

Issues that swung elections: the 'unlosable election' of 1993 still resonates loudly

Written by Haydon Manning, Adjunct Associate Professor, Politics, Policy and Global Affairs, College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University., Flinders University

With taxes, health care and climate change emerging as key issues in the upcoming federal election, we're running a series this week looking at the main issues that swung elections in the past, from agricultural workers' wages to the Vietnam War. Read other stories in the series [here](#)

The 1993 election is known as the “unlosable election” for the Liberal Party. It highlights how the course of a campaign can shift voter opinion to produce a result few would have predicted a month out from polling day.

As the current election campaign unfolds, a foreboding message may resonate from the 1993 campaign. Namely, that being the clear frontrunner tends to foster complacency, and touting a “big target” invites more intense scrutiny.

Read more: ['Fake news' is already spreading online in the election campaign – it's up to us to stop it](#)

Labor's unlikely triumph

Labor in 1993 was a triumph, comparable to Whitlam's 1972 win. After a year languishing in the polls, Labor won a fifth term and increased its majority by two seats.

In his [victory speech](#), Prime Minister Paul Keating declared it “the sweetest victory of all”, and “a victory for the true believers – the people who in difficult times have kept the faith”.

For some, these words reflected one of the great Labor speeches; for others, they reflected the hubris that would eventually envelop the Keating government.

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To win a fifth term having recently presided over a severe economic recession and a bitter leadership challenge was unprecedented. The combination of these factors should have sunk the Keating government.

Why Labor should have lost

The [early 1990s recession](#) was far worse than the 1974 or 1982-3 recessions that contributed to the Whitlam and Fraser governments' defeat. And Keating appeared heartless when, as treasurer in November 1990, he [remarked](#) :

This is a recession that Australia had to have.

A year later, he challenged Prime Minister Bob Hawke in a leadership spill and defeated him by 56 votes to 51.

For the nation, mired in recession, Labor seemed indulgent and power-hungry. It was no surprise that the Liberals led comfortably in the polls.

Hewson's policy platform was a 'large target'

Keen to move beyond the bitter rivalry between Andrew Peacock and John Howard during the 1980s, the Liberal party turned to John Hewson after the 1990 election.

Hewson was inexperienced in politics, having only entered Parliament in 1987, but skilled in his working life as a merchant banker, former advisor to John Howard and professor of economics at UNSW.

Hewson was a visionary who managed to unite both the Liberal and National Parties around one of the most significant policy platforms ever enunciated in Australian politics: a 650-page document titled "Fightback!".

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Fightback's enduring virtue lies in its coherent articulation of reform, accompanied by detail. Its problem was that it pushed too far into the realms of a neo-liberal economic reform. With such a "large target" as Fightback, Keating was able to make the opposition the issue during the campaign.

Read more: [*The budget's dirty secret is the hikes in tax rates you're not meant to know about*](#)

Fightback's centrepiece was a 15% GST, set alongside big personal income tax cuts. Fightback also detailed the introduction of enterprise bargaining, cuts to Medicare bulk billing, the sale of government owned assets, and other commitments aimed at limiting the size of government expenditure.

Over the course of 1992, voters observed a colossal political struggle as Hewson worked at selling Fightback to voters, and Keating warmed to the task of dismantling its vision. This would reach a crescendo in February-March 1993, with one of Australia's most memorable election campaigns.

The [Australia Election Study](#) surveys show this election stood out because voters recognised that there was "a good deal of difference" between the parties.

Different styles of leadership

Arguably, this was not just about policy, it was also about the fact that Hewson and Keating had different leadership styles.

Hewson was committed to "policy as an end in itself" and he tended to shun the hard sell, preferring a more earnest type of advocacy delivered through public rallies.

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Hewson's problem was with Fightback's complexity. According to the political journalist Laurie Oakes, he often appeared "mean and shifty" when he tried to explain the details. This was most evident when he tried to explain on television how the GST would apply to a [birthday cake](#).

Keating fundamentally believed that the strength of political leadership would prevail. Lampooning Fightback, Keating said:

If you don't understand it, don't vote for it; if you do understand it, you'd never vote for it!

With his superior command of rhetoric, Keating framed the campaign as one about core Australian values. Keating shied away from defending Labor's achievements, instead making his opponent the focus. He championed Australian egalitarianism while painting Hewson as a radical. Keating once referred to Hewson as "the feral abacus", a theorist hopelessly out of touch with average voter.

By the eve of the election, the parties were evenly balanced, but pundits were still predicting a Liberal win.

Read more: [*Discontent with Nationals in regional areas could spell trouble for Coalition at federal election*](#)

In favour of a detailed policy platform

Why did Hewson take such a political risk with Fightback? The answer can be found in Hewson's [valedictory speech to parliament](#).

In the speech, Hewson reflected on the purpose of Fightback. He said it was to convince voters

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“in the midst of the worst recession in 60 years” that significant change was required, that the Liberal Party was once again credible because it “stood for something”, and that it was prepared to “challenge vested interests”.

He also said that entering government required a mandate based on detailed policy if there was to be any hope of getting legislation through the Senate. It is worth noting how pertinent this last point is today.

Since Fightback, no opposition has put forward such detailed policy. Putting aside one's own ideological preferences, Hewson's Fightback should be viewed as positive because voters deserve to be presented with detailed policy choices rather than just [political spin](#) .

Haydon Manning does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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