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Internet use, political knowledge and youth electoral participation in Australia

Ian McAllister

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ABSTRACT
Almost since its inception, the internet has been seen as a means of reinvigorating political knowledge and engagement among the young. Early studies showed small but significant effects for internet use and increased political knowledge among the young. Using a large, national election survey conducted in Australia in 2013, this paper examines the role of the internet in shaping political knowledge among the young and, in turn, its effects on electoral participation. The results show that use of the internet during an election campaign significantly increases political knowledge among the young, and that such political knowledge enhances the likelihood of turning out to vote. Overall, the results extend the findings of other studies which have demonstrated the potential of the internet to re-engage young people into the political process.

For as long as opinion surveys have included measures of political knowledge, there has been little change in aggregate levels of knowledge among the young. This finding comes in spite of several major changes that have occurred in the past few decades. These have included the increase in the size and scope of civic education in schools, the huge expansion in university education, and the much greater attention given to young people by political parties, social movements and interest groups. Taken together, these and other changes should have led to increased political knowledge; in practice, the evidence shows conclusively that they have not. Using evidence from Australia, this paper examines the potential of the internet to remedy the persistently low levels of political knowledge among the young. In turn, the paper evaluates whether enhanced knowledge could increase youth electoral participation.

The backdrop to this question is the fundamental changes that are taking place in views of citizenship across the advanced democracies. Patterns of political engagement among the young are changing rapidly, with traditional forms of participation, such as turning out to vote or joining a political party, showing dramatic declines. In particular, low levels of voting among the young and policy measures to counter it have been the subject of many government reports. These traditional forms of political participation are being...
replaced by issue-based activism, expressed in web-based activity such as blogs and engagement with the social media. In this context, the internet has the capacity to increase political knowledge and thereby to strengthen democratic citizenship. Interactions via the internet have already been found to be similar in their political effects to interpersonal interactions (Gibson and McAllister 2013, 2014; Kittilson and Dalton 2011). There is no reason to suppose that the internet’s implications for political knowledge should be any different.

Most of the information that shapes political knowledge is channeled through the mass media. In principle, therefore, the rapid rise of the internet and its widespread use among the young should enhance political knowledge and as a consequence, increase electoral participation (Eveland et al. 2005; Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, and Samuel-Azran 2015). To examine these questions, this paper examines the role of the internet in shaping political knowledge among the young in the context of a national election campaign. In turn, extending other studies which have examined this topic (but cf Bakker and de Vreese 2011), the paper tests the consequences of political knowledge for the likelihood that a person will turnout to vote in a national election. The data come from the 2013 Australian Election Study (AES) survey which asked an extensive range of questions about political knowledge, in addition to detailed questions about internet use and electoral participation.

Young people, politics and the internet

There is little doubt that contemporary patterns of political engagement differ markedly among young people compared to their older counterparts. The most persuasive argument has been advanced by Lance Bennett in a series of influential papers (see, for example, Bennett 2008, 2013; Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011; Bennett, Wells, and Rank 2009). Bennett distinguishes between ‘dutiful citizenship’, which stresses political participation in formal institutions driven by personal duty, and ‘actualizing citizenship’, which is based on ‘looser personal engagement with peer networks that … organize civic action using social technologies’ (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011, 839). Other scholars have used different names for these two concepts of citizenship. Norris (2003), for example, talks of the transition from ‘citizen-oriented’ to ‘cause-oriented’ activism, while Dalton (2008) distinguishes between ‘citizen duty’ and ‘engaged citizenship.’

This fundamental change in the nature of citizenship is demonstrated most forcefully by declining election turnout among the young. There has been an historic disparity between the turnout rates of the youngest and oldest age groups, but the gap has been increasing at a greater rate since the 1990s (Blais and Rubenson 2013; Fieldhouse, Tramner, and Russell 2007; Niemi and Hamer 2010; Phelps 2012). While there is some volatility in the trends across countries and between generations (Bhatti, Hansen, and Wass 2012; Martin 2012), the low levels of electoral engagement among the young are not in doubt. In addition to abstention, young people are also much less likely to join political parties or to attend political meetings. They are also less interested in major political issues or party political agendas, focusing instead on individual concerns or on issues of specific interest to their peer group (Park 2004).

