



## Democratic Conversations

February 2022

Dear champions of Australian democracy,

Welcome to the latest edition of the Democracy 2025 bulletin, “Democratic Conversations”. Despite the difficult times that we are currently living through, the *Democracy 2025 – strengthening democratic practice* initiative has continued to audit the qualities of Australian democracy, investigate and experiment with what works in terms of renewing our representative system of government, and facilitate non-partisan conversations on how to improve our democratic practice.

This Democracy 2025 bulletin was delayed due to the protests and fire at MoAD, and is the last under my direction as I have moved to Charles Sturt University to take on the role of Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research and Engagement.

I will continue to lead the Democratic Audit of Australia which will be published in the first half of 2022 by LSE Press and will be free to download. Watch out for launch information, podcasts, and voxpops on the key findings, some of which will be discussed later in this bulletin.

As this is my final bulletin, it is timely to reflect on the contributions of *Democracy 2025 – strengthening democratic conversations* to democratic debate in Australia. This headlines our bulletin, followed by a series of articles on: President Biden’s December [Summit for Democracy](#); latest research on the state of democracy in Australia; and our Facebook deliberation on *Saving Democracy*.

We hope you enjoy the issue.

Professor Mark Evans

**Democracy 2025 – strengthening democratic practice**

## Democracy 2025 in focus

Established in the context of the lowest level recording of public trust and satisfaction with Australia's democratic arrangements in December 2018 and set against the global rise of debased semi-democracies, *Democracy 2025* audits the qualities of Australian democracy, investigates and experiments with what works in terms of renewing our representative system of government and facilitates non-partisan conversations on how to improve our democratic practice and be the best democracy that we can be.

By implication our activities focus on evaluation, democratic innovation and public engagement activities underpinned by evidence-based research. We have also built world class partnerships with leading knowledge institutions at home and overseas to deliver on our ambitious agenda with limited resources. The highlights of *Democracy 2025's* successes in these areas are outlined below.

### High impact evaluation of Australian democratic governance and delivery of innovation

*Democracy 2025* has produced nine high impact reports on different aspects of Australian democracy from 5 December 2018 to 21 November 2021, with over 20,000 downloads in collaboration with world leading scholars at Trustgov, a collaboration between the universities of Harvard and Southampton. Professor Stoker was awarded \$3 million for the Trustgov project by the Economic and Social Research Council. Although this award did not accrue directly to *Democracy 2025*, it provided support for survey work, international travel and most significantly, the generation of international class outputs, dissemination, and network activities. These reports have received ongoing media coverage, significantly extending MoAD's audience reach.

We worked closely with various federal government departments delivering a broad range of projects and workshops to 16 Commonwealth and State agencies, including Finance, Industry, and Social Services, aimed at improving the quality of democratic governance. Professor Evans also designed and delivered a deliberative jury with the support of the APS Secretaries Board on the contribution of the APS to public trust building<sup>1</sup>, and was invited to compile the public service's peak association (IPAA) submission to the Australian Public Service (APS) Review.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy 2025 Report No. 4. Democracy 2025 Report No. 4. *Report from the Australian Public Service Deliberative Jury on Bridging the Trust divide: Defining the Challenge, making the change* (September 2019), supported by the Australian Public Service Secretaries Board. Retrieved 14 August 2020 from: <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report4.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> M. 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](https://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/magma/media/upload/publication/410_IPAA-Submission-to-the-2018-Review-of-the-APS.pdf)

During its short life, *Democracy 2025* has become the 'go to' organisation for giving evidence at major public inquiries into different aspects of democracy at the Commonwealth and state levels in Australia including:

- The Committee on Procedure - Question time inquiry (August 2020)
- Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Nationhood, national identity and democracy (February 2020)
- Independent Parliamentary Expenses Inquiry (October 2019)
- New South Wales Review of Federal-State Financial Relations (October 2019)
- New South Wales ICAC investigation on lobbying conduct and regulation in New South Wales (July 2019)

A key final body of work, a comprehensive audit of Australia's democracy with research partners in every state and territory and the London School of Economics and Political Science, is nearing completion. It bridges significant gaps in the evidence base on Australia's democratic practice, enhances debate on the quality of democratic governance and provides an invaluable resource to support better civics education in Australia. The Audit will be available for free download later in the year.

