





# About the Whitlam Institute

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*Gough Whitlam 2010*

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Visit [whitlam.org](http://whitlam.org) for a digital copy of this and more of our work on Young People and Democracy.

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# Executive Summary

*The Whitlam Government had a significant impact on the lives of young people in Australia and their relationship to democracy. In addition to lowering the voting age from 21 years to 18 years, Whitlam Government reforms led to the expansion of the social, political, economic and cultural citizenship of diverse young Australians. Among these, enshrining aboriginal land rights, laws addressing anti-discrimination and equal pay for women and the introduction of policies for multiculturalism, women's rights, human rights, needs-based funding for all schools and free tertiary education were particularly significant for Australia's young people. Many would argue that these reforms inspired a generation to be involved in public life in a whole new way.*

Forty years later the need to consider and strengthen the citizenship rights and relationship of young people to Australian democracy is no less important. While many young people today are engaged with politics – even leading movements such as the Global Climate Strikes – a 2019 Report Card on Children's Rights in Australia found that Australians under the age of 18 feel they have no voice in this society (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). In the context of significant change, complexity and uncertainty in the ecology, economy and politics of Australia and the world, understanding and promoting the participation of young people in democracy is more critical to our future than ever.

This literature review was commissioned by the Whitlam Institute following earlier work on Young People and Democracy. That multi-faceted initiative generated several landmark reports on the extant literature, empirical research with young Australians and an intergenerational symposium (Collin 2008; Horsley and Costley 2008; Arvanitakis and Marren 2009; Brooker, 2011; Arvanitakis and Sidoti, 2011). The present literature review forms part of the Institute's current policy research on the Future of Australian Democracy and is also closely linked to its hands-on work in Civics and Citizenship Education and the What Matters? Writing competition for young Australians. The review synthesises Australian and international research published between 2009 and 2019 on young people, democracy, citizenship and participation. Considering the way globalisation shapes youthful politics and citizenship, the review first looks at the international context and then considers the literature on the Australian experience. The review has adopted a broad approach: understanding democracy as constituted through institutions and procedures as well as civic cultures and practices that breach national boundaries. Moreover, as the experience of 'youth' is different among young people, in different settings and country contexts, and transitions from 'childhood' to 'adulthood' are becoming more complex, non-linear and drawn out, the review is inclusive of published research on the political views and practices of people aged 12 – 30.

## Key Findings

### Around the world

**Research on young people and democracy has grown exponentially in the past decade.** What counts as political participation has significantly broadened from conventional forms of electoral and non-electoral participation to be inclusive of a wide range of ways in which young people conceptualise and practise politics.

**Young people's politics are shaped by the experience of growing up in an increasingly complex and challenging world and the intensification of structural forces and inequalities.** Dominant discourses on youth citizenship increasingly construct them as 'active citizens' or 'failed citizens'. As a group they are celebrated or derided. But 'young people' are not a homogenous group and many experience inequality, marginalisation and exclusion based on ethnicity, gender, nationality, class or location in ways that affect how they participate in – and are heard – in local, state and international governance.

**Young people are learning about politics and civic life in the context of globalisation, digital technologies and cultures, as well as mass migration and urban transformation.** These are transforming many aspects of civic and political life that have been previously taken for granted. For example, the role of the news media across platforms and in different settings is increasingly scrutinised, along with the capacity of young people – and the adults who care for them – to critically assess the quality and veracity of the information and opinions they encounter. This is especially significant as advanced technology such as machine learning and deepfake tech (an advanced form of digital content manipulation) shape the content young people are served.

**Political uses of digital technologies and media are positively associated with other forms of civic and political participation and greater digital media use is associated with greater political and civic participation.** However, ongoing and growing inequalities in literacy and access to quality internet, digital tools and content in many parts of the world (particularly in developing countries) are likely to have a significant impact on youth political participation.

## In Australia

**Young Australians are an increasingly diverse social group** and the ways they learn about and engage with democracy are shaped by complex social, cultural, economic, institutional, technological and broader political dynamics – local, national and global in scale.

**Young people are concerned about a range of material and post-material issues.** Material issues include opportunities for education, work and the cost of living. They are also worried about post-material issues such as marriage equality and climate change. While they experience structured inequality that also affects their opportunities to participate in civic and political life, they mainly approach addressing issues of concern as a question of personal responsibility.

**Young people aged 18 – 30 years are dissatisfied with how Australian democracy is functioning.** In keeping with the general population (Stoker et al. 2018) they have low trust in formal political institutions and elites and are less likely than in previous decades to be members of parties and trade unions. While negative perceptions of politicians and governments contribute to low engagement, structural barriers (e.g. casualisation of work, level of education, limited or elite opportunities) are most significant.

**Young people are increasingly oriented towards everyday, issue-based participation at the local level and in movements addressing issues that concern them.** They will engage with institutions around these concerns but continue to feel that political elites and governments do not address the issues that matter to them.

**The ‘places’ and ‘spaces’ of young people’s participation extend beyond electoral and procedural politics to digital devices and platforms, and the local and informal spaces of community, school, home.** Young people have higher levels of engagement and trust in local organisations and local government than other generations, even though many do not believe they could have more of a say.

**Youth-led and civil society organisations and initiatives are playing an increasingly important role in civic and political learning.** Young people are increasingly active on issues in a range of personalised and networked activities but do not necessarily consider these to be ‘volunteering’ or political participation.

**Not all forms of civic engagement and political participation are viewed as equally important or valuable to Australian democracy.** Some new forms of civic engagement and activism that are popular with young people – such as online activism – are being devalued in public discourse and even criminalised by law.

**The political learning and participation of young people is structured by education (parents and teachers) as well as work status and gender.** Young people’s participatory practices and citizenship are also discursively constructed in relation to age, aboriginality, ethnicity, religion, gender and class. Moreover, young people reflexively experience structuring discourses and often adopt or internalise them. Popular claims that young people are ‘pre-political’, disengaged or anti-social citizens are reflected in their political concerns and practices.

## Recommendations

The review indicates the following actions are urgently necessary if we are to better understand and foster a form of democracy that is inclusive of young people:

- Enhance research on the political attitudes and practices of young people – especially those under the age of 18 years. Comprehensive studies of young people’s civic and political participation are now dated, and new research is urgently needed to explain the current context and anticipate future trends.
- Extend research beyond the issues that matter to young people to how these relate to the actors and actions young people identify as required to achieve change. These aspects are what inform their current and future political practices and therefore offer insight on future trends.
- Channel research and young people’s contemporary interest in political action into a national conversation on the role of young people in democracy to inform new thinking and commitments to youth participation in policy.
- Draw on research to inform programs that foster more participatory and everyday forms of participation within current institutions and policy processes, including schools and different levels of government.
- Address the socio-economic and discursive barriers to young people’s participation in policy and public debate. The opportunity structures for civic and political participation as well as the way young people, participation and democracy are discursively constructed contribute to young people ‘turning away’ from institutions of democracy and towards local-level and networked forms of engagement. These dynamics most disadvantage young people who are already marginalised in society and delimit the creative and progressive potential of harnessing pluralistic societies for enhanced democracy.
- Urgently address the decoupling of young people’s everyday politics from political institutions and elites. There is a widening gap between what politicians and governments do, and the concerns and views of Australia’s youngest citizens. If, as a society we are to stem the tide towards populist politics, strengthen social democracy and our capacity as a country to govern in the face of increasingly complex and global challenges, then we must work with young citizens who are, after all, among the most invested in the immediate and long-term future.

# Overview

The Whitlam Government had a significant impact on the lives of young people in Australia and their relationship to democracy. In addition to lowering the voting age from 21 years to 18 years, Whitlam Government reforms led to the expansion of the social, political, economic and cultural citizenship of diverse young Australians. Among these, enshrining aboriginal land rights, laws addressing anti-discrimination and equal pay for women and the introduction of policies for multiculturalism, women's rights, human rights, needs-based funding for all schools and free tertiary education were particularly significant for Australia's young people. Many would argue that these reforms inspired a generation to be involved in public life in a whole new way.

Forty years later, the need to consider and strengthen the citizenship rights and relationship of young people to Australian democracy is no less important. While many young people today are engaged with politics – even leading movements such as the Global Climate Strikes – a 2019 Report Card on Children's Rights in Australia found that Australians under the age of 18 feel they have no voice in society (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). In the context of significant change, complexity and uncertainty in the politics of Australia and the world, understanding and promoting the participation of young people in democracy is as critical to our future as ever.

This literature review was commissioned by the Whitlam Institute following the Young People and Democracy work commencing in 2008. That multi-faceted initiative generated several landmark reports on the extant literature, empirical research with young Australians and an intergenerational symposium (Collin 2008; Horsley and Costley 2008; Arvanitakis and Marren 2009; Brooker, 2011; Arvanitakis and Sidoti, 2011). This present literature review forms part of the Institute's current policy research on the Future of Australian Democracy along with a recently completed environmental scan of the activities of civil society organisations and the institutional frameworks governing young people and democracy in Australia and at the global level. The review will also inform the hands-on work of the Whitlam Institute in Civics and Citizenship Education and the *What Matters?* writing competition for young Australians.

This review reports on the scholarship published between 2009-2019 and reflects on the new insights and questions that the field now poses. The review's key concerns – young people, democracy, citizenship and participation – are highly contested concepts. Therefore, the review has adopted a broad approach, understanding democracy as constituted through institutions and procedures as well as civic cultures and practices. Similarly, the review is inclusive of research on the political views and practices of people aged 12-30. Indeed, as the experience of 'youth' is different among young people, in different settings and country contexts, and transitions from 'childhood' to 'adulthood' are becoming more complex, non-linear and drawn out, a more inclusive approach is not merely justified but necessary.

Young people's politics are emerging in a time of significant social, cultural, technological and economic change. As such, the review focuses on Australian young people's civic and political attitudes and practices in the context of the broader

global forces that shape them. Key trends in democracies around the world are also reflected in Australia where levels of trust in governments and politicians have fallen sharply over the last ten years. At the same time, as the global climate protest movement has shown, people are taking action in local and global movements with even very young children expressing political views and participating in public debate. There is an ever-growing and urgent need to consider diverse experiences, forms of contestation, exclusion and difference that are manifest in contemporary politics and explore the implications of these for democracy.

In the review we have paid attention to questions of diversity: in practices as well as how different groups of young people are discursively constructed and reflexively experience politics and participation. There are approximately 1.2 billion young people around the world who live in very different contexts and have very different experiences.

**Their participation, subordination to 'adult citizens' and, in some cases, exclusion from formal political processes and communities have consequences for democracies.**

Such consequences must be considered if we're to strengthen local forms of democratic engagement and achieve inclusive societies into the future.

Young people's politics are shaped by globalisation and late capitalism. While young people often practise politics at the level of the local, their experiences are increasingly shaped by the internet and digital media, social, economic, ecological and political crisis, mass migration and deepening inequality at the level of the national and global. While much research on young people and democracy looks at particular local or national settings, it is impossible to understand, critique, or intervene through a simple bounded local or national frame. Rather, young people's relationship to democracy must be understood through the messy, complex relations of their particular local, social, institutional, national, global and digital contexts. This review is therefore organised first into international findings, and secondly Australian findings. This is not to establish a basis for comparison, but to consider how the relationship of young people to democracy in Australia is increasingly unfolding in relation to other places, people and non-human things.<sup>1</sup>

The review aims to:

- provide an overarching view of the evidence of young Australian's relationship to contemporary democracy;
- place young Australians' democratic attitudes and practices in the global context;
- inform the activities of civil society organisations and the institutional framework governing young people and democracy as a basis for strategic decision-making for future policy work in this space; and
- to promote informed discussion and consideration of young people's politics among policy makers and the general public.

<sup>1</sup> Such as mobile phones and algorithms.



# Method

The review has considered English-language literature published between 2009 and 2019 on:

- ways of conceptualising political participation and identity;
- young people’s political and civic participation (broadly defined);
- young people’s political and civic attitudes including the way they conceptualise politics and matters of concern; and,
- the role of digital technologies and media.

The literature review used four key strategies: combination keyword searches on Google Scholar and Sage Premier; key author publications list searches; bibliography mining of highly cited texts; and review of online libraries of key government and non-government organisations and research centres for relevant grey literature. Combinations of the keywords presented in the table below were used to conduct the search between October 2018 and April 2019. In addition, key research published up to July 2019 was included:

**Table 1. Search terms**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people</li> <li>• Youth</li> <li>• Adolescent</li> <li>• Teen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political participation</li> <li>• Citizenship</li> <li>• Civic engagement</li> <li>• Activism</li> <li>• Social Movement</li> <li>• Political Parties</li> <li>• Voting/election</li> <li>• Union</li> <li>• Volunteering</li> <li>• Protest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Online</li> <li>• Digital</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australia</li> </ul>
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Research on youth political participation is a rapidly growing field and some keyword searches rendered many thousands of responses – especially when a term relating to digital technologies was included in the search query. As such, the inclusion criteria were: book, article, chapter or report was within, or related to articles within, the first 50 articles listed in any search; abstract confirmed relevance; and/or author was an established expert in the field; and/or referenced new publications.





# Introduction

Young people's relationship to democracy is dynamic and directly related to notions of citizenship. In representative democracies, citizenship is variously understood as an administrative and legal status and normative concept depending on the relative emphasis given to rights and duties (Collin 2015, p. 18-22). These notions of citizenship conceptualise participation as the exercise of rights and responsibilities, as individual and communal practice and as primarily organised in relation to the state or a political community – as either legitimating or oppositional. However, young people's status as citizens in most western liberal democracies is ambiguous as laws, social norms and material realities produce conflicting expectations and limitations on young people (Collin 2015). At the same time, citizenship as a static or definable condition is also the subject of considerable critique as globalisation reveals the porosity of the state as a geographical, legal and cultural construct. Moreover, radical theories argue that citizenship cannot be fixed but rather, is *produced through contestation* over the terms, the structuring, the limits and exclusions of citizenship (Marsh et al. 2007). Put more simply: citizenship is 'enacted' (Isin 2008). The enactment of citizenship by young people can be empirically examined by inquiring into how they conceptualise and practise politics.

Studying young people's relationship to democracy is, therefore, less about measuring how young people meet expectations or fall short of particular standards of democratic participation, and more about understanding the changing and persistent forces that shape experiences of youth, politics, democracies and societies. However, research cannot only be concerned with what young people think and do, given that political cultures and institutional arrangements shape how people perceive and experience themselves as political agents and how they access and assess existing democratic institutions, actors and processes. For example, Harris and Wyn argue, we must pay attention to the way '...political structures, processes and debates marginalise young people (not least by legal age requirements for political and other citizenship rights) and are primarily structured around adult interests and needs' (2009, p. 329). These 'adult interests and needs' have historically manifested in mainstream research's maintenance of a restricted conception of politics and therefore a narrow definition of participation (McCaffrie & Marsh 2013, p. 116; Bessant 2017, p. 8).

