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**The Modernisation of Australian Political Campaigns: The Case of Maxine McKew**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# **The Modernisation of Australian Political Campaigns: The Case of Maxine McKew**

**Evie Watt**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an investigation into the 2007 campaign of Maxine McKew for the federal seat of Bennelong in Sydney, Australia. The campaign created a media sensation in Australia, due to the combination of McKew being a well known media personality, and her campaigns aim of unseating the Prime Minister, John Howard, in an electorate he had held for 33 years. The specific focus of this paper has been to identify trends of 'modernisation' in the McKew campaign, including the personalisation of politics, the modernisation of media coverage and the 'professionalisation' of politics and detachment of parties from citizens.

McKew's campaign was primarily analysed through a content analysis of the press coverage of her campaign, using the campaign of her predecessor, Nicole Campbell, as a basis for comparison. In addition, interviews with key observers of the campaign were incorporated to flesh out the findings of the content analysis, and various books and articles on the campaign were analysed for further evidence.

The results of this study were mixed. McKew's campaign was shown to be highly personalised, though without the focus on personality or private life that was expected. The media coverage of the campaign showed high proportions of strategy coverage, and very little coverage of policy - trends that support the modernisation thesis. However, McKew's campaign was not overly professionalised, and a high level of volunteer involvement contradicted the theory of a detachment of parties from citizens. Indeed, I will argue that her campaign represented, in some respects, a return to more traditional forms of campaigning prevalent in the early twentieth century.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Australian federal election of 2007 was, in many respects, remarkable. First, it was one of the few occasions when the Australian electorate voted against the sitting government. In addition, the defeated Coalition government was led by John Howard, Australia's second longest serving Prime Minister and widely considered very hard to beat. The victorious Australian Labor Party (ALP), led by Kevin Rudd, had been in disarray and seemed certain to be headed for another defeat as recently as a year earlier. However, perhaps the most remarkable feature of the 2007 election was the Prime Minister's defeat in his own electorate of Bennelong, a seat he had held for thirty three years, by a political newcomer – high profile former broadcast journalist Maxine McKew. McKew's defeat of Howard was only the second time in Australian history that a sitting Prime Minister had lost his own seat, and forced his abrupt exit from the political arena (Saville, 2007: 1). The contrast between the two political adversaries could not be more pronounced – Howard the old and experienced political hand whose entire career had been a long struggle up the ranks of the Liberal Party, and McKew the younger and charismatic media personality making a well publicised splash into politics following a long and respected career as a journalist. The McKew victory was considered a political coup of immense proportions, and her campaign and victory created a national media storm of the likes rarely seen for a local campaign.

The McKew campaign would have been of research interest if only because of the historic nature of the result and the level of media interest it aroused, but a more thoughtful reflection on the campaign revealed it to be pertinent to a number of well established themes and debates within political communication and campaign literature. For example, McKew's campaign, particularly considering her status as a 'celebrity' candidate, appears to be a text book case of what has been called the 'modernisation' or 'Americanisation' of political campaigns worldwide. Political campaigns, it is posited, are becoming more personalised and media driven, less ideological, more professional and more expensive in an age of declining social cohesion and increasingly fragmented electorates (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Butler and Ranney, 1992; Bowler and Farrell, 1993; Plasser and Plasser, 2002). These developments are rarely portrayed in a positive light. Indeed, at their worst, modern elections are derided as being little more than superficial popularity contests in which leaders are focussed on winning at any cost and the majority of citizens have no role other than that of cynical and disengaged spectators. If these charges are true, the consequences for democracy seem grave. Not all commentators, however, see the modern

transformation of electoral practices as an entirely negative phenomenon. For example, Pippa Norris sees more, not less opportunity for engagement with citizens as campaigns become more tactical and specialised (2004: 6-7). The questions raised by these varying analyses of modern campaigns are significant. Elections are the most important political communication events of the democratic cycle, and are often the primary opportunity for democratic leaders to communicate directly with the citizens they represent.<sup>1</sup> As Swanson and Mancini (1996: 2) put it:

*The way in which a democracy conducts its election campaigns can empower or silence particular segments of the electorate, achieve or disrupt a balance of power among institutions of government, support or undercut the strength of political parties, and foster public support or alienation from government.*

McKew's campaign, and what it represents, may then have an importance beyond merely the historical novelty of the victory, and is therefore worthy of investigation. It has been my intention to analyse the campaign - and particularly the record of it left in the press coverage - in order to discern the extent to which it displayed the 'modernising' trends mentioned above. McKew's campaign had such an impact on the Australian political scene that 'doing a McKew' has entered the Australian political lexicon as code for running a high profile political outsider against an entrenched incumbent.<sup>2</sup> Australian politics has undoubtedly changed over the latter half of the twentieth century, and if McKew's campaign is emblematic of that change and further changes to come, it is worthwhile trying to understand them.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that not all commentators consider elections to be important. For example: G. Sussman and L. Galizio suggest that elections could be little more than large but ultimately pointless exercises in legitimising the status quo (2003: 312).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: "Turnbull unfazed by plans to 'McKew' him" The Sydney Morning Herald, 2009 (Online) Available: <http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/turnbull-unfazed-by-plans-to-mckew-him-20090726-dxbd.html>

## **2. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW AND FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

Before discussing the theoretical context in which this case study is situated and setting out the framework of analysis which shall be followed, it is important to note that this paper will make use of the term 'modernisation' over the other widely used term 'Americanisation.' Whilst the origins of the modernisation of political campaigning remain a contested issue (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 4), this paper takes the view that although campaign professionals may borrow practices that have been pioneered in America as they become more suitable in the native context, they retain their own distinct national character (Norris, 2000/2004; Plasser and Plasser, 2002: 16-17; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 2007: 103-5). The use of the term 'modernisation' in this paper is therefore an acknowledgement of the local peculiarities of the Australian social, political and media systems that have contributed to the trends in campaign practices to be discussed. The following section will set out what emerged from the literature as the key characteristics of a modern election campaign, as opposed to more traditional modes of campaigning. I have grouped these characteristics into three categories:

1. The professionalisation of politics and the detachment of parties from citizens
2. The personalisation of politics
3. The modernisation of media coverage

This section will conclude with an analysis of modernisation within the Australian context.

