

**Submission
No 6**

**PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION AND
CONFIDENCE**

Organisation: Make it 16
Date Received: 13 August 2024



Via email: info@makeit16.au

13 August 2024

Re: Submission to NSW JSCEM regarding proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence

We're writing to you as young people who have been denied participation in the most essential part of our democracy due to age discrimination.

Our proposal to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence is simple and effective: Extend compulsory voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds and ensure well-resourced civics education in NSW schools.

Who we are

The [Make It 16](#) campaign is a movement of young people from all over Australia, who are calling on our governments to lower the voting age to 16 in Australian elections and referendums.

We have an active group of volunteers in NSW. The campaign launched nationally in June 2023 and we had our Sydney launch in August 2023. The Make it 16 campaign is supported by the Foundation for Young Australians and several other corporate and civil society organisations.

Why lower the voting age?

1. Our democracy will benefit from young people's participation

Everyone deserves a fair and equal say in decisions that affect their lives. Unfortunately, many young people feel excluded and alienated from Australian politics because their voices are simply not valued or heard. So many of the decisions we make today will have a massive impact on the future, so it's only fair



that young people are allowed to have their voice heard on these decisions. By allowing young people to feel heard in politics, we can create a new generation of Australians who are more engaged and more confident about our democracy.

The more people participating in a democratic system, the stronger and more effective it becomes. This is one of the key reasons Australia has compulsory voting. Lowering the voting age will expand the voter base, giving a more accurate picture of who Australians want representing them in parliaments and town halls.

Additionally, in the past, voting rights have been denied to women, First Nations people, and until 1973, people aged 18, 19 and 20. None of these restrictions make sense now, and we would consider it anti-democratic to bring them back. It makes just as little sense to deny voting rights to another group perfectly capable of taking part in elections, 16 and 17 year olds.

2. The impacts of lowering the voting age will be momentous for our democracy, not only at the ballot box, but in our classrooms

Civic education plays a key role in preparing young people to participate effectively in our democracy and vote meaningfully. By increasing young people's knowledge on political and electoral systems, young people are informed about our democracy and feel more equipped to engage with our systems of government.

Currently, because the voting age remains at 18, many schools avoid providing adequate civic and electoral education. A strong democracy begins with strong civic education.

Lowering the voting age to include 16 and 17 year-olds promotes and encourages the inclusion of civic education in state curriculums.

Currently for 16 and 17 year-olds to undertake civic education in their schooling, they have to enrol in a subject such as legal studies or Australian politics.



Enfranchising young people aged 16 and 17 in the electoral process will incentivise educational institutions to provide quality civic education, because young people would be directly experiencing our voting system. The provision of a structured and accessible civic education program would not only inform future voters, but empower them to vote wisely with their values and beliefs in mind.

When informed engagement is not accessible to young people, a disconnect begins to grow between the voting population and those who represent them. By lowering the voting age to 16, we will provide an opportunity to better educate and enfranchise future generations in our democracy.

3. No Taxation without Representation

Young people in Australia start paying tax from as early as 15, when they begin their first jobs. They are given the responsibility to start contributing to the economy but not the right to vote in the interests of their economic wellbeing.

Successive governments have failed to prioritise the financial security of young people and we are now seeing unprecedented transfers of wealth from young to old through our tax system. As a result, the Millennial and Gen Z generations are predicted to be the first to be worse off than their parents since Federation.

Lowering the voting age will help to turn that forecast around. It will make sure more young people are heard, and ensure that their interests and needs are taken into account by policymakers. We need to restore the balance of economic prosperity across generations. 16 and 17 year olds are deemed old enough to pay tax and should have a voice in how their tax dollars are spent.

4. Lowering the voting age will improve the health and wellbeing of young Australians



Young people are directly affected by political decisions concerning climate change, education, health, the economy and countless other policy areas. Decisions in these areas have a large impact on mental health and wellbeing.

There is an increasing proportion of young people experiencing mental ill-health, and voicelessness could likely be a key contributor to this. Lowering the voting age has the potential to positively impact mental health by fostering a sense of agency, empowerment, and civic engagement among young people. It also recognises young people's rights as active members of society and provides them with a voice in shaping their future.

By empowering 16 and 17 year-olds with the right to vote, we promote intergenerational dialogue, amplify diverse perspectives, and ensure that the decisions made reflect the interests of all citizens, regardless of age. By expanding voting rights to 16 and 17 year-olds, we send a powerful message to them that their voices matter. In doing this, we will promote a supportive environment that nurtures young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

From mass protests and online petitions to classroom debates, many high school students are already politically active. They are also psychologically mature enough to be entitled to a say in government decisions that affect their lives and future. But right now, 16 and 17 year-olds are denied a fundamental right in our democracy – which has previously been denied to other groups such as women – the right to vote.

Young people have the vision and energy to be active participants in our democracy but are excluded from having their voices heard in electing political representatives or history-changing public votes, such as plebiscites and referendums. So many decisions made by the government directly affect 16 and 17 year olds working and studying now, and will continue to impact young people for decades to come – long after our current political leaders have retired. Yet



elected representatives can ignore young people's voices, because when it comes to elections, 16 and 17 year-olds can't vote.

When the people we elect to government represent our community and reflect our values and concerns is when our democracy works best. By working together to allow 16 and 17 year-olds to vote in our national elections, we can make sure young people's voices are heard. This will make our democracy fairer and stronger, and ensure our elected representatives serve all of us, including future generations.

Yours faithfully,

Fulin Yan, on behalf of Make it 16 Australia.

Attachment – Make it 16 campaign policy brief

<https://raisely-images.imgix.net/make-it-16/uploads/make-it-16-campaign-policy-brief-digital-compressed-pdf-dca067.pdf>