

Public opinion of alcohol industry corporate political activities

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The alcohol industry has been shown to exercise a significant influence on public health policy in favour of its profits.¹⁻³ Hillman and Hitt⁴ identified several corporate political activity (CPA) strategies that corporations use to establish ongoing relationships with politicians and policy makers to shape public policy in favour of the industry, such as financial incentives, information tactics and constituency building. The alcohol industry has used these strategies successfully to oppose and delay the implementation of evidence-based policy, such as the introduction of mandatory warning labels on alcohol products in Australia.⁵⁻⁸

One particular CPA financial tactic used by the alcohol industry – political donations – is seen as problematic by the public health community and regulatory scholars, as it has been shown to build long-term relationships between industry and politicians and influence short-term decision-making in favour of the alcohol industry.⁹⁻¹² International research has highlighted that CPA strategies are multifaceted,¹³ implemented at the global level^{14,15} and work across industries that profit from addiction.¹⁶ In Australia, laws regulating donations are weak¹⁷ and allow donations under \$14,300 (2020, indexed each year) to go undeclared.¹⁸ From 2005 to 2015, the biggest Australian political parties (the Labor, Liberal, and National Parties) declared a total of A\$7,650,858 donated by the alcohol industry.^{19,20} In the 2018 Victorian state election, the incumbent Labor Party accepted more than \$500,000 from the Australian Hotels Association, reportedly to fight the

Abstract

Objectives: This study explores Australian public awareness and attitudes towards political donations from the alcohol industry and the ‘revolving door’ of politicians into industry or lobbyist positions.

Methods: Data were collected via a nationwide online panel.

Results: In total, n=1,044 participants completed the survey. More than half of the participants agreed that donations are made to influence government policy and to support the interests of the industry. More than half of the participants did not believe that it is appropriate for political parties to accept donations from the alcohol industry or for politicians to attend alcohol industry-hosted events. One-third of the participants agreed that public officials (including politicians) with a role in health policy should never be allowed to work or lobby for the alcohol industry (31.7%) and one-third endorsed a waiting time of 4–5 years.

Discussion: There were demographic differences in the views that participants held of the alcohol industry and the relationship between the government and the alcohol industry. The findings suggest that the laws and controls governing industry–government relationships should be reviewed to ensure they are in line with public expectations, accompanied by education programs including a focus on corporate political activity by the alcohol industry.

Key words: alcohol, public opinion, political donations, alcohol industry

Greens in only three seats to stave off alcohol and gambling reform.²¹

Another well-known tactic to influence political decision-making is lobbying (one of Hillman and Hitt’s information tactics), and the alcohol industry uses lobbyists extensively.¹⁷ However, less well-known is the mechanism of the ‘revolving door’ of politics. This is a phenomenon whereby employees move between positions in government and positions in industry, which can favour industry as it enhances insider knowledge, increases access to key decision-makers and secures industry-friendly networks.²²⁻²⁴ In Australia, there are ministerial codes of conduct that provide guidelines for ‘cooling-

off periods’ and general post-government employment decisions.²⁵ However, in practice, these guidelines are very limited and not well enforced. This is in contrast to other countries such as Canada where ministers are prohibited from passing on information that is not accessible to the general public to any non-governmental or corporate interests for five years after leaving their position.²⁶ In 2016, more than one-third of people registered on the Australian Government Lobbyist Register were identified as former government representatives.²⁴ The Grattan Institute found that one in four (28%) of Australian ministers and assistant ministers ended up in either lobbyist firms, peak bodies, big business or consulting firms.²⁷

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There have been numerous high-profile examples of politicians moving quickly into industry employment in the same portfolio area they served in during their political career.^{28,29} While Australian governments and major parties are reluctant to enforce or establish stronger regulations around donations and the revolving door,¹² strong public support for such policies could increase pressure on governments to ensure that these policies are implemented.^{30–32}

