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Dear The Honourable L. Tarlamis MP, and Members of the Electoral Matters Committee of the Parliament of Victoria,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written submission regarding the role of social media in contemporary elections. I'm a Professor of Political Science and Department Chair at the University of California, San Diego and in 2015 held the Fulbright Flinders University Distinguished Chair in American Political Science in Adelaide, Australia. I also currently serve on the State of California Fair Political Practice Commission's Digital Transparency Task Force. (I list these for identification purposes only, and the research findings and policy views in this submission reflect my individual views). In my research, I have studied how politicians use Twitter to communicate their political views, both in Australia and in the United States. I have attached two of my publications on how Australian politicians use Twitter – research that relies both on interviews with leading national and state legislators as well as quantitative text analyses of all tweets sent by all national MPs as of 2015.

Informed by the large body of the literature on how politicians use social media and by the policymaking approaches adopted by state and local governments America, I wish to make three simple points:

1. Social media, and especially Twitter, is now a primary and vital form of communication between politicians and voters, standing alongside television, radio, and print advertisement as a means of messaging. The information that they communicate performs an important representative function and most often provides their subjective viewpoints rather than objective facts. The public engages with these messages strongly, especially ones that present opinions rather than facts.
2. While the choices of technology and platforms may change, the shift to social media communication is likely here to stay. This necessitates that governments should consider approaches to the disclosure and archiving of social media advertisements than mirror what they have done for television, radio, and print advertising.
3. The State of California has taken steps in this direction, passing recent legislation focused on disclosing the sources of funding for digital advertisements as well as for mass text messaging, an increasingly common form of voter outreach and mobilization. The states of New York, Washington, and Maryland have created archives of digital ads, as have the cities of Los Angeles and New York. Some of these archives are housed by a public authority, while others require platforms such as Google, Facebook, Snapchat, or Twitter to archive political advertisements. If the Parliament of Victoria wishes to consider such an approach, reaching it the civil servants who have implemented these approaches would be paramount.

In the remainder of this submission, I present some evidence from my research to support then initial point and then summarize some resources that the Electoral Matters might use to address policy steps.

1. Social media, and especially Twitter, is now a primary and vital form of communication between politicians and voters.

Even before the 2016 presidential election in California, in which both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton attracted audiences of tens of millions of followers, social media platforms had been widely adopted by politicians around the globe to connect with constituents, voters, journalists, and the general policymaking audience. For instance, even in 2014 as I prepared for my Fulbright in Australia, the Parliament's website listed the Twitter addresses of each member in its directory, alongside their primary contact information, and these legislators. Australian politicians had sent nearly 94,000 tweets at that time, and even those on the front bench, including Leader of the House Christopher Pyne and Leader of the Opposition in the Senate Penny Wong, reported to me that they sent their own tweets.

Then came the United States' 2016 presidential contest, dubbed the "Twitter Election,"¹ marking a qualitative shift in the way that candidates harnessed the power of social media to communicate directly with voters. Speaking to far larger audiences than candidates before them and tweeting more actively and more personally² than ever before, @realDonaldTrump, @HillaryClinton and the rest of the field used social media to bypass the traditional media. Twitter blurred the distinction between paid and free media, allowing candidates the complete control over their messages that they'd previously exerted only through costly advertisements. All of this came without spending a cent for airtime and freed candidates from the mercy of the journalists who arbitrate a campaign's message via earned media. It put voters constantly in touch with candidates, giving them exposure to a campaigner's rhetoric, positions, and personality that was previously granted mostly just to residents of Iowa and New Hampshire. Twitter in 2016 created an immediate and unfiltered link between political leaders and their followers at a scale rarely seen in American politics.

It is important to note that when they communicate over social media, politicians do often focus on their policy positions and providing meaningful information that benefits the collective political discourse. In my research on Australia, I found that, when they took policy positions on Twitter, members of parliament often reflected the viewpoints of their constituents and clarified their positions within their parties, allowing voters to see where leaders position themselves in the internal divisions within political parties. In the figures below, taken from my published research, I measure the policy positions on social media by the percentage of ideological tweets that are conservative. These figures show that politicians take meaningful positions that often reflect those of their voters, demonstrating the positive, informative role that social media can play in politics.

