Compulsory Voting, Encouraged Tweeting? Australian Elections and Social Media

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Abstract

This chapter examines patterns in social media activity around Australian elections, focusing primarily on the 2013 federal election and supplemented by extended research into social media and Australian politics between 2007 and 2015. The coverage of Australian elections on social media is analysed from three perspectives: the evolution of the use of online platforms during elections; politician and party social media strategies during the 2013 election, focusing on Twitter; and citizen engagement with elections as demonstrated through election day tweeting practices. The specific context of Australian politics, where voting is compulsory, and the popularity of social media platforms like Twitter makes this case notably different from other Western democracies. It also demonstrates the extended mediation of politics through social media, for politicians and citizens alike.

Introduction

As the various chapters in this volume demonstrate, the use of social media platforms for political purposes – from commentary and analysis to activism and more tangential discussions – covers a wealth of contexts and forms. Such a diverse range of approaches to the political on social media is apparent even in election settings, which might be expected to feature only a few obvious themes. In this chapter, we examine patterns in

social media activity around Australian elections; our analysis focuses primarily on the 2013 federal election, but we contextualize this study within our extended research into Australian politics on social media, including elections at the federal and state levels since 2007. We approach Australian elections on social media from three perspectives. First, we discuss the evolution of the use of online platforms during elections, for campaigning and citizen commentary alike. Second, we consider how politicians and their parties employed social media during the 2013 election, focusing on Twitter. Third, we examine how citizens engaged with the election and the voting experience by identifying practices of tweeting on election day itself. The specific context of Australian politics, including compulsory voting for citizens on the electoral roll, makes this case notably different from other Western democracies, where Twitter is not adopted to the same extent, a wider range of parties and ideologies might be present in the political spectrum, and voting is optional.

Social Media and Australian Politics

Social media platforms and their predecessors, such as blogs, have had an at times uneasy integration into the Australian political and media landscape. The early political blogs were mostly the work of citizen experts and political activists offering their own analyses of economic issues, policies, and polling data. This new group of voices contributing to political discussions online and commenting on mainstream coverage of politics was not always viewed positively by the established news media (Highfield & Bruns, 2012). While blogging and similar approaches to presenting opinions and analysis were eventually adopted and co-opted by the Australian mainstream media (Garden, 2014), for

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politicians they went largely unembraced. Indeed, it took social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, for Australian politicians to take to the Internet as a means for communicating with the electorate online (whether in dialogue with voters or simply sharing their press releases and public appearances).

A further disparity around social media adoption was seen in the respective integration of online platforms into election campaigns by the main political parties. The 2007 federal election, for instance, saw the Australian Labor Party (ALP) pursue a youth-oriented campaign focused on its new leader, Kevin Rudd – using a "Kevin07" branding strategy – that in part included online social networking strategies on Facebook and MySpace. During the same election, the conservative Liberal Party – which had been in power since 1996 – was less engaged with the Internet as a campaign tool, and while the party posted some material on YouTube, its strategy here was inconsistent (see Flew, 2008). The following federal election, in 2010, was notable in part, because of the leadership spill in the ALP with the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd deposed by his deputy, Julia Gillard. This happened before the campaign was announced, and occurred almost literally in the middle of the night. Its suddenness meant that developments were covered by journalists and other observers on Twitter as they became known, and before mainstream media could interrupt their regularly scheduled programming. The spill underlined the emerging importance of Twitter to the Australian political and media landscape (see also Jericho, 2012), with politicians, journalists, celebrities, and ordinary citizens making use of the platform to cover the ensuing election (Burgess & Bruns, 2011).

Following the 2010 federal election, which resulted in a hung parliament led by the ALP, with Gillard as Prime Minister, Twitter in particular became a popular platform for the ongoing discussion of Australian politics. The 2010 election had received centralized coverage by Twitter users employing the #ausvotes hashtag, and after the election, the online commentariat took to using #auspol as the central marker for day-to-day political discussions. Similar hashtags were adopted for state-level discussions, including #qldpol for Queensland politics and #wapol for Western Australian politics, and elections in these states following the #x-votes template (Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Highfield, 2013). The exception is Victoria, where day-to-day politics uses the #springst hashtag, due to the common use of 'Spring Street' (the location of the Victorian parliament) to refer to Victorian politics. While such popular markers can become swamped by tweets from a small group of dedicated or antagonistic Twitter users whose activity far outweighs other users' contributions (akin to the 'political junkies' described by Coleman, 2006), political topics are also addressed by the wider population, even if they are not employing these hashtags. Regular political topics also received their own, specialized hashtags, including #qt (for Question Time during parliamentary sessions), #qanda for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)'s *Q&A* political panel show (Given & Radywyl, 2013), and #spill (or #libspill) for leadership challenges.

