



VOTERS FOR LIFE

GETTING YOUNG AUSTRALIANS INFORMED ABOUT AND INVOLVED IN OUR DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IS PROVING DIFFICULT. SOME NEW IDEAS ARE EMERGING FROM A PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION. STORY: GEORGIE OAKESHOTT

IN an ongoing national survey being conducted by academics and the Australian Electoral Commission, it has been confirmed once and for all that young people do not trust politicians. They think politicians are promise-breakers, liars and people who say one thing and do another.

The four year 'Youth Electoral Study' is examining young people's attitudes to voting, and its first report shows most students think voting is boring, a hassle and a waste of a Saturday.

This is not the first or only survey to indicate low levels of interest in politics, lack of respect for politicians and ignorance of democratic processes.

Successive surveys of young Australians aged between 15 and 35 have shown they have limited knowledge of Australia's political history and political system, and little interest in Australian political affairs.

But according to the 'Youth Electoral Study' it's not apathy that's the problem—it's the politicians and the political parties.

"Youth are typically stereotyped as politically apathetic. That is not what we found. They were interested in political issues, what to them were real issues, though not political parties and politicians. The need and challenge is to find meaningful ways to encourage young people more constructively so they want to participate more directly in voting and to sustain Australian democracy," the survey report said.

Taking up this challenge is federal parliament's Electoral Matters Committee, which is investigating electoral education and civic responsibility.

The inquiry has already received more than 100 submissions from a wide range of individuals and groups, including teachers, schools, parliaments, electoral commissions and academics.

Photo: Frances Andrijich; AAP Continued page 48 ►

“How do we create the same excitement and urgency about getting your driver’s licence as enrolling to vote?”

As a joint committee inquiry, members are drawn from both the House of Representatives and the Senate, including members of the Liberal Party, Labor Party and Democrats.

While committee members may have different views on some subjects, Committee Chair, Peter Lindsay (Member for Herbert, Qld) said they are united in their desire to improve Australia’s electoral system and promote participation in the political process.

“We need to find better ways of inspiring and engaging young people, because a healthy democracy needs citizens who are informed, and

appreciate and participate in our democracy,” Mr Lindsay said.

“It’s time we took stock of the way we teach civics and electoral education in this country, and the impact these programs are making on our citizens,” he said.

Civics education is defined by the AEC as dealing with the broader concepts which underpin a democratic society, such as the respective roles and responsibilities of citizens, government, political and special interests, mass media, business and non-profit sectors, as well as the significance of periodic and competitive elections. Voter information and education may also be part of civics education.

In its submission to the inquiry, the AEC said two key initiatives have made civics education an important part of social education. In 1997, the federal government introduced the ‘Discovering Democracy’ program to

schools, and in 1999 all state and territory education ministers agreed on a set of national goals which included educating students to understand their role in Australia’s democracy.

The Australian College of Educators told the inquiry that 91 per cent of teachers recognise the importance of civics education in preparing young people for citizenship.

“It is very important that schools find space and time in their overcrowded curricula to give civics education the attention it deserves,” they wrote in their submission.

“Making civics and electoral education more relevant is a challenge for educators and politicians alike. How do we create the same excitement and urgency about getting your driver’s licence as enrolling to vote?” the Australian College of Educators asked.



Making civics and electoral education more relevant is a challenge. Photo: Parliamentary Education Office

They recommend the committee investigate greater use of technology, such as electronic learning and mobile phones.

“Educators across the world are talking about the global classroom, virtual classrooms, cyber-schools, e-learning, on-line learning and connectedness,” the Australian College of Educators wrote.

“We often see phone and sms polls being conducted on television. It seems nearly every young person in Australia has their own mobile phone, so we should be examining ways to engage them through this technology,” the ACE said.

Glenn Marchant is a humanities teacher in a Melbourne high school “where student interest in a diverse range of political issues continues to grow”. He makes a number of suggestions, including student charity groups and student representative councils based on AEC principles.

“I established such a system at our school and can see first hand the positive impact this has had on the student body,” he said describing how students nominate, vote, give speeches and write a constitution for their SRC.

“The flow-on effect for civics and citizenship education creates a positive environment for ‘connectedness’ in the school environment in relation to student awareness of the need for co-operation and an understanding of strong community values,” he told the inquiry.

The suggestion that young people need more experience with voting was also raised in a proposal by the United Nations Youth Association of Tasmania.

“Young people need some knowledge of the practical realities of voting before they are required to vote. This should include not only how to complete ballot papers, but how preferences are distributed, what the process is for voting along a particular party line and the like. It is important to avoid bias in this. This can be through the use of fictional candidates and parties, for example using Harry Potter characters for candidates and houses for parties. This ensures a light-hearted mood, relevance (especially to

early high school students) and a good learning environment,” it wrote in its submission.

Children who are taught early to read become readers for life, and children who are taught early to vote become voters for life, according to civics, citizenship and election education consultant, Yvonne Goudie.

She told the inquiry she has successfully taught children as young as four the differences between first-past-the-post and preferential voting. Ms Goudie said there is a strong correlation between students’ participation in mock elections and their becoming life-long voters.

With that in mind, Ms Goudie suggested the committee examine lowering the voting age to 15 or 16, as a way to increase political and civic efficacy.

Children who are taught early to vote become voters for life.

“If the government of Australia is serious about improving civic virtues and encouraging engaged citizens to maintain our representative democracy, then it should not ignore the problem of youth disengagement, but rather find innovative ways to combat it,” she wrote.

The Victorian Electoral Commission sees the advantages of lowering the voting age in terms of encouraging more effective education programs which are more relevant to students’ immediate rights and circumstances.

“It would provide an incentive for the take-up of civics and citizenship curriculum by schools to ensure that their students have the necessary skills

to prepare them for voting,” the VEC wrote.

The VEC also suggested “contract” arrangements with secondary schools which are prepared to teach an essential voting curriculum. The VEC would provide support materials and certification to all students taking part.

“This certification might be a ‘Passport to Democracy’, certifying each student’s readiness to enrol when they are 17 and vote when they are 18,” the VEC submission said.

And when they reach voting age, one submission suggested state governments could incorporate voting enrolment applications with driver’s licence applications, or HSC results.

In a combined submission from two academic political scientists, the importance of professional development for teachers was emphasised.

“It is important that teachers in these areas are well educated, and that a substantial amount of professional development is spent keeping them up-to-date about information and teaching methods,” Dr David Lovell and Dr Linda Botteril wrote.

“However, the real key to increased involvement by young people as engaged citizens lies with the present players in the political process whose actions determine whether Australia’s democracy is seen as worthy of effort and commitment by the next generation.” ■

For more information on the civics and electoral education inquiry by the Electoral Matters Committee visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em or email jscem@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2374.

Have your say

Do you have a story to tell about civics and electoral education at your school?

About the House would like to hear from primary and secondary students and teachers who are learning about democracy, civics and citizenship. What are you doing that may be interesting to others?

Email your ideas or suggestions to liaison.reps@aph.gov.au or fax to (02) 6277 8521 or mail to:

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