

YVote

GENERATION Y COULD HELP DETERMINE THE OUTCOME OF THIS YEAR'S FEDERAL ELECTION, IF ENOUGH OF THEM ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE. JUDITH IRELAND LOOKS AT WHY SO MANY YOUNG AUSTRALIANS ARE NOT EXCITED BY THE PROSPECT OF VOTING AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT.

With a federal election looming and our politicians gearing up for the nation's biggest contest of the year, we will soon be hearing that familiar mantra of 'every vote counts'. But when polling booths close, there's a good chance there will be lots of potential votes missing.

The Youth Electoral Study conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the Australian National University estimates that only 58 per cent of Australian 18 year-olds and 81 per cent of 18 to 25 year-olds are enrolled to vote. This suggests as many as 380,000 young people are not on the electoral roll—roughly four electorate's worth of voters.

These figures come on the back of a steady flow of studies and headlines—'Apathy wins youth vote', 'Young voters just can't be bothered,' and 'Politics a turn-off for Gen Y'—declaring young people and politics go together like heavy metal music and a yoga retreat.

In its inquiry into the 2004 federal election, federal parliament's Electoral Matters Committee found that "disconnection with politics appears to have the greatest impact on enrolment levels". It said more must be done to improve young people's interest in the political process.

Following on from that report, the committee recently investigated the quality of electoral education provided to young people (along with Indigenous and migrant Australians). It received 118 submissions,

conducted 11 public hearings across the country, visited 10 schools and held two school forums where it talked politics with 244 students and 47 teachers.

Presenting the committee's *Civics and electoral education* report, committee chair Sophie Mirabella (Member for Indi, Vic) said the report's 17 recommendations "will contribute to a healthier democracy with more citizens who are informed, involved and engaged in the issues that are important to them." But Mrs Mirabella recognised that the task is not a straightforward or easy one. "I don't think you can force people to have a passion or everyone should be interested in politics," she said.

Young voters have been a priority group for the Australian Electoral Commission since 2003. Initiatives like the joint AEC/ triple j Rock Enrol program have directly encouraged young people to enrol. More recently, some state electoral commissions have begun sending 17 year-olds birthday cards, inviting them to enrol provisionally—a move the AEC is looking to implement nationally this year. The Electoral Committee's first recommendation asks the AEC to keep a detailed record of how many birthday cards are sent and how successful the scheme is in the lead up to the 2007 federal election. The ACT Electoral Commission has taken the extra step of instituting a 'bounty system' in which young people are paid \$2.50 if they enrol.

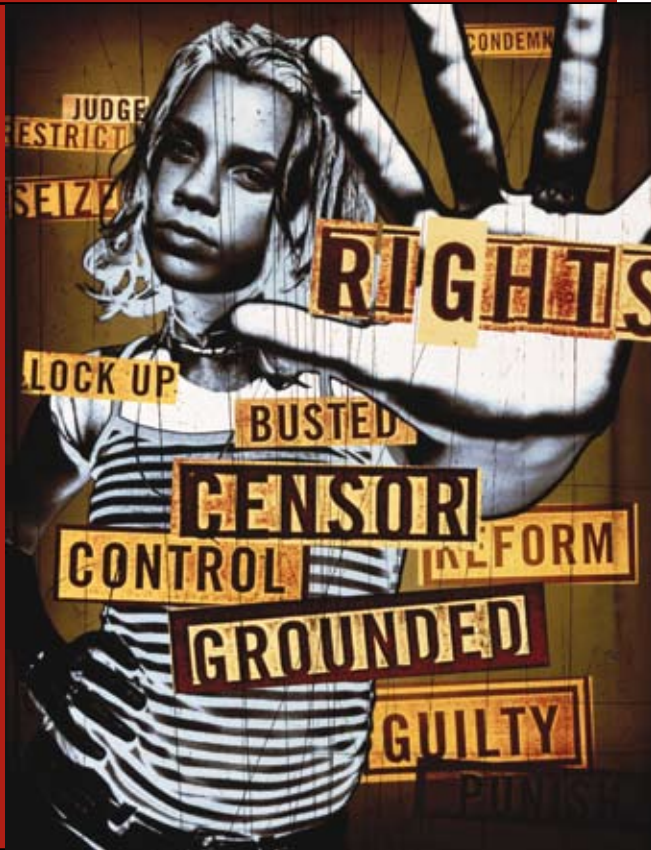


Photo: Jupiterimages

'YOUNG PEOPLE' DO NOT BEHAVE AS A UNIFORM BLOCK OR SHARE THE EXACT SAME ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICS.

With people searching for ideas (hip or otherwise) to encourage more youth enrolments, the committee examined ways to make the enrolling process more hi-tech, in order to connect with the generation that eats iPods for breakfast. The report recommended that the AEC costs and determines the feasibility of emailing all Year 12 students an enrolment form to their school email account and establishing an SMS service by which young people can ask the AEC for an enrolment form. It also encouraged all MPs to create “interactive personal websites to facilitate young people’s access to parliament”.

However, a text message or Facebook page does not a political enthusiast make. In evidence to the committee, Dr Lucas Walsh of the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights, Deakin University, cautioned that research into digital democracy has produced mixed results to date. He agreed that while SMS usage has risen ‘exponentially’, it had not yet resulted in increased democratic participation (Big Brother notwithstanding).

