

Promoting Parliament: civic education and social media

Perceptions of parliament: the civic education factor — 2010 Western Australian findings

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Introduction

This article reports on the findings of a survey commissioned by the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia for early May 2010. The survey sought to assess community views about the performance of the workings of the Western Australian Parliament. First, an overview of the re-emergence of civic education in Australia and the role of parliaments, and other agencies in this ‘movement’, is briefly addressed. Reference is then made to some earlier surveys undertaken in Western Australia, primarily by the same polling company. Cost factors limited the scale of the State-wide survey but questions are posed about the purpose of visits to parliament, views about the workings of parliament, community communications with parliamentarians and the influence of the media on the workings of parliament. An attempt is then made to ascertain whether political and civic education is thought to influence views on the workings of parliament. A critical finding, though tentative, is that civic education, and contact with parliamentarians and the parliament, makes a positive difference to the perceptions of parliament and its workings. Some one third of the electorate have visited the parliament, mainly for an educational reason. About 40 per cent of the electorate recorded some contact with members of parliament, mostly at social or street gatherings. A net 61 per cent satisfaction rating was recorded with the perceived work standards of the parliament. Only 35 per cent of electors believe the portrayal of the workings of the Western Australian parliament by the media is ‘generally accurate’.

Preamble

Giving consideration to the value of civic education to a polity has a long tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks, particularly Aristotle who contended that to preserve the framework of government and a ‘way of life’, citizens needed to be educated in the ‘spirit’ of their constitutions. Many thinkers in the western tradition such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill also wrote of the need for political and civic education. Australian education

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inherited this tradition to learning about the principles of government in courses widely known as 'civics'.¹ Most Australian states had comprehensive civics curriculums in the early years of federation. Since then civics has ebbed and flowed as a subject for study in schools. The thoughts of the ancients have always been important in promoting civic education and today there is an unprecedented commitment to its place in the curriculum. Recent national developments will be briefly canvassed in this article, however, what is rarely examined is the extent to which civic education can make a difference to various aspects of a polity, including broad considerations as visits and perceptions of parliament. This is addressed as the major focus of what follows, which concentrates on Western Australian.

National commitment to reduce the 'civics deficit'

Reports by parliaments and electoral commissions were at the forefront of rekindling an interest in Australian political and civic education. One landmark Senate report, *Education for Active Citizenship in 1989*, recommended a series of political and civic measures to help overcome 'a crisis which Australian cannot afford to ignore'.² A comprehensive documentation of civic education at the national level then appeared in a report entitled *Whereas the People*,³ produced by the Prime Minister's Civic Group, which argued that 'citizenship should be the mortar that holds together the bricks of our contemporary, multi-cultural Australia'.⁴ The authors put the view 'that education for citizenship ranks with English and mathematics as a priority for school education and that it is an essential component of a liberal education'.⁵ The report created considerable national interest, as it included the results of research which has been sponsored by the Group. They indicated apparent deficiencies in knowledge and civic competence that led the Group to identify a 'civics deficit.'

One of the most significant educational developments on citizenship matters and civic education took place at the 1989 Hobart meeting of the Australian Education Council. The Ministers for Education in their 'Declaration' endorsed Goal Seven of the Common and Agreed National Goals of Schooling, with 'the aim to develop knowledge, skills and values which enable students to participate as active and

¹ Citizenship scholar Kerry Kennedy recently said 'civics is the component of the school curriculum that seeks to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes about the political life of society' in *The Australian Oxford Companion to Australian Politics* (2007), South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p. 104.

² *Education for Active Citizenship* (1989), Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Canberra: AGPS, p. 6.

³ *Whereas the People: Civics and Citizenship Education*, Report of the Civics Expert Group, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994.

⁴ *Whereas the People: Civics and Citizenship Education: Summary of Report of the Civics Expert Group*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994, p. 5.

