

# **Development and Operation: Major Party Voter Databases**

Mr Peter van Onselen

School of Politics and International Relations  
University of New South Wales

Dr Wayne Errington

Australian National University

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## Abstract

*Modern political campaigning is becoming increasingly professionalised such that in Australia today the major parties use information databases to assist with their various political activities. This article outlines the design and operation of the electoral databases of the Coalition and Australian Labor Party (ALP). More emphasis is given to the operation of the Coalition's database, Feedback, with details of the ALP's database, Electrac, introduced as necessary. The article also analyses the increased significance of political databases in modern political campaigning, and the ways in which databases complement other features of contemporary campaigns, such as the focus on party leaders. Through analysis of the variation and similarities between the major parties' databases, this little-known aspect of Australian politics will be shown to be one of the most important tools in modern campaigning. Finally, the ethical considerations of political intelligence gathering will be discussed. While Australians have grown used to the idea that governments keep all manner of information about citizens on file, a political party is a private organisation. With the use of electoral databases a comparatively recent development, some discussion about their use and potential abuse with respect to an individual's right to privacy, and the use of personal information in partisan campaigns, is well overdue.*

## Introduction

The stability of Australia's party system is due in large part to the willingness of the major political parties to adopt the latest policies, presentation and technology from around the world (Weller and Young 2000: 157). An essential element of the ongoing professionalisation of political campaigning in Australia is the gathering and management of information by political parties. While there is no substitute for a politician with a sound knowledge of their electorate, the rapid growth in information technology in recent decades has allowed parties to comprehensively record and store an enormous and varied range of information about voters, seats and issues. Electoral databases have become an increasingly important source of information for Australia's two major political parties. While less than a decade in operation, the major parties' respective databases have become integral to the operation of individual Members' offices, and to the ways in which the party organisations target their campaign communication to swinging voters in marginal seats. As well, the databases identify potential party supporters, who can be contacted for financial or other kinds of support to the candidate.

## Electoral Databases: Not-So-Secret Weapons

Members of the public contacting the office of their local Member of Parliament would expect their details and concerns to be taken down by office staff, and are rarely surprised to be told that their name and address is in a computer in the MP's office. How many such citizens would realise, though, that the details of their phone call to their MP then forms part of a sophisticated national database aimed solely at partisan political advantage? Both of Australia's major political parties have such a database.

In interview, Senator Robert Ray was not willing to disclose the details of the ALP database. However he did acknowledge its immense value to ALP campaigning, particularly in marginal seats.

*Yes, we operate a database on constituents but I'm not going to disclose what it does or how it functions. I can say it is an enormously valuable campaign tool, as I am sure Liberal Party persons would suggest theirs is, too (Ray, 2001).<sup>1</sup>*

The unwillingness of the major political parties to publicly discuss their electoral databases is understandable. Well over a decade after their introduction, it is time to shed some light on this crucial development in modern Australian politics.

The introduction of the databases of both major parties has co-incided with a period in Federal politics where a great deal of attention, by the parties and the media, has begun to be paid to a relatively small number of swinging voters, to complement the national campaign. The ALP's database, Electrack, was developed in the late 1980s, as part of Labor's ongoing efforts through it's national secretary, Bob Hogg, to ensure that the ALP was capable of maintaining electoral advantage through exploiting incumbency, something it had failed to do previously. Originally entitled Polfile, the ALP's database was a first in Australian politics. A database of voters was a logical element of more general moves to centralise ALP campaigning in the national secretariat. After commercial disagreements over ownership of the technology, the ALP switched to its current Electrac system after the 1993 election (The Age. 24 August 1996). Ownership of Electrac is compulsory for Caucus members.

The development of the Liberal Party's Feedback database was part of a national review of the Coalition's 1990 election campaign. In that election, it was generally recognised that the ALP had out-campaigned the Coalition in key marginal seats, allowing Labor to win the election without a majority of the two-party preferred vote.<sup>2</sup> A Liberal Party delegation led by Michael Wooldridge had studied campaign methods in Britain and the United States in 1988 (Australian Financial Review. 24 March 1993). In the USA, the Republican Party led their opposition Democrats in the development of targeted campaigning.<sup>3</sup> Technical difficulties, and the differences between the two political systems, prevented the wholesale importation of American campaign techniques (as well as the relevant software). This, along with the federal structure of the Liberal Party, saw it fall well behind the ALP in the development of direct mail techniques. It was becoming increasingly clear, however, that the practice of identifying and targeting individual voters was becoming significantly easier with the increasing power of information technology.

