Media use and its effect on trust in politicians, parties and democracy

Juliet Pietsch and Aaron Martin[*]

Introduction

Over the last few decades there has been considerable research on the decline of political trust in the industrialised democracies (Abramson, 1983; Nye, Zelikow and King, 1997; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004). This article examines whether media use impacts on levels of trust in politicians, parties and democracy in Australia. There has been little research on the effect of the media on political trust. Using the Australian Election Study (AES) surveys (1987–2007) we examine which groups in Australian society are 'switched on' during political campaigns and whether media use impacts on political trust and satisfaction with democracy. First, we examine levels of media use among the Australian public and consider whether citizens use the media to obtain political information more or less than in the past. The second section of this article examines the effect of media use on political trust.

Trends in media use

The AES surveys allow us to look at media use across time. In Figure 1 we have charted the percentage of those who use various types of media and note that since 1987 there have been large falls in those who use television 'a good deal' as a source of election campaign news. In 1987 52% of respondents said they followed the election campaign on television. This figure fell quite precipitously to a low of 26% in 2001 and has recovered somewhat in 2007 (to 37%).

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[*] Juliet Pietsch is in the School of Politics and International Relations, ANU and Aaron Martin is a lecturer at the University of Melbourne

Figure 1: Media use over time
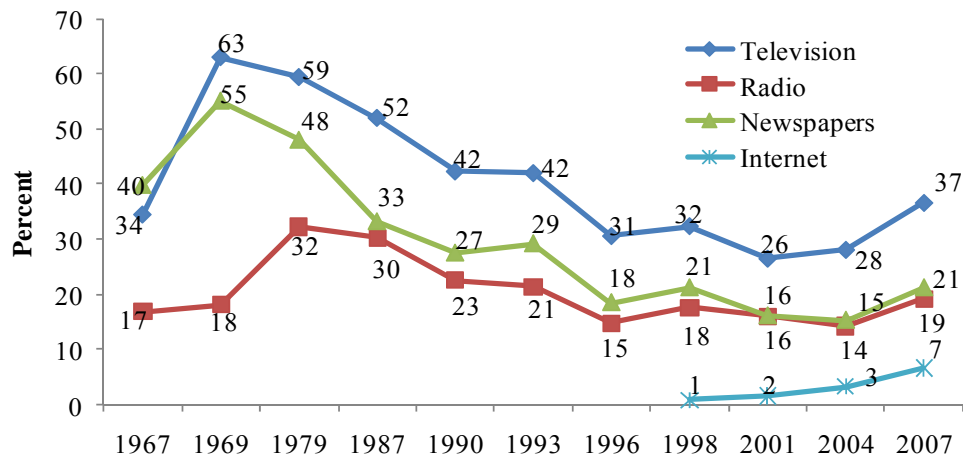
Notes: AES question wording for media use items:

1. 'Did you follow the election campaign news on television?'

2. 'There are a number of programs on radio in which people call in to voice their opinions about politics. How often do you listen to political talkback radio programs of this type?'

3. 'How much attention did you pay to reports about the election campaign in the newspapers?'

4. 'Did you make use of the internet at all to get news or information about the [1998/2001/2004/2007] Federal election?'
   Estimates for Television and newspapers includes 'a good deal'. Estimates for radio combines 'everyday' and 'most days', and internet includes those who reported 'a good deal'.

A similar pattern can be observed in relation to newspaper use. For example, in 1987 33% of respondents said they use newspapers a 'good deal' to get news on the campaign. This number fell even more precipitously to a low of 15% in 2004 and recovered somewhat to 21% in 2007, still well below levels of use in the late eighties and early nineties. Use of radio has declined from a high of 30% in 1987 to a low of 14% in 2004 and recovered to 19% in 2007.

The only type of media that has become more popular is the Internet. When the survey began asking about this type of media use only 1% of people were using the Internet for news on the campaign. This increased steadily to 7% in 2007.

While many types of media use are declining, political events do have an impact on media use as during the 2007 election when media use increased. Table 1 shows the types of individuals who are more likely to use various types of media. Men are more likely to use all types of media. This may be because women are more likely to be raising children and even juggling this with a career.

Table 1: Used the following media a 'good deal' by social background

'A good deal'	Newspapers (%)	Television (%)	Radio (%)	Internet (%)
Gender				
Male	26	40	22	8
Female	17	34	17	6
Age				
18-34	16	32	10	12
35-49	18	32	18	5
50-64	23	38	21	6
65 and over	27	43	24	5
Urban/Rural				
Urban	25	38	20	6
Rural	17	34	18	7
Education				
University Education	26	39	24	12
No university education	19	35	17	4
Party ID				
Labor	25	42	21	8
Coalition	19	36	18	5
Minor	19	34	20	8
No party	17	25	17	7
Strength of Partisanship				
Strong partisanship	26	44	22	8
Weak partisanship	10	21	10	3
Total (n)	(382)	(651)	(312)	(99)

Source: Australian Election Study, 2007.

