

# **The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?**

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## **Abstract**

Fears for the health of representative politics in advanced industrial democracies have gained increasing prominence in recent years with observers pointing to a growing body of evidence that citizens are disengaging from formal politics. One of the solutions put forward to address these perceived problems is the incorporation by politicians and parliaments of new communication channels such as the Internet and the WWW. To date, however, attention has focused largely on the supply-side of online engagement by politicians and legislatures rather than on levels of demand and actual use among citizens, with governments frequently being rated on their performance via international league tables. This paper aims to provide a 'bottom-up' perspective to the debate in the Australian context, looking at the e-democracy and particularly e-representation debate from the public's perspective. Specifically we address two key questions: how much support do such initiatives attract? And can they bring about the mobilisation of less politically engaged groups? Our findings show that while Australians broadly support the roll-out of e-representation tools, current interaction levels are low. Secondly, while they may have the potential to engage some younger people in the political process, widespread mobilisation is unlikely.

## **Introduction**

Much concern has been voiced about the apparent problems of representative politics in advanced industrial democracies (Dalton, 2004; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Gray and Caul, 2000). In a range of countries, survey evidence has consistently identified an increasingly disconnected citizenry with falling levels of interest, knowledge and trust in both parliamentary institutions and political representatives. This decline in the health of the body politic has given increasing urgency to the perceived need to modernize representative politics and ignite public interest in democratic institutions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the emergence of new media technologies over the past decade, notably the Internet and email, has been seen as one potential solution to the disconnection problem. Across a range of countries, politicians have placed considerable emphasis on new media as means of communicating with the public and reconnecting with their constituents (Åström, 2001; Caldow, 1999; Campbell et al., 1999; Kingham, 2003; Hoff, 2004; Ward and Lusoli, 2005). E-government initiatives have been institutionalised over the past decade whilst parliaments around the world have set up investigations into e-democracy and undertaken a range of experiments using e-tools including online consultations and petitions to engage the public electronically. However, despite this apparent enthusiasm for technology, doubts remains about the ability of new media to engage the public in “old style” politics. Many studies have pointed out that technology alone is unlikely to mobilize people who lack prior knowledge or interest in politics (Norris, 2000; Ward et al, 2003; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Davis, 1999). In short, can the Internet really deliver anything beyond a technological modernisation of apparently outdated political institutions?

In Australia, debates about democratic disconnection and the discussion of role of new technologies in the democratic arena appear to somewhat more muted than elsewhere. On the first point, some have even argued that Australian representative democracy is actually in comparatively good health (Norris, 2000; Goot, 2002), although some question whether headline survey statistics and compulsory voting are masking the problems with disconnection observed elsewhere (Smith, 2001). On the ICT front, despite having gained an early reputation for worldwide leadership in the use of new technologies for democratic purposes (Clift, 2002) later empirical research has

questioned this prominence arguing that e-government ambitions have failed to produce a concrete policy initiatives, particularly in terms of measures for citizen engagement (Chen, 2003; Bishop and Anderson, 2004; Gibson et al, 2007).

While it is perhaps premature to argue for an inter-connection between these two trends – with lower levels of concern about democratic performance producing a more relaxed approach to the e-democracy agenda – this apparent lack of momentum in government sponsored political communication with voters does prompt questions as to how far Australians themselves actually need or want such initiatives. On this question, the fact remains that thus far, little research has been done either in Australia or elsewhere to examine how citizens view the situation and what they want. Regardless of whether politicians and academics endorse the democratic potential of the Internet, much of the research informing the debate has proceeded from a top-down perspective, focussing largely on elite initiatives. An approach that has, as Coleman and Spiller (2003: 8) have pointed out, meant that (globally) the academic literature has ‘tended to neglect the effects of the new media upon the represented’, with scant evidence from a citizen perspective about the possibilities of the Internet for connecting and engaging with representative politics.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining the Australian public’s use of, and attitude towards the use of new ICTs for communication and engagement with their elected representatives. It does so with two specific research questions in mind: (1) to what extent do Australians actually favour the harnessing of the representative system to Internet technologies – is there a demand for such an agenda?; and (2) how far do such initiatives hold out the prospect for mobilisation of citizens by allowing MPs to reach out to new audiences online and/or re-connect to old one’s? In answering these questions the goal is to shed some light on the broader debates about democratic performance and the role of new ICTs highlighted above. In particular, we hope to add some new ‘bottom-up’ empirical data to address the issue of the apparently arrested development of e-democracy agenda in Australia. If there is any stalling of momentum, perhaps it is the result of configuration of ‘demand-side’ factors and public interest rather than any failure or complacency on the ‘supply-side’?

## **Disconnected Citizens and Representation in Crisis?**

To understand the growing interest in the Internet as a mechanism for reviving democratic politics one first needs to review some of the wider debates about the current health of representative democracies. An increasingly common theme over past decade has been the idea of malaise in representative politics in many advanced democracies. Although the idea of a crisis in representative democracy is not a new one, such debates have assumed increased urgency in recent years as many countries have experienced problems around the representative nexus. One central concern is the notion of an increasing gulf between citizens, their representatives and their governing institutions – In short, citizens are seen as having becoming more distrustful and detached from the traditional democratic system (Curtice and Jowell, 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001; Klingemann, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Inglehart, 1999). This disconnection thesis is often based on evidence of a number of interrelated symptoms:

- Declining citizen knowledge and interest in representative politics - Representative institutions are becoming increasingly distant in the sense that the public they serve do not understand democratic structures or processes and are largely uninterested in them.
- Declining levels of trust amongst citizens - Citizens trust representative institutions, including the parliament, parties and politicians to a lesser degree than in the past. Indeed not only is trust eroding but many citizens see politicians and state institutions as self-serving, incompetent and even corrupt.
- Declining levels of efficacy amongst citizens – The public's belief that they can influence government or that representatives listen to their opinions is falling. Decision making processes are closed and influenced by powerful unrepresentative cliques from special interest groups, big business or political parties.
- Declining levels of public identification and engagement with representative institutions – The lack of trust, knowledge and efficacy have combined to produce increasing trends of disengagement from, and falling identification with, representative institutions notably through electoral engagement or political activity through mainstream organisations such as political parties. This in turn

then erodes the overall legitimacy of representative institutions such as parliament and government.

- Increasing participation divides – Intertwined with many of the points above is a further difficulty. The problems of connection are exacerbated in areas of social deprivation and inequality. Hence, trust, knowledge and engagement are falling most amongst the poorest. Additionally, many of these problems are also more acute amongst younger people raising additional fears of a generational switch off from mainstream politics. As a result politics risks becoming the minority pursuit of an ageing and socially narrow unrepresentative group within society.