### **Capturing the public imagination**

In broad terms, our work integrated with the activities of Museum of Australian Democracy, actively encouraging and empowering its visitors and audiences to become active citizens. There are several examples of where *Democracy 2025's* work has attracted broad public attention – from ABC's Online Democracy Interactive which used a *Democracy 2025* survey instrument to engage with over 230,000 Australians,<sup>3</sup> to the *Democratic Fundamentals* podcast series in partnership with The Conversation, ANU's 'Democracy Sausage', IPAA's 'Work with purpose' series and 'Independents Can' series with combined downloads of almost 90,000 to December 2022, to lively interactive experiences within the *Democracy. Are You In?* exhibition, where visitors are asked to respond to a provocation, their response data is analysed and incorporated back into the exhibition.

Seven articles in *The Conversation*, *The Guardian* and *The Mandarin*, authored by Professor Mark Evans, elicited total reads to 30 Dec 2021 of 70,915. The *Democracy 2025* website, [democracy20205.gov.au](http://democracy20205.gov.au), generated 26,632 pageviews over the three years since launch on 5 December 2018. The e-news has an active subscriber base of 400 active users, with a click through rate of 26%.

*Democracy 2025* staff have also been invited to present research and practice findings to: the APS Secretaries Board; Council of Museum Directors; Commonwealth Ombudsman Office; Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority; IPAA Future Leaders Program; Senate Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters; Doha World Forum; Australian Davos Leadership Connection (twice); National Schools Convention (twice); Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences; Canberra Writers

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-20/in-a-nation-of-cynics-we-are-flocking-to-the-fringe/10281522?nw=0> (updated 13 March 2019).

Festival (twice); International IDEA; Philanthropy Australia; National Election Commission of the Republic of Korea; NSW Legislative Assembly (twice); and Local Government Professionals Australia.

### **Building high impact partnerships**

*Democracy 2025* has forged a range of successful domestic and international partnerships to deliver key activities which have heightened its domestic and international profile:

- 1) **Institute of Public Administration Australia**, collaboration APS Future Leaders program delivered at MoAD; Democratic Fundamentals brochure for IPAA 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary event; the IPAA submission to the APS Review; Professor Evans elected a member of the IPAA-ACT Council.
- 2) **Philanthropy Australia** *Parliament Meets Philanthropy Summit*, September 2019. Professor Evans presented at the summit's opening session.
- 3) **Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters** – regular briefings to the Committee on MoAD/D2025 research and visitor voice; collaboration on *Democracy 2025 Report No 5* (December 2018-March 2019).
- 4) **Australian Public Service Secretaries' Board** support for APS *Deliberative Jury on Bridging the Trust divide* (February 2019). See *Democracy 2025 Report No 4*.
- 5) **Trustgov** (Harvard University and the University of Southampton), collaboration on three major comparative reports on *Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus* – *Democracy 2025 Reports No 6, 7 and 8*.
- 6) **Multiple university partners** – collaboration on the Democratic Audit of Australia including the Australian National University, Canberra University, Charles Darwin University, Curtin University, Flinders University, Griffith University, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Technology Sydney, the University of South Australia, the University of Sydney and the University of Tasmania.
- 7) **Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom** (London School of Economics and Political Science) – collaboration on the Democratic Audit of Australia to be published in 2022.
- 8) **Council of Australian Museum Directors** – *Guardians of our civic culture- what museums could and should do*, explores levels of trust in Australian Museums (see later in bulletin)

The work of *Democracy 2025* significantly enhanced MoAD's authority at home and overseas, and enabled the generation of world class research outputs on democratic theory and practice - including 31 international journal articles, 5 books and 13 book chapters with leading publishing houses.

