

Millennials, Politics & Visual Communication.

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Abstract

There is a growing decline in political engagement amongst young Australian voters. Simultaneously, we have a growing number of digital platforms designed to assist voters in making choices, understanding their preferences and ultimately – who to vote for. This paper explores a shift in response to the issue of political apathy, through the design of a new online platform. By moving the focus from political science to visual communication design, this new concept aims to engage a contemporary understanding of design activism as a mechanism of political empowerment.

Keywords

Political communication, design activism, millennials, visual communication, mass media

Introduction

It's not uncommon for young Australians to know more about the Kardashians than they do their local government. Although young Australians are keen to contribute to positive social change, they have limited faith in politics. They struggle to connect with politicians and don't feel like their vote has any impact on the issues that matter most to them.

When millennials are referred to as a consumer group, strategies for media communication are creative, progressive and powerful. However, when they viewed as a voting demographic... the focus often shifts to questioning why millennials are lazy, self-absorbed and apathetic. Hill explores the notion that informal voting among young Australians is an act of protest, in response to a lack of meaningful choice, and this is supported by comparative studies¹. Enrolment rates for Australians between the age of 18-19 are low² and the AES reports that satisfaction with Australian democracy has been lower among young people for some time. In response to these challenges, this paper is exploring:

- The low levels of political participation amongst millennial Australians.
- The application of technology and new media as a solution to improve low levels of political participation, and their impact.
- Disruptions to traditional political campaign systems and moving towards a demographic specific solution for political engagement.

Voting applications are new to the landscape of visual communication design, and often fall into non-design disciplines such as political science or sociology.

They contribute to the diversification and accessibility of information – which is a fundamental component of democracy. As these types of design outcomes appear online, continued research is needed to understand the implications and improve the quality and accuracy of the outcome

Out of Touch

The decline in political engagement among young voters is an international trend⁴. This paper explores this issue within the context of the Australian political system and millennial voters. Despite the availability of information online, the growing number of digital applications designed to assist voters – the decline continues to grow. In addition to the dissatisfaction with the overall voting experience, confidence in the Australian Electoral Commission is falling⁵. In 2016, the Australian Election Study survey revealed a record low level of voter interest, and record low levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in government⁶.

An impact of low engagement in a country with a compulsory voting system is the significant occurrence of 'informal voting'⁷, also known as a 'donkey vote'. The significant number of donkey votes submitted in Australian elections is a repercussion of compulsory voting, sometimes seen as a simple strategy to avoid financial penalty⁸. While we can quantify the number of donkey votes identified as blank ballots, ballot papers with drawings or protest messages, how many votes are submitted with random or uninformed selections?

This paper combines both intentional and unintentional informal voting⁹, when referring to donkey votes. It is reasonable to assume that voting without an understanding of how to do so correctly, can also be symptomatic of a lack of engagement in politics. It is also difficult to quantify the number of voters who complete the process successfully, but only make random selections to meet the legal requirement.

Survey data highlights that the millennial demographic is responsible for a significant proportion of donkey votes¹⁰. Hill explores the relationship between young Australians and informal voting, in relation to their lower levels of enrolment and turnout¹¹. Low levels of millennial

¹ L Hill and Serrin Rutledge-Prior, "Young People and Intentional Informal Voting in Australia.," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2016).

² Australian Electoral Commission, "Voter Turnout. 2016 House of Representatives and Senate Elections," (Australia: Australian Electoral Commission, 2016).

³ Hill and Rutledge-Prior.

⁴ Commission.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hill and Rutledge-Prior.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lisa Hill, "Increasing Turnout Using Compulsory Voting.," *Political Studies Association*. 31, no. 1 (2011).

engagement in politics is complex, however can be viewed as a combination of related factors, including:

- Cynicism about the Australian political system¹².
- Disconnection from political parties and increasingly low rates of party membership¹³.
- Feeling 'out of touch' with mainstream electoral politics¹⁴.
- Negative political attitudes¹⁵.
- Preference for protest and alternative forms of societal participation¹⁶.

Another possible source of intentional informal voting is a lack of trust in politics. A trend identified by political scientists globally, trust in political institutions and representatives is declining in most advanced industrial democracies¹⁷.

