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#ausvotes Mark Two: *Twitter* in the 2013 Australian Federal Election

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the use of *Twitter* as a political tool in the 2013 Australian Federal Election. We employ a ‘big data’ approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. By tracking the accounts of politicians and parties, and the tweeting activity to and around these accounts, as well as conversations on particular hashtagged topics, we gain a comprehensive insight into the ways in which *Twitter* is employed in the campaigning strategies of different parties. We compare and contrast the use of *Twitter* by political actors with its adoption by citizens as a tool for political conversation and participation. Our study provides an important longitudinal counterpoint, and opportunity for comparison, to the use of *Twitter* in previous Australian federal and state elections. Furthermore, we offer innovative methodologies for data gathering and evaluation that can contribute to the comparative study of the political uses of *Twitter* across diverse national media and political systems.

Keywords

Twitter; politics; Australia; elections; big data

Introduction: The Use of *Twitter* in the 2013 Australian Federal Election

The 2013 Australian federal election in September 2013 will mark the second time that *Twitter* will be used to a significant extent at the national level in the Australian electoral process, following its use as an additional communications tool in the 2010 election. At that point, although the election already generated a substantial amount of *Twitter* engagement especially under the #ausvotes hashtag (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Jericho, 2012), *Twitter* was not yet a mainstream tool for political communication in the country (Burgess & Bruns, 2012), and was used mainly by a specific community of cognoscenti to communicate amongst themselves; while *Twitter* was gradually adopted by Australian politicians at this time (Chen, 2012; Grant, Moon, & Busby Grant, 2010), a comparatively small number of politicians and journalists actively contributed to the 2010 #ausvotes discussion.

This has changed in subsequent years: *Twitter* has played a more substantial role in subsequent state elections (see e.g. Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Bruns, Harrington, & Highfield, 2012), as well as in the continuous discussion of political issues through the #auspol hashtag which sees a small number of highly active contributors generate almost a million tweets each year (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). During the Queensland state election campaign in February and March 2012, several candidates and parties showed a significant degree of activity – and highly divergent approaches to using *Twitter* to disseminate information, engage with the electorate, or take the political fight directly to opposing candidates – and were mentioned by a large number of Australian *Twitter* users (Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Bruns, Harrington, & Highfield, 2012). Similar patterns are currently being observed in the Western Australian state election campaign, which is taking place in February and March 2013.

Such political uses of *Twitter* in electoral contexts are set to be amplified even further during the 2013 federal election campaign, contested mainly by the incumbent Australian Labor Party (ALP) government and the conservative Coalition consisting of the Liberal and National Parties. More than two thirds of the 150 current members of the federal House of Representatives had created their own

Twitter accounts by early 2013, and a substantial number of the candidates contesting the election for other parties are also active on *Twitter* (*Australian MP Tweets*, 2013). The major parties and party leaders are using *Twitter* to attempt to engage with the Australian public, and several federal ministers and opposition shadow ministers are using the platform actively to argue their points. In a country which counts an estimated two million *Twitter* accounts for a population of some 22 million, *Twitter* has become an increasingly significant campaigning tool.

Methodology

'Big Data' Longitudinal Approach

This paper takes a 'big data' approach to examining the use of *Twitter* during the Australian federal election. Since September 2012, we have tracked and captured all tweets by the known accounts of federal politicians, as well as all tweets @mentioning their account names; this list of accounts is being updated continuously as new accounts become known. Additionally, we have also captured tweets posted to the #ausvotes and #auspol hashtags. This data gathering activity will continue to and beyond the 14 September 2013 election date; at the time of writing, it has already captured several hundred thousand tweets, and (following the pattern established by previous elections) the volume of *Twitter* activity around the election is likely to increase substantially as we move closer to the eventual election date.

Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis: Metrics and Content Analysis

We analyse these data, first, by calculating a series of standard *Twitter* metrics as established by Bruns & Stieglitz (2013). These metrics include the total volume of tweets over time (across the entire dataset, for the politicians' accounts as a group – categorised by party –, and for each individual politician); the volume of tweets of particular types (original tweets, @replies, retweets; tweets containing URLs); and the size of the userbase that engages with the politicians' accounts (subdivided into several categories from lead users to occasional respondents). Additionally, we utilise automated content analysis to identify key themes in the dataset (likely to include current themes of Australian political debate such as climate change, asylum seeker policy, or the management of the economy), and determine their presence in the total volume of tweets over time as well as their prevalence in the communicative exchanges around selected leading politicians. Finally, we also identify and graph the networks of interaction (in the form of @replies and retweets) around the various politicians' accounts. For further comparison, similar metrics will also be calculated for the #ausvotes and #auspol hashtag datasets, following the approaches established in Bruns & Burgess (2011) and Burgess & Bruns (2012).

Research Questions

These analyses provide answers to a number of key research questions. The overview of individual accounts' tweeting activities enables us to develop a typology of different *Twitter* campaigning strategies, likely ranging from mere public relations (posting press releases without further engagement) to direct discussion with voters (through substantial @replying), and building on approaches identified in other, international contexts (see, for example, Broersma & Graham, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2012; Maireder, Ausserhofer, & Kittenberger, 2012). From this, we are able to 'reverse-engineer' the campaigning decisions made by candidates and their party campaign offices, and to determine whether such decisions are linked to the overall standing of each party, the relative safety of each candidate's seat, or the respective national prominence of individual candidates. We will also explore whether the patterns suggest that different candidates have been assigned different campaigning roles ('presidential' leaders, 'attacking' deputies), and whether specific themes and slogans are being promoted by accounts of different political colours, as identified by Chen (2012) in the case of the 2010 election.

We contrast such analyses of the candidate accounts' own activities with the popular response to these accounts. This provides an indication of whether the level of activity by specific accounts translates into a matching response from the overall Australian *Twitter* userbase, or whether in spite of such

efforts the general public continues to talk mainly about (and tweet at) the two party leaders' accounts; it shows whether the political talking points promoted by the candidate accounts align with the overall themes of tweeting activity around these accounts (and in #auspol and #ausvotes); and it examines the extent to which general *Twitter* user engagement with the politicians' accounts is split along party lines or cuts across such divisions. In each case, we also examine the dynamic evolution of such patterns over the course of the campaign period, in response to political events during this time.

Conclusion: *Twitter* as a Political Campaigning Tool

This comprehensive study of *Twitter* activity around the 2013 Australian federal election provides an important longitudinal counterpoint to studies of the 2010 election (e.g. Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Burgess & Bruns, 2012) as well as subsequent state elections (Bruns, Harrington, & Highfield, 2012; Bruns & Highfield, 2013). Additionally, in the context of a panel which reports on research into the use of *Twitter* during four national elections in 2013 (three of them taking place in the space of just a few weeks in September), largely using compatible methodologies for data gathering and evaluation, it makes an important contribution to the comparative study of the political uses of *Twitter* across diverse national media and political systems.

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