

The Challenge of Informed Voting in the 21st Century

**A Research Report Commissioned by the
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Executive Summary

To vote successfully in any electoral system requires some level of information. The complexity of the Australian electoral system increases the information burden for voters.

Vote information can be divided roughly into three types: (1) contextual information about the particular issues, policies, parties and candidates at stake in any election; (2) practical, technical or process information about where, when and how to cast a vote; and (3) broader political information about the role of elections in the wider democratic system.

Political scientists hold a range of views about the role of informed voting in a democracy, with some seeing it as critical to the health of a democracy and others viewing it as a relatively ineffective element of democratic life.

Suggestions to improve voter information and engagement can be divided into demand and supply side solutions. Demand side solutions include education programs and the like to make voters more aware of the current political system, while supply side solutions focus on making the political system more attractive and responsive to voters.

Australian parliaments and courts have both paid attention to the informed voter in recent decades. Parliaments have viewed the challenge in narrow terms, focusing on increasing formal voting and getting more young people to vote. The High Court, by contrast, has reflected on the broader social, political and economic information that might be required properly to inform voters' choices.

Research using aggregate voting data suggests that Australians are generally able to submit (formal or informal) ballots that seem to reflect their intentions on entering a polling booth. Around two-fifths to one-half of the electorate rely on how to vote cards to order their preferences in lower house ballots, with almost all other voters successfully completing ballot papers. Unintentional informal voting is low (2-3%), donkey voting even lower (<1%). The nature of the electoral contest and ballot rules affect these rates, as do the demographic characteristics of voters.

Survey and interview research shows that Australians generally have a fairly shaky grasp of the abstract details of their political system; however, they also have a firmer information base when it comes to the electoral processes in which they take part. Their political knowledge tends to be more practical than theoretical. They have greater knowledge of the political tasks that they are expected to carry out themselves than they have of the more specialised tasks carried out by parliamentarians, government ministers, judges and the like.

Young Australians have been a particular focus of research in Australia. They appear to have lower levels of political knowledge that increase when they enter the electorate and become familiar with voting.

Participants in the original focus group research conducted for this report mostly did not demonstrate high levels of knowledge about Australian electoral institutions and events. Nonetheless, they had generally worked out ways of putting together enough political information to vote on their terms. They had their own favoured sources of political news and electoral information. They relied on a mix of informal advice and official information to deal with the mechanics of voting itself on election day.

Comparison of the younger and older groups suggested that confidence in the ability to find necessary information and to vote independently grow with increased experiences of voting. The older groups' recollections of their first votes were similar to the more recent stories of the younger group.

These focus groups suggest that the challenge of informed voting may be reasonably well handled by Australian voters. Most would undoubtedly fall short of the idealised version of the informed voter; however, they seem informed enough to vote on their own terms. Participants had an awareness of sources of information, such as news media, official information and how to vote cards, which they could use to inform their votes.

The focus groups also suggest two critical barriers to any efforts to increase voter information. One is structural: participants were often aware of factors such as safe seats that reduced both the impact of their votes and the value of becoming more informed. The second is cultural: Australians seem to hold deep suspicions that any political information provided to them will be biased.

Voters seem to be open to receiving more information about the processes of voting but they are unlikely to support official initiatives for increasing broader contextual or political knowledge.

There seems to be no single best way of delivering information to voters. Different voters like to receive political information in their own preferred ways. They are often willing to access information themselves but will disregard communication channels they suspect of bias or find boring or inconvenient.

Many voters need information right up until the point of voting. While many know relatively early for whom they want to vote, they often will not prepare themselves for the mechanics of voting until election day.

1. Introduction: Informed Voting in a Complex Electoral System

1.1 The Australian Context

Australian electoral systems are complex by international standards. Voters face the challenge of participating in different types of election at different levels of federalism, for lower and upper houses, for different local councils (councilors only or councilors plus mayor) and in referenda. Looked at narrowly, these elections involve different electoral districts, balloting rules and counting methods. More broadly, they also involve different rules and processes around voter eligibility and enrolment, election timing, candidate eligibility, campaign finance, advertising, media coverage, alternative methods of voting, scrutiny of the count, dispute procedures, and so on.

In this context of complexity, informed voting can be understood to refer to at least three areas of information. First, it might refer to the basis for choosing between different candidates or referendum propositions. On this score, informed voting based on a certain level of knowledge and reflection would be contrasted with a voting decision based on uncritical partisan loyalty, 'gut instinct', the 'honest' face of a candidate, cynicism about politicians, and so on. Second, it could refer to possession of technical information about the different ways in which electoral rules and procedures contribute to determining which candidates and referendum propositions win and lose. Third, it might be understood more broadly to encompass wider knowledge about the role of elections within the democratic system and about voters' rights and responsibilities as citizens.

In practice, these different types of informed voting are often difficult to separate. For example, a voter's informed support for a particular party on policy grounds might be tempered by the knowledge that the party is unlikely either to win enough seats to govern or to convince other parties that can expect to govern of the merits of its policies. A common vernacular Australian expression of a relationship between these different kinds of information is found in the claim that 'a vote for a minor party/independent is a wasted vote', a claim that can itself be contested by the electorally well-informed. One implication of the links between these different kinds of information is that while electoral administrative bodies might primarily be interested in the second and third types of informed voting set out above, changes to those types of information may well have impacts of various kinds on informed voting of the first type. In this sense, changes to informed voting practices are likely to have partisan consequences.

1.2 The Research Project

This report was commissioned and funded by the Electoral Regulation Research Network.¹ The brief given to the researchers was to address the challenges presented by informed voting in the complex Australian electoral environment. The research was initially driven by four broad questions around the challenges of informed voting in Australia:

1. Why informed voting?

Why is informed voting valuable? How important is it for Australian democracy in the 21st century?

2. What is informed voting?

How has the problem of informed voting been understood by relevant formal and informal stakeholder institutions, such as governments, parliamentary committees, electoral administration bodies, courts, political parties and media organisations? How has it been understood by voters themselves?

3. How is informed voting currently fostered in Australia?

What information relating to voting is available from official and unofficial sources, how is it regulated, how is it delivered, and how effective is it?

4. How can informed voting be better promoted in Australia?

What concrete proposals might be implemented to help meet the challenges of informed voting in the 21 century?

1.3 Research Scope and Methods

These questions were addressed primarily by looking at Australian experience, and in particular by focusing on the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victoria. The research had three major components:

- 1) documentary analysis of previous discussions of the issue of informed voting. This analysis included study of the ways in which key

¹ <http://www.law.unimelb.edu.au/electoral-regulation-research-network>

institutional actors, such as parliaments and courts, have conceived of the problem of informed voting.

2) secondary analysis of existing quantitative data sets on voter information (e.g., the Australian Election Study survey series).

3) original qualitative focus group analysis involving four groups of voters. The focus groups engaged participants in structured discussions designed to elicit their perceptions of voting, the information they feel is necessary in order to cast an 'informed vote', the sources of this information, and whether and how voter information could be improved.

1.4 The Structure of the Report

The results of these components of the research are presented in the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 explores the main positions taken in academic debates about informed voting and democracy. Chapter 3 sets out the ways in which Australian parliaments and the High Court have addressed the question of informed voting. Chapters 4 and 5 present findings on the extent of voter information in Australia drawn from studies based on aggregate, survey and interview data. They critically summarise the existing research and present some new analysis. Chapter 6 discusses findings drawn from four original focus groups conducted specifically for this report. These findings provide new insights into what ordinary electors think they need to know about voting, how they find their information and how they think voters might be better informed. Chapter 7 outlines some conclusions about the state of voter information in Australia and what might be done to foster more informed voting.

2. What is the 'Challenge' of Informed Voting?

2.1 Introduction

The claim that voting *should* be informed (such that its absence represents some kind of 'challenge') is commonly made; however, it is not a straightforward one. There is a range of approaches to thinking about informed voting as a challenge. They imply different answers to questions about the extent of (un)informed voting across the citizenry, whether and why this is important, whether anything can be done about it and, if so, what that should be.

2.2 Informed Voting as Essential for Democracy

A common view is that uninformed voting is a corruption of the type of deliberative and informed decision-making that voting should represent. Following John Stuart Mill,² many commentators argue that uninformed voting not only indicates lack of proper personal development, it produces poor representatives and bad governments. This type of claim is repeated throughout the literature on voting and citizenship. Ian McAllister, the leading political scientist in research on Australian voters, writes in this vein:

One of the most important requirements for the functioning of representative democracy is the existence of informed and knowledgeable citizens. It is normally considered a pre-requisite to voting in a democracy that citizens have some basic information about how the system operates.³

The challenge, McAllister argues immediately after this passage, is that many citizens in Australia and elsewhere do not possess the knowledge thought to be necessary for representative democracy to function.⁴

2.3 Compulsory Voting and Uninformed Voters

For some Australian critics, the practice of compulsory voting exacerbates the tendency of uninformed voting to produce bad government. A half-century ago, Joan Rydon, citing R.S. Milne and Max Beloff, argued that voluntary voting in the United States of America and United Kingdom at least partly 'cushioned' democracy from the effects of the votes of the 'uninterested', 'apathetic', 'thoughtless' and 'ill-informed'. Compulsory voting offers no such

² J.S. Mill, 'Considerations on Representative Government', in H.B. Acton (ed.), *Utilitarianism, Liberty, Representative Government*, London, J.M. Dent, [1861] 1972.

³ I. McAllister, *The Australian Voter: 50 Years of Change*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2011, p. 56; see also p. 71.

⁴ McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, p. 56; see also pp. 65-71.

protection: 'In Australia where the apathetic and ill-informed are forced to the polls by law it is even more likely that the "scum and dregs" of political life will decide who is to govern the country'.⁵ Three years later, Rydon repeated the point in a softer form: 'It is questionable whether those who have no desire to vote or to vote rationally should be compelled to vote and perhaps determine the government'.⁶ Choosing governments should be a task undertaken by interested and informed voters.

2.4 Uninformed Voting as Political Disengagement

Another line of argument sees uninformed voting (and non-voting) as just one manifestation of a wider and growing syndrome of cynicism and disengagement with politics and government among citizens. Matthew Flinders has observed in the British context:

We live in strange and troubled times. Public opinion polls suggest that large sections of the public are more distrustful, disengaged, skeptical and disillusioned with politics than ever before. "Politics", for the many rather than just a few, has become a dirty word conjuring up notions of sleaze, corruption, greed and inefficiency.⁷

This negative view of politics is dangerous and mistaken, Flinders argues, because 'politics delivers far more than most people acknowledge or understand ... people "hate politics" because they simply do not understand it'.⁸ The challenge of informed voting, on this view, is not about voting per se but concerns the decline of wider positive engagement between citizens and politics.⁹ While variations on this argument have been developed most extensively with regard to the United Kingdom, it is generalizable to Australia and other western democracies.¹⁰

⁵ J. Rydon, 'The Electorate', in J. Wilkes (ed.), *Forces in Australian Politics*, Sydney, Australian Institute of Political Science and Angus and Robertson, 1963, pp. 179, 184.

⁶ J. Rydon, 'Electoral System', in H. Mayer (ed.), *Australian Politics: A Reader*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire, 1966, p. 154.

⁷ M. Flinders, 'In Defence of Politics', *The Political Quarterly*, 81:3, 2010, p. 309.

⁸ Flinders, 'In Defence of Politics', p. 309.

⁹ G. Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, Cambridge, Polity, 2007.

¹⁰ Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, p. 3.

2.5 Short-Cuts to Informed Voting?

Against perspectives that view the challenge of informed voting as presenting something of a crisis for contemporary democracies such as Australia, there are more sanguine perspectives. The finding that the vast majority of Australians vote time and time again in line with long-standing party loyalties, rather than according to careful conclusions drawn after serious reflection at each election, is un-troubling to some commentators. In fact, in an argument with some parallels to the rational choice literature,¹¹ party identification is often seen as a reasonable and necessary way for citizens to avoid the high costs of arriving at a well-informed vote. In addition, resilient party loyalties have the advantage of producing political stability. Ian McAllister argues in this vein:

Elections in advanced societies make major demands on voters in terms of the information that they must absorb. ... How does the voter reduce the amount of information that is required in order to reach her decision? The answer lies in the concept of party identification.... [Party] loyalty provides a short-cut through which she is able to understand and interpret the political world. ... In other words, party loyalty provides a crucial informational short-cut. Moreover, since people change their subjective loyalties only rarely, party loyalty provides an important element of electoral stability in the political system that might otherwise be lacking.¹²

The information needed by citizens to vote successfully according to a pre-existing party identification is relatively limited, extending only to how-to-vote instructions from their favoured party. Against a background of stable Australian government and high popular satisfaction with Australian politics and government, this presents a rather different view of the information needs of most voters to that found in the 'liberal democracy demands informed citizens' school.¹³

¹¹ A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1957, Ch. 15.

¹² McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, pp. 33-34. The implication here that there is a kind of informed decision to take up a particular party loyalty in the first place is slightly undermined by McAllister's later argument that most longstanding party loyalties are initially developed through childhood emulation of parents (*The Australian Voter*, pp. 43-45). See also R. Dalton, D. Farrell and I. McAllister, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 148-153.

¹³ McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, pp. 9-11; 81-83.

2.6 Informed Alternatives to Voting

A different but equally sanguine view argues that citizens may be replacing old forms of democratic participation, including voting, with new forms of civic engagement that circumvent established political institutions, or engage with those institutions in new ways. These include protests, boycotts, direct contact with officials and social media campaigning. Writing from a United States' perspective, Russell Dalton argues that:

Voting is a form of action for those with limited skills, resources and motivations—the simplicity of voting explains why more people vote than any other single political activity. As political skills and resources expand, citizens realize the limits of voting as a means of political influence ... and participate through individualized, direct, and more policy-focused methods.¹⁴

Ariadne Vromen has made similar arguments in the Australian context about the need to broaden conceptualisations of democratic engagement and to recognise that many citizens, including younger Australians, participate in ways that have previously been obscured by a focus on voting.¹⁵ On this interpretation, citizens may well be as informed as they ever were but are increasingly channeling their knowledge into more effective forms of political participation than voting.

