

## YOUTH AFFAIRS COUNCIL OF WA SUBMISSION TO THE ELECTORAL REFORM GREEN PAPER



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YACWA Submission to the  
Electoral Reform Green Paper  
'Strengthening Australia's Democracy'

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak non-government youth organisation in Western Australia with a membership of over 250 youth service organisations, community organisations and young people. Established in 1980, YACWA has worked tirelessly for 30 years to deliver high-level representation and advocacy for the Western Australian youth sector and young people.

### Our role includes:

- Acting as a lobbying group for the non-government youth sector and Western Australian young people aged 12-25
- Providing information and support to the non-government youth sector
- Working to promote fair and positive outcomes for young people in our community
- Promoting equity, equality, access and participation for young people in Western Australia
- Advocating to all levels of government on the best interests of Western Australia's young people
- Encouraging the active participation of young people in identifying and dealing with issues that are important to them
- Improving youth services by exchanging ideas, information, skills and resources
- Providing a strong, united and informed voice capable of effectively advocating for the non-government youth sector and the young people with whom they work

Being the peak non-government youth association in Western Australia, we have a responsibility to advocate for young people and to ensure the youth sectors' views are heard on the very important issue of electoral reform in Australia.

### OUR VIEWS

YACWA believes that young people are our community's greatest asset and are too often denied participation in processes and decisions that affect them. As such, we are in full support of greater representation for young people in Australia and of a reform of electoral processes to better ensure the participation of young people and other marginalised groups in Australia's democracy. To achieve this, YACWA is in favour of the following reforms:

- Introducing automatic enrolment of individuals when they become eligible to vote
- Introducing an online system for individuals to update their enrolment details
- Extending the close of rolls period or, ideally, keeping the rolls open up to and including election day, to ensure maximum participation in Australian elections
- Lowering the voting age to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote

## **EXPANSION OF THE DEMOCRATIC FRANCHISE**

### ***Should the voting age and/or enrolment age for Australian elections be lowered?***

At YACWA we believe that young people want the vote. When consulted, young people argue for an expansion of the democratic franchise. For example, the Communiqué from the Youth 2020 Summit stated:

‘Further, to build a more participatory 2020, the age at which people are eligible to vote must be lowered to 16. Sixteen year olds work, pay income tax, pay GST, drive, and can join the army. They must be enfranchised so they can have a say in Government policies that affect them.’<sup>1</sup>

Similar views are also evident in the final report of YouthSpeak, Australia’s largest ever consultation of young people. It highlighted a desire amongst participants ‘*to be taken seriously and have a greater say in the debates usually reserved for people older than them*’<sup>2</sup>. One 17 year old respondent put it succinctly:

‘If we are to be a truly democratic state it is imperative that we open up that process to younger Australians not merely those who have passed the age deemed adulthood.’<sup>3</sup>

This concept of adulthood is intertwined with one of the principle concepts used to exclude young people from voting, the idea that they are unprepared to participate in the democratic process. Such arguments seem inconsistent with the various rights and responsibilities that are currently extended to young people. YACWA believes that the chief criteria for determining when a person of a particular age is ready to vote should be on the basis of when that person is able to make a free and informed choice.

Young people aged 16 and 17 are free, amongst other things, to make decisions about their choice of sexual partner, leaving education and training, driving, work, and joining the Defence Force. By extending to young people the rights to make such choices our society has made a positive judgment in the ability of young people to make independent and major life decisions. As society trusts these young people with such rights and responsibilities, it is essential that we extend to them the power to participate in the political processes that define these obligations - the election of governments.

Currently, legislation exists that has a direct effect on the lives of young people and yet young people have little real input into public policy that affects them. By lowering the voting age to 16/17 there would be a fundamental shift in the way young people are treated by politicians and governments. Making young people active members of the electorate would ensure that their needs and concerns and the issues that affect them would be more actively addressed by governments.

