



Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review

Prepared by Philippa Collin
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Prepared by Philippa Collin,
Policy Manager at the Inspire Foundation.

She is also a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of
Economics at the University of Sydney.

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A large, stylized signature of 'The Whitlam Institute' written vertically in black ink. The signature is highly cursive and fluid, with the words 'The Whitlam Institute' stacked vertically. The 'W' is particularly large and prominent, with a long, sweeping underline that extends across the bottom of the signature.

Foreword

Late in 2007, the Whitlam Institute, together with the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Office of University Engagement, embarked upon some exploratory work on the question of community engagement and political participation by younger Australians. That work is taking shape under the banner of *Young People Imagining a New Democracy*.

This report marks the first stage in this process of exploration. It has been authored for us by Philippa Collin, Policy Manager at the Inspire Foundation. Philippa is also nearing the completion of her PhD in this field.

We have great pleasure in commending the report to you. It not only provides a comprehensive picture of the relevant Australian and international research, it also offers some very valuable insights into the aspirations of young people, their experience and the changes in how they do participate in community and political life. It highlights several powerful questions; not least of which is the extent to which these emerging forms of participation influence particular decisions or the political environment more generally.

These are matters we will be pursuing further.

We have been aided in this project by advice and support from a number of people and organisations, including: Inspire Foundation and ActNow; Vibewire; the NSW Commission for Children and Young People and the Youth Coalition of the ACT.

We are most particularly grateful to the Foundation for Young Australians for their advice, and for the financial support which has made this report possible.

Should you have any comments or feedback on the report, we would be very interested in hearing from you. Simply email us at info@whitlam.org.

Eric Sidoti
Director
Whitlam Institute within the
University of Western Sydney
www.whitlam.org

Professor Barbara Holland
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Engagement)
University of Western Sydney
www.uws.edu.au/oue



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Executive Summary

This literature review was commissioned by the Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney (UWS) to provide context for the *Imagining a New Democracy Project*. The project is a collaboration between the Whitlam Institute and the Office of University Engagement at UWS. The Foundation for Young Australians is the primary funding partner. The project seeks:

- to better understand younger Australian's attitudes towards and active participation in democratic processes;
- to work with young people to 'imagine' how Australian democracy might work better (for them and indeed for all citizens);
- to identify the potential implications for public policy;

- to promote consideration of these matters by policy-makers and the public.

The literature review explores international and Australian literature on youth participation in democracy. Key word searches were used on a number of sociological and social and political science databases, and in addition, the online libraries of organisations and networks were also scanned for relevant research reports.

In summary, the literature review finds that there is clear evidence that young people in Australia are engaged with political and social issues, but that they feel alienated by formal, institutionalised politics and are less inclined to engage in traditional forms of participation.

International Findings

There is a generational shift away from traditional, institutional forms of political participation such as voting, membership of political parties and unions.

At the same time, there is increased engagement in issue, or cause-based participation. Such action involves new kinds of political actors (professionals, celebrities), participatory activities (boycotting, blogging political commentary) and has new targets (intra-state bodies, business).

Political participation is also transformed by the internet and new media, whereby individuals are able to come together in new communities of interest and wide, shallow networks, to blog, deliberate and campaign online, beyond geographical borders.

Australian Findings

Few young people are mobilised to join unions and ever fewer are members of political parties. Many will vote because they have to but that they do not see the efficacy in voting. High numbers state they would not enrol or vote all the time if it were not compulsory.

However, young people are interested and knowledgeable in political issues and engaged in a wide range of new participatory activities. Young people are committed to making a contribution to the community, but many do not consider their participatory acts to be volunteering. They prefer to focus on 'making a difference' and seek participatory experiences that afford them agency and where they can see tangible results of their efforts. These may address local or global issues.

There are important gender differences in both attitudes and experiences of participation. Additionally, young people's engagement in both 'minimal' and 'maximal' forms of citizenship is affected by class and ethnicity because the underpinning assumption of equality is not always substantive.

There is no specific research on what young people would like democracy to look like. However, research on participation in groups and organisations suggests that young people value processes and experiences that are culturally relevant, fun, flexible, efficacious and where they personally get something out of it.

While there is a considerable body of literature looking at the nature and forms of participation, there is little, if any, considering the impact (comparative or otherwise) of these respective activities.

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a summary of the existing research on young people's participation in democracy including:

- young people's aspirations with respect to what matters to them, and their aspirations for society (political, economic, social and cultural);
- young people's attitudes regarding politics (including civic activity) and change: their interests and views on engagement and influence;
- young people's experiences of political and civic participation; and
- the nature/forms and level of political and civic engagement.

The literature covered here is primarily empirical. However, the introduction provides a snapshot of the key theoretical arguments that shape research on young people's participation in democracy.

The literature review is presented in two sections. The first looks at youth participation in democracy in the international context. Because of the increasingly important role of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the lives of young people, there is also a brief consideration of citizenship and democracy as shaped by technology and new media.

The second section focuses on the Australian literature, considering, firstly what young people do and, secondly, what young people think about democracy and citizenship. A broad definition of participation has been used to consider young people's activities and attitudes in relation to:

- voting/enrolment, party and union membership;
- social movements;
- government and NGO facilitated policy making processes;
- volunteering;
- everyday forms of participation.

Method

Keyword searches were conducted via a number of Humanities and Economics databases including:

- Sociological Abstracts;
- Family and Society Plus;
- Proquest 5000;
- Public Affairs Information Service;
- World Wide Political Science Abstracts;
- Australian Public Affairs Full Text.

