



## ELECTORAL REGULATION RESEARCH NETWORK/DEMOCRATIC AUDIT OF AUSTRALIA JOINT WORKING PAPER SERIES

### **ENGAGING YOUTH – STRATEGIES FOR CREATING INTERESTED AND INFORMED VOTERS<sup>1</sup>**

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**This synopsis provides a summary of the issues identified or raised by attendees of the workshop on Engaging Young Voters held at the ACU on 22-23<sup>rd</sup> August 2019 and which was co-sponsored by the ERRN and how these informed the working paper below.**

There were a range of issue identified by participants pertaining to young voters that were common themes throughout the various presentations to the workshop. These included the fact that while young people are engaged and interested in issues they see as relevant to their lives, they are less inclined to participate in ‘traditional’ political activities – such as joining political parties. It was noted that increasing numbers of young people are reporting that they wouldn’t vote if voting wasn’t compulsory. While party politics still dominates the Australian political landscape to many young people traditional parties are irrelevant to them and the issues that concern them. While all these issues are of concern, the workshop’s focus was to try to reach a common understanding of how we can best ensure that young people understand enough to become informed voters.

The issue of civics education was raised – and while some individual schools do a good job, it seems that the extent to which this education helps voting age youth to understand the mechanics of how to vote correctly – to ensure that their vote counts – is not standardised across the country. Indeed as reported in the synopsis under, many young people report being scared and ill-informed about how to lodge a valid vote. As the following precis suggests, young people report that they are not prepared for voting by the time they leave school. The paper below argues that it is time we listened to young people, and actively engage and work with them to uncover strategies that will enable them to be confident and informed voters.

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## **Abstract**

In 2019 the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) reported on calls for greater youth engagement with political institutions. While their final report presented a particular viewpoint – one that maintains the importance of political parties in our democratic system - this paper delves deeper. Utilising the 97 submissions to the JSCEM and additional testimony across four public hearings, we report on what young people themselves believe their democratic responsibility is and what their level of engagement should be. We argue their testimony provides an important insight and crucial information that will be of use not just to academics but also to electoral commissions interested in encouraging and engaging young voters.

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## **Introduction**

The nature and extent of youth’s engagement with the political process represents a key concern for Western democracies, and occupies a central place in scholarly and policy debates

on youth agency (Howe 2010; Martin 2014:1). There is considerable evidence to support the notion that young people no longer see the relevance of engaging in traditional forms of political engagement – voting included. This position is partially motivated by a growing disillusionment with the formal institutions that represent our parliamentary style of democracy. A survey on youth engagement conducted in 2018 by the YMCA found that ‘youth dissatisfaction towards the structures of Government [is] at an all-time high’ as there is a growing consensus that ‘parliament [does not] act in the best interests of young people’ (Canberra Hearing 2018: 27). The 2016-19 Australian Electoral Study summary seems to confirm the trend finding that ‘[y]oung people are less likely to vote, to join a political party, or to engage in interest groups than at any time since democratization’.<sup>2</sup> This raises interesting questions, in both policy and practice about the nature of engagement, and the capacity of the current systems to engage with youth in ways that reflect their views on democratic participation. It also suggests a disconnect between the values and concerns held by young Australians and their elected representatives.

While the reported level of trust in government has declined, young people still care about political issues they perceive as relevant to their lives. In the lead-up to the 2019 federal election, school age people took to the streets to protest inaction on climate change (Feldman 2019). Likewise, in 2017 a record number of new enrolments were recorded by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) in the lead up to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey. The participation rate of those aged 18-19 years was 78 percent (Oliver 2017). Their activism about issues they care about and that relate to them is a positive sign that young people remain concerned about the future of their country and the direction it should be taking. Ensuring that their voices are heard at the formal institutional level, and that they are given opportunities to exert their agency in formal decision-making processes are important considerations for formal institutions seeking to encourage active engagement.

One mooted way this might be achieved came from The Greens’ 2018 Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill. In response, the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) conducted public hearings and called for submissions on the key proposition of the bill which was to lower the voting age for Australian elections and allow participation to be voluntary until the age of 18 when Australia’s compulsory system would come into effect. A total of 97 submissions were received by the JSCEM. Four public hearings were held in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. Following these consultations, the JSCEM recommended that the private members bill not be passed citing key concerns about ‘informed voter’ capacity and the ‘voluntary nature’ of the proposed youth engagement.

The following analysis captures the voices of the youth who participated in these hearings. Due to word constraints we concentrate on three aspects: capacity, knowledge and agency.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://australianelectionstudy.org/voter-studies/>

## **Capacity**

The young people who attended the hearings care about politics and want to participate. Yet many believe that they don't currently have the capacity to do this in an informed way due to a lack of training about how the system works.

