Social Media in Australian Federal Elections:

Comparing the 2013 and 2016 Campaigns

Prof. Axel Bruns, PhD (UQ)

Dr. Brenda Moon, PhD (ANU)

Digital Media Research Centre

Queensland University of Technology

Brisbane, Australia

a.bruns@qut.edu.au – brenda.moon@qut.edu.au

The Persistent Instability of Australian Politics

Australian federal politics has experienced an unprecedented level of turmoil over the past ten years. Following long periods of stable majorities for the progressive Australian Labor Party (ALP) during 1983-1996 and the conservative Coalition of the Liberal and National Parties during 1996-2007, a landslide win for Labor at the 2007 election did not result in another period of stable government under new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, but saw him replaced by his deputy Julia Gillard within three years of taking office; Gillard narrowly won the subsequent 2010 federal election and formed a minority government. However, her increasing unpopularity motivated a new Labor leadership challenge that returned Rudd to the Prime Ministership; in this role, Rudd fought the 2013 federal election, losing decisively against populist Liberal leader Tony Abbott.

A highly effective, aggressive campaigner against the Rudd/Gillard/Rudd governments, Abbott continued his divisive leadership style in government, quickly undermining his

popularity and enabling the resurgence of the Labor opposition. In turn, now the Liberal Party orchestrated a leadership challenge, replacing the socially conservative Abbott with the more moderate Malcolm Turnbull in late 2015. Amid continuing recriminations between Abbott and Turnbull loyalists, Turnbull fought the 2016 election and held on to government with only a one-seat majority in Australia's 150-seat lower house of parliament. This lacklustre result has fuelled persistent rumours of new leadership challenges by Abbott, who has maintained his presence in the national news media, or others representatives of the Liberal Party's conservative wing. This supports Marx's famous aphorism that history repeats itself "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (2008 [1852]: 15).

Such disruptive instability is remarkable given that the Australian political system is designed to deliver stable majorities. It implements a Westminster-style 'first past the post' system where in each electorate the candidate with the most votes wins; there is no provision to adjust the balance of parliamentary seats to reflect the percentage of the overall popular vote won by each of the parties, and it is possible to win a significant majority in parliament without attracting a plurality of the popular vote. The major party blocs are further advantaged by the use of preferential voting: voters do not make a single choice, but rank all parties in descending order of preference; should their first choice fail to have a chance of winning the electorate, votes are transferred to subsequent preferences, usually flowing eventually to the Labor or Coalition candidates. In recent elections, only a handful of candidates from outside these party blocs have won seats in the lower house, therefore.

Finally, Australia also employs compulsory voting, fining citizens for failing to participate in elections. This necessarily generates a very high voter turnout, and guarantees that the major party blocs can rely on support from a 'rusted-on' group of staunch supporters even in an

adverse political climate. As votes from these supporters can be taken for granted, political campaigning in Australia is concentrated on the smaller group of genuinely undecided voters, whose choices ultimately decide the election outcome. This is considerably different from non-compulsory electoral systems: in such systems, elections can be won by mobilising a sufficiently greater proportion of one's own supporters than the political opponent has been able to muster, and campaigning is therefore often addressed chiefly at the party base.

In light of these fundamental features, designed to dampen rapid swings between the two major sides of politics, that Australia has had six different Prime Ministers within ten years (counting Rudd's first and second terms separately), and moved between Coalition and Labor governments twice, is remarkable. This mirrors similar instability elsewhere in western democracies, pointing to considerable popular disenchantment with conventional political parties and increased susceptibility to populist messages and charismatic leaders.

Social Media in Australian Politics

Against this backdrop of substantial disruption in Australian federal politics, this article examines the uses of social media – and in particular, of Twitter – in campaigning in the 2013 and 2016 federal elections. In doing so, we contribute to the growing body of research on social media in political campaigning, especially also beyond the United States, that is now emerging, and provide new insights that support the process of theory-building in this field.

Indeed, it is tempting to attribute a substantial role to social media as a driver of political instability: the increasing electoral turmoil since 2007 and the emergence of major platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have at least occurred in parallel with one another. Further, Australians are known to be comparatively enthusiastic adopters of social media for private and public communication: according to the *Sensis Social Media Report 2016*, 95% of

Australian Internet users use Facebook, and 19% use Twitter (Sensis 2016: 7), and on average they spend some 12.5 hours per week on Facebook alone (*ibid*.: 3). Our own research has identified some 3.7 million Australian Twitter accounts by early 2016, for a population of 24.5 million Australians (Bruns *et al*. 2017). This also has significant implications for Australian news diets: the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2016* indicates that as the role of print and broadcast media declines, some 52% of all Australians now use online and social media as news sources (Newman *et al*. 2016: 78). Notably, too, trust in conventional news media is comparatively low: Australia ranks fifteenth amongst the 26 nations covered by the *Digital News Report* in 2016 (*ibid*.: 79). This might be related to the very substantial concentration of mainstream media ownership amongst a handful of major operators, led by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Young 2010), which in turn may encourage Internet and social media users to seek out alternative coverage and opinions online.

At the same time, any reading of the decline of the stable two-party balance in the Australian political system as being caused by the advent of social media should be regarded as a considerable oversimplification. Social media should not be held responsible for the significant factional in-fighting within Labor and Coalition ranks over the past ten years, any more than social media should be thought to have won the 2008 U.S. presidential election for Barack Obama, or the 2016 election for Donald Trump; these outcomes are driven by a substantially more complex set of factors. However, in much the same way that Obama's *my.barackobama.com* and Trump's use of Facebook and Twitter managed to project a certain public persona for each candidate, and provided ready-made content for mainstream media coverage, so have the social media activities (and missteps) of Australian federal politicians, amplified by the mainstream media, served to shape their image, and politicians across the spectrum have therefore come to utilise the major social media platforms with varying

degrees of enthusiasm. In 2007, incumbent PM John Howard's inept attempts at using YouTube to promote campaign messages were unfavourably contrasted with challenger Kevin Rudd's significantly more sophisticated online campaign (Flew 2008); in 2013, the Labor party switched back from Gillard to Rudd in part because of a perception of Rudd as being more popular amongst social media users (and thus able to bypass largely negative mainstream media reporting; Maguire, 2013); in 2015, Malcolm Turnbull's ascent to the Liberal Party leadership was similarly related at least in part to the likeable and engaging persona he projected on Twitter at the time, which his colleagues expected to translate into a better chance at electoral success than his less liked predecessor Tony Abbott (who had famously dismissed social media as "electronic graffiti"; Snowden 2015) would be able to command (see e.g. Ward, 2015).