Political participation is underpinned by political knowledge. Studies shown that knowledgeable individuals are more likely to participate in politics more frequently (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), to have a more in-depth understanding of the policy choices offered to
them, and to be better informed about electoral choices (Andersen, Tilley, and Heath 2005; Singh and Roy 2014). But how do individuals acquire the political knowledge that makes them effective citizens? In practice, much of the political knowledge that people acquire is accumulated across the lifecycle as citizens gain progressively more exposure to government and politics. Therefore, the more political events and educational interventions that occur early in the lifecycle then – other things being equal – there should be greater the levels of political knowledge.

Civic education represents one source of political knowledge early in the lifecycle. Governments around the world have invested considerable resources in order to impart political skills and knowledge to the young through civic education programs in schools (see Galston 2001; Kisby and Sloam 2012). While the scope and depth of these programs varies widely, they all share the goal of creating competent democratic citizens. A second source of information is elections and the political debate that accompanies them; this has been shown to convey knowledge about policy choices and party positions to voters (see Jeffres, Neuendorf, and Atkin 2012). In particular, research has shown that leaders’ debates improve voters’ understanding of the election issues (Benoit and Hansen 2004; Coleman and Moss 2016).

While civic education and elections are both important sources of political information, arguably the most important channel through which citizens absorb political information is the mass media (Aalberg, van Aeist, and Curran 2010; Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2014; Iyengar et al. 2010). The most important political change in the mass media during the twentieth century was the emergence of television as a political medium in the 1950s and 1960s. With its emphasis on visual images and personalities, the application of television to politics is often seen as the main driver behind the personalization of politics. In turn, the public’s increasing familiarity with political leaders has led to greater expectations of government and, when these expectations are unfulfilled, to declining public trust in politics and politicians. By contrast, other media, especially newspapers, are viewed as a source of more detailed information, particularly regarding policy choices (Scheufele 2002; Weaver and Drew 2001).

The widespread use of the internet in the early twenty-first century is fundamentally reshaping the operation of the political system in ways which are at least as profound as television half a century earlier. The most obvious change is in the transition from a low choice media environment to a high choice one. For most of the postwar period, there were relatively few choices in whatever media sources citizens preferred, whether it was newspapers, radio or TV. The net effect was that citizens were exposed to low but constant levels of political information, which could not be ignored save for avoiding the media altogether (Prior 2007). With the advent of the internet, citizens now have unprecedented choice in the political information that they choose to access. They may choose to access large amounts of political information or, equally, they may eschew politics altogether. As Prior (2005, 578) puts it, ‘access to the medium no longer implies access to the news.’

The interactivity inherent in the internet has been viewed as a key characteristic that can enhance political knowledge and political engagement generally (for recent reviews, see Bakker and de Vreese 2011; Bimber 2012; Farrell 2012). This can involve acquiring political information via the internet, as well as using the internet to communicate with other citizens, election candidates and parties in order to discuss specific issues.
In particular, research has shown that discussion is critical for effective civic education (see, e.g. Hahn 2010; McDevitt and Chaffee 2000); emulating this experience in the virtual world should increase knowledge. For example, the international Student Voices program found a strong positive effect on political knowledge for ‘using the internet to explore issues and learn about candidates’ (Feldman et al. 2007, 97). Used properly, the internet should have considerable potential to enhance political knowledge.

Evaluating the role of the internet in enhancing political knowledge leads to two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Following an election on the internet will lead to higher levels of political knowledge, other things (including other media sources) being equal.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The impact on political knowledge of following an election on the internet will be greater among the young compared to the rest of the electorate, other things being equal.

