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# Valence and spatial explanations for voting in the 2013 Australian election

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This article examines the 2013 Australian federal election to test two competing models of vote choice: spatial politics and valence issues. Using data from the 2013 Australian Election Study, the analysis finds that spatial politics (measured by party identification and self-placement on the left–right spectrum) and valence issues both have significant effects on vote choice. Spatial measures are more important than valence issues in explaining vote choice, however, in contrast with recent studies from Britain, Canada and the USA. Explanations for these differences are speculative, but may relate to Australia's stable party and electoral system, including compulsory voting and the frequency of elections. The consequently high information burden faced by Australian voters may lead to a greater reliance on spatial heuristics than is found elsewhere.

**Keywords:** elections; parties; Australia

Early theories of electoral behaviour relied on spatial explanations, with voters placing themselves at different positions on the ideological spectrum and choosing a party that occupies a position closest to them. This approach, associated with the work of Downs (1957), has dominated electoral research for more than half a century. More recently, valence theories of voting have become popular. In this

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view, voters do not differ on their goals, but instead vote for a party that they judge will be most competent in meeting these goals if elected to office. Valence voting has since been widely promoted as an explanation for electoral change, especially in Britain (Bale 2006; Clarke et al. 2009, 2011; Green 2007), as well as in the USA and Canada (Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2010). This article evaluates these two theories in the context of the 2013 Australian election.

The 2013 election was the culmination of one of the most turbulent periods in recent Australian politics. The 2010 election had resulted in the first hung parliament since 1940, forcing Labor to rely on the support of one Green member and three of four independent MPs. In addition, Labor was subjected to continuous leadership speculation, with repeated attempts to replace Julia Gillard with her predecessor, Kevin Rudd. These attempts finally succeeded just prior to the 2013 election. The 2013 election was also distinctive because the government announced the election date fully eight months in advance (although it was later changed by Rudd). And not least, the government was faced with major policy challenges, with stated Labor positions on balancing the budget, asylum seekers and a mining tax having to be substantially modified or reversed during the life of the government.

An analysis of the dynamics of political choice in the 2013 election represents an ideal opportunity to test rival models of electoral choice, since all of the major elements – policy issues, economic competence, leadership, campaign dynamics and partisanship – were at the forefront of political discussion. In particular, the leadership changes within Labor permit us to make a better test of the impact of leadership traits on the vote than was the case in the 2010. This article uses the 2013 Australian Election Study (AES) survey to test these rival models and also places the results in the context of long-term changes in voting behaviour measured by earlier AES surveys.<sup>1</sup> The first section examines the two main theories of voting, spatial and valence, while the second section examines the events leading up to the election campaign and the campaign itself. The third section covers the result of the election. The fourth section evaluates the two explanations for voting in the 2013, while the final section places the findings within a comparative perspective.

## Theories of voting

### *Spatial theories of voting*

Spatial theories of voting assume that voters adopt differing ideological positions, and vote for the party that is closest to their own position. Party identification and policy issues represent the mechanisms by which spatial voting operates, by means of voters using partisanship as an informal short cut and by taking positions on policy issues that broadly fall along a left–right alignment. Spatial theories, therefore, assume that parties compete for votes within an electorate that is primarily issue-oriented, and in which both parties and voters have full information and voters can transfer their votes freely. Of course, such conditions are rarely, if ever, met so

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<sup>1</sup>The 2013 AES survey was a mail-out, mail-back survey of persons registered to vote in the 2013 election with the sampling frame supplied by the Australian Electoral Commission from the electoral rolls. There was also an online option for completion of the survey, which a small number of respondents used. The final response rate was 33.9 per cent after four follow-ups. The survey was weighted to reflect the national electorate. Full details of the 2013 survey, and of the earlier AES surveys, can be found in McAllister and Cameron (2013).

that spatial theories are frequently subject to criticism and revision because of their unreasonable assumptions (e.g., Adams 2001; Budge and Klingemann 2001).

In the absence of full information, voters use short cuts to make their voting decision, with party identification being one of the primary means of reducing voters' information burden. Partisanship has long dominated explanations for voting behaviour in the USA, Britain and many European countries (for recent reviews, see Bartels 2008; Holmberg 2007; Mair 2007). Since the 1980s, however, the theory of spatial voting has been seen to be less relevant due to continuing partisan de-alignment across a range of countries (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), the declining ability of left–right ideology to shape the vote (Sanders 1999) and an apparent convergence in the policy positions of the major parties (Endersby and Galatas 1998). Partisanship remains a major explanation for voting (and with it, the spatial theory of voting), but it is less important than it once was.

