



Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry into Electoral Education

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The expansion of the internet has had a major impact on the availability of political information necessary for political engagement and participation of the Australian electorate. Results from the Australian Election Studies (AES) can help us better understand the ways in which evolving technologies and new platforms are having an impact on levels of political knowledge among young people. Political knowledge is regarded by political science experts around the world as important for citizens to have in order to participate meaningfully in democracy. Without a basic level of political knowledge citizens may not have the skills to make sense of election campaigns and evaluate competing leaders, parties and policies.¹ This submission provides a brief background of the Australian Electoral Studies and some recent scholarly findings that may be useful to the inquiry into the delivery of electoral education.

The Australian Election Studies are based at the Australian National University and have been regularly funded by the Australian Research Council and the Australian National University since 1987. The Australian Election Studies aim to provide a long-term perspective on stability and change in the political attitudes and behaviour of the Australian electorate, and investigate the changing social bases of Australian politics as the economy and society modernise and change character.² In addition to these long-term goals they examine the political issues prevalent in the election and assess their importance for the election result.³

Since 2001 the AES has been looking at trends in internet use, political knowledge and political participation among the broader population and young people in particular.⁴ While young people learn a great deal through civic education programs, traditionally the most important way in which young people acquire political knowledge is through the mass media. Therefore, of particular interest is the role of the internet in contributing to electoral education and ultimately the participation of engaged citizens.

Around the world it is often thought that the internet is simply exacerbating the existing political knowledge gap because those who use the internet to obtain political information online tend to be young and already interested in politics with higher levels of political knowledge. Therefore, the expansion of the internet for the distribution of political information may not have the desired effect

¹ Rachel Gibson and Ian McAllister. "New Media, Elections and the Political Knowledge Gap in Australia." *Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2014): 337-353.

² The Australian Election Study survey is directed by Professor Ian McAllister (Australian National University), Dr Juliet Pietsch (Australian National University), Professor Clive Bean (Queensland University of Technology) and Professor Rachel Gibson (University of Leicester).

³ See AES website for more information at <http://aes.anu.edu.au/> Accessed: 12 July 2015.

⁴ See Ian McAllister and Sarah Cameron [Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study, 1987-2013](#) Accessed: 12 July 2015.

of increasing overall levels of political knowledge and participation in the Australian electorate. Instead, the internet may simply be introducing a higher degree of selectivity into the media environment.⁵ Drawing on the 2001, 2007 and 2010 Australian Election Studies, Gibson and McAllister tested whether the availability of political information online simply increased political knowledge among politically sophisticated users rather than the broader electorate as a whole. They found that overall a longer experience of using the internet (in terms of the number of years that a person started using the internet) was associated with an increase in levels of political knowledge. Therefore, the internet has the capacity over time to increase political knowledge for all internet users and not just those who are politically engaged.

In a recent study, Ian McAllister compared levels of political knowledge among young people who use the internet with the rest of the Australian electorate. The results in this research showed that there are consistently low levels of political knowledge across the general electorate.⁶ For example, the mean respondent in the 2013 AES could only answer 4.5 political knowledge questions out of the ten. Political knowledge climbs incrementally from the early 20s onwards, peaking at almost 5.5 correct answers out of a maximum of 10 among those aged in their late 60s. Overall, the study showed that the cumulative experience of using the internet over a long period of time is linked with increases in citizen's acquisition of political knowledge, regardless of whether or not they hold a degree of political interest and sophistication.⁷

A key area of inquiry is what implications this has for young people. For young people, the effect of the internet on political knowledge is related to the frequency of internet use during the campaign. With this information, it is important for those involved in civic education to encourage active online engagement during election campaigns at state and federal level.

The committee might also be interested to know that the theme of the next AES (due in 2016) will be young people's political engagement, so that will further add knowledge to this important national issue.

⁵ Rachel Gibson and Ian McAllister. "New Media, Elections and the Political Knowledge Gap in Australia." *Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2014): 337-353

⁶ Ian McAllister, "Internet Use, Political Knowledge and Political Participation Among Young Voters in Australia." In *Democracy: A Citizen Perspective*, Åbo Akademi University, Finland, 27-28 May 2015.

⁷ Rachel Gibson and Ian McAllister. "New Media, Elections and the Political Knowledge Gap in Australia." *Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2014): 337-353.