Australian Historical Association Submission

Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement, and Participation in Australia

24 May 2024

To the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,

We write on behalf of the **Australian Historical Association** (AHA), the peak national organisation of historians working in all fields of history. We represent more than 1,000 professional historians working, researching and teaching in and on Australia.

Many of our members are leading scholars of the history of democracy and they have contributed to public policy and debate about civics education over many decades. Leading historians such as Professor Stuart Macintyre, a former AHA President, and Dr John Hirst chaired federal government committees enquiring into civics education in the 1990s.

We welcome this opportunity to renew the national debate on civics education, engagement and participation in Australia in a digital environment that had barely begun to take shape when they did their work. We recognise that democracy is under intense pressure around the world. Given that broader context, the AHA strongly supports the aims of this parliamentary inquiry. We urge that the recommendations of the inquiry are formulated with these broader contextual factors about the causes of democratic fragility and decline front of mind.

After a brief introduction in which we set out our understanding of the broad contours of citizenship education in Australia today, we take up each of the terms of reference below, and conclude by offering eight tangible recommendations for your consideration.

Professor Frank Bongiorno AM
Professor Michelle Arrow
Associate Professor Carolyn Holbrook

On behalf of the Executive Committee of the Australian Historical Association

Introduction

For almost a century and a half, since authors such as Catherine Helen Spence and Walter Murdoch produced early civics texts for Australian classrooms, the story of civics education in Australian schools has been one in which bursts of enthusiasm, creativity and reform were followed by decline, disengagement and quiescence. The cycle then recommences, following the same pattern. In the age of online disinformation and justified fear of democratic decay and collapse, we can no longer afford this stop-start approach.

At the school level, Australian civics education takes place in the context of a national curriculum with variations in state delivery. Civics education begins at primary school. The NSW History Syllabus includes units on 'The Australian colonies' and 'Australia as a Nation' for Stage 3 (Years 5 and 6) students. The latter in particular is intended to help students understand 'the factors that led to Federation and experiences of democracy and citizenship over time'. The Victorian Curriculum recommends that students should be able to 'explain how decisions can be made democratically' and 'identify features of government and law' by the end of Level 4.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) recommends the following sequence of achievement for high school students in Years 7 to 10:

- Year 7: students should be able to 'explain features of Australia's Constitution', 'explain how Australia's legal system is based on the principle of justice, and 'identify the importance of shared values in promoting a cohesive society'
- Year 8: students should be able to 'explain features of Australia's democracy that enable active participation', 'recognise different types of law in Australia', and 'explain how laws are made'
- Year 9: students should be able to 'evaluate features of Australia's political system', 'explain the key principles of Australia's system of justice' and 'analyse the role of Australia's court system'
- Year 10: students should be able to evaluate the key features and values of systems of government', 'analyse the Australian Government's global roles and responsibilities', and 'analyse the role of the High Court'.

Classroom civics education is supported nationally by the services of a range of institutions. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) includes on its website a small range of 'free education resources' for students and teachers, including an interactive exercise on 'The development of Australia's Self-Governance and Democracy' for Years 9 and 10 students. The AEC also supports civics education through its National Electoral Education Centre, located at Old Parliament House in Canberra.

The Museum of Australian Democracy (also housed at Old Parliament House) similarly provides services such as 'Digital Excursions' and Resources for teachers and students on its website. School excursions to Canberra for targeted and institutional civics education have been supported through the Parliamentary and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program. The rebate level was increased significantly in 2023 and maintained at that level in 2024. We

welcome this investment. In 2023, 88,712 students from 1,538 schools visited Canberra's main cultural and civics education institutions, according to a ministerial media release last month.

These federal programs are supported by a range of smaller state-based or local institutions with enduring connections to local and state education networks. Melbourne's Immigration Museum offers a range of curriculum-aligned exhibitions and courses as well as online experiences to help students understand how and why migrants 'made Victoria their new home'. Other influential examples of museums and local institutions with effective local impacts on civics teaching include Ballarat's Sovereign Hill Museum (which provides for learning opportunities as well as excursions and camps), Sydney's Hyde Park Barracks (with its curriculum-linked programs and resources packages for teachers) and Tasmania's Port Arthur Historic Site (which facilitates in situ educational experiences as well as carefully curated pre-visit lesson plans and more). These institutions matter in the lives of schools and their students, although they invariably cater to particular local or state communities and are not designed to meet the need for national civics education.

