

Wedge Politics: Mapping Voter Attitudes to Asylum Seekers Using Large-Scale Data During the Australian 2013 Federal Election Campaign

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This article examines Australian voters' responses to asylum seeker boat arrivals during the most recent 2013 federal election campaign. We explore this issue using a mixed-methods approach, by conducting media monitoring analytics, content analysis of Liberal Party press releases, and statistical analysis of Voting Engagement Application data. We identify the salience of the issue to the public and the media and examine the prominence of this issue in Liberal Party political messaging about asylum seekers. We then analyze voters' attitudes to asylum seeker boat arrivals using Vox Pop Labs' Vote Compass data (n = 438,050). The survey is of unprecedented size in Australia and contains information collected during the election campaign about citizens' attitudes to policy issues, enabling fine-grained analyses of voter attitudes at the electorate and subgroup level. We find voters' attitudes toward asylum seekers, particularly in marginal electorates, impacted on vote intention. This effect is stronger among subgroup voters who care the most about that issue. These results suggest that the increase in the salience of the asylum seeker issue favored the winning Liberal Party.

KEY WORDS: wedge politics, immigration, asylum seekers, Australian politics, Vote Compass, VAA, VEA

Introduction

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

Immigration has a particularly long historical resonance in the Australian context. Restrictive immigration regulations were among the first laws created during the nation's foundation in 1901, and debates on asylum seekers can be traced back as early as the 1970s. But it was when the post-war bi-partisan

consensus to not politicize immigration broke down in the 1990s and early 2000s that the asylum seeker issue became an intense emotional issue. Numerous Australian surveys make it clear that a majority of Australians in recent years identify “unauthorized asylum seekers” as a priority issue of concern; and in numerous polls the public support more restrictive measures toward Australia’s intake of asylum seekers (Goot, 2000, 2004; Goot & Watson, 2001, 2007, 2011; Hanson, 2013; McAllister & Cameron, 2014; McAllister, Martin, & Pietsch, 2010). Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchinson, and Nicholson (2013, p. 398) argue that few issues in Australia are “as emotionally charged” than that of refugees.

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

We examine this policy area through the lens of what is referred to in Australia as wedge politics. At first glance, the asylum seeker issue during the 2013 election fits the definition of wedge politics. Wilson (2001, p. 14) defines wedge politics as involving “a political party stirring up populist feeling about an issue or minority group and then tagging its political opponent with support for that unpopular cause or group.” Similarly, Wilson and Turnbull (2001, p. 386) view wedge politics as a “calculated political tactic aimed at using divisive social issues to gain political support, weaken opponents and strengthen control over the political agenda.” Importantly, as will be explained below, wedge issues are facilitated by the media (Ward, 2002). Jackman (1998, p. 167), exploring issues of race in Australian politics in the late 1990s, identified that conservative parties can be net beneficiaries of the ideological tensions posed by race issues, including migration, and also identified that racial attitudes cut across other components of the electorate’s ideology, causing internal party strains. Importantly for this article, he identified that of the two major political parties the Australian Labor Party (ALP) was “particularly vulnerable on this score” (Jackman, 1998, p. 167). He further argued that cross-cutting the traditional left–right divide in politics can “act as an ideological wedge, prying apart established party groupings . . . and perhaps even a redefinition of the ideological terrain over which they compete” Jackman (1998, p. 167). We explore this proposition both in terms of the distribution of attitudes on this issue and the effect of this issue on the 2013 federal election.

The article proceeds as follows: we first examine the recent background and political context about asylum seeker policy in Australia, and scholarship about

wedge issues and media agenda setting. We then examine content analysis of media coverage of this issue, as well as Liberal Party press releases, to establish the prominence of this issue and to what extent it appears to have been primed by the Liberal Party. We then undertake analysis of the Vote Compass data to show to what extent partisan views differ on this issue and the extent to which it was an effective electoral strategy. We find support for Jackman's (1998, p. 167) proposition that conservative parties are the net beneficiaries of this issue.

Previously it has been difficult to analyze this issue in a robust manner. This article makes a unique contribution to the literature by combining content analysis and analysis of Voting Engagement Application (VEA) data.² VEA data are unique in Australian politics. The data were collected by Vox Pop Labs, and attracted over 1.3 million responses during the 2013 Australian election campaign. As such, this article expands on the qualitative work already done in this area by using relatively new data sources, also referred to as VAAs in some countries. This article clearly complements the broader VAA literature (see Cedroni & Garzia, 2010, Garzia & Marschall, 2012, 2014; Gemenis & Rosema, 2014; Walgrave, van Aelst, & Nuytemans, 2008). While this literature for the most part examines the effect of VAAs on voter turnout and party preferences we examine a specific issue in detail, and in this way point a way forward for future research using more in-depth case studies and drawing on additional qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Context and Theory

Political Party Positioning on Asylum Seeker Boat Arrivals

In examining the 2013 election it is important to briefly outline the context out of which this issue arose. As mentioned above it has only been since around the turn of the millennium that immigration has become highly politicized in Australian politics. Despite high-levels of immigration there was a (largely unspoken) bi-partisan consensus that this was an issue that was best not politicized. The staining legacy of the White Australia Policy was part of the motivation for this. Just prior to the 2001 election, Prime Minister John Howard (2001) gave weight to this issue by refusing permission for the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa, carrying 438 rescued asylum seekers, entry to Australian waters, declaring that "we will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come," and in a separate incident (falsely) accusing asylum seekers of throwing their children overboard as a ruse to be rescued and processed in Australia. At this time the "Pacific Solution" was adopted whereby asylum seekers were processed offshore. Since this time the Liberals have taken a hard line on this issue and have been seen as the preferred party on this issue (McAllister & Cameron, 2014, p. 25).

