

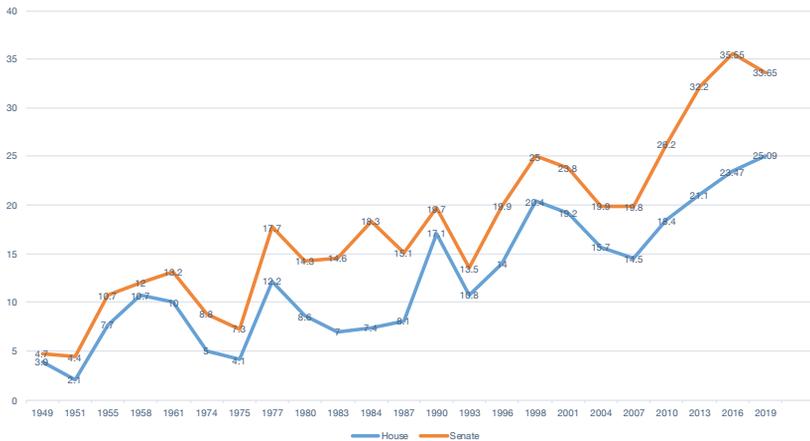
# 17

## THE MINOR PARTIES

Glenn Kefford

The 2019 federal election is noteworthy for many reasons. One of the defining stories should be that the ALP and the Liberal–National Coalition have been unable to draw voters back from the minor parties and Independents. Put simply, the long-term trend is away from the major parties. In this election, there was a small nationwide increase in the vote for minor parties and Independents in the House of Representatives, while in the Senate there was a modest decline. The State-level results are more varied. The Coalition lost ground in some places and maintained its vote in others. The ALP vote, in contrast, was demolished in Tasmania and in Queensland. Almost one in three Queenslanders and Tasmanians decided to support a party or candidate in the House other than the ALP or the Coalition. Across the entire country, this was around one in four (see Figure 17.1). In the Senate, Queensland and Tasmania again had the largest non–major party vote. These results are dissected in greater detail in other chapters in this volume, but they suggest that supply-side opportunities remain for parties and candidates expressing anti–major party sentiments. Put simply, the political environment remains fertile for minor party insurgents.

MORRISON'S MIRACLE



**Figure 17.1 First-preference votes for minor parties and Independents**

Source: Compiled with data kindly provided by Antony Green and from Australian Electoral Commission (2016 and 2019).

In terms of seat composition, the minor parties have remained unchanged in the House, with Katter’s Australian Party (KAP), the Australian Greens (discussed in Chapter 16, this volume) and Centre Alliance (formerly the NXT) holding on to their respective seats. However, it is in the Senate where things have changed dramatically.<sup>1</sup> The government is presented with a streamlined Senate crossbench compared with what it faced after the 2016 election. In total, the Senate crossbench will consist of 15 representatives from the minor parties: nine Greens, two from the Centre Alliance, two from Pauline Hanson’s One Nation (PHON), one from the Australian Conservatives and one from the Jacqui Lambie Network (JLN). In contrast, after the 2016 election, the crossbench was 20-strong.

Beyond the results, and a discussion of how important minor party preference flows were to the outcome (see Raue, Chapter 9, this volume), there were two critical stories about the minor parties that emerged from the 2019 election that will be the focus of this chapter. First, while there has been much discussion of the way the major parties and the Greens have used social media for the past decade or more (Gibson and McAllister 2011), this is the first election in which there has been a significant expansion in social media usage by the other minor parties.

<sup>1</sup> The number and type of minor parties in the Senate are further complicated by the Section 44 disqualifications; some senators who were elected as a result of disqualifications subsequently switched parties or created their own (discussed in Chapter 3, this volume).

At a time when the traditional media landscape is fragmenting, this allows these parties to bypass the talking heads and deliver their messages directly to voters. Second, the re-emergence of Clive Palmer on the national political scene is an important part of the story—most of all for what it says about power and influence in Australian politics. Palmer reportedly spent over \$60 million and, while he failed to win a seat and ended up with a meagre share of first preferences, at the very least, he contributed to the framing of the election in the minds of voters. These issues are worthy of further examination and are unpacked below.

