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Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

10 August 2018

**The Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018**

As a peak body for young people aged 12-25, Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) welcomes the opportunity to submit to this inquiry. Our vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities.

**Widen the franchise, with the support of young people**

We urge the committee to engage directly and extensively with young people before any decision is made. A meaningful youth consultation process must be the first step. However, YACVic would support 16 and 17 year olds who wished to be included in the franchise on a voluntary basis. This has already occurred in various ways in Austria, Germany, Norway, Brazil and Argentina, and in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.[[1]](#endnote-1) Research from some of these jurisdictions showed that large numbers of 16 and 17 year olds voted, and that they were more likely to vote than 18-25 year olds.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Expanding the (voluntary) franchise would serve to recognise young people's developing maturity and the many contributions they make to our community. For example, 4 in 10 young Australians of secondary school age already work in part-time jobs, and more than half (54.1%) are involved in volunteering.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Lowering the voting age might also make it easier for young people to vote for the first time. At present, young people are expected to start voting when they have just left school and are going through big changes like leaving home and juggling work, study and/or job-seeking. At this time of flux and isolation, some young adults struggle to engage confidently in yet another new activity, i.e. first-time voting. Voting for the first time might be less daunting if young people had the option of doing it while most of them are still at school and living with their families, i.e. in relatively stable environments where there is more likely to be a supportive adult present.[[4]](#endnote-4)

**Strengthen opportunities for young people to take part in civic life**

We call for a concerted push to strengthen young people’s engagement in civic life, including (but not limited to) voting in elections.

Many young people – including young people aged 16 and 17 – are passionate about social change and keen to make a difference. For example, in the past year, 4 in 10 young Australians of secondary school age got involved in student leadership activities, and nearly a quarter took part in environmental activities.[[5]](#endnote-5) Many local governments and youth services have youth action groups or advisory bodies, and it is our experience that most of their young members tend to be secondary school aged, keen to make positive contributions to their local communities.

However, it is still common for young people to miss out on having a voice in the decisions that affect them. Many of the most influential mechanisms for decision-making in Australia are failing to engage large numbers of young people.

At present, 86.9% of young Australians aged 18-24 are enrolled to vote. While an improvement on previous years, this is still well below the general enrolment rate of 95.2%.[[6]](#endnote-6) Only 8% of young Australians aged 15-19 are involved in political organisations, and less than 11% of young adults aged 18-24 participate in political or civic groups, such as political parties, unions, professional associations, or consumer rights bodies. Their participation is the lowest of any age group apart from the over-75s.[[7]](#endnote-7) This disempowers young people and has concerning implications for the long term.

We encourage the Commonwealth Government to take five key steps to strengthen young people’s involvement in civic life:

1. **Launch a consultation process with young people**. By speaking directly with young people, your committee will gain a much stronger evidence base, as well as giving young people a valuable opportunity to build their skills and engage in a parliamentary process. We urge that consultations be held in rural, regional and remote communities, as well as cities, and that the consultations involve young people whom the electoral system might struggle to engage. This includes young people with disability, young people not attending mainstream schools, young people who have experienced homelessness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The consultation should ask young people how civic life could be made accessible to everyone, as well as whether the franchise should be lowered to 16.

Recently, we supported several secondary students to present to the Electoral Matters Committee at Victorian Parliament. The young people’s points included:

“School needs to be working at getting youth involved in politics. … Any school program implemented should be about issues that are relevant to the student — for example, the recent assisted dying bill, the same-sex marriage debate or the dual-citizenship scandal. Any program should also be about developing individual opinions and needs to encourage class discussion and debates. Just imagine a class bored out of their mind staring at a work sheet which explains royal ascent compared to a room full of passionate students debating which party should be in government or how to fix the current energy crisis. This would have amazing effects on youth like me.”

