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Political parties

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In Australia, as in other 'Anglosphere' liberal democracies (like the USA, UK or Canada), political parties have moved in the last three decades from being widely trusted and relatively uncontroversial parts of the political system, to being criticised as increasingly unrepresentative of society and blamed for an erosion of liberal democratic integrity and quality. Yet political parties have multiple, complex roles to play in liberal democracies, especially in federations (**Ghazarian, 2024**; Jackson et al., 2022; Marsh, 2006). Thanks to its electoral systems, Australia has not suffered from partisan over-polarisation, nor any major slide towards populism. However, the party system has some significant weaknesses, for which some reforms have been advocated.

What does democracy require for political parties and a party system?

Parties (and now other forms of election-fighting organisations, like referendum campaigns) are diverse, so four kinds of democratic evaluation criteria are needed:

(i) Structuring competition and engagement

- The party system should provide citizens with a framework for simplifying and organising political ideas and discourses, providing coherent packages of policy proposals, so as to sustain vigorous and effective electoral competition between rival teams. In a federal system, this role needs to work both nationally and in (most) component states.
- Parties should provide enduring brands, able to sustain the engagement and trust of most citizens over long periods. Because they endure through time, parties should behave responsibly, knowing that citizens can effectively hold them to account in future. In a federation, some brand differentiation will occur across states, but national coherence is still needed.
- Main parties should help to recruit, socialise, select and promote talented individuals into elected public office, at state and national government levels. In cities and local areas, the major parties can often play a key role in organising political space.

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- Party groups inside elected legislatures (such as MPs and senators federally and in state legislatures), plus associated elites and members in the party's extra-parliamentary organisations at state and federal levels, should help to sustain viable and accountable leadership teams. They should also be important channels for the scrutiny of public policies and the elected leadership's conduct in office and behaviour in the public interest.

(ii) Representing civil society

- The party system should be reasonably inclusive nationally and at state level, covering a broad range of interests and views in civil society. Parties should not exclude or discriminate against people on the basis of gender, ethnicity or other characteristics.
- Citizens should be able to form and grow new political parties easily at state and federal levels, without encountering onerous or artificial official barriers privileging existing, established or incumbent parties.
- Party activities should be regulated independently at both state and federal levels by impartial officials and agencies, so as to maximise electoral integrity and prevent self-serving protection of existing incumbents.

(iii) Internal party democracy and transparency

- Long-established parties inevitably accumulate discretionary political power in the exercise of their functions. This creates some citizen dependencies upon them and always has oligopolistic effects in restricting political competition (for example, concentrating funding and advertising/campaign capabilities in main parties). To compensate, the internal leadership of parties and their processes for setting policies should be responsive to a wide membership, one that is open and easy to join.
- Leadership selection and the setting of main policies should operate democratically and transparently to members and other groupings inside the party (such as party MPs or members of legislatures) (**Jaensch, Brent and Bowden, 2004**). Independent regulation should ensure that parties stick both to their own rule books and to public interest practices.

(iv) Political finance

- Parties should be able to raise substantial political funding of their own, but subject to independent regulation to ensure that effective electoral competition is not undermined by inequities of funding.
- Individuals, organisations or interests providing large donations to parties or other election-fighting organisations (such as referendum campaigns) must not gain enhanced or differential influence over public policies, or the allocation of social prestige (such as honours).
- All donations must be fully transparent, with no payments made from front organisations or foreign sources. The size of individual contributions should be capped where they could raise doubts of undue influence over parties or individual legislators.

The traditional view of parties was captured by Ian McAllister:

> *The hallmark of Australian politics is the dominance of party. The vast majority of voters identify with and vote for one of the major political parties: gaining election at federal level is next to impossible without the benefit of one of the three party labels – Liberal, National or Labor; and minor parties [sic] have played little part in shaping the development of the party system. (2002, p.379)*

This has also been a long-settled pattern. Historically the top two parties became the dominant foci of political activity almost from the outset of the Australian federation (see Chapter 1). The unbroken duopolistic control of government ministries by either the Liberal-National Coalition or the Australia Labor Party (ALP) has continued. But their complete control of policy has been qualified by hung Senates and narrowing House of Representatives majorities. And their combined share of primary votes has fallen fairly consistently over the five elections from 2010 to 2022 (see Chapter 5), reaching just 68 per cent of the total in the last of these. Almost as many 2022 voters chose another party to support as backed Labor – which nonetheless went from second place in the primary vote to an overall win, largely thanks to getting second-preference support from Green voters.

Recent developments

In theory, Australians can change their party of government every three years at federal elections, but this has rarely happened in modern times. Instead, when voters have shifted allegiances, they have tended to give a new party of government two or three terms, giving them the benefit of the doubt, partly sustained by the country's continuous economic growth over three decades. Even when a switch of party of government occurs, the changes of seats involved can be fairly small and the new government may have a narrow majority. This was the case in 2019 when Scott Morrison, a relatively new prime minister (PM) who had toppled his predecessor as Liberal leader only less than a year beforehand, unexpectedly won a small but stable majority (**Gauja, Sawer and Simms, 2020**). He went on to prove himself a determined but perhaps overly combative PM, with a robust alpha-male style that ultimately proved inappropriate to the times.

PM Morrison's apparent laggard reactions in combatting global warming, despite the devastating bush fires of 2019 to 2020, and various lurches away from bipartisanship into criticisms of Labor state governments during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022, diminished the government's popular appeal. Criticisms of the misogynistic or alleged bullying conduct of some Liberal and National politicians also went largely unaddressed. After the 2019 election campaign, it also later emerged that the Liberal-National government had practised partisan tailoring of government programs to focus spending on target seats important for it to win. Following later scandals in the Liberal Party in New South Wales (NSW), PM Morrison also went back on his December 2018 promise to create a federal anti-corruption agency that would be a 'serious new commission with teeth … to protect the integrity of Australia's Commonwealth public administration' (**Gordon, 2022**).

Labor recovered relatively quickly from its 2019 election defeat. Its Members of Parliament (MPs) and senators elected Anthony Albanese unopposed after his predecessor resigned. In May 2022, the incumbent Coalition lost support and fell behind Labor in the crucial two-party preferred (TPP) vote, and additionally lost some seats to disillusioned former Liberals standing as independents. A reconstructed and now relatively consensual leader, Albanese steered Labor successfully to lead a narrowly victorious election strategy, winning Green voters' support in the 2022 election. This was despite Labor garnering less of the primary vote than the Coalition and suffering some unexpected defeats in Queensland's coal-mining and primary industry seats.

