

## From Industrial to Social Campaigns: Lay Morality, General Elections and Australia's Trade Union Federation

### Des campagnes syndicales à des campagnes sociales: moralité laïque, élections générales et Fédération des syndicats australiens

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#### Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine le potentiel de revitalisation syndicale que peut procurer une participation aux campagnes électorales. Premièrement, il décrit les changements intervenus dans les campagnes des syndicats, qui vont au-delà des questions de relations professionnelles et s'attardent dorénavant à des questions d'importance sociale, telles que la santé et l'éducation. Deuxièmement, en conceptualisant cette activité grâce au recours à la 'moralité laïque', les syndicats peuvent renforcer leur capacité à accroître leur pouvoir et leur légitimité. Ainsi, les syndicats peuvent élargir les bases de leur légitimité et créer de nouvelles opportunités pour leur renouvellement.

Bien que cette approche puisse ne pas conduire à revitaliser leur densité, elle peut leur donner une chance de se renouveler, car elle vient consolider leur légitimité auprès d'un public plus large. Nous suggérons que, lorsque les syndicats agissent de la sorte, ils deviennent des 'agents d'utilité sociale' qui défendent les intérêts d'un plus grand nombre de personnes. Nous soutenons que, compte tenu de la dynamique des changements apportés au travail et à cause de la manière dont les travailleurs oeuvrent à présent, cela offre aux syndicats un moyen de mettre à profit ces subjectivités multiples des travailleurs et de demeurer pertinents.

Cet article se fonde sur une analyse de plus de 1000 articles de presse couvrant quatre périodes de campagnes de syndicalistes lors des élections australiennes entre 2007 et 2016. Cette dernière fut complétée par des interviews originales avec des informateurs-clés et une analyse des résultats des sondages électoraux pour chaque élection. Ces trois méthodes ont permis de cerner un changement de cap dans les campagnes des syndicats. Ce dernier constitue une voie potentielle en vue de la revitalisation de ces organisations.

# From Industrial to Social Campaigns: Lay Morality, General Elections and Australia's Trade Union Federation

Donella Caspersz and Tom Barratt

**Considerable attention has been paid to understanding union revitalization that is increasing density, legitimacy and the power of unions. This paper analyzes the campaigns conducted by Australia's national trade union federation, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, in four national democratic elections (2007-2016) to argue that unions can contribute to their revitalization when they campaign on everyday issues such as healthcare and education. By adopting a lay morality approach, we show that the shift from industrial to 'social' campaigns has the potential for unions to broaden their legitimacy to constituents beyond the workplace. It is proposed that, while this shift may not immediately result in increasing density, this may be an efficacious route for unions to retain their legitimacy and power.**

**KEYWORDS:** union revitalization, national elections, social utility, lay morality.

## Introduction

Trade union density, or the proportion of employees who are union members, continues to decline across high wage economies. Data from the OECD show that between 1999 and 2014, union density fell in the United States of America from 13.4% to 10.7% while, in the United Kingdom, density fell from 30.1% to 25.1% during the same period (OECD, 1999-2014). In Australia, where this study was conducted, density dropped to 15.5% in 2014 from 25.4% in 1999 (OECD, 1999-2014). Declining union density has provoked a steady stream of scholarship that attempts to understand how unions can revitalize, that is, increase their density, legitimacy and power (see Frege and Kelly, 2003; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017; Holgate, 2018). The aim of this article is to contribute to this scholarship by asking: "How can unions use national election campaigns to increase their legitimacy and power?"

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Australia is an appropriate context in which to consider this question because there is compulsory voting in Australia, which provides unions with the opportunity to influence the electorate (that is, both in and beyond the workforce) by campaigning in elections. Using a lay morality conceptualization (Sayer, 2004), the study analyses campaigns conducted by Australia's national trade union federation, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) across four national (Australia-wide) elections held between 2007 and 2016 to provide a response to the study's question. This is done by combining analysis of media content original interviews with union leaders and post-election voter surveys. The campaigns that were studied span a period where the ACTU prioritized election campaigning, which commenced with the decision to levy member unions to fund a campaign targeting the 2007 election (Muir, 2008). The analysis shows that, over the course of these elections, the focus of the ACTU campaigns shifted from promoting industrial matters, or issues that directly relate to the terms and conditions of work, to campaigning about the morality of social issues that influence the everyday life of ordinary people, such as equitable access to quality health and education (Nartozky and Besnier, 2014). In Australia, perceived reductions in state support for health-care and education threatened the moral values of equitable access to high quality service in these sectors, and thus became a target for union campaigns.

It is argued that the opportunity for unions to revitalize emerges when they campaign on matters that connect with these everyday experiences of voters in national elections. By campaigning on these issues, unions adopt the role of agents of 'social utility' (Australian Council of Trade Unions [ACTU], 2017) who agitate about issues that affect the lives of ordinary people (in this instance, voters). While this agency may not directly result in increasing union density, unions can gain legitimacy not only as champions of workers, but also as champions of workers as citizens, consumers and family members (Heery, 2018; Seidman, 2011; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010); and build their power, if voters valorize these everyday issues that unions campaign on at elections.

