

**Institute of Public Administration of Australia (IPAA), Curtin  
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**The Decline of the Franchise and the Rise of the I-Generation,  
a Western Australian perspective**

**Lyn McKay**

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# **The Decline of the Franchise and the Rise of the I-Generation, a Western Australian perspective**

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## **Abstract**

In most established democracies there is a growing trend which suggests that significant numbers of young electors are opting not to exercise their franchise and participate in electing their parliamentary representatives. If democracy is judged by the participation and interest in its processes by its citizens, then voting can be regarded as a good barometer to measure the health of a country's political system. Declining electoral participation rates may indicate the perceived legitimacy of governments and their decisions, or can represent other challenges to civic engagement in other areas of public policy and the endorsement and acceptance of community campaigns and initiatives. This paper looks at disengagement factors and barriers to voting, with a particular focus on Western Australia and young electors, as well as strategies that might be employed to engage these voters. Increasing numbers in the 18–30 year old demographic – the decision-makers of the future (often referred to as the 'I-Generation'), are not only not voting, but they are not enrolling on the electoral roll in the first place. This paper also considers whether the penalty system is effective in encouraging participation and whether higher penalties might provide greater impetus for electors to vote.

## Summary of findings and recommendations

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Chapter 1 - Declining Participation</b>	
1.1 Internationally there appears to be no correlation between levels of wealth, literacy and electoral participation.	Further research to determine qualitative data on this issue.
1.2 Participation in Federal elections is relatively stable and consistent at around 93–95% of enrolment.	Ongoing analysis to correlate this.
1.4 Declining participation rates in State election events. Most recent by-election in Victoria Park recorded lowest rate in a by-election in the history of WA.	At State level increase awareness regarding compulsory nature of by-elections and direct communication with electors in the electorate.
1.4 The Victoria Park by-election research indicates that barriers to voting included not knowing the by-election was on despite the fact that it was a compulsory event.	Direct communication with electors who are on the roll for that electorate.
<b>Chapter 2 – Obstacles to Voting</b>	
2.1 Amendments to the <i>Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918</i> , requiring stricter Proof of Identity (POI) on behalf of an elector may be viewed critically and deter people from either enrolling in the first place or amending their current details.	There needs to be analysis of whether new Federal POI provisions have impact on voter enrolment and turnout at a Commonwealth level.
2.1 The closure of the electoral roll on the same day an election writ is issued (for Commonwealth elections) does not provide sufficient time for electors (particularly those having recently moved address or having recently become eligible to vote) to address requirements, and may result in the disenfranchisement.	Analysis of roll close to be undertaken by the Commonwealth electoral body to determine whether the changes to the close of rolls will disenfranchise electors.
2.3 Ongoing vigilance and education is required to ensure electors are aware of which electoral event they are required to participate in.	Analysis of communication regarding State boundary changes.

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
2.3 Changes to State electoral boundaries could be confusing on a four year cycle.	Improve communication with electors and include boundary changes as part of the four year electoral cycle i.e. after every State general election – not as a stand alone event that is not linked to a major election.
2.3 There is an inconsistency in the approach to engagement and procedural fairness in relation to non-voting and non-enrolling, with only the former being subjected to scrutiny and penalties.	Commonwealth may take the lead to research and follow through on those who are eligible to vote but who do not enrol. Major research will need to be undertaken in this area as national figures are ‘rubbery’ at best.
2.4 The various voting methods used for the different tiers of government may be confusing for electors.	Introduction of the same voting system for Federal, State and local government elections.
<b>Chapter 3 – Young Voters</b>	
3.1 Approximately 87 percent of under 18s understood that voting in a Federal election was compulsory and intended to vote upon turning 18; however, only 49 percent of the same group would vote in a non-compulsory election.	Ongoing research is required to determine 15–17 age cohorts barriers and motivators to a range of civic responsibilities and maintain compulsory electoral events to ensure at least 50% would continue to vote once they reach 18 years.
3.2 Youth are inaccurately considered an homogenous group and there is a tendency for governments, the media and the community to approach youth from an adult perspective with regards fixing issues related to youth.	Identify, through a youth forum, range of workshops, how they prefer to receive information, when and key messages.
3.3 There is a general lack of civics understanding in the 18–30 year age cohort, in particular in relation to civics and citizenship and the concept of the ‘common good’.	Undertaking greater civics education in Years 10–12, possibly younger. Revamping of school syllabus.
3.4 There is a generally ad hoc approach to civics education and it is not currently on any syllabus in Australia as a compulsory unit.	Greater collaboration across all electoral bodies with regards to research and education. This needs to be immediate with perhaps the Electoral Council of Australia providing the conduit for research issues to be discussed and agreed upon.

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Chapter 4 – Engagement Strategies</b>	
4.3 The introduction of SMS text enrolment in New Zealand was a successful initiative with over 100,000 requests in a five month period prior to a national electoral event.	Approach communicating with youth in a variety of ways and using different methods – explore further possibilities of SMS text messaging and internet voting.
4.7 There is a plethora of research material on voter participation but a lack of qualitative data on results of initiatives put in place to address enrolment and participation.	Need greater ‘tracking’ of initiatives like the Birthday Card to assess whether the return of enrolment forms by young people translates to participation at their next eligible electoral event.
4.7 Research is being undertaken by a number of Australian universities and, ad hoc, within some electoral bodies – with little or no collaboration to determine a best, collective outcome.	Research needs to be identified by electoral bodies to prevent duplication and perhaps be put before Electoral Council of Australia (ECA) meetings to have a ‘whole of Australia’ approach to what are similar issues facing all electoral bodies. This would include joint funding of research undertaken.
<b>Chapter 5 – Looking to the Future</b>	
5.1 Debate about automatically enrolling students when they turn 18 years of age is underway. In Australia young people can apply for provisional, or early, enrolment which automatically means they are enrolled when they turn 18 and can vote thereafter. Making 18 year olds enrol to vote, when often they think they are enrolled once they say, secure a drivers’ licence, is an extra obstacle to participation.	Automatic enrolment is a necessity. The Commonwealth government needs to consider changes to legislation to have young people automatically enrolled at 18 years of age.
5.3 There is a lack of understanding across all age cohorts regarding the compulsory nature of voting for all State electoral events and the penalties that can be incurred for not voting.	Commonwealth should consider automatic enrolment for 17 year olds in the first instance with further research to be undertaken on the possibility of lowering the voting age to 16 years.
5.3 There is inconsistency across the nation in fines levied for not voting.	Make penalties across Australia uniform for not voting.
5.3 The penalty for not voting in Western Australia has not been adjusted with inflation and has not increased since 1966 and at \$20 is too low for a first time civics offence, nor is it in line with other civics offences.	Raise the penalty to be of a contemporary value and in line with other civic offences and commensurate with acting as a ‘deterrent’ to not voting.

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## Introduction

Democracies around the world are grappling with the issue of declining participation in elections. Historically, turnout numbers at the ballot box have been one of the ways citizens have been able to inform governments about the ‘temperature’ of the community, as well as demonstrate their political proclivities. There is a view that declining numbers point to a lack of interest in politics and that the lack of collective participation threatens the very foundations of the democratic society of which governments depend for their legitimacy. Alternatively, falling participation may not necessarily be unhealthy. There is some suggestion that “most Western countries are far more at ease with themselves than in the past [and while]..... voters may still be discontented with their politicians.....they are far more contented with one another” (King 2001). Essentially this argument implies that the old social divides – class, religion and ethnicity – are no longer prevalent motivators for citizens to ‘get out’ and vote. Further, the old ‘left/right’ dichotomy of politics has waned and ideologies of political parties appear to have converged, with a greater emphasis on economic management *vis a vis* social welfare, thus diluting difference and choice on behalf of the elector. Whilst this latter argument might be true, there are still reasons to be concerned. If citizens are opting not to vote then there is a danger they will not participate in other aspects of civil society, such as endorsement of public policies and initiatives. This paper argues that voting and public policy are strongly intertwined and increasing political disengagement, particularly among those under 30, will adversely affect government policies at all levels.

In an operational sense, high numbers of non-voters pose a problem for electoral bodies around the globe – none more so than in a country like Australia with its compulsory voting system and the subsequent ‘penalties’ which apply to those who are enrolled to vote but do not do so. This consumes time and resources after an electoral event, necessitating a high level of attention at every stage of the process, through to ultimate prosecution and court proceedings. Thereby presenting a need to consider what to do about those in the community who are eligible to enrol but choose not to. Currently, there are limited mechanisms available to identify and pursue individuals who do not enrol. The logistical task involved in both encouraging participation and imposing sanctions for non-enrolment thereafter is significant. Although there is a legal requirement for eligible electors to participate in electoral events, which may be enforced by follow-ups and penalties imposed for failing to do so, there is currently no effective follow through or sanction if individuals do not enrol. This leads to inconsistency in the approach to engagement and procedural fairness given both actions are legal requirements for those who are 18 years and over and Australian citizens.

The topic is a Pandora’s Box of variables and beyond the abilities of any one agency, organisation or government to solve. As will be discussed further, the number of studies, reports and consultative processes undertaken on this topic in Australia alone indicates the importance placed on civic engagement and democracy, especially in relation to research into strategies to engage younger members of society in the democratic processes.

# Chapter 1

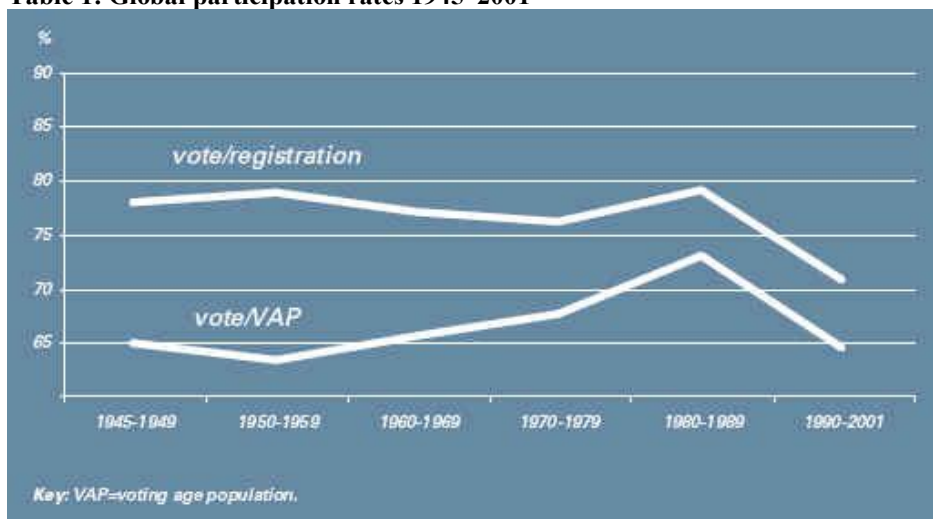
## DECLINING PARTICIPATION

### 1.1. International research and global trends

The problem of engaging electors is worldwide. Longitudinal research undertaken by the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) reveals an interesting picture of global electoral turnout trends. IDEA uses two methodologies to determine the global pool of eligible voters; the number of officially recorded registered electors, and the estimated voting age population. They do, however, place a caveat in relation to using either of these methodologies to measure turnout statistics. Many countries consider registration as a prerequisite for voting and accordingly maintain accurate registration rolls of eligible voters. Although a useful yardstick, in some countries the accuracy of the roll may be called into question due to poor registration processes. Alternatively, using voting age population figures allows for an estimate of potential voters, if all systemic and administrative barriers are removed for the purpose of calculation. However, this simply produces an estimated figure of potential voters and does not take sovereignty of a nation or administrative requirements into consideration or exclude those who might not be eligible to vote due to non-citizenship, mental competence or imprisonment.

