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Democratic resilience and change

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Most social scientists and political system actors in liberal democracies agree that in the last 25 years their political system has fallen on 'hard times' across the world. The number of liberal democracies has remained static or fallen back (depending on how loosely the term is used). Previously well-established 'strong' or 'mature' liberal democracies have fallen prey to 'democratic backsliding' by incumbents in a range of ways. Some have moved a long way now into the category of 'flawed' or systematically imperfect democracies (notably, the USA and Hungary). Some previously flawed democracies have collapsed into military regimes or semi-autocracies (such as Thailand, Myanmar) and the previous marginally democratic cases of Pakistan and Bangladesh (each for the nth time). What were once seen as 'semi-democratic' countries have retained their elections but become outright autocracies, actively promoting old-style 'power politics' via international aggression (as with Putin's Russia). And among autocracies there has been a tightening of overall control into strong dictatorships where previous small areas of protest freedoms from state control have been extirpated (as in China under President Xi, and in Belarus).

How can Australia's overall performance as a liberal democracy be assessed?

There are three key ways of accomplishing this task:

- Analysing how Australia fares *in comparison with other liberal democracies* using these main types of data:
  - Overall 'democracy index' rankings compiled by experts and driven by multiple sets of data and quantitative evidence.
  - Other separate comparisons using objective data that tap into aspects relevant to liberal democratic social outcome goals (like equality, good healthcare, etc.).
  - How Australian citizens themselves evaluate the degree of democracy domestically, compared with people in similar countries overseas.

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- Looking at the evolution of domestic popular support for democracy *over time*, especially considering how far citizens have shown attitudes in opinion surveys that are consistent with maintaining a democratic 'civic culture'.
- Drawing out some key *qualitative* judgements made in the main Chapters 1 to 27 above.

One of the most discussed (but very US-centric books) in this literature has been Levitsky and Ziblatt's (**2018**) 'stages' model in *How Democracies Die*. They argued that democracy has historically been subverted most commonly by 'backsliding' carried out in stages that subtly impair its operation until an incumbent party or politicians can decisively seize power in ways that prevent their opponents ever coming back. First, incumbent power holders attack all integrity watchdogs, seeking to politicise them under government control. Next, they seek permanent power by targeting their opponents to exclude rival parties (using tax or business laws, for instance, as well as electoral restrictions), and changing the rules of the game – for example, using 'voter suppression' tactics to make it harder for opposition voters to get to the polls or enacting blanket bans via stealth on previous non-voters. Constituencies are rigged to 'gerrymander' results and free media are progressively taken over by incumbent party oligarchs, while state media become mouthpieces for the party in power only, abandoning any pretence of partisan impartiality. Lastly, populist intimidation tactics and extreme partisan rhetoric are used to portray all opposition groups as 'enemies of the state' and generate a 'spiral of silence' among opposition party supporters, faced only with the prospects of endless defeats from fraudulent elections.

At every move, the incumbents and their agents may stay just inside the law, while systematically acting against the whole spirit of democratic power-sharing and accountability and eroding 'the soft guardrails' of democracy (**Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018**) and the dozens of the 'micro-institutions' across many legal and administrative fields that provide the foundations for democracy (**Dunleavy, 2019**). Considered individually any one of the incremental changes above may seem small scale, reversible or non-fundamental, but after decades of extreme polarisation, the increasing escalation of such tactics can seriously erode all respect for constitutional checks and balances.

However, the American political scientists Andrew Little and Amy Meng (**2024**) argued in a recent paper that the consensus picture of democratic decline has been overblown, and has been based on analysts' pessimism, rather than on hard facts:

> *Despite the general narrative that we are in a period of global democratic decline, there have been surprisingly few empirical studies to assess whether this is systematically true. Most existing studies of backsliding rely heavily, if not entirely, on subjective indicators which rely on expert coder judgement. We survey other more objective indicators of democracy (such as incumbent performance in elections), and find little evidence of global democratic decline over the last decade … To explain the discrepancy between trends in subjective and objective indicators, the simplest explanation is that recent declines in average democracy scores are driven by changes in bias [among the 'experts' coding democratic performance]. While we cannot rule out the possibility that the world is experiencing major democratic backsliding almost exclusively in ways which require subjective judgement to detect, this claim is not justified by existing evidence. (***Little and Meng, 2023***)*

Yet on closer inspection this judgement appears highly complacent and over-claiming, because it is based on very few indicators, most of them basic statistics of an extraordinarily crude kind. For example, a central argument in the Little and Meng (**2023**) analysis is that if incumbents retained power 'backsliding' claims are supported, but if the incumbent lost an election then this provides a clear sign that no democratic backsliding has occurred. A moment's consideration of the American case suggests the poverty of this 'only objective numbers count' approach. In 2020, the Republican incumbent Donald Trump lost but then insisted that he had not lost, exerting huge pressure on his vice-president and other officials involved in the election certification to arbitrarily disallow packets of votes in several states so that he might be seen to have won. The 6 January 2021 assault on Congress by Trump's enraged supporters, and the presidents' encouragement of it, for which he was prosecuted in 2023–2024, capped his 'bad loser' antics. Trump subsequently waged a remorseless campaign alleging a 'fake' result that successfully persuaded a huge majority of Republican voters that he was indeed wrongly denied the presidency by some kind of vote-fixing conspiracy against him (for which no evidence was ever produced), a public opinion pattern that endured largely undimmed in the ensuing four years. At the time of writing, Trump is the Republican candidate for president (for the third time) and has made apparently undisguised promises to rig future elections in his party's favour if he wins and persecute his opponents. Trump's example was copied in a minor key in Brazil by Bolsonaro's 2023 denial that he had lost the presidential election there, which also led to violent demonstrations that wrecked the country's legislature.

The damage wreaked to American democracy by Trump was also vividly captured in a later article by Levitsky and Ziblatt (**2021**):

> *Whether it is the [Senate] filibuster [to talk out legislation], funding the government, impeachment [of the President], or judicial nominations [especially to the USA's Supreme Court], our system of checks and balances works best when politicians on both sides of the aisle deploy their institutional prerogatives with restraint. In other words, when they avoid applying the letter of the law in ways contrary to the spirit of the law – what's sometimes called [playing] constitutional hardball. When contemporary democracies die, they usually do so via constitutional hardball. Democracy's primary assailants today are not generals or armed revolutionaries, but rather politicians – Hugo Chávez [in Venezuela], Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán [in Hungary], Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [in Turkey] – who eviscerate democracy's substance behind a carefully crafted veneer of legality and constitutionality.*

In contrast to the USA, Australian democracy at the end of 2023 looks in a far better state. Very few incumbent dirty tricks and subversions of democracy have been detected in the preceding chapters. Isolated examples include the 2019 decision by the Liberal-National government to use 'sports rort' and community grants payments for partisan purposes, focusing them on marginal seats in the run up to that year's federal election, and their maintenance of government advertising including clear coalition policy themes and terminology right up to the last possible moment before the Prime Minister (PM) Scott Morrison announced the election date. Another disturbing example of playing fast and loose with constitutional powers was the secret move made by Morrison at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to appoint himself to five additional ministries including Treasury, Health, Industry and Home Affairs. The step was agreed by the Governor-General but never disclosed even to the PM's colleagues, let alone to parliament. When this unprecedented breach of collegial rule was discovered several years later, it raised

acute alarm about the over-concentration of power in the premiers' hands. Many democracies have fallen in the past when top leaders gain 'decree' powers under the cloak of a national emergency to justify their edicts. Thankfully though, these cases seem to have been isolated instances. In 2022, abuses of government power for partisan ends at election time were not evident, and a peaceful transfer of power followed in the same way as ever after the election. Similarly, Morrison's 'portfolio grab' remained notional and was never actually operationalised, for then his colleagues would have had to be told. Perhaps, as his defenders argue, it was only a 'just-in-case' over-reaction taken to really tie down emergency powers at the highly disruptive and hard-to-predict onset of the pandemic.

However, even if there are few 'smoking gun' indications of democratic backsliding in Australia, it is worth looking broadly at how the political system has fared before reaching a more considered overall audit verdict. Political scientists, economists, and sociologists, and wider political commentors, the media, politicians and policy practitioners all take modern indices of democracy seriously as key windows into inherently complex assessments. Sometimes this approach may have risks, because although the wording of a given statement stays the same its *meaning* may change because the context in which people are answering has shifted markedly. However, on more general assessment questions the approach is still a useful one. Accordingly, the chapter begins by first considering how Australia compares in terms of quantitative measures with other liberal democracies. The second section looks at how quantitative indicators have moved that chart the health of democracy *within* Australia. The last section draws out a few overarching themes and conclusions from the detailed qualitative treatments in the previous chapters. For this summary chapter alone, we also do not use the SWOT analysis device employed in all the previous chapters, but provide a brief summing up in the Conclusion.

