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Youth democracy and social change

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Youth democracy and social change

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Abstract

In this paper I examine youth as participants in social change. A particular focus is youth participation through voting. Currently there is much concern worldwide that young people are disengaging from democratic participation through voting, and, either disengaging from political participation entirely, or, engaging in different ways through protest, internet politics and consumer activism. This paper asks the question 'how effective do young people consider the ballot box as a mechanism of social change?' As well as challenging the assumption that young people are disengaged from democratic ideals I examine some of the perceived limitations of democratic participation as young people perceive them. The argument of this paper is that young people are not disengaging from the ballot box as an 'ideal' of democracy, but rather that they are drawing attention to some aspects of the democratic process that they perceive as limitations on democracy. In other words in the debate on young people and participation emphasis needs to be put on democratic practices as requiring reform as well as on young people and 'lack' of participation.

In discussing young people and democratic participation through the ballot box this paper draws on data from the Youth Electoral Study. The main objective of YES is to discover why it is that many young people in Australia are reluctant to enrol and vote despite both enrolling and voting being compulsory in Australia.

Keywords: youth; participation; voting; democracy; social change

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Youth democracy and social change¹

Introduction – Youth, Disengaging or Engaging Differently?

A current preoccupation of policy makers and researchers in Australia, the United States and across Europe, including the United Kingdom, is the supposed 'disengagement' of young people from democratic and political life, and, indeed from life in communities more generally. Evidence for this 'disengagement' is drawn from low youth turnouts at elections, declining youth membership of political parties and dwindling youth membership of civic organisations (Russell et al. 2002). Explanations include that young people are apathetic and don't care about politics or contemporary political issues, that they lack a sense of civic duty, or, that they are increasingly 'individualistic' rather than 'community minded' in their dispositions (Putnam 2000). In the context of future 'social change' implications have included that young people are disenfranchising themselves and that both democracies and communities are increasing in their fragility. Youth are perceived as being passive recipients of change rather than active in effecting change.

By contrast others argue that young people are not disengaged, but are merely engaging *differently* from older generations. Exponents of this view generally agree that young people are eschewing the ballot box as a mechanism of social change but they argue that, like older generations, they still engage in protest and, in fact, have developed new forms of participation that take into account changing issues, times and technologies (Vromen 2003). Attention is drawn to youth-led protests, such as those around globalisation and the recent war in Iraq, as evidence that young people still care about social issues and social change. Exponents of this view also point to 'internet participation' and to numerous youth inspired, operated and patronised internet sites that are either issue based or encourage participation more generally (Stanyer 2005). Indeed there are numerous examples of such sites. Some also argue that the shift in participation represents a shift in attitude. Older generations were concerned with 'material' issues such as those around class, race or sex, younger ones are concerned with broader issues embodied in 'new social movements' for environmental issues, animal rights and global social justice (Inglehart 1990).

Aims –Youth and Social Change in Australia through the Youth Electoral Study

This paper examines some of the dimensions of this debate about youth, political participation and social change with a view towards exploring this in the Australian context. The paper has three main foci. First I will investigate whether young people are in fact interested in social issues. Second I will examine whether young people are interested in political participation towards social change, and in this context I will discuss some of the ways they participate in movements towards social change. Third, and the major issue that this paper will address, I will examine the extent to which young people consider the ballot box as an effective mechanism of social change. In this context I will discuss whether there is a tendency to move away from electoral participation in Australia amongst youth and, if so, what some of the reasons for this might be. I will close by offering some insights about youth, social change and the nature of contemporary democracies.

This paper will address these foci through an examination of some of the data gathered through the Youth Electoral Study (YES) being conducted by researchers at the University of Sydney and the Australian National University. The central aim of YES is

to discover why it is that some young people in Australia are reluctant to enrol and vote, despite both enrolment and voting being compulsory in Australia. Here the project takes up the normative framework common within the literature on youth participation.² To this end YES accepts and presupposes that democracy is a valuable institution worth fostering and enhancing. The project also takes up a theme common to the research internationally, the propensity of young people, compared with older generations, not to be democratically engaged through voting. The best available estimation of youth enrolment in Australia is that whereas 95% of the eligible voting age population overall are enrolled to vote only 80% of those between 18 and 25 years are enrolled.³ Put another way it seems that nearly one fifth of young people in this age group are for some reason eschewing the ballot-box and disenfranchising themselves.

