

Lowering the Voting Age

Young Australians' attitudes and perceptions towards
voting and enrolment

Left Right Think-Tank – Submission to the Federal Government's 2009
Green Paper on Electoral Reform©

Left Right Think-Tank

C/O YACVic Inc, Level 2, 172 Flinders Street, Melbourne VIC 3000
ABN 9413 584 4030 | info@leftright.org.au | www.leftright.org.au

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1.0 Overview

This report is Left Right Think-Tank's response to the Federal Government's call for submissions regarding its 2009 Green Paper on Electoral Reform.¹ Left Right Think-Tank is a non-partisan organisation that values and promotes the ideas of young Australians.² The main focus of this report is the young Australian demographic and their attitudes towards lowering Australia's voting age.³

1.1 Purpose:

The report focuses on a survey conducted on 129 young Australians' perceptions on and attitudes toward Australian suffrage. Specifically, it aims to inform the Australian Federal Government, using the survey's data, on whether:

- The voting age should be lowered to 16 for Australian elections;
- And/or, the provisional enrolment age should be lowered to 16 in Australia.⁴

1.2 Survey Questions:

The survey asked the 129 respondents a total of 15 questions – seven identification and eight attitudinal questions.

Identification questions:

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
- Level of interest in Australian politics
- The Australian political party most strongly identified with
- Importance placed upon the right to vote
- Enrolment status with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC)

Attitudinal questions:

- Support for lowering the voting age to 16 or 17
- Reason for or against lowering the voting age
- Lowering the provisional enrolment age from 17 to 16
- If the voting age were lowered, whether enrolment and voting should be compulsory or voluntary
- Whether sufficient information is readily available on how to enrol with the AEC
- Whether lowering the voting age would facilitate greater enrolment with the AEC
- Whether the right to political representation should be determined by age
- Whether it is important that Australia considers international precedents when contemplating lowering the voting age

¹ Please see Australian Government's 2009 Electoral Green Paper: Strengthening Australia's Democracy http://www.dpmpc.gov.au/consultation/elect_reform/index.cfm

² Please visit www.leftright.org.au for further information on Left Right Think-Tank.

³ For an extensive background into this report, please see Appendix 1.

⁴ Provisional enrolment age is the legal age at which you are able to enrol with the Australian Electoral Commission to vote in Australian elections. For further information, please visit www.aec.gov.au

These questions were designed to gauge the attitudes of young Australians, between the ages of 16 and 25, towards the two questions raised by the Government's 2009 Electoral Reform Green Paper concerning lowering the voting and/or provisional enrolment age in Australia.

This report is divided into two sections, each examining the survey data dealing with one of these two respective questions. It specifically examines the various demographics with the broad category of 'young Australians' and seeks to present the findings to inform decisions concerning electoral reform.

2.0 Overview of Survey Respondents

This section broadly examines data based on the seven identification questions and gives an overview of the survey's demographic.

2.1 Age

Eighteen point one per cent of the respondents were aged between 16-17; 54.3% were aged 18-20; and the remaining 26.4% were aged between 21-25.

2.2 Gender

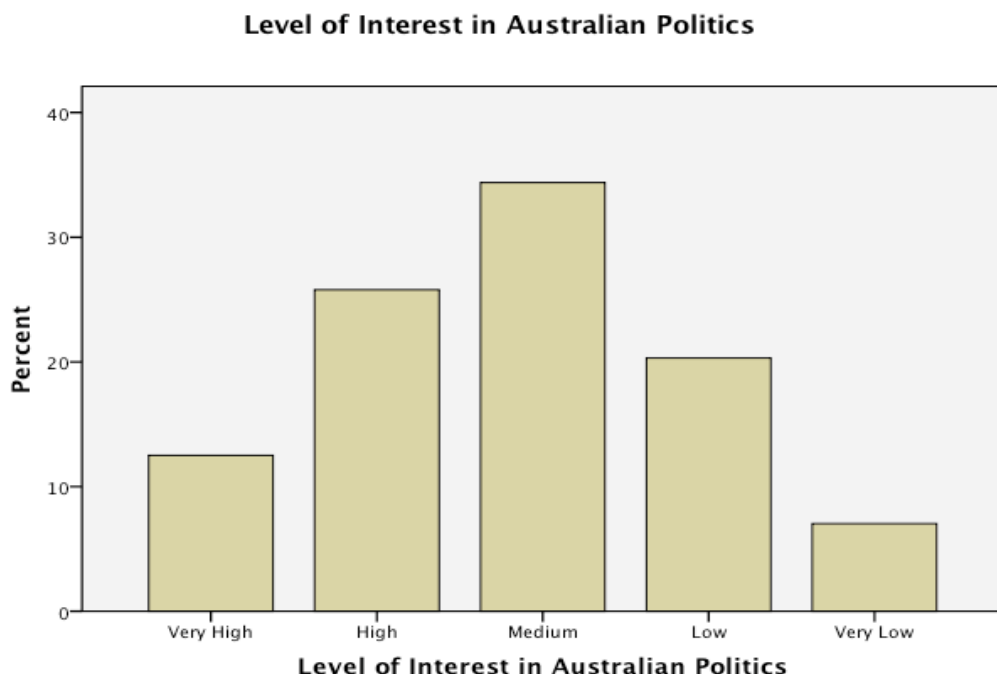
The survey's respondents were from New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria. Females comprised 63 and males 65 of the respondents, with one respondent identifying with neither gender.

2.3 Occupation

83% of respondents were students while the remaining 17% were engaged in full-time, part-time work, or some other form of occupation.

