

Information flow and voter decision-making
in the 2001 Australian federal election:
The role of international and domestic issues

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of TV coverage of international and domestic issues during the 2001 Australian federal election campaign, and its effects on voter decision-making. More specifically, it looks at voters' differential reliance on the two distinct, high profile sets of issues that dominated media election campaign coverage: the domestic issues that had been the focus throughout the election year (especially, health, education, and taxes) and the international issues that assumed centre stage just before the election was called (refugees and asylum seekers, terrorism, and defence and national security). Using an original content analysis of TV coverage, merged with the 2001 Australian election survey, interaction models yield significantly different patterns of reliance on international and domestic for groups of voters distinguished by the timing of their vote choice, and the level of their existing political interest and information. Those moderately-interested voters, who largely decided their vote choice about the time the election was called, were the most likely to cite international issues as the key to their vote choice, while those lower interested voters deciding just before or on election day were significantly more reliant on domestic issues. These patterns point to a variant on Zaller's (1989) model by showing that a single, high-intensity campaign can sustain within it two distinct issue agendas which voters with different cognitive skills and responsiveness to TV cues differentially utilize to inform their vote choice.

Introduction

The 2001 Australian federal election, called just three weeks after the 11 September terrorist attacks and six weeks after the Tampa asylum seekers incident, affords the opportunity to test critical assumptions about the impact of television on voter decision making. The five-week campaign that ensued fused an eleventh-hour set of high profile international issues, which traditionally benefit an incumbent government, with an ongoing agenda of domestic policies that had looked certain for most of the election year to secure victory for the opposition.

This internal variability of issues and information across a single election campaign has important implications for Zaller's (1989) model of political campaign information flow. Zaller contends that campaigns vary primarily in the overall profile, hence intensity, of the election being contested. This in turn differentially affects the ability of the incumbent and challenger campaign messages to "penetrate the electorate" and its ranks of voters who possess varying degrees of prior awareness and partisan predispositions by which to resist the impact of these messages (1989: 182). The 2001 Australian federal election's unusual campaign suggests that voters can be exposed to distinct, but equally high profile issues and political information across the campaign period, during which the different sorts of voters who are known to finalize their vote choice at different stages of the campaign, are likely to be affected by these alternative agendas. Overall, then, it raises the possibility that campaigns can vary in their information flow not just by the intensity of the election type itself, but also by changing issue agendas across a single, high-intensity national election. This paper, using an original content analysis of TV coverage of the five-week 2001 election campaign, merged with survey data, assesses voters' differential reliance on international and domestic issues in their vote decision making of individuals distinguished by their existing levels of political interest and awareness, and by the timing of their vote choice.

Theoretical foundations: Campaigns, information flow and voting

The complexity of the media's impact on voter decision making has long been acknowledged. Converse, in 1966, posited that voters' predispositions, including political loyalties, interest and information constrain both their exposure to the mass media and receptiveness to its cues.¹ The result, Converse argued, is a non-monotonic, or non-linear, effect for individuals' exposure to media information: those with the highest prior political awareness, loyalties and information the most likely to watch political coverage on TV, but the least likely to be affected, due to the resilience of their existing beliefs. At the other end of the scale, individuals with the lowest levels of political information and awareness are potentially the most susceptible to television's influence, given their poorly formed opinions and weak or non-existent political loyalties (1966: 143-4). However, because their disinterest tends to preclude exposure to media information, low-informed voters typically remain unaffected by media messages. In the middle, argued Converse, are moderately-informed individuals who have sufficient interest to seek out media information, and yet insufficiently entrenched beliefs and loyalties to resist the media's informational cues. As a result, he concluded, especially in low-intensity election campaigns where the least interested might remain wholly unexposed to political information, it is only those with moderate levels of political interest and information who are responsive to political communication (also see Zaller's review, 1992: 216-64; and Zaller, 1991).

Converse's model has prompted a number of analytic debates about which sorts of individuals are most susceptible to media cues, especially in the realm of media "agenda-setting" – the ability of the media to convey to its audience the relative importance of issues, ideas, events and images due to the differential intensity of its coverage, and a variety of informal cues about the importance of those items, including the use of headlines, and prominence of the item in a news bulletin or a newspaper or news magazine (Graber, 1989: 163). Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, for example, have contended it is low-informed individuals who most strongly absorb the media's informational agenda, as they are least able to resist its cues through "counter-arguing," due to the weakness of their prior information and beliefs (1982: 854-5). Alternatively, MacKuen, though he found an equivalent impact of those with low levels of prior interest and awareness, argues that highly-informed individuals also exhibit a significant influence for exposure to media information – their stronger beliefs and predispositions being "overwhelmed" by

¹ For recent discussions see, for example, Weaver, 1981; Joslyn, 1984; and Graber, 1989.

the higher levels of media exposure they seek out, and the high levels of attentiveness and cognitive skills they use to consider those messages (1984: 384-5). MacKuen's findings are important because they point to the likelihood that individuals' levels of interest and awareness affect the sorts of messages they entertain – those individuals at the high end of the scale, presumably, the most likely to focus on issues, which require higher cognitive skills to assess.

Recent Australian research has confirmed this distinction, facilitated in part by Australia's system of compulsory voting, which forces the inclusion of the electorate's least interested individuals, thereby creating an unusually broad range of awareness and interest across the single electorate (Denemark, 2002). Distinct media effects can be seen for low- and moderately-interested voters – the former using cues from overall TV campaign news coverage to guide their last minute vote choices; the latter absorbing TV's issue agenda, but not employing that information to guide their vote choice (Denemark, 2002). These distinct uses of media cues have an important temporal facet as well. Those low-interested voters who absorb TV's overall content, including leader images, make their vote choices late in the campaign, while those with moderate levels of interest and awareness, who use issues to guide their electoral evaluations, make their vote choices very early in the campaign.

Zaller's research provides one final component of theoretical stage-setting necessary for this paper. Zaller has sought to extend Converse's original model by arguing that campaigns confront individuals with "differential information flow" – multiple and competing cues about the political alternatives, with differential abilities to penetrate the electorate's various levels of awareness and responsiveness, prompting distinct patterns of support for the incumbent or challenger (1989: 181). This percolation of media messages, he contends, varies by the intensity and balance of campaign information in different sorts of elections. Low intensity elections, such as local government or US House of Representatives races, tend to disseminate low overall levels of political information – what information there is, being dominated by the incumbent's campaign, with almost no attention given to the challenger. As such, low-interested voters are argued to remain unaffected altogether, while moderately interested voters, who seek out higher levels of media exposure, are swayed to support the incumbent (due both to the weakness of their predispositions and the one-sided nature of campaign information). Those individuals with high prior awareness resist these incumbent messages, both because of the strength of their loyalties and their pursuit of higher levels of media information, which exposes them to the low-profile appeals of the challenger.

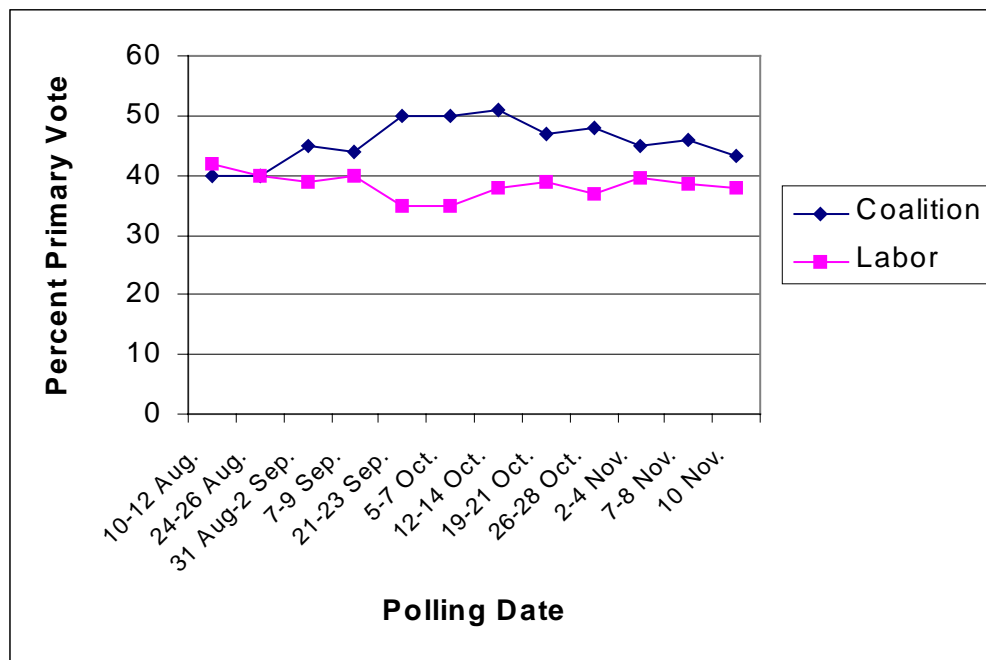
In high-intensity, balanced election campaigns (such as American presidential elections or parliamentary national elections) Zaller argues there are fundamentally different effects for campaign information on voter decision-making. The higher levels of campaign information penetrate the ranks of the least-interested voters who are, as a result, the most likely to respond and defect to the incumbent. At the same time, the intense, balanced information prompts resistance by voters with moderate and high levels of interest/awareness to both the incumbent and challenger's campaign appeals – both groups remaining largely unaffected by campaign information in their vote decisions (1989: 185-214).

All told, then, Zaller's model represents an extension of Converse's original framework in which the differential impact of campaign information on vote choice by level of prior interest and awareness must be seen as varying, in turn, by the type of election and the intensity and balance of campaign information to which voters are exposed.

The role of international and domestic issues in the 2001 election campaign

In the months preceding the 2001 federal election the Liberal-National Coalition Government looked all but certain to lose its bid for a third term in office. Central in the Government's poor poll showings (see Figure 1) was voters' "adverse reaction to five years of unpopular social and economic policies" (Bean and McAllister, 2002: 2), including voter concerns about the new Goods and Services Tax (Charlton, 2002: 83) and unease about the accessibility and cost of health and education (Bean and McAllister, 2002: 7). Labor leader Kim Beazley emphasized these issues in the Labor campaign, including in the ALP's TV ads, while Beazley's and Labor's ability to attract media coverage clearly rested on these themes throughout the campaign, given the inherent advantage of the Prime Minister and the incumbent Coalition to garner TV coverage on international issues as the Government of day acting on behalf of the nation.

