment	environ*, pollut*, waste*, toxic, chemic*, climate*, greenhouse, carbon*, recycl*, asbestos, forest*, species, endanger*, wildlife, conserv*, ozone, emission*, kyoto, reef
Energy	energy, nuclear, electric*, hydro*, gas, oil, drill*, coal, renewable*, biofuel, hydrogen, geotherm*, efficienc*, petrol
Transportation	transport*, highway*, aviation, airport*, rail*, freight, marit*, ship*, waterway*, channel*, truck, roads
Law	law*, crim*, enforcement*, customs, counterfeit*, fraud*, launder*, illegal*, drug*, legal*, prison*, gaol*, parole*, recidivi*, domestic violence, famil*, marriage, birth*, death*, afp, divorce, *gun*
Social welfare	welfare, social, assistan*, poverty, age*, elder*, pension*, dsp, ftb, dole, volunteer, ccb, ccr, fao, centrelink, charit*, dole
Housing	housing, urban, homeles*, landlord*, tenant*, *buyer*, builder*
Banking	commerc*, bank*, financ*, securities, commodit*, asx, asic, apra, exchange*, finance, mortgage*, credit, corporat*, merger*, accc, business*, copyright*, patent, disaster, flood, bushfire*, touris*, sport*, gambl*
Defence	defence*, adf, army, nava*, raaf, ally, anzus, alliance*, nato, peacekeep*, asio, asis, dsd, intelligence, military, espionage, spy, covert, armed, nuclear, weapon*, proliferat*, dva, veteran*, terror*, homeland, prisoner*, damage, afghan* iraq*, laden, wtc, osama, war, wwii, wwi
Science	tech*, science*, communication*, csiro, explorat*, satellite*, telecom*, internet, teleph*, oceanograph*, geologic*, meteorolog*, computer*, ownership, cross-media, telstra, fairfax, broadcast*
Foreign trade	dfat, trade, austrade, export* negot*, wto, investment*, competitive*, tariff*, exchange*
International affairs	dfat, aid, ausaid, europe*, eu, usa, uk, england, japan*, russia*, chin*, america*, nz, zealand, fiji, timor*, indonesia*, png, genocide, unhcr, icrc, unesco, olympic*, terror*, diplomat*, embass*, visa*, passport*, chogm, papua

Government operations	intergovernment*, coag, bureacra*, post*, auspost, aps, appoint*, currenc*, mint, medal*, procure*, property*, ato, scandal*, constitution*, campaign*, aec, census, abs, monarchy, preamble, republic*
Public lands	memorial*, historic, recreat*, forest*, flood, murray-darling, murry, darling
Indigenous	indigenous, aborigin*, atsic, graz*, abstudy, reconciliation, wik, mabo, native, title
Immigration and refugees	immigra*, assimil*, migra*, refug*, asylum*, citizen*, visa*

Hyperparameter settings of the seededLDA model

As set out in section 0, the seededLDA model requires three hyperparameters to be set, alpha, beta and weight. Alpha and beta control the underlying latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) and are left at the default settings. Weight determines the weight that that is placed on the words in the seed-word dictionary. In this section I explain how I determine best setting for the weight parameter.

One of the main drawbacks of LDA models is the level of variation, or instability, in each model run. This occurs because the model has a random element, and the allocation of words to topics is probability-based. This is partially addressed with the introduction of seed-words, which ensures that the topics remain the same. Nevertheless, each time a seededLDA model is run over the corpus, the results differ slightly. Thus, it is important to establish criteria for determining which model is chosen. I focus on achieving the lowest standard deviation across model runs, as consistency across model runs demonstrates that the weight setting reduces random noise. I ran the model at seven different weight settings, between 0.0001 and 0.9 (with 0.01 being the default), with 10 model runs per weight setting. I then determine the standard deviation of the thetas[89] for each topic in each document - with 21 topics, and 2184 documents, this results in 45,864 combinations of documents and topic. I then analysed the spread of standard deviations:

Table A-2 Impact of changes to seed-word weights on standard deviations

Weight	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
0.0001	0	0.005	0.016	0.035	0.050	0.428
0.01	0	0.004	0.011	0.028	0.035	0.387
0.05	0	0.004	0.010	0.027	0.032	0.367
0.1	0	0.004	0.011	0.027	0.034	0.331
0.2	***0***	***0.004***	***0.009***	***0.024***	***0.027***	***0.347***
0.4	0	0.004	0.011	0.027	0.033	0.372
0.9	0	0.004	0.010	0.024	0.030	0.334

Source: Author analysis of Sherratt (2019) and Trove.

With seed-word weight set at 0.2, it generates the most consistency in the 10 model runs. To determine whether this level of deviation was acceptable, I take a random sample of Watanabe and Zhou (2020)'s dataset and ran their code over their model five times. Given that the spread of standard deviations in my model was smaller than Watanabe and Zhou (2020)'s dataset (Table A-3), I consider it sufficient. Thus, a weight of 0.2 was used throughout the research.

[89] The thetas are the proportion of each document assigned to each topic.

I then compared the 10 model runs with that weight setting to determine which model had the smallest distance from the average. This was done by calculating the average theta for each document/topic combination, then obtaining the sum of squared distances from the average for each document/topic combination.

Table A-3 Standard deviation of Watanabe and Zhou's model

Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.
0	0	0.0456	0.0694	0.1011	0.4979

Source: Author analysis of (Watanabe & Zhou, 2020).

Sample invitation letter to interview subjects

In Chapter 4 I set out my interview strategy. Below is a sample of my invitation email to potential interviewees.

Figure A-2 Sample invitation letter to interview subjects

Dear X
I am a PhD student at the Australian National University, supervised by Professor Ian McAllister and Dr Marija Tafaga. My research is looking at how leaders use letters from the public to shape the policy agenda, with a focus on Mr Howard's first five years in government.

As part of this research, I am hoping to interview you, to be able to understand how Mr Howard's PMO worked, and its attitudes on responsiveness to public opinion, and in particular, responsive to letters from the public.

I have already had an opportunity to interview Mr Howard, and [X]. However, I am also keen to talk to more people in the PMO. If you are amenable, I will provide further details and we can organise a time on Zoom. I have attached the information sheet and consent form that is required as part of the research ethics process.

Thanks in advance
Daniel Casey

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Below is the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, as approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (2021/101 refers).

Figure A-3 Participant Information Sheet

Australian National University

Participant Information Sheet

Researcher:
My name is Daniel Casey and I am a PhD candidate in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University.

Project Title: The opinion-policy linkage in Australia: How letters from the public to the Prime Minister impact policy & leadership rhetoric.

General Outline of the Project:

- **Description and Methodology:** I am conducting research on how letters from members of the public, to former Prime Ministers impacted their leadership, policy and rhetoric. The methodology includes analysis of the letters written to the Prime Minister; and interviews with relevant people.
- **Participants:** I intend to interview up to 15 people, including the Prime Minister, former Prime Ministers, their staff, public servants in the Department of the Prime Minster and Cabinet who work on ministerial correspondence, and staff/former staff of interest groups that might have engaged in mass mail campaigns. Participants will be recruited through direct approaches.
- **Use of Data and Feedback:** The data will be used to produce my PhD thesis, and potentially peer-reviewed published articles and conference presentations. A summary of the interviews will be made available to participants by email.

Participant Involvement:

- **Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal:** Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may decline to take part or to withdraw from the research without providing an explanation at any time until the work is prepared for publication. Within the research, you may also decline to answer any question. If you withdraw, the data you have provided prior to withdrawal will be destroyed and not used.

- **What does participation in the research entail?** You are invited to take part in an interview with me about your role and experiences managing ministerial correspondence. With your consent, I will record the interview so that I can accurately transcribe it. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription, unless you agree to being personally identified in the research.

- **Location and Duration:** Interviews are expected to last about an hour, and will be conducted at a place of your choosing (for example, your office), or via Zoom if that is more convenient for you. I may contact you for another one-hour interview if I would like to follow up on anything from the first interview.

- **Risks:** The research carries little risk, as the questions relate solely to your work, or previous work There is also a risk that despite my efforts to keep your identity confidential, you may be identified through the stories that you tell me, and so you should consider not telling me anything that would incriminate you or cause others to take an unfavourable view of you.

- **Benefits:** It is unlikely that you will personally benefit from participation in this research. However, the work will improve our understanding of the ways in politicians engage with their ministerial correspondence, and may have broad benefits in terms of theorising about political responsiveness.

Australian National University

Confidentiality:

- **Confidentiality:** We will keep your identity confidential as far as allowed by law, unless you elect to be named within the research. Access to the data you provide will be restricted to the research team, and identifying details will be stored separately from the rest of the research data. Published results will only be reported in aggregate (unless you elect to be named within the research), and you will not be identifiable within published outputs unless you have elected otherwise

Privacy Notice:

In collecting your personal information within this research, the ANU must comply with the Privacy Act 1988. The ANU Privacy Policy is available at http://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP010007 and it contains information about how a person can:

- Access or seek correction to their personal information;
- Complain about a breach of an Australian Privacy Principle by ANU, and how ANU will handle the complaint.

Data Storage:

- **Where:** Data will be securely stored on password-protected computers in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University. Physical records will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.

- **How long:** All research data will be retained and securely stored for at least five years following publications arising from the research.

- **Handling of Data following the required storage period:** After the storage period, all identifying details will be removed from the data and the non-identified data will be archived at the Australian Data Archive (www.ada.edu.au) for use in later research, including potentially by other researchers. If you have consented for your name to be used in the research, the identifiable data will be archived.

Queries and Concerns:

- **Contact Details for More Information:** Any requests for information or queries regarding the study participants should be directed to daniel.casey@anu.edu.au (02 6125-5425) or my supervisor Professor Ian McAllister (ian.mcallister@anu.edu.au, 02 6125-5553).

Ethics Committee Clearance:

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2021/101). If you have any concerns or complaints about how this research has been conducted, please contact:

Ethics Manager
The ANU Human Research Ethics Committee
The Australian National University
Telephone: +61 2 6125 3427
Email: human.ethics.officer@anu.edu.au

Figure A-4 Participant Consent Form

Australian National University

WRITTEN CONSENT for Participants

The opinion-policy linkage in Australia:

How letters from the public to the Prime Minister impact policy & leadership rhetoric.

I have read and understood the Information Sheet you have given me about the research project, and I have had any questions and concerns about the project (listed here _____) addressed to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the project. YES ☐ NO ☐

I agree to this interview being audio-recorded YES ☐ NO ☐

I agree to be identified in the following way within research outputs:

Full name YES ☐ NO ☐

Pseudonym YES ☐ NO ☐

Category (Minister/Former Minister; Political Advisor;

Public Servant; Interest Group staff) YES ☐ NO ☐

No attribution YES ☐ NO ☐

Signature: .....

Date: .....

The Australian National University | Canberra ACT 2601 Australia | CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

Sample Interview Questions

Below is the list of questions that I used to guide the conversations.

- Q: What was your role in the Howard PMO?
- Q: What are the ways you, and the Howard PMO listened to the public?
    - What channels are more useful than others? In what circumstances
    - In what policy areas is public opinion more important than others?
    - Probe for differences over time
- Q: Specifically on correspondence, I understand that PM&C provided fortnightly briefs to you on the volume and subject of correspondence. How did you engage with this? Why was this important?
    - Probes on process
        - How did he shape the process? What did you do when you were not PM, without the public service to support you?
        - What did PM do, vs staff
        - How much original correspondence did you see?
        - What type of correspondence?
    - Seem to have stopped in 2001. Why?
    - What conversations did you have with the PM about these briefs, or corro in general?
    - When would the PM see individual pieces of corro?
- Q: Were letters useful in thinking about public opinion, your policy agenda and political messaging? Did you seek to respond to trends or hot topics in your speeches/interviews?
        - Policy? Speeches? Dorothy dixers?
        - Examples of where it did impact? Examples where you made an active decision counter to the mincorro? Why?
        - When did it matter more/less?
- Q: Would you amend your policy agenda, or messaging to respond to trends or hot topics? Did you seek to address these issues/trends through speeches/interviews?
        - Is the mincorro representative of the whole constituency?
        - Is the mincorro you see representative of all that arrives?
        - How well informed / reasonable are the letters?
        - What issues or topics triggered large amounts of correspondence?
        - 'Pro-formas' versus actual letters
        - How many letters would you need to get to make it 'significant'
- Q: What factors did you take into account when thinking about how to respond to public opinion?
    - Were you seeking to respond to the majority, or a key minority? Can you think of some examples?
    - Did you feel like you needed to respond more often when polls were bad? Or nearer an election?
        - Where the demand is coming from on the political spectrum (i.e. responding to the median voter, or elsewhere?)
        - Do you think you received more letters from people on the right/centre-right, or from the left?
            - Did you find the left-wing ones at all useful? if so, why?
            - What about letters from the further-right?

Interview Methods Table

Table A-4 Interview methods table

Interviewee	Status	Source	Saturation	Format	Length
Category 1 – Prime Minister			Yes		
The Hon. John Howard	Via Zoom 20 Aug 2021	Original sample frame		Semi-structured	30 min
Category 2 – Political staff in the PMO			Yes		
Grahame Morris	In person 1 Feb 2022	Original sample frame		Semi-structured	25 min
Tony Nutt	In person 11 Nov 2022	Original sample frame and snowball from Grahame Morris		Semi-structured	45 min
Arthur Sinodinos	Via Zoom 22 Nov 2022	Original sample frame		Semi-structured	30 min
Bronwyn Morris	In person 4 Nov 2022	Snowball from Grahame Morris		Semi-structured	40 min
Category 3 – Public service staff in the PMO			Yes		
Stephen Brady	In person 25 Feb 2022	Original sample frame		Semi-structured	1hr 5min
Frank Leverett	In person 11 April 2022	Snowball from Stephen Brady		Semi-structured	1hr
Public servant	Declined	Snowball from Frank Leverett			
Malcolm Hazell	In person 17 Nov 2022	Original sample frame		Semi-structured	1hr 10min
Category 4 – PM&C staff			No		
Public Servant 1	Via Zoom 2 June 2023	Original sample frame, recruited via personal connection.		Semi-structured	1hr
Public Servant	No response	Social media			
Public Servant	No response	Social media			
Public Servant	Declined	Social media			
Category 5 – other			No		
Former Minister	No response	Personal connection.			

