

Australia's Democratic Report Card – Young People Assess Democracy In Australia¹

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In representative democracies governments derive their legitimacy from the popular vote. However, without compulsory franchise it is often quite common for governments to be elected with near to or less than half of citizens voting. In the US for example in 1996 when President Clinton was elected only 49 per cent of the voting age population voted and in 2000 the election of President G.W. Bush saw only 51.3 per cent of the voting age population cast a vote.²

This picture is complicated further by a study of the demographics of voting. Where voting is not compulsory, some groups, such as less-educated or poorer citizens, are less likely to vote.³ One group who tend to be less civically engaged are youth. For example, in the last General Election in Britain only 39 per cent of youth voted (by comparison with 59 per cent of the general population)⁴ and in the US in the 2004 elections the turnout, at only 47 per cent, was considered unusually high.⁵ This lack of participation by young people has been considered a problem in many nations. Not only is a democracy where significant demographics do not vote arguably more tenuous than one that represents all, but by not participating young people are disenfranchising themselves.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has estimated that around 95 per cent of the eligible Australian population as a whole are enrolled to vote. This high figure is undoubtedly due to Australia's compulsory registration and franchise. However the AEC have also identified that younger Australians are less likely to be enrolled to vote. Their estimate is that around 80 per cent of eligible Australians between 18 and 25 are currently registered on the Australian Electoral Roll.⁶

The Youth Electoral Study (YES) is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the AEC. Its primary aim is to investigate why many younger Australians tend to be disinclined to enrol to vote. In this context YES also aims to study the attitudes of young Australians toward politics, democracy and participation more generally. Whereas research regarding these issues has been conducted in many other nations YES is the first major study of its kind in Australia.⁷ Consequently YES aims at gathering benchmarking statistics and information as well as probing more deeply into some of the significant issues uncovered.

YES combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Our qualitative study takes the form of focus group research in 16 disparate Commonwealth Electoral Divisions across Australia. Within these divisions we are conducting focus groups with young

people between 15 and 25 from a range of schools, universities and welfare organizations. Our most comprehensive research so far is within schools, where we have interviewed groups of students in years 11 and 12. Within our divisions 364 students from 55 schools from the government, Catholic and Independent sectors have participated. Research is on-going.

Our quantitative research so far takes the form of a survey distributed in 2004 to classes of Year 12 English students. Surveys were sent to 208 schools and we received responses from 155, a response rate of 75%. The total number of surveys received was 4855. This survey comprised 47 questions and was designed to be completed within a single class period.

This report for the Democratic Audit of Australia uses findings gleaned so far from YES' continuing investigations into young people, voting and politics. It aims to provide a general introduction to YES and a summary of some of our findings to date. In doing so it focuses on assessing aspects of Australia's strengths and weaknesses as a democratic society by asking two questions:

- ❖ what prevents or inhibits young people from democratic participation in Australia?
- ❖ in what ways do young people participate democratically in Australia?

First it must be noted that many young participants in YES claimed to be bored by politics and disassociated from democratic participation. Our quantitative study, that is our survey, found that almost two out of three students considered voting boring and slightly more than one half considered it to be a hassle.⁸ Our focus group interviews gave us the opportunity to explore this finding. Here we asked participants if they were interested in politics. Although some expressed interest we were more frequently met with vehement negative responses. Most told is that they did not discuss politics or consider it personally important.

Whereas 87 per cent of survey participants indicated they would vote after they turned 18 this was largely due to voting's compulsory nature. When asked if they would vote if voting were not compulsory only 50 per cent indicated they would.⁹ This quantitative finding is supported by our qualitative study.

During focus groups the majority of interviewees, when asked if they were intending to enrol to vote, said that they were. There were some who were looking forward to voting and who considered it important and worthwhile. However the reason most gave for this positive intention was that not enrolling was illegal and punishable by fines.

When asked if they would enrol and vote if voting were not compulsory around one third indicated they would not enrol or vote and about another third indicated that they would enrol and vote 'sometimes'. Many who reported they would not vote or regularly vote said they did not see the efficacy of voting. Some went so far as to describe voting as a waste of time, of a Saturday and of paper.

