Political Engagement among the Young in Australia[*]

Aaron Martin

Young Australians are often claimed to be disengaged from politics on a number of levels. But is this true, and to what extent? In this paper I want to interrogate the accusation that young people are disengaged from politics through the use of survey data looking, in particular, at political participation. This work draws on a book I published last year entitled *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo–American Democracies*.[1] In the second section of the paper I want to consider more generally democracy in the twenty-first century and outline some voter engagement projects I was involved with over the course of the last election, namely Vote Compass and the Citizens' Agenda, and examine the potential of these tools to engage the young.

Political participation

We live in a period when the lack of political engagement among Australians, and others around the world, is commonly remarked upon. Pippa Norris writes that 'Many are alarmed that Western publics have become disengaged from public affairs, detached from campaigns, and bored with politics, producing, if not a crisis of democracy, then at least growing problems of legitimacy for representative government'.[2] This concern is particularly salient as it relates to young people.

But exactly what is the nature of that problem? Let me concentrate for the first half of this paper on political participation.

I should mention that by political participation I mean not only voting and joining a political party but what I would call 'non-electoral' forms of political participation as well, such as attending a demonstration and signing a petition. One of the features of political participation today is an expanding array of political activity beyond electoral forms of political participation such as voting or joining a political party.

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[1] Aaron Martin, *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo–American Democracies*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012.

[2] Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 2002, p. 221.

We need then to distinguish electoral forms of political participation from non-electoral forms of political participation and ask whether young people are turning their backs on voting to engage in other forms of participation such as attending demonstrations or signing petitions.

In the literature there is often a debate between those who argue that political participation is in decline[3] and those who argue that political participation is evolving with non-electoral forms of participation such as signing a petition or attending a demonstration replacing electoral forms of participation.[4]

I think it is useful to see the data I am presenting here in light of those debates.

Electoral engagement

Electoral engagement, I argue in my book, constitutes the most substantial form of political engagement for most citizens.

The first thing I will address is attitudes towards voting. The Australian Election Study asked respondents the following question: Would you have voted in the election if voting had not been compulsory? In 2010, 88 per cent of older people (aged 60 and over) said they would have voted but only 78 per cent of young people (aged 18–29) said they would have voted.[5]

We also have data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) which shows that this is accompanied by low levels of civic duty. In 2005 the ISSP asked 'how important is it to always vote in elections?' Respondents were asked to respond on a scale of one to seven, one being 'not at all important' and seven being 'very important'. In terms of those who responded that voting is 'very important' older people are twice as likely to say voting is very important (the respective figures being 84 and 42). So, young people do not seem to see voting as a civic duty in the way older generations do. We know that these attitudes have real effects in relation to

3   R. D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000; Gerry Stoker, *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, England, 2006.

4   Ronald Inglehart, 'Postmaterial values and the erosion of institutional authority', in J. S. Nye, P. D. Zelikow and D. C. King (eds), *Why People Don't Trust Government*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997; Russell Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, CQ Press, Washington, DC, 2008; Norris, op. cit.

5   For the remainder of the paper 'young people' will refer to those aged 18 to 29 and 'older people' to those aged 60 and over.

young people being much less likely to be enrolled to vote and much less likely to vote.[6]

What about broader measures of political engagement such as party identification? In terms of those who do not identify with any party in 2010, 24 per cent of young people did not identify with any party as compared to just seven per cent of older people. This trend has been increasing over time.

So, I think it is clear that electoral politics is becoming less attractive to the young.

Non-electoral political participation

Okay, so what about non-electoral participation? As I mentioned earlier there is a debate about whether political participation is evolving or declining. So here again we have data from the ISSP on non-electoral participation. The data shows that the most common form of activity is signing a petition and young people are more likely than older people to have done this in the past year, 47 per cent to 35. The same applies for boycotting products, which young people are 16 percentage points more likely than older people to have done in the past year. Far fewer people have attended a demonstration but again young people are three times as likely as older people to have attended a demonstration in the past year. Young people are also much more likely to have participated in political activities over the internet (16 per cent to 6) and are much more likely to have visited a politician's or political organisation's website (40 per cent to 13).

