

The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?

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Fears for the health of representative politics in advanced industrial democracies have gained increasing prominence in recent years with observers pointing to a growing body of evidence that citizens are disengaging from formal politics. One of the solutions put forward to address these perceived problems is the incorporation, by politicians, of new communication channels such as the Internet and the WWW. To date, however, attention has focused largely on the supply-side of online engagement by politicians and legislatures rather than on levels of demand and actual use among citizens, with governments frequently being rated on their performance via international league tables. This article aims to provide a 'bottom-up' perspective to the debate in the Australian context, looking at the e-democracy and particularly e-representation debate from the public's perspective. Specifically we address two key questions: how much support do such initiatives attract? And can they bring about the mobilisation of less

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politically engaged groups? Our findings show that while Australians broadly support the roll-out of e-representation tools, current interaction levels are low. Secondly, while they may have the potential to engage some younger people in the political process, widespread mobilisation is unlikely to occur in the near future.

Introduction

Much concern has been voiced about the apparent problems of representative politics in advanced industrial democracies (Dalton, 2004; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Gray and Caul, 2000). Survey evidence has consistently identified an increasingly disconnected citizenry with falling levels of interest, knowledge and trust in both parliamentary institutions and political representatives. This decline in the health of the body politic has given increasing urgency to the perceived need to modernize representative politics and ignite public interest in democratic institutions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the emergence of new media technologies over the past decade, notably the Internet and email, has been seen as one potential solution to the disconnection problem. Across a range of countries, politicians have placed considerable emphasis on new media as means of communicating with the public and reconnecting with their constituents (Åström, 2001; Campbell et al, 1999; Kingham, 2003; Hoff, 2004; Ward and Lusoli, 2005). However, despite this apparent enthusiasm for technology, doubts remains about the ability of new media to engage the public in “old style” politics. Many studies have pointed out that technology alone is unlikely to mobilize people who lack prior knowledge or interest in politics (Norris, 2000a; Ward et al, 2003; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Davis, 1999).

In Australia, debates about democratic disconnection and the discussion of role of new technologies in the democratic arena appear to somewhat more muted than elsewhere. On the first point, some have even argued that Australian representative democracy is actually in comparatively good health (Norris, 2000b; Goot, 2002a). On the ICT front, despite having gained an early reputation for worldwide leadership in the use of new technologies for democratic purposes (Clift, 2002) later empirical research has questioned this prominence arguing that e-government ambitions have failed to produce a

concrete policy initiatives, particularly in terms of measures for citizen engagement (Chen, 2003; Bishop and Anderson, 2004; Ward et al, 2007).

While it is perhaps premature to argue for an inter-connection between these two trends – with lower levels of concern about democratic performance producing a more relaxed approach to the e-democracy agenda – this apparent lack of momentum in government sponsored political communication with voters does prompt questions as to how far Australians themselves actually need, or want, such initiatives. On this question little research has been done either in Australia or elsewhere to examine how citizens view the situation and what they want (Coleman and Spiller, 2003). Much of the research informing the debate has proceeded from a top-down perspective, focussing largely on elite initiatives

This article seeks to address this gap by examining the Australian public's use of, and attitude towards, new ICTs for communication and engagement with their elected representatives. It does so with two specific research questions in mind: (1) to what extent do Australians actually favour the harnessing of the representative system to Internet technologies – is there a demand for such an agenda? And (2) how far do such initiatives hold out the prospect for mobilisation of citizens by allowing MPs to reach out to new audiences online and/or re-connect to existing ones? In answering these questions the goal is to shed some light on the broader debates about democratic performance and the role of new ICTs highlighted above. In particular, we hope to add some new 'bottom-up' empirical data to address the issue of the apparently arrested development of e-democracy agenda in Australia.

Disconnected Citizens and Representation in Crisis?

To understand the growing interest in the Internet as a mechanism for reviving democratic politics one first needs to review some of the wider debates about the current health of representative democracies. An increasingly common theme has been the idea of a malaise in representative politics in many advanced democracies. Although the idea of a crisis in representative democracy is not a new one, such debates have assumed increased urgency in recent years. One central concern is the notion of an increasing gulf between citizens, their representatives and their governing institutions (Curtice and

Jowell, 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001; Klingemann, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). This disconnection thesis is often based on evidence of a number of interrelated symptoms:

- Declining citizen knowledge and interest in representative politics
- Declining levels of trust in politicians and representative institutions
- Declining levels of efficacy amongst citizens – The public's belief that they can influence government is falling.
- Declining levels of public identification and engagement with representative institutions notably through electoral engagement or political activity through mainstream organisations such as political parties. This in turn then erodes the overall legitimacy of representative institutions.
- Increasing participation divides – The problems of connection are exacerbated in areas of social deprivation and inequality. Hence, trust, knowledge and engagement are falling most amongst the poorest. Additionally, many of these problems are more acute amongst younger people raising fears of a generational switch-off from mainstream politics.

Australian exceptionalism?