Searches utilised a combination of the following keywords:

youth	participation	voting
young people	political	political party
adolescents	participation	membership
teenagers	civic participation	volunteering
	civic engagement	decision making
	activism	
	social movements	

Because a significant amount of research and evaluation on youth participation is conducted by non-government organisations and is not always published, the online libraries from the following organisations and networks were also scanned for relevant research reports:

- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Sweden) [www.idea.int/]
- The Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (USA) [www.civicyouth.org/]
- The Pew Charitable Trust (USA) [www.pewtrusts.org/]
- The Carnegie Corporation of New York (USA) [www.carnegie.org/]
- The Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (UK) [www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/]
- The Hansard Society (UK) [www.hansardsociety.org.uk/]
- DEMOS The Think Tank for Everyday Democracy (UK) [www.demos.co.uk/]
- The Australian Centre for Educational Research (Australia) [www.acer.edu.au]
- The Australian Electoral Commission (Australia) [www.aec.gov.au]
- The Democratic Audit of Australia [democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/]
- The Youth Research Centre (The University of Melbourne) [www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/yrcc/]
- The Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies [www.acys.info/]

Australian Government reports on civics and youth citizenship were also examined (eg. National Youth Affairs Research Scheme publications).

Introduction

Participation is a key concept in political theories of democracy, implicitly linked to citizenship both as legal and administrative status, and as normative concept or theory (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994:352; Stokes, 2002:24). Research on young people's political participation is framed by a range of theoretical perspectives on democracy and corresponding perspectives on the rights and responsibilities of citizens. In Australia, young people's legal status as citizens is highly ambiguous as there is no distinct point or age at which young people become full citizens.

“young people should be recognised for how and what they contribute in a changing social environment characterised by risk and individualisation...”

In terms of rights, the age at which young people can officially leave formal education varies according to jurisdiction – anywhere from 15–17

years. From the age of 14 they can be held criminally responsible for their acts and from 17 be jailed in adult prisons, but cannot access independent student support payments until they are 25. In terms of obligations, they can, and do, participate in political activities although they are unable to vote until age 18. In addition, school curricula and pedagogical approaches tend to construct young people as ‘becoming’ citizens, rather than ‘being’ citizens (Holdsworth et.al. 2007:9). Social policy often takes a ‘deficit’ approach to youth citizenship whereby young people are situated as ‘citizens-in-the-making’ and are the subjects of socialisation strategies seeking to create the ‘good citizen’ (Owen, 1996:21; White & Wyn, 2004:87; Smith et.al, 2005:425).

The new sociology of youth has played an important role in promoting a youth participation agenda by demonstrating that young people are often excluded from social processes, rather than being incapable of participating (White & Wyn, 2004:93–95). In addition, rights-based movements have made considerable headway in promoting opportunities for young people to participate at many levels of society (Harris, 2006:222).

Using a capacity-based approach, others have argued that definitions and models of participation need to be rethought. In particular, young people should be recognised for how and what they contribute in a changing social environment characterised by risk and individualisation (Harris, 2006:224). So what is it that young people think about democracy? Are they participating and, if so, how?

Youth participation in democracy is typically conceptualised in two distinct ways – as either individual or collective activities designed to influence public opinion or political outcomes. However, participation can also be conceptualised as something facilitated by government and non-government organisations where deliberate strategies and mechanisms to involve members of the public in policy-related decision making are created.

Different perspectives on youth participation have been summarised in terms of ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ (Walzer, 1994; Marsh et.al. 2007) or ‘minimal’ and ‘maximal’ (Evans, 1995) citizenship. Thin or minimal citizenship emphasises civil and legal status, rights and responsibilities, promotes law-abiding behaviour and an active commitment to the community through service (Evans, 1995:16). In contrast, maximal notions of citizenship:

entail consciousness of self as a member of a shared democratic culture, emphasise participatory approaches to political involvement and consider ways in which social disadvantage can undermine citizenship by denying people full participation in society in any significant sense.

(Evans, 1995:16).

Theoretical debates on youth, democracy and citizenship are not dealt with in detail in this literature review. However, it is worth noting that critical perspectives highlight the ethnocentric, gender specific, ageist and universalist framing of citizenship (Jones and Wallace, 1992:20; Mann, 1987, and Turner, 1990, in Walby, 1995). Others object to narrow definitions of political participation (Norris, 2003; O’Toole et.al. 2003; Vromen, 2003), the normative construction of the citizen-as-adult (Moosa-Mitha, 2005:369; Smith, et.al. 2005: 427–428) and the assumption that participation opportunities are equally distributed regardless of structural inequalities such as class or cultural background (Moosa-Mitha, 2005:373). Many argue that research focused on political processes fails to explain youth engagement in political activities or sufficiently explain how political socialisation is achieved (Frazer & Emler, 1997; Henn et.al. 2002; Coleman, 2005).


Finally, comparative studies have suggested that low levels of youth participation in traditional political activities do not indicate broad levels of apathy or disengagement, but a generational change in common forms of political participation. Norris (2003) argues that there has been a generational shift away from the traditional ‘politics of loyalties’ to the new repertoires and agencies reflecting a ‘politics of choice’. She finds that this is particularly apparent amongst young people (Norris, 2003). Figure 1. presents the theoretical typology developed by Norris.

The critical point is that citizens are no longer mobilised in relation to the state, but in relation to causes or issues (see also, Bang, 2005). Nevertheless, important questions remain as to how the participatory practices of young people inter-relate with formal institutions of democracy. O'Toole et.al., have argued that without first understanding how young people, in particular, conceptualise 'the political', it is difficult to assess levels of political participation (O'Toole et.al. 2003) or indeed to promote it.

Figure 1: Typology of the Evolution of Political Action

Source: Norris, 2003:22.

		REPERTOIRES	
		Citizen-oriented repertoires, including voting, party work and contact activity	Cause-oriented repertoires, including consumer politics, demonstrations and petitions
AGENCIES	Traditional voluntary associations, including churches, unions and political parties	Older generation	
	New social movements and advocacy networks, including environmental and humanitarian organisations		Younger generation



Youth Participation in Democracy: International Perspectives

Internationally, there has been an increasing interest in understanding how young people participate in democracy, particularly in the context of an overall decline in participation in traditional forms of democracy. Research in Europe and the United States finds that, for example, young people have been less involved in the electoral process than other age cohorts in recent years (IDEA, 1999; US Census, 2007). Broadly, the literature from Anglophone democracies (Canada, the United Kingdom and United States) demonstrates two divergent approaches to researching young people's participation in democracy which is further reflected in the Australian literature: research on institutional forms of participation; and research on changing attitudes towards politics, democracy and citizenship, and non-institutional forms of participation.