### **Next Steps**

Two exciting projects which will be delivered later this year:

1. The rolling publication of the findings from the Democratic Audit of Australia, which will be underpinned by a series of panel discussions, podcasts and blogs.
2. The international launch of *Saving Democracy* by Mark Evans and Gerry Stoker (Bloomsbury Books) which has received outstanding advanced reviews by key international commentators in the field of democracy research.

## Biden calls Summit just when democracy is at the crossroads

Mark Evans and Gerry Stoker

*Trust is at a breaking point. Trust in national institutions. Trust among states. Trust in the rules-based global order. Within countries, people are losing faith in political establishments, polarization is on the rise and populism is on the march.*

—Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary General, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018.<sup>[i]</sup>

President Biden's recent proclamation that 'the challenge of our time is to demonstrate that democracies can deliver by improving the lives of their own people and by addressing the greatest problems facing the wider world' brings assurance to citizens around the world that democracy is the key to our past, present and future prosperity.<sup>[ii]</sup> But participants at the Biden Summit for Democracy need to be reminded that democracy is a living, fragile thing that needs to be nurtured and protected on an ongoing basis.

The current pressures on our democratic settlements are significant. Citizens worldwide continue to be distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned with democratic processes. As Antonio Guterres states, there is evidence from many countries of a loss of confidence in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of national governments, as well as political parties, the news media and interest groups, some of the core institutions linking citizens and the state. These decaying institutions provide the connection to our understanding of how democracies could end, as they are no longer as effective at connecting governors and the governed.<sup>[iii]</sup> They also provide some of the focus for the three challenges the Biden Summit hopes to address: fighting corruption, promoting respect for human rights and reinvigorating democracy.

The risks of democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence are such that many observers see democracy in 'retreat', 'recession', or in a 'reverse wave' around the world, losing the war of ideas compared to the Chinese governance model or a newly assertive Russia.<sup>[iv]</sup> Some fear that weak commitment to the democratic norms and rules of the game by political leaders means we are entering an era in which 'democracies die'.<sup>[v]</sup>

As author Larry Diamond, who has spent a career defending and promoting democracy, concludes:

*In every region of the world, autocrats are seizing the initiative, democrats on the defensive, and the space for competitive politics and free expression is shrinking. Established democracies are becoming more polarized, intolerant, and dysfunctional. Emerging democracies are facing relentless scandal, sweeping citizen disaffection, and existential threats to their survival.<sup>[vi]</sup>*

There are significant challenges to democracy from the threat of Russian aggression, Chinese power and the failings of the leader of democracy, the United States of America, and these challenges have been brought into sharp focus by the pandemic.

Democracies confront a diverse range of problems. *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020* found that the share of people who express dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy had risen by 10 percentage points to 57.5 per cent, from 1995 to 2019.<sup>[vii]</sup> In the past, most citizens in countries in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australasia were satisfied with the performance of democracy but this is now no longer the case. Some of the most populous countries in world have seen the steepest decline in satisfaction as in the USA, Brazil, Mexico and Nigeria.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the sense of democracy being at a crossroads which could lead to further decline or spark a renewal. The challenges created by the pandemic have been immense and many predict it will be followed by years of economic dislocation and recession. The fear of the spread of the virus has forced a rethink of safe public spaces and led to stagnating business activity and economic growth. And yet many governments around the world are rising to the challenge and rediscovering their *raison d'être* – collective problem-solving in the national interest.

We have witnessed a renaissance in public faith in science and evidence informed policymaking. Even the media has enjoyed renewed confidence in its reporting, particularly public broadcasters. Most significantly, after a decade of disappointment with digital democratic innovation, governments and citizens around the world are beginning to embrace opportunities for digital participation.<sup>[viii]</sup> While civil society has shown its capacities and provided both practical help and social care and psychological support especially in long periods of lockdown.<sup>[ix]</sup>

COVID-19 has reminded voters that national governments are necessary and that with systemic renovation they can be made to work. Political leaders around the world have begun to talk about new thinking on the other side of the pandemic. Earlier references to a 'snap-back' have given way to a realisation that what is needed is a much more root-and-branch approach, to taxation, transfer payments, industry policy, regulation, and across all these areas, the relative roles of governments and markets.

