Tuning In To Democracy:

Challenges of Young People's Participation and Civic Education

Keynote speech at

Engaging Youth in Modern Democracy

International Symposium
To be opened by the Governor-General of Australia

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MacLaurin Hall
University of Sydney
12 October 2006

Political scientist and scholar Russell Dalton recently wrote:
"Democracy should be a celebration of an involved public. Democracy requires an active citizenry because it is through discussion, popular interest, and involvement in politics that societal goals should be defined and carried out. Without public involvement in the process, democracy lacks both its legitimacy and its guiding force."

How do we assess and measure public involvement? Much of the debate centres around the topic of participation in elections. It's easy to understand, and (even though it's sometimes not easy to find the statistics) easy to measure. But we should not forget that it is only a proxy for wider engagement.

There is little agreement as to what constitutes a good level of electoral participation. Global voter turnout has dropped slowly but consistently in recent years, raising concern among governments, electoral management bodies, NGOs, commentators and citizens. Elections in the years prior to the late 1980s show an average turnout fluctuating in the mid-to-higher 70 per cent range. However, in the decade up to 2006, this figure had fallen to less than 69 per cent.

Most of the detailed study of electoral participation has taken place in established democracies. Given the availability of data, this constraint is understandable. It may even be inevitable. The work of the political science community over more than thirty years has produced some clear findings. David Butler and Donald Stokes suggested as long ago as 1974 that people's voting behaviour is broadly socialised in three elections. Mark Franklin's recent analysis in 22 established democracies uses data covering the span of a person's membership of the electorate, roughly 50 years, to develop and confirm this hypothesis or something close to it. Most people establish their pattern of participation (or not) by roughly the third election after they reach voting age. (Here in Australia, where the parliamentary term is only three years, it may be four elections.) This pattern is then hardly susceptible to change. Once each successive generation of people who join the electorate reach the age of about 30 or 35, their inclination to participate in elections will be set until they leave the electorate through death. If a measure which affects electoral participation is put in place now and remains in place for three elections or so, it will have an effect on people now reaching voting age throughout their life. In assessing policy change proposals, it is their effect on the young that matters.

While analysis of participation is certainly important for established democracies in developed countries, it is even more important for new and consolidating democracies in developing countries. The rate of population growth may be much higher, meaning that the socialisation or otherwise of today's and tomorrow's new potential voters will have much larger long term effects. Questions of institutional and electoral design may well be more open in these countries. The acceptance and legitimacy of democracy itself may still not be as solid.

Are the same influences at work in established democracies and new democracies, or in developed countries and developing countries? We don't fully know, and we need to know more. In developed countries, a higher proportion of educated people turn out, although this does not imply that increasing the level of education will in itself boost turnout. By contrast, in India 'there are those who vote and those who use the telephone'. The 2004 Indian National Election Study confirmed that 'the upper castes are increasingly turning away from the electoral arena, while more and more Dalits are firmly moving into this arena'. But in polling in Indonesia in 2003, it was advantaged groups who were more optimistic that their vote would make an impact.

We can only make best guesses as to what knowledge about electoral participation is transferable from one society to another or from one region of the world to another. With the appropriate health warnings, there are however still useful lessons for political and institutional reformers. We can at least ask questions instead of working in the dark or being unaware of the kind of consequences that may result from different decisions. The institutional design options we choose may have impacts that do not become apparent for years and may then take decades to undo.

What are the factors which affect participation?

First, we know there are ***mechanical factors***. These can include:

- *availability of alternative voting procedures* (advance voting, proxy voting, postal voting etc.) which allow voters who may be unable to participate on election day still to cast a ballot;
- *physical access to the polls*. If access is difficult, some would-be voters – for example the disabled - may be deterred from participating;
- *whether elections take place on a workday or a rest day*: does holding elections on holidays or weekends makes participation

more convenient? Studies have reached differing conclusions as to whether rest day voting makes any difference in practice, but it certainly does not have a negative effect; and

- *the use of new technologies*, such as electronic voting, to complement conventional processes. Some assessments of pilot projects, however, indicate that e-voting may be more effective in providing more convenient channels for regular voters than it is in engaging new voters.

