

The logo features a light blue globe with a grid of latitude and longitude lines, centered on the Pacific Ocean. The globe is surrounded by a laurel wreath. Below the globe is a blue banner with the acronym 'UNYA' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

# **United Nations Youth Association of Australia**

Submission to the “Strengthening Australia’s Democracy” Green Paper

## **Introduction**

The current federal electoral system poses substantial barriers to young people participating in our democracy. For example, the AEC estimates that the electoral roll reflects about 93% of eligible voters, effectively meaning that about one million eligible voters are unregistered.<sup>1</sup> Many of these unregistered voters are young people. While voting is compulsory for all Australian citizens aged 18 and over, only 66% of 19 year olds were on the electoral in 2006, and about 25% of citizens under 25 are not currently enrolled to vote.

This submission argues for three key changes to be made to facilitate a greater involvement of young people in the political process. These are: automatic enrolment (and automatic updating); online enrolment; and, optional enrolment for 16 and 17 year olds.

The United Nations Youth Association of Australia (UNYA) believes that these changes will strengthen the fundamentals of Australia's democracy by improving representation, the rule of law, civic culture, and the effectiveness, efficiency and flexibility of the electoral system.<sup>2</sup>

## **Who we are**

This submission was prepared by the United Nations Youth Association of Australia (UNYA). We are the largest youth-run NGO in the country and our aim is to educate, empower and inspire young people about youth issues and the United Nations.

Quotes from young people in the submission are drawn from youth consultations held in the ACT, NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> AEC, submission no. 169 to JSCEM, *Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> These ideas are drawn from: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2009) *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*, Canberra.

## 1. Automatic Enrolment and Automatic Updating<sup>3</sup>

The current system, which relies on first time voters registering on the electoral roll by post when they turn 18, creates a significant barrier to youth involvement in the electoral process. It disadvantages young people in a number of ways. Many young people falsely believe and expect that they will become automatically enrolled once they turn 18.<sup>4</sup> Insufficient education is provided to remedy this belief.<sup>5</sup>

A system of automatic enrolment in Australia would contribute significantly to remedying many deficiencies in the current system; it also has the potential to generate new opportunities for innovation and engagement in civics and electoral matters. Automatic enrolment and automatic update would strengthen

*Automatic enrolment and automatic updating would strengthen both the institutions and the culture of democracy in Australia.*

both the institutions and the culture of democracy in Australia.

Using the Medicare system as a mechanism for automatic enrolment rather than the cumbersome method attributed to the current system would facilitate a much simpler, broader process of engagement of citizens. The proposed Medicare mechanism would reduce the need for the paperwork associated with enrolment, thus reducing the barriers for participation in the electoral system. Same-day registration would address the issue of the shrinking electoral roll and remove administrative obstacles to participation in elections. This mechanism would ensure, for example, that young people who have changed address and failed to notify the AEC of this change would not be excluded from voting on Election Day. Consequently, the number of people who are unable to vote on

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<sup>3</sup> A response to discussion point 7(b) – “Are there any changes that you think should be introduced to the electoral process?”

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brent, ‘Time to Introduce Automatic Enrolment in Australia’ (2008) Discussion Paper 3/08, *Democratic Audit of Australia*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> For example, UNYA consultations of young people in South Australia, Victoria and the ACT show strong support for the contention “that there need to be greater education of young people on the processes required to enrol to vote”.

Election Day due to multiple changes of address associated with living in rental accommodation, misinformation about the enrolment process, incomplete paperwork, untimely enrolment, and any number of other inhibitions, would be greatly reduced.

UNYA consultations of young people in South Australia, the ACT and Victoria showed enthusiasm for the idea of automatic-enrolment. All of the young people in Melbourne attendance agreed that 'it should be easier to enrol to vote' and all but one supported the introduction of automatic enrolment. In the ACT one young person highlighted that in his rural community there were even fewer young people enrolled than among his peers in the city.

