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The voting strategies of young people: a conceptual framework

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Abstract

This study offers a new framework for understanding the decision-making strategies of first-time voters. Using data from in-depth interviews with young people prior to the 2013 Australian federal election, the paper explores the extent to which our participants were knowledgeable about the upcoming election and the degree to which they invested cognitive effort into making their voting choice. The analysis reveals five distinct voting strategy typologies, which we use to construct a conceptual model that identifies and describes different voting approaches employed by young people. The findings show that young people are not a homogenous group of disinterested and disengaged voters. Instead, within a population of young citizens there are varying levels of interest and effort being invested into electoral participation.

Keywords: First-time voters, young people, voting strategies, voter decision-making

An important aspect of being an active and engaged citizen of a democratic country is to participate in the electoral process. However, it is often suggested that young people may not possess the knowledge and skills to confidently make an informed decision at the ballot box (e.g. see Chan and Clayton 2006; McAllister 2014; Quintelier 2007). In Australia, it is

compulsory for all citizens over the age of 18 to vote, but research suggests that many younger Australians are not interested in traditional forms of political participation. They are also considered to be less knowledgeable about politics than older voters (Martin 2012; McAllister 2014). If young people in Australia are politically disinterested and uninformed, and yet are being compelled to vote, it is important to understand the approaches they use to make a voting choice.

In order to better understand the voter decision-making strategies of young Australians, we have interviewed first-time voters about their interest in politics and the voting strategy they would use to make a choice at their first Australian federal election. Their accounts have enabled us to construct a typology of voting strategies based on the levels of interest, knowledge, and cognitive effort a young person might invest in when deciding how to vote. The resulting conceptual framework not only highlights the variety of strategies used by young voters, but it also clearly establishes the connections and differences between them. These findings, therefore, make an important contribution to theoretical discussions regarding the participatory behaviour of young people by offering a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making processes and abilities of first-time voters.

We commence by providing a brief overview of literature relating to voter decision-making and electoral participation by young people. We follow by describing our study design and analytical process. Our findings are then presented and the implications discussed.

Voter decision-making strategies

There are many theories that endeavour to explain how people arrive at a voting choice (Dean and Croft 2009; Redlawsk 2004). One area of research has explored voters' priorities, that is, whether partisan attachment, party leaders, or a political party's position on particular issues have the most influence. Partisan voters make a decision based on the party they identify with and tend to support its philosophy on most issues. Moreover, partisan voters do not need to know every election policy, but instead have a general sense of how their preferred party may respond towards a particular issue (Schaffner and Streb 2002, 562). While partisan identification can influence an individual's voting choice, so too can their impressions of the party leaders (Mughan 2009). This can include, but is not restricted to, evaluations of the leader's skills, integrity, empathy, and, at times, appearance (Garzia 2011). Voter impression of a political party's leader can, therefore, impact the party's electoral fortunes (Garzia 2011; McAllister 2007; Mughan 2009). Voting on issues is another strategy. Some people will consider the parties' policy platforms and vote for the party most closely aligned to their own views (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Lachat 2011). During an election campaign, parties highlight some issues within the public forum and downplay others. This act of 'priming' is intended to draw voter attention toward areas where the party has demonstrated competency (Green and Hobolt 2008; van der Brug 2004).

Cognitive effort also impacts voting choice. Less informed individuals, for instance, might abstain from voting (Jakee and Sun 2006, 62) or make a random selection (Jakee and Sun 2006, 61). Others follow the lead of family or friends (Achen 2002, 151; Jakee and Sun 2006,

69), or rely on heuristic devices (i.e. cognitive ‘shortcuts’ such as partisan loyalty or stereotypes) to reach their decision (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Selb and Lachat 2009, 576). Voters who have a greater understanding of the issues and candidates can make more calculated choices based on the information they have about the electoral contest. However, as Redlawsk (2004, 597) explains, the ways in which people process that information vary. Some individuals will take a *non-compensatory* approach and restrict their focus towards a limited number of factors which they consider particularly salient. Others will take a *compensatory* approach trading various considerations off against one another. The motivations of more cognitively engaged voters can also differ. Some people might draw on deep-rooted values and use personal moral convictions to guide their voting selection (Caprara et al. 2006, 7). Alternatively, just as rational choice theory posits, self-interest can inform a person’s voting choice. In this case, the individual engages in a cost–benefit analysis to ascertain how they might best use their vote to gain personal benefit (Dean and Croft 2009, 130; Downs 1957).