Thus, as earlier in the election year, Labor's fortunes continued to ride on domestic issues throughout the campaign. Indeed, Labor's campaign launch on 31 October, just 10 days before the election, had Kim Beazley devoting only eight lines of his speech to anything other than his domestic issue agenda, dominated by jobs, health and education. Labor, then, "was staking its claims on domestic issues" (Charlton and Solomon, 2002: 4-5).

Figure 1**Newspoll/The Australian Primary Vote Intentions, 10 August –10 November 2001**

Source: www.newspoll.com.au. All poll results are primary vote intentions from Newspoll/The Australian published polls, the product of telephone surveys conducted in all states, and in both city and country areas. Respondents declaring themselves "uncommitted" or refusing to reply to the question on vote intention were omitted from the sample. Data were weighted to reflect the population's distribution.

For Prime Minister Howard and the Coalition Government, however, negative public sentiment about its performance had "turned" after two international crises dominated the media in the lead up to the election being called on 5 October: the Tampa asylum seekers incident in late August, and the 11 September terrorist attacks in America. With a daily TV focus on the standoff near Christmas Island – the Australian Government refusing to allow the hundreds of asylum seekers marooned on a Dutch cargo ship to land on Australian soil – and then the overwhelming media focus on terrorism, Howard and the Coalition inevitably benefited as the incumbents during a time of external threat. Howard, it is argued, fused the two issues, thereby assuring maximum gain from the refugee issue: "Because Howard had defined the issue as border protection and linked it with the 11 September terrorist attacks, asylum seekers had become a defence issue" (Charlton, 2002: 79). It was a theme, presented regularly in the context of resolute leadership, that culminated in Howard's Liberal Party campaign launch speech on 28 October, when he proclaimed: "we will decide who comes to Australia and the circumstances under which they come" (Charlton and Solomon, 2002: 1).

And yet, despite their emotive power, international issues appear not alone to have won the election for the Coalition.² While voters strongly favoured the Coalition over Labor on the issues of refugees and asylum seekers, immigration and terrorism, the vote gain resulting from these issues was relatively small (Bean and McAllister, 2002: 11) – Labor gains coming primarily from voter evaluations of education and taxation. Bean and McAllister conclude: “The Coalition’s fortunes had well and truly turned around before the election campaign and in that sense, there was a degree of inevitability about the outcome” (Bean and McAllister, 2002: 13).

Given the assumptions of the Converse and Zaller models, outlined above, another way of explaining the relative insignificance of international issues in the Coalition’s fortunes is that the issues appealed to different voters making vote choices at different times during the campaign. This analysis is pursued next.

Anticipated patterns

Because of the clear cut partisan orientation of each of the two sets of issues, International and Domestic, and their dominance at different times in the campaign period, these two issues agendas are expected to generate distinctly different electoral effects for the two parties’ fortunes.

International crisis and external threat historically benefit the incumbent (Bean and McAllister, 2002, forthcoming: 2), while unpopular economic and social policies in uncertain times tend to prompt support for the opposition. As the 2001 Australian election campaign experienced the emergence of a high profile set of international issues just at the election campaign began, one might expect significant vote gains for the incumbent government from voters oriented toward these issues. However, because voters with different sorts of evaluative skills and prior information decide their votes at different junctures of the election campaign, it is anticipated that international and domestic issues will affect different voters’ issue orientations, and their vote choices, in different ways. Those deciding before the campaign, despite the extremely high profile of international crisis, are anticipated, by and large, to resist that issue orientation, and the contemplation of a vote change, due to the resilience of their existing political information,

² Former Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke, concludes differently: “Tampa...was an absolute creation, a deliberate perversion of politics by the Howard Government raising all the questions of security, and then out of the clear blue sky you had September 11 and Labor had no hope” (Schubert, 2002: 7).

awareness, and partisan loyalties. Those deciding close to election day are likely to have contemplated vote change, but not to utilize international issues as a key issue in that process. This is the case in part, because the Labor campaign had succeeded, by its middle stages, in reinvigorating the discussion of domestic issues through its advertising, the leaders' debate and its campaign launch (Charlton and Solomon, 2002: 4-5) and because these primarily low-educated voters are more likely to be responsive to Labor, all things being equal. Moderately interested, issue-oriented individuals, who tend to decide their vote very early in the campaign, and are susceptible to media information, are expected to be the most affected by international issues, and to use that orientation to reinforce their vote for the Coalition, but not to employ it as the basis for a switch to the Coalition from another party.

Data and methods

This paper utilizes two sets of data. The first is an original content analysis of a sample of TV election campaign news coverage of the 2001 Australian federal election campaign (5 October - 10 November). Channel 9 and ABC evening news bulletins were recorded across the campaign, and the content analysed in terms of the time devoted to various issues and leaders, and the prominence within the bulletin of those items (see Appendix A for discussion, and Table A in Appendix A for issue rankings). These measurements are used to establish a ranking of TV coverage devoted to international and domestic issues, and to graph the timing of that coverage across the campaign. The second data set utilized in this paper is the 2001 Australian Election Study, a self-completion survey of the Australian electorate, conducted in the weeks following the 2001 federal election. These data, merged with the TV content analysis measures, are used to test the extent to which voters with varying levels of political interest differed in their issue orientation, their vote choices, and the timing of those decisions.

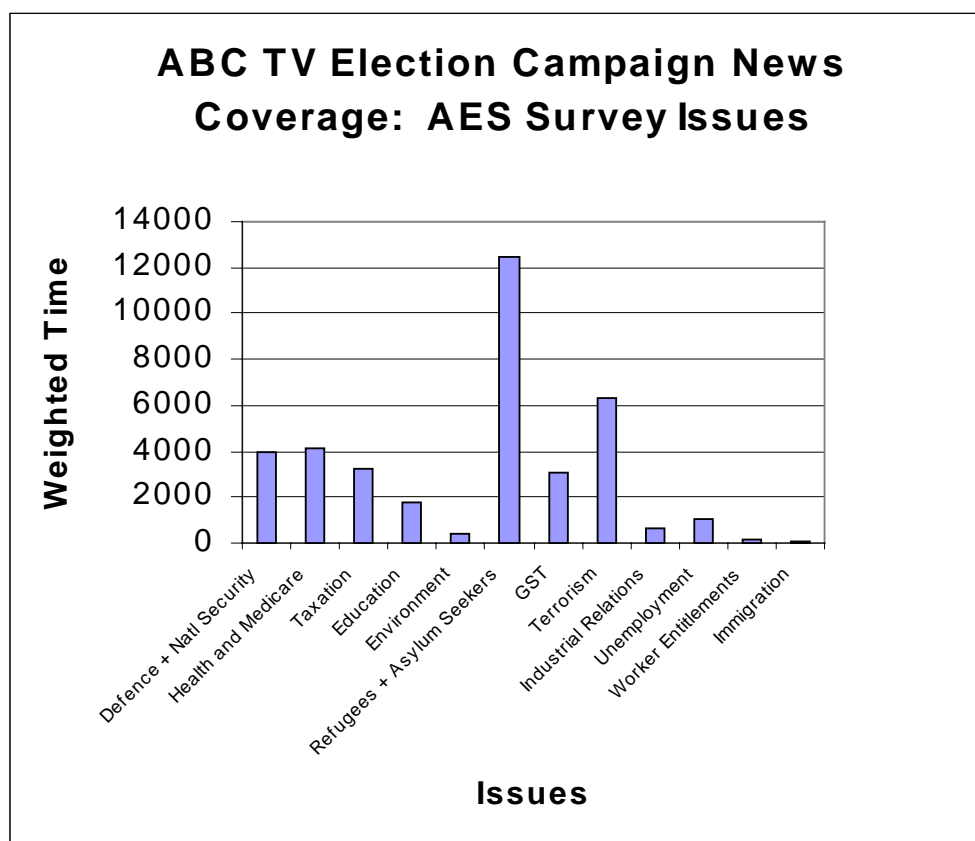
Findings and discussion:

Patterns of TV coverage: International and domestic issues

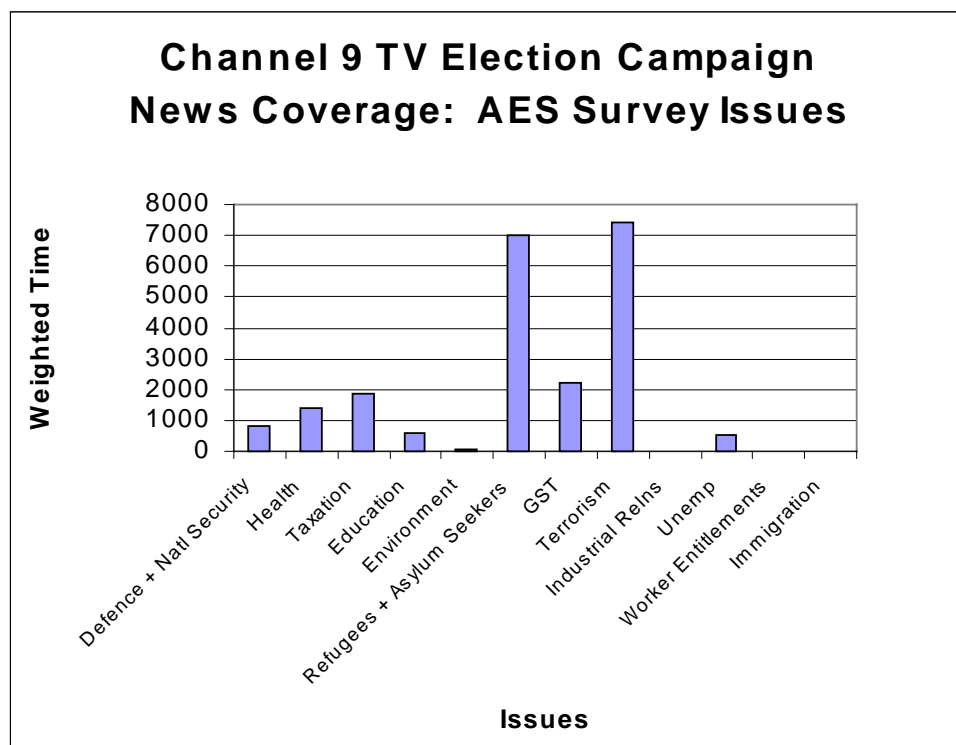
Amongst the 12 concerns used by the Australian Election Survey to tap voter evaluations, we can see in Figure 1 that the two most highly-covered issues for both the ABC and Channel 9 were Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and Terrorism³.