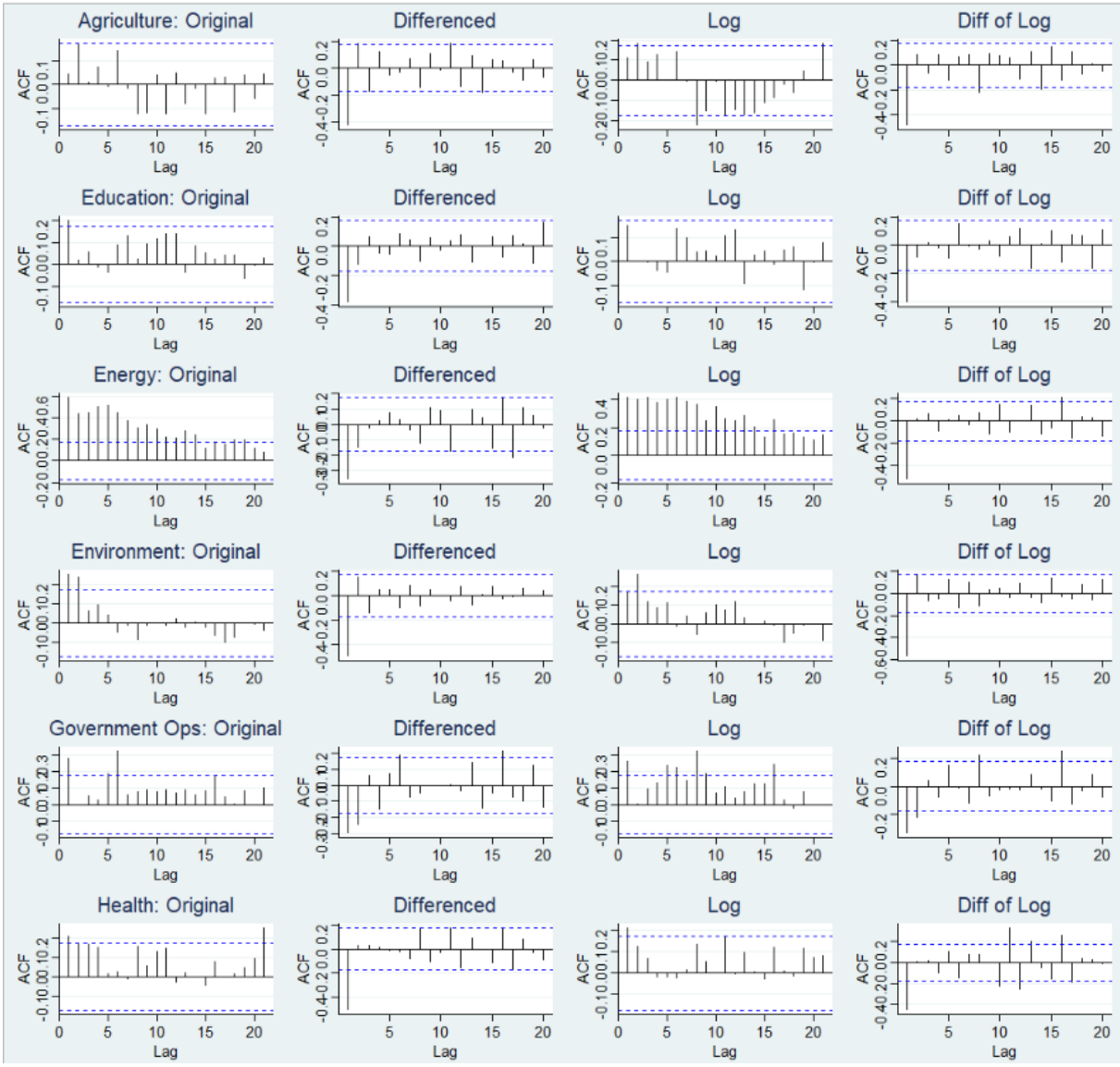
Source: Author, adapted from Bleich and Pekkanen (2013)

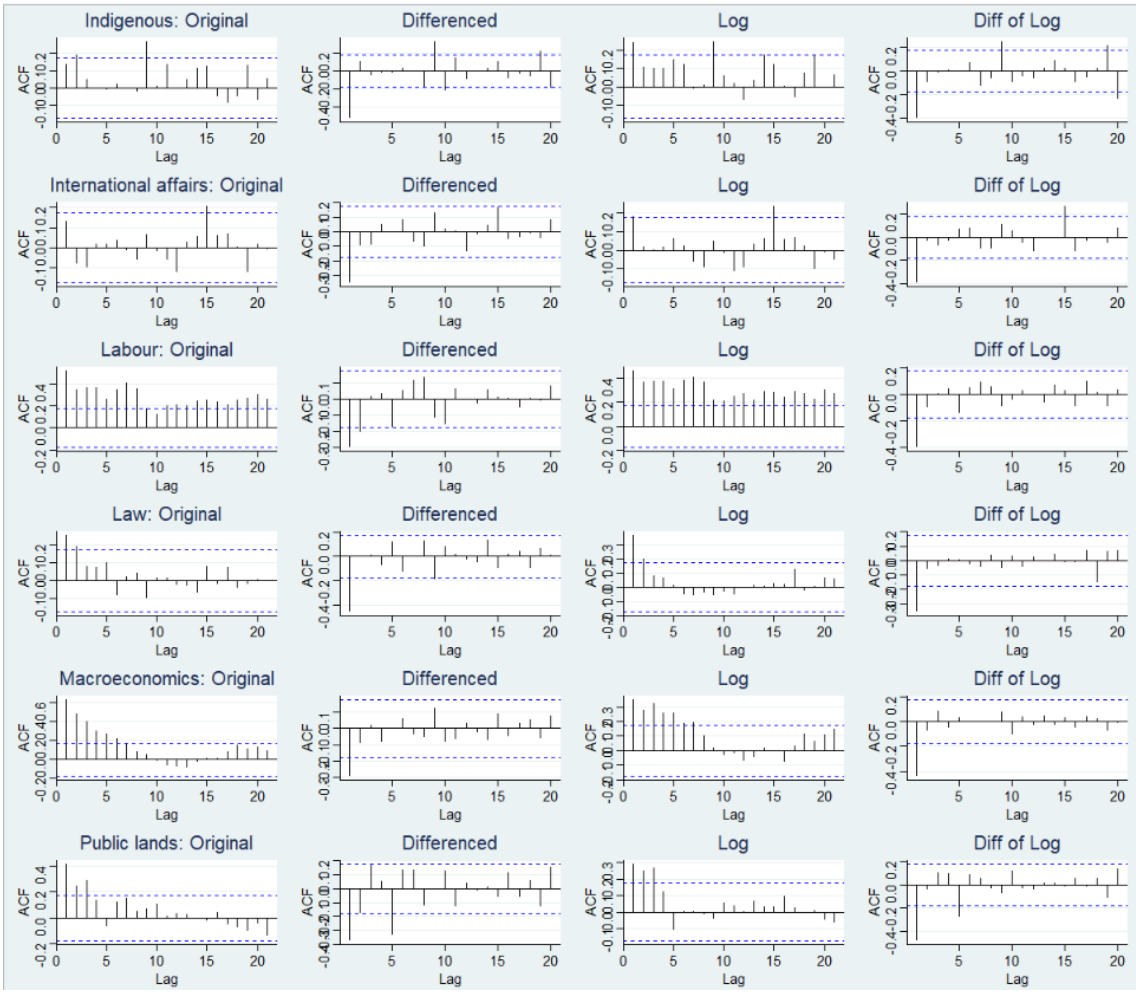
Appendix B Appendix to Chapter 7 (Responsiveness)

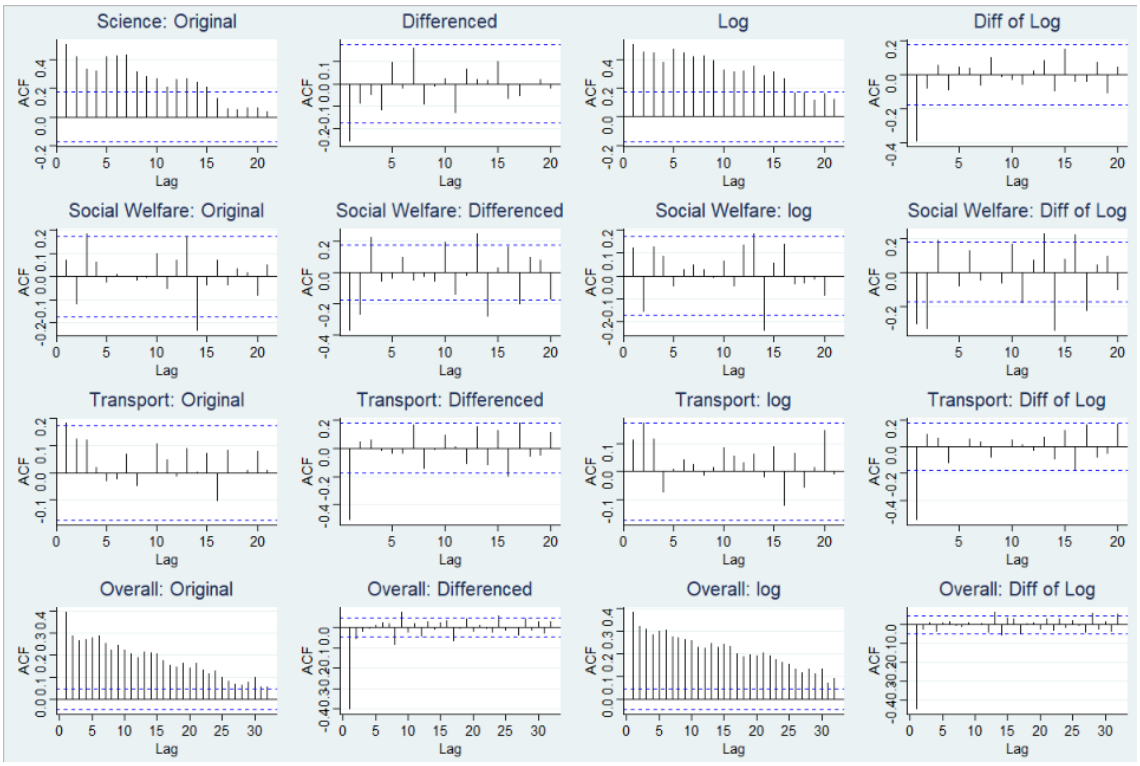
Autocorrelation

In Chapter 7, I explain that because the data (both the speeches and letters) are a time series, I check whether the data is autocorrelated, and explain that the model uses the difference of the log of speech proportions. The ACF plots (Figure B-1) of the original speech proportions of each topic (first column), followed by the difference (second column), the log (third column) and finally the difference of the log (fourth column).

Figure B-1 Autocorrelation plots — Mr Howard's speeches — by topic



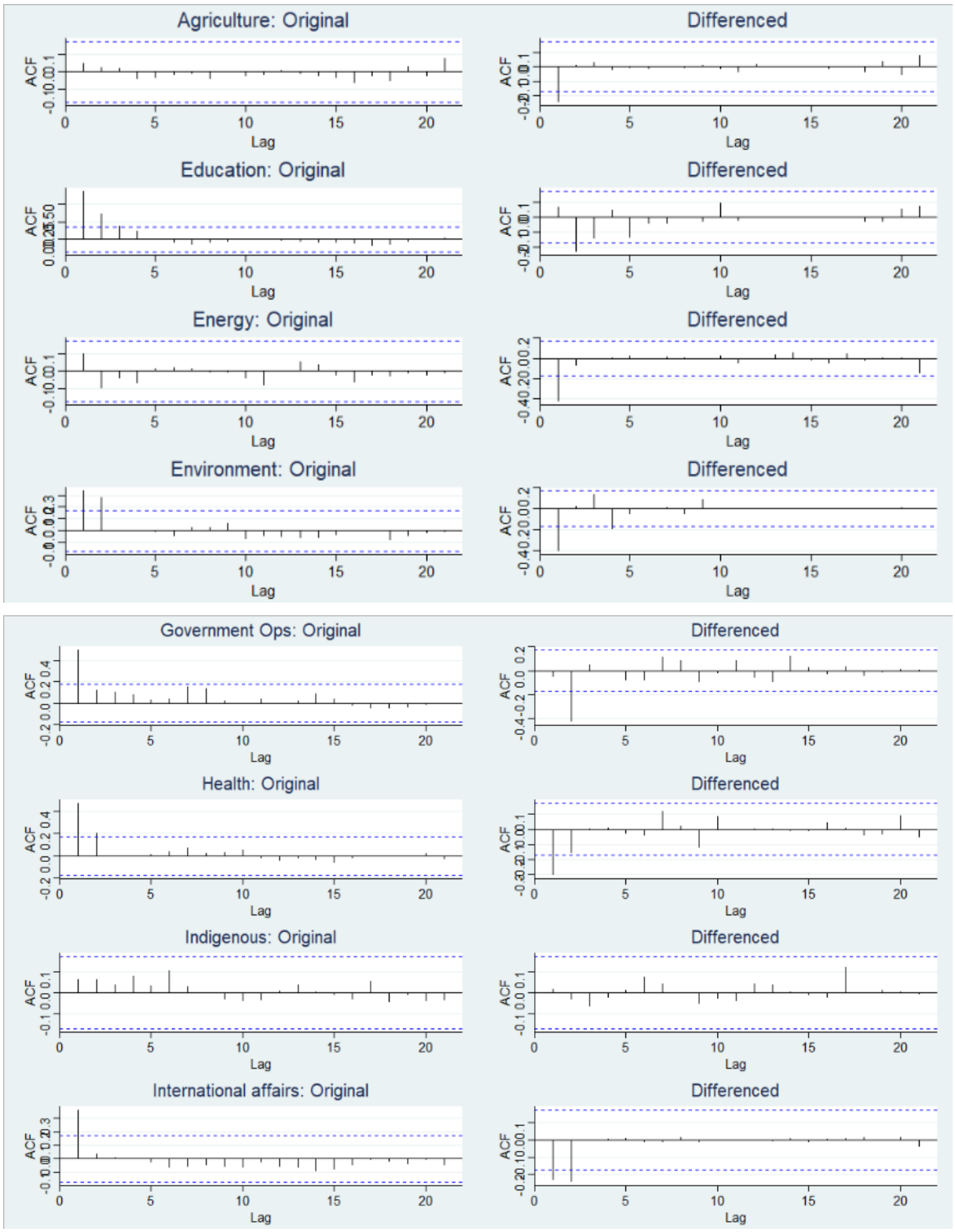


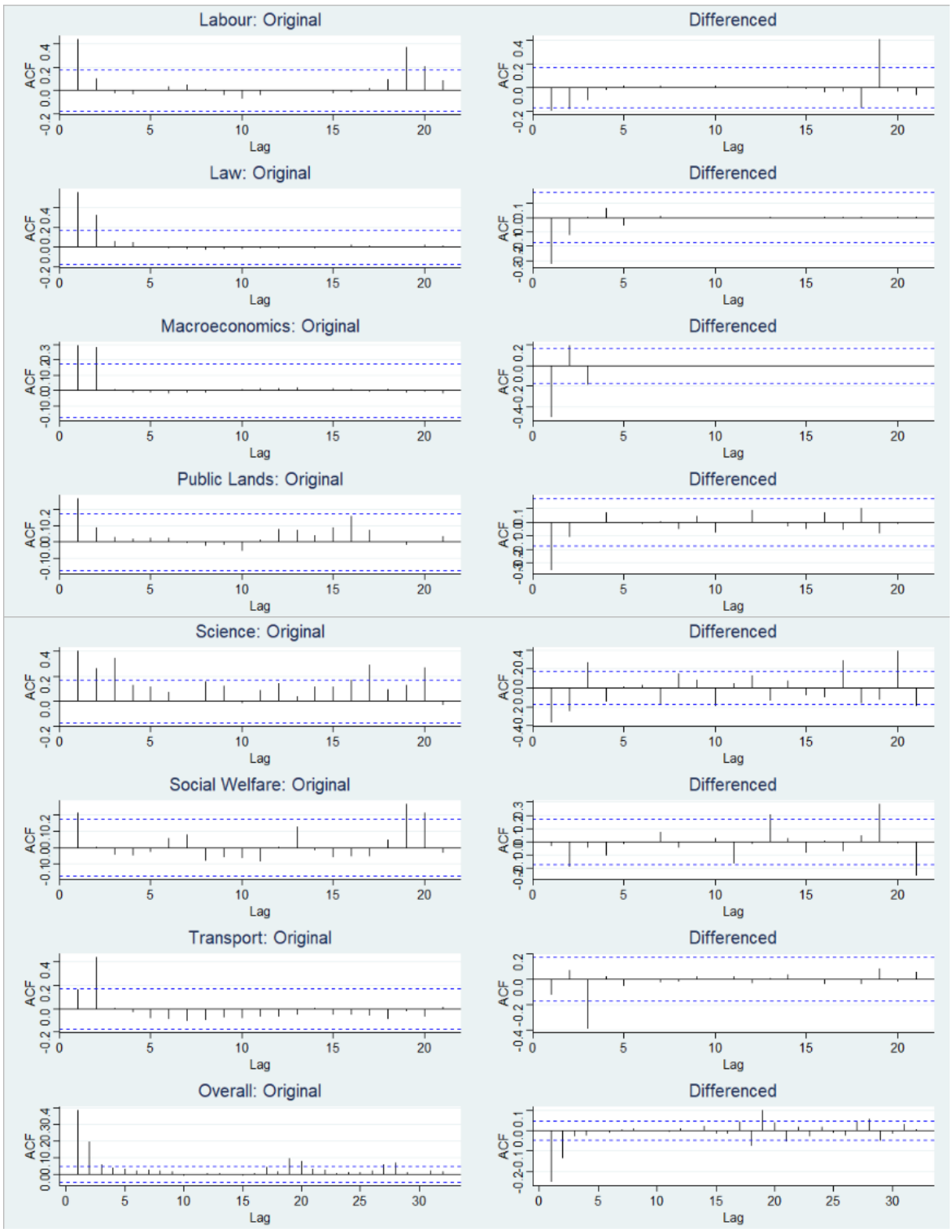


Source: Sherratt (2019) and Trove.

