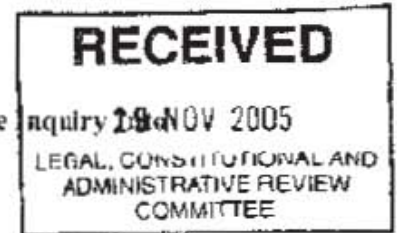


Submission to 'Voices and Votes' A Parliamentary committee
Young People and Democracy in Queensland.

Joel Bateman
Rae Wear



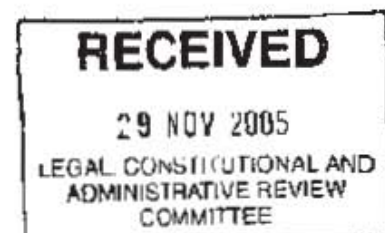
This submission is based on assessment undertaken by students in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland in POLS 1101, Australian Political Institutions. Joel Bateman is the tutorial co-ordinator for this course and Rae Wear is the Course Co ordinator and lecturer. The assessment was based on materials on 'Voices and Votes' produced by the Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee of the Queensland Parliament. Students were asked to prepare a brief report on how young people might be encouraged to engage in democratic participation in Australia. Advice about possible strategies was provided (Attachment 1). POLS 1101 is an introductory course in Australian politics and most students enrolled are in the first year of university study. Most are in the 18-25 year old age group. Overall, 120 assignments were completed. The majority recommended multiple solutions to the problem of engaging young people with democracy.

Civics education

By far the most popular solution to the problem was civics education, either in school or via the media with 115 suggestions regarding this. Some students felt that, as well as formal training, a more participatory environment at school, including experience with elections and student representation, would provide useful training in democracy.

Electronic voting

Another measure with some support was electronic voting with 45 in favour. One student wrote: 'I find the idea of being able to vote in the comfort of my home in my pyjamas very appealing'. Another thought that internet voting 'would enable people to vote before or after work and make voting less of a hassle.' Only a few students appeared aware of possible problems associated with internet voting from home. One acknowledged that 'introducing a new electoral method does not create a more informed or interested citizenry' and two expressed concern that domestic internet voting would detract from the symbolic importance of going to vote and lead to a loss of community engagement.



Some students liked the idea of obtaining information about politics via the internet rather than other media:

We want the message NOW and preferably with as little bullshit as possible. This means using technology. Young people love using the internet so it would be a good idea for political parties to send emails, set up nifty, colourful websites explaining the issues in easy to understand language and even use mobile phones to send text messages.

Politicians and parties

Many students (43) felt that politicians and parties could do better. Some students suggested that politicians should visit schools more often, along with celebrities and sporting heroes, to promote the importance of voting. It was felt that involving celebrities 'would portray political discussions and processes as a cool and hip thing'. Another proposed a reality TV show 'about the insides and what really occurs in the lives of politicians'. One student mentioned the 'Citizen Change' campaign in the United States and its promotion by celebrities and the 'Punk Voter' website. Paul Keating's appearance on the cover of *Rolling Stone* was cited approvingly. Another student argued that 'the Queensland Government should follow the example of the RATQ which sends a team out to schools to speak to students about car ownership and management'. It was also suggested that:

Special focus should be given . . . to ensuring Indigenous Youth are involved in the voting process. These people have been disadvantaged for too long. They were denied the right to vote for too many years and extra steps should be taken to ensure they are given a voice in the process.

Lack of trust and cynicism about politics and politicians was apparent in many responses. Politics was described as a 'foggy muddle of scandal and bickering'. Students declared that 'the Australian youth of today cringe at the very sound of words such as "democracy", "politics" and "government"' and that 'politics needs to

clean up its community image. Many youths feel a great distaste for politicians and political activities'. Another wrote:

To young people, the two major parties locked in their seemingly endless arm-wrestle for electoral supremacy, offer little more than a choice between Fruit Loops and Coco Pops-both saccharine, hollow in the middle and of dubious nutritional value. You wouldn't want to eat them every day if you expected to "grow up big and strong", and neither will Australia.

