



The Students' Association of the University of Adelaide (SAUA)

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Civics and Electoral Education

The Students' Association of the University of Adelaide

The Students' Association of Adelaide University (SAUA) is the peak representative body for all students enrolled at the University of Adelaide. The University of Adelaide is comprised of four campuses – North Terrace, Roseworthy, Waite and Thebarton Campus and has 18,690 enrolled students. The SAUA is an affiliate of the Adelaide University Union (AUU), as legislated in Section 21 of the University of Adelaide Act 1971. The SAUA exists to promote and protect the rights of students. We are the peak student representative body on campus, and the primary advocate for students, to the University, Government and the wider community.

The SAUA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education*. This submission will detail the SAUA's concerns about the disenfranchisement of young Australians in the democratic process.

1. The current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under the Australian electoral system.

The declining rate of awareness, understanding and interest of young Australians in the electoral and governing process of this country is not a new issue of concern for educators and government leaders. In 1967, only one in five Australians surveyed expressed an interest in Australian politics, a figure that only managed to double by the end of the nineties.¹ Former Prime Minister Paul Keating launched a review of citizenship and civics education in 1994, stating,

¹ McAllister, Ian, *Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia*, Department of Senate Occasional Lecture Series, 2001

“As a nation we do not seem to know enough about our system of government and our national achievements.”²

Youth disengagement from the electoral system was the impetus for the 2004 *Youth Electoral Study*. Produced as a joint project by the Australian Electoral Commission, The Australian Research Council and the University of Sydney, *The Youth Electoral Study (YES)* project sought to examine both the electoral awareness of young Australians, and also their intention to fulfil and attitude towards their responsibilities under the electoral system.

The Australian Electoral Commission estimates that the close of the electoral rolls for the 2004 Federal Election only 82% of Australians aged 17-25 were accurately enrolled to vote. This compares to 95% for the rest of the population.³ An estimated 300 000 young Australians are not enrolled to vote and the implications of this stretch far beyond the legalities of compulsory voting. It presents ominous implications for the future of Australian democracy.

Of the near 5000 secondary school students participating in the national Youth Electoral Study, only approximately 50% believed they would vote in election even if they were not required by law to do so and one in every five students surveyed said they had no intention voting once they were eligible.⁴

The YES survey also found that while young Australians are aware that voting is compulsory at age 18, they do not feel confident or prepared with the knowledge to participate and vote in elections. Close to half of the students surveyed felt they were under prepared and lacked sufficient understanding of political issues, parties, and voting processes.

2. **The nature of civics education and its link with electoral education.**

And:

3. **The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities.**

Australian students need to understand the past in order to address to the problems of the present and contribute to developing a better future. Civics education presents a platform for students to make the initial connection between being a citizen and using citizenship to participate in the democratic process.

² Print, Murray, *From Civics Deficit to Critical Mass: The New Civics Education*
<http://www.abc.net.au/civics/teach/articles/mprint/mprint1.htm>

³ Print, Saha & Edwards, *Youth Electoral Study Report 1: Enrolment and Voting*, December 2004

⁴ *ibid*

Prominent in school curriculum during the initial stages of federation, Civics education incorporated topics including Australia's role in the British Empire / Commonwealth, the functions of government including the civil service and cabinet, order and justice, the electoral system, work, housing and the responsibilities of care of people. Print states, "*Civics was viewed as the appropriate source for teaching the requirements of 'good' citizenship to young Australians, especially their 'rights and duties' as future citizens.*"⁵

Print claims "*Australians have learned to take citizenship somewhat for granted ... Australians receive little preparation or enthusiasm for citizenship from their school experience.*"

Civics is a branch of political science that deals with civic affairs and the rights and duties of citizens. Presented as such it is an essential part of every school curriculum. However the potential of civics/electoral education programs to be polarised in value system presents a challenge for government and educators alike.

There seems to be a strong consensus that civics and electoral education should be included in the curriculum of Australian schools – the issue is bound to be contentious. McAllister recognises this predicament.

