Engaging the disengaged: Swinging voters, political participation and media in Australia

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Abstract
It is a feature of contemporary western democracy that in order to win an election, very often capturing the swinging vote becomes a priority. This is especially true in Australia, where voting is compulsory. However, despite it being a term that is commonly used and popularly recognised, there is no academic consensus on who 'the swinging voter' might be in terms of demographic characteristics. What data exist suggest that undecided voters have a low interest in politics, and consume media that are not widely considered political. In this paper, I will focus on the swinging voter as both subject (of media commentary and political targeting) and audience (of campaign and media messages). In doing so, I will critically examine the ways that the key notions of political knowledge and engagement have traditionally been measured, which, I will argue, are bound up in normative ideas of civic virtue. I will propose that the ideas of engagement and knowledge need to be reconceived to reflect the central role of media in the way that politics is performed, experienced and understood. Not only can media use reflect a citizen's level of political interest and engagement, media themselves can be sites of political participation. Expanding this, I will argue that what constitutes 'political media' in much of the debate needs to be expanded beyond broadsheets and six o'clock bulletins, to include sources such as satire, soft news and online spaces. By re-thinking media's role in engagement and knowledge, and broadening the definition of political media, established definitions of swinging voters as low-information, disengaged citizens have the potential to shift.

The term 'swinging voter' is used frequently and confidently by political journalists and commentators, and by politicians and their operatives, in most developed democracies. That swinging voters are electorally important is a given. Aggressive targeting of swinging voters in marginal electorates worked well for the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in the 2007 'Ruddslide', especially with the 'Your Rights At Work Campaign' (Spies-Butcher and Wilson, 2008). In his infamous leaked 47% speech, US presidential candidate Mitt Romney said, 'What I have to convince is the five to ten per cent in the center that are independents...' (Corn, 2012). Commentators tend to regard swinging voters as low-information, disengaged and uninterested in politics. ALP elder John Faulkner has criticised his party's tendency to conduct focus groups of 'uncommitted voters hand-picked for their lack of belief' (Hartcher, *Sydney Morning Herald,* 10 September 2011). In an analysis of the 2010 Federal election, George Megalogenis echoes Faulkner's sentiment, excoriating 'Gillard and Abbott, and behind them their poll-obsessed teams, [who] were so terrified of offending the disengaged that they forgot to inspire the voters who were paying attention' (2010: 2-3). During this same campaign, the then treasurer Wayne Swan was memorably asked by reporter Laurie Oakes whether the line 'Moving Forward' was purchased from a company called 'Slogans for Bogans' (Cassidy, 2010: 144).

It is worth considering how much this popular idea of swinging voters is represented in the academic literature. William Mayer comments that it is a term found a lot in the media, but rarely investigated by academics (2008: 1). In fact Mayer's book *The Swing Voter in American Politics* (2008) is one of very few in English entirely devoted to the subject. Most scholarly examinations of swinging voters tend to be part of bigger studies, for example of specific elections, or of voter behaviour. What literature exists employs a variety of definitions, often interchangeably, to describe voters who are undecided, including swing(ing) voters, floating voters, persuadables, independents and switchers. This is in addition to terms used by political campaigners and strategists, which include soft voters, target voters and shifters.

It is a troubling thought, the idea that the group least interested in politics is the group most interesting to politicians. The primary aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore some different ways of thinking about and addressing this problem. In doing so, it will seek to define more clearly the idea of a 'swinging voter' and ask how this electorally important cohort might use media sources to obtain political information. It will argue for an expansion of the traditional notions of political engagement and knowledge beyond relativity to institutions, or broad normative ideals of civic virtue. Instead, it will be proposed, media use and interaction need to be recognised as a central indicator of political engagement and source of knowledge, and what is regarded as 'political media' must be expanded to reflect a changing media environment.

Swinging voters have been discussed, under various guises, in much of the classic literature of political science, and the way they are characterised is strikingly similar across studies. They are generally defined as possessing low levels of political information, not being interested in seeking out information about politics, and being disengaged from civic life. In their landmark study of the 1940 presidential

election, Paul Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) identified the 'undecided' voter as potentially pivotal in an election result. However, in investigating the way that this voter seeks political information, Lazarfeld's findings were surprising. Intuitively, it follows that a voter who knows very little about politics would seek out information from available sources, like the media; similarly, it might seem obvious to conclude that those with strong partisan views would not need to access further information, as their opinions are solidly formed. However, Lazarsfeld (1944: 124) discovered quite the reverse:

> At any one time, the people who already knew how they were going to vote read and listened to more campaign material than the people who still did not know how they would vote. In other words, the group which the campaign manager is presumably most eager to reach – the as-yet undecided – is the very group which is less likely to read or listen to his propaganda.