The ritualization of Australian political coverage on social media is demonstrated through the adoption of recurring jokes, references, and tropes when discussing politics. Constant speculation about Kevin Rudd challenging Julia Gillard to regain the ALP leadership and become Prime Minister again was accompanied by hashtags such as #respill, #kevenge,

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and #ruddmentum; these peaked during an unsuccessful challenge in February 2012, a rumored challenge in March 2013 and finally during a successful challenge in June 2013. Following this final leadership spill, Rudd became Prime Minister for a second time. (Similar ritualized hashtags have also accompanied speculation about the Liberal party during 2014 and 2015, from #libspill to #returnbull, reflecting rumors of Malcolm Turnbull's interest in challenging Tony Abbott for the Liberal leadership.)

As with 2010, the change in ALP leadership occurred just before an imminent federal election, and this was the context for the 2013 campaign. The Liberal Party, led by Tony Abbott since December 2009, had been obtaining strong results in opinion polls, and changing from Gillard to Rudd was seen as a possible approach for the ALP to reverse this trend and stay in power. Two parties or party blocs that are the only groups likely to have the numbers to form government – the left-of-center ALP and the essentially permanent Coalition between the conservative Liberal Party and the rural-focused National Party (which in the state of Queensland have merged into the Liberal National Party, LNP) dominate Australian politics. However, smaller parties and independent candidates can be competitive in individual electorates and in the Senate. The long-established Australian Greens, several new entrants including the Palmer United Party, Katter's Australia Party, the Pirate Party, and the WikiLeaks Party, and a number of minor, often conservative and right-leaning parties, therefore also contested the 2013 election.

The Australian parliamentary system is based on the Westminster system. At the federal level, there are two Houses of Parliament: the House of Representatives where members represent local electorates and the Senate where members represent states – but there are some notable differences to the election process. Australia uses preferential voting; with votes for minor candidates distributed to other candidates following the voters' stated preferences until one candidate has more than 50% of the vote. This applies for each electorate, and a similar system is used for the Senate except that the vote here is to elect multiple Senators. Government is then formed by the party with a majority of seats in the House of Representatives, either in its own right or in coalition with other parties, and the leader of that party becomes Prime Minister. The other major distinctive aspect of Australian elections is that voting is compulsory for eligible citizens aged 18 and over: anyone registered on the electoral roll who does not vote in an election that they be supposed to can receive a fine. This results in a higher voter turnout than in other Western democracies, and contributes to the familiarity and ritualization of election experiences in Australia. It also implies at least a passing engagement with politics, even if only to criticize this necessity.

Australian Election Campaigns on Social Media

There has been widespread adoption of online platforms for sharing commentary, content, and experiences, both publicly and among a more select audience with social media increasingly integrated into the Australian political and media landscapes. Politicians and their parties run Twitter accounts and Facebook pages as part of their

online presences, while YouTube, Instagram, and other content-sharing channels have also been employed for political purposes. Social media make politicians accessible to a wider audience, connecting them in additional ways – using popular channels – to citizens online. Depending on their individual strategies, this means that politicians can present a particular persona or combat a common perception of their character. During the latter stages of his first period as Prime Minister, and especially after being deposed by Julia Gillard, Kevin Rudd had been described as micro-managing and difficult, his real self very different to his media image and distant from his party and the electorate (Wilson, 2014)**.** Before the 2013 ALP leadership spill and as a newly reinstalled Prime Minister, Rudd started posting selfies on social media in an attempt to seem more personable and down-to-earth than his opponents had previously depicted him. These attempts were not necessarily successful, though: Rudd's selfies, including a post-shaving photo complete with small cuts, were also widely criticized and satirized as examples of Rudd's purported narcissism (Chen, 2015; Manning & Phiddian, 2015).

