

Chasing the Youth Vote

Kevin07, Web 2.0 and the 2007 Australian Federal Election

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Introduction

The 2007 Australian federal election was the first in which the online campaign and Web 2.0 technologies moved into the mainstream. Though not the first election campaign where political parties had maintained an internet presence, it was the first in which Facebook friends of party leaders were compared in the mainstream press, the first where YouTube videos became election issues and the first where online interactions between parties and party supporters were reported as real and breaking news. Amongst all of the online campaigning, though, it was the Australian Labor Party (ALP) that was widely recognised as presenting the best and most effective online presence. With a site that embraced social networking tools, hosted online video, included regular blog posts from leading party figures and drew on user contributions for content, the ALP's Kevin07.com.au brought the election campaign to Australia's online community in a way that was without equal in this or any previous election. The site, widely held to be aimed at drawing young people to the ALP, was judged an unqualified success in the wake of the ALP's historic November win where the party secured a significant majority of the youth vote. The role of the Kevin07.com.au site in drawing young people to the ALP is, however, open to debate. Indeed, when one considers pre-election polling data, it becomes clear that young voters had established firm voting intentions long before the ALP's online campaign was launched.

This paper is presented in four parts. The first presents a review of the increasingly important role played by the online elements of an Australian federal election campaign. Tracing an eleven year, four election period from 1996 to 2007, this section traces the growing focus of political parties, the mainstream media and voters on the online presence of campaigning parties. The second part of this paper presents the ALP's Kevin07.com.au site, the centrepiece of the ALP's online campaign for young voters. The third part of this paper offers evidence that contradicts the notion that the online campaign of the ALP was effective in winning young voters to their cause. Specifically, by considering opinion poll data from 2005 until the election in November 2007 it is clear that while there was a significant rise in support for the ALP amongst young people, this rise occurred many months before the launch of the website and can be attributed to the party's change in leadership. A discussion section follows and the paper concludes by suggesting that – for a number of reasons – the 2007 election was an anomaly in terms of the impact of the internet on the voting intentions of Australian youth and that future campaigning online may well have a measureable and significant effect in drawing young people to a political party.

1996 to 2007: The Growing Significance of Campaign Websites in Australia

The Australian election campaign of the twenty-first century does, in some ways, still resemble the campaigns of the past. As Sally Young has argued, contrary to popular opinion there was never a “golden age of electioneering” where voters were targeted with densely worded factual tracts instead of the common fear-inducing advertising of today.¹ Indeed, campaign elements such as negative campaign commercials, comparing competitors with foreign dictators and the so-called ‘Presidential style campaign’ where a party leader becomes the focus of the campaign are nothing new at all in the Australian electoral experience.² Yet one difference that has emerged in recent years is the embrace by Australian political parties of new communication technologies, in particular internet technologies, through which they

¹ Sally Young. 2003. ‘A Century of Political Communication in Australia, 1901-2001.’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 78:97-110, p.109.

² Young. 2003, p.109.

can campaign for the votes of 13 million Australians enrolled to vote.³ As in other electoral jurisdictions worldwide, campaign websites have become essential elements of a modern electoral effort in Australia in the age of 24-hour cable news and enthusiastic bloggers and citizen journalists who demand immediate access to campaign material.

The first campaign websites in Australia emerged as a part of the 1996 federal election.⁴ Of the two major political parties in Australia, the ALP was most proactive in embracing the internet as a campaign tool. Reports Young:

The ALP's website received 11,000 hits a day during the 1996 campaign. By 1998, all ALP policies were being released on the Internet simultaneously with their release to the media and the ALP website was providing games and online chats with local MPs.⁵

Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward agree and point to the obvious enthusiasm for internet electioneering by the centre-left party in the mid 1990's, noting that in 1996 "the ALP had already begun to use audio and interactive features on their Website as well as offering extensive policy information and negative campaigning against the Liberals".⁶ Not only was the ALP website drawing interested voters to Labor policy statements and media releases, it was also playing a part in recruiting new members for the ALP.⁷ In a country where, according to commentator George Megalogenis, some 10 to 20% of Australians "don't care about politics", the ALP website was attracting five new financial members a day to the party proving a success not only in communicating policy but also driving activism.⁸

The 11,000 daily hits that the ALP received during the 1996 campaign would explode exponentially by the time the 1998 federal election took place. Gibson and Ward report that the ALP site "received over two million hits during the five-week campaign, a remarkable achievement given the eleven million voters in the country".⁹ Moving beyond merely being a source of media releases and maintaining opportunities for infrequent online chats with MPs, the 1998 federal election saw the ALP making a concerted effort to attract web-savvy voters to the cause of leader Kim Beazley. As Gibson and Ward note:

The site revealed a more concerted effort by the party to use the Internet to attract voters with multimedia games, downloadable banners and e-postcards, an interactive tax reckoner, video political commercials, an updated campaign diary, and Webcasting of key events such as the campaign launch in Brisbane (not available in the traditional media).¹⁰

Despite losing the election to the Liberal-National Coalition, the success of the ALP's internet strategy was hailed as a major breakthrough in electioneering in Australia. Bruce Hawker, a prominent Labor strategist, would remark that the

³ Peter Brent and Simon Jackman state the number of enrolled voters was 13,122,006 in 2006. See Peter Brent and Simon Jackman. 2007. *A shrinking Australian electoral roll?* Democratic Audit of Australia Discussion Paper 11/07, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, p.2.

⁴ Young. 2003, p.108.

⁵ Young. 2003, p.108.

⁶ Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward. 2002. 'Virtual Campaigning: Australian Parties and the Impact of the Internet.' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37(1): 99-129, pp.104-105.

