

Topic 5:

Young people and the vote

- **Investigation:**
How engaged are young people
in voting and elections? p 116

Middle secondary | Upper secondary



AEC

Australian Electoral Commission

Topic 5: Young people and the vote

While there is much evidence that young people are engaged in political issues, the enrolment rate of people between the ages of 18 and 24 is below that of the population at large. This topic allows students to explore the influence that young people can have on governments. Students explore issues important to young people and how they might influence outcomes through voting. They consider who can enrol and vote in Australia and whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. Students explore the importance of critical literacy in evaluating political messages and create a campaign to encourage young people to enrol and vote.

This topic contains one investigation.

From the margin

Enrolment rate

At June 2020, the enrolment rate for 18- to 24-year-olds was 85.8% compared to 96.5% for the general population.



Investigation

How engaged are young people in voting and elections?

Recommended levels | Middle secondary | Upper secondary

The investigation at a glance

Background briefings for teacher reference

- Australian Electoral Commission, Democracy

Suggested classroom teaching time

- **Activity 1:** What issues are important to young people in our community? (50–80 minutes)
- **Activity 2:** Can young people influence governments? (80 minutes)
- **Activity 3:** Should the voting age be lowered to 16? (50 minutes)
- **Activity 4:** Elections, engagement and fake news? (50 minutes)
- **Activity 5:** Your vote, your choice? (80–120 minutes)

Indicators of student achievement

- Understand electoral law related to enrolment and voting
- Analyse issues and possible solutions
- Account for different interpretations and points of view about lowering the voting age
- Analyse the importance of critical literacy in evaluating election material
- Develop convincing and accurate arguments on enrolment and voting

Activity 1

What issues are important to young people in our community?

Focus questions

- What issues are young people in our community concerned about?
- What resources can be used to find out about issues?
- How do political parties address issues of concern to young people?

Resources

- Political party websites, for example:
 - [Australian Labor Party: www.alp.org.au](http://www.alp.org.au)
 - [Liberal Party of Australia: www.liberal.org.au](http://www.liberal.org.au)
 - [National Party of Australia: www.nationals.org.au](http://www.nationals.org.au)
 - [Australian Greens: www.greens.org.au](http://www.greens.org.au)



Figure 33: Young people engaging in community work

Gathering information

Have students in groups discuss and come up with a list of four or five political issues that they think are most important and why. Have groups report back to the class. What issues are deemed most important by students? Are the issues local, state, national or global?

Have students develop a brief questionnaire to survey other classes or senior groups within the school or local community using the list of issues they found to be important. Allow them to add other issues. The questionnaire could be in the form of a brief tick box survey where people rate issues in order of importance and give reasons for their first choice or choices.

Have student groups compile the results of their surveys. These could be collated in the form of a data chart.

Ask students where they might find out further information about their issues and how the issues might be addressed and resolved. Compile a list of their suggestions, which might include political parties, interest groups or social media groups. Introduce students to the main party websites and point out where they might find out about party policies.

Have each group explore the main party websites for their policies in relation to one of two of their issues. They should also look at proposed resolutions to issues.

Identifying and analysing

Discuss the following with students:

- Did all groups come up with the same list of issues?
- What issues do they find to be most important? What reasons were given?
- What issues are seen to be most important by the broader student population?
- Is there unanimity about a core group of issues seen as important?
- What do party websites say about the issues important to students?
- How do political parties propose to resolve these issues?
- What similarities and differences are there among parties?
- What might be the best strategy to inform young people about voting for issues they feel strongly about?

Presenting findings

Have students prepare a short digital presentation about issues important to them and who they feel addresses their issues. Combine the presentations into a class presentation for other students at their year level, staff or parents.

Activity 2

Can young people influence governments?

Focus questions

- How can young people influence governments?
- What role do interest groups with a focus on youth play in educating and engaging young people?
- What roles do interest groups play in influencing governments?

Resources

- [BLM 1](#) Young people, influence and interest groups



Gathering information

While citizens under the age of 18 do not have a vote, they may still influence governments and participate in activities that advance ideas and policies, draw attention to issues, enlist community support and make a difference.

