

CONNECTING TO PARLIAMENT

Young People and Australian Politics

Background Document for Deliberative Town Halls with Alicia Payne

About this Document

This document seeks to outline some of the issues regarding the inclusion and representation of young people in Australian politics. It is prepared by the Connecting to Parliament team in consultation with Professor Ariadne Vromen who is the Bunting Chair of Public Administration in the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University. Professor Vromen conducts research on citizen engagement, policy advocacy, future of work, and young people and politics.

You could also watch the short video provided on our website covering the topics provided in this document. Please note that the document does not include a comprehensive list of issues faced by young people neither a full list of possible pathways forward. It is thought of and designed as a conversation starter for the participants of the deliberative town halls.

Introduction: Young people are engaged in politics, but....

Broadly speaking, it is possible to say that young people are engaged in politics in Australia. They talk with their friends on social media, sign petitions, donate time and money to causes that matter to them, and choose to buy or not buy products based on ethical, social, or environmental considerations.

Yet, there is a disconnection between how young people engage in politics in their everyday lives versus how they interact with formal political institutions. Research shows that a lot of people don't trust formal politics because they don't feel like they're heard or listened to. They don't feel like their voices are heard and matter for creating change beyond those regular incidences of an election.

How might we include young people more in the decision-making that matters in their lives? One way to start to answer this question is to understand the issues that impact young people.

What are the key issues that concern young people?

There are various issues that concern young people in Australia. In what follows, we list five of them.

1. Education

Access to formal education is increasingly a matter that concerns young people, either through university, or through vocational trades and apprenticeships. Education is expensive for young people, and this has an impact on the choices that young people can make to develop their life course over time. One [study](#) published in 2019 finds that students who cannot access higher education and who are undecided, vocational education programs only offer options aligned with specific occupations, and yet young people tend to prefer higher education over vocational trades because they believe it opens up more pathways; this could lead to a deficit in necessary skills for Australia's economy, so there needs to be more education and opportunity surrounding both options.

2. Employment

Related to that is the issue of employment, particularly finding support to secure stable full-time jobs. The majority of young people are concentrated in more precarious work, meaning they either work casually, or they work part-time. During the pandemic, debates have revolved around access to both JobSeeker and JobKeeper. In a study published in 2020 surveying high school students, the students ranked "future job security and stability" [2nd out of 8 desired outcomes](#). In [a 2021 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#), the percentage of young people (age 15-24) who are considered NEET (not in employment, education or training) went up 4% between 2019 and 2020, meaning that the proportion of young people considered NEET was twice as high for those living in the lowest socioeconomic areas. The Grattan Institute in Melbourne argues that the federal government should provide a [permanent increase to JobSeeker payments](#).

3. Costs of living

Another concern to young people is housing affordability, both rental security and being able to afford to buy a home. Young people are much less likely to be able to afford a house in comparison to the generations before. This connects to the costs of living, in general. There is economic evidence to suggest that young people are actually going backwards in comparison to their parents, and as such, starting a family, paying for childcare, are increasingly costly. The [Australia Talks](#) survey suggests that a majority of Australians (63%) believe that owning a home is out of reach for young people. This is supported by [research](#) indicating that home ownership among 25- to 55-year-olds will decline to just above 50 per cent by 2040. Adjacently, there has been a [7% increase since 1981](#) of young Australians living at home due to high living costs.

4. Equity and Inclusion

Young people are also interested in fairness and equity in society, often promoting issues concerning equity and fairness, be it in campaigns against racism, and for the rights of people with disabilities, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, access to health care and mental health support. Young people increasingly support the idea that people should be able to live their lives in the ways that they choose and are interested in creating a more equal society. For the first time, equity and discrimination is the [top national issue for young people](#), rising from third place in 2019 (24.8%) to the top spot in 2020 (40.2%), an increase of more than 60 per cent since last year.

5. Climate Change

Young people are increasingly concerned about climate change and responses that can be made by political decision-makers. In a study examining climate opinion and political voting behavior, [younger voters exhibit stronger support for reducing emissions and higher levels of support for climate change action](#). The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience survey (Australia's largest youth survey on climate change) suggests that [67% of young people believe Australia is not doing enough to address carbon emissions](#), and that only 13% of young Australians felt they were listened to by leaders in government about their climate views. This raises questions in relation to a recent [federal court case](#) that suggests the Australian government has the responsibility to protect young people from climate change.

How can we enhance the inclusion and representation of young people in formal politics?

How do we make sure that the concerns of young people are being heard by policy-makers?

There are four potential ways that have different emphases in the way that they would change the nature of inclusion of young people's voices. Each option provides important possibilities to think about.

1. **Funding youth advocacy organisations** and possibly funding a youth peak organisation that represents the services and advocacy organisations that already work with young people on the ground.

This would be the kinds of organisations that are working around rental affordability, around access to work and education, the climate change organisations. Traditionally in Australian politics, there's been a tendency to fund peak organisations, who collect the views of other organisations and civil society groups and bring them together to government. One way to better include young people's views experiences might be through a peak advocacy organisation.

2. **Consulting young people directly**. This could entail regular surveys to learn about the views and experiences of young people on certain issues. It could also mean formalising how young people can engage with Parliament, legislative committees, and the public sector, perhaps an Office of Youth.

3. **Lowering the voting age.** Other countries have experimented with lowering the voting age, arguing that if you lower the voting age, then you're more likely to get young people's views, particularly the views of 16- and 17-year-olds. Countries like Brazil and Austria and Scotland have all now lowered their voting age to 16, to be able to enable younger age groups to express themselves through voting.
4. **Encouraging young people to join existing, formal political institutions.** We could encourage young people to join parties or to join other groups that represent them and to be able to try and change those organisations, particularly political parties from within, by being active members within those organisations.

These ways of thinking about inclusion of young people's voices have different emphases in the way that they collect and bring together young people's views and attitudes and experiences. This town hall offers Canberrans an opportunity to discuss why some of approaches might better enable the inclusion of young people's views, attitudes, and experiences in democratic politics today.