Comparing Australia with other liberal democracies

There are several different approaches to assessing countries' democratic performance comparatively, using statistical methods and metrics. Each has some limitations. Judgement scoring across multiple categories of political practices can create indices that sum up many different points of information into overall rankings of performance, relying either on 'expert' judgements by political and legal analysts or on quantitative survey data. Alternatively, using 'unobtrusive measures' of people's behaviour (what they do in real situations) is non-reactive – people cannot 'edit' how they are coded (as they can by altering their responses in surveys). However, the meaning of behaviours is often context-dependent, especially where countries are dissimilar. Finally, cross-country survey data relies on asking respondents in multiple countries questions with exactly the same wording at (roughly) the same time. However, the *meaning* of even the most carefully chosen words may still vary a good deal across country contexts, and shift over time. We use evidence derived from all three approaches to situate Australia against other liberal democratic countries.

Comparing indices of democracy based on objective data or expert judgements

Indices of democracy bring together a large number of separate assessments (or judgements) spanning across different aspects of political systems and civil rights regimes. Figure 28.1 shows a selection of the best-known and most internationally well-regarded overall indices of democratic quality covering Australia, and that are fairly recent and have reasonably sophisticated methodologies. The indices are arranged in a rough descending order of their influence. The **Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index** is perhaps the most widely quoted, although its methods are not entirely clear. The next three are produced by academic authors, with better explained methods. The democracy NGO International IDEA (**2022**) has an Index that has been adopted by the UN, which means that it tends to pull some punches on imperfect democracies. The **Sustainable Governance Index (SGI)** relies on asking experts to rate very precisely each country's performance on 60 measures – but has been criticised by a few 'objective data' exponents from the USA (see **Little and Meng, 2024**). The **Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Index** has gained ground in academia recently. The Zurich 'Democracy Barometer' assesses a smaller selection of established democracies and accords a lot of influence to the proportionality of the main electoral systems, which other measures more or less ignore, and where Australia tends not to perform well (see Chapter 5).

All the rankings have rated Australia as a well-established and relatively high-performing liberal democracy. Somewhat like other Westminster systems, such as the UK, it has not placed in the top positions (**Dunleavy, 2018**) – these ranks have been occupied by the Scandinavian countries and some European nations. The EIU ranks Australia joint 9th, just inside the top 10 countries, ahead of the UK in 16th place but behind New Zealand in 4th place. The SGI index also rates Australia as 9th in terms of democracy, but only 16th in terms of 'good governance'. The V-Dem measure has Australia lying 20th, with the UK ahead (14th) and New Zealand also (6th). In several indices, Australia has fared poorly because of its lack of clear civil rights safeguards and a complex rights regime (see Chapter 3), and because its emphasis has been on legislature representation, with public participation arrangements being less prominent.

However, the top-scoring countries also tend to be small or very small countries in population terms, especially the Scandinavian countries with some tiny additions (like Estonia). Arguably, smaller states are more straightforward to operate, and organising public participation and consultation is simpler. It might be somewhat easier to run a liberal democracy with (say) six million people than with Australia's current 26 million. It also might be simpler to run a country that is spatially compact like New Zealand or the UK than to run a whole continent spanning across radically differing regions, as Australia does. (However, some high-ranked Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Finland and Norway also have large spatial areas.)

Most comparative assessments of democracy carried out in 2020–2021 during the pandemic were inevitably focused heavily on the effects of the pandemic. Some measures, particularly travel restrictions within Australia imposed to limit the spread of the virus, were seen as unusual curtailments of freedom of assembly and movement (domestically and internationally) by indices (**Gardner, 2024**; and see Chapters 2 and 3). So too were emergency laws enacted through executive orders, without usual parliamentary scrutiny and accountability (see Chapters 11 and 12), and in some cases delayed elections. V-Dem found that although 'most democracies have acted responsibly in the face of the pandemic, nine register major, and 23 moderate, violations of international norms. The situation is worse in autocracies: 55 were involved in major or

Figure 28.1: Five overall quantitative index rankings of liberal democracies and how they rated Australia, 2017–2021

Name of index	Produced by	Rating of Australia	Australia's rank as a democracy	Lowest scoring elements	Methods used
Democracy Index	**Economist Intelligence Unit** (EIU) 2022	9 out of 10. Classed as a 'Full democracy'	9th	'Political participation' = 7.8 out of 10	Varied sources, not entirely clear
SGI Sustainable Governance Indicators	Berlin **SGI, 2022**	On quality of democracy (score 7.3 out of max 10) On good governance 7.3 out of 10	9th on democracy and 16th on good governance	Access to information (poor media fairness) 6.0 (out of 10) Civil rights 7.0 (out of 10)	Quantitative analysis of expert assessments, plus qualitative briefs on aspects
Varieties of Democracy	**V-Dem** at University of Gothenburg, **2023**	0.81 out of 1 (81%) on the Liberal Democracy Index	11th (up from 20th in 2019)	'Participatory component' = 0.66 out of 1 (66%) 'Egalitarian component' = 0.84 (lowest democracy score) (84%)	Quantitative data analysis, aggregated into six components
Global State of Democracy	**International IDEA**, 2022	Range of 82% to 86% scores across four main indices. Also seen as a 'high performing democracy' for their 5th index, participatory engagement	Not given	21% on 'direct democracy'; 60% on 'social group equality'	Varied, but data-heavy
Democracy Barometer	**Zurich University, 2020** (but using 2017 data)	3.76 out of 5 on an overall 'democratic quality' index, (highest 4.41)	22nd (in 2017)		Quantitative data analysis, aggregated into six components

Source: URL links to all sources are included in the second column (see also **References** *section for full details).*

moderate violations in response to the pandemic' (**V-Dem, 2021**, p.9). Australia's relatively high success in controlling COVID-19 was achieved at limited cost to rights (apart from restrictions on movement) as many earlier chapters have shown.

Quite a few other comparative classifications of democracy are orientated only towards assessing marginal or what the EIU terms 'flawed democracy' cases, such as those found in many developing countries. Designed to be inclusive and often used to assist aid agencies distribute funds, these measures simply do not work at all for established democracies, normally assigning

Figure 28.2: Some current quantitative index rankings of partial aspects of liberal democracy and how they rated Australia in 2020

Name of index, and who produces it	Aspect of democracy covered	Rating of Australia	Australia's rank in the world as a democracy	Methods used
Freedom House Index, 2023 See also **(PEI, 2019b)**	Freedom, political rights, civil rights	95 out of 100 (and thus 'free'); 'Freedom on the Net' score = 76/100	Joint 8th	25 indicators are scored 0–4 points by Freedom House analysts, for an aggregate score of maximum 100. Political rights score 38 out of possible 40; civil liberties 57 out of possible 60
Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) (2019a). Team at Harvard, Sydney University and University of East Anglia	How well-run, impartial and democratic are elections?	70% on overall PEI index	31st in first wave, revised to 14th in later waves	Uses multiple data indicators covering all aspects of election processes, from voter registration, regulating parties through to vote counting
Transparency International, 2022	Corruption, bribery, etc.	75 out of 100 (improving)	14th	Survey evidence of perceptions of corruption
InCise Index of Civil Service Effectiveness (2019). By Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University, with UK think-tank, the Institute for Government (with UK civil service funding)	How well national bureaucracies operate, using objective indicators and expert judgements	Average score of 0.863 (mean 0.516); highest score on crisis and risk management	5th out of 38 countries assessed	116 metrics aggregated into 12 component scores

Note: URL links to all sources are included in the first column (see also **References** *section).*

them all 'perfect scores'. Other studies use simplistic typologies or are very dated. For instance, the Polity IV and V scores produced by a USA think-tank have given Australia a 'perfect' 10/10 score, alongside the USA, until 2016 (**Center for Systemic Peace, 2024**). (In the past, Polity was run from the same unit also running a separate atrocities dataset funded by the CI.)

In addition*, there are a range of more partial measures relevant to democracy assessment, covering a few or* single aspects of performance that are highly relevant to assessing democratic outcomes. Figure 28.2 shows how Australia compares with other countries on freedom of speech and media, the integrity and fairness of elections, perceptions of corruption and civil service effectiveness. These indicators cover areas that are threats of 'democratic backsliding' discussed earlier, with electoral laws or public administration services being run in partisan ways to favour incumbents.

Figure 28.3: Three current index rankings of the social outcomes or political equality aspects of liberal democracy, and how they rated Australia in 2020–2021

Name of index	Aspect covered	Rating of Australia	Australia's rank	Methods
Social Progress Index, 2022	Index of how society meets people's basic needs, creates wellbeing foundations and offers opportunities	88% (down slightly)	12th (up from 18th in 2019)	Index aggregated from 12 underlying indicators, then normalised
World Happiness Report, 2023	Happiness index citizens' own evaluation of their wellbeing	7.1 out of 10 (top country's score = 7.8)	11th (up from 19th in 2017)	Survey data on population happiness, then analysed using country statistics on healthy life expectation, social support, generosity, choices
OECD, 2019	Inequality after taxes and transfers (**Gini coefficient**)	9th in terms of overall Gini coefficient (Fig 10b)	21st (out of 37 OECD countries) on impact of state cash redistribution (Fig 10a)	Country statistics on income levels across social groups

Australia has scored well on most of these measures, ranking within the top 10 countries on the 'freedom' index, in its anti-corruption measures and in terms of its public service effectiveness. Some of these measures can also be questioned. On the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (**PEI, 2019a**), Australia initially trailed in 31st place thanks to its weak laws and regulations on donations to political parties, donations transparency and its heavily biased and partisan print media – a pattern found in most Anglosphere liberal democracies (**Young, 2011**). Later this low PEI ranking was revised, and Australia was instead placed 14th in international terms. (PEI has been criticised as unstable and neglecting some deeper quality aspects of party competition and elections (Flavin and Shufeldt, 2019). Australia's strong showing on the Freedom House measure has been chiefly due to that measure assigning a lot of weight to market freedoms. The **InCise 2019** index placed Australia 5th, behind only the UK (ranked top), Canada, New Zealand and Finland. However, this problematic measure was devised and funded with help from a British civil service think-tank – it appears to have privileged an Anglosphere and 'new public management' conception of public administration over European (somewhat more hierarchical and neo-Weberian) models. The relatively strong Transparency International ranking for Australia might also be queried. It seems appropriate for the federal civil service and politics, but perhaps puts too optimistic a gloss on recurring problems for Australian state politics, or for major business sectors like banking, in both of which significant corruption and malfeasance problems have surfaced in recent years.