Indeed, the overall trend towards increased attention to public opinion polls and social media performance – all recent internal party leadership challenges were motivated by concerns about flagging popularity signalling future electoral defeats, rather than by clearly articulated disagreements about party policy – also indicates that social media in Australia are playing a growing role for politicians and their parties as indicators of the present mood of the electorate. The vast majority of federal politicians now operate their own Facebook pages and Twitter accounts – and while their levels of active participation and engagement are widely variable, there can be little doubt that they or their staff do actively monitor these presences for feedback from the general electorate. This necessarily introduces new misperceptions: social media userbases are not representative of the general public, and the magnitude of the social media response is not always proportional to the significance of a political issue, or the electoral popularity of a political leader – after all, despite their personal

followings on Twitter and Facebook, Rudd failed, and Turnbull nearly failed, to win their respective elections.

Social Media and Politics

However, although in isolation they are unlikely to change the outcome of elections, social media have now firmly become part of the arsenal of contemporary political campaigning tools, in Australia as well as elsewhere (see e.g. the substantial number of studies of social media use by political movements and in election campaigns around the world that are collected in Bruns *et al*. 2016). A number of interrelated factors are in play here: first, since the popularisation of leading platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the mid- to late 2000s, social media have become the platforms of choice for an increasing subset of public debate as well as for semi- or "privately public" (Papacharissi 2010: 131) political discussion. Indeed, Wright *et al*. (2016: 75) understand social media as "third spaces" where "everyday political talk" occurs readily, and specifically locate such informal and spontaneous talk away from the more formally organised environments that facilitate explicit political debate and organising through the use of platform affordances like Facebook pages and groups or Twitter hashtags. (In line with this perspective, the present study does not rely on hashtags to define its dataset of election-related tweets.) As Habermas has suggested – if at a time when social media proper were only just beginning to emerge –, "the public sphere is rooted in [these] networks for wild flows of messages" that exist "at the periphery of the political system" (2006: 415), and ultimately political opinions "are influenced by everyday talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of civil society at least as much as they are by paying attention to print or electronic media" (2006: 416); this role has only strengthened in recent years, and it is therefore crucial to further explore how political discussion in social media and related online spaces unfolds away from the self-selecting flashpoints of debate that are marked out

by hashtags and similar mechanisms. Unfortunately, the pursuit of such goals is often hindered by the major platforms' data access regimes, which make it easy to track hashtags and keywords but significantly harder to capture more comprehensive datasets (Bucher, 2013; Langlois *et al.*, 2015).

Second, the growing recognition of social media as spaces for everyday political discussion has also led to increasingly organised and targeted social media campaigning by political actors; a wealth of studies ranging from the early uses of blogs and stand-alone platforms in the 2004 and 2008 U.S. presidential campaigns (e.g. Meraz, 2007; Bimber, 2014) to the normalisation of Facebook and Twitter campaigning around the world in more recent years provide useful insights into the specific configurations of social media use in elections. What such studies indicate most clearly is that there is no single reliable approach to social media campaigning, however: on the one hand, local contexts crucially affect how particular parties and politicians may present themselves and their policies through social media, and which platforms are likely to be most effective for doing so; on the other, those platforms themselves as well as the practices of social media users are constantly evolving, so that even within the same national environment the strategies of the last election may no longer be effective in the next.

In this context, the growing number of longitudinal studies that seek to trace and analyse the evolution of social media campaigning over several electoral cycles (e.g. Larsson & Moe, 2016; Lilleker *et al.*, 2016) are especially valuable, and this article contributes to that body of literature. Such work is complicated by the duration of standard electoral cycles, stretching to four or five years in most stable democracies: in most cases there will have been only three or four national elections during the time that Facebook and Twitter have been available and

popular in a given country, and yet over that period the affordances and uses of these platforms have evolved substantially. Here, in fact, Australia – with its federal electoral cycle of only three years, which may be shortened yet further at the request of the Prime Minister of the day – makes for a particularly useful test case, generating a greater number of data points on social media adoption in formal political campaigning than most other nations.

Finally, one of the most critical questions to emerge at the intersection of the everyday political talk in social media spaces and the formal campaigning efforts of political parties and candidates is whether there is any indication that such efforts are able to affect the views of voters – and by extension, whether the views of voters as expressed through social media provide any meaningful indication of the likely outcome of the election itself. Several such claims of predictive abilities have been made in recent years: in a paper titled "Predicting Elections with Twitter", for instance, Tumasjan *et al*. suggest that their analysis of tweets in the lead-up to the 2009 German federal election served as "a valid indicator of political opinion" (2010: 184) – yet Jungherr *et al*. (2012) dismiss that claim by highlighting the problem of confirmation bias in such studies; Tumasjan *et al*. (2012) respond in turn to defend their work, but also temper some of their earlier claims about the predictive power of their approach. Again, one of the challenges here is that the political environment, as well as the demographics of social media use amongst likely voters, are likely to vary considerably from one election to the next; even if a particular analytical method should prove capable of producing results that match the eventual election outcome in one year, it can be considered as reliable only if it repeats that achievement over the course of several consecutive elections.

A more meaningful task, then (and indeed a fundamental prerequisite to any attempts at predicting election results), is the assessment of the extent to which political discussion on

social media runs parallel or counter to public debate in other media channels. This examines whether the leading agendas and dominant frames of mainstream media and political actors are equally influential within the spaces of social media, too, or whether – due to divergent demographics or interests – the userbase of specific social media platforms skews away from mainstream popular opinion; in doing so, it offers insights into how representative for the wider population these specific social media publics are. Focussing on the election hashtag #ausvotes in 2010, for instance, Bruns & Burgess (2010) found that debate amongst that self-selecting hashtag public revolved considerably more around progressive and technological themes than was the case for mainstream political coverage. However, political discussion in the Australian Twittersphere of the present day, which has evolved considerably since then, may no longer exhibit the same biases – and again, in Australia and elsewhere, it is therefore necessary to repeat such studies over a sequence of elections and thereby establish a longer series of data points that support more comprehensive theory-building efforts.

