Researching youth political participation in Australia
Arguments for an expanded focus

The distinct political lives and lifestyles of young people provide a rich arena for social research. This paper traces the origins of contemporary definitions of political participation, which are often at odds with the real experiences and aspirations of young citizens. Despite a growing body of empirical evidence in this field, researchers are still challenged to represent the unique contribution young people make to political life. This paper suggests that expanding the research focus of the study of youth political participation in Australia would offer scope for generating new knowledge and meaning.

A strong and vibrant democracy relies on the active participation of its citizens. To this end, the attention of many governments of the West, including Australia, has recently turned to the political participation of young people. Consequently, a vibrant field of study has opened up, providing a focal point for social research and academic commentary. This heightened activity has been stimulated by, among other factors, rising public concern about a perceived generational slide toward democratic disengagement. Young Australians are persistently accused of turning away from traditional political institutions, a phenomenon reportedly marked by lower levels of membership and a widespread weakening of social and civic engagement. Comparative evidence related to electoral participation points to a downward trend in voter registration among younger age cohorts. As a result, the notion of a civics or democratic deficit has taken hold as a rhetorical precursor to any critical investigation of the relationship between young people and politics.

In this paper I argue for the need to expand the research paradigm applied to this area of study in order to fully understand the political experiences and aspirations of young citizens. The discussion draws on a breadth of international literature in order to build a definition of contemporary youth political participation. A review of recent Australian research in this field highlights gaps in knowledge and understanding. In response, the paper proposes a research focus that acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of youth political participation in Australia.
Political participation
– towards a definition

Political participation is a contested term. A review of the literature confirms contemporary definitions began to take shape in the USA during the 1960s. The seminal study undertaken by Milbrath and Goel (1977) defined political participation as “those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics” (p.2). This account was bolstered by the work of Verba and Nie (1972), who suggested that the actions of private citizens were directly aimed at “influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (p.2). Together, these studies identified a distinct “separation” of the citizen from the structures and processes of government, whereby political participation primarily took the form of casting an electoral vote. However, Verba and Nie (1972) also argued that participation went beyond merely communicating the needs and desires of citizens to government through the ballot box. They suggested that political participation held more than instrumental value and offered a platform for the learning of the virtues and responsibilities that underpin democracy. These embryonic definitions were principally concerned with representative democracy and presented political participation in hierarchical terms; holding public office being the ultimate form of action.

Figure 1 illustrates the distinct steps of this formative model that pivots between notions of active and inactive forms of participation. Interestingly, the act of voting is viewed as a “spectator” activity, suggesting minimal engagement with the processes and institutions that typify forms of political action. The shift towards a more active participation is characterised by recognisable elements of campaigning, membership, and representation that fall into the “transitional” and “gladiatorial” descriptions.

The work of Inglehart (1977) defined a landmark change in values confirmed by the declining importance accorded to hierarchical authority and a mounting challenge to the dominance of traditional political structures. His influential book The silent revolution documented a growing interest and understanding of political issues across Western democracies, and a desire to participate in decision-making geared toward “elite-challenging” as opposed to “elite-directed” activities (Inglehart 1977, p.3). Also, Inglehart (1997) argued that the ascendancy of the post-industrial society heralded a growing potential for citizen participation in politics. He observed that “the new mode of political participation is far more issue-specific than voting is, and more likely to function at the higher threshold of participation” (p.171).

The perceived expansion of the wider political domain was also evidenced by the emergence of new social movements. Norris (2002) recognised that these channels of citizen involvement emerged as “an alternative mechanism for activists” (p.190). The new movements were seen to be structurally fluid and decentralised, typified by an open membership. They tended to be concerned more with lifestyle issues and achieving social change through forms of direct action and community building, alongside formal decision-making processes. Contemporary social movements are primarily engaged with issues such as globalisation, human rights, debt relief and world trade, and potentially “signal the emergence of a global civic society” (Norris 2002, p.190). These issues, and the campaign activities that support them, hold the attention of young people in particular.

