



**Submission to the  
inquiry into civics  
education,  
engagement, and  
participation in  
Australia**

**May 2024**

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## Executive Summary

The Y is the largest and oldest youth-based organisation in the world, dedicated to amplifying the voices of young people. The Y in Australia has been delivering civics education through our Youth Parliament programs for over thirty years, providing more than 10,000 young Australians with the opportunity to grow their understanding and appreciation of our democracy.

As a community, we all benefit from a society where each member has equitable opportunities to contribute and feel a sense of belonging. Concerningly, social cohesion in Australia is declining – particularly among young people who are feeling increasingly distrustful of and disillusioned by government.

Young people are not a homogenous group and their relationship with government and civic processes is impacted by a variety of life experiences and structural factors. As such, no one intervention alone will be successful in addressing youth civic disengagement. This submission outlines a variety of ways government can remove barriers to civic participation for young people, as well as bolster efforts and activities that are already achieving positive outcomes.

Firstly, young people are dissatisfied with government because they don't feel their voices, interests and concerns are recognised by leaders or reflected in policy development. Providing genuine opportunities for young people to be heard by government, and then delivering tangible actions addressing these concerns is the precursor to addressing formal civic disengagement with young people.

Secondly, community-based civic education programs are a proven avenue to build rates of civic engagement. The Y's own Youth Parliament program is an example of a community-valued program with demonstrated positive outcomes. As result of participation in Youth Parliament, young people have reported increased levels of self-assurance, ability to have a voice and be heard, and confidence and knowledge to engage with civic and political processes. The Australian Government should capitalise on the strengths and successes of this hands-on program – which currently only operates at a state and territory level – and invest in the establishment of a National Youth Parliament to build connections and trust between young people and national decision-makers.

Further, there is currently no ongoing stream of federal funds supporting community-based civic engagement programs, such as Youth Parliament. Local and state governments and philanthropic groups are currently providing the lion's share of support. The Australian Government should commit to funding that ensures community organisations can financially sustain the continuation and growth of existing civic engagement programs, with the funding being adequate to enable equitable

opportunities for young people, regardless of geography, access and participation needs or family income.

The Y is encouraged by the Office for Youth's commitment to delivering a grants program providing leadership development opportunities for First Nations young people and other underrepresented cohorts. We welcome this investment, though urge the Government to ensure the terms of the grants reflect the true costs of program delivery, including addressing structural barriers.

Thirdly, information is power. Yet young people are entering adulthood with varying understanding of democratic processes and how the political relates to the personal. Further, when young people actively seek out information to inform their decision making and electoral participation, they must navigate their way through complex, paternalistic and often competing public narratives about democracy and electoral issues. Contributing to this is rise of misinformation, particularly on social media.

The Australia Government can and should do more to support all young people to build foundational knowledge of civic processes. While the Australian Electoral Commission and the Parliamentary Education Office do great work in this space, the current investment is insufficient to reach all young people equally.

Additionally, efforts are needed to ensure that young people 1) have trusted, age-appropriate sources of quality information to inform their civic decision-making and 2) are equipped with knowledge and skills to discern disinformation spread in various media. In practice, we recommend investment in youth-led media outlets and platforms that young people trust and use to bolster their offerings, such as offering/collaborating with fact checking platforms, as well as the delivery of a National Strategy for Media Literacy.

Lastly, and fundamentally, while young people are disengaging with formal civic processes, they are not disengaged. They remain passionate about social issues and invested in their communities. Young people are more likely to engage with 'informal' and everyday modes of political and civic participation – including, but not limited to – volunteering in their local community, participating in protests, marches and campaigns, creative expression, online communities, and individual behavioural change. These preferred ways of civic participation are often unfairly devalued by policy makers. For true change, government leaders should be more accountable and responsive to these outlets to effectively fulfil their duty as elected representatives.

## Recommendations

1. The Australian Government and Office for Youth take a leadership role in increasing the capacity of governments at all levels to engage young people to support best-practice across the country.
2. The Office for Youth work closely with the youth sector to support the delivery and evaluation of the proposed youth participation activities to support the reach of a broader, more diverse audience.
3. The Department of Education and Office for Youth ensure that the grant funds and conditions committed to in the *Engage!* Strategy in supporting engagement strategies of First Nations young people and other underrepresented cohorts reflect the true costs of delivery and support community organisations to provide a sustainable program.
4. The Australian Government support the establishment of a National Youth Parliament program to build on the success of the state and territory programs and build connections and trust between young people and national decision-makers.
5. The Australian Government commit to funding that ensures community organisations can financially sustain the continuation and growth of existing community civic engagement programs. Funding levels should ensure programs can be inclusive of all young people regardless of geography, family income or access and participation needs.
6. The Australian Government invest in the development of broad reaching programming or curriculum upskilling young people on the foundations of democratic processes. The program should be co-designed by young people and delivered in partnerships with schools and community organisations to effectively reach young people.
7. The Australian Government develop a National Strategy for Media Literacy, as proposed by the Australian Media Literacy Alliance, to ensure children and young people are equipped with skills to critically engage with media, including misinformation. This work should complement investment in digital literacy and e-safety community initiatives.
8. Australian governments ensure they genuinely consult with young people in future debates about social media bans and restrictions to avoid the risk of creating ineffective and disempowering policy.
9. The Australian Government invest in existing, trusted youth-led media outlets and platforms to bolster and professionalise their offerings (e.g., through collaborating with nonpartisan fact checking platforms) and ensure that young people have age-appropriate access to reliable and quality information.