It is helpful when talking about 'democracy' to recognise that it is a practice not a utopian ideal and will always fall short of achieving all that people might want it to accomplish. The 'protective power of democracy', as Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen calls it, is made from a mix of four components and different countries may have more or less of each of these elements in practice.<sup>[x]</sup>

The first two of these features are the 'electoral component' –which measures how open, free and fair, elections are– and a 'participatory component' which asks how many legal channels of participation a country offers its citizens, from the local to the national level? And, how easy is it for citizens to use these channels? In combination these components provide a measure of political participation and freedom in democratic life.

The third, 'liberal values component' judges how embedded civil rights (including minority rights) and duties, are in a country, as well as the effectiveness of checks and balances in limiting the excessive concentration of power in any one institution of government, social group or actor. And the fourth component refers to the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible, accountable and free from corruption.

If all four of these components are present in sufficient quality, then that country can be defined as a liberal democracy.<sup>[xi]</sup> By 2020 there were about 40 countries that met these criteria sufficiently. But a further 50 countries that are substantially democratic but fall short in some way of meeting the third test. Combining liberal and electoral democracies gives us coverage of about half the countries in the world. The other half of countries fall into the category where rulers are not accountable to citizens to any great degree.

In these countries there is broad distinction between 'open' and 'closed' autocracies.<sup>[xii]</sup> In the former, elections take place and leaders and other representatives are elected but limits to levels of party competition, media freedom and the rule of law take away much of the power of the electoral process. In 'closed' democracies, open elections are not part of the governing process.

The motivation for Biden's Summit is the recognition that democracy needs to find ways to renew itself in these four areas. The protective power of democracy remains clear in principle, the challenge is to deliver it more effectively in practice. Most of the problems of democracy that we encounter stem from the persistence of social, economic or political inequality of one form or another. In contrast, effective democracy is shown to be most firmly embedded in creating empowering political and socio-economic conditions that make people both capable and willing to engage in democratic practice as critical citizens.

We remain confident in the adaptive capacity of liberal democracy and its citizens to renew our democratic settlements, restore and strengthen the 'protective' power of democracy. In research in both the UK and Australia we have explored the democratic reform preferences that people support.<sup>[xiii]</sup> It is a challenging exercise because many of the reform options that we have considered are not that well-known to members of the public. So, asking them about the changes they would like to see is best phrased in general terms. Broadly though the message from our research efforts is that the majority of citizens would like to see reforms to the way that representative politics works and operates even more than new opportunities to directly engage themselves. Historically, reform decisions have been presented as a binary choice between those that strengthen the representative system of government and reforms that extend greater public participation. It is increasingly evident, that citizens think that it is the mixture of reforms that restore and strengthen the protective power of democracy that will matter most in the next chapter of our democratic story. We agree with them.

