Voters’ attitudes towards asylum seekers and the 2013 Australian federal election

Andrea Carson, Aaron Martin, (University of Melbourne) Yannick Dufresne (Université Laval)

American Political Science Association, San Francisco
Presenting Parties to Voters: New Media meets Old Media
5 September 2015

Abstract

This article examines Australian voters’ responses during the 2013 federal election campaign to asylum seeker boat arrivals. We explore this issue using a mixed-methods approach. We conduct media monitoring analytics, content analysis of Liberal Party press releases, and statistical analysis of ‘big data’. We identify the salience of the issue to the public and the media and examine the prominence of this issue in Liberal party political messaging about asylum seekers. We then analyse ‘big data’ about voters’ attitudes to asylum seeker boat arrivals using the internationally unique Vote Compass dataset. Vote Compass recorded 1.4 million responses during the campaign enabling Australians to graphically locate political parties’ policy positions in relation to their own. We find voters’ attitudes toward asylum seekers, particularly in marginal electorates, impacted on voters’ electoral choices.

Keywords: Wedge politics; immigration, asylum seekers, Australian politics, big data, Vote Compass
Introduction

Immigration is a salient issue around the world (see Collier, 2013). Parties across Europe have played on anti-immigration sentiment including a number of prominent cases including Austria, Denmark and France. Immigration also features prominently in countries as diverse as the US, India and Singapore. Immigration continues, and will continue, to be a prominent feature of the electoral landscape for decades to come.

This issue is particularly important in Australia. Immigration plays a unique role in Australian politics and it is for this reason that it provides a useful case-study. The bi-partisan consensus to not politicise immigration broke down in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since this time immigration has become an emotionally charged issue. One of the most important aspects of this debate is asylum seekers, or humanitarian refugees. Numerous Australian surveys make it clear that a majority of Australians in recent years identify ‘unauthorised asylum seekers’ as a priority issue of concern; and in numerous polls the public support more restrictive measures towards Australia’s intake of asylum seekers (Goot 2000, 2004; Goot and Watson 2001, 2007; Hanson 2013; McAllister, Martin and Pietsch 2010; Parliamentary Library 2011; McAllister and Cameron, 2014). Bleiker et al. (2013, 398) argues that few issues in Australia are ‘as emotionally charged’ as that of refugees.

Compulsory voting in particular creates an incentive for parties to draw on issues like immigration in campaigning. Because of compulsory voting reaching undecided voters has a specific strategic value in Australian electoral politics. In a compulsory voting context, disaffected voters are amenable to swing their support between the two major parties. Considering the difficulty of getting the attention of these voters, Australian parties have an extra incentive to run campaigns on highly salient polemical issues like immigration. This article examines the salience of this issue among the public and in the media and then looks at what effect this had on the election outcome. In this article we concentrate on Liberal (i.e. conservative)\(^1\) party messaging as it is this party that most prominently broke the silence on immigration in the early 2000s and have since been seen as the preferred party to deal with this issue (McAllister and Cameron, 2014, 25).

We examine this policy area through the lens of what is referred to in Australia as wedge politics. At first glance, the asylum seeker issue during the 2013 election fits the definition of wedge politics. Wilson (2001, 14) defines wedge politics as involving ‘a political party stirring up populist feeling about an issue or minority group and then tagging its political opponent with support for that unpopular cause or group.’ Similarly, Wilson and Turnbull (2001, 386) view wedge politics as a ‘calculated political tactic aimed at using divisive social issues to gain

\(^1\) International readers not familiar with Australian politics should note that the Liberal Party is the conservative party in Australia.
political support, weaken opponents and strengthen control over the political agenda.’ Importantly, as will be explained below, wedge issues are facilitated by the media (Ward 2002). Jackman (1998, 167) exploring issues of race in Australian politics identified that conservative parties can be net beneficiaries of the ideological tensions posed by race issues, including migration and identified that racial attitudes cut across other components of the electorate’s ideology, causing internal party strains and, importantly for this paper, that the ALP was ‘particularly vulnerable on this score’ Jackman (1998, 167) argued that cross-cutting the traditional left-right divide in politics can ‘act as an ideological wedge, prying apart established party groupings…and perhaps even a redefinition of the ideological terrain over which they compete.’ We explore this proposition both in terms of the distribution of attitudes on this issue and the effect this issue had on the 2013 election.