In Australia, between 2001 and 2013, attitudes towards alcohol consumption became more cautious,³³ while public support for alcohol control policies was mixed.^{34,35} Callinan et al. found an increase in general public support for policies relating to the availability and accessibility of alcohol since 2004.³⁵ Tobin et al.'s review found that the public was positive towards tightening alcohol marketing regulation and restricting licensees (e.g. trading hours), but more negative towards universal controls, such as tax and pricing reforms.³⁴ Similarly, an international review identified fluctuating levels of public support for different alcohol control measures,³⁶ which could reflect the increased availability of alcohol³⁴ and de-regulation agendas of many western governments.³⁶ There has, however, been little academic research into public opinion on corporate political activity, and – in particular – political donations by the alcohol industry and the 'revolving door' phenomenon. The exception is a yearly Australian public opinion poll commissioned by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE). FARE is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that supports evidence-based research on the harm caused by alcohol to inform public health policy. The 2017 poll found that more than 50% of respondents believed alcohol companies use political donations to influence government policy and that 72% of Australians believed that political parties should not be able to receive donations from the alcohol industry.³⁷

Given the potential pressure that public opinion can bring to bear on government policy formation and the existing gap in the literature, this study sought to investigate:

1. What are the Australian public's awareness levels of the alcohol industry's primary motivations for donations to political parties?
2. What are the public's views on the appropriateness of donations and the

revolving door in politics in relation to the alcohol industry?

Method

Design and setting

Data were collected by an Australian market research company (Painted Dog Research) via an Australia-wide national fortnightly omnibus online survey. The company was contacted by researchers via phone and email outlining the survey requirements. The survey was developed by the researchers and administered by the company. Respondents were compensated with cash or points towards gift cards. Painted Dog Research was not able to supply information regarding response rates or drop out rates. Data collection occurred between 2 and 6 August 2017 with a total of 1,044 completed responses. Data were post-weighted to the Australian Bureau of Statistics for age, sex, and metro/regional/remote populations across Australia. Ethics approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, project HEAG-H 101_2016.

Measures

All participants provided baseline demographic variables: age (coded 18–29, 30–49 and 50+), location, voting preference in the next federal election, highest level of education, marital status, number of people in their household, number of children aged under 18, current occupation, gross annual income, and a description of their local area (i.e. within a rural town or its surrounds, within a major regional centre, within a capital city, more than 5km from a town). Coding schemas for these variables are shown in Table 1.

Drinking frequency was measured by asking, "How often do you consume alcoholic drinks in a typical month?" (coded: daily, 4–6 times per week, 3 times a week, 2 times a week, once a week, 2–3 times a month, about once a month, less often than once a month, or I don't drink alcohol). Participants who reported consuming any alcohol were also asked, "Do you ever drink specifically to get drunk?" [coded: Yes, more than twice a week; Yes, twice a week; Yes, once a week; Yes, at least once a month; Yes, but less often than once a month; or No, never].

Participants were asked to respond "Yes" or "No" to whether they agreed with a set of possible responses to the question: "Why

do you think the alcohol industry donates to major political parties?" Items were: "To influence government policy"; "To support political parties to better address alcohol issues in the community"; "To encourage political parties to support the interests of the alcohol industry"; "To help to get the political party elected"; "Because the party represents the political beliefs of the industry body"; and "Other" (Free text entry). In order to compare results to a similar, regularly administered public opinion survey about alcohol and CPA, the items were based on questions asked by the FARE annual nationwide opinion poll. Participants could respond to multiple items and the order of item presentation was randomised for each participant.

Participants were further asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following three statements and the order of their presentation was randomised for each participant: "It is appropriate for political parties to accept donations from the alcohol industry"; "It is appropriate for politicians to attend events where the tickets are paid for by the alcohol industry, e.g. tickets to sporting grand finals"; and "The alcohol industry has too much influence on government policy and decision-making" [coded: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, or Strongly Agree].

Finally, participants were asked, "How long should a former public official or politician have to wait before they can be employed in a related industry or lobbying firm?" An example was given: "For example, a former liquor licensing minister working for the alcohol industry". Response options were available: "They shouldn't have to wait"; "Less than 4 years"; "4–5 years (the length of a term of government plus one year)"; and "They should never be allowed to be employed in a related industry or lobbying firm".