H1 is easily tested with the available data. H2, by contrast, implies that any increases in political knowledge as a result of internet use will be greater among the young than the rest of the population. This accords with the ‘digital divide’ argument, which suggests that rises in political knowledge are unequally distributed across the electorate, with the young, the more highly educated and the better informed experiencing a more significant gain in knowledge compared to other groups (van Dijk 2005; Kim 2009; Prior 2007). Although the internet is raising the aggregate capacity of the electorate to follow politics, the impact on political knowledge is not uniform and is exacerbating a preexisting knowledge gap. This effect is attributed to the self-selectivity involved in accessing internet content, since citizens must actively seek information rather than be passively exposed to it via radio or TV.

Political knowledge is widely agreed to be ‘the currency of citizenship’ (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 8). Studies show that knowledgeable citizens are more likely to participate in politics and to be better informed generally (Milner 2007; Singh and Roy 2014). The absence of political knowledge therefore has major implications for the decline in election turnout that has occurred across the advanced societies. Successive studies have demonstrated that much of this decline is accounted for by young people abstaining from voting, rather than by any broader change across the electorate as a whole (Blais et al. 2004; Dalton 2008; Lyons and Alexander 2000). Declining levels of political knowledge has been shown to be a significant component in this major change (Gidengil et al. 2003; Milner 2005).

The potential importance of political knowledge in shaping electoral participation leads to two further hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Higher levels of political knowledge will result in higher levels of electoral participation, other things being equal.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The impact of political knowledge on electoral participation will be greater among the young compared to the rest of the electorate, other things being equal.

Once again, H3 specifies two covariates, while H4 tests the view that political knowledge will have a disproportionately greater impact among the young compared to the rest of the electorate. This reflects the fact that while much political knowledge is cumulative and is a consequence of the political lifecycle, specific events or behaviors which affect one segment of the electorate more than another may increase knowledge. We
hypothesize that internet use may be an example of such a behavior that has a disproportionate indirect influence on electoral participation. In the remainder of the paper, these four hypotheses are tested using a large, national election survey.

Data and method

Data

The data come from the 2013 AES, which was a nationally representative mail-out, mail-back survey of persons registered to vote in the 2013 election. The sampling frame was supplied by the Australian Electoral Commission from the electoral rolls. There was also an online option for completion of the survey, which was used by a small number of respondents. The final response rate was 33.9% after four follow-ups. The survey was weighted to reflect the characteristics of the national electorate. Full details of the survey can be found in McAllister and Cameron (2013).

Dependent variables

Two dependent variables are used, political knowledge and the likelihood of voting. Political knowledge is measured by the proportion of correct answers to 10 factual questions about politics included in the 2013 AES survey. Six of the questions related to the operation of the political system in general, three to the circumstances of the 2013 election, and one to international politics. The 10 items were combined into an additive scale, producing a mean of 4.5 (see Appendix 1).

Studies of political knowledge in the mass electorate have distinguished between ‘factual’ political knowledge – information about events, institutions or personalities – and ‘background’ or ‘structural’ political knowledge, which enables citizens to interpret political affairs (Elo and Rapeli 2010; McAllister 1998; Sheppard 2015). The public’s level of political knowledge is measured here by the former definition, which is the easiest to ascertain in the context of a public opinion survey. There are three problems in measuring basic factual political knowledge within a survey instrument. First, asking factual questions may reveal the respondent’s ignorance and result in a terminated interview. The use of a self-completion survey partly mitigates this risk since it avoids the respondent-interviewer interaction. Second, there is the possibility that the respondents might use the internet or smart phones to identify the correct answers, although we found little evidence of this. A third, potentially more serious, problem is that ‘don’t know’ and incorrect responses may not necessarily represent an absence of knowledge. As Mondak (2001) has argued, a ‘don’t know’ response may reflect a lack on information, while an incorrect response is more likely to indicate misinformation. To test for this possibility, the results were analyzed to see if ‘don’t know’ and incorrect responses differed from one another in any systematic way. The results did not reveal any significant differences and for that reason, the two categories are combined, with respondents being scored one if they gave a correct answer and zero if they gave an incorrect answer or said that they didn’t know.

