

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2022 Victorian State Election

Melbourne – Friday 11 August 2023

MEMBERS

Will Fowles – Chair

Evan Mulholland – Deputy Chair

Brad Battin

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Nathan Lambert

Lee Tarlamis

Emma Vulin

WITNESS

Dr Zareh Ghazarian, Senior Lecturer, Politics and International Relations Discipline, School of Social Sciences, Monash University.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I declare the public hearings for the Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2022 Victorian State Election open. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us are gathered on here today, and pay my respect to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee, or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I am Evan Mulholland, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region, and the other members of the committee here today are –

Nathan LAMBERT: Nathan Lambert, the Member for Preston.

Lee TARLAMIS: Lee Tarlamis, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sam HIBBINS: Sam Hibbins, Member for Prahran.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: And I believe –

Brad BATTIN: Sorry, it is Brad Battin, Member for Berwick.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I welcome Dr Zareh Ghazarian here today.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. You will also be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I invite you to proceed with a brief 5-minute opening statement, followed by questions from the committee.

Zareh GHAZARIAN: Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee. I have prepared a very short talk to get us started.

My name is Dr Zareh Ghazarian, and I am the head of Politics and International Relations at Monash University, and my colleague, Dr Jacqueline Laughland-Booÿ, who is not able to join us today, is from the Australian Catholic University. Together and with other colleagues, we have been researching the political knowledge of younger people, and in particular we have been investigating how younger people build their understanding of politics, government and democracy, as well as an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Our research is also focused on civics and citizenship education in Australia, and we believe our findings can contribute to the committee's good work in relation to elections in Victoria.

Political knowledge is crucial to elections and democratic processes in order to be able to cast an informed vote. People should possess an understanding of the structures and operation of their political and electoral system, as well as an awareness of their representatives and the key policy debates. This knowledge is critical to the health of a democratic system, as it contributes to the confidence people may have to stand for election or hold decision-makers accountable. Our research indicates that younger people in particular are politically engaged. They are passionate and active in all sorts of issues that affect the community. There are gaps, however, when it

comes to their political knowledge. This is a major challenge, as it has implications for their confidence and capacity to participate in our system of politics and government.

This is not a newly identified issue, of course. Over recent decades, state and national governments in Australia have invested in civics and citizenship curriculum programs with the aim of providing younger people with the knowledge and skills to be active and informed citizens. Highlighting how important this issue is to all levels of government in Australia is the fact that in 2019 all education ministers signed the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. Goal 2 of this declaration was that young Australians, amongst other things, became ‘active and informed members of the community’, and were:

... committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia’s civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations.

While these have been worthwhile projects, the results continue to show that more must be done to build young people’s political knowledge, and we can talk about the results in a moment.

In particular, in Victoria 39 per cent of year 10 students at the last National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship performed at or above the proficient standard, which was the same amount as the preceding test. Only 39 per cent of year 10 students have reached that level expected in terms of knowledge. This is highly problematic, as year 10 is the final year of compulsory schooling and it is also the final year in which civics and citizenship is part of the curriculum. Unless students undertake more specialised studies in VCE, such as politics or legal studies, there are limited opportunities through the curriculum to enhance their political knowledge.

Our research has shown that young people would like to boost their political knowledge before leaving school. When we spoke to Victorian school leavers as part of a project before COVID struck, many told us they were keen to know more about the structures, systems and processes relating to politics, elections, government and democracy before graduating. This could be done, for example, through targeted classes in the final years of high school. Within the context of the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship results, we believe it is timely to listen and respond to the voices of our young people.

It is also important that teachers are supported and have the confidence to design and deliver effective civics and citizenship classes. Our research has highlighted that educators who have confidence and capacity to deliver civics and citizenship make a huge difference to their students’ learning outcomes. It is timely that we provide teachers with opportunities to build their confidence and capacity to teach in this space.

