



**Submission to Standing Committee on
Education, Training and Young
People's Inquiry into Voting Age
Eligibility**

The Democratic Audit of Australia

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The Democratic Audit of Australia is an ARC-funded research project based at the Australian National University, promoting discussion about democratic processes and institutions in Australia.

In general, the Democratic Audit is committed to the broadest possible enfranchisement; it has not, however, taken a firm position on the lowering of the voting age. The available evidence suggests that the majority of 16 and 17 year olds do not feel ready to exercise the vote in an informed manner. Whilst there is no doubt that some are passionately and articulately committed to the lowering of the voting age, there is no widespread and burgeoning demand for the vote. For the moment then, it appears that resources would be better placed in political education initiatives. Should such initiatives prove successful, then the issue of the age of enfranchisement should be reconsidered.

The movement for a lowered voting age has gained momentum across the globe. The arguments put forward in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 include: beneficial effects on turnout; the age of maturity; the right to representation for tax-payers; and the promotion of a more responsible and politically engaged youth.

However, in spite of the publicity that advocates of lowering the voting age have gained, their impact on policy has, thus far, been very limited. The age of enfranchisement remains at 18 in nearly all comparator countries. Where 18 is not the age of full enfranchisement, the voting age tends to be higher rather than lower: 20 in Japan; and 25 in elections for the Italian Senate. The age of eligibility for candidacy is, in most cases, also 18. And again, where this is not the case, the trend is for more restrictive eligibility requirements: 23 for the British and French general elections (and 35 to be a French presidential candidate);¹ 25 for the Italian Chamber of Deputies and 40 for the Italian Senate, to highlight a few examples.

Nonetheless, the issue of lowering the voting age is clearly being debated widely: in the UK, the Electoral Commission recently inquired into the subject. Whilst it rejected lowering the voting age, it suggested it returning to the issue within five to seven years.² Furthermore, the House of Commons' Welsh Affairs Committee did

¹ The UK Electoral Commission has now recommended that age of candidacy be reduced to 18.

² Electoral Commission, 2004, *Age of Electoral Majority* London

recommend a lowered voting age,³ as did the high profile Power Inquiry into the health of British democracy, which argued that ‘few people take an interest in a sphere of life from which they have been deliberately excluded’.⁴

There are also instances where the voting age has already been lowered. In 1995, the German Bundesland of Lower Saxony lowered the voting age to 16 for municipal elections. Several others have followed suit, as have some Austrian regions. The evidence from these cases does not significantly strengthen the case for those advocating a lower voting age. From the German examples, it seems that the 16 and 17 year olds are slightly more likely to turn out to vote than 18 to 24 year olds, but rather less likely than the voting population as a whole: in Lower Saxony, it was 56.5 per cent for 16 and 17 year olds, compared with 46.8 per cent for 18 to 24s, with an overall turnout of 57.5 per cent.⁵ It could be, however, that those only entitled to vote in local elections would be more likely to exercise that vote than those also entitled to vote in regional or national elections – the overall turnout rate for the 2005 German parliamentary elections was 77.7 per cent.⁶ More generally, turnout amongst the youngest voters tends to be significantly lower than for the population as a whole. While there may be an argument that giving 16 year olds the vote will improve turnout, there does not seem to be sufficient evidence from German municipal elections to support this proposition.

The issue of turnout is less of concern in Australia, where compulsory registration and voting ensures *almost* all those eligible do actually vote.⁷ The Youth Electoral Study (YES) found that 87 per cent of year 12 students were intending to enrol on becoming eligible. However, for some 50 per cent of them, this was simply because it is compulsory and they wanted to avoid a fine. If voting were voluntary, only 50 per cent said that they would. Significantly YES found that only 50 per cent of year 12 students felt they had sufficient knowledge in order to exercise their vote responsibly: few, for instance, understood the voting process or what happens to their vote once it is cast; and only around 50 per cent felt they understood parties or political issues

³ House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, 2004, *The Empowerment of Children & Young People in Wales*, 1st Report, Session 2003-04, HC 177-I

⁴ Power Inquiry, 2006, *Power to the People*, www.powerinquiry.org

⁵ Electoral Commission, 2004, *Age of Electoral Majority* London, p.15-16. Figures are the average from the municipal elections of Hanover and Braunschweig.

⁶ <http://www.idea.int/vt/>

⁷ Even so, it should be noted that whilst the electoral roll is estimated to be 95 per cent accurate overall, it is far less so when it comes to younger voters, with only 80 per cent of 18 to 25 year olds enrolled. See Kathy Edwards, Lawrence Saha and Murray Print, 2005, ‘Australia’s democratic report card – young people assess democracy in Australia’, Democratic Audit of Australia, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/>

sufficiently to exercise their vote.⁸ Given the this lack of enthusiasm or preparedness to vote amongst those approaching 18, there is no clear demand evident for a lowering of the voting age to 16. This is supported by the evidence from the UK, where 66 per cent of young people did not want the voting age lowered to 16 (the same proportion as the population as a whole).⁹

Given the apparent lack of knowledge about the practice of politics and of the electoral process, it is too early to argue in favour of lowering the age of enfranchisement to 16. At this stage, far more attention, and far greater resources, should be directed to political education – if this proves successful, then a stronger case could be made in a few years time. A particularly noteworthy example that the Committee may not be aware of is the Student Vote project in Canada, which, we believe, has proved highly successful at increasing youth engagement with, and knowledge of, the political process.¹⁰ This non-partisan project, funded by federal and provincial governments and electoral commissions, education bodies, and media organizations, runs simulated elections in schools that shadow national and provincial elections. School students research party policies, prepare questions for the candidate meeting held at their school, and learn how to act as polling booth officials. Media sponsors provide coverage, including the results, which often diverge in interesting ways from the adult vote.

More than 2500 schools participated in the most recent exercise. Of the students who participated in the 2004 Student Vote, 78 per cent said it had increased their interest in voting, 88 per cent said they would vote in future – a slightly higher number than the YES survey of year 12 students Australia, *where it is compulsory* – and 97 per cent agreed that it had helped raise student awareness, interest, and knowledge of the Canadian electoral and political process.¹¹

Linking student electoral education to real legislative elections, as in the Student Vote project, appears to have been highly effective. It is a scheme that could usefully be tried in the ACT if sponsors could be found for it, as in Canada. The ACT has the advantage of fixed-term elections, which makes such electoral education activities

⁸ Murray Print, Lawrence Saha and Kathy Edwards, 2004, *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrollment and Voting*, www.aec.gov.au, p. 8-13

⁹ Electoral Commission, 2004, *Age of Electoral Majority* London, p. 39-41

¹⁰ <http://www.studentvote.ca>

¹¹ Fixed terms make projects such as the Student Vote more successful as it allows the organisers, given limited resources, the ability to plan properly.

much easier to organise, and it would provide a useful supplement to work already done in schools by the ACT Electoral Commission. If similar success can be achieved here as in Canada, then the issue of lowering the voting age should be revisited. Until such time, it is hard to make a convincing case for change.

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