Labor’s Mediscare campaign and its effects on voter intention in the 2016 Australian federal election


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Introduction

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This single issue is studied for several reasons: the issue had known media salience during the campaign (particularly the final two weeks, see Baume 2015), and favours Labor (Cameron and McAllister 2016).
Why this matters?

The Labor Party ran some of the most systematic, well-funded lies ever peddled in Australia... But yet in some quarters so effective, that they boasted about it how skilfully they had lied and how effectively they had deceived.

Malcolm Turnbull, Coalition Prime Minister
We are interested in campaign effects because it is an area that has been understudied in Australia - largely due to a lack of adequate data.

A number of studies that have looked at campaign and media effects on issue salience and election outcomes. However, most of these are US-based, and focused on intent to vote (in an non-compulsory context), and may not fully reflect the reality in other democracies.

As a result, they are less relevant in Australia’s compulsory voting setting, and other contexts.
In particular, we are interested in the possible reinforcement effect of this campaign. This is where news coverage gives partisans a reason to support their predisposed voting choices (Gelman and King 1993).
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Mobilization effects of agenda-setting (Norris et al., 1999; Campbell, 2000) is less relevant in Australia due to compulsory voting.

As a result, we expect that political campaign election strategies using the power of media may have a stronger influence on vote choice in Australia (Denemark et al. 2007: 90; Ward and Stewart 2006: 194; Bean 1986: 58).
Our research questions

1. Is there evidence Labor used media coverage to give prominence to health care, and does this appear to have worked?
2. Did health care media salience have an effect on the issue salience of voters?
3. Can we find substantiation for the effects of Labor campaign activity (and subsequent media coverage) on the election outcome? Is there evidence of reinforcement effects?
We test this in three steps

1. First, we look at association between health care as MIP and Labor support.

2. Then we track Labor’s political messaging on the issue and compare this with media coverage of Mediscare, which is itself measured against the electorates self-nominated MIP.

3. Then, we estimate daily Labor support, and using a regression discontinuity model on the predicted probabilities from this model, we test for evidence of any impact from the Mediscare campaign.
## Our data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campaign week (dates)</th>
<th>Releases</th>
<th>TV ads</th>
<th>State papers</th>
<th>National papers</th>
<th>ABC News</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table:** Level of Labor media communication, and newspaper and television coverage of election-related healthcare issues during 2016 election campaign. Newspaper data covers healthcare-related election coverage on front pages, ABC TV to 7pm national news.
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Selection bias. However, as samples become increasingly difficult to collect, more academic effort is put into developing weighting techniques to correct selection biases (for instance Wang, Rothschild et al. 2015). We compare our results with commercial polls for external validation.
Collected using an open-ended question with no prompts. Those that included the following words where coded as indicating health care issues were most important to them:

- health care
- healthcare
- health
- ndis
- addiction
- hospital
- medical
- disability
- disabilities
- Medicare
- hospitals

Coded into a single variable using the binary of whether voters rated healthcare as the most important issue or not.
Figure: Labor primary support among those who rated health care as the most important issue, and all other voters.
Changing issue salience

**Figure**: Patterns in the perceived importance of health care for each day of the election campaign. We estimate Hawke Mediscare ad increased MIP by nearly 1.5% ABC news story 2%
Figure: Newspaper coverage and patterns in the perceived importance of health care for each day of the election campaign. We estimate newspaper FP coverage increased MIP by nearly 2%.
For our purposes, this really only matters if we can say Labor was causing coverage, not responding to it. We test this using the Labor press release data.

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We then perform the granger test in reverse, using lagged media coverage of health care to predict the Labor press releases. This provides $Pr(> F) = .35$, suggesting coverage does not predict Labor media releases.

Or conversely, that Labor was not capitalising on existing media interest in the story for political advantage, but rather may have been generating it.
The Mediscare campaign and Labor vote

We fit a logistic multilevel model using the glmer() function in to estimate the probability a voter would provide Labor their first preference vote as a function of the demographic and geographic characteristics that define them.

We model and postratify Labor primary vote on age (18-29, 29-44, 45-64, and 65 years and older), birthplace (Australia, other countries), education (some school, high school, a trade qualification or diploma, or a bachelor degree or higher), gender (male or female), religion (Protestant, Catholic, other and no religion) and electoral division (of which there are 150).
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Using the results from this multilevel model, the inverse logit for the probability a respondent providing Labor with their first preference vote is obtained for each combination of individual demographic and geographic values that make up cell, and poststratified using census data.
However, it is possible that rather than actually changing voter behaviour – as we argue – campaign events merely change the enthusiasm of partisans to use Vote Compass (Gelman, Goel et al. 2016). We check this using past vote.
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Figure: Responses by past vote.
To account for possible effects of changing partisan self-selection, we control for Labor and Greens past vote. We then repeatedly fit this procedure on a subset of responses from a four-day moving window, with between 19,414 (day 24) and 147,719 observations (day 4).
Figure: Estimated Labor vote. The lighter curve represents the proportion of voters predicted to be providing the Labor Party with their first preference vote during each day of the campaign, the red bar is the release of the first Mediscare television ad, and coverage of health care by ABC TV news blue bars.
Figure: Labor primary vote from commercial pollsters. Coloured points represent the Labor Party first preference vote during the campaign (the y-axis), taken from Essential (green), Ipsos (purple), Newspoll (orange) and Reachtel (blue).
Discussion and conclusion

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Beginning of Mediscare campaign associated with reverse in trend of Labor vote, from decline to increase.