## The minor parties embrace digital

For a decade or more, there has been increased interest in how various political actors are embracing the digital age (Chen 2013, 2015). Many analyses have suggested that the use of digital media by the non-Greens minor parties has been at a basic level, with rudimentary candidate pages that were lacking in how they engaged their audience (Chen 2012; Kefford 2018). The 2019 contest was different. What this election showed is that the minor parties are, albeit slowly, increasing the sophistication and scale of their social media and digital campaigns.<sup>2</sup> When the social media and digital advertising of the KAP, JLN, PHON, United Australia Party (UAP), Centre Alliance, the Australian Conservatives and Fraser Anning's Conservative National Party (CNP) are analysed, we see evidence of significant investment in the digital space.

Unsurprisingly, Facebook remains the dominant mode for minor parties to interact with voters and the minor parties appear to have been well served by their social media accounts before and during the election campaign. As Esposito (2019) demonstrated, the Facebook pages for Fraser Anning (CNP), Pauline Hanson (PHON) and Malcolm Roberts (PHON) featured 'in the top five performers for the year when it comes to total interactions on the platform'.<sup>3</sup> The reach of and voter engagement with the social media accounts of key minor party actors were also significant during the campaign. As Table 17.1 demonstrates, engagement with the

2 For a larger discussion of social media use, see Bruns and Moon (2018). McSwiney (2019) also noted that right-wing minor parties in 2019 were primarily using social media for issue framing.

3 Palmer (discussed more in the section below) had an unusual digital journey after the previous election. His online presence after the 2016 election started to resemble and be influenced by the alt-right (Caccamo 2018), but, as the election drew closer, these influences seemed to diminish and he ran an orthodox digital campaign with social media at the centre.

social media accounts of key minor parties during the official campaign period (11 April–18 May) was comparable with that of the major parties.<sup>4</sup> Pauline Hanson's Facebook page had the most interactions, and this is perhaps unsurprising given it has one of the highest number of followers of any of Australia's political pages. With seven of these posts receiving over 10,000 interactions, and with more than 250,000 followers on the platform, it is likely that each of these posts was viewed by hundreds of thousands of voters. In total, Hanson had 11 of the top 20 posts by engagement numbers and all of the top seven. The UAP, JLN and Anning's pages had the remaining posts in the top 20.

**Table 17.1 Top 20 minor party campaign posts on Facebook by number of interactions**

Date	Interactions	Party/candidate and link	Content
6 May	30,209	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/990539244483721">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/990539244483721</a>	Anti-ALP
30 April	24,936	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/986838414853804">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/986838414853804</a>	Internal PHON problems and response
1 May	23,705	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/987248828146096">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/987248828146096</a>	Internal PHON problems and response
17 April	22,353	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/979164695621176">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/979164695621176</a>	Anti-Turnbull
8 May	17,587	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/991268844410761">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/991268844410761</a>	Hanson visiting supporter
29 April	17381	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/985985544939091">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/985985544939091</a>	Policy: \$15–20 billion on dam-building in north Queensland
16 May	14,360	PHON: <a href="http://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/996513533886292">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/996513533886292</a>	Attack on mainstream media

<sup>4</sup> These data come from Crowdtangle's Google Chrome plugin, which provides data on the social media engagement of various pages. Interactions here are the combined number of reactions, comments and shares of the post. As a point of comparison, the most interactions a post from the main ALP page received during the campaign was around 35,000 and the main Liberal Party page was approximately 37,000. These figures are current for 31 May 2019.

