

Exploring Ways of Improving Political News Coverage and Increasing Political Engagement

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT!

The project aims to empirically assess how the adoption of a social media-enabled ‘Citizens’ Agenda’ may contribute to increasing (and potentially generating new forms of) political engagement among citizen-participants, and new practices from the media and politicians. It analyses the impacts of a social media ‘intervention’ that was designed to explore to what extent democratic engagement amongst diverse population groups could be enhanced during the Australian federal election. The project continues to analyse how issues raised in the Citizens’ Agenda are reported on in the media.

The project is investigating the following research questions:

1. How, and in what ways, does the Citizens’ Agenda treatment impact on political interest, engagement and efficacy among members of the public and to what extent is that impact sustained?
2. What influence does the Citizens’ Agenda platform have on policy makers’ (elected and appointed) practices of policy prioritisation and formation and how is that represented over time?
3. What difference does the Citizens’ Agenda make to the agendas, practices and coverage produced through various platforms of political journalism during and after the election?

4. To what extent do innovative political and media practices, such as the Citizens’ Agenda, disrupt/augment traditional modes of public formation during election periods, how enduring are these modal changes, and what does this mean for the role of media in public life?

To provide the intervention, social media group OurSay Australia was contracted to recruit for and conduct a series of citizen discussions in the lead-up to the 2013 federal election. OurSay’s method used an online platform, as well as offline meetings, to generate voter awareness, interest, and interaction with crowdsourced issues and political candidates in ten electorates. Citizens were invited to use OurSay’s online forum to propose, debate and

vote for questions to which they wanted their political representatives to respond. To a certain extent, which we are now analysing, these questions and debates differed in content, frame, and scope to broadcast and print coverage of the election and created a ‘Citizens Agenda’.

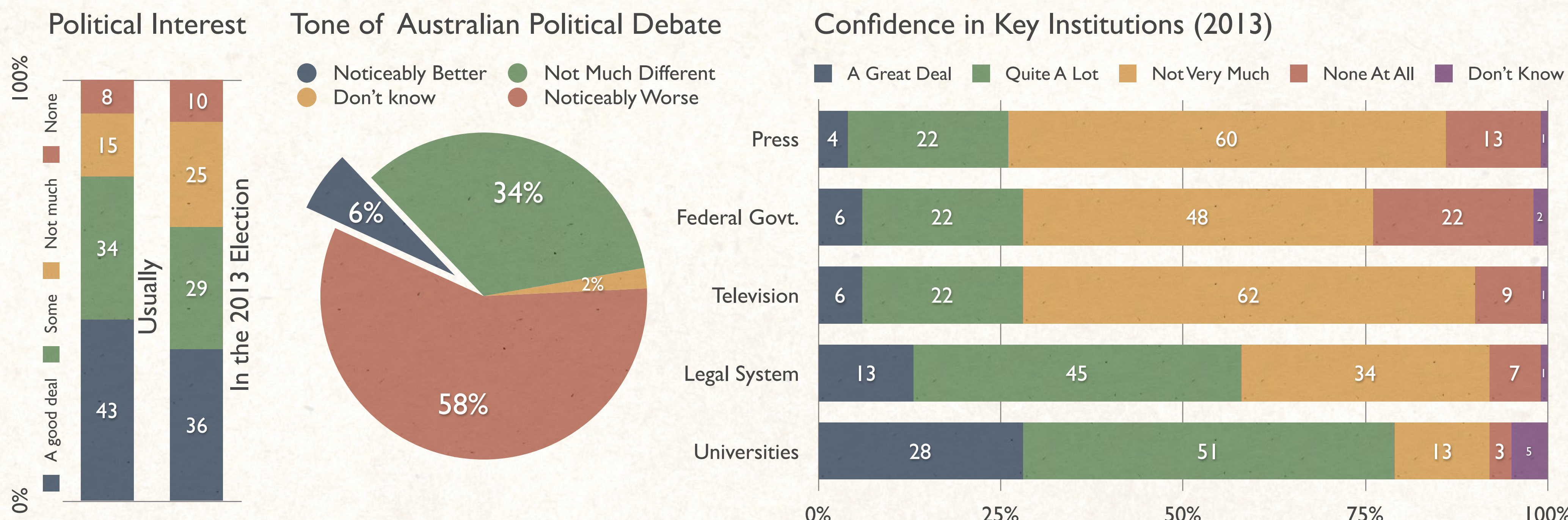
Methods

Substantive qualitative interviews, and survey responses from the general public and Citizens’ Agenda members are providing rich data from which to examine the relationship between changing forms of political engagement, the effect of social media on political participation and emergent forms of political journalism, and their significance for democracy.

One of the project’s two quantitative elements is complete. A national telephone survey of persons eligible to vote provided researchers with a representative control on attitudes to politics, levels of political engagement, and sense of political efficacy. Its data also told a discouraging narrative of current levels of engagement, trust, and efficacy between citizens and Australian institutions (see Chart). A parallel online survey of Citizens’ Agenda members, conducted before, during, and after election events, is in the process of being analysed.

