Elections Without Cues:
The 1999 Australian Republic Referendum

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In the November 1999 referendum on the republic, the Australian electorate was asked to make a complex, technical choice about the system of government, in the absence of clear partisan cues. How did voters resolve this dilemma? Although those in favour of replacing the Queen as head of state made up three-quarters of the electorate, they were divided on the method of election for the head of state, effectively resulting in three separate groups of voters. Four hypotheses are tested to explain voting in the referendum. 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. Voters' knowledge of politics was also important. Overall, the interaction between compulsory voting and lack of political knowledge among large sections of the electorate served to divide republicans, and caused the proposition to fail. Pairing the republic with an unpopular change to the preamble of the Constitution also depressed the 'yes' vote.

In principle, referendums differ little from representative elections. They use the same formal procedures for enrolment and voting as an election; campaigns are mounted to influence voters in much the same way as elections; and many referendums are often intensely partisan with politicians mobilising their supporters as they would in a regular election contest. But referendums present very different choices to voters. No candidate or party names appear on the ballot, and the choices that voters must make are often unfamiliar and frequently complex. Lacking partisan cues, the political context within which the election takes place assumes greater significance, as do the roles of the mass media, the major political personalities, and sometimes non-political organisations. In effect, most referendums present voters with choices that lack the normal electoral cues.

The Australian referendum on the republic in November 1999 represented the

extreme case of a referendum where voters were asked to make a highly technical choice about a change to the system of government, largely in the absence of partisan cues. Although the possibility of a republic had been a practical option for at least a decade, what form the system might take and how it would be presented to the electorate was unclear. Consequently, there had been little public discussion among the political elite about the operation of the new system and voters were relatively ill-informed about its implications. Not least, the political parties—and particularly the Liberal–National Parties—were themselves divided on the issue, further complicating the normal cues that inform a voter's choice. The net result was the defeat of the two proposals that were presented to voters.

This paper examines the electoral cues that voters used in the referendum to inform their choice and, ultimately, decisively to defeat a proposal that the opinion polls demonstrated had attracted majority support for some years prior to the referendum. The data come from the Australian Constitutional Referendum Study, a national survey of voting in the referendum conducted immediately after the poll.

The Emergence of the Republic as an Issue

Although republicanism and republican sentiments have been an integral part of Australian politics for more than a century, until recently the issue attracted the support of only a small minority of the population, few of them influential members of the political elite (McKenna 1994). When the question was first asked in an opinion poll, at the succession of the current monarch in 1953, just 15% of those interviewed stated a preference for a republic (Figure 1). Support for a republic increased gradually through the next three decades, with two exceptions. First, there was a sharp increase in republican support in 1968, to 40%, and a reversion back to the trend shortly after. This may have been a response to the student rebellions and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations of that year. Second, republican support again jumped sharply in 1973, this time to 42%, in apparent reaction to the overtly republican sentiments of the Whitlam Labor government, elected the previous year.

Throughout the period prior to the early 1990s, there was little elite interest in the republic issue. Although the Labor Party formally committed itself to a republican system of government in 1983, it had no agreed timeframe or mechanism for its implementation. This changed in June 1991 when Labor's National Conference voted to work towards the creation of a republic by 2001, the centenary of federation, and two weeks later the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) was formed in Sydney. The replacement of Bob Hawke by Paul Keating as Prime Minister in December 1991 highlighted the issue of national identity and the relevance of the British link. In February 1993, Keating announced his intention to form a Republic Advisory Committee, under the chairmanship of Malcolm Turnbull of ARM, 'to develop a discussion paper that would consider the options for an Australian republic' (Hyde 1998).

The Turnbull Report (RAC 1993), as it became known, argued that 'a republic is achievable without threatening Australia's cherished democratic traditions' and evaluated the two means by which a head of state might be chosen, namely appointment by the government or Parliament, and popular election. The report argued that the appointment of a head of state was closest to current practice, but recognised that the person chosen and the process that would be used could be
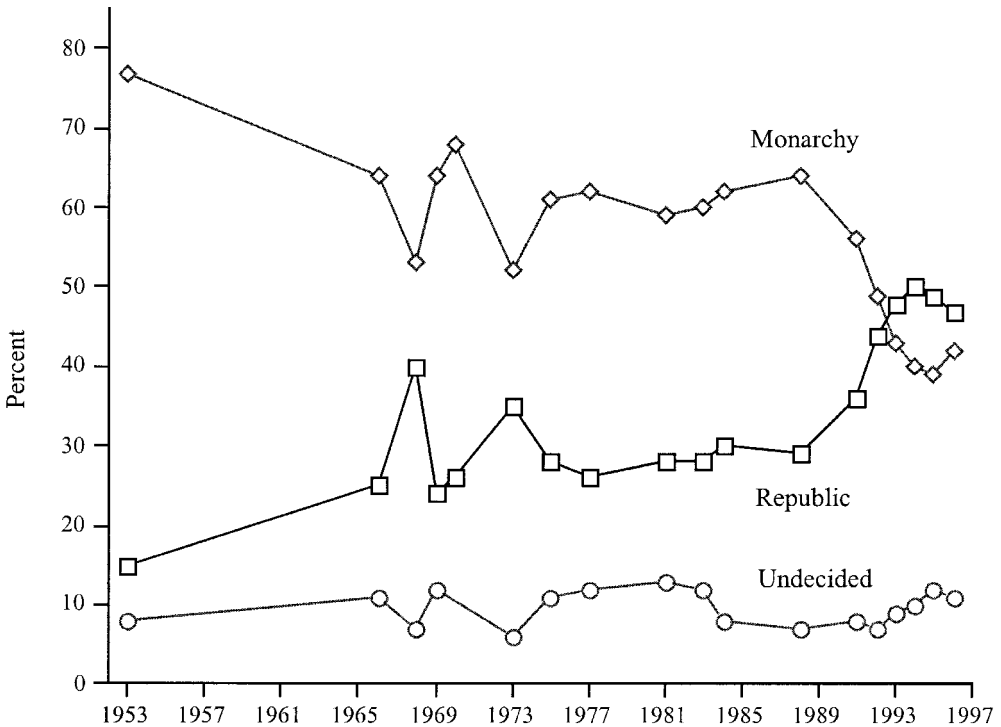
Figure 1. Public opinion on the republic issue, 1953–96.