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## Notes/links

- [i] His full speech is available at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/world-suffering-from-trust-deficit-disorder-united-nations-chief-antonio-guterres-1922131> [accessed 22 November 2021].
- [ii] The White House Briefing Room, 'President Biden to Convene Leaders' Summit for Democracy, 11 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/08/11/president-biden-to-convene-leaders-summit-for-democracy/> [accessed 22 November 2021].
- [iii] David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile Books, 2018).
- [iv] See, for example, recent annual reports by: Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/>), the *Economist Democracy Index* (<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/22/global-democracy-has-another-bad-year>), *Reporters without Borders* (<https://rsf.org/en>), the *Electoral Integrity Project* (<https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>), and the *Varieties of Democracy* project (<https://www.v-dem.net/en/>). All accessed 22 November 2021.
- [v] For example, see: Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democracy in Decline?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Joshua Kurlantzick, *Democracy in Retreat* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (Boston, Little Brown, 2017); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2018); Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; and Sunstein, ed., *Can it Happen Here?*
- [vi] Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds. Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition and American Complacency* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 11.
- [vii] See Robert Foa et al., 2020, *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020*, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/global-satisfaction-democracy-report-2020/> [accessed 22 November 2021].
- [viii] For evidence on all these positives see Célia Belin and Giovanna de Maio, 'Democracy after Coronavirus: Five challenges for the 2020s', *Foreign Policy*, August (2020).
- [ix] Guanlan Mao, Maria Fernandes-Jesus, Evangelos Ntontis and John Drury, 'What have we learned so far about COVID-19 volunteering in the UK? A rapid review of the literature', medRxiv, November (2020).
- [x] Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a universal value', *Journal of Democracy*, 10, 3 (1999), pp. 3–17.
- [xi] See *Varieties of Democracy Project* at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/> [accessed 22 November 2021].
- [xii] A classification undertaken by Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg and Staffan I. Lindberg reported in 'Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes', *Politics and Governance* 6, 1 (2018), pp. 60–77.
- [xiii] For Australia see Gerry Stoker, Jinjing Li, Max Halupka and Mark Evans, 'Complacent young citizens or cross-generational solidarity? An analysis of Australian attitudes to democratic politics', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 52, 2 (2017), pp. 218–235, p. 230, and Mark Evans, Gerry Stoker and Max Halupka, *How Australian federal politicians would like to reform their democracy*. For the UK see: Gerry Stoker and Colin Hay, 'Understanding and Challenging Populist Negativity towards Politics: The Perspectives of British Citizens', *Political Studies*, 65, 1 (2017), pp. 4–23, p. 23.



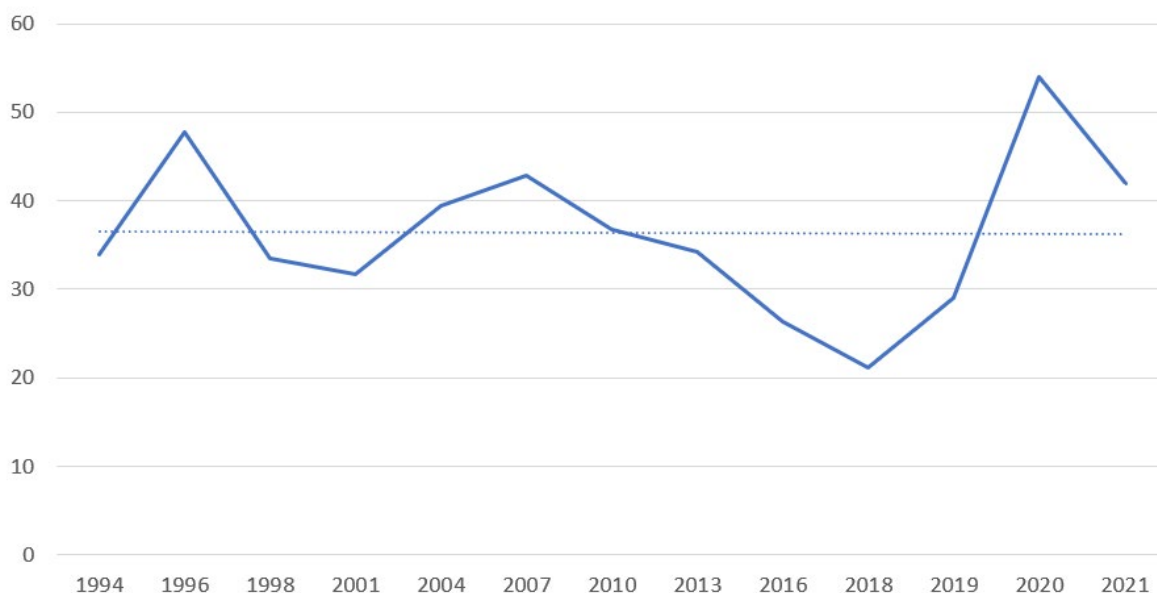
## Australian democracy under pressure

Mark Evans

Australia is considered on the international stage to be a great, young democracy that punches well above its weight.<sup>[i]</sup> 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.<sup>[ii]</sup> 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;<sup>[iii]</sup> our cities are amongst the most liveable in the world;<sup>[iv]</sup> 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).<sup>[v]</sup>

