Parasocial relationships and Australian politics

Xara Anderson

Camberwell Girls Grammar School, Canterbury, Wurundjeri Country

On the night of the 2022 Federal Election, Treasurer Josh Frydenburg lost his 12 year on the seat of Kooyong in a shocking defeat. A seat that had been Liberal since federation, 122 years ago. The culprit? Independent candidate Dr Monique Ryan.

Ryan wasn't alone in such a resounding victory, in fact, five more of the Coalition’s safe seats fell to independent candidates. This was not a bloodbath, but a Teal bath. But how did this happen? Current election studies have provided some insight into this election. However, they have largely relied on traditional indicators of political support for their analysis. This has meant that some stones have been left unturned. For example, the psychology of voters has yet to be considered. Therefore, following the tremendous and frankly unexpected success of the Teal independents, my investigation sought to bridge this gap.

I was guided by the research question: Can political parasocial theory be used to deepen our understanding of the 2022 Australian federal election results? Political parasocial theory is concerned with the cognitive factors that determine why people vote the way they do. As defined by Hakim and Liu in 2018, a parasocial relationship is understood as an enduring, one-sided feeling of intimacy that an ordinary person holds for a public figure based on perceived similarities. The theory itself speculates that these asymmetrical relationships are most likely to form through virtual channels, like television, radio, and social media.

Now, there’s an extensive amount of literature I could share with you, but these are the major works, broken down into 3 main categories. Parasocial theory was founded under the term parasocial interaction by Horton and Wohl in 1956. They defined these interactions as giving the “illusion of a face-to-face relationship between a spectator and a performer.” Though, without an empirical measure, parasocial theory was confined to speculative literature.

So, Rubin and his colleagues developed the Parasocial Interaction Scale, also known as the PSI scale in 1985. Their seminal work allowed the theory to be quantifiable, and the PSI scale became the most frequently used and adapted scale in the field. However, in 2016 in contention with Rubin, researcher Dibble and his colleagues invalidated the PSI scale on the grounds that it overlooked the conceptual niches of parasocial theory.

He further asserted that it had not been adequately tested on its construct and external validity. Prompted by these criticisms, Hakim and Liu set out to develop a valid scale that specifically measured parasocial relationships with political figures. In 2018, they emerged with the PSR-P scale. Following research in 2011 in which Garzia recognised a growth in the personalisation of politics, Hakim and Liu argued for the increasing relevance of parasocial theory - especially with many politicians now present on social media. Hakim and Liu concluded that the PSR-P scale “had sufficient psychometric properties” to measure this trend of personalised politics.

To contextualise my research, I needed to understand both the 2022 federal election, and the election that preceded it in 2019. Researcher Marian Simms contends that the 2019 election was fought not principally on policy issues, but on personalities. She asserts that it was for this reason that Scott Morrison was able to win on his ‘Scomo’ persona against all odds.

Morrison’s 2019 election miracle was also framed by the lowest level of trust in politicians since it was first measured in 1969, a trend that has continued in Australian politics. So then, his miracle was short-lived, and the 2022 election saw Morrison become “the least popular major party leader on record.” This election, young Australians in particular voted outside the Liberal and Labor dichotomy, favouring independents and minor parties.

This shift away from major party voting opened the floodgates for the ‘Teal Wave,’ in which the number of independent candidates in the House of Representatives swelled from 6 to 16. With such rapid evolution of the Australian political climate, my investigation asserted the importance of engaging in analysis that is responsive to these changes. I identified three aims to guide my research. Using the PSR-P scale was vital as it was pointed to by relevant literature as being the most valid and up-to-date tool to measure parasocial relationships with politicians. The Australian Election Study identified Dr Monique Ryan as the most distinct example if the Teal Wave, and thus my research centred around the electorate of Kooyong as a focus. The design of my research was based on previous studies in the field.

I used non-experimental methods which involved a correlational study and closed question survey. The survey contained the PSR-P scale, which was modified to include a 7th item. It had previously been discarded by Hakim and Liu as it produced less significant results than the other items. I chose to reintroduce it because the 2022 election was the first in decades to be held in the wake of a major crisis, the global Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdowns of this crisis meant that Australian’s were forced to rely on digital media to engage with the news and politicians. Therefore, in the context of my research, it was imperative to consider the impact that politicians had on the ways voters evaluated current affairs. When responding to the PSR-P scale, seven answer options were provided. This was in line with the standard Likert approach outlined in 1932, which Hakim and Liu employed in their research.

My participants were drawn using convenience sampling, with my survey being disseminated en-masse through email chains and local community Facebook pages. While this did limit the diversity of my sample population, it allowed for 103 individual responses to be collected in a short period of time and was therefore deemed necessary. Future studies, however, should seek to use a stratified sampling method to maximise the generalisability of their findings. My findings left me with 721 pieces of raw data, so to code it, I established three categories that determined the parasocial inclination of participants - or how intense their parasocial relationship with their nominated political figure is.

The lowest possible score on the PSR-P was 7, while the highest was 49, so responses were categorised as such. Additionally, respondents were categorised into four major groups based on who they voted for. This decision was informed by research by Cameron and her colleagues who recognised these political groups as being the most affected by the “seismic shift in voting behaviour” seen in the 2022 election.

The first key finding observed that parasocial relationships were largely prevalent in the sample population. 16.7% of all participants exhibited a high inclination, while the majority - 61.2% - of participants demonstrated a moderate inclination. Its overwhelming presence suggests that perceptions of intimacy do play a role in shaping how people vote. This is consistent with research by Dunne and Nisbett, who in 2014 demonstrated that perceptions of intimacy are directly related to how credible people evaluate a candidate to be. The second key finding was that of all the participants, those who voted for independent candidates demonstrated the highest parasocial inclination. They accounted for 41.2% of all high inclination responses. Further, independent voters were more likely to sit on the higher end of the PSR-P scale as compared to any other group. This suggests that parasocial attachment was a factor in Ryan’s triumph over Frydenburg for the seat of Kooyong. Interestingly, Liberal voters were the second most parasocially inclined group, suggesting that political partisanship has not disappeared, rather it has been overtaken.

So, can political parasocial theory advance political analysis and deepen our understanding of the 2022 Australian federal election? My results suggest that it absolutely can! The high prevalence of a parasocial connection between voters and politicians, and the strong correlation between this and the outcome of the 2022 election in the electorate of Kooyong, suggests that voters are evaluating candidates on more than just the policies or the party they stand for. Currently, the only reliable metric to analyse the psychology of voters resides in parasocial theory.

Therefore, the insight research into this theory provides for understanding this growth in the personalisation of politics must be taken advantage of.

Without it… we risk being unable to understand the changes occurring around us in politics.

[Copyright Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2024](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Footer/Pages/Copyright.aspx)