A key aim of liberal democracy is to maximise the overall social welfare of citizens, and achieving some basic equality of social conditions across all citizens is widely acknowledged as an essential foundation for political equality. As a country with a developed economy and high

per capita level of gross domestic product (GDP), Australia should do well to realise that goal, while in the Australian political tradition the concept of a 'fair go' is also important. Figure 28.3 shows three important indices.

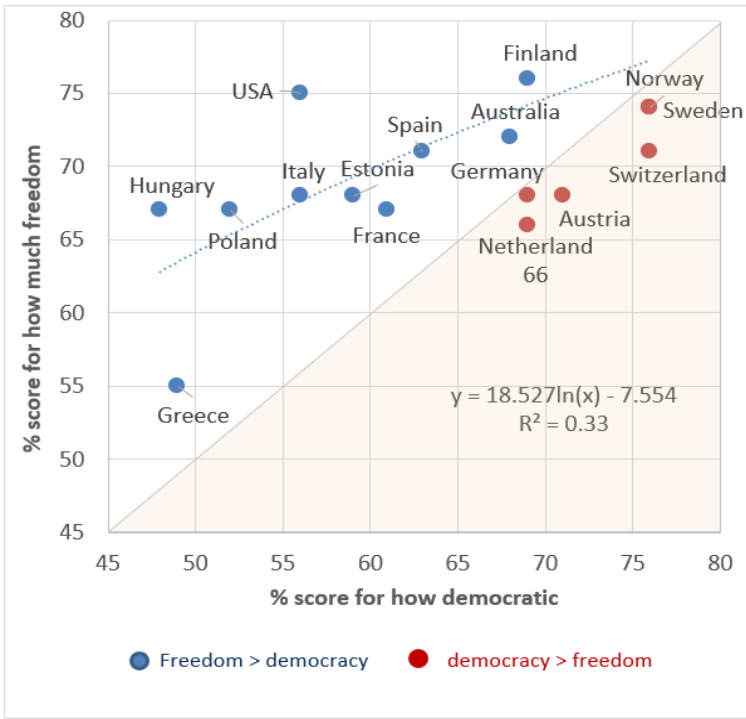
Australia's performance here is rather disappointing. On the OECD index of social inequality (the widely used **Gini coefficient**), Australia was the 9th best-performing country. OECD (**2019**, Figure 5) does show that (along with New Zealand) Australia targets cash transfers most to people in the lowest income quintile (those needing it most). However, it ranked in the bottom third of countries for redistribution effects via cash payments (**OECD, 2019,** Figure 10 B. Gini coefficients).

In terms of wellbeing and reported happiness, Australia does rather better, but was only ranked 18th or 19th in the world despite the many advantages of its suburban lifestyle, and widely available environmental benefits (such as ready access to beaches and wilderness for leisure). The country's score on the Social Progress Index was strong in percentage terms, but again this score only just made the top 20 countries.

Comparing subjective ratings by citizens

Other evidence in the World Values Survey (WVS) shows how respondents rate their own country in terms of its democracy, freedom levels or performance. In over half of the established liberal democracies shown citizens rated their level of freedom higher than they rated the extent of democracy (Figure 28.4) shown by the blue dots on a white background here. American

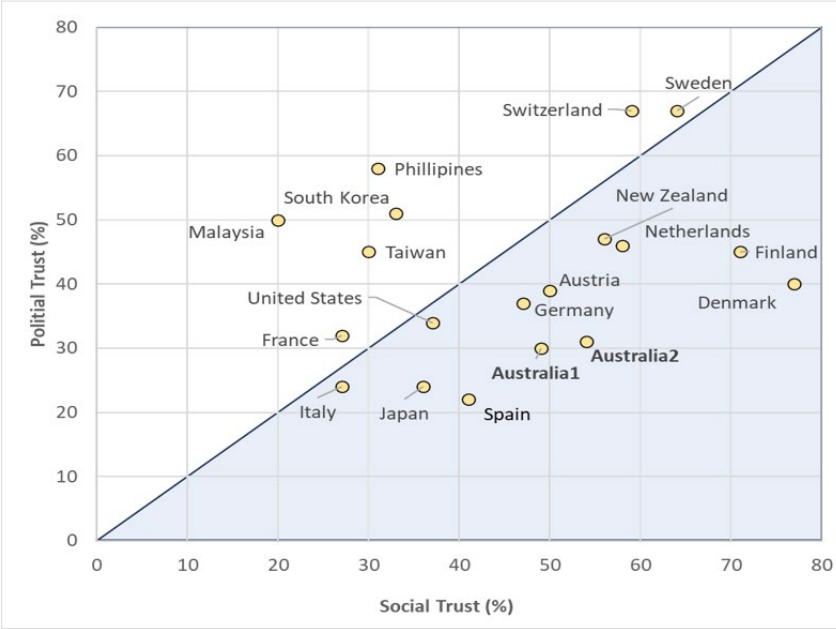
Figure 28.4: How citizens ranked their country in terms of how democratic it was, and how much freedom they had in 2017–2020



*Source: Compiled by authors using data from World Values Survey Wave 7 responses (**WVS, 2021**).*

Notes: The zero is suppressed here. The orange shaded part of the chart shows where respondents saw their country as being more democratic than it was free. The white-shaded part shows where respondents saw their country as being freer than it was democratic. The greater the right-angle distance of a country's dot from the orange-white boundary, the greater the disparity between freedom and democracy that respondents perceived. In Germany, for example, the disparity was almost zero. The dotted line shows the trend line for a regression across all the data, for which the equation is at bottom right.

Figure 28.5: How Australia respondents compared with those in other established liberal democracies in terms of social and political trust, in 2017–2020 data



Source: **Evans, Jennings and Stoker (2020)**, *How does Australia Compare: What Makes a Leading Democracy? Table 1.*

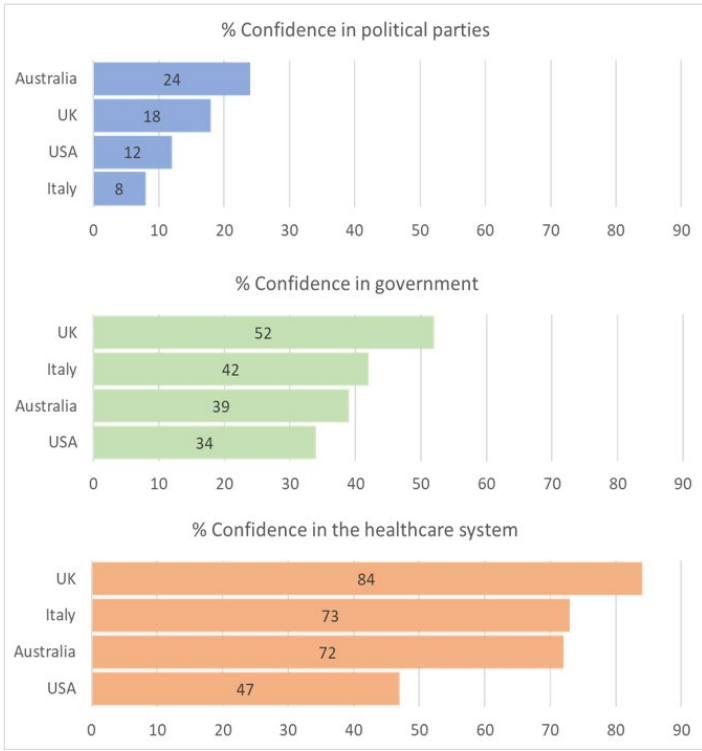
Notes: Data are taken from the World Values Survey, 2017–2020 wave. In the blue shaded area, the levels of social trust are greater than the levels of political trust. In the white shaded areas, the level of political trust is greater than the level of social trust.

respondents especially rated their level of freedom as greater than their level of democracy. In a small number of countries, shown by the red dots on an orange background, democracy levels were rated above freedom levels. From the best fit trendline it is apparent that perceived freedom and democracy in this small set of countries were not that closely related – although the two cases of Greece (where both freedom and democracy levels are rated very low) and the USA explain much of this weakness.

