

You're the Voice!

Youth voters in the NT: Disengaged or disinterested?

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KEY FINDINGS

- In 2013, Northern Territory (NT) had less than 83% of eligible voters enrolled to vote; the lowest rate in Australia.
- New voters (aged 18 to 20 years) who could have voted for the first time in 2013 made up over 6% of eligible voters in the NT but less than half of them enrolled to vote.
- Youth voters (18 to 24 years) account for over 11% of enrolled voters while those under 30 comprised almost a quarter (22%).
- More than a quarter of eligible voters in the NT were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- In the NT seat of Lingiari there were more enrolled female Youth Voters than males, despite there being more eligible male voters than females.
- In the NT seat of Solomon there were more enrolled male Youth Voters than females.
- Over half of eligible Youth Voters in Solomon were employed and working full time compared with less than a third in Lingiari.

RESEARCH AIMS

To explore the enrolment figures for the Northern Territory from the recent Federal Election.

Particular focus is placed on New Voters (aged 18 to 20 years) and Youth Voters (aged 18 to 24 years).

New Voters had the opportunity to vote for the first time in the 2013 Federal Election but Youth Voters have typically had low enrolment rates. We look at how the NT fared by examining Census and other data

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1. Background

This brief examines voter enrolment data from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to explore voter turnout in the Northern Territory (NT) for the recent Federal election held on September 7, 2013. Voter enrolment levels have been historically low in the NT and nationally low rates of youth enrolment continue to be an issue. This brief focuses on Youth Voters (aged 18 to 24 years) and New Voters (aged 18 to 20 years) in the NT, analysing the demographic characteristics of these cohorts.

For the purposes of this research 'Eligible Voters' are those who are 18 years and over and have identified as being an Australian Citizen. 'Enrolled Voters' are those that have been identified by the AEC as being on the electoral roll. We specifically examine a subset of these which we term 'New Voters' as representing those who had the opportunity to vote for the first time in the 2013 Federal Election.

2. Data sources

The AEC releases electoral data on a quarterly basis on their website (<http://aec.gov.au>). In 2013 their third quarter release was provided to coincide with the close of the electoral role on August 12, just prior to the Federal election. Whilst enrolment figures are released with age and sex breakdowns for electoral divisions, equivalent population estimates are not released from which rates of enrolment can be derived. Consequently we used the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) official Estimated Resident Population (ERP) population figures to derive enrolment rates. A drawback of this approach is that ERP data include people who are ineligible to vote because they are not Australian Citizens. The main source of data for the detailed analysis of the Youth Voter and New Voter cohorts was the ABS 2011 Census of Population and Housing (Census).

3. An overview of Northern Territory voters

The NT election in 2012 saw bush votes contribute strongly to a change in government (ABC, 2012). As such there was interest in the recent Federal election and whether 'bush voters' (a term used to describe the rest of the NT outside of the Greater Darwin area) would come out in force to influence the results of that election. ABC's Election Analyst Antony Green premised that '...both Labor and the Country Liberals will need their campaigns in indigenous communities to be organised and targeted if they want to win the seat of Lingiari' (ABC, 2013a). There has also been significant discussion regarding the low enrolment rates of Youth Voters, with the AEC Northern Territory office saying that the Territory's non-enrolled youth rate is the highest in Australia (Vanovac, 2013).

