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Publisher: Routledge

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Australian Journal of Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cajp20>

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Published online: 21 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Ian McAllister (2014) The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia: Evaluating the evidence, Australian Journal of Political Science, 49:1, 68-83, DOI: [10.1080/10361146.2013.868402](https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.868402)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.868402>

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The politics of lowering the voting age in Australia: Evaluating the evidence[†]

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There is a vigorous international debate about lowering the voting age to 16, with some jurisdictions already moving in this direction. The issue of the voting age also intersects with broader normative and empirical approaches to youth political engagement. Using evidence from Australia, this article evaluates empirically the arguments put forward for lowering the voting age. The findings suggest only partial support for lowering the voting age to bring it into line with other government-regulated activities. There is no evidence that lowering the voting age would increase political participation or that young people are more politically mature today than they were in the past. The absence of empirical support for the arguments in favour of lowering of the voting age has implications for how to transform democracy in order to attract greater youth engagement.

Keywords: elections; franchise; voting

One of the most significant postwar changes in the franchise has been the reduction in the voting age from 21 to 18 years. From the 1960s onwards, most of the established democracies made this change, starting with Britain and Canada in 1970, the USA in 1971, and Australia and New Zealand in 1973 and 1974, respectively. The last major democracy to reduce the voting age to 18 was Switzerland in 1991. This widespread change in the franchise resulted in a large number of new voters appearing on the electoral register. In Australia, for example, 824,000 new voters were registered in the election immediately after the change, about double what would have been expected due to the natural increase in the size of the population.¹

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[†]An earlier version of this article was delivered at the Australian Electoral Commission Research Forum, Canberra, 19–20 November 2012. The 2007 and 2010 Australian Election Study surveys were collected by Ian McAllister, Juliet Pietsch, Clive Bean and Rachel Gibson and funded by the Australian Research Council. The 1987–2004 Australian Election Studies were collected by a variety of collaborators. All of the data are publicly available from the Australian Data Archive (<<http://www.ada.edu.au/>>).

¹Between 1972 and 1974, the registered electorate rose from 7,074,070 to 7,898,922, an increase of 824,852. Concurrently, the population rose from 12,960,000 to 13,340,000, an increase of 380,000 (International IDEA 2012).

The public rapidly accepted the lowering of the voting age to 18 years; since the 1990s, the international debate about the franchise has shifted to reducing the age further, to 16 years. One widely held view is that this 'is an idea whose time has come' (NYRA 2012) and that the change represents a logical and inevitable extension of the earlier reform. Lowering the voting age to 16 is advocated by a wide range of youth organisations around the world, and it is promoted in numerous websites. It is also supported as formal party policy by a diverse range of mainly left-leaning political parties, such as the British Liberal Democrats, the Australian Greens and the Danish Social Democrats.

The current debates about reducing the voting age mirror those conducted in the 1960s and 1970s about reducing the voting age to 18. In those earlier debates, supporters of the change pointed to, among other things: equity with the age of military service and marriage; the need to stem declining election turnout rates; and the importance of inculcating civic values at as early an age as possible. Opponents of the change argued that 21 represented the legal age of majority and that those under 21 lacked the political interest or skill to be given the vote.² Like these earlier debates, most of the arguments about lowering the voting age to 16 have been canvassed in government reports (Australian Government 2008; 2009). In contrast, scholarly evidence assessing the arguments for and against such a change has been thin on the ground.³

The debate about the impact of lowering the voting age also addresses normative approaches to youth political engagement. Internationally, young people have been shown to be less likely to vote, to follow an election campaign or to join a political party (Fieldhouse, Trammner, and Russell 2007; Martin 2012a). Concomitantly, young people are more likely to engage in non-electoral forms of political participation, notably using social media (Dalton 2008a). This has led some to question about how appealing traditional forms of democratic politics are to the young, and to propose new and innovative ways to re-integrate youth into the political process (Harris and Wyn 2009; Martin 2012a).

This article evaluates empirically the arguments made in favour of reducing the voting age to 16. The data come mainly from the Australian Election Study (AES) surveys conducted since 1987. The first section examines the nature of the franchise and its relationship to political engagement among the young. The second section summarises the debates about lowering the voting age, in Australia and internationally, while the third section outlines the distribution of public support for the change. The fourth section evaluates the arguments that have been advanced in favour of the change. The conclusion examines some of the implications of the findings for political participation among the young.

The franchise and youth political engagement

Over the past 150 years, the right to vote in national elections has gradually expanded from a privilege reserved for the minority to an entitlement enjoyed by the vast majority. Consequently, the franchise has been extended to virtually all citizens in a country, with relatively few exceptions. From a normative perspective, extending

²Contemporaneous reviews of these debates can be found in Beck and Jennings (1969) and Megyeri (1991).