For adults, there are targeted initiatives to support and nurture civic capacity and engagement. In advance of federal elections, the ABC's online 'Vote Compass' platform has become a popular tool helping individual voters make decisions that are informed by a model of their personal preferences and not by dominant media narratives. During the 2022 federal election, the AEC was active on social media correcting misconceptions and countering disinformation. The problem that many Australians have a poor understanding of their political system was also much discussed in the lead up to the 2023 Voice referendum. The mandatory Yes/No booklets were accompanied by an explanatory referendum publication produced by the AEC to improve public understanding. Clearly, though, more needs to be done to reinforce the health of Australian democracy and cultivate a more active type of democratic citizenship among the wider community.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

Formalised civics education

1. 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

It is well recognised that a combination of factors, including rising wealth and income inequality, the housing crisis, the climate crisis, digital technologies, hostile foreign actors and anti-democratic political leaders, poses a substantial threat to democratic systems globally. Another well-documented phenomenon globally is the spiralling disillusion that young people feel with democracy and a wider erosion of trust that was only temporarily reversed during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (See, for instance, the Edelman Trust Barometer 2021-24).

The AHA believes it is urgent that our young people are instilled with sufficient knowledge to equip them to engage with Australian civic practices and institutions, including those specifically associated with our particular form of government: federal parliamentary democracy. But civics education needs to include an appreciation and understanding of

democracy in the wider sense: as a system built on literally millions of actions by ordinary citizens in their daily lives. It depends, for instance, on the health of civil society organisations, including school parents' and citizens associations, trade unions, interest and advocacy groups, NGOs, and political parties. It relies on the capacity of citizens to join with one another in free association, on the right to express their own views, and on their capacity to deliberate as equals to influence the direction of their society in both small and large ways. This is not only about parliament and parties, elections and voting, as important as an understanding of each of these is. It demands a broader and deeper appreciation of the contingency of democratic systems – that democracy has been made through popular struggle, resistance and sacrifice and that, if it is not valued and protected, it can also be unmade. It is a vision of civics education which recognises that democracy rests on a continuing precious, delicate, hard-won, quasi-sacred compact.

Within the Australian Curriculum, history education is compulsory only until Year 10, and Civics and Citizenship education mandatory only up to Year 8. Moreover, civics teaching often suffers from embeddedness in expansive units such as integrated studies within a crowded curriculum, and is often covered in a short, superficial fashion. Although young Australians demonstrate their capacity for democratic participation in areas such as climate action, research indicates some problems and gaps. Since 2004, the efficacy of Australia's civics education has been assessed triennially (though COVID has recently disrupted that regularity) by the National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC). The 2019 report demonstrated that just 53 per cent of Year 6 students had a 'proficient' knowledge of the 'broad features of Australian democracy', while 38 per cent of Year 10 students met the proficiency standard for 'knowledge of core aspects of Australian democracy'. The five previous reports had generated similar findings. Put simply, we are not producing students with a good understanding of our democratic system. Teachers who do not feel equipped to deliver this type of content ought to have fair and meaningful opportunities for professional development and upskilling, particularly in the form of microcredential courses on the history of Australian civics, politics and citizenship.

Civic apathy does not simply reflect an educational deficit, but rather weak attachments to our democratic history, conventions and institutions. Australians have not tended to derive our communal sentiment from our nation-making moment—Federation in 1901 conspicuously failed to ignite public sentiment—or our civic arrangements more generally. Rather, it was Australians' engagement in the Gallipoli campaign on 25 April 1915 that spawned an enduring national mythology.

We argue that a redoubled effort at education for civics and citizenship needs to take a more comprehensive, and pedagogically and psychologically sophisticated, approach. Imparting civic *knowledge* to our children is necessary but insufficient. People protect what they *value*: children will only attach to and engage with Australia's democratic system if they can see its benefits. They must feel recognised and included within the Australian democratic project, and not be forever treated as future citizens.

Leaving aside complex issues including an overcrowded curriculum, the dearth of qualified teachers and the broader issues of inequality that lead young people to feel disillusioned and disconnected from civic society, we see an opportunity for improvement in civic knowledge

by reframing civics education as *democracy education*. Australian history has more than enough material with which to engage young people in the great questions about how people can live together harmoniously and justly.

The Australian colonies pioneered government-provided ballot papers and provided separate voting booths, which allowed people to cast their votes in secret. Women were early to get the vote by global standards, though when the Commonwealth enfranchised women in 1902 it disenfranchised Indigenous women and men. In 1911 Saturday voting was introduced, making it easier for working people to cast their ballots. Preferential voting was introduced in 1918 and compulsory voting in 1924. Along with our non-partisan, fairly conducted elections campaigns, compulsory voting helps Australia ameliorate the polarisation and voter suppression that are eroding American democracy.

The pervasiveness of Anzac in recent decades owes something to the effectiveness of rituals such as the dawn service and last post ceremony, in addition to the more than $1 billion in government funding. Imagine if the Commonwealth showed the same commitment to fanning a compelling story of Australian democracy as it has to commemorating Anzac!