2.7 Addressing the Challenge of Informed Voting

Just as there are different conclusions about the nature of the informed voting challenge, so there are different views about the best responses to uninformed voting and how much change in informed voting might reasonably be expected after any remedial measures are implemented.

Writing broadly about political disenchantment, Colin Hay usefully distinguishes between demand and supply side explanations and responses.¹⁶ Demand side explanations direct responses to changing deficiencies within the citizenry; supply side explanations point to rectifying problems in the political goods on offer and the way they are marketed.

¹⁴ R.J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, Washington, CQ Press, 2008, pp. 67-68.

¹⁵ A. Vromen, "People Try to Put Us Down...": Participatory Citizenship of "Generation X", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38(1), 2003, pp. 79-99; A. Vromen, 'Traversing Time and Gender: Australian Young People's Participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 6(3), 2003, pp. 277-94.

¹⁶ Hay also cautions against too heavy a reliance on the distinction (*Why We Hate Politics*, pp. 158-160).

Demand side approaches typically focus on improving political information among voters through formal education curricula, information campaigns, community engagement programs and the like. Supply side approaches typically include suggestions for the better conduct of elite politics, better reporting by the news media, development of more participatory political structures, and so on.¹⁷

Some institutions are repeatedly identified as particularly responsible for the success and failure of efforts to increase voter information. These include formal bodies (electoral management bodies, schools, universities and so on) as well as informal bodies (the media, political parties, community groups etc), who are expected to play fundamental roles in voter education and take the blame when remedies appear to fail or the level of informed voting and political engagement appears to decline.

Politics are important in defining the range of remedies that are attempted or even seriously considered. Some former proposals for increasing informed voting are probably off the table in twenty-first century Australia. The great nineteenth century liberal John Stuart Mill spent considerable intellectual energy trying to devise and justify a democratic system that would include a 'widely expanded' franchise without producing 'too low a standard of political intelligence'.¹⁸ His solutions included every citizen paying a poll tax and passing a basic education test conducted at the polling place before they could vote, as well as giving multiple votes to more educated citizens to offset the votes of the more numerous but less educated labourers.¹⁹ These proposals would find few serious public supporters today.

2.8 Will the Effort be Worth It?

The extent to which any of the programs and measures designed to improve informed voting actually produce positive results is a moot point. Rational choice theorists point out that, in large scale elections, the costs for individuals of becoming more informed are often not matched by the benefits of casting a more informed vote, leading most voters to remain relatively uninformed.

¹⁷ Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*, Chs. 9-11; H. Milner, *The Internet Generation: Engaged Citizens or Political Dropouts*, Medford, Tufts University Press, 2010, Chs. 6-10.

¹⁸ Mill, 'Representative Government', p. 283.

¹⁹ Mill thought that '[i]t would be eminently desirable that other things besides reading, writing and arithmetic could be made necessary to the suffrage ... some knowledge of the conformation of the earth, its natural and political divisions, the elements of general history and of the history and institutions of [the citizen's] own country'. He concluded reluctantly that this knowledge was unlikely to be widely enough held except in the 'Northern United States' and testing for it would be difficult ('Representative Government', p. 280-6).

Although this situation can be improved by lowering the costs of information to individuals, there are still strong limits to the electoral information it is rational for voters to acquire.²⁰ On an empirical level, Australian and international research suggests that increased voter education programs and general educational levels might yield only small improvements in political knowledge.²¹

2.9 Conclusion

These dilemmas surrounding informed voting and how to promote it cannot easily be resolved. Neither are they simply matters of academic or philosophical debate. As the next chapter shows, they inform the positions of parliamentarians and judges when they directly or indirectly shape public policy on the conduct of elections. These issues do not only confront policy makers. The focus group discussions reported in Chapter 6 suggest that many ordinary Australian voters are also aware of them when they are confronted by their obligations to vote in elections.

²⁰ Downs, *Economic Theory of Democracy*; McLean, I. *Dealing with Votes*, Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1982, Ch. 4.

²¹ McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, pp. 68-71.

3. Parliamentary and Judicial Attention to Informed Voting

3.1 Introduction

The meaning of an informed electorate has been the subject of Australian jurisprudence and parliamentary scrutiny. This chapter examines the way in which informed voting has been addressed by Australian parliaments and by the High Court. These two branches of government have different interests in the issue. Members of parliament have a very direct interest in the electoral processes on which their positions rely.²² Parliaments pass the legislation that determines how elections are conducted and the types of support that are available to voters. In the larger jurisdictions—the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victoria—parliaments have established standing committees whose remit is to examine the conduct of elections to the relevant parliament, and to consider matters which impact on electoral issues more generally.

The High Court's primary role is quite different. It adjudicates on disputes brought before it, and will only engage in discussion of informed voting to the extent that it is relevant to that task. In recent decades, questions around informed voting have arisen in a series of cases involving the implied freedom of political communication. Such questions occasionally arise in lower courts, but this report focuses on the High Court due to it being the highest court in Australia's judicial system and the fact that, in that role, it has shaped the development of jurisprudence on the implied freedom.

3.2 Parliaments and the Informed Voter

Parliamentarians are arguably the political actors with the keenest interest in the outcome of the electoral processes. They might therefore be expected to be particularly concerned about voter knowledge and education. This has not, however, always been the case. For decades after the Second World War, there was very little parliamentary interest in civic education.²³ That changed in the late 1980s, when the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training began inquiring into 'active citizenship' that focused

²² We also incorporate the views of political parties into the discussion of parliamentary attention. In the absence of clear official policy positions on informed voting, political party submissions to electoral inquiries, as well as the views of elected (party) representatives, provide a good indication of partisan views.

²³ H. Phillips and W. Moroz, 'Civics and Citizenship: Research Findings on Students' Perceptions', *Youth Studies Australia*, 15(1), pp. 13-14.

particularly on the political engagement and knowledge of young Australians.²⁴

More recently, parliamentary activity on voter information and education has been led by the committees whose remit is to examine the conduct of elections for the relevant parliament, and to consider matters which impact on electoral issues more generally. For example, the functions of the Victorian Electoral Matters Committee (VEMC) are to inquire into, consider and report to Parliament on any proposal, matter or thing concerned with:

- a. the conduct of parliamentary elections and referendums in Victoria
- b. the conduct of elections of Councillors under the *Local Government Act 1989*
- c. the administration of, or practices associated with, the *Electoral Act 2002* and any other law relating to electoral matters.

While governments are not obliged to appoint an electoral matters committee, in larger jurisdictions such as the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Victoria their work has been considered to be of sufficient value to both Parliament and the wider community that they are routinely reappointed.

Typically, as part of its inquiry process, a committee will conduct public hearings at which it takes evidence from election administrators, representatives of political parties, academics and members of the public, which then generally forms the basis of its recommendations. The resulting reports are public documents that tend to have more authority than a government report due to the multi-party composition of committees. The New South Wales Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (NSW JSCEM), for example, is made up of four Government members (including the Chair), and three others, of whom two are members of the Opposition and one is from the minor parties.

In the context of examining the conduct of elections, the first decades of the 21st century have seen these committees considering the role that informed voting does, or should, play in the Australian electoral process. Generally, the submissions to the committees and the committees themselves take the intrinsic value of the informed voter as given. This assumption is typified by comments such as '[o]ur whole democracy is based on having an informed

²⁴ Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. *Education for Active Citizenship: A Discussion Paper*, Canberra, AGPS, 1988; *Education for Active Citizenship*, Canberra, AGPS, 1989; and *Active Citizenship Revisited*, Canberra, AGPS, 1991.

electorate'²⁵ and '[a] healthy democracy needs citizens who are informed, appreciate and participate in the various elements of our representative democracy'.²⁶

Committee members therefore tend to see the issue as how to increase the depth and breadth of voter information. In May 2012, for example, the VEMC quoted the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) with approval:

What is now required is a more strategic and long-term approach to address public expectations and technological possibilities. Any strategy for the future should also include further research and development of effective and targeted electoral education programs aimed to achieve a more informed and engaged electoral community.²⁷

Two issues relating to this goal have been of particular concern to parliamentarians and political parties, namely:

- the link between informed voters and informal votes; and
- perceptions of voters aged 18 to 25 as particularly uninformed.

The next sections of this report outline the ways in which these concerns have been dealt with by parliamentary committees.

3.3 Informed Voting and Informal Voting

It is clear from the VEMC's 2012 Report that, in the view of elected members, 'informed voting' is the obverse of 'informal voting':

Like the VEC, the [VEMC] is concerned about declining electoral engagement in Victoria. As noted above, the fact nearly 700,000 eligible Victorians are not participating in elections is disappointing and a strong motivation for further research.²⁸

²⁵ This comment was in the specific context of people from non-English speaking background receiving party political how to vote material: Sir D Smith, evidence to the Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, Canberra, The Parliament of Australia, 8 August 2005, p. 16.

²⁶ Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education*, Terms of Reference, 2006. Available at: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=em/education/tor.htm

²⁷ Victorian Electoral Commission, *Shaping Victoria's Electoral Future*, October 2011, quoted by the Victorian Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2010 Victorian State Election and Matters Related Thereto*, Melbourne, Victorian Government Printer, May 2012, at para 2.67.

²⁸ Victorian Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2010 Victorian State Election*, para 2.70.

Similarly, in its report on the Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election, the Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (CJSCEM) stressed that 'where voters go to the effort of casting an informed and valid vote' it is important that 'their intentions are reflected in the way a formal vote is interpreted and counted'.²⁹

Thus, to members of parliament and political parties, the informed voter is one who is sufficiently knowledgeable about the *process* of voting to ensure that his or her recorded vote faithfully reflects the voting decision, hopefully moulded by How to Vote material both on and before election day. This focus is hardly surprising, given that Australia is one of a handful of democracies worldwide to not only have compulsory voting, but also to enforce it,³⁰ so that elected members are doubtless particularly interested in the potential impact of compulsion on electoral results.

One inquiry process to give some consideration to the role of compulsory voting was the CJSCEM review of the 2004 federal election. In evidence to the CJSCEM, academic Dr John Kilcullen argued that the compulsory voting system *per se* encourages voters to be more engaged in the political process because the statutory obligation to vote:

... makes more people listen seriously to the election campaign and follow politics between elections, since they recognize that they have a civic duty to try to decide. The existence of the obligation seems to move many people to seek information. It helps toward a better informed electorate.³¹

The reverse of this argument is that compulsory voting has the potential to weaken the legitimacy of electoral outcomes by dragooning a considerable number of so-called 'clueless voters' into participating in a process for which they are ill-equipped.³²

²⁹ Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2007 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*, Canberra, The Parliament of Australia, June 2009, para 2.39.

³⁰ As at 23 February 2015, the others are Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Cyprus, Ecuador, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Nauru, Peru, Singapore, Uruguay and the Schaffhausen canton of Switzerland, See http://www.idea.int/vt/compulsory_voting.cfm

³¹ Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*, para 8.27.

³² The expression comes from a brief Canadian article which concluded that 'political scientists who have called for compulsory voting to motivate more citizens to participate in the electoral process should go back to the drawing board': Anonymous, 'The Clueless Voter', *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol 33, No.1 (Winter 2009), 69-70. The Australian Electoral Commission, having analysed the reasons ballot papers were considered informal in the wake of the 2004 federal election, concluded that 'the link between compulsory voting and informal voting [was]

The CJSCEM considered that the essence of the two sides of the argument was contained in two quotes: namely, that ‘the bigger the vote, the more representative the government, the healthier the democracy’ on the one hand;³³ and ‘Quality is always better than quantity’, on the other.³⁴ The CJSCEM noted that an important consideration in the debate was the question of the legitimacy of the government which emerges from the compulsory or the voluntary ballot, but ultimately side-stepped the issue by recommending that voluntary and compulsory voting become the subject of a future inquiry.

3.4 Young Voters

One area where compulsion and the degree of information intersect that the CJSCEM has considered in detail is the issue of ‘young voters’; those aged 18-25, and especially those voting for the first time. Encouraging young Australians to exercise their right to vote is a component of wider attempts by successive governments to address a perceived ‘civic deficit’ among youth, to ‘improve their understanding of what citizenship means in a modern society, and thereby encourage practical participation in our nation’s civic life’.³⁵

The ‘greying’ of political parties³⁶ has combined with assumptions as to the apathy of young Australians to provide the focus of a number of parliamentary inquiries, including the CJSCEM’s 2007 *Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education* and the NSW JSCCEM’s 2006 *Inquiry into Voter Enrolment*.³⁷ The submission to the NSW JSCCEM from the Centre for Research and Teaching in Civics at the University of Sydney noted that there was a voter participation rate of only 81 percent among 18-25 year olds in NSW, and that NSW consistently had a lower than average rate of enrolment of young

difficult to prove’: AEC Submission to the CJSCEM, *Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*, quoted at para 8.88.

³³ “An Obligation to Democracy”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 2005, quoted in Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*, para 8.35.

³⁴ M. Doyle, quoted in Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election*, para 8.36.

³⁵ P.J. Keating, quoted in S. Mellor, K. Kennedy and L. Greenwood, *Citizenship and Democracy: Australian Students’ Knowledge and Beliefs*. The IEA Civic Education Study of Fourteen Year Olds, Camberwell, Australian Council for Education Research, 2002, p 4.

³⁶ This process is not confined to Australia. See, for example, B. O’Neill, ‘Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada: Charting the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation’. June 2007. Available at: http://www.cprn.org/documents/48504_EN.pdf.