³Notable exceptions are Chan and Clayton (2006), Cowley and Denver (2004) and Pammett and Myles (1991).

the franchise is considered to be a key component of democratic legitimacy; those who are affected by the government, it is argued, should have a say in who joins it (Shapiro 2009). Another, more practical, argument is that the quality of governance is enhanced by greater public participation. The net effect of these changes is that contemporary debates concerning the franchise focus on who to exclude, rather than who to include (Blais, Massicote, and Yoshinka 2001). Currently, there are three major groups that are excluded from the franchise: those who are not citizens of the country in which they reside; those who have been convicted of committing a crime; and those who have not yet reached a certain minimum age (Kelly 2012: chapter 4; Orr 2010).

Citizenship has been questioned as the main basis for the right to vote in Australia on two grounds.⁴ First, the increasing trend towards countries permitting dual citizenship has made it possible for citizens of one country to vote in the elections of another country in which they hold citizenship. Around half of all states currently permit some form of dual citizenship (Faist 2007). In this context, requiring citizenship as a right to vote has less validity, and around a quarter of all Australians in 1999 were estimated to have dual citizenship (Millbank 2000). Second, in 1984, the right to vote was restricted to Australian citizens, with the exception of British migrants who were already enrolled to vote. The government's 2009 green paper, *Strengthening Australia's democracy*, argued that if this exemption were to remain, it would be more consistent to base the right to vote on permanent residence rather than on citizenship.

Permitting convicted criminals to vote has been highly contentious (Massicote, Blais, and Yoshinaka 2004). While the USA disenfranchises convicted criminals (Manza and Uggen 2006), most European countries now permit prison inmates to vote. In Australia, the High Court ruled in 2007 that criminals serving sentences under three years should have the right to vote (Hughes and Costar 2006; Koch and Hill 2008; Orr 2007). However, the requirements vary between the different states and territories and the issue has been widely debated without any clear resolution (Kelly 2012: chapter 4).

Excluding from the franchise those who fall below a certain minimum age is at least as contentious as the exclusions based on citizenship or criminality. At the beginning of the 20th century, the mean voting age across the established democracies was around 24 years; by the end of the century, it had declined to just over 17 years (Hamilton 2011). The current debate is about reducing the age further, from the widely accepted age of 18 years, to 16 years. To date, only one established democracy has reduced the age to 16 for national elections: in 2007 Austria implemented a minimum age of 16 for all elections, following its gradual adoption in various *lander*. In the rest of Europe, only Germany and Switzerland allow voting at 16 for some state and municipal elections, but 18 remains in place for national elections.

Extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds also intersects with debates about political engagement among the young. The widely observed decline in electoral participation among the young (Wattenberg 2007) has led some to argue that young people are disengaging from the whole political process. This has been observed across a wide range of indicators, notably electoral enrolment and election turnout, campaign participation and party membership (Blais et al. 2004; Fieldhouse,

⁴There is also an extensive literature on citizenship and voting rights in the USA, stemming from the large illegal migrant population (Hayduk 2005).

Tramner, and Russell 2007; Franklin 2004; Martin 2012a). The alternative view is that youth engagement in traditional forms of political participation is undoubtedly declining, but involvement in non-electoral forms of participation such as protest, social media and online petitions is increasing (Martin 2012b; Vromen 2003). Dalton sees this as evidence of a fundamental shift in the nature of citizen norms, away from notions of obligation and duty, and towards values that emphasise ‘the need for autonomy and skepticism of government’ (2008a: 162).

The available evidence suggests that rather than disengaging with politics, young people are participating in politics in other ways. In turn, the nature and scope of citizenship and its implications for the mass public is also changing. Martin (2012a; cf. McCaffrie and Marsh 2013) shows that internationally young people’s engagement in non-electoral forms of participation is higher than it is for their older peers. Similar findings have been observed by Vromen (2003) in Australia, who used a survey of 18–34-year-olds to identify four different forms of political participation. Several qualitative studies have observed specific barriers to youth political engagement which, it is suggested, represent major impediments to achieving full citizenship (Bessant 2004; Harris and Wyn 2009).

The argument that the franchise should be extended to 16- and 17-year-olds underpins the view that only radical change will stem the rapidly declining levels of youth electoral participation. This decline has been observed by many studies, using different methodologies, and across a wide range of countries. Advocates of reducing the voting age argue that the solution to the problem of youth political engagement is to involve the young in electoral politics at an early age, so that their interest in politics will be stimulated, and a habit will be formed that will endure in later life. In the sections that follow, empirical evidence is brought to bear to test this proposition.

Debates about lowering the voting age

The debate over lowering the voting age has progressed farthest in the UK. The UK parliament first voted on the issue in 1999, when it was overwhelmingly defeated; a subsequent private members’ bill in 2005 was also defeated. Several independent reports have examined the issue, and have been motivated mainly by a desire to arrest the declining turnout in UK general elections, which fell to 59.4 per cent in 2001, the lowest level of turnout since 1918.⁵ A 2004 UK Electoral Commission report, *Age of electoral majority*, examined lowering the voting age, and included extensive survey evidence concerning public attitudes to such a change. The report concluded that ‘there appears to be insufficient current justification for a change to the voting age at the present time’ (UK Electoral Commission 2004: 5).

