

Tweeting to Save the Furniture: The 2013 Australian Election Campaign on Twitter

Introduction

Past years have seen continuing experimentation around the world in the use of online publishing and engagement technologies for political campaigning (Bruns *et al.*, 2016). Australia, with its exceptionally short legislative periods of (nominally) three years at federal level, provides a particularly useful environment in which the transition towards increased online campaigning can be observed.

This also traces the changing mix amongst the digital platforms: the online campaign of the 2007 federal election was overshadowed by the “blog wars” between conservative and progressive commentators over the correct interpretation of opinion poll results (Jericho, 2012; Bruns & Highfield, 2012), and the major parties also experimented with online videos posted to *YouTube*, with varying success (Bruns *et al.*, 2007), but *Facebook* and *Twitter* did not yet feature in any significant way. By 2010, blog-style columns had been incorporated into mainstream online news platforms from *The Australian* to *Crikey*, and no longer played a distinct role in the campaign. Instead, following the widespread adoption of *Facebook* and (less strongly so) *Twitter*, and the role that such tools played in covering the Rudd/Gillard leadership spill earlier in the year (Posetti, 2010; Bruns & Burgess, 2015), parties, candidates, journalists, and commentators began to incorporate social media more fully into their campaigning activities (cf. Grant *et al.*, 2010). However, in spite of the significant journalistic and scholarly attention paid to these developments, the still distinctively netizen-dominated userbase demographics of a platform such as *Twitter* also resulted in social media debates about the election that focussed largely on technology topics such as the proposed National Broadband Network and Internet filter. Major themes in overall public debate – asylum seekers, climate change, same-sex marriage – remained relatively underrepresented, leading scholars to conclude that it was too early to call 2010 “the *Twitter* election” (Burgess & Bruns, 2012).

By the time of the 2013 election, social media had become much more mainstream still – and arguably, Labor PM Kevin Rudd had been returned to the Prime Ministership in a leadership spill against party colleague Julia Gillard earlier that year also because his continuing social media popularity was seen as an indicator of his

greater popular and electoral appeal. (Even in mid-2016, Rudd's 1.65 million *Twitter* followers still place him over one million followers ahead both of his 2013 challenger Tony Abbott and of current PM Malcolm Turnbull.) By 2013, the majority of federal members and candidates operated *Facebook* and/or *Twitter* profiles (if with widely varying degrees of care and enthusiasm), and many party organisations paid close attention to their social media campaigning activities. This article, then, explores the key patterns both in how politicians and their parties campaigned on *Twitter* during the 2013 federal election, and in how the public responded to and engaged with these campaigns.

Methods and Data

The adoption of social media platforms as campaigning tools is mirrored by a similar adoption of increasingly sophisticated social media research tools by media and communication scholars. There is little information about whether and how *Facebook* and *Twitter* may have been experimented with by campaigners in the 2007 election largely also because there were no easily accessible tools for capturing such experiments. By 2010, such tools had become available, but overwhelmingly focussed on capturing tweets that contained specific keywords and hashtags; the fact that contemporary studies such as Bruns & Burgess (2011) and Burgess & Bruns (2012), focussing on the election hashtag #ausvotes, found the discussion to be unrepresentative of broader public debate may be due also to the self-selecting nature of any such hashtag dataset (cf. Burgess & Bruns, 2015). It is possible in principle that themes such as refugee policy, climate change, or same-sex marriage were discussed more widely on *Twitter* than it appears from such studies, but that these discussions took place largely outside of the discursive space of #ausvotes.

The tools and technologies for capturing and analysing social media data that had become available by 2013 allowed for a considerably more comprehensive analysis. In 2013, ahead of the official start of the campaign on 5 August, we used manual searches on the *Twitter* Website to identify the accounts of current Members and Senators, and of the candidates announced to date; we further updated this list after the official declaration of candidate nominations on 16 August. In total, this process identified 361 accounts: 117 Australian Labor Party (ALP) candidate accounts, 100 accounts by candidates of the conservative Coalition (including 68 Liberal Party, 19 LNP, 12 National Party, and 1 Country Liberal Party accounts), 68 Greens accounts, 27 Palmer United Party (PUP) accounts, 19 Katter's Australia Party (KAP) accounts, and 66 minor

party and independent candidate accounts. Throughout the campaign period and until election day on 7 September, we then captured all public tweets by these accounts, as well as all public tweets mentioning them by their *Twitter* username (including both @mentions and retweets, and excluding only tweets from accounts marked as 'private'). Data were gathered using *yourTwrapperkeeper* (2016), running on a server provided by the Australian scholarly cloud computing network NeCTAR. We combined these tweets into one consolidated dataset. For the campaign period of 5 August to 7 September 2013, this resulted in a dataset of nearly 658,000 unique tweets from just over 77,000 distinct *Twitter* accounts. Data analytics were performed in *Tableau*.

We chose this more complex approach over the simpler method of tracking the #ausvotes hashtag because hashtags represent only a self-selecting sample of all the tweets that relate to a given topic: users make a conscious choice of whether to include a hashtag (and thereby make their contribution visible to the imagined audience that follows the hashtag) or not (and thus keep the tweet visible only to their own followers; cf. Marwick & boyd, 2011). Especially with high-profile hashtags such as #ausvotes or the more general politics hashtag #auspol (cf. Sauter & Bruns, 2015; Zappavigna, 2014), to include the hashtag might mean to invite heated responses or personal animosity; it is therefore likely that many users commenting on the campaign would shy away from using #ausvotes as they express their political views on *Twitter*.