Today, of course, sophisticated election campaigns recognise that social media activities reach only a specific element of the voting public, and use them alongside other components – from in-person doorknocking to mainstream media debates – to press home the candidate's and party's messages, shaped to suit each medium, and thereby to ensure that even in a hybrid media environment (Chadwick *et al.* 2016) the campaign maximises its chances of reaching and influencing undecided voters. The observation of social media campaigning strategies, and of the public response to them, can therefore also shed additional light on overall campaigning approaches, well beyond social media themselves. This article examines such approaches, on Twitter, in the 2013 and 2016 Australian federal election campaigns. It builds on findings for the 2013 campaign, reported in more detail in Bruns (2017), and compares these with corresponding patterns in the 2016 election.

The article addresses three key research questions. First (RQ1), what are the major parties' tweeting strategies, and how do they evolve from 2013 to 2016? In particular, do they change with the party's relative electoral standing in each election year, and is there an overall trend towards further coordination and professionalization? Second (RQ2), how does voter engagement reflect the shifting electoral standing of, and voter enthusiasm for, each party and its leading candidates? Is there any indication that retweets, in particular, might signal an endorsement of specific parties and candidates? Third (RQ3), are the themes of Twitter-based election discussion reflective of broader public debate, or do they continue to skew towards particularly Twitter-affine topics? In particular, how do such themes change from one election to the next, and is there evidence that the campaign themes promoted by specific parties can be successfully transported into the Twitter debate?

In addressing these research questions, this article takes an explicitly interpretive approach to the study of social media activities during election campaigns. As we have noted, much of the empirical work on the use of social media in elections remains difficult to translate from one national, platform, historical, and methodological context to another, and there are as yet few studies that generate comparable data across multiple elections – for example by taking a longitudinal approach to the study of social media campaigning within the same nation and platform, and by gathering comparable datasets in each iteration. If, as Dixon (2012: 202) proposes, research should ideally follow a "three-step process of abductive hypothesis forming, deductive theory construction, and inductive empirical testing", then the study of social media in elections largely remains in the abductive and deductive phases, where we identify and interpret patterns in the data and formulate theories that explain them. With this article we seek to contribute to this theory-building effort, by documenting the uses of Twitter in the 2013 and 2016 Australian federal elections and providing a first set

of hypotheses that explain the differences in social media activity between these two campaigns; these hypotheses may then be tested in other electoral contexts or in future Australian elections.

Method

We implement the same approach to gathering and analysing data for both the 2013 and the 2016 Australian federal elections. In each case, following the publication of the federal candidate list by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) we undertook a thorough search of Twitter to identify all sitting members' and candidates' Twitter accounts, if available. For each name on the AEC's official candidate rolls, we searched Twitter for accounts matching that name, and confirmed the identity of the account by checking for Twitter's blue verification tickmark; by reviewing the account's profile information; and by examining the most recent tweets posted by the account. Where doubts about the authenticity of accounts remained, we also reviewed any links to the candidates' Twitter accounts that were available from their official Websites; checked for the accounts' appearance on any official Twitter lists compiled by the political parties; and treated @mentions and retweets of a suspected candidate account by official party or party leader accounts as confirmation that the account was indeed legitimate. Although some Australian politicians have chosen somewhat obscure Twitter usernames for themselves – deputy Labor leader Anthony Albanese is @AlboMP, for instance, while Greens senator Peter Whish-Wilson operates as @senatorsurfer to reflect his love for watersports – we are confident that this exhaustive process identified the vast majority of eligible accounts, at least from the major parties.

In total, then, the search resulted in 454 accounts for the 2013 election, and 351 accounts for the 2016 election (Table 1). While numbers of tweeting candidates for Labor and the

Coalition are highly stable across the two elections, the difference in total numbers is due largely to the implosion of the Palmer United Party, which fielded a substantial number of candidates in 2013 but far fewer in 2016, and a similar reduction in numbers for Katter's Australian Party; both profited from widespread disenchantment with mainstream politics in 2013, but failed to convert this into an improvement in their long-term positioning in the Australian political environment. We also identified fewer independent and minor party candidates, but note that for reasons of timing we had to prioritise our search for candidates of the major parties; it is possible that we missed some minor party or independent candidates if their Twitter profile information did not include their full name and/or did not obviously identify them as Australian political candidates. By contrast, it is notable that Twitter uptake amongst the major parties is consistent from election to election, demonstrating that Twitter is now firmly established as a political communication tool for their candidates.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

For each of the accounts thus identified, we utilised standard Twitter data gathering tools to capture all public tweets posted by as well as @mentioning these accounts (the latter includes unsolicited @mentions, as well as @replies to and retweets of the accounts' previous tweets). In 2013, we used *yourTwapperkeeper* (2017), while for the 2016 collection we used the *Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolkit* (*TCAT*; see Borra & Rieder 2014), both of which connect to Twitter's open Application Programming Interface (API) and therefore capture equivalent datasets. We chose this approach, rather than the more common one of tracking pre-selected hashtags or keywords, because our interest here is in the uses of social media

like Twitter by candidates and their parties for political campaigning, and in the responses from ordinary social media users that this generates; by contrast, a focus on prominent Australian political hashtags such as #ausvotes (Bruns & Burgess 2011) or #auspol (Highfield 2013) would privilege the self-selecting group of political commenters on Twitter who tend to dominate such hashtags. Only a small minority of the tweets contained in our datasets for the two elections contain such hashtags.

In order to enable a meaningful comparison of Twitter activity and engagement patterns across the two elections, we further filtered our dataset to include only the final two calendar weeks of each campaign. From these two weeks we excluded the election day (for Australian federal elections, this is always a Saturday) as well as the following Sunday, as it is by now well established that election-day tweeting practices differ considerably from the rest of the campaign: on that day, the focus is largely on the public performance of the democratic process as Twitter users document polling station decorations and sausage sizzles, and then move on to a running commentary of election outcomes as first results and projections are reported (cf. Zappavigna 2014). Our twelve-day window from the Monday of the penultimate week to the final Friday of the campaign instead captures the last, most critical phase of campaigning; in the following analysis, we therefore cover the periods of 26 August to 6 September 2013, and of 20 June to 1 July 2016. Our 2013 dataset contains 239,210 unique tweets, while the 2016 dataset includes 343,814 tweets; this represents an increase of nearly 44%, even in spite of the smaller number of candidate accounts tracked in 2016, and demonstrates the still-growing use of Twitter for political discussion in Australia.