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

Source: Bean (1993), Warhurst (1999), Winterton (1994).

overly partisan. Popular election of the head of state was seen as leading the person chosen to consider themselves as having a popular mandate, and the powers of the Constitution would have to be revised to restrict the head of state's role.

For the first time, the Turnbull Report politicised the issue of how the head of state might be chosen, if Australia did indeed become a republic. In response, Figure 1 shows that popular support for the republic experienced a rapid increase, and in the four polls conducted since the report's publication, for the first time republicans outnumbered monarchists by up to 10 percentage points.

Debate continued on the likely constitutional options and the way forward during the remainder of 1993 and through 1994. By early 1995, the Labor government had committed itself to a referendum on the republic, and in June Prime Minister Keating announced that the government would conduct a referendum in 1998 or 1999, based on the model of an indirectly elected President. The President would be elected by a two-thirds majority vote in a joint sitting of both houses of Parliament on the nomination of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Keating argued that the option of the direct election of the President would result in a partisan contest, and that indirect election by a two-thirds majority of Parliament would avoid such an outcome. The response of the Liberal Opposition was to argue for the establishment of a 'People's Convention' which would decide whether or not

Australia should become a republic and, if so, the most appropriate model to be put to a referendum.[1]

Framing the Question: The 1998 Constitutional Convention

The return of the Coalition in the March 1996 federal election ensured that the Liberal policy of convening a Convention prevailed, and in March 1997 the legislation was introduced into Parliament. The Convention would have 152 delegates, half elected by a non-compulsory postal ballot and half appointed by government—40 by the federal government and 36 by the State and Territory governments. A voluntary ballot was justified on the grounds that the Convention had only advisory, not binding, powers. The Convention would consider three questions: whether or not Australia should become a republic; which republican model should be put to voters; and in what timeframe and under what circumstances such a change might take place.

The election to the Constitutional Convention was conducted between 3 November and 9 December 1997, using the single transferable vote method of proportional representation based on the States and Territories.[2] The turnout was 45.3%, with a total of 609 candidates standing for election, including 80 groups and 176 ungrouped candidates. Republican groups and candidates gained a majority of the national vote with 54.4%. ARM itself secured 30.4% of the national vote returning 27 convention delegates. The monarchists attracted 35.9% of the national vote, with the Australian Constitutional Movement (ACM) securing 22.5% of the total vote.[3] Overall, declared republicans won 46 seats, compared with 27 seats for declared monarchists. Three winning candidates were uncommitted to either cause (Newman 1998).

While the republic gained majority support in the Convention—by 89 votes to 52 with 11 abstentions—the issue of what model should be put to the referendum produced deep divisions among the republican delegates. In addition to the constitutional monarchy and the status quo, four republican models were debated, named after their proponents among the delegates. Two of the models involved the direct election of the head of state, with the Gallop model (named after Geoff Gallop, the West Australian Labor leader) calling for nominations from the public, a small number of whom would be selected by Parliament and put to a direct election, and the Hayden model (named after Bill Hayden, the former Governor-General) involving the direct election of candidates showing the prior support of at least 1% of voters. The Hayden and Gallop models were eliminated on the second and third days of the Convention, respectively.

The remaining two models were both based on indirect election. In the McGarvie model (named after Richard McGarvie, the former Governor of Victoria), a government-appointed three-member constitutional council would receive confidential nominations from the public, and would ratify the Prime Minister's selection. Under the Turnbull model, a parliamentary committee would receive nominations, with the successful candidate requiring the support of two-thirds of

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[1] This proposal was put forward by the Liberal leader, John Howard, drawing on an earlier idea for a People's Convention advanced by his predecessor as leader, Alexander Downer, in November 1994.
[2] This is the method of voting used in the Senate.
[3] These estimates were made by Malcolm Mackerras.

Parliament and the Leader of the Opposition. This model was eventually supported by 73 votes to 57, with 22 abstentions. It was also agreed that this model should be put to a referendum, which would be held in 1999, and, if successful, the republic would come into effect by 1 January 2001.

The Convention was also charged with recommending what changes, if any, should be made to the preamble of the Constitution. Since the existing preamble was predicated on a monarchical form of government, any change to a republican form of government would require modification of the preamble. But perhaps more importantly, it was regarded as an opportunity to revise the preamble in the light of the major social, cultural and political changes that had occurred during the course of the century. The Convention made a series of recommendations, notably that the preamble should be revised to take account of prior indigenous occupation, current cultural diversity and, by a majority but with strong dissent, the recognition of the civic values of equality, democracy and the rule of law. The proposed preamble was notable for its intention to modernise the Constitution, and to bring it into line with the constitutions of other countries proclaimed since the Second World War (Reilly 1998).
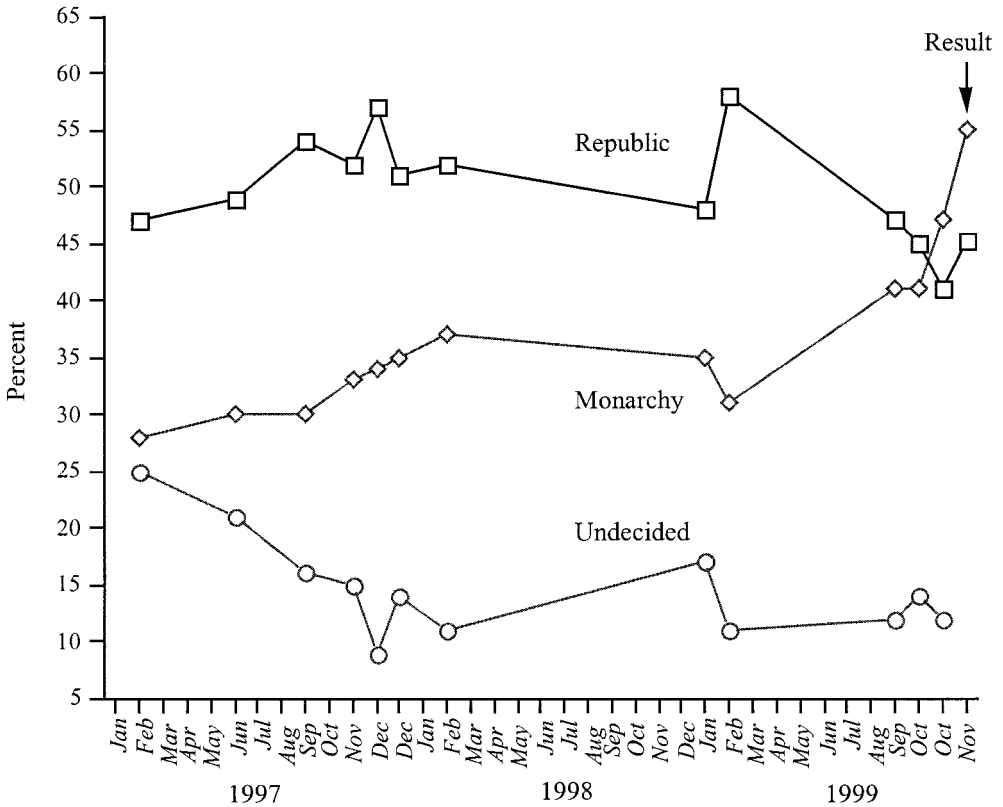
The Campaign