2.4 Level of interest in politics

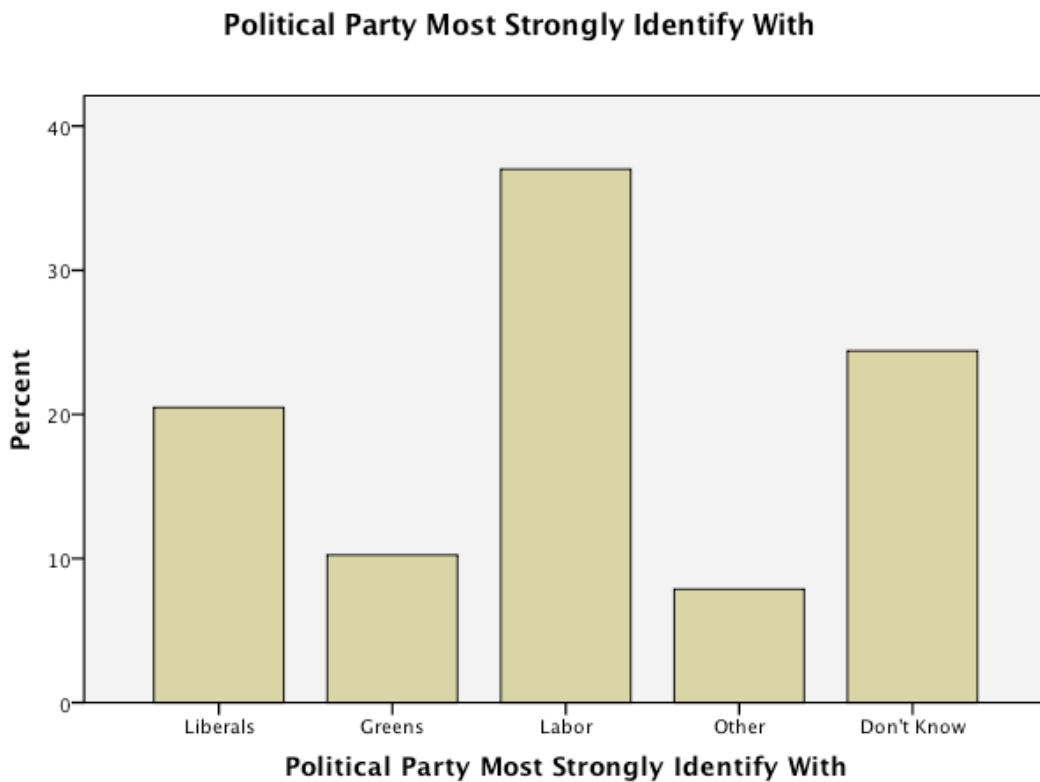
The spread was fairly broad across the five levels of interest in Australian politics, as the graph below demonstrates. Notably, 34.1% of respondents had a medium level of interest in Australian politics, while only 12.4% had a very high level of interest and 7% had a very low interest respectively.



2.5 Political party most strongly identified with

Self-identification with political parties was fairly evenly divided between three cohorts - the two major parties (ALP and Liberal Party) and those who did not identify with any party listed.

The largest group of respondents identified strongly with Labor, with 36.4%. 24 % did not identify with any of the listed parties or were otherwise unsure which party represented their views most strongly. Some 20.2% identified with the Liberals and 10.1% with the Greens. Interestingly, none of the respondents identified with the Nationals or with Family First. However, this could be due to the high percentage of respondents engaged in some form of higher educational study, usually undertaken in inner-regional areas.⁵

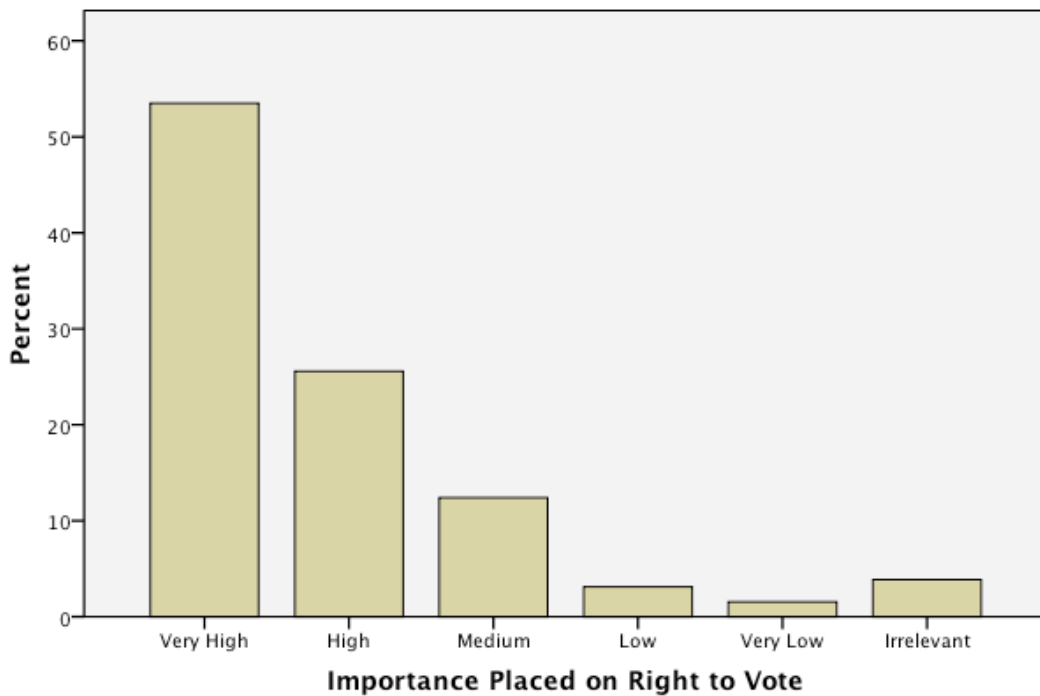


2.6 Importance placed upon the right to vote

The majority of young Australians surveyed, 53.5%, placed a very high level of importance on the right to vote. 25.6 % placed a high level and 12.4% placed a medium level on the right to vote. 3.1 % and 1.6% placed a low and very low level of importance on the right to vote respectively. 3.9 % considered the right to vote irrelevant.

⁵ For information on regional classification, please see the Australian Bureau of Statistics' ASGC Remoteness Classification: Purpose and Use (*Census Paper No.03/01*), available at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3110122.NSF/4a255eef008309e44a255eef00061e57/f9c96fb635cce780ca256d420005dc02!OpenDocument>

Importance Placed on Right to Vote



2.7 Enrolment status with the Australian Electoral Commission

The vast majority of respondents, 76%, were enrolled with the AEC. 17.1 % were not enrolled at the time the survey was conducted while 7% did not know whether they were enrolled with the AEC.

2.8 Summary

From the data obtained from the survey, the majority of respondents were aged between 18-20 and engaged in some form of study. Roughly 50% of respondents were male with the other half comprised of females. Only one respondent identified with neither the female nor the male gender. In general, the respondents had a medium level of interest in Australian politics and identified most strongly with the major political parties, or with no political party. They placed a very high level of importance on the right to vote in Australian elections and the vast majority were enrolled with the AEC. The high AEC enrolment percentage is unsurprising given that the majority of respondents were in the 18-20 age bracket.

