

# Robo-call usage by Australian political parties: the case of the “Spooky vote-hunting robot”

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## **Abstract**

While internationally, pre-recorded telephone messages, often referred to as robo-calls, have been used for some time, their use during Australian election campaigns goes back less than a decade. This article tracks the emergence of robo-calls and a complementary technology known as telephone ‘town-halling’ in Australia. It explores the way Australian parties are using telephonic technology as part of their election campaigns and compares this use to the experience in the United States and Canada. While these countries have seen a push for increased robo-call and telephonic regulation as a result of a number of controversies, this article argues that any regulatory changes in Australia should reflect the different way the technology is being used here. In particular, the evidence shows that it is the telephone ‘town-hall’ technology which is set to grow most significantly and regulatory changes need to reflect the distinction between the two forms of telephonic political campaigning.

**Keywords:** Australia, Political Parties, Elections, Democracy

## **Introduction**

Since 2004, Australian political parties have increasingly broadcast pre-recorded political messages via land line telephone in the lead up to and during election campaigns. This technology, commonly referred to as ‘robo-calling’<sup>1</sup> is now a standard part of the Australian election cycle at both the state and federal level.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a related technology, known as telephone ‘town-halling’ has emerged since 2011 in Australia as an important conduit between political leaders and their rank and file party members as well as with registered voters. The ‘town-halling’ technology, which has only existed internationally since 2005, allows a live broadcast from a political leader to thousands of participants, and allows these listeners to actively participate in the call during a set question time (Om 2013b).<sup>3</sup> While robo-calling and ‘town-halling’ has received some coverage in the Australian mainstream media (see AM 2004; Liddy 2004; ABC 2007; Bolt 2010; Carter 2010 as examples), much of this has been driven by complaints from annoyed citizens, rather than any analysis of the technology. In contrast, telephonic campaigning has evaded analysis of any kind in the Australian academic literature.

This paper will therefore be the first of its kind in Australia to examine the rise of telephonic campaigning techniques in the Australian electoral cycle and seeks to answer three inter-related but important research questions. First, how are Australian political parties using the technology as part of their campaigns? Second, what does growing use of telephonic technology tell us about Australian democracy and the way parties are campaigning? Third, should regulation be altered to reflect the increased use of this technology? To better understand and contextualise use of the technology in Australia, this paper will employ a comparative case study component. Arguably, it is North America where the technology has been embraced most fully. This includes the telephone ‘town-hall’ technology. Therefore, this article will compare use of the technology in the US and Canada to the Australian case. Not only does this provide a useful comparison so that developments in Australia can be better theorised, but Australia has a history of mimicking campaign techniques used

internationally, in particular, those from the US (Mills 1986; Errington and Miragliotta 2011, p.102). While the limited coverage of this issue by both Australian academia and the media limits the findings of this paper somewhat, many of the knowledge gaps have been filled by conducting semi-structured interviews with party officials from the major parties, two of which have been cited in this paper.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while academic consideration has been thus far limited, beginning a discussion on the technology is vital considering use has deepened and widened significantly in the last five years. To add to this debate, a typology of automated telephonic campaigning techniques has also been included (see Table 1). This will not only highlight the differences between the two types of telephonic campaigning and the type of political participation each technology produces, but any similarities and differences in the way Australian parties have used the technology compared to the US and Canada will be identifiable.

Political communication not only reflects the rules of the game (electoral laws, voting systems, party systems), but it also reflects the culture and political climate of the nation. The central goal of most political communication is persuasion.<sup>5</sup> The changing nature of political parties and the professionalisation of their campaigning techniques have been written about extensively in the last thirty years and one part of this detailed literature deals specifically with stages or eras of political campaigning (see Farrell and Webb 2002; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999 as examples). While there are some minor differences between scholars over what constitutes each stage, general agreement exists that the current stage is considered to be dominated by the proliferation of communications technology. According to Farrell and Webb (2002, p.5), in this period, ‘greater weight is attached to more direct modes of communication’. The two variations of telephonic technology explored in this paper, arguably, contrast in the level of ‘directness’ Farrell and Webb (2002, p.5) were alluding to. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the changing nature of political parties and the media as an industry, “voters are seen more as consumers than loyal partisans, to be wooed with sophisticated advertising rather than serious political education” (Gibson and Rommele, 2001, p.32). Moreover, as Street has noted, politics and political communication has been ‘packaged’ just as much as other forms of communication within industrialised societies. “Packaging also suggests that nothing is left to chance; everything is controlled” (2011, p.237). In what follows, the evidence suggests that parties not only employ ‘packaging’ but with the robo-call technology, use it to control key messages not dissimilar to a commercial entity. However, the ‘town-hall’ technology diverges somewhat from this. It is to the use of the technology in the US and Canada that this paper will first turn with the analysis of the Australian case to follow.

