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Evaluating young adult voter decision-making involvement within a compulsory political system

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Abstract
Purpose – This study aims to specifically focus on the lower-involvement young adult voters within the Australian compulsory voting context. It explores voters’ political decision-making by considering the influence of the consumer behaviour theory of involvement.
Design/methodology/approach – A thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the interviews within the two research questions: information seeking and decision-making.
Findings – Key themes within information seeking are the reach of the information available, the frequency of the information presented, the creativity of the message and one-way versus two-way communication. Key themes within evaluation are promise keeping/trust, achievements or performance and policies. Lower-involvement decision-making has the potential to be a habitual, limited evaluation decision. However, issues of trust, performance and policies may encourage evaluation, thereby reducing the chances of habitually voting for the same party as before.
Practical implications – This new area of research has implications for the application of marketing for organisations and political marketing theory. Considering voting decision-making as a lower-involvement decision has implications for assisting the creation and adaptation of strategies to focus on this group of the population.
Originality/value – The compulsory voting environment creates a unique situation to study lower-involvement decision-making, as these young adults are less likely to opt out of the voting process. Previous research in political marketing has not specifically explored the application of involvement to young adult voting within a compulsory voting environment.
Keywords Consumer behaviour, Involvement, Political marketing, Decision-making, Young adult voters
Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Regardless of the party ideology, political parties want to know how to attract people to vote for them. Within this, an aim may be to acquire and retain voters, recruit and retain party members and obtain funding (Lock and Harris, 1996). However, a large proportion of the population tends to look towards the political parties with disinterest (Wattenberg, 1987). Levels of membership in political parties have declined since World War II (Ware, 1995, cited in Lock and Harris, 1996), and current members tend to constitute a minority of the electorate (Martin, 2011; Seyd and Whiteley, 1995). Political party membership in most countries is declining (Butler and Collins, 2001; Dalton et al., 2004), providing evidence that the interest in politics, in general, has seen a decrease.
Wattenberg’s (1987) research in the USA is an early example of research that recognised a decline of interest in politics. He found that one-third of voters gave a response of “nothing” when replying to specific questions about what they liked/disliked about the Democratic...
Party, whereas in the 1950s, 10 per cent responded in this manner (Wattenberg, 1987). He also suggested that party identification was at an all-time low. Ehrenberg (1991) found that UK voters responded to politicians in the same patterns that consumers respond to fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs), implying that not only are politicians regarded as very similar or substitutable but also indicating that a depth, or higher-involvement, decision would be unlikely. In a more recent study, it was proposed that there might also be some propensity to over-report electoral participation (Bolzendahl and Coffé, 2010), which suggests that actual participation is even lower than documented. If interest and participation are low, one might question what a typical voter would take into account when at the polls. Harris and Lock (2010, p. 298) agree and state that “it is frequently forgotten by political commentators and academics that the majority of voters do not share their fascination with politics”.

This research aims to focus on the voters as a consumer and will explore voters’ interest in politics by investigating the consumer behaviour theory of involvement within voter decision-making. The research is grounded in understanding how voters make decisions around politics and their subsequent choice behaviour. This research will contribute by specifically addressing the young adult voters and considering their involvement within decision-making in politics within the compulsory voting context of Australia, which provides an original contribution to lower-involvement decision-making.

This focus on lower-involvement is a knowledge gap relating to this issue in political marketing with only a few studies having investigated the application of lower-involvement to the political context (Ben-Ur, 2007; Faber et al., 1993; Rothschild, 1978). Investigating what underlies voter behaviour is still of recent interest (Davis and Stimson, 2011; Nickerson and Rogers, 2010; Winther and Lrsen, 2014; Dermody et al., 2014); therefore, this topic is particularly important from both academic and practical perspectives. From a political marketing theory perspective, it extends previous research in voter decision-making, therefore, adding to the body of knowledge concerning decision-making. From a practical perspective, understanding the influence of involvement within decision-making can assist the creation and adaptation of strategies by political parties/organisations to focus on young adults. Political parties spend large amounts of money, as well as social costs, trying to gain those crucial votes to win their seats; therefore, understanding the voter decision-making process also provides a practical benefit from this viewpoint, as the electoral outcome depends on understanding voter needs and wants (O’Cass, 2002).

Focussing on the voter as a consumer, the voter is relied on to make an eventual choice: which candidate or political party (or both) to vote for during an election. This choice requires some element of decision-making. Although the study of decision-making in a low-interest context has been researched in consumer behaviour (Darley et al., 2010), there is still a gap in the area of political marketing (Ben-Ur, 2007; Rothschild, 1978).

The effectiveness of marketing when applied to politics was recognised in the US presidential elections in 1952 when Dwight Eisenhower used television advertising as part of his campaign (Rothschild, 1978); therefore, many claim that political marketing originated in the USA (Harris, 2001). Others assess that marketing techniques used in politics can be dated back to the 1920s in Great Britain (Wring, 1994, cited in Lock and Harris, 1996). However, in comparison to the fields of marketing or political science, their combination
into political marketing is still a relatively new phenomenon. What was once a limited area has moved to being a significant area of research (Harris and Lock, 2010; Newman, 2012). Fundamentally, the concept of political marketing relates to traditional marketing theory, as they both are about an exchange (Phillips et al., 2010). Understanding consumer behaviour decision-making is a significant area of research in marketing (Foxall et al., 2011; Simonson et al., 2001) and has been applied to politics as voter decision-making. Research addressing voter decision-making has been studied for decades (Cwalina et al., 2004, 2010; Newman and Sheth, 1985; O’Cass, 2002, 2004; O’Cass and Pecotich, 2005). Still, Harris and Lock (2010) suggest that more focus needs to be placed on the voter as a consumer, especially in the face of weakening allegiances to a particular party. This paper addresses the call to focus on the voter as a consumer, a gap in the area of political marketing, and applies consumer behaviour theory to voter decision-making.