Despite the prevalence of this disconnection thesis in many liberal democracies, in Australia, the debate has been less pronounced and some have argued that the problems are less acute than in other comparable democracies. Norris (2000b), for example, comments that comparably 'the checklist for Australian democracy looks remarkably robust and healthy'. Similarly, Goot concludes his defence of the state of Australian democracy by arguing the idea that there 'has been a serious erosion of public confidence in the democratic and representative institutions built into the framework of society is difficult to sustain (2002b: 34). Such an argument is echoed in research compiled for *Australian Social Attitudes Report* which challenges the idea of a crisis of trust among Australians toward their governing institutions, with corporations showing some of the biggest declines in public confidence (Bean, 2005). Other scholars in the volume draw attention to more behavioural measures of democratic health, pointing to the very high rates of voluntary group and association membership in Australia, and its clear link to

higher rates of political participation more generally (Passey and Lyons, 2005). Despite such confidence, critics and, notably, politicians themselves have raised significant concerns about the health of Australian representative democracy echoing the debates in other liberal democracies. MP Carmen Lawrence (2003) has described Australia as a withering democracy where ‘the fundamentals of the democratic contract have been corrupted’.

If we look more closely at the empirical evidence relating to the measures of knowledge, interest, trust and engagement the Australian picture is somewhat mixed. In terms of awareness, Australians factual political knowledge about representative institutions appears to be relatively high (McAllister, 2002). Although, around 70 per cent of Australians can correctly give the name of their MP and 61 per cent know which party is in charge of the federal government (McAllister, 2002), a significantly higher number than in than many other liberal democracies. Political interest also appears to be relatively high and even appears to have grown considerably between the 1960s and today, following the expansion of tertiary education (McAllister, 2002: 2). Certainly, it has remained at least stable since 1984 (Goot, 2002a).

On the more specific indicators of public confidence and trust, however, there is evidence that significant deficits exist (Walsh 1995). Australian Electoral Study data for 2004 reveals that more than half of the public believes (agrees or strongly agrees) that ‘politicians commonly rot the system’.² Lewis argues that between 1976 and 2000 there was a significant drop in the faith Australians place in their rulers’ ethical conduct. While in 1976 about one in five thought that federal and State politicians were ‘highly’ honest, only one in ten was as sanguine by 2000 (Lewis, 2002: 132). Nevertheless, overall long-term trends of support for the democratic system as a whole have remained fairly constant over time (Papadakis, 1999; Bean, 2005).

Often the catalyst for debates surrounding the notion of representative crisis in many countries has been declining electoral turnout and in some cases dramatic falls in electoral participation. This has also been associated with worries about the health of political parties, with significant falls in membership and activism (McAllister, 2002).

² Source: AES 2004, QC14; data is available for academic use from ESSDA through NESSTAR.

Yet, in Australia, the level of concern about engagement is arguably diminished by the use of compulsory voting that ensures that turnout remains high whatever the underlying attitudes towards parties and politicians amongst the public. Arguably, compulsory voting may simply be masking underlying problems that are comparable to other democracies. For example, research conducted for the Australian Democratic Audit reveals that a significant minority of young people are failing to register to vote and that if compulsory voting was not in place many would simply not bother (Edwards et al, 2005). Moreover, underlying attitudes of contempt towards institutional politics and politicians from young voters are in line with many other democracies.

Overall, therefore, it appears that the case for disconnection and crisis in the Australian context is not as clear-cut as elsewhere. Comparatively, Australia appears to score relatively well on various key attitudinal and behavioural measures of democratic support. Nonetheless, whilst Australian parliamentary democracy may not be compromised, there are signs of a lack of faith among significant portions of the public in the honesty and integrity of their political leaders and governing bodies (Lewis, 2002). The question for this article is whether new ICTs offer any realistic prospect for these structures to strengthen and re-vitalise their connection to the body politic?

(Re)-connecting the Public via ICTs

Given how concerns about democratic institutions and representative politics and the emergence of the Internet have coincided it is perhaps not surprising that the new media have been seen as a means of helping governments' reconnect with the public. It has been suggested that the Internet could assist this process in several respects:

- Increasing service efficiency and delivery –The longstanding hope of many ICT advocates was that through e-government initiatives one could produce efficiency gains, financial savings and increase availability and choice to the public (Dunleavy et al, this volume). Moreover, if the service relationship could be improved through ICTs then there were likely to be broader democratic benefits through increasing citizen satisfaction with government (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Mechling, 2002).

- Increasing transparency and information – In a hostile media environment, one of the apparent attractions of ICTs for representatives and governing institutions is the ability to communicate directly with their citizens. Additionally, the storage capacity of the Internet theoretically means that it possible to provide citizens with access to greater amounts of information about institutions, policies and processes than previously. The combined ability to communicate directly and the provision of much greater levels information could enhance transparency and produce an informed citizenry with a greater capacity to participate in the representative process (Bimber, 2003).
- Increasing networking and linkages – One of the benefits of ICTs is the ability to communicate with large numbers of people across time and geographic boundaries. It also makes it easier to identify other individuals with common political interests and thereby creating links and networks online. At the local level, one might be able to foster social capital producing greater degrees of community interest, trust and activity (Rheingold, 1993; Best and Krueger, 2006).
- Increasing and strengthening the channels for engagement – ICTs also open up the possibility of both modernising old engagement methods e.g. introducing e-voting for example, as well as creating new opportunities for political engagement through online consultation and discussion techniques. Online consultation is, arguably, a relatively low cost mechanism for democratic institutions to open up the political process and target previously ignored or difficult to reach groups in society. A common complaint from voters is that in between elections there are few mechanisms allowing one to engage in dialogue with representatives and representative institutions. The interactive elements of new technologies offer the possibility of creating what Coleman (2005) has referred to as *conversational democracy*.