Young people and electoral participation

Research on the voting behaviours of young people typically centres on how their political views are developed and whether or not they participate in elections. With respect to forming political views, socialisation plays a strong role in shaping a young person’s political choices. Parents are particularly influential in determining a young person’s political interest, but friends, education, and the media can also play a part in shaping their perspectives (e.g. Converse 1969; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009; Levinsen and Yndigegn 2015).

In terms of electoral participation, research shows that young people in liberal democracies are less likely to vote than older individuals¹ (Edwards 2007, 539; Furlong and Cartmel 2012, 13). Explanations for this trend vary. One is that that young people may feel alienated and trust neither politicians nor the political process (Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, and Scullion 2010; Furlong and Cartmel 2012, 24–25). Lack of political knowledge is also often thought to play a part, as might a belief by the young person that their vote is inconsequential (Edwards 2007, 545). The assumption that young people are not interested in politics has, however, also been challenged. The argument made is that many young people are engaged in politics, possess opinion on issues which they believe to be important and will act to ensure those views are expressed either through non-electoral or electoral forms of political participation (e.g. see Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, and Scullion 2010; Edwards 2007; Martin 2012).

Another direction of research relates to defining and determining the age at which people might be considered ready for the responsibility of voting. Chan and Clayton (2006) have argued that willingness and ability are the two indicators political maturity. Willingness is essentially an interest in politics, but ability is a more complex notion. It involves knowledge of how the system works, understanding of the issues being debated and, ideally, political convictions that are well thought out and rationalised. In research designed to measure and compare political maturity across age cohorts, findings indicate a ‘competence gap’ among people aged in their teens and early twenties (Chan and Clayton 2006, 554; McAllister 2014), meaning that they are considered to be less politically mature than older voters.

Studies that describe the voter decision-making strategies used by young people and what informs those approaches are relatively scant. The research that does explore the voting behaviours of young people tends to focus on the probability of young people turning out on election day, rather than describing the process by which they arrive at their decision (e.g. Winchester, Binney, and Hall 2014). We therefore expand these discussions by reporting findings from a qualitative study that has explored the decision-making strategies of first-time voters in Australia. Although sample surveys are effective in determining the direction in which people vote they are, as Redlawsk and Lau (2013, 147) put it, ‘a poor vehicle for studying *how* that decision was reached’. Instead, an interpretivist viewpoint can uncover nuances in voting behaviour that may not otherwise be detected and thus open the field to new theoretical perspectives (Dean 2004, 149–153). In this study, we have taken an interpretivist approach towards addressing the research question: What strategies do young first-time voters use when deciding who to vote for?

The present study

The 2013 federal election was held at a time the Labor government was experiencing internal instability. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who had recently replaced Julia Gillard after she had ousted him three years prior, called the election for 7 September. The opposition, comprising the coalition between the Liberal and National Parties (LNP), was led by Tony Abbott and was predicted to win the election (Johnson et al. 2015, 1). By returning Rudd to the ALP leadership, however, some in the Labor Caucus hoped that their party would circumvent a heavy loss on election day (Economou 2013).

Many policy issues dominated the 2013 election agenda. The economy was the most pressing topic heading into the campaign, but asylum seekers, health, education, climate change, and the National Broadband Network (NBN) also rated as being of concern to voters (ABC 2013; McAllister, Sheppard, and Bean 2015, 339–340). The personal qualities of the party leaders were also very important to the electoral contest. As the campaign progressed, polls indicated that both Rudd and Abbott were not rating highly in terms of honesty and trustworthiness and, although Rudd was considered to be more competent, Australians felt Abbott possessed more leadership ability (McAllister, Sheppard, and Bean 2015, 336). Furthermore, the relationship between Australians’ partisan identification and voting intention was weakening, suggesting that given the political climate at the time some Australians might shift from their traditional affiliations and support an alternative party (McAllister, Sheppard, and Bean 2015, 338).

This election was, as McAllister, Sheppard, and Bean (2015, 331) explain, prime ground for testing theories relating to electoral behaviour. As they point out, ‘all of the major elements – policy issues, economic competence, leadership, campaign dynamics and partisanship – were at the forefront of political discussion’. It was during this time that we spoke at length to young people who would be voting for the first time at an Australian federal election. It was our goal to document their thoughts on the political issues being discussed as well as the politicians and parties contesting the election. We also wished to understand the strategies

they used when deciding who they would vote for in the Australian House of Representatives.

Data and methods

The 'Social Futures and Life Pathways of Young People in Queensland' project is an ongoing longitudinal study of young people from Queensland, Australia which is following a single aged cohort of young Australians as they progress from adolescence and into adulthood. Also known as 'Our Lives', the project commenced in 2006 when the cohort were 12–13 years old and were in their first year of secondary school. To date, six waves of quantitative data collection have been completed with the most recent being carried out in 2017 ($N = 2009$). Qualitative interviews are also regularly undertaken with selected participants (see Our Lives 2018).