Explanations for Australian voting behaviour have likewise focused on spatial theories of voting, exemplified by party identification, although there remains debate about the optimum placement of party identification within any model (Goot 2013; McAllister 2009). In one of the earliest studies of Australian voting behaviour, Aitkin (1982: 1) stressed the importance of party identification in Australian voting, seeing the stability of politics as resting on 'the adoption, by millions of Australians then and since, of relatively unchanging feelings of loyalty to one or other of the Australian parties'. In later studies, others have reached similar conclusions about the central role of partisanship in shaping voter preferences (McAllister 1992). Studies have also highlighted the changing role of issues, emphasising the pivotal role of the economy in deciding electoral outcomes and, in particular, how economic performance was central to the success of the Howard Liberal government between 1996 and 2007 (Goot and Watson 2007).

### *Valence theories of voting*

In contrast to voters adopting different policy positions, valence politics refers to the issues that voters agree on, such as increasing economic growth or maintaining an effective health-care system. First proposed by Stokes (1963) as an alternative to spatial models of voting, the valence model emphasises not the issue itself, since there is consensus that the outcome is desirable, but rather which party or leader is most competent to achieve the outcome. As Mueller (2003: 40) puts it, valence identifies issues on which 'all voters agree that more is better than less'. The model therefore has implications for, among other things, leader images, since voters evaluate particular personalities as being most competent (Bean 1993; McAllister 2007).

In contrast to most of the other advanced democracies, there are no studies in Australia that have explicitly examined valence voting. Studies have examined the role of the economy (e.g., Goot and Watson 2007; McAllister 2011: 172ff) or leaders (Bean 1993; Bean and Mughan 1989). Both are often considered to be aspects of valence. No Australian study, however, has evaluated the utility of valence explanations for voting as against spatial explanations. This is in contrast to Britain, where numerous studies have evaluated the relative merits of the two approaches (e.g., Clarke et al. 2009, 2011; Green 2007). The results of British analyses overwhelmingly find that valence models are superior to spatial models in explaining voting behaviour. Similar studies of valence politics from Europe (Clark 2009), the USA and Canada (Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2010) largely support these conclusions.

Election campaigns represent an ideal event in which to test competing theories of voting. Campaigns concentrate voters' views about the issues, the leaders and the parties. A campaign highlights which party and leader are the most competent in meeting goals, and they often compete with one another on that basis. It can reinforce previously held views, thus producing no change; alternatively, change may occur as a consequence of unexpected events or new information, and via the information flow that comes from the mass media (Brady, Johnston, and Sides 2006; Druckman and Parkin 2005; Hillygus and Jackman 2003). Parties may also approach the campaign in different ways, targeting voters to exert maximum influence on the outcome (Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2008; Rohrschneider 2002). The net effect is that the election campaign becomes a prism through which voters view the issues, the leaders and the parties.

### The 2013 election campaign

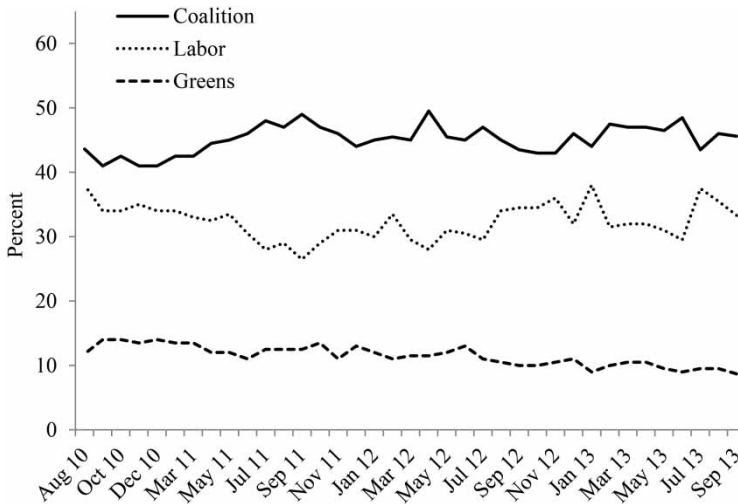
The Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, announced in January 2013 that the election would be held on 14 September, the first time since federation that the date of a national election had been known so long in advance. When Kevin Rudd replaced Gillard as prime minister in late June, however, he made it clear that he would not be bound by her decision and he eventually opted for holding the election a week earlier (ostensibly to avoid conflict with the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur). In theory, announcing the election date over six months in advance was intended to end uncertainty and allow the government to continue with its legislative program, freed from continuous election speculation. In practice, however, the announcement focused voters' minds on the looming election and the necessity of making an electoral decision. More importantly for the Labor Party, it had the secondary effect of highlighting the latent leadership tensions between Gillard and Rudd.

