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**Submission of *Youth Decide Australia* to an Inquiry into Civics Education,  
Engagement and Participation in Australia**

Dear Chair,

Australia is one of the most successful democracies in the world. Governments of any ideological stripe know that they must convince a majority of voters to support them, or else they are all but certain to lose power. Robust civic institutions, such as compulsory voting, preferential voting and an independent electoral commission, support electoral outcomes that are fair and seen to be fair by the vast majority of Australians.

It can be easy to take this state of affairs for granted. Yet civic institutions are sustained by people - lawmakers, other officials, popular opinion - and as such, they are not immune from change. They depend not only on their own integrity, but on public confidence and understanding of how they work and why.

There are growing signs that Australia's democratic system is under strain. Widening social divisions breed distrust. In 2023, Edelman's Trust Barometer [claimed that Australia](#) is on a 'path to polarisation'. More troubling are downward trends in knowledge and attitudes regarding Australian democracy among students and young people. Standardised tests record declining marks in civic knowledge and surveys capture widespread disengagement among younger compared to older Australians. Voter participation in Australia's youngest electorates also lags the country at large.

The risks of such disengagement taking hold or accelerating are significant. Most voters fail to elect their most-preferred candidate or party most of the time, making trust in the intermediate steps of an election vital. Democracies are also vulnerable to the double-edged sword of free speech, in which false or misleading claims tend to await patient rebuttal rather than swift

censorship. Both problems are increasingly acute in an age of misinformation and disinformation. Doubts and disillusionment stemming from such structural vulnerabilities can fester and grow without positive action.

The most direct path to reversing these trends and strengthening Australian democracy lies through comprehensive civics education that builds understanding and engagement among all young Australians, regardless of background. Education can make a complex and jargon-filled system legible and even interesting, lowering barriers to participation and helping safeguard against misinformation and cynicism. A more elusive - but equally crucial - goal is to promote a sense of identity tied to Australian democracy. Democracy is full of moments with which students can identify: making your own decisions; giving everyone a role to play; seeing a winner emerge from a genuine contest. Proactively nurturing pride and ownership of democracy in practice offers the best opportunity to build resilience to the challenges democracy faces in the decades ahead.

## **Civics education is uneven and outcomes are getting worse**

Australia gets much right in civics education. Civics is mandatory in the Australian Curriculum, and present in most state and territory syllabuses. In NSW, electoral processes and civic responsibilities are part of the Commerce and Legal Studies subjects - both electives - but soon to be upgraded to a separate, mandatory and comprehensive subject requirement. This is an overdue but very welcome development.

It is common in NSW for Stage 3 (Years 5-6) students to visit Canberra for tours of Parliament House and even the Australian Electoral Commission. Alternatively, many also visit NSW Parliament and meet with their local Member.

Schools exercise considerable autonomy in their approach to both content and delivery. For some, civics open up creative possibilities. Schools with abundant resources - or at least one teacher with a passion project - can organise multi-week mock election campaigns and polling days. Some students gain experience forming tickets or even parties, and developing policies and campaign materials, culminating in a cohort-wide election complete with preferential voting and scrutineers.

Other schools engage little with the material due to the syllabus structure or lack of resourcing. Schools must also tailor their focus to their community of students, whose needs can vary greatly depending on language and cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, migration status and other factors. Sometimes a combination of these factors spurs them to contact Youth Decide.

The unevenness of this approach is reflected in data. Voter turnout in the 2022 federal election fell below 90 per cent for the first time since compulsory voting was introduced in the 1920s. Turnout was lowest in the youngest electorates, from Sydney (85 per cent) to Lingiari in the Northern Territory (67 per cent). Research conducted by Nicholas Briddle and Matthew Gray for

the Australian National University in August 2023 showed that lower levels of income and education correlate with lower confidence in the government in Canberra.

