

ERRN

Electoral Regulation
Research Network



MELBOURNE LAW SCHOOL

DEMOCRATIC
AUDIT
of Australia



**ELECTORAL REGULATION RESEARCH
NETWORK/DEMOCRATIC AUDIT OF AUSTRALIA JOINT
WORKING PAPER SERIES**

**FROM OPINION TO OWNERSHIP: OURSAY AND WHAT THE CITIZENS'
AGENDA CAN TEACH US ABOUT ENGAGEMENT AND ELECTIONS**

Eyal Halamish

(Co-Founder and CEO, OurSay)

WORKING PAPER NO. 11 (NOVEMBER 2013)

* This paper is based on a talk given to the Electoral Research Regulation Network (Victoria) in October 2013.

How do we get Australians engaged in elections? As the head of OurSay.org, a digital media platform where leaders level with their community online, I have been exploring this question over the past year.

Over the last 12 months OurSay.org has been working with researchers from the University of Melbourne¹ to assess how the adoption of a social media-enabled ‘Citizens’ Agenda’ may contribute to increasing (and potentially generating new forms of) political engagement among citizen-participants, and new practices from the media and politicians. The Citizens’ Agenda was a second level of order in what we see as a four-phase process increasing (and potentially generating new forms of) political engagement among citizen-participants. The four phases voters shift through are:

1. Opinion: Individual voters respond to the existing public agenda with both research-driven and non-research-driven opinion;
2. Ownership: Individual voters are willing to champion an issue they care about and invite others to mobilise support for their opinion;
3. Solution-seeking: Groups of voters are actively prepared to seek solutions and vote with purpose;
4. Living with outcomes: Voters of divergent political persuasions are prepared to live with election outcomes as a result of their belief in the robust democratic process.

While a number of other digital platforms emerged during the 2013 Australian Federal Election², the Citizens’ Agenda was unique in asking voters to actively communicate about the issue they care about (i.e. championing their issue).

During the 2013 Australian federal election, OurSay.org applied its methodology to 10 electorates across the country³. The core OurSay.org method hosts online

¹ The Citizens’ Agenda was delivered as a research partnership with the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Advancing Journalism, School of Social and Political Sciences, Melbourne School of Government and Melbourne Social Equity Institute.

² Liz Tay, “Ten Great Online Tools for Tracking Australia’s Federal Election” Business Insider Australia last modified August 15, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/ten-great-online-tools-for-tracking-australias-federal-election-2013-8#Poll%20Pulse>

community forums where citizens vote for the questions they want answered. In this instance, these forums culminated in a Citizens' Agenda⁴ with physical town hall-style community meetings between citizens and political candidates who agreed to answer questions. Over 2,000 citizens across ten electorates registered with OurSay.org. These citizens created or 'liked' questions, and the questions with the most 'likes' rose to the top. Subsequently, at the live community forum, the most-voted for questions were asked to the candidates by citizens as well as senior journalists from a range of newspapers such as *The Australian*, *The Age*, *Guardian*, and *The Mercury*.

The research project surfaced local stories and influenced regional and national media. Local issues ranged from the lack of a post office in the rural town of Teesdale⁵ or youth engagement in Bradfield⁶; issues that were then pushed out to national press⁷. Across all ten electorates, national issues such as climate change and mental health, a sleeper issue,⁸ emerged. Events in the lead up to the town halls as well as the town halls themselves triggered social media⁹ and traditional media across all electorates¹⁰¹¹¹²¹³¹⁴.

³ The ten electorates and the criteria for their selection can be found here: http://caj.unimelb.edu.au/sites/caj.unimelb.edu.au/files/CitizensAgenda_FACTSHEET_0.pdf

⁴ Georgia Galbraith, "Citizens' Agenda survey: voters tuning out, have little faith in politics" *The Citizen* last modified May 6 2013, <http://www.thecitizen.org.au/news/citizens-agenda-survey-voters-tuning-out->

⁵ Lilly Partland, "While Labor sells the NBN, Teesdale talks snail mail" *ABC Ballarat* last modified August 19, 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/08/19/3828726.htm>

⁶ Brian Karlovsky, "Bradfield voters influence federal election debate through Citizens' Agenda" *The Telegraph* last modified May 14, 2013, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/the-hills/bradfield-voters-influence-federal-election-debate-through-citizens8217-agenda/story-fngr8ilf-1226643174067>

⁷ Nadja Popovich, Madhvi Pankhanla, and OurSay, "Citizens' agenda Australia: what voters want to know," *The Guardian* last modified August 30, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/aug/30/citizens-agenda-15-voters-questions>

⁸ Ania Dutka, "Citizens' Agenda identifies mental health as election 'sleeper'" *The Citizen* last modified August 31, 2013, <http://www.thecitizen.org.au/media/citizens-agenda-identifies-mental-health-election-sleeper>

⁹ Wes Mountain, "New News: The Citizen's Agenda," *Storify* last modified August, 2013, http://storify.com/therevmountain/new-news-the-citizen-s-agenda-mwf13-newnews?utm_source=embed_header

¹⁰ <http://wheelercentre.com/events/event/the-citizens-agenda/>

¹¹ <http://www.moretonbay.qld.gov.au/general.aspx?id=123531>

¹² James Taylor, "Questions via Our Say not political hearsay," *Surf Coast Times* last modified November 13, 2013, <http://www.surfcoasttimes.com.au/news/community/2013/06/06/questions-via-our-say-not-political-hearsay/#.UnYwbSRSYpM>

¹³ Lily Partland, "While Labor sells the NBN, Teesdale talks snail mail," *ABC Ballarat*, August 19, 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/08/19/3828726.htm>

While many of the digital tools this election were designed to support opinion generation and feedback this is the very first stage of building a robust democratic culture for elections. OurSay focuses on shifting from opinion to ownership. The question for future elections is: How do we shift the public from opinion through to owning the election process and being prepared to live with outcomes?

¹⁴ Eyal Halamish, "Hobart today (Sun): Election issues discussion," *Tasmanian Times.com* last modified May 18, 2013, <http://tasmaniantimes.com/index.php?pr-article/hobart-tomorrow-election-issues-discussion/>