

“I Don’t Understand It”: Australians’ Low Interest in Politics and Political News

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Research shows that while a significant portion of Australians are not interested in politics or political news, those who are interested in politics tend to consume a lot of news in general. Based on a thematic analysis of interviews with 60 Australians, ranging from non-news consumers (less than once a month or never) to heavy news consumers (more than once a day), this article shows that the type of political news source used and the way politics is reported have a big impact on people’s level of interest in it. Drawing on the *opportunity, motivation, and ability* (OMA) model, this article highlights how negative perceptions of political journalism as biased, conflict-ridden, and complicated influenced the information-seeking behavior of Australian voters during the 2022 federal election. The findings raise important questions for news outlets about audience disconnection from politics and how it is covered.

Keywords: politics, elections, election coverage, political news, news consumption, interest in politics, OMA

Australians are not known for their high levels of interest in politics. On the contrary, longitudinal studies show that approximately two-thirds of Australian adults report being only somewhat interested in politics or having low to no interest in it (Cameron & McCallister, 2022). Consistently, research shows that

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Australians with low political interest are also less interested in news, consume less of it, are unlikely to pay for it, and have lower trust in it (Park et al., 2023).

Similar patterns are observed in news reporting about politics. Fewer than half of Australians rate politics as a topic of interest, compared with two-thirds who are interested in local news (Park et al., 2022). Proportionally, those who are not interested in political coverage are more likely to be light news consumers with lower levels of trust in the news generally. This is consistent with a range of studies that identify political interest as a key indicator of news consumption (Boulianne, 2011; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). This article draws on the OMA framework of *opportunity*, *motivation*, and *ability* (Luskin, 1990) and explores these elements in relation to interest in politics and news consumption in the context of the 2022 Australian federal election.

In addition to low levels of interest, trust in both news and politics in Australia is low. The latest Edelman Trust Barometer shows that between 2022 and 2023, trust in the Australian government fell from 52% to 45%, and trust in the media dropped by 43% to 38% (Edelman, 2023). Interestingly, the vicissitudes of trust in both the media and the government over the past decade rose and fell in tandem, reflecting the interconnection between them. It is well established that trust in politics and journalism is connected (Ariely, 2015; Jones, 2004). News media are major producers of information about government and politics, which influences public perceptions of these institutions. As Strömbäck et al. (2022) explained, "We seldom access the political world as it is . . . We access the political world mainly through media, and we use mediated information to form perceptions of the world" (p. 50).

Therefore, how politics is reported in the news is foundational to citizens' perceptions of political actors and institutions. However, political news reporting often focuses on the news values of negativity and conflict (Villi et al., 2022). These dominant news values are the cornerstones of political reporting, and they impact audiences' perceptions of politics and the news media (Bartholomé, Lecheler, & de Vreese, 2018; Matthes, 2012). For some, these characteristics can lead to a greater interest in politics and an increased consumption of related news, while for others, they can cause a disconnection from mainstream news and encourage a shift to alternative sources of information (Ladd, 2012; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003).

The level of interest and engagement with politics can be explained by Luskin's (1990) concept of "political sophistication," which he described as political cognitive complexity and expertise. Luskin contended that the more politically sophisticated a person is, the more likely they are to be interested in politics, participate in political activities, resist propaganda, be less vulnerable to media framing and agenda setting, and focus more on policy than a politician's personality (Luskin, 1990, p. 333). However, to become sophisticated or knowledgeable about politics, one needs to be exposed to political information. Luskin's OMA model provides a useful frame of analysis to explain a citizen's level of interest and engagement in politics; citizens have varied degrees of *opportunity* to encounter political information, the *motivation* to do so, and the *ability* to digest large amounts of it. While Luskin's (1990) OMA framework was developed during the mass media era, it remains highly relevant in the digital age. As Strömbäck et al. (2013) explained, the ability and motivation of media users depend on the media environment, and "changes in the media environment affect how individual-level factors work" (p. 416). In a high-choice media environment, Strömbäck et al. (2013) found that interest in politics became a stronger determinant of news consumption

over time as audiences grappled with the enormous volume of online information and split into those who sought news and those who avoided it.