Following the Labor Party victory in 2007 the "Pacific Solution" was dismantled under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and his new Immigration minister,

Chris Evans, declared that the Pacific Solution was a “cynical, costly and ultimately unsuccessful policy” (Sydney Morning Herald, 2008). However, on July 19, 2013, just before the official five-week federal election campaign, and three weeks after regaining the leadership by deposing Julia Gillard as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd (2013) recanted his earlier position and announced: “As of today, asylum seekers who come here by boat without a visa will never be settled in Australia.”

These remarks were unprecedented for a modern Labor Prime Minister. Neither side of politics had stated that asylum seekers identified as refugees would be permanently denied resettlement in Australia. Rudd (2013) acknowledged it was a “hard line” decision, but argued that “our responsibility as a Government is to ensure that we have a robust system of border security and orderly migration.” This statement signified Labor’s distinct move away from framing asylum seekers as a humanitarian issue, which it had done after the 2007 election when it closed the Howard government’s offshore processing centers and stated that such policies had tarnished Australia’s human rights record (Skehan, 2007). As a consequence, research has found that the tone of political debate on both sides of politics has been very negative as reflected in Rowe and O’Brien’s (2014, p. 187) Hansard study of 2010 parliamentary debates about offshore processing. The language of major party politicians was often framed around characterizations of asylum seekers as “illegals,” a threat to national identity and border security, and as not deserving asylum because they “jumped the queue” by paying their way to travel by boat. The counter-narrative was less prevalent, and came predominantly from Australia’s minor third party, the Greens, who placed no emphasis on an asylum seeker’s mode of arrival or perceived legitimacy (Rowe and O’Brien, 2014, p. 188).

In response to Labor’s policy shift, then Liberal opposition leader (Prime Minister from 2013 to 2015) Tony Abbott promised even tougher “direct action” on asylum seeker arrivals (Liberal Party of Australia and the Nationals, 2013). Liberal policy was primarily framed in terms of border protection and national security.³ The Liberals adopted a consistent hard line, policy on asylum seekers promising a military-led operation against what it deemed to be “illegal maritime arrivals” (Liberal Party of Australia and the Nationals, 2013), consistent with the hardline position of former Prime Minister, John Howard. Labor, on the other hand, abandoned its previously humanitarian position. It can be assumed that they did this to try and neutralize the issue while trying to attract or retain valuable swinging voters sympathetic to the Coalition’s position. We examine the success of this strategy in the analysis below.

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

While this issue was seized on by political elites, it came in response to a large increase in the number of asylum seeker arrivals, with a high-point in 2013 at the time of the election (Figure 1).

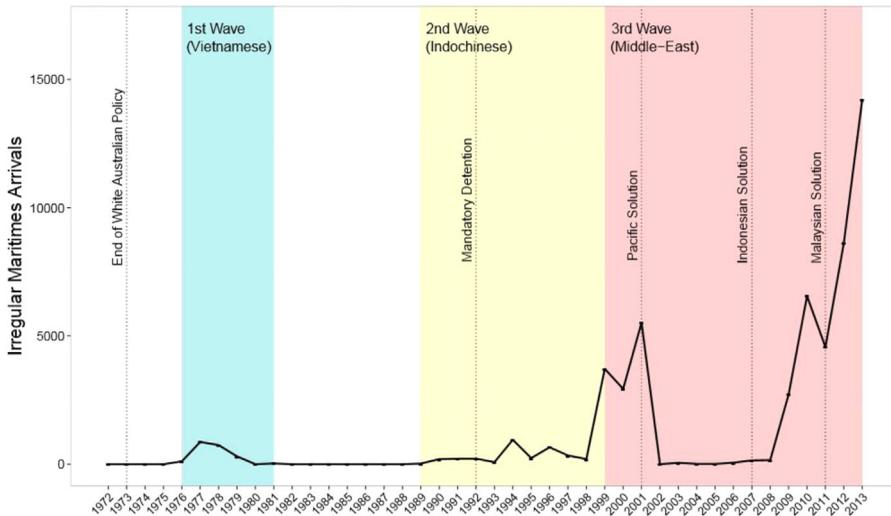


Figure 1. Asylum Seeker Boat Arrivals to Australia, 1972–2013. *Source:* Phillips and Spinks (2003).

Note: The graph goes back to 1972 to allow us to indicate the end of the White Paper. The values were set to zero from 1972 to 1976 because, according to the cited source, “The first boat arrived in Darwin in April 1976 [...]” (p. 1).

The Australian Media’s Portrayal of Asylum Seekers

It should come as no surprise that in parallel to these political statements was an increase in the media attention paid to this issue. Studies undertaken by those like Denmark, Ward, and Bean (2007, pp. 106–107) have identified asylum seeker boat arrivals, along with terrorism, as the issues dominating the news agenda, both framed around national security concerns. The way this issue was reported is also consequential. Scholars have found that political communications about wedge issues often rely on the use of emotive labels and code words, or “dog whistle” messaging that “force[s] us to make judgments and evaluations [and] causes the potential for abuse” (Hillygus & Shields, 2008, p. 6; Woodward & Denton 1996, p. 75, cited in Wiant, 2002, p. 282). Among others, Bleiker et al. (2013, p. 399) demonstrate the mainstream media’s role in shaping Australians’ perceptions of asylum seekers through its use of dehumanizing distant images of asylum seeker boat arrivals. They argue these depictions frame the political debate not as a humanitarian issue, but rather as a security and border control threat. Many researchers have studied the pejorative language used within, and by, Australia’s media to report on asylum seekers. Common negatively framed expressions have included: “floods,” “waves,” “tides,” “queue-jumpers,” “illegals,” and “economic migrants” (Klocker & Dunn, 2003; Manning, 2003; Rowe & O’Brien, 2014; Smit, 2011; Ward, 2002). This kind of commentary has been afforded by the fact that many Australians have “limited accurate knowledge about asylum seeking issues, with their knowledge highly dependent upon media reporting of the issues” (McKay, Thomas, & Kneebone, 2012, p. 128). We see then

that both the major parties and the media have advanced negative constructions of asylum seekers (see Marr & Wilkinson, 2004; McKenzie & Hasmath, 2013).