Despite the modest number of survey respondents, 129, the data presented here should be viewed as a rough guide to the attitudes of young Australians predominantly residing in metropolitan areas. Should there be sufficient interest in lowering the voting and/or provisional enrolment age to 16, this report may act as a steppingstone from which to conduct further statistical research on this issue.

3.0 Lowering the Voting Age

This section examines whether young Australians support lowering the voting age to 16 or 17. It compares the various attitudes towards this question in relation to several variables. Furthermore, it seeks to highlight the reasons why young Australians are for or against lowering the voting age in Australia.

3.1 Age

The majority of young Australians who responded to the survey were against lowering the voting age, especially in the 18-20 year old bracket. Sixteen to 17 year olds were marginally for lowering the voting age to 16. None of the age groups surveyed significantly supported lowering the voting age to 17.

For lowering the voting age to 16

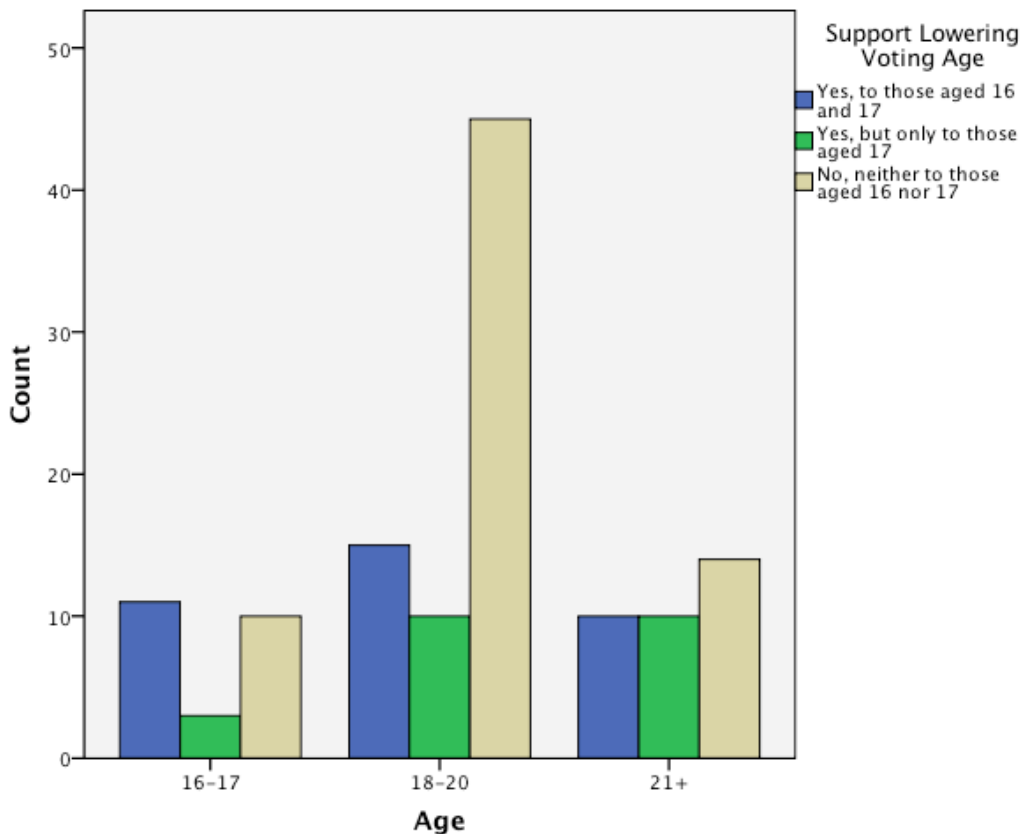
- 28.1% of all respondents were for lowering the voting age to 16
- 45.8% of 16-17 year olds; 21.4% of 18-20 year olds; and 29.4% of 21-25 year olds were for lowering the voting age to 16

For lowering the voting age to 17

- 18% of all respondents were for lowering the voting age to 17
- 12.5% of 16-17 year olds; 14.3% of 18-20 year olds; and 29.4% of 21-25 year olds were for lowering the voting age to 17

Against lowering the voting age

- 53.9% of all respondents were against lowering the voting age to 16 or 17
- 41.7% of 16-17 year olds; 64.3% of 18-20 year olds; and 41.2% of 21-25 year olds were against lowering the voting age.