### **Professionalisation of Politics and the Detachment of Parties from Citizens**

Before discussing the state of political parties in democracies of today, it is worthwhile taking a moment to describe what came before the myriad of social and political changes that have left today's parties as organisations that would be unrecognisable to the campaigners of the early twentieth century. In what has sometimes been called the "pre-modern" age of political communication, campaigns were local affairs that relied on person to person contact as the primary means of disseminating the party's message and mobilising voters. Local party branches were able to call upon armies of volunteers, and directed all electioneering, door knocking, canvassing, and the selection of local candidates. The pre-modern electorate had firm ties to the various parties by social class, religion and/or ideology, and the task of

campaigners was primarily the mobilisation of an existing body of loyal voters on election day, rather than a prolonged persuasion of the undecided (Norris, 2000: 105).

Following the Second World War however, a variety of social and economic changes undermined the traditional class and social alliances on which the traditional political party had its foundation. The electorate became fragmented and individualistic, and no longer easy to mobilise (Blumler, 2001: 202). Concurrently, the arrival and mass proliferation of television completely changed the media landscape and disrupted traditional lines of communication between parties and their members (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002: 10-13). Campaigners were faced simultaneously with the challenges of understanding and persuading an unfamiliar, disjointed electorate, and utilising a new and powerful medium that had the potential to deliver an audience on an unprecedented scale. Writers worldwide have analysed the way campaigns responded to these pressures, with a common picture emerging across the literature.

Essentially, campaigns became 'professionalised' as the emphasis shifted from voter mobilisation to voter persuasion. Instead of armies of volunteers canvassing the electorate, market research experts are now hired to scientifically measure public opinion through opinion polls and focus groups. Opinion polls themselves have morphed beyond a simple tool of measurement to become campaign events in their own right, with consequences for the level of funding and media attention the campaign receives, as well as which policy issues make it on the agenda (Mancini, 1999 pp. 238-239). Marketing, PR and advertising experts skilled at crafting media strategies and 'spin' became central figures in campaign management as parties adapted to the requirements of a televised campaign, and party officials became less central to the campaign process (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 14-15; Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 33).

Consequently, it has been observed that the modern campaign has transformed from a 'labour intensive' enterprise into a 'capital intensive' one – that is, the focus of a parties resources and strategy is now focussed primarily on the media, and traditional local activities performed by candidates, party activists and volunteers such as door knocking have generally been on the decline, and are in some cases close to non-existent (Butler and Ranney, 1992: 280; Scammell, 1988; Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 32-33). Political parties of today are far weaker structurally, and less intimately connected with the electorate than the mass membership parties of the early twentieth century. Described first by Kirchheimer as

the 'catch-all' party and later elaborated by Panebianco as the 'professional-electoral' party, today's parties exist primarily to win elections rather than perform a politically socialising function. Instead of loyal members, today's parties rely on fragile coalitions of voters who coalesce around particular issues or personalities from election to election, in which the electoral platform has been carefully structured and tested by campaign professionals (Mancini, 1999: 233). Farrell and Webb (2000: 123) contend that 'the nature of citizenship is changing' and increasingly people will choose to participate politically through non-partisan issue groups rather than political parties.

While there is consensus in the literature about the general shape of today's political parties, there is less agreement over the consequences of these changes. The detachment of parties from citizens and the professionalisation of campaign organisations is often given as the cause for growing cynicism and political apathy in the general population who are tired of the strategy and spin. Alternatively some writers, such as Norris, see the potential in what has been called the 'post modern' campaign for the re-engagement of citizens through a more traditional style of campaigning. As television has become a less reliable means of reaching a mass audience, Norris (2004: 6-7) sees evidence that campaigning is to some extent returning to more traditional, interactive and localised forms of campaigning that were a feature of campaigns of the early twentieth century. What can be agreed, however, is that parties today are fundamentally different from those of yesterday.

### **The Personalisation of Politics**

The most widespread and pervasive feature of the modernised election campaign is what has been called the "personalisation" of politics. That is, the focus of modern campaigns by the media, the population and the campaign itself on the individual candidate running for office rather than the party, ideology, or policy. The personalisation of politics has its roots in the trends discussed above. First, the decline of the political party as an organisational force has undoubtedly contributed to the focus on individual candidates. Personable leaders with the ability to attract popular support have filled the vacuum left by the detachment of parties from citizens and the retreat of ideology and class loyalty. Their rise to centre stage has in turn further diminished the authority of the political parties in which they operate, and renders party support more fragile and transitory (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 10). The crucial factor in personalisation, however, must be said to be the rise of the media as the primary transmitter of campaign communication – and particularly the centrality of television.



The importance of the candidates' physical appearance, presentation and communication skills on television has not been in doubt since the Kennedy/Nixon debate of 1962. Media professionals who work on campaigns recognise the importance of having a good 'product,' and candidates who can project a good image on television are at a significant advantage to poor communicators. The logical result of this is the selection of politicians who are either already telegenic (for example, Reagan), or established politicians going to great lengths to make themselves so, as in the case of Margaret Thatcher having her teeth capped, hair re-styled and undergoing voice training in the early 1980s (Bowler and Farrell, 1996, pp15-16).