In any case, this article does not intend to revisit the question of *why* Australians might hold negative views about asylum seekers; rather, our aim is to ascertain *if* voters held negative views about asylum seekers during the 2013 federal election; and, if so, what effect that might have had on the election outcome.

Swinging and Cross-Pressured Voters in a Compulsory Voting Setting

Whereas in noncompulsory settings parties may try to mobilize core-supporters or those likely to support them at the margins, compulsory voting in Australia creates strong incentives for parties to create policies that appeal to the broader electorate. Because the Labor Party is traditionally associated with issues like health and education, and the Liberals with the economy, parties continually seek to mobilize voters on issues that may cross party lines. This is particularly important as it relates to undecided or disengaged voters. It also relates to those with weak party attachments; research has found that party identification has been declining in recent years (McAllister, 2011, p. 41). In fact, the two major parties (ALP and Liberal National Party [LNP]) between them have less than 100,000 voting members in a country with a population of more than 23 million people (Bramston, 2015). Political parties see a strategic advantage in mobilizing otherwise disengaged or unattached voters through wedge issues.

The media obviously play a large role in mediating this effect. While the weight of scholarly research identifies a “limited effect” on the capacity of mass communications to alter voters’ choices, Australian research has identified the importance of considering compulsory voting in the relationship between mass media, particularly television, and election campaigns (Bean, 1986, p. 58; Denmark, 2005, p. 398; Denmark et al., 2007, p. 90; Ward & Stewart, 2006, p. 194). Significantly, the least engaged voters are most likely to be undecided until the election campaign begins, and these voters are potentially more open to political news coverage influencing their vote choice—even if they pay only cursory attention to it (Albaek, Van Dalen, Jebiril, & De Vresse, 2014, p. 102; Denmark et al., 2007, pp. 90–91). If this is the case, we would reasonably expect in the context of compulsory voting that cross-cutting issues like immigration would impact some undecided voters’ choices. Graber (2001), Schoenbach and Lauf (2002), and Iyengar et al. (2010) have all found that the least politically interested in society acquire most of their information about current issues from the news media. Cross-pressured voters are particularly susceptible to targeted messaging around wedge issues, being torn between (usually weak) party identification and their competing ideological preferences on particular issues (in the U.S. context, see Hillygus & Shields, 2008, p. 6). This is important in the context of Australia’s compulsory voting system. It follows logically that with recent election contests with very narrow margins, less engaged voters are especially important to political parties. We can expect politicians’ messages in marginal seats to be tailored accordingly.

This leads us to several important points about marginal electorates, and swinging and cross-pressured voters in terms of political messaging in Australia and in the context of compulsory voting. First, Australian academic and internal political party research finds that swinging voters, that is, those with no strong political ideology, are increasing as a proportion of the Australian electorate, estimated to be between 30 and 40 percent (McAllister, 2002, pp. 24–25; Young, 2011, p. 88). Second, researchers have labeled these voters as often motivated by concerns of self-interest or fear—preconditions for the effective use of wedge politics—describing them as “selfish,” “superficial,” and “vulnerable to scare campaigns” (see Crisp, 1965; Jaensch, 1995; Young, 2011, p. 89). Third, it is reasonable to presume that swinging and cross-pressured voters are present in all electorates, including Australia’s most marginal.⁴ We expect that because of some electorates’ narrow margins (officially categorized as below 56 percent of the two-party preferred vote), “softly committed” voters who switch their vote from one party to another during the election campaign do not have to exist in large numbers to alter political outcomes in some marginal seats; a razor-thin margin was a feature of the minority Rudd/Gillard governments. Hillygus and Shields (2008, p. 8) also make the point that small numbers of cross-pressured voters in a competitive electoral environment can impact an election result. As such, these voters are targeted by political parties through micro and macro media messaging, both paid (political advertising) and earned (free news media). In other words, issue priming by a political party is according to Hillygus and Shields (2006, p. 5) “the mechanism by which a campaign can persuade a swing voter to support one candidate or the other.” They also note that whichever party is more strongly promoting the wedge issue is the party that weakly partisan or independent voters will most likely defect to rather than vote for their usual party of preference. We explore the extent of macro messaging in the analysis below.

Method

This article uses mixed methods using statistical analyses of survey data (Vote Compass data) and content data (LNP press releases and media data) to address three main research questions. We investigate the salience of asylum seeker boat arrivals as a political issue in the electorate and media (RQ1); we explore whether the Liberal Party “primed” the issue of asylum seekers (RQ2); and we examine whether it was an effective wedge issue during the 2013 federal campaign (RQ3).

For the content analysis we collected iSentia media data from their Australian Federal Political Issues Reports (iSentia, 2013). iSentia monitor the media and aggregate story topics across different platforms each week. iSentia weekly monitoring includes 400 broadcast outlets, over 1,000 print publications and over 1,000 news websites across national, metropolitan, suburban, regional, and rural media (Baume, 2015). We then delve into how the Liberal Party used this issue by conducting content analysis of the Party’s press releases (n = 138).