None of these ideas has gone unchallenged with sceptics arguing that this kind of techno-optimism is unlikely to deliver much more than short term boosts to democracy. Three types of criticism are commonly voiced: Firstly, even if we accept that ICTs produce efficiency gains, it will not necessarily produce any longer term deeper benefits.

Indeed, observers have warned of the threat that new ICTs may pose to our democratic health by enhancing citizen passivity as we move toward a push-button culture of democracy (van de Hoven, 2005). Others have worried about the prospects for civic harmony and social capital as individuals are able to opt into more specialist information and discussion environments eschewing the broader public sphere (Sunstein, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Secondly, technologically deterministic approaches do not take account of underlying social and political attitudes or values. Simply providing more channels or gadgets with which to connect will not necessarily motivate people to use them. Thirdly, ICTs might actually make some things worse. Most noticeably, ICTs might increase social and political divides and far from lowering the cost of participation, use of technology could raise the bar. In Australia, there are still significant disparities in access to Internet technology. While biases in gender and region appear to be receding, the influence of higher occupational status, income and education on access all remain relatively strong (Willis and Tranter, 2006).

ICTs in the Australian political sphere? Leader or laggard?

The Australian political sphere's adaptation to the Internet era has received mixed reviews. Some have suggested that the peculiarities of Australian geography might make democratic institutions receptive to the use of new technologies to overcome the so-called tyranny of distance (Capling and Nossal, 2001). Initially, at least some of these expectations appeared to be borne out. The Australian government received enthusiastic praise for its e-government initiatives in particular. For example, leading e-democracy advocate Steven Clift (2002) lauded the efforts of the Australian state arguing that Australia, along with New Zealand were leading the way in the Asia Pacific region and even globally with its clear support for ICT enabled government. The establishment of the National Office of the Information Economy (NOIE) in 1997 along with Prime Minister John Howard's stated commitment to ensuring all appropriate government services would be online by 2001 clearly marked the federal government out as a prime mover on the e-government front. What excited Clift, however, was the emergence of an e-democracy agenda within NOIE's remit and early talk of the need for online consultation and citizen engagement.

These federal initiatives were followed by even more sophisticated plans at the state level to utilise the Internet for participatory purposes. Initiatives from a number of states, but most notably Queensland, attracted considerable international attention. The Queensland government set up an e-democracy agenda and series of e-enabled policy initiatives – including an experimental community e-consultation programme, e-policy forums for citizen-government discussion along with the use of the Internet to sign and lodge e-petitions to the Queensland Parliament and the provision, of audio broadcast of parliamentary proceedings via the Internet (Hogan et al. 2004). Similarly, in 2004, the Victorian Parliament launched an official wide ranging ‘Inquiry into Electronic Democracy’ (Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee 2005: v). Although the report did not go as far as to recommend the setting-up of a direct e-democracy initiative, it strongly exhorted the parliament to embrace the Internet for interaction, consultation and the dissemination of information. It also recommended the establishment of an electronic democracy co-ordinating body in charge of the strategic and day-to-day implementation of e-democratic practice.

Early research on the Federal Parliament also engendered cautious optimism notably highlighting the parliament’s adoption of several pioneering schemes to enhance transparency and accessibility including e-petitions in the senate, the provision of websites and email to all representatives (Magarey, 1999). Underpinning this there was also apparent early enthusiasm from the politicians with a number of MPs suggesting that legislators could make effective use of ICTs to reconnect with Australian citizens (Bishop 2002; Lundy 2002).³

However, some of this early optimism has been questioned by subsequent research that has challenged the perception of Australia as a global leader in the area of e-government/e-democracy. Studies by both Chen (2002) and Ward et al (2007) suggest that Australian federal legislators, for example, have been comparatively less active in

³ Kate Lundy noted: ‘While the current debate circulates around the value of the technologies themselves and their merits in a participatory democracy, broader issues regarding the nature, scope and use of an online environment and its accessibility must receive the attention they deserve. Only then can we create a political culture that will truly embrace the concept of an Australian cyber democracy’. Mark Latham, Lindsay Tanner and Carmen Lawrence voiced similar concerns.

their use of ICTs to increase openness, transparency, accountability and interactivity, whilst the Parliament as an institution has given little strategic attention to the role of ICTs in reconnecting with the public. It has been argued that, at the federal level, the narrower issues of e-government and the electronic delivery of citizen services have dominated legislators' agenda (Dugdale et al. 2005; Geiselhart 2001), seemingly, to the detriment of the e-democracy perspective (Bishop and Anderson, 2004).

Similar criticisms have also been levelled at other Australian political actors. For instance, Australian parties have been seen as being relatively slow to adopt ICTs creatively and have largely used ICTs to conduct a business as usual approach (Gibson and Ward, 2003).

Outside the traditional institutions, however, some research indicates that citizen groups, NSMs and protest networks in Australia have been active in using new technologies creatively. Several studies have emphasised the increasing importance of email, mobile phones and the World Wide Web in mobilising and organising protest particularly in the areas of environment, anti-globalisation and asylum issues (Capling and Nossal, 200; Meikle, 2002; Pickerill 2004;).

Overall, however, academic study of the use of technologies in the Australian democratic context has tended to focus on elite level initiatives. Although there has been a received wisdom that Australians are enthusiastic adopters of technologies (Goggin, 2005), outside general statistics on uptake of, and access to, the Internet, relatively little is known about the Australian public online in terms of the representative nexus.

