Dial 'F' for fraud: Explaining citizens suspicions about elections

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ABSTRACT

Doubts about electoral integrity, whether justified or groundless, can undermine faith in the legitimacy of the democratic process. We investigate the reasons for such doubts in the case of the 2016 Federal elections in Australia. A three-wave panel survey of the electorate established that one third of Australians believed (falsely) that the outcome was fraudulent – a remarkable level of scepticism in an established democracy with a long history of clean and well-run contests. One reason was that many Australians misunderstood their electoral system. Media stories of electoral maladministration also led Australians – especially electoral losers – to be suspicious and to embrace reforms. The results suggest that officials seeking to restore public confidence should strengthen civic education and improve electoral administration, particularly where the rules of the game are complex.

1. Introduction

Public confidence in the integrity of elections is widely regarded as important for beliefs about the legitimacy of the democratic process. Where there is a deep reservoir of trust in the process, then this has been found to strengthen citizen participation through the ballot box (Birch, 2010), as well as improving trust in political institutions and satisfaction with the performance of democracy (Norris, 2004). By contrast, where the public expresses little faith in the electoral process, this has contributed towards peaceful demonstrations and even outbreaks of violent protest (Beaulieu, 2014b; Brancati, 2016).

Malpractices triggering contentious elections are most problematic for conflict and major legitimacy challenges in hybrid regimes (Norris et al., 2015). But serious questions about electoral integrity have arisen even in the United States, Britain and Australia, all of which have seen growing dissatisfaction with the democratic process. Several warning flags can be observed in Australia. Among advanced democracies, until relatively recently, Australia was widely known to have amongst the highest levels of satisfaction with the way democracy works (Norris, 2001). For example, in 2007, following Labor's landslide victory over the incumbent centre-right Liberal government, 86 percent of Australians said they were satisfied with the way democracy works. Since then, however, as Fig. 1 shows, satisfaction has declined with each election, dropping to a low of 60 percent in 2016. This places Australia on the lower end of established democracies, which typically have rates

of satisfaction that exceed two thirds. Moreover in Australia and other Anglo-American democracies, young people typically express weaker democratic values than older citizens (Norris, 2017a,b). Finally, as another cause for concern, although electoral fraud is not a common occurrence in Australia, in our survey of voters in the 2016 federal election we find that as many as a third of our respondents believe that fraud affects electoral outcomes.

In the light of this scepticism, it is important to understand what contributes towards trust and confidence in electoral integrity and what steps could be taken to strengthen public confidence. To explore these issues, we summarise what is known about perceptions of fraud from the previous literature and set out a theoretical framework emphasizing the importance of electoral rules and political sophistication. We then discuss the data and evidence that we use to test the theory. In the final section, we discuss our key findings and consider their theoretical and policy implications.

2. Theoretical framework

What contributes towards trust and confidence in electoral integrity? Comparative research suggests that many macro factors are important in explaining cross-national levels of public trust and confidence in elections, such as the institutional design and independence of Electoral Management Bodies and the public funding of parties, as well as contextual factors in any state, such as levels of democracy and
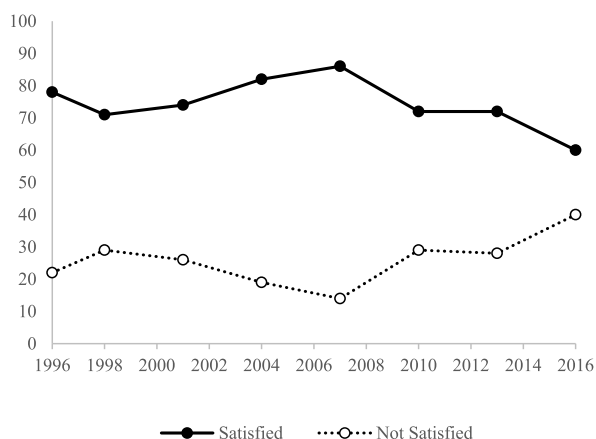

Fig. 1. Satisfaction with democracy in Australia (1996–2016).
Source: Australian Election Study.

corruption (Birch, 2010). At the individual-level, factors include the direct experience of citizens with the voting process (Atkeson and Saunders, 2007), their interaction with poll workers (Hall et al., 2009), whether voters support political parties on the winning or losing side (Anderson et al., 2005; Birch, 2010; Cantu and Garcia-Ponce, 2015), the information about malpractice derived from partisan and media sources of information (Fogarty et al., 2015; Beaulieu, 2014a), as well as the standard sociodemographic and attitudinal variables of age, sex, income, political interest, and left-right self-placement (Birch, 2010; Norris, 1999). In addition to these explanations, we posit that political sophistication is also likely to play a major role in strengthening confidence in elections.

