



Youth Electoral Study

REPORT 5

YOUTH, SCHOOLS AND LEARNING ABOUT POLITICS

Lawrence J. Saha
School of Social Sciences
The Australian National University
Lawrence.Saha@anu.edu.au

Murray Print
Faculty of Education
University of Sydney
m.print@edfac.usyd.edu.au

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1. The YES Project

Youth participation in the electoral process is of great concern in most democracies today. For many years we have known that young people are less likely to enroll to vote than older groups. The Youth Electoral Study (YES) is a national study investigating the reasons why this is so and also looks at what motivates Australia's young people to participate in voting and democracy.

This four year national project is a major investigation into youth voting behaviour led 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, through its ARC Linkage Grants program, with a major contribution from the Australian Electoral Commission as industry partner. The Chief Investigators are A/Professor Murray Print (University of Sydney) and Professor Lawrence J. Saha (Australian National University).

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, despite compulsory voting, and hence do not participate in Australian democracy. It has been estimated that there might be as many as 400,000 young Australians, 18-25 years of age who do not vote in elections because they have not registered on the electoral roll (see Table 1). Apart from the fact that

voting is compulsory, the under-registration of eligible young people raises questions about their political interest and commitment.

A more fundamental purpose of YES is to investigate the impact of disengaged youth on Australian democracy. Large numbers of non-participating youth have implications for the effectiveness and representativeness of our political system. Should this trend continue, the future viability of the Australian democratic political system may become problematic.

Thus the project is investigating the underlying characteristics of those who do and do not register 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 are analysed for their impact and new strategies examined

Table 1: Participation rates of young Australians

| Age | Revised ABS est of eligible pop | Actual federal enrolment | Participation rate as % ABS Est. |
|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| 18 year olds | 261,927 | 152,687 | 58.29 |
| 19 year olds | 261,373 | 194,559 | 74.44 |
| 20 year olds | 256,903 | 209,751 | 81.65 |
| 21 year olds | 256,157 | 220,421 | 86.05 |
| 22 year olds | 249,831 | 213,768 | 85.57 |
| 23 year olds | 243,892 | 212,112 | 86.97 |
| 24 year olds | 236,210 | 209,773 | 88.81 |
| 25 year olds | 232,427 | 207,042 | 89.08 |
| Overall 18-25 year old cohort | 1,998,720 | 1,620,113 | 81.06 |

Source: Hallett (2007)

2. Methodology

The study uses a mixed-method methodological approach to collect both in-depth qualitative and quantitative data. A review of literature on youth participation in democracy and voting has been conducted. Extensive international interest, particularly in Europe, Britain and the United States is evident in addressing the issue of youth

disengagement. In countries where voting is not compulsory, youth voting rates are invariably the lowest of any age group (Wattenberg 2008). Most western democracies are aware of the implications should the current youth disengagement continue through to later years, and are actively seeking ways to engage their youth in voting.

2.1 Case studies

A key source of data are the 16 electoral divisions (from 150 nationally) selected as case study sites. Our cases covered the main categories of electoral divisions – inner city, mid city-suburban, outer suburban, rural city, rural town and remote. Over a four-year period data were collected through in-depth group interviews with youth aged 17-25 in school and non-school sites to identify electoral behaviour and evaluate the effectiveness of various pro-registration and voting interventions. Data collection was carried out by the principal researchers together with a Senior Research Associate and casual research assistants, and was supported by the Divisional Returning Officers (DROs) of the 16 designated electoral division

Most data in the 16 case studies were collected through group and individual interviews with students from a range of schools within each of the divisions. These students represent a critical age in terms of enrolment as Australians can enroll at age seventeen years. Most group data were obtained from interviews with groups of Year 7-10 students in four schools in each division, usually two government secondary schools, an independent and a catholic school. In 2003 we interviewed students in Year 11 (aged 15-17) and then followed up the same students in 2004 (then aged 16-18). We contacted many of these students in 2005 and 2006 to determine changes in behaviour and attitudes.

2.2 National school survey

The second data-gathering strategy consists of two national cross sectional surveys of Year 12 senior secondary schools, the first in 2004 to investigate student attitudes towards enrolment and voting and to identify the impact of civics and citizenship programs in schools. A second survey will be held in 2009 which will pursue in greater depth selected findings from the 2004 survey.

From a national data-base, a stratified random sample of secondary schools was drawn, controlled for state and type of school. A total of 208 schools were drawn, and invitations were sent to participate in the survey. Following this initial contact, each school was contacted by phone and negotiations were initiated about participation in the survey. In the end, over 155 schools participated, giving a response rate of 78.6 per cent. An average of 31 students from each school participated, providing a national sample of 4923 senior secondary students.

In addition to the main questionnaire, each school received a questionnaire which sought information on type of school, enrolments, and the teaching program related to civics or citizenship education. Finally, each teacher whose class was surveyed was

asked to complete a form which provided information of the conditions under which the student questionnaire was completed.

2.3 What Do We Mean by “Commitment to Vote”?

In the national survey students were asked two specific questions about voting. The first was: “Do you intend to vote in Federal elections after you reach 18?” As we would expect, given compulsory voting, the vast majority, or 87%, said they would “Definitely” or “Probably” vote. (See Yes Report 1 for more details.) These findings are a little higher than the official Australian Electoral Commission data which indicate that about 85% of the youth age cohort do vote. We call this variable, **Intention to Vote**.

The second question about voting was: “Would you vote in a Federal election if you did not have to?” The response to this question was simply “Yes” or “No”. In contrast to the responses to the previous question, only about 50% said they would. We call this variable, **Would Vote Even if not Compulsory**.

We then combined these two questions to form a third voting variable, which is sometimes used in this analysis. There are five categories in this third variable: 1) definitely will vote, 2) probably will vote, 3) Maybe will vote, 4) probably will not vote, and 5) definitely will not vote. Each category is given a value ranging from 6 to 2, with 6 being allocated to “definitely will vote”, and definitely will not vote a value of 2.¹ We call this variable **Commitment to Vote**.

Therefore we have three variables which measure voting intention:

1. Intention to Vote (when compulsory)
2. Would Vote Even if not Compulsory
3. Commitment to Vote (taking both #1 and #2 into account)

The difference between these variables will be made clear in the context in which a form of voting intention is analysed.

3. Education and the Political Participation of Youth

The importance of education for the development of youth into active participatory citizens is widely accepted (Saha 2000). However, in a democratic society this process is not straightforward, nor is it without problems, largely because schools are not democratic institutions (Tse 2000). Many factors can account for how young people acquire knowledge and learn about participating in their democracy, including the usual

¹ This variable is a combination of two questions in the questionnaire, namely whether the student intended to vote when 18 years of age, and whether the student intended to vote even if voting were non-compulsory. Thus, by combining these two variables, we have a variable which takes into account both the compulsory nature of voting in Australia and the hypothetical intention to vote if not compulsory. This gives us a measure of the student’s “commitment to voting”, even if it were not compulsory.

list of important socialization agents – parents, media, siblings, peer groups, more recently the internet and of course, the school. This report explores what the YES research found in terms of the ways schools influence student political engagement. While political engagement is a complex construct composed of multiple variables, one key measure of engagement and participation, often regarded as the minimal level, is voting.

The assumption is made that voting is important for sustaining democracies. Voting in an election is an important contribution to maintaining the principle of popular sovereignty, a cornerstone of representative democracy. It is also the legitimate manner by which citizens can change their government. Of the various forms of political engagement, voting has a special role as it is the only form of political participation in which each citizen has an equal voice. While in principle the right to vote is a great equalizer of political influence, in practice it is only shared by those who make the effort to exercise that right. Furthermore voting in an election provides legitimacy for the elected government and for the democratic system as a whole.

Even in a country like Australia, where voting is compulsory, these concerns are relevant. First, not all eligible Australians actually do vote, and second, debates about the withdrawal of compulsory voting need to keep these concerns in mind.

Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996) noted a strong positive relationship between formal educational attainment (measured in years of completed schooling) and political behaviour, cognition and attitudes:

Well-educated citizens display substantially greater levels of understanding of the principles of democratic government, have a much better ability to identify incumbent local and national leaders, ... pay much closer attention to political life... More likely to participate in political life, including those difficult activities of contacting public officials, working on political campaigns, serving on local boards... are also more likely to vote in both local and presidential elections than their less educated counterparts (1996, p 31)

Much learning of political engagement is incidental, idiosyncratic and frequently superficial. Niemi and Junn (1998) acknowledged that even students in the later years of school developed most of their knowledge of government and politics from parents, friends, the media and even through direct contacts with government agencies. “Indeed, political scientists have largely ignored the high school civics curriculum, having concluded that efforts to teach civic knowledge in the schools are largely redundant and therefore ineffectual.” (1998, p 62). It is in this context that we have written the present report. What did we find in terms of school influences on Australian students?

4. Schools and the formal curriculum

The situation in lower secondary schools (Years 9 and 10) is that some democratic and civic education exists, well embedded within broad fields of school subjects such as SOSE and HSIE. In many cases this material is so deeply embedded that students were unable to recall if they had studied civic education. As for electoral education, almost none exists, except in passing when mention is made of electing a government.

In upper secondary years the situation is different. Most states offer a unit of study invariably called Political Studies or more recently, Australian and International Politics. However, as elective subjects they compete with higher prestige subjects which are nominally elective but in reality are almost compulsory, either by the school or from university entrance requirements (e.g. science, mathematics, history or geography). Consequently few students have studied politics subjects at senior secondary level. Subjects offered vary by State, and for example include:

- a) WA – Political and Legal Studies – elective – modest status and modest popularity accordingly. Of around 12,000 studying the TEE, nearly 1,000 sat for Politics and Legal Studies, compared with 2,500 in Economics, 3,000 in Geography as well as History.
- b) Victoria – In 2006 two units exist – International Politics and Political Studies. Neither had been very popular with students. In 2005 out of more than 50,000 students, Political Studies attracted nearly 1,000 students compared with Geography (3,000), Economics (3,000) and History (>6,000, but various forms).
- c) Other states – Queensland – Political Studies (25 students in a trial course); South Australia – Australian and International Politics. No political studies course exists in NSW, the most populous state.
- d) History is a common elective subject but it does NOT address democratic, civic and electoral education. Individual teachers may address some issues but this is unlikely.

Therefore, by the time students leave school, many are able to vote as they have reached 18 years, yet they are seriously under-prepared for that task. In the case of an election held very late in the year, as in the case of 2007, most will vote while still at school or in the year they complete school (many Year 12 students ‘leave’ school in October). Comments like the following were common.

“yeh ... I didn’t know I could vote at school...didn’t cross my mind.”