In contrast to the Electoral Commission’s conclusions, a 2006 report from the non-party *Power inquiry*, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, recommended voting at 16 as one of 30 proposals aimed at increasing political participation and countering what it called Britain’s ‘democratic malaise’.⁶ In 2007 a green paper, *The governance of Britain*, proposed a Youth Citizenship Commission to examine

⁵The 1918 election was itself affected by the disruption caused by the end of the First World War and the extension of the franchise to women aged over 30. Turnout increased slightly, to 61.4 per cent in 2005, and 65.1 per cent in 2010.

⁶The other means were decentralising power, reforming the electoral system and introducing citizen-initiated legislation (White 2006).

‘whether reducing the voting age would increase participation in the political process’ (UK parliament 2007: 55). Voting at 16 has all but been ruled out at the national level in the UK, but several sub-national jurisdictions have introduced it, the first being the Isle of Man in 2006. In 2012, the UK and Scottish governments agreed that 16- and 17-year-olds would be allowed to vote in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.⁷ And in November 2012, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted in favour of voting at 16, although the power to implement such a change resides with the Westminster parliament.

Following the lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1973 in Australia, there has been only periodic discussion about reducing the voting age further, and certainly nothing on the scale of the British debate. In 2004, a Victorian Electoral Commission discussion paper canvassed the advantages and disadvantages of such a change, although it relied mainly on survey evidence from the UK Electoral Commission’s 2004 report (Victorian Electoral Commission 2004). Following the election of the Rudd Labor government in 2007, the *Australia 2020 Summit* advanced the idea of allowing voluntary voting for those aged 16–18 years old, while voting would remain compulsory for those aged 18 or over and be accompanied by automatic enrolment. In 2009, the government’s green paper, *Strengthening Australia’s Democracy*, canvassed a wide range of electoral reform measures, one of which was to lower the voting age to 16. The paper also raised for discussion the idea of whether voting by 16- and 17-year-olds should be compulsory or optional, and whether different minimum voting ages should be applied to different levels of government, as is the case in some European countries.

The publics across the established democracies are generally opposed to lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. The 2004 UK Electoral Commission report, *Age of electoral majority*, commissioned a national public opinion survey which found that just 22 per cent favoured lowering the voting age to 16. Even in Scotland, which has implemented voting at 16 for the 2014 independence referendum, just 36 per cent say that they favour the lower age for the referendum and 35 per cent support it for voting in all UK elections (Nelson 2012). In Australia, the public is also opposed to lowering the voting age. Table 1 shows that 94 per cent of the respondents in the 2010 AES opposed any change, with 72 per cent saying that the voting age should ‘definitely stay at 18’. Indeed, if anything, Australian public opinion is more emphatically opposed to lowering the voting age than is found elsewhere. Overall, just 6 per cent of the electorate favour change.

Public opinion in Australia is, then, overwhelmingly opposed to lowering the voting age to 16, and is more strongly opposed than is found elsewhere, most notably in Britain. This may be explained by the fact that the issue has been more extensively debated in Britain and is already mandated in several sub-national jurisdictions, so the public is more receptive to the change. Nevertheless, as the UK Youth Citizenship Commission points out, ‘public opinion is divided and does not assist us’ (2009: 4).

⁷Paragraph 10 of the agreement between the two government states:

The Scottish Government’s consultation on the referendum also set out a proposal for extending the franchise to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in the referendum. It will be for the Scottish Government to decide whether to propose extending the franchise for this referendum and how that should be done. It will be for the Scottish Parliament to approve the referendum franchise, as it would be for any referendum on devolved matters. (UK government 2012)

Table 1. Voter views of lowering the voting age, 2010

	(Per cent) Voters
Definitely lower to 16	3
Probably lower to 16	3
Probably stay at 18	22
Definitely stay at 18	72
Total	100
(N)	(2050)

Note: The question was: 'Do you think that the voting age in elections should be lowered to 16, or should it stay at 18?'.
Source: AES (2010).

Evaluating the arguments

Three main arguments have been advanced to support lowering the voting age to 16, in Australia and internationally.⁸ The first is equity, and it is argued that the minimum age for voting needs to be reduced in order to bring it into line with other government-regulated activities. A second argument concerns political participation, and a lower voting age is seen as essential in order to reverse the decline in political participation and to increase civic engagement. The third argument focuses on education, and stresses the greater maturity of contemporary 16- and 17-year-olds compared with their counterparts 20 or 30 years ago, due to better education and information. The evidence for each of these arguments is evaluated below.

