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Interest Groups and the Election

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This chapter provides an overview of the various means by which interest groups involved themselves in the 2016 Australian federal election campaign. As far as possible, we address this task through an engagement with the broader political science and public policy literature on interest groups and elections. This literature is sparse, but our hope is that through this contribution we can play some small part in pushing the broader engagement of group scholars with those of elections and political parties.

We focus on the following themes: relationships between groups and parties, the reasons why elections matter to interest groups, and their most visible and manifest public policy activity during elections, namely their group manifesto or policy priorities document. For each theme, we combine some background from the broader literature on groups and elections with specific illustrations of the strategies and activities that various groups applied during the election. We define interest groups as collective membership organisations that engage with public policy (Jordan, Halpin and Maloney 2004: 205).

We conclude that efforts by interest groups to shape Australian elections are hard to assess, but in reality they are likely to be very slim. Direct attempts to change outcomes in specific seats seem limited to those well-resourced groups who can in effect replicate a party's organisation on the ground. For most groups, the strategy most available—and therefore utilised—is to generate credible policy 'asks' (or requests), and to have

parties engage with them. We speculate that groups most often engage in campaigns to address organisational maintenance issues, such as convincing members they are active on the issues that matter to them.

Relationships between groups and political parties

The broader context for this chapter is the relationship between groups and political parties, irrespective of elections. While interest groups have some similarities with political parties (e.g. they are both membership bodies and engage with public policy), a critical difference arises from the fact that interest groups do not participate in elections. As a result, they strongly rely on good relationships with political parties, particularly those in government, in order to achieve their policy objectives. These relations, however, are not only relevant in the context of their lobbying activities. Many interest groups (notably groups that have citizens as members or provide services) rely strongly on government funding, and therefore ensure that close and good relationships with policymakers and government officials are also a matter of organisational survival and maintenance.

As regards the nature of the ties between political parties and interest groups, various relationships are foreshadowed in the literature (Allern and Bale 2012; Thomas 2001). A dominant perspective emphasises *financial* dependencies, mapping the regular or systematic flow of funds between them—for instance, through the provision of donations. While these financial interdependencies have been often highlighted (and problematised) by political observers and analysts, three other types of ties appear equally relevant for understanding relations between interest groups and parties. First, one might also emphasise an *organisational* focus, which highlights sharing of key personnel, or the overlap of staff. For instance, there is a strong flow of union officials into the ranks of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Second, affinities between groups and parties might be more *ideational*, whereby shared views on what the key policy problems of day are, and how they ‘ought’ to be resolved, matter. Groups who are ideologically close to each other (e.g. progressive or conservative) might be more likely to develop close ties and to (formally or informally) cooperate and support each other. Finally, one might focus on shared or overlapping *membership* between groups and parties, in the sense that people are members of, for instance, a trade union and the ALP.

While these may all be logical possibilities, for most groups such relationships simply do not, and have never, applied. Indeed, the international literature has asserted that linkages are irrelevant for most, but not all, groups (Thomas 2001). Yet, we know that some key sets of groups in western European democracies have long been strongly linked with political parties. Social democratic parties and organised labour, farmers and farmers' parties, as well as business and conservative parties, have historical (if weakening) links in many European countries (see Allern and Bale 2012). To these, we might add the contemporary relations between environmental and peace movements, and the development of Green parties in Western Europe. In these few cases, parties and groups might actually be allies, and closely coordinate their activities and messages during election times to increase the chances of their message gaining traction. That Australian electoral regulations allow groups to be directly engaged in elections might lead one to conclude this would be a frequent activity. In the 2016 election, the Business Council of Australia (BCA) came out strongly in favour of the Coalition, with the Chief Executive Officer reported as being 'gobsmacked' by Labor's campaign and announcing that 'the council will be launching its own campaign in the run-up to election day to underline how business underpins the wealth of the country' (*Guardian* 2016). These relationships, however, are the exceptions, rather than the rule.

In the Australian context, some groups do have formal links with parties in a structured manner. The trade union movement—at least parts of it—still remain vital allies of the ALP. Some report that the influence of the union movement extends to deciding placement of specific candidates in 'safe' positions in federal Senate tickets. This special relationship also means a degree of coordination in the messaging of the trade unions' election campaigning and extends to large-scale on-the-ground canvassing of voters in marginal seats by union members. As has long been documented, the proximity of certain social groups to parties can harm their electoral appeal to the broader community (Kirchheimer 1966)—and so the canvassing by union members tends not to involve direct appeals to 'vote Labor', but rather aims to focus voters' attention on particular issues that feature in the Labor manifesto. For groups, a similar problem can emerge where traditional allegiances with a specific party can blunt the influence of the group when 'their' party is out of government, or when this party makes unpopular decisions and seeks the support of their traditional group ally (which may result in the latter losing members over their stance on this issue).

