

SUPPLEMENTARY SUBMISSION NO 104

Youth Enrolment in the Northern Territory

Age	1999	2004	2004 National Avg.
17	6%	10%	22%
18	42%	45%	73%
19	62%	52%	80%
20	73%	65%	83%

Source: Electoral Council of Australia, Continuous Roll Update reports, 1999, 2004-05

The Northern Territory has the country's lowest enrolment rates for young people. It also has the country's lowest turnout rate at Federal elections.

This shows a slight improvement for 17 and 18 year olds, noting that the 17y year old figures come from a very low base – but an 8-10% decrease in enrolments for 19 and 20 year olds.

The Electoral Council of Australia's *Continuous Roll Update Report 2004-2005* noted that NSW and NT were the only jurisdictions where there had been no specific school enrolment programmes undertaken to get young people enrolled. In the other jurisdictions, these programmes capture up to 20% of the eligible 18 year olds. (Note: accepted that NT may have a smaller proportion going through to year 12).

Compounding the low enrolment rates in the Northern Territory are the low turnout rates at Federal elections, which have dropped alarmingly at the past two elections.

Federal Election Turnout in the Northern Territory

Year	Turnout	Year	Turnout
1990	89.4%	1998	90.3%
1993	88.8%	2001	86.5%
1996	89.1%	2004	84.3%

Looking at the 2004 turnout figures, this is 10% below the national average and 8% below the next worst-performed jurisdiction (Western Australia). It should be noted here that the seat of Kalgoorlie, which has similar issues of a higher Indigenous population and remoteness, also has a low turnout rate – 83.5% in 2004.

It could be said that by having the combination of lowest enrolments of eligible citizens, and the lowest turnout, means that NT politicians are the least-democratically elected of any in the country.

If the committee is serious about engaging indigenous people in Australia's democratic processes, I suggest it could recommend the re-establishment of a body, such as the AEC's former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Election Education and Information Service, which was abolished in the 1996 Budget. This would send a clear message that there is a need to integrate the indigenous population, particularly young indigenous people, in Australia's democratic processes. There is definitely a need to arrest the declining enrolment and turnout rates.

Table 4 - 2 Youth enrolment by age and percent of eligible population – 7 September 2004

Age	17		18		19		20		21-25	
	Enrolled	% of eligible pop'n	Enrolled	% of eligible pop'n	Enrolled	% of eligible pop'n	Enrolled	% of eligible pop'n	Enrolled	% of eligible pop'n
ACT	1,092	27%	3,822	86%	4,157	87%	4,432	85%	23,124	88%
NT	2,629	10%	1,263	45%	1,497	52%	1,803	65%	11,666	78%
NSW	10,326	13%	60,325	70%	67,827	80%	69,159	83%	338,747	83%
Qld	5,615	12%	35,969	70%	41,337	80%	42,435	83%	211,035	84%
SA	4,311	24%	14,908	74%	15,252	75%	16,087	79%	80,399	84%
Tas	1,577	25%	5,480	80%	5,684	83%	5,591	86%	25,805	91%
Vic	21,880	38%	49,826	80%	53,474	85%	54,702	87%	268,009	85%
WA	6,283	25%	19,940	74%	20,179	76%	20,571	80%	164,541	83%
NAT	51,336	22%	191,533	73%	209,407	80%	214,780	83%	1,062,636	84%

Note: Stated participation rates are estimates and may vary by a number of percentage points.

Source: Electoral Council of Australia, *2003-2004 Continuous Roll Update* report

Note: NT figure for 17 year olds is erroneous, should probably be 262, not 2,629. The 10% would be correct.

There are three other issues I would like to briefly comment on.

Fixed Election Dates

By not having fixed election dates, the effectiveness of any electoral education campaigns will be diminished to some extent. Firstly, because the AEC is unable to structure its campaigns in the lead-up to a specific date. It therefore needs to dilute the message over a longer time period. Secondly, campaigns are weakened by not being able to refer to a specific date. Effectively the AEC campaigns have to say "It's important to enrol and vote, but we can't tell you when".

Early Close of the Electoral Roll

There is a real danger that the recent changes to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* will counteract the intentions of this inquiry.

Combined with not having a fixed election date, the earlier closing of the rolls at the next election is likely to disenfranchise many young people – there is a danger here that these people will then disengage from having any interest in the election campaign because they don't have a voice. This sets up a bad precedent that can continue in their lives. We should be encouraging people to engage in political debate and activity – not creating obstacles for them.

Inconsistency of Election Systems

It would assist all forms of electoral education if there was greater consistency between jurisdictions in how elections are carried out. For example, the current differences in preferential systems, such as optional and full preferential voting, and different forms of ticket voting, not only leads to higher levels of informal voting, but is very confusing when educating people about how 'the system' works.

Political Science Students at the Australian National University

I was also involved in the preparation of another submission to his inquiry – No. 21, from eight lecturers and teachers of politics at ANU. We conducted some informal surveying of our first-year political science students, and some of the main points which would be good to reinforce here are:

At this level, there was no problem in these students being interested and engaged in political debate – after all, that is why they're doing these politics units.

However, their knowledge of the Australian political system is weak – many received some education at the primary school levels, which often included visits to Parliament House, and to meet their local MP – which they tended to find to be tedious.

There was general agreement that it would be more beneficial to have some structured political/civics education at the years 10-12 level – perhaps in the form of a one day workshop.

Students from Victoria appear to have had the best exposure to basic teaching on the electoral system and parliament – it is interesting to note in the above table that Victoria also has by far the highest enrolment rate of 17 year olds.

There were concerns about who would deliver the information – that teachers could take the opportunity to express their particular bias – this concern was particularly expressed by students who had attended schools with a religious affiliation. It was felt that the AEC would be the best organisation to produce and deliver the education material.