



# RAISE OUR VOICE

## Young people and public leadership

A national survey of young  
Australians to understand how  
they envision and relate to  
careers in politics and policy.

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# Introduction

While the business case for diversity is becoming more widely accepted, diversity work remains underdeveloped in state public sector bodies and in political spaces. This contrasts the federal public service, which has taken significant steps to ensure its workforce reflects its population; however, there's still a way to go when considering the participation of young Australians.

The *Our Public Service, Our Future: Independent Review of the Australian Public Service (2019)*, led by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, states that “To be fit for purpose...the APS must ensure a diverse and inclusive environment that accepts individuals’ differences, embraces their strengths and provides opportunities for all employees to achieve their potential” (p. 216). It acknowledges that the Australian Public Service (APS) has progressed in promoting women and employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but is behind in gender equity, the retention of culturally diverse employees, and employing people with disabilities. In response, the Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2026 was launched.

## It’s not enough to ask ‘where are the women?’

The most recent iteration of the *Australian Public Service State of the Service Report (2022–23)* highlights that women comprise 60.4 per cent of the APS. Women have overtaken men at all levels except Graduate and Senior Executive Service (SES) level 3, and 2023 was the first year that women have overtaken men at SES level 2. There is minimal data on intersectional identities at each level, and data on gender-diverse people in the APS workforce is lacking. Further, the APS does not publish data on gender segregation in the workforce. While the strategy commits to collecting intersectional data, it only reports on singular diversity categories – for instance, the section on gender equality does not include data on women who are also culturally and linguistically diverse, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, neurodiverse or have a disability, or identify as LGBTQIA+. While the report notes 5.5 per cent of employees are aged 18–24, broader discussions on age, and strategies to attract young women and gender-diverse people to the workforce are also missing.

# Introduction

The lack of intersectional data continues in state and territory public service bodies, with the exception of Victoria. In 2023 Victoria established a Commissioner for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, and released a baseline report on intersectional gender equality, which (to our delight) also examines the role of age and other compounding inequalities. However, it defines “youth” as ages 18–39, deviating from the federal Office for Youth's definition of ages 12–25. While the report does not contain specific measures to support the recruitment and retention of young people, it is an extremely positive start.

Victoria remains the national leader in intersectionality in the public service, though it has yet to publish intersectional data. Other state and territory public services have: committed to drafting a gender equality plan (ACT), set targets for gender equality (NSW), or have gender equality plans which are years out of date (TAS, SA, NT and QLD), and WA has no public service gender equality plan at all. For the plans that do exist, proposals to attract and retain young women and gender-diverse people are missing.

Across the country, progress has been made in parliamentary gender equality. As of 28 January 2024, The parliaments of the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia comprise over 50 per cent women, with the Northern Territory and Victoria close behind at 48 per cent and 47.7 per cent respectively. Queensland has the lowest representation of women at 30.4 per cent. Federally, 2022 saw the election of our most diverse parliament. This followed an election campaign which positioned gender equality as a central topic of conversation, and an issue which mobilised voters. Millennial voters narrowly outnumbered the numbers of baby boomers. The Australian Electoral Commission recorded the largest ever voter enrolment period ahead of the 2022 election, with the majority of new voters being young people aged 18–24. This was evident in the election outcome, leading some in the media to declare the election a “youthquake”. Sadly, despite the groundswell of young voters, the number of representatives aged 30 or under in Parliament only increased from one to three. The Commonwealth Parliament current comprises 38.7 per cent women.

# Introduction

Despite the growing power of young voters, political parties are not actively working to attract young members. In turn, young people are turning away from a political system they see as not representing them. Contrary to the opinion that young people are politically disengaged, our research echoes prior studies showing that young people are politically engaged and active, but are disenfranchised with politics in its current form and lack role models.

We must ask: how do we attract a younger generation of changemakers to our public sector and politics workforces, and what is needed for young women and gender-diverse people to be celebrated for the perspectives and experience which they contribute? This question will progress discussions from a focus solely on women towards the achievement of true gender equality, diversity and inclusion in all its forms and across all generations. In doing so, we create better public policy outcomes for all Australians.

