



SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO THE COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL
AMENDMENT BILL

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Submission: Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment Bill

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About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Our work helps build the capacity of young people, youth workers and youth services, and we advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups.

It is the role of Youth Action to:

1. Respond to social and political agendas relating to young people and the youth service sector.
2. Provide proactive leadership and advocacy to shape the agenda on issues affecting young people and youth services.
3. Collaborate on issues that affect young people and youth workers.
4. Promote a positive profile in the media and the community of young people and youth services.
5. Build capacity for young people to speak out and take action on issues that affect them.
6. Enhance the capacity of the youth services sector to provide high quality services.
7. Ensure Youth Action's organisational development, efficiency, effectiveness and good governance.



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Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters supports the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018.

Recommendation 2: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recommend the expansion of young people voting in special ballots, such as referenda and plebiscites, to include 16 and 17 year olds.

Recommendation 3: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters uphold the proposed amendments to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 items 26 to 28, making voting optional for young people aged 16 and 17.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the Department of Education and Training (DET) review civic education curriculum in consultation with young people to ensure relevancy and student engagement.

Recommendation 5: The Federal Government fund and initiate programs to encourage 14 and 15 year olds to enrol to vote in preparation for their eligibility at 16.

Recommendation 6: The Federal Government appoint a Youth Minister and fund the national youth peak body, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC).

Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment Bill. Youth Action promotes the participation of young people in our political system and commends Senator Jordon Steele-John for introducing the Lowering the Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation Bill 2018 (the Bill) and opening up the discussion about young people's contribution to Australia's democracy.

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing the 1.25 million young people (12–25) in NSW. Youth Action undertakes significant primary research work, consulting and engaging with young people and youth support services. As we represent the cohort that will be the most impacted by this Bill, Youth Action is well positioned to respond to its impacts and provide recommendations on how the Bill may reach its key objectives.

The fundamental core of democracy is allowing citizens to be heard and considered in policies that impact them. Youth Action supports this Bill in recognition of the rights of young people as citizens and contributors to society. Because a key objective of the Bill is increasing voter participation, many of Youth Action's recommendations focus on approaches that are intended to encourage young people to contribute to Australia's democracy appropriately, knowledgably and enthusiastically throughout their youth and into adulthood.

Internationally, voter turn-out rates for young people aged 16 and 17 is high and voting at this age results in ongoing engagement with politics.¹ Including young people in Australia's political process at an earlier age will increase youth civic engagement and strengthen Australia's democracy.

A society where young people are empowered to make political decisions, and in consequence, where political parties are dedicated to making the best policies for young people will benefit society and ensure a positive future for Australia as a whole.

¹ National Youth Rights Association (2016), 'Ten Reasons to Lower the Voting Age', Maryland, United States



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Lowering the franchise is vital to nurturing more active citizens for the future health of our democracy. Giving 16 and 17 year olds a vote provides an opportunity to get the next generation more engaged with politics

– Electoral Reform Commission UK²

Principles underlying our submission

Youth Action has consistently advocated for young people's involvement in Australia's political system and regularly consults with young people about the issues that most affect them and their peers. Any approach to increase young people's involvement in the political system is best underpinned by three key principles: empowerment, education, and representation.

Empowerment

Recommendation 1: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters supports the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018.

Research shows that young people are engaged, passionate and educated about politics, and are expressing this interest through the avenues that are available to them.³ In the past year, 47% of young people signed a petition compared to 35% of older people. They are also three times more likely to have attended a demonstration in the past year in comparison with their older counterparts.⁴ Between March 2016 and December 2017 the number of enrolled young people aged

² Electoral Reform Commission UK (2017), 'Votes at 16 Parliamentary Briefing'.

³ The Whitlam Institute (2009), 'Putting the politics back into Politics: Young people and democracy in Australia', Sydney.

⁴ Martin, A. (2014), 'Political Engagement among the Young in Australia', Canberra.



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18 to 24 grew from 81.3% to 87.8%.⁵ The same-sex marriage postal survey was conducted during this period, demonstrating young people are interested in and willing to politically engage with issues that they are passionate about.

Providing 16 and 17 year olds with the ability to vote would allow for this political motivation to be funneled into the traditional civil process. By supporting the Bill, The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has an opportunity to ensure that young people do not have to rely on alternate forms of political expression and can establish active participation in traditional politics from a young age.

