

16 August 2024

The Honorable Peter Primrose MLC
Chair, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
NSW Parliament

Via email: electoralmatters@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Chair,

I welcome this opportunity, as the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, to provide feedback to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' 'Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence'.

Established under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*, the Advocate for Children and Young People is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People. The Advocate promotes the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0-24 years and their participation in decisions that affect their lives. The Act requires the Advocate to 'give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people' and to 'focus on systemic issues affecting children and young people.' Further information about the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People's (ACYP) work can be found at: www.acyp.nsw.gov.au.

ACYP recognises and supports the work being done across government to include children and young people in the development of policies, programs and services that impact them. Through the work of ACYP, children and young people have had opportunities to discuss matters that are important to them, and throughout some consultations, the issues of government and voting have been raised.

This letter is informed and underpinned by the voices of children and young people across NSW. The evidence outlined in this submission is drawn from several sources including ACYP polling and face-to-face consultations such as:

- Youth Week Polling: ACYP conducts annual Youth Week polling to track sentiment and identify emerging issues impacting children and young people in NSW. In this letter, data has been drawn from the 2022, 2023 and 2024 Youth Week polls.
- As part of the development of the [Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024](#), ACYP conducted polling among children and young people in NSW to identify priority areas.

- [*The Voices of Children and Young People with Disability* report](#): Released in 2020, this report is informed by the voices of children and young people who live with disability that participated in face-to-face consultations with ACYP.

Given the focus of the ACYP's work, and how the topics of voter engagement, participation and confidence relate to children and young people, this submission is focused on the following Terms of Reference:

- c) Reduce barriers to participations, in particular for voters with disabilities and voters from groups with historically lower enrolment and turnout rates, and
- g) Any other related matters.

Children and young people should have an opportunity to contribute to decisions on matters that impact their lives. Regardless of age or whether they can vote. When children and young people have the opportunity to participate in policy design and implementation, then we know the outcomes will benefit them. Every year, ACYP engages with many children and young people across NSW to inform our work.

In 2021, ACYP developed the *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024* (Strategic Plan), in accordance with our Act, to reflect what children and young people have said is important and matters to them. Through consultations that informed the Strategic Plan, children and young people shared that they feel like their views are not taken seriously or considered because they are 'too young' and don't vote.¹ Children and young people want to have their voices heard and have their ideas and views taken seriously.

In ACYP's 2022 annual Youth Week poll (Figure 1), we heard that if given the chance 57% of children and young people aged 10-17 were either 'very' or 'somewhat' interested in voting, particularly those aged 16-17 who expressed interest at a higher rate of 61%.

¹ The NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, <https://www.acyp.nsw.gov.au/strategic-plan-2022-2024>