By focusing on national election campaigns and union activity, this paper differs from the majority of revitalization literature, which strives to identify strategies that increase union density (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). Thus, the contributions of this paper are to chart the development of the ACTU's political election campaigns over four elections, a sphere of activity that has already been shown to be a source of union power (Wilson and Spies-Butcher, 2011), and suggest that these developments can provide a potential path to union revitalization by increasing unions' power and legitimacy. The following sections of this paper review: first, the union revitalization literature, focusing on the strategies that unions have employed in order to revitalize; and second, introduce the theoretical concepts of moral economy and, in particular, lay morality. The four election

campaigns are, then, described and interpreted as a case study methodology that draws upon media content analysis, interviews and electoral surveys. This is followed by the data analysis and conclusion.

## Revitalizing Unions

There is disagreement about what union revitalization means and, as a result, controversy about how to measure it (Frege and Kelly, 2003). In this paper, union revitalization is defined as attempts by trade unions to arrest and reverse the decline in membership, their power and legitimacy (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). Revitalization has been broadly considered in three ways: first, through identifying the reasons for trade union decline, such as the rise of neoliberalism (Johnstone and Ackers, 2015); second, through examining the strategies, such as organizing, put in place by unions to increase membership and power (Frege and Kelly, 2003); and third, through measuring the outcomes of these strategies (Behrens *et al.*, 2004), with relevant indices variously including membership density and political influence (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017). Despite different foci, what unites these three approaches is that they consider union activities in the context of changing external circumstances (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). The focus of this paper is election campaigns as a source of trade union revitalization and, as such, this literature review addresses trade union strategies for revitalization. In doing so, it considers the implementation and effectiveness of Frege and Kelly's (2003) six revitalization strategies. That is, political action *vis-à-vis* political parties, organizing for membership and mobilization, cooperative partnership with employers and the state, internal restructuring, trans/international unionism and coalition building with other social movements.

Unions have engaged in political action *vis-à-vis* political parties for over a century. The strategy of political action represents unions providing resources to assist in the election of preferred candidates, which in turn allows unions to gain political power, influence state regulation and ensure their ability to survive, mobilize and bargain (Hyman, 2001). Korpi (1983) argues that the political arena can prove more effective than the industrial arena for unions in pursuing their goals as politics unifies class interests, rather than dividing them across occupation and industry lines. From a more practical standpoint, a further advantage for unions' involvement in politics is that such an approach provides better and more cost-effective outcomes for workers. The deployment of resources towards electing favourable officials is, however, problematic for two reasons: first, if preferred candidates are not elected then unions potentially face political and industrial foes (Cooper *et al.*, 2015); and second, 'progressive' political parties have not maintained active support for unions (Murray, 2017; Holgate, 2018). As such, while unions continue to commit resources and effort into supporting

particular political parties (e.g. The Australian and British Labo(u)r Parties and the Democratic Party in the United States) and such a strategy has failed to provide unions with the desired outcomes (Borland, 2012). Instead, unions' historical institutional role has been progressively marginalized and organized labour has had to find new ways to survive (Murray, 2017).

A second revitalization strategy is organizing for membership and for industrial power. Organizing is characterized by unions recruiting and mobilizing workers to win better terms and conditions of work through collective expressions of agency, which, in turn, spurs further recruitment and mobilization (Heery, 2018). Trade union confederations, particularly in the USA, Britain and Australia, committed significant effort and resources during the 1990s and 2000s to remake the union movement into an organizing movement, which emphasizes recruitment of new members (Holgate, 2018). Despite initial optimism (Kelly, 1998), the suitability of organizing structures for many non-unionized workforces has come into question (Murray, 2017). Even where successful, organizing has increasingly been seen as a collection of varying tactics responding to different circumstances (Ibsen and Tapia, 2017), rather than contributing to renewal through either a coordinated political vision or genuine worker empowerment (Simms *et al.*, 2013).

A cooperative or corporatist strategy for union revitalization involves unions cooperating with management to provide mutual gains for employment relations stakeholders (Kochan *et al.*, 2009). A cooperative approach appeals to unions as diminished resources and institutional protections limit the ability of unions to engage in, and benefit from, industrial conflict. However, fragmentation of workforces coupled with reduced institutional protections (Murray, 2017) mean that employers (or the State) no longer need unions to create joint gains, and further, the rhetoric of cooperation can be manipulated by management to pacify workforces (Upchurch, 2009).

Unions' fourth revitalization strategy, internal restructuring through mergers, sees unions with reduced membership and resources combine resources to benefit from economies of scale and increase their market and political power (Frege and Kelly, 2003). For example, in Australia, mergers saw 144 unions in 1987 become 45 in 2000 (Kirsch, 2005). However, consolidation is an internal strategy for unions that is generally defensive and thus unlikely to result in revitalization (Michelson, 2000). Further, the decentralization of bargaining, particularly in English-speaking, liberal market economies, demands that unions remain attentive to member needs at the enterprise level. The centralized structures and heterogeneous memberships, which mergers create, can thus act against union interests (Murray, 2017).

The fifth response, trade union internationalism, has its roots in the 1860s and has taken various forms depending on economic and institutional landscapes

(Waterman and Timms, 2005). The internationalisation of production processes, as well as the increased ability of capital to exercise mobility and select favourable labour regimes has compelled union leaders to find ways of operating outside the constraints of national borders (Ford and Gillan, 2015). Organizations such as the Southern Initiative on Global Trade Union Rights (Lambert and Webster, 2001) and Global Union Federations (Harrod and O'Brien, 2002) have created optimism for unions to generate and exercise power on an international scale. Internationalism, however, is dependent on articulation between different levels of actions (Lévesque and Murray, 2010), and remains fundamentally limited while domestic trade unions are in decline (Lambert and Webster, 2001).