This article explores the relationship between audience interest in politics and political news, the changing nature of news production, and its impact on political and election news consumption. Based on this relationship between news consumption and political interest, we interviewed audiences with different levels of news consumption and their attitudes toward the political coverage of the Australian federal election in 2022. Using this election as a case study, we found that while citizens have ample opportunity to consume news about politics, their motivation to do so is generally weaker than their motivation to access news in general. This is particularly interesting considering that voting is compulsory in Australia, which should increase people's motivation to participate in elections. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that low interest in politics among non-, medium-, and heavy-news consumers was partly driven by perceptions that political news coverage was biased, conflict-ridden, and complex. We find that where people get political news is an important driver of their motivation. The most common source of election information among heavy news consumers was the mainstream media, whereas non- and medium-news users turned to social media or friends and family as their primary source of information. This article argues that improving the way politics is reported could help reconnect audiences with reliable political information, especially during elections.

Literature Review

Political Interest and News Consumption

News consumption is deemed to be one of the cornerstones of a functioning democracy. By accessing news regularly, citizens can inform themselves about a range of issues, including politics, and make informed choices when they vote (Fenton, 2010). The link between interest in politics and news consumption has been the focus of much research (Boulianne, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2013; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). It is well established that interest in politics is the strongest indicator—or *motivator*—for levels of news consumption. High levels of interest in politics strongly correlate with heavy levels of news use, and low interest in politics correlates with lower rates of news access (Park et al., 2023).

There is a range of demographic factors known to influence levels of interest in politics and news consumption, not just in Australia but elsewhere (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022). People with higher levels of education and older generations generally consume more news and have higher political interest compared with younger generations and those with lower levels of education (Newman et al., 2022).

A person's *ability* to engage or connect with political news has been traditionally conceived in terms of socioeconomic status (SES) and its impact on individual ability to acquire knowledge (Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019). This capacity underpins the "knowledge gap" theory, which argues that knowledge inequality would increase in a high-choice media environment based on the mode used to consume news (Gibson & McCallister, 2015; Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019). However, the extent to which SES factors determine political interest is contested (Bergström, Strömbäck, & Arkhede, 2019).

Finally, how and where audiences access news—*opportunity*—plays a role in how much they learn about an issue, such as politics. Boukes and Vliegthart (2019) measured the acquisition of new knowledge about politics and the economy over time to gauge the impact of increased news consumption. They found that the more news people consumed, the more knowledge they acquired. This had less to do with the level of education of the participants and more to do with the platform or modality of news used. For instance, they found television to be an effective learning platform for people with lower levels of education, whereas knowledge acquisition from newspapers and news websites was consistent, regardless of education. However, consuming news via social media and mobile devices may have a negative effect on acquiring new political knowledge (Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). In Australia, Gibson and McCallister (2015) contended that the rising use of social media for election coverage is exacerbating the “knowledge gap” among women, young people, and the less educated. Van Erkel and Van Aelst (2021) similarly found that daily knowledge of politics was much lower among people who followed news on social media than among those who used traditional news media platforms. While levels of education played a small role, their study found that the difference in political knowledge acquisition was mainly due to information overload, while on social platforms, “the more opportunities there are the more selective people have to be, and the more selective people have to be, the more important their individual motivations and abilities become” (Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021, p. 7). In turn, they contended that individuals interested in politics are likely to become more engaged and access more news about it, while those who are not interested will turn their attention elsewhere. In this article, we argue that in addition to the mode or platform of news, attitudes toward politics and the way it is reported have an impact on people’s *motivation* and *ability* to understand it.

The State of Political Journalism

There are several reasons why audiences may disconnect from politics and political news. First, the news media has been criticized for framing politics as a strategic game with winners and losers, emphasizing political tactics over important policies and issues that matter to the electorate (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & De Vreese, 2012). This disconnection with audiences is partly driven by political journalists seeing themselves as “insiders” with elite access and knowledge that might be of interest to other “insiders” but not relevant to the needs of the public (Rosen, 1999). As scholars argue, political journalists are attracted to the winner-loser paradigm (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2021) inherent in campaigns and polling, which reflects the dominant news values of conflict and negativity (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012). This emphasis on “horse race” coverage and the representation of politics as a “strategic game” have been identified as being related to audiences’ dissatisfaction with political news (Aalberg et al., 2012; Young, 2011).