UNYA submits that automatic enrolment would have significant flow-on effects and may generate a range of new possibilities in relation to voting and civic engagement in the Australian community. An accurate electoral roll will effectively engage all eligible voters; this will both stimulate interest and the process and strengthen a culture of democratic participation, not least by removing the barriers that create voter disenfranchisement. Empowering voters, particularly young people and new citizens (noted as especially active, community-minded, creative and energetic demographics), is critical to a sustainable, open and dynamic democracy of the kind which can and should exist in Australia. Automatic enrolment could also facilitate voter participation in referenda and in demographic-specific votes (should they be necessary; for example to elect a youth representative to a particular forum or committee). Automatic enrolment would streamline what is currently a complex and inconsistent way of maintaining the electoral roll, as well as fortifying the democratic process of which Australia is proud.

For these reasons UNYA continues to support the young people across the country who expect their politicians to deliver automatic enrolment.

## **2. Maintaining the integrity of the electoral roll with automatic enrolment and automatic updating<sup>6</sup>**

The simplest way to ensure the integrity of the electoral roll would be to allow for the transfer of information between government agencies that have access to the age and addresses of citizens as has been proposed in NSW with drivers' license details. At a Commonwealth level UNYA suggests the use of Medicare details, particularly as most citizens gain their own Medicare number at age 16. Other potential synergies in information would be between state education systems, driving licence registrations and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Once the AEC has the information of a citizen aged 17, or of a new citizen, from another Government agency they would automatically be added to the roll and would receive information from the AEC welcoming them to the roll.

UNYA is particularly concerned that with the proposed changes to enrolment practices in NSW. While we strongly support the NSW Government's discussion of automatic enrolment, it is likely that young people in NSW may be

**“Many young people in NSW are confused about the need to enrol for the Federal election but not the State election. This may lead to even more young people being disenfranchised.”**

**Morgan Forrest, NSW, 20**

confused about the need to enrol for the Federal election but not the State election. This may lead to even more young people being disenfranchised.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of automatic updating, the automatic deregistration of voters who have changed address, and the lack of corresponding power to automatically enrol voters at a new address, has a significant and disproportionate impact on young people, many of whom change addresses often because of living in rental

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<sup>6</sup> A response to discussion point 7(c) – “If automatic enrolment or online enrolment and/or online updating were introduced, what processes do you think would ensure the integrity of the electoral roll?”

<sup>7</sup> This is a response to discussion point 7(i) – “what options are there for greater harmonisation of enrolment requirements and processes across the Commonwealth, States and Territories?”

accommodation, or moving back into the family home for periods of time. The result is that many young people fall off the electoral list, either because they are not aware of the requirements or because keeping on the roll becomes too great an effort.

Concerns have been raised about automatic enrolment regarding both electoral fraud and privacy. These are by no means insurmountable issues, although they must of course be carefully considered. The most effective and appropriate model by which to implement automatic enrolment would need to be designed in consultation with the AEC, the state and territory electoral commissions and other stakeholders, and adequate regulations put in place. Systems of direct enrolment in other countries (such as Canada)<sup>8</sup> provide examples not only of an effective model in place, but also means by which the concerns raised in opposition to such models may be countered and appropriately responded to. Australia should not be lagging behind our international counterparts in the introduction of measures to strengthen democratic processes. Furthermore, it is the firm belief of UNYA that any difficulties arising from the implementation of such an initiative are far outweighed by the immediate and long-term benefits of automatic enrolment.

### 3. Online Enrolment<sup>9</sup>

Currently, changes to electoral details require a hard copy of the enrolment form

*“The current enrolment process of mailing a hard copy of the form to the AEC is cumbersome. More young people would enrol if they could do so online.”*

*Ruvini Leitan, 19, VIC*

to be posted to the AEC. This is a cumbersome method that discourages enrolment, with young people increasingly used to being able to communicate via the internet rather than post.