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.<sup>[vi]</sup>

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

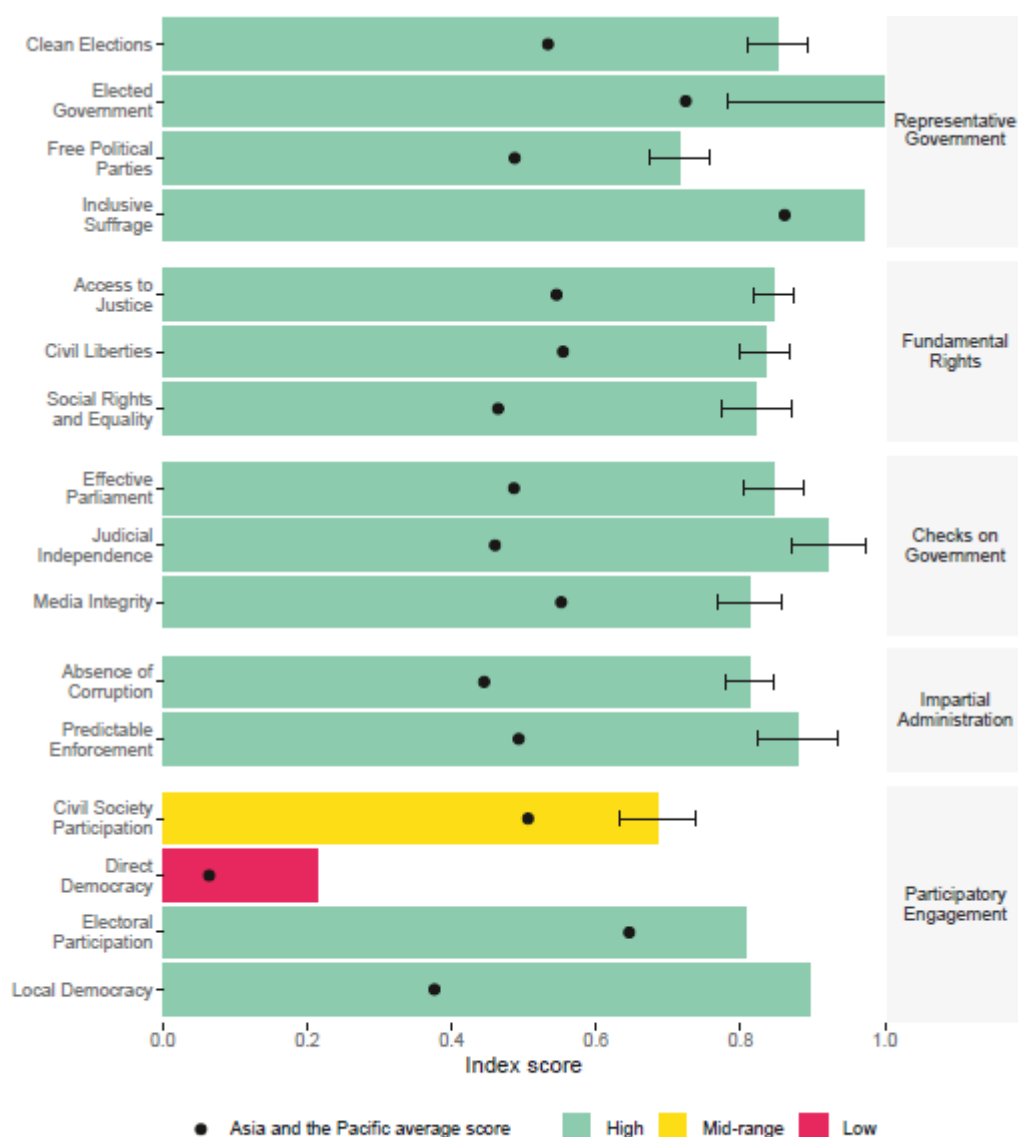


*Sources:* Australian Election Study (1994-2019) and Democracy 2025 (2016, 2018, 2020 and 2021)