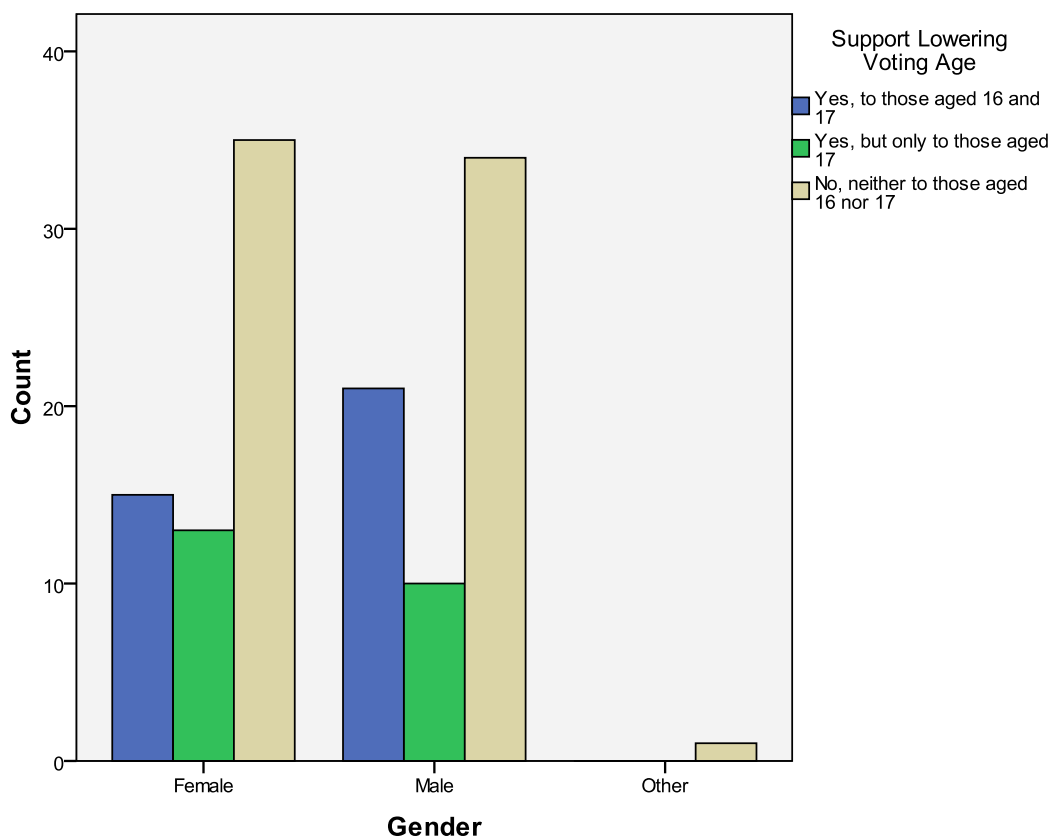


The lack of support for lowering the voting age to either 16 or 17 amongst those surveyed who themselves had recently attained the right the vote is notable.

3.2 Gender

Support for lowering the voting age to either 16 or 17 did not vary significantly according to the gender of those surveyed. Approximately half of the respondents of each gender opposed lowering the voting age entirely - 55.6% of female respondents and 52.3% of male respondents.

Support for lowering the voting age to 16, as opposed to 17, was consistently higher between both genders. Male respondents more heavily favoured this option – 32.3% of male respondents agreed to lowering the voting age to 16, compared with only 15.4% support for lowering the voting age to 17.



3.3 Level of Political Interest

The single largest cohorts within each level of political interest opposed lowering the voting age. Respondents who identified high or medium levels of interest where almost evenly divided on the question, while the majority (62.9%) of those with a low level of interest opposed the proposition.

Participants with a high level of political interest demonstrated a marginally increased support for lowering the voting age to 16. 30.6% of respondents with a high level of political interest supported the proposition compared with 25% and 28.6% of respondents with medium or low levels of interest respectively. However, the single largest group within this cohort remained opposed to

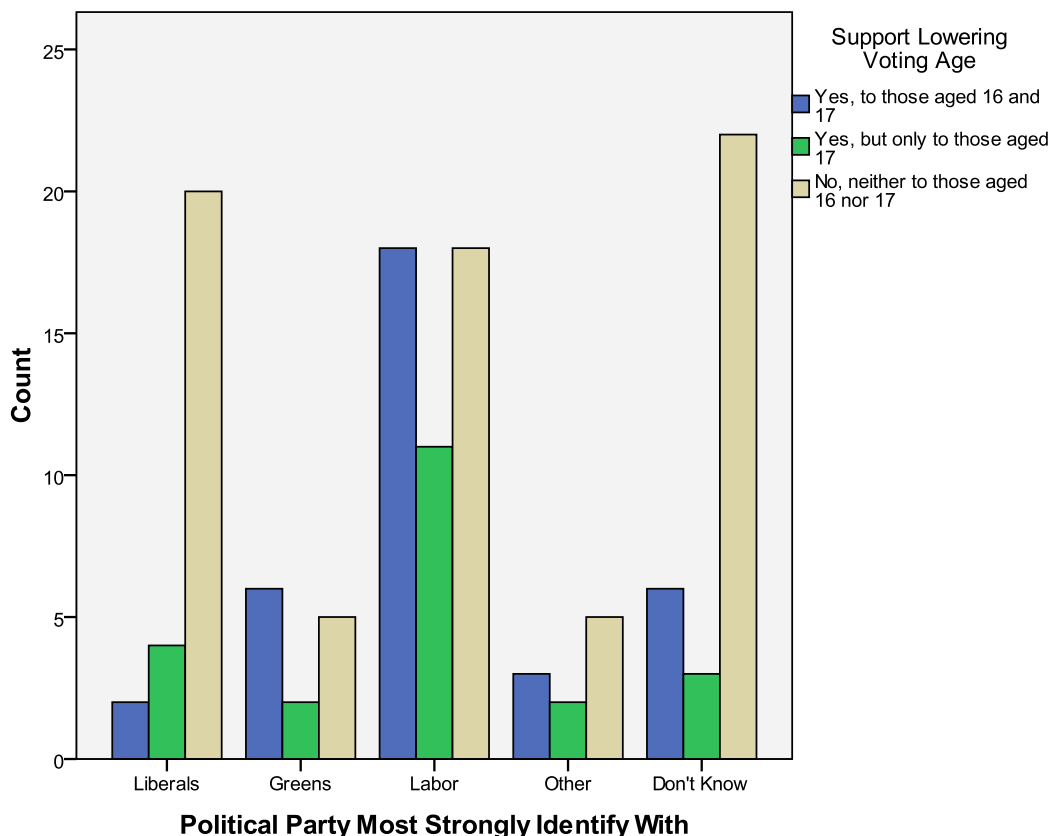
lowering the voting age – 49%. Only 8.6% of respondents with a low level of interest supported the option of lowering the voting age to 17, more than half the percentage of those with either high or medium levels of interest in politics.

3.4 Political Party Identification

Variations in opinions on lowering the voting age were correlated to alignment with political parties. Young Australians surveyed identified most strongly with either the two major parties (ALP and Liberal Party), or indicated a noncommittal attitude to the political parties listed. Across these three groupings, young people’s attitudes to lowering the voting age varied.

The overwhelming majority of respondents who identified with the Liberal Party, or who did not identify with any party, opposed lowering the voting age – 76.9% and 71% respectively. Combined, these respondents’ views constituted 44.9% of respondents; while not a majority, they did dominate the views of those who aligned themselves with the ALP (37%).

Supporters of the ALP were more divided on the question and more amenable to the option of lowering the voting age to 17. An even proportion supported lowering the voting age to 16 and opposed lowering the voting age at all - 38.3%. However, when the views of those who supported lowering the voting age to 17 are included (23.4%), the majority were in support of lowering the voting age to either to 16 or 17. Similarly, the majority of those aligned with the Greens were in support of lowering the voting age – 61.5% of respondents for this party.



3.5 Compulsory or voluntary

Insights into attitudes towards lowering the voting age can be drawn from respondents' support for compulsory or voluntary voting more generally. The majority of those in opposition to lowering the voting age to either 16 or 17 supported voluntary enrolment and voting.

