
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Civics and Electoral Education

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

May 2007
Canberra

© Commonwealth of Australia 2007

ISBN 978-0-642-78944-0 (Printed version)

ISBN 978-0-642-78945-7 (HTML version)



Chair's Foreword

As one of the sixth longest continuous democracies in the world, Australia has a proud history and solid foundation of democratic principles. A basic understanding of our political and voting systems is fundamental to a vibrant participatory democracy.

It is of some concern to the Committee that surveys have shown that Australians between the ages of 15 and 35 typically have limited knowledge of Australia's political history and political system, and have little interest in Australian political affairs.

Young people are not alone in this feeling of disconnection: evidence suggests that Indigenous Australians and migrant citizens also experience some difficulties in their interactions with the democratic process.

The Committee's inquiry sought to examine the reasons for low rates of electoral participation amongst young people, Indigenous Australians and migrants, and to find more meaningful ways to encourage citizens to participate more directly in Australian democracy, primarily based on their poor English language skills.

The terms of reference for the inquiry were very broad, enabling us to hear from a diverse range of Australians, from school children and teachers to community leaders, academics and practitioners. The Committee conducted 11 public hearings which included hearings in every state and territory.

The Committee also visited ten schools (both primary and secondary) and held two school forums, during which it held discussions with 244 students and 47 of their teachers.

The Committee has made a series of recommendations which we believe will contribute to a healthier democracy with more citizens who are informed, involved and engaged in the issues that are important to them.

While many of the Committee's recommendations focus on matters regarding the provision of civics education, we also recommend a number of practical measures aimed at reducing the disenfranchisement of eligible voters.

I take this opportunity to thank my fellow Committee members, including the previous Chairman, Peter Lindsay, for their dedication to the inquiry. I also acknowledge the support the Australian Electoral Commission provided to the Committee throughout the inquiry.

Finally, I wish to thank all groups, organisations and individuals who gave their time to prepare submissions and appear as witnesses before the Committee.

Sophie Mirabella MP
Chair

Contents

Chair's Foreword	iii
Membership of the Committee	xi
Terms of reference	xii
List of abbreviations	xiii
List of recommendations	xv

REPORT

1	Introduction	1
	Background to the inquiry.....	2
	Conduct of the inquiry	5
	Structure of the report	6
2	Young people's civic engagement	7
	Defining civic engagement.....	7
	Are young people apathetic and cynical?.....	8
	Conventional forms of politics as 'unappealing'	8
	Conventional forms of politics as 'irrelevant'	10
	Conventional forms of politics as 'exclusionary'	11
	Committee comment	11
	Information sparks interest	13
	Parents as a source of information.....	14
	The media as a source of information	15
	Electoral commissions as a source of information	18

Committee comment	20
Communicating with a generation of ‘digital natives’	20
Civic engagement	21
Committee’s conclusions and recommendations.....	23
3 Young people’s civic knowledge	27
Civics and citizenship education in Australian schools.....	31
Lessons learned from the implementation of civics and citizenship programmes.....	35
Requiring a more coordinated approach across states and territories	36
Committee comment	40
Civics and electoral education can begin at primary school	41
Civic knowledge and civic engagement	43
Continuing professional development for teachers	45
Civics education requires a variety of source materials	49
Civics, values education and Australian History.....	52
School governance	53
Parents and civics education.....	58
Outside school activities and civic knowledge.....	59
Committee Comment	60
The tertiary sector	61
Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges	61
Universities	61
Committee’s conclusions and recommendations.....	63
4 Inspiring future civic participation	65
The national capital: a civic attraction—for how many?	66
Citizenship Visits Programme and the Education Travel Rebate	66
Parliament and Civics Education Rebate	68
Concerns with PACER	70
Attracting the remotest students.....	70
Accessing civics and electoral education programmes in Canberra.....	72
Attracting students in off-peak periods	76
Accessing state/territory legislatures and local governments	78
Electoral education centres.....	79

‘Virtual’ alternatives	81
Committee’s conclusions and recommendations.....	82
5 Indigenous Australians	85
Introduction	85
Civic Engagement	86
Enrolment trends.....	86
Barriers to Indigenous electoral participation	88
The impact of cultural activities	89
AEC service delivery to Indigenous Australians	90
Committee comment	94
Civic Knowledge	95
Challenges for the provision of civics education to school aged children	95
Targeting school-leavers.....	97
The ‘tyranny of distance’	98
Committee conclusions and recommendations.....	101
Participating in democracy	102
Not every vote counts: Informal voting by Indigenous electors	102
Qualifications and experience of polling staff	103
Use of interpreters.....	103
‘Are you enrolled in this area?’ Asking the right questions	104
Challenges with remote mobile polling	105
Committee’s conclusions and recommendations	106
6 Migrant citizens	107
Australia’s diverse population	107
Strength of English language proficiency	108
Addressing Australia’s increasing linguistic diversity.....	110
Adult Migrant English Programme.....	112
Creating pathways to participation: the role of ethnic media	114
Recruitment of appropriate polling place staff	115
Access to information about Australia’s democracy	116
Impact of previous democratic experiences	116
Learning about Australian democracy: current requirements and opportunities.....	117