As a response to the challenge of political participation, a range of technological platforms are currently available. Despite the benefits of these resources, political engagement among Australian millennials continues to fall¹⁸. In the following chapter, we will discuss a selection of these platforms and investigate what is effective, and suggest issues that limit their efficacy. Can we use their momentum to design solutions which lead us towards real change?

Digital Voting Resources

Interactive media and communication design strategies are increasingly being used to explore their potential for increasing engagement in politics. This chapter explores two online platforms, in addition to an example of political education design within a university setting.

The **ABC's Vote Compass** is a new online application designed to resolve the issues raised in the first chapter of this paper. One of the most commonly known applications in Australia, it utilises the largest survey data of voter attitudes ever undertaken in the country (1.3 million), helping its users to identify how their policy preferences align with political parties¹⁹.

Despite its many positive attributes, we can assume that it isn't meeting the needs of disengaged voters – as their numbers continue to increase. One reason for this may be its lack of specific target audience. The designers of Vote Compass have an objective to stimulate democratic participation in a clear and accessible manner²⁰, however their target audience is unmanageably wide – and referred to only as 'the electorate'. In a review of Australian Voter Turnout, The Australian Electoral Commission highlights the need for focus on specific demographics, responding to complex issues surrounding lack of participation throughout

society²¹. Critics of the platform question its accuracy²² bias²³ and focus on specific policies²⁴.

Secondly, the Vote Compass development team contains a majority of social researchers, data scientists, political scientists²⁵. This is logical considering the political content of the platform, and an obvious requirement of an outcome focusing on politics. But its primary use is *communication*. The platform is aiming to communicate complex information to a user group who are not accessing the same information from existing, available sources. Would Vote Compass be more effective if the development team included more communication design specialists? (One member of the team is identified as a 'designer', however a 'Google stalk' reveals that he is a recent university graduate, suggesting limited experience). If we assume that designers were consulted during its development, their lack of acknowledgement may suggest that 'design' and its related professions (interactive media specialist, communication designer, visualization designer) are not highly regarded within its production. A recent study of the Quebec iteration of Vote Compass indicated that it **does** have an impact on young voter's political preferences – however only for educated users who are already politically engaged²⁶. When young Australian voters are disengaged to the extent that they aren't actively seeking the resources to assist with their voting issues, the challenge becomes complex and required a multi-disciplinary approach, beyond the limitations of political science as a practice.

Aiming to increase voter engagement and education using information, data and technology²⁷, the digital platform **isidewith.com** was developed in 2012. Peck and Boutelier have a professional tool kit of political analysis, tech marketing, user experience, data and analytics – much closer to the field of 'design' than the team behind Vote Compass, as demonstrated by its contemporary interface. Like all related voting resources, there are criticisms. Users of isidewith.com highlight the focus on policy at the exclusion of other elements, a drawback²⁸. Like other tools with similar functionality, it also cannot take into account staffing changes within political parties, recent events that may change public opinion or the likelihood of a politician following through with an election promise²⁹.

Beyond using technology and the internet to impact political engagement, educators are experimenting with creative curriculum design solutions. In her introduction to politics course, **Wadsworth** has adapted her content and redesigned the learning experience around the theme of 'zombie apocalypse'³⁰ with success. She identified her student's numbness towards political

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hill and Rutledge-Prior.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mazoe Ford, "Abc Vote Compass Opens," (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016).

²⁰ ABC, "Vote Compass," www.votecompass.com.

²¹ Commission.

²² Patrick Batchelor, "Why Abc's Vote Compass Doesn't Work for Me.," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 26 2016.

²³ Chris Kenny, "Media Watch Watch: Abc Vote Compass Fails to Find True North," *The Australian*, May 16, 2016 2016.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ ABC.

²⁶ Val erie-Anne Maheo, "The Impact of Voting Advice Applications on Electoral Preferences: A Field Experiment in the 2014 Quebec Election," *Policy Studies Organsation: Policy and Internet* (2016).

²⁷ Taylor Peck, Nick Boutelier, and Andrew Karpel, "I Side With," www.australia.isidewith.com.

