

INFLUENCERS and MESSAGES

Analysing the 2023 Voice to Parliament
Referendum Campaign

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The authors acknowledge Australia's
First Nations peoples as the Traditional
Custodians of Country throughout Australia.
We recognise their continuing connection
to land, waters and community.

We respectfully acknowledge the role that
First Nations people play in shaping
Australia's democracy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

On the night of 22 May 2022, newly elected Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese confirmed that Australians would be asked to vote on a proposal to amend the Constitution to set up an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The proposal had gained critical impetus from a landmark 2017 meeting of Indigenous leaders at Uluru, which produced a document – the Uluru Statement from the Heart – formally calling for a “Voice”, enshrined in the Constitution, to advise the Parliament on issues affecting Indigenous Australians.

Until late 2022, opinion polls had indicated a clear majority of Australians intended voting Yes for the Voice. Thereafter, polls revealed a steady, almost linear decline in support, as the No camp rolled out a highly organised, focused and effective campaign leading up to the referendum on Saturday 14 October 2023. The final defeat was emphatic, with just 39.94% of voters nationally supporting a change to the Constitution, and 60.06% rejecting it. The No vote also prevailed in every state and territory with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

However from the outset – well before Liberal leader Peter Dutton’s pivotal decision to reject the Voice – **the proposal faced significant hurdles, including:**

- **Built-in systemic barriers to constitutional change in Australia.** To succeed, a referendum proposal must be supported by a majority of voters nationally, as well as majorities of voters in at least four of the six states.
- **A history of reluctance by Australians to support constitutional change.** Since Federation, only eight of 44 referendum proposals prior to the Voice had succeeded – perhaps reflecting, in part, that a request to change the Constitution entails a more difficult cognitive load for voters than supporting the status quo.
- **The rise of social media and other online platforms as primary information sources,** which has enabled the insidious spread of false information online – particularly in political “scare campaigns” aimed at voters.
- **A minority of high-profile Indigenous Australians,** (notably Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, Nyunggai Warren Mundine and Senator Lidia Thorpe) **publicly declaring their opposition** to the Voice early in the debate.

This report

This report aims to identify and explain the key factors that contributed to the failure of the Voice referendum, with a particular focus on the roles of political communications and media.

We examine and analyse the main topics of debate, the key actors, the contrasting campaign strategies for Yes and No, the polls, and the prevalence and influence of online misinformation and disinformation. We also explore the roles of social media platforms and mainstream media in disseminating campaign messages, and the inter-relationship between the two.

Our findings are informed by extensive data tracking and analysis of media activity surrounding the Voice in the months leading up to the referendum, including mainstream news coverage; Voice-related posts on major social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok and YouTube; and online advertising on the Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram.

We also track major shifts in opinion poll numbers before and during the campaign, and their correlation with key campaign moments and events. And we examine the final voting results in detail – identifying telling geographic and demographic variations between the regions and the cities, and between states, and comparing these patterns with voting trends at the 2022 federal election.

Why the Voice failed: key findings

We conclude that six key factors coalesced to ensure the defeat of the Voice referendum.

1. Lack of bipartisan support

No referendum proposal in the history of the Australia federation has succeeded without bipartisan political support, and the 2023 Voice referendum continued this pattern. Opposition leader Peter Dutton's announcement in April 2023 that the Liberal Party would not support the Yes case was pivotal, following a similar announcement by the Nationals in November 2022. Dutton's announcement roughly coincided with an acceleration in the decline of voter support for referendum in opinion polls, as many conservative voters apparently took their cues from their leaders. Overall, public support for the Voice – as measured by published public opinion polls – collapsed by more than 20 percentage points in the year leading up to the vote. This was a massive shift in public opinion by historical standards, and underlined the difficulty of achieving constitutional change in the absence of bipartisan support.

2. Demographic fault lines, Labor voters divided

Labor voters were far more equivocal in their support for the Voice than were Coalition voters in opposition to the plan, while Greens and Teal voters overwhelmingly supported the Voice. Stark contrasts in voting patterns also emerged between the cosmopolitan, politically progressive inner suburbs of the major cities – which yielded the strongest results for the Voice – and rural and regional seats, which recorded the largest No votes. Support for the Voice also cleaved along lines marked by educational attainment and wealth, including a strong statistical correlation between university education and support for the Yes case.

Our research confirms wide variation in support for the Voice across Labor-held seats, which turned out to be a principal contributor to the referendum's failure. Just 21 of Labor's 78 seats in the House of Representatives returned Yes majorities – and most of those were in inner-city electorates. By stark contrast, three Labor held seats – Spence (outer Adelaide), Hunter (regional NSW) and Blair (Qld) – had No votes exceeding 70%.

Had Labor voters been more united behind the Voice – all other things being equal – the referendum would have succeeded comfortably.

3. No campaign's effective media strategy

Since Australia's last referendum – the failed bid for a republic in 1999 – the media environment has changed dramatically, with the internet and social media platforms emerging as key vehicles for political campaigning, partly at the expense of old media such as free-to-air television, print newspapers and radio. While traditional media continue to play an important role, they increasingly rely on social media to reach wider audiences for their stories, and vice versa.

Both the Yes and No camps understood the value of messaging across both legacy media and the major social media platforms, but the No side did it far more effectively. Backed by the right-wing activist group Advance, No was earlier to focus on social media, and quicker and more adept at harnessing the power of the fastest growing social media site in Australia, TikTok, to reach younger voters. It used storytelling, authentic voices and personalisation, and focused its campaign – with apparent success – around two high-profile and articulate Indigenous leaders, Jacinta Nampijinpa Price and Nyunggai Warren Mundine. No's messages were amplified by Sky News Australia, which had a vast reach through its YouTube channel and re-postings of its stories by commentators and conservative politicians on social media.

Despite the Yes campaign's extensive online advertising, YouTube video posts and legacy media coverage, it failed to reverse falling poll numbers, suggesting the relationship between spending, visibility and public sentiment is not straightforward.

4. Political messaging: simple, targeted and consistent

With Advance at its communications helm, the No camp centred its campaign around a simple over-arching message that the Voice proposal was "divisive" because it favoured one group of Australians over another. The message was repeated often and consistently across the media spheres (mainstream, social media, mobile phone texts and paid media) to strategically targeted audiences. The No camp also used subsidiary fear-based narratives suggesting the Voice was a "slippery slope" that would lead to other social, political, economic and legal changes, repeatedly telling voters: "If you don't know, vote no". And the decision to centre the campaign around two high-profile and articulate Indigenous leaders, Price and Mundine, appeared to pay off, with the pair proving to be a potent combination.

By contrast, the Yes camp deployed multiple messages and messengers – among them sporting groups, trade unions, universities, charities and businesses – which gave rise to commentary about possible message overload and predictions of a voter backlash. These predictions were realised at least in one case, with the online backlash over the use of John Farnham's iconic "You're the Voice" as a campaign theme song.

Yes also struggled to find consistent and coherent messages in response to No's largely negative campaign, and to counter specific cases of misinformation and disinformation about the Voice proposal. The Albanese government struggled particularly in the face of persistent challenges from Voice opponents demanding more detail on how the plan would work.

5. Misinformation and disinformation

The referendum provided another telling example of the increasing challenges to democracy from the spread of disinformation. Both misinformation and disinformation polluted the discussion of key issues throughout the campaign, with a variety of untrue negative narratives surrounding the Voice gaining early traction. These included a suggestion that the Voice would presage a "globalist land grab", and the claim that First Nations people did not overwhelmingly support the Voice – a claim debunked by this study's analysis of referendum voting results in seats and regions with high Indigenous populations.

False claims that the Australian Electoral Commission would allow individuals to cast multiple votes were also spread in an apparent attempt to undermine confidence in the electoral process.

Many falsehoods spread during the campaign were exposed by third-party fact-checking organisations. But their efforts to correct the record were clouded by claims of partiality levelled against one of the main fact-checking groups, RMIT FactLab, and reported prominently by the politically conservative Sky News Australia. Despite the claims, surveys conducted for this report found high levels of trust among voters in fact-checking organisations overall.

In the absence of conclusive social science studies on the reach and consumption of misinformation and disinformation, and their effects on voter behaviour, assertions about how the spread of falsehoods impacted the referendum result remain somewhat speculative.

In absolute terms, misinformation and disinformation constituted a small share of the debate on the Voice. However, where it appears, disinformation is extremely efficient in focusing people's attention due to the cognitive attraction of pervasive negativity, a focus on threats, or arousal of emotions. In this way, just one false story may draw into doubt things learned from multiple accurate stories. It is therefore not unreasonable to speculate that the spread of falsehoods during the Voice campaign – many of which went unchallenged despite the efforts of fact-checkers – across multiple platforms may have influenced the attitudes and behaviour of some voters.

6. Crowding-out by other issues

As the campaign for the Voice progressed, other issues increasingly crowded out the policy agenda, particularly about the state of the economy and the rising cost of living. Voter anxieties about their finances and the economy were weaponised by the No campaign in its paid advertising, which drew attention to the costs of holding the referendum and of implementing a Voice to Parliament. Critics also used perceptions of an economic crisis to dismiss the Voice as a secondary issue and a political distraction. This tapped into historical evidence that propositions put to voters in referenda have tended to be far removed from their everyday concerns and may not have figured prominently in political discourse prior to the referendum process commencing.

Survey responses from late 2022 and into early 2023 were almost certainly overstating support for the Voice, a function of the issue's low salience, the superficially positive character of the "Voice" label, and well-understood, long-studied biases in survey response attributable to social desirability and acquiescence.

Conclusion

In rejecting the proposal for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, Australian voters delivered one of the more emphatic and comprehensive referendum defeats in the history of the federation.



Significantly, majorities of voters in all six states rejected the plan – rendering somewhat irrelevant one of the key historical barriers to referendum success: the requirement that it be carried by at least four states.

Instead, as we have detailed in this research paper, a combination of factors other than the built-in systemic difficulty of referendum success combined to doom Labor's proposal.

There is strong evidence – particularly from the tracking of opinion polls, and from history – that the moves by the Nationals, and later the Liberal Party, to campaign actively against the Voice (thus denying the proposal bipartisan support) were decisive, perhaps more than any other single factor. However, it is also clear that other issues we identified played significant roles, collectively contributing to the comprehensive nature of the defeat.

We believe our findings contain important lessons for participants in future election and referendum campaigns, as our political and media environments inevitably continue to evolve.

Speaking at a public forum, 'Yes' campaign director Dean Parkin has revealed the Voice to Parliament is the mechanism for Indigenous Australians to change Australia Day.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2023 referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament was Australia's 45th referendum held since Federation.¹ The referendum plan was announced by the then newly elected Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on the night of his federal election victory on 22 May 2022.

In his victory speech, Albanese declared:

Together we can embrace the Uluru Statement from the Heart. We can answer its patient, gracious call for a voice enshrined in our Constitution because all of us ought to be proud that amongst our great multicultural society we count the oldest, living, continuous culture in the world.²

The Uluru Statement of the Heart had been years in the making. A turning point came in 2017 when Indigenous leaders met at Uluru to vote on a proposal for an Indigenous Voice, enshrined in the Constitution, to advise the Parliament on issues affecting Indigenous Australians.

As many observed at the time, the proposal faced “an uphill climb”³ from the outset, particularly given the considerable barriers to achieving Constitutional change in Australia by popular vote. To succeed, a referendum must be supported both by a majority of voters nationally, and by majorities in a majority of states. Historically, all referenda that have succeeded have had bipartisan major party support. Prior to the vote on the Voice, only eight out of 44 referendum proposals since federation had succeeded. Notably, the last successful Yes vote was in the 1970s, achieved with bipartisan support and undertaken in a very different and less challenging media environment to 2023.

Fifty years ago, Australia's media landscape was dominated by print newspapers, periodicals and free-to-air television. Today, by contrast, the media environment is highly diverse and fragmented, spanning multiple platforms across the digital and analogue domains. Success for a political campaign in such an environment requires sophisticated and skilful navigation of various media platforms, encompassing social media, online forums and messaging apps, as well as traditional channels like television, radio, newspapers, billboards, letterboxing, door knocking, and word-of-mouth.

¹ Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, 'Referendums A to Z' [webpage], <https://moadoph.gov.au/explore/democracy/referendums-a-to-z#:~:text=Australia%20has%20held%2044%20federal,about%2C%20and%20why%20they%20mattered>

² Anthony Albanese, 'New Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's victory speech in full', *ABC Online*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-22/anthony-albanese-acceptance-speech-full-transcript/101088736>.

³ Stan Grant, 'Albanese has pledged a referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. He may face strong headwinds in Dutton' *ABC Online*, May 29 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-29/albanese-referendum-indigenous-voice-parliament-peter-dutton/101105084>.

The 2023 referendum campaigns also involved a mix of free and paid messages that could be targeted to undecided voters with more precision than ever before. The pervasive global problem of online misinformation and disinformation added another layer of noise and complexity to campaign communication strategies.

Moreover, unlike typical election campaigns, the Yes and No campaigns were plural, with different actors conveying different messages. At times, there was little intersection

between those on the same side who supported the same end goal, potentially confusing voters.

The official date of the referendum was Saturday 14 October 2023. However, early voting was available from 2 October in some states and 3 October in others, resulting in almost half of eligible Australians casting their votes before the campaigns had concluded.⁴ By the night of 14 October, it was clear that the Yes case for Constitutional change had been roundly defeated. The final tally was 39.94% Yes to 60.06% No.⁵



4 Antony Green, 'The Voice Referendum -Postal and Pre-Poll Voting Rates.' *Antony Green's Election Blog*. October 3, 2023, <https://antonygreen.com.au/the-voice-referendum-postal-and-pre-poll-voting-rates/>

5 Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), 'Referendum: National Results', AEC, November 2, 2023, <https://results.aec.gov.au/29581/Website/ReferendumNationalResults-29581.htm>



AIM AND REPORT OBJECTIVES

This report aims to identify and explain the factors that contributed to the final outcome, with a particular focus on political communication, media strategies and polling.

The report outlines the key actors, the prominent debates and influential messaging (including misinformation and disinformation) about the Voice in the lead-up to polling day.

The authors track social media public posts on Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Tik Tok, YouTube and mainstream media stories using data accessed through global media monitoring company Meltwater. We combine our analysis of media data with Meta advertising data and public opinion polling to form a clearer picture of how public sentiment about the Voice to Parliament was shaped in the lead-up to the 14 October referendum.

To this end, the report:

- Provides an overview of the Yes and No campaigns, the key actors and their core messages
- Outlines the roles of social media platforms and mainstream media in disseminating messages to voters, and the inter-relationship between them
- Explores the presence and influence of misinformation and disinformation during the campaign, and efforts to curb its spread by the Australian Electoral Commission and third-party fact checking organisations
- Provides insight into the campaigns' online advertising campaigns
- Tracks public opinion polling in the year leading up to the vote, and how it corresponded and correlated with key campaign events and moments
- Uses public opinion data to explore levels of trust in fact-checkers
- Summarises the aftermath of the referendum, both domestically and internationally.

Method, Scope and Terminologies

The report uses mixed methods and a range of data sources, with content analysis of media data via Meltwater, analysis of public polling data from multiple pollsters, a survey of 3,825 adult Australians about their experiences with fact-checking during the Voice campaigns fielded in December 2023, and desk methods.

The report's key focus is on political communications across the Australian media ecosystem, identifying and seeking to understand the key influences and messages during the referendum, while also providing relevant background information and political context. To achieve this, the report is divided into three sections focused on i) the campaign, ii) disinformation and fact-checking, iii) polling and results and its aftermath. Our analysis does not seek to provide a single explanation for the referendum outcome; rather, our aim is to advance public understanding of the various factors that contributed to the No result.

In preparing this report, we have sought to be consistent and clear in applying frequently recurring terminology surrounding the Voice referendum.

First, we use the terms First Nations people and Indigenous Australians throughout the report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who come from the many Indigenous lands spanning Australia.

Second, we recognise the absence of consensus in defining the terms misinformation and disinformation – which is itself a barrier to the formulation of effective policies to mitigate these problems.

To try to assist readers, the report defines:

- **"Fake news"** as an umbrella term for misinformation and disinformation
- **"Misinformation"** as the dissemination of inaccurate or misleading content that is not intended to cause harm (even though it may have that effect)
- **"Disinformation"**, by contrast, as the spread of inaccurate or misleading content with *decisive actions* intended to mislead, deceive or otherwise cause harm or self-gain.⁶



⁶ Andrea Carson and Andrew Gibbons, 'What is misinformation and disinformation? Understanding multi-stakeholders' perspectives in the Asia Pacific.' *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 57/3 (2022), 231-247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2022.2122776>



BACKGROUND: THE 2023 REFERENDUM

The Voice to Parliament Referendum presented adult Australians with a proposal to recognise First Nations people in the Australian Constitution, and to establish a representative body that would offer advice to the federal Parliament on issues affecting them.

There is a long history of struggle by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for Constitutional recognition.⁷ Historically, they were excluded from full Australian citizenship under the Constitution until 1967, when more than 90% of Australians voted in favour of a referendum proposal to remove this exclusion.

In the decades since the 1967 referendum, political debate has persisted over how to enable further inclusion and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution. In 2010, an expert panel on Constitutional Recognition was established to investigate how to advance recognition, and its 2012 report canvassed options for Constitutional change and approaches to a referendum.⁸ In 2015, then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Leader of the Opposition Bill Shorten established the Referendum Council to advise on next steps towards a referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the

Constitution. Its 2017 report proposed a series of Indigenous-led consultations on what meaningful recognition would look like.⁹

Foundational work that led to the Uluru Statement from the Heart occurred during 12 Dialogues and one regional meeting held by the Referendum Council across Australia in 2016 and 2017, culminating in a National Constitutional Convention at Uluru in 2017.¹⁰ The 250 First Nations representatives called for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution, and envisaged a Voice mechanism based on principles of self-determination and justice to ensure that Indigenous Australians could have a say on issues that affect them.¹¹

This emphasis on self-determination was seen as critical to the legitimacy of the Uluru Statement. The Voice to Parliament proposal emerged in the context of wider efforts by politicians, non-government organisations (NGOs) and Indigenous leaders to address the significant health, life expectancy and incarceration deaths and disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Beginning in 2006, the “Close the Gap” campaign focused on reducing these disparities.¹² However, critics of this framework said it was “doomed to fail” because it had been designed

7 Referendum Council, *Final Report of the Referendum Council*, (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia 2023), https://ulurustatementdev.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Referendum_Council_Final_Report.pdf

8 Report of the Expert Panel, *Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution*, (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012) <https://www.indigenousjustice.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/mp/files/resources/files/12-01-16-indigenous-recognition-expert-panel-report.pdf>.

9 Referendum Council, *Discussion Paper on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, October 2016, https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2016-12/referendum_council_discussion_paper.pdf

10 Uluru Statement from the Heart, ‘*The Dialogues*’, <https://ulurustatement.org/history/the-dialogues>

11 Final Report of the Referendum Council.

12 Closing the Gap, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/>

without sufficient input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹³

In 2008, then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a national apology to Indigenous Australians, and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation.¹⁴ The COAG's National Indigenous Reform Agreement outlined specific targets in areas such as health, education and employment.¹⁵ There was increasing awareness that "closing the gap" would require more consultation with Australia's First Nations.

Malcolm Turnbull's Coalition government originally rejected the Voice proposal, framing it as an unrepresentative "third chamber of Parliament".¹⁶ The subsequent Morrison government committed to legislating a voice during the 2022 federal election campaign, rather than enshrining the Voice in the Constitution.¹⁷ In contrast, then Labor Opposition leader Anthony Albanese pledged to enshrine a Voice in the Constitution, a decision he affirmed in his election night victory speech when he committed the new government to the Uluru Statement from the heart "in full".¹⁸ Turnbull subsequently supported this proposal.¹⁹

On 30 March 2023, the wording of the referendum question was revealed in the Constitution Alteration Bill introduced into Parliament.²⁰ The referendum asked Australians to approve an alteration to the Constitution by adding a new chapter and section to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia, and to establish a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to advise on policy issues relevant to them.

On 5 April 2023, Opposition leader Peter Dutton announced he would actively oppose a constitutionally enshrined Voice. Following an extraordinary meeting of Liberal MPs, it was confirmed that the shadow frontbench would be obliged to

oppose the referendum. But Liberal backbenchers, consistent with party tradition on some contentious issues, were given discretion to campaign according to their consciences.²¹ The Liberals' coalition partner, the Nationals, had already declared in November 2022 that they would not support the Voice.²² The Liberals' decision was a pivotal moment in the Voice campaign. As noted earlier, given the built-in systemic barriers to passing referenda in Australia, proposals lacking bipartisan political support have a consistent history of failure.

On 30 August 2023, Prime Minister Albanese confirmed 14 October 2023 as the referendum date. Before the official campaigning period had begun, concerns had emerged about the spread of misinformation and disinformation aimed at influencing the referendum result.

Table 1: A summary of key events leading up to the Voice to Parliament referendum

Date	Event
2010	Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition established
2016-17	Referendum Council holds First Nations Regional Dialogues
May 2017	250 First Nations Representatives call for an Indigenous Voice through the Uluru Statement from the Heart
May 2022	Anthony Albanese becomes Prime Minister, commits to a referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament
March 2023	Referendum question wording released
June 2023	Constitution Alteration Bill passed in Parliament
October 2-3,	Early voting begins for Referendum
October 14, 2023	Final polling day for the Referendum

Source: authors

13 'Circuit breaker needed as the cycle of failure continues in 2020 Closing the Gap report', *Coalition of Peaks*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.coalitionofpeaks.org.au/media/circuit-breaker-needed-as-the-cycle-of-failure-continues-in-2020-closing-the-gap-report>

14 'Close the Gap – National Indigenous Health Equality Targets', *Australian Human Rights Commission*, humanrights.gov.au/our-work/close-gap-national-indigenous-health-equality-targets

15 Australian Government, 'National Indigenous Reform Agreement', *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*, 2020, <https://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/718468>

16 Calla Wahlquist, 'Indigenous voice proposal 'not desirable', says Turnbull', *The Guardian*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/26/indigenous-voice-proposal-not-desirable-says-turnbull>

17 Sarah Martin, 'Indigenous voice to parliament legislation 'imminent', Coalition sources say', *The Guardian*, 19 November, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/19/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-legislation-imminent-coalition-sources-say>

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21 Josh Butler, 'Peter Dutton confirms Liberals will oppose Indigenous voice to parliament', *The Guardian*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/05/peter-dutton-confirms-liberals-will-oppose-indigenous-voice-to-parliament>

22 The Nationals, 'The National oppose a Voice to Parliament', *The Nationals*, <https://nationals.org.au/the-nationals-oppose-a-voice-to-parliament/#:~:text=The%20Leader%20of%20The%20Nationals,Parliament%20in%20the%20Australian%20Constitution.>

Broader information and policy context

Misinformation and Disinformation

Like most nations, Australia faces a growing challenge from the pernicious spread of “fake news”, including misinformation and disinformation, that can cause real-world harm and confuse citizens about basic facts.²³ Since 2021, Australia has taken a voluntary regulatory approach to the management of misinformation and disinformation online through the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (the Code). Developed by the Digital Industry Group (DIGI) with eight current signatories, the Code places responsibility on its signatories to be responsible and accountable for the content they allow on their platforms, while balancing freedom of expression and other important rights.

Following the work of the centre-right Morrison Government, in 2023 the Albanese Government developed a draft exposure bill proposing a strengthened regulatory framework through mandatory co-regulation overseen by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The plan, modelled on the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA), would impose non-compliance penalties on digital platforms that lack adequate systems and processes to address misinformation and disinformation. At the time of the referendum, the proposed law had yet to advance beyond public consultation, meaning platforms were left to self-regulate efforts to tackle online disinformation.

In May 2023, a study of social media platform X found misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories about the Voice to Parliament were being spread online. The study author said the findings underscored “the challenges

of fostering meaningful deliberation in such an environment, highlighting the pitfalls of the current media and political landscape for Australia’s liberal democracy, particularly in matters concerning First Nations representation”.²⁴

Amid these concerns, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) established a disinformation register, intended to inform citizens about false messages they might encounter.²⁵ By agreement with online platforms, some falsehoods that breached the Commonwealth Electoral Act or violated the platforms’ own terms and conditions were removed – providing an alternative to regulation to deal with the spread of electoral disinformation. The AEC also used its own social media channels to negate false claims and set the record straight.