Promoting Popular Engagement

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

The period around elections and particularly election day itself present some of the best opportunities to increase Australians' knowledge of and engagement with their democratic system. This can take the form of social and conventional media engagement, but the opportunity for physical engagement at election polling locations offers the most significant opportunity to change attitudes and behaviours.

Similar opportunities for popular engagement as those presented by Anzac commemoration are provided by increasingly popular election day rituals such as the democracy sausage and community cake stall. These moments of public engagement facilitate communal cohesion and provide the opportunity to educate Australians about their democratic systems. The AEC and other appropriate bodies could devise innovative and creative education campaigns and activities based around election days; these can be tailored for specific groups, such as young Australians, for Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and from countries in which democratic mores are not culturally entrenched.

Mechanisms for Civic Knowledge Distribution

3. 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

The deficiencies of public civics education were much discussed in the lead up to the 2023 Voice referendum. Online misinformation campaigns about the outcomes of the Voice to Parliament as well as the voting process itself (for example, encouraging voters to take pens to

the polling booth so that their pencilled-in votes could not be erased and changed) spread far more quickly than the AEC was able to counter. While truth in political advertising laws might be difficult to enforce, they would go some way to responding to community cynicism about politics and civic debate: debate without any foundation in fact is corrosive to democratic institutions. Community fact-checking could be empowered by government to counter misinformation online in a far more timely manner. For example, X has a 'community notes' section where users can point out inaccuracies or omitted contextual information in posts.

Civic information literacy is connected to broader issues of media and digital literacy. Many adults need assistance in understanding how media and social-media algorithms tailor the content they see online based on their preferences and online interactions. This can create opinion bubbles or silos where they are exposed primarily to ideas that align with or reinforce their own, rather than being given opportunities to encounter external, dissenting, or contradictory voices. A robust democracy depends on people's ability to identify a 'trustworthy' source, while retaining their ability to subject the opinions of others to rational appraisal. But without general digital literacy, online media, social media, and tools like AI can easily be weaponised against democracy itself.

The government is currently running a public education campaign about scams and ways to avoid them. These campaigns are similar to the staff training programs run by large organisations on avoiding phishing attacks; these educate employees on how to verify email addresses or read URLs critically. A similar campaign could address the digital literacy deficit. How do you spot a deepfake? How can you tell if an X account with the name 'Anthony Albanese' or 'Peter Dutton' is the official account of that person? What can you do to see outside your algorithmic bubble? While there are mechanisms that could be used to improve the integrity of formal political advertising (e.g. no AI-generated photographs or videos; explicit information on how images have been edited) this will not stop material coming from other sources, including potentially foreign actors seeking to influence domestic politics. Social media companies, moreover, have proved themselves incapable of dealing with the issue themselves. Therefore, the majority of the work will come down to the reader/consumer of content.

There is a dual benefit in addressing lack of digital literacy and civics education as a single project. Using civics education can improve people's broader media and digital literacy; and improving people's broader media and digital literacy can help them engage more effectively in civic life.

Promoting Full Electoral Participation

4. opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation

Australia has a rich democratic history and any program or campaign to promote full electoral participation must be informed by a sound understanding of this past. Australia's culturally and geographically diverse population means that a single-message civics and democracy

education campaign is unlikely to resonate. We must also do better at extending membership of the Australian civic community to the 25 per cent of Australians who were born overseas, and to the 50 per cent whose parents were born overseas. However, a community-based program to develop relevant, appropriate and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, elections, enrolment and voting might have greater success. Such a program might invite communities within each federal electorate to identify democratic milestones or significant democratic sites in their community. The data generated could be displayed (in numerous languages, with hashtags and other search tools) on an interactive online 'democracy map', creating a 'citizen civics' resource that could be used to create and commemorate community history and memory.

Participating in democracy is not just a matter of knowing how to vote or take part, but in feeling some kind of affective or emotional *reason* for doing so. A deeper knowledge of Australia's rich history of democracy might, we suggest, offer a basis for this kind of connection and extend a sense of citizenship beyond voting every few years into a fuller civic participation.

Addressing Barriers to Electoral Participation

5. social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers

Australia's system of compulsory voting secures a strong turn-out at elections, although it is still the case that some people do not vote. Turnout declined at the 2022 election and it now below 90%. This should be cause for alarm, and there should be funded research that aims to gain an insight into the causes of this phenomenon as well as to develop means of boosting voter participation again.

One way of promoting voter turnout would be to run a campaign that explained how Australia's democracy, with its compulsory voting for about a century, has improved the daily lives of ordinary people. This might be achieved in a non-partisan manner: while it has its flaws, a wide range of individuals and groups have been able to advance their goals through Australia's open society and democratic institutions. Few settler Australians, for instance, understand the history of political action by First Nations Peoples, nor their very long history of deliberative decision-making.