Our analysis of these datasets draws on standard Twitter activity metrics (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013) as used in a wide range of studies of political and other activities on the platform.

We distinguish, first, between the tweets posted by the candidate accounts themselves, and those posted by other Twitter accounts that mention (as an @mention or a retweet) candidate accounts. The former provide insight into the active communicative efforts of the candidates, and can be further distinguished into tweets that retweet other accounts; tweets that @mention other accounts; and tweets that make a statement without @mentioning or retweeting others in the process of doing so (we use the term 'original tweets' to describe this class of message). While the total count of tweets posted by candidates (individually, or aggregated for each party) indicates their level of activity on the Twitter platform, its breakdown across the three fundamental tweet types indicates preferences for diverging engagement styles, ranging from announcements made in original tweets through discussion and debate via @mentions to the dissemination and on-sharing of news and opinions by way of retweeting.

By contrast, posts by ordinary users appear in our dataset if they mention one of the candidate accounts by their Twitter account name; these can then be distinguished into retweets of candidates' messages, and into other @mentions of these accounts, while necessarily no 'original' tweets by ordinary users (i.e. posts that neither retweet nor @mention candidate accounts) are included in our datasets. Again, the total count of these mentions indicates the relative public attention paid by Twitter users to these candidate accounts (individually, or by party); further, the distinction between @mentions and retweets enables an analysis of whether Twitter users are merely talking about, at, or with the candidates, via @mentions, or are actively re-disseminating their tweets by retweeting them. Finally, in a further step (outlined in more detail below), we also examine the overall themes present in these tweets.

Analysis

Candidates' Tweets

We begin our analysis by comparing the patterns of candidate tweeting activity. These remain broadly stable across the two elections, despite the parties' considerably different starting-points (Table 2): Labor candidates contribute by far the largest number of tweets, followed by Greens politicians (who, given their smaller group, post a slightly greater average number of tweets per capita, however). Coalition candidates' Twitter activities remain comparatively subdued, posting significantly less than half the number of tweets that their Labor candidates can muster even though there is a broadly comparable number of Coalition Twitter accounts. In 2013, in fact, because of its considerably greater average number of tweets per account, even the Palmer United Party's 30 candidates with Twitter accounts managed to closely match the performance of the Coalition's 119 accounts. (Per capita, however, the small but highly technologically affine Pirate and WikiLeaks Parties fielded the most enthusiastic Twitter users that year, while in 2016 the leaders of two other micro-parties, Derryn Hinch and Jacqui Lambie, are personally responsible for their high number of tweets per account.)

[TABLE 2 HERE]

This clearly points to different tweeting approaches: Labor and Greens candidates are considerably more proactive overall in promoting their agenda through Twitter than their Coalition counterparts. For 2013, we have interpreted this – in Bruns (2017) – as evidence of the Coalition's "small target" campaigning strategy, where in light of the deep-set unpopularity of the incumbent Labor government there was little incentive for Coalition

candidates to campaign particularly actively on Twitter (and thereby risk gaffes and other mistakes that could jeopardise the conservative win). By contrast, Labor candidates were highly active on Twitter as well as in their local house-to-house campaigning in order to save whatever seats they could from the impending landslide; we described this approach, embraced by local candidates in the absence of an effective central party campaign, as a "local target" strategy in Bruns (2017).

In 2016, patterns amongst the major parties remain broadly similar, against the backdrop of a generally reduced volume of tweets. Labor candidates, in particular, tweet somewhat less than they did in 2013, posting an average of 43 tweets per account during these final campaign weeks (compared to nearly 50 tweets in the previous campaign). This may indicate a comparatively more comfortable electoral positioning that reverses the 2013 election's patterns: this time, it was tempting for Labor to itself embrace a "small target" approach in response to voter disenchantment with the incumbent Coalition government. However, such reduced tweeting by rank-and-file Labor candidates might also point to a more effectively coordinated central party campaign which did not leave local candidates to fend for themselves.

By contrast, even in spite of their by then precarious hold on government there is no change in the tweeting performance of Coalition candidates' accounts in 2016; where in 2013 Labor candidates posted a substantial number of tweets in an effort, if not to hang on to government, then at least to retain as many seats as possible, in 2016 Coalition candidates did not engage in similar activities. This may point to an unjustified confidence about the party's electoral chances in the approaching election; however, it might also indicate persistent scepticism amongst rank-and-file Coalition politicians about the utility of social

media in political campaigning. We do not have comparable data for Facebook, but in light of long-held beliefs amongst Australian conservatives that the Twittersphere is dominated by left-leaning users – for which Bruns *et al.* (2017) find no clear evidence – it is also possible that Coalition politicians continue to privilege other platforms over Twitter in their campaign communications.

Table 2 also shows the types of tweets posted by candidates for the different parties, distinguishing between retweets (both via the retweet button and using manual constructions such as 'RT @user: …'), @mentions, and original tweets that do not retweet or @mention another account. We note here that percentages across the three tweet types can add up to more than 100%, as retweets may also contain @mentions of additional accounts; in fact, this is especially likely in the context of an election campaign, where candidates may be expected to frequently retweet their party leaders' tweets and where those tweets in turn may contain @mentions both to endorse party colleagues and to attack political opponents. We also note that, in order to compare like with like across the two elections, our analysis here does not include 'quoted tweets' (where the URL of a previous tweet is included in a new post), a feature which Twitter introduced only in 2015.

The overall trend in candidate tweeting activity from the 2013 to the 2016 election, then, points to a considerable shift towards retweeting: the proportion of retweets amongst the total volume of tweets posted by major party candidates increases by nine percentage points for Labor, eight percentage points for Greens, and sixteen percentage points for Coalition candidates. We interpret this as indicating a tendency towards greater central control of campaigning by the respective campaign headquarters: for Greens and Coalition candidates, in particular, the proportion of original tweets simultaneously declines, signalling a

considerable shift from posting individually crafted messages to re-posting the tweets of others. The net result is that nearly half of the tweets posted by candidates for the three largest party blocs are now retweets, while less than one third are original posts. (Additionally, of course, it is possible that even the content for the candidates' original tweets might have been supplied in private talking points briefings sent by campaign organisers; we cannot assume that all 'original' tweets in our dataset actually originated with the candidates themselves.) The leading targets of such retweets are, predictably, the major party and leaders' accounts within each bloc; given the recent history of in-fighting in both major party blocs, this emphasis on retweeting might also be designed as a show of party unity and mutual support. Labor candidates also share a substantial number of tweets by centrist or left-leaning news outlets and journalists, however.