## About the Y

The Y (formerly the 'YMCA') in Australia is a not-for-profit organisation, operating in more than 680 communities, with 12,300 employees and over 16 million visits to our programs and facilities over the past year.

As a not-for-profit movement that exists to support children, young people and the community across every state and territory in Australia; and across 120 countries globally, the Y is committed to supporting people from all backgrounds and walks of life to reach their full potential, with dignity.

The Y's mission is to empower children, young people and communities Australia-wide to build a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world, where every person can thrive in body, mind and spirit.

The Y in Australia is made up of 12 Member Y's, each governed by a local voluntary Board of Directors elected by its members, to enable us to have local community relevance and impact. Our collective work is driven by our bold vision – to create systemic change for a better world with and for young people – across four strategic pillars:

- Community Wellbeing
- Meaningful Work
- Sustainable Planet
- Just World.

The Y offers a wide range of programs and services to support children and young people across their lifespan, in every state and territory, including youth leadership, empowerment and civic education programs.

Notably, the Y delivers the Youth Parliament program which empowers young people to stand up and be heard in state and territory Parliament chambers. In 2024, we also delivered the inaugural Youth National Cabinet – a program that brought together 12 young delegates from around the country to travel to Canberra and deliver policy pitches to Federal Ministers, Members of Parliament and advisers in Australian Parliament House.

## Introduction

As a community, we all benefit from a society where each member has equitable opportunities to contribute and feel a sense of belonging. Concerningly, social cohesion in Australia is declining.<sup>1</sup> A recent report found that young people were less likely to believe that most people can be trusted, were more pessimistic about Australia's future, less likely to trust government, and more likely to feel isolated than older cohorts.<sup>2</sup>

Young people are not a homogenous group and their relationship to democracy and community is impacted by a range of complex and interplaying factors and life experiences. No single intervention will be able to address civic disengagement. As such, this submission outlines a variety of ways government can remove barriers to civic participation for young people, as well as bolster efforts and activities that are already achieving positive outcomes.

Civic education programs – and equitable access to these programs – are a key mechanism to support improved civic understanding and participation, as demonstrated through Y's own Youth Parliament program (Section Two). However, equally, policy and decision making that includes young people and reflects their wants and needs is also vital to see a cultural shift (Section One).

Lastly, information is power. We want and need young people to feel informed and critically engage with formal civics processes, such as elections. However, as detailed in this submission (Section Three), seeking accessible, reputable, and objective information can be a challenge for young people. Government needs to do more to ensure young people 1) have trusted, age-appropriate sources of quality information to inform their civic decision-making and 2) are equipped with knowledge and skills to discern disinformation spread in various media.

This submission addresses the following inquiry terms of reference:

- The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement;
- The vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donnel, J. (2023). *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023*. Scanlon Institute. Available at [2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report | Scanlon institute](#)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system;

- The mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about electoral matters; the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media and mis- and disinformation; and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes; and
- Social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers.

Our recommendations are informed by research and the expertise and insights of our youth services/program staff and young representatives from across the Y federation.



# Section one: Young people and civic engagement

## Institutional distrust

### Recommendations

- 1. The Australian Government and Office for Youth take a leadership role in increasing the capacity of governments at all levels to engage young people to support best practice across the country.**
- 2. The Office for Youth work closely with the youth sector to support the delivery and evaluation of the proposed youth participation activities to support the reach of a broader, more diverse audience.**

Young people are increasingly distrustful of formal institutions. A recent report exploring young Australians' attitudes toward key political institutions found that there is an emerging 'democracy gap', whereby young people have trust in democratic principles and processes, though feel alienated from and had low confidence in Australia's political system and Federal Government.<sup>3</sup> Prominent factors behind this growing disillusionment are that young people:

- 1) Do not see themselves represented by those in charge,
- 2) Do not believe leaders are prioritising the right issues, and
- 3) Do not believe that their voices are heard in policy development.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders young peoples are even less likely to feel that government leaders are 'representative of people who look like you' than their non-Aboriginal peers.<sup>4</sup>

Comments from Y young people:

*"For me, it's really transparent when you can see politicians trying really hard to like relate to young people and their doing things that are really cringey and awkward. ... It could be a Tik Tok thing or a social media thing where they're trying to fit in and be like,*

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<sup>3</sup> Fu, J., and Wyn, J., Churchill, B. (2021). *Young Australians' Confidence in Political Institutions and Their Civic Engagement*. Youth Research Collective, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> Stephenson, E. et al. (2024). *Alternative paths to politics: How young people engage in politics in Australia*. Available at [Alternative\\_paths\\_to\\_politics.pdf \(anu.edu.au\)](https://www.anu.edu.au/alternative_paths_to_politics.pdf)

*‘We’re relatable to you guys, look at us doing these things that you’re doing’. I’m allergic to that sort of stuff. [Politicians need] more authenticity in the way that they actually try and go, ‘This is actually really serious stuff. We’re not trying to water in down for you because you’re too young to get it if we explain it like you’re adults.’”*

*“There should be a mindset shift of politicians that because someone can’t vote or you can’t rely on their vote, doesn’t mean that you’re not responsible for representing their interests. ... For instance, an example that comes to mind in the Religious Discrimination Bill and how that was going to affect queer students. Nobody was going into schools and saying, ‘Hey, this is the Bill, this is what it means for you as a student, what do you think it should say?’. It was more young people finding out about it and talking about it on social media. There was no engagement.”*

The Youth Barometer 2023<sup>5</sup> – a national survey of young people aged 18 to 24 – analyses the current challenges experienced by young Australians. The research found that young people perceived government support as inadequate in areas they valued and prioritised. Only 10 per cent believed that government provided enough or more than enough support for housing. Further, only 14 per cent and 19 per cent responded that they thought there was enough or more than enough support with finances and mental health respectively.

