

Opinion Polls: Important Issues and Preferred Party

Election predictions often focus on two things: the issues that voters rank as the most important to them, and the party that voters prefer to handle these issues. Newspoll conducts regular polls of the importance of issues and the party preferred to handle them. *The Australian* publishes the results in table format and includes the results of the preceding five issue polls to allow a cross-time comparison.¹ This Research Note graphs the figures since the last election to enable an easier comparison. It is published in conjunction with another Research Note comparing the voting intention polls of two major pollsters: Newspoll and Roy Morgan Research.

Vote-catching issues

Explanations of the November 2001 election outcome often note the impact of the Tampa 'boat people' incident of August–September and the September 11 terrorist attacks. Until these events, the Coalition had polled either behind Labor or so close to it that its victory could not be deemed a surety. On election day, however, voters turned to the Coalition, apparently attracted to its tough stance on immigration and security. Yet these issues were not what a September 2001 Newspoll claimed voters were most concerned about; voters ranked education and health well ahead of immigration and security (see Figure 1).

At the time, election analyst Antony Green noted that although asylum seekers and defence did not rate as highly in the polls as education, health and the economy, 'in terms of the space they occupy in the election spotlight, they crowd out other issues'.² This suggests a need for caution when examining issues of importance to voters. That is, which party voters prefer to handle an issue may be a more critical indicator to election outcomes than which issues voters rank as the most important.

Thus, although October 2003 figures show that voters remain most concerned about health and education, and prefer

by a large margin that Labor handle these issues, this does not guarantee a Labor victory. Attention must also be paid to those issues attracting media attention, such as defence and interest rates, on which the Coalition is significantly ahead in the polls.³

1. *The Australian* reports only the current responses for the party preferred to handle the issues.
2. Antony Green, 'Flawed polls create a smokescreen', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 2001.
3. For further information on the poll results, contact Greg Baker, of the Statistics Group. The figures will be posted on the Intranet.

Figure 1. Issues important to the electorate

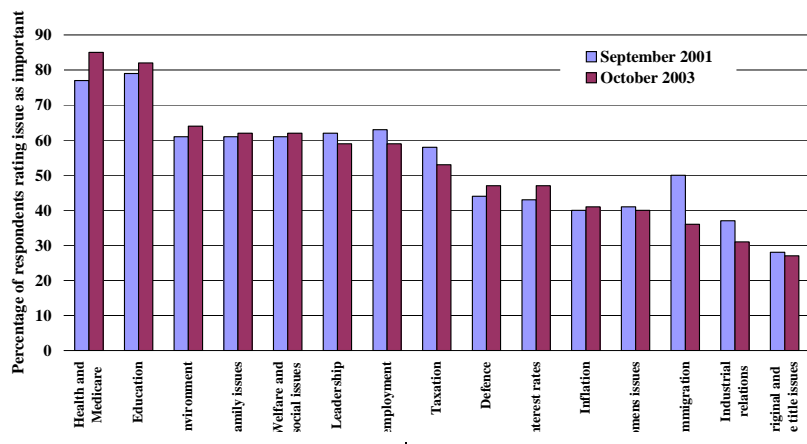
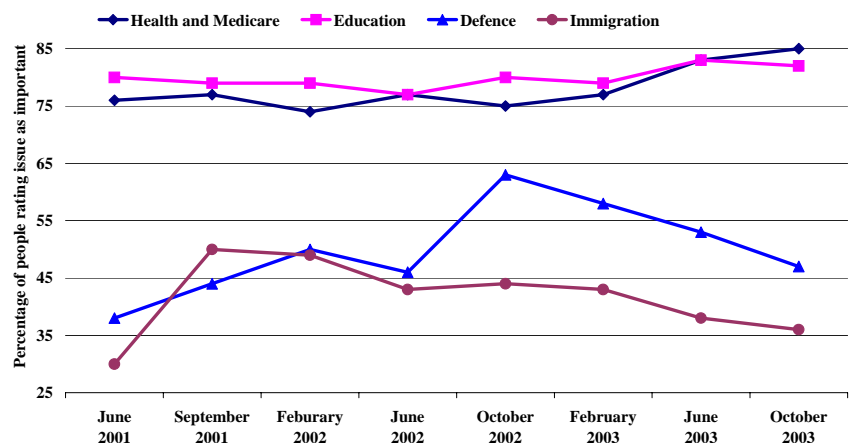


Figure 2. Level of importance of issues



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Figure 3. Education and Health / Medicare: party preferred