At the time of the last review (Collin 2008), mainstream research on political participation could be characterised in several key ways. Firstly, it mainly studied institutionalised practices, namely electoral enrolment and voting and, to a lesser extent, party and union membership. Secondly, the mainstream research took a normative view on the 'citizen as adult', with very little research conducted on young people's politics and participation outside of studies of civics education. Research tended to be quantitative and based on established and narrow notions of what 'politics' and 'participation' are. The consensus of this research was that many democracies around the world were experiencing drops in political party membership, enrolment in elections as well as traditional civic organisations such as charities and churches (Putnam 2000). These studies revealed that, while declines were evident across age groups, young people were less likely than older generations to join or participate in traditional modes of political organisation and participation. This was interpreted by many commentators as evidence that young people were disengaging from politics and that liberal democracy was facing an impending crisis (Pirie & Worcester, 1998; Putnam 2000; Hay 2007). By some, young people were cast as a threat to already-existing democracy (Pirie & Worcester 1998). For others, the key issue was the way neoliberalism was producing a growing disjuncture between the participation expectations of the public and the ways in which contemporary politicians, politics and parliaments operate, specifically via the individualisation and marketisation of politics (Hay 2007).

Beyond political science, the field of social movement studies was also well developed, but there was, in both camps, a tendency to view electoral forms of political participation (such as enrolment, voting, joining a political party, contacting an elected representative and membership of a union or similar advocacy organisation) as being in opposition to activist or 'non-electoral' political practices (such as joining a protest or advocacy organisation, boycotting or buycotting companies and products, signing an online petition and culture-jamming<sup>2</sup>). Of interest were the ways in which digital technologies – especially the internet and mobile phones – were influencing how people learnt about and engaged in politics and whether this was further exacerbating a turn away from electoral politics and participation.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Culture jamming' is a radical protest tactic designed to expose and question political assumptions underpinning commercial culture and to promote progressive change. Culture jamming usually involves refiguring an existing logo, advertisement or piece of branding or product messaging to create an ironic or satirical commentary to challenge public perceptions. Memes are a key media in culture jamming.

Debates on the role of the internet for democracy at this time principally turned on the question of whether it contributed to new forms of civic and political learning and action that enhance or erode democracy. Research found that the internet expanded the opportunities for civic and political participation (Livingstone et al. 2005; Vromen 2007), but tended to be structured by class and gender reinforcing the social, cultural and political capital of those who were already engaged (Norris 2001; Vromen 2003; Livingstone et al. 2005; Mossberger et al. 2008). In light of the strongest international evidence, the 2008 review proposed young people's participation in Australian democracy be viewed in relation to broader, international trends: specifically, a shift from a 'politics of loyalties' to a 'politics of choice' (Norris 2002 cited in Collin 2008). This implied young people were more likely to act in accordance with their interest than traditional civic or political loyalties.

In the Australian context, the extant research suggested that few young people joined unions and political parties, and many would not vote in elections were they not compelled to by law (Collin 2008, p. 13). However, there was substantial evidence that young people were interested and knowledgeable about social and political issues and wanted to make a difference – particularly in their local communities and on global challenges. These concerns found expression in a wide range of participatory practices including school-based and government-run advisory mechanisms, community groups and everyday acts such as accessing and sharing information about political issues or activities online. The review found that structural forces such as gender, class and ethnicity influence who participates and in what activities, and that there was a dearth of evidence of the impact of young people's participation on politics, policy and social change.

Since the 2008 review, research on young people's political participation and democracy burgeoned. Many of the trends and shifts identified in the first *Young People and Democracy* literature review have become more evident – and new ones have emerged. This review thus contributes an overarching view of young people's relationship to democracy in Australia by considering the international and domestic research conducted since 2009.



# Young People, Participation and Democracy in the International Context

*Young people who have become teenagers and young adults during the last two decades have done so in the shadow of significant global, regional and national events, and major significant disruptions, as well as deepening continuities, in local and global social and economic conditions.*

Since 2008 these include: the global financial crisis (2008); ongoing war and conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, Northern Africa, Eastern Europe and Central America; rapid technological development including advanced automation; increased migration and mobility of people, information and products; and, deregulation and liberalisation of many aspects of national and international economies. Young people have directly experienced or borne witness to the mass mobilisation of refugees, and inhumane politics of border control in countries such as the USA and Australia. There have been mass shootings and other acts of violence in the USA and Europe: from the Mediterranean to refugee camps in Nauru and Texas to student gatherings and classrooms from Norway (2011) to Florida (2018). Amongst all of this, the urgency to take action on climate change has never before been more widely acknowledged and debated in the public sphere. Young people are expected to navigate and manage the risks associated with these dynamics even as they are faced with uncertain work futures and increasing levels of debt and insecurity associated with deregulated and liberalised domestic education, housing and industrial relations. Anita Harris argues that such realities highlight how contemporary youth participation and citizenship is significantly shaped by the dynamics of economic rationalism, globalisation and individualism (Harris 2011; 2016).

**One aspect of this is that young people are learning about and practising politics in the context of changing democratic norms, values and practices associated with a shift from 'the politics of loyalties' to 'the politics of choice' (Norris 2003).**

This means they are increasingly mobilised by issues of concern, rather than commitment to democratic traditions or ideologies. For example, there has been a rise in ethical purchasing, consumer boycotts and ethical or 'political travel' (Micheletti 2003) at the same time as party membership, electoral enrolment, voting and participation in traditional civic organisations have generally been in decline in representative democracies around the world (Putnam 2000; Norris 2002). However, in the last decade there have also been many mass mobilisations of people online, on the streets and at the polling booths. These trends are most pronounced, and not exclusive, to young people, but are experienced unevenly in different countries and internally amongst national youth populations. Moreover, not all young people are discursively framed as citizens in the same way (Harris 2011; Kwon 2018). In particular, racialised young people, people who have low levels of education, are unemployed or live with a disability

are often viewed as 'disengaged' – when in fact mainstream political science is blind to their local forms of action and broad structural exclusion (Checkoway 2011). The kinds of political opportunity structures that are available to these young people frequently construct them as 'at risk' or 'of risk' to democratic societies (Harris 2011; Black & Walsh 2015, p. 182).

**Internationally, a 'politics of choice' is also associated with an increase in 'lifestyle' and personalised activism that blends leisure, culture and politics (Bang 2005; Harris 2001).**

These can include forms of what Micheletti terms 'individualised collective action' (Micheletti 2003, pp. 25-34), political consumerism (Stolle & Micheletti 2013) and is increasingly mediated by the internet and mobile technologies. Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014) have summarised these features within an 'ideal type' they call the *networked young citizen*:

**Networking young citizens are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations such as parties or trades unions; they are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; they are more project orientated; they reflexively engage in lifestyle politics; they are not dutiful but self-actualizing; their historical reference points are less likely to be those of modern welfare capitalism but rather global information networked capitalism and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment (Loader et al. 2014, p. 145).**

While young people's participatory practices, networks and spheres of influence in democracy have, therefore, diversified and expanded beyond the institutions and political elites of representative democracies, Norris has theorised the emergence of a 'democratic deficit' – defined as the gap between aspirations and the perceived reality of already existing democracies by citizens. According to Norris, democratic deficits 'may arise from complex interactions involving rising democratic hopes, negative political news, and perceptions of failing performance' (Norris 2011, p. 8). Below we explore how these, and other trends, are evidenced in the research on young people's political and civic participation in countries around the world and at the global level – and which inform and shape the experiences of young people in Australia.



## Institutional forms of participation

Globally, the past several decades have been marked by declining levels of voter turnout and this has been particularly the case for young people (Sloam 2016, p. 68). Drawing on World Values Survey data<sup>3</sup> (2010-2014), Sloam notes that while there is little difference in voter turnout by gender, level of education does make a difference as young people with a tertiary qualification are more likely to always vote in national elections (2016, p. 69). A process of voter dealignment has been observed, as 'many of those young people who do vote have turned away from mainstream political parties' (Sloam 2016, p. 68). The ongoing impact of the global financial crisis, economic restructuring, high unemployment and their disproportionate effects on youth have intensified a perception among young people that traditional institutions of governance and electoral participation are ineffective tools for meaningful political engagement (Sloam 2014, p. 218). This feeling of disconnection has contributed to a sense of alienation from traditional institutions of democracy and a turn towards other targets and repertoires of political participation among young voters (Norris 2003; UN DESA 2016, p. 64). Importantly, this looks different in different country contexts (Sloam 2014) and does not suggest a wholesale rejection of electoral forms of participation. Indeed, a European study with young people in Austria, France, Finland, Hungary, Spain, Poland and the United Kingdom has found that 'though it is not the preferred mode of participation of all young people, voting is still perceived as relatively the most effective way to participate and even more so as the most beneficial to democracy' (Cammaerts et al. 2016, p. 110).

In most democracies, young people are poorly represented within formal political structures, with low rates of political party participation and parliamentary involvement: barriers include the fact that, for example, many countries only allow individuals aged 25 years and older to run for parliament (UN DESA 2016, p. 63). Some data suggests that young people aged 18 – 29 are less likely than the rest of the adult population to be active members of a political party (Sloam 2016, p. 71) although more recent studies indicate this may be shifting. Grasso (2017) finds that in nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, United Kingdom, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland), 18 – 34 year olds are more likely to be a member of a political party and as likely as those over the age of 35 to volunteer for a party and be involved in party activities (Grasso 2017, p. 182). Nevertheless, parliaments around the world rarely reflect their population profile of people aged over 18.

**The 'downward trend' in institutional forms of participation is now subject to new scrutiny as research finds young people have and will enrol and vote when parties, politicians and particular issues directly address their needs (Pickard 2017; Sloam & Henn 2019).**

For example, rates of youth enrolment increased at the time of Brexit (Sloam and Henn 2019, p. 85), the Scottish independence referendum, the 2010 Obama election (Keeter et al. 2008). In the UK there has been an increase in supporters and members of political parties since 2015 (Pickard 2017). Sloam (2016) argues that, across the world, young people are interested in 'politics' in the broader sense and that they participate in a wide array of civic and political activities from the ballot box to the Internet, within political parties, as members of student associations, and youth-serving organisations as well as leading and participating in campaigns and protests (see also Collin 2015). A number of studies identify the disconnection between informal and increasingly everyday youth politics and electoral politics and political elites as the key problem (Bang 2005; Marsh et al. 2007; Harris 2013; Collin 2015; Sloam 2016, p. 68). This reflects a more general trend in 'democratic deficit' (Norris 2011) associated with the dynamics of increased democratic aspirations while simultaneously, satisfaction with democracy is waning. In many countries, citizen evaluations of democracy are shaped by multiple individual and contextual material conditions as well as by broad measures of the non-material, such as the quality of political accountability, fairness, and voice (Norris 2011).

**Further to this, the United Nations observes that a whole new framework for political participation and governance is needed to enable change in political structures and processes, institutions and cultures to ensure that they genuinely respond to and include young people (UN DESA 2016, p. 65).**

It urges: 'Finding a way to facilitate youth engagement through institutionalized processes while also integrating less traditional forms of political engagement is an emerging challenge for Governments and policymakers – one which, if left unresolved, may threaten the stability and security of countries' (UN DESA 2016, p. 65).

Common mechanisms to promote engagement between institutions of government include youth participation initiatives such as youth councils, young mayors and youth representatives in specific decision-making bodies and delegates in leadership programs. Via such mechanisms, young people are encouraged to advocate and lead campaigns regarding issues of concern from the local to the global. They are also, increasingly, starting up charities, social enterprises and other 'for purpose' businesses to address social problems such as global poverty, sanitation and education (UN DESA 2016; Walsh & Black 2011). At the international level, youth participation and leadership approaches are popular. These may be more or less geared towards 'youth development' – aiming to build the social and democratic capacities of young people – or 'youth participation', which is focused on intervening in political cultures and institutions that have traditionally excluded young people (Vromen & Collin 2010; Vromen 2012; Collin 2015). Common strategies focus on supporting young people to take part in procedural politics through new opportunity structures and building relationships between young people and adult-decision-makers (UN DESA 2016; Collin 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Survey participants were aged 18 years and over and came from 33 countries: Australia was not included in the sample.

**The UN recommends successful youth engagement initiatives include youth involvement in design planning, development, execution, and in monitoring and evaluation, and recommend that this should be the norm in all youth engagement efforts. (UN DESA 2016, pp. 146-147).**

The UN also advocates for institutional channels to provide direct interaction between government officials and young people, such as the introduction of quotas to improve the representation of young people (particularly women) in national parliaments and other decision-making bodies as well as strategies to promote diversity in the youth wings of political parties and youth representative bodies (including youth parliaments and councils) (UN DESA 2016, p. 151; Kwon 2018). However, Kwon finds that in practice, the UN implementation of such strategies reproduce discourses and processes of governance that privilege the self-governing youth subject, a minority of socio-economically enabled young people and adult-centric institutions and processes (Kwon 2018).

To help unsettle and address these processes that reproduce the democratic deficit (Norris 2011), some argue for a focus on how to refigure adult-centric institutions, organisations and political cultures through co-production of participation processes and their outputs (Collin 2015; Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2016). For example, Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2016) argue for professional development for policy-makers using citizenship curricula that is co-designed with young people. This would inform policy-makers about ‘the kinds of new and old forms of politics young people are engaged in’ (p. 274), as well as ‘enhance democratic practice within education settings, allowing students to learn to develop new knowledge and skills as they ‘learn by doing’ in ways which acknowledge their own capacity and political agency’ (p. 273). While youth engagement that expands political deliberation and decision-making can enhance the democratic value of these spaces for young people, the targets (young people), terminology (active citizenship) and methods (education) of youth participation continue to structure the activities and the evidence that counts as youth participation (Edwards 2009). Regardless of hardship or exclusion, young people are expected to meet these expectations or be deemed ‘disengaged’ or ‘failed’ citizens even when their non-participation (such as non-enrolment in elections or spoiling a vote) may be a reflection of exclusion, loss of trust or desperation with the ‘system’ (Edwards 2009; Farthing 2010; Harris 2011). As such, youth participation mechanisms are also critiqued for the way they ‘govern’ youth politics, valorising some forms of participation and delegitimizing and even criminalising others (Harris 2011; Bessant 2016; Kwon 2018).

As demonstrated by Hay (2007), young people’s fluctuating participation in institutional and procedural forms of politics is not only affected by opportunity structures but also by how they are positioned in discussions of what constitutes ‘good citizenship and participation’ and, in turn, how they perceive the actors that represent these institutions and elite politics. In a three-country comparative study of young people in Australia, the UK and USA, Manning and colleagues (2017) identified that young people expect politicians to be accessible, authentic and honest – while also wanting them to be serious, informed and professional. These changing norms

and expectations are not easy for politicians and political elites to respond to as young people “...want politicians to be ‘just like us’, fallible and capable of having ‘fun’ but at the same time they also need to be responsible, judicious and worthy of respect” (Manning et al. 2017, p. 140). Overall, young people remain committed to democratic principles – they simply do not feel current procedures, institutions and political elites serve democracy well.

## Issue-based, ‘everyday’ and networked forms of participation

**There is now much evidence that the trend to issues-based politics is deepening. Around the world, young people are concerned about and active on issues such as corruption, poverty and inequality, work conditions and war, as well as so-called ‘post-material’ issues such as climate change, racism, state and interpersonal violence, sexual equality, gun control, mental health, bullying and freedom of speech (Pew Research Center 2018, p. 7; Vromen et al. 2015; Sloam & Henn 2019).**

Issue or cause-based action takes a multitude of forms – including involvement in community groups, volunteering, protest and direct action and political consumerism (Stolle & Micheletti 2013). These are more common among young people, although many issue-based and non-electoral forms of participation are increasingly prevalent across generations and there are only slight differences between 18-29 year olds and older adults (Sloam 2016, p. 74). For example, while young people are slightly less likely than all adults over age 18 to sign a petition, they are only marginally less likely to join a boycott, and slightly more likely to participate in a peaceful demonstration (Sloam 2016, p. 74).