The letters are also a time series, the autocorrelation is not as significant. The ACF plots for the letters (Figure B-2) show that both the original and the differenced series are suitable.

Figure B-2 Autocorrelation plots – letters — by topic

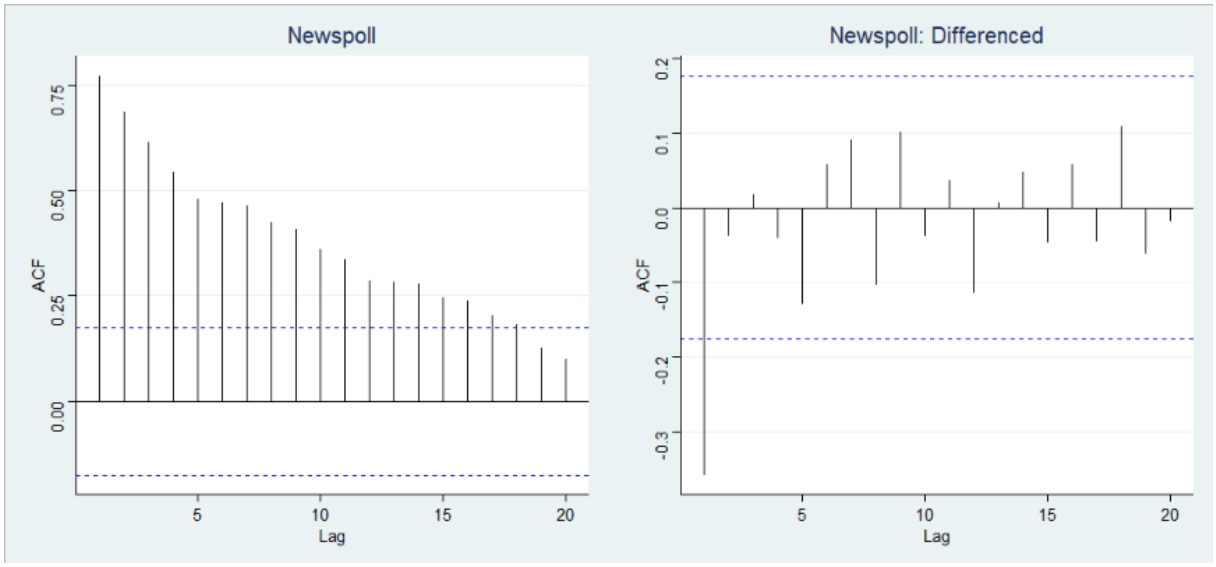




Source: Items from NAA series M4326 and M4261

Finally, the Newspoll series of public opinion polls, also displays autocorrelation. Figure B-3 shows the ACF plots for Newspoll, which confirms that the differenced series is appropriate for use.

Figure B-3 Autocorrelation plots — Newspoll

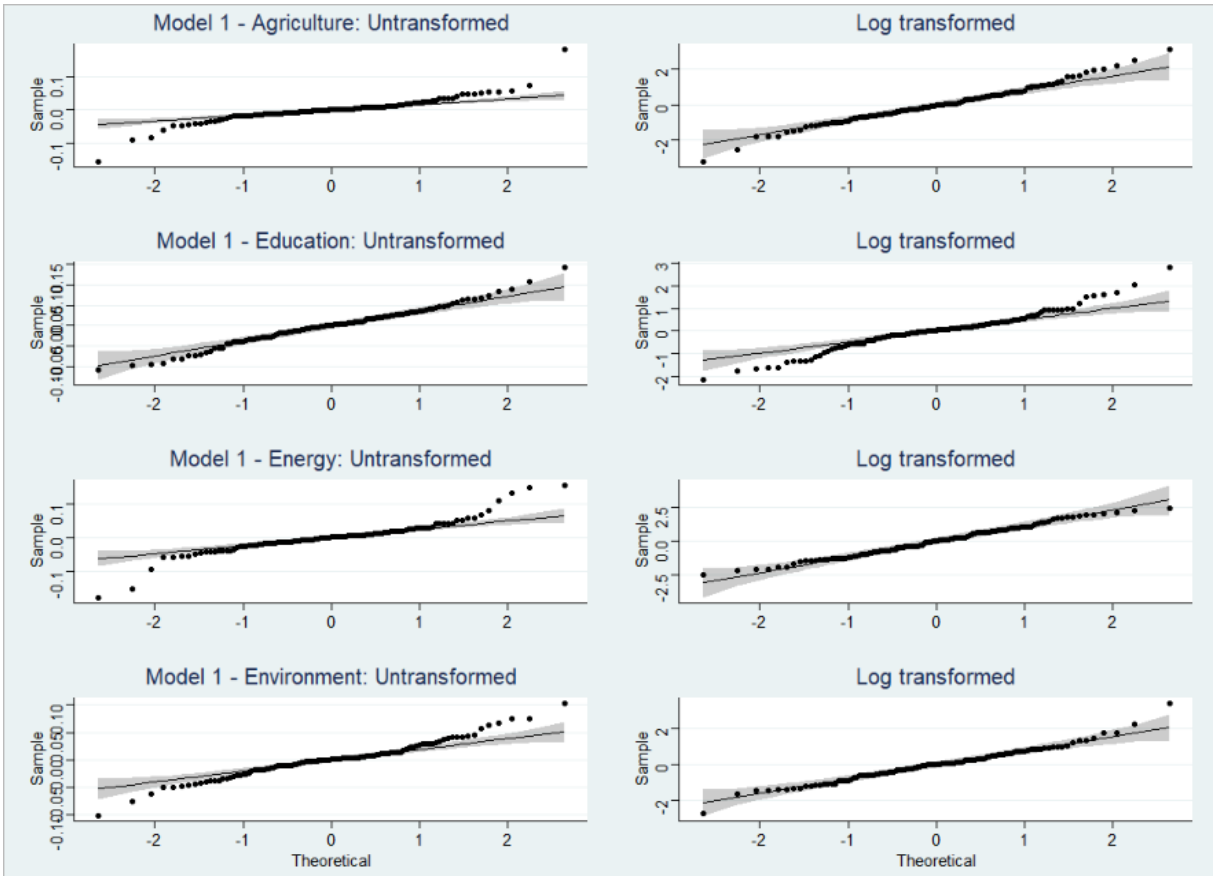


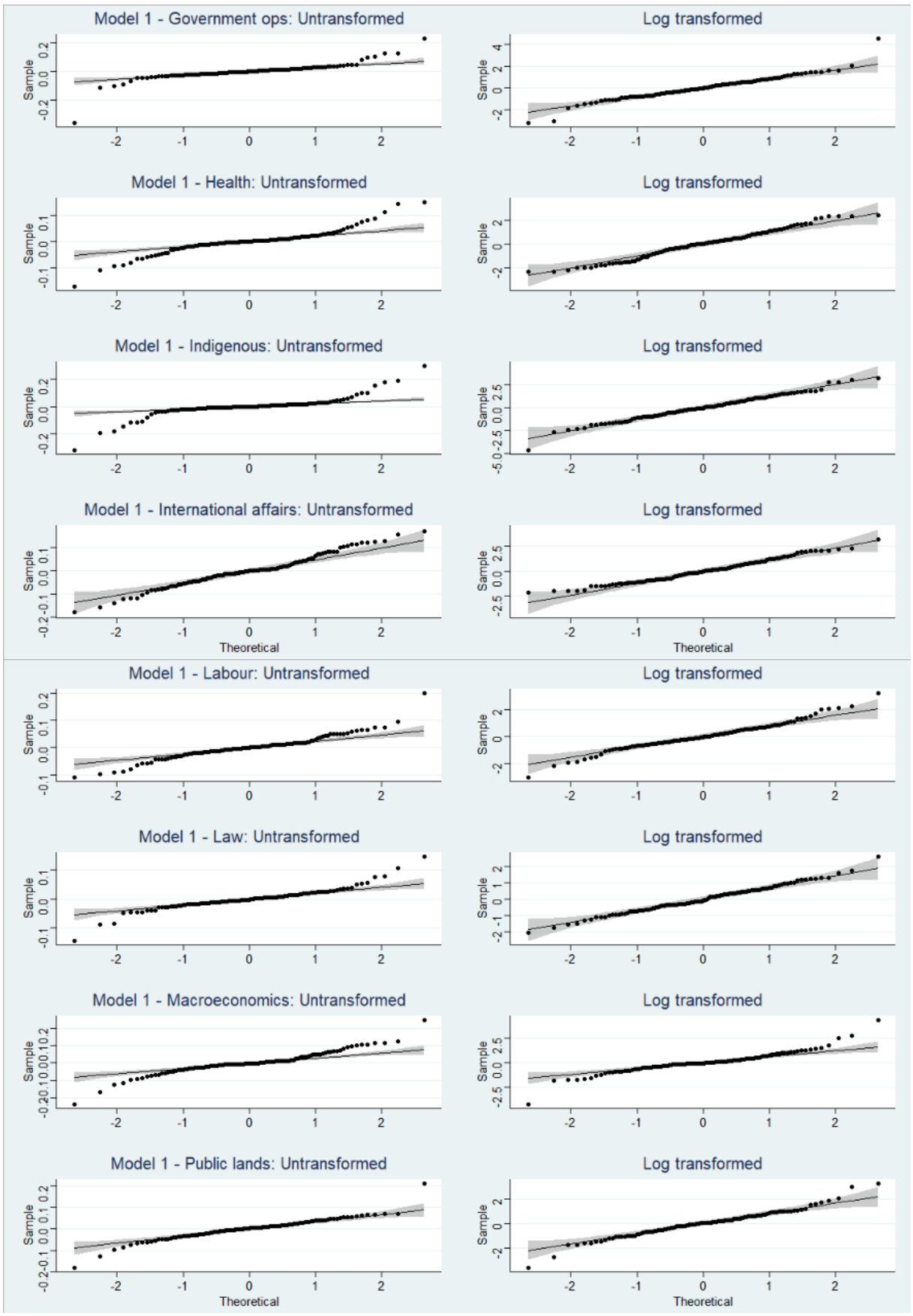
Source: Newspoll.

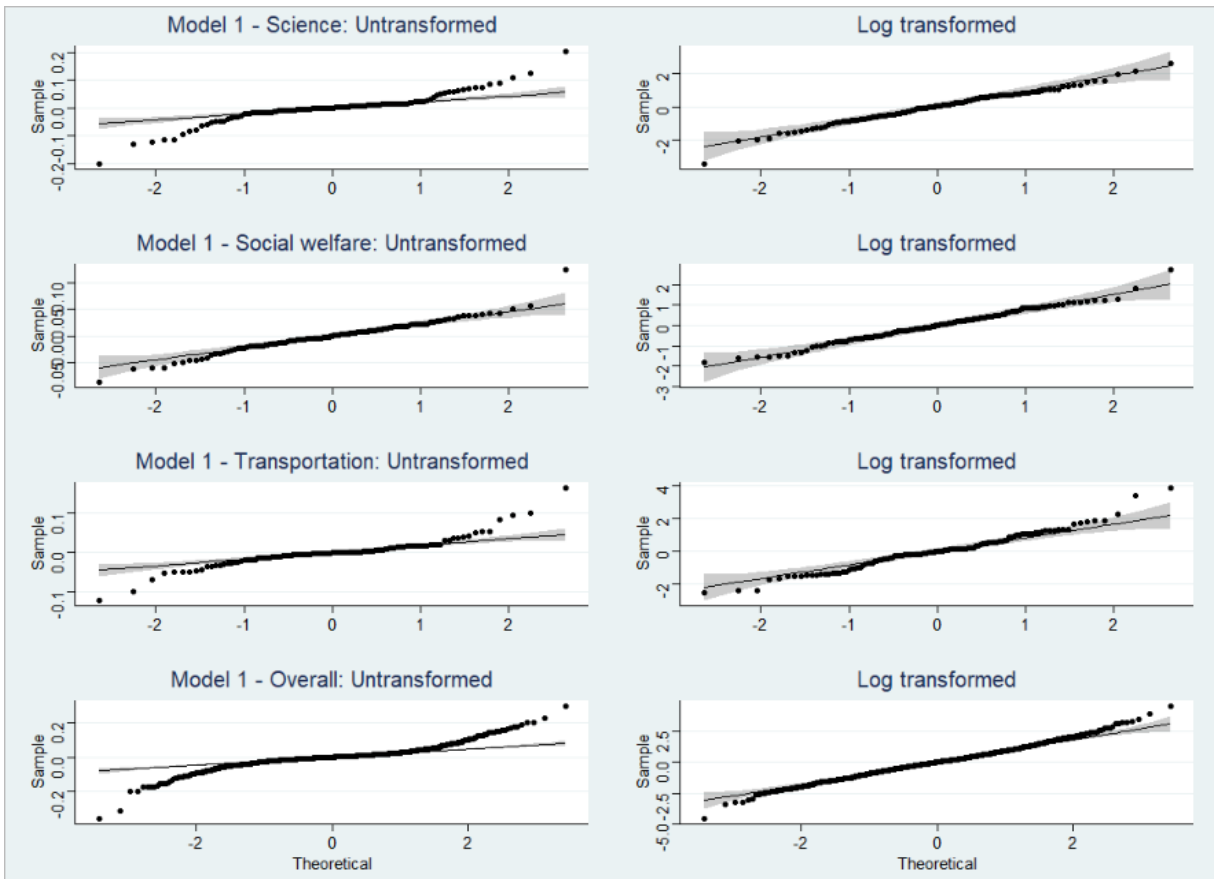
Normality of residuals

In Chapter 7, I explain that OLS requires that the residuals be normally distributed. To determine this, I run Q-Q plots for the residuals of model 1, first with an untransformed dependent variable (change in the proportion of Mr Howard's speech by topic), in the left-hand column, then second the log-transformed dependent variable. In relation to model 1, as can be seen in Figure B-4, for almost all topics, the residuals are much closer to normal, with a lot more observations within the confidence intervals.