Analysis

All analyses were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 23.0.³⁸ Variables were categorically coded, so outlier testing was not conducted. Where applicable, missing data are reported for descriptive demographic variables (Table 1).

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all demographic variables (Table 1). Pearson chi-square analyses were used to compare endorsement of donation reasons across demographic variables, voting preference and alcohol consumption

behaviour. Donation reason "Other" (Free text entry) was excluded from analysis due to low cell count. Bonferroni adjusted p-values were computed due to the number of comparisons.

A series of three ordinal logistical regression models were computed to observe the association of demographic variables, voting preference, and alcohol consumption behaviour with the level of agreement to statements about alcohol industry political activity. Assumption testing indicated that the data were appropriate for these models, and indicated a good model fit.

Finally, a multinomial regression model was computed to observe the association of demographic variables, voting preference, and alcohol consumption behaviour with the dependent variable of: "How long should a former public official or politician have to wait before they can be employed in a related industry or lobbying firm?" Assumption testing indicated that the data were appropriate for this model and indicated a good model fit.

Results

Sample description

The panel sample was stratified according to age, gender, sociodemographic factors, location, and voting preferences, reported in Table 1. Respondents were most likely to be 50+ (42.5%) and Labor voters (31.4%), and living within a capital city (59.5%). There were no differences in the likelihood of being male or female. Self-reported alcohol consumption behaviour is reported in Table 2. Overall, 82.1% of the sample reported being alcohol consumers; 24.9% of all respondents and 43.6% of current consumers reported drinking with the aim of getting drunk.

Donation motives

The most commonly selected donation motives were to influence government policy (52.4%) and to support the interests of the alcohol industry (59.5%), see Table 3. Less frequently selected motives were to help address alcohol issues in the community (14.0%), to help get the party elected (20.7%), and because the party represents the beliefs of the industry (12.5%).

Pearson chi-square analyses were used to compare the frequency of reasons selected for political donation, across different demographic variables (Table 3). Participants

Table 1: Description of sample demographic variables.

	Freq (n)	%		Freq (n)	%
Age			Highest Education		
18 to 29	218	20.9	HDR/Post-Grad	140	13.4
30 to 49	382	36.6	Bachelor	258	24.7
50 +	444	42.5	Undergrad Diploma	58	5.6
Gender			Associate Diploma	105	10.1
Male	507	48.6	Skilled Vocation	166	15.9
Female	537	51.4	Basic Vocation	40	3.8
Location			High School	174	16.7
Melbourne	203	19.4	Incomplete High School	93	8.9
Rural Victoria	57	5.5	Don't Know	10	1.0
Hobart	11	1.1	Marital Status		
Rural Tasmania	12	1.1	Married	547	52.4
ACT	14	1.3	Single/Never Married	252	24.1
Perth	93	8.9	Divorced/Separated	99	9.5
Rural Western Australia	20	1.9	Widowed	32	3.1
Sydney	209	20.0	De-facto	112	10.7
Rural NSW	124	11.9	Don't Know	2	0.2
Brisbane	113	10.8	Occupation		
Rural Queensland	97	9.3	Professional/Managerial	234	22.4
Adelaide	68	6.5	Sales/Clerical	119	11.4
Rural South Australia	15	1.4	Technical/Skilled	105	10.1
Northern Territory	8	0.8	Unskilled/Labourer	52	5.0
Voting Preference			Other	52	5.0
Labor	328	31.4	Don't Know	6	0.6
Liberal	199	19.1	Missing	476	45.6
Nationals	32	3.1	Income		
Greens	91	8.7	Under \$15,000	45	4.3
One Nation	105	10.1	\$15,000 to under \$25,000	80	7.7
Nick Xenophon	52	5.0	\$25,000 to under \$35,000	96	9.2
Other/Independent	50	4.8	\$35,000 to under \$50,000	123	11.8
Don't Know	171	16.4	\$50,000 to under \$75,000	200	19.2
Area			\$75,000 to under \$100,000	145	13.9
>5km from nearest town	33	3.2	\$100,000 to under \$150,000	161	15.4
Within rural town	132	12.6	\$150,000 to under \$200,000	59	5.7
Within regional city	258	24.7	\$200,000 and over	31	3.0
With capital city	621	59.5	Refused	104	10.0
Kids under 18			No. of people in Household		
Yes	331	31.7	One	173	16.6
No	534	51.1	Two	401	38.4
Don't Know	2	0.2	Three	196	18.8
Missing	177	17.0	Four	176	16.9
			Five or More	94	9.0
			Don't Know	4	0.4