According to IDEA, Western European nations have maintained the highest non-compulsory average turnout, 77 percent, with Latin American nations recording the lowest, 53 percent (refer Table 1). Interestingly, high electoral turnout is not the sole territory of established democracies in the West. In the 1990s, only three Western European democracies made it into the top ten, as measured by percentage of electors to turnout. IDEA data suggest that globally, electoral turnout began to dramatically decline from the mid-1980s and, this trend is apparent regardless of the methodology used to measure electoral participation (Pintor, et al. 2002).

**Table 1: Global participation rates 1945–2001<sup>1</sup>**



Additionally, there does not appear to be any correlation between wealth and electoral participation. For example, North America and the Caribbean nations produced the third lowest turnout rate, whilst Oceania, former Soviet States and Central Eastern European nations are second and third highest in regional league tables. Just as lack of wealth does not appear to be an impediment to voter participation, nor does literacy. Data seems to suggest that there is no significant statistical correlation between literacy and participation. According to IDEA, nations that enjoy high levels of literacy on average record to some extent higher levels of participation; however, low literacy countries such as Angola and Ethiopia have also achieved high participation rates (Pintor, et al. 2002).

The body of research compiled by IDEA illustrates important historical trends in electoral participation and dispels some of the myths surrounding voting and participation. Clearly, the act of voting is not exclusively cherished or practiced in Western nations, nor is it an activity fashionable and practised solely by societies' elites, the affluent and the educated. It is difficult to directly compare many countries with Australia, largely due to its different voting systems and the compulsory nature of its elections that no doubt inflate participation rates. Australia enjoys almost universal adult franchise, modern electoral practices, accurate electoral registration rolls and arguably is a nation that enjoys high living standards with a well educated and for the most part affluent society. Despite these advantages, enrolment numbers and participation are both areas of concern. Data suggests that electoral participation is waning and electoral enrolment is of concern, particularly with regard to young voters, as evidenced by the Victoria Park by-election in Western Australia in February 2006, covered later in this paper.

## **1.2. Australian trends – a national perspective**

Australia's compulsory voting system ensures that it enjoys a reasonably stable ranking in electoral turnout tables, with some of the highest participation rates in the world. Since Federation and up to 1924<sup>2</sup>, prior to the advent of compulsory voting in Federal elections, electoral turnout averaged 65.1 percent of eligible electors across the six States<sup>3</sup>. Western Australia (WA) was ranked equal lowest in terms of participation, at 59.6 percent along with Victoria. The effect of compulsory voting post 1924 proved encouraging with electoral turnout percentages increasing to an average of 92.5 percent over the period 1924–1995, with WA averaging approximately 90 percent (Major 1995). The 2004 Federal general election for the House of Representatives enjoyed a 94.32 percent national participation rate (Australian Electoral Commission 2006).

Although all indications are that compulsory voting continues to have widespread public support, advocates of voluntary voting are becoming more vocal (Hughes & Costar 2006). An Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) 7.30 Report<sup>4</sup> discussed the issue of young voters prior to the 2004 Federal general election, and quoted Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data that indicated approximately 800,000 young Australians had become eligible to vote, yet only about half of this figure actually enrolled. While it is difficult to determine whether these people conscientiously objected to the compulsory nature of the Australian electoral system, the trend demonstrates a clear concern with regards to young citizens.

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2 Compulsory voting was introduced in 1924 by the Commonwealth

3 Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania. The self governing territories of ACT and the Northern Territory had not been established at this time.

4 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Young voters to have big impact on federal election <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2004/s1154989.htm>

### 1.3. The situation in Western Australia

#### *Historical background*

While compulsory voting was introduced for Federal elections under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* in 1924, the introduction of compulsion in Western Australia did not eventuate until 1933 with the Secession Referendum. Over a 50 year period, 1933–1983, the franchise was extended to include those who had been previously denied, mainly Indigenous Australians, and changes to qualification regarding eligibility to vote.

In line with most ex-British colonies, the Western Australian Legislative Council was originally set up as an advisory body to the appointed Governor, becoming the upper chamber of Parliament when self-government was achieved in 1890. Initially it remained an appointed body, becoming an elected chamber from 1893. Until 1962, the state was divided into 10 provinces, each province electing three Members to the Legislative Council (MLC) for terms of six years, one member from each province facing the electorate every two years. This resulted in most Legislative Council elections being conducted at a different time from lower house elections, something that was unpopular with Governments. The Legislative Council was reformed in 1963 and 1964, so that in the future there would be two members elected from each province for six year terms, one retiring every three years meaning elections could be held jointly with the Legislative Assembly. The franchise for the Council was also brought into line with the Legislative Assembly, as up until 1962 Council elections had been restricted to owners of property or lessees of property above a certain value. While the franchise was extended, the system that gave lower enrolment quotas to rural provinces remained. Since then, changes have been made, and one that will have a major impact on the voting system has been the introduction of the Gallop Government's 'One Vote, One Value' policy in 2005, whereby the weight of one's vote is no longer calculated depending on whether the elector is a metropolitan or regional dweller.

The following is a snapshot of the State system and when key voting milestones were introduced:

- 1933–Compulsory voting for the secession referendum;
- 1936–Compulsory voting for Legislative Assembly (applied in 1939 election);
- 1964–Compulsory voting for Legislative Council (*Electoral Act Amendment Act 1964*); and
- 1983–Compulsory voting for Aboriginal electors.

#### *The 2005 State general election*

At the 2005 Western Australian State general election overall participation was 91.5 percent and although a reasonable figure, it does mean that more than 106,000 Western Australians failed to participate. A further analysis of the data illustrates that approximately 48 percent or 51,474 of these non-voters were aged between 18–34 years of age.

Voter turnout in the 18–29 year age group was 85.4 percent for males, 87.7 percent for females and 86.6 percent combined. Compared to the 40–49 year age group the figures are 91.9 percent, 94.2 percent, and 93 percent respectively (refer table two). A disturbing trend in this data is the decline in participation, or interest in politics, for those aged 20–29. Interestingly, turnout was a healthy 91.6 percent in the 18–19 age group, compared to 84.8 percent for 20–24 year olds and 83.3 percent for 25–29 year olds.

**Table Two: Voter participation, February 2005 State general election, Western Australia<sup>5</sup>.**

Age	Male			Female			Total		
	Enrolled	Voted	% voted	Enrolled	Voted	% voted	Enrolled	Voted	% voted
18–19	20,139	18,377	91.25	20,432	18,792	91.97	40,571	37,169	91.61
20–24	53,591	44,924	83.83	54,449	46,835	85.94	108,090	91,759	84.89
25–29	51,009	41,455	81.27	51,781	44,169	85.30	102,790	85,624	83.30
30–34	56,623	48,291	85.29	59,289	53,046	89.47	115,912	101,337	87.43
35–39	56,893	50,400	88.59	60,096	55,348	92.10	116,989	105,748	90.39
40–44	62,629	57,136	91.23	65,729	61,602	93.72	128,358	118,738	92.51
45–49	61,887	57,286	92.57	65,086	61,596	94.64	126,973	118,882	93.63
50–54	59,021	55,242	93.60	60,751	57,832	95.20	119,772	113,074	94.41
55–59	55,192	52,199	94.58	54,195	51,799	95.58	109,387	103,998	95.07
60–64	40,745	38,817	95.27	39,830	38,308	96.18	80,575	77,125	95.72
65–69	32,045	30,729	95.89	32,592	31,405	96.36	64,637	62,134	96.13
70+	63,473	60,325	95.04	81,091	76,204	93.97	144,564	136,529	94.44
Unknown	293	109	37.20	351	131	37.32	644	240	37.27
<b>Total</b>	<b>613,540</b>	<b>555,290</b>	<b>90.51</b>	<b>645,722</b>	<b>597,067</b>	<b>92.47</b>	<b>1,259,262</b>	<b>1,152,357</b>	<b>91.51</b>

More detailed analysis is required to ascertain the factors impacting on these figures. Perhaps the transition to becoming an ‘adult’ and the ability to participate at their first electoral event is a sufficient motivator for 18–19 year olds to have their say, but with subsequent electoral events, transient living arrangements, it may be that frustration and/or disillusionment affects the numbers. It would be easy to adopt the approach that youth voters are either apathetic towards society or cynical towards democracy and politics, but that would do little to inform the debate, let alone resolve the issue of disengagement. Whilst these traits no doubt exist they are not the exclusive preserve of the young. The question for this paper then becomes what other barriers or obstacles are there which lead to significant numbers of young people forfeiting their democratic rights?

Before undertaking further enquiry into why young people are choosing not to vote a snapshot view of one electorate, Victoria Park, provides some insight.

#### **1.4. Case study – Victoria Park by-election**

In March 2006 a by-election was called for the seat of Victoria Park after the resignation of the then Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop. In 2005–06 Victoria Park was the youngest and most mobile electorate in the State. Extensive advertising and a range of initiatives from the 2005 State general election were emulated during the by-election with varying degrees of success. However, given an historically low voter turnout, 64.04 percent, the lowest for a by-election ever held in the State since 1936, questions need to be asked regarding the effectiveness of the strategies used. There were many reasons debated by electoral commentators as to why the turnout was lower than expected, the most prominent being Victoria Park was considered a ‘safe seat’<sup>6</sup> and therefore many in the community might have thought the result was a foregone conclusion and saw no value in voting. There is also a perception, real or otherwise, that the government of the day is rarely at risk of defeat in a by-election. It is possible that a large percentage of electors considered Victoria Park a safe seat. However, the reverse is also true, and the safeness of the seat could be a drawcard for electors to cast a ‘protest vote’ against the government even in the knowledge that the status quo may have been maintained.

<sup>5</sup> Western Australian Electoral Commission internal data.

<sup>6</sup> Safe seat is a descriptive term, and is based on the past electoral performance of the successful candidate in that seat. Typically, if the winning candidate obtained 60 percent or more of the two party preferred votes then the seat is considered safe, as a swing greater than 10 percent is required at any subsequent election for the candidate to be replaced.

Such assumptions are difficult to determine so a survey was commissioned by the WAEC to clarify participation rates and identify some of the motivational factors behind why people did or did not vote. The survey focussed on people's understanding of electoral requirements to vote, not political proclivities or understanding of politics.

As a by-election focuses on only one electorate the results can sometimes be considered an aberration due to the variables associated with that electorate. For example, whether the by-election is held for a metropolitan or regional seat, the demographic profile of the electorate, and the social, educational and economic factors associated with its electors. For instance, data covering a 20 year period, 1986–2006, reveals that the by-election for Merredin in November 2001 achieved the second highest voter turnout rate, 86.30 percent, over this period (refer table three). The high turnout could be due to the fact that Merredin is a country seat, with a large number of farming and rural families making up the electorate. Typically, in Australia such communities are fairly stable with low population turnover. Therefore, in Merredin, local issues and having a say about who will represent them in Parliament could be considered very important factors and might explain the high motivation for casting a vote.