**Review of the key literature**

**Involvement in decision-making**

Ever since Krugman (1965) initially discussed involvement within the field of consumer psychology, researchers have emphasised the role of involvement in decision-making. Rothschild and Houston (1980, p. 655) define involvement as the “overall level of interest in some issue or object”. Although involvement itself has developed to include multiple taxonomies, the three main delimitations of enduring, situational and response involvement are widely accepted (Burton and Netemeyer, 1992; Houston and Rothschild, 1977; Michaelidou and Dibb, 2008). Enduring involvement relates to the individual’s general or ongoing interest; situational involvement relates to the reaction to the circumstances; and response involvement relates to the combined influence of both (Antil, 1984).

Within these multiple taxonomies of involvement, theorists have also considered low versus high levels of involvement (Dagger and David, 2012; Krugman, 1965; Michaelidou and Dibb, 2008; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Krugman (1965) argued that both high- and low-involvement conditions impact on how consumers process information, and that neither should be considered better than the other. Antil (1984) agreed and argued for caution when assuming that all consumers react in the same manner to the same stimulus. Instead, he cautioned that the level of involvement would depend on how each individual consumer interprets the situation (Antil, 1984). Antil (1984) also argued that involvement should be seen as a continuum, rather than a dichotomous variable of high or low. Although involvement is more likely to occur as a continuous variable, in operational terms, it is harder to measure (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Winther and Løsen, 2014), and therefore, researchers tend to use the high–low segmentation (IpsosMORI, 2010). Higher response involvement correlates to a decision-making process in which very few alternative decisions are acceptable, and those decisions are based on a number of differing salient elements (Rothschild and Houston, 1980). Conversely, lower response involvement correlates to a decision in which there are a small number of salient elements across a wide variety of alternatives (Belenas and Javalgi, 1989; Rothschild and Houston, 1980). Petty and Cacioppo (1984) suggest that for lower-involvement decisions, the decision may be influenced by the number of arguments made, rather than the strength or quality of those arguments. Lower involvement also consists of a different set of behavioural and cognitive activities than higher involvement (Antil, 1984; Leavitt et al., 1981). Low or limited decision-making, as its name suggests, is a cognitively reduced form of decision-making. While problem recognition remains the same, the search for information tends to be more internalised, and
external searches are more limited (van Rijnsoever et al., 2012; Zaichkowsky, 1984). In a lower-involvement situation, consumers have decided that a search for information is too costly, or they cannot be bothered to engage in any cost-benefit calculations (Parsons, 2005; Sproles, 1983). Lower-involvement consumers also tend not to make use of all the information available in decision-making (Zellman et al., 2010).

**Involvement in voter decision-making**

Few studies have investigated involvement within the context of politics (Ben-Ur, 2007; Faber et al., 1993; Rothschild, 1978). Ben-Ur (2007) suggested that enduring involvement was an important characteristic of the voter’s interest in politics. The application of involvement to the political context suggests that enduring involvement is related to the individual’s general interest in politics, whereas situational involvement is related to interest in the specific election or campaign at that point in time (Ben-Ur, 2007; Faber et al., 1993; Rothschild, 1978). Enduring involvement may also be related to the individual’s previous experience with politics or the political process, as well as the strength of their values (Ben-Ur, 2007; Rothschild, 1978). Response involvement is a combination of the outcomes, or consequences, as a result of the enduring and situational responses (Burton and Netemeyer, 1992) and relates to the extent of cognitive processing in response to the issue (Antil, 1984; Ben-Ur, 2007). If enduring involvement influences situational involvement which, in turn, influences response involvement, those who have a high degree of interest or involvement in politics in general would have a positive degree of response involvement as well (and vice versa). Therefore, it is expected that higher response involvement will result from higher involvement (Ben-Ur, 2007).

In higher-involvement political decision-making, as with a complicated or high-risk product (or service), the decision-making process would be more complex (Erasmus et al., 2001; Leavitt et al., 1981; Mittal, 1989; Shocker et al., 1991). In this situation, voters would seek out information upon which to base their decision, implying logical, rational thinking (Zaichkowsky, 1985). If using a rational approach, there is an assumption that voters would cognitively evaluate each stage of the decision-making process (Erasmus et al., 2001). As Peng and Hackley (2009) suggest that voters have the propensity to think more rationally and critically about politics than they do about consumer goods and services, one might assume that voter decision-making may be high involvement. Following this perspective, a political campaign may use the five-stage decision-making model as the voter cognitively processes through each of the major stages (problem awareness, information seeking, evaluation, choice and post-purchase evaluation) (Reid, 1988). In this case, political campaigners would be well-advised to use persuasive, well-constructed logical arguments to encourage voting for their political party. However, the concept of rational, higher-involvement decision-making processes has been criticised (Erasmus et al., 2001; Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979; Sears, 1987), as it assumes that voters make decisions in a consistent and rational manner.

In a rational decision, the voter would need to seek political information and gather facts to form a rational opinion upon which they can base their voting decision. Following a gathering of information, the voter would evaluate all decision options available, and then make a rational decision based on the evidence gathered. However, Ormrod et al. (2013) state that voting theories based on a rational choice perspective are not realistic, as the voting decision is too complex and rational theory only explains part of the process.

