

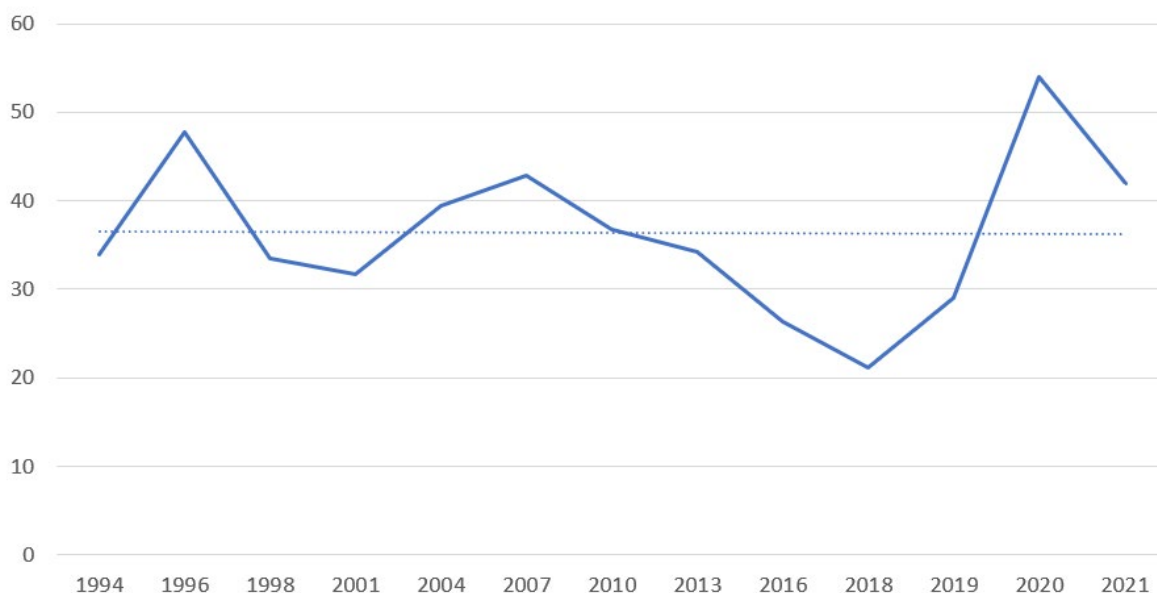
Australian democracy under pressure

Mark Evans

Australia is considered on the international stage to be a great, young democracy that punches well above its weight.^[i] This is supported by much of the evidence on the quality of its democratic arrangements which suggests that Australian citizens are free; our parliament is a strong custodian of democratic values; our liberty is the envy of our region; and our system of justice is robust and fair.^[ii] The guardians of our security—the police and defence service—are among our most trusted institutions (see below). We also have a world-ranked public service that is an impartial steward of public trust;^[iii] our cities are amongst the most liveable in the world;^[iv] and, against all the odds Australia's Indigenous communities maintain a proud identity. Significantly, by mid-2020, Australia was widely viewed as having successfully managed the pandemic, especially compared to the USA, the UK and other European countries and public trust in government almost doubled in a year from a low point at 29% to 54% (see Figure 1).^[v]

These beliefs and practices are now increasingly threatened. There is mounting evidence of increasing integrity problems at the heart of our democracy, a disconnect between government and citizen, a weakening of the protective powers of democracy and erosion of public confidence in the capacity of governments to grapple with policy fundamentals from cost of living to climate action and facilitate the necessary collaborative problem-solving across the federation to stimulate a sustained COVID-19 recovery.^[vi]

