



# Youth Electoral Study

## **REPORT 3:**

## **YOUTH, THE FAMILY, AND LEARNING ABOUT POLITICS AND VOTING**

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### **Youth, The Family, And Learning About**

### **Politics And Voting**

#### **1. The YES Project**

Youth participation in the electoral process is of great concern in many Western democracies today. For some years we have known that young people are less likely to enrol to vote than older groups. This national study is attempting to uncover the reasons why so many young people today are not enrolled and also look at what motivates Australia's young people to participate in different ways as 'active citizens'.

This four year research project is a major national study by a team of researchers from the University of Sydney and the Australian National University working in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Commission. The research is funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), through its ARC Linkage Grants program, and supported by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The project is being administered through the University of Sydney.

The Chief Investigators for the project are A/Professor Murray Print (Centre for Research & Teaching in Civics, University of Sydney) and Dr. Larry Saha (Reader in Sociology, ANU), together with Dr Kathy Edwards as Senior Research Associate. The Partner Investigator is Brien Hallett (Assistant Commissioner, Communications, AEC). The Steering Committee is composed of the following: Brien Hallett , Andrew Moyes (Assistant Commissioner, AEC), David Farrell (NSW/AEC), A/Prof Murray Print, Dr. Larry Saha and Dr. Kathy Edwards.

#### ***1.1 Project Objectives***

The principal purpose of the project is to determine why many young people do not register on the Australian electoral roll. According to the Australian Electoral Commission, whereas 95% of the eligible voting age population is enrolled to vote, this figure drops to around 80% for young Australians between 18-25<sup>1</sup>. This means that around one fifth of this age group do not perform the duty of voting or partake of the right to vote.

A more fundamental purpose is to investigate the impact of electorally disengaged youth on Australian democracy. Democracies are nurtured and legitimised by participatory citizens. Where groups of citizens do not participate this has implications for the effectiveness and future of the Australian democratic political system. Of equal concern is that where individuals do not enrol and

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<sup>1</sup> These data were obtained from the Australian Electoral Commission and is the best that current methods of modelling of enrolment data can provide. The figures quoted, however, are approximate only and may be subject to future revision.

vote they disenfranchise themselves. Where one social group, defined in this case by age, is less likely to enrol and vote than other age cohorts, it is also possible that our democracy is not reflective of the views of one portion of the Australian population.

Thus the project is investigating the underlying characteristics of those who do and do not register to vote when they become eligible at age 17, and is focusing on the links between pro-voting behaviour and family, school and other social and psychological variables. The meaning of voting and other forms of active citizenship by Australian youth is being examined. Various current intervention strategies to improve registration will be analysed and new strategies will be proposed and developed.

Like most studies that examine the political participation of young people YES assumes a normative framework. This is established within different literatures drawn upon in the project. These include those taking psephological, behavioural science, political psychology, political sociology, and civics education backgrounds. For a discussion of this normative framework refer to Nie, Junn and Stehlik Barry (1996).

To this end YES presupposes that democracy is a valuable institution worth preserving and enhancing. It examines the behaviour of young people within this democratic framework with particular reference to aspects of political behaviour that pertain to democratic values and norms. We consider it desirable that citizens value democratic principles and practices as well as participate in Australia's democracy. We recognize that there are a variety of behaviours considered to positively reinforce democratic norms. These include some forms of protest, critical evaluations of governments, membership of political parties and other forms of participation. Voting, however, we contend, is distinctive. Although not the only form of political participation, it is a necessary one within democracies.

## ***1.2 Project Methodology***

Because this report relies heavily on data gained from our focus-group studies with high school students, it is pertinent to explain our methodology.

### Sixteen Electoral Divisions

The sixteen disparate Commonwealth Electoral Divisions across Australia in which we have carried out research for YES include ones in rural and remote areas, major regional centres, inner-city and outer-suburban areas. These sixteen divisions function as individual case studies allowing us to study young people from very different backgrounds. YES includes young people from the full range of geographical areas, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities found in Australia. In terms of the school participants discussed here we aimed to reflect the demographic characteristics of our divisions as closely as possible. Across our divisions we selected a range of schools from very affluent private colleges and selective government high schools to much poorer public and private schools. We interviewed students in government schools, including comprehensive, selective and specialist schools, in the Catholic system and in a range of independent schools. Some of our schools were single sex, but most were co-educational. A total of 476 students from 55 schools participated in this phase of the study.

The young people whose views are discussed here were between 15 and 18 years of age when they were interviewed and they were in their final two years of secondary education. We interviewed these students first in 2003 when they were in Year 11 and again in 2004 when

they were in Year 12. The disparity in the age range of participants is a result of the Australian education system where school entry and completion ages differ slightly between different states and territories.

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Researchers considered it important to enable young people to discuss their attitudes and opinions with a full and free voice. It was decided that the best way to achieve this was through the use of focus groups. By allowing participants the opportunity to interact and respond to others this methodology allowed us to approach the subject of politics in a manner less threatening than if we had interviewed participants individually. In this way it also assisted us in circumventing the power relationship between older researchers possessive of the 'power of knowledge' about politics and younger students who were being asked for what were frequently quite nascent opinions. Further it allowed for texture, that is, for a multiplicity of views within a group and also for us to observe interactions with peers and reasoning processes. Where participants called on others to justify and explain their views we were also able to access reasoning processes in a non-confrontational way.

The methodology followed was that developed by Kreuger (1988) and the research staff was asked to read selections from this text before being briefed on the methodology more extensively. Our discussions utilized semi-structured questions, were audio-taped, and were conducted with groups consisting of between 5 and 8 students. Before interviewing commenced individual researchers assured participants that any information they gave would be treated confidentially and that their anonymity would be preserved. Post interview our tapes were analysed using an analysis sheet that encapsulated the major themes of the interview questions. In performing content analysis care was taken to include both majority and dissenting viewpoints. Particular trends and patterns were also highlighted as were discussions of topics that may indicate specificity related to factors such as individual schools or areas. Analyses were in turn mapped onto matrices to allow cross-comparison of schools and divisions.

### The National Survey

Data gained from our 2004 questionnaire survey also contribute to this report. This survey was designed to be a benchmarking instrument measuring various aspects of young people's attitudes about politics, voting and civic knowledge. In addition it asked questions about democratic attitudes, tolerance and information sources regarding politics. In total 4855 senior secondary school students from 153 schools across Australia, were drawn randomly from an inclusive national list, participated in the survey, with a response rate of 74%.

Data gained from each methodology are clearly delineated in this report. Pseudonyms are used where specific divisions, schools and individual participants are referred to.

## **2. Political Socialisation, Political Learning and the Family**

### *2.1 Political Socialisation in the Literature*

The aim of this report is to consider what we have learnt from YES about how and what young people learn about politics, voting and enrolling to vote from their families. The influence of

the family on political behaviour has a long history as a subject of research. One of the best sources for an overview of this literature is Niemi and Sobieszek (1977), which describes the field of political socialisation. The seminal text that defined this discipline is generally agreed to be Hyman's *Political Socialization: A Study in The Psychology of Political Behavior* (1959). Others such as Renshon's *Handbook of Political Socialization* (Renshon 1977) have also been influential.

The foundational argument of political socialisation was the hypothesis that, although 'politics' was an adult activity, attitudes about politics were gained at a very young age. The aim was to understand the stability of Western democracies through an analysis of how democratic and other political norms were transferred through the generations. Political socialisation identified a number of sites for the transmission of political norms, values and attitudes, including schools, the media and, most significantly, the family (Beck and Jennings 1991; Jennings and Niemi 1971; Jennings and Niemi 1968, 1971).

Reflecting its mixed parentage of political science and psychology most studies carried out in the name of 'political socialisation' adopted a rigid quantitative approach based on written closed-question surveys. Particular emphasis was placed on attitudes toward authority, recognition of political persons, understanding of institutions and trust in accepted norms. Most of these studies concerned the political socialisation of children in the USA. Among them, however, was R.W. Connell's *The Child's Construction of Politics* (Connell, 1971) that aimed at understanding how Australian children learned about and understood politics. Connell's intention was to understand whether political values, including a commitment to conservative politics, could be transmissible through the generations.

But this new political socialisation literature failed to live up to its promise of understanding the complexity of the formation of political attitudes. As early as 1968 studies highlighting 'major problems' in the theory and methodology of political socialisation began to appear (Dennis 1968). For a start, although earlier studies of the transmission of political values from parent to child discovered high degrees of correlation in parent-child values, later studies using different methodologies questioned this. Assumptions made about the passivity of children as subjects within the process of socialisation were also challenged.

By the 1980's studies of political socialisation had all but vanished and researchers turned to a meta-analysis of the objectives and methodology of the discipline. In 1987 Connell was confident in asserting that the discipline had 'failed' (Connell 1987). Yet, even Connell asked, 'what should replace it'? And studies mooting a 'return to political socialisation' continually appear (Dudley and Gitelson 2002; Sears 1990). Clearly there is something about the subject of political socialisation that engages researchers.

Civics and Citizenship Education programmes widely found in the education systems of many Western democracies including Australia, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom are testimony to a principle that as a normative practice both the family and the school *should* prepare young people to enter the world as 'active citizens' aware of their rights, duties and able to understand the mechanisms of the state and political institutions. Also accepted is that young people do not emerge as adults as 'blank slates', but as already having some views about politics and democratic participation. At the time that young people in Australia are eligible to enrol to vote (at the age of 17) and required to enrol and vote in any elections (at the age of 18) they already hold some attitudes towards democracy, political views and opinions about the social and political landscape of Australia. This was clearly demonstrated in previous

YES reports that showed that many young people have protested and others have positions on what they think about voting as a democratic act (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004; Saha, Print and Edwards 2005).