³⁷ Both of these Inquiries also focussed on the specific needs of Indigenous Australians, voters from non-English speaking backgrounds and voters with disabilities.

people. Informed young voters were particularly important, since they represented the future of Australian democracy:

A healthy, viable and sustainable representative democracy requires the participation of its citizens. In particular, a flourishing democracy needs informed, appreciative and engaged young citizens, whose participation ensures that this democratic way of life is maintained.³⁸

The lack of knowledge amongst young Australians about the electoral process was a particular concern for the Australian Labor Party, which made submissions to both the NSW and federal parliamentary inquiries arguing for not only for more robust civics education in schools, but also for a greater role for parties in providing electoral education as 'encouraging people to be active in the civic affairs of the nation has a natural corollary with involvement with organised politics'.³⁹ The Australian Greens took an even more expansive view of the role of parties and politicians in this process, suggesting that:

For civics education (and by corollary electoral education) to have a lasting impact on young people and young adults there needs also to be a great emphasis on ethics amongst politicians and their parties. The various scandals involving branch stacking, non-core promises...can only serve to undermine public, and particularly youth, confidence in the political process.⁴⁰

One outcome of the NSW Inquiry was the *Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Amendment (Automatic Enrolment) Act 2009*, which introduced SmartRoll in NSW. SmartRoll is an opt-out system of automatic voter enrolment. The NSW Electoral Commission uses information from a range of

³⁸ M. Print and J. Compton, Centre for Research and Teaching in Civics, University of Sydney, Submission to NSW Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, Inquiry into the current levels of Voter Enrolment in NSW, Particularly Among Young People and Other Groups with Special Needs, p. 2. Available at:

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/245C2377535FAFE4CA2571B60014730E>

³⁹ Australian Labor Party, Submission to the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education, p. 3. Available at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=em/education/subs.htm. See also NSW Young Labor, Submission to the Inquiry into Voter Enrolment. Available at:

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/98DB4640157CA09FCA2571B60014D8C5>

⁴⁰ Australian Greens, Submission to the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education, p.3. Available at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=em/education/subs.htm.

government agencies to identify potentially eligible electors and sends them an SMS, email or letter notifying them that they will be enrolled unless they object. If no objection is received after the legislated minimum elapsed time of seven days, the eligible elector is notified that they are enrolled at their notified address.⁴¹ Of the one million voter enrolment changes made by SmartRoll as at February 2015, 382,000 were of young voters enrolling for the first time.

Perhaps the most thorough-going Parliamentary Inquiry was that of the Queensland Parliament's Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee [QLCARC]. In 2006, it concluded a thirteen month inquiry entitled *Voice and Votes* that investigated the civic engagement of young people aged 12 to 25. The QLCARC appeared to take seriously its need to consult with young stakeholders, and the Inquiry took evidence by way of:

- workshops held around the state;
- an on-line poll and polling at the regional sitting of Parliament in Rockhampton;
- written submissions;
- exit polls conducted at state and local by-elections; and
- a youth jury held at Parliament House.

The ensuing Report made a wide range of recommendations—directed to Government Ministers, Parliament, the Queensland Electoral Commission, political parties and the media—all designed to 'empower young people to participate in government decision-making and policy-making processes, to be involved in their communities, and to be 'literate' about democracy'.⁴²

Despite paying lip service to 'the value of educational programs in enhancing civic involvement', the Queensland Government's Response was tepid. Many of the Inquiry's recommendations were accepted in principle but were not implemented. The proposal to have all 17 year olds directly provisionally enrolled was rejected. Accordingly, the Queensland *Electoral Act 1992* did not provide for automatic enrolment for the January 2015 State Elections, although pursuant to arrangements under s62 of that Act, Queensland voters can be directly enrolled by the AEC.⁴³

⁴¹ See http://www.elections.nsw.gov.au/enrol_to_vote/smartroll

⁴² Queensland Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee, *Voices and Votes: a Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Young People engaging in Democracy*, Brisbane, Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee, August 2006, p 26.

⁴³ The AEC gained this power in 2012.

3.5 The High Court and Informed Voting

The High Court has primarily considered the subject of informed voting in the course of developing its jurisprudence around the implied freedom of political communication.⁴⁴ Indeed, informed voting was at the centre of one of the earliest cases in which the implied freedom arose, *Australian Capital Television v Commonwealth*.⁴⁵ That case concerned a constitutional challenge to a federal law that banned the broadcast of political advertisements, on radio or television, during federal, State and Territory election campaigns, and substituted a system of 'free time' in its place. One of the aims of the legislation was to combat the trivialisation of political debate but a majority of the Court, while finding this aim to be legitimate, held that the law was invalid for breach of the implied freedom.

The High Court does not have an institutional view on informed voting in the same way that a government body, such as an electoral commission, might. Nor does it engage in abstract analysis of possible rationales for informed voting, or the sort of information that is necessary for electors to cast an informed vote. In cases where the implied freedom of political communication arises, the Court's primary role is to determine the validity of a legislative or executive act that purportedly curtails a type or mode of political communication. It is only in the service of that task that the Court will engage in discussion of informed voting. With this caveat in mind, it is possible to make some observations about the High Court's approach to informed voting.

3.6 Why Informed Voting?

Similar to parliaments, the High Court has generally accepted the value of an informed vote as a given. An example is this statement from Isaacs J in *Smith v Oldham*, a case in which the Court considered the validity of a law requiring electoral material to be 'tagged' with the names and addresses of its authors:

The vote of every elector is a matter of concern to the whole Commonwealth, and all are interested in endeavouring to secure not merely that the vote shall be formally recorded in accordance with the opinion which the voter actually holds, free from intimidation, coercion and bribery, but that the voter shall not be led by misrepresentation or concealment of any material

⁴⁴ The Court first identified the freedom in *Nationwide News Pty Ltd v Wills* (1992) 177 CLR 1, and has refined it in a series of subsequent cases: eg, *Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (1997) 189 CLR 520; *Coleman v Power* (2004) 220 CLR 1.

⁴⁵ (1992) 177 CLR 106.

circumstance into forming and consequently registering a political judgment different from that which he would have formed and registered had he known the real circumstances.⁴⁶

In more recent times, the Court's acceptance of the intrinsic value of informed voting has formed part of the rationale for its development of the implied freedom of political communication. In a series of decisions the Court has maintained that freedom of political discussion is valuable and worthy of protection because it fosters informed voting. In the unanimous decision in *Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, for instance, the Court said that freedom of political communication 'enables the people to exercise a free and informed choice as electors'.⁴⁷

In other cases, members of the Court have given hints as to why an informed vote should be regarded as desirable. Voting choices made after exposure to information and discussion have been described variously as 'free and informed',⁴⁸ 'true',⁴⁹ 'genuine',⁵⁰ 'intelligent' and 'fully informed',⁵¹ and 'effective and responsible'.⁵² The implication is that informed votes are more authentic and of a higher quality than those that are less informed.

3.7 What is Informed Voting?

In his dissenting judgment in the *ACTV* case, Dawson J elaborated on what it means for an elector to make a 'true choice'. He said:

[T]he Constitution provides for a choice and that must mean a true choice. It may be said – at all events in the context of an election – that a choice is not a true choice when it is made without an appreciation of the available alternatives or, at least, without an opportunity to gain an appreciation of the available alternatives.⁵³

In other words, an elector will be in a position to make a 'true choice' only after being exposed to information and discussion that fosters a full

⁴⁶ *Smith v Oldham* (1912) 15 CLR 355, p. 362.

⁴⁷ *Lange*, p. 560.; see also *Coleman*, pp. 125-6 (Heydon J).

⁴⁸ *Lange*, p. 560.

⁴⁹ *Australian Capital Television*, p. 186 (Dawson J).

⁵⁰ *Lange v Commonwealth* (1996) 186 CLR 302, p. 324 (Dawson J).

⁵¹ *Nationwide News*, p. 72 (Toohey and Deane JJ).

⁵² *Australian Capital Television*, p. 230 (McHugh J).

⁵³ *Australian Capital Television*, pp. 186-187 (Dawson J). The context of Dawson J's comments is a discussion of the significance of the directive in sections 7 and 24 of the Constitution that members of federal Parliament be 'directly chosen by the people', which is the primary textual source of the implied freedom of political communication.

assessment of the merits of candidates for office, or proposals for constitutional amendment. This statement was cited with approval in the *Lange* decision.⁵⁴

3.8 What Information Should Voters Have?

The implied freedom operates to protect communications about 'political or government matters'.⁵⁵ This encompasses communication between voters and their representatives, between voters and election candidates, and amongst voters themselves.⁵⁶

More specifically, the implied freedom protects the communication of information about 'the functioning of government in Australia and about the policies of political parties and candidates for election'.⁵⁷ Relevant to this is information about the performance of Ministers, but also about the conduct of the public service and some statutory authorities and public utilities.⁵⁸ The implied freedom requires the free flow of such information at all times, not just during election periods.⁵⁹

It is information and discussion about *federal* politics that is the primary focus of the implied freedom. This is because the freedom operates to protect communications that bear on voting decisions at federal elections and referendums. However, discussion of political matters at State, Territory and local levels may also be protected where it is relevant to voter choice at federal elections.⁶⁰

The Court has acknowledged that information about the means of casting a vote might be necessary to the making of an informed choice. In *Langer v Commonwealth*, a case which concerned communication about the allocation of preferences, Dawson J remarked that a voting decision could not be thought of as an informed choice 'if it is made in ignorance of a means of making the choice which is available and which a voter, if he or she knows of it, may wish to use in order to achieve a particular result'.⁶¹ In *Mulholland v Australian*

⁵⁴ *Lange*, p. 560.

⁵⁵ *Lange*, p. 560.

⁵⁶ *Lange*, p. 560.

⁵⁷ *Lange*, p. 560; also *Australian Capital Television*, p. 230 (McHugh J) ('the performances of their elected representatives and the capabilities and policies of all candidates for election').

⁵⁸ *Lange*, p. 561.

⁵⁹ *Lange*, p. 561.

⁶⁰ *Unions NSW v New South Wales* (2013) 88 ALJR 227, p. 234 (French CJ, Hayne, Crennan, Kiefel and Bell JJ).

⁶¹ *Langer*, p. 325 (Dawson J).

Electoral Commission, McHugh J thought that party endorsement on a ballot paper was a form of political communication that an elector might take into account when casting a vote.⁶²

More broadly, access to other types of information might also come within the purview of the implied freedom. French CJ has commented that ‘governmental and political matters’ arguably encompasses ‘social and economic features of Australian society’.⁶³ Other members of the Court see the category of relevant material as even wider than this, encompassing ‘the countless number of other circumstances and considerations, both factual and theoretical, which are relevant to a consideration of what is in the interests of the nation as a whole or of particular localities, communities or individuals within it’.⁶⁴

3.9 Conclusion

Several Australian jurisdictions have utilised parliamentary committees to gauge the extent to which citizens are informed voters, and what that concept means in Australia. Generally, the instincts of members of Parliament as professional politicians have led them to interpret the concept of ‘the informed voter’ in a narrow, practical way, as a voter who will cast a formal vote, having had the opportunity to be persuaded in the course of an election campaign. A subset of the potentially uninformed voter with which successive parliamentary inquiries have been especially concerned is the young voter, especially the novice. While the rhetoric of the inherent good of civic participation—epitomised by participation in the electoral process—has characterised these proceedings, *realpolitik* has meant that the results have been mixed.

The High Court cases reviewed above demonstrate a concern with voters being able to register their intentions accurately on the ballot paper that is similar to that shown by parliamentary committees. At the same time, the Court’s reasoning also suggests a more expansive view of informed voting, in which voters are free to access information about a wide range of political, economic and social affairs. Whether or not voters take up this freedom and access the available information is a matter for them. Subsequent chapters of

⁶² *Mulholland v Australian Electoral Commission* (2004) 220 CLR 181, pp. 211-212 (McHugh J).

⁶³ *Hogan v Hinch* (2011) 243 CLR 506, p. 543 (French CJ).

⁶⁴ *Nationwide News*, p. 72 (Toohey and Deane JJ). See also Keane J in *Unions NSW*, p. 252: ‘It may be said that whether information is pertinent to the exercise of the political choices required of the people of the Commonwealth is a question which only the people of the Commonwealth can answer.’

this report examine the ways in which Australian voters do and do not inform themselves.

4. Researching Australian Voter Information: Aggregate Data

4.1 Introduction

While a number of empirical studies covering aspects of voter information have been conducted in Australia by electoral commission researchers, academic researchers, or both, Australia lacks systematic and sustained research on the topic. The empirical studies draw on three main sources:

- 1) aggregate data
- 2) social science and opinion poll surveys
- 3) qualitative interview material

This chapter focuses on aggregate voting data. Research using aggregate data typically uses voting figures compiled by electoral commissions at the polling booth, electorate, regional, state or national levels to describe overall patterns of voting across different areas, or to correlate those voting figures with aggregate demographic data collected for the same geographical units to determine the characteristics of areas in which particular types of voting and non-voting occur. The following sections discuss what aggregate studies of informal voting, 'donkey voting' and the use of how-to-vote cards can show about levels of informed voting among Australian electors.

4.2 Informal Voting

Informal votes are often viewed as resulting from inadequate voter information. This is particularly the case when they seem to be unintended. As the University of Melbourne political scientist Sally Young wrote after the informal vote for the House of Representatives in 2013 reached 5.91 percent, up from 5.55 percent in 2010: '... many voters whose votes were informal will have expressed a preference this election, but failed to have it recorded. And so the rising proportion of informal votes is a major democratic concern'.⁶⁵

The proportion of voters who voted informally in 2013 due to a lack of information about how to vote correctly will have been less than the one in seventeen suggested by the overall informal figure. The AEC analyses informal ballots after each election and attempts to distinguish between unintentional and intentional informality as follows:

- Ballot papers with incomplete numbering, non-sequential numbering, ticks and crosses and those where the voter had been identified are assumed to be unintentionally informal. In other

⁶⁵ S. Young, 'Informal Voting is on the Rise', *Election Watch Australia*. 19 September 2013. Available at: <http://electionwatch.edu.au/australia-2013/analysis/informal-voting-rise>

words, it is assumed that all voters completing ballot papers in these categories intended to cast a formal vote.

