

## **Elite division and voter confusion: Australia's republic referendum in 1999**

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**Abstract.** Although a majority of Australian voters favour the introduction of a republic, in the November 1999 referendum a majority of them nevertheless voted to retain the monarchy. This article explains the background to this apparently perverse outcome. The central problem was asking the Australian electorate to make a complex, technical choice about the system of government, in the absence of clear partisan cues. As a result, republicans were divided on the method of election for the head of state, effectively resulting in three separate groups of voters favouring change. Using survey data collected just after the referendum, four hypotheses are tested to explain the result. The most important influence on voting was views about whether or not to sever the link with Britain, followed by the positive and negative aspects of the proposed change, and the cues presented by the leaders of the respective YES and NO campaigns. The interaction between these factors enabled political elites opposed to change to manipulate the result in their favour.

As democratic exercises, referendums are paradoxical. Referendums seek to replace representative democracy by enabling citizens to decide issues directly, instead of indirectly through competing elites. However, like elections, referendums are initiated and controlled by elites, many of whom are unelected and unrepresentative of citizen attitudes and preferences. By forcing relatively uninformed voters to give simple answers to complex constitutional or policy questions, referendums invite elites to make claims that are often more simplistic and deliberately misleading than those they employ in elections.

This paradoxical aspect of referendums was apparent in the campaign to transform Australia from a monarchy into a republic, culminating on 6 November 1999 in a constitutional referendum to adopt a republican form of government. The proposed change would have replaced the British Queen and her representative in Australia, the Governor-General, with a president appointed by two-thirds of the bicameral federal parliament sitting as one body. Australians voted 54.9 to 45.1 per cent against this proposal, with majorities in all six states and the Northern Territory rejecting it (only the Capital Territory, where Canberra is located, registered a majority in favour). A second referendum proposal, to add a preamble to the Constitution, was even more soundly defeated, with 60.7 per cent voting against.

The voters' rejection of the republic proposal was puzzling, since opinion polls throughout the 1990s regularly recorded voters favouring a republic by roughly two to one, albeit with a quarter undecided. The most apparent reason for the winning NO vote on referendum day was the specific proposal that the president of the proposed republic be appointed by Parliament. Many who wanted a republic disliked this 'indirect' selection of their president and, combined with the one-third or so of voters who wanted to retain ties to the British Crown, formed a narrow majority to defeat the proposal. However, the story is more complex than this, and tells us much about how elites control referendums and the tendency for democracy to be debased in the process.

### **The constitutional background**

The origins of the 1999 republic referendum can be traced to the 1975 constitutional crisis (see Higley & Evans Case 2000; Uhr 2000; Miles 1999). The events of that time had no precedent in Australia's 75 years of independence and they embittered a large part of the political class, convincing many that Australia must sever its remaining links to the British Crown and become a republic. During the next 20 years, republican sentiment spread in concert with intensifying Australian nationalism. In 1991, a new Labor prime minister, Paul Keating, made proposals for a referendum or a plebiscite on the republic and Keating eventually made this a central tenet of Labor's 1996 election platform. In order to defuse this electorally popular promise, John Howard, the Liberal-National opposition leader, promised that if elected the coalition would convene a 'people's constitutional convention' and if the convention produced a practical proposal for a republic, it would be put to a referendum before the end of the decade.

The institutional design of the republic had always been problematic. Australia's constitution is a unique mix of British and American institutions (see, *inter alia*, Abbot 1995; Galligan 1995; McGarvie 1999; Uhr 1999; Bogdanor 1995; Smith 1999). How to transit to a republic without inviting confrontations between prime ministers and presidents was the puzzle that Australian elites wrestled with in the years leading up to the 1999 referendum (for an account of the extensive discussions and political maneuvers that took place throughout the 1990s, see Turnbull 1999). The minimal institutional change was the one eventually proposed – a largely ceremonial president appointed by Parliament. Those who advocated this 'minimalist model' argued that any greater change, such as direct election of the president, would require

extensive and politically divisive changes to Australia's British-American constitutional mix. Moreover, it was argued, if the president's role was to be merely ceremonial, why have him or her popularly elected in the first place? And if presidential elections became party contests, as they very likely would, would not the office inevitably become partisan and expansive in its powers?