Sears (1987, p. 234) states that there are two opposing issues defining a voter:
Is homo politicus informed, consistent, sensible, and rational, operating from a set of stable preferences and values, and responsive to external reality – or is he/she uninformed, inconsistent, irrational, operating from anachronistic preferences and prejudices that are out of touch with current reality?

Some question even using a decision-making model to describe voter behaviour, noting that the idea of cognitive processing in a rational, calculated manner does not take into account the importance of choice in decision-making (Dermody and Scullion, 2001). Nor does it reflect all possible influences on what may be a complex decision-making process (Erasmus et al., 2001). Criticisms against a higher-involvement decision-making process can be characterised broadly by the following:

[...] an assumption of rational consumer decision-making behaviour; a generalization of the decision-making process; concern about the detail included in consumer decision-making models as well as limitations as a result of a positivistic approach to the development of consumer decision-making models (Erasmus et al., 2001, pp. 83-84).

Therefore, approaching all voter decision-making from a rational, higher-involvement perspective may not always be appropriate.

Falkowski and Cwalina (2012) suggest that there are two approaches when considering voting behaviour – constructive and realist. In the constructive approach, voters behave because of cognitive processing, which is closer to the higher-involvement or cognitive decision-making approach. In the realist approach, the attitude that a voter has towards the politician/candidate/object is independent of processing information and is more a result of their direct perception. In this case, a voter might make a decision without much cognitive processing, similar to how consumers behave within lower-involvement decision-making (Ehrenberg, 1991; Ki and Hon, 2012).

**Voting in a lower-involvement context**

Research suggests that for lower-involvement or lower-importance choices, such as those made on a repeat basis, very little in-store evaluation takes place while the product is being purchased (Hoyer, 1984), as the choice may be viewed as inconsequential (Van Kerckhove et al., 2011). Although voting in elections does not take place on a frequent, reoccurring basis, it could be argued that for some voters, it is a relatively low-importance choice. Lane (1983, p. 469) argues that:

[...] one reason that there is less personal influence in public affairs is that there is less interest in the subject; many people who necessarily have opinions on the things they must buy do not feel it necessary to have opinion on public affairs.

The evaluation of alternatives would also be more limited, in that only a few attributes are used to make the evaluation on, and those attributes are applied to only a few alternatives. In this case, the voter is “somewhat concerned” with their vote, but not enough to evaluate the choice in a careful manner. Thus, the lower-involvement model may hold in many electoral situations. In this application, although there is the basic need to perform, or vote, there is no perceived need to evaluate the choices carefully before behaving. In this context, non-rational elements, or shortcuts, might be used by voters to help make up their minds. These shortcuts might include a heuristic, which is “a strategy that ignores
part of the information, with the goal of making decisions more quickly, frugally, and/or accurately than more complex methods” (Ormrod et al., 2013, p. 454). This is not to say that political choice is demeaned by the use of heuristics, rather that because of the stimuli that is presented to voters with regards to elections and politics, such as campaigns based on character rather than policy, sound bites and catch phrases, heuristics are used as a coping mechanism (Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014) to simplify the decision-making process. Bettman (1981) stated that there are a number of factors which may lead to consumers making a choice without any evaluation, such as the type of information available and the level of involvement associated with that choice. Therefore, in a lower-involvement decision, if the information is not made available or is not perceived to be available, the chance of a voter making a choice without evaluation is quite likely.

**Young adult voters**

Some research studies that investigated younger voters’ behaviour argue that young adults are an indifferent, apathetic group of people who show a high level of disinterest in politics (Martin, 2011; Pirie and Worcester, 2000; Vromen, 2003) and governments (Edwards et al., 2005; Edwards, 2007). Researchers in the UK stated that “young people are the most disengaged of all the electoral segments in Britain [...] non-voting is becoming the norm” (Dermody et al., 2010, p. 422). They tend to have the lowest voting turnouts across the population, which may be an issue, as these low-participation behaviours may become habitual over time (Aldrich et al., 2011; Hill and Louth, 2006).

Interviewers in Australia and America reported that young people also thought they were stereotyped as disengaged by politicians and, therefore, felt excluded from the political process (Edwards et al., 2005; Dalton and Crosby, 2008). This stereotypical viewpoint of an uninterested young adult tends to be one held by many, and it has been advocated that often the media contributes to this view (see commentary in Manning, 2012; Spurgeon et al., 2012; Wring et al., 1999), outlining how young adults have historically been portrayed as disinterested in politics. Jasperson and Jung Yun (2007) suggest that young voters in America conventionally do not participate to the same degree as older voters, as they are less engaged in the political process. Politicians and political strategists generally do not spend much time or resources appealing to young voters (Jasperson and Jung Yun, 2007), possibly because their voting turnouts are generally the lowest across the population (AEC, 2010b; Henn et al., 2005; Manning, 2010). As the 2010 federal election in Australia was won by less than a 0.5 per cent margin (AEC, 2010c), understanding the involvement in young adult voter decision-making may be of significant importance in determining the election outcome.