⁷ Gibson and Ward. 2002, p.105.

⁸ George Megalogenis. 2008a. *Nats swamped by a demographic tide*. [11 March 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/3angnc>; Gibson and Ward. 2002, pp.104-105.

⁹ Gibson and Ward. 2002, p.105.

¹⁰ Gibson and Ward. 2002, p.105.

ALP's online effort had "changed the face of Australian political campaigning".¹¹ Hawker highlighted the points of difference that the website offered users as compared to mainstream campaigning, in particular the online streaming video that allowed 100,000 users to watch the ALP campaign launch live and exclusively in the absence of a live free-to-air television broadcast.¹²

By the time of the 2001 federal election both major parties had invested significant resources into their campaign websites recognising that the internet was allowing them to interact with interested voters. Specifically, though, the major parties recognised the opportunity that internet campaigning presented for targeting key electoral demographics, in particular, the young, internet-savvy voters who were beginning to shun old media. As Gibson and Ward argue, the youth vote was an explicit focus of both the ALP and Coalition election campaigns where a "multimedia format appears to be highly attractive to young people".¹³ Learning from experiences in the UK and the US, where young voters had been successfully targeted by Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore, the Australian parties "fiercely fought" an online war for the votes of young people.¹⁴ However, as Edgar Crook notes, "[t]hough there was much activity on the Internet it did not have a leading role in the election battle".¹⁵ Despite significant numbers of hits to party and campaign websites, the impact of the online campaign was hard to quantify and may have been, as Crook contends, the online campaign played a minor role in determining the eventual electoral outcome.¹⁶

The 2004 election saw a further sustained focus paid by the major parties to online campaigning. In 2006 Peter Chen, Rachel Gibson and Karin Geiselhart reported that the online campaigns of the major parties were proving successful in connecting the parties with "committed and active individuals".¹⁷ Australian voters who visited campaign websites were twice as likely to have a tertiary education (50% compared to 25%) and be almost twice as interested in the election outcome as the average voter (56% compared to 30%).¹⁸ Significantly, however, the individuals who visited party websites were also much more likely to already hold strong party identifications or, as Chen, Gibson and Geiselhart put it, "the parties are preaching to the converted, if not members specifically".¹⁹ Whatever the audience of the campaign websites, the online presence of Australian political parties became increasingly important for, as Edgar Crook writes:

...political parties, lobby groups and official bodies such as the Australian electoral Commission were now using the Internet as the only or primary source for information on policies, candidates and general voting information.²⁰

¹¹ Bruce Hawker. 1999. 'Australia 1998: Internet Campaigning Makes a Spectacular Debut.' *Netpulse* 3(14): <http://tinyurl.com/378el2>.

¹² Hawker. 1999.

¹³ Gibson and Ward. 2002, p.102.

¹⁴ On US experiences see Pippa Norris. 1999. *Who Surfs? New Technology, Old Voters and Virtual Democracy in the 1996 and 1998 US Elections*. Paper presented at the 'John F. Kennedy Visions of Governance for the Twenty First Century Conference', Bretton Woods, United States of America, 19-22 July 1999, pp.1-29; Gibson and Ward. 2002, p.102.

¹⁵ Edgar Crook. 2007. *The 2007 Australian Federal Election on the Internet*. National Library of Australia Staff Paper, Canberra, Australia, pp.1-17, p.1.

¹⁶ Crook. 2007, p.1.

¹⁷ Peter Chen, Rachel Gibson and Karin Geiselhart. 2006. *Electronic Democracy? The Impact of New Communications Technologies on Australian Democracy*. Democratic Audit of Australia Report No. 6, Canberra, Australia, p.24.

¹⁸ Chen, Gibson and Geiselhart. 2006, p.23.

¹⁹ Chen, Gibson and Geiselhart. 2006, p.24.

²⁰ Crook. 2007, p.1.

Thus, from 1996 where the ALP celebrated 11,000 daily hits to 2004 where the internet had become, for some parties, the only source for policy documents and party information, the internet has moved from being an ignorable election sideshow to a key part of every federal election campaign and this trend would continue in 2007.

Crook argues:

[i]t is clear now that the 2007 federal election can safely be adjudged as the first in which the Internet became not just the repository for information, but also a tool both to communicate policies with the public and to allow potential voters to in return interact in multiple ways with the parties and their candidates.²¹

The interaction between candidates, parties and voters led some commentators to label the 2007 federal poll the first Web 2.0 election. As candidates embraced technologies and web services such as blogs, YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and user-driven campaign content, the online campaigns of the major parties and major lobby groups became mainstream news. Writing in the country's only national newspaper, *The Australian*, Anne Parsons remarks on the success of the leftist lobby group GetUp.org.au in drawing their issues to the attention of politicians and voters via online petition drives and fundraising for issue advertisements.²² A stomach-turning YouTube video of the ALP Leader Kevin Rudd eating his own ear wax in the federal parliament was widely reported on television and in newspapers across the country and internationally, the *Herald-Sun* reporting that the video was replayed on Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* and linked on the influential *Drudge Report*.²³ The online and mainstream print media eagerly tracked the number of Facebook and MySpace friends that party leaders maintained and parties engaged online voters with exclusive, internet-only campaign events.²⁴ The Web 2.0 election had certainly arrived and it was the Australian Labor Party that led the political field in seeking votes through the engagement of Australia's online electorate.

The Kevin07 Online Campaign: Chasing the Youth Vote

Of the two major Australian political parties it was the ALP that garnered the most attention to its online campaign, so much so that the branding of the site and its URL quickly entered the Australian lexicon.²⁵ Whereas the campaign launches of the major parties in Australia tend to take place some weeks into the 'official' campaign period immediately before the election, the ALP's Kevin07.com.au site was launched months before the November 24th poll. Indeed, it was

²¹ Crook. 2007, p.2.

