

**YOUTH ELECTORAL STUDY**

**REPORT 1: ENROLMENT AND VOTING**

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## **REPORT 1: ENROLMENT AND VOTING**

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

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 (ARC), through its ARC Linkage Grants program, with a major contribution from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) as industry partner. The project is being administered through the University of Sydney.

The Chief Investigators for the project are A/Professor Murray Print (Centre for Research & Teaching in Civics, University of Sydney) and Dr. Larry Saha (Reader in Sociology, ANU), together with Dr Kathy Edwards as Senior Research Associate. The Partner Investigator is Brien Hallett (Assistant Commissioner, Public Awareness , Media and Research, AEC). The Project Officer from the AEC, until recently, has been Ms. Yvonne Harrison (NSW/AEC). The Steering Committee is composed of the following: Brien Hallett , Andrew Moyes (Assistant Commissioner Enrolment and Parliamentary Services, AEC), David Farrell (Australian Electoral Officer for NSW, AEC), Yvonne Harrison, (NSW/AEC), A/Prof Murray Print, Dr. Larry Saha and Dr. Kathy Edwards.

### ***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 enrolment and voting provisions in legislation. The AEC estimates indicate that at the 2004 electoral roll close, approximately 82% young Australians (17-25 years of age) were enrolled (compared with 95% of other Australians), on the electoral roll. Apart from the fact that enrolment and voting are compulsory, the under-

registration of eligible young people raises questions about their political interest and commitment to their civic responsibility.

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 will be analysed for their impact and new strategies examined.

### ***Outcomes***

The outcomes of the study will be fivefold.

- To better understand the political socialisation process by which young adults become politically informed and engaged citizens;
- To understand why large numbers of young people are increasingly disengaged with democracy as evidenced by non-enrolment and non-voting;
- To identify the specific causes and combination of causes which account for youth non-enrolment in the group aged 17-25 years;
- To investigate intervention programs that encourage youth to enrol and vote, as well as better prepare youth to become enlightened and active citizens as adults;
- To publish and disseminate the results of this research widely both nationally and internationally.

### **Methodology**

The study uses a mixed-method methodological approach to collect both in-depth qualitative and quantitative data. Initially the study utilised existing non-personal data held by the AEC which will establish benchmark indicators of youth, electoral registration, and voting, and will guide the development of two further data-gathering strategies.

### ***Literature***

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 enrolment and voting is invariably the lowest of any age group. Most western democracies are aware of the implications should the current youth disengagement continue through to later years and are seeking ways to engage their youth in voting.

### *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 will continue to be collected through in-depth group interviews with youth aged 17-25 in school and non-school sites to identify enrolment behaviour and evaluate the effectiveness of various pro-registration and voting interventions. Data collection has been carried out by the principal researchers together with casual research assistants and supported by the Divisional Returning Officers (DROs) of the 16 designated electoral divisions.

Most data in the 16 case studies have been 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 aged seventeen years. Most data have come from focus group interviews with groups of 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 (ages ranged 16-17) and then followed up the same students in 2004 (now aged 16-18). We will contact these students in 2005 and 2006 to determine changes in behaviour and attitudes.

### *National school survey*

The second data-gathering strategy consists of two national cross sectional surveys of Year 12 senior secondary schools in 2004 and again in 2006 to investigate student attitudes towards enrolment and voting and to identify the effectiveness of Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) programs in schools.

The purpose of the first national survey of Year 12 students conducted during 2004 was to investigate the factors related to youth attitudes towards enrolment and voting. The survey instrument was developed and pre-tested in late 2003 and revised in early 2004. 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, of which, upon inspection, 12 were declared ineligible because they did not completely fulfill the necessary criteria for the survey.

All sampled schools received an invitation to participate in the survey. Following this initial contact, each school was contacted by phone from and negotiations were initiated about participation in the survey. In the end, 154 schools participated at the time of this report, giving a response rate of 78.6%.

An average of 30 students from each school participated, providing a national sample in excess of 4,600 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 and Citizenship Education. Finally, each teacher whose class was surveyed was asked to complete a form that provided information of the conditions under which the student questionnaire was completed.

## **Research Findings**

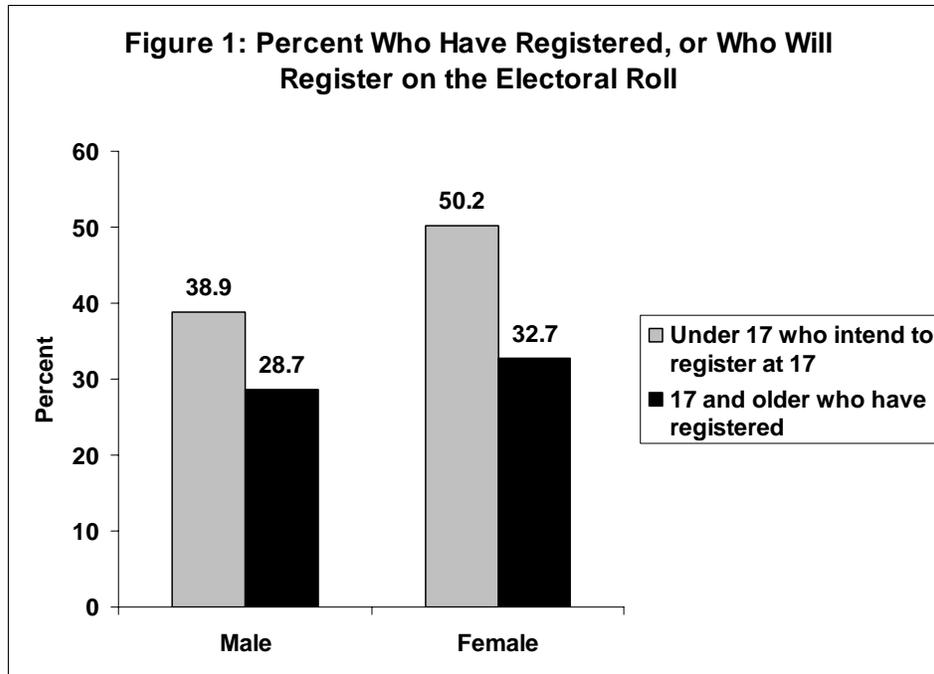
### ***Registering on the Commonwealth Electoral Roll***

The first compulsory act in the exercise of Australian citizenship as an adult is to vote in an election. Prior to voting, it is necessary to register on the electoral roll. While voting is compulsory for persons 18 years of age and older, it is possible, and encouraged, for young people who reach 17 years of age to register on the electoral roll.

