SOCIAL MEDIA IN SELECTED AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL AND STATE ELECTION CAMPAIGNS, 2010-15

Introduction

Campaigning in Australian election campaigns at local, state, and federal levels is fundamentally affected by the fact that voting is compulsory in Australia, with citizens who are found to have failed to cast their vote subject to fines. This means that - contrary to the situation in most other nations – elections are decided not by which candidate or party has managed to encourage the largest number of nominal supporters to make the effort to cast their vote, but by some 10-20% of genuine 'swinging voters' who change their party preferences from one election to the next. Political campaigning is thus aimed less at existing party supporters (so-called 'rusted on' voters whose continued support for the party is essentially taken for granted) than at this genuinely undecided middle of the electorate.

Over the past decades, this has resulted in a comparatively timid, vague campaigning style from both major party blocs (the progressive Australian Labor Party [ALP] and the conservative Coalition of the Liberal and National Parties [L/NP]). Election commitments that run the risk of being seen as too partisan and ideological are avoided as they could scare away swinging voters, and recent elections have been fought as much (or more) on the basis of party leaders' perceived personas as they have on stated policies, even though Australia uses a parliamentary system in which the Prime Minister and state Premiers are elected by their party room rather than directly by voters. At the same time, this perceived lack of distinctiveness in policies between the major parties has also enabled the emergence of new, smaller parties which (under Australia's Westminster-derived political system) have no hope of gaining a parliamentary majority but could, in a close election, come to hold the balance of power and thus exert disproportionate influence on a government which relies on their support.

Social media have emerged as political campaigning tools in Australia since YouTube was first used by the major parties, with varying success, to disseminate campaign statements during the 2007 federal election campaign (see Flew, 2008), with blogs also adopted (Kimber, 2012). The leading contemporary platforms, Facebook and Twitter (respectively with some 13m and 2.8m Australian accounts, in a population of 23m Australians), have featured in federal and state campaigns since 2010 (see, for example, Jericho, 2012; Chen, 2015; Young, 2011). Over time, a number of strategies for using such platforms have emerged, and distinctions in the strategies adopted can be discerned based on a number of factors, including for example the technological affordances and social network structures of specific platforms; the overall electoral

standing of parties; the projected personas of party leaders; the social media affinity of parties and candidates; and the positioning of individual candidates as prominent party leaders or comparatively unknown politicians from the parliamentary backbenches.

This paper presents evidence from a longitudinal study of Twitter use by political parties and candidates especially during the 2010 and 2013 federal and 2012 and 2015 Queensland state election campaigns, with additional data drawn from the 2013 Western Australia state campaign. We focus on Twitter both because of its more public and more real-time nature, and because of the significant technical and ethical issues associated with extracting comparable data from Facebook (where politicians' pages are still operated at least in part as personal profiles rather than public pages, and where data gathering would thus be severely affected by the Facebook networks of the researcher gathering the data) – but also because Twitter has by now become a very central space for public political communication in Australia: well over half of all federal and Queensland state parliamentarians now operate Twitter accounts, as did an even greater majority of major and minor party candidates during recent elections.

During the 2013 federal and 2015 Queensland campaigns, we captured all tweets from and @mentions of all of the candidates' known Twitter accounts (442 accounts for the federal election, 158 accounts in Queensland), as well as the prominent hashtags #ausvotes and #qldvotes, providing an exceptionally detailed perspective of party and candidate activities and their resonance with the wider public. We compare this perspective with the respective previous campaigns in 2010 and 2012, where we tracked a smaller sample of accounts (focussing on party leaders and other prominent politicians) as well as the #ausvotes and #qldvotes hashtags, and the 2013 Western Australian election (for candidate accounts and #wavotes alike). Although these earlier datasets are necessarily more limited, and cannot retrospectively be extended to encompass a scope similar to the more recent election datasets (due to the well-documented limitations of retrieving historical Twitter data), they nonetheless serve as highly valuable points of comparison to these recent elections: the aim of our research is not to merely explore the quantitative differences between each set of elections, but instead to address the more important qualitative differences between the social media campaigning approaches adopted especially by the major parties from one election to the next.

To do so, we employ a multi-method approach that connects the quantitative evaluation of the patterns that emerge from our analysis of the Twitter datasets themselves with a close reading of the contemporary media coverage of the political context in general and of the mainstream and social media campaigns in particular. This enables us not only to document what campaigning strategies the parties and candidates employed in each case, but also to infer why they made these specific choices; from election to election, we are also able to test whether in similar circumstances, parties make similar campaigning choices.

For example, preliminary analysis of the social media data on the 2015 Queensland election (held on 31 Jan. 2015) shows exceptionally strong activity by and public engagement with the backbench candidates fielded by Labor – which had suffered a historic defeat in the 2012 election (where it was reduced to only seven MPs in an 89-

member parliament), but which in 2015 won 44 seats and was able to return to government with the support of an independent MP. We observed similarly strong engagement with Labor backbenchers during the 2010 and 2013 federal campaigns, both of which saw Labor lose seats and eventually (in 2013) also lose government. It appears even from this very preliminary analysis that Labor has gradually realised the value of strong social media campaigning by backbenchers in their local electorates - if not to retain or win government, then at least to limit the size of its defeat.

By contrast, the 2015 Queensland L/NP campaign on Twitter was very restrained, with few tweets by front- and backbenchers alike and thus also much more limited public engagement by ordinary Twitter users. This is markedly different from the L/NP's 2013 federal campaign, which saw much more forceful activity from the party's leadership team, yet also very little independent activity from backbenchers, who mainly only retweeted key party messages. This points to a more economical campaigning approach which focusses only on winnable contests and promotes closely stage-managed party content only where such material is likely to be met with a sympathetic response; this would explain why the party adopted a more active Twitter stance during the ultimately successful 2013 federal campaign, while it went to ground rather than expose its Twitter accounts to public criticism during the unsuccessful 2015 Queensland state election.

It should be noted that such explanations are necessarily tentative at this stage; as only one month has passed since the Queensland election date we have not yet been able to process the full dataset in comprehensive detail, and to compare our findings with those from previous elections. Such work will continue over the coming months, and more detailed findings and interpretations will be presented in the final paper.

References

Chen, P. J. (2015). New media in the electoral context: The new normal. In C. Johnson & J. Wanna (Eds.), *Abbott's Gambit: The 2013 Australian Federal Election* (pp. 81–94). Canberra: ANU Press.

Flew, T. (2008). Not Yet the Internet Election: Online Media, Political Commentary and the 2007 Australian Federal Election. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, (126), 5–13.

Jericho, G. (2012). *The rise of the fifth estate: Social media and blogging in Australian politics*. Melbourne: Scribe.

Kimber, M. (2012). Blogging the 2009 Queensland state election. *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy,* (145), 75-85.

Young, S. (2011). *How Australia decides: Election reporting and the media*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.