

Young people disenfranchised in Australia's snap election

Richard Phillips, SEP candidate for Blaxland
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In an attempt to provide a fig leaf of democratic legitimacy to the backroom coup that ousted her predecessor Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister Julia Gillard has claimed that the August 21 federal election allows Australians to exercise their “birth right” to deliver a verdict on her prime ministership and elect the government of their choice.

In fact, Gillard's snap poll—called with the minimum legally permissible time for campaigning—marks a further sharp erosion of the democratic process. Most starkly, Gillard's timing has effectively disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of eligible voters, most of them young people.

Although Australian federal parliaments have three-year terms, the exact timing of national elections is in the hands of the prime minister: Labor won the last ballot in November 2007 and, under the constitution, could have delayed the poll until as late as next April. Gillard, however, called a sudden poll just three weeks after ousting Rudd.

Gillard's decision followed demands for an early election by key sections of the corporate media, which hoped the poll would stifle popular disquiet over the political coup that removed Rudd, and quickly establish a new government committed to an austerity program like those being imposed by governments around the world.

In her rush to meet these demands, Gillard announced the poll on July 17 for August 21, meaning the campaign would last just five weeks, and given the estimated 1.4 million unregistered voters—a third of them aged 18-24—just one day to apply for enrolment.

Gillard had reportedly considered calling the election for a week later, August 28, so that first-time voters would have an extra week to register. Her rejection of that option expresses the contempt of the Labor Party and the entire political establishment for democratic rights, and for the voting rights of young people in particular.

Most Australians are unaware of the country's restrictive and anti-democratic electoral laws, and many young people falsely believe that they are automatically enrolled once they turn 18. Few know about the impossibly short time—just one working day after the election writs are officially issued—in which to register.

This year's election was called so swiftly that it was not even possible to mail the required forms to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) in time to beat the deadline. Moreover, the AEC

refused to accept enrolment forms lodged on-line with the applicants' electronic signatures. New voters had to find their way to an AEC office, or download a form on-line and fax or email it to the AEC.

On July 19, the first working day after Gillard's election announcement, thousands of young people joined long queues in AEC offices across the country in an attempt to enrol. Officials reported that the commission was forced to increase its call-centre staff from 500 to 700, fax lines were seriously overloaded and the enrolment section of its web site collapsed for almost an hour. According to the AEC, only 85,996 people were able to enrol. During the 2004 campaign, when the registration period was longer, 157,311 people or almost double, enrolled after the election was called.

Registered voters who had moved home but not informed the electoral commission of their change of address were also struck off the roll unless they re-registered. They were only given four additional days to update their details. The laws discriminate against those people most likely to change addresses—the young, poor, renters, itinerant workers and those in insecure jobs.

Before 2006, potential voters had a minimum of seven days to register. This was slashed to a minimum of one day by the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government in a deliberate attempt to exclude large numbers of youth who were regarded as less likely to vote for the coalition parties.

Labor pledged in opposition that it would change the laws if elected. But it has made no serious attempt to do so. Earlier this year, the Rudd government introduced an amendment to restore the seven-day rule, but when it was blocked by the Liberal-National Coalition and Family First in the Senate, Labor quietly dropped it.

Australia's registration laws are more restrictive than legislation in comparable countries. Canada allows enrolment up to and including on polling day; the US closes its electoral rolls 11 days before; and New Zealand permits potential voters to enrol the day before an election.

Another key factor in the declining number of registered voters—young and old—is the growing alienation of broad sections of the population toward the entire political setup. In 2007, 7.7 percent of eligible voters were not registered. That figure has since increased to 9.6 percent, or almost 1 in 10. Three years ago, about one-fifth of 18-24 year-olds were not registered. That proportion has more than doubled to just over half. Whereas in 2007, many young people had

illusions that a Rudd government would be an improvement over Howard's, those hopes have since been dashed.

It is now nearly 40 years since the Whitlam Labor government was elected, having promised to grant 18-year-olds the right to vote. Whitlam also promised to withdraw troops from the increasingly disastrous war in Vietnam and end conscription, a system that sent young men to war before they could even vote. After those pledges were kept, the youth vote was a major factor in Whitlam's re-election in 1974. Today, Labor has nothing to offer youth.

The electoral registration laws are just one aspect of the erosion of basic democratic and voting rights. Over the past 20 years successive governments have introduced a range of measures restricting electoral rights won in struggle since the eighteenth century.

As support for the traditional parties—Labor and Liberal-National—has dwindled, they have joined hands to shore up their position by restricting the access of new or small parties to the ballot process. In recent years, the Greens, having won parliamentary seats, have backed these moves as well.

Under legislation initially introduced by the Hawke-Keating Labor government in the 1980s, parties without current parliamentary representation have to surmount a range of major obstacles just to exercise the elementary right to have their party name alongside their candidates on election ballot papers. They must apply for registration with the AEC, and submit the names, addresses, telephone numbers and dates of birth of at least 500 members.

This requirement constitutes a gross violation of privacy, forcing party members to divulge their political affiliations to a government agency, and opening them to surveillance and harassment by the government and its security and intelligence agencies.

Moreover, these provisions are the antithesis of genuine democracy. The right to organise politically and have one's party name on ballot papers is a fundamental democratic right. Voters should also have the right to know the political affiliations of all candidates on the ballot.

Elections are supposed to allow voters to consider and assess an array of political programs and perspectives, and freely decide which parties they support, on the basis of equal access to information about their policies. In other words, it should be up to the voters to decide, not the government, who has support.

The 500-member rule is strictly policed by the AEC, which can demand a membership and/or financial audit of a registered party at any time. Generally, a random sample of 20 members is selected and the individuals contacted by AEC officers. Unless 19 members out of the 20 can be contacted by AEC officers within three phone calls or respond to a subsequent letter, the party can be automatically deregistered. Party registration laws contain other invasive legal mechanisms, including fines and jail terms, which can be used to target parties that are perceived as political threats.

In 2004, Australia's highest court, the High Court, dismissed a constitutional challenge to these laws, adopting the anti-democratic proposition that access to the electoral system was a "privilege," not a

fundamental democratic or constitutional right. The judges declared that electoral rights were created by parliament, and therefore parliament could simply take them away.

A further High Court ruling in 2007 declared that there was no guaranteed right to vote under the Constitution and that the parliament could disenfranchise 18-21 year-olds, and prisoners who had been convicted of "serious" crimes. When the Constitution was adopted in 1901 it contained no explicit guarantee of voting rights, but instead permitted the states or federal parliament to set franchise qualifications. Most women had no right to vote; many states imposed property or income qualifications, and Aborigines and Pacific islanders were barred from voting. Many Aborigines were denied the right to vote at federal elections until as late as 1962.

Another undemocratic feature of the federal electoral process is compulsory preferential voting. Under this system all electors, in addition to voting for their party of choice, must allocate successively numbered preferences to all parties on the ballot paper. In effect, these votes are ultimately redistributed back to Labor, the Liberal-National coalition parties or the Greens.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party in the federal election that is exposing the fraud of the entire electoral process, and developing the struggle for genuine democracy through the fight for a workers' government—a government of the working class, for the working class and by the working class. As the SEP's founding *Statement of Principles*, explains, real participatory democracy requires the independent mobilisation of the working class to carry through the revolutionary transformation of society, establishing popular democratic control over all aspects of economic, as well as political, life.

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