
Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia*

Ian McAllister

The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs ... to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are.

Voting, 1966

Introduction

Ever since democracy came into existence, there's been a tension between consulting all citizens, and the capacity of those citizens to make properly informed decisions. It's always assumed that one of the most important requirements for the functioning of representative democracy is the existence of knowledgeable citizens. Yet ever since mass opinion surveys first began to be used more than half a century ago, surveys have consistently found that most citizens are anything but knowledgeable about politics. The majority know little about politics and possess minimal factual knowledge about the operation of the political system.

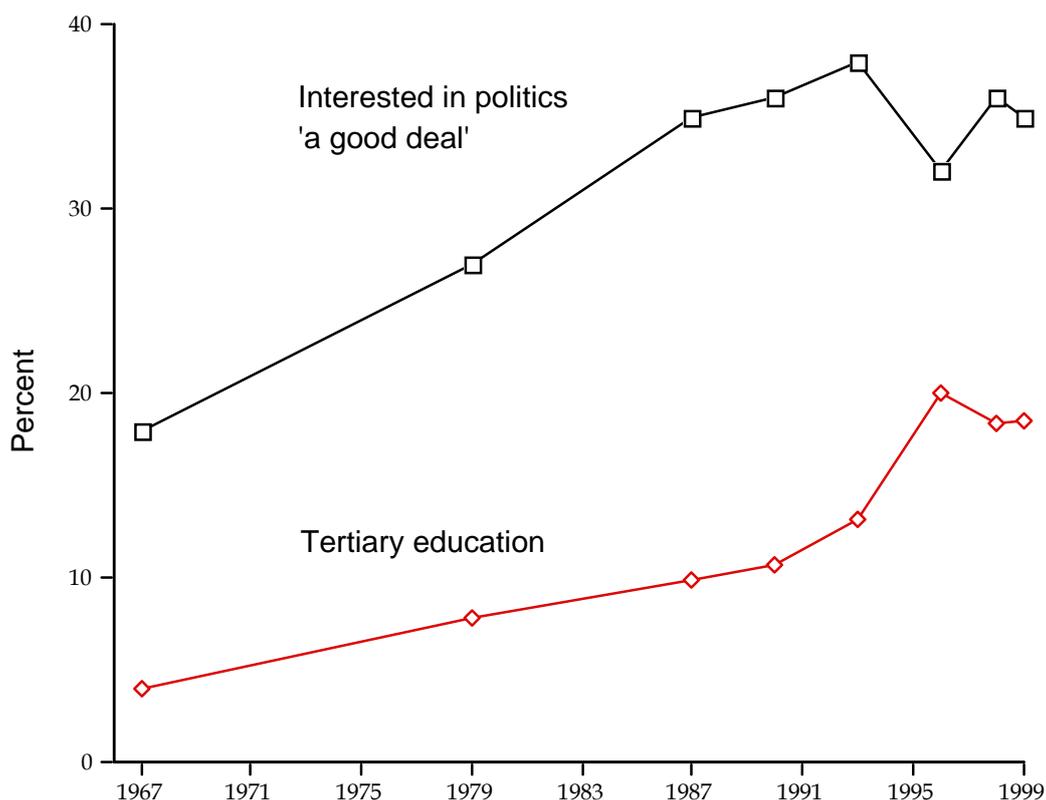
Those of us who have marked first year Australian Politics essays know this from first hand experience. Even what most of us would regard as some of the most significant events in Twentieth Century Australian politics are often the subject of much confusion. I've read essays which have variously described the dismissal of the 1975

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Whitlam government as being caused by Bill Kerr, Billy Hughes and Margaret Thatcher.

Nor does the lack of political knowledge among citizens appear to be temporary. There has been relatively little postwar change in levels of political knowledge within the advanced democracies. This is despite the dramatic growth in information disseminated through the mass media, and the proliferation of political groups and organisations which might be expected to enhance political awareness and interest.

Graph 1: Political Interest and Education within the Electorate



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

If we take just two indicators, interest in politics and the proportion of citizens with a tertiary education, both have increased quite dramatically over the past three decades. In 1967, less than one in five survey respondents said they were very interested in politics; at the time of the referendum of 1999 that proportion had doubled. Yet the overall levels of political knowledge have remained unchanged.

The Response

How should we respond to this situation? Do modern democracies have to operate with relatively ill-informed electorates?

One answer to this question is that they do. The response of some political theorists has been to argue for democratic elitism. Rather than participating fully in the political process, democratic elitists have interpreted the voters' role as one of choosing between several competing elites, who will then take decisions on the

electorate's behalf. This approach has been supported by research which has shown that elites have a stronger commitment to democratic principles than citizens.

In contrast, many democratic governments have approached the problem in a different way, by promoting civic education. Internationally, civic education courses have generally followed one of three models.

- (1) The oldest model is found in the United States, where civic education is an integral part of the curriculum in all parts of the school system. This approach also involves students participating in active programs on particular community issues.
- (2) The second model is provided by Britain; although there is no separate civic education program as in the United States, civic education forms part of a wide range of subjects within the national curriculum, with a particular emphasis on history.
- (3) The third model falls between the integrated program you find in the United States and the more informal British approach; the best example is France, which introduced a discrete civics curriculum in 1985, focusing mainly on French history and the operation of the political system.

In Australia, there's been a variety of approaches to civic education, which have differed across time and across the states. Interest in civic education dates back to federation in 1901. The first New South Wales primary school syllabus, published in 1904, included a 'Civics and Morals' course which covered imperial history as well as topics such as responsibility, duty and patriotism. This remained a core part of the curriculum in most states until the 1930s, when criticism of its nationalistic focus resulted in its abandonment as a separate subject.

Alone among the states, civic education remained on the curriculum in Victoria, although it was subsumed under the heading of 'social studies'. In the 1970s, it became a separate subject called 'Politics', covering Australian political institutions and foreign policy. During the 1980s several of the other states also adopted politics as at secondary school subject.

During the last two decades, there's been something of a renaissance in civic education. In 1988, civics and citizenship education were examined by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training which concluded that students should be provided with the knowledge to make them 'active citizens'. This renewed interest also occurred at a time when there was more interest in Australian national identity than at any time since the Second World War. Vigorous debates have emerged about the nature of Australia's political institutions, the relationship between the federal government and the states, and about Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region.