Figure 1. Trust in People in Government, 1994 to 2021

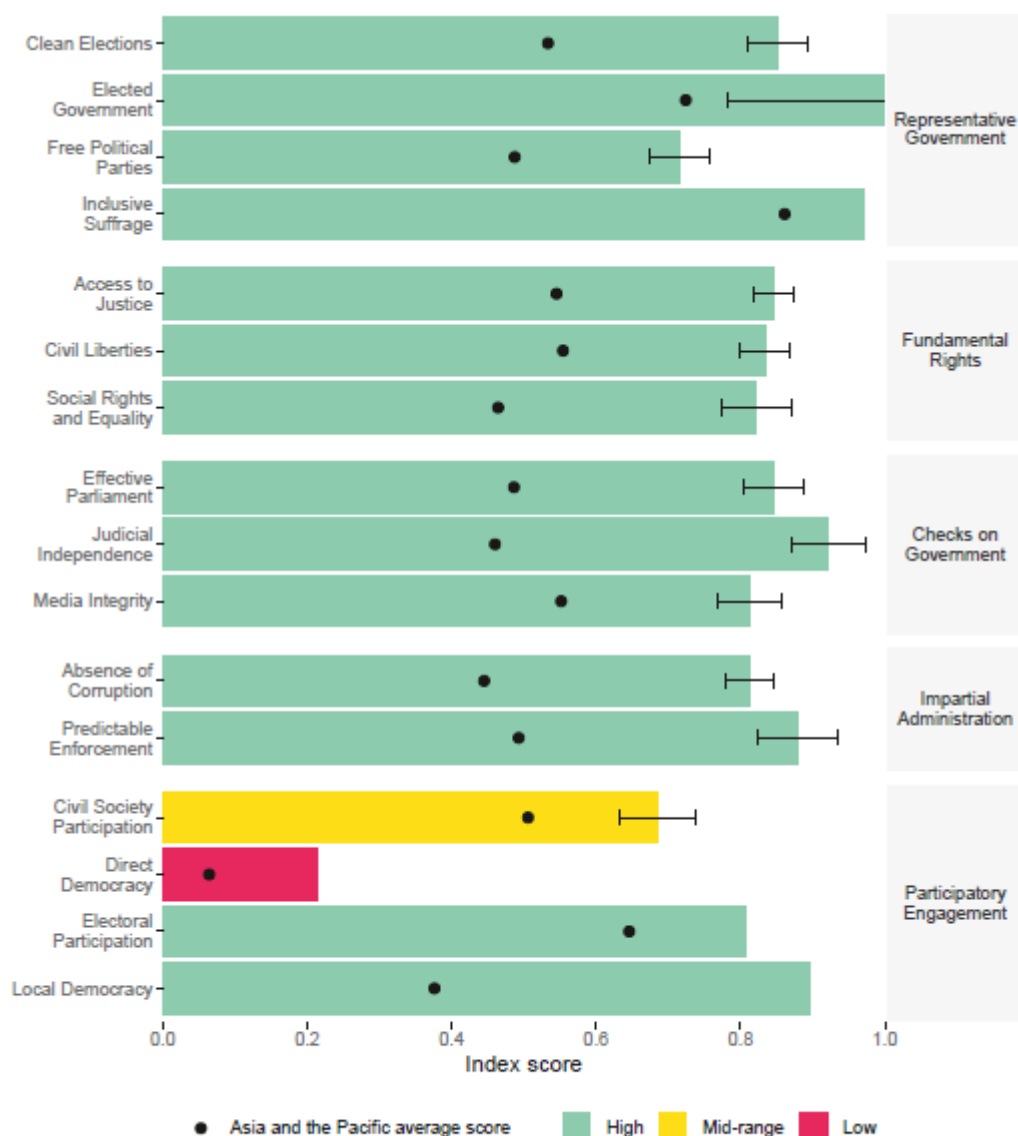


Sources: Australian Election Study (1994-2019) and Democracy 25 (2016, 2018, 2020 and 2021)

But first the good news. A report published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in November 2021 characterises Australia as a 'high performing democracy' relative to other Asia and Pacific democracies on 14 out of 16 democratic indices

(see Figure 2) with particular reference to the quality of representative government, the protection of fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial administration, electoral

Figure 2. Australia's democratic performance



Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2020, v. 5.1, 2021, <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices/dataset-resources>>, accessed 3 September 2021.

participation and local democracy. Australia is reported to perform less well on certain areas of participatory engagement such as civil society participation and poorly in terms of the use of direct democratic arrangements.^[vii]

We should, of course, have high expectations for Australia's democratic performance given that it is the most mature democracy in the region. Unsurprisingly then, the Democratic Audit of Australia, which reports early next year and has undertaken qualitative investigation of each indices, identifies democratic risks emerging in five of these areas. Three of which talk

to the agenda at the Biden Summit and its focus on fighting corruption and promoting respect for human rights.

