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## National and state-level politics on social media: Twitter, Australian political discussions, and the online commentariat

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the use of Twitter for long-term discussions around Australian politics, at national and state levels, tracking two hashtags during 2012: #auspol, denoting national political topics, and #wapol, which provides a case study of state politics (representing Western Australia). The long-term data collection provides the opportunity to analyse how the Twitter audience responds to Australian politics: which themes attract the most attention and which accounts act as focal points for these discussions. The paper highlights differences in the coverage of state and national politics. For #auspol, a small number of accounts are responsible for the majority of tweets, with politicians invoked but not directly contributing to the discussion. In contrast, #wapol stimulates a much lower level of tweeting. This example also demonstrates that, in addition to citizen accounts, traditional participants within political debate, such as politicians and journalists, are among the active contributors to state-oriented discussions on Twitter.

**Keywords:** social media; politics; Twitter; Australia; public debate; commentariat; hashtags; Western Australia; political commentary; everyday politics.

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## 1 Introduction

The potential for the internet, and different online platforms individually, to reshape, open up, or revitalise political debate has long attracted attention and analysis, both empirical and theoretical. From the possibility of a reimagined public sphere online to the development of new flows of information and opinion sharing, introducing new gatekeepers into the construction of public opinion, such studies have treated online communication as a means of countering, or updating, the mass and mainstream media models of discussing politics. In particular, online platforms are seen as providing the potential for more people to become politically engaged, including by voicing views which are not distributed or represented – or are marginalised – by traditional media (for wider examination of these ideas, see, for instance, Dahlgren (2009), and the edited collection by Chadwick and Howard (2010)).

These ideas are not new; various forms of online communication have been treated at times as a means of stimulating new political coverage and commentary, from blogs and citizen journalism platforms to social media, including Facebook and Twitter. Rather than one platform being the sole successful medium for reimagining political debate online, though, these various sites are part of a continuum, evolving over time, wherein political themes, and especially the day-to-day coverage of politics, are an increasingly discussed and accessed part of the wider conversation taking place online. The ability for Twitter users to tweet about breaking news and political debates, for example, is built upon the advances made over the previous decade by bloggers in highlighting the means and the audience for such coverage from non-journalist sources (or from websites separate to those run by the major traditional media titles). Furthermore, these platforms are not used in isolation. Bloggers tweet and post Facebook status updates on political themes, and Twitter users post links to extended blog posts and articles on current issues, as a part of the extended mediasphere. Social media are just one component within a hybridised media ecology, encompassing traditional and alternative media, voices, and formats (Chadwick, 2011). Indeed, social media may also provide an extension of the concept of ‘political omnivores’ – “people who increasingly consume news and information across multiple media” (Howard and Chadwick, 2010, p.431) – by providing a means through which established and new voices alike can publish and respond to, as well as consume, news, opinions, and analyses. While this paper focuses on Twitter-based coverage of Australian politics, then, it is important to note that the setting for these discussions encompasses a wider online commentariat – or ‘viewertariat’, as described by Ampofo et al. (2011) – which may also be contributing to several other platforms.

In this paper, two specific cases of Twitter activity are analysed, exploring different levels of Australian politics as denoted by the inclusion of relevant hashtags in tweets: national political issues (featuring the #auspol hashtag), and state-level discussions, focusing on Western Australia (#wapol). These hashtags are not event-specific, but are ongoing markers for discussion of associated topics, politicians, and policies. For this study, the hashtags were tracked over the first half of 2012. The captured activity then provides a long-term overview of the discussions at hand, and takes into account several different events which attracted widespread attention from Australian and, at times, international media audiences (both mainstream media and social media).

The long-term tracking of these distinct, although occasionally linked or overlapping, hashtags then allows this paper to explore how Twitter is used for the coverage of

Australian politics at different levels. Rather than examining a single debate in isolation, this approach means that the day-to-day patterns around Australian political discussions on Twitter can be established. Such methods enable the identification of themes or events which provoke periods of heightened attention and activity. The method employed here also allows the analysis to identify who is taking part in the discussions tracked, and which Twitter users are invoked in the process. The growing adoption of Twitter as a communications platform by Australian politicians and journalists means that not only do these individual users have the opportunity to participate within debates within the Twittersphere, but also that other users can refer directly to a politician's Twitter username (such as @JuliaGillard, the account of the then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard)<sup>1</sup> in their discussion of that individual (for example "Angry protesters from tent embassy trap @JuliaGillard and @TonyAbbottMHR inside Canberra restaurant. #auspol"). The use of Twitter handles as shorthand for talking about people involved in particular discussions is not an Australian or politics-specific development, and tweeting in this way does not necessarily mean that a reply from the politician is expected. What Twitter allows for, though, is a visible and direct connection from one user to another by linking to individual user names. Within the context of political debate, this means that voters and their elected representatives are occupying the same space, discussing topics in the same manner, in a way that is both public and potentially widely visible.

Unlike previous online communication platforms, which were mostly private and individual (for example, e-mail) or not widely used by politicians in Australia (such as blogs), Twitter is perhaps the first major opportunity for political actors, the media, and voters to respond to one another and collectively and publicly shape the coverage of Australian politics. Notably, Twitter is also a space that was not established explicitly for political purposes. Instead, these discussions occur within the wider comments shared through the platform. While determining the extent of the Australian Twittersphere is not a straightforward task, an ongoing project has identified over one million Australian Twitter accounts (see Bruns et al., 2014), demonstrating that there is a sizeable tweeting population which can potentially contribute to, and become more engaged with, political debate online. This widespread adoption of Twitter, and social media more generally, may provide a clear distinction from other online communication, such as e-mail, where studies found that it was Australians who were already engaged with politics and the internet who were the most likely to contact politicians in this way (Gibson et al., 2008). Despite the growing use of social media by Australians, though, increased political engagement is not a given, nor are changed patterns of political communication an automatic result. While politicians and journalists are present on Twitter, and might be mentioned by other users, they might not reply to these comments, or even tweet at all. This paper then examines the place of politicians within the gathered datasets, to determine whether they are purely incidental (mentioned in tweets but not contributing themselves) or if there is a more extensive conversation taking place between these different political actors.