### *Australian Exceptionalism?*

Despite the prevalence of this disconnection thesis in many liberal democracies, in Australia, the debate has been less pronounced and some have argued that the problems are less acute than in other comparable democracies. Norris (2000), for example, writes:

By all major indicators, Australian democracy remains one that generates considerable levels of national pride, satisfaction and confidence... Compared with comparable democracies like Britain, Canada and New Zealand, as well as France, Germany and the US, the checklist for Australian democracy looks remarkably robust and healthy

Similarly, Murray Goot concludes his defence of the state of Australian democracy by arguing that:

The idea that an ‘inevitable consequence of massive structural change in Australia’s economy has been a serious erosion of public confidence in the democratic and representative institutions built into the framework of society’ is difficult to sustain (Goot, 2002b: 34)

Such an argument is echoed in research compiled for *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report* which challenges the idea of a crisis of trust among Australians toward their

governing institutions, with corporations showing some of the biggest declines in public confidence (Bean, 2005). Other scholars in the volume draw attention to more behavioural measures of democratic health, pointing to the very high rates of voluntary group and association membership in Australia, and its clear link to higher rates of political participation more generally (Passey and Lyons, 2005). Despite such confidence, critics and notably politicians themselves have still raised significant concerns about the health of Australian representative democracy and its traditional institutions echoing the debates in other liberal democracies. MP Carmen Lawrence (2003) has described Australia as a withering democracy where:

The fundamentals of the democratic contract have been corrupted. Many Australians are disgruntled by a system which does not appear to respond to their needs and seems, increasingly, to be in the hands of elites more interested in their own advancement than the general good. As a result, our political system has less and less legitimacy.

If we look more closely at the empirical evidence relating to the measures of knowledge interest, trust and engagement the Australian picture is somewhat mixed. In terms of awareness, Australians factual political knowledge about representative institutions is patchy (McAllister, 2002). The 1996 Australian Election Study found only about one in three knew that the House of Representatives does not have 75 members, that a deposit is required to stand for federal Parliament or that federal parliaments are not elected every four years' (pp. 2-3, also see Goot, 2002a). More positively, however, around 70 per cent of Australians can correctly give the name of their MP and 61 per cent know which party is in charge of the federal government (McAllister, 2002), a significantly higher number than in than many other liberal democracies. Of course this is arguably the result of compulsory voting forcing voters to gain at least a limited knowledge of their representatives and parties rather than reflecting any deep rooted awareness amongst citizens. Political interest also appears to be relatively high and even appears to have grown considerably between the 1960s and today, following the expansion of tertiary education (McAllister, 2002: 2). Certainly, it has remained at least stable since 1984 (Goot, 2002a).

On the more specific indicators of public confidence and trust there is evidence that significant deficits exist (Walsh 1995). Australian Electoral Study data for 2004 reveals that more than half of the public believes (agrees or strongly agrees) that 'politicians commonly rot the system'.<sup>i</sup> Based on Morgan Poll data, Lewis argues that between 1976 and 2000 there was a significant drop in the faith Australians place in their rulers' ethical conduct. While in 1976 about one in five thought that federal and State politicians were 'highly' honest, only one in ten was as sanguine by 2000 (Lewis, 2002: 132). At the institutional level, however, political actors fare somewhat better with legislatures ranking above parties and politicians in the public's esteem but below other institutions such as the armed force, the police, and the United Nations. Overall long-term trends of support for the democratic system as a whole have remained fairly constant over time (Papadakis, 1999; Bean, 2005).

Often the catalyst for debates surrounding the notion of representative crisis in many countries has been declining electoral turnout and in some cases dramatic falls in electoral participation. This has also been associated with worries about the health of political parties as the traditional participatory vehicles of liberal democracies, with significant falls in party membership and activism. Furthermore, specific concerns have been raised about the apparent disengagement of younger generations from mainstream electoral and party politics. Yet, in Australia the level of concern about engagement is arguably diminished by the use of compulsory voting that ensures that turnout remains high whatever the underlying attitudes towards parties and politicians amongst the public. Arguably, compulsory voting may simply be masking underlying problems that are comparable to other democracies. Certainly, Australian party membership, activism and identification have all fallen significantly over the past 40 years (McAllister, 2002). Equally, research conducted for the Australian Democratic Audit reveals that a significant minority of young people are failing to register to vote and that if compulsory voting was not in place many would simply not bother (Edwards et al, 2005). Moreover, underlying attitudes of contempt towards institutional politics and politicians from young voters are in line with many other democracies.

Overall, therefore, it appears that the case for disconnection and crisis in the Australian context is perhaps not as clear cut as elsewhere. Comparatively, Australia

appears to score relatively well on various key attitudinal and behavioural measures of democratic support. Nonetheless, whilst Australian parliamentary democracy may not be compromised, it does not claim a perfect report-card. It is clear that there are signs of a lack of faith among significant portions of the public in the honesty and integrity of their political leaders and governing bodies (Lewis, 2002). The question for this paper is whether new ICTs offer any realistic prospect for these structures to strengthen and revitalise their connection to the body politic? Are politicians being somewhat shortsighted in not being more adventurous in their use of new media tools to meet the challenges of representation? Or, are they actually maintaining a pace with their electorates, who are not quite ready for the virtual polity?

### **(Re)-connecting the public via ICTs**

Given how concerns about democratic institutions and representative politics and the emergence of the Internet have coincided it is perhaps not surprising that the new media have been seen as a means of helping governments' reconnect with the public. It has been suggested that the Internet could assist this process in several respects:

- Increasing service efficiency and delivery – Many of the regular interactions between state and citizens revolve around the provision of state services. The longstanding hope of many ICT advocates was that through e-government initiatives one could produce efficiency gains, financial savings and increase availability and choice to the public through allowing access to services 24/7 and 365 days of the year. Moreover, if the service relationship could be improved through ICTs then there were likely to be broader democratic benefits through increasing citizen satisfaction with government (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998; Mechling, 2002).
- Increasing transparency and information – In a hostile media environment, one of the apparent attractions of ICTs for representatives and governing institutions is the ability to communicate directly with their citizens without having to go through the media middleman. Additionally, the storage capacity of the Internet theoretically means that it is possible to provide citizens with access to greater amounts of information about institutions, policies and processes than previously.

The combined ability to communicate directly the provision of much greater levels information could, it was hoped, enhance transparency in the political system and produce an informed citizenry with a greater capacity to participate in the representative process (Bimber, 2003).