With the effective framing of the referendum questions by the Convention, and therefore the terms under which the debate about the republic would be conducted, the campaign began in earnest. Nevertheless, the exact wording and format of the questions was the prerogative of the federal government. The government had decided by early 1999 that there would be two questions, one on the preamble and one on the system of government. Prime Minister John Howard made it known that he had a personal interest in the wording of the preamble, and Attorney-General Darryl Williams was given responsibility for framing the republic question. The formal part of the referendum process commenced in August with the passage of the enabling legislation through Parliament. Shortly after, the government distributed a pamphlet to each household, which included the cases for and against the proposed changes, together with the textual alterations and additions to the Constitution that were proposed.[4]

Throughout 1997 and 1998, popular support for the republic as indicated in opinion polls remained relatively stable, at about half of all respondents, with monarchists attracting support from about one-third of respondents. The number of undecided respondents, numbering one in four in early 1997, gradually decreased to about 1 in 10 by the end of 1997, with both the republican and monarchist campaigns gaining equally. The balance between 'yes' and 'no' supporters began to change in 1999, as the parties and groups launched their respective campaigns. The first poll conducted in 1999 showed an increase in republican support of 10 percentage points, but thereafter support for the republic decreased consistently, for the first time dipping below support for the monarchy in the last two polls conducted before the referendum (Figure 2).

Political interest in the referendum was little changed from the levels found at the 1998 federal election (Table 1). Identical proportions of people said that they

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[4] The government was legally restricted from spending any further money on the campaign, regardless of how much money was spent by other organisations, including State governments.

Figure 2. Public opinion during the referendum campaign.

Note: Questions vary between surveys.

Source: Bean (1993), Warhurst (1999), Winterton (1994).

were interested in the election campaign, and about one in three said that they followed the campaign regularly on television, and about one in five followed it in the newspapers. Despite the referendum displaying all of the characteristics of a second-order election, voter interest and attentiveness therefore compares very favourably with that of a federal election. This accords with findings which show that when voters lack the normal partisan cues that might guide their choice, they are more likely to access a range of media sources to inform their decision (Bowler and Donovan 1998).

Voters clearly needed the referendum campaign and the informational sources that emerged from it in order to inform themselves about the issues and ultimately to make their choice. If anything, voters appeared more sure of their decision early on in the campaign, rather than delaying their choice until closer to polling day. More than one in four of all respondents said that they had made up their minds how to vote in the referendum 'a long time ago', compared with 35% who made a similar statement at the 1998 federal election. Moreover, while 20% of referendum voters delayed their decision until polling day itself or a few days before, the same figure in the 1998 federal election was 28%. The fixed nature of the referendum choice (unlike the dynamic of a national election campaign, involving

Table 1. Political attentiveness, 1998 Federal election and 1999 referendum

	1998 Federal election	1999 Referendum
Political interest (percentage who say 'good deal')		
Politics generally	36	35
In the election campaign	37	38
Cared about outcome	74	71
Media interest (percentage who say 'good deal')		
Television	32	28
Newspapers	21	24
Radio	18	18
The voting decision (percentage who say yes)		
Definitely vote if not compulsory	67	66
Thought of changing vote	29	31
Decided vote long time ago	35	43
(N)	(1897)	(2311)

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]?'

Source: 1998: AES; 1999: ACRS.

shifting promises and policies) may have enabled voters to make their decision earlier, once they believed that they had acquired the necessary information.

The Result

The result of the referendum was a national vote of 45.1% in favour of the republic, and 54.9% against the proposition (Table 2). It was the 13th 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 preamble fared even worse; the 'yes' vote of 39.3% was the sixth lowest this century and no State or Territory

Table 2. The November 1999 referendum results

	Republic	Preamble
Yes	45.1	39.3
No	54.9	60.7
Total	100.0	100.0
(N)	(11,683,811)	(11,672,561)

Note: Figures exclude a small number of informal votes.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

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

However, the electorate results showed wide variations in the proportions supporting the two changes. Support for the republic varied by a substantial 48.1%, from a low of 22.8% in the rural Queensland electorate of Maranoa to 70.9% in the inner-city electorate of Melbourne. A total of 38 of the 148 electorates produced a majority in favour of the republic. By contrast, support for the preamble varied by 30.7%, with Maranoa once again recording the lowest level of support, at 21.8%, and John Howard's seat of Bennelong the highest, at 52.5%, reflecting his own personal interest in the issue. Overall, just 13 electorates produced a majority in support of the preamble.

Although both the republic and the preamble questions emerged out of the same deliberative process, a significant minority of voters supported one of the changes but not the other. At the electorate level, there was a strong correlation ($r = 0.95$) between votes cast for the republic and for the preamble. However, at the individual level the Australian Constitutional Referendum Study (ACRS) survey indicates that just 28% of voters voted 'yes' to both questions, with a further 43% opposing both. Of the remaining 29% of voters, 20% supported the republic but not the preamble, and 9% the preamble but not the republic. Voters clearly distinguished between the two proposals and about 3 out of 10 did not view them as part of the same overall change.