## **2 Twitter politics**

Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has gradually become an established part of the global media landscape; although other social media platforms may remain more popular (in terms of user numbers, at least) at both the international and national level, Twitter is

employed in slightly different ways to sites such as Facebook. The public nature of most tweets, the brevity of messages – each tweet is limited to 140 characters – and the development of features such as retweets, @mentions, and hashtags have contributed to Twitter's adoption as a medium for posting and sharing live commentary and instant responses to breaking news. Indeed, the tweeted coverage of major stories as they happen arguably acts as a “first draft of the present” in comparison to the view of journalism as the “first draft of history” (Bruns and Highfield, 2012, p.25); short messages informing of new developments, from deaths of public figures to announcements in press conferences, can be posted and circulated immediately – and updated as required – with more extensive analysis and reflection published later.

In addition to acting as a platform for breaking news, Twitter has also been widely used as a backchannel for live events, as users provide their own commentary to sporting contests, television programs, awards ceremonies, and other broadcasts as they happen. Here, the use of relevant hashtags provides a link between individual users and the wider discussion of what is being watched, creating a communal experience despite the distance between participants (Deller, 2011; Harrington et al., 2012). This kind of commentary lends itself to live television coverage – and broadcasters include featured tweets on screen and may promote their own hashtags – and this extends to political broadcasts, too. Election debates, parliamentary broadcasts, and political panel shows are all accompanied by tweeted commentary (see, for example, Elmer, 2013), and act as a focal point for politics-oriented discussions on Twitter. In a study of Twitter coverage of the 2010 Swedish election campaign, for example, Larsson and Moe (2012) found that the televised broadcasts of debates between party leaders provoked prominent spikes in election-related tweeting (second only to activity on election day itself).

Election campaigns in general, of which leaders' debates form a part, have also made increasingly extensive use of Twitter. Candidates, sitting politicians, and their parties tweet updates from the campaign trail, linking to relevant press releases and promotional material, posting messages to encourage voters to support them at the ballot box, and also engaging with other Twitter users. This latter use, though, is not universal for all candidates. While politicians might engage with each other, or with known members of the political commentariat (such as journalists and media commentators), they do not always reply to users from the wider Twitter electorate. There is no one established way of tweeting, as a politician, and variations are evident across parliaments and nations. Broersma and Graham (2012), for example, compared the tweeting approaches of British and Dutch members of parliament and candidates within an election context. Overall, the British accounts used Twitter as a broadcast medium, tweeting at their followers without engaging with any subsequent replies or mentions; however, their Dutch counterparts were more willing to communicate with their followers, interacting rather than simply announcing their own views and messages. These approaches may be used by politicians outside of the election context, too; an early study of Australian politicians on Twitter, at multiple levels of parliament, found that the general tweeting strategy was more broadcast than interaction, as with the UK example (Grant et al., 2010). However, it should be noted too that even among these different national examples, individual politicians might employ their own approaches, whether broadcasting, interacting, or using a completely different strategy; other factors, including the identity and role of the politician, their party, and the period covered by the study, will also have some bearing on how a politician or candidate tweets at any particular time.

Politicians and their parties are not the only people tweeting about politics, though, and social media are used for more campaigns than just elections. A wave of protest movements around the world, including the Arab Spring series of uprisings starting in late 2010, and the integration of social media into them, led to numerous commentaries around the success of “Twitter revolutions” (for contrasting views, see Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2013; Shirky, 2011). In these cases, Twitter was used to spread information and reports from the scene of physical protests in countries such as Iran, Moldova, Egypt, and Tunisia. However, while social media helped the movements to attract international attention, the importance of the medium to the protestors themselves, for domestic organisation or support, for example, is less clear.

Other activist groups and social movements have more clearly adopted social media as an organisational and broadcasting platform. The Occupy movement, for example, was launched in 2011 through the physical occupation of Wall Street, New York City, branded with the #occupywallstreet (also shortened to #ows) hashtag, and later spread to other cities in the USA and in other countries. In such cases as Occupy or the Arab Spring, political discussion covers different topics than, and has different intentions to, more everyday concerns of what politicians and candidates may be tweeting about during election campaigns or while parliament is sitting. However, because these various conversations are all taking place on Twitter, they co-exist – and overlap – within the one platform, using the same conventions of character limit, linking, and hashtagging, as part of the total tweeted coverage of political issues and events. Furthermore, such coverage occurs alongside tweets about non-political topics, including comments by the same users contributing at other times to political discussions on Twitter. Here, Twitter might act as a ‘Third Space’ (Wright, 2012), where the aims of the hosted discussions are not focused on politics, but “where political talk emerges within conversations” (p.254). However, there may be a conceptual difference between emergent political discussions on Twitter, and the more declarative, organised political talk around hashtags established for such a purpose.

Research into Twitter and politics so far has primarily focused on individual cases, although covering a range of international perspectives and comparisons. Election campaigns as discussed on social media have been analysed within Sweden (Larsson and Moe, 2012), Finland (Strandberg, 2013), the USA (Christensen, 2013), and Germany (Dang-Xuan et al., 2013), among other examples. While these studies provide valuable information about one key aspect of politics online, though, there is a need for a wider consideration of the continuing political debates outside of the election context. An election acts as a period of focused and heightened activity, building towards a known date and potentially uncertain result; this makes such discussions appealing to track on Twitter, because of their clear beginning and end dates, but it also means that there is more limited academic research into tweeted coverage of what the elected government actually attempts and achieves. Long-term coverage of quotidian politics is required, in order to develop our understanding of how online political debate is shaped, provoked, framed, and sustained, beyond elections and major flashpoints such as leadership votes.

Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013), in their study of Austrian politics on Twitter, provide a possible means for such work. Their research tracks the tweets of selected politicians, as well as journalists, experts, and citizens, in order to determine how Austrian politics is tweeted, and how different Twitter users, and types of users, interact with each other, with political topics, and with the mainstream media.

This paper uses an approach located between the election-specific studies and the more extensive tracking of Ausserhofer and Maireder. The data collection focuses on two hashtags, rather than multiple users and hashtags, but the period of Twitter activity represented here allows for a more rounded analysis of Australian political discussions on Twitter, covering several events instead of election campaigns.

### **3 The Australian context**

Australian politics is dominated by two main parties: the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the centre-right/conservative Liberal Party (in coalition with the rural National Party – in Queensland, these parties have merged to become the Liberal-National Party, or LNP). There are several minor parties, including the Australian Greens, the Christian conservative Family First Party, the centre-right Palmer United Party, and the agricultural/conservative Katter's Australian Party, but only Labor and the Liberal-National coalition have the support and win sufficient seats to be able to form government in their own right. At the start of 2012, when this project began, the federal government was led by the ALP, with Julia Gillard as Prime Minister. However, of the six state parliaments, three saw the ALP in power (Queensland; South Australia; Tasmania), and three were Liberal-led (Western Australia; New South Wales; Victoria). Furthermore, the result of the Queensland election in March 2012 saw the Liberal-National Party take office after a landslide victory. The majority of Australian parliaments are bicameral, including the federal parliament; the main exception is the Queensland parliament, which is unicameral. Voting in federal and state elections is compulsory for eligible and enrolled voters. During Australian elections, voters complete a ballot for candidates in their local electorate; government is formed by the party winning the most electorates, either by themselves or in coalition, and the leader of the party becomes Prime Minister.

The use of the internet for political purposes and communication in Australia has had a varied history. Political bloggers, for example, became established voices online by the mid-2000s (Bahnisch, 2006), but for the most part these were citizen experts, including academics and analysts, rather than journalists or politicians blogging. Indeed, an antagonistic relationship between bloggers and parts of the mainstream media led to several incidents where journalists attacked the work of bloggers for publishing their own analysis of political issues (and criticising the work of the traditional media in the process) (Highfield and Bruns, 2012). Different online platforms have been adopted for election campaigns, although not always with the intended results. During the 2007 federal election campaign, the ALP ran a successful youth-oriented strategy branded as 'Kevin 07', including social networking sites and focusing on the party's then-leader, Kevin Rudd. In the same campaign, though, the Liberal Party were less decisive in their use of the internet, with their use of YouTube, for example, attracting attention for the ill-considered style of presentation and interaction (Flew, 2008). These differing approaches by the two major parties to online campaigning can also be seen in their uses of social media in later elections. While ALP members have been active on Twitter in Queensland and Western Australia, Liberal accounts in these states have been less numerous and less actively engaged with discussions on social media. This may in part be party strategy, particularly given the strong conservative results in the most recent elections in both states (in 2012 and 2013 respectively) – engaging an audience online was not a

required strategy for victory, and limiting activity on Twitter also meant reducing the opportunities for gaffes which could take over the media cycle (for more on both state campaigns, see Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Highfield and Bruns, 2013).

At the federal level, the 2010 election saw the first campaign where Twitter was an established part of the Australian media landscape. The election campaign followed an ALP leadership challenge where the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, had lost to his deputy, Julia Gillard. The breaking news of this leadership spill and its result were covered first on Twitter (Jericho, 2012). The election itself was then accompanied by social media commentary, with Twitter coverage using the hashtag #ausvotes to denote election-related tweets (Burgess and Bruns, 2012). Following the election, which resulted in a hung parliament led by the ALP, with Gillard as Prime Minister, further hashtags developed for the coverage of everyday politics; one of these, #auspol, became the overarching signifier for Australian political discussion on Twitter. However, tweets containing #auspol became increasingly polarised, rather than a space for political debate, and users would deliberately incite and provoke extreme reactions from other participants in these discussions (Jericho, 2012).

Despite the confrontational and hostile environment that might be fostered within the #auspol discussions, Twitter itself is an increasingly popular political communication platform in Australia. Broadcasters integrate social media into their live coverage of politics and news; the public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, encourages and displays tweeted questions for the participants in the political panel discussion *Q&A* (see Given and Radywyl, 2013). Similarly, politicians themselves have adopted Twitter to a far greater degree than they did blogging; in July 2012, 146 of 226 members of the federal parliament (both the Lower and Upper Houses) were present on Twitter. Finally, platforms such as Twitter are also used for political humour, including satirising politicians and journalists through the creation of fake accounts inspired by their namesakes (Wilson, 2011).

#### **4 Research questions and methods**

This paper then provides a new, overarching examination of how politics is discussed on Twitter, by moving beyond specific events such as election campaigns, instead considering the quotidian coverage of 'everyday' politics. Tracking political tweets over an extended period of time allows for an identification of any patterns in such social media activity, including any periods of heightened or lessened tweeting. These periods can then be individually examined in greater detail, to determine what events, political figures, or Twitter users might have provoked such activity. The common approach to tracking discussions pertaining to national and state-level politics also means that these different topics and their coverage can be compared further, using the same analytical methods.

