



Young People Imagining
a New Democracy:
Young People's Voices
Focus Groups Report

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Supported by the Foundation for Young Australians



Foreword

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

The first stage of this project saw the publication of a literature review authored by Philippa Collin, Policy Manager at the Inspire Foundation, released in August 2008.

This report on the results of 10 focus groups with young people across NSW, conducted by UWS academics Dr Mike Horsley and Dr Debra Costley, is another step in the process of exploration. The research, whilst modest in its ambit, provides us with some further insights into how young people are participating in the community and political life of Australia and their views on participatory and representative democracy.

It is clear from the literature review and this research that the aspirations of many young people to participate in the civic and political life of the nation are as strong as perhaps they ever were. It is critical that policy makers and governments understand how our young people imagine their democracy of the future and the part they wish to play. Our research to date has revealed some powerful unanswered questions which we intend to explore further, not least of which is the impact that young people's contributions and engagement are having – at a local, state and national level.

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 grateful to the Foundation for Young Australians for their support of this project.

Should you have any comments or feedback on the report, we would be very interested to hear from you. Email us at info@whitlam.org.

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1. Key Findings

Young people demonstrate a broad understanding of, and faith in, Australian democratic society. They see value in voting and wish to participate in decision-making, but see traditional political structures and levels of government as complex, and difficult to understand. They recognise that they need to be informed themselves in order to participate at a political level but would like the pathway of citizen engagement in the political process to be more transparent and accessible. They question the opportunities available to them to engage in representative democracy in a meaningful way.

Young people are engaged with and interested in a broad range of issues, local, national and global, that have implications beyond their communities. They see value in pursuing those issues, particularly at a community level, including local government, where they can have an impact and contribute to the development of their community. They acknowledge their community activity as an important contribution to the functioning and development of a democratic society and believe they can influence the development of their communities through active participation. Politically active young people who had engaged in direct action - such as protests, running campaigns, standing for office and organising political delegations - on issues transcending local and community activity, expressed frustration that their participation had not achieved intended aims and that they felt removed from participatory decision making processes.

- Young people demonstrate a broad knowledge about how the political system, and democratic society, operates in Australia;
- They consider that the existing political system does not encourage or value their participation nor offer them sufficient opportunity to contribute to decision making;
- They see the current political structures, particularly at state and federal level, as complex and a barrier to meaningful participation;
- Compulsory voting is seen as an important component of the political system. However young people do not strongly identify with more traditional political institutions. Those that sought active engagement with more traditional forms of political activity expressed a sense of frustration that their efforts were often not recognised and as a group expressed the least level of trust in political leaders and the current democratic system;
- There was a strong thread that Australia's democratic system was functional and effective. The majority of young people were involved at varying levels in community and local activities and expressed the view that this involvement offered them the opportunity to actively influence the development of their community as an important part of their contribution to the Australian democratic system;
- There were clear views that young people consider Australia's representative democracy - characterised by most as adversarial and by others as non-participatory - is flawed and needs to change to re-engage citizens, particularly beyond the community level; and
- All focus groups participants indicated that they want to change and modify the political system to make it more effective, to make it more understandable and to make it more participative.

2. Introduction

The *Imagining a New Democracy* project, a project focused on young people, is a collaboration between the Whitlam Institute and the Office of University Engagement at the University of Western Sydney. The Foundation for Young Australians is a primary funding partner for the project.

The development of the project has been assisted by the building of collaborative ongoing relationships with a number of organisations that work with, and for, young Australians: *Inspire Foundation-ACTNOW*; *Vibewire*; *Youth Action and Policy Association*; *NSW Commission for Children and Young People*; *Youth Coalition of the ACT*; *Golden Key International Honour Society*.

The project seeks to:

- Better understand younger Australians attitudes towards and active participation in the democratic process;
- Work with young people to 'imagine' how Australian democracy might work better for them and all citizens;
- Identify potential implications for public policy;
- Promote consideration of these matters by policy-makers and the public.

The focus group component of the project sought young people's ideas and young people's voices to gain an appreciation and understanding of how young people participate as citizens, what works for them and what they envision in a democracy that meets their needs.

