

Supplementary Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters: Electoral Education

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Dear Senators Brown and O'Sullivan and Messrs Buchholz, Goodenough, Gray, Griffin and Pasin,

My colleagues and I would like to thank you for this opportunity to make a supplementary submission with reference to the two questions I (Gagnon) had taken on notice during the public hearing held at Parliament House the morning of 16 March, 2016. Below we address each question in turn.

(1) How far back does the Lowy Poll data go? (A question from Mr Griffin)

- ➔ The Lowy Institute first published its poll in 2005. However, it only began publishing data on democracy in 2012. Hence, we have at least 4 years of data on young Australians' impressions of their democracy from Lowy.

That said, academics studying public opinion, citizen knowledge, the psychology behind democratic practices, and so forth, with reference to governments, governance, and democracy in Australia and beyond, have published numerous influential works in this area over the span of several decades. Likewise, there is much to draw from here to support evidence based policy.

My colleagues and I are contributing to the abovementioned area of research in two ways: (1) We have prepared and submitted an ARC Discovery Grant application for our project, *Rediscovering Democracy: Young People and Australia's Civics Debate* (outcome pending); and, (2) We have secured a contract for our book *Young People, Citizenship and Political Participation: Combatting Civic Deficit?* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, publication date early 2017). Both projects are led by Associate Professor Mark Chou (ACU).

In our ARC application, we propose to conduct an online survey of a nationally representative sample of young people aged 15-24 years-old (n=5000) to obtain quantitative data on how youth evaluate the civics education they are receiving or have received. This important data is currently unavailable. Using the data derived from this survey, we will then delve deeper by undertaking 30-40 focus group interviews with young people aged 15-24 to obtain in-depth qualitative responses to try answer the question of how young people evaluate the civics education they currently receive in schools. Should this study interest you, we would be happy to share our findings as they emerge.

At the same time, our book, which is currently under production, problematizes claims that young people are disengaging from democracy and that an appropriate civics education will rectify the problem. We take an open-ended approach to exploring electoral and civics education with reference to young people as we feel the answers aren't there yet – and those that purport to

be are premature if not at times misleading. Please do let us know if our book might interest you. If so, we will ensure the publisher sends the JSCEM one or more copies.

(2) What tools can engage Australians, especially the young, in electoral education or political engagement more broadly? (A question from Senator O’Sullivan and Messrs Griffin and Pasin)

This, for politics, is one of the enduring questions of our time. Whilst some scholars are advocating the use of digital solutions like democracy apps to couple citizens with specific people (e.g. MPs), institutions (e.g. parliament), and processes (e.g. elections), and video games to ‘train’ citizens in the democratic practices of local through to national governments, we would encourage you to critically evaluate these approaches where used. For there still remain too many unanswered questions, and untried studies, to say with any degree of certainty whether, for example, an app will foster genuine political engagement with young people or simply reiterate the usual ‘vote for me’ tropes that continue to manifest with each new trend in methodology.

That said, every opportunity that’s taken to integrate Australians, of all ages, in governing processes, whether that is coming up with a public policy, working it through the political process, or implementing it when it becomes law, is a good in itself as there is much empirical evidence which demonstrates that citizens learn politics and consequently understand politics by *doing politics*.

With reference to electoral education, as noted in our ARC application and our forthcoming book, we recommend that young people be given the opportunity to co-produce it, co-govern it, and inform it along the policy process. There is however no silver bullet, or right way, to do this as it all depends on immediate context and further research.

My colleagues and I – backed as we are by our own international communities of electoral and civics education experts – are available to work in the medium- to long-term with the JSCEM so that open-ended opportunities are designed to do what no previous Australian government has done before: work *with* young people on their electoral and civics education.

With best wishes,

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