With an election date in place, Rudd and his supporters were able to work to a timeline in returning him to the prime ministership (Hartcher 2013). A series of poorly received decisions by Gillard during the subsequent 'long campaign' dented her already waning popularity. By March 2013, opinion polling predicted that the government would be defeated in a 'landslide' (Jones 2013). With Rudd's supporters convinced of the need to change leaders, Gillard was unable to withstand the internal momentum against her and Rudd took the leadership back from her on 26 June with a majority of 57–45 among Labor Party MPs. The views of voters – including telephone survey data collected between 9 and 23 July 2013 (McAllister 2013) – about these two leadership

**Table 1.** Views of Labor's leadership changes, 2010 and 2013

	Gillard replaces Rudd, 2010	Rudd replaces Gillard, 2013	(Change)
Strongly approve	5	12	(+7)
Approve	21	30	(+9)
Disapprove	37	24	(-13)
Strongly disapprove	37	34	(-3)
Total	100	100	
<i>N</i>	(2042)	(1075)	

Question: 'Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Labor Party handled the leadership change in June of this year, when Julia Gillard (2010: Kevin Rudd) replaced Kevin Rudd (2013: Julia Gillard)?  
Sources: 2010 AES and 2013 ANUpoll.



**Figure 1.** Voting intention, August 2010–September 2013

Notes: Estimates are monthly averages. Question: ‘If the federal election for the House of Representatives was held today, which one of the following would you vote for? If uncommitted, to which one of these do you have a leaning?’

Source: Newspoll.

changes are shown in [Table 1](#). In 2010, a large majority disapproved of the leadership change. In 2013, however, Gillard’s unpopularity combined with Labor’s poor performance in the polls contributed to stronger support for the leadership change. Nevertheless, a majority still disapproved of the change. Labor, therefore, went to the polls having experienced an unprecedented period of leadership turmoil and with the wounds of leadership division largely unhealed.

### *Party support, 2010–13*

Throughout the 2010–13 period, the Liberal–National coalition remained consistently ahead of Labor in the opinion polls ([Figure 1](#)).<sup>2</sup> Labor support reached its nadir in mid-2011, when it trailed the Coalition by up to 20 percentage points. Labor fortunes gradually improved during 2012, for three reasons. First, the February leadership vote between Gillard and Rudd resulted in a decisive win for Gillard, by 71 votes to Rudd’s 31. The issue of a Rudd succession appeared to be over. Second, in August the government reintroduced the ‘Pacific Solution’, with asylum seekers being sent to Nauru and Papua New Guinea to have their refugee claims assessed. This policy had been introduced by the Howard Liberal government in 2001. Labor’s dismantling of the program in 2008 had resulted in a substantial increase in asylum seekers arriving by boat (Phillips and Spinks 2013). Third, on 9 October Gillard gave an impassioned speech in parliament accusing Abbott of misogyny. Video of her speech went viral on social media, recording over one million views in one week alone.

<sup>2</sup>Figures 1 and 2 rely on Newspoll as their source, but the other polls conducted during the course of campaign come to similar conclusions. See Goot (2014).



Late 2012 represented the peak in Labor popularity; thereafter it declined. On 20 December Wayne Swan, the treasurer, announced that the budget would be in deficit, thus breaking a key plank in Labor's 2010 election platform. On 21 March 2013, Gillard called a leadership ballot in which Rudd did not stand, and Gillard and her deputy, Wayne Swan, were returned unopposed. Labor popularity continued to decline before bottoming in mid-2013, when Labor trailed the Coalition by almost 20 percentage points. Following Rudd's return to the leadership in June, Labor's support in the polls immediately increased. Even at that time, however, the government remained around 10 percentage points behind the Coalition, and quickly lost approximately half of the advantage gained by the leadership change.

### *Leaders' popularity*

Gillard and Abbott were two of the least popular party leaders in recent Australian political history. [Figure 2](#) shows how far Gillard's popularity declined throughout 2011, recovering only gradually in 2012 with that of her party's fortunes. In only two short periods – in late 2010/early 2011 and late 2012 – was she ahead of Tony Abbott. Indeed, in the three months leading up to her replacement by Rudd, she trailed Abbott as preferred prime minister by an average of seven percentage points. When Rudd replaced Gillard, he immediately led Abbott as preferred prime minister. Rudd's lead was short-lived, however, and in the two subsequent months his popularity declined rapidly as he introduced confusing and poorly received policies on, among other things, the development of the Northern Territory and the relocation of Sydney's naval base to Brisbane ([Hartcher 2013](#)). By contrast, Abbott's popularity rose over the same period.

The public's views of a leader's integrity and leadership capacity are the most commonly measured components of overall leadership evaluations ([Goren 2002](#)). These measures originated in survey research from the USA, and there is a debate over their relevance to parliamentary systems such as Australia ([Goot 2013](#)). 'Effectiveness' has been shown as the most important trait among leaders in Australia ([Bean and Mughan 1989](#)). Without a similarly broad measure available, integrity and leadership are used here to measure two attitudes closely related to effectiveness.

The extent to which the continuous leadership speculation following Rudd's ousting in 2010 affected the standings of both Gillard and Rudd on these vital dimensions is demonstrated in [Table 2](#). When Rudd stood against John Howard in 2007, 72 per cent of voters considered Rudd to be honest and 66 per cent considered him to be trustworthy. By 2013, when Rudd finally replaced Gillard, these proportions had halved. There are comparable collapses in public views of Rudd as an effective leader. These are dramatic changes in the public's view of Rudd and can only be accounted for by Labor's constant leadership manoeuvrings.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Abbott's standing with the electorate on integrity and leadership – not high to begin with – actually increased marginally between 2010 and 2013, which crucially put him ahead of Rudd.