On election night, Scott Morrison conceded defeat and resigned as Liberal party leader. Normally the Liberal deputy leader, Josh Frydenberg (who had been Treasurer), would have been expected to succeed Morrison, but he lost his Kooyong seat. The Liberal MPs and senators went on to elect unopposed the experienced but controversial 'hard man' MP Peter Dutton as their leader. Initially, at least, this did little to stem a substantial post-election decline in the party's fortunes, with Dutton at first lagging well behind PM Albanese's initial soaraway evaluations. However, the 2023 loss of the Voice referendum and 'cost of living' worries brought this period to a close.

More than one in seven of 2022 MPs in the House of Representatives were elected to the crossbench, with the Teal Independents (all women) winning a handful of previous Liberal-National seats on fairly conservative policies but linked to faster action on global warming and taking women's issues seriously (see later in this chapter). Green voters' support was critical in securing the overall Labor victory, although the smaller party also unexpectedly won three inner-city Brisbane seats by defeating Labor candidates. On the political right, over 12 per cent of the primary vote went to small parties, damaging Coalition chances in some seats – even though most of this voter base backed Liberals or National in the TPP vote. The political prominence of anti-vaccination movements during the COVID-19 lockdowns did not trigger any effective revival in terms of far-right parties winning seats, but more than 1 in 12 voters backed one or another of various small parties in this space.

Clearly, then, the rise of new parties, movements and issue orientations has changed a great deal over the last two decades of Australian politics. At the time of writing the new parties were still small, and the shifting start-ups on the far right have faced problems in building permanent support bases, given the high threshold needed to win seats in the single-member House constituencies under the Alternative Vote (AV) (see Chapter 5). But Australia's third, fourth and other parties have ceased to be minor in their impacts or significance (Gauja and Gromping, 2020).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
At the time of writing, some political scientists had recently characterised Australia's party system as highly stable. However, the rise of the Greens at Labor's expense, changes in the relative partisan strength of the Liberals and Nationals, and the successes of independents at the federal level have all created significant dynamism, especially in the 2022 national election. Teal Independents and Greens especially were able to reach the final stage in important local AV seats, due to voters' disaffection with the main two parties.	Thanks to the operations of AV, the long-established Liberal-National Coalition and Labor parties have been in a privileged position in dominating second-preference votes for lower houses at both the federal and state levels. This privileged hegemony has long made it harder for newer or alternative parties to win MPs and to attract and retain activists and financial support.
The use of proportional representation (PR) elections has allowed parties outside the top two to win representation in the federal Senate at Canberra and in some state upper houses (**Ghazarian, 2024**). The Greens have increased their capabilities as a party (Jackson, 2016). But various small right-wing parties have proved evanescent and dependent on one leading figure for their representation in the legislature or funding.	Under AV, new or smaller parties cannot win seats unless they can make it into the TPP vote final stage of the counts. Hence, parties running third or fourth can accumulate substantial votes across many seats without winning any MPs. Historically, local independents have been the key exceptions to two-party dominance, and usually not for very long periods.
In terms of structuring the political/ ideological space for voters, the Labor versus Liberal-National divide has generally captured a (moderate) left-wing to (robust) right-wing politics that has been well understood by voters. This ideological dimension centres around societal equality and welfare state provision versus low taxation/private enterprise. It also links to major social interests – the Liberals with business (Brett, 2006) and the conservative middle class (Brett, 2003), the Nationals with rural areas (**Cockfield, 2020**) and Labor with trade unions and urban liberals.	The two main parties have been conspicuously poor in handling the issues that do not fit neatly into left- versus right-wing politics, especially around climate change and global warming (see Chapter 27). Labor's position has been fractured between trade unions representing carbon industries (like Queensland coal mining) and urban middle-class supporters pressing for faster climate policy changes (**Crowe, 2018**). Up to the 2022 election, the Liberal-National Coalition was dominated by factions minimising the scale of climate change challenges – contributing to the Teal Independent phenomenon in 2022.

Political polarisation between the top two parties has generally been relatively restrained, despite periodic rhetorical excesses or blunt speaking. In modern times, abuses by incumbents to boost their tenure in office have still occurred, but in small ways only. Attempts by populist politicians (mainly of the right) have created occasional surges of support, without creating any lasting or cumulative election-fighting capacity (**C. Johnson, 2020**).	Critics argue that the top two parties have responded to populist issue surges by incorporating into their programs some semi-populist policies that inhibit civil rights (for example draconian restrictions on illegal immigrants) or that postpone action on threatening issues (like climate change or Australia's relations with China).
Public trust in Australia's political parties re-grew in encouraging ways during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, partly because the parties (most of the time, and in their official discourses) stressed bipartisan cooperation and joint working. Occasional lapses from this stance occurred but were generally quickly retreated from.	In some repeated lapses away from bipartisanship, at times mainstream Liberal or National politicians at federal and state levels made efforts to blame COVID-19 restrictions on Labor state governments. However, populist right parties and anti-mask movements, together with significant numbers of the Coalition parties' state and local activists and smaller office-holders, ensured that the myths and other unfounded positions involved were widely repeated and their impacts considerably magnified.
The main two parties have consistently shown an ability to attract serious leaders to become lower house politicians at the state level and as federal MPs.	The normal longer term for senators (six years instead of three) was supposed to diversify the type of people in federal politics. However, the dominance of the established party machines has meant that differences in age and experience between MPs and senators have not been large.
The gender diversity within the top two parties has improved considerably in terms of more women entering federal politics in winnable seats and reaching ministerial ranks. A record 102 women were elected to the 47th Parliament. However, recent sexual misconduct scandals (a particular problem for the Liberals and Nationals) have highlighted deeper issues of misogyny. They also partly contributed to the success of Teal Independents women candidates. The ethnic diversity of parties has continued to be dominated by politicians of white, Anglo, Irish or European origins. Nonetheless, in 2022 Ed Husic and Anne Aly became the first two Muslim federal ministers.	First Nations representation improved in the 47th Parliament, with a record 11 parliamentarians elected – 5 per cent of the total number of federal politicians, representing 3.8 per cent of the population. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (**2023**) has shown that appreciable percentages of Australian citizens were born overseas in India (2.8), China (2.3), the Philippines (1.2), Vietnam (1) and other Asian countries – and they continue to face barriers to entering Australian parties (**Wikipedia, 2023e**).

