

**Submission to the Inquiry into the
Commonwealth Electoral Amendment
(Lowering Voting Age and Increasing
Voter Participation) Bill 2018**

August 2018



The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

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1. Introduction

This submission to the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering the Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018 (the Inquiry) outlines the views of the Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition) in relation to lowering the minimum non-compulsory federal voting age.

The Youth Coalition strongly supports the purpose of the Bill to lower the minimum, non-compulsory voting age to 16, in recognition of the fundamental rights of young people as citizens and contributors to society, and to provide an opportunity for young people aged 16-17 to choose to participate in and express their views about policy decisions in Australia.

1.1 About the Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition is the peak body for youth affairs in the ACT, representing and promoting the rights, interests and wellbeing of young Canberrans aged 12 to 25 years and those who work with them. The Youth Coalition undertakes policy analysis, sector development, advocacy, research and projects that respond to ongoing and current issues. One of our key roles is to develop and analyse the social policy and program decisions that affect young people and youth services in the ACT, and to facilitate linkages and collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people.

1.2 Young people in the ACT

Young people, aged between 12 and 25 years, are an integral component of the community. Although diverse, as a group, young people frequently experience systemic disadvantage, discrimination and unequal access to resources. This means that young people who also experience other forms of disadvantage, such as poverty or low educational attainment, are amongst the most vulnerable members of the ACT community.

With over 78,000 people aged between 12 and 25 in the ACT, young people comprise 20% of the ACT population (ABS, 2018). As a fifth of the ACT's population, it is important that the wellbeing and outcomes of young people are viewed as critical indicators of the country's future prosperity, and that young people are provided with opportunities to participate meaningfully as citizens in their communities.

1.3 Process for developing this submission

The Youth Coalition welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry. This submission is based on:

- Ongoing collaborative work with state and territory youth peak bodies
- The policy positions outlined in the *Youth Coalition Policy Platform*
- The views of participants of the Youth Coalition's Forums and Networks
- The views of young people as expressed through the 2016 Rate Canberra survey of young Canberrans
- Previous Youth Coalition submissions to the ACT Government, including relating to lowering the non-compulsory voting age
- Current and topical research on youth affairs

2. Rationale for lowering the voting age

The Youth Coalition strongly supports the proposed Bill to lower the non-compulsory voting age in Australia to 16, to recognise the rights and capabilities of young people as active citizens, and to increase opportunities for young people to participate and engage in policy processes. In particular, we support the proposal to make voting for this age group non-compulsory, which would negate many of the common concerns frequently promoted by opponents to lowering the voting age.

Since its release, Ian McAllister's (2012) paper to the Australian Electoral Commission has remained the most contemporary literature on the lowered voting age debate in Australia. However, it is our observation that opponents of such change rely almost entirely upon this study to the exclusion of empirical evidence and studies from other countries. The Youth Coalition attended the speeches at the second reading of the Bill in the Senate, and noted that the study was cited as the primary source of evidence to argue against lowering the voting age.

We contend that this study, which concluded that there is a lack of evidence to support a lowered voting age, is based upon information irrelevant to the Australian context and to the proposed Bill because it focuses on the impact of lowering the mandatory voting age, and presents data from countries without mandatory voting for the adult population. Our submission refutes many of the key points presented in McAllister's study, relating to their being a lack of public support, that young people are not politically engaged, that they lack political maturity and that the current minimum age is sufficiently equitable.

2.1 Recognising the rights and capabilities of young people as active citizens

A crucial component of democratic nations, such as Australia, is the extent to which the opinions and interests of all citizens are permitted to be heard and considered in policies that impact upon them. The current paradigm of democracy in this country undermines young people's legal status as citizens and diminishes their capacity to become politically engaged citizens. Holdsworth et al. (2007) identify that young people are often constructed as in the process of becoming, rather than already being actual citizens. This mischaracterises young people as politically inept and fuels a narrative that they are not ready to participate in democratic activities. Though 18 years was previously an appropriate voting age, as the roles, responsibilities and expectations of today's young Australians have evolved, so too should the legislation.

Young people aged 16-17 actively contribute to Australia's economic, social and cultural environment. Upon turning 16 years of age, the scope of activities and decisions that young people can legally participate in significantly widens. As seen in Table 1, at 16 years, an individual can: leave school, obtain full time employment, live independently, obtain a driver's license, and even become a parent. A large number of young people also engage in formal or informal patterns of employment and take on legal responsibilities such as tax obligations, with those under 18 years generating almost \$51 million in income tax revenue annually (ATO, 2018). Young people aged 16-17 are active and contributing members of Australian society, who hold considerable decision-making powers regarding their own lives and who are required to meet a number of legal requirements. They should therefore be afforded the opportunity to vote on matters that affect them.