Now, that data does not prove that young people today are more likely than young people 20 or 30 years ago to engage in these activities, but other literature suggests that these findings reflect generational rather than lifecycle effects. So, it seems that the way young people engage in politics is changing over time and this will obviously have implications for electoral commissions, parties and other organisations.

In short, it seems that electoral politics is becoming less attractive to the young and non-electoral politics more attractive.

Implications

There are a number of implications for these findings. First of all, electoral commissions will have to work hard just to maintain the current rate of youth voting

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6   Aaron Martin, 'How high is voter turnout in Australia and could it be increased? Lessons for policy makers', *Representation*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2013.

(electoral commissions are flying into a stronger headwind than before, it seems, in terms of attitudes).

Secondly, parties can no longer rely on habitual party supporters. Other research I have done shows voting patterns among younger generations are much more volatile than before with young people being less likely to support minor parties.[7]

Because young people seem to be amenable to different types of political participation, this creates opportunities for other organisations to mobilise young people in a way not possible before. The internet seems more a symptom than a cause of this.

We should also be aware of resource inequalities inherent in this change in styles of participation. If the trends I have documented continue, political participation will increasingly become the province of the resource rich (those with more education and so on) who are more likely to participate in non-electoral forms of political participation.

In summary, the political engagement/participation marketplace is more crowded and competitive than it was when you had parties as the sole conduits for political activity.

Democracy in the twenty-first century and voter engagement tools

Having established the extent of young people's political participation I now want to turn to broader conceptions of democracy and outline some voter engagement tools I have been involved with as they relate to this.

Democracy in the twenty-first century

There are many different conceptions of what democracy entails in the twenty-first century. There has been a voluminous literature devoted to this topic. The debate feeds into an ongoing argument about what exactly the people's role should be in politics:

> Historically, there has been a widespread suspicion of placing day-to-day
> political decisions in the hands of ordinary citizens, a suspicion that started

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7   Aaron Martin and Juliet Pietsch, 'Future shock or future stability?: Generation change and the Australian party system', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 59, no. 2, June 2013, pp. 212–21.

with Plato and Aristotle and continued with democratic theorists such as John Stuart Mill.[8]

But there exists a sharp tension between these suspicions and the views of those advocating a more participatory form of democracy. Put simply, these views can be divided between the 'bringing the people in' and the 'leaving the people out' positions.

Participatory democracy

Supporters of participatory democracy see the solution to the democratic malaise as making politics more participatory—bridging the gap between politics and the people, the rulers and the ruled. This line of argument contends:

> that democracy cannot be fully realised until citizens express their shared interests as members of a community … participation in the democratic process is seen as vital to the political education of citizens if they are to develop this civic orientation.[9]

There is a long line of thinking in this area dating back, in modern political theory, to Rousseau and Mill. Jean-Jacques Rousseau 'saw individuals as ideally involved in the direct creation of the laws by which their lives are regulated, and he affirmed the notion of an active, involved citizenry'.[10] John Stuart Mill argued that 'by actively participating in the civic life, rather than allowing others to make decisions in their own interest, people learn and grow. In this view, involving the public can make better citizens, better politics, and better governance'.[11]

Modern variants of this argument include that of Benjamin Barber who views modern democracy as 'weak democracy' whereby people have little say in government affairs. This is in contrast to the 'strong democracy' that he endorsed, a democracy that 'reflects the careful and prudent judgment of citizens who participate in deliberative, self-governing communities …'[12]

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[8] Ian McAllister, 'Party elite, voters and political attitudes: Testing three explanations for mass-elite differences', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1991, p. 237.