- All other informal ballots (including blank ballots and those with scribbles, slogans or other protest vote marks) are assumed to be intentionally informal. In other words, it is assumed that all voters casting ballots papers in these categories intended to vote informally.⁶⁶

This analysis is not yet available for 2013; however, results for previous elections point to around three percent of House of Representatives ballots being unintentionally informal (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 AEC Analysis of Informal Voting in House of Representatives Elections (% of total votes).

Election	Unintentional	Intentional
2001	3.18	1.64
2004	3.21	1.97
2007	2.47	1.48
2010	2.85	2.70

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Analysis of Informal Voting*, p. 28.

Some caution needs to be used in interpreting these figures. With regard to intention, it is not clear, for example, that all ballots with incomplete or non-sequential numbering are unintentional. Voters may intentionally stop numbering squares or use non-sequential numbers because they think doing so will send some kind of protest message, or because they decide to vote informally while they are filling out the ballot paper.⁶⁷ With regard to voter information, it is not clear whether a blank ballot is the result of a lack of knowledge—a voter who is uncertain about how to fill in the ballot paper or how to choose between candidates and so does not try—or the result of a deliberate protest based on considerable political knowledge and reflection.

Bearing these caveats in mind, lack of voter information about how to complete ballot papers correctly does seem to play a role in informal voting. Ballot rules that require voters to record a full set of preferences seem to increase informality. In 2013, informal voting for the Senate was 2.96 percent, down from 3.75 percent in 2010. Senate informal voting was thus almost half

⁶⁶ Australian Electoral Commission, *Analysis of Informal Voting. House of Representatives, 2010 Federal Election*, Research Report Number 12, 29 March 2011, p. 34. Available at: http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/research/paper12/files/informality-e2010.pdf

⁶⁷ See, for example, the comments section in J. Rizvi, 'Five Reasons Why You Shouldn't Even Think about Donkey Voting this Weekend', Mamamia, 5 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.mamamia.com.au/news/five-reasons-why-you-shouldnt-vote-informal/>

that for the House of Representatives. Lower rates of informal votes for the Senate than for the House of Representatives have been the norm since the introduction of straightforward '1 above the line' voting for the Senate at the 1984 election. Prior to 1984, larger proportions of voters struggled to record full sets of preferences on Senate ballot papers than for the smaller House of Representatives ballot papers, resulting in a higher Senate informal vote. Similarly, AEC research indicates that as more candidates contest a House of Representatives electorate, requiring more preferences to be recorded, the rate of informal voting increases.

Inconsistencies between state or territory and federal ballot rules may also play a role in confusing voters. New South Wales and Queensland, for example, use optional preferential voting, which may result in some voters in those states mistakenly believing that federal ballots require only a single recorded preference to be valid. The AEC's research on the possible effects of inconsistent ballot rules in different jurisdictions has been inconclusive. Antony Green has presented analysis of NSW state elections suggesting that informal voting is increased when a jurisdiction holds simultaneous elections with inconsistent balloting rules:

The informal vote was very high at the 1991 and 1995 [New South Wales] State elections. This was because of confusion caused by the conduct of referendums at both elections. While the referendum ballot paper instructed voters to use a tick, if a tick was used on the Legislative Assembly ballot paper, the vote was informal. At the 1991 election, the highest informal vote was recorded in electorates with only two candidates, in which case the Assembly ballot paper closely resembled the referendum ballot paper.⁶⁸

Complex and inconsistent ballot rules raise the information level required by voters to complete ballots formally.

Informal voting, including unintentional informality, is higher in some electorates than others. Electorates in western Sydney rank among the highest in the country for unintentional informal voting, with 8.34 percent of ballots in the seat of Blaxland unintentionally invalidated in 2010.⁶⁹ These electorates also have high proportions of residents from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), while electorates with lower NESB populations tend to

⁶⁸ A. Green, *Implications of the 1998 Federal Election for the 1999 New South Wales Election*, Sydney, New South Wales Parliamentary Library, Background Paper No. 5/98, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Australian Electoral Commission, *Analysis of Informal Voting*, p. 33.

have lower rates of informal voting.⁷⁰ This correlation is consistent with research on aggregate electorate data from the 1990s by Ian McAllister and Toni Makkai:

The major conclusion is the central importance of social structure in determining informal voting and more specifically, of ethnicity. Informal voting is significantly higher in polling booth areas which have large proportions of immigrants, especially those who are recently arrived in Australia or who originate from southern Europe. A substantial component of this relationship is attributable to lack of English language skills among immigrants, rather than to cultural factors such as coming from a country which lacks a democratic tradition.⁷¹

Language barriers as well as ballot complexity seem to make informed voting difficult for some voters.

4.3 Donkey Voting

As its name suggests, donkey voting is another type of voting behaviour that is commonly viewed as 'apathetic', 'thoughtless' or uninformed.⁷² Donkey voters simply numbered their ballot papers from top to bottom with no consideration for the logic of their preference ordering.⁷³ Interest in donkey voting grew in the 1960s, when parties were believed to favour standing candidates with surnames near the start of the alphabet so as to gain top position on ballot papers. At the time, ballot positions were allocated alphabetically and party labels did not appear on the ballot paper. Estimates of the proportion of voters who discharged their obligation to vote in this way, made by comparing votes when a party held top spot on the ballot paper and when it did not, ranged from 1.5 to 3.5 percent.⁷⁴

Systematic study of the size of the donkey vote petered out in the late 1970s. In the 1980s, the introduction of ballot ordering by lot rather than surname nullified party efforts to gain first place on the ballot paper, while the

⁷⁰ Australian Electoral Commission, *Analysis of Informal Voting*, pp. 34-38. For a strong correlation between non-English speaking background residents and local polling booths in NSW for the 2013 federal election, see P. Brent, 'Informal Votes in 2013', Mumble Blog, 18 October 2013. Available at: http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/mumble/index.php/theaustralian/comments/informal_votes_in_2013/

⁷¹ I. McAllister and T. Makkai, 'Institutions, Society or Protest? Explaining Invalid Votes in Australian Elections', *Electoral Studies*, 12(1), 1993, pp. 34-35.

⁷² G. Orr, 'Ballot Order: Donkey Voting in Australia', *Election Law Journal*, 1(4), 2002, p.573, 577.

⁷³ *The Penguin Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Politics*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1988, p. 118.

⁷⁴ Orr, 'Ballot Order', pp. 574-575.

introduction of party labels on ballot papers gave voters in the polling booth immediate information about the candidates who would benefit from any donkey vote.⁷⁵ Interest in the donkey vote is now largely confined to upper house elections, at which some voters are thought to vote for whichever party appears on the left hand side of the ballot paper. In 2015, for example, minor party strategist Glenn Druery claimed that in Senate and NSW Legislative Council elections, the 'highly coveted first column of the ballot paper ... can garner greater than a 1 per cent increase in expected votes'.⁷⁶

How widespread is donkey voting? Answering this question ideally requires a direct comparison of the votes a party gains from a group of voters when it holds the prime position on the ballot paper with the votes it gains from the same voters when it holds another position on the ballot paper. That is truly possible only for jurisdictions that use a random rotation of candidate orders across all ballot papers, as in the Australian Capital Territory's Robson rotation system.⁷⁷

An imperfect approximation is achieved by comparing Senate results for parties that run in a number of jurisdictions. Table 4.2 shows the Senate first preference votes in 2010 and 2013/14 for parties or groups of candidates that gained the first column on the ballot paper and compares this with their votes where they drew other columns. In all except one case—the Wikileaks Party, which drew Column A in the 2014 WA Senate re-election—parties or groups of candidates drawing the first column did improve their vote over their average vote for other jurisdictions they contested. Only in four cases—Labor and the Australian Sex Party in 2010, the Liberal Democratic Party and Palmer United Party in 2013/14—was that advantage over or even close to one percent. Variations in the Labor and Palmer United votes were likely to have been affected by a range of factors other than ballot positions.

The clear outlier in Table 4.2 is the Liberal Democratic Party, which gained an apparent 7.53 percent vote boost relative to its average vote in five other jurisdictions in 2013. The implication is that most of the NSW Liberal Democratic Party voters were not donkey voters—compare the meagre 0.56 percent won by the Socialist Alliance in the same ballot position in 2010—but

⁷⁵ Orr, 'Ballot Order', pp. 575-576.

⁷⁶ G. Druery, 'NSW Election: Small Parties Will Determine Who Will be Premier', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2015. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/nsw-election-small-parties-will-determine-who-will-be-premier-20150326-1m8e9e.html>

⁷⁷ Elections ACT, 'Ballot Papers for the Legislative Assembly', 6 January 2015. Available at: http://www.elections.act.gov.au/elections_and_voting/ballot_papers_for_the_legislative_assembly

were inattentive voters who were unable to find the Liberal and National party candidates in Column Y of the ballot paper.⁷⁸

For the remaining largely unknown parties and groups that might have been hoping that Column A alone would boost their vote, the average benefit was just 0.34 percent. The proportion of Australian voters who express their 'thoughtlessness' about elections through donkey voting, at least in the Senate, thus appears to be very small.

⁷⁸ See also A. Green, 'Does Electronic Voting Increase the Donkey Vote?', ABC Elections, 2 April 2015. Available at: <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/2015/04/does-electronic-voting-increase-the-donkey-vote.html#more>

Table 4.2 Apparent Effect of Donkey Vote in 2010 and 2013/14 Senate Elections (% of first preference votes).*

Party/ Candidates	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA**	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Column A minus average in other ballots contested.
2013/14									
Liberal Democratic	9.50	0.01	0.69	3.43 1.82	3.53	2.32	N/A	N/A	7.53
Rise Up Australia	0.10	0.92	N/A	0.29 0.17	0.12	0.30	0.38	0.94	0.56
Animal Justice	0.48	0.75	1.07	0.74 0.65	0.62	N/A	1.21	N/A	0.42/0.56
Smokers Rights	0.19	0.00	0.20	0.67 0.28	0.18	0.24	N/A	N/A	0.51
Socialist Equality	0.04	0.07	0.06	0.09 N/A	0.28	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.21
Country Alliance	N/A	0.15	N/A	N/A N/A	0.03	0.28	N/A	N/A	0.19
Palmer United	3.39	3.66	9.89	5.01 12.34	2.65	6.58	2.11	7.14	2.77
Wikileaks	0.83	1.24	N/A	0.75 0.63	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	-0.31
2010									
Socialist Alliance	0.56	0.10	0.16	0.10	0.10	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.44
Socialist Equality	0.09	0.32	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.23
Senator On- Line	0.07	0.07	0.36	0.04	0.12	0.45	N/A	N/A	0.28/0.37
Ungrouped	0.58	0.34	0.28	0.55	0.30	0.32	1.12	0.62	0.04
Climate Sceptics	N/A	0.15	0.19	0.16	0.46	0.23	N/A	N/A	0.28
Labor	36.54	37.65	29.39	29.70	38.29	41.40	40.84	34.39	5.51
Australian Sex	1.77	2.26	2.59	2.25	1.69	N/A	N/A	5.10	2.99

*Bold numbers indicate party/candidates appeared in column A. 'N/A' indicates party/candidates did not contest the Senate election in that jurisdiction.

**The WA Senate election had to be re-run in April 2014 due to the loss of some ballot papers in September 2013. The top number for WA is the 2013 result; the bottom number is the 2014 result.

4.4 How to Vote Cards

The case of the Liberal Democratic Party vote presented in the previous section suggests the ongoing importance of party cues for many Australian voters. Most Australian voters identify with one or other of the major political parties (see section 2.5 above). Those party identifiers need relatively little information to connect their identification with support for their party at the ballot box. Parties typically present that information through the 'how to vote' cards that parties use to show voters exactly how they want them to fill out the ballot papers at elections.

The nationwide Australian Electoral Study (AES) surveys taken after each federal election indicate that about half of all voters claimed to use a how to vote card, although the proportion has been slowly declining from 56 percent in 1996 to 47 percent in 2010.⁷⁹ Aggregate data from the electoral commissions is more useful than survey data in determining whether voters exactly follow the advice on how to vote cards. Recent results from state election data suggest a wide range of compliance levels from around three-quarters of Liberal National Party (LNP) voters in Queensland in 2009 to just one-seventh of Green voters in Victoria in 2010.

These types of variations are associated with:

- the complexity of how to vote instructions ('just vote 1' for the Queensland LNP versus full preferences in Victoria).
- the ability of parties to get how to vote cards into the hands of voters (major parties generally have better volunteer coverage at polling places than minor parties).
- the willingness of voters to follow how to vote cards even if they do receive them (Green voters seem less likely to do so than major party voters)
- whether how to vote instructions may be displayed in voting compartments (South Australia allows this and has slightly higher how to vote compliance than Victoria, which has identical lower house ballot rules but does not allow such displays).⁸⁰

Overall compliance with how to vote cards in the 2010 South Australian and Victorian state elections was around two-fifths. Whether the voters who did not follow the preferencing instructions of candidates who received their first

⁷⁹ McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, p. 9.

⁸⁰ A. Green, 'Do Australians Follow How-to-Votes?' ABC Elections, 29 September 2011. Available at: <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/2011/09/do-australians-follow-how-to-votes.html#more>

preferences were more or less informed than those who did follow the how to vote cards is impossible to say. Voting independently of the instructions of candidates is often seen as a mark of informed voting (see Section 6.4 below). Undoubtedly some of the three-fifths of voters who do not follow how to vote advice do so as an informed decision. Their votes may, however, reflect other factors, such as a lack of available information about their preferred candidate's preferencing wishes, a purely emotional response to party names on the ballot paper, mistakes in transcribing the how to vote advice, a lack of concern about anything beyond a first preference, and so on.

