

THE INFORMED VOTER: IMPROVING THE POLITICAL LITERACY OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Australian Catholic University, August 2019

CONVENORS: Professor Zlatko Skrbiš
Professor James Walter
Dr Zareh Ghazarian
Dr Jacqueline Laughland-Booy
Dr Tracey Arklay

Evidence suggests that many young people in Australia may not possess sufficient knowledge about the Australian system of politics and its electoral system to confidently engage in the Australian electoral process and cast an informed vote.

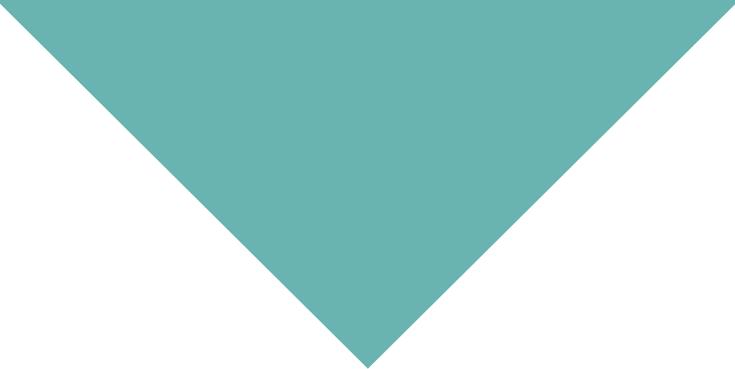
Young Australians' understanding about democracy, government and the political process has implications for how they receive, retain and process information about the decisions of their government as well as the broader political debate. Those who understand how their nation's system of politics and government functions are better able to appreciate how decisions that affect them are made. They are also better equipped to vote with confidence and keep decision makers accountable.

Building young Australians' knowledge about politics and government has been a focus of successive national governments since the 1990s. Recent national testing results suggest, however, that many young Australians may not possess the fundamental political knowledge required to cast an informed vote. Data collected as part of the 2016 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) shows that young peoples' knowledge about the political system is at a record low with just 38% of Year 10 students achieving the proficient level. These results were described by the then Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, as being 'woeful' and indicate that the majority of young Australians nearing voting age do not understand how their nation's system of parliament, judiciary and politics works.

Preliminary findings from a pilot study recently undertaken by Ghazarian, Laughland-Booy and Skrbiš confirm this. Interviews undertaken with young Australians who have recently left school suggest that, while they want to become more engaged and have their opinion heard, they feel they have neither the knowledge nor confidence to vote at a state or federal election. Moreover, the young people themselves have said that more could have been done to better prepare them for this responsibility.

This workshop will feature and draw on the work and experience of scholars and practitioners from a range of fields including sociology, political science, media, and youth studies to review the skills and knowledge young Australians require to be informed voters. It will canvass the views of these experts about how to improve the capacity of young people to engage in the electoral process.

"while they want to become more engaged and have their opinion heard, they feel they have neither the knowledge nor confidence to vote at a state or federal election."



First, the workshop will involve presentations from invited speakers who are currently working in the field in either a practical or research capacity. The presentations will explore three main themes:

1. **The Young Voter**

This session will consider current trends relating to the voting behaviours of young Australians. First, it will review theoretical arguments as why this topic is important and why young people should be encouraged to learn about the democratic process and participate in it. This will be followed by the presentation of empirical evidence relating to the voting behaviours of young people in Australia and the factors that might impede their participation.

2. **Young People and Political Knowledge**

The papers presented in this session speak to how young people are currently being educated about the democratic process in Australia. This will include an explanation on how The Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship is being delivered in Australian schools. In addition, the role of national and state Electoral Commissions in educating and informing young people about the political system will be explained. Suggestions for improving the political knowledge of young people will be discussed.

3. **Engaging Youth in Politics**

The session considers how young people might be encouraged to become more engaged and empowered in the electoral process. Here, the rationale behind reducing the voting age will be discussed.

The role of new media and new technologies in increasing youth engagement will also be explored.

The final session of each day will be used to discuss and summarise core points raised by the presenters. This will be led by discussants who will summarise the presentations and then lead an open floor discussion on the issues raised. The first day's discussion, **The Young Voter: Identifying the Issues** will consider the factors that limit young people's understanding of Australian politics and the electoral process.