Public cynicism and distrust of politics also increases the trend to personalisation. A common strategy in modern political campaigns is for candidates to portray themselves as political outsiders running against the entrenched powers that be. In what amounts to an attempt to 'transcend their demeaning profession,' it is now commonplace for politicians to distance themselves from the parties to which they belong. Ronald Reagan's own campaign chairman described him as 'non-political' (Troy, 1991: 258). Jimmy Carter, too, ran ostensibly as a simple farmer with no political connections in Washington (Matthews, 1988: 154-55 and 34-35). An extreme manifestation of this and of personalisation is when a genuine political outsider – often a celebrity candidate – runs for election. This approach combines the appeal of the political outsider with the proven ability to attract sustained media attention, although perhaps not always with the desired outcome. As Christine Jackman (2008: 197) points out in her study of the 2007 election in Australia, running a celebrity candidate assures publicity, 'but that spotlight also ensures any naive mistake will be elevated to headline status.'

The criticisms of personalisation – and particularly celebrity politics – are not difficult to surmise. A pleasant appearance, exuberant charisma and being media savvy does not automatically translate into an ability to govern effectively. The media is said to focus on politicians' softer, human qualities at the expense of other qualifications, advantaging those who are able to elicit populist empathy (Jackman, 2008: 439). Authors such as Postman (in Street, 2004: 439) worried that superficial appearances were coming to dominate politics to such an extent that '...cosmetics have replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control...' and that it was becoming impossible to determine who was a more capable leader in any meaningful sense. In summary, critics of personalisation believe it threatens to elevate style over substance, relegating to the

sidelines those who may have years of political experience and policy skill but who lack camera appeal. Although voices in support of personalisation are harder to find, some argue that there are benefits to focussing on candidates with media savvy or an existing high profile. Many such candidacies have the ability to re-energise large numbers of people, including those who do not normally have an interest in politics – a distinct positive in times of widespread cynicism about politics (Street, 2004: 440; Warhurst in Rehn, 2007: 77).

### **The Modernisation of Media Coverage**

The media played a central role in all of the modern electoral practices described above, beginning with the assumption of the political communication function that used to belong to parties. Over the twentieth century it has taken on an increasingly independent and active role within election campaigns, and although the precise nature of so-called 'media effects' is disputed, the media is thought to have the ability to make or break political candidates by choosing the amount and type of coverage a candidate gets (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 11; Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 32-34).<sup>3</sup> Campaign officials consequently strive to provide the media with material that will result in favourable coverage – leading to charges of spin, of events orchestrated for the media, and the promotion of telegenic candidates over others (Butler and Ranney, 1996: 283). The media itself has been accused of feeding into this 'spiral of cynicism' by focussing less on substantive issues, and more on conflict, controversy and the 'horse race' aspects of a campaign (Capella and Jamieson, 1997: 31). Also called 'strategy coverage,' new trends in campaign coverage are said to focus on stories that '...emphasize who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead' (Capella and Jamieson, 1997: 33).

This obsession with who's ahead in the polls and the political tactics behind every action is a frequently lamented feature of modernisation (Blumler and Gurevitch, 201: 384). Authors such as Capella and Jamieson (1997 pp.31-34) claim that this type of reporting is greatly increasing the cynicism and disengagement citizens feel toward politics. Some strategy coverage and political commentary is warranted, they argue, but not if it 'crowds out' substantive policy issues that are important to governance. Some suggest that the tendency

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<sup>3</sup> Norris (2000: 36-49) disputes claims that there is a simple cause and effect between bad coverage and bad political fortunes, and suggests many methodologies used to evaluate media effects are flawed.

of the media to cover campaigns in this way is a consequence of the ever fiercer struggle between campaign staff and journalists for control over the news agenda, and a means for journalists to demonstrate their independence from the 'spin' of the campaign (Capella and Jamieson, 1997: 384; Blumler et. al. 1996: 54). Tony Blair (2007) expressed frustration with this perpetual struggle and the inability of politicians to communicate an unmediated message in the speech he gave on the media when stepping down from office: 'Tell me how many maiden speeches are listened to; how many excellent second reading speeches or committee speeches are covered. Except when they generate major controversy, they aren't.'

Authors such as Norris (2000/2004) argue that the politicians themselves are as much to blame for this as the press, and the obsession with strategy in the press reflects the same obsession within the campaign, which is itself far more focussed on the horse race than issues of policy. Regardless of who is to blame (if anyone) the crowding out of issue coverage and the increase in strategy or 'horse race' coverage in today's media environment is a prominent feature of the modernisation of election campaigns.

### **Setting the Scene: Modernisation in Australia**

Australia is a parliamentary democracy dominated by two main political parties, the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party (confusingly, the conservative party).<sup>4</sup> Federal elections are held every three years, and voting is preferential rather than 'first past the post.' Australia is also one of the few democracies where voting is compulsory, with citizens liable to pay fines if they fail to cast a ballot on election day. Like most modern democratic societies, the detachment of parties from citizens has been evident in Australia since the 1950s. The ALP was, however, the only Australian political party that could ever truly have been called a 'mass party,' formed as it was from the trade union movement in the context of class struggle. The Liberal party, intended as a middle class mass party, mimicked the structure of the ALP but could never match it in terms of membership (Ward, 1993: 486).