The design and operation of electoral databases is fairly simple. Access to commercially available information, Australian Electoral Commission data, and the telephone directory provides the raw material of names and addresses of constituents. That is where the hard work

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<sup>1</sup> Campaign directors from both major parties have been similarly guarded about the details of their databases. See The Australian Financial Review. 1 February 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Coalition: 50.1%, ALP 49.9% two-party preferred. Source: Australian Government and Politics 2002.

begins. The purpose of the databases is to provide parties with information about the policy and voting preferences of individual voters, and to collate this information in ways useful to political campaigning. Their effectiveness, however, hinges upon the diligence with which individual offices enter data (a decentralised process with variable adherence on the part of MPs), and the way in which the information stored in the database is utilised by the party and individual candidates.

The Coalition's Feedback program is automatically updated monthly with information from the AEC roll. This process takes account of boundary redistribution's and adds and removes constituents who enter and leave the electorate (allowing welcome letters to new constituents). The electoral roll data contains every elector's full name and address, telephone number, gender, date of birth, and occupation (an optional entry on electoral enrolment forms). An important feature of the database is the transfer of constituent details with the AEC updates. This effectively allows Coalition members to often have some briefing notes on new electors moving into their electorate. Such information is not only valuable in relation to individual record keeping, but it also helps the parties track demographic changes.

Office staff can add to the basic electoral roll data in two ways. Feedback employs a kind of shorthand known as tagging. Constituents are tagged based on information gathered through contact with the electorate office, local newspaper coverage (letters to the editor provide good information about issues of interest to particular voters), doorknocking and telephone canvassing. Feedback provides specific tags for voting information (to identify swinging voters, strong or weak party identification), issues of concern, any history of party donation, ethnic identity, and alternative contact details.

Feedback allows voters to be tagged according to their interest in over 300 issues. These tags may mark a general interest in health, or a particular interest in the cost of private health insurance. Tags can also be created to account for local issues (about problems with particular roads or proposed developments) or new issues as they arise (such as the debate over stem cells). Feedback has over 150 generic forms of tags. These tags are easily viewed by office staff as icons as soon as they open the constituent's file on the database, and thus provide an instant picture of the person with whom they are dealing. Hidden tags allow MPs to make notes about constituents that are not accessible by the central database. Seamless operation of the database adds both an aura of professionalism to the office, as well as a personal touch to dealings with constituents.

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<sup>3</sup> The American databases now allow automated telephone messages from candidates, with separate messages for

The second way of adding to a constituent's profile is to retain detailed information about any contact with the office. Contact with the office may come through a letter<sup>4</sup> addressing a particular concern, or as 'off the record' as an anonymous telephone call to complain about a particular action of the government. In both cases the political staffer is likely capable of adding information onto the constituents file. Staff are trained to log all written correspondence into Feedback. In the case of anonymous callers unwilling to give their names, the use of caller ID telephone technology (although not universally available), allows staffers to identify the number the constituent is calling from, and if that number is a home line it can be cross checked with the Feedback system.

A summary of the new contacts is added to the database, so that the frequency and nature of contacts is tracked. These general tags build up a picture of individual voters and their suitability for party communication. It is this data that interests the party organisation, and can be used by individual MPs to tailor letters to small groups of voters. This method is both cheaper and more effective than an electorate-wide mail-out, as discussed below. If a letter needs to be composed to the constituent, or to another party on the constituent's behalf, this is done from within the database, so that the letter stays on the constituent's electronic file. However, these attachments are unable to be downloaded by the central computer. Thus, the party organisation only receives a summary of the issue involved as contained in the tags or other notes.

Feedback also allows the compilation of a community database. This database is linked to the main database by connecting the files on individual members to the organisation listed in the community database. This allows identification of voters based on issues of potential interest (Chamber of Commerce members), identification of potential donors, as well as a list of school or community groups within the electorate who can be sent government information packages about such events as ANZAC Day, or relevant government health and community programs. In particular, MPs can direct these organisations towards grants programs aimed at community groups for purposes such as regional development, community and communications infrastructure. However, privacy laws prevent community and public organisations from handing out lists of members, making the compilation of the community database difficult. For this reason political electorate staff are expected to scour the local newspapers for constituent affiliations to community organisations.