The need for improved civics education was echoed across all four hearings. The testimony received indicate a considerable degree of reflection on the obligations and responsibilities inherent in voting and an awareness of the need for further education regarding the technicalities involved. Kate Connolly (ACT hearing: 3) who is a member of the group, Young Women Speak Out, told the committee that 'young people [were] uncomfortable [with the idea of voting] because of their lack of education'. She noted that 'having to completely learn how to vote from that age [18] could be very overwhelming, whereas having the opportunity to hear about it within their education as 16- to 17-year-olds would probably make them feel more comfortable with prioritising that responsibility once they become 18 (p 4). This view was reflected by the comments of the Youth Governor of NSW, YMCA Sophie MacDonald, (p 26) who argued that '[t]he introduction of lowering the voting age must be complemented with increased civic education, particularly in senior years of high school ...In New South Wales we did the civic education in year 6. That was a really effective program. But as I entered high school it began to become less important'. In regards capacity Stefaan Bruce-Truglio from the Youth Affairs Council of WA (p 16), told the committee that the key to a successful implementation of the proposed change was education, '[y]oung people may have [the capacity to make informed decisions and votes] but they may not also have that knowledge of exactly how the system works. Then, when they turn 18, they're dropped into this system where they don't know exactly what's going on'. At the Victorian hearings Wren Gillett, a member of the Victorian Student Representative Council, which is a group of elected students who represent their fellow students across Victoria suggested that, 'I think that the lack of participation and education for young people around politics definitely [increases]... the apathy and cynicism that young people are feeling. Australian politics isn't... taught at my school'. Ms Gillett went on to explain that she'd learned about politics at home. At the Queensland hearing, student Michael Buckley told the committee that being compelled to vote at an earlier age would be stressful, but if it was introduced 'you would need to teach them what it actually means, what it's all about, what they're electing... who they're electing, what their job is and what they do, because a lot of people don't even know that' (p 14).

## **Knowledge**

We now turn to the level of knowledge young people feel they possess about the system of government.

At the Canberra hearing, one student highlighted a lack of awareness regarding access to political representatives explaining 'I just found out that you can actually contact your local ministers if you have an issue... that is something I have never known' (Canberra Hearing: 2). Similarly, another respondent suggested that what is important is not an understanding of the

role of the House of Representatives or the role of the Senate but rather more awareness of ‘how to access political information’ and how to determine whether the information they are reading is biased (Canberra Hearing: 29). The responses to questions about knowledge suggests that understanding the abstract structures of the system is *less* important to young people than practical information about *how* to participate in the political process. At the Melbourne hearing, when asked about the receipt of information from the formal structures and institutions and its relationship to the responsibilities of informed voters, one young person explained ‘as things stand right now, I have yet to vote myself, but I haven’t received any information about what the voting process is, how to vote. It’s made me very nervous about my first time voting’ (Melbourne Hearing: 19). In response to this perceived lack of information the participant viewed the proposal to lower the voting age as a potential panacea suggesting that ‘if we lower the voting age we may actually include some educational material with instructions’ (Melbourne Hearing: 20).

The general consensus around the voluntary voting proposal amongst youth, was that it would allow them to gain experience and awareness through active engagement. As one young person explained ‘it’s almost like a transition phase to compulsory voting and knowing that they have to vote’ (Canberra Hearing: 3). She continued, ‘it’s a trial period’, that would provide opportunities for youth to demonstrate their political agency whilst building their knowledge of the structures central to the Australian democracy. Another student echoed this sentiment suggesting that ‘having this transition phase will benefit a lot of people, especially if they haven’t had the opportunity to learn all of what they need to in school’ (Brisbane Hearing: 28). Broadly speaking, what these responses demonstrate is that current processes for informing citizens on their responsibilities do little to encourage youth’s engagement with the formal political structures. In addition, they suggest that youth are motivated to engage with the political process in informed ways, however this willingness is tempered by the current structural factors.

While young people are responsive and well informed on issues, including climate change and same sex marriage, their testimony indicated that their understanding of institutional structures remains a significant gap. The youth testimony reveals a sense of insecurity amongst youth with respect to their capacity to engage with the parliamentary voting system. Concerns about their ability to make *informed* choices were prominent at the hearings, as were requests for more targeted education that would provide guidance on how to effectively engage with political structures and institutions. While it was argued that civics education taught at school was critical (Youth Affairs Council of South Australia), lowering the voting age and allowing voluntary voting until the age of 18 was argued by others as an additional way of reinforcing the reason and value of this education and would provide young people with an additional reason to engage with it. According to representatives from the Victorian Youth Parliament, at the moment, formal civics education was ‘non-existent’ but should include media training to allow young people to better identify ‘fake news’ and media bias. The submissions and testimony reveal a sense of disillusionment amongst youth with respect to their ability to actively engage in the social and political discourse. Currently, only ‘one in five (19.8%) young

people between the ages 15-24 feel able to have a say in their communities about issues that are important to them' (YMCA Australia: Submission 73).