By contrast, Australia lies close to the trendline in Figure 28.4, and somewhat above the parity line for the two dimensions. Thus, according to its WVS respondents Australia was slightly freer than it was democratic, but it did well on both dimensions. Its score ranked it as the 7th most democratic country of those shown (behind six affluent European countries) and the 4th freest country (behind only three Scandinavian countries and the USA). In response to another WVS question asking respondents if democracy was important, Australia's score was 86 per cent (out of a possible 100 per cent), ranking it 12th among liberal democracies, a relatively weak performance.

Closely related to perceptions of democracy is the level of 'trust' that citizens have in their state (**Evans and Stoker, 2018**). On 'trust' Australian respondents seem more sceptical and questioning of elites. The WVS asked how much respondents trusted other people in society, and how much they trusted political office-holders, and the results were somewhat less favourable for Australian democracy (Figure 28.5 shows). Over half of Australian respondents endorsed the statement that other people could generally be trusted, making the country the 7th or 8th most socially trusting. (The two 'Australia' dots in the Figure showing differences in the national averages over two waves of the survey, but they were very close together and consistent.) However, less than one in three respondents believed that Australian political leaders could generally be trusted, placing the country 14th out of the 17 countries in Figure 28.5. The 'parity line' in the chart shows where the two dimensions of trust were equally

Figure 28.6: How Australian respondents compared with those in three other liberal democracies in their level of confidence in political parties, government and healthcare after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in May and June 2020



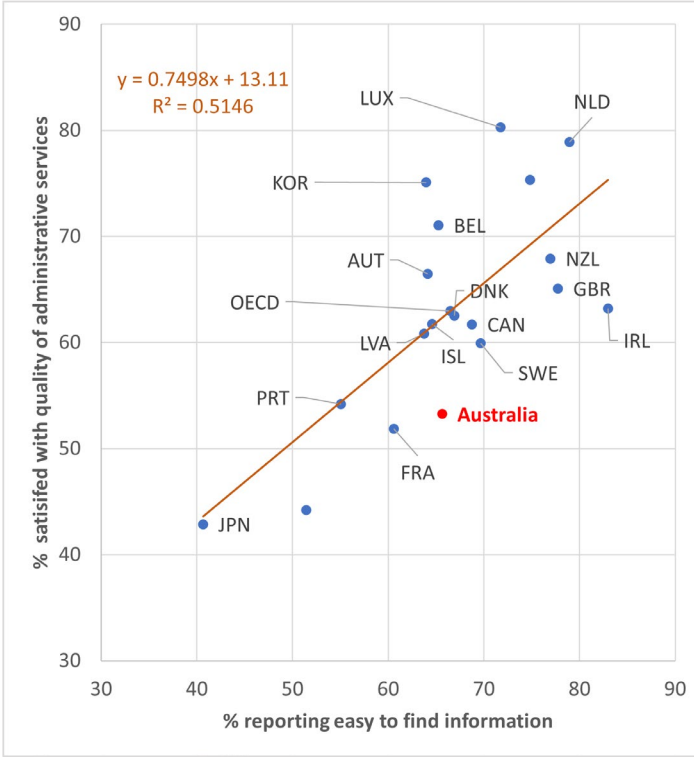
Source: Ipsos survey from May/June 2020, described in **Jennings et al., 2021**. *The numbers inside bars add together respondents answering either 'a great deal of confidence' or 'quite a lot of confidence'.*

developed. Given its moderate level of social trust Australia was well below the line on political trust – in fact only France and Denmark were further from parity.

The COVID-19 pandemic generally produced an upsurge of trust in democratic governments. At the height of the crisis (during May/June 2020), Figure 28.6 shows trust in different elements of the political system in Australia and three other established liberal democracies (the UK, USA and Italy). Citizens were least confident in the political parties to handle the pandemic well, moderately confident in government, and (as we would expect) most confident in their country's healthcare system. The Australian responses showed considerably more public confidence in political parties than other countries (albeit still at a low level). Confidence in Australian government was markedly less than the UK, but on a par with levels in Italy and the USA. Australia essentially tied second with Italy on trust in the healthcare system, and considerably behind the UK with its NHS, but beating by far the USA with its mostly private healthcare.

The same four-country comparison survey also recorded citizens' level of confidence in core institutions crucial for the long-running health of liberal democracies. Australian respondents' confidence in most public services (the health service, armed forces, police and universities) was high (75–80 per cent), similar to the levels in the other countries. Around 50–60 per cent of Australian respondents were confident about the federal government, the civil service and courts, again more or less on a par with other countries. However, confidence in the Australian press was much less, on a par with the dismal showing of political parties but not disastrous, unlike the UK public's view of their media (with only 7 per cent confident in them).

Figure 28.7: How Australian respondents rated the ease of finding government information and the quality of administrative services compared with other countries in a cross-national OECD survey, 2022



Source: **OECD (2022)** *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy 'Figure 5.2. Perception that information is easily available is positively linked with satisfaction with administrative services cross-nationally'. The brown line shows the trend line for a regression across all the data, for which the equation is at the top left.*

A final aspect of effective liberal democratic arrangements concerns how easy it is to find government information, which we might expect to be associated with how satisfied citizens are with administrative services. Yet, Australia seems to be an exception to this pattern. Two-thirds of respondents in a cross-national OECD survey reported that it was 'easy to find information' on Australian government services, ranking it 12th out of the 20 nations shown in Figure 28.7. However, only just over half of respondents said they were satisfied with 'the quality of the administrative services', placing Australia third from bottom in Figure 28.7 and well below the trendline shown.

Ceiling effects are less evident when attention focuses on subjective responses gathered consistently across liberal democracies. Australia makes the top division of excellent performers on some indicators, but it is ranked a creditable but not stellar performer on others. Its rather similar rankings across a wide range of comparative indicators (coming from different authors and institutions) suggests that these measures have correctly gauged the country's basic position. Compared with other securely established liberal democracies, Australia is not quite in the top division, but sits well up within the closely following group of good but not outstanding political systems.

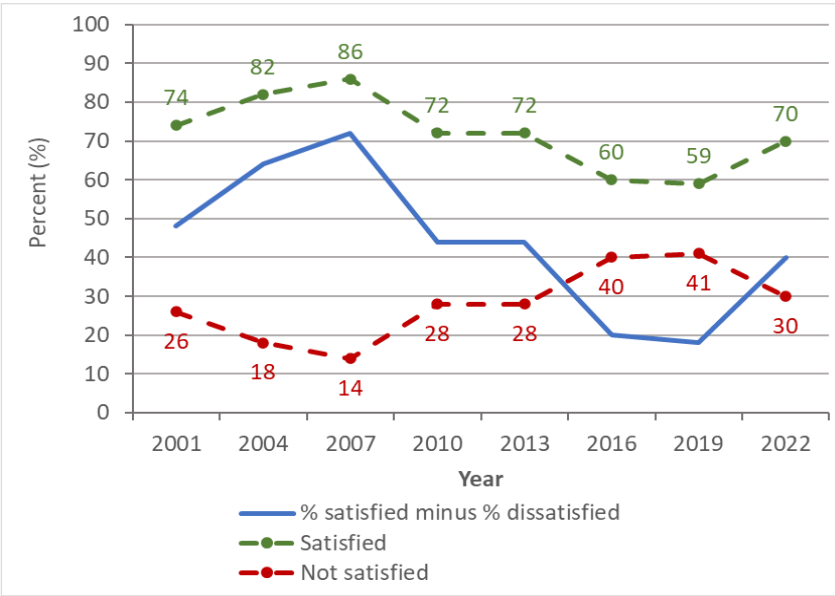
Do Australians have faith in democracy?

For decades now political scientists and other pollsters have gauged citizens' view of democracy within one country by asking how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with it. The Australian Election Survey (AES) asked this just after each federal election, a critical time for the public. Figure 28.8 shows that from 2001 to 2013 many more respondents said they were satisfied with democracy (the green dashed line) than said they were dissatisfied (the red dashed line). In 2016 and 2019 the gap between the two lines narrowed a lot (from 44 to just 19–20 per cent), and it would have been tempting then to identify a loss of faith in democracy. However, in 2022 far more people again said they were satisfied, and fewer were dissatisfied, pushing the net satisfaction balance back up to 40 per cent. Throughout this century the balance of satisfied minus dissatisfied respondents in the AES has been solidly in positive terrain, albeit substantially less so since 2010 than in earlier periods shown.

Some of the democratic decline literature has drawn on different kinds of data, where survey respondents are presented with pre-defined statements that the analysts judge are relevant to gauging faith in democracy. In the USA and many recently established democracies (like former communist countries in eastern Europe) such surveys have shown disturbing numbers of respondents willing to endorse anti-democracy statements. And in a 2017 cross-national survey, 28 per cent of Australia respondents who placed themselves on the political right agreed with the statement that: 'A system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliaments and the courts would be a good way of governing this country' (**Pew Research, 2017**). But only 16 per cent of centrist respondents and 8 per cent of those on the left gave this response.