Previous research has reported that young Australians will show commitment to an issue they have an interest in (Fyfe, 2009), and perhaps, this interest can be developed through “trial” of the product, or voting, similar to the consumer behaviour explained by Ehrenberg’s (1997) theory of awareness-trial-reinforcement when buying a new brand. Using this model, the voter must first become aware of the political parties. Awareness operates at different levels of attention and interest, and in a lower-involvement context it may even be peripheral or passive. The trial in a voting context might be voting for a particular political party, although it has been argued previously that all voters essentially trial the political party whether they voted for them or not (Winchester et al., 2012). After trial of the political party, the voters may then choose to continue to vote for that party (reinforcement), as in a lower-involvement context, this trial experience may be sufficient
(Percy and Rossiter, 1992). Similar to FMCGs, the voters may not perceive a large difference between political parties, but they must choose a party/candidate for which to vote for. Therefore, normal repeat voting may occur just through the development of habits (Ehrenberg, 1974).

**Lower-involvement behaviours**

Researchers in consumer behaviour report that a lower-involvement decision may be one in which the potential for consequences is small (Weitz and Wensley, 2002). In this context, decisions, as well as participation behaviours, may be mainly driven by habit (Dall’Olmo Riley et al., 1999; Gerber et al., 2003; Hill and Louth, 2006). Even choices which are exciting at first can quickly descend into indifferent habitual behaviour (Wathieu, 2004). Habitual behaviours limit the evaluation of alternative choices (Ehrenberg, 2004) and simplify the decision-making process, as repeat choices are made indifferently (Lin and Chang, 2003). In this case, there is little incentive for consumers to revisit decisions or re-evaluate attitudes once they are formed (Weitz and Wensley, 2002).

In application to politics, Burton and Netemeyer (1992) argued that voter choice is stable across situations because a higher level of involvement leads to loyalty to the candidate or party. These results imply that those with high-involvement are also more stable in their voting decisions (Burton and Netemeyer, 1992) or portray greater resistance to changing their preference (Ben-Uri, 2007). Therefore, habitual behaviour is perhaps not a result of lower involvement, but loyalty to one political party. However, as many loyalty measures tend to measure established habits (Ehrenberg, 2004), and young adults are likely, as a whole, to be a lower-involvement segment of the population, this paper will focus on habitual voting behaviour within a lower-involvement framework.

Aldrich et al. (2011) researched habitual voting behaviours in an environment where there are no major lifecycle changes. Their research found that previous behaviours, driven by habit, influence future behaviours or the cues that trigger those behaviours. McCulloch et al. (2008) found that when a choice is repeatedly made, other choices become less considered. Therefore, understanding the influence of involvement within voter decision-making is an important area of research. Australia’s compulsory voting requirement makes it more likely that voters turn out to vote regularly, creating the potential for habit formation (Aldrich et al., 2011). The compulsory voting requirement also makes it even more likely that lower-involvement voters participate in elections, as they are required to vote by law. Therefore, Australia is a suitable context to explore the lower-involvement voters and will now be discussed further to highlight this context.

**Voting in a compulsory voting system**

Since 1924, Australia has enforced compulsory voting in elections for eligible people over the age of 18 years (AEC, 2006). Therefore, as almost all Australian citizens vote, many constituents with political disinterest are required to vote, setting the context for this study. For a summary of the Australian political system, see Table I.

Of the 14 million Australians registered to vote in the 2010 federal election, 11 per cent were between the ages of 18 and 24 years (AEC, 2010b). Young Australians are less likely to vote than older people: in 2008-2009, 81 per cent of eligible young Australians were registered to vote compared to 92 per cent of all eligible Australians (ABS, 2010). As many as 400,000 young Australians do not vote in elections because they have not registered to vote, which represents approximately 20 per cent of all eligible young adult voters (Edwards
et al., 2005; Saha and Print, 2009). A report by Edwards et al. (2005) found that only 50 per cent would still vote if it was not compulsory, and young adult voters were half as likely as older voters to believe their vote is important (Martin, 2011). Previous research on political efficacy found that young adults perceive that their vote has little meaning or impact on the political process (Henn and Weinstein, 2002; Hill and Louth, 2006; Ødegård and Berglund, 2008). This, in turn, may contribute to their political disengagement (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2004). Therefore, the suggestion that voting is a lower-involvement decision-making process for many young adult voters may be regarded as a reasonable assumption.

### Table 1. The Australian voting system

| Australian | Compulsory
| History | Democratic (Westminster-based)
| Voter turnout for the most recent election | 93% (2010)
| Major political parties (2010-2011) | Four:
| Liberal and The National (Coalition)
| Greens
| Independent and other minor parties
| Election conditions | Consistent two-party system
| Methods of protest (aside from ballot paper spoiling) | Abstain from voting (lines involved)
| Blank vote
| Informal vote<sup>a</sup>
| Donkey vote<sup>b</sup>
| Representativeness of voters | Lowest turnout from young voters

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> Informal voting occurs when the ballot paper has been incorrectly completed or left blank. Informal votes are not counted as an official vote (AEC, 2011). <sup>b</sup> As Australian Federal elections use a ranking system, Donkey Vote indicates the voter has numbered his/her House of Representatives ballot paper in numerical order according to the order presented on the ballot paper and the Senate paper down each group and across from left to right. Thus it constitutes a valid vote, yet is one cast by someone either indifferent or ignorant (Mackerras, 1989) and can give a slight alphabetic advantage (Hughes, 1970).

**Source:** AEC (2010a), AEC (2010), Saha and Print (2009), IDEA (2011)

In non-compulsory contexts, young adults who have lower involvement in the political process may choose to opt out of the decision all together, a common choice as seen by However, as stated above, Australia enforces compulsory voting. This creates an interesting paradigm, in that there may be a higher turnout from young adults, but a greater number of voters with a general disinterest in, or apathy towards, politics. It also creates a unique situation to study lower-involvement decision-making, as these young adults are more likely to make a choice about whom they will choose to politically represent them than to opt out of the decision entirely.