who were in younger age groups (18–29, 30–49) were less likely than older participants (50+) to select donation motives "to influence government policy" ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 8.84, p < 0.013$) and "to support the interests of the industry" ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 21.59, p < 0.013$). Females were also less likely than males to select the motive "to influence government policy" ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 19.22, p < 0.013$). Voting preference was significantly associated with the selection of the motive "to help address alcohol issues in the community",

with fewer Greens and One Nation voters and more Liberal and Nationals voters selecting this motive ($\chi^2_{(8)} = 20.21, p < 0.013$). Drinking frequency was not associated with the selection of any donation motives. However, participants who indicated drinking with the aim to get drunk were less likely to select the motive "to influence government policy" than people who never drink to get drunk ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 12.60, p < 0.013$).

Appropriateness of donations and industry involvement

More than half of the participants disagreed that it is appropriate for political parties to accept donations from the alcohol industry (54.5%) and for politicians to attend alcohol industry-hosted events (57.2%). Nearly one-third neither agreed nor disagreed

(29.1% and 25.8%, respectively), and only a small proportion of participants agreed with its appropriateness (16.4% and 17.0%, respectively). Almost half of participants (45.6%) agreed that the alcohol industry holds too much influence on government policy and decision-making, and only 14.2% disagreed (Table 4).

Three ordinal regression models were conducted to explore the association of gender, age, voting preference and frequency of alcohol consumption with the level of agreement to statements regarding acceptable alcohol industry political activity (Table 5).

Compared to participants aged 50+, those aged 18–29 and 30–49 were more likely to agree that political parties accepting industry donations and politicians attending industry-hosted events were appropriate. Further, they were less likely to agree with the statement that the alcohol industry held too much influence on government policy and decision-making (Table 5).

Compared to Labor voters, Liberal voters were more likely to agree that political parties accepting industry donations (17% vs. 23%; more than 50% disagreed from each voter group) and attending industry-hosted events were acceptable behaviours, whereas Greens voters were significantly more likely to disagree with this behaviour (66%). Similarly, Greens and Nick Xenophon voters were more likely to agree with the statement that the alcohol industry held too much influence on government policy and decision-making (Table 5).

Finally, more frequent drinkers were more likely to agree that political parties accepting industry donations and politicians attending industry-hosted events were acceptable behaviours, and more likely to disagree with the statement that the alcohol industry held too much influence on government policy and decision-making (Table 5).

Public opinion on revolving door

Nearly one-third of the participants agreed with the statement that ex-politicians and public officials should never be allowed to work for a related industry or lobbying firm (31.7%) and one-third agreed that a waiting time of 4–5 years (government term plus one year) should be enforced (Table 4).

A multinomial logistic regression was conducted to explore the association of gender, age, voting preference and frequency of alcohol consumption with the perceived appropriate waiting time before an ex-politician or public official should be able to work for industry or associated lobbyists (Table 5). Compared to the reference category of “they should never be allowed to be employed in a related industry or lobbying firm”, younger participants (aged 18–29) were

Table 2: Frequency of alcohol consumption and participants who report drinking specifically to get drunk.