This paper proceeds as follows: we first examine the recent background and political context about asylum seeker policy in Australia, and scholarship about wedge issues and media agenda-setting. We then conduct content analysis of media coverage of this issue as well as Liberal Party press releases to establish the prominence of this issue and to what extent it appears to have been primed by the Liberal Party. We then conduct analysis of the Vote Compass data to show to what extent partisan views differ on this issue and the extent to which it was an effective electoral strategy. We find support for Jackman’s (1998, 167) proposition that conservative parties are the net beneficiaries of this issue.

Previously it has been difficult to analyse this issue in a robust manner. This paper makes a unique contribution to the literature by combining content analysis and analysis of newly-available and internationally unique ‘big data’ collected through the Vote Compass instrument (see below). Through the unique use of content analysis and analysis of ‘big data’ this article complements and expands on the qualitative work already done in this area. In this way we to do not intend to supplant the existing literature but rather add a richness to the analysis by using unique data sources. In addressing the Australian case we make larger inferences for comparative politics in which immigration features prominently and is likely to feature more prominently in the future.

**Context and Theory**

**Political party positioning on asylum seeker boat arrivals**

In examining the 2013 election it is important to briefly outline the context out of which this issue arose. As mentioned above it has only been in the last decade or so that immigration has become highly-politicised in Australian politics. Despite high-levels of immigration there was a (largely unspoken) bi-partisan consensus that this was an issue that was best not politicised. The legacy of the White Australia Policy was part of the motivation for this. Prior to the 2001 election Prime Minister John Howard elevated this issue by turning back a boat of asylum seekers, declaring that ‘we will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come,’ (Howard, 2001) and (falsely) accusing asylum seekers of throwing their children overboard. At this time the ‘Pacific Solution’ was adopted whereby asylum seekers were processed offshore. Since this time the Liberals have taken a hard-line on this issue and have been seen as the preferred party on this issue (McAllister and Cameron, 2014, 25).

Following the Labor party victory in 2007 the ‘Pacific Solution’ was dismantled under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and a minister of the government declared that the Pacific Solution was a ‘cynical, costly and ultimately unsuccessful policy.’ However, on 19 July 2013, just before the official five-week federal election campaign, and three weeks after regaining the leadership by deposing Julia Gillard as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd (2013) announced: ‘As of today, asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia’.
These remarks were unprecedented for a modern Labor Prime Minister. Neither side of politics had stated asylum seekers identified as refugees would be permanently denied resettlement in Australia. Rudd (2013) acknowledged it was a ‘hard line’ decision, but argued that ‘our responsibility as a Government is to ensure that we have a robust system of border security and orderly migration.’ This statement signified Labor’s distinct move away from framing asylum seekers as a humanitarian issue, which it had done after the 2007 election when it closed the Howard Government’s offshore processing centres and stated such policies had tarnished Australia’s human rights record (Skehan 2007). As a consequence, research has found that the tone of political debate on both sides of politics was very negative as reflected in Rowe and O’Brien’s (2014, 187) Hansard study of 2010 parliamentary debates about offshore processing. Major party politicians’ language was often framed around characterisations of asylum seekers as ‘illegals’, a threat to national identity and border security and as not deserving asylum because they ‘jumped the queue’ by paying their way to travel by boat. The counter-narrative was less prevalent, and came predominantly from the Greens who placed no emphasis on an asylum seeker’s mode of arrival or perceived legitimacy (Rowe and O’Brien 2014, 188).

In response to Labor’s policy shift, then Liberal opposition leader (now Prime Minister) Tony Abbott promised even tougher ‘direct action’ on asylum seeker arrivals (Liberal Party of Australia and the Nationals 2013). Liberal policy was primarily framed in terms of border protection and national security. The Liberals adopted a consistent hard-line, policy on asylum seekers promising a military-led operation against what it deemed to be ‘illegal maritime arrivals’ (Liberal Party of Australia and the Nationals 2013), consistent with the hard-line position of former prime minister, John Howard. Labor on the other hand abandoned its previously humanitarian position. It can be assumed that they did this to try and neutralise the issue while trying to attract or retain valuable swinging voters sympathetic to the Coalition’s position. We examine the success of this strategy in the analysis below.

