

**JSCEM Submission for Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement, and Participation  
in Australia**

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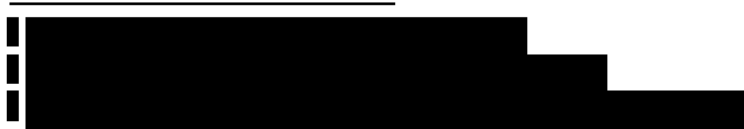
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## **Summary**

Representative democracies the world over are experiencing crises associated with citizen disengagement, particularly among the young and disadvantaged. Australia is no exception. Not only is voter turnout declining, but informal voting has been rising for some time. Australians are increasingly unable or unwilling to communicate their political preferences and this is a major threat to our electoral democracy which has historically enjoyed very high and socially-even levels of voter inclusion.

In this submission we establish the magnitude and extent of the problem. We then review existing civics curriculum arrangements across Australia in order to evaluate the adequacy of the current approach to preparing future electors. After suggesting that the current system is not fit-for-purpose, we recommend that, in a nation where voting is compulsory it is not unreasonable to expect that graduates of Years 10, 12 and even 6 should be capable of casting a formal vote. Therefore, civics education should no longer be at the discretion of schools and individual educators but be mandated as part of the core, compulsory curriculum. Further, and crucially, it should be a requirement that every high school graduate is capable of casting a formal vote at both State and Federal levels and preferably local levels as well.

## **Introductory Comments**

Democracies the world over are experiencing crises associated with citizen disengagement, particularly among the young and the marginalised. Australia is no exception. Not only is voting turnout declining, but those who do turn out to vote in Australia are increasingly likely to cast an informal vote.

A healthy democracy is only as good as the input of its citizens and the best way to optimise input is to ensure that elections are highly inclusive (with high turnout across all social groups) and that there are mechanisms in place to guarantee that the preferences of the electorate are effectively communicated and recorded. Yet, turnout is selectively declining in Australia and Australians are increasingly unable or unwilling to communicate those preferences.

## Two Concerning Trends in Disengagement

***Declining Turnout.*** The 2022 Federal election saw turnout dip to its lowest level since the first election conducted under compulsory voting in 1925 (89.9% for the House of Representatives (AEC, 2022)). Of particular concern is the escalating electoral disengagement of citizens from low SES and disadvantaged socio-demographic backgrounds as well as First Nations peoples (AEC, 2017, p. 13). Equally concerning is the electoral withdrawal of the young who are, after all, the future of our democracy. In March 2024 only 87% of 18–24-year-olds were enrolled to vote compared with 98.2% of all-age Australians (AEC, 2024). Actual voting participation among the young is even lower: in Australia, even with compulsory voting in place, from 2001 to 2016 youth turnout declined from 90% to around 78% of eligible voters (AEC 2017). More recent figures for federal elections are unavailable but figures for recent state elections are telling. For example, in Queensland the turnout rate for 18-29 year-olds at the last state election was 81% (ECQ, 2021)<sup>4</sup>. For Victoria, at the 2022 state election, despite a relatively high enrolment rate for 18–24-year-olds (91.6%), turnout was only 73.12% for those without VoterAlert and 86.5% for those with VoterAlert (VEC, 2022)<sup>5</sup>.

Voting abstention is not our only problem; as more and more voters who *do* attend a polling place fail to lodge a formal vote, *effective* voting abstention is also rising.