Consistent with the research of Wattenberg (2007) and Putnam (2000) in the US, young people are shown to be much less likely to use most types of media. While 27% of those aged 65 and over read newspapers a 'good deal' only 16% of those aged 18 to 34 did. The same pattern applies to television (the respective figures are 43 and 32) and to an even greater extent for radio (the respective figures are 24 and 10). This pattern is reversed, as may be expected, for Internet use. Young people are more than twice as likely to use the Internet compared with older people. Those with a university education are also more likely to use all types of media than their counterparts without a university education. This is especially the case for Internet use. This supports the 'narrowcasting' thesis (Sunstein, 2001) that a more select group of individuals are using the internet. Identifying with a party also increases all types of media use. Those with no party identification are less likely to use all types of media and this effect is even more pronounced for strong and weak partisans.

The Internet

The Internet is invariably going to become a larger part of the political landscape in the future. Rather than those who use the Internet a 'good deal' (as in Figure 1 and Table 1) Table 2 shows those who have used the internet a 'good deal' and 'sometimes'.

Table 2: Factors Related to Internet Use

Internet use during campaign 'good deal' or 'sometimes'	(%)	(n)
Gender		
Male	17	(115)
Female	15	(117)
Age		
18-34	28	(79)
35-49	15	(63)
50-64	14	(63)
65 and over	8	(20)
Urban/Rural		
Urban	19	(156)
Rural	12	(74)
Education		
University Education	27	(113)
No university education	12	(118)
Party ID		
Labor	17	(91)
Coalition	12	(69)
Minor party	26	(32)
No party	16	(39)
Strength of Partisanship		
Strong partisanship	17	(155)
Weak partisanship	12	(39)

Source: Australian Election Study, 2007.

This allows us to better establish how widespread Internet use is. A sizable portion of young people (28%) use the Internet, a similar figure to those with a university education (27%). This shows that Internet use is more widespread than suggested in previous tables. Those who identify with minor parties are also more likely to use the Internet.

Related to Internet use is the question of whether the Internet being used to supplement conventional types of media use or being used as a substitute for conventional types of media use. Table 3 shows those who use only one type of media (i.e. only newspapers, television, radio or internet).

Table 3: Exposure to Media during campaign

	(%)	(n)
Newspapers only	*3.3*	*(60)*
Television only	8.9	(159)
Radio only	1.4	(26)
Internet only	0.3	(5)

Source: Australian Election Study, 2007

Only 3.3% of those who read newspapers read newspapers only. The respective figures for television and radio are 8.9 and 1.4. Among Internet users only 0.3% of Internet users used the Internet only. Clearly, political news on the Internet is only being used to supplement other types of media use. Finding political news on the Internet requires some initiative whereas on the radio or television people may be exposed to media during news bulletins or in articles they come across while reading general news. Therefore, the young and more educated who are more likely to use the Internet don't seem to be relying on just the Internet. In other words, the Internet is not mobilising those who are not engaged at any other level. Rather, a more select group of people seem to be using a wider variety of sources, whereas those who aren't using any media (as in Table 1) are not turning to the Internet to get information.

Effect of media use on trust in government, parties and satisfaction with democracy

In Australia, political trust has been found to be low. For example, only 43% of respondents agreed that the government can usually or sometimes be trusted to do the right thing (McAllister & Clark, 2007).[1] Political trust, which can be defined as 'more broadly-based values about how government acts within the society as a whole' (McAllister, 1992, 47) is among the most important political attitudes and has been a key theme beginning with the early literature on voter behaviour (Stokes, 1962; Almond & Verba, 1963). Given that trust in government has been found to be low in Australia, we might expect that media use would have an effect on this. However, satisfaction with democracy has been found to be much higher than political trust (see McAllister & Clark, 2008) so we may expect media use to have a smaller effect here.

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[1] However, the extent to which trust has declined over time is disputed. Goot (2002) argues that political trust declined over the period of a party's time in power and then increases when a new party's elected (see also Bean, 2005). But other research presents a different argument. For example, Papadakis (1999) (1999, 76), Leigh (2002) and Dalton (2004) all draw on evidence to show that political trust has declined in Australia over time. Without the across-time data available in other countries this debate is unlikely to be fully resolved. By international standards political trust in Australia has been found to be quite low (see Martin, 2010).