Audience Responses

In addition to tracking the candidates' own tweeting activities, we also captured all tweets that @mentioned or retweeted one of the candidate accounts (Table 3). These show, in the first place, a very substantial increase in the overall volume of tweets directed at candidate accounts: during the twelve days before election day, Twitter users posted almost exactly 50% more tweets that @mentioned or retweeted candidates in 2016 than they did in 2013. We regard this as indicating, in the first place, the far more closely fought nature of the 2016 election, whose outcome remained genuinely in doubt during these final days, while in 2013 all opinion polls had pointed to a landslide Coalition win for several months ahead of election day. Further, the relative volume of overall tweets directed at each of the major party blocs also demonstrates the changed electoral context: in each case, members and candidates representing the struggling incumbent government (Labor in 2013; the Coalition in 2016) receive the majority of tweets.

Differences in the behaviour of Twitter users are most pronounced, however, when we take into account the types of tweets they direct at each party's candidates. In 2013, neither of the leading parties received a substantial volume of retweets; users were content to @mention their candidates in the course of their political discussions on Twitter, but largely refrained from publicly sharing (and thereby perhaps endorsing) the content posted by candidate accounts. This likely reflects both the contemporary political situation (with an election contested between a deeply unpopular Labor government and a Coalition opposition led by the widely disliked Tony Abbott), and the popular perception that the outcome of the election was already inevitable. Fewer than 3% of the tweets directed at the two major party blocs were retweets, therefore.

By 2016, that picture had changed considerably. Even under new Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who had replaced Abbott by now, the retweets directed at Coalition candidates represent only about 3% of the total tweets received; for Labor candidates, on the other hand, that percentage has risen to over 19%. Retweets of Greens and independent candidates – largely aligned with Labor in the 2016 election in their opposition to the Coalition government – have similarly increased substantially, both in absolute and in percentage terms. The vast majority – more than 90% – of the tweets directed at members and candidates across all parties even in 2016 are @mentions rather than retweets, indicating that the Australian Twitter userbase continues to prefer talking to, at, and about political accounts rather than sharing the content they post, but (to the extent that we may understand retweets of political actors' messages as implicit endorsements) there is now a renewed willingness to support the major opposition parties' campaigning statements, and thereby to aid them in defeating the incumbent Coalition government. This significant behavioural change is clearly in line with the considerable improvement in Labor's share of the vote on election day; if the aphorism that

"oppositions don't win elections – governments lose them" appears to hold true in 2013, then in 2016 there is evidence that public support for a reinvigorated Labor opposition at least contributed to the government's troubles.

Of these candidate mentions for the major party blocs, a substantial component is usually directed at their prime ministerial candidates. Labor PM Rudd receives 56% of all Labor candidate @mentions and retweets in 2013, while Coalition PM Turnbull receives 54% in 2016; Coalition opposition leader Abbott receives 45% in 2013, and Labor opposition leader Shorten receives 48% in 2016. Over both elections, the strong focus on the incumbent PM and the somewhat greater distribution of attention across the opposition team might be seen as reflecting the voter perception that the newly installed Prime Minister in each case did not have the full backing of his party, and that each election was therefore a somewhat uneven contest between the individual PM and the opposition's leadership team. In this context it is also notable that the substantial number of retweets for Labor candidates in 2016 are yet more evenly distributed: Shorten attracts only some 15% of all Labor candidate retweets, as other Labor frontbenchers' tweets are also widely retweeted. This points to a considerable distribution of Twitter users' attention across the leading Labor politicians' accounts, even if Shorten remains by far the most widely @mentioned Labor leader; in the Australian political context it also indicates that by 2016 voters may have revised the perceptions of a deeply divided Labor frontbench that had emerged in the acrimonious Rudd/Gillard/Rudd period and culminated in the 2013 election defeat, and that they now again see the Labor leadership as a united team with several key representatives. Labor may well have actively nurtured such perceptions, of course, by not overly singling our Shorten in its campaigning.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

Themes of Twitter Discussion Surrounding Politicians' Accounts

Finally, we also examine the key themes addressed in the tweet datasets we have captured. Here, we follow the approach implemented in Bruns (2017), which for the 2013 election drew on the list of the key political issues in Australia in 2013 published by market research company iSentia (2013), and on the list of major campaign issues in the election as identified by *ABC News*' "Vote Compass" (*ABC News*, 2013), distilled these into a set of thirteen themes, and iteratively developed a collection of topical search terms for each theme. The initial lists provided a set of primary keywords associated with each theme; we queried our dataset for tweets using those keywords, and through close reading of the most retweeted messages identified further frequently used terms for each theme. We then assessed the thematic fit of the messages returned by a new query using the extended keyword list, and further revised that list by removing keywords that produced a substantial volume of false positives (i.e. tweets that used a keyword in a context different from the theme at hand) as well as adding further terms relevant to the theme. Over the course of several iterations, this manual process of refinement (outlined in more detail in Bruns, 2017) produced a set of keywords that returned clearly distinct, thematically unified collections of tweets for each theme. We then applied these terms to the full dataset of tweets in order to computationally code tweets as belonging to one of the thirteen topics.

For the present study, in light of the fact that the major political issues of the day had not changed substantively from 2013 to 2016 we re-used the thirteen 2013 topics and associated keywords identified in Bruns (2017), but extended them by introducing three additional

themes that had clearly emerged in 2016: the UK's vote in favour of leaving the European Union (Brexit) during the penultimate week of the 2016 election campaign, which due to Australia's strong historical ties and the significant population of Australians living in Britain and the EU also materially affects Australia; the proposal for a parliamentary inquiry into Australia's banking system that was part of Labor's election platform (Banking Inquiry); and the resurgence of the debate about racism and xenophobia in Australia, also in the context of persistent calls from Coalition backbenchers for a reform of section 18c of Australia's *Racial Discrimination Act* (Racism). For these three themes, too, we iteratively developed a set of keywords to capture relevant tweets.