Australian Citizens and Online Communication

Having examined the ways in which representatives and the representative process in Australia are currently using new ICTs, and the range of possibilities yet to be explored, we turn now to the empirical evidence regarding citizen attitudes' to the technology. How much demand actually exists and who is utilising and/or demanding such services?

Two questions of substantive interest are investigated specifically in this analysis: (1) The first being the extent to which government and parliamentary initiatives and public opinion are in step with each other. While it may be the case that representatives are proving relatively slow to roll-out ICT-enabled opportunities for online

communication, this may be not necessarily due to an inherent reluctance or inertia but based on perceptions of the lack of any clear demand for such innovations. Voters may already see that they have enough opportunities to influence the political process and regard development of online capabilities as a useful but not necessarily ‘must-have’ feature of a modern democracy. Looking at levels of public support for, and usage of, existing and prospective online governmental and parliamentary services can help us to judge if Australian representative structures are struggling to maintain their leading position worldwide? Perhaps these judgements of under-performance are arrived at through application of a technologically-determined global yardstick that is essentially divorced from local context? Judged within, and by, its own national standards, Australia’s institutional performance on the ‘e’ stakes may in fact prove to be quite satisfactory?

(2) The second major question to be examined is how wide the range of individuals displaying interest in, and engagement with, online representation is. Recent studies of e-participation have revealed signs of interest in online politics among some unlikely groups – the young and those from lower socioeconomic grades (Gibson et al, 2005; Krueger, 2004; Owen, 2006). Whether these findings about e-participation more generally translate into the narrower and more formal arena of representative government, however, is an important question. Activities such as searching for online political news or contacting a political organisation to volunteer help or opinions may have an appeal to those outside of the mainstream, while engagement with more institutionalised forms of politics via representatives and parliaments may see a preponderance of the better resourced and educated middle classes.

Data and Analysis

To address these questions we examine responses to a specially commissioned national opinion survey in May 2005, with the assistance of the Survey Research Centre.⁴ The

⁴ The ‘Internet and Parliamentarians Survey’ was a self-contained study commissioned by the authors to the SRC, a market research institute based in Melbourne. Telephone interviews were conducted in Australia with 1200 adults aged 18+ between 2-15 May 2005; 7000 respondents were selected through a state-

survey polled 1,200 Australians regarding their current usage of and attitude toward new ICTs in general, and toward the governing and parliamentary process more specifically. Questions were asked about Australians' levels of political knowledge and experience in contacting their MP through a number of different channels, including the Internet. The types of online government services and political websites individuals had used were established, as well as the types of e-democracy and e-government facilities and opportunities that respondents would like to see in the future. Additionally, we profile responses to these items according to standard demographic factors.⁵ Baseline results from the survey are reported in the finding section, below, under two headings: 'The Online Audience' and 'Perceptions and use of e-Representation tools'.

We then report the results from a multivariate analysis of who is using and/or most interested in using new technologies to communicate with politicians. We specify four levels of engagement in online representation – from attitudinal to behavioural – and examine them as dependent variables in logistic regression models. Our goal is to establish how far traditional predictors of political engagement increase the likelihood of involvement at each level, and whether and how these predictors vary across levels of online engagement. The predictors examined are: individuals' levels of political knowledge, specifically in terms of representation; use of the Internet, access to broadband and use of political websites; extent of engagement in offline or traditional forms of participation. In addition, we controlled for a range of socio-demographic resources including age, gender, education, social class and residence that have been linked to Internet access and rates of conventional political participation. Procedurally, the independent variables were entered together and then removed in a backwards manner as their significance levels and the overall difference in alternative models' significance decreased below commonly accepted levels. The final models reported below were those that maximised overall goodness of model fit and individual variable fitness at predicting online representation. Tests for multi-collinearity and interaction effects between the remaining variables were run. These highlighted significant

stratified sample of phone books where the Federal Electoral Seat could be identified; respondents were then randomly selected within households and not replaced.

⁵ For full questionnaire see www.i-pol.org or contact w.lusoli@chester.ac.uk.

correlations between Internet use, frequency of use, length of use and home access to broadband. Length of Internet use was chosen for inclusion due its higher contribution to model fit as compared to other indicators. Interaction effects not contributing to overall model fit were found between education and social class, between education and political engagement, and between social class and political engagement. Where significant, these variables were entered independently. No unexpected interactions were detected.

Findings

The Online Audience

Overall our findings show that the potential audience for online politics in Australia is high, with just under 70 per cent of respondents reporting use of the Internet. In addition, most users are relatively well experienced. As Table 1 shows many have been online for five years or more (47 per cent) and an additional 36 per cent for between three to five years. Only a very small minority have online experience of less than one year (six per cent). When online, most people tend to spend around four hours per week or more using the Internet. While some of this may be work-related, home usage is high, with 70 per cent of respondents having an Internet connection in their home, half of whom have broadband. Based on these initial findings, therefore, it appears that Australians are generally well equipped to take on the challenges of e-democracy.