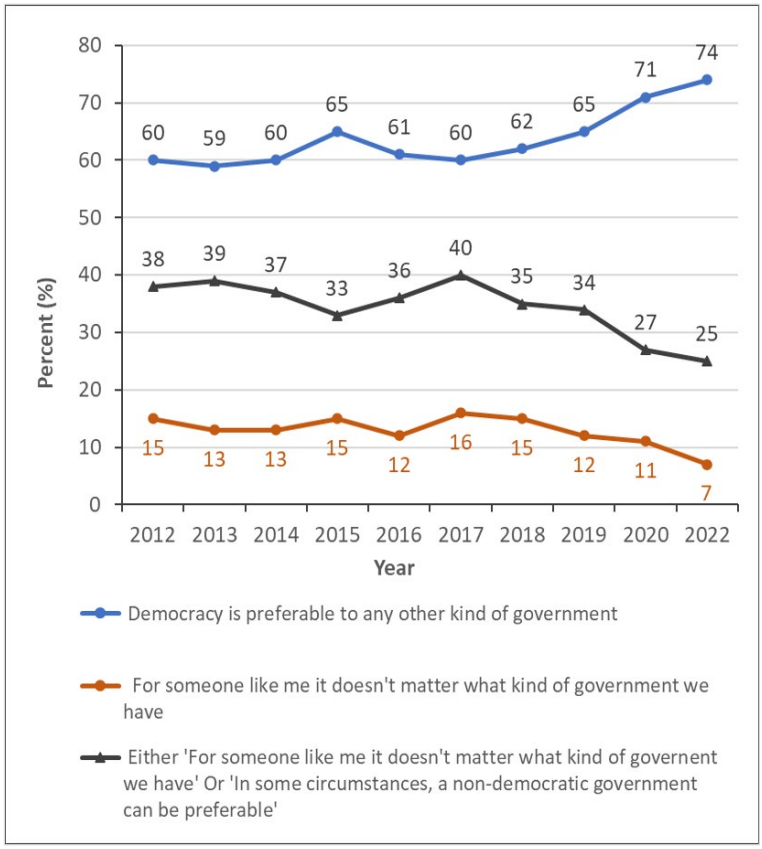
We have no sure way of knowing if respondents recognise anti-democracy views when agreeing with statements, nor what salience they ascribe to them. 'Agree' questions may

Figure 28.8: Respondents' satisfaction with democracy in successive Australian Election Study samples, 2001–2022



Source: **Cameron et al. 2022**, *The 2022 Australian Federal Election Study, Figure 5.1.*

Figure 28.9: Respondents' views about democracy in Lowy Institute surveys, 2012–2022



Source: Lowy Institute (2022) and various dates.

Note: Respondents were asked to choose one of the three statements in Figure 28.9.

capture a deeply held conviction motivating behaviours, or just an apathetic endorsement of a hypothetical statement asked out of the blue. However, we can take *changes* in such indicators over time to be capturing something, especially if they seem to show consistent trends.

Figure 28.9 shows a useful series from repeated Lowy Institute surveys over the last decade asking respondents to choose one of the three statements below the chart. From 2012–2019, a stable 'large majority' of three-fifths of respondents picked the first view that democracy is a better system than alternatives, and this percentage grew to nearly three-quarters of the sample in 2022. Similarly stable from 2012–2019 was the smaller fraction of between one in eight and one in 14 respondents who picked the 'indifference' statement that systems of government made no difference to 'someone like me'. A relatively stable quarter of people chose the last statement that 'in some circumstances a non-democratic government could be preferable'. Adding this last response to the bottom indifferent line gives a total for both 'non-democracy' responses, shown in Figure 28.9 by the black line. The vertical gap between the blue and black lines then shows the net balance of the pro-democracy responses. This difference was just 20 per cent points in 2017, but it has grown consistently since, and reached over 50 per cent points by 2022, exceeding anything earlier on.

Another approach to gauging democratic quality over time has asked respondents whether they trust key institutions, but here the results have not shown similarly benign patterns. Figure 28.10 shows that less than a third of respondents in the 2022 AES survey agreed that 'people

Figure 28.10: Australian respondents' trust in 'people in government', 2001–2022

Year	% People in government can be trusted	% People in government look after themselves	Trust balance (%)
2001	32	68	-36
2004	40	60	-20
2007	43	57	-14
2010	37	63	-26
2013	34	65	-31
2016	25	74	-49
2019	25	75	-50
2022	30	70	-40

Source: **Cameron et al., 2022**, *The 2022 Australian Federal Election – Results from the Australian Election Study. See also* **Cameron and McAllister (2019)**.

Notes: The question asked was: 'In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time?' The trust balance is column 2 (trust) minus column 3 (look after themselves).

in government' can be trusted, while more than twice as many agreed that they 'look after themselves'. This level is slightly less adverse than ratings in the period 2016–2019, because during the COVID-19 pandemic more respondents said they trusted government (see Figure 28.6).

A final approach to assessment has asked more specifically about what respondents liked or disliked about 'Australian democracy'. Lists of possible prompts were provided and respondents asked to pick out their 'top ten' (Figure 28.11). Very similar (but unfortunately not quite identically phrased) questions were given to samples of Australian citizens, elites and federal politicians, and Figure 28.11 shows how these differently situated actors' lists of likes compared.

All three sets of actors included free and fair elections in their top three likes, and both citizens and politicians assigned importance to stable government, with citizens liking the two-party system, but also politicians finding a middle ground.

Figure 28.11: 'Top 10' responses by citizens, elites and federal politicians to the survey question: 'What do you like about Australian democracy?'

'What do you like about democracy in Australia?'		
Citizens in 2018	**Elites in 2016**	**Federal politicians 2019**
1. Stable government	1. Compulsory voting	1. Political participation (equality of access, ability to engage)
2. Free and fair elections	2. Social equality ('fair go')	2. Free and fair voting
3. Two-party system	3. Free and fair elections	3. Compulsory voting
4. Political choice	4. Free press	4. Stable government (ordered transitions)
5. Representative government	5. Freedom of speech and assembly	5. Freedom of speech
6. Politicians usually find a good middle ground on policy	6. Australia is relatively free from corruption	6. Open government (including freedom of information)
7. Big corporations and wealthy people don't have too much influence	7. Representative government	7. Strong institutions
8. Political participation	8. Rule of law	8. Rights protection (including minorities)
9. Australia has experienced a good economy and lifestyle	9. Separation of powers	9. Constitutional checks and balances
10. Good public services	10. Stable government	10. Free press

*Sources: First column (***Stoker, Evans and Halupka, 2018***); second column (***Evans, Stoker and Halupka, 2016***); third column (***Evans, Halupka and Stoker, 2019***) also Evans, Halupka and Stoker (***2018***).*

Figure 28.12: 'Top 10' responses by citizens, elites and federal politicians to the survey question: 'What do you dislike about Australian democracy?'

'What do you dislike about democracy in Australia?'		
Citizens in 2018	**Elites in 2016**	**Federal politicians 2019**
1. We don't get much choice; political parties are too similar	1. Lack of action by governments of all persuasion on key public policy problems	1. Media misrepresentation (misinformation, pressure)
2. Big business has too much power	2. The decline in the quality of public policy debate	2. Integrity (political donations/ corruption/political advertising)
3. The media has too much power	3. The personalisation of politics by the media and decline in media standards	3. Short-termism/three-year electoral cycle
4. Women are not well represented within politics	4. The poor behaviour of politicians	4. Dominance of party machines and two-party system
5. People from diverse cultures are not well represented within politics	5. Narrow parliamentary representativeness in gender, ethnic and class terms	5. Conflict-driven party politics (adversarial, combative, hyper partisanship)
6. Young people are not well represented within politics	6. Australians dislike adversarial politics	6. Over-representation of minorities
7. Too much compromise and not enough decisive action	7. The major political parties are undemocratic and broken	7. Public understanding/political literacy
8. Minor parties and independents hold too much power	8. Poor leadership	8. Power of vested interests
9. The battle between the two main political parties puts me off politics	9. Weak economic conditions in the global economy	9. Lack of responsiveness to constituents/poor public engagement
10. The media focuses too much on personalities and not enough on policy	10. The rise of the career politician	10. Centralisation of power

*Sources: First column (**Stoker, Evans and Halupka, 2018**); second column (**Evans, Stoker and Halupka, 2016**); third column (**Evans, Halupka and Stoker, 2019**).*

All actors included stable government in their top ten likes. Elites and politicians placed a free press and freedom of speech and assembly quite high, but these did not make the citizens' top ten. Citizens liked representative government and participation opportunities, as did elites. Politicians and elites liked checks and balances, rights protection, the rule of law and open government, but none of these made the citizen respondents' list. Good public services made the citizen list at the bottom, but not those of other actors.

Turning to dislikes about Australian democracy the citizen respondents essentially felt that their influence was hampered by that of the parties (using discretionary power in several ways), big business, the media (too much power and too much focus on personalities) and a lack of social diversity in politics (Figure 28.12). Elite responses often mirrored these complaints, but with more of an emphasis upon politicians' poor behaviour, narrow backgrounds and poor leadership. Federal politicians' dislikes about Australian democracy focused on over-adversarial conflicts, 'biased' media representations, lack of integrity, vested interests, not serving constituents, short-termism and the centralisation of power. Politicians also criticised citizens' limited understanding of politics.