For the data analysis, we draw on data collected through the Vote Compass VEA that played a unique part in the 2013 federal election. Political scientists from Vox Pop Labs, together with academics from the University of Sydney and University of Melbourne, developed a questionnaire about attitudinal and policy issues which was made available for the first time on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation website to all voters (see <http://www.abc.net.au/votecompass/>). From a much larger list, 30 questions were selected to reflect a mix of economic and social policies across wide-ranging topics. A 5-point Likert scale was used ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” for most questions (see Vote Compass, 2013). The development of Vote Compass’ questionnaire faces a unique challenge: in addition to being understandable to the average user, the questions must be specific enough so that political parties can position on them. Indeed, political parties were invited to calibrate their policies on the scale and to respond to the team coders’ calibrations of their policy positions. A “hierarchy of evidence” schema, previously tested in Canada and the United States was used to identify party positions on issues when one was not publicly available. The result was a series of questions that was thought to represent the most salient issues to the general public during the election and that parties were satisfied with in terms of where they were positioned. The order of the questions was randomized to prevent framing or fatigue biases. For detailed explanations of methodology and statistical formulae, see: <http://voxpoplabs.com/votecompass/method.pdf>.

During the five-week campaign Vote Compass collected more than 1.3 million responses. The value of these specific VEA data is that multiple socio-demographic questions (including gender, age, education, student enrollment, religion, marital status, occupation, and territory/state) were included in the survey. These questions were included for the purpose of poststratifying the sample. The data collected through Vote Compass were matched with census data collected every five years through the Australian Bureau of Statistics. By combining these two sources we can establish joint distribution of geographic and sociodemographic characteristics for the Australian population. These census data were used to calculate weights for the data through entropy balancing, an established method to weight nonrepresentative data (Hainmueller, 2012). After weighting and cleaning of the data for incomplete entries, the sample size of complete observations was 438,050.⁵

It should be emphasized here that the advantage of VEA data over commercial and conventional academic polls is that it offers cost-effective continuous data collection from *every* Australian electorate in very large numbers. Conventional public opinion research relies on small-sized random sampling. These very large samples offer unique opportunities to run analyses at the electorate level and for specific subgroups of voters like issue publics. Of course, the selection bias in these types of data is larger than the ones encountered in traditional polls. However, as representative survey samples become increasingly difficult to collect, more academic effort is being put into developing weighting techniques to correct selection biases. Some scholars find that “with proper statistical adjustments, non-representative polls are able to yield accurate presidential election forecasts, on par

with those based on traditional representative polls” (Wang, Rothschild, Goel, & Gelman, 2015, p. 981). While a large random sample would provide valuable insights, samples of this size have not been used in Australia because of the costs of collecting the sample in a geographically vast nation.

Findings

Content Analysis: Saliency of the Asylum Seeker Issue in the Media

In this section we report on the results of content analysis to determine how prominent the issue of asylum seeker boat arrivals was on the media agenda generally, and the Liberal Party agenda specifically. Agenda-setting and priming theory is premised on the idea that the mainstream news media act as information gatekeepers and can influence the prominence received by an issue or story over other issues (Denemark et al., 2007, p. 95). Table 1 presents data collected by iSentia’s extensive media monitoring during the five weeks of the 2013 election campaign. This shows “asylum seekers” ranked consistently among the top five national media issues leading up to the election. An exception was the last week in August, which might suggest that the political messaging on this

Table 1. How the “Asylum Seeker” Issue Ranks in the Top Five Media Issues During the 2013 Election Campaign

Campaign Period	Press	Radio	TV	Internet	Total	Top Five Key Issues
Week 1 (3–9 August)	824	4,042	4,249	2,038	8,306	1) Election campaign 2) Company tax 3) Asylum seeker 4) Carbon pricing 5) Interest rates
Week 2 (August 9–15)	823	6,308	7,231	2,601	16,963	1) First leaders’ debate (includes asylum seekers) 2) Abbott’s “sex appeal” gaffe 3) Economic and fiscal outlook 4) Marriage equality 5) Goods and services tax
Week 3 (August 16–22)	640	6,094	3,884	1,258	11,876	1) Paid parental leave 2) Asylum seekers 3) Second leaders’ debate 4) Marriage equality 5) Treasurers debate
Week 4 (August 23–29)	—	—	—	—	—	1) Paid parental leave 2) Garden Island naval base 3) Syria conict 4) High-speed rail 5) Third leaders’ debate
Week 5 (August 30–September 5)	474	2,936	1,141	1,680	6,231	1) National Broadband Network 2) Asylum seekers 3) Marriage equality 4) Coalition costings 5) Syrian conflict

Source: iSentia (2013) Australian Federal Political Issues Reports.

issue had peaked in week two of the campaign. iSentia (2013, p. 9) noted, in its weekly reports, the earlier salience of media coverage of asylum seekers in contrast to its absence from the top five issues in the last week in August and remarked that other policy issues finally had an opportunity to receive media coverage.

Asylum seekers reappeared as a main issue in the final week of the campaign. The data, however, cannot tell us if the discourse was positive or negative in tone. It is to be expected that different media outlets and platforms would not necessarily cover the same “news angle.” Table 1 shows the issue’s prominence during the election campaign, but not the qualitative debate. It is the issue’s prominence that speaks to Cohen’s (1963) observation that the media might not tell people how to think, but they are effective at telling the public what to think about. Table 1 shows us that asylum seeker issues were firmly on the news agenda.