Table 1 about here

If we probe these figures a little deeper, however, it becomes apparent that some Australians are better able than others to engage with new ICTs. As the lower part of Table 1 shows, while the gender gap has largely eroded as a determinant of Internet use, age still exerts a strong effect. There is a clear predominance of younger people online. While just under half of the sample overall are aged 45 years or less, approximately two-thirds of the online population belong to this age bracket. Education remains a relevant predictor of Internet use, with tertiary educated individuals moderately over-represented among the online population.⁶ Occupationally, Internet users are not necessarily drawn

⁶ While the numbers of those with access across all categories of education has risen since the AES first collected data on access, the gap between the better and less well educated has remained. The 1998

from higher-status professions; indeed, there is a slightly higher preponderance of lower grade white-collar workers (clerical, sales, service staff) than we find in the sample as a whole. In terms of geographical distribution, while Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales have above average proportions of their population online, Queensland, Western Australia and particularly the Northern Territory report lower than average levels of use.

Based on these descriptive statistics, therefore, it would appear that the Australian Internet-using population constitutes a large and relatively diverse group of people, most of whom have a significant amount of experience of the medium. Thus, while certain groups are better placed to take advantage of a new ICT connection to their representatives, in general we would expect such developments to have a fairly widespread appeal.

Perceptions and use of e-Representation tools

In this section we assess individuals' interest in, and practical engagement with, various forms of government and parliamentary online initiatives. We examine the extent to which people had actually visited a range of institutions' and political organisations' websites and the way in which they use new media to keep in touch with their MPs – or otherwise. Table 2 reports the proportions of respondents (with Internet access) that had visited a range of key political websites in the year preceding the survey. The findings show that while major news organisations and Australian newspapers top the bill (over one third of users have visited such a site), national and local government sites are most popular amongst political institutions, with almost half of Internet users claiming to have visited one in the previous twelve months. The numbers visiting parliamentary or individual MPs' websites is considerably lower, with only around one in ten reporting having viewed them.

Table 2 about here

Australian Election Study for instance shows that 57 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree and 52 per cent of those with a bachelors degree reported access, only 20 per cent of those with no qualifications did so. By 2004 while the proportion of those with no qualifications reporting access had grown to 51 per cent, among those with University experience it was virtually nil (two per cent).

Despite these low levels of interest, the appeal of using ICTs to contact an MP appears to be quite high. When asked about preferred methods to get in touch with their MP, email attracted over one third (36 per cent) of respondents, only one just behind personal visits (37 per cent). Letters and phone calls are still the most popular methods, however, with 48 per cent and 72 per cent of respondents respectively citing them as ways they would contact their MP. Actual use of email to contact one's MP, however, is much lower. Among the 13 per cent of the sample who reported having contacted their MP in the last three years, only eight per cent had used email, with most people opting for regular 'snail' mail (37 per cent). Follow-up questions to establish why people were not choosing email to contact their MP indicated that lack of access was a problem (28 per cent), although a similar proportion cited a preference for postal or phone communication (23 per cent) and actual face to face contact with their MP (22 per cent).

Having provided some insights into levels of take-up of e-services in Australia, we also sought to understand citizens' attitudes toward a range of more ambitious schemes including: being able to comment online on legislation being passed in Parliament; participating in online government polls on policy matters; accessing government services online; using Internet voting in federal elections; and contributing to online government discussion forums. Internet voting attracted the lowest level of support, with only 45 per cent of those polled saying they would like to see it happen. Other initiatives were all supported by a majority of respondents. Online polls and online discussions both held an appeal for 57 per cent of the sample. Most popular, however, were opportunities to comment on legislation via email (74 per cent) and having online access to all government services (76 per cent).

To return to our first question, therefore, our survey evidence suggests that Australian political leaders may not be too far out of step with what their electorates demand in terms of online communication opportunities. Australians tend to make most use of executive branch websites and the take-up of channels to interact with representatives are minimal. That said, however, Australians are also interested in opportunities to offer more direct input into the policy process. The survey findings showed a large groundswell of support for new ICTs being used to add citizens' voices to their legislators' deliberations. Of course, it may be the case that our research has

discovered a divide between ‘preferers’ and ‘doers’ when it comes to new ICTs and the representative process. The former constituting a larger group that are more content to simply express interest in the new technology to communicate with their representatives and the latter being a small core of devotees who are prepared to practically engage with new ICTs for such purposes. This observation leads us into analysis of our second research question which focuses on the characteristics of those who are positively oriented (behaviourally and attitudinally) toward the use of new ICTs in the representative arena.

Our principal interest here is in establishing how wide the constituency is for online representation? Does it really offer a channel for MPs to connect with a wider and more diverse electorate by offering additional digital opportunities? Do such opportunities offer a chance for mobilising new faces in the political arena or do we see the usual suspects (the more educated, affluent and already engaged)? Perhaps it depends on the extent of activity called for. Those displaying a positive inclination toward using new ICTs in the representative process but stopping short of engaging currently in its direct application may constitute a wider and more diverse pool of potential participants, compared to the more active early adopters who are already engaging in online communication with governing bodies?

Modelling orientations toward e-representation

To examine these questions we first divided our sample into four sets, according to citizens’ propensity to engage online with their representatives, ranging from purely attitudinal to behavioural.

- Set 1. Respondents who would like to see all MPs with a website
- Set 2. Respondents who would consider using email and website to contact their MP.
- Set 3. Respondents whose preferred mode of contact with their MP is through email and the website.
- Set 4. Respondents who actually made contact with their MP through their website and/or email.

In the first set, respondents have generally positive attitudes towards MPs' offers of interaction via email and websites. In the second set, respondents report an overall propensity to use the Internet, among other media, to get in touch with MPs. In the third set, citizens have a definite propensity to use the Internet as a first-resort medium through which to carry out transactions with representatives. Finally, in the fourth set, respondents made contact with their MP using the Internet.