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) explored the impact of strategic framing and conflict-driven political reporting on audiences and found that it fuels a “spiral of cynicism” among voters, not just about politics but also about the media. The spiral is generated by the media prioritizing news based on conflict and strategy over consensus and substance, which politicians feed into to ensure media coverage. In doing so, politicians and journalists reinforce each other’s cynicism, which fuels the public’s cynicism in both. Shehata (2014) found that game-framing not only boosts cynicism in politics but also lowers interest and engagement with it and undermines institutional trust, whereas issue-framed stories about real-world issues had positive effects. The effects of framing were found to be independent of people’s motivation to pay attention to the news.

More positively, others contend that journalism about the political process that exposes the government's strategy and political public relations techniques has served to educate the public and render the government's tactical practices transparent (McNair, 2004). Meanwhile, Norris (2000) asserted that citizen disengagement and cynicism have less to do with news media reporting of politics and professional political communication tactics and more to do with the nature of representative government. She argued that those who are not interested in politics will pay little attention, whereas those who are will consume more news, forming a "virtuous circle" by further activating the already active.

Negativity and Bias in the News

Conflict in politics is not entirely confected by the news media. Given that the very nature of politics is a contest of ideas to ultimately persuade voters at election time, conflict as a form of competition is inherent in much political activity, though not all (Bartholomé et al., 2018). Conflict also lies at the heart of the relationship between the news media and politics, built on the idealized watchdog conception of journalism in democracies holding power to account, which often results in an emphasis on scandal, drama, and corruption (Shehata, 2014).

However, a focus on negativity and conflict in political reporting can lead to increased apathy among voters. Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, and Oegema (2006) found that negative election reporting had more of an effect on trust in political leaders than education and voter preference. According to Bartholomé et al. (2018), conflict frames are multi-faceted and consist of two main categories based on the level of (1) substantiveness and (2) journalistic intervention in a conflict frame (p. 1689). The substantiveness of conflict framing is reflected in a focus on policy rather than strategy and incivility between political actors rather than respectful dealings. Journalistic intervention in conflict framing refers to the degree to which the reporter speculates about and directly comments on the conflict or is involved in it.

Both negativity and conflict have also been found to be key drivers of news avoidance (Park et al., 2022), particularly among women and people with lower levels of interest in politics and news. Drawing on the OMA framework, this article explores the link between sources of political news, interest in politics and political news, and news consumption behaviors. Using the 2022 federal Australian election as a case study, this article includes attitudes toward politics and political news as mediators of motivation (political interest) and the ability to understand politics. In doing so, it asks the following questions:

RQ1: How are opportunities (where people get political information) related to interest in politics and political news?

RQ2: How is motivation (political interest) related to news consumption and news behaviors?

RQ3: Is the perceived ability (political knowledge) related to users' motivation and opportunities?

Methods

The findings of this article draw on 60 semi-structured interviews with adult Australians from a larger project. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen because it is an effective way to elicit reflexive and descriptive responses to questions about the role of the news media in people's lives (Galletta, 2013). A total of 60 participants were recruited through the McNair yellowSquares consumer research panel. Panel members are invited to complete surveys or participate in interviews and are given an incentive to compensate for their time to maximize the quality of their responses. To minimize the impact of self-selection based on the participant's interest in the topic of news, the research team devised a screener question to ensure that a diverse range of news consumers were recruited. However, we note that this is a qualitative study and by no means intends to generalize the results to a larger population group. The following screening question was used to ascertain their level of news consumption: "Typically, how often do you access news? By news we mean national, international, regional/local news and other topical events accessed via any platform (radio, TV, newspaper, or online)" (as described in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report; see Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 31 and November 11, 2022. Five members of the research team interviewed the participants. Each interview lasted an average of 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai software and checked for accuracy.

We recruited 20 heavy news consumers (who accessed news more than once a day), 20 moderate news consumers (who consumed news between once a day and once a week), and 20 low/non-news consumers (who accessed news either less than once a month or never). First, the participants completed a short 10-question survey about their news habits, attitudes, and demographics (see Table 1). Based on their responses, we then tailored each participant's interview guide.

Table 1. Summary of Participants.