**Table Three: Voter turnout rates 1986–2006 for by-elections held in Western Australia.**

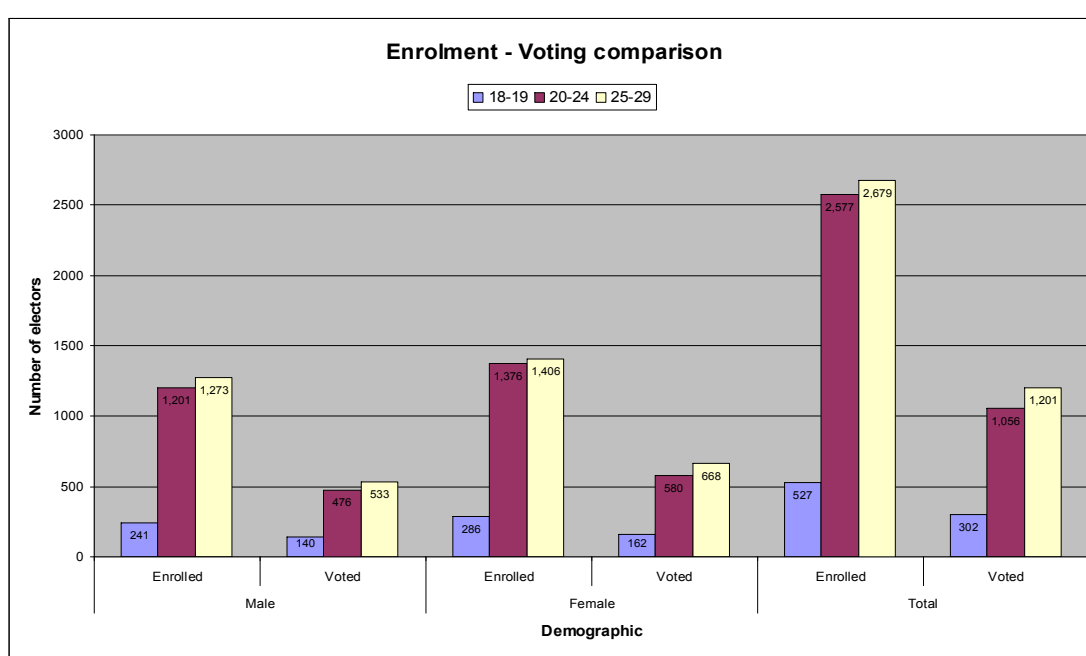
<b>Date</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Electors</b>	<b>Turnout %</b>
7 June 1986	Cockburn	23149	83.68
7 June 1986	Victoria Park	16574	77.23
9 May 1987	Morley/Swan	22646	82.05
9 May 1987	Narrogin	9103	85.99
9 May 1987	Perth	17347	74.17
24 October 1987	Darling Range	11309	78.58
24 October 1987	Gascoyne	5097	81.56
19 March 1988	Ascot	16634	81.82
19 March 1988	Balga	25220	79.81
7 May 1988	Dale	13257	78.99
26 May 1990	Fremantle	22793	82.46
26 May 1990	Maylands	23243	80.82
11 August 1990	Cottesloe	21815	69.61
13 April 1991	Geraldton	11915	86.76
20 July 1991	Floreat	21094	82.90
4 April 1992	Ashburton	9777	83.37
19 March 1994	Glendalough	22720	79.42
10 September 1994	Helena	23080	79.94
16 March 1996	Kalgoorlie	11351	84.33
9 June 2001	Nedlands	23723	68.30
24 November 2001	Merredin	12447	86.30
11 March 2006	Victoria Park	25580	64.04

Interestingly, there was significant difference in turnout for the Victoria Park by-elections over this period, in June 1986 turnout was 77.23 percent, compared with 64.04 percent in 2006, but still below average. This represents an approximate 13 percent decrease in turnout in an electorate where the numbers of electors had risen by 9,000 over the same period. It is surprising, if not a little confounding, for the WAEC to observe such a dramatic decline in turnout numbers in an electorate that has experienced population growth.

Election data compiled by the WAEC indicate there were 25,580 eligible electors in Victoria Park, 16,381 cast a vote. Accordingly, 8,844 eligible electors did not enact their franchise. There are obviously mitigating circumstances for why people do not vote, such as illness, changed address, overseas or interstate travel or work commitments, vacations, and death. Nevertheless, Victoria Park went against the trend when considering the average by-election turnout over the previous 20 years was approximately 80 percent.

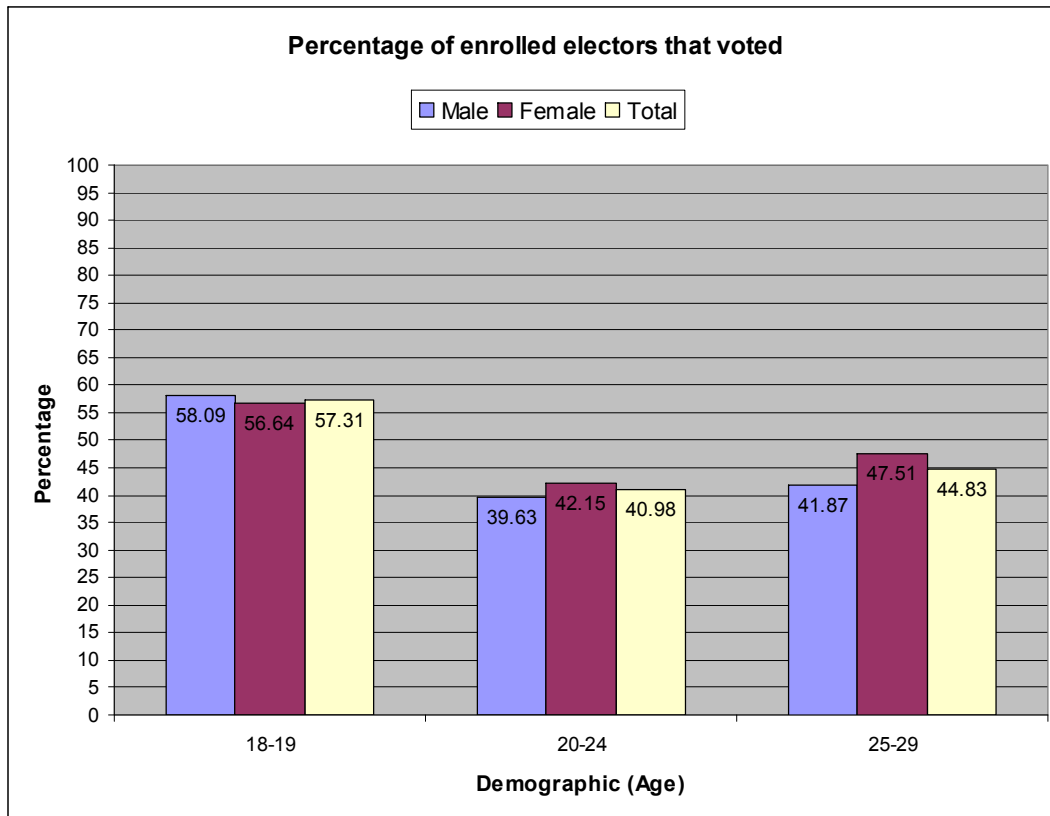
A further analysis of data illustrates a disturbing picture of youth engagement in political processes. There were 5,783 registered electors aged between 18–29 in Victoria Park, of this number, 2,559, (or approximately 44 percent) voted. There appears to be a large disparity in the number of 18–29 year olds who are enrolled but, for whatever reason, chose not to vote (refer graph one).

**Graph One: Enrolment to voting comparison.**



The percentage of young voters, both male and female, in each age cohort that voted is not encouraging (refer graph two). If these individuals see no value in the democratic process of electing their parliamentary representative, then there is little to suggest that they would be involved in the more mundane, but just as important, development of government policies and practices in general. There is a real danger that dissatisfaction or disengagement at such an early age might lead to a lifetime of cynicism and alienation from the political/policy decision-making processes, or at least a more adversarial stance when engaging.

**Graph Two: Percentage of enrolled electors that voted.**



The data suggest that females had a slightly higher rate of enrolment in all age groups but there were slightly more males in the 18–19 age group who voted. In the other two categories female participation rates were higher. These results seem to correlate with the findings from the Youth Electoral Survey (YES) which tends to suggest that civic understanding/and or engagement is marginally higher in females at secondary school level (Print, Saha and Edwards, 2005). It would not be unreasonable to surmise that their understanding and willingness to engage in political affairs, developed at an early age, continues into young womanhood, as both the 20–24 and 25–29 age groups enjoy a higher level of female participation.

Therefore, another factor potentially to be considered in finding solutions at an educational level will be consideration of student learning abilities and whether gender needs should be considered in education regarding electoral matters. This reflects wider education concerns generally about the development of young males.

## 1.5. Market research – unenrolled citizens

With such a low voter turnout for the Victoria Park by-election, the WAEC commissioned a survey of electors by an independent research company. The catalyst for the research was the historically high number, 36 percent, of non-voters. The survey was conducted using a hybrid survey design of both telephone and intercept<sup>7</sup> survey techniques over a three week period. The WAEC wanted to develop an understanding of why some 8,844 electors failed, or chose not to vote. The survey was designed to determine elector satisfaction with the electoral process; underlying causes for non-participation and opportunities to improve turnout. There was a strong correlation between age and not voting, with 48 percent of those aged 18–25 years not participating. Additionally, and again in this age group, 13 percent were not enrolled on the electoral roll but were generally eligible to be included; meaning that, of this age cohort, 61 percent did not participate in the Victoria Park by-election. In the 26–39 age cohort, 40 percent were enrolled but did not vote, and 5 percent were not on the electoral roll, equating to a 55 percent non-participation rate. In contrast, 70 percent of 40–60 year olds and 82 percent of those aged 61 years or over voted. With 61 percent of 18–25 year olds either not enrolling or voting there is an imperative to better understand this group and its requirements with regards voting and participation.

The obstacles and barriers to voting are varied. And the variables range from legislative complexities to relatively simplistic logistical or operational challenges. These include a legislative framework that has the same voting and count system across all levels of Government, to the location of polling places on Election Day. The following chapter covers some of these perceived barriers to electors casting their vote.

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<sup>7</sup> Intercept technique – interviewing one on one in the street and “intercepting” citizens as they went about their daily business – compared to the telephone survey whereby operators contacted enrolled electors on a Commission database at random. Both surveys aimed for specific demographic results

## Chapter 2

# OBSTACLES TO VOTING

Under the current legislative arrangements, every effort is made to make the voting process easy for the community to understand. However, there are potential additional complexities; such as different enrolment requirements, different voting methods in various levels of government and for upper and lower chambers, that makes electoral education difficult. In the next few pages the barriers and motivators to voting will be discussed, with a particular focus on young voters.

### 2.1. Legislative complexities

So if it can be argued that encouraging people to enrol to vote is the first step to participation, then impending Federal and State changes to electoral legislation could prove challenging and may result in discouraging some electors from enrolling or updating their enrolment details.

At a Federal level, an amendment to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* has resulted in new legislation requiring Proof of Identity (POI) for enrolment. The legislation was passed on 22 June 2006 creating a three-tiered approach to the enrolment process. It is expected that the new POI provisions will commence in April 2007.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, electors enrolling for a Federal election or amending their enrolment details, such as a change of address, will have to satisfy the new POI provisions. The first tier requires the elector to produce their Driver's Licence as POI. In the event that an elector does not hold a Driver's Licence then the POI section must be signed by a credible witness, the second tier, with a list of acceptable witnesses nominated on the form. Failing the first two tiers, names and signatures of two registered electors who have known the potential elector for at least one month will be required.

The arguments for imposing more stringent POI criteria are understandable given there is a need to avoid electoral fraud. Yet with 13.1 million electors on the joint electoral roll (Federal and State) there have been no cases of identified electoral fraud (AEC 2006). This added detail, with no substantiated evidence to support its introduction, has, in my view, the capacity to confuse and potentially deter voters from enrolling or changing details at a Federal level. Additionally, the new POI criteria may have unintended ramifications for State electoral bodies because of a shared Joint Roll Arrangement (JRA) with their Federal counterpart. There are questions regarding how the POI criteria will be policed, given roll stimulation occurs in the lead up to every election and typically this is the busiest period for any Commission in the electoral cycle as this is the time that electors will change their details or enrol to vote and keeping track with the new provisions in place could be a difficult exercise. The ramifications from these changes are as yet unknown, especially from a State electoral body's perspective, as there might be future pressure to bring State enrolment provisions into line with Federal requirements. Needless to say, further collaboration and monitoring will be required to determine the impact on the States and Territories.