While not the only platform used for this purpose, Twitter has become an established medium for political discussions in Australia, with journalists, commentators, politicians, analysts, lobbyists, activists, and citizens all active participants. There has also been a standardized approach to discussing Australian politics on Twitter through the adoption of common hashtags: the #ausvotes hashtag used in 2010 and then again in 2013, provides a starting point for our studies into social media and elections. Since 2010, though, the scope of our research has expanded beyond hashtags alone to also track user accounts and mentions of candidates and parties. While the following analysis focuses on the 2013 federal election, this work builds on methodologies and findings developed

from research into the 2010 federal election and state elections in Queensland and Western Australia in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

During the 2013 election, we used YourTwapperKeeper to capture data from the Twitter API, representing specified hashtags (including #ausvotes), and tweets by and @mentioning candidates' accounts (for a full description of our methods from previous elections, see Bruns & Highfield, 2013). In total, during the 2013 election campaign, we tracked the Twitter accounts of some 454 sitting members and candidates across the 150 Australian federal lower house electorates and the eight state and territory senate contests, and captured some 694,000 tweets @mentioning or originating from these accounts between 4 August and 8 September 2013. The dataset was variously filtered to isolate periods of interest, topics, and individual users, with the text and media content of relevant tweets studied to provide further context and explanation of the patterns identified here.

We observed regular patterns in Australian election coverage on social media, and these appear to apply internationally, too. Tweeting using the main election hashtag gradually increases during the campaign, with spikes coinciding with the major broadcast events: in particular, televised debates involving party leaders, a trait not unique to Australia (see, for instance, Larsson & Moe, 2013). There is then a marked increase in tweeting in the days leading up to the vote itself, while election day results in a clear peak in related social media activity. However, this spike in tweeting is a result of several different user

practices that coincide on election day, all related to the voting context but reflecting personal experiences as well as engaging with the results at large.

#ausvotes tweeting during the 2013 election followed this pattern: The election was called on 4 August, with the vote on 7 September 2013, and over the four weeks of the campaign the gradual increase of activity saw peaks on days with televised debates and the ALP's campaign 'launch' (which came a week before the vote). The tweeting increased in the days leading up to the election. Yet the hashtag does not represent the entire election coverage on Twitter: while it provides a useful marker for related content, it is not universally used in election tweets, or by candidates actively participating on Twitter. While #ausvotes provides an initial context for the election, by demonstrating when there was peak interest or activity, analysis needs to look further to determine *how* social media were used during the campaign, rather than just *when*.

Tweeting about and by Candidates in the 2013 Election

One way of doing so is to track @mentions of the main candidates, to see which political figures are attracting attention (whether positive or negative) and in what contexts. The Australian electoral system is parliamentarian and constituency-centered, unlike, for instance, the US presidential system. However, the popular media portrayal of Australian elections, including the social media attention directed towards candidates, shows that there is a presidential-style focus on the leaders of the two major parties, well ahead of other candidates and sitting politicians.

Figure 1 shows the @mentions (including @replies and retweets) of the Twitter accounts of the most party leaders during the campaign, including Rudd and Abbott as well as Clive Palmer and Christine Milne, respectively the leaders of the Palmer United Party and the Australian Greens. The mentions of Rudd and Abbott far exceeded those of the other accounts, although their fortunes fluctuated against one another: spikes again accompanied televised debates between the two leaders, but other events also provoked increased mentions, such as gaffes like Abbott remarking that a Liberal candidate had "sex appeal".
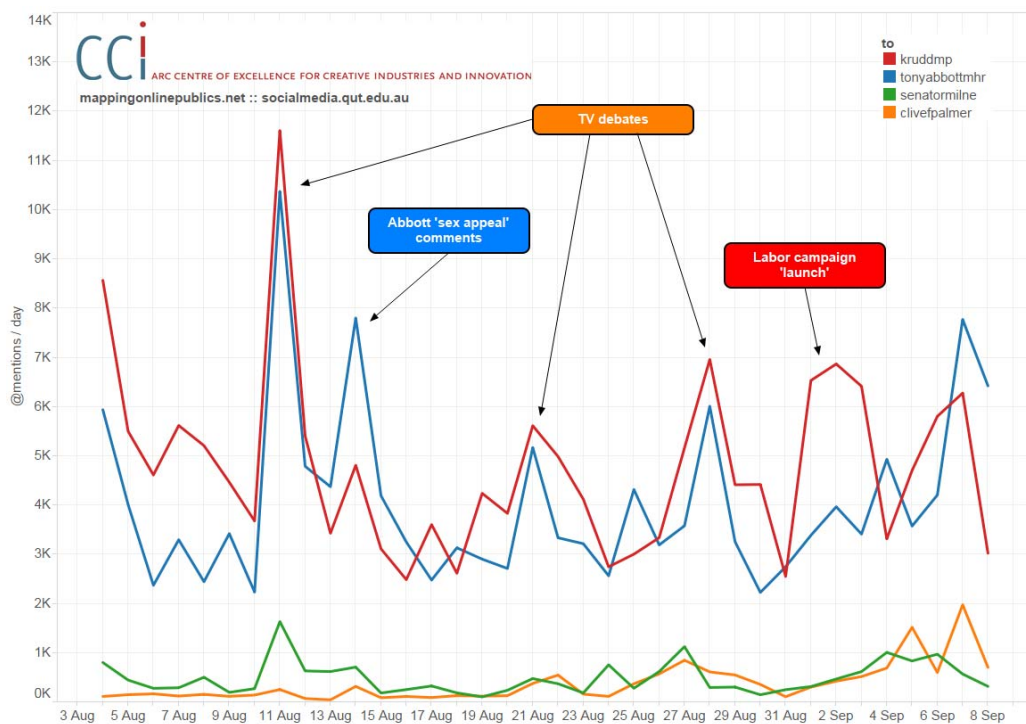