“One of the other things I wanted to raise today is there is no-one in [Victorian] Parliament who currently has a disability. I think the Victorian Parliament should encourage parties or Independents who have a disability in order to encourage young people with a disability … I [also] feel that it would help if we had more high schools attending excursions to Parliament House just to see question time or even a debate.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

1. **Strengthen education about elections, citizenship and politics**, in ways which students find interesting and relevant. For example, the number of 16-17 year olds in Austria describing themselves as “very interested” in politics doubled after the “Demokratielnitiative” campaign to strengthen citizenship education.[[9]](#endnote-9) Young Australians often express a wish that schools would teach them more “life skills”, including how to engage in elections.[[10]](#endnote-10) The Australian Electoral Commission and Victorian Electoral Commission provide quality resources for schools about Australian democracy, which we value. However, a recent Victorian parliamentary inquiry found that while schools’ use of VEC resources is increasing, many students still don’t get enough opportunities to engage with democracy. For example, the VEC’s respected “Passport to Democracy” has reached just over 1% of secondary students on an annualised basis. There are opportunities for expansion, and to connect electoral education to hands-on student election processes.[[11]](#endnote-11) We encourage the Commonwealth to support such moves, in partnership with students, teachers, electoral commissions, and state and territory governments, and to meet the needs of students in specialist, flexible, vocational and mainstream school settings.
2. **Promote young people’s civic engagement outside of schools.** Work closely with local governments, given their expertise in youth engagement and community planning. Recent examples include the Australia Day Study Tour (City of Casey), which connects young people with elected representatives in local, state and federal governments, and the youth policy platform developed by City of Whittlesea to help young people connect with federal candidates.
3. **Appoint a federal Minister for Youth.** We need a minister who can drive a cross-government national strategy from within Cabinet to improve outcomes for young people. This should include strengthening young people’s civic involvement, as well as addressing major concerns such as high youth unemployment and underemployment, and record low housing affordability.
4. **Fund National Youth Week and a national youth peak body.** Young people who have spoken up, volunteered, or made real decisions about things that matter to them are more likely to engage in voting too. This is because they have already been encouraged to reflect on their ideas and values and see themselves as active contributors.[[12]](#endnote-12) Young people’s role as active citizens would be strengthened by renewing funding to National Youth Work, which celebrates young people’s contributions, and by funding a national youth peak, to give young people a platform to speak about the issues that matter to them.

We would be delighted to discuss any of these matters further with you.

Yours sincerely



Leo Fieldgrass

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1. BBC News, "In Maps: How close was the Scottish referendum vote?" 19 September 2014; Richard Berry, "How Young Is Too Young? The case for lowering the voting age", *The Conversation*, 14 May 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Berry, "How Young Is Too Young? "; Dr Alan Renwick, University College London, "Votes at 16: What effect would it have?”, *The UK In A Changing Europe*, 18 November 2015; Eva Zeglovits and Julian Aichholzer, “Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria”, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 24:3, 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mission Australia, *Youth Survey Report 2017*, by A. Bullot, L. Cave, J. Fildes, S. Hall, and J. Plummer [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Berry, "How Young Is Too Young?”; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, “Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 than at 18?” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mission Australia, *Youth Survey Report 2017* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), "National youth enrolment rate", 17 July 2018; AEC, "Size of the electoral roll and enrolment rate 2016", updated 13 January 2017 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1370.0 - Measures of Australia's Progress, 2013 ("Governance - Participation"); Mission Australia, *Youth Survey Report 2017* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Victorian Parliament Electoral Matters Committee, "Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation in State Parliamentary Elections," 24 October 2017, https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/emc/inquiries/article/3546 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Renwick, "Votes at 16: What effect would it have?” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. YACVic, *Turning Ideas Into Action Youth Forums 2016 - Summary Report*, Melbourne, 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Parliament Of Victoria, Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections*, Melbourne, August 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ABS, "1370.0 - Measures of Australia's Progress, 2010”; Lawrence J. Saha, Murray Print, Kathy Edwards, "Youth Electoral Study: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting," ANU and University of Sydney, 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)