The federal legislature sits for relatively short sessions, and MPs and senators get to spend much of their year in their home areas (see Chapter 5). So, running for legislative office has been feasible for a wider range of politically interested people. State legislatures sit for even shorter time periods, and across much of the country they are far closer and more geographically accessible than Canberra.	Despite their formal openness to the public and internal democracy, the increased professionalisation of politics has radically narrowed the recruitment avenues followed by most MPs and senators at the federal level, with paid advisors, journalists and party/union officials progressing most up the political ladder. In the late 2010s and the 2020s, signs of the professionalisation of party roles have multiplied also in the states, especially the three biggest states (NSW, Victoria and Queensland).
The process of joining an Australian party has generally been open and straightforward. Many internal events are open to any member to attend, internal voting and decision opportunities are well advertised to members, and membership fees are low. Forming a new party involves registering with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), but has been relatively straightforward.	Although most party members are also more active on social media than politically uninvolved citizens, party campaigning on the internet tends to be dominated by 'loyalist' or repeated official messages by the parties' legislators, party communications offices and professionals, paid party staffers and the most strongly involved party activists (**Humphrys, Copland and Mansillo, 2020**).
The regulation of federal elections by the AEC has been impartial and independent of the parties. And all Australia's states and territories now have parallel bodies that administer state elections professionally. Australia scores highly on international studies of political integrity at both federal and state levels (**Norris, Wynter and Cameron, 2018**). This change has been a radical improvement on the historical record of partisan malapportionment and election 'fixes' by dominant parties at state level (in South Australia and Queensland, which lasted into the 1970s and 1980s).	Micro-institutions – very tiny rules or practices apparently far removed from the direct administration of elections themselves – can nonetheless often have a significant bearing on their democratic fairness (Dunleavy, 2021). The Labor–Liberal/National duopoly of power, and restricted constraints on ministerial powers, has resulted in Australia being chronically vulnerable to over-use of public resources by incumbents for partisan ends. Recent examples include the Morrison government's partisan concentration ('rorting') of federal funding onto coalition marginal constituencies in the run-up to the 2019 federal elections (**Martin, 2023**). The Morrison government ministers also injected more clearly partisan themes favouring the incumbent government into government-paid advertising right up until the last possible date before the 2019 election was formally called. However, both these aspects improved in 2022.

Political finance in Australia has been fairly 'clean', with strong rules against political corruption and considerable transparency around parties' spending and receipts of large donations. Smaller parties like the Greens and Independents generally rely more on individual supporters' donations (Gauja and Jackson, 2016; Jackson, 2015). Attempts by wealthy individuals to 'buy' their way into a political presence with heavy funding have generally failed, as with Clive Palmer's $100 million intervention in the 2022 federal election, where his 'party' won no seats.	Australia's top two parties depend heavily on large financial contributions from business (both parties) and trade unions (for Labor). Business funding rules are open-ended and powerful vested interests can spread smaller donations across many successful MP candidates so as to maximise their access (for example, see Chapter 7 on the Pharmacy Guild of Australia). Large corporation donations and active media campaigning have achieved some major political effects, notably the scrapping of Labor's carbon taxes in 2012. In an era of politically active billionaires achieving huge influence across the world, the Palmer case highlights that there has been a huge gap in Australia regulation, namely the absence of a cap on any one individual's funding of political activity.
The strong Liberal-National dominance in terms of press media support at elections has been partly offset by the non-political character of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), and bipartisan coverage rules for most TV news outputs. Having one dominant newspaper per state may also encourage some editorial efforts at inclusiveness in political coverage.	Strong press and even some TV media biases, combined with acute imbalances in press coverage of issues and leaders on partisan lines, remain the key area where party competition at and between elections has always been seriously unbalanced – see Chapter 8.
Parties' campaign activities have increasingly moved online, using social media to disseminate information and memes to supporters and floating voters.	However, studies suggest that digital campaigning largely replicates more traditional patterns of activity, with most social media use being by strongly involved party members and exactly mirroring party lines on issues (**Chen, 2013**; Kefford, 2018). Moderately involved party members show more independence in their choices of content but are less active.
Future opportunities	**Future threats**
Recent elections show that Australia's party system has diversified, with, at the time of writing, a Labor/Green coalition on the left and greater Liberal-National differentiation on the right, plus the Teal Independents, if they survive. If smaller parties can succeed in building out bastions of strong local party support, they may be able to reach the TPP stage in AV across more areas, creating more of a multi-party system in the House of Representatives, which might match the more diverse party mix produced by PR systems in the federal Senate and some other state upper houses.	Alternatively, the top two parties may retain their privileged hegemony at the TPP stage of AV counts even though their core (first-preference) support falls and gets smaller, even in areas where they win seats. Such a pattern may lengthen lags in the top parties adjusting their policies to movements of public opinion. For example, a Labor MP dependent on Green voters' support to win, or a Liberal candidate who needs Teal Independent votes, may be influenced to be more active on green issues. But in each case, they would still be constrained by strong party discipline to stick to national policies.

Greater diversity in the parties that Australian voters support has tended to 'coalitionalise' both left-wing and right-wing politics, as the top two parties may need to attract support from outside their ranks. An optimistic analysis argues that this increases the need for ministers to consult broadly to pass legislation and favours the development of more balanced and deliberative policies.	Some critics, especially on the political right, argue that the weakening position of the top two parties increases the likelihood of hung legislatures (or small majorities at best), extending from the Senate to the House of Representatives. They worry that the strength of government may decline, with greater difficulties in ministers legislating or tackling difficult or 'wicked' issues (Marsh, 1995).
Citizen vigilance about ministerial and party behaviours has continued to increase on social media, shortening reaction times in Australian politics and increasing the capacity of public opinion to scrutinise detailed issues (see Chapter 9).	Critics argue that social media have limited length and content, and so tend to open up internal party debates to populist opinion surges or tendencies.
Scandals around misogynistic behaviour by federal legislators and party officials led to electoral damage for both the Liberal and National Coalition parties in 2022. This may accelerate changes in the gender mix of Liberal candidates in future. Improved rules of behaviour for party machines and elected politicians around gender and diversity issues are also likely.	

