

To:
The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Attention: Stephanie Hesford

Submission to Inquiry into Voter Enrolment

From:
Daniela Giorgi,

I would like to thank the Committee on Electoral Matters for the opportunity to address the following reference for inquiry and report:

"3. Any additional strategies to maintain or improve the level of voter enrolment and to ensure that the roll remains up to date, with particular regard to the needs of particular groups (such as young people) and other demographic changes (such as the ageing population)"

I believe that recent changes to the federal electoral laws that preclude enrolment changes after an election has been announced, are likely to have an undemocratic impact, unnecessarily disenfranchising many voters. In light of this, encouraging voter enrolment amongst young people who are eligible to vote for the first time when they turn 18, should be a top priority.

I would like to address two issues in this submission:

- 1. the need for a major initiative for civics and citizenship education programs (which also encourage voter enrolment) to be provided in the post compulsory school years;**
- 2. the need for new ideas and initiatives that use a whole of government approach and are designed to increase voter enrolment.**

1. Civics and citizenship education has been successfully embedded in the current NSW K-10 HSIE syllabuses. In Stage 1 students learn about roles, rights, responsibilities and rules at school and in the family and may look at decision-making processes. In Stage 2, local government and its processes are addressed, with electoral processes implied or minimally touched on. In Stage 3, state government is studied, specifically including electoral processes. In secondary school, Stages 4 and 5, when students begin to approach voting age, several NSW HSIE syllabuses focus on civic history, civic institutions and civic participation, which can include some electoral education. However, the senior syllabuses in post-compulsory Stage 6 have no provisions for civics and citizenship education or electoral education content at all. I consider this to be of serious concern as this is the very age when students move towards enrolment and voting.

The provision of civics and electoral education in the post-compulsory school years is one that needs to seriously be addressed given that these are the very people who are about to enter into the voting age. Currently there is no requirement or provision for this in NSW and the situation I believe is similar in the other States and Territories. This should therefore be a priority area for electoral education with the aim of improving the level of voter enrolment of young people who are turning 18 and eligible to vote for the first time. At the very least, a unit of work could be included in a compulsory course such as English. Ideally, a compulsory one-unit (possibly one semester) course in civic participation or political studies could be developed and implemented perhaps as a joint State and Commonwealth initiative.

2. I believe that each of the three levels of Government and each part of government has an important role in facilitating enrolment to vote and supporting electoral education – a whole of government approach. Its importance to the processes of government is so basic that, effectively all government departments should include some reference to supporting democratic processes in their mission statements or objectives and perhaps also offer electoral education as part of their human resources provisions for employees - encouraging an ethos of active and informed citizenship. Listed below are some specific ideas that might be implemented at each level of government to encourage voter enrolment:

The Federal Government:

- could encourage or require tertiary institutions to provide voter enrolment forms as part of their enrolment procedures;
- could require the Australian Taxation Office to supply enrolment forms when people apply for tax file numbers, ABNs, etc;
- should fund very specific advertising relating to the closure of electoral roles during an election year before an election is called, especially in relation to providing enrol to vote campaigns;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all Government department information centres, especially in Centrelink and Medicare offices.

State Governments:

- could incorporate enrol to vote forms in Driver's licence applications or statements of HSC results;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all schools and clearly displayed in the administration area for students and community members;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all Government department information centres, particularly in administration of public housing given that tenants often move to changed electorates when allocated housing;
- similarly, as housing is a determinant of electorate location and possibly change, voting enrolment forms could be placed with real estate agents in cooperation with the Real Estate Institute of Australia.

Local Governments:

- are uniquely placed to provide information directly to local communities;
- should offer electoral education for their constituents to explain local council election procedures, as well as supporting electoral education for state and federal elections in conjunction with the AEC and state and territory electoral authorities;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all council offices, local government community and information centres and particularly in public libraries.