Figure 2a:

ABC TV evening news campaign coverage of the 12 AES issues



³ Several issues received modest TV coverage that were not amongst the list available to AES respondents to choose from. These included Telstra, Aged Care, and Preference Deals – their exclusion from this analysis does not appreciably affect the overall balance of TV coverage and, hence, the analysis utilizing this distinction.

Figure 2b:**Channel 9 TV evening news campaign coverage of the 12 AES issues**

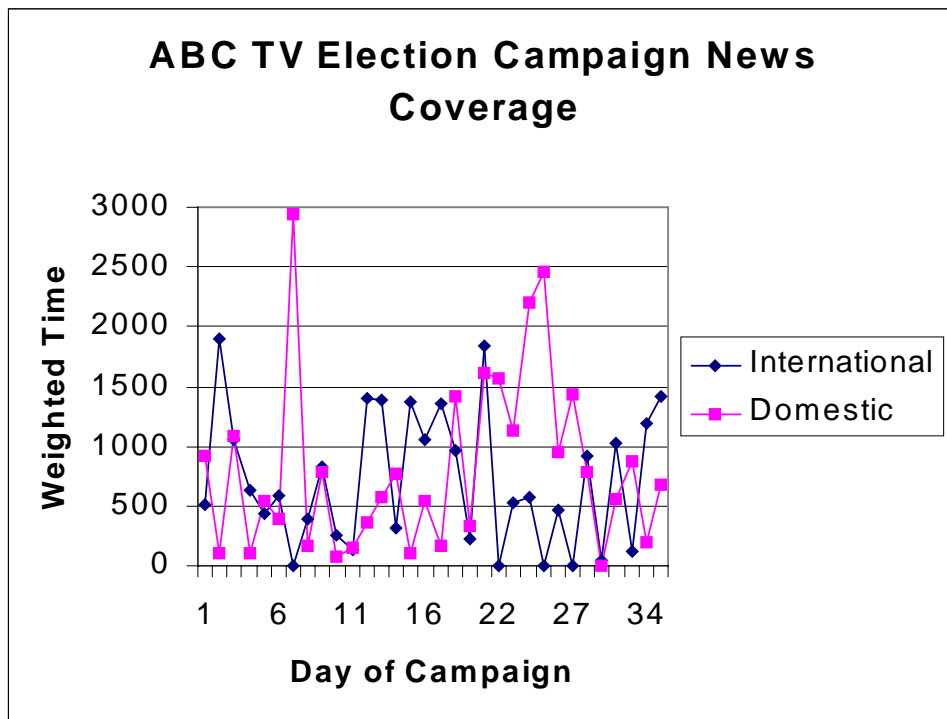
At the same time, a third international issue, National Defence and Security, attracted only moderate coverage, while a fourth international issue, Immigration, attracted next to no coverage as a stand-alone issue.

The 8 domestic issues (Health, Education, Taxation, the Environment, GST, Industrial Relations, Unemployment and Work Entitlements), though receiving lower individual coverage than either of the two high-profile International concerns, collectively received more coverage from the ABC than did the four International issues (27,000 weighted seconds versus 23,000 weighted seconds)⁴. At the same time, Channel 9's evening news bulletins devoted more attention to International than to Domestic concerns (15,250 versus 12,750 weighted seconds).

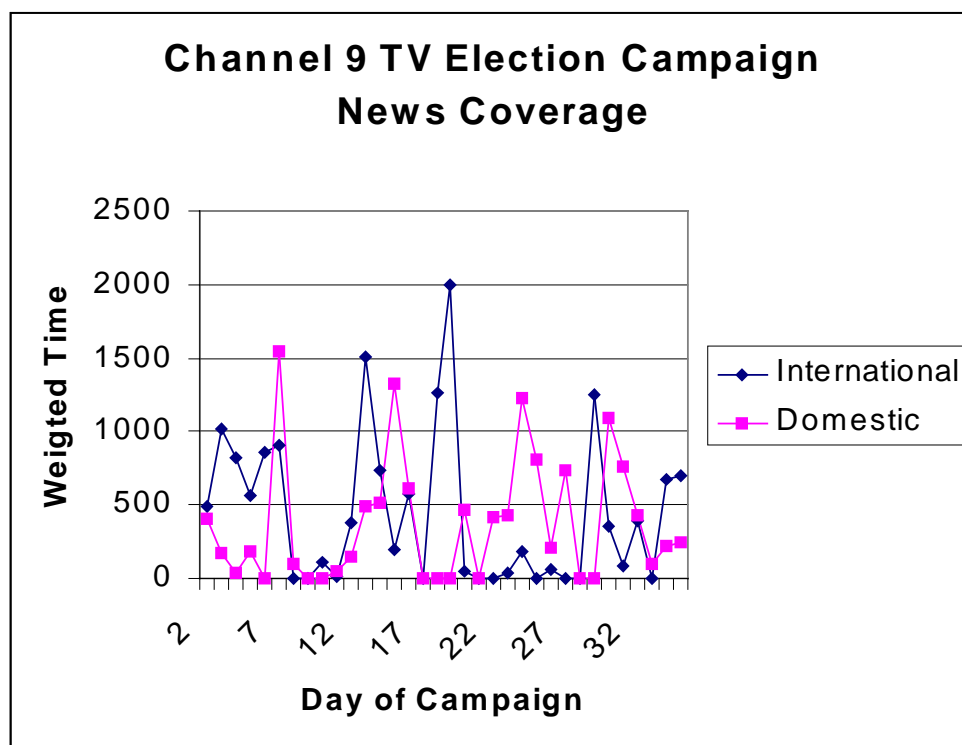
⁴ See Appendix A for a discussion of the TV content analysis techniques and measurements utilized to establish weighted times and rankings for all issues.

Figure 3a:

ABC TV evening news election campaign coverage of international and domestic issues



Figures 3a and 3b plot the coverage given International and Domestic issues by the ABC and Channel 9 across the 5-week campaign (5 October – 10 November). Several spikes in coverage for the two sets of issues are evident, broadly echoing key moments in the campaign: the early emphasis on terrorism and refugees, the leaders’ debate, which Beazley used to focus on domestic issues (14 October), the drowning of over 300 asylum seekers on their way to Australia (20 October), the Liberal campaign launch (28 October), the Labor campaign launch (31 October) and the final-week debate about whether the Government had deceived the public concerning the 7 October “children overboard” incident. All told, these issue rankings and graphs point to the 2001 election campaign as both divided and oscillating between two sets of issues, each receiving significant levels of TV coverage. The discussion below assesses the extent to which these two groups of concerns figured in different voters’ evaluations and in vote decision-making.

Figure 3b:**Channel 9 TV evening news election campaign coverage of international and domestic issues**

Source for Figures 2a, 2b, 3a and 3b: Original content analysis of ABC TV and Channel 9 Evening News, Perth. See Appendix A for details.

The electoral effects of international and domestic issues

Central to this analysis, given the theoretical discussion above, are the following analytic components:

- 1) exposure to TV campaign news coverage;
- 2) the level of individuals' political interest and awareness;
- 3) the timing of their vote decision;
- 4) the extent to which they absorb TVs issue agenda; and
- 5) the consideration of changing one's vote preference during the election campaign.

Table 1
Considered International Issues Most Important in Vote Decision
Logistic Regression

Independent Variable	Dep. Variable Considered International Issues Most Important in Vote Decision INTLVOTE
TV Campaign News Exposure CAMPTV4	.03 (.09)
Considered Changing Vote During Campaign CAMPCHNG	-.36** (.16)
Political Information and Interest Scale INTINFO	.06* (.03)
Congruence of TV's and Respondent's Issue Agenda ABC9RANK	.06** (.02)
Care Who Wins Election CAREWINS	.10 (.17)
Strong Party ID STRONGID	-.09 (.16)
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	-.17 (.16)
Age AGE	.01** (.01)
Gender (Female) FEMALE	.07 (.14)
High Education HIGHEDUC	-.40 (.15)
High Income INCOME	-.01 (.02)
Constant	-1.82** (.42)
-2 LogLikelihood	1339.48
N	1012

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Source: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis (see Appendix A for details).

Tables 1, 2 and 3 use logistic regressions to assess the independent effects of these factors on voters' issue orientation, vote decision-making and vote choice. Each model controls for an identical set of attitudinal factors that might also be expected to have an impact on these effects: concern for who wins the election (CAREWINS), the strength of the respondent's party identification (STRONGID), and whether or not the individual had switched their House of Representatives vote from that in the 1998 federal election

(VOLATILE). Four demographic variables are also included in each model to isolate their independent effects: the respondent's age (AGE), gender (FEMALE), level of education (HIGHEDUC) and household income (INCOME) (see Appendix A for details on all measures and scales used).

Table 1 examines the influence of these factors on the likelihood of considering International issues as more important than Domestic issues in respondents' vote decision. Counter-intuitively, exposure to TV campaign news coverage (CAMPTV4) has an insignificant effect on affirming International issues as most important in individuals' vote choice, despite Refugees and Asylum Seekers, and Terrorism representing the two most highly-covered issues in the TV election campaign news (See Figures 2a and 2b above). An explanation for this apparent anomaly is evident in the effects for the other key variables in the model. First, those who most closely absorbed TV's issue agenda (ABC9RANK) are significantly more likely than those who chose issues receiving low TV coverage to consider International issues as the most important in their vote choice. This suggests, as established in previous research (Denemark, 2002) that exposure to TV news and absorption of TV's issue agenda are two different functions, affecting in different ways low- and moderately-aware voters (and, as a consequence, voters who decided their votes in the last days of the of the campaign, and in the first days of the campaign). The weak link between late deciders and International issues is evident in the significant, negative effect for those who considered changing their House of Representatives first preference during the campaign (CAMPCHNG). These respondents were significantly less likely than those who did not consider switching vote preferences during the campaign to view International issues as the most important in their vote choice. Stated in the obverse, those contemplating vote change during the campaign were significantly more likely than non-changers to view Domestic issues as the most important in their vote decision.