⁵ *Whereas the People: Civics and Citizenship Education: Summary of Report of the Civics Expert Group*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994, p. 13.

informed citizens in our democratic Australian society within an international context.⁷ The subsequent Adelaide (1999) and Melbourne Declarations (2008) had similar tones. These signatories were important because they were made by the major political parties. It appeared that one of the greatest barriers to political and civic education, the fear of political party bias, was being eroded. Perhaps the lessening of the ideological divide between the major Labor and Liberal parties has helped to reduce this concern. Some states and territories incorporated civics, to various degrees in their respective curriculums. In Western Australia, for instance, citizenship was integrated into the curriculum framework without specific requirements.

National statements and national testing

By July 2003 the intergovernmental Ministerial Education Council (known as MCEECDYA from 2009)⁶ had witnessed a set of National Citizenship Statements of Learning for Civics and Citizenship having been negotiated for years 3,5,7 and 9. They were released in August 2006 for implementation by all states and territories by 2008. As early as April 1999 the intergovernmental Ministerial Council endorsed a program to monitor progress towards the National Goals for Schooling. Civics and Citizenship testing, with carefully considered protocols, were scheduled on a rolling triennial basis for year 6 and year 10 students in 2004, 2007 and 2010. The national tests were constructed with reference to proficiency levels for two key performance measures (KPMs) for civics and citizenship. One band was based on knowledge of key concepts and understandings related to civic institutions and processes in Australian democracy, government, law, national identity, diversity, cohesion and social justice. The second band of KPMs related to attitudes, values, dispositions, beliefs and actions that underpin democratic citizenship. The domains, including the professional elaborations, take into account the various state and territory civics and citizenship curriculum frameworks which contribute to the two measures.

‘National’ testing though has been limited to identifying 5 per cent of schools. As only one class in each of these schools with year six and year ten students attempt the test it means that only some 2 per cent of students are surveyed on each occasion. Of course some of these students have not received any formal civic education although no individual students are identified in the publication of the results. Nor are the test results published with reference to each particular question. Instead the standard variables of state/territory, metropolitan and country region, socio-economic factors (parental occupation), gender, language background and Indigenous students are identified. The survey is conducted in the classroom and administered by the student’s regular teacher. Schools taking part in the sample assessment receive reports summarising their student’s results. In summary it is

⁶ MCEECDYA-Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs previously MCEETYA from 1993 Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs.

very 'hit and miss'. It is questionable how much the testing is specifically providing evidence of the proficiency levels in civics.

Symbolically, though, it is extremely significant that civics courses and testing are endorsed across the political spectrum remembering, too, that in most cases to become an Australian citizen since October 2007 it is necessary to pass a citizenship test based on a booklet now titled *Australian Citizenship: Our Common Bond*. With this requirement in mind it could be expected that Civics and Citizenship would be one of the first rounds subjects for the introduction of the National Curriculum. As we know, however, english, mathematics, science and history (with some reference to citizenship) are first for formulation in 2010. For round two, some 12 months later come geography, languages and the arts. Then round three, is to include consideration of the remaining learning areas listed in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration. This includes information and communication technology, design and technology, health and physical education, economics, business and civics and citizenship. The later will again 'offer hope' including resources for the subject which are readily available through the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment website, maintained by the Curriculum Corporation.

Western Australian civic agencies and parliamentary polls

At the Western Australian Parliament (in concert with other Australian jurisdictions) the national endorsement of civics and citizenship has been recognised. It has made a significant commitment to making an influential contribution to parliamentary and civic education in the state. Other agencies in Western Australia including the Australian and Western Australian electoral commissions, together with Western Australian Constitutional Centre and the Francis Burt Legal Education Centres, have also played an important civic education role. A Civics and Citizenship Reference Group, with representation from all of the agencies as well as Education Department and Curriculum Council meets quarterly with an informational and co-ordinating role. Known to these agencies have been some surveys conducted in Western Australia in the wake of *Part Two of the Report of the Royal Commission into the Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters (1992)*, popularly known as 'WA Inc'. They revealed that the public overwhelmingly regarded being educated in the political process as part of the national civic ideal.⁷ The Commission's report had included a section headed 'Parliament and Public Education'. It was claimed that 'knowledge of our constitutional and administrative arrangements is a pre-requisite for effective action in democracy.'⁸ The post WA Inc. survey had revealed a greater interest in political matters than is often assumed. This was again confirmed in a 2006 community