Two questions were included in the questionnaire to measure the extent to which a person intended to register, if not yet 17 years of age, or who had registered if they were 17 or older. Students were asked:

- “If you are under 17 years of age, do you intend to register on the electoral roll when you become 17?”
- If you are over 17, have you registered on the electoral roll?

The responses to these questions, given separately for males and females, are found in Figure 1 below.



The figure indicates two important findings. First, for both males and females, a higher percentage of those under 17 intend to register on the electoral roll than the 17-and-older students have actually registered. Second, a higher percentage of females both intend to register (for the under 17s) and have registered (for the 17s-and-older) than the males. Thus 38.9% of the under 17 males say they intend to register, while only 28.7% of the 17-and-older males actually have. The similar figures for the females are 50.2% and 32.7% respectively. The differences are statistically significant.

The fact that there is a difference between intention to register and actual registration is not surprising. Our group discussion data showed male students generally less inclined to participate to all aspects of enrollment and voting. Across the range of cases we found females were more aware of voting, more likely to enroll and more likely to vote.

However, in the case studies we found low levels of awareness of enrolling at 17\*.

“Can you? Really? Didn’t know that.” (female, 17, NSW)

“Never knew that. Too late now.” (male, 18, NSW)

“I think I heard something about that... don’t remember where.” (Male, 17, WA)

In our survey, when we asked both the under-17s and the over-17s: “Why do you say this?” in response to the former questions we received explicit responses. These are typical quotes written by those who say they WOULD NOT enrol at age 17 #:

- “Laziness is my main reason, nothing else.”

- “Couldn’t be bothered.”
- “Because it doesn’t interest me at all.”
- “I am 17 and I know nothing about it. What’s the point when you can only vote at 18?”
- “I didn’t know it was possible. There has been no information given to me or my school to say this can happen.”

Those who say they WOULD enrol at age 17 typically said:

- “Because I have to sign up anyway so I might as well do it when I’m 17 so I’m on the roll when I’m 18.”
- “Because I feel it is important.”
- “Because I believe there are not enough young people having their say about the future of Australia and surrounding areas, so yes definitely.”

\* quotes from group discussions within case studies indicate age, gender and state.

# quotes from national survey use bullet points

Those students who were in the over 17s category and who have registered, were also asked “How did you find out about registering on the electoral roll?” Many students mentioned they were told by their mothers or fathers, and in many instances in the case studies, parents initiated action to enrol. However, a few students found out in more unusual ways, including:

- “My boyfriend turned 18 and found out that you can register at 17.”
- “One day in Year 6 people came to our primary school and explained it to us.”
- “A letter to update the electoral roll was sent to the household.”
- “I just always knew, probably from parents.”
- “I was sent a card on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. Yay!”
- “Tertiary expo. There was a place to enrol.”
- “Careers Expo”

### Key Points:

- Of the under 17 students, 4 out of 10 males and half of the females intended to enrol at age 17.
- Of the 17 and over students, less than 3 of 10 males and a third of the females had actually enrolled.
- The intention to enrol for the under-17s was higher than actual enrolment for those who were 17 or older.
- Females were higher than the male students in both intention to enrol and actual enrolment.

- Awareness of enrolling at 17 is low.

### *Intention to vote*

The students were asked two specific questions about voting. The first was: “Do you intend to vote in Federal elections after you reach 18?” The results for all students indicate that the vast majority, 87%, either “Definitely” or “Probably” would vote, though there were differences for males and females, with positive responses of 82.7% and 90.2% respectively.

These data are consistent with other AEC data which suggests about 15% of the youth age cohort, when compared with ABS demographic data, are not enrolled.

The second question asked: “Would you vote in a Federal election if you did not have to?” In contrast to the responses to the previous question, only about 50% said they would. When broken down by gender, again the females were more likely to vote than the males, even if not compulsory. The figures are 48.2% for males and 50.9% for females, which is statistically significant for a one-tailed test ( $p = .04$ ).

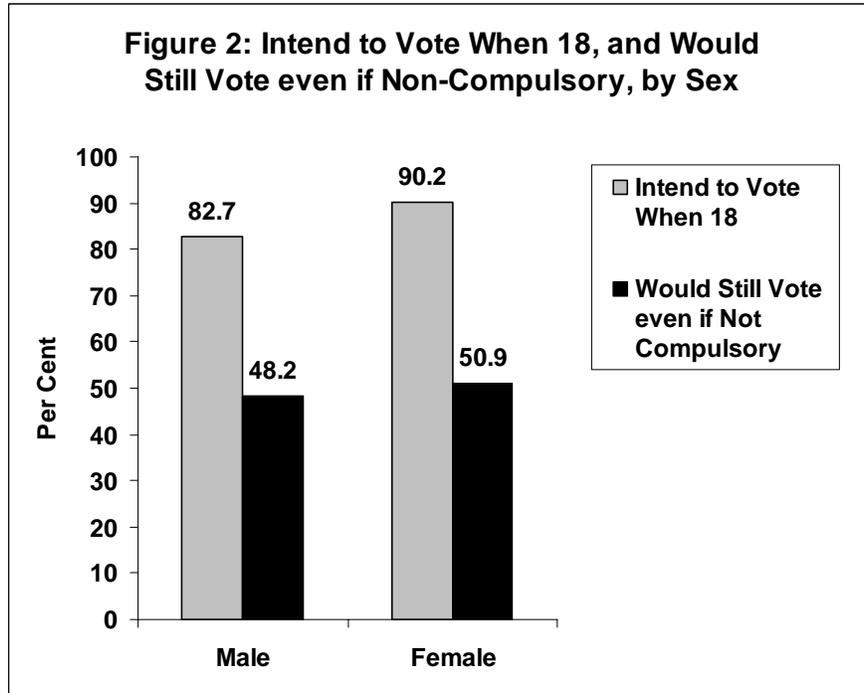
Figure 2 compares the responses of males and females with respect to these two questions and clearly shows the differences between intention to vote at 18 and voting if not compulsory. In the group discussion students made this point very clearly. Half the students or so wanted to vote regardless of compulsion, but many indicated they would vote simply to avoid the fine.