Fig. 1. @mentions of party leaders, 4 August to 8 September 2013

Although the focus of Twitter coverage was directed towards Rudd and Abbott as the two leaders contesting to become Prime Minister, this prominence is not only a response to

tweeting activity by the politicians in question. During the campaign, Abbott and Rudd each posted only around 100 tweets, with their deputies and other prominent members of their respective parties being considerably more active on Twitter. Figures from both sides, including Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop (Liberal) and Anthony Albanese and Penny Wong (ALP) doubled and even tripled their leaders' total campaign tweets. However, even Albanese, the most active representative from either major party, posted fewer than 500 tweets during the 35-day campaign; in comparison, the Greens leader Christine Milne tweeted over 1,300 times during this period.

Such divergent activity patterns amongst the leading politicians did not result in significantly different numbers of retweets received by their tweets. While Twitter users tweeted about the major candidates regularly and at substantial volume throughout the election period, as fig. 1 shows, their choices to rebroadcast what the politicians posted was based less on the prominence of the account and more simply a response to specific moments or comments. Tony Abbott received the most daily retweets on the day the election was called, but during the rest of the campaign retweets of his and Kevin Rudd's posts were much more limited, generally remaining at below 100 retweets per day (and therefore astonishingly low, given that each leader's account was @mentioned some 4,200 times per day, on average). The only other significant peaks in the daily number of retweets were received by Greens leader Milne and by ALP Senator Penny Wong, and both remained isolated incidents; ordinarily, even highly active Twitter user Milne received fewer than twenty retweets per day.

The brief spike in retweets for Wong's account is worth noting, however, as it represents a rare incident of a senior politician stepping outside their carefully stage-managed campaign role and responding forcefully to an ordinary Twitter user. Wong (the first Australian federal politician to be openly in a same-gender relationship) tweeted an off-the-cuff response to a user registering their opposition to same-sex marriage, and this response, which also quoted the original tweet (which itself was later deleted), was then widely spread by other Twitter users, receiving over 500 retweets in one day:

> Gee, highly original. Hope your one follower enjoyed it. RT @*[redacted]*:
> @SenatorWong marriage is for Adam & Eve, not Adam & Steve.

Throughout the rest of the campaign, Wong was not retweeted especially widely, but this comment clearly cut through and travelled beyond her follower list, due to its relevance to the election and the long-running debate about gay marriage legislation in Australia but especially also because of its particularly straight-talking style.

Figure 1 also demonstrates that, while Rudd and Abbott were the most mentioned politicians during the election, other major figures also maintained presences on Twitter without being particularly active. This includes several senior frontbenchers of the Liberal Party, which in previous state elections had adopted a so-called "small target" strategy of not using social media widely in order to avoid gaffes and to control its message (Highfield, 2013). However, the prominent figures were present on Twitter and the combined @mentions for ALP and Liberal candidates exceeded any other party by

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50,000 tweets even without counting @mentions of Rudd or Abbott. Nevertheless, the total tweeted output *by* each party's candidates shows that the Liberal Party (and its coalition partners) were still considerably less active than either the ALP or the Greens. The 131 ALP candidates on Twitter were responsible for nearly 17,000 tweets during the campaign, while the 80 Greens candidates contributed just under 12,000 tweets. No other party exceeded 10,000 tweets; the next highest total was from the Pirate Party, contesting its first federal election with seven tweeting candidates and becoming the only other party to contribute more than 5000 tweets, while the cumulative activity of the 82 tweeting Liberal Party candidates totaled over 4000 tweets.