### **Use in the United States and Canada**

In the US, while call centres have played a prominent role in politics since the 1940s, robo-calls or automated phone messages started to become a popular way to reach voters around the time of the 1996 Presidential election (Stephey 2008; Dale 2008). Since this time, technological advances have greatly reduced the costs of the calls. According to Green and Gerber, in 2008, the cost to reach 100,000 US households was around US \$0.05 per call and US \$5000 in total (2008, p.66). It is therefore unsurprising that robo-calls have become an integral part of the campaigns ran by Democrats and Republicans alike. In discussing the use of robo-calls in the United States (US), Green and Gerber (2008, pp.65-66) note that:

The recorded message may be provided directly by the candidate, by a member of the candidate’s family or a prominent local or national figure endorsing the candidate...The advantages of robo-calling are that the calls are consistent in quality, relatively inexpensive, and easy to produce on short notice. They are designed as much for

answering machines as for live respondents. Those who tout their virtues frequently recount anecdotes of voters who come home from work only to discover a memorable message on their answering machine from Bill Clinton, Barbara Bush or LL Cool J.

Evidence from the Pew Research Centre suggests that up to two-thirds of American households in battleground states had received robo-calls in the lead up to the mid-term elections of 2006 and 2010 (Pew Research Centre 2010, p.20; Stephey 2008). While during the 2012 US Presidential election campaign, research from Pew suggested that 60 per cent of households in battleground states had received a robo-call and 42 per cent had received robo-calls nationwide (2012, p.5). The technology, which is also widely used by Political Action Committees (PAC's), has been at the centre of a number of controversies in the US. For instance, during the 2000 South Carolina Republican primary, robo-calls were used which questioned the race of John McCain's children and whether his wife had a drug addiction (Gooding 2004; ABC News 2008).<sup>6</sup> While during the 2008 Presidential campaign, as John McCain was behind in the polls, the Republican campaign used the following message to attack Barack Obama:

Hello. I'm calling for John McCain and the RNC because you need to know that Barack Obama has worked closely with domestic terrorist Bill Ayers, whose organization bombed the U.S. capitol, the Pentagon, a judge's home and killed Americans. And Democrats will enact an extreme leftist agenda if they take control of Washington. Barack Obama and his Democratic allies lack the judgment to lead our country. This call was paid for by McCain-Palin 2008 and the Republican National Committee at 202-863-8500 (Politico 2008; Stein 2008; Healey and Becker 2008).

In state elections, the viciousness of some robo-call campaigns has, arguably, been even higher. For instance, in 2006 in Missouri it was reported that robo-calls were repeatedly used warning voters to bring identification to the polls or they would be arrested (Common Cause 2008, p.3; Miller 2009). There was also evidence which suggested that 'registered voters in Virginia, Colorado and New Mexico reported receiving phone calls in the days before the election claiming that their registrations had been cancelled and that if they tried to vote they would be arrested' (Common Cause 2008, p.3). Moreover, according to one report, some Californians were receiving up to ten robo-calls per day during the 2006 mid-term elections (cited in Dale 2008).

Increasing frustration about the use of the automated messages has led to a number of calls for increased regulation at the state and federal level, and to the formation of organisations such as StopPoliticalCalls.org which claims to have over 500,000 members. At the federal level, the Do Not Call Registry was established in 2003 to prevent unwanted telemarketing and cold-calling with Congress giving the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) the power to enforce the registry. Under the Act, all robo-calls must identify who is initiating the calls and provide either a telephone number or address so that the organisation calling can be reached (Welsbaum 2012). At the state level, at least a dozen states have introduced legislation which goes beyond that of their federal counterparts. For example, Californian and New Hampshire state legislation currently holds political robo-calls to the same standards as commercial entities. This means that for political robo-calls to be legal, they have to be introduced by a live person, or the person receiving the call must have an existing relationship with the organisation (Lamb 2012; Renaud and Zehr 2011).