The result of all of this activity was the appointment by the Keating Labor government of a Civic Experts Group to promote that they called 'public education on civic issues'. The Civic Experts Group's report proposed an extensive program of

civic education which would take place mainly in schools, and to a lesser extent in tertiary institutions and across the society as a whole. Both Labor and Liberal governments have supported the majority of the Group's recommendations and allocated funding for the program.

But despite several government reports and much public discussion, there remains no clear definition of what should be taught under the heading of civic education in Australia. At one level, the goal of simply increasing knowledge about the processes and structure of government has been seen as important. At another level, providing a sense of Australia's history has been emphasised. In theory, a country's history should be an uncontentious part of any civic education program, but in practice the twin issues of multiculturalism and reconciliation make the inclusion of an historical dimension to civic education highly divisive. A third goal has been to promote greater political participation. This is the part of civic education that politicians often stress.

The Extent of Political Knowledge

So what do citizens actually know about the political system? Attempting to measure popular political knowledge raises the question of how we define it.

One view is that such knowledge is factual, covering information about events, personalities or institutions. Another view is that it is background knowledge, covering political concepts as well as the procedures by which political institutions operate. Background knowledge provides the skills to interpret political affairs, as well as to think in ideological terms.

For the purposes of the discussion here, I'm going to define political knowledge as factual knowledge, partly because it is the most straightforward and easily measured form of political knowledge, and partly because this is how the Civic Experts Group itself interpreted the term.

Table 1: Political Knowledge within the Electorate

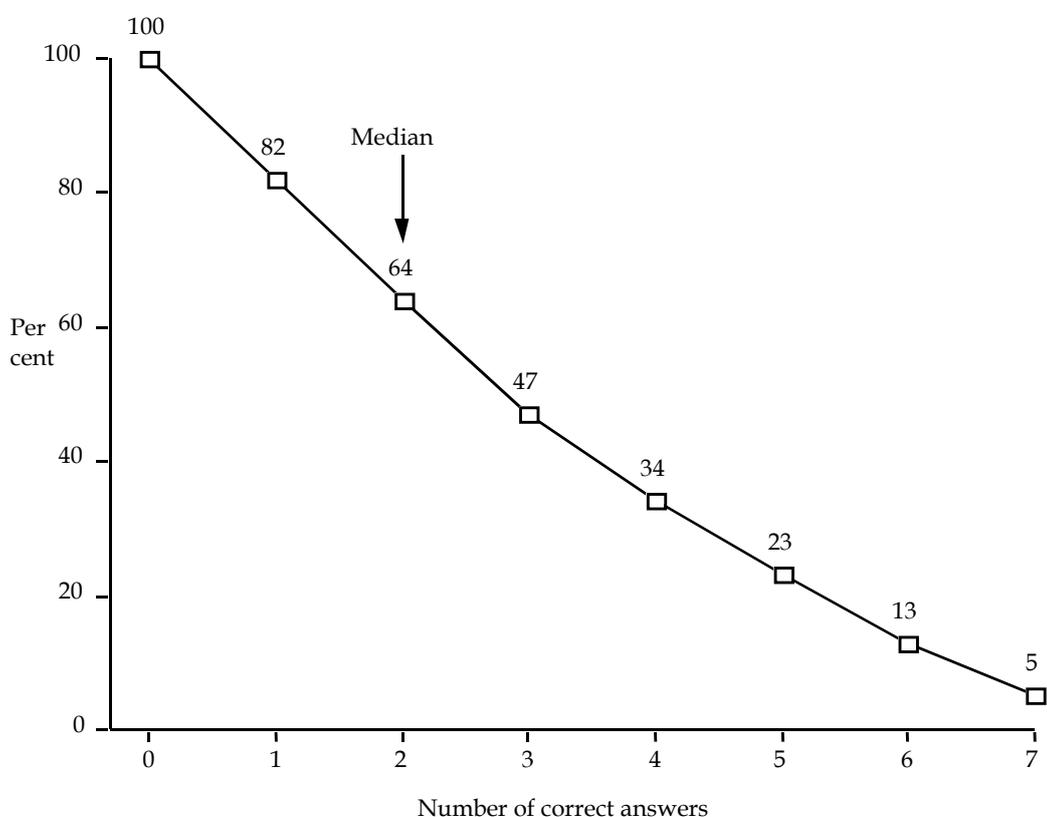
	<i>Percent answering:</i>		
	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
1. Australia became a Federation in 1901	65	3	32
2. The Senate election is based on proportional representation	45	10	45
3. Senators may not be members of the Cabinet	18	41	41
4. The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court	29	37	34
5. No-one may stand for Federal Parliament unless they pay a deposit	31	36	33
6. The longest time allowed between Federal elections for the House of Representatives is four years	55	31	14
7. There are 75 members of the House of Representatives	21	30	49

Note : Percentage of correct answers shown in bold type

1996 Australian Election Study Survey

By any standards, levels of political knowledge within the electorate are low. The 1996 Australian Election Study survey asked respondents whether seven factual statements about political institutions were true or false (see Table 1). While the survey respondents were reasonably knowledgeable about basic political history—two-thirds knew that Australia became a federation in 1901, for example—fewer were familiar with the operation of the political system. 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. As the Civic Experts Group’s own survey found, a great lack of knowledge concerned the High Court: only 37 percent knew that the statement ‘The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court’ was incorrect.

Graph 2: The Cumulative Distribution of Political Knowledge



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

Overall, the median voter could correctly answer only two of the seven statements. Furthermore, just under one in four of the electorate could correctly answer five out of the seven statements, and only 13 percent could answer six. Only one voter in 20 had the highest level of knowledge by answering all seven questions correctly (see Graph 2).

Although these results suggest a high level of political ignorance, they are in line with international findings. In the United States, for example, despite a concerted civic education program, one researcher has concluded that citizens are ‘hazy about any of the principal political players, lackadaisical regarding debates on policies that

preoccupy Washington, ignorant of facts that experts take for granted, and unsure about the policies advanced by candidates for the highest political offices.’

How do we improve this situation? Many would argue that a concerted policy of civic education would improve matters. But the main problem with any form of civic education designed to improve political knowledge is that it concentrates on increasing the factual base of knowledge within the electorate, rather than inculcating an awareness of how and why the democratic system works in the way that it does.