The Australian case resonates with the above analysis. Yet, there is some debate as to the trajectory. The orthodoxy in the Australian literature places interest groups as second-tier players compared with political parties (Matthews and Warhurst 1993). The key argument here is that changes in government have a strong influence on the prospects of groups in achieving policy change. Trevor Matthews and John Warhurst argue:

for many producer and promotional groups ... it is above all else the adversarial character of Australian party politics that shapes their strategies, their access to government, and their chances of success. They operate in the shadow of strong parties (1993: 82).

In the intervening two decades, there is some cause to revise this position, not least because of the emerging bipartisan nature of group lobbying and the changing complexion of the party system (for more details, see Halpin 2015). In the latter respect, to the extent that a shift to a cartel party system is occurring, this creates even fewer incentives for groups to see the 'party in government' as a critical variable in explaining policy success. Our own 2015 survey work, examining the views of close to 400 national interest groups, indicates that very few groups have a strong ideological position (see Table 17.1). In fact, 25 per cent indicated that the ideology of their group is not relevant, with about 54 per cent indicating it was moderate, somewhat progressive or somewhat conservative.

Table 17.1. Ideological positions of Australian national interest groups

| Ideology | Frequency | Per cent |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|
| Very conservative | 12 | 3 |
| Somewhat conservative | 32 | 8.1 |
| Moderate | 74 | 18.6 |
| Somewhat progressive | 109 | 27.5 |
| Very progressive | 71 | 17.9 |
| Not relevant | 99 | 24.9 |
| Total | 397 | 100 |

Source. Compiled by authors with data from Australian Interest Group Survey, 2015: interestgroupsaustralia.com/?page_id=88.

Why do elections matter to groups?

Before we go further, the fundamental question that must be asked is why do elections matter to interest groups? After all, by definition, interest groups do not seek political office and thus do not contest elections directly. What is in it for them?

The literature, to the extent that it has considered this question at all, tends to assume groups will by and large have a general interest in election campaigns and outcomes, but will seldom intervene (Binderkrantz 2015). As such, there is not a great deal to guide the curious student of elections as to the role (if any) of interest groups (but see Farrel and Schmitt-Beck (2008) for an exception to this pattern). We offer a three-fold approach here. We organise our discussion by highlighting three possible objectives that might guide the activities of interest groups during elections: shaping the election outcome; affecting the policy agenda of the incoming government; and considerations related to their organisational maintenance and survival.

As outlined, the Australian position is that party politics decisively shapes the opportunities for groups to get access and ultimately to influence the policy agenda and legislative activities of government. It follows that groups would have an interest in seeing the party win government with which they have most affinity. Groups may seek to *shape the election outcome*. For some groups, the direction in which this effort is pointed is self-evident—we think here of organised labour and business. Yet, for many others, there is no clear-cut alignment between their interests and those of parties. For these groups, the election outcome does not fundamentally affect their chances of realising their policy objectives. However, we note that many groups who are not clearly ideological or aligned with a party still engage in various activities during the election period. For such groups, the engagement can be viewed in terms of progressing substantive policy goals—getting ‘their’ issues on party agendas and into party policy positions, which in turn may be acted upon in the new parliament. Groups may seek to *affect the policy agenda of governments* (and would-be governments) by using the election period as an opportunity to increase the political and/or public salience of issues that they are concerned about. Of course, groups may also see election campaigns as a chance—when the national media are more attentive to political stories—to get noticed and to raise their profile. That is, groups may seek to engage in elections as an

opportunistic strategy to *maintain their organisations*. Here, the objective is not so much as shaping election outcomes or the future policy agenda, but rather ensuring that the organisation is visible to (potential) members (even though this organisational visibility might not actually translate into policy outcomes).

Election outcomes

As a first possible objective, groups may take a longer-term or indirect approach, seeking to change the overall electoral outcome or the result in specific seats. That is, they seek out a political strategy (on the presumption that this will eventually lead to policy change). If groups decide to engage in any of the strategies outlined below, we can safely assume that the outcome of the election (and the composition of the next government) is critically important to them.

Political donations

Groups might involve themselves in elections in myriad of forms. The most obvious—and headline grabbing—approach has been to donate money directly to parties. Recent discussion of party funding has underscored the controversial nature of such a strategy; for example, the Australian Hotels Association's donations to the Liberal Party (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 2016). Even though the available data on donations suffers from various shortcomings, we can safely assume that the majority of groups abstain from making political donations. Most of them are simply unlikely to have the financial resources required, whereas others will be very cautious about establishing these kinds of visible linkages to a certain party.