- Increasing networking and linkages – One of the benefits of ICTs is the ability to communicate with large numbers of people across time and geographic boundaries. It also makes it easier to identify other individuals with common political interests and thereby create links and networks online. At the local level one might be able to foster social capital producing greater degrees of community interest, trust and activity. At the national and international level, it is now possible to form more stable networks through an increased ability to communicate regularly (Diani, 2001).
- Increasing and strengthening the channels for engagement – ICTs also open up the possibility of both modernising old engagement methods e.g. introducing e-voting for example, as well as creating new opportunities for political engagement through online consultation and discussion techniques. Online consultation is arguably a relatively low cost mechanism for democratic institutions to open up the political process and target previously ignored or difficult to reach groups in society. Connectivity can also be improved, not simply by opening new channels, but by the ability to conduct an ongoing dialogue. A common complaint from voters is that in between elections politicians rarely listen and that there are few mechanisms allowing one to engage in dialogue with representatives and representative institutions. The interactive elements of new technologies offer the possibility of creating what Coleman (2005) has referred to as *conversational democracy*.

None of these ideas has, gone unchallenged with sceptics arguing that this kind of techno-optimism is unlikely to deliver much more than short term boosts to democracy. Three types of criticism are commonly voiced: Firstly, even if we accept that ICTs produce efficiency gains in terms of services or make participation a lower cost activity, it will not necessarily produce any longer term deeper benefits. Indeed, observers have

warned of the threat that new ICTs may pose to our democratic health by enhancing citizen passivity as we move toward a push-button culture of democracy (Coleman, 1999; van de Hoven, 2005). Others have worried about the prospects for civic harmony and social capital as individuals are able to opt into more specialist information and discussion environments, eschewing the broader public sphere (Sunstein, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Secondly, technologically deterministic approaches do not take account of underlying social and political attitudes or values. Since web technology is mainly a pull technology, then it is still difficult to connect to those who lack a pre-existing political motivation. Simply providing more channels or gadgets with which to connect will not necessarily motivate people to use them. Thirdly, ICTs might actually make some things worse. Most noticeably, ICTs might increase social and political divides and far from lowering the cost of participation, use of technology could raise the bar. In Australia there are still significant disparities in access to Internet technology. While biases in gender and region appear to be receding, the influence of higher occupational status, income and education on access all remain relatively strong (Willis and Tranter, 2006). How the use of the new ICTs can actually widen participation is thus seriously questionable.

### ***ICTs in the Australian Political Sphere? Leader or laggard?***

The Australian political sphere's adaptation to the Internet era has received mixed reviews. Even though Australia lacked the immediate catalyst of a crisis in electoral turnout to prompt interest in the use of ICTs for democratic engagement, expectations have still been high. In particular, some believed that the peculiarities of Australian geography might make democratic institutions receptive to the use of new technologies to overcome the so-called tyranny of distance. Initially, at least some of these expectations appeared to be borne out. The Australian government received enthusiastic praise for its e-government initiatives in particular. For example, leading e-democracy advocate Steven Clift (2002) lauded the efforts of the Australian state arguing that Australia, along with New Zealand were leading the way in the Asia Pacific region and even globally with its clear support for ICT enabled government. The establishment of the National Office of the Information Economy (NOIE) in 1997 along with Prime Minister John Howard's stated commitment to ensuring all appropriate government services would be online by

2001 clearly marked the federal government out as a prime mover on the e-government front. What excited Clift in particular, however, was the emergence of an e-democracy agenda within NOIE's remit and early talk of the need for online consultation and citizen engagement.

These federal level initiatives were followed by even more sophisticated plans at the state level to utilise the Internet for participatory purposes. Initiatives from a number of states, but most notably Queensland, attracted considerable international attention. The Queensland government set up an e-democracy agenda and series of e-enabled policy initiatives – including an experimental community e-consultation programme, e-policy forums for citizen-government discussion along with the use of the Internet to sign and lodge e-petitions to the Queensland Parliament and the provision, of audio broadcast of parliamentary proceedings via the Internet (Hogan et al. 2004). Similarly, in 2004, the Victorian Parliament launched an official wide ranging 'Inquiry into Electronic Democracy', in order to explore the web-casting of Parliamentary proceedings, online interactive and collaborative approaches to policy discussion, including citizen email and online forums and other technology solutions to promote access and participation in the work of the Parliament (Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee 2005: v). Although the report did not go as far as to recommend the setting-up of a direct e-democracy initiative, it strongly exhorted the parliament to embrace the Internet for interaction, consultation and the dissemination of information. It also recommended the establishment of an electronic democracy co-ordinating body in the Department for Victorian Communities in charge of the strategic and day-to-day implementation of e-democratic practice.

Early research on the Federal Parliament also engendered cautious optimism notably highlighting the parliament's adoption of several pioneering schemes to enhance transparency and accessibility including e-petitions in the senate, the provision of websites and email to all representatives (Magarey, 1999) which in the late 1990s was not common practice in many parliaments. Underpinning this there was also apparent early enthusiasm from the politicians with a number of MPs suggesting that legislators could make effective use of ICTs to reconnect with Australian citizens (Bishop 2002; Lundy 2002).<sup>ii</sup>

However, some of this early optimism has been questioned by subsequent research that has challenged the perception of Australia as a global leader in the area of e-government/e-democracy. Studies by both Chen (2003) and Gibson et al (2007) suggest that Australian federal legislators, for example, have been comparatively less active in their use of ICTs to increase openness, transparency, accountability and interactivity, whilst the Parliament as an institution has given little strategic attention to the role of ICTs in reconnecting with the public. It has been argued that, at the federal level, the narrower issues of e-government and the electronic delivery of citizen services have dominated legislators' agenda (Dugdale et al. 2005; Geiselhart 2001), seemingly, to the detriment of the e-democracy perspective (Bishop 2004a).

Even the heavily promoted flagship Queensland initiative has been questioned, with Bishop and Anderson (2004) suggesting that the programme was more about wiring up existing processes than developing any new agenda. Similar criticisms have also been levelled at other Australian political actors. For instance, Australian parties have been seen as being relatively slow to adopt ICTs creatively and have largely used ICTs to conduct a business as usual approach (Gibson and Ward, 2003).

Outside the traditional institutions, however, some research indicates that citizen groups, NSMs and protest networks in Australia have been active in using new technologies creatively. Several studies have emphasised the increasing importance of email, mobile phones and www in mobilising and organising protest particularly in the areas of environment anti-globalisation and asylum issues (Meikle, 2002; Pickerill 2004; and Capling and Nossal, 2003).

Overall, however, academic study of the use of technologies in the Australian democratic context has tended to focus on elite level initiatives. Although there has been a received wisdom that Australians are enthusiastic adopters of technologies, outside general statistics on uptake of, and access to, the Internet, relatively little is known about the Australian public online in terms of the representative nexus. Very little mass data exists with respect to Australians' use of the Internet to communicate and interact with representative institutions for wider democratic purposes.