²² Anne Parsons. 2007. 'Political methods digitally enhanced.' *The Australian* (13 September 2007): 32.

²³ John Ferguson and Peter Jean. 2007. 'Rudd cops US earful.' *Herald-Sun* (1 November 2007): 5. Other coverage of the YouTube video includes Jonathan Porter. 2007. 'Why we should lend an ear to the Opposition Leader.' *The Australian* (29 October 2007): 15; Piers Akerman. 2007. 'Rudd over the wax and wane.' *Daily Telegraph* (30 October 2007): 18; Annabel Crabb. 2007. 'Suddenly squeaky clean Kevin is a bit on the nose.' *Sydney Morning Herald* (1 November 2007): 9; Ben Quinn. 2007. 'Waxing lyrical.' *Newcastle Herald* (17 November 2007): 38.

²⁴ See examples of 'friend tracking' in Lauren Parle. 2007. 'Web 2.0 pollies: no polls, just popularity.' *Crikey* (13 August 2007): <http://tinyurl.com/2rblvr>; DD McNicoll. 2007. 'Strewth: Too many friends to face.' *The Australian* (1 October 2007): 18. An example of an exclusive online campaign event is chronicled in Crook. 2007, p.4.

²⁵ See, for example, Mark Kenny. 2007. 'Now it's Kevin07 in race for Lodge.' *The Advertiser* (7 August 2007): 2. Note, too, that some post-election commentary now refers to PM Kevin Rudd as Kevin08. See Matthew Warren. 2007. 'Reality check for Rudd's climate change plans.' *The Australian* (26 November 2007): 40; Annabel Crabb. 2008. 'Get set for Kevin08, Australia – best you look busy.' *Sydney Morning Herald* (14 January 2008): 1; John Lethlean. 2008. 'Kevin gets a grilling – 72 hours eat, drink, cook...and be merry.' *The Age* (26 January 2008): 7.

launched before the election date was even announced.²⁶ The central website brought together all of the other online elements of the ALP campaign, with particular focus given to the Web 2.0 elements of both the ALP and Kevin Rudd's new technologies approach. The site not only offered a video channel (through YouTube) and links to popular social networking sites (MySpace and Facebook) but also a campaign blog which – in a move that remains atypical for major political parties – allowed the public to respond to blog posts with comments critical of the party.²⁷ Visitors to the site could also purchase branded merchandise, including bumper stickers and t-shirts, and sign up for 'K-Mail' which would allow the user to receive regular ALP campaign updates.

The launch of the central Kevin07.com.au site was met with great media interest and all major newspapers in Australia reported the launch of the web presence.²⁸ In almost all cases the MSM coverage was positive with reporters and columnists commonly comparing the ALP online strategy to a relatively non-existent Coalition strategy.²⁹ In the blogosphere, however, the reaction was more mixed. Left-leaning bloggers at *Larvatus Prodeo* (larvatusprodeo.net) welcomed the ALP's strategy:

Kevin07 does...what the Coalition isn't really doing – engaging with the (mostly young) users of social media. It's a cleverly designed one stop site for the Kevin07 presence on YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. And as Trevor Cook suggested, it's a first for Australian Politics 2.0 in actually allowing unfiltered comment on the Kevin07 blog – there's criticism there as well as Young Labor adulation. That's actually very clever.³⁰

Other left-leaning bloggers were less impressed – arleesher from group-blog *Stoush* reacted to receiving her first piece of K-Mail by posting, "despite my general love of pop culture hottness [sic], this actually makes me less likely to vote for Rudd".³¹ Elsewhere in the Australian blogosphere some concluded the newly launched site would be of great benefit to the ALP in the coming campaign, particularly in comparison to the relatively weak online campaigning of the Coalition parties. At *ElectionTracker* one commenter noted:

This effort to get in touch with young people through things such as www.kevin07.com.au may be seen as just playing YouTube politics to get votes. But hey at least he [Rudd] is trying to get in touch with young people! Howards [sic] been in government for 11 yrs and only when it looks like his government is going down does he attempt to get connected. But he has no idea and gives boring and out of touch speeches to young people via You Tube. That only continues young people's uninspired relationship with the [Coalition] government.³²

While some commentators saw the Kevin07.com.au campaign as too 'presidential' and too 'American', the online campaign was closely followed and widely reported upon during the long 2007 Federal campaign.

²⁶ The election date was announced by Prime Minister John Howard on 14 October 2007. The Kevin07 site was launched on 6 August 2007.

²⁷ See an example of a critical comment published on the Kevin07.com.au blog at Trevor Cook. 2007. 'Kevin07 publishes criticism.' *Trevor Cook* [11 January 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/2k8m96>.

²⁸ Mark Kenny. 2007. 'Now it's Kevin07 in race for Lodge.' *The Advertiser* (7 August 2007): 2; Sid Marris. 2007. 'ALP launches Kevin07.' *The Australian* (7 August 2007): 2; Alison Rehn. 2007. 'OO-Kevin: ALP taps a wired world.' *Daily Telegraph* (7 August 2007): 8; Ben Packham. 2007. 'Trick up sleeve.' *Herald-Sun* (7 August 2007): 2; Kirsty Ross. 2007. 'Ruddy complexion washes over web.' *MX* (7 August 2007): 8; Misha Schubert. 2007. 'New spin in politics web.' *The Age* (7 August 2007): 6; Ben Doherty. 2007. 'www.Kevin07.com.au: Rudd ups the ante on the cyberspace war.' *The Age* (8 August 2007): 8.