Institutional Forms of Participation

The first approach measures young people's participation in institutional forms of political participation, or what Bennett (2007:14) has referred to as 'dutiful citizenship'. Theoretically, this approach conceptualises political identity as either legitimating (consenting to state domination) or oppositional (struggling against state domination) (Bang, 2005:169). As such, research typically involves quantitative studies of participation in elections, political parties, unions or civic organisations (For example: Banks et.al, 1992; Park, 1998; Pirie & Worcester, 1998).

"research on the impact of youth participation in decision making finds that it improves young people's social inclusion and citizenship..."

This approach assumes that young people can be socialised to develop traditional loyalties to particular institutions

(such as political parties) and processes of democracy (such as elections). Research in this tradition also assesses young people's participation in traditional volunteering and membership in civic organisations (eg. Putnam, 1995; Hugo Lopez et.al., 2006), as well as their understanding of political institutions and processes with a significant focus on civic education and literacy (eg. Torney-Purta et.al. 2001; Torney-Purta, 2002).

More recently there has been a policy drive within some government and community sectors to increase the participation of young people in decision making through formalised 'youth participation', such as youth reference groups, advisory groups and committees. Most research on formal processes has been conducted in the UK and there is a substantial amount of evidence that youth participation is taking place in the community and non-government sectors (Cavet & Sloper, 2004:615–616).

Whilst youth participation has been embedded in the consultative practices of local, devolved and national governments in the UK, there is a tendency to conflate all forms of participation (from adult controlled to youth led). There is little evidence on the kinds, or quality, of decisions that are made or informed by young people (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). However, in a range of settings, research on the impact of youth participation in decision making finds that it improves young people's social inclusion and citizenship and program or service effectiveness (Kirby et.al., 2003:10–11).

Everyday Forms of Participation

The second approach challenges the traditional paradigms of participation – in particular, assumptions about indicators and meanings of 'non-participation' (O'Toole et.al. 2003). This approach looks not only at activities and levels of engagement, but at young people's attitudes and perceptions of participation in order to better understand how they conceptualise citizenship (Andolina et.al. 2002; O'Toole, et.al. 2003; Smith et.al. 2005; Marsh, et.al. 2007; MacKinnon, et.al. 2007). This research is often qualitative and explores young people's everyday experiences of citizenship to create a deep and broad understanding of the ways that young people participate outside of institutional or formalised structures.

Theoretically, this approach challenges the traditional conceptualisation of political identity arguing that the 'individualisation' (Norris, 2004) or 'personalisation' (McDonald, 2006) of politics has changed how individuals and groups (activists and social movements) organise (Lichterhan, 1996; Norris, 2002).

As a result, new forms of individualised (Norris, 2003) and 'micro-political' (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004) actions, aimed at a range of political targets (big business, celebrities) feature in the participatory repertoires of young (and older) people. Forms of micro-political action typically relate to people's everyday lives – workplace conditions or the education of one's child – and can bring people together in discussion and action on political issues in ways not possible through formal institutions (Pattie et.al., 2004:117).

These actions are also less likely to involve traditional political actors, such as politicians or trade union officials, and more likely to involve professionals (such as teachers and doctors), colleagues, friends and family (Pattie et.al. 2004:119). In other words, micro-political and individualised forms of participation take place in arenas and on issues that people feel they are able to make a difference (Bang, 2005).

Participation in Democracy in the Age of Digital Media and the Internet

The dilemmas of how to define and measure participation in democracy have been brought into stark relief as the internet and other Information Communication Technology (ICT) have come to play an increasingly significant role in the social and political lives of citizens. Research has increasingly sought to understand the general impact of ICTs on democracy and citizenship (eg. Wilhelm, 2000; Norris, 2001; Howard & Jones, 2004).

The study of the internet and youth political participation can be summarised in two broad approaches that reflect those outlined above in wider research on citizenship and participation. The first assumes a normative position on political participation and looks at how technology is extending or deepening democracy as a legal and administrative mechanism, and for strengthening the legitimacy of normative political ideas and culture (Montgomery, et.al. 2004:102).

The focus is often on the opportunities and effectiveness of 'e-democracy' in strengthening existing institutional arrangements (Lewis, 2005:10), the ability of technology to link decision-makers and political elites to citizens (Delli Carpini, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001; Luhrs, et.al. 2001) and extending government to marginalised or 'hard to reach' groups, such as young people (Brackertz et.al., 2005; Simpson et.al. 2005).

These accounts view the internet as a vehicle for public information and 'civic education' (Dahlberg, 2001:618–19; Montgomery, et.al. 2004:103). There is also optimism that the internet will foster 'active citizenship' – community engagement in (often local) government (Goodwin, 2005) or 'youth service to the community' – through such mechanisms as online volunteer matching (Delli Carpini, 2000:347).

The current top-down nature of e-governance has been criticised for focusing on communicating policy to young people, being government/decision-maker focused and limiting the degree to which young people are able to contribute to agenda setting or decision-making (Lewis, 2005:12). There is also concern that digital technologies may reinforce the role of those who are already engaged, whilst further marginalising those who are not (Norris, 2001:98).

Studies in the UK (Livingstone & Bober, 2004) and Australia (Vromen, 2007) argue that class and level of education are predictors of internet use and quality of internet access. Furthermore, top-down mechanisms fail to effectively link policy makers with forms of online youth participation taking place through NGOs, youth-led sites or social movements.

The second approach challenges both the way that political participation is conceptualised (eg. Norris, 2001; Vromen, 2003) and the way that it is researched (eg. Coleman & Rowe, 2005; Livingstone et.al., 2005). Survey-based research in the UK (Livingstone, et.al., 2005) and in Australia (Vromen, 2003) has deliberately explored a broad range of participatory opportunities, deepening our understanding of the range and forms of youth online participation. For example, in the UK, Livingstone et.al. find that seeking information or advice on an issue, visiting a civic or political website and interacting with or creating a website are all activities undertaken by young people to develop and express their political identities (Livingstone et.al., 2005:294–295). Similarly, in her survey-based Australian research, Vromen found that young people aged 18–34 use the internet to find out about news, current affairs and community events as well as to share information regarding community or political issues (Vromen, 2007:57).