Young people – young women and gender diverse people in particular – have always been on the forefront of change. Over the last few years, we've seen young women and gender diverse people leading our climate movements, and reforming consent laws and education across Australia. It is time we welcomed these young women and gender-diverse people to design their futures through formal public policy and politics with a meaningful seat at the table.

Raise Our Voice Australia's core mission is to mobilise young women and gender-diverse people through education, campaigns and community to transform policy and politics. To do that, we need to first understand their views on public leadership careers – that is, politics and public policy, including their motivations, and barriers to entry. It is only once we stop and listen that we can make progress.

# The Survey: Key Takeaways

Raise Our Voice Australia engaged PureProfile to conduct a 10-minute online survey in October 2021. The survey of 1,006 Australians aged 16–29 found that:

1

**While half of young people were optimistic about the future of their communities, optimism was lower for girls and women (compared to boys and men) and declined among people aged 23+ years.**

In general, young people felt that their vote can make a difference. While they understood the impact of government decisions, they didn't feel represented in politics or have a clear understanding of how the system works.

2

**Compared to boys and men, girls and women had less interest in careers in politics and policy, lower confidence in their qualifications and were least likely to imagine themselves in top political jobs.**

Young people listed their interest in working in politics and policy at 17 per cent and 15 per cent respectively – this figure was higher among gender-diverse young people.

3

**One in three young people saw themselves as leaders, though this identification with leadership was lower among girls, women and gender-diverse people compared to boys and men.**

Almost all young people could see themselves as leaders in the future, but were more likely to see themselves as potential leaders in workplaces or families as opposed to in communities or in government. Positively, people living with a disability and those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds were strongly represented among those who would be interested in a career in both politics and policy.

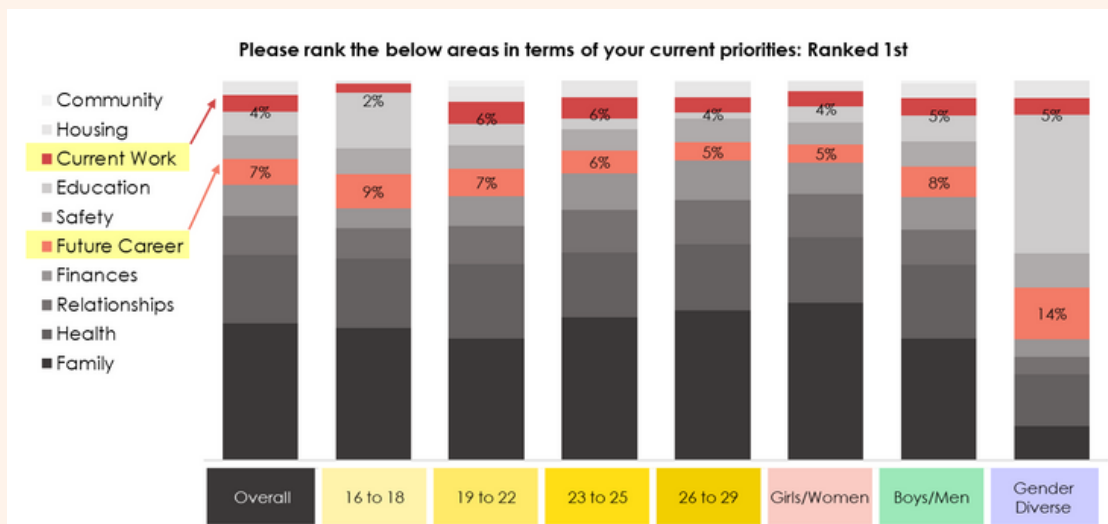
□ n=1,006 Australians aged 16-29. n=252 aged 16-18. n=253 aged 19-22. □ n=250 aged 23-25. n=251 aged 26-29. 2% of respondents identified as gender-diverse, 8% identified as someone living with a disability, 12% identified as LGBTQIA+, 5% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 29% identified as culturally, ethnically or linguistically diverse.

# Careers in public decision-making

Young women were less likely to rank their career as their first priority.

Eleven per cent of young people listed ‘future career’ or ‘current work’ as their number one priority. This was much lower for gender-diverse persons. Overall, the majority of young people had other key priorities outside their potential future employment, including family, health, relationships and finances.