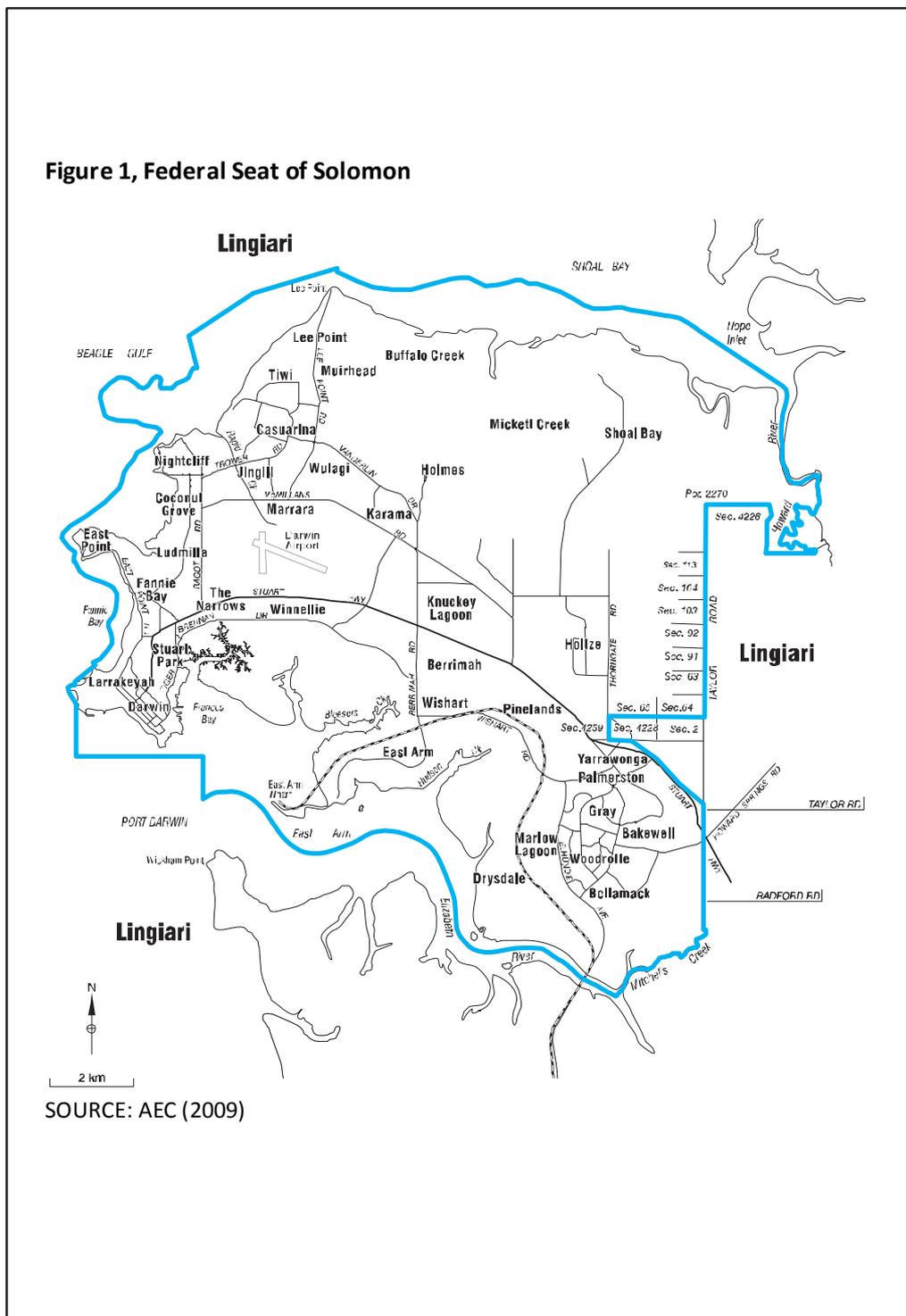
In 2012 there were 172,300 people aged over 18 years of age in the NT with almost 53% (over 90,000) of these males (ABS, 2013). At 30 June 2013 the AEC estimated that there were over 156,000 people eligible to enrol to vote in the NT but only 81% (under 127,000) had enrolled to vote. The NT consequently had the lowest

proportion of eligible voters enrolled, with Queensland the next lowest at less than 88%, and considerably below the National average of 91%. By close of enrolment (12 August, 2013) the AEC estimated that nearly 129,000 (83%) had enrolled to vote in the NT in time for the Federal election held on September 7, 2013 (AEC, 2013).