“I can’t see the point. It’s a waste of time.” (male, 17, WA)

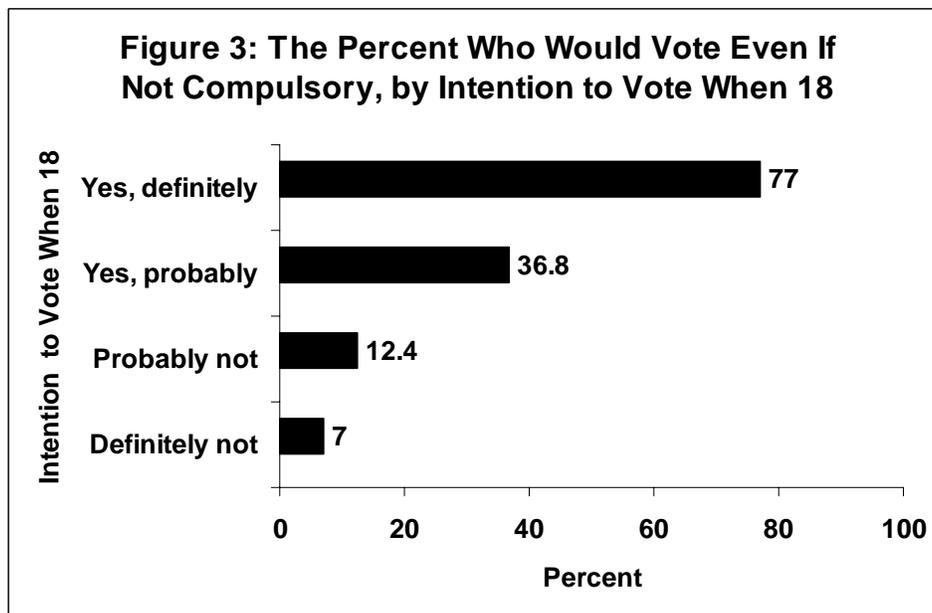
“I definitely want to vote and express my views.” (female, 18, NSW)

“No one takes any notice anyway.” (male, 18, NSW)

“...and I don’t want to get fined, eh? ... and it heaps....\$200?.....\$300?” ( male, 18, NSW)



By combining the responses to these two questions, it is possible to measure the level of commitment to voting among this sample of secondary school students. Figure 3 shows the percentage of students who say they would still vote even if it were not compulsory, by their intention to vote when age 18.



The figures indicate that for those students who said they will “definitely” vote when they are 18, 77% said they would still vote even if it were not compulsory. On the other hand, the proportion declines to 36.8% for those who say they “probably” will vote. It declines substantially further for those who are less inclined to vote, namely to 12.4% for those who said they probably would not vote, and 7% for those who say the “definitely” will not vote.

Why do these students say they will or will not vote? In our survey we asked them to write-in their explanation. Those who will vote at 18 said:

- “So I can have a say in the current government. Also the government takes enough of my money as it is. I can do without fines for not voting.”
- “Because unless you vote, you cannot say you have no influence! You can try to have an influence by voting.”
- “Because I think it’s really important that we all get our say, because we’re voting for who will run our country.”
- “Because I will. Everybody needs to vote. If you don’t vote, you don’t have the right to complain about the government.”
- “Well, I am not 18 yet so the excitement is quiet low. But when I am 18, definitely.”
- “I don’t have a choice! Do I? Vote or a fine...nice choice.”

From the group discussions it was clear that all students were aware that voting was compulsory. Ignorance was not an issue. In our survey we also asked the students to explain why they would, or would not vote if they did not have to.

- “Because the government doesn’t affect my day to day life. Therefore I don’t care who gets elected.”
- “Because if it isn’t required by me, then I wouldn’t bother finding out about it. I would leave it to those who know and are passionate about it.”
- “Why would you do anything you don’t like if you didn’t have to?”
- “I don’t really care about politics, and am very disillusioned by the government.”
- “Because either way they don’t care about the youth or young people, which is me and many other important issues. They will do what they want. Their promises mean nothing. So what’s the point?”
- “I don’t think any of the parties have society’s thoughts at heart.....”
- “Waste of a Saturday, time consuming, and I am too lazy. Although I would vote on important issues, such as becoming a republic.”

Key Points:

- A little more than four-out-of-five students say they will vote when they become 18 years old.
- Females are more likely to say they will vote than boys.

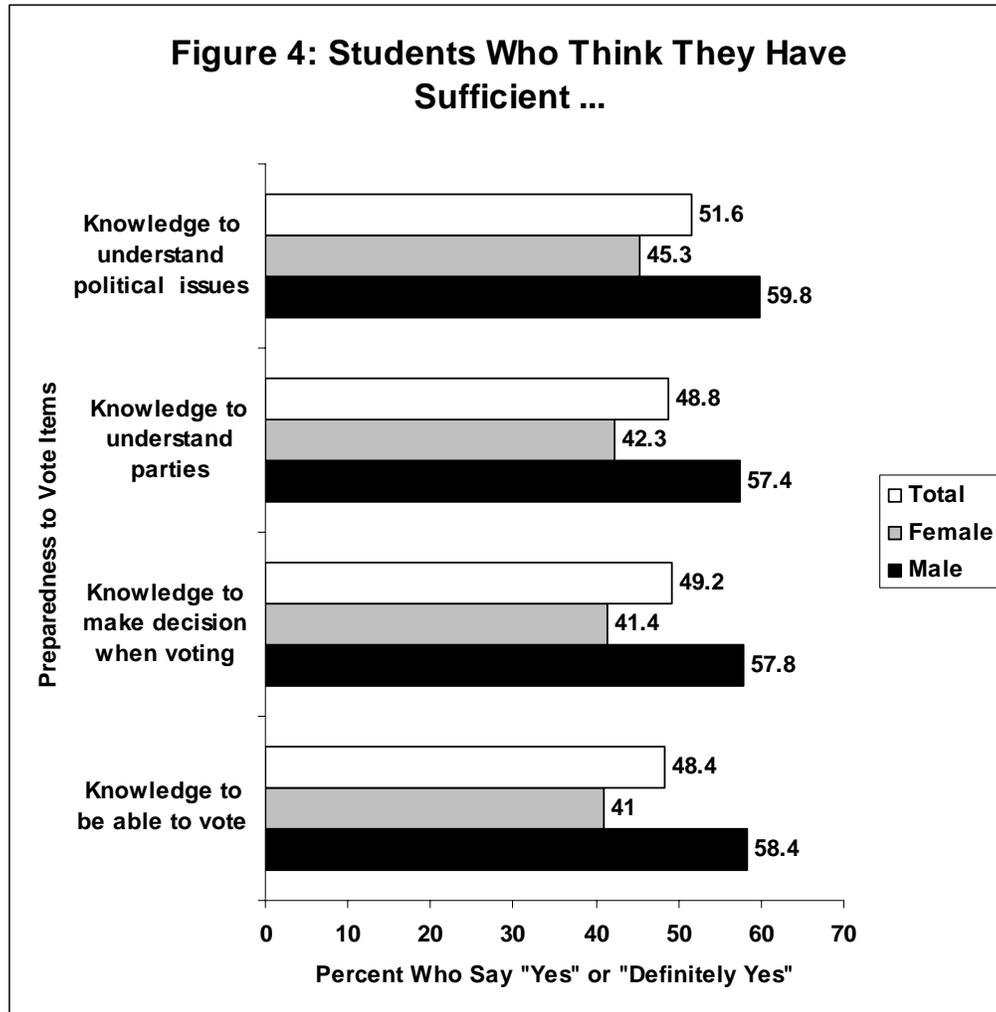
- Only one-out-of-two students would vote at 18 if voting were non-compulsory.
- Females are more likely to say they would vote, even if non-compulsory.
- The percentage who say they would vote even when compulsory is directly related to the strength of their intention to vote at age 18.
- Young people know that voting is compulsory at 18.