In contrast to the US, use of the technology in Canada had been relatively free of controversy until recently. While it is difficult to ascertain exactly when the technology started to emerge in Canada, as far back as 2003 Marland noted that while robo-call

technology was being used, ‘the technology is applied almost exclusively for internal party purposes’ (2003, p.21). However, Marland also noted that even then that there were ‘some indications of deceitful calls using this technology’ (2003, p.22). One example of this was a claim that an auto-dialler in an abandoned factory had ‘circulated messages with the impostored voice of former Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, endorsing the local PC candidate as one of the boys’ (Marland 2003, p.22).<sup>7</sup> Less than a decade later, the technology was central to one of the most controversial elections in Canadian history. In February 2012 it was revealed that Elections Canada, the independent monitor and regulator of elections, were investigating the use of robo-call technology in the weeks leading up to the May 2011 election. According to Kessler and Cornwall (2013, p.1), the probe was specifically designed to identify those responsible for the robo-calls used to ‘discourage voting for a particular party’. As in the days leading up to the election, robo-calls were used falsely claiming that the call was from Elections Canada and that polling locations had changed.

Since the investigation began, the Canadian Elections Commissioner has received over 1400 official complaints in 247 electoral districts and some evidence suggests that voter turnout was affected by the use of robo-calls (Kessler and Cornwall 2013, p.21).<sup>8</sup> On 26 March 2013, the Chief Electoral Officer presented a report to the House of Commons and in 2014 a second report will be released (Elections Canada 2013, p.7). Since the revelations came to light, one person has been arrested and is due to face trial in June 2014 charged with ‘wilfully preventing or trying to prevent an elector from voting’ (Hume 2013; Raj 2013). However, while Canada’s Chief Electoral Officer indicated that more people may be charged, they also argued that they require much tougher laws ‘to compel witnesses to speak and gather physical evidence, and stiffer penalties to deter election fraud’ (cited in Raj 2013; also see Elections Canada 2013, p.17). None of the current privacy legislation in Canada deals with political parties and while Canada does have a National Do Not Call List, Canadian political parties are exempt from this, similar to the situation in the US and Australia (Elections Canada 2013 pp.18, 21).<sup>9</sup> While the Canadian government initially offered support for changes, they are yet to table the changes to electoral law they have promised for some time (Raj 2013).

In contrast to the controversy surrounding the use of robo-calls, the use of telephone ‘town-hall’ technology in the US and Canada has remained controversy free. The evidence suggests that it is in the US where the technology has been employed most extensively. Examples of this use include Mitt Romney using the technology during the 2012 presidential campaign and Barack Obama discussing health care reforms with a reported 100,000 members of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) (Itkowitz 2012; Koffler 2009). While in Canada, the evidence suggests that the telephone ‘town-hall’ technology has only been embraced since around 2010. Examples of this include controversial Toronto mayor Rob Ford, Liberal Party leader, Justin Trudeau, and Liberal Party MP for British Columbia, Joyce Murray (Taber 2013; Gombu 2010). The evidence suggests that use of this technology has expanded greatly in recent years and the limited data collected on the telephone ‘town-halls’ indicate they have been successful (Gombu 2010; Smithson 2012).

### **Robo-calls in Australia**

As mentioned, Australian political parties regularly copy US campaign tactics (see Errington and Miragliotta 2011, p.102; Mills 1986). However, they were relatively slow or reluctant to adopt robo-calling. The first use of automated message calling occurred during the 2004 election campaign when then Prime Minister, John Howard, made a series of recordings that were auto dialled and delivered to voters in a number of marginal seats (AM 2004). The recording made for the marginal Queensland seat of Bowman was an endorsement of the

sitting Member of Parliament (MP) Andrew Laming. John Howard's 2004 endorsement message was as follows (AM 2004):

Hello, this is John Howard. I've taken the unusual step of contacting you with this recorded message to support your local Liberal candidate in Bowman, Andrew Laming. As part of my federal Liberal team, Andrew Laming will immediately start work on his detailed plan for your seat of Bowman. I know Andrew Laming and I know he will get things done for Bowman. This is John Howard on behalf of Andrew Laming. Thank you for your time.