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<sup>4</sup> The "Liberal" is for economic liberalism. The majority of the party's MPs are social conservatives (although not as far right as U.S. conservatives). The Liberal party has a coalition agreement with the National Party, meaning they direct preferences to each other and generally vote together. The Liberal government is hence often referred to as the Coalition Government.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, however, both parties experienced a steady and then precipitous decline in membership. The ALP went from 350,000 members in the 1930s to 40,000 in the 1960s, and by the 1990s was at a point where the National Secretary of the ALP admitted that the party could no longer legitimately describe itself as a mass party (Ward, 2003: 586). As volunteer numbers dropped, so did traditional face-to-face campaigning activities. This, combined with the arrival of television, triggered the gradual modernisation of the Australian campaign. According to Ward (1993 p.483), Australian political parties have been sending campaign workers to the U.S. since the 1960s, and since then there has been a steady "cross-fertilization" of talent between the two countries.

However, although there are now a large number of media professionals working on Australian campaigns, the major parties have so far not ceded control of the campaign to them. The key players in the campaigns of major parties are still, above all, party officials (Ward, 2009: 350). Also, although the tools required to persuade rather than mobilise (such as polls and advertising) are central features of Australian campaigns, they have always been more of a focus than in other democracies because of compulsory voting. That is, the key tasks of mobilisation and voter registration are performed by the State, so Australian parties have always been compelled to focus on undecided voters and marginal seats (Ward, 2009: 348).

Australian politics are certainly more personalised now than they were before – particularly since the ideological convergence of the two major parties in the 1970s left little to differentiate them other than leadership (Ward, 1993: 497). Candidates are very aware of their personal appearance and mannerisms – Kevin Rudd had to undergo significant efforts to make himself seem more like an average Australian before he could win leadership of the party (Jackman, 2008: 18-35). From time to time, local candidates have been encouraged to avoid using the party brand if they're at a low point in public popularity (Ward, 2003: 591). However, unlike American presidential candidates who can make themselves viable contenders even if they start as political outsiders (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 2007: 103) Australian prime ministerial candidates have generally accumulated years of experience within the party, built up factional support, and have had to win pre-selection from their colleagues.

It's hard to imagine an Obama-style candidate emerging in the Australian context. Where it can and has occurred has been in local electorates, where both parties have run a number of

celebrity candidates.<sup>5</sup> McKew was however one of the first cases where a very high profile candidate was inserted into a truly marginal situation. Perhaps the combination of her high profile and an intense political battle was the perfect storm for the media frenzy that ensued. It may be possible, as Australian academic Ian Ward contends, that the beginning of Norris's post-modern stage of campaigning is evident in Australia, in which a return to localised campaigning is the new trend.

Perhaps the appearance of celebrity candidates such as McKew in local campaigns is evidence of this. In his article 'Localising the National' Ward (2003: 590) documents this new focus on specialised, targeted local campaigns, made easier by digital technologies such as Labor's online voter database, Electrac. However, Ward (2003: 594; 2009: 350) sees this as primarily a marketing response to the growing political alienation of Australian voters, and believes the grass roots is still essentially dead – at least in terms of what it once was. Local candidates, he notes, still seldom feature in the national campaign and rarely receive much news coverage.

The McKew campaign was an event of immense importance in Australia, and its repercussions for future political campaigning in Australia have yet to fully play out. On the face of it, the campaign was the most explicit example of modernised politics seen in Australia. McKew appeared to have limited ties to the party, massive personal appeal and even celebrity status, and attracted unprecedented media attention. The purpose of this research project has been to gain a deeper understanding of the modernisation theory, and investigate to what extent McKew's campaign was truly typical of these unfolding trends.

I have examined the press coverage and other available evidence through the three key areas of modernisation outlined above: The declining relevance of the political party and the professionalisation of politics, the personalisation of politics, and the role of the media in reporting the campaign.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, former Midnight Oil rock star Peter Garrett ran in the safe Labor seat of Kingsford-Smith in the 2004 election, and is now a cabinet member in the Rudd government.

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The central means of empirical investigation employed is a content analysis of the press coverage of the McKew campaign. This is the primary existing record of the campaign, observed and recorded as it unfolded and without the benefit of hindsight. The behaviour of the press itself, of course, is also an object of this study. Content analysis seemed an appropriate means both for analysing the record for evidence of the trends described above, and as a tool for comparing the McKew campaign with that of her predecessor in the 2004 election. Content analysis has a long established use for the investigation of trends in news reporting, as in Speed's 1893 systematic study of the 'moral decay' in the yellow press (Bauer, 2000: 132). In addition, content analysis is an accepted method of researching trends of modernisation and/or Americanisation in the media – particularly personalisation or 'presidential' styles of campaigning, and strategy or 'horse race' coverage.

I have endeavoured to flesh out the findings of the content analysis by supplementing them with interviews – primarily first-hand accounts of the Bennelong election by two close observers. The first was journalist and author Margot Saville, a former colleague of McKew's who closely shadowed the campaign, had close access to all key players and wrote the book *The Battle for Bennelong* documenting its day to day progress. The second was Oliver MacColl, Director of Offline Campaigns with activist group GetUp!, who ran a very active grass roots campaign in Bennelong.

#### **Sampling and Design of Research Tools**

The sample of articles was collected through both relevance and systematic sampling (Krippendorff, 2004: 118) of four newspapers from the date of the announcement of her candidacy (26<sup>th</sup> February 2007) until the date of the election (25<sup>th</sup> November 2007), yielding 530 articles. Of these papers, *The Northern District Times* is a free local publication that circulates in Bennelong, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph* are the two major Sydney based papers that circulate state-wide (the former a broadsheet publication and the latter a tabloid) and *The Australian* is a national broadsheet. To produce a manageable sample, the 530 articles were then cut down to roughly a quarter (132 articles), with each paper maintaining the same proportional rate of articles in the smaller sample as had been present in the larger sample. This was achieved by systematically selecting every

fourth article from each publication, so as to accurately reflect the volume of coverage over the time frame.