4. Federal Electorates in the Northern Territory

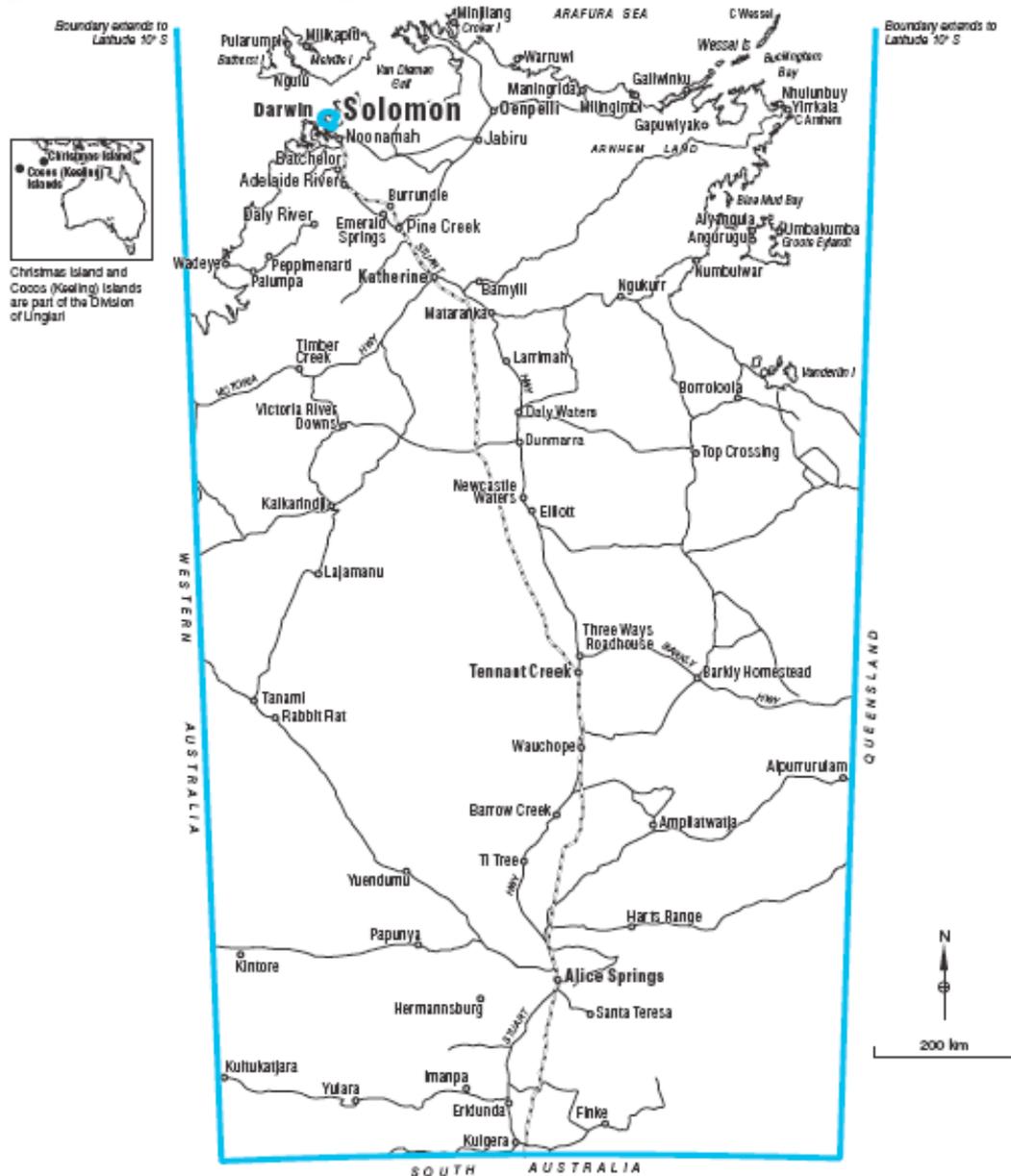
The Federal seat of Solomon (figure 1) covers an area of just 337 square kilometres, incorporating the Darwin and Palmerston urban areas. The Federal Election in 2013 election saw a 0.4% swing to the Labour Party however this seat was retained by Natasha Griggs (Country Liberals), who has held it since 2010 (ABC, 2013b).

Figure 1, Federal Seat of Solomon



The seat of Lingiari (figure 2) covers the remainder of NT, including Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands, and accounts for 99.98% of the land area of the NT (ABC, 2013b). However, despite incorporating the vast majority of the land it accounts for less than half (49%) of the combined eligible voters in both Solomon and Lingiari.