Discuss with students examples of ways that students can participate in and advocate for causes they believe in; for example, political rallies, student parliaments, multicultural organisations, Student Representative Council (SRC) activities, volunteering, social media campaigns, contacting local MPs.

Have students share examples of organisations outside of government that support and advocate for particular causes on behalf of groups of people and for issues that may be local, national or global. For example:

- human rights organisations such as Amnesty International
- health organisations such as the Australian Medical Association
- agricultural organisations such as the National Farmers Federation
- trade unions such as the ACTU
- environment organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature
- climate concerns such as the Australian Conservation Foundation
- online petition groups such as AVAAZ.

Show students an online example of one interest group and the sorts of information, ideas and advocacy contained on their website.

Discuss with students the roles of these organisations in promoting ideas and policies, representing groups, educating about specific issues, the ways they seek to influence government policy, how they engage with the public to build support and provide opportunities for citizen participation. Discuss the differences between interest groups and political parties. While political parties aim to win seats in parliament, interest groups aim to influence policies.

Provide students with a copy of [BLM 1](#).

Have them complete the checklist with a partner. (Explain that they may need to conduct online research when making some decisions.)

Then have students conduct research on one of the organisations with a focus on young people. (This is not an exhaustive list and there may be alternative youth-focused organisations within your local community.)

Students should focus their research on:

- the name of the organisation
- the target audience of the organisation
- the goals of the organisation
- the issues addressed by the organisation
- the scope of the issue – local, national or global
- how young people can be involved
- how the organisation might influence government
- how the organisation might influence and build support among young people
- the actions taken by the organisation
- the challenges to resolving the issues raised.

Identifying and analysing

Have student pairs compare their lists with others in the class. Discuss with students the items that pairs have in common, differences between pairs, and what students learnt about influencing government.

Have student pairs present and discuss their research findings. What did they find out about these organisations? What is their scope, support and influence? Do these organisations provide expert advice, educate about issues, seek to influence government or encourage participation?

Presenting findings

Have students use examples from their research and class discussions to produce a wiki, blog or presentation in response to the question: Do young people have power to influence government?



Figure 34: Young people at a protest

Activity 3

Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Focus questions

- Who can vote?
- How do you enrol?
- Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Resources

- [BLM 2](#) The vote at 16?
- AEC, [Enrol to vote](http://www.aec.gov.au/enrol/): www.aec.gov.au/enrol/
- BBC News, Australian election – [Fines, donkey votes and democracy sausages](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=3y_xXZ7paVI): https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=3y_xXZ7paVI



Figure 35: Young people enrolling to vote

Gathering information

Show students the BBC news video clip on voting in Australia. Remind students that voting is not compulsory in Britain. Discuss with students the aspects of Australian elections this BBC reporter finds unusual, the views about compulsory voting expressed in the video and the impact of compulsory voting on election outcomes. What are their views about compulsory voting?

Have students in groups use the AEC website to briefly answer the following questions:

- Who can vote?
- How do citizens enrol to vote?
- What is the purpose of the electoral roll?
- What are the arguments for and against compulsory voting?

Read through [BLM 2](#) with students.

Discuss the arguments advanced about lowering the voting age, compulsory and voluntary voting and the maturity of 16-year-olds. Which arguments are most convincing to them?

Have students research voting knowledge of your senior school population as well as attitudes to lowering the voting age to 16. Develop a simple class survey that could be used by all groups in the class.

Identifying and analysing

Have students report back to the class and discuss the following:

- What arguments are there for and against compulsory voting? Which arguments are most convincing to students?
- How might compulsory enrolment of 16-year-olds encourage increased interest in voting for young people?
- How knowledgeable is our senior school population about enrolling and voting? What are their attitudes to lowering the voting age?

Revisit the material on [BLM 2](#).

Discuss the arguments put forward by young people about reducing the voting age:

- What are the arguments for and against voting for 16- and 17-year-olds?
- What are the arguments for and against compulsory voting for 16- and 17-year-olds?
- What are the arguments regarding the maturity of young people?
- What is your opinion?