Finally, social movement unionism (SMU) or 'community unionism' (Fine, 2005) is based on unions building broad coalitions with civil society. By working in partnership with civil-society actors, such as religious or environmental groups, on matters of social and economic injustice, SMU aims to appeal to employees both as workers and as citizens (Heery, 2018). Therefore, SMU seeks to focus union activity around issues that connect to economic and social aspects of workers' lives and draw upon relationships that they have with local stakeholders, who, in turn, can augment union power (Seidman, 2011). However, due to the fact that SMU actions are mobilized around issues that are of individual political relevance, which individuals join for a variety of reasons (Heery, 2018), there is no guarantee that individuals' involvement in SMU actions will increase union density or influence (Holgate, 2018; Holgate *et al.*, 2018).

Despite pursuing these six union revitalization strategies, union density has continued to decline. Such a result indicates that there is a need for a new way of conceptualizing the strategy of union revitalization. In response to this need, a lay morality (Sayer, 2007) conceptualization of the role of unions, as orchestrated by trade union confederations rather than individual unions, is presented and defended.

## **A Lay Morality Conceptualization of Union Revitalization**

Lay morality is a "bottom-up morality approach" (Bolton and Laaser, 2013: 515) that is grounded in the concept of moral economy. It "studies the moral norms and sentiments that structure and reinforce economic practices, both formal and informal, and the way in which these are reinforced, compromised or overridden by economic pressures" (Sayer, 2007: 262). Beginning with Polanyi (1944, see Palomera and Vetta, 2016 for an overview), a moral economy perspective argues that resistance to particular economic practices emerges when these violate socially shared values, norms and customs, that is, morals (Bolton and Laaser, 2013). For example, while child labour was acceptable

as a work practice in Britain during the industrial revolution, this came to be considered as transgressing shared values and norms about justice, fairness and morality, resulting in a successful campaign to outlaw the practice via legislation (Nardinelli, 1980). Thus, it is impossible to separate moral evaluations about the efficacy or otherwise of the “practices of production, exchange and reproduction” (Palomera and Vetta, 2016: 419-421) in a capitalist economy.

However, a key critique of the moral economy approach (see Silver, 2003) is that the framework lacks an understanding of *how* the tension between what is moral and economic motivates agency. Thus, while collective resistance to economic practices in a moral economy framework emerges when shared values, norms and customs that characterize a community are transgressed (such as child labour), people’s reflective capacities to decide what practices they accept or reject are overlooked in analyses (Bolton and Laaser, 2015). In other words, moral economy does not consider how the micro-level (or individual) moral evaluations of socio-economic practices that emerge with daily living can foster resistance.

Sayer (2007) and others (Nartozky and Besnier, 2014; Simoni, 2016) argue that it is crucial to clarify what is ‘moral’ and what is ‘economic’ to appreciate why this micro-level agency may emerge. Sayer (2007: 266-267) argues that most accounts of resistance present a ‘soft’ explanation of resistance, or one that “ignore(s) the *cognitive* element of values, that is how, directly or indirectly, they involve or imply assessment of behaviour and situations in relation to well-being”. In other words, they lack an explanation of *why* the tension between the moral and the economic *motivates* agency to create change.

A lay morality conceptualization instead argues that agency is motivated when individuals experience a moral breakdown when they consider that an economic practice transgresses their moral values. Because individuals ‘free their thought’ when they experience this moral breakdown, they consciously *make* an ‘*ethical decision*’ to make an ‘*ethical demand*’ for matters to be managed differently—that is, agency (Robbins, 2009). Thus, the realization that child labour transgressed the moral values of the English in industrial Britain triggered a moral breakdown. British industrial society subsequently made an ethical decision to demand that the practice be outlawed.

It is argued that these ideas provide an alternative conceptualization in considering how unions can revitalize. That is, instead of focussing on strategies for revitalizing by increasing union membership, the focus should be on how can unions can become the agent that encourages ordinary people to *consciously* question how economic activity transgresses their ‘moral’ values about matters pertaining to their everyday lives. We suggest that unions can use election campaigns to foster this questioning, and in so doing, redefine their role to strengthen their legitimacy and, potentially, their influence.

## Methodology

Case studies are useful for considering bounded phenomena (Yin, 2013) such as in this study where the focus is on the ACTU's campaigning strategies over four elections, 2007-2016. A case study approach is preferred here over participant observation as political election campaigns are diffuse phenomena, which exist in multiple places over an extended period.

Creswell (1994: 12, cited in Blaikie 2000: 215) describes a case as a protocol where an object of interest is studied in detail using a variety of methods over time and with sufficient contextualization. In this research, the case is studied in detail using three methods (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to establish the reliability of each source. Despite the ability to deploy triangulation in case study research, the case-specific nature of inquiry necessarily delimits the generalizability of the phenomenon under examination (Stake, 2000), thus necessarily delimiting the claims made in this paper.