The Economy

In addition to concerns that false or unreliable information was contaminating the Voice to Parliament debates, other issues were crowding the policy agenda, particularly public concerns about the rising cost of living. In 2022, as the world recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia recorded sharp increases in price inflation. The Consumer Price Index rose 5.4% in 2023.²⁶ All five Living Cost Indexes used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics rose by between 5.3% and 9% over the 12 months to September 2023.²⁷ Commentary during the campaign suggested that many voters were more focused on economic pressures than the Voice to Parliament campaign. In the final days of the referendum campaign, for example, a survey of 1000 voters revealed that eight in 10 people wanted the government to focus on cost-of-living issues, with only one in 10 prioritising the Voice.²⁸

23 Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell and Jesse Holcomb, ‘Many Americans believe Fake News is sowing confusion, Pew Research Centre,’ December 15, 2016, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/>

24 Timothy Graham, ‘Understanding Misinformation and Media Manipulation on Twitter During the Voice to Parliament Referendum’ September 8, 2023, <https://osf.io/qu2fb/download>.

25 See ‘Disinformation register – Referendum process’, AEC, <https://www.aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-register-ref.htm>

26 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *CPI rose 1.2 per cent in the September 2023 quarter [media release]*, October 25, 2023, ABS, [https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/cpi-rose-1-2-cent-september-2023-quarter#:~:text=The%20Consumer%20Price%20Index%20\(CPI,Bureau%20of%20Statistics%20](https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/cpi-rose-1-2-cent-september-2023-quarter#:~:text=The%20Consumer%20Price%20Index%20(CPI,Bureau%20of%20Statistics%20)

27 ABS, ‘Selected Living Costs Indexes, Australia’, September 2023, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/selected-living-cost-indexes-australia/latest-release>.

28 Phillip Coorey, ‘Voters were focused on cost of living, not Voice, survey reveals’, *Australian Financial Review*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/voters-were-focused-on-cost-of-living-not-voice-survey-reveals-20231023-p5ee7s>.



SECTION I: THE CAMPAIGN

Key Campaigns and Actors

Both sides of the referendum debate had multiple lead actors and concurrent campaigns. The most prominent campaigns for the Yes side were “Yes23”, “Uluru Statement from the Heart” and “Liberals for Yes”.

Each of the Yes campaigns had multiple public advocates, rather than a single apex figurehead, although some were more prominent than others (see Figure 1). Among the most high-profile media voices for the Yes case were Professor Megan Davis and Pat Anderson AO for Uluru Dialogue, and Noel Pearson, Thomas Mayo (a signatory and architect of the 2017 Uluru Statement From The Heart) and Rachel Perkin of Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition Ltd, campaigning as Yes23. Political communications for Yes23 were authorised by Dean Parkin in accordance with the Electoral Act (See Table 2a).

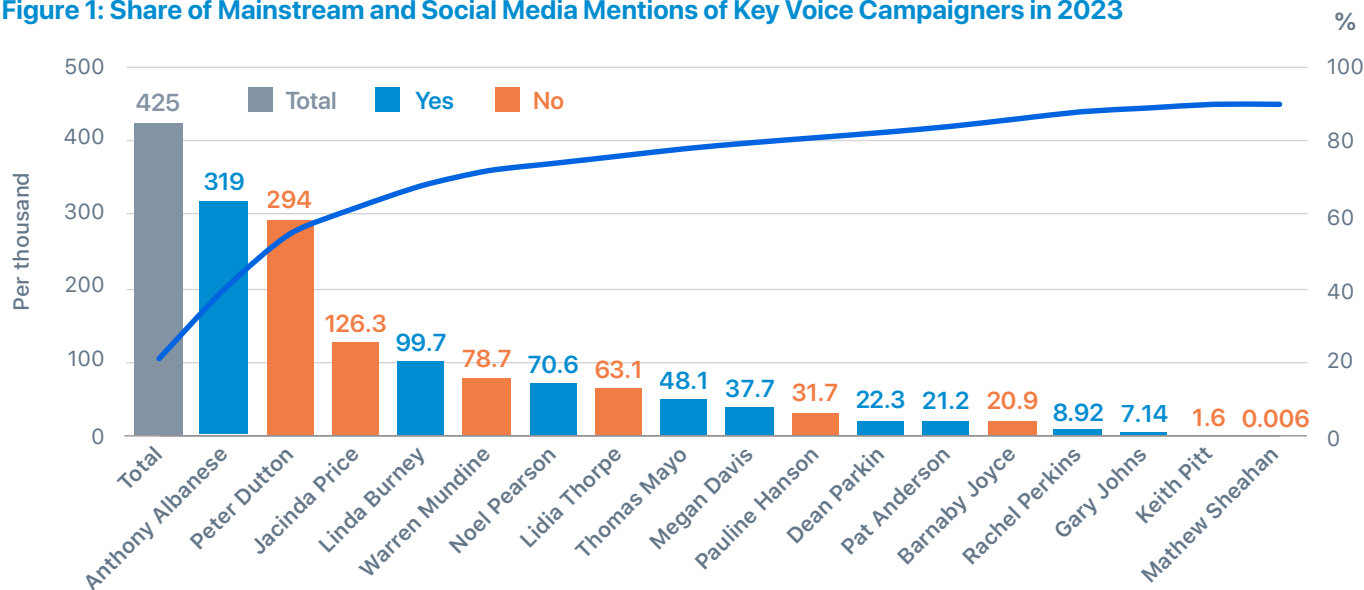
According to Guardian Australia, the Yes campaign comprised groups with “a shared history and objective: the enshrinement of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the Constitution, followed by a Makarrata process of treaty-making and truth-telling”²⁹. Some groups merged during the year leading up to the referendum and/or were loosely

aligned in their messaging. For example, the “From the Heart” movement, initially sponsored by the Cape York Institute, was later absorbed into Yes23³⁰; while “Uphold and Recognise” joined Liberals for Yes, which was also aligned with Yes23.

On the No side, the most prominent campaigns were “Fair Australia” and “Not My Voice”, both run by Advance and funded by Australians for Unity (AFU). There was also some reshuffling and merging of No campaigns during the year. In May 2023, Warren Mundine and Gary Johns’ group “Recognise a Better Way” reconnected with Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who had left them in February to head up “Fair Australia” as part of the wider Advance campaign. Both groups campaigned against the Voice with support from Advance and funding from Australians for Unity, which collected public donations. Unlike the Yes side, with its multiple speakers, the No side was largely represented in the media by Mundine and Price, both of whom had become highly recognisable public figures by referendum day, along with political leaders who joined the campaign efforts (see Figure 1). Advance’s political communications were authorised by the group’s executive director, Matthew Sheahan, who, unlike his counterpart for the Yes campaign, Dean Parkin, was largely invisible in the media.

²⁹ Lorena Allam and Josh Butler, “Voice referendum: who’s behind the yes and no campaigns and how do they plan to convince Australia?” *The Guardian*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/20/voice-referendum-whos-behind-the-yes-and-no-campaigns-and-how-do-they-plan-to-convince-australia>

Figure 1: Share of Mainstream and Social Media Mentions of Key Voice Campaigners in 2023



Source: Authors using Meltwater data and Boolean operators for the Voice. Red represents No campaigners and Green represents Yes campaigners.

To add to the complexity and potential confusion for voters of having multiple campaigns running on both sides, some of the public campaigns were run by groups with different names such as Advance (which on its website described its role as “powering” the Fair Australia and Recognise a Better Way campaigns). On the Yes side, Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition brought together a loose coalition of groups and grassroots campaigners under the broad Yes23 banner. Some groups also customised their campaigns to include state-specific branches, such as “yes23tasmania”. While these branch campaigns allowed for more localised message targeting, their follower numbers on social media tended to be low, suggesting they may have fragmented public support across the platforms, as shown in Table 2a.

Meanwhile Advance, as well as sponsoring the Fair Australia and Not My Voice campaigns, set up news-like Facebook pages, including “Referendum News” and “Not Enough”, to target specific voter cohorts. “Not Enough” used progressive-style narratives to argue that the Voice proposal did not go far enough towards improving the lives of Indigenous Australians and should therefore be rejected as inadequate.³⁰

The two starkly contrasting camps on the No side – the radical left “progressives” who argued that the Voice did

not go far enough, and the larger conservative camp that opposed the very notion of a Constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, potentially added further confusion for voters. Senator Lidia Thorpe, who headed “The Blak sovereignty movement” (see Table 2b), described her position as “progressive No”, saying the Voice mechanism was inadequate to deliver sovereignty to First Nations people. “Our sovereignty does not coexist with the sovereignty of the Crown,” she said in June 2023. “We don’t accept any colonial mechanism that continues to control us, which is what the Voice ultimately is a part of.”³¹ Politically conservative groups such as Advance had entirely different reasons for opposing the Voice, arguing it would create division and disunity by giving Indigenous Australians privileged access to the Parliament over other Australians.

The following tables provide summary information about the people and organisations behind the major campaigns for the Yes and No sides. Many other campaigners – too many to list here – also represented community and religious groups, businesses and for-purpose organisations. As previously noted, the primary focus of our analysis for this report is on the major groups, and particularly their political communications strategies and influence in mainstream and social media.

30 Cam Wilson, ‘Anti-Voice ‘news’ Facebook page is tun by the No camp, but you wouldn’t know it’, *Crikey*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/05/22/voice-to-parliament-no-advance-australia-unbranded-news-facebook-advertising-page>

31 Amy Hall, ‘Lidia Thorpe has revealed her position on the Voice to Parliament’, *SBS News*, 20 June 2023, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/lidia-thorpe-has-revealed-her-position-on-the-voice-to-parliament/Ofxj1j9jw>.

Table 2a: Major groups and actors involved in Yes campaigns for the Voice referendum.

Yes Campaigns	Date formed	Prominent actors	Websites
The Uluru Dialogue A group of First Nations people from across Australia who made the mandate of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and academics and lawyers. It was hosted by the UNSW Indigenous Law Centre.	2017	Co-chaired by Professor Megan Davis (Cobble Cobble) and Pat Anderson, AO, (Alyawarre). Both were members of the government's referendum advisory group. Davis was also a member of the constitutional expert group advising the government on the amendment and referendum question. Its people included Professor Gabrielle Appleby; Associate Professor Sean Brennan; Bridget Cama, Wiradjuri; Allira Davis, Cobble Cobble; Nolan Hunter, Bardi; Dr Dani Larkin, Bundjalung; Dr Dylan Lino; Delilah MacGillivray, Kalkutungu; Sally Scales, Pitjantjatjara; Geoff Scott, Wiradjuri; Eddie Synot, Wemba Wemba.	https://ulurustatement.org/about-us/
From the Heart (later campaigns as Yes23)	2020	Sponsored by Cape York Institute, an Indigenous think tank founded by Noel Pearson. From the Heart described itself as "an education project created to show Australians that an Indigenous Voice to Parliament enshrined in the constitution is fair, is practical, and that it is time that we make this change in the interests of our shared future." Its Director was Dean Parkin. It later merged with Yes23.	Website expired - switches to Yes23 with Dean Parkin featuring on the ads
Uphold and Recognise Centre-right approach targeted at finding common ground among conservative voters. Later joined with Liberals for Yes (see below)	2015	Founded by Damien Freeman, a lawyer at the Australian Catholic University, and Julian Leeson, who became the Coalition spokesperson on Indigenous Australians, with a long involvement in Indigenous constitutional recognition. Leeson later ceased involvement with the group. Includes constitutional lawyer Greg Craven. Board members include the former Indigenous Australians minister and Yamatji man Ken Wyatt and is led by the Wangkumarra/Barkindji man Sean Gordon.	https://www.upholdandrecognise.com/ U&R joined the official YES campaign as part of the Liberals for Yes movement.
Liberals for Yes	2023	Headed by former Liberal ACT chief minister and Small Business Ombudsman Kate Carnell. Prominent members Ross Macdonald, Nicole Lawder, Tom Adam, Elizabeth Lee, Gary Humphries and Mark Parton.	Website expired
Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition (AICR) , the fundraising, governance, and organising vehicle for the Yes alliance of campaign organisations entitled "Yes23". Yes23 brought together people from various walks of life in a coalition to support the Voice.	2019	Authorised by Dean Parkin (campaign director), with a board co-chaired by Business Council of Australia board member Danny Gilbert and Arrernte-Kalkadood film-maker Rachel Perkins. Its directors included prominent business and political heavyweights across the political spectrum including Tony Nutt, former principal adviser to PM John Howard; Michael Chaney, chair of Wesfarmers; Andrew Fraser, Chancellor of Griffith University; Tanya Hosch, former head of diversity and inclusion for the AFL; Cape York Institute's Noel Pearson; and Mark Textor, a veteran pollster and political strategist. Other directors: Lachlan Harris, Thomas Mayo, Karen Mundine, Catherine Tanna and Chloe Wighton AICR had gift recipient (DGR) tax status, allowing tax-free donations to its campaign.	https://www.yes23.com.au/
The Parliamentary friends of the Uluru statement	2023	Co-chaired by Labor's Gordon Reid, Liberal Bridget Archer and independent Allegra Spender.	
Empowered Communities Indigenous leaders from ten regions across Australia working together with government and corporate Australia to reform how Indigenous policies and programs are designed and delivered.	2013	Leaders include Chris Ingre, Inner Sydney; Denise Bowden, North East Arnhem Land; Fiona Jose, Cape York; Ian Trust, East Kimberley; Anthony Watson, West Kimberley; Tyrone Garstone, West Kimberley; Paul Briggs, Goulburn Murray; Vickie Parry, Central Coast; Shane Phillips, Inner Sydney; Lawrence Rankin Snr, Ngarrindjeri Ruwe; Des Hill, East Kimberley; Wayne Miller, Far West Coast, SA; Mark Jackman, Npy Lands.	https://empoweredcommunities.org.au/

Sources: Authors using data from campaign websites and Guardian Australia³²; Crikey³³; ABC.³⁴

32 Lorena Allam and Josh Butler, 'Voice referendum: who's behind the yes and no campaigns and how do they plan to convince Australia?' *The Guardian*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/20/voice-referendum-whos-behind-the-yes-and-no-campaigns-and-how-do-they-plan-to-convince-australia>

33 Cam Wilson, 'No campaign launches digital Voice campaign targeting Indigenous voters.' *Crikey*, 25 July 2023, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/07/25/not-my-voice-no-campaign-voice-to-parliament>

34 Dana Rose and Dan Bouchier, 'Key 'No' camps merge to form Australians for Unity to strengthen referendum campaign.' *ABC Online*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-11/key-no-camps-merge-to-strengthen-referendum-campaign/102329478>

Table 2b: Major groups and actors involved in No campaigns for the Voice referendum.

No Campaigns	Date formed	Prominent actors	Websites
Recognise a Better Way An early group to emerge arguing the No case, criticising the referendum as a “distraction” from achieving real, practical and positive outcomes for first nations people.	2023	Formed by Gary Johns, a former Keating Labor minister with Nyunggai Indigenous businessman Warren Mundine and, until February 2023, including Country Liberal Party senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who left to spearhead the Fair Australia campaign for Advance. She was a former spokesperson for Advance before entering politics. The group also featured former Nationals deputy prime minister John Anderson. They argued for symbolic recognition of Indigenous Australians in a constitutional preamble. Recognise merged in May 2023 with “Fair Australia” and was funded by Australians for Unity.	Transitioned to https://closethegapresearch.org.au/ after the referendum The Close the Gap Research Chairman is Gary Johns.
Advance (formerly Advance Australia) A conservative lobby group that came to prominence in the 2019 election as Advance Australia, claiming to represent “mainstream Australia” by “removing the far-left’s control” and attacking progressive activist group GetUp!	2019	Advance’s executive director, Matthew Sheahan, and other Advance staff are registered as directors of “Australians for Unity”, along with Nyunggai Warren Mundine and Gary Johns. Advance’s “Fair Australia” campaign was led by Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, and its “Not My Voice” campaign by Nyunggai Warren Mundine.	https://www.advanceaustralia.org.au/
“Not my Voice” Its arguments for the No case appeared to Indigenous voters.	2023	Led and authorised in political advertising by Nyunggai Warren Mundine AO.	https://www.facebook.com/NotMyVoice/ https://notmyvoice.com.au/donation-policy/
“Fair Australia” A self-described “grassroots movement of Australians pledged to vote ‘No’.”	2023	Led by Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, and featuring on its website indigenous voices and former PM Tony Abbott and Nyunggai Warren Mundine.	https://www.fairaustralia.com.au/
Australians for Unity (AFU)	2023	A registered charity, with deductible gift recipient status, provided funding to Advance to run the Fair Australia and Not my Voice campaigns. Authorised by Advance Executive Director Matthew Sheahan.	https://australiansforunity.com.au/
The Blak sovereignty movement Claimed to represent the “progressive Nos” in the community who believed the proposed Voice to Parliament was “meaningless”.	2023	Led by Senator Lidia Thorpe, who quit the Greens to lead the Blak sovereignty movement. Key members: Michael Mansell, Wayne Wharton, Hayley McClure and Murriguel Coe. They declared that “Recognition of Sovereignty and Truth-telling are the key to real change”.	https://blaksovereignmovement.com/

Sources: Authors using data from campaign websites and Guardian Australia³⁵; Crikey³⁶; ABC.³⁷ Shaded area represents Advance campaigns.

35 Allam and Butler, 2023.

36 Wilson, 2023.

37 Rose and Bouchier, 2023.

Campaigns and Social Media

The major campaigns made extensive use of social media platforms to communicate their messages about the Voice, with varying platform choices and levels of exposure. Overall, the Advance campaigns had the largest footprint across the popular platforms TikTok and Facebook, and the most subscribers (as distinct from views) on YouTube in the lead-up to the referendum.

Facebook was used more than any other platform by the major campaigns, which is unsurprising given that it is the most popular platform with adult Australians, and tends to skew towards older users.³⁸ Instagram and TikTok, which have younger average user profiles, were also targeted by all the major campaigns, with the Yes campaign having the largest presence on Instagram. However, as the blue shading in Table 3 indicates, the campaigns and campaigners with the most followers and subscribers were Advance (YouTube, TikTok and Facebook); Nyunggai Warren Mundine on X, and Uluru Statement of the Heart on Instagram.

Table 3 shows that Advance had strong social media followings with both younger Generation Z voters (TikTok) and older voters (Facebook). Advance did not directly campaign on X under its name, but its leaders Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (50,000 followers) and Nyunggai Warren Mundine (69,000 followers) did. Uluru Statement of the Heart had the largest following of the campaigns on X and the under 35s, and with generation Y on Instagram. Yes23 had a presence on all platforms but did not attract the highest number of followers on any. The Voice to Parliament debate significantly bolstered Advance Australia’s following on Instagram. Notably, its increased presence across the digital platforms has set up critical channels for its political communications ahead of the next federal election. As discussed below, Yes23 focused its political communications efforts on YouTube and on paid advertising on Meta (Facebook).

Table 3: Number of campaign followers across the digital platforms

Digital Platform	YouTube	TikTok	TikTok	Facebook	X (Twitter)	Instagram
	Subscribers	Followers	Likes	Followers	Followers	Followers
Advance Australia (Jacinta Nampijinpa Price; Nyunggai Warren Mundine)	1,780	n/a (80,100)	(2.6M)	110,000 (116,000) (249,000) (33,000)	n/a (50,000) (69,900)	515 (18,300) 34,500 5,000
Recognise a better way	19	(n/a)	(n/a)	n/a	n/a	n/a
Fair Australia		35,500 (0) Shifted to Advance	Shifted to Advance	32,000 (45,000)	5,764 (0)	3,627
Not My Voice	91	(n/a)	(n/a)	(22,000)	n/a	n/a
Uluru Statement	1,380	4,300 (7,000)	(111,000)	36,000 (44,000)	29,500 (30,600)	63,600 (85,100)
Yes23	623	3,300 (8,200)	(197,100)	60,000 (79,000)	15,300 (18,300)	40,300 (69,200)

Source: Authors using data from platforms. Figures in brackets are updates as of 1 Jan 2024. Green indicates campaigns with most followers on that platform.

As Table A1 (see Appendix) shows, Yes23, despite having fewer followers on YouTube than the Advance campaign, posted the most video content to the site (75 videos), which collectively recorded 19.93 million views – far more than the collective views for any other campaign). The next most viewed campaign on YouTube was Uluru Statement from the Heart, with 3.5 million views.

38 ‘Breakdown of social networking sites or app use among seniors in Australia as of June 2020’, Statista, 30 June 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1255946/australia-leading-social-networking-sites-or-apps-among-seniors/#statisticContainer>

Notably, Table A1 reveals the wide diversity of messages from the Yes campaigns in comparison to the No campaigns, which (excluding the Gary Johns videos for Recognise a Better Way) consolidated its messaging about the Voice being “divisive” and elitist, and not representing the perspectives of all First Nations Australians. In a profile of Advance’s executive director Matthew Sheahan published in *The Saturday Paper*, he was reported to have told the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Sydney in February 2023 that Advance’s use of polling and focus groups identified “division” as an early key message, saying that “through the polling ... focus groups, it was clear that division was the big, big factor for people voting No”.³⁹

The No side also produced negative videos for YouTube attacking key Yes campaigners. By contrast, the Yes campaign had only positive messages in its videos, which is worth noting in the context of academic studies that suggest negative campaigns can be more effective than positive campaigns especially when undertaken by third parties (such as Advance).⁴⁰

Case Study of X

We analysed the key events and themes of the referendum that attracted public attention and engagement on X (previously known as Twitter) throughout the campaign period using the media listening tool, Meltwater.

Our analysis confirmed, unsurprisingly, that public interest and engagement with the referendum grew throughout 2023 as the referendum drew closer, and peaked on polling day (Figure 1).

Content on X, a site widely used by journalists, commentators, politicians and other political actors, was also unsurprisingly

responsive to major campaign events and news coverage of the referendum. Figure 2, below, reveals a strong correlation between peaks in legacy media coverage of the referendum (blue line) and X content (yellow line).

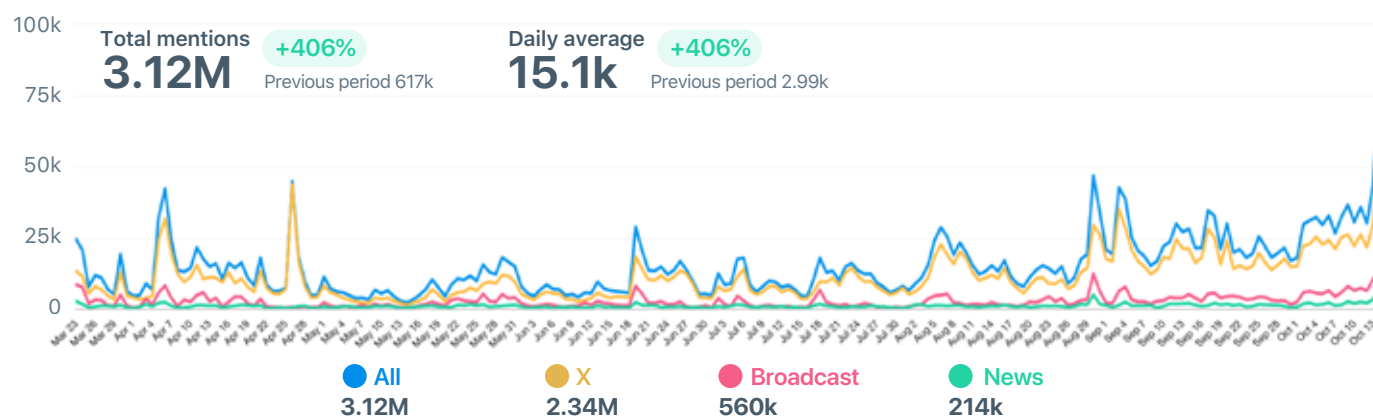
The correlation between key moments in the referendum campaign and peaks in referendum content on X are shown in Figure 3. Key moments included the release of the referendum question wording (23 March), the introduction and passing in Parliament of the Constitutional Alteration Bill (June 2023) and the announcement of the referendum debate (30 August).

Hashtags associated with Yes were more common on X than those associated with the No side. Major campaign events for Yes also garnered significant attention, including the launch of the Uluru Statement of the Heart’s advertisement featuring Australian music legend John Farnham’s 1980s hit “You’re the Voice” as its soundtrack. The Yes campaigns’ multiple “Walk for Yes” rallies also attracted significant attention on X.

