

## **More young Australians dismissing democracy**

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THIS generation is different. Of course, every older generation says that, but this one really is.

The annual Lowy Institute Poll, released this week, contains some thought-provoking news for our politicians. Gen Y, or "millennials", as the current generation of 18-29-or-so-year-olds is sometimes called, are not particularly interested in democracy.

Gender-bending American model Jeffree Star's Facebook comment last year - "we live in a world where losing your phone is more dramatic than losing your virginity" - got more than a million "likes".

This year's Lowy Institute Poll suggests that for this generation, losing their vote might be even less dramatic than that.

According to the poll, only 59 per cent of all Australians believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

An astonishingly small 48 per cent of 18-29-year-olds say they prefer democracy over any other form of government. Almost a quarter of them say that "for someone like me, it doesn't matter what sort of government we have".

It may be that Australians have come to take their freedoms for granted. According to the Lowy Institute's international polling in recent years, young Australians value their democracy less than their counterparts in Indonesia (an emerging democracy), India (a newer democracy than ours) and Fiji (not a democracy at all).

So what does this all mean? Should we be worried that these ambivalent democrats will soon be running the country?

They've been called the "screwed generation" by *Newsweek*: "over-educated, laden with debt and jobless".

They've grown up in a world easily able to provide all the latest consumer toys. They won trophies simply for showing up at junior sport. They are often criticised as whiners with an inflated sense of self-worth and entitlement.

But the economic circumstances they will face as adults will be tougher than when they were children. There will be higher unemployment, public debt and more expensive housing. They will be loaded with HECS and HELP loans and probably have lower graduate incomes to pay them back with.

The recent demonstrations in Turkey, and mass protests across Europe over the past year, show what can happen when a generation becomes enraged about their political or economic circumstances.

What will happen here if this generation's very high expectations are not met? Could we see mass protests on Australia's city streets?

So far, though, the looming gloom does not seem to have affected Gen Y's generally sunny outlook on life. This 2013 poll finds Gen Y to be significantly more optimistic than their parents, with 83 per cent of them optimistic about Australia's economic performance over the next five years, bucking the trend of falling optimism about the economy.

Their optimism is similar to that of millennials in the US, who still think, according to a Pew survey, that despite earning far less than their parents did at the same age, they'll have enough income in the future to lead the kind of life they want.

Australia's Gen Ys are also quite liberal and "doveish" in their views, showing less concern about unauthorised boat arrivals than their elders and more support for increasing the level of immigration from Asia in Australia's drive to engage with the Asian Century.

They don't like the Government's policy of offshore processing of asylum seekers and are less inclined to spend more on Australia's defence.

Nevertheless, their seeming lack of interest in our democratic system, a finding that is backed now by two successive Lowy Institute polls, should be of huge concern to those who believe in the importance of participation in the civic life of the nation.

Whether it is apathy following decades of peace and prosperity, a failure of civics education in our schools or disillusionment with the way our politicians behave in Parliament, this phenomenon needs to be better understood, not least by whoever takes the reins of government on September 14.

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