Presenting findings

Have student groups use discussion and research to either:

- compose a letter to the editor of a newspaper or create a social media campaign arguing the case for or against voting for 16- and 17-year-olds
- prepare a presentation for senior students about enrolling to vote.

Activity 4

Elections, engagement and fake news

Focus questions

- How do we engage and inform people about enrolling and voting?
- Why is critical media literacy particularly important in the digital age?
- Why is disinformation a challenge to free and fair elections?

Resources

- **BLM 3** How to vote based on the facts (not spin) this election campaign
- **Animation: Your rights and responsibilities**
- AEC, **Electoral communication:** www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/electoral-communication.htm
- Media Literacy in Democracy, **Women's Suffrage in Australia:** <https://education.aec.gov.au/teacher-resources/media-literacy.html>



Figure 36: Young polling official on election day

Gathering information

View the **animation 'Your rights and responsibilities'**.

Discuss the following with students:

- Who is the key audience for this animation?
- What is the purpose of this animation?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of voters in a democracy?
- What are the responsibilities of the AEC?
- In a democracy, why is it important for voters to have access to voting? In what ways does the AEC create access for people who would normally not be able to get to a polling booth on election day?
- Is the source reliable? Is it current? Is it true? Why might the AEC include advice about checking the content of political communication?

Have students view the Communication page of the AEC website and read the material on 'Stop and consider' and discuss the following in groups:

- Why do you think the AEC included 'Stop and consider' in its 2019 election material?
- What advice is given in relation to the political content of election material?

- What do you think motivates some people to intentionally create or share disinformation (false information or fake news) online?
- How can social media users deal with the problem of disinformation, inaccuracies and missing facts on social media?
- Why is disinformation bad for democracy?

Provide students with **BLM 3**.

Have students in groups list and discuss the challenges and possible strategies to detect and counter disinformation during elections.

Identifying and analysing

Have groups present and discuss the following:

- What are the key messages that young people need in order to encourage them to enrol and vote?
- Why are truth, complete and factual information particularly important during election campaigns?
- What are the best strategies young people can use to interrogate election material they find on the internet?

Presenting findings

Have student groups prepare a social media campaign alerting young people to the questions that must be asked of social media election material.

Activity 5

Your vote, your choice

Focus questions

- How might we best encourage young people to enrol?
- How might we best encourage young people to vote?

Resources

- AEC, [Enrol to vote](http://www.aec.gov.au/enrol/): www.aec.gov.au/enrol/
- AEC, [Voting options](http://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/ways_to_vote/): www.aec.gov.au/Voting/ways_to_vote/
- AEC, [Preferential voting](http://www.aec.gov.au/learn/preferential-voting.htm): www.aec.gov.au/learn/preferential-voting.htm
- AEC, [Electoral communication](http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/electoral-communication.htm): www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/electoral-communication.htm



Figure 37: Enrolling to vote

Gathering information

Organise students into groups of five to discuss, research and organise a campaign encouraging enrolment and voting among young people in your area. The task is to create a promotional video to encourage young people in your local area to enrol and vote.

The video should be no longer than 2–3 minutes.

Ask students to follow these steps:

- Identify your goals.
- Profile your audience and the issues that will engage them.
- Research your issues – you need to get your facts straight.
- List your key messages – these need to be short and catchy.
- Research the requirements of enrolment and voting to include in your presentation.
- Storyboard your script – consider visual appeal, props as well as messaging.

Identifying and analysing

Conduct a focus group activity to test your ideas with other groups in the class.

They should consider the following:

- Is the messaging clear and accurate?
- Have you hit your target market?
- Is the content engaging?
- What resonated with them? What missed the mark?

Groups should adjust their storyboards based on the feedback they received before filming.

Presenting findings

As a class, agree on a set of criteria to assess the videos.

Prepare a simple rubric and distribute to the class. Students will assess each film (except their own) and findings will be collated. Alternatively, use an online survey or polling tool to capture responses immediately.

Have students present their videos to the class.

Consider presenting the videos to other classes or at student assemblies or parent meetings.