How often do you consume alcoholic drinks in a typical month?	Frequency		Do you ever drink specifically to get drunk?	Frequency	
	Freq (n)	%		Freq (n)	%
Daily	72	6.9	Yes, more than twice a week	17	1.6
4 to 6 times per week	93	8.9	Yes, twice a week	25	2.4
3 times per week	117	11.2	Yes, once a week	36	3.4
2 times per week	121	11.6	Yes, at least once a month	43	4.1
Once a week	128	12.3	Yes, less often than once a month	139	13.3
2 to 3 times a month	113	10.8	No, never	597	57.2
About once a month	88	8.4	–		
Less than once a month	125	12.0	–		
I don't drink alcohol	187	17.9	Non-drinkers	187	17.9

Table 3: Chi square results cross-tabulating reason for donation and demographic variables.

	Reason for donation				
	To influence government policy	To help address alcohol issues in community	To support interests of the industry	To help get the party elected	Because party represents beliefs of industry
	%	%	%	%	%
Age					
18 to 29	44.0 ^a	16.5	51.4 ^a	23.4	16.5
30 to 49	52.6 ^a	14.7	54.7 ^a	18.8	13.1
50+	56.3 ^a	12.2	67.6 ^a	20.9	10.1
Gender					
Male	59.4 ^a	12.2	59.8	23.7	12.8
Female	45.8 ^a	15.6	59.2	17.9	12.3
Voting Preference					
Labor	50.3	15.5 ^a	59.1	23.5	13.1
Liberal	51.3	20.1 ^a	58.8	18.6	9.50
Nationals	43.8	21.9 ^a	71.9	28.1	18.8
Greens	49.5	8.8 ^a	65.9	23.1	19.8
One Nation	59.0	3.8 ^a	56.2	21.9	12.4
Nick Xenophon	65.4	13.5 ^a	65.4	15.4	9.6
Other/Independent	62.0	12.0 ^a	70.0	20.0	12.0
Don't Know	50.9	12.3 ^a	52.0	17.5	11.7
Drinking Frequency					
Daily	56.9	20.8	69.4	22.2	11.1
4 to 6 times per week	58.1	15.1	66.7	25.8	16.1
3 times per week	50.4	19.7	58.1	19.7	8.5
2 times per week	52.1	10.7	49.6	22.3	14.9
Once a week	48.4	14.1	59.4	16.4	18.8
2 to 3 times a month	45.1	8.8	60.2	16.8	9.7
About once a month	52.3	14.8	51.1	21.6	8.0
Less than once a month	49.6	12.8	60.0	24.0	9.6
I don't drink alcohol	58.3	12.8	62.6	19.8	13.9
Ever drink to get drunk					
Yes	41.9 ^a	17.7	53.8	19.6	15.0
Never ^b	55.1 ^a	12.7	61.0	21.4	11.1

Notes:
 a: Significant at Bonferroni adjusted p value: 0.013.
 b: Excludes non-drinkers.

more likely to endorse shorter/no waiting time response options. Liberal voters were more likely than other voters to agree that politicians should be allowed to work for a related industry or lobbying firm, either immediately, within four years, or after 4–5 years (Table 5). There was no significant association with consumption behaviour.

Discussion

This study aimed to gauge public sentiment in Australia around the issues of alcohol industry influence in health policy formulation, especially in relation to political donations¹² and the revolving door between industry and public service.²⁴ The findings

Table 4: All participants' acceptance of donations, industry involvement and revolving door of politicians into industry positions.

	Donations and Industry Involvement			Politician wait time
	Appropriate to accept donations	Appropriate to attend industry events	Too much industry influence	%
	%	%	%	
Agreement				
Strongly disagree	30.7	32.8	4.3	-
Disagree	23.8	24.4	9.9	-
Neither agree nor disagree	29.1	25.8	40.2	-
Agree	12.7	12.9	29.9	-
Strongly agree	3.7	4.1	15.7	-
Wait Time				
Should never be allowed	-	-	-	31.7
4-5 years	-	-	-	33.0
Less than 4 years	-	-	-	16.4
Shouldn't have to wait	-	-	-	18.9

Table 5: Results of Ordinal and Multinomial Regression Models.