Lazarsfeld's study, and later classic studies, including that of Angus Campbell et al. (1960), suggest that the swinging voter is disengaged from political media. He concludes that the 'more interested people are in the election, the more opinions they have on political issues, the more actively they participate in a campaign, and the more they expose themselves to campaign propaganda' (1944: 43). Or to put it another way, the less people are interested in politics, the less political media they are likely to consume, and the less engaged they will be.

In his seminal 1962 article, 'Information flow and stability of partisan attitudes', Philip E. Converse takes the idea that there is a link between political knowledge, political engagement and partisan attitudes further, with his observation:

> Not only is the electorate as a whole quite uninformed, but it is the least informed members within the electorate who seem to hold the critical 'balance of power', in the sense that alternations in governing party depend disproportionately on shifts in their sentiment... 'shifting' or 'floating' voters tend to be those whose information about politics is relatively impoverished. (1962: 578-9)

Here Converse identifies the central paradox of political communication, one that continues to flummox campaigners: the people you most want to reach are probably not paying attention.

VO Key (1966: 92) makes a similar observation. He acknowledges the existence of a group of 'independent' voters, which he describes disparagingly: 'It is not an impressive lot. On the average, its level of information is low, its sense of political involvement is slight, its level of political participation is not high.' Only a few others have written about swing voters in an American context, with Kelley (1983), Zaller (2004) and Mayer (2008) being the most prominent. Remarkably, all scholars are fundamentally consistent in their findings. Whether they focus on rationality, or persuadability, or develop a scale for identifying swingers, they all refer to a cohort

of citizens whose vote is neither stable nor predictable; a cohort with low levels of political information and knowledge, and which is disengaged from politics.

The Australian electoral context, in which voting is compulsory for all adult citizens, casts a different perspective. In the American system, the swinging voter is at least sufficiently engaged to vote; those who are disengaged or uninterested simply opt out of the political system altogether. In Australia, regardless of a citizen's levels of political knowledge or interest, s/he is required by law to turn out to vote. This creates the potential for a larger number of voters, compelled to vote, but without a strong opinion. However, even though Australian scholars are writing about a different voting environment, the same central characteristics of swinging voters – as being disengaged and uninterested – are observed.

In his book *the Australian Voter*, Ian McAllister (2011) compiles the results of decades of Australian Election Studies (AESs), the post-election surveys conducted by the Australian National University (ANU), which remain the most comprehensive source of voter data in the country. Within the framework of the AES, the swinging voter is defined as one who leaves it very late in an election campaign to decide whom s/he will vote for, or the voter who changes his/her vote from election to election. Considering the electorate as a whole, McAllister identifies four types of voters. There are early deciders, whose vote is decided before the campaign begins, or near its start. Then, there are those who are broadly disengaged from the campaign but make up their minds early. The third category is of late deciders who spend the campaign gathering information, carefully considering it in order to make an informed decision that best suits their individual needs or beliefs. Finally, there are voters who do not follow the campaign and make up their mind at the last possible minute based on very little information. McAllister calls the four types Partisans, Disengaged, Calculating and Capricious. Partisans are the biggest group, comprising 64% of us. The other three groups are all equal at 12% (McAllister, 2011: 103). This means that one-third of Australians lack a strong political opinion, and 24% are generally uninformed about politics.

Ernie Chaples (1997) divides swinging voters into four sub-categories. There are the 'rationalists' who cast their vote according to a consideration of who serves their best interests. Then, there is an anti-major party group which flits around between the minor parties and independent candidates. Third, there are the protest voters, who vote to 'punish' (Chaples, 1997: 361-2). The final group is described by Chaples in such as way as to warrant extensive quotation:

> The airheads and drongos are the apoliticals of our society. They do not know much about politics, and they care even less. If it were not for compulsory enrolment and voting, the airheads would hardly matter as they often would seldom be enrolled and would hardly ever show up to vote. But in the Australian system, airheads do vote.
> (1997: 363)

This vivid and unflattering portrait of the low-information voter, disengaged from the political system, is reflected in the 'swinging voter' of the public imagination.