While this first series of robo-calls gained some attention from the mainstream media, they also generated criticism from the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Labor MP, Wayne Swan, a previous QLD Campaign Director of the party, labelled the automated process 'a spooky vote-hunting robot' (AM 2004). Swan also contended that while the ALP had known about the technology for some time, they had not and would not consider using the technology. This resistance did not, however, last long. By the time the 2007 federal election drew near, both the ALP and the Coalition were using robo-calls to augment their campaign communications. Indeed from this point on the use of robo-calls became widely used by both major parties during state and federal elections. During the 2007 federal campaign, this growth was evident as the ALP used recorded messages from candidates with perceived celebrity status. This included former television presenter, Maxine McKew, and former lead singer of Midnight Oil, Peter Garrett, who both delivered targeted policy messages relating to climate change to electorates across the country (AM 2007; Party Official A 2013).

During the 2010 Tasmanian state election campaign, the ALP used robo-calls from a Hobart mother of two identifying herself as Glenys Lindner. The automated message, which incorrectly claimed that the Greens supported legalising Heroin and giving inmates serving lengthy jail sentences the right to vote, was heavily criticised including within the party (Milne 2010; Carter 2010). Much of this criticism centred on a nine-year old child in the small town of Spreyton south of Devonport. After the child picked up the phone and listened to one of the automated messages, she asked her mother 'What's heroin mum?' (cited in Ford 2010, p.6). As criticism of the strategy widened, Labor premier, David Bartlett, declared that the campaign tactic had been terminated (Carter 2010). However, it was revealed that prior to this termination, that the party had also intended to target another 20,000 homes with calls with an anti-Liberal Party message (Neales 2010, pp.1-2). In the view of a number of prominent political figures, the campaign had backfired (Neales 2010, pp.1-2; Ford 2010, p.6).

During the 2010 the federal election campaign, the evidence suggests that the ALP again attempted to use a negative message to influence voters.<sup>10</sup> Conservative commentator Andrew Bolt's blog describes a call from "John" on the Friday immediately before the election. The blog claimed that the call suggested that if Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, was elected he would bring back WorkChoices, the Coalition's deeply controversial industrial relations legislation (Bolt 2010). While Tony Abbott and the Liberal Party denied that the policy would be re-introduced, the calls augmented printed material and media statements by the ALP during the campaign and Party Official A confirmed a call similar to the one described on the blog had been used by the party (Party Official A 2013; Atkins 2010).

Robo-call usage also extended beyond political parties. It was revealed that the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) used robo-calls to campaign against the federal government's Mineral Resources Rent Tax (MRRT). According to Wilshaw (2010),

the calls were set to be made to around 900,000 voters in fifty marginal seats around Australia. The recording included the following message:

Here's a 30-second message about the biggest threat to Australia's economy since the global financial crisis. It's industries like mining that keep Australia strong by paying taxes and creating jobs. But Labor's excessive extra tax on mining will make Australia uncompetitive because it will cut investment, hurt business and cost jobs (Wilshaw 2013).

By 2013, even Australia's minor parties were using the technology. This included Clive Palmer and his Palmer United Party (PUP) who used a recording of his own voice in the seat of Fairfax which he was contesting (Marriner 2013; Zemek 2013). Moreover, both Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, and Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, made endorsement calls on behalf of local candidates across a wide range of seats (Zemek 2013; Hudson 2013; Lion 2013; Mesner 2013). During the campaign, the ALP also used robo-calls in an attempt to influence the result in the federal seat of Indi, which was to be fought out between Sophie Mirabella from the Liberal Party and Independent, Cathy McGowan. The automated message attacked Mirabella, the sitting Liberal MP, as a 'parachute candidate' and it included an audio recording of NSW Independent MP, Tony Windsor, who noted that when reflecting on his time in Parliament that Ms Mirabella 'won the nasty prize' (Le Grand 2013). The call finished with a request that voters reject Ms Mirabella and vote for a local and that the call 'was paid for by the ALP National Secretariat' (see Crikey 2013; Le Grand 2013). The New South Wales (NSW) branch of the ALP also used robo-calling in a new way during the campaign. The party used 'foreign-language robo-calls' in an attempt to increase formality of votes amongst non-English speaking communities, an issue the Australian Electoral Commission has previously identified as problematic (Dario 2005; AEC 2013; Norrington 2013).