To reference a political candidate in one's tweet has different consequences. To @mention the account even of then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd or Opposition Leader Tony Abbott does not change the potential visibility of the tweet in the way that including #ausvotes does: primarily, it simply brings the tweet to the attention of the candidate. This may be the intended effect especially with tweets that commend or criticise specific policies, or request information or action. Thus, our approach offers a different and more diverse perspective on how *Twitter* users commented on the 2013 election; this is borne out by the fact that only some 64,000 of the tweets in our account-centric dataset (less than one tenth) also contained the hashtag #ausvotes.

That said, an even more comprehensive analysis would focus not just on hashtags or candidate accounts, but would also track all potentially important keywords as well as activities around the accounts of journalists and civil society actors. Such broad-based tracking was well beyond what most data gathering tools available by 2013 were able to support, however, and also introduces the considerable challenge of reliably distinguishing *general* discussion about issues such as climate change from specifically *election-related* conversations.

Common to both our 2013 approach and to previous studies is a focus on *Twitter* over the more widely used *Facebook*. This is for practical as well as ethical reasons, as it is both difficult and problematic to extract a representative and reliable dataset of election-related conversations from the semi-private spaces of *Facebook*; our present focus on *Twitter* is justified because its considerably more open structure means that much of the fully *public* social media debate about the election does take place on *Twitter* rather than *Facebook*. This publicness also means that such debate is in turn represented more strongly again also in journalistic coverage of the election. From this perspective, *Twitter* certainly does not reflect the attitudes of the Australian public at large – but it represents a disproportionately influential subset of wider public debate.

These intersections between social and mainstream media can be quantified. Skogerbø *et al.* (2016: 117) have already shown that in the weeks preceding the 2013 federal election “tweets were included into [mainstream] election coverage regularly in Australia”, proportionally more so than in the lead-up to roughly contemporaneous elections in Norway and Sweden. They regard this as evidence that “Twitter contributes ... to agenda-setting and agenda-building in Australia” (*ibid.*). Conversely, *Twitter* is also known to serve as an important conduit for the dissemination of news content (see Kümpel *et al.*, 2015, for a detailed overview of the literature), suggesting considerable agenda-setting processes flowing in the opposite direction – from mainstream to social media. To analyse the dynamics of such flows, we resolved all short URLs found in our dataset to their final destination, and identified the most influential media sources.

Analysis and Discussion

The 2013 election took place against the backdrop of a considerable decline in the Australian Labor Party’s electoral fortunes. The 2010 election had resulted in an ALP minority government under the leadership of controversial Prime Minister Julia Gillard; Gillard herself was replaced as PM by her predecessor Kevin Rudd in a Labor leadership spill on 26 June 2013 largely in order to improve the ALP’s chances of avoiding a comprehensive defeat – in Australian political parlance, an attempt to at least ‘save the furniture’ by retaining as many seats as possible, even if an outright victory was highly unlikely. By contrast, the conservative Coalition under Opposition Leader Tony Abbott benefitted substantially from the government’s unpopularity and appeared virtually assured of success, barring any significant missteps on the campaign trail.

Activities by Candidates

This inequality in the major parties' starting positions is clearly represented in their campaigning activities on *Twitter*. Although the conservative Coalition overall fielded a greater number of candidates than the ALP, considerably more ALP candidates operated *Twitter* accounts. The 117 ALP candidates also tweeted significantly more than their 100 Coalition counterparts: collectively, they posted 16,017 tweets during the campaign, while Coalition accounts posted only 7,285 tweets – fewer even than the 11,059 tweets posted by the 67 Greens accounts (table 1).

Tweet Type	ALP	Coalition	Greens	PUP	KAP	Indep.	Pirate Party	Wiki-Leaks	Other Minor Parties	Total
<i>original</i>	4,753	2,625	3,789	1,347	494	639	857	303	1,111	16,250
<i>@mention</i>	7,311	3,522	5,124	2,300	851	921	2,784	1,008	1,888	26,020
<i>retweet</i>	6,079	1,834	4,314	1,483	518	459	1,856	718	1,352	19,043
Total	16,017	7,285	11,059	4,389	1,708	1,704	4,793	1,725	3,952	52,028
<i>original</i>	29.67%	36.03%	34.26%	30.69%	28.92%	37.50%	17.88%	17.57%	28.11%	31.23%
<i>@mention</i>	45.65%	48.35%	46.33%	52.40%	49.82%	54.05%	58.08%	58.43%	47.77%	50.01%
<i>retweet</i>	37.95%	25.18%	39.01%	33.79%	30.33%	26.94%	38.72%	41.62%	34.21%	36.60%

Table 1: tweets posted by candidate accounts, 5 Aug. to 7 Sep. 2013 (percentages for individual tweet types may add up to more than 100% because individual tweets can be both @mentions and retweets at the same time)

There are also substantial differences in the types of tweets posted, pointing to significantly diverging approaches to using *Twitter* for campaigning. Most notably, almost two fifths (37.95%) of ALP candidates' tweets are retweets; for Greens candidates, this percentage rises even further, to 39.01%. By contrast, only just over one quarter (25.18%) of Coalition tweets are retweets: this percentage is even lower than that for independent candidates – a group who, by their very nature as individual campaigners, have few like-minded colleagues whose posts they could pass on and endorse. But more than one third (35.82%) of the Coalition candidates' 1,834 retweets are of tweets by their party colleagues, or by major party accounts such as @liberalaus or national campaign director Brian Loughnane (@loughnaneb), while the same is true for only one quarter (25.30%) of ALP candidates' retweets, and for 29.69% of Greens candidates' retweets.