The comparison of various Australian political discussions on Twitter evaluates whether the convergence of users – citizens, politicians and their staff, journalists, think tanks, unions, activist groups – within a single platform such as Twitter changes the dynamics of political debate. To do so, it seeks to answer the following questions:

“Which users act as central figures within Australian political discussions on Twitter?”

Do national and state-oriented discussions lead to different patterns of participation?”

The long-term data collection also provides the opportunity to examine how the Twitter audience responds to Australian politics, including which themes attract the most attention and which events stimulate heightened tweeting activity.

To track Australian political discussions on Twitter, this paper used the yourTwapperKeeper data capture tool. This tool accesses the Twitter Streaming API, and captures tweets including defined keywords or hashtags; an archive is created in yourTwapperKeeper for a given term (such as #auspol or gillard), and the tool then repeatedly queries the API for tweets which feature this term in either the tweet itself, any URL included, or in Twitter user names. The capture process archives the text of relevant tweets, including hashtags and links, and records the date and time of publication, the user ID, and location information if the user has made it available. There are some limits to this data capture process; accessing the Streaming API means that not all relevant tweets will be collected for high-volume datasets, as services are not able to continually query the full set of tweets published on Twitter. Similarly, yourTwapperKeeper does not capture all retweets published using the 'retweet' button through Twitter; manual retweets, where a user adds RT: @username to the original tweet, are collected, but automated retweets are often not featured in the final datasets. The collected data were then processed and analysed using a series of Gawk scripts developed for the specific examination of large Twitter datasets, enabling, for example, the extraction of hashtags, @replies and retweets, and filtering by user name and keyword (see Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Bruns and Liang, 2012).

For this study, yourTwapperKeeper archives were set up for several political hashtags, including #auspol, denoting Australian politics in general, and #wapol, for Western Australian state-oriented political topics. These hashtags are established markers for such topics on Twitter. #auspol became a widely-used hashtag following the 2010 federal election, which had been accompanied by the #ausvotes hashtag. Similar hashtags are also used for other Australian state-based political discussions, such as #qldpol for Queensland and #nswpol for New South Wales, while election periods also see the use of #statevotes markers (#qldvotes, #wavotes, and so on).

Of course, not all political tweets pertaining to either national or state issues contain these, or other, hashtags, and so this paper does not cover all Australian political discussions on Twitter. There is also a methodological limitation to focusing solely on hashtags, as there is no requirement to include hashtags either in original tweets or in replies to hashtagged comments. The use of such markers is variable, and tracking only hashtags means that these extended discussions may be absent from the final datasets. There are alternative ways of tracking political coverage on Twitter, such as capturing the tweets of individual users or tracking multiple keywords and hashtags, and these ideas are discussed further at the end of this paper. However, for this project, the two chosen hashtags are used to examine the public performance of political debate, especially since there is an established convention to the use of #auspol and its ilk – indeed, putting #auspol in a tweet can be seen as a clear statement that there is an Australian political dimension to its content. By including a hashtag, a Twitter user is making a declarative link to a wider discussion, extending beyond the users that they follow and who follow

them. This can potentially increase the visibility of a tweet beyond a user's followers, since Twitter clients can follow searches and hashtag streams. While there is no guarantee that including a hashtag in a tweet will mean that it is seen by more users, the decision to feature such devices in tweets is an active choice on the part of the user to connect their comments to larger-scale debates.

For this project, three hashtags were tracked between 15 January and 4 July 2012: #auspol, #qldpol, and #wapol, covering two state-oriented discussions as well as national politics. However, in this analysis, only #auspol and #wapol are featured due to space limitations; research into #qldpol from part of the same period, focusing on the 2012 Queensland state election campaign, is featured by Bruns and Highfield (2013). The selected hashtags were tracked using yourTwrapperKeeper throughout 2012, providing datasets including tweets posted in response to several major Australia political events and issues, such as the federal Labor leadership contest between Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her predecessor Kevin Rudd in February 2012, the Queensland election in March, and the introduction of the carbon tax in July. The following sections highlight the general patterns found in the datasets, including daily posting patterns and the users who are most active within these political discussions.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 #auspol

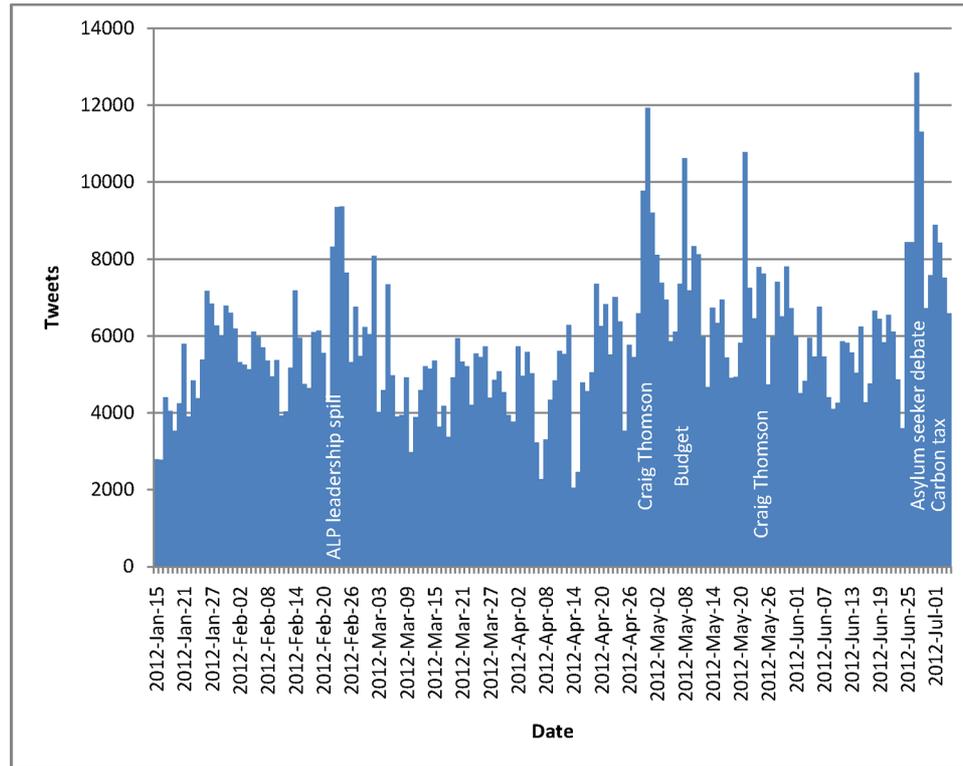
In total, 1,002,451 tweets containing the #auspol hashtag were gathered between 15 January and 4 July 2012. These tweets were posted by 50,622 Twitter users, at an average of 19.8 tweets per user. The average daily posting rate was 5828 #auspol tweets per day; however, as Figure 1 shows, the number of tweets per day varied substantially across the dataset. Several prominent spikes can be seen in the graph, in response to major announcements, breaking news, and parliamentary debates: such spikes include the ALP leadership spill on 23 February, developments in the ongoing allegations of improper use of union funds against ALP MP Craig Thomson from late April onwards (including Thomson's decision to move to the crossbenches as an independent MP rather than an ALP member), the federal budget announcement on 8 May, a debate on asylum seekers on 27 June (which saw a peak of more than 12,000 tweets), and finally the introduction of the carbon pricing tax on 1 July.