²⁹ Schubert. 2007, p.6.

³⁰ Mark Bahnisch. 2007. 'Kevin07.' *Larvatus Prodeo* [11 January 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/3blbmv>.

³¹ Arleesher. 2007. 'Kevin07 Rocks Da Youf Vote.' *Stoush* [11 January 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/37fm3h>.

³² Jason Virgo. 2007. 'KEVIN07?' *ElectionTracker* [11 January 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/2j6k7d>.

All commentators were in agreement, however, as to the electoral demographic that the ALP was targeting with the Kevin07.com.au strategy. The online push – and particularly its focus on social networking and user-generated content and commentary – was aimed at young voters and most MSM sources noted the deliberate push by Rudd and the ALP to attract the youth vote. *The Australian*, the country's only national daily newspaper, noted the obvious targets of the ALP's Web 2.0 strategy:

Labor has been courting the youth vote, upping the web war for votes by launching the Kevin07 site, where it explains its policies and provides a forum for debate. Drawing on the format of MySpace, Facebook and YouTube, the site encourages viewers to contribute their own videos, written and audio comments and to make links to their sites as part of the ALP campaign.³³

Melbourne's *Age* newspaper also noted how the site quite deliberately reached out to young people:

BEFORE Kevin Rudd even got up to make his first speech of the election campaign yesterday, the Kmails and text messages had gone out from Labor headquarters to Kevin's estimated 25,000 cybermates to remind young voters who weren't already enrolled to vote, to sign up. A digital clock was loaded onto the Kevin07 website to begin the countdown until 8pm Wednesday night when the electoral rolls close to those not already signed on.³⁴

Catherine Deveny, also writing in *The Age*, also focussed on the ALP's push for the youth vote via the Kevin07.com.au site. In a column shortly after the launch of the Web 2.0 effort she wrote, slightly tongue in cheek:

When I first heard about Kevin07, I thought it was something cooked up by the boys from The Chaser. "The Name's Rudd. Kevin Rudd. Agent 07." But log on to kevin07.com and you'll find that Kevin Rudd is so down with the youth, he's practically an Emo. It's all YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. You can even sign up to KMAIL.³⁵

A specific link between Web 2.0 technologies, the youth demographic and the ALP campaign was made by Jane Bunce who noted that "Kevin Rudd's pitch to the YouTube generation" was "paying off".³⁶ Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* went so far as to profile one of the young people that the ALP's online campaign had successfully targeted, noting that the online strategy of the party was "unashamedly coveting" the support of "2 million voters aged between 18 and 30".³⁷ With ALP policies targeted specifically at winning over the youth vote and age-specific advertising released as part of the Kevin07.com.au campaign, it appears likely that the Web 2.0 campaign had, at its heart, the aim of winning the young voters to the ALP cause.³⁸

The Youth Vote at the 2007 Australian Federal Election

Historically, younger voters in Australia are significantly more likely to vote for the ALP or one of the other left-leaning parties. Research conducted as part of the Australian Democrats 2007 Youth Poll suggest that left-leaning parties such

³³ Patricia Karvelas. 2007. 'Labor urges young to register.' *The Australian* (28 August 2007): 7.

³⁴ Annabel Stafford. 2007. 'Fresh from the announcement, Labor sniffs for Rudd-rats.' *The Age* (15 October 2007): 6.

³⁵ Catherine Deveny. 2007. 'Only one party's in the game for attention in cyberspace.' *The Age* (15 August 2007): 15.

³⁶ Jane Bunce. 2007. 'Screaming teenagers mob Rock Star Rudd.' *AAP News Australia* (24 October 2007): 1.

³⁷ Patrick Lion. 2007. 'Politics explores new frontiers to win youth vote.' *Courier-Mail* (3 November 2007): 56.

³⁸ An example of advertising targeted specifically at young voter is the ALP's 'A Brighter Future for Young Australians'. See Young Labor. 2007. *A Brighter Future for Young Australians* [13 March 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/3927jf>.

as the ALP, the Democrats and the Greens were favoured by 58% of young people while only 23% favoured right-leaning parties such as the Liberals, the Nationals and Family First.³⁹ Of the individual parties, support amongst young people for the ALP outstrips support for the Liberal-National Coalition by more than 2 to 1 (see Figure 1, below).⁴⁰