First, although the evidence clearly demonstrates that Australia's elections are 'free' and expertly administered by the independent Australian Electoral Commission, the Electoral Integrity Project, has observed that uncontrolled government advertising in the run-up to the 2019 election, problems with our political funding and disclosure scheme and growing concern about political donations made by vested interests increasingly undermines Australia's claim to 'fair' elections. These factors mean that incumbents are placed at a significant advantage at election time.^[viii]

Second, financial dependence on the Commonwealth is amongst the highest of all federations, third only to Belgium and Austria and accounts for 44 per cent of all states' revenue. Federal Government spending accounts for almost 19 per cent of annual GDP. Vertical fiscal imbalance in the federation has seen the incremental accretion of economic power to the Commonwealth Government by engaging in policy domains not conferred upon it by the Constitution and using funding agreements to control policy systems and indicative programmes. OECD data shows that from 1995 to 2017, the state and local share of expenditure by all three levels of Australian government increased by 4.7 percentage points, but their share of national tax revenues fell by 3.1 percentage points.^[ix]

Executive dominance has also been displayed in other ways. Westminster principles of parliamentary democracy have come under challenge with mounting integrity challenges, the increasing politicisation of the Australian Public Service (APS), and gridlock between the current government and the APS on the way forward reflected in the abortive 2019 APS Review. In short, the executive wields disproportionate power in Australia's democratic settlement which undermines the effectiveness of traditional checks and balances through the separation of powers.

Third, it is at best problematic to assume that the fundamental rights of all Australian citizens are effectively protected through the rule of law. Australia was subject to a damning critique of its human rights record by the United Nations Human Rights Committee with regard to the rights of children, the treatment of refugees, domestic violence, transgender rights, the sterilisation of intellectually disabled women and girls, and the impact of anti-terrorism laws on civil liberties.^[x]

Fourth, the composition of the Commonwealth Parliament is not representative of the community it serves either in gender (31%) or ethnic terms on population measures. And this is much broader than the highly visible case of Indigenous under representation (3.3% of the population represented by 6 out of 227 members) but includes other groups as well. Contrast for example, the representation of British-Australians (10 members for 3.8% of the population) with Chinese Australians (2.5% of the population), and Indian Australians (2.8% of the population) both of which are not represented in our Parliament.^[xi]

And fifthly, Australia is far from free from corruption, maladministration and poor, often illegal, parliamentary behaviour. Recent evidence from both sides of politics of various forms of rorting and misconduct at the Commonwealth and state levels has demonstrated that a

lack of integrity in public office has become culturally embedded in democratic governance.^[x] Moreover, public cynicism has been fuelled by habitual examples of poor parliamentary conduct and misogyny not to mention allegations from the French President Emmanuel Macron, that the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison had lied to him over the scrapping of the \$90 billion submarine contract and broken the trust between the two countries. Allegations that the Prime Minister continues to deny.^[xii]

How do these findings square with the views of Australian citizens? Australians are uncertain about how well their democratic arrangements work. In the most recent survey, close to half (47%) expressed they felt 'fairly' or 'very satisfied' with the way democracy works in Australia, approximately a quarter (26%) felt 'dissatisfied' to some degree ('fairly' or 'very'), and the remainder reported feeling neither 'satisfied' or 'dissatisfied'. As noted above, Australians' trust in their government almost doubled in a year from 29% to 54% but the same is not the case today, despite the success of the vaccine-roll out.^[xiii]

Our latest research with the Social Research Institute at Ipsos also shows that trust in people in government has declined 12 points from 54% to 42% in a matter of months (see Figure 1). Satisfaction with democracy and trust in people in government tends to increase by age, and income and decrease by age and gender with women and young Australians less satisfied and more distrusting. Two thirds of Australians think that corruption is present in the wider society and economy but short of a quarter think that public authorities are involved but the integrity problem is most closely associated with the behaviour of the political class.^[xiii]