<sup>3</sup>The declines on the other traits are much smaller. For example, the proportion seeing Rudd as knowledgeable dropped by just two percentage points between 2007 and 2013, and the proportion seeing him as intelligent declined by 7 per cent.



**Table 2.** Leadership traits and ratings, 2007–13

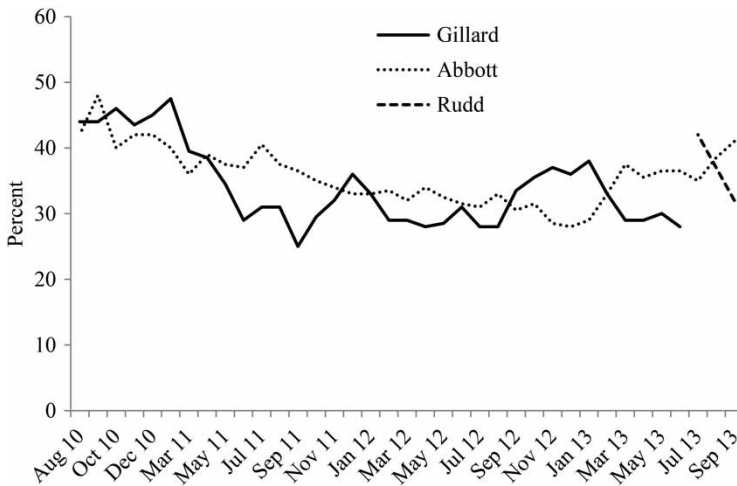
	Gillard			Rudd			Abbott	
	2007	2010	2013	2007	2010	2013	2010	2013
<i>Integrity</i>								
Honest	na	48	na	72	na	38	43	45
Trustworthy	na	40	na	66	na	29	36	40
<i>Competence</i>								
Intelligent	na	89	na	92	na	85	72	68
Knowledgeable	na	80	na	82	na	80	59	58
<i>Leadership</i>								
Strong leader	na	60	na	76	na	40	54	60
Sensible	na	72	na	82	na	49	50	52
<i>Mean ratings (0–10)</i>	5.2	4.9	4.0	6.3	5.0	4.1	4.3	4.3

Questions: ‘Here is a list of words and phrases people use to describe party leaders. Thinking first about [leader], in your opinion how well does each of these describe [him/her] – extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all?’ ‘Using a scale from 0 to 10, please show how much you like or dislike the party leaders. If you don’t know much about them, you should give them a rating of 5.’ Trait estimates are for per cent who said ‘extremely’ or ‘quite’ well. Traits were only asked of the prime minister and opposition leader.

Sources: 2007, 2010 and 2013 AES.

*The leaders’ debate*

The leaders’ debate has become a standard election event and has been held continuously since 1990 (Senior 2008). Three debates were held during the 2013 campaign, on 11, 21 and 27 August, respectively. In addition, a debate was held between the treasurer, Chris Bowen, and the shadow treasurer, Joe Hockey, on 27 August. The



**Figure 2.** Preferred prime minister, August 2010–September 2013

Notes: Estimates are monthly averages. Question: ‘Who do you think would make the better Prime Minister?’

Source: Newspoll.

AES measured exposure to the first of the three leaders' debates, when just 32 per cent of the electorate reported that they had watched it. This was the lowest proportion watching a debate so far recorded. In 2010, the same proportion (for one debate) was 47 per cent. Among those who watched the debate, Table 3 shows that opinions were almost equally divided, with 36 per cent believing that Rudd won and 37 per cent that Abbott won. Just over one in four thought that the two leaders were about equal in their performances. This division reflects published opinion polling from the campaign period, which saw Abbott win the first debate, Rudd perform strongly in the second debate only to be overshadowed by media criticism of his temperament and a large number of 'undecided' respondents overall (Holmes 2014).

Labor remained consistently behind the Liberal–National coalition in the polls in the period leading up to the 2013 election. Much of this can be attributed to Gillard's inability to overcome the controversial circumstances in which she replaced Rudd. For many voters, she was regarded as an illegitimate leader, as Table 1 has already illustrated. Once Rudd finally replaced Gillard, however, he too became fatally tainted by the continuous leadership speculation and he actually trailed Abbott on the key areas of integrity and strong leadership, previously some of his strongest attributes. Nor did the leadership debates work in Labor's favour, with the voters declaring the first debate a draw.