Who Possesses Political Knowledge?

Which groups within the electorate possess political knowledge? As many international studies have demonstrated, the least well informed tend to be the young, those who have low levels of educational attainments, who were born outside the country, or who are involved in home duties—in other words, the factors that are also most associated with lack of political interest as well as with lack of partisanship.

Table 2: Gender, Birthplace and Occupational Differences in Political Knowledge

	Number of correct answers		(N)
	Mean	Std Dev	
<i>All</i>	2.7	2.1	(1,793)
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	3.0	2.2	(861)
Female	2.4	2.0	(932)
<i>Birthplace</i>			
Australia	2.7	2.1	(1,370)
English speaking background (ESB)	2.8	2.2	(155)
NESB democratic country	2.3	2.0	(116)
NESB non-democratic country	1.7	1.6	(83)
<i>Occupation</i>			
Non-manual	3.1	2.1	(896)
Manual	2.2	1.9	(480)
Farmer	3.0	2.0	(45)

1996 Australian Election Study Survey

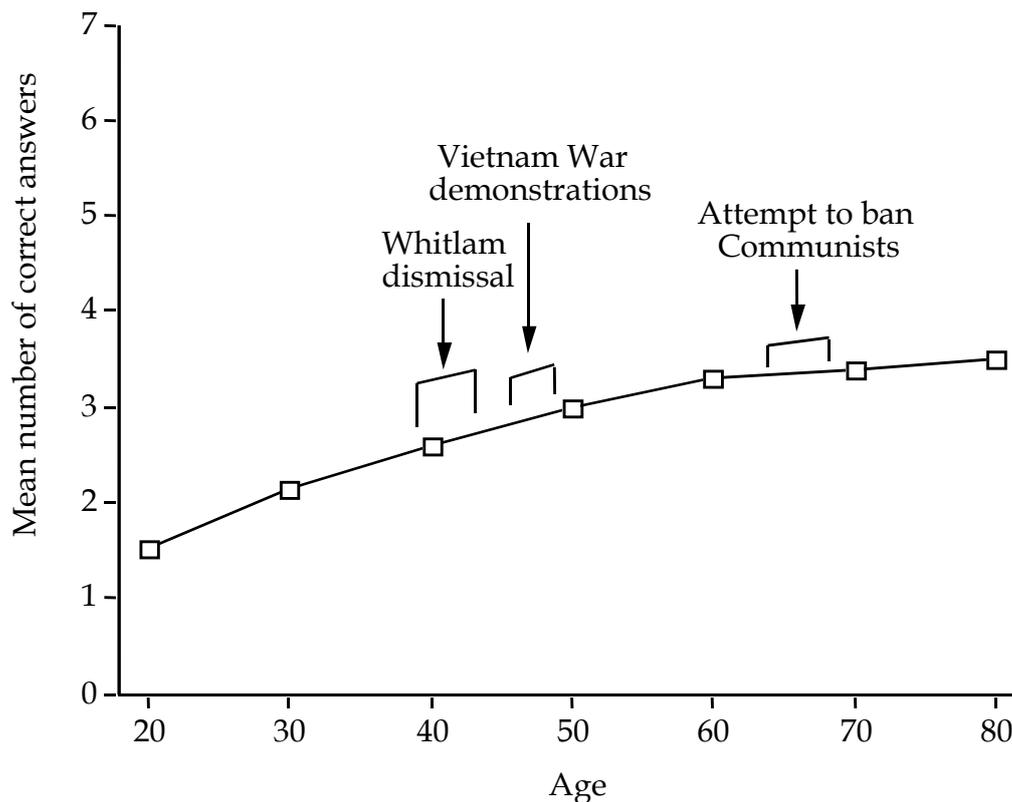
Gender, birthplace and occupation all influence the extent of political knowledge that a person possesses. Women have significantly less political knowledge than men, but as others have shown, participation in the labour force is an important factor which interacts with gender. Political knowledge is lowest among women who are involved in house duties; among men and women who are in the fulltime labour force, the gender gap almost disappears.

It is not surprising that those who have been born overseas possess less political knowledge than those who have been born in Australia, since they have had less exposure to the political system. However, the geographic and political background of immigrants also plays a role in the process.

- Immigrants from English-speaking countries, mainly the United Kingdom, have almost identical levels of political knowledge compared to the Australian born.
- Those born in non-English speaking countries with democratic traditions have less knowledge, although the difference with the Australian born is not statistically significant.
- Those who were born in countries with little or no democratic traditions have least knowledge. This confirms the findings of other research which has found that those from countries which lack democratic traditions possess different political values compared to migrants from countries with democratic traditions.

Age is usually identified as being a major factor influencing levels of political knowledge. Citizens accumulate political information as they gain more experience with the political system and as they are exposed to more political socialisation. As a consequence, other political indicators such as the proportions who participate in elections and identify with a political party increase steadily with age. It is not clear, however, whether this social learning process continues over the course of a lifetime, or whether its impact diminishes once a certain age or level of knowledge is reached.

Graph 3: The Effect of Age and Political Events on Political Knowledge



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

A factor related to age concerns the role of critical historical events. We might expect that political crises would enhance political knowledge by attracting widespread

interest and by citizens becoming familiar with the political institutions that such events highlight. Three postwar crises stand out:

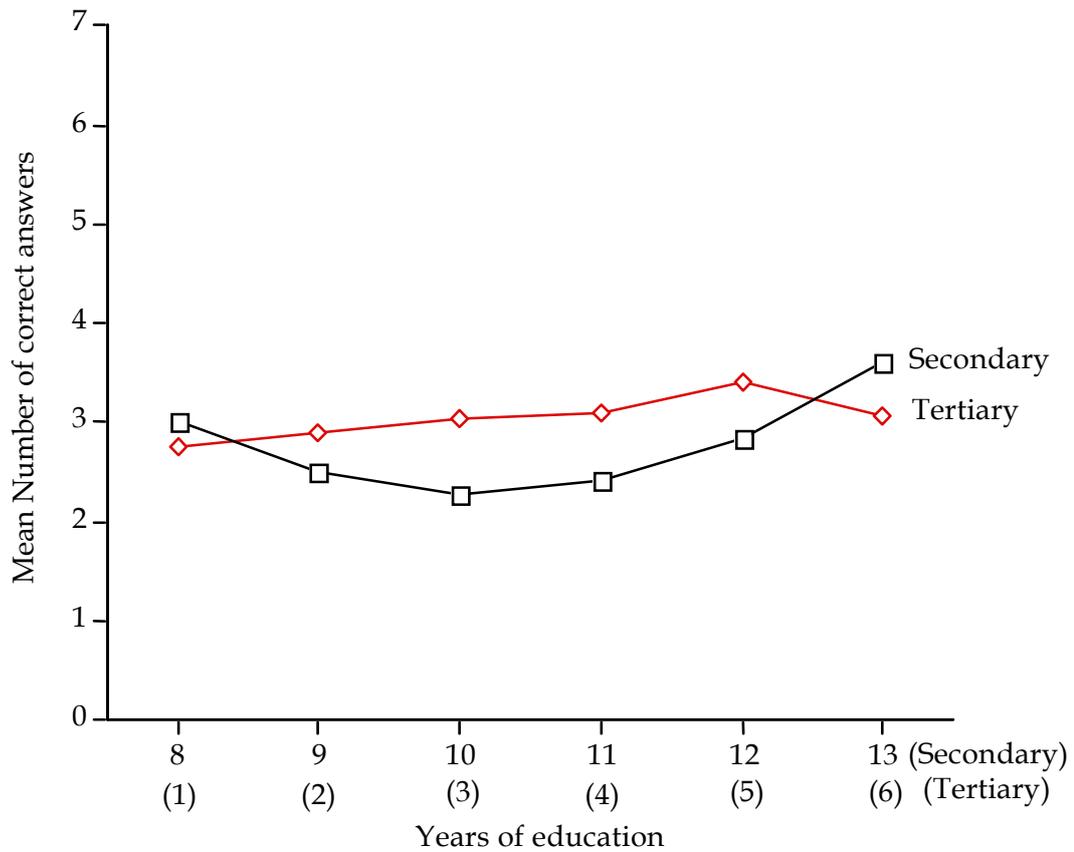
- (1) The dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. This event focused attention on the role of the Governor-General as laid out in the Constitution and helped to stimulate the later growth in public support for an Australian republic.
- (2) The Vietnam War demonstrations of the late 1960s, events which in the United States have been shown to be important in promoting political interest and involvement, particularly among the young.
- (3) The attempt by the Menzies government to ban the Communist Party between 1949 and 1951.

Graph 3 shows that the impact of age on political knowledge in Australia is cumulative, with knowledge increasing by about half a question for each additional decade that a person has been a member of the active electorate. The cumulative impact of age in promoting political knowledge diminishes in middle age: someone aged 60 is only marginally less knowledgeable than someone aged 70, net of their socioeconomic status. That knowledge begins to level off in middle age probably reflects decreased political interest.

In addition to the passage of time, the results show that critical historical events also represent a source of political information that increase political knowledge. This is based on estimates which assume that such events are most likely to influence individuals when they are aged between 18 and 20 years at the time the events took place—that is, at the start of a person's participation within the active electorate.

Each of the three critical events of interest increases the amount of political knowledge a person possesses, although only the Whitlam Dismissal in 1975 is statistically significant. In the case of the 1975 crisis, being aged between 18 and 20 years at that time results in an increase in political knowledge of around one-third of a question out of the total of seven questions asked in the survey.

Graph 4: The Effect of Education on Political Knowledge



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

Like age, education is normally viewed as the major factor influencing political knowledge. Some have even assumed that education is a surrogate for knowledge itself: those with tertiary education are assumed to be the most knowledgeable about politics. But apart from those who are exposed to social and general studies curriculums, it is unclear how much and why the type of education the individual experiences is important in enhancing political knowledge.

As Graph 4 shows, secondary education emerges as more important than tertiary education in determining political knowledge, as we might expect. It is in the secondary school that particular political information is imparted, while tertiary education is generally based on a much more specialised curriculum, where the political content is likely to be negligible. Indeed, net of other things, someone who has completed three years of tertiary education has little additional political knowledge compared to someone who possesses six years of tertiary study, equivalent to a period of postgraduate study.

The effect of secondary education shows that those at opposite ends of the scale have the most knowledge, those in the middle the least. The unexpected effect for those with least secondary education showing comparatively high levels of knowledge does not reflect age (since that is controlled for in the model) but it is probably a

consequence of their early entry into the labour force and consequently of their greater social experience.

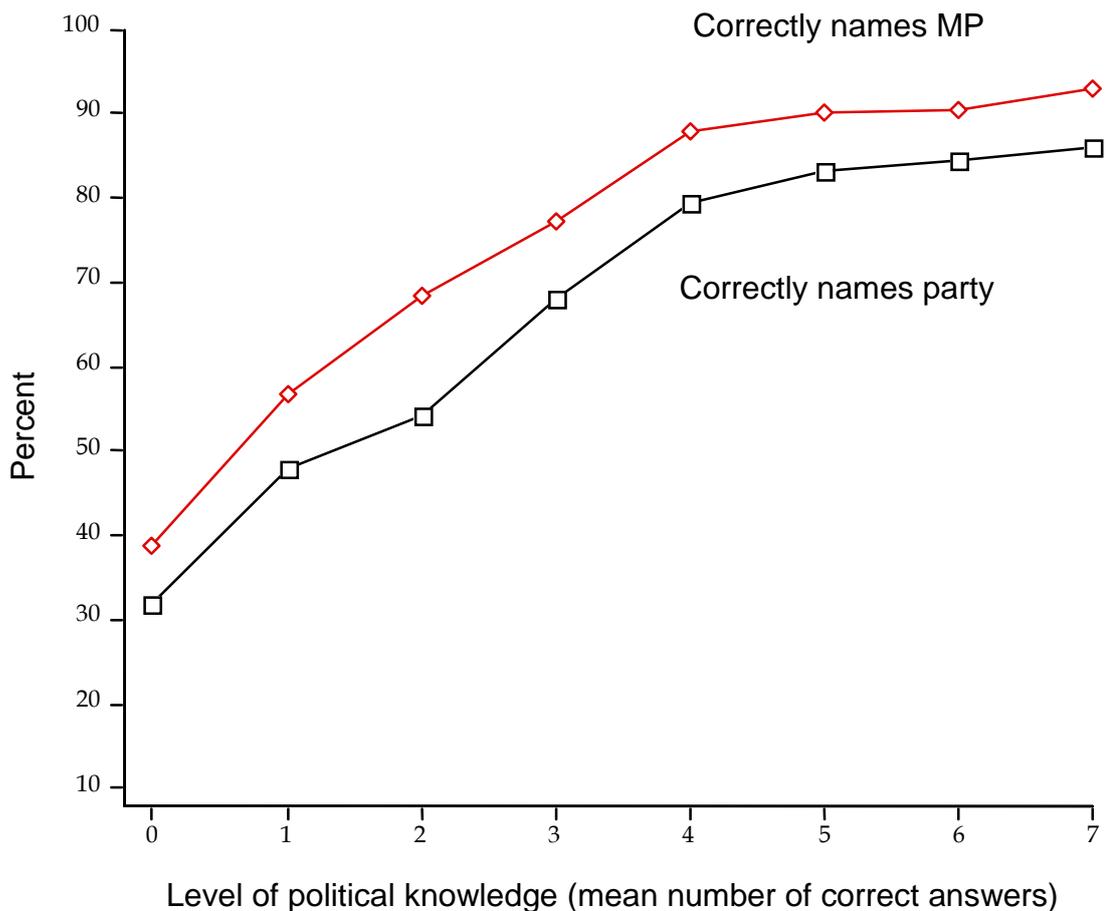
So what we can conclude from this is that the extent of political knowledge varies widely across Australian society. While it is the young, those who have migrated and women who are involved in household duties who have least knowledge, it is also clear that secondary education plays a major role.

