



SUPPORT FOR EXPANDING THE VOTING AGE IN THE ACT JANUARY 2022

**To: Standing Committee on Justice
and Community Safety, ACT Legislative
Assembly**

**Submission: Inquiry into Electoral
Amendment Bill 2021**

Introduction

Northside Community Service (Northside) supports the ACT Government's current consideration of expanding voting rights for young people in the ACT to include people 16 years of age and over. Northside is a not-for-profit, community-based organisation. We've been supporting our community in North Canberra – and beyond – since 1976. We're a progressive and modern community organisation that embraces diversity, social justice and advocacy for those in our community whose voices are often unheard.

Northside works closely with children and young people across the ACT through our early education services, the Y.Engage Program, the Safe and Connected Youth Program, Gunners Place Youth and Community Space, the CHANGE Program, and the Community Development Program. Northside's position is evidence-based and informed by an expertise and experience derived from working with children young people across our services - along with consultation with 16-18 year olds.

Support for expanding the voting age in the ACT

The proposal to expand voting rights for young people in the ACT aligns with Northside's acknowledgement that youth empowerment and participation are vital

to the development of young people, and critical to the development of civically-engaged, connected and cohesive communities. Our engagement with young people is evidence that those aged 16 years and over do have the capacity and political maturity to make decisions about their own future, contribute to decision-making about the future direction of their jurisdiction and hold the State accountable for decision-making.

Young people are currently excluded from the democratic process despite assuming the rights of a legal personality in many other capacities (criminal responsibility, property, employment, taxation etc.). Participation is a means of democratic and civil engagement through which young people can negotiate and advocate for the realisation of their rights. In line with Article 12 of the Convention of the Rights of a Child, this bill gives due weight to the voices of young people, empowering them to vote on issues that directly affect them during their youth, and will affect them into the future (Picollo 2018).

Evidence indicates that the motivation to participate and quality of participation of people younger than 18 is similar to that of older voters, and that with the proper political education, young people can reach the political maturity to make informed decisions about their future (Wagner et al. 2012; Zeglovits & Aichholzer 2014; Peto 2018). Northside believes that expanding the voting age will be instrumental in acknowledging that children and young people are active citizens in our communities, and could shape the culture of future active participation and engagement among young people.

Further considerations

Northside is aware that the introduction of compulsory voting for young people at risk of homelessness, those disengaged from family and school, or experiencing other challenges in their life, could add to the existing stressors that young people experiencing vulnerability and/or face on a daily basis. In order to properly represent the vulnerable cohort of young people that Northside frequently engage with, we recommend consideration of the following points along with any changes:

- Institutional support should be made available to assist young people to navigate the process of enrolment and voting, especially to those who lack kinship ties or other support.
- Actions must be taken to ensure the inclusion of young people whose eligibility or ability to enrol to vote are hindered by disability, learning difficulties, language barriers, lacking a fixed address and/or suitable identification documents, and other such systemic barriers.

- Young voters should have access to impartial political education, ensuring informed engagement in the political process.
- Young people are provided meaningful and appropriate opportunities to express their own views on this amendment.
- It must be widely and accessibly communicated that penalties for failure to vote shall not be enforced to those who do not vote.

Summary

We call on the ACT Government to expand voting rights in the ACT to include people 16 years of age and over. Such a move would recognise the fundamental rights of young people as active citizens in Australian society, and empower them to participate in decision making processes on issues that directly affect them.

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