## 2.2. Federal versus State

Another amendment to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s102(4), relates to enrolment cut-off times, and has the potential to restrict some citizens from participating in an electoral event. These changes will see the closing of the electoral roll for *new* enrolments at 8pm on the day that a writ to call an election is issued. This is a significant departure from past practice and means there is no longer a seven day period of grace for new electors to enrol, and could conceivably lead to disenfranchisement for some in the community already struggling to understand their responsibilities in the electoral process. Similarly, for electors seeking to change their enrolment details, the new provisions will shorten the period to 8pm on the roll close date, which is three days after the issue of the writ.

The significance of these changes and the developing ambiguities between Federal and State enrolment requirements will prompt discussion regarding whether the States will have to amend their practices to mirror those of their Federal counterpart (Hughes, 2006). The implication of these changes are as yet unknown, and their practicality untried, with the next Federal election set for late 2007, and the first State election to be held in New South Wales in March 2007. Only assumptions can be made about whether enrolment statistics will slide further as a result and what the impact of the changes may be elsewhere at the State level.

## 2.3. Knowing the boundaries

Under Part IIA of the *Western Australian Electoral Act 1907* electoral boundaries are required to be redrawn to take account of the rise and fall in elector numbers in each district. Recent changes to that Act will see electoral boundary distributions every four years (after a State general election), rather than the eight years which had previously been the case. These changes will usher in an element of complexity, either perceived or factual, requiring electors to be vigilant that electoral boundary changes do not affect their enrolment status. An electoral boundary distribution will take place in 2007, in preparation for the next State general election due in 2009. This distribution will need to take into account legislative changes that reflect 'One Vote, One Value' principles that will see the Legislative Assembly seats, based on geographical districts, increasing from 57 to 59 members and the Legislative Council based on geographical regions increasing from 34 to 36 members.

Anecdotal evidence provided to the Western Australian Electoral Commission (WAEC) seems to suggest that the names of electoral districts may be confusing electors, with some not realising that an electoral event in a particular district included them. For example, the metropolitan district of Victoria Park encompasses ten suburbs<sup>9</sup>, including parts of East Victoria Park, while the neighbouring district of South Perth also includes parts of East Victoria Park. This will need vigilance on the part of the State electoral body and the four yearly committee of Electoral Distribution Commissioners to ensure the public are aware and informed regarding the impact for them.

Legislative complexities are not the only barriers to having electors vote. Other obstacles include the more mundane, the issue of too many electoral events, to making voting easier at the closest possible location.

## 2.4. Voter fatigue

Voter fatigue is the term used when the community becomes tired by too many or too frequent electoral events. In Australia, voter fatigue has been blamed for poor voter turnout when back-to-back Federal, State and local government elections have been held within months (occasionally weeks) of each other. However, voter fatigue can also occur when an election timeframe is too long, and party and candidate campaigning runs over many weeks instead of the more usual four week period associated with Federal and State elections in Australia.

The extent to which voter fatigue affects electoral turnout is difficult to gauge. In Western Australia there have been a number of electoral events since the last Federal election held on 9 October 2004, as demonstrated in table four which represents the 2006 Victoria Park by-election.

**Table Four: Electoral events impacting on the electors of Victoria Park since 09 October 2004.**

Event	Date	Days Passed	Turnout %
Federal general election <sup>10</sup>	09 October 2004		94.3
State general election	26 February 2005	140	91.5
Local government Victoria Park <sup>11</sup>	07 May 2005	70	33.9 & 34.6
By-election Victoria Park	11 March 2006	308	64.

Although differences in the types of elections represented above preclude direct comparison<sup>12</sup>, the data does provide an opportunity to illustrate the number of days passed between each election. Over a 17 month period, four electoral events were conducted that affected the electors of Victoria Park, three of them compulsory and one optional, equating to an electoral event on average once every 129 days. To what extent the closeness of these events impacted on turnout is not known, but it is clear that the last (compulsory) event stimulated the least interest as measured by turnout.

## 2.5. Marking the ballot paper

Conducting Federal, State and local government elections poses another potential challenge for electors in marking ballot papers. While the election process is straightforward, allowing for a range of candidates (and parties) to receive votes, the actual practical completion of a ballot paper is less straightforward.

In State elections for the Western Australian Legislative Assembly (the lower house)<sup>13</sup> the marking of a ballot paper requires that all boxes on the ballot paper must be completed under the Preferential Voting method of selection.<sup>14</sup> Preferential Voting is a system whereby a candidate must poll an absolute majority of the total formal votes (in excess of 50%) in order to be elected to the vacancy.

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10 Federal election to the House of Representatives.

11 Local government election in two wards, Carlisle and Victoria Park.

12 State and Federal electoral events are compulsory and local government elections are not.

13 The exception being Queensland that has a unicameral system, as opposed to a bicameral system.

14 In the Legislative Assembly, electors are voting to elect just one representative for their electoral district who must have obtained an absolute majority that is over half the total number of formal or valid votes cast. If no candidate gains an absolute majority of first preference votes, then the second preferences of the one candidate with the fewest votes are distributed to other candidates until one of the remaining candidates gains an absolute majority.

In Western Australia, for the Legislative Council (the upper house), under Proportional Representation,<sup>15</sup> the ballot paper must be marked either with a '1' (one) in a box on the left-hand side of the ballot, which then means distribution of preferences will be completed according to the group or party that has been voted for by the elector or all candidates numbered from one through to however many candidates are on the ballot paper. Conversely, in local government elections, papers are marked by either a tick or a cross. Not surprisingly, some voters may become confused, which may lead to a higher level of informal votes. Alternatively, such experiences, either personally or anecdotally, may deter potential voters from enrolling. It is this author's contention that a consistent approach would make it easier to educate the public regarding the marking of a ballot paper.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.6. Polling place locations

And as simple as the location of polling places may seem some international research suggests it can be a key factor to turnout. Findings from a United States (US) study of accessibility of polling places provide an interesting insight into voter behaviour, in particular in relation to polling places and their accessibility. Gimpel and Schuknecht (2003) opine that the topic of voter turnout attracts a considerable amount of academic attention, mainly due to its axiomatic link to democracy, and because it is seen as the easiest form of political participation available to citizens. However, if voting is the easiest avenue for citizens to participate in political processes, people tend not to be taking up the offer, with only 51 percent of US voters turning out in 2000. For example, Gimpel and Schuknecht (2003) point out that accessibility to polling places may be a key issue, stating that:

.....commuting to and from precinct locations can be burdensome on potential voters, particularly on a busy weekday in congested metropolitan areas when citizens are pressed by the demands of everyday living: work, family and school. Some precinct locations are more accessible than others, and for the less accessible ones, at least *some* people will conclude that the cost of getting there outweighs any benefit they may reap in terms of personal satisfaction from having fulfilled a civic obligation.

Australian elections, Commonwealth, State and local government, are always held on a Saturday, so there is a tendency not to experience the same issues noted in their research of lifestyle and weekday polling problems. Nevertheless, work patterns and lifestyle have changed dramatically, and as a result the WAEC has started a major review of polling place locations in the lead-up to the next State general election in 2009. Some initiatives include collaboration with the State Disabilities Services Commission to assess whether drive through polling places are at the best possible locations for those with special needs, and whether there are residential communities, mainly consisting of those who are disabled, that can be identified to act as polling locations.

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15 In the Legislative Council, electors are voting to select more than one representative for their electoral region. PR is used to elect a total of members. Under PR a party or group of candidates receives a percentage of the vote and therefore gains seats within a specific region.

16 Changes are before Parliament regarding the count system for Local Government elections and the system of voting used. If the Proportional Preferential System is passed, the ballot papers will be marked in the same way as those for State and Federal elections

In relation to young voters and their lifestyles, consideration could be given to polling-place locations. For example, polling places could be established at beach locations that have high concentrations of youth, and where coastal communities congregate, as well as in the heart of the CBD near the train station and arts precinct around the City of Perth and other areas youth are known to frequent. However, such options would potentially create logistical problems, including ballot security, and electoral bodies managing the trials, and would necessitate the increased use of absent ballots to allow people to vote outside their electoral district. Such trials would also impede the counting process as declaration ballots require extra scrutiny to ensure proper recording of participation and counting of secret ballots.

So from this relatively simple logistical challenge facing electoral bodies of making the venue of a polling place easier for all electors to meet their electoral obligations we now move into the area where possibly governments around the globe will meet their greatest challenges: the youth elector – how do we approach them?

## **Chapter 3**

# **YOUNG VOTERS – TAPPING THE CULTURE**

So what is youth culture and how do we tap into it? How do governments, and for that matter, private organisations, local communities, media, and society in general, engage today's youth in decision-making processes, especially, when traditionally policy and dialogue are targeted towards voting age citizens in an ageing population and less overt attention is paid to the issues and concerns of young people? These are complex questions with no obvious definitive answers.

Research, for example the 2004 Australian Youth Electoral Study (YES), indicated that reaching young people and engaging them in the political process is even more difficult than attracting older citizens. One possible explanation for this, to some degree, is that older electors may have a greater understanding of their responsibilities and higher value of the importance of being involved, as well as greater experience as part of the political process.

### **3.1. Enrolment and participation**

In the age group popularly known as the Y Generation, or the more tongue-in-cheek I-Gen (or 'me Generation'), typically thought to include 18–24 year olds, there are two major aspects of concern with regard to their involvement in electoral events. One is ensuring that they are on the electoral roll, and the other is getting them to cast a vote at election time.

YES seeks to understand the issues and impediments confronting youth voters and what motivates (or de-motivates) them to participate. Their research suggests that approximately 300,000 young Australians, aged 18–24, do not vote in elections because they are not on the roll. Failure to effectively engage this group of citizens, particularly if large numbers continue to disengage, portends serious implications for the effectiveness and future of the Australian democratic political system (Print et al, 2005).

Findings from the 2004 YES survey of Australian senior secondary school students drawn randomly from a national list, and a focus group containing 18–30 year olds revealed some interesting factors in relation to compulsory voting. When students were asked about their voting intentions upon reaching the legal voting age (18), 87 percent said they would vote in a Federal election and understood that a Federal election was a compulsory electoral event. Surprisingly, the willingness of the same students to participate in a non-compulsory Federal electoral event reduced to 49 percent.

At the time the findings created a stir within east coast media regarding youth and elections, with one commentator remarking "the youth vote will affect the election outcome, yet 300,000 haven't even enrolled. Young people's interests in party politics is plummeting and a growing number of Australians aged 18 to 24 would not vote if it was voluntary, studies show" (Minchin, 2004).

### **3.2. Youth issues – adult perspective**

There has been much discussion about youth culture and how to involve this ‘next generation’ of society’s decision-makers. International, Australian and State research demonstrates that members of this group are not apathetic, and that civic engagement is high when the cause is deemed worthy.

Ariadne Vromen, Lecturer in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney, discusses the dichotomy of engaging youth from an adult perspective, and argues:

Both major political parties propagate myths about young people. These myths – ‘young people are apathetic community members’, young people are deviant and do not conform with social norms of behaviour’, and ‘young people depend too much on technology’ – all label young people as a community problem that needs to be fixed. The myths are generalisations that cannot be substantiated, but politicians regularly invoke them when diagnosing deficiencies in Australian society. The myths are dragged out during public debate on the supposed decline of social cohesion, the increasing crime rate, and the increasing impermanence of relationships. The cures politicians propose for these problems invariably involve stronger communities underpinned by a universally shared – that is, adult led – value system. The distorted way young people are seen and understood is related to this adult-centred idea of ‘community’ (Vromen, 2004)

Although not all politicians share this view, it is one generally perpetuated in the media. Youth are not a homogenous group and youth culture means different things depending on the individual involved: whether they are urban or rural dwellers, levels of education, socio-economic background, political socialisation etc. Youth culture will differ also depending on country of origin, family status and parental influences. Therefore it cannot be defined as one type of culture, but rather a hybrid culture of values, behaviours and environmental factors. In an electoral or democratic context, youth cultures affect whether young people understand the link between their participation in democracy, the voting process, and the longer term consequences for them as citizens. In short, the connectedness between their vote and what happens as a consequence is, it seems, not readily understood. As a result, it may be realistic to suggest that one size does not fit all and that information for the youth group may need to be in various formats, address various issues, and use various mediums to help engage this very varied group.