In 2013, the Our Lives cohort participated in their first Australian federal election. In the six weeks prior to the election qualitative interviews were undertaken with 33 Our Lives members to investigate their views on issues surrounding the election and their thoughts on who they might vote for and why. Potential interviewees were identified from the political affiliation they reported in the 2010 Our Lives survey: LNP ($n = 608$), ALP ($n = 443$), Australian Greens ($n = 301$) and, 'Don't know/Other' ($n = 1040$) with the aim being to undertake interviews with individuals from each category. For logistical reasons, they needed to reside within South East Queensland.² Thirty-eight individuals were contacted and asked to participate in an interview. Thirty-three agreed (17 female, 16 male) and five declined. At this time the participants were aged 19–20 years old.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted at either the participant's place of residence, a university campus, or at a café. The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 min. The interview typically began with an opening comment that the federal election was soon approaching, followed by the question: 'How interested in politics are you?' In the course of these interviews, the participants were questioned on numerous topics surrounding the upcoming election. These included voting choice, their opinions of politicians, and their thoughts on key political and social issues. They were also asked about the factors they believed would influence their vote. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

The inductive methodological approach is, as Vromen (2010, 257) explains, 'premised on discovering categories and being exploratory with open questions'. The goal of this exploratory analysis was to identify qualitative variation among, and subsequently categorise, the approaches young people took towards making a voting choice. The data were coded and analysed using qualitative research software NVivo 10. Several factors were considered throughout the coding process. These included: participants' interest in, and knowledge of Australian federal politics and the upcoming election; where they sourced information to help make their voting decision; and their primary voting focus during the campaign (i.e. party, personality, or policy). Broad voting strategy categories were identified and refined throughout the analytical process to best describe the most dominant patterns in the data (see

Vromen 2010). When labelling and describing our observations we were also mindful of the advice offered by Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright (2012, 222) who explain that the development of a useful conceptual typology involves:

(1) clarifying and refining their meaning, (2) establishing an informative and productive connection between these meanings and the terms used to designate them, (3) situating the concepts within their semantic field..., and (4) identifying and refining the hierarchical relations among concepts.

Based on participants' reported political interest and knowledge, as well as the degree of cognitive effort they were prepared to invest in the vote decision-making process, five distinct categories of voting strategy were identified. These were labelled *impulsive*, *collective*, *instinctive*, *principled*, and *pragmatic*. In short, impulsive participants' claimed to have minimal interest in politics or the election and would put little effort into deciding who to vote for. While the collective voters also seemed uninformed about current political affairs, they were more disposed towards being involved in the process. They also indicated they would rely on the views of others when voting. Instinctive voters expressed some political leanings but would use heuristic shortcuts to guide their choice. Those in the principled and pragmatic voter categories demonstrated greater knowledge in, and engagement with, the election. There were, however, key differences between these two types. The principled voters had identified a political priority and would vote for the candidate or party best aligned with their own views in that regard. In contrast, pragmatic voters engaged in a complex process of weighing up and trading off multiple considerations to identify the better 'on balance' option. The connections between, and the hierarchical relations among, these categories are illustrated in Figure 1. In the next section, we describe the data and elaborate on these definitions.

Findings: first-time voter types

Our analysis showed that, while some of these first-time voters were disinterested in the electoral process or claimed to have little knowledge of politics, others demonstrated greater political acumen and invested considerably more effort into deciding who to vote for. Below we elaborate on the five categories identified using quotations to illustrate each voting strategy. All participants' political leanings reported in 2013 along with a summary of this analysis are presented in Appendix A. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of participants.

The impulsive voter

Some first-time voters were identified as intending to take what we describe as an 'impulsive' approach. They attached little importance to the upcoming election and reported that they