***Informal Voting.*** For decades now Australia’s informal vote rate has been climbing steadily. For instance, in 1977 the informal vote rate at federal elections stood at 2.5% of the total votes cast, but by 2022 it had more than doubled to 5.1% (AEC, 2022a). For most of the electors who cast them, a wasted vote is an undesired outcome, but it is also an undesirable outcome for Australian democracy because it is generally the case that the more inclusive an election, the better governments perform and the more satisfied are citizens (Hill, 2016). Further, Australia has long prided itself on being one of the most progressive and inclusive electoral regimes in the world (Hill, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> Electoral Commission of Queensland 2021, *2020 State General Election Report on the Election*, Electoral Commission of Queensland, Brisbane, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Electoral Commission 2023, *Report to Parliament 2022 Victorian State election and 2023 Narracan District supplementary election*, Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne, p. 49

Historically the majority of these informal votes have been unintentional. In Australia, the typical informal voting pattern in both state and federal jurisdictions is for *unintentional* informal votes to outpace intentional informality by about 20 to 30 percentage points. For example, our current ARC funded research with the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) (LP200200073) finds that, in Victoria, about 60% of informal votes are unintentional, while the remaining 40% are intentional. Similar proportions have been found in NSW (Dario, 2006) while an almost identical pattern occurs at the federal level with the unintentional informal vote rate consistently outpacing the intentional informal vote (Hill and Rutledge-Prior, 2016; AEC, 2016). This pattern shows that most informal voters are trying to cast a formal vote but failing due to lack of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the majority of informal votes in Australia are cast by those who can least afford to lose the protection that a formal vote can afford its bearer: the poor, the marginalised, the less-well-educated, First Nations peoples, CALD citizens, and the politically disaffected (Young and Hill, 2009; Praino and Hill, 2024, forthcoming). As a result, the democratic ideals of political equality and inclusiveness are compromised.

We know that there is a strong relationship between education levels and propensity to cast both intentional and unintentional informal votes (Young & Hill 2009, p.73; Praino & Hill, 2024), therefore it is clear that electors need to be better educated in how to vote.

While it would be much harder to ensure that every young Australian receives the same level of formal education across all aspects of a curriculum, it would be a much more straightforward exercise to ensure that every young Australian received an education in how (and why) to cast a formal vote. Special efforts could be made in electorates where informal vote rates are higher, and these are easy to identify. So too are the social groups most affected. This is not to suggest that all Australians should consider themselves required to cast a formal vote;<sup>6</sup> but at the very least they should be *capable* of doing so.

Civic courses should also communicate the *value* of casting a formal vote, meaning that everyone should learn how individual electors can benefit from the use of their vote as both a form of self-protection from government neglect and a means to ensure that their democracy

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<sup>6</sup> Further, it should certainly not be taken to mean that demonstrated voting competence should be *in any way* linked to voting eligibility beyond current arrangements.

has sufficient levels of inclusion for it to function in a healthy and responsive manner (Malkopoulou and Hill, 2020). We believe this would motivate future electors to better understand voting processes and also to be less willing to spoil their ballot intentionally or fail to turn out at all.

Many informal votes are cast by voters who express a clear preference, but whose votes cannot be accepted due to the formality rules of the legislation. But one of the most common type of informality in Australia is one that communicates nothing at all: a blank ballot (Praino and Hill, 2024). Course content that enables such ballots to be converted to meaningful and impactful electoral choices should be the aim of every school civics program. Doing so would doubtless enhance the Australian public's sense of political efficacy and address the problem of declining satisfaction with Australian democracy (Cameron et al, 2022, p. 27).<sup>7</sup> It might also help reverse the declining sense of trust in electoral processes. Despite decades of high levels of trust in the mechanics of our electoral arrangements (Hill, 2010) a growing proportion of electors 'express doubts about the integrity of the electoral process and outcome' (Karp et al, 2017). We know that Australian elections are run with verifiably high levels of security and integrity, therefore such doubts are largely fed by disinformation, something that a well-designed, election-focused civics course or course module could address.

**The Role of Civics Education.** The growing problems of voluntary and involuntary electoral withdrawal and disaffection can be at least partly addressed through education at an early stage in the formation of the civic personality. Yet, there is a notable gap in instruction regarding the significance and especially the practical mechanics of voting. This is reflected, not only in the curricula (see below), but in the measurable results of existing programs.