### **3.3. Knowing the past, participating in the future**

In a recently published report commissioned by Federal, State and Territory education ministers, prepared by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), findings involving 10,000 Year 6 and 10,000 Year 10 students from every State and Territory, reveal a worrying lack of understanding about Australia’s basic historical facts and system of Government. While some issues of civic understanding and engagement are complex according to *The Australian* newspaper, the report asserted that 77 percent of Year 10 students and 93 percent of Year 6 students cannot nominate the role of the Governor-General, nor are aware that the Queen is Australia’s Head of State. The report is understood to question the effectiveness of civics and citizenship education, and argues that such levels of unawareness will restrict students’ involvement in democratic processes. Further, students are believed to have a problem with concepts, which are arguably the most complex for these age cohorts, such as the ‘common good’ or how to influence political systems for the benefit of society, arguing “it is unclear whether students do not have such a concept at all, don’t believe in the common good or do not see how individuals can act for the common good” (Ferrari 2006).

Such lack of knowledge of who we are as a civil society, how it evolved, and the role each individual plays as a citizen, may help explain why young people don't vote or act in the common good for the benefit of the whole. Yet the level of involvement of young people in community activities and volunteering is a source of hope, and may suggest less a level of ignorance of politics and more a disengagement from current political practice.

### **3.4. Civic education**

Civic education in schools and other institutions in Australia is limited although historically there have been phases when it has been part of the curriculum. It has even been said 'that recognition of its value has been integral to our heritage'. A major problem, however, has been that such civics courses have rarely been mandated. Two recent extensive studies on the scope of civic education by the Queensland Legislative Assembly titled *Voices and Votes (2006)* and the Power Report in the United Kingdom have recommended mandatory civic education for youth in the form of a specific course (or inclusion in a number of courses) for students in lower secondary education. A recent Australian Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) National Assessment Report on Civics and Citizenship for Years 6 and 10, published in December 2006, raised questions about the effectiveness of current civics and citizenship education in schools. Although concerns about the conduct of the tests have been expressed, particularly about the questions posed, the lack of pre-testing and lower age groupings of pupils for the Western Australia sample, it is not the intent of this paper to question the effectiveness of current educational practices in this field; on the contrary it applauds all efforts regardless of any perceived, or factual limitations.

A comprehensive documentation of the contemporary drive for better civics education is not attempted in this paper but reference is made to a few of the significant developments. Addressing a broader idea of active citizenship in 1989, a Senate Standing committee spoke of 'a crisis which Australians cannot afford to ignore'. Education ministers across Australia responded by incorporating 'active citizenship' in the common agreed national goals of schooling', a stance which was re-iterated in 1999 by MCEETYA. In Western Australia, the so called WA Inc Royal Commission and the Commission on Government (COG) each endorsed more civics education. A Western Australian Constitutional Report in 1994 recommended the establishment of a Western Australian Constitutional Centre as a medium to foster civics. This came to fruition in 1997 by which time it was necessary to recognise the educational role of Electoral Commissions and Parliaments at both the National and State level to enhance electoral and parliamentary education. For instance the Western Australian Electoral Commission established an Electoral Education Centre (EEC) in Subiaco in 1992. This is now located adjacent to the Constitutional Centre.

### **3.5 Society and environment**

Today, in 2007, the EEC in partnership with the Parliament of Western Australia and the Constitutional Centre, delivers a 'Joint Civics Outreach' program in regional Western Australia, with a parallel program in the metropolitan area being provided by the EEC and the Constitutional Centre. The program for both public and private schools takes into account the 'Society and Environment' Curriculum with learning outcomes delivered in the context of 'Social and Civic Responsibility', with particular focus on:

- Participation and citizenship;

- Community; and
- Social justice.

Initiatives such as these seek to improve students' understanding of the relevance of the political and legal systems, and to raise awareness of the opportunities that exist for their participation as informed, effective and responsible citizens. In addition the EEC has developed wide-ranging and interactive programs that give students the opportunity to understand, evaluate and participate in some of the basic elements of a democratic society, including:

- Exploring the history and structural basis of Australia's democracy;
- Appreciating the importance of keeping informed about public issues;
- Engaging in activities involving critical thinking and decision making;
- Learning how the system of government works and how it affects all citizens;
- Participating in a mock election to understand preferential voting; and
- Examining a citizen's rights and responsibilities.

(Actuals about these civics presentations are provided publicly each year in the Western Australian Electoral Commission's annual report).

Evaluation of the programs occurs on a regular basis with assistance from the program facilitators. With limited funding available the programs are considered effective as an outreach process.

### **3.6 TEE course**

In the late 1970s, a Tertiary Entrance Enrolment (TEE) Course in Politics became available for post-compulsory education students throughout Western Australia. A focus of this course was the electoral system for all tiers of government. In 1996 the course was modified to be titled 'Political and Legal Studies'. This expanded the candidates to some 1000 students per annum. One positive benefit of these courses was the publication of resources for the students undertaking such studies. The planned adoption of a course of study known as 'Politics and Law' formulated under 'outcomes education' principles from 2008 will probably result in a drop in the number of candidates. Historically, though, it can be postulated that the availability of the Politics (and Law) courses has made a modest contribution to civic education in Western Australia. Even more difficult to discern will be the civic education benefits of other humanities courses such as History, Geography and Economics. They, too, will be changed in the 'outcomes education' courses of study era but, with other courses such as Philosophy and Ethics on offer, there are other avenues for civics to be touched on.

While there has been a slow acceptance of the need for civic education generally, it has been at periphery, if not closer, to many governments' hearts over the years.

### **3.7 Whereas the people**

In 1994, the Keating Government produced a summary of the report by the Civics Experts Group titled *Whereas the People – Civics and Citizenship Education*. It defined civics as 'an identifiable body of knowledge, skills, and understandings relating to the organisation and workings of society, including Australia's political and social heritage, democratic process, government, public administration and judicial system'. Later, backed by the Howard Government, it led to the production of a range of 'discovering

democracy' resources. This helped maintain governmental support for civics education which surveys indicate is widely regarded as highly beneficial by the wider community. As mentioned, though, such civics education is not undertaken by a vast majority of citizens.

### **3.8 Federal Parliamentary inquiry**

In March 2006, the Federal Special Minister for State referred an inquiry to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) into civics and electoral education within Australia. This was a sound idea given the level of interest in civics and citizenship in the past five years and its impact on our youth. The JSCEM received over 100 submissions from around Australia and undertook public hearings in all States and Territories. The JSCEM indicated their interest in finding better ways to inspire and engage youth and indigenous Australians in Australia's electoral processes.

At the public hearing in Perth, held in September 2006, questions were asked by the Committee as to whether civics education provided by the Commission's Electoral Education Centre involved discussion on democratic values. The short answer was no, given the timeframe available for students on a visit to the Centre. Consequently, civics education is primarily focused on the voting system and processes, not the democratic history behind voting as a civic duty and responsibility. Clearly civics issues and education needs wider discussion and debate. Nevertheless, as learning tools education centres are very effective, particularly for younger age groups. They are interactive and provide a fun and entertaining environment for students to learn about participating in election processes. However, they do not educate about political processes per se, and address democratic responsibilities in a minor way. This is mainly due to the limited amount of time available, as students visiting these facilities tend to do so as part of a bigger tour of other like facilities in the vicinity.

There was some debate at the 'Engaging Youth in Democracy' international symposium held in Sydney, October 2006, about the role of these centres and whether there should be one in every major capital city. Needless to say, such initiatives would require substantial additional funds. One potential avenue to secure the additional funds would be to increase current non-voting penalties to reflect rises in inflation as arguably the current \$20 penalty is too low and has devalued 'compulsion'. The penalty issue is covered in greater detail further in this paper.

### **3.9 Is it apathy?**

In the lead-up to the February 2005 State general election the WAEC undertook market research with young voters regarding the barriers and motivators to voting. This was to ensure that the limited funding available for advertising helped target young voters. Anecdotal evidence suggested the 18–25 year old cohort was the hardest to engage and there was an assumption that apathy was a barrier to voting. Qualitative research was undertaken to explore the breadth and depth of attitudes towards voting, and the response to advertising propositions. The research was informed by a range of focus groups, consisting of individuals aged between 20–39 years of age and stratified into two education levels (high school and tertiary). The focus groups were designed around three factors aimed at establishing and understanding some of the motivational aspects that influence people's intention to, or not, to vote.

The relative weight or influence of three factors, attitude, practicality and penalty varied depending on an individual's orientation to voting. Understanding the relative influence of these factors is critical to encouraging people to vote.

The opposing attitudes to voting from the younger voters who tended to be less educated were:

- Don't care;
- Not familiar/knowledgeable;
- Politicians never fulfil promises; and
- I can't really influence decision-making.

The opposing attitudes to voting from the slightly older age group, who were more highly educated, business owners and family people were:

- Having a say;
- Influencing the future;
- Making a difference; and
- Contributing to the bigger picture.

The focus group study demonstrated that attitudes towards voting revealed three main voter categories:

- **The Apathetics**  
Those who lack interest in voting and politics, motivated by the penalty of not voting, explicitly cited a penalty as a motivator; tend to be younger and less educated.
- **The Marginals**  
Those who believed in having a say, but were also conscious of the penalty, motivated by attitude and penalty, although the penalty was an implicit motivator.
- **The Pro-Voters**  
Those who were positive towards voting, would vote regardless, motivated by attitude.

It was determined that in the 2005 State general election communications campaign, the 'Apathetics' and 'Marginals' represented the key target markets to maximise voter participation. This decision was reinforced by a study undertaken in the UK, at a local authority level, in Bristol.

Bristol City Council, undertook extensive research of young people and developed a publication 'Democracy, What does that Mean?' (nd) highlighting the major barriers and motivators to engaging young people (refer table five). Their findings reflect those of the WA qualitative research.

**Table Five: Bristol City Council report findings.**

<b>Engagement</b>	<b>Disengagement</b>
Access to good information about the issue	Little information about the issue
Feeling strong emotion in relation to the issue	Not really interested or passionate about the issue
Being interested in the issue and ‘what happens next’	Not really interested in outcomes or actions
Feeling enthusiastic about the impact giving their views would have	Feeling cynical about the impact giving their views would have
Having positive past experience(s) of participation (including positive outcomes/actions)	Having not received feedback or seen any action as a result of participation and therefore become cynical
Finding it easy to participate (e.g. in terms of accessibility)	Limited access to technology
Knowing how to participate	Unsure of how to participate

The results from these studies demonstrate the ‘show me the way’ mentality of the younger age groups. This age group is the most turned off by the ‘stick’ approach, not responding well to being told what to do. The 2005 State general election advertising campaign took the findings from the focus groups and the message was encouraging and identified what happened when people were not engaged in everyday decision-making. Perhaps the most important messages derived from the focus groups, both locally and internationally, is that in the main, young people are not apathetic towards politics and democracy; they just don’t understand or associate with it. Which returns us to the point of whether greater civics education, involving younger schoolchildren at high school level, would assist youth to associate with voting as part of a democratic and civic duty.

### **3.10 Apathy not the case**

Another body of work conducted in the UK, ‘The Power Inquiry’, looked at civic engagement within a democracy at a range of levels, and in essence dismisses the notion of apathy amongst the electorate. Power suggested that apathy might just be a straw man, given that participation in community events, volunteering, and socially responsible activities were at encouraging levels.

