Submission to the Electoral Matters Committee
28th August 2007

As one of Australia's premier youth-run organisations, the United Nations Youth Association of Australia (UNYA) is committed to public policy that includes and assists participation by young people in the Australian political process. Further, UNYA is committed to strengthening Australia's democratic systems by promoting broad community awareness of political issues in an apolitical fashion and supporting peaceful and progressive mechanisms for change. UNYA believes that democracy is an evolving concept that must constantly adapt to the rigors of a dynamic society. Australia has a responsibility to advance democracy, leading by example and assisting developing nations in our region.

Education

UNYA feels that the current legislative requirement for Australian citizens to vote in State and Federal elections accurately reflects the responsibilities of individuals in a participatory democracy. To this end, UNYA fully supports compulsory enrolment and voting. However, participatory democracy also requires citizens to be confident and enthusiastic in translating knowledge of political institutions and issues into active involvement in community decision-making. A system of compulsory voting must not supplant continued promotion of voting, nor can we falsely identify the passive casting of a ballot with active and motivated participation in the democratic process.

All Australians have a civic duty to vote and voting for the first time or first few times can be a confusing and alienating experience for many. Not only do young people have to try and make decisions on partisan issues, they also have to steer themselves through the actual electoral process. There needs to be a stronger civics education focus in the high school curriculum, and we believe this should be a compulsory component in the pre-VCE years. Young people need to be made aware of how the voting system in Australia works, how the ballots are arranged and the ramifications of their actions in the booth. Often these issues are only covered in elective VCE units and are not compulsory for students. The Australian Electoral Commission can play a leading role in this area and work with schools in running voting workshops as well as supplying and distributing resources.

For many young people their first educative experience with the voting process is on election day at the polling booths where parties hand out their how to vote cards. While these cards are helpful to people there needs to be a similar pamphlet accessible to young people instructing them how to vote regardless of which party they choose. This could
potentially affect those who vote informally accidentally because they are not familiar with the system.

People learn differently and respond to new information in different ways. This is particularly true of young people. Not all students absorb classroom lessons as well as others. There needs to be more dynamic and creative ways to educate and engage young people in relation to voting and the political system. Today young people are increasingly connected and communicate quickly and efficiently through a wide variety of mediums. There are avenues for education using the internet, community radio, youth commercial radio, and having a presence in environments associated with young people such as universities and schools, train stations, or sporting areas.

In democracies with voluntary voting, campaigns such as the United States of America’s apolitical Rock The Vote have succeeded in encouraging young people to actively participate in elections. Results from the AEC’s Youth Electoral Study suggest that similar programmes in Australia would act as a significant incentive for young people to vote.

UNYA also strongly believes that the inclusion of non-government organisations enhances the learning process for students, and also acts to mitigate concerns about partisanship in the delivery of civics curricula.

UNYA believes that a greater emphasis on youth-for-youth education, including the use of youth NGOs and the equipping of young people with the capacity to educate and motivate their peers, is essential.

Voting is a civic habit which is heavily influenced by early experiences. If a young person voting for the first time or even third time is not comfortable voting or is disengaged with the process those attitudes may carry into later years. Young people will become the adult voters in marginal seats, the swinging voters, the informal voters, the partisan voters and informed voters. More informed young voters will create a more empowered voter which will boost the health of our democracy.

Engagement

We feel that significantly more effort must be made to engage young voters, by MPs, the Electoral Commission and other relevant organisations. Young people need to be directly engaged with the policies that are most relevant to them as well as provided with opportunities to access and explore all elements of party policies. Youth NGOs could be enlisted to develop engagement strategies, and a multiplicity of avenues should be pursued (including interactive internet forums and education programs). The Australian Electoral Commission must play a significant role in disseminating information to young voters and providing alternative, non-partisan resources.

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2 Murray Print et al, Youth Electoral Study: Report 1 p. 19-20
We feel that there is a significant need to target and interact with young people before the age of 18. More often than not, it is the under 18 demographic that feels the most disenfranchised. A pre-existing interest in and commitment to the electoral process will undoubtedly create a generation of active citizens.
Enrolment

A lack of engagement by a broad range of citizens, especially young people, suggests the need for alternative methods of enrolment. UNYA strongly believes that the automatic subscription of citizens to the electoral roll combats the trend of young people not enrolling. Currently, it is presumed, through compulsory enrolment and voting, that Australian citizens have the automatic right and responsibility to vote, yet this is not reflected in the automatic engagement of citizens by our democratic institutions. Automatic enrolment must be complemented by an explanation to citizens of what enrolment entails. UNYA believes that automatic enrolment, coupled with comprehensive schemes notifying citizens of their new rights and responsibilities would augment youth engagement in voting systems.

We believe there would be considerable value in allowing optional voting from the age of 16. This would empower a significant number of young people who are capable of participating in the democratic process, contribute to education of young voters and make our democracy more representative. Many young people between the ages of 16-18 feel they have the right to participate in decision making that affects their lives. Concerns have been raised that 16 year olds are not responsible enough to make such decisions, yet we feel that introducing a non-compulsory vote would alleviate these concerns. UNYA's experience with this age group has firmly convinced us that these young people deserve and are fully capable of exercising their right to vote.