In total, the thirteen themes identified for 2013 were found in 59,253, or 25%, of the 239,210 tweets in our dataset; the sixteen themes identified for 2016 were present in 119,009, or 35%, or the 343,814 tweets in our dataset. This suggests that in spite of the continuing and historically unprecedented leadership turmoil on both sides of politics in Australia, which certainly would have been addressed in a sizeable number of the non-thematic tweets, by 2016 more of the Twitter audience's attention had returned to the substance of the political debate.

Table 4 compares the relative prominence of the various themes across the two campaigns, and points to substantial shifts in emphasis. While the Coalition had campaigned strongly in 2013 on the perception that the Labor governments had been poor economic managers, the Budget Deficit theme is somewhat more muted in 2016 by the fact the Abbott/Turnbull governments had been similarly unable to return the federal budget to surplus; although it still accounts for 16% of the thematic tweets, this represents a decline by over eight percentage points since 2013. Broadband Policy – in 2013 one of the remaining

strong points for Labor, which had initiated the deployment of a National Broadband Network – has similarly declined by over eight percentage points in 2016, as Labor attempts to spell out an alternative vision for the country by focussing on more traditional areas of policy. Key to these efforts is Health: this theme records the most substantial gain from one election to the next, improving by more than twelve percentage points and becoming the central topic of these final weeks of the 2016 campaign by a considerable margin. Here, Twitter mirrors trends within broader political discussion in Australia: Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull even referenced Labor's so-called "Mediscare" campaign in his election night speech as one of the root causes of the Coalition's poor results (Hunter 2016). By contrast, Labor's calls for a Banking Inquiry (and related attacks on the Coalition for its opposition to that proposal) fail to attract similar attention: fewer than 3% of all thematic tweets address this issue.

Other key themes in Australian political debate remain comparatively stable: perennial, often acrimonious discussions about the legal recognition of Same-Sex Marriage or about changes to the country's hard-line Refugee Policy attract virtually the same percentage of thematic tweets in both elections, while Environment and Education policies decline slightly in prominence. As the latter are generally seen to favour Labor, we interpret their relative decline as a successful, deliberate shift of emphasis of the public debate towards Health policy, orchestrated in large part by the Labor campaign.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of the patterns of Twitter activity around members' and candidates' accounts during the 2013 and 2016 elections clearly shows considerable changes in the patterns of tweeting by and at these accounts over the course of this turbulent period in Australian federal politics. The observations we have been able to present here reveal both predictable and unexpected results. First, in relation to the tweeting activities of the candidates themselves (RQ1) they persistently document a considerably more enthusiastic embrace of Twitter as a campaigning tool on the progressive end of the Australian political spectrum. Labor and Greens candidates are substantially more active – in total and per capita – than their colleagues in the conservative Coalition; this pattern is stable even across the two elections with their significantly different electoral contexts.

In 2013, at a time when Labor candidates could be forgiven for despairing at their practically inevitable impending defeat, they nonetheless fought a vocal social media campaign, "tweeting to save the furniture", as Bruns (2017) put it. In 2016, however, in reverse circumstances that eventually saw the Coalition hang on to government by a single seat in the House of Representatives, its candidates failed to engage in a similar rear-guard action designed to shore up their voter base. We speculate that this points to Australian conservative politicians' innate – but possibly incorrect – reading of Twitter in Australia as a social media environment that favours progressive politics, and where it is therefore easier for Labor than for the Coalition to mobilise support and gain votes. (This view has been frequently reiterated by conservative commentators in Australia, too; see e.g. Mitchell, 2016.) A comparison of candidate activities across Twitter and Facebook, following the example set by Rossi and Orefice (2016) in their analysis of the 2013 general election in Italy, might be

able to test this hypothesis, but due to the significant limitations of the Facebook API faces considerable methodological hurdles and is beyond the scope of the present article.

Further, across both major party blocs we also see a notable increase in the percentage of retweets sent by candidates as part of their overall tweeting activities. We interpret this as a sign of greater organisation within the Twitter campaigns on both sides: in 2016, candidates are more aware of their colleagues' Twitter accounts, and are therefore also more likely to retweet them; they may also have been instructed more explicitly by their respective campaign headquarters to do so. In spite of any remaining misgivings about the purported political leanings of the audience that may be reached through Twitter, this indicates that Twitter has nonetheless become even more normalised as a campaigning tool. It may also point to the fact that – contrary to the 2013 election, which was called only five weeks after Kevin Rudd's return to the prime ministership – both sides entered the 2016 campaign with better preparation. This normalisation of Twitter as part of the communicative arsenal in election campaigns mirrors similar findings in Lilleker *et al.*'s seven-year study of social media in U.K. general elections (2016).

Second, addressing RQ2, the activities of ordinary Twitter users, directed at the candidates in each election, display their own changing patterns. On the one hand, the distribution of attention across the competing party blocs is relatively stable from one election to the next: in each case, the incumbent government is the centre of the Australian Twitter community's attention. On present evidence, then, it is primarily the underlying political constellation (which party is in power), rather than campaigning efforts (how enthusiastically each party uses Twitter) or ideological positioning (whether a party represents the left, centre, or right of the Australian political spectrum) that appears to drive user engagement with political

candidates. This is significant, and indicates a considerable disconnect between campaign activities and voter attention; it is tempting to relate this finding to Australia's compulsory voting system (where the decisions of genuinely undecided voters rather than the relative mobilisation of long-term party supporters decide election outcomes), but that relation would need to be tested by further research that explores the motivations behind Twitter users' political engagement during election campaigns.

It also remains to be seen whether the present pattern holds over the longer term. By historic comparison, recent federal elections in Australia (including 2016 and 2013, as well as 2010) have been unusual in that they served as the first electoral test for a sitting Prime Minister who had mounted a successful challenge against a party colleague; it is not surprising, therefore, that one of the key questions in these elections has been whether voters would punish the incumbent PM for this overt act of disloyalty. Put simply, in other words, these elections have been more about the character of the Prime Minister than about the qualities of the opposition leader seeking to replace them, and this would also explain why Twitter attention has been largely directed towards the PM. The next Australian federal election which pits a well-established PM against a similarly stable opposition leader will test whether in this constellation Twitter users might focus more on the challenger than on the incumbent; however, given the persistent rumours at the time of writing of a new internal Coalition challenge against current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, there is a strong possibility that the next federal election may be contested by yet another newly installed PM, repeating the 2010/2013/2016 pattern.