Youth Participation in Democracy: The Australian Context

The literature on the participation of young people in democracy in the Australian context follows a similar pattern to the international literature. As such, this review presents a summary of empirical research on young people's participation in individual and collective activities, as well as those that are 'managed' (for instance, by groups, organisations or the state) and 'autonomous' (youth-led).

What Do Young People Do? Youth Participation in Democracy

Research on youth participation in democracy has been dominated by liberal theoretical perspectives and quantitative methodologies. As a result, much of the literature focuses on participation in political parties, voting in elections and young people's political attitudes and literacy (eg. Civics Expert Group, 1994; Lean, 1996). However, research has also examined youth participation in volunteering as well as 'everyday' forms of participation.

Participation in Political Parties, Trade Unions and Social Movements

Data on youth membership of political parties and unions is not readily made available. As a consequence, there is little research on actual rates of participation, or comparative data on different age cohorts. It has nevertheless been suggested that rates of youth membership are dropping and the existing membership is aging (Huntley, 2006b:131). Research also looks at reported rates of institutional forms of participation amongst representative or random survey samples. This research suggests that there is low level participation by young people in trade unions and political parties, but more engagement in activities, such as protests and signing petitions to support social movements.

For example, of 300 young people surveyed in Western Australia:

- 18% had joined a trade union;
- 17% had supported a protest movement;
- 11% had joined a community protest;
- 5% had participated in a strike;
- 4% had joined a community pressure group;
- 2% had joined a political party; and
- 65% had done none of the above.

(Beresford & Phillips, 1997:14)

Beresford and Phillips concluded that this 65% were not 'active political participants'.

Of a broadly representative sample of 287, 18–34 year old Australians who participated in a telephone survey, Vromen (2003) found that over one third were union members (37%) though a minute percentage (3%) were members of a political party with only fractionally more reporting that they contributed to campaign work (5%) (Vromen, 2003:86). Vromen also found that nearly one third of respondents discussed issues such as workplace issues and unions, equality of men and women and Federal/State politics with family or friends at least once a week and a majority had boycotted a product.

“This research suggests that there is low level participation by young people in trade unions and political parties, but more engagement in activities, such as protests...”

Those with post-schooling education were more likely to have boycotted over a political issue. Although relatively low levels (19%) overall reported attending

a rally or march, those who had not completed high school are significantly less likely to have participated (Vromen, 2003:86). Harris et.al. (2007) also found that although a very small number of respondents in their Victorian mixed methods study were likely to be member of political organisations, a significant number were 'joiners' of formal associations. The study involved a survey of 970 young people and follow up in-depth interviews with around 30 participants.

Vromen also found that participation in activities, such as rallies and events is facilitated by political exchanges through the internet (Vromen, 2007:61). Though there is little research that indicates the extent to which Australian young people use of the internet to participate in social movements, several scholars have explored case studies of how young people use the internet for political communication and activism. For example, Bessant (2000:15) has demonstrated that the internet was an important tool in the organisation of protests against Pauline Hanson. Harris (2001) argues that the internet can create new public spaces for political expression by young women via 'gURL' webpages and Vromen (2007) shows how the internet is being used to create new youth communities for political action.

Though focused on young people's attitudes and intentions to vote, the Youth Electoral Study (YES) also explored student's participation in different kinds of activities often associated with social movements. Over 55% of survey respondents reported having signed a petition, but very few had taken part in a rally (15%) or written or contacted a politician (9.9%) (Saha, et.al. 2005:6). The study did not ask young people about membership of unions or political parties, but it did look at young people's support for a range of social movements. For example, 47% of students said they would 'likely' or 'very likely' join a protest in support of the peace/anti-war movement and 29% would join a protest in support of the green movement (Saha, et.al. 2005:11).

Despite acknowledging that many of the young people who participated in the study were knowledgeable and active on political issues (Saha, et.al. 2005), participatory acts were narrowly defined and the role of the internet was not explored at all. Furthermore, the study disregards certain types of political participation (notably passive and violent resistance activities) as 'bad' because they do not correlate with intention to vote – without fully exploring whether young people consider non-voting to be a legitimate political action.

Voting

Because voting is compulsory, Australia records high levels of participation of all age cohorts relative to countries with non-compulsory systems, such as the UK and USA. However, the Australian Electoral Commission estimates that only 80% of young people aged 18–25 are enrolled to vote (Print, 2004:2). The YES study used a national survey and focus groups to explore the relationship between young people's participatory acts and intention to vote. Survey responses found that:

- 87% would vote after they turned 18 – mostly because it is compulsory;
- 50% would enrol if voting were not compulsory;
- Around 50% of respondents felt they had sufficient knowledge of political issues, parties and voting.

Focus groups found that:

- Around 30% of young people said they would enrol and vote if voting were not compulsory; around 30% indicated they would not enrol or vote; and, around 30% indicated that they would enrol and vote sometimes;
- Many who reported they would not vote or regularly vote said they did not see the efficacy of voting.

(Print, 2004)

The YES study also reveals important structural disadvantages that impact on young peoples' enrolment and intention to vote. In particular, instability in housing – especially for transient young people – was a factor in non-enrolment or electoral participation (Edwards, 2006a:12).

Volunteering

Compared with countries such as the USA, there is comparatively little research in Australia on young people and volunteering. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that young people maintain a strong commitment to doing work for community benefit, but do not necessarily relate to traditional notions of volunteering. Research also suggests that volunteering, like other forms of participation, is impacted by structural factors such as gender and class.

For example, the 2003 Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) looked at the relationship between 'active citizenship' and community participation amongst young people (Brown, et.al., 2003). The research used three surveys administered to young people who were in Year 9 during 1995 and 1998. Brown and colleagues concluded that four factors significantly contributed to volunteering: gender, socioeconomic status, home language and size of home community.

Girls spent more time volunteering than boys and were more likely to volunteer if they were optimistic about their future prospects and if their mothers worked outside the home. Boys volunteered if they were pessimistic about their future and decreased their volunteering after completing secondary studies.

