



## Young adult voting decision-making: Studying the effect of usage from a consumer behaviour perspective



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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of consumer behaviour theory to young Australian adults' voting decision-making. Previous decision-making studies identified constructs of subjective knowledge, involvement, information seeking, satisfaction, confidence, and stability as key factors in voting decision-making. This research tests the relationship that these factors have with the consumer behaviour concept of usage. A new concept, commitment to vote, is also considered for Australia's compulsory voting context. Data were gathered from a sample of 257 Australian citizens between the ages of 18 and 25. Exploratory factor analysis produced nine factors, and MANOVA and ANOVA were used to test the differences between three usage groups: voluntary users, involuntary users, and never triers. The results illustrate that usage has a significant influence on information seeking, commitment to voting, satisfaction with voting choice, and stability in voting decision-making. Therefore, usage is a key element in voter decision-making and needs to be included in future studies.

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### CHINESE ABSTRACT

年轻成年人的投票决策:

从消费者行为角度的影响进行研究

本文旨在研究消费者行为理论对澳大利亚年轻成年人在投票决策时的应用。以前关于决策制定的研究发现，主观知识结构、参与度、资讯寻找行为、满意度、信心以及稳定性是投票决策的关键因素。本研究探索这些因素与应用消费者行为概念之间存在的关系。有一种新概念叫做“投票责任”，也应被列入澳大利亚强制性投票的考虑范围。本文收集的抽样数据来自257名年龄介于18至25岁之间的澳大利亚公民。探索性因素分析产生九个因素，同时使用MANOVA和ANOVA对三个应用[消费者行为概念]的小组进行测试，研究其不同之处。三个小组分别为：自发应用、非自发应用，以及从未应用组别。结果表明应用[消费者行为概念]对投票决策当中的资讯寻找、投票承诺、对投票选项的满意度以及稳定性具有重大影响。因此，应用[消费者行为概念]是投票人投票时的关键依据，在将来的相关研究中需要包括这一选项。

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### 1. Introduction

The study of consumer behaviour, or voting behaviour, within political marketing is important, not only from a practical but also from a theoretical viewpoint. Political parties spend large amounts of money trying to gain crucial votes to win seats. Understanding the decision-making process, therefore, provides a practical benefit, as the electoral outcome depends on understanding voter needs and wants (O'Cass, 2002a). From a theoretical standpoint, understanding consumer behaviour decision-making is a much-debated

topic in marketing (for example see Foxall et al., 2011; Simonson et al., 2001), and adding to that knowledge by application of the principles in another field makes the models and/or theories used stronger and better supported.

Consumer behaviour is a widely researched field focused on examining consumer characteristics and behaviours to better understand consumption. Similar to consumer decision-making, the predictability of voting behaviour is also of great interest. Therefore, research addressing voter decision-making has been contributed by Newman and Sheth (1985), with replications by Cwalina et al. (2004) and Cwalina et al. (2010), as well as research by O'Cass (2002a) replicated and extended by O'Cass (2004) and O'Cass and Pecotich (2005). Harris and Lock (2010) and O'Cass and Natarajan (2003) suggest that more attention needs to be

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given to the voter as a consumer, especially in the face of weakening loyalty to a single party.

Weakening loyalty to parties may be why, when canvassing, politicians ask: “Who did you vote for last election?” There may even be records of previous canvassing visits where certain homes are noted as being party voters (Duhigg, 2012). It is then assumed that if an individual voted for that party previously, that individual will be more inclined to vote for the candidate again. Newman and Sheth (1985) note the increasing importance of not only asking “who do you intend to vote for”, but also understanding why voters behave in the way in which they do, especially in regards to their voting behaviour. If voters respond to political brands in the same way that consumers respond to brands (Smith and French, 2009), the concept of usage or prior behaviour from a consumer behaviour perspective, and its application to political marketing, is particularly important from both academic and practical perspectives.