Governments and politicians often overuse the cliché ‘young people are our future’ whilst ignoring the fact that young people are a marginalised group within our society, more often seen as a ‘problem’ to be dealt with than an ‘asset’ to be valued. YACWA would like to see a reversal of this situation, so that

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<sup>1</sup>Evans, H & Ellis, K. et. al, *2020 Youth Communiqué*, 2008, p. 8 Available at:

[http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/youth\\_summit\\_communique.pdf](http://www.australia2020.gov.au/docs/youth_summit_communique.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Youth Association, *Youth Speak – A Conversation for the Future*, 2008, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

young people - the 'future' of Australia – are engaged in the policies and processes that will determine this future. Giving young people the option of voting in all elections is the best way of ensuring this engagement. It is YACWA's opinion that giving young people the right to vote at 16 will ensure that governments begin to show a genuine interest in the issues faced by young Australians.

Australia's demographics mean that young people will become an increasingly small minority in the community. As the median age of Australians increases, young people will have an increasing burden placed on them to support older generations, juxtaposed by diminishing electoral representation due to their minority status in the voting populous. The Australian Bureau of Statistics notes that:

'Over the next several decades, population ageing is expected to have significant implications for Australia including health, labour force participation, housing and demand for skilled labour.'<sup>4</sup>

These problems will be some of the most significant challenges of Australia's future and it is essential that the next generation of young people have an adequate stake in the decision-making process. YACWA believes that lowering the voting age to 16 will help to insulate young people from the drastic under-representation that will otherwise occur as result of our ageing population.

Voter apathy is often used as an argument to support the exclusion of young people from the franchise. However the United Kingdom's *Votes at 16* campaign makes a compelling point:

'Preventing 16 and 17 year olds from expressing their political views through the ballot box gives them - and the rest of society - the impression that young people's views are somehow not valid and young people are not 'real' citizens. This contributes to the disconnection that many young people feel from political processes and structures'<sup>5</sup>

Further, the YouthSpeak consultation found that young people believe '*[that they] face many barriers to participation not experienced by those outside the youth demographic*' and it emerged that a common thread in young people's thoughts on government is the need for expanded avenues of participation and consultation in the policy making process.<sup>6</sup>

As the evidence above suggests, the 'apathy' of young voters is the *symptom* of their disenfranchisement rather than the *cause*. In YACWA's opinion, addressing the disconnection by allowing young people the right to vote is certain to result in increased participation and decreasing apathy in our political process.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *3201.0 - Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories*, June 2008. Available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3201.0>

<sup>5</sup> *Vote at 16 (UK), 16 for 16 - 16 reasons for Votes at 16*, 2008, p.20. Available at: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/16for16.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> YouthSpeak, op. cit., p.90.

## **ENHANCING PARTICIPATION THROUGH ENROLMENT**

### ***How can enrolment processes best ensure maximum participation in Australia's elections?***

Australians are renowned for their voter apathy, much of which can be attributed to the complexity of our electoral arrangements. To ensure maximum participation in Australian elections – at all levels of government – it is vital that enrolment processes become quick, easy and cater to all groups within the eligible voting population. The Green Paper reports that the number of eligible voters not enrolled as at June 2009 numbered approximately 1.2 million people (see Figure 7.1, p.92). This figure should prompt a re-evaluation of Australia's electoral processes, some of which currently act as a barrier to participation in our democracy.

At present, the enrolment system features a number of processes and factors which are discouraging potential voters. These include paper-only enrolment and update of details, the absence of election-day enrollment provisions, and the 'opt-in' system for enrolment and re-enrolment, which places the onus of participation on voters themselves.

Paper-only methods for enrolment and update are becoming increasingly anachronistic, particularly for younger segments of the voting population and future generations of voters. In order to generate and sustain maximum participation in Australian elections, these enrolment methods must be replaced with a combination of automatic enrolment and online update of details, which together will hasten and streamline the (re)enrollment process for voters.

The difficulty for voters maintaining current and accurate enrolment details is exacerbated by the closing of the rolls prior to polling day. The arguments for closing the rolls prior to polling day (outlined in 7.83 of the Paper) are logistical in nature, focusing on the surge in enrolments to be processed by the AEC following the issue of writs so as to deliver an accurate roll to polling places in time for the election. However, the practice of disallowing enrolment or update on polling day is a major barrier to participation for many eligible voters. The roll close reforms of 2006 further limit the participation of many groups, particularly young people enrolling for the first time who, under the reforms, are prevented from enrolling beyond 8pm on the day the writs are issued. Such time frames are entirely unworkable and further disillusion individual perceptions of the electoral process and its relevance to their daily lives.