Table 3 and Figure 1 about here

From the figures reported in Table 3 and summarised in Figure 1 it is immediately evident that the four sets include an increasingly narrower range of respondents, who engage in increasingly direct and active forms of online representation.. On the one hand, the four sets largely overlap, with people holding positive attitudes also having positive propensity to use MPs emails and websites (79 per cent), and finally being engaged in actual online contacting behaviour (86 per cent). Although sets 2 and 3 are nested by design, the second being a subset of the first, the degree of overlap is significant. Overall, this suggests that it is increasingly smaller subsets of respondents that are engaged in the more demanding activities. However, there are also two clear areas of incongruence between attitudes and behaviours, as attitudes and behaviours are not nested concentrically (as the model in Figure 1 would predict). Firstly, neither set 2 nor set 3 are perfectly inside set 1. This means that there are some respondents who do not think that MPs should have a website, but, nonetheless, choose email and website as the medium of choice (respectively 21 per cent and 28 per cent of sets 2 and 3). Secondly, despite the fact that most of the 'doers' of set 4 see email as a tool of first resort to contact their MP (61 per cent) some have a more neutral attitude (14 per cent) and some are even doubtful about its value as a communication tool in this regard (16 per cent). Overall, therefore, although there appears to be a high level of reinforcement and complementarity in individuals levels of engagement with e-representation initiatives. It is not entirely axiomatic that displaying an interest in online communication with one's MP goes hand in hand with a commitment to behavioural engagement in such activities and vice versa.

To explore this proposition more systematically we compared the socio-demographic profiles and politically relevant attitudes and behaviours of the individuals at each of the four levels of e-representation propensity identified above. The key

question asked was whether these groups are divided essentially by the level of resources they possess such that those displaying the highest level of commitment to e-representation (i.e. the ‘doers’) simply have more of a certain type of resources than the rest? Or, is it more that different types of resources are relevant for different groups? Perhaps more traditional resources such as education and political knowledge prove more relevant to more direct engagement whereas Internet familiarity and online experience stimulate overall levels of interest and preference.

Findings from the multivariate analysis

The results for each of the models are reported in table 3. In the discussion we consider the findings for each model individually and then examine them cumulatively. Only variables significant at $p \leq 0.1$ are reported. Where a variable is not included (for instance gender) this means that it is not significant either at zero order or when controlling for other variables.

Model 1: The poor fit of model 1 to the data together with the lack of any ‘stand-out’ predictors of positive attitudes suggest a diffuse coalition of people are supportive of virtual representation. In general, those who display an engagement in politics (discuss politics, signed a petition), and who are satisfied with the work of their MP and can correctly name their MP’s party are among the most likely to support their representatives online engagement. Those who visit political websites are also more likely to call for MPs to have websites (an increase of two per cent in the probability of support). Somewhat surprisingly, however, individuals’ level of Internet use is not significant in predicting an interest in online representatives. Young people are also not necessarily more likely to hold supportive attitudes to this aspect of e-democracy, although older citizens, (+65 years) are significantly less inclined to regard MPs having a website as important. Overall, therefore, the findings suggest that a positive orientation toward online MPs is largely a reflection of a positive view and engagement with the representative process as a whole and a general familiarity with the online political environment.

Model 2: The findings from our second model, predicting the propensity of citizens to use email and the web to contact MPs, tell a somewhat more interesting story.

Firstly, young people (18-34 years olds) are more inclined to using online media to actually get in touch with MPs. Indeed, they are, on average, 13 per cent more likely to consider contacting their MP online. Older people, however, are distinctly less sanguine about direct online contact, those over 65 being around 10 per cent less likely to want to contact their MP via email or the Web. This finding indicates that the digital divide within online politics based around age is certainly alive and kicking, particularly when it comes to the more specific question of using the technology to communicate with political elites. As well as indicating that older citizens may be shut out of these new channels of influence, such findings of course also point to the possibility that the Internet may be able to mobilise new constituencies, who were previously less connected to the representative circuit. In addition, while levels of existing political involvement recede in importance, Internet use becomes highly relevant. Although different lengths of use predict different probabilities, overall long-term users are almost twice as likely as non-users to say they would utilise new ICT channels to communicate with their elected representatives. Taken in conjunction with Model 1 findings, such results indicate that while most people would generally think it a good thing for MPs to be online, those that would actually seek to exploit the new possibilities for access are younger, technologically literate but not necessarily highly politically active individuals. Some level of political interest is important, however, as having a history of viewing political websites is strongly linked to one's inclination to utilise online representation channels. Having visited a political website increases an individuals' propensity to contact MPs via email and web by approximately six per cent.

Model 3: The results for the third model very much echo those of Model 2. Younger, experienced Internet users with some interest in online politics (but not offline necessarily) are most inclined to see email and Web contact as the preferred way to get in touch with their MPs. Table 4 shows that young adults (aged 25-34) are almost twice as likely as other citizens to report a first preference for online communications. Length of Internet use assumes an even greater value here than in the previous model, with people who have been on the Internet for more than six years being twice as likely as non Internet users to chose it as a preferred contact mode, and 1.5 times more likely that those who have been online for up to two years.