The three methods used to examine the case were media content analysis, semi-structured interviews and examination of electoral surveys. Content analysis involves making sense of recurring and related themes of particular texts. The examination of media texts is particularly useful as it provides a representation of both social meanings and institutional relations (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). This is particularly applicable in this case as these election campaigns are expressions of both unions' position within society and how unions influence other institutional actors.

The media materials were sourced using *Factiva*, a database, which collates newspaper articles, newswires, industry publications, websites and company reports (Factiva, 2019). Texts were collected using the keywords 'ACTU', 'election' and 'campaign' and were limited to the time period of nine months before and three months after each election, 2007 (n=954), 2010 (n=294), 2013 (n=268) and 2016 (n=198) to capture the campaign activities and reactions to them. This design allows for analysis of the discursive terrain upon which the ACTU's campaigns were waged.

The secondary (media) material was analyzed using the Leximancer computer assisted software to both extract key themes and to show the relationship between particular themes (Stockwell *et al.*, 2009). Leximancer software algorithmically identifies key themes, concepts and ideas by mining the text. The concepts that emerge are highly ranked lexical terms based on word frequency and co-occurrence, which represent the ideas in the text and, as such, the subjects of each campaign.

Interviews are an active way of making data, allowing respondents to construct and make sense of reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Five original,

semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants. A stratified, convenience sampling approach was adopted to target individuals who had been involved in some or all of these election campaigns (Robinson, 2014) on the basis of seniority within the campaign. The strata of interviewees, outlined in Table 1 below, included the architect of a national campaign (n=1), union office bearers in elected positions of state confederations (n=2), a senior union employee (n=1) at a state confederation and an activist delegate in an ACTU affiliated union (n=1). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Leximancer was used to guide the thematic analysis before the data were manually coded. All interviews, recording and transcription were conducted under a university ethics protocol.

**TABLE 1**  
**Schedule of Interviewees**

Position	Level	Code
Key National Campaign Organizer	National	Interview 1
Federation Official	State	Interview 2
Federation Employee	State	Interview 3
Federation Official	State	Interview 4
Activist Delegate	Affiliated Union	Interview 5

Finally, the results from an electoral survey conducted after each election were analyzed. Australian Electoral Surveys (AES) are designed to “provide a long-term perspective on stability and change in the political attitudes and behaviour of the Australian electorate” (AES, 2016: 1). This dataset provides indications of voter trends and preferences and has been used to analyze union election campaigns in Australia (Wilson and Spies Butcher, 2011).

To analyze this study’s data, survey data from 2004 (as a baseline) onward was considered, that is 2004 (n=1769), 2007 (n=1873), 2010 (n=2214), 2013 (n=3955) and 2016 (n=2818). Categories of survey questions were selected that aligned with the campaign themes revealed through the Factiva analysis and interviews. These were industrial relations (2007 and 2010), education (2016) and health (2016). These categories were corroborated by interview data provided by a key national campaign organizer and a state union official (Interview 1, Interview 3). Responses relevant to these categories were tracked using AES data from 2004 to 2016. As this data was used to identify shifts in voter sentiment, the trends identified were aggregated and expressed as percentages of voter sentiment on the issues of interest. By isolating voter attitudes on single issues, it is possible to gauge how significant the issue was for voters.

## ACTU and Election Campaigns

Formed in 1927, the ACTU represents nearly 2 million Australian workers through its 46 affiliated unions (ACTU, 2015). The ACTU collaborates with state-level union confederations such as Unions WA in the Australian state of Western Australia, and affiliate unions such as the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union<sup>1</sup>. The ACTU has a tradition of being involved in Australian party politics through its affiliation with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) (Cooper *et al.*, 2015). Thus, when the ALP forms government in Australia's national parliament, the ACTU typically influences public policy (Peetz and Pocock, 2009).

In the 2004 national-level Australian election, the conservative Liberal & National Party coalition (LNP) won a majority in both houses of parliament and used its mandate to pass industrial relations legislation that privileged individual employment relations. As part of this agenda, it introduced legislative provisions limiting unions' ability to access worksites (Peetz and Pocock, 2009). The passage of this legislation galvanized the ACTU to use election campaigns to exert political pressure (Wilson and Spies-Butcher, 2011):

And, so all of the unions were given the instructions to basically, in 2004, call your union members. So, it was the first time we started talking about politics, and how we need to change the government to change the laws, particularly limiting workers' rights and privatizing, and individual agreements and all that. (Interview 5).

The ACTU subsequently launched its own national election campaign in 2007 entitled 'Your Rights @ Work' (Muir, 2008). This had the explicit goal of removing the LNP government and electing the ALP, as the expectation was that an ALP in government would repeal the industrial relations legislation, or at least attenuate some of its more employee-hostile elements (Muir, 2008). Using campaign strategies that included television advertising, telephone banks and community meetings with union and non-union members (Muir, 2008), the ACTU sought to convince the electorate that the LNP legislation on industrial relations was broadly disadvantageous and specifically so for large sections of the workforce. At the same time, the ACTU campaigning message stressed that the LNP's industrial relations legislation was immoral: "(These) laws take away the respect that working families correctly believe is their right as Australians." (ACTU, June 2007).