The focus groups were designed to solicit young people's ideas and experiences of participation in democracy, including the impact of their participation and their vision for imagining a new democracy.



3. Focus group research methodology

A. Focus group methodology

The focus group approach chosen for this research was a mixed method focus group approach. The mixed method approach blended both direct and affinity focus groups and was designed to utilise the strengths of direct and affinity group approaches.

The *direct approach* establishes central focus group venues, enlists participants through promotion, ensures participants meet certain demographic characteristics and is conducted around pre-structured questions. Researchers closely and actively control the flow of discussion in the focus group by adherence to prepared questions.

The operation of the direct focus group represents staged conversations that access the collective memories and shared ideas of the participants, in relation to the questions seeking exploration. In such direct focus groups the researcher is directive, the venues pre-organised and the participants respond to heavy promotion and incentives.

The *affinity approach* utilises affinity groups of friends, colleagues, employees and acquaintances. The groups are usually conducted in more naturalistic settings such as homes, workplaces and offices. The affinity approach uses these techniques to build on the participant's current relationships and the trust that these relationships are based on. The naturalistic settings increase the comfort of participants and reduce the artificial nature of the research process. Also in this approach, the researcher has a more passive role and facilitates discussion rather than directs it with prescribed questions.

In this research a mixed method utilising the strengths of both approaches was adopted. This allowed the researchers to generate both direct and spontaneous ideas and responses. It accessed participants from a wide demographic and included participants who might normally have been reluctant to participate. The direct focus groups were developed to allow participants to attend central locations and respond to the focus group program state wide promotion.

Six of the focus groups (60%) were affinity groups and were held in naturalistic settings. Four of the focus groups (40%) were direct groups promoted and held in central locations.

All focus groups responded to prescribed questions and the researchers conducted staged conversations directed through the questions provided. However, spontaneous issues that arose in the focus groups that reflected the interests and ideas of the participants were also subjected to discussion and were used to generate responses from all the participants. Participants in two groups, for example, raised the issue of the republic. This issue was then referred to the entire group for discussion. A list of issues and questions raised by the participants is provided in Part B below.

All groups, in responding to the question of '*What would you like democracy to look like?*' raised the issue of simplifying the three levels of Australian Government. Once these issues were raised each participant in the group was asked for a response.

Each focus group discussion was of approximately 70 minutes duration. The longest focus group discussion was of two hours duration and the shortest was of 55 minutes duration.

Two thirds of the focus groups were held in the evening and one third were held at lunchtime. Three focus groups were held on weekends. In all focus groups light refreshments were provided towards the end of the focus group discussion. There were no other incentives for participation.

Each focus group was kept small (the largest group was limited to six participants). This approach was undertaken to develop the depth of responses and allow each participant to respond to each question and have their response noted. As a result, one group of 11 was divided into two and two consecutive focus groups of 6 and 5 participants were conducted. This in depth approach allowed the researchers to report on and categorise the voice of each participant.

B. Data analysis methodology

Each focus group was attended by two researchers. One researcher was nominated to ask the majority of the questions, while the other researcher was primarily responsible for making field notes of the responses and discussion. However, in each focus group the researcher asking the questions also took field notes, and the researcher taking notes also asked questions. The researchers reversed roles in each focus group.

As soon as possible after each focus group the researchers typed up their field notes and produced a transcript reflecting both researchers field notes. The data was subject to initial and preliminary coding to identify key categories and highlight critical discourse. From this coding and reflection on the focus group, the researchers produced the focus group response to the research questions.

The approach allowed the researchers to identify the responses of each participant and compare participants responses across the focus groups. The approach also allowed the researchers to report on the consistency of some views across different focus groups. This approach also allowed the researchers to contrast different opinions and ideas within and across the focus groups. As a result, majority and minority views resulting from the research can be reported.

C. Developing the focus group questions

The questions asked of the focus groups were adapted from a preliminary set of questions developed by the Whitlam Institute. The questions were reviewed and then modified to meet the time requirements of focus group sessions. The focus group questions are provided in the panel below.

Focus group questions

What issues are you interested in?