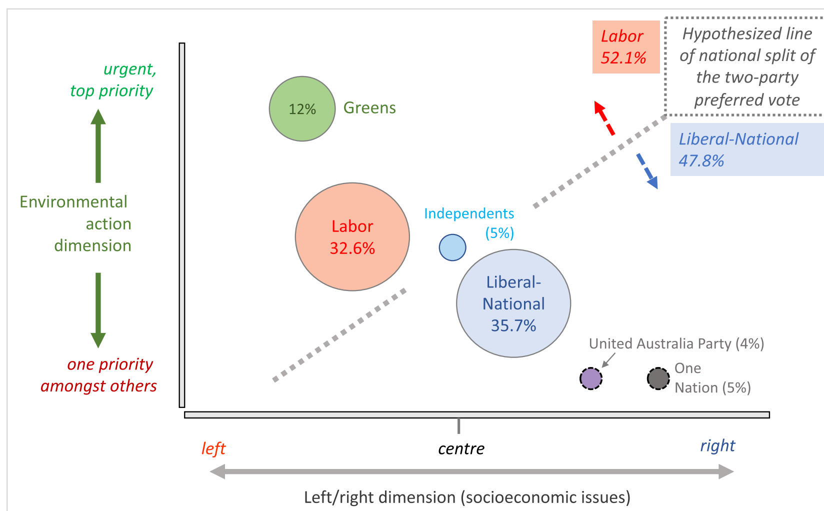
The remaining sections of this chapter consider how political parties structure political competition, the democracy and transparency of intra-party decision-making and, lastly, political finance issues.

How parties structure political competition

Since the earliest elections in the late 19th century, the dominant ideological dimension in Australian politics – the central set of issues around which the top two parties have differentiated their appeal – has been a left versus right one, focusing on socioeconomic equality and distribution versus growth debates. On the left side, from its outset the Australian Labor Party was based in the trade union movement and organised around ideas like 'a fair go' to secure decent wages and conditions for working people. In the modern period, the party has defended unions in regulating industrial bargaining and focused on providing key welfare state services like social security, Medicare, public education and housing assistance to medium- and low-income groups. On the right side, the Liberals stress enterprise and supporting business to deliver economic growth (**Barry, 2020**). They accept the welfare state yet are critical of high taxation and alleged welfare abuses, and generally condemn strikes, especially in public services. The Nationals share these stances, but from a distinctive perspective rooted in rural and regional Australia and especially supporting agriculture, mining and other outback primary industries and 'country' ways of life.

Historically, both parties have been relatively centrist, as they were again in 2022, with their positioning illustrated in Figure 6.1. Unfortunately this diagram cannot be based on the systematic mapping of party stances in voters' ideology space that is feasible in some countries. Instead,

Figure 6.1: Illustrative picture of where Australian parties stood on two main ideological dimensions and their primary vote support nationally, House of Representatives election, May 2022



Source: Designed by the authors.

Notes: This figure is diagrammatic only. It shows all parties receiving at least 3 per cent of the national vote in the House of Representatives election. The size of each circle approximately reflects the size of each party's primary vote. Parties with dashed borders failed to win any seats.

it reflects only the authors' impressionistic summary of how most political scientists and expert commentators picture the main dimensions of political competition. The top parties' generally centrist convergence has been partly because they need to attract two-party preferred votes from people who are not their primary supporters. Yet in a characteristically Australian way the rhetoric of leading politicians has also often been robust and frank about their opponents, and in the past periods of greater polarisation did occur, especially when an incumbent party apparently on a 'winning streak' felt itself secure from effective opposition challenges.

Since the 2010–2016 travails of the Labor party in introducing and then withdrawing a carbon tax, a second key dimension of Australian party competition has been the environmental issues around climate change and global warming. Labor was historically pulled between two poles: on the one hand, the shrinking but heavily unionised workforces involved in Australian coal mining and fossil fuel exploitation (especially in Queensland) and, on the other hand, the liberal/progressive and often green-orientated middle and working classes of Australia's big cities (including Brisbane). Fighting on two fronts (especially since 2019), Labor was keen to stem its losses of support to the Greens by more vigorously criticising Liberal-National governments for their lagging and luke-warm responses to tackling environmental issues.

The Coalition's positioning on the environmental dimension has changed over time, as evidence of environmental damage from global warming mounted and public alarm swelled during the unprecedented bushfires of 2019 to 2020. In 2013 both wings of the Liberal-National opposition fully backed the fossil fuel corporations' intensive public and media campaigns against the carbon tax. By 2019 only a few, isolated voices on the centrist wing of the Liberals (like the deposed former party leader John Hewson) were calling for more full-hearted adoption of 'green economy' measures. The Liberal stance later evolved to rhetorically endorse the needs for some environmental policy changes, but only those that were 'affordable' and that could be implemented gradually so as to avoid economic damage to the fossil fuel industry and employment. Some National politicians were franker in downplaying the need for policy reforms and wanting them to be extended over decades. In 2017 Scott Morrison, when he was

the Treasurer, took a large lump of coal into the House of Representatives, brandishing it at his Labor opponents from the front bench during his speech and urging them not be scared of it (**Guardian, 2017**). Allied with both the Coalition parties' substantial funding from fossil fuel industries, this incident and other events in Morrison's time as PM (such as going on holiday with his family during the height of the bushfire crisis) cemented a public view of Morrison and the Liberals as pro-carbon and complacent about climate change, even though the Turnbull government had previously signed up to the Paris Agreement on reducing carbon emissions by 25 to 30 per cent by 2030.

The Greens' placement on Figure 6.1 has been clear on the vertical dimensions, with the party advocating the fastest, most concerted and far-reaching programme for reducing Australia's carbon emissions and moving towards a green economy based around solar and wind power, ending the burning of fossil fuels for power or transport as soon as feasible (**S. Johnson, 2020**). There has been more controversy about where the Greens should be placed on left/right socioeconomic issues, with trade unions and left-wing critics arguing that the party's politicians do not support organised Labor nor the welfare of workers and the poorest in society as consistently as Labor does. However, the issue mix involved in contemporary left/right politics has evolved from its earlier 'legacy' configuration. The Greens may have reservations about trade union power (often mobilised against carbon reductions), but they have consistently been more progressive than Labor on issues like the taxation of corporations, the treatment of immigrants, the importance of local democracy and public involvement, fostering a many-sided equality of rights amongst diverse groups, and peace-based international relations. So, it seems safest to picture the Greens as somewhat to the left of Labor on these newer urban or 'lifestyle' aspects of left/right politics.