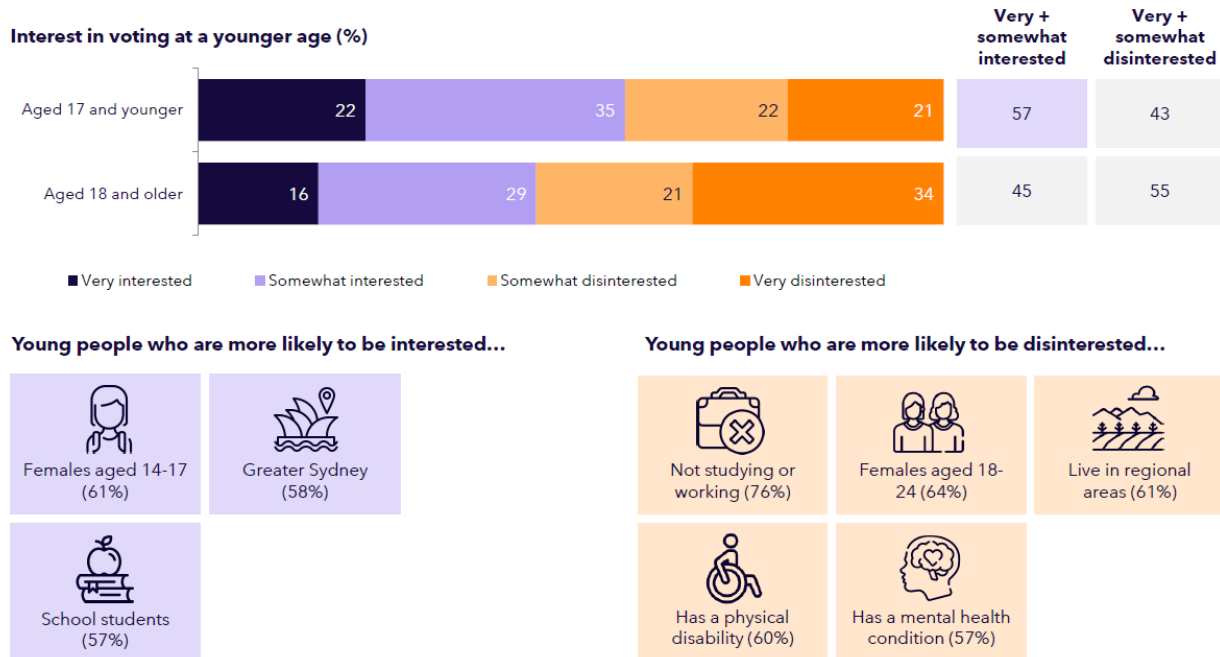


Figure 1. *[if aged under 18] Currently the voting age is 18 years in NSW. If someone your age was allowed to vote, would you be interested?*
[if aged 18 or older] Currently the voting age is 18 years in NSW. In retrospect, would you have been interested in voting at a younger age?
 Source: ACYP Youth Week 2022, Survey Base, all participants (n= 1000)

In ACYP's 2022 Youth Week poll (Figure 2), we also asked children and young people about their confidence in interacting with the political system. While most young people were 'very' or 'somewhat' confident that they understood why it is important to vote (71%) and how to vote (61%), many could benefit from information on how to decide who to vote for, what to do if they are unable to vote on election day and how to contact their local Member of Parliament.

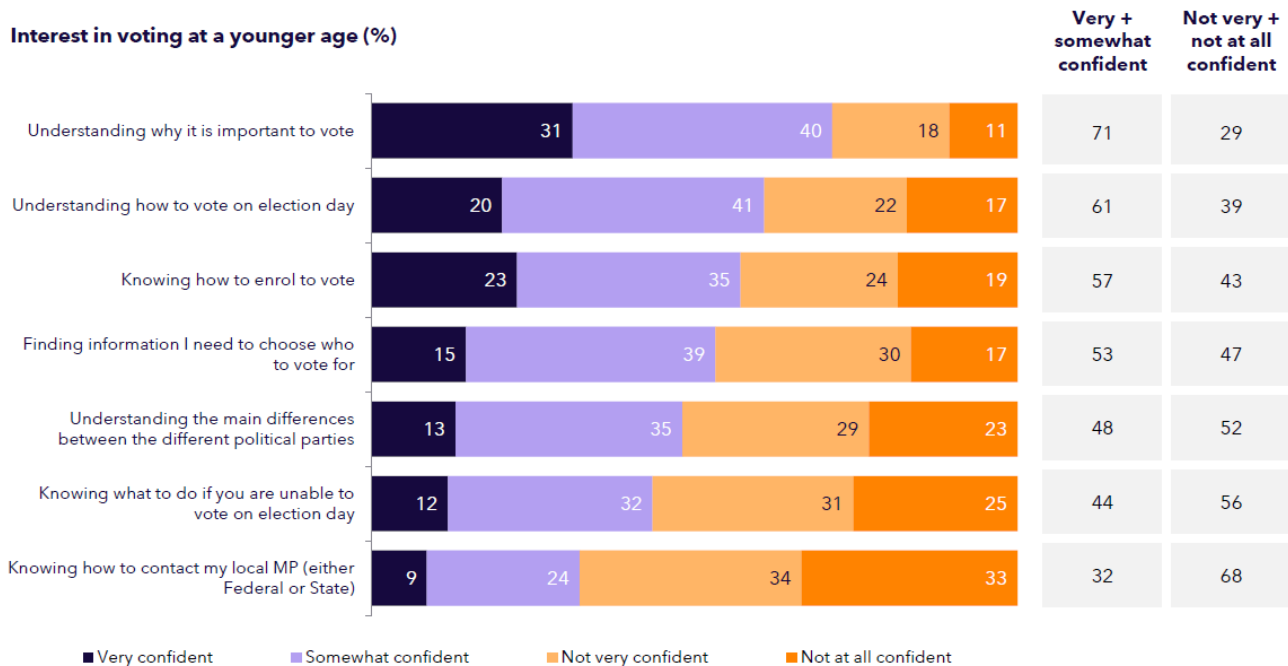


Figure 2. How confident do you feel about the following things?
Source: ACYP Youth Week 2022, Survey Base, all participants (n= 1000)

The results from Figure 2 illustrate that there are some opportunities to improve the knowledge of children and young people in voting engagement and electoral processes.

In ACYP’s 2023 Youth Week poll, when asked for ‘final advice to the NSW Government on how It could improve the lives of children and young people’, the participants said:

- “look at the future of the country, stop treating politics as a battle, work together for the future”;
- “get young people aware in politics”;; and
- [recognise that] “younger generations need to be more informed holistically about politics...”.

In the 2024 Youth Week poll (Figure 3), children and young people were asked questions about the government, including “to what extent do you agree or disagree that the NSW Government listens to people your age and considers their opinions when making decisions?”