“Really? Knew I had to enroll, but somehow voting this year ...mmmmm”

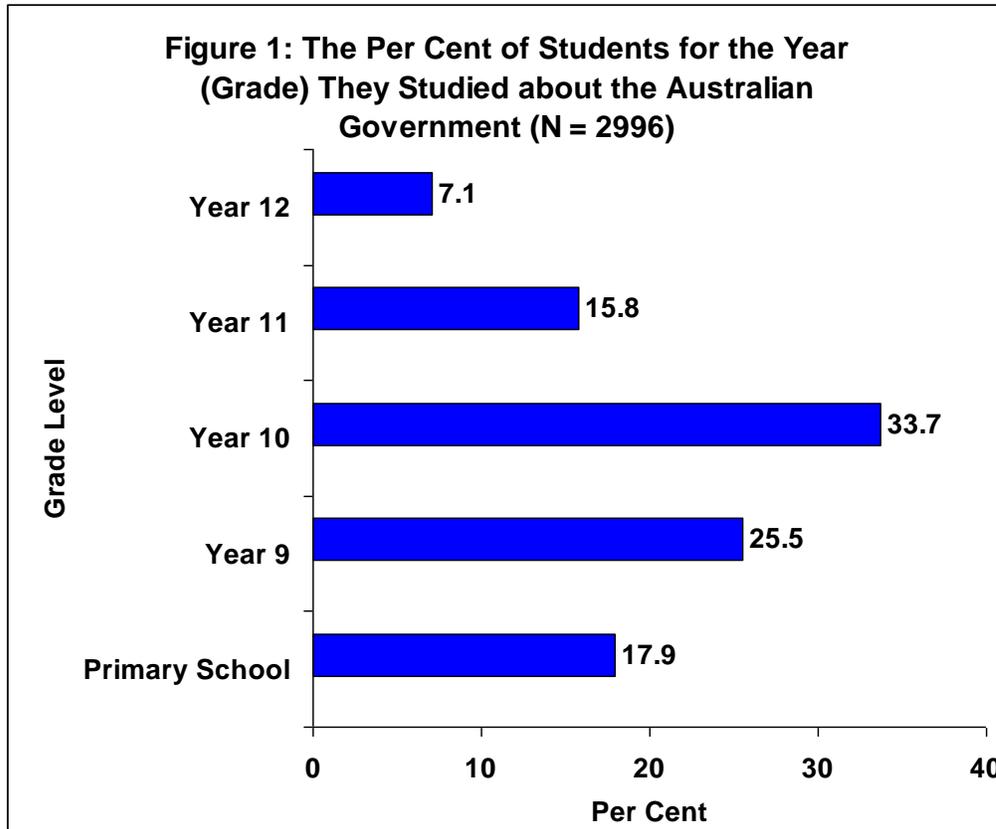
Interestingly, international studies (Niemi and Finkel 2006; Torney-Purta et al. 2001) show that students who have studied about the government at school are more likely to be engaged than those who have not studied it. But, the evidence indicates that participatory pedagogy is weak. Instruction is characterized by textbooks, rote learning and non-participatory, non-critical strategies, exacerbated by low levels of teacher preparation in civics related subjects (Niemi and Junn 1998; Hahn 1998; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Furthermore, a recent Canadian study found that different forms of citizenship education had a positive effect on the knowledge and behavioural patterns of young people (Claes, Stolle, and Hooghe 2007). Similarly, we know that different types of schools have different levels of success in instilling civic values in students (Wolf 2007). However, the first question we want to address is whether the subject in which the Australian political is taught, does make a difference with political engagement, in particular enrolment and voting.

5. Who, When, and in What Subjects Do Australian Students Study about The Government?

We know that there is a lack of uniformity in the Australian educational system in the study of the government. Therefore we wanted to identify when and in what subjects the students studied about it. In the YES survey we asked students to give us information on up to five subjects in which they studied about the Australian government, and we asked them to give the years in which they studied it.

We found that 81.3 per cent answered regarding the 1st subject, 38.2 per cent gave a 2nd subject, 13.3 per cent named a 3rd subject, five per cent a 4th subject, and only 2.5 percent gave names for a 5th subject. However, we found that only 2996, or 61 per cent of all students, could give us the name of both the subject and the year in which they studied about the Australian government.

Figure 1 presents the per cent of the students in each year in which they said they studied about the Australian government. For convenience, we have grouped students in primary school into one category.



Of the students who had studied about government, almost 60 per cent said they studied the subject in Year 9 or Year 10. Only 7 per cent said they studied the subject in Year 12, and 15.8 per cent in Year 11, which are the grade levels in which most secondary school students become 17 or 18 years old, and during which they become old enough to enrol.

It is generally argued that Years 9 or 10 are the ideal grade levels in which to study about the government because most students are still in school, given the age of compulsory schooling. Because the average retention rate to Year 12 in Australia is around 75 per cent, this argument has some merit.

Students gave the names of many subjects in which they studied about the government. In fact there were over 330 names of subjects written by the students when asked in which subject they studied about the government. However, it is obvious that the names for subjects vary considerably, for example History or Social Studies. When we combined the names of those subjects into more traditional discipline or subjects, we found that the following subjects is where the students say they learned about the Australian government.

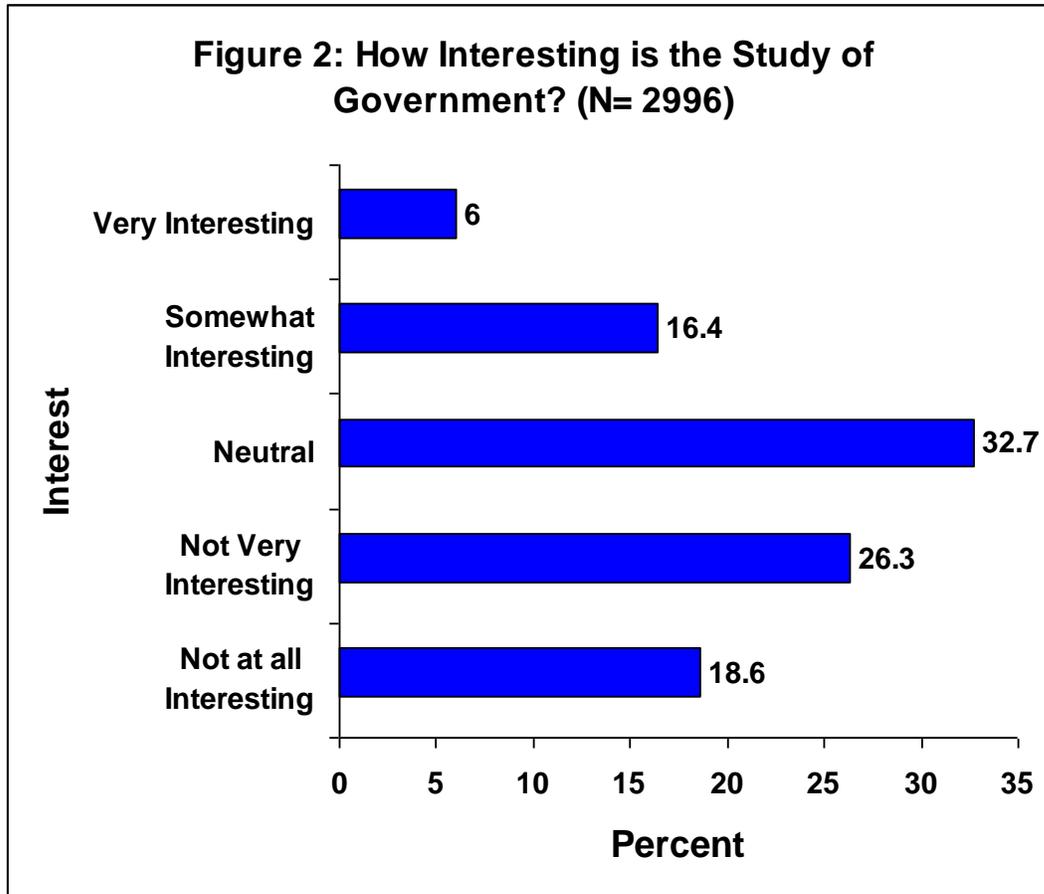
Table 2: Subject Areas in which students said they studied about the Australian Government, ranked in terms of frequency (N=3883)

| Subject | % (N) |
|---|-------------|
| SOSE and Social Studies | 28.0 (1089) |
| History | 23.5 (913) |
| Legal Studies | 12.5 (485) |
| Economics and Commerce | 11.5 (445) |
| Australian Studies | 07.5 (291) |
| English | 05.3 (207) |
| Civics and Politics | 04.1 (161) |
| Geography | 02.9 (113) |
| Other (VET, Work Studies, Religion, etc)* | 02.3 (89) |
| Other (Don't Remember/Uncodable) | 02.3 (90) |

* There were 1040 students who did not answer this question.

From Table 2, it is clear that most students who could recall studying about the government, and could name the subject, did so in Social Studies and History courses. What is interesting, however, is the wide variety of subjects in which the political system is taught. When combined with the data in Figure 1, it is clear that the study of the Australian government or the political system generally, is not very uniform across the country.

How interesting is the study of the Australian Government? We asked this question, and the results are given in Figure 2.



The student responses clearly indicate that students do not perceive the study of Australian government to be interesting. Only 22 per cent say they found the study of government interesting, while 45 per cent find it not interesting, with 32.7 per cent saying that they are neutral. These figures are consistent with comments that we frequently heard in our group interviews.

In Frenchtown High School, for example, a student said, “I didn’t remember anything – it was pretty boring”. This type of statement was also mentioned by a student at Greenhill College. Another student, for example a student at Wickham College, said that he thought that learning about politics “would be wasted” on most students because they were not interested anyway. At Sancta Sophia College, a student remarked that many “hated” the subject and that it made the respondent “angry”.

Occasionally we received positive views about the study of government. For example one student at St. Margaret’s College said that “it cleared things up for me”, and it helped her understand about voting.

In one “Independent” school, we were told that students took “civics” because it was an easy subject: “Civics was the one subject if you weren’t smart ...if you

wanted the easy way out...not as many exams...no assignments and one exam.” Also, we heard a student from Dampier High School say “...we didn’t study Australia much at all anyway...I think that I come out of high school knowing more about the United States and how it works”.