Introducing YES – Project Methodology

YES' participants come from 16 disparate Commonwealth Electoral Divisions including ones in inner city, outer suburban, major regional, rural and remote centres. Although we have interviewed a range of young people this paper focuses on research with senior secondary school students ages between 15 and 18. We interviewed these participants in 2003 when they were in Year 11 and in 2004 when they were in Year 12. The disparity in age ranges is due to states and territories having different school entry and completion ages. Within each of our divisions we selected a range of schools from the public, independent and Catholic systems. A total of 476 students from 55 schools participated in the study.

A research aim of YES was endeavouring to enable young people with the capacity to discuss enrolling, voting, participation and democracy in their own words. The research team decided that the best way to achieve this aim would be with a mixed methodology comprising of a primarily quantitatively based survey and qualitative research comprising of focus groups conducted by key researchers and a small group of local researchers. The choice of a focus group methodology allowed researchers to circumvent power relationships between adult researchers and their young subjects and approach the subject of politics in an open and participatory manner. This method also allowed for texture, or, for a multiplicity of views within a group and for us to observe interactions with peers.

In designing YES methodology researchers used Kreuger (1988) as a guiding text and all interviewers were required to read selections from this text before being briefed on the methodology more extensively. Our interviews used semi-structured questions, were audio-taped, and were with focus groups consisting of between 5 and 8 participants. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity and they were also assured that the interview was not a 'test' but rather an open forum for them to discuss their views and opinions.

The interview format followed required researchers to ask a question of the group that was then discussed freely amongst participants. Interviewers intervened from time-to-time to prompt participants where necessary or to draw interviewees back on track when discussion wandered. Sometimes particularly silent or unresponsive participants were prompted or asked if they had any views to contribute. From time to time it was necessary to remind groups that all opinions were valid to ensure the expression of minority views.

Post interview tapes were analysed using an analysis sheet that encapsulated the major themes of the interview questions. In performing content analysis care was taken to include both minority and dissenting viewpoints within each of our groups. All students, schools and divisions have been given unique pseudonyms to maintain

confidentiality. Where quotes from participants have been used they are verbatim, but may have been edited slightly to preserve anonymity and improve readability.

Some data from our survey, conducted in 2004, of Year 12 students in 208 schools across Australia, also contribute to this paper. Participating schools in this survey come from all states and territories and include a range of school types similar to those participating in our focus groups. Schools were selected using a random sampling design based on location, size of school and type of school. The survey was self administered and designed to be completed in 45 minutes. It was supervised by teachers who had been briefed prior to distribution. Of the 208 targeted schools responses were received from 155, thus giving us a response rate of 75%. In all 4855 surveys were returned.

Do Young People Care About Social and Political Issues?

In the context of the aims of this paper the first question to be addressed is whether young people in Australia are engaged politically in so far as they are concerned about contemporary political issues. Here the prevailing research suggests either that young people are not interested, or that they are interested in a range of 'new' issues somewhat different from those of the social movements of previous generations.

In YES focus groups researchers asked participants to identify a political issue of concern to them. As explored elsewhere this frequently led groups to discuss and explore meanings of politics (Edwards 2005). A result of this discussion was that participants indicated that they were interested in a range of issues of a political and social nature, although they did not necessarily contextualise these issues as 'political' ones. They associated politics narrowly with institutional politics, governments, parliaments and politicians. These they were not interested in, but they were interested in what they called, simply, 'issues'. This context is best explained with reference to quotes from participants. One, for example, said, 'I'm interested to know about issues and to voice my opinion and stuff but I'm not interested in people getting elected and stuff like that'. Another, 'I care a lot more about issues than [political] people - like the environment because we like have to grow up and there's all these issues like the war and stuff'.

Revealed by this question, and following discussions about the meaning of politics, was that almost every participant in YES was able to name a political issue of interest. Some participants, such as Tina from Sancta Sophia College, or members of the group at Mayfield Secondary College, were interested in a large array of issues, and, further had clearly developed opinions and perspectives on these issues. Others, such as members of the group at Crowfield Agricultural College were less interested in the issues at hand and their perspectives and opinions less well formed. What was demonstrated clearly, however, is that regardless of the degree of interest or the sophistication of perspectives that most participants were engaged in so far as they were aware of contemporary issues and were able to name at least one issue that they personally cared about or found meaningful.