The political function of wedge issues is two-fold: to divide the electorate, and to weaken the position of an opposing candidate (Safire 1992; Ward 2002; Wiant 2002: 278; Wilson and Turnbull 2001). Common strategies to achieve these objectives focus on the message and the audience. We examine both.

While this issue was elevated by political elites this did come in response to a large increase in the number of asylum seeker arrivals, as indicated in Figure 1, with a high-point in 2013 at the time of the election.

---

2 We use Liberal as shorthand to refer to what is a coalition between the Liberal and National parties. It should also be noted that the National Party endorse the Liberal Party position on all but a few rare occasions.
The Australian media’s portrayal of asylum seekers

It should come as no surprise that parallel to these political statements was an increase in media attention paid to this issue. Studies done by those like Denemark et al. (2007, 106-07) have identified asylum seeker boat arrivals, along with terrorism, as the issues dominating the news agenda, both framed around national security concerns. The way this issue was reported is also consequential. Scholars have found that political communications about wedge issues often rely on the use of emotive labels and code words, or ‘dog whistle’ messaging to ‘force us to make judgements and evaluations [and] causes the potential for abuse’ (Hillygus and Shields 2008, 6; Woodward and Denton 1996, 75 in Wiant 2002). Among others, Bleiker et al. (2013, 399) demonstrate the mainstream media’s role in shaping Australians’ perceptions of asylum seekers through its use of dehumanising distant images of asylum seeker boat arrivals. They argue these depictions frame the political debate not as a humanitarian issue, but rather as a security and border control threat. Many researchers have studied the pejorative language used within, and by, Australia’s media to report on asylum seekers. Common negatively-framed expressions have included: ‘floods’, ‘waves’, ‘tides’, ‘queue-jumpers’, ‘illegals’, ‘economic migrants’ (Klocker and Dunn 2003; Manning 2003; Rowe and O’Brien 2014; Smit 2011; Ward 2002). This kind of commentary has been afforded by the fact that many Australians have ‘limited accurate knowledge about asylum seeking issues, with their knowledge highly dependent upon media reporting of the issues’ (McKay et al. 2012, 128). We see then that both the major parties and the media have then advanced negative constructions of asylum seekers (see McKenzie and Hasmath, 2013; Marr and Wilkinson 2004).

In any case, this paper does not intend to revisit the question of why Australians might hold negative views about asylum seekers; rather, our aims is to ascertain if voters held negative views about asylum seekers during the 2013 federal election; and, if so, what effect that might have had on that election outcome.
Swinging and cross-pressured voters in a compulsory voting setting

 Whereas in non-compulsory settings parties may try and mobilise core-supporters or those likely to support them at the margins compulsory voting in Australia creates strong incentives for parties to create policies that appeal to the broader electorate. Because the Labor party are traditionally associated with issues like health and education and the Liberals with the economy parties are on the lookout to mobilise voters on issues that may cross party lines. This is particularly important as it relates to undecided or disengaged voters. It also relates to those with weak party attachments and research has found that party identification has been declining in recent years (McAllister, 2011, 41). Political parties see a strategic advantage in mobilising otherwise disengaged or unattached voters interested through wedge issues.

 The media obviously play a large role in mediating this effect. While the weight of scholarly research identifies a ‘limited effect’ on the capacity of mass communications to alter voters’ choices, Australian research has identified the importance of considering compulsory voting in the relationship between mass media, particularly television, and election campaigns (Bean 1986, 58; Denemark 2005, 222; Denemark et al. 2007, 90; Ward and Stewart 2006, 194) Significantly, the least engaged voters are most likely to be undecided until the election campaign begins, and these voters are potentially more open to political news coverage influencing their vote choice — even if they pay cursory attention to it (Albaek et al. 2014: 102; Denemark et al. 2007: 90-91). If this is the case, we would reasonably expect in the context of compulsory voting that cross-cutting issues like immigration would impact some undecided voters’ choices Graber (2001), Schonback and Lauf (2002) and Iyengar et al. (2010) have all found that the least politically interested in society acquire most of their information about current issues from the news media. Cross-pressured voters are susceptible to targeted messaging around wedge issues. Cross-pressured voters are torn between, usually weak, party identification and their competing ideological preferences on particular issues (in the American context see Hillygus and Shields 2008, 6). This is important in the context of Australia’s compulsory voting system. It follows logically that with recent election contests with very narrow margins, less engaged voters are especially important to political parties. We can expect politicians’ messages in marginal seats to be tailor-made accordingly.