The referendum results displayed considerable variation by State and Territory. Support for the republic in New South Wales and Victoria both exceeded the national average, as did the Northern Territory and the ACT—the latter by more than 18 percentage points (Table 3). Queensland registered the lowest support for the republic, at 37.4%, nearly 8 percentage points less than the national figure. State and Territory variations in voting on the preamble followed those for the republic, albeit in a more muted way; once again, the lowest vote occurred in Queensland and the highest in the ACT, although in the latter case support was nearly 20 percentage points lower than in the republic vote.

There has been much discussion about the party effects in these State and

Table 3. Referendum results by State and Territory

	Yes on republic (%)			Yes on preamble (%)			
	Mean	SD	Difference	Mean	SD	Difference	(N)
NSW	46.4	8.7	+ 1.3	42.1	6.9	+ 2.8	(50)
Victoria	49.8	10.3	+ 4.7	42.5	7.6	+ 3.2	(37)
Queensland	37.4	8.4	− 7.7	32.8	6.6	− 6.5	(27)
South Australia	43.6	9.0	− 1.5	38.1	6.7	− 1.2	(12)
Western Australia	41.5	7.6	− 3.6	34.7	5.8	− 4.6	(14)
Tasmania	40.4	4.7	− 4.7	35.7	4.8	− 3.6	(5)
ACT	63.3	—	+ 18.2	43.6	—	+ 4.3	(2)
Northern Territory	48.8	—	+ 3.7	38.5	—	− 0.8	(1)
National	45.1	8.7		39.3	7.8		(148)

Note: The difference is the State or Territory variation from the national vote.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

Table 4. Party influences on electorate voting

(Regression coefficients)

	Republic		Preamble	
	Partial	Standardised	Partial	Standardised
Liberal	− 0.13	− 0.21	− 0.07	− 0.14
National	− 0.18*	− 0.23*	− 0.14*	− 0.23*
Labor	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.05
ONP	− 1.15*	− 0.64*	− 0.88*	− 0.63*
Democrat	0.96*	0.25*	0.49*	0.16*
Constant	53.6		45.8	
Adjusted R^2	0.66		0.61	

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

Note: Partial (b) and standardised (beta) regression coefficient predicting support for the republic and the preamble. N = 148 federal electorates.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

electorate patterns (Irving 2000); these are examined in more detail in the next section, using the individual-level survey data. However, the patterns of voting at the electorate level permit us to examine the interrelationship between party support and referendum voting, with party support being measured by the first-preference vote in the October 1998 federal election. The results in Table 4 are in the form of two regression equations, showing partial (b) and standardised (beta) coefficients predicting the vote for each of the two referendum propositions across the 148 electorates.

Party factors were clearly important in shaping the outcome, at least at the electorate level. Electorates with more Liberal and National voters were less likely to support either change to the Constitution, though the effects are generally modest, notably in the case of the preamble. The votes Labor attracted in an electorate made no significant difference to the electorate's referendum vote. By contrast, electorates with more Democrat voters were strongly supportive of the republic, though less so of the preamble. However, the major effect comes from One Nation voters; in both equations each additional percentage point of the first-preference vote that One Nation attracted in the electorate in the 1998 election reduced support for both the republic and the preamble by around one percentage point—a substantial effect.

Explaining the Outcome

The aggregate-level results, for the 148 electorates, suggest that there was a significant relationship between aspects of party support and voting in the referendum.[5] At the individual level, the ACRS survey data permit a more detailed analysis of the factors shaping the vote. Despite the minority who voted for the bipartisan appointment model in the referendum, the survey shows that—

[5] For reasons of space, and because of the strong correlation between support for the republic and support for the preamble, the analyses are restricted to explaining voting for the republic.

Table 5. Referendum vote by constitutional preference

	All	Republic vote	
		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)	(1998)	(993)	(1005)

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

Source: 1999 ACRS.

combining those who wanted a directly elected President with those favouring appointment by Parliament—a large majority of the electorate were actually in favour of the introduction of a new system of government (Table 5). Indeed, according to the survey, just 24% of those interviewed favoured the retention of the current system.

The survey shows that advocates of direct election outnumbered those favouring bipartisan appointment by more than two to one. When we disaggregate the 'no' vote on the republic by the form of government they preferred, almost half actually wanted a directly elected President, slightly more than those who voted 'no' because they wanted the retention of the monarchy.

From this typology it is possible to derive four groups of voters in the referendum. First, there are republicans who voted 'yes', but preferred a directly elected head of state; these may be termed *pragmatists* and constitute 31% of the total electorate. Second, there are *conservatives*, who also voted 'yes' but supported Parliament choosing the head of state, as laid out in the referendum; they make up 20% of the total. Among the 'no' voters, those who favoured the direct election of the head of state may be termed *populists* and constitute 25% of the electorate, while *monarchists* constitute 24%.

Party and Leader Cues to Voting

The previous section showed that there were strong relationships between the 1998 vote and the referendum outcome. To what extent were political leaders also a factor in this process? The hypothesis predicts that in the absence of the traditional cues found in national elections, voters made their choices based on what they perceived the parties to favour and, more particularly, from the public positions of the major party leaders on the issue.

Labor Party policy on the republic has been unambiguous since June 1991, when its National Conference voted to support the creation of a republic by 2001, and successive polls have shown a large majority of Labor voters in favour of the change. But while Labor has agreed on the republic as a goal, there have been deep divisions over the method of election. The two direct-election republican models put forward in the Convention were both promoted by prominent Labor figures: Geoff Gallop, the Western Australian Labor leader, and Bill Hayden, a former national Labor leader.

Table 6. Party vote, leader ratings and the referendum vote

| | Yes voters | | No voters | | |
	Pragmatists	Conservatives	Populists	Monarchist	(N)
1998 vote (row per cent)					
Labor	39	26	19	16	(775)
Liberal–Nat	23	15	28	34	(847)
Democrat	33	26	27	14	(116)
One Nation	20	3	42	36	(70)
Other	37	22	31	10	(87)
Leader ratings (mean, 0–10 scales)					
Howard	4.2	4.0	5.4	6.7	(1908)
Beazley	6.6	6.7	5.1	4.5	(1916)
Turnbull	4.5	5.3	3.2	2.8	(1869)
Jones	3.4	2.6	4.1	4.7	(1865)

Note: The leader question was: 'Again using a scale from zero to 10, please show how much you like or dislike the following political figures. Again, if you don't know much about them, you should give them a rating of 5.'