Political Knowledge, Competence and Participation

So how does political knowledge affect what we might call political competence or political sophistication? Are knowledgeable citizens also more politically competent and more likely to participate in politics than those who are less knowledgeable? In short, is the knowledgeable citizen a better citizen?

There is little dispute that the knowledgeable citizen is also the more politically literate citizen. The 1996 Australian Election Study survey asked the respondents if they knew the name and party of their federal MP in the House of Representatives prior to the election.

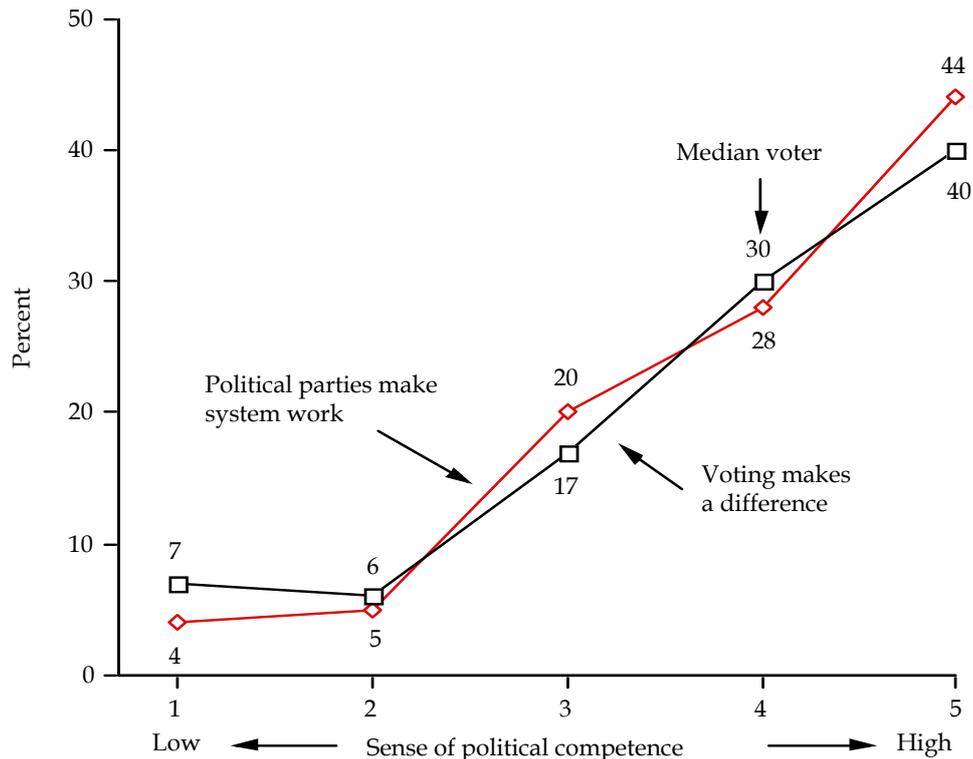
Graph 5: Knowledge of Local MP and Party



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

- Seventy percent correctly gave the name of the MP, and 61 percent the correct name of the party.
- However, among those who were unable to answer any of the political knowledge questions correctly, the figures were considerably lower. By contrast, around nine out of ten of those who could answer five or more questions correctly knew both the name and the party of the member—almost a threefold increase.