### *Preparedness to vote.*

An important precursor to voting and participating in democracy, it can be argued, is the personal preparedness of people to vote in elections. The stem question for the students was: “Do you think that you personally have sufficient knowledge to do the following? (Tick ONE box for each statement.) The response categories were “Definitely No”, “No”, “Yes”, and “Definitely Yes”. In Figure 4, the combined responses of those who said “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” are combined and shown separately for males and females. The number of students who responded to this item ranged from 4647 to 4660 and the gender differences are statistically significant.

Overall, only about half of the students in our sample feel prepared to vote. The figures clearly show differences between the males and females who think they have sufficient knowledge to vote in a meaningful way. For the females between 41% and 45.3% (less than half) thought they had sufficient knowledge on the various items. For the males, the figure ranged from 57.4% to 59.8 % (Slightly more than half). Males clearly feel more prepared to vote than females, yet, as seen in Figures 1 and 2, young males claimed lower levels of intention to enroll, intention to vote and voting if not compulsory.

Preparedness to vote is a multidimensional concept as can be seen in Figure 4. An important aspect relates to the mechanics of voting – do young people understand the voting system? In our group discussions the answer was very clear. Apart from numbering boxes on a ballot paper, few students understood voting and what happened to their vote when counted.



A final, more direct, question was asked of the students about voting, namely: “Do you personally feel prepared to vote in a Federal election?” For all students, the percentage who said “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” was 51.9%. For the male students, 56.4% said “Yes” or “Definitely Yes”, while for the females, the comparable figure was 37%. For this direct question, the gender gap in confidence is even greater.

It is not clear at this stage why males should feel more prepared than females, though the pattern of responses is consistent across related forms of knowledge related to voting. We found similar comments in the group discussions which might reflect young males’ views of themselves as more certain, more ‘in command’. This question will be the subject of on-going research in the project.

Conversely young females, though less confident of their preparedness to vote, are more likely to vote and are more likely to vote than males if voting was not compulsory, as seen in Figures 1 and 2.

*Key Points:*

- About one-in-two students feel they lack the knowledge to understand the issues, the political parties, to make a decision about voting, and in general to vote.
- Young people do not perceive themselves generally as well prepared to participate in voting
- Generally, young people don't understand the voting system
- Female students feel less prepared to vote, in terms of knowledge, than the males.

***Information about voting in elections***

If students generally do not feel well prepared to participate in voting, where do they obtain their information about voting in elections? They were asked to identify their main sources of information about voting from twelve sources identified from the research literature, with an additional write-in "other" category. For each source of information, the students were asked to indicate how much information they obtained on a scale of "None", "Little", "Some", or "Most". In Figure 5, the sources of information for the twelve (not including the write-in category) are ranked according to mean score, with "4" indicating the highest source of information and "1" indicating none.

Figure 5 shows that parents are the main source of information about voting, followed by TV and newspapers. Teachers, radio and other adults are other sources with a mean score above two (meaning more than a "little"). The differences between the responses are statistically significant

Those sources scoring less than 2, especially those closer to 1.5, suggest very little use by students as sources of information about voting. Students claim that religious groups, siblings, magazines, books and even friends are not commonly used as information sources. Interestingly, the use of the internet was rated low by students, which is consistent with a growing body of research on youth use of the internet.