A well-organised office (it is hard to estimate what proportion of MPs' offices fit this description, probably less than half) incorporates the database into all stages of constituent contact. As soon as the telephone rings, or a letter is received, the first response of the staffer is to find the constituent's details in the database. The basic information (name, address, date

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<sup>4</sup> For example, a constituent might write to a member of parliament to complain about a particular government policy.

of birth, other members of the household) is supplied by the Australian Electoral Commission from the electoral roll<sup>5</sup>. If that constituent has contacted the office in the past, or been canvassed by telephone (even if when living in another electorate), the staffer can see some basic information about the constituent. This includes such things as political affiliation or leaning, their occupation, membership of community organisations, and the issues in which they have shown interest in the past. The design of the major parties' databases differs at this point but the goal is the same – to gather as much information as possible about voters in a form useable to both the individual member and the party organisation. A well-integrated electorate office information management system will also include data about weak or swinging booths in the electorate, and a breakdown of Census Collection Districts. The latter allows demographic information to be gathered from the census about particular areas within the electorate. As well, since the Census Collection Districts provide the basis for the geographic breakdown of all Commonwealth statistic data collection, such information as areas of high and low unemployment can be tracked.

Feedback is designed to be operated in individual member electorates (members and candidates must purchase their own copy of the software). The limiting factor is that feedback allows for logged entries that do not throw back to the central system – thereby protecting members interests by allowing them to freely enter info they may not want their name or their offices name linked to inside the party, such as unkind descriptions of troublesome constituents. With pre-selection contests often bitter affairs, there is an incentive for MPs to mostly tag their constituents in the section that does not feed back to the central system (in case they get challenged in preselection for example : they don't want this person to have any benefits.). This in turn has consequences for the level and quality of information gathered by the central office. Further, where pre-selections end bitterly – either because a sitting member is defeated or the sitting members preferred candidate is defeated on his/her retirement, Feedback information is often removed from the system. This removal of information can either occur simply where information has been added in the sealed section not available to the central party, or with risk of central party reprisal by removing information prior to a central load down and update, thereby wiping previous entries and replacing them with the newly vacated information. An example of these latter approaches occurring was following the pre-selection battle for the Liberal held seat of Wentworth. The sitting member Thompson was defeated at pre-selection by former Woollahra Mayor and State organisational President Peter King. Thompson's office immediately began de-logging information off both the central and local sections of the Feedback information. King thereby not only had little to no Feedback information for the 2001 election, but his office had to begin the task of re-entering such information from scratch after the election (Subject A, 2002).

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The decentralised nature of the databases is therefore a source of weakness. New members of parliament, more familiar with information technology and likely to have worked with their party's database in the past, are more inclined to use Feedback. Some do so without much enthusiasm however, believing that office resources can be better utilised. In future, even with the majority of MPs' offices using their database systematically as described above, each party will have significant gaps in their database. For example, where a senator provides a presence for a party in an opposition marginal seat, the public is less likely to contact a senator's office than their local MHR, limiting the comprehensiveness of the party's picture of that seat.

Further, members in their final term are unlikely to be motivated to make comprehensive entries in the database in their final term. Electoral Commission data can become out of date very quickly. Constant updating of the database is essential given that as many as 48.2% of electors in any one seat changed their address from 1996-2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Thus, electorate-specific information is lost if a constituent leaves the electorate (even though generic information about each constituent will follow them to their new address. Thus, new members often begin their careers with little information on their electorate database even if their hand-over from the previous member is comprehensive. A new member in this situation has a strong incentive to have their office comprehensively oriented towards quickly building up their database.

After each election, the Feedback State Audit comprehensively reviews the efforts of each office in providing information through the database. Offices which are below average in their identification of issues and voting preferences are strongly encouraged by the Government Members Secretariat (GMS) to improve their use of the system. The decentralised nature of the system also adds to the potential for technical problems. If an office's database is, through crash or theft, unavailable for any length of time, there is little the central office can do to assist in the compilation of data while the office is offline (Blaemire 2001).

### **Government and Opposition**

While both parties' databases have the same goal - maximising the precision with which candidates and leaders can communicate with swinging voters - their databases are slightly different. In the case of the ALP, the database system is run as a collective, however candidates need to access the system through an existing Senator. The weakness of this system is that Senators rarely devote their time to unwinnable seats, the unwinnable seat candidate is therefore largely prohibited from enjoying the benefits of the system.