Graph 6: The Distribution of Political Competence



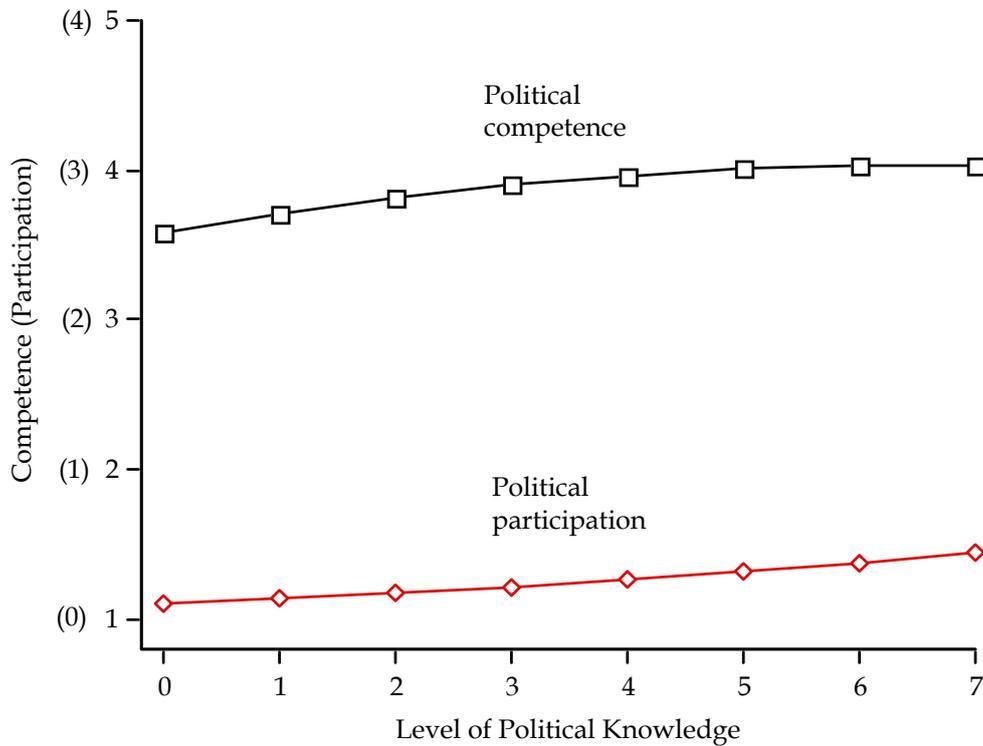
1996 Australian Election Study Survey

Political knowledge does therefore result in better political literacy, but does it generate greater political competence? Political competence is usually defined as the extent to which a citizen can utilise abstract political concepts to interpret the political world, to evaluate arguments and debates, and to make informed political decisions. In Graph 6, political competence is measured by two questions.

- The first relates to whether the respondents considered political parties important in making the system work. On a scale of one to five, where five denotes the highest level of competence and one the lowest, the median voter scores four, suggesting a high level of political competence.
- The second question concerns whether or not respondents thought it mattered who they voted for. Once again, the results show that there is a strong sense of political competence, with four out of every ten respondents believing that it did

make a difference who they voted for. The responses to these two questions are combined to form a single measure of political competence.

Graph 7: Political Knowledge, Political Competence and Political Participation



1996 Australian Election Study Survey

The second aspect of political behaviour which may be related to knowledge is participation. Political participation can involve a range of activities which may influence politics, starting with such activities as discussing politics with others, which requires little skill or initiative, to more demanding activities, such as joining a political party. As it is used here, participation is measured by the extent to which the voter participated in five activities during the 1996 federal election campaign, ranging from discussing politics with others to working for a party or candidate. The median voter participated in just one of the five activities.

Relating political knowledge to competence and participation shows that knowledge has a modest impact on both, net of socioeconomic factors. Political competence increases in line with knowledge up to about four correctly answered questions; thereafter, the benefits of enhanced knowledge in stimulating more competence is negligible. The most benefits are found at the lower end of the knowledge scale.

There are smaller gains to be found in more knowledge leading to greater participation. Participation, already low, increases with knowledge, but the difference between those at the bottom of the scale and those at the top is not large.

So what we can conclude from this is that political knowledge does have some impact on how citizens view the political world and on how they behave in it. The

knowledgeable citizen is a better democratic citizen. But with the exception of basic political literacy the effects are not large. Moreover, it is how people view the political world that is more likely to be influenced by knowledge, rather than how they behave in it.

Conclusion

So what do these results tell us about civic education? Civic education has the laudable goal of increasing political awareness and knowledge about a country's history, national identity and political institutions. The intention of such education is to increase political literacy, competency and participation under the assumption that such skills and activities will strengthen public support for democratic institutions. But establishing a program of civic education involves two major problems.

- (1) The first is to devise a curriculum which attracts widespread public support. Most countries have emphasised the historical dimension, and encroached on contemporary politics only insofar as it concerns the origins and functioning of democratic institutions. In Australia, however, history is itself a matter of dispute, on the one hand over monocultural versus multicultural history, and on the other, over Aboriginal versus settler history.
- (2) The second problem concerns the priorities of educationalists as against the priorities of politicians. Educationalists view civic education as a public good in its own right. By contrast, politicians see it as a means of promoting political participation and, indirectly, enhancing their own public standing and self-esteem.

What I've been concerned with here is the second of these problems: the consequences of civic education for political outlooks and behaviour. The main conclusion is that political knowledge increases political competence, which is a major component of support for democratic institutions. If individuals do not consider themselves to be competent, they are less likely to see the system as responsible and therefore less likely to give it their support.

Another conclusion is that political knowledge has, at best, little influence in promoting political participation, the major goal that politicians wish to derive from civic education.

What are the implications of these findings for the development of civic education in Australia? The results suggest that the curriculum, or at least the part that deals directly with politics, should have the modest goal of imparting basic factual knowledge about political institutions, since these enhance political literacy and competency. The more ambitious goal of promoting active citizenship through civic education is unlikely to succeed.

In terms of how the curriculum could best be delivered in schools, the extensive international research on civic education suggests that such programs have relatively little role in moulding political attitudes and views; it is the total experience of education that matters. That implies that a system of civic education that integrates

civics into the general educational curriculum may be the most effective in promoting democratic values and beliefs.



Question — These are comments, rather than questions. I’ve taught civic education and politics to journalism students for the past 12 years. I haven’t seen any increase in political knowledge at all. As an example: if I asked the students, ‘Who is the Attorney-General?’ they’ll say that he is the representative of the Queen. The caucus or cabinet are just words that end up in the kitchen. They don’t know, for example, what it means to be ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’. And they can’t read the newspapers. As a journalism lecturer, one wants the journalism students to read the newspaper and listen to the news, and there is much hair-tearing about the fact that they don’t. The reason they don’t is that, when you pick up a newspaper, it is a dense text to them. They have no idea what many of the words mean.

So, with the backing of the Professor from the department I worked in at the University of Queensland, I offered voluntary current affairs discussion groups to the 450 first-year journalism students and others who were interested. Of the 450 students, 420 turned up week by week for this voluntary, non-examinable subject. And they didn’t want to know a lot of those political questions—they wanted to know what it meant to be ‘left-wing’ or ‘right wing’; what is meant by ‘balance of power’; what does the Liberal Party stand for compared to the Labor Party; what do all these terms mean? I had huge success teaching that. And what that discussion group gave them was the skill to read the newspaper, and from there they developed their political knowledge.

Another point I would make concerns the teaching manual that was designed in Queensland for teaching civic education. It deals with teachers who come through the school system, and if they don’t have any political knowledge, I doubt whether they would be able to teach the subject. That’s a major problem.