Model 4: In this model we examined the traits of those who have actually initiated communication with their representative, either through their website or by email. What we note immediately from Table 4 is the lack of significance of age and Internet experience variables, which proved very strong predictors of the preference for using these means of contact. Instead, what we find is that those making the move to engage in online contact are people who can name their MP, have contacted him/her in the past and are making heavy use of the Internet. Significantly, however, they are not necessarily more politically involved or engaged in wider forms of politics, nor are they better resourced in terms of education. As such, these findings suggest that online contacting when viewed behaviourally is not attracting a wider range of previously unmobilised citizens, although neither is it necessarily appealing only the highly active citizen. Those choosing to email their MP appear to be doing so on strategic or opportunistic grounds. Having already contacted their MP in the past they are opting for a new, quick and convenient way of continuing the conversation.

Taking the results from our four models together it is evident that in answer to our original question about who is taking part in e-representative politics, a rather mixed picture emerges. The models consistently challenge the importance of traditional socio-demographic resources in predicting engagement with online representatives. In particular, an escalation in the commitment to online engagement in the representative process does not appear to rely on any corresponding rise in education or offline political experience. Essentially, a basic interest in the idea of MPs having a web presence and being reachable via the Internet attracts a fairly wide group of politically engaged individuals (with the notable exception of older citizens). More specific expressions of support for the Internet as preferred channel of communication, however, tend to be advanced by younger, technologically literate but politically inexperienced citizens. Taking the next step and actually engaging in online contact with one's representative however, does see political experience return to the fore, especially one's knowledge of the system and a past history of contacting.

Extending these findings to the bigger question of whether e-representation can widen the current scope of participation we are left with a somewhat ambivalent set of conclusions. Overall, the lack of importance of education, class, and gender in predicting

these any of these forms of engagement with e-representation certainly suggests that the pool of potential and actual participants for this mode of engagement is wider than has typically been seen for more active forms of offline participation. However, the factors that emerge as relevant do not necessarily point toward more democratic outcomes. In particular, Models 2 and 3 suggest that a declared preference for online contact with an elected representative is driven largely by simply being young and familiar with the technology rather than by any more expressly political motives. Model 4 findings are perhaps even more cautionary in that although the level of Internet experience not necessarily decisive, heavy use of the medium along with knowing one's MP and having a track record for contacting him/her does significantly raise the likelihood that one take-up the online option.

Conclusion

In general, therefore, we can conclude from these data that online contacting in Australia is not currently leading to any significant reconnection or even possibly deepening of existing connections citizens have to their representatives and representative institutions. Contacting one's MP online is largely a result of having done so already and being a high user of the Internet. Broadening the focus a bit further, however, to those who are attitudinally disposed toward the practice if not behaviourally engaged, a somewhat more positive story emerges. Here we found mostly younger citizens who are not highly politically mobilised in other respects. While youth engagement in online contacting of an MP may stem more from interest in trying out new types of activities online, if such opportunities lead them into a more direct and closer interaction with the political system than they would ordinarily experience, then they may end up helping to widen participation in the democratic process. However, the numbers for whom this conversion may occur are not known and based on the numbers present in our sample we would not necessarily expect them to be large group.

Returning to our two broad research questions, therefore, it would appear that the any apparent slowdown in the Australian government's approach to e-democracy has not chafed against popular expectations. While there is support among the public for seeing more of their MPs use the Internet it does not appear to be an area of government where

immediate action is required. Most people are content to use other means than Internet-based communications to correspond with their elected representatives. Should the government decide to embark on any modernising agenda of the e-democratic kind, however, these findings do indicate a number of concerns that might be borne in mind. Based on the profiles we have developed to describe the groups most likely to be involved in the uptake of such initiatives, it is clear that while they provide opportunities to catch the attention of younger less politically aware citizens, they will very likely bypass a significant minority of older citizens entirely. In addition, translating those levels of interest in online communication with MPs into more practical engagement may require some kind of educational or interventionist strategies to be developed given that it is largely those with a track record in contacting their representatives that appear willing and able to do so in the online environment.

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Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of Internet users in Australia, 2005

Characteristic	%	
	n = 815	
<u>Internet use [intensity]</u>	Up to 1 hour per week	19
	1-3 hours per week	23
	4+ hours per week	58
<u>Internet use [length]</u>	Up to 6 months	3
	About 1 year	3
	1-2 years	11
	3-5 years	36
	6-10 years	37
	10+ years	10
<u>Gender</u>	Female	48
	Male	52
<u>Age</u>	18-24 years old	18
	25-34	23
	35-44	24
	45-54	18
	55-64	10
	65+	7
<u>Leaving education</u>	Up to Year 10 / 4th Form/ Intermediate	20
	Finished technical school / TAFE	13
	VCE / HSC or Matriculation / Year 12	17
	Some Uni - College of Advanced Education	9
	Tertiary Degree/s	41
	Don't know / can't say / refused	1
<u>Student</u>		11
<u>Social grade</u>	AB	48
	C1	27
	C2	11
	DE	13

Source: SRC 'Internet and Parliamentarians Survey' May 2005

Note: % are calculated within categories, decimals have been rounded up. Student % is calculated as a proportion of the overall Internet user population.

Q6 Just to clarify your Internet use: Do you use the Internet at all these days?

Q6A How long have you been using the Internet?

Q15 And what is the highest level of education you have completed?

Q15B Are you studying full-time now?

Q12 Could you tell me please what sort of work the main income earner in your household does?