The early groundswell of public support during the pandemic is partly explained by what is called the 'rally-round-the-flag', patriotic effect.^[xiv] In Australia, Scott Morrison's approval rating soared on the back of his effective handling of the initial threat, judicious decision-making on early closure of international borders and an atypical coordination of state and federal governments via the National Cabinet. Yet, research also suggests that people do not lose their capacity for reason or critical judgement in a crisis.^[xv] Above all, the competence and outcomes of the government's actions matter. If the government is perceived as not able or willing to adequately respond to a threat, then public support will fade. It was therefore expected that public trust would increase once the government had got to grips with the vaccine rollout but this has not proved to be the case with public trust continuing to wane. Is there something distinctive about the present trust debacle or are we returning to a longer term pattern of distrust in our political class?^[xvi]

Our survey findings suggest that institutions viewed as extending the protective power of democracy in a time of fear – safeguarding our civic culture and heritage, community security, health and wellbeing – are most trusted (see Table 1). For example, note the high levels of trust in defence and law and order organisations such as the police (76%), army (73%) and the courts (61%). Moreover, the highest levels of trust are bestowed to Medicare (80%), cultural institutions such as libraries (82%) and museums (78%) and universities (70%) and experts (79%). Trust in the Australian public service also remains quite high at 55%.

In contrast, institutions deemed, rightly or wrongly, to be acting on the basis of self-interest or against the collective interest fared worst. And unfortunately, politicians figure strongly.

There is evidence of receding trust in political parties (20%), the National Cabinet (38%) and other key institutions held responsible for bringing politics into disrepute such as television (35%), the press (30%) and especially social media (15%) (see Table 1).

Both Government and opposition in Australia have remained remarkably mute on questions of democratic renewal in response to these sources of democratic deficit. Even the Government's 2019 election promise to deliver a federal ICAC to tackle integrity problems at the federal level remains in limbo. The Biden Summit can, however, draw on the thoughts of Australian citizens on the types of reforms that they would like to see to reinvigorate democracy.

Last year, we asked Australians what they would like their democracy to look like post-COVID-19? ^[xvii] In general, there is still overwhelming support for representative democracy but with a focus on making the representative system of government more representative of the people they serve, and accountable and responsive to their constituents underpinned by integrity politics which are 'cleaner', 'collaborative' and 'evidence-based'. It is also evident from two longitudinal surveys conducted this year that there is increasing support for a constitutional voice for Australia's first nations (61%), and emphatic support for a document that sets out the rights and responsibilities of Australia citizens (83% an increase from 66% in 2019). Indeed, 74% agreed that a Charter of Human Rights would 'help people and communities to make sure the government does the right thing', compared to 56% two years earlier. The biggest increases in support were from young Australians. ^[xviii]

In summary then, Australian democracy is under concerted pressure. What is certain is that the next Australian federal election will be won or lost on which party is best able to forge a national consensus on a post-COVID-19 recovery plan. This is not a mere matter of economics but about what type of society we want to live in, the values that should drive it and, crucially, the form of democracy which will best protect us in a turbulent and uncertain world.

Notes/links

- [i] Mark Evans, Michelle Grattan, and Brendan McCaffrie, 'The Trust Divide' in Mark Evans, Michelle Grattan, and Brendan McCaffrie (eds.), *From Turnbull to Morrison. Trust Divide*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2019), pp. 1–2.
- [ii] See: Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/>), the Economist Democracy Index (<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/22/global-democracy-has-another-bad-year>), and the Varieties of Democracy project (<https://www.v-dem.net/en/>) [All accessed 22 November 2021].
- [iii] Mark Evans (2018), Australian Public Service Reform: Learning from the past and building for the future. Retrieved 14 August 2020 from: https://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/magma/media/upload/publication/410_IPAA-Submission-to-the-2018-Review-of-the-APS.pdf [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [iv] Economist Intelligence Unit, *The Economist's 2021 Global Liveability Index*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/global-liveability-index-2021/>. [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [v] See Will Jennings, Viktor Valgardsson, Gerry Stoker, Dan Devine, Jenn Gaskell and Mark Evans, Democracy 2025 Report No 8: *Political Trust and the COVID-19 Crisis – pushing populism to the backburner? A study of public opinion in Australia, Italy, the UK and the USA* (Canberra, IGPA/MoAD/Trustgov, 2020), <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/resources.html> [Retrieved 30 November 2021].