Drawing upon theories of trust developed by Russell Hardin (2002, 2006), we suggest that trust in electoral institutions is, at least in part, a rational response to knowledge, awareness and experience about how elections work. We argue that, citizens are more likely to have confidence in contests where they are familiar with electoral processes, procedures, and rules, such as how votes are translated into seats, how candidates get on the ballot, and how ballots are tabulated. By contrast, lack of knowledge about these types of matters is more likely to breed suspicion. According to Hardin, in the absence of information, the rational response in a threatening world is one of mistrust. We place our trust in persons whom we believe will act in our best interest. In informal communities, we are therefore more likely to trust those around us whom we think share common norms and values. Friends, family, neighbors and colleagues have an incentive to act in a trustworthy manner, so that they act to protect our best interests, to preserve relationships. When it comes to a broader array of social relationships, and government institutions, however, it can no longer be assumed that there are shared norms and bonds of social relationships to promote trustworthiness. In this context, Hardin theorizes that we have to rely more heavily upon formal procedural rules and laws to protect our interests. Understanding how institutions work and what procedures are in place to protect our interests makes greater demand for information and therefore the cognitive skills which come from formal education and prior experience. The more transparent the safeguards and regulations, the easier it is to understand – and therefore trust-the workings of political institutions. The more complex the procedures and rules, the more difficult it is to make sure that our interests are served.

2.1. The complexity of electoral systems

In general, the complexity of the choices facing voters and the way that electoral systems work to translate votes into seats can also be expected to prove important for trust. In this paper, we examine whether the public's understanding of electoral processes and voting rules affects confidence in electoral integrity in the case of Australia because

it provides a unique opportunity to examine what citizens think of a preferential electoral system. In addition, voting in Australia is compulsory and nearly everyone votes. This means of course that people who may be disinterested in politics and low-information citizens who lack an understanding of the system nonetheless have to navigate their way through it, which may have greater implications for democratic legitimacy.

Australia uses a preferential voting system which provides voters with more opportunities and challenges in exercising their vote choice (Bowler and Grofman, 2000). Farrell and McAllister (2006) find that preferential systems promote a greater sense of fairness about election outcomes among citizens, which in turn is a major component of the public's satisfaction with the democratic system. Rather than selecting a single candidate or party, voters in Australia rank-order their preferences on the ballot paper writing the number of their choice in each box beside a candidate or party's name. This system is used for both the lower House and the Senate.

The Alternative Vote (AV) used to elect members of the House of Representatives is a majoritarian system that requires a candidate to receive at least 50 percent of the vote. If, on the basis of first preferences, no candidate received a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the second preferences are transferred to the remaining candidates until a majority is reached. Voters are required to rank order every House candidate on the ballot.

The process is similar in the Senate, with one crucial difference. Australia uses the Single Transferable Vote (STV), which consists of multi-member districts rather than a single member district as used in the House. This means that the quota is smaller, which is determined by the number of candidates elected within a state (usually six) and the outcomes are more proportional depending on the district magnitude (see Farrell, 1996; Norris, 2004). If a candidate receives more votes than the quota the surplus votes of a voter's second preferences are transferred to the remaining candidates. As with AV, a candidate who fails to reach a quota is eliminated and the second preferences are transferred to the remaining candidates. The process continues until all seats are filled.

Recent reforms for Senate voting may have led to further confusion. Previously, citizens had the option of either ranking all of the individual Senate candidates in order of their preference or voting for a single party.[1] The vast majority of voters choose the easier option. This had the unintended consequence of electing candidates or parties that had little actual public support because of pre-election trading among parties on how each party would allocate their preferences. To address this problem, the system was changed in 2016 requiring voters to rank their preferences for at least six parties or groups *or* for at least 12 candidates.

The 2016 Federal election was also a double dissolution election, the first since 1987, which meant that the entire Senate was dissolved simultaneously.[2] All 76 Senators were up for reelection, 12 from each of the six states and 2 from each of the two Territories (The Australian Capital Territory, ACT, and the Northern Territory, NT). One consequence is that because of the increase in district magnitude, the quota was lowered by half making it easier for independents and candidates from smaller parties to get elected. This may have also led to an increase in the number of candidates appearing on the ballot paper

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[1] Ballot papers for the Senate are divided horizontally by a black line; above the line are listed the main competing parties (or groups), and below the line the individual candidates. Few voters choose to vote "below the line", a far more demanding task. Thus, citizens are said to be "voting above the line" when they cast a preference for political parties exclusively; conversely, a vote "below the line" reflects a choice for specific candidates. For more details on the Australian voting procedures see: http://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/How_to_Vote/Voting_Senate.htm.

[2] Australian Senators normally serve for a fixed term of six years; during "normal" federal elections, only half of the Senate is contested (40 seats out of 76, which represents 6 seats per each State plus the 4 seats for the Northern Territories and the Australian Capital Territory); the seats contested in any given election are not contested in the following one.

Table 1
Number of candidates on the ballot in the 2016 Australian federal election.
Source: Australian Electoral Commission

State/territory	House		Senate	
	Candidates	Candidates per seat	Candidates	Candidates per seat
New South Wales	314	6.68	151	12.58
Victoria	259	7.00	116	9.67
Queensland	204	6.80	122	10.17
Western Australia	86	5.38	79	6.58
South Australia	72	6.55	64	5.33
Tasmania	30	6.00	58	4.83
Australian Capital Territory	9	4.50	22	11.00
Northern Territory	20	10.00	19	9.50
Total	994	6.63	631	8.30

making the choice for voters potentially even more complex. As shown in Table 1 there were a total of 631 candidates for the Senate, a record number up from 529 in 2013. In 1987, the last Senate election following a double dissolution, 255 candidates contested. In New South Wales, a total of 151 candidates appeared on the ballot and in Queensland the ballot paper featured a record 122 names, 103 of whom would appear in grouped columns for above the line voting.[3] The 994 House candidates is larger than the 849 candidates in 2010 but not as large as the record of 1188 in 2013.[4] As can be seen from Table 1, the average number of candidates for House seats ranges from 4.5 in the Australian Capital Territory to 10 in the Northern Territory and in these contests, as mentioned above, voters must rank order all of the candidates appearing on the ballot.