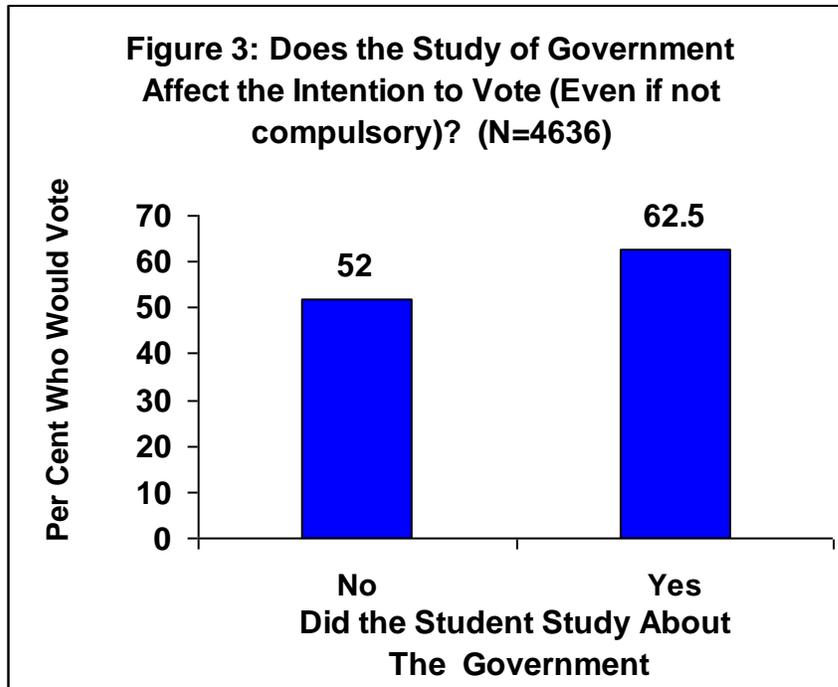
Overall, the group interviews suggested that the study of civics and the Australian government left a fairly vague impression with them. In the survey, we found that a few (2.3 per cent) could not remember having taken the subject, presumably because they had studied it several years beforehand (see Table 2).

Nevertheless, 60 per cent of our survey students were able to say when they studied about the government, and could name the subject in which it occurred. The next question we want to explore is whether the study about the government made a difference regarding the political engagement of these young people.

6. The Study of Australian Government and Voting Intentions

The important question regarding the link between schools and whether or not students studied about government is whether it made any difference regarding future political behavioural intentions. In Figure 3 we see that students who could remember studying about the government, and also could remember the name of the subject and the year in which they took it, are slightly more likely to say that they will vote at 18, even if they did not have to.

The difference in voting intention between those who have and have not studied about government seems small, only a little more than 10 per cent, but this difference is statistically significant and therefore could not have occurred by chance. The study of government does make a difference for students’ commitment to voting when they turn 18.

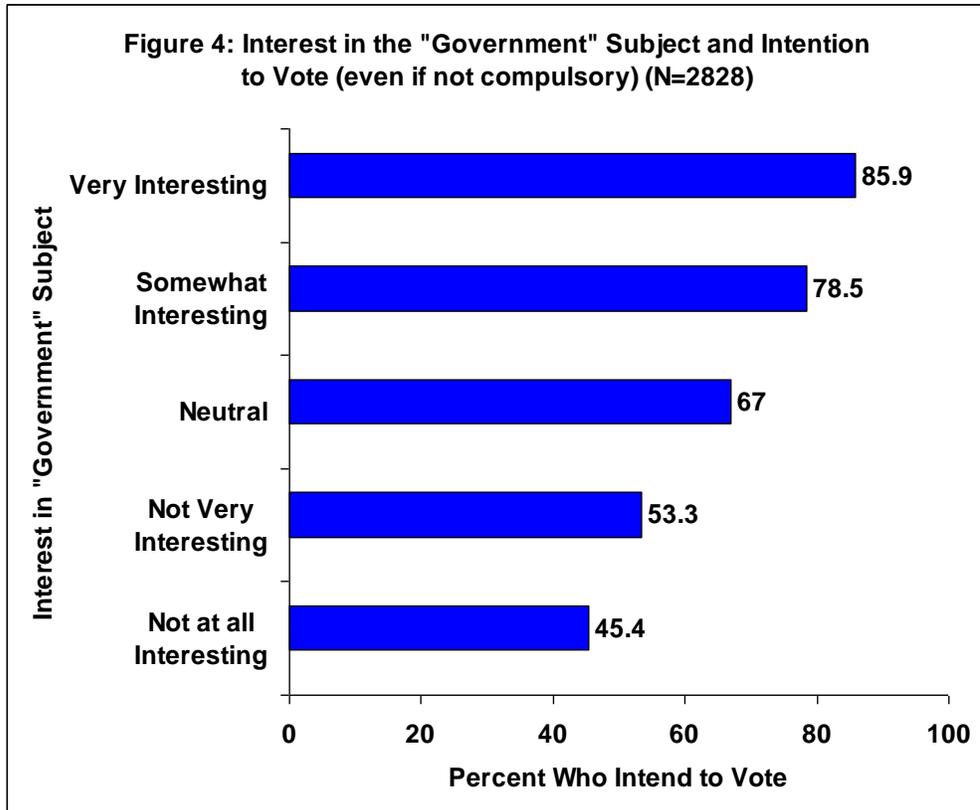


Although it is comforting to know that the study of “civics”, in whatever form, does make a difference in voting intention, a more relevant question is whether the timing of the study of the government makes a difference. Would the schools be more effective in promoting political engagement among students, especially voting, if they taught about the Australian government in Years 11 or 12, closer to the time that the students will actually have to vote?

In actual fact, we found very little difference between the grade level in which the students studied about the government, and their intention to vote. We found no correlation between the grade level of the study of government and intention to vote; the main significant correlation is between those who studied government and those who did not, the correlation (Pearson r) being 0.14.

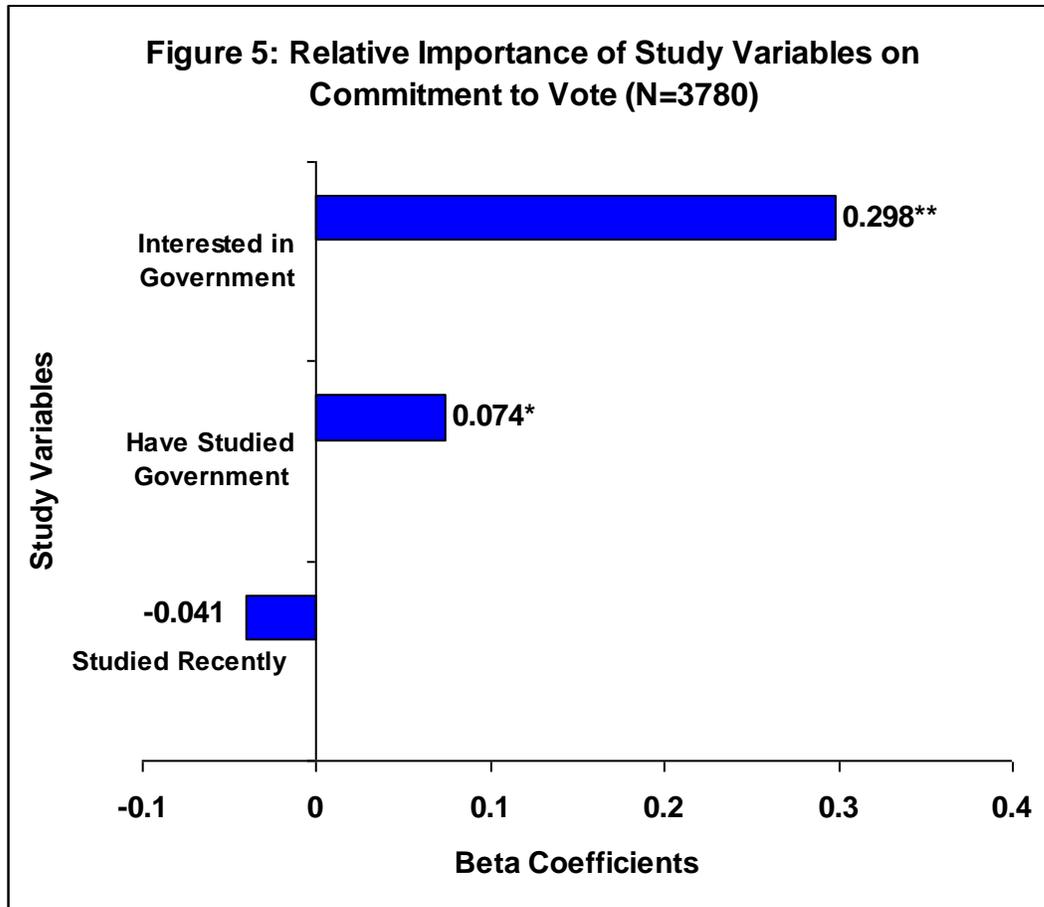
Thus the main issue regarding the study of government seems to be *whether* the students studied it, not *when* the students studied it, at least in terms of intention to vote.

However, the one final question concerns the students’ interest in the subject. We saw in Figure 2 that there is considerable variation in the level of interest that students reported regarding their government subject. To what extent does interest in government affect the extent to which students are committed to voting? These data are found in Figure 4.



Clearly, the figures in Table 4 show that the more interesting the study of government is to the student, the more likely the student is committed to voting. The Pearson correlation between interest in the "government" subject and commitment to vote is $r = .30$, which is reasonably strong.

We further found that when the grade level of taking a government course is included in a regression equation, with interest and whether the student takes such a subject, the level of interest is by far the most important. The relative importance of these three variables is shown in Figure 5, which displays the standardized regression coefficients for each variable.



$R^2 = .09$
 ** $p > .000$
 * $p > .01$

In this simple model, it is clear that having taken a government subject, and being interested in government study are important in the student’s commitment to voting in the future. Whether the student studied government in primary school, or any of the high school grade levels, is not related to commitment to vote. Finally, because the figures represent standard units, they are comparable. Therefore it is possible that being interested in the government course is four times more important than whether the student took such a subject. Clearly the implication in these figures is that it is more important to teach about the government in an engaging manner, than to teach it at all. However, the figure also indicates that simply teaching about the government, interesting or not, is still beneficial.

7. Does The Subject Make a Difference?

We have established that aspects of the study about the Australian government do make a difference in the disposition of students regarding future voting intentions. What we want to address now is whether it makes a difference in what subject the student studies about the Australian government. In Table 2 we saw that there were ten general

categories of subjects which the students themselves listed in which they said they studied about the government, varying widely from SOSE or the Study of Society, to Science, Religion, or Vocational Studies. We now ask the question whether the specific subject makes a difference. In Table 3 we use the same list of school subjects and show whether the students would vote in a federal election when 18, even if they did not have to, whether they were interested in the subjects which taught about the government, and the per cent who correctly named both Houses of Parliament. The school subjects are ranked according to the percentage of students who indicated that they would vote in the next Federal election when 18, even if voting were non-compulsory.