On the far right of Figure 6.1, a succession of smaller parties has organised around 'freedom' issues like protecting hunting and fishing, bikers and rural areas from government 'interference', plus some disguised hostility to ethnic minorities, some conspiracy theories, and anti-vaccination mobilisations during the different state COVID-19 lockdowns. Their importance rests heavily on their ability to win seats at federal Senate elections (Ghazarian, 2015) and in state upper houses under the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

The Teal independents at federal and state level

The rise of the Teals was part of a long-term trend, reflecting substantial shifts in the electoral landscape and in voters' values, which created the space for populist movements to challenge the established two-party system. The Liberal-National Coalition's perceived foot-dragging on acting on climate change and the establishment of a federal anti-corruption commission, plus the perceived insensitivity of its PM and other leaders to women's issues, triggered some prominent defections by Liberals to stand as independents in safe seats (**Guardian, 2022**). They attracted about a fifth of their support from former Liberal voters, but the rest mainly from Labor and Green voters seeing them as more viable anti-government candidates. Greatly helped by the funding guru Simon Holmes à Court and Climate 200 (a grassroots crowdfunded outfit trying to compensate for a 'lost decade' of climate policy stasis), Teal candidates emerged in numerous electorates, and six Teal MPs were elected (Holmes à Court, 2022). They have gone on to meet regularly as a group in the House of Representatives and developed a well-worked-out strategic position and issue orientation. However, in subsequent state elections in Victoria, NSW and Queensland, Teal candidates narrowly missed winning seats – so that their ability to entrench at the state as well as federal levels and have some hope of 'breaking the mould' of two-party dominance remains uncertain at the time of writing (Colebatch, Evans and Grattan, 2023).

Internal party democracy and governance

Political parties in liberal democracies are complex organisations. Despite the growth in salience first of mass media campaigning and then social media coverage of political events, the top national parties still have (and need to retain) substantial memberships to populate a network of local branches covering all Australia's states and territories, constituencies and electoral districts. A key to retaining members' involvement has long been a substantial measure of internal party democracy and transparency, initially over local candidate selection, more sporadically over shaping party policy and, most recently, a possible membership role in the choice of national party leaders.

Party members and social representativeness

Political parties' declining ability to recruit members and represent significant sections of citizens has been a major point of criticism, especially when contrasted with Australia's constantly increasing population size throughout the modern period. However, Figure 6.2 shows that in fact the modern picture has not solely been one of decline. The Liberal Party's membership has more or less halved in the last four decades and shows little sign of stabilising – especially after the Teal Independents' success in the 2021 federal election. Their key coalition partner, the National Party, grew its membership in rural and regional Australia in the 1990s, but that subsequently declined by around a third. The party has still retained almost twice as many members as the Liberals. Turning to Labor membership, it has fluctuated quite markedly, falling by half in the 1980s and 1990s, but then re-doubling in the last two decades. The Greens have grown their member numbers fairly consistently since their founding in 2002, as well as building an effective election-fighting organisation in some specific constituencies. Yet even after acknowledging fluctuations in party memberships rather than any invariable decline, involvement with parties has clearly remained a minority pastime amongst Australian citizens.

Figure 6.2: Party memberships and representatives in state legislatures

Aspect	Liberal Party	National Party	Labor Party	The Greens
Approximate number of members in 2020	50,000 to 60,000	100,000	60,100	15,000
Modern movements in membership	Higher point 75,000 (in 1990)	High point 130,000 (in 1990)	Low point 26,000 (in 2002)	Low point 2,000 (in 2002)
Membership in 1980	110,000	75,000	55,000	0
% share of all state lower house members (2023)	37% *(includes LNP Queensland)*	not applicable	57%	3.5%
% share of all state upper house members (excludes Queensland) (2023)	27%	not applicable	42%	6.5%

*Source: Compiled by the authors from Humphrys, Copland and Mansillo (**2020**); Wikipedia (**2023a**, **2023b**, **2023c**, **2023d**).*

Do the party members of the major parties in Figure 6.2 represent Australian society? This would be a difficult task with such small membership numbers and given that we might ask for social representativeness at three different levels – local, state and national. Recent available data on party memberships has been largely limited to the national level (Gauja and Gromping, 2020). It shows that party members are generally considerably more male, elderly, and Anglo-Irish than are Australia's population as whole. However, this pattern has been more moderately present in Australia than in some other liberal democracies (like the USA and UK, where elderly members strongly predominate). The presence of women has increased in both local branches and higher-tier party committees, and there are some signs that more recently growing ethnic groups (of south Asian origin) are also participating more in major cities.

We do not have much information on state parties' representativeness, but their territorial success within state legislatures across Australia provides some relevant evidence. Figure 6.2 shows that in 2020 the top two parties still largely monopolised representation in state legislatures. Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition were dominant in lower houses, holding 94 per cent of seats between them. But in five states with upper houses (four elected by STV proportional representation) this share drops to below 70 per cent. The Greens are more present in states' upper than lower houses, but even there they usually only hold one or two seats in each state.

The key power of party branches: shaping who joins the governing elites

Critics also argue that the parties have long since ceased to be mass organisations, and so their ability to represent ordinary citizens has consistently fallen. Local party organisations remain varied because they are grounded in their communities, but politics has come to be seen by most citizens as a minority interest or specialist activity. This social marginalisation has been strengthened by a trend towards the greater professionalisation of even local party office-holding or campaigning in both federal and state elections. In the Labor Party, this might take the form of a politically ambitious official in a local trade union branch seeking to make their mark as a local political activist, as a prelude to securing a paid role as an aide to a Labor member of the federal Parliament or a senior Labor figure in a state government or state legislature. From there a promotion pathway for this person might lead to an appointment as an aide to a federal minister, providing valuable experience to draw on when they then look for their own nomination to contest a seat in the House of Representatives. On the Liberal-National side, someone from a 'political' profession (a journalist, social media expert, or possibly a lawyer or an executive in a regulated industry) might work as a local activist and campaigner, using that as a gateway to a similar upward path as a political advisor to Liberal-National legislators and so forth, perhaps assisted by the greater availability of business and donor funding for political aides on the political right.

The crucial activity that local party members have always controlled is to vote on who their local candidate for lower house elections should be. Incumbent MPs and state legislators have most often been reselected, but alternative local challengers have sometimes emerged when an MP has been touched by scandal or falls out of sympathy with their constituency party. Occasionally an MP or even minister may be targeted by a well-funded alternative candidate willing to commit the time and resources to trying to win the local nomination. Competition to represent the opposition party has generally been more intense in winnable seats.