**However, young people are not a homogenous group. Non-electoral forms of participation are structured by educational attainment, employment status and income among other forms of social stratification (Li & Marsh 2008; UN DESA 2016; Xenos et al. 2014).**

In a study of 13 countries, Pew Research Center (2018) found that people with more education are more likely to post their views online, donate money to a social or political organisation and participate in political protests.

Issues-based politics is aligned with a preference for ‘project-based’ participation: practical action through local, new community and issue-based organisations and embedded in political networks for change on issues, rather than actions in support or opposition to governments or the state (Bang 2005, p. 163). Indeed, there is growing evidence of project-based participation among young people in countries such as the UK and Australia (Collin 2015) along with more traditional forms of activism and deliberate ‘disengagement’. Importantly, research also finds that not participating in institutionalised

forms of political or civic action can be an effect of alienation and exclusion – rather than ignorance or apathy (Bang 2005; Marsh et al. 2007; Li & Marsh 2008; Farthing 2010; Collin 2015; Manning 2015).

**At the same time, in the last decade, young people have mobilised in unprecedented numbers across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe, Latin America, Australian, South East Asia and North America.**

Spain's *15-M Movement* (Movimiento 15-M), Mexico's *Yo Soy 132*, the global *Occupy*, Chilean students for education and social inequality, Hong Kong students for democracy and other youth-led protests and movements have used online media activism as well as gathering in prominent public places to call for action on particular social issues. In many cases, the targets of their efforts are governments and established authorities and in some cases these movements have been instrumental in bringing about change in governments and social structures (UN DESA 2016, pp. 64-65).

This rich diversity of issue-based, everyday and social-movement action is matched by the range of preferences of young people for different forms of non-electoral participation within and between country contexts (Cammaerts et al. 2016). Youth participation is shaped by local political, cultural and economic conditions and, particularly, the presence of youth-focused and youth-led organizations which often provide the first experience of intentional engagement for young people at the community level (Banaji & Buckingham 2013). Local, regional and civil society groups and, specifically interest groups leveraging the internet to share information, raise awareness, organise and mobilise young people, have significantly transformed opportunities and modes of democratic engagement.

Since 2008 the internet, digital technologies and cultures have evolved rapidly, proliferated and become more embedded in the everyday lives of young people – although access, use and regulation remains uneven around the world (Collin 2016; UN DESA 2016, p. 67; Third et al. 2017). Subsequently a huge amount of research is being undertaken on the role of the internet for youth civic and political participation examining: how the internet shapes forms of collective action and political community; whether the internet has a positive or negative effect on the civic and political engagement of groups and individuals; and, whether digital technologies expand democratic opportunity or reinforce exclusion and disadvantage. The scholarship is replete with competing evidence. On the one hand, the internet is expanding the public sphere: deepening democracy as politicians, political parties, governments and their agencies variously use digital platforms and media to extend the places and mechanisms of policy development to better engage with the public (Coleman & Blumler 2009; Chen & Walsh 2010; Chen 2013). Other research finds online government/civil society interactions largely replicate existing (offline) relations of power and modes of political communication (top-down, one-way) through managed processes of 'eDemocracy' (Coleman 2008; Coleman & Blumler 2009; Collin 2015). In contrast, Papacharissi (2009) proposes the internet is best understood as an expanding 'public space', opening new possibilities for (young) people to engage, act and influence (Papacharissi 2009). For example, Johns argues that the events

of the Arab Spring demonstrate how in some country contexts, the internet and social media provide young people with alternative platforms for experimenting with civic and political identity, mobilising networks and creating international solidarities that reshape political structures, relations and communities around the world (2014, p.77). In this way the internet is purported to have significantly enhanced the informational and network capacities of people and groups, enabling them to communicate, organise and speak back to institutions and forms of power in ways not previously possible (Shirky 2008). Internet-mediated groups, organisations and movements are often networked, often more culturally relevant and practically suited to the norms and material realities emerging for young people (Bennett & Segerberg 2012; Karpf 2012; Vromen 2017). Digital media practices can also reshape the relationship of young people to the state.

The digital practices of young people and the groups, organisation and networks they engage with range from group pages on Facebook to 'hybrid' organisations that use technology to flexibly support activism, advocacy and lobbying (Chadwick 2007; Karpf 2010; Costanza-Chock 2014) as well as organisations that use bespoke, large scale platforms (eg. [www.moveOn.org](http://www.moveOn.org); [www.change.org](http://www.change.org)) to organise predominantly or wholly 'online'. These developments are associated with a rise in personalised politics at the level of the individual (Bang 2005), 'individualised collective action' in groups and networks (Micheletti 2003) and 'connective action' through the formation of loose, widespread and international coalitions of interest groups and social movements (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). These dynamics are exemplified by recent digitally-enabled youth-led movements such as #marchforourlives and #schoolstrike4climate which have had strong local and cultural aspects, just as they have enabled the connection and amplification of youth voices around the world.

These movements demonstrate the democratic potential of young people's use of technology. They also reveal how young people are engaging politically through popular culture and creative repertoires of expression and action ranging from flash mobs, graffiti, culture-jamming, creating blogs, zines, mashups and memes in public space and online (Harris 2008; Hartley 2010; Micheletti 2003; Jenkins 2016). Issue-based participation is thus, increasingly associated with and fuelled by the internet and 'participatory cultures' (Jenkins 2016). Participatory cultures are underpinned by enhanced access to information, opportunities to form connections and take action, and the increasing porosity of work and personal life (Gordon & Mihailidis 2016). While many young people and the groups and networks they form create bespoke digital platforms and tools with which to communicate, create and campaign (e.g. the Harry Potter Alliance), many use the mega-platforms of Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Twitter. Common among social media practices for civic and political purposes are accessing, liking and sharing information – which have come under specific criticism as nothing more than superficial 'feel-good' emotion with little social and political impact resulting in 'slacktivism' and greater 'free-riding' (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2009). However, beyond Western countries with strong protections for free speech and assembly, re-tweeting an image or hashtag may pose serious personal danger as many countries readily harass and even imprison online activists (Graeff 2016, pp. 102-103; Johns 2014). The increasing centrality of major technology providers to the creation and use of civic media also signals the ways in which civic engagement has moved from a 'community

benefit' to a central feature of the infrastructure of networked consumerism and governance (Gordon and Mihailidis 2016). Commercial and government platforms, by design, monitor and manipulate users, capture and profit from their data. From this perspective, critical issues include the eroding quality and manipulation of news and information online (Marwick & Lewis 2017), the capture and use of digital data by commercial platforms used by activists, such as Facebook and Twitter (Graeff 2016, p. 103) and the criminalisation of certain forms of political action through internet regulation and law (Bessant 2016).

Nevertheless, the internet and digital technologies are also sites for the making of new forms of political activism through digital making, appropriation and hacking. These can include the use of existing tools or platforms to generate data or organise civic and political communities through to direct action and disruptive digital protest, such as 'tactics for culture jamming vandalism of online property (replacing web pages with political manifestos), picket lines and roadblocks (distributed denial-of-service, or DDOS, attacks to take down web servers), and leaking private personal information in support of radical transparency (data exfiltration from private servers)' (Graeff 2016, pp. 100-101. See also Bessant 2016). In global terms, young people who are creating digital tools, platforms and media for civic and political engagement are a small cohort but they are diverse, ranging from social entrepreneurs and designers (Graeff 2016, p. 96; Irani 2015); to school students appropriating existing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp to organise or instigate hashtag and/or direct-action movements. They are also 'civic hackers' in youth-led and non-government organisations (eg. Ciudadano Inteligente) and 'hacktivists' in distributed groups and networks, such as Wikileaks and Anonymous

(Graeff 2016; Bessant 2014; Coleman 2014). The more radical, oppositional and disruptive forms of 'hacktivism' are controversial, and even considered criminal or terrorist (although government-affiliated hackers have also been accused of using similar tactics for cyberwar and espionage). The contribution of these forms of 'hacktivism' to participatory politics is contested and sometimes problematic on several fronts. Firstly, they are not inherently inclusive as they often require high level education and digital skills along with access to high quality hardware and internet (Irani 2015). They are also subject to strong discursive and legal challenges on the basis that they are at best anti-social and at worst a serious threat to national security, attracting laws that criminalise particular practices (Irani 2015; Bessant 2014; 2016; 2017).

**For more general users, multi-country studies find that young people are more likely to participate online.**

In 12 of the 14 countries surveyed, those aged 18-29 were 'more likely than older adults to post comments online about social or political issues': 36% of 18-29 year old Poles, for example, have posted their views online, compared to 4% of those aged 50 and older (Pew Research Center 2018, p. 5. See also Pew Research Center 2016, pp. 6-7). Moreover, young people who use social media are more likely to be engaged in issues-based participation than those who do not (Pew Research Center 2018). Meta-analysis of survey-based studies on young people's digital media use and civic and political engagement 'affirm the abundance of positive correlations between digital media use and engagement in civic and political life' (Boulianne & Theocharis 2019, p. 12).





**Most studies do not support the claim that digital media has a negative effect on civic and political participation – either online or offline. Boulianne and Theocharis find that political digital media use is strongly and positively linked to offline civic and political activity but that non-political use such as that associated with leisure or creative self-expression are not (Boulianne & Theocharis 2019, p. 13).**

In keeping with other mixed methods studies (eg. Banaji & Buckingham 2013), the meta-analysis also finds that offline civic and political participation is more likely to lead to online participation than the other way around, demonstrating that there is still an important role for civil society groups, schools and families. Furthermore, the findings suggest that simply increasing the range of online mechanisms for civic and political participation is insufficient to engage young people, especially those who are marginalised or disadvantaged within the community. International comparative studies (Banaji & Buckingham 2013; Xenos, Vromen & Loader 2014; Pew Research Centre 2016) find that the internet is most likely to be used for political purposes by those who are already civically and politically active 'offline'. Therefore, while digital media use for political purposes is positively correlated with other forms of civic and political engagement, it may not mobilise new political actors, but continue to reinforce existing ones.

**Moreover, while the potential for the internet to enhance the civic and political participation of young people is significant, another significant barrier globally is poor access to quality digital devices and access to the internet.**

Around the world the number of young people who have access to the internet is high however, it is very uneven and many do not have adequate access to fast internet or to the mobile tools and devices needed to take advantage of the opportunities the technology presents (Collin, 2016). While 3.2 billion people (43% of the global population) were connected in 2015, Internet was only accessible to 35% of people in developing countries and 90% of people in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) did not have access to any kind of Internet connectivity (UN DESA 2016, p. 67). Young people in different countries around the world report significant barriers to being able to go online, including access and quality of technology devices (Third et al. 2017). More general challenges such as low literacy levels also present a significant barrier in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and southern and western Asia where more than 20 percent of young people are not literate (UNDP 2013, p. 13). Graeff argues that, as such, '...people who have the greatest access and the time to develop their skills and realize their full potential will pull away from their fellow citizens in terms of political agency' (2016, p. 104). Similarly, those with poor access to quality devices and reliable internet will be disadvantaged in terms of developing the digital skills that are increasingly central to political agency and that are shaping political agendas around the world (Graeff 2016, p. 104). Moreover, many online spaces are highly gendered and raced and some young people may also be more susceptible than others to structural forms of inequality and abuse online

from trolls, misogynists and racists who harass and intimidate women and racial and ethnic minorities for expressing political views online (Graeff 2016; Kennelly 2011; 2014, p. 278).

## Surveillance, Criminalisation and Anti-Democratic Politics

As people all over the world grapple with rapidly unfolding digital technologies and cultures, so too do governments. The events of September 11, 2001 ignited security and terrorism concerns which led particular western governments to start introducing measures that, while 'ostensibly designed to protect their citizenry', have had the effect of 'shifting the balance towards security at the expense of civil liberties and human rights' (Bessant 2016, p. 922). Some states are moving to regulate forms of online political participation and, specifically, dissent through legal reform and other regulatory practices, a tactic that 'has a long history' but 'does however appear to be intensifying and involves increasing numbers of young people' (Bessant 2016, p. 922). As argued by Bessant (2016) this may constitute efforts to contain and criminalise otherwise legitimate forms of political protest and specifically civil disobedience.

For example, Bessant (2016) examined the use of Distributed Denial of Service ('DDoS') for political protest, an activity that involves mobilizing significant numbers of computers to target a website at a set time, inundating it with traffic to disrupt the processing of requests (usually without compromising the security of files or databases). Bessant describes DDoS action as 'the digital equivalent to traditional protests like sit-ins, that flood a space, create bottlenecks, disrupt or deny access' (Sauter 2014 cited in Bessant 2016, p. 924). DDoS campaigns have targeted the sites of governments and corporates in many countries (including Australia), 'motivated by interests in securing liberal values like public accountability, freedom of information, speech, and the right to privacy' (Coleman 2014 cited in Bessant 2016, p. 924). Bessant identifies '... the discrepancy between the clear commitments expressed by those engaging in such political activity to democratic values, and the willingness of ostensibly liberal-democratic governments to represent this activism as criminal or terrorist and to use criminal law to repress dissent' (2016, p. 929, original emphasis). She notes that 'many young people have been arrested, charged and imprisoned in a number of countries for their involvement in DDoS activities', and points out that government agencies themselves use DDoS actions in various contexts but '[p]resumably... are not subject to criminal sanction' (2016, p. 933). Bessant concludes that '... when political action is described as 'threatening security', the 'obvious' response is to constrain politics in ways that entail suspending the officially declared regard for such political rights... Such recourse to the practices of sovereign exceptionality raises questions about the legitimacy of our claims to be democratic as well as the genuineness of recent political and policy claims to 'give voice' to young people' (2016, p. 934). Graeff argues that, in order to prevent youth digital activists '[suffering] the chilling effects of government and corporate censorship and surveillance and [being] criminalized or castigated for non-violent political activity', governments should address issues of trust by 'engaging more authentically with youth both online and offline' by 'creating more efficient channels of official communication, but also strengthening protections for freedom of speech, assembly, the press, and privacy' (2016, p. 106).

Such developments concern certain categories of young people more than others. For example, Muslim youth in the west have been identified as particularly requiring surveillance and intervention (Harris 2011, p. 146), regarded as 'objects of public anxiety...whose citizenship and expressions of civic commitment must be carefully managed and monitored' (Harris & Roose 2014). Johns (2014) notes a growing body of research and policy regarding Muslim young people's internet use, with two dominant narratives. Firstly, the 'securitization' narrative concerned with social cohesion and the risk that alienated young Muslims will be influenced and/or recruited by online jihadist networks. Secondly, an emphasis on 'opportunities for civic participation', highlighting 'the potential of online participatory practices to facilitate greater social inclusion and social connectedness for marginalised youth' (Johns 2014, pp. 71-72). Against these, Johns warns against reductive framing of Muslim young people's online participatory practices, arguing instead for a focus on how online participation enables Muslim young people to stage 'new performances of religious, civic and political selves' and exercise their democratic rights to speak and be heard (Johns 2014, p. 80). Johns highlights the importance of the way the kind of 'knowledge' that is produced about different groups shapes and constrains their ability to participate in civic and political life '...on their own terms, and in ways which facilitate meaningful experiences of citizenship and social inclusion' (2014, p. 71).