Compared with simple plurality (casting a ballot for one candidate in a single member constituency) and proportional representation systems (voting for a single party in a multimember district) the preferential electoral system used in Australia therefore demands that citizens make fairly complex ranked choices requiring familiarity with many candidates and parties. Indeed the complexity of preferential voting, and the concern about potential voter confusion, were some of the principal reasons given by the Jenkins report to reject the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in the 1990s when Britain considered electoral reform (Oonagh, 1998). In 2011, a referendum was held in the United Kingdom on whether to replace the first past the post system with the alternative vote. There is evidence that misinformation about the system influenced the decision over whether to adopt it (Vowles, 2013). The system was widely criticized for being too complex. Leaflets designed by the Electoral Commission, which aimed to be neutral, ended up making the system look too complex with first past the post explained in just three sentences and AV explained over four pages and three diagrams.[5] The UK referendum was eventually defeated by a vote of 68 percent against adoption.

2.2. The role of political sophistication

Given the complexity of the system, we expect that greater knowledge and formal education will generally serve to strengthen awareness of how elections work and this will, in turn, generate more trust in elections and, by contrast, less concern about electoral fraud and malpractices. Several competing and partial overlapping definitions exist in

the literature when it comes to citizens' cognitive abilities, such as, e.g. political awareness (Zaller, 1992), expertise (Sniderman et al., 1991), sophistication (Luskin, 1990), political motivation (Kuklinski et al., 2001) or, more simply, knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002). It is not our goal to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of those similar concepts; rather, we opt here for an inclusive approach that covers three distinct dimensions: factual knowledge, education, and cognitive skills – in this sense, our definition and measures echo Bob Luskin's multidimensional concept of political "sophistication" (Luskin, 1990).

Although the electoral system in Australia poses considerable hurdles to understand the choices on the ballot, and indeed how votes are translated into seats, more sophisticated citizens who pay close attention to politics are likely to be relatively well-informed.[6] On the other hand, news coverage that focuses on potential problems associated with the administration of elections may lead people to believe that electoral fraud is more prevalent than it is. Fogarty et al. (2015) note that a substantial segment of the public in the United States believe that fraud is widespread when there is no actual evidence that this is the case. They suggest that political campaigns may contribute to these fears by focusing news attention on voter fraud to mobilise their base, particularly when elections are hotly contested. Instead of educating citizens about the virtues of political participation, negative news coverage stirs fears of maladministration, fraud and bad governance. Negative news about electoral processes may further undermine public confidence for those on the losing side who feel more vulnerable and more responsive to fears of fraud and deceit. Doubts about the integrity of elections may also arise because people are prone to believe in conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). Talk of conspiracy and rigged elections may resonate with groups who are suffering loss or are shut out of the process altogether. In this sense, media exposure does not directly increase or decrease of political trust – rather, it may reinforce the effect of news coverage: trust in the electoral system is promoted by strong exposition to positive news, whereas weak exposition to those same news or strong exposition to negative news should result in more pessimistic opinions.

Media exposure, and the reception and treatment of media content are, however, a function of sophistication. Knowledgeable individuals are more likely to be exposed to information and, simultaneously, more likely to treat and assimilate its content (McGraw et al., 1990; Sniderman et al., 1991; Zaller, 1992; Kuklinski et al., 2001; Nai, 2014). Knowledgeable citizens are, furthermore, more likely to reject information which is inconsistent with their previously held beliefs (Zaller, 1992; Lodge and Taber, 2000; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Nai et al., 2017). According to Zaller's 'resistance axiom', "people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions. [… Thus,] the likelihood of resisting persuasive communications that are inconsistent with one's political predispositions rises with a person's level of political attentiveness" (Zaller, 1992: 44). Sophistication, thus, acts as a cognitive switch allowing individuals to filter out information that is considered not relevant for their judgmental task – in which case such information would not affect their attitudes and opinions. If we start from the assumption, as described above, that citizens with high knowledge should be more trustworthy towards the electoral system, then news coverage framed in a negative way is likely at odds with their beliefs and thus acts as counter attitudinal information. On the other hand, a high exposure to negative news leads to a more pessimistic view, especially for those respondents with low knowledge about the issues at stake.

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[3] http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2016/federal-election-2016-record-field-for-queensland-senate-ballot-paper-20160610-gpgfgf.html.

[4] http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/2016/06/close-of-nominations-2016-federal-election.html.

[5] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/06/reasons-av-referendum-lost.

[6] For a discussion of political knowledge about electoral rules see Karp (2006).

2.3. Direct experience of elections

Whether citizens experience the voting process and elections positively or negatively will have a direct impact upon their trust and confidence in the performance of electoral officials, the institutional rules, and the overall integrity of elections. One of the most memorable examples in how contests can quickly become controversial and generate mistrust even in established democracies is the 2000 U.S. Presidential election when George W. Bush's narrow plurality in Florida triggered an automatic recount which set off a legal battle taking place over the course of more than a month that ultimately culminated in the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore*.