These patterns are in keeping with general trends from Australia and overseas. Previous elections have seen ALP politicians and candidates as more active and more represented on social media than their conservative opponents, for instance. Similarly, analyses of Twitter-based political commentary in various European countries have found that Green parties have taken to social media as popular communication and campaigning tools (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013). In countries such as Australia, where the Greens are a relatively minor party and do not attract the support, attention, or funding of the major parties, social media can offer a means for sharing information and attracting voters that might not be available through traditional media channels. Furthermore, both the Greens and the Pirate Party have clear connections with internet-related issues and policies, and so their use of social media demonstrates their familiarity with online communication and platforms.

Candidate strategies on Twitter during the 2013 election reflected a mix of party promotion and engagement with issues and discussions across party lines. Extracting the @mentions of other candidates from tweets posted during the campaign, there was some clustering along party lines. Greens candidates, for instance, repeatedly @mentioned one another – and especially Christine Milne, the party leader, and Adam Bandt, the sole Greens member in the House of Representatives – in their tweets, as a means of responding to comments by fellow candidates and promoting the party. Cross-party connections were still apparent, particularly when topical interests converged or for specific rivalries and contests. The bridging role of Greens Senator Scott Ludlam, between the Greens and the Pirate Party, resulted from his visibility in debates around Internet policy, for instance. While ALP and Liberal candidate strategies focused on @mentioning other candidates from their parties, there was also substantial tweeting directed at their opposition. Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott were often mentioned in tandem, and there were similar connections between other major figures in both parties; Treasurer Wayne Swan and Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey, for example, were also closely linked through @mentions. Finally, close contests in individual electorates also made for connections between opposing candidates. Most notably, the Liberal member for Indi, Sophie Mirabella, was @mentioned repeatedly in tweets by rival independent candidate Cathy McGowan (who went on to win the seat).

While @mentions showed candidates' willingness to engage opposition members, whether in civil debate or by criticizing and attacking them, their retweeting patterns exhibited very different tendencies. The retweet network generated from candidates

reposting tweets by other candidates is seen in Fig. 2; this network clearly demonstrates

that retweeting is a party-oriented strategy. Clustering is highly focused on parties, with

distinct groups of ALP, Liberal, Greens, Pirate Party, and Palmer United Party

candidates. These candidates predominantly only retweeted their fellow party candidates,

promoting their messages and campaigns. Although generally retweets may serve various

purposes and are not necessarily an endorsement of another Twitter user's views, for the

candidates studied here retweeting outside of the party was not a common approach, most

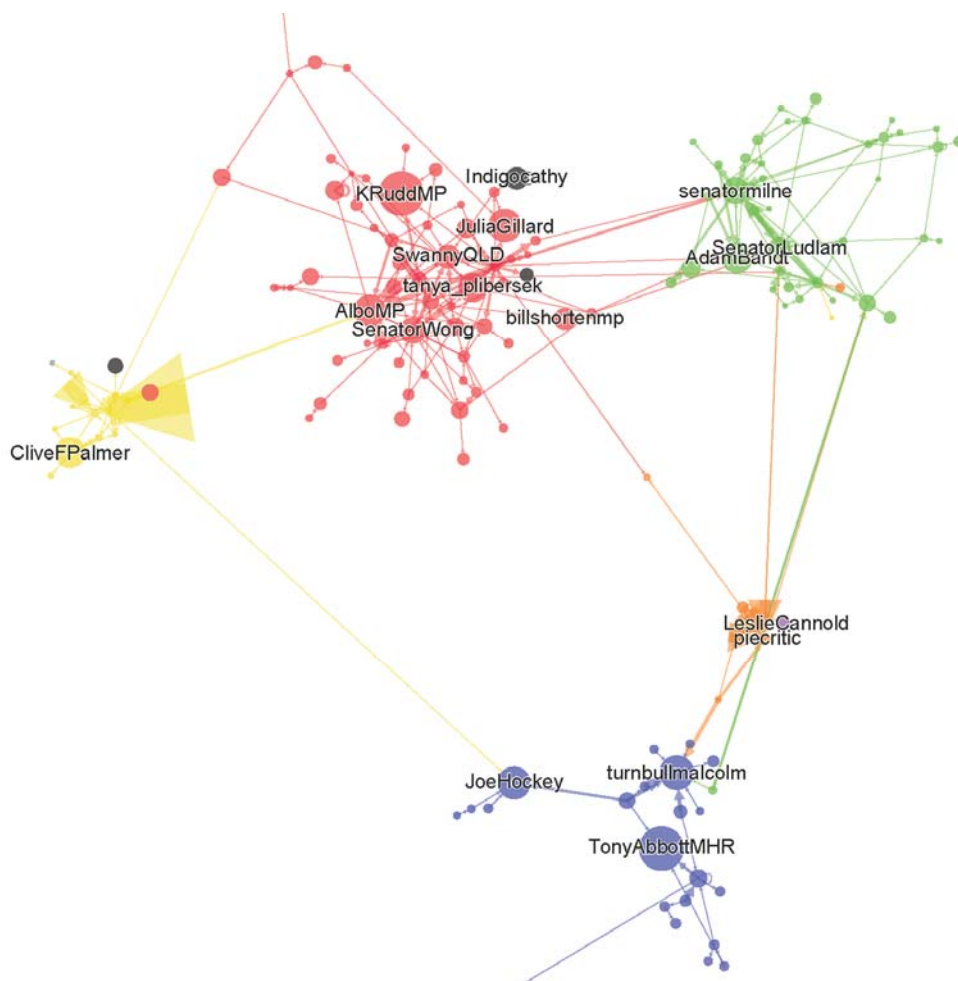likely in order to avoid the risk of appearing to promote a rival's messages.