Source: 1999 ACRS.

Although Liberal voters were predominantly monarchists, there was a large minority in favour of a republic. Within the Liberal elite, views were more equally divided; while John Howard is a fervent monarchist, about half of his Cabinet favoured a republic, including his deputy Peter Costello, the Finance Minister John Fahey, and the Environment Minister Robert Hill (Warhurst 1999). In January 1999, 'Conservatives for an Australian Head of State' was formed by the former Liberal Secretary, Andrew Robb, to give voice to conservatives who supported the republic.[6] The Liberals overcame their deep divisions on the issue by declaring that members would be free to vote and campaign according to their conscience. The National Party, while overwhelmingly monarchist, adopted the same policy.

In addition to partisan cues to voting—reflected in party support and the major party leaders—the referendum campaign also produced two articulate leaders of the respective 'yes' and 'no' cases. Malcolm Turnbull, the national president of the ARM, first came to prominence as the solicitor representing the ex-spy Peter Wright in the 'Spycatcher' trial and his highly effective cross-examination of the British Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong, attracted international attention. Turnbull chaired the Republic Advisory Committee established in 1993, and he helped to devise the republican model that was presented to the electorate in the referendum. Kerry Jones was the executive director of ACM and, along with Lloyd Waddy, was the main advocate for the organisation. When Waddy became a judge in 1994 and withdrew from active ACM involvement, Jones became its principal spokesperson. Although a less competent advocate than Turnbull, she was nevertheless an effective voice for the 'no' cause during the campaign.

The survey evidence suggests a strong link between partisan support, leader ratings, and referendum voting. Table 6 shows that, as we would expect, Labor

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[6] Peter Reith, the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, supported a directly elected President and declared that he would vote 'no' in the referendum.

voters overwhelmingly supported the republic and just 16% were monarchists. However, a further 19% were populists who voted 'no', taking the total 'no' vote among Labor voters to 34%. The largest group of Liberal–National voters (34%) were monarchists, but the second largest group, 28%, were populists, making the total 'no' vote among Liberal–Nationals 62%. Democrats were mainly divided between the three non-monarchists groups, while One Nation voters were mainly divided between populists and monarchists. Leaders, too, exerted a strong influence on voting. Howard's rating varied by 1.7 points among the four groups in Table 6, while Beazley's rating varied by 2.2 points. Beazley was most popular among the two 'yes' groups, while Howard also picked up support among populists. The leaders of the respective 'yes' and 'no' campaigns were less popular overall compared with the two party leaders, with Turnbull being slightly more popular (mean of 4.0) than Jones (3.7 points). Turnbull's popularity varied by 2.5 points, Jones' by 2.1 points.

The Republic as Elite Initiative

Critics of popular referendums often argue that voters have a paucity of knowledge about the workings of the current political system, and possess little or no insight into what any proposed changes might involve. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that voters in the November 1999 referendum who supported the move to a republic split between advocates of direct and indirect election. It is certainly true that levels of basic political knowledge within the electorate are low (McAllister 1998), and that the changes proposed in November 1999 presumed some understanding of the operation of the political system. Although the government funded a public education campaign chaired by a former High Court Judge, Sir Ninian Stephen, costing A$4.5m, it appears to have had little success. However, it is unclear to what extent low levels of political knowledge may have accounted for the referendum result.

To examine levels of popular political knowledge, the ACRS survey asked the respondents what they knew about the current political system, and about the system that was being proposed in the referendum. About half of the electorate understood how the current Governor-General is appointed, and the powers that the Governor-General possesses to dismiss a government (Table 7).[7] There is more knowledge about how the role of the proposed President would accord with that of the Governor-General—72% correctly believed that the roles would be the same. However, just one in three knew that under the proposed change the Prime Minister could dismiss the President at any time, though seeking retrospective approval from Parliament. The highest levels of knowledge about the current and the proposed systems are found among conservative republicans; perhaps surprisingly, knowledge among the other three groups is generally similar. For example, monarchists were no less knowledgeable about either aspect of the system compared with either pragmatists or populists.

Another variation on the elite-driven argument focuses on voters' innate distrust of politicians. Throughout the 1990s, polls conducted in most of the advanced

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[7] In each case there were four options, so the chances of selecting a correct response by randomness is reduced.

Table 7. Political knowledge and the referendum vote

	All voters	Yes voters		No voters	
		Pragmatists	Conservatives	Populists	Monarchists
Knowledge of current system (per cent correct)					
Queen appoints G-G on PM's advice	51	46	75	42	49
G-G decides to dismiss government	48	45	61	45	46
Under proposed change … (per cent correct)					
… President like current G-G	71	70	95	62	65
… PM dismiss president anytime	31	30	51	25	25
Political trust (per cent agree)					
Politicians usually look after themselves	40	41	21	51	44
Politicians don't know what people think	29	30	10	41	29
(N)	(1935)	(592)	(383)	(490)	(470)

Note: The questions were: 'Now for some questions about our head of state. Firstly, as far as you know, which one of these best describes the current role of the Queen in relation to the Australian Governor-General?'; 'As far as you know, which one of these is true of the current role of the Governor-General in Australia?'; 'Under the proposed change to a Republic, as far as you know which one of these would the role of the President be more e like?'; 'Under the proposed change to a Republic, as far as you know which one of these best describes how the Australian Prime Minister in the Republic can remove the President?'

Source: 1999 ACRS.

democracies have recorded consistent declines in public confidence in political institutions and politicians, giving rise to fears about the future health of democratic institutions (Nye, Zelikow and King 1997; Norris 1999). Research conducted in Australia has confirmed the existence of this trend, although voters' cynicism about the motives of politicians is hardly a new phenomenon (McAllister 2000). However, in general, Australians have high levels of support for the institutional regime, at least compared with the other advanced democracies, and seem to be able to distinguish between the principles that underpin their system of government, and the methods by which those principles are implemented (McAllister and Wanna 2001).