There are several constituencies around the world which use a system of election-day enrolment, including Canada as well as nine states and the District of Columbia in the United States. In these nine states there is a strong trend of higher voter turnout, varying between seven and twelve per cent higher than those states without election-day registration provisions<sup>7</sup>. Minnesota has employed election-day registration for 33 years and as such has one of the highest turnout rates in the US, reporting turnouts of above 70 per cent in all Presidential Elections since 2000.<sup>8</sup> Similar effects could be seen here in Australia, with the million or so non-voting individuals in the population being re-engaged in the electoral process.

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<sup>7</sup> Demos, 'Voters Win with Election Day Registration', January 28 2009. Available at: <http://www.demos.org/publication.cfm?currentpublicationID=2D9B9786%2D3FF4%2D6C82%2D5AC18BB4E53ADCFA>

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Michael McDonald, 'Turnout 1980-2008', *United States Election Project*. Available at: <http://elections.gmu.edu/FAQ.html#Where%20data?>

The positive act that is required to enrol oneself and stay enrolled is especially problematic in light of Australia's system of compulsory voting. It highlights a disparity between our nation's electoral processes and electoral legislation, a disparity which is compounded by several other incongruities mentioned in the Green Paper at 7.48, specifically:

- the AEC notifying an individual they are still registered at an old address yet failing to update their enrolment details,
- the exclusion of the AEC from governmental information-sharing agreements, contrary to the common belief of individuals that *'when they notify 'government' of their change of address...their enrolment is being automatically updated.'*

Contradictions such as these undermine the transparency of Australia's enrolment system and contribute to public perceptions of enrolment as an unnecessarily complex process. In a nation where voting is compulsory, such perceptions lead to a feeling amongst the population of frustration and disillusionment with political life. Rather than being a healthy and participatory democracy, segments of the Australian population risk falling into a state of permanent disengagement. It is thus imperative that electoral reform takes place and is geared towards the participation of young people and the needs of future generations, who will determine the future of Australia's democracy.

***Are there any changes that you think should be introduced to enrolment processes, such as:***

- ***automatic enrolment?***
- ***automatic update of enrolment details?***
- ***online enrolment?***
- ***online update of enrolment details?***

One of the best ways to achieve a simpler and more voter-friendly enrolment system would be the introduction of automatic enrolment of eligible persons in conjunction with online update of details for previously registered individuals.

The automatic enrolment of newly eligible voters, such as 18 year olds, would hugely increase the number of enrolled voters in Australia and remove the 'positive action' requirement that currently discourages many individuals from enrolling to vote. Not only is this 'opt-in' model of enrolment inconsistent with Australia's compulsory voting legislation, it also acts as a barrier to participation for many groups. These groups include young people, newly eligible voters, Indigenous Australians, those with language or literacy issues, and those citizens living overseas. For Australia to truly fulfill its commitment to a strong and representative democracy, the engagement of these particular groups through a combination of electoral reforms is essential. Automatic enrolment would be the first such step to ensure young people and eligible voters are not absent from the nation's political process.

In order to maintain a maximum of eligible voters on the electoral roll, online update of enrolment details must be introduced. While automatic update would be consistent with the aforementioned automatic enrolment of voters, it introduces several additional processes both for the AEC and the individual in verifying the accuracy of the details being automatically updated. Therefore, online update of enrolment appears to be the most viable and voter-friendly reform. The convenience, flexibility and ease with which everyday tasks can be completed means online services are widely used by Australians, particularly by young people in the 18-25 age bracket. Electoral re-enrolment and updating one's details should be made similarly easy if Australia is to avoid voter disengagement.