To this end, in the literatures on education and political science more broadly, the subject of children's and adolescents' learning about politics remains a subject of analysis. Most studies highlight the role played by 'the family' as a site of political learning. The International Education Association (IEA), for example, in its study of civic learning identified the family as a major variable (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). In relation to voting specifically studies also highlight the benefits of positive reinforcement through discussion in the family about politics (Andolina et. al. 2003) and through parents taking young children to the polling booth (Meirick and Wackman 2004).

YES reported in *Enrolment and Voting* (Print, Saha, & Edwards, 2004), that survey respondents identified 'the family' as the most important source of information about voting in elections, followed by the television, newspapers and teachers (See Table 1 in that report). Participants in our focus groups identified the same sources as being important in terms of finding out about politics and voting. Taking into account some of the pitfalls encountered by previous attempts to understand and theorise 'the family', it is therefore important that we explore the family as a source of political learning, information, discussion and knowledge for young Australians.

To summarise, the fundamental problem in research about young people and political learning seems to be how to understand the process of learning about politics without lapsing into determinism. With respect to the family the issue appears to be how to understand the family as an important arena in which young people learn about politics without conceptualising young people as simple products of familial conditioning.

The following discussion of young people and political learning in the family thus considers the young person as an active subject. We do not presume that the young person is a simple product of familial socialisation such that they merely replicate parental perspectives. Nor do we presume that their views are entrenched and static. Rather we consider that we have interviewed subjects at a pivotal period in their career as 'political subjects' and as Australian citizens, the years around which they will gain the citizen's right and duty of the franchise, and this is placed in the context of the primary research problem – why do many of these young people not register to vote?

## ***2.2 Families in Australia: Forms, Characteristics and Resources***

The first factor about 'families' that must be considered as part of any effort to understand political learning in the family is the diversity of families themselves. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) notes the diversity of family types in Australia in the twenty-first century (ABS 2003a). Although nuclear families still predominate, they are in decline and other family types where children are present include one-parent families (usually female headed) and families where children live with non-parental adults, such as grandparents, are increasing.

It is important to note that the families of YES participants reflected the diversity discussed by the ABS report mentioned above. In our focus groups we encountered participants who described living in traditional nuclear families, in single parent households and with other

(non-parent) family members. A small minority had left the parental home and were living within state or charity provided accommodation.

The ABS also notes the diversity in ethnicity of Australia's population (ABS 2003b). YES participants and their families again reflected this trend. They were ethnically diverse and came from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We encountered participants whose families were long-established in Australia and others who were first and second generation Australians. Some participants identified themselves as indigenous Australians. Some came from homes where English was not spoken, or was spoken as a second language, and some identified themselves as from another country, despite being born here

In any context where 'learning' is discussed it is also important to discuss the issue of resources. Studies conducted in the United States and also in Great Britain have found that access to resources necessary for political participation are mediated by an individual's socio-economic, ethnic and language speaking position (Sherrod 2003; The Electoral Commission 2005). In the case of young people this access is dependent on their family's access. The diversity of families and of the ancestry of these families in Australia are among factors that may impact on resources of families in terms of knowledge about politics and democracy, the ability to participate in Australia's democratic processes, or the available capacity to assist children in the family in learning about politics and accessing Australia's democratic processes.

### ***2.3 The Family and Gender***

The second issue concerning the family and political learning is gender relations within the family. The literature on political socialisation recognised gender differences and dynamics within the family and speculated that these may result in boys being socialised differently from girls, and mothers and fathers playing different, gendered, socialising roles (Jennings and Niemi 1971; Niemi, 1977).

Political sociologists were not alone in highlighting the family as an arena of socialisation or in recognising its gendered dimensions. 'The family' emerged in the same period as an object of study by feminist scholars (Mitchell, 1986; Rowbotham 1983). These scholars saw the traditional nuclear family as a political entity in its own right. Families were considered as arenas where men had a greater degree of power than women and where the gender division of labour saw men with the capacity to earn in the public sphere and women as performing most of the unpaid labour, particularly that relating to the raising of children, in the private sphere.

Also noted was that just as religious, moral, social and political values were learned in the family, so girls and boys also learned gender roles that influenced their behaviour as adult men and women. Just as the person/subject of political socialisation theory was reconceptualised as an active subject, capable of active learning and resistance, rather than being simply a passive subject of socialisation, so the gendered subject of feminist theory also evolved in a similar manner. Further, gender roles have changed and evolved over the last three decades. However, that elements of both gender roles and gender relations still exist in the family is evidenced by a recent Australian report on women, men, work and the family (Sex Discrimination Unit 2005).

To some extent there was an overlap of concerns, although not a common theoretical or methodological base, to studies of political socialisation and to the themes prevalent in the work of feminist scholars theorising the family. Both disciplines recognised that the private sphere of the family (however the family was conceived) had an influence on the public sphere, either in terms of determining the political attitudes and behaviour of its citizens, or structuring the gender roles within it. However the family is discussed, gender relations are inevitably at issue.

## ***2.4 The Gender Gap in Political Participation***

A problem addressed in both the political socialisation literature and also by feminist scholars is that of the 'gender gap' that exists in terms of political representation and participation. A recent British study found that the historical propensity for males to outnumber females as voters (voting is voluntary) had largely disappeared (The Electoral Commission 2004). However the YES study, and others, has found evidence of other gender differentials in political life. Most significantly, in most democratic nations, including Australia, men still outnumber women in terms of political party membership and consequently as elected representatives (Miskin and Lumb, 2006).

In reports already published (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004; Saha, Print and Edwards 2005) YES also found evidence of a 'gender gap' amongst youth. To summarise we found that:

1. Female respondents under 17 were more likely to enrol at 17 than male participants, and female participants 17 years and older were more likely to have enrolled than male participants.
2. Female respondents were more likely to say that they would enrol and vote even if voting were not compulsory.
3. Male respondents were more likely to report they had the knowledge to understand political issues, knowledge to understand parties, knowledge to make a decision when voting and knowledge to be able to vote, than did the female respondents.
4. Male respondents were more likely to say that they could trust people in government, that they thought people in government were honest and that they considered people running the government to be clever, than did the female respondents.
5. Female respondents were more likely to say they would engage in mild protest than male respondents.
6. Female respondents were more likely to have engaged in normative forms of protest than male respondents, whereas male respondents were more likely to have engaged in non-normative forms.
7. Female respondents were more likely to say they would be willing to engage in demonstrations in support of specific social movements than male respondents.

In exploring this gender gap some feminist political theorists have drawn conclusions about political and participatory behaviour from the gender socialisation theories mentioned previously. Another approach considers that males and females had different ways of 'being' citizens, that is, of conceiving of and performing their roles as political subjects within the state. Others have examined the notion of 'citizenship' itself. Some considered the 'ideal citizen' of liberal democratic societies to be male (Pateman 1988). In Australia Vromen has attributed at least some aspects of participation to familial structures, noting that women's lack of participation in some participatory acts is directly related to their roles within families



(Vromen 2003). Put simply, domestic work in the private sphere impacts on time available for participation in the political realm of the public sphere.

Thus there is evidence that some aspects of existing ‘gender gaps’ in political participation may be the result of learning about politics in the (gendered) family. Understanding what happens in the family in terms of teaching and learning about politics and participation may therefore be crucial to understanding some elements of the ‘gender gap’. Again, a caveat. This argument should not be considered in a reductionist sense; other elements of gendered social relations may also play differing roles in the creation of this gap. But it is essential to study the family as one source.

### **3. Discussions about Politics and Voting in Families**

Within the context of Australia’s very diverse families then, our first question is ‘to what degree did participants indicate that politics was a subject of discussion in their families?’ Here it is important to pause briefly to consider the issue of what we mean by politics. When we discussed politics with focus group participants we talked with them about the meaning of politics. Initially we discovered that most participants conceptualised politics very narrowly, and in a sense pertaining almost exclusively to parliamentary politics. To this end researchers used prompt phrases such as ‘current affairs’ and ‘things that are happening in your community that affect you’ to establish a broad meaning for the word ‘political’ when using this term in interviews. In this section ‘politics’ is thus interpreted broadly to include discussions about political personages, events, issues and current affairs as well as elections and voting.

It is important to preface all discussions of focus group data in this report by emphasising that we are using participants’ *reportings* of familial political discussion and learning in this report. That is, our research focuses on how our participants *perceived* various aspects of discussions and learning about politics, voting and elections within their families. If we had interviewed parents they may have told a different story with different emphases. Similarly an ethnographical approach involving participant observation may have provided us with other viewpoints and interpretations. However our primary concern in YES research was with the views and thoughts of our participants.

#### ***3.1 Sources of Information about Voting: Family and Gender***

One of the purposes of our study is to find out where Australian youth obtain information about voting. To do this we included a question in our survey which asked: “Where do you get your information about voting in elections?” We listed twelve possible sources, and we asked the respondents to tick the appropriate box with labels of “None”, “little”, “Some” and “Most”. Figure 1 gives the average value on a four point scale for all our respondents for each of the twelve categories that we listed. In the figure, we separate the scores for boys and girls.