**Research aim**

This study aims to extend understanding of consumer behaviour theory within political marketing by investigating decision-making in lower-involvement voter behaviour. This new area of research will contribute by specifically focussing on the young adult voters within the compulsory voting environment of Australia and evaluating their voting decision-making process within a lower-involvement context. A large proportion of young adult Australian voters choose to make a voting decision, regardless of their involvement level,
rather than opting out of voting. This unique political context provides an opportunity to further understand politically disengaged voting. This study does not seek to add to the literature on justifying how young people are interested or involved in democracy (Edwards, 2007; Furlong and Cartmel, 2012). Nor will it explore why they are disenfranchised with the system (Edwards, 2009), feel inhibited from participation (Edwards et al., 2005), are disengaged (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012; Henn et al., 2005), or how the young voter can be more engaged or empowered (Vromen and Cartmel, 2010). Engagement in this context is seen as a behaviour taken as a result of involvement within politics, such as boycotts, petitions or taking part in demonstrations (Furlong and Cartmel, 2012). Instead, it sees the young adult voter as a microcosm of the lower-involvement voter, which exists across the entire spectrum of voters and is not necessarily defined by age, gender, education or income. The younger voter, aged 18-25 years, is chosen for this research as literature has defined this group as disengaged and indifferent, and, therefore, it could be assumed that this voting age group would contain more lower-involvement voters than any other group. As young adult voting decision-making is primarily lower-involvement, this has implications for how to approach this cohort of voters, especially those who cannot or do not opt out of the voting process because of the compulsory nature of the Australian voting environment. Therefore, this research will address the following research questions:

RQ1. To explore young adult information seeking within a lower-involvement compulsory voting context.
RQ2. To understand how young adult voters evaluate political decision-making within a lower-involvement compulsory voting context.

Method
As the focus of this research was on gaining further in-depth understanding of lower-involvement voting, a qualitative research method was used. Collin (2008) argues that qualitative methods are required to fully understand young adult political participation. Others have also advised that qualitative methods are particularly useful in studies concerning young people and politics (Collin, 2008; Henn et al., 2005; Manning, 2010; O’Toole et al., 2003). Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were used for data collection. A group of trained young adult interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with young adult voters (Australians aged 18-25 years) about their perceptions of candidates, political parties and the overall political system. The interviewers were trained in qualitative interviewing processes with a particular focus on this research. This included matters relating to the ethical conduct of research and interviewing procedures.

One benefit of using young interviewers was that the interviews tended to sound more like conversations and, therefore, more natural. The participants did not view the interviewer as an adult authority figure imposing rigid structure on the interview, thus reducing the power balance (O’Toole et al., 2003). It has been suggested that individual interviews have the potential to be somewhat intimidating (Edwards, 2007); therefore, by having a “peer” conduct the interview, this perception was diminished as there was little to no perceived power difference between the interviewer and respondent.

Participants were purposefully selected to provide information relevant to young adults and politics within the compulsory voting context of Australia. All cases met the criteria of being 18-25 year old Australian citizens. Participants were recruited by the interviewers through purposeful selection to select participants with which the interviewers could establish the
most productive relationship, thereby providing the most valuable data for this study (Maxwell, 2013). Overall, 29 interviews were conducted.

*Preparation of qualitative data*

Data analysis was conducted using the procedures of thematic analysis. This involved a thorough examination of the data set to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ruane and Wallace, 2013). Through thematic analyses, the researchers explored the interview transcripts by searching for common patterns of response (Norton, 2009) then structurally organising the data into categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In preparing for qualitative analysis, the researchers recorded, transcribed and purified all of the interviews. The interviews were read several times to become familiar with the data before coding began. The second stage involved generating initial codes, where the transcripts were analysed line by line to segment the information. To analyse the interviews based on the research aims, the researchers started by focusing on involvement, then searched for themes within this code, which generated a thematic “map” of the analysis. Analysis was triangulated by having two researchers analyse each interview, increasing the reliability of the study by assessing the consistency of the analysis, known as investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002). This also ensured a form of intersubjective certifiability (Sharp and Eddy, 2001), where two or more researchers reach the same conclusions after reviewing the same data.

*Results and discussion*

As discussed previously, the research questions focus around understanding the decision-making within the compulsory context of Australia. Therefore, the interviews were analysed within the two research questions: information seeking and decision-making evaluation. As the context for this research assumes that voter decision-making for Australian young adults is lower-involvement, the qualitative interviews were viewed through this lens, rather than the assumption that they are making a higher-involvement rational decision.

*Information seeking*

Some respondents acknowledged their lack of understanding of the political system, but then reflected that they could not be bothered to conduct any information search. As outlined previously, in a lower-involvement decision, the search for information tends to be more internalised, and external searches are more limited. While the information search for these young adults could not be summarised as completely internal, there was some evidence of a limited external search, or a passive information search. This passive search for information supports previous research that within a low-involvement context, voters may not seek out much information at all (Ben-Ur, 2007; Rothschild, 1978). As previous research argues that those with low-involvement or low interest in a topic have little incentive to seek information (Apospori et al., 2010; Downs, 1957; Sears, 1987), further analysis was conducted to unearth some of the complexity in this compulsory voting decision-making context. Within the passive information seeking context, four themes were unearthed:

1. the reach of the information available;
2. the frequency of the information presented;
3. the creativity of the message; and
(4) one-way versus two-way communication.