Figure B-4 Residual Q-Q plots of responsiveness model 1 — all topics



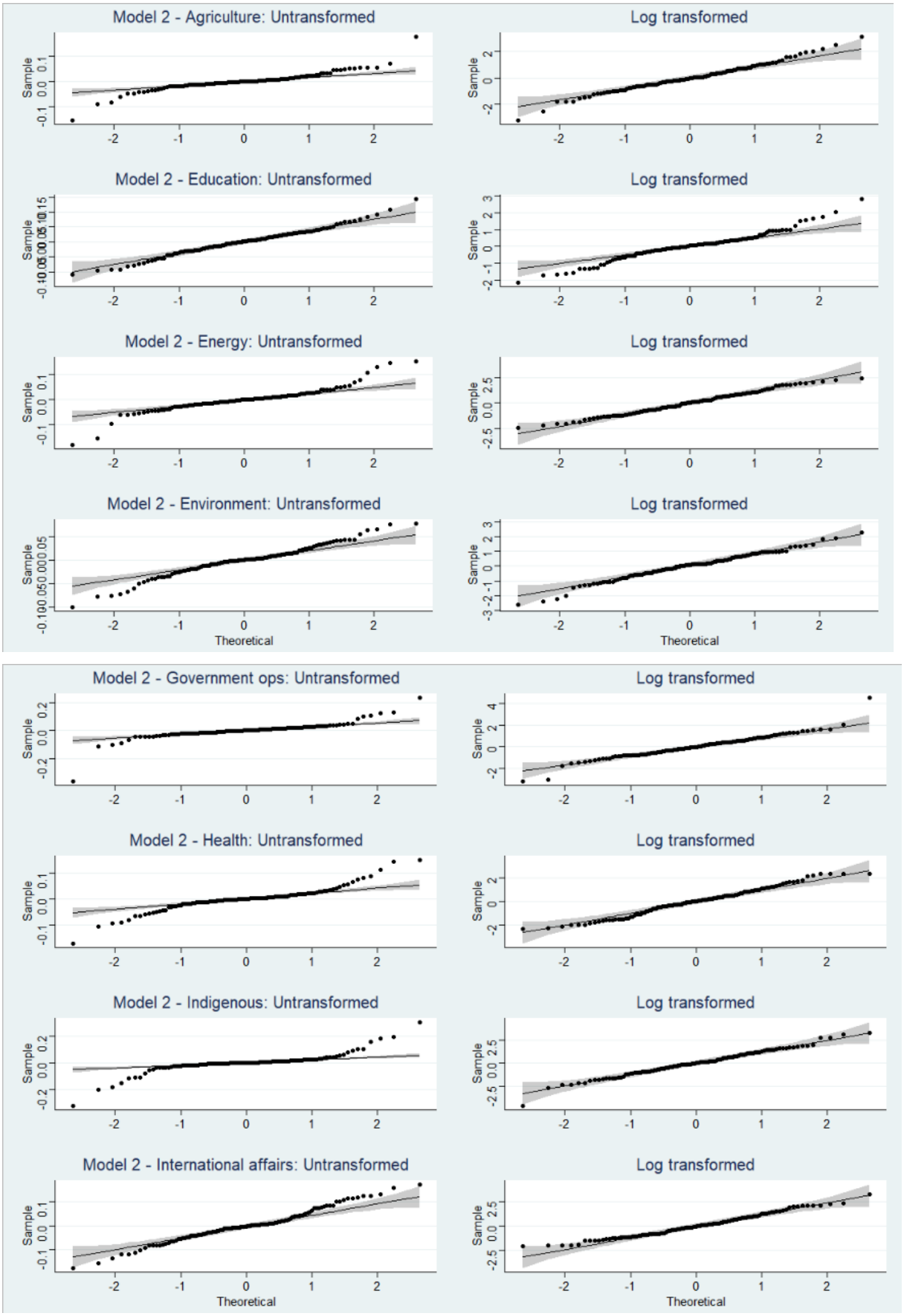

Model 1 - Government ops: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - Health: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - Indigenous: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - International affairs: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - Labour: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - Law: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - Macroeconomics: Untransformed
Log transformed
Model 1 - Public lands: Untransformed
Log transformed
Sample
Theoretical

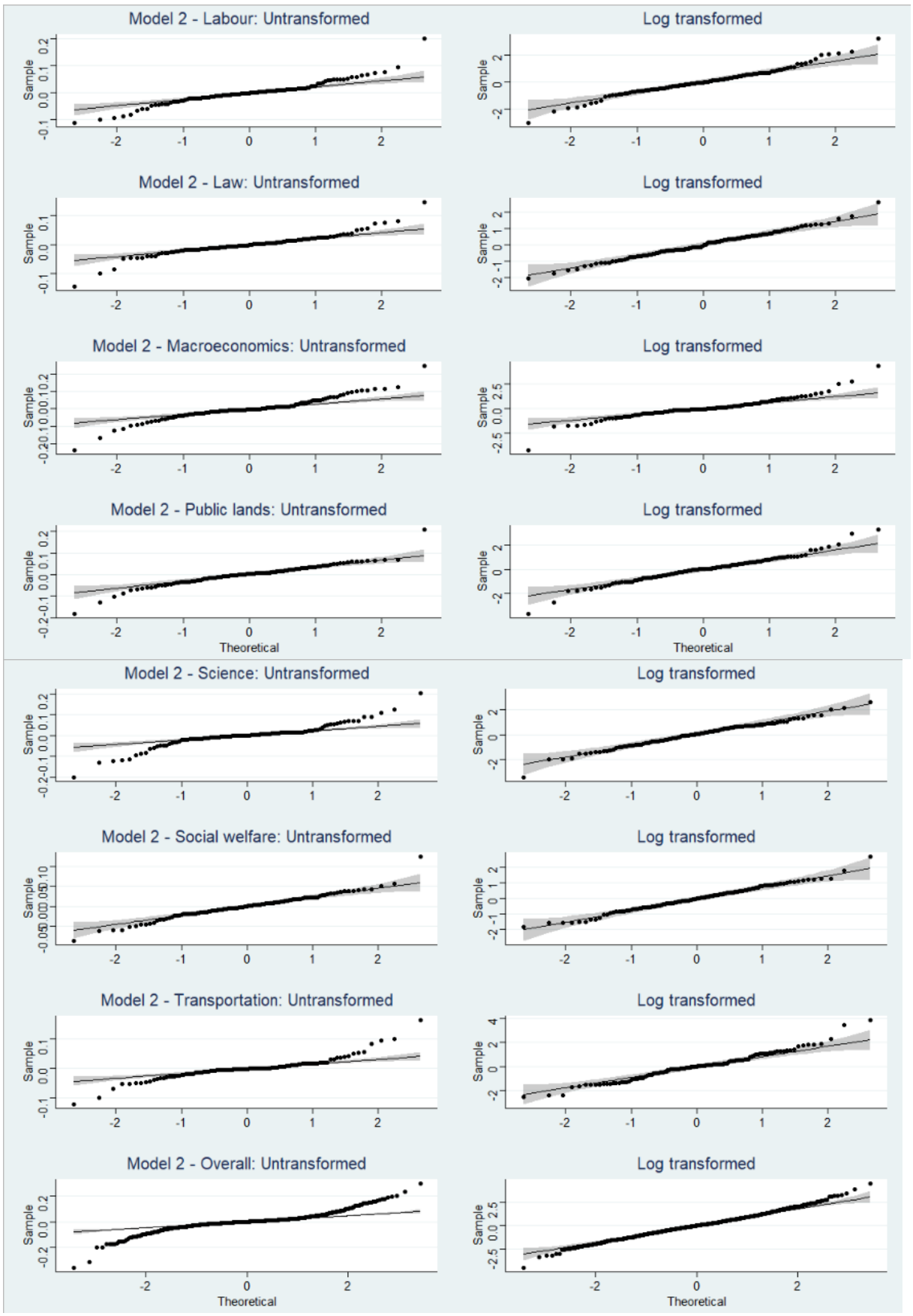


Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The same analysis is then undertaken for model 2 (Figure B-5), which similarly shows that the log-transformation of the dependent variable (right-hand column) helps ensure that the residuals are much closer to normally distributed than the untransformed dependent variable (left-hand column).

Figure B-5 Residual Q-Q plots for responsiveness model 2 — all topics



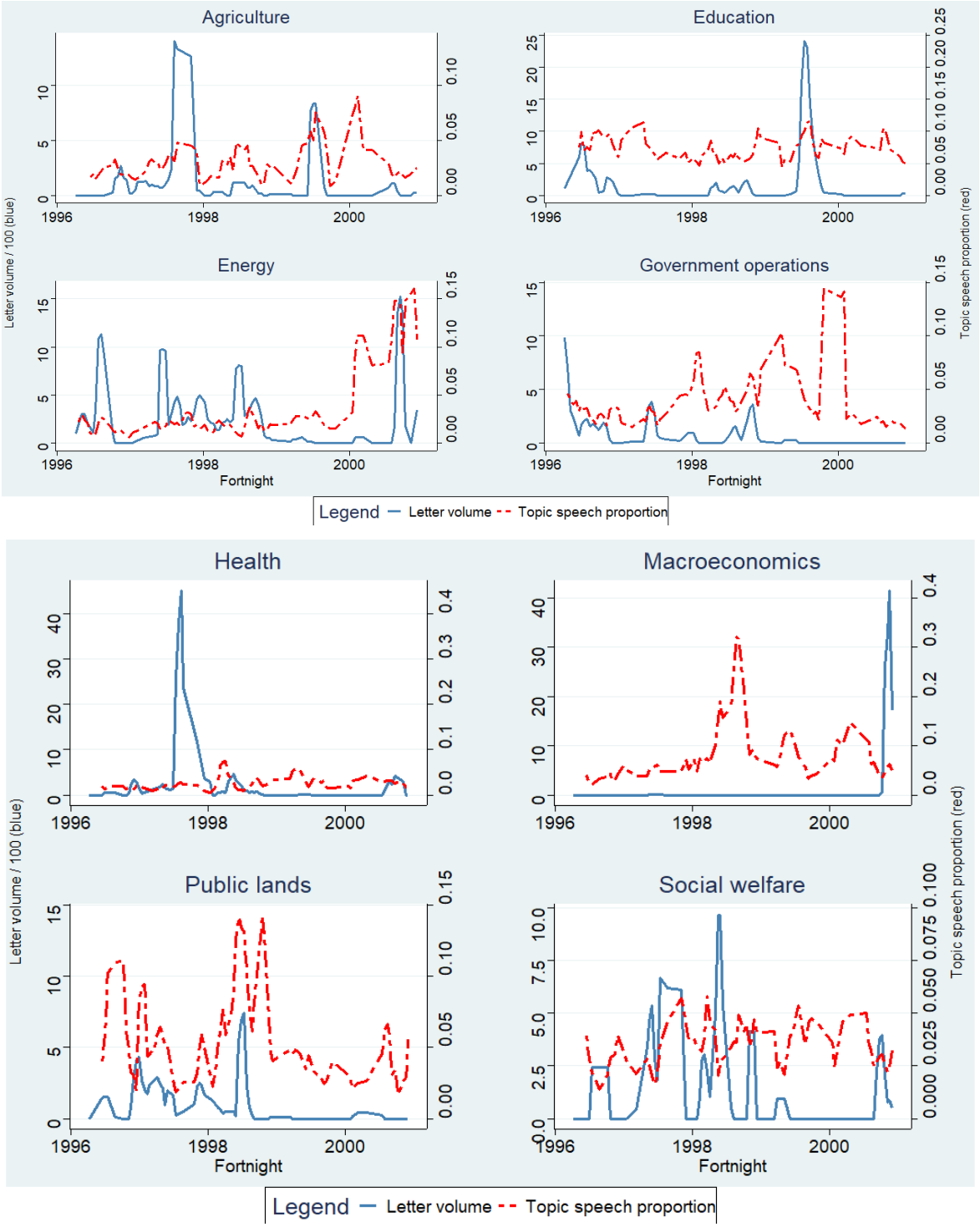


Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Comparing letter volume and speech proportion over time

In Chapter 7, I provide graphs comparing letter volume and speech proportion over time for seven topics. The remaining topics are presented here.

Figure B-6 Comparing letter volume and speech proportion over time — all topics



Note: Data are rolling 3-fortnightly averages. Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Regression tables — main models

In section 7.5 I include a graph of the results of model 1. This table is the complete regression results for all topics.

Table B-1 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — all topics (model 1)

Topic	Intercept Confidence interval p-value	Total mail / 100 Confidence interval p-value	Observations	R^2 / Adjusted R^2
Agriculture	0.04 -0.18 – 0.25 0.74	0.02 -0.02 – 0.07 0.28	79	0.015 / 0.002
Education	0.02 -0.15 – 0.19 0.78	0 -0.03 – 0.03 0.76	79	0.001 / -0.012
Energy	-0.02 -0.28 – 0.23 0.85	0 -0.04 – 0.04 0.99	87	0.000 / -0.012
Environment	0.16 -0.06 – 0.38 0.16	-0.04 -0.06 – -0.01 **0.004**	74	0.112 / 0.100
Government operations	0.04 -0.18 – 0.26 0.71	-0.03 -0.11 – 0.06 0.51	80	0.006 / -0.007
Health	-0.02 -0.27 – 0.24 0.90	-0.01 -0.03 – 0.02 0.61	78	0.004 / -0.010
Indigenous	-0.05 -0.35 – 0.25 0.73	-0.03 -0.11 – 0.04 0.38	89	0.009 / -0.002
International affairs	-0.02 -0.27 – 0.23 0.90	-0.01 -0.02 – 0.01 0.58	94	0.003 / -0.007
Labour and employment	-0.04 -0.23 – 0.15 0.66	0.01 -0.01 – 0.02 0.42	86	0.008 / -0.004
Law	0.04 -0.15 – 0.22 0.71	0 -0.02 – 0.02 0.68	76	0.002 / -0.011
Macroeconomics	-0.03 -0.26 – 0.20 0.80	0 -0.03 – 0.02 0.75	69	0.002 / -0.013

Public lands	-0.1 -0.35 – 0.15 0.43	0.01 -0.10 – 0.11 0.85	82	0.000 / -0.012
Science	-0.02 -0.22 – 0.18 0.88	0 -0.03 – 0.02 0.76	89	0.001 / -0.010
Social welfare	0.03 -0.16 – 0.22 0.74	0.01 -0.04 – 0.06 0.68	72	0.002 / -0.012
Transportation	0.06 -0.17 – 0.28 0.62	-0.02 -0.04 – 0.01 0.21	107	0.015 / 0.006
Overall	0.01 -0.05 – 0.07 0.82	-0.01 -0.01 – 0.00 0.08	1175	0.003 / 0.002

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

In section 7.5 I include a graph of the results of model 2. This table is the complete regression results for all topics.