Campaign events, debates and disputes attracted engagement from both Yes and No supporters on X, with allegations of misinformation or incivility particularly prominent. Major topics included a spurious debate around the length of the Uluru Statement from the Heart; contested claims that Indigenous activist and academic Marcia Langton had labelled No voters as “racist” and “stupid”, and the leaking of Fair Australia’s persuasion training guide for No campaign volunteers.

As referendum day approached, the general tenor of media coverage and public discourse became a talking point itself. Tweets decrying the uncivil nature of the debate peaked on 29 September, two weeks before polling day.

Figure 2: Mentions of the Voice across X, broadcast, and news media

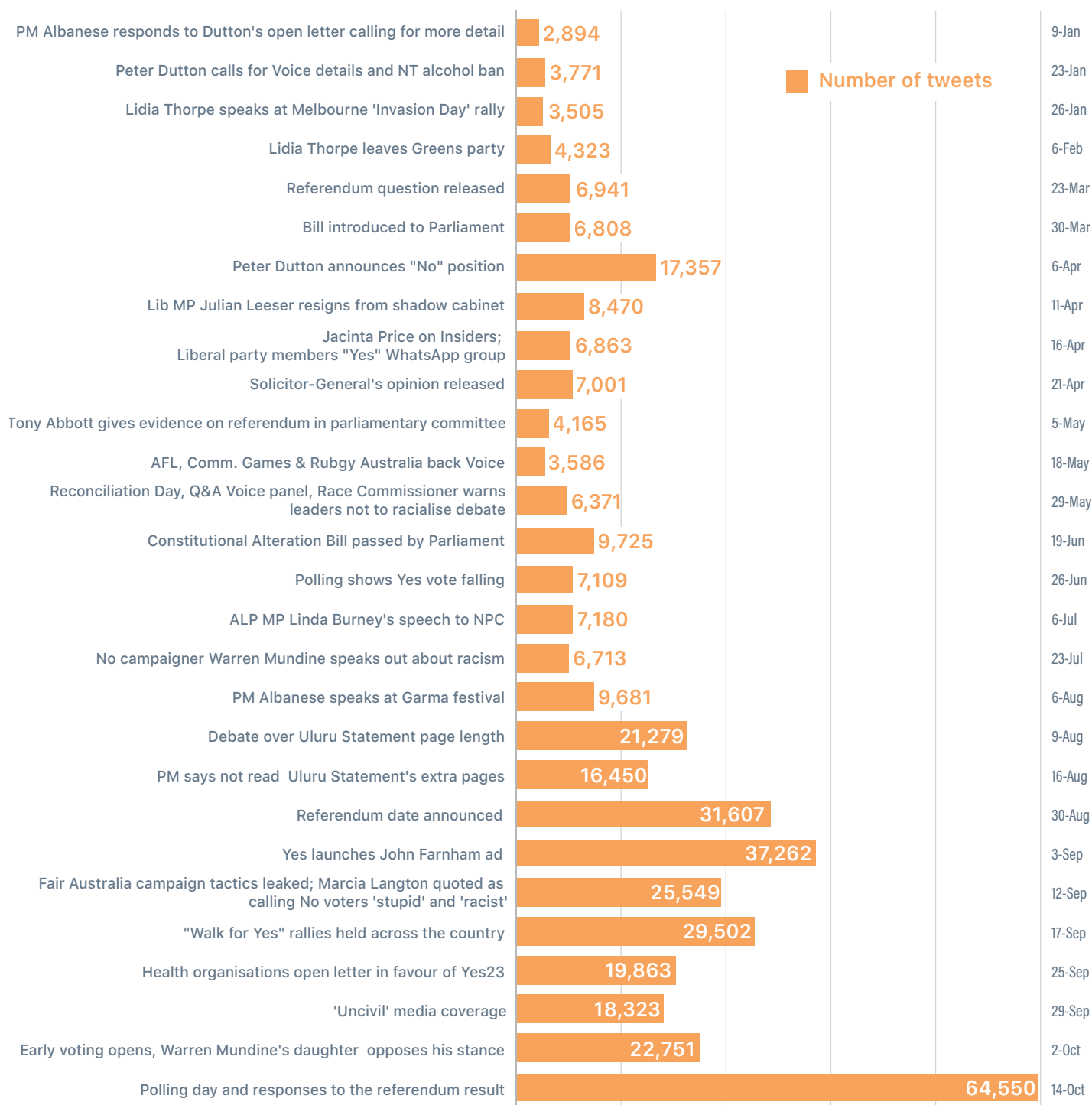


Source: Meltwater data

³⁹ Mike Secombe, ‘The man behind Advance’s far-right campaign.’ *The Saturday Paper*, 11 April 2023, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/2023/11/04/the-man-behind-advances-far-right-campaign>

⁴⁰ Justin Phillips, “Leave the Attacking to Others: Assessing the Effectiveness of Candidate Endorsed and Independently Sourced Televised Attack Ads in the 2016 Presidential Election.” *Mass Communication and Society* 24, no. 3 (2021): 319–344.

Figure 3: Major stories and peaks in public engagement with the Voice debate on X



Source: Authors using X data via Meltwater.

In summary, both the Yes and No camps recognised the significant potential power of messaging on social media, and acted accordingly. The No campaigners built larger social media followings overall, perhaps in part because they launched their efforts earlier, while Yes campaigners attracted significant mainstream media attention through their campaign events and the Farnham ad campaign. Our analysis also underlined how the daily news cycle has become so comprehensively reflected and documented on X. In the case of the Voice referendum, this involved rapid responses by X users to every campaign development.

Case Study: TikTok

Almost three quarters of TikTok's audience globally (71%) is in the 18–34 age range.⁴¹ As the platform has grown rapidly in Australia, it has become an important space for campaigns seeking to reach young people. However, despite strong support for the Voice among younger voters, the No campaign garnered significantly more attention on TikTok than the Yes side, as shown in Table 3 above.

Advance posted more often and more consistently on TikTok than any other Voice campaign group in the lead-up to the referendum (see Figure A1 in Appendix). In the final month of the campaign, Advance uploaded approximately the same number of posts as both Yes campaign accounts combined (107 to 106) and did not miss a day. Advance achieved this in part by re-using content across multiple posts, which contributed to the consistency and repetition of their No message. In contrast, the Yes campaign accounts were more likely to use unique content in each post.

The major Yes and No accounts prioritised Indigenous voices. Campaigners such as Jacinta Nambijinpa Price (No), and Dean Parkin (Yes) featured prominently, but not exclusively. Everyday Indigenous Australians were also represented, most frequently by Advance. Yes23 often posted edited footage from television news or other mainstream media sources, which tended to feature high-profile figures. In comparison, Advance posted more footage shot specifically for the campaign. Posts by the Uluru Statement had the most variation in style and format, including both highly produced advertisements and authentic DIY videos featuring Indigenous people. In the final stages of the campaign, both Yes23 and Uluru Statement posted more professionally produced content, which attracted more engagement than their previous posts.



The tone and substance of posts differed significantly between campaigns. Advance's posts were consistent and repetitive in their messaging – such as “Vote No to division” (Table A2) – and were more likely than Yes posts to use humour and to engage with TikTok trends. Yes23 and Uluru Statement tended to be more informative in approach, providing factual information on the proposed Voice and a range of arguments and personal narratives in favour of it. The tone of these videos was typically entertaining as well as informative. Correcting misconceptions about the Voice was also a common theme (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

Unlike Advance, Yes23 did not allow comments in response to its TikTok posts, which limited user engagement. Advance not only allowed public comments, but often posted videos in response to them. As demonstrated in the 2022 federal election, harnessing the interactivity features of TikTok can bear fruit.⁴² In combination, Advance's consistent messaging, interactivity and use of humour enabled it to attract millions of “likes” – clear hallmarks of success on TikTok that were much less apparent in the Yes campaign's efforts.

⁴¹ DataReportal, 'TikTok Users, Stats, Data & Trends', *DataReportal*, 11 May 2023, <https://datareportal.com/essential-tiktok-stats>

⁴² Lucien Leon and Richard Scully, 'Talking pictures (and cartoons, videos, memes, etcetera)', in Anika Gauja, Marian Sawyer and Jill Sheppard (eds.), *Watershed: The 2022 Australian Federal Election* (Canberra: ANU Press:2022), 138.

Paid Campaign Messages: Meta Ad Library

To gain deeper insights into the campaign messages, we also analysed content from the Meta Ad Library, which contains a comprehensive record of paid messaging posted by both sides on the major Meta platforms: Facebook and Instagram. Importantly, the Meta database allows us to see each paid message in its full and original form – rather than the cut-back, edited versions often relayed to the public by journalists and others. In other words, these ads contain the deliberate messages that the campaigners sought to persuade the Australian public to their side. Some of the messages are targeted at particular demographics such as age groups, geographical locations. The major campaigns also advertised on other digital platforms, including Google. We do not analyse those messages here. More advertising was directed to Meta platforms than Google, and thus Meta provides us with a useful and representative snapshot of both sides’ paid strategic political communications.

The biggest online advertisers among the campaigns were for the Yes side, particularly Yes23 (Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition), Liberals for Yes and Uluru Statement from the Heart (Uluru Dialogue). Online advertising for the No side was dominated by Advance – which posted

paid messages under various campaign names and labels including Fair Australia, Referendum News, Advance Australia, Christians for Equality, Save Aus. Day – and the Not My Voice campaign, which was funded by Australians for Unity, while still being part of Advance’s group of campaigns (see Table 4).

Some politicians, mostly on the conservative side, contributed funds under their own names to pay for online advertising against the Voice. They included Jacinta Nampijinpa Price (NT); Alex Antic (SA), Garth Hamilton (Qld), Jason Wood (Victoria), Tim James (NSW), Andrew Hastie (WA), Colin Boyce (Qld), Andrew Willcox (Qld), Keith Pitt (Qld) and Pauline Hanson (Qld). Among the fewer individuals on the progressive side of politics who had paid online advertising under their names were independents Allegra Spender (NSW), Zoe Daniel (Victoria) and Helen Haines (Victoria). Prime Minister Anthony Albanese also advertised on Meta platforms during this time. But, interestingly, none of his paid messages were about the Voice or the referendum. Opposition leader Peter Dutton, by contrast, did post ads against the Voice in his name during this period.

Table 4: Online advertising by the major campaigns on Meta

Side	Campaign	No. of ads (approx.) (start date)	Branded as:	Paid for by
Yes	The Uluru Dialogue	220 ads 11 April 2023-14 October 2023	Uluru Statement from the Heart	Indigenous Law Centre, UNSW
Yes	Liberals for Yes	820 ads 20 sept 2023-14 October 2023	Liberals for Yes	Liberals for Yes
Yes	Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition (AICR)	10,218 ads 27 November 2022-Oct 14 2023	Yes23	Yes 23 (earlier ads until paid by Cape York Institute - 27 Nov -24 Feb)
No	Advance (Advance Australia)	824 ads 1 Dec 2022-14 October 2023	Fair Australia Referendum News Advance Australia Christians for Equality Save Aus Day Not enough	Advance Australia
No	Not my Voice (powered by Advance)	145 ads 18 July 2023-14 October 2023	Not my Voice	Australians For Unity

Source: Authors using data from online Ad Library.

Meta's database reveals some interesting differences between the rival online campaigns. The Yes side essentially had three major groups running online campaigns in parallel. The No side, by contrast, had Advance overseeing all its major messaging, though with different campaign titles seemingly designed to target particular voters. Despite these different titles and target groups, many of the No ads carried the same key messages about "division".

The biggest online advertiser about the Voice was Yes23. It far outspent the other campaigns, producing over 10,000 ads. It also had many more people appearing in its ads than other campaigns, and a greater diversity of messages.

Two of the Yes campaigns were late to advertise compared to the others. For example, Liberals for Yes did not appear to begin advertising on Meta platforms until a month before the referendum vote. And Uluru statement from the Heart did not post any paid online content until April, a week after Opposition leader Peter Dutton's pivotal announcement that the referendum would not have bipartisan support.

Referendum News

The No campaigners used different campaign titles to target their message to different types of voters, and for different purposes. For example, more than 280 advertisements posted online under the 'Referendum News' banner leveraged content from mainstream news sources such as Sky News and news.com.au, as well as SBS, Nine publications, the ABC and Guardian Australia, to amplify and spread reported concerns about the Voice to Parliament. The themes included identity politics, legal issues and claims of big businesses "forcing" their staff to advocate for a Yes position. Individual items posted under Referendum News often featured prominent figures asserting that the Voice to Parliament would further divide Australians, or that it was being used to push a hidden agenda. For example, an ad featuring content from The Australian newspaper focused on racial division:

*Former UN assistant secretary Ramesh Thakur, an Australian of Indian heritage, has slammed the Voice, arguing it will entrench identity politics, make Australia a more racially divided society.*⁴³

'Referendum News' ads used Yes campaigners' own words in articles to suggest that the Voice would lead to "mission creep", with radical changes to Australian life such as in the operation of the High Court would function, landowners losing rights over their properties, new payments to Indigenous Australians, and a change to the date of Australia Day. For instance:

*Speaking at a public forum, 'Yes' campaign director Dean Parkin has revealed the Voice to Parliament is the mechanism for Indigenous Australians to change Australia Day.*⁴⁴

For a campaign aimed at preserving the status quo, the re-use of authentic news stories quoting prominent Yes figures to raise doubts about Constitutional change carried obvious strategic potential for the No camp.

Not my Voice

The Not my Voice campaign, which began in July 2023, had a strong focus on Indigenous voices. Five different ads were used on repeat across Australia with four key messages. All centred on Indigenous spokespeople or imagery. The messages were:

1. The only way 'Yes' can win is if you don't turn up to vote 'NO!' (October 2023)
2. "I'm an Australian just like you. The Voice will divide us." More and more Indigenous Australians are asking you to vote No on October 14, because the Voice will divide us. (September/October 2023)
3. The idea that all Indigenous Australians support the Voice is just not true (September 2023)
4. This is their Voice. Not mine. Not yours. (July 2023)
Watch why Aboriginal leader Nyunggai Warren Mundine AO is voting NO.

The ads employed various techniques and devices, including authenticity using Indigenous voices, story-telling through personal narrative, and consistent and frequent descriptions of the Voice as "divisive". Through this Indigenous-led messaging, they highlighted the heterogeneous views of Indigenous people about the Voice to send a tacit message to all voters that it was okay to vote No.

⁴³ Ramesh Thakur, 'Reject race-based 'poison', privilege Indigenous voice to Parliament will deliver', *The Australian*, 11 July 2023, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/reject-racebased-poison-privilege-the-indigenous-voice-to-parliament-will-deliver/news-story/3219ffaea3f8cf58183bf0a73329c891>

⁴⁴ Geoff Chambers and Rosie Lewis, 'Yes23 campaign boss linked voice to January 26', *The Australian*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/yes23-campaign-director-linked-voice-to-january-26/news-story/16842f9bfdc1f2cb28bf3d27c061d6e0>

Fair Australia

The Fair Australia campaign, featuring largely negative messages highlighting fears about potential wider consequences of implementing the Voice, ran from February to October 2023. It produced hundreds of ads, carrying messages that the Voice would divide Australians “by race” and was a threat to democracy and the Constitution. Some Fair Australia ads also warned that the Voice was an economic threat that would “cost the Earth”, and that it would lead to “policy creep”. Some ads also said there were more important issues for Parliament to deal with, including the “cost of living crisis”:

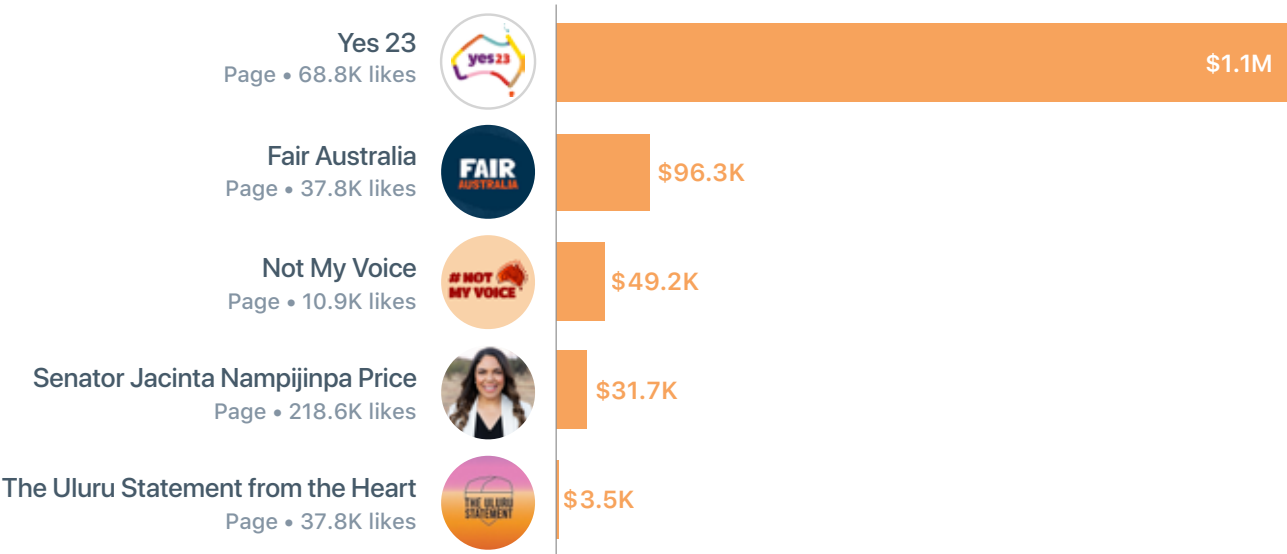
...the dangerous and divisive Voice is a “first step” towards Treaty and “agreement making”. That could mean reparations, a “black parliament”, and oversight of executive government and the public service. Meanwhile there’s a crime crisis in Alice Springs, along with an energy and cost of living crisis that’s just going to get worse. It’s not right and it’s not fair.”

Like the other Advance campaigns, the ads featured mainly Indigenous voices and imagery. There was a strong focus on Price and Mundine, with story-telling through their personal narratives, and references to the Voice as divisive. Unlike the Yes campaign, the Advance campaign was heavily focused on a few key messages that were repeated throughout the pre-referendum period. As shown in the next sections, these messages were successfully amplified in news stories and on social media.

As noted previously, Yes23 was by far the largest spender on Meta advertisements during the year, and particularly in the final months (see Figure 4).

Theoretically, No had an easier task than Yes because it only needed to convince voters in three states to support its case for the status quo. Yes, on the other hand, needed to carry a majority of states – at least four – as well as an overall majority vote across the nation for the referendum proposal to succeed. In addition to the mathematical electoral challenges, asking Australians to change the Constitution – on any question – arguably entails a more difficult cognitive load for voters than asking them to vote for the status quo.

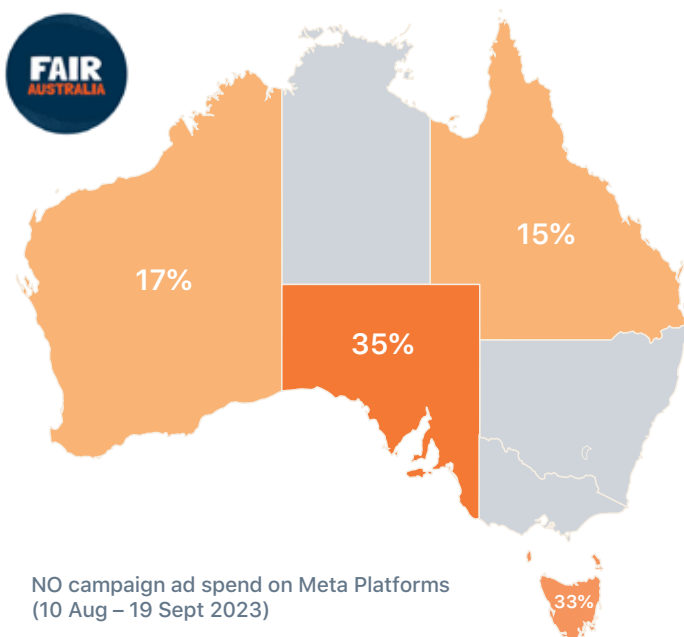
Figure 4: Top five Voice campaign spenders on Facebook and Instagram, June to September 2023.



Source: Meta Ad Library.

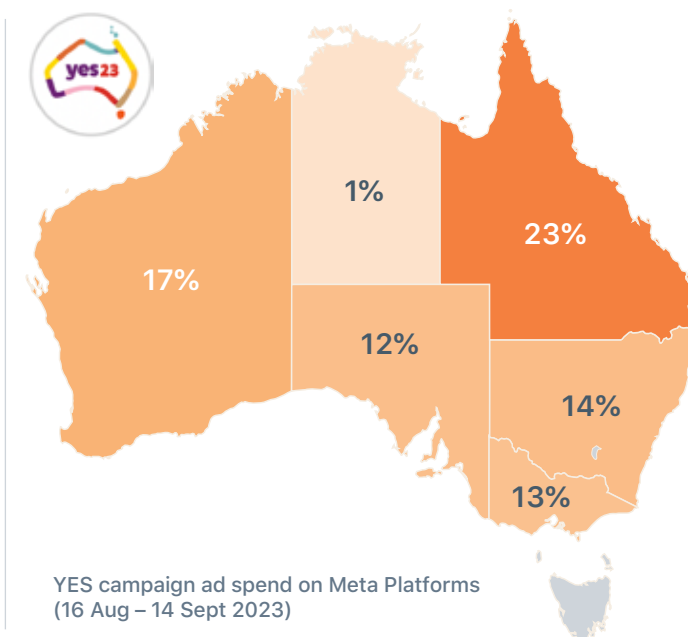
As referendum day drew closer, the state-based mathematical challenges of constitutional change played out strategically in the Yes and No online social media advertising. Polling was showing a majority of voters in Western Australia and Queensland supported the No case.⁴⁵ This meant No needed to secure a majority in just one other state to ensure the Voice was rejected. Accordingly, in the closing months of the campaign, No targeted more than half of its online advertising spending and efforts into just two states – South Australia and Tasmania – in a bid to secure the defeat of the Voice (see Figure 5a).

Figure 5a: A month-long snapshot of where Fair Australia was targeting its online ads.



Source: Authors using Meta Ad library data for Fair Australia.
Note: Percentages do not add to 100 as some ad spend was nationally distributed.

Figure 5b: A month-long snapshot of where Yes23 was targeting its online ads.



Source: Authors using Meta ad data for Yes23.
Note: Percentages do not add to 100 as some ad spend was nationally distributed.

Because Yes needed to win a majority of states and an overall national majority, it necessarily had a more even distribution of spending across the country than No (see Figure 5b). It is therefore unsurprising that its ad spend was not only distributed widely, but that it spent more overall (see Figures 4 and 5b).

⁴⁵ David Crowe, "A tipping point": Support for Voice falls below a majority', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/a-tipping-point-support-for-voice-falls-below-a-majority-20230612-p5dfto.html>

Mainstream Media (Earned Media)

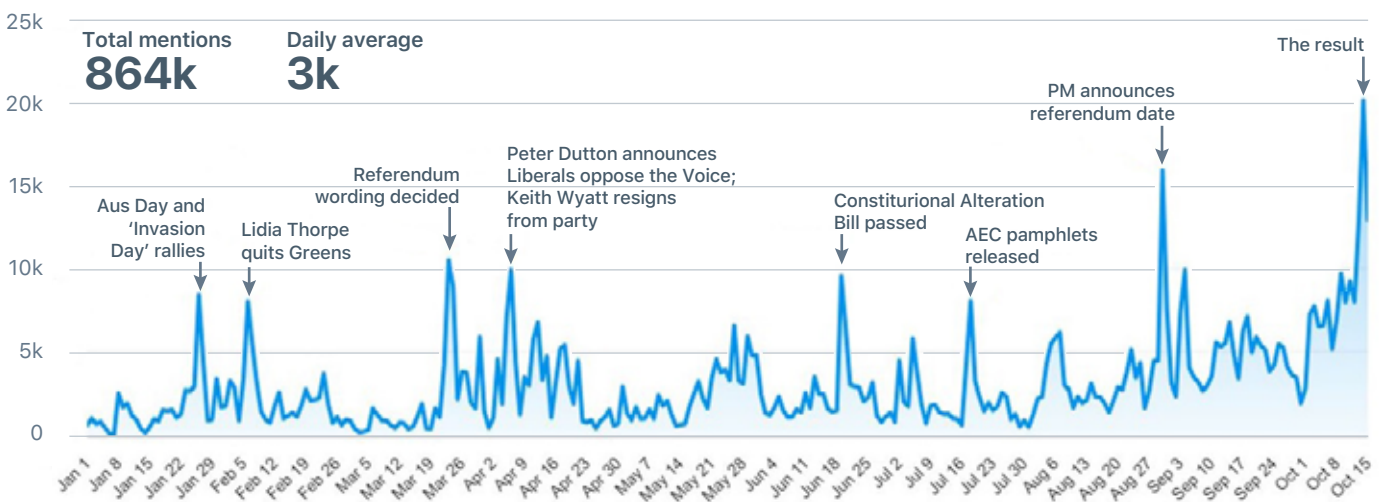
In addition to paid advertising, another key driver of campaign messaging is news coverage in the mainstream media – sometimes referred to as “earned media”, because of the efforts spent by campaign strategists to achieve it. Following our examination and analysis of social media messaging, this section of the report focuses on legacy mainstream media coverage (radio, television and newspapers) of the Yes and No campaigns. As with social media messaging, overall news coverage increased as the referendum date drew closer, and as campaigning activities intensified and, arguably, more Australians paid attention to the forthcoming compulsory vote. According to data sourced from media monitoring company Meltwater, there were 3.89 million media mentions of the referendum, including on social media, from 1 January 2023 until October 15 (the day after the referendum). Mainstream media mentions made up about one third of total mentions (864,000), with broadcast media representing three quarters of the mainstream coverage (670,000) and newspapers one quarter (194,000).