²⁸ "Can't Choose? Try the Voting App.," *The New Zealand Herald* 2017.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nancy Wadsworth, "Awakening the 'Walking Dead': Zo, Bie Pedagogy for Millennials," *Radical Teacher*. 107 (2017).

engagement, linking this with the understanding that her target generation has been the most quantified, monitored, medicated, micromanaged and assessed in history. Wadsworth links research and practice to understand her student's motivations; their apathy for politics is born from the feeling that there is no alternative to life in a materialist, consumerist society³¹.

Millennials have grown up learning that the power to buy things is a greater expression of agency than direct political engagement, and economic growth is what keeps a nation strong. Wadsworth's educational design outcomes highlight the want and need for millennial students to understand theory concepts in relation to their agency in the contemporary world. Despite a much smaller 'reach' when compared to Vote Compass and isidewith.com, Wadsworth's example highlights the success that can come from designing solutions that meet the individual needs of a target audience, exploring new innovative solutions and applying design thinking within an educational context to create real change. Is it possible to combine the characteristics of these examples?

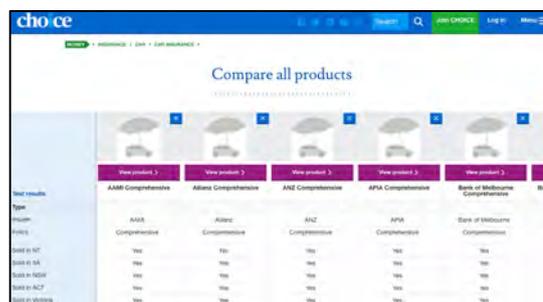
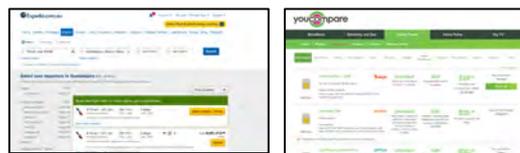
Despite the growing number of designed outcomes aiming to improve engagement in Australian politics, our participation is on the decline³². 2016 saw the lowest recorded turnout since voting was made compulsory in 1925³³. Although this statistic indicates that the current voting applications aren't working, examination of them will create a foundation for future work in this area. By reframing the development of political communication tools into the field of design, we may start to see an improvement in political engagement.

No Donkey dot org

The studio design practice associated with this paper seeks to explore alternatives to current political campaign systems, with the view to reengage Australian millennial voters. It aims to recontextualise commercial advertising strategies and embrace the current consumption habits of the target demographic. Rather than seek to reengage young Australian's into traditional forms of political campaigns, this research seeks to redesign the current political campaign content to suit the selected demographic. The first iteration of this is called www.nodonkey.org.

'No Donkey' aims to apply the format of existing compare and contrast websites, currently used by consumer platforms like www.choice.com, www.expedia.com and www.youcompare.com. These examples (pictured) successfully provide their users with complex product information in a usable format. All available options are identified in a side by side layout, according to the parameters set by the user. At first, this idea may seem simplistic, however the adaptation of existing design strategy for non commercial outcomes isn't often attempted. The familiarity that comes with this concept is also part of its strength. This concept isn't a viral social media campaign, it isn't a mass street protest, however forms of protest or design activism do not need to be loud to create impact³⁴. One of the potentially significant outcomes of design initiatives such as No Donkey, are the growth of inner conversations and collective

epiphanies regarding an individual's connection to their government and environment³⁵.



In addition to selected digital consumer platforms, 'No Donkey' utilises the systems of social media (predominantly Facebook) already widely adopted by Australian millennials. By designing new ways to communicate political information, in a way that responds to the needs of the user, No Donkey aims to increase political engagement through:

- transparent connections between political candidates and social issues.
- easily accessible information, without jargon, presented in a familiar format.
- the humanization of political candidates and direct access to their profile.
- visible connections between a vote and potential election outcomes.
- access to any changes or updates to a candidate's opinion or policy over time.

While there are existing platforms that aim to achieve similar results, nodonkey.org is unique in that it aims to engage a specific target audience; young Australian voters. Its functionality, layout and design will reflect the preferences of this target audience and will follow the traditional iterative design process to ensure it functionally meets the needs of its users. By connecting voters with a resource that allows for engagement in familiar and meaningful ways, we take a step towards a significant revolution in political campaigning – we are changing the way in which politics appears in the minds of voters³⁶. It's no longer something distant or irrelevant, it's accessible and connected to everyday issues.