 This leads us to several important points about marginal electorates, swinging and cross-pressured voters in terms of political messaging in Australia. First, Australian academic and internal political party research finds that swinging voters, those with no strong political ideology, are increasing as a proportion of the Australian electorate, estimated to be between 30 and 40 per cent (McAllister 2002, 24-5; Young 2011, 88). Second, researchers have labelled these voters as often motivated by concerns of self-interest or fear — preconditions for the effective use of wedge politics — describing them as ‘selfish’, ‘superficial’ and ‘vulnerable to scare campaigns’ (see Crisp 1965; Jaensch 1995; Young 2011, 89). Third, it is reasonable to presume that swinging and cross-pressured voters are present in all electorates, including Australia’s most marginal. We expect that because of some electorates’ narrow margins (below 56 per cent of the two-party preferred vote), ‘softly committed’ voters who switch their vote from one party to another during the election campaign do not have to be in large numbers to alter political outcomes in some marginal seats — a razor-thin margin was a feature of the minority Rudd/Gillard governments. Hillygus and Shields (2008: 8) also make the point that small numbers of cross-pressured voters in a competitive electoral environment can impact an election result. As such, these voters are targeted by political parties through micro and macro media messaging — paid (political advertising) and earned (free news media). We explore the extent of this in the analysis below.

 Method
This paper uses mixed methods of content and statistical analysis to address three main research questions. In the analysis below we investigate three questions as they relate to the literature review above. We investigate the salience of that issue in the electorate and media (RQ1); we explore whether the Liberal party ‘primed’ the issue of asylum seekers (RQ2); and we examine whether it was an effective wedge issue during the 2013 federal campaign (RQ3).

For the content analysis we collected iSentia media data from their Australian Federal Political Issues Reports. iSentia monitor the media and aggregate story topics across different platforms each week. iSentia monitoring includes 400 broadcast outlets, over 1,000 print publications and over 1,000 news websites across national, metropolitan, suburban, regional and rural media (Baume 2015). We then delve into how the Liberal Party used this issue by conducting content analysis of their press releases (n=137).

For the analysis of ‘big data’ we draw on data collected through the Vote Compass instrument that played an important part in the 2013 federal election. Political scientists from Canada’s not-for-profit Vote Compass together with academics from the University of Sydney and University of Melbourne developed a questionnaire about attitudinal and policy issues made available for the first time on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) website to all voters (see http://www.abc.net.au/votecompass/). From a much larger list, 30 questions were selected to reflect a mix of economic and social policies across wide-ranging topics. A five-point Likert scale was used ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ for most questions (see Vote Compass 2013). We note that the Vote Compass questions are not of the sort that would usually be included in an academic survey. These questions were written to reflect the way most citizens think about these issues and the way the media represent particular issues. While we recognise this deficiency we also note that phrasing the questions in such a way made the tool more accessible and popular and hence resulting in a very large N.

Political parties were invited to calibrate their policies on the scale and to respond to the team coders’ calibrations of their policy positions. A ‘hierarchy of evidence’ schema, previously tested in North American jurisdictions, was used to identify party positions on issues when one was not publicly available. The result was a series of questions that represented the most salient issues to the general public during the election and that parties were satisfied with in terms of where they were positioned. For detailed methodology and statistical formulae explanations see: http://voxpoplabs.com/votecompass/method.pdf.