The restricted size, diversity and social representativeness of the main parties' memberships has sometimes meant that local 'selectorates' can be influenced by branch stacking, where one candidate for the party's nomination seeks to radically enlarge the local membership (for example, by paying supporters to join *en masse* as members) in ways that favour them (**Gauja, 2020**). In close-fought races for party nominations, relatively small numbers of votes have tipped the outcomes between candidates one way or another. One particular area of branch stacking was historically important in the Labor Party, where far-left or communist activists sought to become members in local parties or trade union branches with a view to shifting opinion to the left and securing the candidacy of strongly left-wing people. Countering such 'entryism' efforts also led some local Labor parties and trade union branches to effectively close their membership in restrictive ways, so as to perpetuate the grip on control of the more centre-right Labor factions. In the 2010s, some Australian movements on the right began to follow branch-stacking tactics similar to those used by polarising American Republican movements. This created problems for the Liberals, especially with religious and anti-abortion groups seeking influence in seats with small local memberships, aiming to secure candidates congenial to their views.

The selection of candidates for the federal Senate or state upper houses are made by state committees within the party apparatuses, which are generally controlled by the state party leadership. In the Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition, the position in which candidates are listed on each party's STV list or ticket makes the key difference to which people get elected, with only those in the first four slots having any realistic chance of winning a seat. The party leaderships (or other influential figures, like some state trade union leaders in Labor) have generally been able to assign their list's top slots to the most loyal or most ideologically congenial candidates – although popular politicians may also win places, because having them head up the party's list will attract more votes. For smaller parties (like the Greens) only the top one or maybe two candidates per state have regularly won seats under STV.

Local deliberation and influence in higher-tier party policy commitments

The other local party role, historically assigned importance as the 'nursery of democracy' and a key foundation for a 'civic culture', has been the quality of deliberative discussions within local party branches and its influence on local MPs and state senators. In the heyday of mass parties – particularly in the Labor Party, with its formally affiliated unions – the grassroots participation of members was seen as a critical source of inputs from significant social groups. As this role has withered, party members' involvement with branches has tended to revolve more around helping with campaigns, fund-raising, social events and social media activity online. The most serious debates occur only periodically, when a branch has considered changing its candidate or has needed to choose a new candidate – at these junctures, local party discussions have often come alive, with a wide range of issues being canvassed. Otherwise, 'hard core' members have increasingly seemed to take their cues from their party's senior politician via social media, which they largely seek to amplify (**Humphrys, Copland and Mansillo 2020**). Moderately involved members have picked up and repeated party messages much more selectively, and fringe members or non-joining supporters even less. Nonetheless, overall social media reactions have generated valuable instant feedback for MPs and party communication professionals about which of their messages have resonated with members and reached the wider public.

In addition, local branches contribute to higher-level policy debates by electing delegates to state and federal conferences, and state councils or executive committees are chosen to run business between conferences. Each state party committee chooses top officials to run its apparatus and control donations and funding, and they discuss policy issues regularly with the party's state legislators. However, committee decision-making has typically been slow-moving, with preparatory work on drafting resolutions and manifestoes taking months – a time scale that matches poorly with the modern pace of political, media and social media changes.

Political scientists have long debated the bureaucratisation of party politics, first analysed by Robert Michels (**1915**), with each party's permanent staff and senior elected officials (rather than members) essentially controlling all processes above the local selectorate level. More recently, the professionalisation of a wide range of campaigning roles ('policy wonks' and think tanks, speech writers, communications experts, pollsters, political advertisers, finance raisers, and social media strategists) has increased. The 'permanent campaign' at federal level (Van Onselen and Errington, 2007) has increased the premium on professional expertise. Communications factors especially have supplemented the dominant judgement on policy and organisational issues previously made by elected representatives and party elites (**Mills, 2020**). Increasingly, campaigning has also become data-driven and dependent on sophisticated IT-driven targeting strategies (Dommett, Kefford and Kruschinski, 2023). Formally, all these developments have (in theory) been melded into the pre-existing channels of party policy-making, but in practice they have tended to supplant them.

The Labor Party historically took most seriously the principles of internal party democracy pyramiding up to match government levels (**Manwaring, 2020**). A National Conference convenes every three years to define the party's overall electoral commitments in broad terms, usually in close conjunction with the national party leadership and its key trade union backers. There has been a long history of occasional clashes at state or federal level, with the extra-parliamentary party sometimes demanding that the Labor Party champion more left-wing or 'socialist' policies than the parties' MPs and senators are prepared to endorse. For example, from 2017 to 2019 the West Australia Labor party (influenced by a trade union leader) voted through a set of program commitments that the successful West Australian leader Mark McGowan then conspicuously ignored (see Chapter 21).

The Liberal Party's founding leader, Robert Menzies, initially created party structures in the 1920s that made each state party autonomous and set up only weak machinery at the federal level. Under the Howard governments (1996 to 2007), however, federal influence over state parties considerably increased. Yet, in practice both the Liberal and National parties defer to their elected MPs and senators to set party policy commitments, although they must take account of grassroots members' opinions. In the National Party, the ideology of 'countrymindedness' has especially assigned importance to the views of 'deep rural' party branches.

The Greens are also structured as a confederation of eight state and territory parties, plus a network of local branches and a separate mode of joining for First Nations people. They stress local democracy in many aspects, including the choosing of candidates and the setting of policies by extra-parliamentary party conferences at the state and federal levels. The Greens choose two co-convenors to be the federal party's public media face, one a woman and one a man.

Choosing a party leader

Until very recently, no Australian party involved their members in the country at large directly in the choice of party leaders. Figure 6.3 shows that has remained the firm position of the Liberals and Nationals for choosing their national party leader, who must sit in the House of Representatives. The Greens have co-convenors outside Parliament, but their legislators also choose a leader from amongst their own ranks. All three parties can 'spill' (that is, eject from office) their leader in a confidence vote confined to members of the party room in Canberra, including both MPs in the House and senators. It is only when an incumbent leader has actually been voted out that rival alternative leaders need to declare their candidacy for the leadership. Where two or more rival candidates emerge, additional party room votes decide which candidates go forward to the last two and contest for election.