It thus appears that Coalition candidates were much more partisan in their retweeting than ALP and Greens candidates: they posted a lower percentage of retweets overall, and of these a greater proportion remained within their party group. Along with the much lower overall volume of tweets, this suggests a significantly more tightly organised campaign than for the other key parties, in keeping with the public perception that – as the presumed election favourites – the Coalition could run a ‘small target’ campaign that minimised risks by tightly controlling its candidates’ mainstream and social media exposure. The comparatively high percentage of original tweets by Coalition candidates does not necessarily contradict this: such announcement-style tweets, neither @mentioning nor retweeting others, may well have been crafted for candidates by campaign headquarters, too. By contrast, ALP and Greens candidates – faced with a substantial swing towards the right – both retweet more overall, and retweet a broader range of accounts. This can be read as an attempt to marshal a wider range of external views in support of their policies.

These notable differences are also reflected in the range of accounts that tweeted most actively throughout the campaign. For all major parties, activity was distributed unevenly across the party candidates: in each case, a handful of candidates tweeted considerably more than their colleagues, while others did not tweet at all. Such long-tail activity distributions are common in many communicative contexts, including on *Twitter*. More significant, however, are differences in the composition of these most active groups. Table 2 presents a count of tweets posted by the twenty most active accounts for ALP, Coalition, and Greens, as well as the median count calculated across all candidate accounts for each party grouping.

The ALP group features only six senior leaders’ accounts: Deputy PM Anthony Albanese, cabinet ministers Penny Wong and Mark Butler, and members of the outer ministry Mike Kelly, Kate Lundy, and Kate Ellis. It is dominated, by contrast, by a number of rank-and-file candidates – some of whom are past office holders (such as former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, as @smartstate1, or former federal minister Craig Emerson, who appears twice as he changed his account name in mid-campaign), but who did not belong to the then current Labor leadership team. In spite of his well-established affinity for social media, PM Rudd does not appear amongst the most active ALP accounts: he posted only 95 tweets during the campaign.

Account	ALP				Account	Coalition				Account	Greens			
	orig.	@	retw.	Total		orig.	@	retw.	Total		orig.	@	retw.	Total
leanne4hinkler	181	516	907	1,274	james_stacey_	53	462	194	614	senatormilne	244	670	625	1,206
mcphersonalp	349	415	377	1,035	mathiascormann	275	254	110	583	pjallmanpayne	281	216	261	654
ursulastephens	45	271	693	836	turnbullmalcolm	137	261	38	402	alexbhathal	260	151	144	499
mikekellymp	179	370	313	773	juliebishopmp	94	216	77	327	dawnjecks	228	79	204	438
grahamperrettmp	54	273	453	573	senbmckenzie	14	219	65	261	senatorludlam	119	218	167	428
smartstate1	232	252	84	493	natsforhunter	131	75	47	226	greencate	63	315	186	424
albomp	135	256	170	458	briggsjamie	58	82	107	222	joshfergeus	138	144	177	399
aleighmp	110	308	49	446	scottmorrisonmp	57	113	40	189	maranoagreens	151	146	111	380
timwattsalp	112	201	190	430	andrewrobbmp	74	53	97	188	tobiasziegler	85	205	107	351
drraigemerson	24	393	8	417	alexhawkemp	42	119	33	180	senatorsurfer	69	170	187	340
cathbowtell	91	256	166	407	melbournereports	81	90	76	179	slade4bendigo	165	116	91	326
craigemersonmp	15	373	5	388	darrenchestermmp	26	101	80	166	larissawaters	53	169	156	311
fi4bris	164	88	55	271	birmo	50	87	50	164	adambandt	77	199	45	296
katelundy	56	169	58	251	asouthcottmp	59	63	25	133	pennywrites	84	180	51	291
mrowlandmp	65	119	98	249	bobbaldwinmp	56	45	53	133	jonathondykyj	75	131	103	286
senatorwong	60	105	125	249	angry_angrytat	64	42	35	129	timread_wills	51	144	142	277
kateellismp	48	138	91	231	colemoreton	31	86	14	126	janet_rice	84	121	134	275
nickchampionmp	0	107	171	219	brucebillsonmp	31	58	65	121	senatorsiewert	137	80	76	264
lmchesters	65	94	110	218	bertvanmanen	78	24	19	108	jamesharrisonau	34	147	154	260
mark_butler_mp	109	68	61	216	joshfrydenberg	27	79	26	107	sjhod	56	148	95	236
Median					Median					Median				
(all accounts)	33	41	23	88	(all accounts)	26	21	12	48.5	(all accounts)	48	45.5	41.5	99

Table 2: twenty most active candidate accounts for ALP, Coalition, and Greens, and median number of tweets for all accounts in each party grouping (numbers for individual tweet types may add up to more than 100%)

The list of most active Coalition accounts is much more strongly dominated by senior party leaders. Of the twenty accounts, more than half belong to frontbenchers: Mathias Cormann, Malcolm Turnbull, Julie Bishop, Scott Morrison, Andrew Robb, and Bruce Billson would become cabinet ministers in PM Tony Abbott's first ministry; Jamie Briggs would join the outer ministry; and Darren Chester, Simon Birmingham (@birmo), Bob Baldwin, and Josh Frydenberg would become Parliamentary Secretaries. Similar to PM Rudd, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott is absent, if by a small margin: he posted 105 tweets during the campaign period.