Both boys and girls were more likely to volunteer if the father was employed. Additionally, those from non-metropolitan communities volunteered more than those living in urban areas. The study also acknowledged some significant limitations of the methodology including inability to enquire into the reasons why young people volunteer and how volunteering is affected by engagement in paid employment.

In 2004 the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme also looked at LSAY data, but augmented their analysis with focus groups and interviews. This study sought to understand how and why Australian young people volunteer, as well as to understand the factors that enable or inhibit volunteering and how the volunteering experience could be improved. The research found that by age 20 52% of LSAY participants had participated in community volunteer work but that participation in volunteering is affected by class, gender and cultural background (Ferrier et.al.2004:18). Their qualitative data found that many young people do not consider their participatory activities as volunteering and therefore under-report their level of participation.

Managed Decision Making Processes

Youth participation in government and community decision making has become a significant area of activity over the last decade. Youth participation in this sense almost always refers to managed forms of participation within existing groups or organisations and it is typically framed in two ways:

- youth development: preparing young people for becoming citizens; or,
- youth involvement: enabling young people to exercise citizenship and be full citizens.

(Collin, 2007:11–12)

Despite the popularity of youth participation strategies in government and community sectors, there is surprisingly little research into the outcomes and impacts of this area of activity. Most of the literature is driven by ‘adult agendas’ – and focuses on how young people ‘should’ participate in organisational decision making (Couch & Francis, 2006:275) and is process oriented, focusing on best practice (eg. Westhorp, 1987; Holdsworth, 2003). Nevertheless, there is some evidence on how young people are participating in managed decision making processes within three distinct settings: schools; community groups and organisations; and government.

1) Schools

The school setting has been a focus of much research on the mobilisation of youth participation strategies. On one hand the literature constructs the school as a site for delivering civic education. However, the school setting is also seen as one where young people can learn about citizenship and democracy through participating in decision making around curriculum as well as school governance and social life (Wilson, 2000: 26).

This is most frequently constructed as student leadership and facilitated via Student Representative Councils (SRCs). In a survey conducted by the NSW Youth Advisory Council (2004) of 2400 young people aged 12 and over, more than 60% of respondents were SRC members. The survey indicated that SRC members reported higher participation rates (approximately 8%) across all other activities compared to non-SRC members (NSW YRC, 2004:6), suggesting that involvement in structured forms of participation can lead to increased participatory practices.

However, only around 4% of secondary school students will be members of their SRC (NSW YRC, 2004:4). As such, involvement in SRCs is open to only a very small number of students and Holdsworth and Blanchard note that in international literature on ‘student voice’ evidence shows that opportunities to participate in the school setting are not equally distributed (Holdsworth and Blanchard, 2006:15).

“the school setting is also seen as one where young people can learn about citizenship and democracy through participating in decision making...”

In recent years, Student Action Teams (SATs) have also emerged as a strategy for promoting youth participation. As well as addressing in-

school issues related to learning and teaching practices and wellbeing, SATs are oriented outwards towards local issues and the community. This model emphasises the role that young people play in working with the community to address social issues (Holdsworth, 2007:16).

In Victoria, a state-wide program of Student Action Teams began in 1999, initially involving 20 secondary schools and a further 36 teams of students were supported to undertake action through a second phase of the project (Holdsworth, 2007:17). An impact evaluation of the second phase drew on Final Reports from schools and Impact Survey data and found that in self-reportage items teachers and students report increases in knowledge, skills and attitudes and connectedness (Holdsworth et.al. 2003:6). School evaluations of SATs also report tangible changes (such as a reduction in speed limits) in the community as a result of the student community projects (Holdsworth et.al., 2003:38).

2) Government

Youth participation has been variously pursued by governments at all levels during the last few decades. There is a large body of policy documents (eg. Department for Victorian Communities, 2006; Queensland Department of Communities 2006; NSW Department of Community Services, 2006) and literature assessing models and processes of youth participation in government decision making. However, there is a dearth of evidence on rates and impact of youth participation at the state and federal level, although some research has been done at the local government level.

Under the Howard Government (1996–2007), participation was primarily conceptualised as individualised activities, particularly those oriented towards ‘education, training and community participation’ (Footprints to the Future, 2001). The only formal mechanisms for youth participation at a federal level was the National Youth Roundtable (NYR) and the National Indigenous Youth Leadership Group (NIYLG). First run in 1999, the NYR, involved around 44 young people annually and is the only current mechanism to support young people’s direct input into policy development and decision making at a federal level. In 2007, the NIYLG was consolidated within the NYR, which had 12 Indigenous representatives. There are no publicly available evaluations of the NYR.

The current Rudd Government has indicated a commitment to more collective forms of participation in government policy making (Youth Bureau, 2008).

The final NYR was held in March 2008 and the Minister for Youth Affairs, Kate Ellis has instigated a broad community-based consultation process on what role a new Australian Youth Forum should serve in the formation of government policy and how it should operate.

At a state government level, youth participation is usually conceptualised as part of a whole of community approach to policy making (Nabben, 2007: 27). There is often an emphasis on participatory governance with participation viewed as a strategy for addressing the needs of 'at risk' groups, delivering services to young people and promoting community building.

Unstructured mechanisms, such as online chat and consultations, email alerts and working in partnership with youth-serving organisations also feature in state government policy (Building a Better Future for Young Territorians, 2003; NSW Youth Action Plan, 2006). These have been found to facilitate ongoing connections of young people government initiatives, improving opportunities for communication and building connectedness between young people and adults (Saggers, 2004:90).

At the local government level, the most common forms of formal participation utilise youth council or advisory committee structures (McLaren, 1995–1996). Research for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) nearly a decade later (Saggers, et.al. 2004) found that youth advisory committees and groups continued to be the main mechanism for involving young people in decision making.

In a mixed methods study involving an online survey of local governments (of a possible 614, 35.7% provided useable surveys) 89% reported using advisory committees with a further 46% having a youth/junior council (Saggers, et.al., 2004: 23). Whilst this research did not measure rates of participation by young people in local government, research conducted in Victorian local government areas found that over half the councils sampled had a Youth Advisory Council or committee that involved between 12–20 young people over a 1–2 year period (Holdsworth, et.al. 2007: 35).