Since voting in Australia is compulsory, the second dependent variable, electoral participation, is based on an attitudinal rather than a behavioral question: ‘Would you have voted in the election if voting had not been compulsory?’ and is scored from 1 (definitely
would not have voted) to 5 (definitely would have voted). Around 84% of the respondents said they would ‘definitely’ (66%) or ‘probably’ (18%) vote if voting was voluntary. While the question asks the respondents to imagine how they would act in a hypothetical circumstance – always a difficult proposition in the context of an opinion survey – these figures are close to the experience of other countries that have abolished compulsory voting. In the Netherlands, for example, turnout was 92.1% in 1967, the last election before compulsory voting was abolished. Turnout declined to an average of 84.1% over the six voluntary voting elections immediately following 1967. The estimate that turnout in Australia would decline to around 88% in a voluntary voting election is therefore very comparable with the Netherlands experience, and suggests that the measure of electoral participation used here is robust.

**Independent variables**

Three variables are used to measure internet use. Frequency of general internet use is measured by responses to the question: ‘In general, how often do you use the internet?’ and is coded from 1 (never uses the internet) to 7 (uses the internet several times per day). Frequency of election internet use is measured by responses to the question: ‘Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the 2013 federal election?’ and is coded from 1 (never used) to 5 (used many times). Internet skills is an additive scale based on the question: ‘Have you done any of the following tasks on the internet? … sent an attachment via email … downloaded a software program. … posted audio, video or image files. … personally designed a webpage or blog.’ All three measures have been shown to tap into different aspects of how individuals used the internet, with consequences for political attitudes and behavior (van Deursen and van Dijk 2010; Gibson and McAllister 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012).

The variables measuring media sources were derived as follows. Frequency of following the election in the newspapers is based on the question: ‘How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in the newspapers – a good deal, some, not much or none at all?’ Frequency of following the election on television and on the radio were based on the question: ‘Did you follow the election campaign news on television – a good deal, some, not much or none at all? And did you follow the election campaign news on the radio?’ All three variables are coded from 1 (none at all) to 4 (a good deal). These questions provide a summary measure of self-reported media use during the election campaign.

Six socioeconomic variables are used as controls in the models. Gender, tertiary education and Australian born are dummy variables. Gender is used as a control variable since there is evidence that women and men have different rates of internet usage and often use the internet in different ways (see, e.g. Helsper 2010). Education discriminates in the quality and quantity of political information that a voter seeks and is therefore also an important control variable. Birthplace is taken into account since one in five of the Australian population have been born overseas, about half of them in non-English speaking countries, and their political outlooks often differ from the Australian born (Bilodeau, McAllister, and Kanji 2010). Age, which reflects cumulative political life experiences, is measured in years and family income is measured in quintiles. Urban residence is a four point scale coded from 1 (lives in a rural area or village) to 4 (lives in a major city
over 100,000 people). This is a potential important control variable since the speed and availability of internet access varies considerably across Australia.

One attitudinal variable, interest in politics, is also included as a control. It is measured by the question: ‘Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what’s going on in politics?’ and is coded from 1 (none) to 4 (a good deal). Political interest is an important control since it is one of the most significant predictors in its own right of political knowledge (Gronlund and Milner 2006), as well as of electoral participation (Blais and Rubenson 2013). It has also been shown to be stable over time, and to have its roots in childhood political socialization and adolescence (Prior 2010). Given the importance of political interest, it is therefore crucial to take it into account to properly specify the predictive model.

**Results**

**Levels of political knowledge**

As virtually all other studies have demonstrated, the level of political knowledge across the general electorate is consistently low (Table 1). The survey respondents were reasonably knowledgeable about basic political history, with almost three in four knowing that Australia became a federation in 1901 (question 1). Around half could correctly answer the three questions concerning the 2013 election (questions 7, 8 and 9). The remaining questions show lower levels of political knowledge. For example, less than one in four knew that a deposit is required to stand for election (question 4). Overall, the mean respondent in the survey could correctly answer just 4.5 questions out of the 10, a remarkably low figure given that the answers were based on true or false options.