Citizenship ceremonies: how effectively do they inform new citizens?	118
Timing: providing information sooner or later?	120
Delivery of civics and electoral education	122
Proposal for citizenship test	124
Committee's conclusions and recommendations.....	125

APPENDICES

Appendix A	129
Submissions to the inquiry	129
Exhibits presented to the inquiry	134
Appendix B	135
List of hearings and witnesses, including school visits.....	135
Appendix C	151
Learning from initiatives overseas	151
Encouraging greater civic awareness and engagement.....	152
Encouraging voter registration (or enrolment) and voting.....	155
Civics education initiatives	157

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Percentages of Year 6 and Year 10 students attaining each proficiency level, by sex	28
Table 3.2	Discovering Democracy—primary school units	32
Table 3.3	Discovering Democracy—secondary school units.....	33
Table 3.4	Opportunities for participation in civics-related activities at school, by year level	54
Table 4.1	Rebates under the Citizenship Visits Programme, per zone.....	67
Table 4.2	Student visits subsidised under the Citizenship Visits Programme, 2001-02 to 2005-06	68
Table 4.3	Funding for the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate.....	68
Table 4.4	Parliament and Civics Education Rebate rates.....	69
Table 4.5	Students receiving highest rate of subsidy (travelling over 3000kms) 2001-02 to 2005-06	71

Table 4.6	Schools visiting Canberra under the PACER programme, July-December 2006 (subsidy per student)	72
Table 4.7	Attractions most visited by schools while in the National Capital, 2001-03 and 2005	73
Table 4.8	Session participants at the Canberra Electoral Education Centre	74
Table 4.9	Participant nos. for Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth electoral education centres, 2005-06.....	80
Table 5.1	Estimated resident Indigenous population of Australia (as at 30 June 2001)	87
Table 6.1	Estimated resident population, country of birth—at 30 June 2005.....	108
Table 6.2	Electoral Divisions with highest informality levels in 2004	109
Table 6.3	Rates of increase into Australia's population 1996-2005	111

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1	Distribution of Year 6 and 10 students on the Civics and Citizenship Scale	29
Figure 4.1	Canberra Electoral Education Centre visitors, 1995-96 to 2005-06	75
Figure 4.2	Student participation in PEO role play programme 1998-2005.....	76
Figure 4.3	Monthly visitation figures to the National Capital, 2004 and 2005	77
Figure 5.1	Estimated resident population by remoteness areas (2001).....	87
Figure 5.2	Apparent retention rate of full-time students from Year 7/8 to Year 12	98



Membership of the Committee

Chair	Mrs Sophie Mirabella MP (from 26/2/07) Mr Peter Lindsay MP (to 24/1/07)	
Deputy Chair	Senator Glenn Sterle (from 6/12/06) Mr Michael Danby MP (to 6/12/06)	
Members	Mr Steven Ciobo MP	Senator Judith Adams (from 26/2/07)
	Mr Michael Danby MP	Senator George Brandis (to 26/2/07)
	Mr Alan Griffin MP	Senator Kim Carr
	Mr John Forrest MP (from 14/02/07)	Senator Fierravanti-Wells (from 26/2/07)
		Senator John Hogg (to 6/12/06)
		Senator Brett Mason (to 26/2/07)
		Senator Andrew Murray

Committee Secretariat

Secretary	Stephen Boyd
Inquiry Secretary	Sonia Palmieri (to 9/3/07) Justin Baker (from 10/3/07)
Research Officer	Tegan Smith
Administrative Officers	Doris Cooley Cameron Carlile



Terms of reference

A healthy democracy needs citizens who are informed, appreciate and participate in the various elements of our representative democracy. Civics education, including electoral education, is a key part of this goal and helps to ensure that citizens are adequately informed and able to participate effectively.

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters is inquiring into the adequacy of electoral education focusing on but not limited to:

- the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system;
- the nature of civics education and its links with electoral education;
- the content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities;
- the school age at which electoral education should begin;
- the potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs;
- the adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities;
- the adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens;
- the role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education;
- the role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education;
- the access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament; and
- opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.