4.5 Conclusion

Aggregate voting data can be used to measure the extent of types of voting and non-voting that are often believed to reflect inadequate voter information. The studies presented in this chapter suggest that unintentional informal voting is relatively low at around two to three percent, donkey voting is even lower at less than one percent, and around two-fifths to one-half of the electorate rely on how to vote cards to order their preferences in lower house ballots. The nature of the electoral contest and ballot rules affect these rates, as do characteristics of voters, such as their familiarity with English.

A sanguine conclusion from these figures might be that the vast majority of Australian voters appear to be able to cast a ballot—formal or informal—as they intended and that very few give no thought to their vote. Nonetheless, the data do not permit us to infer too much about the intentions of voters or why those intentions were formed. The survey and interview research presented in the next two chapters provides better evidence on these points.

5. Researching Australian Voter Information: Survey and Interview Data

5.1 Introduction

Since the 1960s, a number of survey studies have been conducted on aspects of Australian political knowledge. Don Aitkin's pioneering national voter surveys of 1967, 1969 and 1979 included several questions about knowledge of local members of parliament.⁸¹ The federal government's interest in constitutional reform, the centenary of federation and civics education in the early to mid-1990s resulted in several surveys both of the general electorate and of younger Australians. Some of these surveys were supplemented by individual interviews or focus groups.⁸² The Australian Election Study (AES), conducted after each federal election since 1987 by Ian McAllister and other political scientists, has included a fairly consistent battery of political knowledge items in most of its iterations since 1996.⁸³

5.2 How Much Do Australians Know About Politics?

The dominant interpretation of findings from these survey and interview studies has been that Australians are generally not informed voters and that their lack of knowledge constitutes a problem. Comparing the results of the 1996 AES with results from the Civics Expert Group survey three years earlier, Ian McAllister commented, 'The low levels of political knowledge within the electorate are largely confirmed'.⁸⁴ This mattered, McAllister argued, because more knowledgeable voters had more positive attachments to democracy and were slightly more likely to be political participants.⁸⁵ Kate Krinks reported similar concerns in a contemporaneous report for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library:

Australians' lack of political knowledge has been reported regularly over the last ten years and has prompted expressions of concern from politicians, educators and other sections of the public. In particular, low levels of knowledge about, and interest

⁸¹ D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics*. Canberra: ANU Press, second edition, 1982.

⁸² QRS, *People's Knowledge of Australia's Constitution: Sydney and Melbourne*. Report Prepared for Ideas for Australia, 1993. ANOP, *The Australian Community and Its Governments, The Constitution, Citizenship and Civics: Community Knowledge and Understanding*. ANOP Detailed Report presented to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994. Civics Expert Group, *Whereas the People... Civics and Citizenship Education*. Canberra: AGPS, 1994.

⁸³ McAllister, *The Australian Voter*, pp. 65-71.

⁸⁴ I. McAllister, 'Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 33(1), 1998, p. 11.

⁸⁵ McAllister, 'Civic Education', pp. 18-20

in, politics amongst people aged between 15 and 35 has sparked particular concerns about the implications for the well-being of Australia's democratic political system.⁸⁶

In a summary analysis of surveys taken from the 1960s to the 1990s, Rodney Smith argued that 'Wherever one chooses to start looking, the sketchiness of Australians' knowledge of crucial areas of democratic politics soon becomes obvious'.⁸⁷ Updating his earlier study in 2011, Ian McAllister concluded that '[a] politically informed electorate is considered to be a prerequisite for representative democracy. Yet ... levels of political knowledge remain comparatively low'.⁸⁸

Given the negative conclusions derived from the survey data, it is worth thinking critically about the sorts of voter information that these surveys test. Most of the surveys are designed to cover electoral behaviour writ large and therefore only include a few questions dealing with political knowledge. Not all of the limited survey items about political information concern voting and elections. Of the six AES voter knowledge items used consistently since 1996, for example, three relate directly to elections—the use of proportional representation for Senate elections, the time between House of Representatives elections and the payment of candidate deposits. Two items—the number of MHRs and the High Court's role in constitutional change—have a tangential relationship to elections or referenda, while knowledge of the date of federation seems unconnected to informed voting (see Table 5.1).⁸⁹ This point is equally true of the civics and constitutional knowledge surveys of the 1990s, which covered topics such as the contents of the Constitution, the roles of the houses of parliament and cabinet, and the process for choosing a prime minister, along with information about elections and voting.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ K. Krinks, *Creating the Active Citizen: Recent Developments in Civics Education*. Research Paper 15, 1998-1999. Parliamentary Library. Parliament of Australia. Accessed at: http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9899/99RP15

⁸⁷ R. Smith, *Australian Political Culture*. Sydney: Longman, 2001, p. 27.

⁸⁸ McAllister, *Australian Voter*, p. 71.

⁸⁹ Earlier AES surveys included a seventh item about the eligibility of Senators to serve in Cabinet. See McAllister, 'Civic Education', p. 12.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, pp. 28-29.

Table 5.1 Political Knowledge Items and Responses in the 2013 AES.⁹¹

Item	Correct response (%)	Incorrect response (%)	Don't Know (%)
Australia became a federation in 1901.	73	3	24
The Senate is based on proportional representation	46	11	43
There are 75 members of the House of Representatives.	40	21	39
The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court.	33	30	37
The longest time allowed between Federal elections for the House of Representatives is four years.	28	52	20
No one may stand for Federal Parliament unless they pay a deposit.	23	33	44
<i>Average</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>35</i>

2013 AES weighted sample. N = 3955.

The extent to which informed voters should have accurate knowledge about non-electoral political institutions and roles is a matter for debate. It *may* matter, for example, that a large minority of Australians mistakenly believes that the prime minister is somehow directly chosen by the people, rather than by having the confidence of the House of Representatives and being commissioned by the Governor General.⁹² On the other hand, contemporary Australian elections focus heavily on leadership contests. Thus a voter who thinks of elections as involving a preference for one prime ministerial candidate over another may only need to be able to make a successful connection between his or her preference and the party candidates presented on the ballot papers in his or her electorate to qualify as informed.

Finally, the political knowledge tested in the AES and like surveys is often arid and arcane. This applies to some items about elections, such as the rule about paying a deposit. The three-quarters or so of Australian voters in the 2013 AES who did not know that candidates have to pay deposits are unlikely to be affected by their ignorance. By the same token, the three-quarters who

⁹¹ C. Bean, I. McAllister, J. Pietsch and R. Gibson, Australian Election Study, 2013. [Computer file]. Canberra: Australian Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2014.

⁹² Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, p. 29.

did know that federation formed Australia in 1901 are unlikely to find this knowledge helpful either when voting or when thinking about politics more generally. These are questions that political scientists and historians should be able to answer but it is less clear that they constitute the types of information that voters need to possess in making an informed decision at the ballot box.⁹³

The patterns in the more comprehensive questionnaires on political knowledge from the 1990s indicate that the questions that voters are asked affect how knowledgeable they seem. For example, voters knew less about processes from which they were excluded and that rarely featured on the television news (cabinet business, parliamentary proceedings outside question time etc.) than they did about political processes in which they had taken part (voting) or seen highlighted on television (leadership challenges).⁹⁴

5.3 Variations in Political Knowledge

Little data exists that might tell us whether Australian voters have become more or less knowledgeable over time. In the 1996 AES, 58 percent could name their federal member of parliament, an improvement on the 35 percent in Don Aitkin's 1967 survey and the 38 percent who could do so in his 1979 research.⁹⁵ However, this apparent improvement has not continued, with only 54 percent able to name their federal member in the 2013 AES. Other findings from the AES series suggest that levels of voter knowledge have remained relatively stable since the mid-1990s, with around half the respondents in each survey scoring two or fewer correct answers out of six questions and about one-quarter of respondents scoring four or more.⁹⁶ The pattern for 2013 is shown in Table 5.2.

⁹³ M. Goot, 'Studying the Australian Voter: Questions, Methods, Answers', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48(3), 2013, p. 372. For example, the importance of political knowledge in this conceptualization of informed voting can be contrasted with the view taken by the courts that informed voting primarily involves exposure to competing political ideas.

⁹⁴ Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, p. 30.

⁹⁵ Aitkin, *Stability and Change*, pp. 367-8, 390; Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, p. 27.

⁹⁶ McAllister, *Australian Voter*, pp. 68-69.

Table 5.2 Number of Political Knowledge Questions Correctly Answered, 2013 AES.

Number of questions correctly answered.	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
6	1.1	1.1
5	5.2	6.3
4	15.4	21.7
3	26.9	48.6
2	23.1	71.7
1	14.1	85.8
0	14.3	100.0

2013 AES weighted sample. N = 3955. Questionnaire items as per Table X.

The survey research suggests that some Australians are more likely to be informed voters than others. Perhaps not surprisingly, studies since the 1960s have shown that immigrants are less knowledgeable than native-born citizens who have grown up in the Australian political system.⁹⁷ This pattern has been most pronounced for immigrants from non-English speaking countries.⁹⁸ At the same time, these differences have been relatively small.⁹⁹ Moreover, the knowledge gap between immigrants and the native born appears to close over time, as those who have arrived in Australia learn more about their new country.¹⁰⁰

Table 5.3. Voter Characteristics and Political Knowledge, 2013 AES.

Variable	Beta
Political Interest	.26*
Birthplace	.11*
Education	.08*
Age	.05*
Gender	-.01

Adjusted R² .09. * p<.001. 2013 AES weighted sample.

Ian McAllister has reported findings from the 1996 and 2007 AES showing that Australians with higher levels of formal education score higher than

⁹⁷ Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, pp. 240-43.

⁹⁸ McAllister, 'Civic Education', p. 14; *The Australian Voter*, p.70.

⁹⁹ See, for example, ANOP, *Australian Community*, pp. 67, 72, 75, 77, 79, 89, 93, 96, 103, 111.

¹⁰⁰ N. Mistilis, 'The Political Participation of Immigrant Electors', *Politics*, 15(1), 1980, pp. 69-70; Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, p. 243.

others on the political knowledge quiz, as do older Australians and those with more interest in politics. In both surveys, male voters also possessed, on average, more political knowledge than female voters.¹⁰¹ Table 5.3 shows that while birthplace, education, age and political interest had the expected effects on political knowledge among respondents to the 2013 AES, gender produced no significant difference.¹⁰² The 2013 AES might be anomalous in this regard, or the gender gap in political knowledge may have closed since 2007.

5.4 Young Australians as a Particular Focus of Research

Young people have received particular attention in the research on voter information. This attention has reflected the emphasis of both Labor and Coalition federal governments since the 1990s on school curriculums as key tools to promote stronger citizenship in Australia.¹⁰³ As part of this emphasis, government agencies have funded major research projects on young people's civic engagement, although they have not conducted systematic evaluations of the school civics programs that have been implemented as a result of these projects.¹⁰⁴

Kathy Edwards, a researcher on the Youth Electoral Study (YES) project, argues that the emphasis on youth represents a new version of the 'moral panic' that often colours the way authorities view young people; in this case the failure of the young to meet expected standards of citizenship.¹⁰⁵ This moral panic was encapsulated in the Civics Expert Group's claim in the mid-

¹⁰¹ McAllister, 'Civic Education', p. 14; *The Australian Voter*, p.70. See also Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, p. 209.

¹⁰² Male and female AES respondents both averaged 2.4 correct answers in 2013.

¹⁰³ See M. Print, 'Curriculum Policy, Values and Changes in Civics Education in Australia', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 20(1), 2000, pp. 21-35; M. Print, 'From "Survival" to "Leadership": The Practice of Civic Education in Australia', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 35, 2001, pp. 77-91 M. Print, 'Citizenship Education and Youth Participation in Society', *British Journal of Education Studies*, 55(3), 2007, p. 331; L. Tudball, 'The Shifting Sands of Civics and Citizenship in Australia: What Principles, Policies and Practices Should be Enacted in the Times Ahead?', *Ethos*, Term 2, 2009, pp. 9-13; K. Edwards, 'Political Socialisation', in R. Smith, A. Vromen and I. Cook (eds), *Contemporary Politics in Australia: Theories, Practices and Issues*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 88.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, the involvement of the Australian Council for Education Research in the IEA Civic Education Study during the late 1990s and the Youth Electoral Study (YES) funded from 2003 to 2006 by the Australian Electoral Commission and the Australian Research Council. S. Mellor, K. Kennedy and L. Greenwood, *Citizenship and Democracy: Australian Students' Knowledge and Beliefs*. The IEA Civic Education Study of Fourteen Year Olds, Camberwell, Australian Council for Education Research, 2002; Australian Electoral Commission, 'Youth Electoral Study (YES)' http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/Publications/youth_study/index.htm

¹⁰⁵ Edwards, 'Political Socialisation', pp. 88-90.

1990s that Australia's youth suffer from a 'civic deficit'.¹⁰⁶ The focus on young people may also stem from the common (if contestable) view found in the political socialisation literature that an individual's political attitudes are largely formed by early adulthood.¹⁰⁷ On this view, if Australians are not educated about and interested in politics when they are young, they are unlikely to want to learn more in later life.

This attention to young people's civic engagement has produced more evidence regarding their acquisition of political knowledge, although these advances in understanding have been restricted by limitations and inconsistencies in the methodologies used by different studies. With this caveat in mind, the studies point to some tentative conclusions.