⁷ Harry C. J. Phillips (1993), 'Political Education-Survey Findings in the Wake of WA Inc.', *Legislative Studies*, 8(1), Spring, p. 38

⁸ *Report of the Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters, Part 11*, Western Australia, October 1992, 5–12.

survey conducted under the auspices of the Western Australian Parliament.⁹ A constant outcome for a majority of respondents is the inadequacy of their political education. One survey of Western Australian electors in 1995 had indicated that some 79 per cent of the respondents reported they knew ‘hardly anything’ or nothing about the State Constitution or ‘did not know’ it existed. Three years later, in a replica study, the proportion of electors in the same broad category had fallen to 54 per cent.¹⁰ The more positive response possibly reflects more community focus on constitutional matters and the gradually increasing focus on political and civic education.

There is a realisation, however, that little is known about the contribution of civic education to the body politic. At the initiative of the Peter McHugh, the Clerk of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly, it was decided to authorise a public survey in accordance with the 2010 Australasian Study of Parliament Group Conference theme namely ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Perceptions of Parliament’. One particular sub-theme ‘Does Civic Education Improve Perceptions?’ was regarded as a central question. In order to obtain public opinions Patterson Market Research was engaged for the survey. This market research company has been the agency for *The West Australian* newspaper for two decades. As its recent record for electoral predictions had been very good, a series of questions were constructed for a state-wide survey which was conducted in the first week of May 2010. The survey was conducted with a random sample of 410 respondents, 310 within the metropolitan area and 100 in country Western Australia. As all respondents were eligible to vote in the next state election it effectively meant that the sample of people aged 18 years or older in Western Australia. The variables were age (above and below 35 years), gender, location (metropolitan and country) and household income (see Tables 2.1 to 2.8). Upon reflection an indication of the highest formal level of education would have been insightful.

In this survey about one-third (34%) of the adult people in Western Australia indicated they had visited the Western Australian parliament.

The results were fairly evenly distributed between the different age and gender groups. Understandably, with the great geographic expanse of Western Australia, the ratio of people from country regions that have visited the Parliament is lower than for metropolitan people. A similar question on focussed on visits to the Western Australian Parliament for a November 1992 survey by the same agency, Patterson Market Research, recorded a higher percentage of 41 per cent of the electorate visiting the Parliament, with very little difference between men and women, and a similar differential on the age and region factors.

⁹ Phillip Pental, David Black and Harry Phillips (2007), *Parliament: Mirror of the People?* Perth: Western Australian Parliament. See Community Survey, pp. 261–86.

¹⁰ Harry Phillips, et. al. (1998), *Representing the People: Parliamentary Government in Western Australia*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, pp.13–14.

Detailed Findings

Visited Western Australian Parliament

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they had ever visited the Western Australian Parliament.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100K	\$101K+
		N=401 %	N=109 %	N=292 %	N=198 %	N=204 %	N=313 %	N=89 %	N=177 %	N=98 %
Yes	34	31	35	35	33	37	25	27	36	46
No	66	69	65	65	67	63	74	73	64	54
Don't know	0	-	1	0	0	0	1	0	-	-
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

Again the question was asked by the same agency in December 2003 with 45 per cent of respondents indicating they had visited the Parliament. Readings on the basis of gender, age, metropolitan and country were similar.

One significant observation in 2010, made possible by the inclusion of a household income variable (less than \$60,000 per annum, with K standing for thousands), is that lower income people have been less likely to visit the Parliament of Western Australia.

In summary it can be concluded that at least one third of the electorate has visited the Western Australian Parliament. Of course, this survey for the time being, excludes the vast numbers of students who visit the Parliament. Of special interest is the differential based on household income.

Purpose of most recent visit

The respondents who had visited the Western Australian parliament before (34%) were asked about the purpose of their (most recent) visit.

For most people the purpose of their visit to the Western Australian parliament was to join an educational tour (53%). Another 14% went sightseeing and for 9% the visit was work related.