Rather than looking at the effect of each type of media use on political trust (which would be messy and complicated by low Ns in some categories) we have created a scaled variable which looks at media use overall. This is also appropriate given that most respondents to the AES are likely to use various types of media (not just one) and therefore each type of media use (alone) is unlikely to have a large effect. Rather, it is media use overall that is important. Tables 4 and 5 regress the scaled media use variable on trust in government, then on trust in parties and then on satisfaction with democracy.

Table 4: Effects of media usage during campaign on political trust (OLS estimates)

	(b)	(beta)
(Constant)	2.891	
Media Usage	-0.040	-0.097***
Gender (male)	-0.001	-0.004
Location (urban)	0.135	0.064*
Age (in years)	-0.005	-0.074*
University Educated	0.076	0.032
Party Id (Labor)	-0.213	-0.099**
Minor Party	-0.333	-0.084**
No party	-0.270	-0.094**
Partisanship (strong)	0.181	0.077**
Adjusted R²		.04

Source: Australian Election Study, 2007 *Note 1:* b: Unstandardised regression coefficient. *Note 2:* beta: standardised regression coefficient p value (p < .05 =*, p < .01 = **, p < .001=***). *Note 3:* In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time? Note 4: The five background factors (gender, location, age, university and party ID) have been specified in simple binary dummy variable form.

Table 4 shows that except for party identification media use has the largest effect on political trust. Media use has a highly significant and negative effect on political trust. In other words, those that use the media more often are more likely to be less trustful of government than those who use the media less or not at all. This finding suggests that the media's reporting of scandals and bungles may have an effect on political trust whereas those who don't follow the media may be more trusting because they are less likely to be exposed to this negative reporting (see Schudson, 2004). Being younger, identifying with the Labor party, no party or independent/green also has the effect of depressing trust. Having a strong partisan identification increases trust. Overall, we can say that media use seems to have an effect political trust.

Table 5 employs the same procedure as Table 4 but this time uses trust in political parties as the dependent variable.

Table 5: Effects of media usage during campaign on Trust in Political Parties
(OLS estimates), AES, 2007 (political parties know what ordinary people think?)

	(b)	(beta)
(Constant)	-2.378	
Media Usage	-0.069	-0.165***
Gender (male)	- 0.064	0.030
Location (urban)	0.117	0.055*
Age (in years)	0.001	0.009
University Educated	0.232	0.096**
Party Id (Labor)	-0.105	-0.048
Independent/Green	-0.413	-0.102***
No party	-0.450	-0.154***
Partisanship (strong)	0.165	0.069*
Adjusted R²		.08

Source: Australian Election Study, 2007 *Note 1:* b: Unstandardised regression coefficient. *Note 2:* beta: standardised regression coefficient p value (p < .05 =*, p < .01 = **, p < .001=***). Note 3: The question was, 'Some people say that political parties in Australia care what ordinary people think. Others say that political parties in Australia don't care what ordinary people think. Where would you place your view on this scale from 1 to 5?'

Media use has the strongest (negative) effect on political trust. In other words, media use depresses trust in parties. The effect is even larger than it was for trust in politicians. Being university educated, urban or having a strong partisan identification increases trust. Having no party identification or being an Independent/Green depresses trust. Overall, we can again see that media use has a significant negative effect on political trust.

Table 6 again repeats the same procedure with satisfaction with democracy as the dependent variable.

We can see that media use has a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy but other factors are also important. Identifying with the Labor Party, no party or Independent/Green depresses trust. However, again, we can say that media use is important to satisfaction with democracy.

To summarise, we show that media use depresses trust in politicians, parties and satisfaction with democracy. However, the effect of media use on political trust should not be overstated and the r-square statistic shows that media use only explains a small portion of political trust. Furthermore, if fewer people are being exposed to political news from the media (as shown in Figure 1) then the effect media use will have on political trust will be smaller than when more people use the media.

Table 6: Effects of media usage during campaign on satisfaction with democracy
(OLS estimates)

	(b)	(beta)
(Constant)	3.422	
Media Usage	-0.036	-0.098***
Gender (male)	0.024	0.018
Location (urban)	0.061	0.046
Age (in years)	-0.001	-0.021
University Educated	0.010	0.006
Party Id (Labor)	-0.129	-0.093**
Independent/Green	-0.388	-0.152**
No party	-0.337	-0.183**
Partisanship (strong)	0.047	0.031
Adjusted R²	.05	

Source: Australian Election Study, 2007 *Note 1:* b: Unstandardised regression coefficient. *Note 2:* beta: standardised regression coefficient p value ($p < .05 =$*, $p < .01 = $**, $p < .001=$***). Note 3: The question was, "On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?'