Equity

Equity arguments gained considerable currency when the voting age debate first gained momentum in the late 1960s. This was the period when the USA was embroiled in the Vietnam War and, of the more than 58,000 soldiers who died in that conflict, one-fifth were less than 20 years old (Roush 2008).⁹ The large number of casualties among the young gave rise to the slogan 'old enough to vote, old enough to fight' (Cultice 1992).¹⁰ Similar equity arguments have been made to justify lowering the voting age to 16. In Australia, the age of appearing in an adult court and being free to marry is 18 in most circumstances, but other government-regulated activities have a lower minimum age, such as military service and obtaining a driving licence, which are both set at 17 (see Table 2). However, there are relatively few activities which have a minimum age of 16, with the exception of the age of consent and holding a firearms licence. In short, there is only partial evidence to support an equity argument.

A related equity argument concerns taxation. It is argued that 16- and 17-year-olds pay tax so they should, therefore, have the right to vote under the principle of 'no taxation without representation'. However, this logic applies equally well to those

⁸The arguments for and against are well summarised in Cowley and Denver (2004) and Folkes (2007).

⁹The average age of the 58,148 military personnel who were killed was 23.1 years.

¹⁰In the USA, Edward Kennedy, a strong advocate of lowering the voting age to 18, put it as follows: 'At the very least, the opportunity to vote should be granted in recognition of the risks an 18 year-old is obliged to assume when he is sent off to fight and perhaps die for his country' (Kennedy 2011).

Table 2. Minimum ages for selected government-regulated activities

Responsibility	Age	Notes
Age in adult court	18	17 in Queensland
Marriage	18	16 if both parents consent
Alcohol consumption	18	Possession and consumption
Military service	17	Application can be made from 16 years, 6 months
Vehicle licence	17	18 in Victoria, 16 years 6 months in the Northern Territory
Sexual consent	16	17 in Tasmania; other ages apply depending on type of act and circumstances
Pilots licence	17	16 for balloons and gliders
Firearms licence	14	Some variations between states and territories

under 16, as well as to tourists and to temporary residents, who also pay tax but who do not have the right to vote. In any event, most 16- and 17-year-olds are school students who are financially dependent on their parents. They, therefore, pay indirect tax on what they buy, but few will pay income tax.

Political participation

A second argument that is advanced to justify lowering the voting age is that it will increase political participation. In countries that have voluntary voting, supporters of the change argue that ‘lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout ... the earlier in life a habit is formed the more likely that habit or interest will continue throughout life’ (NYRA 2010). As voter turnout has declined across almost all of the established democracies that use voluntary voting (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Franklin 2004), one way of arresting the decline in turnout might be to reduce the voting age, thereby drawing new, more interested voters into the active electorate.

The argument that lowering the voting age will increase turnout is not supported by the evidence. Blais (2000; 2006) and many others have shown that turnout increases with age, so that, other things being equal, turnout should be higher if the minimum voting age is 21 rather than 18. In a study of 324 national elections across 91 countries, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998: 246) found that ‘everything else being equal, turnout is reduced by almost two points when the voting age is lowered one year.’ Lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 in the 1970s therefore reduced turnout by about 5 percentage points. Franklin (2004), analysing a smaller group of countries, estimated the decline in turnout due to lowering the voting age to be about 3 percentage points.

The evidence from 14 established democracies that lowered the voting age between 1970 and 1992 suggests that, in the majority of cases, turnout declined (Table 3). The estimate is made by comparing the average turnout in the two national elections prior to the change with the average turnout in the two national elections following the change.¹¹ Across the 14 countries in Table 3, turnout decreased by an average of 2.7 per cent, ranging from 9.3 per cent in France to 0.5 per cent in

¹¹Australia and Belgium are excluded because they have compulsory voting, and the Netherlands is excluded because compulsory voting was abolished in the year that the voting age was lowered. The

Table 3. Turnout before and after lowering the vote to 18, selected countries

	Year vote lowered	Turnout (per cent)		Change
		Before	After	
Canada	1970	75.8	74.1	-1.7
Germany	1970	86.7	90.9	+4.2
UK	1970	76.5	75.5	-1.0
USA	1971	92.7	87.9	-4.8
Finland	1972	81.8	74.6	-7.2
Sweden	1972	88.9	91.3	+2.4
Ireland	1973	76.8	76.3	-0.5
France	1974	80.6	71.3	-9.3
New Zealand	1974	89.9	84.0	-5.9
Italy	1975	93.0	91.9	-1.1
Denmark	1978	88.5	86.7	-1.8
Spain	1978	77.0	74.0	-3.0
Switzerland	1991	48.2	44.2	-4.0
Austria	1992	88.3	84.2	-4.1
Mean		81.8	79.1	-2.7

Notes: Turnout figures are the average for the two elections before the change and for the two elections after. All estimates are for parliamentary elections except for the USA which is presidential.