During the recount, a number of voting irregularities were discovered involving the use of punch-card ballots, and the now infamous use of the butterfly ballot in heavily Democratic Palm Beach County which apparently confused enough voters to have changed the outcome of the election (Wand et al., 2001). The problems exposed during the 2000 Presidential election led to the passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 which provided federal funds for states to acquire electronic voting machines or optically scanned paper ballots (Alvarez and Hall, 2008). The problems of excessive party polarization over basic issues of electoral registration and balloting, which started with Florida, continued and even deepened in subsequent contests (Norris, 2017a,b). Recent research suggests that there is a link between how well elections are conducted and the perceptions of the fairness of electoral outcomes (Bowler et al., 2015).

The problems in electoral administration exposed by close elections are not unique to the United States. In the 2013 Australian federal election, a recount in a Senate election in Western Australia was called where at one point in the process just 14 votes separated two minor parties. During the recount it was discovered that 1375 votes went missing.[7] The High Court of Australia declared the election void and ordered a special by-election and the Electoral Commissioner resigned as a result of the debacle. [8] There were also recounts in other constituencies. In Queensland, a seat won by Clive Palmer with just 53 votes following a controversial recount.[9] Palmer had repeatedly accused the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) of trying to manipulate the outcome.[10]

In the following Australian federal election in 2016, the AEC held a recount in a House district of Herbert (Queensland), following an outcome with a margin of eight votes. The final count had Labor winning the seat by 37 votes. The number of contested seats were enough to create uncertainty about who would form the government. After a week of counting many close seats remained in doubt and neither party held enough seats to form a majority.[11] The changes in the Senate rules and changes in procedures for counting ballots delayed the vote count.[12] The final outcome of the 2016 election was not announced until four weeks after the election. The experience of having to wait to learn the outcome for so many weeks may have undermined confidence in the performance of the electoral officials managing the count and increased doubts about the electoral process.

3. Data and evidence

To examine these questions we designed a three-wave panel survey that was administered online before and after the 2016 Australian Federal Election. Respondents were drawn from a large panel of representative voters recruited by Survey Sampling International (SSI), an international market research firm with offices in 21 countries. There is a growing consensus in both academia and in the private sector that data obtained from online panels are increasingly comparable to those collected via traditional probability based methodologies, especially for population-based experiments (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2014; Stephenson and Crete, 2010).

The federal election was held on Saturday, July 2. Prior to the 2016 election, polls predicted a narrow win for the Coalition government (composed of members of both the Liberal Party, led by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, and the National Party), placing the Coalition at 50–51 percent compared to 49–50 percent for the opposition (Australian Labor Party), well within sampling error.[13]

Respondents were initially contacted in the week before the election between 28 June and 1 July and completed an online questionnaire lasting approximately 15 min. This forms the pre-election base line survey (wave 1). The same individuals were contacted again after the election to complete a longer survey, an average of 25 min in length. Respondents in wave 2 were contacted between 4 July and 19 July, with two thirds completing the survey after the first week. By the end of the first week there were enough seats in doubt that it was not clear which party would be in a position to govern. At the time, there were also reports of problems with the distribution of ballots in four states.[14] On 10 July, eight days after the election, the leader of the Labor Party, Bill Shorten, conceded defeat.[15] It was still unclear, however, if the Liberal-National Coalition would have enough seats to form a majority in the House of Representatives. The Senate also remained in doubt. The final outcome in the Senate was not announced until August, more than four weeks after the election. The same respondents were interviewed again (wave 3) beginning on 23 August and ending on 13 September.

The initial sample contains 2139 valid responses for the first wave of questionnaires, 1838 for the second wave (an 86 percent retention rate), and 1543 for the third wave (84 percent retention rate). Overall, 72 percent of the respondents were carried over from the pre-election wave to the final wave. Unless otherwise mentioned, the analysis that follows relies on data collected from Wave 2.

We asked several questions to assess views of the preferential system and confidence in the results. We asked voters what they thought of the change in the rules for voting in Senate elections that gave them more control over their preferences. *"Previously, voters could only number a single party box "above the line" or complete all the boxes "below the line". Now voters can rank their preferences. What do you think of this change?"*[16] The results, which are summarised in Table 2, indicate that over two thirds of voters feel they should have more control over their preferences even if it makes the choice more complex. Nevertheless, when asked to assess the voting system, 58 percent said it was too complicated and should be simplified. Furthermore, about a quarter of the respondents expressed doubts about whether their votes were counted accurately. To examine confidence in the integrity of elections we asked, *"How likely do you think fraud affects electoral outcomes in Australia?"* This concept is treated as antithetical to the notion of electoral integrity, which is defined and

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[7] http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/wa-senate-recount-in-turmoil-as-1375-votes-go-missing-20131031-2wjub.html.

[8] http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/electoral-commissioner-ed-killesteyn-resigns-after-bungled-wa-senate-vote-20140221–336vx.html.

[9] http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/clive-palmer-wins-fairfax-after-marathon-recount-20131031-2wjl6.

[10] http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-31/clive-palmer-wins-fairfax/5061740.

[11] http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-03/election-result-what-happens-now/7564250.

[12] In 2016 the Electoral Commission changed its process for transporting ballot papers across electorates which meant that it took two days after the election to bring early and absent votes to the right place before counting could begin.

[13] http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-23/are-australian-polls-really-that-bad/8046934.

[14] http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-07/election-2016-widespread-ballot-issues-around-australia/7577548.

[15] https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2016/jul/10/australian-election-2016-bill-shorten-defeat-turnbull-victory.