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The overall structure through which the databases are organised differs between the parties and also depends on whether or not a party enjoys the resources of government. Databases undoubtedly afford advantages to incumbents, since while opposition candidates may have access to their party's database, pre-selection may take place a matter of months before an election. In any event, constituents are more likely to take their concerns about a specific problem (especially one that pertains to a government department) to an MP rather than an opposition candidate. MPs are also in a better position to ingratiate their office staff with the database than are opposition candidates who rely to an overwhelming degree on unpaid volunteers. Opposition MPs are also largely precluded from significant database entry. Shadow Ministers only receive one additional staffer on top of their electorate staff – therefore using their electorate staff to assist with portfolio issues. Backbench opposition MPs are expected to devote staff to neighbouring marginal seats, again detracting from their capacity to devote time to the party database. Each of these examples illustrates the amount of manpower available to effectively utilise the party database from opposition. It is particularly important in opposition for the coordination between individual candidates and the central office to run smoothly, since candidates without the resources of an MP's office are heavily reliant on outside assistance to campaign effectively.

Both parties open access to the databases to pre-selected candidates as well as members. Candidates in both winnable and unwinnable seats are afforded access. The inhibiting factor for each party is derivative of their ideological roots. In the case of the Liberal Party, Feedback is purchased on an individual basis. Cost is incurred at the point of sale, and again at the point of election. This process effectively lowers the costs for unwinnable contesting candidates. The party does this with a view to encouraging such candidates to purchase the system to improve voter identification in such electorates. This view is held by the party for a number of reasons. Boundary changes may increase the importance of the information within a particular area; electors may move and the AEC information transfers a particular elector into a marginal or safe seat of the party; demographic changes may see the seat in question shift to marginal seat status; for the purpose of senate votes to assist in securing the number three senate ticket position; as a means of encouraging the local party organisational wing to continue to use feedback for either state or local government elections, again as a means of boosting the party's presence in a particular area. Nevertheless the start-up cost as well as the ongoing cost to receive updates are significant (over \$1000 for a copy of the software) and therefore an inhibiting factor in itself.

In the case of both major parties, their Senate team plays an extensive role adding value to the databases uses. In the case of the ALP, the Senators run the party's database with a regional focus, designed to mirror the party's approach of spreading its senate team across marginal seats during election campaigns. The Coalition senators, whilst involved in the databases

describe lower-house electorates that their senators are responsible for assisting (van Onselen 2001). Major parties allocate their own seats, as well as seats held by the opposition (usually marginal), to their state Senate teams to assist the local member or candidate and party branches (Payne 2002). It is a natural consequence that in the small states, where senator representation per MHR is higher, the senators play a more significant role in the operation of the database. Western Australian Senators usually take responsibility for one seat (Bishop 1999). In Tasmania, where there is no Coalition lower-house representation, the five Liberal senators act as quasi-representatives of the five House electorates. While in Victorian and NSW duty Senators are responsible for a number of seats, and cannot be expected to do as thorough a job as their interstate counterparts.

An MP's office staff can only assist in the compilation, running and expansion of the database when operating out of their member's office, although Senators usually have feedback set up in their offices for the duty electorates they have been assigned. They can therefore enter information and check data already on the system entered by the local member. The central office-electorate office division described above also limits the extent of help the Senator offers the local member, primarily through limiting the extent of information sharing. This factor in part acts as a causal reason the Coalition Senators out-source staff to lower-house members more frequently than do ALP senators.

Factional disputes may also limit the level of information sharing between a senator and their duty electorates. For example, Senator Marise Payne, a prominent Liberal Party moderate, is the duty Senator for western Sydney, taking in the Liberal-held seats of Lindsay and Parramatta, occupied respectively by Jackie Kelly and Ross Cameron, members of the Liberal Party's Right faction. The factional divide thus limits the incentive for the MHRs and the Senator to fully share information through the feedback system. The extent to which this disincentive is played out in practical terms is difficult to quantify. For the central office, it is a constant struggle to co-ordinate the sharing of information in this regard. It also displays the importance of duty senators and candidates in un-winnable seats involving themselves in the feedback process. Failure to do so can result in large sections of electorates at all levels not gaining the coverage required to stimulate adequate correspondence to maximise the party's electoral prospects.

Senator John Tierney, in interview, raised the fact that his operating of Feedback out of the Hunter Valley area he serves as duty senator for, has provided new candidates with strong constituent information for doorknocking, direct mail-outs and general canvassing of the issues that concern local residents. He pointed out that from when he entered the parliament and moved his office to the Hunter area, the Liberal Party have picked up the seats of Paterson, Dobell and Robertson, where previously the Liberal Party was unrepresented in the

quantify the level of effect Feedback had in the securing of lower-house seats in the Hunter region for the Liberal party. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the duty Coalition senator based in the Hunter, operating as the only sitting member of parliament involved in the campaign, has identified Feedback as a vital cog in the campaign.