The younger respondents (up to 35 years) went for an educational tour (80% vs. 44%) more often than the older respondents, who in return more often mentioned 'sightseeing' (17% vs. 2%). Work related visit (11% vs. 2%), 'lunch/morning tea'

(10% vs. 3%) and/or to 'view a debate' (10% vs. 0%) were reasons for visiting the parliament. Presumably some electors when visiting an MP would do so by visiting a Member's electorate office in their district or region.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100K	\$101K+
	N=136 %	N=34 %	N=102 %	N=69 %	N=67 %	N=114 %	N=22 %	N=47 %	N=35 %	N=47 %
Educational Tour	53	80	44	65	41	51	62	49	40	67
Sightseeing	14	2	17	11	17	12	21	21	8	10
Work Related	9	2	11	9	10	9	12	4	14	10
Lunch / morning tea	8	3	10	8	8	9	4	13	6	4
To view a debate	7	-	10	5	10	9	-	6	16	3
Participate in protest	4	9	6	2	6	5	-	7	3	2
Visit an MP	1	-	2	1	2	2	-	-	5	-
Other	7	9	6	5	9	8	4	6	6	4
Don't know	1	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	2	-
TOTALS	104	100	106	105	104	105	103	107	100	102

Male respondents mentioned a visit for an educational tour more often than did female respondents (65% vs. 41%). On the basis of educational tours alone the country figures are higher. This reflects the tendency, particularly in the last decade, for school groups to travel to Perth to visit the Parliament and sometimes the nearby Constitutional Centre and Electoral Education Centre, as part of an educational program. Not indicated in the figures is the availability of 'the virtual tour' on the internet. Particularly in the last year the Education Office has also visited large areas of the mining and pastoral regions where many Indigenous students are enrolled.

The perceived work standards of the WA Parliament

The respondents were asked to indicate what their perceptions about the standard of workings of the Western Australian Parliament are, based on what they knew or had heard. The scale used was very high standard; quite a high standard; satisfactory; quite low; and very low.

Most respondents (48%) rated the work standards of the parliament as 'satisfactory' although not many respondents rated the work standards as 'quite high' (13%) or 'very high' (1%). Nevertheless, the net 'satisfactory and above' rating was 61%. Subsequently 21% and 8% of the respondents considered the work standards to be 'quite low' or 'very low'. Some 9% of the respondents were not able to provide a clear answer to this question.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100K	\$101K+
		N=401 %	N=109 %	N=292 %	N=198 %	N=204 %	N=313 %	N=89 %	N=177 %	N=98 %
Very High	1	-	2	0	2	1	-	2	-	-
Quite High	13	18	11	15	12	13	13	11	12	18
Satisfactory	48	48	48	50	46	47	52	47	48	50
Quite Low	21	17	23	20	22	21	21	23	21	15
Very Low	8	6	9	8	8	9	6	8	12	6
Don't know	9	12	7	7	10	9	8	8	7	11
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
NET HIGH	14	18	13	15	14	15	13	13	12	18
NET LOW	29	23	32	28	30	30	28	32	33	21

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

The results were fairly equally distributed for the different subgroups; younger respondents (up to 35 years) and people within the highest income group (\$101K+, with K standing for thousands) slightly more often rated the working standard as 'net' high, whereas the above 35 age group respondents and people within the lower income groups (less than \$60,000 dollars) more often rated the working standard as 'net' low, although this was not deemed as statistically significant.

Personal Contact with Member(s) of the Western Australian Parliament

The respondents were asked whether they had ever met or had any direct communication with Members of the Western Australian parliament. Two-out-of-five (39%) of the people surveyed in Western Australia indicated they have had personal contact with one or more members of the Western Australian parliament. On the other hand 61% of all respondents had never met or had any direct communications with a member of the Western Australian parliament. In the future this figure could alter if internet communications are included. As the following table indicates the internet is being recognised a means of political participation.

Some respondents who had participated in petition signing may not have recalled this activity.

Older respondents (36+ years), rural residents and the people within the higher income groups have slightly more often experienced personal dealings with one of more members of the Western Australian parliament compared to respectively younger respondents, metropolitan residents and people in the lowest income group. Once again the latter is not considered statistically significant but it should be regarded as an important finding suggesting that household income is a factor which needs consideration. This is broadly in keeping with the National Citizenship school testing which indicates that the socio-economic location of various schools is a variable in performance.