Second, there are ***political context factors*** at each individual election or referendum which combine to make participation more or less attractive. The context can vary, sometimes greatly, from one election to the next. Examples include:

- *perceptions of the effectiveness of political competition* or the degree to which citizens believe that different election outcomes will lead to significant differences in the direction and impact of government. Turnout is generally lower when the results of elections are seen to make little difference to the subsequent form of the executive. The grand coalition model used in Switzerland has led to continuity of government over a long period whatever the results of individual elections – and is accompanied by one of the lowest turnout rates in elections of any established democracy;

- *the competitiveness and salience of the electoral event* at both national and local levels: if voters believe that the electoral contest will be close, they are more likely to ensure that they take part. In Canada, turnout declined through a series of elections up to 2000. A closer election in 2004 saw turnout levels stabilise – and at a further close and vigorously fought election in 2006, turnout rose. Similarly, the different perception of party competition was an important factor in the 12% drop in turnout in the UK in 2001: but in the 2005 election, there was less certainty about the result, and again turnout rose. Those people who are going to vote are more likely to vote in elections where they think it may matter, and more likely to stay at home when they think the result is a foregone conclusion – either nationally or, under a majoritarian electoral system, in their own area;

- *strategic voting*: people may be more willing to turn out to vote when they see a particular electoral outcome to be strongly undesirable;

- *the type of the electoral event*: elections other than national elections, such as municipal elections or European Parliament elections, often see lower turnouts - as do elections to the legislature in presidential systems where they do not synchronise with presidential elections;

- *campaign spending*, which may raise the profile of an election and lead to a wider distribution of political information;

- *party identification:* which appears to play a role in keeping turnout up in 'less relevant' elections - but it is itself on the decline. In Sweden, the proportion of the electorate with a strong party identification fell by a third from 1968 to 2002. Among those who also have little interest in politics, it fell by more than half. Nor is party identification necessarily higher in newer democracies: in Indonesia in 2003, approaching a major series of elections after fundamental institutional changes, only 34% were prepared to express a party identification; and

- *length of time between elections*: when elections are held with great frequency, it has generally been found that voter turnout suffers.

Third, there are ***systemic or institutional factors***. These usually require considerable legislative and/or administrative effort to change. Examples are:

- *the nature of the party system*: where political choice is restricted, those who cannot see an option which reflects their views are likely to stay at home. More electoral participants may provide more varied options for the voters – although when the political system is perceived as too fragmented, turnout drops, with voters confused or unclear as to the effect that their vote may have. Outside microstates, it is thus desirable for some major parties or coalitions to emerge which give coherence to the political system.

  This has implications for institutional and electoral system design, especially when it is be considered alongside factors such as the desirability of inclusion of all groups in an elected legislature. During transition and subsequent democratic consolidation, it opens the question of how far it is desirable to see the institutions adopted as themselves transitional. On

the one hand, inclusion during the transition may lead to fragmentation later. On the other hand, if rules are continuously altered, it may be that no stable electoral and institutional system can emerge in which parties and voters know how to respond to the incentives built into the system. It may not be desirable to keep pulling up the plant by the roots to see if it is growing – but it may be just as undesirable to grow a giant weed;

- *the choice of electoral system:* almost all electoral systems can be categorized as plurality/majority, proportional representation (PR), or mixed systems. The more responsive the electoral system is in representing the choices made by the electorate, the higher voter turnout will be. PR thus tends to be linked with higher turnout. Plurality systems are linked with lower turnout: mixed systems, unsurprisingly, are likely to produce results in the middle. In majoritarian systems, turnout tends to be higher in districts with closer results. This means that boundary delimitation methods matter. Politicians have an understandable urge to design systems which keep their bottoms on their seats – look at the US House of Representatives – but there is a price to pay in terms of popular engagement in elections;