Posting activity by Greens candidates, finally, is concentrated around party leader Christine Milne. Her 1,206 tweets over the 34 days of the campaign average to over 35 tweets per day, placing hers as the fifth most active of all 361 candidate accounts; she also tweeted nearly twice as much as the next most active Greens account. Notably, much of this volume stems from retweets, which account for more than half of

Milne's tweets; this also considerably boosted the volume of @mentions sent from her account, as Milne chose to retweet many tweets that @mentioned her account, the central @greens account, or the accounts of other Greens candidates, and thus in effect she frequently @mentioned herself or her colleagues through her retweets. Most of the remaining Greens leadership team are also included in this list of most active accounts, including Senators Scott Ludlam, Peter Whish-Wilson (@senatorsurfer), Larissa Waters, Penny Wright (@pennywrites), Janet Rice, and Rachel Siewert, as well as MP Adam Bandt.

These differences may again be read, in the case of the Coalition, as controlling the message by centring tweeting activity on the inner circle of frontbenchers. Whether these politicians posted their own tweets or had campaign staff do so, such senior party leaders are likely to take relatively few significant missteps, compared to less experienced rank-and-file candidates. The centralisation is in line with a 'small target' strategy, in essence drawing supporters' as well as critics' attention to these senior leaders as what might be described not as 'small', but as *known targets*, while diverting the spotlight from unproven campaigners. To a lesser extent, the same may be true for Greens candidates – although here the picture is somewhat more mixed, and Senator Milne clearly serves as the most active, most visible face of the party.

For the ALP, the pattern diverges considerably: here, two explanations appear most likely, and are not mutually exclusive. First, after the bitter internal struggles within the party in the years leading up to the 2013 election, and in the face of seemingly certain defeat, it seems possible that some senior frontbenchers did not feel motivated to campaign to their full capacity, on *Twitter* or elsewhere. Second, this created space for social media experimentation by less prominent local candidates, who – absent coordinated action by party headquarters – may have been especially motivated to devise their own strategies to at least limit the magnitude of the impending defeat.

This interpretation would also provide an online counterpart to observations by journalists that local ALP candidates were particularly active at door-knocking in their electorates during the 2013 campaign, and a similar emphasis, in Labor's own review of the 2013 campaign (Garrett & Dick, n.d.), on the results of local campaigning even in an otherwise unsuccessful election. In essence, Labor sought to draw voters' attention away from the parliamentary party's problems, and towards the more immediate choice of local representatives. This combination of offline and online engagement in the electorate – a *local target* strategy – was also an important factor in independent candidate Cathy McGowan's victory against Coalition frontbencher Sophie Mirabella in the electorate of Indi, against an overall swing of the national vote towards

the Coalition (Legge, 2013). (With 695 tweets, McGowan was the tenth most active candidate on *Twitter*; Mirabella sent only three tweets during the 34 days of the campaign.)

It is clearly unrealistic to expect that such strong *Twitter*-based campaigning by rank-and-file candidates outside of the party leadership group could have averted the ALP's defeat; this would significantly overestimate the influence of social media campaigning on the electorate's judgment. Rather, such social media campaigning – as well as any increased offline activities in local electorates – should likely be regarded as (coordinated or instinctive) attempts to 'save the furniture': to limit the magnitude of the defeat. For candidates continuing on to the next campaign, they may also have a longer-term effect: by distancing the local candidate from the turmoil in the parliamentary party, they may make it easier for the candidate to present themselves as electable again in a future contest not overshadowed by the Rudd/Gillard melodrama. (While available space does not permit a full discussion, there was similarly heightened activity from local ALP candidates about to be defeated in the 2012 Queensland state election, with several of these candidates returned to parliament in the 2015 election (Bruns *et al.*, 2012; Bruns, 2015); however, more fundamental factors than the level of online campaigning will certainly have been responsible for the enormous swings towards LNP and ALP, respectively, in these two state elections.)

Tweets Mentioning Candidates

How politicians tweet represents only one side of the election picture. As important – arguably more so – is how ordinary *Twitter* users engage with their accounts, respond to their posts, and retweet their tweets. Whatever the amount of effort expended by parties and politicians in their own tweeting activities, only this public response indicates whether such effort is also bearing fruit in the form of increased attention. As noted, in addition to the candidates' own tweets we also captured all tweets mentioning these candidates by their account name – including unsolicited @mentions, @replies to prior tweets by the candidates, and retweets of their posts (through the retweet button and in the form of manual retweets using *RT @user* and similar conventions).

