

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Adam Lovett to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia

1. I am a lecturer at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Melbourne campus, at the School of Philosophy. I have previously taught at the London School of Economics (LSE) and New York University (NYU). I have been doing research in democratic theory for just under ten years and have published half a dozen articles on democratic values in leading academic journals. I recently published an academic monograph, *Democratic Failures and the Ethics of Democracy*, on the challenges that democracies face in achieving democratic values.
2. My submission focuses on the following term of reference:
  - The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and *opportunities for improvement*. [emphasis added]
3. My aim in this submission is to (a) provide the committee with a deeper understanding of the philosophical case for civic education and (b) show that Australian civic education would be improved by rebalancing the curriculum towards policy issues.

### Executive summary

4. The main points in my submission are:
  - To understand how to improve civic education, we need to understand what makes democracy valuable. There are two core democratic values. First, democracy facilitates citizens' autonomy. It enables citizens to autonomously author their social and political affairs. Second democracy facilitates citizens equality. It helps prevent some citizens from wielding asymmetric power over, and thereby subordinating, other citizens.
  - Citizens' knowledge about politics is critical to both values. Citizens cannot autonomously author their social and political affairs unless they know about their options in the ballot booth. And when political knowledge is distributed very unequally, those with more knowledge have asymmetric political power over those with less knowledge.
  - Civic education, thus, is valuable democratic autonomy and equality. It can provide citizens the knowledge they need to be able to make autonomous choices in the ballot booth. And it can flatten inequalities of knowledge—it can ensure children who get less political socialization in the family still learn about politics. The best form of civic education is designed to achieve these tasks.
  - The current Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum focuses on the wrong kind of thing to achieve these tasks adequately. It focuses almost wholly on teaching students about Australian political institutions. It should, instead, focus on policies. Policy knowledge furnishes citizens with the ability to choose between parties on election day.
  - **My recommendation is that the Civics and Citizenship curriculum should be rebalanced towards policy.** It should contain as much content about different sides of policy disputes—disputes about taxation, housing, immigration, healthcare and so on—as it does about political institutions. It should focus on the substance, and well as the processes, of government.

## Section 1: What makes democracy valuable?

5. Civic education is meant to be valuable insofar as it makes democracy work better. So, **to understand the case for civic education, we need to understand what makes democracy valuable in the first place.** This theoretical understanding is also indispensable for understanding the proper form of civic education—we should have the program of civic education that best facilitates democratic values. So to address what might count as an improvement to Australia’s system of formalized civic education, it is essential for the committee to have a deep understanding of democratic values.
6. The place to look for a deep understanding of what makes democracy valuable is in the academic literature on political philosophy and political theory. **In the last thirty years, there’s been tremendous advancement in the collective understanding of democratic values** arising from this literature. The overall picture that has emerged from this progress identifies two core aspects of what makes democracy valuable: autonomy and equality. In the next two subsections, I will explain what these values are.

### 1.1. Democratic Autonomy

7. The first aspect of democracy’s value is autonomy. **Democracy helps us become authors of our social and political affairs.** We can understand this value by thinking about autonomy in one’s personal life (Lovett and Zuehl 2022). It’s valuable to be the autonomous author of one’s personal affairs. It is valuable for you to decide who you marry or where you live or what career to pursue. This gives you authorship over your life, and that is good in itself (Raz 1986). Such authorship doesn’t only have good consequences. It is intrinsically good.
8. You can enjoy authorship of your social and political affairs as well as your individual affairs. **Your social and political affairs consist of the important features of your society and political system.** They include what the government does and the consequences of such governmental action: the nature of the economic system, the extent of inequality, the degree of prosperity, the way your society treats criminals, and so on. Authorship of such things is also intrinsically good—or so many contemporary thinkers have argued (Altman and Wellman 2009; Stilz 2019; Wilson 2021; Lovett and Zuehl 2022; Lovett 2024).
9. To be author your social and political affairs, there must be a causal connection between what you want and what the government does. Yet such a causal connection on its own does not suffice for making citizens autonomous authors of government policy. **To act autonomously, you need to know about your options.** To see this, consider a personal case. Suppose you’re a twenty-one-year-old choosing whether to be a politician or a banker. But you have no idea what either career involves. Here, your ignorance means that you are not in a good position to make an autonomous choice (Raz 1986, 382; Lovett 2020). The less you know about your options, the less autonomous is your choice.
10. Parallely, citizens need to know about their options in the ballot booth to be able to make an autonomous choice. If they don’t know about what the parties will do in office or the consequence of those actions, then they are not in a good position to autonomously choose who to vote for. And so they are not in a good position to, via their vote, be autonomous author of government policy. In other words, **the less citizens know about their political options, the less we achieve democratic autonomy.**