Fig. 2. Network of retweets between candidates, 4 August to 8 September 2013

The patterns of activity and attention around candidates on Twitter suggest that social media, while adopted by the various parties, occupy different places in campaign strategy for different parties, as well as for citizens. The major parties are present on Twitter, but actual tweeting activity highlights a wide gulf between ALP and Liberal Party. ALP candidates tweeted throughout the election campaign while Liberal candidates were much less active. Instead, smaller parties such as the Greens and the Pirate Party posted more often on Twitter, using social media as an outlet for their messages. Yet this activity also over-ascribes prominence to these parties, in particular the Pirate Party. Despite being very active on social media, the Pirate Party did not attract a substantial share of the vote. Its tweeting is more representative of the importance of the Internet to its policies and interests than of the size of its support base.

Twitter activity thus provides an important perspective on the public discussions and campaigns taking place during elections, but it is not the campaign itself; tweeting during the 2013 Australian federal election skewed towards an urban electorate, with the metropolitan areas of the major Australian cities most represented here. Twitter activity is also not demonstrative of each party's fortunes in the election: the Liberal Party's strategy of lower levels of activity, avoiding gaffes, and focusing on the party leadership team might have resulted in far fewer tweets than for other parties, but they were also successful in winning the election overall. The ALP's strategy was less focused, in comparison; while many candidates were active, there was a lack of coordination across the leadership team (and despite his well-established social media presence, Kevin Rudd

himself was not particularly active on Twitter during the campaign). The Greens' high levels of tweeting might also have had negative effects: increased activity does not mean increased support and engagement, and the sheer output of tweets by Christine Milne in particular might have been excessive for followers.

Most fundamentally, what our observation of activity patterns during the 2013 election indicates is that there is an almost complete disconnect between the tweeting activities of election candidates on the one hand, and the volume of @mentions they receive on the other. Many Twitter users in Australia who did engage with the election evidently simply used the Twitter handles of politicians like Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott as alternatives for their names, without necessarily following these leaders' tweets, and certainly without bothering to retweet their messages on a day-to-day basis.

Election Day on Twitter: Tweeting while Australia Votes

These patterns of politician activity and user interaction on social media provide one picture of Australian elections, but politicians are not the only participants in the campaigns or in the Twitter discussions. Tweeting directly at or about candidates is just one way that Australians might engage with elections on social media. Previous studies of election coverage on Twitter have noted the patterns of activity resulting in peak tweeting on election day itself. Examining election day tweets for the 2013 election in more detail finds that this spike is the result of several different practices over the course of the day, using Twitter for different purposes as the nation goes to the polls. For the analysis of these practices, we return our focus to the #ausvotes hashtag.

Three distinct phases of election day tweeting are apparent within the Australian context.