Tweet Type	ALP	Coalition	Greens	Indep.	PUP	Wiki- Leaks	Other Minor Parties	Pirate Party	KAP	Total
@mention	305,155	227,221	49,004	17,975	13,053	5,892	5,657	3,311	3,194	609,765
retweet	8,751	6,753	3,342	434	593	189	330	319	185	20,304
Total	318,899	232,590	51,767	18,278	13,549	6,083	5,941	3,559	3,346	623,540
@mention	95.69%	97.69%	94.66%	98.34%	96.34%	96.86%	95.22%	93.03%	95.46%	97.79%
retweet	2.74%	2.90%	6.46%	2.37%	4.38%	3.11%	5.55%	8.96%	5.53%	3.26%

Table 3: tweets mentioning candidate accounts (percentages for individual tweet types may not add up to 100% because individual tweets can @mention or retweet multiple candidates at once)

The most striking observation is that retweets of candidates' posts represent only a vanishingly small component of the overall tweeting activity surrounding the politicians – across all parties, only just over three per cent of all tweets referring to candidates' *Twitter* usernames are retweets (table 3). These percentages are even smaller for the major party blocs, as well as for independent candidates, while the minor parties – especially the Pirate Party, the Greens, and Katter's Australia Party – receive a disproportionately greater percentage of retweets, although in both percentages and real numbers even here retweets make up only a small fraction of all tweets received.

This discrepancy may be explained precisely by their minor party status: such parties receive more limited mainstream media coverage, while perhaps attracting more committed supporters. To the extent that these supporters are on *Twitter*, they may therefore feel a greater need to amplify their candidates' messages through retweeting. From this perspective it is unsurprising that Pirate Party supporters – who may generally be more technology- and thus also *Twitter*-affine – should be most enthusiastic about retweeting their candidates; by contrast, the sub-par performance of WikiLeaks Party supporters is unexpected. A less favourable interpretation, however, also rings true: along with more limited mainstream media coverage, the minor parties also receive considerably less overall attention on *Twitter*, as the total mention figures in Table 3 demonstrate. It is therefore easier for the retweets posted by a small number of supporters to amount to a greater percentage of all candidate mentions for these parties.

By contrast, major party candidates are talked about (and talked *at*) in a very large volume of tweets, very few of which are retweets. Here, in particular, a comparison of the number of tweets posted by each party's candidates, and the number of retweets received, is useful. ALP candidates received 8,751 retweets for the

16,017 tweets they posted, while Coalition candidates received 6,753 retweets for their 7,285 tweets; on average, this translates to a retweeting ratio of roughly 1 in 2 for Labor, and 9 in 10 for the Coalition. (However, such averages mask greater complexity: retweeting attention is very unevenly distributed, with a handful of tweets receiving the vast majority of all retweets.) Overall, thus, *Twitter* users were considerably more prepared to retweet Coalition than Labor messages during the 2013 election, even if the total number of retweets received still favours the ALP.

But the vast majority of tweets simply @mention or @reply to candidate accounts. Such attention, too, is very unevenly distributed, and strongly favours the Prime Ministerial candidates – who for both ALP and Coalition each attract half or more of all mentions received by their respective parties (Table 4). PM Rudd’s 158,653 @mentions and retweets represent almost exactly 50% of all tweets directed at ALP candidates; OL Abbott’s 127,538 @mentions and retweets even amount to some 55% of Coalition candidates’ mentions. The situation is markedly different for the Greens: here, leader Christine Milne’s account is the most mentioned, but her 16,303 mentions represent less than one third (31%) of all Greens candidate mentions.

Account	ALP			Account	Coalition			Account	Greens		
	@	retw.	Total		@	retw.	Total		@	retw.	Total
kruddmp	156,497	1,713	158,653	tonyabbottmhr	124,757	1,921	127,538	senatormilne	15,272	972	16,303
albomp	24,377	1,008	25,259	turnbullmalcolm	30,458	1,032	31,546	adambandt	11,356	330	11,716
senatorwong	15,072	1,188	16,388	joehockey	27,735	967	28,807	senatorludlam	7,412	419	7,776
juliagillard	12,074	218	12,224	juliebishopmp	9,780	447	10,283	sarahinthesen8	4,732	105	4,842
billshortenmp	8,331	182	8,441	scottmorrisonmp	6,547	200	6,700	greencate	2,616	490	3,088
tanya_plibersek	7,558	199	7,814	mathiascormann	6,356	255	6,637	simonsheikh	1,399	57	1,446
bowenchris	7,345	229	7,517	greghuntmp	4,259	125	4,368	richarddinatale	996	102	1,089
swannyqld	5,515	136	5,625	smirabellamp	3,184	40	3,209	bobbrownfndn	851	50	901
bobjcarr	5,241	262	5,539	barnaby_joyce	2,545	57	2,594	shoebridgemlc	845	56	901
davidbradburymp	4,989	448	5,439	andrewrobbmp	2,279	240	2,551	larissawaters	788	80	868
smartstate1	5,144	283	5,409	warrentrusmp	1,666	12	1,676	leerhiannon	780	85	865
tony_burke	3,633	57	3,717	kellyodwyer	1,382	44	1,420	senatorsurfer	647	80	727
kateellismp	3,341	119	3,488	teresagambaromp	1,280	12	1,289	pennywrites	558	92	650
mikekellymp	3,237	116	3,370	alexhawkemp	919	144	1,059	hallgreenland	545	34	579
aleighmp	2,437	298	2,770	melbourneports	860	108	968	janet_rice	506	25	531
mark_butler_mp	2,550	143	2,681	birmo	827	129	956	senatorsiewert	443	75	518
drcraigemerson	2,626	43	2,678	senatorabetz	898	16	914	alexbhathal	439	28	467
craigemersonmp	2,555	51	2,618	joshfrydenberg	853	44	897	tobiasziegler	377	64	441
cathbowtell	2,402	159	2,514	james_stacey_	766	14	780	timread_wills	374	26	400
edhusicmp	2,312	96	2,437	briggsjamie	700	23	723	stoneadam	342	13	355