These conundrums gave rise to much concern among elites, especially during and after the constitutional convention in early 1998. In their complexity and subtlety, the conundrums were analogous to those faced by elites in European countries who have recently crafted or are planning referendums on such issues as accession to the Maastricht Treaty, joining the Euro zone, or applying for European Union membership. As in Europe, Australian elites faced the dual tasks of achieving limited agreement among themselves and then of persuading voters, most of whom had little or no knowledge of the complexities that lay behind the referendum proposal, to approve it. The Australian case illustrates the difficulties that beset this method for effecting political change. It is a cautionary tale that we now propose to tell in greater detail.

### **Initiating the referendum: Active elites, dormant voters**

The Australian Constitution can be amended only by means of a rigorous referendum process. First, the Commonwealth government, not citizens, must initiate constitutional referenda. Second, the government must submit each referendum proposal as legislation to both houses of Parliament, and an absolute majority of each house must approve it. Third, when a constitutional referendum is finally put to the voters, it must secure a majority of all voters nationally and majorities of voters in a majority of the six states in order to pass. Given these requirements, it is not surprising that only eight out of 44 constitutional referenda put to the electorate during the course of the twentieth century passed into law.

The Commonwealth government is the crucial actor in constitutional referenda. Not only does it have the sole power to decide whether to propose a referendum, but it also controls how the referendum is worded and the content of the implementing legislation. In Australia's Westminster parliamentary system, this means that prime ministers play the dominant role in referendum matters – something that became clear during the run-up to the republican referendum. As a steadfast opponent of the adoption of a republican form of government, Prime Minister John Howard used his position to undermine the referendum's success. Given Howard's power and his opposition to the idea,

why did his government expend so much political capital, plus millions of dollars, to hold the referendum in the first place?

One might expect that public pressure forced the Howard government to mount the referendum. This was not the case, however. It was, instead, elite pressure and the dynamics of party politics that pushed Howard and his government into convening a constitutional convention in early 1998 and then holding the referendum itself in late 1999. The first time Australian voters were asked in an opinion poll about becoming a republic was when Queen Elizabeth ascended to the throne in 1953, when just 15 per cent favoured the republic (see Figure 1). Support for a republic increased only minimally through the next three decades. When undecided voters are taken into account, support for a republic never exceeded one in five voters until the 1990s, and even then it never encompassed a majority of all voters.

In July 1991, an Australian Republican Movement (ARM) was launched in Sydney by a handful of eminent intellectuals and civic leaders. ARM's goal was 'a Head of State who is an Australian citizen, who is appointed by

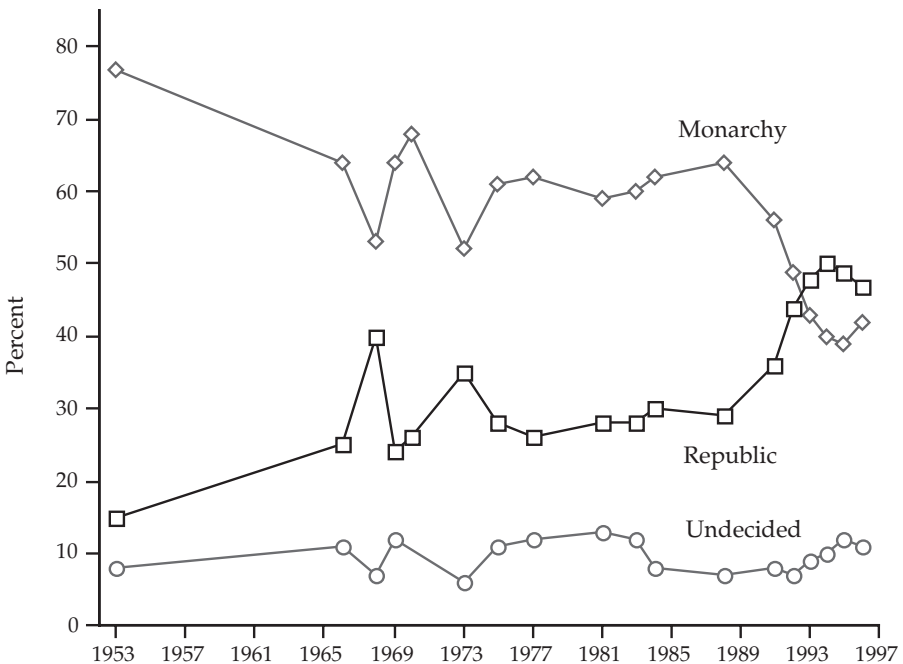


Figure 1. Public Opinion on the Republic Issue, 1953–96

Note: Questions vary between surveys. If there was more than one survey in any year the results have been averaged.