Details of funding by groups to parties for specific campaigns sometimes leak. The independent Senator Nick Xenophon and his new party, the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT), became a target for the Australian Hotels Association (AHA). While the AHA is ostensibly a liquor industry lobby, the reliance of clubs and pubs on poker machine revenue has made antigambling candidates a target. It was reported that the AHA had made contributions to the two main parties to aid efforts to repel the NXT and Greens candidates (Millar and Schneiders 2016).

Marginal seat campaigns

Perhaps the most obvious way for groups to shape election outcomes is to target specific seats—particularly marginal seats—where ‘their’ issue is likely to gain traction. Groups might target specific candidates or incumbents whose views or ideologies are clearly antithetical—for instance, progressive groups targeting conservative flag-bearers. They might also direct their members on how to vote, or run marginal seat campaigns. Some groups might seek to influence the ideological nature of a party by shaping the outcome of preselection contests in specific seats. GetUp! launched a funding campaign to produce 1 million how-to-vote cards. While marginal seats were the focus, the broad strategy was actually to target ‘right-wing’ figures in the Coalition, and Senate candidates such as Pauline Hanson. While Hanson was herself elected, efforts by Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi to establish a conservative GetUp! after the election suggests that their activities had a substantial impact, or at least highlighted the absence of grassroots mobilisation efforts by the conservative side of the political spectrum (see Vromen, Chapter 18, this volume). Indeed, the postmortem offered by the Liberal Party’s national campaign director, Tony Nutt, explicitly acknowledged the professionalism of the unions and GetUp! in respect of running campaigns on the ground (Warhurst 2016).

The union movement constituted a big presence on the ground. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) had emergency services staff door knocking 20,000 homes in marginal electorates, asking people to write down their pledges to support certain policy outcomes. That is, not to ‘Support the Labor Party’ or ‘Vote Labor’, but to support a specific policy outcome that happens to be Labor policy. The ‘pledge’ is posted back to the individual and a follow-up call made prior to election day (Maher 2016).

As they did in 2013, the ‘Friends of the ABC’ again engaged in a large and creative campaign to gain pre-election commitments on ABC funding. Targeting 20 marginal seats across Australia, the strategy included volunteers asking voters to sign pledges, with the use of several parody videos circulated through social media highlighting possible program cuts under a more market-oriented ABC. The organisation claims to have taken the scalp of Coalition MP Warwick Smith in 1993, arguing this result shows its capacity to change electoral outcomes. As Randal McDonald, ABC Friends spokesperson explained, ‘we’re throwing everything we have at changing public opinion because we see this as a crucial election for the national broadcaster’ (quoted in Gordon 2016).

Policy agendas

In general terms, given the unprecedented media attention, elections offer groups the prospect of shaping the ordering of the public agenda, and the chance to reframe public understandings of salient policy issues. These might include having a party or candidate adopt or commit to a key policy ‘ask’. Election periods can represent a ‘critical juncture’ from a policy perspective, and therefore several groups will attempt to make their issue one of *the* key election issues. For most, however, disappointment is likely, as political parties are unlikely to engage with new issues during election campaigns, and the room for new issues to enter the debate (in addition to ongoing policy matters from the previous government and current events) is limited.

The approach that groups take to get these commitments is not too different to the standard choice between insider and outsider strategies (see McKinney and Halpin 2007).

Insider approach

As we outline in more detail below, most groups in the 2016 election took an orthodox policy process approach, setting out key policy priorities or ‘asks’ for both parties in the lead-up to the election (see Halpin and Fraussen 2017). Presumably, the intention being that it offers ready-made bite-sized commitments that parties might see advantage in adopting. A successful insider approach is unlikely to emerge during election periods; groups who successfully follow this strategy often build upon good longstanding relations with a particular party (as it requires know-how in respect of who to approach in the party, and the particular internal party processes that determine the focus of the party’s election platform).

Outsider approach

The Australian politics literature has noted the apparent rise of ‘outside’ advertising campaigns by groups that are usually considered to be powerful—and thus least likely to engage in such a strategy (Orr and Gauja 2014). Arguably, election campaigns provide a most likely environment for groups to utilise such campaigns—as there are media and electorate focuses on politics at this time. As Graeme Orr and Anika Gauja (2014) argue, such advertising campaigns can have a multitude of aims—including as part and parcel of a party-political strategy to harm a specific party or candidate (in that sense they can sometimes be seen as part of a marginal seats campaign). Whether overtly criticising a party

platform or actively campaigning to get a particular issue noticed, this approach sets out to increase the salience of an issue in the minds of the general public and policymakers. Such a strategy relies on recalibrating the calculus of politicians as to the electoral cost of ignoring a specific issue. But, no doubt, these are also utilised to demonstrate to their members and supporters that they are actively lobbying.

