

This is part of our Reimagining New South Wales (NSW) series. For this series, vice-chancellors across NSW asked a select group of early and mid-career researchers to envisage new ways to tackle old problems and identify emerging opportunities across the state.

Many people are watching the Donald Trump campaign in the US and wondering: how has it come to this? Anti-politics, populist, and some say even authoritarian candidates such as [Trump](#) have risen in recent years across established democracies, along with rising polarisation and increasing political instability.

In Australia, federal instability symbolised by the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd and Abbott-Turnbull machinations has left many Australian citizens concerned that leadership spills may now have become a regular feature of Australian politics. And despite NSW Premier Mike Baird's historically high personal approval rating, NSW has also recently experienced its fair share of political drama.

[Large-scale protests](#) – often centred around lack of consultation – are not [uncommon](#) in NSW and are starting to [shift election outcomes](#). The NSW government has [tightened the rules](#) on protest (which has sparked further demonstrations).

The common thread here is governance: the relationship between the state and civil society. Many NSW citizens appear to be indicating they feel disenfranchised, marginalised and silenced when it comes to policymaking. Could doing governance differently make NSW more prosperous?

Good governance can lead to a stronger NSW

Governance means different things to different people, but there are some common features.

Governance refers to the processes of public decision-making and the processes by which decisions are implemented. Government, citizens, business, unions, and other civil society organisations are all involved.

The process starts with identifying issues of concern to citizens and ends with evaluating the effects of policy decisions. It involves much more than simply holding periodic elections – it means making and implementing decisions that are participatory, accountable, responsive, transparent, equitable, effective, efficient, and that follow the rule of law.

Most of these principles reflect the core underpinnings for democracy. These principles apply to governance everywhere, from the local school level to national politics. It's only when these principles are upheld and put into practice that a democracy functions well.

Good governance is the right thing to do, and boosts the legitimacy of decision-making. But if moral chivalry does not appeal to you, here are two more reasons.

Good governance leads to better solutions. Citizens' capacity to solve problems is greatly undervalued. Better involving citizens in deliberation about how to solve problems may actually result in much better outcomes – socially and economically. We should make better use of the [wisdom of the crowd](#).

Good governance is also cost-efficient. Ensuring support of citizens and other stakeholders may reduce the costs of policy implementation. Involving citizens creates a more legitimate process of decision-making and creates a positive perception of government. Engagement ensures that outcomes of policymaking processes are more widely supported.

Good governance is happening – but we need more of it

Good governance as described above can work, and in some cases is already happening in NSW. For example, governments have:

- 1.

Legislated for engagement: the [Advocate for Children and Young People](#), in consultation with the relevant minister, is mandated to advise the NSW parliament and monitor progress on policy affecting children and young people. In 2015, it consulted with more than 4,000 children and young people to devise the [NSW Children and Young People's Plan](#).

2.

Engaged in genuine consultation: in 2014, citizens in the [Lower Hunter](#) provided fresh solutions to the problem of water supply by coming up with ways to reduce water usage. As a result, the need for expensive desalination plants and complex water treatment schemes was significantly reduced.

3.

Drawn widely on the experience of the community: a [panel of experts on political donations](#) established by the Baird government in 2014 used the expertise of Australian researchers working on corruption, money and politics to craft a series of independent recommendations for political finance reform in NSW.

4.

Invested in platforms for citizen-engaged innovation: in Belgium, the [G1,000](#) initiative brought citizens together to identify political and social problems and craft policy solutions.

The challenge is to draw lessons from these positive examples and apply them more broadly. Encouraging engagement between constituents (citizens young and old, organisations, networks and governments) requires enhancing opportunities for citizens to have a voice, as well as fostering a culture of listening among lawmakers. Ongoing commitments beyond one-off events and experiments can cultivate the cultures and skills required for good governance.

One practical step could be the creation of a NSW Citizen's Forum, tasking a representative sample of NSW citizens with the challenge of imagining an ideal NSW in 2025. Finding out the priorities for the public will give a starting point on what policy changes are needed for implementation.

Creating a specialised agency that facilitates regular citizen engagement in policymaking will also help. The agency may be tasked with engaging citizens in the problem and design stage of policymaking, rather than putting fully developed policy proposals to citizens and asking their response.

A long-term commitment to such an approach would position NSW as a leading state in good governance and produce better long-term policy for a vibrant NSW now and in the future.

Further reading:

[Reimagining NSW: how the care economy could help unclog our cities](#)

[Reimagining NSW: four ways to boost community well-being and why it matters](#)

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Reimagining NSW: how good governance strengthens democracy

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