First, compared with their counterparts in other countries, young Australians do not seem to be poorly informed about politics. The one major international comparative study on young people's political knowledge was conducted across 28 countries in 1999. It included a sample of 3331 Australian Year 9 students. Given the cross-national nature of the research, the questionnaire items were relatively broad and focused on conceptual knowledge of democracy rather than the details of specific political institutions in any particular country setting. Typical examples included items on the expected role of mass media in a democracy, reasons for having more than one political party, and citizens' democratic rights. The average overall scores of Australian students on content items matched the international average for those items. On interpretation items, such as identifying the core messages in election campaign material, Australian students returned average scores above the international average.¹⁰⁸

Second, given that repeated AES results since 1996 consistently show that younger Australians are less informed than older Australians, it seems safe enough to conclude that Australians are not stuck with the level of knowledge they hold in their teenage years. Some research suggests that political knowledge gradually increases until electors are in their 40s, when it tapers off.¹⁰⁹ Other research suggests that among young people, the differences between 18 and 25 year olds are noticeable. Australians enter the electorate with little knowledge or interest in politics but develop a greater interest by

¹⁰⁶ Civics Expert Group, *Whereas the People*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ For discussion, see Smith, *Australian Political Culture*, pp. 123-9.

¹⁰⁸ Mellor et al, *Citizenship and Democracy*; S. Mellor, 'Comparative Findings from the IEA Civic Study and their Impact on the Improvement of Civic Education in Australia', *Journal of Social Science Education*, 1, 2003, pp. 1-13.

¹⁰⁹ McAllister, 'Civic Education', pp. 14-15.

their mid-20s, as they take on 'the rights and responsibilities that accompany attainment of legal adulthood'.¹¹⁰

Third, part of the difference between younger and older voters may not be about their political knowledge per se but about the confidence they have that their political knowledge is adequate. Murray Print, discussing the national YES, which surveyed 4,700 year 12 students in 2004 and 2007, concludes that '[h]alf the students *feel* they lack the fundamental knowledge to understand the political parties and the key issues, as well as to make decisions about voting, and in general, to vote'.¹¹¹ The YES questionnaire did not measure political knowledge directly, so it is impossible to know how good or bad the young people's knowledge actually was. Analysing the detailed focus group interviews conducted as part of the same YES research, Kathy Edwards argues that young people's lack of political participation is driven by a lack of opportunity rather than a lack of knowledge.¹¹² Young people's willingness to admit uncertainty may feed into a mistaken perception that they are especially unknowledgeable about politics.

Fourth, the pattern of political information among younger voters seems to be similar to that among older voters; that is, they know most about what they have seen on the news media and what they themselves are expected to do, such as voting, rather than finer details of the processes of Australian government. Ariadne Vromen's study of 339 Year 12 students in NSW, conducted after the 1993 federal election, found that almost all respondents could identify the leaders of the Labor and Liberal parties and most could correctly match policy positions with major party platforms. Fewer knew the names of cabinet ministers and fewer still could identify a minor party leader or that party's key youth policy. Their knowledge of which level of government was responsible for particular services varied widely.¹¹³

A 1994 survey of 856 students from Years 7 and 11 in WA found that respondents were most likely to think that they needed to know about their rights as citizens and how to enrol and vote and least likely to think that they

¹¹⁰ Q. Beresford and H. Phillips, 'Spectators in Australian Politics?', *Youth Studies Australia*, December 1997, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Print, 'Citizenship Education', p. 334, our emphasis.

¹¹² K. Edwards, 'From Deficit to Disenfranchisement: Reframing Youth Electoral Participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(5), 2007, p. 552. For similar evidence and arguments from the UK, see M. Henn, M. Weinstein and D. Wring, 'A Generation Apart? Youth and Political Participation in Britain', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 4(2), 2002, pp. 167-192.

¹¹³ A. Vromen, 'Paul Keating is the Prime Minister, But Who Delivers the Mail? A Study of Political Knowledge Amongst Young People', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 30(1), 1995, pp. 74-90.

needed to know about the features of the Constitution or minor party policies. Their definitions of the good citizen were equally focused on individual behaviour, such as respecting other people's rights, rather than knowledge of the Constitution or the Australian political system.¹¹⁴ These priorities were the reverse of those of the Australian teachers surveyed in the IEA Civic Education Study, who tended to emphasise the need for factual knowledge.¹¹⁵

Finally, while much of the Australian policy discussion about improving young people's political knowledge has focused on the formal and informal school curriculum, the research suggests that schools are only one source of political knowledge for young people. Moreover, while there is some evidence that school civics programs increase political knowledge and activity,¹¹⁶ young people appear to view schools as less important than their families or the news media as sources of information about voting and politics.¹¹⁷

5.5 Conclusion

Despite the growth of survey and interview studies since the 1990s, conclusions about the contours of Australian voter knowledge must still be tentative. The research has not been systematic and it is difficult to compare the results either over time or with those from other countries. That said, Australians generally seem to have a fairly shaky grasp of the abstract details of their political system; however, they also appear to have a firmer information base when it comes to the electoral processes in which they take part. Their political knowledge tends to be more practical than theoretical, in that they have greater knowledge of the political tasks that they are expected to carry out themselves than they have of the more specialised tasks carried out by parliamentarians, government ministers, judges and the like.

Much of the research into voter information has been driven by a concern that young Australians lack the knowledge to participate in elections and in politics more generally. The AES surveys repeatedly find that older Australians tend to be more informed than younger voters. Although the

¹¹⁴ H. Phillips and W. Moroz, 'Civics and Citizenship: Research Findings on Students' Perceptions', *Youth Studies Australia*, 15(1), pp. 13-19.

¹¹⁵ Mellor et al, *Citizenship and Democracy*, pp. 112, 118.

¹¹⁶ Lawrence Saha, 'Political Activism and Civic Education among Australian Secondary School Students', *Australian Journal of Education*, 44(2), 2000, pp. 155-174.

¹¹⁷ Vromen, 'Paul Keating is the Prime Minister', p. 82; M. Print, L. Saha and K. Edwards, *Youth Electoral Study. Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, December 2004, pp. 13-15. Available at: http://www.aec.gov.au/about_aec/publications/youth_study/youth_study_1/youth_electoral_study_01.pdf

relative lack of knowledge among the young might confirm the fears often expressed for the future of Australian democracy, those fears may also be unwarranted. One interpretation of the AES findings is that rather than turning up for their first votes as fully fledged citizens, voters gradually learn their politics on the job, increasing their knowledge as voting becomes a more familiar activity for them. The focus group discussions reported in the next chapter of this report suggest that many citizens learn through voting.

6. The Views of Ordinary Voters

6.1 Introduction

Previous sections of this report have set out the views of official and academic stakeholders on the challenge of informed voting in Australia. These views are well-known through official reports and academic articles. Far less is known about what ordinary Australian voters think about their own levels of voter information and whether and how that knowledge could be improved. The following sections of this report set out the views of 34 voters who took part in four focus groups covering these topics in late 2014. The focus group discussions arguably present a less alarming view of the challenge of informed voting in Australia than the view often expressed by elite stakeholders. There are undoubtedly gaps and uncertainties in the participants' information about politics and voting but those participants seem to have generally worked out ways of getting the information they need to vote on their own terms.

6.2 The Four Focus Groups

In consultation with the authors of this report, facilitators from the social research company Ipsos conducted four focus group discussion sessions over the 7th, 8th and 14th of October 2014. The discussions lasted between 90 and 110 minutes. Three of the focus groups were metropolitan, while one was located in a rural town. The three metropolitan groups had age ranges of 18 to 25, 26 to 50 and 51 to 70 years respectively, while the rural group was an all-age discussion. In all, 34 people participated in the four focus groups.

Due to nature of the research topic, participants had to be on the electoral roll and to have voted in at least one Australian federal or state election. To ensure participants were 'ordinary' voters without professional or specialist knowledge, they could not have worked in the media, advertising, marketing, market research, or for any electoral commissions, political parties, government ministers or parliamentarians. They also had to be able to participate in an English language discussion. Although this last restriction excluded some Australian voters, the participants were not all anglo-celtic. Two participants self-identified as immigrants from China and two others indicated that their families came from non-English speaking countries. Nineteen participants were male and 15 female. They had a range of occupations and educational levels.

The four focus group discussions followed an agreed set of questions (see Appendix 1). The names and other identifying features of participants have

been anonymized in the analysis that follows, as per University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee approval for the research, received on 29 August 2014 (Project No. 2014/688). Instead of using their names, participants have been assigned a pair of initials.

6.3 Does Voting Reward Efforts to Become Informed?

Almost all of the focus group participants viewed voting as an important duty and the majority claimed that they would vote if it was not compulsory. At the same time, they disagreed about the efficacy of voting. For some, such as CD, voting was simply the trade-off for other political participation: 'if I want to bitch and moan, I've got to have had my say in the first place [laughs]'. People who did not vote had no right to criticise the government.

Others thought that their vote in itself gave them a voice. As CE put it: 'When I get to the place to vote, there's a sense of power [laughs]'. CH thought that voting '... means you have some input in the benefits and the outcomes'. This view of voting as efficacious was contested by other participants, such as CA:

I don't entirely agree. I think I will have a very small say, it depends on your electorate as well. If you're in an electorate that's got a large margin, your vote is very minimal. If you are in an electorate that has a very small margin, your vote can be very important to who wins that election, so I see it varying from electorate to electorate how important your vote is.

While most participants themselves thought voting was important, they were unable to find arguments that might convince doubters who lived in safe electorates. The following exchange between DN and several sceptical participants in the metropolitan 50 to 70 year old group illustrates the difficulty:

DP: Yeah I think it's, for me it's important to vote although I guess I've lived in [inner suburb], raised in [inner suburb], lived in [another inner suburb] so it really doesn't make any difference who I vote for [laughs]. And that's a bit of a disappointment.

DM: Yeah I'd agree with that, you know I think it's important to vote, and I will always make the effort, but I don't think my vote carries much weight.

DN: Once again, one vote carries a lot of weight, because ... your vote might have been the one that tips whichever way the election goes.

DM: That can happen.

DN: So I think you know...

DL: Not in my electorate.

DN: You should take your vote very seriously I think.

The issue of safe electorates aside, doubts about the efficacy of voting were also expressed by participants who thought the Labor and Liberal parties offered them no real choice, or who felt the political agenda omitted critical issues. Two comments from the 18 to 25 year old focus group suggest that these perceptions are formed relatively early:

BG: Yeah I guess [I'm] indifferent. I mean, I follow political stuff every day, I watch the TV, read newspapers, listen to the radio so I'm aware of what's going on, I agree with some things, I disagree with some things. I just feel that from my point of view where I live, in a safe electorate it actually doesn't make any difference whatsoever what I vote, so I just want the whole thing to be over.

BF: Yeah ... well you'd like to think there were some fundamental differences between the two major political parties, but at the end of the day you know, there really isn't. And again the issues that count for me, don't ever seem to be addressed, so it's like well you know, does it really bloody matter who gets in [laughs].

Older participants also tended to differentiate between voting in federal and state elections, which most saw as important, and in local government elections, which they tended to see as irrelevant. BG was typical in discussing whether or not he would vote if it was not compulsory:

I think in federal and state elections I probably would, even though I live in a [safe] seat and it will actually make no difference whatsoever, and I've lived in both Labor and Liberal safe seats, but yeah I guess local elections not always.

The 18 to 25 year old metropolitan group voiced a similar distinction, although in their case, they would vote in federal elections but tend not to in state or local contests: 'I probably wouldn't vote at state or local level. I wouldn't even bother about it. And with the federal election, that's something that I think is probably pretty important to vote at' (AE).

The comments above suggest that while most participants see voting as a legitimate duty, their desire to become more informed voters are often inhibited by features of the Australian political system that reduce the efficacy of their votes. These features include safe electorates, major party convergence, gaps in the policy debate and the centralisation of responsibilities in Australia's federal system. Moreover, the comments confirm the tension noted earlier in this report (see Section 5.2 above) between citizens becoming informed about politics and their becoming informed *voters*. Once citizens learn, for example, that their seat is safe and that therefore their (lower house) vote will not be decisive, there is little incentive for them to increase their knowledge of candidates or party platforms.

6.4 Voter Knowledge Through the Electoral Cycle

The focus group discussions also suggested that once citizens have voted a few times and acquired a basic familiarity with elections, their information levels vary across different points in the electoral cycle. Presented very schematically, the cycle is as follows. Between elections, voters' knowledge of politics can be quite sketchy but they gradually build up impressions of the main parties and their policies. As an election approaches, they tend to pay more attention to politics until they make or confirm a decision about who they will vote for. If this occurs before or early in the campaign period, they often find the election campaign tedious and trivial. Election day itself switches voter attention to finding polling places and filling in ballot papers correctly. Once the result is known, voters revert to a more casual approach to following politics.

While the levels of political interest and knowledge among the focus group participants varied, their discussions indicated that many would struggle with the kinds of voter knowledge questions asked in the Australian Election Studies (see Section 5.2 above). Two of the groups, for example, became engaged in discussions of compulsory voting that indicated gaps in the details of their political knowledge. First, the metropolitan 51 to 70 year old group:

DM: Well [voting in Australia] sort of is [voluntary] because if you don't want to vote, you just have to turn up and not vote.

DQ: True, but if you don't turn up you're going to get a fine, aren't you.

DM: That's right, but that's turning up, that's not voting.

DN: You can get your name struck off and then walk out.

DM: Yeah that's right. You don't have to vote.

DQ: You can do it that way, but just the concept, the whole idea of whether it should be, in a democracy whether you should have the right to choose.

DS: And compulsory voting is quite unusual, I like it, it's not just the US where it's not compulsory, it is most countries in the world where it's not compulsory.

The metropolitan 26 to 50 year old group took a slightly different but equally sketchy approach to the topic of compulsory voting:

BE: But there's no other way [than compulsory voting] to do it though is there?

BG: I can't think of any other country that has...

BF: We're it and there's one other and they're the only two countries in the world that's got compulsory and we're one of them.

BE: Is that right?

BF: Yep.

BE: Oh I didn't know that.

BG: Are you sure there's another one?

BF: I can't remember but I know there is another one [laughs].

The details of the Australian political system, including the electoral system, are not topics that the focus group participants were able to discuss confidently or accurately. Nonetheless, the discussion in the older groups in particular suggested that voters gradually accumulated information about

how the government and opposition parties were performing that they then use at an election:

BC: Yeah [I] look at their record and then yeah, just what they stand for in general.