Some have suggested that low-involvement may be more applicable to voting than high-involvement (Ben-Ur, 2007; Faber et al., 1993; Rothschild, 1978), and that low-involvement voters may be an ideal focus for political candidates (Ben-Ur, 2007; Burton and Netemeyer, 1992). In this case, approaching voter decision-making from a rational, high-involvement perspective may not always be appropriate. Harris and Lock (2010) agree: “It is frequently forgotten by political commentators and academics that the majority of voters do not share their fascination with politics” (p. 298).

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

## 2. Voter behaviour modelling

Previous models addressing voter decision-making offer different perspectives on what the key constructs are, possibly since political marketing as a discipline still varies in the definition of its context, understanding, orientation and approach (Butler and Harris, 2009; Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy, 2007; Ormrod and Henneberg, 2010). When analysing voter behaviour at a macro level, there are characteristics of it that mimic consumer behaviour, such as influence from politician or party image, politician’s appearance, and celebrity endorsement appeal (Lane, 1983; Peng

and Hackley, 2009). However, Peng and Hackley (2009) caution strongly against assuming all voter behaviour is interchangeable with consumer behaviour, and recommend that context is important.

Research by O’Cass (2002a) and O’Cass and Pecotich (2005) on voter decision-making is conducted within the Australian compulsory voting system, it contains the construct of involvement, thereby providing an opportunity for extension within a similar context. As their study was conducted with a sample aged on average 51 years, and only 8% between the ages of 18 and 25, its emphasis on the young adult voter was limited. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to extend previous research on voter decision-making by concentrating on the low-involvement voter as personified by the youth voter and the influences on their decision-making process within the Australian political system.

## 3. The Australian Political System

Of the 32 countries or sub-states entities in the world that have compulsory voting (Mutascu, 2011), the Australian political system is said to have the most well established system of compulsory voting after Belgium (Hill, 2002). Since 1924, Australia has enforced compulsory voting in elections for eligible people over the age of 18 (AEC, 2006). For a summary of the Australian political system, see Table 1.

Compulsory voting makes it even more likely for voters with low interest in politics to participate in elections, as compared to non-compulsory voting systems, as they are required by law to vote. Of the 14 million Australians registered to vote in the 2010 Federal election, 11% were between the ages of 18 and 24 (AEC, 2010b). As the election was won by less than a 0.5% margin (AEC, 2010c), understanding what it is about political parties, candidates, campaigns, or what catches the attention of this group of voters is of importance, and could affect the outcome of an election. While voter apathy is not confined to any particular voter age group (Scammell, 1999), it is largely discussed in application to the youth vote (for example, Cushion, 2007; Edwards, 2007) as the young adult voter is more likely to be uninterested in politics in general (Martin, 2011; Pirie and Worcester, 2000; Vromen, 2003).

## 4. Usage

Consumer behaviour researchers report that a low-involvement decision may be one in which the potential consequences are small

**Table 1**  
The Australian voting system.

	Australian
Voting method	Compulsory
History	Democratic (Westminster based)
Voter Turnout for the most recent election	93% (2010)
Major Political Parties (2010–2011)	<b>Four Labor</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liberal and The National (Coalition)</li> <li>• Greens</li> <li>• Independent and other minor parties</li> </ul>
Election Conditions	Consistent two party system
Methods of Protest (aside from ballot paper spoiling)	Abstain from Voting (fines involved) Blank vote Informal Vote <sup>a</sup> Donkey Vote <sup>b</sup>
Representativeness of Voters	Lowest turnout from young voters

Sources: ABC, 2010; AEC, 2010a; IDEA, 2011; Saha and Print, 2009.

<sup>a</sup> NB: Informal voting occurs when the ballot paper has been incorrectly completed or left blank. Informal votes are not counted as an official vote (AEC, 2011).

<sup>b</sup> NB: As Australian Federal elections use a ranking system, Donkey Vote indicates the voter has numbered his/her House of Representatives ballot-paper in numerical order according to the order presented on the ballot paper and the Senate paper down each group and across from left to right. Thus it constitutes a valid vote, yet is one cast by someone either indifferent or ignorant (Mackerras, 1968) and can give a slight alphabetic advantage (Hughes, 1970).

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