Australia's "coup culture" has become so entrenched that it now holds serious dangers for our democracy. Not that the politicians seem to give a damn. For all the talk of "listening" and being "on your side" the voters have once again been treated as little more than a gullible audience for a low-grade reality show.

A decade or two ago, many commentators advocated four-year federal terms, to encourage better policy-making. Now we can't even count on a prime minister lasting through the three-year parliamentary term after the election they win.

In less than a decade, we've had four prime ministerial coups: from Rudd to Gillard (2010); from Gillard to Rudd (2013); from Abbott to Turnbull (2015); and, last week, from Turnbull to Morrison.

A couple of these seemed politically savvy. I admit to thinking them so. In 2013, Kevin Rudd was reinstated to "save the furniture", and he did. In 2015, Tony Abbott's government appeared headed for certain oblivion. Malcolm Turnbull was installed as a better prospect; in the event, he won in 2016 only by the skin of his teeth.

The Gillard coup, driven by a panic attack and colleagues' frustration with Rudd's style, was ill-conceived. The botched assault by Peter Dutton, that elevated Scott Morrison, was fuelled by a cocktail of revenge against Turnbull and a policy push to the right. We'll see how it ends, but likely it won't be well.

While a particular coup may have its justifications, when you look at a clutch of them, they're bad for the country and for the political system.

Some will point to history for precedent - Paul Keating overthrew Bob Hawke in 1991. But we didn't in those days have a "coup culture".

We may chuckle on hearing Australia referred to abroad as the "coup capital" of the world. But

it’s not a joke. Although this country will continue to be seen as a safe place to invest, a rolling prime ministership must eventually test the faith of outsiders.

The coup culture works against the sort of decision-making that requires serious policy bravery. Timeframes shorten - ironically, just when governments fancifully cast programs as stretching over 10 years.

Thinking for the future is difficult enough with continuous polling and the shrill media cycle. But if a prime minister can’t rely on their troops guaranteeing their leadership through tough patches, or standing up against guerrilla insurgencies, public policy is reduced to the lowest common denominator or falls victim to the worst of internal power struggles.

Ditching opposition leaders is different from tossing out prime ministers. It has its own problems, but doesn’t undermine the system the way assassinating a PM does. Voters feel (and are entitled to feel) they elect the prime minister; it’s not technically true but it is effectively so, as campaigns are so leader-focused.

Fundamental in this revolving door is the cost to trust. As in other democracies, Australians’ trust in their system and its players has been eroding over decades.

Research from the University of Canberra’s Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis found fewer than 41% of Australians are currently satisfied with the way our democracy works. This compared with 78% in 1996.

Generation X is least satisfied (31%); the baby boomers most satisfied (50%). Women are generally less satisfied with democracy and more distrustful of politicians and political institutions.

According to this data – which preceded the leadership crisis - politicians are trusted by only 21%, and journalists by 28%.

The yet-to-be-released research concluded that “politicians, government ministers and political parties are deeply distrusted and media of all kinds and how they report Canberra politics is viewed as a key part of the problem.” It also found strong public support for reforms to ensure greater political accountability of MPs and to stimulate more public participation.

The coup culture further alienates an already disillusioned public, unable to comprehend the appalling behaviour they often witness from their politicians.

Recently I spoke to members of a community leadership program who’d come to Canberra for a couple of days of briefings from politicians and others. They’d been to Question Time a few hours before I met them.

To journalists, it was a pretty standard QT. For these people, what they witnessed was shocking. They had trouble getting their heads around how the goings on – the shouting, the insults - could be so dreadful. They’d looked over at the school children in another part of the public gallery and wondered what those youngsters were thinking.

They asked: why do our politicians act like this and what can be done? All 72 decided to write to their MPs to say this wasn’t the type of conduct they wanted to see from them.

My hunch is that this group of ordinary, well-educated, interested citizens would probably be even more put off by subsequent events.

One thing I suspect would have particularly disturbed them is the way the players in last week’s coup expect the public to just move right on. Everyone was back to work, they said.

Gillard in 2010 tried to explain and justify her deposing of Rudd by saying “I believed that a good government was losing its way”. It didn’t wash.

We know for ourselves the reasons for the latest coup – hatred of Turnbull and a desire to force

a sharp turn to the right. But have the main coup-makers and their allies (as distinct from their noisy backers in the media), and the windfall beneficiaries felt the need to properly account for their actions?

This hit-and-run attitude is contemptuous of the public.

The coup culture, especially in this instance, is also accompanied by an “anything goes” view of tactics. Again, it is a matter of degree – the extent to which the hardball, which we always see at such times, crosses a line.

For some of the Liberal women, it undoubtedly did last week.

Julia Banks, announcing on Wednesday that she’ll resign her Melbourne seat of Chisholm at the election, has cited bullying. Western Australian senator Linda Reynolds went to the lengths of telling the Senate: “I just hope that … the behaviours we have seen and the bullying and intimidation, which I do not recognise as Liberal in any way, shape or form, are brought to account.”

But Victorian Liberal president Michael Kroger saw it as par for the course, saying, in response to Banks: “This is politics. People do speak strongly to each other. You just need to look at Question Time. If you think Question Time is not full of bullying and intimidation then you’ve got another thingcoming.”

Well, anyone who bullied or was fine with such conduct should do this: go to your local high school and explain to the kids why bullying shouldn’t be in their tool kit but is needed in yours.

Some Liberals flirt with the idea of rules to curb the coup culture, a path Labor has gone down.

It depends on the model: as with so much in politics, what looks good at first sight may hold dangers. Giving a party’s rank and file a say in electing the leader, as the ALP does, might

eventually advantage those harder to sell to voters, because party memberships are small and unrepresentative.

A higher than 50% threshold for a spill, which Labor also has embraced and Reynolds suggests, holds some merit. But when Anthony Albanese was stalking Bill Shorten before Super Saturday, Albanese's supporters insisted the rule could be circumvented.

What's really critical is the culture - in a party and in the political system generally. And once that's been corroded, it's a devil of a job to scrape the rust off.

There are no easy ways to rid ourselves of the coup culture, or to force tin-eared politicians to lift their game. But it wouldn't hurt for more people to follow the example of those in the community leadership program and remind their MPs of their KPIs.

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Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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