	TOTAL		AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
	Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100K	\$101K+		
	N=401 %	N=109 %	N=292 %	N=198 %	N=204 %	N=313 %	N=89 %	N=177 %	N=98 %	N=102 %	
Yes	39	32	42	38	41	38	45	33	44	45	
No	61	68	58	62	59	62	54	67	56	55	
Don't know	0	-	0	-	0	-	1	-	-	-	
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

Form of Contact with Western Australian MPs

The respondents who had previously experienced personal contact with one or more members of the Western Australian parliament (117 or 39%) were asked how this contact took place from a pre-determined list of categories.

The respondents who have been in direct contact with one or more members of the Western Australian parliament often mentioned 'a social gathering / street greeting' (40%) or 'meeting the MP at other location' (22%) as the way they had contact with the MP(s). Another 15% indicated contact via a letter or via e-mail and 8% has been in contact with the MP(s) through their work.

The results were fairly equally spread over the different subgroups but the small numbers in each category made it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Clearly, though, social gatherings are still an important mode of communication for electors with their members of parliament.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100	\$101K+
At a social gathering or street greeting	40	47	37	37	42	38	43	37	40	42
Meeting MP at other location (not just street greeting)	22	5	27	18	26	22	21	17	34	17
Letter/Email	15	15	15	19	12	17	11	15	19	15
Through work	8	4	9	11	6	8	10	9	8	7
Other community meeting (e.g. school visit, union meeting, party event, poll day)	8	11	7	9	7	8	6	7	4	13
Visit to Electorate Office	5	-	7	6	5	4	9	7	5	2
Friends with them or through friends / family	5	2	6	8	3	4	9	8	2	7
Telephone	5	2	5	2	7	4	6	3	13	-
Visit to Member's Parliament House office	5	9	3	6	3	5	4	5	5	4
Visiting Parliament	2	-	3	1	3	3	-	3	2	-
Other	2	3	1	2	1	1	4	2	2	2
Don't know	0	-	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	-
TOTALS	117	100	122	120	115	115	125	115	133	109

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

Personal Contact with the Western Australian Parliament itself

The respondents were asked whether they previously had any communication with the Western Australian parliament itself (with Parliamentary Committees and Parliamentary Education Office mentioned in findings together with 'other').

Five percent of the electors in Western Australia indicated they previously had personal contact with the Western Australian parliament itself and 95% never had personal contact. It seemed that many respondents were not considering general educational visits in response to this question. The information calls to the parliament are often directed to the Education Office. The Parliamentary Library is not a public facility although it often assists in answering queries about

parliamentary practices and history, particularly if they emanate from the parliamentarians and the press.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100K	\$101K+
	N=401 %	N=109 %	N=292 %	N=198 %	N=204 %	N=313 %	N=89 %	N=177 %	N=98 %	N=102 %
Yes	5	3	6	5	5	6	3	3	9	4
No	95	97	94	95	94	94	96	97	91	96
Don't know	0	-	0	-	0	-	1	-	-	-
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

The older group of respondents (36+ years) and respondents in the Perth metropolitan area have slightly more contact with the Western Australian parliament than younger respondents (up to 35 years), rural people, and those with lower income. Again these figures can not be regarded as statistically significant.

The respondents who had personal contact with the Western Australian parliament itself (5%) were asked how exactly this contact took place. The results (on a total level) are shown below;

- 29%-made a submission to a Standing or Select Committee (n=6);
- 18%-sought assistance/guidance from other Parliamentary Officers (n=4);
- 13%-sought assistance/guidance from Parliament's Education Officers (n=3);
- 5%-provided oral evidence to a Standing or Select Committee (n=1);
- 46%-mentioned contact for (various) other reasons (n=9).

Based on the low sample size for this question (total sample: n=21, 5%), results on sub-group level are not shown.