Source: International IDEA.

Ireland. Turnout increased in only two of the 14 countries: Germany, where it increased by 4.2 per cent; and Sweden, where it increased by 2.4 per cent.

Australia's compulsory voting system obviates any similar test of turnout. However, the effects of age on electoral participation can be modelled by using a question in the AES which asked the respondents if they would vote if voting was voluntary. In order to make these estimates, the 2007 and 2010 AES surveys were combined, so as to provide a sufficiently large sample size for the various age categories.¹² Across the combined sample, 86 per cent of the respondents said that they would have turned out to vote if voting had been voluntary. This is a high figure but equates to turnout in the Netherlands following the abolition of compulsory voting in 1971.¹³ The estimates by age group in [Figure 1](#) show that intended turnout is lowest among the youngest groups: 71 per cent among those aged 18–20, and 68 per cent among those aged 21–23. Thereafter turnout increases significantly, rising to 92 per cent among those aged in their early 30s. Electoral participation is, therefore, lower among the young in Australia, as is found elsewhere.¹⁴

pre-change estimate for Spain is based on one election, as only one election was held after the fall of the Franco dictatorship prior to lowering the voting age.

¹²An examination of the distribution of responses by age between the two surveys showed few or no differences.

¹³In the election immediately following that change, turnout was 79.1 per cent, and in the second election after the change, it was 83.1 per cent (Irwin 1974).

¹⁴Since the AES sampled registered electors, we are unable to measure the views of those aged 16 or 17. However, there is evidence from the Youth Electoral Study (Saha, Print, and Edwards 2007) that intention to vote and electoral participation are similar among 16- and 17 year-olds as among our 18- and 19-year-olds from the AES. Political behaviour among 18- and 19-year-olds in the AES is, therefore, a reasonable proxy for these slightly younger counterparts.

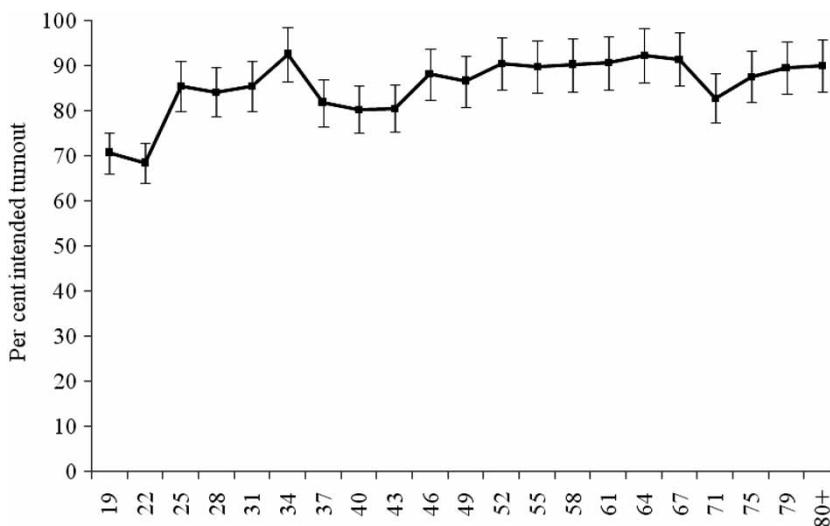


Figure 1. Intended turnout by age, 2007 and 2010 combined. The question was: ‘Would you have voted in the election if voting had not been compulsory?’ Estimates are ‘definitely’ or ‘fairly’ likely to vote by age. Age is measured in three-year categories, up to 67 when four-year categories are used. Estimates show 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Sources: Australian Election Studies (2007, 2010).

A related argument in support of lowering the voting age is that the sooner people begin voting, the more likely it is that they will participate in elections in later life: what is sometimes called the ‘vote early, vote often’ effect (Cowley and Denver 2004: 59). The argument is that if people vote at an earlier age, then the habit will become entrenched. However, as noted earlier, lowering the voting age to 18 resulted in reduced turnout, so that the newly enfranchised 18-year-olds will have learned abstention rather than voting. Franklin (2004) presents evidence to support what he calls a ‘low turnout footprint’ and points out that a small decline in turnout is magnified over successive age cohorts; he argues that the declining turnout observed across many established democracies in the 1980s and 1990s is explained by the lowering of the voting age in the early 1970s. As he puts it, ‘the socializing experience of the act of voting (or non-voting) will have tended to lock in the lower turnout of the newly enfranchised 18 year olds’ (Franklin 2004: 64).

The ‘vote early, vote often’ argument can be tested by again using the intended turnout question in the AES. By examining the intended turnout among the cohort of voters who entered the electorate in 1974 as a result of the lowering of the voting age to 18, we can determine if their turnout differs from the immediately preceding cohort, and the cohort immediately ahead of them. If the ‘vote early, vote often’ argument holds, then turnout among the new 1974 voters should be higher than among either the cohort ahead of them or the one preceding them. If, by contrast, the ‘low turnout footprint’ argument holds, then turnout should be lower among the new 1974 voters. The two competing hypotheses are tested in Table 4 at three time periods: the late 1990s, the early 2000s, and the late 2000s. In order to increase the sample size, once again two surveys in each time period have been combined.