## **Australian Citizens and Online Communication**

Having examined the ways in which representatives and the representative process in Australia are currently using new ICTs, and the range of possibilities yet to be explored, we turn now to the empirical evidence regarding citizen attitudes' to the technology. In the face of this level of 'supply' of online communication services from political elites, how much demand actually exists and who is utilising and/or demanding such services?

Two questions of substantive interest are investigated specifically in this analysis:

(1) The first being the extent to which government and parliamentary initiatives and public opinion are in step with each other. While it may be the case that representatives are proving relatively slow to roll-out ICT-enabled opportunities for online communication, this may be not necessarily due to an inherent reluctance or inertia but based on perceptions of the lack of any clear demand for such innovations. Voters may already see that they have enough opportunities to influence the political process and regard development of online capabilities as a useful but not necessarily 'must-have' feature of a modern democracy. Looking at levels of public support for, and usage of, existing and prospective online governmental and parliamentary services can help us to judge if Australian representative structures are struggling to maintain their leading position worldwide? Perhaps these judgements of under-performance are arrived at through application of a technologically-determined global yardstick that is essentially divorced from local context? Judged within and by its own national standards, Australia's institutional performance on the 'e' stakes may in fact prove to be quite satisfactory?

(2) The second major question to be examined is how wide the range of individuals displaying interest in and engagement with online representation is. Recent studies of e-participation (Gibson et al, 2005; Krueger, 2004; Owen, 2005), there are signs of higher levels of interest in online politics than one might expect among less conventional groups – the young and those from lower socioeconomic grades. Whether these findings about e-participation more generally translate into the narrower and more formal arena of representative government, however, is an important question. Activities such as searching for online political news or contacting a political organisation to volunteer help or opinions may have an appeal to those outside of the mainstream, while engagement

with more institutionalised forms of politics via representatives and parliaments may see a preponderance of the better resourced and educated middle classes. Data from studies in the UK by the Hansard Society of the uptake and interest in e-legislative initiatives by parliament suggest grounds for optimism (Coleman, 2001; Hansard, 2002). Whether this holds true elsewhere, and in Australia in particular has not yet been investigated.

## **Data and Analysis**

To address these questions we examine responses to a specially commissioned national opinion survey conducted by the authors in May 2005, with the assistance of the Survey Research Centre.<sup>iii</sup> The survey polled 1,200 Australians regarding their current usage of and attitude toward new ICTs in general, and toward the governing and parliamentary process more specifically. Questions were asked about Australians' levels of political knowledge and experience in contacting their MP through a number of different channels, including the Internet. The types of online government services and political websites individuals had used were established, as well as the types of e-democracy and e-government facilities and opportunities that respondents would like to see in the future. Additionally, we profile responses to these items according to standard demographic factors (see full questionnaire, Appendix).<sup>iv</sup> Baseline results from the survey are reported in the finding section, below, under two headings: 'The Online Audience' and 'Perceptions and use of e-Representation tools'.

We then report the results from a multivariate analysis of who is using and/or most interested in using new technologies to communicate with politicians. We specify four levels of engagement in online representation – from attitudinal to behavioural – and examined them as dependent variables in logistic regression models. We examine how far traditional predictors of political engagement increase the likelihood of involvement at each level, and whether and how these predictors vary across levels of online engagement. Predictors of online connection are individuals' levels of political knowledge, specifically in terms of representation (Q1 and Q2); use of the Internet, access to broadband and use of political websites (Q6, Q6a, Q6B, Q13, Q14 ); extent of engagement in offline or traditional forms of participation (Q3, Q10A). In addition, we controlled for the role of standard socio-demographic resources including age, gender,

education, social grade and residence. These have been linked to Internet access and rates of conventional political participation. Procedurally, the predictors entered in the initial models had significant correlations with online connection indicators. They were entered together, and removed backward where significance levels of variable and of the overall difference in alternative models' significance decreased below commonly accepted levels. The final models, reported below in the section 'Modelling orientations toward e-representation' were those that maximised overall goodness of model fit and individual variable fitness at predicting online representation. Multicollinearity and interactions between similar variables were tested. This highlighted significant correlations between Internet use, frequency of use, length of use and home access to broadband. In this respect, length of Internet use was chosen as a predictor, due its higher contribution to model fit as compared to other indicators. Interaction effects not contributing to overall model fit were found between education and social grade, between education and political engagement, and between social grade and political engagement. Where significant, these variables were entered independently. No unexpected interactions were detected.

## ***Findings***

### **The Online Audience**

Looking simply at the overall size of the audience, we can conclude that any lack of interest or uptake of new democratic tools is not immediately traceable to lack of Internet access. When asked whether they used the Internet at all nowadays, over two thirds of respondents (68 per cent) reported that they did. In addition (Table 1) most Internet users have relatively high levels of experience. Most have been online for more than five years (47 per cent) and an additional third between three to five years (36 per cent). Only a very small minority have online experience of less than one year (six per cent). When online, as Table 1 also shows, most people tend to spend around four hours per week or more using the Internet. While some of this may be work-related, home usage is high, with 70 per cent of respondents having an Internet connection in their home, half of whom have broadband. Based on these initial findings, therefore, it appears

that Australians are generally well equipped as a citizen-body to take on the challenges of e-democracy.

**Table 1 about here**

If we drill somewhat deeper into these access figures it becomes apparent, however, that some Australians are better able than others to engage with new ICTs. As the lower part of Table 1 shows, while the gender gap has largely eroded as a determinant of Internet use, age still exerts a strong effect. There is a clear predominance of younger people online. While just under half of the sample overall are aged 45 years or less, approximately two thirds of the online population belong to this age bracket. Education remains a relevant predictor of Internet use, with tertiary educated individuals moderately over-represented among the online population.<sup>v</sup> Occupationally, Internet users are not necessarily drawn from higher-status professions; indeed, there is a slightly higher preponderance of lower grade white collar workers (clerical, sales, service staff) than we find in the sample as a whole. In terms of geographical distribution, while Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales have above average proportions of their population online, Queensland, Western Australia and particularly the Northern Territory report lower than average levels of use.

Based on these descriptive statistics, therefore, it would appear that the Australian Internet-using population constitutes a large and relatively diverse group of people, most of whom have a significant amount of experience of the medium. Thus, while certain groups are somewhat better placed to take advantage of a new ICT connection to their representatives, in general we would expect such developments to have a fairly widespread appeal.