"The first day's discussion...will consider the factors that limit young people's understanding of Australian politics and the electoral process.."

The discussion on the second day, **Building the Capacity of Young Voters** will focus on the practical steps needed to improve the political knowledge and skills of young people in Australia so that they can confidently and effectively engage in the electoral process.

The purpose of this workshop is to facilitate dialogue between scholars and practitioners about what steps need to be taken to improve the political knowledge and skills of young people in Australia. This will then lead to the development of policy recommendations for use by government authorities and educators.



The Informed Voter: Improving the Political Literacy of Young Australians

Workshop program

Australian Catholic University (ACU)
North Sydney
22–23 August 2019

Supported by



ACADEMY OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA



CONVENERS

Zlatko Skrbiš, ACU
James Walter, Monash University
Zareh Ghazarian, Monash University
Jacqueline Laughland-Booÿ, ACU
Tracey Arklay, Griffith University

VENUE

ACU North Sydney
Room 532.12.25B
Level 12, Tenison Woods House
8-20 Napier Street
North Sydney NSW 2060

DISCLAIMERS

The views and opinions expressed in this workshop are those of the authors and presenters. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the workshop organisers, sponsors, or any other organisation or entity.

Supported by



ACADEMY OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA

ERRN
Electoral Regulation
Research Network



 **Griffith**
UNIVERSITY
Queensland Australia
Centre for Governance and Public Policy
| Enhancing knowledge of governance
in Australia and globally

 **OurLives** | The Social Futures &
Life Pathways Project

THURSDAY 22 AUGUST 2019		
10am	Registration opens	
10.30am	Workshop commences Acknowledgement of Country and ACU Prayer	Michael Ondaatje, ACU
10.45 – 11.15am	Welcome address	Zlatko Skrbiš, ACU
11.15am – 12pm	Guest speaker	Antony Green, ABC
12 – 1pm	Lunch	
1 – 3pm	Session 1: The young voter	Chair: Tracey Arklay
	The voting behaviour of young Australians*	Clive Bean, Queensland University of Technology
	The young non-partisan voter*	Bruce Tranter, University of Tasmania Jonathan Smith, ACU
	A new participatory landscape? Changing forms of young people's politics*	Anita Harris, Deakin University
3 – 3.30pm	Afternoon tea	
3.30 – 4.30pm	Session 2: The young voter	Chair: Zareh Ghazarian
	Electoral engagement and the inner metropolis: The affluent, well-educated voter and the incidence of voter apathy *	Nick Economou, Monash University
	Young muslim australians and political literacy*	Joshua Roose, ACU
4.30 – 5pm	Publication meeting with authors	

FRIDAY 23 AUGUST 2019		
8.30am	Registration opens	
8.45am	Welcome	
9 – 10.30am	Session 1: Engaging youth in politics	Chair: Zareh Ghazarian
	Engaging youth: Strategies for creating interested and informed voters*	Caitlin Mollica, Griffith University Tracey Arklay, Griffith University
	The role of new media in increasing youth political engagement*	Peter Chen, The University of Sydney
	Engaging young people in politics: Insights from GetUp!	Zaahir Edries, GetUp!
10.30am	Morning tea	
11am – 12.30pm	Session 2: Young people and political knowledge	Chair: Jacqueline Laughland-Booÿ
	Conceptualising political knowledge*	Zareh Ghazarian, Monash University Jacqueline Laughland-Booÿ, ACU Zlatko Skrbiš, ACU
	Civics and citizenship education in Australia: A teacher's perspective	Adam Brodie-McKenzie, University of Melbourne/ Social Education Victoria
	Lowering the Voting Age?*	Judith Bessant, RMIT
12.30 – 1.30pm	Lunch	
1.30 – 2.15pm	Panel discussion Electoral commissions and their role in informing young citizens Electoral commission representatives	Chair: Tracey Arklay
2.15 – 3pm	Summary discussion Building the capacity of young voters Workshop conveners	Chair: Zareh Ghazarian
3pm	Workshop ends	

*Submitted discussion paper

Discussion paper abstracts

THE VOTING BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Clive Bean, Queensland University of Technology

Young voters are often depicted as differing in a variety of ways from the older members of the electorate due to their being newly, and perhaps not yet fully, engaged with the political process. They are less politically interested, less inclined to engage in participatory behaviours and when they vote, they tend to deviate from the remainder of the electorate by supporting minor political parties and left-leaning parties. But while there is a good deal of truth to these generalisations, the political behaviour of young people also varies from election to election. Using time series data from the Australian Election Study, this paper examines elections from 2001 to 2016 to see how patterns of support of young voters have varied since the beginning of this century. The data show that there have been substantial fluctuations in the electoral preferences of young voters over this period, both for the major parties and the minor parties. The paper explores these patterns and their implications.