Of deeper concern to the committee was young people’s apparent lack of civic knowledge—giving rise to the inference that they may not even know why it’s important to vote or how to do so responsibly. The 2007 Report on Government Services found that only 16 per cent of Year 6 students and 23 per cent of Year 10 students surveyed knew what Australia Day commemorated (apart from enjoying a BBQ). The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, in its Civic Education Study for Australia, revealed that “only half of the Australian students have a grasp of the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy”.

However, it’s not for want of trying on the government’s part. Between 1997 and 2004, the federal government allocated \$31.5 million towards civics and citizenship education, with an additional \$4.9 million over four years in its 2004-2005 budget. The Discovering Democracy program has since been distributed to all Australian schools. In 2005, \$29.7 million was allocated to values education initiatives, aimed at promoting values such as care and compassion, doing your best and giving people a fair go.

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Evidence heard by the committee pointed to a lack of teachers' skills and professional development in the area. Mrs Melissa Rasmussen, a teacher from Western Australia, said "most teachers do not even know about the Australian Constitution ... They would not know where to begin teaching it." This is coupled with a lack of time to teach the subject matter— particularly in high school, where 100 hours in Years 9 and 10 must be found in an already jam-packed history or geography syllabus.

While students have the option of studying politics and government at university, formal civics education stops at Year 10, as historian Dr John Hirst further pointed out in a recent article in *The Australian*. "In these vital years we have abdicated the responsibility to prepare students to be citizens of this country," he wrote.

Among the Electoral Committee's recommendations in response is the development of a short, focused electoral education unit to be delivered in either Years 9 and 10 or Years 11 and 12. The committee also recommended that the AEC be granted sufficient funds to create several electoral education officer positions in each state and territory with responsibility for the development and presentation of electoral education teaching resources.

Yet the above is not to say that young people are apathetic or ignorant. As academics such as Sydney University's Dr Ariadne Vromen have argued, young people may not be voting or joining political parties en masse, but they are involved in less-traditional forms of political participation, such as boycotting products, making a post to an online discussion or joining a community group.

It all depends on how you define 'politics'. In a 2004 article in the *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, Dr Vromen reported her research that "93 per cent of young people [surveyed] were very involved in collective activities and had been involved in a group of some kind within the last five years". And given that many older Australians would be hard-pressed to prove their unflagging commitment to civic activity and in-



Australian Youth Forum held at the Victorian Parliament House in Melbourne. Photo: Newspix

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depth knowledge of the country's political system, it hardly seems fair that young people alone should be tarred with the apathy brush.

Other academic studies have been quick to point out that 'young people' do not behave as a uniform block or share the exact same attitudes towards politics. The only thing that lumps them together is their age. A survey of 700 young Britons published in the journal *Political Studies* in October 2005 found there is no "uniform youth orientation" to politics. Rather, factors like socio-economic status, education and gender were more powerful shapers of attitude and involvement.

Sweeping generalisations aside, the committee noted that young people tended to be "media savvy"—they consumed media (mostly via television news) and were critical about that consumption. They take a similarly analytical approach to news sourced via the internet, as Melbourne High School student Alex told the committee: "When I look at blogs, I am actively looking out for different viewpoints on the subject. So I will go

to global security and then to global issues, the left-versus right-wing ideas on different issues."

The committee found that young people's apparent political disengagement is often in response to banal presentations of politics and its associated hangers on—young people might find themselves caring about issues but not the process. According to the University of Adelaide Students' Association submission to the inquiry, "politics is offered to the public as problematic, limited, lacking in connections, dichotomised, confusing, superficial and media driven".

Potential voters can also be discouraged by feelings of ignorance—or the 'what would I know' syndrome. Annie Hebenstreit, a participant in the Adelaide school forum, told the committee: "I think having an interest in voting and so on really comes down to understanding. Personally, I do not know much about all the parties and everything, so I do not think I would be able to make a valuable and proper vote because I do not know enough about all of it."

Mainstream politics' emphasis on 'older', less accessible issues such as mortgages, superannuation and interest rates also makes it difficult for younger electors to work up a care factor. Indeed, the committee noted the Australian Clearinghouse of Youth Studies 2002-03 report, which found that of 800 young people aged 12–15 who were surveyed in 2003, only 13 per cent believed “that governments were responsive to the views of young people”.

Nevertheless, (some) younger voters are still interested in making a contribution—and find 'young people just wouldn't understand' attitudes frustrating. As Melbourne High School student Brad told the MPs: “I think a committee like this really should be addressing the problem of youth not being actively involved in the decisions being made by parliament ... It is a very individualistic view to say that youth will only be interested in issues that have a direct bearing on them.”

Billie Millard, another participant at the Adelaide schools forum, similarly argued that politics cannot be hermetically sealed: “I am an 18-year-old student. I voted in this year's election. I am doing my year 12 over two years. I have a car, I have a job ... it is this [younger] age group that must start becoming aware and thinking, 'Okay, in five years time I will have finished my uni degree. I will be out there looking for a house. I will be getting married and having kids.' So now is the time for you to start making your own choices and having your say in what your future will look like.”

Speaking at the tabling of the unanimous report in the House of Representatives, Electoral Matters Committee member Alan Griffin (Member for Bruce, Vic) called for an even greater emphasis on technology and an increased number of targeted electoral education programs. “This report raises some important issues,” he said, “but I would urge the House to realise that this is only part of the answer and that more needs to be done.” ■

The Civics and electoral education report by the Electoral Matters Committee is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/education/report.htm or email jscem@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2374.



*Australian Electoral Commission initiatives to encourage young Australians to enrol to vote.
Photos: Australian Electoral Commission*