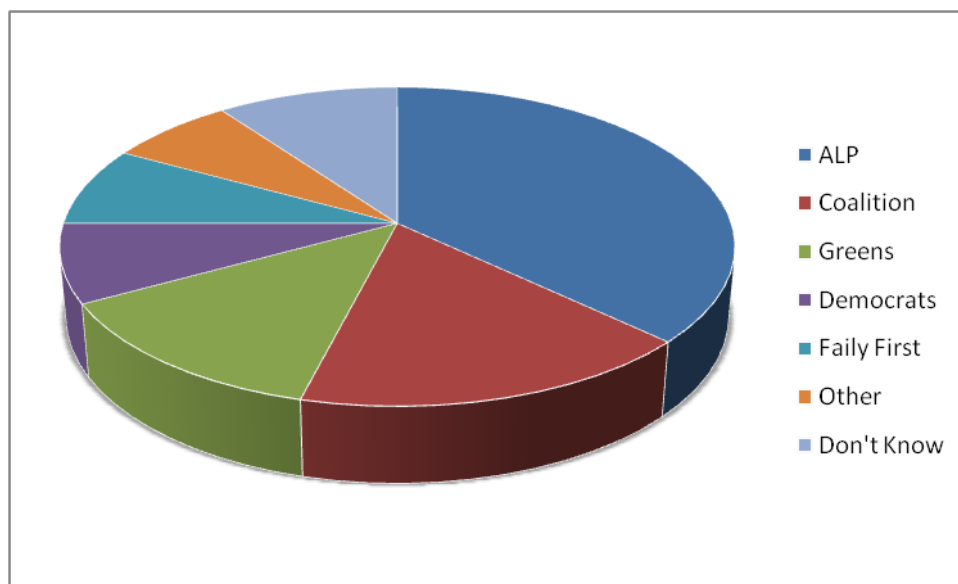


Figure 1: Party Support Amongst Young People (2007)⁴¹

Pre-election polling suggested that this disparity was even greater in 2007 with one public poll concluding that 73% of voters under the age of 29 intended to vote for the ALP, a result that was “staggering” in its implications according to one commentator.⁴² This massive swing in support amongst youth to the ALP – far outweighing even the historic trend amongst young people to favour the political left – has been attributed to many factors including the ALP branding of the campaign, an impression that the time had come to replace a Prime Minister approaching 70 years of age with a younger person or simply a slightly exaggerated facsimile of the national swing in support to the ALP after more than a decade of Coalition government. One factor it should *not* be attributed to, however, is the ALP’s high profile Web 2.0 campaign. Kevin07.com.au may have gained the party headlines but it did nothing to draw younger voters to the party on the 24th of November 2007.

Tracking Youth Voting Intentions, 2004-2007

A clear change in the voting intentions of young people can be seen when voting intentions are tracked via public polling results. As shown in Figure 2 (overleaf), however, this spike in support for the ALP occurred some 8 months before the ALP launched its Web 2.0 campaign and, further, the launch of the Kevin07.com.au site did nothing to encourage any more young voters to pledge support to the ALP or its leader.

³⁹ Natasha Stott-Despoja. 2007. *Federal Election Youth Poll Results* [13 March 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/2txd29>, p.2.

⁴⁰ Stott-Despoja. 2007, p.2.

⁴¹ Data for this chart extracted from Stott-Despoja. 2007, p.2.

⁴² Tony Jones. 2007. *Poll shows youth vote critical in election*. [13 March 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/38lpp5>.

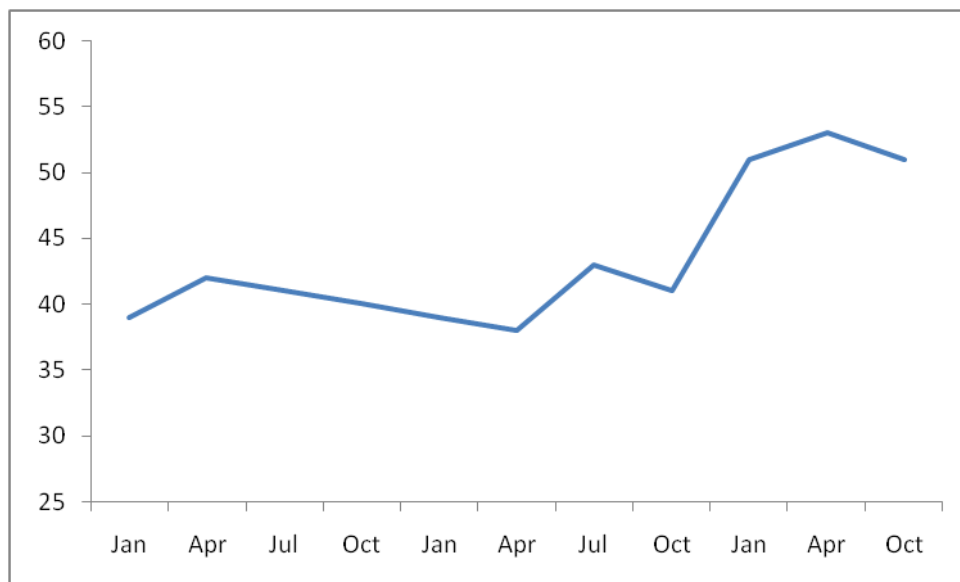


Figure 2: Proportion of Voters Aged 18-34 Years Favouring ALP (Jan 2005 – Oct 2007)⁴³

The jump in support for the ALP between the October 2006 quarter and the January 2007 quarter can be attributed to the ALP's decision on the 4th of December 2006 to replace leader Kim Beazley with Kevin Rudd. This conclusion is supported when the same January 2005 – October 2007 period is considered for another Newspoll question as to a voters preferred Prime Minister (Figure 3, below).