### The election result

The result of the election gave the Liberal–National coalition a total of 90 seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives, compared to Labor's 55 seats. Three minor parties – the Greens, the Palmer United Party and Katter's Australian Party – won one seat each, and two independents were also elected. On a two-party preferred vote, the Coalition won 53.5 per cent of the vote and Labor 46.5 per cent. The Coalition gained 18 seats in the lower house, but Labor's two-party preferred vote dropped by only 3.4 per cent compared to 2010. Indeed, the result was not as catastrophic for Labor as some had feared: opinion polls during the first half of 2013 had suggested that Labor might lose up to 35 seats (e.g., Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2013). From this perspective, the replacement of Gillard with Rudd appeared to have 'saved the furniture' as some have subsequently claimed (Hawker 2013: 3).

**Table 3.** The 2013 leaders' debate

	All	Watched debate	Did not watch
Rudd much better	8	13	5
Rudd somewhat better	21	23	20
About equal	38	27	45
Abbott somewhat better	25	26	24
Abbott much better	8	11	6
Total	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	(3497)	(1357)	(2140)

Questions: 'Did you watch the televised debate between Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott on Sunday 11 August?' 'From what you saw or what you heard or read about it, who do you think performed better in the debate – Rudd or Abbott?'

Source: 2013 AES.

**Table 4.** The turnover of the vote, 2004–13

	Lab.	Lib.–Nat.	Green	Other	Total	<i>N</i>
			<i>(2013 vote)</i>			
<i>2010 vote</i>						
Lab	67	15	8	10	100	(1425)
Lib.–Nat.	4	88	1	7	100	(1443)
			<i>(2010 vote)</i>			
<i>2007 vote</i>						
Lab.	72	15	12	1	100	(929)
Lib.–Nat.	7	89	3	1	100	(804)
			<i>(2007 vote)</i>			
<i>2004 vote</i>						
Lab.	89	4	4	2	100	(530)
Lib.–Nat.	18	76	2	4	100	(875)

Note: Estimates are the current and recalled vote in the two elections in question.

Sources: 2007, 2010 and 2013 AESs.

Placing the turnover of the inter-election vote in a longer term perspective shows the scale of the defections from Labor in 2013 (Table 4). Of those who voted for Labor in 2010, one in three subsequently defected from the party in 2013, with about half going to the Coalition, and a substantial number to minor party candidates.<sup>4</sup> Placing this in the context of the 2007 and 2010 elections shows that Labor has retained a declining proportion of its voters. In 2010, Labor retained 72 per cent of its 2007 voters, and in 2007, 89 per cent of its 2004 voters. This decline in voter loyalty to Labor is also reflected in the proportion of Labor partisans who voted for the party. In 2013, 76 per cent of Labor partisans voted for the party, compared to 84 per cent in 2010 and 91 per cent in 2007. By contrast, the Coalition has performed consistently better in recent elections in retaining voters from the preceding election as well as those who identify with the party, gaining the vote of 91 per cent of its partisans in 2013, 94 per cent in 2010 and 92 per cent in 2007.

The result of the 2013 election was not as catastrophic as the polls in the months leading up to the election seemed to indicate, but the underlying patterns suggest that Labor suffered major defections among its longer term supporters. These defections occurred both among those who voted for it in 2010 and, more strikingly, among its partisans. We have already speculated about some of the reasons for these defections, including Labor's leadership changes and its numerous policy failures during the 2010–13 period. In the next section, we systematically test these hypotheses in order to explain the outcome of the 2013 election and place these explanations within the context of the spatial and valence theories of voting.

### Evaluating the explanations

The valence and spatial explanations of voting lead to different predictions about the way in which voters reach their party choice. The valence model implies that voters agree about what they want a government to do; their choice is shaped by which party

<sup>4</sup>In particular, support for the Palmer United Party, which attracted 5.5 per cent of the first-preference vote, was disproportionately composed of former Labor voters (50 per cent of whom voted Labor in 2010, 20 per cent Coalition and 30 per cent were other/non-voters; *N*=84).

they believe is most likely to deliver the desired outcome (Clarke et al. 2011: 238; Stokes 1963: 373). The model also implies that voters evaluate the qualities of the party leaders based on their perceived ability to meet these goals. Finally, since all agree on the importance of economic performance, the valence model predicts that the economy will improve in the future and that government will have a positive effect on future economic performance (e.g., Clarke et al. 2011: 244). By contrast, the spatial model assumes that voters position themselves within an ideological space and choose the party that is closest to their own ideological position (Stokes 1963). This is expressed in party identification, namely, the attachment a voter feels to one party and which acts as a shortcut in their voting decision (Campbell et al. 1960: Ch. 7).

As in all recent Australian national elections, there were different views among the public on the major issue in the 2013 election campaign (Table 5). When asked which issue was most important, management of the economy emerged as the top-ranked issue, mentioned by just over one in four of the respondents, up from one in five in the 2010 election. Health and Medicare ranked second in importance, mentioned by just under one in five, and education was mentioned by 15 per cent of the respondents. The remaining issues attracted one in 10 mentions or less. The absence of a single dominating issue largely reflects the narrative of the 2010–13 Labor government, with a range of policy issues – notably the carbon tax, asylum seekers, and health and education – emerging to occupy public debate for a short period and then fading away.

