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democracy**

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Young people, political knowledge and the future of Australian democracy

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Recently, Western Australian Greens Senator, Jordon Steele-John, introduced a bill to Federal Parliament that proposed voluntary voting rights be granted to Australians aged 16 and 17. This has prompted a flurry of debate about whether or not a 16-year-old is ready for this responsibility.

Yet irrespective of the age at which they are able to vote, a young person must understand the Australian system of politics and its electoral system to be prepared to confidently participate in the democratic process. The current problem is that many young Australians may not possess such knowledge.

In 1973, the voting age in Australia was lowered from 21 to 18. The decision to reduce the age of franchise received bipartisan support and reflected the broad mood of the electorate. The arguments at the time centred around the fact that 18 year olds were able to drive, marry, work, pay taxes, and serve in the armed forces, so should therefore have a say in who was running the country.¹

Those who supported lowering the voting age to 18 also presented young Australians as being quantifiably different from previous generations. As Opposition Leader Billy Snedden put it, young Australians in the 1970s were ‘better informed, better able to judge, more confident in their judgements, more critical in their appraisals, and on more mature terms with society around them’.²

Current day supporters of further reducing the voting age in Australia have argued that today’s 16 and 17 year olds are politically literate. They are, after all, ‘digital natives’, who have a vast source of political information at their fingertips. It is also thought that it is better to politically engage citizens when they are younger.³ The family and educational networks young people also have at this time of their life, help ‘socialise them into the practice of voting at elections’.⁴ This means that young people could be given extra support whilst engaging with the electoral process for the first time.

Proponents for change also argue that lowering the voting age is the tonic to cure a sense of alienation some young people experience with politics. If the voting age were lowered then parties will make greater efforts to advance the interests of younger Australians.

There is, however, reason to be cautious. Research suggests that 16-year-old Australians are unlikely to be politically informed. There is also evidence pointing to the possibility that lowering the voting age would not necessarily increase political participation of young people.⁵ For example, international experience reminds us that inconsistencies across jurisdictions and schools in preparing young people to vote may result in patchy participation rates.⁶ Young people themselves are also less than enthusiastic about allowing 16 year olds the right to vote.

Critics have also argued that those under 18 do not have the experience to be able to make an informed political choice. For some commentators, the fact that many young people lived with their parents and had yet to take on the responsibilities of adulthood was grounds to keep the voting age at 18.⁷

Further concerns about the legislation extend to its potential to undermine compulsory voting, which was introduced for federal elections in 1924.⁸ Rather than rely on the Australian Electoral Commission, a statutory authority, to get people out to vote, parties and candidates would have to find ways to mobilise voters under 18.

While this in itself is not problematic, it has the potential to shift campaigning methods towards modes seen in the USA or other systems that use non-compulsory voting. Parties would therefore have to balance the policy demands of the broader electorate with targeting the population of younger voters.

There is also a view that the Greens and Labor stand to benefit from a lowering of the voting age.⁹ This is predicated on the assumption that young voters tend to be more socially progressive and would support left-of-centre candidates. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. In our research on the voting strategies of first time voters in Australia, we found that many weigh up the suite of proposals before deciding whom to vote for, including economic, welfare and social policies. In doing so, the voting choices of young people broadly replicated the voting patterns of the electorate.¹⁰

Irrespective of whether or not the voting age is lowered, more needs to be done to prepare our young people for the responsibility of voting.

While family is an important source of political socialisation, the job of ensuring that young people have the functional knowledge they need to confidently participate in the electoral process lies with the schooling system. This is the best place to provide all young Australians access to accurate information about how the system works and to provide the knowledge they need to be empowered citizens.

Civics and citizenship education in Australian schools

As Australia is a federation, states are responsible for administering education. This has meant that teaching young people about civics and citizenship has varied across the states. It is within this context that successive national governments have sought to equip young Australians with knowledge about their civic rights and responsibilities since the 1980s.

One of the most significant attempts to implement a national approach to building political literacy was made by the Keating Government in 1994. Following consultations with the community and educators, the Civics Expert Group outlined its findings in a report handed to the government. Amongst the recommendations, the report proposed that all young people receive civics education throughout the compulsory years of schooling.¹¹

Although the Keating Government welcomed the report it could not fully act on its recommendations as it lost the 1996 election. The incoming Howard-led Coalition, however, also had a desire to increase the political literacy of young Australians. In 1998, the government introduced the *Discovering Democracy* program, which implemented many of the themes identified by the Civics Expert Group report including teaching young people the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, as well as how the Australian system of politics and government was structured.

More recently, the goal of preparing young Australians to be active and informed citizens was incorporated into the redesigned national curriculum. Known as the *Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship*, this was introduced during the time of the Gillard Government. It seeks to provide educators with tools to teach young Australians about democracy and civic participation.

Currently, the civics and citizenship curriculum begins in Year 3 by providing students with a broad introduction to values and principles. The program continues in each year level through primary and secondary schools and concludes in Year 10. By that stage students are expected to have a more nuanced understanding of how the parliamentary and judicial systems work as well as how they may participate in democratic processes.¹²

Since 2004, the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) has sampled Year 6 and Year 10 students every three years in order to measure their knowledge about subjects including Australian government and democratic processes. The test identifies the percentage of students who achieve the proficient standard, which is a point on a scale that represents what has been deemed as a challenging, but reasonable, expectation of student achievement for their year level.¹³ The most recent NAP-CC tests were carried out in 2016.