Feedback became fully operational just in time for the 1996 campaign. The Coalition has therefore enjoyed the use of government resources in the compilation of its database, and in turning the database to political advantage. The government, by definition, has a numerical advantage in that it occupies more seats (and usually more marginal seats) than the opposition, providing additional staff (including ministerial staff) and resources to enhance the database. The government can also make use of ministerial staff to contribute towards maintenance of the database. The Coalition has also had, both in government and opposition, more Senators than the ALP in recent decades, adding to the benefits of incumbency.

### **Usage Across Tiers of Government**

Both Feedback and Electrac are open to both state and federal members to use. Theoretically, given that both major parties operate at all three levels of government, including some local councils, party databases offer assistance to all three levels. In practise resource limitations prevent local councillors from greatly utilising the database systems. Such representatives are less ordered in their logging of information. Most councillors do not even have access to the software, much less understand how to use it effectively. In the limited instances where local councillors use party databases they do so more as a way of gaining background information on constituents. Occasionally they will log information back into the system. Such actions require councillors to either procure the software themselves, use the system in a state or federal electorate office, or simply call the information through to staffers in such an office. Some major party councillors double up as political staffers in state or federal member's offices, within which area their council is located. In the case of Feedback electoral conferences at the organisational level of the party can purchase and retain the database (this is not the case with the ALP's Electrac). This generally only occurs in conferences unrepresented at state and/or federal level. This represents a final access point for councillors, however again resource limitation is a hindrance of usage.

Differences between state and federal operation of databases are primarily driven by the party's incumbency at the time. As highlighted in the previous section, incumbent governments have far greater capacity to effectively operate the database system. The major difference in operation of databases when comparing state and federal levels, barring issues of incumbency, is the more limited staffing pool at the state level. Federal electorate offices are staffed by three fulltime 'Electorate Officers' plus a casual staffing allowance. State electorate offices are generally staffed by no more than two electorate officers (in some cases one) plus

additional staffer does reduce an office capacity to utilise the database system. In the case of Feedback, given that it is primarily operated out of the federal wing of the party (GMS) and that it originated as a result of federal MP investigations, means that there has been a greater emphasis and training for Feedback at the federal level when compared with the state parties. This variability of emphasis on Feedback has cut across incumbency stages at state levels. It remains to be seen whether this will alter when the federal Liberal Party slips into Opposition. In the case of the ALP there was a marked transfer of control from federal to state with regard to its database system when the ALP lost Government at the federal level in 1996 (most particularly in states with Labor Governments).

Feedback is a private company owned and operated by the Liberal Party, with an independent staff, however one that can only offer adequate assistance with the use of the GMS. The Feedback organisation provides training in database management and telephone support to Coalition staff. This support is currently mostly provided by the Government Members Secretariat, a taxpayer funded organisation that is overseen by the Department of Finance. There is thus a good deal of public subsidy involved in the maintenance and effective operation of political party databases. As well as giving the government an advantage over the opposition, the level of resources required to make the databases effective helps to entrench the two-party system, despite a political environment favouring minor parties in ways outlined by Marsh (1995).

Members that have managed to be elected without Feedback, often in marginal seats, are sceptical of the value it adds. The new crop of party members, combined with MPs in the lower and upper houses with central party experience as part of their pre-parliamentary backgrounds are likely to be more supportive of the new systems<sup>6</sup>. A permanent factor political databases need to overcome is the inertia of members in safe seats. While their want to maintain a solid margin for the purposes of both pre-selection and to avoid the seats slipping toward the opposition is always present, such members are generally more sceptical about Feedback. The role of Senators in the Feedback process is therefore important for such seats – particularly where maintaining the senate vote is concerned. This is an inhibiting factor re senators performing duty and patron roles in their allocated marginal seats.

### **The Target: Identifying Swinging Voters**

Databases are used both by individual members and party organisations in their campaigns. The strategy was summarised in the 2002 Feedback review of the previous parliamentary term: ‘...informing voters of Federal Government initiatives in an area where you [the MP] have these identified they have an interest. These mail-outs may be small in number but will have a big impact in the long run’ (Feedback Document 1). Since its inception, Feedback has identified over 500,00 federal voting preferences, of which over 203 000 were identified as

swinging voters, and 75,500 as soft (weak or persuadable major party voters) or minor party voters. So, on average, each Coalition user (an MP or candidate) identified 2, 204 swinging voters (Feedback Document 1).