The second part of Table 5 shows which party respondents believed was best able to handle each of the 10 issues. Labor emerges as the preferred party on five of the issues, and the Liberal–Nationals on the remaining five. The Coalition is the preferred party – by almost two to one – to manage the economy, but Labor leads decisively on health and education, also by a considerable margin. The largest party gap on all 10 issues is on the contentious issue of refugees and asylum seekers, with the Coalition leading Labor as the preferred party by 22 percentage points. The last line of Table 5 shows that party preferences were relatively evenly matched, with a slight (5 percentage point) advantage to the Coalition across the full range of issues.

In addition to measuring the party judged most competent to deal with the first and second mentioned issues, the valence model also takes into account leader traits. These are defined as competence, integrity and leadership, operationalised by the items in Table 3. Leader ‘thermometer’ ratings are commonly used to operationalise views on leaders, but it is not possible to control for those ratings in addition to leader traits since they are strongly correlated. Trait measures are used here to better capture the multidimensional nature of leadership evaluations. The correlations between the items used to make up the three scales are as follows: ‘competence’ comprises ‘intelligent’ and ‘knowledgeable’ (Rudd:  $r = .73$ , Abbott:  $r = .76$ ); ‘integrity’ comprises ‘honest’ and ‘trustworthy’ (Rudd:  $r = .80$ , Abbott:  $r = .86$ ); and ‘leadership’ comprises ‘strong leader’ and ‘sensible’ (Rudd:  $r = .66$ , Abbott:  $r = .65$ ).

The main event that assists voters to assess the personalities of the leaders and their ability to deal with the issues facing the country is the leaders’ debate (Holbrook 1999). Accordingly, we include a measure for whether the respondent thought that Rudd or Abbott had won the debate. There are limitations to such a measure on its own – primarily the decline in televised debate audiences in recent years and concerns about the accuracy of recalling evaluations some weeks after the event (prior 2012) – but here it complements the leadership evaluation scales to provide a more valid measure. Finally, three measures are included for an assessment of the country’s

**Table 5.** Election issues and party competence

Issues	Most important issue		Party best able to handle issue			
	First	Second	Lab.	Lib.–Nat.	No diff.	Total
(1) Management of the economy	27	14	23	44	33	100
(2) Health and Medicare	19	21	37	27	36	100
(3) Education	15	15	43	25	32	100
(4) Taxation	11	11	25	34	41	100
(5) Refugee and asylum seekers	10	14	19	41	40	100
(6) Environment	6	6	36	22	42	100
(7) Carbon tax	4	6	32	42	26	100
(8) Global warming	3	5	35	22	43	100
(9) Industrial relations	3	4	31	30	39	100
(10) Immigration	2	4	21	37	42	100
			(35)	(40)	(25)	(100)

Questions: ‘Here is a list of important issues that were discussed during the election campaign. ... Still thinking about the same 10 issues, which of these issues was most important to you and your family during the election campaign? And which next?’ ‘Still thinking about these same issues, whose policies – the Labor Party’s or the Liberal–National Coalition’s – would you say come closer to your own views on each of these issues?’ ‘No diff.’ combines ‘No difference’ and ‘Do not know’ responses.

Source: 2013 AES.

economy compared with one year ago (i.e., a retrospective assessment), expected economic performance in one year’s time (i.e., prospective), and for the impact of the government on future economic performance.

The spatial explanation for voting is represented by partisanship, measured by whether the respondent reported that they were a Labor or a Liberal–National partisan, and by their placement on the left–right scale. In addition, two measures of economic collectivism versus economic individualism are included: whether the respondent thought that more should be spent on social services rather than on providing a tax cut; and whether or not the respondent thought that income and wealth should be redistributed. These measures represent the longstanding divide between business and labour (Wilson and Breusch 2003).

The two models are evaluated by estimating a regression model using the variables defined above to predict the Labor versus the Liberal–National vote. The variables falling within each of the two models, together with their scoring and means and standard deviations, are shown in Table A1. The results in Table 6 show that the predominant effects on the vote are partisanship and the party judged to be best able to handle the respondent’s most important issues, with partisanship being about twice as important as issue proximity. Among the other spatial factors, none reaches statistical significance. Among the other valence factors, leader traits matter. In particular, assessments of both leaders’ integrity have a significant influence on the vote, net of other things. Assessment of leadership matters for Abbott, but not for Rudd. There is also a minor effect for expectations about the government’s impact on the economy in the coming year.