Sources: Bean (1993); Warhurst (1999); Winterton (1994).

Australians and who represents the independent and sovereign nation of Australia'. ARM's proposal for a republic with a president appointed and, if necessary, removed by Parliament gained political salience in 1992–1993 when the Labor prime minister, Paul Keating, delivered several widely noted speeches decrying Australia's 'outmoded' ties to the British monarchy and endorsing the idea of a republic. After winning re-election in 1993, Keating marshalled a government-commissioned report entitled *An Australian Republic*. These initiatives by Keating forced successive opposition leaders, Alexander Downer and then John Howard, to find some way of defusing the issue. This was because their own Members of Parliament were divided over the desirability of a republic, so that destructive Liberal-National infighting had to be avoided if possible. In addition, neither Downer nor Howard wanted the republic issue to dominate the 1996 federal election. In 1994, Downer, as opposition leader, settled on the idea of promising a 'People's Constitutional Convention' if elected. When he replaced Downer as opposition leader in 1995, Howard, though personally opposed to a republic, found himself with no political alternative but to commit the Liberal-National coalition to convening a people's convention and, if the convention agreed on a proposal to make Australia a republic, to putting that proposal to a constitutional referendum before the end of 1999.

Having won the 1996 election, the Howard government convened the Convention in February 1998 after first holding a voluntary postal ballot to elect half its 152 delegates, the other half being appointed by governments. During the Convention's two weeks of nationally televised deliberations, the main struggle was between the republican delegates who wanted directly elected presidents and those who, led by ARM, considered that this would create so many institutional uncertainties or require so many constitutional alterations that it would guarantee defeat of the republic idea altogether. Though opinion polls showed that voters favoured a directly elected president, no group had mobilized nationally in support of this option. In the glare of media coverage, however, the Convention provided direct-election enthusiasts with a stage from which they could advocate their position while denigrating the proposals for indirectly appointed presidents as the handiwork of devious 'politicians' and 'elitists'. Nevertheless, the direct electionists' relatively small numbers, lack of organization and internal divisions led to the direct-election models being easily defeated in early Convention voting rounds. After two weeks of fractious debates, a republic with an indirectly chosen president was recommended by the Convention: 73 for, 57 against and 22 abstaining. On the Convention's final day, Prime Minister Howard said that this was what his government would ask voters to approve or reject in a referendum to be held before the end of 1999.

## The campaign: Elite division, voter confusion

The exact wording of the referendum question and format remained the government's prerogative, supervised by the Prime Minister, and these matters were not decided until July and August 1999, some 16 months after the Convention. The groups favouring a republic assailed Howard's initial formulation of a referendum proposition because it made no mention of replacing the Queen and Governor-General with an Australian head of state: voters would be asked only if they favoured 'a president appointed by two-thirds of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament'. This was seen as favouring the NO vote because it would lead voters to think that they were being asked to approve an American-style president appointed by 'politicians'.

Two circumstances forced Howard to revise this formulation. One was a deep split in Howard's Cabinet and more widely in the governing Liberal and National parties over the republic question. Some of Howard's most senior ministers, several state Liberal leaders and a few key National Party leaders were staunch republicans opposed to any referendum proposal that favoured the monarchical *status quo*. The other circumstance was that the Howard Government did not control a majority of Senate seats. To gain Senate approval of the referendum proposal and enabling legislation, the government needed support from the small Australian Democrat Party and from two independent senators. Accordingly, the republic proposal was changed to ask voters: '[Do you approve of a republic] with the Queen and governor-general being replaced by a president appointed by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament?'