Table B-2 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — all topics (model 2)

Topic	Intercept Confidence interval p-value	Total mail / 100 Confidence interval p-value	Observations	R^2 / Adjusted R^2
Agriculture	0.06 -0.15 – 0.27 0.60	0.02 -0.02 – 0.06 0.45	79	0.007 / -0.005
Education	0.01 -0.15 – 0.17 0.89	0.02 -0.02 – 0.06 0.41	79	0.009 / -0.004
Energy	-0.03 -0.25 – 0.20 0.83	0 -0.03 – 0.03 0.90	87	0.000 / -0.012
Environment	0.07 -0.13 – 0.28 0.48	-0.03 -0.06 – -0.01 **0.002**	74	0.121 / 0.109
Government operations	0.01 -0.19 – 0.21 0.92	0.01 -0.08 – 0.09 0.87	80	0.000 / -0.012
Health	-0.03 -0.27 – 0.21	0 -0.03 – 0.02	78	0.001 / -0.012

	0.80	0.77		
Indigenous	-0.11 -0.37 – 0.16 0.42	-0.03 -0.11 – 0.05 0.48	89	0.006 / -0.006
International affairs	-0.04 -0.27 – 0.19 0.71	0 -0.02 – 0.02 0.95	94	0.000 / -0.011
Labour and employment	-0.02 -0.20 – 0.16 0.82	0.01 -0.01 – 0.02 0.40	86	0.008 / -0.003
Law	0.03 -0.15 – 0.21 0.73	-0.01 -0.03 – 0.01 0.28	76	0.016 / 0.002
Macroeconomics	-0.03 -0.26 – 0.19 0.76	0 -0.02 – 0.02 0.94	69	0.000 / -0.015
Public lands	-0.09 -0.32 – 0.13 0.43	-0.04 -0.12 – 0.04 0.34	82	0.011 / -0.001
Science	-0.03 -0.21 – 0.15 0.75	0.01 -0.02 – 0.03 0.65	89	0.002 / -0.009
Social welfare	0.05 -0.13 – 0.23 0.57	0 -0.05 – 0.04 0.85	72	0.001 / -0.014
Transportation	-0.01 -0.21 – 0.19 0.92	0 -0.03 – 0.02 0.80	107	0.001 / -0.009
Overall	-0.01 -0.06 – 0.05 0.75	0 -0.01 – 0.00 0.36	1175	0.001 / -0.000

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

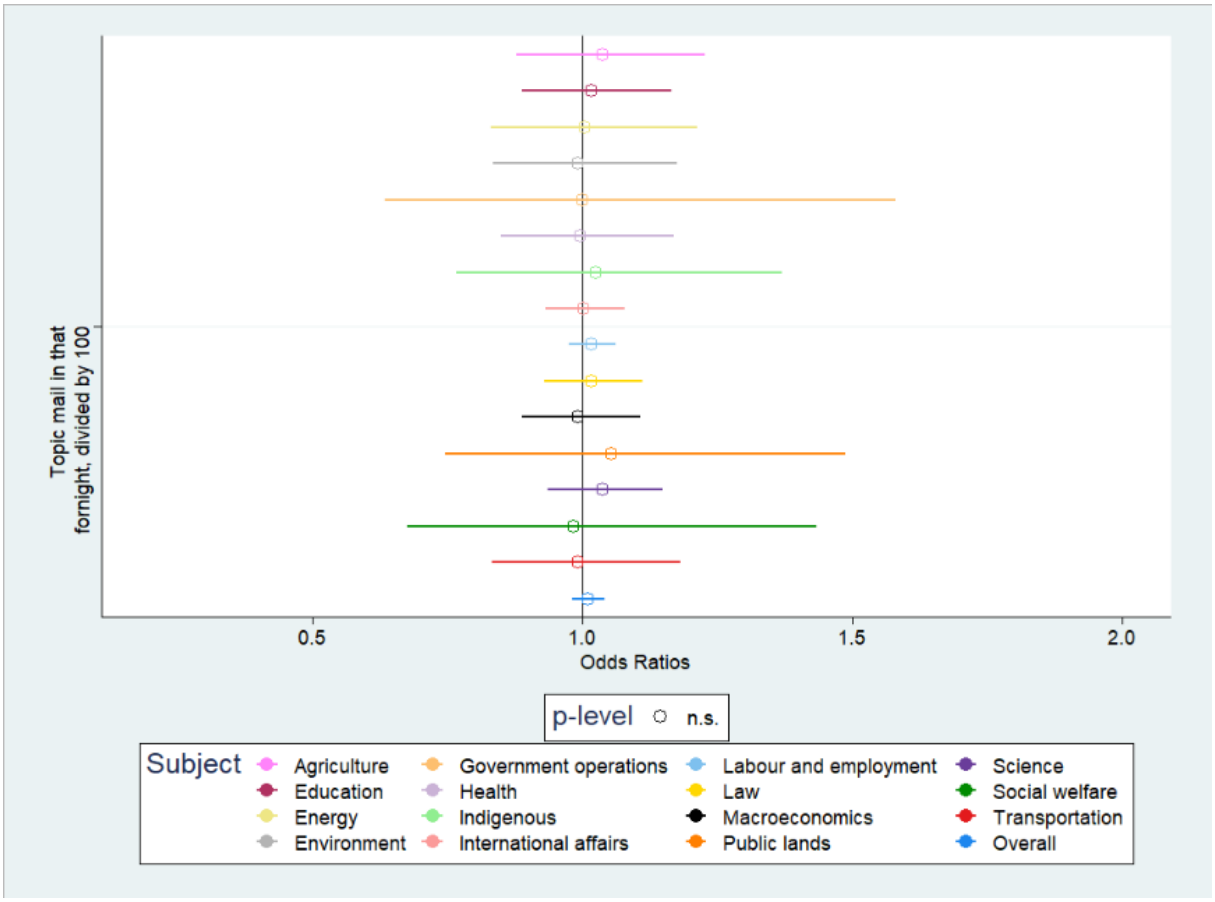
Alternative model specification — logistic regressions

In footnote 66, I say that logistic regression models are also used, using the original, untransformed proportion of Mr Howard's speech per topic. As this model requires the responsive variable to be bounded between 0 and 1, the first-difference transformation cannot be used. Thus, the model is:

$$\text{Logistic model 1: } speech\ proportion = \alpha + \beta(total\ mail/100)_{t-1} + \varepsilon$$

Figure B-7 shows that no topic demonstrated any level of statistical significance.

Figure B-7 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — logistic regression — all topics (model 1)



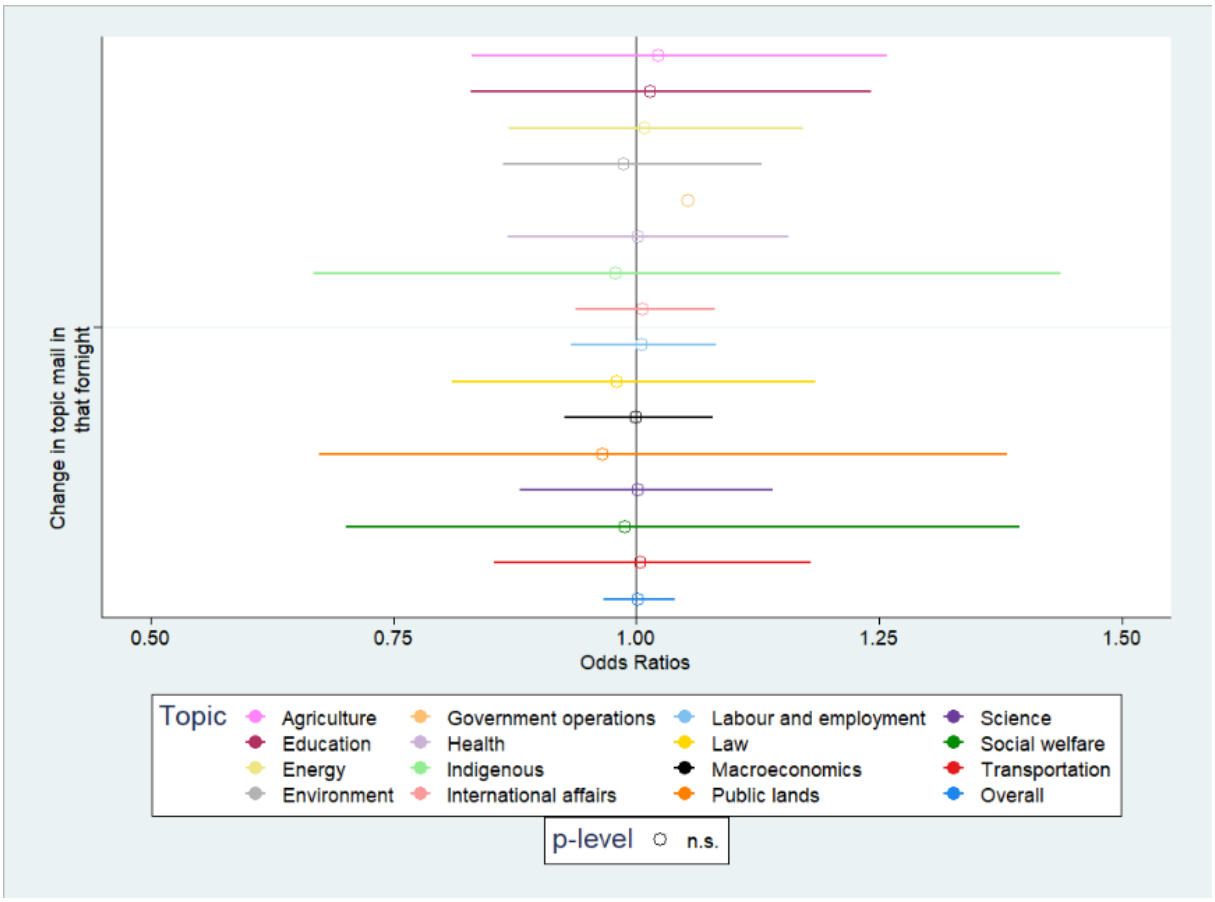
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Adapted for logistic regression, model 2 is:

$$\text{Logisitic model 2: } speech\ proportion = \alpha + \beta\Delta(total\ mail/100) + \varepsilon$$

Figure B-8 shows that no topic displays any level of statistical significance.

Figure B-8 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — logistic regression — all topics (model 2)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Alternative model specification — squared terms and extra fortnight

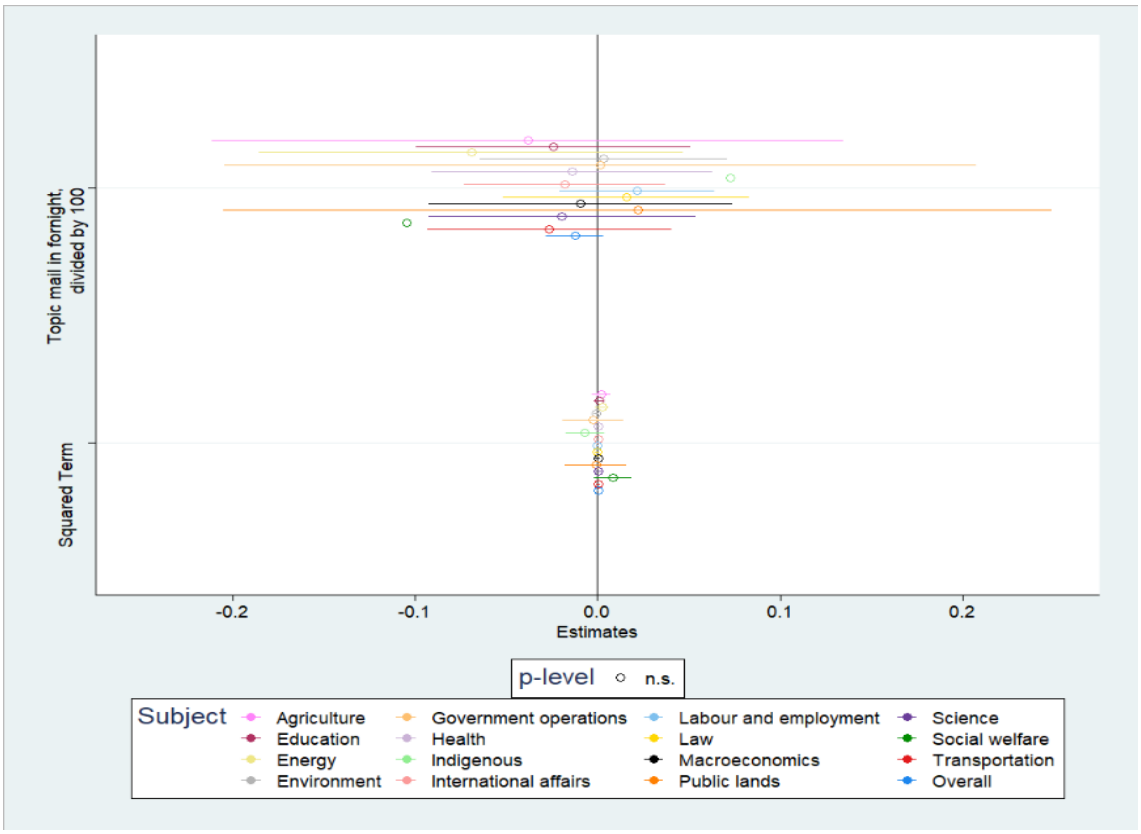
In footnote 66, I say that a range of other model specifications are also used. Using the preferred OLS modelling approach, both models 1 and 2 are also re-specified to also include a squared term, to account for the possibility that Mr Howard was only responsive to very large volumes of mail. The amended models become:

$$\text{Squared model 1: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta_1 (total\ mail/100)_{t-1} + \beta_2 (total\ mail/100)_{t-1}{}^2 + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Squared model 2: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta(total\ mail/100) + \beta_2 \Delta(total\ mail/100)^2 + \varepsilon$$

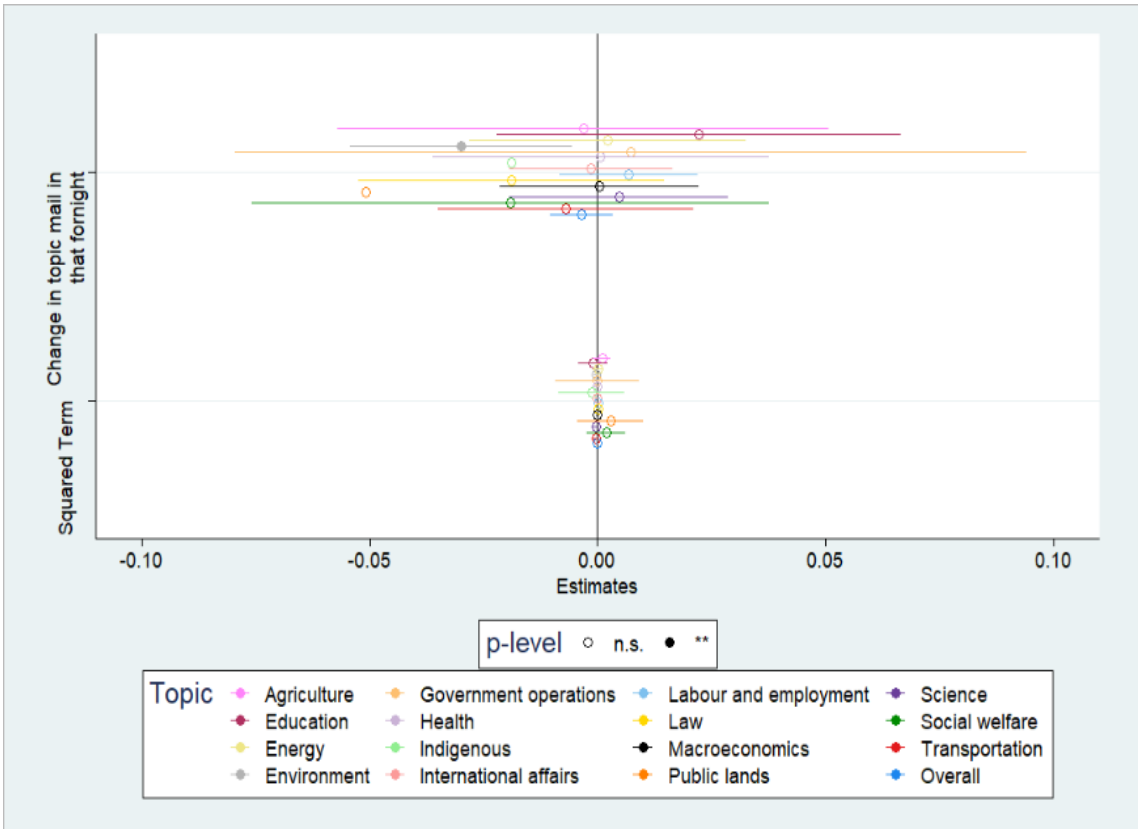
As can be seen in Figure B-9 and Figure B-10, no topic displays any level of statistical significance across both models and both predictors.