**Perceptions and use of e-Representation tools**

In this section we assess individuals' interest in and practical engagement with various forms of government and parliamentary online initiatives. We examine the extent to which people had actually visited a range of institutions' and political organisations' websites and the way in which they use new media to keep in touch with their MPs – or otherwise. Table 2 reports the proportions of respondents (with Internet access) that had visited a range of key political websites in the year preceding the survey. The findings

show that while major news organisation and Australian newspaper top the bill (over one third of users have visited such a site), national and local government sites are most popular among the formal governing structures, with almost half of Internet users claiming to have visited one in the previous twelve months. The numbers visiting parliamentary or individual MPs' websites is considerably lower, with only around one in ten reporting having viewed them.

**Table 2 about here**

Despite these low levels of interest, the appeal of using ICTs to contact an MP appears to be quite high. When asked about preferred methods to get in touch with their MP, email attracted over one third (36 per cent) of respondents, falling only one percentage points behind a personal visit (37 per cent). Letters phone calls are still the most popular methods, however, with 48 per cent and 72 per cent of respondents respectively citing them as ways they would contact their MP. By probing these preferences further, the endorsement of email drops somewhat. Among the 13 per cent of the sample who reported having contacted their MP in the last three years only eight per cent had used email, with most people opting for regular 'snail' mail (37 per cent). At a further probe to establish what prevented people using email in this manner suggested that problems of access were not paramount. While just over one quarter said they did not use email due to lack of Internet access, just under a quarter cited a preference for more traditional modes of communication and a similar number indicated they sought a more personal interaction with their MP.

Having provided some insights into levels of take-up of e-services in Australia, we also sought to understand citizens' attitudes toward a range of more ambitious schemes including being able to comment online on legislation being passed in Parliament; participating in online government polls on policy matters,; accessing government services online; using Internet voting in federal elections; and contributing to online government discussion forums. Internet voting attracted the lowest level of support, with only 45 per cent of those polled saying they would like to see it happen. Other initiatives were all supported by a majority of respondents. Online polls and online discussions both held an appeal for 57 per cent of the sample. Most popular, however,

were opportunities to comment on legislation via email (74 per cent) and having online access to all government services (76 per cent).

To return to our first question, therefore, our survey evidence suggests that Australian political leaders may not be too far out of step with what their electorates demand in terms of online communication opportunities. Australians tend to make most use of executive branch websites and the take-up of channels to interact with representatives are minimal. That said, however, Australians are also interested in opportunities to offer more direct input into the policy process. The survey findings showed a large groundswell of support for new ICTs being used to add citizens' voices to their legislators' deliberations. Of course it may be the case that our research has discovered a divide between 'thinkers' and 'doers' when it comes to new ICTs and the representative process. The former constituting a larger group that are more content to simply express interest in the new technology to communicate with their representatives and the latter being a small core of devotees who are prepared to practically engage with new ICTs for such purposes. This observation leads us quite neatly into the analysis of our second research question about the defining characteristics of those who are positively oriented (behaviourally and attitudinally) toward the use of new ICTs in the representative arena.

How wide is the constituency for online representation? Does it really offer a channel for MPs to connect with a wider and more diverse electorate by offering additional digital opportunities? Do such opportunities offer a chance for mobilising new faces in the political arena or do we see the usual collection of more educated, affluent and already engaged suspects? Perhaps it depends on the extent of activity called for. Those displaying a positive inclination toward using new ICTs in the representative process but stopping short of engaging currently in its direct application may constitute a wider and more diverse pool of potential participants, compared to the more active early adopters who are already engaging in online communication with governing bodies?

## **Modelling orientations toward e-representation**

To examine these questions we first divided our sample into four sets, according to citizens' propensity to engage online with their representatives, ranging from purely attitudinal to behavioural.

Set 1. Respondents who would like to see all MPs with a website

Set 2. Respondents who would consider using email and website to contact their MP.

Set 3. Respondents whose preferred mode of contact with their MP's is through email and the website.

Set 4. Respondents who actually made contact with their MPs through their website and / or email.

In the first set, respondents have generally positive attitudes towards MPs' offers of interaction via email and websites (see Appendix: Q8A). In the second set, respondents report an overall propensity to use the Internet, among other media, to get in touch with MPs (Q4 Total). In the third set, citizens have a definite propensity to use the Internet as a first-resort medium through which to carry out transactions with representatives (Q4, First). Finally, in the fourth set, respondents made contact with their MP using the Internet (Q6b or Q5 Email). For full listing of all questions and variables see Appendix.

### **Table 3 and Figure 1 about here**

From the figures reported in Table 3 and summarised in Figure 1 it is immediately evident that the four sets include an increasingly narrower range of respondents, who engage in increasingly direct and active forms of online representation, from general perceptions of MPs offer of online facilities to direct engagement with such opportunities. On the one hand, the four sets largely overlap, with people holding positive attitudes also having positive propensity to use MPs emails and websites (79 per cent), and finally being engaged in actual online contacting behaviour (86 per cent). Although sets 2 and 3 are nested by design, the second being a subset of the first, the degree of overlap is significant. Overall, this suggests that it is increasingly narrowed subsets being engaged in the more demanding activities. However, there are also two clear areas of incongruence between attitudes and behaviours, as attitudes and behaviours are not

nested concentrically (as the model in Figure 1 would predict). Firstly, neither set 2 nor set 3 are perfectly inside set 1. This means that there are some respondents who do not think that MPs should have a website, but nonetheless choose email and website as the medium of choice (respectively 21 per cent and 28 per cent of sets 2 and 3). Secondly, some of the 'doers' of set 4 have at least neutral attitudes (14 per cent), are doubtful about using email as a communication tool (16 per cent) or even more as a tool of the first resort (61 per cent). Therefore, one can conclude that although there are wide areas of overlap, having a propensity toward using online communication with one's MP does not necessarily go hand in hand with a commitment to behavioural engagement in such activities and vice versa.

To assess this proposition we probe more systematically the differences between the individuals comprising the four sets by comparing their socio-demographic backgrounds and politically relevant attitudes and behaviours. Is the divide between the groups simply one of degree or level of individual resources, such that similar factors predict engagement across levels of e-representation, with the 'doers' possessing more of said resources than the 'preferers'? Alternatively, perhaps key differences emerge between the groups with traditional resources such as education important for 'doers' and internet skills and technological abilities being more important for the lower levels of engagement.

### **Findings from the multivariate analysis**

The results for each of the models are reported in table 3. In the discussion we first consider the findings for each model individually and then examine them as a whole. Only variables significant at  $p \leq 0.1$  are reported. Where a variable is not included (for instance gender) this means that it is not significant either at zero order or when controlling for other variables.