As Figure 6 below shows, the news events that attracted the most public attention were the finalisation of the wording for the referendum on 23 March; Opposition leader Peter Dutton announcing the Liberals’ opposition to the Voice, sparking the resignation from the Liberal party of former Indigenous Affairs Minister Ken Wyatt on 6 April; the announcement of the referendum date on 30 August, and the Voice outcome on 14 October.

Levels of mainstream media coverage of the Voice followed similar patterns to coverage on social media, with levels peaking for the same events. This indicates an interdependent relationship between stories in mainstream and social media, with stories being shared across digital and legacy media spheres. Stories that gain attention in mainstream media will tend to be shared on social media, and vice versa, with political actors and other commentators on social media being reported in mainstream media news stories.

The data, and the tracking of news stories during the campaign using keywords and hashtags,⁴⁶ indicate that the Yes campaigns (170,000 mentions) generated more mainstream media coverage than No (125,000 mentions) overall. Some caution is needed in interpreting these figures, as both campaigns can refer to Yes and No terms in their commentary and postings. News reporters also often quote from both sides in the same story, further complicating the task of comparing numbers of mentions for each campaign. But the overall figures confirm that both the Yes and No campaigns were well covered in legacy media. Analysis of the media coverage also highlights what another prominent aspect of No campaign messaging. In addition to the emphasis on the word “divisive” in paid advertising, conservative politicians, including Michaelia Cash and former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, were frequently quoted in the media using the phrase, “if you don’t know, vote no”, which became a key aspect of No campaign messaging.

Figure 6: Mainstream media (print and broadcast) coverage of the Voice to Parliament 1 January to 15 October 2023.



Source: Meltwater data. Notes: A “mention” is the number of times the Voice (or related keywords) was mentioned in the media.

46 Convo pieces

Closer examination of the news stories that attracted the most attention on social media (Facebook and X), reveals the top five most shared news items online about the Voice in 2023 were largely personality driven, echoing a similar finding in a study on the 2022 federal election.⁴⁷ The findings also underline the entwined relationship between mainstream media coverage and social media when it comes to attracting public attention.

The list below, sourced from Meltwater's "Social Echo" database, details the top five Voice-related stories ranked according to numbers of shares on social media.

1. Gina Rinehart named "Western Australian of the Year" and Ken Wyatt awarded the "Wesfarmers Aboriginal Award" for being "a strong advocate for an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament" (The West Australian 3 June, 28,500 shares)
2. Indigenous ABC journalist and commentator Stan Grant stepping away from the media, citing the emotional impact of racist attacks (ABC Online 19 May, 25,400 shares)
3. Sky News Australia story accusing RMIT FactLab and a University of Adelaide academic of "academic-driven censorship" of the Voice debate (Sky News Australia 22 August, 23,300 shares)
4. The NRL backs the Indigenous Voice to Parliament (Wide World of Sports 9 May, 20,000 shares)
5. Blak Movement leader Senator Lidia Thorpe in clash outside Melbourne strip club (The Australian 16 April, 16,000 shares)

The data also shows how key paid and political messages sometimes led to mainstream news coverage. For example, the repeated use of the word "divisive" in No paid advertising was not only repeated by Coalition politicians, but also used in counter arguments from the Yes campaign, which served to amplify its prominence. The word appeared 37,900 times in print and broadcast media coverage of the Voice during 2023, most frequently in the six weeks leading up to the vote. The term peaked in media coverage on 18 July when both sides of the debate presented official pamphlets arguing their respective cases to the Australian Electoral Commission, before distributing them to households and sharing them on the AEC website.

We also observed in the data a reversal of the previously-described flow of Voice campaign messaging, with mainstream legacy news stories featuring criticism of the Voice tagged in Advance's 'Referendum News' paid campaigns. This was redolent of the traditional election campaign practice of featuring 'tear-out' images of newspaper stories in political party television advertising to criticise the opposite side – which seeks to leverage the legitimacy of professional journalism and news stories for political purposes.

Finally, Table 5 below provides insights into how story selection differed between major legacy media outlets, and what their audiences chose to share on social media.

Tracking the top three stories of selected major news outlets from 1 January to 15 October 2023, the data shows the disparate audience appetites for Voice stories across the news spheres, and the fragmentation of the media ecosystem. It also shows how Sky News, despite its relatively small primary audience, managed to top the list for Voice stories shared online with its emotionally charged and, in the case of some of its broadcasters, overtly partisan Voice coverage, which seems to have been more intrinsically "shareable" than the more balanced, or "he said, she said", approaches of other outlets.

⁴⁷ Andrea Carson and Simon Jackman, 'Media coverage of the campaign and the electorate's responses' in Anika Gauja, Marian Sawer and Jill Sheppard (eds.), *Watershed: The 2022 Australian Federal Election* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), 138.

Table 5: Most popular Voice stories shared online by audiences in 2023

Sky News* (3.44k mentions of Voice) Avg 11 mentions/day	'000	ABC* (1.84k mentions of Voice) Avg 6 mentions/day	'000	The Guardian (1.13k) Avg 3 mentions/day	'000	Nine* (SMH) 2.85k Avg 9 mentions/day	'000
Sky story accusing RMIT Fact Lab ...'academic-driven censorship'	23.3	Stan grant cites racism after exit from ABC	25.4	Australia rejects proposal to recognise Aboriginal people in constitution	9.0	John Farnham backs Voice, permits his anthem to front Yes campaign ad	SMH 6.3
'Heartbreaking': Sky reporter's emotional live cross on NT violence	8.3	More than 70 university law professors say Voice 'not constitutionally risky' in letter ...	6.4	Australia's new \$5 banknote will feature Indigenous history instead of King Charles	4.7	No campaign's 'fear, doubt' strategy revealed	SMH 5.1
Peta Credlin exposes Uluru Statement from the Heart's 'true agenda'	6.3	Analysis: The attacks on Marcia Langton are not part of a theoretical debate. We know that racism exists	5.9	Indigenous communities overwhelmingly voted yes to Australia's voice to parliament	3.8	Booth by booth, Indigenous Australians backed the Voice	SMH 4.6
TOTAL online shares	37.9k		37.7k		17.5k		16k

Source: Authors using Meltwater data, filtering for news source. *Does not include broadcast.

Sky News Australia and Guardian Australia use of YouTube

The opinionated and partisan approach of Sky News and some of its high-profile broadcasters was particularly evident in Voice content posted on its YouTube channel. While most major media outlets have a presence on YouTube, none was as prolific on the platform in its Voice coverage as Sky, a part of the conservative Rupert Murdoch-owned global News empire. From the start of 2023 to referendum day, Sky posted about 490 Voice-related videos. By comparison, the self-described progressive news organisation Guardian

Australia posted about 110 videos in the same time period. Sky Australia has a large subscriber base on YouTube – 3.86 million compared to the Guardian's 58,600 YouTube subscribers. Collectively, Sky News Australia had more than 9 million views of its Voice stories, with 27 videos each viewed by more than 50,000 viewers. Voice stories on Guardian Australia's YouTube channel had about 1.6 million views, with nine videos attracting more than 50,000 views each. The polar differences in the Voice coverage of Sky Australia and Guardian Australia is evident in the types of stories featured by these news outlet on their YouTube channels. See Figures 7 and 8.

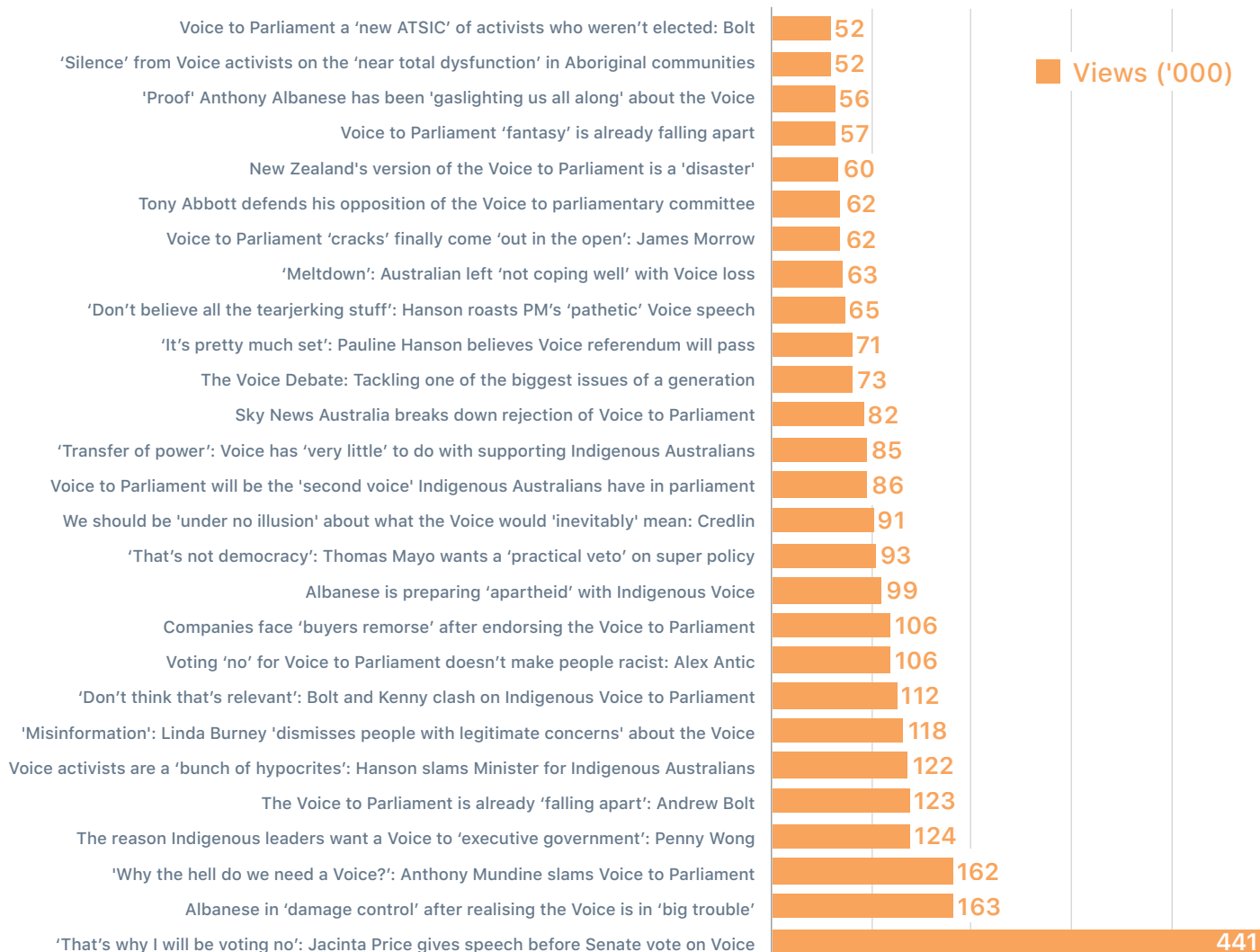
Figure 7: Guardian Australia posts about the Voice that attracted more than 50,000 views on YouTube



Source: Authors using data from YouTube

Notably, the most watched Sky News stories about the Voice posted on YouTube were negative in tone and, in many cases, openly partisan and activist (see Figure 7).

Figure 8: Sky News Australia content on the Voice that drew more than 50,000 views on YouTube



Source: Authors using data from YouTube.

Other Campaign Activities

Field Campaigns

Yes23 claimed it ran the largest grassroots campaign in Australian history, reporting 50,000 volunteers.⁴⁸ Other groups campaigning for Yes included the Teal independents, the Australian Labor Party and many trade unions. Despite the claimed number of volunteers, the reported rate of voter contacts was low compared to recent election campaigns. Yes23 reported 250,000 doors knocked, while the Teal independents reported 82,459.⁴⁹ These numbers are lower than those from the 2022 federal election campaign. For example, Teal campaigns reported 165,586 doors knocked in 2022, and the Labor Party reported more than one million in 2019.⁵⁰ Although claimed campaign volunteer numbers should be treated with scepticism,⁵¹ the reported figures suggest that participation in voter contact was less than anticipated across the Yes campaigns. Beyond door-knocking, the most prominent of Yes23's campaign events were the highly visible "Walk For Yes" rallies conducted around the country in the months before the vote.

In contrast, Fair Australia declined to publicly report volunteer numbers and focused instead on less visible activities.⁵² In addition to distributing flyers and its polling day campaign efforts, Fair Australia conducted phone banks and sent hundreds of thousands of mobile text messages directly

to voters. It spread campaign messages through traditional and digital media by encouraging supporters to call talkback radio stations and take part in social media activism. The Liberal and National parties supported these efforts.

Both sides of the campaign experienced controversies around leaked volunteer training documents detailing persuasion techniques.⁵³ These documents indicated that their persuasion efforts were largely in line with the latest academic findings, which show evidence for the use of emotion and personal values to form connections with voters, rather than appealing to fact-based arguments, to change voters' minds.⁵⁴

Beyond the official campaigns, community forums on the referendum were organised across the country by a variety of organisations including community groups, activists, local councils, churches and universities. Major businesses like Qantas and sporting bodies such as the AFL and NRL also campaigned in favour of the Yes case. This was met with derision by some commentators who argued that businesses and sporting bodies should stay out of politics, and that their efforts may have had a backlash effect with voters. A survey of company shareholders found 70% did not agree with company advocacy for or against the Voice.⁵⁵

48 Joseph Dunstan, 'Yes and No campaigners hope Voice referendum will swing their way in final days of voting', *ABC Online*, 9 October 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-09/voice-campaign-yes-no-volunteers-voting-referendum/102934478>

49 Climate 200, *Impact Report*, 2023 <https://www.climate200.com.au/resources/impact-report-2023>; Jamie Walker, 'Behind the scenes of two very different voice campaigns', *The Australian*, 30 September 2023, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-behind-the-scenes-of-two-very-different-voice-campaigns/news-story/f031400fca11c4cff4c1ca1b9d99023>

50 Private correspondence with a campaigner from Climate 200. 2022; Australian Labor Party, *Review of Labor's 2019 Federal Election Campaign*, (*The Australian Labor Party*, 2019) <https://alp.org.au/media/2043/alp-campaign-review-2019.pdf>

51 In many cases these numbers are drawn from volunteer sign-ups rather than active participants

52 Volunteer For No, 'Get Involved, Make A Difference: Volunteer Now! [webpage]', August 12 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230812012013/https://www.volunteerforno.com.au/volunteer>; Fair Australia, 'Volunteer [webpage]', 25 March 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230325193810/https://www.fairaustralia.com.au/volunteer>

53 Geoff Chambers, 'Pick a villain': unofficial Yes campaign document reveals strategies for swaying 46 million undecided voters', *Sky News*, 28 August 2023, <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/pick-a-villain-unofficial-yes-campaign-document-reveals-strategies-for-swaying-46-million-undecided-voice-voters/news-story/3f924dab374267f759b70ed440e7f2ae>; Paul Sakkal, 'No campaign's 'fear, doubt' strategy revealed', *The Age*, 12 September 2023, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/no-campaign-s-fear-doubt-strategy-revealed-20230910-p5e3fu.html>

54 Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, 'Reducing Exclusionary Attitudes through Interpersonal Conversation: Evidence from Three Field Experiments.' *American Political Science Review*, 114/2 (2020), 410–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055419000923>; Emily Kubin, Curtis Puryear, Chelsea Schein, and Kurt Gray, 'Personal Experiences Bridge Moral and Political Divides Better than Facts', *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A.* 118 /6 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2008389118>

55 Paul Sakkal, 'Investors put heat on big business over backing for Voice', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/investors-put-heat-on-big-business-over-backing-for-voice-20230905-p5e265.html>

Summary

In this first section of the report, we have provided a detailed examination of the rival Yes and No campaigns for the Voice referendum, their key actors and their messages – with “Yes23” and “Uluru Statement of the Heart” for the Yes side, and “Fair Australia” and “Not My Voice” (both under the auspices of Advance Australia) leading the opposition to the Voice. We showed how social media played a pivotal role in the lead-up to the referendum, especially for Advance campaigns, which leveraged online platforms like TikTok and Facebook to reach broad audiences of both young and older voters. The Yes side garnered millions of views to its messages using YouTube and Instagram.

Examining paid campaign messages revealed strategic intricacies, with Yes23 emerging as a major advertiser, showcasing a multitude of actors and messages supporting the Yes case, and its broader assignment to win a majority of voters nationally, and a majority of states. In contrast to the Yes side’s broad national focus, the No campaign was more strategically targeted, both geographically and at particular voter groups under various banners. Notably, it harnessed prominent Indigenous Australians as spokespeople for the “Not My Voice” and progressive “Not Enough” campaigns.

Mainstream media and social media engagement were interdependent, with peaks in legacy media coverage correlating with surges in social media activity surrounding the Voice, highlighting the interconnected nature of these platforms in shaping public discourse and the importance of a multi-platform campaign.

As referendum day neared, and with opinion polls increasingly pointing to a win for the No case, the Yes side initiated major advertising efforts and refined some of its key messages.

Until late in the campaign, the Yes camp had deployed multiple messages and messengers – among them sporting groups, trade unions, universities, charities and businesses, which gave rise to commentary about possible message overload and predictions of a voter backlash. This was in contrast to the No campaign, which consolidated a more sharply focused and targeted narrative early, and embraced the simple effectiveness of two main messages: “If you don’t know, vote no”, and that the Voice was “dangerous and divisive” for Australians. These phrases were repeated often in media coverage and advertising by politicians, led by prominent Indigenous campaigners Mundine and Price who, with their large personal followings, proved to be a potent combination for Advance’s major campaigns.

Other politicians, particularly conservatives, garnered substantial media coverage, adding to the No case’s momentum. Sky News provided a powerful platform for the No campaign and leveraged its millions of followers on YouTube and social media to rival Yes23’s YouTube presence. Despite the Yes campaign’s extensive online advertising, YouTube video posts and legacy media coverage, it failed to reverse falling poll numbers, suggesting the relationship between spending, visibility and public sentiment is not straightforward.

In essence, the interplay of diverse messages and messengers, campaign timing differences, the influence of conservative politicians, accusations of rampant disinformation, and the intricate relationship between traditional and social media collectively shaped the contours of the referendum campaign. The next section of the report looks more closely at the roles of disinformation and fact checking in the campaign.



SECTION II: DISINFORMATION AND FACT-CHECKING

Misinformation and Disinformation during the campaign

A variety of untrue negative narratives surrounding the Voice gained traction from the early months of 2023.⁵⁶ This raised concerns among Voice proponents about detrimental impacts of misinformation and disinformation on public perceptions of the issues and the process, and its potential to skew voter intentions and precipitate the rejection of the

proposal. Measuring these effects on voter behaviour is difficult and outside the scope of this report. However, we do look at the types of disinformation that circulated during the campaign, particularly those targeting the politically neutral administrator of the referendum, the Australian Electoral Commission.

Varieties of Electoral Misinformation and Disinformation in the Voice Referendum

For this report, we define disinformation as false information spread intentionally to cause harm or self-gain. Bennett and Livingston note that it can, though not always, be in the guise of journalistic formats or news stories.⁵⁷ Misinformation is also false information, but it may be shared inadvertently, without the sender being aware of its falseness.⁵⁸ Both come in different shapes and forms, ranging from rumours or conspiracy theories, to outright lies. The harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation can vary according

to the issues and actors involved, or the reach they gain with audiences.

When it comes to electoral misinformation and disinformation, three types of sources can be usefully distinguished: foreign governments, domestic governments, and other domestic actors. Elections and referendums worldwide are increasingly affected by interference in the local information environment through foreign-based troll farms or the amplification of falsehoods in foreign-based media outlets.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Graham, 2023.

⁵⁷ W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston (Eds.), *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/9781108914628>

⁵⁸ Claire Wardle, 'The need for smarter definitions and practical, timely empirical research on information disorder', *Digital Journalism*, 6/8 (2018), 951-963, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1502047>

⁵⁹ Samantha Bradshaw and Phillip N. Howard, 'The global organization of social media disinformation campaigns', *Journal of International Affairs*, 71/1.5 (2018), 23-32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26508115>; Matthias Mader, Nikolay Marinov and Harold Scheon, 'Foreign Anti-Mainstream Propaganda and Democratic Publics', *Comparative Political Studies*, 55/10 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211060277>

Although autocratic regimes are the primary foreign sources of disinformation (such meddling has a long Cold War pedigree), disinformation campaigns can also emanate from democratic states.⁶⁰ In addition to interfering in other countries' affairs, governments also deploy falsehoods to confuse their own populations about elections through propaganda.⁶¹ However, neither foreign nor domestic governments played a significant role in Voice-related misinformation or disinformation. Despite some initial fears about foreign interference⁶², there was little concrete evidence of it. Rather, the bulk of information disorders were homegrown, originating from Australian non-state actors (see Figure 9).⁶³

Misinformation and disinformation surrounding The Voice campaign primarily related to (a) the issues at stake; (b) the mechanics of the electoral process; and (c) the procedural integrity of that process.

First, a stream of messages inserted false or misleading information about the Voice proposal into public debate. Examples included the false claim that First Nations people did not overwhelmingly support the Voice,⁶⁴ and claims that the Voice was a "globalist land grab".⁶⁵ Though numerous, and clearly aimed at influencing people to vote No, these types of falsehoods were not covered in the AEC's disinformation register, as there are currently no provisions for truth in political advertising in Australia at the federal level, and the Commission itself had no remit to engage in fact-checking claims about the Yes or No case.

The register did cover one category of misinformation and disinformation – untruths about the referendum process itself. The AEC has power to cite these falsehoods as they fall foul of the Commonwealth Electoral Act and Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act. Falsehoods in this category included suggestions that the referendum was voluntary

(like the 2017 postal survey on same-sex marriage), which may have been aimed at influencing the outcome by depressing voter turnout.

Another category of messages was explicitly targeted at the AEC itself, the organisation that ran the referendum process. A possible goal of this disinformation may have been to undermine trust in the integrity of the vote. On 24 August, for instance, Opposition leader Peter Dutton claimed the voting process was "rigged" because ticks on ballots would be counted as votes for Yes, but crosses would not be accepted as No votes.⁶⁶ A day later, Sky News host Andrew Bolt echoed that claim in his podcast, which reached at least 920,000 people.⁶⁷ Attention surrounding the issue spiked when the AEC came out in defence of the voting system, saying "fewer than 1 per cent of votes recorded in the 1999 republic referendum were informal votes, with ballot papers including crosses and ticks forming a small portion of them."⁶⁸ However, this did not end the controversy, as the story of an allegedly partisan AEC became its own headline, with the Daily Telegraph commentator Maurice Newman doubling down and linking it to voter fraud.⁶⁹

Another example of this type of disinformation involved a claim that the AEC's processes enabled multiple votes by individuals, a narrative promoted via the hashtag #voteoften on social media. As shown in Figure 9, most of these attacks came later in the campaign and featured across various platforms, particularly on X and Reddit. The AEC took a proactive approach in all these instances, using its own social media accounts to actively defend itself against such accusations.⁷⁰ However, it did not engage on TikTok despite that platform's emergence as a popular political communication channel for young Australians.⁷¹

60 David Shimmer, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference*, (New York: Knopf, 2020).

61 Graeme Robertson, 'Political orientation, information and perceptions of election fraud: Evidence from Russia' *British Journal of Political Science*, 47/3 (2017), 589–608.