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Date	Interactions	Party/candidate and link	Content
14 April	13,798	JLN: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/jacquilambienetwork/posts/1122791707928356">www.facebook.com/jacquilambienetwork/posts/1122791707928356</a> [page discontinued]	Lambie joke and photos
12 May	11,581	Anning: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/707083586374005">www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/707083586374005</a>	Racism/visas for white South African farmers
14 May	10,676	UAP: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/CliveFrederickPalmer/posts/2441739792512210">www.facebook.com/CliveFrederickPalmer/posts/2441739792512210</a>	Anti-Labor/Greens
14 April	10,587	JLN: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/jacquilambienetwork/posts/1122756534598540">www.facebook.com/jacquilambienetwork/posts/1122756534598540</a>	Anti-major party
9 May	9,670	Anning: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/705012946581069">www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/705012946581069</a>	Racism/ban on Muslim immigration
13 May	9,509	UAP: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/CliveFrederickPalmer/posts/2440482705971252">www.facebook.com/CliveFrederickPalmer/posts/2440482705971252</a>	Anti-Labor, claim of deals with China
28 April	9,149	Anning: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/699190917163272">www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/699190917163272</a>	Racism/support for white South Africans
16 May	9,002	Anning: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/709512019464495">www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/709512019464495</a>	Anti-major party, anti-mainstream media
30 April	8,688	PHON: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/986642288206750">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/986642288206750</a>	Internal PHON problems and response
17 April	8,659	Anning: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/692901687792195">www.facebook.com/senatorfraseranning/posts/692901687792195</a>	Racism/claim that 'fake refugees' are entering country
2 May	8,114	PHON: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/987836294754016">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/987836294754016</a>	Anti-ALP/Shorten
10 May	8,093	PHON: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/992611410943171">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/992611410943171</a>	Anti-major parties
7 May	6,931	PHON: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/991111161093196">www.facebook.com/PaulineHansonAu/posts/991111161093196</a>	Results in NSW election

Note: The Facebook pages of Hanson, Lambie, UAP, Palmer, Anning, the Australian Conservatives, Brian Burston, KAP and the Centre Alliance were all analysed as part of this analysis of social media engagement.

Source: Crowdtangle (see Footnote 6).

In terms of targeting, there is evidence to suggest that the minor parties have started to embrace targeting across various platforms and search engines. On Facebook, evidence of the UAP and PHON using targeted ads during the campaign was identified via the Facebook ad library, as well as through searches of some of the party pages and examination of the ads they were running. Some of the targeting was, however, more than a little unusual. For example, one PHON Senate candidate for New South Wales had targeted ‘people over the age of 18 who lived in Victoria’, while another targeted ad on Facebook, from the UAP, targeted ‘people aged 16 to 38 who live in Australia’.<sup>5</sup> There were also a number of reports of UAP advertising spreading across other areas of digital media, including YouTube and mobile game apps, as well as in Google search results (Bogle 2019; Vitorovich 2019). This is all evidence of the trajectory of minor party campaigning, which is increasingly heading online.

The increased use of social media by the minor parties to connect with voters during the election campaign is unsurprising, but it does present challenges. This is changing the nature of electoral politics and how issues are framed in the minds of voters. Given that increasing numbers of voters are accessing their political information solely from social media, Facebook and other platforms provide opportunities for minor parties to reach vast numbers of voters in an affordable way. The danger, however, is that parties willing to produce misinformation or provocative content seem to do better on the platform and, as a result of the network effects of social media, this information can spread rapidly across the political landscape. This problem is likely to only get worse.

## The return of Clive

Clive Palmer’s return to the federal political arena was significant, not because he won a swag of Senate seats and a seat in the House—as he did in 2013 with his Palmer United Party (PUP) (Kefford and McDonnell 2016, 2018)—but because of what his 2019 campaign says about power in Australia. An extremely wealthy individual, Palmer has a résumé that, among many other things, includes the rapid disintegration of his previous party as a result of incompetence and infighting, not paying the

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5 These descriptions are taken from Facebook’s advertising information, which provides limited details on the targeting strategy used.

workers of his Queensland Nickel refinery an estimated \$7 million in lost wages and benefits (Ferrier 2019) and being an absentee parliamentarian when he was the member for Fairfax between 2013 and 2016 (Evershed 2014). He spent a reported \$60 million<sup>6</sup> on a campaign that contributed to how the election was framed in the minds of at least some voters and delivered significant preferences to the government, hurting the ALP along the way.<sup>7</sup>