*Model 1:* The poor fit of model 1 to the data together with the lack of any 'stand-out' predictors of positive attitudes suggest a diffuse coalition of people are supportive of virtual representation. In general those who display an engagement in politics (discuss politics, signed a petition), and who are satisfied with the work of their MP (+ five per cent) and can correctly name their MP's party (+ seven per cent) are among the most

likely to support their representatives online engagement. Those who visit political websites and who are presumably more familiar with online politics are also more likely to call for MPs to have websites (+ two per cent) probability of supporting per each political website visited). Somewhat surprisingly, however, individuals' level of Internet use is not significant in predicting an interest in online representatives. Young people are also not necessarily more likely to hold supportive attitudes to this aspect of e-democracy, although older citizens, (+65 years) are significantly less inclined to regard MPs having a website as important. Overall, therefore, the findings suggest that a positive orientation toward online MPs is largely a reflection of a positive view and engagement with the representative process as a whole and a general familiarity with the online political environment.

*Model 2:* The findings from our second model, predicting the propensity of citizens to use email and the web to contact MPs, tell a somewhat more interesting story. Firstly, young people (18-34 years olds) are more inclined to using online media to actually get in touch with MPs. Indeed they are, on average, 13 per cent more likely to consider contacting their MP online. Older people, however are distinctly less sanguine about direct online contact, those over sixty five being around 10 per cent less likely to want to contact their MP via email or the Web. This finding indicates that the digital divide within online politics based around age is certainly alive and kicking, particularly when it comes to the more specific question of using the technology to communicate with political elites. As well as indicating that older citizens may be shut out of these new channels of influence, such findings of course also point to the possibility that the Internet may be able to mobilise new constituencies, who were previously less connected to the representative circuit. In addition, while levels of existing political involvement recede in importance, Internet use becomes highly relevant. Although different lengths of use predict different probabilities, overall long-term users are almost twice as likely as non-users to say they would utilise new ICT channels to communicate with their elected representatives. Taken in conjunction with Model 1 findings, such results indicate that while most people would generally think it a good thing for MPs to be online, those that would actually seek to exploit the new possibilities for access are a more segmented group of younger, technologically literate but not necessarily highly politically active

individuals. Some level of political interest is important, however, as having a history of viewing political websites is strongly linked to one's inclination to utilise online representation channels. Having visited a political website increases an individuals' propensity to contact MPs via email and web by approximately six per cent.

*Model 3:* The results for the third model very much echo those of Model 2. Younger, experienced Internet users with some interest in online politics (but not offline necessarily) are most inclined to see email and Web contact as the preferred way to get in touch with their MPs. Table 4 shows that young adults (aged 25-34) are almost twice as likely as other citizens to report a first preference for online communications. Length of Internet use assumes an even greater value here than in the previous model, with people who have been on the Internet for more than six years being twice as likely as non Internet users to chose it as a preferred contact mode, and 1.5 times more likely that those who have been online for up to two years.

*Model 4:* In this model we examined the traits of those who have taken online contacting of representatives to its most demonstrable level and actually initiated communication with their representative, either through their website or by email. What we note immediately from Table 4 is the lack of significance of age and Internet experience variables, which proved very strong predictors of the preference for using these means of contact. Instead, what we find is that those making the move to engage in online contact are people who can name their MP, have contacted him/her in the past and are make heavy use of the Internet. Significantly, however, they are not necessarily more politically involved or engaged in wider forms of politics, nor are they better resourced in terms of education. As such, these findings suggest that online contacting when viewed behaviourally is not attracting a wider range of previously unmobilised citizens, although neither is it necessarily appealing to the already active citizen. Those choosing to email their MP are doing so largely on strategic and instrumental grounds. These individuals are a rational group of participators, opting for a new mode of communication to continue a conversation.

Taking the results from our four models in conjunction it is evident that in terms of our original question about who is partaking of e-representative politics, the picture is quite mixed. While the models consistently deny the importance of traditional socio-

demographic resources in predicting varying degrees of engagement with online representatives, it appears that general levels of interest in such activities are driven by factors different to those determining specific preferences for such means, and also for actual behavioural engagement. Or, looking at the results another way, the 'progression' or escalation in commitment to online contacting of one's MP does not appear to be dependent on any quantum increase in individuals' possession of certain key resources, i.e. it is not a linear process of engagement. Essentially while general interest in the overall concept of having MPs a web presence and being reachable via the Internet is fairly non-discriminatory and attracts fairly wide support of politically engaged individuals (with the notable exception of older citizens), those expressing a specific preference for this channel of communication are experienced technologically but not necessarily politically, and tend to be younger. Taking the next step onto actually engaging in online contact with one's representative however, does see political experience return to the fore, and in particular one's knowledge of the system and a past history of contacting.

Thus, it would seem that in regard to the bigger question of how far e-representation might be leading to mobilisation versus reinforcement of the status quo, a mixed picture emerges. The lack of importance of education, class, and gender in predicting these any of these forms of engagement with e-representation indicates that the pool of potential and actual participants for this mode of engagement is wider than has typically been seen for more active forms of offline participation. However, the factors that emerge as relevant do not necessarily point to a more democratic outcome. In particular, Models 2 and 3 show that a declared preference for online media contact with an elected representative is largely a function of youth and familiarity with the technology rather than any political stimulus, a finding which suggests that any strong interest in utilising these new channels is essentially 'opportunistic' and medium-driven. Model 4 findings are equally cautionary in that although length of Internet experience is not necessarily decisive, heavy use of the medium is, along with knowing one's MP and having a track record for contacting him/her. Such findings point to online contacting being primarily a strategic activity, done on a need-to-contact basis, by those for whom the Internet option is an efficient option given their high frequency of use.

## **Conclusion**

In general, therefore, we can conclude from these data that online contacting in Australia is not currently leading to any significant reconnection or even possibly deepening of existing connections citizens have to their representatives and representative institutions. Contacting one's MP online is largely a result of having a reason to do so, having already done so, or both. The Internet is one of the tools used but, as our Venn diagram suggests, it is neither the primary nor the exclusive one. The Internet does broaden the Broadening the focus a bit further, however, to those who are attitudinally disposed toward the practice if not behaviourally engaged, a somewhat more positive story emerges. Here we found mostly younger citizens who are not highly politically mobilised in other respects. While youth engagement in online contacting of an MP may stem more from interest in trying out new types of activities online, if such opportunities lead them into a more direct and closer interaction with the political system than they would ordinarily experience, then they may end up helping to widen participation in the democratic process. However, the numbers for whom this may occur are not known and one would not necessarily expect these to be dramatic, given the size of sets 2 and 3 in our analysis.

