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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters



ABN 17 209 492 539

STATE OFFICE

146 Devonshire Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010

Phone: 02 9319 1100

Fax: 02 9319 1144

Email: info@yapa.org.au

Free-call: 1800 627 323

WESTERN SYDNEY OFFICE

Suite 7, Level 1
48 Macquarie Street

Parramatta NSW 2150

Phone: 02 9687 1466

Fax: 02 9687 1229

yapaws@yapa.org.au

www.yapa.org.au

Inquiry into Voter Enrolment

- 1. The current level of voter enrolment in NSW, particularly among young people and any other groups with special needs in relation to voter enrolment**
- 2. 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)**

YAPA is the peak community group working in the interests of young people and youth services in NSW. YAPA strives to achieve social justice for young people, including the appropriate provision of services for young people.

YAPA is strongly in favour of the lowering the voting age to sixteen. Firstly, this would increase voter participation among young people in Australia and foster a greater relationship with the formal political system. Secondly, through the lowering the voting age to sixteen, this system would create the potential to improve the quality of life for young people via political means.

There are the usual arguments for lowering the voting age because young people pay taxes and live under the laws of the government, so therefore, they should have a say in who makes these decisions. While these arguments are valid, it is more important to realise that lowering the voting age will provide an intrinsic benefit to both young people and the electoral system.

Supported by the compulsory voting system, governments must consider the total electorate in formulating and responding to

policy. Elected members of government must include the needs, issues and voices of young people, and therefore, young people should be able to exercise their vote for these members. Although these elected members should already be representing young people in their constituents, the process of younger people exercising their vote will ensure these members take the needs of young people much more seriously and have a greater inclination to represent their interests.

Lowering the voting age will also strengthen the electoral system. Currently, young Australians have a lower voter turnout than the rest of the community. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has estimated that 80% of eligible Australians between 18 and 25 are currently registered on the Australian Electoral roll, compared to about 95% of the population as a whole. Through engaging young Australians at a younger age, habits of electoral participation will develop earlier and voter enrolment will increase in the higher age brackets. Similarly, lowering the voting age will signal to these young people that their votes are important and this will have a positive flow on effect throughout their lives.

These arguments are also supported in the international community. Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, United Kingdom, has also backed lowering the voting age, on the condition that it is linked to citizenship education in UK schools. In Australia, there is already a degree of citizenship education in our syllabus throughout years 7 to 10. The aims of this citizenship education are very clear in the syllabus:

“Informed and active citizens support democratic participation, foster individual and group involvement in civil society, critically question existing political institutions and social, economic and political arrangements, and facilitate democratic change.”

Thus, as Gordon Brown has said, if lowering the voting age is linked with this education, it will have a tremendous benefit on the electoral system and the political system overall.

Similarly in the United Kingdom, The Power Inquiry, an independent inquiry into Britain’s Democracy, has recommended lowering the voting age to 16 to re-engage young people with formal democratic politics. In their

recommendations they have also called for automatic, individual voter registration to be implemented at age 16. There are similar calls in the United States of America through organizations such as the National Youth Rights Association. Regarding the international community, Australia has been a leader in electoral reform to benefit the entire country. Australia was the second country in the world to allow women the right to vote, occurring in 1902, many years before both the United Kingdom and United States of America. It would be similarly as impressive if Australia led the world again in positive electoral reform.

Although lowering the voting age will benefit young people and the electoral system, there will be the reliable arguments against this initiative. This refers to the notion that young people are too apathetic about politics and should therefore not be included in the voting system. However, this view is narrow and ill-informed. The Youth Electoral Study (YES), funded by the Australian Research Council and the AEC, has been investigating these issues. The results thus far have found that a lot of young people find voting boring and even a waste of paper, although this should not be taken as young people's apathy towards politics. If this were the case, the same principle would have to be applied to the adult population. For example, in 1994, ANOP Research Services conducted a project commissioned by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, into the community's knowledge of government and constitutional issues. Amongst other findings, the report showed that only 40% of respondents could recall both names of the two houses of parliament, 24% knew the Senate represents the States, and only 18% showed some degree of understanding about the constitution. It is evident that claims of apathy and lack of knowledge cannot be used to exclude young Australians from the democratic process.

To the contrary, many studies have shown that young people do have an interest in politics and the issues that are important to them. The YES study has also found young people were able to name a number of political issues of importance to them as well as the methods they had used to demonstrate these interests. Further emphasising these points, YAPA's ACTivate consultations, consisting of 500 participants, found that young people wanted more say on the issues that affected them and

more input into how to address these issues, at all levels of government. Moreover, research conducted by the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) found that 91% of respondents said governments should do more to consult young people about youth issues. Therefore, these studies highlight that young people have a significant interest in political issues combined with a strong desire to be more actively involved in the process of democracy.

It is clear, for young people, that the discrepancy lies between the interest in political issues and the perceived efficacy of the voting system. Respondents in the YES study felt that members of government could not be trusted and that their interests are of no concern to these people. Hence, young people have an interest in politics but at the same time, they have negative views of the voting system and the role of the politicians. Lowering the voting age to sixteen will directly address these perceptions, leading to improved voter participation and positive outcomes for young people.

Recommendations

Lower the voting age to 16

The voting age should be lowered to 16, at all levels of government, Local, State and Federal.

Increased promotion of voter enrolment by AEC, with the view of achieving an automatic individual registration system

The Australian Electoral Commission should be encouraged to distribute and promote voter registration information through non-political bodies such the education system, Centrelink, the RTA, the ATO, the Medicare system and public libraries. This should be undertaken until such a time that a system can be developed that enables automatic voter registration when an individual turns 16.

For further information on any of the issues raised in this submission please contact YAPA on 9319 1100 – extension 5.

Regards

John Ferguson
Policy and Training Officer
Youth Action & Policy Association
146 Devonshire St
Surry Hills 2010