Interviews with Citizens’ Agenda participants, journalists, and politicians are ongoing. These enquire about changes to subjects’ practices during the election because of the Citizens’ Agenda. The Project is also conducting content analysis of election coverage to measure the extent to which the issues raised in the Citizens’ Agenda forums were reported on in the media, as well as how the role of public participation and journalism in democracy is reported.

In sum, the benefit of testing the Citizens’ Agenda in terms of impact, influence and efficacy concerns the democratic quality of participatory innovations. This research will enable us to delineate and test: who has, shares, and contests agency in new political spaces, new formations of public participatory roles, and any impact on policy results.



The above findings tend to confirm suspicions that political engagement is in decline - if we accept perspectives on traditional institutions of government and mass media as our measure. This conclusion nevertheless requires some qualification, for at least three reasons. First, faith in electoral democracy appears to be socially stratified. This suggests a more complex picture. Second, there is a marked difference between respondents’ lack of faith in government and media organisations compared to their faith in democracy itself, as represented by their belief in the efficacy of their votes. Thirdly, the findings could be interpreted as relating, not to political engagement overall, but to moves away from traditional relations of representative democracy, in which key ‘representative’ institutions of democracy and citizenship, including news media, appear to be in decline. This phone survey was conducted on a stratified random sample of 1000 eligible voters across Australia creating a variance of $\pm 3.2\%$ at the 95% confidence level.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO PROVIDE CONTEXT FOR THE VALUE OF THE RESEARCH

A sense of democratic dissatisfaction has occurred over the last two decades that some critics have described as a ‘crisis of democracy’ (Castells 2009, 198). Dissatisfaction is empirically indicated through such variables as declines in voter registration and perceived declines in voter registration (Saha, Print, & Edwards, 2005), low levels of trust in politicians and government (Bean, 2005; Goot, 2002), and declining membership of and/or attachment to political parties. All of these factors suggest rising political disengagement (Leigh, 2002) and democratic decline.

Other studies, however, note that political engagement appears to be changing rather than ‘declining’. For example, citizens are more likely to engage in non-electoral forms of political participation (e.g. petitions, demonstrations), and use the Internet as a medium/mode of political involvement (Vromen, 2003, Dahlberg 2012, Martin, 2012). Meanwhile, citizen organisations, political parties, national governments and supranational institutions are developing

‘participatory’ forms of decision-making that emphasise deliberation and co-production between diverse actors (Vromen 2008, Cammaerts 2008, Macnamara 2010).

The state of affairs for reporting on politics in Australia also shows similar, and concerning, trends in terms of efficacy. Critiques describe political journalism as serving to produce politics as a domain of ‘insiders’, reproducing the strategic agendas of political parties and presenting politics as ‘spectator sport’ through ‘horse race’ and ‘game frame’ coverage (Young, 2011, Benoit et al. 2005, Lawrence, 2005, Simons 2012.). Challenges to revenue models in the current media environment make engaging publics to sustain and extend journalism’s role as a facilitator of democracy more pressing (O’Donnell, McKnight, and Esbo, 2012, Young, 2011).

However, like changing and innovative modes of political engagement, other research has focused on the democratic potentials of collaborative forms of

‘participatory journalism’ (Simons 2011, Flew 2009, Domingo et al 2008). In this context, US media professor and media activist Jay Rosen posted a set of proposals for replacing managed and ‘mediatized’ agendas (Lundby, 2009) with a ‘citizens’ agenda’. In a set of proposals aimed primarily at media organisations and journalists, Rosen suggested that prior to the election, journalists should begin with ‘a simple question: not, “who are you going to vote for?”, but “what do you want the candidates to be discussing as they compete for votes at this year’s election?”’ (Rosen 2010, n.p.).

These dual changes in Australian political engagement and political journalism have not been measured in an interval/nominal research design. Significantly, this study considers how the nominal Citizens’ Agenda ‘treatment’, affects the interval data of political engagement over time. The first point of data surrounds the 2013 federal election.

THE RESEARCH CONTINUES... FINDINGS TO EMERGE FORTHWITH

The research team is currently interviewing key informants who took part in the Citizens’ Agenda, gleaned rich data from the experience for those members of the public involved as online question askers and ‘clicktivist’, forum attendees, and professional media and political staff that engaged in the process.

Further, we are quantitatively measuring any changes to political engagement and feelings of efficacy across the diverse sample of Citizens’ Agenda participants. This purposive sample of citizens who live in

particular electorates were engaged in the OurSay ‘treatment’. Important to this set of informants is how they came to be involved in the Citizens’ Agenda. Were their interests in politics fomented through the social media treatment? Or was this group self-selected on previous indicators of political engagement?