As expected, respondents aged under 25 displayed much lower levels of knowledge; the mean number of correct answers was more than 1 question less than the general

![Table 1. Political knowledge among citizens 2013.](http://example.com/table1)

(1–6) ‘And finally, a quick quiz on Australian government. For each of the following statements, please say whether it is true or false. If you don’t know the answer, cross the ‘don’t know’ box and try the next one.’ (7–10) ‘Now a few questions about your interest in and knowledge of politics. If you don’t know the answer, just indicate that and move on to the next one.’ For questions 1–6, statements 1, 2 and 4 are correct; 3, 5 and 6 are incorrect. For question 7, the choices were Bob Carr, Bill Shorten, Chris Bowen, Tony Burke (the correct answer is italicized). For question 8, 3.7%, 5.7%, 7.7%, 9.7%. For question 9, Greens, Bob Katter’s Australian Party, Labor Party, Liberal National Coalition. For question 10, Kofi Annan, Kurt Waldheim, Ban Ki-moon, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Source: AES, 2013.
population, at 3.4. Particularly notable is the relatively small proportion who could correctly name the treasurer before the 2013 election and the name of the UN Secretary-General. At the other end of the scale, slightly more young people knew that Australia became a federation in 1901 compared to the general population, the only item on which young people were more knowledgeable than the rest of the population. These general results reflect the weaker attachments that younger people have to civic life, through lower levels of home ownership, marriage and parenthood (Galston 2001, 219).

How political knowledge varies across the lifecycle is shown in Figure 1, which estimates the mean level of political knowledge by age group. Political knowledge climbs incrementally from the early 1920s onwards, peaking at almost 5.5 correct answers out of a maximum of 10 among those aged in their late 1960s. The patterns suggest a cumulative rise in knowledge; as individuals gain more experience and assume more and different responsibilities, they have greater political interest and acquire more political knowledge. Thereafter, political knowledge declines slightly, to 5.0 among those in the late 1970s, and rises again slightly to 5.2 among those aged 80 or more. There is, then, a distinct and important lifecycle effect in political knowledge.

The levels of knowledge presented above for Australia are very similar to those found in Canada and the US, where survey respondents could correctly answer just 2.9 questions out of a total of seven (Milner 2007; Table 1). Similar results have been recorded elsewhere, especially in Scandinavia (see, e.g. Grönlund 2007; Grönlund and Milner 2006). Moreover, levels of knowledge are much lower among the young, in line with the acquisition of knowledge being essentially a cumulative process across the lifecycle. Nor has there

Figure 1. Political knowledge by age. Figures are the mean number of questions answered correctly by each age group, using the 10 questions listed in Table 2. Broken lines show 95% confidence intervals. Source: AES, 2013.
been much change in these aggregate levels of knowledge overtime, either in Australia (McAllister 2011, 67) or the US (Kohut, Morin, and Keeter 2007). The next section examines whether the internet can play a role in increasing political knowledge.

The internet and political knowledge

The role of the internet in shaping civic engagement generally, and political knowledge specifically, has received considerable attention from scholars. This accords with the frequently advanced argument that by providing ready access to political information, the internet has the capacity to reinvigorate civic life. However, as with anything involving the internet, such findings are often rapidly eclipsed by changes in the technology. Early studies suggested that there was a small but significant effect for internet use increasing political knowledge, net of a wide range of other factors (Grönlund 2007; Kenski and Stroud 2006). In a review of 38 studies, Boulianne (2009) has suggested that the effects of the internet on engagement are positive, but because of the small size of the effects in question, they are unduly affected by whether or not access to online news is included in the models.