When asked in our survey if they considered they had sufficient knowledge to understand political issues, parties and voting only around half of our respondents indicated they had.¹⁰ Some interviewees in our focus groups drew attention to their lack of knowledge about politics and voting, identifying this lack of knowledge as a factor contributing to their personal lack of interest and participation.

We asked young people in both our survey and our focus groups why it was that they had such negative views of politics, and such a lack of trust and investment in Australia's democratic processes and institutions. Their responses are telling.

Only about one half of our survey respondents considered that 'people in government' could be trusted to act in Australia's best interests.¹¹ Only one quarter thought that people in government were honest. Broken promises, endless and hollow speeches and the conflictual nature of the chambers and of party politics were major issues cited by our focus-group participants. These participants indicated that they considered politicians to be insincere, only after people's votes and badly behaved. One focus-group participant described politics as about 'people sitting in a room and shouting at each other'. Another asked, 'why bother voting when politicians don't keep promises?'

Many interviewees also reported feeling marginalised, trivialised and stereotyped by politicians. Many considered that issues of importance to them were not on any government agenda. In short young people in Australia feel excluded by the democratic process. They consider that their voices are not heard and that few are willing to listen. One interviewee said, 'if young people knew their voice would be heard then it would be a hell of a lot more appealing to vote'.

Yet, despite these negative perceptions, we also discovered that a significant number of young people maintained that democracy was a valuable asset. We also found that many participated in active ways.

Although they considered politics, defined as parliamentary politics, a 'turn-off' it would seem that many young people are interested in political issues. When asked, most of our interviewees were able to name a political issue of interest to them, with the war in Iraq, education funding, refugees and the environment being highlighted. Further in their discussion of these issues many displayed factual accuracy and used language that showed some grasp of political language and terminology.

We also discovered that many of our survey and focus-group participants had participated in some form of protest with regard to the issues they found important. Our survey revealed that signing petitions was the most popular form of protest activity, followed by gathering signatures and attending rallies.¹²

Despite professing disinterest in politics many focus group participants reported discussing political issues in class, with their families and with friends. 'The war', for example, was a heated topic at a party attended by a female participant in one focus group. Other participants reported they discussed the issues of refugees, live animal exports and the environment in classes at school.

Democracy was important to many interviewees with some calling for ‘more democracy’ in the form of referenda. They indicated that democracy did not go far enough – and that they wanted more say regarding the issues they found important.

A pattern that emerges here is the disassociation of young people from formal political interest and participation. This is not the same as, and should not be confused with, disassociation or political apathy more generally. We have also found that many young Australians are active and engaged politically. Nevertheless their lack of faith and trust in the ballot box is an issue of concern.

Perhaps some, given a report card on which to assess the democratic participation of young people in Australia, would be tempted to tell young Australians to ‘try harder’ when it came to attitudes towards voting and levels of political knowledge. However, given a report card on which to assess democracy in Australia, many young people would fault it for ‘not trying hard enough’ to be worthy of their trust, to be inclusive of their perspectives, or to provide for genuine debate rather than quarrelling.

One message emerging so far from our study of young people’s views it is that it is necessary to examine the system we are asking young people to trust and participate in as well as merely encourage them to participate.

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¹ YES acknowledges the assistance and support of the Australian Electoral Commission in funding and assisting with research. However opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the AEC.

² United States of America, 'Election Assistance Commission Voter Turnout 2000' {
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⁶ These data were obtained from the Australian Electoral Commission and are the best that current methods of modelling of enrolment data can provide. Figures quoted,

however, are approximate only and may be subject to future revision. For the derivation of the figure for the overall percentage of Australians enrolled to vote see Table 3 in Section 1.1.1 of the AEC's Annual Report 2004-2005.

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Section 1.1.2 the AEC Annual Report 2004-2005 provides some background regarding the derivation of the figures used to describe youth enrolment.

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⁷ In Britain the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) 'Democracy and Participation' programme funded several projects on youth and participation. For details see,

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