Younger people (under 23) were more likely to consider their future careers a top 3 priority. By gender, girls and women were more likely to rank their future careers last. 40 per cent of girls and women ranked future careers 8th to 10th in priority (compared to 27 per cent of boys and men). 19 per cent of gender-diverse persons elected either ‘current career’ or ‘top career’ as their top priority.



3 in 10 young people thought about their future career frequently. 16–18 year olds were most likely to think about their future careers with less consideration as age increased.

# Careers in policy and politics

Young women were less likely to consider a career in politics or policy when compared to boys and young men. Gender-diverse respondents were far more likely to consider a career in these spaces.

Among other career fields, a minority of respondents considered policy (14 per cent) or politics (12 per cent), ranking a career in law or public policy 9th out of 14 options, and government or politics 10th. Gender-diverse people were more likely than girls and women, and boys and men to consider working in these fields.

When prompted specifically on a career in politics, 15 per cent of respondents had considered it. This included 19 per cent of boys and men compared to 10 per cent of girls and women. Positively, 27 per cent of gender-diverse respondents had considered a career in politics.

Only 15 per cent of respondents believed they could be prime minister one day, with only 16 per cent of respondents believing they could be a state premier. Half of respondents believed that government is an important actor in solving important social challenges but only 1 in 4 respondents could see themselves solving social challenges through careers in government.

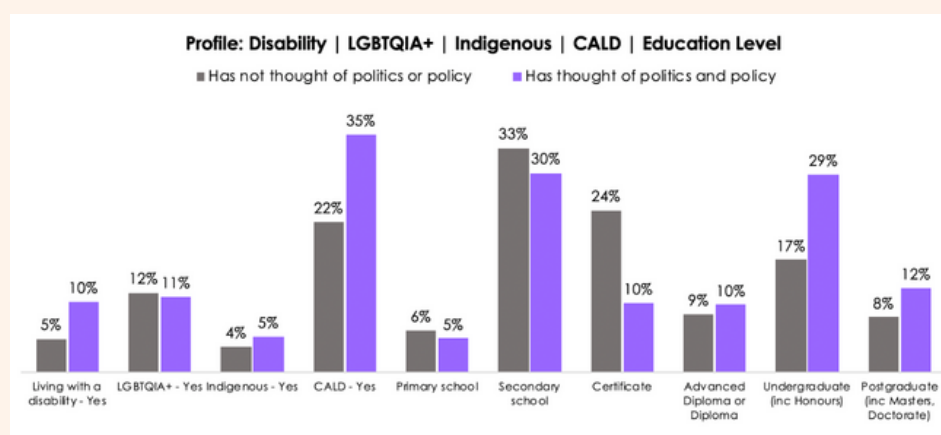
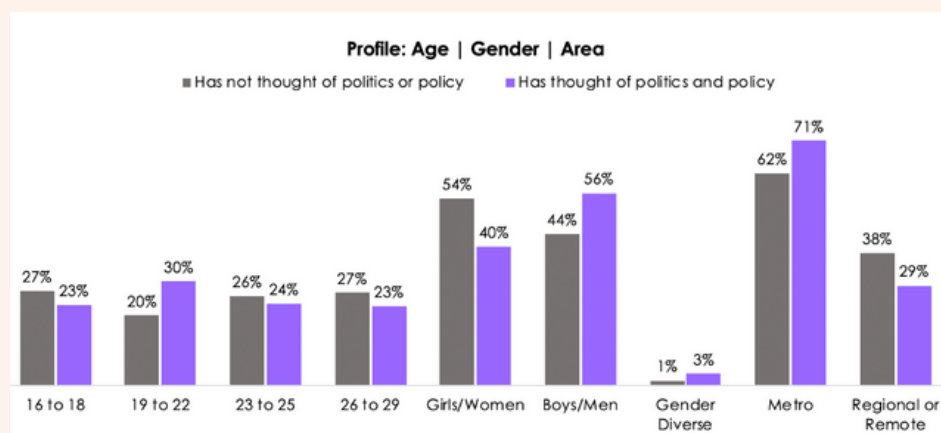
“ There are a number of positive stories about women in politics; however, there are not nearly enough to be satisfactory and often **the language used is sexist and demeaning**. The media has a large role in how the general public respond to politicians and I think **they need to acknowledge the harm that can be done by using sexist terminology**. ”