Widespread use of social media has added a new dimension to the role of the internet in shaping political knowledge. The interactive nature of the social media is often seen to represent its greatest potential, by facilitating discussions between citizens on issues of mutual interest, and between citizens and election candidates. For example, in the 2008 US presidential election, Facebook users shared links to news sources, as well as to candidate profiles and party sites (Hilbert 2009). Studies that have sought to quantify the effects of social media have generally found that its use has a significant impact on social capital and civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, and Rojas 2009).

How important is internet use – in terms of seeking information, and in possessing internet skills – in predicting political knowledge, net of a wide range of other factors? Table 2 answers this question by presenting the results of a regression analysis predicting the probability of possessing political knowledge. Two equations are presented, the first for the general population, and the second for those aged 18–24 years only. Among the general population, internet use is a significant influence on political knowledge. Two equations are presented, the first for the general population, and the second for those aged 18–24 years only. Among the general population, internet use is a significant influence on political knowledge, in the form both of the frequency of election internet use and in the possession of internet skills. This confirms the first hypothesis. Among the young, election internet use is also a significant predictor of political knowledge. However, for both the general population and the young, the magnitude of the effect is similar, and the difference in political knowledge between someone who never uses the internet for election information and someone who uses it frequently is around 0.4 of 1 question, net of other things. This is a substantial and important effect. However, given that the effect is similar for both age groups, the results reject the second hypothesis.

In terms of other media effects on political knowledge, only following the election on the radio is statistically significant, and then only for the general population. Perhaps surprisingly, there is no significant effect for newspapers, which have traditionally been seen as the media source of choice for those seeking detailed political information. It may be, of course, that newspaper readers now access their political information through online editions of newspapers, many behind paywalls, and that this effect is being picked up by
following the election on the internet. The survey did not distinguish between following the election in newspapers using hard copy and on the internet.\footnote{As we would expect, the results for the general population also show that age is the most important predictor in the model, with each decade increasing the cumulative level of political knowledge by about half of one question, net of other things. Second in importance is political interest: someone who said they were very interested in politics could expect to correctly answer about 0.8 of 1 question more than someone with no interest in politics. This is similar to the impact of possessing a tertiary education. Among the young, only political interest and family income matter in predicting political knowledge; the latter may indicate the level of political discussion in the family home which is absorbed by the child.}

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**The internet, political knowledge and voting**

Australia’s system of compulsory voting results in a turnout rate of over 90%, by far the highest among the advanced democracies. The system has been in use in federal elections since 1924 and is widely supported by voters (McAllister 2011, 20ff). It is therefore not possible to measure the effects of internet use on turnout in Australia. To the extent that there is abstention, it is manifested in eligible voters failing to enroll, rather than enrolled voters failing to turnout to vote (Edwards 2007). Since the survey used here sampled enrolled voters only, we are unable to measure under-enrollment. We can, however, measure the likelihood that an enrolled voter would turnout to vote if voting was voluntary. These results are shown in Table 3.

Both political knowledge and media sources play a significant role in shaping the likelihood that a person will turnout to vote, if they had the choice between casting a ballot and abstaining. This holds for both the electorate as a whole, and for younger voters, thus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Political knowledge, internet and media use.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of general internet use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of election internet use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of following election in newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of following election on TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of following election on radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban resident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj R (^2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ordinary least squares regression estimates showing partial (b) coefficients and standard errors predicting the probability of possessing political knowledge, measured from 0 to 10. See Appendix 1 for details of variables and scoring. Source: AES, 2013.

*Statistically significant at p<.01.
confirming the third hypothesis. However, there are two notable differences. First, political knowledge has a greater impact among the young than among the electorate as a whole, confirming the fourth and final hypothesis. Second, possessing more internet skills is significant for the general population, but not for the younger group. This may be because internet skills are already high among the young and therefore do not adequately discriminate between the respondents. Among the general electorate television is an important predictor of the probability of voting. Once again, these effects are net of a wide range of other factors, including political interest, age and education.