The 2007 ACTU campaign had a "decisive electoral impact" in that year's federal election (Wilson and Spies-Butcher, 2011: s324) and the ALP government was elected and pledged to enact new legislation that would redress provisions in existing law that were 'unfriendly' to unions. Following this success, the ACTU conducted another campaign in the 2010 election. In this campaign, the ACTU strategy focused on returning the ALP government for a second

mandate. Legislation had been passed during the 2007-2010 electoral term, which restored certain union rights, prioritized collective over individual bargaining and expanded the minimum standards, which protected large sections of the workforce (Stewart, 2011). However, despite this, many unions who considered themselves responsible for changing the government were disillusioned about what they saw as only moderate reform (Wilson and Spies-Butcher, 2011). Despite these influences in the ACTU-ALP relationship, the slogan for the 2010 union campaign was “Work Choices: Whatever the name never again” and the union agenda remained focused on industrial relations public policy reforms.

However, the ACTU continued to use the strategies from the previous election to politicize their issues with voters:

We did a huge amount of training of union members of how to have conversations, how to go door knocking, explaining the political system and why marginal seats are important; breaking it down for them about how many votes can change this seat. (Interview 5).

Importantly, the ACTU also implemented strategies to ensure that they were able to contact voters in subsequent elections:

The other big difference between now and then is data and the ability to use the data and databases to be much more efficient and effective in terms of how we go about persuading people and so this is persuading on the side of voters. (Interview 1).

Although the ALP government was re-elected in 2010, it could, in its second term, only form a minority government.

While the ACTU campaign supported the ALP in the 2013 election campaign with a television advertisement expenditure of over AUD \$5 million using a negative campaign that targeted the LNP, the election resulted in a LNP government (Schneiders, 2018). In 2016, the campaign was, explicitly, designed to oust the LNP government. However, this time, the ACTU campaign was to ‘Put the [LNP] last’, rather than vote for the ALP. Again, the ACTU used TV advertisements of AUD \$3 million and social media campaigning to build activism (Skulley, 2015). However, the LNP was, ultimately, declared to have won the election after negotiating a compromise with members of the cross-bench to support the LNP in government.

Thus, between the years 2007-2016, the ACTU not only made election campaigning a priority, but also moved away from actively supporting a political party in national election campaigns. The ACTU used its national election strategy to influence voting intentions: “We would put the data into, as the conversation went, you had conversation training, how to shift undecided voters.” (Interview 5). By the end of this period, the ACTU’s national election strategy had connected

with a broader range of voters than those sympathetic to organized labour and, concerning Australian voters, on matters other than industrial relations:

We would produce, for example, campaign materials that would talk about cuts to the local hospitals in the budget or cuts to the diagnostic services or the fact that how they don't give funding, whether not getting funding affected the local schools in the area. We sent those materials out to the secret army and they would go and do that in a way that engaged people in conversations. So, it wasn't about letterboxing, not about people's letterbox, but it was about having as many conversations as possible with people in the electorate every week. (Interview 1).

In summary, election campaigns not only connected the ACTU with every day (and non-union) voters, but the strategy that they used in the campaigns connected them with the 'hurts' that voters were experiencing in everyday living.

## Results

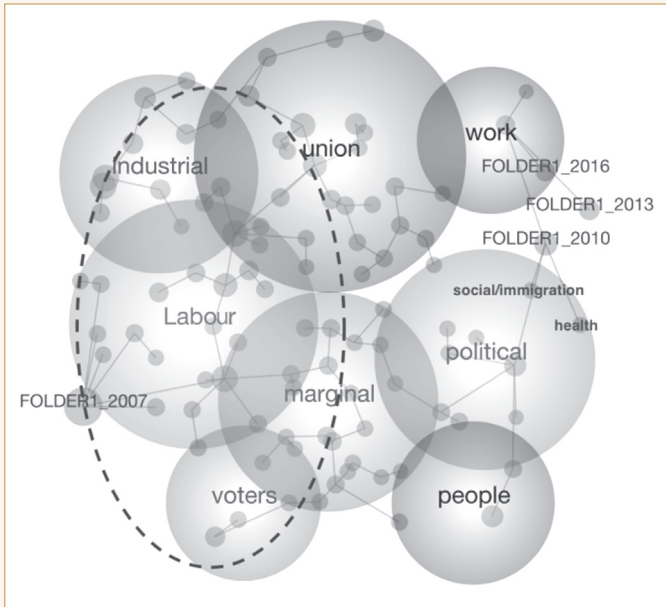
### Media Data and Content Analysis: "Freeing Thought"

The Leximancer analysis for the media search is depicted in Figure 1. This shows that the focus for the union campaigns significantly changed between the 2007 and the 2010, 2013 and 2016 campaigns. As the keywords in the circled area depict, the 2007 campaign focused on 'industrial relations' and 'laws' and 'policy' that related to the 'workplace' and the 'union'. This campaign focused on the strategy of the 'ACTU' and the 'national secretary'. The connection of these keywords to 'campaign' and 'Labor' suggest that the campaign was linked to the Labor Party's political campaign: "The ACTU has spent an estimated \$30 million on a series of highly effective television ads that have boosted Labor's (ALP) fortunes". Thus, the desired outcome from this campaign was to change the incumbent government from Conservative to Labor.

