

Australians' trust in politicians and democracy hits an all-time low: new research

Written by Mark Evans, Professor of Governance and Director of Democracy 2025 - bridging the trust divide at Old Parliament House, University of Canberra

Over the past four years, we have conducted a [range of attitudinal surveys](#) with the Social Research Institute at Ipsos on the relationship between trust in the political system and attitudes towards democracy in Australia.

Our latest research, conducted in July 2018 (prior to the Liberal Party's leadership spill), includes a quantitative survey of a representative sample of 20 focus groups and 1,021 Australians from a wide range of demographic backgrounds. We understood [political trust](#) in this survey as "keeping promises and agreements".

Our findings should give all democrats pause for thought. We continue to find compelling evidence of an increasing trust divide between government and citizens. This is reflected in the decline of democratic satisfaction and receding trust in politicians, political parties and other key institutions (especially media). We also found a lack of public confidence in the capacity of government to address public policy concerns.

Democratic decline and renewal

Australians should rightly be proud of their hard-won democratic traditions and freedoms and the achievement of stable government, which has delivered social and economic well-being for its citizens.

The majority of Australians dislike the conflict-driven politics of the federal parliament, but don't dislike democratic values or democracy as a system of government.

When asked to select three aspects of Australian democracy that they liked the most, the top three in 2018 were (in order):

1. "Australia has been able to provide good education, health, welfare and other public services to its citizens"
2. "Australia has experienced a good economy and lifestyle"
3. "Australian elections are free and fair".

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Respondents were least likely to choose features that praised (or showed engagement) with current democratic politics. The findings suggest that Australians are happy with the underlying democratic infrastructure of Australian society that allows them to achieve a high standard of living, but are less positive or engaged about day-to-day political operations.

Australians are deeply unhappy with democratic politics

Fewer than 41% of Australian citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia, down from 86% in 2007. Public satisfaction has fallen particularly sharply since 2013, when 72% of Australian citizens were satisfied. Generation X is least satisfied (31%) and the Baby Boomers most satisfied (50%).

At a time of the “#Metoo” movement, women are generally less satisfied with democracy and more distrusting of politicians and political institutions.

In general, levels of trust in government and politicians in Australia are at their lowest levels since time-series data have been available.

Read more: [Why do Australians hate politics?](#)

Just 31% of the population trust federal government. State and local governments perform little better, with just over a third of people trusting them. Ministers and MPs (whether federal or state) rate at just 21%, while more than 60% of Australians believe the honesty and integrity of politicians is very low.

The three biggest grievances people have with politicians are:

1. they are not accountable for broken promises
2. they don't deal with the issues that really matter

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3. big business has too much power (Liberal and National Party voters identify trade unions instead of big business).

The continued decline of political trust has also contaminated public confidence in other key political institutions. Only five rate above 50% – police, military, civic well-being organisations (such as Headspace or community services), universities and healthcare institutions.

Trust was lowest in political parties (16%) and web-based media (20%). Trust in banks and web-based media has significantly decreased since the last survey. This reflects the impact of the banking royal commission and the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal.

People who are more likely to feel satisfied with the status quo include those aged over 55 (Baby Boomers), those earning more than \$200,000 a year and those who vote for the National or Liberal parties. They are more likely to be male and an immigrant, because those born overseas tend to be more satisfied with Australian politics than native-born.

Those who are most likely to be unhappy are Australian-born, female, aged in their 40s (Generation X) and struggling on less than \$50,000 a year. They are more likely to identify with minor political parties like One Nation, Centre Alliance or independents.

The perfect storm for independents

Levels of social trust are also in decline. Social trust between people has fallen below 50% for the first time to 47%. A majority, though, still believe that people in their neighbourhood would help others out – except for the very rich (47%).

Four attitudinal shifts are on display here.

First, many voters care more about effective and competent government than promises of more dollars in their pockets.

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Second, there is a group of voters who are completely disconnected from traditional politics. They are deeply distrustful not just of politicians but almost every major institution and authority figure listed in the survey, except for their local GP.

Third, we can identify an increasingly large group of Australians who are deeply critical of the main political parties and are looking for an alternative across the ideological spectrum.

And fourth, there is a group of Australians who vote independent for tactical reasons, either to secure greater resources for their communities or to register a protest vote against the two-party system.

Appetite for democratic reform is extremely strong

Our survey revealed a significant appetite for reform. Nine out of 15 proposed reforms received net agreement rates above 50%. The top five reforms favoured in the survey were:

1. limiting money donated to parties and spent in elections
2. the right for voters to recall ineffective local MPs
3. giving all MPs a free vote in parliament
4. co-designing policies with ordinary Australians
5. citizen juries to solve complex problems that parliament can't fix.

Reforms aimed at improving the practice of representative politics were the most popular, followed by reforms aimed at giving citizens a greater say. There was also strong support for reforms aimed at creating a stronger community or local focus to decision-making. Only reforms aimed at guaranteeing the representation of certain groups failed to attract majority support.

Remarkably, accessing more detailed information about innovative reforms led to greater support for those reforms. This is an important finding, revealing the importance of strategic communication in winning the war of ideas.

We are at the tipping point

Liberal democracies are founded on a delicate balance between trust and distrust. Our survey

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findings suggest we may have reached a tipping point due to a deepening trust divide in Australia, which has increased in scope and intensity since 2007.

Read more: [Grattan on Friday: The high costs of our destructive coup culture](#)

Yet citizens still appear to value the overall stability of their political system, even if the lack of political trust means they doubt its ability to deliver, especially on more challenging policy issues.

Australians imagine their democracy in a way that demonstrates support for a new participatory politics but with the aim of shoring up representative democracy and developing a more integrated, inclusive and responsive democratic system. In the light of this discovery, we believe an effective path to reform is not about choosing between representative and participatory democratic models, but finding linking arrangements between them.

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