BG: I think it's a fairly long term process.

BC: Yeah, exactly, yes.

BG: Not always but in general.

BE: I think it's more than information, I think its things like how the party works together. I mean I think that Labor were, you know, it went really badly for them because of just the way they just kept stabbing each other in the, you know, just the way that...

BF: The in-fighting.

BE: Yeah. Just handled themselves over three years did them no favours at the polling booths. And I think things like that are really important, how a team work together, and that's always going to have an impact on what they can actually do for the country. And I think it always says a lot about their integrity, that's what you said. So I think it's more than policies, I think it's, because I think sometimes their policies are quite similar and you have to look at things like that.

BG: The ability to actually execute what it is and the competence.

BF: Because they can say anything they want, but it's whether they follow through with it or not.

BE: Yeah, yeah.

The official campaign period is thus not necessarily the most important period in this process of forming electoral judgements. For first time and younger voters, the campaign does often produce an increase in information, or at least awareness, particularly about local representatives and candidates:

I mean, I personally find though that I don't hear of anything about my local MP or whoever's running, right up until I have to vote for them, and then I find out who, you know, my member

for parliament is in the area and the council and I go, okay, here's all these documents that are coming in the mail and I previously had no idea who they were (AG).

For some more experienced voters, the campaign marks a period in which they are resistant to any new information from the media and candidates and just want to get to the ballot box. The following exchange resulted when the rural group was asked how they reacted when an election was called:

CG: Oh, again? [Laughs.]

CH: Can I hide and come back when it's done?

CJ: Well, I suppose we just look at all the junk mail ... that you get hit with all the time, all trying to...

CG: Win your vote.

CJ: Get your vote to their...

CG: Speed the process up, hurry up.

CJ: So it just goes on for too long sometimes. Probably more so with the federal, the last federal one, you know? Where we had three years of posturing [laughs].

Voters from the rural focus group who were most enthusiastic about elections shared this negative view of campaigns as a source of information:

I'm still excited about elections. It's about, it's that whole, 'Yes, finally I get a chance to get in there and make my vote'. So, I'm sad I know, but it's just something that I get excited about, I think 'Yes!' And then spend the rest of the time turning off, when I see the election, you know, all the campaign ads come on, because I like to go and do my own research, so you know, cut the talking in the TV, interrupting my TV-watching (CB).

Polling day provides its own specific information challenges, from finding a polling place to casting a valid ballot. Voters with different levels of experience tend to address these challenges in different ways (see Section 6.5 below); however, it is clear that many voters rely heavily on information that is provided by party campaigners and electoral officials at polling places. Some of the more experienced voters were confident that they could vote in

the way they intended without assistance from how to vote cards: 'I usually just put it in my order, not worry about what they've put' (J). Others were confident only because they were able to access immediate information on polling day: 'I just need to take the papers [how to vote cards] ... I'd hate to mark the wrong box. I mean it wouldn't really matter at the end of the day, but it would matter to me' (BE).

Others, particularly in the 18 to 25 year old group, were not sure whether they had in fact cast a valid vote at all, once they began to discuss preferences. This group was affected by the difference between optional preferential voting in state elections and full preferential voting in federal elections. AG's uncertainty was typical: 'I thought you could just number the first like X amount. I'm pretty sure it said [that] and the rest you can leave. So now we're all going to get to the voting booths and go, hang on I'd better check this'.

Participants were particularly aware of the complexity of preferences in Senate elections. While they welcomed the option of above the line Senate voting—'At least you've given the choice' (BD)—most were also uncomfortable with either voting one above the line and therefore allowing the parties to order their preferences for them or having to work out a full system of preferences themselves. Participant DS summarised the view repeated in various ways in all groups:

Well, yeah, then you've got either, you've got a dilemma because you either tick one party and give your preferences to them, or you have to go through 50 or 100 parties, most of which you wouldn't know about, even if you've been doing thorough research, wouldn't know about some of them. Some of the smaller parties are incredibly extreme. I don't like this new trend that seems to have emerged where the small parties are preferencing all the other small parties, in the hope that one of them will get over the line and not really caring about the policies, the only appeal to them is that it's a small minority.

Whichever option they chose in the Senate ballot, participants felt that they lacked critical information about the effects of their choice.

After polling day, voters were aware of the headline result—which party won government—but seemed to have little information about more detailed outcomes. Discussion of the responsibilities of the Australian Electoral Commission by the 18 to 25 year old group led to the following exchange about the 2013 federal election:

AH: They've got to make sure the procedures are met. So like in WA, that was like two years ago, they had to do a recall on all of the votes.

AB: Did they?

AH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't know if that really got reported that much over here, but they had to do the whole state election again. So basically it's under their responsibility to make sure stuff like that doesn't happen.

AB: Why did it have a recall?

AH: Well they lost some papers or something like that, yeah, so they had to do it again. I don't know exactly what happened.

AG: Was it compulsory the second time around?

AH: Yeah. Definitely.

AD: Gives you time to rethink your vote.

AF: Wasn't there that thing with Palmer or someone up in Queensland where he suggested that 250 people voted more than once or something like that and they had to recall it because they didn't believe it was fair?

The 26 to 50 year old focus group featured an equally tentative discussion about the circumstances of the 2013 election of the Liberal Democratic Party Senate candidate in New South Wales. Participants quickly became engaged in a discussion of the implications of these events; however, most seemed to have little or no prior knowledge of them.

6.5 Sources of Information

For most participants, early information about where to direct their vote came from family members and especially parents. In a few cases, parents influenced their children by encouraging them to find out information for themselves. More commonly, as for AD in the 18 to 25 year old group, the information was more pointed:

AD: [Y]our one vote that could be kind of dangerous, like if you have no idea what you're doing. Like the last time I voted I was actually very unsure. I just called up my dad and I was like, "Hey, so I'm about to vote. What do you think?" you know.

AB: So you really just voted for your dad twice.

AD: Yeah I just voted for my dad, yeah.

Participants in the older groups indicated that it took time for them to develop their own ideas about how to vote. Participant CG's first vote was 'the same as what my father told me to do [laughs]'. Later, she worked out her own views: 'I've now got an opinion, my own opinion now, but even when I first married back in '69, I followed my husband until I thought, "No, I don't have to do what he does, or Dad does." No, I've got my own thing, it's totally different than theirs'.

Informal sources, such as parents and friends, were also important for early information about the mechanics of voting on election day. AD's experience was typical:

I had friends and like my family kind of, because I had no idea how to do it. And like just my mates, you know, at school, like I was just like, how do I do it, because it was my first time, you know, because I'd only just signed up to do the election and stuff that year and stuff like that. Because I'd been living overseas most of my life anyway, so I was so confused. And none of them went up with me because they'd all done it already and by the time I met them, so they were like, "Just go up. There's like a place up the road there you can go and do it." And I was like, oh man. So I just kind of winged it, walked in, called my dad on the way. And then I kind of asked him and he was just like, "You're just going to have to fill out a bunch of like boxes and order them, you know, which one's the most." It's pretty simple.

Other first time voters, like AF, relied on official information to help him through the process:

I got a letter in my mail saying, 'Hi, you've reached the age to start voting. Go online and enter your details', and then like there was little, it was kind of like a YouTube video, 'This is how you vote'. And it was like candidate one, candidate two, went

through. There was old ladies at the school and they were like, 'This is how you do it'.

The same was true of BA, who migrated to Australia from China: 'the first time I vote, because I got Australian citizenship ... they send the letters to your letterbox, you've got all the instructions to fill, where to put a one, where to put a two, and which way you prefer, the long list. And when you go [on] the day they still have the descriptions there'. Other first time voters used enrolment confirmation letters, leaflets, newspaper advertisements and signage at polling places as aides to voting. The discussions indicated that as they became more experienced, voters continued to make use of a range of formal and informal information sources to orient them on polling day, with no particular information source dominant.

Participants acknowledged the mainstream news media's role in informing voters and most had media sources that they favoured for political news. They were, however, sensitive to news media bias:

DQ: I remember it used to be a tradition here in Australia, say depending on the newspaper, *The Australian* might be a bit right wing, and *The Age* a bit more to the left.

DM: That's right.

DQ: It used to be that way, and...

DS: It still is to an extent, but not...

DQ: But unlike the online newspapers...

DL: Yes, there's definitely a bias there.

DP: Particularly with *The Australian* I think, to me.

DQ: *The Australian* I can't comment on because I don't read it, but certainly between *The Age* and the *Herald Sun*.

The view in all groups was that news bias was inescapable. In response, participants tried to filter out this bias themselves, or to consume news from a range of media sources, or do their own research on news stories. Participant BG took the latter approach: 'Yeah I've looked up, in general I don't, but I have looked up a couple of things, one to do with superannuation policies of one of the parties and stuff which is pretty important to me. So I wanted to

make sure what I heard from the media was actually accurate'. Other voters took similarly selective approaches, not trying to understand all policy areas but trying to be well informed about those of particular concern to them. One or two had even emailed candidates and parties directly to ask for information.

Voters in the older focus groups tended not to use new social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, viewing them as for young people. Those older voters who were on Facebook did not read any political posts, seeing those who put them up as dogmatic and uninformed (BC, BG). Participants in the 18 to 25 year old group were more likely to use new social media platforms. Interestingly, they mirrored the views of older voters about social media and politics. The dominant view among younger voters was that political commentary on social media was more 'extreme' (AD), trivialising (AH) and less reliable than that in traditional media: 'it's too easy to just say things online' (AD). Some, like AG, also complained that elections changed the behaviour of their friends on social media:

I don't like social media in elections. I don't know, like sometimes it brings out people's true colours. Like I have a friend on social media, quietest person, always like happy statuses and whatever and then all of a sudden, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, and it's like no, I can't cope ... I find it too hard listening to too many opinions, but I'd rather just have my own little opinion.

AG's response, like that of several voters in the older focus groups, was to do his own research on issues he cared about, rather than engaging in on-line forums.

6.6 Suggestions for Better Informing Voters

Most participants thought that more could be done to inform Australian voters. Perhaps predictably, they had few firm ideas about how this should occur. The suggestions that were made often provoked immediate objections of various kinds. Sensitivities about partisan bias figured prominently in this part of the discussions. In this context, the groups drew a distinction between 'political information' about party policies and candidates on the one hand and 'process information' about voting and elections on the other. They were more sceptical that information about parties and candidates could be presented without bias than they were that information regarding electoral processes could be neutrally presented.

Participants often expressed the view that political parties should be responsible for informing voters about their own policies and candidates. Some would have liked to ensure that campaign material focused more on

party policies and less on attacking opponents. For them, negative campaigning was one reason for participants not trusting political information and not paying attention to elections contests.

Other participants believed that a neutral organisation could facilitate comparisons of the parties' policies to allow voters to choose between them in a more informed way. One suggestion was that the Australian Electoral Commission could 'deliver to every single household in Australia a booklet of the party manifestos' (BG). For BG, the idea of everyone having access to the same information was more important than whether or not they used it:

BA: It's going to be like a Yellow Pages, no one will read.

BG: Probably ... not many people would read it, but if everyone's getting the same information, the idea is that they do have a look.

On-line tools were more commonly suggested than printed material. Some thought the Australian Electoral Commission might host a website that contained a series of links to the different party websites (BA), or produce a smartphone application that collated different party policies by issue. Some participants had heard of, or used, the online VoteCompass tool produced by the ABC and several universities for the 2013 federal election, which allowed voters to compare their own views on a range of issues with those of Labor, the Coalition and the Greens. Another idea was an equivalent to the Australian Consumer Association's *Choice* website:

If they want more informed voters it could be beneficial where you know, you've got that neutral party. It's like *Choice*. *Choice* is the consumer watchdog. There's the neutrality of it. I would go onto the *Choice* website and have a look at it because I know that it's not a biased article. If there was something similar for voting I'd be more inclined to go, right, I'm assured that this is not biased, I can get my information from this without it being swayed a particular way or the other (AG).

Some participants argued that such an on-line tool would have to include all parties to be fair, which might make it too cumbersome to use. For others, the difficulty was no one could be trusted to compile such a website in a non-partisan way. Obvious contenders such as universities, independent research companies and the ABC were all seen as potentially biased.

Similar concerns were raised about the idea that schools should take the lead in informing voters, even if that information was limited to learning about

electoral processes. Discussion in the rural group moved quickly from the potential of schools to educate young people about elections to the dangers of biased teaching. Like religion, politics should be kept out of schools:

DN: Well schools are supposed to not have that role.

DM: They have a role in coaching about the political process and how it's structured, not about how parties respond to issues I think.

DN: Yeah you can't have Christmas carols, you can't be giving political stuff [laughter].

DQ: Explain the process of how actually government works, how the voting system works, and just what each chamber of the government how, what its function is and what... I think that's very broad. But I think that helps, and after that you sort of, I guess form your own opinion don't you of your own ideas.

....

DN: You get a bit when you study Australian politics, but you don't get a direction, it's all process.

DQ: Yeah it's got to be process otherwise it's brainwashing.

DN: And past, not present and future because that can be misleading.

The discussion in the 26 to 50 year old metropolitan group followed a similar pattern:

BF: I know, they should teach politics in, like start from young primary school and you know, make politics interesting and the kids get into it.

BE: Yeah maybe.

BF: And you can gravitate towards something.

BG: I think the danger with that though is you might get, a teacher might have a certain political view.

BA: Like with the religion, going to a Catholic school.

These discussions involve a complex balance between the potentially competing values of political neutrality, specifically Australian content and promoting student interest in politics.

Each of the groups expressed the view that there was no single best way of distributing information to voters. Some emphasised the need for information in community languages other than English to spread information throughout ethnically diverse communities. All saw age as a key variable for effective information delivery, with different approaches best for different age groups. The oldest group favoured traditional media but thought that new social media would be best for young voters:

BB: ... [F]or older generations, the email thing might be too hard for them....