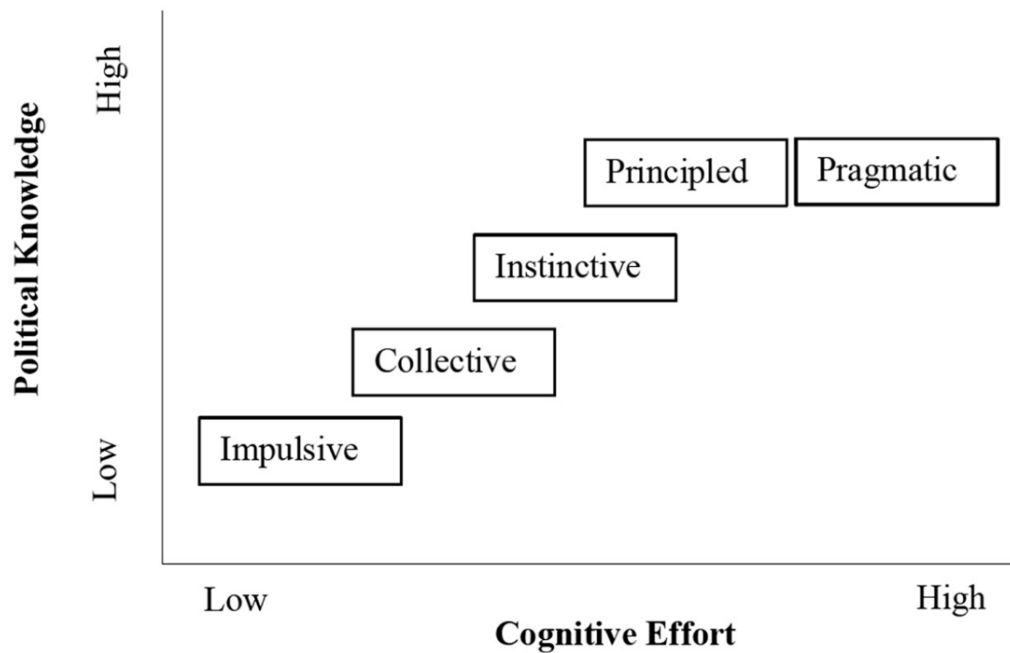


Figure 1: Illustration of observed voting strategy categories in relation to participants' expressed political knowledge and cognitive effort (low – high).

would spend minimal time on deciding who to vote for. Describing politicians as 'childish', Ryan explained he was disinterested in the election campaign and politics in general. Because voting is compulsory in Australia, it was going to be 'a spur of moment thing' as to who he would vote for. David was also disdainful of politics, complaining that politicians could not be trusted and made promises they had no intention of keeping. David had not yet enrolled to vote, but went on to say that if he was to vote he would 'probably just have a quick look through all the promises and see ... which one sounds the best at the time'.

Liam was not following the election and indicated that he had very little idea about who was running or the position of the major parties. When asked what he thought would ultimately determine his voting choice, he said it would be 'random' and that 'I'll close my eyes and I'll tick a box'. Selb and Lachat (2009, 573) argue that compulsory voting does not encourage people to educate themselves politically, rather it compels the 'uninterested and less knowledgeable' to cast votes that are uninformed and arbitrary. This was the case for Liam who had little intention of making an informed selection. He also commented that it was unfortunate that many disengaged individuals like him were compelled to vote:

When it comes to politics, you're not too sure who to vote on. So I guess in a sense it's the people who are more aware of politics, they should probably be a bit more into the voting, whereas us, as in general, who aren't into it, our vote counts, but it's random ... That's not a good thing, because I really don't give a damn.

The collective voter

The 'collective' voter category describes those first-time voters who deferred to the political opinions of those close to them. Young voters in this category explained that, while they respected the electoral process, they did not know enough about politics to make a qualified choice. For that reason they would follow the direction of others, particularly their parents.

Some participants in this category believed their parents were more knowledgeable about the current political debate and preferred to be directed by their judgement. For instance, when we asked Brooke how she might vote she said she would ask her parents because she did not understand politics and would rather her vote 'go to what they believe is right'. Consistent with the social learning model and theories of political socialisation (see Converse 1969; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009), others spoke of how longstanding parental loyalties to a specific party had become ingrained into their own psyche. Furthermore, despite these allegiances sometimes being constructed in a different context (such as temporal, generational, or geographical), loyalty to a political party could remain strong. Alexis, for instance, said her parents' stories of New Zealand politics and the two main parties in that country (Labour and National) informed her opinion of Australian politics. Irrespective of the fact that she had lived in Australia since she was a small child, associations with New Zealand party names shaped her viewpoint of politics in Australia. Since her parents had always supported 'National', she did too.

I'm definitely anti-Labor, but that's just because a Labour government got in power in New Zealand under Helen Clark while we were living there and just the country went [down]. They've [parents] always been anti-Labour, for National. So I think that's probably definitely influenced me.

Jay, whose parents were also immigrants, spoke of how her family had always supported the ALP because her family to settled in Australia during the Hawke Labor government era. It was this partisan loyalty and gratitude learnt through her parents' own stories that would determine her vote, irrespective of the party's current leadership or policy platform. As Jay explained:

When my parents first migrated to Australia they were allowed to come under the Labor migration laws...So ever since then...it's been Labor. They've given me a life.... so that's why. But I mean if you had to ask me now if I had any reasoning? No I don't.