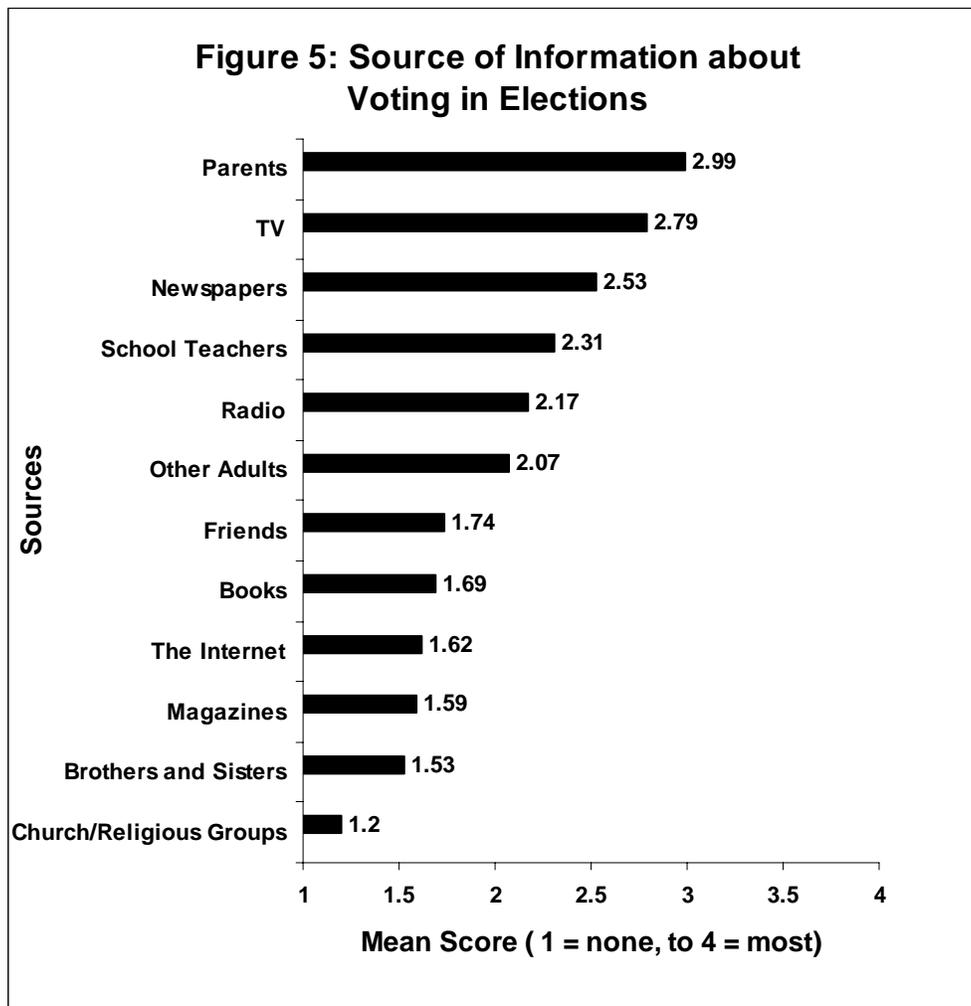
In the groups we found that the use of media as a source of information was limited amongst youth. Media, especially television, was for entertainment! Consumption of media was problematic, being either passive or haphazard.

"I'll watch the news if its on, but I don't plan to watch it." (female, 18, NSW)

"If I'm walking by I may stop and watch a story, but a half and hour of news is way too much."(female, 18, NSW)

"Dad gets the newspaper delivered so I read the headlines...oh, and the sport." (male, 17, WA)

"The media provides good comedy because they surround politicians like seagulls looking for a chip" (female, 18, Tasmania)



Furthermore, students revealed a substantial distrust of media as a source of information. They certainly didn't trust it as a source of impartial knowledge. And any consumption of news is greeted with substantial skepticism.

"Its so biased, you can't trust it. They tell you what they want you to hear" (female, 18, NSW)

"The TV is worst. They don't tell the truth..... (male, 18, NSW)

"The media's reporting of politics just confuses you more" (female, 18, Tasmania)

"We were taught to critically review the media in our English classes. When you do that you see how biased they are, especially television and some newspapers."(female, 18, NSW)

" And Americans are worse..... They actually make up the news!!" (Male, 17, WA)

The importance of parents is not surprising, given the consistency of this finding in other studies. However, they didn't escape unscathed and we identified a wide range of attitudes towards parental input.

[my parents] “just ramble on” (female, 18, Victoria)

[my parents] “just turn it [politics] all into a joke” (male, 18, Victoria)

Yet the clear importance of TV and newspapers, and perhaps even teachers, was somewhat unexpected. What these data suggest is that attempts to inform youth about voting, apart from parents, can be most successful by using TV, newspapers, and of course, education, but probably not much else.

*Key Points:*

- Parents are regarded by the students as the most important source of information about voting, followed by TV and newspapers.
- Yet television and newspapers are regarded with skepticism
- Church and other religious groups are the least important source of information about voting.
- School teachers are a moderate source of information about voting for the students
- the internet has little impact as an information source on voting for students

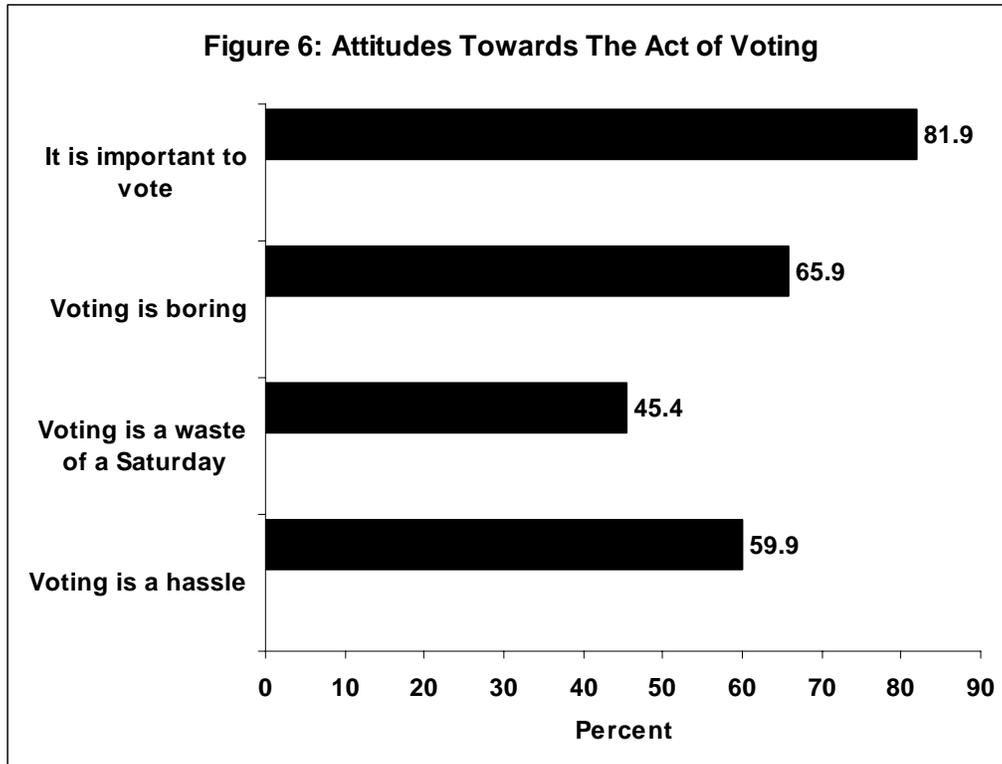
*Attitudes towards voting*

The intention to vote tells us something about how these young people intend to behave when they have the opportunity to vote and to participate as an adult citizen in a democracy. However it is another matter to ask whether they actually *like* what someday they are required to do as a citizen. To this end, our questionnaire included a set of items intended to measure how youth regarded the act of voting itself.