Some young people face serious misrecognition, over-surveillance or criminalisation that should be more closely scrutinised and addressed. For other young people, political disenfranchisement, identity crises and socioeconomic inequality can also make them more susceptible to radical narratives, networks and activities (Awan 2016, p. 89). Awan finds that in combination with unemployment, poverty, insecure housing, crime, drugs, racism, social marginalization, alienation, war and other conflicts, the experience of being excluded, ignored or demonised by political institutions and elites may lead some young people towards illegal and violent forms of protest including rioting, public disorder, sabotage and even terrorism (Awan 2016). People may even see radical or extremist groups as offering 'an escape from a potentially bleak future or a criminal past' or 'security and a chance to meet basic survival needs' (Awan 2016, p. 91).

Awan notes that online platforms have contributed significantly to the rise and increased visibility of radicalism and extremism by enabling highly insulated, immersive environments in which debate, discussion or dialogue is stifled and extreme ideology can be advocated without challenge (Awan, Hoskins & O'Loughlin 2011 cited in Awan 2016, p. 92). There is therefore real potential, when new repertoires of action – especially online and networked communication – are leveraged, for anti-democratic politics to emerge. When people engage in violent or extremist activities such as espousing intolerant, extreme or fundamentalist views or actively participating in extremist groups and causes, they work against human rights, social mobility, civic responsibility and political socialization (Awan, 2016, p. 87). As such, there is an even greater imperative for democracies to address structural issues such as poverty and racism and channel the readiness of youth to act in everyday, individual and organised ways for the benefit of improved governance and democracy. Addressing the structural drivers of social inequality and alienation (including corruption), engaging with young people's political agency and promoting inclusive

societies can help to address issues of disillusionment and disenfranchisement that underpin extremist and anti-democratic politics.

## Conclusions

**There is a growing consensus that young people are engaged in a very diverse range of political practices and this literature challenges many of the past assumptions about political apathy and disengagement among young people.**

These shifts are taking place in the context of changing citizenship norms from 'duty-based' to 'engagement-based', whereby many people are principally mobilised by issues and commitments to everyday practical and personalisable action. At the same time, young people have not completely turned away from the state and electoral forms of participation and in many countries and contexts they are mobilising online and in the streets, calling elected representatives to account – on issues including violence, corruption and climate change.

Many forms of political participation that young people now favour are rooted in everyday political experience, are mediated by the internet and mobile devices and are articulated, amplified and elaborated (but not altogether fundamentally changed) through participatory culture and media. They reflect cosmopolitan, material and post-materialist values and highlight how young people as a group are highly diverse and cannot be described as a single homogenous group. Across the world and within country contexts, young people's politics and the ways they experience civic and political life are gendered, racialised, classed and shaped by generalised and particularised forms of exclusion from social and political systems and cultures. Scholars also caution that there are problematic effects of self-actualising citizenship norms for young people. For example, the emphasis on personal identity, choice and effort responsabilise young people by emphasising individual choice and effort, while concealing the material forces that constrain young people's power and influence in social and political processes (Furlong & Cartmel 2007; Harris 2011, p. 148). Similarly, the concept of the 'self-actualising citizen' simultaneously designates those who are incapable of flexible self-making or are disengaged from civic, political and economic domains of society as 'failed citizens' (Harris 2011) who are also responsible for their own exclusion (Edwards 2010). As described above, not all forms of civic and political participation are framed as desirable – even if they are 'democratic' in so far as they express dissent and promote debate on the nature of a 'good society'.

**The over-surveillance and criminalisation of young people's political practices are emergent issues. An overall challenge for researchers, policy makers, educators, service providers and parents is to be open-minded and seek to understand the ways in which young people conceptualise, practice and contest politics in always evolving democracies.**

# Young People and Australian Democracy

The status of young people in Australian democracy is ambiguous – there are a range of laws across different age thresholds that govern young people as citizens (White & Wyn 2004; Collin 2009, p. 15). Youth participation in civic and political life has also become a central goal of much youth policy and the organisations and programs that serve young people (Collin 2015; Peterson et al. 2018). Within policy, popular and media discourse, young people are variously constructed as either ‘active citizens’, as ‘at risk’ of disengagement from democracy, or ‘of risk’ to democracy itself (Edwards 2010; Harris, 2011; Black & Walsh 2015, p. 182). These ambiguities and competing discourses do not merely describe but are a significant force in the constitution of the context in which young people are learning about and forming political views and practices. At the same time there is significant consensus that approaches to governance and the range of political and social actors involved in identifying and responding to policy problems are becoming more diverse and networked (Norris 2002; Bang 2005; Collin 2009; McCaffrie & Marsh 2013).

As discussed above, young people increasingly conceptualise politics through the lens of issues – rather than as a set of institutional procedures, processes and actors. Their understanding of issues and how they act to address these is situated in relation to different, overlapping settings, including school, family, community, peer groups, the media and online. They learn about, but also witness, less democratic practices in their everyday lives, which also shapes their motivations to engage (or not) in a diverse range of electoral and non-electoral forms of participation. Knowledge of how Australian democracy functions also informs how they think about and practise politics and this is shaped by broader discourses of ‘youth’ and ‘democracy’, that empower some young people and further marginalise others in relation to mainstream politics. How young people conceptualise politics as well as the institutional, local community and networked opportunity structures for participation all shape the relationship young people have with democracy.

## Conceptualising politics

Australian research has continued to demonstrate that a restrictive understanding of politics has perpetuated a restrictive definition of participation in much political science research, policy and education (Arvanitakis & Marren 2009; Collin 2009, 2015; McCaffrie & Marsh 2013; Bessant 2017, p. 8).

However, in contrast with an ‘enlightenment notion of politics’, young people are increasingly adopting an ethico-political practice or ‘micro-politics’ (Manning 2013) that is experienced through the lens of issues (Harris et al. 2010; Collin 2015; Vromen et al. 2015). This has led to more research that focuses on the issues that matter to young people as well as their perceptions of different actors and institutions of democracy. Improved understanding of how young people conceptualise politics has helped the field to surface, study and explain diverse and sometimes new forms

of participation as well as engagement in and adaptation of existing repertoires.

## Issues

Young people in Australia are concerned about a range of issues that shape their attitudes towards politics and participation. In the last ten years, studies and industry surveys have sought to better understand what young people care about, their personal concerns and the national issues they want to see change on. In a self-selecting sample of 970 young people in Victoria, Harris and colleagues found the top five personal concerns for young people were: getting a good job in the future, doing well in studies, health and wellbeing, being independent and lack of money. The top five national concerns for respondents were War/Terrorism, Environmental Issues, Good Government/Governance, Employment and Poverty (Harris et al. 2010, pp. 17-18). A 2018 survey by youth radio station, Triple J, found that Mental Health was the most-raised issue by young people along with Housing Affordability, Employment and Education (Triple J 2018). In a representative sample of 1,222 Australian young people aged 16 – 29, Vromen and colleagues found that when asked for their top three issues respondents wanted to see addressed in the coming 5 years, the most frequently nominated issues were Education (27%), Immigration (27%), Environment and Climate (26%), Health (25%), Economy (23%) and Work (20%) (Vromen et al. 2015, p. 538).

Similarly, in 2016 Youth Action and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth surveyed a self-selecting sample of 3,369 12 – 25 year olds. While not representative, and skewed towards females, respondents came from across Australia, metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas and a range of levels of education, employment status and cultural backgrounds. When asked to self-nominate three issues they most wanted addressed at the 2016 election, respondents were most concerned about the issues of Asylum Seekers (21%), Marriage Equality (19%) and Climate Change (16%). When asked to rank the importance of a range of federal policy areas, respondents ranked the following as ‘extremely important’: Education (61.7%); Health (52.7%); Environment (51.4%); Social Justice (51.0%); and Employment (43.0%) (Sealey & McKenzie 2016, p. 14).

The same study collected qualitative responses which elucidate in more detail what young people want in these areas: quality, affordable and accessible education and health care (especially for young people who live in regional and under-served metropolitan areas); direct action on climate change including tax and emission-trading schemes, clean energy investment and ending coal mining; policies to promote equality in opportunities, wealth and outcomes generally as well as for specific groups including people identifying as LGBTQI, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refugees, people experiencing homelessness or living with disability; and, for improved employment opportunities with better levels of remuneration, training and longer-term security (Sealey & McKenzie 2016, pp. 15-17). Concern for issues of equality and discrimination were further evidenced by the active engagement of young people in the campaign and turnout for the 2017 poll on marriage equality (McAllister & Snagovsky 2018).

Over five years, Mission Australia surveys of young people demonstrate the consistency of issues of concern to young people (when asked for the top three most important issues

for Australia) and suggests a shift towards issues reflecting everyday lived experience and away from socio-economic structural concerns. The top five issues for the last five years are captured in the table below.

**Table 2. Most important issues affecting Australia, Mission Australia Youth Survey 2014 – 2018 (Fildes et al. 2014; Cave et al. 2015; Bailey et al. 2016; Bullock et al. 2017; Carlisle et al. 2018)**

2014 (13,600)	2015 (18,994)	2016 (21,846)	2017 (24,055)	2018 (28,286)
Politics and Societal Values Economy and Financial Issues Alcohol and Drugs Equity and Discrimination Mental Health	Alcohol and Drugs Equity and Discrimination Economy and Financial Issues Politics Population Issues	Alcohol and Drugs Equity and Discrimination Mental Health International Relations Population Issues	Mental Health Alcohol and Drugs Equity and Discrimination International Relations Education	Mental Health Alcohol and Drugs Equity and Discrimination Bullying Crime, Safety and Violence

Concerns about Equity and Discrimination, Alcohol and Drugs and Mental Health have featured consistently. Economic and Financial concerns, International Relations and Safety and Violence have also been prominent priorities at different times.

Overall, there is very little comparative research on which issues matter to different generations and how these may change over time. However, the Life Patterns Project has looked at the issues that two different age cohorts reported as of greatest importance to Australia in 2017 (Chesters et al. 2018). The study followed two groups: Cohort 1 – young people who left school in 1991 ('Gen X'); and, Cohort 2 – those who left school in 2006 ('Gen Y' or 'Millennials'). While representing the experiences and views of 'older' 'young

people', this valuable comparative data offers unique insights into the similarities and differences in the issues that matter to different generations of Australians. The study found that almost 40% of respondents from Cohort 1 (n=250) and Cohort 2 (n=395) considered 'the Environment' as one of their top three issues of concern (Chesters et al. 2018, p. 3). For Cohort 1 the other key issues of concern were Cost of Living (21.1%), Security/Terrorism (18.8%), and the Economy and Education (both 16.8%); for Cohort 2, the other most important issues facing Australia were lack of jobs/Job Security (33.9%), Drug Abuse (24.3%), Housing Affordability (24%) and Health (19%) (Chesters et al. 2018, p. 3). Cost of living was a concern for both cohorts and the significant proportion of Cohort 2 concerned with job opportunities and



housing affordability point to the significance of social context for shaping the issues that concern young people (Chesters et al. 2018, p. 16). Bell et al. (2008) also found that the views on the issues that 'should' matter to young people differed. While policy makers primarily identified 'youth issues' such as Education, Housing, Health and Mental Health as priorities for young people, young people themselves offered a much wider range of local and global issues – including Racism and Exclusion from Public Space, as well as Environment and Immigration/Refugee Policy (Bell et al. 2008; Vromen & Collin 2010).

These studies demonstrate that young people are concerned about a range of material and 'post-material' issues. Many of these relate to matters they likely encounter in their everyday lives – concerns relating to health and wellbeing, access to education, employment and housing. Young people also consistently identify 'post-material' concerns including a range of 'social justice issues', the environment/ climate change and international relations. Vromen et al. (2015) highlight that more than the issues per se, it is the way young people understand issues and who is responsible for effecting change that matters most for democracy. In their study, Vromen et al. argue that the issues identified by young people broadly relate to concerns regarding equality and inequality. They find that, in contrast with notions of structural disadvantage and inequality, young people were more likely to conceptualise inequality in terms of personal responsibility and choice, and equality in terms of lifestyle politics (2015, p. 545). This, the authors argue, illustrates how the way young people think about politics is shaped by dominant discourses on social, economic and cultural change, with implications for the way political participation may evolve (Vromen et al. 2015, p. 545). While personalisable and individualised collective action may become more common, the enduring problem remains how to connect young people's issue-based and everyday politics and localised experiences with institutional processes of governance and public policy making – particularly at the federal level (Vromen & Collin 2010; Collin 2015; Vromen et al. 2015).

## Attitudes towards democracy

Generally speaking, studies of voting and electoral institutions in Australia have shown 'a reasonably long-standing pattern of satisfaction with democracy' (Gauja 2015, p. 24).

**However, in the last decade Australians have become deeply unhappy about democracy, and levels of trust in government and politicians in Australia are at an all-time low (Stoker et al. 2018, p. 9).**

There is mixed evidence as to whether this is more pronounced for younger Australians. A significant number of Australians aged under 30 are either neutral or dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Australia. In a nationally representative survey conducted in 2018, Stoker and colleagues (2018) found that among 'Gen Z' (born after 1995) 26% were fairly or very dissatisfied with democracy and 34% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Among Millennials (born 1980 – 1994), 30% were fairly or very dissatisfied with democracy and 32% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (Stoker et al. 2018, p. 28). Young

people report low levels of trust in institutions such as the federal and state parliaments and political parties (Fraillon et al. 2017, p. 64; Stoker et al. 2018, p. 29).

**However, young people aged 18 – 25 years have the highest levels of trust in federal and local level governments of all voting-age generation-groups (Stoker et al. 2018, p. 29).**

Against charges of being disengaged or frivolous, young Australians *along with older generations* are engaged but dissatisfied with democracy (Stoker et al. 2017), even if young Australians are more likely than older people to question whether democracy is the best form of government. Annual Lowy Institute Polls reveal that, since 2012, there have been only two polls where a majority of 18 to 29-year-old Australians regarded democracy as preferable to other forms of government (54% in 2016 and 52% in 2017). Minority preference for democracy ranged from a low of 39% in 2012 to highs of 49% in 2015 and 2018 (Lowy Institute 2018, 2017, 2016). While these findings are important, these studies do not explain *why* young people report these views or what such views might mean.

Ambivalence to democracy as a system of governance is influenced by a perception that politicians do not represent the public's opinions and interests (Hay 2007). Young people are more concerned about their lack of representation within politics than any other generation (Stoker et al. 2018, p. 42).

**In the 2018 UN Youth Australia consultation, less than one in five young people felt as though their opinions are represented by politicians in government (Washington 2018, p. 13).**

Furthermore, in a cross-sectional survey of 11,000 self-selected young people by the national youth radio station, Triple J, only 7% of young people were confident that politicians are working in the interests of young people (Triple J, 2018). Along with older generations, young people aged 18 – 25 believe that one of the most negative features of Australian democracy is that 'Politicians don't deal with the issues that really matter' (Stoker et al. 2018, p. 42).