The results in Table 4 provide no support for either hypothesis. In 1996/1998, there is modest support for the ‘low turnout footprint’ hypothesis, with intending turnout

Table 4. Intended turnout by generation, 1996–2010

	Per cent say ‘definitely’ or ‘fairly’ likely to vote		
	Pre-new 1974 voters	New 1974 voters	Post-new 1974 voters
1996/1998	84	78	80
(<i>N</i>)	(184)	(188)	(180)
2001/2004	86	85	85
(<i>N</i>)	(183)	(169)	(162)
2007/2010	91	91	91
(<i>N</i>)	(201)	(162)	(163)

Notes: ‘Pre-new 1974 voters’ were aged 15–17 in 1974, ‘new 1974 voters’ aged 18–20 in 1974, and ‘post-new 1974 voters’ aged 21–23 in 1974. The ages were adjusted to their current ages in the relevant survey. See [Figure 1](#) for question wording.

Source: Australian Election Studies (1996–2010).

among the new 1974 voters (who were by then aged 40–42 in 1996 and 42–44 in 1998) being slightly lower than either of the other two cohorts. However, in the early and late 2000s, there is no clear pattern; indeed, in the 2007/2010 surveys intended turnout is exactly the same, at 91 per cent, among all three cohorts. While Australia’s system of compulsory voting makes any robust test of the two hypotheses difficult, we must conclude that the ‘vote early, vote often’ argument is not supported, at least based on the experiences of those who entered the electorate as a result of the previous lowering of the voting age.

Political maturity

In the debates about lowering the voting age to 18 in the 1960s, a major argument was that the young were more politically mature compared to their counterparts in previous generations. As Kennedy (2011) put it in a 1970 speech, ‘our 18 year-olds today are a great deal more mature and more sophisticated than former generations at the same stage of development’. Similar arguments are advanced today about reducing the voting age to 16; as one youth organisation comments, ‘if we let stupid adults vote, why not let smart youth vote?’ (NYRA 2010). Certainly the postwar expansion of the educational system, and particularly the tertiary sector since the 1960s, has given increasingly large numbers of young people the opportunity to attend university.

The expansion of tertiary education is assumed to have significant effects on citizens’ political skills, by fostering cognitive mobilisation. Studies of childhood cognitive development suggest that political attitudes and preferences are formed early in life, and are reinforced through a variety of educational and family experiences (van Deth, Abendschon, and Vollmar 2011). This process produces a politically sophisticated electorate with the ability to process and interpret the political information that citizens accumulate in their day-to-day lives, through the mass media and in social interactions with others (Dalton 2007). What is the evidence that increasing levels of education within the electorate is generating more politically mature younger voters? Political maturity can be measured in a variety of ways. It is most commonly measured by interest in politics and by political knowledge, both of which are measured in the AES surveys.

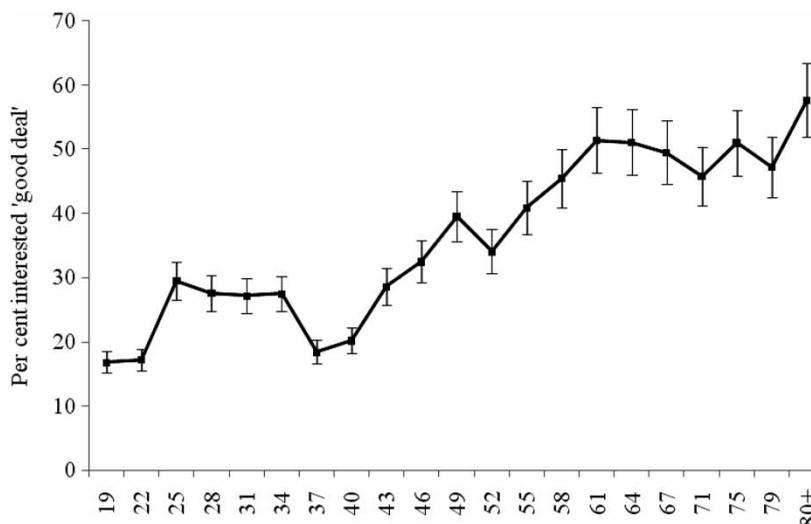


Figure 2. Political interest by age, 2007 and 2010 combined. The question was: ‘Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what’s going on in politics?’ Estimates are ‘good deal’ of interest. Age is measured in three-year categories, up to 67 when four-year categories are used. Estimates show 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Sources: Australian Election Studies (2007, 2010).