### 1.2. Democratic Equality

11. The second aspect of democracy’s value is equality (Christiano 2008; Kolodny 2014; Viehoff 2014; 2019; Lovett 2024). **Democracy helps preclude relationships of subordination.** To understand this value,

consider the relationship of master to slave, lord to peasant, or Brahmin to Untouchable. These relationships are intrinsically objectionable—we have a right against being subjected to them. And they're partly constituted by asymmetries of power. Part of what it is to be subordinated to someone, to be their inferior, is for them to have asymmetric power over you. Democracy ameliorates asymmetries in political power asymmetries. So it ameliorates these inegalitarian relationships.

12. One person has power over another when they can affect their behaviour or well-being. I have power over you when I can make your life worse or get you to do what I want. So it is asymmetries in this ability to affect people that democracy aims to eradicate. Yet **the extent to which one person has power over another is mediated by their knowledge**. To see this, imagine that you're imprisoned. Your cell door, let's suppose, is a combination lock. Do I have the power to free you? Only if I know what the combination is. I have the ability to affect your well-being and behaviour only insofar as I know how to affect your well-being and behaviour (Lovett 2020). It follows that if you know much more than me, you often have power over me. Knowledge is power.
13. This point applies, more specifically, to political power. Many voters are able to affect one another's behaviour by voting for a party that will enact the policies they want. But consider a voter who has no real knowledge of what policies the parties will enact. This voter has very little ability to affect their fellow citizens' behaviour via voting. So more knowledgeable voters have asymmetric power over this voter. In other words, inequalities of political knowledge generate power asymmetries. Since such asymmetries generate relationships of subordination, they are objectionable. **The more unequally is political knowledge distributed, the less well we achieve democratic equality.**

## Section 2: The Case for Civic Education

14. This background theorizing allows us to see the case for civic education clearly. Educating adolescents about politics can do two things. First, it can increase they know about politics (Niemi and Junn 1998; Green et al. 2011). This helps them make autonomous choices in the ballot booth, and so facilitates democratic autonomy. Second, educating adolescents can help even out inequalities of political knowledge (Campbell and Niemi 2016; Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets 2016). This helps reduce asymmetries of political power, and so helps facilitate democratic equality. **The core of the case of civic education is that it promotes democratic autonomy and democratic equality.**
15. If this is so, what kind of topics should civic education teach? **Civic education should teach voters facts relevant to their political choices**, and especially their choice who to vote for. What kind of facts are relevant? We shouldn't understand this in entirely subjective terms. A fact is not relevant to one of my choices just because I happen to believe that it is relevant. Suppose I think that the most important difference between the parties is what colour their logo is. That does not make the colour of their logo the most relevant fact to my choice of who to vote for. Instead, the facts relevant to political choices are those that determine which choice best coheres with a voter's core values.
16. **Facts about what the parties will do in office and the likely consequences of such actions are very relevant to voter's political choices.** Such facts matter to autonomy, because knowledge of them lets voters know what outcomes electing a party is likely to bring about. This is required for them to be author of these outcomes. And such facts matter to equality, because knowledge of them lets voters know how voting for a party will influence their fellow citizens. This is required for them to have the ability to affect their fellow citizens behaviour and well-being. More abstractly, these facts bear critically on whether a vote choice coheres with a voter's core values.