In a last preparatory act, the Howard Government appropriated Aus\$20 million for educating voters about the issues they would confront in the referendum. Of this sum, Aus\$5 million was given to the Electoral Commission to organise the referendum and send each voter a neutral information document about the proposal. The government took the unprecedented step of dividing the remaining Aus\$15 million between officially constituted YES and NO committees, each consisting of ten prominent organisation leaders in the opposing camps. The NO committee included two prominent direct-election republicans, and their presence, coupled with the government funding, heightened the NO campaign's focus on the proposed republic's 'democratic deficiencies'.

Throughout 1997 and 1998, voter support for a republic had remained relatively stable, at about half of all voters, with those favouring the *status quo* comprising about one-third of the electorate (see Figure 2). Undecided voters, who were one in every four in early 1997, gradually decreased to about one in every ten by the end of 1997, with the republican and monarchist alterna-

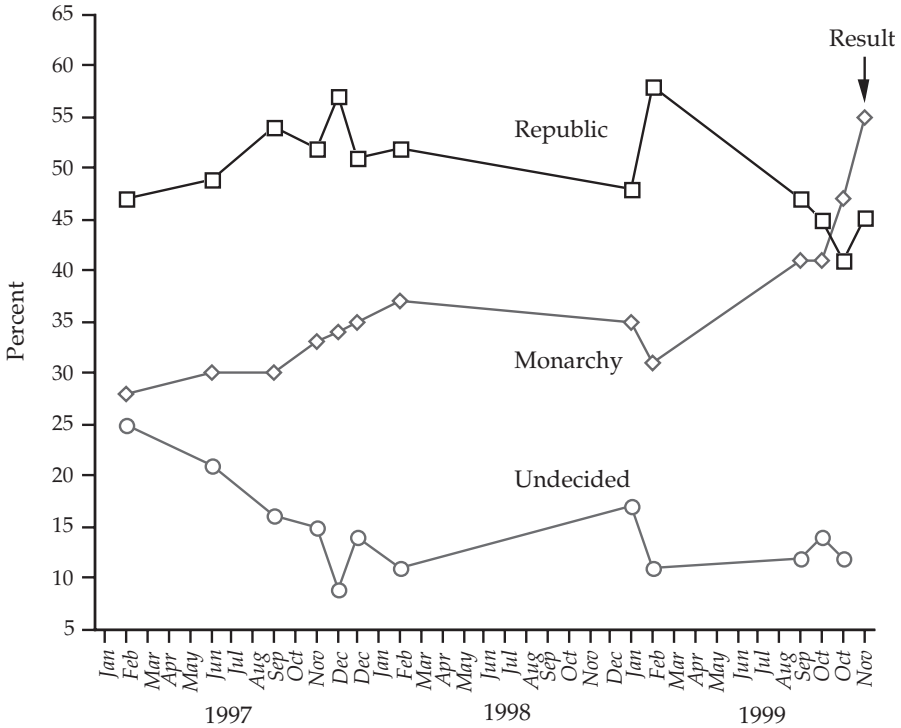


Figure 2. Public Opinion During the Referendum Campaign  
 Note: Questions vary between surveys.  
 Sources: Bean (1993); Warhurst (1999); Winterton (1994).

tives gaining equally from the decline in undecideds. The balance between YES and NO voters began to change only in 1999, once the competing camps launched their respective campaigns. The first opinion poll conducted in 1999 showed an increase in republican support of 10 percentage points, but thereafter support for the republic decreased steadily, dipping for the first time below support for the *status quo* in the last two polls conducted before the referendum.

Why did support for the republic decline so markedly during the months and weeks before the referendum? The answer lies in the relative effectiveness of the YES and NO campaigns. Recognising voter ignorance of the complex institutional issues involved, both campaigns aimed at basic voter sentiments. The YES campaign reassured voters that the proposed change was ‘small and safe’, that most of Australia’s brightest leaders and celebrities favoured the change and that retaining the *status quo* would risk numerous embarrassments, such as an Australia ruled by ‘King Charles III and Queen

Camilla'. The NO campaign railed against the 'Chardonnay-swilling elites' who had fomented a republican plot, claimed that the referendum would create a 'politicians' republic' and said that 'real democrats' should favour a directly elected president and should therefore vote NO. Some extreme anti-republicans even asserted that the referendum would lead to Australia's ejection from the Commonwealth of Nations, a new flag and even to a Weimar-like republic with the specter of a 'Hitler' hanging over it. Such was the campaign discourse preceding the referendum.