Additionally, recent research<sup>6</sup> reviewed how young people were engaged in policy development and represented in Federal and state policy between 2014-2021. The researchers found that Australian youth policy frequently and persistently depicted young people through an adult lens (e.g., as ‘risk takers’), and that opinions and perspectives from consultations were generally included on a limited basis in the final policy product.

Commitment to youth participation in policymaking across Federal, state and local governments remains haphazard, inconsistent across portfolios and settings, and generally in the form of a formal, structured consultative measures that reinforces existing power relations and limits the possibilities of youth involvement.<sup>7</sup>

Earlier this year the Australian Government and its Office for Youth released *Engage!*, a strategy to improve how government can work with young people. The Y welcomes this strategy, its priorities and commitments. We urge the Government to continue to work alongside the youth sector to support the delivery and ongoing evaluation of the strategy, particularly in efforts to reach a broader, diverse cohort of young people on their terms and in

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<sup>5</sup> Walsh, L., Gallo Cordoba, B., Cutler, B., Huynh, T., & Deng, Z. (2023). *2023 Australian Youth Barometer: Understanding Young People in Australia Today*. Monash University, Melbourne: Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice. DOI: 10.26180/24087186

<sup>6</sup> Waite, C., Walsh, L., Gallo Cordoba, B., Cutler, B., & Bao Huynh, T. (2024). About them, without them? Figures of youth in Australian policy 2014–2021. *Journal of Youth Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2325447>.

<sup>7</sup> Collin, P. and McCormack, J. (2020). *Young People and Democracy: A Review*. Sydney: Whitlam Institute. The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University

their environments. Otherwise, the strategy's measures evaluating impact will only tell a fraction of the story if interventions are only reaching an existing, captured audience.

The strategy also seeks to build the capacity of government departments to engage with young people. As per the strategy, this action will be measured by '*Percentage of Australian Government departments and agencies that worked with the Office for Youth and felt supported to engage with young people*' and '*Percentage of the Australian Public Service who feel confident engaging with young people on the development of policy and programs*'. While a positive inclusion in the strategy, feelings of confidence to engage with young people does not necessarily translate to tangible policy change and the genuine inclusion of young people. The Y recommends a more critical and regular measure of inclusion of young people's needs and voices in policy to hold departments and agencies to account – including and beyond 'youth policy areas'.

Lastly, the *Engage!* strategy focuses on young people's relationship with the Australia Government. While this is understandable considering the Office for Youth's remit, it will also limit the potential of its positive work. Engagement activities are haphazard across levels of government. The Australian Government has a key leadership role to improve standards across all three tiers of government and use the learnings, tools, and interventions to build local, state and territory government capacity in youth engagement.

## Informal civic participation

While young people are increasingly disengaging with formal institutions, they remain passionate about social issues and engaged in their communities. Young people are more likely to engage with 'informal' and everyday modes of political and civic participation – including, but not limited to – volunteering in their local community, participating in protests, marches and campaigns, creative expression, online communities, and individual behavioural change (e.g., purchasing goods from social enterprises, consumer boycotting, reducing waste, etc.).<sup>8</sup>

We see this passion and interests first-hand through our services and programs. For example, [WhyNot](#), our digital platform that provides young people a safe and trusted environment to submit their thoughts and amplify their unique points of view, has experienced substantial user growth. WhyNot has:

- Received 258 submissions from young people in 2023-24 (so far)
- Achieved a 284% increase in published submissions in the last twelve months

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<sup>8</sup> Collin, P. and McCormack, J. (2020). *Young People and Democracy: A Review*. Sydney: Whitlam Institute. The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University; Fu, J., and Wyn, J., Churchill, B. (2021). *Young Australians' Confidence in Political Institutions and Their Civic Engagement*. Youth Research Collective, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.; Walsh, L., Gallo Cordoba, B., Cutler, B., Huynh, T., & Deng, Z. (2023). *2023 Australian Youth Barometer: Understanding Young People in Australia Today*. Monash University, Melbourne: Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice. DOI: 10.26180/24087186

- Had over 429,000 organic platform views in the last twelve months.

Positively, WhyNot user outcome measurements have also found that:

- 96.8 per cent of young contributors report that their voices have been heard and valued after working with the WhyNot editorial committee
- 89.1% have improved their confidence in voicing their opinion as a result of WhyNot.

Despite this clear engagement in social and political issues and debates, too often young people are unfairly regarded as ‘disengaged’ and their preferred ways of civic participation are devalued by policy makers. While this inquiry, its terms of references, and subsequently, this submission focus on how to ‘bring’ different communities to formal, existing civic processes, the salient question is how decision makers can better ‘come to’ communities and draw on their preferred ways of civic engagement and expression.