Once these swinging voters are identified, they are further broken down according to the issues with which they have been tagged on the database. For example, an MP may have identified about a hundred swinging voters who have indicated a strong interest in the aged care portfolio. When the government (or opposition) makes a policy announcement in that area, the GMS will send to each MP a generic letter outlining the advantages of the policy. The MP can then send the information only to those constituents identified as both swinging voters and interested in that particular issue, gaining the maximum possible value from the postal allowance and other resources expended. Further, constituents not interested in that particular issue are not irritated by superfluous mail from their local MP. This strategy forms part of the continuous campaigning in which the major political parties currently engage, serving as one aspect of incumbency advantage<sup>7</sup>.

The weakness of gathering information from contact initiated by the constituent is that while this provides Feedback with issues, depth of concern, and organisational affiliation, it is unusual for such contact to reveal voting preferences. For example, an ALP voter is unlikely to reveal their voting preference when seeking assistance from their local Coalition MP. Instead, voting preferences are more systematically gathered through telephone canvassing or door-knocking. It is for this reason that while the parties have a significant number of voters identified on an issue basis, such identification does not readily translate into swinging voter understanding. MPs are able to use issue-based knowledge to design issue-based direct mail-outs. However, awareness of swinging voter status is significantly more valuable in targeting a mail-out because costs can be reduced. It should be noted that where sitting members are concerned the issue of cost is primarily one of the tax-payer funded allowance mail-outs. The costs incurred are a combination of printing, postage and the time consuming tasks of mail-out preparation. The first two forms of costs are carried by taxpayer-funded allowances. MPs are conscious of keeping such costs within a reasonable frame to avoid unwanted attention at Senate Estimates hearings. It is the third cost of mail-out preparation that engages the political staff of an MP, thereby limiting the alternative functions that they could be performing to the benefit of the local Member. It can therefore be seen that on all accounts the MP has an interest in keeping costs to a minimum.

Information from the databases also allows telephone canvassing to be targeted towards filling in gaps in the database rather than wasting calls on voters who already identify with a political party. Party pollsters are also provided with feedback information so as to gain better

data through the conducting of their polls. A strong ALP tag will ensure that the constituent receives no contact from the Liberal member or candidate (and therefore probably re-enforce such voters' negative perception of the party).<sup>8</sup> Strong Liberal voters on the other hand, are targeted for requests for donations, party membership, and volunteer help. This aspect of the database is yet to be fully realised. Since elected as Federal Treasurer of the Liberal Party Malcolm Turnbull has publicly spoken of the party's need to engage Liberal voters for political donations. Turnbull has suggested this is becoming increasingly important in the face of ever equalling out of big business donations to the two major parties (Sydney Morning Herald. 3 December 2001).

Similarly, once constituents with strong party identification are excluded, doorknocking the entire electorate becomes a more realistic goal for the candidate. When an area is chosen for doorknocking, if possible on the basis of its high proportion of swinging voters, the database can provide, for each household, a number of issues for discussion, as well as pointers for fruitful small-talk such as club membership or occupation. The system can print out the list of households on one side of the road at a time, providing the member or candidate with a list of any contacts to the office the constituent has made, or any issue of concern they have been identified as having. In such situations members typically doorknock with the assistance of office staff or volunteers. The helper is thereby able to record constituent particulars while the local member freely engages in discussion. The constituent is likely unaware that the content of their discussion will be logged into a party database which will follow them as long as they remain on the electoral role.

### **Targeted Communication and the Nature of Political Representation**

While electoral databases undoubtedly assist in the professionalisation of marginal seat campaigning, these comparatively unknown information systems raise a range of questions about marginal seat campaigning, and its advantages and disadvantages for the operation of democracy. Do databases contribute to the marginalisation of large numbers of voters on the basis that they can be identified as strongly supporting a political party? Does the targeting of campaigns towards swinging voters skew public policy towards the wants of a tiny minority of the electorate? These questions strike at the very heart of representative democracy.