Given the prevalence of council and committee models for youth participation in government, we can assume that young people are participating in them. However, these are highly elite and structured mechanisms that engage only small numbers. This research notes that structured participatory mechanisms can be elitist and obstruct the voices of particular young people, that they are often adult-led and managed processes that limit the extent to which young people can have real influence and that they can actually 'turn-off' some young people who view such processes as replicating adult institutions they distrust (such as governments) (Saggers, et.al. 2004: 106). In particular, structured approaches are seen to disadvantage young people from low socio-economic and indigenous backgrounds (Saggers, 2004:109).

Additionally, LGAs are increasingly partnering with local organisations to engage with young people (Saggers et.al., 2004:101). These partnerships that facilitate youth participation in decision making are often project-based, such as youth papers, online media and cultural events that are designed, planned, managed and evaluated by young people (Saggers, et.al. 2004:105).

3) Community Groups and Programs

Though there is a move to implement mechanisms such as youth councils, roundtables, advisory committees and other activities and consultative apparatus at all levels of government, the community sector is the greatest proponent of youth participation (Wierenga et.al., 2003:6). Whilst formal mechanisms for facilitating youth participation in organisations are common, informal and project-based approaches are also evident (eg. Douglas, 2006).

“Evidence indicates that youth participation in organisations and groups improves young people’s skills and sense of citizenship.”

To date, there is no comprehensive data on the extent of youth participation in decision making through community

groups and programs, though there is some evidence on the outcomes of programs and different strategies. For example, an adult-established youth project in Brisbane was set up to promote community development and improve social infrastructure in the area (Douglas, 2006: 349). Though the project was initiated and supported by adults, young people had 'total control of the project'.

They set the goals, made decisions, took responsibility and managed project[s] to their conclusion.

(Douglas, 2006:361)

Three years on from inception, the group was still functioning and coordinating activities to address youth issues in the local community.

Evidence indicates that youth participation in organisations and groups improves young people's skills and sense of citizenship (Singer & Chandra-Shekeran, 2006). Singer and Chandra-Shekeran (2006) find that participation mechanisms through groups and organisations can help particular groups, such as refugees, to learn more about processes of democracy and develop skills to engage with different institutions and agents, such as politicians (Singer & Chandra-Shekeran, 2006:50). Also, it can have a positive impact on participants, improving social connectedness and wellbeing (Oliver et.al. 2006; Holdsworth et.al. 2007: 72) and improve service delivery (Swanton et.al. 2007).

'Everyday' Political Participation

While young people are not engaging with traditional institutionalised forms of participation, they are finding everyday ways to express their political views. For example, the YES study found that many young people discuss political issues in class, with their families and with friends (Edwards, 2006:3). Vromen (2003) also found in her quantitative study that significant numbers of young people report discussing political issues with their friends and families at least once a week (Vromen, 2003: 94). Harris et.al. (2007) find that whilst a high proportion of respondents to their survey reported participation in a range of activities that connect them to their peers and communities, they "prefer to be engaged in informal activities that are not structured through organisations or by adults" (Harris et.al., 2007:24).

They also find that for the young people in their study "political engagement is about having a say in institutions and relationships that have an immediate impact on one's wellbeing with family, friends, school and work" (Harris, et.al.2007:24). In other words, their participatory behaviours are reinforced where they feel able to influence outcomes.

A Victorian study on young people's participation found that culturally and linguistically diverse young people – particularly new arrivals – were more likely to get involved in a cultural or religious organisation or group (Mohamed, 2006).

Amongst a diverse range of young people, being able to tap into online opportunities to take action on issues they care about is important because it fits in with their lifestyles and their need for choice and flexibility (Collin, 2007). Young people also report that being able to see evidence of the impact of their participation online (ie. the kinds of decisions that are made by organisations, a reported change in attitude or behaviour of another person) is motivating and inspires them to continue to take action (Collin, forthcoming).

The internet is increasingly considered a site for everyday forms of participation. Vromen finds that there is an important relationship between individuals finding out about community/political events and sharing information about these events (Vromen, 2007:59). Additionally she finds that the use of the internet in young people's everyday lives is related to higher levels of participation in general because people use it to find information and keep in touch with others (Vromen, 2007:59). Young people also state they value using the internet to participate because it allows them to take part in their own time and on their own terms (Collin, 2007). The internet also helps facilitate autonomous forms of youth participation in democracy (Vromen, 2008).

What Do Young People Think? Attitudes and Experiences

Internationally, research shows that an increased understanding of how young people conceptualise political participation and their views on citizenship and democracy can make visible new, or unconventional forms of participation. This section summarises the literature on young people's attitudes and opinions – taking into consideration that many studies take a normative position on political participation and make firm assumptions about what knowledge and attitudes are desirable or necessary for strong citizenship and democracy.

Citizenship and Civic Literacy

According to National Youth Affairs Research Scheme research by Manning and Ryan, young people see participation as a central element of citizenship (Manning & Ryan, 2004:87). They find that young people themselves conceptualise participation in the context of citizenship in a variety of ways:

- any type of activity in civil society, such as membership of sporting clubs or social activity;
- community service;
- engaging with ideas and political or policy debate;
- engaging in political activism;
- voting.

(Manning & Ryan, 2004:87)

However, the study also found that while young people feel they have an obligation to participate, as citizens, in a democracy, they also feel that they have very little power to do so (Manning & Ryan, 2004:88). This research suggests that young people's lack of political efficacy affects their attitudes and approaches to participating in democracy.

Alternative perspectives focus on the role of civics education for socialising young people as good citizens. In both Australia (see: Mellor, et.al. 2002) and overseas (Torney-Purta et.al., 2001, Takala et.al., 2002), research has looked at how young people learn about democracy, what they know and how this affects their attitudes towards different forms of participation – particularly voting, party membership and volunteering. This research typically focuses on the school as a setting for civic learning.