And finally, within a global context, where conflict, misinformation and fake news threaten to dismantle the positive elements of liberal democratic systems, it is important to redouble our efforts to provide young people with the skills, knowledge and confidence to be active and engaged citizens. We must empower them to make a positive contribution, because what we do now will have implications for the future of our democracy. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much for your insights. Can you, I guess, elaborate a bit on voter engagement with young people. You mentioned that young people are quite switched on – I am probably paraphrasing you – in their engagement with politics. I guess what I am asking is: what more do we need to do in your opinion in order to make sure young people are enrolling, and is your interest more sharply focused on making sure young people are aware of issues in the political arena?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: I think that is a fantastic starting point because ultimately when we speak to young people they are switched on. We know they are switched on. We can see them engaged in matters concerning social policy matters – whether it is climate change or whether it is social justice, they are passionate. They are also attuned and receptive to these sorts of approaches from the state. Whether it is the Australian or the Victorian electoral commissions, they remember having engagement with them. They remember getting the reminders to register to vote before they turn 18. The challenge, though, is that often young people are unclear. They have told us that they are unclear when it comes to understanding not necessarily their rights and responsibilities as citizens only but also how they can contribute to established democratic systems. For example, whether it is a question of levels of government – some young people we spoke with did not know that there were different levels of government in Australia, and that was after having undertaken 12 years of schooling in Victoria. We know that there is a bit of confusion in terms of who is responsible – what level of government is responsible for what policy area.

So when we combine these sorts of elements, there is that scope for misinformation or disinformation to go out into the community, and people turn to others in order to vote, whether it is their parents or whether it is trusted friends. If there is that limited understanding of how a system works, then they are not going to be able to be much use either in allowing people to participate fully. So there are a whole range of things that we have identified and our research is seeking to unpack, but I think partly we can try and think about teacher support and also respond to what young people are saying in terms of those refresher courses. They remember going to Parliament, they remember seeing parliamentary question time and they remember the grandeur of the building, but after that, not much else.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Misinformation and disinformation are often terms that are thrown about quite a bit. I will just get you to unpack any specific examples you might have. You suggested an awful thought, that people might take advice from their parents in regard to political views or voting. Are you suggesting perhaps – this might be me being a bit cheeky – there is an overarching authority that might be better placed to inform young people of their views?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: I think when we look at how young people are voting – we did a study in terms of the strategies young people use to determine how they are going to vote for the very first time. It sort of maps onto what the broader community does. There are those at both extremes – those who are really intensely following the campaign, dissecting all the information that comes through to them from candidates, and there are those that sort of go into a polling booth not having given much thought and just selecting a candidate at random. Then there is a whole range within that sort of middle. When it comes to authority, I think young people have told us that their teachers give them great confidence, but what has occurred is that when teachers themselves have not been confident in terms of explaining or themselves feeling prepared or feeling as though they have the confidence to deliver these classes, debates can go sideways and they can go in areas that do not necessarily skill up young people to dissect information that is presented to them. It may open the door for all the sorts of things that we are talking about.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: No worries. That is all from me. Mr Lambert or Mr Tarlamis?

Nathan LAMBERT: Thank you, Dr Ghazarian, for your submission. It was a very succinct submission, leaving us to tease out the details in this hearing today. I am interested in the civics and citizenship taught at the moment. I suppose perhaps we face a general problem with that as we do with a lot of things, that you ultimately learn a lot of stuff by doing it. Probably most of us were taught how to factorise a quadratic equation in year 10, and very few of us probably remember it now. Do you think that holding elections in schools for electing school captains and stuff like that, is there any way in which those things contribute to civic education?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: I think so, and this is I think part of a broader debate in terms of how it is taught and what is taught, and sort of approaching this from a political science perspective – we do not want to go down in terms of teaching approaches or pedagogy – what we are identifying through the research that is out there is that where there are those opportunities for experiential learning, outcomes are stronger. Whether it is school captains, whether it is about participating in extracurricular activities outside of school hours, whatever it may be that allows young people to practise democracy, as it were, really strengthens those sorts of things and knowledge. So when it comes to civics and citizenship, there have been consistent debates about ‘It should just be taught about the facts’, or ‘It should be taught about issues’ – sort of both extremes – and then there is that space in the middle that we are finding.