Table 2 examines these factors on the likelihood of considering a change in House of Representatives first preference vote during the campaign period. Here (as in Table 1) we see that those who consider International issues the most important in their vote decision (INTLVOTE) are significantly less likely than those favouring Domestic issues to contemplate a vote preference change during the campaign period. At the same time, those individuals whose issue orientation whose most closely echoed heavily covered issues in TV campaign coverage (ABC9RANK) are not significantly more likely to consider changing their votes than those who did not absorb TV's issue agenda. We can also see that both high exposure to TV (CAMPTV4) and high levels of prior political interest and information (INTINFO) are significantly associated with considering a campaign-period vote change.

Table 2
Considered Changing Vote During 2001 Election Campaign
Logistic Regression

Independent Variable	Dep. Variable Considered Changing Vote During 2001 Election Campaign CAMPCHNG
TV Campaign News Exposure CAMPTV4	.18* (.11)
International Issues Most Important in Vote Choice INTLVOTE	-.40** (.16)
Late Vote Decision B4	.24** (.05)
Political Information and Interest Scale INTINFO	.13** (.04)
Congruence of TV's and Respondent's Issue Agenda ABC9RANK	.02 (.02)
Care Who Wins Election CAREWINS	-.30 (.20)
Strong Party ID STRONGID	-.14 (.19)
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	.90** (.17)
Age AGE	-.01** (.01)
Gender (Female) FEMALE	.34** (.16)
High Education HIGHEDUC	.10 (.18)
High Income INCOME	-.05** (.02)
Constant	-2.47** (.52)
-2 LogLikelihood	1029.70
N	1011

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Source: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis (see Appendix A for details).

Table 3
Vote, Contemplated Vote Change and Vote Switch for the Coalition, House of
Representatives Vote, 2001 Election
Three Logistic Regressions

Independent Variable	MODEL ONE	MODEL TWO	MODEL THREE
	Dep.Variable Coalition House of Reps Vote 2001 Election	Dep.Variable Considered Giving Changing First Pref. To Coalition During Campaign	Dep.Variable Switched House Vote to Coalition in 2001 from 1998
	COALVOTE	COALPREF	COALSWIT
TV Campaign News Exposure CAMPTV4	.03 (.09)	.44** (.21)	-.11 (.17)
Internat'l Issues Most Imp. in Vote1.23** INTLVOTE	.28 (.14)	.24 (.30)	(.25)
Late Vote Decision B4	.03** (.04)	.11 (.09)	.21** (.07)
Political Info. & Interest Scale INTINFO	-.07* (.04)	.02 (.08)	.02 (.06)
Congruence of TV's and Indivs.' Issues ABC9RANK	.02 (.02)	.04 (.04)	.04 (.03)
Care Who Wins Election CAREWINS	.65** (.19)	-.71** (.37)	.23 (.32)
Strong Party ID STRONGID	-.13 (.17)	-.07 (.35)	-.18 (.29)
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	-.54** (.17)	-- --	-- --
Age AGE	.01** (.00)	-.02 (.01)	-.02** (.01)
Gender (Female) FEMALE	-.25* (.14)	.25 (.31)	-.48* (.26)
High Education HIGHEDUC	-.25 (.16)	-.35 (.36)	-.23 (.31)
High Income INCOME	.08* (.02)	-.03 (.03)	-.06** (.03)
Constant	-1.99** (.47)	-3.86** (.97)	-2.19** .79
-2 Log Likelihood	1245.53	393.80	510.94
N	1017	1054	1064

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Source: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis (see Appendix A for details).

As discussed in the theoretical review above, these inconsistencies serve as reminders that these factors seldom have simple, monotonic effects on electoral evaluations and behaviour. Indeed, they assume their most important electoral implications when considered in interaction with each other, for different types of voters, distinguished by level of political interest, and the timing of the vote decision – the analysis pursued in the next section.

Similar patterns are evident in Table 3's three models predicting vote choice. In Model One, predicting House of Representatives vote, we see that individuals who view International issues as the most important issues in their vote decision-making (INTLVOTE) are, as expected, strongly and significantly more likely than those embracing Domestic issues, to vote for the Liberal-National Coalition. However, late vote decision-making (B4) and low levels of political information and interest (INTINFO) are both significant predictors of Coalition voting, while exposure to TV campaign news (CAMPTV4) and absorption of the TV issue agenda (ABC9RANK) have insignificant effects on the likelihood of casting a vote for the Coalition incumbents. The problem, of course, if Bean and McAllister (2002) are correct, is that International issues may well have served only to reinforce re-campaign intentions to vote for the Coalition, and not to precipitate campaign-period vote defections.

Model Two in Table 3 examines the impact of these same factors (except, for obvious reasons, VOLATILE) on the likelihood of individuals considering switching their House of Representatives first preference vote to the Coalition during the campaign. Here, we can see that while high exposure to TV campaign news coverage (CAMPTV4) was significantly associated with switching preferences to the Coalition during the 5-week campaign, an International issue-orientation (INTLVOTE) has no equivalent significant impact. Thus, despite a significant reliance on International issues for Coalition voters overall (Model One) these issues were not significantly more likely than Domestic issues to prompt the contemplation of a change in vote intention to the Coalition. We can also see that the level of voters' prior information and information (INTINFO) and closeness with which they affirm TV's issue agenda (ABC9RANK) were had insignificant effects on the likelihood of respondents considering switching their vote to the Coalition during the campaign.

Similarly, in Model Three, which examines the influence of these factors on individuals switching their House vote to the Coalition in the 2001 election from another party in the 1998 election, one sees again that those viewing International issues as most important in their vote decision (INTLVOTE) were not more likely to switch to the Coalition than those who felt Domestic issues were the most important in their vote choice. At the same time,

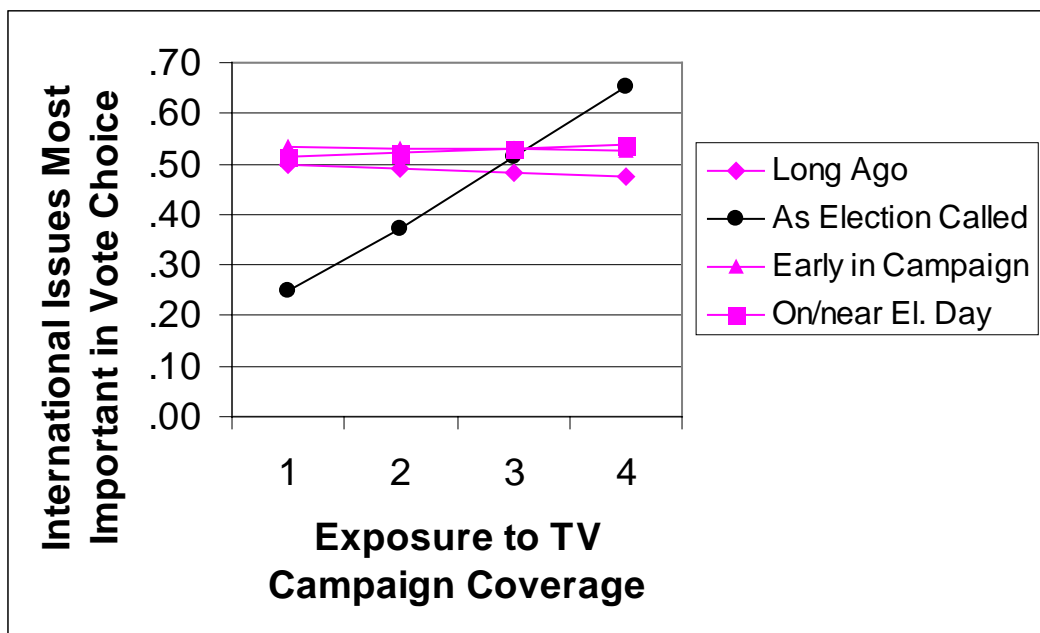
TV campaign news, the level of voters' political interest and information (INTINFO), and the extent of congruence between their choice of important issues and those receiving high levels of TV coverage (ABC9RANK) were all insignificant predictors of vote switching to the Coalition. Considered in tandem with the patterns in Model One, showing, amongst other things, significant effects for International issues and voters' interest and information levels, these results suggest the need to explore the interactive effects of TV exposure, issue orientation, interest and information, and vote choice timing. As argued in the theoretical discussion above, it is only in these factors' interaction that we can uncover their differential effects.

Interaction effects models of issue orientation and vote choice

Voters with differential levels of political interest and information use different sorts of media cues to inform their vote decision-making, which they finalize at different times of the election calendar. My previous research (Denmark, 2002) established that those who decide near the time an election is called are those with moderate levels of political interest and awareness, and the group most likely to absorb the TV issue agenda, but not to use those issue-based cues in the vote choice calculus. If so, then perhaps part of the solution to the inconsistencies in the logit models above, is that while International issues are significantly associated with Coalition voting overall, they are not with last-minute switchers who, across the campaign, may well have absorbed a Domestic issue orientation as TV coverage, advertising and party launches began to convey the Domestic issue agenda. Certainly this is consistent with the patterns of party support in Figure 1 above, which plots Newspoll/The Australian survey results of vote intentions over the period from mid-August to election day on 10 November. While Labor led in the days before the Tampa crisis (26 August) a significant 15% advantage was realized by the Coalition across September and the first part of October, only to see it whittled down to a 5% lead by election day.