The first figure below shows that the percentage of conservative positions that Australian politicians tweet (reported on the y-axis) is highly correlated with the share of the vote won by the Coalition in the 2013 election (reported on the x-axis). This shows that political tweets mirror voter preferences. The next

¹ See for instance Mike Isaac and Sydney Ember, "For Election Day Influence, Twitter Ruled Social Media," New York Times, November 8, 2016, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/technology/for-election-day-chatter-twitter-ruled-social-media.html>.

² An analysis of tweet that Donald personally sent, rather than relying on his communications team, was covered by Jessica Roy, "Here's How to Tell Whether Donald Trump is Doing his Own Tweeting," Los Angeles Times, August 10, 2016, accessed at <http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/trailguide/la-na-trailguide-updates-trump-tweets-iphone-android-1470868218-htmlstory.html>.

figure shows the ideological distribution of politicians on their answers to a set of policy questions on the Australian Candidate Survey, and then their Twitter ideologies. While the distributions do not match perfectly, they are quite similar, showing that political tweets do represent the positions of candidates. Finally, the last table reports individual Twitter ideologies for party accounts and the accounts of prominent members of Parliament (in 2015). These show that social media can reveal true positions of legislators that are often obscured when party discipline rules on roll call votes.

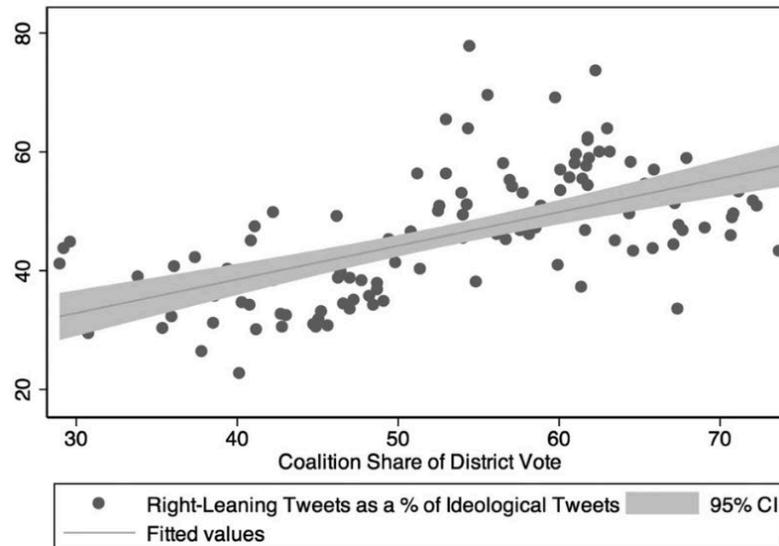


Figure 3. Predictive validity: do constituent voting patterns predict tweets?

Source: Kousser, Thad. 2019. "Tweet Style: Campaigning, Governing, and Social Media in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science*. 54(2):183-201.