Whether or not one approves of the use of the database to tailor political communication depends largely on one's view of what political leadership is all about in a democracy. A major party candidate for office has an enormous amount of information about voters: their position and strength of conviction on a range of issues, occupation, membership of political

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<sup>7</sup> The contents of such letters embarrassed former ALP Member for Eden-Monaro, Jim Snow, when their contents made the local media. He had sent quite different letters to supporters of the local timber industry and conservationists before the 1990 election (Australian Financial Review. 2 March 1990).

and community organisations. Leaving aside the ethical considerations of the use of the information in the databases (discussed below), the question of the way in which it should be used depends on whether representative democracy is better served through MPs who closely reflect the views of their electorate, or those who seek to lead public opinion toward more effective and fairer policies. Applying these well-known delegate and trustee models of representation to Australia, Emy commented that despite many politicians from both major parties styling themselves as delegates, the most common type of representation in Australian politics is what he called the 'politico.' This is the term Emy used to describe the attempt to balance local representation with the need of the party to win office at the national level (Emy 1974: 482). Contemporary studies of representation in Australia have closely followed the typology established by Emy (see, for example, Sawer and Zappala 2001: 5). Clearly databases assist politicians in fulfilling this balance of local and national concerns. As described above, candidates for individual seats can highlight those aspects of party policy of most interest to voters in their seat.

On the one hand, political parties have a wealth of quantitative and qualitative information on public opinion with which to assist in the formulation of policies. On the other hand, the system is designed to assist the major parties in skewing this policy formulation process toward the views of a smaller and smaller number of electors. A positive way of putting this is that public resources are not wasted trying to persuade voters who have no intention of changing their vote. In reality, however, a growing majority of campaign resources are being targeted towards a small number of voters.

It might be said that the down-side of this type of communication is that election campaigns are increasingly being fought over the votes of a smaller and smaller number of voters. Indeed, the guidelines for the use of Feedback suggest a rule of thumb for the entry of information about a constituent: 'Always ask yourself while tagging information "Is this information going to be useful in a campaign?"' (Feedback Document 2). However, databases may assist to allay concerns about the representation of 'oppressed groups' (Phillips 2001: 30), since databases are compiled from contact with self-selected constituents who invariably have some sort of problem with government services. Instead, the database marginalises voters wedded to the major parties.

As suggested by the name Feedback, the purpose of political databases is to allow communication between politicians and the electorate. The fact that these databases have been invented to serve the interests of political parties should not blind us to the possibility that they may serve a wider public good, particularly in the efficient way they transmit information between MPs and thousands of constituents. The number of swinging and weakly identifying voters has been steadily increasing since the 1960s. In 1967, only 11% of voters

1990 (Chaples 1997: 358). Further, while the actual number of swinging voters (or those weakly identifying with parties) in each seat may be relatively small, finding out exactly who they are is not easy. Voters may be reluctant to tag themselves as strongly identifying with an opposition political party to that of the MP's office. This limits the number of constituents totally excluded from consideration by candidates through the database. While the number of swinging voters actively targeted by marginal seats campaigns is relatively small in order to save on mailing costs, these people serve as proxies for many other voters with similar concerns, who may have had no contact with their MP's office.

The targeting of political communication at the electorate level serves to complement the message of the central party machine, where the majority of resources (in media advertising) are spent. This point is underlined by another contemporary trend in modern campaigning, the emphasis on the party leader. Indeed, with media coverage of politics increasingly centred upon the activities of party leaders, the tightly targeted messages described above are becoming more important. As much time as the present Prime Minister spends talking to radio talkback callers, he can only speak personally to a limited number of voters. The combination of emphasis on the leaders, and reduced time given to broadcast news media coverage of politics creates a less politically-literate electorate. Many voters would be hard-pressed to name a federal politician aside from the Prime Minister, Opposition Leader and Treasurer. This impersonal trend in political campaigning thus finds its polar opposite in the targeted, personal political communication facilitated by political databases.

Databases also provide the aggregation of electorate-wide data so that the most important issues for the electorate can be readily identified. This system allows the early identification of burgeoning issues, such as voter concern about particular legislation or local issues. This information is of interest to the party organisation and parliamentary leadership as they make judgements about the popularity of policy and legislative proposals. Again, this efficient dissemination of information serves to improve the functioning of representative democracy. Targeting political communication towards specific groups (by sending letters on youth issues to young people, seniors' issues to seniors etc.) simply makes that communication more relevant to the recipient. From the point of view of an individual elector, the databases ensure that their MP retains a list of issues in which the constituent is interested, as well as a record of correspondence. This allows MPs to attain a comprehensive and accurate picture of public opinion in their electorate, instead of relying on a gut feeling of views in the electorate. Thus, despite their tendency to allow political parties to ignore a substantial section of the electorate (those with strong party alignment), there are a number of positives to come from the development of political databases.