Finally, media practitioners and political operatives are being interviewed for their reactions to the Citizens’ Agenda. Where possible our sample is purposive to ensure the upper bound number for survey participants saturates observable and

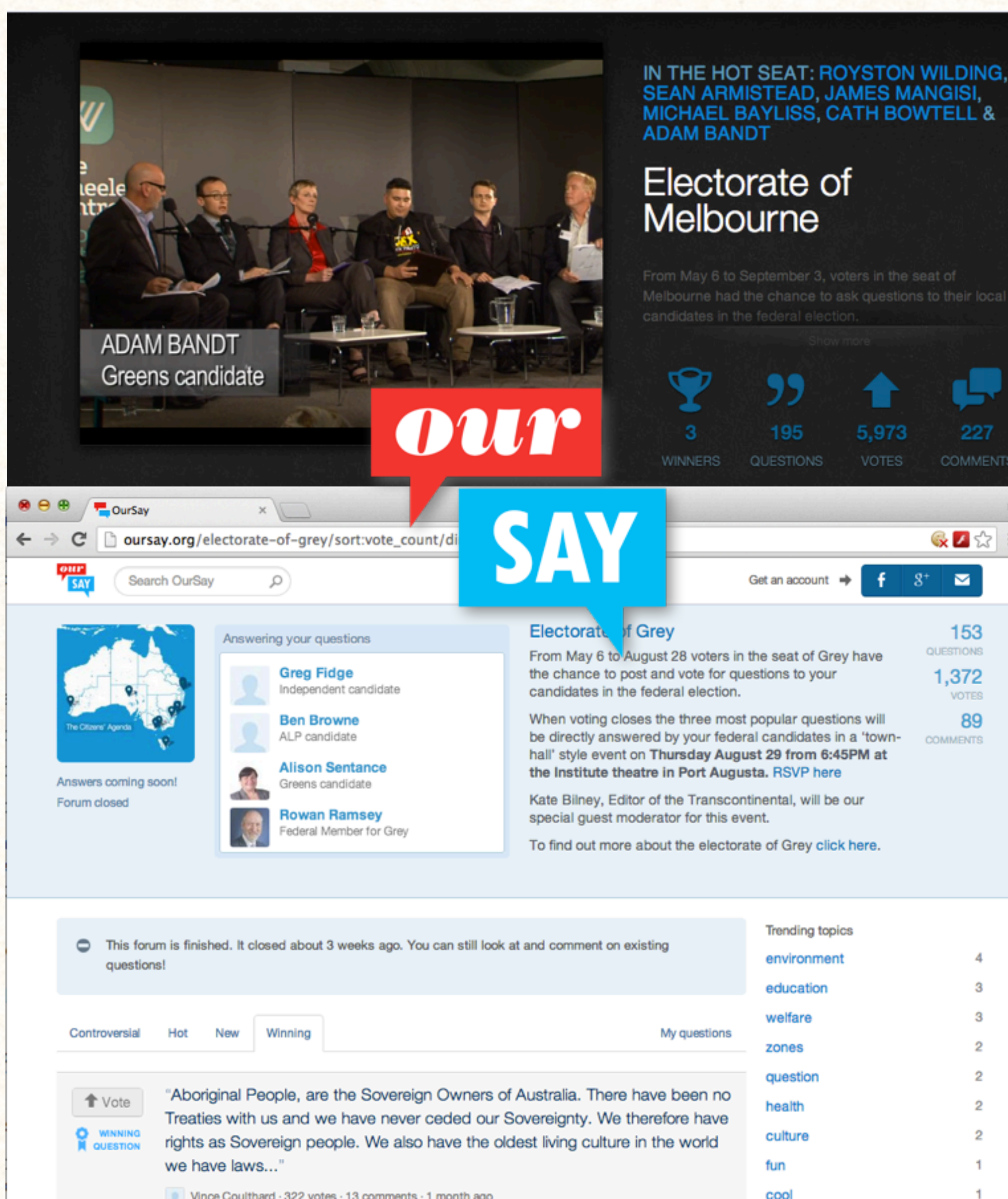
meaningful data patterns creating information redundancy (Kuzel, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990, 1999; Sandelowski, 1995). To assess saturation, data analysis is occurring alongside data collection in an iterative fashion.

For the sample of interview participants, a smaller upper bound number is deemed adequate for the purposes of contextualising the survey data with a more in-depth understanding of some of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions about changes to public political attitude and media reporting.

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10 Electorates, 42 Candidates, 624 Questions, 2,334 Citizens, 11,332 Votes



The core OurSay method is to advocate and host online community forums that build towards a physical town hall style community meeting between citizens and, in this case, political candidates who agree to answer questions from the gathered public. These questions are ‘crowdsourced’ beforehand through the OurSay website. Any citizen registered with OurSay.org can create or ‘like’ a question and those questions with the most ‘likes’ rise to the top. Subsequently, at the live community forum, the top questions are asked to the candidates.

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