Figure 2, Federal Seat of Lingiari



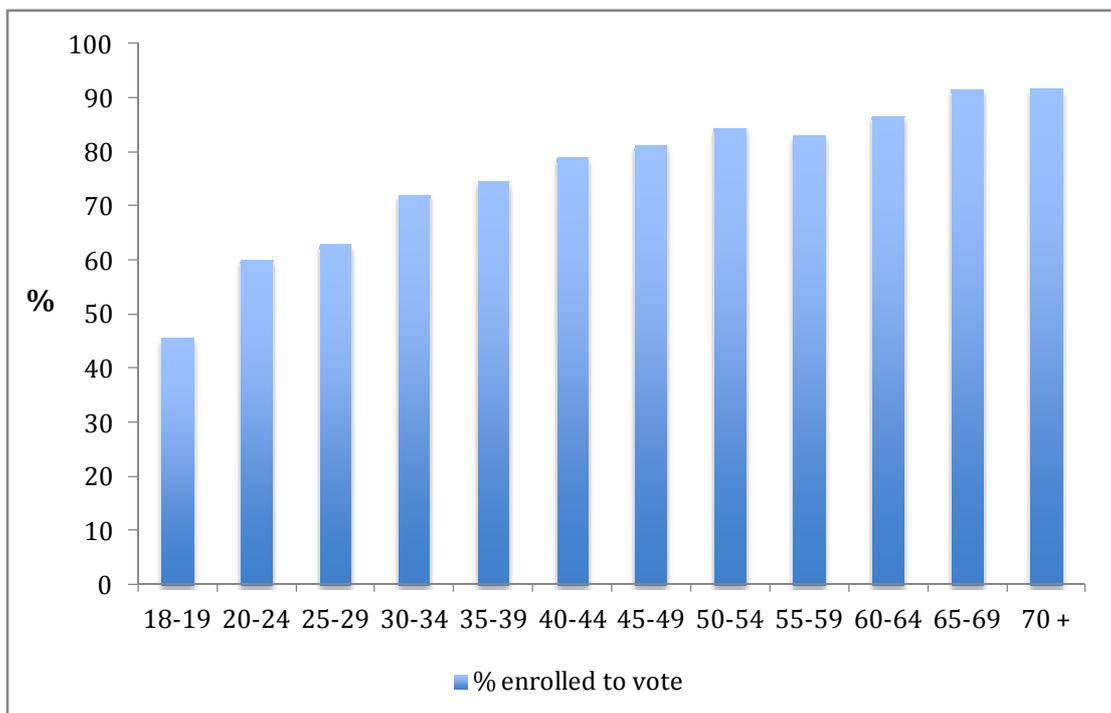
SOURCE: AEC (2009)

In 2013 a 2.8% swing away from the Labour Party to the Country Liberals was recorded in the Federal election, however this was not enough to remove Warren Snowdon (Labour) who has held this seat since it was created in 2001 (ABC, 2013b).

5. AEC voter counts and the ABS ERP

The AEC releases quarterly elector counts by divisions and their most recent release was in line with the close of the electoral rolls on 12 August 2013. When comparing this electoral count data with the ABS ERP data we see that less than 75% of the total NT population were enrolled to vote at the Federal election (ABS 2013). It is important to note however that ERP data does include people who are not eligible to vote because they are not Australian Citizens. However, Census data suggests less than 5% of the NT population identified as being non-Australian residents in 2011 (and therefore ineligible to enrol to vote). Applying this to ERP data, our estimate is that just over 78% of the Territory’s population who were eligible to vote were enrolled at this date. Critically, young people, (particularly those aged 18 to 24 years) had considerably lower enrolment rates than for older age groups (figure3).

Figure 3, Proportion of enrolled voters by age



Source: AEC enrolment figures at close of enrolment, 12 August 2013 and ABS, Australian Demographic Statistics, cat no. 3101.0 as at 30 June 2012 (includes non-Australian Citizens).

6. New Voters aged 18 to 20 years

Territorians aged between 18 to 20 years at 7 September 2013 became eligible to vote at the national level for the first time in that year. Based on Census figures this group made up over 6% of eligible voters, a potentially significant voting group, particularly in the seat of Lingiari where new voters made up nearly 7% of eligible voters. Of this cohort nearly 52% were male; with the seat of Solomon comprising nearly 54% males and the seat of Lingiari just over 50%.