Going further

Media literacy and democracy

Extend students' understanding of critical media literacy by having them complete activities in the AEC online unit, [Media Literacy in Democracy](#).

Students explore activities to help them recognise bias and a range of persuasive techniques which are commonly used to direct readers to accept a particular point of view. They look at characteristics of the changing media landscape: how algorithms are used to filter and determine information shown to users and the characteristics of online media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Students explore critical media literacy through the historical issue of Women's suffrage in Australia where they examine fictional online news sources, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds.

Teachers can reinforce and apply the understanding of media literacy obtained in this unit by asking students to investigate particular contemporary issues.

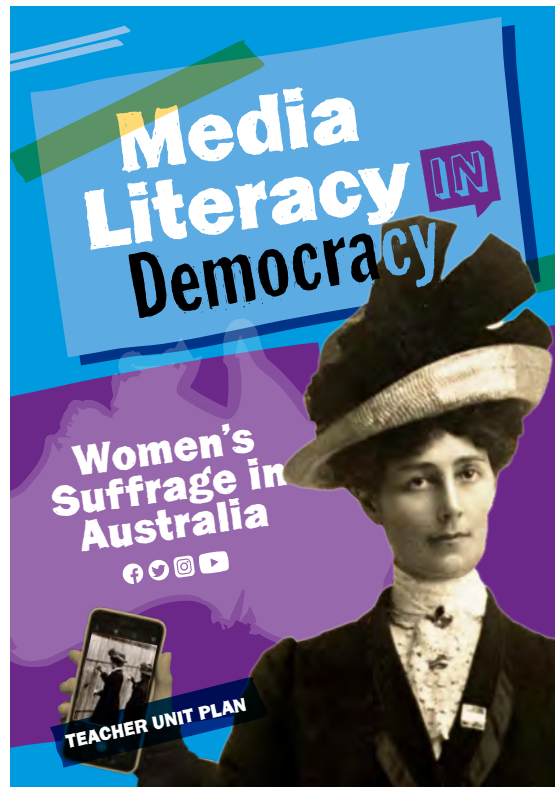


Figure 38: Media literacy in democracy resource

BLM 1

How engaged are young people in voting and elections?

Young people, influence and interest groups

1. Tick the actions that people under the age of 18 can undertake to advocate for issues and influence government.

	Organise or sign a petition
	Write a wiki or a blog about an issue
	Start a social media campaign
	Vote at national elections
	Speak at a public meeting
	Distribute leaflets
	Put up posters
	Contact a member of parliament or councillor about an issue
	Wear a badge or T-shirt supporting a cause
	Write a letter to mainstream media
	Join a street demonstration
	Perform street theatre
	Vote in a referendum
	Provide input to parliamentary committees
	Join a political party
	Stand for parliament or council
	Join a non-government organisation (NGO)

2. Examples of interest groups with a focus on youth.

- **Oaktree:** www.oaktree.org
- **Australian Youth Climate Coalition:** www.aycc.org.au
- **Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network:** www.myan.org.au/
- **UN Youth Australia:** www.unyouth.org.au/
- World Vision, Young Mob – **Leadership Program:** www.worldvision.com.au/global-issues/work-we-do/supporting-indigenous-australia/sydneys-young-mob-leadership-program
- **The Foundation for Young Australians:** www.fya.org.au
- **VicSRC:** www.vicsrc.org.au
- **Youth Action (NSW):** www.youthaction.org.au/what_we_do
- **Student Voice hub:** studentvoicehub.org.au/forums/t/nsw-src/#
- **National Schools Constitutional Convention:** www.ncsonline.com.au/projects/national-schools-constitutional-convention
- **Youth Coalition of the ACT:** www.youthcoalition.net
- **Queensland Youth Housing Coalition:** www.qyhc.org.au
- **Youth Opportunities (SA):** www.youthopportunities.com.au/
- **YACWA:** www.yacwa.org.au

The vote at 16?

The voting age in Australia was lowered from 21 to 18 years in 1973. Some people argue that it is time to lower the voting age again – to 16.