The most comprehensive international study ever undertaken is the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). This included case studies and a national representative sample of 14 year olds in each of the 28 participating countries (including Australia), involving nearly 90,000 students world wide. The IEA data was used to compile a report on Australian young people's civic knowledge and beliefs (Mellor, et.al. 2002).

This report concluded that amongst Australian students:

- Females demonstrated better civic knowledge and more positive responses to the attitude scales than males. Females are more likely to demonstrate social movement citizenship, confidence in participation in school, society-related government responsibilities, positive attitudes towards immigrants.
- Only half grasp the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy.
- There is only a weak understanding of civil rights.
- There is a strong sense of natural justice and equity, but limited understanding of theoretical underpinnings of democratic models and structures.
- 89% believe in the importance of participating in activities to benefit people in the community; 75% think that taking part in protecting the environment is important and 66% support the promotion of human rights. Just over 50% would participate in a peaceful protest against a law they believe to be unjust.
- With the exception of voting, students do not value conventional forms of political participation, such as joining a union or political party or running for public office.

(Mellor et.al., 2002)

The report ends by noting that:

Perhaps the most significant of all findings identified by the Study is that students need to be convinced that conventional forms of democratic engagement are worthwhile.

(Mellor, et.al.2002: xxiii)

The *Learning for Activism Project* looked at the impact of formal and informal education on civic and political literacy (Fyfe, 2006). Using mixed methods to investigate the experiences and views of politically engaged young people, the project found that civic learning takes place in a variety of settings and that there are a range of mobilising factors that motivate young people to learn and participate in democracy (Fyfe, 2006).

These include:

- generative themes underpinned by philosophical or value positions;
- trigger issues (policy, humanitarian etc);
- mobilising platforms (university, youth organisations, church/religious groups/the internet); and
- role models (teachers, parents, fellow activist).

Fyfe finds that politically active young people relate strongly to one or other of these mobilising factors.

Structured Participation: Political Parties, Unions, Youth Participation Programs and Volunteering

Beresford and Phillips (1997) found that 72% of young people surveyed did not have a long-term commitment to the ideals of any political party. In a follow up questionnaire, the reasons participants gave for not wanting to join a political party were the perceived lack of choice and a disinclination to commit to a party whose policies and ideals they might not always support (Beresford & Phillips, 1997:14). Saulwick and Muller found in qualitative research that young people distrust unions, governments and politicians because they felt they had no power to influence their decisions or actions (Saulwick and Muller, 2006:09).

“young people distrust unions, governments and politicians because they felt they had no power to influence their decisions or actions.”

The Youth Electoral Study survey found that young people show low levels of trust in governments, political parties and

particularly politicians (Print, 2004:21). It also found that young people feel neglected by politicians, and that politicians lack interest in issues that affect young people (Edwards, 2006:15). In-depth qualitative research finds that young people also consider politicians insincere and inaccessible (Collin, 2007).

As such, they look to other political forums, actors and activities to influence policy and public perceptions on a range of political issues (Huntley, 2006b; Collin, 2007). This tendency is reflected in their views on the use of the internet by government bodies. Largely, young people view government youth sites as top-down strategies for communicating at young people and not with them (Collin, forthcoming).

The YES study focus groups heard from very few young people who were members of a political party, though more than 50% said they'd been involved in a protest march (Edwards, 2006:5).

Furthermore, 46% said they would take part in a rally, and 50% said they would contact a politician (Saha, et.al. 2005:6). Though the study did not elaborate on what young people's experiences of these forms of participation are, it did report that many young people felt that there was little choice between parties and that voting was not efficacious (Edwards, 2006:7).

Amongst young people who participate in structured youth participation through boards and committees, experiences differ. Few evaluations are published, though qualitative research by Bridgland Sorenson (2007) on the National Youth Roundtable found that some participants found the experience was tokenistic, highly controlled and that their participation made little or no difference to policy agendas. Bridgland Sorenson concludes that the highly elite and possibly negative experience of participation in the National Youth Round table can turn young people off formalised participation processes in government.

Mohamed finds that young people from CALD backgrounds feel excluded from many formal decision making processes, and that they're only included to meet funding requirements around diversity (Mohamed, 2006:8). Other young people have expressed concern that structured participation mechanisms are elitist and have a tendency to attract and involve the same select groups of people (Collin, 2007:15).

Nevertheless, evidence also suggests that young people most appreciate participation mechanisms where:

- they determine the agendas but have adult support (Douglas, 2006):
- there is flexibility, creativity and evidence that their participation makes a difference (Collin, 2007); and
- participation is embedded across the whole organisation or group (Holdsworth et.al., 2007:47).

Furthermore, young people value participation mechanisms that combine internet and face to face communication (Collin, forthcoming).

Australian young people demonstrate positive attitudes towards community and getting involved, but don't necessarily associate their actions with volunteering (Ferrier, et.al.2004). Such participation is often connected to cultural, sporting or community activities, and tends to be informal and organised through loose networks, rather than formalised organisations or groups (Ferrier, et.al. 2004:21). Ferrier and colleagues also found that amongst focus group participants almost all could identify a volunteering activity in which they were currently involved. However, when asked about what kinds of people volunteer, most suggested it was 'other people', particularly older people with lots of spare time, skills, experience and strong altruistic motivation (Ferrier, et.al. 2004:19–20). As such, young people are relating to issues and forms of participation differently to previous generations.

Although young people recognise the voluntary and political dimensions of their participatory activities, most describe participation as 'just something that they do' – as cultural and personal expression (Collin, 2007:14). They appear to be mobilised in relation to issues and not traditional institutions (Collin, 2007) and are seeking to exercise citizenship – to influence the decisions that affect them – in new settings (family, home, school) (Harris, et.al. 2007; Hartmann et.al., 2007).

The importance of agency and having control of the kinds of activities they're involved in is further illuminated in a study by Warburton and Smith (2003). They conducted a qualitative study into the views and experiences of young people in Queensland involving ten focus groups with a sample consisting of eight compulsory 'volunteer' groups – five Work for the Dole groups and three school groups; and, two volunteer groups. The study found compulsion as a strategy to socialise people into good participatory behaviours is counter-productive. Young people resented the lack of choice and the restrictions on agency implicit in compulsory volunteering programs (Warburton & Smith, 2003:778–781).

