EVALUATIONS OF, AND RESPONSES TO, DIFFERENCES WITHIN AND BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTIES – Preliminary results, May 2002.

1. SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
   We collected the data for the present study by distributing questionnaires in three large first-year classes in the School of Political Science and International Studies. Our sample probably wasn’t representative of the classes, in that participation was voluntary and those absent from the lectures were not included in the study. Respondents’ ages ranged from 16 to 51, with a median of 18. The sample was predominantly (67%) female, Australian (87%) and more specifically Queenslander (81% of the sample had lived in the state for at least 5 years).

2. PARTY AFFILIATION AND EVALUATION
   Respondents were asked which party they would choose to support in an election if they were called on to vote the following day. They were urged to choose a party even if they felt unsure about the choice and uncommitted to the party in real life. Three percent of the people we studied did not follow these instructions. Of the remainder, 37% affiliated with the Labor party; 22% with the Democrats; 27% with the Liberals; 12% with the Greens, and fewer than 5% were National, Independent, or other party supporters. Relative to the Queensland vote in the federal election of November 2001, Liberal, National, and One Nation supporters are under-represented, while Democrats and Greens are over-represented. The urban, educated nature of the sample, as well as course selection and content, are likely to have contributed to this variance.
   The extent to which respondents identified with their party, felt committed to it, and felt positively about their party membership was measured with a series of six questions. In the present sample, identification did not vary as a function of party affiliation: for all parties, identification hovered in the midpoint of the scale.
   Respondents were also asked to evaluate their party's political power, assessed in terms of four questions on popular support and ability to get things done. On this variable, coalition supporters thought that their party had more power than Labor party supporters, who thought that they had more power than Democrat supporters, who in turn thought that they had more power than Green party supporters did. Controlling for differences between the parties in perceived power, people who identified more strongly with their party also rated the party as more powerful.

3. RESPONDENTS’ VIEWS ON ASYLUM SEEKERS
   Four statements were presented concerning Australians’ position with respect to asylum seekers: “Asylum seekers are queue-jumpers who cheat the system at the expense of genuine refugees,” “Without detention centres, Australia would be swamped by asylum seekers,” “Detention centres are inhumane and immoral,” and “Australians have a moral duty to protect asylum seekers”. Across parties, most respondents had relatively favourable views of asylum seekers. Sixty-eight percent disagreed that asylum seekers were queue-jumpers; 59% disagreed that without detention centres, Australia would be swamped; 61% agreed that detention centres were inhumane and immoral; and 76% agreed that Australia has a moral duty to shelter and protect asylum seekers. However, the views of coalition supporters towards asylum seekers were on average slightly unfavourable, compared to the moderately favourable views of Labor, Democrat, and Green supporters, who did not differ significantly from each other.

4. RELATIVE EVALUATION OF ISSUES
   Respondents were asked to rate the attention that each of five issues was receiving in the political climate. Coalition and non-coalition supporters agreed that in the moment, asylum seekers and the war on terrorism were receiving a great deal of attention, and that regulating the economy was receiving a moderate amount of attention. Coalition supporters and non-coalition supporters concurred that education and protecting the environment were receiving less attention than the other issues, but non-coalition supporters perceived this more strongly.
Respondents also evaluated whether their party should strive to direct attention towards or away from each of the issues. Coalition and non-coalition supporters concurred that the environment and education should receive more attention, but non-coalition supporters felt more strongly about this. Coalition supporters thought that the current focus on asylum seekers and the war on terrorism was appropriate, and that the economy should receive more attention. Non-coalition supporters agreed about the economy, but less strongly. Non-coalition supporters also thought that the war on terrorism was receiving too much attention, while the issue of asylum seekers should receive even more.

5. RESPONSES TO DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AND WITHIN PARTIES

Within parties, Labor and coalition supporters perceived not only that their official party line was harsher towards asylum seekers than their own personal views, but also that other supporters of their party had harsher views than they themselves did. By contrast, Democrat and Green supporters felt that the official party line reflected their personal views, but that most other supporters of their party wanted even softer treatment for asylum seekers than the official party platform. Labor party supporters perceived the greatest difference between the party platform and supporters’ views; the other three parties perceived only a modest difference. But quite different strategies were favoured for dealing with the differences. Coalition supporters thought that differences within the party should be ignored or downplayed. By contrast, Democrat and Labor supporters thought that supporters should try to change the party line to reflect their views. Respondents across parties were relatively neutral on the appropriateness of discussing divisions within the party with supporters of other parties.

Between parties, coalition supporters thought that most supporters of other parties wanted softer treatment for asylum seekers than they themselves did, while Labor, Democrat and Green supporters thought that most supporters for other parties wanted harsher treatment for asylum seekers than they themselves did. Labor and coalition supporters perceived a moderate difference between their party’s official platform and the views of other parties’ supporters, while Green and Democrat supporters perceived a greater difference. Controlling for differences between parties, supporters more strongly identified with their party were more likely to perceive differences between their party’s platform and those of other parties.

Supporters of all parties concurred that the best way to deal with differences between parties on the issue of asylum seeker was to convince other Australians of the rightness of their party’s views. However, coalition supporters were more likely to favour ignoring or downplaying other party views. When respondents were asked about differences between parties on the other issues, respondents again thought that the best strategy for their party was to challenge the views of the other party, rather than ignoring differences between parties or downplaying the differences. Coalition supporters, however, were again more likely to suggest that their party should ignore the views of the other parties than opposition supporters. Controlling for differences between parties in strategy choice, supporters more strongly identified with their party were more likely to endorse a confrontational strategy.

6. ATTITUDES WITH RESPECT TO POLITICS

Finally, respondents evaluated the extent to which they perceived politics as interesting, important, confusing, and stressful. Responses to these positive and negative evaluations were independent, and did not vary importantly by party affiliation. Rather, most people in the study thought that politics were very important and interesting, but also significantly stressful and confusing. Respondents who were less strongly identified with their political party, and respondents with less favourable attitudes towards asylum seekers, evaluated politics less favourably and more negatively.

Thank you!

Thank you for your interest in the survey! Questions, comments, or requests for copies of future analyses may be directed to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, x56406, wlouis@psy.uq.edu.au.