There are overseas examples for lowering the voting age. Countries and territories such as Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Guernsey, Jersey, Isle of Man, Malta, Nicaragua and Scotland have a legal voting age of 16. Our neighbours in Indonesia, Korea and Timor-Leste have a voting age of 17. Still other countries have a voting age of 19 or older.

Joint Standing Committee of the Australian Parliament and the Vote for 16- and 17-year-olds

In March 2019 the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters published an Advisory Report in response to the proposed amendments to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* and the *Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984* proposed by the Greens which included lowering the voting age to 16, allowing voluntary voting for 16- and 17-year-olds and lowering the age that individuals can be added to the electoral roll from 16 to 14. The committee considered a range of submissions covering arguments relating to equality, maturity and compulsory voting before rejecting the proposal.

(Source: Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, [Advisory Report](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/VotingAge/Advisory_report), March 2019, www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/VotingAge/Advisory_report)



The following extracts cover a sample of the information and views put forward.

Age of majority for selected activities

Responsibility	Age
Age in federal adult court	18
Marriage	18 (16 with parental consent)
Alcohol consumption	18
Military service	17 (requires parental consent)
Sexual consent	16 (17 in some states)
Drivers licence	17 (18 in Victoria)
Consent to medical treatment	18 (16 in NSW and SA; no age restrictions in Queensland and Tasmania)
Leave full-time education	17 (in some states 16 if working; in WA until 17.5 or on completion of Year 10)

(Advisory Report page 9)

The vote at 16?

“ Aligning the franchise with adult responsibilities such as taxation, parenting and medical consent is a compelling argument. However, while 16- and 17-year-olds do take on significant responsibilities, in most cases this is under parental guidance and most social and legal norms do not apply full responsibility until the age of 18 – even young parents remain under the guardianship of their parents until they reach the age of 18. Every state and territory has legislation relating to the age of majority and this is set at 18 in each jurisdiction.

(Advisory Report page 9)

“ Little longitudinal research has been undertaken on the community’s attitude towards lowering the voting age to 16. However, the research that has been undertaken indicates limited community support for lowering the voting age.

(Advisory Report page 4)

“ Young people aged 16 and 17 are active and contributing members of Australian society, who hold considerable decision-making powers regarding their own lives and who are required to meet a number of legal requirements. Extending the voluntary vote to 16- and 17-year-olds would be an instrumental step in assuring that young people are funnelling their political motivation into traditional civic avenues, that relationships between young people and politicians are strengthened, and that young people are treated as valued citizens. These outcomes would be positive for Australia’s democracy as a whole.

Youth Action NSW, quoted (Advisory Report page 5)

“ Young people are frequently excluded from policy discussions in a range of domains affecting their lives, such as employment, education, housing, tax, the environment, welfare and support services. Due to their ineligibility to vote, young people aged 16 or 17 are unable to hold politicians and governments to account through electoral processes, resulting in youth affairs seldom being a priority for the government. Consequently, the challenges that young people experience frequently go unaddressed.

Youth Coalition of the ACT, quoted (Advisory Report page 7)

“ Young people have a powerful vision for the world, and have a vital role to play in shaping our future, especially in this critical time for addressing climate change. The tired rhetoric that young people are apathetic is so out of touch with a generation of young people who feel scared about the future they’ll grow up in.

Australian Youth Climate Coalition, quoted (Advisory Report page 8)

“ [...] making voting for 16- and 17-year-olds voluntary poses a risk to Australia’s very successful system of compulsory voting. Any arguments that could be made in support of making voting for 16- and 17-year-olds voluntary are equally applicable to voters who are 18 years old, 28 years old or 88 years old. Making voting for 16- and 17-year-olds voluntary would put a hole in Australia’s system of compulsory voting

Associate Professor Luke Back, quoted (Advisory Report page 16)

“ At 16, teenagers are still basing decisions off on their emotions and impulse rather than logic and reasoning. Moreover, as teenagers, they are prone to peer pressure and may vote according to their friend group’s votes. Teenagers at this age may not take it as a serious matter of the country, and may regard it as an annoying, compulsory chore. They are likely to be swayed by influential people in their lives, as they have little political view and are likely to adopt those of the people around them.