During the five-week campaign Vote Compass collected more than 1.4 million responses. The value of ‘big data’ of this sort is that multiple socio-demographic questions (including gender, age, education, student enrolment, religion, marital status, occupation and territory/state) were included in the survey. These questions were included for the purpose of post-stratifying the sample. The data collected through Vote Compass was matched with Census data collected through the Australian Bureau of Statistics. By combing these two sources we can establish joint distribution of geographic and socio-demographic characteristics for the Australian population. These census data were used to calculate weights for the data through entropy balancing (Hainmueller, 2012). After weighting and cleaning up the data for incomplete entries, the sample size was 539,994.3

It should be emphasised here that the advantage of Vote Compass over commercial and conventional academic polls is that it offers cost-effective continuous data collection from

---

3 Vote Compass implemented undisclosed measures to prevent users manipulating the online tool’s outcomes. These are not made public in order to not aid those who might attempt to exploit the system. Generally speaking, these include: logging IP addresses, cookie tracking, and using time codes, among other measures.
every Australian electorate in very large numbers. Conventional public opinion research relies on small-sized random sampling. We do not dismiss the importance of conventional public opinion research and we should be clear that we see ‘big data’ as complementing rather than replacing conventional survey data. However, we believe ‘big data’ offers unique opportunities to answer questions such as the ones posed in this article.

As availability sampling with big data becomes more widely accepted we believe many of the sampling criticisms of non-representative polling (followed by appropriate post-data adjustment), will be allayed (see Wang et al. 2013). For example, Wang et al (2014) show that ‘with proper statistical adjustment, non-representative polls yield accurate presidential election forecasts, on par with those based on traditional representative polls.’ We do not want to underplay the weaknesses of ‘big data’ nor the challenges to be overcome. However, there are also clear strengths that this paper leverages. While this data is not unproblematic the unique value of this data (as we will show below) is that it allows us to drill down into the data on individual electorates in way that we cannot using representative national surveys.

Findings

Content Analysis – The salience of the asylum seeker issue in the media

In the section below we conduct content analysis to determine how prominent this issue was on the media agenda generally and the Liberal party agenda specifically. Agenda-setting and priming theory is premised on the idea that the mainstream news media act as information gatekeepers (Denemark et al. 2007, 95). Table 1 presents data collected by iSentia’s during the five weeks of the 2013 election campaign. This shows ‘asylum seekers’ ranked consistently among the top five national media issues leading up to the election. An exception was the last week in August, which might suggest that the political messaging on this issue had peaked in week two of the campaign. iSentia (2013, 9) noted the earlier salience of media coverage of asylum seekers in contrast to the absence of asylum seeker questions in the final leaders’ debate during that last week in August.

Asylum seekers reappeared as a main issue in the final week. The data, however, cannot tell us if the discourse was positive or negative in tone. It is to be expected that different media outlets and platforms would not necessarily cover the same ‘news angle’. Table 1 shows the issue’s prominence during the election campaign, but not the qualitative debate. It is the issue’s prominence that speaks to Cohen’s observation that the media might not tell people how to think, but they are effective at telling the public what to think about. Table 1 shows us asylum seeker issues were firmly on the news agenda.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Press</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>Other key issues of the week (in order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Week 1 3-9 August | 3    | 824   | 4,042 | 4,249 | 2,038     | 8,306
|              |      |       |       |     |          | Election campaign; Company tax; asylum seeker; Carbon pricing; Interest rates |
| Week 2 9-15 August | 1*   | 823   | 6,308 | 7,231 | 2,601     | 16,963
|              |      |       |       |     |          | ‘Leaders’ debate – Inc. asylum seeker policy; Abbott’s ‘sex appeal’ gaffe; Economic and Fiscal Outlook; Marriage equality; GST |
| Week 3 16-22 August | 2    | 640   | 8,094 | 3,884 | 1,258     | 11,876
|              |      |       |       |     |          | Paid parental leave; Asylum seekers; Second televised leaders debate; Marriage equality Treasurers debate |
| Week 4 23-29 August | N/A^ | -     | -     | -    | -         | Paid parental leave; Garden Island naval base; Syria conflict; High-speed rail; Third leaders’ debate |
### Table 1: How the ‘asylum seeker’ issue ranks in the Top 5 media issues during the 2013 election campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>30 Aug - 5 Sept</th>
<th>474</th>
<th>2936</th>
<th>1141</th>
<th>1680</th>
<th>6,231</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Election Week 5</td>
<td>National Broadband Network, asylum seekers, marriage equality, Coalition costings, Syrian conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors processing data from iSentia: Australian Federal Political Issues Reports.