		Heavy news users	Medium news users	Non-news users
Age	18–25 (Gen Z)	2	4	1
	26–41 (Gen Y)	12	8	14
	42–57 (Gen X)	4	8	3
	58–76 (Baby Boomer)	2	0	2
Gender	Female	10	12	11
	Male	10	8	9
Education	Bachelor's degree or above	11	13	11
	Postsecondary	8	5	4
	Secondary	1	2	5
Interest in politics	Extremely interested/ very interested	10	2	0
	Somewhat interested	8	8	3
	Not very/not at all interested	2	10	17

Interest in the news	Extremely interested/ very interested	18	7	0
	Somewhat interested	2	9	4
	Not very/not at all interested	0	4	16
Avoid the news	No	9	4	2
	Yes	11	16	18
Political orientation	Left	7	10	1
	Centre	5	5	5
	Right	7	1	6
	Don't know	1	4	8
Trust in the news	Trust	5	6	4
	Neither	5	5	2
	Distrust	10	9	14
Trust in my news	Trust	11	10	6
	Neither	4	2	1
	Distrust	5	8	13
Sources of news <i>*participants were able to select more than one source of news</i>	Social Media	20	14	8
	Traditional media (TV, Radio, Print)	16	14	4
	Online media (excludes social media)	17	13	3
	Personal network	9	9	3
Sources of election information <i>*participants said they used more than one source of election information</i>	Social Media	6	10	8
	MSM/Traditional platforms	12	10	2
	Personal networks	3	6	8
	None	2	2	5

Among heavy news users, half were female and half male. There was a mix of age groups, and half reported having an undergraduate or postgraduate university degree. Half expressed a high interest in politics, while half said that they sometimes avoided the news. Their trust in the news was very diverse. Only five said they trusted news in general, five neither trusted nor distrusted news, and 10 said they distrusted news. For news that they chose to consume, 11 said they trusted, four neither trusted nor distrusted, and five distrusted the news they consumed.

Among medium news users, 12 were female, and eight were male. Thirteen of them had undergraduate or postgraduate university degrees. Only two expressed an interest in politics. News avoidance was high, with 16 saying they avoided the news. Almost half reported having low trust in the news, but half said they trusted the news they chose to consume.

Among the non-news user group, 11 participants were female, and nine were male. There was a mix of age groups. Importantly, not all non-news consumers had low levels of formal education or were disengaged from society. Just over half had an undergraduate or postgraduate university degree

(12), five had a postsecondary qualification, and four had completed year 10 or 12 of high school. However, none of them said they were highly interested in politics, and almost all (18) said they avoided the news. Almost half (8) reported not knowing their political orientation, reflecting their lack of interest in politics. To be clear, this sample is not reflective of the general Australian population and does not aim to be. It simply provides a summary of the characteristics of the interviewees. The wider study aimed to better understand the context in which people with differing levels of news consumption perceive the news generally and political news in particular.

An OMA approach has typically been used for quantitative research, which focuses on deductive analysis. However, as a qualitative project, our analysis included both deductive and inductive approaches: Deductive in the first instance where the first round of analysis was based on key interview questions. The second round inductively developed codes for emerging themes. The interview analysis followed the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021): (1) data familiarization and writing familiarization notes, (2) systematic data coding, (3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. Thematic analysis of the interviews was assisted using Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. To ensure the robustness of the coding, at least two members of the team coded each transcript.

Research ethics was approved by the lead author's Human Ethics Committee (#9186).

Findings

Descriptive Analysis

In the short preinterview survey, participants were asked a range of questions about their levels of news consumption, interest in the news and politics, and demographic information. Analysis of this survey data found important demographic differences based on levels of news consumption, interest in the news and politics, education, and political orientation.

Heavy news consumers were much more likely to have postsecondary, bachelor's, or postgraduate education and identify as either politically left or right wing. In contrast, non-news consumers were the least likely to know their political orientation, and the most likely to identify as center or right wing. Moderate news consumers were most likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher and identify with the left side of politics.

About interest in politics, nearly half of the generations interviewed said they were not very or at all interested in politics (Gen Z (3), Gen Y (17), Gen X (7), and BB+ (2)). The proportion of participants who said they were very or extremely interested in politics was much lower (Gen Z (1), Gen Y (7), Gen X (3), and BB+ (1)). Those who were interested in politics were also interested in the news, but interest in the news did not necessarily coincide with interest in politics. Of the 25 participants who said they were very or extremely interested in the news, 11 were also very interested in politics, 12 were only somewhat interested in politics, and two were not at all interested in politics. More than half of the 15 participants who said they were somewhat interested in the news said they had low to no interest in politics (8). Only one participant who was moderately interested in news was extremely interested in

politics. Overwhelmingly, those who were not interested in the news were also not interested in politics (19), with one being somewhat interested.