# Careers in policy and politics

Compared to those with no interest in politics or policy, those who **would** be interested in a career in both were more likely to:

- be aged 22 and under (53 per cent of of respondents)
- be boys and men (56 per cent of respondents) or gender-diverse (3 per cent of respondents) and less likely to be girls and women (40 per cent of respondents)
- live in metropolitan areas (71 per cent of respondents)
- be living with a disability (10 per cent of of respondents)
- be from a CALD background (35 per cent of of respondents)
- have completed a higher level of education (12 per cent of respondents)
- have household incomes over \$100,000 (42 per cent of respondents).

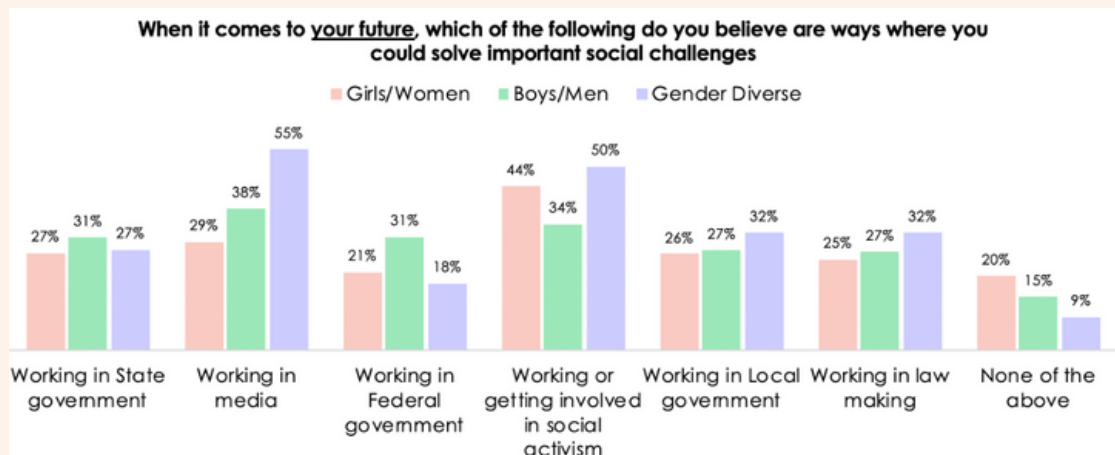


# Policy, politics and change-making

Half of young people saw the government as an important part of solving social challenges; however, there was low interest in joining the public service in the future.

All age cohorts expressed a high interest in being involved with social activism either informally or in a paid capacity. Those aged 26–29 were less likely to consider the listed initiatives as a vehicle for making change.