Figure 4

Interaction effects of exposure to TV election campaign news with timing of vote decision on considering international issues as the most important in the vote decision



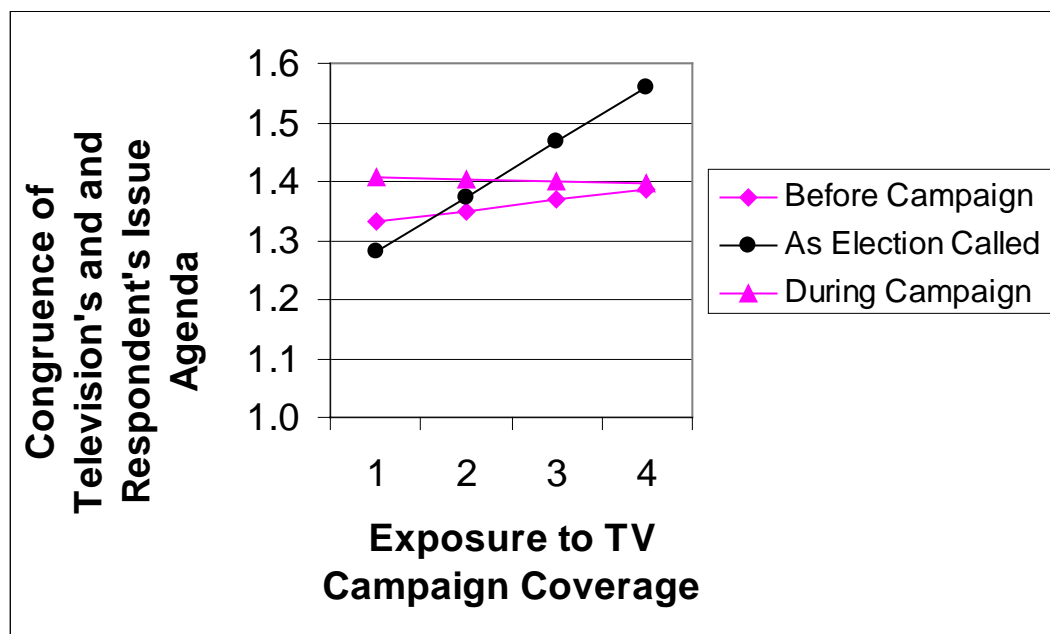
Sources: 2001 Australian Election Study; and original television election campaign news content analysis.

See Appendix B (Model for Figure 4) for the logistic regression from which these probability figures are derived. Probabilities are for those respondents who made their vote choice a long time ago--before the campaign, as the election was being called, early in the campaign, and on or near election day. All other variables are held constant at the means (for interval variables) or modes (for dummy variables).

Figure 4 examines the impact of exposure to TV campaign news coverage for four different groups of voters on their likelihood of considering International issues as the most important in their vote choice: those who decided their vote “long ago, before the campaign;” those who decided “around the time the election was called”; those who decided in the “first few weeks” of the campaign; and those who decided “on or near election day”. The probabilities plotted in Figure 4 derive from logistic regression analysis, utilizing interaction effects. As these statistics are notoriously difficult to convey, the four groups’ main variable coefficient probabilities are plotted, while all other variables in the model are held constant at either their means (for interval variables) or modes (for dummy variables).

Figure 5

Interaction effects of exposure to 2001 TV election campaign news with timing of vote decision on TV agenda setting



Sources: 2001 Australian Election Study; and original television election campaign news content analysis.

See Appendix B (Model for Figure 5) for the multiple regression from which these probability figures are derived. Probabilities are for those respondents who made their vote choice before the campaign, as the election was being called, and during the campaign. All other variables are held constant at the means (for interval variables) or modes (for dummy variables).

The result, in Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7, are plots of the groups' main interaction effects regression coefficients that allow the reader easily to see the differential effects central to this analysis. Note that the complete regression models are presented in Appendix B, while a detailed discussion of how to interpret interaction effects in regression analysis is provided in Appendix C.

As anticipated in the discussion above, one can see that the only group for which there is a significant effect for exposure to TV coverage on considering International issues as most important in their vote decision are those who decided about the time the election was called. The other three groups of voters, though they all exhibit a substantial likelihood of viewing International issues as more important, are essentially unaffected by TV viewing in those issue orientations. Given high levels of TV news viewing, those who decided their vote as the election was being called are more than 10% more likely to use International issues in their vote decision as those individuals deciding at any other time.

This effect seems likely to reflect a purely temporal component as well as an effect for the interaction between individuals' information levels and media exposure: those making their vote choice as the election was called did so at a time dominated by International issues in the mass media.

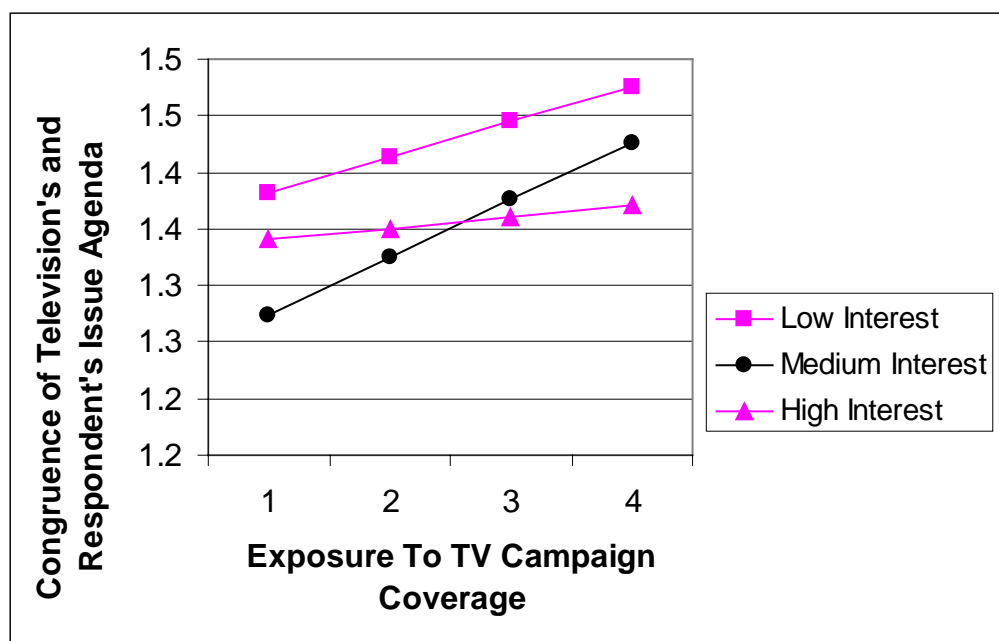
Figure 5 explores the extent to which different groups of voters selected issues as important in their vote considerations that had been heavily covered in TV campaign news ("agenda-setting"). Figure 5, as with Figure 4, isolates the group of individuals who made their vote decision about the time the election was called and compares the effect of TV coverage on absorption of the TV issue agenda for them, and for those deciding their vote before the campaign, and those deciding during the 5-week campaign. Once again, we see a significant effect for exposure to TV news coverage on the likelihood of citing heavily-covered TV issues as being the most important for those individuals deciding their vote about the time the election was called. Those who decided during the campaign were significantly less likely to translate TV news coverage into an echoing of the TV issue agenda. At the same time, those who decided before the campaign, though insignificantly different from our key group – those deciding as the election was called – are clearly far less likely to respond to TV exposure by absorbing the TV issue agenda. As Converse would suggest, these patterns suggest that those voters who decided their vote long before the campaign, given high levels of political loyalties and political interest and awareness, effectively tuned out campaign cues. At the same time, those deciding during the campaign were deciding while the Domestic issues were receiving more coverage, and far more likely to turn to Domestic issues – those receiving lower TV coverage (see Figures 2a and 2b).

Figure 6, employing the approach central to the Converse and Zaller models, divides respondents into three levels of existing political interest and awareness: low, medium and high (see discussion of INTINFO in Appendix A for details). Figure 6 illustrates the extent to which exposure to TV campaign news coverage is translated by each of these groups into selecting as their most important issues those receiving the highest levels of TV coverage. Evident in the plots is that, while the range of effects is small, all three groups positively translate TV exposure into a higher likelihood of citing highly-covered TV issues as the most important. Clearly, the strongest effect, as anticipated, is for those with medium interest, who have sufficient cognitive skills, but sufficiently weak existing loyalties and opinions, to be susceptible to media cues in the realm of political issue evaluation. The unanticipated strong effect for those with low interest – which is insignificantly lower than that of their counterparts with moderate interest, is likely a reflection of the way the agenda-setting measure (ABC9RANK) is constructed. Their positive score for issue agenda-setting may not, in fact, be a reflection of selecting

International issues, but perhaps of other higher profile Domestic issues (such as Health and Taxation) over lower profile Domestic issues (such as Industrial Relations, Unemployment, and Worker Entitlements). Certainly this is consistent with the effects of INTINFO in Table 1 above, in which high levels of interest and information (INTINFO) are significant predictors of choosing International issues as the most important issues in their vote decision.

Figure 6

Interaction effects of exposure to 2001 TV election campaign news with level of political interest/information on TV agenda setting



Sources: 2001 Australian Election Study; and original television election campaign news content analysis.