Further the range of issues raised was broad. Some mentioned international issues. The war in Iraq for example was cited by at least one participant in almost every group. Another frequently mentioned international issue was terrorism, sometimes specifically linked to '9/11' and sometimes discussed more broadly. National issues raised included Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq, refugees, funding for schools and universities, water rationing and the Goods and Services Tax (GST). There were also local issues raised in many groups. For example, participants in groups in one remote regional centre referred (taking both sides) to the issue of land clearing for development. Some participants from groups in an outer suburban area raised speed

limits on local roads (generally unpopular) as an issue. In addition some issues of more general concern were raised. For example some highlighted racism and others 'the environment'. Some referred to different aspects of animal rights. In some cases issues were youth specific. The provision of local recreational facilities was one such issue. In one outer suburban area of a capital city a skate park had been built, and, perhaps surprisingly, this was not popular amongst many participants with some seeing it as a tokenistic gesture made without consultation and others as a negative move that had introduced crime into the area. Another youth specific issue was general opposition to youth curfews.

How do Australian Youth Engage in Social Change?

The second aim of this paper is to examine the ways that YES participants engaged in practices of social change. Given the emphasis of YES on voting this activity was examined closely in both the survey and the focus groups. In YES' first report it was noted that in the current context where voting is compulsory that 87% of respondents to YES' survey indicated they would vote upon turning 18 (Print et al. 2004, 8). This figure is only slightly higher than the estimate, cited earlier, of 80% for young people aged 18 to 25 who have actually enrolled to vote. Similar results were gained from focus groups where participants were asked if any intended on not enrolling and voting. Here only a few isolated individuals indicated they would not enrol or vote.

From time-to-time in focus groups we came across individuals who were members of political parties. Tina, for example, was an enthusiastic member of Young Labor and Jake was a Young Liberal. Even more rarely we encountered participants who were active on their local councils. Narelle, for example, had participated in some local government committees. But these participants were the exception rather than the rule. This is unsurprising given the relative youth of our school participants. Also at issue here is the 'youth friendliness' of these institutions. There was also evidence, however, that few participated in more youth focussed and friendly institutions such as youth reference groups or parliaments. Some participants from Our Lady of Lourdes and also from St Margaret's Catholic College, for example, had been delegates to a youth parliament. But again participation in these structured events was rare.

Revealed by YES' second survey is that significant numbers of young people had engaged in forms of protest (Saha et al 2005, 6). For example 55% of respondents indicated that they had signed a petition, 21% said they had helped collect signatures for a petition and 15% said they had taken part in a demonstration. Slightly smaller numbers indicated they had written letters variously to the media (12%), politicians (10%) and the Prime Minister (8%). The YES survey also asked respondents whether they would join movements for particular, researcher identified, political causes (Saha et al 2005, 11). Many indicated they would. Not surprisingly the 'peace / anti-war' movement gained the most support with 47% of respondents agreeing that they would support this cause though protest. The green movement was also popular with 28% indicating they would protest in support of environmental issues. Significant numbers of respondents also indicated they would protest for aboriginal land rights, anti-globalisation and abortion rights.

Many focus group participants also indicated that they attended protests around some of the aforementioned issues that they indicated were of concern to them. By comparison with the numbers who were engaging in mainstream politics as members of political parties or taking place in mainstream organised youth events numbers of youth who had protested were relatively high. In regard to the specific issues of protest, the peace movement, again, and particularly protesting against the war in Iraq, was revealed as the most popular issue of protest. To this end a participant from Trenton

College indicated that at her school 'heaps of people went to peace rallies and got really involved'. At St Margaret's Catholic College students were forbidden from protesting. During the focus group interview many reported that they and their friends had written letters to politicians and the media instead. In Palmville, a remote regional centre, many participants across participating schools had attended a local meeting to discuss the war where they had listened to speakers and voiced their views to their Federal Member who was in attendance. Other issues of protest included funding for public schools and animal rights. In the latter case participants from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic College, after discussing the issue of live animal exports in the classroom, had written letters to the media and to politicians as protest. In some cases participants melded the personal and political by, for example, practicing vegetarianism. A participant from Port James High School described how at her place of work she tried to discourage the use of plastic bags.

Youth and Participation Through the Ballot Box

Revealed above is that most respondents to YES' survey and a definite majority of focus group participants would enrol and vote. In the context of compulsory voting this is not surprising. In order to find out about how effective participants considered voting was as a mechanism of social change, however, it was necessary to ask other questions about voting. Other evidence obtained from YES data suggests that young people were ambivalent about voting as an effective mechanism of social change. To this end, as noted in YES' second report, only about half would vote where voting was not compulsory (Saha, et al. 2005, 5). YES' first report revealed that 82% of respondents considered voting important, but that 66% also considered it 'boring' and 60% a 'hassle' (Print et al. 2004, 16).