Fig. 3 shows the total tweets per hour tagged with #ausvotes on 7 September 2013 – the

date of the federal election. There is a regular level of tweeting activity during voting

period itself, from 8am to 6pm, with the end of polling and the start of the analysis and

vote counting serving as the catalyst for increased tweeting. A third phase accompanies

the official results and, especially, the victory and concession speeches made the
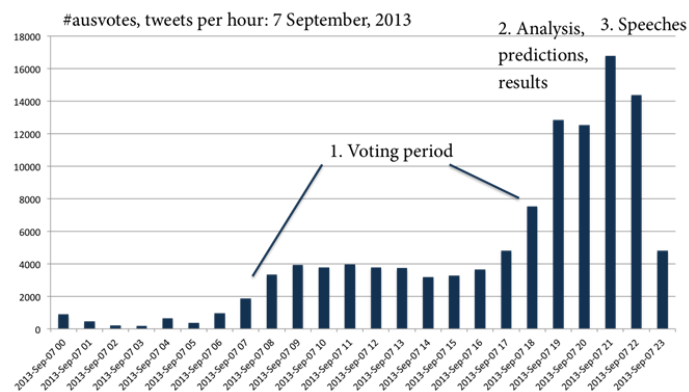
respective leaders of the major parties.

Fig. 3. #ausvotes tweets per hour, 7 September 2013

These three phases each feature their own particular practices and purposes for election

day tweeting. The day starts with tweets about the individual and personal experience of

voting, at the micro-level of the election. After the polls close, there is a shift to more

analytical tweets, moving from the personal to a greater mix of the individual's own

electorate with nationwide predictions and results. Finally, the official results and

leaders' speeches are accompanied by a predominantly reactionary mode of tweeting,

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where users provide live responses to the broadcast media coverage of election night, including live tweeting the speeches. The election day-tweeting model also exhibits a narrowing of the scope of the comments posted during the day. While there is a general, shared context of the election, the first phase features a wide range of topics as users provide their own personal thoughts on voting and campaigns, specific to them. The shift to the analytical discussion and, later, the live tweeting of results, though, sees the common context become substantially more focused: commentary becomes less individualized, instead reflecting responses to mass broadcasts.

The first phase of election day tweeting, the personal experience, sees a mix of political commentary and individual reports on the democratic act of voting. In the context of a compulsory voting system in particular, actually going to a polling place and filling in a ballot paper is a necessary activity for enrolled voters. This obligation is reflected in tweets during this period – criticizing the requirement that an individual has to interrupt their day to vote, ignoring the fact that this is a privilege not available to many people around the world – which represents quite a grudging engagement with the election. Other tweets feature partisan commentary, promoting parties and candidates at the local and national level in a last-minute campaign push at a time when formal political advertising in broadcast media is embargoed. Tweets might also reflect the temporary intrusion of the political into an individual's usual weekend and social media activities; their messages might not normally have any political content, but their brief participation in the election allows a mix of the everyday and politics, even if the content is only along the lines of "just voted. #dutyfulfilled #ausvotes".

The voting experience also informs various political rituals which play out both physically and on social media. There are aspects of election days which are well-established routines for Australian voters: voting takes place on Saturday, with polling places at local schools and community centers often accompanied by fundraising barbecues (sausage sizzles) and cake stalls (Meikle, Wilson, & Saunders, 2008). These rituals have been recognized and underlined on social media, with several independent projects running online on election days to document the election day experience and to provide information for people still to vote. Projects such as *Booth Reviews*, *Democracy Sausage*, *Snag Votes*, and *The Hungry Voter* respond to the compulsory voting context by variously soliciting feedback on the voting experience and making information about polling places available to people still to vote. *Booth Reviews* asks for crowd-sourced voter feedback about the experience and facilities at individual polling places, whereas the other projects named above reflect directly the rituals of Australian elections. They offer information specifically about the food available at polling places, putting user contributions on collaborative maps and promoting further participation to improve the accuracy of the information. Although a user tweeting about the availability (or lack thereof) of 'democracy sausage' at their local polling place might not be offering any political opinions or campaigning, they are still engaging with the election itself by documenting their experience of voting. Such tweets might also include general election hashtags such as #ausvotes in addition to the project-specific #snagvotes, for example. Conversely, #democracysausage and its ilk have also become de facto markers and punch

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lines for election coverage in general, providing commentary without necessarily contributing information to the relevant projects.

The personal experience in the first phase of election-day voting may also be separate to others' experiences, with @mentions, @replies, and retweets not widespread – and certainly less focused on prominent accounts. During the second phase, though, as the focus of tweets moves from the individual experience to the wider coverage of the election with predictions, analyses, and initial results, different information flows are apparent. Established media and political actors become central figures in the election coverage on Twitter, demonstrated through high levels of @mentions. This pattern is enhanced by some broadcasters, such as the ABC, which use common hashtags like #ausvotes rather than their own channel-specific election hashtags. Similarly, journalists and accounts for local news stations will retweet the relevant comments posted by their parent media organizations, further centralizing established media accounts. For the journalists, politicians, and pundits appearing on election night broadcasts, their presence will also lead to increased levels of @mentions, as users employ Twitter handles as shorthand for their full names.