	Ordinal Models		Multinomial Model			
	Appropriateness accepting donations	Appropriateness attending industry-hosted events	Too much industry influence	Shouldn't have to wait	Politician wait time ^a	
	Estimate (95% CI)		Exp(B) (95% CI)			
Age						
18 to 29	0.95 ^c (0.65–1.26)	1.18 ^c (0.87–1.49)	-0.69 ^c (-1.00– -0.38)	3.61 ^c (2.14–6.07)	3.59 ^c (2.09–6.18)	2.47 ^c (1.54–3.98)
30 to 49	0.35 ^c (0.09–0.61)	0.49 ^c (0.23–0.75)	-0.48 ^c (-0.74– -0.22)	1.02	1.04	1.07
50 +	b	b	b	b	b	b
Gender						
Male	0.10	-0.02	0.27	0.84	1.28	1.13
Female	b	b	b	b	b	b
Voting Preference						
Liberal	0.58 ^c (0.26–0.90)	0.50 ^c (0.18–0.82)	-0.31	1.91 ^c (1.12–3.25)	2.10 ^c (1.22–3.64)	1.89 ^c (1.17–3.04)
Nationals	0.042	0.06	-0.31	0.58	1.34	1.70
Greens	-0.59 ^c (-1.02– -0.16)	-0.52 ^c (-0.96– -0.09)	0.55 ^c (0.12–0.98)	0.87	1.27	1.63
One Nation	0.13	0.11	0.16	0.72	0.49	0.53
Nick Xenophon	-0.27	-0.31	0.79 ^c (0.25–1.33)	0.71	0.49	1.87
Other/Independent	-0.05	-0.18	0.12	0.85	1.84	1.78
Don't Know	0.05	0.14	-0.10	1.00	0.84	1.06
Labor	b	b	b	b	b	b
How often do you consume alcoholic drinks in a typical month?						
Daily	0.59	0.71 ^c (0.20–1.22)	-0.51	2.13	2.39	1.47
4 to 6 times per week	0.98 ^c (0.52–1.43)	1.08 ^c (0.62–1.54)	-0.56 ^c (-1.01– -0.09)	1.05	1.68	1.13
3 times per week	0.86 ^c (0.44–1.29)	0.69 ^c (0.26–1.11)	-0.43	1.27	2.26	1.08
2 times per week	0.67 ^c (0.25–1.10)	0.80 ^c (0.37–1.22)	-0.76 ^c (-1.18– -0.33)	1.26	1.99	1.06
Once a week	0.89 ^c (0.47–1.30)	0.96 ^c (0.55–1.38)	-1.05 ^c (-1.47– -0.63)	1.91	1.95	1.23
2 to 3 times a month	0.34	0.32	-0.45	1.56	2.05	0.98
About once a month	0.40	0.50	-0.59 ^c (-1.05– -0.12)	1.31	1.61	0.81
Less than once a month	0.18	-0.05	-0.36	0.98	0.97	0.82
I don't drink alcohol	b	b	b	b	b	b
Model Summary - Pseudo R-Square						
Cox and Snell	0.087	0.107	0.076	0.100		
Nagelkerke	0.093	0.113	0.081	0.108		

Notes:

a: Reference category: they should never be allowed to be employed in a related industry or lobbying firm.

b: Reference category for predictor.

c: Significant at Bonferroni adjusted p value 0.013.

show that more than half the respondents in this survey consider the alcohol industry's donation motives to be self-serving, and similarly think it is inappropriate for political parties to accept alcohol industry donations or for politicians to attend alcohol industry-hosted events.

Nearly half of the people surveyed believe that the alcohol industry makes political donations to influence policy or to support the interests of the industry: this is similar to FARE's estimation of 55%.³⁷ Similar concerns have been voiced by key stakeholders in relation to gambling.³⁹ The purpose of political donations is increasingly coming under scrutiny across the spectrum of political activity and there have been moves in some states to ban specific donors including the alcohol industry. While this reflects a political awareness of the issue in some jurisdictions, it is also clear that political parties desire funding for their election campaigns. There will no doubt be substantial variations within parties in regard to appropriate responses to political donations and how they should best be dealt with. Of course, this is also contrasted with the importance of being in government. While voter cynicism presents a problem for government authenticity, a degree of passivity and trust in politicians and decision-makers has always been relied upon.⁴⁰ However, a range of recent political developments – not least in countries such as the US and UK – suggests that voter cynicism might result in political polarisation in the age of the internet and decline of traditional media.