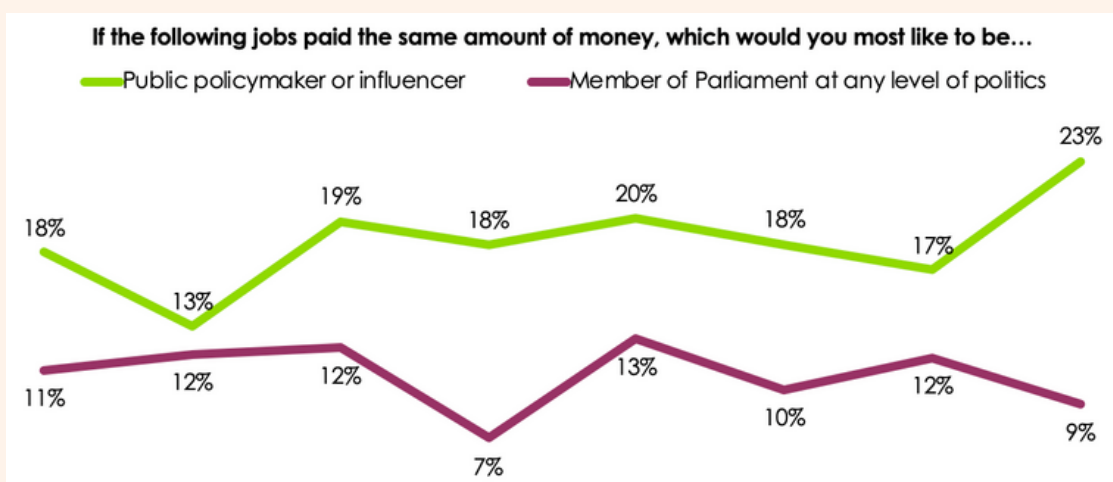
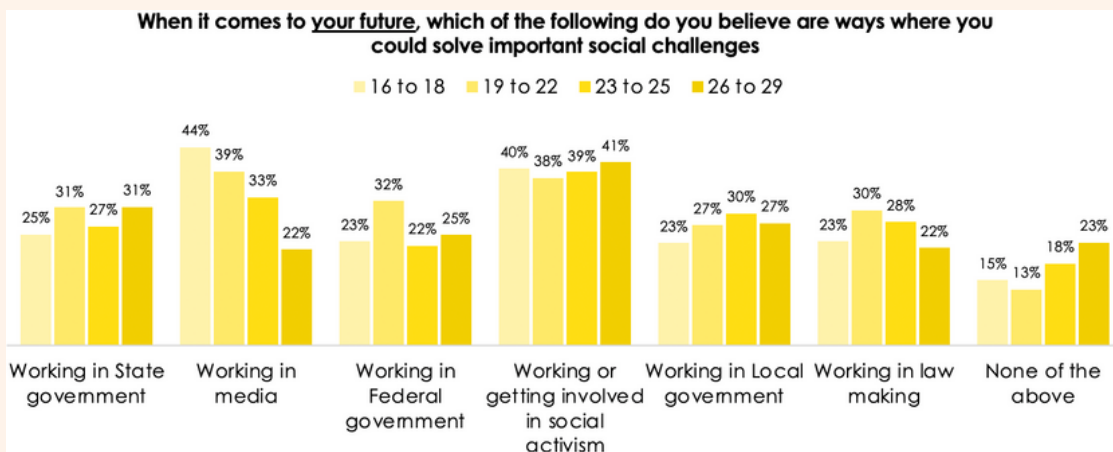
By gender, consistent with other results, boys and men were more likely to consider working in the federal government, while gender-diverse people, girls and women were more likely to consider activism as a way to address social challenges. Gender-diverse respondents were significantly more likely to see media or social activism as the best vehicle to create change. Those aged 26–29 were less likely to consider the listed initiatives as a way they could make change in their futures.



# Policy, politics and change-making

Across all age-groups surveyed there was a high interest in working in social activism as a way to make change.

When compared to other forms of change-making, respondents were least likely to see a benefit in working in the federal government. By category, no more than 32 per cent of respondents saw state, federal and local government or lawmaking as ways to solve important social challenges. Respondents of all ages expressed consistently high preference for working in social activism as a way to make change, as opposed to media, which was rated 44 per cent by those aged 16–18, but dropped to 22 per cent among those aged 26–29.



# Young people and politics

Despite feeling relatively optimistic about the future, many young people were uncertain about their ability to make change through the political system.

While some young people felt empowered by voting, 60 per cent did not understand how the political system works, despite having a relative understanding of the impact of political decisions. Three out of four respondents felt that they do not see people like themselves working in politics.

Boys and men were nearly twice as likely (19 per cent) as girls and women (10 per cent) to have considered a career in politics, compared to twenty-seven per cent of gender-diverse people.

Six per cent of boys and men strongly agreed with the statement 'I strongly agree I could be prime minister one day' compared to 2 per cent of girls and women, and zero per cent of gender-diverse respondents. Girls and women were most likely to strongly disagree with the statement.

**For those with no interest in politics or policy, sentiment reflected negative feelings towards the system or a misalignment in values or personality.**

*I don't like politics. They are **boring confusing** and **everyone is just in it for the money***

*I see this as a career where you have to **give way your priorities and values***

*I do not like politics. Lots of work, **everyone knows about you**, and many people wont like you. Decisions you make can have a huge negative impact on people, even if it's helping others. I just don't enjoy the thought of it*

*I think all politicians are corrupt. **Politicians do what is popular** - not what is in the best interest of the people.*

60%

of respondents felt that they don't understand how the political system works

76%

of respondents felt that they do not see people like themselves working in politics

2%

of girls and women felt they could be Prime Minister one day, compared to 6% of boys and men



# Young people and politics

Gender-diverse people, boys and men were more likely to strongly agree with the statements ‘I could be Premier one day’ (5 per cent of boys and men, 5 per cent of gender-diverse respondents and 3 per cent of girls and women), and ‘I could be a local councillor one day’ (9 per cent of gender-diverse respondents, 7 per cent of boys and men, and 3 per cent of girls and women).