In the absence of automatic

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<sup>8</sup> See Peter Brent, ‘Time to Introduce Automatic Enrolment in Australia’ (2008) Discussion Paper 3/08, *Democratic Audit of Australia*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> A response to discussion point 7(b) – “Are there changes that you think should be introduced to the enrolment process?”

enrolment, UNYA believes that access to a broader range of enrolment methods would be a significant step in the right direction towards overcoming the disturbing trend of considerable disenfranchisement of young people. In particular, online enrolment and update for voters who change address would make enrolment more flexible, accessible and easier for all Australians.

UNYA does hold concerns about maintaining the integrity of the electoral roll in an online environment. However, UNYA believes that the potential benefits of online enrolment are significant, especially in terms of facilitating the enfranchisement of young people. By using sensible identity verification procedures and prudent security measures, online risks can be overcome. For example, submitted enrolment forms can be checked against information already held in Government databases.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. What is an appropriate ‘close of rolls’ period?<sup>11</sup>**

In 2007, 100 370 people submitted a change of enrolment or enrolment application after the close of rolls period and therefore were not allowed to vote. Young people make up a disproportionate fraction of this statistic: the high propensity of young people to change address regularly, coupled with the long period during which an election may be called, means that young people may be accidentally disenfranchised.

UNYA believes that the most effective solution to this disturbing trend is automatic enrolment. Barring that, extending the ‘close of rolls’ period to a week (or longer) after the election is called would be a valuable change. There is also a need for the community (particularly young people) to be educated and informed about the close of rolls period, the importance of enrolment details being up to date, and the consequences if details are not in order. In the past, this function has been ably carried out by several community-based organizations, for example ‘Rock the Vote Australia’. UNYA also notes the

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<sup>10</sup> AEC, submission no. 169 to JSCEM, *Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election*.

<sup>11</sup> A response to discussion point 7(h) – “what close of rolls period do you think is appropriate?”

positive activities of the AEC in raising awareness of enrolment requirements amongst young people. UNYA believes that the Government has a responsibility to dedicate substantial funding to educating the community about enrolment procedures and that this would be highly beneficial if used in conjunction with extending the enrolment period. We strongly support the Government doing more to inform young people about voting procedures, and believe that an appropriate avenue for this education is the Australia Youth Forum (AYF). UNYA believes that greater civics, enrolment and voter knowledge ties firmly into priority three of the 'core priorities for action' in the 'National Strategy For Young Australians': "mobilizing young Australians within their communities".<sup>12</sup> This education can highly effective if, for example, peer-to-peer methods are utilised.

### **5. Should enrolment on polling day be permitted?<sup>13</sup>**

A second, complementary mechanism would be to allow for 'same-day registration.' This would allow citizens to arrive at any polling place and vote automatically. This system would either require a pre-prepared list of potential voters, probably based on information from other agencies, or for voters to bring identification. However, UNYA is concerned that this system would also make it difficult to fine a citizen for non-attendance at a polling place; as is required under the current legislation.

### **6. Should the voting age and/or enrolment age for Australian elections be lowered?<sup>14</sup>**

UNYA strongly supports extending the right to vote to sixteen and seventeen year olds. There are a number of reasons why it would be reasonable and desirable to incorporate 16 and 17 year olds into the electorate, including the demonstrable maturity and astuteness of this age group, the fact they are

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<sup>12</sup> Office for Youth, DEEWR (2009) *National Strategy For Young Australians*.

<sup>13</sup> A response to discussion point 7(h) – "what close of rolls period do you think is appropriate?"

<sup>14</sup> A response to discussion point 4(d) – "should the voting age and/or enrolment age for Australian elections be lowered?"

currently inequitably deprived of their right to influence how their taxes are spent, and the substantial benefits they would bring to the electoral system if they were allowed to vote.

The most powerful reason for allowing sixteen and seventeen year olds to vote is that they may face significant social, legal and financial responsibilities. Sixteen year olds can engage in paid work, leave home, leave school, drive, join the army, and support themselves financially. Society's confidence in their ability to handle these challenges demonstrates the widespread belief that people of that age are able to cope with the demands of adulthood. Having this degree of independence indicates a self-reliance and autonomy that sets sixteen year olds apart from children. Lowering the voting age would overcome the marked inconsistency between the responsibilities and high level of maturity that society expects from a sixteen year old, and the lack of voting rights that they are actually given.