Due to our compulsory voting requirement, it is imperative that processes surrounding electoral enrolment are made as simple as possible for eligible voters, particularly those groups who are at risk of being excluded from the democratic process. Young people have been identified as one such group and so must be re-engaged through new strategies and effective electoral reform that removes the barriers to participation currently posed by paper-only enrolment and update of details.

***What changes (if any) should be made to the special enrolment arrangements for silent electors, homeless persons, and youth?***

Of particular concern to YACWA are the special enrolment arrangements for young people and the reforms that can be implemented to increase the participation of these people in the democratic process.

The present arrangements whereby 17 year olds can provisionally enroll to vote are to be commended for their efforts to ensure 18 year olds are ready to vote immediately. However, the percentage of young people utilising this enrolment method must be scrutinised. In a survey of YouthSpeak participants aged 17, it was found that 93.69 per cent were un-enrolled to vote and of these 4.88 per cent claimed they were not old enough to enroll.<sup>9</sup> The provisional enrolment arrangement for 17 year olds is intended to act as a safeguard, ensuring the involvement of young people in the democratic process. However, figures such as these question the efficacy of such an arrangement.

Several proposals have been made to remedy this situation. One involves lowering the provisional enrolment age to 16 or even 15, when a greater proportion of young people are attending school. This could be tailored to the legal school leaving age for each state, in order to capture a greater number of students who are soon-to-be voters. Incorporating this process into the civics education courses commonly taught in Year 10 at secondary school would demonstrate the relevance of such courses and the role that young people can play in political life and processes. This suggestion is worthwhile and could increase the number of young people enrolled to vote as well as enhancing their interest in the political process. However, YACWA feels that this proposal does not go far enough to engaging young Australians in the political decisions that affect them.

Ideally, Australia would introduce a lower enrolment age of 16 or 17 to enable interested and informed 16 and 17 year olds to participate in the decision-making processes and policy debates that directly affect them and the future of their nation. This measure would do away with the provisional enrolment process and effectually combat problems of low youth enrolment rates due to misinformation, barriers to enrolment, and/or disengagement from the political process.

***What 'close of rolls' period do you think is appropriate?***

- Should the roll close date be set later in the election period?***
- Should enrolment on polling day be permitted?***

In order to combat the large number of eligible voters who cannot vote in elections due to the current 'close of rolls' arrangement, it is recommended that Australia introduce polling day enrolment alongside the other proposed reforms of automatic enrolment and online update of details. While many have argued against polling day enrolment for reasons of logistical difficulties and roll integrity, the proposed

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<sup>9</sup> YouthSpeak, op. cit., 2008, p.90.

abandonment of paper-only enrolment and the undertaking of thorough identity checks during polling day enrolments refute both of these arguments.

With the introduction of automatic enrolment of eligible voters, there will remain a far smaller number of late enrollees than exists at present. The burden of enrolments placed on AEC officers on polling day would thus be drastically reduced. Allowing enrolled voters to update their details online will also contribute to this reduction and produce a far more accurate roll on polling day. To prevent any electoral fraud in the form of multiple votes, the roll could be maintained as an online database, accessible by all AEC officers at all polling places who could then check each voter's details against the online roll before allowing them to cast their vote. Those who would benefit from polling day enrolment would be those who have not updated their details online prior to polling day, those who will become eligible to vote after the issue of the writs, and those individuals who are transient or experiencing homelessness.

## ***CONCLUSION***

Australia's electoral system is in need of drastic revision to bring its processes and principles into the twenty-first century. In the same way that Australia led the way and granted women the right to vote at the turn of the last century, it is now time to be a global leader and update our electoral system to include young people and a greater proportion of the current eligible voting population.

The obligations and responsibilities we now extend to 16/17 year olds make it impossible to continue to refuse them a seat at the decision-making table. Voter apathy and disengagement loom as serious issues and must be addressed if Australian citizens are to continue participating in our democratic system. Methods to ensure this include:

- introducing automatic enrolment for eligible individuals
- introducing an online system for individuals to update their enrolment details
- introducing provisions for election-day enrolment
- lowering the voting age to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote

Introduced alongside one another, these reforms will combat problems of voter apathy and make voting more attractive for current and future generations, thereby safeguarding Australia's democratic traditions.