## **Structural barriers and the importance of local organisations and place-based approaches**

### **Recommendation**

- The Department of Education and Office for Youth ensure that the grant funds and conditions committed to in the *Engage!* Strategy in supporting engagement strategies of First Nations young people and other underrepresented cohorts reflect the true costs of delivery and support community organisations to provide a sustainable program.

Young people’s relationship with democracy and institutions is impacted by their life experiences. Structural and intersectional factors, such as employment status, educational attainment, gender, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, intergenerational trauma, or location all affect and contribute to young people’s perception of and engagement with civic activities.<sup>9</sup>

Mainstream and government activities to consult with and engage young people often attract educated, ‘high-achieving’ young people from English speaking backgrounds and often do not address the structural barriers to participation that young people may be experiencing.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, community organisations are more likely to use informal

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

mechanisms to engage and collaborate with young people, break down barriers and facilitate new skills, networks and resources that supports young people to feel they can influence and lead change in decision making.

Earlier this year, the Y provided a Federal 2024-25 Pre-Budget submission outlining the need for a grants program to strengthen civic engagement and social cohesion in young people from diverse communities and cohorts. We were pleased to read the subsequent commitment from the Australian Government and the Office for Youth's to deliver grants to both 'strengthen the capability of First Nations young people in leadership and engagement' and to support young people to advocate and build their leadership skills with a particular focus on 'marginalised young people, including rural, regional and remote young people.'<sup>11</sup>

This is a welcome initiative, particularly as there is currently no other Australian Government-led funding stream to support this work. We recommend the Department of Education deliver this commitment in a timely manner and with terms that align with the findings from the ongoing work of the Department of Social Services' *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector*<sup>12</sup> and Government's commitment to ensure grants reflect the real costs of delivering services. On page 14, we provide a case study that highlights the complex factors of delivering programs that provide equitable opportunities for people living in remote communities.

## **Reaching young people in communities with low engagement**

Over 98 per cent of Australians are enrolled to vote. On the face of it, this presents a rosy picture of engagement and participation, but it's worth looking below the surface.

Enrolment rates vary significantly between states and territories, from 99 per cent in NSW to 92.9 per cent in the Northern Territory.

There is also significant variation within states and territories. For example, while Victorian has an enrolment rate of 98.2 per cent, 11 Victorian electorates fall under this level, and five of those seats have enrolment rates less than 95 per cent. Age is a potential driver behind lower enrolment rates in some places.

Age has always been a factor in lower enrolment rates with voters aged 18-24 compared to general enrolment rates. In the last eight years, enrolment rates of 18-24 year olds have hovered in the mid to high 80 per cent range with peaks corresponding with Federal elections in 2016, 2019 and 2022. The first time the enrolment rate for this

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<sup>11</sup> Department of Education. (2024), *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make*. Available at [Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make - Office for Youth, Australian Government](#)

group climbed above ninety percent was in the lead up to the 2023 referendum on the Voice to Parliament.

The Australian Electoral Commission does not publish data on the enrolment rates of young people at an electorate level, but it's worth noting that eight of the low enrolment Victorian seats have a higher proportion of younger voters (under 30) than the national average.

The challenge is starkest in remote communities as the following case study outlines.

## Case Study – Civic Education in Remote NT Communities

The Northern Territory is home to the most remote Aboriginal communities in Australia, who are deeply impacted by, yet are significantly underrepresented in government. The lack of education, engagement and representation is disenfranchising young people and the wider community to engage meaningfully with Northern Territory civics, with significant socioeconomic repercussions over generations.

In the Northern Territory:

- Only 55 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled to vote compared to the national average of 92 per cent (Northern Territory Youth Strategy 2023 to 2033).
- 30.8 per cent of the Northern Territory population (76,500) are Aboriginal (2021 census, Australian Bureau of Statistics). The total population of Aboriginal people living remotely is 57,375 (approximately 20 per cent of the Northern Territory population). Of this figure, 17 per cent (9753) are under the age of 30.
- Northern Territory Electoral Commission has only two permanent staff delivering public awareness programs, including civics and citizenship sessions with schools. In 2022-23, six out of 130 sessions were run in remote communities with 93 participants in total out of 4744 (1.96%) (NTEC Annual Report 22-23).

To support youth civic engagement, the Y NT rebooted its Youth Parliament program in 2023. Forty per cent of the program's 25 participants identified as Aboriginal, with 20 per cent from remote communities.

This was achieved through successful partnerships and collaboration with staff and families in communities, strategic alignment of outcomes with the Department of the Legislative Assembly, and genuine engagement with MPs and staffers (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) to support the program in a culturally thoughtful way.

Outcomes of the program saw significant increases in outcomes of teamwork and leadership, civics knowledge, self-confidence, and sense of belonging and community.

However, there were significant challenges too. They include geographic distance, language barriers, cost of travel (in one example where flight is the only option the cost is \$1,500 per person), cultural differences in decision-making, including authority to be involved in decision-making, stretched capacity of staff in remote communities to support involvement, limited technology infrastructure for online engagement and cultural obligations.

The current capacity of a community-based not for profit program to address these challenges is limited.

## Section two: Community-based civics education - Youth Parliament

The inquiry's terms of reference focus on *'the effectiveness of formalised civics . . . though schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments.'* This overlooks the valuable role community sector organisations play.