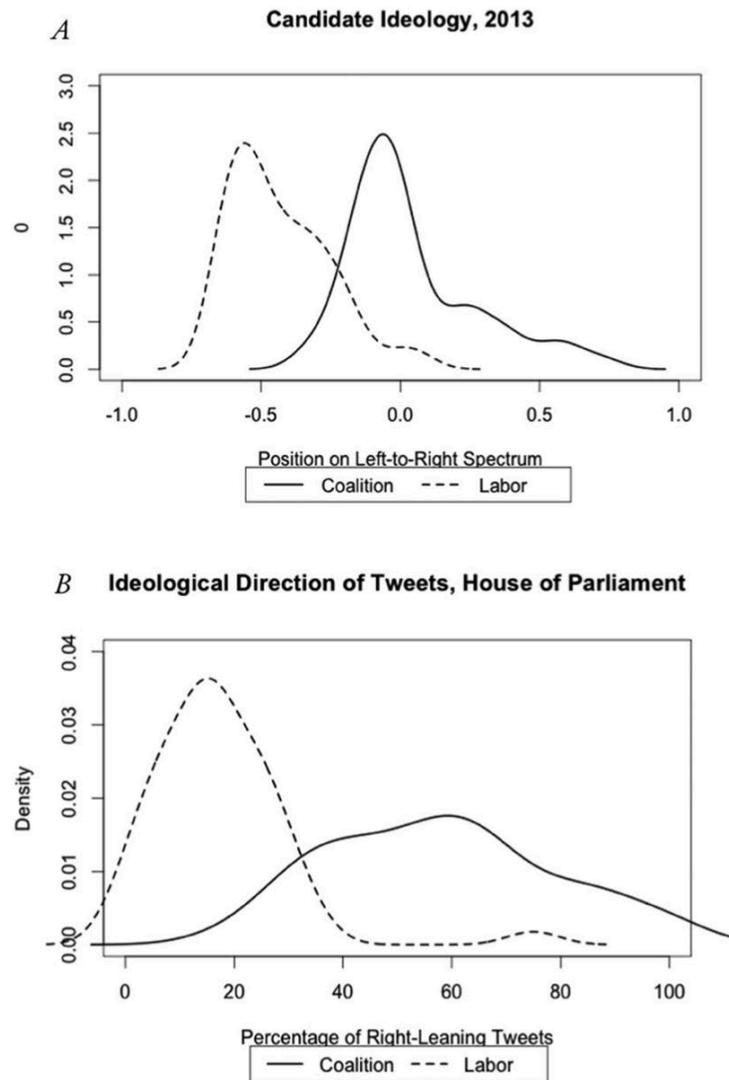


Figure 2. Convergent validity: comparing positions in survey with tweet ideology (A) Scaled ideology from 28 questions in 2013 Australian candidate survey; (B) Ideology from tweets by house members elected in 2013.

Source: Kousser, Thad. 2019. "Tweet Style: Campaigning, Governing, and Social Media in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science*. 54(2):183-201.

Shades within the Left

	Percentage of Right-Leaning Tweets
Greens Party	2%
Adam Bandt	10%
Australian Labor Party	1%
Mark Butler	10%
Tanya Plibersek	12%
Wayne Swan	17%
Andrew Leigh	28%
Richard Marles	32%
Chris Bowen	34%