[16] Response categories included the following: Voters should have control over their preferences even if it means it may be a bit more complicated and takes longer to vote? Or parties should have control over the distribution of other preferences (i.e., 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc.) which makes it easier for voters?.

Table 2
Understanding of the system and concerns about Accuracy.
Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016)

	%	n
Voters should have control over their preferences (support change)	69	2575
Voting system is too complicated and should be simplified	58	1799
Lack of confidence in accuracy of the vote count	26	1797
Electoral fraud affects outcomes	34	1803

discussed elsewhere (Norris, 2014). Although fraud is only one type of malpractice, it is perhaps the most commonly used concept and thus a suitable indicator for a perceived lack of integrity. About a third believe that electoral fraud is either somewhat or extremely likely to affect electoral outcomes. This is a cause for concern. Doubts about the integrity of elections, whether these perceptions are true or false, can undermine public faith in the legitimacy of the democratic process. Below we examine whether concerns about the complexity of the system undermines confidence in the system.

We designed an experiment in Wave 2 to measure how accepting voters are of the time it takes to count ballots. In one version of the questionnaire, a third of the respondents were asked whether they view it is acceptable if the results would not be known for weeks. As Table 3 shows, when there are no reasons provided, 71 percent felt that a delay was unacceptable. Another third of respondents were told that it takes time to count the ballots. In this case, voters were more understanding of the time it takes to count ballots but 62 percent still found it unacceptable. The remaining third were told that it takes more time because many people voted by post and the postal ballots still had to be returned. In this case, the proportion who find it unacceptable drops to 56 percent indicating that fewer people express a concern about delays when the reason is framed in terms of providing a convenience. Nevertheless, a majority continue to express concern with the time it takes to count ballots.

As the experiment above suggests, citizens are willing to be more patient when they are given information with an explanation for the delay. Nevertheless, the more time it takes to count the results, the more doubts that may emerge over the interim. Apart from impatience and a lack of understanding of the system, concerns about electoral fraud and the integrity of elections can arise for a number of other reasons. Often it is those on the losing side of an election who may express doubts or openly question electoral processes particularly when elections are close. As discussed above, losers may be particularly sensitive to conspiracy theories and any reports of malpractice or fraud.

4. Analyses

4.1. Lack of confidence in outcomes

Our theory suggests that experience with delays in the length of time it takes to count ballots are likely to raise doubts about the

Table 3
Opinions about delays in vote count (experiment).
Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016)

	Control Group	It takes time to count ballots	Many people voted by post
Completely unacceptable	40	29	24
Somewhat unacceptable	31	33	32
Neither unacceptable nor acceptable	14	12	11
Somewhat acceptable	11	16	20
Completely acceptable	5	11	14
N	499	477	515

Note: Data from wave 2, respondents assigned randomly to one of the three conditions.

integrity of the system. We also expect that complexity and a lack of understanding of the electoral system and procedures will also undermine confidence. To assess these factors, we rely on several measures. Two questions measure subjective political knowledge. The first item, as described in Table 2, asks respondents whether they believe the voting system is too complex and should be simplified. The second item is a more general question about whether respondents believe politics is too complicated. Apart from a lack of internal political efficacy, we anticipate that those with low levels of factual political knowledge will also be more likely to express doubts about the integrity of the system. To measure factual knowledge we asked respondents whether they could recall the colour of the House and Senate ballots (green and white respectively). A simple dummy variable is used to identify those respondents who correctly identified the ballot colours. We also use formal education as an additional indicator based on the assumption that those who have more education are more knowledgeable about politics. For simplicity, a simple dummy variable is used to identify those who have a University degree.

To examine the winners-losers thesis, we rely on reported vote for the House of Representatives, coding as 'losers' all those who voted for parties other than Liberal or National. Media exposure is measured by the following item, "On an average week, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs?" Political cynicism is measured by three items that were developed for the American National Election Study, asking respondents whether they agree that politicians and public servants care a lot about what citizens think, that government is largely run by a few big interests, and that most members of the parliament are out of touch with the rest of the country. Between two thirds and three quarters of the respondents agreed with each of the statements, reflecting a rather high level of discontent. A single index was created that summarises responses to all three items, ranging from 0 to 12.

For additional controls, we also include dummy variables representing those who place themselves on the right and left side of the ideological spectrum, based on the assumption that ideological extremists may be more likely to question the integrity of system than political moderates. Age and sex are also included in the model as controls.

The dependent variable is based on responses to the question about the likelihood of fraud affecting electoral outcomes. Responses range on a five point scale from extremely likely to extremely unlikely with those who respond neither likely nor unlikely and don't know placed in the middle. Because this measure is ordinal, we use ordered logit to estimate the model.

The results are shown in Table 4. Most importantly, as the cognitive theory suggests, we find that *those with greater political knowledge and the more educated are less likely to believe that fraud is a problem*. We also find clear and convincing evidence that *concern about the complexity of the preferential system undermines confidence in electoral outcomes*. Those who find the rules too complex, or who find politics complicated, are more likely to believe that fraud is likely to affect electoral outcomes. Aside from complexity, there is also evidence that experience plays a role, in particular *those who express a concern over the length of time it takes to count ballots are also more likely to question the results*.

Those voting for losing parties are also more likely to believe that fraud is a problem, as others have found (Anderson et al., 2005), but the differences do not match the magnitude of the effects for sophistication and knowledge. There is also evidence that those on the right side of the ideological spectrum are more likely than moderates to be concerned about fraud, while there is no evidence that those on the left are significantly different from moderates. We found no evidence, however, that media exposure has any direct impact on perceptions of fraud.