^ Asylum seeker issue not in top five.

Content analysis - Liberal Party press releases

To address the question of whether the Coalition initiated political messaging about asylum seekers to ‘prime’ it as an election issue, we undertook content analysis of the Liberal party’s press releases archived on its website [http://www.liberal.org.au/](http://www.liberal.org.au/). We coded all press releases available on the party’s website between 26 June and 5 September 2013. Ideally we would analyse other party political communications such as media interviews, speeches and ‘doorstop’ interviews but these were not posted consistently to the website after 28 June which makes systematic comparisons difficult.

The data collection commenced on the day that Prime Minister Rudd regained the Labor leadership from Gillard (the sitting Prime Minister at that time) because this moment effectively, in our view, signalled the beginning of the 2013 election campaign. This time frame yielded 137 press releases. Using a database we coded 10 fields of data for each release. These fields related to the release’s date, title, person quoted, central message, whether it was positive or negative and identification of key words: ‘asylum’, ’boat’ and ‘border’ (in the context of border protection). It was noted if the keywords were in the headline and frequency in the release (see Figure 1).

![Pie chart showing media issues](chart.png)

We did not examine National Party releases because of their coalition status with the Liberal and the replication which would dilute our analysis.

There is much debate ‘permanent campaigning’ (Albaek et al. 2014: 3), but for practical reasons we focused on the weeks between when Rudd was reappointed Prime Minister until the three-day media blackout that prevents the release of press statements prior to polling day on 7 September 2013.

---

4 We did not examine National Party releases because of their coalition status with the Liberal and the replication which would dilute our analysis.

5 There is much debate ‘permanent campaigning’ (Albaek et al. 2014: 3), but for practical reasons we focused on the weeks between when Rudd was reappointed Prime Minister until the three-day media blackout that prevents the release of press statements prior to polling day on 7 September 2013.
Fourteen press releases (10 per cent) contained the search terms. Eleven focused exclusively on asylum seeker issues. This is equivalent to one asylum seeker press release a week from June until the election. Three releases mentioned asylum seekers but were more generally about criticisms of Rudd’s Prime Ministership. The most frequent term was ‘border security’, followed by ‘illegals’ and ‘boats’; less common was ‘asylum’.

Interestingly, in the context of Bleiker et al.’s (2013) research discussed earlier, pictures of an asylum seeker-carrying vessel at a distance accompanied most press releases. The messages were attributed to Abbott or senior shadow ministers Michael Keenan and Scott Morrison. The most common theme was Labor had ‘failed’ to stop asylum seeker boats coming to Australian shores. For example, message such as ‘This latest arrival, carrying 47 passengers, is the 40th boat to arrive this month as Labor’s border protection failures continue’ (Keenan, 2013) were prominent. This fits Wilson's (2001: 14) definition of a wedge issue by tagging a political opponent to an unpopular cause, as discussed earlier. It also shows that Labor’s attempt to neutralize the issue had failed as the Liberals continued to campaign heavily on this issue, presumably in part to attract cross-pressured voters.

As Figure 2 shows, the number of Liberal party press releases that discussed asylum seekers was equal to anti-carbon tax releases. This is unsurprising. The Liberals had identified both issues as priorities in their 12-point ‘real action’ plan (Liberal Party 2013), and again in their shorter four-point ‘action contract’ used in television advertising during the campaign, which included a pledge to ‘stop the boats’ (Young 2013). What is also interesting here is that despite the Liberals being seen as the preferred party on the economy both asylum seekers and carbon tax both receive more than twice as much attention. We attribute this to the Liberals trying to appeal to cross-pressured vote and play up an issue that would attract undecided voter’s attention.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) identified that voters evaluate politicians in terms of the recent news topics that they notice. Therefore, if the issue dominating media discourse during the 2013 campaign was asylum seekers (within a ‘border security’ frame) then it appears the Liberal party was inviting the electorate to think about asylum seeker boat arrivals when evaluating the major parties. By its nature, interpreting political intent is problematic, but what we can observe is that the frequency of press releases focused on asylum seekers during the election campaign was very high relative to other policy issues communicated in party press releases. This data and the iSentia media results show that the Liberal party pursued the asylum seeker issue and, with the news media, together effectively helped raise its status as an election issue. While we cannot be sure which way causation runs (for example, it could be the media priming the political parties on this issue and at any rate those two things are not independent) it does appear that elite priming was important here.