The 2016 results show that the proficiency rate for Year 6 students has consistently been over 50 per cent and rose to its highest rate of 55 per cent in the latest round. The results for Year 10 students, however, has been more volatile and has never reached 50 per cent. The strongest result was in 2010 when 49 per cent of Year 10 students reached the proficiency

level, but since then the results have fallen. The 2016 Year 10 performance was the lowest on record at just 38 per cent.

This is a concerning result as it shows that young Australians who are approaching voting age may not have the functional knowledge to confidently participate in Australian democratic processes.

Year	Year 6 percentage of students at or above proficiency standard	Year 10 percentage of students at or above proficiency standard
2004	50%	39%
2007	53%	42%
2010	52%	49%
2013	52%	44%
2016	55%	38%

Table 1: Year 6 and Year 10 achievement on the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship¹⁴

The future of Australian democracy

The question of whether individuals possess sufficient knowledge about politics and government to participate effectively in the electoral process is an important issue in advanced liberal democracies. According to normative theory, a democracy operates best when its citizens understand their nation's system of government and its democratic processes.

Those with higher levels of political literacy are better able to understand how decisions are made, better equipped to select candidates that advance their aspirations, and have the capacity to make sense of the political debate. Moreover, citizens who know how a political system is structured and functions are better able to hold decision makers accountable and cast their vote with confidence.¹⁵

The strength of Australian democracy therefore lies in whether or not the Australian citizenry understands how the political system works, rather than the voting age.

There have been concerted efforts by state and national governments to provide Australians with political knowledge, especially through the education system. The fact that the states have retained the constitutional power over the realm of education, however, has meant that national programs have often lacked uniformity as states have implemented reforms at different rates and times.

The ending of the compulsory civics and citizenship curriculum at Year 10 is also limiting what young Australians know about their rights and responsibilities. While they do encounter many core themes in early years of schooling, students need to consolidate this knowledge prior to leaving secondary school. opportunities exist to do so.

Many schools run life skills classes for students in Year 11 and 12, where they are taught about issues such as resilience, safe consumption of alcohol, and reproductive health. Within this framework, short courses could be delivered to refresh and crystallise young people's understanding of Australian politics and government. This would provide greater confidence to school leavers about their civic rights and responsibilities.

In sum, conversations about a person's capacity to vote responsibly in Australia should not just be about age. It should be about knowledge. The only way young people will ever be able to contribute to the Australian democratic process is if they are provided with the knowledge and skills to do so confidently.

Sidebar

What is the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018?

This bill proposes to:

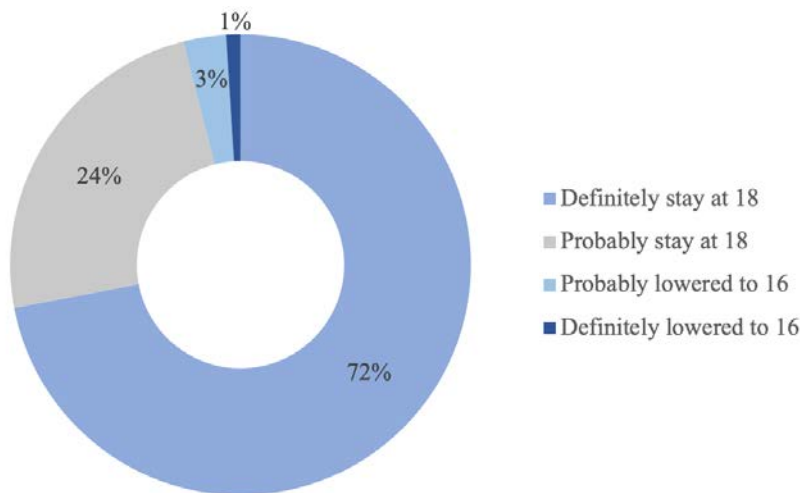
- 1) Lower the minimum (non-compulsory) voting age in Australian federal elections and referenda from 18 to 16 years
- 2) Allow 14 and 15 year olds to be added to the electoral roll
- 3) Provide for 16 and 17 year olds to be included in the certified list of voters (but not to be given a penalty notice if they do not vote)
- 4) Enable an eligible voter, who is not yet on the electoral roll or enrolled at their correct address, to cast a provisional vote on election day.

Do young people think the voting age should be lowered?

The Social Futures and Life Pathways Project is an ongoing longitudinal study of young people from Queensland, Australia.¹⁶ Also known as 'Our Lives', it is following a single aged cohort of young Australians as they progress from adolescence and into adulthood. The project commenced in 2006 when the cohort were 12–13 years old and were in their first year of secondary school. To date, six waves of quantitative data collection have been completed with the most recent survey being carried out in 2017.

In 2013, the Our Lives cohort were aged 18–19 years old and were voting at their first federal election. At this time, the Wave 4 Our Lives survey was administered to the group. One question asked of the cohort was whether they thought the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16.

As their responses indicate, irrespective of education, background, or political affiliation the overwhelming majority felt that the voting age should stay at 18.



Source: *Our Lives Wave 4, 2013. Percentage of Our Lives participants who thought the voting age should stay at 18 or be lowered to 16 (n=2,173)*

There is currently no compulsory national civics and citizenship curriculum for Year 11 and 12 students. Instead, students must enrol in an elective unit such as Legal Studies or Australian Politics (if they are offered by their school), in their final years of high school if they wish to learn more about their national system of politics and government.

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