- How do you participate in these issues?

What do you think are the key features of Australian democracy?

- How do those features affect you?
- How do you relate to them (federal, state, local and personal level)?

What do you expect to get from Australia's democracy?

What should you have to contribute as a citizen?

What do you understand "participating in democracy" to mean?

What is your personal experience of participating in or fulfilling a role as a citizen in our democracy?

What is your preferred way of participating?

- Why?

If you wished to be more involved in the democratic process how would you go about it?

What would you like democracy to look like?

- How could it better serve you, your community and the country?
- How could democracy be more:
 - flexible
 - culturally relevant
 - fun
 - rewarding for the individual, community and country?

4. Focus groups conducted

Ten focus groups were conducted comprising six affinity groups and four direct groups.

Affinity focus groups

Affinity focus groups were established where young people were, and a focus group plan to access these young people was developed.

Type of Focus Group	Location	Participants from	Number of participants
Workplace focus group	Gladesville	North Shore, Hills District, Inner City	6
Community group focus group	Penrith	Upper Blue Mountains	5
Youth group focus group 1	Mortdale	Mortdale, Canterbury Bankstown areas	6
Youth group focus group 2	Campbelltown	Revesby, Liverpool and Campbelltown areas	5
Central Coast focus group	Gorokan	Central Coast	5
Riverina focus group	Wagga Wagga	Riverina	4

Direct focus groups

The research team identified appropriate Sydney, Greater Western and South Western Sydney and regional locations that complied with the focus group specifications and selected venues that the research team considered useful places to meet young people in focus groups. The research team promoted the focus groups widely - online, through University and TAFE networks and local council youth workers - to encourage awareness of and participation in the focus groups. Twelve direct groups were promoted. Four direct groups attracted participants and were conducted.

Location	Participants from	Number of participants
Parramatta RSL	Upper North Shore, Parramatta area	4
Kingswood UWS	Western Sydney	6
Windsor – The Terrace	Richmond, Windsor	5
Orara Way – Coramba	Coffs Harbour, Bellingen, Coramba	6

5. Demographic characteristics of the focus group participants

The Whitlam Institute commissioned the research team to undertake focus group research in New South Wales on young people’s ideas about *Imagining a New Democracy*. The specifications for the focus group design included:

- Ensuring that focus group participants were broadly representative of young people in the 18-25 age group;

- Ensuring that focus group participants would be drawn from Sydney, Greater Western and South Western Sydney, and appropriate Regional Centres in New South Wales.

The following table outlines the demographic characteristics of the focus group participants.

Imagining a New Democracy Focus Group Participants: Demographics

Age	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
	12%	15%	7%	20%	3%	7%	13%	23%

Gender	
Female	52%
Male	48%
Total participants	52

Main Occupation	
Full-time student	21%
Part-time student	22%
Apprentice/Trainee	6%
Full-time employee	28%
Part-time employee	32%
Volunteer	46%
Unemployed	2%
Other – Work from home	2%

Background Details	
Born in Australia	62%
Another language spoken at home	30%
ATSI	2%
Attended government school	66%
Attended private school	34%

6. Results of the focus group research

A. Categorising the participants' responses

Analysis of responses across all the groups revealed three categories of participants. These categories are based on the discourse employed by the participants in their responses; in their explication of their current political and community participation, and in the way they reflected on their roles and responsibilities in Australia's current democratic system.

1. Currently politically and community inactive participants: 31% of participants across 5 focus groups

These participants are currently politically and community inactive. They appreciate that in Australia they can participate in the polity and community if they should wish to. However, at the moment no real issue has affected them to such an extent to elicit them to participate.

These participants, like all the others, identified issues of importance to them such as climate change and improving the current political and democratic system.

However, they currently see the Australian political and democratic system as a political safety net. This safety net is currently in good hands protected by current active participants and stored ready and waiting for future participation. This safety net means that they will be able to increase their level of political and community participation when and where, and under what circumstances they want to. The safety net offers protection for their participation in the future.

These participants also express high levels of trust in political leaders, and in the democratic system.

