

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

17 August 2018

Submission to Joint Standing committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018

I am a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. I study youth political participation in international perspective and have written a number of significant texts on the subject including [Young people imagining a new democracy \(2008\)](#) and [Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society \(2015\)](#) I appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to the committee on this matter and do so in a personal capacity.

I support lowering the voting age to 16 and outline my reasons why below.

Young people's enrolment is on the increase. Within the broader youth category, enrolment of 18 year olds has increased from 50% in 2013 to over 70% in 2016 (AEC) Nearly 150,000 fewer young people were not on the electoral roll at the 2016 election and the current rate sits at 86%. There is no strong evidence for these gains, but it could logically be attributed to the efforts of the AEC, the significant campaigning of youth peak organisations and youth-led initiatives such as YVote. Additionally, my research – and that of other eminent Australian scholars (Professor Anita Harris, Professor Ariadne Vromen and Professor Lucas Walsh) – finds that young Australians are civic and politically minded and active at many different levels in seeking to shape the kind of society they want to live in. They have a participatory approach to democracy, as is demonstrated in their participation in youth-led organisations such as Oaktree and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition which have over 100,000 members each.

However, research also shows that young people report experiencing a sense of alienation and exclusion from formal political processes. Australian surveys show young people have low levels of trust in politicians and political efficacy. A move to lower the voting age would send a positive message that the concerns and views of young people are important and valued in Australian democracy.

In addition to building positively on the already existing civic and political interest and activity of young people, lowering the voting age would help address other barriers to electoral participation including the fact that around the age of 18 many young people experience significant changes in their lives and increased mobility. Many finish school and leave home which can impede their electoral enrolment. Offering a path to enrolment and participation while most young Australians are either in school, living at home, connected to a service or other support network can remove barriers to enrolment and establish positive attitudes to participation in formal political process by using their vote.

Lowering the voting age would also bring the franchise more into line with the age of consent to sexual interactions (16), criminal responsibility (10) and in most states, young people can work and pay tax from age 13.

It is also my view that many common justifications for *not* lowering the voting age to 16 are unsustainable. Firstly, claims that young people aged 16 and 17 lack maturity, lack life experience or are easily influenced by others are baseless and rest on assumptions and out-dated developmental ideas about linear trajectories towards 'adulthood'. They are, simply, discriminatory. No other part of the population is 'tested' for maturity or sufficient civic and political knowledge. Moreover, over 40% of young Australians are in the workforce and 34.5% are looking for work (Mission Australia, 2017), around 10% are the primary carer for a family member and at least 55% are volunteers in their communities, demonstrating many young people already carry responsibilities in their personal lives and that of their communities.

There are a number of countries around the world that have lowered the age of franchise to sixteen: Argentina, Cuba, Brazil, Nicaragua and Austria and in some state votes, such as the 2014 Scottish independence referendum – in which 75% of those eligible turned out to vote. There is a dearth of research on the positive effect of lowering the voting age, but on current evidence, there are no strong arguments against it.

I strongly encourage the committee to engage directly with Australian 16 and 17 year olds in the inquiry and understand that youth peak bodies such as YACWA, YACVic and Youth Action will be in an excellent position to support young people to come before the committee.

Finally, it is my belief that any amendment should be to extend *compulsory voting* to Australian citizens aged 16 and 17 and that this requirement remain in line with the responsibilities citizens aged 18 and over have. I also recommend the Commonwealth Government invest in the civic and political participation of Australian young people by reinstating a Minister for Youth responsible for a national youth strategy and cross-government coordination of engagement with young people in policy processes across all departments. Strengthen relevant and experiential civic education in and beyond schools and through investment in local youth and advocacy organisation – specifically those working with marginalised and disadvantaged young people who are disproportionately affected by high cost of living, transformations in the workforce and the most unaffordable housing market in recent Australian history.

I am extremely happy to discuss my position on this matter further.

Kind regards,

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