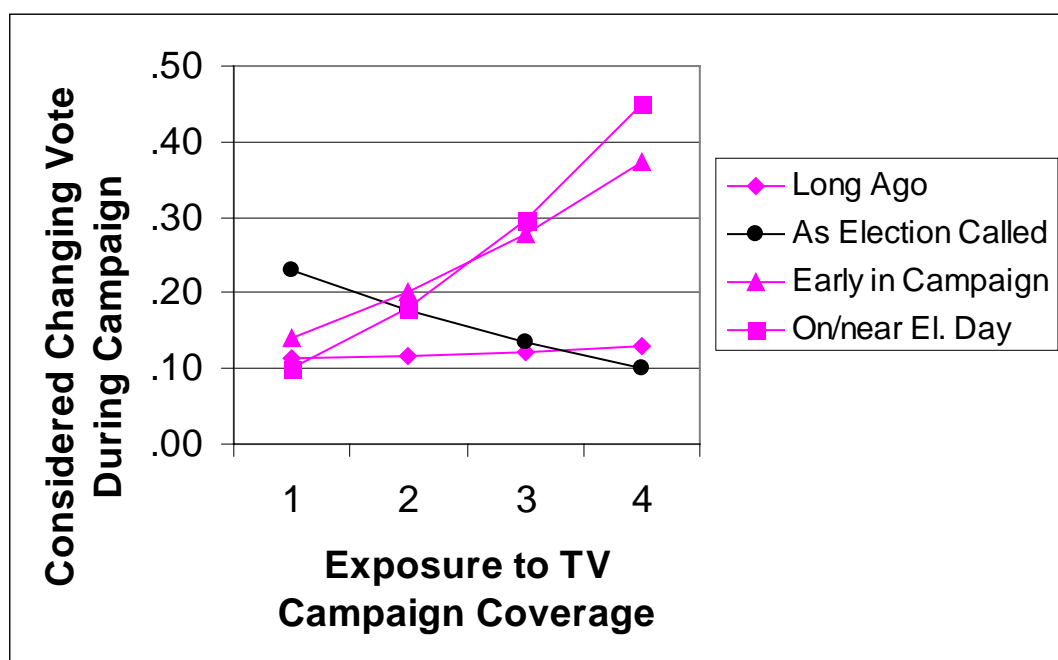
See Appendix B (Model for Figure 6) for the multiple regression from which these probability figures are derived. Probabilities are for those respondents with low, medium and high levels of political interest and information. All other variables are held constant at the means (for interval variables) or modes (for dummy variables).

As campaign 2001 had within it two distinct groups of issues, it is likely the least interested voters responded to TV cues – consistent with the notion that they are the least well equipped with existing information and beliefs to resist TV cues. Zaller might argue the especially high intensity of the campaign had prompted the least-interested to respond

to campaign cues; in this case almost certainly Labor's highest Domestic issues, Health, Education and Taxation.

Figure 7

Interaction effects of exposure to TV election campaign news with timing of vote decision on consideration of vote change



Sources: 2001 Australian Election Study; and original television election campaign news content analysis.

See Appendix B (Model for Figure 7) for the logistic regression from which these probability figures are derived. Probabilities are for those respondents who made their vote choice a long time ago--before the campaign, as the election was being called, early in the campaign, and on or near election day. All other variables are held constant at the means (for interval variables) or modes (for dummy variables).

These suspicions are borne out in Figure 7, which returns to four groups of respondents distinguished by the timing of their vote decision making and the way they translate exposure to TV campaign news coverage into the consideration of changing their vote during the campaign. Here, we see that those who decided as the election was being called - the only group significantly affected by TV coverage to view International issues as the most important (see Figure 4) are less likely to contemplate changing their vote during the campaign as their level of exposure to TV news increases. Those deciding "long ago" before the campaign were essentially unaffected by TV coverage, while those

deciding early in the campaign, and on or near election day, were significantly more likely to consider changing their vote during the 5-week campaign, given high levels of exposure to TV coverage. As we have already seen, these late vote decisions were not on the basis of International issues. Thus, it seems clear that TV coverage prompted significant rises in the likelihood of contemplating vote switches, almost certainly on the basis of Domestic issues. This connection can be seen in terms of the effect for VOLATILE. As one would expect, those who switched House of Representatives vote from the 1998 election were significantly more likely than non-switchers to contemplate campaign-period vote switches. But VOLATILE voters (see Table 1) were not significantly less likely than non-switchers to view International issues as the most important. In short, late deciders in the 2001 election were responsive to TV cues, but not in affirming International issues as the evaluative basis by which to guide their decision.

Conclusion

The results in this paper have several important implications for our understanding of political campaign information flow and the way voters with different amounts of political interest and information process TV cues in their evaluations and vote decision making. Because the 2001 Australian federal election involved the fusion of two distinct sets of issues – International and Domestic – which dominated the campaign at different times across its five weeks, and were differentially linked to the incumbent and opposition parties, it represents an opportunity to assess the interaction of voter predispositions and exposure to media cues within the context of their evaluations of two distinct, high profile sets of issues. It was anticipated that voters with different levels of political interest and awareness, who have been shown to make their political decisions at different times during the campaign, would be differentially susceptible to TV's messages and the role of these two different sets of issues.

The non-interaction regression models presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3 point to a significant link between TV issue agenda-setting and viewing International issues as the most important in individuals' vote decision-making. At the same time, however, those contemplating campaign-period vote changes relied on Domestic, not International, issues in their evaluations, but were likely to have high levels of existing interest/awareness and to have been exposed to high levels of TV coverage. Because previous research has shown late decision-makers tend to have low levels of political interest and information and to rely on TV cues, the inconsistent patterns in these models point to likelihood of complex

interactions between voters' existing information/awareness, their exposure to TV, and the timing of their vote decision in the 2001 federal election.

And, indeed, the interaction models provide substantiation for the existence of significant interactive effects between these factors. In Figure 4 we saw that it was only those voters deciding about the time the election was called who, given high levels of exposure to TV, viewed International issues as most important in their vote choice. In Figure 5, we saw that it was this same group of voters whose perceptions of the importance of political issues most closely echoed those issues receiving high levels of TV coverage. As Converse argued fifty years ago, those voters deciding their vote choice early in the campaign are mostly likely to use their moderate levels of interest and information to seek and utilize media cues to inform their vote decisions.

Clearly, this is echoed in the patterns of Figure 6, which showed those with moderate levels of political interest and information are most likely to respond to TV exposure by selecting vote choice issues that had been heavily covered in TV campaign news bulletins across the campaign. However, as Figure 7 shows, exposure to TV did not prompt the consideration of campaign period vote changes. This, we know from Table 2, remained the domain, by and large, of voters using Domestic issues to guide their decisions on or near election day.

Overall, then, while these results confirm Converse and Zaller's contentions that the effects of campaign information are mediated by individuals' predispositions, they point as well to a more novel possibility: that a single, high-intensity political campaign can sustain within it two distinct agendas which voters with different cognitive skills and responsiveness to TV cues differentially utilize to inform their vote choice. In part, as discussed above, the differential impact of these two sets of issues reflected the timing of these issues' dominance of the campaign - international concerns over terrorism and the highest profile incident concerning refugees and asylum seekers occurring just as the campaign got underway. But the figures show, as well, that those voters who made their decision at about that time were alone in exhibiting significant effects for their exposure to TV campaign news coverage. In short, while historical circumstance created Australia's bifurcated campaign - punctuating what had been an orthodox domestic election campaign with an additional set of international concerns - only one part of the electorate responded significantly to the TV-conveyed power of its international messages in its vote choice evaluations. But, as we have seen, these evaluations served more to confirm than to change their vote intentions. In the end, as Figure 1 shows, Labor made a late comeback on the basis of its Domestic issue agenda, but it proved insufficient to supplant the lead

created at the beginning of the campaign by those confirming Coalition votes on the basis of International issues.

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Appendix A

Variable codes, scales and measures

Demographics

FEMALE A dummy variable for respondent's gender: 1= female; 0=male. Original survey item [I1].

AGE A continuous variable for respondent's age. Original survey item [I2].

INCOME A 16-value variable for respondent's gross family income: 1=less than \$5,000/yr.; 16=more than \$100,000/yr. Original survey item [I17].

HIGHEDUC A dummy variable for respondent's level of education: 1= post-grad degree or diploma, bachelor degree, undergrad diploma, or associate diploma; 0=no qualification since leaving school, trade qualification, or non-trade qualification. Original survey item [H3].

Other control variables

STRONGID A dummy variable for strength of partisan identity: 1=very strong supporter, or fairly strong supporter; 0=not very strong supporter. Original survey item [B2].

VOLATILE A dummy variable for switching first preference House of Representatives vote between the 1993 and 1996 Federal elections: 1=switcher; 0=non-switcher. Original Survey items [B16 and B11REPS].

CAREWINS A dummy variable for "caring which party won the 1996 Federal election": 1=cared a good deal; 0= did not care very much, or did not care at all. Original survey item [B4].

INTINFO A 13-value summated rating scale for respondent's political interest and political information: 2=low interest/information; 14=high interest/information. INTINFO derives from responses to three survey items:

INT1 A 4-value variable for respondent's interest in politics in general: 4=a good deal; 3=some; 2=not much; 1=none. Original survey wording [A1]: "Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what's going on in politics?"

INT2 A 4-value variable for respondent's interest in the Federal election campaign: 4=a good deal; 3=some; 2=not much; 1=none. Original survey wording [A4]: "And how much interest would you say you took in the election campaign overall?"

POLINFO A 6-value variable for respondent's level of political information, deriving from answers to 9 questions in a "quiz on Australian government" [G22p1 to G22p6]:

1. Australia became a federation in 1901 (true).
2. There are 75 members of the House of Representatives (false).
3. The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court (false).
4. The Senate election is based on proportional representation (true).
5. No one may stand for Federal parliament unless they pay a deposit (true).
6. The longest time allowed between Federal elections for the House of Representatives is four years (false).

The final INTINFO scale was created by summing the scores for each of these three variables. A principal components factor analysis extracted one factor, with the following matrix:

Component Matrix^a

	Component
	1
INT1 (interest in politics)	.891
INT2 (interest in the election campaign)	.862
POLINFO (political information)	.672

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

Exposure to TV Election News Coverage

CAMPTV4 A 4-value variable for respondent exposure to TV election coverage: 4=a good deal; 3=some; 2=not much; 1=none at all. Original survey wording [A3p1]: “did you follow the election campaign news on television...?”

TV/Respondent issue ranking congruence

ABC9RANK A 21-value variable for the degree of congruence between those issues cited as most important to respondents in the Australian Election Survey (AES) and those issues receiving TV coverage during the 5-week election campaign: 21=high congruence; 1=low congruence (see Table A for discussion of the procedures used in content analysing TV news coverage, and in creating the ranking of issue coverage).

After deriving a ranking of issues covered in the TV election news, respondents were scored by the degree to which their “issue of most concern” [D3p1] and their “second issue of concern” [D3p2] were congruent with TV’s coverage-ranking of those issues. Original survey wording [D3p1 and D3p2]: “Still thinking about the same 12 issues, which of these issues has been most important to you and your family during the election campaign? And which next?”