Many also found the activities they were engaged in as volunteers to be boring, particularly as they didn't learn anything new (Warburton & Smith, 2003:782). Comparatively, amongst the two groups where young people chose themselves to be engaged in volunteering, participants felt that volunteering enabled them to benefit personally from new experiences and developing new skills, as well as giving something to the community.

Political Issues

In 1997, Beresford and Phillips conducted survey research with young people aged 18–24 in Western Australia. A commissioned standard opinion poll with a sample of 300 was conducted, with a further 24 young people from three distinct contexts (attending a youth support service for the unemployed; employed in low-level clerical jobs in the public sector; and undergraduate law students) completing an in-depth questionnaire. The survey explored young people's level of political interest, level of political understanding, the role of family and school in shaping their outlooks, and their level of direct involvement in politics.

The study found that 66% of those who reported a professional/academic household head took an interest in politics once a week or more and only 13% said they took an interest in politics at election times only (Beresford & Phillips, 1997:13). In addition, young people with parents in professional/academic jobs felt they understood politics either 'very well' or 'quite well' compared with 31% from a trades backgrounds (Beresford & Phillips, 1997:13). Additionally, those who reported taking an interest in politics once or more a week were full time students.

The largest group likely to report having little or no interest in political issues were those who were in part time work or were unemployed (Beresford & Phillips, 1997:14). Amongst these young people, Beresford and Phillips encounter a strong sense of distrust of politicians and government, and a lack of faith that either could produce tangible, meaningful outcomes for them (Beresford & Phillips, 1997:15). They conclude that there remains a clear relationship between class and political interest and engagement, though this may be more complex than that for previous generations. In a survey with high school students in Newcastle, Threadgold and Nilan (2003) also found that class background impacted significantly on the political views of young people and the extent to which they felt alienated from the political process (Threadgold & Nilan, 2003).

Research also suggest that a distinction should be made between interest in the 'political system' and interest in 'political issues', arguing that young people show an interest in a range of issues, despite a broad dismissal of politicians and government (Beresford & Phillips, 1997:16). Qualitative and quantitative research confirms that young people are put off by the idea of 'politics' and 'political issues' (Aveling, 2001; Threadgold & Nilan, 2003; Huntley, 2006; Collin, 2007). Threadgold and Nilan (2003) found that the majority of young people said they were only 'a little interested' and spoke in very negative terms about politicians and governments (Threadgold and Nilan, 2003). Similarly, the YES study also explored young people's attitudes to politics, politicians and political process. It concluded that Australian young people:

- are distrustful of politicians and believe that politicians are dishonest, insincere and badly behaved;
- feel 'marginalised, trivialised and stereotyped by politicians' and that their voices are not heard.

(Edwards, 2005:3).

However, young people are interested and knowledgeable in many political issues, local, national and global in nature (Edwards, 2005). These include the environment, social justice, health and wellbeing and portrayal of youth in the media, the republic and taxation (Aveling, 2001; Huntley, 2006; Collin, 2007).



Main Themes and Gaps in the Literature

Much attention is given to a perceived lack of political socialisation (reflected in low participation rates) and low levels of civic literacy amongst young people. There are few studies on democratic participation which compare youth and general or adult populations. Those that do are focused on voter turn out, but there is no research on the meaning ascribed to non-voting or dummy voting by young people.

Young people report that they will vote because they have to but that they do not see the efficacy in voting. High numbers state they would not enrol or vote all the time if it were not compulsory. Structural disadvantage, such as lack of permanent housing can impact on electoral enrolment and participation.

Few young people are mobilised to join unions and ever fewer are members of political parties. However, young people are interested and knowledgeable in political issues and engaged in a wide range of new participatory activities.

Young people are committed to making a contribution to the community, but many do not consider their participatory acts to be volunteering. Young people prefer to focus on 'making a difference'.

Civic education – via school syllabus and compulsory volunteering programs – has been the dominant policy response to dwindling rates of youth participation in formal institutions of democracy and with traditional political actors (such as politicians and political parties). Young people who participate tend to increase their levels of participation with age. Civic education programs and participatory experiences where young people have little or no control over the process or outcomes can be counter-productive.

Young people are not content to accept the hierarchies implicit in many traditional institutions of democracy. Instead, young people seek participatory experiences that afford them agency and where they can see tangible results of their efforts. These may address local issues and be oriented towards local actors or targets, or they may be manifest in direct action thought to impact on global issues (taking public transport, or starting an online discussion group on alternatives to car transport as a response to global warming).

Research on youth participation in democracy most often conceptualises participation as a relationship between groups/individuals and the state. However, as processes of governance and policy production become more complex, young people are identifying new targets, alliances and methods to communicate their political beliefs.

There is no specific research on what young people would like democracy to look like. However, research on participation in groups and organisations suggests that young people value processes and experiences that are fun, culturally relevant, flexible, efficacious and where they personally get something out of it.

There is limited evidence on Australian young people's use of ICT (particularly the internet) and new media for participation.

There are important gender differences in both attitudes and experiences of participation. Also, young people's engagement in both 'minimal' and 'maximal' forms of citizenship is affected by class and ethnicity because the underpinning assumption of 'equality' is not always substantive.

While there is a considerable body of literature looking at the nature and forms of participation, there is little if any considering the impact (comparative or otherwise) of these respective activities. Andolina, M.W., Jenkins, K., Keeter, S. & Zukin, C. (2002) 'Searching for the Meaning of Youth Civic Engagement: Notes From the Field', Applied Developmental Science, Vol.6, No.4, pp.189–195.

There is clear evidence that young people in Australia are engaged with political and social issues, but that they feel alienated by formal, institutionalised politics and are less inclined to engage in traditional forms of participation.

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Whitlam Institute

WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

UWS Parramatta Campus, Cnr James Ruse Drive & Victoria Rd Rydalmere NSW Australia 2116

Locked Bag 1797 Penrith South DC NSW Australia 1797

T + 61 2 9685 9187 F + 61 2 9685 9110 E info@whitlam.org W www.whitlam.org