Content Analysis: Liberal Party Press Releases

To address the question of whether the Coalition initiated political messaging about asylum seekers to “prime” it as an election issue, we undertook content analysis of the Liberal Party’s press releases archived on its website <http://www.liberal.org.au/>.⁶ We coded all press releases available on the party’s website between June 26 and September 5, 2013. Ideally we would analyze other party political communications such as media interviews, speeches and “doorstop” interviews but these other communications, unlike press releases, were not posted consistently to the website after June 28th, which makes systematic comparisons difficult.

The data collection commenced on the day that Prime Minister Rudd regained the Labor leadership from Gillard (the sitting Prime Minister at that time) because this moment effectively, in our view, signaled the beginning of the 2013 election campaign.⁷ This time frame yielded 138 press releases. Using a database we coded 10 fields of data for each release. These fields related to the release’s date, title, person quoted, central message, whether it was positive or negative, and identification of key words: “asylum,” “boat,” “illegal” (in the context of “illegal arrivals” or “illegal boats”), “people smugglers,” and “border” (in the context of “border protection” or “border security”). It was noted if the key words were in the headline, and frequency in the release (see Figure 2).

Seventeen press releases (12 percent) referenced the asylum seeker issue. Some used the key words up to 23 times in one release. Eleven focused exclusively on asylum seeker issues as shown in Figure 2. This is equivalent to at least one asylum seeker press release every week from June until the election. Five of the 17 releases mentioned asylum seekers but were more generally criticisms of Rudd’s Prime Ministership, and one release criticized the Australian Greens’ support for asylum seekers arriving by boat. The most frequent term was “border security,” followed by “illegal” and “boats”; much less common was reference to “asylum.” All of the press releases referencing the key terms were negative political messages. To put this in context, of the total of 138 Liberal press

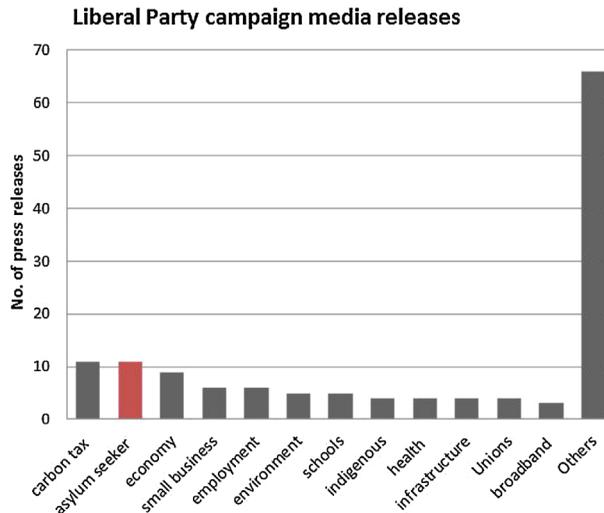


Figure 2. The Number of Liberal Party Press Releases Identifying the “Asylum Seeker” Issue: June 26 to September 5, 2013. *Source:* <http://www.liberal.org.au/>. *Note:* Based on 138 press releases.

releases issued during this period, only 54 releases (39 percent) contained positive political messages.

During the same period (June–September 2013) the ALP promoted 14 broad topic areas on their website under the heading “What we’re for” to represent their election policy pledges (National Library of Australia, 2016). None of the key words of “asylum,” “boat,” “illegal,” or “border” appeared within their policy statements under these broad headings.⁸ In other words, the ALP was not actively promoting its changed policy stance prior to the election about asylum seeker boat arrivals on its official website. Unlike the LNP, immigration and asylum seeker management was not identified as one of the political party’s priorities within these 14 policy areas during the election campaign.

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

As Figure 2 shows, the number of Liberal Party press releases that specifically targeted the asylum seeker issue was equal to the Party’s anti-carbon tax messaging, also with 11 dedicated press releases. This is unsurprising. The

Liberals had identified both issues as election priorities in their 12-point “real action” plan (Liberal Party, 2013), and again in their shorter four-point “action contract” used in television advertising during the campaign, which included a pledge to “stop the boats” (Young, 2013). What is also interesting here is that despite the Liberals being seen as the preferred party on managing the economy, both asylum seekers and carbon tax were prioritized in the party’s campaign messaging. We attribute this to the Liberals trying to appeal to cross-pressured voters and to play up an issue that would attract the attention of undecided voters.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) identified that voters evaluate politicians in terms of the recent news topics that they notice. Therefore, if the issue dominating media discourse during the 2013 campaign was asylum seekers (within a “border security” frame) then it appears the Liberal Party was inviting the electorate to think about asylum seeker boat arrivals when evaluating the major parties. By its nature, interpreting political intent is problematic, but what we can observe is that the frequency of press releases focused on asylum seekers during the election campaign was very high relative to other policy issues communicated in party press releases. This data and the iSentia media results show that the Liberal Party pursued the asylum seeker issue and, with the news media, together effectively raised its prominence as an election issue. It is also worth noting that the iSentia data reveal that carbon tax was not as prominently positioned as asylum seekers in the media coverage during the campaign (see Table 1). While we cannot be sure which way causation runs (e.g., it could be the media priming the political parties on this issue, and at any rate those two things are not independent) it does appear that elite priming of asylum seekers as a border security issue was happening here.

These findings are not unexpected. However, the content analysis is useful because it allows us to quantify the volume of coverage and say something about how the Liberals (who clearly saw the greatest advantage in campaigning on this issue) represented this issue in media releases, which would have provided a basis for their broader campaigning on this issue. The data show that the Liberals recognize political advantage in campaigning on asylum seeker boat arrivals.

Incorporating Vox Pop Labs’ Vote Compass Attitudinal Data

Vote Compass data can help determine whether the asylum seeker issue was an effective wedge issue during the 2013 federal campaign. We first show the distribution of attitudes toward asylum seekers as revealed by the Vote Compass data and how these differ by vote intention. We then examine the salience of the issue among the party supporters.