To examine this question further, we gathered data on the tone of Australian press coverage in the month before and after the election. The most important newspaper in circulation in each state was selected

Table 4
Fraud affects electoral outcomes (ordered logit model).
Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016)

	Coef.		Std. Error	Min	Max
Rules too complex	0.21	**	(0.04)	0.19	0.32
Politics is complicated	0.12	**	(0.04)	0.23	0.31
Political knowledge	−0.49	**	(0.10)	0.32	0.24
University degree	−0.41	**	(0.10)	0.3	0.23
Media exposure	0.03		(0.03)	0.26	0.28
Impatience	0.09	**	(0.04)	0.23	0.29
Loser	0.30	**	(0.11)	0.24	0.29
Cynicism	0.15	**	(0.02)	0.1	0.35
Age	−0.01	**	(0.00)	0.31	0.23
Female	0.36	**	(0.10)	0.24	0.3
Left	−0.18		(0.13)	0.27	0.24
Right	0.45	**	(0.12)	0.25	0.33
cut1	0.01		(0.31)		
cut2	1.49		(0.31)		
cut3	2.97		(0.32)		
cut4	5.06		(0.33)		
N	1552				
Log likelihood	−2187.2				

**p < .01; *p < .05.

Table 5
Fraud Affects Electoral Outcomes, by news coverage (Multilevel Random Effects Logit Model).
Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016)

	Coef.		Std. Error
Rules too complex	0.23	**	(0.05)
Politics is complicated	0.09		(0.05)
Political knowledge	−0.70		(0.46)
University degree	−0.23		(0.12)
Media exposure	0.08	*	(0.04)
Impatience	0.09	*	(0.04)
Loser	0.11		(0.43)
Cynicism	0.20	**	(0.03)
Age	−0.01	*	(0.00)
Female	0.05		(0.12)
Left	0.03		(0.16)
Right	0.54	**	(0.15)
Negative news coverage	0.00		(0.05)
Negative news x loser x knowledge	−0.16	*	(0.08)
Negative news x loser	0.07		(0.06)
Negative news x knowledge	0.07		(0.07)
Loser x knowledge	0.67		(0.55)
cut1	−3.69	**	(0.53)
N (respondents)	1549		
N (states)	7		
Log likelihood	−903.36		

**p < .01; *p < .05.

for analysis to vary news exposure.[17] For each newspaper, we identified all articles mentioning the election and then identified whether there was any mention of one or more of the following electoral malpractices: fraud, corruption, scandal, and/or bribery. A simple ratio of the amount of negative news coverage was estimated which varies between 3.5% (Western Australia) and 10.7% (New South Wales). To examine whether losers are more sensitive to negative news coverage, we include a three-way interaction term between negative news coverage, loser status, and political knowledge.[18]

Table 5 presents the results of a multilevel random effects model where observations are nested at the state level.[19] The results show that the effects of the tone of news coverage (that is, how "negatively" news media cover the election) on opinions about fraud are conditional on both vote choice and political knowledge. When there is more negative news coverage, losers who have low political knowledge are more likely to believe that fraud affects electoral outcomes. Fig. 2 illustrates these effects. The upper panel in Fig. 2 shows the marginal effects of negative news coverage for winners with both low and high political knowledge whereas the lower panel replicates the same interaction for respondents for losers. In both panels, the y-axis represents the probability of believing that fraud affects electoral outcomes. As Fig. 2 reveals, the effects of negative news coverage are only apparent for losers with low political knowledge. As the news becomes more critical and includes more mentions of malpractice and fraud, those with low political knowledge have a higher probability of believing that fraud affects outcomes. In comparison, the probability for losers with high political knowledge appears to be relatively unchanged. Similarly, there is no apparent change for winners.

4.2. Support for reform

While a lack of understanding of the system can undermine public faith in the legitimacy of the democratic process, it is not clear what

impact this may have in an established democracy. We suggest that citizens may be more likely to support proposals to change existing rules when they lose faith and confidence in the system. To address this question, we examine how attitudes about the integrity of elections affect support for a range of reform proposals.

We asked respondents whether they would support a range of hypothetical reforms that are not currently on the political agenda. These are summarised in Table 6. Some of these reforms attract a great deal of support, as in the case of the direct election of the Prime Minister and voter identification laws. Just a third support the abolition of compulsory voting and fewer would support the adoption of early voting in place of polling place elections.

We deliberately selected different types of reforms that would not necessarily be endorsed by the same political parties. For example, both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition support compulsory voting although there is some evidence to suggest that if voluntary voting were adopted it would hurt Labor. Similarly, voter identification laws may also adversely affect Labor voters. It is unclear whether either party would benefit from the direct election of the Prime Minister. To control for any partisan effects we include a dummy variable representing whether respondents reported giving their first preference for Labor or the Coalition in the election for House of Representatives. We also include dummy variables for those at both ends of the ideological spectrum following the assumption that they would be more likely to support reform than political moderates. Each of the dependent variables are dichotomous so a logit transformation is used to estimate the model. The results are displayed in Table 7.