## **Agency**

The testimonies to the committee highlight a growing consensus amongst youth and their advocates that, governments and electoral institutions have a responsibility to create ways for youth to, 'participate in the [democratic] process' as 'the ability to have a voice and to have a say in politics is really important' (Acheson: 16). This sentiment was echoed by Ms. Neumueller who explained that 'by making [voting] optional for those first two years... you are really empowering young people to have a say and think about how [politics] impacts them (Melbourne Hearing: 34). Yet currently, the ways that we expect young people to engage with the political system fails to reflect their political agency and the centrality of issue politics. As Dickson notes, the emphasis on agency as reflected through active participation in voting means that 'as things stand right now, [youth] are just pushed off the deep end and expected to sink or swim' (Melbourne Hearing: 23). The presence of diverse ideas about what it means to possess political agency within Australian society, particularly amongst the youth demographic, suggests that new engagement strategies are required at the institutional level, which balance new representations of agency with the current demands of the political system.

Amongst the youth participants, the importance of being able to demonstrate agency and have their voices heard was tied directly to an awareness that political decisions made now will impact on their futures. As one youth participant explained 'it's crucial for young people to have a voice in today's society as we're the next generation and should have the right to choose a representative in government who will work with us to address today's issues (Perth Hearing: 5). Moreover, there was a consensus amongst young people that they currently exercise agency within the social sphere, therefore, should be given the opportunity to contribute to decisions that are made at the political level that could potentially impact them. As one student explained 'already young people have made significant contributions to our economy and our national identity' (Perth Hearing: 9). Similarly, another highlighted that 'youths can now get jobs, pay tax[es] and leave school. [They] are heavily involved in political news and want to voice opinions regarding laws and issues' (Perth Hearing: 8). As evidenced by these testimonies, youth have the capacity and the political will to engage with political issues and ideas. However, as demonstrated throughout the paper youth's agency is constrained, not by an unwillingness to engage, but by the strict procedural rules that inform and dictate our relationship with formal political institutions. Furthermore, as the hearings and final decision of the committee to reject the proposal to lower the voting age suggests, there is little political will within the formal institutions to consider reforming how individuals engage with these structures.

## **Conclusion**

In its report to Parliament the JSCEM acknowledged the strong impression given by those attending the hearings that lowering the voting age may improve political engagement.

However, they stood firm in their opposition due to a lack of ‘empirical evidence’. Committee members noted the declining levels of trust for political institutions yet remarked on the ‘minimal understanding of political parties’ or what they stand for. Overall the committee expressed concern that allowing people between the ages of 16-18 to participate in elections only if they wanted to, potentially created two classes of citizens.

We suggest the committee’s response highlights the disconnect between elected officials and the people they represent. There is a strong body of evidence that membership of political parties is declining (Loader et al 2014: 143). While most Members of Parliament belong to parties, most Australians do not. That trend is likely to become more pronounced overtime. Translating declining party membership to mean that young people are disinterested in political issues is drawing a long bow. Overall, the committee’s report seems to highlight a distinction between seeing youth and hearing their views.

There is a growing disconnect between the established political system and viewpoints that remain wedded to the idea of catch-all parties. The view that engagement with or knowledge about political parties and their platforms is linked to democratic values more broadly misses the point. We would argue that as well as schools, the nation’s various electoral commissions could have an important role to play. Despite the obvious sensitivities, young people need more than reminders about registration, and information about key dates, certainly more than ‘a birthday card’ as reported by one young person attending the Melbourne Hearing (Dickson: 20). Electoral Commissions are well placed to be able to bridge the gap that currently exists in regard to civic education and embrace less risk averse strategies than many currently do. While acknowledging that this will be difficult, and that it is crucial that they remain non-partisan, perhaps their mandate should be broadened to enable them to work with young people through education departments to uncover strategies and issues that might better resonate with youth, to produce civic training aids which help reinforce why voting matters.

The dismissal by the committee of this Bill is arguably a lost opportunity. The assertion that allowing voluntary voting for youth aged 16 to 18 years creates two classes of citizens, dismissed other possibilities such as allowing them to register earlier to vote if they felt ready to participate through the compulsory system. To be successful though, civic education across Australia needs to be significantly improved and standardised. From the evidence provided at the hearings it seems clear that there is no standardised civic education currently offered in Australia. Some youth report learning about politics at home but for those living in disinterested households, in an era where institutional trust is declining and fake news is proliferating, we argue routinized civics training that provides people with fundamental knowledge should be as much a part of our electoral mechanics as the other conveniences long associated with compulsory voting: mobile booths, pre-polling, postal voting, and Saturday elections.

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