Campaigns do not usually deliver decisive changes in parties’ shares of the vote. As Wlezien (2010, p. 114) notes, they typically only have small to modest effects on net voter preferences in national elections. Even today, many voters have decided how to vote before the campaign begins (Figure 11.2). Neither are these findings especially surprising: elections are, in part, referendums on government performance and this record (though not its interpretation) is fixed by the start of the short campaign.

When a party’s support does change during a campaign, it often just takes the form of returning a party’s support to its natural share as underlying predispositions reassert themselves (Holbrook, 1996). To be sure, Hillygus’s review of American elections (2010, p. 326) concludes that ‘campaign efforts can have a significant impact on voters’ turnout and candidate choice’. Even so, few would argue that such impact is routinely decisive. It is surely more accurate to agree with Butler (1989, p. 116) that ‘the function of elections is to record the decisions of individuals rather than to create them’.

Two points are helpful in understanding why most campaigns only exert limited effects. The first is the difference between *gross* and *net* effects. Voters who change their preference from party X to Y may be cancelled out by those moving from Y to X, limiting net impact.

The second point is the short-run nature of many campaign effects. Some events – often including leader debates, for example – produce a temporary bounce in a party’s support, a fillip which nonetheless decays before the election arrives. Events with