Table 3: Subject Areas in which students said they studied about the Australian Government, ranked by whether they “Would Vote”, and showing if they “Found Study Interesting” and if they correctly named both Houses of Parliament (N=3883)

| Subject | Would Vote % (Total N) | Found Study Interesting % (Total N) | Named Both Houses of Parl % (Total N) |
|--|---------------------------|---|---|
| Civics, Politics and International Relations | 77.8 (153) | 38.0 (160) | 50.3 (161) |
| Geography | 68.8 (109) | 23.0 (113) | 47.8 (113) |
| Australian Studies | 68.7 (275) | 24.7 (288) | 42.6 (291) |
| Business, Economics and Commerce | 64.5 (431) | 27.1 (442) | 50.1 (445) |
| Legal Studies | 64.1 (460) | 34.3 (481) | 48.0 (485) |
| History | 63.5 (875) | 19.7 (899) | 45.5 (913) |
| SOSE and Social Studies | 57.4 (1032) | 15.8 (1075) | 29.8 (1089) |
| Humanities | 54.4 (195) | 21.6 (199) | 32.9 (207) |
| No Response or Uncodable | 52.9 (87) | 25.0 (72) | 27.8 (90) |
| Other (VET, Work Studies, Religion, etc)* | 45.9 (85) | 22.1 (86) | 27.0 (89) |

* There were 1040 students who did not answer this question.

The figures in Table 3 make it clear that the school subject in which the student recalls having studied about the government does make a significant difference in voting commitment, in the level that the student found the study of government interesting, and in the extent to which the student could correctly name the Houses of Parliament.

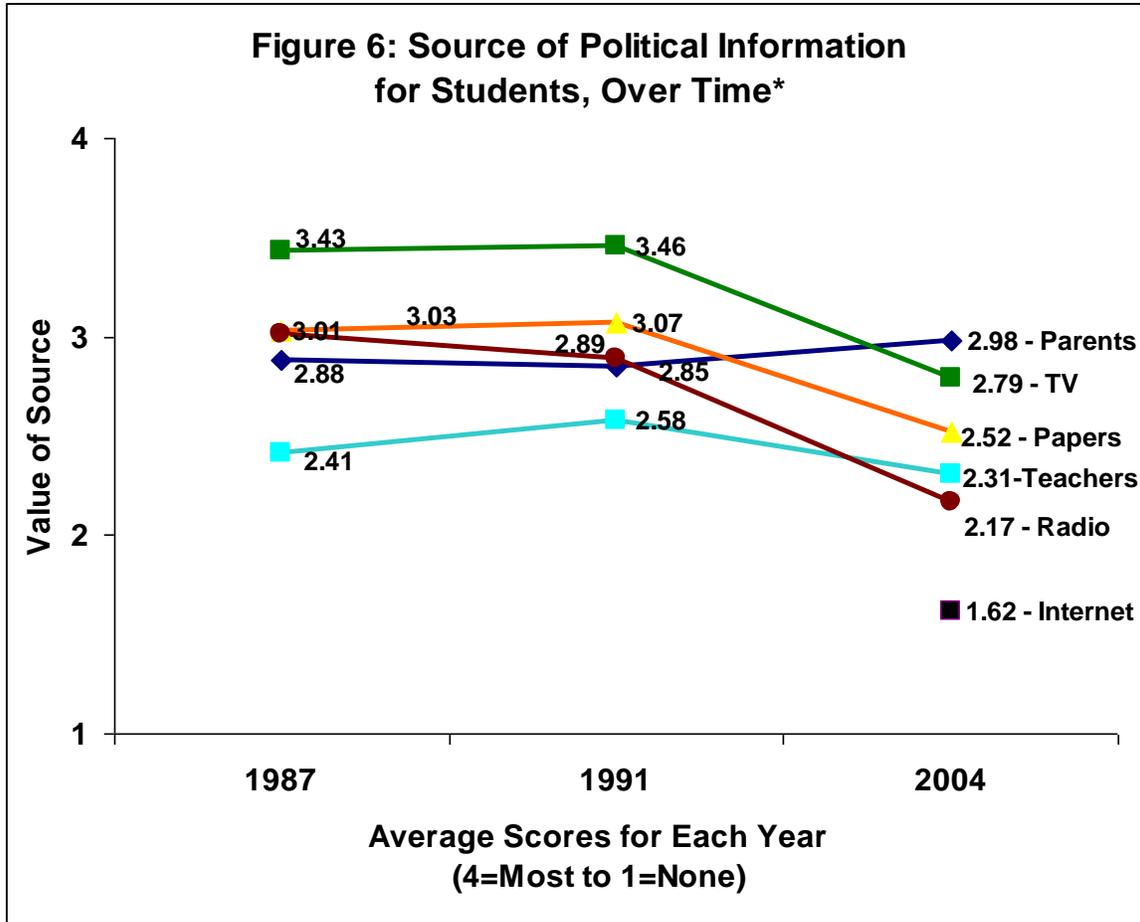
Although only 4 per cent of the students said they studied about government in a civics or politics subject (see Table 2), the proportion of this group who say they would vote (77.8 per cent) is the highest of all the school subjects mentioned. As can be seen, the per cent declines to a low of 45.9 per cent for the “Other” category of subjects. The difference between the highest and lowest is over 30 per cent.

The other figure of interest is that concerning SOSE (Study of Society and Environment) and other social studies subjects. Although this category is the most frequently mentioned by students as the subject in which they studied about the government, it is one of the lowest in which students said they would vote, were interested in the study of government, and in the ability to correctly name both Houses of Parliament.

We need to keep in mind that some students took some of these subjects because they were compulsory, and others did so because they chose too. Because SOSE is more likely a compulsory subject, and civics, politics and international relations more likely to be elective subjects, it may be that the conditions under which the subjects were taken might be a factor regarding the impact on. Nevertheless, these differences do provide important information regarding the study of government in the curriculum.

8. Teachers and Sources of Political Knowledge

How important are teachers and the school in the process of political socialization, and the preparation for entry into adult political life? To begin this section we first examine who or what are their main sources of political information. In our first report, we gave the responses for our 2004 survey. (See Figure 5, in Print, Saha, and Edwards 2004). However, the same questions were asked in previous surveys of Australian youth. In order to acquire a broader contextual view of the importance of teachers, we present in Figure 6 (below) a comparative ranking of sources, as based on the average responses which students gave to each source. In similar surveys conducted in 1987 and 1991, a question was asked which was replicated in 2004. Although the three Australian samples differed somewhat, we think a comparison of student responses in the three surveys is informative.



* The three surveys included the same question, but the samples were somewhat different. The 1987 survey (Saha 1987) was limited to the ACT and was based on a sample of 1014 senior secondary students. The 1991 survey (Saha 1992) included students from South Australia, and was based on 1311 senior secondary students. The 2004 YES survey was based on a nation-wide sample of schools, and included 4923 senior secondary students.

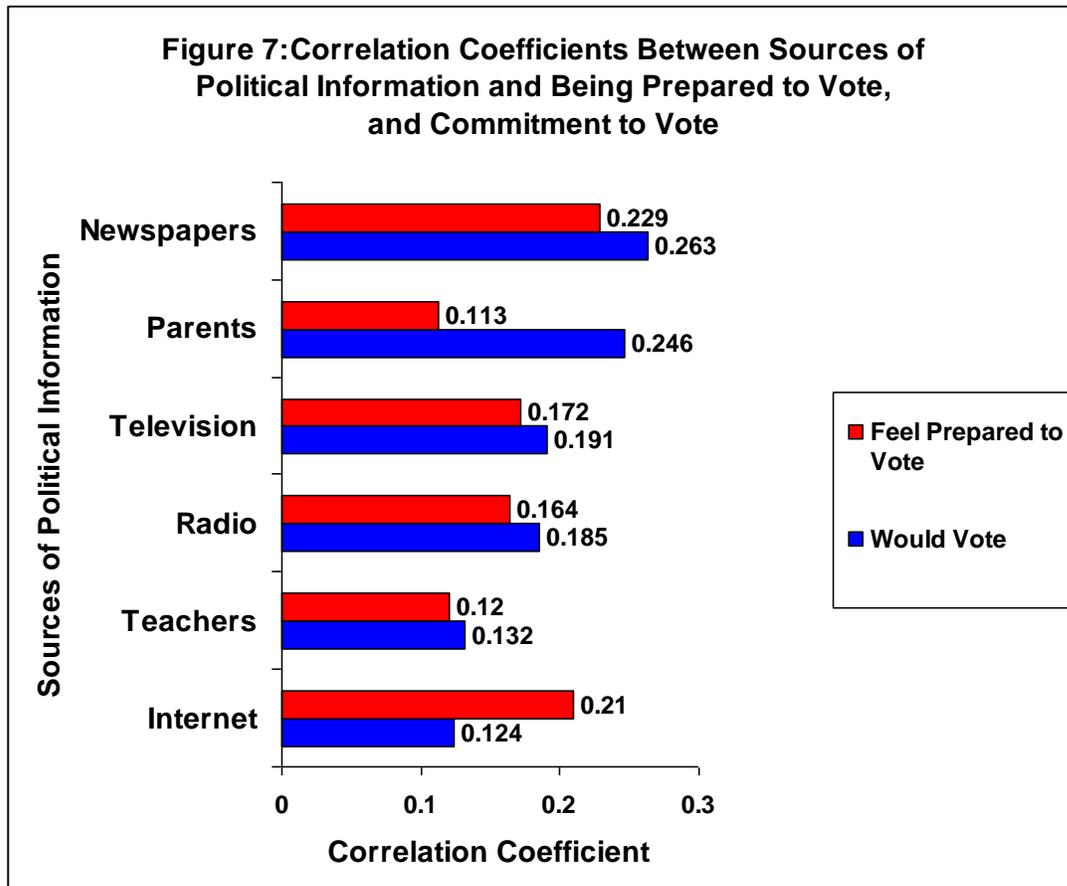
Overall, teachers do not rank highly as a source of political information. In 1987 teachers ranked last, with an average response of 2.41 out of a possible 4. On the other hand, in the same survey, the three media sources, radio, television, and newspapers ranked higher than other sources of information. However in our 2004 survey, the media sources had dropped considerably. By comparison, parents and teachers remained fairly constant over the three surveys, with parents being a more stable and important source of political information.

The decline in the media as a source of political information for young people in recent years is dramatic, but also is consistent with observations made elsewhere. For example, Wattenberg (2008) not only found that newspaper readership had declined among youth in the United States, but in most European countries, as well.