62 Albert Zhang and Danielle Cave, 'China's cyber interference narrows in on Australian politics and policy'. *The Strategist*, 24 July 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-cyber-interference-narrows-in-on-australian-politics-and-policy>

63 Greg Austin, 'Forget China, the real Voice influencers are in Australia', 360, 12 October 2023, <https://doi.org/10.54377/ba13-6884>; Graham, 2023.

See also Adam Creighton, 'Voice vote not influenced by foreigners: ASIO', *The Australian*, 21 October 2023, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/asio-chief-mike-burgess-slaps-down-claims-foreign-governments-were-spreading-disinformation-in-australia/news-story/7265b07605fc139699b65b2c4a3dc8ca>

64 'Anthony Albanese says surveys show between 80 and 90 per cent of Indigenous Australians support the Voice. Is that correct?'. *RMIT ABC Fact Check*, 2 August 2023) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-02/fact-check-indigenous-australians-support-for-the-voice/102673042>

65 Stephen Reason, 'The Voice to Parliament: The United Nations' Agenda 2030, and how 'The Voice' will be Used to Steal Australian Land & Assets'. *Stephen Reason Substack*, 20 April 2023, <https://stephenreason.substack.com/p/the-voice-to-parliament-the-united>

66 Tom McLroy, 'Voice voting rules confusion 'stinks': Dutton', *Australian Financial Review*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/voice-voting-rules-confusion-stinks-dutton-20230824-p5dz41>

67 See Andrew Bolt, 'Sky News host Andrew Bolt says the Australian Electoral Commission's ballot paper for the Voice to Parliament is the latest evidence the vote "seems rigged" against the 'No' campaign' [video], (*Sky News Australia*, 25 August 2023), <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1256952825005993>

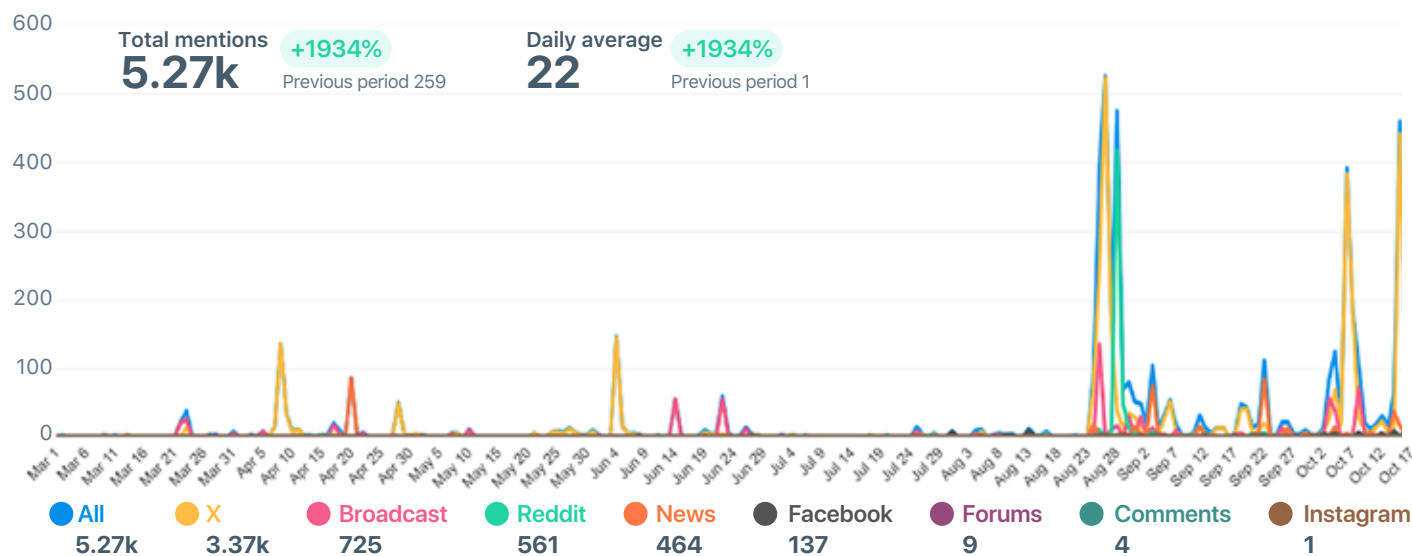
68 Sarah Basford-Canales, 'AEC hits back after Peter Dutton suggests voice referendum rules are 'rigged'', *The Guardian*, 25 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/aug/25/indigenous-voice-to-parliament-referendum-aec-poll-unfairness-claims-rejected>

69 Maurice Newman, 'AEC rules on voting could create 'confusion, uncertainty'', *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 August 2023, <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/maurice-newman-aec-rules-on-voting-could-create-confusion-uncertainty/news-story/c76bc3e1e031c2f349710dd1e9f3b51e>

70 See for instance @AusElectoralCom, 'Multiple voting is an offence...', Twitter, 4 October 2023, <https://twitter.com/AusElectoralCom/status/1709301274544685526>

71 Ariel Bogle, 'TikTok repeatedly urged AEC to join app during voice campaign, FoI reveals', *The Guardian*, 22 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/dec/22/tiktok-repeatedly-urged-aec-to-join-app-during-voice-campaign-foi-reveals>

Figure 9: Number of items mentioning the AEC in the context of partisanship or 'rigged'



Source: Authors using Meltwater data; Note: Boolean search ("voice" AND "referendum") AND (("AEC" near/5 "partisan") OR "rigged" OR "vote often" OR "voteoften").

Did electoral misinformation and disinformation affect the referendum outcome?

In the absence of conclusive social science studies on both the reach and consumption of misinformation and disinformation, as well as their effects on voter attitudes and behaviour, assertions about whether the spread of false information impacted the referendum result remain somewhat speculative.

In absolute terms, misinformation and disinformation constituted only a small share of the debate on the Voice. For instance, analysis of social media and mainstream media data suggested that the overall volume of posts and stories alleging rigging and AEC partisanship was relatively low compared to other substantive debates in the campaign.⁷² Notwithstanding widespread alarm about "infodemics", this is consistent with recent research suggesting that the spread of misinformation and disinformation is less prevalent than it may seem.⁷³

Nevertheless, where it appears, disinformation is extremely efficient in focusing people's attention due to the cognitive

attraction of pervasive negativity, focus on threats, or arousal of disgust.⁷⁴ In this way, just one false story may draw into doubt things learned from multiple accurate stories. Claims disseminated by agenda-setting political elites like Opposition leader Peter Dutton can be particularly sticky and may have had substantial impact on citizens' evaluation of electoral conduct.⁷⁵

Overall, the attention spiral around the numerous false claims in the Voice referendum followed a similar pattern to US-style "participatory disinformation".⁷⁶ Disinformation narratives such as former US president Donald Trump's "big lie" are almost always started by political elites, who seed messages such as that of the allegedly rigged 2020 US election. In this case, audiences responded by generating false or misleading stories of voter fraud, thereby reinforcing the frame. Elites then pick up these crowdsourced messages and reinforce them again. Thus, it goes back and forth, creating more and more attention for the false narrative.

72 Andrea Carson, Max Grömping, Rebecca Strating and Simon Jackman, 'The 'yes' Voice campaign is far outspending 'no' in online advertising, but is the message getting through?', *The Conversation*, 26 September 2023, <https://theconversation.com/the-yes-voice-campaign-is-far-outspending-no-in-online-advertising-but-is-the-message-getting-through-213749>

73 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election' *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31/2 (2017), 211-235. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>; Sacha Altay, Manon Berriche and Alberto Acerbi, 'Misinformation on misinformation: Conceptual and methodological challenges', *Social Media+ Society*, 9/1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221150412>

74 Alberto Acerbi, 'Cognitive attraction and online misinformation', *Palgrave Communications*, 5/1 (2019), 1-7, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0224-y>

75 Kevin Arceneaux and Rory Treux, 'Donald Trump and the Lie', *Perspectives on Politics*, 21/3 (2023) 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722000901>

76 Kate Starbird, Renee DiResta, Matt DeButts, 'Influence and Influence and improvisation: Participatory disinformation during the 2020 US election', *Social Media+ Society*, 9/2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305123117794>

As previously stated, we identified three main types of disinformation spread during the Voice campaign: disinformation about the issue(s), the process and the integrity of the referendum. While the jury is out on how these types of disinformation might have influenced the result, there certainly is cause for concern. Disinformation about the integrity of the referendum was arguably the most pernicious, as it struck directly at trust in core political and social institutions. Globally, comparative research shows that disinformation can be effective in undermining the accuracy of popular beliefs about election fairness.⁷⁷ If sufficient disinformation is circulating, more and more people may believe that a referendum or an election is rigged – even in the face of compelling, objective and readily accessible evidence to the contrary. In the case of the Voice, disinformation about the integrity of the referendum was spread despite the AEC’s strong history and reputation for professionalism, non-partisanship and integrity.⁷⁸

The spread of disinformation during the Voice campaign added traction to calls for Australia’s regulatory regime on information disorders to be augmented.⁷⁹ The new Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023, at draft stage as of January 2024, may be one such instrument. It would equip the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) with new powers to combat online misinformation and disinformation.⁸⁰

In addition, parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM), in its interim report of June 2023, endorsed the need for stronger regulation of truth in political advertising.⁸¹ However, while an overwhelming majority of Australians see misinformation and disinformation as a threat and support stronger regulation of information disorders (as report by The Australia Institute, 2023),⁸² there is no clear way forward amid a deepening partisan divide about how best to tackle the issue.⁸³

Third-party fact-checking and the Voice

Third-party fact-checking has emerged in recent years as an alternative and non-regulatory mechanism to help tackle misinformation and disinformation during election campaigns. Though third-party fact-checking, a nascent industry in Australia, enjoys high public trust,⁸⁴ it came under sustained attack from some quarters during the Voice referendum campaign. Third-party fact-checking, as distinct from internal fact-checking by traditional media outlets, is a relatively recent development arising out of the United States in the 21st century, with the aim of countering the extensive spread

of misinformation and disinformation, particularly during election campaigns. The term “third party” denotes the external verification of controversial claims by an organisation independent of the initial publishing outlet.

Since the launch in 2003 of FactCheck.org, a non-partisan US university initiative dedicated to scrutinising political claims, trust in fact checkers in the US has been frequently contingent and subject to political partisanship.⁸⁵ Based on the experience of the Voice referendum campaign, Australia is potentially on a similar trajectory of polarisation in this regard.

77 Marlene Mauk and Max Grömping, ‘Online Disinformation predicts Inaccurate Beliefs about Election Fairness among both Winners and Losers’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 0/0 (2023), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140231193008>.

78 Australian Public Service Commission. 2023: *Trust in Australian public services*. Australian Public Service Commission. <https://www.apsreform.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/Trust%20in%20Australian%20public%20services%202023%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

79 Christopher Arnott, ‘Regulating political misinformation isn’t easy, but it’s necessary to protect democracy’, *The Conversation*, 2 November 2023, <https://theconversation.com/regulating-political-misinformation-isnt-easy-but-its-necessary-to-protect-democracy-216537>; Alice Drury, ‘Disinformation is setting us on a dark path. We need laws to protect us from billionaires, bigots, shysters and trolls’, *The Guardian*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/15/disinformation-regulations-laws-tiktok-facebook-instagram-x>; Saanyal Saeed, ‘Could truth in political advertising laws have saved the Voice debate from lies?’, *Crikey*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/10/17/no-vote-voice-truth-political-advertising>

80 See Australian Government, ‘New ACMA powers to combat misinformation and disinformation’, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 2023, <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/new-acma-powers-combat-misinformation-and-disinformation>

81 See Parliament of Australia, *Conduct of the 2022 federal election and other matters [Interim Report]*, (Canberra, Parliamentary Joint Committee, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, June 2023), https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/2022federalelection/Interim_Report

82 The Australia Institute, ‘Misinformation and the Referendum’, (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2023), <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Polling-Misinformation-and-the-referendum-Web.pdf>

83 James Robertson, ‘As dust settles on the Voice, a new divide emerges on digital deceit’, *The New Daily*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.thenewdaily.com.au/news/politics/2023/10/23/misinformation-bill-voice-divide>

84 Andrea Carson, Timothy B. Gravelle, Justin B. Phillips, James Meese, and Leah Ruppanner, ‘Do Brands Matter? Understanding Public Trust in Third-Party Factcheckers of Misinformation and Disinformation on Facebook’, *International Journal of Communication* 17/25 (2023), 6051–6075, <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/SN59H>

85 Ibid.

Before the commencement of the official referendum campaigns, discussions highlighting the necessity of third-party fact checking were prominent. In his address to the Chifley Research Conference in February 2023, Prime Minister Albanese warned: “There are already people out there pushing misinformation on social media. Drumming up outrage, trying to start a culture war.”⁸⁶ In March, discussion of the use of disinformation by the official Yes and No campaigns gained momentum, particularly in relation to the development and dissemination of official Voice referendum pamphlets.⁸⁷

Several organisations conducted fact-checking throughout the campaign. They included RMIT FactLab, AAP FactCheck, RMIT ABC Fact Check, and the AEC’s disinformation register, which focused on misinformation and disinformation about the voting process. RMIT launched a dedicated misinformation tip line, CrossCheck, and at the peak of the campaign, the AEC was being tagged in about 100,000 social media posts a week.⁸⁸

By addressing misinformation and disinformation in media reporting, fact-checking not only aims to correct falsehoods but ideally to limit their spread. Following the proliferation of third-party fact-checkers, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) was established in 2015 to try to ensure standards of impartiality and rigour. Meta has since made IFCN accreditation a requirement of partnership when it signs up third-party fact-checkers to test doubtful claims on social media.⁸⁹

However, fact checking’s efficacy is limited by context and the receptiveness of the audience. In a recent study of Australian audiences’ responses to fact checking content and organisations, Carson et al. found that while the credibility of fact-check sources mattered, so too did the political partisanship of its audience. The results of their experiment showed that “the more politically conservative... participants were, the less likely they were to trust the fact check, and especially for RMIT ABC”⁹⁰.

A possible explanation for some of these responses could be motivated reasoning, where individuals are motivated to ignore or dismiss findings that do not fit with their existing beliefs or political perspectives. Such feelings could have contributed to respondents’ distrust of both fact-checked information and third-party fact checkers.

The impartiality of third-party fact checkers was openly questioned during the referendum campaign, perhaps undermining their efforts. In August 2023, in a report dubbed the “Fact Check Files”, Sky News accused RMIT FactLab and RMIT ABC Fact Check of bias in their fact checking of the referendum coverage.⁹¹ The original article was shared 22,200 times on X and reached an estimated 3.75 million social media users, according to our analysis of Meltwater data.

Sky reported an extensive and varied range of hostile claims, focused on RMIT FactLab, RMIT ABC Fact Check, Meta, the ABC, the IFCN, as well as several individual fact-checkers and researchers. These actors were accused of bias, activism, censorship, targeting the No campaign, and accepting or distributing foreign funding. It was claimed, for example, that RMIT FactLab had aimed to “block political debate and news coverage around the Voice” by targeting coverage that presented the No campaign’s perspective.⁹² The claims by Sky focused particularly on fact-checking of its own reports that had found them to contain falsehoods. The conservative Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) later added to the controversy, releasing a report in November arguing that RMIT ABC Fact Check, RMIT FactLab and AAP FactCheck had all unduly focused their efforts on the No campaign’s claims, resulting in a form of censorship.⁹³

86 Anthony Albanese, ‘Address to the Chifley Research Conference’, *Prime Minister of Australia*, 5 February 2023 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-chifley-research-conference>

87 Lisa Visentin, ‘Greens, Pocock push for independent fact-checking of Voice referendum pamphlet’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 7 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/greens-pocock-push-for-independent-fact-checking-of-voice-referendum-pamphlet-20230303-p5cpal.html>

88 Linton Besser, ‘The Voice campaign was infected with disinformation. Who’s in charge of inoculating Australians against lies?’ *ABC Online*, 17 October 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-17/voice-referendum-infected-disinformation-australians-lies/102981108>

89 Meta, ‘How Meta’s third-party fact-checking program works’, *Meta for Media*, 1 June 2021, https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/third-party-fact-checking-how-it-works?locale=en_GB

90 Carson, Gravelle et al, 2023, p.6068.

91 Jack Houghton, ‘The Fact Check Files: Inside the secretive and lucrative fact checking industry behind a foreign-funded bid to censor Voice debate’, *Sky News Australia*, 23 August 2023, <https://www.skynews.com.au/business/media/the-fact-check-files-inside-the-secretive-and-lucrative-fact-checking-industry-behind-a-foreignfunded-bid-to-censor-voice-debate/news-story/31915e1eb03b029b86a2f03aac19338b>

92 Houghton 2023.

93 Storey, John and Chamber, Margaret, ‘The Arbiters of Truth: Analysis of fact checking organisations during the 2023 Voice Referendum’, (Melbourne: Institute of Public Affairs, 2023) <https://ipa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/IPA-Research-The-Arbiters-of-Truth-Analysis-of-biased-fact-checking-organisations-during-the-2023-Voice-Referendum-FINAL.pdf>

A key claim by both Sky and the IPA was that RMIT FactLab had fact-checked content that was not fact checkable, such as personal or legal opinions and satire. Research indicates that individuals have difficulty differentiating fact from opinion, and that fact-checking is less effective when the subject material includes both purported facts and opinion.⁹⁴ These issues arose repeatedly during the referendum campaign, as media outlets sought both expert opinion and campaigners' views in their coverage. However, there is also evidence that even the terms misinformation and disinformation can be weaponised to dismiss viewpoints that others find unsavoury. This misclassification of fact and opinion is also shaped by motivated reasoning and partisan views, according to some studies.⁹⁵

For their part, referendum fact-checkers identified four dominant misleading narratives that persisted throughout the campaign in spite of fact-checking efforts.⁹⁶ In a report detailing its recommendations following the referendum, RMIT's CrossCheck called for more sustained fact checking of claims and for media outlets and journalists to avoid "both sideism" or "he said/she said" reporting in which competing claims are relayed to audiences without active adjudication.

Consistent with Carson et al.'s research on Australian audiences' reactions to various fact-checkers, partisanship appeared to play a leading role in the Sky News and RMIT FactLab controversy. The claims and reporting by Sky News aligned with pre-existing partisan viewpoints on third-party fact checking and media organisations, resonating particularly with conservative individuals predisposed to scepticism towards fact checking, as shown below.

Survey: Attitudes to Fact-checking and The Voice

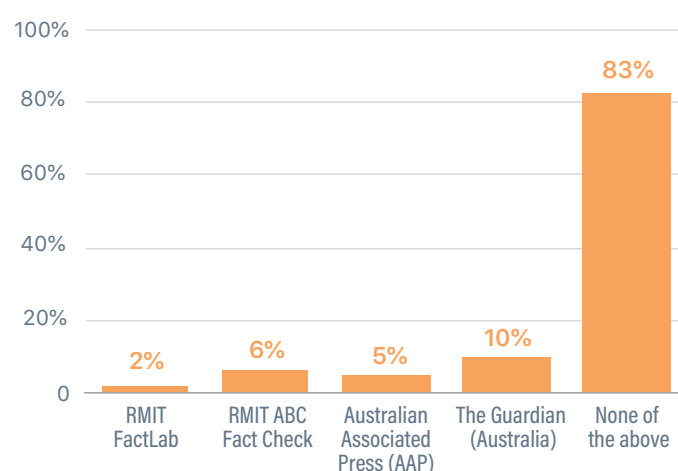
A month after the referendum, the authors of this report surveyed a broadly representative sample of 3,825 adult Australians about their use and level of trust in fact-checking of reports about the Voice during the referendum. The fact-checkers named in the survey were RMIT FactLab, RMIT ABC Fact Check, Australian Associated Press (AAP) and The Guardian (Australia).

Respondents were asked:

Third-party fact-checkers are independent organisations that review and report on the accuracy of media content. Thinking back to the Voice campaign, which of the following third-party fact-checkers did you use to fact-check any news or information about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, if any? None of the above.

As shown below in Figure 10, a minority of respondents reported using fact-checkers during the Voice campaign.

Figure 10: Survey users preferred fact-checkers during the Voice campaign



Source: Authors using PureProfile to gather survey data; Note: N= 3825, n=1012 fact-check users combined

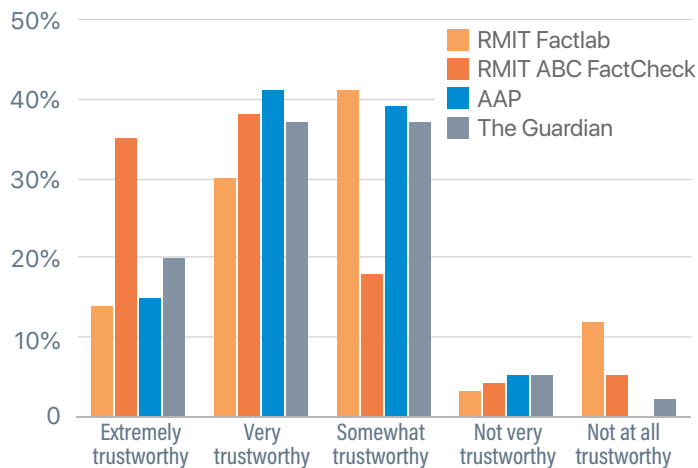
Among respondents who reported using fact-checkers, trust in them was generally high, as shown in Figure 11. Three of the four fact-checking groups were rated either "extremely trustworthy" or "very trustworthy" by more than half of our survey respondents. The exception was RMIT FactLab, which was ranked either "extremely trustworthy" or "very trustworthy" by only 44% of respondents, and "not very trustworthy" or "not at all trustworthy" by a relatively high 15%. The somewhat divergent result for RMIT FactLab was perhaps unsurprising, given it was the focus of widely-aired criticism and claims of bias from Sky News.

94 Nathan Walter, and Nikita A. Salovich, 'Unchecked vs. Uncheckable: How Opinion-Based Claims Can Impede Corrections of Misinformation', *Mass Communication and Society* 24/4 (2021), 500–526, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2020.1864406>

95 Ibid.

96 Renee Davidson, Eiddwenn Jeffery and Anne Kruger, 'Call to action: A postmortem on fact-checking and media efforts countering Voice misinformation' *CrossCheck - RMIT University*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/crosscheck/countering-voice-misinformation>

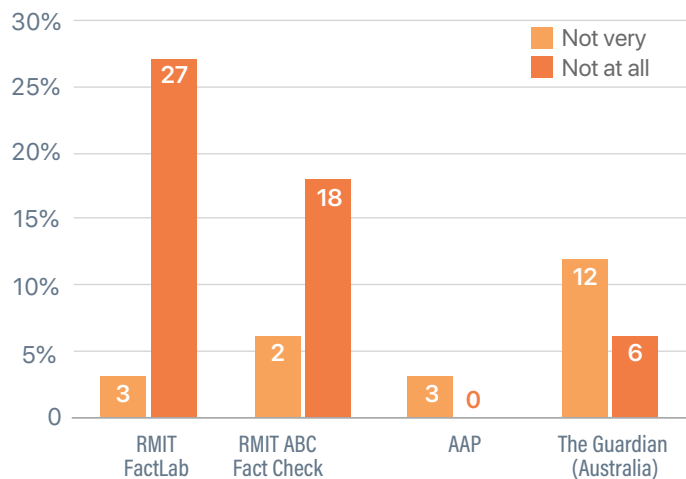
Figure 11: Respondents’ perceptions of fact-checker trustworthiness during the Voice campaign



Source: Authors using PureProfile to gather survey data; Note: n=1012; n=648 voted yes; n=325 voted no; n=39 did not vote

Digging deeper into the data, we find that respondents who distrusted RMIT FactLab were more likely to be older Australians (aged 55-74); males; people who voted No, and those who identify with the political right. Respondents who self-identify with the right were also more likely than other respondents to distrust RMIT ABC FactCheck and The Guardian, but not AAP. However, overall numbers of respondents who distrusted fact-checkers were small (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Levels of trust in fact-checkers – right-wing respondents



Source: Authors using PureProfile to gather survey data; N= 288 respondents identifying as right-wing; n=40 that used RMIT FactLab

In summary, section two outlined prominent examples of disinformation spread during the Voice to parliament referendum campaign and, concerningly, how some of it was aimed directly at the AEC. Overall, as our survey confirms, Australian fact-checkers enjoy high levels of public trust, and provide an important mechanism to tackle harmful misinformation and disinformation. However, we also found a minority of survey respondents actively used fact-checkers to verify campaign information, which suggests fact-checkers alone cannot be relied upon as the only mitigation measure against fake news. Further, the attacks on RMIT Fact Lab raise the spectre of Australia’s nascent fact-checking industry heading the way of its longer-established US counterpart, which has become the focus of regular and persistent targeted political attacks. The existing data already suggests a degree of political polarisation surrounding Australian fact-checkers, with distrust concentrated in politically conservative quarters.