These results show a consistently strong effect for the internet increasing political knowledge. Across the population, this manifests itself in using the internet in order to acquire election information, and knowledge is more likely to be gained among those who are skilled in using the internet. Among the young, the effect is limited to using the internet for election information, and there is no effect for internet skill. In turn, knowledge and internet use assume greater importance among the young in predicting the likelihood of turning out to vote, compared to the electorate as a whole. However, for both groups, political knowledge is a significant predictor of the likelihood of voting.

Discussion

The internet has often been viewed as a panacea for the ills of modern democracy, not least declining electoral participation and low levels of political trust and efficacy. The 1990s and early 2000s saw historically low levels of election turnout in many of the advanced democracies. In Britain, turnout in the 2001 general election was just 59.4%, the lowest since 1918, while turnout in the 1996 US presidential election was the lowest since the early 1920s.

Table 3. Likelihood of voting, political knowledge, and internet use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All respondents</th>
<th>Age 18–24 only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>.047* (.007)</td>
<td>.067* (.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of general internet use</td>
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<td>−.024 (.080)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of election internet use</td>
<td>.056* (.018)</td>
<td>.210* (.072)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet skills</td>
<td>.030 (.020)</td>
<td>.188* (.069)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of following election in newspapers</td>
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<td>.075 (.073)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of following election on TV</td>
<td>.158* (.022)</td>
<td>.109 (.069)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of following election on radio</td>
<td>.034 (.019)</td>
<td>.156* (.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>.480* (.030)</td>
<td>.479* (.093)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>−1.73* (.035)</td>
<td>−2.282 (.113)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Tertiary education</td>
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<td>.188 (.143)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian born</td>
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<td>.206 (.145)</td>
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<td>Family income</td>
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<td>.032 (.035)</td>
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<td>Urban resident</td>
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<td>−.081 (.046)</td>
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<td>(3,955)</td>
<td>(404)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Ordinary least squares regression estimates showing partial (b) coefficients and standard errors predicting the probability of voting if turnout was voluntary, measured from 1 (definitely would not vote) to 5 (definitely would vote). See Appendix 1 for details of variables and scoring.

Source: AES, 2013.

*Statistically significant at p<.01.
The almost universal decline in turnout is mostly accounted for by abstention among the young. Accordingly, considerable attention has been directed at ways to reinvigorate youth electoral participation (for a review, see Loader 2007). Among other things, proposals have included: the introduction of compulsory voting; reducing the voting age to 16; e-voting and easier postal voting; and easier and quicker methods of voter registration. But perhaps most attention has been devoted to the potential of the internet to mobilize young voters.

Early studies of the internet and political engagement among the young produced mixed results. Some of the observed effects, while statistically significant, tended to be small (see, e.g. Calenda and Meijer 2009; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Other effects potentially attributable to the internet are difficult to identify due to changes in technology, not least the transition of newspapers from hard to soft copy. In addition, some studies have relied on limited surveys of young people or students, and the generalizability of these findings are often in doubt. This paper has sought to overcome these problems by using a national election survey, enabling a wide range of controls to be added to the models. In addition, the paper has extended current findings about the link between internet and political knowledge by measuring their combined effects on youth election participation.

Net of a wide range of other factors, the results demonstrate a strong effect for election internet use increasing political knowledge. The magnitude of the effect among the general population easily surpasses any other media source, and is similar to the effect of a person possessing a tertiary education (see Christensen and Bengtsson 2011). The effect among the young is also significant, although it is limited to the frequency of election internet use, rather than to possessing particular internet skills. Among the general population, possessing internet skills is only slightly less important than following the election on the internet. This may reflect the fact that as sophisticated internet skills have become widely dispersed among the young, it represents a normalization of the medium (van Deursen and van Dijk 2010; Gibson and McAllister 2014).