These figures may be underpinned by low political engagement. A 2020 survey of 1,026 Australians by The McKinnon Prize in Political Leadership found that large majorities of young Australians (18-29 years) could not name a politician who had a positive impact that year (67 per cent) or any political achievement (58 per cent). These responses significantly underperformed Australians over 50 years, which reached 39 per cent and 43 per cent respectively. All of this rests on growing knowledge gaps. In the 2019 national civics and citizenship assessment, conducted by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, just 38 per cent of Year 10 students demonstrated a proficient level of knowledge across topics including democracy and Australia's system of government, citizens' rights and legal obligations, and national values.

As students become adults and embrace the full rights and responsibilities of citizens, they deserve to understand how their system of government works and why, for example, our right to vote is treated as a mandatory protection rather than personal preference. Equally important is the national interest in an informed and engaged citizenry actively participating in the project of self governance and self determination.

The key ingredients involve both content and methodology: what students are taught, and how. Getting the content right tends to be an easier step than positively engaging a diverse student population around the country, but it is a vital area of focus if the information and confidence gaps are to be closed.

## **What is Youth Decide?**

Youth Decide is a social enterprise delivering hands-on democracy experiences for high schools and communities. These involve interactive workshops and activities that promote inquiry and identifying with democratic values.

Ballots are printed to match the students' electorates, with candidate names shown in order based on the most recent federal or state election. Students enter cardboard polling booths, much like those in real elections. "The highlight for me was voting because it made me feel like an adult," reported a Year 10 student in one workshop.

When everyone has cast their votes, the ballots are spilled and students participate in the counting process, seeing the way preferences flow and influence the final result.

Students engage in respectful discussion about the factors that influenced their decisions - typically spanning from family and friends to values, promises, track records, and even identity attributes, such as gender or religion.

The voting experience is set in the context of how governments are formed, how laws are passed, and a broad understanding of what democracy is. Students discuss the checks and

balances of democracy, too: the constitution and rule of law, human rights, separation of powers and more.

Students also engage in role plays that identify rights and responsibilities of people and groups in society, and experiment with various voting methods, including preferential, proportional and first past the post. These activities support syllabus outcomes in Commerce and Legal Studies, and create challenging and memorable learning experiences. “The highlight for me was learning what some of the terms actually mean because I can now understand what they talk about in the news,” wrote one student in feedback.

Students leave with a deeper understanding of their own values, and a wider perspective that democracy goes beyond merely the right to vote every three years. They can identify a web of institutions, rights and responsibilities that combine to support Australian democracy.

Students have reported greater likelihood to research elections, discuss elections, and agree with statements that listening to other points of view is important. Workshops have also boosted satisfaction with democracy in Australia (from 11 per cent to 23 per cent), and helped students correctly understand how parties form governments in Australia (from 50 per cent to 80 per cent).

Most of all, however - and if they remember nothing else - they have a fun incursion that stays as a positive and confidence-boosting memory that prepares them for voting in real elections after they graduate. This is a key focus: students may forget facts, but they remember how you make them feel.

## **Recommendations**

1. The government should invest in the development of resources to support teachers to deliver engaging, experiential learning that promotes understanding and confidence in Australian democracy.
2. The government should invest in the Australian Electoral Commission and state electoral commissions to empower them to identify communities most at risk of low turnout, and boost delivery of educational outreach.
3. Recognising that local organisations may be better placed to engage particular communities, the government should support organisations with ties to culturally and linguistically diverse communities and socio-economically disadvantaged communities that face barriers to participation, by providing resources and training for educational outreach.
4. The government should support the development of digital resources and training to engage students in rural and remote communities.

5. The government should integrate civics content and appropriate evidence-based teaching methodologies in teacher training courses.
6. The government should collaborate with experts in misinformation and disinformation, and accelerate the application of this research into practical, age-appropriate syllabus content, to boost media literacy and resilience against information-related threats to Australia's democratic culture and norms.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to your important inquiry.

Youth Decide would be more than happy to participate in a public hearing if the Committee would find our evidence valuable to its deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

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Youth Decide Australia

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