



Policy Platform: Young People and Voting

Youth Coalition of the ACT

The vast majority of young people in the ACT are active and engaged members of their communities, and the Youth Coalition considers that young people have a right to be involved in all decisions that affects their lives.

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that 'everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives'.¹ In addition, the Youth Coalition supports the ACT Government's commitment to building a 'Child Friendly City',² which seeks to guarantee the right of every young person to influence decisions about their city and express their opinion on the city they want.³

The Youth Coalition supports the notion that voting is a fundamental right that should be accorded to young people as members of society. As such, the Youth Coalition supports the lowering of the voting age to allow young people aged 16 and 17 years of age the option to enrol and vote in territory and national elections.

Many young people would vote if given the choice. In the 2012 *Rate Canberra* survey conducted by the Youth Coalition, 62% of the 1165 young respondents identified that young people aged 16 – 17 should be able to vote, with the vast majority of these indicating that this voting should be optional, not compulsory.⁴ 67% of survey participants aged 16 – 17 thought people their age should be able to vote, and more than half of this age group said they would vote if it were optional.⁵

The Youth Coalition notes that individual competence is not taken into account for individuals over the age of 18 in Australia; nor should 'competence' be the sole determinant in decision making. The Youth Coalition recognises that young people aged 16 to 17 have the right to: learn to drive (as a learner and a provisional driver), consent to sexual intercourse, apply for youth allowance income support, apply to live independently, engage in employment and training, and consent to medical procedures.⁶ The Youth Coalition believes that if young people have the right to make decisions regarding these activities, and the legal obligation to contribute to the community (e.g. through the payment of taxes), it is essential to provide them the option of enrolling and voting in elections. This ensures democratic accountability.

Enrolment

The Youth Coalition further notes that while 81% of young people aged 18 – 25 are enrolled to vote, a significant proportion of young people aged 18 – 19 years are not enrolled.⁷ The ACT Electoral Commission estimates that only 67% of eligible people aged 18 and 56% of eligible people aged 19 were enrolled to vote in the 2012 ACT Legislative Assembly election.⁸ The ACT Electoral Commissioner has stated that there were fewer young people enrolled to vote in the 2012 election than in previous ACT elections.⁹ The Youth Coalition believes that this low enrollment may in part be due to education around government and the political system for young people, and ease of access to enrolment. In 2010, Youth Coalition consultations on these issues revealed that many young people do not feel connected to politics or politicians. This

highlights the need for governments to make a concerted effort to engage with young people in a meaningful manner and to create processes for equitable automatic enrolment.

Voter Education

The importance of education in empowering young people to actively participate in the voting process was documented in a 2009 Youth Enrolment Study, where 62% of the young people surveyed indicated that studying the government and politics positively affected their intention to vote, even if voting wasn't compulsory.¹⁰ However, the study also indicated that while 25.5% of young people studied government and the political system in Year 9; and 33.7% studied it in Year 10; only 15.8% and 7.1% studied the topic in Year 11 and 12 respectively, which is when most young people become eligible to enrol to vote.¹¹ The Youth Coalition notes with concern the finding of the Youth Electoral Study that only half of the students surveyed from across Australia felt prepared to vote. Therefore the Youth Coalition believes that interactive and engaging education on civics and citizenship matters for young people in schools and other settings and should be improved.¹²

The young people involved in the Youth Coalition consultations in 2010 also raised access to enrolment and voting as an issue, and identified it would be useful to be able to enrol via the Internet. Therefore, the Youth Coalition supports increased access for young people in enrolling to vote and maintaining their enrolment; potentially including the ability to enrol online as well as more comprehensive programs through existing structures, such as education and employment.

Commitments

1. Advocating for the voting age to be lowered to allow young people aged 16 & 17 years of age the option to enrol to vote in territory and federal elections.
2. Advocating for improved education on civics and citizenship matters for young people, at schools and in other settings, with a particular focus on young people aged 16 – 19 years of age.
3. Advocating for enrolment processes to be made more simple, automatic and accessible for young people.
4. Advocating for the active involvement of young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth political engagement and political education frameworks.

¹ United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21.

² Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (2009) ACT Young People's Plan 2009 – 2014, ACT Government, Canberra

³ UNICEF (Accessed 2010) Child Friendly Cities

⁴ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2012) Rate Canberra 2012: Findings from the Survey of Young People aged 12-25 in the ACT, Canberra.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Legal Aid ACT (2009) When Can I? A Legal Handbook for Young People, Canberra

⁷ Saha, L; Edwards, K (2004) Youth Electoral Study: Enrolment and Voting, Report 1, Australian National University and University of Sydney

⁸ ACT Electoral Commission (2012) Over 256,700 enrolled to vote in the ACT election, Canberra

⁹ ABC News (2012) Many Young Canberrans Fail to Enrol

¹⁰ Saha, L; Print, M (2009) Youth Electoral Study: Youth, Schools and Learning about Politics, Report 5, Australian National University and University of Sydney

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Saha, L; Edwards, K (2004) Youth Electoral Study: Enrolment and Voting, Report 1, Australian National University and University of Sydney