Based on the coefficients presented in this table, spatial explanations for the vote in the 2013 election appear more important than valence explanations. The differences, however, are not large. In fact, if we allocate the variance explained by the full model – 69 per cent – according to the weights of the independent variables, the 11 valence variables account for 39 per cent of the total variance, while the four spatial variables

**Table 6.** Valence and spatial explanations for the 2013 vote

	Labor versus Liberal–National vote		
	<i>b</i>	Beta	(SE)
<i>Issues</i>			
First mentioned issue, prefers Labor	.24*	.25*	(.02)
Second mentioned issue, prefers Labor	.03	.03	(.02)
<i>Leader traits</i>			
Rudd competence	.01	.01	(.01)
Abbott competence	-.00	-.00	(.01)
Rudd integrity	.05*	.09*	(.01)
Abbott integrity	-.03*	-.07*	(.01)
Rudd leadership	.01	-.02	(.01)
Abbott leadership	-.03*	-.06*	(.01)
Rudd won leaders' debate	.02	.04	(.01)
<i>Economy</i>			
Country's economy compared one year ago	-.00	-.00	(.01)
Country's economy better in one year	.01	.02	(.01)
Government good effect on economy	-.01	-.01	(.01)
<i>Partisanship and ideology</i>			
Labor partisan	.46*	.46*	(.02)
Left–right self-placement	.00	.02	(.01)
Prefer more social services to tax cuts	.01	.02	(.01)
Redistribute income and wealth	.01	.02	(.01)
Adj. $R^2$	.69		
Constant	.18		
( <i>N</i> )	(3955)		

Note: Ordinary least squares regression analysis predicting the probability of a Labor versus a Liberal–National vote, coded 1 = Labor, 0.5 = other, 0 = Liberal or National. See Table A1 for details of scoring of independent variables.

Source: 2013 AES.

\*Statistically significant at  $p < .01$  or better.

account for 30 per cent of the variance. The calculation is made by summing the standardised (beta) coefficients for the two categories of variables and then apportioning the variance explained by the model to each of the two. In simpler terms, the  $R^2$  figure on the model – .69 – can be interpreted as showing that the independent variables in the model can explain 69 per cent of variation on the dependent variable; conversely, that 31 per cent of that variation is either random or the result of other unmeasured factors. Within that 69 per cent, we can show – using the standardised, or ‘within model’, coefficients – the relative predictive powers of the spatial and valence factors. In the next section, we place this finding in longitudinal and comparative perspective.

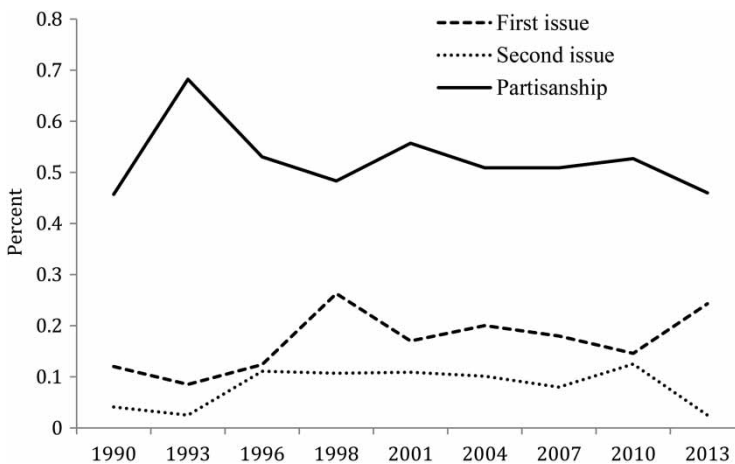
## Discussion

The 2013 Australian election saw the Labor government defeated after six years in office, replaced by a Liberal–National party coalition led by Abbott. The election came after several years of constant leadership speculation within the Labor government, with Rudd deposing Gillard as party leader and prime minister just three months before the election. Gillard, Rudd and Abbott each attracted historically

low levels of personal support among voters. A plurality of voters listed economic management as their most salient election issue, an obvious weak point for Labor because of its record of relative policy failure. The result was a large defection of Labor voters to the Liberal–National coalition, the Greens and to minor parties.

The purpose of this article has been to test two main alternative theories – valence and spatial – as explanations for voting in the 2013 election. Our analysis of the 2013 AES shows that party identification – a measure of spatial politics – is substantially more important than valence issues in explaining the 2013 election result. In addition, the results of a longitudinal analysis from 1990 to 2013, shown in Figure 3, confirms that spatial politics are consistently more important than valence issues, even after a wide range of other factors are taken into account. In each of the nine elections analysed in Figure 3, partisanship easily surpasses the combined impact of the first and second mentioned issue on the vote. The dominance of partisanship was exceptionally strong in the 1993 election, which witnessed a divisive campaign between an incumbent Labor government led by an unpopular leader, Paul Keating, and a Liberal Party proposing radical changes to tax, health and industrial relations policies. In that election, partisanship was almost three times more important than issues in determining the vote.