- *voter registration as a state or individual responsibility*;

- *compulsory versus voluntary voting*: it is not surprising that institutionalised compulsory voting is linked with high turnout, although this only appears to be true in practice where the compulsion is backed by effective sanctions for not voting – as here in Australia. But many people make arguments of principle against compulsory voting, and it is slowly on the decline worldwide. Effective enforcement action requires resources to implement it, which are sometimes difficult to defend in national resource allocation discussions;

- *the existence and role of direct democracy instruments:* while the turnout in individual Swiss referendums on initiatives is low, it is said that a high proportion of the Swiss electorate participates in initiative votes when all the referendums in, say, a given year are taken together. Referendums have generally lower turnout than general elections worldwide, but there is more variation in turnout. However, there are some referendums – for example those on Norwegian EU accession

or the independence of Québec – where turnout has been higher than in the preceding general election;

- *presidential or parliamentary democracy:* it has been suggested that in the US, separation of powers has in itself an effect on turnout, because it makes the link between voting and the outcome of the election on the executive weaker. But we simply don't know whether this can be established as a general effect in presidential systems. Does it imply that any country with a presidential system will find lower turnout levels an associated phenomenon, with possible consequences for legitimacy? Changing from presidentialism to parliamentarism is rarely an option – so even if it does imply this, the emphasis may need to be on strategies which ask 'how do we make presidentialism work'? Does this mean that the existence of compulsory voting, however weakly enforced, in much of Latin America is actually an important structural feature in maintaining the legitimacy of its democracies? Are there implications for the Philippines or Indonesia in their current debates on democratic development and institution building?; and

- *the voting age:* the widespread introduction of votes at 18 has diminished turnout in developed democracies. Mark Franklin has described it as "a well-intentioned decision with the unanticipated consequence of giving rise to a lifetime of disenfranchisement for many of the intended beneficiaries." The brave and adventurous response is to propose the further reduction of the voting age to 16. The pathfinders of this approach are as diverse as Brazil, Nicaragua and the Isle of Man. Its proponents suggest that in a wide range of societies, 18 or just older is about the worst age for people to become politically engaged – they may have lost many of their close links with family or school, and they are likely to be mobile and not yet fully established into another community. Would lowering the voting age further enable schools to be agencies of democracy education and engagement, or would it make things even worse? The danger is that it is a political one-way street: just as raising the voting age from 18 to 21 is politically impossible, so would raising the voting age back from 16 to 18 be politically impossible.

Fourth, there are ***demographic factors*** – which are very long term. For example, the gender balance of the electorate matters, and the

difference in turnout between men and women has shrunk since 1945. When all or nearly all women gained the right to vote at the same age as men, the turnout of women matches or slightly exceeds that of men.

To summarise, there are some factors affecting electoral participation which require major institutional or systemic change. This is an important part of wider debate about the state of democracy and about reforms to the institutions and practices of democracy. This does not however mean that there is nothing for individual electoral management bodies, education ministries or civic education CSOs to do.

The core challenge - encouraging young people to participate

How does the socialisation of people into becoming voters work? What makes young people become habitual voters? It is tempting to assume that those who do not vote may participate in other ways - but we don't know whether this is true. Sometimes those who engage in other kinds of participatory activity are also those who vote.

However, the story of interest in politics is not all gloom. It appears paradoxical that interest in politics in Sweden has increased since 1968 even though turnout has fallen over the same period. The explanation is a big increase in the number of thoughtful independent people over the period, but also a big increase in the number of uninterested, non-partisan people – both of which groups are probably made up more of younger than older people.

The same holds true in Latin America. Young people may be more dissatisfied with the performance of democracy, but they seem to be more interested in politics than their elders. Their political activism is often being channelled towards "street democracy" – authorised demonstrations, unauthorised demonstrations, blocking traffic. Engagement in politics is not always or primarily expressed institutionally, and this is reflected in the levels of electoral participation. The unanswered question is whether today's 15 year old street activists will become tomorrow's 30 year old voters.