[9] Paul Webb, Tim Bale and Paul Taggart, 'Understanding democratic disconnect: An agenda for research', Paper presented to the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Annual Conference, University of Nottingham, 8–10 September 2006, p. 9.

[10] David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2006, p. 45.

[11] Norris, op. cit., p. 5.

[12] Benjamin Barber, 'Three scenarios for the future of technology and strong democracy', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 113, no. 4, Winter, 1998–99, p. 585.

These views have evolved into a distinct theory of participatory democracy. Carol Pateman, one of the most important thinkers in developing the notion of participatory democracy, argues that 'participatory democracy fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more active interest in government affairs'.[13]

The views of Pateman and C. B. Macpherson[14] hold that if people know that meaningful channels exist for them to get actively involved then a greater number will. This is not to discount the significant obstacles that may stand in the way of participation. Further, Pateman doubted whether many citizens would be very interested in issues outside of their community or electorate and that the role of the citizen in national politics would always be highly restricted. Theories such as these allow us however to see richer channels for participation than elitists allow. And, support for more participatory democracy has some empirical support and is in line with the views expressed by the Power Report in the United Kingdom.[15] Further, many have argued that from the increase in activism in other non-conventional forms of politics (as discussed in the previous section) we can infer an eagerness to get more involved in conventional politics, if it was seen to be more attractive—a question I will return to.

Elitism

Challenges to participatory democracy have evolved from earlier arguments concerning representative democracy. By the eighteenth century, faced with an increasingly expanded citizenry, representative democracy was seen as a more practical model. 'By ingrafting representation upon democracy', wrote Thomas Paine, a system of government is created that is capable of embracing 'all the various interests and every extent of territory and population'.[16] John Stuart Mill, an enthusiastic advocate of participatory democracy, was very much aware of its shortcomings in a large, modern society and also supported representative democracy. However, the debate amongst advocates of representative democracy has become more fractured. In trying to find a suitable form of government for such a large *polis* as we have today became an issue of contention. Debate has continued up until the present day about the best way to solve this problem.

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[13]   Held, op. cit., p. 212.

[14]   ibid.

[15]   Power Inquiry, *Power to the People: The Report of Power: An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy*, sourced from www.powerinquiry.org/report/documents/ii.pdf (accessed 11 November 2006).

[16]   ibid., p. 94.

Trying to find a model that would fit with modern, complex society Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter 'shared a conception of political life in which there is little scope for democratic participation and individual or collective development'.[17] Schumpeter believed the 'essential role of citizens should be relatively limited, confined principally to the periodic election of parliamentary representatives, along with the continuous scrutiny of government actions'—that would provide a check against the emergence of tyranny.[18] This was in line with concerns expressed at the time that 'excessive' participation might produce the mobilisation of the demos with highly dangerous consequences.[19] According to this formulation of politics, the notion of 'rule by the people' comes into question. Schumpeter certainly did not shy away from this. He wrote: 'democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms "people" and "rule". Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing' the politicians that rule them. 'Democracy is the rule of the politician', he wrote.[20]

Elitists argue that the consequences of political participation by the public are either neutral or negative. According to this view political apathy or disinterest lies not so much with politicians and parties as with 'the widespread failure of ordinary citizens to understand the fundamental nature of politics and citizenship'.[21]

Elitists are deeply sceptical of the public's capacity to be involved in decision-making. They argue that the level of knowledge of the average citizen is dangerously low—a suspicion dating back to early survey research in the 1920s and 1930s which revealed that the majority of citizens were 'not well informed, not deeply involved, not particularly active; and the process by which they come to their voting decision is anything but a process of rational calculation'.[22] In support of these arguments they also cite the separate works of Philip Converse and George Bishop. In his famous experiment Converse found that people, afraid of responding 'I don't know', often answer survey questions referring to non-salient political issues almost randomly—a 'non-decision' as he termed it.[23] Building on this work is Bishop's experiment that found that people voiced opinions on a government statute that never existed as did readers of the *Washington Post* when the paper celebrated the '20th anniversary' of this Act.[24] This research should highlight the extent to which voters can hold

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[17] ibid., p. 125.