Levels of political knowledge among school-age children are well below desired standards. A national test administered every three years to a sample of Year 6 and Year 10 students 'identifies the rate of young people achieving the proficient standard in the civics and citizenship space'. Since 2004, the average national proficiency rate for Year 6 students has been 52% while the average national proficiency rate for Year 10 students has been a mere 42% (Ghazarian & Laughland-Booÿ, 2021, p.131). In 2019 when the most recent available

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<sup>7</sup> Although there was a spike in satisfaction levels in 2022, the trend has been a secular one over time (Cameron et al, 2022, p. 27).

figure was captured, the result for Year 6 students was 53% at or above proficiency level and for Year 10 students it was just 38% (Fraillon, J. 2019, pp. 23-4).

We have known for some time that Australian youth do not have a strong sense of political competence, and many do not feel well prepared to vote. In 2007 only a narrow majority (52 per cent) reported that they understand ‘political issues well enough to vote’ (Saha et al 2007, p. 56). This doubtless contributes to their low voting rates. What is really needed right now is civics education that is both compulsory and which includes a particular focus on the capacity to cast an informed and formal vote in a manner that makes voters feel efficacious. A fit-for-purpose civics education program is urgently needed to arrest electoral disengagement, especially among the young. It is particularly necessary at a time when electors are increasingly exposed to the kind of political and electoral disinformation that exacerbates both voting abstention and informal voting rates. Therefore, it is our view that targeted programs that teach the value and mechanics of voting should not only be embedded in all civics curricular but should be a **compulsory component taught by trained instructors**.

In a setting where electors are required by law to vote in all state and federal elections and most local council elections, this proposal can hardly be regarded as controversial; rather, it is both appropriate and necessary, especially in light of our unusually complex ballots and the complications around voting introduced by federalism and the variations in voting methods between the different jurisdictions and tiers of government.<sup>8</sup>

### **Existing Arrangements and Resources**

Current arrangements are inadequate to deal with emerging threats to Australian participatory democracy. We now discuss these arrangements and their inability to help forestall rising voting abstention and informality.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The complexity of the voting system, including the rigorous demands of formality for House of Representatives votes; the generally large number of candidates on the ballot paper; and the confusing variations between state and federal electoral systems all contribute to high rates of informal voting in Australia.

<sup>9</sup> Note that some sources of voting abstention and intentional informality are beyond the control of educators: for example, declining satisfaction with government performance and trust in politicians (see Praino and Hill, 2024, forthcoming).

The Australian education system is distinctive due to its somewhat decentralised nature; where education is a shared federal and state responsibility (*Australian Education Act 2013*, p.3). Whilst there is presently a standardised Australian curriculum until grade 10 and standardised general capabilities throughout all levels of schooling, requirements for senior secondary (also recognised as grades 11 and 12) education varies by state or territory (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (henceforth, ACARA) 2020, p.4,5). This decentralisation presents obstacles in achieving consistency and coherence in civic education curricula nationwide. So too does their non-compulsory nature.

As of 2023, the current civics and citizenship curriculum for years 7-10 covers four key areas of content: ‘government and democracy’; ‘laws and citizens’; and ‘citizenship, diversity and identity’, with distinct content elaborations dependent on year level (ACARA 2024). Students are then assessed according to year level achievement standards, such as the following for a grade 10 student (ibid):

*By the end of Year 10, students compare the key features and values of Australia’s system of government to those of another system of government. They describe the Australian Government’s role and responsibilities at a regional and global level. They explain the role of the High Court of Australia. They explain how Australia’s international legal obligations influence the law and government policy. They identify and explain challenges to a resilient democracy and a cohesive society in Australia.*

*Students develop and refine a range of questions and locate, select and compare relevant and reliable information from a range of sources to investigate political and legal systems, and contemporary civic issues. They analyse information to evaluate perspectives and challenges related to political, legal or civic issues. They evaluate and compare the methods or strategies related to civic participation or action. Students use civics and citizenship knowledge, concepts and terms to develop descriptions, explanations and arguments that synthesise evidence from sources.*

The content elaborations for curriculum code AC9HC8K02 are provided under the following headings (ibid):

- examining the structure and composition of current parliaments, both federal and state/territory;
- evaluating different voting systems such as preferential and proportional representation;

- understanding how government is formed and may be lost, through discussing concepts such as parliamentary majority, the opposition, hung parliaments, minority government, party discipline and balance of power; and
- investigating the roles of political parties and elected representatives, including independents.