The enactment of the Bill will also ensure a stronger Australian democracy. Democracy relies on politicians to foster positive relationships with citizens. Currently, 71% of over 10,000 millennials around the world feel as though political leaders are having a negative impact on their lives.⁶ Lowering the voting age in Australia would allow more than half-a-million young people aged 16 and 17 to be added to the electoral roll. As politicians think in terms of voters, this will provide the opportunity for parties to consider how their policies impact young people and ensure that relationships between young people and politicians are strengthened. Positive relationships between young people and politicians will result in higher youth political participation that will continue throughout their lives.

Lowering the voting age to 16 would also be a statement from the Government to young people, assuring them that they are valued citizens. Similar statements have been made in the past through changes to the the Commonwealth Electoral Act. For example, the Commonwealth vote has been won by a number of groups such as non-propertied people and women in 1902, and Aboriginal people in 1962. The vote in this sense has a deep meaningful value; it states that these people's

⁵ AEC (2018), 'National Youth Enrolment Rate', Canberra.

⁶ Deloitte (2018), '2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey', New York.



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perspectives, values and votes are imperative to include in our democratic process. Those aged 16 and 17 are active citizens in our society economically, socially and culturally. Young people aged 16 can leave school, become parents, obtain full-time employment, live independently and obtain a driver's license. Additionally, 17 year olds can serve join the military. A large number of young people take on tax obligations, with those under 18 years generating almost \$51 million in direct income taxation revenue annually.⁷

Young people aged 16 and 17 are active and contributing members of Australian society, who hold considerable decision-making powers regarding their own lives and who are required to meet a number of legal requirements. Extending the voluntary vote to 16 and 17 year olds would be an instrumental step in assuring that young people are funneling their political motivation into traditional civic avenues, that relationships between young people and politicians are strengthened, and that young people are treated as valued citizens. These outcomes would be positive for Australia's democracy as a whole.

Recommendation 2: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters recommend the expansion of young people voting in special ballots, such as referenda and plebiscites, to include 16 and 17 year olds.

Ballots such as referenda and plebiscites encompass issues of great magnitude and the results often shape the direction of nations for future generations. Young people have the most to gain or lose when such policies are put in place, as the impacts will affect their cohort for the longest period. Therefore, extending the vote to young people aged 16 and 17 in these special ballots is extremely important.

⁷ Australian Tax Office (2018), 'Taxation statistics 2015-16 - Table 2: Selected items for the 2015-16 income year', Canberra.



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This was the reason that, in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, 16 and 17 year olds were permitted to vote. The result of this was overwhelmingly successful, with significantly more 16 and 17 year olds voting than those aged 18–24.⁸ After the vote, 75% of 16 and 17 year olds expressed their support for permanently lowering the voting age to 16.⁹

The Scottish Independence Referendum demonstrates the benefits of opening up the vote to young people and the ways that a politics of hope may be harnessed to maximise youth political participation

– Newcastle University (UK)¹⁰

Recommendation 3: The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters uphold the proposed amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* items 26 to 28, making voting optional for young people aged 16 and 17.

Ensuring that 16 and 17 year olds are granted a voluntary vote is a necessary first step in including their voices in Australia's democracy and increasing youth voter participation. A soft entry into the democratic process gives young people who are eager to vote a platform to do so without enforcing this on the whole cohort.

Many young people are eager to vote when given the opportunity, and this is reflected in international statistics. Again, in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, 75% of 16 and 17 year olds voted, with 97% of these individuals stating that that they would continue to vote in the future. This voter turnout is high in comparison to the 18 to 24 year old cohort, who's turn out was

⁸ The Electoral Commission UK (2014), 'Scottish Independence Referendum: Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014', Edinburgh.

⁹ ICM Research (2014), 'Scottish Independence Referendum Research', Edinburgh

¹⁰ Hopkins, P (2015), 'Young People and the Scottish Independence Referendum', *Political Geography*, vol. 46, pp. 91–92.

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54%.¹¹ This is echoed in Austria, where voting turnout rates for 16 and 17 year olds are markedly higher than for 18 to 25 year olds.¹² The high numbers of 16 and 17 year olds voting demonstrate the effectiveness of lowering the voting age below 18.

The mandatory requirement to vote at 18 comes at a time of significant transition in a young person's life. In Australia, 18 years old is when young people are moving from school to university, leaving home, or starting formal employment. Additional requirements or responsibilities introduced at this time may be seen as a lower priority and may not encourage a strong sense of interest or engagement in the political process.

Allowing young people to opt in to vote at a younger age means they can become engaged in the process during a more secure time of their lives – when they are more likely to be supported by schools and family. In these contexts, enrollment and voting can be explained and supported by family and teachers, and one key advantage of lowering the voting age is that it can be combined with civics education and enrolment drives to ensure the best outcome.

Education

Recommendation 4: The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the Department of Education and Training (DET) review the civic education curriculum in consultation with young people to ensure relevancy and student engagement.