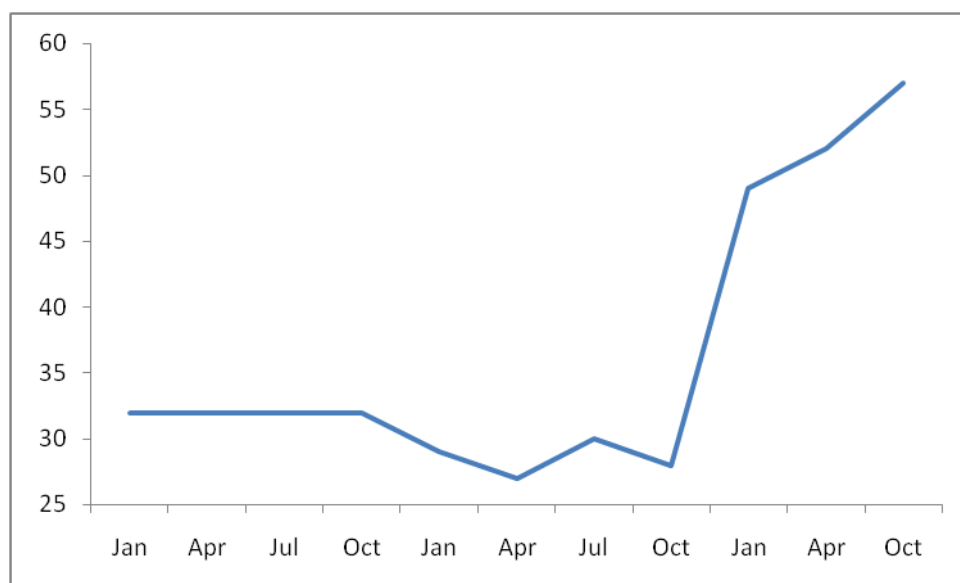


Figure 3: Proportion of Voters Aged 18-34 Years Preferring an ALP Prime Minister

Quite clearly, the proportion of young voters who intended to vote for the ALP rose immediately as a result of Kevin Rudd's accession to the Labor Party leadership. Indeed, young voters reported that their preference for the ALP leader as PM rose from an average of 28.3% across the last three quarters of 2006 under Beazley to an average of 52.6% across the first three quarters of 2007 under Rudd.

⁴³ Data for Figures 2, 3 and 4 is extracted from public opinion polling conducted by Newspoll and available at www.newspoll.com.au.

Significantly, though, the level of youth support that flowed to the ALP as a result of the leadership change was maintained in the 11 months until the election. As depicted in Figure 4 (below), the support for the ALP by young people remained around the 50% mark from January 2007 until November 2007, barely fluctuating with the launch of the Kevin07.com.au website in August.

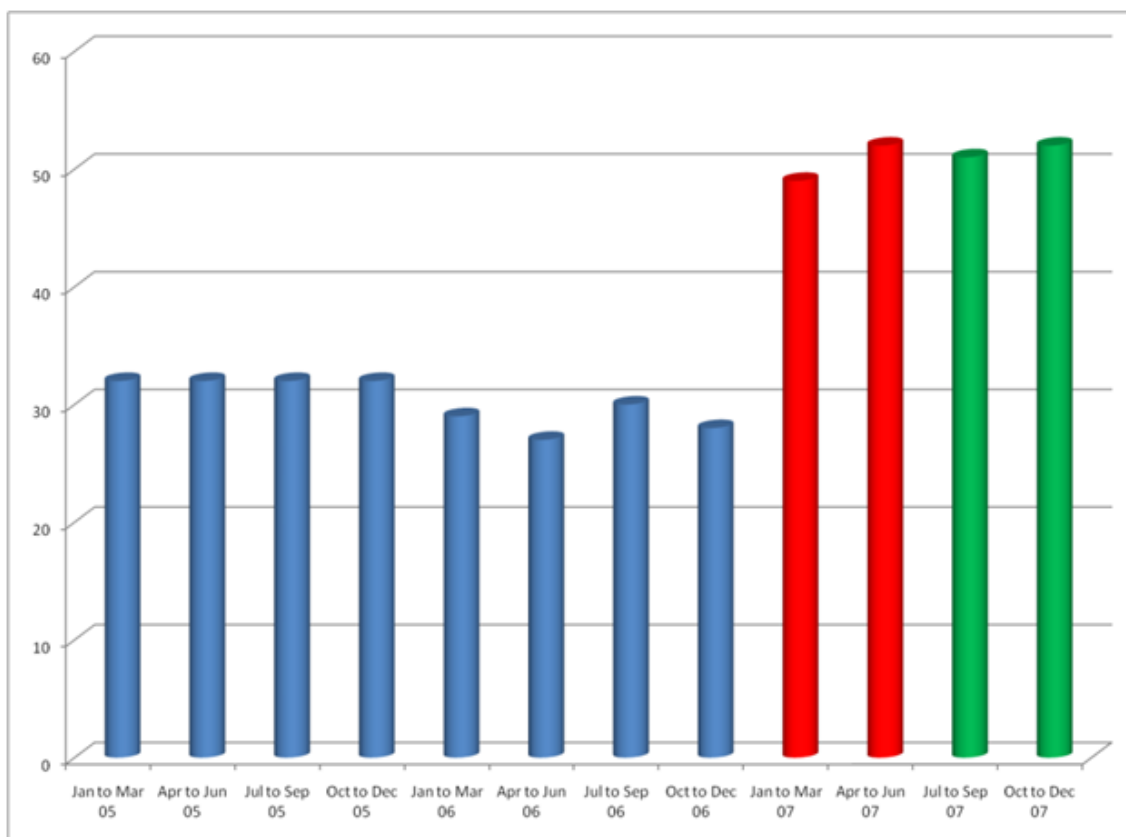


Figure 4: Prefer ALP Prime Minister 18-34 Year Olds, 2005-2007

(Blue bars indicate Beazley leadership, red bars Rudd leadership and green bars periods in which the Kevin07 campaign was active)

As is clearly shown, neither the 'Presidential style' focus of the ALP campaign on leader Kevin Rudd and the branding of the Web 2.0 campaign at Kevin07.com.au had any significant effect on the electoral preferences of young voters. Indeed, Figure 4 suggests that the most effective electoral strategy employed by the ALP in attracting young voters was the replacement of one leader with another.