Table 4: twenty most mentioned candidate accounts for ALP, Coalition, and Greens (individual tweet types may not add up to 100%)

This focus by *Twitter* users on the major party leaders mirrors a similar distribution of attention in the mainstream media, and reflects a quasi-presidential election discussion mode even in spite of Australia's parliamentary system; further longitudinal studies could test whether this focus on the leaders is the product of a period of significant leadership instability (which continued beyond the 2013 election itself, and has produced five changes of Prime Minister between 2007 and 2015) and may recede if and when the Australian political system reaches a new equilibrium, or whether such personality-driven politics will become normalised.

Members of the senior leadership team for each party are also well-represented amongst the most mentioned accounts for each major party – but (except for the Greens) at a considerable distance from the leaders' accounts. On the ALP side, several accounts from outside the then current frontbench team are also present here: former PM Julia Gillard is the fourth most mentioned Labor politician, and former Deputy PM Wayne Swan (@swannyqld) and former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie (@smartstate1, running for the ALP in an unwinnable Coalition seat) also feature strongly. Such prominent positions for former leaders do not necessarily indicate support or endorsement by ordinary *Twitter* users – but they do point to public discussions, during the campaign, of the internal struggles played out inside the parliamentary Labor party. Such discussions would necessarily have disrupted Labor candidates' efforts to get their message across to social media users. There are no similar distractions for Coalition candidates; here, the comparative absence of candidates from outside the leadership team amongst the most mentioned accounts may indicate the success of the centrally controlled, 'known target' campaign that prevented rank-and-file candidates from becoming visible through widely reported gaffes and missteps.

Themes

A brief overview of key themes addressed in the *Twitter* discussion is similarly instructive. A detailed manual coding of all 658,000 tweets, or of a substantial sample, was beyond the scope of the research project. Instead, we drew on the key themes identified by media monitoring company iSentia as the most mentioned issues in the Australian media in 2013 (iSentia, 2013), and on the key campaign issues listed by *ABC News'* 2013 "Vote

Compass" (*ABC News*, 2013). In combination, these provide a contemporary reflection of themes in both media coverage and voter interests, the presence of which we can assess in our dataset.

To do so, we iteratively constructed several collections of filter terms. From the iSentia list, we excluded the non-political topics 'bushfires' and 'drugs in sport', and the generic theme 'federal election'; we also excluded 'Gillard vs. Rudd' as it would be impossible to determine for each mention of Kevin Rudd whether he is being discussed predominantly in the context of his struggle with Julia Gillard for the Prime Ministership. For similar reasons, we excluded 'trust' from the Vote Compass list. We combined the remaining themes from both lists into one master list, consolidating related themes. Finally, we added two themes missing from both lists that nonetheless appeared potentially relevant to the campaign: terrorism, as an extension of the 'Defence' theme (because of continuing security concerns relating especially to Islamist terror groups) and sexism (because of persistent public criticism – not least from former PM Gillard – of Tony Abbott's attitudes towards women).

This process resulted in 13 key themes: Agriculture Policy; Budget and Economy; Defence and Terrorism; Education; Environment and Climate Change; Health; Internet Policy; Manufacturing and Mining Industry; Refugee Policy; Same-Sex Marriage; Sexism; Transport Policy; and Workplace Relations. For each theme, we identified several keywords that were both likely to be used in discussions related to these themes, and sufficiently unique to avoid false positives. All keywords were implemented as regular expressions capturing all relevant variations of the same term (e.g. 'tax'/'taxes'), while excluding false positives (e.g. 'coal', but not 'coalition').

We tested these keywords by reviewing the thirty most frequently retweeted messages for each theme, observing both any false positives captured by the initial set of keywords and any additional, new theme-specific keywords emerging from these tweets. We similarly reviewed the top thirty messages amongst the tweets that did not contain any of our initial keywords, in order to identify any relevant keywords not yet used. We repeated this revision process several times, until we had eliminated false positives and identified all thematically relevant keywords that appeared through this process. Finally, we ordered our keyword tests to maximise their specificity: for instance, we tested for terms such as 'carbon' and 'mining' ahead of testing for 'tax', so that mentions of 'carbon tax' and 'mining tax' were counted towards the themes Environment and Climate Change or Manufacturing and Mining Industry, respectively, rather than towards the more generic 'Budget and Economy' (which captured all other mentions of 'tax').