So what evidence exists of a new era of youth political participation? Norris (2002, 2003) observes that a diverse range of activities have been utilised
for political expression over recent decades, particularly within new social movements, where a mixed repertoire of actions is often adopted as part of a strategy for change. This multi-dimensional approach to political participation appears to have been embraced by young people. Vinken (2005) suggests that the classic indicators of citizen participation may have less significance to young people who are more likely to prefer alternative forms of engagement that are both meaningful and practical to them. In his opinion, “sticking to the old parameters leads to serious misperceptions of what is going on in youth’s citizenship” (p.149). This position is supported by Dalton (2006) who states that participation “is not limited to voting, nor is voting necessarily the most effective means of affecting the political process” (p.36). He concludes that democratic participation can take many forms and proposes that “the spread of protest politics not only expands the repertoire of political participation; it also represents a style of action that differs markedly from conventional politics” (Dalton 2006, p.64).

In the Australian context, evidence from a recent study of young activists provides a snapshot of contemporary forms of youth political participation. Figure 2 reflects the range of engagement among a sample group of 75 young people aged between 15 and 24 living in the state of Victoria, and all actively involved in politics (Fyfe 2006). Through an online survey conducted between 2006 and 2007, respondents were asked to record their involvement across nine indicators of activism.

The data collected portrays a sample cohort who is actively involved across the gamut of conventional and non-conventional politics. The versatile nature of the political participation of the young people studied provides up-to-date evidence of a citizenry that goes beyond merely voting. The responses confirmed high levels of membership of political parties, unions, social movements and community organisations among the research cohort. Similar to other studies of the associational life of young Australians in civic and public life, this investigation profiled a generation of “joiners” of institutions (Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007, p.23). In the case of the young political activists studied, they are predominantly aligned with the campaign activities of specific political parties, organisations and groups. The profile of the sample cohort matches that described by Verba and Nie (1972, p.86) as “Complete Activists”, those who combine all modes of political activity with combined allegiance to conventional and non-conventional forms of...
participation. The young people surveyed also demonstrated similar characteristics to those described in a similar UK-based study. Haste (2005) described a young political activist as someone “very likely to become involved in all kinds of community activity, and in voting, joining a party and making their voices heard” (p.3).

Clearly, youth political participation has become an activity that straddles both conventional and non-conventional politics. Young citizens are actively engaging in the political process through a diversity of mobilising platforms and agencies. These include the traditional institutions of political parties, unions and organisations, as well as the plethora of new social movements and community organisations that occupy civil society. Young people draw on a range of repertoires to express themselves politically. Their chosen forms of participation reflect a broader knowledge and skills base that enables new and creative political activities within both civic and public domains. The diversity of their engagement with politics demands a broader understanding of political activism.

**Redefining youth political participation: International perspectives**

In research, use of the term “activist” can be problematic. It has strong connotations with the politics of the left, and has become increasingly associated with violent street protest and acts of vandalism. Through media coverage, young people’s political engagement is often described in pejorative terms that question the validity and legality of their actions. Against this backdrop, Todd Gitlin, a prominent student activist in the USA during the 1960s, professes that:

> An activist refuses to take the world for granted. Faced with pain and evil, the activist is not content to deplore or rage or regret, does not just believe or wish or declare but thinks: I’m not an outsider to the world, and the world – with all its persecutions, endangerment and wonders – is not an outsider to me. History is not (or not only) something that other people do. My action and yours are the heart of the matter (Gitlin 2003, pp.4-5).

Here, Gitlin portrays (young) activists as critical, thoughtful and considerate individuals who clearly see themselves as social actors working towards “good” in the world, their world. Through their participation, Gitlin suggests young activists are making history, and in doing so are transforming the future. Berger, Boudin and Farrow (2005), three young activists, recently wrote that “effective activism is rooted in an understanding of the events of the past, strategies for the present, and a vision for the future” (p.xxxii).