In the ‘Myth of Apathy’, the inquiry asked: “why is a population that is active in so many political and non-political areas increasingly unwilling to participate in the institutions and processes of formal democracy?” (The Power Inquiry, 2006). In response, Malcolm Clark<sup>17</sup> stated:

the simple message that emerges strongly from the report is that if people feel that their vote will count, they will turn out; if they feel that their vote doesn’t matter or their voice will not be heard, they won’t participate [and it] dispels the myth that low turnout

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17 Coordinator of Make Votes Count, UK,

is merely a sign of apathy or a contented electorate. Instead, non-voting is a perfectly rational response to living in a seat where voting will not be seen to make a difference or where the choice between candidates doesn't necessarily reflect the spread of opinions that people hold (Clark 2006,)

With these factors in mind, a further analysis of the survey of Victoria Park's electors was undertaken to establish the behaviours of its youth.

### **3.11 Victoria Park's youth – an example**

The survey results for Victoria Park by-election discussed earlier in this paper revealed some interesting factors about why younger citizens were less inclined to vote. In the 18–25 year age range, 48 percent did not vote because they were unaware of the election or missed seeing any advertising. This compared to 31 percent of those 26–39 years, 22 percent of those aged 40–60 years and 8 percent of those aged 61 years or more.

The survey revealed that the communication task that needs to be addressed is much greater with younger voters than with their older counterparts. This is supported by research by Elections Canada, the Canadian Electoral body responsible for elections and education. A survey of 'Youth Electoral participation – Survey and Analysis of Canadian Trends' revealed how large the gap was between the youngest and oldest voters was in relation to participation in electoral events (Elections Canada, 2003). Similarly, in the Victoria Park survey only 47 percent of those aged 18–25 years indicated that they were aware that they needed to vote when the election was called compared with 83 percent of their over 60 years counterparts.

Results from the survey indicate that 28 percent of younger voters became aware of the election through family and/or parents. This appears to support Print, Saha and Edward's (2006) view that the 'lifecycle factor' plays a role in shaping young people's appreciation and comprehension of the political process, and their propensity towards participation and evolution in their political maturity. That is, parents and families can play an important influential role in the shaping of a young person's political and civic life. A young person's propensity to vote will increase as they get older, if they follow a positive example set by their parents. Of course, as more parents fail to enrol or vote however, no example or a poor attitude may well work in reverse.

Given the mobility and age profile of the district, whilst the 'lifecycle factor' might have been a motivational aspect in the Victoria Park by-election for 28 percent of young voters, it does not appear to be a sufficient device for increasing participation in general, and might be waning in its potential influence. Considering the 2005 Western Australian State general election, and using the theory of the 'lifecycle factor', then we should expect to see the high participation rate, 94 percent, of mature electors, (those aged between 35–69 years old) influencing participation rates of their children. Yet in the 18–34 age group the participation rate was only 86 percent, so whilst mum and dad might be voting their children are not.

### **3.12 Compulsory voting**

The survey was also quite intuitive in gauging peoples' understanding of compulsory voting. Many voters surveyed after the Victoria Park by-election were unaware of the requirement for compulsory voting at by-elections, nor were aware of the correct State penalty for not voting, with more than 40 percent believing it was over \$100. The results indicated that only:

- 94 percent surveyed were aware it was compulsory to vote in a Federal election;
- 90 percent were aware it was compulsory to vote in a State election;
- 68 percent were aware it was compulsory to vote in a State or Federal by-election; and
- 11 percent believed it was compulsory to vote in local government elections

Surprisingly or worryingly depending on one's perspective, only 32 percent of younger non-voters knew it was compulsory to vote in by-elections (Patterson Market Research, 2006).

So with all this in mind, what do electoral administrators have to do to engage electors in the voting process?

## 4

# ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES – WHAT VOTING MEANS TO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

It is not being too dramatic to suggest that if people are not engaging at the ballot box, which is compulsory in Australia, then there is good chance they will not engage in other areas of public policy and administration. Consequently, public policies that are developed in isolation, that is without citizens' input, can become misunderstood (by citizens), misguided (fail to deliver), misconstrued (tackle the wrong problem), and that left unchecked will result in a society that is disassociated with the government of the day and the political system in general.

The act of voting provides all citizens with a direct voice in the choice of their government, an opportunity to participate and also to inform themselves and others about proposed public policies. The results of the vote give those elected the mandate to govern – or to oppose and oversee those who govern – until the next election, and the responsibility to decide political issues on the behalf of their constituents. Thus voting becomes the key form of interaction between those elected and ordinary citizens. It provides the fundamental foundation for the operation of the rest of the democratic system and, it provides great symbolic value. (Ellis et al, 2006).

If voting declines, then the impact on that symbiotic relationship between the citizen and the government is at risk, which means that so too are the policies, processes and strategies that are in place. In simple utilitarian terms, if democratic systems and frameworks deliver a societal model which offers, what Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) called the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' of people, then it is clear that the consequences of not voting impacts the quality of public policy.

The reason for this is simple. Good public policy benefits greatly from diverse community input of which voting is central, from across the whole of the population, opposed to the support of a diminishing number of citizens. More often than not in specific interest groups the lack of a critical mass of voices has the potential to create serious ramifications for public sector agencies if the community are not engaged, as they will struggle to gain:

- The best possible outcomes and clearest practical solutions;
- Endorsement of new or continuing initiatives;
- Community support for public sector agencies and the idea of the public service generally; and
- Support of the media.

## 4.1 Citizen participation

Considerable research, resources, and time is going into strategies to make voting easier; however, the question remains whether it would increase voter participation or only provide extra mechanisms for those who are already engaged in the political system.

British researchers Catherine Bromley and John Curtice surveyed British electors regarding their cynicism towards their political system. They tested the assumptions that voters' reluctance to vote reflected disengagement from the political system as a result of growing cynicism, and that the reason for the cynicism was the way politicians were portrayed in the media. Their report assessed culpability by the media for inducing cynicism and found:

There is little evidence that cynicism is the preserve of those who are most exposed to the modern media's reporting of politics or those who read Britain's much criticised tabloid press...the fall in turnout appears primarily to be the consequence of both a perceived lack of difference between the parties and Labour's decade long dominance of the electoral landscape rather than any "disengagement of voters from politics" (Bromley & Curtice 2003)

Therefore, convergence in political ideology as represented through the major political parties, and or staleness associated with the governing party of the day, means that new and more inclusive initiatives are required to stimulate interest in the mechanisms that govern a diverse society. One such avenue is deliberative democracy, or as Joshua Cohen (2002) refers to it 'an association whose affairs are governed by the public deliberation of its members' has proven successful.

Deliberative democracy or actively engaging the community in consultation and decision-making is proving to have beneficial effects and many believe it is a necessary investment for the future. There are many examples of organisations who have successfully engaged local communities in their decision-making processes. Deliberative exercises aim to provide the community with access to information, opportunities to be consulted and actively participate in policy formulation and implementation. The rationale and benefits for governments are that such initiatives contribute to good governance, greater transparency and accountability through direct public scrutiny and oversight. From a legitimacy perspective, government policies are more likely to be endorsed and adopted, and of a better quality, due to public participation in the decision-making processes from a wider range of information sources (Caddy and Vergez, 2001).

While these types of processes need careful monitoring and evaluation there are claims of great success in Western Australia. An example is where deliberative democracy was a useful tool for the Western Australian Government in 2003, when the Department of Planning and Infrastructure (DPI) undertook an ambitious engagement process for planning the future of the City of Perth. Called 'Dialogue with the City', it involved over 1,100 Western Australians. The DPI can be considered as the vanguard in this area of public consultation in Western Australia. Its web site states "we have taken a leading role in exploring innovations in community engagement, with 21st Century Town Meetings (Dialogues), Deliberative Surveys, Citizens' Juries, Multi Criteria Analysis Conferences and Consensus Forums.

In the last few years the Department has hosted numerous community engagement activities involving 30,000 people and has distributed around \$400,000 in grants for local governments who have held mini-dialogues, enabling a further 20,000 people to have a direct involvement in the future of their suburb.” There are other examples where consultation has been undertaken within more niche areas for engagement and the author recognises that DPI is not the only public sector agency to use this device.

Such initiatives could be used in an electoral process context, by asking electors their views on electoral events, participation, and how they see democracy being structured. However, while there have been positive examples, not all were or will be happy with the result. There is an alternative (and often covert) view, that whilst encouraging debate is appropriate, the ultimate decision-making on areas of public policy lies, and should remain, within the domain and delegated authority of the agencies involved.

The UK’s Hansard Society suggests democratic debate is not the same as democratic decision-making and that “widening democratic debates to as many people as possible is beneficial, devolving decision-making power down to the citizen body is potentially very bad, and should be avoided” (Hansard Society, 2006). Broadly the Hansard Society is arguing that the inclusion of citizens in democratic debate is healthy and offers the potential to ‘buy-in’ for public policy from a range of voices, but the ultimate power of what is put in place is the responsibility of the elected organisation or appointed institution. But what if citizens want that power? Do they know and understand the responsibilities involved? The question is whether citizens, lacking any significant background in civics, as previously discussed in the education of high school age children, would be able to be the decision-makers. However despite the concerns some are making in-roads into finding out young people’s interest in democracy and civics practices.

An interesting study undertaken by the Queensland Parliament, Legislative, Constitutional and Administrative Review Committee in August 2006, which has no direct Western Australian equivalent, released its report on practical ways to increase young people’s interest and engagement in democracy.

In ‘Voices and Votes’, recommendations were made regarding the use of ‘Youth Juries’, an initiative developed along the lines of the ‘Citizen Jury’ model, in the belief that engagement at a collective level may have greater impact than trying to engage at the individual level. It stated that the Queensland Minister for Communities should seek the views of the State Youth Council regarding the strategy and establish an umbrella organisation, ‘Get Young People Involved’ (GYPI), to assist young people to engage with democracy either individually or collectively within geographic or social communities. It was recommended that GYPI should promote:

- Engagement by young people in regional, rural and remote communities;
- Engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and regarding issues important to these young people; and
- Involvement of Members of Parliament and local government representatives (CARC, 2006)

In the weeks leading up to the Queensland State general election, held in September 2006, Electoral Commissioner David Kerslake discussed in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* his view on what he termed the ‘electoral revolution’.

It was reported that Kerslake would not accept that Queensland's 18–24 year olds were less politically active or interested in politics, rather he argued it was up to Queensland Electoral Commission to get their attention. He opined that “young voters are becoming increasingly turned off by the processes which are currently available to them to participate, [and that] Internet voting is the way of the future [stating] many people do their banking and lodge their tax returns via the internet...” For Kerslake the Internet is an avenue “to make the [voting] system more relevant to them” (Cameron, 2006).

A question needs to be asked, given that we know young people are not apathetic per se. and are more likely to be confused or not appreciative of their democratic rights, coupled with a limited understanding of how their individual votes can collectively change and inform governments and public policy to promote the ‘common good’: *how do we adapt current arrangements or initiate new ones to engage youth in democratic processes?* There is no definitive answer to this question because it is a journey, not a destination. However there have been various initiatives trialled with varying degrees of success, some of which are discussed below.

## **4.2 Internet or ‘e-voting’**

Much has been written regarding Internet or e-voting as a vehicle to cast a ballot, with suggestions that the Internet could increase electoral participation rates from between 2.5 to 5.0 percent of those voting. In a Western Australian context, with a current population of over 1.5 million adult residents or just under 1.4 million eligible electors, if these assumptions hold true and the Internet delivered a two percent increase in participation, then that would translate to 34,700 electors casting a vote and at five percent that would be 69,400 electors. Although these figures are encouraging the central hypothesis that the use of the Internet increases participation is an untested concept in Western Australia. Given that in the 2005 State general election 106,000 eligible voters did not participate, it is still not enough. In the 18–34 age bracket 51,474 (or 48 percent) did not vote. However, if one assumes such an innovation would be more readily accepted and utilised by 18–34 year olds, (of the 106,000 non-voters) then considering the use of technology as a means to engage younger electors could be a useful method of maximising engagement.