Reach of the information available
One common thread in the discussions was on the ability of political communication to reach a significant proportion of the population, thereby gaining reach in its message. One respondent commented:

   Political leaders and parties could have extensive campaigns but if they are not in the paper or on the news I, and I’m guessing a lot of other young people, would never hear about them and would vote for whoever [...].

Many young adults commented that along this line, the television and newspaper were a prevalent source of information, possibly because of their availability and visibility in comparison to other media sources, such as radio.

Frequency of the information presented
Alongside the theme of reach was that of frequency. Many respondents commented that during election time, the political information was so frequent that they could not seem to get away from it:

   As for the advertising, well, it appears on TV for countless times every day.

   I Guess every time you saw an ad it would sort of persuade you a little bit and I think that media was influential.

However, a few commented that this was “overkill and [...] you get just a little sick of it”. This would indicate the likelihood of selective perception whereby if too much information is presented to these voters within a short timeframe, the higher likelihood of them “tuning out” (Jones, 1990). Perhaps one suggestion is more emphasis on the permanent campaign. The idea that campaigns should only take place during an election period has been firmly dismissed in political marketing (Butler and Collins, 2001). Instead, an argument would be that politicians, especially those in power, should focus on maintenance of a consistent presence, whether in the media or at a more local level. However, the young adult voters, as noted by the following comments, did not perceive this:

   Also, political parties should stop bombarding us at election time and then telling us nothing for the rest of the three to four years.

   I think you definitely get tired of it because you, you, you are inundated with it in all communication forms whether it be on the internet, television, paper [...].

As stated previously, a lower-involvement decision is more likely if the information is not made available or is not perceived to be available. However, from the interview analysis, it would seem that this is not the case, and, therefore, the availability of information does not seem to be a key driver of the lower-involvement decision-making in the compulsory voting environment.
Creativity of the message
Another theme outlined was that of the creativity of the message presented. Previous research has suggested that advertising needs to be creative to break through the clutter (Pich et al., 2014) and that the higher the novelty, the more likely it will capture attention. Overall, the respondents did not seem to find political advertising interesting or creative, as seen by the following comments:

But not the annoying ones that you immediately click out of [...] they need something creative.

Advertising should also be unique and memorable.

I think many young guys can tell you if it’s not interesting the chances are I will not be bothered much to find out.

One campaign that was mentioned by a few of the respondents was the ‘Kevin07’ election campaign run by the challenger Kevin Rudd in 2007. While many of the respondents would have been too young at this stage to vote, one respondent stated the following:

I liked that as I stated before it was memorable, but I also liked that he used traditional medias such as TV in unique ways to really engage with the younger generation, like him appearing on the Rove show. It was something that politicians had not done before, and has not been repeated since.

While it might be suggested that to reach these lower-involvement voters, political parties need to engage in campaigns based on character rather than policy, sound bites and catch phrases that directly appeals to young adults, this may not necessarily be the case, as indicated by the following statements:

I’d like to see it more used for issues ’cause I don’t care what marathon or swimwear Abbott has or new haircut Gillard has so I think it’s important where it has relevance.

If they are just going to flood my Twitter with useless information that I don’t even need to know, then no, I would not follow them.

One-way versus two-way communication
The fourth theme analysed was that of the types of communication tools used to reach young adults. From the responses, most of the communication was perceived to be one-way communication, rather than two-way. Drawing on from the discussion above about the use of television and newspaper to reach a large number of young adults, this was seen to have limitations, as noted by two respondents:

Because if they’re only going through mediums such as the TV or radio, it loses that personality factor.

[...] stuff like Facebook because they, kind of, show an image of the candidate that’s a little different from the media.
[..] you’re not going to be able to physically sit them down and have a conversation and talk about all the benefits you’re going to give them.

However, one could argue that with the increase of two-way communication technology, specifically social media, there is a way of having a conversation with young adults. The respondents seemed to agree that this could be useful, and argued that discussion was important:

But if they can engage with younger people through those mediums and actually try and get them thinking about issues and how it can affect them [...] then it’s a good thing.

I think they should [...] take their campaigns to where the people are. Send texts or go to Facebook or Twitter.

It would seem though that these young adults did not perceive this was currently the case. One respondent who currently followed a politician on Twitter stated the following: “You know it’s, you don’t expect a reply”. This would indicate that young adults perceived this two-way medium as one-way communication. If this is the case, then it would limit social media’s relevance and usefulness as the communication was only presented to young adults, rather than encouraging a dialogue.

While many argued that they used social media, others argued against using Facebook as it was perceived to be “like a news service” and, therefore, not suitable. Others suggested that it was useful, but then stated:

I don’t think I’d be completely satisfied with my party if this was their only form of communication, but I think that if they used this and other forms of communication, then, yeah I think I would be happy.

This view is consistent with qualitative research undertaken in the UK, which suggested that young people are disinclined to use civic/political websites that simply display information to them (Coleman, 2005), limiting their relevance and meaning. Therefore, if politicians are inclined to use social media to communicate with young adults, it may be advisable to be cognisant that some level of interaction is required, rather than using it as a one-way medium.

Therefore, it would seem that for young adults making voting decisions in a lower-involvement context, information seeking tends to be limited or passive. However, the information that is noticed by young adults needed to be cumulative, arguing for a permanent campaign rather than a one-shot only during election time. It also needed to be creative enough to break through the clutter and noise, as well as memorable, but not irrelevant or separate from the political message being sent. Finally, it needed to be across a number of media platforms, utilising both one-way and two-way communication.