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/gsoi-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.<sup>[vii]</sup>

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.<sup>[viii]</sup>

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.<sup>[ix]</sup>

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.<sup>[x]</sup>

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.<sup>[xi]</sup>

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.<sup>[x]</sup> 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.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

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 rollout.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

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.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

The early groundswell of public support during the pandemic is partly explained by what is called the 'rally-round-the-flag', patriotic effect.<sup>[xiv]</sup> 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.<sup>[xv]</sup> 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?<sup>[xvi]</sup>

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? <sup>[xvii]</sup> 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. <sup>[xviii]</sup>

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.

## Challenges

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

<b>Column %</b> ⚡	<b>Builders (born 1925-45)</b> ⚡	<b>Baby boomers (born 1945-64)</b> ⚡	<b>Generation X (born 1965- 79)</b> ⚡	<b>Millennials (born 1980- 94)</b> ⚡	<b>Generation Z (born 1995 - 2003)</b> ⚡
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%

## **Saving Democracy**

### **Mark Evans and Gerry Stoker**

We began writing *Saving Democracy* towards the end of 2018 in the context of the lowest reported levels of public trust and satisfaction with Australia and the United Kingdom's democratic arrangements set against a global democratic malaise, the rise of debased semi-democracies, the Brexit debacle and the general confusion associated with the Trump presidency. Democracy was under attack on a global scale and there was a pressing need for a book that provided an understanding of the political dynamics underpinning the pre-pandemic crisis and mapped out potential pathways to renewal. Then COVID-19 hit.

Unsurprisingly COVID-19 compelled us to rethink how we approached the book. The intrinsic value of democracy had not diminished but the challenges confronting democracies appeared starker and how democracy was being practiced began to change as we wrote. We therefore decided to connect-up with everyday citizens through a Facebook discussion group at <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/programs/save-democracy-post-covid-19.html> which posed the question – how can we save democracy in a post-COVID-19 world?

The purpose of this international crowdsourcing experiment was to ensure that we were focusing on appropriate conceptual issues, drawing on the right areas of reform in terms of strengthening democratic practice and identifying credible pathways to reform. Knowledge of stellar international examples of democratic innovation during the pandemic were particularly welcomed. Over the following 12 months we posted draft chapters, invited comments, synthesised the commentary, and posted a rejoinder on the lessons that we would draw for the subsequent redrafting of the chapter.

We were delighted with the feedback we received which has improved the book in at least three ways. It has: sharpened our operational understanding of the concepts of 'democracy' and 'politics'; provided for a more nuanced understanding of deliberative, direct and digital democracy; and, introduced us to a broader range of relevant reforms than originally envisaged. Participants were excited with the systems approach to politics that we developed; they recognized the difference between 'old' and 'new' power and its' implications for democratic politics; and they agreed with the global challenges to democracy that we identified. There were different views on the focus for reform. Participants felt that we were too kind to politicians and political parties, and too conservative on alternative forms of democratic representation through devices such as sortition. There was also cynicism with the capacity of existing democratic institutions to improve their own practices and connect-up better with the citizenry.

We defend the representative role of politicians but think that it requires a serious redesign to address its dysfunctions and contradictions. We do not see sortition as replacing representative democracy rather as a component of a broader participatory governance system where a variety of methods can be used to co-produce solutions to governance problems with citizens and stakeholders and bolster the legitimacy of public policy-making. We look to historical evidence as the basis of our optimism that democratic institutions can and do change for the better over time. However, we do share the concerns of our participants that although the protective power of democracy remains clear in principle, the challenge is to deliver it more effectively in practice. Most of the problems of democracy that we have encountered in this book stem from the persistence of inequality of one form or another that the political class has conspicuously failed to counter. We must all be more



demanding of our politicians to take concerted action and willing to engage in democratic practice as critical citizens. After all, we largely get the democracy that we vote for.

We thank our 83 champions of democracy for their rich insights and hope that the final product *Saving Democracy* was worth the investment in time and thought.