There were four questions, to which the students had to indicate their level of agreement. One of the items simply asked how important they thought voting was. The response categories were as follows: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. These were scored on a scale from 4 to 1 respectively.

Figure 6 gives the percentage of students who either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement. While students strongly agreed with the statement that it was important to vote (81% agreed with the statement), a majority also agreed that the act of voting itself was boring (65.9%) and that it was a hassle (59.9%). Slightly below half thought that it was a waste of a Saturday (45.4%).

These data reinforce those in Figure 2 that a half of students would not vote if it were not compulsory. Despite the acceptance that it is notionally important to vote, most find voting to be boring, a hassle and a waste of a Saturday. *A strong bond between the idea of voting in a democracy and a citizen’s duty to vote does not exist for most young Australians.*



Many young people *will vote*, not because it is their right, hard-won by their forebears, or because it is their democratic responsibility as a citizen, but because they want to avoid a fine.

We are concerned that many of these statements in Figure 6 are proxies for something deeper, more substantial, and potentially more problematic. This will be the subject of further investigation in the study.

*Key Points:*

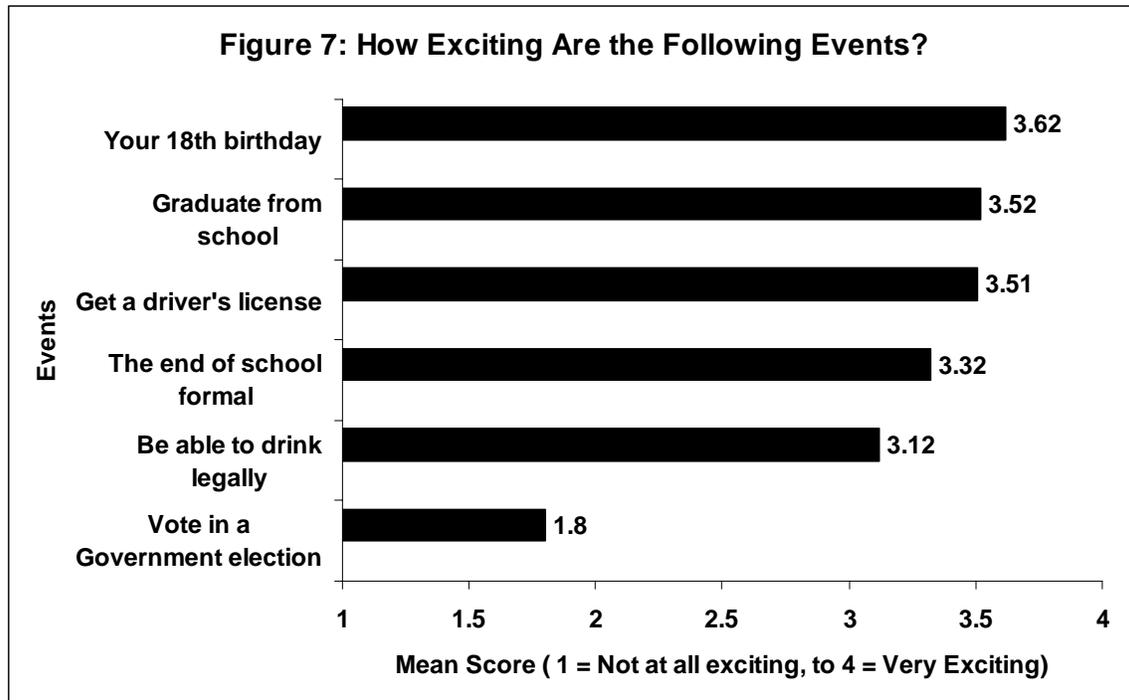
- Most (four-out-of-five) students think that voting is important.
- Almost two-out-of-three students think that the act of voting is boring, and slightly more than one-half think it is a hassle.
- Slightly less than one-half students think that voting is a waste of a Saturday.
- The link between a citizen’s right and duty to vote is not powerful

***Rites of passage***

What might engage students more in voting? Could voting be seen as more important in the eyes of young people? Students were asked to indicate how exciting they found a number of rite-of-passage events which typically take place in late adolescence. For each event, the students were asked whether they considered the event to be “Very exciting”, “Exciting”, “A little exciting” or “Not at all exciting”. The response categories were

coded 4 to 1 respectively on a scale with a score greater than 3 considered as ‘exciting’ to ‘very exciting’. The results for this question are seen in Figure 7 below.

The figures clearly show that compared to other rite-of-passage events, the ability to vote ranks last when compared to other events. Furthermore, it does not come close to the other events. “Becoming 18”, and hence legally an adult, was ranked at the top with a mean score of 3.62. To vote in a Government election was last and far behind with a score of 1.8, which falls between “A little exciting” and “Not at all exciting”.



From the group discussions we found that being able to legally drink was “not real big for guys...we do it anyway” ( male, 17, NSW), but being legally an adult meant many positives including “clubbing and pubs....they card you all the time so you need to be 18.” (female, 17, WA). Voting was not raised as an important issue or rite of passage into adulthood except incidentally.