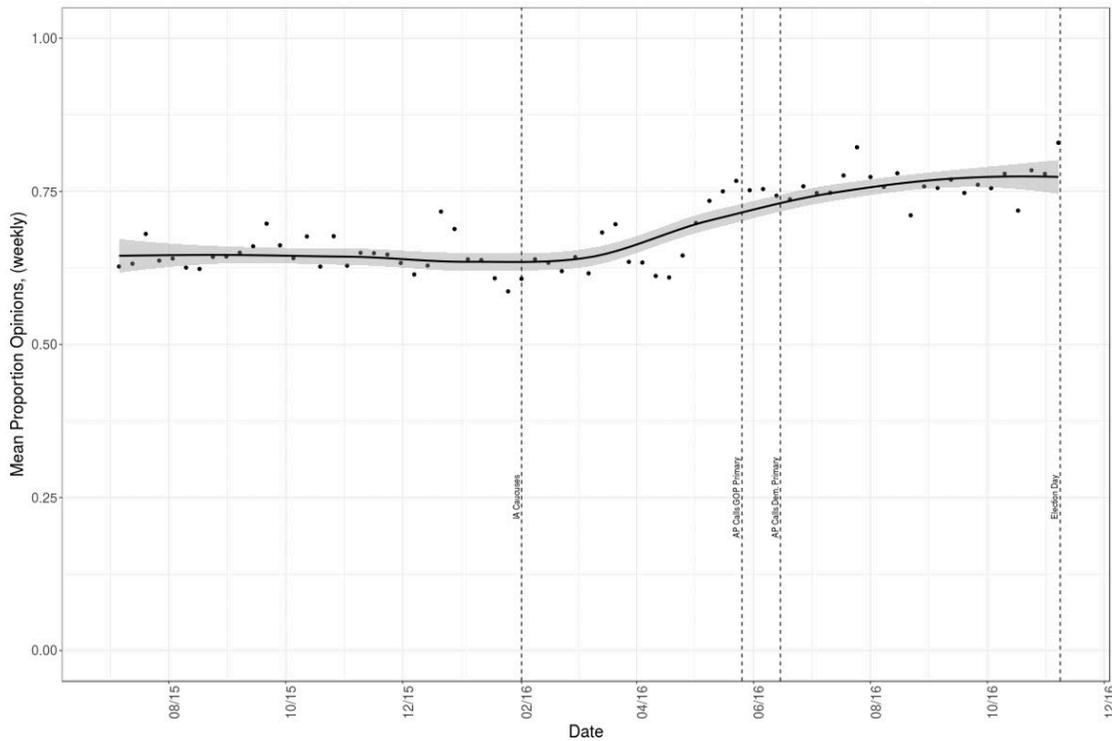
Shades within the Right

	Percentage of Right-Leaning Tweets
Julie Bishop	24%
Andrew Southcott	33%
Kevin Andrews	50%
Malcolm Turnbull	56%
Joe Hockey	57%
Tony Abbott	66%
Warren Truss	79%
Christopher Pyne	90%
Liberal Party	95%

Source: Thad Kousser. 2018. "Polarization vs. Polarisation: Comparing Party Divergence in the US and Australia." Fulbright Flinders University Lecture Series 5.

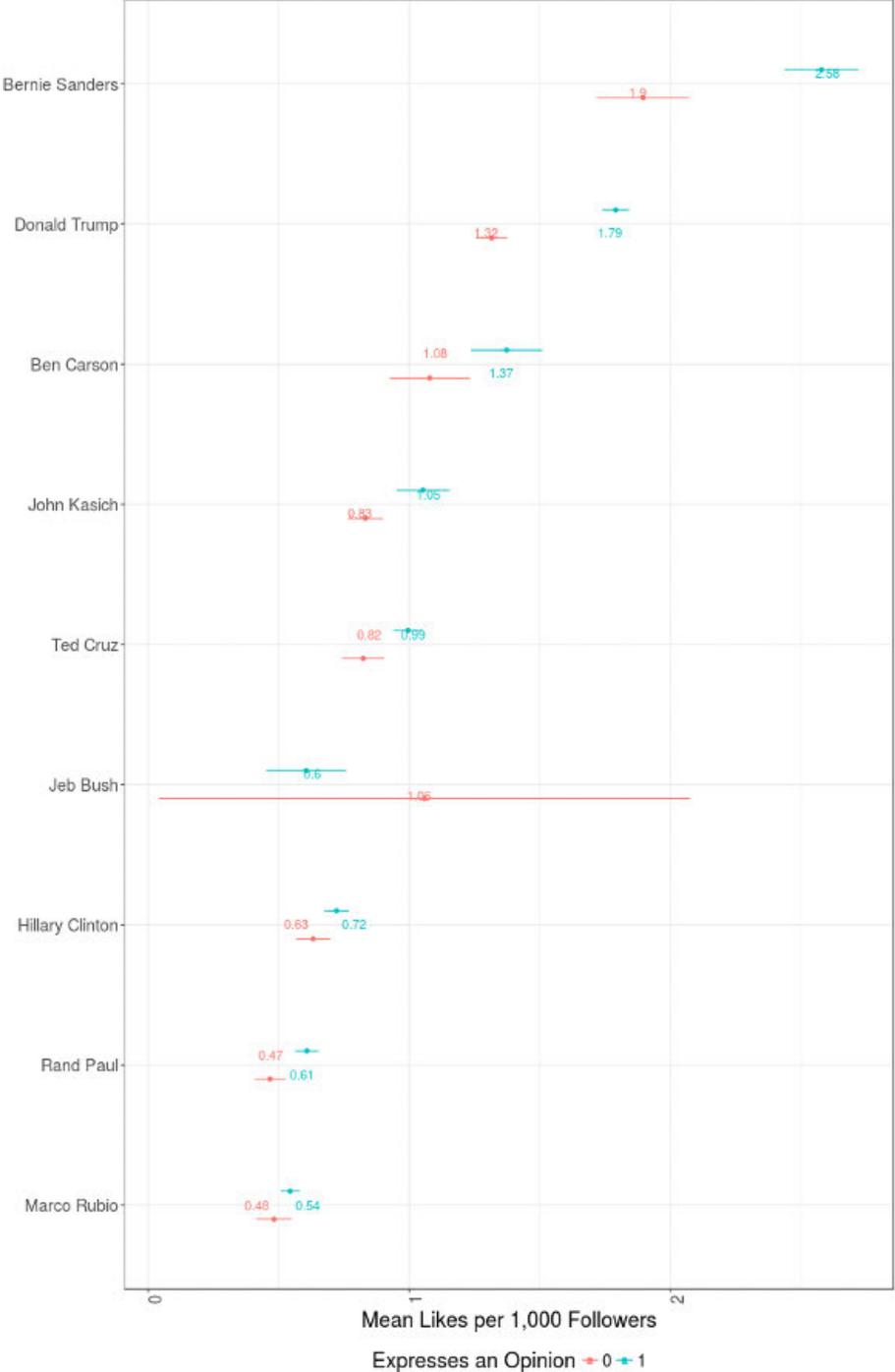
Finally, evidence from my research on tweets in the 2016 presidential campaign shows that Twitter was primarily used by candidates in that context to lay out their opinions, rather than to make factual claims. By using human codings of nearly 8,000 tweets to train algorithms to categorize the full set of all tweets sent by all major party candidates, co-author Stan Oklabidzija and I show that all candidates consistently tended toward using Twitter to broadcast their opinions during that election. The first figure shows the average percentage of tweets in each week that were opinions, rather than factual claims, from all