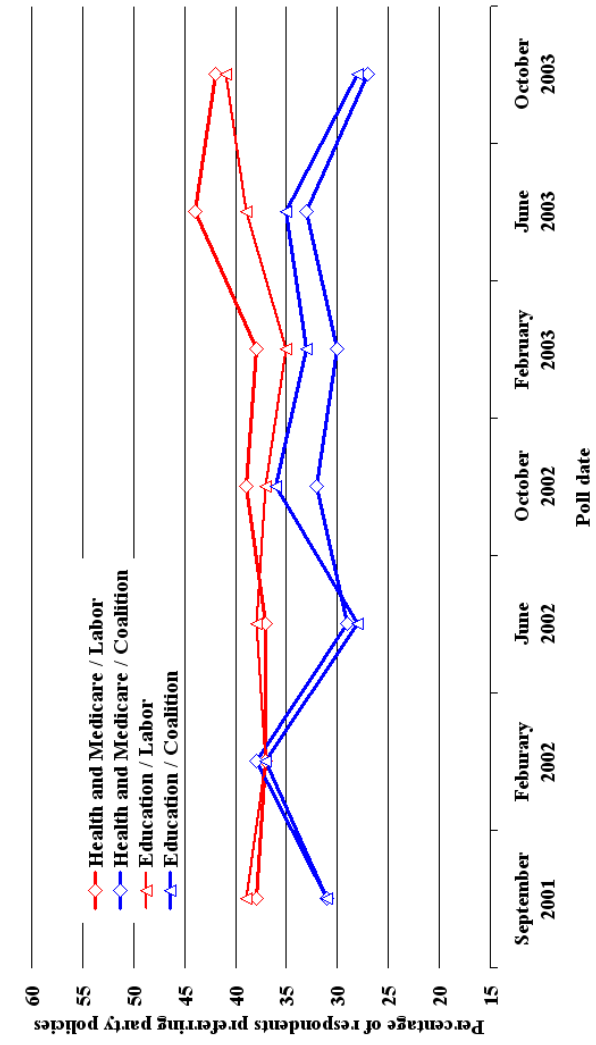


Figure 4. Immigration and Defence: party preferred

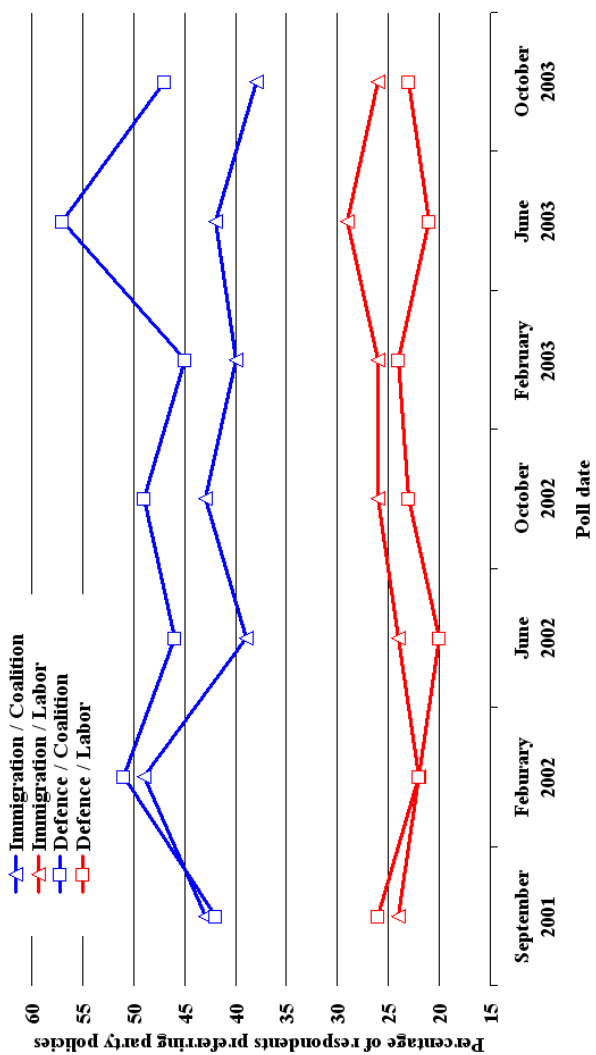


Figure 5. Taxation and Interest Rates: party preferred

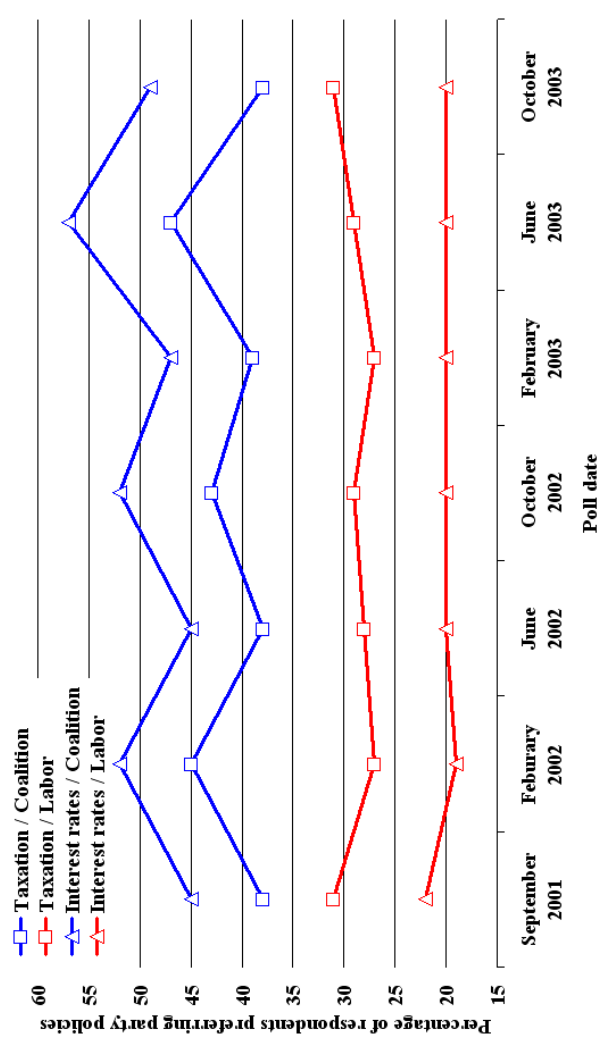


Figure 6. Unemployment and Family Issues: party preferred