It appears that the biggest challenge in engaging young people tuned out of voting in the habit forming years is that of engaging the young, urban, unemployed, unqualified and personally vulnerable 'underclass' who are tuned out of society generally. With this tuning out comes lack of trust and lack of engagement not just in elections but in all forms of community or institutional involvement. Where daily life is

based on assumptions of being cheated or imposed on, distrust grows, and the experience of any kind of working together is less accessible to those with less skills and less confidence.

How is trust gained? What knowledge and skills are needed to engage and how are they acquired? Is political knowledge now gained differently from the past, with the proliferation of media channels on which news can be present from 24 hours a day to never, and with the almost instant access to information provided through the Internet? Or is the issue that those who tune out do not see news in the daily course of events and do not have Internet access?

The electoral community and the education community – time to build an active partnership

If attitudes to participation are formed in one's first three or four elections, is any democracy education not aimed specifically at young people a waste of time, or even just not a cost effective use of budgets? There is lots of talk, and a significant amount of activity, in the field of democracy curricula and education civics – but much of it may have a limited impact. There does not yet appear to be any basis to understand what may be effective and what not effective, with a consequent danger of the spending of vast amounts of money to no purpose.

Both civic educators and voter participation practitioners tend to be proud of their activity and anxious to share their experiences with others who wish to learn what is being done elsewhere. It is therefore worth summarising what we already know.

On the one hand, we know that there is a wide variety of civic education activity in schools and colleges in a large number of countries. Who undertakes it? How much time is allocated to it? Is it a compulsory part of the school or college curriculum? What does the syllabus contain – constitutional and national principles, democratic values, history, citizenship, electoral procedures, active involvement in the community? Who teaches it? Is it examined in any way?

On the other hand, there are a wide range of voter participation projects around the world. These can be classified into six categories:

- Most numerous, perhaps because they are the least controversial, are the *voter information campaigns* undertaken largely by those authorities which actually conduct elections.

These campaigns are designed to answer the basic 'how, where and when?' questions related to voter registration and to casting a ballot.

- While information campaigns certainly involve advertising, *advertising campaigns* tackle the 'why' question head-on and exhort citizens to go to the polls. These campaigns use messages which range from appeals to citizen duty ('vote because you should') to self-interest ('vote because you need to protect or advance your interests') to the ubiquity of politics ('vote because politics is all around us').

- *Grass-roots campaigns* operate on the assumption that personal contact and exhortation are the ways to get out the vote rather than more impersonal advertising methods.

- *School programmes, such as mock elections,* are another popular method of trying to engage young people in the political process in the hope that they will learn the 'habit' of voting. Such programmes are conducted from primary school to university level.

- *Entertainment* events, the largest and splashiest of which are massive rock concerts, put out a message of participation as a by-product of engaging youth at leisure. Other, smaller-scale approaches, such as travelling theatre troupes, are however sometimes more relevant in societies where the literacy rate is low.

- Finally, there are *inducements* to vote, such as lotteries, or discounts on charges for public documents. Examples of these are, however, rare. Some of those which have been implemented or suggested have aroused controversy, and their effectiveness in increasing turnout has been mixed.

In conclusion

International IDEA works with networks of partners both in the world of practice – legislators, electoral management bodies, the education community, the academic community, civil society organisations, political commentators and other stakeholders in reform – and in the academic world. I would like to thank the University of Sydney as one of those partners for taking the initiative for this symposium. IDEA's objective is to strengthen democratic institutions and processes, and

the results of our work are knowledge resources, the development of policy options, and democratic reform.

That is why this symposium is so important. I believe it is the first major occasion at which those involved with elections and those involved with education have been able to come together to share knowledge and experience with each other. It is a necessary step towards developing policies and tools which are based on this knowledge and experience and which use resources effectively to encourage young people not only to participate in the electoral process but to engage in the public involvement which is integral to legitimate and credible democracy. We have a lot to share, a lot to find out together, and a lot to do.

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