It was also the 2013 election cycle in which the 'town-halling' technology was adopted in Australia. While the ALP began trialling the technology in Sydney in 2011, the evidence indicates that the first time the technology was used during a campaign was the 2013 West Australian state election. By using the electoral roll, the ALP was able to connect with thousands of voters across four marginal seats in the state. According to Om (2013b), 'up to 5000 people took part in one teleconference. That's more than 20 per cent of voters in that electorate'. Moreover, West Australian Labor Assistant State Secretary, Lenda Oshalem, argued: 'To the listener it operates like talkback radio so it seemed like an exciting new technology' (cited in Om 2013b). Party Official B (2013) noted that they had trialled the system with branch members to refine timing and scripts before using the technology during the final two weeks of the campaign in seven West Australian state seats. Party Official B (2013) also contended that analysis completed since the campaign, indicated that it had worked best in regional areas and was less effective in suburban areas.

During the 2013 federal campaign, the ALP again used the technology. The party conducted English language 'town-halls' in marginal seats across the country and also utilised Kevin Rudd's language skills to interact with Mandarin speakers via the technology (Party Official A 2013). Meanwhile the Liberal Party also started using the technology, implementing it to connect with voters in the federal seat of Lindsay. According to Om (2013a; also see Murphy 2013), 8000 households, almost 10 per cent of the electorate, participated in a telephone 'town-hall' with Tony Abbott. The technique has also been used by trade unions to communicate with their membership (TWU NSW 2013), and most recently by the ALP as part of the federal parliamentary leadership ballot. Both Bill Shorten and Anthony Albanese used the technology to attempt to connect with regional voters during

the contest (Whan 2013; Karvelas 2013). Party Official A (2013) argued that within the ALP, the technology was viewed as extremely successful in targeting a niche group of harder to reach members during the leadership ballot. The success of the technology, Party Official A (2013) argued, was apparent when the number of participants, the length of time these participants remained on the calls and the number of questions asked were quantified.

## **Robo-Call and ‘Town-Hall’ Effectiveness and Implications for Australia**

While the evidence produced here demonstrates that in Australia, robo-call and ‘town-hall’ technology has increased from zero before 2004 to regular use now, Australian political parties need to consider just how effective the technology is. The scholarship that has been conducted internationally indicates that robo-calls used to persuade voters are extremely ineffective. For example, Professor Donald Green, who has conducted numerous field experiments testing the efficacy of the robo-call technology, has argued ‘We, so far, found a perfect record of it never working’ (cited in Dale 2008). Moreover, Green and Gerber (2008, p.77; also see Shaw et al 2012; Ramirez 2005) when reflecting on the results of a dozen experiments which tested the effects that robo-calls have on voter turnout, concluded that ‘Thus far, none of the experiments using robo calls has been able to distinguish their effects from zero. Our best guess places the vote production rate somewhere in the neighbourhood of one vote per two thousand contacts, but given the shaky state of the evidence, robo calls may have no effect at all’. Considering they are extremely inexpensive, robo-calls may ‘help you stretch your resources in ways that allow you to contact the maximum number of people, but don’t expect to move them very much, if at all’ (Green and Gerber 2008, p.71). In fact, the research conducted by Green and Gerber indicates that far more effective in mobilising voters is the use of volunteer phone banks, not automated dialling systems (Green and Gerber 2008, p.71).