Given the UAP's eventual nationwide vote was 3.4 per cent in the House and 2.3 per cent in the Senate, voters might be wondering what exactly the point of all this was. Perhaps we will never know. But Palmer's return to the federal political arena raises a variety of questions about our democracy, including how we want elections to be funded, whether we think wealthy individuals should be able to pour this amount of money in and whether we care if the messaging from our parties and candidates for office is completely detached from anything resembling truth or facts. Ultimately, Palmer has burnt through another set of candidates and \$60 million dollars with an amateurish, self-interested campaign, and maybe he does not care, but perhaps we should.

The campaign the UAP ran received significant media coverage from the outset. First, in April and May 2018, billboards started to emerge across the country with Palmer's image and the slogan 'Make Australia great'. Then, in January 2019, Palmer began advertising through the mass media. Television advertisements—which were accused of infringing the copyright of a song from the band Twisted Sister—generated plenty of media attention for Palmer and were 'broadcast on the Seven, Nine and Ten networks between 50 and 167 times in the first week of January alone' (Whitbourn 2019).<sup>8</sup> Around this time, hundreds of thousands of text messages were sent out from the UAP claiming that, 'when elected, United Australia Party will ban unsolicited text messages which Labor & Liberal have allowed'. The text message also contained a link to the UAP's

6 See Chapter 3 (this volume) for more on the advertising spend.

7 It should be noted, however, that in no seat in the House did this change the outcome, so the UAP's preferences had no direct effect on who won government. But as Raue (Chapter 9, this volume) demonstrates, around 65 per cent of UAP preferences flowed to the Coalition.

8 One version of the ad focused on the National Broadband Network, stating that \$55 billion had been spent on it and it still did not work (Swanston 2019). Another started off with an image of disgraced former Labor Senator Sam Dastyari, with the headline: 'Labor Senator's expenses paid by the Chinese Government.' This was followed by 'No more foreign control' (Whitbourn 2019).

website. Again, this generated substantial media coverage for the party. But what modest gains the party may have made via increasing its name recognition were surely undone by the ill will generated by the tactic.



**Plate 17.1 Copy of UAP text message sent to voters**

Source: Brent Davidson, Twitter account, 16 January 2019.

The contrast with PUP's 2013 campaign was stark. In 2013, when Palmer and his PUP tasted success, they had a set of policies that were generous to everyone and were designed to harvest a protest vote (Kefford and McDonnell 2016), but their messaging was largely an attack on both major parties with their slogan 'Not the Liberal way or the Labor way, but the right way' being emblematic of this (Kefford and McDonnell 2016). In 2019, with at least double the amount of funds injected into the campaign, Palmer and the UAP released, *word for word*, the same national policies as 2013, with one change: there was no need to 'dump the carbon tax' as that had already been achieved (UAP 2019h).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as opposed to 2013, when the campaign messaging was filled largely with generic, anti-major party rhetoric, in 2019, the messaging from the UAP was completely detached from reality, primarily targeted the ALP and was filled with what can only be described as lies.<sup>10</sup>

One media release and message spread across social media was titled: 'Labor and China's Communist government conspiring against Australia' (UAP 2019e). Another said: 'Bill Shorten will hit us with another trillion

9 To describe the policies of PUP and the UAP as lacking in detail would be a very generous assessment. Instead, they published four policies on their website and then a range of policies were floated at points throughout the election campaign. An example of this was a post that said the party would 'increase the age pension by \$150 per week' (UAP 2019g). Another was that they would reduce power costs by 50 per cent, once elected (UAP 2019b).