Comment

The analysis above has shed light on the effect of media use on political trust which has been an area not explored in any depth in Australia. We have shown that with the exception of the Internet, media use has been declining. This does not mean media use is in secular decline and immune to political events. For example, media use increased in 2007 in the run up to what was anticipated to be a very close election. The charitable explanation of this downward trend in media use is that perhaps people today rely more on friends or work colleagues to find out about politics. A less charitable explanation is that people are becoming less informed about politics through the media and then making less well-informed voting choices. If people are not following political events through the media, it is difficult to see where else they would get information.

The Internet may have been expected to better inform people about politics - after all, finding political news on the Internet requires just a click of the button - but because the Internet is self-selecting it is easier for those who have little political interest to avoid political news on the Internet. First of all, we found that use of the Internet is quite low although some groups (such as the young and the university educated) use it at a much higher rate than others. Secondly, we found that almost no one uses just the Internet as a sole news source. Rather than serving as a substitute for conventional news sources it is being used to supplement other news sources. Those who are not using the television or newspaper to find out more about politics are not using the Internet to do this (despite it being very easy to find political news). In other words, the Internet is not informing people who would not

otherwise look for political news on the Internet as is the case for newspapers and television when viewers/readers come across political news inadvertently. This supports the narrow-casting thesis which suggests the Internet caters to more specific interests of individuals (and these interests will often not be politics).

The other significant finding in this article is that media use has a significant effect on trust in government, trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy. For all of these levels media use had the largest or close to the largest effect compared to the other factors we examined. While it is difficult to establish the causation, it does seem media use affects trust and not the other way around, which accords with the findings of previous studies (Norris, 2000). At any rate, we have established an association between media use and political trust even if there is some debate about the way the causation runs.

The more vexed question is why this is the case. While the AES data did not allow us to test certain hypotheses, some explanations could be put forward. It may be that media reporting has become more negative and therefore those who use the media are more likely to be exposed to media scandals, reports of bungles and intra-party factional differences. According to Schudson (2004), the Watergate scandal in the US became a reference for subsequent political scandals in the United States and an archetype for political scandals around the world. Australia is not immune to political scandal and exposure of political incompetence. In 2005 it was revealed that an Australian company AWB Limited, had assisted the Iraq government in bypassing a UN sanctions regime raising serious doubts about the effectiveness of government compliance to UN sanctions (Botterill and McNaughton 2008). Reporting of these scandals could be linked to the negative effect media use has on political trust.

It may also be that the media report politics in a very polarised way which depletes trust in those exposed to it. For example, when there is consensus among both parties around an issue it is much less likely to be reported (even if it is a significant policy). Rather, the media prefers to report stories where there is conflict between the parties (or within parties). If the news coverage relies on sensational, superficial and populist political reporting it may have a corrosive effect on political trust and satisfaction with democracy. Such coverage is thought to encourage viewers to become cynical and disenchanted with their institutions of government and political leaders because of their focus on scandal, corruption and political conflict. For example, Mutz and Reeves (2005) found that those exposed to uncivil political debates in news coverage were less trusting of Congress, politicians, and the government system than those exposed to civil debate. Given that segments of Question Time are regularly reported in the news it is likely that many Australians are exposed to the polarised nature of Question Time on television and radio and this could be expected to have a negative effect on political trust in Australia.

Another explanation for the effect of media use on trust is rising and diverging expectations. The public are now placing greater demands on their political leaders to bring about change in areas such as environmental policy. If public demands on government spiral upwards, then satisfaction may fall if performance remains

unchanged (Putnam, Pharr & Dalton 2000, p. 23). Dalton for instance, argues that the criteria for judging government has become more postmaterialist in orientation and therefore changing public values are an important factor in altering expectations of government performance (Dalton 2000). Again this may be linked to the media placing unrealistic expectations on politicians and parties which affects political trust. According to Dalton, postmaterialists have criticised parties and leaders for their emphasis on materialist goals and their inadequate attention to postmaterial goals such as the environment and multilateralism. The issue of climate change has sparked many in western democracies to publically express widespread dissatisfaction with their government's failed attempts to exercise leadership on climate change. However, those that are less exposed to the media may not be as aware of, for example, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 'ETS backflip' and therefore may be less distrustful than those who are better informed about this.

This article has shown that, first, media use (except for the Internet) is declining; Second, the Internet is being used to supplement traditional news sources and is by no means replacing them; Third, media use is related to low levels of trust in government, trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy. The next stage of research could involve more targeted (and perhaps experimental) studies which can better explain the mechanisms by which media use leads to low levels of trust. Qualitative research may help in exploring why some citizens who follow political news more closely have lower levels of trust and which way causation runs. This article has outlined the broad dimensions of the problems by using an across time dataset and shown the media is an important factor to consider when examining political trust.   ▲

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