Clive Bean is Professor of Political Science at Queensland University of Technology. His research interests focus on political and social attitudes and behaviour and he has been a co-principal investigator of the Australian Election Study, a national post-election sample survey of voting behaviour at each federal election, since 1998.

THE YOUNG NON-PARTISAN VOTER

Bruce Tranter, University of Tasmania

Jonathan Smith, ACU

In this paper we examine the growing phenomenon of non-partisanship amongst young Australian voters. Using data from our large cohort study of young people growing up in Queensland, we explore the characteristics of those who do not indicate support for any political party, including their socio-demographic attributes, levels of political knowledge, civic involvement, and trust in institutions, and their views on a range of key social and political issues. Our longitudinal data enables us to assess the trends over time in, and transitions between, partisanship and non-partisanship for this distinct cohort in order to better understand the factors driving political socialisation and marginalisation during the transition to adulthood.

Dr Bruce Tranter is a Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Tasmania. His research interests include the social and political influences on attitudes and action toward climate change, environmental social movements and their leaders and national identity.

Dr Jonathan Smith is a Research Fellow with the Social Futures and Life Pathways Project at ACU. His current research explores different facets of young adulthood in contemporary society, including work and study pathways, social and political attitudes, psychosocial well-being, and digital inequality.

A NEW PARTICIPATORY LANDSCAPE? CHANGING FORMS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICS

Anita Harris, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University

This paper investigates contemporary debates in youth citizenship studies about how young people engage with politics. Attention to young people's participatory citizenship in research, policy and program development (with a particular focus on civic and political knowledge and engagement) has intensified since the 1990s, with considerable concern about youth voter turnout, civics deficit, political apathy, and changing forms of social movement activism. This paper considers these concerns against the backdrop of changing definitions, opportunities and practices of political engagement for young people. This provides important context for understanding youth disengagement/engagement in more nuanced ways, and for identifying productive processes for skills and knowledge acquisition that enable young people to be active citizens now and into the future. It considers arguments about the qualities of 'good' citizenship and changing indicators of participation, shifts to more individualised modes of engagement, the role of both local and global domains as spheres for youth citizenship and participation, the significance of 'everyday' and cultural forms of participatory practice, and the importance of understanding a diversity of youth experience.

Anita Harris is a Research Professor in the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. She is a youth sociologist undertaking a series of projects on youth and citizenship.

ELECTORAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE INNER-METROPOLIS: THE AFFLUENT AND WELL EDUCATED YOUNG AND THE INCIDENCE OF VOTER APATHY

Nick Economou, Monash University

All manner of claims are made about young people and their engagement with politics. Commentary on 'the young' oscillates between seeing them on the one hand as the vanguard of socially progressive change and that more of them should be brought into politics by lowering the voting age, to, on the other hand, expressions of concern about how little they know about government and that they might not be getting on the electoral roll as required by law. Those who fall in the age categories between 15 and 30 years are spread fairly evenly across Australia's age distribution pattern but, in certain places, a concentration of the young can be observed. The inner-metropolis of both Melbourne and Sydney are areas of youth concentration, and their impact on politics can be identified through voting behaviour and the party system. These are areas of exception, however, and this means that they stand apart from general trends in Australian society particularly in relation to voting behaviour and in non-attendance in national and local elections. One of the stark points of differentiation between this socio-economic subset and the rest of the community is the comparatively high rate of absenteeism from federal and local government elections. This paper uses census and electoral data to draw attention to a rising incidence of 'voter apathy' in the inner cities of Melbourne and Sydney that appears to correlate with this clustering of 'the young'.

Dr Nick Economou is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, Monash University. His teaching and research interests include political parties and state and federal elections.