The ranking of the 12 issues which were among the 12 listed on the AES questionnaire for respondents to choose from, in descending order of TV news coverage, were as follows:

TV-Covered Issues Listed in the AES

- Refugees + Asylum Seekers
- Terrorism
- Health
- Defence + National Security
- Taxation
- GST
- Education
- Unemployment

- Industrial Relations
- The Environment
- Worker Entitlements
- Immigration + Multiculturalism

Other issues received TV coverage during the Federal election campaign, but were not among the list provided in the AES questionnaire for respondents to choose from as issues of importance. These included:

TV-Covered Issues Not Included in the AES Questionnaire List of Issues

- Economic Conditions
- Aged Care
- Preference Deals
- Tourism
- Telstra
- Arts and Communications

Respondents were scored by the degree to which their “issue of most concern” and their “second issue of concern” echoed those receiving coverage in TV news broadcasts during the 5-week election campaign (5 October 2001 to 10 November 2001). Thus, if respondents cited “Refugees and Asylum Seekers” (the issue receiving the highest aggregate TV coverage) they were assigned the highest score of 11 (in a range of 0-11), since there was no difference between their top-ranked issue, and that receiving the most coverage on the TV election news. If they cited “Terrorism” (the issue receiving the second highest TV coverage) they received a score of 10, since there was a 1-place difference between the respondent’s top issue and TV’s top-covered issue -- and so on. If respondents cited the issue receiving the least TV coverage (Immigration and Multiculturalism) they received a score of 0. The same procedure was followed for respondents’ second issue choice. These two scores were then added, yielding a combined score for the closeness of congruence between the respondent’s self-perceived issues of most importance, and those receiving the most TV coverage. The result is a variable ranging from 1 to 21 in value (since the highest score is an 11 for the issue of most concern, and a 10 for the second issue of concern). ABC9RANK’s high scores=high issue congruence, while low scores =low issue congruence. In short, ABC9RANK measures the degree of correspondence between those

issues cited as being most important to respondents and those receiving different amounts of coverage in TV election news broadcasts during the final 5-week election campaign.

INTLVOTE A dummy variable for the degree to which respondents cite International issues as important when they were deciding about how to vote: 1=International issues were more important than Domestic issues in the vote decision; 0=Domestic issues were more important than, or of equal importance to, International issues in the vote decision.

For each of the 12 issues listed in the AES (see list in the discussion of ABC9RANK above) respondents were asked whether that issue was “extremely important,” “quite important,” or “not very important” when deciding about how to vote (original survey items [D2p1-D2p12]) -- scored 2, 1, and 0 respectively. The average score for the 4 International issues was then calculated, as was the average for the 8 Domestic issues. The final variable, INTLVOTE, was assigned a score of 1 if the respondent’s average score for TV-covered issues was greater than the average score for non-TV covered issues; 0 if the former score was less than or equal to the score of the latter. In short, INTLVOTE measures the relative importance of International versus Domestic issues in the respondent’s vote decision, but does not rank the issues by degree of coverage.

Other dependent political measures

CAMPCHNG A dummy variable for consideration of changing House of Representatives first preference vote choice during the election campaign: 1=considered changing; 0=did not consider changing. Original survey wording [B15]: “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?”

COALPREF A dummy variable for consideration of changing House of Representatives first preference vote choice to either the Liberal or Coalition parties during the election campaign: 1=considered changing; 0=did not consider changing. Original survey wording [B15]: “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?”

COALVOTE A dummy variable for 2001 House of Representatives first preference vote for either party in the Coalition. 1= Coalition; 0=any other party. Original survey

wording [B11REPS]: “In the Federal election for the House of Representative on Saturday 10 November, which party did you vote for **first** in the House of Representatives?”

COALSWIT A dummy variable for switching House of Representatives first preference votes to either Coalition party between the 1998 and 2001 elections. 1= switched in 2001 to the Coalition; 0=did not switch votes to the Coalition. Original survey wording [B11REPS]: “In the Federal election for the House of Representative on Saturday 10 November, which party did you vote for **first** in the House of Representatives?” and {B16}: “In the last Federal election in October 1998, when Labor was led by Kim Beazley and the Liberals by John Howard, which party got your first preference then in the House of Representatives election?”

Political interest and information/TV News exposure terms

INTLODUM A dummy variable for respondents with low political interest/information. Respondents with INTINFO scores of 2-6 (see discussion above) were scored 1. All other respondents =0. This variable produces an intercept for those respondents scored 1. Note, this division of the INTINFO scale was chosen by applying the standard deviation of INTINFO (2.75) to its mean (8.34), yielding a lower dividing point of 5.59 (approximately 6) and an upper dividing point of 11.09 (approximately 11).

INTHIDUM A dummy variable for respondents with high political interest/information. Respondents with INTINFO scores of 11-14 (see discussion above) were scored 1. All other respondents =0. This variable produces an intercept for those respondents scored 1. See discussion for INTLODUM for logic used to create this measure.

INTLOINT An interaction term for TV campaign news exposure, for those respondents with low levels of political interest/information. This term produces a regression slope estimate for the effect of exposure to TV campaign news for those respondents with low political interest/information (those scored 1 in INTLODUM).

INTHIINT An interaction term for TV campaign news exposure, for those respondents with high levels of political interest/information. This term produces a regression slope estimate for the effect of exposure to TV campaign news for those

respondents with high political interest/information (those scored 1 in INTLIDUM).

CAMPTV4 In models which include the interaction terms for political interest and information/TV news exposure (INTLOINT and INTIINT) CAMPTV4 produces a regression slope for the effect of TV news exposure for those respondents with a medium level of political interest and information -- those not scored 1 in either INTLODUM or INTLIDUM above (namely, those scoring a moderate score of 7-10 in the variable INTINFO). (See discussion of INTLODUM above for logic used in creating this measure).

Timing of voting decision/TV exposure interaction terms

ERLYDUM A dummy variable for respondents making an early vote choice: 1="a few months ago; before the election was announced" or "a long time ago" (Original survey item: B4).

CAMPDUM A dummy variable for respondents making a vote choice about the time the election was called: 1= "about the time the election was called" Original survey item: B4).

LATEDUM A dummy variable for respondents making a late vote: 1= ""in the first few weeks of the campaign," "a few days before election day" or "on election day" (Original survey item: B4).

ERLYINT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate for the effect of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making an early vote choice (those scored 1 in ERLYDUM).

CAMPINT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate the effect of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making a vote choice about the time the election was called (those scored 1 in CAMPDUM).

LATEINT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate for the effects of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making a late vote choice (those scored 1 in LATEDUM).

CAMPTV4 In models which include the interaction terms for the timing of the respondent's vote decision (ERLYINT, LATEINT) CAMPTV4 produces a regression slope estimate for the effect of TV news exposure for those respondents who made

their vote choice “about the time the election was called” -- those not coded 1 in ERLYDUM or LATEDUM.

4-fold timing of voting decision/TV exposure interaction terms

BFOR4DUM A dummy variable for respondents making an early vote choice: 1=“a few months ago; before the election was announced” or “a long time ago” (Original survey item: B4).

CALL4DUM A dummy variable for respondents making a vote choice about the time the election was called: 1= “about the time the election was called” Original survey item: B4).

ERLY4DUM A dummy variable for respondents making an vote choice early in the campaign: 1=“In the first few weeks of the campaign” (Original survey item: B4).

LATE4DUM A dummy variable for respondents making a late vote: 1= “a few days before election day” or “on election day” (Original survey item: B4).

BFOR4INT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate the effect of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making a vote choice about the time the election was called (those scored 1 in BFOR4DUM).

CALL4INT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate the effect of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making a vote choice about the time the election was called (those scored 1 in CALL4DUM).

ERLY4INT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate for the effect of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making a vote choice in the first few weeks of the campaign (those scored 1 in ERLY4DUM).

LATEINT An interaction term which creates a regression slope estimate for the effects of TV campaign news exposure for those respondents making a late vote choice (those scored 1 in LATE4DUM).

CAMPTV4 In models which include the interaction terms for the 4-fold timing of the respondent’s vote decision (BFOR4INT, ERLY4INT, LATE4INT) CAMPTV4 produces a regression slope estimate for the effect of TV news exposure for those respondents who made their vote choice “about the time the election was called” -- those not coded 1 in BFOR4DUM, ERLY4DUM or LATE4DUM.

Procedures used in the content analysis of TV election news

Following the announcement of the 10 November 2001 Federal election on 5 October, video recordings were made of two evening TV election news broadcasts: Channel 9 and the ABC news. The most watched 6:00pm news bulletin in Australia (Channel 9) -- which is broadcast with some different emphases by local news teams in the major capitals -- was recorded in Perth. The ABC 7:00 evening news was also recorded in Perth. Again, while ABC news varies in emphasis between metropolitan areas, these are of sufficient comparability to merit reliance on that from Perth. 28.6% of AES respondents reported relying on Channel 9 TV for their evening TV news, while 24.8% relied on the ABC -- representing 53.4% of the AES sample.

For each election news item, the following details were noted in the record of transcription: The date of the item; its length of duration; and the placement of the story in the sequence of that bulletin's stories (first, second, third, etc.). The recorded time for each election news item was used to measure the story's prominence, which was weighted by its placement in the larger bulletin -- a technique routinely employed to measure the relative prominence of different parts of newscasts. This was done by multiplying the actual duration of the news story by the inverse numerical rank of the story's appearance in the sequence of the news bulletin. Thus, assuming a notional 30-minute news bulletin of 10 stories, if, for example, a news story on health was 90 seconds in length, and appeared third in the bulletin, those 90 seconds were weighted by 8 -- or 720 seconds of weighted air time. The result, then, is a ranking of election issues for each channel reflecting both their air time and the prominence of their placement in the news bulletin. The relative coverage of issues by the different channels is summarized in Table A below.

Using weighted time as the measure for issue prominence in TV election news coverage, the various issues were ranked for each channel, and an overall, cumulative ranking then ascertained. The result is a ranking for the 12 issues which both received TV coverage in the 5-week election campaign, and were included in the AES pool of issues. It is the ranking of these 12, which is utilized in the TV issue measures ABC9RANK discussed above.