If millennials are unengaged in politics, why would they use No Donkey? Existing research indicates that Australian millennials **are** engaged in their communities and are motivated to contribute to positive social change. However, they struggle to identify with political candidates and don't feel like their vote makes a difference. They understand fake news and alternative facts, which create issues when this information is

³¹ Ibid.

³² Commission.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Micah White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution*. (Canada: Penguin Random House, 2016).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

expected to contribute to an educated political decision. One aim of No Donkey is to provide information, without the filter of news media.

New resources designed to have positive impacts on voter engagement need to reconsider the relationship between the participants and the institutional structures. In 2004, only 82 per cent of Australians aged 17–25 were enrolled, compared with a national average of 93 per cent, and The (Australian) YES found that 45 per cent of Year 12 students described voting 'a waste of a Saturday'. The design and visual communication strategies utilised within the No Donkey platform aim to negate these issues, and link young voters existing motivations to current political systems.

Like the examples presented in the previous chapter, limitations have been identified during the early development stages. No Donkey cannot verify the honesty of a candidate. However, the increased transparency between a candidate and their policies over time has the potential to assist with voter decision making. The site also does not respond to the additional challenges faced by Australia's Indigenous population and other user groups with specific challenges. The platform is also dependent on a user's ability to access information freely through the internet, with suitable hardware and software.

When a business understands the behaviour of its target audience, it is able to apply this knowledge to its communication or advertising strategy, with the ultimate goal of increasing profits. One example of this is a recent study by Hall and Towers exploring the patterns of millennial shoppers and their decision making in a retail environment³⁷. The research centers around the identification of a small, distinct target audience. It discusses the user's decision making process, expectations and preference for communication strategies. It also explores the changing landscape of consumption, from real spaces to the digital spaces. If this depth of research was applied to the previous examples of political communication design, would we see an increase in political participation? Can we apply the same engagement strategies to young Australian voters, and young Australian consumers? And what would happen if we combined this level of user group awareness and visual communication design strategy?

The perpetual development of technology requires business to actively engage in systematic improvement, research, redevelopment and refinement of its communication strategy (also known as advertising)³⁸. However, this type of redevelopment and growth isn't currently visible within political communication.

Another contributor to lack of political participation is voters feeling unprepared to make a good decision. Perception of political competence can play a significant role in engagement, 48% of young Australians report that they do not understand 'political issues well enough to vote'³⁹. How can this be so, when the Internet provides us with so much information, all the time? Without significant political-economic critique of media, limited research is available on

how this is impacting specific target groups. What is the connection between the flood of available information and the lack of millennial political engagement?⁴⁰. Forms of political communication are not reflecting the most advanced modes of communication technology, practice and 'information overload'. Technological advancements within communication industries are evolving rapidly, faster than traditional political communication systems are able to adapt. Working towards renewed solutions for political engagement may be more successful if framed within the context of creative industries, visual communication and design. A critical approach to the relationship between media and politics must be explored⁴¹. There is a clear link between age and voter participation, suggesting that we can target people under the age of 40 to increase overall turnout⁴².

Future Updates

In democratic society, we assume that the public rules, but it can be argued that decision-making power resides in private hands⁴³. If this is an accurate statement, the development of voter resources are not significant enough to resolve the issue. However, if we can increase the engagement of young Australian voters in our political systems, it has the potential to lead to significant change, revolution or disruption. When society is apathetic about politics, we aren't able to debate or take action when needed⁴⁴. By changing the focus of political engagement from the context of political science to visual communication design, we can work towards creating effective solutions to the issue of millennial apathy and political empowerment on a wider scale.

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³⁷ Angela Hall and Neil Towers, "Understanding How Millennial Shoppers Decide What to Buy: Digitally Connected Unseen Journeys.," *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management* 45, no. 5 (2017).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lawrence Saha, Kathy Edwards, and Murray Print, "Report 4: Youth, Political Parties and the Intention to Vote," in *Youth Electoral Study* (The Australian National University & University of Sydney, 2007).

⁴⁰ Enda Brophy, "The Internet's Factory Floor: Political Economy for an Era of Communicative Abundance," *International Journal of Communication*. 11 (2017).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Commission.

⁴³ N. Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions. Thought Control in Democratic Societies.*, (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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