List of abbreviations

AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
AFSSSE	Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment
AISSA	Association of Independent Schools of South Australia
AMEP	Adult Migrant English Programme
ATSIEIS	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service
BTN	<i>Behind The News</i>
CEF – A	Constitution Education Fund – Australia
CEIO	Community Electoral Information Officer
CVP	Citizenship Visits Programme
DEST	Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training
DIAC	Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship
DRO	Divisional Returning Officer
ETR	Education Travel Rebate
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
ICT	information communication technology

IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
LGANT	Local Government Association of the Northern Territory
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NCETP	National Capital Educational Tourism Project
NESB	non-English speaking background
OMI	Office of Multicultural Interests (WA)
PACER	Parliament and Civics Education Rebate
SCG	Southern Cross Group
SOSE	Studies of Society and Environment
TAFE	Technical and Further Education



List of recommendations

2 Young people's civic engagement

Recommendation 1 (para 2.62)

The Committee recommends that in the lead up to the expected 2007 federal election, the Australian Electoral Commission should keep a detailed record of the number of electoral commission birthday cards sent to Australian secondary students and report on the success of this rollout in its submission to the Committee's inquiry into the conduct of that election.

Recommendation 2 (para 2.64)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, encourages the cooperation of state and territory education authorities, including boards of secondary school studies, in providing the Australian Electoral Commission with appropriate data for the purposes of electoral enrolment.

Recommendation 3 (para 2.68)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission determine the feasibility and costing of the following initiatives, and implement these initiatives where possible:

- emailing all Year 12 students an electoral enrolment form at a school email address;
- sending out enrolment forms with tertiary institution (including university and TAFE college) application forms; and
- establishing an SMS service by which young people can ask the AEC for an enrolment form.

3 Young people's civic knowledge

Recommendation 4 (para 3.113)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission, in collaboration with the State Electoral Commissions, develop a short, focused electoral education unit to be delivered to either Year 9 or 10 students, and Year 11 and 12 students, in all secondary schools.

The Australian Government – through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs – should ensure that the delivery of this unit is incorporated into all secondary schools.

Recommendation 5 (para 3.114)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission be granted sufficient funds to create several electoral education officer positions in each state and territory with responsibility for the development and presentation of electoral education teaching resources.

Recommendation 6 (para 3.115)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission provide an assessment of statistics regarding the delivery of civics education, which includes both students and teacher training, for inclusion in its submission to the Committee's regular inquiries into the conduct of federal elections.

4 Inspiring future civic participation

Recommendation 7 (para 4.47)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government re-assess the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate as it affects students from the remotest parts of Australia.

Recommendation 8 (para 4.54)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government provide additional support to both the Parliamentary Education Office and the Australian Electoral Commission in their efforts to access additional space so that a greater number of students and schools who want to participate in relevant programmes can do so.

5 Indigenous Australians

Recommendation 9 (para 5.59)

The Committee recommends that State and Territory education authorities develop induction strategies incorporating the delivery of civics education for pre-service teachers bound for regional and remote communities.

Recommendation 10 (para 5.61)

The Committee recommends that a modified civics education website be created for an Indigenous audience.

The website should be established through collaboration between the Office of Indigenous Affairs and the Department of Education, Science and Training, and should be developed in consultation with local governments in remote and regional areas.

Recommendation 11 (para 5.76)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission provide adequate training and guidelines for polling officials in communicating with Indigenous Australians.

6 Migrant citizens

Recommendation 12 (para 6.68)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission review the languages it currently translates its materials into and consider introducing languages spoken by more recent migrant arrivals to Australia.

Recommendation 13 (para 6.69)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government urge migrants and candidates for citizenship to undertake as much language training as is currently made available to them by the Government.

Recommendation 14 (para 6.70)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government amend the Australian Citizenship Ceremonies Code to include the additional mandatory requirement that during citizenship ceremonies there be a presentation regarding the notion of citizenship, voting rights and obligations in Australia, including the opportunity for enrolment at the ceremony.

Recommendation 15 (para 6.73)

The Committee recommends that the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, in consultation with the Australian Electoral Commission, develop a programme of electoral education, to be implemented through migrant resource centres.

Recommendation 16 (para 6.74)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission prepare a professional development seminar for migrant resource workers to enable them to deliver this programme of electoral education.

Recommendation 17 (para 6.75)

The Committee recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission provides a programme of electoral education in the lead up to federal elections which specifically targets areas of high informal voting including those with a high proportion of voters from non-English speaking backgrounds and those in areas where there are different voting systems in place for State elections.