Assessing Australian democracy in qualitative terms

The rich tapestry of analysis in earlier chapters continues the fundamental qualitative traditions of the democratic audit stream of work (see Chapter 1; and **Beetham, 1999**; **Beetham and Weir, 1999**; Sawer et al., 2009). Attempting to re-summarise them here could risk either being repetitive or blurring their focus on achieving balanced commentary with late-stage over-simplifications. Instead, we have sought to conclude by condensing out from the detailed qualitative audit analyses given in the 27 chapters some overall findings related to the quantitative measures discussed so far. We focus most on the key areas where democratic performance has been problematic or sub-optimal, and sketch in some potential feasible solutions, measures that might help to deepen citizens' democratic engagements and faith in the political system. We also briefly set these audit conclusions within a brief review of the generally difficult and perhaps darkening picture for liberal democracies within the Asia-Pacific region, where Australia's example has been (and can continue to be) so influential.

In the 21st century Australia has clearly not suffered from 'democratic backsliding', any greater polarisation of top two-party politics than normal in the past, nor any sustained rise of populist parties securing representation – although there have been recurrent but short-lived 'surge' outcomes in voting indicating varied levels of dissatisfaction with conventional political parties and politicians. Apart from occasional reactions to these wobbles, neither of the top two 'major' parties has adopted populist rhetoric and tactics that overtly call into question the civil rights of minorities. To the contrary, many past defects of elections management and the regulation of democratic competition at state level have been corrected and electoral integrity has been maintained and improved. The earlier chapters generally show that most of the diverse 'micro-institutions' needed across many sectors of regulation and public administration to support strong democracy (**Dunleavy, 2019**) are generally in place and in good health. (We consider some key exceptions to this picture at the end of the section.)

Similarly, although Australia has no integrated charter of human and civil rights, in recent years substantial improvements have been made in rectifying major rights-anomalies and defects affecting huge numbers of Australians – especially in equalising the position of gay and lesbian people; acknowledging and rectifying past institutional abuses of vulnerable social groups in the care of government agencies or civil society NGOs; delivering (albeit belatedly) on the rights of women to equal pay and equal representation in public and business life; and improving the still substantial remaining discrimination and disadvantagements suffered by Aboriginal 'bush' communities and other ethnic minorities. The failure of the Voice initiative at federal level could mark important setbacks for Indigenous people's cause. Yet even in this conjuncture, the wider picture of rights improvements has been positive and important.

Australia's counterpart 'Westminster systems' (including Canada, the UK, India and New Zealand) have all faced exceptional problems in managing the transition to multi-party politics that is arguably inevitable in the modern period. The first three have retained plurality rule ('first past the post' or FPTP) voting, and so the democratic costs of maintaining the 'stability' of national two-party dominance have been large, with very high levels of deviation from proportionality (DV scores). Huge threshold vote levels have been imposed on new party entrants before they can win any seats at all (let alone achieve proportional numbers of seats to votes), thereby artificially suppressing any smaller competitors. These features have insulated

the 'major' parties in the UK, Canada and India from competition in ways that have produced repeated episodes of 'dominant party systems' where party competition becomes ineffectual because of incumbents' strong artificial advantages from the voting system (**Dunleavy, 2010**). This protection also allowed governments with an overall majority to push the limits of their country's constitutional feasibilities for narrow and overtly partisan ends (**Innes, 2023**; **Bevan, 2023**).

Australia has not joined New Zealand is shifting over wholly to proportional representation. Yet the unique emphasis of its voting processes, that everyone should vote and that every vote should count via the Alternative Vote (AV) aggregation process into the two-party preferred vote (TPP), has meant that barriers to new party entrants have been somewhat less. And the 'balancing' use of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in upper house elections (with lower entry barriers and somewhat lower DV scores both federally and in the states) has also helped it to manage the modern transition to multi-party politics far better than its FPTP Westminster counterparts.

Yet the extensive advantagement of the top two parties vis-à-vis newer and smaller competitors has been a central fact of life across both federal and state government. At least Australian voters have had many opportunities to signal the diversification of their preferences (albeit often a little unavailingly, to short-lived 'surge' parties, or other parties with a somewhat episodic presence). And despite some limited populist themes being picked up occasionally by main party politicians (especially on the political right), new populist politics and parties have signally failed to take off in Australia, up to now. Nor have rich interventionists (like Clive Palmer) secured political representation, despite spending large sums on campaigning. After the COVID-19 pandemic, some analysts claimed a 'great reset', such that populist politics has declined in many democracies (**Bennett Institute, 2022**). But any such effect proved strictly temporary (**Kampfner, 2023**).

In terms of transitioning to more multi-party politics, the Greens have become fairly solidly established on the centre-left. Their winning three AV seats in Brisbane from Labor in 2022 may suggest that the Greens might yet be able to develop more local 'bastions' of support needed to regularly make the TPP count stage. Similarly, the ability of six Teal Independents in 2022 to pull some local Liberal votes with them into a new moderate political coalition (alongside local centre-left voters) may signal an end to the centre-right's previously lower level of fragmentation. In 2016 and 2019, hardline right-wing lobbies and factions in the coalition arguably 'held to ransom' the Liberal-National government's overall policy stance on climate change and women's rights. Initially, this had few electoral costs, given the comparatively greater fragmentation of Labor-Green voting (and Labor trade union 'brown' factions limiting their own party's climate policy). Yet voters in 2022 found ways to bypass the attempted vetoes of powerful factions inside both the top two parties and may be able to do so again in any similar conjuncture.

Where Australia's historic two-party predominance has never yet cracked is in terms of Labor's and the Liberal-National Coalition's monopoly of ministerial positions, both federally and at state level. On multiple occasions collective governmental power has now passed peacefully and consensually from one of the top two parties to its main rival with no problems, despite the occasional doom-laden coalition warnings of impending catastrophe should Labor win. Yet the transition to multi-party politics has only exceptionally and very rarely led to *even one* minister from outside Labor or the coalition ranks being appointed, still less a whole set of ministers entering a formal coalition government between two distinct parties. (The Liberal-Nationals'

permanent coalition is really just a factional coordination of a single party entity and so does not count here.) The formal creation of a genuine coalition government, and the regular access of other parties' politicians to ministerial rank, of course will depend on future AV elections not delivering an overall majority to the leading 'major' party.

There have been some short-lived 'hung parliament' periods in federal and state lower houses where ministers have lacked a single-party majority. And the normal upper house pattern at federal level and in five states has been one where the governing party has no automatic or secure majority for new legislation (and sometimes even confidence votes). Yet (as in other Westminster systems) Australia's federal and state governments dispose of a considerable armoury of executive powers that prime ministers, state premiers and ministers (at both levels) can use in ways that are only weakly checked by legislatures, and usually 'after the fact'. From a democratic audit viewpoint, some of the most troubling scandals of modern Australian politics have their roots in ministers' ability to exploit executive powers for nakedly partisan ends in ways that clearly skate outside the rule of law (as with the 'sports rorts' and other 'pork barrelling' scandals, and media abuses of power during the 2019 election). Some episodes have infringed the civil rights of unpopular minorities in populist mode and thus the foundational political equality of a democratic polity. The populist 'anti-bludger' (or 'scrounger') politics of Liberal and National minsters in 2016–2020 was a key example, that led to the illegal pursuit of 'robodebt' policies (see Chapters 13 and 14). Rather similar has been the (for a long time bipartisan) Labor and Coalition elites' joint insistence on housing irregular asylum seekers and refugee migrants offshore, contrary to international treaty obligations. Thus, AV's weaknesses in ensuring the democratic accountability of ministers have created spaces where ministers' discretionary capabilities have been exploited in party competition. In some mitigation, both these cases were initially justified by ministers citing clear majority backing from 'public opinion'. And when malfeasance or rights infringements have been demonstrated, most such efforts at 'exploitative' politics have either proved limited in scope, or backfired, or proved short-lived (as with robodebt).

There are also strong defenders of advantaging the top two Australian parties vis-à-vis smaller rivals, citing Schumpeter's minimalist version of liberal democracy as just a polity where voters have a genuine choice between two competing and credible government teams. At both the federal and state levels, AV has a great track record of (almost) always awarding the most seats to the most popular party, and it enjoys enduring support among the Australian public, despite their equal recognition of the constraints that this has imposed on voters' ability to spur governments into action on some issues (see Figures 28.11 and 28.12). Critics argue that there can be severe policy consequences in letting the top two parties' ministers and elites indulge in internal factional appeasement rather than following national interest policies. A key example in 2016–2022 was arguably the Liberal-National governments' weak policies against climate change and their insistence on continuing to develop new coal and oil projects, despite the 2019–2020 bushfires wake-up call and many other signs of darkening Anthropocene-era changes (see Chapter 27). Australia's long-time lags in developing solar and wind power (belatedly being swiftly rectified in the 2020s), and Labor's 2023 decision to license new fossil fuel projects because of continuing energy security difficulties and trade union lobbying, seem to be other examples of 'faction appeasement' decisions.