Discussion

Such conclusions stand somewhat in opposition to other research into the efficacy of campaign websites in attracting support and converting voters to the campaigns cause. As Rachel Gibson, Ian McAllister, Clive Bean and David Gow argued in a paper on cyber-campaigning in Australia, the impact of the internet on the public is usually more significant:

Our results reveal strong support for the proposition that a web campaign is an integral part of securing victory in an election. Net of a wide variety of other factors, including incumbency, party affiliation and political experience and support, the use of a web page delivers just under 4 percent of the House of Representatives first preference vote. This is more than all of the traditional methods of campaigning combined, and is only slightly less than incumbency, usually considered one of the major electoral influences. The web is, then, a major vote

attractor for candidates and has the potential in closely fought contests to determine the election outcome.⁴⁴

Far from an integral part of securing the youth vote, the Kevin07.com.au Web 2.0 campaign had no significant effect on drawing young voters to the ALP.

It seems possible that the particular circumstances of the 2007 Federal election played some part in the impotence of the ALP's online campaign for youth votes. With the ruling Liberal-National Coalition having held power for more than a decade and with Prime Minister Howard having held his position for all of that time, there was a generation of voters born after 1978 that has never known an election as a voter where Howard and the Coalition did not win.⁴⁵ As a result, some commentators speculate that the young voters of Australia were simply ready for a change. George Megalogenis, writing in *The Australian*, noted that a month before the election the swing of youth voters to the ALP was "paradoxical":

The group that has swung most decisively to Kevin Rudd are the 18-24 year olds...The [Coalition] Government's primary vote was up 5.4 per cent on the 2004 election. Against [former ALP leader Kim] Beazley, John Howard was seen as groovy. No wonder the Prime Minister thought he had a fifth victory in him. Then Labor changed leaders last December, and the country went to Kevin. By the end of June this year, Rudd was pulling a gen Y swing of 19.4 per cent, leaving Labor 14 per cent ahead of where it had been with this tribe at the 2004 election. It is the youth belt where the paradox of Howard's near-full employment economy is most apparent. The 18-24s have never known recession.⁴⁶

The paradox – being that young people who had never known a recession, had every likelihood of gaining employment in their field without problems, be more highly educated and earn more in real terms than any other generation yet choose to endorse an untested leader for his new and fresh leader – was noted by other commentators, too. Just two weeks before the election Dennis Shanahan noted polling that suggested that 51% of Australians considered the Coalition better economic managers (compared to 32% for the ALP), 84% of Australians considered John Howard a strong leader and that the Coalition leader outpaced the ALP challenger almost two to one in terms of experience – and yet still favoured the accepted weaker economic managers and less strong and experienced Opposition over the incumbent.⁴⁷ With economic management historically one of the most significance factors in deciding the vote of the Australian electorate, the paradox Megalogenis and Shanahan point to might suggest that this election was an anomaly as far as the youth of the country are concerned.

As well, it might also be the case that the young voters who clicked their way to the Kevin07.com.au site were likely already committed ALP voters. Besides the fact that more than half of young voters had committed to the ALP before the launch of the website in August 2007, previous research into online campaigning in Australia has suggested that it is active and already committed voters that are most likely to access campaign websites of their favoured parties.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Rachel Gibson, Ian McAllister, Clive Bean and David Gow. 2005. *Does Cyber Campaigning Win Votes? Online Communication in the 2004 Australian Election*. Center for the Study of Democracy Paper 05-09, UC Irvine, United States of America, p.14.

⁴⁵ Voting in Federal elections is obligatory for all Australians aged over 18.

⁴⁶ George Megalogenis. 2008b. *Gen Y registers Kevin's really on a roll*. [19 March 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/2uoj4x>.

⁴⁷ Dennis Shanahan. 2008. *Howard's economic approval rating rising*. [19 March 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/2oyqj7>.

⁴⁸ Chen et al. 2006.

Considering that one of the most reported Web 2.0 elements of the 2007 campaign was a non-campaign YouTube video of ALP leader Kevin Rudd eating his own ear wax – garnering more than 900,000 views or approximately 1 view for every 15 enrolled voters – there is scope to suspect that the Web 2.0 campaign did little to influence the electoral preferences of young Australian voters. Essentially, the popularity of the ALP site may have been the result of the young people who switched allegiances to the ALP in early 2007 rather than the site drawing young voters to the ALP via an interactive Web 2.0 approach.

Conclusion

The 2007 Federal election campaign was the first truly internet era campaign and, as well, the first online campaign where Web 2.0 technologies were an integral part of the campaign. The ALP site Kevin07.com.au was by far the leading campaign site in the 2007 election cycle drawing more attention, more media reports, more hits and its URL quickly entering the wider Australian lexicon. Aimed at drawing young voters to the ALP, the site was lauded in the mainstream press and by the Australian online community as a new and welcome element in modern Australian electoral battles. In the final analysis, the youth of Australia did swing to the ALP in massive numbers and the Labor Party gathered in excess of 70% of the two-party preferred vote amongst 18-29 year old voters. Yet as polling data suggests, the launch and success of the Kevin07.com.au campaign had nothing to do with this historic support. Instead, the young people of Australia had established their preference for a revitalised ALP under the new leadership of Kevin Rudd as early as January 2007, seven months before the website was launched and 10 months before the election date was announced.

This paper has suggested that the reason that the Kevin07.com.au campaign website played no part in drawing youth support to the ALP in the manner it would be expected to (based on previous federal polls) is related to the specific circumstances of the 2007 election. A government that was incumbent for more than a decade, a Prime Minister that was perceived as too old and too conservative for a younger generation all a large group of voters who – being born after 1978 – had never known an election as a voter where the Coalition had not triumphed all contributed to a feeling of 'it's time' among young people who voted the government out in spite of, not because of, the Web 2.0 efforts of the Australian Labor Party. For all the millions of dollars that the ALP spent on online advertising, managing the Kevin07.com.au site, promoting the Kevin07 brand and reaching out to young voters, the single most important step that the ALP took to securing the votes of young people was dumping the experienced but unpopular Kim Beazley in favour of the younger, less-experienced, morning TV regular Kevin Rudd. Kevin Rudd may have captured more youth votes than any Opposition Leader in a generation at the November poll but the vote that delivered them took place nearly twelve months before behind closed doors in the ALP party room.