“ yeh, .... I guess you can vote too....big deal.” (male, 18, NSW)

“Voting is no big milestone, I’ll think about it when it happens”. (male, 17, SA)

“On a list of 100 things voting would come in at number 100”. (female, 18, Tasmania)

“Voting feels pretty much like a responsibility, not a rite of passage – you don’t have to go to schoolies, you don’t have to buy alcohol – but you DO have to vote, and that’s pretty much like a major deterrent for any member of our generation”. (female, 18, NSW)

Key Points:

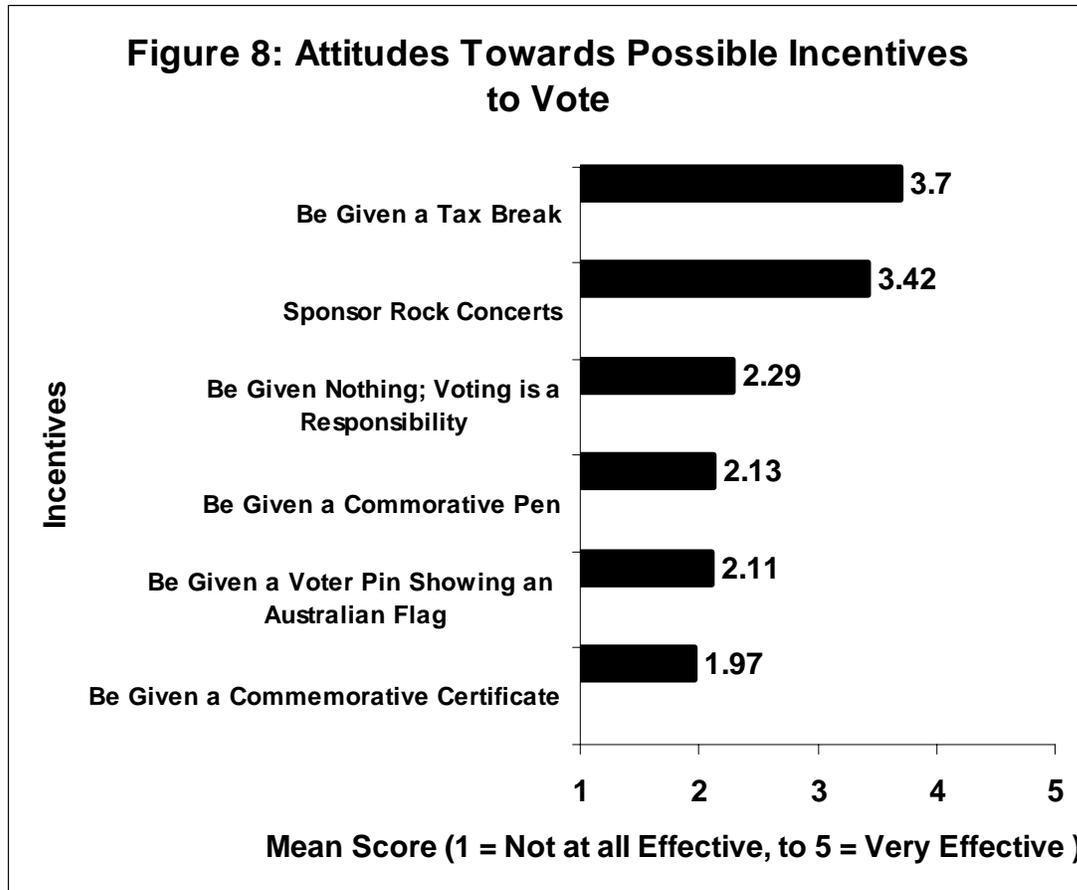
- Students feel that major events that mark their transition to adulthood, like turning 18, are “exciting” or “very exciting”.

- By comparison, students feel that voting in an election is quite unexciting.
- Voting ranks last in excitement compared to other youth rite-of-passage events.
- Few students linked voting with other rites of passage.

### *Incentives to Vote*

Could young people be encouraged to enroll and vote? Since one of the aims of the project is to find how to get more young people enrolled and enthusiastic about voting, we asked a number of questions about various incentives which might encourage students to vote. The wording of the question was as follows: “How effective do you think the following activities would be to encourage young people to vote for the first time?” The response categories were on a five-point scale from “Very Effective”, with a value of 5, to “Not at all effective” with a value of 1.

The concept of incentives arose from the early group discussions in 2003. The options indicated in Figure 8 were self-suggested by students during discussions. We excised the alternative “give us money” on the grounds that this was not remotely likely to be taken seriously by governments, though it may enhance democratic participation. In order to compare survey responses, we report the mean scores for each of the incentives in Figure 8 below.



To reinforce Australians’ concerns at our taxation regime, even students who have casual work would prefer a tax break more than any other incentive in order to encourage their first vote. The figures indicate that the students were considerably more positive about a tax break and the use of rock concerts to promote enrolment and voting than any of the suggested incentives, with mean scores of 3.7 and 3.42 respectively. The next most frequent response is that there should be no incentive, since voting is a responsibility. There was little difference between the use of a commemorative pen, a voter pin, or a commemorative certificate.

In the survey we gave students an opportunity to express their own ideas about making voting more interesting for young people, by asking them “What do you think could be done to make voting more interesting for young people between 18 and 25?”

- “To be honest I don’t think you can make it more interesting, Sorry!!” [sad face drawn]
- “Educate young people about how voting will influence their lives.”
- “Nothing. It shouldn’t have to make them interested. If you are responsible, you will make a wise choice. If not, so be it.”

- “Not make voting be on a Saturday - Have colourful boxes.”
- “Beautiful young models wearing bathing suits at Voting Stations.”
- “Have more interesting and relevant information about elections. Have information about what the government is going to do.”
- “More prizes, less corruption, more history in Aussie politics, and more info on what has been done by particular political parties to give us reliable info to judge, than just bias newspapers controlling our society.”
- “Inform them clearly about the objectives of each party. Do not include visits of the party members, as I see them as smiles that last while you are present. They are fake during promotions.”
- “Show the incentives, consequences of, and effects one can have in taking a vote. Take special time eg during uni, on television, in newspaper etc to go through and explain why voting is so necessary and how important your vote is.”
- “Have more information provided on how to vote so we are able to understand what we are required to do. Also provide more easier-to-understand information about each political party.”