The second sample of articles are those referring to Nicole Campbell in the 2004 Bennelong election. Campbell's campaign was selected as the most appropriate control sample, considering the setting is the same, and the gender of the candidates is the same, negating the possibility of gender related differences in the coverage. Campbell is however a far more traditional local candidate, having a low profile and long involvement in politics as a local Labor councillor. A keyword search for Nicole Campbell in the same papers over the same time period before the 2004 election, yielded only 32 articles – all but one from the local publication, *The Northern District Times*. Due to the small number, all of these were included in the sample and coded.

The coding frame for this category has twelve categories (labelled A-L) designed to measure signs of modernisation evident in the press coverage of the campaign.<sup>6</sup> Categories A-D record general information such as the date, newspaper, headline and whether the article can be considered news or comment. Some categories are only relevant to one aspect of modernisation, while others are applicable to several. According to the theory of personalisation, the selection of high profile candidates or those that are adept media performers leads to large volumes of coverage from a personality obsessed media. It should diminish focus on the party in favour of the candidate, and be drawn to the softer, superficial human interest stories about the candidates (Street, 2004: 439-441).

To test for personalisation, I included categories that measure McKew's relative prominence in the articles in which she is mentioned (her ability to attract focussed coverage), specific mention of her special 'celebrity' status, mention of her private life or physical attributes, and whether reporting on the Bennelong election is framed as a contest between two candidates (McKew and Howard) or the two political parties to which they belong. Key characteristics of the media coverage in modern election campaigns is said to be the prominence of 'horse race' or 'strategy' coverage, and the diminishing focus on substantive policy issues (Capella and Jamieson, 1997).

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<sup>6</sup> The coding frame for articles on Nicole Campbell was the same (with Campbell's name inserted instead of McKew) except for the exclusion of the category that measured mention of celebrity status.

To capture these trends, I included categories to measure the proportion of the article devoted to strategy coverage, and the proportion of each dedicated to discussion of issues. The final aspect of modernisation that has been discussed here is the increasing professionalisation of political parties and the declining role of modern political parties. Evidence of a highly personalised campaign is in an oblique way also evidence of the diminishing prominence of political parties at election time, particularly the category that measures whether it is framed as a contest between the candidates or their respective parties. Similarly, a high degree of 'strategy' coverage should reflect the prominence of polls and other scientific means of measuring the electorate in Bennelong. However, most evidence in relation to this aspect of modernisation theory was gathered through interviews and other material concerning the campaign, and interview guides were designed accordingly.

The results of this research will be analysed in turn according to the theoretical framework identified in chapter 1 of this paper. The two sections that rely most on the content analysis are discussed first – the personalisation of politics, and the modernisation of media coverage. The detachment of parties from citizens, relying mostly on interviews and documentary evidence, is discussed last.

### **The Personalisation of Politics**

Of all the articles that mentioned McKew from the date of the announcement of her candidacy to the election, 27% made her the primary focus (more than 50% of the article is devoted to her), 34% secondary focus, and in 39% she was mentioned only in passing (less than 5% of the article). Her prominence in the articles was highest in the period immediately following her candidacy announcement (during the first third of the sample period she was coded as the primary focus in 41% of the articles) declined during the middle third of the time frame, and picked up again slightly toward the election, presumably as the marginal nature of polling data renewed interest in her candidacy. By comparison, in the election coverage of Nicole Campbell she achieved primary focus in only 6% of the sample, secondary focus in 53%, and was mentioned only in passing 41% of the time. As all but one of the articles that mentioned Campbell came from *The Northern District Times*, it was important to check that these differences in coverage were not due simply to differences in the style of the paper. When controlling for this, I found that in its coverage of the McKew campaign, *The Northern District Times* awarded greater prominence to McKew than the



sample as a whole, negating the possibility that the low prominence of Campbell was due to the paper.

McKew's celebrity status was specifically mentioned (adjectives such as 'star,' 'high profile,' or 'celebrity') in 39% of the articles. This was more pronounced during the first third of the sample time period, where 59% of the articles referred to McKew in this way, and gradually tailed off over the course of the campaign as the media became more accustomed to covering her. It should be noted however that even in the last third of the time period McKew's celebrity status was still referenced in nearly a quarter of the sampled articles. This category was not included in Campbell's coding frame.

Reference to McKew's private life, or other 'soft' qualities was measured on an ordinal scale of 1-4, with 1 meaning the majority of the article was devoted to a discussion of these qualities, and 4 meaning there was no reference. Of the entire sample, only 5% were coded 1, and an overwhelming 85% were coded 4 – leaving 10% somewhere in between. In the sample of articles referring to Campbell the contrast was even more stark, with the full 100% of articles coded 4. *The Northern District Times'* coverage of McKew mirrored the larger sample in the proportion of space devoted to McKew's private life, with 6% coded 1 and 84% coded 4. This suggests that the difference between McKew and Campbell in this category, although small, was not due to the newspaper. Only 8% of the articles in the McKew sample mentioned her physical appearance. Campbell's physical appearance is never mentioned.

Finally, of all the articles in which McKew was discussed in context of the Bennelong election (66% of the total sample), 74% framed the race as between McKew and Howard personally, with just 26% emphasising the broader context of the Labor and Liberal campaigns. The coverage of Nicole Campbell has exactly the opposite trend, with just 26% of relevant articles framing the election as primarily a private battle between Campbell and Howard. Once again, this is not the result of a difference in coverage style from the *Northern District Times*, which had similar proportions as the overall sample when covering the McKew (71% McKew vs. Howard, 29% Liberal vs. Labor). In the pilot study, an association was noticed between articles with a high proportion of policy coverage and articles where the election was portrayed as Liberal vs. Labor rather than the two candidates. In the larger study, however, this association was not born out.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the 2007 election, the local newspaper published an article in which a reporter visited several long term residents of Bennelong to canvass their views. One of these residents – a 'Ms Goddard' felt that Howard probably should have retired before the election, but acknowledged it was a difficult decision because no one liked his assumed successor, Peter Costello. She then goes on to say 'But I do not agree with having a presidential-style campaign, I think one should not vote for the man but the ideology' (Northern District Times, 2007). If the theories of academics and campaign consultants are correct, Mrs Goddard is in the minority. This is certainly the belief of the Labor party itself. Even though Bennelong had been a marginal seat for some time, it is clear from the opinion of Margot Saville, and the words of senior Labor figures, that the seat would never have been a priority if not for the McKew candidacy.