Using these keyword sets, we allocated all tweets that contained at least one of these terms to their respective themes. In total, more than 150,000 tweets – 23% of the total dataset – contained one or more of the keywords identified. The ranked list of themes in Table 5 provides a comparison with the key themes identified by *ABC News*' demographically weighted Vote Compass results. Both lists are led by Budget and Economy themes – yet while in Vote Compass that topic was the top issue for nearly one third of respondents, in our *Twitter* data it accounts for only one fifth of all themed tweets. By contrast, the Internet Policy as well as Environment and Climate Change themes (ranking only sixth and fourth in Vote Compass, respectively), as well as Same-Sex Marriage (not included amongst the key Vote Compass issues) are considerably more prominent in the *Twitter* data than they are in Vote Compass. Conversely, Refugee Policy was ranked second in Vote Compass, and identified by nearly 13% of its respondents as their most important issue (it was also the most prominent single political issue in iSentia's media issues of 2013), but was only the sixth most prominent topic on *Twitter*, behind Same-Sex Marriage; it features in only 10% of all themed tweets. These differences indicate a divergence in interests between the Australian *Twitter* userbase (as reflected in our data) and the overall population (documented in Vote Compass), as well as between both these groups and mainstream media coverage (as captured for all of 2013 by iSentia).

For the Australian Twittersphere, the greater presence of budget concerns and environmental and social issues, in addition to Internet Policy themes, also indicates a shift in focus since the 2010 federal election, when much of the discussion was dominated by the NBN and Labor's proposal of a national Internet filter (Burgess & Bruns, 2012). Such a shift may result from changes in the overall composition of the Australian *Twitter* userbase, away from a smaller community dominated by technology-affine netizens and towards a broader selection of Australians (which nonetheless remains unlikely to be representative of the overall population). However, the differences in data gathering methods between Burgess & Bruns (2012), who tracked the #ausvotes hashtag, and our study, which examined tweets by and to candidate accounts, may also have contributed to such different patterns.

Themes	Tweets	Vote Compass
Budget and Economy (budget, debt, deficit, fiscal, financ*, treasur*, MYEFO, superann*, GST, econom*, GFC, tax, costings, surplus, savings)	31,837	30.88%
Internet Policy (NBN, broadband, fraudband, bps, FTTH, FTTP, FTTN, fibre, fiber, internet speed, *net filter)	20,425	6.84%
Environment and Climate Change (coral, coal, climate, reef, environm*, carbon, ETS, CSG, emission, direct action, reef, CSIRO, marine, dredg*, warming, renewable)	18,544	9.28%
Education (PPL, parental, educat*, school, Gonski, university*, childcar*, kindergar*)	17,762	10.03%
Same-Sex Marriage (gay, lesbian, LGB*, same sex, homosex*, marriage, sexuality, homophob*)	16,120	---
Refugee Policy (asylum, migra*, boat, Nauru, Manus, detention, refugee, border, humanitar*)	15,831	12.92%
Health (health, medic*, hospital, bulk, doctor, GP, NDIS, aged care, sick, disab*, nurs*)	12,785	11.23%
Sexism (sexism, sexist, misogyn*, sexappeal, sex appeal, gender)	5,497	---
Transport Policy (transport, road, rail, infrastruct*, bike, east west link, congest*)	5,415	0.75%
Agriculture Policy (food, farm, agri*, cattle, agchatoz, live export)	4,547	1.66%
Workplace Relations (employment, workchoices, work choices, IR, penalty, fair work, dole)	3,441	2.35%
Manufacturing and Mining Industry (manuf*, car industr*, automotive, holden, ford, mining)	2,673	1.92%
Defence and Terrorism (terror, islam, muslim, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, defence, ADF)	2,047	0.93%
Total	152,063	

Table 5: key themes in tweets by and to the candidates' accounts (list of search terms used to identify each theme is given in brackets); Vote Compass ratings (demographically weighted percentage of responses to the question "Which issue is most important to you personally in this election campaign?"; italics indicate combination of multiple VoteCompass categories into one)

We note that the themes as presently defined account for just under one quarter of the total volume of tweets captured during the election period. This is not unexpected, as tweets by and to candidates may serve a range of other functions beyond discussing policy, and as even policy-related tweets may not always explicitly include such keywords (but could simply say "@candidate I disagree with your position"). Further refinement of the keywords is certainly possible, and manual identification and coding of follow-on discussion would inevitably change the patterns observed. This would be highly labour-intensive, however, and was well beyond the scope of the present study.

URLs Shared

Just as these themes do not match closely the dominant preoccupations of mainstream media coverage during the campaign, the *Twitter*-based interactions and discussions captured in our candidate-centred dataset engage with media sources external to *Twitter* only to a relatively limited degree. Only 20% of the tweets in

our dataset include links; of these, more than one quarter linked to material hosted on *Twitter* itself (typically, embedded images or videos), and nearly one quarter consisted of *t.co* short URLs that could not be resolved to their intended destination (often because the short URL had been truncated during retweeting). This leaves some 70,000 tweets containing resolvable links to external sources, representing just under 11% of all tweets.

Given the well-established role that *Twitter* plays – in Australia and internationally – as a medium for the dissemination of news (Kümpel *et al.*, 2015; Bruns, 2016), such limited linking to external media may appear surprising. However, it is important to stress that our dataset is designed specifically around tweets by and @mentions of candidates. Such tweets should be expected to be more strongly interpersonal and conversational than informational; while they may be used by ordinary *Twitter* users to confront political candidates with information from media sources, or by candidates to share additional campaign material, such uses are unlikely to dominate our data. Rather, in the context of our dataset the limited presence of URLs documents the use of *Twitter* to talk about, at, or with candidates.