An interesting outcome is that those with lower education at school had higher political knowledge. My students, who all had high scores when they left school, all said they had had no civic education, because they were doing other subjects. So it was the so-called ‘less intelligent’ students who received the civics education. I wonder if that’s actually a factor in your graph?

Ian McAllister — I think the most interesting part of your comment is the dichotomy we have between people’s factual knowledge about politics and their understanding of the political processes, and their ability to use skills to interpret the political world. I think this is very important. If you’re developing some program of civic education not focused on factual knowledge because it’s something that’s easily measured in surveys, it’s something that, in theory at least—apart from your journalists—ought to be something that could be increased across the population through education.

But understanding the processes by which people arrive at political decisions is important, because it's not something that can necessarily be taught in a very simple way. It's something that people pick up from their environment—from political socialisation, from parents and schools, and so on.

I've spent a lot of time analysing public opinion in Russia and the former communist states of Eastern Europe, and the extent to which people expressed democratic values. What's very noticeable there is that people have had no experience of this. People have to be in contact with a particular system over a long period of time. They inherit political values from parents and people they are in contact with. And it is actually very difficult to generate this type of support for a democratic system in terms of this skill in thinking about politics and using that skill to interpret the political world over a short space of time. And that's probably why developing any program of civic education is such a delicate balance between all of these various things.

Question —In regard to civics education internationally, the research is actually showing that it's not having much of an impact, and I think that is because it is starting too late. Educationalists know that people—especially young children—learn by actually doing. If we're going to have a truly politically literate community in the end (one that supports our representative democracy) we need to be teaching children, through 'doing', what it means to choose a representative for a particular role—and to allow those children at a very early stage to see the consequence of their choice. A political curriculum which is actually going to have a measurable effect needs to be one that is designed across the curriculum, and schools need to be encouraged to use the preferential voting system, which is our system, and to be demonstrating that to students. There are a whole range of ways you can ensure that students actually actively learn that the choice that they make has a direct consequence on their life. They will then become politically astute through that process, and you can teach them the history and the factual stuff that goes with it much later on, because they will then know that it actually has an effect on their real lives. If you start when they're 18, you've started far too late.

Ian McAllister — I would agree with almost everything you've said. What the results in our survey show is that, when you get people early on, you're much more likely to inculcate sets of political values than if you get them later on. So, for example, we showed that tertiary education really didn't matter all that much in terms of people's political knowledge.

The international research on political socialisation shows that people tend to get political awareness around the age of seven or eight, and then it develops through identifying political party labels and so on. By the age of about 14 or 15, people have some understanding of the electoral system and the head of state and so on. The very first election people actually vote in is very important, because it cements their party identification and their commitment to the system over a long period of time. We can actually trace to a large degree people's subsequent party identification—even when they are in their sixties or seventies—right back to the first election that they voted in.

A separate issue to that is compulsory voting. It actually draws people out and ensures that younger people vote, whereas in voluntary voting systems, non-voters tend to be disproportionately young.

So I would agree entirely with your comment. I think the earlier people are exposed to civic education and the nature of the political system, the better.

I suppose one other comment I would make is that it's actually quite difficult to educate people politically in a country which is politically stable. That may seem something of an anomaly but what we find in a lot of the international research is that a political crisis or instability actually enhances people's knowledge of the system.

For example, I've done a lot of research in Northern Ireland, and the levels of political literacy and knowledge there are really quite remarkable. You could have a conversation with someone in a downtown bar about the intricacies of the single transferable vote method of proportional representation on independents—or something like that—and they would have a very good knowledge of what you were talking about. Now I'm not suggesting political unrest as the solution to a lack of civic education, but it does suggest that, in a country as stable and as settled as Australia, politics tends to be a peripheral activity and it is difficult to get it into the forefront of people's understanding.

Question — In developing your curriculum on civics, have you looked at the impact of location as a variable? People in, say, the outback or outer regions tend to be more conservative, whereas in Canberra people become politicised almost by osmosis. Is there something in your plan to include this aspect?

Ian McAllister — Indicators such as political sophistication or competency are obviously going to differ very much in terms of how they're measured—by locality, region, state, or as urban, rural and so on. We didn't really look at that in the survey. I would have thought the only way you could reasonably relate that back to any program of civic education—apart from making federal Parliament meet in every state capital and regional town in the course of the year—might be to ensure that the things we have been talking about are part of a core national curriculum. The development of civic education in Australia has gone through fits and starts. It's differed across time, it's differed across states, and there's been no concerted policy. For a country such as Australia, which has compulsory voting, and which has a large proportion of its population born overseas in non-English speaking countries, a large proportion who are young, and a large proportion who live in isolated areas, it would be very important to have a concerted national approach to all of this, agreed between the Commonwealth and the states. To date, that is something that has largely not occurred.

Question — From reading the daily press, especially the 'Letters to the Editor' in various papers, it seems that it doesn't really matter how much civic education you may have, people seem to be responding only to the daily issues of their life. The moral and ethical behaviour of the politicians, or the decline thereof, and the way in which the media—particularly television—handles the issues of the day and portrays

the political process to us seems to have a much greater effect than civic education. Do you agree?

Ian McAllister — I think that people who write letters to the editor are a very skewed sample of the population. I agree with your basic point. Politics, to a large extent, tends to be peripheral to the lives of a lot of people. It's something that doesn't really grab them unless there's a high profile political event occurring, and these really only come along once every decade or so. The republic referendum last year might be considered to be the event of the 1990s, the Whitlam dismissal was probably the event of the 1970s, and so on. I think you are correct when you say that the way the mass media portrays a lot of these things is very important. I showed a graph at the beginning which suggested that people's level of interest in politics had gone up almost twofold over the last quarter of a century. That's not because people know twice as much about politics—it's because all of these sound bites now surround people every 15 to 30 minutes on television or radio, and so they believe they're better informed and more interested.

There has actually been quite a bit of research analysing the content of mass media over the last 20 or 30 years. It has found that, about 25 years or so ago, the normal length of a story that would be broadcast on radio and television was about 40 seconds. Quite often now, on the radio, a story is about five or ten seconds. So there has been a dramatic difference in how these stories are actually portrayed to people. And people think they have more knowledge and interest, but in fact they don't—despite all the changes in levels of tertiary education and everything else. So I think the mass media to a large extent is responsible for a lot of this, and indirectly it's also responsible for a lot of the decline in confidence that people have in democratic institutions across a very wide range of countries.