Effect of personal contact on Opinions about the WA Parliament

Respondents who indicated they had personal contact with one or more members of the Western Australian parliament (39%) and respondents who indicated they have had personal contact with the parliament itself (5%) were asked whether their communication with the Parliament of Western Australia, or with its Members, had improved or reduced their opinion about the workings of the Parliament. The following scale was used: 1) Greatly Improved; 2) Slightly Improved; 3) No Effect; 4) Slightly Reduced; 5) Greatly Reduced.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		HOUSEHOLD INCOME		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	<\$60K	\$61-\$100K	\$101K+
	N=161 %	N=38 %	N=123 %	N=77 %	N=84 %	N=121 %	N=40 %	N=61 %	N=43 %	N=46 %
Greatly Improved	4	9	3	4	5	5	2	6	3	3
Slightly Improved	16	26	13	20	12	14	22	17	15	13
No effect	53	51	54	53	53	54	51	43	50	70
Slightly Reduced	12	9	12	12	11	10	16	17	9	7
Greatly Reduced	11	5	13	6	16	13	7	11	18	6
Don't know	4	-	5	5	2	4	2	6	5	-
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
NET Improved	20	35	16	24	17	19	24	23	18	16
NET Reduced	23	14	25	18	27	23	22	28	28	13

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

Fifty-three percent of the respondents who had been in contact with the parliament itself and/or with one or more of its members, indicated that this contact has had no effect on their opinions about the workings of the parliament. Some 20% claimed that their opinions of Parliament improved after having personal contact. In contrast, another 23% claimed that their opinions about Parliament were reduced after having personal contact. Younger respondents (up to 35 years), men and people in rural electorates slightly more often reported a positive influence of having contact. Whereas respondents of 36+ years and women were slightly more often reported a negative influence (although not statistically significant). Respondents in the lowest income groups seemed most often influenced by contact; they reported higher levels of influence (in both directions) compared to respondents with higher incomes.

Opinion on Accuracy Media Portrayal of WA Parliament

All respondents were asked to indicate how accurate they believe the picture is that the media portrays of the workings of the Western Australian Parliament. Instead of 'income classes', a subgroup based on 'exposure to parliament' is shown. The following scale was used: 1) Completely Accurate; 2) Generally Accurate; 3) Neither one nor the other; 4) Generally Inaccurate; 5) Completely Inaccurate.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		EXPOSURE TO PARL.		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	Visited Parliament	Met MP	No contact
	N=401 %	N=109 %	N=292 %	N=198 %	N=204 %	N=313 %	N=89 %	N=136 %	N=158 %	N=177 %
Completely Accurate	1	3	1	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Generally Accurate	34	31	36	38	31	37	24	34	28	36
Neither one nor the other	36	33	37	33	38	32	50	39	38	33
Generally Inaccurate	19	20	18	19	19	19	19	19	24	17
Completely Inaccurate	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	2
Don't know	7	11	5	5	9	8	3	4	4	11
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
NET Accurate	36	33	37	40	31	39	25	35	30	37
NET Inaccurate	22	23	21	21	22	22	22	22	28	19

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

Thirty-six percent of the respondents believed that the accuracy of the media portrayal of the Western Australian parliament is 'completely' (1%) or 'generally accurate' (34%). In contrast, 22% believed that the media portrayal is 'generally' (19%) or 'completely inaccurate' (3%). The highest percentage of respondents (36%) indicated that they did not have a firm opinion as to whether the media portrayal of the workings of parliament were accurate.

The results were fairly equally spread over the different subgroups. Men and metropolitan residents showed a greater propensity to believe in a 'generally accurate' media portrayal of Parliament's workings compared to women and rural residents. Interestingly, people who had met an MP before, more often than others thought that the media portrayal of the Western Australian parliament is 'generally inaccurate', though this result was not statistically significant.

Influence of Education on Opinions about the WA Parliament

The respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they expect that their 'political and civic education' had an influence on their perceptions of the workings of the parliament. Again, instead of 'income classes', a subgroup based on 'exposure to parliament' is shown. The following scale was used: 1) Very Great; 2) Quite Great; 3) Only moderate; 4) Slight; 5) None at all.