[18] Norris, op. cit., p. 5.

[19] Held, op. cit., p. 142.

[20] ibid., p. 145.

[21] Webb, Bale and Taggart, op. cit., p. 239.

[22] Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Sage, Newbury Park, Ca., 1989, p. 338.

[23] James S. Fishkin, 'The nation in a room: Turning public opinion into policy', *Boston Review*, March/April 2006.

[24] ibid.

contradictory and illogical positions and have little capacity for decision-making, argue elitists. Lack of interest in politics therefore may not be a problem but rather seen as favourable.

Further, some find fault with the finding that people have any desire to get more involved in politics. John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse in their book *Stealth Democracy* present a very strong counter to the participatory model of democracy. They find fault with much of the research that shows that while people may be disengaged with conventional politics they hold favourable attitudes towards participatory democracy. They argue that:

> The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making process. Most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would prefer to spend their time in nonpolitical pursuits.[25]

Their study found support for the idea that people want 'Stealth Democracy' that is hidden from view. 'The people as a whole', they say, 'tend to be quite indifferent to policies and therefore not eager to hold government accountable for the policies it produces'.[26]

In regards to the above theories we may ask: what does politics mean to young people in the twenty-first century? In light of the lack of political participation (electoral engagement in particular) that characterises democracy in the twenty-first century this question is especially pertinent. Some have suggested that what is perceived as the current malaise may, in fact, be the default setting for democracy in the twenty-first century.[27] Peter Mair has argued that 'what we now see emerging is a notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component—a notion of democracy without a demos'.[28] The theories relating to participatory democracy and elitism prove fertile ground for exploring questions of importance to this study. Do young people actually want to get more involved in politics?

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[25] John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans Beliefs About How Government Should Work*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 2002, pp. 1–2.

[26] ibid., p. 2.

[27] Webb, Bale and Taggart, op. cit., p. 2.

[28] Peter Mair, 'Democracy beyond parties' (paper posted on the eScholarship Repository, University of California, 2005), http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vs886v9 (accessed 15 November 2006), p. 1.

The Citizens' Agenda

In order to examine these questions, albeit in an indirect way, I would now like to examine a few voter engagement projects I was involved with over the course of the last election to examine whether, when given the choice, people chose to engage or not. We cannot at this stage say a lot about the extent to which young people participated in these voter engagement projects (although we will be able to say more as we analyse the voluminous data collected). These projects do nevertheless allow us to think about the questions above and then relate that back to young people.

The first thing I should say is that the context of the election had an effect on these projects, in good and bad ways. A poll that colleagues and I released on behalf of the Centre for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne highlighted the magnitude of this problem. Majorities said the quality of political leadership, and political debate, was noticeably worse now than it has usually been in the past. Fewer than 10 per cent said it was 'noticeably better'. On top of this only 28 per cent said they had confidence in the federal government!

The first project I will discuss was called the Citizens' Agenda. This was a project that I was involved in with colleagues from the Centre for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne.

It worked thus: we chose 10 electorates in which to conduct a Citizens' Agenda. These seats were chosen on the basis of a range of criteria including marginality, state representation, internet penetration and rural and urban locations.

In these 10 electorates a new social media group called OurSay organised the logistics of voting and the town hall meetings which followed. On the website citizens could either post a question, vote for a question (each registrant had seven votes) and/or then comment on a question. The question with the most votes was then discussed in a 'town hall' meeting which we invited all incumbents and contestants in the particular seat to attend.

Bob Tapscott has said that 'The first era of representative democracy was great … But there was a weak public mandate and an inert citizenry'. He suggested we can now move 'toward a second era now where you have a culture of public deliberation and active citizenship'.[29] The Citizens' Agenda was our attempt to contribute to this.