User activities across the two most recent elections differ markedly, on the other hand, with respect to ordinary Twitter users' preparedness to retweet the posts of political

candidates. As we have shown, in 2016 supporters of the opposition parties were considerably more active in their retweeting; we interpret this in the first place as an indicator of the very close nature of that year's electoral race. Opposition supporters may well have concluded that every small contribution – even simply in the form of a retweet – could make a difference under these circumstances (especially in the final weeks of the campaign that are the focus of our analysis), and therefore amplified the tweets not only of the opposition leader, but also of a number of other frontbench politicians. In 2013, by contrast, supporters of either side of politics had less incentive to do so, given the almost inevitable outcome of that election; additionally, however, the considerable reluctance to retweet political messages that year could also point to a deep disaffection with the politics of both major party blocs at the time – such general frustration with both sides of Australian politics was a central feature of election reporting in 2013, and well documented in voter surveys at the time (e.g. Centre for Advancing Journalism, 2013). Importantly, then, it appears that this change in the relative willingness of ordinary users to promote specific party messages is thus again related more to the contemporary political climate than to the quality of the campaign materials themselves.

Finally, addressing RQ3, our exploration of the major themes of each election campaign reveals a considerable shift in the dominant topics, and in particular lends some support of the Coalition's post-election complaints about Labor's so-called "Mediscare" campaign as an important factor in its loss of electoral support. (We do not make any judgment here, of course, about whether that campaign simply stoked irrational fears in the Australian populace, or highlighted genuine concerns about the Coalition's prospective health policies.) This reverses the pattern experienced in the previous election, when a Coalition campaign designed to raise concerns about the Labor government's budget deficit was similarly

effective in amplifying public discontent. Other themes have remained a great deal more stable across the two elections, and address some of the major concerns also regularly captured in opinion polls and media coverage. This indicates that – although its demographic is certainly unrepresentative of the Australian populace at large – in its political discussions Twitter in Australia does not necessarily depart markedly from mainstream public conversations.

This observation appears to depart from the findings of earlier studies, which identified a strong skew towards technological and progressive issues in Australian political discussion on Twitter (e.g. Bruns & Burgess, 2011). But this highlights an important methodological point: our account- rather than hashtag- or keyword-centric data gathering approach over these two elections has enabled us to observe a very different range of Twitter activities, compared to what previous studies have been able to capture. We suggest that the observation of what candidates tweet out, and what users tweet in turn to, at, and about these candidates, offers a distinctly more diverse picture of political debate on Twitter than the study of only those tweets that were deemed by their authors to be worthy of a hashtag like #auspol or #ausvotes, and we strongly encourage further studies to employ the approach we have chosen here. It should be noted, of course, that neither of these approaches will generate a 'true' representation of political discussion on Twitter: both capture only a particular set of user practices, and miss out on political tweets that neither address candidates by their Twitter handle nor connect with specific hashtags. Future studies should therefore also explore a combination between account, hashtag, and keyword tracking – as well as comparing Twitter activity patterns with observations from other platforms.

We acknowledge that the space available here has only permitted a broad analysis of the overall patterns of Twitter activity across the 2013 and 2016 elections. Further in-depth exploration should examine the distribution of activity across key individual accounts both amongst the candidates fielded by each party and amongst the general public; in particular, it could also study the role of other identified societal actors, from journalists through activists to celebrities, and test for the presence of bots and other automated accounts in our data. The analysis of the URLs being shared in tweets presents another opportunity: do the candidates representing different parties also draw on different sources of information as they make their case for election and attack their opponents? Do ordinary users link to third-party materials as they comment on, criticise, or seek a conversation with the candidates? Do campaigners utilise embedded images and videos to promote their causes, and are there notable differences in the visual styles employed in doing so? Additional network analysis may be especially fruitful for some of these approaches, as it would help identify clusters of especially dense interconnections both as candidate and other Twitter accounts engage with each other, and as Twitter accounts connect to third-party sources. Such analysis could then reveal patterns of preferential attachment that may be driven by political ideology or geographic location, amongst other factors.

Overall, however, the analysis presented here makes a clear and distinct contribution to the body of literature on the uses of social media in election campaigns that has been established over the past ten years or more. It extends, in the first place, the longitudinal series of data points available about the uses of social media in Australian federal elections, which collectively chart a trajectory from early experimentation in 2007 (Flew, 2008) through uneven adoption in 2010 (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) to increasing professionalization in 2013 and 2016; further, by employing an identical approach in both 2013 and 2016, it offers the

potential for a first systematic comparison of activity patterns across the two elections, and serves as a template for further studies in future electoral cycles (as do similar studies in Scandinavia and the U.K. for their respective electoral contexts, for example; see Larsson & Moe, 2016, and Lilleker *et al.*, 2016). Emerging from this is the observation that Twitter in particular, and social media more generally, is neither irrelevant in Australian politics, nor inherently skewed towards any one party or ideological orientation; thus, parties and politicians who remain resistant to engaging more fully in social media run the risk of ceding ground to their competitors.

Additionally, of course, this study also enables comparisons between the Australian experience and developments in more or less similar democratic contexts elsewhere. With its comparatively short electoral cycles, compulsory voting requirements, and modified Westminster system, the Australian political environment would be unique even in the absence of the substantial level of political instability it has experienced over the past ten years; it is to be expected, then, that political social media uses here diverge notably from those in slower-paced, voluntary, proportionally representative, and/or more stable political systems. This article enables scholars as well as political operatives with experience in those systems to examine what aspects of political social media use transcend such differences, and what aspects are rooted in local specificities; overall, then, our detailed discussion of the complex and at times confounding Australian political context is also intended to warn against the wholesale translation of research findings on political social media usage that emerge from systems such as that of the United States, which is globally unique, to political contexts that operate under fundamentally different rules. International parallels do exist – not least in the functionality and affordances of the leading social media platforms that party operatives and ordinary citizens now incorporate into their political practices –, but national

contexts deeply affect how such platforms may be used most effectively. As we continue to develop our theoretical frameworks for analysing the uses and effects of social media as tools in political campaigning, it will be crucial to pay attention both to these local specificities, and to their evolution from one election to the next.