The instinctive voter

The 'instinctive' voting strategy describes young people who also reported they were not well versed in politics, but were drawing on some political knowledge to reach a voting decision. They would cast their vote based on general feelings related to the broad information they had. 'Gut' reasoning or low information rationality is described by Popkin (1991, 7) as a strategy whereby voters apply 'various information shortcuts and rules of thumb...to obtain and evaluate information and simplify the process of choosing between candidates'. Some of the instinctive voters we spoke to focussed on whether or not they liked the party leader. Others drew on general beliefs about the parties. In this respect, partisan attachments related more to the individual's own emotion-based appraisal of the party rather than familial solidarity.

Among those young voters who used the character of the party leaders as a heuristic device to make a voting choice, observations ranged from: 'He just seems nice' and 'He's a good

communicator' to 'He's always just kind of angry', and 'He's a backstabber'. Anna, for example, planned to vote for Labor. When asked the reasons for her choice she explained that, while she was probably being superficial, her perceptions of the leaders of the main parties would definitely influence her decision:

Well, firstly just in terms of leaders, I think personality wise, I know that's such a shallow thing to do but I just don't like Tony Abbott ... He doesn't seem as down to earth maybe and likeable ... I just prefer Kevin Rudd. It's just personal.

Likewise, Ella said that she, like a lot of her friends, would also 'vote for the face' adding that 'Tony Abbott's annoying and Kevin Rudd's okay'. Cameron, on the other hand supported the Liberals because he preferred the personality of Tony Abbott to Kevin Rudd:

I think Kevin Rudd - I don't know what it is, I just can't really seem to like him ... I think he just says a lot of things that in the end it's not really true or whatever he does doesn't end up being true.

Other instinctive voters used general assumptions about a party to inform their vote. For instance, although Mia was not familiar with specific personalities or policies of the Australian Greens she reported that she identified with their environmental platform:

Because in high school I was an Environment prefect, so I was all about being healthy and cleaning the environment and stuff. But I don't know if they're going to do much about it because I haven't heard much about them on the news.

Similarly, Gabrielle felt the ALP would, as she put it, 'operate in a way I prefer' although she also could not articulate specific reasons to justify her viewpoint. This choice, she said, was merely instinctive:

I feel like, politically probably Labor, but I feel like the fact that I just don't really know about the policies ... I think that I'm being forced to take a leap of faith, so I'm going to go politically Labor, which is my instinct.

The principled voter

Some interviewees were more engaged in the electoral process than those identified in the previous groups. These were young people who had processed more information about policies and candidates and used a variety of sources to help inform their choice.

'Principled' voters were those who intended to use their vote as a conduit for expressing and asserting their own moral or social ideals. Some expressed strong views on specific values based issues and would vote for the party they believed had the best policy on issues of interest to them. Others spoke of having strong partisan allegiance. They used this not as a heuristic shortcut, but because they were aware of, and supported, the policy platforms of that party.

Principled voters who were issues-focused utilised a non-compensatory cognitive process and identified a particular issue they considered important. Moreover, they would prioritise that issue over others (Redlawsk 2004, 597). Nicholas, for instance, strongly believed that Australia should have more compassionate policies towards asylum seekers. Although Labor had previously been seen as having more humane policies towards those who attempted to reach Australia by boat, Rudd had recently announced the immediate implementation of *The Regional Resettlement Arrangement*, which would send all ‘unauthorised maritime arrivals’ to Papua New Guinea for processing. Moreover, no individuals processed through this system would be offered resettlement in Australia (see Parliament of Australia 2013b). Although Nicholas had previously supported the ALP, he was particularly disappointed by the Labor Government’s change in position. As he explained:

I feel like that it’s such a dramatic change, so at odds with kind of the obvious position of the party being a more left leaning party. I don’t know, it really kind of disillusioned me to the idea that when he [Rudd] first appeared he seemed like someone who could stand up for things that he believed were righteous ... but he just seems like a lot of compromise.

Nicholas stated he would now be voting for the Australian Greens who promised increased provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum seekers (Norman 2013). While acknowledging that his vote for the Australian Greens in the House of Representatives would likely have a negligible impact on which major party would ultimately form government, he believed he would at least be casting ‘an honest vote’ which would not compromise his own principles.

As an apprentice, John spoke of his concerns for the economy and blamed Labor for a lack of employment opportunities in the trades and technical sector. Despite his family having long been Labor Party supporters, he thought it was time for ‘someone better in power’ and would probably vote for the LNP. Ultimately, however, John’s choice would also be guided by his strong anti-asylum seeker views. The LNP asylum seeker policy was to ‘salvage’ (Kenny 2013) aspects of ALP policy and integrate them with broader policies outlined in the Liberal Party’s *Operation Sovereign Borders*. An important aspect of this policy was a mandate for the Australian Navy to intercept and, ‘where it was safe to do so’, turn boats carrying asylum seekers away from Australia (Parliament of Australia 2013a). John supported this proposed policy, and stressed that the Coalition would not receive his vote if they softened their stance on this issue – irrespective of their policies on the economy.