Girls and women were less likely to believe they would have the skills to run for office even after finishing studies and starting careers (9 per cent), compared to 16 per cent of boys and men, and 18 per cent of gender-diverse people.

**For the cohort who had thought about politics, motivations stemmed from a frustration with the current system, and a lack of inspiring role models.**

*Observing the **current declining condition of politics in NSW** has made me think about **what I could do to correct the wrongdoings of the government***

***I am frustrated by the lack of action in our LNP government, and I am really interested in electoral policy. A career in the AEC would be awesome***

*The **old white men in power***

***Julia Gillard and other amazing and inspiring women who are seeking to make change***

***The poor politicians currently. I have no one to aspire to but we had great politicians previously in Aus.***

9%

of gender-diverse respondents believed ‘I could be a local councillor one day’

18%

of gender-diverse respondents believed that they could have the skills to run for office, compared to:

16%

of boys and men; and

9%

of girls and women.



# How do young people feel about present and future leadership?

*A good leader listens, encourages, is collaborative and honest. Leadership is taking charge to **encourage the team to work to the best of their abilities without compromising values***



*Representing the people. Making good, strong and assured decisions. **Doing what's best for everyone, not themselves.***



**There were diverse perspectives on leadership – key words that emerged included: ‘people’, ‘setting an example’, ‘community’ and ‘decisions’. Respondents said:**

*Empowering those around you to **make positive change**.*



*Someone who **steps in and is present** in bringing about change*

*Responsibility to **do right by those trusting you** with said leadership*

*Standing up for what is right and helping progress the country forward.*

***Larissa Waters is an inspiration***

*I want to be a part of **improving policy/systems** where I see serious issues.*

# Leadership

**Thirty-five per cent of young people saw themselves as a leader.**

Gender-diverse people (27 per cent) were less likely than girls and women (30 per cent) and boys and men (41 per cent) to currently see themselves as leaders.

People aged 19–22 were the most likely to see themselves as a leader (38 per cent) though people aged 16–18 (37 per cent) and 23–25 (36 per cent) shared this confidence. This figure was lowest for people aged 26–29 (31 per cent).

When asked about leadership contexts, respondents were most likely to see themselves as a leader in their workplaces (67 per cent), in their families (58 per cent) or a community setting (31 per cent). Just 14 per cent of respondents saw themselves being a leader in government.

Gender-diverse people were more likely to see themselves as leaders in a community but not in a family.