Figure 1 also shows a more regular pattern, though, within the #auspol dataset; a recurring decline in tweeting activity followed by several days of increased tweets per day. These variations are weekly, and demonstrate the relatively low volume of #auspol tweets on weekends. As with the political blogosphere previously (Highfield, 2011), Australian political discussions on Twitter are less active on weekends than during the week. This pattern is not unexpected, since political news and announcements do not often take place on weekends (election days being a major exception). However, it is still noteworthy that these patterns are continued within the Twittersphere.

While #auspol is a very active hashtag, as seen by the total tweets gathered, the discussions are dominated (in terms of the volume of tweets) by a small number of Twitter users. 64% of the more than one million #auspol tweets during this period were posted by 1% of the users contributing to the dataset. Indeed, six users were collectively responsible for over 87,000 tweets between them, as shown in Table 1. However, as with

other large datasets of Twitter activity, these figures are affected somewhat by the presence of automated accounts and bots, which publish tweets and retweets based on particular keywords or hashtags. Several of the most active accounts represented here have also since been deleted from Twitter, possibly because of excessive volume or spamming discussions with unrelated (and automated) content.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1** #auspol tweets per day, 15 January–4 July, 2012 (see online version for colours)



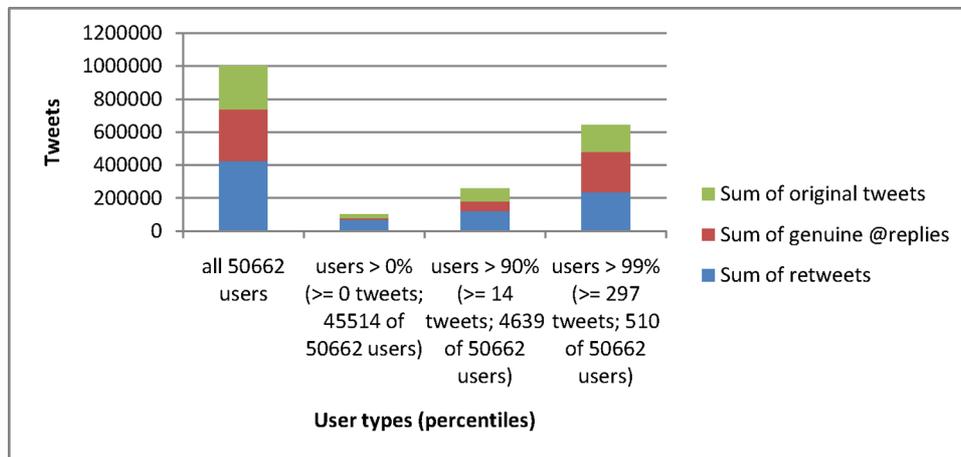
**Table 1** Users posting the most #auspol tweets, 15 January–4 July 2012

| <i>ID (for this study)</i> | <i>Account type</i> | <i>Total tweets</i> |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1                          | Since deleted       | 27,253              |
| 2                          | Citizen account     | 13,019              |
| 3                          | Citizen account     | 12,594              |
| 4                          | Citizen account     | 11,615              |
| 5                          | Citizen account     | 11,612              |
| 6                          | Citizen account     | 11,603              |
| 7                          | Citizen account     | 9,578               |
| 8                          | Citizen account     | 9,279               |
| 9                          | Citizen account     | 9,272               |
| 10                         | Since deleted       | 9,108               |

The users contributing the highest numbers of tweets to the #auspol dataset are not elected parliamentarians or journalists, but politically-engaged citizens (or automated accounts, as the case may be); they, and other high volume Twitter users contributing to these datasets, fit Coleman’s (2006) description of ‘political junkies’, who treat political issues as major topics of interest and actively seek out relevant news and opinion pieces. These users form a core group of #auspol discussants, responsible for the bulk of the tweeted content. Numerically, this finding follows patterns found in other online discussions, such as discussion forums, where ‘superparticipants’ are present (Graham and Wright, 2013), although further analysis is required to evaluate whether the ‘super users’ of #auspol perform similarly positive roles.