As discussed in our first report for this project, (Print Saha and Edwards, 2004), the family is acknowledged as the most important source of information about voting by our student respondents. What is of added interest here is whether young males and females differ in their sources and whether the differences between males and females were statistically significant.

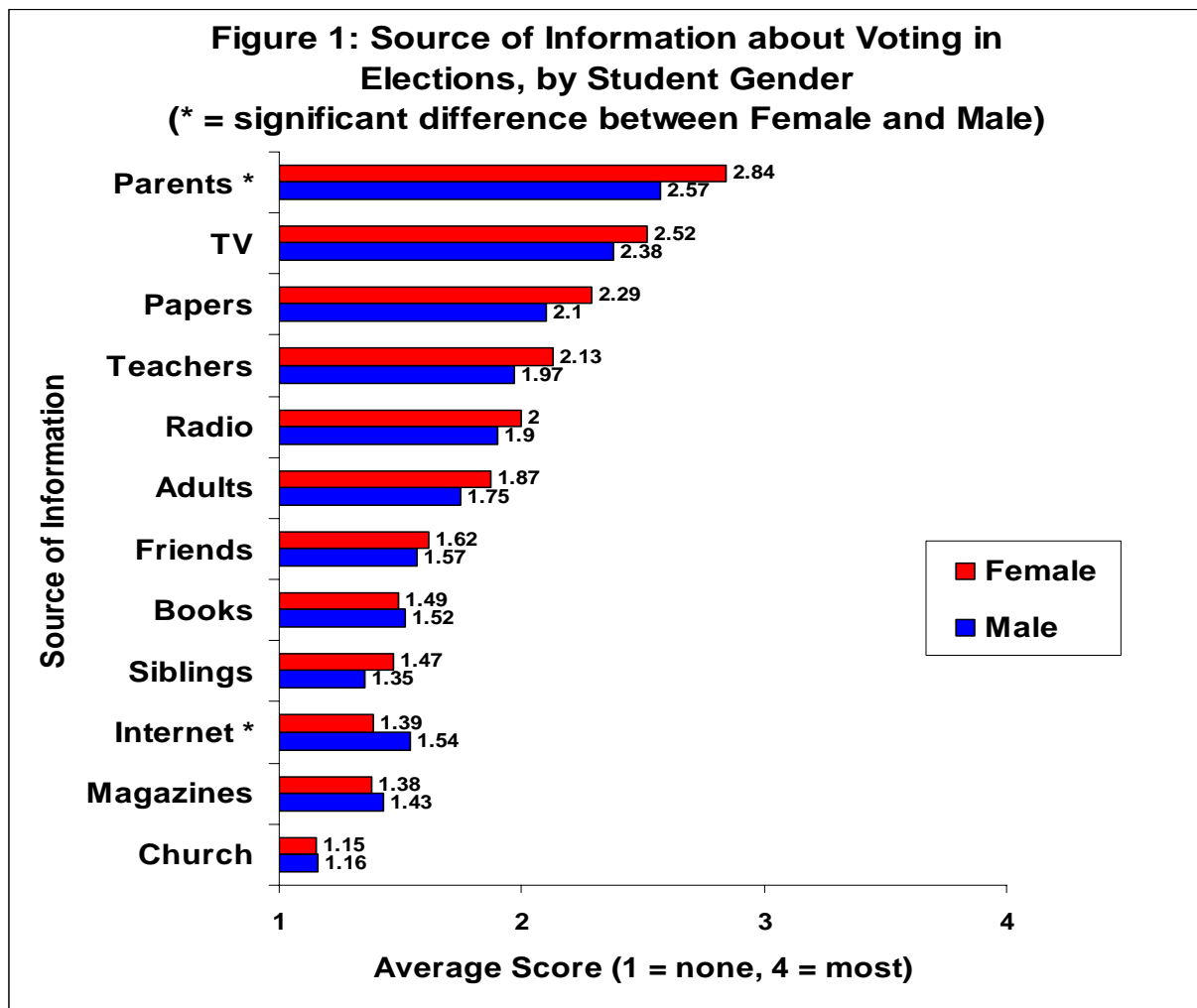
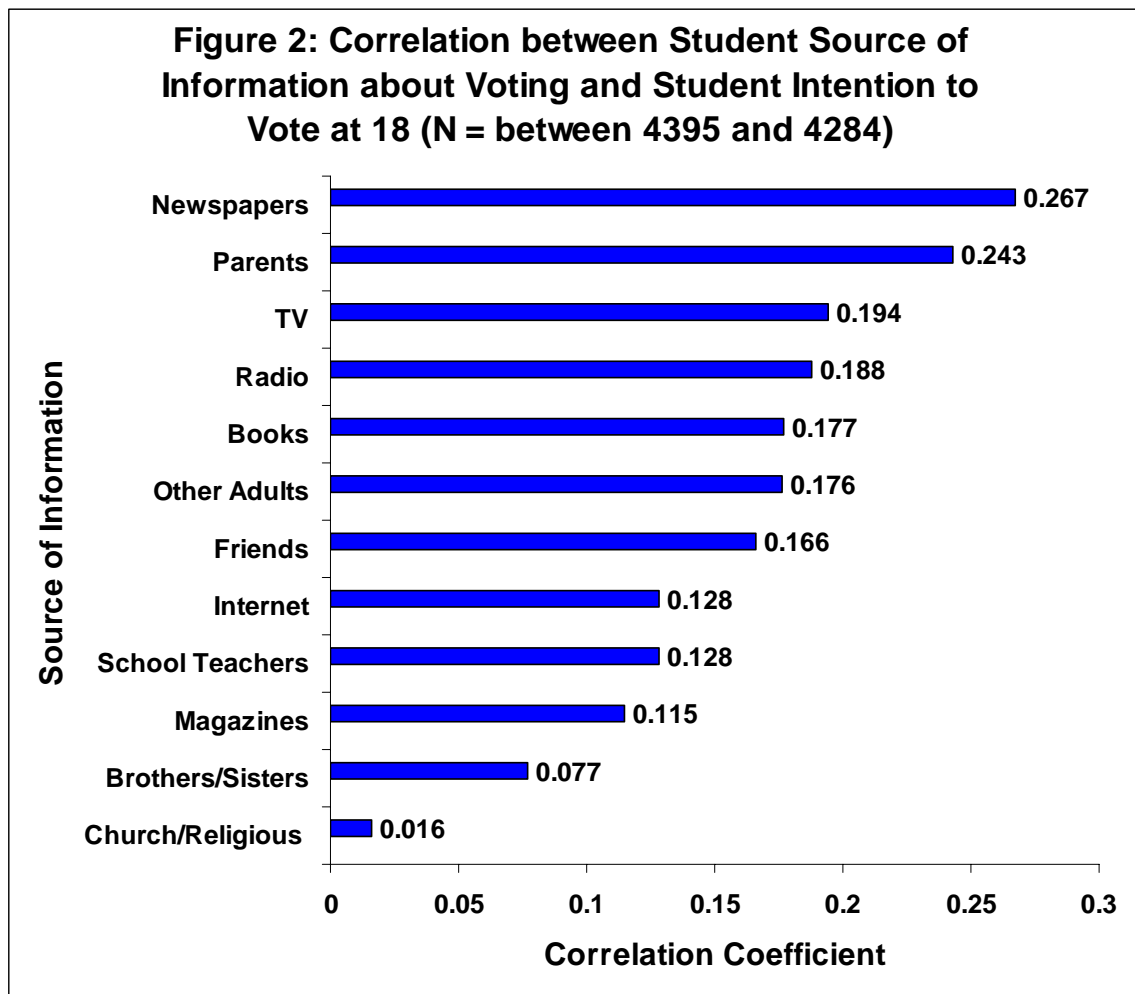


Figure 1 shows that the girls say they receive more information about voting from almost all sources than boys. The two exceptions are the Internet and Magazines. However, only two of the differences between boys and girls are statistically significant, namely Parents and the Internet. Girls claim they obtain more information from their parents about voting than boy, while boys get more information about voting from the Internet than girls. But it is necessary to point out that the amount of information generally from parents and internet is much different: Parents are clearly the most important source of information about voting, while the internet, by comparison, is one of the least important sources. The fact that it is more frequently used by boys does not explain which of the two is the more influential source of information about voting.

### 3.2 The Effectiveness of Information about Voting

But does the information from these sources lead equally to the intention to vote by these respondents? In order to examine this question, we used the correlation coefficients between the amount of information from each source and student intention to vote when 18 (even if voting were not compulsory). The correlations can vary from zero (no relationship) to one (perfect relationship) for each source. This information can be seen as an indication of how much each of the sources of information contributes to the students' intentions to vote, as seen in Figure 2.



Newspapers and parents, as shown in Figure 2, provide the two largest coefficients, indicating that the link between information and intention to vote is the greatest between these two variables. This gives further emphasis to our earlier point, that when compared to other possible sources of information, the family is the most important. On the other hand, the relatively small correlation between information from brothers/sisters and church/religious and intention to vote reveals two ineffective sources of influence.

What about the media? Although we will discuss the media in greater depth elsewhere, both Figures 1 and 2 suggest that the media is also an important source of information about voting. However, as Figure 2 shows, newspapers, more than TV or the radio, is more effective since students who get more information about voting from them, are more likely to intend to vote when 18. One explanation for this difference in media sources is that reading, as compared to watching or listening, is a more focused and demanding activity, and therefore students who get their information from newspapers are more likely to value and act upon that information.