Nathan LAMBERT: Yes, for sure. You alluded to a 39 per cent statistic. Are there good longitudinal datasets on the basic level of information that young people have? And then, what does the overall trendline look like – up or down?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: The stats that I referred to come from the national assessment program – civics and citizenship, which began in 2004. So this is measuring the proficiency level of year 6 and year 10 students at three-year intervals. In 2004 the proficiency rate national average was 39 per cent. It peaked at 49 per cent in 2010 and it has been at consistently low levels in 2016 and 2019, at 38 per cent. In Victoria it sort of maps onto that at the year 10 level, where Victoria has just been one up – so 39 instead of 38 per cent for the last two tests.

Nathan LAMBERT: A final question from me, coming back to the learning-by-doing theme. My own observation is that if you knock on the door of a 65-year-old, they will typically know more than a 25-year-old

about the political system by virtue of course of simply having voted in a lot more elections, and at some point it all begins to sink in, as it does for all of us. Is there data on that? Is it the case that if we give people long enough, say, from when they are at 20, we might find they are a lot better placed by 30 just by virtue of being citizens?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: I suspect that there is some data there. I cannot point to exactly where it is, but there is this sense that younger people sort of drop off in terms of electoral participation early on in their voting career, and then they sort of come back on. I think your point there is a really good one: the more people practice, the more confident they are and the more knowledgeable they are. But we have also been hearing stories that it is not necessarily age that is the determinative of political knowledge or confidence, it is that idea of ‘What have they learned? What have they been able to remember in terms of that core knowledge?’ I think that is the thing. Rather than age, it is more about their knowledge. It ties into the discussion of lowering the voting age to 16 and whether that is going to have an impact.

Nathan LAMBERT: That might be an opportunity for the Member for Prahran now.

Sam HIBBINS: Well, it is a good segue. I did have another question, but I will start with that. I mean, would it be beneficial to be lowering the voting age to 16?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: Look, we actually wrote an opinion piece on this a few years ago, and our view was exactly that. The argument about age is not necessarily, in our view, the only argument that we should be focusing on. It is about giving anyone of any age those skills, the knowledge and the confidence to then participate in the electoral process. Just incidentally, we did a poll – this is now quite a few years old now – in 2013. I am an affiliate in a longitudinal study known as the Our Lives study based in Queensland. We asked first-time voters, so 18- to 19-year-old voters, whether they thought the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16, and only 1 per cent said that it should definitely be lowered to 16. So I think there are arguments. It is not necessarily the age, it is the confidence and the capacity and the knowledge that people have.

Sam HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Now, in some of your studies you have actually gone and surveyed directly young people in terms of their experiences of civics. I just ask: if, say, we are developing a new curriculum or new programs or what have you to help with civics and citizenship and that sort of education, just how important is it to actually engage with young people in developing those sorts of programs and curriculum?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: I think it is really important. I think the idea of student voice is crucial in designing and developing something as important as civics and citizenship. I note that Victoria in particular emphasises the idea of student voice across education, which is a fantastic initiative. When we think about what young people are telling us, there are opportunities right now. From one of our studies there is the idea of looking at years 11 and 12 and that opportunity for refresher courses for specialist knowledge, and they point to the idea that schools do offer courses on reproductive health or substances or whatever the case may be. There are things that exist that are targeted at those final years of school, and young people have told us that would be a wonderful thing to do to remind them of the core knowledge that they have encountered and what sorts of things they will be experiencing after this but in a really succinct way. It does not need to be another course, but it could be a series or short and sharp attempts at trying to really consolidate knowledge before they leave.

Sam HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Brad, do you have any questions?