	TOTAL	AGE		GENDER		LOCATION		EXPOSURE TO PARL.		
		Up to 35 yrs	36 yrs plus	Male	Female	Metro	Country	Visited Parl.	Met MP	No contact
	N=401 %	N=109 %	N=292 %	N=198 %	N=204 %	N=313 %	N=89 %	N=136 %	N=158 %	N=177 %
Very Great	7	6	7	7	6	7	5	9	9	5
Quite Great	12	12	11	11	12	12	8	16	16	8
Only moderate	43	38	45	43	43	44	41	42	42	42
Slight	19	24	18	22	17	17	27	19	17	20
None at all	17	19	16	15	18	17	16	12	14	20
Don't know	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	4
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
NET Great	18	18	18	18	18	19	14	25	25	13
NET Slight /None	36	42	34	37	35	34	42	31	32	40

- Minor rounding errors may make the figures add beyond 100%

Eighteen percent of all respondents believed that their political and civic education had a 'very great' (7%) or 'quite great' (12%) influence on their perceptions of the workings of the Parliament. 43% of the respondents believed in a 'moderate' effect. 19% believed that the effect was only 'slight' and 17% answered 'no effect at all'. Younger people (up to 35 years) and rural people slightly more often believed that their education had 'only a slight' or 'no' influence compared to older respondents and metropolitan area respondents. Significantly, though, political and civic education (however acquired) is considered to have some impact. This tentative finding should be noted as it indicates that the spectrum of civic education does have an impact upon electors who 'enjoy' this educational experience. Interestingly, people who had visited parliament or had met an MP before, more often (than people who never had contact) thought that their education had a 'great' effect on their perception of the workings of parliament (significant at 95% level).

Concluding observations

The commitment to civic education has a long and formidable history. In Australia, and other comparable countries, interest in civic education was regenerated in the last quarter of a century with the nation's parliaments and electoral commissions supporting the respective Hobart (1989), Adelaide (1998) and Melbourne Declarations (2008) active citizenship goals. These goals have been ratified by the respective Ministers for Education.

Following the endorsement of national civics and citizenship descriptors their status has been enhanced by the testing of key performance measures (KPMs) for civics and citizenship. To date the findings have only been published in general terms. Very little is known about whether civics education has any impact on the perceptions of Parliament and its workings although it must be conceded that this has not been an objective of the limited national testing program.

This parliamentary sponsored survey has attempted to make some provisional steps towards ascertaining whether civic education and communications with parliamentarians has any bearing on the perceptions of Parliament. Moreover, what view do electors have of the media's reporting of parliament? Of course this study is limited to the Western Australian polity. It would need to be extended to other states for a more comprehensive picture but what aggregates did this preliminary step reveal?

Some one third of electors can record a visit to the Western Australian parliament, with an educational tour being the most frequent reason cited for such a visit. This fact makes it imperative that this tour needs to be interesting and effective. The virtual tour also needs to be well resourced. Although no real gender difference was observed, metropolitan area residence and higher income was associated with the visit to Parliament rates.

Two out of five electors indicated that they had contact with one or more members of the Western Australian parliament. This mostly takes the form of social gatherings but communications by letter, telephone and email were mentioned as well as visits to the electorate and parliamentary office. Personal contact with parliament itself, with the numbers being quite low, took the form of submissions to standing and select committees and seeking assistance from parliamentary officials such as the education officers. Contacts with the parliament were more frequent when they were linked to older respondents, those with metropolitan residence and those with higher household income.

One third of electors took the view that the media portrayal of the workings of the parliament was generally accurate. Another third thought the coverage was neither generally accurate or inaccurate. About 20 per cent of respondents thought the coverage of the workings of the Parliament was generally inaccurate or completely inaccurate. Interestingly, those who had met an MP before, more often than others thought that the media portrayal of the Western Australia is 'generally inaccurate'. In conclusion, a critical finding, though tentative, is that civic education, and contact with parliamentarians and the Parliament, makes a positive difference to the perceptions of Parliament and its workings.

Survey details

Questionnaire Design

The questions were designed by Patterson Market Research's Consultant, Keith Patterson, in consultation with key personnel from the Western Australian Parliament.