### ***3.3 What happens when parents are uninterested in politics?***

While the family is clearly the most significant factor influencing our participants, when asked in our focus group interviews, a number of participants indicated that politics was never or infrequently discussed in their families. The perception for these students was that their parents

were not interested in political events or issues, or that they do not know much about politics, resulting in infrequent discussion of the topic. In some cases this lack of interest was not attributed to any particular cause. In Exhibit 1 (below) some of these perceptions are discussed.

However, in other cases, participants attributed lack of discussion about politics to specific resource issues such as parents not speaking English well or at all, or to parents not being citizens and therefore being ineligible to vote. In these cases, it is important to consider that parental silences may result in a lack of ability to transfer information about politics to their children. But what of the effect of the lack of parental resources on the generation of young people who participated in YES? Demonstrated in Exhibit 1 is also that some participants consider that the lack of such resources is a detriment. Others more directly attribute their own lack of interest in politics to a family environment in which politics is a neglected subject of discussion.

Here, the lack of provision of resources by parents, (that is discussion about politics) can be seen to have some impact on their children, affecting their knowledge about and interest in politics. Where this lack of resources stems from a parental lack the impact of this can be seen to be generational.

**Exhibit 1: Variations in Discussions About Politics in Families (From the YES focus group interviews using pseudonyms for schools)**

Participants from many schools, including St Jude’s Catholic College, Leighton Catholic College, Greenhill High School and Malory College, indicated that politics was discussed in their families.

At Springfield High School two students said that politics was rarely discussed at home because their parents did not know much about politics. One participant said, “my parents don’t really know about politics – no one really gives me a lesson in what’s happening.” Another said that in her family the issue was language, “because my parents are Chinese speaking and they don’t speak English that well, so they don’t really care”.

Students at Scholl High School agreed that their parents were not that involved in politics and did not talk about it much. They were asked if it was discussed around the dinner table and this idea was greeted with derision.

At St Luke’s Catholic College some participants indicated a parental lack of interest in both politics and voting. Most indicated that their parents were not interested in politics and were either ambivalent or negative about voting. One student said, “If my parents were really into it and if they talked about it I’d get more knowledge about it. But because my parents don’t really speak about it, I don’t care about it much”.

At Marino High School Jemima said that politics was not discussed in her family. Travis said his parents were not eligible to vote because they were not yet citizens. He added that they didn’t take an interest in politics because they could not vote. He said this was why he had a lesser interest than others in the group.

It was also the case that politics was discussed in many families as seen in Exhibit 1. Where politics *is* discussed in the family environment, participants report a number of responses. Most students accepted, concurred or supported their parents political positions, a phenomenon well known in the political socialisation literature. However, as shown in Exhibit 2 some are discomfited by discussions with parents. Here the method of delivery seems to be at issue, for example where parental discussion is considered one-sided, fanatical, or in the style of lectures participants do not appreciate it. Others indicate that the provision of useful information, the willingness of parents to listen to viewpoints other than their own, and parental enthusiasm for politics is positively received. Although a minority some indicate that their own active enthusiasm for politics is the result of positive interactions with politically aware parents.

### **Exhibit 2: Perspectives of Family Discussions about Politics**

Raj from The Lakes High School had discussed voting with his father when his father explained what 'donkey voting' was. Jackie, from the same school, mentioned her father's enthusiasm for politics saying that this had influenced her.

Hanie and Ana from Mayfield Secondary College said they "talk to their fathers about political issues".

A student at Port James High School discussed politics with her father, with things that she wanted explaining on, with the television news being the main catalyst.

An interviewee at Pinehill Catholic College described how he discussed politics with his father.

At Anthony's College two students reported talking to their fathers about political issues. Cole described her father as "ranting" about political topics, but Harriet said "I have lots of discussions with my dad; he's pretty open to my opinions".

Edward from Dampier High School described himself as "enthusiastic" about politics. He indicated that his parents "led an activist lifestyle" and that politics was important in his household. He attributed his own enthusiasm to this.

At Marino High School Kelvin said he discussed politics with his mum. He added that his father was not eligible to vote because he was not a citizen.

At Central Districts High School Sean also reported that he particularly discussed politics with his mother.

At St Anthony's College two participants who discussed politics with their fathers have already been noted. At this school two participants had tried to talk to their mothers. Ellie said this was difficult because "I seem to know more about the issues than she does" and Cole said "My mum was asking me the other day about all the parties, what they stand for and which way she should vote".

Also illustrated in the context of Exhibit 2, in terms of immediate family, is some indication of *which* family members the participants report they discuss politics with. This reveals an interesting gender dimension. Participants who reported that they discussed politics with their families indicated either that discussions took place within a broad family context or with parents only. Sometimes this was further limited to ‘my dad’ or ‘my mum’. Where a particular parent was mentioned it was considerably more common for participants to name fathers as discussants of political topics and issues. This was a noticeable tendency despite the gender of the participant describing the issue. Despite the survey finding discussed above that girls were more likely to name parents as a source of information about politics than boys there was no discernable difference in male and female focus group participants’ respective reports that they discussed politics with their parents. At issue was only the gender of the parent they discussed politics with.

Also demonstrated by Exhibit 2 are some minority views where mothers were mentioned. Here it is interesting to note another tendency. Where mothers were mentioned participants often specified either that male family members were unavailable, or lacked the ability to discuss politics for some particular reason, or that discussions with female family members were unsatisfying in terms of knowledge provision and learning potential. Interestingly, when mention was made of who assisted them to enroll, students almost exclusively mentioned their mother as the actionable parent.

Sometimes the participants mentioned other family members as discussants. Exhibit 3 shows the diversity of family members with whom participants discuss politics. The most common family members to be identified are siblings and grandparents, particularly older siblings.

### **Exhibit 3: Other family members and political discussions**

Students from Greenhill High School mentioned older siblings and a participant from Greenfield High School said that they had discussed voting in particular with their grandparents.

As well as discussing politics with his mother, Cole, from Marino High School, also reported he discussed politics with his sister.

At Mayfield Secondary College a participant identified her grandfather as a particular family member with whom she discussed politics.

Similarly participants frequently mentioned brothers as particular family members with whom they discussed politics. For example at Mercy College, whereas many indicated they discussed politics with their parents, one student also mentioned an older brother. A female student from Leighton Catholic College reported that she discussed and indeed argued about politics with her brother. At St Margaret’s Catholic College a girl reported that she discussed politics with her brother and that he influenced her opinions.

Sergi, from Our lady of Lourdes Catholic College, had a father and a brother who were lawyers. He discussed political issues with them because he thought that their profession meant they had some particularly interesting things to say.

A gender dimension is also visible here. When particular individuals were named by relationship there was a marked tendency for participants to name ‘brothers’ and ‘grandfathers’. Sisters were rarely mentioned and grandmothers not at all.

### **Key Points from Section 3:**

1. According to the student respondents, parents seem to be most important source of information about voting.
2. Females attribute information from parents more than males, and males from the internet more than females.
3. Information from newspapers and parents are the most likely sources related to the intention to vote by students.
4. A substantial number of participants reported that politics was not discussed in their families.
5. There was a tendency for participants to link their own level of interest in politics to levels of discussion at home.
6. There were instances where lack of parental resources (such as knowledge about politics, English language skills or ability to participate in elections) affected the resources of participants.
7. Although parents were the main discussants of politics, participants also reported discussing politics with siblings and grandparents.
8. Participants reported discussing politics with male family members significantly more than with female family members.
9. Where participants reported discussing politics with female family members there was a tendency to indicate that male family members were unavailable.

## **4. Learning about Politics in Families**

In the YES research we are endeavouring not just to find out about the ways young people discussed politics but also about aspects of *learning* about politics within families. We want to find out whether young people think they learned about politics in the domain of the family and, if so, what, and how, they learn.

### **4.1 What effect do families have in attitudes toward politics?**

In Section 3 we began to explore the idea that learning does not simply involve the transmission of quantifiable knowledge. Some participants who reported that politics was not discussed in their families also reported that they lacked knowledge and interest as a result. Discussion in this section obviously excludes these participants, as well as others who indicated that politics was not discussed in their families, and deals only with that subset that

report that they engage in some process of information and opinion sharing about politics within their families.

We also noted some problems involved in thinking about the transmission of political behaviour and opinions in terms of ‘socialisation’. In this context it is significant that some focus group participants, as shown in Exhibit 4, recognise the family not only as an important learning environment, but one where young people are ‘socialised’. Those recognising this frequently described the process of socialisation as a simple ‘top-down’ transfer of values, opinions and knowledge, with young people mostly passively assimilating and replicating the views of their parents.

#### **Exhibit 4: Transmission of Values about Politics Across Familial Generations**

Ally from Central Districts High School, for example, said, “it is interesting how children inherit their parents’ politics”.

Christine from Malory College said, “because you are socialised by your family and everything” that most young people would have similar views to their families.

A student at Rural View High School saw attitudes towards enrolling and voting specifically as dependent on family background and the attitudes passed on about voting to children. She said her parents had taught her that voting was very important.

A student from Farnell High School said, “you grow up and take on your family’s values”.

For the most part the above quotes in Exhibit 4 refer to the general process of knowledge transmission and ‘socialisation’ rather than personal experience. There are few ‘I’ statements in these quotes; most are generalisations about the way that these participants conceptualise the transmission of knowledge.