YOUNG MUSLIM AUSTRALIANS AND POLITICAL LITERACY: A FAIT ACCOMPLI

Joshua Roose, ACU

Based on research across a number of young migrant Muslim Australian cohorts over the past decade, this paper makes the case that individual and collective experiences of social hostility and negative representation have combined with a locally evolving form of Islamic practice to shape a highly politically informed and literate outlook. The primary challenge with young Muslim Australians is not a lack of political awareness or literacy, but rather a lack of formal avenues to channel their political energies. Drawing on case studies of Muslim political engagement both at home and across western contexts this paper asserts that the challenge lies not with engagement, for many young Muslim migrants are demonstrating creativity, courage and a willingness to make a positive difference through new forms of DIY citizenship outside of formal politics, but with opening pathways for those keen to make a difference in a system sustained by institutionalized racism. In doing so, this paper speaks more broadly to migrant communities and youth across the cultural and religious spectrum.

Dr Joshua Roose is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Religion, Politics and Society at ACU. He is the author of Political Islam and Masculinity: Muslim Men in Australia and has been a visiting scholar at Harvard Law School, NYU and the Graduate Centre, City University of New York.

ENGAGING YOUTH – STRATEGIES FOR CREATING INTERESTED AND INFORMED VOTERS

Caitlin Mollica, School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University

Tracey Arklay, School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University

In 2018 the joint standing committee on electoral matters responded to calls for greater youth engagement with political institutions. This paper examines the process employed to capture youth voices and to represent their agency. While this report presented a particular viewpoint – one that maintains the importance of political parties in our democratic system – this paper delves deeper. Through the 97 submissions across four public hearings, we report on what young people themselves believe their democratic responsibility is and what their level of engagement should be. We argue this is crucial information that will be of use not just to academics but also to electoral commissions interested in encouraging and engaging young voters.

Dr Caitlin Mollica is a Lecturer with the Department of Government and International Relations and the Centre for Governance and Public Policy at Griffith University. Her research interests include youth, children, gender, transitional justice and human rights.

Dr Tracey Arklay is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University. She researches on federal and state politics, parliamentary analysis, policy capacity and disaster management.

Discussion paper abstracts

THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN INCREASING YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Peter Chen, The University of Sydney

This paper critically examines the role new media can play in the political engagement of young people. Moving away from 'deficit' models of youth participation that drive the interest in 'civics' education in the 1990s, the paper argues two major points. First, that there is a comparatively well-established model of contemporary political mobilization that employs both new media and large data analysis that can be, and has been, effectively applied to young people in electoral and non-electoral contexts. The recent school climate strikes are cited as an example. Second, and more critically, the paper argues that new media, and particularly social media, are not democratic fora and their general use and adoption by young and older people does not cultivate democratic values. The focus on scale as drivers of influence, mass use of algorithms, and centralized editorial control of these platforms make them highly participative, but illiberal sites for political socialization and practice. Without the development of democratic structures within those institutions in which young people spend most of their time – families, training institutions, private civil society clubs – an emphasis on engagement and mobilization runs the risk of being simply 'therapy' as articulated by Arnstein's typology of civic participation types.

Dr Peter John Chen is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government and International Relations where he teaches Australian and regional politics, media politics, and public policy.

CONCEPTUALISING POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Zareh Ghazarian, Monash University

Jacqueline Laughland-Booij, ACU

Zlatko Skrbiš, ACU

This paper seeks to identify what political knowledge is, and how it is significant to the operation of liberal democracies. In particular, it explores the key areas that contribute to political knowledge including how citizens learn about, and participate in, the political debates and democratic processes. We explain how citizens with higher levels of understanding about how their nation's system of politics and government work are better equipped to select policy decision makers and keep them accountable. Furthermore, we consider how liberal democracies might act to better equip its younger citizens with political knowledge so they could be active and informed citizens.

Dr Zareh Ghazarian is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations in the School of Social Sciences at Monash University. His research interests are in the fields of political parties, public policy and civic education.

Dr Jacqueline Laughland-Booij is a Research Fellow with the Social Futures and Life Pathways Project at ACU. Her research interests are in the fields of life course studies and political sociology.