However, the position of the 2010, 2013 and 2016 campaigns in Figure 1 is one indication that these ACTU campaigns differed significantly from the 2007 campaign. Figure 1 further shows that while the 2007 campaign was linked to the word "industrial", these later campaigns clustered around the keywords of 'immigration', 'tax', 'health' and 'social'. Importantly, as Figure 1 shows, the connection between these words and the themes 'people' further suggests that these campaigns were conducted for the more general 'people', rather than a 'political' party or even 'workers'.

Thus, this first analysis shows the dramatic divergence between the ACTU 2007 and subsequent campaigns. However, the analysis further illustrates the shift in the ACTU campaigns away from focusing on industrial issues to engaging voters in making evaluations about 'moral' matters relating to immigration, tax, health and social issues.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Media Search 2007-2016 Campaigns**



### Interview Analysis: “Reaching an Ethical Decision”

The 2007 campaign that was entitled ‘Your Rights at Work’ was described as following “a narrow, industrial agenda” (Interview 3) that focused on changing industrial laws. However, thematic analysis of the interviews indicates support for the media analysis finding that the focus of the ACTU campaigns was from an industrial agenda in 2007 to one that engaged broader social issues that were of interest to the entire Australian population in the later campaigns. Union leaders, though, also stated that this transition to campaigning on social issues was due to changes in the wider institutional environment. These changes made ‘traditional’ union activities more difficult, with one union employee stating that the shift towards social campaigning, “reflects the fact that... the union movement got built up in large workplaces in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but now they don’t exist.” (Interview 4). The need for change was emphasized by key national campaign organizer, who noted, “our old life was over” (Interview 1) and a union officer who said, “building widespread community campaigns around issues that are important are a key piece going forward.” (Interview 3).

However, interviewees suggested that the shift towards campaigning on more social and everyday issues emerged from the feedback that the ACTU

received through its telephone polling strategy of voters. They stated, "We'll have a conversation 6-8 months before the election—just a very generic conversation about issues people care about." (Interview 2). Nevertheless, while talking about work-related issues, voters themselves shifted conversations towards 'social' issues. "[The campaigner] starts to talk about penalty rates [a higher rate of pay for certain workers who work unsocial hours], [the voter says] I don't want to talk to you about penalty rates, I want to talk to you about healthcare." (Interview 2). Ultimately, the focus in this polling shifted to gauging social issues:

[Union representatives] would talk about cuts to the local hospitals in the budget or cuts to the diagnostic services or the fact that [they] don't get much funding, or [how] not getting consistent funding whether that affected the local schools in the area" (Interview 1).

Thus, voters regarded the ACTU as an agent that was both interested in and capable of advocacy about their everyday issues.

While adding support to the media analysis about the shift in the ACTU campaign strategy from 2007, the interview findings illustrate how their election campaign strategy connected the ACTU with the "bottom-up morality" or the "non-economic realms of norms and values" (Bolton and Laaser, 2013: 515) that were affecting workers' everyday lives, rather than only industrial issues. However, the findings also illustrate that voters appeared to entrust the ACTU with helping them to improve the matters that were affecting their everyday lives; in summary, the ACTU appears to have been endowed by voters with being their 'moral champion' on these everyday matters.

By 2016 therefore, the ACTU's election campaigns were "Publicly moving away from industrial issues and talking about the social safety net" (Interview 2). The focus became, "Do(ing) activities of ordinary people and communities, which was a bit of a different way of going about things" (Interview 1), also describing this shift towards everyday matters in their campaigning as, "We're fighting not just for our work but also for our community, so that's part of it, that's a new thing and that's one of the permanent things." (Interview 1). In other words, not only did voters endow the ACTU as being their 'moral champion' on everyday matters, it appears that the ACTU accepted this mandate suggesting that, "the (ALP) progressive party aren't going after the basic sort of foundations of living standards so they are not going after these rights—they are not going after health and then they aren't going after education, all of those big social issues, like we will." (Interview 1).

In summary, the interview findings illustrate a number of key themes; firstly, as a result of engaging in election campaigns, the ACTU appears to have

bridged the gap between workplace issues and matters of concern that voters have about issues that affect their everyday lives. As a result, between the years 2007-2016, the ACTU appears to have evolved as the agent that champions the moral concerns that voters have about how everyday matters affect their lives. However, the findings further suggest that, by 2016, the ACTU was consciously embracing this role as a strategy in election campaigns. Thus, election campaigns enabled the ACTU to broaden its legitimacy by connecting with workers multiple subjectivities as workers, citizens, consumers and family members (Heery, 2018; Seidman, 2011; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). By deliberately pursuing a role as ‘agents’ that champion everyday realities in election campaigns, the ACTU was also well-positioned to enhance its power base with voters:

The stuff in the 2016 campaign cut through better, I think the responsivity to that was better than to the straight ALP politics. It was because people recognized that it touched their lives personally, in terms of their children, in terms of their finances possibly and understood that campaign I think a little bit clearer than they did the overall policies of the major parties. (Activist 1).

**Australian Electoral Survey Data: “Making an Ethical Demand”**

AES data were analyzed to find the relative and absolute importance voters placed on the issues upon which the ACTU focused the campaigns analyzed for this study. Table 2 shows the changes in the proportion of voters who characterized each issue as the most important election issue, a relative measure of importance, and how this changed from the base-mark election in 2004 and the subsequent elections in 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016. Additionally, Table 3 shows the percentage of survey respondents who considered the issue ‘extremely important’.