This second phase is not entirely broadcast-oriented, though; local results and candidates remain important, but they are also incorporated into the overall narrative of the election results, and are at times even referred to on air as they report new exit polls or counting updates from local polling places. This phase then bridges the personal model of election day and the mass, common context of the official results tally on election night. In the

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final phase, then, the focus is narrower still, as users respond to the major results and the specific media coverage being observed. There is now a shared focus by a mass audience on a small handful of actors – and especially on the leaders of the Liberal Party and the ALP – rather than a distributed coverage of the voting experience. Attention is directed towards these key figures, as users livetweet the speeches and offer short, immediate analyses of the remarks and the future implications of the election results.

The election day tweeting practices then suggest a general transition from personal to popular contexts over the course of the day, as social media discussions ultimately coalesce around a common focus on the results and speeches. While election commentary mixes political and personal views throughout, with responses to the results including personal opinions as well as partisan slogans, the early tweets are more uniquely individual in their content: one person's voting experience will not be the same as another's. By the time of the speeches, however, the individual context is subsumed by a shared response to a common topic. There is a further participatory aspect during these latter phases, though, similar to other media events, as social media users comment on broadcasts as they happen and offer analysis, invective, and pithy one-liners (see, for example, Harrington, 2013).

What Australian election day tweeting practices demonstrate, then, is that some aspects of the traditional politics-media dynamic are reinforced on social media. The role of traditional media sources for both providing and amplifying information is central – even if users do not mention media accounts, they are responding to elections as media events.

Analysts, commentators, and politicians appearing in the broadcast coverage might not simultaneously tweet, but they still receive high numbers of @mentions from other users due to the practice of using Twitter handles rather than proper names. This further positions these established gatekeepers as central figures, even if they are only being invoked in the social media discussion rather than actively participating.

This is not to say that the traditional political and media voices are the only actors of note; newer and alternative voices can also achieve prominence and the Twitter discussions both during elections and in more everyday political contexts are a mixed space of the old and the new. However, it is clear that established political figures are still central to these discussions, even with inconsistent use of social media by politicians and parties. While their accounts are @mentioned by other users, they are not universally tweeting on election day itself. Last-minute social media campaigning is not a common strategy, as candidates make appearances at local polling places to promote their causes in person rather than on Twitter.

The tweeting practices of the Australian electorate highlight that elections and political discussions are not the sole preserve of the political elite. The election context affords a wide range of subjects in social media discussions that might be tangential to the actual democratic process. Similarly, election-day tweets are not necessarily 'serious' in tone, with humor and sarcasm, in text and in image-based memes and macros, present in online commentary around the vote. While a common hashtag like #ausvotes acts as a central marker to denote election-related coverage, what the election day practices make clear is

that there are several different approaches to discussing the election that are connected by these hashtags, and which otherwise might not intersect. Hashtags can serve useful curatorial purposes, but they may also suggest the existence of a more unified discussion than the diverse and distinct tweeting patterns that are actually found in the Australian context.

Conclusion

The use of Twitter by many Australians for ongoing communication, including regular political discussions, has led to the development of rituals and standard practices around social media and media events, inviting diverse kinds of participation on social media. In addition to contributions by the politically engaged, election days also see increased activity from casual contributors, whose interest or participation within political themes is limited to the period in which they are required by law to be involved due to the compulsory voting context. Secondary hashtags, around sub-themes, issues, and rituals, hook into these different practices and audiences, from tweeting about food availability at polling places to discussing specific parties or electorates.

In this chapter, we have primarily focused on the use of Twitter during the 2013 Australian federal election, by politicians and citizens alike. Of course, Twitter is not representative of the Australian population at large, or indeed of Australians on social media: other platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, are used for election campaigning and commentary, for documenting and sharing the experience of voting and reacting to events as they occur. However, Twitter has seen a relatively widespread

uptake in Australia (see Bruns, Burgess, & Highfield, 2014), and so the practices observed here do demonstrate behaviors by more people than just the traditional political elite. Twitter is a space in which Australian politicians, journalists, and ordinary citizens are present, and can potentially interact as well as providing their own interpretation of political topics. At the same time, though, the mediation of politics takes place across multiple platforms, involving diverse actors who also participate on more than one platform themselves. Australians are willing to use social media platforms for political discussion and engagement. Building on the findings from Twitter to examine how this takes place across the wider media ecology is the next major step for our research.

Acknowledgments

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