“Young people throughout the world’s advanced industrialized democracies have simply not gotten into the routine of picking up a daily newspaper and reading about current events.” (p 26)

He found that the newspaper websites had not replaced the decline in hard copy newspapers as a source of news. Furthermore, he found the same pattern regarding television. With the coming of the 24-hour paid news channels such as CNN, and the nature of their news casting schedule, their followers generally come from older voters. Wattenberg notes that this pattern is also found in many European countries. Therefore the pattern which is displayed in Figure 6, namely the sharp decline in importance in the three media sources, is consistent with patterns found in other countries. To a minor extent, this decline amongst young people may be supplemented by use of the internet as a source of information.

However a more relevant question concerns the effectiveness of these sources. In Figure 7 we present the correlation coefficients between each knowledge source and two important variables, namely whether the students feel prepared to vote, and whether they would vote, even if not compulsory.



The sources of political knowledge are ranked according to the size of the correlation for voting. In this respect, newspapers are the most effective source of political knowledge, both regarding feeling prepared to vote and voting. In effect this means that while many students might not regard newspapers as a source of knowledge, those that do are more likely to act on that knowledge. They not only feel prepared to vote, but would vote even if not compulsory.

9. Teachers and the School Context

Numerous studies have documented the importance of the teacher's style and the classroom climate in the study about the government. For example, we know that an authoritarian teacher or a repressive classroom climate is not likely to provide an atmosphere for learning about democracy and the acquisition of democratic values.

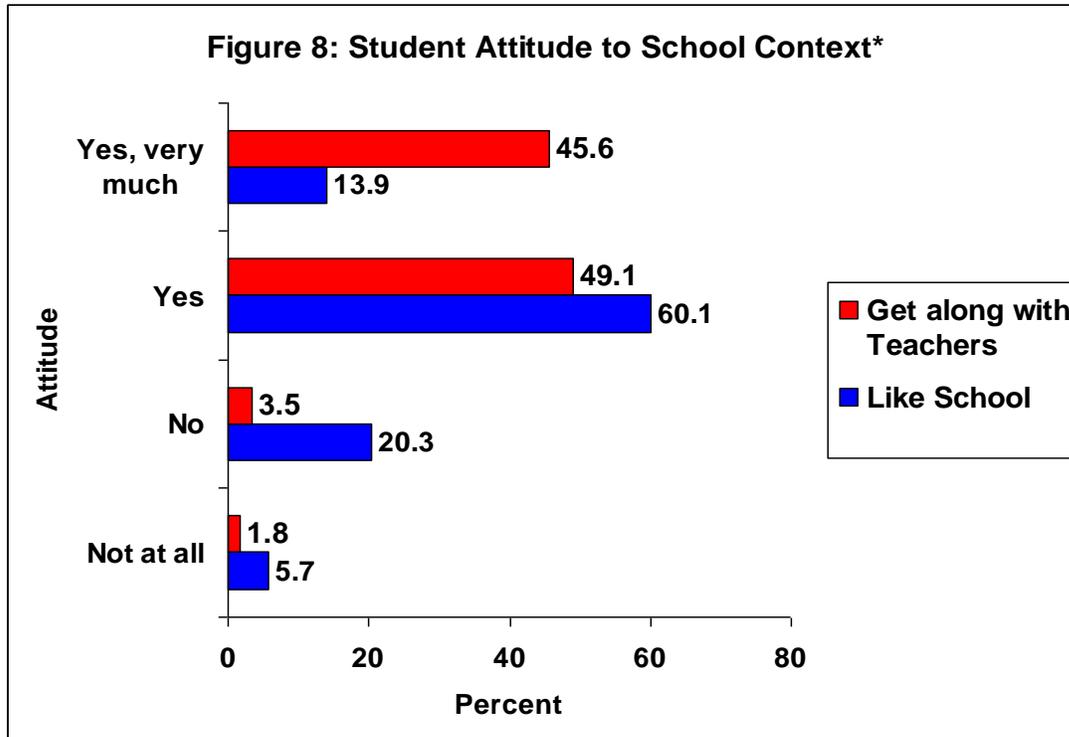
We do not have measures of classroom climate or of teaching style, but we do have measures of whether the student likes school, and whether the student claims to get along well with teachers. The question about teachers was the following:

“How well do you get along with the majority of your teachers this year?” The response categories were “very poorly”, “not satisfactory”, “satisfactory” and “very well”.

The question about school was as follows:

“Do you like being at school?” The response categories were “No. I hate it”, “No, not particularly”, “Yes, it's alright”, and “Yes, very much”.

The per cent of responses to the two questions are given in Figure 8. We have slightly changed the designated response categories to be able to combine the variables in one bar chart.

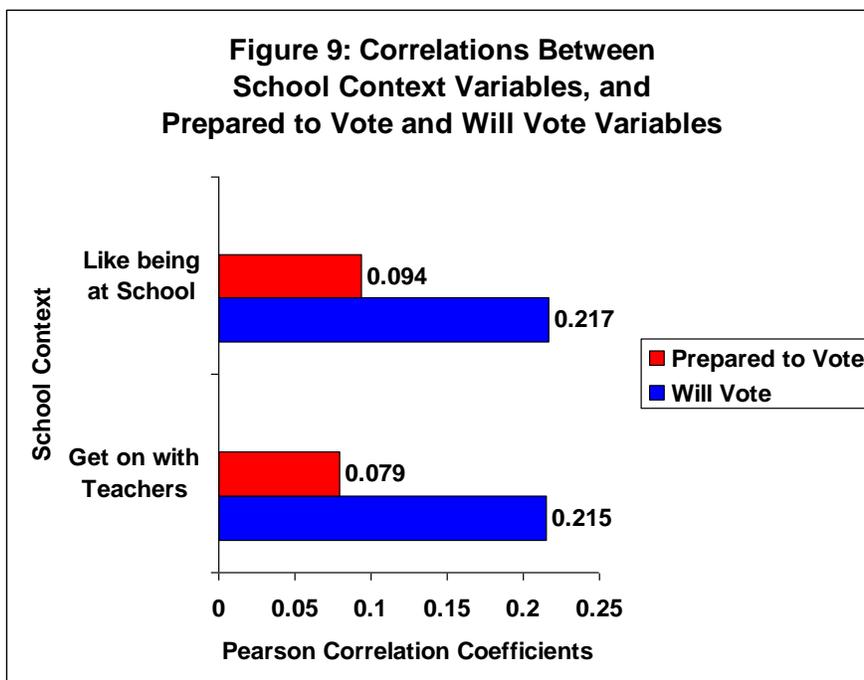


* There were 4898 valid responses (out of 4923 students) to the question about teachers, and 4771 responses to the question about liking school. The disparities are due to missing data.

While the responses to the two questions appear similar, there are some differences. Most students seem to both get along with their teachers, and like school. However they get along with their teachers more than they like school. The average score for first is 3.39 (out of a maximum 4), and for the second 2.82. The correlation for the responses to the two questions is .40.

Does the school context have any relationship with the intention to vote. One could argue, for example, that the more integrated a student is with the school, both its teachers and its culture, the more likely the student will be integrated with society generally. Researchers who study schools often argue that schools are microcosms of society. Therefore it can be argued that the willingness to accept the school culture is consistent with a willingness to accept the general culture of a society.

In Figure 9, we display the relationships (correlation coefficients) between the school context variables, and the students' perceptions of being prepared to vote and their commitment to vote. The longer the bar, the stronger is the relationship between the variables. The red bar represents the correlation between the school context variables and perceptions of being prepared to vote. Neither correlation (the two red bars) is very large, being .094 and .079. On the other hand, the correlations with the student commitment to vote (the blue bars) are much larger though somewhat modest, being .217 and .215.



The data in Figure 9 make it very clear that getting along with teachers, and liking school, are two dimensions of the school context which positively affect student attitudes toward voting. The more students have a positive relationship with the school, the more likely they are to feel prepared for voting, and say they will vote. But what is somewhat surprising is that having positive relationships with the school are not as strongly related to perceived voter preparation, compared to commitment to voting.

10. Government and Private Schools

The literature which has focused on differences in traditional academic achievement subjects between government and private schools has been considerable (Evans and Kelley 2002). However less attention has been directed to less tangible outcomes between the two types of schools, such as in the civic values and behaviours which result in politically engaged adults.

Since most private schools tend to be affiliated with a religious denomination, one debate has focused on real or potential incompatibilities between some aspects of religion and democratic civic socialisation. The argument is that the appropriate attitudes and values which are central to a democracy, for example the duties to one's civic community, political tolerance, and acceptance of non-traditional lifestyles, may conflict with some religious values. However in at least one study of fundamentalist schools, by Year 12 it was found that the students surpassed government school students in all desired attitudes and values, except the acceptance of alternative lifestyles (Godwin et al. 2004). Most arguments about differences in outcomes between government and private schools focus on different levels of home background, while

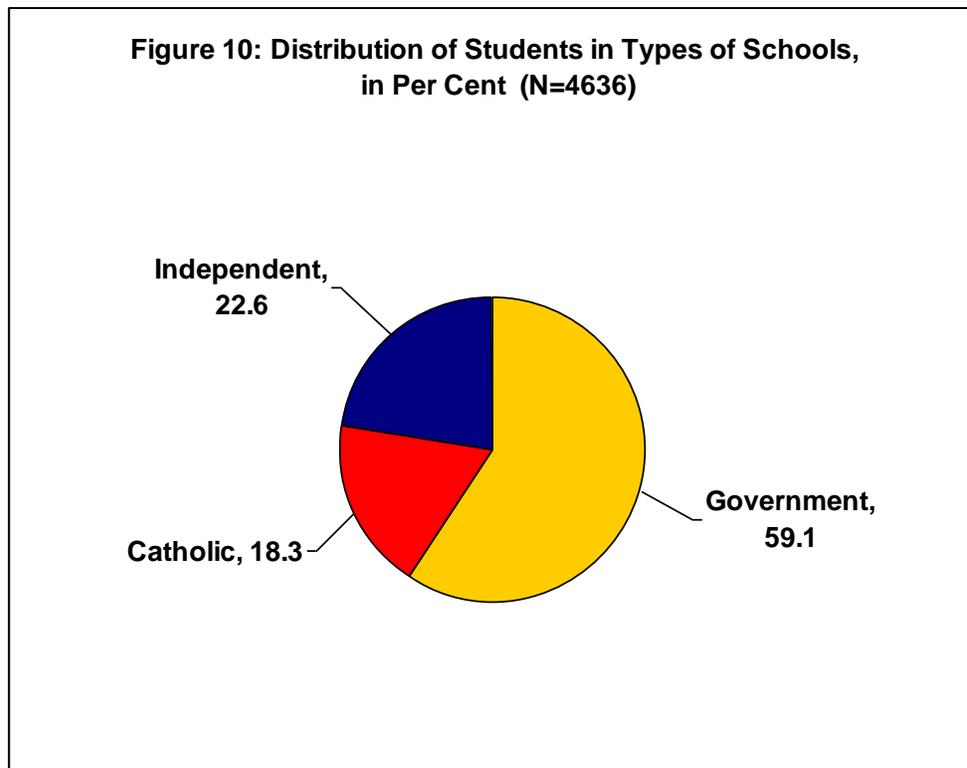
others contend that the fact of school choice in attending private schools accounts for the difference (Wolf 2007). However in some European countries, the differences between government and private schools have been found to be less than in some other Western countries (Dronkers 2004).