- [vi] Mark Evans, 'Scott Morrison's pandemic popularity boost has vanished, along with public trust in our politicians', *The Guardian*, 16 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/16/scott-morrison-pandemic-popularity-boost-has-vanished-along-with-public-trust-in-our-politicians>
- [vii] International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy Indices*, 1975-2020, v. 5.1, 2021, https://www.idea.int/gsod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_0.pdf [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [viii] See: Electoral Integrity Project (<https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>). [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [ix] Forman, K., S. Dougherty and H. Blöchliger (2020), 'Synthesising good practices in fiscal federalism: Key recommendations from 15 years of country surveys', *OECD Economic Policy Papers*, No. 28, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/89cd0319-en> [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [x] Ben Doherty, 'Unacceptable: UN committee damns Australia's record on human rights', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/19/unacceptable-un-committee-damns-australias-record-on-human-rights> [accessed 30 November 2021].
- [xi] For the data see: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/australia-datablog/2021/mar/31/drilling-down-into-the-gender-balance-in-australias-parliament>; https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Parliamentary_Handbook/mpsbyplc; and, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/migration-australia/latest-release> [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [xii] See: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-12/prime-minister-scott-morrison-says-he-is-not-a-liar/100614822>
- [xiii] Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan (2020), 'The Isolated Political Elite', *Australian Quarterly*, 91, 2, pp. 31-39.
- [xiv] For a useful review of the literature see Marc Hetherington and Michael Nelson, 'Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism', *Political Science and Politics* 36, 1 (2003), pp. 37-42.
- [xv] See Graham Smith and Tim Hughes, *Democracy in a Pandemic. Participation in Response to Crisis* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021).
- [xvi] Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan (2020), 'The Isolated Political Elite', *Australian Quarterly*, 91, 2, pp. 31-39.
- [xvii] Mark Evans, Viktor Valgardsson, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker (2020), *Democracy 2025 Report No 7: Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus - Is Australia still the lucky country?* (July 2020). A collaborative report with Trustgov, <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/resources.html> [Retrieved 30 November 2021].
- [xviii] See: Griffith Constitutional Values Survey 2021, https://www.cqu.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/190092/australian-constitutional-values-survey-2021.pdf. and, <https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/2021/9/7/covid-19-sees-huge-increase-in-support-for-a-charter-of-human-rights-poll> [Retrieved 30 November 2021].

Table 1. Trust in Institutions by Age Group, October 2021

Column % ⬆ ⬇	Builders (born 1925-45) ⬆ ⬇	Baby boomers (born 1945-64) ⬆ ⬇	Generation X (born 1965- 79) ⬆ ⬇	Millennials (born 1980- 94) ⬆ ⬇	Generation Z (born 1995 - 2003) ⬆ ⬇
Libraries	90% ↑	86%	80%	78%	84%
Medicare	87%	81%	77%	78%	82%
Museums	84%	83%	78%	69% ↓	80%
The police	87% ↑	80%	72%	73%	74%
The armed forces	83% ↑	82% ↑	71%	65% ↓	70%
Universities	71%	65%	69%	70%	80%
Art galleries	77% ↑	75% ↑	64%	63%	57%
The courts	60%	64%	61%	55%	72%
Community sector organisations (churches, clubs, social service groups etc.)	68% ↑	58%	53%	52%	53%
The public service	47%	52%	52%	58%	66%
State or Territory government	46%	47%	47%	53%	63%
Local government	47%	45%	46%	51%	65% ↑
Federal government	47%	41%	39%	42%	48%
The National Cabinet	37%	38%	34%	40%	46%
Television	42%	37%	34%	33%	31%
The press	32%	29%	29%	31%	26%
Political parties	16%	18%	19%	22%	28%