Table A:

2001 TV election campaign news coverage
Total weighted times and ranks

AES Issues	ABC Total Weighted Time	ABC Rank	Channel 9 Total Weighted Time	Channel 9 Rank	Aggreg Time	Aggreg Rank
Refugees + Asylum Seekers	12499	1	6991	2	19490	1
Terrorism	6340	2	7473	1	13813	2
Health	4157	3	1395	5	5552	3
Defence + National Security	3929	4	814	6	4743	6
Taxation	3206	5	1851	4	5057	5
GST	3056	6	2237	3	5293	4
Education	1759	7	613	7	2372	7
Unemployment	1079	8	516	8	1595	8
Industrial Relations	634	9	0	11	634	9
The Environment	366	10	58	9	424	10
Worker Entitlements	150	11	10	10	160	11
Immigration + Multiculturalism	112	12	0	12	112	12

Special thanks are due to Joanna Devereux for her diligence in content analysing the video recordings, and in performing the issue classifications used in this content analysis.

Appendix B: Models for probability figures

Model for Figure 4

Interaction effects of exposure to TV election campaign news with timing of vote decision on considering international issues most important in vote decision Logistic Regression

Independent Variable	Dep. Variable Considered International Issues Most Important INTLVOTE	
<i>Interaction Effects in Italics</i>		
<i>TV News Exposure: Vote Choice Long Ago</i> BFOR4INT	-.61** (.26)	-.03**
EX: TV New Exposure: Vote Choice As Election Called CAMPTV4	.58** (.26)	.58**
<i>TV News Exposure: Vote Choice Early in Campaign</i> ERLY4INT	-.59 (.40)	-.01
<i>TV News/Agenda-Setting: Vote Choice On or Near El. Day</i> LATE4INT	-.55* (.30)	.03*
Dummy: Vote Choice Long Ago BFOR4DUM	1.71** (.83)	
Dummy: Vote Choice Early in Campaign ERLY4DUM	1.83 (1.20)	
Dummy: Vote Choice On or Near El. Day LATE4DUM	1.72** (.90)	
Interest and Information Scale INTINFO	.05 (.03)	
Care Who Wins the Election CAREWINS	.17 (.17)	
Strong Party ID STRONGID	-.05 (.16)	
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	-.31** (.16)	
Age AGE	.01** (.01)	
Gender (Female) FEMALE	.10 (.13)	
High Education HIGHEDUC	-.45** (.15)	
High Income INCOME	.00 (.02)	
Constant	-2.72** (.83)	
-2 Log Likelihood	1395.20	
N	1040	

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients (b), with the standard error on line below in parentheses.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Excluded dummy group/main effect (**EX**): those who made their vote choice a 'as election was called'.

The main effect and interaction effects coefficients in **bold** result from adding the original main effect to those of the interaction term coefficients. It is these coefficients that are plotted in the probability figure (Figure 4).

*Sources: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis
(see Appendix A for details).*

Model for Figure 5

Interaction Effects of Exposure: 2001 TV Election Campaign News with Timing of Vote Decision on TV Agenda Setting Multiple Regression

Independent Variable	Dep. Variable Congruence Between TV- Covered Issues and Respondent Issues Viewed as Important ("Agenda-Setting") ABC9RANK	
<i>Interaction Effects in Italics</i>		
TV News Exposure: Before Campaign ERLYINT	-.75 (.51)	.18
EX:TV News Exposure: As Election Called CAMPTV4	.93** (.48)	.93
TV News Exposure: During Election- LATEINT	.96* (.54)	-.03
Dummy: Decided Vote Before Campaign ERLYDUM	1.27 (1.52)	
Dummy: Decided Vote During Campaign LATEDUM	2.22 (1.61)	
Care Who Wins Election CAREWINS	.46 (.32)	
Strong Party ID STRONGID	.11 (.30)	
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	-.19 (.30)	
Age AGE	.02** (.01)	
Gender (Female) FEMALE	.93** (.25)	
High Education HIGHEDUC	-.94** (.28)	
High Income INCOME	.007 (.03)	
Constant	10.10** (1.51)	
N	1098	
R ²	.04	
SE	4.02	

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Excluded dummy group/main effect (EX): Those who made their vote choice "as the election was called."

The main effect and interaction effects coefficients in **bold** result from adding the original main effect to those of the interaction term coefficients. It is these coefficients that are plotted in the probability figures (Figure 5).

Source: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis (see Appendix A for details).

Model for Figure 6

Interaction Effects of Exposure to 2001 TV Election Campaign News with Level of Political Interest/Information on TV Agenda Setting Multiple Regression

Independent Variable	Dep. Variable Congruence Between TV- Covered Issues and Respondent Issues Viewed as Important ("Agenda-Setting") ABC9RANK	
<i>Interaction Effects in Italics</i>		
<i>TV News Exposure: Low Interest/Info.</i> INTLOINT	-.20 (.41)	.31
EX:TV News Exposure: Med. Interest/Info. CAMPTV4	.51** (.24)	.51**
<i>TV News Exposure: High Interest/Info.</i> INTHIINT	-.41 (.40)	.10
Dummy: Low Interest/Info. INTLODUM	1.29 (1.08)	
Dummy: High Interest/Info. INTHIDUM	1.08 (1.32)	
Care Who Wins Election CAREWINS	.41 (.33)	
Strong Party ID STRONGID	.08 (.31)	
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	-.06 (.30)	
Age AGE	.02** (.01)	
Gender (Female) FEMALE	.81** (.26)	
High Education HIGHEDUC	-.92** (.29)	
High Income INCOME	.04 (.03)	
Constant	10.03** (.97)	
N	1019	
R ²	.04	
SE	4.03	

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients. The numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Excluded dummy group/main effect (EX): Those with medium interest/information.

The main effect and interaction effects coefficients in **bold** result from adding the original main effect to those of the interaction term coefficients. It is these coefficients that are plotted in the probability figures (Figure 6).

Source: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis (see Appendix A for details).

Model for Figure 7

Interaction Effects of Exposure to TV Election Campaign News with Timing of Vote Decision on Consideration of Vote Change Logistic Regression

Independent Variable	Dep. Variable Considered Changing Vote During Campaign CAMPCHNG	
<i>Interaction effects in italics</i>		
<i>TV News Exposure: Vote Choice Long Ago</i> BFOR4INT	.38 (.30)	.05
EX: TV New Exposure: Vote Choice As Election Called CAMPTV4	-.33 (.28)	-.33
<i>TV News Exposure: Vote Choice Early in Campaign</i> ERLY4INT	.76* (.43)	.43*
<i>TV News/Agenda-Setting: Vote Choice On or Near El. Day</i> LATE4INT	.99** (.33)	.66**
Dummy: Vote Choice Long Ago BFOR4DUM	-1.24 (.88)	
Dummy: Vote Choice Early in Campaign ERLY4DUM	-1.37 (1.28)	
Dummy: Vote Choice On or Near El. Day LATE4DUM	-1.97** (.96)	
Interest and Information Scale INTINFO	.11** (.04)	
Care Who Wins the Election CAREWINS	-.33* (.20)	
Strong Party ID STRONGID	-.12 (.19)	
Vote Switching: House VOLATILE	.98** (.17)	
Age AGE	-.02** (.01)	
Gender (Female) FEMALE	.35** (.16)	
High Education HIGHEDUC	.05 (.18)	
High Income INCOME	-.05** (.02)	
Constant	-.31 (.87)	
-2 Log Likelihood	1044.79	
N	1039	

Note: Figures in the table are regression coefficients (b), with the standard error on line below in parentheses.

* Significant at the .10 level; ** Significant at the .05 level.

Excluded dummy group/main effect (EX): those who made their vote choice a 'as election was called'.

The main effect and interaction effects coefficients in **bold** result from adding the original main effect to those of the interaction term coefficients. It is these coefficients that are plotted in the probability figure (Figure 7).

Sources: Australian Election Study, 2001; and original TV news content analysis (see Appendix A for details).

Appendix C:

Interpreting interaction terms and probability plots

Creating Interaction Terms: Perhaps the most efficient way to distinguish between the effects of a key variable for separate groups of respondents is to utilize interaction models, which allow the simultaneous measurement of the impact of the variable for respondents grouped by the values in a second variable, such as the timing of their vote choice. More specifically, this is done by creating dummy variables for three of the four groups of individuals making their vote choice at different times, and then multiplying those terms by the level of the key other variable, say TV news exposure.

Interaction Coefficients and the Excluded Group: The result is three TV exposure/vote decision timing interaction terms which allow us separately to estimate the effect of TV news exposure on the consideration of changing vote for those who decided 'a few months ago'; those who decided in the 'first weeks of the campaign'; and those who decided either 'a few days before the election day' or 'on election day'. The effect for the fourth, excluded, group (those who decided their vote 'a long time ago') is estimated by the main effects variable, TV exposure, and is included in the table as well. When the coefficients of the three interaction terms are added to the main effect (see the coefficients in bold in the Models for the Figures, Appendix B) these then represent the slope estimates for these three groups, while the main effect represents the slope estimate of the excluded group.

Significance Levels: The significance levels for the three interaction terms may be interpreted as reflecting whether or not the slope for the group in question is significantly steeper (or flatter) than that of the excluded group. These four interaction terms, then, produce four different regression slope estimates, which can be seen as representing the effect of TV news exposure on the dependent variable for each of the four groups specified.

Intercepts: The "Constant" in the model represents the y-axis intercept for the excluded group (those who decided their vote 'a long time ago') while the dummy variables for the other groups represent the y-axis intercepts for the other three groups. That is, they represent the average value of the dependent variable for the group in question when all independent variables in the model have a value of zero.

Plotting Regression Coefficient Probabilities: While regression estimates and significance terms for these interaction models are essential evidence in this analysis, they

are difficult to convey. Perhaps the best way to illustrate these distinct effects is to use probabilistic plots of the regression coefficients for the primary independent variable being tested, while holding all other independent variables constant at their means and modes. Each set of results below utilizes this analytic format: the regression model is presented in Appendix B for the reader's reference, while probability plots of the primary independent variable's regression coefficients are presented in the text for ease of illustration.

NB: Much of the explanatory discussion in this appendix appears in a forthcoming article of mine (Denemark, 2002).