SECTION III: POLLING AND RESULTS

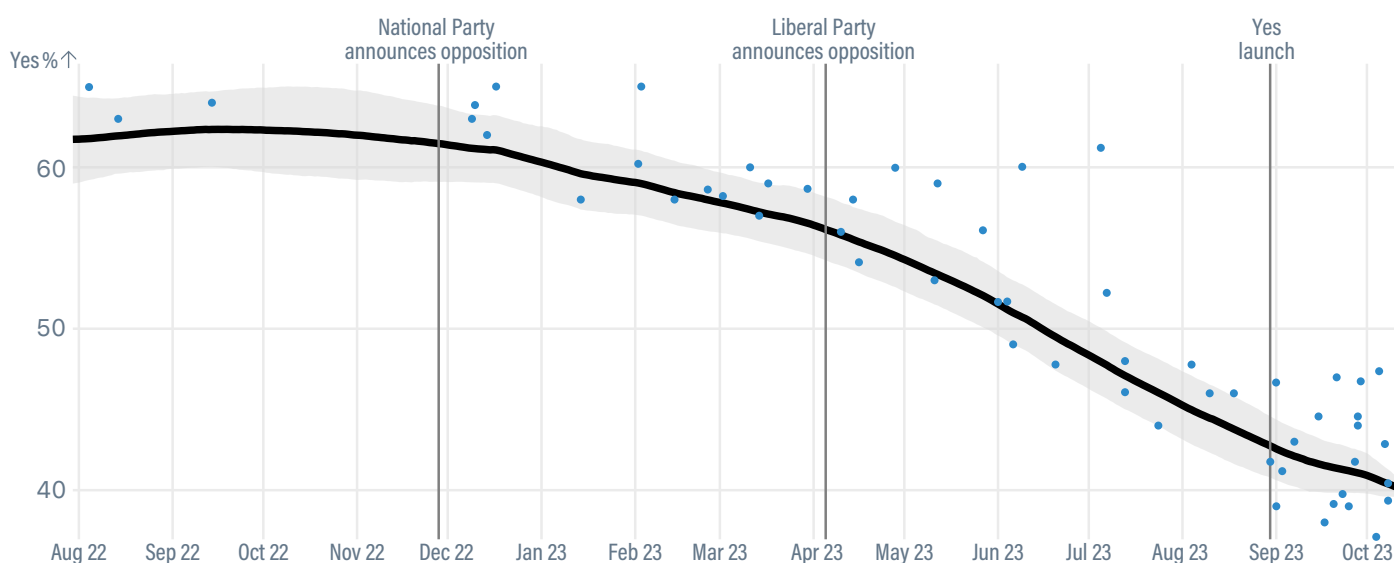
Twelve months before the Voice referendum, public opinion polls showed clear majorities in favour of the Voice. But between late 2022 and the referendum in October 2023, polls almost uniformly revealed a steady, almost linear decline in support.

From its peak in opinion polls to the final result, the Voice shed roughly 20 percentage points of support.

Seldom does public opinion shift so dramatically in such a short period of time on questions of such importance.

Charting the fall in support for the Voice, we draw on long-standing statistical methods treating public sentiment as a target that moves over time, measured intermittently with noisy and possibly biased sensors (public opinion polls). Ex post, the actual referendum result supplies a known end point of the trajectory of public opinion towards the Voice. We use polls and the statistical model to recover the trajectory leading to this known end point⁹⁷, displayed in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Trajectory of Yes %, Indigenous Voice to Parliament, given public opinion polls and referendum results.



Source: Data compiled by Casey Briggs (Australian Broadcasting Corporation); analysis and computation by Professor Simon Jackman. Notes: Dots show individual polls. Shaded region corresponds to a 95% credible interval around estimated trajectory (which — by construction — collapses to a point on the referendum Yes percentage on 14 October 2023, the date of the referendum). Each poll's results are computed as Yes% divided by Yes% plus No% (effectively, proportionally allocating undecideds to either Yes or No).

⁹⁷ See Chapter 9 of Jackman (2009).

The fall in percentage support for Yes began in late 2022, around the time that formal, organised opposition to the Voice began to cohere. The National Party announced its opposition on 28 November 2022, in a press conference featuring their Country Liberal Party colleague, Senator Jacinta Price. Price would go on to be one of two prominent Indigenous voices leading the No campaign.

On 5 April 2023, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton announced the Liberal Party (and, in Queensland, the Liberal National Party), would campaign against the Voice. Dutton's announcement roughly coincided with an acceleration in the decline in support for the Voice, as shown in Figure 14. Yes had been losing about one quarter of a percentage point per week from Christmas 2022 until the time of Dutton's announcement, with the rate of decline accelerating to at least a half a percentage point per week thereafter.

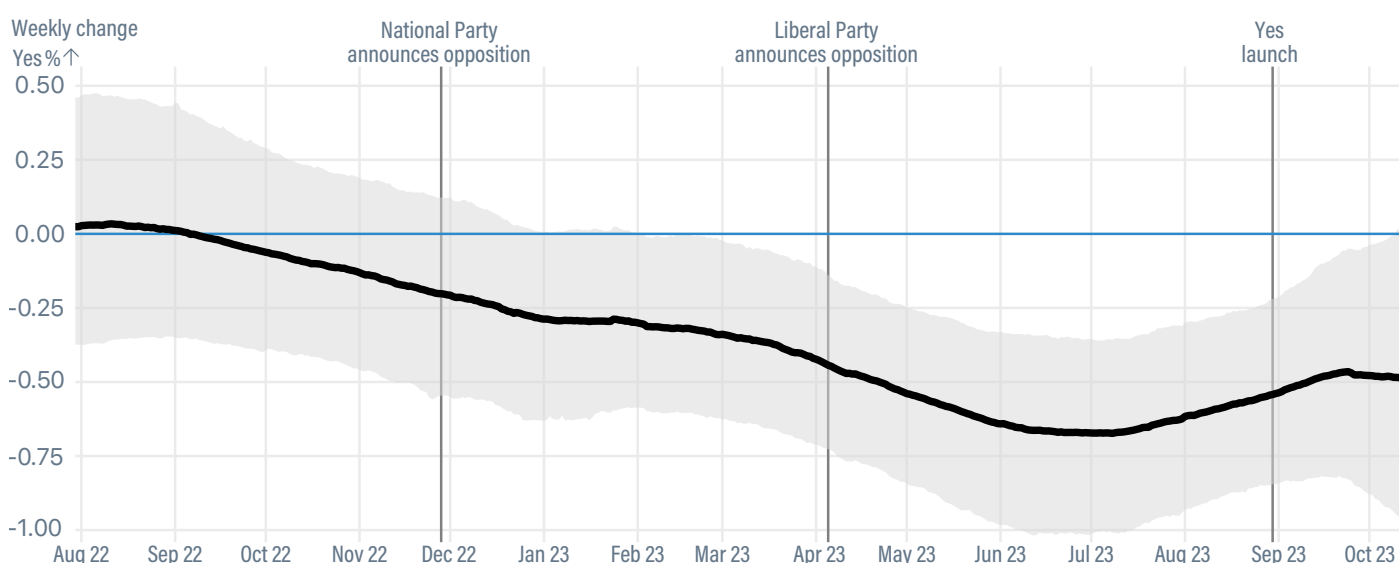
As the referendum drew closer in July and August 2023, Yes campaign efforts intensified. But the effect of this campaign effort was to only slow the rate of decline in support for the Yes campaign, not reverse it. After early July 2023, no published opinion poll had Yes leading No. For even casual observers of Australian politics, the question became not if the referendum would fail, but by how much. Polls fielded in the closing weeks of the referendum campaign differed markedly in their estimates of Yes support, but all agreed that No would prevail.

The near 25-point movement in Yes support over the year leading up to the referendum is massive relative to the swings in voting intentions observed in comparable timeframes leading up to Australian national elections. The largest, post-WW2, inter-election swing in two-party preferred vote occurred between 1974 and the 1975 federal election following the dismissal of the Whitlam government, with the ALP losing 7.4 percentage points. One of the few, recent comparable shifts in Australian public opinion was an almost 30-point fall in the satisfaction ratings of Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the two years leading up to his loss in the 2022 federal election.

These comparisons highlight the novelty of referenda in Australian politics. At least in the Voice referendum – and in several other referenda over Australian political history – the substantive proposition being put to voters is far removed from their everyday concerns and may not have figured prominently in political discourse prior to the referendum process commencing.

So it was with the Voice. A small segment of the electorate paying attention to debates about Indigenous reconciliation and constitutional recognition would have been familiar with the Uluru Statement, the processes stemming from it, and the main players on either side of the proposal, a group that political scientists would describe as the “issue public” for Indigenous matters.

Figure 14: Weekly rate of change in Yes %, Indigenous Voice to Parliament, given public opinion polls and referendum results.



Source: Simon Jackman using public opinion data. Notes: Shaded region corresponds to a 95% credible interval around the weekly trend.

But for most voters, the Voice was hardly a “front burner” issue. With the debate on the Voice confined to its small, largely elite “issue public”, early opinion polls typically revealed high levels of support for “the Voice” from survey respondents making real-time assessments, often hearing the term for the first time while responding to the survey. Survey responses from late 2022 and into early 2023 were almost certainly overstating support for the Voice, a function of the issue’s low salience, the superficially positive character of the “Voice” label, and well-understood, long-studied biases in survey response attributable to social desirability and acquiescence.

As the Voice gained salience in late 2022 and over 2023, well-established ideological and partisan contours of support and opposition in the Voice issue public became visible to the mass public. The opposition parties declared their hands: first the Nationals in late 2022, then the Liberals in April 2023, along with the chief narratives and spokespeople of the No campaign. Taking cues from elites of one’s preferred party could then replace social desirability and acquiescence in shaping survey responses, helping account for the pattern of declining support for the Voice shown in Figure 13 and Figure 14.

Results

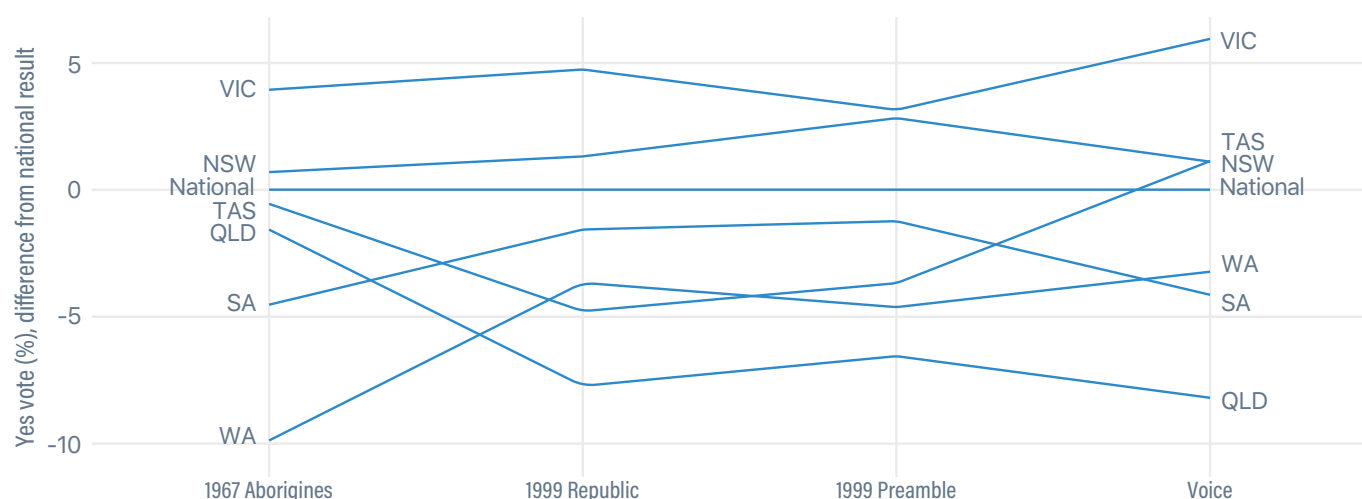
The Australian Electoral Commission provides referendum results at a variety of levels: state (as required to determine to if the referendum has satisfied the constitutional requirements for successful passage or not), House of Representatives electorates, and polling places. Some brief analysis of the referendum results across these levels reveals different facets of why No prevailed on the question of an Indigenous Voice to parliament, and how the divide between Yes and No on the Voice taps long-standing divisions in Australian society.

The persistence of social conservatism and moral traditionalism

No prevailed in every state, ranging from a resounding 68.2% of the vote in Queensland to a more marginal 54.1% in Victoria – a 14 percentage-point spread. Yes won in the Australian Capital Territory with 61.3% while No handily won in the Northern Territory with 60.3%. The votes of the territories contributed to the national result (though just 2.5% of the national, formal vote tally) but were not relevant for the constitutional requirement that a proposed alteration to the Constitution prevail in a majority of states as well as nationally.

Figure 15 tracks how states have voted in referenda relative to the national result in four referenda,⁹⁸ two directly related to Indigenous recognition (1967 and 2023)⁹⁹.

Figure 15: Persistence of state level differences in support for constitutional change, 1967 to 2023.



Source: Official results reported by the Australian Electoral Commission and National Archives of Australia and presented by Simon Jackman. Notes: Vertical axis is a state’s Yes vote in a given referendum relative to the national Yes vote. Referenda analysed are the 1967 “Aborigines” question, the two Republic and preamble questions (1999) and the Voice (2023).

⁹⁸ We omit the same-sex marriage postal survey from this analysis, since participation was voluntary (unlike a referendum) with just 79.3% of enrolled voters returning clear responses.

⁹⁹ The 1999 “preamble” proposal included inserting the words “honouring Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the nation’s first people, for their deep kinship with their lands and for their ancient and continuing cultures which enrich the life of our country” into the preamble of the Constitution.

Victoria and New South Wales consistently record Yes votes greater than the national result, with Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia consistently recording Yes votes below the national result. Only the smallest state, Tasmania, departs from this pattern, narrowly lagging the rest of Australia in its Yes vote on the 1967 referendum and narrowly leading the rest of the country on the 2023 Voice referendum.

Fifty-six years separate the 1967 and 2023 referenda. The youngest voters in the 1967 referendum, 21-year-olds at the time, were 77 years old in 2023. The youngest voters in 2023 are some five or six generations removed from the oldest voters participating in the 1967 referendum. The persistence of state-level differences across this span of time provides compelling, if indirect, evidence as to the durability and reproducibility of attitudes towards Indigenous Australians and appetites for social, cultural and political change across Australia.

Cosmopolitan “Yes” and provincial “No”

Inspecting the referendum results at the level of each House of Representatives seat reveals much about the demographic and political fault lines underlying support for the Voice. Figure 16 shows the percentage of Yes votes in each House of Representatives seat, with seats coloured by the party or affiliation of the incumbent.

Just 34 of 151 seats produced majorities for Yes, with inner-city seats producing the strongest results for the Voice. Newcastle (NSW) was the only non-capital city seat to return a Yes majority. The strongest Yes vote was in Melbourne, where 76% of voters supported the Voice. Rural and regional seats recorded the largest No votes, with five of these seats returning Yes votes below 20%.

Just one Coalition-held seat returned a majority Yes vote: Bradfield on Sydney’s North Shore. All Green-held seats returned Yes majorities (ranging from 77% in Melbourne to 53% in Ryan in Brisbane’s western suburbs), as did Teal-held seats (ranging from 63% in Wentworth in Sydney’s eastern suburbs to 51% in Mackellar on Sydney’s northern beaches). Additional analysis of the Teal seats appears below.

Labor-held seats produced disparate results, a function of the ambivalence towards the Voice among Labor’s voters.

Labor held 78 of 151 seats in the House of Representatives at the time of the referendum. Just 21 of these 78 seats returned Yes majorities, again concentrated in inner-city Australia. Twenty-eight Labor seats produced Yes vote shares lagging the national result of 40%, including traditional “heartland” Labor seats in western Sydney such as Blaxland, Werriwa and McMahon.

Three Labor held seats – Spence (outer metropolitan Adelaide), Hunter (regional NSW) and Blair (taking in Ipswich and the Brisbane Valley in Queensland) – returned Yes votes below 30%. Sixty-four Labor-held seats returned No majorities, with the strongest No vote in the Queensland seat of Spence, where 73% of voters opposed the Voice. This wide variation in support for the Voice across Labor-held seats was one of the principal reasons for the referendum’s failure. We examine the sources of this variation more closely with analysis of results at the level of polling places.

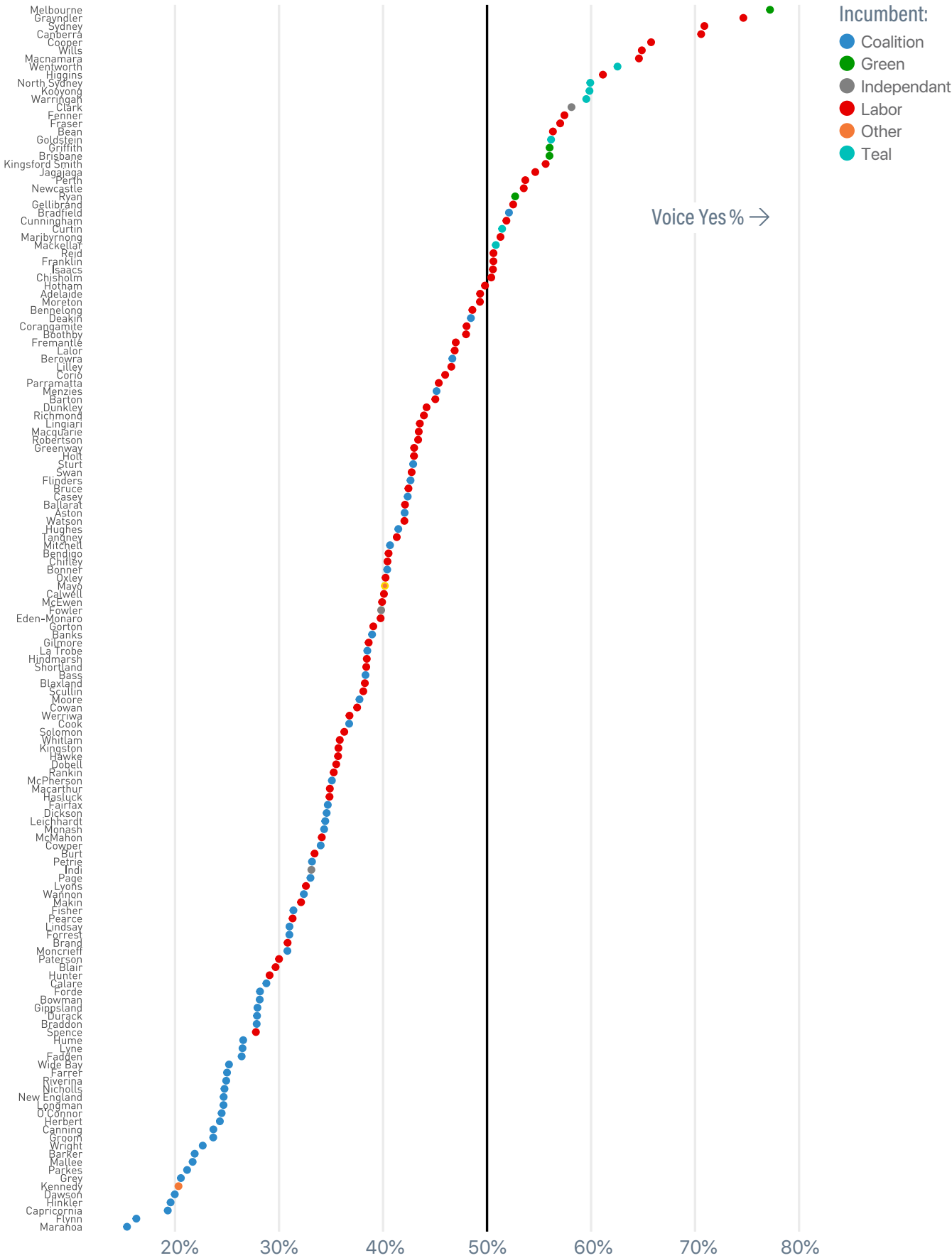
Support for the Voice cleaved along lines marked by educational attainment and wealth. Combining Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) results and Census data allows us to form demographic profiles of polling places¹⁰⁰, the smallest geographic unit for which Voice electoral results are made available by the AEC.

One of the strongest demographic correlates of Voice vote is tertiary education, as shown in Figure 17: as the prevalence of tertiary education increases, so too does support for the Voice, in every state and territory. The differences within states and territories on the prevalence of tertiary education – and support for the Voice – are large relative to the differences between states. In Victoria, the most pro-Voice state, Yes generally had majority support in polling places where as few as 35% of adult citizens have tertiary education, and similarly in Tasmania. In Queensland, the state with the strongest No vote, the average level of Yes support doesn’t break 50% until the prevalence of tertiary education reaches 45%.

Notably, a handful of polling places with very low levels of adult citizens with tertiary education had high Yes votes (e.g., in the Northern Territory, Queensland, and Western Australia). As we show presently, these are polling places servicing Indigenous communities in remote regions of the corresponding state or territory.

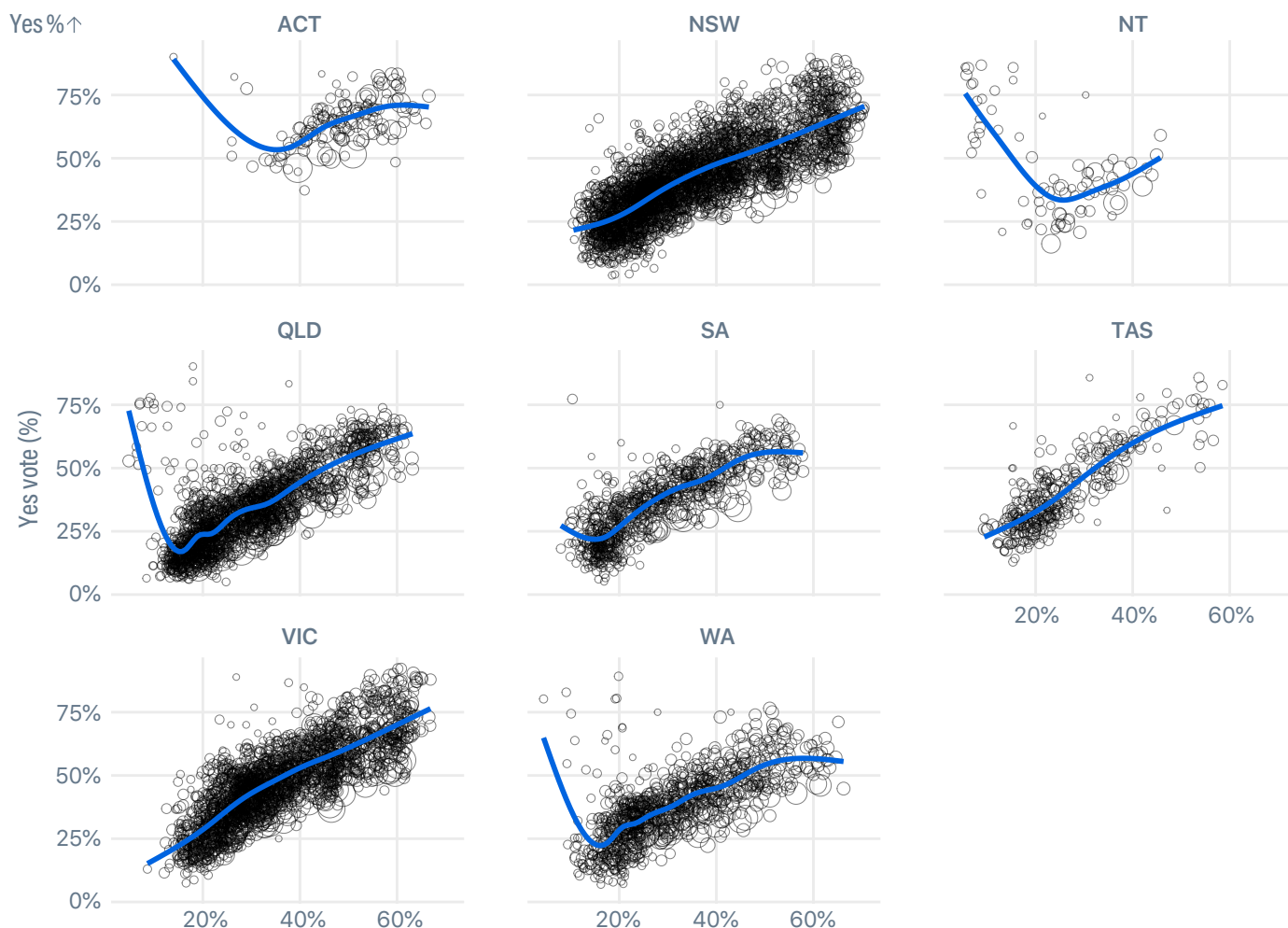
¹⁰⁰ After each federal election, the AEC produces counts of the number of voters from a given SA1 (Statistical Area 1, collections of about 300 households) turned out at a given polling place; we accordingly combine Census data at the SA1 level using these counts as weights to produce a demographic composite of each polling place, which we can then analyse alongside electoral returns. In this analysis we use the SA1 to polling place mapping produced by the AEC for the May 2022 federal election; this mapping was not available for the Voice referendum at the time of writing.