As can be noted, ‘industrial’ issues dominated the 2007 election. However, as Table 1 and 2 show, this was a ‘one off’ rise in importance. This trend is

**TABLE 2**  
**Percentage of voters who considered each issue “most important to you and your family”**

	Industrial Relations	Change	Education	Change	Health	Change
2004	2.3%	-	15.0%	-	30.2%	
2007	16.8%	+14.5	10.5%	-4.5	20.5%	-9.7
2010	2.8%	-14.0	10.7%	+0.2	27.3%	+6.8
2013	2.3%	-0.5	13.2%	+2.5	19.5%	-7.8
2016	No data	n/a	10.1%	-3.1	23.4%	+3.9

TABLE 3  
Percentage of voters who considered each issue “extremely important”

	Industrial Relations	Change	Education	Change	Health	Change
2004	30.9%		69.2%		76.2%	
2007	51.1%	+20.2	68.3%	-0.9	76.3%	+0.1
2010	28.5%	-22.6	61.8%	-7.5	76.4%	+0.1
2013	30.0%	+1.5	63.4%	+1.6	70.4%	-6.0
2016	No data	n/a	60.3%	-3.1	70.9%	+0.5

partially explained by the success of ACTU “Your Rights @ Work” campaign, which had been waged in direct opposition to various pieces of industrial relations legislation that was passed after the 2004 election (Muir, 2008; Wilson and Spies Butcher, 2011). However, as Tables 1 and 2 show, the importance of this issue diminished quickly during the period of ALP government (2007-2013) before being altogether removed from the survey in 2016. Instead, education and health were considered more important for voters, both absolutely and relatively, than industrial relations. The persistently high relative and absolute importance placed on education and health supports the interview data above, where interviewees explained how voters were more concerned with these ‘social’ (or everyday) matters rather than industrial relations.

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to contribute to scholarship about how unions can revitalize. However, the focus has been to consider strategies that enhance the legitimacy and influence of unions, as measured through enlarging their constituency, and build their power, rather than on measures that increase rates of union density. Thus, the media analysis shows that ACTU election campaigns shifted from workplace-related campaigns to campaigning on other social matters. The interview data indicate voter appetite for the shift in campaigns to these matters, while the AES data show these other matters to be of higher concern to voters than those pertaining to the workplace. While it cannot be claimed that the union campaigns ‘made’ these issues important, the high levels of importance that voters placed on health and education in the campaigns suggest that voter sentiment valorizes the foci in the latter ACTU campaigns. In addition, while it is not known whether voters changed their voting behaviour on the basis of the union campaign, the findings show that the shifts by the ACTU towards campaigning on social issues in their national election campaigns resonate with voters.

Thus, the findings from the analysis presented in this paper suggest that by shifting their strategy from solely promoting industrial rights to be agents that promote ‘social utility’ (ACTU, 2017) of quality healthcare and education, unions will broaden their legitimacy beyond union members. This is because, by campaigning on these matters, unions connect with the hurts that individuals (or voters) experience about everyday living, and the desires or the “bottom-up morality” (Bolton and Laaser, 2013) that they use to make their everyday life better. However, unions force the electorate to make a conscious choice about the morality of a political party’s position on these issues. A lay morality perspective assists in understanding how the tension between economic and moral ideals motivates activism by ordinary (or non-union and union) people to make a conscious decision about the morality of an economic practice on the quality of their lives. By illustrating this, the study adds to accounts of how lay morality can foster resistance.

Unions will enhance their influence when they embrace a commitment in national election campaigns of a broader range of issues than those purely pertaining to the workplace. This can influence their opportunity for revitalization, not by increasing union membership, but by reclaiming their legitimacy as an agent that seeks to broaden its constituency. It may be the case that this role becomes the province of trade union federations, such as the ACTU, to pursue. The ability of national unions to engage with a disparate and diverse constituency makes them well placed to adopt this role. This study illustrates the relevance of national unions fostering revitalization by adopting the role as an ‘agent of social utility’, that is, an actor that pursues a better overall quality of life for ‘ordinary people’.

As the industrial power of unions continues to wane, and their institutional position becomes increasingly circumscribed, unions must seek new ways of revitalizing. The capacity to problematize moral issues connects with voters and compels them to make a cognitive assessment of what is moral and immoral in the context of election campaigns and provides a potential source of optimism for their future. Nonetheless, pursuit of this strategy needs national union bodies such as the ACTU to fundamentally reconsider their role and operations. Like the workers that they seek to represent, they too may have to adopt an ‘on-demand’ strategy moulded to the multiple subjectivities that workers now occupy. The potential effect of reconfigurations of work and worker identities with the gig economy and the on-demand economy, where ratings by consumers decide the form of employment relations that frame a workers employment, and even whether a worker—such as an Uber worker—continues to be employed (Donaghey *et al.*, 2014) exacerbates this challenge for unions.

## Conclusion

A limitation of the present study is that relevant data has not been obtained from voters in the Australian general elections that were scrutinized. How is it known that the shift in perception is attributed to ACTU national election campaigns? This is compounded by the limitation of the AES data and the inability to use this to present a more conclusive assessment. Thus, while the shift in campaign foci can be measured, the analysis does hold some speculative reasoning. Future research should seek to overcome this limitation by canvassing voter opinion more directly. Future research could also adopt a longitudinal design and use a qualitative approach to understand the shifts in sentiment and lay morality of both unions and voters over time.