Acknowledgments

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Party	2013	2016
Australian Labor Party (ALP)	131	131
Coalition	119	116
Includes: *Liberal Party*	*82*	*83*
National Party	*13*	*12*
Liberal National Party	*22*	*21*
Country Liberal Party	*2*	—
Greens	80	66
Palmer United Party (PUP)	30	—
Katter's Australian Party (KAP)	21	1
Nick Xenophon Team (NXT)	—	12
Independents	18	8
Other Minor Parties	55	17
Total	**454**	**351**

Table 1: Twitter accounts identified per party, 2013 and 2016 Australian federal elections. Candidates contest 150 seats in the House of Representatives, and 72 seats in the Senate.

2013

	Labor	Greens	Coalition	PUP	Pirate Party	Other Minor Parties	WikiLeaks	KAP	Indepen-dents	Total
original	1948	1483	941	688	329	514	185	219	249	6490
@mention	2976	2062	1240	1186	1156	893	474	375	418	11218
retweet	2717	1527	659	983	800	591	381	243	183	8338
Total	**6535**	**4230**	**2511**	**2373**	**1981**	**1803**	**850**	**748**	**722**	**22614**
Average	*49.89*	*52.88*	*21.10*	*79.10*	*283.00*	*40.98*	*283.33*	*35.62*	*38.00*	*49.81*
original	29.81%	35.06%	37.48%	28.99%	16.61%	28.51%	21.76%	29.28%	34.49%	28.70%

@mention	45.54%	48.75%	49.38%	49.98%	58.35%	49.53%	55.76%	50.13%	57.89%	49.61%
retweet	41.58%	36.10%	26.24%	41.42%	40.38%	32.78%	44.82%	32.49%	25.35%	36.87%

2016

	Labor	Greens	Coalition	Independents	Other Minor Parties	Derryn Hinch's Justice Party	Jacqui Lambie Network	NXT	KAP	Total
original	1724	1159	790	147	153	25	45	36	31	4158
@mention	2221	1575	1179	329	115	264	149	79	11	5596
retweet	2853	1568	1008	187	122	219	1	41	14	5986
Total	**5655**	**3562**	**2374**	**538**	**337**	**326**	**194**	**128**	**48**	**13116**
Average	*43.17*	*53.97*	*20.47*	*67.25*	*22.47*	*326.00*	*194.00*	*10.67*	*48.00*	*37.37*
original	30.49%	32.54%	33.28%	27.32%	45.40%	7.67%	23.20%	28.13%	64.58%	31.70%
@mention	39.27%	44.22%	49.66%	61.15%	34.12%	80.98%	76.80%	61.72%	22.92%	42.67%
retweet	50.45%	44.02%	42.46%	34.76%	36.20%	67.18%	0.52%	32.03%	29.17%	45.64%

Table 2: Tweets posted by identified member and candidate accounts in the final campaign weeks in 2013 and 2016. 'Average' shows average number of tweets per capita of accounts. Percentages show percent of tweets by each party that matched a particular tweet type; these may add up to more than 100% as tweets can be @mentions and retweets at the same time.

2013

	Labor	Coalition	Greens	Independents	PUP	Other Minor Parties	Wiki-Leaks	KAP	Pirate Party	Total
@mention	103,726	80,168	18,746	7,938	7,292	2,114	1,806	1,544	1,372	217,369
retweet	2,308	1,364	855	160	271	48	65	83	141	5,423
Total	**106,088**	**81,380**	**19,494**	**8,053**	**7,483**	**2,171**	**1,869**	**1,640**	**1,514**	**220,577**

	Coalition	Labor	Independents	Greens	Jacqui Lambie Network	Derryn Hinch's Justice Party	NXT	Other Minor Parties	KAP	Total
@mention	97.77%	98.51%	96.16%	98.57%	97.45%	97.37%	96.63%	94.15%	90.62%	98.55%
retweet	2.18%	1.68%	4.39%	1.99%	3.62%	2.21%	3.48%	5.06%	9.31%	2.46%

2016

	Coalition	Labor	Independents	Greens	Jacqui Lambie Network	Derryn Hinch's Justice Party	NXT	Other Minor Parties	KAP	Total
@mention	188,803	85,612	19,580	17,694	2,818	2,460	2,252	1,261	202	300,486
retweet	5,692	19,883	4,952	6,229	1,760	5	105	189	44	37,277
Total	**194,280**	**104,453**	**24,144**	**22,670**	**4,553**	**2,464**	**2,380**	**1,452**	**246**	**332,312**
@mention	97.18%	81.96%	81.10%	78.05%	61.89%	99.84%	94.62%	86.85%	82.11%	90.42%
retweet	2.93%	19.04%	20.51%	27.48%	38.66%	0.20%	4.41%	13.02%	17.89%	11.22%

Table 3: Tweets @mentioning or retweeting one of the identified member and candidate accounts in the final campaign weeks in 2013 and 2016. Percentages show percent of tweets directed at each party that matched a particular tweet type; these may add up to more than 100% as tweets can be @mentions and retweets at the same time.

	2013		2016		
Theme	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Change (%pts.)
Health	9.61%	5,530	21.97%	26,147	+12.36
Budget Deficit	24.27%	13,961	16.00%	19,038	-8.27
Environment	13.66%	7,858	10.76%	12,803	-2.90
Same-Sex Marriage	8.97%	5,163	9.33%	11,107	+0.36
Education	12.16%	6,999	7.83%	9,316	-4.34
Refugee Policy	7.75%	4,460	7.39%	8,798	-0.36

Broadband Policy	13.80%	7,938	5.53%	6,579	-8.27
Brexit	———	———	3.94%	4,692	+3.94
Agriculture Policy	2.66%	1,528	2.82%	3,351	+0.16
Banking Inquiry	———	———	2.73%	3,245	+2.73
Defence and Terrorism	1.51%	870	2.25%	2,678	+0.74
Transport Policy	4.34%	2,498	1.60%	1,903	-2.74
Manufacturing / Mining	1.04%	599	1.31%	1,554	+0.26
Workplace Relations	1.99%	1,143	1.09%	1,300	-0.89
Racism	———	———	1.06%	1,261	+1.06
Sexism and Misogyny	1.23%	706	0.72%	856	-0.51

Table 4: Tweets referencing one of the thirteen (in 2013) or sixteen (in 2016) identified key themes of the election campaigns. Percentages show the percentage of all thematic tweets for each year that matched a particular theme.