Political interest is generally lower among young people than among their older counterparts (Russell et al. 2002). The trends in Australia, shown in Figure 2 for the 2007 and 2010 surveys combined confirm the importance of age in shaping political interest. Among the two youngest age groups, just 17 per cent said they were interested in politics ‘a good deal’, compared to around 50 per cent for those aged over 60. As with intended turnout, there is a slight decline in interest among those aged in their late 30s and early 40s, before the strong upward trend resumes. These trends are very close to those found in Britain, which show a continuous upward trend across virtually the whole lifecycle (Chan and Clayton 2006: 542–43).

From the perspective of the argument that younger people are more mature now than they were in the past, the test is whether younger voters are more interested in politics now than they were previously. Figure 3 tests this hypothesis using the 1967–1979 Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys, and the 1987–2010 AES surveys. The estimates show the per cent who say they are interested in politics ‘a good deal’; estimates are provided for the total electorate and for those aged under 25 only.¹⁵

Over the 1967–2010 period, the trend for the total electorate shows increasing interest, starting with 18 per cent saying they were interested in politics ‘a good deal’, increasing to 27 per cent in 1979 and peaking at 39 per cent in 2007. Indeed, from 1987 onwards, never fewer than one in three of the electorate express a strong interest in politics. By contrast, political interest among the young remains at a low level, despite the upward trends among the electorate as a whole. In 1967, just 3 percentage points separated the young from the electorate as a

¹⁵In the 1967 and 1969 surveys, the young are aged 21–24, and from 1979 onwards, 18–24.

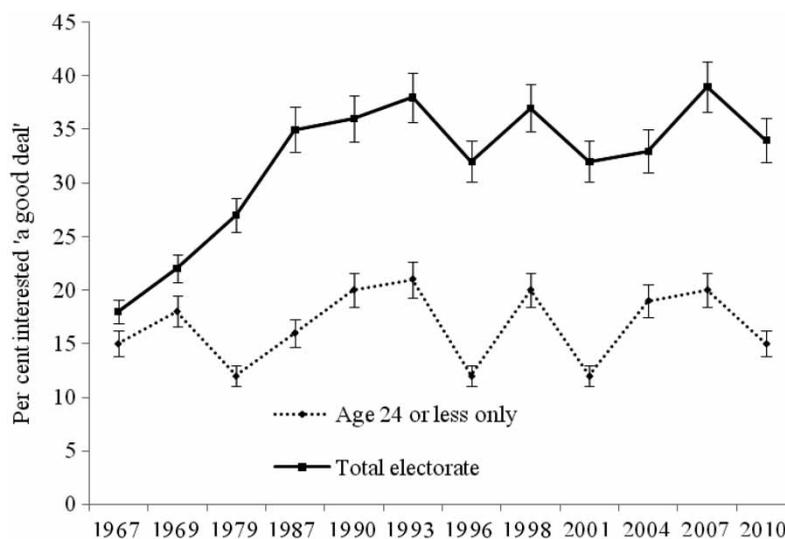


Figure 3. Changes in political interest, 1967–2010. See Figure 2 for question wording. Estimates show 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Sources: Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys (1967–1979), AES (1987–2010).

whole; by 1987 the gap had widened to 19 points and it remained at that level for the whole period from 1987 to 2010. The evidence, then, does not support an increase in political maturity, at least as far as it is measured by political interest.

A second measure of political maturity is political knowledge. While political knowledge can be defined in various ways and its measurement is subject to intense debate (Norris 2000), there is a distinction between factual knowledge that covers events, personalities and institutions, and background knowledge, which covers concepts and procedures.¹⁶ Since 1996 (but with the exception of the 2004 study), the AES has asked the respondents to say whether six factual questions concerning the Australian political system were true or false.¹⁷ Over the period of the surveys, the factual political knowledge of the electorate has remained remarkably constant, despite the very substantial increase in the amount of civic education that is available in schools. In 1996, for example, the average voter could answer just 2.3 out of the six questions correctly; by 2010 that had increased only marginally, to 2.4 questions (McAllister 2011: 67).

In order to test the hypothesis that younger people are becoming more politically mature, Figure 4 shows the mean values for the correct number of answers for those aged 25 years or more, and for those aged 18–24 only. As we would expect, there is a substantial gap in the number of correct mentions between the younger and older groups, ranging from 0.42 in the 1996 survey to 0.71 in 2007 and averaging 0.57 over the period. To put this in context, the average older voter could correctly

¹⁶There are known difficulties and limitations in measuring political knowledge (Mondak 1999; 2001).

¹⁷The questions were: ‘Australia became a Federation in 1901’; ‘The Senate election is based on proportional representation’; ‘The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court’; ‘No-one may stand for Federal Parliament unless they pay a deposit’; ‘The longest time allowed between Federal elections for the House of Representatives is four years’; ‘There are 75 members of the House of Representatives’. Statements 1, 2 and 4 are correct, and statements 3, 5 and 6 are incorrect.