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[29] Gavin Newsom and Lisa Dickey, *Citizenville: How to Take the Town Square Digital and Reinvent Government*, Penguin Press, New York, 2013, p. 11.

I wrote an opinion piece in *The Age* before the election in which I ended the article saying: 'This is a "world-first" trial and we're excited to be a part of it. But do citizens actually want to be part of this conversation? Over to you'.[30]

Well, what happened? The success, as you may expect, was patchy. In the seat of Melbourne we had 195 questions posted on the OurSay website, 5973 votes and 227 comments. The town hall meeting was attended by over 250 people with the three major candidates contesting that seat attending this event and answering questions. The top question with 697 votes was by Mike Pottenger who asked: 'In 2013, corruption and problems of integrity have been prominent nation-wide. What do you consider to be the most important reform needed in our political system to improve integrity and accountability, and what do you see as the biggest obstacle to that reform?'

Compare this to the electorate of Fowler in the west of Sydney where we had only eight questions, 102 votes and no comments. Only one candidate (from the Australia United Party) agreed to turn up. And the event overall was poorly attended and not something we would call a success.

We are at the very early stages of the data analysis but one thing that has emerged is that the project, in many seats, seems to have engaged the already engaged. Another thing, more specific to the topic of this paper is that, on average, participants at the town hall meetings tended to be older which raises questions about the commitment of young 'clicktivists' to political engagement.

We will be reporting in much more detail on this over the next few years. But for now we can say that when given the opportunity to participate in a 'participatory democracy' activity like this a relatively small amount of people took this up. As mentioned above, the views of Pateman and Macpherson hold that if people know that meaningful channels exist for them to get actively involved then a greater number will. But we could did not see an overwhelming uptake of the Citizens' Agenda. There could have been other reasons for this: we may not have advertised the events well enough or it may have had something to do with the nature of the election. But at this stage we could only label the Citizens' Agenda a moderate success. Widespread 'participatory democracy' it was not and young people on average did not seem more engaged than others in this project.

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[30] *Age* (Melbourne), 13 June 2013, http://www.theage.com.au/comment/having-our-say-in-the-political-conversation-20130612-2o49k.html.

Vote Compass

Compare this to Vote Compass where we had more than 1.3 million people log onto the site and complete the survey.

What is Vote Compass? Vote Compass is an interactive electoral literacy application developed by a global non-profit network of political scientists. Its objective is to promote democratic engagement during election campaigns.

Australia was by no means the first country for Vote Compass to be used. Vote Compass was developed by Canadian political scientists and first launched during the 2011 Canadian federal election campaign in partnership with CBC, the Canadian equivalent of the ABC. It drew nearly two million respondents, making it one of the largest datasets of Canadian public opinion of public policy issues in the country's history. Vote Compass has since been run in two provincial elections in Canada and the last US election.

The premise of the application is relatively straightforward: based on their responses to a series of public policy propositions, users are presented with an analysis of how their views compare with the positions of each of the political parties.

The project is motivated by many of the concerns expressed in this paper. A desire to stimulate voter engagement in election campaigns in particular, but also to spread awareness of the public policy positions adopted by parties, increase accountability of politicians to their platforms, and prompt government to be more responsive to public opinion.

How does it work? Anyone can log onto the website and fill out a questionnaire of 30 questions (which included questions on issues like the economy, health, education and foreign affairs). We arrived at this set of questions after whittling down a list of over 100 questions which we developed over the course of a two-day meeting in Sydney. This was followed by numerous email and Skype correspondence to discuss what questions should be included. We arrived at what we thought were a set of questions that were representative of the most important issues facing Australia.

An example of the questions asked were:

- Australia should end the monarchy and become a republic
- The government's parental leave pay should be the same for all working mothers
- How many new immigrants should Australia admit?