Perhaps the classic example in recent times was the political advertising campaign of the mining industry in the 2013 election (for an overview, see Eccleston and Hortle 2016). There was no equivalent in the 2016 election, but there were some similar clear-cut public facing campaigns.

The level of payments from Medicare for GP visits, for instance, became an issue in the 2016 campaign. The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) instituted a campaign whereby members placed posters in surgeries and went on the offensive in the media, outlining that the sustainability of the system of general practice was under threat. In a series of advertisements aired on national television, the RCGP drove home the message that higher charges mean that patients would delay visits to see medical professionals, ultimately leading to higher health costs (Lee 2016).

Another example involves the BCA, who (as mentioned earlier) launched ads attacking the Labor Party for its antibusiness agenda. Specifically, the adverts flagged the impact of Labor policies on business investment, highlighting that a spending plan needed to be accompanied by a plan for growth (Sexton 2016).

Of course, these twin approaches—shaping policy commitments and electoral outcomes—can be linked; a ‘marginal seats’ campaign is typically about raising the profile of a given issue or policy ‘ask’ by targeting seats where incumbents face stiff competition for re-election. While GetUp! most clearly linked these two objectives, the majority of groups have prioritised issue-related advocacy, rather than directly targeting particular MPs.

Group maintenance

It is tempting to view the actions of groups in the context of elections as determined by rational calculations as to net benefits in policy or political terms (Binderkrantz 2015). Yet, we might also assume that the election period provides other ‘goods’ that groups might seek. It has been

argued more broadly that before groups can engage in lobbying or attend to policy influence, they face the more basic task of survival (Lowery 2007). Attention is a ‘good’ that can assist in the group-maintenance task. For instance, as elections deliver a once-in-three-year high of journalistic and politician engagement in political discourse, groups might view this as an important opportunity to flag to members and donors that they are salient policy players. Given the cluttered advocacy landscape in Australia, and the difficulty for smaller niche players to cut through, it is not unreasonable to expect that many groups might seek out possible free media attention and the heightened attentiveness of politicians. This is what, in our view, explains the broad engagement of groups in generating election policy priority documents (see discussion in the next section), even where the prospects of these having any impact seem very slim indeed. Again, the findings of our survey of Australian interest groups underline the precarious nature of group survival, with 50 per cent of all groups indicating that they are likely to face a threat to their survival in the next five years. This high level of mortality anxiety underlines the importance of basic survival for groups.

Election manifestos and policy ‘asks’

While the activities of groups in the context of elections are not a key traditional focus of the group literature, we find that many groups do seek to engage in election campaigns to further their policy goals, and adopt a range of strategies to do so. In this section, we focus in on what is, by our estimation, the most usual form of engagement by Australian interest groups in contemporary national election campaigns: the written *policy priorities* document. These documents list policy reforms sought by the interest group. The priorities are often in a short (or dot point) form and then expanded. Our research on these documents found that all election priority documents were in PDF format and typically available on the interest group’s website. The length of the document was anything between one and 80 pages. The typical title would be ‘Publication Title: Election Statement/Policy Priorities [year]’. For our purposes, we call these documents ‘election policy priorities’ documents. Of course, in practice, the groups called the documents various names. Examples include ‘key election issues’ (issued by the Australian Psychological Association in 2013), ‘reform priorities for the next Australian Government’ (issued by

the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2013) and ‘election year policy scorecard’ (issued by the Australian Mines and Metals Association Inc. in 2016).

There is considerable variation in how, and the extent to which, groups utilise these election manifestos, as we clarify in the illustrations below:

- The case of the RSPCA is perhaps indicative of many well-resourced groups. They developed a glossy policy priorities document, which outlines key aims. The policy priorities that the RSPCA made include specific requests related to funding certain policy programs, initiating particular action plans or specific policy positions. The policy documents are routinely sent to the parties during the early weeks of the campaign.
- Many groups combine this policy priorities document with additional strategies, including requesting parties respond to questions—to produce what is generally referred to as a ‘report card’. This practice is probably more consistent with the professionalised core of the group system, but provides a good sense of how elections can be engaged with by groups.
- Of course, those groups that have been defunded—or for whom government service delivery contracts constitute a key source of financing—are unlikely to engage directly or visibly in the election campaign (or in public lobbying more generally).