Rebecca had researched each party’s platform and very much wanted ‘to vote the right way’. As a teacher, education policy was very important and she felt Labor’s education platform was more in line with her own views, primarily due to the Gillard government seeking to implement a new funding model for schools (see Hawley 2013). Rebecca, however, was against same-sex marriage in Australia due to her religious beliefs. As such she was supportive of the LNP because Tony Abbott steadfastly opposed any change in existing Australian marriage laws (Neilsen 2013). On the other hand, Kevin Rudd who had previously been against same-sex marriage had recently announced he had re-evaluated his views

(Norington 2013) and promised to introduce marriage equality legislation if the ALP won (Holmes 2014). The possibility of same-sex marriage being legalised in Australia was something that weighed heavily on Rebecca's mind and would likely influence her vote.

Principled voters might also vote along partisan lines. They identified strongly with the policies advanced by their party of choice and would vote for that party's candidate. Describing himself as being in agreement with '99 per cent of their policies', Troy said he would also vote for the Australian Greens. The issues he felt most strongly about were education reforms, marriage equality, the acceptance of asylum seekers, and climate change. While he acknowledged that the Australian Greens were unlikely to form government, he argued that with one or two seats they could still exert their influence in parliament especially if neither major party achieved a clear majority, as had been the case with the previous Gillard government:

They [the Australian Greens] have these great policies that I absolutely love and believe in and then they never have any real power in order to take advantage, you know, to introduce them. With the hung parliament a couple of years ago they had a bit more power and I liked what they did with it then.

Jake was a strong Labor supporter, saying that despite recent in-fighting he believed the party was ultimately about 'protecting people and giving people opportunity'. While he explained that his family had played a strong role in the development of his political views they were not telling him who to vote for to vote for, but instead encouraged him to make a considered choice:

We have philosophical discussions, theological discussions all the time about what the implications of certain things are and what the actual facts of things are. Because sometimes I say something that I have no basis for and Dad goes: 'Are you sure that that's right? Here is some policy they passed six months ago that says this. How about that?'

Jake also believed people should educate themselves on issues, form an opinion, commit to that position and most importantly act:

You have to look at everyone's view and opinion and beliefs before you can make an educated decision as to where you sit and how to sit. It's not about where you sit. It's how you sit there. What action you can take from that. It's useless to you if you say 'I'm a Liberal'. Cool, yeah. What ideals are you living by? What are you doing with that?

The pragmatic voter

'Pragmatic' voters engaged in a process of critical reasoning by weighing up multiple factors and priorities before arriving at a voting choice. This might have included an assessment of party leadership, but also the individuals' views on different policies and the degree to which that individual thought one issue was more salient than another. They also considered whether a party advocating a particular plan of action was qualified to govern. Their final

selection was based on the electoral option they felt could, on balance, deliver the most beneficial outcomes for either broader society or themselves.

Unlike participants who adopted approaches to help simplify their choice, the pragmatic voters engaged with the complexity of the decision-making process. Matthew, for example, described himself as a swinging voter who was not aligned to any party, but who would probably vote for Labor in the House of Representatives. He explained that he was considering a number of variables. This included his appraisal of the competency of his local candidate and the party leaders, his beliefs regarding the capability of each party, and his strength of feeling towards their policies on certain issues. His local representative was the deputy leader of the Labor Government and a person Matthew felt he could support. While he could not name the LNP candidate in his electorate, he expressed disdain for Tony Abbott because of his socially conservative outlook, but said if the LNP had a different leader he would give them serious consideration. Despite deciding to vote for Labor, Matthew said he was more closely aligned with many policies put forward by the Australian Greens, but added that he did not think they were capable of governing the country. Also, because he felt that they would not win enough seats in the House of Representatives to have significant influence, he believed voting for the Australian Greens in the House of Representatives was 'futile', whereas he thought they could affect more change in the Senate.³ While he did not necessarily agree with all the policies Labor was proposing, Matthew felt that they were a strategically better option:

Kevin Rudd's a bit more liberal in terms of gay marriages ... I don't have a vested interest in it, but I support it ... I don't like [the LNP] asylum seeker policy. That said, Labor's going very conservative as well ... Keeping the carbon tax. I think the carbon tax and moving to an exchange scheme is good. I think in terms of how they're managing the deficit and the budget is fairly responsible. In terms of Gonski [education funding], I'm not sure how I feel about that and the changes to university funding, because obviously I feel a bit - obviously, as a university student, I have an opinion on it and that as well, as someone who works at the university in a program that could be cut because of the changes in funding like that influences my views somewhat.

