



Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

**Submission in response to
*Electoral Reform Green Paper -
Strengthening Australia's Democracy***

December 2009

Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's non-government youth affairs peak body, which seeks to represent young people aged 12-25 and the sector that supports them.

AYAC boasts a growing membership of State and Territory Youth Peak Bodies, National Youth Organisations, researchers, policy makers and young people themselves, who are all passionate about creating an Australian community that supports and promotes the positive development of young people.

AYAC aims to:

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia.
- To advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights, and provides justice for all
- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia, at both a national and an international level
- Promote the elimination of poverty and to promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged.
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society, to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society
- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to Governments and the broader community
- Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation within the youth affairs field

AYAC and its members are dedicated to working for and with young people and seek to ensure they have access to mechanisms which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

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Introduction

AYAC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to a national discussion surrounding how levels of Government can work to develop a more robust electoral process, which community members feel they own and actively engage with.

In preparing a response to the *Electoral Reform Green Paper – Strengthening Australia’s Democracy*, AYAC is conscious that a number State and Territory jurisdictions have undertaken similar inquiries dealing with predominantly similar issues proposed in the Green Paper.

Therefore AYAC’s response is informed primarily by submissions and consultations carried out by State and Territory Youth Peak Bodies, as well as from the Coalition’s Policy Advisory Council which is a representative group of young people and National organisations from around the country.

Our response focuses primarily on the concept of lowering the voting age, as well as increased civic education and the development of a commitment to re-engage young people with the Australian electoral process.

Extending the Franchise

Assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child¹

AYAC believes young people are vital contributors to the vibrancy of the Australian community and as such we support the lowering of the voting age at all levels of Government to the age of 16.

The lowering of the voting age will strengthen the Australian political process and have flow on effects for both young people, elected officials and the community, including:

- Young people having an increased understanding of and engagement with the political process
- The fostering of a greater relationship between young people and elected representatives
- Greater and more meaningful opportunities for young people to voice their concerns about issues that impact on them
- A greater impetus for elected officials to ensure they are adequately addressing young people's needs
- The development of long term positive electoral habits in young people which would increase their engagement with the system in the future

Debunking the Apathy Myth

We believe that it is a myth that young people are apathetic and lack the maturity to contribute their views through the franchise as to who they want to elect to make decisions in their respective communities and nationally.

Many 16-17 year olds are actively engaged in the Australian community and are working in a range of organisations to ensure the positive development of a nation for now and into the future.

At last year's Youth 2020 Summit, one hundred delegates from across the nation were empowered to provide the Federal Government with advice on how to, amongst other things, develop Australia's Governance and create a more vigorous electoral system.

As part of their final Communiqué the young people provided unequivocal support for the lowering of the voting age saying:

Further, to build a more participatory 2020, the age at which people are eligible to vote must be lowered to 16. 16 year olds work, pay

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

income tax, pay GST, drive, and can join the army. They must be enfranchised so they can have a say in Government policies that affect them²

What we see from examples such as these is that there is a consistent message coming from young people; that they want the ability to vote and have the opportunity to influence decision-making processes.

Mental Competency

One of the salient arguments against young people being extended the vote is that they lack the cognitive ability to vote in a free and informed manner. This argument is incongruent with rights that have already extended to young people in the Australian community.

In a submission to the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ) notes that young people demonstrate significant skill in dealing with and responding to complex situations and scenarios, they note:

Young people pay taxes, 17 year olds can join the armed forces, can be locked up in adult prisons, may be parents or carers of children, can drive cars, are held criminally responsible for their actions, can take legal action or have action taken against them, can fly a plane, may hold a firearms license, can provide evidence in court, can sign a lease, get married ... If we can ask young people to die for their country, allow them to take civil actions, or expect them to be legally responsible for their actions and the effect they have on others, it is unreasonable to deny them a vote in who governs. It is time therefore to lower the voluntary voting age to 16, with the compulsory voting age remaining at 18³

As part of consultations facilitated by the Youth Affairs Coalition of the ACT in 2006, young people were asked whether or not they believed they and their peers had the ability to make complex decisions. Overwhelmingly young people responded in the positive with 75% of those consulted indicating they felt they would have the capacity to make decisions, including decisions that determined elected officials⁴.

Similarly, in 2006 a report tabled by the Joint Standing Committee in Federal Parliament found that young people had considerable ability to engage with the political system in a critical and unbiased manner, saying:

² 2020 Youth Communiqué, 2008, www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/youth_summit_commique.pdf, p. 8

³ Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, 2005, *Voices and Votes: An Inquiry into Young People Engaging in Democracy*, p.5

⁴ Youth Affairs Coalition of the ACT, 2006, *Submission to the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People Inquiry into Lowering the Voting Age in the ACT*, p. 3

2.48 *If the students canvassed in the course of this inquiry are typical of their generation, then it seems that for young people today, not only are they media savvy, but civic engagement for them is not simply a matter of blindly following their parents' footsteps. Nor do young people digest news and current affairs uncritically*⁵

There is also significant empirical evidence to suggest that young people have the cognitive ability to make complex decisions and solve difficult problems.

A study by Dawson *et al* found that from as early as the age of thirteen, adolescents have acquired the major components needed to begin formation of a *mature political self*⁶ while Furnham and Stacey suggest fifteen year olds can take into account the long-term impacts of political activity whilst understanding the philosophic principles for making political judgments⁷.