These analyses focus on two questions that tap into voters’ attitudes toward asylum seekers:

1. Boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back.
2. Asylum seekers who arrive by boat should not be allowed to settle in Australia.⁹

Attitudes Toward Asylum Seeker Issues

Congruent with other studies (Goot & Watson, 2011, p. 57) general negative sentiments about asylum seekers are found.¹⁰ More specifically, voters who self-identify as Liberal partisans expressed the most negative attitudes toward asylum seekers whereas Labor partisans were split on the issue and, significantly, appeared to be cross-pressured (see Figure 3). We found that Greens supporters had the most positive attitudes. Notably, the left side of Figure 3 shows an overlap between Labor and Greens voters' attitudes about asylum seekers; in this case, reflecting a positive rather than negative attitude. These overlaps suggest that Labor voters might have been cross-pressured, exhibiting cognitive dissonance between their party identification and ideological preference on the issue of asylum seeker boat arrivals. As such, Figure 3 demonstrates how some Labor supporters overlap in their sentiments about asylum seeker boat arrivals with Liberal supporters.

Figure 3 shows an obvious partisan split of the attitudes on the asylum seeker issue. That distribution fits one of a potential wedge issue: Labor's partisans are heavily polarized on that issue in contrast to the two other parties (see Figure 3). This situation can provide an incentive for both the Liberal and the Green parties to prime the asylum seeker issue (in different directions) in order to discourage segments of Labor supporters from voting for their party

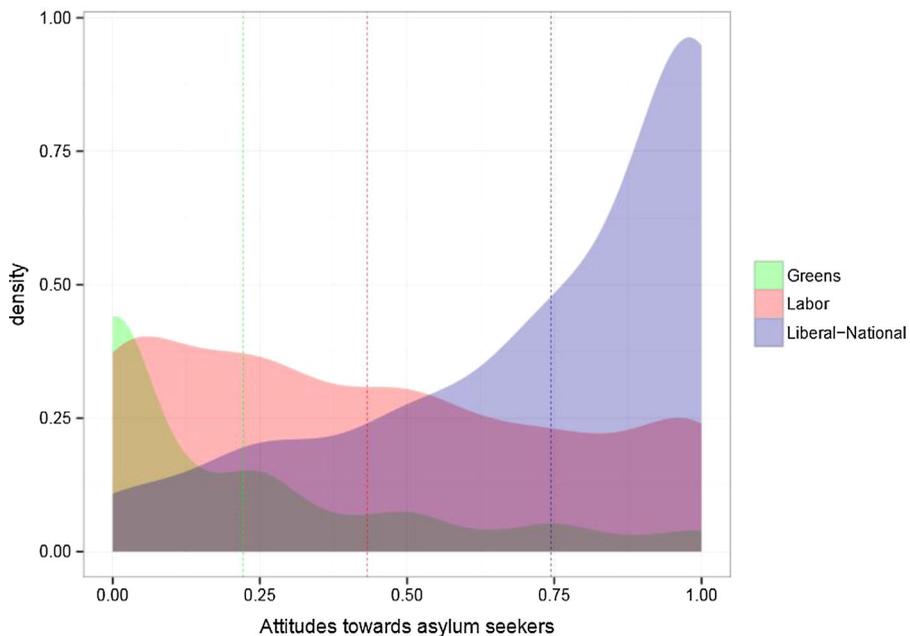


Figure 3. Distribution of Voter Attitudes on the Asylum Seeker Issue During the 2013 Federal Election Campaign. *Source:* Vote Compass (2013) (Vox Pop Labs). n = 438,050.

(Hillygus & Shields, 2008). But do voters care about that issue enough to defect from their preferred party?

Some scholars suggest that attitudes must be considered important to the voters to have any effect on vote (Krosnick, 1990). Personal salience is measured using voter's stated most important issue. In the 2013 campaign, respondents nominated the issue of asylum seekers as equal second (11 percent) in terms of the most important issue for them. Only the economy (30 percent) ranked higher, and health and hospitals (11 percent) was equivalent. More importantly, the distribution of Labor partisans who considered asylum seekers as their most important issue does not show the same pattern as the one found in Figure 3. Indeed, those voters that intended to vote Labor and cared the most about asylum seekers held significantly *more positive* positions on that issue than the other Labor voters (Figure 4). This result suggests that a sizable minority of potentially cross-pressured Labor partisans existed during the 2013 campaign. But did it matter in the end? We could speculate that Labor partisans that cared about asylum seekers, but who were at odds with their party's new-found tough position, might have been tempted to vote Green. Similarly, Labor partisans holding more negative views toward asylum seekers might be tempted to vote Liberal when that issue becomes more salient because many voters see it as the preferred party to deal with this issue (McAllister & Cameron, 2014, p. 25). The next analysis tests these possibilities empirically.