The pragmatic strategy meant that voters considered numerous variables prior to deciding who to vote for. Pragmatic voters undertook some background work in coming to a decision. They were eager to receive and evaluate information presented to them during the election campaign and reflected on how the messages from candidates and parties corresponded to their own values and policy goals. Pragmatic voters also accepted that, since no one party would entirely reflect their own political views, they would have to make some compromises. This approach has been described as a compensatory process whereby desirable attributes are ranked in order of priority. Lower priority attributes are compensated for by higher priority attributes (Redlawsk 2004, 597). As Redlawsk (2004, 597) explains, this strategy is cognitively challenging, particularly if opposing candidates possess highly valued attributes.

Redlawsk and Lau (2013, 13) also explain how some voters will evaluate their electoral options based on how they might derive maximum benefit from their choice (see also Downs 1957; Dean and Croft 2009). Michael was one such individual. He described himself as being strongly affiliated with the Labor Party. When asked why, he explained how he had ‘a list of wants’ from the government which he thought Labor would be best placed to deliver and while the Australian Greens were more left-wing than the Labor party, he argued ‘they are not big time’, meaning they would not be given his consideration. He also made it clear that he was prepared to change his voting choice if another party offered what he wanted and was a viable option. Training in information technology, Michael’s highest priority was the National Broadband Network and faster Internet in Australia. As such, he supported Labor’s policy of delivering fibre optic cables to 93% of Australian consumers by 2021 (see Jennett 2013). Michael also said he felt strongly about certain conscience issues like same-sex marriage but, because he was not directly influenced by these issues he would only be ‘happy to get behind them as long as it doesn’t come at the expense of my own convenience’. Just as rational choice theory posits that an individual will vote in a manner that will serve their own self-interests (see Downs 1957; Dean and Croft 2009), Michael saw his vote as being first and foremost a transactional exercise and he wanted tangible and maximum benefit in return for his vote.

Discussion

The importance of understanding voter behaviour is often highlighted within the political sciences, however, more needs to be done to develop and expand theoretical understandings surrounding the decision-making strategies of younger voters. By talking at length to a group of first time voters, we were able to document the broad range of factors that will influence who they will choose to vote for. Using an inductive approach we have then taken guidance from the broader literature on voting behaviour in order to understand the different voting strategies described by our research participants. This includes theories relating to informal voting (e.g. Jensen and Spoon 2011), familial influence (e.g. Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009), cognitive heuristics (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Selb and Lachat 2009), and the use of more cognitively challenging strategies (Redlawsk 2004).

Importantly, we have framed and linked these various strategies under an overarching rubric. This process has enabled us to bring together these various threads of existing theoretical understanding and join them to construct a typology that not only identifies and describes different voting strategies within a population of young voters, but also explains the similarities and distinctions between them. This extends discussions in the existing literature relating to young people and electoral participation.

Among our interviewees we encountered individuals who were simply not interested in the election. The *impulsive* voters were the most disconnected – making it clear they wanted little to do with the electoral process and saying that they would likely be making an arbitrary selection. As has been argued elsewhere if individuals are ill-informed or disinterested about politics, yet compelled to vote, they will resort to ‘uninformed’ voting approaches such as

'donkey' and informal voting (e.g. Jensen and Spoon 2011; Selb and Lachat 2009). This appears to have been the case in this instance.

While the *collective* and *instinctive* voters also did not seem overly concerned about political affairs, they were more disposed towards being involved in the process, but would rely on heuristics to inform their vote. As Lau and Redlawsk (2001, 954) explain, cognitive shortcuts are used by voters to 'tame the tide of political information' made available to them. The apparent problem here was that the beliefs informing these shortcuts did not always appear to be based on information that was factually accurate. The common claim among these young people was that they wanted to vote responsibly, but did not have the skills to confidently participate in the political process. This being the case, it appears that more could be done to ensure that young people are provided the knowledge and skills to understand the workings of the electoral process and how to make a considered voting choice.

We also found evidence of some young people being both interested in, and knowledgeable of, the electoral process. These individuals also invested considerable cognitive energy in their deliberations. The point of difference among these more informed and invested young voters was that the *principled* voters took a non-compensatory stance as described by Redlawsk (2004), prioritising one or two election issues they felt particularly passionate about, whereas the *pragmatic* voters adopted a compensatory position where they factored in a number of issues, but were prepared to trade some off against others in order to achieve what they believe would be of greatest overall benefit (Redlawsk 2004).