An important question to then consider is why Australian political parties are using a campaigning technique which the evidence suggests has little or no effect. According to Party Official A (2013), the ALP are aware of the literature on the limited capacity robo-calls have as a persuasive tool, so their use of them has not increased substantially in recent times. However, the evidence suggests that at the very least, use has widened beyond the major parties. As was shown, this now includes use by minor parties as well as interest groups. Though, the evidence also suggests that Australian use of the technology has been vastly different to the US and Canadian experience (see Table 1). In particular, controversy related to the technology has been relatively minor. Moreover, use of the robo-call technology in Australia for what we have referred to as ‘negative’ purposes has been rare.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, while Australian use has been much shorter than the US, the evidence suggests that compulsory voting plays at least a minor role in this. The disillusionment parts of the electorate feel with the focus on the ‘swinging voter’ has been evident in the last two elections as levels of informal voting in the House of Representatives have increased (AEC 2010; AEC 2013). This is further exacerbated by Australia having some of the highest levels of party identification across any liberal democracy (Bean and McAllister 2011, p.343). Therefore, when Green and Gerber’s (2008) evidence on the ineffectiveness of robo-calls are considered in the context of compulsory voting, increased use would seem to have only one possible effect if it were to have one at all. This effect would be negative, and may also lead to a small increase in informal voting. The evidence suggesting use of negative robo-calls has backfired, anecdotally supports this. Moreover, considering Australian voters are already incentivised to vote via fines, the capacity to positively impact on voting intentions or formality seems extremely remote.

Another important point to consider, as Orr (2010, p.142), has acknowledged, is that ‘especially compared to the United States, Australian parties are tightly organised’. Australia’s major political parties are extremely strong and highly disciplined because they have a unique combination of advantages (Jaensch 2006, p.24). This includes compulsory voting, publicly funded elections and preferential voting in the lower house. When these unique features are considered in the context of the rising use of the telephonic technology, four conclusions can be drawn. First, Australian election campaigns have historically been relatively passive and uneventful. However, the rise of robo-calling coincides with a period of Australian politics in which partisanship and negativity has, arguably, been on the rise.<sup>12</sup> While Australian use of the technology has, with the exception of the Tasmanian state election of 2010, remained relatively controversy free, if the technology continues to be increasingly used, it is not unimaginable that the focus may be on negative or attack campaigns, similar to what has happened in the US and Canada.

Second, as political parties are exempt from the Do Not Call Registry, robo-calls are largely unregulated at present. The register, established in 2007, was initially established in response to concerns that intrusiveness from telemarketers was on the rise (ALRCa n.d). Australian political parties, similar to many other Western nations engage in data collection which they combine with data they are given by the Australian Electoral Commission. Under the current legislation, the parties are allowed to use this information to connect with voters for election or referendum purposes, to check the accuracy of the electoral roll and MPs and Senators are allowed to use this information in performing their role in their electorates (ALRCb n.d). As evidenced by the recent Canadian experience, growing use of the technology has profound implications for privacy. The Australian Law Reform Commission has previously argued that ‘it may be too early to recommend the removal of the exemption relating to politicians and electoral candidates from the Do Not Call Register Act’ (ALRCb n.d). This advice, now a number of years old, may require revision if robo-call usage continues to widen. Of course, the backfire effect also needs consideration which as Orr (2010) has argued shows ‘there are some incentives to self-regulate’. However, considering thus far, parties and interest groups continue to use the robo-call technology despite the evidence suggesting its ineffectiveness, some level of regulation may be required to maintain what the general public views as acceptable in regard to invasions of privacy.

Third, while the robo-call technology appears to be widening in use without deepening substantially, it is the growth of the telephone ‘town-hall’ technology which offers the most interesting insights to be drawn about Australian political campaigning. While robo-calls and telephone ‘town-halls’ are related by the medium they are delivered by, they are indicative of different stages of political campaigning. The use of both techniques indicates a willingness to bypass the traditional media in an attempt to connect with voters. Nevertheless, as robo-calls are an automated message, are pre-tested and the message clearly controlled, this technique fits with older, more traditional modes of campaigning (Farrell and Webb 2002; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). In contrast, while the ‘town-hall’ is still scripted, it is the uncontrollable nature of questions which fits with newer, more direct forms of campaigning (Farrell and Webb 2002; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Moreover, considering the recent changes to the way the Australian Labor Party (ALP) select their federal parliamentary leader and the broader evidence suggesting this technique has been successful, increased use seems inevitable.

