

Shorten's scare campaign will be all or nothing

Written by John Hewson, Professor and Chair, Tax and Transfer Policy Institute, Crawford School, Australian National University

Scare campaigns can work in Australian politics. I should know as I have experienced a couple of real “doozies”.

Although conventional wisdom has it that I lost in 1993 because of the GST, which certainly was the focus of a very intense scare campaign, the major effect was from a scare campaign over my health policy, waged with effective ferocity and focus over the last 10 days of the campaign.

The Government launched a saturation scare in about 13 key marginals – letterbox drops, local media, door knocking - essentially claiming that it would cost some \$90 plus for mum and two kids to visit a doctor “if Hewson wins”. The claim was absolutely without any foundation. It certainly worked.

The circumstances of the scare are most important. I was particularly vulnerable as I was still relatively unknown to the electorate, and was advocating very significant and broad-based change/reform in most areas of public policy. Moreover, health is a difficult, complex and multi-faceted policy, where few people really understand the detail, and so are easily misled and frightened.

The “anti” or “no” case is very easy to run and win. As we saw in the Australia Card debate in the 1980s, it was easy to create enough doubt by arguing, “If you don’t understand it, don’t vote for it!” Similarly, a few years ago, in the enforced referendum in Toowoomba, where the local council wanted to recycle sewerage as a solution to an acute water shortage, “If you don’t want to drink sewerage, don’t vote for it!”

Fear and doubt can be mustered to override facts and common sense. Shorten has decided to run hard on a Medicare scare campaign in the last two weeks of this very long campaign, arguing that Turnbull will privatise Medicare, even though this oft-repeated claim has forced Turnbull into making, and repeating, a blanket guarantee that he will not touch Medicare, or its delivery.

Although Shorten has campaigned well, and with slightly more flare, the public and private polling suggests he won’t win, with two more weeks of the same. So, he has decided to risk all,

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to hopefully create enough doubt in key seats, to shift enough votes, to get across the line.

But, will it work? Shorten is relying on confirming the well entrenched electoral perception that “Labor can best be trusted to manage health”, that “Labor is better able to manage health”, not only by consolidating the traditional Labor vote, but hopefully to attract doubtful or fearful voters more broadly, mostly from the LNP and the Greens.

Health and Medicare consistently rank among the top three issues in this campaign, but behind the economy, where the LNP have enjoyed a consistent edge. So, while Shorten's scare campaign will undoubtedly pull some votes, it will be against significant overall concern about the economy and jobs, and against Malcolm's denial, which you can expect to come with increased frequency and intensity, from Malcolm and all his team.

One important question, is how much funding the LNP has left to mount a “rebuttal campaign”, through all media platforms?

A great failing of the '93 campaign was that, despite my explicit request to preserve a reasonable amount of funding for rebuttal TV adds, the party organisation had spent nearly all the funds on negative adds attacking Keating. So, we were essentially sitting ducks when the Government broke the health scare, as revealed by our nightly polling of those marginal seats.

I suspect this won't happen to Turnbull. We will be swamped with rebuttals, everything from posters through a complete media blitz.

I also suspect that Turnbull could return the favour by launching a scare campaign around (say) asylum seekers, an issue on which he enjoys a considerable electoral advantage, and one where we have already witnessed considerable disunity within the ALP in the early days of this campaign. Imagine if there was another boat on the horizon? And/or he might decide to also up the ante on negative gearing another notch.

In all this, Shorten risks a net negative reaction – looking too desperate and opportunistic, against an effective Turnbull response, to those few in the electorate that have even bothered to

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engage in the detail of this campaign.

I suspect the over-riding motivation of a majority of voters will be to still give Turnbull the “benefit of the doubt”. Although there is genuine disappointment that Turnbull hasn’t yet matched those early, quite spectacular, expectations, he will probably be given a chance to do so. In this case, scare campaigns won’t be definitive.

Disclosure

John Hewson is chair of the Asset Owners Disclosure Project, and was federal leader of the Liberal Party from 1990 to 1994.

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