Although the referendum campaign had undoubted effects, it is nevertheless striking that voter interest in it throughout 1999 was virtually identical to the interest voters reported having in the preceding year's federal election campaign. When surveyed immediately after the referendum, somewhat less than two out of every five said they had been interested in both campaigns, a bit less than one in three said they had followed both on television, less than one in four had done so through newspapers, and less than one in five had followed them via radio (see Table 1). One-third of all voters doubted that they would have voted on either occasion if not forced to do so by Australia's compulsory voting system. In terms of voter interest, then, there was little difference between the party-led federal election campaign and the referendum campaign in which parties were largely supplanted by new and unfamiliar YES and NO committees, leaders and movements. In both cases, voter interest was modest.

It is possible to compare the two campaigns' effects more closely. Our data indicate that both campaigns caused about one-third of voters to think about changing their initial preference. Moreover, roughly one-quarter of voters reported that, in both cases, they delayed their decision until polling day was nearly upon them (28 per cent in the federal election, 20 per cent in the referendum). On the other hand, noticeably more voters in the referendum (43 per cent) than in the election (35 per cent) apparently remained untouched by campaign effects, having made up their minds 'a long time ago'. This suggests that the fixed nature of a referendum – choosing to vote YES or NO to a single proposition – is conducive to greater voter certainty than is a fluid and shifting election campaign in which multiple issues, some of them cross-cutting, are discussed.

The result of the referendum was a national vote of 45.1 per cent in favour of the republic and 54.9 per cent against the proposition. It was the thirteenth lowest YES vote in a referendum out of the 44 questions asked in referendums since federation. No state produced a majority of YES voters, and only the Australian Capital Territory produced a majority in favour of the change. The proposed preamble to the Constitution fared even worse; the YES vote of 39.3 per cent was the sixth lowest this century and no state or territory pro-



Table 1. Political attentiveness – 1998 federal election and 1999 referendum

	Federal election 1998	Referendum 1999
<i>Political interest</i> (% who say 'good deal')		
Politics generally	36	35
In the election campaign	37	38
Cared about outcome	74	71
<i>Media interest</i> (% who say 'good deal')		
Television	32	28
Newspapers	21	24
Radio	18	18
<i>Voting decision</i> (% who say 'yes')		
Definitely vote if not compulsory	67	66
Thought of changing vote	29	31
Decided vote long time ago	35	43
(N)	(1,897)	(2,311)

Note: 'Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what's going on in politics?'; 'And how much interest would you say you took in [the election/referendum campaign] overall?' (1998: 'How much attention did you pay to reports about the election referendum campaign in the newspapers?'; 'Did you follow the election campaign news on television?') (1999: 'In the weeks leading up to polling day, did you follow the Referendum news on television?') 'And did you follow the election/referendum campaign news on the radio?' 'Would you have voted in [this election/the Constitutional Referendum] if voting had not been compulsory?' 'Was there any time during the [election/referendum] campaign when you seriously thought you might [give your first preference to another party in the House of Representatives/vote differently on the question of Australia becoming a republic]?' 'When did you decide how you would definitely vote in [this election/the Constitutional Referendum about the Republic]?'

Sources: 1998 Australian Election Study; 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study.

duced a majority in support of it. By any standards, the two constitutional changes envisaged in the referendum suffered a decisive rejection by the electorate.

### **Elites, pragmatists, conservatives and populists**

The result of the referendum, then, was a clear majority against the proposed constitutional changes. Yet, as we have shown above, for more than five years prior to the referendum a majority of Australian voters had favoured the change to a republic. How did such unambiguous public support for the principle of a republic become translated into a decisive defeat for the proposal

at the referendum? The Australian Constitutional Referendum Study (ACRS) survey of 3,341 voters, conducted immediately following the referendum, permits us to answer this question (see Gow et al. 2000). The survey shows that – combining those who wanted a directly elected president with those favouring appointment by Parliament – a large majority were actually in favour of a republic (see Table 2). Indeed, just 24 per cent of those surveyed favoured retaining the monarchical *status quo*, the lowest figure since opinion polls started asking the questions in the early 1950s.