Importantly, such a campaign would require government agencies, especially the AEC, to reach the public through the various digital spaces where they spend vast majorities of their time. In the past television advertisements were a useful and effective way of reminding voters of their obligation to vote in upcoming elections, and adroit uses of language, visuals and music were calculated to inspire a sense of agency and empowerment on the part of viewers. The fragmented media landscape of the twenty-first century means that the AEC and other civic nurturers need to reach disparate audiences in different ways if they are to cultivate popular engagement with democracy. This will involve more targeted and effective advertising to those watching free-to-air streaming services, *YouTube*, Spotify and TikTok among others.

Potential Improvements to Electoral Processes

6. potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.

Long-established techniques used for election campaigning might also be used for democracy education and promoting full electoral participation. For example, at election time, political candidates and volunteers routinely hold street stalls and hand out flyers at train and bus stations, and volunteers are often asked about updating their electoral roll information or how to vote correctly. These are powerful moments when people *do* engage and will be open to learning. Polling day (and increasingly, pre-poll) might offer a potential avenue to disseminate information about Australian democracy in an accessible and culturally appropriate manner. Along with how-to-vote cards from candidates, electors might collect a flyer with information about the role of social movements in Australian democracy, or the purpose of compulsory voting, along with a QR code to allow deeper investigation of the issue.

Conclusion

This year – 2024 – marks a century since the introduction of compulsory voting for federal elections. It is unclear, however, whether there has been any investment of public resources in promoting understanding of that initiative. By way of contrast, the preparation for the Centenary of Anzac extended over many years, as did the Bicentenary of 1988 and, in a more low-key way, the Centenary of Federation.

Australians are arguably becoming more conscious of the ways that aspects of their political, electoral and policy history distinguish them from other nations. Medicare and gun laws are now understood as marking Australian difference from the United States, as well as being instances of democracy working for the public good. Australia's fair electoral administration and compulsory voting – and peaceful way it conducts elections in hundreds of communities across the country – are captured in the image and aroma of the Democracy Sausage.

There is also greater awareness of the way creative political actors sought to make the country's democracy work in favour of greater equality: First Nations rights campaigner William Cooper, women's rights campaigner Vida Goldstein, Aboriginal activist and public servant Charles Perkins and equal pay campaigner Zelda D'Aprano take their places beside the more traditionally familiar figures of Henry Parkes, John Curtin, Robert Menzies and Gough Whitlam. Citizenship education should not be uncritical of our system, but we need to invest more resources, energy and creativity into fostering an understanding of what Australian democracy has accomplished, how it can be improved, and what it might yet achieve.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That the Australian Curriculum be revised to treat Civics and Citizenship as a mandatory component of all Humanities and Social Sciences programs up to Year 10, and that this form of learning be renamed *democracy education* to better account for the nature of its content.

Recommendation 2: That secondary teachers in Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) be offered practicable and meaningful opportunities to undertake microcredential courses to enhance their understanding of Australian civics and citizenship for teaching purposes.

Recommendation 3: That the Australian Government set firm improvement targets over the next ten years for the National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship evaluations, and provide incentives for schools to effect improvements in civics teaching.

Recommendation 4: That an innovative and creative education campaign be devised and conducted through the AEC, with the support of all major political parties, to raise awareness of the distinctiveness and effectiveness of Australia's democratic culture and processes. Such a campaign would need to cater differently for specific groups, such as young people, for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people from countries in which democratic mores are not culturally entrenched. The campaign would be best conducted at polling booths during a federal election (including pre-poll), when the entire national community tangibly engages with their democracy, supplemented with targeted information campaigns in online spaces such as free-to-air streaming services, *YouTube*, social media platforms and TikTok.

Recommendation 5: That the Australian Government establish an online media and digital literacy tool that voters and citizens can use or consult to mitigate the risks of misinformation and disinformation, and that such a tool be administered by the AEC or another statutory authority at arms' length from government.

Recommendation 6: That the Joint Committee on Electoral Matters undertake a targeted investigation into the feasibility of truth in political advertising laws to help mitigate the risks of grievous distortions of fact during our democratic processes.

Recommendation 7: That local communities be empowered to develop their own 'citizen civics' histories and resources online (perhaps supported by local government authorities) to develop relevant, appropriate and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, elections, enrolment and voting.

Recommendation 8: That the Australian Government use the mechanism of the National Competitive Grants Program (in its revised form) to sponsor a major research project that will gauge public attitudes toward compulsory voting and develop concrete proposals to mitigate the risk of declining electoral participation.