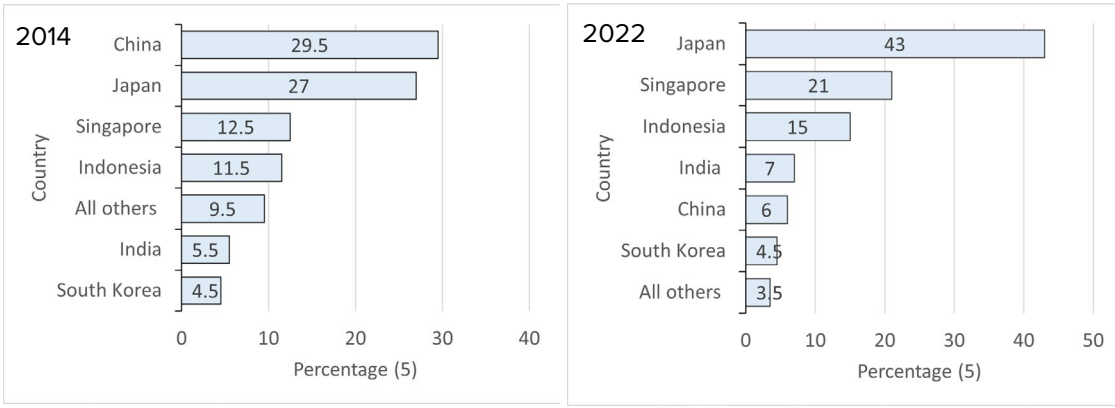
Yet in another critically important area of national policy-making, defenders of the Schumpeterian/Westminster system's capacity for strong executive action and ability to respond to public opinion changes might have a strong counter-example. In the 2010s, many

critics pointed out that Australia's international policies (and its wider cultural orientation and alignments) were bifurcating in unsustainable ways. Australian trade with many Asian countries developed phenomenally, with China becoming overwhelmingly its largest trading partner thanks to massive iron ore, coal and oil exports from Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. An influx of Chinese capital into Australia followed, especially in infrastructure facilities. At the same time, the 2000s and 2010s saw large increases in the regular in-migration of people from Asian countries, as 'white Australia' policies and the domination of UK and European in-migration were finally eclipsed, and an 'Asian century' loomed. Yet Australia's historic sociocultural attitudes of anxieties about (and distancing from) Asia persisted with considerable force (**Walker, 1995**; Sobocinska et al., 2012). And despite the shift in its economic dependencies, and opening up of immigration, critics argued that in the 21st century culturally Australia had become a 'stranded nation', situated within Asia but uncommitted to it (**Walker, 2019**).

Throughout these rapid changes Australia's defence and international policies were solidly and intimately tied into long-standing alliances, mainly with the USA. Under PM Menzies in 1965–1967 Australia backed the USA with force commitments in the Vietnam war (rather disastrously for its troops) when even the UK did not. And it formed part of the USA alliances that threw back the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003 (and again in 2005–2009) and intervened militarily twice in Afghanistan (with troops involved in 2001–2014 and 2015–2021). Although these recent interventions were on a far more restricted scale than those of the UK, Australia was still usually the third or fourth largest USA ally in terms of force commitments. American forces also operate major bases in the north of the country and are Australia's largest partner for annual joint exercises under the joint Pacific command structure. Defence links to the UK (in a far smaller way) have also been sustained by traditional monarchical and Commonwealth ties to the UK (re-emphasised by the failure of the 1999 republic referendum), plus links to two other countries included in the 'five Eyes' security and intelligence alliance (Canada and New Zealand). Some observers of Australia's long-run policy evolution linked this period of systematic ambivalence in its orientation to its alleged long-run 'cultural cringe' dependence on Anglosphere cultures from the USA and Britain, evident in its reluctance to release monarchical ties to the UK (reinforced by royal visits after 1999).

In the 2000s and 2010s many critics argued that Australia could not comfortably straddle two diverging horses at once – remaining militarily tied into USA-lead alliances when America was developing far more China-critical (even anti-China) policy stances on defence, intelligence, foreign policy and security issues. Federal PMs repeatedly denied that these difficulties were unmanageable. But in the late 2010s Australia regularly had to denounce actions taken by China to apparently 'punish' Australia for issuing pro-USA or critical statements on a series of incidents – including cyber-attacks on parliament and government agencies, sources attributed to China but not admitted. China also became increasingly and frankly authoritarian under President Xi, engaging in a period of aggressive 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' against the USA and its allies (Xiaolin, 2023), building up military forces in the South China Sea, and threatening the invasion of Taiwan with increasing frequency. Xi also offered a powerful non-democratic development pathway model, plus aid, to still developing countries across the Asia Pacific nations, including the Solomon Islands in return for a naval base there. Punitive Chinese measures were taken against Australia's wheat and wines imports when PM Scott Morrison ill-advisedly demanded an investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, feeding populist suspicions that it was caused by a leak from a Chinese laboratory.

Figure 28.13: How Lowy survey respondents' perceptions of Australia's 'best friend in Asia' changed between 2014 and 2022



Source: **Lowy Institute Poll, 2022**.

At the same time, Australia made efforts in the Asian group of nations to encourage a focus on economic growth as the pathway to political liberalisation in Asia. Yet trends in the Asia-Pacific world region were not favourable for liberal democracy. Thailand and Burma previously made the EIU's 'badly flawed democracy' status but both dropped out following military take-overs. Vietnam's Communist system did not improve, but nor did it worsen on civil rights. Indian democracy has remained resilient but with substantial problems, with recent trends moving it towards a new BJP 'dominant party system', accompanied by some populist Hindu attacks on civil rights for Muslims and other ethnic minorities. Nearest of all to Australia is Indonesia, an overwhelmingly Islamic country where democratic processes have remained resilient, despite some threats from extreme jihadist movements. Previous conflicts over Indonesia government military reactions to East Timor's independence faded into the past.

These developments, especially the dire warnings about China's military build-up had a transformative effect on Australian public opinion, as Figure 28.13 demonstrates. In 2014–2016, three in ten respondents in Lowy Institute surveys saw China as Australia's 'best friend in Asia' – this came shortly after the then Labor government in 2012 inaugurated a turn towards Asia in economic and cultural terms. By 2022, that survey share fell to just one in 16 respondents, while the public recognition of Japan, Singapore and Indonesia as friendly nations soared.

Liberal-National politicians both fuelled and sought to capitalise on this dramatic *volte face* in public views. The strong executive powers under 'Westminster system' arrangements gave PM Scott Morrison a dramatic (if costly) way to signal a policy change and seek to wrongfoot his opponents. In August 2021, the PM suddenly announced the cancellation of an ongoing A$50 billion contract that Australia had signed with a French submarine manufacturer only in 2019. The French deal was originally announced in 2016 by PM Malcom Turnbull and involved converting a French nuclear-powered sub design to use conventional propulsion only. There were indications in 2021 that the project was running into some technical difficulties, which provided a thin pretext for the cancellation. Australia ended up paying A$2.4 billion for work already done by the French contractor, plus a penalty fee of A$750 million for its cancellation.

Instead, Morrison immediately followed up by announcing a new three-way USA, UK and Australian agreement (AUKUS) to develop a fleet of more powerful nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. This deal had been six months in development and kept completely secret, since it would be Australia's first nuclear-powered defence technology, outclassing all its neighbours (except China) in creating untrackable subs armed with long-range cruise missiles. In characteristic 'Westminster system' style, the PM gave the Labor opposition just 24 hours' notice of the AUKUS deal before it was announced in parliament. Equally characteristically, the Labor shadow cabinet used that short time to decide that they would support AUKUS, which the party and Albanese continued to do once he became PM.

Other announcements under Morrison of expanded cooperation with USA forces in training and bases made clear that the Coalition government meant AUKUS to signal both its decisive re-commitment to 'the West' in any military conflict with China, and a determination to remain militarily more advanced than any of its other Asia-Pacific neighbours. For instance, huge increases were touted in the Australian army's fire power from a reach of 60 miles away with conventional artillery (useful only for defence) to one of 600+ miles away with cruise missiles. Air force weaponry also attracted new investments for distance-handling of targets, along with other substantial boosts to the military budget and to a wide range of equipment. The AUKUS decision triggered strong denunciations from China of 'war mongering' but Australia went on to join the 'Quad' conference (with the USA, Japan and India), discussing other aspects of 'containing' perceived China threats. Dire forecasts followed of high costs for Australia from Chinese sanctions and the increase in 'new cold war' tensions (**Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2022**).

However, instead the *Economist* (**2023**) argued that China's actions had not worked and that 'The "lucky country" may be uniquely able to endure Chinese bullying'. Australia quickly found other Asian markets in Japan, South Korea and India for the agricultural products and liquid natural gas exports that China boycotted. Other observers also took a sanguine view, arguing that China's 'sound and fury' could not offset its strong economic needs for Australian basic resources and access to its product markets (**Herscovitch, 2023**; **Uren, 2023**). By 2023, China also rolled back generally on its previous 'wolf diplomacy' policies and scrapped most sanctions on Australian goods thereafter (**Collinson, 2023**; **Curran, 2022**). A cooling-off of overt diplomatic hostilities occurred under the new Labor government after PM Albanese met President Xi in person at a conference in June 2023. Some critics still took a less sanguine view, arguing that these small shifts 'can't undo fundamental differences' (**Zelinsky, 2023**). If China invades or intervenes militarily in Taiwan, American observers also argue that Australia would surely back USA counter-measures, even if this meant some form of outright war (**Brands, 2022**).