16 Years	17 Years
Leaving school	Independent driving
Full-time employment	Military service
Sexual activity	Leaving home
Marriage (with parental support)	Independent questioning by police
Independent medical decisions	Obtain student loans
Parenthood	
Firearm usage (with supervision)	
Pay tax	

Table 1: Age at which certain activities become permissible in Australia (ages may vary between states)

2.2 Increasing opportunities for young people to participate and engage in policy processes

Lowering the minimum non-compulsory voting age to 16 will increase young people's engagement in political and policy processes, and strengthen the mechanism of accountability that politicians and governments have to young Australians. Currently, young people are unheard and underrepresented in Australia's policy decisions. Young people are frequently excluded from policy discussions in a range of domains affecting their lives, such as employment, education, housing, tax, the environment, welfare and support services. Due to their ineligibility to vote, young people aged 16-17 are unable to hold politicians and governments to account through electoral processes, resulting in youth affairs seldom being a priority for the government. Consequently, the challenges that young people experience frequently go unaddressed.

The United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* mandates that governments 'assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child' and that they 'be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body' (UN General Assembly, 1989: 3). Currently, young people in Australia are afforded neither a meaningful forum to express their views in policy matters affecting them, nor are they adequately represented. In 2014, the *Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC)*, the national youth affairs peak body, was defunded by the federal government. This was followed by the *Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (ACYS)*, the foremost organisation on best practice for youth work, being defunded in 2015.

In addition to the lack of non-government representation, young people have likewise been deprived of a champion for youth affairs within government. Since 2013, the role of a federal Minister for Youth Affairs and a portfolio aimed at addressing issues specifically facing young people has ceased to exist. The office that previously existed in the space, and the *Australian Youth Forum (AYF)* that it established, played an important role in giving young people and youth organisations a platform through which their needs and concerns could be voiced and directly received by policy makers. The removal of this Ministerial position precipitated a further erosion of opportunities for young people to engage in political and policy processes.

'It is hard to think of an argument that would show that 16 and 17 year olds do not have a substantial stake in government decisions... Indeed, arguments cited generally rely on reasons to exclude them rather than on denying [young people's] stake.'

– Victorian Electoral Commission (2004: 2)

Providing young people aged 16-17 with the opportunity to vote can foster a greater sense of civic engagement from young people at an earlier age, encouraging a discourse about politics earlier in young people's lives and allowing for a greater understanding and interest in politics that can be further developed over time.

Recent international studies rebut arguments that young people are politically disengaged. In their assessment of Austria's 2007 voting age change, Zeglovits and Zandonella suggest that it 'could have a positive long-term impact on young voters' political interest', and '[political interest] triggered by enfranchisement at an early age may lead to higher interest during a lifespan' (2013: 1098). Further, lowering the voting age to 16 for the 2014 Scottish Referendum was shown to increase discourse about politics within schools, which 'increased engagement with politics and raised 'political confidence'' (Hill et al., 2017: 15).

'Lowering the franchise is vital to nurturing more active citizens for the future health of our democracy. Giving 16 and 17 year olds a vote provides an opportunity to get the next generation more engaged with politics'

– Electoral Reform Society UK (2017: 1).

Young people's disenfranchisement with traditional methods of civic engagement is often portrayed as disengagement with politics as a whole. However, as new platforms and arenas of communication have emerged, young people 'are embracing more expressive styles of actualising citizenship defined around peer content sharing and social media, in contrast to earlier models of one-way communication managed by authorities' (Bennett et al., 2011: 835). This is reinforced by McKee who contends that youth culture is often represented as politically apathetic but in actual fact engage in the most extreme forms of political activism of any age demographic (2005).

2.3 In support of non-compulsory voting for young people

The 2016 *Rate Canberra Survey* of young people in Canberra found that 61% of respondents aged 16-17 years old, and 57% of all respondents aged 12-25, were in favour of lowering the non-compulsory voting age to 16 (Figure 1). Findings from the 2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes also indicated that 71% of respondents across all age groups supported the notion that young people aged 15-18 years should be able to influence government decisions (Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Inc, 2016).

Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

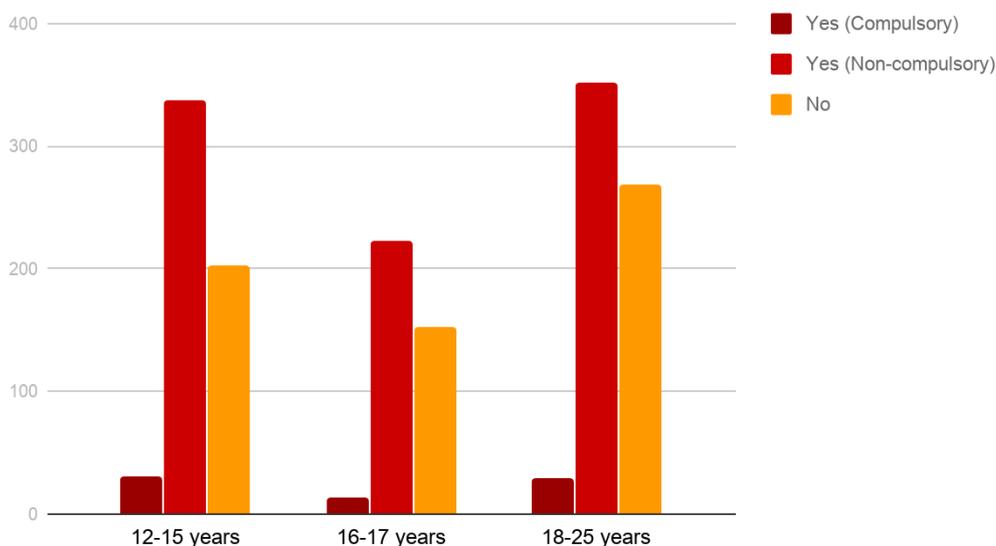


Figure 1: Rate Canberra 2016 - Young people responding to whether the voting age should be changed
Youth Coalition of the ACT (2016)

The nature of Australia’s existing compulsory voting system for adults, alongside the proposal to introduce voting for young people aged 16-17 as non-compulsory, negates common concerns raised by opponents, such as that young people are unprepared to vote, and lack the mental capacity and maturity required. Data from the 2016 *Rate Canberra* survey indicated that while some young people aged 16-17 felt unprepared to vote, a larger proportion felt capable and prepared to vote at 16 years of age. Non-compulsory voting allows those young people who do feel prepared and who would like to participate, to exercise their rights as citizens.

‘I’d say people my age group are actually as politically aware if not more than most of the adults in my life.’

– Female, 16 years

Assumptions about young people’s maturity and capacity to make effective long-term decisions have been grounded in antiquated beliefs that young people are predisposed to act only in response to emotion, are easily influenced by others, and seek instant / short-term gratification; a notion which continues to be reflected in public policy. Johnson and colleagues (2009: 221) note that in relation to policy making, ‘the focus on pathologic conditions, deficits, reduced capacity, and age-based risks overshadows the enormous opportunity for brain science to illuminate the unique strengths and potentialities of the adolescent brain’. Steinberg (2005) also notes that in situations of unhurried decision-making and where consultation is possible, adolescents’ capacity to make judgements is equal to that of adults. It therefore stands to reason that young people aged 16-17 have the capacity to make informed voting decisions.

Opponents to lowering the voting age point towards studies conducted in other nations without compulsory voting systems, which found that lowering the voting age led to a decline in overall voter turnout (McAllister, 2012). However, this concern is not applicable in Australia, due to voting being compulsory for citizens aged 18 years and over. Opponents have also argued that lowering the non-compulsory voting age may degrade the quality of votes and undermine the process of democracy, reflecting a belief that young people lack the capacity to make informed votes and will merely vote for the sake of voting (Collin, 2008). In their analysis on the effect of lowering the voting age in Austria,

Wagner et al. found that it did 'not appear to have a negative impact on the quality of democratic decisions' and identified that further studies should examine the positive consequences of the voting age change (2012: 381). Wagner et al. (2012) further contend that the voting behaviours displayed of Austria's young people and their impact on democracy can be considered a legitimate proxy for what would occur in other nations, should they adopt such changes.

Internationally, young people's desire to vote can be seen in the first year voter turnout statistics, in both Norway and Scotland. In Norway following the lowering of the voting age, the turnout of 16-17 year old newly enrolled voters was 58%, which although was lower than the overall turnout of 63%, was reported to be high when compared to the turnout-rate for first-time voters (Bergh, 2013: 92). Additionally, when 16-17 year olds were permitted to vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum for the first time in 2014, 75% of newly enfranchised voters participated, with 97% of those who voted indicating that that they would continue to do so in the future (The Electoral Commission, 2014).

3. Opportunity for youth participation in the Inquiry

While the Youth Coalition strongly supports the purpose of the proposed Bill, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute a submission to this Inquiry, we are disappointed that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters did not provide meaningful, appropriate opportunities for young people to express their own views on this matter. The decision to conduct the Inquiry using the traditional mechanism of seeking formal submissions goes to the heart of the issue being debated, in that it fails to actively engage with the young people whom the decision ultimately affects.

Although we understand that young people may contribute individual submissions to the Inquiry, this does not allow for the diverse methods that young people use to engage with their communities and on political/social issues, including through social media. State and territory youth peak bodies have limited capacity to engage with young people on national policy issues. Future inquiries on policy issues affecting young people would benefit from targeted and innovative strategies to obtain the views of young people.

4. Conclusion

There is a strong rationale for lowering the minimum, non-compulsory, voting age to sixteen in Australia. While common concerns against lowering the voting age often centre upon young people's maturity, mental capacity and interest in engaging in politics and policy issues, the evidence presented in this submission indicates that many young people aged 16-17 are capable of voting at this age. This further reinforces the case to make voting for this age group non-compulsory.

Lowering the non-compulsory voting age to 16 recognises the fundamental rights of young people as citizens who make significant contributions to Australian society. Providing the opportunity to this cohort to exercise their democratic right will strengthen youth political engagement and young people's participation in policy issues affecting them.

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