Figure 16: Division-level Yes %, Voice referendum.



Source: Simon Jackman using Australian Electoral Commission data.

Figure 17: Voice Yes (%) by percentage of adult citizens with tertiary education, by polling places and state or territory.



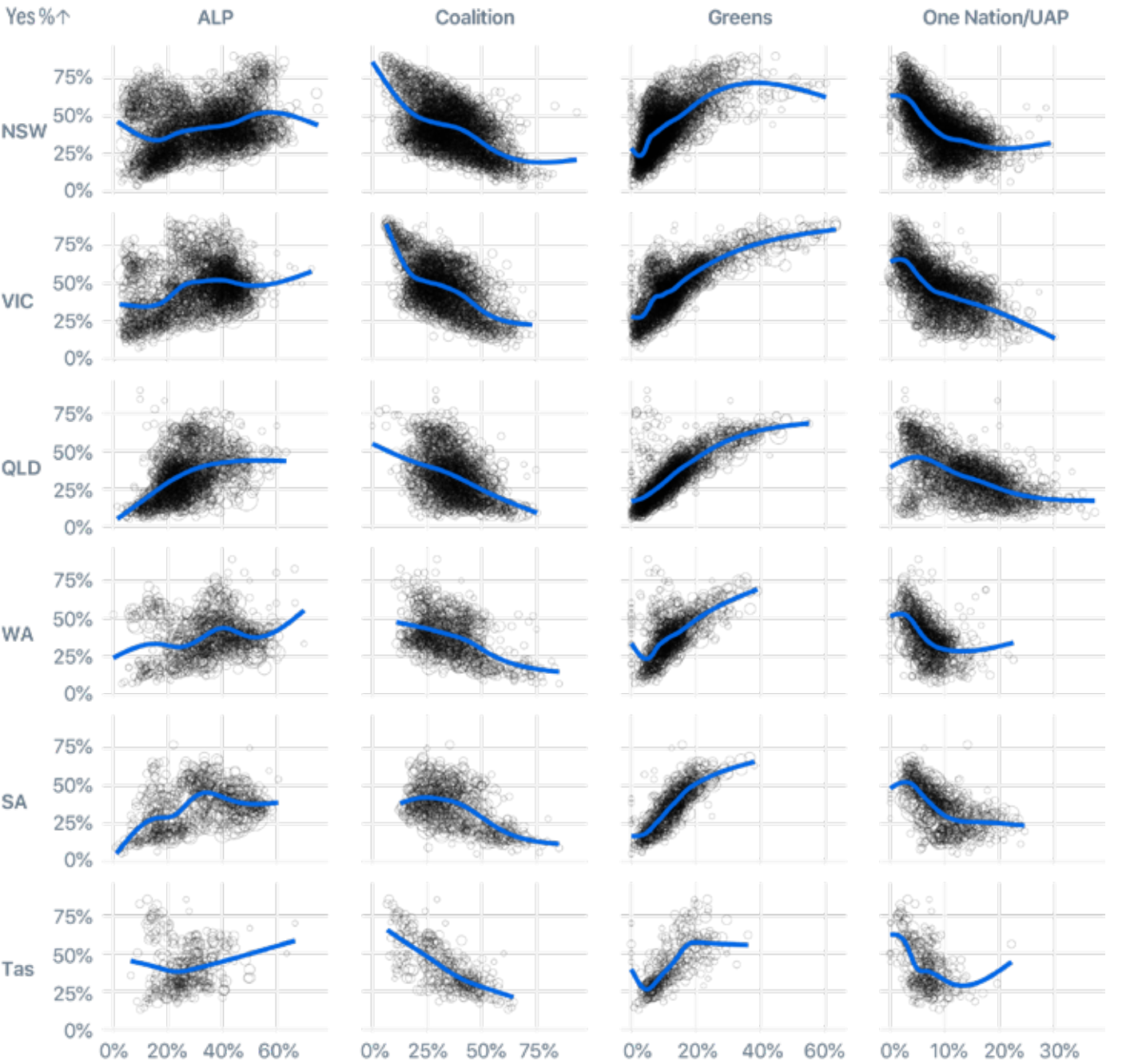
Source: Simon Jackman using Australian Electoral Commission results and 2021 Census data, projected to polling places from SA1s. Notes: The blue line is a smoothed regression fit.

The positioning of political parties on the Voice was an important driver of mass support or opposition to the proposal. This is reflected in polling place level analysis, shown in Figure 18. For each state, we graph the relationship between Yes vote share in the Voice referendum as a function of vote shares for major political parties in the 2022 federal election – for Labor, the Coalition, Greens and One Nation plus United Australia. Note the tighter and steeper relationships between 2022 Coalition vote share and Voice vote, or between 2022 Green vote share and the Voice, compared to the relationship between 2022 ALP vote share and the Voice. In fact, in New South Wales (top left panel of Figure 18), the relationship between 2022 ALP vote share and Voice vote is almost flat.

This pattern is consistent with reports from analysts with access to the campaigns' survey data, that ALP voters were far more equivocal in their support for the Voice than were

Coalition voters in opposition to the Voice. This asymmetry in support across major party voters is in no small measure the story of the Voice's failure. Once the Coalition announced its opposition to the Voice, supporters of the Voice faced a monumental task: trying to secure passage of a referendum in the absence of bipartisan support. If most or nearly all Coalition voters were opposed to the Voice, then virtually all Labor and Green voters would have to vote Yes if the Voice was to succeed; indeed, if the 2022 federal election results were to be transposed directly onto the Voice referendum, the Voice would have prevailed, with a majority of votes nationally and a majority of votes in a majority of states (only in Queensland did Labor fail to attain a majority of the two-party preferred vote in 2022). Green voters did overwhelmingly support the Voice, but Labor voters were divided in their support for the Voice, despite the Voice being the signal initiative of the Labor government elected only in May 2022.

Figure 18: Voice Yes (%) by 1st preference vote in 2022 federal election, by polling place, party (columns) and state (rows).



Source: Simon Jackman using Australian Electoral Commission results. Notes: Each blue line is a smoothed regression fit.

Teals and the Voice

Further evidence of the cosmopolitan/provincial split in support for the Voice can be seen in the Voice vote in the six House of Representatives seats won by “Teal” independent candidates in 2022: Mackellar, Warringah and North Sydney on Sydney’s lower North Shore and northern beaches, Wentworth in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, Kooyong and Goldstein in Melbourne’s east and bayside, and Curtin in Perth. In the 2022 election, Teal independents won these seats with coalitions of disaffected Liberal voters – seeing the Liberal Party as too conservative on a variety of issues spanning climate change and renewable energy, gender equity and transparency and good government – and tactical voting by Labor and Green identifiers. No successful Teal independent won a majority of first preferences in 2022¹⁰¹; they relied instead on preference flows to win, principally from Labor and Greens candidates.

In addition to these six successful Teal candidacies, similar “community independent”, climate-progressive candidates finished second – and hence generated a two-candidate preferred vote share – Cowper (NSW) centered on Coffs Harbour on the NSW coast, Bradfield (Sydney’s North Shore), and the two rural seats of Calare (NSW) and Wannon (Vic). The seats of Clark and Indi were retained in 2022 by well-established independent incumbents whose candidacies were not “Teal” per se.

The Voice referendum was seen as a test of the robustness of these coalitions some 17 months after their 2022 successes, and with the Indigenous Voice to parliament at best “adjacent” to the mix of issues animating the Teal coalitions in 2022.

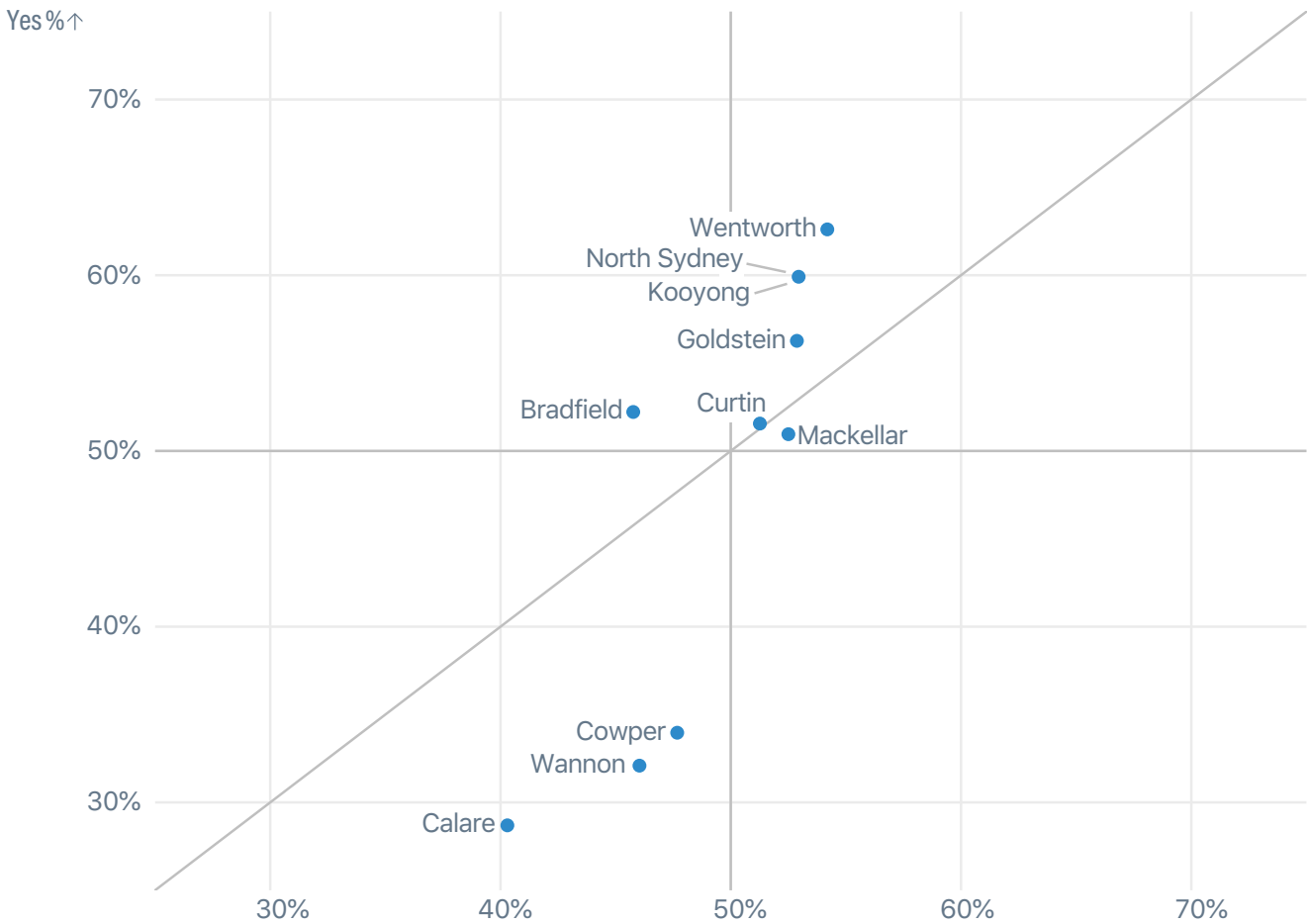
In all six seats won by Teal independents in 2022, Yes won a majority of the Voice vote (see Figure 19). Averaged across these six seats, Yes won 56.8%, while the average Teal two-candidate preferred (TCP) vote in 2022 was 52.8%. Of the six seats won for the first time by Teal candidates in 2022, only in Mackellar did Yes trail the Teal TCP, and by less than two percentage points. Warringah, won by Zali Steggall in 2019 – and easily retained in 2022 with 61% TCP – recorded a 59.5% Yes vote in the Voice referendum. The nearby seat of Bradfield also produced a majority Yes vote (52.1%), outperforming the 45.8% Teal TCP result in the 2022 election.

On the other hand, in seats where Teal candidates failed to win – e.g., Calare, Cowper and Wannon (see Figure 19) – Yes trailed the Teal TCP considerably, perhaps reflecting the shallowness of social progressivism in these electorates and the absence of a strong, local Yes campaign led by a Teal incumbent (as occurred in Wentworth, Kooyong, North Sydney, etc).

In short, not only did the Teal “heartland” deliver majorities for Yes – outpacing the rest of the country by almost 17 percentage points on this score – the Yes vote appears to have picked up support from those segments of these seats that did not support Teal candidates in 2022. There is nothing in these results to suggest that the “economically centrist, socially progressive” coalitions underlying the Teal victories in these seats have become less cohesive. In fact, quite the opposite: if anything, the Liberal Party’s opposition to the Voice is likely to help Teal candidates win re-election in these formerly Liberal-held seats at the next federal election (due no later than mid 2025), with Yes voting, hitherto-Liberal voters presumptive targets for Teal campaigns.

101 Zali Steggall won Warringah with 44.8% 1st preferences while Kylea Tink won North Sydney with 25.2% of 1st preferences.

Figure 19: Voice Yes (%) by Teal two-candidate preferred (TCP) vote 2022, in 13 divisions where a Climate 200-supported independent was one of the final two candidates.



Source: Simon Jackman using Australian Electoral Commission results. Notes: Divisions plotted above the 45-degree diagonal had Yes outperforming Teal 2022 TCP.

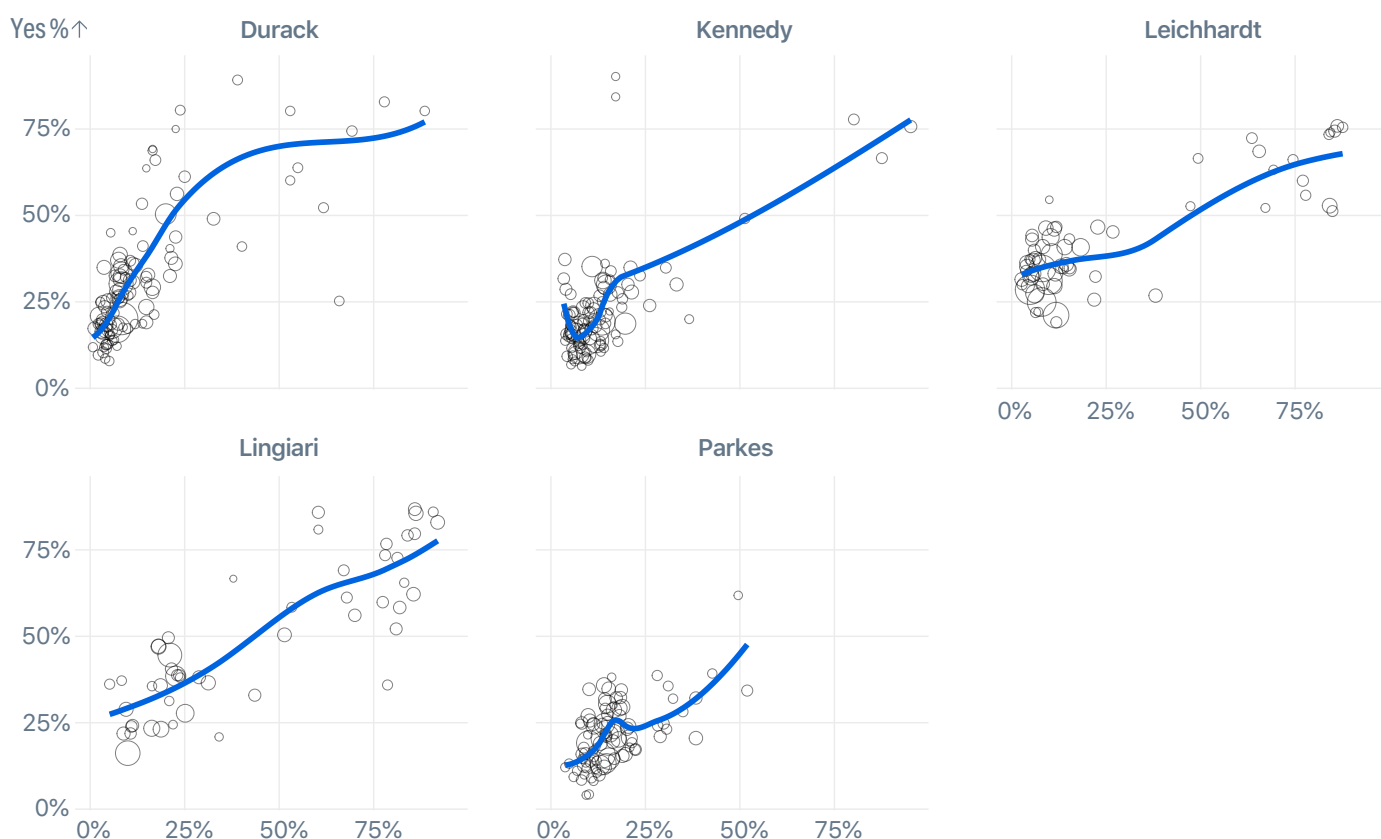
Indigenous communities tended to vote Yes

During the Voice referendum campaign and in analysis of the results, it was alleged that both polls and election returns indicated considerable opposition to the Voice among Indigenous Australians. But the available, relevant evidence – such as it is – shows this was not the case. Only a small number of polling places in Australia serve majority Indigenous communities; these communities are largely found in the five seats shown in Figure 20, the top-five seats in the country ranked by the proportion of adult citizens who are Indigenous: Leichhardt and Kennedy in northern Queensland, Parkes in rural New South Wales, Durack in Western Australia, and the “non-Darwin” Northern Territory seat of Lingiari.

Within these seats we see unambiguous evidence that the Yes vote increases as does the proportion of Indigenous people in the serviced communities.¹⁰² Analysis of this small set of communities provides the clearest, most direct evidence of the way Indigenous people voted.

Of course, the vast bulk of Indigenous Australians reside in urban areas (as do non-Indigenous Australians), where Indigenous voters constitute tiny shares of the population using any particular polling place. Analysis of electoral returns is therefore uninformative with respect to the votes of Indigenous people in these locales. Nonetheless, in the small set of locations where it is clear that Indigenous people comprise the bulk of voters, it is patently clear that the Voice was supported by majorities of Indigenous voters, and most likely overwhelming majorities.

Figure 20: Voice Yes (%) by indigenous population, by polling place



Source: Simon Jackman using Australian Electoral Commission results and 2021 Census. Notes: Each blue line is a smoothed regression fit.

¹⁰² Five “Remote Mobile Team” polling places in Lingiari are excluded from this analysis, as we lack precise information as to the SA1s they serviced, but all returned majorities “Yes” votes.

National Reactions to the Outcome

Following the referendum result, there was a significant drop in public attention to the Voice across traditional and social media platforms, as shown in Figure 21.

While this was partly an obvious consequence of the Yes and No campaigns ending, it was probably also influenced by a group of Indigenous leaders calling for a 'week of silence' after the Voice.

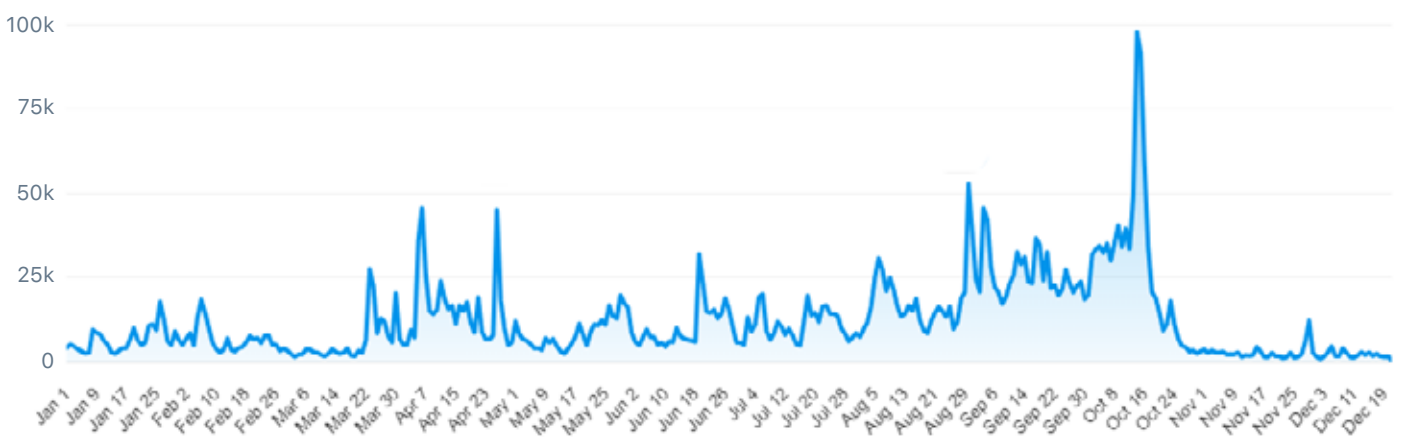
In his election victory speech on May 22, 2022, Anthony Albanese said a goal for his government would be "to promote unity and optimism, not fear and division". Proceeding with the Voice referendum in 2023, however, may have had the opposite effect. In response to the referendum result, a group of Indigenous Australians who supported the Voice released a statement, which read in part:

*That people who have only been on this continent for 235 years would refuse to recognise those whose home this land has been for 60,000 and more years is beyond reason. It was never in the gift of these newcomers to refuse recognition to the true owners of Australia... Talk not of recognition and reconciliation. Only of justice and the rights of our people in our own country. Things that no one else can gift us, but to which we are entitled by fact that this is the country of our birth and inheritance.*¹⁰³

In a similar vein, some Indigenous leaders advocated for lowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags to half-mast for the week.

Leaders also expressed concerns that the campaigns were shaped by racism and misinformation and disinformation. Some members of the Uluru Dialogue criticised the responses of Albanese and other government ministers, saying the referendum defeat would be seen as "just a blip" for the government, and criticising Albanese for saying he was proud of being Australian.¹⁰⁴ Others declared reconciliation "dead".¹⁰⁵ Professor Marcia Langton argued: "I think it will be at least two generations before Australians are capable of putting their colonial hatreds behind them and acknowledging that we exist."¹⁰⁶ Other Indigenous leaders disagreed, arguing that it was "time for healing".¹⁰⁷ Indigenous Minister Linda Burney, for instance, called for ongoing engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to work toward closing the gap.¹⁰⁸

Figure 21: Overall media coverage of the Voice referendum



Source: Authors, using Meltwater data of Voice social media and mainstream coverage in 2023

¹⁰³ Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, 'A Week of Silence for the Voice [media release]', 14 October 2023, <https://www.caac.org.au/news/a-week-of-silence-for-the-voice>

¹⁰⁴ Paul Karp and Josh Butler, 'Indigenous campaigners accuse government of 'flippant' response to no vote ahead of 'week of silence'', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/15/indigenous-campaigners-accuse-government-of-flippant-response-to-no-vote-ahead-of-week-of-silence>

¹⁰⁵ Yan Zhuang, 'After Bruising Vote, Indigenous Australians Say 'Reconciliation Is Dead'', *The New York Times*, 21 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/21/world/australia/indigenous-voice-reconciliation-dead.html>

¹⁰⁶ Praveen Menon, 'Reconciliation is dead': Indigenous Australians vow silence after referendum fails', *Reuters*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australian-indigenous-leaders-call-week-silence-after-referendum-defeat-2023-10-15>

¹⁰⁷ Jarred Cross, 'Reconciliation is not dead': Indigenous voices call for action. *National Indigenous Times*, 16 October 2023, <https://nit.com.au/16-10-2023/8159/reconciliation-is-not-dead-indigenous-voices-call-for-action>

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

One consequence of the “week of silence” was that it ceded the space for post-referendum analysis to political commentators, particularly those on the No side. Opposition Leader Peter Dutton continued to argue that the Voice referendum was publicly divisive, calling it “the referendum that Australia did not need to have. The proposal and the process should have been designed to unite Australians, not to divide us”.¹⁰⁹ Leading Indigenous No campaigner Jacinta Nampijinpa Price also continued to prosecute the argument that a “gap doesn’t exist between Indigenous Australia and non-Indigenous Australia”.¹¹⁰ In contrast, Yes advocates pointed out that polling booths in predominantly Indigenous communities had tended to vote Yes, countering pre-poll

arguments (and what some called misinformation) that Indigenous citizens were also sceptical of the Voice.