There are implicit mentions within these elaborations of the purpose of voting and the evaluation of different voting systems; for example, under curriculum code AC9HC8K02, students in year 8 must learn about “the role of political parties and independent representatives in Australian democracy, including elections and the formation of governments” (ibid).

But as far as we can tell, within each of these content descriptors and achievement standards, there is no specific mention of the mechanics of casting a vote in a manner that can be counted as formal. Further, and importantly, these elaborations are *optional*.

Beyond year 10, senior secondary schooling varies significantly from state to state. Each state or territory houses its own secondary certificate<sup>10</sup> (ACARA 2022, p. 56), and although requirements differ in each jurisdiction, no certificates have a requirement for any civics and citizenship education. Further, there exists a standardised national curriculum for senior secondary schooling, however, this curriculum is only developed in the areas of English, Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, Earth and Environmental Science, Physics, Ancient History, Modern History, and Geography (ACARA 2020, p.23).

Within each secondary certificate, there exists an option to undertake Legal Studies, or its equivalent, as a subject<sup>11</sup>. In most programs<sup>12</sup> students may opt to take a Politics subject. Common to almost all of these subjects are learning areas including understanding legal systems, rights and responsibilities for active citizenship, and an overview of electoral

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<sup>10</sup> South Australia – SACE, Western Australia – WACE, New South Wales – HSC, Victoria - VCE, Tasmania – TCE, Australian Capital Territory – ACT SSC, Queensland – QCE, Northern Territory – NTCET.

<sup>11</sup> See references to subject outlines for each jurisdiction in reference list.

<sup>12</sup> Excluding the HSC, QCE and TCE.



processes. These courses tend to value theory over practical applications with an emphasis on student understanding of the structure and function of democratic institutions at the expense of practical details such what a ballot paper looks like, what it represents and the methods for casting a formal vote in state or federal elections. This is certainly not to suggest that understanding the structure and theory of our democratic institutions is irrelevant; in fact, it is vital for electors to understand how our democratic system works. But failing to show students how to be an effective actor within such institutions is akin to providing driving lessons that only offer instructions in the workings of a car engine.

This theoretical emphasis is present even within subjects that include a greater focus on electoral processes, such as the VCE's Australian and Global Politics course, which includes a reasonably comprehensive level of instruction regarding the Australian electoral system. The study design of this subject stipulates that students will learn the operation of the Australian electoral system according to the following points (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2023, p.20):

- the role and functions of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC);
- the arguments for and against compulsory voting – the functions of elections;
- the aims and effectiveness of preferential voting;
- the aims and effectiveness of proportional representation;
- the impact of voting systems on the composition of parliament;
- consistency with the values of political equality (one person one vote, one vote one value);
- the impact of party pre-selection, electoral funding, political donations, political advertising, and campaign techniques; and
- the democratic strengths and weaknesses of the Australian electoral system.

Here, one can note that the syllabus specifies that students must learn the 'aims and effectiveness' of processes such as preferential voting and proportional representation, but do not necessarily receive instruction on the practical mechanics of these processes. Such knowledge seems basic in a system where everyone over 18 is expected to vote in state, federal and some local elections and where the ballot paper is rarely, if ever, short or uncomplicated.