Brad BATTIN: Yes, thank you very much. I just want to say obviously I think civics is super important. Many of us try, I know, as members of Parliament to get out to our communities to do it ourselves. However, the one thing – and I think our Chair almost laughed when he said it – is we always have to have concern that a civics class has to be about an open, honest discussion about what the system is, how the voting works and what your role in it is, less so a values-based discussion around what we believe should be your values as you go to vote. So if we are going to put civics and the electoral system in a stronger position for younger people, how do we ensure it is monitored and put in place so that it is not a values session encouraging people or an activist session to get people to vote a specific way?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: That is a very important point, and there is some research on that. As part of our inquiries we also uncovered some important information here. The idea is that when teachers approach this in a frank and fulsome way and allow students to engage with all sides of the issue as well as weaving it or linking it back to the ideas of civics and citizenship in terms of the curriculum, that is when we have strong education outcomes.

What young people have told us is that when debates or issues are in class and they may not align with their own views or their own values, then they may feel marginalised and they may feel that this is not necessarily something that they should be tuning into. So that has the potential risk of making people just tune out of the area of study because it can be something that they do not necessarily agree with in terms of the debate and the discussion that goes on. So it is that craft and that importance of building that confidence for teachers to be able to use, for example, contemporary studies, contemporary issues, in highlighting the ideas that are covered in the content of the course.

Brad BATTIN: No worries. Thank you. That is all. Thanks, Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Lee.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you, Dr Ghazarian, for presenting today and your submission. I was just interested – it has been a while since I have looked at it, but I know that there are programs in school that are targeted at the younger age cohort, like the passport to democracy program that is run by the VEC. It is not offered in all schools, but that is a system where they sort of provide some support to help the teachers understand and give them the mechanism to be able to roll that program out. And then they try to have a bit of an element of co-design in the sense where they try to identify an issue that is relevant to their everyday life and then talk with them about how to navigate the system to affect change. I think years ago when I looked at this it was something like whether or not there should be a post office box in a local area and how do you contact your local councillor versus state member and things like that. It was that sort of experiential way of introducing them to becoming active in the political world. I am not sure that has ever been analysed to see how effective that is and whether there are any other programs like that that operate that you are aware of that would be helpful in this space in terms of engaging more people in that civics education.

Zareh GHAZARIAN: I think it is really important to remember the wonderful work that the VEC does and the AEC does through programs, the passport to democracy program in particular. We have done a couple of projects for the VCAA. I cannot present the findings. The VCAA has not authorised the release of data, but I can very briefly talk about one project that we did, and that is professional development for teachers. And I think we were able to – through the speed of enrolment there was great appetite in the teaching profession to build confidence and knowledge in terms of civics and citizenship education. I think it could be something that we would like to pursue in terms of our research space, potentially to continue and advance those sorts of areas where we can really build on existing programs, offer new approaches and new resources to build other sorts of networks that educators may find useful. But I think all of these are playing their role. The amount of times that we saw VEC and AEC resources provided to us in terms of what students remember – they are certainly making a very strong contribution.

Lee TARLAMIS: You have spoken a bit today about the figures across Australia. Are there any other jurisdictions that are doing a lot better, and are there things that they are doing that we could be doing to improve those numbers?

Zareh GHAZARIAN: It is interesting. Looking at the US, for example, prior to the previous election there was just 39 per cent of people who were able to name the three branches of government accurately. There was a study done that just 10.3 per cent of young people in America were able to meet all the criteria to be regarded as an informed voter. So while Australia seems to be doing okay, there is still plenty of scope obviously to improve.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Excellent. Are there any other questions? Well, thank you, Dr Ghazarian, for your insightful, expert analysis that you have put to us in your submission, which will go a long way in helping us deliberate over our Electoral Matters Committee review into the 2022 state election. Thank you for your time.

Zareh GHAZARIAN: Thank you so much for having me.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I close the meeting.

Witness withdrew.