Appendix A: Screenshots of the Kevin07.com.au site

Home Why Labor? Fresh Ideas Your Team Blog News Your Say Get Involved Search Go

Welcome to KEVIN07

Fresh ideas for Australia's future.

Stay in Touch

Have Your Say
KEVIN 07
We want to hear your thoughts.

Become a part of the K07 community. Here at KEVIN07, we're doing things differently.

We want to hear from you - your ideas, hopes and concerns. [Have your say](#). Or comment on [the K07 Blog](#).

GET ON BOARD WITH KEVIN07. Get a t-shirt, send us your photo or make your own video. Tell us why Kevin should win in 07.

The best ones will appear on this website.

» [To upload your video, use YouTube.](#)

The hot topics...

- Education Revolution
- Job Security
- Economic Prosperity
- Climate Change
- Iraq

Sign up for KMAIL

Email

Postcode Go

DONATE

URGENT Enrol Now

Tell your friends about this site!

Buy K07 gear

Sign a petition

Do your bit online

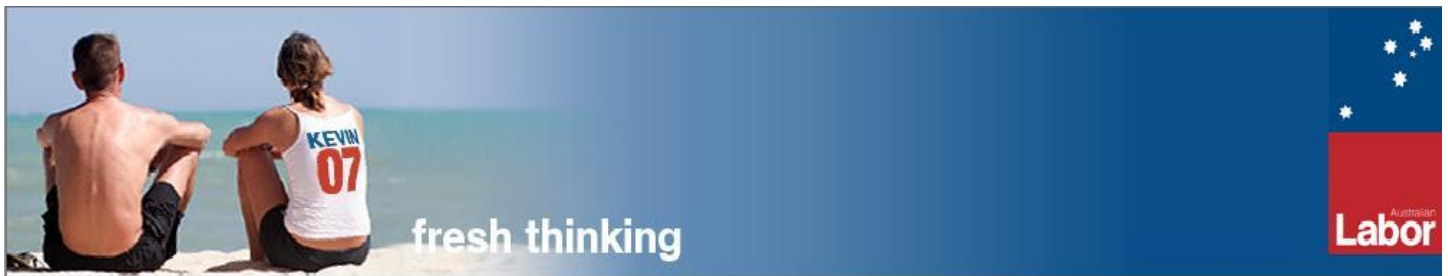
You Tube

myspace

facebook

8763
Interest rate rises a bit much?

Homepage of Kevin07.com.au on 7 August 2007 (launch of site)
(<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/75521/20070807-1702/www.kevin07.com/>)



Blog



Sign up for KMAIL

08
Oct

Not just the 'baby blues' – changing the politics of postnatal depression

Published by [The KEVIN07 Team](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

Each year in Australia, around 75,000 new and expectant mothers experience depression related to pregnancy and the enormous changes and challenges associated with parenting a newborn.

It's estimated that about 26,000 women each year, or one in 10 Australian mothers, experience depression in the lead up to the birth of their baby. That figure doubles after a baby is born, with around one in five women experiencing postnatal depression in the weeks and months after the birth, according to research by the national depression initiative [beyondblue](#).

> [Click here to read more and post your comment](#)

DONATE

URGENT Enrol Now

Tell your friends about this site!

Buy K07 gear

Sign a petition

Do your bit online

You Tube

facebook



05
Oct

Speaking out, and a timely message or two from YouTube

Published by [The KEVIN07 Team](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#)

The state of our health and hospital system was under the spotlight this week, as Kevin Rudd undertook his frontline visit to hospitals around the country.

We've known from the beginning that fixing our health system and investing in proper healthcare for Australians everywhere is key. And we've heard from you all along how important it is to get the health system in good shape for our future. So when we announced Kevin Rudd and Labor's [\\$2 billion National Health Reform Plan](#), it quickly became one of the top-commented blogs on the KEVIN07 site.

> [Click here to read more and post your comment](#)

04
Oct

Guest blog: Not just more underwear from Kmart, up close and personal with autism

Published by [The KEVIN07 Team](#) | [Comments \(11\)](#)

It took a week to stop bawling my eyes out when breaking the news to people my son had been diagnosed with autism.

All I knew of autism before a doctor mentioned it as a possible explanation of my son's speech delay was from the movie

Blog tab of Kevin07.com.au on 8 October 2007

(<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/75521/20071008-1208/www.kevin07.com.au/myblog/index.html>)



The image shows the homepage of the Kevin07 Labor campaign website as of November 24, 2007. The page features a dark blue header with the 'KEVIN07 Labor' logo and the Australian flag. A navigation menu includes links for Home, Why Labor?, Fresh Ideas, Your Team, Blog, News, Your Say, and Get Involved. A search bar is located in the top right corner. The main content area is divided into several sections: a 'Welcome to KEVIN07' banner, a 'Fresh Ideas' section with a large blue placeholder, a 'Why vote Labor today?' section featuring a video player and a list of six reasons, and a 'The hot topics...' section with five thumbnail images. On the right side, there is a 'Sign up for KMAIL' form, a 'DONATE' button, and social media links for YouTube, Myspace, and Facebook. A small photo of Kevin Rudd is visible at the bottom right.

Homepage of Kevin07.com.au on 24 November 2007 (election day)

(<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/75521/20071124-0655/www.kevin07.com.au/index.html>)