Question — I wanted to comment on matters raised by the lady earlier who was speaking about curriculum matters. I am with the ACT Department of Education, and with very limited resources, there is probably only about one of us in there who is trying to work on some sort of civics and citizenship framework for the ACT. I just wanted to let you know that, due to this civics expert group, the first grant of the Curriculum Corporation was connected to the development of curriculum materials nationally, and the second part of that grant, the professional development aspect, is now getting under way for every state and territory. Within the Discovering Democracy pack, there is a primary pack and a secondary pack, and there's lower, middle and upper primary, and lower and middle secondary. Those units hopefully will go some way towards increasing the knowledge of students. I don't know that we can measure their knowledge as such, but I do know that there are many schools in the ACT that are undertaking case studies and are doing units of work in association with that pack. We have an extreme advantage here in that we have a lot of resources that we can utilise and, as far as I know, at least interest is generated.

There is a lot of talk going on and there is a lot of visiting, for example to the new National Museum. These sources are very useful resources. But it's difficult and challenging, as you say, and I would like to hear a 'part two' of this lecture, on the solution to embedding civics and citizenship into the education system.

Ian McAllister — I am available for grants and consultancies.

Question — Can any comfort or interpretation be drawn from the material you have found for the proponents of compulsory or voluntary voting? Senator Minchin and other people are speaking about voluntary voting, and it seems almost a conclusion from your results to say that voluntary voting could be seen as attractive, but would you like to take that step into the dark?

Ian McAllister — I would probably reverse the question a bit, and say that when you have a system of compulsory voting it makes civic education much more important, because what you find under a compulsory voting system is that 95 percent of people vote. If you had a voluntary voting system, you would probably have an initial turnout in the low 80 percentage, and then it would gradually decline perhaps to about the British level of the low 70 percentage. But the people who vote in a compulsory system who wouldn't vote under a voluntary one tend to be people who are disproportionately young, less interested in politics, less knowledgeable, much more volatile in their voting, much more likely to protest and to be highly conservative (in a 'small c' sense) in terms of what they actually vote for. So in that context, civic education is very important, because you are finding that virtually everybody votes and in that situation there is an obligation, I would have thought, on behalf of the state to ensure that people have the technical skills and knowledge before they go out to cast that vote.

There are some interesting things about compulsory voting coming out of the surveys we have conducted in the last couple of years. We regularly ask people if they would vote if it was voluntary, and we find about 80 percent say they would and the other 20 percent say they wouldn't. When we calculate a lot of results we actually find that it does make a substantial difference if you have voluntary voting. For example, in the referendum survey we carried out at the end of last year on the republic, we found that the referendum proposal would have been carried under a voluntary voting system, because, disproportionately, the people who said that they only voted because it was compulsory tended to be people who voted for the status quo. Which is what you'd expect, because they were less knowledgeable and they didn't particularly want to change it.

We also found in the 1998 election survey that a disproportionate number of people who voted for the One Nation Party were people who wouldn't have voted under a voluntary system because they were people who were simply expressing a protest against the system, rather than people who had very strong beliefs about one or other of the major parties. So I think to a large extent people in Australia tend to take compulsory voting for granted, but it actually has all sorts of effects right round the political system—civic education is one, support for third parties another, and the outcome of referendums is another. But it really is a very important thing that infuses itself through all our political institutions.

Question — Some of these conclusions, for instance about the referendum result and also the support for the One Nation group, vindicate some research I have done. I was going to refer to Senator Payne, who in 1924, introducing a private member's bill, said: 'Apathy and indolence are to be found in all directions amongst the people, and

compulsory voting would induce in a short time, a wonderful improvement in their political education.’ That was the bill, of course, that gave us compulsory voting. I was going to ask whether you think it has done anything at all to induce an improvement in the political education of the population?

Ian McAllister — It’s very difficult to test that empirically. I would have thought that it probably hasn’t, in the sense that people accept compulsory voting in a very direct way. They don’t regard it as an imposition and it is very much ingrained in the political culture of Australia. So it’s not something that forces them to think very strongly about political issues. I think where it does make an important difference is the very high levels of partisanship you find in Australia. And when you compare Australia to a variety of other advanced industrial democracies, Australia has by far the highest levels of party commitment that you’d find anywhere in the world.

For example, in Britain and the United States there has been a rise of independents and third parties—you really haven’t had that here to the same extent. A lot of that can be drawn back to compulsory voting. People have to vote every three years in a federal election, or less, and every three or four years at state level, depending on what state they’re in. So, on average, people are voting in an election once every 18 months. That means that they think very directly about the political parties, and that they are in the front of their minds when they vote, and that’s translated into the high levels of identification you find with the major political parties. You don’t get that in other countries, and it’s had a major effect by ensuring that the party system and the party machines here are very strong and that you have very strong party discipline in Parliament. I don’t think, by and large, that compulsory voting makes people think more about the political issues, because they identify with a party. Fifty-five percent of people in our surveys use ‘how to vote’ cards, or in the case of the Senate, it’s ninety-odd percent of people who vote above the line. So they don’t actually think about the particular issues and discriminate among candidates.

Question —The Electoral Commission conducts a survey after each federal election, and probably going back as far they have records, there’s been about two-thirds support for compulsory voting, and that continues and it’s really never varied. Another thing I wanted to mention is that if you look at the United States system, one of the effects of the lack of compulsory voting is that the parties’ own policies for those that vote—i.e. the lower socio-economic groups—are not catered for. That has quite an effect.

Ian McAllister — I would agree. These are all things people take for granted under a compulsory voting system. People don’t always realise to what extent it flavours the political institutions of Australia, the political culture, the way people look at politics and so on. A lot of my American friends say that we are very lucky to have compulsory voting, because everyone turns out and it makes the surveys you run much cheaper and more effective, so you get a more reliable indicator because you know that everyone has voted when you sample them. It’s much more difficult with voluntary systems.

On the other hand, its clear that, unless you had a country like Australia that had a utilitarian political culture, where people basically obey political rules, it would be

very difficult to bring in a system of compulsory voting anywhere else. So it works very well in Australia where we have a utilitarian, Benthamite political culture, but it clearly wouldn't work in a society like the United States where you've got a 'rights' culture.