Three factors align with significant frequency in both the academic literature and popular commentary: swinging voters tend to have low levels of political information, they do not consume what is traditionally regarded as political media, and they are less likely to be engaged in traditional civic groups and activities. What is striking about most of the literature and media commentary around swinging voters is that it casts the low-information voter as inadequate, irresponsible and even stupid. The assumption made by these scholars is that our political systems are functional, interesting and worth engaging with, and that citizens who do not participate or fail to seek information from traditional sources are deficient. Citizens, according to these models, have a duty to fully inform themselves of the issues, and vote accordingly. The concern that citizens are more ignorant and less engaged in civic life has spawned a literature worried that this is leading to a crisis in democracy.

The most influential prosecutor of this thesis is Robert Putnam (2000). His theory of social capital emphasises the desirability of people forming social connections which create a polity rich in civic virtue and cohesion. In considering America at the turn of the millennium, Putnam laments the loss of social capital. As evidence, he points to the declining voter turnout, declining trust in government, declining membership of civic groups, and the breakdown of the traditional 'mom, dad and the kids' families (2000: 277). However, the most important factor in this decline in American civic virtue, Putnam argues, is the introduction of television into the majority of American homes. Putnam sees television as eroding community, citing figures that explicitly link large amounts of television consumption with low levels of group participation (2000: 228). Putnam's thesis that excessive television consumption correlates with a lack of engagement is not unique, and can be found in the work of many other scholars (including Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999). The argument has also been made in the Australian context by Federal Labor MP, and former research assistant of Putman's, Andrew Leigh (2010).

However, the ways that the concepts of engagement and knowledge are measured are often in relationship to formal institutions, and do not acknowledge the possibility for other forms of participation and acquisition of information, for example in or via media sources. Traditionally, the most common way of measuring voter participation is in simple terms of turnout at election time. While in Australia there are debates about the decline in enrolment, especially among young people, when considering the engagement of the broad population, this is not such a useful barometer. Ideas of civic engagement are also commonly measured in terms of membership of bricks-and-mortar political or civic institutions such as trade unions, political parties, and community groups (McAllister, 2011; Lazarsfeld, 1944; Campbell, 1960; Lipset, 1960). Other forms of engagement, for example online activity, are not recognised. Political knowledge is often measured with a test of civic knowledge. For example, the AES asks its participants True or False questions such as 'No-one may stand for federal parliament unless they pay a deposit.'

(McAllister, 2011: 58). Citizens typically perform poorly in these tests, which do not address issues like the recognition of political figures, or awareness and comprehension of policy. That the measuring sticks of our understanding of knowledge and engagement do not reflect a contemporary political environment is significant, especially when it is considered that the AES data is the major data source for Australian scholars considering these issues. It must also be noted that the AES requires participants to fill in a long survey with pen and paper, and then post it back to the ANU, a mode of delivery which has the potential to exclude significant demographic groups, for example the young.

The thesis that television is largely responsible for political disengagement has other flaws. Pippa Norris (1996: 475) points out that Putnam and others assume that there is one television experience, where the same content is broadcast to a homogenous audience. She concedes that there is a correlation between a high number of hours spent watching television with a low level of membership of civic groups. However, she goes on to observe that:

> If we turn to the content of what people watched the picture changes. Those who regularly tuned into network news were significantly more likely to be involved in all types of political activity and the relationship between watching public affairs programs on television and civic engagement proved even stronger.
> (1996: 476)

Norris' study suggests that media consumption (of a certain type) is an indicator of political engagement, and therefore an avoidance of political media might indicate a tendency to swing vote. The notion that political interest and engagement can be directly measured in relationship to media habits is further explored by Sally Young (2011) who argues that media are a central information source in the decision-making processes of Australians, and by extension, in the way we learn about and involve ourselves in politics (Young, 2011: 26). Young creates a theoretical model whereby the media that a person consumes are directly reflective of their real-life political behaviour and engagement. This model is backed up by studies that explicitly link consumption of political media (for example, watching presidential debates) with turning out to vote (Kennamer, 1987; Franklin, 1994).