The post-referendum survey shows that advocates of direct election outnumbered those favouring a president appointed by Parliament by more than two to one. When the NO vote is disaggregated by the form of government that voters preferred, almost half actually wanted a republic with a directly elected president, slightly more than those who voted NO because they wanted to retain the monarchy. From the typology in Table 2 it is possible to discern three kinds of republicans (non-republicans, monarchists and unclassified voters constituted 35 per cent of the weighted sample). First are *pragmatic republicans* who voted YES even though they actually preferred a directly elected head of state. These were prepared to compromise and constituted 26 per cent of all voters. Second are *conservative republicans* who voted YES and supported the idea of Parliament choosing the head of state; they presumably feared the problems that a directly elected president might create, but these conservatives made up only 17 per cent of all voters. Third are *populist republicans* who wanted a republic but voted NO because they could not accept Parliament, instead of the people, choosing the president. This group comprised a crucial 22 per cent of all voters – populists who felt so strongly about the issue that they voted against the republic altogether

Table 2. Referendum vote by constitutional preference

	Republic vote		
	All	Yes	No
President, directly elected by people	55	60	49
President, appointed by Parliament	21	39	3
Retain Queen and Governor-General	24	1	48
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(1,998)	(993)	(1,005)

Note: 'If you had to choose among the following possibilities for Australia, which one would be your first choice?'

Source: 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study.

rather than accept one with a president appointed by Parliament. For example, both of the direct election models put forward in the Constitutional Convention were authored and promoted vigorously by prominent Labor figures.

What gave rise to this distinctive division among the voters? The first and most obvious hypothesis is that referendum voters took their cues from the parties and party leaders that they had supported in 1998, and their perceptions of what the major parties and leaders favoured in the referendum. The Labor Party's support of a republic had been unambiguous since June 1991, yet there were deep divisions among its leaders and activists over the method of selecting a president. For example, both of the direct election models put forward in the Constitutional Convention were authored and promoted vigorously by prominent Labor figures. On the other side of the party divide, Liberal Party leaders and activists were divided, with John Howard, as we noted earlier, at odds with a considerable part of his Cabinet over the republic question. Indeed, the Liberal Party was so divided on the issue that it permitted members to vote and campaign according to their conscience. The National Party, though overwhelmingly monarchist at the rank-and-file level, adopted the same policy because some of its most prominent leaders were also outspoken republicans. The referendum struggle also produced two highly effective leaders of the respective YES and NO camps: Malcolm Turnbull and Kerry Jones. Turnbull, the president of ARM, first came to prominence as the solicitor representing the ex-spy Peter Wright in the 'Spycatcher' trial. He chaired the Republic Advisory Committee established by Paul Keating in 1993 and helped to devise the republican model for indirect election of the president. Kerry Jones was the executive director of ACM and was a highly visible advocate of the monarchist position. For the purposes of the referendum campaign, both represented the public faces of the YES and NO cases.

The second hypothesis is that the referendum process was elite-driven and had little relevance to ordinary Australians. Voters had only dim knowledge about how the existing constitutional system works and little or no insight into what the proposed changes would involve. Consequently, voters who thought a republic a good idea were split between those who voted for the indirect presidency on offer and those who thought a directly elected president made sense. Although, at the Howard Government's direction, the Electoral Commission implemented a public education campaign about the referendum issues, its results were modest indeed. For example, the survey shows that only about half of the electorate understood how the Governor-General is appointed, and the powers that the Governor-General possesses to dismiss a government. Equally important may have been voters' innate distrust of political elites. Throughout the 1990s, polls have recorded consistent declines in

public confidence in politicians, although the declines in support for institutions found in other countries have not, so far, occurred (McAllister & Wanna 2001).

The third hypothesis is that voters were strongly committed to maintaining – or severing – Australia’s formal historic links with Britain. For republicans and monarchists alike, the British monarchy and the Union Jack in the corner of Australia’s flag that symbolizes it, have strong implications for national identity. For republicans, Australia’s increasing cultural diversity in the postwar years, moves to establish closer links with Asian neighbors and, not least, Britain’s own role in Europe, make the British link anachronistic. However, for many monarchists, the British link embodies a set of values and beliefs that are inseparable from Australia’s democratic rights and freedoms.