While it is not our intention to conduct a thorough analysis for the differences that we find, we do intend to report on some of the basic findings that came out of our survey regarding government and private schools, and various outcomes relating to citizenship behaviours.

There are three major types of schools in Australia: government, Roman Catholic, and Independent, the latter being a mixture of denominational and secular. In Figure 10 we show the distribution of students in our survey between the three types of schools.

The YES sample slightly over-represents the independent school students, and slightly under-represents the government school students, which may reflect willingness to participate in the study. The 2004 statistics reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics is 12.5 per cent for independent, 19.9 per cent for Catholic schools, and 67.6 per cent for government schools (Australia) across both primary and secondary schools.

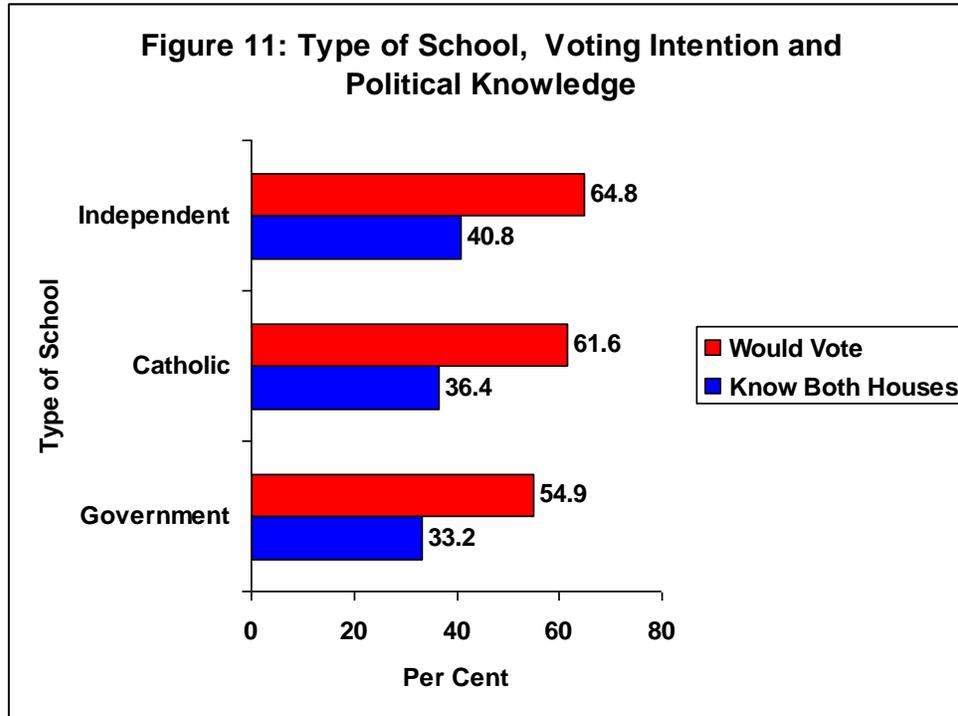
The figures for the YES sample are indicated in Figure 10.



Does the type of school a student attends make a difference in the extent to which students intend to vote, and the knowledge that they have about Parliament? The first item we looked at was whether there was a difference between the types of schools and the per cent of 17 year-old students who had already registered on the electoral roll. Overall, of the 3277 students we had who were over 17, and who responded to this question, 30.8 per cent had registered. However there was virtually no difference between type of school and registration, the per cent being 32.1, 26.4 and 31.5 per cent for independent, Catholic and government schools respectively. The correlation between type of school and registration was virtually zero. However this was not the case when we examined other civic related outputs, for example the per cent of students who could name the Houses of Parliament and who said they would vote at 18, even if they didn't have to.

Figure 11 presents the per cent of students in the three types of school who say they would vote when 18, even if not compulsory. It also shows the per cent of students who were able to name both Houses of Parliament, and thus to answer a knowledge item correctly.

These two criteria measure two types of civic outcomes – intended political behaviour, and political knowledge. It is clear that for both criteria, students in private independent schools come out on top, followed by the Catholic schools, with the Government schools on the bottom. The relationships, although somewhat small, are both statistically significant.



The issue regarding this pattern is whether there is some factor in the schools themselves that account for the difference, or are the differences a function of other characteristics in the students, for example their family background. In order to test this possibility, we conducted two small multiple regression analyses, one for voting and one for knowledge of the Houses of Parliament, in which we held constant the educational and occupational levels of the parents of the students. We also added the variable which measured how much information the student said he or she received from their parents.

For this analysis, type of school is coded into three categories, with values of 1 = government (least selective), 2 = Catholic (some schools selective, some not), and 3 = private independent (mostly selective). By selective, we mean that schools select or admit an elite group of students as a result of admission and fee structures. Thus, it might be argued that this variable measures the elite status of the three types of school.

The baseline regressions for the relationships between type of school, and the two dependent variables, are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Baseline regression coefficients for two dependent variables: knowledge of the Houses of Parliament, and commitment to vote (even if not compulsory).

| | Knowledge of Parliament | | Commitment to Vote | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------|--------------------|------|
| | B | beta | B | beta |
| Type of School (Private=3) | .085* | .075 | .108* | .081 |
| R ² | .006 | | .007 | |

The baseline regressions show that the elite status of the school is directly related to both the knowledge of the Houses of Parliament and the commitment to voting when 18. Although the variances explained are very low (less than one per cent, the relationships are statistically significant.

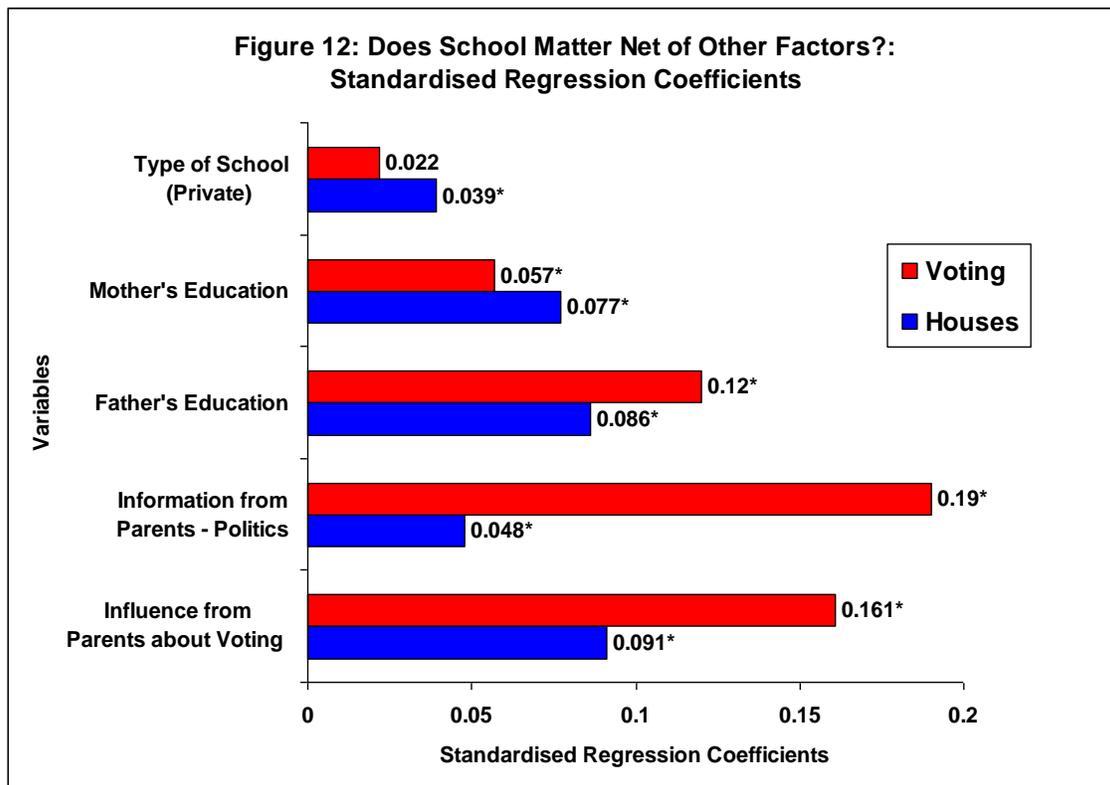
The question now is whether this relationship between type of school and the two outcome variables is due to the type of school, or to the characteristics of the students. To answer this question, we ran the two multiple regressions again, but included four control variables, namely the education of mother and father, the occupational prestige of mother and father, and whether a student felt that he or she received much political information at home.

The results of the two regression analyses are given in Figure 12 which displays the standardized regression coefficients for each variable which theoretically might determine the student's knowledge of the Houses of Parliament and commitment to voting. Because the standardized regressions are measured in standard deviation units, they are comparable; the larger the value, the more impact the variable has on the variable being explained. The asterisks indicate which variables are statistically significant. In this case all the significant variables have probabilities more than .01.

The first observation concerns the power of the two models. The model which explains commitment to voting is much more powerful, in that it explains 11.5 per cent of the variance, whereas the model which explains knowledge of the Houses of Parliament only explains a little over 4.2 per cent. This means that the factors that explain knowledge of the houses of Parliament lie outside the variables included in these models. These differences are visually apparent by the generally longer top bars, indicating stronger relationships.

The second important observation concerns the significance of whether the type of school makes a difference in both knowledge and voting commitment, net of the other home background and school variables. Overall, the type of school coefficients is small relative to all other variables, with the exception of Mother's Occupation, which is the only variable to be unimportant in both models. The effect of the other variables can be

seen by comparing the coefficients in the base model (See Table 4), with the coefficients for Type of School in Figure 12. The coefficient for explaining the ability to name the Houses of Parliament in the base model is .075 and statistically significant, whereas in the multiple regression it declines to .039, but remains significant. This means that the family background and the school variables actually explain about half of the base coefficient. However, since Type of School remains significant (although small), *it means that the private schools still have an independent effect on students' knowledge about Parliament, over and above the effects of parents and other school variables.*



*These beta coefficients are statistically significant at .01 or more.