Much insight was gathered into the perceptions of participants about voting through our focus group research. Here, themes of voting being boring and a hassle re-emerged in many instances in many groups. In order to explore perceptions of the efficacy of voting we asked participants if they considered voting to be important. We also asked them if, by voting, they thought that they could have an influence on the individual issues that were of concern to them. Efficacy in this context refers to the belief of participants that they could have an influence by voting. This question allowed for the exploration both of 'internal efficacy', or whether an individual can have an influence through voting, and 'external efficacy', or whether governments are responsive to individuals' concerns and demands as voiced through the ballot (Craig and Maggiotto 1982).

The first theme that arises from this question relates to internal efficacy. To this end some participants agreed immediately that voting was an effective way for individuals to influence issues of concern. Others were more ambivalent. There were also a significant number of participants who were adamant that voting could have no effect. YES' focus group methodology allowed for exploration of some of these views.

There was a tendency for participants to associate the efficacy of voting with the potential of their individual votes to 'make a difference'. Tina, for example, the Young Labor member discussed earlier, said immediately that voting could affect issues of personal importance. Most of Tina's classmates were less sure about this and this question caused prolonged debate in this school. At Pinehill Catholic College the group also considered that voting granted them efficacy to the extent that they could affect issues. These expressions of 'high individual internal political efficacy' were rare, however.

More frequently we heard that voting could not affect issues, or could only affect them in very minor ways. For example, when asked both whether voting was important, and if it could affect issues of concern to participants, we heard in various groups that; 'individual opinions get lost', 'we can only make small changes', 'it is just one vote amongst many' and 'it doesn't affect it at all because it is only one vote'. Here the main issue seemed to be the potential affect that 'just one vote' could have. Some participants considered voting an ineffective method of social change because they perceived individual votes to be worth little. For others this was a matter of debate. The best example from our focus groups that illustrates the ambivalence felt by participants comes from the interview at Rural View High School. Here one participant, when asked if voting was important, said that a single vote is 'one in a million'. Kitty, thinking about this, said, 'you hear that some parties lose by ten votes, so that's ten people who could have voted for them, or who haven't voted at all, or who voted for someone else'. Miriam compared voting in local elections with Federal ones saying, 'for local government I reckon every vote counts, because it is only a small number ... but in Federal Elections you've got everyone in Australia so really you are only one small dot'. The result of this discussion at this school was that participants decided that voting was important because an individual vote could have an affect, however small, on the outcome of an election.

There was similar ambivalence expressed in regard to external efficacy. Here participants raised several interrelated factors that could be considered to indicate low external efficacy. One tendency was for participants to comment on the homogeneity of the Australian political landscape. Here participants indicated they were currently afforded little scope or choice amongst the parties. To this end an individual vote would achieve very little because essentially the choices offered in an election were similar. At Cheltenham College, for example, some participants agreed that the 'parties are too similar'. A number of participants at Crowfield Secondary College referred to the 'sameness' of politicians. Individuals in a number of other groups echoed these sentiments. Thus we heard that change regarding issues of personal concern was not possible because there is 'no real choice in the current system'.

For others, limitations on external efficacy were perceived as lying in a political environment where decision makers were not responsive to the voices of the people. This was related to perceptions about the locus and nature of political power. Narelle, for example, despite being active politically on her local council, said that she had 'doubts' that governments 'really did take into account' the opinions of the people as registered via the ballot box. Breanna saw individuals as having little power or efficacy because 'in the end it is the people you vote for' who have the real decision-making power. Mitch considered decisions to be made not through the ballot box but instead by what he described as a 'cabinet dictatorship'. Louis said 'we have the power to put someone in power but we don't have the power to affect what they will say'. Louis spoke about 'the war' in Iraq, an issue he was particularly concerned about. He was angry that Australia had gone to war despite what he saw as popular opposition to sending troops. The war, he said, 'was just the Prime Minister's decision'.

The Potential of Social Change and 'The War'

'The war' arose in focus groups in many contexts and was clearly a major issue of concern to participants. This is not to say that all opposed it. Some did support both the war and Australia's involvement. The majority, however, were in opposition and considered that troops should not have been sent by the Australian Government. As a reference point 'the war' was used to explain a number of perceptions about politics including trust (or lack of) of politicians, the power of politicians and the Prime Minister and efficacy. The war provides an interesting case study in terms of discussing the efficacy of both protest and voting.

Participants who had protested against the war had considered the efficacy of their protests. At Trenton College where 'heaps of people' had been involved in protests they had, at the time of the protest, felt 'powerful'. However in the focus discussion at this school some participants agreed that they were disappointed that their protests 'had not changed anything'. Similar views were expressed at Grania High School. Here participants were concerned that their protests were ineffective in that they had not changed government policy regarding the war. To some degree, then, there was dismay that the power of protest was limited.