Methodology

The data included in the report was gathered using Patterson Market Research's monthly omnibus survey known as FlashPoll. FlashPoll is a quantitative telephone survey using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) for fast and efficient data collection and processing.

Data collection was carried out by West Coast Field Services (WCFS); a subcontractor to Patterson Market Research, from their CATI equipped phone room in Applecross, WA.

All interviewers were fully briefed regarding the methodology and questionnaire-specific instructions prior to commencing data collection.

Sample Reliability

Any survey is subject to sample error. Patterson Market Research and WCFS operate using systems that have been developed in line with the international standard for Market, Opinion and Social Research, the ISO 20252. As such stringent quality control procedures are applied to all elements of the research process, including sampling, quota management, data collection and processing and reporting.

Nonetheless, for the proportions estimated in this series, (sample error is reduced as the estimate moves away from the 50% level) a simple random sample of 400 voters will be within 2.5% of the "real figure" in about 7 out of 10 cases. The survey error at the 95% level of confidence would be +/- 4.9%. The "Metropolitan Only" component of 300 respondents will produce a survey error of +/- 5.7% at the 95% level of confidence, or +/- 2.8% in about 7 out of 10 cases.

Response rate

The response rate is calculated as the number of interviews as a proportion of the calls made. The response rate of 15% shown below is typical of modern quota controlled random dial surveys.

The response rate is shown in the table below:

Response Rate	N=401
Interviews	401
Refusals	1108
Answer machine	452
Call back	32
No reply/engaged	374
Termination	0
Total	2629
Overall Response Rate:	15%

Target Respondents and Sampling

The survey was conducted with a random sample of 401 respondents; 301 within the metropolitan area and 100 in country WA. All respondents were eligible to vote “in the next state election”. Effectively, this means a sample of people aged 18 years or older in WA.

The sample was drawn randomly from the Perth and regional White pages (on CD Rom). The broad sample was then loaded into the computer system and numbers were drawn randomly from this pool.

Data Collection Period

The data was collected from May 3rd until May 5th 2010. Interviewing was conducted between the hours of 4.30pm and 8.30pm each evening from a central phone room. The sample composition was carefully monitored as the survey was in progress, and any sample aberrations corrected by quota sampling.

Data Processing and Analysis

As a means of ensuring the highest quality of data, WCFS routinely validate a proportion of all data. Effectively this means a random selection of respondents are re-contacted and their recorded responses are checked to ensure the most accurate recording of data is upheld by the field team at all times.

The data was analysed using Patterson Market Research’s survey analysis software: SurveyCraft.

The data was carefully weighted to a twelve cell age/gender/region weights matrix to replicate the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) profile of the Western Australian adult population. Patterson Market Research routinely weights data to ensure that the sample profile most closely represents to true profile of the WA community, in terms of age and gender.

Profile of Respondents

The survey covered 402 adults in Western Australia, with the sampling stratified by age, gender, and region. Table T2.1 below shows the age, gender and regional distribution of the “raw” data, and the weighted profile. The profile for weighting was the 2006 census.

Profile of Respondents	Un-Weighted	Weighted
	N=402	N=401
	%	%
Age: 18-35 years	28	27
36+ years	72	73
	100	100
Gender: Male	50	49
Female	50	51
	100	100
Region: Metro	75	78
Country	25	22
	100	100

The above profile replicates the age, gender and distribution of West Australian adults aged 18 years and over. ▲

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Addendum

David Marr (2010), 'Power Trip: The Political Journey of Kevin Rudd', *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 38, pp. 18-19.

'Australia-The Democracy'. (Kevin Rudd- Early Version-Nambor *Chronicle*).

Kevin [Rudd] said the present apathy on the part of many voters, and the "donkey vote", could only be overcome by the dissemination of a workable knowledge of the subject of government in such a form as to be comprehensible to the man in the street. He called attention to the fact that no compulsory provisions exist for a student to obtain an elementary knowledge of this subject at school. He advocated that the subject of government be introduced to school curricula, which would entail an examination of the policies of major parties and the structure of government.