The intersection between news interest and political interest found here was generally repeated when correlated with levels of news consumption. Half of the heavy news users had a high interest in the news and politics (10), while the remainder were either moderately interested in politics but highly (7) or moderately (1) interested in the news, or they had low interest in both politics and news (2) despite being heavy news consumers. Most non-news users with low interest in news had low interest in politics (15). The remaining five non-news users had combinations of low interest in politics and moderate interest in news (2), moderate interest in politics and news (2), and moderate interest in politics and no interest in news (1). While these findings confirm previous studies that show a strong correlation between levels of news consumption and interest in politics (Boulianne, 2011; Strömbäck et al., 2013; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010), there are some variations indicating that people can be highly interested in the news and have little motivation to acquire knowledge about politics.

Opportunity: News Coverage of Politics and the Election

Sources of Political News

Participants in the study accessed a range of news sources. There were differences based on age and levels of news consumption. One-third of older participants said they used traditional media platforms like newspapers, television, and radio to get news, compared with 19% of those aged under 35. Instead, half of those under 35 used social media, compared with one-third of the older participants. Among heavy news consumers, all 20 used social media platforms to get news, 17 used online sources, and 16 turned to traditional platforms, such as TV, print newspapers, and radio. Nine heavy news users also said they turned to friends and family for news. Moderate news users were more evenly spread in their use of social media (14), traditional platforms (14), and online sources (13). Similarly, nine said they also got news and information from their personal networks. Non-news users rarely, if ever, sought the news. Instead, news tended to find them (Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2023) when they were on social media for other reasons (8), listening to something else on the radio, watching a show on TV (3), or searching for something online (3). Three said that they got news about what was going on in the world from their friends, family, and colleagues.

In the context of the 2022 federal election, news sourcing behavior changed. It is important to note that voting in Australian national elections is different from many other Western democracies. First, voting in federal elections is compulsory. Second, Australia has a preferential voting system at the federal level, which might encourage some voters to learn about more than one candidate. These factors can impact people's information seeking at election time.

To inform themselves about who to vote for, heavy news consumers relied less on social media (6) and personal networks (3) and more on traditional platforms (12). However, two said they did not seek any information about the election despite being heavy news consumers. Medium news users reduced their use of social media (10) and traditional platforms (10), with six saying they relied on friends and families to tell them who to vote for and two saying they did not seek any information about the election. This reduction

in the use of mainstream news platforms for election information appears to be part of a national trend (Cameron & McCallister, 2022).

Some of the biggest changes in behavior can be seen among non-news consumers. Fewer listened to or saw news incidentally on traditional platforms (2), and one-quarter (5) said they did not seek any information about the election and who to vote for. While the same number continued to bump into the news on social media (8), an increased number turned to their personal networks to find out who to vote for (8). This shift to personal networks likely reflects the lack of knowledge and low trust in mainstream media coverage. As previously mentioned, it is compulsory to vote in Australia, and while this did not motivate these citizens to access mainstream political news, it did motivate them to ask their friends and family who to vote for. Hence, their motivation is likely derived from legal necessity rather than increased political interest during election time.

The difference in the number and type of sources used to access general news and election news reflects this cohort's low interest in politics and political news, regardless of their general news consumption. Concerning the OMA framework, the opportunity to access news did not change, but their motivation and ability to seek news specifically about politics and elections did.

Qualitative Findings

Motivation: The Way Politics Is Reported

The interview data revealed that these different levels of connection with political news were at least partly related to participants' perceptions of how political issues were covered in the news: poor quality, full of conflict, and biased. The following discussion includes observations from each level of user: low/non (using an "L" prefix), medium (with an "M" prefix), and high (participants with an "H" prefix).