Professor Zlatko Skrbiš is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Innovation) and Professor of Sociology at ACU. He is the Principal Chief Investigator of the Social Futures and Life Pathways Project. His research focuses on the question of identities in transition, culture and migration.

LOWERING THE VOTING AGE?

Judith Bessant, RMIT University

In this paper I argue that large numbers of young people have interest in, and deserve a stake in, our democracy. Such an argument needs to acknowledge the complex normative issues about how we understand young people, citizenship and what is the appropriate threshold for voting. This involves addressing the deep fracture lines opening in our polity. What many call a 'crisis of democracy' is evident in declining electoral participation and formal political participation especially by young people. This does not, however, mean young people are politically disengaged. If anything, as the #Strike4Climate and other movements indicate, young people know enough, and care enough, to take political action. Lowering the voting age to 16 or lower, will encourage more political engagement and may even help light a fire under the political class.

My paper addresses two points. Australia is the only English-speaking country that compels its citizens to vote. In her history of compulsory voting Judith Brett observes that no-one seriously proposed making interest or knowledge a threshold test for voting. Rather, as Brett notes, the key argument for compulsory voting when it was introduced was that the elected government should represent not just those who voted for them but the majority of eligible voters. This would increase the government's legitimacy and ensure it paid attention to the interest of all people.

This is why the 'politics of misrecognition' also matters (Taylor 1994). In a society fragmented by continuing and deep inequalities, age-based prejudices are one of many grounds used to misrepresent and violate the identities of people. This can take the form of denying them access to important socio-economic and legal entitlements and denying them certain aspects of their humanity by attributing to them various deficiencies. This has serious implications for establishing a society based on recognition and justice. Even careful political scientists can fall into the trap of recycling these prejudices as 'empirical data' (Young-Bruehl 2012, McAllister 2014). We send a dire signal when we declare that certain groups which included women, Indigenous people and people under 21 are not fit to vote. If the legitimacy of our democracy is to be secured, young people need to be counted in.

Judith Bessant AM is a Professor at RMIT University, Melbourne. She is widely published in the fields like policy, sociology, politics, youth studies, technology, media, and history. Judith has also worked with national and international governments and non-government organisations as an advisor.

The Informed Voter: Improving the Political Literacy of Young Australians

22–23 August 2019
ACU
North Sydney Campus

DIGESTED ANALYSIS

THE INFORMED VOTER: IMPROVING THE POLITICAL LITERACY OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

1. Convenors

Professor Zlatko Skrbis, Australian Catholic University
Professor James Walter, Monash University
Dr Zareh Ghazarian, Monash University
Dr Jacqueline Laughland-Booy, Australian Catholic University
Dr Tracey Arklay, Griffith University

2. Venue

ACU North Sydney, Room 532.12.25B Level 12, Tenison Woods House, 8–20 Napier Street, North Sydney
NSW 2060
22-23 August 2019

3. Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this workshop were those of the authors and presenters. They did not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the workshop organisers, sponsors, or any other organisation or entity.

4. Summary

The question of whether citizens possess sufficient knowledge about politics and government to participate effectively in the electoral process is an important issue in advanced liberal democracies. In particular, the issue of political literacy amongst youth has been raised in recent years, posing new challenges in the space of electoral participation and political literacy.

Evidence suggests that many young people in Australia may not possess sufficient knowledge about the Australian system of politics and its electoral system (e.g. how voting works and who represents them), to confidently engage in the Australian electoral process and cast an informed vote.

The purpose of the workshop was to facilitate dialogue between scholars and practitioners about what steps need to be taken to improve the political knowledge and skills of young people in Australia and to the development of policy recommendations for use by government authorities and educators.

5. Workshop Content

The two-day workshop featured the work and experience of scholars and practitioners from a range of fields including sociology, political science, media, and youth studies in Australia. The goal was to review the skills and knowledge young citizens require to be informed voters with the scope to understand how to improve the capacity of young people to engage in the electoral process.

The main theme of Day 1 was: *The Young Voter: Identifying the Issues*. The theme for day 2 was: *Building the Capacity of Young Voters*.

The workshop included presentations from invited speakers who have conducted studies in the field in either a practical or research capacity. The workshop comprised three presenter sessions: The Young Voter; Engaging Youth in Politics Young People and Political Knowledge. On the second day there was also a panel discussion with electoral commission representatives and a concluding summary discussion.