When discussing the increasingly marginal nature of Bennelong with a reporter from *The Sunday Telegraph* before McKew had decided to run, Labor's campaign director Tim Gartrell said 'Bennelong has never been on our target list, but has now come to our attention... If we get a good candidate, it will be a target seat and we'll campaign to win' (Gartrell in the Australian, 2007). It is clear that those running the Labor campaign considered the candidate to be a very important factor in the race, including McKew's experienced campaign manager, Michael Butterworth, who believed the 'increasingly presidential nature' of Australian campaigns would work in her favour (quoted in Saville, 2007: 44). Former Senator and key Labor powerbroker Robert Ray, also, is quoted speculating about McKew's win: 'Maxine McKew was the perfect candidate because she is not seen as a Labor insider. She had a career well outside the Labor party and that is very attractive to many of the voters of Bennelong' (quoted in Saville, 2007: 175).

Overall, the evidence gathered in the content analysis supports the belief of the party strategists that the candidate run in Bennelong would have a significant impact on the campaign's profile. The most significant feature of the coverage is its sheer volume and scope. Compared to Nicole Campbell, whose overall mentions were small and localised, McKew's coverage was vast, and the paper in which she received the most mentions was the national publication. In addition to attracting the coverage, McKew was frequently the primary focus of articles in which she was mentioned, unlike Campbell, who was very rarely

the focus of articles in which she was mentioned. The press accentuated McKew's high profile by constantly referring to her special status, betraying an appetite for celebrity.

It is quite clear from these figures that running a candidate with a high profile, as opposed to a regular party candidate, is sure to attract and sustain a high volume of focussed media coverage, as the theory of personalisation suggests. Similarly, evidence of personalisation is reflected in the way the press framed the campaign – the majority of the time focussing on the individual figures of Howard and McKew rather than their respective parties. This was not the case in the coverage of Campbell, which suggests that at least at the local level, this kind of coverage is not standard for every candidate. Perhaps, then, as running a media-friendly candidate is more likely to attract personalised coverage – which in turn convinces campaign strategists they must run media-friendly candidates – a self-sustaining cycle of personalisation is being generated.

The evidence does not uniformly support all aspects of the personalisation theory however. People close to the campaign emphasised the importance of McKew's personal qualities as a candidate. Michael Butterworth, the campaign manager, is quoted as saying 'empathy' is her most important characteristic (Saville, 2007: 44), and in interview, Margot Saville stressed her engaging personality, '...she does have this real X factor. You know, when she was a journalist as well. When she'll meet someone she does this – she gives you the Bill Clinton handshake. That focus on you as a person.' Overall, however, discussion of McKew's 'softer' characteristics, private life and physical appearance were not dominant features of the press coverage. Even though personalisation was clearly a factor in McKew's campaign, it does not seem that the press was flooded with frivolous material of the kind feared by critics of personalisation. Even so, there was a significant difference between McKew and Campbell's sample for these categories. Although a small proportion of the overall coverage, the articles that did focus on McKew's private life were long, detailed feature articles of the kind an ordinary local candidate would never attract, particularly in the national press (Overington, 2007; Woodard, 2007). Also, nearly 10% of the sample made reference to her physical appearance, including the label 'sexiest woman on television' which emerged and circulated in the press for some time (Overington 2007; Woodard 2007; Saville 2008: 3). This, again, does not appear to be a significant proportion until compared with Campbell's coverage, where no mention whatsoever was made of her appearance.

So, though not an overwhelming feature of the coverage, it does appear that personalisation contributes in a small way to a focus on style over substance. A far more dominant feature of personalisation reflected in the press coverage is the large volume of coverage achieved by McKew, and her prominence within that coverage – a significant advantage in media centred campaigns.

### **The Modernisation of Media Coverage**

To measure for the prominence of strategy coverage, an ordinal scale of 1-4 was used, where 1 indicates the majority (more than 50%) of the article was devoted to 'coverage that focusses on the strategies and prospects of the participants,' and 4 indicates there was no coverage of this kind in the article.<sup>7</sup> In the McKew sample, articles which were coded 1 for strategy coverage made up 40% of the sample. Of the remainder, 18% were coded 2, 13% were coded 3, and 29% were coded 4. In the Campbell sample, almost the opposite proportions were discovered, with only 25% coded 1, and 50% of the sample having no strategy coverage at all. However, when controlling for the influence of *The Northern District Times*, it was discovered that this paper's coverage of the McKew campaign had a similar distribution of strategy coverage to the Campbell sample, indicating that in this case the reason for the reduced strategy coverage of Campbell was due not to her campaign, but to the difference in style of the publication that made up the majority of her coverage.