The results show that concerns about fraud have a positive impact on all four of the reforms. Indeed, fraud is the only variable that is a consistent predictor across all four of the models. In contrast, political cynicism appears to have a weak and inconsistent effect and is only significant in two of the four models. Both Coalition and Labor voters are more likely than those supporting smaller parties to support voter identification laws and oppose voluntary voting but there are no significant differences on early voting. Those on the right are more supportive of voter identification laws while those on the left are more likely to oppose them. While sociodemographic factors are significant, the effects are not consistent across the four models.
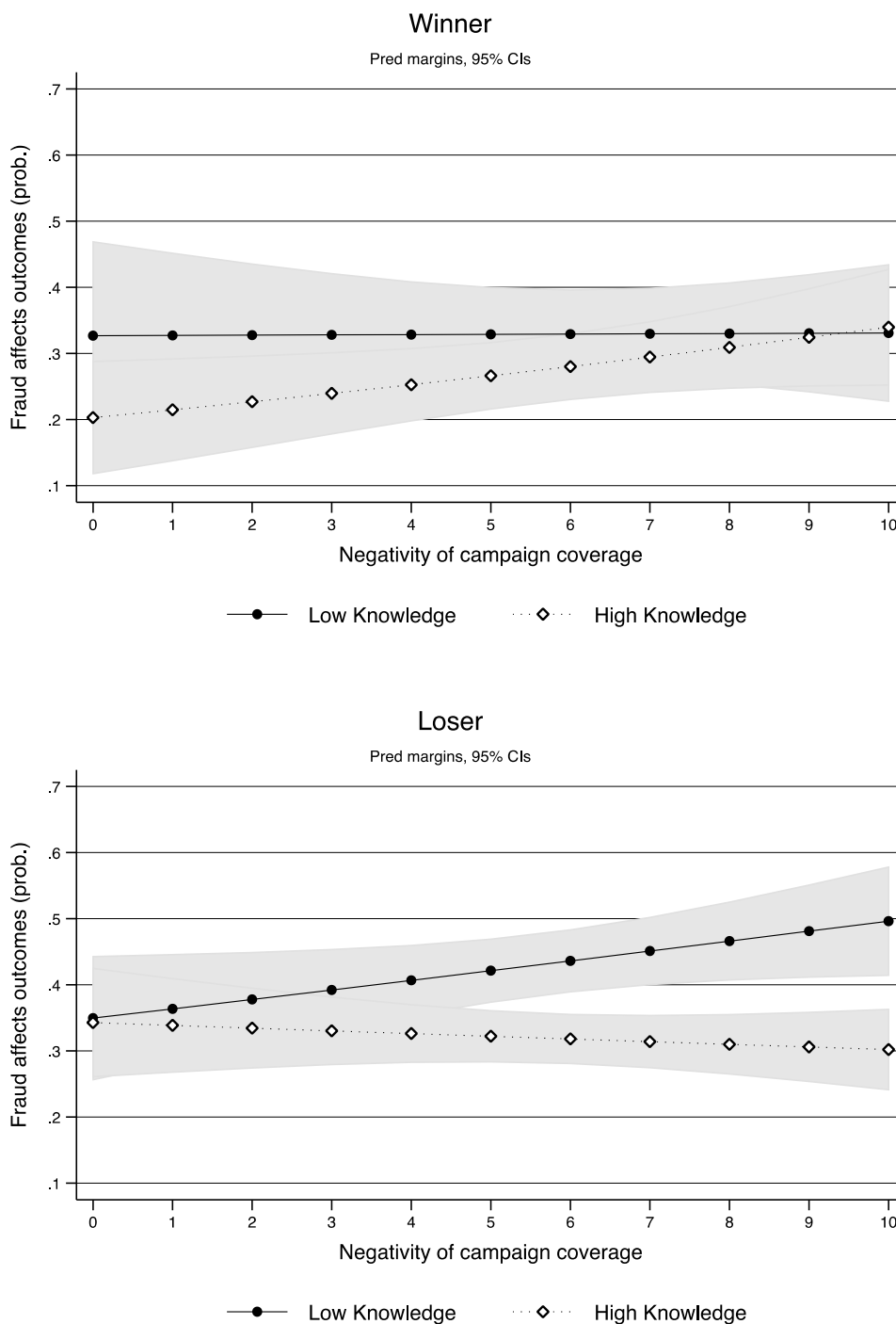
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[17] The papers are *The Canberra Times* (Australian Capital Territory), *The Sydney Morning Herald* (New South Wales), *The Courier-Mail* (Queensland), *The Advertiser* (South Australia), *Hobart Mercury* (Tasmania), *Herald Sun* (Victoria), and *The West Australian* (Western Australia).
[18] Along with the three-way interaction term we include all three pairs of the two-way interaction terms.
[19] To simplify the results, a logit model is estimated where somewhat and extremely likely are coded as "1" and the remaining categories are coded as "0".

Fig. 2. Tone of News Coverage and Perceptions of Fraud. Marginal effects.
Note: Marginal effects (95% confidence intervals), based on coefficients in Table 5. In both panels the y-axis represents the predicted marginal probability of believing that fraud is likely to affect electoral outcome. Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016).

5. Discussion

Perceptions of electoral fraud, and a lack of confidence in the integrity of elections, is widely acknowledged to be a serious problem. If faith is undermined in elections, then this bodes poorly for the health of liberal democracy. Any doubts about the integrity and security of the registration and balloting process, as well as public dissatisfaction with the efficiency, fairness, and transparency of how elections are managed, have the capacity to erode citizen's trust in political parties and parliament, to fuel public disaffection with government, reinforce cynical views about politics and to even undermine faith in democracy (Norris, 2014).