Figure B-9 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — squared term — all topics (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Figure B-10 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — squared term — all topics (model 2)



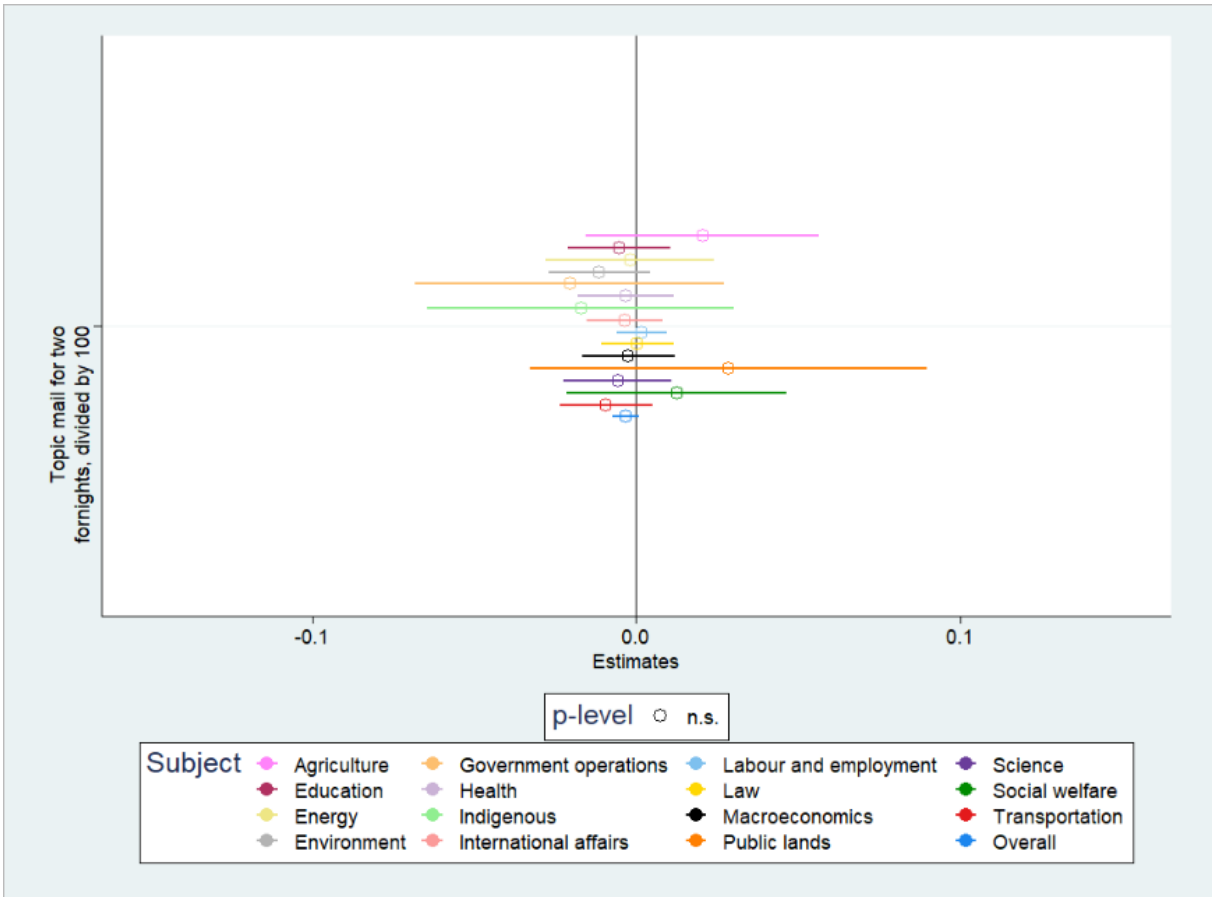
Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Using the preferred OLS modelling approach, both models 1 and 2 are also re-specified to also include an extra fortnight's worth of mail, to account for the possibility that Mr Howard was only responsive after repeated fortnights of large volumes (increases) of mail on a topic. The amended models become:

$$\text{Extra fortnight model 1: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta(total\ mail_{t-1} + total\ mail_{t-2})/100 + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Extra fortnight model 2: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta((total\ mail/100) + \Delta(total\ mail/100)_{t-1}) + \varepsilon$$

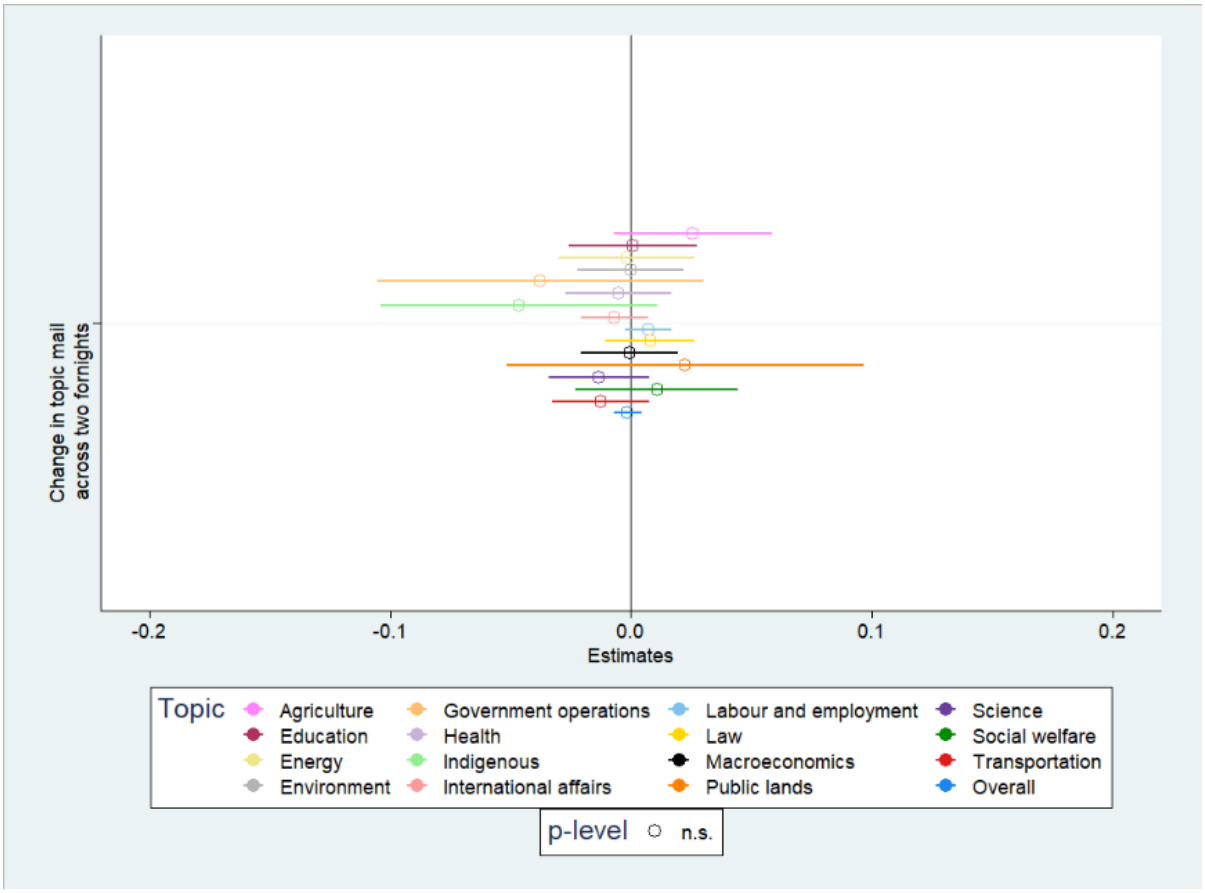
Figure B-11 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — additional fortnight — all topics (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

As can be seen in Figure B-11 and Figure B-12, no topic displays any level of statistical significance across both models and both predictors.

Figure B-12 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — additional fortnight — all topics (model 2)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

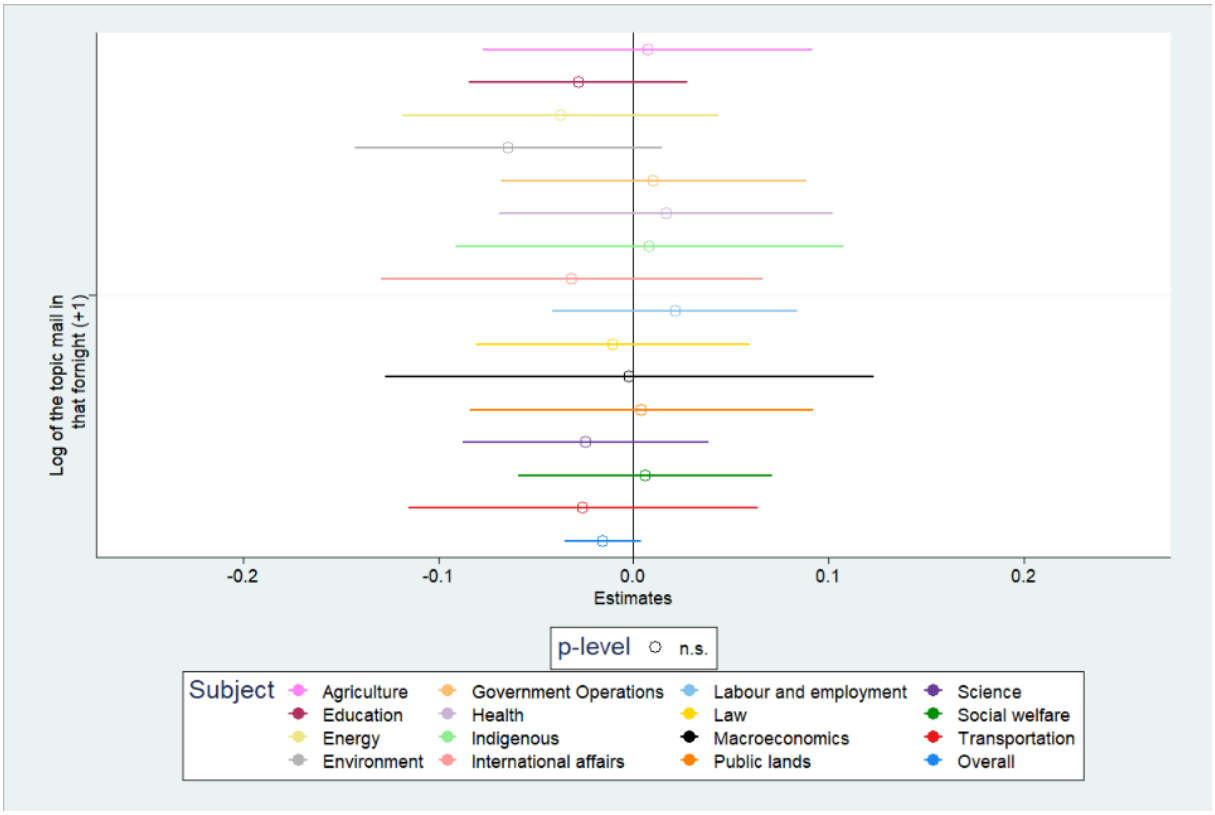
Alternative model specification — log-log transformation

As indicated in footnote 66, the mail volume is heavily skewed, so I also tried a log transformation of the independent variable, as well as the dependent variable. That results in the following model:

$$\text{Model 1 log log transformation: } \Delta \log(speech\ proportion) = \alpha + \beta \log(total\ mail + 1)_{t-1} + \varepsilon$$

Figure B-13 shows that in this model, no topic displays any level of statistical significance. In addition, QQ plots show that the residuals from this model does not perform better than the main model.

Figure B-13 Responsiveness: the effect of letters on Mr Howard's speeches — log-log transformation — all topics (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Appendix C Appendix to Chapter 8 (Elite agenda setting)

Normality of residuals — suitability of OLS

In section 8.1, I indicate that OLS was attempted, but the residuals deviated significantly from normal, and this was not rectified by taking a log transformation of the dependent variable. The models tested here are

$$\text{OLS Model 1: } volume\ of\ letters = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta(speech\ proportion)_{t-1} + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{OLS Model 2: } volume\ of\ letters = \alpha + \beta_1((speech\ proprtion)_{t-1} + (speech\ proprtion)_{t-2}) + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \varepsilon$$

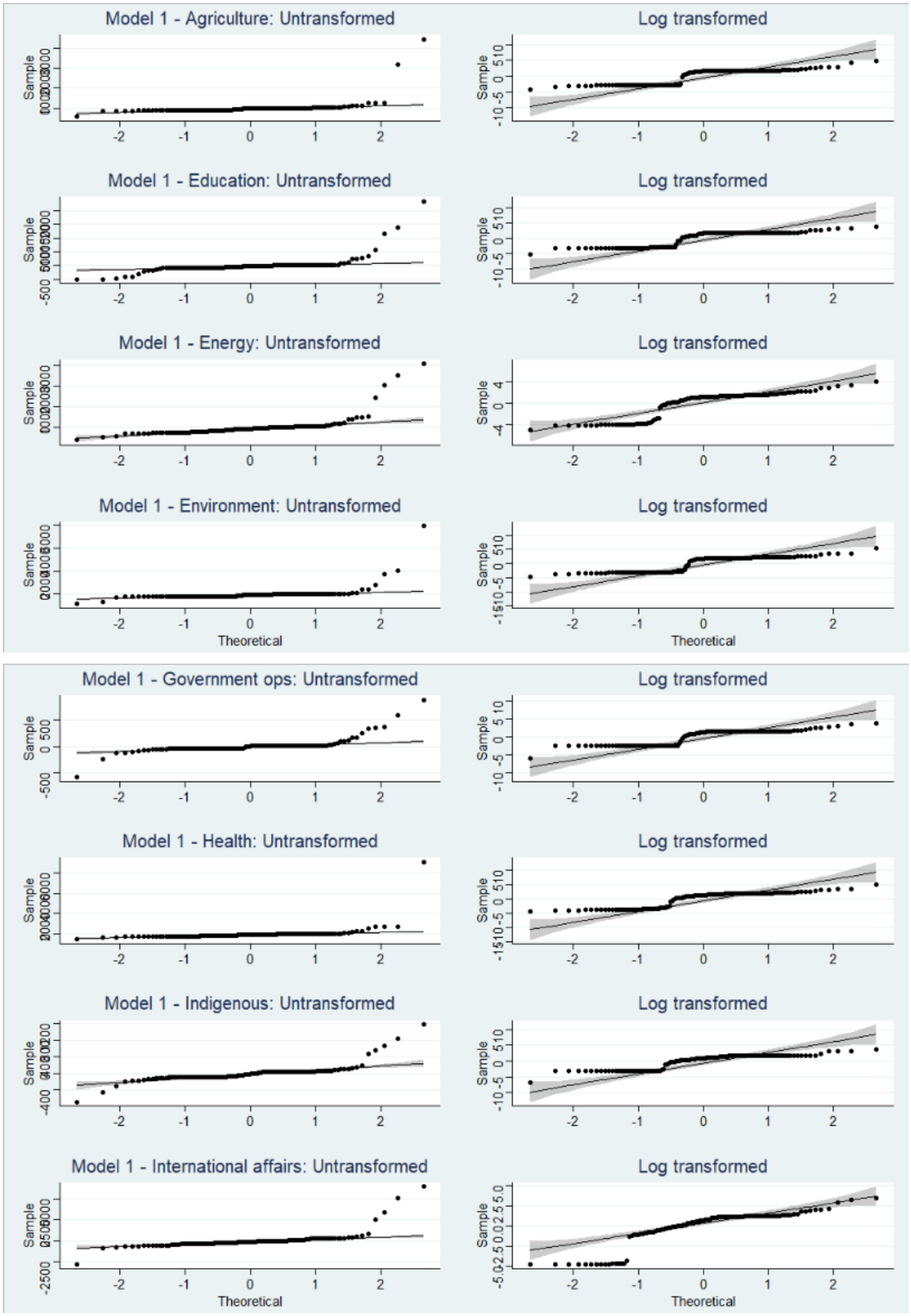
And the log transformations:

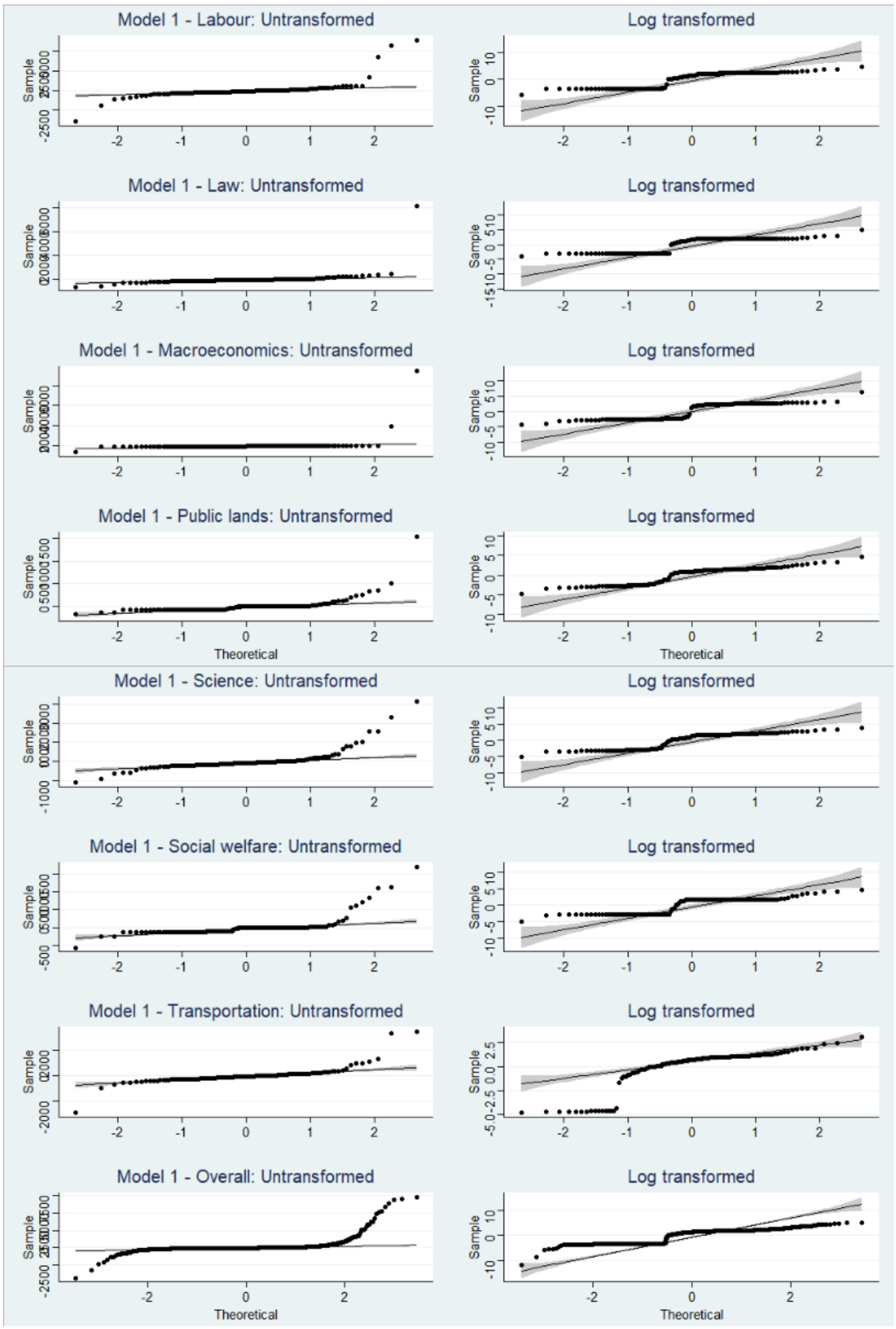
$$\text{Log} - \text{transformed OLS Model 1: } Log(volume\ of\ letters + 1) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta(speech\ proportion)_{t-1} + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Log} - \text{transformed OLS Model 2: } Log(volume\ of\ letters + 1) = \alpha + \beta_1((speech\ proprtion)_{t-1} + (speech\ proprtion)_{t-2}) + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \varepsilon$$

As can be seen in Figure C-1 and Figure C-2, the residuals deviated significantly from normal, in both the untransformed and log-transformed versions. As such, these models are not appropriate.

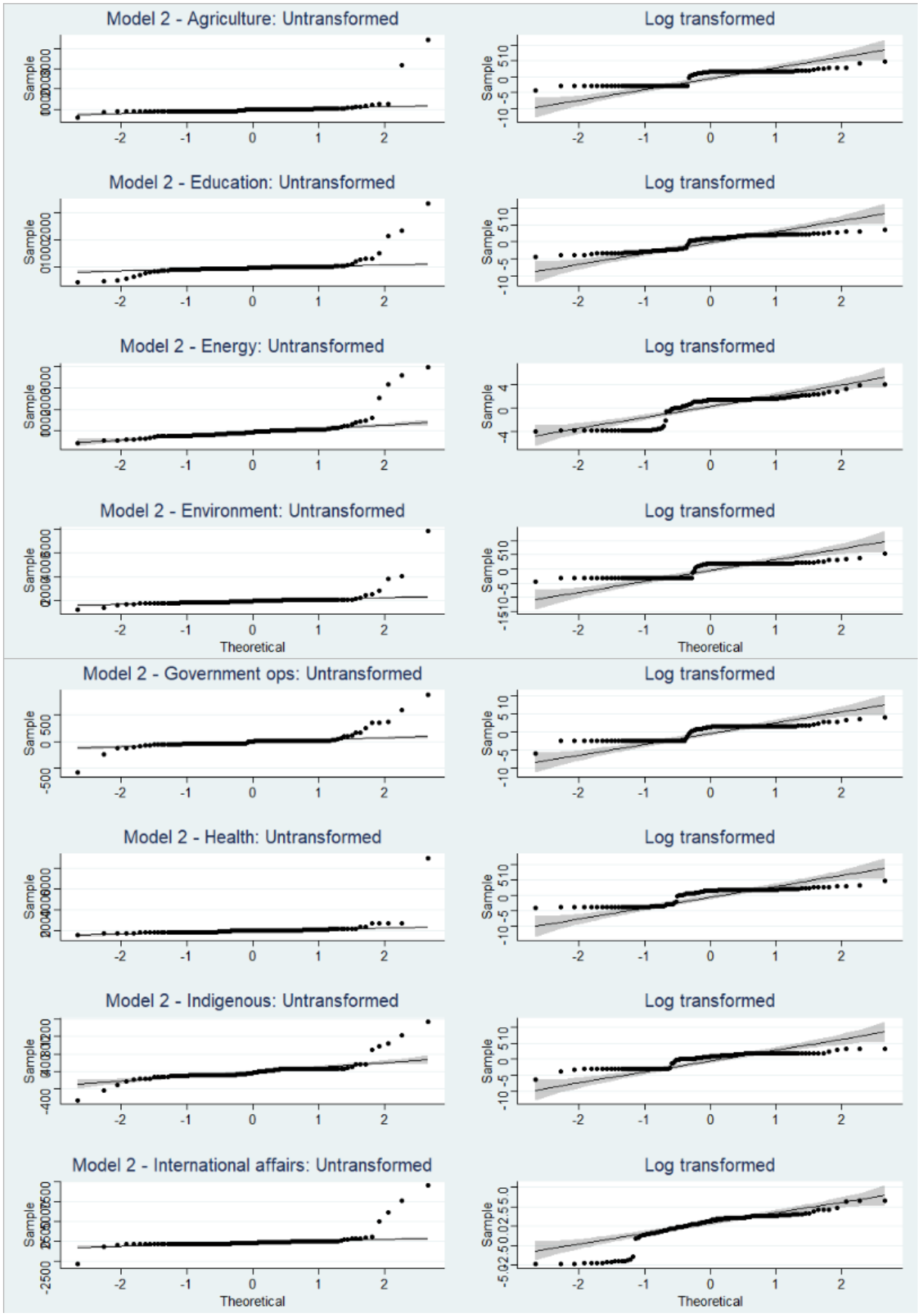
Figure C-1 Residual Q-Q plots of Elite agenda setting alternative model 1 — OLS — all topics

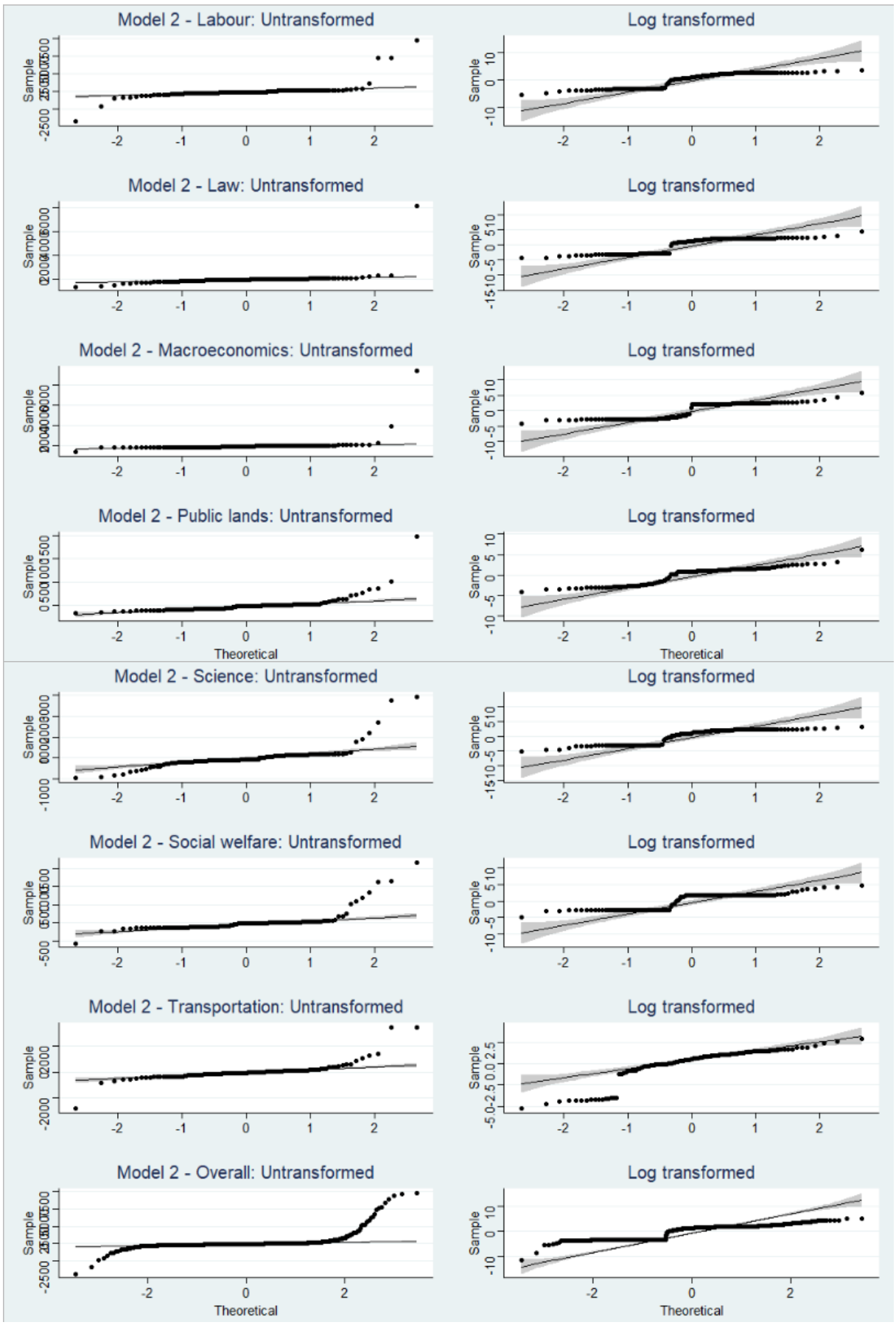




Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Figure C-2 Residual Q-Q plots of Elite agenda setting alternative model 2 — OLS — all topics





Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches).

Regression tables — main models

In section 8.1, I provide a graph of model 1. These are the complete regression results.

Table C-1 3 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — all topics (model 1)

Topic	Intercept Conf. Int. p-value	Change in speech proportion * 100 Conf. Int. p-value	Total mail / 100 (previous fortnight) Conf. Int. p-value	Obs	R^2 Tjur
Agriculture	0.44 0.26 – 0.72 **0.00**	1.01 0.85 – 1.19 0.92	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.47	76	0.01
Education	0.32 0.17 – 0.54 **<0.001**	1.01 0.91 – 1.11 0.92	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 **0.03**	77	0.01
Energy	0.32 0.14 – 0.63 **0.00**	1.02 0.88 – 1.20 0.76	1.03 1.02 – 1.06 **0.00**	85	0.59
Environment	0.12 0.05 – 0.25 **<0.001**	0.98 0.81 – 1.21 0.83	1.01 1.01 – 1.03 **0.02**	74	0.44
Government operations	0.22 0.10 – 0.41 **<0.001**	1.04 0.89 – 1.21 0.66	1.01 1.01 – 1.02 **<0.001**	78	0.37
Health	0.26 0.14 – 0.47 **<0.001**	1.11 0.92 – 1.38 0.30	1.00 1.00 – 1.01 0.20	76	0.11
Indigenous	0.19 0.09 – 0.35 **<0.001**	1.02 0.93 – 1.11 0.70	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.44	86	0.01
International affairs	0.82 0.51 – 1.31 0.42	0.97 0.91 – 1.04 0.45	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.11	92	0.07
Labour and employment	0.28 0.15 – 0.50 **<0.001**	0.97 0.87 – 1.09 0.64	1.00 1.00 – 1.01 **0.01**	83	0.24
Law	0.08 0.03 – 0.20 **<0.001**	1.09 0.84 – 1.39 0.48	1.11 1.06 – 1.19 **0.00**	74	0.67
Macroeconomics	0.03 0.01 – 0.10 **<0.001**	0.99 0.81 – 1.21 0.93	1.05 1.01 – 1.19 0.20	67	0.57

	0.10	0.98	1.20	79	0.76
Public lands	0.03 – 0.25	0.83 – 1.20	1.06 – 1.74		
	<0.001	0.81	0.11		
	0.21	1.02	1.01	86	0.50
Science	0.10 – 0.41	0.90 – 1.16	1.01 – 1.02		
	<0.001	0.79	**<0.001**		
	0.17	1.01	1.00	70	0.03
Social welfare	0.08 – 0.33	0.78 – 1.33	1.00 – 1.00		
	<0.001	0.93	0.13		
	1.83	1.00	1.00	104	0.02
Transportation	1.08 – 3.04	0.88 – 1.15	1.00 – 1.00		
	0.02	0.98	0.25		
	0.40	1.01	1.00	1144	0.16
Overall	0.34 – 0.46	0.98 – 1.04	1.00 – 1.00		
	<0.001	0.47	**<0.001**		

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

In section 8.1, I provide a graph of model 2. These are the complete regression results.