Figure 2 shows the quantitative dominance of a small group of users more clearly. Here, the volumes of different types of tweet (original tweet, retweet, and genuine @reply) are depicted for the total #auspol dataset, and for different groups of users based on their overall activity ranked as a percentile. The most active 1% of users, for example, provide similar amounts of retweets and @replies, suggesting that these users are engaging in an ongoing discussion (whether cordial or not, as noted in Jericho’s (2012) description of the hostile nature of many #auspol tweets) which involves responding to others’ comments. In comparison, the least active 90% of users, each contributing up to 14 tweets containing the #auspol hashtag, are publishing retweets for the most part. This suggests that, rather than becoming regular participants within these discussions, most of these users are only posting once or twice, and these comments are most likely retweets of others’ views. While these users might publish many tweets about political topics, they do not make ongoing use of the #auspol hashtag.

**Figure 2** Types of #auspol tweet published by different percentiles of Twitter users (see online version for colours)



Unsurprisingly, the most active users are also those which make most mention of other Twitter users in their #auspol tweets. However, for many of these users, the number of @mentions exceeds the number of tweets published, suggesting that their tweets make reference to multiple users, either in reply to discussions taking in several participants, or in directing their comments at several different users simultaneously. In comparison, while some of these ‘super users’ are also among the most-mentioned accounts (as shown

in Table 2), they are not as prominent in the gathered tweets as the accounts of major politicians and political groups: those of the Prime Minister (@JuliaGillard) and the Leader of the Opposition (@TonyAbbottMHR) respectively, as well as the official account of the Wikileaks activist group. The politicians themselves, though, are not major contributors to the #auspol dataset – Gillard makes a few references to other users in tagged tweets, while Abbott contributes no such tweets. However, because of their positions within Australian politics, they remain focal points for commentary on related issues even if they do not respond (or at least, do not respond with a similarly hashtagged comment).

**Table 2** Twitter users mentioned the most by other Twitter users in #auspol tweets

| <i>ID (for this study)</i> | <i>Account type</i>        | <i>Total@mentions received</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 11                         | Politician (Julia Gillard) | 23,658                         |
| 12                         | Activist group (Wikileaks) | 23,193                         |
| 13                         | Politician (Tony Abbott)   | 15,952                         |
| 3                          | Citizen account            | 14,713                         |
| 6                          | Citizen account            | 12,925                         |
| 4                          | Citizen account            | 12,381                         |
| 14                         | Since deleted              | 11,837                         |
| 15                         | Citizen account            | 9671                           |
| 9                          | Citizen account            | 9624                           |
| 16                         | Alternative news           | 9376                           |

These patterns are reinforced when the @mentions of other users are separated by the types of tweet containing these mentions, as either retweets or @replies. Wikileaks is the most-mentioned account within #auspol-tagged retweets – either because their original tweet is being retweeted, or because they are mentioned in tweets which are then retweeted further – with more than 21,000 retweets. This suggests that rather than participating in the discussions, tweets posted by this account are retweeted by its followers who are themselves not necessarily involved in #auspol debates. Tweeted content involving Wikileaks attracts attention from the group's supporters, regardless of its context; tweets mentioning articles published about the group on Australian news and opinion websites, for example, regularly account for spikes in the number of tweets linking to these sites (Bruns et al., 2013). In comparison, several politicians are among the most @mentioned accounts in tweets not presented as retweets, as seen in Table 3. These accounts include those of the then-Deputy Prime Minister Wayne Swan and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, as well as Gillard (more than 23,000 mentions) and Abbott (more than 15,000 mentions). These patterns suggest that politicians are referenced deliberately within tweets – rather than retweeting content containing the @mention, or indeed rebroadcasting tweets from these users, Twitter users choose to cite the accounts of Gillard and Abbott as part of their comments on Australian politics.

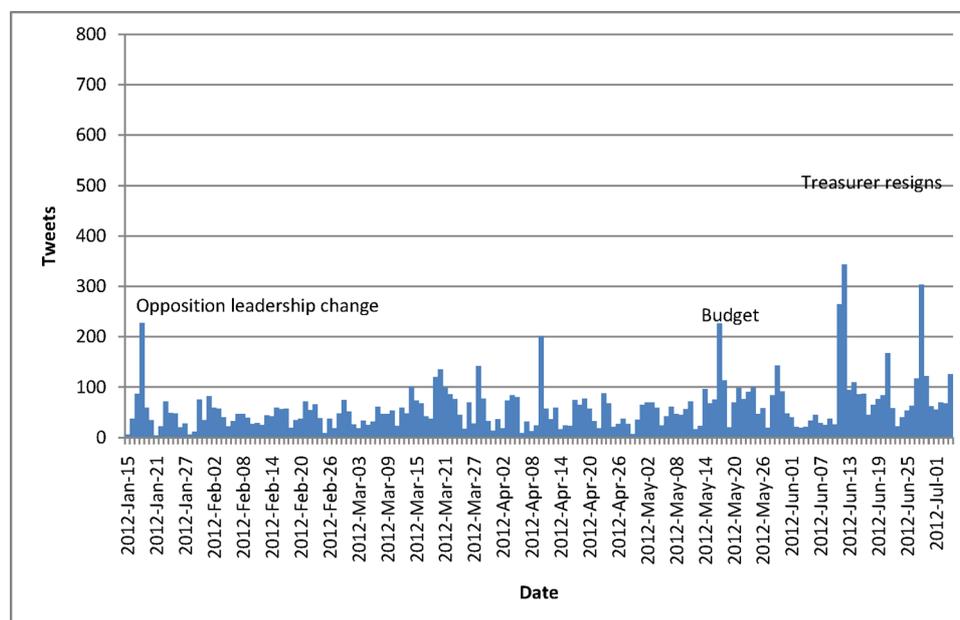
**Table 3** Twitter users mentioned the most by other Twitter users in #auspol @replies

| <i>ID (for this study)</i> | <i>Account type</i>        | <i>Total times mentioned (@replies, not retweets)</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| 11                         | Politician (Julia Gillard) | 23,303  |
| 13                         | Politician (Tony Abbott)   | 15,830  |
| 6                          | Citizen account            | 10,407  |
| 3                          | Citizen account            | 10,225  |
| 4                          | Citizen account            | 8063  |
| 17                         | Politician (Wayne Swan)    | 7693  |
| 2                          | Citizen account            | 6695  |
| 18                         | Citizen account            | 6505  |
| 19                         | Politician (Kevin Rudd)    | 6472  |
| 14                         | Citizen account            | 6230  |