"In theory, a country's history should be uncontentious parts of any civic education program, but in practice the twin issues of multiculturalism and reconciliation make the inclusion of an historical dimension to civic education highly divisive."⁶

In 2004 Prime Minister Howard and then Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson set out to set schools on the correct path of civics education with claims that schools had become "value-neutral" and "politically correct". Schools would be required to fly the national flag to qualify for their share of the Government's \$31 billion federal schools package. Australian Education Union Federal President, Pat Byrne argued, "*Issues of civics education are far more subtle, and far more wide-ranging that whether or not you have a functioning flagpole.*"⁷

In the 2003-4 Annual Report, the AEC states that divisions conducted enrolment displays at Adelaide University's Orientation Week and at Flinders University clubs and societies days, generating enrolment cards from 176 young people. Enrolment displays once a semester on as many university campuses as possible would be great way of integrating electoral education into the university calendar. These events can be run in conjunction with student organisations on campus.

⁵Print, *op cit*

⁶ McAllister, *op cit*

⁷ Orietta Guerrero, *Schools Told To Fly Flag or Loose Cash*,

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/22/1087844937754.html?feed=rss>

4. The school age at which electoral education should begin.

Young Australians are alarmingly unaware of the role, authority and relevance of the Federal Government. Comments such as “*the Government doesn’t affect my day to day life ... I don’t care who gets elected*” were recorded as part of the Youth Electoral Study and demonstrate that young people are not making the connection between their lives and their Government. Civics education should be educating for participation in decision-making and play a prominent and on going role throughout a child’s school career.

In her Discovering Democracy discussion paper, *Teaching Democracy in Primary School*, Lianne Singleton states:

“If democracy is to continue to prevail in Australia, our students must be taught to value democracy as a concept and a way of life ... if Australians are to have a capacity for active citizenship, then schools have a vital role to playing nurturing the moral and ethical development of young people and their capacity to participate in civic life.”⁸

Singleton suggests that

“Education for democracy has to begin in the primary years, the developmental years when children are learning about society and how to become effective members of it. The Foundations of children’s skills, habits and knowledge are laid during these years of education.”⁹

Civics and electoral education should be a gradual process that continues through to the end of secondary school. Early primary years seem the ideal age to begin that process. The more groundwork that is done before students enter high school, the greater expansion and depth can be covered in secondary school.

5. The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs.

Electoral education is a community issue - participatory democracy is a community issue. Sporting clubs, social groups, social movements and community programs all have a responsibility to contribute to the awareness of its citizens. There needs to be a massive change in the cultural view of politics and citizenship in Australia. Too often young people are surrounded by negative presentations of political and civic figures and situations. Politics is offered to the public as problematic, limited, lacking in connections, dichotomised, confusing,

⁸ Singleton, Lianne, *Teaching Democracy in Primary School*, Discovering Democracy Discussion Paper 5

⁹ *ibid*

superficial and media driven. Characterised like this, it is hardly surprising that young people in particular are not expressing an interest.

This needs to change and this change would most effectively be done through community programs, and necessarily newly established programs for this purpose, but more practically and successfully through programs that young people are already involved in.

The Youth Electoral Study examined subject of student support of social matters. The study found that students' top three preferred social movements were:

- Peace/Anti War Movement
- Green/Environment Movement
- Refugees/Asylum Seekers Movement

There are established community organizations that work within these social movement, and often have specific youth divisions. These organisation need to assist young people to make the connection between the issue they are passionate about and the way to make a difference. Ensuring their members are enrolled to vote, and understand the democratic process should be part of being involved in such community movements. These organisations are also more accessible to Australian and multicultural youth due to participation in many large and small-scale community events.

Sport and entertainment play a major role in the lives and culture of so many young people in this country. They stretch across the expanses of our multi-cultural community and offer a great platform for electoral awareness. The AEC could work in conjunction with major retailers and corporations that already have strong connections with the youth market. The key role of sporting and entertainment industries would be awareness of the responsibilities of enrolling to vote – and active citizenship. Working in conjunction with school curriculum, these outside influences would reinforce the school program and present democracy and citizenship very much as community issues.