This study found variations in opinion between people of different gender, age and voter groups. In general, the younger the age group, the more likely they were to believe it is appropriate for the alcohol industry to make political donations and for politicians to attend industry-hosted events. This could reflect a lower interest in politics in general in young people or be more specific to alcohol in comparison to other dangerous consumption industries. Previous research has identified that people generally become more interested in politics as they age.⁴⁰ Similarly, some young people have also traditionally been seen as less cynical about politics, potentially reflecting a developmental stage when many are still focused on developing their own independent identities and careers. While some will still be cynical of political motives, it appears likely that they will become more

cynical with age.⁴¹ It may also be that people are less critical of the alcohol industry than issues such as gambling⁴² or climate change, as alcohol use is uniquely linked with rites of passage in many cultures. Our results align with prior research showing that older Australians are more likely to support alcohol controls.³⁴

Heavier and more frequent drinkers were also less critical of the alcohol industry's financial ties to politicians than lighter drinkers and abstainers. Similarities can be observed in previous public opinion research on alcohol control policies that shows that older Australians⁴³ and lighter drinkers³⁶ are generally more supportive of restrictions around issues such as legal drinking age, road safety and outlet density. It is unclear why frequent drinkers might be more trusting of the alcohol industry. It may be that harbouring doubts around the motives of the alcohol industry might create cognitive dissonance in terms of then buying their products. An alternative explanation might be that heavy drinkers are more likely to use the alcohol industry framing of the issue, to be around the rights of drinkers to readily access alcohol as a personal freedom, allowing them to avoid any dissonance.⁴⁴

This study also includes voting preference as an independent variable for the endorsement of the financial and working relationships between the alcohol industry and government, political parties or political staffers. We found that Liberal and National voters are slightly more trusting around the motives of the alcohol industry than other voters. Compared to Labor voters, they are also more likely to endorse financial CPA, whereas respondents who vote for the minor parties, such as Nick Xenophon and One Nation, do not. This may well be related to the nature of the political parties' ideologies, especially given that the Liberal/National parties often align strongly to supporting less regulation and more of a focus on personal responsibility.

While more than half of the respondents did not approve of the alcohol industry's current degree of political influence, the findings of our study also suggest that there might be demographic differences in awareness of CPA. There may therefore be a rationale to inform public opinion with CPA awareness campaigns. Previous research has found youth to have varying levels of success with critically evaluating online information.⁴⁵

When maturing, people encounter more opportunities to develop their information evaluation skills.⁴⁵ Media literacy is defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication".⁴⁶ Education interventions to improve media literacy could lead to more civic engagement and higher levels of political participation.^{47,48} As a part of a comprehensive approach, incorporating CPA education in such programs could contribute to better-informed public opinion around issues such as the acceptability of donations and the revolving door in these groups.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. The use of an online panel survey means that certain groups in the community might be under-represented, although population weightings were employed to minimise the impact. Panel surveys are ultimately self-selecting and while there are some methods employed in the current design to reduce obvious bias, the method will always miss a certain proportion of the population. On the other hand, using the panel allowed us to compare to the only existing survey in the field, which is conducted by FARE on an annual basis.

Conclusion

The alcohol industry employs CPA strategies successfully to delay and prevent effective, evidence-based alcohol policies globally. The majority of respondents reported that the alcohol industry's motivations for political donations are self-serving and nearly half believed that the alcohol industry has too much influence on government policy, suggesting current political behaviour is out of step with the Australian public's expectations. The majority also disapproved of standard industry CPA strategies such as political donations, politicians attending industry-hosted events, and revolving door politics, although there are sections of the community who appear less aware of the alcohol industry's CPA strategies and their implications. Measures to address these concerns might include a substantial review of the laws governing industry-government relationships, and programs to develop further public information and awareness.

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