- Australia should spend more on foreign aid
- Students in government and non-government schools should receive the same amount of federal funding
- How much should the federal government do to tackle climate change?
- The national budget deficit should be reduced, even if it means fewer public services
- Private health insurance rebates should depend on income
- The Australian Constitution should recognise Indigenous people as Australia's first inhabitants
- Marriage should only be between a man and a woman
- How much should the government spend on defence?
- Boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back

We then identified 17 broad areas like climate change, gender equality, immigration, budget deficit and defence and then asked respondents to ascribe an importance to issues as we recognised that people do not feel the same way about all issues and some will be more important to some people than others. For example, economic issues may be more important than other issues to many people.

As mentioned previously, based on people's responses to a brief questionnaire, Vote Compass generates an analysis of how the respondent's views compare to the positions of the parties. For various reasons we decided to only include the Coalition, the ALP and the Greens. We placed respondents' answers and the parties' positions on an economic right and left and social liberalism and social conservatism scale.

We then calibrated the parties. Party positions in Vote Compass were determined by way of a two-part process. A research team of political scientists based at the University of Melbourne analysed the available data on party positions vis-à-vis the issues reflected in the questionnaire. Based on this analysis, a determination was made as to how each party would respond to each proposition. The research team then initiated a direct dialogue with each of the parties represented in Vote Compass as an additional check as to the accuracy of its calibrations. All parties were provided with an opportunity to review and, if necessary, challenge the calibrations before Vote Compass was launched.

Voters could engage with this tool as much or as little as they liked. To complete the survey and see the results could take less than 10 minutes but respondents could go deeper into the results and compare themselves to the parties on particular issues or look up the party's position on different issues.

What lessons can we take from this? Clearly Vote Compass tapped into something. My personal view is that it was representative of the tenor of the election in which there was not a lot of substantial policy discussion. Vote Compass provided voters with an easy way to see where the parties stand when this was often obscured in media coverage. It was also novel for many and interactive.

We also did not have a major media partner with the Citizens' Agenda whereas the ABC heavily promoted Vote Compass. The Citizens' Agenda is also obviously more labour intensive in terms of attending a town hall meeting. It required something more than just filling out a survey.

So what does all of this mean for young people? It is actually a little too early to say. Vote Compass was completed more by young people than older people but its success was in engaging the disengaged, to the extent that many people came to Vote Compass from other streams aside from through the ABC site so it did not just engage ABC viewers and listeners.

Conclusion

I have tried in this paper to show how engaged young people are in politics, in terms of their political participation in particular. In terms of electoral engagement the picture is quite bleak. This is concerning. My personal view is that there is no replacement for the aggregating mechanism that electoral politics and voting in particular play, which is why I am very admiring of the work that electoral commissions and politicians do. Electoral politics matters. And it is largely to do with the success of electoral politics, I think, that young people are a little neglectful of it. In terms of non-electoral politics, young people are more engaged. However, there is a real danger of resource inequalities being exacerbated here.

In the second section of the paper I outlined some models of democracy and gave examples of two voter engagement projects I was involved with. These are attempts to 'bring the people in'. In the case of the Citizens' Agenda it has been a moderate success but has been limited in large part to the already engaged and those attending many of the town hall meetings tended to be older rather than younger. Vote Compass, on the other hand, has engaged the disengaged to an extent and, we hope, improved the public's knowledge of the positions of the parties. There was clearly some appetite for this.

But in terms of what democracy means in the twenty-first century and what young people's place in it will be, that remains to be seen. What does seem certain is that different forms of engagement will continue to transmogrify with reverberations being felt around the political landscape.

Question — Your figures about engagement, or lack of engagement, of young people are very contemporary figures. Is this a new phenomenon? Is there any reason to believe that young people are less engaged now than in the past or, alternatively, is the inference one draws from your figures that people become more engaged as they become older?