Table 2. Political websites visited in the last 12 months, 2005

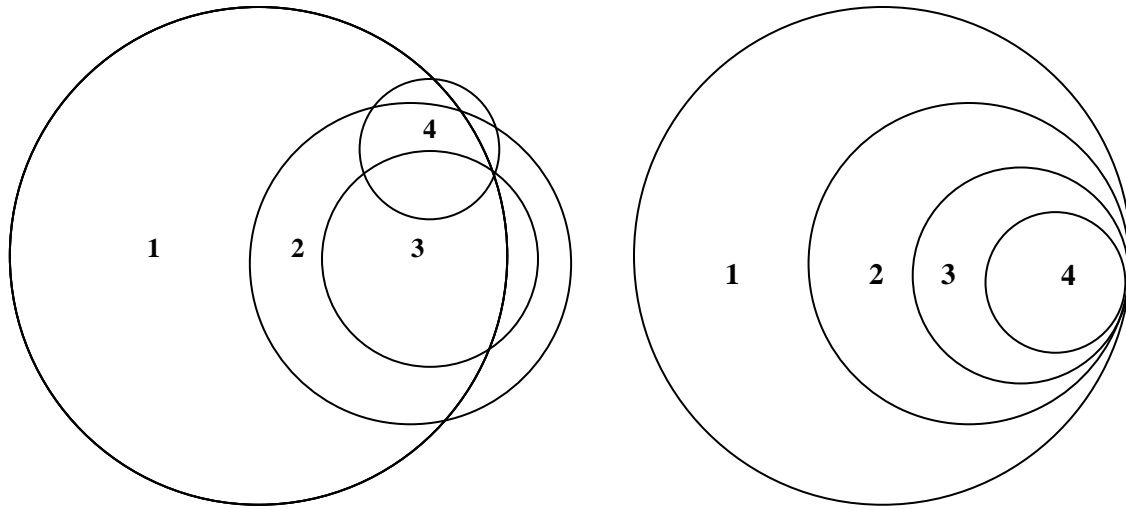
	% of Internet users n = 835
News for current affairs	71
Government / departments	47
Local councils	40
NGO / political groups	25
Parliament	14
Regional / national assemblies	13
Parties	9
MPs	9
None	17

Source: SRC 'Internet and Parliamentarians Survey' May 2005
Qu. Which, if any, of the following websites have you visited in the last 12 months?

Table 3. Levels of engagement with e-representation – Set overlaps

	<i>Would like to see all MPs with websites</i>		<i>Prefers using email and website to contact MP [total]</i>		<i>Prefers using email and website to contact MP</i>		<i>Contacted MP online, by email or website</i>	
	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %
Would like to see all MPs with websites	850							
Prefers using email and website to contact MP [total]	355	79	450					
Prefers using email and website to contact MP	107	72	148	100	148			
Contacted MP online, by email or website	68	86	66	84	31	39	79	

Figure 1. Set overlaps: actual vs. model layout.



Notes

Set 1. Would like to see all MPs with website, n = 850. .

Set 2. Would use email and website to contact MP, n = 447.

Set 3. Email and website are the single preferred mode of contact, n = 148.

Set 4. Actual contact with MPs through their website and / or email, n = 79.

Table 4. Logistic regressions regarding online representation attitudes, propensity and activities (4 models)

Model		1 Would like to see all MPs with website		2 Would use email and website to contact MP		3 Email and website as single preferred mode of contact		4 Made contact with MPs through their website and / or email.		
Variable	Measurement	Exp(B)	Δ %	Exp(B)	Δ %	Exp(B)	Δ %	Exp(B)	Δ %	
Age [a]	18-24 years			*	1.73	13	*	1.67	6	
	25-34 years			*	1.80	14	**	2.23	10	
	35-44 years			†	1.44	8				
	> 65 years	**	.57	- 12	*	.59	-10			
Terminal education age	10-14 years			†	.384	-22				
	17-18 years			*	.644	-11				
Correctly names MP	Yes							*	2.042	1
Correctly names party	Yes	**	1.453	5	†	1.380	5			
Contacted MP [offline]	Yes							*	2.103	3
Boycott	Yes							†	.574	-3
Discuss	Yes	*	1.405	3						
Petition	Yes	*	1.408	1						
Satisfied with MP	Yes	*	1.341	7						
Length of Internet use	Scale 0-7							*	1.366	4
Length of Internet use	6 months			**	9.575	25				
	1 year			***	9.999	26	*	20.897	6	
	1-2 years			***	9.383	25	*	16.162	4	
	3-5 years			***	9.238	25	***	36.346	10	
	6 to 10 years			***	14.034	34	***	54.305	14	
> 10 years			***	11.961	30	***	50.992	13		
Political websites visited	Scale 0-8 [b]	**	1.107	2	***	1.277	6	***	1.246	3
Constant			1.013		***	.043		***	.002	
Model fit		850, 71 % positive 71 % correctly classified Nagelkerke R2 .07		447, 36.5 % positive 74 % correctly classified Nagelkerke R2 .43		148, 13 % positive 88 % correctly classified Nagelkerke R2 .27		n = 79, 6.5 % positive 94 % correctly classified Nagelkerke R2 .42		

NOTES

[a] Reference categories are, respectively, 55-64 years old for Age; 19 + for Terminal Education Age; negative responses for dummies; ‘No use’ for Length of Internet use.

[b] Scale ranges 1-8 in model 4, predicting actual online contact.