The ACRS survey found widespread cynicism about the motives of politicians. The third part of Table 7 shows that 40% of those interviewed believed that politicians would usually look after themselves; just 11% took the view that politicians could usually be trusted to do the right thing, with the remaining 59% taking intermediate positions.[8] About 3 in every 10 voters also believed that politicians were out of touch with what ordinary voters thought; just 3% thought that politicians were fully in touch with ordinary voters. Once again, these responses were effective in discriminating among referendum voters. Not surprisingly, conservative republicans took the most optimistic view of their politicians, both in terms of trustworthiness and their ability to keep in touch; by contrast, populists were less likely to see them in a favourable light.

The British Link

A third possible explanation for referendum voting is that the voters were strongly committed to maintaining—or severing—the formal historic links with Britain. For republicans and monarchists alike, the British monarchy and the union jack flag have come to symbolise much of debate about the head of state, and what it implies for Australia's national identity. For republicans, Australia's increasing cultural diversity in the post-war years, moves to establish closer links with Australia's Asian neighbours, and not least Britain's own closer role with Europe, have made the British link appear increasingly anachronistic. For monarchists, the link implies loyalty to a set of values and beliefs which are inseparable from Australia's democratic rights and freedoms.

Since the late 1960s, the public has tended to view the Queen as increasingly unimportant to Australia, and to favour a change in the flag (Figure 3). For most of the 1970s and 1980s, about half of those interviewed in national opinion surveys said that they thought the Queen was unimportant; with the advent of the republican debate and the increasing politicisation of the issue, opinion has moved to view the monarchy as even less relevant, peaking at 70% during the 1998 federal election. Opinion on changing the flag has always been some 30 percentage points lower than views about the irrelevance of the British monarchy, largely because it is interwoven with Australia's role in two world wars and domestic symbols of nationhood. Nevertheless, the two trends follow each other closely. In 1967 just 17% favoured a change in the flag; in 1993 the same figure was 41%, and it

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[8] A total of 21% believed that politicians would 'sometimes look after themselves' and 28% that they would 'sometimes be trusted'.
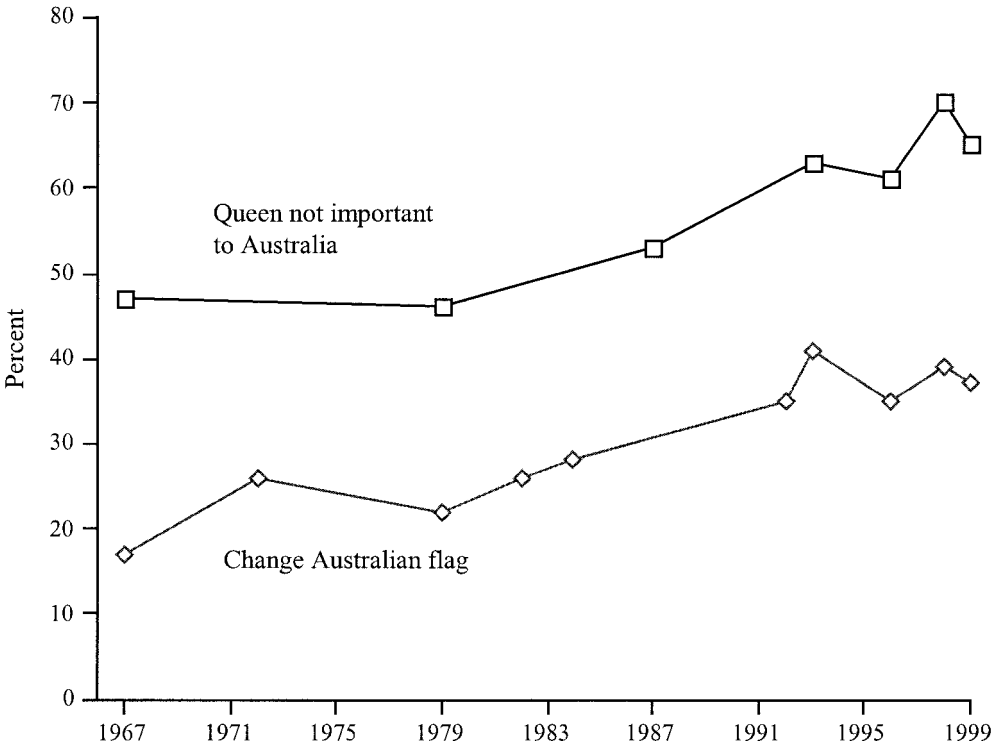
Figure 3. Attitudes towards the monarchy and the flag.

Note: The questions were: 'How important do you feel the Queen and Royal Family are to Australia?' The flag question was: (1967–92) 'Next about the Australian flag. Do you think the union jack should continue to be in our flag or not?' (1993–99) 'On the issue of the Australian flag, do you … strongly favour changing the flag, favour changing the flag, oppose changing the flag, strongly oppose changing the flag?' The 1992 estimate averages two surveys.

Source: 1967–92: Roy Morgan Research; 1993–99: Australian Election Studies (AES).

remained at this level during the period leading up to and during the referendum campaign.

As we would expect, these beliefs about the Queen and the flag, together with a more general question concerning severing the ties with Britain, exerted a strong influence on voting in the referendum (Table 8). Both of the two republican groups that voted 'yes'—the pragmatists and the conservatives—were strongly of the view that the Queen was unimportant and that the ties with Britain should be severed, and a majority also supported changing the flag. The two 'no' groups were much less supportive of these views, though even one-quarter of monarchists thought that the Queen was unimportant. In general, then, the strength of feeling about the republican issue and what it symbolises for Australia's identity were strong influences on referendum voting.

Hopes and Fears of 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

Table 8. The British link and referendum voting

| | Yes voters | | No voters | |
	Pragmatists	Conservatives	Populists	Monarchists
Percentage who say:				
Queen not important	90	93	60	24
Change flag	63	62	25	4
Cut ties with Britain	75	80	24	3
(N)	(572)	(379)	(485)	(459)

Note: See notes to Figure 2 for question wording for first two items. The wording of the third item was: 'How strongly do you agree or disagree … Australia should keep rather than cut its remaining constitutional ties with Britain?'