The fourth hypothesis centers on the hopes and fears voters harboured about the proposed change. In the absence of clear partisan or social cues, the decisions of voters in a referendum must rest, to some extent, on their views of the issue itself. When faced with a complex constitutional change, it is possible that the innate conservatism of the electorate becomes a factor in explaining voting. Both the YES and NO campaigns played on various aspects of voters’ fear and aspiration about the republic. For example, ARM argued that a failure to approve the change to a republic would detract from Australia’s international standing and perceived independence in the world. Equally, the monarchists argued that the adoption of the proposal and the creation of a presidency with ill-defined powers could introduce political instability.

To evaluate these four hypotheses, we estimate four separate multivariate models, predicting which of the four voter segments the individual voter fell into and simultaneously controlling for the range of variables in each of the four hypotheses. In the logistic regression analysis (see Table 3), ‘political knowledge’ combines four knowledge items about the constitutional role of the Queen, the Governor-General, the proposed president and the prime minister in a cumulative scale. ‘Sever British link’ combines three items concerning the importance of the Queen, the flag and the British link, coding missing values to the mean and re-scoring the resulting scale from 0 to 10. ‘Proposed change negative’ combines three items covering political stability, further reform and the federal system, and ‘proposed change positive’ combines three items about political independence, international standing and democratic governance. Full details of the items and their wording are given in McAllister (2001).

The most consistently important influence on voting is attitudes to the link with Britain; for both republicans and monarchists this provided a major motivation for their vote, and particularly for the latter (see Table 3). The only

Table 3. Evaluating the explanations (logistic regression estimates)

	Pragmatists		Conservatives		Populists		Monarchists	
	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)
<i>Parties</i>								
Liberal	0.00	(0.04)	0.03	(0.05)	-0.02	(0.04)	-0.01	(0.06)
National	0.03	(0.03)	0.00	(0.04)	0.05	(0.03)	0.03	(0.05)
Labor	0.11*	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.05)	-0.07	(0.03)	-0.02	(0.05)
One Nation	0.00	(0.03)	-0.13*	(0.04)	0.01	(0.02)	0.03	(0.03)
Democrat	-0.09*	(0.03)	0.14*	(0.04)	0.02	(0.03)	-0.07	(0.04)
<i>Leaders</i>								
Howard	0.02	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.05)	0.00	(0.03)	0.12*	(0.05)
Beazley	0.02	(0.04)	-0.02	(0.05)	-0.01	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.05)
Turnbull	-0.01	(0.03)	0.11*	(0.03)	-0.12*	(0.03)	-0.01	(0.04)
Jones	0.06	(0.03)	-0.18*	(0.04)	0.07*	(0.03)	0.08*	(0.04)
<i>Elite initiative</i>								
Political knowledge	-0.24*	(0.05)	0.36*	(0.07)	-0.16*	(0.06)	-0.01	(0.07)
Trusts government	-0.12	(0.07)	0.29*	(0.08)	-0.16*	(0.07)	0.11	(0.09)
Trusts politicians	0.06	(0.06)	-0.18	(0.08)	0.16*	(0.06)	-0.12	(0.08)
Tertiary education	-0.22	(0.15)	0.62*	(0.16)	-0.36	(0.17)	-0.25	(0.23)
<i>Sever British link</i>	0.29*	(0.03)	0.16*	(0.04)	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.63*	(0.05)
<i>Proposed change positive</i>	0.24*	(0.04)	0.00	(0.04)	-0.03	(0.03)	-0.33*	(0.05)
<i>Proposed change negative</i>	-0.10*	(0.04)	-0.27*	(0.05)	0.14*	(0.03)	0.19*	(0.05)
Constant	-3.66		-2.52		-1.23		1.42	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.23		0.34		0.10		0.47	

Notes: \*statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed; logistic regression analyses showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting voting in the referendum. Weighted N = 2,311 respondents.