These findings are not particularly surprising. However, the content analysis allow us to quantify the volume of coverage and say something about how the Liberals (who clearly saw the greatest advantage in campaigning on this issue) represented this issue in media releases which would have provided a basis for their broader campaigning on this issue. The data show that the Liberals recognise political advantage in campaigning on this issue.

**Incorporating ‘big data’ from Vote Compass**
Our final and more complex analysis involved analysing post-stratified Vote compass data (as explained above) to address our third research question: whether asylum seekers was an effective wedge issue during the 2013 federal campaign. We first show the distribution of attitudes towards asylum seekers as revealed by the Vote Compass data and how these differ by vote intention. We then examine the salience of the issue among the party supporters. Finally, we examine the effect of attitudes to this issue on vote intention from respondents in Australia’s 20 most marginal seats which, as we argued earlier, the political parties saw as most consequential to the election outcome.\(^6\)

The two questions from Vote Compass analysed here about voters’ attitudes toward asylum seekers are:

1. Boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back
2. Asylum seekers who arrive by boat should not be allowed to settle in Australia\(^7\)

**Attitudes towards asylum seeker issues**

Congruent with other studies (Parliamentary Library 2010-11: 57), the Vote Compass data found negative sentiments about asylum seekers generally (i.e. that many agreed that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back and that asylum seekers should not be allowed to re-settle in Australia). More specifically, voters who self-identify as Liberal partisans expressed the most negative attitudes towards asylum seekers whereas Labor partisans were split on the issue and, significantly, appeared to be cross-pressured (see Figure 3). We found that Greens supporters had the most positive attitudes. Notably, the left side of Figure 3 shows an overlap between Labor and Greens voters’ attitudes about asylum seekers — in this case, reflecting a positive rather than negative attitude (i.e. supporting stopping the boats). These overlaps indicate ALP voters were cross-pressured, exhibiting cognitive dissonance between their party identification and ideological preference on the issue of asylum seeker boat arrivals. Figure 3 demonstrates how some Labor supporters overlap in their sentiments about asylum seeker boat arrivals with Liberal supporters which reinforces our earlier point about cross-pressured voters and the electoral advantage that comes from this.

---

\(^6\) An electorate is ‘marginal’, ‘fairly safe’ or ‘safe’ using the AEC definition: ‘Where a winning party receives less than 56 per cent of the two-party preferred vote, the seat is classified as “marginal”, 56 to 60 per cent is classified as “fairly safe” and more than 60 per cent is considered “safe”,’ (AEC 2014a).

\(^7\) The questions are designed to provoke a response in order to graphically map voters’ political position relative to the major parties’ positions, but it is acknowledged that this carries with it an acquiescence response bias.
However, for attitudes to be consequential to election outcomes they need to be seen as salient among the electorate. Salience refers to the issues stated by the voter to be the Most Important Issue (MII) for them, which was also one of the questions asked about in Vote Compass. The Vote Compass data shows that asylum seekers were identified as the third most important issue in terms of issue salience with 11 percent of respondents saying it was the most important issue to them. Only the economy (30%) and health and hospitals (11%) were rated higher. This suggest the topic meets the criteria as a wedge issue with issues being divided among voters (see Figure 3) and it being a highly salient issue. Both of these facts then create a strong incentive for parties to campaign on this issue.