Aaron Martin — That is an excellent question and it gets to the point that I made about 'have young people always been this way?' and the question of 'is this actually generational effects or is it life cycle effects?' The answer on electoral politics is that this is a generational phenomenon. In other words, young people today are less electorally engaged than were young people 20 or 30 years ago, so there is something different about young people today. On non-electoral participation, the honest answer is that we do not have the data to say because we have not asked these questions over a long period of time. On non-electoral participation, yes, young people are more engaged. Will that continue as they age? We do not know but we will find out. In regards to electoral engagement, I actually have figures in the book that show what is happening over time, but we are not sure in terms of non-electoral participation.

Question — Is it something different about young people today, or is it something different about politics or the political issues?

Aaron Martin — I guess that there is no clear answer to that. You could blame young people and say, 'it's actually young people's fault they are lazy' or you could say 'actually, it's just the rational reaction to the political system which they don't feel is responsive to them'.

Question — Australia has an aging population which is changing its demographics. Is that having an impact on the engagement of the younger population?

Aaron Martin — It could do. I haven't actually looked at that in a lot of detail. I think there will be various challenges in terms of where we allocate resources, because there will be an ageing population that will require certain resources to deal with. But the answer is I do not know whether or not that is having an effect.

Question — I get the impression that the older population has a slightly more conservative bent to the younger population and they are beginning to dominate the

political discussion and that might be causing younger people to become less engaged, because they feel their voice is becoming more marginalised.

Aaron Martin — I could say something in regards to the US, and what happened in 2008 with Barack Obama. It is a different system to Australia but I still think this story is constructive. When Obama was running for the presidency in the primaries in 2007, the conventional wisdom was that young people do not vote in primaries and it is no use in going after them; it is better to actually try and mobilise the base, which is older people. One of the things Obama thought was 'if I just try and mobilise older people I am not going to beat Hillary Clinton for the nomination and John Edwards as well', and the second thing was 'well, that's the conventional wisdom but maybe they can be mobilised'. He was laughed at by people in the Clinton team and others for deciding to go after the young people, because it was considered that young people do not vote. He went after that group, he mobilised their support, he won the nomination, and he won the presidency. I think even though there might be this tendency to just try and mobilise older people there is some advantage in trying to mobilise young people as well.

Question — My question is about Vote Compass and how it didn't have questions about some very important issues that young people would be interested in. For example, the great increase in casual and part-time work, youth unemployment, crippling levels of HECS debt, the decline in apprenticeships in this country, and the housing affordability issue, would be five issues that would resonate with young people and I do not recall seeing them in the Vote Compass repertoire of questions. Was there any youth input into devising Vote Compass?

Aaron Martin — Vote Compass was not designed for young people and in a way it is a slightly uncomfortable fit with the focus of the talk today, which is young people. We designed the tool to represent the issues that we thought were most important in terms of Australians generally and we only had so much space because we didn't want to design a questionnaire that had 100 questions in it. We started off with about 150 questions, which we got down to 30, so I think it is a good point but the tool was really designed for the general population to represent their policy interests rather than just young people's.

Question — I only voted once in the United Kingdom before I left for various other countries and at that time you could not vote until you were 21. Because you could not vote you became more and more anxious to be able to vote. At the time I did vote in the United Kingdom, the two main political parties were very demarked, one from the other. You had a Labour Party which was in favour of nationalisation and which had social security from the cradle to the grave, whereas you had a conservative party

which went back to the policies of before the 1939–45 war. Isn't this one of the problems today, that there is far less demarcation between the main political parties?

Aaron Martin — There is reasonably good evidence that reducing the voting age from 21 to 18 had a deleterious effect on voter turnout. The argument is that you could not have picked a worse year to try and engage young people in their first act of voting than at age 18, because they are finishing high school, trying to get a licence, thinking about university and just generally have other things on their mind. So it is a really terrible year to try and engage young people to be enrolled to vote and then to turn up. There is an argument that 16-year-old voting would be preferable because young people are less distracted by those sorts of things and you could enrol people through their schooling. There could be some truth to the idea that once you have actually got to a point you have been waiting for you might engage more. As to whether the parties are different or not, that is a question which I do not know the clear answer to but I think it is a really interesting empirical question.