Source: 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study.

group not to be influenced by the British link was the populists. The various positive and negative aspects of the proposed change were next in importance, working in the expected directions. Notably, conservatives were moved to refute the negative arguments, though less inclined to support the positive ones. By contrast, populists saw more negatives than positives. Parties and leaders also provided important cues to voters in determining their vote and, in general, it was leaders rather than parties that were more important. However, it was the leaders of the respective YES and NO campaigns, rather than the two major party leaders, who were significant. In this regard, both Malcolm Turnbull and Kerry Jones were similarly influential figures in either attracting or repelling voters to the respective causes.

Voters' knowledge of politics and their views of politicians is last in importance, and is consistently significant in discriminating among the three non-monarchist groups, but does not emerge as significant for monarchists. For republicans, political knowledge is consistently important; conservative republicans were likely to possess more knowledge than other voters, net of other things, while both of the two direct election groups possessed less knowledge. Similarly, conservative republicans were more likely to think well of politicians than other republicans, believing that governments could be trusted and that politicians were generally in touch with the people. By contrast, populists took the opposite view. Whether or not the voter possessed tertiary education was also important, notably among conservative YES voters.

## Conclusions

Viewed comparatively, changing the Australian constitution by referendum is an exceedingly difficult process because it requires a double majority – a majority of voters and a majority of states. Few countries set the referendum bar so high (Butler & Ranney 1994; Gallagher & Uleri 1996). All eight of the Australian referendums that were approved during the twentieth century (of the 44 proposed) were uncontroversial and involved mainly technical changes to the Constitution to bring it into line with already changed practices and sentiments. It was, therefore, no great surprise that a controversial referendum about altering the form of government and head of state failed, even though opinion polls indicated that a majority was in favour of the underlying republican principle.

The reasons for this failure can be attributed to an attachment among some voters to the British link, lack of knowledge about the institutional implications of the change among other voters and the interplay with party and leader cues. The British link has remained an important national symbol for many

Australians, despite mounting evidence of its irrelevance to Australia's contemporary circumstances. Monarchists, for example, were more strongly in favour of preserving the link than republicans favoured severing it. Nevertheless, only a minority of monarchists in the our post-referendum survey believed that the Queen guaranteed Australia's democratic rights; clearly, the British link is part and parcel of an underlying sense of the country's heritage and traditions among many Australians.

Lack of voter knowledge about the existing constitutional system and how the proposed change would work, together with distrust on the part of some about the motives of politicians in seeking the change, further complicated the referendum vote. Although the government, for the first time, funded the large YES and NO campaigns handsomely, in addition to mounting a significant and neutral public education campaign, voter ignorance was considerable. The ability of voters to understand complex political changes has long been a problem with referendums, and with the potential for direct democracy more generally (Budge 1996; Lupia 1994). When voters receive differing cues from the political parties and the mass media, and where the issue is a complex one, it is hardly surprising that many voters, though perhaps supportive of the principle at issue, choose a cautious stance and vote NO. This problem is exacerbated by Australia's system of compulsory voting, which ensures that the least knowledgeable, who would be most likely not to vote in a voluntary system, are compelled to attend the polls. The ACRS survey showed that a disproportionate number of NO voters would have not turned out to vote if voting had been voluntary (see McAllister 2001).

The third component of voting choice in the referendum was party and leader cues. In many referendums, the outcome is determined less by the question posed to voters, than by party popularity and domestic politics. In Canada, for example, the issue of Quebec sovereignty has been contiguous with party cleavages, with the latter exercising a strong influence on the result (LeDuc & Pammett 1995). In the 1999 Australian referendum, the party cues were mixed: Labor was divided on the method of election for the head of state, and the Liberals were divided on the republic issue itself. Moreover, the Prime Minister, usually a key influence in any referendum, opposed the referendum that his government had proposed. It is noteworthy that where party signals were least contradictory – for example, those given out by the small but ultra-populist One Nation party – they exerted a significantly greater influence than did the leaders of the major but internally divided parties.

What is the likelihood that any future referendum on the head of state question in Australia will be endorsed? Past experience suggests that this is unlikely; only one defeated proposal has ever been subsequently passed at a referendum. For a new referendum on this question to succeed would require

either elite acceptance of the principle of popular election of the head of state, or voter acceptance that selection of the head of state should remain in the hands of the elite. The former would require a major change of opinion among the elite, while the later would require unprecedented voter education. Neither of these is likely to come about, at least in the medium term.

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