Source: 1999 ACRS.

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' fears—and aspirations—about the republic. The Australian Republican Movement, for example, argued that a failure to approve the change in the referendum 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 the position of President with ill-defined powers could introduce political instability.

The survey results in Table 9 suggest that the hopes and fears of voters about the proposed change had a major impact on their vote. Monarchists, for example, were particularly concerned about the detrimental effect on the prospects for further constitutional reform, and about continued political stability. These factors were of little concern to most republicans (with the partial exception of the populists). The

Table 9. Hopes and fears of change and referendum voting

| | | Yes voters | | No voters | |
Percentage who agree that …	All voters	Pragmatists	Conservatives	Populists	Monarchists
Republic would threaten …					
… political stability	23	11	4	35	43
… further reform	21	6	3	28	48
… the federal system	16	8	5	19	31
Republic would improve …		80	77	50	29
… Australia's independence	60	80	77	50	29
… international standing	41	64	64	26	8
… democratic governance	24	35	30	18	10
(N)	(1907)	(585)	(386)	(482)	(454)

Note: The questions were: 'Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about what would happen under the proposed change to a republic. … Australia's record of political stability would be endangered. … Further constitutional reform would become more difficult. … The states in our federal system would be weakened. … Australia would become a more independent country. … Australia's standing in the world would be improved. … Australia's government would be more democratic.'

Source: 1999 ACRS.

argument that a republic would improve Australia's international role and independence were particularly attractive to republicans (and even one in three monarchists believed that a republic might improve Australia's independence); the argument that democratic governance would be improved was of much lesser significance. Overall, the hopes and fears that voters expressed about the change appear to have had a substantial effect on their vote.

Evaluating the Explanations

Each of the four major explanations for voting in the referendum attracts some degree of support from the bivariate analyses. Party and leader cues were clearly important to voters, as was the argument that the republic was an elite initiative, little understood or of little relevance to ordinary voters. Equally, the various groups of voters can be discriminated on the basis of whether or not they saw positives or negatives in the proposed change, and according to their views about the link with Britain. Which of the four explanations is most important in explaining voting in the referendum? To make this evaluation we need to estimate four separate multivariate models, predicting whether or not the voter fell into one of the four groups and simultaneously controlling for the range of variables in each of the four categories of explanations.[9] The results of these analyses are shown in Table 10.

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. The only 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 who 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 their 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.

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[9] Earlier analyses included a range of control variables, such as birthplace, age, gender and urbanisation. Since these had little impact on the overall results, for parsimony thay are excluded here.

Table 10. Evaluating the explanations (logistic regression estimates)

	Pragmatists		Conservatives		Populists		Monarchists	
	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)
Parties								
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)
Leaders								
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)
Elite initiative								
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)
Sever British link	0.29*	(0.03)	0.16*	(0.04)	− 0.04	(0.03)	− 0.63*	(0.05)
Proposed change positive	0.24*	(0.04)	0.00	(0.04)	− 0.03	(0.03)	− 0.33*	(0.05)
Proposed change negative	− 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^2	0.23		0.34		0.10		0.47	

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

Note: Logistic regression analyses showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting voting in the referendum.

Source: 1999 ACRS.

Table 11. Comparing populists to other voters (percentages)

	Populists	Monarchists	All yes voters
Voted no on preamble	83	82	41
Second preference retain Queen	73	2	13
Enough information to decide	44	59	52
Thought of changing vote	43	17	31
Unsure about ties with Britain	33	13	13
(N)	(497)	(477)	(985)

Note: Unsure about ties to Britain combines 'neither' and 'don't know' responses.

Source: 1999 ACRS.

The Puzzle of the Populists

The key group in ensuring the failure of the referendum proposal on the republic was the populists. Although their first preference was for Australia to move to a republic, they choose to vote 'no', ostensibly because they preferred a directly elected head of state. The foregoing has demonstrated that this group of 'no' voters was actually closer to monarchists than to republicans in many of their opinions and outlooks. For example, when asked their second preference for the head of state, 73% of populists said that if they could not have a directly elected head of state, they would prefer to retain the Queen; by contrast, just 13% of republicans choose this option (Table 11). Populists were also very close to monarchists in their dislike of the preamble, with 83% voting 'no', compared with 41% of 'yes' voters. The political sentiments of this group, regardless of their stated constitutional preferences, were much closer to monarchists than to republicans.

The British connection has remained an important national symbol for many Australians, despite mounting evidence of the irrelevancy of the British monarchy to Australia's system of government. Monarchists, for example, saw it as the cornerstone of their opposition to the proposed changes in the referendum, and they were more strongly in favour of preserving the link than republicans were for severing it. Nevertheless, only a minority of monarchists in the ACRS survey believed that the Queen guaranteed Australia's democratic rights; clearly, the British link tapped an underlying belief about the country's heritage and traditions among some Australians. Populists supported the rhetoric of change, but the survey evidence suggests that they were unsure of their commitment. Compared with either 'yes' voters or monarchists, much lower proportions said that they had enough information to make a decision, and more considered changing their vote during the course of the campaign. Perhaps most revealingly, almost one in three were unsure about Australia retaining its ties with Britain, almost three times the proportion among 'yes' voters and monarchists.

The populists will represent a key group in any future referendum on the republic. They mildly favour change, but not at the risk of undermining Australia's traditional symbols of nationhood and the British heritage. Moreover, their lack of commitment to the proposed change in 1999 was fostered by the complexities of the proposal put to referendum. In a straight bipolar contest, most populists would probably have identified with the monarchists and voted 'no'; in the unusual circumstances of the republic referendum, the divisions among the advocates of

change provided a convenient vehicle by which the populists could voice a formal commitment in favour of change, while at the same time enabling them to maintain a practical veto against its implementation.

Discussion

Placed in a comparative context, referendum change in Australia is a difficult process, requiring a double majority—a majority of voters and a majority of States—in favour before the change can take place. Few countries expect proposals for constitutional change to meet such a stringent test (Butler and Ranney 1994; Gallagher and Uleri 1996). It is hardly surprising, then, that of the 44 questions placed before voters since 1901 only eight have been supported, and the successful proposals have all been generally uncontroversial, involving technical changes to the Constitution to bring it into line with changing practice. It should be no great surprise that a proposition to alter the head of state failed, even though the polls indicated that a majority were in favour of the underlying principle. The reasons for this failure can be attributed to an attachment among some voters to preserve the British link, lack of voter knowledge about the implications of the change among others, and the interplay with party and leader cues.