In the past the AEC has worked with the organisers of the Big Day Out to raise electoral awareness of young Australians. The Big Day Out is the largest outdoor music festival in the country and visits almost every capital city. Significant numbers of people travel from regional areas to attend the event, which draws crowds close to 60 000. Concert attendees were able to visit the AEC tent on site and enrol to vote. In 2004, over 3500 first time voters took advantage of this and enrolled to vote at the Big Day Out. This is something can be reproduced at any number of events across the country which attracts a large number of young people.

6. The adequacy of electoral education in Indigenous programs.

And:

7. The adequacy of electoral education of Migrant citizens.

The adequacy of electoral education for the Indigenous and Migrant communities in Australia is vital to ensuring that all sectors of the community in have the ability to participate in the democratic process with confidence and equality. It is essential that members of these communities make their vote count because they face very different challenges than the majority of voting demographics. Life expectancy is just 56 years for Indigenous men (compared to 77 years for other Australian men) and 63 for Indigenous women (compared to 83 for other Australian women). Indigenous babies are 4 times more likely to die before their first birthday. Unemployment is 2.8 times higher for Indigenous people than other Australians and suicide rates for Indigenous people are nearly 3 times that of other Australians.¹⁰

Language is a major participation barrier for Indigenous communities. For the 2004 federal Election, the AEC translated radio advertisements into 24 Indigenous languages. Press adverts were translated into 17 languages.

Effective participation is critical for these communities; however, the level of support provided to them is slowly being eroded away. In the 1996 Federal Budget, the Howard Government removed the funding for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service. Established by the AEC in 1979, and expanded to include Torres Strait Islanders in 1993, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service sent teams to remote areas in Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory to run Indigenous electoral education programs. The abolition of ATSIC in 2005 has further disenfranchised Indigenous Australians. On the impact of the abolition of ATSIC and the impact on Indigenous citizens, Larissa Behrendt writes,

“The removal of accountable and elected representation has meant that there is no national voice to advocate on Indigenous policy positions. In an era that has seen an enormous amount of change in the Indigenous affairs portfolios ... this loss of a united voice has left many Indigenous people feeling excluded from debates about policies and programs that are going to impact directly on their lives, families and communities.”¹¹

While ATSIC was not a specific electoral body – advocate bodies such as ATSIC provided a voice for indigenous issues on a far larger scale than ever before.

¹⁰ ACOSS, *Indigenous people the most marginalised in election, says community organisations*, <http://www.acoss.org.au/News.aspx?displayID=99&articleID=18>

¹¹ Behrendt, Larissa, *The abolition of ATSIC – Implications for democracy*, Democratic Audit of Australia – November 2005

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser has made comment about the impotence of bodies like ATSIC on Indigenous communities and democracy,

“At present, most of the best-known Aboriginal leaders have been chosen by non-indigenous institutions. We need leaders elected by their own people. Democracy is a learned art, and may not always throw up good leaders. But it empowers ordinary voters and, given time, develops attitudes of civic responsibility. ATSIC was a good start, in need of reform, not closure.”¹²

In South Australia, local governments have taken the initiative and looked at ways of educating non-Indigenous communities about encouraging and supporting Indigenous participation in local government. In preparation for the 2006 local elections, the Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA) in conjunction with South Australian Government Office of State/Local Government Relations, and the South Australian Government department for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, produced a resource guide for councils of South Australia entitled ‘Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Local Government Elections’. The guide includes sections on mapping Indigenous traditional lands in South Australia, developing community awareness, enhancing relationships between Indigenous and non- Indigenous communities, and resource contacts for Indigenous community councils, and Indigenous specific media.

Only 7% of the total media budget for the 2004 AEC Public Information campaign was spent in regards to ethnic and Indigenous media.¹³ Television adverts were translated into 5 languages and radio spots translated into 26 languages. Telephone interpretation services were established for the eight-week period surrounding the 2004 Federal Election. Fifteen language specific phone lines logged over 7000 phone calls; a large percentage of those calls required the further assistance of an interpreter.