However, following the Rudd–Gillard clashes in the Labor Party from 2011 to 2013, the then PM, Kevin Rudd, introduced new arrangements where the final choice of party leader (in a two-horse race) would be made by what would normally be called an 'electoral college', giving 50 per cent weight to the party room caucus members and the other half of the total weight to the votes of the national membership. However, member votes can only be activated if two or more Labor members of the federal Parliament stand against each other. In 2019, Bill Shorten resigned as Labor leader following the party's disappointing election performance, but no contested election followed. Instead, Anthony Albanese announced that he would stand; a few

Figure 6.3: How Australia's main party leaders are chosen

<table>
<tr><th>Aspect</th><th>Liberal Party</th><th>National Party</th><th>Labor Party</th><th>The Greens</th></tr>
<tr><td>Who can trigger and decide a 'spill' vote to potentially remove an incumbent PM or leader of the opposition?</td><td colspan="3">A simple majority (50%+1) of party MPs and senators voting in the party caucus</td><td>Simple majority of Green MPs and senators</td></tr>
<tr><td>If a leader loses the 'spill vote', who determines who can stand for leadership?</td><td colspan="3">Nominations by party MPs and senators (usually two, sometimes one or three candidates)</td><td rowspan="3">Unclear, given the party's usually small numbers of legislators</td></tr>
<tr><td>Voting system used to get to last two candidates</td><td colspan="3">Run-off ballots amongst party MPs and senators, eliminating the bottom candidate in each round until only two candidates are left</td></tr>
<tr><td>Time allowed before last vote</td><td>One or two days</td><td>One or two days</td><td>Six weeks, for party members to vote</td></tr>
<tr><td>Voting system used to decide between the final two candidates</td><td>Simple majority of Liberal MPs and senators</td><td>Simple majority of National MPs and senators</td><td>Simple majority of weighted votes of (i) MPs and senators (50%); and (ii) party members (50%)</td><td>Simple majority of Green MPs and senators (since 2005)</td></tr>
</table>

Source: Compiled by authors from multiple party websites.

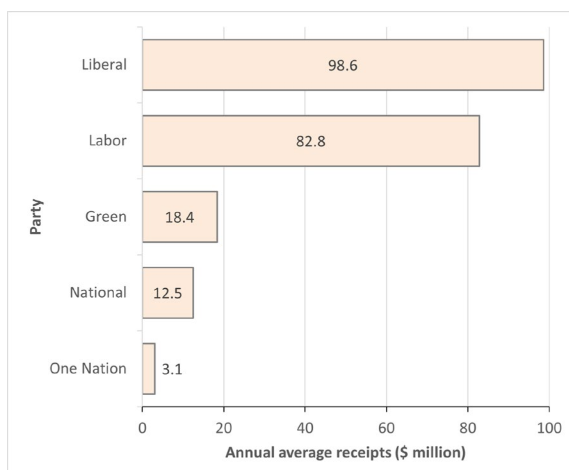
days later another candidate (Chris Bowen) emerged, but then withdrew. Two other Labor MPs considered standing but, in the end, following discussions with Albanese, they did not, so that Albanese ended up being elected unopposed by the MPs and senators in the party room and Labor members never got to vote. Albanese's position was protected for his first year as leader, and after that his poll ratings increased while those for the Morrison government declined. In the 2022 election, Albanese's win cemented his position as both PM and Labor leader and gave him mass democratic legitimacy for the first time.

Financing campaigns and publicity

Modern political campaigning has become an expensive activity, raising important questions for all political parties that have transitioned away from a mass membership basis to contemporary small numbers. In the mass party model, most financing was provided by local membership dues paid to branches, plus donations by members, with standard portions remitted to the state or federal parties to cover their organisational expenses and activities. In the Labor Party, this was supplemented by local trade union bloc donations to branches, to cover affiliated memberships, and to state and federal parties for their campaigns and activities. For the Liberals and Nationals, individual donations by business corporations (often at higher-tier party levels) predominate, along with donations by wealthy individuals or smaller businesses, sometimes at local and sometimes at state/federal levels.

All donations to federal parties over a lower limit of $16,300 in 2023–2024 (**AEC, 2024a**) have to be publicly declared by law to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), which publishes (around a year late) an annual transparency list of which parties have received funding from which donors. Because campaigning costs in state and territories are much less, disclosure limits were much lower there in 2022, at or near $1,000 in NSW, Victoria, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and at between $2,600 and $5,00 in the remaining states (**Muller, 2022**). These limits create an important democratic safeguard, since they ensure that larger gifts made to parties can be tracked, sometimes with embarrassing results. For example, it emerged that one of the largest personal donors to the Liberal Party from 2017 to 2018 was in fact the PM of the time, Malcom Turnbull. In a more systematic way, the register also shows how the Labor/Liberal-National duopoly translates into much larger donor receipts than those for any other party, as figures 6.4 and 6.5 demonstrate. The Liberals' and Nationals' average annual receipts for 2018–2021, at $111 million when added together, was substantially more than gifts to Labor,

Figure 6.4: Average annual receipts for the top five Australian parties receiving donations from 2018 to 2021



*Source: Compiled by authors from data in AEC (**2022**).*

Figure 6.5: Donations received by all Australian political parties from 2018 to 2021

Party	2018–21 receipts (3 years) $ million	% of major party receipts	% of all party receipts
Liberal	295.9	45.8	38.0
Labor	248.5	38.5	31.9
Green	55.2	8.5	7.1
National	37.5	5.8	4.8
One Nation	9.2	1.4	1.2
Total major party receipts	*646.3*	*100.0*	*83.0*
All other parties	132.6		17.0
Total receipts, all parties	**778.9**		**100.0**

Source: Compiled by authors from data in AEC (2022).

chiefly reflecting the greater donor power of big business and trade associations donating to the Liberals. The Greens (who rely on their membership plus philanthropic foundations for mostly small donations) were well behind, but also have a smaller membership.

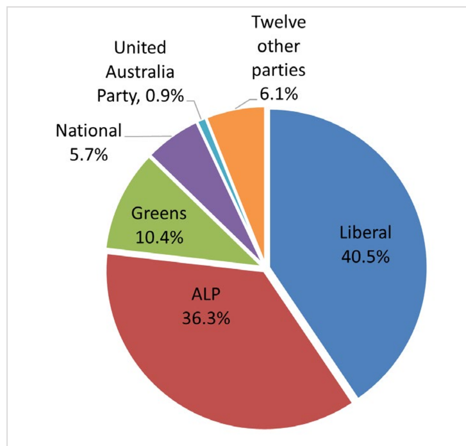
Figure 6.5 shows that the top two parties (Liberal-National and Labor) received three-quarters of all political donations, although it is also notable that over $44 million a year, or a sixth of all monies donated, went to very small parties with no seats and relatively few chances of winning representation.