Next, we examine attitudes among those who nominated asylum seekers as the MII (see Figure 4). From left to right the trilogy of graphs represents self-identified Green, Labor and Liberal voters’ views in terms of a positive (south sphere) or negative (north sphere) attitude toward asylum seekers and also how they identify along left-right political lines. The most intensely coloured area of the graph represents the collective attitude expressed by self-identifying partisans. This analysis confirms that while Labor partisans are generally more positive about this issue and Liberal partisans more negative there is a considerable spread which is particularly notable among Labor partisans. This suggests that there are a sizable minority of Labor partisan who could be seen as cross-pressured voters and therefore affected by Liberal party messaging. This finding is consistent with Jackman’s earlier findings in the 1990s identifying that racial attitudes (positive and negative) can cut across other components of the electorate’s ideology. This analysis shows this is also true of voters who identify this as the most salient issue.
Voter salience and impact on vote intention

To examine the effect of attitudes towards asylum seekers on vote intention we run logistic regression (including variables such as age, gender, education, geographic location, religion, religiosity, race, country of birth, spoken language, marital status, income level, political interest and political party partisanship as controls) on the effect of these attitudes on vote intention (see Table 2). We find individuals’ attitudes towards asylum seekers impacted on vote intention at the 2013 federal election — even when all other demographic variables are taken into consideration. In the table below we show that negative attitudes towards asylum seekers had a measurable effect on Liberal party as against Labor support (measured by vote intention). The converse is true for Green versus Labor support. Salience also had a measurable impact on Liberal Party support. While we cannot prove a casual link between the Liberal party’s and media priming of the issue and vote intention it does seem that Liberal Party campaigning on this issue was a success electorally. This is consistent with other research. Denemark et al. conclude that television news coverage of asylum seekers during that election campaign advantaged incumbent conservative leader John Howard (2007, 107). These relationships hold up even controlling for partisanship which again suggests that Liberal party were successful in capturing cross-pressured voters.
Conclusion

This paper contributes to the scholarship about wedge politics and cross pressured voters focusing on the politicisation of asylum seekers in the 2013 federal Australian election campaign. This article is the first of its kind to use Vote Compass’ ‘big data’ to identify voter attitudes and intentions in Australia. Using mixed methods, this paper examined the message and the audience. We investigated the salience of that issue in the electorate and media (RQ1); we explored whether the Liberal party ‘primed’ the issue of asylum seekers (RQ2); and we examined whether it was an effective wedge issue during the 2013 federal campaign (RQ3). We found that 1) asylum seekers is a prominent issue in the media and among the electorate; 2) that the Liberal party also campaigned heavily on this issue and in pejorative terms; 3) that the
Liberal party appear to have gained electoral advantage out of doing so suggesting that appealing to cross-pressured voters on issues that cut across the electorate’s left versus right political ideology is a successful electoral strategy.

These findings support Hillygus and Shields’ argument (2008, 8) that cross-pressured voters who experience cognitive dissonance over an issue, are more likely to defect to the Liberals. Of course there may have been other reasons for this to occur (including disenchantment with the Labor leadership) but our results suggest attitudes towards asylum seekers played a significant role. Despite Labor’s unprecedented policy shift to the right on asylum seekers in 2013, the majority of Australia’s marginal seats were won by the Coalition in the 2013 election. Labor’s policy shift on asylum seekers was electorally unsuccessful in marginal seats and, in fact, might have served to reinforce voters’ negative attitudes towards asylum seekers by making it the normative position. What was successful was the potent mix of wedge politics about asylum seeker issues on cross-pressured voters, particularly in marginal electorates, under the institutional setting of compulsory voting.

There are clear future directions for research such as this comparatively. For example, how does messaging from the conservative side of politics differ across countries?; content analysis of Greens’ political messaging would be useful to identify whether the Greens primed politically progressive sections of the electorate with more positive messages about asylum seekers and to what extent this has been successful electorally; more generally, what is the effect of pro-immigration messaging? These are important questions. Using an internationally unique dataset this article has gone some way to answering them. Our hope is that new datasets such as Vote Compass, used alongside standard academic surveys can help answer these question more rigorously than before.
Reference list


Baume, P. 2015. Author correspondence with iSentia's managing director. 26 February 2015.


Wright S. and Tillett. A. 2013. Victory is location, location: Marginals are where federal elections are won or lost. *The West Australian* 21 September: 54.


Author/s: 
CARSON, A; Martin, A; Dufresne, Y

Title: 
Voters’ attitudes towards asylum seekers and the 2013 Australian federal election

Date: 
2015

Citation: 

Persistent Link: 
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/55595

File Description: 
Submitted version