Many factors shape citizen's perceptions of the trustworthiness of the electoral process and the results in this study suggest that political sophistication and information play an important role. The more educated, aware and efficacious the citizens, the more likely they are to trust electoral outcomes to be free of fraud and malpractices. The findings also suggest that these perceptions do matter. Citizens who lack confidence or question the legitimacy of elections are more likely to reject the status quo and support a range of reforms, whatever they might be. While supporting changes to the system do not represent a threat to democracy, the apparent link between misperceptions and a lack of confidence and a willingness to support calls for change is a cause for concern.

Table 6
Support for reforms.
Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016)

	Percent	n
Should the Prime Minister be directly elected by the country as a whole?	67	1805
Some people think voting should be voluntary while others think voting should be compulsory. What do you think?	32	1824
Voter identification laws are necessary to prevent electoral fraud, even if means that some eligible voters will be unable to vote.	66	1801
Polling places on election day should be abolished and everyone should vote early, either by post or at an early polling centre. Do you agree or disagree?	28	1795

If this thesis is true more broadly, this carries certain important policy implications for the process of building electoral trust. Firstly, as Milner (2002) emphasizes, it follows that civic education will be important for increasing confidence, such as civic programs in schools and broader public information campaigns among the general electorate. Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) commonly conduct campaigns informing citizens about how the electoral process works in general, as well as how and where to register to vote, and this process is likely to build public confidence.

In addition, the degree of transparency and complexity in the design of the electoral rules is likely to be important for whether the public understands the electoral process, institutions and outcomes, and thus whether citizens trust elections, especially low-information voters. In general, more complex rules and processes are expected to undermine confidence in electoral integrity. In addition, repeated positive experiences of election procedures and outcomes, such as voting over successive contests, are likely to build a reservoir of trust in the process. By contrast, negative experiences of malpractices, such as incomplete and inaccurate registers, acts of intimidation, bribery and vote-rigging, or excessive delays in the count and announcement of the results, can be expected to sow mistrust of the process.

Therefore, one factor which increases the information hurdles required of Australian voters is the electoral system. Preferential voting systems have several advantages that make them appealing to election reformers. In the case of the Alternative Vote (AV), it avoids the problems associated with plurality systems by requiring candidates to receive a majority of support without the need for holding a second runoff election. Proportional representation systems provide an alternative vision of democracy that places greater emphasis on equality and inclusiveness (Powell and Bringham, 2000). The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is a form of proportional representation and allows voters to

exercise a choice over the selection of candidates in ways that other PR systems do not provide. Despite these advantages, there are few countries in the world that have adopted these systems. Papua New Guinea and Nauru use AV, Ireland uses AV for presidential and parliamentary by-elections, and London uses a version of AV for its mayoral election. STV is used in Ireland and Malta.

Despite several advantages, the evidence from Australia suggests that a preferential system may also prove complex for low-information citizens and to have unintended consequences. Voters face a daunting task when asked to rank more than a few choices some of which they may either have no knowledge about or are indifferent. In some cases, the number of candidates can be so large that it might be difficult to even locate preferred candidates on the ballot paper. Such a system also poses a number of challenges for electoral administration. The counting of ballots is more complex and more time consuming and potentially more prone to error which may undermine confidence in close elections. This may be further complicated because the outcome of a close election could potentially depend on which candidates or parties are eliminated first. The findings suggest that many Australian citizens believe that the voting system is too complex and should be simplified. They are also frustrated by the time it takes to count ballots. All of these considerations suggest that debates about electoral reform should also consider the likely consequences of the transparency and complexity the rules of the game on public trust and confidence in the electoral process.

Notes and Acknowledgments

Table 7
Explaining support for reforms (logit model).
Source: Australian Voter Experience (2016)

	Direct Election of PM			Voluntary Voting			Voter ID Laws			Early Voting		
	Coef.		St. Error	Coef.		St. Error	Coef.		St. Error	Coef.		St. Error
Fraud	0.42	**	(0.05)	0.18	**	(0.05)	0.11	*	(0.05)	0.29	**	(0.05)
Cynicism	0.14	**	(0.00)	0.11	**	(0.00)	0.00		(0.00)	0.03		(0.00)
Age	−0.02	**	(0.00)	−0.01	*	(0.00)	0.02	**	(0.00)	0.00		(0.00)
Female	0.28	*	(0.11)	−0.37	**	(0.11)	−0.33	**	(0.11)	0.03		(0.11)
University degree	−0.22		(0.12)	−0.45	**	(0.12)	0.41	**	(0.12)	0.02		(0.12)
Labor voter	0.22		(0.13)	−0.60	**	(0.13)	0.31	*	(0.13)	−0.02		(0.13)
Coalition voter	0.31	**	(0.15)	−0.40	*	(0.14)	0.67	**	(0.15)	0.27		(0.15)
Left	−0.57		(0.14)	−0.27		(0.15)	−0.42	**	(0.14)	−0.03		(0.15)
Right	0.22		(0.15)	0.19		(0.14)	0.33	*	(0.15)	0.20		(0.14)
Constant	−0.63	*	(0.31)	−1.09	**	(0.31)	−0.54		(0.31)	−1.77	**	(0.32)
N	1676			1675			1676			1671		

**p < .01; *p < .05.

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