Politicians were exhorted: 'don't make promises that can't or won't be kept; tell the truth about what is possible and what the outcomes or effects might be. Another student declared that 'Most are skeptical (sic) of the conduct of politicians and believe that politics is a waste of time, as nothing gets accomplished.' Other impressions were that 'young Australians...tend to view politics as an elitist field, and politicians as manipulative creatures' and that 'currently a lot of Youths (sic) see politicians as stereotypical lying scumbags who couldn't tell the truth if their lives depended on it.' Another student advised: 'political figures have to also spruce up their image and bring themselves out of the category whereby people have compared them side by side with car salesmen'.

The unrepresentative nature of politicians was also raised:

As of 2004 the average age of members of the Queensland parliament was 48, with only five representatives under the age of 35 and none under 25. With such a disparity in representation it is no surprise that young voters feel indifferent towards politics.

Other comments were: '...the only social group spoken for adequately is that of the middle- to upper-class Caucasian male'; 'politicians are predominantly middle-aged white men'; and 'the reality is that the overwhelming majority of our prominent politicians are old enough to be the parents or even grandparents of people entering the age of suffrage'. As an alternative, Natasha Stott-Despoja was mentioned approvingly.

Policy

There was also a sense that politicians could do more in presenting policies of greater relevance to young people, with 55 students advocating this. One noted the Howard government's dropping of the 'Youth Affairs' portfolio from the list of Cabinet Departments as symptomatic of politicians' lack of interest. Another wrote:

There is no doubt this section of the population would be far more encouraged in participating in elections if some attention was actually paid to issues pertaining to young people specifically, such as casual employment conditions or energy sources which are actually *sustainable for the next generation*

Further suggestions

Other less frequently cited solutions to the problem of engaging youth were changing the voting age either to 16, or even 15, with one suggestion that voting at this age should be voluntary. Two students canvassed raising the voting age to 21 and 20.

Other suggestions were to vary enrolment strategies. Triple J was applauded by a number of students for encouraging enrolment. Other ideas were to make voter registration forms available at high schools, universities, Centrelink and at youth group venues. Students approved receiving registration forms on their 17th birthday, with their OP results or by ticking a box when they got their driver's licence. One student suggested only making enrolment possible through membership of a political party. Another recommended advertising the need to enrol throughout the electoral cycle, not just when an election was due.

POLS 1101 Independent Exercise
Due Date: Tutorial in week beginning 3 October 2005
Weighting: 5%

PLEASE NOTE: THIS EXERCISE REPLACES THE ADVICE ON P.8 OF THE COURSE GUIDE THAT REFERS TO POLITICAL PARTIES

Reports completed to the satisfaction of your tutor will receive 5 marks. Answers should be carefully considered and written. They should show a conscientious attempt to research and consider relevant issues. Reports should be confined to two sides of a single A4 page. I would like to include extracts from your reports in a submission to the parliamentary committee. Please indicate on the report if you do not want your work cited.



**A parliamentary committee inquiry into young people
engaging in democracy in Queensland**

Through its *Voices and Votes* inquiry, the Legal and Constitutional Committee of the Queensland Parliament aims to recommend practical ways to increase young people's interest and meaningful engagement in democracy in Queensland.

- The committee wants to hear the views of the people of Queensland, particularly those aged 12 to 25 years. In coming months, the committee will talk to young people throughout Queensland and will hold a youth jury.
- The committee has produced a range of publications, including a multi-media CD ROM. These provide information about young people engaging in democracy in Queensland, with the aim of encouraging discussion, public debate and submissions to the committee's inquiry.

Information, including the publications, is available from www.parliament.qld.gov.au/LCAC.
The closing date for submissions is Wednesday, 30 November 2005.

The committee's contact details are:
Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE Q 4000
Telephone: (07) 3406 7407, fax: (07) 3406 7070, email: lcac@parliament.qld.gov.au



Legal, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee
Legislative Assembly of Queensland

POL 1101-0000

The above advertisement appeared in the Courier Mail on 23 July 2005.

Prepare a report on how young people might be encouraged to engage in democratic participation in Australia. Issues you might consider include, but should not

necessarily be confined to: the introduction of internet voting; a lower or higher voting age; better civics education for school students; better strategies by political parties and politicians to attract young voters; the promotion by government of policies of interest to young people.