50% of those who supported lowering the voting age to 16 also supported voluntary enrolment and voting. However, the remaining 50% was almost evenly divided between those who supported an entirely compulsory system and those who supported voluntary enrolment but not compulsory voting.

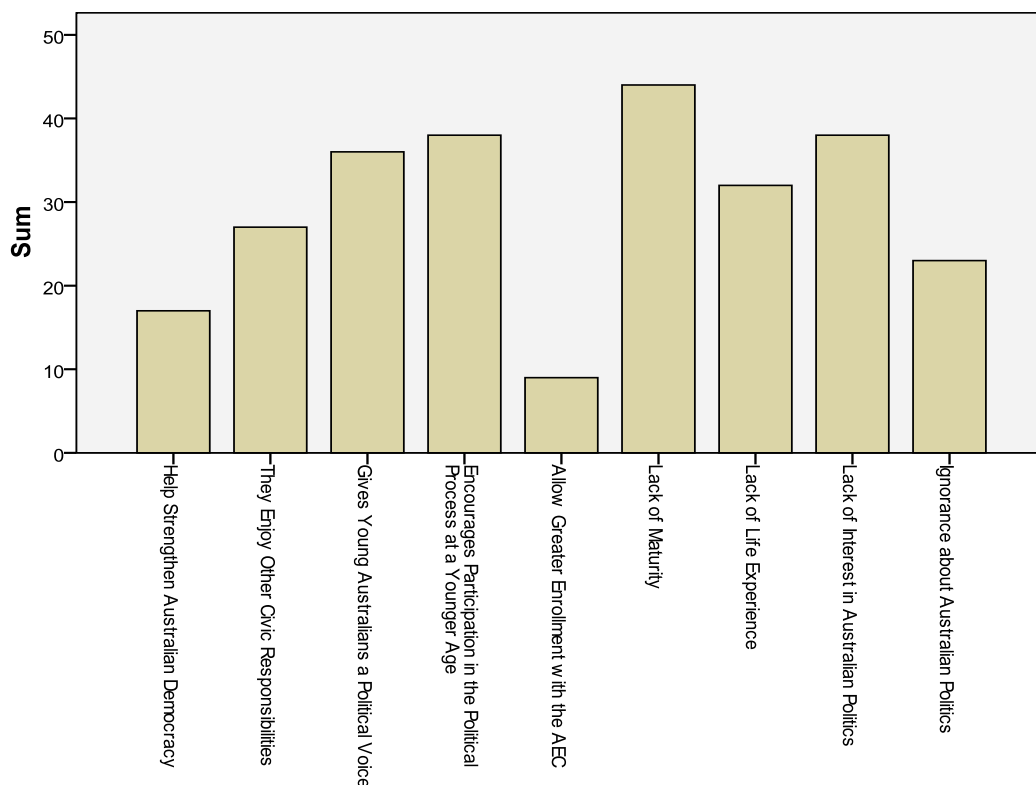
The single largest group of supporters for lowering the voting age to 17 supported voluntary enrolment but not compulsory voting - 47.6%.

3.6 Reasons for or against

Participants were invited to select from nine options to explain their attitudes towards lowering the voting age. In the majority of responses, multiple reasons were provided. Many respondents indicated considerations for and against, regardless of their position on question.

A lack of maturity was most consistently noted as a reason to oppose lowering the voting age – 34.1% of responses emphasised this consideration. Of secondary importance (evident in 29.5% of responses) was a perceived lack of interest amongst 16 and 17 year olds in Australian politics. Interestingly, the majority of participants' own responses on the question of personal interest in politics indicated a medium to very high level of interest.

Support for lowering the voting age was fairly evenly shared between considerations regarding giving young Australians a political voice and encouraging participation in the political process at a younger age. Despite this, only 7% of responses indicated a view that lowering the voting age might facilitate greater enrolment with the Australian Electoral Commission.



In addition, 53.7% of those who opposed lowering the voting age thought that age should determine the right to vote. In contrast, the majority of those who supported lowering the voting age, to either 16 or 17, thought age should not be determinative – 65.7% and 52.2% respectively. Those respondents who considered the option of lowering the voting age to 17 included the highest proportion of participants whose views were undecided – 30.4% responded that they did not know whether age should be determinative.

3.7 Summary

Several conclusions can be advanced about the attitude of young Australians from the survey data collected. Overall, the majority of young Australians who responded to the survey did not support lowering the voting age.

Interestingly, the lack of support for lowering the voting age to either 16 or 17 was strongest amongst those who themselves had recently attained the right to vote (ie, in the 18-20 year old age bracket). Support for lowering the voting age rose marginally for those young people aged 21 years and older. 16 and 17 year olds were divided on the question.

Support for lowering the voting age to either 16 or 17 did not vary significantly according to the gender of those surveyed. Support for lowering the voting age to 16, as opposed to 17, was consistently higher between both genders.

Self-identification with a political party and views on compulsory or voluntary voting contributed to attitudes towards lowering the voting age. The overwhelming majority of respondents who identified with the Liberal Party, or who did not identify with any party, opposed lowering the voting age. Supporters of the ALP were less uniform in their responses.

Generally, those who supported a voluntary voting system were less likely to support lowering the voting age. In addition, approximately half of respondents who supported lowering the voting age were opposed to compulsory voting for those in the expanded age bracket.

