
From: Jean-Paul Gagnon
Sent: Monday, 17 August 2015 11:47 AM
To: Committee, EM (REPS)

Subject: Submission to the Committee Secretariat on Electoral Education

Dear Committee Members,

Might we kindly introduce ourselves as Jean-Paul Gagnon (Assistant Professor in Politics, University of Canberra), Mark Chou (Associate Professor in Politics, Australian Catholic University), Lesley Pruitt (Lecturer in International Development, RMIT), Catherine Hartung (Research Fellow in Education, Deakin University), Kathy Edwards (Senior Lecturer in Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT), David Marsh (Professor in Political Sociology, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra) and Gerry Stoker (Centenary Professor in Governance, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra).

We've been conducting critical research into young people and civics education which recently culminated in a grant proposal and other academic research outputs. We thought that perhaps our work might be of some interest as you carry out your inquiry into electoral education.

Summary: This submission problematises claims that young people are disengaging from democracy and that an appropriate civics education will rectify the problem.

Short description: In recent years, a number of prominent studies and opinion polls have purported to show young people in the US, Britain and Australia, among other Anglo-American democracies, as distrustful of politicians, disengaged from political institutions and even open to the idea of abandoning democracy for other forms of governance. We respond to these findings by exploring whether and how civics education can redress this so-called crisis of democracy. Instead of seeing civics education as the solution – especially when it is used to combat the civic deficit in young people – we propose an approach to civics that seeks to acknowledge the increasingly diverse ways in which young people are engaging politically.

Full description: Young people are not only disconnected from democracy; they are also disinterested in it. That, at least, is what we are told – by politicians, policymakers and researchers. Young people the world over are turning away from democratic politics. The young don't vote. They don't participate. They're no longer interested in political parties. They barely know who their elected representatives are. Some, as recent polls have shown, would even swap their democracy for a nondemocratic form of government if they could.

In the United States, for example, research now shows that young people are less devoted to the American creed – 'an amalgam of constitutional democracy in politics, equal opportunity in the economy, and freedom in society' – than their parents and grandparents were. Indeed, politics is now an important consideration for less than 30 percent of American youth; this number was as high as 60 percent during the 1960s.

In Britain, a similar scenario is brewing. According to Gerry Stoker, voter turnout at national elections and membership in political parties has been on a steady decline since the 1970s. 'Opinion surveys show that people are turned off by formal politics and show an extensive lack of trust in political institutions and politicians', as Stoker points out. More than anything else, citizens find themselves alienated and cynical. This is especially so for young Britons.

In Australia, another example of the supposedly strong Anglo-American democracies, young people have been described as suffering from a 'civic deficit' both in terms of political literacy and participation. Data has shown that as many as 50 percent of young Australians would not vote at all – an essential practice in a representative democracy – if they were in fact not compelled to do so. These trends were most recently confirmed through the

2015 Lowy Institute Poll, which revealed that close to 50 percent of the Generation Y respondents either did not care about the kind of government they had or felt that a non-democratic government could be preferable under certain circumstances.

Seen by many as a 'reflection of a deepening crisis of democracy', governments the world over have responded with a number of different initiatives. However, in all democracies elected officials and policymakers have agreed on the importance of reviving the civic spirit in an effort to halt the political disengagement and cynicism amongst young people. Wave after wave of civics renewal, costing millions of government funding, has culminated in a number of civics and citizenship programs across Britain, the US and Australia for example.

Informing these initiatives have been two underlying assumptions, which have been central to a number of debates about young people and politics in many established democracies. The first assumption is that young people are increasingly disengaged from and uninformed about politics. However, the second assumption is that young people are capable of learning to embrace and participate in politics once they have been properly educated about a nation's political institutions and processes. Guided by the notion that young people are 'on a developmental path' to becoming full citizens, curriculum experts and policymakers have thus tended to see young people from a 'civic deficit' or citizens-in-the-making perspective.

Recognising these assessments, we seek to challenge this view of young people's supposed political disengagement and the capacity of civics to ensure their participation in politics. Our research speaks to claims which have suggested that '[y]oung people's clear preference for more "direct" and everyday forms of political participation should be nurtured by civic educators while public policy should be crafted to address the raft of barriers to young people's political participation.' This involves the need to bring the critical political and youth participation literatures to bear on how civics education is conceived and implemented.

We argue that a vital step in rethinking electoral education is by broadening what is understood as young people's democratic participation and recognising the myriad of ways in which young people participate as citizens in their everyday and not so everyday lives. While civics authorities, much like mainstream political parties, have typically ignored these 'everyday' political practices, instead favouring the more formal political insights of 'curriculum experts, stage of schooling specialists and others with extensive research and practical experience in this domain', we instead argue that civic authorities should be exploring the diverse ways in which young people can contribute to debates about civics implementation and teaching practices – drawing from their own lived experiences.

To end, we would like to express our willingness to further discuss the issues we've raised in this submission - especially in terms of how civic authorities can easily implement them (e.g. the methodology).

All best wishes and our kind thanks in advance for your consideration,
Jean-Paul Gagnon, Mark Chou, Lesley Pruitt, Catherine Hartung, Kathy Edwards, David Marsh, Gerry Stoker