For Kovacheva (2005), young people’s engagement in public life “holds out some great promises” (p.20). There is mounting international evidence that records an emerging new civic culture driven by the social and political interests of young people (for example White, Bruce & Ritchie 2000; Kerr et al. 2002; Roker & Eden 2002; Cunningham & Lavallette 2004; Kovacheva 2005). New forms of organisation and action are being shaped by issues of concern in the everyday lives of a new generation of young activists. Empirical evidence suggests that young people are increasingly looking to social movements and community organisations as platforms for their political interests and subsequent action (Koffel 2003; Norris 2003).

Also, electronic technologies are offering young people an alternative political arena for organisation and additional repertoires for action. Young activists are accessing peer-led online platforms for critical discussion, exploring alternative forms of cultural expression through internet blogging and downloading online resources to support active participation (Coleman & Rowe 2005; Owen 2006). Young people are generating a discourse constructed around new global alliances and extending the boundaries of political expression and participation across the virtual world. For most young people today, the internet is an intrinsic part of their everyday lives and they are at the forefront of its use and evolution as an arena for political mobilisation and action.

Youth political participation continues to push the boundaries of longstanding definitions of social and political action and, by its nature, promises “democratic innovation in society” (Kovacheva 2005, p.28). The emerging paradigm being shaped by the active involvement of young citizens profiles political participation as “not only the action structured through political institutions and non-government organisations but also
involvement in less structured, looser networks and friendship circles” (Kovacheva 2005, p.27). As a result, new forms of participation surface which appear less institutionalised and more flexible. These changes represent an alternative concept of democracy, one that is “based on participation and distance from the political parties and their individualisation”, bringing about “a detachment from and a calling into question of institutions” (Pleyers 2005, p.141). In other words, the participation of young people in social and political action promotes a new understanding of active citizenship through new and different forms of social interaction and active involvement in civic and public life. Their political participation relies more on a multi-dimensional approach rather than the traditional hierarchy that has dominated academic research and commentary.

**Reseaching youth political participation in Australia**

Over the past decade some key debates have been generated from the findings of research surrounding the political knowledge and participation of young Australians. The topics investigated have included political interest and knowledge (Civics Expert Group (CEG) 1994; Vromen 1995), and young people’s engagement with political issues (Beresford & Phillips 1997; Aveling 2001). Others have concentrated on the impact of political knowledge on levels of political efficacy and participation (McAllister 1998; Mellor 1998). Similar themes have been explored with specific relation to the learning outcomes arising from civics and citizenship education (Mellor, Kennedy & Greenwood 2002). Studies have also concentrated on the impact of social and structural factors on young people’s perceptions and experience of politics (Threadgold & Nilan 2003). While within the wider political sphere, researchers have focused on the agency of young people and their roles and responsibilities as active citizens (Vromen 2003; Manning & Ryan 2004; Harris, Wyn & Younes 2007). Recent studies have been more concerned with political literacy and learning for activism (Fyfe 2004, 2007), as well as the motivational factors affecting the electoral participation of young Australians (Edwards, Saha & Print 2005). The subject of young people, politics and the media, particularly the use of the internet in youth political participation, has also become a key area of investigation (Collin 2007; Fyfe & Wyn 2007; Vromen 2007). Altogether, this research forms an important body of work that has provided essential new knowledge.

Common themes to emerge from this collective work have included a perception that young people are less interested in the machinations of conventional forms of representative democracy than their adult counterparts. This is a core argument that shapes one of the pillars of the dominant civics deficit discourse. Also common across many of the studies cited above, is evidence of young people’s unabated commitment to action on a range of social issues that are of specific interest to them. This is confirmed through both their current participation, and expressed intentions to be politically involved in the future. Although, all too often the markers of their intended participation tend to follow more traditional forms such as voting, party membership and contacting politicians. Many of the cited actions of the young people involved in recent Australian studies lie outside the normal channels of conventional democracy. For Vromen (2006), the existence of a range of forms of participation “demonstrates that young people are not a homogeneous category with the same political experiences or policy needs” (p.1). Her arguments reveal that some forms of youth political participation are more acceptable than others. Those political activities that tend to be more community-orientated, creative, informal and issue-based are considered less important. Hence, Vromen (2006) concludes, “there appears to be an unwritten hierarchy of acceptable actions that characterises appropriate citizenship behaviour (p.1). As a consequence, the actions of some young people are not validated in the spectrum of political action. Those who choose to participate in ways viewed to be non-conventional are potentially in danger of merely fuelling the perceived civics deficit that persistently permeates discussion on the political agency of young people. Contemporary research also suggests an apparent lack of trust and respect of politicians and the broader process of representative democracy. For example, the important findings of the *Youth electoral study* have highlighted that “young people in Australia feel excluded from the democratic process” and “they consider that their voices