The Style of Political Reporting

While there was an abundance of news sources the interviewees could turn to, many felt that there was not enough quality political news to command their attention. Participants said there was too much reporting on politics as a type of sport, that the coverage was full of conflict and did not contain enough substance. There was also concern about partisan media agendas and political bias in mainstream news coverage. For L52, who said he was not at all interested in politics or news: "Politics is just one person or one team trying to beat another team and that's not the sport that I prefer." M22 understood that journalists liked to create conflict in their stories by portraying someone in a negative light "because it's a better news article or a better story or they're gonna get better coverage from it." H10 said that this undermined the quality of the coverage:

[It] was very much around trying to destroy each one's character based on comments or what they've done in the past. And it was less around, you know, the fundamentals of what each party were offering. So yes, it became a bit of a of a joke . . . a bit childish and humorous, the way that the campaign was fought.

Interviewees felt that the focus on who was going to win meant that there was less coverage of policy. While L47 said he was not very interested in the news or politics, he would like to see more substance and less conflict in political reporting at election time because "I want to get to the heart of the issue." This sentiment was echoed by L57, who said journalists "should be digging deeper and holding the politicians responsible for running the country properly."

The lack of substance in the election coverage meant that M38 did not get much benefit from it: "I don't remember anyone presenting like the main parties and their main policies and what their plans are, which I guess would be what I was really interested in choosing who to vote for." The lack of substance was a source of annoyance for H12, who accessed news up to five times a day from online news websites and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit:

It was just a lot of reporting about their private lives and what Scott Morrison [Australian Prime Minister] was doing on the weekends and stuff, which I guess sort of has to do with politics because he obviously makes policies that suit his agenda, but I don't really care what he's doing on the weekend. I don't care that he's at Hillsong Church, like he can do whatever he wants. I'd rather know about what sort of policies they plan to put in place and that sort of thing.

Political Partisanship and Bias

Political partisanship and bias were reported as the main reasons why news audiences disengaged from the news coverage of the election campaign. L49 said, "I definitely steered away from the news, particularly around election time." He strongly believed that the traditional media exerted control over the election outcome: "It's going to be whoever the political party is that the, you know, TV station wants in power."

L43 held similar views about the influence of the media during elections, stating, "I think it's always rigged . . . I think there's always 'we're gonna put Liberal in this year and we're gonna put Labor in this year.' I think there's always a set way in which it's sort of gonna go."

In a less conspiratorial way, several interviewees believed that the political interests of news media outlets and their owners swayed the way the election was covered. For instance, "I'm pretty sure my brother-in-law was saying how someone who is heavily involved in the Liberal party owns some sort of like News Corporation. And so that's in the back of my thinking . . . Looking after their own. Yeah" (H19).

Well, I guess because a lot of the outlets have their own political leaning, right? So, ABC and SBS will I mean, I never saw anything very blatant like putting any party down as such, say. But there are always biases that you can kind of tell, I think. (M31)

These allegiances were seen to lead to biased political reporting:

I think your more conservative media weren't giving Labor, you know, and the Greens etcetera a fair go, and vice versa. So, . . . your more traditional left leaning media weren't really giving fair coverage to your more conservative politicians. (H3)

For M36 and M40, this tendency toward political bias in reporting meant that election coverage was not fair, especially toward smaller parties: "I guess fair would be giving every politician the right, the same amount of time to speak, which definitely isn't the case. They definitely give the major parties more time" (M36).

It was interesting, because only certain ones really got airtime. And only certain ones were written about in a positive light. You could tell when a journalist wasn't enjoying or didn't support another party. That was very evident. There was not much what's that word? When you're objective, maybe objective? There were not many journalists that could be objective about what was being said. And, not many journalists that would actually cover all of the different parties and what they were offering. I found that quite interesting. (M40)

Motivation: Lack of Trust in Politicians and the Political Process

The responses suggested that disinterest in politics and political news for many—particularly among non- and medium-news users—was driven by a distrust of politicians and the political process and was accompanied by a distrust in the news.

There was a strong relationship between trust in news to accurately reflect reality and trust in the version of politics it presents. If politics is inherently untrustworthy, then the unreliable media's interpretation of that is arguably even less trustworthy. As L47 said, he was not sure who was telling the truth, politicians or the media: "If I'm gonna invest my time reading news, I want to make sure that what I'm reading is at least accurate and something I can trust."

Distrust in News

Distrust in the news was high across all levels of news consumption. While non-news consumers were the most likely to say they didn't trust most news most of the time (14), neither did half of heavy (10) and moderate (9) news users.