Calvin Teo, quoted (Advisory Report page 18)

How to vote based on the facts (not spin) this election campaign

Source: Extracts from ABC Life: www.abc.net.au/life/federal-election-how-to-vote-based-on-the-facts-not-spin/11025852 (May, 2019)

[...]

As an engaged voter, one of the hardest tasks is trying to cut through the spin and promises of the campaign. Politicians, commentators and media outlets all have their own biases, which makes getting to the truth a difficult task.

On top of all of that, we have our own preconceptions that can make it hard to separate fact from fiction.

So, here's some tips for using your head, rather than your instincts, to make a better voting decision this election.



Navigating bias in an election campaign

The first step to becoming more objective when it comes to decisions is accepting that being objective is really, really hard, says Blake McKimmie, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland.

[...]

Here's a few of the more common biases to be particularly aware of: We tend to see our beliefs as being typical, which means we often overlook or underestimate those with different perspectives. It's what's called the false consensus effect, Dr McKimmie says.

When we're repeatedly exposed to something, we tend to like it more. This is called the mere-exposure effect. Politicians take advantage of this when they repeat talking points or statements over and over again, Dr McKimmie says.

We tend to only seek out information that confirms or supports our views. This is called confirmation bias. If you want to be objective, you really need to be challenging yourself and thinking about how you might be wrong, or what it would take to change your mind.

We tend to estimate the likelihood of an event occurring based on how easy it is to bring to mind examples. Psychologists call this the availability heuristic. (Heuristic just means 'mental shortcut'.)

[...]

So what can we do about it? Dr McKimmie suggests asking yourself two key questions when evaluating something you read or hear during the campaign:

1. Why is this speaker, writer or commentator telling you what they're telling you? Remember, political campaigns are about advocacy and not about providing accurate information, Dr McKimmie says. Be cautious about taking any claim at face value.
2. What is the evidence to support this claim? And what evidence will undermine the claim? Try to look at both sides of any issue, he says, and ask yourself what it would take to change your mind.

'Political campaigns are filled with noise ... if you want to remain as objective as possible, tune all that out and focus on impartial sources that analyse actual policy,' adds Tim Dean, Honorary Associate at the University of Sydney's Philosophy department.

How to vote based on the facts (not spin) this election campaign

It's especially important today, when anyone with any motive can publish information or misinformation online. And it goes beyond deception and 'fake news'.

'In order to understand information, you can't simply put it in a fact or fiction bucket ... we need to really understand bias, and agenda, and credibility, and how those things are intertwined,' Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, executive director of the US National Association for Media Literacy Education, told the ABC last year.

[...]

Along with her husband and her late father-in-law, Ms Rosling Rönnlund has worked to promote a 'fact-based worldview'. They wrote a book together aimed at combating some common misconceptions we hold about the world.

[...]

We tend to hear more bad news than good news, which can lead us to think the world is worse off than it really is.

We tend to hear about extreme events — freak weather and terrorist attacks, for instance — but rarely hear about the mundane or the average. We're also prone to making sweeping generalisations.

So how can we overcome this tendency towards the dramatic? It's as simple as remembering two key things, Ms Rosling Rönnlund says.

Try to stay humble about your own abilities and your own knowledge. Most likely, you know less about the world than you think.

Be curious about getting to know what others think and try to fix your own knowledge gaps.

'If people could act more like that, I think we could have more decent debates, and I think people would use their analytical brains in better ways,' she says.

Focus on the facts, not person

Let's be honest, a lot of us take all kinds of shortcuts when deciding how to cast our vote. Many of us vote for the politician we like the most, or the one who performs well in debates or interviews.

While it's important for our political leaders to be likeable and good communicators, it doesn't necessarily make them better at the job they're applying for: running the country.

This is just one example of how stereotypes can affect our decision-making when it comes to choosing who to vote for.

[...]

'If you break it down issue by issue, and evaluate it issue by issue, then work out which political party is best aligned with your own priorities, that's probably a better way to do it,' Dr McKimmie says.