

Not only do youth vote, they also represent their own

Written by Helen Berents, Lecturer, School of Justice, Queensland University of Technology

When we talk about young people and politics, it's usually to discuss young people's [supposed disengagement](#) with formal politics.

However, young people are more disenchanting – rather than apathetic – by current political behaviour. This disenchantment often manifests in non-enrolment, non-alignment with parties, participation through issue-based politics, and involvement in protests.

If we talk about engaging youth in politics, what is normally meant is policy consultation and mechanisms such as youth parliaments. [Rarely](#) is the election of young people to formal political institutions discussed. This absence is notable for what it tells us about generally held conceptions of young people and prejudices against their age and supposed competency.

Yet young people do run for public office. In some cases – like that of Wyatt Roy, who was elected in 2010 [at age 20](#) – they win. So why do they involve themselves and what is the response when they win?

What do they care about?

In spite of the [never-ending stream](#) of think-pieces on the apathy of millennials, young people are running for office, getting elected, and speaking about issues that concern them but that often are not appearing on the political agenda.

Issues such as climate change, same-sex marriage, and asylum-seeker policy were rated most importance to young voters in a [study conducted last month](#) by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and Youth Action. These issues have been largely absent from the current campaign.

Many say if they can't see themselves or the issues they care about represented in politics, it's motivation to get involved in formal politics.

Youth advocating for youth

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Young people [have articulate views](#) on political issues, but politicians are not tackling issues of concern to young people.

This attitude is exemplified in former prime minister Tony Abbott's electorate of Warringah in this election. In 2014, his government's first budget brought [youth out onto the streets](#) in protest; they argued the budget unfairly hit young people.

Two years later, Abbott is faced with a different kind of protest. Challenging Abbott are 24-year-old [Clara Williams-Roldan](#) for the Greens, and 38-year-old [James Mathison](#), who is running as an independent on a platform [specifically targeted at youth](#) – including the pointed hashtag [#TimesUpTony](#).

In 2015 Williams-Roldan [ran against Premier Mike Baird](#) in the New South Wales state election (winning a decent 26% of the vote), and her motivations are similar for this federal election.

She argues her generation is not represented in politics and so do not feel engaged. Last year, [she said](#) “we need young voices right across the political spectrum”, and in an op-ed in May [wrote](#) her youth means she is “acutely more invested in the future”.

In the UK, Mhairi Black [was 20](#) when she won her seat for the Scottish National Party at the 2015 general election. This made her the youngest MP in UK parliament for 350 years. She [has been outspoken](#) about key issues of concern to young people, foregrounding her youth as a strength.

Mhairi Black's maiden speech.

Williams-Roldan is following a similar path, arguing her participation will enhance the democratic process even if she doesn't win.

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While Mathison is not as “youthful”, his argument that Abbott is out of touch on issues that concern young people echoes the sentiments of Williams-Roldan and other politically engaged youth.

Young and ambitious

Some young people do not enter politics to represent youth issues in particular.

When Roy was elected, he argued he was focused on issues that concerned the electorate. However, the media was preoccupied by his youth. Coverage included pieces headlined “[No Mother’s Boy](#)”. And even as he became the youngest MP to become a minister (at age 25 in September 2015), [news coverage continues](#) to reiterate his age.

Before Roy, the youngest MP elected in Australia was 22-year-old Edwin Corboy, who was elected in 1918. [The Argus reported](#) that in Corboy’s first speech to parliament he “created a good impression” by speaking “clearly and with confidence”. Surprise is expressed [when young people are articulate](#) and do the job for which their electorates have chosen them.

While Roy is potentially in [danger of losing his seat](#) at this election, his presence, achievements, and ambitions in politics should be measured without needing to constantly refer to his youth.

Greater legitimacy

Young people were being [encouraged to enrol](#) last month in an effort to address the estimated 400,000 young people [missing from the electoral roll](#).

The [Australian Electoral Commission](#) has reported that 150,000 did enrol before the deadline, and, for 18-year-olds, enrolment has gone from 51% to 70%. Young people [listened](#)

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If we think young people are capable and should be encouraged to be involved in making decisions about who is elected, it follows that young people should also be encouraged to run for office. Parliament and its members [has been criticised](#) for its [limited](#) representation [of people](#)

. Both Black and Williams-Roldan have argued that the voices of young people are an important and absent aspect of democracy.

Many people argue that a government should be representative, and this element of representation gives parliament [greater legitimacy](#) . On this basis, if a young person can convince their electorate they are skilled, competent and equipped to serve, prejudice against age should be challenged and overcome.

Who says the “leaders of tomorrow” cannot also be leaders of today?

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