Major donors to state parties have often been companies with important interests that are regulated by that tier of government. The importance of continuous economic growth in financing regular urban expansion has meant that donations from property companies have come under ever more critical scrutiny and occasioned several corruption scandals. Similarly, fossil fuel and mining company donations to state parties or politicians have attracted increasingly critical public attention to the power of big business (see Chapter 7).

At federal party level, some large companies either split their donations across the top two parties or donate only via cut-outs (for example, channelling donations below the minimum registration limit via business executives or their wives) to avoid negative publicity or problems from consumers if they back one party. Quite a range of trade associations follow similar strategies by breaking up very substantial political donations into smaller packets given directly to party candidates of the top two parties. Yet critics argue that the interests involved often have strong reasons for getting politicians to lobby for detailed rule changes favouring them. An example is the retail pharmaceuticals industry, which funds dozens of local campaigns in federal seats while its members' turnovers and profits are shaped directly by Medicare regulations.

However, even with growing donations by business and wealthy people, the membership stagnation in Australian parties (plus declining trade union memberships supporting Labor) might spell increasing difficulties for the political parties were it not for the federal government since 1984 providing public funding of political party expenses in running federal election campaigns. Each party receives an 'as-of-right' payment immediately after an election (in 2019 set at $11,000 per seat). If the party gets more than 4 per cent of the vote in any contest, then

Figure 6.6: The proportion (%) of A$68.6 million federal election cost reimbursements provided to parties by the Australian Electoral Commission following the 2019 election



Source: Chart created by authors from data in AEC (2020, Table 1).

Notes: The final slice (6.1 per cent) covers payments to 12 smaller registered political parties. In addition, just over A$1 million was paid to independent or non-party candidates.

it can also submit a claim to the AEC for a variable reimbursement of its expenses, depending on how many primary votes it gets in such contests (set at just over $3 per vote in 2019). This system means that the top two parties plus the Greens regularly do well in terms of federal funding. In 2019, over three-quarters of the funding paid went to the top two parties and a tenth to the Greens (Figure 6.6). However, more than one in eight dollars paid out by the AEC also went to 13 other smaller parties – though only the United Australia Party met the 4 per cent cut-off criterion and gained more substantial funding.

Public money subsidies to political parties (even based on primary AV votes) remain controversial. Some political scientists argue that the state underpinning especially the most important governing and opposition parties reflects a 'cartel party' system (Ward, 2006). Here the key parties are co-opted by official subsidies into acting as agents for the state apparatus to explain itself and public policies to voters, instead of being a genuinely independent political input mechanism – a role that parties can no longer fulfil because of their small minority status in the population. The importance of public funding reimbursements places a premium on parties accurately documenting the costs of their activities. It also meshes with the more onerous requirements on political parties to track and declare to the AEC all major donations to promote the greater bureaucratisation and professionalisation of politics, with local party branches delegating most finance-related issues to higher-tier party officials (Gauja et al., 2022).

The cartel party analysis also chimes with the shrinking away of any clearly separate intra-party discussion and deliberation spaces under the impact of continuous media coverage and ever more intrusive social media coverage of previously semi-private spaces where party members and elites could interact behind some kind of veil of secrecy. With all intra-party debates open, and members taking their cues from media, social media or elite politicians anyway, public funding has added an extra layer of protection for established governing elites against losing their positions to newer rivals. Counter-critics have argued that the 'cartel' image greatly underplays the ever-changing character of major party organisations and their relative autonomy (still) in shaping their own distinctive and robust internal political debates, from which public funding in no way detracts.

Conclusion

Australia's party system has evolved slowly, but the accumulation of changes evident in the 2020 federal elections, and in state politics also, has been considerable (Kefford et al., 2018). The majoritarian AV system for lower house elections (and to some extent public funding subsidies) continue to protect the Labor Party and Liberals and Nationals from party diversification processes, but the Senate elections nationally and in most states show that their appeal remains dominant, even with STV elections. Some critics argue that their dominance is artificially maintained by compulsory voting (see Chapter 5), which has kept turnout levels very high (**AEC, 2024b**)

Only the Greens have so far shown in a consistent way that they can organise around new issues, gain continuous representation in Parliament beyond winning for a time in isolated constituencies, and build a national profile and organisation. Many small parties have started out on the right organising around populist, 'freedom' or covert ethnic resentment issues, but they have failed to match any of these three achievements. For example, Pauline Hansen's One Nation has not sought to develop into a national party organisation. Moreover, the emergence of successful community-based centrist movements, such as the 'Voice for Indi', led first by Cathy McGowan and now by Helen Haines, has remained localised. And the Teal Independents cannot be viewed as a political party because, at the time of writing, they do not yet match AEC requirements for a political party, namely a constitution specifying an intention to endorse candidates and at least 1,500 members.

Defenders of Australia's party system have argued that it has adapted (albeit gradually and in a laggard way) to accommodate the growth of environmental and climate change issues, and to handle what public choice political science acknowledges as some of the unavoidable difficulties involved in moving from a one-dimensional to a two-dimensional ideological space. They have also argued that its nationwide resilience to populist movements and to short-term 'surge' movements has proved a valuable asset for an enduring and stable liberal democracy, demonstrated especially in the bipartisan consensus on anti-COVID-19 measures which managed to marginalise strident anti-vaccination voices and some quite large demonstrations.

However, critics have argued that the far right has only remained small because the established centre-right Liberal or National parties shifted their policy agendas to accommodate and legitimate right-wing movements of public opinion (for example by holding would-be asylum seekers in tough conditions on islands overseas and by Liberal leader Pete Dutton opposing the Voice for Indigenous Australians in 2023). They have also argued that the top two parties are a legacy oligopoly protected – by AV voting and public funding – from the consequences of their own stagnant memberships, their increasing dependence on corporation or pressure group funding, and their shrinking autonomy versus the media or social media influences. The legitimacy of Australian political parties has been falling among the wider public (**Jennings et al., 2020**), but also among civil society organisations and even the many non-political business sectors.

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