I propose to take this idea one step further, and argue that the media themselves can be places of political engagement. Contemporary western society is now 'highly mediated' (Dalhgren, 2009: 81), and media are becoming central to the way politics is not just communicated to a mass audience, but also learnt about, experienced and engaged with by individuals. This increasing co-dependence of media and politics is highlighting the limitations of some of the traditional ways of measuring participation and knowledge. It is less relevant now to consider participation only by asking about one's relationship to an institution, when one's interaction with media can itself be a political expression. Live tweeting on a television broadcast such as *Q and A,* for example, denotes an active engagement with politics. Increasingly, Twitter is a place which people visit during times of political crisis or high activity.

During the leadership spill of June 26, 2013, for example, there were in excess of half a million individual tweets related to the events posted to Twitter between 12pm and 12am (Christensen, 2013).

In a small but influential study, Nick Couldry et al. (2007) asked people to keep media diaries and then spoke to them about their political interest and involvement. Not only did Couldry et al. (2007) find a relationship between media consumption and political behaviour, they also saw that a shared media experience creates a type of public sphere in which political interactions can occur. Underpinning this argument is Jürgen Habermas' notion of the 'public sphere', which 'may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as public' (1989: 27). Perhaps the most important theory informing much of the literature about civic engagement, Habermas' 'public sphere' is an idealised place where public opinion is deliberatively formed. For Habermas, the mass media that are used to communicate within the public sphere are controlled by elites. He regards digital media platforms as being useful insofar as they allow citizens in oppressive regimes to communicate uncensored information. But in Habermas' view, within liberal democracies the Internet simply fragments mass political audiences (2006: 423).

However, this overlooks the potential of online environments to deliver an interactivity which allows the public sphere to be realised in a media context. Stephen Coleman (2006) argues that politicians could learn from the contestants in the television program *Big Brother* about the way they communicate with and mobilise mass audiences. Coleman sees media as providing a public sphere, which is neither exclusive nor elitist, in which people can perform politics. The interactive voting tools of TV reality shows are, Coleman (2006: 463) argues, democratic and non-exclusive. Coleman, of course, is being deliberatively provocative, but there is a broad point to be made here. These sorts of popular television programs engage a different type of voter in what is an inherently political activity, and point to a potential for media platforms and spaces to effectively function as places where political behaviour can be practiced.

Similarly, a citizen could well eschew party membership, but be part of a large online community which engages indirectly with politics by posting on forums and arguing with others in the community, or directly by lobbying government. Online groups such as GetUp! explicitly mobilise citizens to participate in politics by facilitating the lobbying of government (Vromen and Coleman, 2011: 76). These organisations have built communities which do not conform to the traditional idea of bricks-and-mortar civic groups, but which nonetheless allow people to politically engage. And while it is premature to be heralding in a new golden age of online participation for all, Vromen (2011), Norris (2001) and others note that many people, especially in developing nations, still do not have access to these modes of democratic expression, the sorts of media spaces provided by new communications technologies point to emerging possibilities for greater engagement, and the huge potential for media platforms to facilitate and host political activity.

By expanding what is regarded as political activity, citizens who would otherwise be categorised as disengaged might now be recognised as more participatory. This applies to swinging voters, as they are typically defined. Similarly, challenges can be made to traditional views regarding the acquisition of political knowledge. Just as the characterisation of swinging voters in popular and academic literature implies that they fall outside of an ill-defined boundary of virtuous, engaged citizenship, it also suggests that they are below an arbitrary benchmark of knowledge that would make their vote informed and therefore worthwhile. However, there are questions around how much knowledge is actually necessary to cast a vote that reflects the voter's basic attitudes. Anthony Downs (1957), for example, argues that becoming highly politically informed is actually a waste of effort, because an effective vote can be made on relatively scant information. The paucity of this reward is even less for someone who does not care about the election result. If the voter does not care, then s/he has nothing to lose: there is no 'wrong' vote and so no return on a right one. Subsequent scholars have used Downs' idea to argue that you do not need a lot of information, or high levels of engagement, in order to vote meaningfully. Samuel Popkin (1991) argues that we form informational shortcuts, in which 'gut decisions' are made based on simple messages. Arthur Lupia (1994) conducted a study in which citizens were asked to vote on some complicated changes to insurance reform. He found that citizens were able to effectively use information shortcuts, such as the opinions of friends and colleagues, or the position of the insurance companies, to place a vote which represented their beliefs (1994: 63-76). John Zaller (1992) recognises that partisanship is our best shortcut to opinions about a range of other topics. Michael Schudson (1999) talks about the 'monitorial citizen', where people pay passing attention to politics, much like a parent supervising children in a pool. It might be that, despite lacking a thorough knowledge of political debate, policy and position, swinging voters are capable of voting in a way that does genuinely reflect their own attitudes and ideologies.