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are not heard and that few are willing to listen” (Edwards, Saha & Print 2005, p.5).

Despite this growing body of work, some key identified research gaps remain. In a recent review of available evidence on young Australians and political participation, Collin (2008) concluded that “while there is a considerable body of literature looking at the nature and forms of participation, there is little if any considering the impact (comparative or otherwise) of these respective activities” (p.6). Also, the political interests, motivations and aspirations of Australian youth require further investigation. Collin (2008) observes “there is no specific research on what young people would like democracy to look like” (p.20). The recent deficit approach to young people’s knowledge and understanding of political processes and structures has generated a range of data. However, Edwards (2007) proposes it is now time:

For the research agenda around youth participation to shift from consideration of young people’s knowledge about or interest in politics towards an analysis of the way that youth participation is framed by the modern state (p.552).

Increasingly, Australian researchers have acknowledged the emerging importance of the internet as a platform for political information, discourse and action. In spite of this shifting agenda, Vromen (2007) concludes that “there is still much to learn about the way that young people use the internet, and the potential relationships with political and community engagement” (p.65). She proposes that a starting point for further research in this field could be “the political acts and organisations that are known to be attracting young people” with the goal “to examine more comprehensively the relationship between the internet and real-world participation” (Vromen 2007, p.66).

**Arguments for an expansion of the research focus**

The wave of research attention across many countries of the West has been driven by the common indicator of dwindling electoral participation among the cohort of eligible first-time voters (e.g. Kimberlee 2002; Milner 2005; Phelps 2005). I would contend that the process of compulsory voting renders this focus less relevant in the Australian context. Not only does this seem an unjustifiable starting point for the study of youth political participation, it also narrows the field of investigation to the conventional political sphere. Another common practice adopted by many researchers has been the application of an uncontested definition of politics, often without cognisance of the perceptions and experiences of young people themselves. As Vromen (2003) suggests, “research on political participation ought to be inclusive of participation undertaken around the issues that we already know young people to be interested in” (p.81). From their work in the UK, O’Toole et al. (2003) concluded that the imposition of a researcher’s conception of politics “is, at best, poor research design and, at worst, risks seriously misunderstanding political participation” (p.47). Also in the UK context, Henn, Weinstein and Forrest (2005) found that today’s youth “consider by a large majority that other methods and styles of political participation – such as protest politics and direct action – are important and justified” (p.570).

While avoiding the potential pitfall of assuming homogeneity among the youth of Australia, there does appear to be a growing need to target young people as a specific group. This is on the key basis of recognising their relative interests, concerns, aspirations and actions. For Bessant (2003), recent Australian initiatives designed to augment democratic youth participation such as youth parliaments and councils merely “have the effect of extending the governance of young people” and as a result overlook “the problem of young people’s negligible political status” (p.87). The findings of the UK-based work of O’Toole, Marsh and Jones (2003) confirmed that politics is generally something that is done to young people, not something they can influence. They argue that if research is genuinely concerned with encouraging young people to become active citizens “the specific views and experiences of young people need to be much better understood” (2003, p.350). This is an argument taken up in Australia by Melville (2005), who stresses that research needs to ask “broader questions about the way in which young people define and experience political
participation in contemporary society” to gain a better understanding of the “complexity and range” of their involvement (p.8). By placing the political lives and lifestyles of young people at the centre of research, new opportunities take shape for alternative investigative approaches encouraging an expanded focus.