When those participants who reported that they learned about politics from discussions within their families described the *way* that they learned, though, the picture was, for the most part, very different from this simple ‘top down’ model of passive acceptance of political knowledge. Not only was the process not a simple ‘top down’ one, but participants described being actively engaged. To this end they also sought external sources in order to furnish their political learning.

Apart from those who reported that they directly inherited their parents’ lack of interest in politics, discussed above, it was rare to hear from participants that they unquestioningly followed the political leads of their parents. We did hear this view from a minority of interviewees who reported that they would just do as their parents did or told them to do. Three of these minority views are discussed below in Exhibit 5.



### **Exhibit 5: Examples of Strong Parental Influence**

At St Mary's Catholic College a participant said, "my parents sort of form my opinions, they have a big input".

Alecia from Dampier High School said of politics "I take their word for it because I've got no idea".

Lyndon from Marino High School said he discussed politics a lot with his family and tended to agree with their views. "Who you support comes a lot from who your parents support, what you hear at home".

There were participants who reported that they did not actively pursue discussions about politics or try to gather information either within their families or elsewhere. Those who did, however, described a process whereby they actively sought knowledge, both from their parents and from other sources, in order to actively form opinions and views. These sources included friends, school and the media. With respect to learning about politics at school, as well as general classroom discussion, it was also common for participants to describe learning from particular knowledgeable or enthusiastic teachers. Church groups and parents of friends were mentioned less commonly as sources of political knowledge by the students. The quotes in Exhibit 6 illustrate the variety of sources from which participants report they gain political knowledge.

### **Exhibit 6: Examples of Other Sources of Influence on Attitudes towards Politics**

Students at Malory College reported that although they learned about politics from parents they also considered they learned from discussing issues with school friends. Some issues were also discussed more formally in the classroom and participants learned from these also.

Participants at Rural View High School mentioned the media as a particular source they used in order to gain information about politics.

At Mayfield Secondary College students mentioned a diversity of people they discussed politics with including their politics class, friends, church congregation, teachers and family friends. Similarly this group also found information from a variety of media sources.

At Central Districts High School participants mentioned particular teachers as people they discussed politics with.

Students at Grania High School said that whereas parents were sources of information about politics that they also considered school friends as sources.

The next question that arises is how influential these different sources are. In Table 2 we presented data showing the effectiveness of the various sources with respect to student intention to vote. In that table, newspapers and parents were clearly most important. As described in Exhibit 7, we encountered mixed responses from YES participants with regard to how influential they think their family environments are in shaping their personal views about politics. A minority view among participants was that parents' views were uncritically accepted. Amongst the plethora of other responses were those who indicated that they tended to agree with their parents, but that this agreement is the result of 'testing' other views first. Many acknowledged that their parents provided the foundations on which they developed their own ideas. For others the object was to 'develop our own views', to not be tied to those of parents, or at least to test parents' views against external sources.

What is significant, though, is that this is an active process. Participants are conscious of their own agency in terms of learning. Participants describe 'listening' to the media for information or 'seeking global views' which they compare and contrast with views obtained elsewhere, as well as discuss with parents and others. Also significant is that the development of 'own' views is implicitly, or explicitly in the case of some, associated with 'growing-up'.

#### **Exhibit 7: The Effectiveness of Parental Influence**

Participants from Rural View High School were ambivalent about parental influence. Most conceded that parents were their main influence but also said that they were developing their own views. One said "I think my parents have influenced me with voting but more it comes down to what I think". This was seen as being part of 'growing up' with two participants saying that by the time of the attainment of the age of majority that most young people had their own individual thoughts about politics and the issues that affect them.

In the formation of these 'individual thoughts' participants referenced the media as being particularly important. "We listen to our parents but it's been the media more than our parents having an influence on our lives. We'd rather listen to the media and hear about government from the media, more than we do our parents".

Many participants from Pinehill Catholic College agreed that they had learnt from their parents. One said that his father's ideas about political parties had caught his attention. Another said that although their parents "kind of set my views about voting in general" that they would "go to the media and get global ideas" too before voting. Another said she thought she'd "end up voting the same way as my parents" although "it's not because they forced me, or anything".

At St Jude's Catholic College opinions were again mixed. One student reported he was not influenced by his family but rather had his "own opinions". Another agreed saying, "I listen to what my parents say but also to other views".

One student at Northcott Secondary College said her parents kept her "informed" about politics and another said her parents encouraged her to be informed through reading the newspaper.

Although students at Our lady of Lourdes Catholic College were generally in agreement that their parents had been influential in shaping their political opinions they also noted that other sources, school, the media and extended family (cousins) had influenced them too.

Whereas students at Trenton Catholic College acknowledged the influence of their parents they also said that they were increasingly seeking other sources of information as well. They said that school was becoming a big influence. Gretel said “to start off I think that parents’ views were quite a big influence. But now I think my views are quite different. I started off with similar views to them because they were the only views I was aware of”.

#### ***4.2 Parent-Student Conflicts about Politics***

The process of ‘moving away’ from parental views and developing individual opinions about politics is also the potential cause of conflict on political issues as seen in Exhibit 8. Again, of significance, is that for many participants the process of learning about politics is active. Political views are not ‘absorbed’, they are critically evaluated and actively sought, though not necessarily deeply. Participants were aware of the process of learning, of different actors, and they saw themselves as agents.

Discussions involving friction can also be further indicative of the process of learning. Through bringing their externally obtained knowledge into the family environment young people have a chance to test this information. The process of discussion and debate also provides them with more knowledge, and, possibly, with the impetus to seek more information elsewhere to refine their views. In other words, debate can be an important part of the learning process.

In some families the friction was considered disruptive and discussion about political matters was ‘banned’ by parents. Such situations are different from those where there is simply no discussion about politics at all. However where this is the case, it is possible that the effect may be similar in that this silencing denies young people the scope to test and refine their political views.

#### **Exhibit 8: Examples of Family Conflicts About Politics**

Students from Pinehill College also argued with their parents about politics. One of the students was from an immigrant background. He described his parents as “pigheaded” about politics and noted that his opinions differed from theirs.

At Greenhill High School discussion about politics was also reported as leading to friction. At Crowfield Agricultural College discussion of politics was banned in some households because it led to disputes.

Stefanie from Johnson College said, “my father and I fight like you have no idea because we both have our really strong opinions and we just like yell at each other”.

At St Jude's Catholic College some of the boys reported arguments in their families.

One student at Northcott Secondary College said that she was interested in arguing about politics with her family. Her use of the word arguing suggests some conflict. A classmate reported he had "problems" with his parents' views on politics.

Some students at Seaside College had argued with parents and one was quite emotive saying, "I was quite angry about a lot of the stuff that was said and the comments that were made".

At Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic College a female student said that she often disagreed with her parents since developing her own opinions. Other students agreed that as they got older they more frequently considered that their parents were wrong.

Students at Mayfield Secondary College were studying politics as part of their Year 12 subjects. As a group they were divided with respect to how much they agreed and disagreed with their parents. One particularly enthusiastic male student complained that his parents would not let him talk about politics as much as he liked. "I'm right and they're wrong", he said. Another girl had "big arguments with her parents about politics. The parents complained that she had learnt her views from school, whereas she said she was only voicing her own opinion.

## Key Points

1. A large number of students did obtain at least some level of information and forming of opinions from parents.
2. There was awareness amongst participants that they were engaged in a *process* of learning about politics.
3. Some saw this process as a simple model where they inherited parental views. Others considered themselves as agents in a learning process.
4. Whereas some reported that they thought they would take on the general framework of political values held by their parents it was more common that participants would test these opinions against views and knowledge sought externally to the family.
5. The most common sources of political opinions outside of the family identified by participants were schools, particular teachers, the media and peers.
6. Participants generally associated obtaining their own political values and opinions with the transition from adolescence to adulthood.
7. A significant number of participants who reported that politics was discussed in their families also highlighted debate within their families about political matters.
8. In some families discussion and debate about politics was 'banned'. This may deny young people a resource in terms of allowing them a place to test and refine their nascent views.