The following section details the importance and effectiveness of community-based civics education programs and need for greater Federal Government investment. While this submission focuses on outcomes and examples from Y's own Youth Parliament program, we also acknowledge other valued civics programs being delivered by youth organisations, such as Foundation for Young Australia's *Young Mayors* program and the *Run for It* movement, who also operate with minimal or no federal funds.

### Civics education through Youth Parliament

#### Recommendation

- The Australian Government support the establishment of a National Youth Parliament program to build on the success of the state and territory programs and build connections and trust between young people and national decision-makers.

The Y's vision is a 'better world, with and for young people'. One of our flagship programs helping us realise this ambition is Youth Parliament, a civics education program that aims to empower, educate and connect young people and amplify their voice within their communities.

Running for over 35 years, Youth Parliament provides young people aged 15-25<sup>13</sup> years the opportunity to learn about democracy, policy development and parliament, and build their skills in teamwork, public speaking, problem solving and leadership. The program engages young people through experiential learning, whereby they are supported to research, develop and debate bills that address pressing community issues. In South Australia we also deliver a Junior Parliament program for young people aged 12-15.

In 2023, the Y delivered its Youth Parliament program in all states and territories, except Canberra, with a total of 463 young participants. Participant demographic breakdown:

- 28% Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

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<sup>13</sup> Age range varies between state and territory programs.



- 28% LGBTQIA+
- 6% First Nations
- 6% Disability.

The Youth Parliament program has had over 10,000 participants to date<sup>14</sup> and there is expectation that there will be participant growth in 2024.

A key strength of the program is the progressive touchpoints and intensive support participants receive to build their confidence and sense of belonging, which underpins a personal conviction that their voice and opinion matters. This self-confidence then drives their positive participation in the civic education elements of the program.

The program entails a series of training days, committee meetings and a camp, culminating with participants ‘taking over’ the Chambers in their state’s respective Parliament House where they deliver statements and debate their proposed bills. On occasions, these debates are chaired by Members of Parliament and Ministers – providing important connections for both Youth Parliamentarians and Members of Parliament. In 2023, approximately 60 Bills were developed, debated and voted on across the country.<sup>15</sup> At conclusion, the successful bills are then disseminated to the relevant state/territory Ministers and leaders to provide an understanding of the concerns, insights, priorities and innovation of the youth community.

A further point of difference contributing to the success of the program is that the program is youth-led. With the support of the Y’s broader team, the program is designed and delivered by young staff, with the invaluable assistance of Youth Taskforce Members (volunteers who are generally Youth Parliamentary alumni). In addition to the upskilling opportunities for Youth Parliament participants, the program model further provides its young volunteers opportunity to build their mentoring and leadership skills, and in turn, their civic participation. For instance, the 2023 Victorian Youth Parliament evaluation found that 100 per cent of Taskforce Members ( $n=19$ ) felt more inspired to contribute to positive change and social impact in their community post-program.

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<sup>14</sup> The Y. (2021). *Community Impact Report 2021*. Available at [2761-YMCAAust\\_CommunityReport-2021-A4pdf-V4.pdf](#)

<sup>15</sup> Y Australia. (2023). *What do Australia’s Youth Parliamentarians Think?* Available at [Federal Youth Engagement Strategy A4 Booklet Draft.indd \(ymca.org.au\)](#)

The longevity of the Youth Parliament program and its local connections with councils, schools and other community organisations in itself demonstrates its immense community value. Further, findings from our state and territory program evaluations illustrate the impact on young people’s understanding of civic engagement processes and soft skill development (see box below).

### Outcomes from across 2023 Youth Parliament Programs

*Northern Territory* – Post program completion, participants reported an increased understanding and confidence in the civic knowledge; teamwork and leadership; sense of belonging; and sense of self.

*Western Australia* – Post program completion, 94 per cent of participants agreed their participation increased their ability to have a voice and be heard on community issues, and 88 per cent reported an increased sense of belonging.

*Victoria* – Eighty-eight per cent of participants believed they had stronger voice and am able to be heard more clearly on issues that they care about because of my involvement in Youth Parliament, and reported confidence to engage with political and civic processes and to vote at the next local, state or federal election respectively increased 19 and 17 percentage points between pre and post program surveys.

As detailed in the Sections One and Three of this paper, young people are disengaging from formal institutions because they do not feel their voices are heard and do not always see how democratic processes relate to their communities and everyday passions and concerns. Youth Parliament is a tried and tested model that reliably produces positive civic engagement outcomes for individuals, which in turn, strengthens community cohesion.

Our service delivery is currently contained to state/territory-based remits, whereas previously we also delivered a National Youth Parliament, bringing together young representatives from around the country to Canberra to debate national policy issues and connect with Federal Members of Parliament. There is great opportunity for the Federal Government to capitalise on the success of the Youth Parliament program model and reestablish a National Youth Parliament.

## Challenges in delivering and growing Youth Parliament

### Recommendation

- The Australian Government commit to funding that ensures community organisations can financially sustain the continuation and growth of existing community civic engagement programs. Funding levels should ensure programs can be inclusive of all young people regardless of geography, family income or access and participation needs.