10 To be clear, there were numerous videos, posts and media releases that attacked the major parties together, but there was no advertising that attacked the LNP or Morrison in the way that some of the UAP's advertising did the ALP.

dollars of taxes and costs' (UAP 2019c). A third claimed that Labor's negative gearing policy would allow 'foreign companies to claim tax deductions that Australians will not be able to' (UAP 2019a). Beyond the anti-Labor messaging, Palmer's economic nationalism was exemplified by ads that asked: 'Did you know that a Chinese communist controlled company owns an airport in the Pilbara? Now another Chinese owned company has bought another airport near Perth for just \$1' (UAP 2019d). This video has, thus far, been viewed 1.4 million times on Facebook. Another of the UAP's fabrications was that the major parties would not deliver a tax cut until 2024 (UAP 2019f); this was spread across social media widely and promoted via paid advertising. Over and over, the messaging from Palmer and the UAP was not just loose with the truth, it had absolutely no connection with it.

This is all evidence of Palmer's malignant influence in Australian politics. While it could be argued that in 2013 he sought to damage the major parties and have his business interests advanced, his campaign resonated because of increasing dissatisfaction with the major parties and Australian democracy. He was subsequently able to have some input on policy as a result of the numbers he held in a finely balanced Senate. The 2019 campaign was something altogether different. Palmer and his UAP actively spread misinformation and falsehoods across the political landscape, which may sow further seeds of discontent in the Australian body politic.<sup>11</sup> Internationally, Palmer's gigantic personal investment and complete domination of his party are not unparalleled (Kefford and McDonnell 2018), but it is worth considering whether any plutocrat has spent this much money and ended up with as little in return. Perhaps we are fortunate that this is the case.

## Conclusion

The 2019 federal election has provided more evidence of the challenges Australian democracy confronts. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the major parties to build a coalition of voters large enough for them to govern across a country where the interests and preferences of the States and regions are increasingly contradictory. So, while the crossbench

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11 The scholarship on negative advertising and attack ads has long suggested that negative advertising can weaken political efficacy. See Ansolabehere et al. (1994).

in the Senate has shrunk, the nationwide vote for minor parties and Independents in the Senate has decreased slightly and there are certainly challenges for each of the minor parties, the reality is that voters are not returning to the major parties in any significant way. Voters continue to spray their first preferences across a wide range of minor parties, depending on the State or Territory in which they live and whether they live in the major metropolitan areas or in the regions. There is an opportunity for a fourth force to emerge in Australian federal politics, especially on the right, but thus far none of the party entrepreneurs has had the resources or knowhow to pull this off.

The challenges of institutionalising, outlined in the 2016 election book (Kefford 2018), remain for the minor parties. Indeed, we have seen some of these challenges come to fruition. Since the previous election, Nick Xenophon departed the parliament, the NXT became the Centre Alliance and, notwithstanding Rebekha Sharkie holding on to the seat of Mayo, their vote in the Senate has collapsed. While Katter remains very popular in his stronghold of Kennedy, his party has made little headway at the federal level beyond this seat. Katter, who has held the seat for 26 years, is 74 years old and the question must be asked, how much longer can he continue? The JLN and PHON probably have reason to be most optimistic. Lambie has been returned to the Senate for six years and, given the state of play in Tasmania, there is a significant opportunity for her to be a long-term senator for the State. PHON has overcome crisis after crisis and still managed to increase its Senate vote in Queensland. With two senators, the party is, again, in a critical position given the finely balanced numbers in that chamber, but whether the party can remain united given all the evidence to the contrary remains to be seen.

Australia's minor parties remain critical in many ways. They are vehicles through which frustration at the major parties and the political establishment is channelled. They represent interests that the major parties are perceived to overlook. They often determine what policy passes through the Senate, securing deals along the way for their home States or favoured issues. While there is significant fragmentation on the right—far more than on the left—and these parties appear to be fighting for the same electoral space, the situation is more complex. These parties are pulling voters away, not just from the Coalition, but also from the ALP, suggesting the drivers of de-alignment are multidimensional. The major parties are therefore caught in a bind. They are losing their share of first preferences to minor parties, hence, their need to compete with them. But

they also require preferences from these parties—thus, they often need to find ways to cooperate. Australia’s institutional architecture, therefore, continues to produce pressure points that challenge the major parties and provide opportunities for the minor parties.

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