Voter Salience and Impact on Vote Intention

Figure 5 shows the effect of the attitudes toward asylum seekers on the probability of voting for each of the three major Australian parties.¹¹ The effect of the asylum seeker issue on vote intention is as expected: more negative views

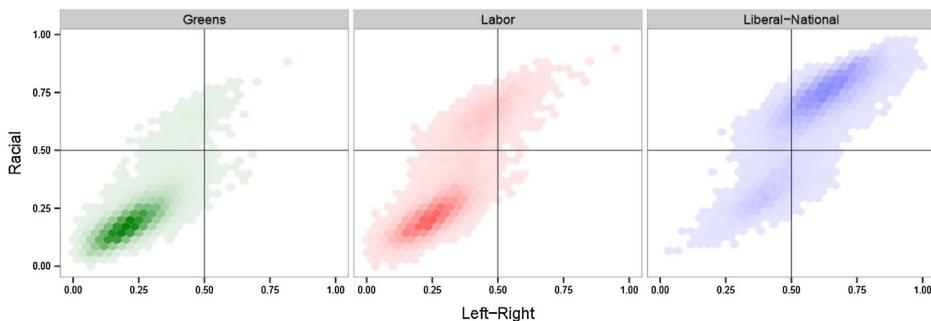


Figure 4. Salience of Asylum Seekers as Main Issue for Voters Across Ideological and Party Divides. *Source:* Vote Compass (2013) (Vox Pop Labs). *Notes:* The two dimensions are based on results from a factor analysis of 30 issue questions ($n = 438,050$). Only those respondents that identified “asylum seekers” as an important issue to them personally are represented in the graphic ($n = 42,216$). This representation of Australian ideological landscape is consistent with Jackman’s earlier findings in the 1990s identifying that racial attitudes (positive and negative) can cut across other components of the electorate’s ideology (Jackman, 1998).

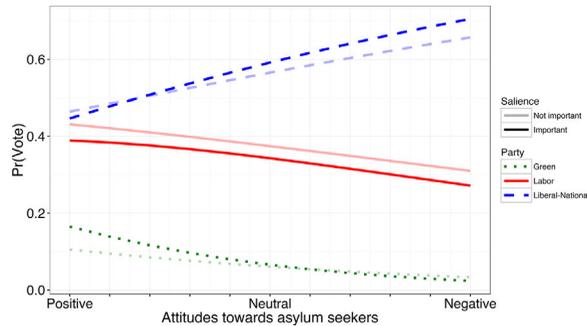


Figure 5. Effect of Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers on the Probabilities of Voting for Each Party.
Source: Vote Compass (2013) (Vox Pop Labs). $n = 438,050$. *Method:* Multinomial logistic regression (predicted probabilities). Full regression results shown in Appendix. *Notes:* The darker line represents the predicted probabilities for those respondents that identified “asylum seekers” as an important issue to them personally. The paler line represents the predicted probabilities for all other respondents.

increase the probability to vote Liberal, more positive views increase the probability to vote Green. The flatter line for the Labor Party indicates a weaker effect of the asylum seeker issue on the probability to vote for that party. Results are more revealing when we look at the impact of the *salience* of the asylum seeker issue.

Interactive effects were included in the regression model to consider the possibility that the effect of the asylum seeker issue on vote intention differs for those who care a great deal about that issue. The results indicate this to be the case. Respondents that consider asylum seekers as their most important issue are significantly more prone to vote for the Liberals or the Greens, depending on their positive or negative attitude toward asylum seekers. For instance, respondents with positive views about asylum seekers, and who care about the issue, have a 6 percent higher likelihood than those who do not care to vote Green. Similarly, the Liberals benefit from the salience of the issue too: they gain 5 percent among respondents that hold very negative views on asylum seekers when they care a lot about the issue. What we see is that Labor appears to lose voter support on both sides of the issue; its effect line for those considering the issue as important is consistently lower than the effect line for all other voters across the range of positions (positive or negative) on asylum seekers. The model estimates that Labor loses an average three and a half percent of votes at every level of attitude (positive or negative) toward asylum seekers. This last result clearly suggests that the asylum seeker issue harmed the Labor Party in the fashion that a wedge issue would. More importantly, if we assume that increased public salience of an issue also means that this issue becomes *more important* for voters, our findings indicate that any increase in the salience of the asylum seeker issue is potentially damaging for the Labor Party. This view is consistent with other research that concludes that television news coverage of asylum seekers during that election campaign advantaged incumbent conservative leader John Howard (Denemark et al., 2007, p. 107). That way, even if they did not

necessarily do so, both Liberals and Greens had incentives to prime that issue during the last campaign. However, it is important to note that through Australia's compulsory preferential voting system, Labor partisans who defect to the Greens usually direct preferences back to Labor (rather than the Liberals). Therefore the defection of Labor partisans to the Greens, as opposed to the Liberals, is less threatening to Labor's final two-party preferred vote, but only under the condition that the Greens' primary vote is lower than Labor's.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the scholarship about wedge politics and cross-pressured voters by focusing on the politicization of asylum seekers in the 2013 federal Australian election campaign. This article is the first to use VEA data to identify voter attitudes and intentions in Australia. Using several methods, we examined the message and the audience. We investigated the salience of asylum seeker boat arrivals as an election issue in the electorate and media (RQ1); we explored whether the Liberal Party "primed" the issue of asylum seekers (RQ2); and we examined whether it was an effective wedge issue during the 2013 federal campaign (RQ3). We found that: (i) asylum seekers is a prominent issue in the media and among the electorate; (ii) that the Liberal Party also campaigned heavily on this issue and in pejorative terms and using dehumanizing images; and (iii) that the Liberal Party appear to have gained electoral advantage out of doing so, suggesting that appealing to cross-pressured voters on issues that cut across the electorate's left versus right political ideology is a successful electoral strategy.