Each of the Y's seven Youth Parliament programs operates with slightly varied models, shaped on different community and historical contexts, and access to program funding and external support. There is currently no uniform approach across the country to fund civic engagement programs and ensure young people across different states and territories have equitable access. As result, Youth Parliament project staff actively seek out a variety of avenues to support the program, including, but not limited to, government and electoral office support, sponsorship from local state Members of Parliament, state government grants, alumni/philanthropic donations, participant fees and collaboration with other community organisations. While the Y greatly appreciates the local support we do receive, the process of seeking out and piecemealing sufficient funds for program delivery – on a yearly basis for some of our programs – is incredibly resource intensive and creates uncertainty for future iterations or growth.

Further, the success of the program relies on goodwill and in-kind support, including from Parliament House services and staff, Members of Parliament and the volunteer Youth Taskforce. If support were to be withdrawn from any of these stakeholders, the look, feel and program offerings of Youth Parliament would vary greatly.

While the depth and intensity of the program underpin its quality and success, delivering a program with so many touchpoints, stakeholders and participants requires immense internal resourcing and project management nous. This includes knowledge and compliance with child safety/safeguarding internal processes and external legislation, participant and volunteer recruitment and management, risk identification and management, stakeholder relationship building and engagement, and reporting. This staffing contributes to the fixed cost of program delivery and can be a challenge for external funders to understand when justifying the cost of the program against participant numbers.

This challenge is compounded by the reality that the deliverables our staff achieve – particularly in acknowledging our Youth Parliament project coordinators are all on part-time hours – is well beyond what the program funding should permit. With pressures to keep costs down and staff already at capacity, our ability to actively network and build

skills to reach new, diverse audiences, and innovate and build on successful elements of the program is stifled.

The Y is committed to diversity and inclusion. While we acknowledge the vital role of specialist services and organisations providing targeted supports and programs designed to meet the needs of distinct cohorts, we also understand that true inclusion requires all community services and civic engagement programs to be responsive to broad community needs. This includes, but is not limited to, Youth Parliament.

Material costs of inclusion, such as Auslan or language interpreters, closed captions, travel costs (remote and regional participants) and specialist training can be a challenge to fund within available resources. While we endeavour to be flexible and adapt our program delivery to meet access and cultural needs, we find that the information, funding and available support for community organisations to engage with inclusive services is insufficient.

As such, government can do more to build the capability of the community sector. For example, this could look like the Inclusion Support Program (albeit, not a program without flaws<sup>16</sup>) model in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector which provides staff to access to inclusion professionals and guidance, and funds to remove inclusion barriers.

While we acknowledge that the Australian Government does provide individualised funds to people with disability to remove access barriers through the NDIS, in our experience this has not been a feasible solution as participant's plans have not had allocated sufficient funding to draw on for their participation without concern that it will detrimentally impact their ability to access assistance or support required for other areas of life.

Further, the NDIS is only disability-specific (with only a small proportion of people with disability having access to NDIS funds) and does not support broader inclusion needs. Individualised funding models alone also do not support staff capability building which is needed for creating cultural shifts in existing civic education programs and the wider community sector to embed inclusive practice as the norm.

Lastly, young people often take the lead on issues that may seem radical at first but are later widely accepted in our communities. Over the years, Youth Parliament Bills have preceded actual reforms on areas like gun control, euthanasia rights, drug testing for drivers and bans on single use plastic bags.

There is an untapped opportunity to continue to grow Youth Parliament and support young people to pursue further advocacy activity post program completion. We know

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<sup>16</sup> Deloitte. (2023). *Review of the Inclusion Support Program – Final Report*. Available at [Review of the Inclusion Support Program – Final Report - Department of Education, Australian Government](#).

this is both an area many young people would like us to offer, and a current opportunity lost for government. As detailed in the Section One of this submission, a key driver behind young people's disengagement with government is that they do not feel heard or seen by policy makers. With sufficient resourcing, the Youth Parliament could continue to grow and become an opportunity for public service staff and Members of Parliament to have ongoing working relationships with young representatives and understand and tap into their ideas, insights and priorities.

Currently, state, territory and local governments are doing the lion's share of funding and supporting the delivery of community civic engagement programs. The Australian Government must take on greater responsibility to support the sustainability and growth of existing, effective civic engagement programs (including and beyond Youth Parliament). Otherwise, there is great risk that community organisations will be required to pull back on this work and sector expertise, and valued and effective community civic programming will be lost.

## Section three: Seeking information

### Recommendation

- The Australian Government invest in the development of broad reaching programming or curriculum upskilling young people on the foundations of democratic processes. The program should be co-designed by young people and delivered in partnerships with schools and community organisations to effectively reach young people.

In developing this submission, we consulted with young people from across the Y federation to understand their relationship with democracy and voting, and how they sought trusted information to inform their decision making. The ages of the group (n=6) averaged in the mid-twenties.

Young people in the consultation discussed difficulties in understanding democratic processes, particularly when first being eligible to vote.

Comments from Y young people:

*“When I think about voting in past years, particularly when I was at that age when I was just able to vote, I didn’t understand it and it sounds quite bad, but I also didn’t really care to a certain extent. So, I would just vote whatever.”*

*“If I’m being honest, I don’t think I’ve ever felt confident in knowing what I’m voting for [. . .]. I just do what I feel is right. [. . .] I think in school you learn basics, but it’s not enough that to feel confident. I think there is a better way to reach people about [government] processes.”*

*“When I first voted I asked why I had to vote with a pencil. I didn’t get taught anything about voting, I didn’t know what I was doing either.”*

Some participants added that their interests and participation in democratic processes grew as they understood it more and could relate it to their passions and interests.