As a postscript, since gathering the research for this article, another national-level general election was held in Australia during 2019. In this campaign, the ACTU focused on promoting more secure jobs and wage rises by conducting a campaign entitled "Change the Government. Change the Rules", declaring that the incumbent LNP government must change "to ensure a fair go for working people" (ACTU, 2019)

In the wake of the re-election of another LNP government, there has been controversy concerning the overt political organizing in the 2019 campaign. While it is too soon and there is not the access to the types of data used in the paper to draw final conclusions about this campaign, it is interesting to note that, in commenting on the campaign, Tim Kennedy, who is the Secretary of the National Union of Workers states, "The issue we'll have to analyse is: was Change the Rules a vague solution? If people didn't believe their material condition had a hopeful prospect of changing, we need to know why." (Karp, 2019). Indeed, the ACTU instituted its own review, wherein it was concluded that, "The ACTU's Change the Rules campaign was not well understood beyond union officials and activists" (Workplace Express, 2019).

Drawing on this paper's analysis, it is argued that national union bodies such as the ACTU need to look beyond industrial issues if they are to renew their legitimacy and power. In the wake of so many changes to their workplace conditions and status, workers are unsure about their 'material conditions' and 'the rules' that govern their working lives. However, as the study shows, they support issues that make a difference to their everyday realities as ordinary citizens.

In conclusion, trade unions currently find themselves between a rock and a hard place concerning the future (Gall and Fiorito, 2011: 244). They face a diminished institutional role largely due to changes in the way work is organized. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, their attempts at revitalization have mostly forestalled their complete demise rather than inculcated their growth. However, by problema-

tizing the moral component of economic activity that resonates with the everyday reality of ordinary people, it has been argued that unions can develop the opportunity to genuinely revitalize by being the agent that challenges the immoral elements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's economic order.

## Note

- 1 See <<https://www.actu.org.au/about-the-actu/directory>> for a full list of ACTU-affiliated unions.

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## SUMMARY

### From Industrial to Social Campaigns: Lay Morality, General Elections and Australia's Trade Union Federation

This article considers the potential for union revitalization through campaigning in general elections. It first charts changes in unions' campaigns in general elections, moving beyond a focus on industrial relations issues towards issues of social significance, such as health and education. Second, by reconceptualizing this activity using lay morality, unions may enhance their ability to increase their power and legitimacy. Thus, by acting in this way, unions can broaden the bases for their legitimacy and build new opportunities for their renewal.

However, this approach may not lead to revitalizing their density, but may open the opportunity for their renewal because this approach consolidates their legitimacy to a broader constituency. We suggest that when unions act in this way, they become agents of social utility who champion the interests of a wider constituency. We argue that, given the dynamics of changes to work and the ways in which workers now work, this provides one route for unions to tap into these multiple subjectivities of workers and remain relevant.

This article combines an analysis of over 1000 media articles that cover four periods of campaigns by peak unions in Australian elections between the years 2007-2016, with original interviews with key informants and an analysis of electoral survey results for each election to provide the discussion. These three methods triangulate to establish the shift in unions' campaign focus and to suggest that this is a potential path to revitalization.

KEYWORDS: union revitalization, national elections, social utility, lay morality.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Des campagnes syndicales à des campagnes sociales: moralité laïque, élections générales et Fédération des syndicats australiens

Cet article examine le potentiel de revitalisation syndicale que peut procurer une participation aux campagnes électorales. Premièrement, il décrit les changements intervenus dans les campagnes des syndicats, qui vont au-delà des questions de relations professionnelles et s'attardent dorénavant à des questions d'importance sociale, telles que la santé et l'éducation. Deuxièmement, en conceptualisant cette activité grâce au recours à la 'moralité laïque', les syndicats peuvent renforcer leur capacité à accroître leur pouvoir et leur légitimité. Ainsi, les syndicats peuvent élargir les bases de leur légitimité et créer de nouvelles opportunités pour leur renouvellement.

Bien que cette approche puisse ne pas conduire à revitaliser leur densité, elle peut leur donner une chance de se renouveler, car elle vient consolider leur légitimité auprès d'un public plus large. Nous suggérons que, lorsque les syndicats agissent de la sorte, ils deviennent des 'agents d'utilité sociale' qui défendent les intérêts d'un plus grand nombre de personnes. Nous soutenons que, compte tenu de la dynamique des changements apportés au travail et à cause de la manière dont les travailleurs œuvrent à présent, cela offre aux syndicats un moyen de mettre à profit ces subjectivités multiples des travailleurs et de demeurer pertinents.

Cet article se fonde sur une analyse de plus de 1000 articles de presse couvrant quatre périodes de campagnes de syndicalistes lors des élections australiennes entre 2007 et 2016. Cette dernière fut complétée par des interviews originales avec des informateurs-clés et une analyse des résultats des sondages électoraux pour chaque élection. Ces trois méthodes ont permis de cerner un changement de cap dans les campagnes des syndicats. Ce dernier constitue une voie potentielle en vue de la revitalisation de ces organisations.

MOTS-CLÉS : revitalisation syndicale, élections nationales, utilité sociale, moralité laïque.