Participants raised several issues in support of their perception that voting was ineffectual because 'real power' lay elsewhere. Of these the war is perhaps the most interesting and pertinent. Sadie felt that voting had limited efficacy in terms of affecting change. She said '[voting] doesn't matter – they still went to war'. Samantha also felt that despite popular opposition to the war 'the government did not listen'. At Cheltenham College students were particularly passionate and when the issue of the possible effect of voting was raised the general view was that voting could not do much because 'they don't take out a ballot box every time they declare a war'.

What 'the war' brings into focus is that these are not reactions against democracy *per se*, or even against voting. Participants argue that voting is not effective because it does not *go far enough* as a strategy that invests individuals with the power to effect change. In other words the reaction here is against governments that do not listen or regard the will of the people. It is also against the limitations of democracies that only allow for voters a limited say in who will represent them. Christopher – "just voting for somebody does not make it democratic". At Trenton College Debby expressed the view that there should be more democracy, through the form of referenda in Australia. In particular, she emphasised, these should be on "international issues" like "whether we go to war or not". This sentiment was agreed on by the group. Indeed there was support for more referenda in a number of schools where participants indicated they wanted to vote for 'issues' and not just 'people'. For example one participant said "Australia is not a total democracy because the decisions they make are up to them, we can only choose whether or not to elect them".

Summary and Conclusion

The exploration of issues of concern to young people, interest in social change, methods effecting social change and perceptions of voting as a mechanism of social change through YES has enhanced our knowledge about young people's participation. Demonstrated by YES is some support for elements of both competing models of youth engagement, but also some evidence that suggests limitations of both models. In addition new information has been revealed that may lead the way towards a new approach to youth participation in social change.

In support of the disengagement hypothesis YES has revealed that few young people are involved in the institutions of mainstream politics. It was a rarity to encounter participants who were members of political parties or otherwise involved in formalised governmental institutions or processes, even those that were ostensibly 'youth focussed'. Also revealed was that although most participants would enrol and vote that compulsion was a main impetus for this. The majority of participants considered it important to meet the obligation of enrolling and voting, but many also described voting as boring and as a hassle. To this end there is some evidence to support the view that young people are disengaging from political life, and, that if voting were not compulsory in Australia that we may face a crisis of turnout much like many other Western nations.

YES also revealed, however, that many young people are engaged politically, and, with respect to mainstream politics. Most are aware of the political landscape and

contemporary issues and could name an issue that personally concerned them. Many had protested in respect to some of these issues. The issues themselves suggested that young people maintained an interest in 'old' causes, such as the peace movement, whilst also being interested in newer causes, such as animal rights or the environment. None specifically mentioned they engaged in non-traditional methods of protest, although some discussed how they integrated their political beliefs into their own lives and practices. Interestingly there was a tendency not to regard these issues of interest as 'political', but to see them simply as issues.

The conflict in Iraq and Australia's decision to send troops to this provided a fulcrum around which young people often defined their views about political participation and social change. 'The war' was the most frequently mentioned issue of concern. It was also this issue that provided the greatest impetus for many to attempt to engage in social change through protest. Measures of the efficacy of both protest and voting were also frequently taken with regard to the effect that these practices had, or could potentially have, on Australia's involvement in this war. The most significant finding here was in respect to voting. Discussion about the war revealed that many young participants were not retreating from democracy, but that they considered that Australia's representative democracy does not go far enough. Many concluded that governments are not responsive enough and that there is not enough scope for 'real' democracy. Hence, there were calls for more direct mechanisms of democracy, such as referenda.

Suggested by this is that the focus of the debate about youth and participation needs to change. Currently commentators, regardless of which model of participation they advocate, ask *whether* young people participate and *how* they participate. Young people, however, are more concerned with the *effects* of participation. Many have misgivings about the potential of either voting or protest to effect social change. To this end young people, in discussing social change, turn the question around. Their issue is 'to what extent can participation in Australia's modern representative democracy facilitate social change?' Young people have been asked by educators, politicians and policy makers to participate in Australia's public and political life. YES research has indicated that one of the most fruitful ways of encouraging young people to participate would be to focus on scrutinising and enhancing Australia's democratic processes and institutions in order to make both participation and democracy meaningful to young people.

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² The literature on youth participation is extensive and crosses many fields including political science, education and sociology. A comprehensive summary of the literature and its heritage as well as elucidation of the normative framework that characterises this literature can be found in Nie, Junn and Barry (1996).

³ These data were obtained from the Australian Electoral Commission and are the best that current methods of modelling of enrolment data can provide. Figures quoted, however, are approximate only and may be subject to future revision.