## **The Use and Abuse of Information**

In addition to these wider questions about representative democracy, the use of political databases raises ethical and legal questions of the handling of information by political parties. Because political parties are private organisations, and because the major parties have no interest in public scrutiny of their databases, Electrac and Feedback have come under remarkably little scrutiny from parliament and the media. The very fact that private information, such as a health problem, becomes a small cog in a political campaign would no doubt upset many people were they made aware of it. Indeed, fear of media coverage of a Big Brother-style database ensures the subject is not publicly discussed by the parties. For example, instructions for Feedback include 'ensure that constituents cannot read the computer screen if Feedback is open.' (Feedback Document 2). Each of the major parties in Australia uses a single database at state and federal level. Compared to the United States, where the decentralised major political parties, as well as private campaigns for ballot initiatives, have ensured the development of a lively political database industry<sup>9</sup>, Australia's market is very small. Public consciousness of the databases is therefore likely to remain low.

When constituents contact an MP, are they dealing with an officer of the parliament, or a member of a political party? In order for their MP to assist with a problem with, for example, a child support case, a member of the public may hand over information they would prefer is kept private. In their role as a Member of Parliament representing a particular citizen, the politician (or their staff) contacts the bureaucracy (say, the Child Support Agency), or the relevant minister's office<sup>10</sup> to discuss the constituent's problem. In order to provide the highest level of assistance, as much detail as possible is gathered about the problem. Just how much of this detail is recorded on the database, and how much of that information is downloaded to the central computer, will vary from office to office, and from case to case. Of course, party organisations are only interested in the raw data about voters, such as their level of interest in a range of issues. Nevertheless, the potential for abuse of this information is clear.

Commonwealth privacy legislation is designed to prevent the misuse of personal information by private organisations (Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000). Such legislation mitigates against the collection of information without an individual's consent (amongst other limitations). Political parties however are exempt from such legislative requirements where their activities are 'in connection with an election, a referendum, or other participation in the political process' (Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000). In effect therefore, party databases can collect, log and use information in such a way, were the database not controlled by a political party, as to contravene the Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000.

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<sup>9</sup> A number of companies promote databases to assist in political campaigning in the United States. See, for example [www.aristotle.com](http://www.aristotle.com)

Political party exemption from the aforementioned Act has been described by the legal community as ‘a surprise’ given it had ‘never previously been raised during the extensive consultations over the legislation’ (Dixon, 2001). Further, given that party databases routinely collect information in a manner contrary to privacy legislation (barring the fact they are affiliated to political parties), it is high time closer attention were paid to the apparent conflict of interest in political parties determining where and when they receive exemptions to privacy legislation.

One obvious reason why political parties rarely publicly discuss the databases is their effort to keep the operation of the system secret from the opposition party (even though the two systems are quite similar). Apart from the strictures of party secrecy, though, there appears to be little thought given by either party organisation to the ethical ramifications of the handling of personal information. Party databases are a powerful and invasive political tool. Public opinion surveys both within Australia and overseas consistently show that an overwhelming majority of citizens are concerned about invasion of privacy (Dixon 2001:NP). Surveys also consistently indicate high levels of voter distrust towards politicians. Political parties’ exemption from privacy legislation therefore demands greater scrutiny.

### **Conclusion**

The operation of political databases is central to the way in which Australians are represented by the major political parties. To put it bluntly, the system allows the major parties to treat voters who strongly identify with either major party, particularly against their own, with contempt. For the major political parties, the trade-off between the usefulness of the system and its role in the distortion of public policy barely rates consideration. There is, of course, a wider debate within political parties as to whether the general shift towards targeting marginal seats is corrosive of the sound public policy-making required to maintain a solid nation-wide primary vote. However, the sheer effectiveness of the marginal seats strategies of both parties (particularly while in government) in recent decades ensures that tools such as electoral databases are an entrenched part of the management of political campaigns. On balance, the positive elements of electoral databases, chiefly a systematised flow of information between voters and their representatives, have the potential to outweigh the negative elements.

Electoral databases would be much less effective were there not considerable public resources devoted to their smooth operation, both in MPs offices and the backup provided by the Government Members Secretariat. This aspect of their operation alone justifies public scrutiny of their operation. It is therefore essential that the operation of electoral databases is more extensively discussed, and that a set of principles be developed by the parliament to ensure that privacy is respected. Further, attention needs to be drawn to the problem of MPs gathering personal information about their constituents, which is in turn used for party

into their personal data by political parties. Once the public is aware of the operation of party databases, the wider ramifications of data collection and use can be debated. Equally the wider operation of political parties can thus be more fully discussed.

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