A particularly salient outcome of this research is that it demonstrates that young Australian voters are not a homogenous group. As one might also see in an adult voting population, young voters have differing degrees of political interest and knowledge. While some were disinterested, we also encountered young people able to articulate strong and well-reasoned arguments for the voting choice they would make. They had knowledge of the key events and personalities surrounding the election campaign and in no way presented themselves as being disenfranchised from the political process – thereby demonstrating the levels of willingness and ability indicative of possessing the type of political maturity described by Chan and Clayton (2006). This, therefore, challenges claims that most young people are disengaged from electoral forms of participation and instead highlights the range of political sophistication among some young voters.

Although this is an exploratory qualitative study, the conceptual model proposed here offers a strong foundation upon which future research can be undertaken. For example, further investigations could focus on non-voting behaviour with a view to including strategies relating to avoidance or boycott in this model. Given suggestions that young people are making a deliberate decision not to include themselves in the electoral process (Martin 2012, 212), how does the choice not to vote correspond to political knowledge and cognitive effort? The definitions provided here could also be used to develop a voting strategy measure to quantitatively test and validate these classifications using larger a sample. This would enable information to be obtained on the proportion of young voters within a population who employ

each strategy and the conditions under which individuals might rely on a particular approach. Furthermore, this would help explain how factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, education, religion or ethnicity influence voting strategy and produce findings that can be generalised across other research settings. Such a measure could also be used to investigate the voting strategies of different populations or to undertake international comparisons.

Our aim here was to contribute to theoretical discussions regarding the strategies first-time voters use when deciding how to vote. In doing so, we have also been able to highlight the range of political interest and ability present within a group of young Australians. The lesson learnt here is that, while steps could be taken to help our young people acquire more knowledge about how the system of politics works in this country, we cannot hastily dismiss an individual's ability to meaningfully contribute to the electoral process solely on the basis of their youth.

Notes

1. In 2013, 25 per cent of eligible voters aged 18–24 did not meet the enrolment deadline for the 2013 federal election (McGrath 2013).
2. The area of Queensland is 1,727,000 square kilometres. South East Queensland accounts for two thirds of the state's population and encompasses urban and regional areas.
3. In Australia, minor parties such as The Greens have been more effective in winning representation in the Senate, which uses the single transferable vote method of proportional representation.

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Appendix A. Summary of interviewees.

Pseudonym	Primary Occupation	Gender	2013 Partisan Attachment*	2013 Strength of Partisan Attachment	2013 Political Party Voting Preference
Alexis	Student	F	National	Fairly Strong	Not Enrolled
Amber	Student	F	Liberal	Not Very Strong	LNP
Andrew	Not disclosed	M	Did not complete survey	Did not complete survey	Unsure ***
Anna	Student	F	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP

Aysha	Student	F	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
Brooke	Student	F	Greens	Fairly Strong	Unsure
Cameron	Apprentice	M	No Party	–	Unsure
David	Student	M	No Party	–	Not Enrolled
Ella	Student	F	No Party	–	ALP
Emily	Student	F	No Party	–	Unsure
Erin	Student	F	No Party	–	Unsure
Gabrielle	Student	F	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
George	Armed forces	M	Liberal	Fairly Strong	LNP
Jake	Student	M	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
Jennifer	Student	F	No Party	–	LNP
John	Apprentice	M	National	Not Very Strong	LNP
Justin	Student	M	Liberal	Fairly Strong	LNP
Kaelyn	Student	F	No Party	–	Unsure
Lachlan	Police	M	Liberal	Fairly Strong	LNP
Laura	Student	F	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
Liam	Student	M	Did not complete survey	Did not complete survey	Unsure***
Luke	Personal trainer	M	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
Matthew	Student	M	No Party	–	ALP
Meg	Retail	F	Labor	Fairly Strong	Greens
Mia	Student	F	Greens	Fairly Strong	Greens
Michael	Student	M	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
Nicholas	Student	M	Greens	Not Very Strong	Greens
Phil	Beneficiary	M	Labor	Fairly Strong	ALP
Rebecca	Student	F	Labor	Not Very Strong	Unsure
Ryan	Student	M	Liberal	Not Very Strong	Unsure
Sandra	Student	F	Liberal	Very Strong	LNP
Sara	Office worker	F	Liberal	Fairly Strong	ALP
Troy	Student	M	Greens	Very Strong	Greens

Main source: Our Lives Wave 4 2013 survey.

**Generally speaking, do you think of your self as Liberal, Labor, National or what?

**In the 2013 federal election which party will you vote for in the House of Representatives?

***As reported in interview.