



youth affairs council
OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Dear Committee,

ABN 21 294 698 466

Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018 Inquiry

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia Inc. (YACSA) has been the recognised peak body representing the interests of young people aged 12 – 25 years and organisations and networks throughout the non-government youth sector since 1980. YACSA is an independent, member-based organisation that works towards supporting meaningful improvements in the quality of young people's lives. We create policy, contribute policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to governments and the broader community, and provide information, support, and training and development activities for the youth sector and young people.

Young people are expected to assume many responsibilities in a society which often devalues their contribution and fails to recognise their position as stakeholders in the political process. This is especially so for young people who are experiencing social disadvantage, whose voices are rarely heard in political debate and whose issues and interests may be ignored and even denounced for political gain.

YACSA is committed to encouraging participation through young people's active involvement in the decision-making processes which affect their lives. Youth participation in decision-making by extension includes creating opportunities for young people to articulate their political concerns to decision-makers, question policy and influence political debate. YACSA strongly endorses the importance of ensuring that equitable measures are put in place so that political processes are accessible to all young people.

YACSA has long advocated for voting to be voluntary for 16 and 17-year-olds at local, state, and federal elections as this provides young people with a formal mechanism for participating in decisions that affect them. Not only is this consistent with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but it also promotes community inclusiveness and fosters young people's active citizenship.

Lowering the voting age to 16 and 17-year-olds is not without precedent. Currently, 16-year-olds can vote in Scotland, Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Seventeen-year olds can vote in East Timor, Ethiopia, Indonesia, North Korea, and Sudan. Fifteen states in the United States now allow 17-year-olds to vote in primaries for elections that will be held after they turn 18.

Research from the Austrian and Scottish experiences suggests that 16 and 17-year-olds are as engaged and interested in politics as older voters. Figures from the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum - in which 16 and 17-year-old voters could vote for the first time – showed that 16 and 17-year-olds demonstrated higher rates of polling booth turnout than 18 to 24-year-olds (75% voting and 97% saying they would vote in future elections). In addition, the 16 and 17-year-old voters accessed and engaged with more information and political debate than any other age group.

Lowering the voting age in other jurisdictions has not been an easy road and the debate surrounding this issue in Australia has been met with consternation and intense opposition. Opponents often site a lack of understanding and interest in political issues amongst young people as a reason to exclude them from the political process but this does not reflect our experience. Young people consume politics in unique ways; they are passionate about political issues, but instead of joining political parties, they are expressing their political views in alternative ways such as through activism, social media, and product boycotts. Young people are likely to be intensely focussed on one or two key causes as opposed to consistently siding with one party. Social media, in particular, has created a new way for young people to be overt about their political opinions.

There are a range of benefits to reducing the voting age in Australia. Most importantly, it has been shown that voting early is more likely to establish a pattern of life-long engagement with the voting system and an understanding of the ways in which a young person's vote can influence the decisions that affect them.

To enable young people to effectively and meaningfully engage in a voluntary voting system, effective civics and citizenship education in schools will be critical to ensuring young people have the theoretical knowledge necessary to make the seamless transition from learning about politics and voting to putting what they know into practice.

Young people are the experts in their own lives; they are already politically active and should be able to exercise their right to participate in decisions that affect them. Voluntary voting for 16 and 17-year-olds will provide interested young people with a formal mechanism for participating in political debate and the democratic process.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Bainbridge
CEO