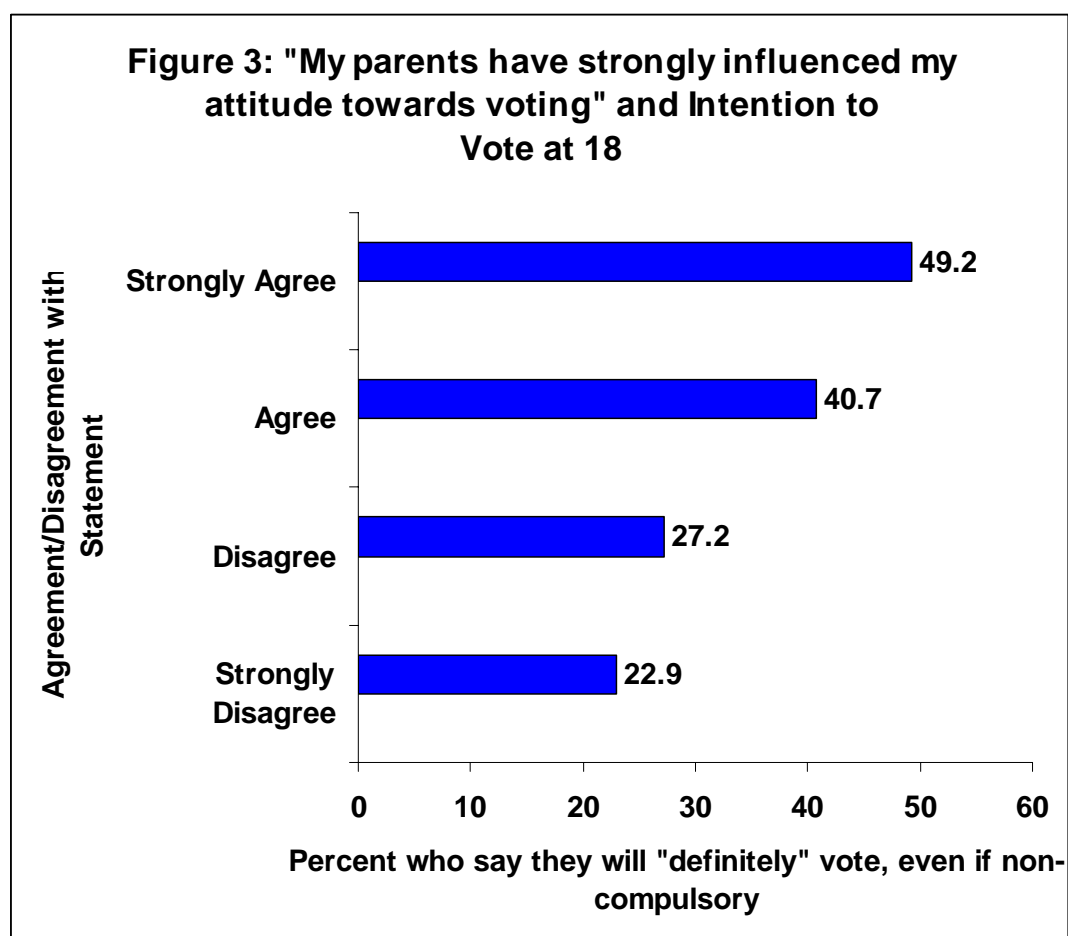
## 5. The Family and Learning about How to Enrol To Vote

So far we have discussed the family and how young people learn about politics more broadly. In the next two sections we focus specifically on learning about enrolling to vote, and about elections and voting.

### 5.1 The Family and Attitudes Towards Voting in the YES Survey

In our first report we pointed out that young people tended to regard voting as a hassle, a waste of time and boring (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004, 16). We want to know whether closer contact with the family in terms of information about voting has an impact on these negative attitudes. To do this, we first examine in more detail whether increases in source of information are linked with the intention to vote.

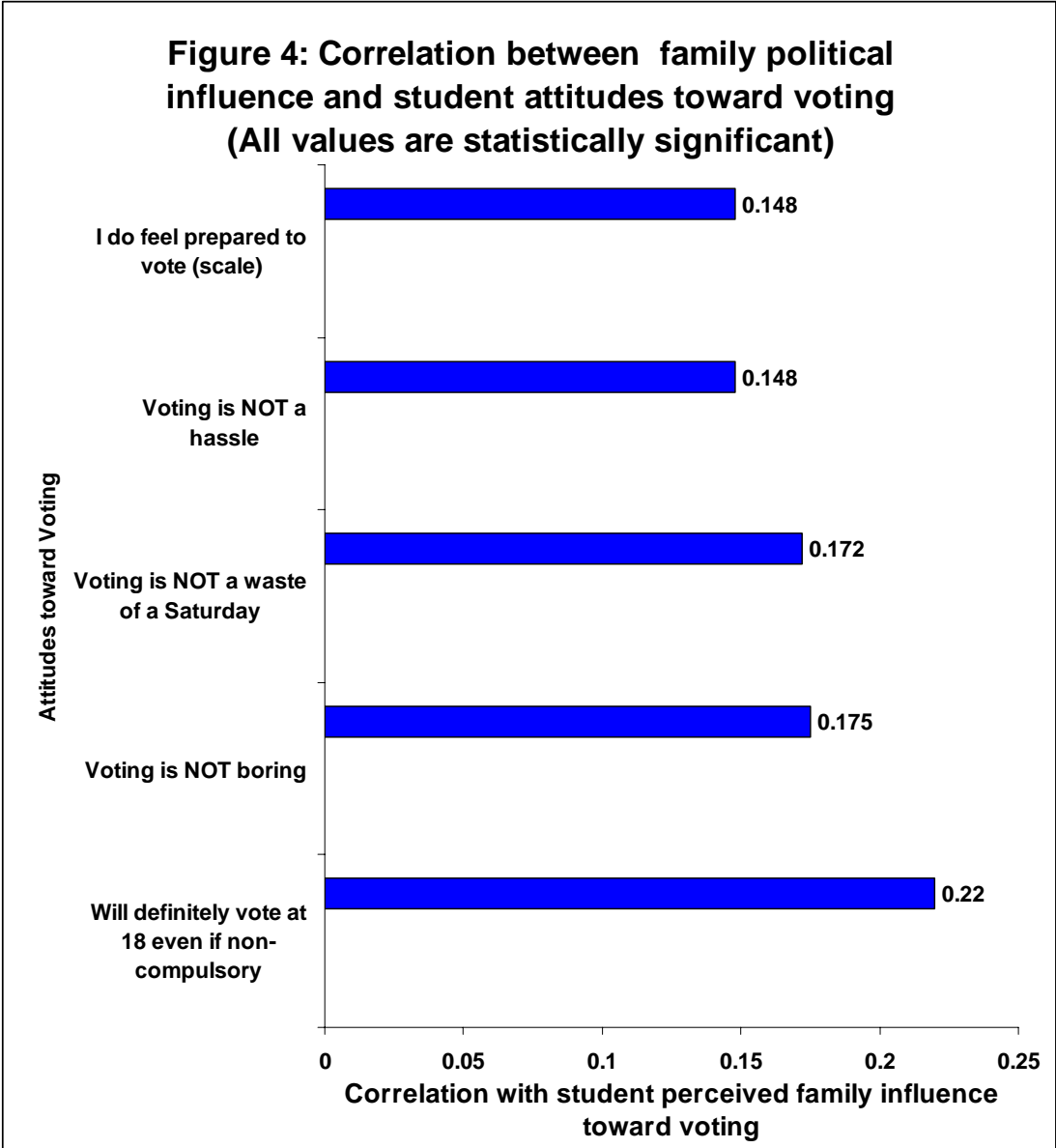
Figure 3 clearly shows that the more the students acknowledge influence from their parents about voting, the more they themselves intend to vote. This is shown in the percentage of students who say they would definitely vote when 18. For students who ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement, 49.2% said they definitely would vote, while for students who ‘strongly disagreed’, only 22.9% said they would vote.



Clearly, parental influence has a strong positive effect with respect to youth voting. What we now want to know, is whether increased information from parents leads to more positive

attitudes towards voting. In Figure 4 we extend this analysis, but use a different strategy. In this figure, the extent of agreement or disagreement with the statement is correlated with a number of attitudinal items related to voting.

Figure 4 indicates that the more the student is likely to say that their family has influenced their attitudes toward voting, the more positive are their attitudes toward voting, the more they feel prepared to vote, and the more they say they will vote, even if non-compulsory. Interestingly the survey data in Figures 3 & 4 on voting conflict with some of the earlier qualitative data on politics discussed in section 4. In part this may be explained by the students' perceptual difference between voting and discussing politics, and second, it must be remembered that the discussion groups represent somewhat different data to the survey. In the groups students had a greater opportunity to discuss the range and depth of their feelings towards their parents on the issue of how significantly they have been positively influenced on political issues.



These two figures indicate that although not all parents exert a strong influence over their children regarding politics, those who do, affect their children in a positive manner. Parental influence must be taken into account in explaining the difference between politically engaged youth and those who are not politically engaged.

### ***5.2 The Provision of Information about Enrolling to Vote, Voting and Elections by Parents***

We interviewed participants in YES between the ages of 15 and 18 when enrolling to vote as well as learning about elections and voting are age-appropriate activities. The fact that young people in Australia can enrol to vote at 17, and indeed are encouraged to do so, (although they cannot actually vote until they are 18), provides impetus either for young people to ask for information or for parents to independently provide this. Enrolling to vote may be considered as one of many ‘rites of passage’ into adulthood, though it rates very low (Print, Saha & Edwards, 2004). Some participants were motivated by developing their own political views as part of attaining maturity. Further, it was likely that participants’ parents were assisting many through other rites of passage including obtaining a driver’s license and entering the world of post-secondary study or work. We were keen in this context to determine if parents also assisted young people with acquiring knowledge related to enrolling to vote, elections and voting.

To this end we were interested to explore *how much* the young people who participated in YES had learnt about enrolling to vote, elections and voting in the family environment as well as *what* they had learnt. There are many possibilities for learning about aspects of enrolling to vote, voting and elections within the family. Some of these methods are direct, others indirect. There is, for example, scope through young people directly asking for information about aspects of enrolling or through parents providing this information unsolicited. There is also scope for the direct transmission of knowledge during elections and particularly when parents attend polling booths. This provides an opportunity for parents to explain aspects of voting to their (usually young) children, and for children to ask questions related to elections and voting. It also allows for children to learn indirectly through observation of their parents and of activities more generally at polling booths.

In this section we focus on how participants learn about enrolling to vote. To this end in our focus groups we asked what factors had motivated or prevented participants from enrolling to vote, and we also asked participants where they had come across information about enrolling to vote.