Such insights should inform institutional improvements, although more extensive, nuanced and qualitative investigations into why young people hold particular attitudes towards democracy is required (Gauja 2015, pp. 23-24; Walsh 2016, p. 112). For example, qualitative research finds that young people are disillusioned with political institutions and actors who are unresponsive to their needs and concerns, but they are not wholly opposed to or dismissive of the role of government and formal processes of democracy (Collin 2009; Harris et al. 2010; Collin 2015). Moreover, while very few young Australians are members of political parties, media reporting suggests that there may be positive improvements in the numbers of young people running for office with a record high number of people under 30 years of age registering as candidates in the 2019 Australian federal election (Whyte 2019). At the same time, many young people also have inclusive attitudes towards diverse non-government actors who they think should participate in formulating responses to social issues and public policy problems (Collin 2009, 2015;

Walsh 2011; Walsh & Black 2019; Manning et al. 2017). According to the latest World Values Survey, people aged 25 – 34 are almost twice as likely as 70 – 74 year olds to think that experts, not governments, should make decisions regarding what is best for the country (Sheppard et al. 2018).

The research demonstrates that young people identify with and engage with different issues in relation to different *settings* in which politics plays out. While there are debates about the contemporary importance of traditional influences on political socialisation (Martin & Pietsch 2013, pp. 220–221), studies find that governments and political parties, parents, friends, community organisations, as well as educational settings and the media (legacy and ‘new’) all play an important role in the way young people learn about and participate in politics and democracy (e.g. Harris & Wyn 2009; Vromen 2012; Flanagan 2013; Collin 2015; Vromen et al. 2016; Laughland-Booÿ et al. 2018, p. 145). The following sections therefore consider the literature on young people’s political and civic engagement in relation to *Institutions*, *Local Community* and *Networks and Media*.

## Institutions

### Elections and voting

Voting enrolment and turnout have traditionally been regarded as key measures of political engagement.

**Australia is regarded as a ‘world leader’ when it comes to young people voting (ARACY 2018, p. 42), due largely to a system of compulsory voting.**

The Australian Electoral Commission (‘AEC’) aims to ensure that at least 95% of eligible voters are on the electoral roll at all times (AEC 2019a), with a national youth enrolment rate target of 80% (AEC 2019b). The youth enrolment rate has risen in recent years: after sitting at 81.3% in March 2016, the rate increased to 87.4% in the lead up to the 2016 Federal Election, and hit 88.5% in September 2017 after 65,274 18 to 24 year olds enrolled to vote in the lead up to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (AEC 2017).

**Enrolment rates sit at their highest ever levels in Australia in 2019, with an estimated 88.8% of eligible 18-24 year olds and 96.8% of the overall eligible population enrolled to vote ahead of the federal election in May 2019 (AEC 2019c).**

Turnout to elections is much harder to calculate and there remains a persistent concern that young people’s electoral participation in Australia is a problem to be fixed (Martin, 2013, p. 223). This is, in part, fuelled by surveys that find some young people value voting less than the broader population (Hill & Rutledge-Prior 2016, p. 412), that young people likely play a key role in the large and growing informal vote in national elections (Hill & Rutledge-Prior 2016, p. 412) and that many older young people are ambivalent about democracy as a system of government (Lowy Institute 2015). Kathy Edwards notes that ‘electoral participation has been positioned as a problem to be addressed by education policy,

on the assumption that apathy is the problem, and that there is a clear redress for this through the provision of knowledge’ (2009, p. 33). She highlights that young people as a group are diverse, both in terms of personal and demographic factors as well as the ways in which they engage, and that ‘choices’ about enrolling and voting are influenced by a range of factors (including housing, employment, and subjective experiences of participation and citizenship) that can prove to be barriers to the franchise, particularly for marginalised and disadvantaged young people. She argues that young people’s electoral participation should accordingly be an issue of social and welfare policy as well as education policy (Edwards 2009, p. 34). However, debates about what drives young people’s dis/engagement in electoral politics tend to focus on what young people know or do and how this can be improved to strengthen enrolment and turnout.

Suggestions commonly include procedural changes such as easier and more efficient voter registration, options for e-voting and easier postal voting (McAllister 2016, p. 1231) as well as longer voting periods such as one week voting, which young people support (Martin 2013, p. 224). There is also a recurring debate on lowering the voting age to 16 and as recently as 2018, the Australian parliament has considered a bill proposing to, among other things, lower the minimum (non-compulsory) voting age to 16 and allow 14 and 15 year olds to be added to the electoral roll (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). Such proposals cannot easily be data-informed due to a lack of data on the opinions of those young people who stand to be most affected by such a change (young people under the age of 18 years). Instead, arguments for expansion of the franchise tend to take a rights-based approach, whereas, those who oppose lowering the voting age tend to draw on developmental psychology and neuroscience to argue that adolescent brains cannot manage the rational and logical processes required for voting (Bessant et al. 2018). According to Australia’s leading experts in electoral participation, there is simply not enough evidence to determine the effect of lowering the voting age on the political engagement of young people and Australian democracy more broadly (McAllister 2014).

Despite this, the majority of research continues to focus on factors believed to influence voter turn-out and how people vote. Using data from the 2013 Australian Election Study (AES) survey, McAllister found that ‘[p]olitical knowledge and internet use are both important resources in determining electoral participation’ (McAllister 2016, p. 1231). He therefore argues that as knowledge and internet use are more important resources for the young than for the general population as a whole, using the internet to increase political knowledge among the young could raise levels of youth electoral participation.

While some analyses suggest young people report feeling less efficacious and competent about voting (Hill & Rutledge-Prior 2016, p. 412), they also speculate that young people are more likely to use their vote to convey protest and dissatisfaction as a consequence of increased preference for everyday and new forms of participation (Hill & Rutledge-Prior 2016, pp. 412–413). Qualitative research with young people prior to the 2013 federal election suggests that young voters are diverse and reflect a range of strategies when making decisions about how to use their vote. Laughland-Booÿ et al. (2018) identified five distinct voting strategy typologies: ‘Impulsive’; ‘Collective’; ‘Instinctive’; ‘Principled’; and ‘Pragmatic’ (p.147), demonstrating the diversity of young Australian voters and

challenging claims that most young people are disengaged from electoral forms of participation. Their findings reveal some young voters to be remarkably sophisticated and discerning, while others use alternative strategies, including relying on the views of others, to make decisions about how they vote (Laughland-Booy et al. 2018, p. 155).

Analysis of pre-polling data further indicates that young voters may in fact be an emergent 'fluid electorate' whose vote changes according to the ways in which major events and key issues are dealt with by parties and candidates (Brooker 2011). More recent research argues young people do not vote as a block due to 'differences by gender, age, political preference, state, metropolitan versus non-metropolitan, marginal or non-marginal electorates and demographic characteristics such as Indigenous heritage, student status or employment status' (Sealey & McKenzie 2016, p. 3). Brooker's analysis of Newspoll Quarterly Data over 14 years from 1996 – 2010 found that there are likely some structural drivers of voting patterns, such as gender. His analysis of past intention to vote polling data found young women are more likely to express support for progressive parties and candidates although young men may vote as a block around key concerns, such as the economy. Brooker notes that, given young people aged 18 – 30 make up 30% of the population, they likely have had a substantial, 'possibly determinative', impact on the outcomes of the elections of 2001, 2004, 2007 and 2010 (Brooker 2011). This highlights that young voters matter and that their engagement can signal broader political shifts and trends and should be taken seriously – along with their interest in elections and voting. Sealey and McKenzie (2016) found that in a self-selecting sample of young people aged 12 – 25, only 10% indicated that they weren't interested in voting in the upcoming Federal Election<sup>4</sup>: this intention decreased with age, with 16% of those aged 12-16, 10% of those aged 17-19 and 4% of 20-25 year olds not interested (Sealey & McKenzie 2016, p. 8).

Martin and Pietsch (2013) investigated the impact of generational effects on voting behaviour, drawing on Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys (ANPAS) (1967-1979) and Australian Election Study (AES) surveys (1987-2007). They found that 'Generations X and Y are at least twice as likely to support a minor party compared to the depression/war generation', noting that '[t]his finding suggests that there are strong generational effects at work and that the propensity of younger generations to vote for minor parties is much higher today than it was in the past' (Martin & Pietsch 2013 p. 217). Moreover, they purport that '[i]f generational effects continue to work as they have been shown to here, minor party support will increase as generations who are unwilling to vote for minor parties are replaced by generations who are much more willing to vote for minor parties and this may disrupt the stability of the Australian party system over time' (Martin & Pietsch 2013, p. 218). Their research also showed that values are more important than which generation people belong to in terms of whether they will vote for a minor party. Education and political trust were also factors, but 'postmaterialism and generational effects exert the strongest influence on minor party voting' (Martin & Pietsch 2013, pp. 219 – 220).

## Political parties and unions

Much like the general population, young people's membership of political parties is in decline (Cross & Gauja 2014). While individual political parties in Australia do not publish statistics regarding young people's membership or involvement in party activities, including their federal and state 'youth wings', surveys indicate that the percentage of young people aged 18 – 29 years who are party members is around 3% (Harris et al. 2010, p. 19; Martin 2012, p. 217).

**This means there are approximately half as many party members who are aged under 30 years as there are those aged over 60 years (10%) (Martin 2012, p. 217).**

Cross and Gauja (2014) conclude that '[a]s a form of participation oriented towards 'citizen duty' and institutionalised politics, party membership may no longer meet changing social preferences for more individualised and ad hoc political engagement' (Cross & Gauja 2014, pp. 612-613). Some parties are experimenting with digital and procedural innovations to reinvigorate and expand their membership base, but '[s]cholars of political participation, particularly young people's participation in politics, are less certain of the ability of formal political institutions such as parties to engage a new type of politically active citizen' (Gauja 2015, p. 30).

While very few young people are joining political parties, they are not completely 'turning away' from them. While low, young people aged 18 – 30 report higher levels of trust in political parties than any other generation in Australia (Stoker et al. 2018, p. 29) and up to three quarters of young people identify with a political party (Martin 2012; Hill & Rutledge-Prior 2016). Nevertheless, there are concerns that party alignment – which has historically been 'an important correlate of propensity to vote' (Hill & Rutledge-Prior 2016, p. 406) – is declining among young people. Among a 2016 self-selecting sample of 3,369 young Australians, 57% of respondents were not aligned with any political party (Sealey & McKenzie 2016, p. 2).

As legal frameworks and business cultures have produced a global shift away from long-term, permanent, high-quality employment towards precarious, short-term, low-paid work, there has also been a global decline in youth participation in trade unions (UN DESA 2016, p. 59) including in Australia. Around 4% of Australian 15-19 year olds and 7% of 20-24 year olds are trade union members (Harris et al. 2010, p. 19; ABS 2017a).

**Young people are also less likely than older people to be union members, in part because they are much more likely to be working on a casual and/or part-time basis (Gilfillan & McGann 2018).**

<sup>4</sup> The question asked: 'In the 2016 Federal Election, do you know who you would vote for?'

The changing nature of work and differential labor market inclusion and exclusion of young people present new challenges to unions (Huziak 2016, p.55). Employment platforms and practices which transcend and subvert regulatory environments (e.g. Uber), extreme casualisation and precarity of young workers, especially migrants, discourage workers from knowing and defending their rights. Media reports indicate that Australian unions are exploring ways to increase membership rates among young workers, including considering free or reduced membership fees and engaging with young people through the school system and social media (Hannon, 2018). Other initiatives aimed at engaging young people have included 'Hospovoice', Australia's first 'digital union' (<https://www.hospovoice.org.au/>). Unions, along with political parties, must also find language, strategies and membership models to bridge the gap between young people's everyday issues and the political arenas from which they are structurally excluded (Edwards 2009; Harris et al. 2010).

## Youth development, leadership and participation programs

In Australia there is a now-established tradition of youth programs aimed at socialising young people into civic and social norms and roles or promoting their 'active citizenship'. Youth development and leadership programs tend to focus on the growth and development of individual young people and groups, to address social problems or support other interventions (Collin 2008; Vromen 2012; Wierenga & Wyn 2015). Youth leadership programs aiming to promote the 'active citizenship' of individuals are often competitive and prestigious. Broader youth participation programs have burgeoned over the last decade with a strong emphasis on creating the conditions for young people to participate in community, government and service decision-making with greater emphasis placed on partnerships and sharing power with young people (Collin 2015). Research has found that these initiatives, whether *targeted* (high-achieving or service users) or *universal* (aimed at the 'general' youth population) tend to attract educated, high achieving young people from English-speaking backgrounds (Bell et al. 2008).

Many 'active citizenship' programs also focus on young people who are constructed as 'at risk' of disengagement from 'active citizenship', including Indigenous youth, minoritised young people, young mothers, and young people with disabilities (Edwards 2010; Harris 2011; Black & Walsh 2015). Efforts to enhance their participation have tended to focus on individual empowerment, self-esteem, entrepreneurialism, leadership, and creating pathways to engagement in mainstream cultural activities. Such programs often reinforce the perception that these young people are 'caught between two cultures' (Harris 2011, p. 149) and are responsible for their own possible – or actual – exclusion (Edwards 2010, p. 20). Rarely do programs or policies support the alternative or unconventional participatory practices young people may already be engaged in, partly because these often exclude adults or are enacted outside standard forms of adult surveillance. Moreover, programs rarely address the structural barriers to participation that young people may face, or acknowledge the capacity of young people to critically disengage from debates and programs that position them as a problem to be understood and then managed by adult experts (Edwards 2010; Harris 2011, p. 149). At the

same time, Harris argues that broader community discourse as well as programs for youth participation make possible unexpected ways for young people to contest this regulation through advocacy, youth and community-led alternatives as well as 'refusals, denials, disengagement, mimicry, and performance' (Harris 2011, p 152).

This concern notwithstanding, case studies of youth participation strategies delivered by NGOs and community organisations can, under some circumstances, positively influence adult attitudes towards collaborating with young people as well as the way young people imagine themselves as civic and political actors (Collin 2015). While government bodies have tended towards an over-reliance on managed processes such as youth advisory groups and surveys to include youth perspectives in decision-making, community organisations are more likely to use informal mechanisms along with a broader array of engagement and collaboration mechanisms (Vromen 2012, p. 222). Such approaches are reported to facilitate skills and knowledge as well as provide spaces in which young people feel they can influence decision-making and lead change in local communities – particularly when programs enable young people to access resources, networks and mentors who help break down barriers such as ageism, tokenism and closed institutional cultures and help to achieve influence at the local level (Walsh & Black 2018, p. 300). Programs that actively promote diversity have increased in the past decade, however, there is no research on how this has shaped who participates or the implications of young people's involvement and its relationship to government policy-making.

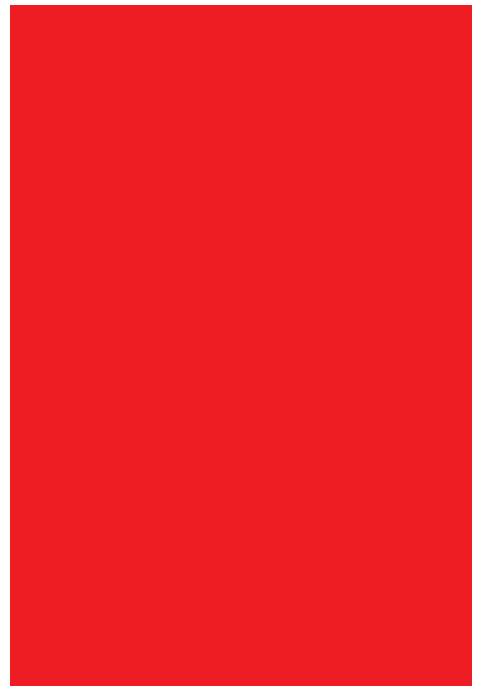
## Participation in policy-making

There are ongoing efforts to include young people in policy-making processes, advancing institutional mechanisms to identify and develop policy that affects young people – although these are haphazard and uneven across settings and portfolios. Youth participation has been driven historically by the youth advocacy and NGO sector where commitments to youth participation and a range of formal and informal mechanisms – from youth representation on project or organisation boards, youth advisory boards to and informal chats – are increasingly common. In Australia, state and federal governments have had varying levels of commitment to young people's participation, and involvement is, almost without exception, in the form of formal, structured consultative mechanisms (Bell et al. 2008, p. 34). These mechanisms can also reproduce deficit-discourses of youth and reinforce, rather than transform, existing power relations that limit and manage the participants, terms, agendas, processes and possibilities of youth involvement (Vromen & Collin 2010).