Compared with previous referendums, lack of voter knowledge about the current system and the proposed changes, together with distrust by some about the motives of politicians in seeking the change, unduly complicated the referendum vote. Although the government, for the first time, funded the 'yes' and 'no' campaigns, providing them with A$7.5m each, as well as a neutral public education campaign costing A$4.5m, there was still considerable lack of knowledge. 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, as was the case here, it is hardly surprising that many voters, while supportive of the principle underlying the change, chose the cautious approach and voted 'no'.

The problem of voter knowledge is compounded by the 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. Those who say that they would abstain in a voluntary system tend to be younger, less educated and less politically interested than intending voters (McAllister and Mackerras 1999). In the referendum, the least informed were also those who said they would be least likely to vote if the system were compulsory. For example, the mean level of political knowledge among those who said that they would definitely vote if the system were voluntary was 2.2 (out of a maximum of four correct answers), compared with a mean of just 1.2 among those who said that they definitely would not vote. So voter apathy played a major role in shaping the outcome of the referendum (Miles 1999).

The impact of compulsory voting on the outcome of the referendum can be demonstrated by showing how support for the two propositions would have varied, at different levels of turnout (Table 12). When asked if they would have voted if voting had been voluntary, 66% said that they 'definitely' would have voted. If these voters only had voted, then the referendum would have attracted 53% in favour of the republic and 47% against, thereby producing a majority in support. Adding in less willing voters in subsequent rows of Table 12 shows how the 'yes'

Table 12. Participation and referendum voting

	(Column per cent)	(Percentage yes vote)	
		Republic	Preamble
Definitely voted	(66)	53	39
Adding …			
Probably voted	(19)	51	39
Might, might not	(6)	50	39
Probably not	(6)	49	38
Definitely not	(3)	49	37
(N)	(2283)	(2148)	(2119)

Note: The question was: 'Would you have voted in the Constitutional Referendum if voting had not been compulsory?'

Source: 1999 ACRS.

vote would have fared. Adding to the total the 19% of the electorate who said that they 'probably' would have voted produces an overall 'yes' vote of 51%. Thereafter, the majority in support of the republic disappears. In the case of the preamble, however, the introduction of a voluntary voting system would have altered the result by only 2% and would not changed the outcome.

In many referendums, the outcome is determined less by the questions 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 and 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 issues itself. Moreover, the Prime Minister, usually a key influence in any referendum, was a supporter of one of the questions but not the other, even though both questions were closely associated in the public mind. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the most unambiguous party signals were conveyed by One Nation, and that the campaign leaders exerted a significantly greater influence than the party leaders.

What role did the preamble play in reducing support for the republic? The close correlation between the two ($r = 0.95$ at the electorate level, and 0.42 at the individual level) suggests that either posing the question about the head of state on its own, or pairing it with a more popular question, would have increased support for the republic. Nevertheless, making any estimates of the likely impact of the preamble in depressing the 'yes' vote for the republic is problematic. In the first place, we can only infer that the direction of causality was from the preamble to the republic; for some voters it may have been in the opposite direction. Second, on various occasions (most recently in 1977) voters have discriminated between the proposals placed before them, and passed some but not others.[10]

What is the likelihood that any future referendum on the head of state would be endorsed? Past experience suggests that this is unlikely; only one defeated proposal

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[10] In 1997 voters passed three proposals—on filling Senate casual vacancies, to permit voters in the territories to vote at future referendums, and to stipulate retirement ages for judges—but did not support a proposal for simultaneous elections between the House of Representatives and the Senate.

has ever been subsequently passed at a referendum.[11] Such a precedent 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; the later would require either an unprecedented commitment to voter education or a shift to a system of voluntary voting. Neither of these is likely to come about, at least in the medium term.

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[11] The proposed inclusion of Territory voters in referendums was initially defeated in 1974 but subsequently passed in 1977. I am grateful to John Uhr for bringing this to my attention.

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Appendix

Data

The Australian Constitutional Referendum Study was a random sample of the electorate stratified by State and Territory in order to provide at least 500 respondents from each of the six States. Sample units of 1000 voters were drawn from each of the six States, 100 from the Australian Capital Territory, and 50 from the Northern Territory. The sample of Australian electors was drawn from the Commonwealth Electoral Roll by the Australian Electoral Commission following the close of rolls for the 1999 referendum on 8 October 1999. Weights are applied to the data to ensure that the survey is nationally representative of the electorate (see Gow, Bean and McAllister 2000). The total number of respondents is 3341, representing an effective response rate of 58.9%.

Variables and Scoring

The variables included in the multivariate analyses in Table 10 and their scoring are shown in Table A1. Political knowledge combines the four items listed in Table 7 in a cumulative scale. Sever the British link combines the three items in Table 9, coding missing values to the mean and rescoring the resulting scale from 0 to 10. Proposed change negative combines the first three items in Table 10, and Proposed change positive combines the second three items.

Table A1. Variables, definition, means

Variable	Definition	Mean
Parties		
Liberal		5.3
National		4.5
Labor	0 (strongly like) to 10 (strongly dislike)	5.6
One Nation		2.0
Democrat		4.7
Leaders		
Howard		5.0
Beazley		5.7
Turnbul	0 (strongly like) to 10 (strongly dislike)	3.9
Jones		3.7
Elite initiative		
Political knowledge	Scale item, from 0 to 4 correct answers	1.9
Trusts government	1 = government usually look after themselves, 2 = sometimes look after themselves, 3 = sometimes can be trusted, 4 = usually can be trusted	2.1
Trusts politicians	1 (federal politicians know what people think) to 5 (don't know what people think)	3.7
Tertiary education	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.22
Sever British link	Scale item, from 0 (retain British link) to 10 (sever British link)	5.3 5.5
Proposed change positive Proposed change negative	Scale item, from 0 to 10	4.2

Source: 1999 ACRS.