5.1. THE YOUNG VOTER

This session considered current trends relating to the voting behaviours of young Australians. First, it reviewed theoretical arguments as to why this topic is important and why young people should be encouraged to learn about the democratic process and participate in it. This was followed by the presentation of empirical evidence relating to the voting behaviours of young people in Australia and the factors that might impede their participation. During this session, considerable concern about youth voter turnout, civics deficit, political apathy, and changing forms of social movement activism was raised. Discussions sought to understand the backdrop of changing definitions, opportunities, and practices of political engagement for young people.

Presenters demonstrated the electoral behaviours of youth, including substantial fluctuations in the electoral preferences of young voters for both major and minor parties from 2010 to 2016 and the growing phenomenon of non-partisanship amongst young Australian voters. Moreover, as a result of the data collected in the longitudinal study conducted by the Our Lives Project in Queensland, the need to further investigate the dynamics and transitions between partisanship and non-partisanship was identified. This would enable better understanding of the factors driving political socialisation and marginalisation during the transition to adulthood. Socio-economic factors were also considered in explaining the comparatively high rate of absenteeism from federal and local government elections in specific areas, such as the inner-metropolis of both Melbourne and Sydney.

Challenges surrounding the political inclusion of migrants were analysed with a focus on the young Muslim Australians. The indications are that the main challenge for the political inclusion of this group lies not with engagement, since many young Muslim migrants are demonstrating willingness to make a positive difference through new forms of DIY citizenship outside of formal politics, but with opening pathways for those keen to make a difference in a system sustained by discrimination.

5.2. ENGAGING YOUTH IN POLITICS

The session considered how young people might be encouraged to become more engaged and empowered in the electoral process. In this session, the rationales behind reducing the voting age and the role of new media and new technologies in increasing youth engagement were also discussed.

The discussion papers analysed the processes employed to capture youth voices and to represent their agency to respond to calls for greater youth engagement with political institutions. It was argued that youth are active and engaged political agents, but traditional rules and norms within formal political structures create barriers to youth's substantive engagement. As a result, barriers perpetuate the belief that youth are apathetic and disinterested. The argument was made that consideration must be given to how youth engage with political discourse.

Furthermore, in this session, the role new media can play in the political engagement of young people was discussed. In particular, it was argued that, without the development of democratic structures within those institutions in which young people spend most of their time – families, training institutions, private civil society clubs – an emphasis on engagement and mobilisation runs the risk of being simply 'therapy' and not an efficient platform for political socialisation.

5.3. YOUNG PEOPLE AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

The papers presented in this session speak to how young people are currently being educated about the democratic process in Australia. This included an explanation of how The Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship is being delivered in Australian schools. In addition, the role of national and state Electoral Commissions in educating and informing young people about the political system was explained and suggestions for improving the political knowledge of young people were discussed.

The purpose of this session was to identify and discuss what political knowledge and to explore the key areas that contribute to political knowledge including how citizens learn about and participate in, the political debates and democratic processes. Furthermore, the discussion included the analysis of how liberal democracies might act to better equip its younger citizens with political knowledge so they could be active and informed citizens.

During this session, the issue of lowering the voting age in Australia was discussed in light of the large numbers of young people who have interests in, and deserve a stake in, our democracy.

5.4. SUMMARY DISCUSSION

The final session was been used to discuss and summarise core points raised in the workshop. The main conclusion reached during the workshop was the general consensus about the lack of studies in this field of youth and political engagement in Australia and, as a consequence, the limited understanding of the future strategies institutions should consider implementing in order to foster the political engagement of youth. For this reason, it was argued that further research is needed in the area of youth, political literacy and participation in Australia to explore the challenges of new forms of youth political engagement and identify potential solutions to support the political literacy of young Australians.

6. Next Steps

The conveners and paper discussants are in the process of identifying potential publishers for publication (i.e. edited book). Journals have also been approached to gauge their interest in publishing a special edition on this topic. If this bid is successful, presenters will be invited to expand their original submissions and submit an article for consideration. These papers will undergo the standard peer-review process. Moreover, future publications will also include pieces on *The Conversation* and similar online platforms the reach a broader audience.