Table C-2 4 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — all topics (model 2)

Topic	**Intercept** **Conf. Int.** **p-value**	**Speech topic proportion (2 fortnights) * 100** **Conf. Int.** **p-value**	**Total mail / 100 (previous fortnight)** **Conf. Int.** **p-value**	**Obs**	**R^2 Tjur**
	0.98	0.85	1.00	76	0.04
Agriculture	0.36 – 2.88	0.67 – 1.01	1.00 – 1.00		
	0.97	0.11	0.33		
	0.02	1.18	1.00	77	0.23
Education	0.00 – 0.13	1.07 – 1.32	1.00 – 1.00		
	<0.001	**0.00**	0.18		
	0.34	0.99	1.03	85	0.59
Energy	0.12 – 0.89	0.90 – 1.06	1.02 – 1.06		
	0.03	0.79	**0.00**		
	0.02	1.22	1.01	74	0.52
Environment	0.00 – 0.10	1.05 – 1.45	1.01 – 1.03		
	<0.001	**0.01**	**0.01**		
	0.32	0.95	1.01	78	0.38
Government operations	0.09 – 1.10	0.81 – 1.08	1.01 – 1.02		
	0.07	0.47	**<0.001**		

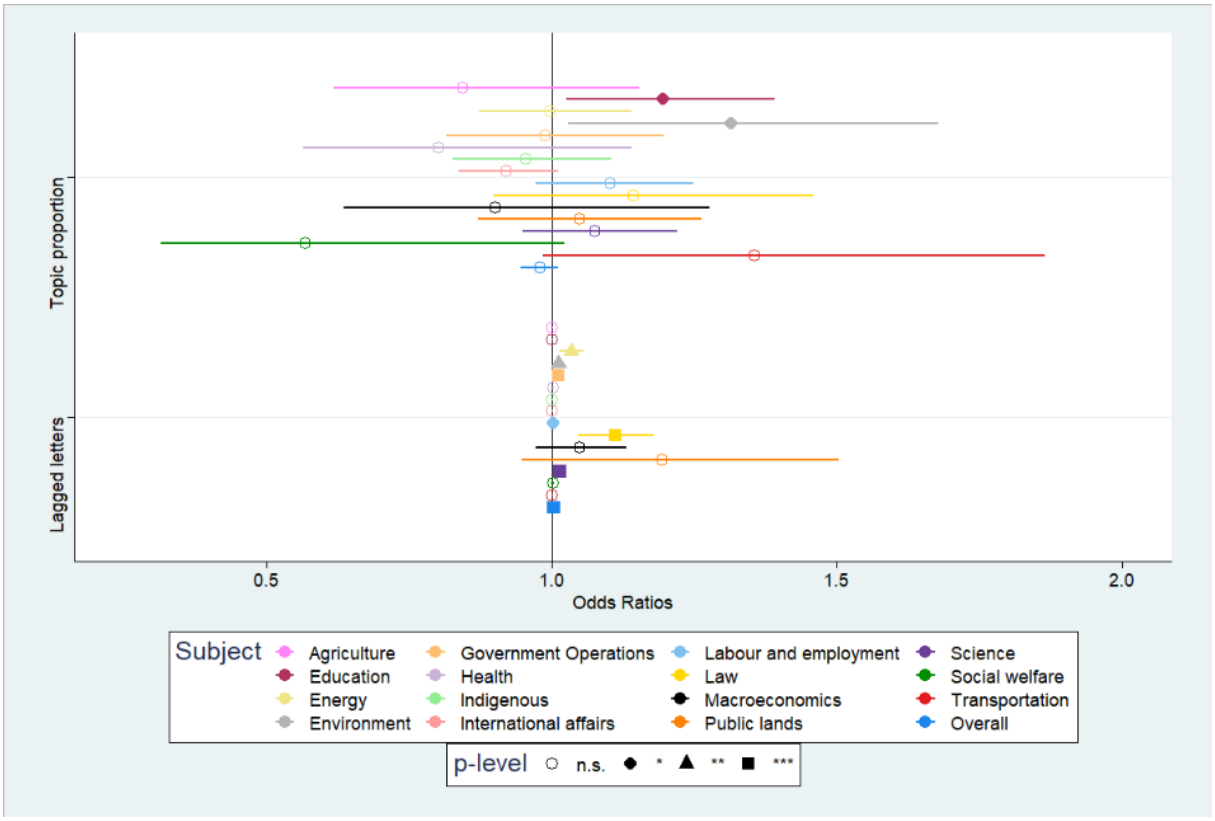
Health	0.66 0.24 – 1.95 0.43	0.81 0.61 – 0.97 0.08	1.00 1.00 – 1.01 0.18	76	0.14
Indigenous	0.26 0.11 – 0.60 **0.00**	0.94 0.81 – 1.02 0.27	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.25	86	0.03
International affairs	1.42 0.63 – 3.26 0.40	0.95 0.89 – 1.01 0.11	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.08	92	0.08
Labour and employment	0.13 0.04 – 0.33 **<0.001**	1.10 1.01 – 1.20 **0.03**	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.13	83	0.26
Law	0.05 0.01 – 0.25 **<0.001**	1.07 0.87 – 1.26 0.42	1.11 1.05 – 1.19 **0.00**	74	0.68
Macroeconomics	0.10 0.00 – 2.75 0.14	0.92 0.65 – 1.06 0.51	1.05 1.01 – 1.20 0.27	67	0.58
Public lands	0.05 0.01 – 0.31 **0.00**	1.05 0.93 – 1.18 0.37	1.20 1.06 – 1.82 0.15	79	0.77
Science	0.14 0.05 – 0.33 **<0.001**	1.07 0.98 – 1.18 0.11	1.01 1.01 – 1.02 **0.00**	86	0.51
Social welfare	3.61 0.41 – 44.15 0.28	0.59 0.36 – 0.85 **0.02**	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.30	70	0.18
Transportation	0.65 0.25 – 1.58 0.35	1.28 1.07 – 1.59 **0.02**	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 0.30	104	0.09
Overall	0.46 0.37 – 0.56 **<0.001**	0.98 0.96 – 1.00 **0.05**	1.00 1.00 – 1.00 **<0.001**	1144	0.17

Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Alternative model specification

In section 8.1, I include two fortnights of Mr Howard's speeches in the independent variable for model 2, because that provides stronger results. Figure C-5 shows that the model with a single fortnight's worth of Mr Howard's speeches shows that some of the topics are significant. Once the additional fortnight is added, further topics show statistical significance.

Figure C-5 6 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — single fortnight — all topics (model 2)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

The models are re-specified to also include a squared term, to account for the possibility that people only write letters if the topic became particularly prominent in the speeches:

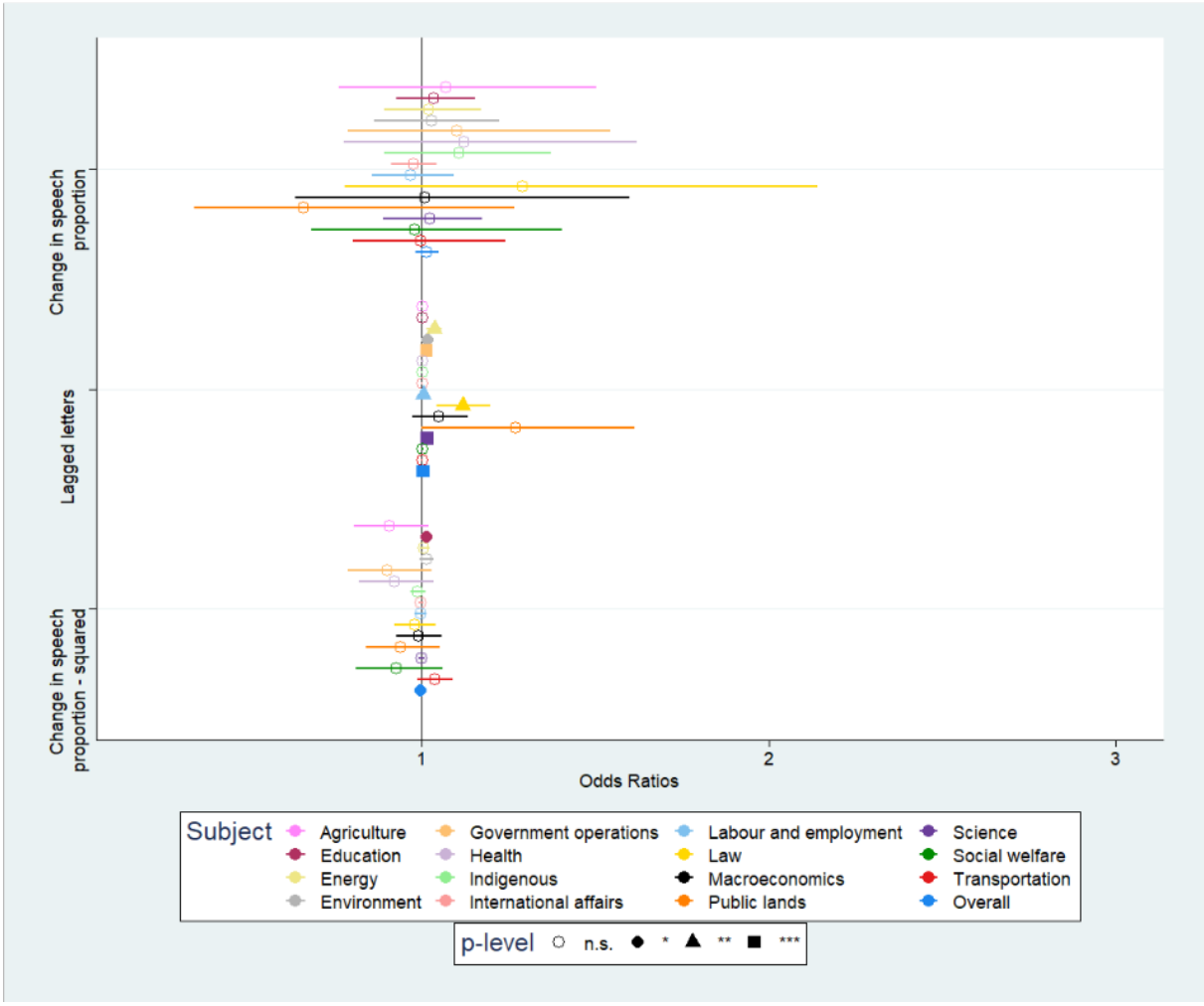
$$\text{Squared model 1: } \ln(\Pr(Letters)) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta(speech\ proportion)_{t-1} + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \beta_3 (\Delta(speech\ proportion)_{t-1})^2 + \varepsilon$$

and

$$\text{Squared model 2: } \ln(\Pr(Letters)) = \alpha + \beta_1((speech\ proprtion)_{t-1} + (speech\ proprtion)_{t-2}) + \beta_2 lag(volume\ of\ letters) + \beta_3((speech\ proprtion)_{t-1} + (speech\ proprtion)_{t-2})^2 + \varepsilon$$

As can be seen in Figure C-7, no topics display statistically significant relationships, or those that do (education and overall in the squared term) have an odds ratio of 1.

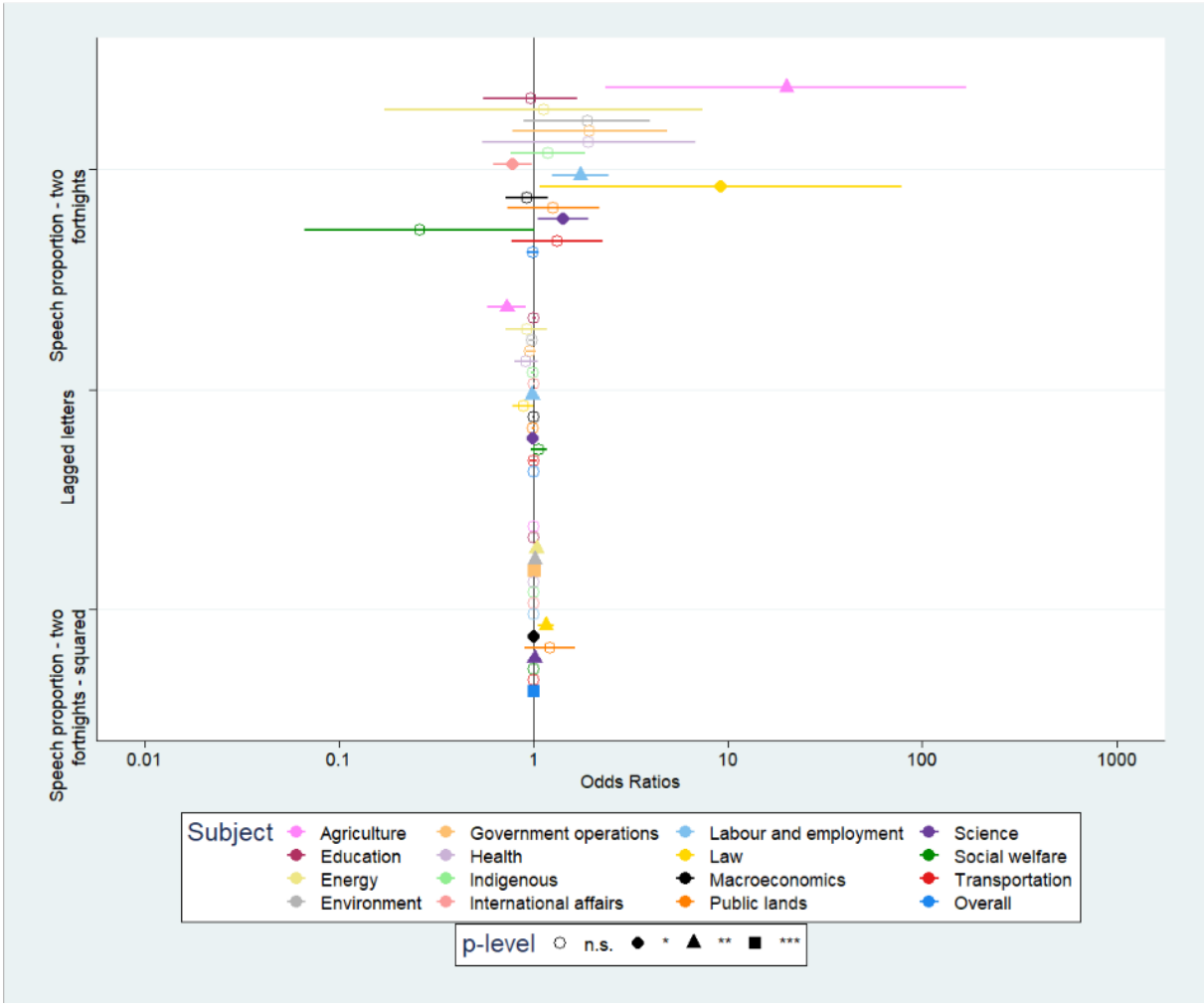
Figure C-7 8 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — squared term — all topics (model 1)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)

Similarly, the addition of a squared term to model 2 does not improve the model (Figure C-9).

Figure C-9 10 Elite agenda setting: predicting the likelihood of letters arriving — squared term — all topics (model 2)



Source: Author analysis of items from NAA series M4326 and M4261 (letters) and Sherratt (2019) and Trove (speeches)