R^2 for Naming Houses of Parliament = .039

R^2 for Commitment to Voting = .113

When we turn our attention to commitment to voting, we find a completely different picture. The base coefficient was .081 (See Table 3), but in the multiple regression, shown in Figure 12, the coefficient was reduced to .022 and was not statistically significant. This means that the original relationship between private schools and voting commitment was explained away by the background and school variables (the top bars). When we examine Figure 12, we find that although all other variables are significantly related to voting, the largest and most important, by far, are getting information from parents about politics (.19), and acknowledging the influence of

parents about voting (.161). These are closely followed by the education of the father (.12) and education of the mother (.057). *In effect, this analysis tells us that the characteristics of the family are more important in determining whether the student intends to vote, rather than the type of school the student attends.*

Thus, from these analyses we can see that the apparent association of private schooling with student political knowledge and the commitment to vote is very much interrelated with student family home background characteristics. In effect, when we take into account both attendance in private school and family characteristics, the influence of private schools on voting commitment disappears, whereas with respect to political knowledge, it is diminished, but remains important.

Summary

1. Students in private independent schools show the highest level of political knowledge (naming the Houses of Parliament) and commitment to voting (will vote even if not compulsory), followed by students in Catholic schools and finally by students in government schools. (See Figure 11.)
2. The effect of private school attendance on commitment to voting disappears when home background characteristics are taken into account; the fact that a higher proportion of private school students say they will vote is due to the fact that they get more political information and influence from their parents, and their parents are generally better educated. (See Table 4 and Figure 12.)
3. The effect of private school attendance on political knowledge (naming the Houses of Parliament) is diminished when family background (as defined in #2 above), but it doesn't disappear. Attending private schools, both independent and Catholic, does add to the effect of home background, in the acquisition of political knowledge. (See Table 4 and Figure 12.)

11. The Informal and the Hidden Curriculum

The informal curriculum is recognized as including those learning experiences not part of formal school subjects and which are characterized by low status and low perceived value. Many areas of the informal curriculum, such as volunteering, participation in clubs and raising funds for charities, have long been undervalued or ignored as sources for building student civic and political engagement. Our study has found that students do not value these experiences highly largely because the school does not value them. Furthermore, most aspects of student government, for most students, are inconsequential for the same reasons. The most common student comment in relation to student government was that the results were 'rigged' by teachers and not to be taken seriously. Furthermore students had little influence over important decisions, their

opinions were not valued and student government had negligible power, unlike some Scandinavian countries (Print et al. 2002).

Yet, more than twenty years ago Beck and Jennings (1982) found in the United States that extra curricular activities (or the informal curriculum as we know it) are better predictors of adult political participation than attendance at civics classes. Similarly, international research has found that participation in both student government and school interest groups, such as clubs, is strongly related to adult engagement in political and civic life as voters, members of voluntary associations and as contributors to the common good (Youniss et al. 1997). In large measure this contention is supported by the research studies of Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) as well as Putnum (2000). As Patrick (1999) argues

“Participation in democratically run student organizations, and especially in student government activities, provides opportunities to practice the habits and skills of democracy.” (p 53)

Previous research has also found that participation in student government is positively related to later adult political behaviour. Verba and his colleagues (Verba et al. 1995) argued that institutions in which individuals have an opportunity to practice democratic governance are ‘schools of democracy’. In their study of over 2000 American adults, having participated in student government while in high school was the most important school variable in predicting adult political activity, stronger even than taking a civics course (1995, p 424).

11.1 Student Government

We included a number of questions about student government in our questionnaire. We asked both about voting and about standing for office in various types of student government, such as the student representative council or a school parliament. We combined these to form two variables, namely whether the student had ever voted or stood for office in a school. Our figures show that 81.2 per cent of the students had voted, and 54.1 per cent had run for office, in a school election.

The important question is whether participation in student government is related to a higher level of political participation.

First of all, let us look at the students 17 years old or older, and ask whether having participated in school elections is related to enrolling. These figures are given in Figure 14.

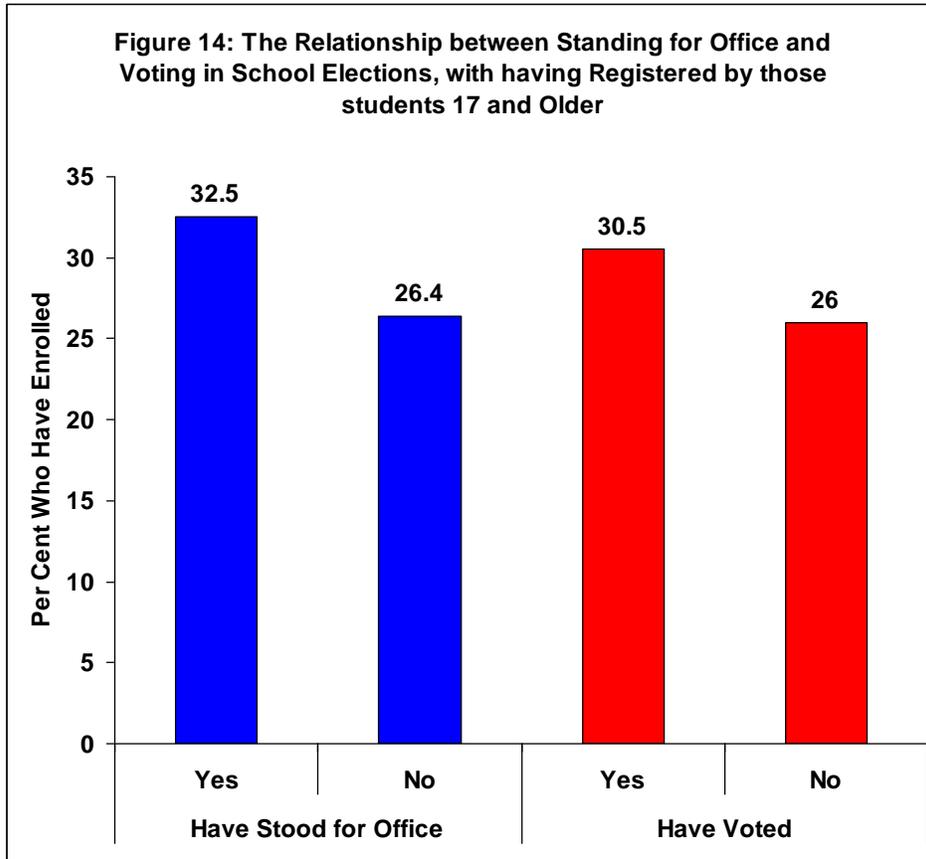
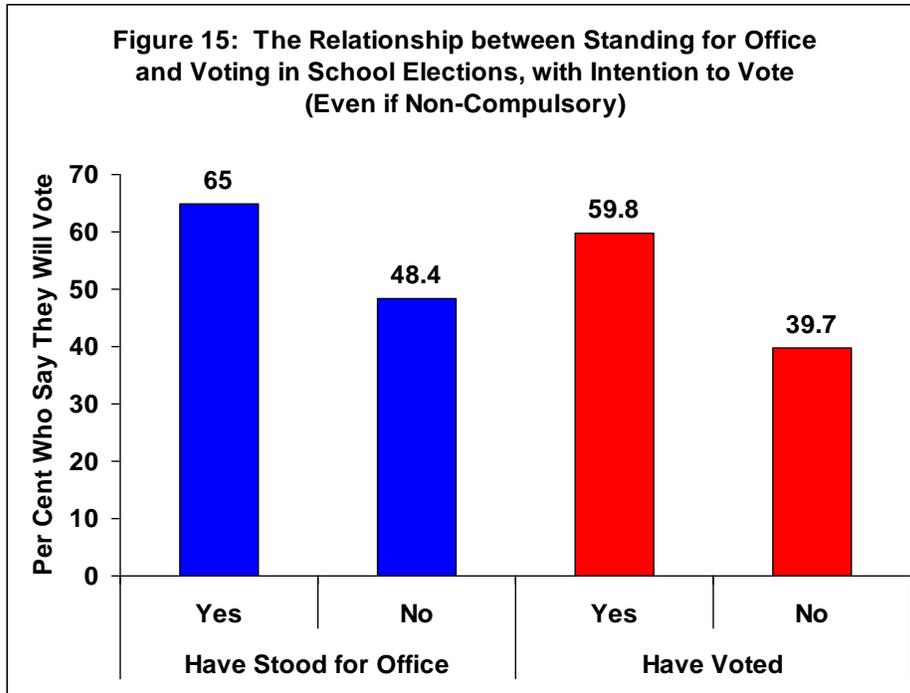


Figure 14 indicates that there is a small but significant effect of participation in student government and registering for the electoral roll while in high school. The Pearson correlation coefficients for “having stood for office”, and “voting in school elections”, with enrolment is .07 and .04 respectively. These correlations are small. It is clear that other mechanisms for getting young people on the electoral roll at 17 years might be more effective than participating in student elections while at school.

Is participation in school elections related to the intention to vote? In YES Report 2 we already briefly examined this question and concluded that it did (See Saha, Print, and Edwards 2005), Figure 10). Here we want to examine the effects of student government on potential voting more thoroughly. Figure 15 presents the same school election variables, but related to the commitment to vote. Although the pattern looks the same as in Figure 14, the relationship between the school election variables and commitment to vote is stronger. The Pearson correlation coefficients are .16 and .17, for voting and standing for office respectively.



The data in Figure 15 indicate that for those students who have stood for office, 65 per cent say they will vote when 18, compared to 48 per cent who have not stood for office. Similarly, for those who have voted in school elections, 60 per cent say they will vote when 18 compared to 40 per cent who have not voted in a school election.

These data make it clear that participating in school elections have a beneficial positive effect on both electoral enrolment behaviour and the voting intentions of secondary school students. The relationship with enrolment behaviour is weaker than the relationship with voting intentions. But the pattern is very clear, school elections are strongly related to voting related behaviour, which is consistent with the findings reported by Verba and his colleagues, using retrospective data on a sample of American adults (1995).

Summary:

1. Around 81 per cent, or four-out-of-five, of our student sample said that they had voted in a school election at some time in their school career. A little more than half (54.1 per cent) said they had run for office in a school election at some time in their school career.
2. Having participated in school elections is positively related to both enrolment and the intention to vote.

3. Students who had run for office were more likely to both enrol and intend to vote, and students who had voted were more likely to both enrol and intend to vote.
4. For students who are 17 years old, the relationship between voting and standing for office are much more strongly related to intention to vote than for actually having enrolled at the time of the survey.