Decision-making evaluation

As discussed previously, lower-involvement is likely in young adult voter decision-making, especially given the previous research on young adult disinterest. One suggestion is that in this context the voter is “somewhat concerned” with their vote, but not enough to evaluate the choice in a careful manner. However, in the Australian compulsory voting environment, where young adult voters are encouraged through enforced voting laws to turn out and
vote, there seems to be a higher level of evaluation than would be expected given the lower-involvement context. Three main themes were uncovered during the analysis, those of promise keeping/trust, achievements or performance and policies.

**Promise keeping/trust**
Issues of trust are often found at the forefront of studies on the young adult voter, and trust in politicians and the political system have been shown to be low (Apospori et al., 2010; Dalton and Crosby, 2008; Henn and Weinstein, 2002). The analysis of the interview transcripts uncovered that trust was also a consideration when evaluating political parties. This was possibly because at the time of the interviews, the carbon tax had just been announced, which was perceived by many as a breach of trust. Many respondents commented on issues with trust and political parties:

> If they said they were going to do something and then went ahead and did it then voters would have a reason to stay loyal. It’s when parties say one thing and do another that voters get upset and become less engaged in the political process.

Another noted that while trust was a concern, they did not expect to be able to trust politicians; therefore, breaking promises was seen as the norm or something that politicians are expected to do:

> [...] unfortunately, you have to be realistic with politics, some things that are promised during a campaign are not always going to be achieved, you need to see that in the long run, they try to win your vote.

However, regardless of this view, most voters noted that trust, or perceived level of trust, had an impact on their satisfaction and, therefore, influenced their evaluation of the political party:

> I suppose a satisfied first-time voter would continue to vote the same way if the candidate or party continued to represent the interests of the electorate. If the party started to represent themselves in a way that was contrary to their original position then I suppose they could not expect any voter loyalty.

This suggests that trial of the political party is important in voters overall evaluation of that party. Though it has been argued previously that all voters essentially trial the political party whether they voted for them or not (Winchester et al., 2012), upon deeper investigation of the transcripts, it would seem that those who voted for the current party in power commented more often on issues of trust.

**Achievements or performance**
An extension on this theme was that of political party achievements, or evaluations of their performance, as noted by one respondent:

> It also depends on exactly what they’ve promised, so if it’s something big that they haven’t achieved, and they use their whole campaign against that and they haven’t achieved that, then I would find that pretty annoying and that would definitely affect it in the future.
Another noted that it was consistency that was key for them, along with perceived benefit to them as a voter:

[...] if they have a history of aligning with my, like, issues that I believe in then I would generally stick to the party.

Basically what I think is beneficial to me, and what political party is going to come rough with the goods.

**Policies**

When probed further along the lines of what was perceived to be beneficial, many young adults began to discuss policies, which lead to the third theme of policy influencing the evaluation of political parties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this age group, education was a large concern, with many noting that if a political party made changes that positively influenced funding for education then that would influence their vote:

For example if the government changed and students had to pay their Uni fees up front then it would impact me but not so much in everyday life.

I think politicians need to think about [...] the students particularly in the education sense, so, for example with HECS how they can better [...] perhaps change it so it’s a bit effective for us and for them.

Others stated that while they would be interested in a political party who addressed them as a student, this was not expected based on their evaluation:

They seem to be forgetting a bit about students and children, things that effect us in our day to day lives that actually need improving.

Young voters who were employed were more focused on how changes to policy would affect them at work:

I think, well, working in the health industry I place a pretty high priority on health issues [...] if a party can show me that they are going to be able to create a health system which has really fair and equal value for all Australians, not just people who can afford health care.

[...] obviously factors dealing with my job. I’m a courier so [...] things around that affect prices of petrol, maybe building new roads [...] cost of cars, car factories [...].

Overall, policies that had a direct impact on young adults were those that were focused on first, followed by issues such as the current carbon tax, indicating some level of situational involvement (Burton and Netemeyer, 1992). Other issues of importance were family, the environment, and to a lesser extent migration, asylum seekers, gay marriage, national broadband, and multi-cultural issues. If polices were mentioned, it tended to be a limited number within the discussion, consistent with the previous discussion on evaluation within a lower-involvement context whereby only a few attributes are used to make decision
alternatives (Belonax and Javalgi, 1989; Rothschild and Houston, 1980). However, when asked to expand on the policy issues, discuss a political party stance on any issue, or attribute any policy to a particular party, there was very little knowledge:

Right now there is the whole carbon tax thing, and that’s about the only difference I know in the policy. Other than that, they both want a National broadband thing and both want asylum seekers to be processes in Malaysia or wherever they want.

It seems to me and my friends that the two major parties pretty much represent the same things. They seem to lack any differentiation.

Therefore, it would seem that while policies have some importance to young adults when it comes to decision-making, unless the political parties can clearly differentiate themselves and communicate that in a form that young adults will be aware of, evaluation based on these attributes seems less likely.

**Conclusion**

In this study, a thematic analysis was conducted on the interviews of young adult Australian voters to uncover themes within voter information seeking and evaluation within a lower-involvement compulsory voting context. Involvement has long been acknowledged as having a role in decision-making, but has had limited application to political marketing. This study provides insights into the lower-involvement decision-making of young adults, as previous research has suggested they are the most disengaged segment of the population, but have the potential to have an impact on the outcome of elections. The compulsory voting environment creates a unique situation to study lower-involvement decision-making, as these young adults are less likely to opt out of the voting process. As noted previously, political parties spend large amounts of money, as well as social costs, trying to gain those crucial votes to win their seats; therefore, understanding the young adult voter lower-involvement decision-making process provides a practical benefit, as the electoral outcome depends on understanding voter needs and wants. Two research questions were addressed within a lower-involvement compulsory voting context: to explore young adult information decision-making.