In a compulsory voting system that is particularly complex, a dedicated teaching module on how ballot papers work and the best way to fill them in so as to gain political representation that reflects an individual's political preferences (we call this 'congruent' voting) should be treated as an essential part of education, not an add-on that may or may not be delivered at the discretion of schools, instructors or even students.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and relevant state electoral commissions offer voter education resources with a more applied focus on their respective websites and these can be used by educators in both lower and upper secondary sectors. The AEC also offers outreach activities whereby AEC officers 'can visit schools and teach students about voting and elections, as well as offering online professional development tools for educators' (Ghazarian & Laughland-Booÿ, 2021, p. 129).<sup>14</sup> For example, the AEC's 'Get Voting' education initiative provides resources for schools to run a school election, with an aim to provide a constructive learning experience for students, 'demonstrating the value of voting as a decision-making tool' (Australian Electoral Commission, 2024). The Victorian Electoral Commission similarly offers a program entitled 'Passport to Democracy', which aims to 'facilitate young people's understanding of electoral matters' through activities which encourage students to choose social issues and create campaigns, which are then subject to voting by their peers (Victorian Electoral Commission 2024). But the uptake of these resources largely relies on proactive engagement. Consequently, there remains a gap between the provision of voting information and its guaranteed dissemination to young citizens.

Upon turning 18 and becoming eligible to enrol to vote, young citizens receive a pamphlet in the mail from the AEC, titled 'Enrolling and Voting: Key Information'. This flyer informs the young person of their status on the electoral role and directs them to the relevant state and federal websites for more information on when and where to vote. Any instruction on the mechanics of voting formally must be accessed proactively by the young person; it is not disseminated automatically, and it is not a commission's responsibility to do so. When sought out, the public can consult 'How to Vote' instructions from both the AEC (Australian Electoral Commission 2024) and relevant state electoral commissions, which are freely accessible on

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<sup>13</sup> Note that *Vote Compass* is an invaluable tool for assisting electors in determining which parties or candidates best represent their personal preferences; this aids the casting of a congruent vote.

<sup>14</sup> Parties, of course, also provide voters with how to vote cards.

their respective websites. These instructions explain how to vote formally in separate houses of parliament at both the federal and state level and provide information on what constitutes an informal vote.

Although electoral commissions are proactive and effective electoral educators, their main task is to run elections with high levels of inclusion and integrity. It is our view that schools should take greater responsibility for electoral education so that our commissions can get on with the main task of running elections to the high standards Australians expect and receive. In particular, schools and education departments should take elections and their vital role in the health of Australian democracy and society more seriously.

**Conclusion.** It is clear that many young Australians enter adulthood without an adequate understanding of how (and why it might be a good idea) to vote formally or in a manner that is congruent with their preferences. This is contributing to the nation's relatively high – and rising – rates of informal voting. It is doubtless also a contributing factor to rising voter abstention.

Australia has a well-deserved reputation as a democratic innovator and, in particular, an electoral innovator (Sawer, 2001; Hill, 2021). Historically, it has also been one of the most well-managed, trusted, and robust democracies in the world due to its bold and successful experiments in voting inclusion and integrity. But, despite compulsory voting, our citizens are increasingly less able or willing to either vote or to vote formally. We must act now to arrest this problem and to educate future electors about their vital role in preserving Australian democracy. Australia is in a unique position to defend itself from both internal and external threats to democracy, not only because we use compulsory voting but also because of our high standards of electoral management and integrity. However, we can no longer rely entirely on these institutional features to protect our democracy. Citizens must now be better activated to do so.

**Main Recommendation:** In a nation where voting is compulsory it is not unreasonable to require that graduates of Years 10, 12 and even 6 should be capable of casting a formal vote. For this reason, we recommend that civics education no longer be at the discretion of schools and individual educators but be mandated as part of the core, compulsory curriculum. **Further, and crucially, embedded in any civics program should be the requirement that every high school graduate is capable of casting a formal vote at both State and Federal levels and**

**preferably local levels as well.** Given the importance of healthy democratic functioning to the welfare of a nation and its people, this is surely one of the most valuable skills a person can possess.

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