Whilst New Voters had the potential to impact the vote in the NT, their low enrolment rates suggest they were significantly lacking in voice. Figure 1 demonstrates this with less than half (46%) of those 18 to 20 years enrolled to vote. In Lingiari nearly half (44%) were employed and less than 10% unemployed, whilst in Solomon, three quarters of this cohort (75%) were employment and less than 7% were unemployed. The remainder were either not actively seeking employment (this may include people who are undertaking tertiary studies and not working) or did not state their employment status. Nearly a third (30%) of New Voters in Lingiari, and over a half (56%) in Solomon had completed year 12. Of those that had attained year 10 or higher, Lingiari had nearly 68% whilst Solomon had over 93%.

7. Youth voters aged 18 to 24 years

Nearly one month out from the close of the electoral roll the AEC revealed a third of young Territorians were not enrolled to vote, the highest rate in the country. Of the almost 30,000 eligible voters missing from the NT's electoral roll, 10,000 were aged between 18 and 24 years, representing one third of the total youth population of the Territory (Vanovac, 2013).

According to the AEC (2013) Youth Voters in Australia accounted for just over 11% of enrolled voters. When looking at enrolled voters under 30 years (18 to 30 years) this figure was just over 22%. This is similar in both of the Federal electorates of the NT with Lingiari and Solomon sharing 11% of the 18 to 24 years and 22% and 21% of the 18 to 30 years, respectively. Across the two electorates there were a number of significant demographic and socio-economic differences between Youth Voters.

7.1 Gender

There were more enrolled female voters aged between 18 to 24 years in Lingiari (5.9%) compared with males (5.3%), whereas in Solomon enrolled female voters accounted for 5.4% and males 6.0%. Females aged 18 to 24 years in Lingiari represented 7.6% and males 7.7% whilst in Solomon females accounted for 6.6% and males 7.9%. So, in the seat of Lingiari, although the proportion of eligible female voters was lower than males, the proportion of enrolled female voters was higher than for males. In Solomon both the proportion of eligible male voters and rate of enrolled male voters were higher than for female voters.

7.2 Indigenous voters

The Territory election held in 2012 saw a change in government and some commentators, such as Marcia Langton, believed that '...it was Aboriginal voters in the bush who threw out the government that had ignored them, delivering victory to the Country Liberal Party', challenging perceptions of the marginal 'power' of the Indigenous vote. Voter turnout across the Territory was an unusually high at 77% with three in ten Territorians being Aboriginal who clearly wanted to make their votes 'count' (Langton, M 2012).

Based on the 2011 Census, 26% of the eligible voters in the NT identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, varying significantly between Lingiari (over 42%) and Solomon (9%). In Lingiari over 60% of the eligible Youth Voters were Indigenous, compared to less than 40% of those aged over 25 years. In the seat of Solomon Indigenous Youth Voters accounted for just over 12% compared to 8% for those aged over 25. Consequently the Indigenous youth vote had the potential to have a strong voice in the recent Federal election, particularly in the seat of Lingiari. But despite the bush vote having a strong impact in the NT election by supposedly playing a strong role in unseating the incumbent Labour Government to vote in the Country Liberal Party, in the Federal election the Labour candidate for Lingiari (Warren Snowden) retained his seat.