## 5.2 #wapol

The #auspol dataset, covering national political issues, attracted on average nearly 6000 tweets per day; for state-specific discussions, though, interest on Twitter is substantially lower. For Western Australian politics, as demonstrated in tweets containing the #wapol hashtag, the 15 January–4 July period saw 10,329 tweets – a figure which, for #auspol tweets, could be achieved within two days. #wapol tweets were published by 1624 users, at an average of 6.4 tweets per user and 60 tweets per day. Several spikes, seen in Figure 3, accompany major breaking news here, as with #auspol; the early spike on 17 January follows the state Leader of the Opposition, Eric Ripper, stepping down and being replaced by Mark McGowan, while the peak activity in mid-June follows the shock resignation of the state Treasurer, Christian Porter.

Unlike #auspol – and perhaps due to the smaller size of the Western Australian discussions – politicians and journalists take more prominent roles as participants within the #wapol tweets. Two ALP politicians, Ken Travers and John Hyde,<sup>3</sup> appear among the most active contributors to the #wapol dataset, as shown in Table 4. The central role of established political actors is also apparent in their @mentions by and of other users in #wapol tweets, as seen in Tables 5 and 6; here, politicians, journalists, and political commentators are not only being mentioned often, but are also among those users mentioning other accounts. The #wapol example then suggests that, unlike the larger, more prominent national hashtagged content featured here, the Twitter coverage of Western Australian politics involves a more even spread of – and comparable contributions from – citizens (including the ‘political junkies’), journalists, and politicians alike. Of further interest is the lack of crossover between the prominent accounts in the #auspol and #wapol datasets. While some of the highly active contributors to the #auspol discussion do also appear in other state-oriented datasets, over the period featured here they do not feature as frequent participants in Western Australian political communication on Twitter. The accounts featured in Tables 4–6 are all based in Western Australia, and this suggests that there is a separation of interest around state and national politics. Outside of periods such as state election campaigns, which still attract nationwide interest, the day-to-day coverage of state politics does not usually receive the same attention or audience as the discussion of Australian political topics overall.

**Figure 3** #wapol tweets per day, 15 January–4 July, 2012 (see online version for colours)**Table 4** Users contributing most #wapol tweets, 15 January–4 July 2012

| <i>ID (for this study)</i> | <i>Account type</i>      | <i>Total tweets</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 20                         | Political commentator    | 572                 |
| 21                         | Journalist               | 319                 |
| 22                         | Environmental group      | 308                 |
| 23                         | Citizen account          | 283                 |
| 24                         | News                     | 253                 |
| 25                         | Citizen account          | 219                 |
| 26                         | Politician (Ken Travers) | 184                 |
| 27                         | Politician (John Hyde)   | 133                 |
| 28                         | Citizen account          | 130                 |
| 29                         | Blog                     | 124                 |

## 6 Discussion

The examples of national and state-oriented discussions of Australian politics highlight the varying attention devoted to these separate themes. While the coverage of federal politics attracts thousands of tweets per day containing the #auspol hashtag, tweeting about state politics is much less extensive. These cases then suggest how Australian political discussions are taking place on Twitter. The posting patterns demonstrate that there is an active social media commentariat, and an audience for such topics, yet the make-up of the users participating in these discussions changes somewhat between the federal and state levels. #auspol, in particular, is dominated by a small but vocal core

group of Twitter users, representing neither journalists nor politicians – the traditional voices within political debates – but instead a highly engaged, and in some cases fiercely partisan, group of citizen commentators and political junkies. While politicians are invoked in #auspol tweets, they are not active participants to the same degree as this core group, if indeed they do contribute to the #auspol discussion at all. Some politicians who do tweet regularly are not as visible within the #auspol dataset as might be expected (including Tony Abbott), and this may be due to the limits of this analytical approach. If politicians, or other Twitter users, do not use #auspol in their tweets, then these comments do not appear in the dataset. This is not to say that politicians do not use relevant hashtags at all, or become participants within these wider discussions; the #wapol example shows that a smaller Twitter commentariat can include journalists and politicians as well as engaged citizens. Individuals' involvement here, though, is determined by several factors, including wider party strategy. While WA Labor members are regular #wapol contributors, for instance, their Liberal counterparts are less numerous on Twitter, and new Liberal candidates were requested not to use social media during the 2013 state election campaign in order for the party to more effectively control the messages being disseminated.