These findings support Hillygus and Shields' argument (2008, p. 8) that cross-pressured voters who experience cognitive dissonance over an issue, are more likely to defect to the party promoting the wedge issue, in this case the Liberals. Our results suggest that attitudes toward asylum seekers might have played a significant role in the reduced Labor vote. Like Hillygus and Shields (2006, p. 57), who found that political independents and cross-pressured partisans were significantly more likely than congruent partisans to change their vote choice when exposed to an election campaign that narrows its agenda to a particular set of issues on which the voters can base their decision, we also find a percentage of partisan Labor voters—who also reported that the issue of asylum seeker arrivals was an important election issue for them—less inclined to stay with their usual party of choice, Labor. It should also be noted that despite Labor's unprecedented policy shift to the right on asylum seekers in mid-2013 in the lead-up to the election campaign, the majority of Australia's marginal seats were won by the Coalition, which was heavily promoting "Stop the Boats" in its campaign. It can be seen that Labor's policy shift on asylum seekers was overall electorally unsuccessful in marginal seats and, in fact, might have served to reinforce voters' negative attitudes toward asylum seekers by making it the normalized position. What was successful was the potent mix of wedge politics about asylum seeker issues on cross-pressured voters,

particularly in marginal electorates, under the institutional setting in Australia of compulsory voting.

There are clear future directions for research such as this, including comparative nation studies on attitudes to asylum seekers. For example, how does messaging from the conservative side of politics differ across countries? Within Australia, further comparisons of political party political communication about immigration is also underexplored. For instance, content analysis of the Greens' political messaging would be useful to identify whether the Greens primed socially progressive sections of the electorate with more positive messages about asylum seekers and to what extent this has been successful electorally; more generally, what is the effect of pro-immigration messaging? These are important questions in a globalized world where forced migration, the number of people seeking asylum, is increasing, rather than abating. The increasing availability of data—traditional and new large samples collected by VEAs and social media—might help with probing these important questions more deeply in the future.

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Notes

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1. For those not familiar with the Australian context, note that the Liberal Party has the most right-wing ideology of the three major parties and is the majority party governing in coalition with the conservative National party, while the Green Party has the most left-wing ideology. The Labor Party is situated in-between these two parties ideologically.
2. We prefer the term VEA to the convention of Voter Advice Application (VAA) because we believe the greatest utility of such tools is voter engagement rather than advice on who to vote for. At any rate, we believe voters make evaluations on who to vote for on many dimensions and the policy positions of parties is but one of those considerations.
3. We use Liberal as shorthand to refer to what is a coalition between the Liberal and National parties. It should also be noted that the National Party endorses the Liberal Party position on all but a few rare occasions.
4. An electorate is "marginal," "fairly safe," or "safe" using the AEC definition: "Where a winning party receives less than 56 percent of the two-party preferred vote, the seat is classified as 'marginal,' 56–60 percent is classified as 'fairly safe' and more than 60 percent is considered 'safe'" (AEC, 2014).
5. Vote Compass implemented undisclosed measures to prevent users manipulating the online tool's outcomes. These are not made public in order to not aid those who might attempt to exploit the system. Generally speaking, these include: logging IP addresses, cookie tracking, and using time codes, among other measures.

6. We did not examine National Party releases because of their coalition status with the Liberals and the replication which would dilute our analysis.
7. There is much debate about “permanent campaigning” (Albaek et al., 2014, p. 3), but for practical reasons we focused on the weeks between when Rudd was reappointed Prime Minister until the three-day media blackout that prevents the release of press statements prior to polling day on September 7, 2013.
8. The ALP’s promoted media topics were: “Growth and Opportunity,” “families,” “education,” “fairness,” “workers,” “better health,” “jobs,” “senior Australians,” “students,” “a sustainable environment,” “the first Australians,” “Australian businesses,” “being a good global citizen,” and “regional Australia.”
9. The questions are designed to provoke a response in order to graphically map voters’ political positions relative to the major parties’ positions, but it is acknowledged that this carries with it an acquiescence response bias.
10. Attitudes toward asylum seekers are considered negative when one agrees that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back and that asylum seekers should not be allowed to re-settle in Australia.
11. The full multinomial regression results including those of the control variables are shown in Table A1 in Appendix.

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Appendix

Table A1. Effect of Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers on Vote Choice

	Coalition vs. Labor (1)	Greens vs. Labor (2)	Coalition vs. Labor (3)	Greens vs. Labor (4)
Asylum seekers (negative attitude)	2.714*** (0.001)	-1.743*** (0.002)	0.678*** (0.003)	-0.821*** (0.003)
Asylum seekers (salience)	0.252*** (0.003)	0.718*** (0.002)	0.064*** (0.005)	0.552*** (0.003)
Age	0.007*** (0.00003)	-0.013*** (0.00004)	0.004*** (0.0001)	-0.0002** (0.0001)
Female	-0.054*** (0.001)	0.323*** (0.001)	0.178*** (0.002)	0.050*** (0.002)
University degree	0.145*** (0.001)	0.198*** (0.001)	0.105*** (0.002)	0.070*** (0.002)
Rural	0.232*** (0.001)	0.066*** (0.001)	0.159*** (0.002)	0.024*** (0.002)
Immigrant	0.180*** (0.001)	-0.025*** (0.002)	0.205*** (0.002)	0.028*** (0.002)
Income	0.154*** (0.0003)	-0.043*** (0.0004)	0.077*** (0.001)	-0.023*** (0.001)
Political interest			0.217*** (0.003)	-0.449*** (0.003)
Liberal-National partisan			8.262*** (0.004)	0.187*** (0.004)
Labor partisan			-8.121*** (0.004)	-7.133*** (0.004)
Green partisan			-0.954*** (0.004)	6.825*** (0.004)
Asylum seekers (attitude × salience)	0.001 (0.004)	-0.934*** (0.007)	0.139*** (0.007)	-0.767*** (0.008)
Constant	-2.510*** (0.003)	0.056*** (0.003)	-0.837*** (0.005)	-0.096*** (0.005)
Akaike information criterion	47,226,966.000	47,226,966.000	19,884,111.000	19,884,111.000
n	438,050	438,050	438,050	438,050

Source: Vote Compass (2013).

Notes: Multinomial logistic regression (reference category = labor).

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.