For non-news users, the lack of trust contributed to their rejection of news. Bias in reporting, lack of representation, and inconsistent reporting of the same issue by different outlets all contributed to low levels of trust: "So why should I trust it? Why should I trust anything just because somebody else tells me to? They've got to prove their trust in the first place." (L45)

L47 said he was not very interested in either news or politics and only accessed news less than once a month. Instead, he relied on friends, family, and colleagues to find out what is going on in the world. Concerning news and politics, he said, "I don't know who I should trust and that pushes me away from it."

Among heavy and moderate news consumers, low distrust did not necessarily lead to disconnection from the news. Some consumed it, understanding that it was not wholly reliable. As H12 explained about her news outlet of choice, "I don't particularly trust that they have 100% the most accurate information because they're just the ones that quickly post and don't really follow up with how truthful it is." For others, the lack of trust was motivation for greater connection with news to verify, like H7 who said, "[I] certainly go elsewhere to find out if it was fact or not."

Distrust in Politics

Difficulty believing in what politicians say was accompanied by perceptions that politicians are corrupt, break promises, and are only motivated by self-interest. L58 said that she was not at all interested in politics and accessed news less than once a month. When she did, she got it from either TV, blogs, podcasts, or Tik Tok, and she was very cynical about the motivations of politicians: "I just think whoever's in power is in it for themselves and not for us. So, I just think they're just in it for their lifetime pension and that's it." These sentiments were echoed by other non-news users like L45 who said he is not at all interested in politics or news:

Politicians, no matter what country they're in, all a bunch of rat bags . . . for them it's all about power, money. Greed, climbing to the top, falling off the top and possibly coming back again. So, I mean, you know the way you can tell when a politician is lying. The lips move.

Even those who accessed the news more regularly perceived politics as corrupt. M23 said she looked for news 4–6 days a week from either TV, radio, podcasts, Facebook, or friends and family. She did not trust the news, and corruption in politics turned her away from it:

Boy, there's so much corruption in it. When you hear the news, then later on when this one's gone and spent all this money and this one's done this and, and then yes, they're going to put their own spin on it, but it's just like, Oh, it's just a big, bloody vicious cycle. Labor, Liberal they're all . . . I don't need to put my energy into that.

Even though M26 stated that she was very interested in politics, she said, "I'm cynical about what they say." Politicians tell lies, and it is hard to know what is true, especially during election time. Although she consumed news once a day via Facebook, Google, or radio, she said she does not trust it. Importantly, the interviewee's reflections highlight the inseparability of trust in the news and politics.

Ability: Politics Is Hard to Understand

Many interviewees acknowledged that they found it difficult to understand politics. While other studies have identified this issue with non-news consumers specifically (Toff, Palmer, & Nielsen, 2023), we found evidence of this difficulty across all levels of news consumption. Given that people mainly learn about politics through the news media, the fact that they find it hard to understand necessarily reflects how it is reported by the news media (Strömbäck et al., 2022). For H19, politics was impenetrable. Even though he was very interested in news and consumed it up to 10 times a day on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, he said he was not interested in politics. Put simply, he said, "I've got no interest because I've got no idea about it." He explained that people need a lot of context to understand what's happening: "I will watch it

but it's sort of it's gone within 10 minutes because I don't know anything building up to it." H9 felt the same way. She described herself as very interested in news, accessing it multiple times a day from a wide range of traditional and social media platforms. However, she said she was not at all interested in politics: "I think it's because I don't understand it. I've got a creative brain, [but] I've got a bit of a hectic job and so I've tried and tried . . . but it just doesn't sink in."

There was a perception among the interviewees that politics was complicated, and you needed to stay on top of it to understand what was going on. As L41 put it, "I think my biggest thing is I actually don't understand it." People who are time poor said they simply could not invest in keeping up-to-date with politics. As L44 explained, "I feel like politics is this huge area, and you have to spend so much time looking and listening and hearing and reading to understand everything that's going on. And I just don't have the time to do that. So, I think, it's just really hard."