### ***5.3 The Family and Learning How to Enrol to Vote***

Participants in YES who had enrolled to vote discussed their motivations for doing so. The majority were well aware of the legal compulsion to enrol and vote and the fines for not doing so. A minority was motivated to enrol by philosophical concerns, while others wanted to vote and were keen to enrol because they saw it as part of ‘growing-up’ or because they wanted to have their say. But in a practical sense most were motivated when the opportunity presented itself, for example where schools provided forms or where they were sent forms in the mail. In many cases parents had facilitated, or were expected to facilitate, enrolment. Here parents had variously provided the impetus for a participant filling out the form, or they had obtained the form and pressured the participant to sign it, or had gone so far as to obtain the form and fill it out, requiring only that the participant sign it. In rare cases other family members prompted participants to enrol.

Of interest here is the ‘passivity’ of enrolling. Relatively few students sought out the form and filled it out on their own volition. This is in contrast to the way, described above, to how many sought information about politics. According to participants both they and their parents agree that it is part of the parental role to facilitate the procedural aspects of enrolment. Not only was this demonstrated by the fact that many parents had performed this task, or were expected to do so, it was also demonstrated by participants’ emotional responses. These are evident in Exhibit 9 in some of the ways that participants describe their parents facilitating their enrolment. These responses are various and include neutrality, resignation and mild indignation. No participant suggested that actual conflict had arisen during this process. Most reported that they had simply done as they were told.

We identified earlier a gender differential in terms of the family members with whom participants discussed political issues. Male family members, and particularly fathers, were most likely to be mentioned in this context. Of significance in Exhibit 9 is that whereas many participants referred generically to ‘parents’ facilitating their enrolment there was a tendency for ‘mothers’ in particular to be singled out as the parent who took, or who would be expected to take on, the responsibility for ensuring that participants filled out their enrolment forms. Indeed mothers were often described as obtaining the form, filling it out and then simply requiring the enrollee to sign. Fathers were mentioned too, and so was a grandfather, but mothers were mentioned in this role more than any other adult family member.

#### **Exhibit 9: Motivation Within Families to Enrol and Vote**

At Rural View High School most of the students reported that their mothers would enrol them, and had done so already for older siblings.

At Frenchtown High School one student, who was 17, had enrolled to vote because “mum had the enrolment form” and indeed had filled out this form for the student concerned.

Participants at Scholl High School reported that their parents would get the forms for them in order that they could enrol to vote.

At Crowfield Agricultural College most students had turned 17 or 18 in 2004. Most of this group had enrolled to vote at a local university open day. However Jeremiah, who was 18, enrolled because his mother had reminded him about it.

Jacob from Johnson Catholic College explained that when the family moved house his mother had collected enrolment forms for the whole family. She had filled out the form for him and merely required that he sign it.

At Leighton College parents had been instrumental in persuading participants to enrol to vote. Some parents had assisted participants to fill out the enrolment form. Others said they didn’t think their parents would help then unless they asked first.

At Northcott Secondary College a student had enrolled because her father reminded her to do so.



At Beachside College a student said that he had been motivated to enrol and vote because his mother had filled out the form and asked that he sign it.

Tia from Wickham College remembered her sister being told to enrol to vote when she was 18, “because of the fines”.

Tawny from The Lakes High School was encouraged to enrol by her grandfather, who thought it an important thing for her to do.

Students at Sancta Sophia Catholic College also reported their parents would make them enrol.

Erica from Dampier High School said “my dad sent me a form and said enrol now!”

Willow and Simmy from Dampier High School said they had enrolled because their mothers had insisted they fill out the forms.

A student at Gray’s High School said his mother had ‘forced’ him to sign the form.

#### **5.4 Parents as Sources of Knowledge or Facilitators**

In our first report *Enrolment and Voting* (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004) we discussed preparedness to vote in the context of knowledge about voting. We identified that only half of our survey participants felt they had enough knowledge to understand the party system and political issues in order to vote. Further there was a gender dimension with more female respondents feeling less prepared to vote, in terms of knowledge, than male respondents.

Our focus group research reveals that very few participants indicated their parents provided any factual information about either process beyond stating that enrolment was necessary and providing the form. In large measure enrolling to vote was a procedural business, a necessary bureaucratic process. It was not associated with an opportunity to impart knowledge about any aspect of the democratic process. Two rare exceptions to this rule appear in Exhibit 10.

#### **Exhibit 10: Parents and Information about Enrolling to Vote**

At Trenton College most students said that they had discussed enrolling and voting with their parents and also older siblings. Lauren’s parents stressed the importance of informed voting. Debby’s parents said it was fair to vote. In Dara’s case she said that she felt “capable of voting” and that she had talked with her parents and as a result had felt motivated to enrol.

A student at St Luke’s College had wanted to enrol. She didn’t know how so she asked her mother “I only found out yesterday how to enrol, I didn’t know so I asked my mum”.

Given that survey respondents and focus group participants both identified families, and, particularly parents, as important sources of knowledge about politics and voting, we combined feelings about ‘lack of knowledge’ and ‘parents as an information source’ in the second year of our focus-group research. Here we were concerned to gather responses regarding possible

strategies that may encourage voting. Some of the possibilities suggested to interviewees drew upon these reported feelings about lack of knowledge and suggested ways that knowledge could be provided. One option was that parents could assist with filling out the enrolment form and, at the same time, provide some information about enrolling and voting.

We received very mixed responses to this question. A variety of these are presented in Exhibit 11. Some participants agreed that this would be useful and a way of combining the process of enrolling to vote with gaining more information. Some suggested that their parents would do this anyway (although as noted above it was rare for parents to be reported as actually doing this). Others were more ambivalent, suggesting that they may not actually listen to advice given. This could, of course, also explain the lack of reporting of parents who had performed this role. There were also those who were more overtly negative about this strategy. These participants suggested that they would find parental intervention in the form of information giving as ‘patronising’ or demeaning. Although there was general acceptance that parents would facilitate enrolment through the provision of forms, there was less than general acceptance that parents should also provide information.

### **Exhibit 11: Student Views about Parental Assistance with Enrolment**

At Scholl High School (where participants expected parents to provide enrolment forms), participants, when asked if it would be useful and motivational for parents to explain the process of enrolment and voting agreed that it would not be.

Interviewees at Rural View High School also expected parents to provide enrolment forms. However here it was agreed that it would be useful to have parents explain about enrolling and voting.

Participants from Johnson Catholic College agreed that having parents give them enrolment forms and explaining the process to them would be useful.

Participants from Pinehill Catholic College were more ambivalent with one saying that it would be ineffective because children didn’t listen to their parents.

The boys at St Jude’s for the most part felt that parents would be neither motivational or influential although one reported that his parents had already explained aspects of enrolling and voting to him.

At St Margaret’s College the girls were ambivalent about the idea of having parents explain the enrolment process and voting. Some said “it depends on the parents” and another said she was tired of her parents “telling me stuff”.

Participants at George St High School indicated that they would find this method patronising. One girl said that she came from a migrant family and that her parents don’t have the same knowledge that she does.

Given the diversity of familial relationships and individual personalities this range of responses is not unexpected. Our research does show that this strategy would be useful in some contexts, however, and thus may be worthwhile pursuing.

There was one other type of response to this question that bears further discussion. The response of a participant at George Street High School exemplifies this. This participant suggests that this strategy would be ineffective, not because they would be personally adverse to it, but because he considers that his parents would not know enough about politics and voting to inform him. In some cases, but not all, this latter response was made where participants came from migrant or NESB backgrounds, or where parents were not eligible to enrol and vote.

Of course we only have one participant reporting of this parental lack of knowledge. Our intent was to find out what the young people themselves thought would be useful, not what parents considered they could provide, so parental views were not sought. But here the issues of parental resources and the intergenerational transfer of these resources are again raised, as they were in Section 4. Parents are clearly identified as a major information source *and* they have been identified as instrumental in motivating their children to enrol. Yet many parents, it seems, are considered by their children as not having adequate resources to do this. Here the issue may be building the resource base of parents.

#### Key Points:

1. Many participants report parental assistance in the procedural aspects of enrolling to vote.
2. Many participants actively expect that their parents will assist them to enrol to vote.
3. Although some participants had approached parents with requests for information about enrolling to vote in most cases they were 'passive' in the process of enrolling to vote and waited for external motivation.
4. There was a gender dimension to parental motivation to enrol to vote with mothers most frequently described as the parent who motivates and facilitates enrolment.
5. Mixed responses were received from participants to the suggestion of a strategy whereby parents facilitate enrolment and provide information about voting.
6. Some participants reported that the parental information strategy would not be useful because parents lacked knowledge. This again raises issues of parental resources and the generational transfer of these.

## **6. The Family and Learning How to Vote at Elections**

In this section we discuss learning within the family about elections and the process of voting. By elections and voting in this context we mean the philosophical context of elections and voting (what role they play in Australia's democracy, why they are important) as well as procedural aspects (what happens at a polling booth).

## 6.1 Experiences of Visiting Polling Booths

In the first year of our focus group research we asked Year 11 students if they had been to a polling place with their parents. We also asked them to describe this experience. We were interested both in what they learnt and their emotional responses to the experience.