**Table 5** Users mentioning other users most often in #wapol tweets

| <i>ID (for this study)</i> | <i>Account type</i>      | <i>Total@mentions of other users</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 20                         | Political commentator    | 665                                  |
| 21                         | Journalist               | 375                                  |
| 25                         | Citizen account          | 298                                  |
| 23                         | Citizen account          | 267                                  |
| 22                         | Environmental group      | 157                                  |
| 30                         | News                     | 137                                  |
| 26                         | Politician (Ken Travers) | 137                                  |
| 31                         | Citizen account          | 115                                  |
| 32                         | Citizen account          | 103                                  |
| 33                         | Citizen account          | 102                                  |

**Table 6** Users mentioned most often by other users in #wapol tweets

| <i>ID (for this study)</i> | <i>Account type</i>          | <i>Total@mentions received</i> |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 22                         | Environmental group          | 578                            |
| 34                         | Politician (Eric Ripper)     | 277                            |
| 20                         | Political commentator        | 256                            |
| 28                         | Citizen account              | 227                            |
| 26                         | Politician (Ken Travers)     | 216                            |
| 21                         | Journalist                   | 205                            |
| 35                         | Regional promotional account | 203                            |
| 36                         | Journalist                   | 198                            |
| 37                         | Politician (Mark McGowan)    | 172                            |
| 38                         | News                         | 164                            |

While #wapol provides a clearer mix of traditional and new commentators and political figures, #auspol demonstrates that these discussions are primarily led – in terms of volume of tweets – by a small group of core users tweeting at prominent politicians. This is most evident when comparing the lists of most active users with those users who are mentioned most often within #auspol tweets, as it is only the latter group which contains the accounts of active politicians. Primarily, politician accounts are referred to symbolically, creating a direct link through a tweet without expecting or requiring a reply. However, what is also clear is that such approaches are oriented around key personalities, rather than around parties – the #auspol mentions of the ALP and Liberal leaders far exceed their respective parties' own accounts. While there are some spikes in the various datasets which do suggest a response to policies and issues rather than personalities, the tweeting patterns within #auspol in particular also suggest that there was still regular framing of politics around Gillard, Abbott, or both of them, as a contest between two people and their respective views.

Indeed, many of the spikes in the two hashtag datasets correspond with major personal intrigue – the resignation of ministers, the leadership challenges and changes, or allegations made against members – rather than policy (although some debates, including those around budgets, taxes, and immigration, do attract further heightened tweeting). Sometimes this is unavoidable, as was seen later in October 2012, when Gillard accused Abbott of repeatedly making misogynistic remarks during Question Time; the reaction to this speech generated a further peak in Twitter activity, with nearly 20,000 #auspol tweets on 9 October alone, while the video of the speech attracted global media attention. Such patterns continued in 2013, framing the upcoming election as a contest mostly between Abbott and Gillard – and, indeed, continuing speculation about a leadership challenge between Gillard and Rudd, which generated its own hashtags. This ongoing question ultimately saw a vote called in February 2013 (at which Rudd did not challenge) and a second vote in June 2013, won by Rudd to become ALP leader and Prime Minister ahead of the 2013 election (where the Liberal-National victory saw Tony Abbott become Prime Minister).

## **7 Further outlook**

This paper has provided a brief overview of tweeting patterns around different Australian political debates, covering the national and state levels of politics. With long-term tracking of these discussions, further analysis is possible to explore more about political debates on social media. Some aspects of these discussions, such as any cross-party or partisan linking between politicians themselves, could not be included here due to space reasons; however, studying the networks of @mentions and @replies allows the analysis to explore not just whether politicians or journalists are participating in these discussions, but also which users they are actually responding to or citing in their own tweets.

Further research will also expand upon the datasets available for analysis, including exploring other state-specific discussions not featured in this study. For example, the hashtags are not used in isolation, but may appear in the same tweets; indeed, users may make strategic use of #auspol and state-oriented hashtags in order to connect their comments to several different Twitter streams (and these comments might not be directly related to all – or any – of the subjects concerned by the hashtags). However, while tracking hashtags, especially popular markers such as #auspol, enables the identification

of general patterns around political commentary online, these datasets are not exhaustive in their coverage of Australian political debates. Following the example of Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013), multiple datasets covering hashtags, keywords, and individual users help to provide a more rounded overview of relevant discussions (for the Australian context, a similar approach was used to study the 2012 Queensland state election; see Bruns and Highfield, 2013). When multiple, competing hashtags may be used to discuss the issues or events at hand, and there is no requirement to use these or any other hashtags in topical tweets, research should supplement hashtag-specific tracking with other, related data.

## 8 Conclusion

The cases of #auspol and #wapol provide important information about the different approaches to tweeting about Australian politics, and in particular the make-up of the Twitter commentariat for national and state political issues. While Twitter is a medium used by citizens, politicians, and journalists alike, they are not equally involved in the major hashtagged discussions of Australian politics. Although politicians and journalists are mentioned by other users, their hashtagged contributions are overshadowed by the sheer volume of tweets by other users, in particular by a small core group of political junkies. In some contexts, politicians play a more conversational role, replying to other users as well as tweeting using relevant hashtags, but within the case of #auspol in particular, politicians appear within the wider discussions symbolically first, and as participants second. The findings so far indicate the presence of an audience, of varying sizes, for commenting on political topics at both a national and state level on Twitter. Further analysis of the hashtag archives, and of the total tweets published by politicians, journalists, and other prominent commentators, is required, though, to establish to what extent political coverage on Twitter counts as a single debate, discussion, or conversation about Australian politics, featuring contributions from established and new political actors alike – or, indeed, whether the sum output covers multiple, distinct, and separate series of comments, linked only by a common convention in the form of a hashtag.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A leadership spill in June 2013 saw Julia Gillard replaced as Labor Party leader and Prime Minister by her predecessor, Kevin Rudd. A subsequent federal election in September 2013 saw the Liberal Party form government, under the leadership of Tony Abbott as Prime Minister, with Labor in opposition.

<sup>2</sup>In the following tables, account names have been anonymised, with the exception of individual politicians and activist groups. Citizen accounts may include automated accounts and users who work for politicians or political parties, but who are not elected representatives themselves.

<sup>3</sup>Of the Western Australian politicians mentioned here and in Tables 4–6, John Hyde lost his seat and Eric Ripper retired at the 2013 Western Australian state election.