At the very least it must be recognised that adolescents make complex decisions on a daily basis about their health and wellbeing, their peers, their education or training, and many have significant involvement in non-government organisations for example many young people hold board level positions in youth service organisations around the country.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT notes that *individual mental competency is not taken into account for those over the age 18*⁸, AYAC believes that it is unjust to place such a test on young people who have already demonstrated a commitment and desire to exercise their fundamental right to have a say in decisions that impact on them.

Educating & Connecting

A study by Manning and Ryan found that *while young people felt obliged to participate in the democratic process they felt powerless to be able to engage with the process*⁹. This lack of power makes many young people feel disenchanting, which is demonstrated by low engagement levels. The lowering of the voting age is an important step to re-ignite young people's interest in the electoral system.

In 2006, the Power Inquiry in the United Kingdom found that the argument against lowering the voting age due to already low engagement levels in younger age groups should be denounced saying:

We have also heard the claim that reducing the voting age to 16 will drive down turnout figures as the youngest age groups have lowest turnouts. This argument suggests that a significant reform should be rejected on the grounds that its results may embarrass politicians and

⁵ <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/education/>

⁶ Dawson R, Prewitt K, Dawson K, Political Socialization, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1977.

⁷ Furnham A & Stacey B *Young People's Understanding of Society* (1991) pp19-34. Also

⁸ Youth Affairs Coalition of the ACT, 2006, Submission to the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People Inquiry into Lowering the Voting Age in the ACT, p. 3

⁹ Manning B. & Ryan, R, 2004, Youth and Citizenship, The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme

*reinforce the widespread view that the party and electoral system are disliked. This cannot be accepted...*¹⁰

But lowering the voting age alone will be not enough to engage and re-engage young people with the political system. Unfortunately many young people do feel disenfranchised by the current electoral process. This is due to numerous factors including a general mistrust of politicians, changes to policy impacting on young people and a lack of consultation.

Throughout a young person's development it is imperative they have access to ongoing education mechanisms that encourage their understanding of the political process. We believe Australia's democracy would benefit if such a mechanism were to be afforded to all enrolled voters.

In Germany, where young people have a graduated right to vote in elections, it has been found that turnouts in elections can actually be boosted with a lowered voting age. Voter turnout in 16-18 year olds is significantly higher than that of the 18-24 age group¹¹. This success in increasing voter engagement has been attributed to a sustained public awareness campaign targeted at young people informing them of their right to and responsibility of voting.

Targeted Approach to Educating Disadvantaged Constituencies

The Green Paper indicates that there are several constituency groups that consistently demonstrate low enrolment rates and voter turnout, including young people, indigenous populations, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups (CALD) and transient populations

It is not acceptable to simply ignore this anomaly. Targeted approaches are needed to increase understanding and engagement as well as increased flexibility to meet the needs of mobile population groups.

Young people are not a homogenous group and must be targeted in different ways. Some suggestions from AYAC to increase voter engagement in identified needs areas include:

- Partnering with non-government service providers to educate and enrol young people who are experiencing difficulty or are at risk
- Introducing peer-based education process where young people inform other young people about the significance and importance of electoral commitment
- Expansion of and greater support for programs including *Rock the Vote* & *RockEnrol*

¹⁰ Power Inquiry, 2006 Power to the People – The Report of Power: An Independent inquiry into British Democracy, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust

¹¹ Vote at 16, 16 for 16 - 16 reasons for Votes at 16, 2008, <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/16for16.pdf>, p. 7

- Greater support for non-government programs that educate young people about the electoral and political process including the YMCA Youth Parliament initiative
- Expansion of civics education programs in the curriculum for all students beyond the current Year 10 benchmark
- A greater obligation being placed on elected officials to connect with educational institutions, workplaces and services where young people congregate, to increase young people connection to those elected to represent them
- The introduction of first time voter election day enrolment¹² to allow young people and other first time voters to register to vote at polling booths on the day of the election rather than the current requirement that only allows first-time voters to enrol by 8pm on the day the writs are issued
- Partnering with educational institutions to allow young people to be emailed enrolment and civics information from the AEC via their school email

However the significant impasse in our current strategies is the lack of a consistent communication mechanism of education in the online sphere, demonstrated clearly by the lack of ability for potential electors to enrol online. Young people are increasing engaging with social, political and cultural issues through the use of Information Communication Technology¹³. It is here that strategies will reach the largest number of young people and assist with connecting them not only to issues but the political and electoral process as well¹⁴

Conclusion

AYAC believes that young people are experts in their own experience and not only have the cognitive capacity to make decisions but can actively and critically engage with the Australian political system.

In introducing strategies to increase young people engagement with the political process, including the extension of the franchise to young people, we demonstrate that we as a nation are committed to ensuring young people have a place in community decision making processes and at all levels of government.

This debate should not be led by arguments that diminish young people, instead it should be led by a strengths based approach that recognises young people's abilities, unique perspective and ultimately their demonstration of a desire to be actively involved.

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage¹⁵

¹² Election Day Voting is in practice in Canada and in the District of Columbia in the USA

¹³ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, 2006, Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education, <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/education/>, p. 21

¹⁴ Collin, P., 2008, Young people Imagining Democracy: Literature Review

¹⁵ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>