Analysis of the first research question of information seeking found that the search for information had a tendency to be passive, supporting previous research that within a low-involvement context, voters may not seek out much information at all (Ben-Ur, 2007; Rothschild, 1978). Within this passive information seeking behaviour four themes were explored:

1. the reach of the information available;
2. the frequency of the information presented;
3. the creativity of the message; and
4. one-way versus two-way communication.

As the search for external information is limited, young adults suggested that media needed to be presented across a number of platforms (with television and newspaper mentioned frequently), thereby increasing its availability and visibility. While the respondents were negative about the increased communication during campaign time, it would seem that this did increase their attention and awareness of the upcoming (Jones, 1990) because of
information overload, arguing for a permanent campaign rather than a one-shot only during election time.

This research may help policy makers, political candidates and political parties when creating a message to be presented to young adults: ideally it should be creative, unique and memorable enough to break through the clutter (Pich et al., 2014). However, the message also needs to be relevant to the campaign, rather than based on sound bites and catch phrases, which were seen by some respondents as useless information. The message also needs to be relevant to the medium used, with social media seen as both positive (as it allows the candidate to show a different image that is more personal) and negative (if it was used as a one-way rather than an engaging two-way communication).

When exploring the second research question of decision-making evaluation in the compulsory voting environment, there seems to be a higher level of evaluation than would be expected given the lower-involvement context. Three main themes were uncovered:

(1) promise keeping/trust;
(2) achievements or performance; and
(3) policies.

The findings were consistent with previous research that suggested that young adult trust in politicians was low (Apospori et al., 2010; Dalton and Crosby, 2008; Henn and Weinstein, 2002). Further to this, it was uncovered that young adults did not expect to be able to trust politicians, and that breaking promises was seen to be normal. Those who voted for the current party in power mentioned issues with trust more often, suggesting that trial of the political party is important in voters overall evaluation of that party (Ehrenberg, 1997). Issues of satisfaction and consistency also had an impact on evaluation, with young adults noting that major changes to the promises made by the party, or their stance on key policies, could impact their voting decision. Key policy issues for young adults were those directly affecting them, such as education or policies that would affect their work. However, when asked to expand on these issues, or attribute them to any particular party, there was very limited knowledge, suggesting that the political party in power that wishes to have young adults continue to vote for them needs to be associated with policies that are important to them, thereby reducing evaluation and encouraging habitual behaviour (Dall’Olmo Riley et al., 1999; Gerber et al., 2003; Hill and Louth, 2006).

The key contribution of the research findings in this paper was the outline of lower involvement decision-making within a compulsory voting context. Young adult voters may or may not search for information and evaluate their choices before making a decision. This research contributed by suggesting that habitual behaviour, including usage of the political party, may impact on how young adults search for information and evaluate their voting choices. While usage does influence behaviour, usage does not mean that the party in power is more likely to be re-elected because of habitual voting. While voting decision-making is a low-involvement decision for many voters, especially young voters, they are still evaluating the political brand while the party is in power and do show some elements of decision-making; however, it is still a lower-involvement choice; therefore, lower-involvement marketing strategies are most relevant.

In a lower-involvement context, young adults may use heuristics as coping mechanisms to interpret the stimuli presented to them (Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014), as their external information seeking behaviour is limited. Therefore, the message needs to be consistent,
available and relevant to the medium used. Australia’s compulsory voting requirement makes it more likely that voters turn out to vote regularly, creating the potential for habit formation (Aldrich et al., 2011). However, it would seem that issues of trust, performance and policies may encourage evaluation, thereby reducing the chances of habitually voting for the same party as before. Therefore, if a key policy change occurs during the term in power, this may encourage evaluation and, therefore, possible switching behaviour [1].

Limitations
The results were based on an exploratory study near Melbourne, Australia. A limitation of the study was that because the participants were selected by purposeful selection, there is no guarantee that their views are typical of all young adult voters. Although the participants tended to be from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, their experiences or perceptions may not be generalised to young voters from the general population. As well, some of the participants may be hesitant to express all of their opinions because of the potential for sensitivity to the subject matter, even if the recruitment methods aimed to establish the most productive relationships between interviewer and respondent.

Future research
Future research should be conducted to investigate what other factors influence the decision-making of lower-involvement voters, such as the salient elements that attract this group of people. Research should also be conducted on how to reach this type of audience who may not actively seek political information externally, and instead may depend on lower-involvement mechanisms such as previous behaviour (Aldrich et al., 2011) or heuristics (Keller, 2003). Considering the differences in decision-making of those who habitually vote for the same party out of loyalty versus apathy or disinterest would also be of interest. It is also of significant importance to investigate what appeals to this group of voters, what gains their attention, and what might trigger changes in behaviour, as political parties are interested in how to get people to vote for them.

Note
1. Following this study, the new taxes introduced by the incumbent Tony Abbott in his first budget (when he had been elected on a platform of no new taxes) caused an outcry by some in the community, particularly when they related to increased education and health costs that directly affected young adult voters (Hamblin, 2014; Landy, 2014; Lillebuen, 2014). This was exemplified by rallies around the country by thousands of tertiary students against changes to the key policy areas that directly affect them, as mentioned in this paper. This would suggest that, come the next election, young adults will be more likely to evaluate their decision, rather than habitually voting for their previous party/candidate selection.

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Further reading


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