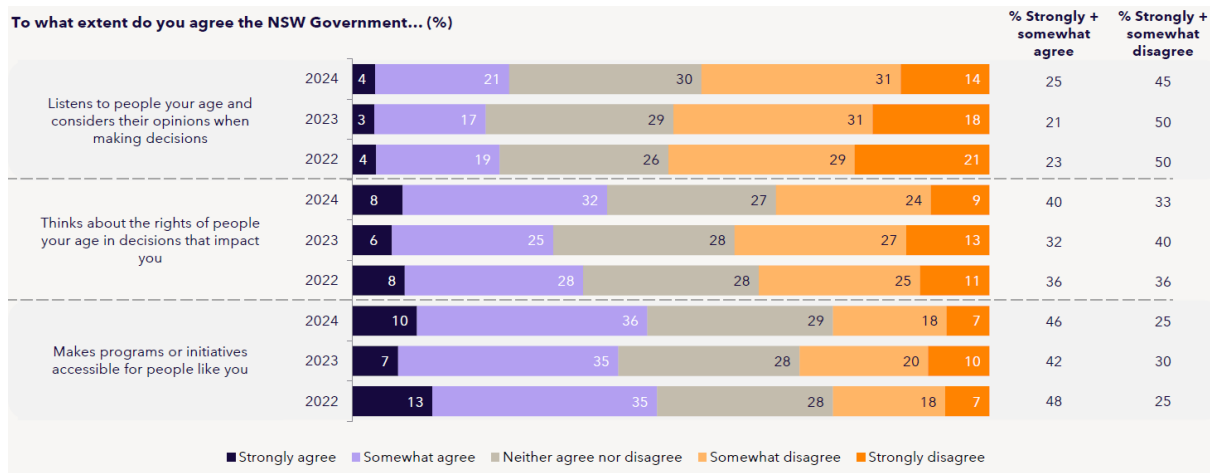


Figure 2.

Q47. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the NSW Government listens to people your age and considers their opinions when making decisions?

Q48. All children and young people have rights as human beings to respect, safety and wellbeing. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the NSW Government thinks about the rights of people your age when it makes decisions that impact you?

Q49. When the NSW Government develops programs or initiatives for children and young people – this could be anything from a mental health support group to a public park or playground – it is important that children and young people are able to access and use them. To what extent do you agree or disagree the NSW Government makes programs or initiatives accessible for people like you?

Source: ACYP Youth Week 2024, Survey Base, all participants (2024 n=1,102; 2023 n=1,007; 2022 n=1,000)

As demonstrated in the above graph, in 2024 45% of children and young people selected ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ disagree when asked about their perception of the government considering their opinions when making decisions. This is slightly better than 2023 and 2022 data, in which 50% of children and young people selected ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ disagree to the same question.

When discussing engagement, participation and confidence, it is important to understand the diversity of children and young people in NSW and ensure we consider the needs of all children and young people when it comes to participation. Children and young people with disability often have unique experiences and challenges. In 2020, ACYP conducted consultations with 372 children and young people with lived experience of disability for the purpose of *The Voices of Children and Young People with Disability* report. During this consultation, children and young people with disability shared what is working well, what is not working and what could change to make NSW a better place. The children and young people who participated in this work courageously shared their experiences, opinions and dreams. Some responses included:

- “we just need a chance like everyone else”;
- “nobody has ever asked us before”, and “we need to have a voice because we have to live through it... you [adults] will die eventually; and
- “we will be the next generation so we should get a say not just you”.

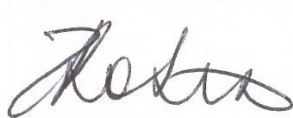
Children and young people with disability expressed that the main barriers to their inclusion are caused by societal stereotypes about their capabilities, misunderstandings, and a general lack of community awareness and education. They expressed feeling helpless, angry and frustrated when they are not given the opportunity to express themselves, or not listened to when they wanted to voice their opinion. ACYP is of the view that children and young people should have the opportunity to directly participate in decision making on matters that impact them.

Recommendations:

- The NSW Government and schools support and distribute the work done by the Australian Electoral Commission that has been specifically designed for children and young people.
- NSW Local Councils and NSW Government include young people on boards and advisory committees to assist in policy design and implementation.
- Always include tailored and specific support for children and young people with disability, so that they are given an equal opportunity to learn about and participate in political processes.

Thank you once more for the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to the inquiry to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence. ACYP would be happy to work with the committee to explore this further, and trust that this information has been of some assistance. Should you wish to discuss these matters, please do not hesitate to contact my office via: acyp@acyp.nsw.gov.au or ph: (02) 9248 0970.

Yours Sincerely,



Zoë Robinson

Advocate for Children and Young People

Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People