**41%**

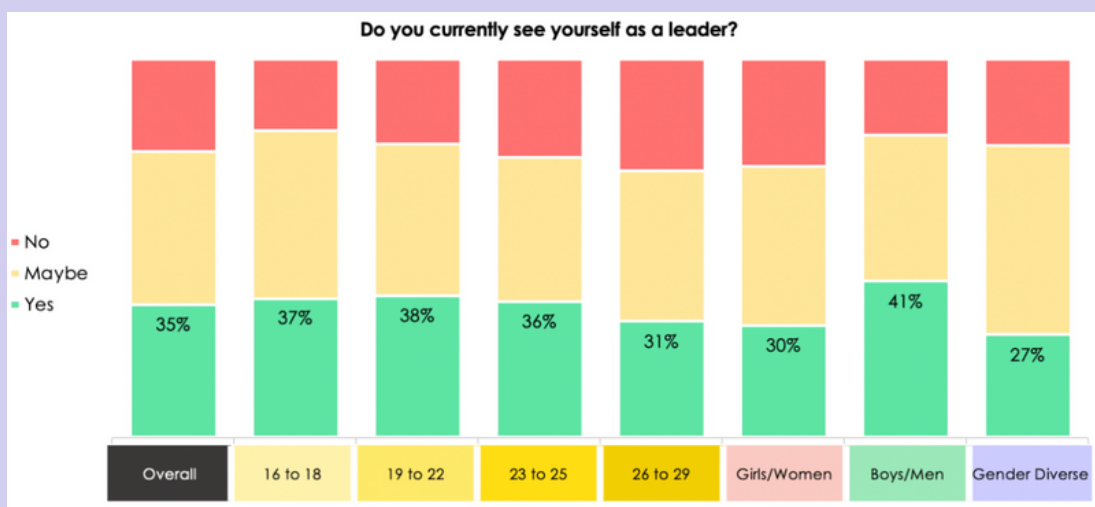
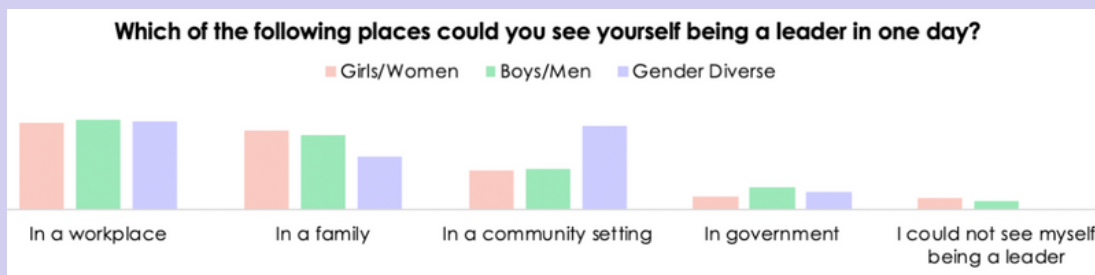
of boys and men saw themselves as a leader compared to:

**30%**

of girls and women; and

**27%**

of gender-diverse people

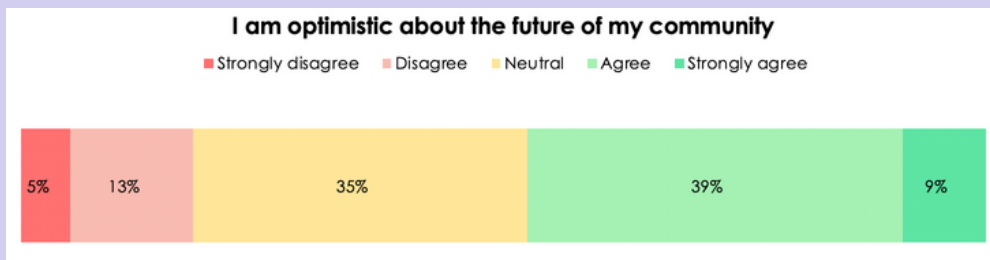




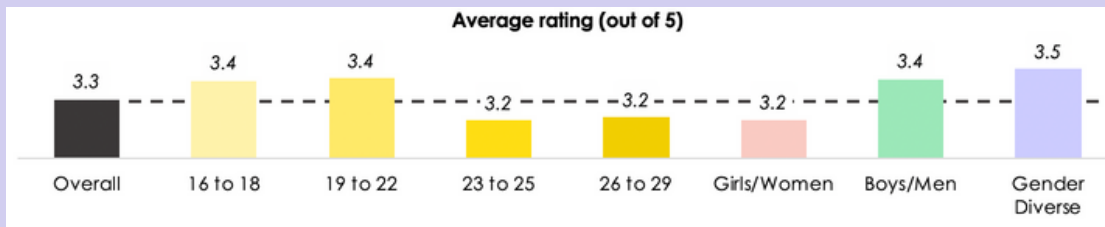
# Optimism

While over half of young people are optimistic about the future of their community, this was lower for girls and young women.

Girls and young women were less likely to feel optimistic about their future (giving an average rating of 3.2 out of 5) when compared to boys and men (3.4). Gender-diverse people were the most optimistic, with an average score of 3.5.



Optimism too declined with age, with 16-18 year olds reflecting the highest levels of optimism (an average score of 3.4 out of 5), which this score dropping for the 23 to 25 and 26 to 29 age groups (an average score of 3.2).



Just over half (48 per cent) of the young people surveyed felt optimistic about the future.