The AUKUS saga reminds us that for a polity to remain a liberal democracy it must also be effective as a state as well. And systems of party competition and elections do not just shape how citizens' preferences reach political elites but can also have important influences on governance and policy outcomes. Defenders of the status quo can argue that in privileging the top two parties, Australian democracy has not been perfect but has been resilient. That is a considerable virtue in these dark times for democracy worldwide, especially as the global region around Australia potentially threatens to become a far more turbulent geo-political environment than in the past.

Conclusions and reform priorities

The over-time and comparative data considered here clearly situate Australia as a long-established and solidly founded liberal democracy. Especially within the Indo-Pacific region Australia (alongside New Zealand) has been a very important local exemplar of how to run a pluralistic society and electoral governance in ways that have fostered long-term economic expansion and increased prosperity over time – as the non-stop stream of visitors from nearby countries to admire Parliament House in Canberra also demonstrates. At the same time, Australia (along with the UK) has not 'topped the table' in democratic terms, or even been in the top 10 countries for many decades. And it has experienced some substantial 'democratic malaise' problems, including declining trust in government in recent years. Both comparative and over time indicators of Australia's democratic performance have given rather variable or mixed pictures at times, often apparently responding to quite short-term factors. Although indices have turned up in 2022, previous data suggested some decline in democratic confidence over recent decades.

The qualitative analysis in the book's main chapters (Chapters 1 to 27) also demonstrate that Australia has been home to many lasting and worthwhile democratic innovations. Many benign outcomes have followed on from holding frequent elections with compulsory voting at both federal and state levels. For instance:

- voter turnout has consistently exceeded 90 per cent (albeit under compulsory voting)
- the electoral systems in the House of Representatives and Senate have different features, which help different parties secure representation
- modern Australian election processes overall have been rated as high in integrity
- citizens have been engaged in the electoral process, and although women's representation in the federal parliament has been low, it has increased over time
- Australia has generally avoided the extremes of partisan polarisation produced by strong populist policies securing significant voter support or being adopted by the top two parties, and partisan polarisation has been moderate
- 'democratic backsliding' has generally been ruled out by 'rule of law' principles, enforced by the courts and the High Court, together with the independence of most 'micro-institutions' regulating discrete aspects of elections and policy-making
- Australia has a vigorous interest group universe that in the modern period has been a force for increased social diversity, reduction of discrimination against minorities, and (along with social media) speedier and more complete citizen vigilance not just over government, but also over media and important civil society institutions.

Turning to the quality of democrat governance, Australia has enjoyed a very 'balanced' configuration of political control across the two houses of the legislature at federal level, and to a lesser extent in five of the six states, with PR-elected upper houses not bound by the same rigid discipline enforced by single-party governments in the AV-elected lower chambers. The relationship between the Commonwealth and states and territories has also been broadly cooperative, with state and territory control tending to shift against long-term parties in power at federal level in ways that can 'stabilise' policy-making. Thirty years of continuous economic growth have testified both to Australia's 'lucky country' situation in terms of resources and geographical placement, but also to regulatory systems and public services that have been

highly rated in international terms and actively supported economic modernisation and improvements in societal diversity and rights regimes.

Nevertheless, there also remain significant challenges for elections and the quality of democracy in Australia, including:

- the 'artificial' protection given to the top two parties, which has conferred a duopoly of government control on the top two parties at all levels of government. This situation has now lasted for decade after decade, denying all other parties experience of ministerial government, and despite voters' sharply weakening identification with the top parties
- disproportional treatment of smaller parties in the House of Representatives
- 'semi-permanent campaigning', produced by the short electoral cycle
- the make-up of MPs and senators has not reflected the broader population in many respects
- the highly biased and partisan press and private broadcasting control by a few 'oligarchs' like Rupert Murdoch and other tycoons has continuously raised important questions about democratic fairness and journalistic integrity at election times especially, with no amelioration of the situation
- significant integrity question marks still exist, around the roles of money in party financing and its weak regulation.

In terms of the wider democratic representation of interests, there are multiple signs (recognised by most voters) that major problems remain:

- Business has a political and governmental power that exceeds all other societal interests and is permanently at work shaping federal and state policies both through regular *de facto* resource suasion, political lobbying, partisan funding and control over policy-relevant information.
- Australia's interest group and media processes have only recently worked to highlight minority disadvantagement and rectification of past wrongs. And in other fields (like climate change and the characterisation of irregular migration) active press and media disinformation campaigns have remained prominent and heavily biased.
- Federal government policy has sometimes apparently lagged years behind Australia's opportunities and threats, partly because of veto power of factional blocs pushing minority sectional interests inside the top two governing parties, especially in environmental policies.
- The weakness of rights regimes under 'Westminster system' arrangements and the relatively unconstrained executive powers enjoyed by incumbent governments have regularly tempted PMs, premiers and ministers to play hardball with their constitutional remit, threatening to impose unwarranted costs on unpopular or less politically protected minorities.

Reform priorities

The picture drawn here and in the previous chapters is a complex one, yet one that underlines the importance of established liberal democracies not sitting back complacently on their laurels, but instead committing to continued democratic developments and reforms to further improve how they operate. This imperative is made all the more pressing by rapid technological and socioeconomic developments in fields like social media, the use of data science and artificial intelligence in policy-making, the developing importance of robotics in the economy and within government, the continued worsening of climate change threats (like drought and

desertification) in the Anthropocene era, and the changes in Indo-Pacific international relations. Australia's society and political situation will inevitably change radically in the next decade, and perhaps unrecognisably in the next three decades. Therefore, its liberal democracy will need to grow its capabilities to engage citizens and tackle 'wicked' problems accordingly (**Head and Alford, 2015**).

What then should the areas of urgent attention be? Australia has been among the best nations in the world at conducting elections. However, uncontrolled government advertising in the run-up to the 2019 and 2022 elections, problems with Australia's political funding and disclosure scheme, and growing concern about political donations made by vested interests have increasingly undermined Australia's claim to fully 'fair' elections. These factors mean that incumbent governments are placed at a significant advantage at election time. Improving regulations to counteract these issues is relatively straightforward.

Second, good democratic governance requires constant vigilance in the protection of civil rights (including minority rights) and duties. Although Australia has no integrated charter of human and civil rights, in recent years improvements have been made in rectifying major rights-anomalies and defects affecting large numbers of Australians (see Chapter 2). But an influential human rights monitoring report in 2021 still found that Australia remains 'strikingly poor at protecting the rights of those most at risk of rights abuses' such as children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, people with disabilities, people with low socioeconomic status, and refugees and asylum seekers (**SBS News, 2021**). Maintaining some continued progress on rights (albeit short of a charter of rights) is the essential counterpart of free elections and majority rule.

Third, good democratic governance depends upon public faith in and commitment to sustaining a democratic culture – as measured through levels of public satisfaction in democratic values and public trust in government. In general, Australians are great champions of democratic values, but they have become more distrusting of people in government and now have limited confidence in the ability of parties and governments of whatever form to address major public policy concerns. Rebuilding trust levels via responsible government and party campaigning practice is an effort that relies on party elites being willing to forego narrow party opportunism and cases where the public interest can be eroded by a 'hard line' pushing of self-restraint limits.

Fourth, the administrative and legal channels of citizen participation and inclusive parliamentary representation need to be strengthened, since Australia performs poorly in this regard, for instance by using citizens juries to monitor and evaluate key issue areas and direct democratic arrangements, such as participatory budgets at the local scale. To counter Australia's strong 'metropolitan dominance' in every state, there is also an urgent need for governments to connect more effectively with citizens in regional Australia and better address regional policy concerns.

Finally, good democratic governance relies on keeping governments responsible and accountable, responsive to the needs of the citizenry in service terms, and free from corruption**.** On the positive side, and with some misgivings, Australia's democratic institutions met the challenges posed by both the 2019–2020 bushfire and COVID-19 emergencies in an effective and adaptive manner. Its parliaments are comparatively dutiful and innovative custodians of democratic values and in the main hold executives effectively to account across states and territories. The system of justice and integrity agencies has been robust and fair, and the Australian public service has discharged its functions with professionalism and creativity.

However, the federation has become dominated by the Commonwealth executive wielding disproportionate political and economic power in Australia's democratic settlement, which undermines the effectiveness of traditional checks and balances through the separation of powers. And Australian government is still far from free of corruption – for instance, the extravagant remuneration of politicians after they leave office, (their 'vast post-service wealth') has opened a new frontier of acute concern (**Peters and Burns, 2023**). A lack of integrity in public office in both the public sector and politics has become culturally embedded and addressing it is an issue of significant political salience.

In sum, evidence from the Audit suggests that Australian democracy needs to find a way to renew itself in these five areas. It requires a period of democratic imagination, reflection and reinvention to restore and strengthen what Amartya Sen (**1999**) refers to as the 'protective power of democracy'. In general, there is still overwhelming support for representative democracy but with a focus on making the system of government even more representative of the people they serve, accountable and responsive to their constituents and underpinned by a cleaner integrity politics and more 'caring', 'collaborative' and 'evidence-based' policy-making.

Notes

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