**The mechanisms for youth participation in policy-making are highly subject to political conditions.**

Liberal governments typically consult and outsource, inviting the non-government sector to advise on and then tender to deliver youth policy in the community. Labor governments have favoured a more structural approach embedding offices, ministers, advocates and advisory processes, and using a range of mechanisms to enable more diverse constituents to direct policy design and delivery in partnerships with non-





state actors. As stakeholders in this process, opportunities for young people to participate have been limited, as will be discussed below.

### Federal Government

In general, federal level policies have emphasised youth participation as a strategy for delivering youth development programs for 'young leaders' and interventions for young people identified as 'at risk' (Collin 2015) that, while underpinned by a rights-based discourse primarily define participatory rights as 'voice' (Harris 2011, p. 147). Some scholars argue that the forms of participation that focus on youth voice – such as reference groups and advisory boards – are often tokenistic and are designed based on institutional perspectives and needs (Bessant, 2004; Bell et al. 2008; Vromen and Collin, 2010; Harris, 2011). When viewed through the lens of diversity, common mechanisms for youth participation in government mainly engage white, educated and middle-class young people (Bell et al. 2008). Moreover, when designed to engage with specific minoritised or excluded young people, these can utilise highly curated strategies for 'handpicking' existing youth leaders who are palatable to governments and mainstream society (Harris 2011, p. 148).

Young people's direct experiences of federal government initiatives to facilitate consultation and deliberation indicate a persistent disconnect between young people's values and the 'top-down' model of engagement preferred by government (Vromen & Collin 2010; Vromen 2012). For example, the Government National Youth Roundtable (1999 – 2007) lacked diversity, offered limited representativeness as participants applied for membership rather than being elected and involved limited numbers of young people – fifty participants each year (Edwards 2009). While the Youth Roundtable purported to offer these young people the 'opportunity to be authentically heard' and the 'chance to make a significant difference to National Youth Policy' a large number of participants did not feel heard at all, rather, they were disillusioned, disappointed and felt the process to have been tokenistic (Bridgland Sorenson 2007 cited in Edwards 2009, pp. 32-33).

This was echoed in interviews conducted with youth representatives who worked on another contemporary Federal Government initiative – the Australian Youth Forum (AYF). The AYF was a decentralized online youth forum created in 2008 by the Rudd government with the intention of engaging young people in discussion on (preselected) social and political issues. While it was a top-down and managed consultation initiative, it was notable for convening a 10-member steering committee of young people aged 18–26 who were representatives of various independent youth organizations (Pillay 2018, p. 769). However, young people reported that institutional regulations, processes and other constraints prevented them from experimenting with different practices and goals, making it difficult to keep pace with the perceptions, attitudes and practices of their peers (Pillay 2018, p. 773). Young people were not able to nominate topics or direct the nature of the debate, and noted that '... the potential of media technology in encouraging diverse forms of mobilization did not matter as much as the internal organizational practices and attitudes, in shaping political and social outcomes...' (Pillay 2018, p. 779). Consequently, nine of the ten interviewed members felt their role had little to do with helping government surface and respond to youth issues and more to do with managing the dialogue in the context of the structural limitations of governmental bureaucracy (Pillay

2018, p. 774). As a result, young people revealed how they pursued 'entrepreneurial initiatives' to get around government rules and regulations and achieve specific objectives (Pillay 2018, p. 775).

The extent to which this has changed in the last ten years is difficult to gauge due to the paucity of research. Collin et al. (2016) undertook focus groups and workshops with 100 young people and policy-makers in government and the youth sector and found that while youth participation in policy-making is seen as important by both young people and policy-makers, the means by which to achieve this are viewed very differently. Policy-makers emphasised the desirability of a 'bottom up' approach, characterised by youth-led participation and self-advocacy. While young people argued for agency they called for more collaborative and partnership-based approaches and drew attention to the structural barriers such as economic resources and lack of opportunity structures that could enable young people to penetrate adult-centric institutions and policy processes (Collin et al. 2016).

**There is a persistent disconnect between policy-maker and young people's perspectives on what youth participation in policy processes should look like (Vromen & Collin 2010; Collin, 2015) and the challenges of recoupling young people's everyday political practices with increasingly hollowed-out and complex policy institutions.**

### Australian States and Territories

As of early 2019, all state and territory governments have some form of goal, aim, vision, mission or commitment that recognises the importance of hearing young people's voices, all have Children's Advocates or Commissioners and most have (or are developing) youth policies or strategies developed with young people's input (Collin and McCormack 2019). While most have some form of youth advisory group that feeds into strategies and other governance processes, there is no consolidated research on who participates in these or their effects on decision-making, and institutional or community change. Youth Advisory Boards made up of small numbers of young people are common, although mass consultation mechanisms effectively engage with many diverse young people and channel their views into government. For example, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (ACYP) consulted with over 4000 young people in NSW to set the themes and direction of the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2016 – 2019 (Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People 2016). The ACYP has also spearheaded the adoption of regular co-creation events with large groups of young people coming together to generate frameworks and action plans for government, as well as co-designed resources for young people to promote enhanced connection to services and opportunities (e.g. Our Local app) (<https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/>).

The experiences young people have engaging with formal and informal mechanisms to advise government shape their broader views of democracy and can have both positive and negative effects on their sense of political efficacy and trust in politicians and political processes. For example, Horsley and Costley (2008) conducted ten focus groups with 52 young people aged 18 – 25 in different parts of regional and metropolitan NSW. They found that the more active young people had been in electoral and non-electoral forms

of participation the more sceptical and distrustful they were likely to be of politicians and democratic processes in general (Horsley & Costley 2008, p. 10; Collin 2015). Their distrust in democracy was tied to the view that their efforts to bring about change had been ignored, rejected, stymied or sanitised.

### Local Government

Current research on young people's participation in local government is lacking although studies conducted more than a decade ago found that despite young people's differing perspectives on the openness and responsiveness of local councils to young people's views, they nevertheless frequently identified it as a forum where they could discuss political issues (Harris and Wyn, 2009). Local government was accordingly identified as having 'enormous potential to tap into young people's everyday social and political issues and to enhance their participation in formal politics', although most participants did not feel local government responds well to their interests and needs (Harris & Wyn 2009, p 341). Harris and colleagues found, further, that a large majority in their study did not feel they had a say in their local councils (83 per cent) or in their electorates (83 per cent) (Harris et al. 2010, p. 20). This is at the same time as young people express a desire to find new language and mechanisms to be a part of local decision making (Harris et al. 2010, p. 22) precisely because they are more likely to look to the settings and actors with which they have the most immediate and everyday experience.

What is clear in the research is the way young people's participation in government decision making is discursively and materially constituted by policy which shapes young people's experiences of opportunity, inequality, diversity, exclusion, health and wellbeing (White, Wyn & Brady 2017, pp. 265-290). This includes how 'youth' and 'participation' are defined and what counts as evidence that young people do, or do not 'participate'. Edwards argues that the fundamental assumptions of the debate – who can participate, in what circumstances and to what effect – have gone largely unchallenged in Australia (Edwards, 2010). The implications of this include the continued valorising of a particular view of democracy, ongoing references to disengaged young people (Farthing, 2010), and the production of 'failed citizenship' (Harris 2011). Research shows that young people are sensitive to this and frequently perceive that young people's voices and issues are not heard or taken seriously (Harris et al. 2010).

## Local Community

### Everyday and local action

Young people report they are more likely to feel they have a say among family and friends (78.8%) than in the community (19.8%) (ABS, 2010; 2014 reported in ARACY 2018, p. 43). Family are also the number one source of news for young people – especially teenagers and children (Notley & Dezuanni 2019) and where they feel they can 'have a say' (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 337). The home as an important setting also raises questions about the implications for young people who experience the home as a hostile or oppressive environment, or who are in out-of-home care or detention.

Community is also a key setting for young people when discussing political and social issues. Community in this sense refers to local community or what Harris and Wyn call the 'micro-territories of their everyday lives' (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 336) although communities can also be constituted

through shared interests and traverse physical place via networked technologies and associational arrangements (to be discussed below).

**Young people's preference for local-level engagement is not just convenient but can be attributed to a sense of marginalisation that many young people feel from formal political processes.**

The issues that matter to young people – violence, public transport, neighbourhood amenities – are those they relate to in their everyday lives – as distinct from the 'politics of formal public spaces which are not part of youth geographies' (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 336) and which construct politics as remote and the concern of a social elite. However, the local community can also be the site of 'complex and contradictory experiences of citizenship' (Black 2016). For example, Black finds that in Australia, young people's local communities can be simultaneously constructed as a source of supportive and protective relationships enabling young people as they transition to full economic and social citizenship, while also being constructed as a place of constraints and limitations that they should aspire to escape (Black 2016, p. 128). As in other settings, young people are subject to tensions and contradictions of discourse and opportunity in their communities – of agency and control – highlighting the need for more research and care into the delivery of localised initiatives, particularly in areas of socio-economic inequality.

Many young people practise politics in these local spaces in personalised acts embedded in daily activities. For example, young people in Manning's research identified a range of micro-practices from being vegan in support of sustainability to having broad political interest manifest in seeking out news and information, but not direct action (Manning 2013). These forms of 'individualised collective action' (Micheletti 2003) are self-reflexive individual political practices that are morally and ethically motivated and take place in a range of different arenas.

**The 2016 ACARA civics and citizenship assessment suggests that these kinds of practices are viewed by young people to be particularly important for democracy: Year 10 students identified 'making personal efforts to protect natural resources, for example, water-saving, recycling, ethical shopping' as 'very important' behaviour (85%) ahead of 'voting in elections' (84%) (Fraillon et al. 2017, p. 57).**

Harris et al. (2010) also identified that 'conscious consumerism' is prominent in young people's everyday, self-managed strategies for effecting political and social change. Among the young people aged 15 – 18 they found the most common activity was recycling (75%). Young people also reported listening to political music (28%) although 'stronger' forms of consumer politics were less common: only 18 percent had attended a rally and 16 percent had boycotted a brand (Harris et al. 2010, p. 23).

According to Harris (2011), self-actualising citizenship for young people is increasingly constructed through the lens of consumption whereby '[y]oung people are encouraged to

take charge of their lives and articulate their rights and needs through practices of consumption as the state and especially the welfare system diminish in their capacity to provide economic security and a space for democratic expression...’ (Harris 2011, p. 148). She points out that in much public discourse, civic rights are reinvented as consumer choices, and young people are compelled ‘...to see themselves as powerful players in the global economy as trendsetters and savvy choice-makers’ (Harris 2011, p. 148). Moreover, she argues that the construction of the young citizen as consumer is gendered as women are especially targeted as a new breed of economic agents called forth to use their economic and political empowerment to shape the market and thus, politics (Harris 2011, p. 148).

Young people also take part in and value traditional group or collectively-based action. Other citizenship behaviours students identified as ‘very important’ or ‘quite important’ were ‘taking part in activities to protect the environment’ (79%), ‘taking part in activities promoting human rights’ (77%) and ‘participating in activities to benefit the local community’ (Fraillon et al. 2017, p. 57). Significant proportions reported involvement in a sports club (51%), online group (29%), youth/student group (23%), a band (19%), religious group (18%) (Harris et al. 2010, p. 19). As civic and political action becomes increasingly broadly defined to include more everyday practices for promoting change and challenging the status quo it is also possible to recognise the creative, cultural and even ‘silly’ forms of participation young people engage in (Harris 2008; Hartley 2010; Harris & Roose 2014; Collin 2015). Young people report cultural and creative practices that express social and political views, aspirations, and seek to shape society as important and valued. These can encompass community-based ‘hijabi fashion’ events (Vromen & Collin 2010) or online blogs (Harris & Roose 2014, p. 11), visual art and music (Bessant & Watts 2017), participating in flash mobs (Collin 2015), creating

music (Pruitt cited in Chou et al. 2017), or producing youth media (Kral 2011). Importantly, such practices encompass aspects of individual agency and expression, community and interest-based networks as well as a range of local/community and broader public audiences. These repertoires of civic and political participation are particularly valued and practised by migrant and Muslim young people (Harris & Roose 2014, p. 9), Aboriginal young people (Kral 2011; Bessant & Watts 2017) and young people who are socio-economically disadvantaged or live with disability (Collin 2015).

This is perhaps unsurprising given that all young people, and minoritised and marginalised young people in particular, experience youth as a period of ‘physical and legal restriction’ (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 328). In contrast, political thinking and action that is local, individualised, culturally relevant and primarily occurs in the spaces of home, friendship groups, school and neighbourhood offers a sense of agency and efficacy. Moreover, Harris and Wyn (2009) find that that young people’s ‘deep embeddedness’ in the ‘micro-local’ affects their conception of politics and their views of themselves as political actors (p. 335). The vast majority felt they could ‘have a say’ with friends (95%), with family (89%) and in the classrooms (83%) while only 17% felt they could have a say in their local councils or in their electorate (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 332). This sense of alienation appeared to shape their aspirations with only a little over one-third wanting a greater voice in the council or the electorate, while two-thirds wanted more of a say in the places in which they already felt heard (Harris & Wyn 2009, pp. 337-338). For example, Harris and Roose (2014) have found that that many young Muslim people have expressed their political and social views through media (particularly social media), participated in online forums and/or written a blog (with blogs considered to be a platform for ‘getting your voice heard out there’). Topics discussed in these forums included ‘Islam and politics’, ‘feminism’, ‘a woman’s place in Islam’ and ‘hijabi fashion’ as



well as 'everyday stuff' (Harris & Roose 2014, pp. 802-824; Johns, 2014, p. 79). These 'ordinary' online activities and 'DIY styles of citizenship' enabled by the internet and social media help young Muslims to develop their religious, political and civic identities, and provide opportunities to engage with other Muslims as well as non-Muslims (Harris & Roose 2014, pp. 8 and 14-15; Johns 2014, p. 79). These examples demonstrate how young people adopt views on civic and political issues and their own agency according to the opportunity structures available to them.

## Schools

School is an important 'local' setting that shapes young people's understanding of citizenship and democracy. While the role of schools for developing civic or political engagement through civics education is highly contested (Manning & Edwards 2014; Bessant et al. 2016), the ways schools are organised nevertheless produce (and often reproduce) socioeconomic conditions – which, in turn, shape political values and dispositions (Bessant et al. 2016, p. 276). This extends beyond the delivery of the school curriculum to the ways students are included – and excluded – in decision-making and are allowed to express their views and concerns in the classroom, broader school and community. Young people are subject to various discourses of 'youth' and 'democracy' in the everyday routines and practices of school and community life, as well as structured programs such as Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and other (often externally provided) programs.