At the heart of this debate is a struggle with normative ideas of civic responsibility, adequate knowledge levels, and their effects on political participation. On one hand, there is a desire to be more inclusive and non-elitist when considering what might be an 'acceptable' level of political knowledge among voters. However, that inevitably clashes with a concern that political and media messages are being 'dumbed down'. Lindsay Tanner (2011) in Australia, and Thomas Patterson (1996) in the US, are particularly strong critics of what they regard as an increasingly populist, intellectually flabby political media. While it could be argued that an ignorant voter is more susceptible to misinformation and fear campaigns, it is unrealistic and unhelpful merely to chastise the populace for failing to consume serious political media, or lambast media organisations for simplifying their content in order to attract audiences. Just as platforms for media delivery are evolving, so are the types of media content that can deliver political information changing.

Political satire, comedy and non-mainstream (often online) news sources are changing the nature of political media, and are attracting wide audiences from demographic groups that do not consume what has been regarded as 'political media' (Chaffee and Kanihan, 1997; Norris, 2000; Prior, 2003). 'Soft' news is now

attracting and informing viewers (and voters) who would not necessarily seek out political information from more traditional media sources. For example, Matthew Baum found that a significant proportion of viewers gathered information about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (2002: 91-97). Similarly, the Lewinsky scandal of the late 1990s has been cited as changing the way that politics and media were played together (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2000; Zaller, 1998). The scandal was first broken online by blogger Matthew Drudge, and despite the best efforts of Clinton's communications team to contain the damage of another 'bimbo outbreak', the scandal became a full-blown media spectacle. 'Soft' news, serious news, satirists, bloggers, chatrooms, professional journalists and non-professional commentators all contributed to make this the biggest news story of the final years of the twentieth century. The traditional gatekeepers of the media and political machine were sidestepped, burrowed under and ultimately steamrolled by these new players.

The legacy of this media frenzy was a fundamental change in the way that politics is not just reported, but conceived of. For example, in the lead-up to the 2012 U.S. Presidential election, a debate between newscaster Bill O'Reilly and comedian Jon Stewart attracted an online audience of such scale that the video servers temporarily collapsed, unable to cope with the demand (Lederman, 2012). Jon Stewart's comedy program *The Daily Show* has been shown to increase political knowledge among audience groups not typically interested in politics, for example young voters (Hollander, 2005: 402-4). In Australia, television programs such as *The Chaser: The Hamster Decides, Gruen Nation* and *The Project* all package political content in non-traditional, often satirical ways, and all enjoy large audiences and repeated commissions.

Media interaction is now the most common and frequent form of political activity engaged in by the highest number of people, and popular media has become so entwined with politics that the two can no longer be separated (Jones, 2005: 8). Jeffrey Jones (2005: 17) writes:

> Media are our primary points of access to politics, the space in which politics now chiefly happens for most people, and the place for political encounters that precede, shape, and at all times determine further bodily participation.

Jones updates the idea of political participation to allow for a thoroughly mediated culture, and recognises the consumption of and interaction with political media in its many forms as a political act. In doing so, he allows for an expansion of what might be regarded as engagement, to better reflect a contemporary, media-centred world.

The political indifference of swinging voters, as they are traditionally regarded, seems to indicate that the group most crucial to political outcomes is poorly equipped to make sound political judgments. However, traditional measurements of key concepts such as engagement and knowledge have failed to take into account a changing media landscape which allows for different types of political activity, and different ways that information can be conveyed. This, in turn, has affected the way

that political knowledge and engagement are considered and understood. Media has become central to the way that politics is performed and learnt about. The types of media that can deliver political information have changed, with soft news, satire and new communications technologies providing information to audiences/voters in non-traditional ways. Further, media have become central sites for practicing politics, and need to be acknowledged not just as reflections of one's political engagement, but as places of participation in themselves.

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