*“I think in more recent times, particularly when the Voice Referendum came out, was when I particularly started to dive for that information and make decisions for myself. In past years I would be like, ‘Oh, Mum, what do you think? Who are you voting for?’ or ‘Why are you voting for them?’, and then thinking ‘Oh, yeah. That sounds about right. I’ll do the same’. Whereas now I start to dive in for more information.”*

*“Now that I’m older – still a young person – but older, I’m intimately aware and believe that my vote matters so I personally do take it upon it upon myself to think about what*

*matters to me, my age, my gender, my working life, other social factors and I do try and educate myself on what party aligns best with that. It's all kind of self, proactive learning."*

*"The more you actually start to care about it and the more you realise your voice does matter. I want my vote to count so I want to make sure it's going to what I actually believe in. When you care you put in more effort into finding the information you need."*

One young person further added that they believe the government could play a greater role in educating young people to build understanding and interest in democratic processes and elections.

*"I guess in Australia, unlike the United States, it is compulsory to vote here. [The government] could help by explaining to young people explaining why we have to vote and [. . .] explaining why it matters when you go to line up to vote, and what your vote means. [. . .] [K]nowing why it matters is probably going to have more influence on young people to take their vote more seriously."*

When participants were asked how and where they sought information from to inform their voting decisions, answers were mixed. Some mentioned the importance of self-directed research to make decisions, others discussion with peers, and another that they still weren't quite too sure where to look.

*"Not all people want to talk about politics and stuff, but I feel that with the younger generation that there is less of a stigma to talk about it. I think in our parents' generation people didn't talk about who they were voted for, it's weird. [. . .] I've got a couple of friends and we talk about politics over people, so we talk about what values we have in an upcoming election, so for instance in this one the housing crisis and stuff like that and we debate who is addressing that. We debate about the policy and not the person."*

*"I also only know [how to differentiate factual information from misinformation] through trial and error and not really being taught that. [. . .] [I]t's not like in school you're taught that. It was all very self-taught my understanding of how democratic processes work and what influence or part I play."*

*"I do care about politics, but I just don't know enough. I don't know where to go to find trusted information and it just seems like too much work for me. In my head I go, 'I know it's important', but maybe I'm just at that age where I don't care enough and I don't think feel like my vote matters enough. I kind of just go, 'Okay, that sounds about right' and that's my vote, or I'll talk to my parents and that's my vote. [. . .] [I]t's just very confusing to me [. . .] and that's just me being honest."*

Young participants also discussed how they preferred to receive information about democratic processes and information ahead of elections. They discussed the preference for "easily digestible" information. The group discussed a recent campaign

led by a Member of Parliament on the indexation of tertiary HECS debt as an example of when complex information was articulated in an accessible manner and how it had a positive influence on ongoing engagement and interest in government decision making processes.

Comments from Y young people:

*“I feel like in my head I have the concept that policy and government is such a massive thing to understand and that if you want to understand it, you’ve got to like spend a lot of time and it’s going to be really hard, and you’ve got to put a lot of effort in and you need to like study it really, really hard to understand it. Whereas I think if it was broken down and made in to like, more simplified, then it wouldn’t be as big and scary as what people think it is and then you can kind of understand and make your decisions better.”*

*“I personally find it incredibly difficult to read, I can’t read books or anything like that because I can’t put the words together and it doesn’t make sense in my head, so like, videos like the one about HECS debt, it was really short, it was broken down, the information is handed to you so it’s easier to engage with it to make an opinion about it. I feel as though if that was done more, then people would follow along with it more.”*

In terms of Members of Parliament or candidates reaching young people with information about their policies and stances, the group discussed how they didn’t want politicians to preach to them about what issues young people *should* care about, or “*guilt-tripping*” them into voting particular ways – but rather, meet them halfway and acknowledge young people’s existing work and concerns.

*“I think it’s funny [being told] ‘As a young person, you should care about this’, whereas the reality of the situation is we already care about that thing or we’ve been shouting out about it from the rooftops for the last six months and you’re like finally on the same page as us, but you’re actually not on the same page of us, because we’re like all on the other side of the bridge and you’re just coming to the entrance now.”*

*“That validation is important. We already care about these issues, [politicians are] just coming to the party now. I think that’s why the HECs [campaign] went well. The politician was like, ‘Hey, I can see this is already an issue for you that you guys care about, I can see it’s already affecting you, so here’s what we’re going to do about it’ [. . .] there’s actually something happening, rather than, ‘Hey, come give us a survey and we don’t know what’s going to happen at the end of it.’*

Conversations that emerged from the group discussion demonstrated that while there was a keen interest in social issues, the link between electoral participation and the influence it can have on improving (or worsening) these issues was not always clear or valued, particularly in early experiences of voting or when they don’t feel informed.



In contrast, when young people felt informed, they were more likely to engage with electoral events. The challenge for young people, as demonstrated in the discussion, is the onus is on them to seek out information, build their civic skills, and navigate their way through complex, paternalistic and often competing public narratives about democracy and social issues.

As discussed in Section One, young people are civically engaged at a local level. To break down barriers for young people in participating in and feeling informed about electoral events, government needs to meet them in the trusted spaces where they are already congregating – whether physical or online. In practice, this could look like nonpartisan bodies, such as the Parliamentary Education Office or the Australian Electoral Commission, partnering with community organisations and schools to design and deliver targeted information about foundational democratic. The Y understands pockets of this work does occur, however significantly more investment is needed in this space to ensure young people are receiving equal opportunity to develop these critical skills.