To begin with not all of our participants had shared in this childhood experience. Those born to parents ineligible to vote in Australia were denied this early learning experience, as were some who grew up outside of Australia (depending on where they were raised). Again this raises the issue of the transmission of parental resources to children, and the importance of ensuring that parents are also equipped with resources that can be transmitted.

We encountered mixed responses to forced attendance at polling booths, with perceptions tending towards the negative, as discussed in Exhibit 12. Although such experiences may in theory be valuable in terms of positive reinforcement and learning it may be that in practice their value is more ambivalent. Some participants considered that their childhood attendance at polling booths was ‘boring’ because while their parents voted they had been left to wait. Some complained that they had to wait in the family car, where, removed from the ‘action’, they had limited scope to learn by observation anyway.

### **Exhibit 12: Experiences at Polling Booths**

Most of the girls at Sancta Sophia Catholic College had been to polling booths with their parents. One girl in this group was particularly politically active and aware and had enjoyed the experience. When discussion turned to attendance at polling booths debate ensued between her and three of her less interested classmates who said “the people who give you pamphlets are really annoying”, “it’s boring”, “it’s a waste of time” and “it takes hours and hours”.

Jill from Gore High School reported, “voting looked too complicated”.

Responses from the group at Mercy College were mixed. Most had been to polling places with their parents. One was discomfited describing the process as ‘formal and proper’. Another was more negative describing it as ‘a bit scary, being pushed around’. Others described the process as being boring because they had been made to wait in the car.

At Crowfield Agricultural College most students had been to polling booths with their parents and most made the observation that adults did not behave all that responsibly at the booths. One mentioned a sibling who voted informally.

At Central Districts High School most had been to booths. Responses from this school were largely positive. Samantha said it “wasn’t scary”, Jon-Paul said it was “cool” and Sean said that he thought “election time is a great time because the whole way there and for the next few days I get to hear about all the different policies and why you should vote for this person and not for this person”.

Others recounted memories of long lines and waits. For some voting looked hard and complicated. For others it seemed serious, formal and daunting. Sometimes voting was perceived as intimidating. One aspect highlighted by respondents was the pamphleteers at the

door to polling places. Participants recalled (being at child-height) and walking past these whilst parents were given 'how to vote' pamphlets. Many recounted this as a scary or unpleasant experience. Participants also recounted other events, such as where family members didn't vote, or voted informally.

Conversely there were participants for whom attending a polling place was an enjoyable experience, and even one that they recalled learning from. Some said that it was something they would like to do one day. The experience even received a 'cool' from one participant and another recalled how he had learnt from it by listening to parents' views on various candidates before and after the election. This, however, was a minority view.

## ***6.2: Awareness of Parental Talk about Voting***

We also asked participants specifically about what they had learnt through discussing the process of voting with anyone. We asked whether they had spoken with anyone about what it was like to go to a polling booth and vote on polling day. Parents were a source suggested as prompt. We were keen to find out both what factual information had been transmitted from parents to participants about voting and also what they had learnt from parental reactions and responses to voting. We also asked participants whether the information they had received, or the parental reactions they had observed, had influenced their own views in any way.

We found first that it was uncommon for participants to report talking to anyone other than parents about the experience of voting. From time to time older siblings were mentioned, but the primary discussants were parents. Participants, in fact, often referred to parents unprompted. We also found it was common for interviewees to ask researchers to explain what they meant by 'discussed' in terms of discussing the process of voting. Many said that they had talked about voting with their parents, but that they did not consider the informal nature of this conversation to merit the term 'discussion'. In other words conversation about voting tended to be informal rather than formal.

Responses to this question are outlined in Exhibit 13 below. Participants tended not to report that they learned any of the mechanics of voting as a result of conversations with their parents. Instead they described such conversations as being mostly about parental *feelings* toward voting. A minority reported their parents as being 'enthusiastic' about voting. The majority view, however, was that parents regarded voting negatively. Parents highlighted long queues and unwieldy ballot papers, and reported generally that voting was 'boring' or 'annoying'. In some cases parents were depicted as being much more unenthusiastic, describing voting as a waste or their hatred of the politicians they had to vote for. A small number of participants described their parents as relating to them the ways that they subverted the compulsion to vote. Parents who talked about 'refusing' to vote were described, as were parents who told participants that they donkey voted or put blank papers in the ballot box.

We also asked participants whether they considered parental views had affected attitudes towards enrolling to vote and voting. In Section 5 we noted a tendency of participants to want to learn actively about *politics* and to consider a range of sources, including parental views. We discovered, however, that when attitudes towards the practice of *voting* were discussed that interviewees were less inclined to challenge the views of parents. Although many said that they would 'make up their own minds', many more reported feeling influenced by what they had heard from their parents. For the purposes of clarity responses to this question have been combined with those from the previous question and are included in Exhibit 13.

### Exhibit 13: Parents' Views of Voting and Participants' Responses

Many of the participants at St Anthony's College had visited a polling booth with parents at some time. Some said that their parents' enthusiasm for voting had encouraged their interest in the process but others indicated that parental negativity had affected their attitude. Jenaya opposed her father's negativity saying "My father refuses to vote because he doesn't believe the state should make someone vote.... I respect his choice but I don't agree with him".

Students at Johnson Catholic College said that they had discussed the process of voting with their parents but said that most parents had not given factual information. Instead they had described the process negatively as "tedious", "a chore", or complained about long lines and unwieldy papers. Students at this school said that despite this negative input they wished to make their own minds up about voting.

At Crowfield Agricultural College one participant said that her parents considered it a drag having to vote.

At Leighton College a student said that the importance attributed to voting is often learnt from parents. In his case he reported that his say "ewwww we have to go and vote and there will be all these long lines, rather than talking about the importance of it they just complain about it". Another student agreed saying that his parents saw it as a hassle and that this was how he saw it too.

At Wickham College Terri said that her parents had said that voting was "a bit of a waste".

Susie from St Luke's Catholic College said, "dad just said he donkey votes. He doesn't really care about what the outcome is – he just does it because he has to do it".

A girl from Our lady of Lourdes said "I hear my parents complaining about how they have to give up their Saturday mornings, so the way I'm thinking is that its just going to be a pain".

A male student at Crowfield Agricultural College said, his parents' negative attitude towards voting had influenced him and made him feel "it's a big waste of time".

At Frenchtown we encountered one of the few participants who stated they were simply not intending to vote. This participant had parents who were "quite annoyed that they actually have to go down and vote" and said he would not put his name on the electoral roll if he didn't have to.

Students at St Margaret's Catholic College had discussed voting with their parents. In one case a student reported that told her how you go "to a place to vote, but you walk out and don't actually do it". According to this student many of her family members handed in blank papers at polling booths. Another student said she heard "about 50/50" percent of positive and negative information. Another said she "hated" many politicians because she had heard her father make negative comments about them. Most of the girls in this group said that they thought their parents' comments had influenced their own views.

## Key Points

1. Few participants found out factual information about the process of voting from parents, though they appreciated such information when it was provided in a clear and useful form.
2. Where parents had described voting negatively, or as a confusing process, participants indicated they tended to be put off voting.
3. Resource issues may again be raised where participants have not had the opportunity to attend polling booths with parents due to parental ineligibility to vote.
4. Most participants regarded attending polling booths negatively, describing it as boring, daunting or intimidating.
5. Participants were more likely to talk to parents than anyone else about the process of voting.
6. Communication between parents and participants was likely to be informal rather than formal. It tended to be based around parental emotional responses to voting.
7. Participants reported that parents usually regarded voting negatively, as a chore and a waste of time.
8. Participants were of mixed opinions when asked whether they agreed with parents' political views. Some said they would challenge parental views but the majority view was agreement with parents.
9. There is thus a difference between the active way that participants tended to learn about politics and the passive way they tended to learn about voting.

## 7. Conclusions

This report has highlighted both diversity and some trends in the way that young people learn about politics, enrolling to vote and voting with their families. There is no doubt that for most young people 'the family', and particularly parents, directly or indirectly, plays a significant role in giving young people a foundation upon which to build their own views of politics and democratic participation through voting. It was found that some families are better equipped in terms of resources in providing this information than others. It also highlights the importance of the school in levelling the playing field in terms of what is learned at home.

It was also discovered, however, that most young people are 'active' learners about politics, if not active participants, and that they turn to a number of sources for their political information. This supports criticism of the more traditional political socialisation literature discussed earlier. Of interest was that the 'activism' of many in terms of wanting to establish their own *political* views was in stark contrast to the passivity played in terms of *enrolling to vote*. Here participants waited for the opportunity to present itself rather than actively seeking it out. Also of interest was that whereas participants frequently challenged parental political views and

opinions they tended to accept parental descriptions and assessments of voting without question, most of which were negative. Many also had negative views of voting drawn from childhood experiences at polling booths. Finally although there was evidence that many participants did discuss politics with their parents, and that parents did reveal their feelings about voting, there was little evidence that parents provided factual information about what was expected of citizens when they voted.

Another interesting and perhaps significant trend was in respect to ‘gendered labour’ within the family in terms of providing information about politics and ensuring that young people fulfill the obligation of enrolling to vote. Young people tended to name their fathers as discussants about politics, but relied on their mothers to assist in the procedural aspects of enrolling to vote. Although no causal relationship between this familial gendered division of labour and a ‘participation gender gap’ can be deduced this is an interesting aspect of the gender gap.

In conclusion this report describes both the importance of the family and its complexity in terms of an arena in which young people learn about politics, enrolling to vote and voting.

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