A subgroup within these politically and community inactive participants were highly politically aware. These politically aware participants possessed high level knowledge of the political system, and were aware of current political issues and debates. They could explain complex political ideas and possessed advanced knowledge of the technical aspects of the Australian democratic system (such as clauses in the Australian constitution). These politically aware but inactive participants were highly critical of politicians and their current background, and were critical of the media. Almost all were tertiary educated.

2. Community active participants: 51% of participants across 7 focus groups

These participants in the focus groups are involved in a wide range of community activities. They are much more focused on the practical everyday ways of participating, of supporting their community, assisting others and strengthening their community organisations.

They have much more experience in participation, and are involved in either volunteer community service or the development and enhancement of their own community organisation, to which they have a great commitment.

They tend to see the impact of national events from the point of view of their own community. They tend to express their participation in democracy by thinking about how the community and their community organisation can move forward.

3. Politically active participants: 18% of participants across 5 focus groups

These participants are politically highly active. They participate in a wide range of political action and political groups. Their responses highlight deep reflection about national and international issues and national and international policy and political responses to these issues and policies.

Their views of democracy and of participation exhibit a critical depth, resulting from significant political experiences in direct political action such as being a candidate for public office, and leadership of a political party and in political organisations. Their experiences of direct political action have occurred as they have attempted to change and improve the political and democratic system.

Their responses reflect significant experience about how the political system works. Accordingly, they have a much deeper and greater understanding of the current political system at work.

Their responses tended to be much more insightful about how a more participatory democracy could be promoted and how the political system could be changed.

These participants expressed the least level of trust in political leaders and the current democratic system.

B. Young people respond to the focus group questions

This section provides the results of the focus groups discussions by focus group question.

What issues are young people interested in?

All of the focus group participants identified the issue of climate change as one of interest. Some of the politically inactive participants noted that *'democracy helped environmentalists as environmentalists get involved in action'*.

Prominent among the issues raised were:

- Developing the community;
- Reducing violence and substance abuse;
- Equality (in the workplace, multicultural, inter-generational);
- Social inequality.

Other issues identified included:

- Youth Allowance;
- Voluntary Student Unionism;
- South Sydney Rugby League Club;
- Becoming more self sufficient as a country;
- Education and higher education standards (indigenous education);
- Social entrepreneurship;
- Providing a voice for young people;
- Australian identity;
- The republic;
- Terrorism and the decline of civil liberties;
- Narrow background of our politicians;
- Drought and climate change;
- Reduction in rural services;
- Overdevelopment;
- Cultural diversity;
- Transport issues and petrol prices;
- The Murray-Darling Basin.

All focus groups participants indicated that they want to change and modify the political system to make it more effective, to make it more understandable and to make it more participative.

Discussion around this question elicited long and detailed responses on the current layers of government in Australia. Discussion extended to simplifying and reducing the levels of government (by abolishing the States) and making the political system clearer and less complex.

As can be seen from the list, some participants (especially the politically active) identified what might be termed 'big picture' issues around education, welfare, and the environment. Diversity and also intergenerational equality were the subject of discussion and concern.

The community focused participants were concerned with community issues. Generally, they expressed negative attitudes about globalisation. They reported that Australia should be more self sufficient and isolationist. Their responses used the word 'community' consistently and they saw their own community as the issue. Issues were perceived as influences that affected their community and so they were interested in those issues only as they related to their community.

The politically aware but inactive sub group raised the issue of the republic, crime, terrorism and the reduction of civil liberties. They were concerned that current politicians came from too narrow a background and were unrepresentative as a group.

How do young people participate in these issues?

For community active respondents grounded in their communities, participation in issues of interest included:

- Voting;
- Joining volunteer organisations such as rural fire brigades, SES (emergency services), landcare groups, in their local communities;
- Attending community meetings;
- Joining local and regional organisations;
- Petitioning local council about issues that matter in their local community;
- Buying Australian Made.

While voting (and compulsory voting more specifically) was seen as important, for these participants, voting was necessary but not sufficient. *'I don't think that I can actively have a say in reducing the level of government. No individual can change that'*. But there was acknowledgement that individuals participating strongly in their communities had a say and could influence the development of their community through active participation.