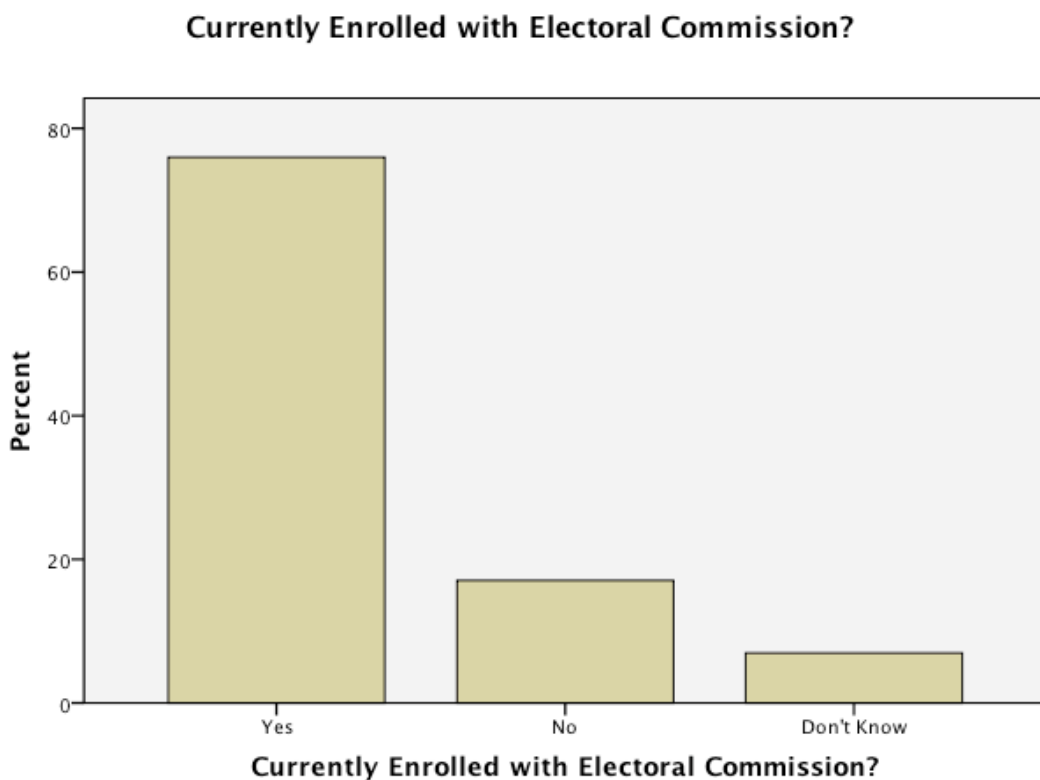
Respondents considered various and multiple factors in the formation of their attitudes towards lowering the voting age. A lack of maturity was most consistently noted as a reason to oppose lowering the voting age. Support for lowering the voting age was fairly evenly shared between considerations regarding giving young Australians a political voice and encouraging participation in the political process at a younger age. Broader views on whether age should determine the right to vote were also indicative of attitudes on this issue.

4.0 Lowering the Provisional Enrolment Age

This section explores whether those young Australians surveyed supported lowering the provisional enrolment age. It begins by broadly surveying the respondents' current enrolment status with the AEC before examining their attitudes towards the current AEC enrolment arrangements.

4.1 Enrolment with the AEC

A total of 76 – out of the 129 – respondents surveyed were enrolled with the AEC – 76%. Twenty-two were not enrolled while nine did not know their enrolment status – 22.5% and 18.6% of total respondents respectively. The high number of young Australians enrolled with the AEC in this study is unsurprising given that 80.7% of respondents were over the voting threshold age of 18. The 18.6% of respondents who were unaware of their enrolment status is significant. The respondents generally placed a high level on importance on the right to vote; however, this did not translate to awareness of enrolment status: a precondition to exercising the right to suffrage.

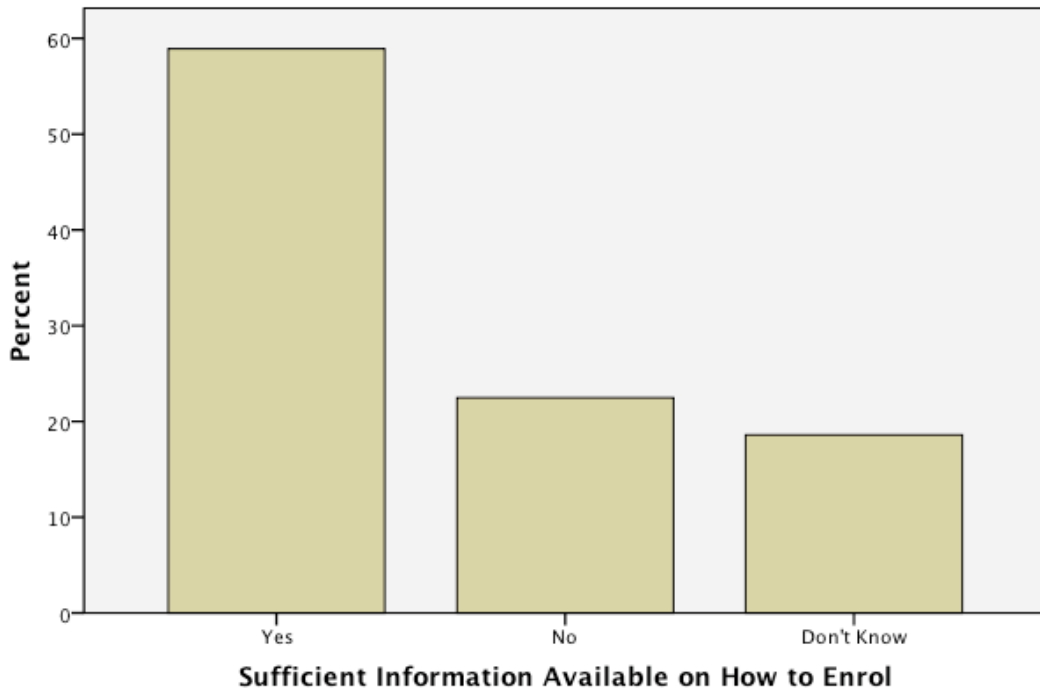


4.2 Information on enrolling

Of importance to assessing whether the provisional enrolment age should be lowered is the question of whether there is sufficient information on how to enrol with the AEC. 58.9% of respondents to this question were supportive of the current amount of information readily available on how to enrol with the AEC. Of the remaining 41.1%, 22.5% believed that there was insufficient information available while 18.6% were unsure of their position. These findings are fairly consistent with the high AEC enrolment amongst respondents.

Of surprise was the relatively high number of enrolled respondents who believed that there was insufficient information on how to enrol with the AEC – 22.4% of those currently enrolled. Also of interest was the positive correlation between those unsure of their enrolment status and those who held that there was insufficient information available on how to enrol – 88.9% of those unsure of their enrolment status.