Fourth and inter-related with the previous point, the implications of growing use of this format is multi-faceted. It offers a new way for representatives and constituents to communicate directly and most importantly provides political parties and political leaders the capacity to communicate with those hard to reach parts of the electorate. Whether this difficulty is due to location or language barriers the evidence presented in this paper has



demonstrated the capacity of this technology to overcome these barriers to greater political engagement. In addition, considering the difficulty Australia’s political parties are having in attracting *active* members, the technology may be one way to reach party supporters and convince them to become more involved in the affairs of the party. While the recent changes to the way the ALP elects its parliamentary leader *may* have some impact on party member engagement, especially during periods when a new leader is required to be elected, this technology has some capacity to play a role in connecting grassroots members with the parliamentary leadership. While this technology is no panacea to the problems political parties face, greater engagement with grassroots members has been a consistent call, in the ALP at least, for many years (see ALP National Review 2010 as one example).

**Table 1: Typology of Automated Telephonic Campaigning Techniques**

Type Sub-Type	Automated (Robo-Calls)		Live and Interactive calls (Tele ‘Town Halls’)		
	Negative (‘Don’t vote for them’)	Positive (‘Vote for us’)	Broadcast (Polity-wide)	‘Narrow-Casting’ <sup>713</sup>	Intra- party/organisation
<b>Examples</b>	US - (1) 2000 South Carolina primary anti-McCain calls. (2) 2008 US presidential election - anti-Obama calls Canada 2011 Canadian federal election calls. Australia (1) 2010 Tasmanian state election campaign from ALP. (2) 2013 federal election – anti-Mirabella calls into electorate of Indi from the ALP. (3) During the 2010 federal campaign, the CCIQ recorded and delivered calls warning about the dangers of the MRRT.	US - Ongoing GOTV and Candidate endorsement. Australia (1) Candidate endorsement. For example, the Liberal Party during the 2004 campaign with a candidate endorsement from Howard. (2) In 2013, both the Liberal Party and the ALP made calls with their respective leaders endorsing the local candidate. (3) PUP calls from Palmer during the 2013 campaign. (4) During the 2007 campaign, the ALP recorded and delivered messages from Maxine McKew and Peter Garrett.	US - Romney during the 2012 presidential election. Australia (1) ALP with voters in marginal electorates during the WA state Election (2) Tony Abbott into electorate of Lindsay during 2013 federal campaign. (3) ALP and Rudd connected with voters across the nation. Canada -Toronto mayor Rob Ford connected with Toronto voters.	US -In 2009 Obama used technology to connect with AARP members to discuss health care reform. Australia - Rudd and ALP conducted with Mandarin speakers during the 2013 campaign.	Canada - Justin Trudeau and Joyce Murray of the Liberal Party have used the technology to connect with party members. Australia (1) 2013 ALP party leadership election calls from Albanese and Shorten. (2) TWU NSW branch using the technology to connect with members.
<b>Form of Political Participation</b>	Information Voting	Information Voting	Information Discussion Voting	Information Discussion Voting Targeted message	Information Discussion Internal communication Voting

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the growth of robo-call and telephone ‘town-hall’ technology during Australian political campaigns. The evidence indicates that the parties are not only using the technology during state and federal election campaigns, but that it has also been used as part of the ‘permanent campaign’. This goes beyond the clearly defined borders framing election periods. Compared to the US and Canada, the technology has not been employed as widely resulting in less controversy from its usage. The increased use of robo-call type technology nevertheless raises important questions about the current regulatory environment which governs the behaviour of political parties and interest groups. At present, the exemptions that

political parties enjoy from the Do Not Call Register and the Privacy Act means they are essentially self-regulating entities. The evidence suggests that the technology has not been used excessively or, with one exception, controversially. However, if use of the robo-call technology increases, regulation may need to be strengthened to ensure that intrusiveness from political parties and interest groups remains at an acceptable level. While field experiments have been conducted internationally which have examined whether robo-calls have the capacity to mobilise voters in countries with voluntary voting, their ability to alter voting intentions in a system with compulsory voting is yet to be systematically examined.<sup>14</sup> In particular, their capacity to influence voters via the transmission of negative messages about political opponents requires increased attention. Though, when the evidence from the US, where 'Get out the vote' drives are vitally important is considered, their use in Australia appears unlikely to translate into an enlarged share of the vote. In fact, as Australian's are already compelled to vote, it is possible that it may have a negative effect for those who choose to connect with voters in this way. In contrast, telephone 'town-hall' communication seems likely to expand in use. While the effectiveness of this technique is yet to be systematically diagnosed, the data collected for this paper indicates that it has some capacity to motivate the rank and file, appears to increase engagement in intra-party functions and allows party leaders to more easily connect with regional members. This technology offers no quick-fix to the problems modern political parties face. Nevertheless, any changes in the Australian regulatory environment which governs the use of political robo-calls and telephone 'town-hall' technology should reflect the distinction between the two. This may mean adopting regulation similar to that which some US states currently employ, where the initial robo-call is only permitted if you have a pre-existing relationship with the caller.

### Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> While the technology is sometimes referred to as robocalls or robo calls, this paper will refer to the technology as robo-calls.

<sup>2</sup> While robo-calling is a form of telephonic campaigning, it should not be confused with push-polling. While they can often be used together, the obvious difference between the two is that push-polling involves a live person on the other end of the phone, intentionally attempting to guide the views of the person who receives the calls. Robo-calls are also not to be confused with automated response political polling, also commonly referred to as robo-polling. This system of polling uses recorded questions about voting intention but does not contain a political message intended to influence the voter.

<sup>3</sup> While this technology does have a live component, as it begins with an automated message it has been included in this study.

<sup>4</sup> Four interviews in total were conducted. Two were contacted in-person and two over the phone. Interviewees were not provided set questions beforehand but 6 set questions were asked with points of interest followed up on and clarification asked for on certain examples provided.

<sup>5</sup> See Dainton and Zelle (2005) for more on persuasion theory and what they consider to be effective persuasion techniques.

<sup>6</sup> There is some debate whether these calls were robo-calls, push polling or a combination of both. For example, according to Steinhauer (2007), there was evidence of emails and flyers being distributed which claimed that McCain had 'chosen to sire children without marriage' and that 'people in some areas of South Carolina began to receive phone calls in which self-described pollsters would ask, Would you be more likely or less likely to

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vote for John McCain for president if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?’.

<sup>7</sup> PC was the abbreviation of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. The party was dissolved in 2003.

<sup>8</sup> However, in the report released by Elections Canada, they noted that they had received what they referred to as ‘40,000 communications’ over the matter (Elections Canada 2013, p.10).

<sup>9</sup> Canadian political parties do, however, have to keep their own Do Not Call List and ensure they do not contact anyone who has requested that they do not do so (Elections Canada 2013, p.21).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, in 2007 the ALP were comfortably in front in the polls leading in to the election. While in 2010, the polls released before and during the campaign suggested the contest would be much closer.

<sup>11</sup> In the table we have divided use of the automated calls into 2 sub-types. ‘Negative’ which is attempting to persuade you *not* to vote for an individual or party and ‘positive’ which is attempting to persuade you *to* vote for an individual or party.

<sup>12</sup> The reasons for this are hotly debated. Some of the reasons often provided are that this is a consequence of the death of ideology based politics, some view it as the ‘Americanisation’ of Australian politics, while others view this as symbolic of post-modern politics.

<sup>13</sup> Farrell and Webb (2002, p.6) explained, ‘narrow-casting’ as campaign messages which are targeted to specific audiences.

<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding the obvious difficulty in conducting a randomised trial in these conditions.

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<b>Title</b>	Communication, Politics & Culture (Print)
<b>ISSN</b>	1836-0645
<b>Publisher</b>	R M I T * School of Media & Communication
<b>Country</b>	Australia
<b>Status</b>	Ceased
<b>Start Year</b>	1963
<b>End Year</b>	2012
<b>Publication History</b>	1963-2012
<b>Frequency</b>	2 times a year
<b>Language of Text</b>	Text in: English
<b>Refereed</b> 	Yes
<b>Abstracted / Indexed</b>	Yes
<b>Serial Type</b>	Journal
<b>Content Type</b>	Academic / Scholarly
<b>Format</b>	Print
<b>Description</b>	Publishes scholarly articles that connect communication and cultural technologies to areas of legislative or parliamentary politics, to governance of social organizations and the institutions they constitute, or to broader negotiations of power.
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▶ <a href="#">Publisher &amp; Ordering Details</a>	
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