17. The facts that bear on what the parties will do in office and the likely consequences of those actions are facts about policy. They are facts about what the standard policy positions of the parties are, and what the likely consequences are of different policies. **Facts about policy are different from facts about political institutions.** The latter kind of fact include facts such as the number of members in the House of Representatives, or the voting system for the Senate, or the role of the High Court. These are facts about the processes and structure of Australian government.
18. Facts about political institutions can help citizens make voting decisions. But, usually, **facts about political institutions are less relevant to citizens in the ballot booth than are facts about policy.** It doesn't matter to most citizens whether there are seventy-five, one-hundred and fifty or five hundred members of the House of Representatives. That is not relevant to which party they will vote for. It's not important to most citizens whether the voting system for the Senate is proportional or majoritarian. It isn't relevant to their preferences between different candidates. Facts about policy matter more to voting decisions than do facts about political institutions.
19. It follows that **civic education should primarily aim to teach facts about policy.** This is because civic education should aim to teach citizens facts relevant to their political choices, and facts about policy are more relevant to citizens political choices than are facts about political institutions. Of course, civic education should not eschew teaching facts about political institutions. But the primary focus should be on teaching facts that help voters make decisions about who to vote for. That means teaching facts about policy.

### Section 3: Reforming the Curriculum

20. **The current Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum predominantly focuses on teaching facts about political institutions.**<sup>1</sup> In Year 7, students focus on the Australian constitution. In Year 8, students focus on how laws are made and on the different kinds of laws. In Year 9, students focus on how political parties, interest groups and the media influence government. In Year 10, students compare Australian governments to governments in Asia and explore Australia's role in international organization. The focus is on the processes and structure of Australian government.
21. **There is no formal inclusion of policy issues in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.** The curriculum does include some topics besides political institutions for adolescents to learn. In Year 9, for example, students learn about the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and about national identity. In Year 10 they spend some time on the values and practices that help sustain democracy. But, since its inception, the curriculum has not included policy. It does not include discussion of taxation, or healthcare, or immigration, or inequality, or housing and so on.
22. Civic education should primarily aim to teach facts about policy. It follows that the current version of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum has the wrong content. It is not teaching citizens about the things that are most relevant to them when they make voting decisions. So, we should rebalance the Civics and Citizenship curriculum. **The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority should include policy issues on the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.** It is only by doing that that it properly equips citizens to make political decisions.

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/civics-and-citizenship/>

23. What policy issues should students learn about? This can be decided by references to several factors. On the one hand, **surveys often ask Australians what the most important issues facing the nation are.** A recent Ipsos survey, for example, found that 61% of Australians identified the cost of living, 42% identified housing, and 29% identified healthcare and the economy (Ipsos 2024). That Australian citizens enduringly identify an issue as important in response to surveys is good reason to teach Australian adolescents about the policy disputes connected to that issue.
24. On the other hand, journalists and parties often identify what the most important policy issues dividing the parties are at each election. **News organizations, especially, publish articles laying out what the main policy differences are between the parties** (e.g., Lal 2022; Staff reporters 2022). That experts repeatedly identify some selection of policy dispute as most important is good reason to teach adolescents about the different sides of that dispute. Both factors should have a bearing on what policy disputes it is best to teach in Civic and Citizenship classes. The point is that we're not adrift in deciding what policy disputes to teach—there are sensible ways to make such curriculum decisions.
25. Let's give a concrete example. **Consider taxation policy.** The optimal level of taxation is a longstanding dispute between Liberal and Labor parties. Very roughly, the Labor party prefers more taxation and more spending, and the Liberal policy prefers less of both. Knowing the general arguments for and against more (or less) taxation would help citizens decide between these parties in the ballot booth. So, there is good reason teach adolescent Australians about these arguments. By doing this, schools will give Australian adolescents the knowledge to make decisions for themselves when they become adults.
26. **Policy disputes can be taught in a neutral way.** The key task is to teach both sides of policy debates. When it comes to taxation policy, for example, some claim higher taxation leads to less growth. Others claim that higher taxation is essential for economic equality. The curriculum's content should focus on these differing arguments. For most longstanding policy disputes, there are perfectly reasonable arguments on both sides. Teachers can similarly focus on teaching the debate. They needn't (and obviously shouldn't) take a side when teaching these policy disputes.
27. **My main recommendation is to include policy issues in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.** This would constitute a substantial improvement in Australian civic education. It would furnish Australian citizens with the tools that they need to make informed choices about who to vote for.

### Section 3: Conclusion

28. The core case for civic education is that it helps facilitate democratic autonomy and democratic equality. But not all education equally facilitates these democratic values. The most important knowledge to impart to students is knowledge relevant to their primary political choices: who to vote for on election day. That is knowledge bearing on the policies of the different parties and the considerations on different sides of such policy disputes. So, in conclusion, **the Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum should be rebalanced to focus on policy issues.**

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