

Saving Democracy

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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.