The coverage of substantive policy issues was measured on an identical ordinal scale to that used to measure strategy coverage. In the McKew sample, only 13% of the articles were coded 1, meaning discussion of substantive policy issues was the primary focus of the article. The great majority (75%) were coded as having little or no coverage. Fully 53% were coded 4. Campbell's sample showed a very different picture, with 72% of articles having policy as either the primary or a significant aspect of the coverage (56% were coded 1). Of the remainder, only 22% were coded 4. Once again, however, controlling for the influence of *The Northern District Times* showed that that paper had a far higher proportion of policy discussion than the other papers in the McKew sample. Although not as pronounced as in the Campbell sample, 33% of *The Northern District Times* articles that mentioned McKew were coded 1, making up nearly 60% of all articles in the McKew sample that were coded 1.

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<sup>7</sup> This category and its description in the coding frame was based on the very similar "Electoral Process" category in Deacon et. al. (2005: 27)

Only 25% of its articles in the McKew sample were coded 4. Therefore, the higher proportion of policy coverage in the Campbell sample can at least in part be accounted for by the influence of *The Northern District Times*.

Of all the variables measured in this study, it is clear that strategy coverage is the most pervasive across the sample of articles that mention McKew – with the exception of articles from *The Northern District Times*. On the basis of this evidence it seems that this aspect of modernisation was very much present in the McKew campaign. Unfortunately in this case the comparison with Campbell's campaign coverage is not meaningful, coming as it does from the local publication. Intuitively, however, it seems likely that the extremely close nature of the race in Bennelong in 2007 provided the perfect fuel for strategy and 'horse race' coverage. The importance of the Prime Minister's seat ensured a plethora of polling information was available and frequently reported and commented on. There was endless speculation as to whether running a high profile candidate would backfire, discussions of the fate of other celebrity politicians, and rumours that McKew's strategy in Bennelong was not really to win, just to create a distraction for Howard that would take his attention away from the national campaign.<sup>8</sup> There is an obsession with explaining what is really going on, and with getting behind the spin of the Labor party, which suggests a battle for the agenda. The press's fixation on these aspects of the campaign are not surprising, or even very noticeable if one is not looking for them, attuned as we are to this style of reporting. It is perhaps worth remembering that there is nothing inevitable about strategy coverage, as the local publication proves.

Although it would be difficult to prove a direct causal link between the two phenomena, there is also strong evidence to show that while strategy coverage is all pervasive, coverage of issues in the major publications is dismally low, and only slightly better in the broadsheets than the tabloid. Cappella and Jamieson's fears of modern campaign coverage that is obsessed with process to the detriment of issues does therefore seem warranted. Although the intention of this study was not to seek to place blame for this trend either solely with the media or with politicians, the results do provide some grounds for comment on this. From the coverage of the *Northern District Times*, it is clear that the candidates involved in the race were frequently attending local events and making speeches where policy issues were discussed at length, so there was clearly not an absence of these issues from the campaign

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<sup>8</sup> This is a claim McKew herself has always denied (Saville 2007: 24-25)

itself. Rather, the larger papers do not cover these small local events, or cover them in a different way. The interest in the McKew campaign for them was not on her grasp of issues or what policy could bring to the table, but in the good story of the fight between the celebrity newcomer and the ageing Prime Minister.

### **The Professionalisation of Politics and the Detachment of Parties from Citizens**

The theory suggests modern campaigns are overwhelmingly professional, capital-intensive over labour-intensive enterprises that are decreasing the importance of political parties, which are themselves increasingly detached from citizens. Unlike personalisation and modernising trends in media coverage already discussed, the evidence of professionalisation and the decline of the political party in relation to the McKew campaign is very mixed.

First, the theory of 'professionalisation' holds that campaigns are heavily influenced, indeed often run by hired political consultants, pollsters and media experts, rather than traditional party bureaucrats. Although her decision to run was based partly on new polling information from Bennelong, none of McKew's key advisors fit that description (Saville, 2007, pp21-22). For example, Michael Butterworth, the campaign manager, is a local Labor councillor, and has a long history running campaigns for the National President of the ALP, Senator John Faulkner. He was, in Margot Saville's words 'parachuted in' by the ALP. Another key advisor (although not in an official capacity) was McKew's long term partner Bob Hogg, who was the National Secretary of the ALP for many years and still enormously influential within the party. The only member of the core campaign team who did not have a traditional background was McKew herself. A political outsider, a media professional, and not even a member of the Labor party until two weeks before she announced, McKew's partisan inclinations were obscure enough that she had been approached to run as Liberal candidate at one stage (Saville, 2007: 21; Overington, 2007: 24).

Second, her campaign, although highly personalised, did not transcend traditional ties to the party. Although it was not presented this way in the media, her activities were very much embedded within the broader campaign. For example, once she had decided to run, McKew did not snub the party chain of command. Rather, she was careful to consult with and cultivate the support of key Labor officials such as Mark Arbib, John Faulkner and Tim Gartrell before taking the plan to Kevin Rudd (Saville, 2007). She had also worked briefly as an advisor to Rudd in the months between resigning from her job in broadcasting and

announcing her candidacy. Saville's impression was that McKew was not free of the party discipline that applied to other ALP candidates, or given any extra money due to her special status.

Rather than an individualistic vehicle that undermined the party, it appears as though the McKew campaign relied upon the ALP very much for staffing and direction, which is at odds with the modernisation theory, and particularly the professionalisation of politics.