How big are the policy ‘asks’ within the policy priorities documents? Not all ‘asks’ are equal. Some ‘asks’ are specific in nature and easy to implement: they are ready-made for action. For example, ‘the government will create a task force’, or the ‘creation of a fund for ...’. Others are motherhood statements, for example, urging government to introduce tax reform. The former are actionable items that a party could announce within the confines of a campaign, the latter are strategic changes that take time and cannot be accommodated within a campaign. Others vary with respect to ambition; some are items that are soft or low-hanging fruit that will not be contentious, while others are challenging ‘asks’ that will potentially cause parties some discomfort.

In reality, the likelihood of actually having the government shift position or make specific announcements during a campaign as a response to these documents is limited. Instead, it is most likely that they represent a public statement (or signal of positions) that—ideally—have been fed

into the policy formation positions of parties in the nine to 12 months prior to the election, or else are the first signal of what the groups will be seeking to progress as future critical junctures emerge—such as pre-Budget submissions and statutory reviews of legislation—which allow groups a chance to pursue change.

The example of the ‘backpacker tax’ is instructive. Rural, farming and tourist interests voiced concern that the removal of the tax-free threshold for earnings by workers on tourist visas would adversely affect the labour market in these sectors. While this was flagged prior to the Budget, and the views of these groups were well known and publicised, the context of an election campaign enabled such interests to renew their efforts. The government pledged to reverse the decision, albeit for six months. The point here is twofold. First, governments do change pledges during campaigns. Second, while groups like the NFF got what they wanted in this case—it was one of the groups opposing the tax—it failed to get traction with many other issues it championed (it had formulated over 35 priorities, most of which have been ignored).

Another question involves the extent to which these policy asks are useful in cluttered election campaigns. While it is easy to point to a handful of cases where group electioneering has garnered media and public attention, the limited evidence we provide suggests that these are not evenly spread. In fact, we can surmise that the modal group in Australia probably presents a set of policy ‘asks’—by way of a document and press release—that has little hope of cutting through the media cycle’s laser focus on a handful of issues at a time. As referred to in the chapter on Indigenous policy (see Perche, Chapter 27, this volume), the National Congress of Australia’s First People was not able to get its Redfern Statement noticed; doubly surprising given the proximity to a referendum on constitutional recognition of Indigenous persons. By contrast, the issue of marriage equality dominated a great deal of the campaign, with both sides of the debate—perhaps best captured by the Australian Christian Lobby and Australian Marriage Equality—managing to attract political and media attention to the issue. In response, Labor proposed a parliamentary vote on the issue if elected, while the Coalition retained the position established by former leader Tony Abbott to hold a plebiscite (see Williams and Sawer, Chapter 28, this volume). Of course, even when attention is garnered, it is easy for politicians to park issues until after the election is over. For instance, the concern over the sustainability of the Australian

dairy industry gained high media attention, and quick responses by supermarkets to defend their cheap milk marketing campaigns, but only promises of future possible dairy industry assistance plans.

While we can highlight cases of success, focusing on the dependent variable in relation to influence can generate misleading conclusions, as it would omit the multiple cases where the actions of groups result in limited or no reaction from policymakers.

Conclusion

The interest group system in Australia is vast (Fraussen and Halpin 2015), which renders attempts to generalise in the absence of systematic data difficult. Instead, what we have offered here are some useful illustrations as to the variety of ways that groups involve themselves in election campaigns. We used the 2016 campaign as a canvas.

In this regard, we put forward a framework that highlights three different objectives that interest groups might aim to achieve through their activities over the election period: shaping the election outcome; shaping the policy agenda of the next government; and considerations related to organisational maintenance and survival. While we have not provided a systematic analysis, the illustrative examples provided here suggest that only a few well-known and resourceful groups possess the resources and capabilities to affect election outcomes—for instance, through campaigns in marginal seats. For them, elections really do provide important junctures to substantively shape policy.

For the majority of groups, the stakes are probably much lower. At best, they might be able to generate more attention for the issues that they prioritise (and in the long run possibly shape the agenda of the next government). This appears more likely where these topics align with the policy priorities that parties pursue during the campaign. Much of the election activity of groups is probably best understood from considerations related to organisational maintenance. Members and supporters expect the group they support to be active and visible during this period, even though the chances of shaping the agenda (let alone policy outcomes) are rather limited.

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This text is taken from *Double Disillusion: The 2016 Australian Federal Election*, edited by Anika Gauja, Peter Chen, Jennifer Curtin and Juliet Pietsch, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/DD.04.2018.17