The findings of this study, while important in helping to explain the outcome of the 2013 election result, also have substantial comparative implications. Why have valence issues had less resonance in Australia than in comparable countries, such as Britain, Canada and the USA, where valence has consistently grown in importance over the past three decades (e.g., Clarke et al. 2009, 2010; Green 2007)? Australian voters have clearly defied electoral trends evident in those systems. Two factors may be at work to set Australia apart. First, Australia maintains a strong, disciplined party system, including high and stable levels of party identification, in contrast to similar systems elsewhere (Mackerras and McAllister 1999; McAllister 2011). The 2013 AES shows that 71 per cent of voters were either ‘fairly’ or ‘very strong’ party



**Figure 3.** Electoral effects of valence and spatial measures, 1990–2013

Notes: Estimates are partial regression coefficients, predicting vote, with other measures controlled for as defined by the model in Table 6.

Sources: 1990–2013 AESs.



identifiers, compared with 57 per cent of British voters in 2010 (Clarke et al. 2010). Almost half of all voters in the 2013 AES have always voted for the same party and 45 per cent said that they had decided how to vote ‘a long time’ before the campaign commenced. Placed in a comparative perspective, party support in Australia is strong and remarkably stable.

Australia’s electoral system, combining compulsory voting and frequent elections, constitutes a second explanation. Compulsion increases the informational burden on voters. To compensate, voters rely more heavily on shortcuts such as party identification, leadership perceptions and party images (Popkin 1994). Compulsory voting also helps to explain the high levels of party identification among Australian voters (McAllister 2011; see also Singh and Thornton 2013). Where citizens who would not otherwise vote are compelled to turn out and at the very least accept a ballot paper, it is also the case that they more readily draw on heuristics – most commonly party identification – in making electoral decisions. Where citizens choose to vote – the USA, UK and Canada inclusive – it is unsurprising that voters are more likely to engage with issues during the electoral decision-making process, to maximise the utility of their vote. In compulsory systems, utility maximisation may in many cases be achieved simply by avoiding sanctions for abstention. Additionally, Australian voters face more frequent federal elections than British voters (every three years on average, compared with five-year terms in Britain), in addition to state elections. Frequent voting combined with compulsory voting thus underpins strong partisan attachments among Australian voters, at the expense of valence politics. Future research into valence explanations of voting behaviour should examine the variation in effects between systems, particularly by expanding the analysis of valence issues in compulsory voting systems.

As the first analysis to compare valence and spatial explanations of Australian voting behaviour, we conclude that spatial politics dominate Australian electoral behaviour. In the context of the 2013 election, voters’ reliance on spatial politics meant that Labor was unable to overcome its combined problems of leadership instability and an absence of trust. Labor thus struggled to retain many of its core partisans. The most salient issue nominated by voters positively predicts vote choice, but party identification is almost twice as important. Other measures related to valence politics, including leadership and economic evaluations, have negligible effects in the model. With voters relying on their party identification, and to a lesser degree on their valence issue judgements, the Labor government was unable to retain power. To put it another way, the Liberal–National opposition did not need to present a popular leader to win the election. It simply needed voters to draw on their usual heuristics at the polling booth.

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## Appendix

Table A1. Variables, scoring and means

Variable	Codes	Mean	SD
<i>Valence variables</i>			
First mentioned issue, prefers Labor	1=Yes, 0=No	0.47	0.43
Second mentioned issue, prefers Labor	1=Yes, 0=No	0.49	0.42
Rudd competence	4=Extremely well, 3=Quite well, 2=Not too well, 1=Not well at all	3.06	0.73
Abbott competence	4=Extremely well, 3=Quite well, 2=Not too well, 1=Not well at all	2.67	0.84
Rudd integrity	4=Extremely well, 3=Quite well, 2=Not too well, 1=Not well at all	2.07	0.86
Abbott integrity	4=Extremely well, 3=Quite well, 2=Not too well, 1=Not well at all	2.29	0.95
Rudd leadership	4=Extremely well, 3=Quite well, 2=Not too well, 1=Not well at all	2.34	0.82
Abbott leadership	4=Extremely well, 3=Quite well, 2=Not too well, 1=Not well at all	2.55	0.83
Rudd won leader's debate	5=Rudd did much better, 4=Rudd did somewhat better, 3>About equal, 2=Abbott did somewhat better, 1=Abbott did much better	2.99	1.04
Country's economy compared one year ago	5=A lot better, 4=A little better, 3>About the same, 2=A little worse, 1=A lot worse	2.55	1.00
Country's economy better in one year	5=A lot better, 4=A little better, 3>About the same, 2=A little worse, 1=A lot worse	3.09	1.05
Government good effect on economy	3=A good effect, 2=Not much difference, 1=A bad effect	1.77	0.67
<i>Spatial variables</i>			
Labor partisan	1=Yes, 0=No	0.35	0.48
Left-right self-placement	10=Right, 0=Left	5.03	2.27
Prefer more social services to tax cuts	5=Strongly favour spending more on social services, 4=Mildly favour, 3=Depends, 2=Mildly favour reducing taxes, 1=Strongly favour	2.87	1.29
Redistribute income and wealth	5=Strongly disagree, 4=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 2=Agree, 1=Strongly agree	2.60	1.09
(N)		(3955)	

Source: 2013 AES.