Returning to our original two broad research questions, therefore, it would appear that our analysis has offered some positive findings about the state of Australian e-democracy in the sense that it does appear to be keeping pace with popular expectations. While there is support among the public for seeing more of their MPs use the Internet, the actual preparedness of the electorate to engage with MPs in this manner is not something that many of them appear to take too seriously currently. Such a consistency in supply and demand, however, is clearly not a cause for celebration or complacency. Beneath this general finding are nestled slightly more concerning signs of a possible digital divide in use of the technologies, should the government decide to embark on any modernising agenda of the e-democratic kind. Based on the profiles we developed to describe the groups most likely to be involved in the uptake of such initiatives, they do not present MPs with an ideal way for them to reach out to any new or any more diverse constituencies. Based on current patterns of use and propensity toward new technologies,

as revealed in our analysis, it is largely those with most experience of the new media or of contacting their MP through other means that would be most likely to take up the offer. Groups that arguably are unlikely to feature strongly among the ranks of those most lacking 'voice' in society.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of internet users in Australia, 2005**

Characteristic	C2	%
	DE	n = 815
<u>Internet use [intensity]</u>	Up to 1 hour per week	19
	1-3 hours per week	23
	4+ hours per week	58
<u>Internet use [length]</u>	Up to 6 months	3
	About 1 year	3
	1-2 years	11
	3-5 years	36
	6-10 years	37
	10+ years	10
<u>Gender</u>	Female	48
	Male	52
<u>Age</u>	18-24 years old	18
	25-34	23
	35-44	24
	45-54	18
	55-64	10
	65+	7
<u>Leaving education</u>	Up to Year 10 / 4th Form/ Intermediate	20
	Finished technical school / TAFE	13
	VCE / HSC or Matriculation / Year 12	17
	Some Uni - College of Advanced Education	9
	Tertiary Degree/s	41
	Don't know / can't say / refused	1
<u>Student</u>		11
<u>Social grade</u>	AB	48
	C1	27

Source: SRC 'Internet and Parliamentarians Survey' May 2005

Note: % are calculated within categories, decimals have been rounded up. Student % is calculated as a proportion of the overall internet user population.

Q6 Just to clarify your internet use: Do you use the Internet at all these days?

Q6A How long have you been using the Internet?

Q15 And what is the highest level of education you have completed?

Q15B Are you studying full-time now?

Q12 Could you tell me please what sort of work the main income earner in your household does?

**Table 2. Political websites visited in the last 12 months, 2005**

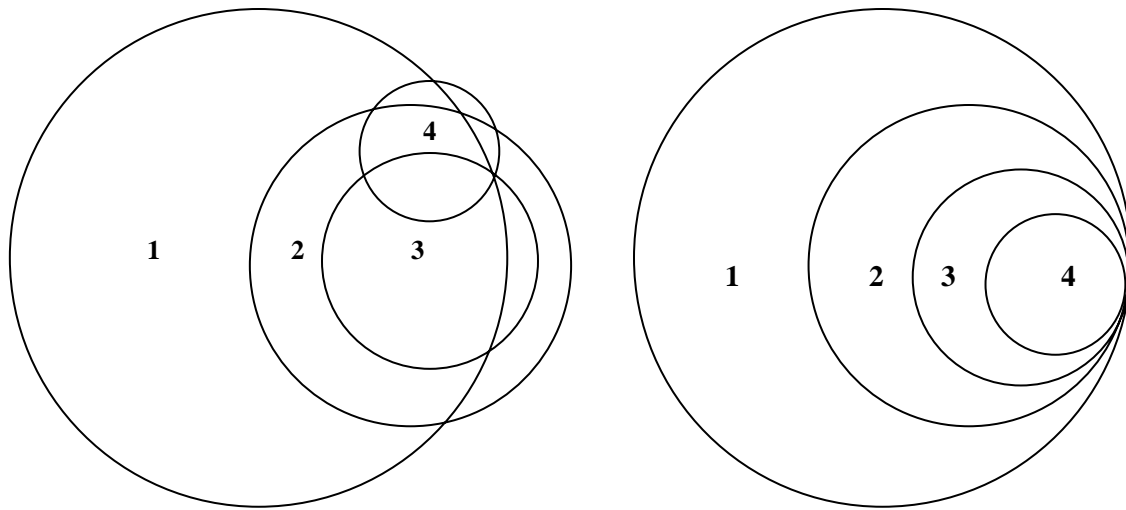
	<b>% of Internet users n = 835</b>
News for current affairs	71
Government / departments	47
Local councils	40
NGO / political groups	25
Parliament	14
Regional / national assemblies	13
Parties	9
MPs	9
None	17

Source: SRC 'Internet and Parliamentarians Survey' May 2005  
Qu. Which, if any, of the following websites have you visited in the last 12 months?

**Table 3. Levels of engagement with e-representation – Set overlaps**

	<i>Would like to see all MPs with websites</i>		<i>Prefers using email and website to contact MP [total]</i>		<i>Prefers using email and website to contact MP</i>		<i>Contacted MP online, by email or website</i>	
	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %	N	Row %
Would like to see all MPs with websites	<b>850</b>							
Prefers using email and website to contact MP [total]	355	79	<b>450</b>					
Prefers using email and website to contact MP	107	72	148	100	<b>148</b>			
Contacted MP online, by email or website	68	86	66	84	31	39	<b>79</b>	

**Figure 1. Set overlaps: actual vs. model layout.**



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**Notes**

Set 1. Would like to see all MPs with website, n = 850. .

Set 2. Would use email and website to contact MP, n = 447.

Set 3. Email and website are the single preferred mode of contact, n = 148.

Set 4. Actual contact with MPs through their website and / or email, n = 79.

**Table 4. Logistic regressions regarding online representation attitudes, propensity and activities (4 models)**

Model		<b>1 Would like to see all MPs with website</b>		<b>2 Would use email and website to contact MP</b>		<b>3 Email and website as single preferred mode of contact</b>		<b>4 Made contact with MPs through their website and / or email.</b>		
<i>Variable</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	$\Delta$ %	<i>Exp(B)</i>	$\Delta$ %	<i>Exp(B)</i>	$\Delta$ %	<i>Exp(B)</i>	$\Delta$ %	
Age [a]	18-24 years			*	1.73	13	*	1.67	6	
	25-34 years			*	1.80	14	**	2.23	10	
	35-44 years			†	1.44	8				
	> 65 years	**	.57	- 12	*	.59	-10			
Terminal education age	10-14 years			†	.384	-22				
	17-18 years			*	.644	-11				
Correctly names MP	Yes							*	2.042	1
Correctly names party	Yes	**	1.453	5	†	1.380	5			
Contacted MP [offline]	Yes							*	2.103	3
Boycott	Yes							†	.574	-3
Discuss	Yes	*	1.405	3						
Petition	Yes	*	1.408	1						
Satisfied with MP	Yes	*	1.341	7						
Length of Internet use	Scale 0-7							*	1.366	4
Length of Internet use	6 months			**	9.575	25				
	1 year			***	9.999	26	*	20.897	6	
	1-2 years			***	9.383	25	*	16.162	4	
	3-5 years			***	9.238	25	***	36.346	10	

	6 to 10 years		***	14.034	34	***	54.305	14					
	> 10 years		***	11.961	30	***	50.992	13					
Political websites visited	Scale 0-8 [b]	**	1.107	2	***	1.277	6	***	1.246	3	***	1.981	6
Constant			1.013		***	.043		***	.002		***	.001	
		850, 71 % positive		447, 36.5 % positive		148, 13 % positive		n = 79, 6.5 % positive					
Model fit		71 % correctly classified		74 % correctly classified		88 % correctly classified		94 % correctly classified					
		Nagelkerke R2 .07		Nagelkerke R2 .43		Nagelkerke R2 .27		Nagelkerke R2 .42					

#### NOTES

[a] Reference categories are, respectively, 55-64 years old for Age; 19 + for Terminal Education Age; negative responses for dummies; 'No use' for Length of Internet use.