¹¹ The Electoral Commission UK (2014), 'Scottish Independence Referendum: Report on the referendum held on 18 September 2014', Edinburgh.

¹² Wagner, M., Johann, D. and Kritzing, S. (2012), 'Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice', *Electoral Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 372-83



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Lowering the voluntary voting age to 16 should be seen as an opportunity to improve voter participation through education. A large majority of 16 and 17 year olds are enrolled in Australia's secondary education system, making them a captive audience for politics and civics education. Improved education in schools will ensure that young people are ready to actively participate in Australia's democracy

It is imperative that civics education is taught in ways which are interesting and relevant to school students. Australia's formal civics education is tested in the National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship. In 2016, only 38% of Australian Year 10 students achieved a proficient standard in this test.¹³ In response to this, Australian Education Minister Simon Birmingham stated that the results are 'a stark reminder of the need to ensure our schools are giving students the opportunity and support to learn and expand their knowledge base across the entire spectrum of the curriculum.'¹⁴ This response shows the potential for a change in the Australian curriculum to include more engaging civics education. An example of this is the 'Demokratie Initiative' Austrian school program which resulted in two-times the number of young Austrians describing themselves as 'very interested' in politics after completing the program.¹⁵

Recommendation 5: The Federal Government fund and initiate programs to encourage 14 and 15 year olds to enrol to vote in preparation for their eligibility at 16.

In order to effectively increase voter participation, programs that encourage young people to enrol should be implemented and endorsed by the Australian Government. Past successful non-curricular campaigns include AEC and triple J's 2013 'Rock Enrol' campaign, which put voting enrolment drives at music festivals aimed towards a younger demographic. In addition, the AEC ran another successful voting drive in 2012 using Facebook, resulting in 37,000 young Australians under 18

¹³ Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2017), 'NAP Civics and Citizenship Report 2016', Canberra.

¹⁴ Birmingham, S. (2017), 'Getting the Fundamentals Right for Students', Adelaide.

¹⁵ Renwick, A. (2015), 'Votes at 16: What effect would it have?', London.

enrolling to vote¹⁶.

In addition to non-curricular campaigns, schools should also be a core provider of programs encouraging young people to enrol to vote. School systems are not only best situated for providing engaging civics education but are also well versed to provide opportunities for young people aged 14 and 15 to enrol. An example of school-based campaigns is the Australian Tax Office's 'School Education Program' which provides educational resources and free facilitated presentations on tax and superannuation to schools. In addition, the ATO also ran the 'Secondary Schools Tax File Number Program' until 2015, which provided students the opportunity apply for a tax file number through their school.¹⁷ A similar program aimed at providing young people the opportunity to enrol to vote would be an effective means to ensure that youth enrolment rates continue to improve into the future.

Representation

Recommendation 6: The Federal Government appoint a Youth Minister and fund the national youth peak body, the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC).

Young Australians are experiencing growing inequality at a greater rate than any other age-group.¹⁸ They are the first generation of Australians to have lower living standards than their parents.¹⁹ For this reason, it is imperative that the interests of young people be represented in policy processes and have a formal avenue to participate in decisions about issues that affect their lives, such as employment, education, housing, tax, the environment, welfare and support services. In addition to

¹⁶AEC (2013), Annual Report 2012–13, Canberra.

¹⁷ATO (2017), 'School Education Program', Canberra.

¹⁸ACOSS & UNSW (2018), 'Inequality in Australia', Sydney.

¹⁹Foundation for Young Australians (2014), 'Renewing Australia's Promise', Melbourne.

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providing 16 and 17 years olds with the option to vote, young people need to be represented in both government and services to ensure that youth issues are on the political agenda and that policies consider people of a young demographic.

There is a need for a dedicated ministry for young people to drive cross-government national strategy from within cabinet to improve outcomes for young people. However, there has not been a federal minister for youth in Australia or a specific portfolio aimed at addressing youth affairs since 2013. The removal of this ministerial position was followed in 2014 by defunding both the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC), the national peak body for young people's issues, and the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (ACYS), the foremost organisation on best-practice youth work. As a result, youth issues have slipped off the political agenda and young people currently have no avenue to influence policies that affect their lives.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this submission demonstrates that many young people aged 16 and 17 are prepared to and capable of voting, and that providing an optional vote for these young Australians would result in strengthening Australia's democracy in multiple ways. Lowering the non-compulsory voting age to 16 recognises the fundamental rights of young people as citizens who make significant contributions to Australian society. Providing the opportunity to this cohort to exercise their democratic right will strengthen youth political engagement and young people's participation in policy issues affecting them.