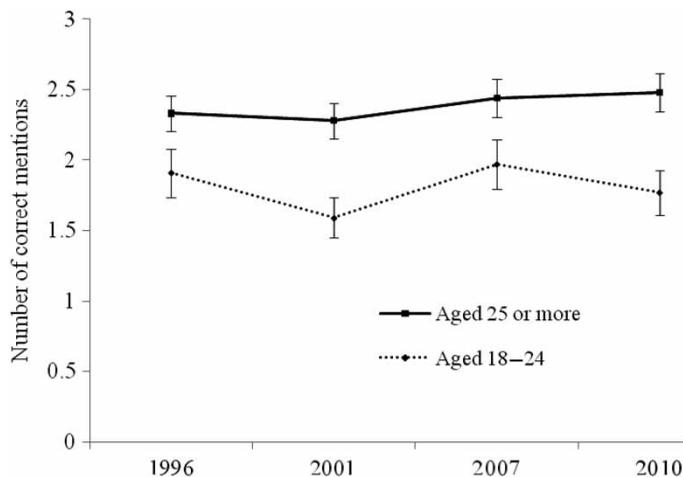


Figure 4. Political knowledge by age, 1996–2010. The question was: ‘And finally, a quick quiz on Australian government. For each of the following statements, please say whether it is true or false. If you don’t know the answer, cross the “don’t know” box and try the next one.’ See text for details of statements. Confidence intervals are for the 95 per cent level. Differences between estimates for electorate and those aged 18–24 are all statistically significant at $p < .01$ or better.

Sources: Australian Election Studies (1996, 2001, 2007, 2010).

answer almost two-and-a-half questions out of the total of six questions, while the average younger voter could correctly answer less than two questions. This is a substantial gap, and one that appears not to have diminished over the period of the four surveys.

According to Chan and Clayton (2006: 542), ‘political maturity is the pivotal issue in the debate over the voting age.’ Based on the evidence presented here, the increasing prevalence of tertiary education within the electorate has not resulted in greater political maturity. Political interest remains relatively low among young voters, while it has increased across the population, and political knowledge remains significantly lower among younger voters compared to their older counterparts. There are, of course, limitations in these estimates. Political interest is only one measure of political involvement, and it may not measure the potential of young people to be engaged with the political process (Dalton 2008b). Similarly, the political knowledge items reflect factual knowledge only and are available only over a relatively short period. Nevertheless, the results do seriously question the assertion that young people are politically more mature now than in the past.

Conclusion

The debate about the appropriate voting age raises a range of complex normative and empirical issues, including the definition of citizenship, the appropriate threshold for adulthood and the nature of the franchise. In the USA, the debates in the 1960s about lowering the voting age were driven by fears about escalating student protests on university campuses and the ethics of allowing 18- to 19-year-olds to fight in Vietnam but not to vote; these concerns loomed large with the legislators of the period. While lowering the voting age had first been proposed in 1942, it was not enacted

until 1971; the 26th amendment to the constitution was the fastest ratification of any legislation in US history (Cheng 2008: 1). The ease of its ratification contrasts sharply with the long process and bitter debate surrounding extending the franchise to women, which was embodied in the 19th amendment.

The debate about lowering the voting age to 16 is relatively recent. While it is a significant political issue in Britain, it has been little discussed in Australia and is not supported by any major political party, with the exception of the Greens. The evidence presented here finds little empirical support for the main arguments used by advocates of lowering the voting age. The evidence is, however, partial; the analyses have assumed that 18- and 19-year-olds are behaviourally similar to 16- or 17-year-olds. This assumption may be questionable, but it would be surprising if a survey of 16- or 17-year-olds yielded dramatically different results to those shown here.

Any move to lower the voting age might have other consequences, beyond enfranchising around 500,000 additional voters. It would raise issues about ensuring that these new 16- and 17-year-old voters were properly enrolled and that they turned out to vote – assuming their vote was compulsory. It would also raise the issue of the age at which persons could stand for election. In most countries, the age of candidacy has moved in tandem with the voting age. But should 16-year-old voters also be eligible to be MPs or senators? A change might also raise the issue of enfranchising even younger groups, such as 14- or 15-year-olds. And if that eventuated, the argument might be to apply a common civics test to all citizens prior to letting them have the vote.

More generally, these results address the broader question how to re-engage young people with the political process. Lowering the voting age will not in itself reverse increasing youth disengagement with traditional forms of political participation, but it does point to other ways in which such a change might take place. Dalton (2008a) has emphasised the need for a new set of cultural norms, eschewing a conception of citizenship based on duties and responsibilities and embracing a citizenship that uses direct action, works within a global framework, and is based on a holistic view of democracy. This would require a fundamental shift in how democracy is conceived and implemented, but radical thinking is required if we wish to reverse the long-term decline in youth political engagement.

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