Participation for the politically inactive category of respondents was limited to voting and protest letters written to support groups they belonged to. This category of participants argued that they were aware that many forms of participation were possible.

The politically active respondents reported a wide range of participatory action in support of their issues of interest. These included:

- High profile protests and protesting;
- Petitions;
- Working as activists;
- Political delegations;
- Standing for parliamentary office;
- Disseminating political materials in the community;
- Establishing a new political party;
- Letter writing and emailing campaigns.

This level of participation transcended the local and state community and in some cases was national activity. These participants also expressed the greatest frustration in that much of their participation had not achieved its intended aims. This resulted in a wide frustration with the political system as a whole and provoked suggestions for more participatory decision making and political processes from these participants.

What do young people see as the key features of Australia's democracy?

This question provoked responses about the various flaws and weaknesses of the current Australian democratic system.

The community participants suggested that the current system was dominated by parties, and that the parties had an adversarial relationship. This adversarial system prevented knowledge being disseminated widely and resulted in the peoples' opinion and ideas not being built into decision making.

This group also argued that it would probably be an advantage to reduce one level of government (the States). They questioned the role of representation and they argued that decisions were being made without the public being informed or having a say. Their summary of the key features of Australian democracy was that it was flawed in a number of ways that prevented meaningful participation.

The political activist participants acknowledged that Australian democracy was superior to political systems that operated in other countries, but expressed the view that they were committed to improving the Australian democratic system and making it more participatory. They described the key feature of Australia's democracy as being non-participative, and that there were better models available to encourage participation in the political system. They expressed the view that Australia required electoral reform because the community was disengaged. In this context there was discussion of the Swiss system of referendums. There was specific discussion that our current system of parties bred politicians purely for exercising power and that this power was too centralised.

The politically inactive participants identified the key feature of Australia's democracy as compulsory voting. This was seen as an important process because it made people engage in the democratic system. The politically aware sub group of participants suggested that compulsory voting reduced political polarisation and helped to limit extremism.

All groups expressed negativity about the adversarial features of the current political system. In particular it was expressed that negative responses for no real gain or benefit drowned out real discussion about policy and issues. There was a strong view that positive discussion and debate about important issues and decisions were being neglected and limited in the community.

What do young people expect to get from Australia's democracy?

For the politically inactive group the main response to this question was a feeling and sense of security. This was expressed as *'the feeling that there is always someone there to step in and do something if it's needed, that you could do yourself, but there is always someone else there'*.

This sense of security also extended to the fact that Australia is generally a secure society that enables young people to undertake education, access the welfare state, access the medical system and that Australia is a mature developed economy and young people's basic needs will always be met.

Most focus group participants reported that they have expectations for a fairer political system, more focused on consensus and participation. This was expressed in the following way: *'there needs to be more opportunity for everybody to put their opinions and feel their opinions are being listened to, heard, responded to and it's not just information for information sake or that they are not acting for their own political gain but they are acting for the people and the community'*.

The more politically activist grouping went on to explain in greater detail how a fairer and consensus system may be developed, through Swiss style community referenda mentioned previously. Another idea discussed was that Ministers should listen to people in different ways, and that Ministers should have experience and expertise in their portfolio areas: *'Ministers doing things on your behalf should have the ability and the expertise to do that'*.

What should young people have to contribute as citizens?

There was extended discussion of a level of Australian *'community camaraderie, caring for other people'* that participants feel *'that's what we can do and that's where we can make a difference'*. Looking out for your neighbours, civic pride, support for the community, working within your community, volunteering and general courtesy and friendliness were seen as critical contributions.

There was a strong sense of personal responsibility: *'people should make themselves informed so that they understand what decisions are being made on their behalf and they can contribute on behalf of their community'*. Some of the active community participants suggested that *'people who are unemployed should complete national service so they contribute to the nation'*.

The politically active respondents do not believe that our current democracy is participatory. Their comments in this particular context reflect their views about the role of the media being to *'take away the prospect of participation and that young people disengage because they are unable to participate in any meaningful way'*.