BD: I think local papers would be a good area to advertise, because most people get it either at their home or grab it from their local chemist or wherever, and it's free.

...

BC: I think social media would be excluding the older generation too much. And that kind of media to me and advertising is, I wouldn't take it seriously, like a pop up for me. I know I'm going to use the word integrity again, but it doesn't have the integrity like a newspaper or something you take a bit more seriously.

Participant BE: It is a way of tapping into the younger generation and getting them more motivated to vote.

The youngest group of voters echoed this view about age-related communication channels:

AA: A Facebook link would be perfect.

AH: People that use Facebook are like, I don't know, I think that people over 40 aren't really using Facebook every day.

AA: No, but for us, for us.

A central theme in these discussions was the need to give people a choice of different methods of information delivery. From the point of view of those attempting to inform voters, this probably means using as many methods as possible to maximise the chance of messages being received.

6.7 The Electoral Commissions: A Limited Information Role

Electoral commissions currently play a central role in providing information to citizens about a range of aspects of voting, such as enrolment, candidate information, polling place locations, voting periods, methods of voting and the results of the election count. Despite this, electoral commissions did not seem to be well known among the focus group participants and uncertainty existed about the extent of their information role.

The 18 to 25 year old focus group knew little about the electoral commissions:

Q: So do you know who runs the elections, who's responsible for managing them?

AA: Is it the AEC or something? AECC.

Q: Yeah, the Electoral Commission. So there's the Australian Electoral Commission, there's also the New South Wales Electoral Commission who obviously run all the elections that happen in New South Wales. I mean, do you know much about them? It sounds like you've got this vague concept that they're kind of out there, but ...

AB: No.

AF: No.

The focus group interviewer pursued the idea that even if young people may not have heard of the AEC and NSWEC, they had received information from them:

Q: Like you've obviously presumably got information from them but you just haven't registered who it was from kind of thing.

AB: Yeah.

Q: What do you think they do?

AB: They just ...

AA: Count the votes.

AB: Yeah, count them, make sure everyone votes, make sure people enrol.

AG: Organise the voting areas.

This view of the core roles of electoral commissions was very similar in the older focus groups:

CB: They are there to set up the polling stations, to collect people's votes, to count the votes...

CG: Keep the addresses.

CB: To keep the addresses... on the electoral roll...

...

CB: To deal with the people who come up with questions like, "my partner died two weeks ago, they will still be on the electoral roll", so you've got that whole issue of dealing with bereaved persons.

As might be expected, the focus in these answers is on the most visible roles of electoral commissions around election day. This left at least one participant (BE) to wonder: 'What do they do the rest of the time? [Laughter.]' Some participants were able to answer this question by drawing on their experiences of electoral commissions running workplace ballots and local elections and updating the electoral roll. This caused BE to remember her own experience: 'I must say that as soon as my daughter turned 18 she got a letter from the electoral commission to say that she was not on the register, she didn't even have to apply, it all happens straight away now. They don't miss anyone.'

The groups generally expressed doubt that electoral commissions had, or should have, any communication role beyond providing voters with basic functional information about voting:

Q: Do they have a role in providing information?

Participant CB: Apart from the location ... and the times of the polling booth being open?

Participant CC: No, I don't think...

Participant CJ: It could give the impression of bias ... unless they handed you everything on everyone in the election...

...

Participant CD: So the electoral commission's job really is to facilitate an election.

Participant CB: Yes, take care of the logistics.

As noted earlier, a few participants thought that the electoral commissions could play a broader role in informing voters about candidates, parties and policies, as long as they were able to remain neutral. For most participants, however, the core tasks of the electoral commissions were to make sure everyone got to vote and that the vote was counted properly. The 2013 Western Australian Senate vote had raised some doubts that these were being accomplished properly (see Section 6.4 above).

6.8 Referendums: A Special Case?

Focus group participants reported that the casting of an informed vote at a referendum involves similar considerations to the casting of an informed vote at an election. In particular, it was widely thought that the information sources they would draw upon for referendums would be much the same as for an election; for example, news reports in the print and broadcast media, websites and social media.

An additional source of voter information at referendums is the official pamphlet that sets out the cases for and against the proposed amendment (as prepared by federal politicians) and is posted to all households. There was broad support for this practice in the focus groups, provided that the pamphlet was impartial. Some participants, however, doubted the value of it, saying that they preferred to get their information from other sources and that the pamphlet would likely go 'straight in the bin' (AD).

Notwithstanding the similarities between elections and referendums, several participants thought that referendums had a special status and that this would

influence their information-gathering practices. For BE, the decisions made at referendums could have more longstanding consequences than choices made at elections:

I mean for me I think that it's more important than an election, mainly because you know that in three years' time there could potentially be another change, whereas with a constitutional change this is a change that's going to affect my children and my grandchildren potentially and for everybody....

Other participants noted that governments and policies change regularly – whatever happens ‘you can fix it in four years’ (AF)– whereas constitutional change is infrequent, and is ‘set in stone for a long time’ (BD). Referendums were variously described in the youngest group as ‘major’, ‘a big deal’ and ‘extremely huge’ (AA, AB, AF).

Some participants said that the special status of referendums would encourage them to become informed about the issues, to a greater extent than they otherwise would for elections. One reflected that ‘for me it's probably something that I would take more notice of, and I'd like to think Australians for that reason too’ (BE). Another remarked: ‘I feel like because it's a referendum and they don't have them pretty often I'd be pretty keen’ (AB). Others emphasised the importance of public debate prior to the vote, and thought that proposals for constitutional reform were ‘something that everybody should be informed about’ (CG).

Nonetheless, the focus groups noted particular challenges that might arise for voters seeking to learn about constitutional issues. One was the need to develop some understanding of the Constitution itself. CB reflected that ‘[y]ou'd have to be aware of what the Constitution actually says in the first place’. CJ agreed, saying ‘you'd have to have an understanding of what it means’. A second challenge that arose in discussion is the complex and technical nature of many constitutional questions. Such matters ‘aren't really that straightforward’ (AH) and so a special effort is required by authorities to ‘fully explain’ what is changing and to ‘break it down into layman's terms’ (AG).

6.9 Conclusion

The focus group participants did not show high levels of knowledge about Australian electoral institutions and events. Most of them appeared to have a limited interest in day to day Australian politics. Nonetheless, they had generally worked out ways of putting together enough information to vote on

their terms. They had their own favoured sources of political news and electoral information. They relied on a mix of informal advice and official information to deal with the mechanics of voting itself on election day. Comparison of the younger and older groups suggested that confidence in the ability to find necessary information and to vote independently grew with increased experiences of voting. The older groups' recollections of their first votes were similar to the more recent stories of the younger group.

These focus groups suggest that the challenge of informed voting may be reasonably well handled by Australian voters. Most would undoubtedly fall short of the idealised version of the informed voter; however, they seem informed enough to vote on their own terms. The discussions cannot, of course, tell us whether these voters would vote the same way if they knew more about politics and elections, or even if they actually cast the ballot they intended. However, those discussions do suggest that the participants did have an awareness of the sources of information, from news media to official information to how to vote cards, which they can use to inform their votes.

The discussions also suggest two critical barriers to any efforts to increase voter information. The first is structural: participants were generally aware of factors such as safe seats that reduced the impact of their votes and therefore the value of becoming more informed. The second is cultural: Australians seem to hold deep suspicions that information provided to them about their voting choices will be biased in some way. They may be open to receiving more information through various channels about the processes of voting but seem unlikely to support initiatives for increasing broader political knowledge.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

Informed voting is widely valued by political practitioners and academic stakeholders alike. Considerable efforts go into informing Australians about elections. The electoral commissions do much to ensure that potential voters know about their obligations to enrol and vote, as well as how, when and where they can go about these tasks. Political parties provide information at saturation levels throughout election campaigns and supply electors with how to vote cards at polling places. The news media extensively cover election campaigns, as well as broader political stories. Social media participants tweet, retweet, share and like election news and comment. A plethora of official information is available on the internet.

7.2 How Informed Are Voters?

How well does all of this information inform voters when they fill in their ballots? The empirical research in this report suggests that it is hard to know exactly. As the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has written about informal voting: 'The very nature of the secret ballot (and uniqueness of the election environment for each federal election) means that it is difficult to determine what influences a voter to intentionally or unintentionally cast an informal vote'.¹¹⁸ Unless voters have made obvious mistakes in filling out the ballot, it is hard to identify uninformed votes. In many cases, an uninformed and an informed vote will look exactly the same on the ballot paper.

It is also difficult to state unequivocally how much information, and of what type, voters need to qualify as informed. A few participants in the focus groups conducted for this report admitted to having cast uninformed votes (usually describing them as 'donkey votes') at some point in their lives. Most, however, indicated that they tried to fill in their ballots in a way that would support the candidates or parties they preferred. They were confident that they had succeeded, albeit in some cases with the help of how to vote cards. The focus group discussions revealed that these voters often get details about political institutions and processes confused or incorrect. By that measure, like many of the respondents to the AES surveys after each federal election, they would count as uninformed voters. The discussions also, however, indicated that those voters have various ways of acquiring enough information to believe that they have made reasonably informed choices about how they should vote. They had their own favoured sources of political news

¹¹⁸ Australian Electoral Commission, *Analysis of Informal Voting*, p. 34.

and electoral information. They relied on a mix of informal advice and official information to deal with the mechanics of voting itself on election day. By those measures, they seem informed enough voters.

The focus groups thus suggest that the challenge of informed voting is both known to, and may be reasonably well handled by Australian voters. Comparison of the younger and older groups indicate that confidence in the ability to find necessary information and to vote independently grow with increased experiences of voting. The older groups' recollections of their first votes were similar to the more recent stories of the younger group. It seems to be a mistake to think that young voters will not build up their information resources as they vote over time.

7.3 How Could Voter Information be Improved?

The dominant theme in the focus group research was that voters are not passive recipients of electoral information. They actively accept, reject or ignore the various pieces of information available to them and make decisions about how much information they need and how and when they will try to access it. For some, what they learn about the effectiveness of their votes will make them less likely to think they need to become more informed voters. Others will become more informed regardless, because they think it is the right thing to do.

This complex environment makes it impossible to propose confidently any measures that will definitely improve voter information. Instead, this report suggests three considerations that should be applied in any information strategy. These are:

- (1) the distinction between process and political information
- (2) the use of multiple communication channels, each of which will involve at least some wasted effort and resources
- (3) provision of information until and at the point of voting.

It was clear from the groups that voters make a rough distinction between two sorts of information: information about electoral *politics* and information about electoral *processes*. When it comes to information about electoral politics—the competing parties, candidates, issues, policies and so on—voters are mostly happy to rely on favoured sources of information. They manage political information by turning off the news when the campaign becomes trivial or

boring, or ignoring friends who suddenly start posting political commentary on social media.

There seem to be very limited possibilities for increasing political information in this context. While some participants were attracted to the idea of voter information tools that collated and compared party policies, others were suspicious that their information would be biased and would not use them. Similar suspicions of bias were raised at the idea of schools providing more political information to students.

Voters were more open to receiving information about the processes of voting because they thought it could be presented in a neutral way. A number of participants already relied on official voter information sent to them by electoral commissions, although they did not always register that the commissions were the sources of that information.

There seems to be no single best way of delivering information about electoral processes to voters. Different voters like to receive political information in their own preferred ways. While younger voters tend to prefer social media channels and older people tend to be more comfortable with paper-based and traditional media communication, there are exceptions to these age-based patterns. Voters often seem willing to take the trouble to try to access information—for example, by searching the internet themselves—while at the same time disregarding communications sent to them that they think will be boring. The suggestion from the focus groups is that any communication strategy that aims to reach all voters will need to use a range of communications channels and accept a level of redundant effort.

Many voters need access to information right up until the point that they vote. While many of them know relatively early for whom they want to vote, they often will not prepare themselves for the mechanics of voting until election day itself. While unprepared voters seem to muddle through in these circumstances, contacting friends and family for help or driving around until they find a polling place, provision of more last minute advice (even including the exhibition of approved how to vote instructions in all polling compartments) may allow more voters to reflect accurately their intentions on their ballots.

Appendix 1

Discussion Questions for Focus Groups

[NB the sections are not intended to be identified as such during the focus group discussions. They are included here to show the general topics covered and the order in which they will be covered.]

Section A Attachment to Voting

How important is voting in elections to you personally?

Would you vote in elections if it wasn't compulsory? Why/not?

Section B Ease of Voting

How easy do you find it to vote in elections?

What makes it easy/hard?

Is it different for federal, state and local elections?

Section C Gaining Information about Voting

How did you learn how to vote the first time you did it?

How do you decide how you'll vote at an election?

When an election is on, do you ever look for particular information to help you decide how to vote?

[If YES] How easy do you find it to get the information that you want?

[If YES] Where do you usually get that information from?

[Possible follow up prompts: television; radio; newspapers; web; friends; parties/candidates; official information from the electoral commission; voter

advice applications like the Vote Compass; how to vote cards; electoral officials on polling day.]

Do you think most people that you know--your family, friends and neighbours--know enough about voting to do it properly?

Section D Improving Voter Information

Should anything be done to help people vote in a more informed way?

[If YES] Who should do that?

[Possible follow up prompts: schools; news media; electoral commission; parties.]

Section E Information about Voting in Constitutional Referendums

We don't vote on possible changes to the Australian Constitution very often—not since 1999. If the Parliament decided that we should change the Constitution, for example, for Australian to become a republic, voters would have to vote for or against that change at a referendum. If that happened, how would you get the information you need to vote on whether or not to change the Constitution?

[NB the discussion here is not about the pros and cons of a republic—that is just a concrete example to help participants think about voting in referendums. Changing the preamble or recognition of local government could be other alternatives.]

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