Further, many sixteen year olds contribute to the Government by paying tax. Arguably, they should be given a say in how this money is spent. Hence individuals of this age should not be prevented from voting, as they have the same interest in the direction of public policy as persons of the legal age and above.

*"We treat 16 year olds as adults in the sense that they can work full-time, pay taxes and leave home. Yet when it comes to participating in our democracy, we treat them like children and don't let them vote."*

Another common argument against lowering the voting age to sixteen is that sixteen year olds are not politically aware enough to vote.

*Alice Bleby, 21, VIC*

UNYA consultations of young people in NSW, ACT, SA and Victoria indicate that there is strong anecdotal evidence of a broad spectrum of political engagement and political awareness amongst young people, but that stereotypes that young people are generally 'apathetic' should be rejected. As will be discussed, voluntary enrolment for sixteen and seventeen year olds provides a possible

model that would allow those young people who are politically engaged to have their voice heard. UNYA consultations also indicate broad support amongst young people for lowering the voting age: all but one young person in the SA consultation supported “that the voting age be lowered to 16”, with similar outcomes in the ACT and Victoria.

## **7. Comparison of possible models for lowering the voting age**

There are several possible models for lowering the voting age, as outlined in the Green Paper.<sup>15</sup> It is UNYA’s position that all of these models are an improvement on the status quo, due to the benefits of young people participating in the political process.

### *7.1. Voting rights to those with certain responsibilities, for example economic independence*

An important argument for lowering the voting age is that 16 and 17 year olds are given responsibilities that are generally regarded to be in the domain of adults, and so have the adult and mature capacity to cast a reasoned, informed and responsible vote. However, UNYA rejects the idea that those young people not directly subject to some of these responsibilities should be excluded from voting. UNYA believes that the right to vote should be derived from the fact that 16 year olds have the choice to take on substantial responsibility. Individuals who are not subject to these responsibilities should not be excluded from voting.

Also, there is the possibility that only conferring voting rights to young people with certain responsibilities would undermine the universal nature of our democracy. In Australia, the right to vote is based solely on citizenship rather than on the exercise of some particular responsibility. Requiring young people to hold certain responsibilities before being allowed to vote would conflict with this universality principle.

### *7.2. Compulsory voting, compulsory enrolment*

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<sup>15</sup> Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2009) *Strengthening Australia’s Democracy*, Canberra.

The strength of this model is that it treats 16 and 17 year olds in the same way as 18 year olds. This avoids the inconsistency of other models of lowering the voting age so that young people are treated 'as equals', while also requiring them to vote under a different model.

However, many young people feel unqualified to vote.<sup>16</sup> An electoral system where voting is voluntary (or where enrolment is voluntary) would allow these young people to not opt-in, and therefore UNYA believes that these are the preferred models.

### *7.3. Voluntary voting, compulsory enrolment*

UNYA believes that compulsory voting in Australia is a unique and important tenet of our successful democracy. There is the potential for a voluntary voting model for sixteen and seventeen year-olds to undermine this aspect.

### *7.4. Voluntary enrolment, compulsory voting for those enrolled*

UNYA believes that this is the preferred model. It would not undermine compulsory voting and would create a period of two years in which youth can learn how democratic mechanisms work before being required by law to cast a vote. Optional enrolment would bring all the benefits associated with having young people in the electorate without many of the disadvantages.

## **Conclusion**

Australia's electoral system is failing young people. Enrolment numbers are substantially lower for young people than other age brackets and young people are given the freedom to exercise most adult responsibilities from age 16 but not awarded the right to vote until age 18. As Australia's largest by-youth for-youth organization and as young citizens of this country, UNYA firmly supports the implementation of automatic enrolment (and automatic updating); online enrolment; and, optional enrolment for 16 and 17 year olds. These mechanisms and changes are essential improvements on the current system.

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<sup>16</sup> JSCEM, *Civics and Electoral Education*, 2007.