The AEC has the information to expand on this service. With figures indicating the migrant communities that require the most interpretation assistance with understanding the electoral system the AEC is more equipped to target those communities in the time leading up to the next election. This should be a process the builds continually over the three years between elections.

8. The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education.

¹² Fraser, Malcolm, *End the denial of wrongs*, The Age, 24 May 2006
<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/end-the-denial-of-wrongs/2006/05/23/1148150251963.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>

¹³ AEC, *Behind The Scenes: Public Information Campaign*, www.aec.gov.au

The Australian Electoral Commission works according to its guiding principles:

- Impartiality and neutrality
- Integrity and accuracy
- Mutual respect
- Respect for the law
- Service
- Transparency

The AEC Annual Report for 2004/5 reports that the AEC Electoral Education Centers operated at capacity throughout the year. Visitors to these centers participate interactive sessions and mock parliament and referendums. In that year the Electoral Education Centers saw 108493 visitors over 2917 sessions. There were session requests that could not be met due to capacity issues.

The AEC also operates the School and Community Visit Program – this is an essential role of the AEC, as community visits would help address the problem of raising civic and electoral awareness of young people who are not part of the school system for whatever reason. In the 2004/5 period the AEC took their School and Community Visit program to over 91 000 people.

Electoral Education Centers and School and Community Visit Program are vital roles played by federal and state electoral commissions in the bigger effort of trying to connect with younger constituents.

There are other also more unique one off tactics electoral commissions can use to reach young first time voters. The Victorian Electoral Commission sends all Victorians, on their 17th birthday (using Drivers License [RTA] and VCE enrolments - [Board of Studies] databases) a birthday card with an electoral enrolment form enclosed. This program should be operational nationally and can be achieved through co-operation between federal and state electoral commissions, federal and state governments as well as local governments.

9. The role of the Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education.

State and Local Governments can have an enormous impact on raising the awareness of electoral responsibility and developing electoral education. Youth is a captive demographic – there are always changes in their lives that provide opportunities for federal, state and local governments to promote electoral awareness and education. State Governments and especially local governments have a vested interested in an informed and active citizenship. Voting in local government elections in voluntary and often passes residents by without much notice.

The major role of the Federal Government is to allow the Australian Electoral Commission to act independently and fulfil its role as the “*agency responsible for providing Australians with independent electoral service that meets their needs and enhances their understanding of and participation in the electoral process.*” To present itself to a cynical and disenfranchised youth vote, the AEC needs credibility as an independent agency. Acts like the removal of the funding for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Electoral Information Service cannot happen again. When federal government interfere, the agency loses legitimacy with young and first time voters.

It is with cautious apprehension that this submission notes the passage of the *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2005* through the House of Representatives. If successful through the Senate, this legislation will see the electoral rolls closed on the same day the writs are issued. If the Federal Government wants to increase democratic participation of young voters – restricting their ability to get on the electoral role seems a strange course of action.

10. The access to and adequacy of funding for school visits to Federal Parliament.

School visits to Federal Parliament are a fantastic opportunity for students to witness first hand the mechanics of government and learn about Australia’s electoral and democratic system. Currently approximately 126,000 students visit the National Capital annually on a school excursion. The National Capital Educational Tourism Project (NCETP) commenced operation in 2000 and is a partnership project of the ACT Government, the National Capital Authority and the National Capital Attractions Association. The project strives to increase student education visits to the ACT. In the 2006/2007 Federal Budget \$10.7 million over four years for a new Parliament and Civics Education Rebate.

11. Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and in particular in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

It is taken for granted in Australia that people will vote. Voting is compulsory under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* and as such, electoral awareness is primarily focused on electoral responsibility, rather than encouraging participatory democracy. International approaches to electoral education in countries such as

those listed above face the challenge of creating electoral awareness in a climate of voluntary participation in the electoral process.