Lastly, politicians can do much more to reach the young community members they are elected to represent to hear their concerns and include their interests in parliamentary debate. At minimum as their obligation as an elected official, but also in recognition of the power of the youth vote. As at 31 March 2024, young people age 18 to 29 years accounted for 18 per cent of those enrolled. Young people are also more likely to support minor parties and be a ‘fluid electorate’, whereby their vote is influenced by how major events are dealt with by parties and candidates, rather than by strict party allegiance.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Collin, P. and McCormack, J. (2020). *Young People and Democracy: A Review*. Sydney: Whitlam Institute. The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University.

## Social media as a source of information

### Recommendations

- The Australian Government develop a National Strategy for Media Literacy, as proposed by the Australian Media Literacy Alliance, to ensure children and young people are equipped with skills to critically engage with media, including misinformation. This work should complement investment in digital literacy and e-safety community initiatives.
- Australian governments ensure they genuinely consult with young people in future debates about social media bans and restrictions to avoid the risk of creating ineffective and disempowering policy.
- The Australian Government invest in existing, trusted youth-led media outlets and platforms to bolster and professionalise their offerings (e.g., through collaborating with nonpartisan fact checking platforms) and ensure that young people have age-appropriate access to reliable and quality information.

Social media is a key source of information and avenue for political engagement and expression for young people, particularly as young people's trust in traditional forms of media is on the decline.<sup>18</sup> Recently, a report from the Australian National University found that social media was the most popular route for political engagement with young people, highlighting the important role digital communication channels play in young people's lives.<sup>19</sup>

While young people value social media, understanding and identification of its risks were inconsistent. For example, recent research shows Australian teens' (ages 13 to 16) awareness of algorithms and understanding how to identify misinformation is low.<sup>20</sup>

Further, in our internal consultation with Y young people (ages averaging in mid-20s) we heard that while they were cognisant of the dangers and limitations of social media and the manipulation of algorithms, they also were not totally equipped with how to detect fact from fiction.

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<sup>18</sup> Corser, K., Dezuanni, M. & Notley, T. (2022). *How news media literacy is taught in Australian classrooms*. Aust. Educ. Res. 49, 761–777. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00457-5>

<sup>19</sup> Stephenson, E. et al. (2024). *Alternative paths to politics: How young people engage in politics in Australia*. Available at [Alternative paths to politics.pdf \(anu.edu.au\)](#).

<sup>20</sup> Notley, T., Chambers, S., Zhong, H., Park, S., Lee, J., & Dezuanni, M. (2023). *News And Young Australians in 2023: How Children and Teens Access, Perceive and are Affected by News Media*. Available at [News and young Australians in 2023: how children and teens access, perceive and are affected by news media \(apo.org.au\)](#)

Comments on social media from Y young people:

*“My experience of social media and something that I’m really, really aware of is that it’s designed to confirm what you already believe, in terms of it shows you content of what you want to see. [. . .] Who the information comes from is big, because if it is someone you really, really like on social media you sort of trust that a little bit more, if you’re conscious of it or not. It really depends where the information is coming from as to how much you believe or don’t believe it, but just because it’s coming from someone you like it doesn’t mean it’s factually correct.”*

*“I actually stay away from [social media] because I can’t handle the good versus evil all the time on it. That’s what it feels like when I go on there, ‘Oh, good’, ‘Oh, bad’, ‘Oh, good’, ‘Oh, bad’, and yeah, that’s why I don’t pay a lot of attention to the social media side of it.”*

*“[In looking for trustworthy sources] I know it’s definitely staying away from stuff pushed out on social media.”*

As technology continues to be intrinsically linked with widespread areas of life, the need for knowledge and support to proactively navigate online spaces and mediums safely is all-important. This call for investment and innovation in cyber safety education and literacy strategies was also a prominent theme in Bills developed across 2023 Youth Parliament programs (see pages 15 more information on Youth Parliament).

At writing, there is a public debate in Australian media to introduce bans on social media for teens and young people. The discourse is *about*, not *with*, young people and does not factor in their voices or perspectives of virtual communities and connection, and access to information. Echoing the young voices in our Y community, we urge governments to invest in universal access to media and digital literacy and education for young people.

We also strongly recommend that any further development of laws on social media use or restrictions be developed in genuine partnership with young people to avoid the risk of ineffective and disempowering policy.

Lastly, social media provides young people an outlet for information that traditional media does not. Young people do not feel that mainstream news media portrays them in a fair and equitable way, nor do they have confidence that their interests and concerns are understood by media.<sup>21</sup> The Australian Government should do more to ensure that young people have readily available access to quality, reliable and digestible news and information on social issues. This investment should be targeted towards increasing collaboration between youth-led media outlets and platforms (such as WhyNot, detailed on p.11) that young people trust and feel represented by, and

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<sup>21</sup> Notley, T., & Dezuanni, M. (2023) The Impact of News Media Exclusion: Understanding and Addressing the Under-Representation of Young People in the News. In De Abreu, Belinha S. (Ed.) *Media Literacy, Equity, and Justice*. Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 65-73.

resources, such as the ABC Fact Check, who provide high-quality, nonpartisan and transparent fact-checking.

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