Political knowledge and internet use are both important resources in determining electoral participation. And both knowledge and internet use are more important resources for the young than for the general population as a whole. This confirms the hypothesis that using the internet to increase political knowledge among the young can result in higher levels of electoral participation. In other words, efforts to arrest declining youth election turnout should start with the internet, and might be expected to reap significant returns. Election management bodies and political parties are already alert to the internet’s potential in this regard. Election management bodies in Australia, Germany and elsewhere are actively evaluating the role of the internet in e-voting and voter registration and enrollment (see, e.g. Macnamara, Sakinofsky, and Beattie 2012), while political parties have also become more attuned to the internet’s potential to mobilize supporters (see, e.g. Lilleker and Jackson 2013). Despite these positive advances, much more could be done to harness the potential of the internet to reinvigorate youth electoral participation.

Notes

1. The literature on this is large, but for general overviews and evidence see Althaus (2003); Bennett (2003); Jennings (1996); Lau and Redlawsk (2006) and Milner (2002).
2. Among the many government reports seeking to remedy low youth electoral participation, see particularly Australian Government (2009); Russell et al. (2002); United Kingdom Electoral Commission (2004).
3. Bennett, Wells, and Freelon (2011, 839) argue that the Norris and Dalton distinctions are inadequate because an emphasis on causes and engagement also represents a form of citizen action.

4. The disadvantage of the self-completion survey is that it risks the possibility that the answers reflect the collective knowledge of the household, rather than the knowledge of the individual. This difficulty, which studies have shown affects only a small proportion of the responses, applies to other questions in a self-completion survey; it is unlikely that the political knowledge questions would be affected to a greater extent than other parts of the survey (McAllister 1998).

5. To test for this possibility, the responses of younger respondents were examined over-time using earlier AES surveys (which also asked the political knowledge questions). Younger people are more likely to use the internet and smart phones in the later surveys, but there was no significant change in the proportions of correct answers for this group comparing the 2013 AES with the 2001 and 2007 AES surveys.

6. Regressions were conducted on the 2013 AES predicting ‘don’t know’ and incorrect responses from the full range of independent variables, but the results did not reveal any systematic or significant variations between the two.

7. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) suggest that political knowledge batteries should include an introductory statement dissuading respondents from guessing a response. That approach was used here; the full question wording appears in the note below Table 1.

8. The choice of the 18–24 age category to identify youth is somewhat arbitrary. However by age 24, most individuals will have completed tertiary education, but most will not have married or bought a house. Preliminary analyses using different cut-off ages (ranging from 22 to 26) did not reveal significantly different results from those presented here.

9. A question was asked in the survey about whether or not the respondent used the internet to access mainstream news media. Including this variable in the equation showed a significant effect for the general population, suggesting that this may represent a partial explanation. There was no significant effect for younger voters.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


### Appendix 1: Variables, scoring and means.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coding</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likelihood of voting</strong></td>
<td>From 1 (definitely not vote) to 5 (definitely vote)</td>
<td>4.20 3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political knowledge</strong></td>
<td>From 0 to 10</td>
<td>4.51 3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of general</td>
<td>From 1 (never uses) to 7 (several times per day)</td>
<td>5.77 6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internet use</td>
<td>Frequency of election</td>
<td>2.66 3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internet use</td>
<td>Internet skills Additive scale, 0–4</td>
<td>2.14 3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of following</td>
<td>From 1 (none at all) to 4 (a good deal)</td>
<td>2.47 2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>election in newspapers</td>
<td>Frequency of following</td>
<td>2.90 2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>election on TV</td>
<td>Frequency of following</td>
<td>2.31 2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>election on radio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>From 1 (none) to 4 (a good deal)</td>
<td>3.02 2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0 (female) or 1 (male)</td>
<td>0.48 0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>48.43 21.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary education</td>
<td>0 or 1</td>
<td>0.32 0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian born</td>
<td>0 or 1</td>
<td>0.74 0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>Quintiles</td>
<td>3.35 3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban resident</td>
<td>From 1 (rural area or village) to 4 (a major city over 100,000 people)</td>
<td>3.96 3.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(W) (3,955) (404)

Source: AES, 2013.