Third, what of the detachment of the party from citizens and the precipitous decline of the traditional, labour intensive campaigning activities? The McKew campaign, on the contrary, appears to have mobilised unprecedented levels of support. Saville describes how as soon as McKew announced her candidacy, the campaign team were overwhelmed with requests to volunteer and the local Labor branch, which had languished, came back to life:

*... I think it's fair to say the local Labor party members were pretty... discouraged, I'd say... Branch membership wasn't very high, I don't think were a lot of fabulous new ideas coming out of there or anything. So, yes, I mean the minute Maxine announced her candidacy the branches sprang into action. Everyone came to life, as it were... she ended up having about 900 volunteers, which is unbelievable.*

In addition to the huge number of volunteers mobilised, the methods of campaigning employed by McKew were in some respects very old fashioned. McKew attended hundreds of local events, fetes and mobile offices, so much so that Saville suggests she was becoming an ordinary sight to most people in the electorate by the end of the campaign. McKew personally called a large number of voters, and she and her campaign team knocked on 26,000 doors, which is roughly a third of the electorate (Saville, 2007: 176; McKew on ABC radio, 2007). These traditional campaigning activities were, however, greatly augmented by sophisticated technology which allowed very specific targeting of voters. The Electrac voter database, described by Saville, is capable of matching voter records with any information about them that makes its way online. In addition, notes taken by McKew and her staff with citizens at mobile offices and other events would be added to the system.

Consequently, when McKew would call a voter in Bennelong, she would be able to personalise the phone call to that particular voter. As Saville said: "...people were ringing me up saying "my mother who lives in Epping has had a phone call from Maxine" and not only was it a phone call from Maxine, she said "I noted from your last letter to the local paper that you're interested in this issue..." Such activities resemble not so much modernised

campaigning, but are closer to the theories of Pippa Norris and Ian Ward, who say that modern technology is facilitating the localised targeting that may make people feel more connected to campaigns. The McKew campaign combined the old tactics of one-to-one communication, with one of the oldest mediums, the telephone, all facilitated and enhanced by state of the art technology.

Another aspect of the campaign in Bennelong that offers mixed evidence of modernisation is the involvement of the organisation GetUp!.<sup>9</sup> Saville mentioned, when discussing campaign volunteers, that the McKew campaign probably would have had even more, but some people instead chose to volunteer through GetUp!. GetUp! is a non-partisan, progressive issue-based advocacy organisation that runs active campaigns all the time, but played a particularly significant role in the 2007 election, especially in Bennelong. Although non-partisan, the progressive issue focus means that in practice GetUp! members would have been almost uniformly anti-Howard, and pro-McKew by default. As MacColl put it: 'The focus on Howard was an implicit one.... it wasn't something we spelled out... but if you're talking about the energy that brought people to GetUp, that's what it was'. GetUp! had been active in Bennelong since the state election in March 2007, mobilising approximately 450 volunteers who were present at campaign events, handing out leaflets and speaking to people about the issues important to them.

In other respects, however, the prominence of GetUp! in the campaign is a perfect example of modernisation – in this case by citizens choosing to participate politically through means other than political parties, and coalescing around issues rather than ideology. MacColl explains people's involvement in GetUp! this way:

*Basically, if you care about issues, elections are when the politicians are most interested in what their constituents think...So people say, I could either follow the politics as usual, and the journey as usual, elect the guy and hope they do it, or I can get them to publically commit to doing something which means I can hold them to account for it. It's people just being rational, basically.*

Both GetUp! and McKew's labour intensive styles of campaigning proved to be very effective, and particularly McKew's intense personal involvement in campaigning activities. Saville describes a conversation with McKew's partner, Bob Hogg, veteran of many campaigns, on what he thought was a winning strategy:



*.... and he said to me, the basic premise of campaigning hasn't changed. You need to communicate with someone, and you need to connect with someone. And whether you're doing it through the media or shaking hands, or whatever, there has to be that connection...*

McKew's campaign does not fit the theory's description of a completely professionalised, party-detached political campaign, nor was it an entirely a traditional campaign. In at least this aspect of modernisation, it most closely matches the 'post-modern' campaign described by Norris and Ward, in which new technologies and old techniques combine to re-create some of the interactivity and connection early twentieth century campaigns.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

I started this project intrigued by the spectacle created by the McKew campaign, and convinced it was a perfect example of the modernisation of political campaigns in Australia. In some respects I was correct. McKew's campaign was undoubtedly symptomatic of the highly personalised nature of modern political campaigns in Australia. Her high profile status ensured swift acceptance of her candidacy within the upper echelons of the ALP, and secured her an instant high volume of press coverage, and a special prominence within that coverage, particularly compared to her more ordinary predecessor. The style of the press coverage analysed in this study displayed two of the key symptoms of modernisation – heavy emphasis on strategy coverage, and little on substantive policy issues. It would be interesting to study television coverage of Australian campaigns to see if the dearth of policy information is corrected there. If not, the Australian media needs perhaps to reassess the extent to which it meets public service obligations. Unlike the press coverage, however, personalisation did not prove to be an entirely negative phenomenon, especially considering McKew's campaign in relation to another aspect of modernisation – the detachment of parties from citizens who are supposedly too apathetic or cynical to be politically active.

The unprecedented resurgence in the local Labor branch, and the huge number of new volunteers the campaign was able to mobilise, as well as other organisations such as GetUp!, is testament to the excitement generated by McKew's announcement. Her style of

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<sup>9</sup> The discussion of GetUp! is based on an interview with Oliver MacColl, Director of Offline Campaigns with GetUp!

campaigning, too, did not fit the modernisation theory as neatly as expected. Rather than an expensive enterprise run by PR and advertising experts, it appears the majority of McKew and her team's time was spent on traditional, face to face communication, albeit enhanced by technologies such as Electrac.

Indeed, the McKew campaign seems to exemplify the theory that modern campaigns, rather than alienating citizens, can utilise new technologies to return to a more localised focus in which more people have the opportunity to participate and feel heard. This is a positive development. The fact that McKew was victorious, in what were widely considered to be very difficult circumstances, means campaigners all over Australia will be reflecting on the lessons to be learned from Bennelong.

An interesting object of further research would be to see whether future Australian campaigns incorporate more of a focus on local elections, and display signs of renewed engagement with the electorate.

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