Where URLs were present, they reflect a strong concentration on a limited number of mainstream news sources, as well as significant intersections between *Twitter* and other social media platforms (Table 6). Excluding *twitter.com* and *t.co*, the most prominent domain is *YouTube*, and other social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Wordpress* also feature. This demonstrates the cross-connections between these platforms, with *YouTube* especially serving as a major hosting service for video content. Such videos may draw on mainstream media, and be posted to *YouTube* by mainstream media, but repackage the material for social media contexts: for instance, the most shared *YouTube* videos included parodist Hugh Atkin’s montage of campaign coverage to the tune of Daft Punk’s “Get Lucky” (recast as “Get Hockey”), *ABC News*’ snippet of Tony Abbott’s “does this guy ever shut up?” quip at Kevin Rudd during the televised Leader’s Forum, and *ABC News*’ post of a segment from political talkshow *Q&A* that featured Rudd’s unexpected advocacy for the legalisation of same-sex marriage.

Domain	Tweets
youtube.com	8,609
abc.net.au	5,563
smh.com.au	4,326
facebook.com	3,513
theage.com.au	2,313
news.com.au	2,057
instagram.com	1,670
theguardian.com	1,465
theaustralian.com.au	1,359
yahoo.com	928
greens.org.au	886
wordpress.com	732
dailytelegraph.com.au	709
brisbanetimes.com.au	700
afr.com	684
heraldsun.com.au	637
sbs.com.au	586
theconversation.com	583
greensmps.org.au	578
canberratimes.com.au	523

Table 6: Twenty most prominent domains in URLs shared in tweets by and to the candidates' accounts (*twitter.com* and *t.co* URLs excluded)

Amongst conventional news sources, quality publications such as *ABC News*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Age* lead, with tabloids such as *Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* playing only a comparatively minor role. This reflects long-standing patterns: *ABC News* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* have consistently been the most widely shared Australian-based news sites on *Twitter*, by a wide margin (Bruns, 2016). (Note that *yahoo.com* should also be regarded as a news site in the present context; it is featured here largely because of its collaboration with Channel Seven, as *Yahoo! 7 News*, at *au.news.yahoo.com*.)

Notably, party-affiliated sites are almost entirely absent, with the exception of the Greens' *greens.org.au* and *greensmps.org.au*. These sites are present largely because of the extraordinarily high *Twitter* activity of Greens candidates themselves, whose tweets often contained links to party Websites; conversely, it is noteworthy that Labor and Coalition candidates chose to link to their party sites considerably less frequently (we captured only a total of 404 *alp.org.au* and 282 *liberal.org.au* URLs being shared). Ordinary *Twitter* users appeared to have very little interest in linking to party sites.

The candidates' own linking behaviour again points to different strategies. 11% of Greens candidates' links pointed to their party sites, while only 5% of Liberal candidates' links referenced *liberal.org.au* and less than 2% of ALP candidates' links pointed to *alp.org.au*; the latter in particular reflects again the extent to which Labor candidates appeared to campaign for and as themselves, rather than explicitly as Labor representatives. Conversely, some 41% of Labor candidates' links went to *twitter.com* itself, indicating the particular prominence of embedded image content in their campaigns; Liberal candidates referenced *twitter.com* in 33% of their links, while Greens candidates did so in only 15% of their links. By contrast, Greens candidates pointed 16% of their links to *Facebook*, and a further 11% to *Instagram* (Labor: 7% to *Facebook* and 1% to *Instagram*; Liberal: 9% to *Facebook* and 11% to *Instagram*). This suggests that political campaigners were still uncertain about the relative value of each platform, but that the major parties generally focussed on providing embedded inline content (especially through material on *twitter.com* itself) rather than linking to external sources requiring users to click on links in their *Twitter* feeds.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the patterns of activity on *Twitter* by the candidates in the 2013 Australian federal election, and the patterns in the responses these candidates received from ordinary *Twitter* users. Our analysis has shown marked differences in the approaches to *Twitter* that were taken by the various parties and their candidates: Labor candidates, especially beyond the immediate leadership team, were generally more active users of *Twitter*, while Coalition tweeting activities were focussed on the frontbench and left relatively little space for extensive tweeting by rank-and-file candidates. These patterns are consistent with the parties' differing starting positions: riven by internal tensions after four years of leadership instability, Labor's campaign remained disjointed and left local candidates to experiment with their own approaches to 'saving the furniture', while a resurgent Coalition, widely predicted to win government, could afford to run a 'small target' campaign on *Twitter* as much as elsewhere.

The popular response to the candidates on *Twitter*, however, proved largely disconnected from such strategy settings: ordinary *Twitter* users preferred talking about and at candidate accounts, rather than widely retweeting the candidates' political messages to their own networks. Their focus of discussion was overwhelmingly on the two contenders for the Prime Ministership, and this is perhaps unsurprising at the end

of an electoral cycle that was thoroughly dominated by discussions about leadership; this focus, on *Twitter* as well as elsewhere in the media, may well indicate a temporary or permanent shift towards a more presidential style of politics even within Australia's parliamentary system.

With yet another replacement of a first-term Prime Minister by his own partyroom in the 2013-16 term – this time on the Coalition side –, and a comparatively united front presented by the new Labor leadership, it will be interesting to see whether patterns of interaction on *Twitter* in the 2016 campaign mirror those of the 2013 election, with roles reversed between the major parties. It is also possible, however, that changes to the overall demographics of *Twitter* in Australia, as well as further developments in the parties' use of *Twitter* and other social media platforms in campaigning, could result in as significant a shift in activity as that observed between the 2010 and 2013 campaigns.

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