

# Political participation among the young in Australia<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In this brief paper I will outline some of the findings from my book, *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American Democracies*, which was published with Routledge in 2012. This book looks at political engagement across the Anglo-American democracies but in this paper I'll stick to the Australian data.

In this paper I'll discuss findings from my book and then draw out the implications of the findings for electoral commissions, political parties and other political groups. In this paper I'll really just give broad brushstroke figures from the book but obviously these arguments are spelt out in more detail in the book. Also, what I present in this paper is cross-sectional data whereas there is much more over-time data in my book. In other words, for more information on across time trends and cross-national patterns please refer to the book.

## 2. Political participation

I should begin by stating that this paper will focus on political participation although my book looks in detail at political attitudes as well. By political participation I mean not only voting and joining a political party but what I would call 'non-electoral' forms of political participation as well, such as attending a demonstration and signing a petition.

One of the features of political participation today is an expanding array of political activity beyond electoral forms of political participation such as voting or joining a political party. We need then to distinguish electoral forms of political participation from non-electoral forms of political participation.

Let's think first about electoral engagement. The first thing I'll present is data on attitudes towards voting. The Australian Election Study asked respondents the following question:

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<sup>1</sup> These notes are derived from a talk I gave as part of an Australian Electoral Commission Research Symposium held at Old Parliament House in Canberra on the 19th and 20th November, 2012.

Would you have voted in the election if voting had not been compulsory? In response to this question in 2010 88% of older people (aged 60 and over) said they would have voted but only 78% of young people (aged 18-29) said they would have voted.

We also have data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) which shows that this is accompanied by low levels of civic duty. The ISSP asked 'how important is it to always vote in elections?' Respondents were asked to respond on a scale of one to seven, one being 'not at all important' and seven being 'very important.' In terms of those who responded 'very important' in Australia older people are twice as likely to say voting is very important (the respective figures being 84 and 42).

So, young people do not seem to see voting as a civic duty in the way older generations do. And we know that these attitudes have real effects in relation to young people being much less likely to be enrolled to vote and much less likely to vote.

Young people also have lower levels of party identification in Australia.

So, I think it is clear that electoral politics is becoming less attractive to the young.

### 3. Attitudes towards voting reforms

So let me just focus on what electoral commissions could do about this just in terms of changing voting procedures.

The AES asked respondents in 2010 the following questions:

Do you think that the voting age in elections should be lowered to 16, or should stay at 18?

The AES also asked:

Would you find it easier or more difficult to vote if you could cast your vote on the following days instead of a Saturday?

- On a weekday (Monday to Friday)?
- On a Sunday?
- Over a weekend?
- Over a one week period?

And then the AES asked:

Would you find it easier or more difficult if you could cast your vote in the following ways?

- Electronic voting machines available in polling booths
- Early voting on paper ballots at pre-poll centres
- Voting online via the internet
- Other forms of electronic voting (e.g. via smart phones, SMS texts)
- Postal voting

The data show that young people are more supportive of lowering the voting age to 16 but support for this reform is not widespread. Twelve per cent of young people support lowering the voting age as compared to 3 per cent of those aged 60 and over.

When we turn to which reforms young people think would make voting easier young people are more likely to respond that every reform would make voting easier (the exception being postal voting). The data suggest that in terms of voting, technology and time appear to be much more important to the young. For older people mobility seems to be the bigger problem with older people being more supportive of postal voting.

#### 4. What does all this mean?

The questions featured in the AES did not look at enrolment which is an important part of the broader voter disengagement story. However, it is clear from the responses outlined here that electronic enrolment would appeal to the young (and the AEC and others are making significant progress in this area). Therefore, it should be clear that changes to voting procedures would be most effective if changes in registration procedures were made alongside these reforms.

So there is no slam dunk case in terms of what electoral commissions do but the data hint at some of the things electoral commissions may consider.

#### 5. Non-electoral participation

Okay, so what about non-electoral participation. As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper there is a debate about whether political participation is evolving or declining. We have data from the ISSP on non-electoral participation which shows that the most common form of activity is signing a petition and young people are more likely than older people to have done this in the past year, 47 to 35.

The same applies for boycotting products where young people are 16 percentage points more likely than older people to have done in the past year (40% versus 24%).

Far fewer people have attended a demonstration (6%) but again young people are three times as likely as older people to have attended a demonstration in the past year.

Young people are also much more likely to have participated in political activities over the internet (16 to 6) and are much more likely to have visited a politician's or political organisation's website (40 to 13).

Now, that data doesn't prove that young people today are more likely than young people 20 or 30 years ago to engage in these activities but other literature suggests that these findings reflect generational rather than lifecycle effects.

So, it seems that the way young people engage in politics is changing over time and this will obviously have implications for electoral commissions, parties and other organizations.

## 6. Implications for electoral commissions, political parties and other political groups

First of all electoral commissions will probably have to work hard just to maintain the current rate of youth voting (electoral commissions are flying into a stronger headwind than before, it seems, in terms of attitudes).

Second of all parties can no longer rely on habitual party supporters and other research I've done shows voting patterns among younger generations are much more volatile than before with young people being more likely to support minor parties.

Because young people seem to be amenable to different types of political participation this creates opportunities for other organizations to mobilize young people in a way not possible before. The internet seems more a symptom than a cause of this.

We should also be aware of resource inequalities inherent in this change in styles of participation. If the trends I've documented continue political participation will increasingly become the province of the resource rich (those with more education and so on).

My personal view is that there is no replacement for the aggregating mechanism that electoral politics and voting in particular play which is why I am very admiring of the work that electoral commission and politicians do. Electoral politics matters.