[b] Scale ranges 1-8 in model 4, predicting actual online contact.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Source: AES 2004, question C14; data is available for academic use from ESSDA through NESSTAR.

<sup>ii</sup> Kate Lundy noted: 'While the current debate circulates around the value of the technologies themselves and their merits in a participatory democracy, broader issues regarding the nature, scope and use of an online environment and its accessibility must receive the attention they deserve. Only then can we create a political culture that will truly embrace the concept of an Australian cyber democracy'. Mark Latham, Lindsay Tanner and Carmen Lawrence voiced similar concerns.

<sup>iii</sup> The 'Internet and Parliamentarians Survey' was a self-contained study commissioned by the authors to the SRC, a market research institute based in Melbourne. Telephone interviews were conducted in Australia with 1200 adults aged 18+ between 2-15 May 2005; 7000 respondents were selected through a state-stratified sample of phone books where the Federal Electoral Seat could be identified; respondents were then randomly selected within households and not replaced.

<sup>iv</sup> The full interview schedule is available through the authors' website, at <http://www.i-pol.org>.

<sup>v</sup> While the numbers of those with access across all categories of education has risen since the AES first collected data on access, the gap between the better and less well educated has remained. The 1998 Australian Election Study for instance shows that 57 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree and 52 per cent of those with a bachelors degree reported access, only 20 per cent of those with no qualifications did so. By 2004 while the proportion of those with no qualifications reporting access had grown to 51 per cent, among those with University experience it was virtually nil (two per cent).

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## **Appendix: Questionnaire**

[Skips, rotation, probes omitted]

**Q1** To begin, can you tell me the name of Your Federal Member of Parliament (the one who sits in the House of Representatives)? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

**Q2** Can you tell me which party your federal Member of Parliament belongs to? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

**Q3** Have you contacted Your Federal Member of Parliament in the last 3 years or so (that is since the start of 2002)?

YES – NO – DK

**Q4** If you wanted or needed to contact your local MP, what would be your preferred method of contacting them? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

Phone, Letter, Personal visit, Attend public meeting, Fax, Email, Use the website, Would not contact them, None of these , DK

**Q5** How did you contact your local MP the last time you contacted them? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

Phone, Post, Fax, Email, Personal visit, Attend public meeting, Use the website, None of these, Don't know

**Q5A** Was there any particular reason why you did not use email or the website (to contact Your Federal Member of Parliament)? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

No access to Internet, Not familiar enough with the Internet to know how to do it, Did not know local MP could be contacted online, Prefer using telephone / post / fax, Prefer face to face, Other, DK

**Q6** Just to clarify your Internet use: Do you use the Internet at all these days?

Yes – less than 1 hour per week, Yes – 1 – 3 hours per week, Yes - 4 or more hours per week, No – never, DK

**Q6A** How long have you been using the Internet?

Less than 6 months, About 6 months, About 1 year, Between 1 and 2 years, Between 3 and 5 years, Between 6 and 10 years, More than 10 years, DK

**Q6B** I'm going to read out some websites. Could you tell me please which of these, if any, you have visited in the last 12 months? (MULTIPLE RESPONSE)

The Parliament, Federal MP's, State / Territory, Parliamentary or Assembly, Australian Government, State / Territory government, Local council, Non government organisation, A political party, News, None of these

**Q7** To the best of your knowledge, does your federal MP have a website?

YES – NO – DK

**Q8A** Now I'm going to read out a list of government services that could be delivered online. For each one, could you tell me please if you would like to see it happen, if you would NOT like to see it happen, or if you don't mind and have no preference either way: Can you tell me how you feel about.....

Having Access to all government services via the Internet.

Having Government online polling on policy issues?

Having Regular (government) email bulletins on policy and issues of interest to you?  
Having Voting in federal elections via the Internet?  
Being able to comment via email to the Parliament on major laws being discussed?  
Having Special chatrooms / discussions forums for the public to engage in debate about important government issues?  
All federal MP's having websites ?

**PREQ9A** Supposing all Federal Members of Parliament were online and had websites, which of the features I'm going to read out would be important to you?  
(MULTIPLE RESPONSE)

Having an online advice service so that you can raise any problems you may have?  
Having an online survey to express your views in general?  
Having a consultation forum where you can discuss issues with others and MP's can read others (constituents) views?  
Having Email updates sent to people who are interested on matters of importance?  
Having information on the voting record of your federal MPs?  
Having information on your federal MP's policy position?  
Having information on your federal MP's daily dairy or schedule?

**PREQ10A** Now some questions about your political involvement. Can you tell me please if you have participated in the following activities? Have you ever...

Voted in a local council election, state election or federal election?  
Discussed politics with friends/family during the last week?  
Contacted a politician or government official?  
Donated money to a political cause or organization?  
Joined a political party?  
Joined another political organization such as a trade union or political interest group to lobby government?

Actively campaigned for a political organization (leaflet dropping, worked for candidate)?

Attended a political meeting or demonstration?

Signed a petition?

Boycotted a product or company?

**Q11** And would you say that generally speaking you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the work of your federal MP? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

5 POINTS SCALE, DK

**Q12** Could you tell me please what sort of work the main income earner in your household does?

SOCIAL GRADE LIST

**Q13** Do you have a computer in your household? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

YES – NO – DK

**Q14** Does your household have Internet connection? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

BROADBAND, NO BROADBAND, NO

**Q15** And what is the highest level of education you have completed? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

EDUCATION QUALIFICATION LIST

**Q15A** At what age did you complete that level of education?

**Q15B** Are you studying full-time now? (SINGLE RESPONSE)

YES – NO – DK

**Age** [from sampling]

18 – 24, 25 – 34, 35 – 44, 45 – 54, 55 – 64, 65+, DK