In post-referendum political and media commentary, Albanese was criticised for poor judgment in pushing ahead with the Voice proposal in the face of falling support in opinion polls¹¹¹, and the government was accused of failing to recognise that Australians were more concerned with cost-of-living pressures than Indigenous recognition.¹¹² The Sydney Morning Herald’s political editor, Peter Hartcher, argued that the Voice was silenced by fear and doubt, blaming instead a political campaign that “set out to wreck the voice”.¹¹³

International Response

In the week leading up to the vote, Meltwater data showed a 30% increase in Voice to Parliament mentions in the mainstream news and social media.¹¹⁴ Articles in some foreign news media attempting to explain the result to global audiences painted Australia and the result in unflattering light.¹¹⁵ “Voice referendum: Lies fuel racism ahead of Australia’s Indigenous vote,”¹¹⁶ screamed one BBC headline, explicitly linking misinformation to racism.

Three main explanations were offered for the Voice outcome in global news coverage. First, the failed referendum result was viewed as demonstrating Australia’s inability to reckon with its colonial past. Australia was compared unfavourably in this regard with other settler colonial states such as the New Zealand and Canada. A sub-strand of this narrative suggested that the result was a consequence of “deep divisions” over how to improve the lives of First Nations people, which consolidated one of the central messages of the No campaign.¹¹⁷

A second popular explanation was that the referendum campaign had been subject to a large amount of misinformation that left the campaign “ensnared in a bitter culture war” based on “Trump-style misinformation” and “election conspiracy theories”.¹¹⁸ The BBC story under the headline cited above drew parallels between how the referendum campaign was conducted and the 2016 presidential election in the United States that elected Donald Trump, and the ‘Brexit’ referendum in the United Kingdom.

A third explanation presented to global audiences was that the government had bungled the vote and had failed to deliver “tangible improvements for citizens facing cost-of-living pressures and a housing crisis”.¹¹⁹ The government’s focus on the Voice referendum was thus “seen alongside its handling of other national issues”.¹²⁰

109 Elias Visontay, ‘From ‘gut-wrenching’ to ‘respect’: how prominent Australians reacted to the voice referendum result’ *The Guardian*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/14/day-of-sadness-how-prominent-australians-reacted-to-the-indigenous-voice-referendum-result>

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 David Crowe, ‘A Failure in slow motion: Albanese showed great courage but poor judgment’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/a-failure-in-slow-motion-albanese-showed-great-courage-but-poor-judgment-20231010-p5eb5t.html>

113 Peter Hartcher, ‘We shouldn’t feel ashamed. But we could be forgiven for feeling embarrassed’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-shouldn-t-feel-ashamed-but-we-could-be-forgiven-for-being-embarrassed-20231011-p5ebkz.html>

114 Rebecca Strating and Andrea Carson, “‘Lies fuel racism’: how the global media covered Australia’s Voice to Parliament referendum. *The Conversation*, 15 October 2023, <https://theconversation.com/lies-fuel-racism-how-the-global-media-covered-australias-voice-to-parliament-referendum-215665>

115 See for more information of specific articles: <https://theconversation.com/lies-fuel-racism-how-the-global-media-covered-australias-voice-to-parliament-referendum-215665>

116 Hannah Ritchie, ‘Voice referendum: Lies fuel racism ahead of Australia’s Indigenous vote’, *BBC*, 6 September 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-66470376>

117 Mike Cherney, ‘Australians Say ‘No’ to Recognizing Indigenous People in Constitution’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/australians-say-no-to-recognizing-indigenous-people-in-constitution-b328e320>

118 Yan Zhuang, ‘Crushing Indigenous Hopes, Australia Rejects ‘Voice’ Referendum’, *The New York Times*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/world/asia/indigenous-voice-australia-referendum.html>

119 Elias Visontay, ‘Australia rejects proposal to recognise Aboriginal people in constitution. *The Guardian*, 14 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/14/australia-rejects-proposal-to-recognise-aboriginal-people-in-constitution>

120 Ibid.

International attention to the referendum might have been affected by the global news context of the time, in which the overwhelming focus was on the unfolding crisis in Israel and Gaza that began on 7 October 2023 – a week before the referendum. Concurrently, Australian foreign policy attention had shifted to Albanese's trip to China to try to stabilise relations with Beijing. Notwithstanding these major events, the Australian referendum still received significant attention in international forums. At the United Nations forum in

Geneva, human rights experts had advocated for Australians to vote Yes before the poll, saying it would "pave the way to overcome the colonial legacy of systemic discrimination and inequalities".¹²¹ There is little doubt that leaders across Asia and the Pacific were also watching the result, putting pressure on the Australian government to explain to the international community the "substantive policy steps" it would now take to address Indigenous disadvantage.¹²²

Where to for the Voice from here?

A significant challenge now facing the Australian government is how to continue the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and avoid undoing decades of progress. One area of concern is levels of trust among Indigenous people in Australia's institutions and democracy, given that polling areas with the highest proportion of Indigenous people voted in favour of the Voice. There are also concerns in some quarters that the Voice referendum revealed, enabled and ultimately fuelled racism in Australia.

Another concern is that the result will undermine support for other reconciliation processes – and there is evidence that this is already happening. Queensland's Liberal National party announced its withdrawal of support for the state's "Path to Treaty" process after the referendum result.¹²³ In January 2024, the Liberal and National opposition in Victoria – the state with the highest Yes vote – formally withdrew its support for the state's treaty process. In NSW, the state Labor government revealed after the referendum result that a state treaty would not progress past consultation and planning until after the next election.¹²⁴ The results also emboldened some politicians to advocate for the scrapping of welcome-to-country ceremonies.¹²⁵

One suggested response to the failure of the referendum proposal has been to legislate a Voice to parliament mechanism. However, this seems unlikely to have widespread support after the referendum defeat. It also would be in conflict with the wishes of the Voice architects; the Uluru Statement from the Heart calls specifically for "establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution". During the campaign, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton promised an alternative referendum proposal under a future Coalition government to formally recognise First Nations people in the Constitution. However, he rescinded the proposal after the referendum result, arguing Australians wouldn't want it.¹²⁶ Other suggestions for next steps have included: focusing on other elements of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, such as "truth telling" and "treaty making"; establishing a national truth and justice commission; addressing Indigenous disadvantage through practical policies; establishing locally-based Community Development Councils; strengthening anti-racism and human rights frameworks; and developing "an interim listening mechanism to provide advice directly to the prime minister".¹²⁷

¹²¹ Rob Harris, 'How the world reacted to the rejection of the Voice', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 October 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/how-the-world-reacted-to-the-rejection-of-the-voice-20231015-p5ecal.html>

¹²² Hugh Piper, 'Indigenous Voice: Getting Ready to Explain to the World If Australia Votes 'No'', *Lowy Institute*, 16 May 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indigenous-voice-getting-ready-explain-world-if-australia-votes-no>

¹²³ Eden Gillespie and Ben Smee, 'Queensland LNP abandons support for treaty with First Nations people', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/19/queensland-lnp-abandons-support-for-treaty-with-first-nations-people#:~:text=The%20Path%20to%20Treaty%20Act,the%20First%20Nations%20Treaty%20Institute>

¹²⁴ Tamsin Rose, 'NSW treaty will not progress beyond consultation until after election, Chris Minns says', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/23/nsw-treaty-indigenous-will-not-progress-until-after-state-election-chris-minns>

¹²⁵ Declan Brennan, 'Councillors look to ditch Welcome to Country, smoking ceremonies post referendum', *National Indigenous Times*, 10 January 2024, <https://nit.com.au/10-01-2024/9258/councillors-look-to-ditch-welcome-to-country-smoking-ceremonies-post-referendum>

¹²⁶ Paul Karp, 'Peter Dutton walks back offer of second referendum after voice poll', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/oct/16/peter-dutton-second-referendum-australian-indigenous-voice-to-parliament-poll>

¹²⁷ Ibid; Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan, 'The Voice to Parliament and the Silent Majority', *Australian Quarterly*, vol 95, issue 1, p. 10.



CONCLUSIONS

The overarching aim of this report was to investigate the factors that contributed to the No result in the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum, with a focus on the influencers and messages.

We find that multiple factors coalesced to determine the No result. These included:

Political: Lack of Bipartisan Support – No referendum proposal in the history of the Australia federation has succeeded without bipartisan political support. The result of the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum continued this pattern. Opposition leader Peter Dutton’s announcement in April 2023 that the Liberal Party would not support the Yes case was a pivotal moment in the campaign, following a similar announcement by its Coalition partner, the Nationals, in November 2022. Voter support for the Voice in opinion polls had exceeded 50% in 2022 but started declining from late in the year. After Dutton’s April 2023 announcement, the decline accelerated, as many conservative voters apparently took their cues on the Voice from their leaders. Overall, public support for the Voice – as measured by published public opinion polls – collapsed by nearly 25 percentage points in the year leading up to the vote, representing a massive swing in public opinion by historical standards, and underlining the difficulty of achieving constitutional change in the absence of bipartisan support.

Electorate: Cosmopolitan “Yes” and Provincial “No” – The defeat of the Voice is not just a Coalition story. Labor voters were far more equivocal in their support for the Voice

than were Coalition voters in opposition to the Voice. Green and Teal voters overwhelmingly supported the Voice, but Labor voters were divided, despite the referendum being the initiative of a Labor government. Stark contrasts in voting patterns were observed between voters in the cosmopolitan and politically progressive inner suburbs of the major cities – which yielded the strongest results for the Voice – and rural and regional seats, which recorded the largest No votes. Support for the Voice also cleaved along lines marked by educational attainment and wealth, including a strong statistical correlation between university education and support for the Yes case.

Fragmented Media Environment – The last referendum held in Australia involved the unsuccessful proposal for an Australian republic in 1999. Since then, the media ecosystem through which political campaigns communicate their messages to voters has changed dramatically, with the internet and social media platforms emerging as key vehicles for political campaigning and the dissemination of information. Legacy media such as free-to-air television, print newspapers and radio continue to play an important role, but increasingly rely on social media to reach wider audiences for their stories, and vice versa. A symbiotic relationship has thus evolved between legacy and social media when it comes to political communications.

Both the Yes and No groups understood the value of messaging across both legacy media and the major social media platforms, but No did it far more effectively. Backed by the right-wing activist group Advance, No was earlier to focus on social media, and quicker and more adept at harnessing

the power of the fastest growing social media site in Australia, TikTok, to reach younger voters. It used storytelling, authentic voices and personalisation, with Indigenous campaigners Price and Mundine as its leading campaigners. No's messages were amplified by Sky News Australia, which had a vast reach through its YouTube channel and re-postings of its stories by commentators and conservative politicians on social media. The No camp's messaging was also sharp and simple, with key lines about the Voice proposal being "divisive" repeated often and consistently across the media spheres (mainstream, social media, mobile phone texts and paid media) to strategically targeted audiences under strategically different campaign names.

By contrast, the Yes campaign had more disparate messages, and many more messengers, perhaps contributing to confusion and uncertainty among voters. Yes appeared to attract more "free" mainstream media coverage for its scripted campaign events than No did for its events. But it didn't always go to plan. Notably, there was a significant backlash on social media against the use of John Farnham's iconic song "You're the Voice" in the campaign. The Yes side also spent much more on online advertising than No, but this clearly had limited impact.

Information Quality: Misinformation and Disinformation

– The referendum provided another example of the increasing challenges that the spread of misinformation and disinformation present to Australia's democracy. Blatant misinformation and disinformation polluted the discussion of some key issues in the Voice referendum. False claims that the AEC permitted multiple voting in the referendum was a conspicuous example, representing apparent attempts to undermine the procedural integrity of the electoral process.

Many of the falsehoods spread during the campaign, which were beyond the scope of the AEC's disinformation register, were brought to light by third-party fact-checkers. However, the intended role of fact-checkers to enhance the integrity of referendum discourse was challenged from politically conservative quarters, with Sky News Australia pursuing claims of bias by RMIT FactLab. Notwithstanding the attacks from Sky News, we reported survey results that confirm high levels of overall public trust among Australian voters in fact-checking organisations.

Gauging the level of influence of misinformation on the referendum result is challenging. This is especially true considering the paradoxical nature of the "electoral rigging" fear campaign focused on the AEC – a tactic that would more typically come from a vanquished player rather than a victor. That said, false narratives, including claims that the Voice

would presage a "globalist land grab", certainly provided fuel for public doubt about voting for constitutional change.

Strategic Political Communications: Multiple Campaigns

– Unlike the singularly focused nature of competing parties in federal election campaigns, the Yes and No camps in the Voice referendum were represented by multiple and sometimes disparate campaigns. The management of this plurality on both sides appeared to play a role in the effectiveness of messaging, particularly on social media. As noted above, the No side largely relied on 'Advance' to orchestrate its messaging. It settled on a relatively consistent message that the Voice was 'divisive'. As part of this overarching message, it also adopted fear-based narratives based on notions that the proposed change was a "slippery slope" that would lead to a raft of other social, political, economic and legal changes. The No campaign relied substantially on two highly visible and well-known Indigenous leaders telling their stories about their objections to the Voice to the Parliament. Aside from Indigenous Affairs Minister Linda Burney for the Yes case, Price and Mundine were the most prominent Indigenous leaders in media debates. The Yes campaign struggled to find a coherent message as it sought to manage the No's largely negative campaign, and particularly to counter misinformation and disinformation about the Voice proposal. The Albanese government also struggled to clearly explain the purpose and nature of the Voice mechanism. The Yes side also faced challenges with timing, with some major advertising released late in the campaign when public opinion already appeared to have turned decisively against the Voice.

Policy Salience – As the campaign for the Voice progressed, other issues increasingly crowded out the policy agenda, particularly heightened public concerns about the state of the economy and the rising cost of living. The salience of public concerns about the economy was weaponised by the No campaign in its paid advertising campaign, which drew attention to the costs of holding the referendum and claimed future costs if the Voice to Parliament was implemented. This backdrop presented another challenge for the Yes campaign in persuading voters about the value and importance of the Voice to Parliament at this point in time.

In sum, our research points to a combination of factors – summarised above – as the essential ingredients that doomed Labor's referendum proposal for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in 2023. Though we will never know for certain which factors influenced the result more than others, we believe our findings contain important lessons for participants in future election and referendum campaigns, as the political and media environments inevitably evolve further.

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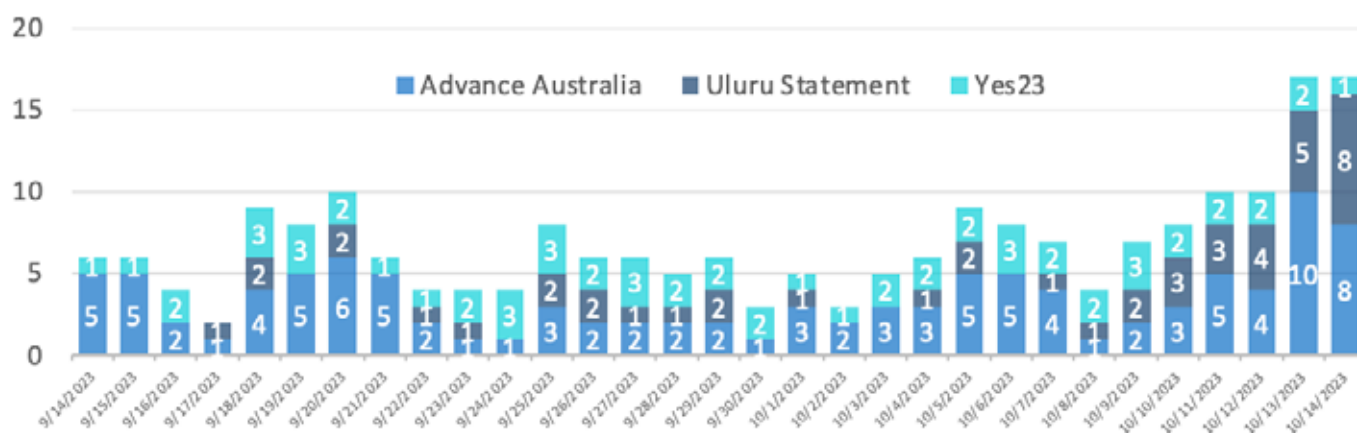
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Appendix

Figure A1: TikTok posts per day in the final month of the campaign



Source: Authors using TikTok data

Table A1: Top five most viewed posts on TikTok from Yes/No accounts

	Post	Views	Likes	Comments	Shares
Yes23	Have you googled it? #yes23 #voicetoparliament #referendum #voteyes #australia #FirstNations #auspol #australianreferendum #ulurustatement #closingthegap #briggs #fromtheheart	784,800	58,400	0*	1092
	We need action now, and planning for the future. That's why John Harding is voting Yes. #yes23 #voice #thevoice #voicetoparliament #australia #tiktokaustralia #fyp #garma	444,900	47,300	0*	2369
	Rachel Perkins answering questions on the Voice to Parliament ❤️💛💛 #yes23 #voicetoparliament #referendum #voteyes #australia #FirstNations #auspol #australianpolitics #ulurustatement #closethegap #fromtheheart #australianreferendum	271,600	15,600	0*	353
	Rachel Perkins talking about one of the biggest misconceptions! Also, if you're worried about money, the Voice is very likely to make things more efficient! #yes23 #voicetoparliament #referendum #voteyes #australia #FirstNations #auspol #australianpolitics #ulurustatement #australianreferendum #referendum #fromtheheart	198,400	11,900	0*	392
	We as parents want to give a better version of life than we've all had. On Saturday stand with 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and vote YES! 💛 #yes23 #voteyes #voicetoparliament #referendum #FirstNations #auspol #closingthegap #australianpolitics #australianreferendum #australia #fromtheheart #ulurustatement #closingthegap	121,900	16,000	0*	652

	Post	Views	Likes	Comments	Shares
Uluru Statement	If you don't know, here you go  #TheVoice #UluruStatement #VoteYes	342,500	33,900	127	1509
	It's time for a history lesson on the Australian Constitution. #VoteYes #UluruStatement #VoiceReferendum	86,500	9143	60	380
	OUR NEW AD IS LIVE! You're the Voice that will make history. On 14 October, we know we all can stand together with the power to be powerful. #HistoryIsCalling, so #VoteYes. Are you in? John Farnham is. #UluruStatement #StayTrue2Uluru #YoureTheVoice #voteyes	55,700	5598	734	248
	In exactly 3 weeks, Australia, you will be asked if you wish to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. History is calling, it's your chance to vote YES for recognition and representation.  Authorised by Geoff Scott of the Uluru Dialogue, University of New South Wales, Sydney. #Historyiscalling #ulurustatement #ulurustatementfromtheheart #voicetoparliament #tiktokaustralia #fyp #voicetoparliamentexplained #referendum #voteyes #voteyesaustralia #yes23 #yes23au #australian #auspol #thevoiceaustralia #foryoupage #viral #blowthisup #referendum2023 #thevoicereferendum	39,900	5834	73	526
	The Voice will improve the lives of First Peoples and all Australians, now and for future generations. Check our FAQs page to learn more about the referendum for a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution https://ulurustatement.org/education/faqs/ (link in bio) #ulurustatement #historyiscalling #voicetoparliament #auspol #auspolitics	39,900	3772	274	46
Advance Australia	Replying to @McLovin What is the Indigenous Voice to Parliament? These Indigenous Australians are voting 'No' because the Voice will divide us. #votenoaustralia #voicetoparliament #australia  #auspol #yes23 #fyp #foryoupage #blowthisup #referendum #indigenous #aboriginal #australia #australian #tiktokaustralia	2600,000	209,600	2714	17,100
	#votenodivision #votenoaustralia #voiceofdivision #yes23 #thevoice #referendum #auspol #voteno #voicetoparliament #voice #indigenousvoicetoparliament	2,200,000	120,300	4311	25,300
	Replying to @joey_tulips We are ALL Australians! The Voice will divide us. Vote No to the Voice of Division. #voicetoparliament #votenoaustralia #tiktokaustralia #fyp #voicetoparliamentexplained #voteno #notothevoice #referendum #voteyes #voteyesaustralia #yes23 #australian #auspol #thevoiceaustralia #viral #blowthisup #referendum2023 #thevoicereferendum #notmyvoice #parliament #indigenous #aboriginal #australia 	2,100,000	197.3K	2600	5424
	If you don't understand the Voice to Parliament, listen to this Indigenous woman.  #earlyvoting #earlyvoting2023 #voteno #voicetoparliament	1,900,000	120,400	2561	14,800
	"I don't want others to look at me differently." These Indigenous Australians don't want to be divided along the lines of race. Vote No to the Voice of Division. #voicetoparliament #votenoaustralia #tiktokaustralia #fyp #voicetoparliamentexplained #referendum #voteyes #voteyesaustralia #yes23 #yes23au #australian #auspol #thevoiceaustralia #foryoupage #viral #blowthisup #voteno #notothevoice #referendum2023 #thevoicereferendum #australians #indigenousvoicetoparliament #indigenous #australia #aboriginal	1,700,000	159,700	1948	6643


Source: Authors using TikTok data: Note: *Indicates comments were turned off on Yes23 posts

Table A2: Campaigners use of YouTube, their key messages and number of subscribers and views

YouTube							
Campaign	subscribers	No. of videos	Sentiment +/-	Key message	Lead voice	length	Views
Recognise a Better Way	19	5	-	Gary Johns Referendum Ballot Explainer Gary Johns on the AEC Cases Gary Johns on his book 'The Burden of Culture' Gary Johns on Paper 03: The 'Truth' Model Cherylín Waye Interview Video	Gary Johns	2' 24" avg	3.4k
Advance Australia	1.78k	4	+	"We're Voting No"	Jacinta Price; Warren Mundine and others	4' 39"	23k
			-	"Meet Voice Activist Teela Reid"	Teela Reid	1' 03"	10k
			-	Thomas Mayo	Mayo	1' 26"	69k
			+	"One, Together"	Jacinta Price and family	8'59"	3.9k
Total views							109.9k
Fair Australia Comes up under Advance	0		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Not My Voice	91	12	-	"Not My Voice" (7 versions) "Same as You"	Janetia Kapp Multiple speakers	12-15" 30"	829.1k 235
			-	"Too many questions – won't speak for me – will divide us" (2 versions)	Mundine	15-30"	1k
			both	"This is their Voice. Not mine. Not Yours"	Mundine	7'37"	5.3k
Total views							836.3k
The Blak sovereignty movement	n/a	0	n/a	Has YouTube presence via TV interviews	n/a	n/a	n/a
Uluru Statement from the Heart (Uluru Dialogue)	1.38k	7	+	"History is calling" (3 versions) John Farnham Ad (3 versions) "Women of the Voice" (event)	multiple Farnham + multiple Allira Davis introducing Uluru Dialogue	1'- 30" 15"; 1'; 2'48" 1:28'4"	2.75M 752k 0.37K
Total views							3.5M
Uphold and Recognise^	n/a	0	n/a		n/a	n/a	n/a
Sky News Australia	3.86M	490	-			5' 21"	9.03M
The Guardian Australia	58.6K	110					1.6M

Yes23*	623	+		Vote Yes on October 14	4:57" – 00:15"	19.93M
	75 (15 are labelled as shorts) (15 short)					
Australians for Indigenous Constitutional Recognition	0		Has YouTube presence via TV interviews	n/a	n/a	n/a
Empowered Communities^	0		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: Authors, using data from YouTube. Only looking at 2023*; *Duplicates and variations of theme removed from key messages column.



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