7.3 Educational levels

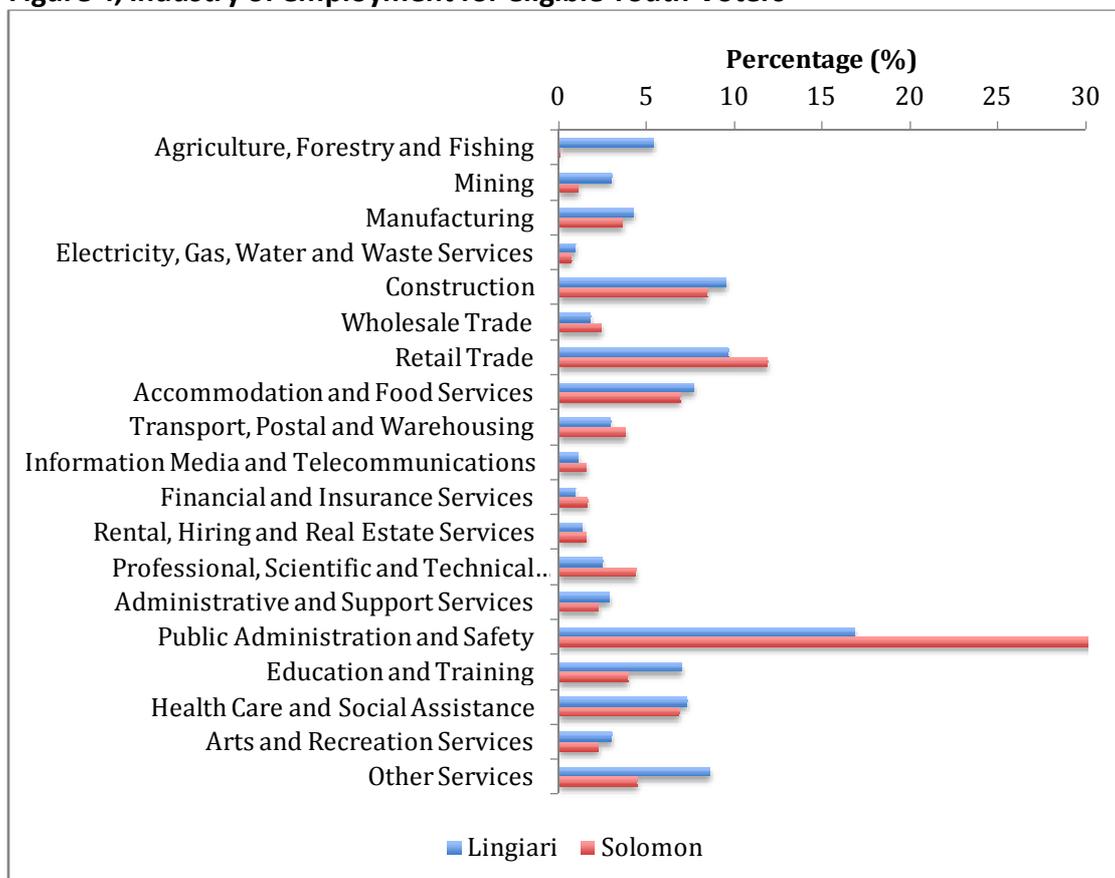
Amongst Youth Voters there were significant differences in educational attainments across the two Federal electorates. In Lingiari a large proportion of youth (44%) ended high school between years 8 and 10, compared with less than 20% in Solomon. In Solomon well over three quarters (78%) went through to years 11 or 12, whilst in Lingiari it was less than half (48%). When looking at tertiary studies, less than 4% in Lingiari went on to undertake TAFE/VET courses and the same amount (4%) higher education studies, compared with nearly 5% in the seat of Solomon undertaking TAFE/VET studies and over 13% completing higher education studies.

7.4 Employment and industry

Over half of eligible Youth Voters in the seat of Solomon (58%) were employed and working full-time compared with less than a third (31%) in Lingiari. Part-time workers accounted for 16% in Solomon and 13% in Lingiari. More than a third (38%) of eligible Youth Voters in Lingiari were not in the labour force (either not employed or unemployed and not looking for employment) compared with just 14% in the Solomon electorate.

Within both electorates the main industries for youth employment were public administration and safety, and retail trade. In Solomon over 30% of employed youth worked in public administration and safety compared with less than 17% for Lingiari. There were higher proportions of youth workers in the seat of Lingiari working in agriculture, forestry and fishing (5.3%), other services (8.6%) and education and training (7%).

Figure 4, Industry of employment for eligible Youth Voters



SOURCE: ABS Census 2011, generated using ABS TableBuilder 2012

8. Discussion and Conclusion

Although NT enrolment rates have improved since the last Federal election in 2010, up from less than 75% (AEC, 2010) to nearly 83%, they remain the lowest of all States and Territories in Australia and trail the national enrolment rate of 91% significantly. In 2011 those aged 18 to 30 years made up well over a quarter (29%) of the eligible voters in the NT yet accounted for just 22% of enrolled voters. Although the Youth and New Voter cohorts differ markedly between the electorates of Lingiari and Solomon, both are lagging in enrolment rates, particularly in Lingiari where the population is young and has a high Indigenous composition. With improving educational achievements in ‘the bush’ in the Territory, there should be redress to low youth enrolment rates but further innovative strategies are required in the intervening period between the 2013 and next Federal or Territory elections to give full and proper ‘voice’ to Young Voters throughout the NT.

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