Sufficient Information Available on How to Enrol



4.3 Support for lowering the provisional enrolment age

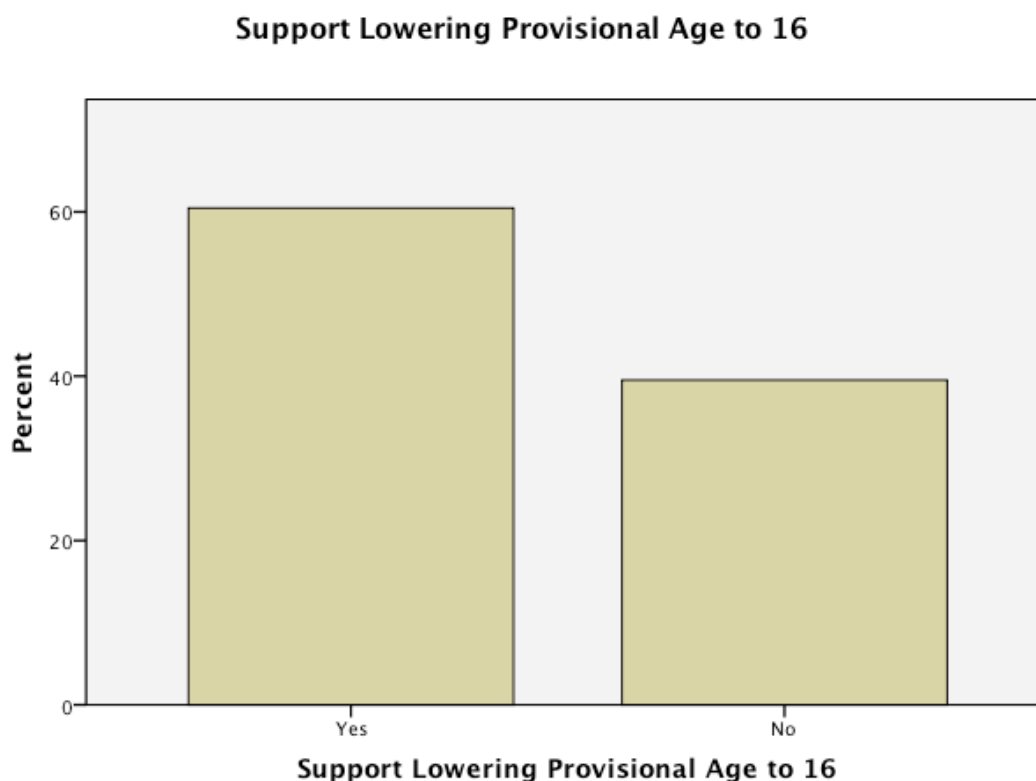
Over half of all respondents supported lowering the provisional enrolment age to 16 – 60.5%. The remaining 39.5% were opposed to lowering the provisional enrolment age. This does not support the previous findings regarding lowering the enrolment age, where 54.3% of respondents were against such a proposal.

Under the current system, the AEC automatically sends out an enrolment application via mail to an Australian citizen once they reach the provisional enrolment age of 17.⁶ Given the high number of respondents (54.3%) against lowering the voting age, support for lowering the provisional enrolment age may be seen by respondents as a mechanism for greater inclusion into Australia's democratic process while still maintaining current voting arrangements.

According to the data collected on a hypothetical lowering of the voting age to 16, 49.2% supported voluntary, as opposed to compulsory, enrolment and voting. Voluntary enrolment with the AEC was generally the most supported position amongst the respondents if the voting age was lowered. Given the high support for lowering the provisional enrolment age and for voluntary enrolment

⁶ Please see Australian Government's 2009 Electoral Green Paper: *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*, Chapter 7 – Enrolment and Participation. Available at http://www.dpmc.gov.au/consultation/elect_reform/index.cfm

with the AEC, if the provisional enrolment age was lowered to 16 then enrolment ought to be voluntary up until the age of 18.



4.4 Summary

A high number of respondents were enrolled with the AEC. This was consonant with the large percentage of those surveyed also being over 18 years of age. However, a significant percentage of respondents were unaware of their enrolment status. This was reflected in the data concerning information provided by the AEC on how to enrol. Just under half of all respondents believed information about enrolling with the AEC was scarce or they did not know enough about the context to answer the question. The finding is significant for the AEC, given the organisation's goal of having 95% of those eligible to vote on the electoral roll.⁷ Without sufficient information on enrolment, lowering the provisional enrolment age to 16 would have little impact on the enrolment figures of young Australians.

Support for lowering the provisional enrolment age to 16 was high amongst the respondents, who were in favour of voluntary, as opposed to compulsory, enrolment if the provisional enrolment age was lowered.

⁷ The AEC enrolment target is to have 95% of people who are eligible to vote on the electoral roll. Please see Australian Government's 2009 Electoral Green Paper: *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*, Chapter 7 – Enrolment and Participation. Available at http://www.dpmc.gov.au/consultation/elect_reform/index.cfm

5.0 Conclusions

5.1 Lowering the voting and/or provisional enrolment age

Young Australians tended to be unsupportive of lowering the voting age to 16 or 17. While generally having a moderate interest in Australian politics and placing high importance on the right to vote, the young Australians surveyed did not support extending the right to suffrage to 16 and/or 17 year olds. The majority appeared to be content with the AEC's current voting arrangements.

However, the young Australians surveyed were generally enrolled with the AEC, thought that sufficient information was available, and significantly supported lowering the provisional enrolment age to 16. This may be, in part, due to the reluctance to extend the right to vote to younger, less mature voters but an acknowledgement that younger Australians should be exposed in to the political process at a younger age than is currently the case.

There is a multiplicity of factors underlying these two broad generalisations, which may explain this attitude toward Australian suffrage.

- As many young Australians did not identify with any political party as those who identified with the two major parties. While lack of party support does not necessarily represent disengagement in the political process, including younger Australians through the lowering of provisional enrolment may expose them to the political system at a younger age and encourage political awareness and engagement.
- Young Australians place a very high level of importance on the right to vote and the data revealed positive indications about their general interest level in Australian politics.
- There were a variety of reasons underpinning young Australians' support or rejection of lowering the voting age to 16. This in itself is indicative of the diversity in young Australians' attitudes toward this question, with no one reason for or against lowering the voting age significantly standing out in the data.
- The data regarding the AEC was generally supportive of the organisation's role in disseminating information on enrolment, suggesting that there is sufficient information readily available to those seeking to enrol.
- The young Australians surveyed seemed to understand the importance of the AEC within the wider context of Australia's political system and therefore considered it necessary to grant provisional enrolment to younger Australians.
- While a small majority of young Australians are opposed to lowering the voting age, there is no overwhelming evidence to suggest a coherent and singular response to this issue.