*Key Points:*

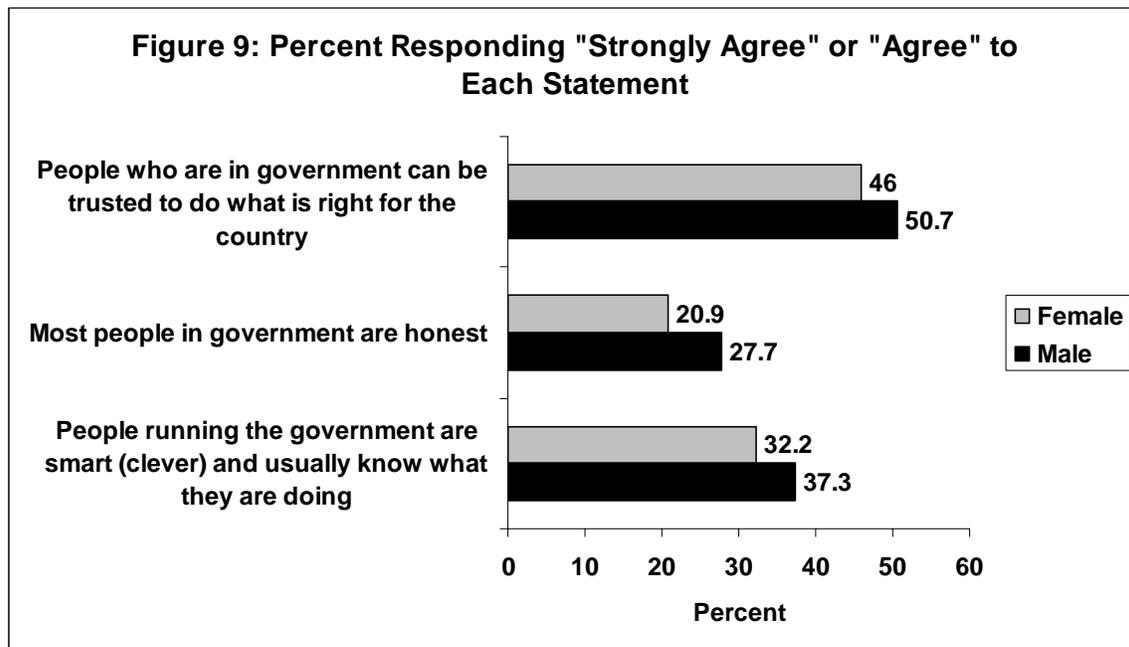
- Students saw a tax break or the use of rock concerts as the most effective incentives to get young people to enroll and vote. This reflects the view that voting is an act requiring substantial incentives rather than a good in its own end.
- There was considerable support for the notion that there should be no need for incentives, since voting is a responsibility that comes with citizenship.

***Trust in Government***

An essential attribute of successful democracies is the trust of citizens in their elected representatives. Similarly an important variable explaining youth disengagement is the extent to which young people actually trust their political leaders. Research suggests that political trust underlies much of the political attitudes and electoral behaviour of most people, including that of youth.

Generally, young people consider school to be a trustworthy environment. It is perceived to be nurturing and supportive. Teachers are generally seen as highly trustworthy. In such an environment we could expect students to be more positive on any dimensions of trust towards authority than older citizens.

We included four questions relating to political trust. Students were asked the extent to which they agreed with the four statements. Their responses, given separately for males and females, are found in Figure 9. These data show statistically significant differences on gender grounds.



Despite the supportive environment of school, students showed remarkably low levels of trust in their elected representatives. About half of the students felt that the people in government could be trusted to do what is right for the country, with males articulating a higher level of trust than females. However, relatively few students, about one-fourth, agreed that parliamentarians are honest. Finally, about one-third of the students agreed that parliamentarians are smart and know what they are doing in running the government. For both of these latter two questions, the males were more likely to give parliamentarians the benefit of the doubt than the females.

It seems from these responses that the students make a distinction between “trust” and “honesty”. While they might “trust” someone with the task of running the government, they do not necessarily believe that they are “honest”. But even with this distinction, the levels of trust, and the levels of attributing honesty, and of intelligence to parliamentarians are low.

The survey findings are strongly supported by student comments in the group discussions. Politicians were not to be trusted, they were not interested in young people and they behaved badly in parliament. Politicians were seen as promise-breakers, liars and as people who say one thing and do another.

Key Points:

- Young people do not trust politicians
- Politicians are seen as liars and promise-breakers

- Only about one half of the students agreed that parliamentarians could be trusted to do what is right for the country, with males more “trusting” than females.
- Only one-fourth agreed that parliamentarians are honest, with males more likely to agree than females.
- About one-third of the student agreed that parliamentarians were smart and knew what they were doing when running the government.

## **Conclusions**

This report addresses the first phase of the YES research. It is investigating why so many young Australians do not enroll and vote in elections. Given that voting is a minimal contribution to democratic society, why are so many youth disengaged from Australia’s democratic system? And what are the longer term implications of non-enrolment and a less engaged youth cohort?

As a first phase in this research we conducted a national survey of Year 12 students and many group discussions with students and non-students across the country. At this time we report the following major findings.

Most young people will register on the electoral roll, mostly because they believe it is the right thing to do. However, few were aware that they could enroll at 17 years.

Females were more likely to enrol both in intention and actual behaviour, and more likely to say they will vote than males. In addition, more females than males say they would vote if it was not compulsory. But only a half of all those surveyed would vote if it was not compulsory.

About half the students feel they lack the knowledge to understand the issues, the political parties, to make a decision about voting, and in general to vote. Given that most of the students in our study could enrol and many could vote, this insecurity with voting is problematic. This situation raises major questions about the role of formal education in preparing young people to become active citizens.

While parents are the most important source of information about voting and political matters, television and newspapers are also important as are teachers. Other sources, including the internet, are considered unimportant. This offers opportunities for schools

and media to perform a more prominent role in preparing Australia's youth to be engaged citizens.

While most students believe that voting is important, the majority also think voting is boring, a hassle and a waste of a Saturday. Clearly for these students the link between a citizen's right and duty to vote is not powerful.

And voting is not seen as part of transition to adulthood by students. Turning eighteen, attending 'schoolies', obtaining a drivers license and leaving school are all far more important rites of passage.

Despite this situation, there were some incentives that would attract a first vote. Students saw a tax break or the use of promotional rock concerts as the most effective incentives to get young people to enroll and vote. However there was some support for the notion that no incentives are needed, since voting is a responsibility that comes with citizenship.

A major disincentive to participate in Australia's democracy, particularly through voting, is the lack of trust in political leaders. Young people widely characterized politicians as liars and promise-breakers. Only half agreed that parliamentarians could be trusted to do what is right for the country, while barely a quarter agreed that parliamentarians are honest.

Youth are typically stereotyped as politically apathetic. That is not what we found. They were interested in political issues, what to them were *real* issues, though not political parties and politicians. The need and challenge is to find meaningful ways to engage young people more constructively so they want to participate more directly in voting and to sustain Australian democracy.

The second report in this series on youth voting and participation is available on the [AEC Website](#)