However, for some, the nature of their work motivated them to try to find out more about politics. Since moving to Canberra, the national capital of Australia and the seat of the federal government, M31 said she had been listening to the news and "trying to get more into it." Similarly, M33 applied himself to understand politics for his work. M33 had a university degree and said that he trusted the news media, which he accessed once a day to stay up-to-date with the news. Despite his level of education, he found political reporting too difficult to understand and needed to supplement his knowledge to absorb the news:

I'm trying to be interested in politics as much as I can . . . I'm making ground I think like, in the last few years, I think I understand the political system better as a whole and sort of to accompany news I've read a few books on sort of how the system works, which I think has helped me contextualize some of the news. Because I think there was a bit of an educational barrier where I didn't have the background to even be able to interpret some of like the news and, and discussions in the workplace and things like that, that were happening. And I think I've started to bridge that gap, but I've probably got a way to go. And yeah, to be honest, it's like, it's a conscious effort to be, to care about it.

Conclusion

In a time of online information abundance, citizens have never had as much opportunity to access the news. On one hand, this high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) offers a wide array of quality and convenient sources of news and information. On the other hand, it has opened the floodgates to low-quality news and information content that competes for the limited attention of overloaded citizens. In this environment, audiences need to decide what news and information to access and what to ignore.

Making news and information choices is arguably most important in the lead-up to a democratic election. It has long been argued that democracy cannot function properly without a rational and informed citizenry. However, various factors influence the level of political sophistication that individuals develop.

Drawing on Luskin's OMA framework of *opportunity*, *motivation*, and *ability*, this article explores these elements in relation to interest in politics and news consumption in the context of the 2022 Australian federal election. Based on survey responses and a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 60

adult Australians ranging from non- to heavy-news consumers, this article finds that disengagement from politics and political news was pervasive among participants, particularly among non-news consumers. In line with wider national studies (Cameron & McCallister, 2022), many participants reported having a low interest in politics and political news. These attitudes were associated with their perceptions of how political issues were covered in the news, including poor quality, excessive conflict, and bias. Participants, particularly those who did not actively consume political news, said they found politics difficult to understand, and most participants shared a lack of trust in politicians and the political process, which was echoed in their low levels of trust in news. While interest in politics did correlate with high interest in and consumption of news, the converse was not always true. Even heavy and moderate news consumers did not necessarily have an interest in politics and found political news hard to understand.

The analysis revealed the interconnectedness of *opportunity*, *motivation*, and *ability* when it comes to political interest and news consumption. All the participants had the opportunity to find out about the election and consume news regularly, but not all chose to. Heavy news consumers tended to rely on hybrid platforms, including traditional platforms, to inform themselves about news and elections, whereas general and election news found non-news consumers on social media while they were doing other things. However, taking advantage of the abundant information was strongly influenced by their motivation to do so. It was clear that people's motivation was also influenced by a range of factors, including their interest in politics and political news. Their interest was strongly influenced by perceptions of politics and political reporting, much of which was negatively grounded in perceptions of distrust of journalism and politicians and poor political reporting. This, in turn, impacted their ability to understand politics and, for some, turned them away from it because it was too complex, partisan, full of conflict, and did not pay enough attention to substantive issues, further undermining their interest and trust in both politics and journalism. In this regard, the findings from our study support the spiral of cynicism thesis (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Shehata, 2014). It is important to note that education levels were not a central factor in this. Highly educated participants had consciously chosen to eschew news and politics in a similar way to other users.

This article makes several contributions to the use of the OMA framework. First, to date, most studies employing the OMA framework have been quantitative. This study adds an in-depth account of how opportunities, motivations, and abilities are linked to political interest and news consumption using a qualitative method. Our findings make a further contribution by identifying the quality of news media reporting, not just the volume of consumption and availability of news, as an important factor influencing both the motivation and ability to develop and sustain interest in politics and political news. Third, this study includes an underexamined cohort of non-news consumers and sheds light on some of the barriers that need to be cleared to connect these citizens to the mainstream news environment and politics in particular. Lastly, this study was conducted in Australia, where voting in federal and state elections is compulsory, which adds a different dimension to the aspect of motivation in relation to political news consumption during elections. Combined, these additional elements help enrich the application of the OMA framework in broader contexts. Despite these innovations, this article also has limitations. It is based on a small sample that is not representative of the Australian population.

Importantly, this article clearly links disconnection from politics and political news with how politics is conducted and reported. The inability of citizens to follow politics raises important questions for political

reporters and news editors about how politics is covered and points to opportunities to reengage audiences with politics and better inform their democratic participation.

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