The Internet is only a tool to be applied to a task in the hope it makes it easier. For those who do not vote, for whatever reason, in all probability the Internet will be an insufficient drawcard and tool to engage non-voters. Consequently serious questions remain regarding the Internet's utility as an engagement strategy. Internet voting does not assist in the understanding of the political system or the electoral system framework, although it may assist in providing wider access to public information (but the public will still want to engage first). Oostveen and van den Besselaar (2004) contend that “expectations that e-voting will positively effect political participation and turnout seems more a hope and a selling point than something various stakeholders believe in”. They investigated the opinions of the users of the Internet and conducted discussion sessions in different countries with organisers of electoral ballots and “found consensus that e-voting will not influence turnout” (Oostveen and Van den Besselaar 2004).

In a Western Australian context a trial of Internet voting has been undertaken for a fee-for-service client of the WAEC. The results substantiate the previous paragraphs although the author offers a caveat on that comment, in so much as further trials using a range of clients in various levels of government are required to completely corroborate previous research results and evidence.

In the WA example, the client had a membership base of 19,580. In a recent election for a director for its Board of management, the WAEC and the client offered the membership the choice of Internet or regular postal voting. There were 7,500 ballot papers received by mail and 898 electronically. This was 4.58 per cent of eligible voters and of those who voted were 15.48 per cent who voted via the internet. The demographic breakdown was 555 males and 343 females (refer table six). One of the interesting outcomes was that in this trial, it was the mid range age cohort which had the largest number of members choosing internet voting as their method of choice to cast their vote.

**Table six – Internet voting – trial – votes cast by age**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Votes</b>
18-19	13
20-24	46
25-29	70
30-34	81
35-39	93
40-44	90
45-49	96
50-54	122
55-59	131
60-64	83
65-69	31
70+	19
<b>Total votes</b>	<b>898</b>

### **4.3 SMS messaging**

The New Zealand Electoral Commission has already adopted innovative ways to re-engage or engage voters using other forms of technology. For the 2005 Federal election they introduced text messaging as a way for people to request enrolment election packs. The Minister responsible for electoral matters, Hon. Rick Barker, stated in a media release there were 250,951 eligible electors who were currently not on the electoral roll, with approximately 100,000 aged between 18 and 24 years. In his urging of young people to enrol he stated “it’s easy, just free, text your name and address to 3676 and get a form” sent to your home (New Zealand Electoral Commission). The results were quite remarkable with thousands of extra requests for enrolment forms. According to electoral enrolment manager Murray Wicks, in the first two weeks of the campaign the New Zealand Commission experienced almost 18,000 text messages requesting enrolment forms, and almost 100,000 in the five months before the election, with some 50,000 extra enrolments resulting. The number of people wanting to enrol more than doubled. This innovation was considered so successful in stimulating enrolment activity it has now been adopted as standard practice within the New Zealand Electoral Commission.

At this juncture it is prudent to discuss both of these forms of technology. Both of these communication tools enjoy high levels of community saturation; that is a considerable number of Australians have access to them, with arguably mobile telephones enjoying greater market saturation. Whilst the Internet is a convenient option for those who are enrolled and inclined to vote, it may only prove to be a mechanism to encourage non-voters who are not on the electoral roll to sign up and be active. Undoubtedly the Internet is a great medium, sometimes referred to as 'new media', for dialogue and dissemination of information, but consumers of such information are, in all probability, already politically active. Nor is the Internet a truly mobile communication tool. It is typically accessed from either home or a work place which reduces spontaneity.

Conversely mobile telephones are, by design, a truly mobile communication tool which can induce spontaneous behaviour. As the New Zealand initiative showed this tool was quite adept at encouraging those who are currently not enrolled on the electoral register to become so. In light of what we know from New Zealand, with the right advertising campaign, such a communication tool could be quite effective in grasping attention and engaging non-enrolled eligible voters.

Let's assume this scenario, a group of young people sitting at a café, or walking around a shopping precinct, or soaking up the sun on the beach are exposed to an advertising campaign that implores them to get active and have their say. They are informed that it is easy, they can do it from where they are right then, just send a text and the WAEC will do the rest. This sort of spontaneous behaviour might just be the stimulus electoral enrolments need. Given a propensity for people (especially the young) to flick off a text to their friends, it might even become a self advertising initiative as people inform their friends of what they did.

It is true neither of these communications tools will address young people's lack of understanding or appreciation of democratic systems, but of the two, only the mobile telephone offers the spontaneous opportunity to take the first step and enrol. Much more research is required into both mechanisms to be able to catalogue results that underpin commentary and decision-making for the way forward regarding these tools.

#### **4.4 Lower voting age**

The declining number of willing participants in electoral events, in particular young people, has led some commentators to suggest the lowering of the voting age to 16 as an initiative to reverse or steady this trend.

Serious consideration to such an initiative has been active in the UK since 2003, with the Electoral Reform Society launching a campaign 'Votes at 16' aimed at reducing the voting age from 18 to 16. Then in April 2004 *The Guardian* newspaper ran an article on this topic, stating it was on "the UK Electoral Commission's agenda to back a reduction in the voting age to 16. (Wintour, 2004).

The arguments against young people voting at 16 are that they are unlikely to have reached 'political maturity' to express sound political judgement and yet we expect them to behave as adults in many other areas. Further, there is the view that while enrolment could increase, there is every likelihood that turnout could decrease because younger people are the least likely to vote.

The Queensland LCARC, reported on previously, supports the view that political maturity occurs as we age. Informed by international research the paper argues that “turnout is usually low among the youngest category (80 percent) then increases more or less pronouncedly as electors approach middle age, reaches the highest levels of participation among people between 60–69 years of age (around 93 percent) and finally decreases slightly to around 90 percent for the oldest age group...” (LCARC, 2006).

Gauging political maturity is no easy task, especially when there is no clear criterion against which to evaluate an individual’s ‘maturity’. Consideration must be given to the fact that many young people are actively engaged in the market place, both as consumers and producers, and are considered mature enough to finance the political system through their taxes. It would not be unreasonable for young people to cry the old American revolutionary adage ‘no taxation, without representation’. There are other anomalies; young people can get married, join the armed forces or represent their country in international sporting and scholarly events yet are denied the right to elect their political representatives. True, young people can be ‘immature’, but age is no guarantee of wisdom or intellect.

Research undertaken in the UK into first time voters and young people’s attitudes towards voting reveals a level of political maturity that should make elected representatives proud. Henn et al, (2005) note that one of the British Government’s greatest challenges will be in involving the younger members of the community in contemporary politics, because “despite feelings of general powerlessness, young people do appear to have faith in the democratic process itself, and are generally supportive of the notion of elections”.

#### **4.5 Three strikes**

Another reason why young voters should be exposed to political processes early is because failure to engage them when young will often mean they may be lost for the future. International research suggests that if an elector has not voted by the time a third electoral event has occurred, for which they are eligible, then the likelihood of them ever voting in their lifetime is questionable. This has severe implications for electoral bodies as “...voter turnout will remain relatively stable from one election to the next [with increasing participation levels only occurring] as a result of the turnout levels of new voters”. (Ellis et al, 2006) At a State level, (with an election once every four years), on this basis there is an approximate 12 year window of opportunity to engage young electors once they become eligible to vote at 18; before they are potentially lost as active participants in a State election.

Recently the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Legislative Assembly Committee on Education, Training and Young People called for submissions as part of its inquiry into lowering the voting age to 16. Submissions from groups representing youth interests tended to support the notion of lowering the voting age, with a caveat on the fact that youth would need greater support to be able to understand the process and their role. This indicates that if lowering of the voting age were to occur, better and more rigorous civics education would be required to help prepare younger voters. But better education is needed anyway, and the education system is probably the best/most appropriate equipped system to handle the scale required.

In Western Australia the debate was raised as recently as 24 October 2006, when the Greens, supported by the Democrats, added amendments into the *Electoral Legislation Amendment Bill 2006* seeking to provide persons aged 16 and 17 years of age with the option (but not the obligation) to vote. This approach has merit, as the option to vote is not enforced by compulsion and arguably only those who are politically mature, for want of a better word, would participate. In addition, with a lower voting age, younger electors may have greater practical exposure to the ‘lifecycle’ effect, while still under the family roof, before work and lifestyle mobility impacts and adds to the challenge of enrolling and participation.

The amendments would require changing three sections of *Electoral Act 1907*, and are as follows:

- The proposed amendment to section 17(1) of the *Electoral Act 1907* relates to the qualification of electors and would extend the franchise to 16 year olds by reducing the age of a person who is otherwise qualified to vote to 16.
- The proposed amendment to section 17(4a) of the *Electoral Act 1907* relates to the age at which a person may enrol. In line with lowering of the franchise age, this amendment provides that a person who has attained 15 years of age, instead of the present 17 years of age, is entitled to enrol to vote – provisional enrolment.
- A further clause waived the compulsory enrolment requirements in section 45 of the *Electoral Act 1907* so that they do not apply to voters under 18.

However, Parliament dismissed the proposed changes. So, for the time being it’s a matter of ‘watch this space’ with regards this proposal. It may not be in the next year or so, but it will surface again.

The Youth Electoral Study (YES) surveys, found that over four years at least 50 percent of those interviewed suggested they were ‘ready’ to vote by the time they were 16 years of age (Print et al, 2005) The survey’s focus groups comprised young people in 16 electoral divisions, drawn from just under 10 percent of all secondary schools in Australia.

Evidence seems to suggest that there is indeed a high level of awareness, or political maturity, amongst today’s youth. If they feel ready to vote at age 16 then there is an argument that civics education needs greater priority from Years 6 through to Years 11–12. Targeted intensive civics education for 12–14 year olds would mean they could reach some level of civics ‘maturity’ at 16. Certainly, there would be a roll-on effect that finishing education and voting were much more closely related than for those leaving education at 16 or 17 years of age. Currently a gap occurs and young people may tend to disassociate with education and politics, before turning 18 and having the right to vote.

## 4.6 Improved civics education

Greater emphasis on mandatory civics education, combined with voluntary voting at 16 (if an individual wished to be involved) could be a strategy to engage younger people in what could be considered a 'ritual', as part of their curriculum in later higher school years. This could be introduced as a pilot scheme to be tested and researched further and in much greater detail. However, it can only be truly tested once young people are enfranchised.

Western Australia is the only State to have a legal and political studies unit as part of its curriculum in Years 10–11 (15 and 16 year olds), although it is a voluntary unit and students select it as part of their final year's syllabus. Some educators argue that reaching Years 8, 9 and 10 with information will help with recall in later years. They further argue that there could be as high as a 98 percent flow on effect from what is learned in Years 10–11, but learning and cognitive recall diminishes between Years 11 and 12. This is unconfirmed and can only be tested in practice.

Further research is perhaps required to have better comprehension of cognitive ability in students in democratic and civic issues and active citizenship so that information can be targeted accordingly.