48%

of young people are optimistic about the future

3.2

the average score of girls and young women



# Recommendations for enduring change

For girls, young women and gender-diverse people to feel included and invited to formal political spaces, changes need to occur.

## **1. Political parties should create youth engagement strategies**

Political parties are the home of community members, politicians, and future political leaders. They create the room where it happens – so we need to get young people in there. Youth engagement through political parties should move from being a by-product of party membership to being accessible and meaningful, where young people – particularly young women and gender-diverse people – feel valued, with their voices heard.

## **2. Political parties should commit to and uphold a zero tolerance policy for bullying, discrimination in all forms, and sexual harassment, and take active measures to ensure these spaces are welcoming, safe and accessible for young women, gender diverse people, and people from traditionally marginalised backgrounds.**

To create meaningful change, it is crucial that young women and gender-diverse people feel safe and confident in joining political parties, and know that their membership will create the change they wish to see. All political parties and political spaces should loudly commit to implementing the findings of the Jenkins review, actively enforcing positive duties under the Sex Discrimination Act, and actively enforce a zero tolerance policy for bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment.

## **3. Political parties should create affirmative action measures around diverse participation.**

The use of affirmative action was demonstrated by the Australian Labor Party when it adopted gender quotas in 1994 – a policy that has resulted in almost 50:50 gender representation in parliament. To ensure that our parliament reflects the diversity of the population, all political parties should adopt or extend affirmative action measures to other under-represented groups including the LGBTQIA+ community, persons with disabilities, First Nations individuals, and young people.

# Recommendations for enduring change

To ensure that girls, young women and gender-diverse people feel included and invited to formal political spaces, political parties and public service bodies need to engage, nurture and elevate politically marginalised voices.

#### **4. Political parties and the media should elevate and celebrate members and leaders from politically marginalised backgrounds.**

The phrase ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’ is somewhat true - while you can be what you can’t see, it is much harder to get there.

Political parties and media outlets should meaningfully and positively highlight and amplify members from politically marginalised backgrounds, providing a role model for the next generation of politically marginalised young leaders.

#### **5. Public service bodies such as the Australian Public Service Commission should implement a youth engagement strategy to teach more young people about careers in the public service.**

To challenge the disconnection between young people and governments, the public service governing bodies such as the Australian Public Service Commission and Gender Equality Commissioners should implement engagement programs with young Australians, particularly those from under-represented backgrounds. Building a greater understanding of the careers available and the work done by public service would bolster the understanding of young Australians, and help them to see the public service as a vehicle through which they can make the change they want to see in their futures.

# Recommendations for enduring change

To ensure that young women and gender-diverse people feel included and invited to formal political spaces, changes need to occur in how the media reports and moderates on leaders from politically marginalised backgrounds.

## **6. Implement media reporting standards for reporting on women, political figures, and people from marginalised backgrounds.**

This will ensure more balanced coverage of political figures with a focus on actions and policies as opposed to gender, appearance or bias. It will also create positive outcomes for media outlets, which are more likely to be consumed by young people who perceive their coverage to be balanced and free from discriminatory tropes.

## **7. Social media companies should commit to, and meaningfully implement, standards for content on their platforms.**

This will add pressure to major media companies to improve the quality of their content, and meet young people where they are more likely to be consuming their media. It will also combat some of the negative online conversations around women and gender-diverse people in public spaces.

## **8. Media companies should take affirmative action to elevate diverse voices and seek opinions from individuals not currently heard in the media landscape.**

Media companies should create databases of diverse individuals who are well-placed to comment on current affairs. Media companies should implement strategies – and timelines for achieving them – to engage diverse voices in media reporting to ensure that a range of perspectives are being sought on all issues, including politics, which still attracts predominantly white male commentators (Women’s Representation and Voice in Media Coverage of the Coronavirus: Global Institute of Women’s Leadership, 2020).



hello@raiseourvoiceaustralia.com



raiseourvoiceaustralia.com



/raiseourvoiceaustralia



@raiseourvoiceaus



@raiseourvoiceau

# RAISE OUR VOICE

Raise Our Voice Australia  
49 Chetwynd Street  
North Melbourne  
VIC 3051