From the evidence discussed, the various elements that typify the definitions of a multi-dimensional view of contemporary political participation are summarised in Figure 3. This paradigm tenders opportunities for an expanded research focus in relation to youth political participation in Australia. The matrix presented draws on the earlier work of Norris (2003), who suggested that young people have shifted allegiance from politics of loyalties (First dimension) to a politics of choice (Fourth dimension), and, in doing so, expanded the repertoires of action taken. The categories above have been updated to reflect emerging forms of participation and alternative fields of study; these are intended to be flexible in terms of the potential crossover of mobilising platforms and actions undertaken. The respective research focus identified in the available literature has been mapped out across the four dimensions.

Arguably, despite evidence a new era of youth political participation, the core research focus remains true to the seminal definitions of political participation that have dominated the discourse internationally for almost half a century. While there is an emergent trend to include more non-conventional forms of participation, any meaningful study of the political aspirations and engagement of young people must expand across the four quadrants illustrated. A continued preoccupation with the study of conventional participation by young people in the traditional spheres of representative democracy falls short of telling the true story. A review of the available literature suggests the field of study must include alternative platforms for organisation and action already utilised by young people as well as investigating the important impact of their preferred forms of activism, which may lie outside the definitions of conventional forms of participation. The fact that young Australians are perceived to be looking more to social movements and community organisations opens up a rich arena for investigation, where important lessons can be learned about alternative repertoires of action. An updated definition of youth political participation built on empirical evidence must surely be a desirable outcome of these research endeavours.

**Some conclusions**

Since the 1960s, the functional definitions of political participation have continued to showcase conventional politics, in particular electoral voting, as the primary means of engagement. Existing empirical evidence confirms the ongoing legacy of youth as an innovative force whose actions extend the boundaries of our understanding and sharpen the meaning of political participation. Existing research data increasingly profiles young Australians as being actively involved across the gamut of conventional and non-conventional politics. The versatile nature of the contemporary youth political participation provides evidence of a citizenry that goes well beyond voting. The multi-dimensional political actions undertaken by young people are influenced by well-trodden forms of public protest, allied to contemporary repertoires supported by electronic technology, creative expression and alternative media. The resultant portfolio of youth political participation is a composite of traditional and new skills and supports development of the complete activist.

**FIGURE 3 A multidimensional model of youth political participation**

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<tr>
<th>FORMS OF PARTICIPATION</th>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>Non-conventional</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>Consumer boycott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership/affiliation</td>
<td>Demonstrations/rallies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party campaign work</td>
<td>Creative public protest</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community governance</td>
<td>Lobbying/advocacy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Industrial action</td>
<td>Online activism</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Elected representation</td>
<td>Culture jamming</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>AGENCY/FIELD OF STUDY</th>
<th>First dimension</th>
<th>Second dimension</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/Representative</td>
<td>Core research focus (Older generation)</td>
<td>Peripheral research focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade unions</td>
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<td>Church organisations</td>
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<td>Youth councils/parliaments</td>
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<tr>
<th>Issue-based/Participative</th>
<th>Third dimension</th>
<th>Fourth dimension</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New social movements</td>
<td>Peripheral research focus</td>
<td>Limited research focus (Younger generation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community organisations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Online platforms/networks</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-partisan activism</td>
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Adapted from Norris 2003
This situation presents major ontological considerations for future research.

The distinct experience of young people within the political sphere has become a meeting point for contemporary social research. This field of study is predominantly shaped by the longstanding definitions of political participation. Potentially, a narrow research agenda runs the risk of reinforcing common assumptions of young people's apathetic disconnection from political life – ultimately giving weight to a perceived civics deficit. The resultant discourse fails to engage with the true and diverse nature of youth political engagement. Recent studies in this area have uncovered valuable insight and meaning. However, I would argue there is a need to build on the existing body of empirical work and expand the focus for future investigations. This would tell us more about the everyday experience of young Australians in relation to politics: their motivations, how they participate and the outcomes of their actions. A failure to do so could result in a stagnation of democratic participation. As researchers, we have a responsibility to learn from the real experiences of young Australians and represent meaningfully the unique contribution they make to contemporary political life.

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