At the same time they provided examples of the sort of participation they had undertaken from identifying a cause, then giving expression to that cause through protest, lobbying and writing letters and undertaking other forms of direct action. They especially identified climate change as an area they are interested in taking direct action about. Their preferred way of participating was very much direct action and involvement.

This grouping expressed the view that we must find new ways to participate and that *'what we have is not a democracy in action or not a participatory democracy in action'*.

The active community group provided numerous examples of actual participation in the community, including: participating in bushfire brigades and landcare groups, attending community meetings and organisations, and working with emergency services (SES). They suggested that *'these forms of participation were critical in participating in a democracy'*. They also viewed work as contributing and any work in local government or community was highly contributory.

The politically inactive participants expressed the view that voting was significant. They also suggested that the provision of opportunities on the web meant that young people *'did not have to actually go anywhere to participate and that they could participate in a web way using web2'*. They were very much against politicians using the web as they considered this to be politicians intruding into their world. These participants also identified working and paying appropriate taxes as critical contributions.

If young people wished to be more involved in the democratic process, how could they go about it?

The community oriented participants nominated direct local action as the preferred means of increased involvement: *'I will run for election myself and try to get into local government or ask more direct questions, make enquiries, make people accountable, lobby at local and state level'*.

They described involvement in terms of increasing the accountability of their representatives, through making their representatives answer their questions. Many of the community oriented participants spoke of strengthening their community groups and having them play a bigger role in the way that the political and democratic system works. *'Our community group has many members, and our leaders should be more important in the political system and have a greater say on our behalf'*.

The politically active grouping provided a detailed discussion of ways of becoming politically involved and of changing the current system. They expressed a range of ideas about direct action and activism. They responded to this question by identifying the changes in the democratic system they would fight for and encourage as a way to be more involved in the democratic system, such as the aforementioned Swiss-style referenda.

The politically inactive participants, while resenting intrusion by politicians online, expressed the view that the web could be used to build participatory online communities that could *'overcome isolation through engagement'*. They also suggested that talkback radio was an excellent medium and pathway for increased participation and suggested that talkback radio allowed the community's voice to be heard.

What would young people like democracy to look like as they imagine a new democracy?

One group spent over an hour discussing the response to this single question. It was the question that generated most discussion from each focus group.

The community oriented participants responded *'we would like things to be simpler, fewer levels of government'*. They want the community to understand how to improve the political system to advance their communities.

For these participants transparency is very important. In this context transparency refers to the information base on which the community depends to make decisions, so that people can make informed decisions and the community understands what they are voting on and how they can get involved in making decisions.

They argued that the adversarial conflict model which dominates politics is not mature, and cannot deliver informed discussion of both sides of important decisions.

The politically inactive participants expressed the view that they felt they should be given some sort of incentives for getting involved in democracy. Despite some probing there was little discussion of what these incentives could be. One response that these participants made was that they felt that *'we should trust politicians to make the right choice. So basically once a decision is made and most people have voted then we should just trust that politicians will do the right thing'*. This correlates highly with their conceptualisation of the current democratic system as offering a political 'safety net'.

In contrast the activist participants made a series of concrete suggestions to imagine a new democracy. They suggested a reduction in the three levels of government to two; citizens' referenda; and even a process whereby the community are active in allocating portfolios to Ministers. *'We don't want to just vote for the Prime Minister and he/she chooses everybody else, we want to be sure that people in portfolios have experience and expertise and knowledge to be running that portfolio and we want to have a say in that'*. This idea generated considerable interest.

The politically inactive participants' final comment was about trusting politicians – they argued that although referendums were a good idea, *'were people smart enough to make the right choice?'*. They specifically discussed segments of the comedy show *The Chaser*, and referred to the way that this media program exposed the low levels of knowledge that the public (and sometimes politicians) had about issues and decisions. They were very much very influenced by *The Chaser's* *'these people vote'* segment which linked lack of knowledge to voting.

All the participants acknowledged the view that although there are weaknesses in the Australian political system, there are strengths and positive aspects as well. *'Many don't realise how good they have it'* was a comment made by many of the participants born overseas with some knowledge of political systems in the US, China, Vietnam, Samoa and England.

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