## 4.7 Enrolment birthday card

In Victoria and Western Australia, the respective electoral bodies mail out a birthday card, with an enrolment form, to students turning 17 years of age, indicating that they can enrol to vote. In Western Australia it has been demonstrated that this 'Birthday Card' initiative has stimulated a number of increased enrolment forms being returned by almost 25 percent (refer table seven). Considering 2005 statistics, the WAEC sent enrolment claim forms to Year 12 students in September of that year using a list authorised for release by the Curriculum Council. The results of this exercise were encouraging and it was again undertaken in October/November of this year (WAEC, 2005–2006). The statistics for 2005–2006 are as follows:

**Table Seven: Year 12 Enrolment Program Statistics**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Statistic</b>
Number of enrolment claim forms distributed	23,619
Number of enrolment claim forms returned	5,698
Number of enrolment claim forms returned to sender	478
Number of enrolment claim forms from people not on the database	207
Percentage of enrolment claim forms returned	24.12%

What is now required is improved capacity for evaluation and further research to track whether those who completed and returned a form, actually voted at the next electoral event after they turned 18. A follow up investigation is required to identify:

- a) Those students who enrol by means other than the Year 12 enrolment program;
- b) Those students who fail to enrol;
- c) Students who enrolled and did not vote at the next electoral event for which they were eligible; and
- d) Students who enrolled and voted.

## 4.8 Bounty to schools scheme

The birthday card replaced a “Bounty to Schools” scheme where schools were paid a fee for every card received which was administratively complex and far less efficient. For each of the years 2000, 2001 and 2002 the WAEC invited high schools to participate in a scheme whereby they were paid a bounty for Electoral Enrolment Forms (EEFs) that they collected (refer table eight). In the first year of this scheme TAFE colleges were included, but as a result of the poor returns from the TAFE colleges they were not included in subsequent years.

Under the bounty scheme the secondary schools were mailed promotional material and EEFs and they were expected to present the material to the students, and gather completed EEFs which they mailed back to the WAEC. The WAEC then processed the EEFs and forwarded them to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The WAEC then organised for payment to be made to the schools.

**Table Eight: EEFs returned over the three years .**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>
Issued	19,550	16,333	18,990
Returned	5,853	5,568	5,833
% Return	29.94%	34.64%	30.72%

A major weakness of the bounty scheme was that it relied on schools being willing to participate. Where a school did not participate in the scheme, then every student at that school missed out. The poor response from TAFE colleges could be attributed to the informal structure of TAFE where it is difficult to get students together in a common form room as you would in a secondary school.

Significant WAEC effort was involved to establish contacts at the schools, to prepare promotional material and instructions, to follow up and to process payments. Schools were given a deadline to have completed the process but substantial effort was involved to get the EEFs back. There were instances of EEFs:

- being held at the school over the holiday break;
- being left at the school office where no one knew what to do with them;
- being sent direct to an AEC divisional office which processed them without recognising their significance;
- being completed by 16 year olds; and
- being incomplete.

So while some of these engagement strategies could be considered ‘pie in the sky’ ideas and others have been tried and found wanting – what does the future hold?

## 5

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

### 5.1 Automatic enrolment

In Australia, there is current debate about automatically enrolling students when they turn 18 years of age. Currently, 17 year olds are able to apply for provisional, or early, enrolment which automatically means they are enrolled when they turn 18 and can vote thereafter. More high school students now reach 17 before they leave school and a significant number of 18 year olds leave school in the year they turn 18. Automatic enrolment, it could be argued, is a necessity.

While this would achieve the target of increasing youth enrolment numbers, it does not correlate that it would necessarily increase voter participation. This, in turn, could increase the number of non-voters and if this were introduced it would need to be critically assessed using data and analysis. The opportunity will not guarantee active engagement if there is no motivation to participate, or participation is seen as meaningless or unproductive. However, on the basis of taking the obstacles out of the way, to 'enable' young people to participate, there is merit to the Commonwealth parliament considering this strategy.

### 5.2 Political party funding

With public funding now available to parties and candidates for advertising for State elections, along similar lines to Federal funding, parties and candidates will receive \$1.43 per elector who votes for them at the next State general election (in 2009), or before if there is a by-election. The money will be paid retrospectively to parties and candidates who have funded their campaigns for a State general election. Based on 2005 election results there is the potential for the major parties to receive in excess of \$1 million. Some argue that, with thought and planning, political parties and candidates could include electoral 'content' in their campaign materials to assist in the awareness campaign in the lead-up to an election. It needs careful consideration, given that it may require some vigilance by the WAEC, and the question of take up would have to be monitored. However, it could be a possibility, given that the Victoria Park survey reflected that party material was the way a large number of electors were aware that an election was being conducted in their area. It's a complex area because parties might not use funds for the 'common good' but for their own party interests, for example, where there are swinging voters or where they want to build on a solid and reliable supporter group there may be a disincentive to informing all electors.

Of the respondents to the Victoria Park by-election survey 36 percent indicated that party campaign material was the key media vehicle by which they were informed about the election, followed by 34 percent informed by television, 28 percent community newspapers, 20 percent the "state newspaper", 16 percent from previous experience, 11 percent newspaper advertisements (Electoral Commission and parties) and 26 percent to a variety of other mediums

### 5.3 Penalties

Currently non-voters have 21 days to provide satisfactory reasons for not voting, if the apparent non-voter fails to reply, or cannot provide a valid and sufficient reason or declines to pay the penalty, then prosecution may be instigated. If the matter is dealt with in court and the person is found guilty, he or she may receive an additional fine and have to pay court costs.

The penalty, therefore, does provide motivation to vote although the level of penalty may be considered too low. It has been proven, in WA at least, that many electors are unaware of the current penalties for not voting in Federal or State elections and anecdotally, national focus group research suggest the same. The issue of imposing the penalty is exacerbated by different penalty levels in effect in different States which have generally been devalued over time (refer table nine).

**Table Nine: Non-voting penalty matrix**

State	1 <sup>st</sup> offence	2 <sup>nd</sup> offence
QLD	\$37.50	\$75.00
ACT	\$20.00	\$50.00
NSW	\$25.00	\$55.00
SA	\$10.00	\$40.00
WA	\$20.00	\$50.00
TAS	\$20.00	Ad hoc
CTH	\$20.00	\$50.00

This broad variation of fines seems not to make a great deal of sense when, unlike a speeding or traffic offences that have many variables involved, (like how fast someone was travelling), someone either votes or not.

If we look at how the penalty system evolved in Western Australia the penalty was set at two pounds in 1936 following the introduction of compulsory voting and raised to \$20 after decimalisation in 1966. If one considers that in 1936 the average wage was around three and a half pounds the penalty set in those days required someone to relinquish half of their weekly salary as a fine for not voting. In 1969 with an average wage of 25 pounds per week, or after decimalisation around \$50 per week the fine of \$20 was again almost half one's weekly wage. In today's terms, rough estimates suggest a fine of \$20 in 1970 would equate to around \$150 in today's money, still well short of the precedence set way back in 1936 when at over \$1,000 now being touted as the average weekly wage \$20 is not enough of a contemporary value to encourage participation. If the penalties were increased, apart from providing a further 'incentive' for electors to vote, funds raised by increasing the sanction could be used as additional revenue to fund engagement programs. With 1.2 million electors in Western Australia and a 10 percent non voter turnout in State elections, that could equate to around an extra \$18 million of revenue! Think of what that could do for civics education!

Although this may cause some angst among parliamentarians and others, if Australians are compelled to vote and financial penalties are applied for those who don't, then there is an obligation on behalf of governments to equip citizens to understand, appreciate and participate in electoral events. With an increasingly diverse community this

challenge then is not only for greater civics education at school level but that there needs to be a greater investment in civics education across the community.

#### **5.4 Incentives**

In the United States incentives to vote have been used to encourage voter participation. As with many of these engagement strategies the underlying fundamentals for electors to understand the political environment, of which they are a part, are not addressed nor is encouragement to be proud of 'having a say'. In the Arizona State election in November 2006, a lottery prize of US\$1 million was awarded to a voter who cast a vote in the election. The overtones of 'self-interest' can be a two-edged sword, as accusations that politics is 'just about money' rather than the public interest would be more difficult to refute.

## 6

# CONCLUSION

What has been obvious while researching this paper is there is no validity to the oft used criticism that today's youth are indolent and apathetic towards society and its democratic institutions. True, some youth are turned off, but are they really alone? There are city office blocks full of older voters who are turned off and the matter of addressing enrolment and participation issues includes all demographics.

While historically Australian electoral participation fluctuates, depending on the electoral event, high numbers of younger voters choose not to participate in elections and even more concerning not to enrol in the first place. This paper has discussed some of the barriers and motivators to voting and findings regarding how the Commonwealth and State electoral bodies might collaborate to reduce the obstacles.

What is also evident is that doing nothing and retaining the status quo is not an option. Electoral bodies are charged with responsibilities to educate and engage with the public to assist them to exercise their franchise because in a compulsory framework, turnout matters. The way forward, therefore, may not lie on one path. Given that neither youth nor the general public are homogenous groups, a focus on enrolment strategies in the first instance combined with some innovative participation mediums may increase an individual's propensity to vote at election time. In support of the latter strategies, further research into Internet voting and introduction of SMS text messaging, may prove stimulating tools to encourage not just young voters, but all age electors.

So while consideration needs to be given to increasing enrolments and participation in electoral events for all electors, it is evident that different strategies might be applicable to the young. Even within the youth framework 'one size does not necessarily fit all'. If young people do not participate by the time their third electoral event transpires they may well stay outside of the process for their lifetime. So, if youth are to be engaged from 18 years of age, before the 'three strikes effect' then closer scrutiny of impediments for these age groups are imperative.

Research shows today's youth lack a clear understanding of what is expected from them as active citizens and more importantly, how to engage in democratic processes. They are not alone. One can hardly expect today's youth to share and embrace the 'common good' and appreciate society's democratic structures, if society does not extend a 'common embrace' and included them in a more meaningful way. Today's youth need to be 'shown the way' not turned away.

Further if we are to approach an old dilemma with fresh eyes and modern ideas, not the same old mindset and techniques that have been in place previously, then perhaps youth need to drive the changes in some areas of electoral reform. In just one example, as has been the case in Queensland, youth juries can and have provided meaningful input on matters that impact their futures.

New approaches may be vital to assist with identifying and understanding the impact of non-voting, by these young voters, on government policies and administration. Realistically, can governments claim legitimacy if an increasing number of the new

generation don't vote? And, further, if young voters are not enrolling in the first instance, once eligible, the risk of them never enrolling may be of even greater concern. Therefore attempting to engage these young people is important and greater consideration of the merits of civics education, at high school level, in the early years, should be a priority.

In the more immediate future, while civics education is put into government agendas for action, a 'reality check' is required. As governments in Australia have legislated for participation in electoral events by the people, then the issue of penalties needs to be addressed. This paper does not take any position on the compulsory versus voluntary voting debate. It takes it as a given. If Australia is to maintain compulsory voting at both Federal and State levels then the penalties for not voting should be meaningful in contemporary values or at least commensurable to the cost of enforcement.

More importantly, public revenue raised from non-participation could effectively be applied 'twice' to addressing the problem if meaningful and appropriate fines were levied to fund a civics and electoral education 'trust fund'. This would be specifically for public awareness, information and engagement programs.

The scale of effort required to maintain or re-engage electors cannot be expected from existing resource commitments, particularly given competing priorities. But education is not enough. Collaborative approaches to public engagement must also address questions of frustration, disillusionment and disempowerment if the widest possible franchise is to be democratic and effective.

There is much research material available within Australia on certain aspects of non-voting, which is a sure sign that it's been a fairly serious issue and continues to be so. What is required is for electoral authorities to monitor the numbers of those who are not enrolling, although eligible, those who are not re-enrolling for whatever reason, and then follow participation by those on the roll.

Lastly, more collaboration and a more cohesive approach should be taken to applied research that uses qualitative data on the motivators and barriers to voting across all demographics. If electoral bodies are aware of who they are dealing with and what their needs and concerns are, then modern solutions may be applicable to what has been an ongoing issue. Many of these solutions will require capacity for sharing information and undertaking collaborative approaches to trials and research. Better understanding benefits not just one electoral body. It will have positive ramifications for others, despite the vagaries of State or Commonwealth legislation.

## 7

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