12. Bringing it All Together: The Impact of School Variables on Voting Commitment and Political Knowledge

The findings regarding the importance of the school have thus far been discussed at a bi-variate level, that is, the simple relationship between aspects of the school and political behaviour. The interrelationship between the many variables of the school (as well as the family), have not been taken into account. Only with respect to the differences between government and private schools have we attempted to show that differences between the schools in student political behaviour are attributable to differences in the student populations of the schools.

In this section, the analysis of the relative effects of the school on student political behaviour will be more complex, and the interrelationships between the variables of both home and the school will be taken into account. We will first examine the relative impact of the school on one aspect of political knowledge, namely being able to give the correct names of the two Houses of Parliament. Then we will use the same analytic model to examine the determinants of voting commitment.

12.1 Political Knowledge: Naming the Houses Parliament

Virtually all studies of adult political behaviour find that political knowledge is related to voting (Verba et al. 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Nie et al. 1996; Wattenberg 2008). We have found a similar relationship among our students in the YES survey. Using the ability to name the Houses of Parliament as a measure of political knowledge, the Pearson correlation coefficient between this and voting commitment is .262, which is moderately positive. Therefore it is useful to explore the relative importance of the school on political knowledge. In order to obtain a more accurate estimate of the school's influence, we will include family variables as controls, and also to obtain a better picture of the relationship between family and school regarding political learning and behaviour.

In Table 5, the full regression model to explain the ability to name the Houses of Parliament, with school and family variables, is presented.

Table 5: Beta Coefficients for Full Simultaneous Multiple Regression Model, Family and School Variables on Political Knowledge (Name Houses of Parliament)

| Demographic/Background Variables | | School Variables | |
|----------------------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
| | Beta | | Beta |
| Father's education | .072* | Interest in Study Govt | .104* |
| Mother's education | .064* | Stood for office | .084* |
| Info from parents - voting | .060* | Get on with teachers | .073* |
| Info from parents - politics | .020 | Voted in elections | .037 |
| Sex of student | .003 | Like school | -.022 |
| | | Studied Government | .008 |
| | | Attend private school | .008 |

* $p > .05$
 $R^2 = .064$.

The regression model is not very powerful in predicting who is able to name one or two of the Houses of Parliament. The R^2 , or variance explained, is only .064 per cent (Compare that with the 21 per cent in the same model to predict voting commitment in Table 6). On the other hand, there are some variables which clearly are important, although the sizes of the Beta coefficients are modest. Also, the results show that the ability to name the Houses of Parliament is determined by both family variables and school variables. However the top three most important variables are school-related.

Interest in Study of Government is the strongest variable in determining the ability to name the Houses of Parliament (Beta = .104), followed closely by *Stood for Office* (Beta = .084), and *Getting on with Teachers* (Beta = .073). These three variables represent three dimensions of the school, namely the academic dimension, the informal curriculum (school elections), and the school environment, the teachers. Students who find the study of Australian government interesting, who have been motivated to participate at a higher level in student government, and who have a positive relationship with the teachers, are more likely to be able to name the Houses of Parliament.

The family plays a parallel role to the school. Although not as powerful as the school, the acquisition of political knowledge is affected by a higher educational level of the father and mother (*Father's education* and *Mother's education*). Presumably the parental educational levels suggest significant involvement in the learning process of the children. But along with this, the student's own acknowledgement of parental source of information about voting (*Info from parents – voting*) makes it clear that the family and the school are partners in the political socialization of young people.

Assuming that the ability to name the Houses of Parliament is a surrogate for political knowledge generally, what can we conclude from Table 5 about the role of the school?

Summary

1. Interest in the study of the Australian government is the most important determinant of whether a student can name the Houses of Parliament correctly.
2. School elections, especially choosing to run for a student representative position, have beneficial effects in the acquisition of political knowledge.
3. Teachers have an independent influence on the acquisition of political knowledge, probably because students who get along with teachers, will be more receptive to teacher instructions and teacher behaviour. In this respect, teachers serve as role models.
4. The family and school complement rather than cancel each other. The more educated parents seem to be able to better politically socialize their children. Parents can influence the political knowledge and attitudes of their children, at the same time that the school teaches them in the classroom and in the organizational structure of the school.

12.2 Voting Commitment

We now turn to the question which is similar to the one we posed regarding the effects of private schools on aspects of enrolment and voting. Is there something special about school characteristics which, in and of themselves, develop a sense of civic or political duty, or create a familiarity with voting behaviour in young people, over and above what the family does?

To address this question, we will return to our regression model which we used in Figure 12 and Table 5. This will indicate whether there is a unique link between school and voting behaviour, over and above the importance of family variables. The results of this analysis are given in Table 6.

Table 6: Beta Coefficients for the Full Simultaneous Multiple Regression Model, Family and School Variables on Commitment to Vote

| Demographic/Background Variables | | School Variables | |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | Beta | | Beta |
| Info from parents - politics | .139* | Interest Study of Gov | .215* |
| Info from parents - voting | .116* | Voted in elections | .116* |
| Father's education | .101* | Get along with teachers | .087* |
| Sex of student | -.024 | Like school | .060* |
| Mother's education | .011 | Stood for office | .046* |
| | | Attend private school | .024 |
| | | Studied Government | .023 |

* $p > .05$
 $R^2 = .21$.

As in Table 5, the figures in Table 6 are Beta regression coefficients. They are in standard deviation (sd) units, and they all come from the same regression model. They also are grouped separately into family and school, and they are ranked by size in order to facilitate interpretation. The asterisks indicate the variables which are statistically significant, that is, they are of sufficient size as to be significantly different from zero. The non-asterisked variables could be zero, and therefore are not statistically significant and cannot be regarded as having any direct independent influence.

Because these figures came from the one regression model, each figure indicates the impact of that variable on voting commitment, controlling for all the other variables in the model. Thus, in the full model, the variable that exercises the largest impact on voting commitment is *Interest in Study of Government*, which has a Beta weight of .215, which means one increment in Interest results in a .215 sd increment in voting commitment. Furthermore, this impact occurs irrespective of the value of the other variables, that is for both boys and girls, for any parental educational or occupational level, whether students like school or get along with their teachers, and whether the students are in a government or private school.

What do the figures tell us about the importance of the school on voting commitment? Firstly, within the context of the variables in the model, the type of school the students attend - government, Catholic or independent - does not have any unique impact on commitment to voting. Nor does taking a subject about the Australian government have an impact. Whatever relationship might exist at the bivariate level with these variables, does disappear when the other variables are taken into account.

On the other hand, by far the variable with the strongest unique impact, either among the school or family variables, is *Interest in the Study of Government*, as noted above. The next most important school variables are *Voted in a School Election*, with a Beta of .116, followed by *Get Along With Teachers*, *Like School*, and *Stood for Office*. Clearly school elections, and the general satisfaction of the student with the school, have

significant impacts on the students' commitment to voting, irrespective of whether the student is male or female, or whatever socioeconomic background the student comes from.

What is interesting in this model is the coexisting impact of the family. In other words, the student's commitment to voting is not a function of only the family, or only the school, but a combination of both. In the family, the extent to which the student learns about politics from their parents, and the extent to which the student claims to be influenced about voting by parents, both appear very important in affecting the student's commitment to voting. Again, these effects occur independently of the student's relationship with the school.

Using five family variables and seven school variables, it is possible to make some strong statements about the effect of the school on commitment to voting. The regression model explained 21 per cent of the variance, which by sociological standards, indicates a fairly strong model. What are some conclusions?

Summary

1. Of the twelve variables in the model, *Interest in the Study of Government* is by far the most important school variable which determines whether a student says they would vote, even if they did not have to. (Beta = .215)
2. School elections, especially the experience of having voted (*Voted in Elections*) is the second most important school determinant of voting commitment, but is only about half as powerful as Interest in the Study of government (Beta = .215 compared to .116).
3. Having a positive attitude toward schooling (*Like School*), and being integrated in the school (*Get Along with Teachers*) also contribute to voting commitment. These variables relate to the school environment.
4. Standing for a political position in school elections (*Stood for Office*) has a small but significant positive impact on voting commitment, but is only half as important as voting in school elections (Beta = .046 compared to .116).
5. In the context of the other variables, the two school variables of taking subjects about the Australian Government (*Study about the Australian Government*), and the type of school a student attends (*Attend Private School*), have no effect on voting commitment. This may seem surprising for type of school (See the baseline regression in Table 4). In other words, any bivariate relationships between these variables and voting commitment are a function of other family or school variables in the model.
6. Family variables are important determinants of voting commitment, concomitantly with school variables. The family as a source of political

knowledge (Beta = .139), and the family as a source of influence about voting (Beta = .116) are both independently important, and this could have policy implications.

7. The father appears more important than the mother with respect to voting commitment, and education has a positive effect.

13. Policy Actions Which Can Enhance the Political Knowledge and Voting Commitment of School Students

There is considerable evidence in this report about the factors which affect young people's knowledge and attitudes toward politics. In particular, while some dimensions of the school emerge as important, it is clear that the school coexists with the family in the political socialization of young people. The question is whether there are policy measures which flow from these findings which can improve the family and the school in this partnership process. In the following we suggest some policy measures which might improve the political engagement of young Australians and improve their knowledge about the government and increase their commitment to voting.

1. Interest in the study of the Australian government is a key determining factor in the acquisition of political knowledge and in the commitment to vote. There needs to be more attention into aspects of studies of government, politics, civics – whatever it is called – which make it interesting for young people.
2. The subject of the course in which students learn about the government is important for a full range of political engagement variables, including intention to vote, being interested in the study of government, and political knowledge.
3. Take school elections more seriously. The data indicate that students who participate in school elections, either by standing for office, or voting, are more politically engaged. Furthermore this effect is not explained by other variables in our model.
4. Be aware of the importance of teachers as citizen role models, in and outside the classroom. If students get along with their teachers, the students are more likely to listen to them and do what they do. This includes political behaviour.
5. Appeal to parents to involve their children in their own political life by encouraging their children to accompany them to vote, by discussions with them about politics, and by encouraging them to register on the electoral roll.

14. Conclusion

Our analyses in this report highlight the important role that the school plays in the political learning of young Australians. Furthermore, it also shows how the school and the family both play independent and supporting roles. There are many aspects of the influence of the school which are not explained away by characteristics of the home. The influence of the school is broad, including the way academic subjects are taught, the way students interact with teachers, and the extra-curricula practices which occur in the school, such as the informal and hidden curricula.

The aspects of the school identified as important lend themselves to policies which are designed to maximize the political engagement of young Australians. By taking into account both the family and the school, as suggested here, we believe the level of enrolment and voting by young Australians can be improved.

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