Question — You mentioned that earlier generations were more likely to be involved at a younger age. I was wondering if this was due to the very times, such a World War II or the Depression and so on, and whether those older people who got more involved when they were young retained their interest? Have you studied the younger people who have been involved and those who have not been involved? Has there been any criteria such as the suburb they lived in, the school they attended, their apprentice, their services or their profession that they were in and so on?

Aaron Martin — The answer to a few of those questions is 'I don't know'. My book looked at young people in general so I am not sure about what specific groups are doing and I didn't do qualitative interviews, although I will in the future.

But I wanted to pick up on what I think is the most substantial point there, which is that in the past politics had a much more visible effect on people's lives. The two events that you pinpoint, the Depression and both world wars, in both of those cases the State or the political system, was doing a few really crucial things. It was sending you off to war, it was sending your friends off to war, and you saw your friends being killed in war, all as a consequence of decisions made here. It is probably the most serious decision a nation can make, to send young people to war. In the case of the Great Depression, you had enormous levels of unemployment where people were really poor and then you had this state come in and basically engage in programs that got tonnes of people into employment and out of having to beg for food. So in that case, is politics important to your life? Of course it is, it is crucial.

My argument is that politics today is also really crucial and also really important because although we cannot see it, if it was taken away we would find out really quickly. So young people's neglect of electoral politics is in part driven by the success of politics. I think you are absolutely right that in times past that connection was more visible. I think it is very important now to realise what a tremendously large and positive impact politics actually does have on our lives.

Question — Mine is not so much a question as an observation. With my participation with the election in Malaysia, I found that it is not so much the young or the old but it is more the digital divide. What we found was that in the areas where we could reach people via the internet, Twitter and Facebook, most of the people, young and old, would vote for the opposition for change. Yet for the areas that we could not penetrate through digital means, they would vote for the government because the newspaper was completely controlled by the governing party. I do not think that same issue applies in Australia. If it does, I am interested to know.

Aaron Martin — I can just say a few things about that. I do think that the digital divide does play out in Australia and I think we saw that with the Citizens' Agenda in particular and some people were engaged and others not engaged and I think the internet has tremendous potential to mobilise people. My larger concern though is that that just becomes a substitute for more substantive engagement. I think it was 'Groucho' Marx who said 'those who win are those who turn up'. I think that can also be said to relate to electoral politics; you do have to turn up and actually have to leave your computer screen and get engaged to effect real change. So yes, the digital divide does exist, but I think in terms of substantial change a lot of that occurs offline.

Question — With my experience in Malaysia, of what I observed, it did actually bring the highest voters. They do not have compulsory voting and I think last election they managed to get 82 per cent of people coming out and the opposition did get a popular vote, despite the fact that they lost the election to gerrymandering. But the digital power did get people to come out.

Aaron Martin — Maybe I will just end by saying that I made a case before about the importance of politics and Malaysia and other countries which are not established democracies are interesting cases. I was speaking to a group of Iranian dissidents a few years ago and I said 'where does politics happen for you?' Their basic answer was 'it happens everywhere, so when we go to see a sporting game there is politics, when we speak to our friends it is politics'. Part of the genius of politics in a successful democracy like Australia is that it allows politics to happen in one place and for us to get on with our lives without worrying about being coerced to do things by the government in other areas. So we can go to the football and not worry about it

being a political thing. So I think that is worthwhile remembering and actually reminding ourselves that in contrast to countries like Malaysia where you might have high levels of corruption or gerrymandering and in contrast to countries like Iran where politics is everywhere in a really oppressive sort of way that we can actually get on with our lives for the most part and do not actually have to engage in politics so much. That, in part, is due to the success of our political system.