**Young people identify schools as an important place where their voices can be heard – or ignored – and as sites of struggle over their rights as well as important environments where they engage in political discussions (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 340).**

In their study of Victorian students, Harris and Wyn (2009) found that some students regard school as a place where 'opportunities for participatory democracy are cultivated', while others 'wished that schools could facilitate citizenship as well as impart education and imagined a school linking them into the world 'outside' where public decisions are made' (p. 340). Encouragingly, approximately two-thirds of Year 6 students are confident they could be a candidate in a school or class election indicating they feel positive towards opportunities to participate in school-based democratic processes, although female students were more likely than male students to feel confident and value civic action (Fraillon et al. 2017, p. 99).

The diversity of student views and experiences of schools as democratic environments reflects variation in school values, approaches and capacity to cultivate democracy internally. Harris and Wyn (2009) find this is partly because of the huge demands and pressures on teachers. Indeed, the context in which young people are learning about and making sense of democracy is becoming more complex requiring more – indeed different – cognitive capacities and, thus, raising the bar for teaching (Fraillon et al. 2017). There is, however, evidence that practising educators have a *thin* conception of democracy (Zyngier 2011b, p. 18) which, if typical of in-service teachers, raises many concerns about the prospects

for a *thick*, more participatory notion of democracy to be applied to school settings (Zyngier 2011b, p. 18). It also heightens questions regarding how teaching and learning environments and approaches can be better equipped to reflect the transformation in citizenship values and norms which underpin contemporary forms of participatory and 'networked citizenship' (Loader et al. 2014), particularly given that this is something that students hope – even expect – their schools will offer (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 341). Such steps to improve the way students participate in school decision-making should be accompanied by research, as a systematic review finds a notable lack of evidence on the effects of student participation in school decision-making (Mager & Nowack 2012, p. 51).

Unfortunately, the dominant experience of Australian students of democracy in school is of 'having a say', rather than building skills and relationships with peers, allies and the broader community to identify and challenge the structural issues which create barriers to youth participation (Walsh and Black 2018). This matters because the ways that students experience school settings informs the kinds of democratic values and norms they will internalise.

**Many studies therefore conclude that experiential approaches to learning democracy are needed and that teachers should use the curriculum to more genuinely engage students – especially boys – in civic activities throughout their schooling (Fraillon et al. 2017).**

However, it is also argued that any engineering of a democratic curriculum should be directly informed by the interests and actual participatory practices of young people, and ideally co-designed with diverse students (Arvanitakis & Sidoti 2011; Gusheh & Powell 2013, p. 113; Collin 2015, p. 167; Bessant, Farthing & Watts 2016, p. 275). This is even more important given that social class – particularly parental level of education and type of work (skilled or professional) – can impact levels of attainment in existing civics and citizenship learning (Fraillon et al. 2017, pp. xix – xx).

Normatively, studies have found that participation in issue-based political and civic activities in formal and informal learning (e.g. outside school subjects) 'exhibits potentially powerful, sustainable education in civic values, knowledge and skills' (Reichert & Print 2018, p. 319). Novel programs based on youth-led learning (Wierenga et al. 2008, p. 8), principles of justice and social change (Heggart 2015), participatory citizenship (Black & Walsh 2015), 'thick democracy' (Zyngier 2011a) and critical-service learning (Porfilio & Hickman 2011) assist students to identify issues of concern and develop partnerships, projects and actions to address these issues. In particular, effective programs challenge students to consider the role of agency and capabilities (their own and other actors in democratic societies), identify the skills and knowledge required for action, and to work collaboratively and creatively with others to address issues of shared concern in the community (Walsh & Black 2011; Black 2016; Heggart, Arvanitakis & Matthews 2018, p. 9). Students and teachers involved in these kinds of active citizenship programs (e.g. ruMAD? – are you Making A Difference?) report positive outcomes including improved attendance and engagement at school; greater community engagement, connection and efficacy; and a

sense of personal satisfaction for the students themselves, rooted in the belief that they had 'made a difference' or 'changed someone's life' (Black 2016, p. 124). However, considering the same research data, Black and Walsh (2015) also highlight that the way teachers frame the introduction of active citizenship curricula is also important for student experience and outcomes. They found that educators at the schools studied hoped that their delivery of active citizenship programs would reduce the risk and increase the opportunities their students in economically marginalised communities faced. While understandable, Black and Walsh find that this 'sets up a discourse of risk and vulnerability that reduces these young people's experience of active citizenship to little more than an educational safety net', which is '[i]n sharp contrast to the agentic and self-directed discourse of active citizenship' (Black & Walsh 2015, pp. 189-190).

## Volunteering

Volunteering is defined as giving time to an activity that is aimed at contributing to the common good without receiving a financial gain. It is part of a wider concept of civic participation and can include activism (Volunteering Australia 2015, pp. 2-3).

**There are many issues with how volunteering is defined and, subsequently, what data is collected on the volunteering practices of Australian young people (Walsh & Black 2015; 2018) and which activities are excluded.**

For example, the way the Census questions are currently framed excludes various types of volunteering such as informal, cause-based, spontaneous, one-off and online. These and other non-traditional volunteering roles that are common among young people, such as e-volunteering, social enterprise, time-banks, and volunteer tourism during a gap year, are also not well evidenced or included in statistics on young people's volunteering (Walsh & Black 2018, p. 224).

Perhaps as a result, studies find vastly different levels of engagement in activities that could count as volunteering. In the 2016 Civics and Citizenship assessment, approximately two in every three Year 10 students indicated that they had collected money for a charity or social cause and participated in voluntary group activities to help the community (Fraillon et al. 2017). Mission Australia's 2018 Youth Survey found that 36.8% of young people do volunteer work, making volunteering the third most common activity for young people aged 15 to 19 years (after participating in and spectating sport) (Carlisle et al. 2018, p. 4). The 2016 Australian Census found lower rates with 20.1% of 15-19 year olds, 17.2% of 20-24 year olds and 14.6% of 25-29 year olds reporting they are involved in volunteer work (ABS 2017b cited in Volunteering Victoria 2018). Those most likely to volunteer are female, in employment or education, speak English at home, live outside a major city and give money to charity (Muir et al. 2009). Lower rates of reporting volunteering among young people may be because they do not necessarily identify with the term 'volunteer' and may not consider their activities to fall into that category (Geale et al. 2010; Collin 2015; Walsh & Black 2018). For example, young people may give unremunerated time to participate in advisory boards or moderate an issues-based Facebook group, or start a

Go-Fund me campaign to support a person or a cause, but may not consider these activities to be 'volunteering'.

In addition to newer forms of participation noted above, in some cases, young people's 'volunteer activities' are 'not entirely free' – such as service learning in schools, community service orders or where recent graduates feel compelled to undertake unpaid work in order to 'get experience'. While these types of activities might usefully be counted as volunteering, they also raise important questions about the democratic value of volunteering in contexts which 'conflate the voluntary nature of young people's acts of citizenship with other, more instrumental goals' (Walsh & Black 2018, pp. 222-223) or are in fact exploitative (Huxley 2016, p. 122). Even making 'intent to do something for the greater good' (rather than being compelled through policy or context, such as competitive jobs market) is questionable 'in an era when the lines between paid and unpaid work, and between personal and public goods, are being increasingly blurred' (Walsh & Black 2018, p. 223).

Moreover, the democratic value of 'compelled' volunteering can be difficult to ascertain. Walsh and Black (2015) find that while service learning can be an effective way to introduce young people to volunteering, there may be negative effects, such as perpetuating normative hierarchies, exacerbating young people's sense of limited agency when it comes to how they choose to participate in society and the fact that many young people feel exploited and stigmatised by compulsory programs and do not regard them as volunteering (Walsh & Black 2015, pp. 27-30). By contrast, when free to choose how to contribute their time, young people are motivated to volunteer based on a combination of altruism and the desire to make a difference, and pursuit of personal gain, including new experiences and skills that support employability (Walsh & Black 2015, p. 19).

Volunteering can deliver a range of personal and social benefits for young people, including strengthening social relationships and belonging, contributing to community and 'making a difference', enhancing career prospects and developing skills, social capital and civic and citizenship values (Walsh & Black 2015, pp. 5-21). Research demonstrates that a sense of civic efficacy and social responsibility both lead to and emanate from the experience of volunteering. Indeed, young people with social, cultural and economic capital, who are already civically engaged and who already have the skills required to volunteer are also the most likely to choose to volunteer and '[s]uch young people have a significantly higher sense of community belonging, social responsibility, and sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy than those who do not volunteer' (Walsh & Black 2015, p. 22. See also Hardy et al. 2010 cited in Walsh & Black 2018).

However, volunteering and the associated civic and personal benefits are socially structured. Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (for example) are less likely to volunteer: they are less likely to be exposed to organisations and opportunities that promote social participation, less likely to participate in their communities, and less likely to believe that their participation will be taken seriously (Walsh & Black 2015, pp. 23-24). The authors note that '[t]he overrepresentation of more affluent volunteers in many contexts may itself be a barrier to volunteering for less affluent young people' (Walsh & Black 2015, p. 24). Walsh and Black (2018) find this 'has the potential to set up new patterns of inequality amongst young people, as well as to

reinforce and exacerbate existing inequalities' (p. 227). They argue that 'civic and political institutions need to take a more positive view of young people's citizenship and social participation if they are to draw on their enthusiasm and energy, but the contributions of young people through volunteering remain largely off the radar because they are not recognised by the predominant (adult) gaze(s) of those institutions' (Walsh and Black, 2018, p. 223). They also note that the 'lack of data and consistency means that many policy proposals with regards to youth volunteering are made without real knowledge or substantial research into young volunteers' values, activities and attitudes' (Walsh and Black, 2018, p. 224). They recommend four areas of good practice for governments to promote young people's volunteering: supporting the development of an evidence base; establishing an 'authorising environment' in schools; supporting multi-stakeholder engagement in providing volunteering opportunities; and providing recognition and incentives (Walsh & Black 2015, pp. 6-7). International perspectives emphasise that, in addition, volunteering programs and policies should be designed to reflect the needs and motivations of diverse young volunteers and young people should have more of say in defining the terms of their voluntary engagement (UN DESA 2016, p. 155).

## Networks

The internet is now a significant setting for social life through which familial and peer relationships are enacted, young people explore identity and express themselves, source, create and share information and engage with social institutions and authorities ranging from government departments and services to schools (Collin & Burns 2009). Research

with Australian young people has found that online spaces, especially social media platforms are attractive to young people as settings for exploring and organising on issues of concern because they are felt by many young users to be a youth space that is relatively free from adult regulation (see Harris 2008; Collin 2015). The internet has enabled some young people to be 'visible' (to their peers, community and wider public), and simultaneously facilitate forms of sociality that elude the 'adult gaze' (Third et al. 2019). While this is significant for all young people, it is particularly important for young people who experience discrimination or are minoritised or excluded from physical public space (Johns 2014; Vivienne, Robbards & Lincoln 2016; Kral 2011 cited in Peterson et al. 2018). Studies often focus on the potential for the internet to foster formal political deliberation, however, for many young people informality, intimacy, familiarity and lack of adult regulation is what makes online environments attractive for exploring political ideas (Harris & Wyn 2009, p. 338; Harris et al. 2010, p. 27). Some young people describe the increasingly 'public' nature of social media and the adversarial and aggressive nature of much online commentary as both intimidating and a disincentive to interact and express opinions on social and political issues on sites such as Facebook (Vromen et al. 2016).

The internet generally and specific platforms from social media, to apps and virtual worlds are not neutral spaces. While there is little research specifically on the implications of advanced technologies such as machine learning and deepfake tech on young people's experiences of mediated social life, there is strong cause for studies to take seriously how they might reconfigure young people's civic and political learning, organising and participation in a digital society. There is already strong evidence that digital and



social networks are significant for how young people access news media, organise and protest and initiate new forms of enterprise to address issues of concern.

## News Media and Political Talk

Australian young people are interested in the news and believe that 'learning about political issues in the newspaper, on the radio, on TV or on the internet' is important citizenship behaviour (Fraillon et al. 2017, p. 58).

**Family and television continue to be the primary sources of news (Notley et al. 2017) although young people are increasingly using the internet and social media to gather and distribute news media (Vromen et al. 2016; Vromen 2016, p. 57; Notley & Dezuanni 2019, p.698).**

For example, in a 2013 survey of 16 – 29 year olds, Vromen et al. found that 53% used Facebook to access news stories or other political information and significant numbers use Twitter to follow newsmakers/media (32%), read information about news and politics (41%) and follow celebrities who sometimes tweet about politics (50%) (Vromen et al, 2016, p.520; Vromen 2016, 0.57).

However, young people also report low levels of trust in a variety of media platforms and actors including social media and legacy media such as television, newspapers and radio (Fraillon et al. 2017 p. xxi). This reflects the low levels of trust reported in the broader Australian population (Vromen, 2016, p. 61). At the same time, young people are also confronted with a news media landscape that is more complex and in which deliberately false or 'fake' news can be easily produced and circulated. In a representative study of 1000 young people aged 8 – 16 years old, Notley and Dezuanni found that the majority of Australian students do not think they can tell 'fake news' from real news stories (Notley & Dezuanni 2019). This suggests that if engaging with news media and discussing political issues continue to be considered core citizenship practices for healthy democracies, then both the production and distribution of quality news, as well as young people's critical media literacy must become a renewed focus. Furthermore, as Notley and Dezuanni (2019) argue, there are ongoing and deepening questions about the role of the news industry, government and educators for promoting young people's media literacy. However, as families remain the primary source of news for young people aged 16 years and under, there is also a significant need to provide support for parents and carers as facilitators of discussion and young people's learning about the news – and their capacity to critique it (Notley & Dezuanni 2019, p. 703).

While very little of the news media is made for young people, or deals with their issues, some young people are increasingly using digital technologies, particularly social media, to create their own platforms specifically to broadcast political news stories. These include youth-media outlets (e.g. Junkee), podcasts (e.g. Binge Thinking and Let's Get Political) as well as the websites and social media accounts of youth-serving and youth-led organisations such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition and Foundation for Young Australians. Moreover, social media is also significant because it is viewed by many young people as a political space that facilitates broader political discussion, often with more in-depth and diverse

views (Loader et al. 2015, p. 92). Contrary to claims that young people online encounter 'echo-chambers', some young people believe political discussions on social media can involve more people with different or opposing views (Loader et al. 2015, p. 92). This notion that the internet and social media generate new public spaces in which young people can speak on politics and issues of concern is significant, particularly for how to ensure these connect young people's politics and policy processes in a meaningful way (Collin, 2015, pp. 27, 144). While the view, among Australian students, that discussing politics is an important citizenship behaviour is increasing, it is not considered to be as significant as individual or institutional acts (such as ethical shopping or joining a political party) (Fraillon et al. 2017, p. 58).

## Petitions, Campaigns and Protest

Many young people take part in various forms of direct action, from petitioning to joining protests and setting up their own campaigns and youth-led organisations. These manifest at the local level as well as via online platforms that connect people across place and time. They also reflect the range of material and post-material issues young people are concerned about (discussed above).