Figure 1. Opinion vs. Fact over Time in the 2016 Presidential Campaign



candidates combined; the level of opinion started high and rose as the campaign went on. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton tweeted opinions the most, with 77% and 78% of their tweets, respectively, being opinions rather than factual claims. For all candidates, this was a strategy that paid off. The next figure compares the average number of likes per 1,000 followers that each candidate generated for opinion tweets (in blue) versus factual tweets (in red). Clearly, followers on social media engage most strongly with opinion.

Figure 3. Engagement with Fact vs. Opinion Tweets



Source: Thad Kousser and Stan Oklabdzija, “The Supply and Demand of Fact v. Opinion in Presidential Tweets,” paper presented at the 2018 Meetings of the American Political Science Association

2. While the choices of technology and platforms may change, the shift to social media communication is likely here to stay.

Comprehensive reviews of the literature on social media and politics demonstrate the broad reach that an ever-evolving variety of platforms have in this realm. Over one hundred studies show how often politicians use social media and how much the public engages with this discourse. In nations from Australia to the UK to India to the Netherlands, politicians are using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to communicate with voters and others. Newly emerging venues for political advertisements such as the streaming services Hulu and Spotify are gaining an increasing advertising foothold, and in many parts of the world, WhatsApp has become a popular political platform. The choice of platform will evolve, but social media will remain central to modern political discourse.

3. State and local governments in American are enacting legislation to disclose and archive online political ads, and the State of Victoria may wish to learn about successes and failures of these approaches.

An excellent resource to begin to learn about the variety of approaches to digital advertisement regulation can be found at the informational page for the California Fair Political Practices Commission's Digital Transparency Task Force at <http://fppc.ca.gov/about-fppc/hearings-meetings-workshops/digital-transparency-task-force.html>. The professional staff of the FPPC, along with the staff to the State Assembly Committee on Elections (<https://aelc.assembly.ca.gov>) and the Senate Committee on Elections (<https://selc.senate.ca.gov>) can serve as expert resources. California has passed many recent bills in this realm, including:

- Assembly Bill 2188, the Social Media DISCLOSE Act (passed in 2018) which requires that all electronic media advertisements disclose their funding sources prominently.
- Assembly Bill 201, passed in 2019, on Mass Text Message Disclosure, which requires that political text messages sent out broadly also carry these sorts of disclosures.
- Assembly Bill 864, passed in 2019, which exempts from disclosure any electronic communication that the recipients opted into.

In addition, many states are now considering creating archives of digital ads, so that the public has access to them and so that any politician attacked in them can be able to respond to these attacks. A potential obstacle that the internet poses to counter speech like this is that digital ads can be ephemeral, reaching a small targeted audience and then disappearing forever if there is no archive. Creating an archive can let the public learn what is being said in the campaign sphere and who has paid for these messages. There are two different approaches to creating archives – the public can create and maintain a state or local government archive, or governments can mandate that platforms archive political ads. Reaching out to state officials in Washington, Maryland, and New York, as well as to cities such as Los Angeles and New York City, to learn about their different approaches could fruitfully inform Victoria's actions going forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission, and please contact me at [REDACTED] should you need any additional information.

Best regards,



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