United States & Canada - Rock The Vote

Rock the Vote is a non-profit, non-partisan organisation, founded in Los Angeles in 1990 by Jeff Ayeroff, the co-chief of Virgin Records. Rock the Vote makes a real connection for young people between the issues that affect their daily lives and the act of casting a vote at election time. The awareness material is stripped of negativity, and presented in a straightforward manner.

The following is an example of a Rock The Vote advertisement from the last Presidential Election in the United States:

*If you care about the environment,
The cost of health care
If you care about being hurt
If you care about the cost of education
If you care if there is a military draft*

*Politicians are passing laws that affect
the air we breath, the water we drink,
who fights the war in Iraq, how much
you pay for your college education
and who makes the sacrifice?*

Our environment.

*Your future.
Censorship.
A new military draft.*

*There are many issue s that will be
decided at this election.*

Show you care

Vote. It's up to you. Please vote.

*The most important thing I can do is
the same thing you can do. Vote.*

Rock the Vote encourages young voters to make their own decisions and considers their main aim to make them aware of the issues they will be deciding on.

Rock the Vote utilises popular culture to get the attention of potential voters. Some of the entertainment industries most prominent figures are involved in Rock The Vote. The information is presented to potential voters by they identify with in a way that grabs their attention. Mark Strama, one time Project Developer for Rock the Vote said "*Young people identify with [Rock the Vote] and will participate in the political process because of MTV's exposure.*"¹⁴

Rock the Vote and MTV's Choose or Loose projects combine news segments and specials mixed with contemporary music, quick cuts, and flashy graphics with the political reporting. Dave Sirulnick, MTV senior VP/executive producer of news and specials told Billboard magazine,

¹⁴ Atwood, Brett, MTV renews 'Choose or Lose', *Billboard* (0006-2510); Volume: 108; Issue: 5; Date: 1996

"This audience grew up with video games and MTV, so hearing the candidate speak with music in the background is a normal thing ... It's the way that this generation processes information. It may be too much information for an older viewer, but not for us."¹⁵

Rock the Vote is effective because it operates all year. Young people are already reluctant to trust politicians and political parties because they view them as only visible when campaigning for election. Rock The Vote works primarily because its website, it is a communication format that reaches out to young people on an ongoing basis.

www.rockthevote.com includes features such as a regularly updated web log covering the big issues affecting young people each day, a comprehensive reading list, archives of Rock The Vote media, advertisements and campaigns, special features such as a calculation clock of student debt, 'how to' guides for getting involved in rock the vote and other community organisations and Rock The Vote merchandise.

The development of an Australian website, similar to www.rockthevote.com that is informative all year round, that exists specifically to translate political issues into a communication format they will understand and relate to – and that does so in a manner purely aimed at increasing youth interest in civic and electoral awareness, the trends of youth ignorance and indifference may be to subside.

Australia has a similar program in place. Rock Enrol is a joint initiative between Triple J and the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Rock Enrol is about raising awareness of enrolling and voting, and encouraging young Australians to enrol to vote. Triple J, as part of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and marketed as a youth network, is instrumental in keeping young Australians aware of political issues, both nationally and internationally. However in metropolitan rating surveys Triple J usually has less than one third the market share of its major commercial rivals.

New Zealand - SMS & Text Messaging

In the lead up to the 2005 election, the New Zealand Electoral Enrolment Centre introduced a text messaging service where you could request an enrolment form via text message.

This campaign was designed to break down the initial barriers to youth participation in the electoral process. It was a resounding success with 18 000 requests sent during the first two weeks of the campaign.

¹⁵ *ibid*

Australians send an estimated 250 million text messages each month – it is quick, easy and effective means of communication for young Australians and could be utilised in improving electoral awareness.

In conjunction with the major network providers, the AEC could develop a SMS Election Awareness campaign. Upon an election being called, mobile telephone providers could issue a reminder SMS to all customers urging them to enrol or update their enrolment details, and another SMS on the day of election to remind everyone to vote.

While this strategy would not work for all areas of the Australian community, mobile phones represent a persuasive communication tool in youth culture. This campaign would primarily target the youth demographic through a medium that they are familiar and comfortable with.