Petitioning is a well-established repertoire in Australia, including among young people. Of more than 4,800 high school students surveyed in the 2004 Youth Electoral Study survey, 55.5% said they had signed a petition, and 40% said they would, while 21.2% said they had collected signatures for a petition and 52.1% said they would do so in the future (Saha et al. 2005, p. 6). Young people – particularly young women – are likely to sign online and offline petitions and the practice is likely to become more common and positively associated with emerging norms of democracy (Sheppard 2015). Historically considered an 'outsider activity' – like protest or social movement practices – creating, sharing or recruiting to and signing petitions has become understood as mainstream, if low-threshold, action (Halpin et al. 2018, p. 431). Given the proliferation of government, non-profit, and commercial platforms (Halpin et al. 2018, p. 429) the normalisation of online petitions is increasingly likely for young people. Additionally, new hybrid online campaigning organisations such as GetUp! use a form of member polling to inform campaign directions and petitioning is a key repertoire promoted on the platform (Vromen 2017, p. 107).

**GetUp! was launched in 2005 and now has more than 1 million members which is approximately ten times the total number of members of Australian political parties (Vromen 2017, p. 89).**

A 2010 survey of the membership (n=17,500) indicated 59% identified as female, 36% identified as male and 5% did not indicate gender. Of the total sample 25% were under the age of 30 and 75% were born in Australia (Vromen 2017, p.89). Indeed, more recent studies reveal that minoritised young people, such as those who are migrant or Muslim, find that increasingly common practices, such as signing a petition are not seen as effective ways to have their voice heard on issues of concern (Harris & Roose 2014, p. 803).

Young people have traditionally taken part in – even led – protest actions (Adamson, 2019), however, there is limited research on their involvement in traditional forms of protest,



such as strikes and street marches. Harris et al (2010) found that Australian young people did participate in a range of 'everyday participatory practices', although few reported having taken part in a rally (p.23). Other studies find that two thirds of year 6 students and more than half of year 10 students perceive participating in peaceful protest to be a very or quite important citizenship behaviour (Fraillon et al. 2017, pp. 56-58) and just under half of students in both year groups said they would probably or definitely take part in a protest (Fraillon et al. 2017, pp. 211-212). Other research has focused on 'protest cultures' looking at the diverse and culturally-relevant ways in which young people register their dissent, for example, through new media strategies including video, social media acts (changing profile photos), consumer activism and music sub-cultures (Harris et al. 2010, p. 14). Indeed, many young Australians actively join campaigns led by organisations and loose networks on issues such as climate change (AYCC; School Strike 4 Climate), ending poverty (Oaktree), anti-austerity policies (#MarchInMarch) health and food (Youth Food Movement) and sustainability (Food not Bombs). These can and do include street protests and more research is needed to understand the role young people play (Collin and McCormack, 2019).

For example, as Collin and McCormack write (2019), in 2018 when school students from Castlemaine, Victoria, organised with peers to demand that parliamentarians take urgent action on climate change. Inspired by Swedish school student, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg who had regularly gone on strike from school to bring attention to the climate crisis, they organised a group of classmates to go on strike from school and journey every week to the offices of different members of parliament in their region to stage a similar event. Organised by word of mouth, eight initial school strikes in the Castlemaine region attracted between 20 and 50 students to each event. Following the success of the initial strikes, the AYCC helped the Castlemaine students create a webpage for their movement, develop a campaign strategy, train in organising and, importantly, generate a social media presence to allow a decentralised model that would support students anywhere in Australia to organise and co-ordinate their own school strikes for climate action. An online community grew, and students across Australia began to co-ordinate and organise in their own regions (Collin & McCormack, 2019). On 30 November 2018, an estimated 15,000 students temporarily left school to attend rallies in 30 locations around Australia to demand that politicians take immediate action on climate change. This (school) student movement has spawned similar groups and developed informal links to other groups and campaigns, such as Fridays For Future. On 15 March 2019, 150,000 students in 56 locations around Australia were joined by an estimated 2.29 million strikers in over 2,700 sites in 137 countries participating in a School Strike for Climate (Fridays For Future, 2020). While researchers have previously posited that young Australians are increasingly viewing protests as passé and instead are adopting online forms of action (Tranter 2010), it appears that young people are combining, rather than supplementing online action with offline protest.

These campaigns are increasingly led or supported by left-wing and progressive interest groups, powered by young people as instigators, members and supporters via social media (Vromen, 2015; Collin 2015). The most emblematic and largest of these is GetUp! which was established and continues to be run by 'young people' (typically in their early 20s) who have been involved in other Australian political

and activism networks and organisations (Vromen 2015). GetUp! and other youth-led organisations such as the Australian Youth Climate Coalition and Oaktree are important organisations in which many young leaders train and attain positions of political influence – largely within the new social movement, social enterprise and 'profit for purpose' or social enterprise sectors of Australian politics (Vromen 2015; Vromen 2017; Collin 2015). Vromen has identified GetUp! as part of a 'network forum' of progressive organisations including the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, the Sydney Alliance and the Centre for Australian Progress which use strategic online and campaign-based strategies to engage with a wide base of 'members', often online and on an issues-basis. These organisations are also notable for their decentralised models for mobilisation (encouraging local face-to-face activities organised by members) and focus on building skills and capacities of individuals and communities to take action. Importantly, the 'network forum' of progressive organisations in Australia represents a significant site in which many young Australians are learning about politics and democracy and developing skills and networks.

For example, the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) emerged in the mid-2000s as an organisation founded and governed by young people and based on strong coalitions with other organisations and movements. A key difference with older styles of civic organisations is that the more than 150,000 AYCC 'members' can choose their level of involvement – and self-organise. For example, the AYCC encourages 'members' to organise their own actions – on and offline – and runs different campaigns and activities from which members can 'pick and choose'. They are also unique for running workshops and training aimed at school-age students, networking and building coalitions with aligned causes and communities (Collin & McCormack, 2019). The primary goal of AYCC is to bring about lasting political change for climate action by mobilising and amplifying the voices of young people. In 2009, for example, it organised 'Youth Decide' in which 37,000 young people aged 12 – 29 participated in more than 300 local events and online to 'vote' for a viable climate future (Walsh & Owen 2015, p. 223). Despite the scale and high visibility of youth-led organisations and campaigns in Australia, research is still catching up.

While most of the research on young people's politics is concerned with progressive politics, some young people in Australia are also engaging in far-right groups (see Bessant et al. 2017). These groups are typically not as public as progressive campaign organisations and there is no available data to estimate the number of young people involved. However, Bessant and colleagues (2017) identify that young participants in organisations such as Reclaim Australia and the Australian Defence League espouse pride, loyalty and commitment to principles of democracy and the role of policy for determining the kind of society we live in. At one level, their appeals for participation – at meetings, marches and in online forums – to discuss and raise their concerns about what they perceive to be threats to 'good Australian society' might be interpreted as 'active citizenship', even as their actions may be confronting, racist and incite violence.

As described above, hacking is also used – by a small minority of people – as a form of protest although there is no Australian research on young people's participation in forms of digital dissent such as 'Distributed Denial of Service' (DDoS) activities.

## Social enterprises and 'for purpose' businesses

In addition to the rise of youth-led activist organisations and 'campaign entrepreneurs' (Vromen 2015), young people are increasingly encouraged to adopt a social enterprise model for addressing the issues they care about.

While young people are often positioned as the beneficiaries of social enterprise (Barraket et al. 2016, p. 20), the reconfiguration of state, business and civil society relations and the emergence of open source and social media have created a social and policy environment in which a discourse of youth action as enterprise has emerged (Walsh 2011).

As such, many young people are 'choosing alternative ways of expressing or enacting their citizenship' including through 'newer modes and sites, such as the socially dynamic spaces of social enterprise, in which young people work interstitially between the government, business and not-for-profit sectors while drawing on tools and resources from each or all of them' (Walsh & Black 2018, p. 219). Young people are supported by youth-led initiatives, youth-serving NGO programmes and a growing number of corporate-NGO initiatives that train, mentor and seed-fund the design, development and start-up of initiatives for social change, underpinned by a business model. These initiatives have evolved from various paradigms including volunteering, social innovation and political activism (Collin 2015).

Digital media has also powered an increasingly diverse array of youth-led social change initiatives and enterprises,

from volunteer-run online resource hubs, to organisations promoting aid and development, climate education and action, and campaign-delivery and consultancy ventures (Collin 2015). Many of these can be understood as hybrid organisations encompassing community and network-building, for-fee professional services and training, project delivery, campaigning and advocacy (Chadwick 2007). The inherently 'youthful' qualities of creativity, energy and innovation are juxtaposed with the 'old world' ways that adults and adult-led institutions conceptualise and respond to the opportunities and challenges of the contemporary world. While questioning the direct impact of mediated social enterprise on political decision-making, Walsh has argued that the youthful individualised and networked forms of engagement and collaboration that characterise it do further challenge dominant discourses of youth participation and the institutional and market power of governments and business (Walsh 2011, p. 116).

While at least 20,000 social enterprises were operating in Australia in 2016 (Barraket et al. 2016, p. 30), there is no data on how many young people are leading or participating in social enterprises (Walsh & Black 2018). The limited research on how young people conceptualise their social enterprise activities suggests there is a diversity of views but that many are motivated to pursue a social enterprise by a desire for 'more dynamic, responsive and efficient forms of change-making' (Walsh & Owen 2015, p. 220). The ABS has noted that social enterprise is 'an area of global growth' and has been noted as a topic of interest for future iterations of their General Social Survey (ABS 2018). As young people in Australia increasingly lead and contribute to social enterprises in an effort to achieve social change, research on prevalence as well as the motivations, benefits and democratic potential of this kind of participation is needed.



# Conclusions

## Existing Evidence

Young Australians are diverse and the ways they learn about and engage with democracy are increasingly shaped by complex social, cultural, economic, institutional, technological and broader political dynamics – local, national and global in scale.

Like the broader population, young people aged 18 – 30 years are dissatisfied with how Australian democracy is functioning, have low trust in formal political institutions and elites, and are less likely than in previous decades to be members of parties and trade unions. While negative perceptions of politicians and governments contributes to low engagement, structural barriers (e.g. casualisation of work, level of education, limited or elite opportunities) are most significant.

Young people are concerned about a range of material and post-material issues and while structured inequality affects their opportunities to participate in civic and political life, they mainly approach addressing issues of concern as personal responsibility. This is manifest in everyday, issue-based participation at the local level, but also as individualised collective action in communities of interest. Young people will engage with political institutions on these issues but feel that political elites and governments generally do not address the issues that matter to them.

The 'places' and 'spaces' of young people's participation are continuing to change and extend beyond electoral and procedural politics. These include digital devices and platforms, and the local and informal spaces of community, school and home. Young people have higher levels of engagement and trust in local organisations and government than other generations, even though many do not believe they are heard and taken seriously by local authorities.

Youth-led and civil society organisations and initiatives play an important role in civic and political learning. Young people are increasingly active on issues in a range of personalised and networked activities but do not necessarily consider these to be 'volunteering' or political participation. At the same time, not all forms of civic engagement and political participation are viewed by commentators and policy makers equally as important or valuable to Australian democracy. Moreover, some new forms of civic engagement and activism undertaken by some young people are being devalued in public discourse and even criminalised by law.

Political learning and participation are structured by educational attainment (of parents and young people) as well as work status and gender. Young people's participatory practices and citizenship are also discursively constructed in relation to age, ethnicity, religion, gender and class. Moreover, young people reflexively experience structuring discourses and often adopt or internalise them. Popular claims that young people are 'pre-political', disengaged or disruptive citizens are sometimes internalised and reflected in their political concerns and practices.

## Gaps and Emerging Issues

There is a dearth of research on the political attitudes and practices of young people – especially those under the age of 18 years – even as they increasingly demonstrate concern about political issues and are engaged in networks and protests such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition and the School Strike for Climate.

While more is known about what issues matter to young people and how they take action, there is less evidence of how they understand different issues, and how this relates to the actors they identify as responsible for creating change. The political theories of young people are, therefore, important to investigate as they directly inform current and future political practices and therefore offer greater insight into what young people's relationships to democracy might be into the near future.

This porosity of evidence is compounded by problems in the way that existing data is captured – leaving gaps in understanding of civic and political engagement. For example, what counts as volunteering or civic engagement. Furthermore, the most comprehensive Australian empirical studies of young people's online participation (Vromen 2007), participation in community and government decision-making (Bell et al. 2008) and civic and political participation (Harris et al. 2008; Harris & Wyn 2009;) are now dated. While much excellent case study and qualitative research has been undertaken with particular groups of young people or on specific practices, there is no comprehensive project that offers both quantitative and qualitative insights into the breadth and depth of young people's politics in contemporary Australia.

The settings and opportunities for participation are increasingly structured in terms of socio-economic advantage and culture. A predominant rights-based discourse is largely interpreted by young people through the lens of personal responsibility and choice 'to get involved'. The opportunity structures for political participation beyond local, networked and community/NGO-based initiatives, however, remain largely inaccessible to ordinary young people. Many groups are targeted for interventions to secure 'good citizenship' and when young people challenge the status quo, they are often 'put back in their place'. For minoritised young people this is especially significant as they are frequently portrayed by the media and political elites as problematic insofar as they challenge dominant civic social and cultural norms in Australia.

In 2008, the need to address the decoupling of young people's everyday politics from political institutions and elites was identified. This review finds that this need remains and is more urgent than ever before. While the past decade has seen the proliferation of young people's everyday, personalised and issue-based civic and political participation – especially at the local level – there has been a concurrent shift in many levels and arenas of government away from direct engagement with young people in agenda-setting and policy processes. While there are pockets of deep and effective engagement that directly informs the professional practices and decision-making of organisations and governments (e.g.

NSW ACYP, specific high-profile NGOs such as Foundation for Young Australians and some local councils), across the board, there is a widening gap between what politicians and governments do, and the concerns and perceptions of Australia's youngest citizens.

*If, as a society we are to stem the tide towards populist politics, strengthen social democracy and our capacity as a country to govern in the face of increasingly complex and global challenges, then we must work with young citizens who are, after all, among the most invested in the immediate and long-term future.*

## Recommendations

This review of the extant research indicates the following are urgently necessary if we are to better understand and foster a form of democracy that is inclusive of young people:

- Enhance research on the political attitudes and practices of young people – especially those under the age of 18 years. Comprehensive studies of young people's civic and political participation are now dated and new research is urgently needed to explain the current context and anticipate future trends;
- Extend research beyond the issues that matter to young people to how these relate to the actors and actions young people identify as required to achieve change. These aspects are what inform their current and future political practices and therefore offer insight on future trends;
- Channel research and young people's contemporary interest in political action into a national conversation on the role of young people in Australian democracy and use this to inform new thinking and commitments to youth participation in policy;
- Draw on research to inform strategies to foster more participatory and everyday forms of participation within current institutions and policy processes, including schools and different levels of government;
- Address the socio-economic and discursive barriers to young people's participation in policy and public debate. The way young people, participation and democracy are understood in mainstream debates contributes to young people 'turning away' from institutions of democracy and towards local-level and networked forms of engagement. These dynamics most disadvantage young people who are already marginalised in society and delimit the creative and progressive potential of harnessing diversity for enhanced democracy; and,
- Urgently address the decoupling of young people's everyday politics from political institutions and elites. There is a widening gap between what politicians and governments do, and the concerns and views of Australia's youngest citizens. If, as a society we are to stem the tide towards populist politics, strengthen social democracy and our capacity as a country to govern in the face of increasingly complex and global challenges, then we must work with young citizens who are, after all, among the most invested in the immediate and long-term future.



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