

NSW Young Labor Submission: Inquiry into Voter Enrolment

Introduction

This submission makes recommendations to encourage young people's levels of enrolment, what can be done to address these concerns and the impact the Commonwealth reforms will have on young people seeking to enroll.

NSW Young Labor believes in a democratic society where all Australians not only have the right to vote, but are able to carry out that right. We are concerned that currently young people are ill informed about the electoral process and also that young people are disadvantaged in the lead up to elections due to the Commonwealth's new electoral laws.

Background Information

The current level of voter enrolment in New South Wales, particularly among young people and any other groups with special needs in relation to voter enrolment

Knowledge of Australian democratic processes can often lead to higher levels of young people's participation- particularly in relation to voter enrolment¹. In order to encourage young people to vote, they need to be informed of their rights and responsibilities in relation to enrolment. Students at high schools should also be informed of the responsibilities of local representatives and Government. Young people need to be aware of the structure and role of government, from ministers to backbenchers and the separation of powers to be able to understand their own role in the political process. There needs to be a stronger civic component in the education curriculum for young people. Voter enrolment amongst young people in more educated areas is higher than amongst those with a lower education². Our recommendation is hold voter registration as an activity coinciding with civic education in the classrooms and base it around issues affecting the school as quite often those more involved in political processes are there because they are passionate about an issue that is close to them.

Whilst education is an important issue in relation to the number of students enrolling to vote, it must be remembered that in today's society young people live fast paced lives so enrolling to vote isn't necessarily at the top of young people's list of priorities. No matter how many programs are introduced to increase

¹ http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/What/publications/youth_study_1/page03.htm

² *ibid*

education in relation to political processes, unless you make it harder to avoid enrolling, young people will continue not to vote.

The AEC is instrumental in going into schools and encouraging young people to enrol, however this is generally done when a student reaches years 10 or 11. By this time a high number of students have left to pursue work or alternative study. This is why it is so important that young people be encouraged to enrol at a younger age- before they have the opportunity to leave school.

NSW Young Labor believes in lowering the age of voting from 18 to 16, in the belief that it will allow for young people to become more involved in Australian democratic processes. The best way to get young people to participate in elections is to give them a say at election time. A young person at the age of 16 can pay taxes and join the army, so it appears somewhat contradictory that we do not give them the opportunity to vote.

The impact on voter enrolment of Commonwealth reforms to introduce new identification requirements for people seeking to enrol to vote or to change their enrolment details

The amendments of the *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Act 2006* ("the Act") to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* ("the Electoral Act") and *Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984* ("the Referendum Act") will have a significantly adverse impact on young people enrolling to vote.

Section 41, subsection 102(4) to (4AB) of the Act, amends the Electoral Act to state that if a claim to enrol or a claim to transfer enrolment by a person is received between 8pm on the date the writ is issued for an election to the close of polls of the election, the claim must not be considered until after that period. Under section 104 paragraph 4(2)(a) of the Act, registration is also closed for the same period for a referendum. It is also specifically stated under section 106(4) of the Act that those turning 18 years old, in the period from 8pm the day the writ is issued to the end of the voting day for the referendum, will not be able to register. Further, section 107, subsection 9(1) of the Act has amended the day for the close of rolls to 3 working days from 7 days.

The amendments made to the electoral legislation will mean that a politically motivated announcement of the calling of an election will take away the right of a young person to participate in our democracy. In particular it will inhibit people enrolling for the first time, including young people who:

- have recently moved their address from the country into the city for educational or work purposes.
- are working in casual jobs in the hours after the writ is called and thus cannot get to an office or fax the forms through in time.

- are living in rural areas and who are limited by distance and opportunities to travel to get to an office of the AEC or adequate equipment to fax their forms in.

The Federal Government insists that the purpose of this legislation is to decrease enrolment fraud by decreasing the administrative work of the AEC in the week before polling day³. There should be no maximum cost in the administration of the AEC that the government budgets for and the setting of a threshold that will disenfranchise young eligible voters. For the purpose of cutting administration costs this government will deny 70 000⁴ young people from their right to vote.

Recommendations

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).

The following recommendations attempt to increase the number of young people enrolling to vote in elections:

- The committee should condemn the amendments to the Electoral Act by the Federal Government and particularly note that these reforms are undemocratic. The length of time to enrol should again be extended to the seven day period so as to not discriminate against young people.
- The committee should move to strengthen youth participation in the voting process by supporting local members of parliament to engage with young people.
- The committee should further support programs where young people can see the political process in action. This can begin with Student Representative Councils receiving more support and responsibility.
- The committee should move to strengthen civic education so that young people understand how they can participate in the political processes.

It should be noted that whilst the above suggestions are central in establishing a culture of the importance of keeping enrolment details updated, education alone will not dramatically raise the levels of enrolment of young people. The following recommendations outline a program that if introduced could serve to ensure that all students enrol to vote before leaving school. The following points outline a program that would act to ensure enrolment in NSW increases:

³ Keenan, Michael, MP, Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2005: Second Reading, 10/06/2006, p.8

⁴ Warren Snowdon MP, Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2005: Second Reading, 30/05/2006, p.46

- Lower the age of enrolment from 17 to 15.
- Make it compulsory to enrol to vote for students (that are eligible) before they have the opportunity to leave school. This should be facilitated by the schools for students in year 9.
- Schools be given adequate resources to facilitate mass enrolment.

Conclusion

If voting is compulsory in Australia, the Federal Government should do everything in their power to give citizens the chance to exercise their democratic right, not pass legislation to prevent them from doing so. There are a number of ways to encourage participation in Australia's democratic processes particularly through educational programs and suggestions of making enrolment methods more accessible to young people. In particular we draw your attention to the mandatory electoral enrolment in schools.

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