5.2 Overarching conclusions

The Federal Government has recognised the need to involve young Australians within the political and public arena, by including the question of whether the voting age and/or provisional enrolment age should be lowered in the 2009 Green Paper on Electoral Reform. This is a promising start.

However, the young Australians surveyed, while having no clear position, were generally dismissive of lowering the voting age. On the other hand, there was data that suggested that more inclusive democratic process was desired amongst young Australians, with support for lowering the provisional enrolment age.

The Federal Government should not see granting enrolment to 16 year olds as the panacea to political engagement or inclusion. There are a variety of positions amongst the survey's respondents, and simply lowering the provisional enrolment age could not address these attitudes toward Australian suffrage. Instead, it may be considered as a step in the process towards greater political awareness, and the realisation of an inclusive and engaging political culture within Australia, especially amongst its younger demographic.

A functioning democracy implies more than just the right to suffrage. Ultimately, the Federal Government needs to explore possibilities and alternatives aimed at promoting greater inclusion in the Australian political system outside of electoral reform. Yet, by lowering the provisional enrolment age, it would be taking a vital step in redefining the lines of political inclusion and frame Australian democracy within a younger context into the 21st century.

6.0 Appendix

6.1 Background to Left Right Think-Tank's submission

In September 2009, the Rudd government released an electoral reform green paper entitled *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*. The green paper broadly outlined Australia's current electoral system, its flaws, and the possibilities for alternative electoral arrangements. It asked the question: "What does democracy mean to Australians?" and invited Australians to respond to this question by submitting recommendations or comments to the Australian federal government.

The purpose of this survey is to respond, from the perspective of young Australians, to this broad question. It seeks to collect data that can be collated into a report on young Australian's perceptions of the current electoral system and their attitudes toward democracy. Once complete, this report will then be submitted to the Australian federal government along with young Australians' recommendations for Australian democracy in the 21st century.

In doing so, Left Right aims to provide a platform, from which young Australians can air their views on Australia's current electoral system and democracy. Furthermore, Left Right seeks to supply the Rudd government with a report representative of the views, values, and ideas of young Australians to inform the Australian government's decisions concerning electoral reform.

Young Australians are the future torchbearers of Australian democracy: this is no platitude. Therefore, the attitudes and values of young Australians towards electoral reform and democracy ought to be taken seriously if they are to have a credible stake in Australia's future.

6.2 Survey – Attitudes towards lowering the voting age

Survey Instructions and Background

Please read carefully before commencing the survey

Instructions:

- Provide an accurate response to each question;
- Tick/circle the response you most strongly identify with, unless instructed otherwise;
- If you are unsure of what the question is asking, please seek clarification from the survey provider;
- Once finished, please return the completed survey to the survey provider.

Background:

- This survey is designed to gauge young Australians' attitudes towards the question of whether the voting age or provisional electoral enrollment age should be lowered in Australia;
- The data collected from this survey will be used in a submission to the federal government's 2009 Electoral Reform Green Paper. Please visit www.aec.gov.au for further information;
- If you do not wish for your responses to be included in the submission, please notify the survey provider;

If you have any additional comments, concerns or questions, please speak with the survey provider or contact Left Right Think-Tank via info@leftright.org.au

1. Age:

- 16-17
- 18-20
- 21+

2. Gender:

- Female
- Male
- Other

3. Occupation:

- Student
- Student and full-time work
- Student and part-time work
- Full-time work
- Part-time work
- Other (please specify)

4. Please identify your level of interest in Australian politics?

- Very high
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very Low

5. Which Australian political party do you most strongly identify with?

- Liberals

- Greens
- Labor
- Nationals
- Family First
- Other
- Don't know

6. The Australian Government is considering lowering the voting age to those aged 16 and/or 17.⁸ Do you support lowering the voting age in Australia?

- Yes, to those aged 16 and 17
- Yes, but only to those aged 17
- No, neither those aged 16 nor 17

7. Please specify your reason/s for supporting or opposing granting the right to vote to those aged 16 and/or 17 in Australia.

For

- It would help strengthen Australian democracy
- They enjoy other civic responsibilities at a younger age and should therefore be entitled to vote
- It would give young Australians a political voice
- It would encourage them to participate in the political process at a younger age
- It would allow for greater enrollment with the Australian Electoral Commission

Against

- They lack the necessary maturity required to engage with Australian politics
- They don't have enough life experience
- They lack interest in Australian politics and are therefore unable to cast an informed vote
- They are ignorant about Australian politics

8. What level of importance do you place upon the right to vote in Australia?

- Very high
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very low
- Irrelevant

9. The Australian Government is considering lowering the provisional enrollment age from 17 to 16.⁹ Do you support lowering the provisional enrollment age to 16?¹⁰

- Yes, support lowering the provisional enrollment age to 16
- No, oppose lowering the provisional enrollment age to 16

⁸ Please see Australian Government's 2009 Electoral Green Paper: *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*, p. 40 http://www.dpmc.gov.au/consultation/elect_reform/index.cfm

⁹ Please see Australian Government's 2009 Electoral Green Paper: *Strengthening Australia's Democracy*, p. 104 http://www.dpmc.gov.au/consultation/elect_reform/index.cfm

¹⁰ Provisional enrolment age is the legal age at which you are able to enrol with the Australian Electoral Commission to vote in Australian elections. For further information, please visit www.aec.gov.au

- 10. If the voting age were lowered should enrollment and voting for those aged 16 and/or 17 be compulsory or voluntary? Or should enrollment be voluntary but voting compulsory?**
- Enrollment and voting should be compulsory
 - Enrollment and voting should be voluntary
 - Enrollment should be voluntary but voting should be compulsory
- 11. Are you currently enrolled with the Australian Electoral Commission to vote in Australian elections?**
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
- 12. Do you think that there is sufficient information readily available on how to enroll with the Australian Electoral Commission?**
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
- 13. Do you believe that lowering the voting age to 16 would facilitate more effective methods for registration with the Australian Electoral Commission?**
- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
- 14. Should a person's age determine their right to political representation?**
- Yes, should determine right
 - No, shouldn't determine right
 - Don't know
- 15. Internationally, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Somalia have lowered the voting age to 16. Is it important for Australia to consider international precedents when contemplating lowering the voting age for Australians?**
- Very important
 - Important
 - Moderately important
 - Unimportant
 - Very unimportant