




Australian Government

Department of Home Affairs

Strengthening Australian democracy

A practical agenda for democratic resilience

Report of the
Strengthening Democracy Taskforce



"Democracy is a precious national asset. We must recognise and celebrate its strengths, acknowledge its vulnerabilities, and join with common purpose to ensure our confident, vibrant and resilient democracy is protected, nurtured and advanced."

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Minister's foreword



Far too often, contemporary discourse on democracy is characterised by overwhelming pessimism.

It's clear that in the 21st century, democracy is facing challenges of incredible scale and complexity. Like others around the world, Australia's

democracy is facing new threats—both acute and chronic, local and global—which existing policies, practices and capabilities are ill-equipped to meet.

But Australians have more reasons than most to be optimistic about the future of our democracy.

Australian democracy remains strong in the face of modern challenges. Our country has an extensive track record of innovating and adapting when it comes to tackling these threats. In the words of historian Judith Brett, Australia has traditionally been "a laboratory for new ideas about democracy"—and with the right attitude and investment, we can once again be a world-leading innovator in democratic resilience. Our history shows that strengthening democracy is a process of continuous innovation—and Australia can play a leading role in defending our democratic values.

Our first step is identifying the challenges we face.

In December 2022, I announced my intention to establish the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce to determine what could be done—practically—to prepare our democracy for a new era of challenges. Rapid advances in technology, changing dynamics of income and wealth inequality, and accelerating climate change and biodiversity loss are compounding socioeconomic pressures and testing democracies in new ways. In recent times, democracies have been hit by sudden global shocks—including the widespread consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the ongoing Israel– Hamas conflict.

One of our top priorities is taking a stand against those who seek to undermine democracy.

Intensifying foreign interference by non-democratic actors has many harmful consequences for democracies, but perhaps most pernicious is the way it undermines confidence in democratic systems—

at precisely the time that solving global challenges most needs strong, trusted democratic leadership. Rising misinformation and disinformation, amplified with the unprecedented speed and reach of social media platforms, further destabilises trusted relationships between people and their governments. To flourish, democracies need to meet rising citizen expectations for greater representation, responsiveness, openness and integrity.

Australia is integral to this revitalisation of democracy.

The fundamental strength of Australia's democracy means that this is precisely the moment for us to act. Our long tradition of careful stewardship, continuous investment, and practical innovation has prepared us to face the headwinds of the coming decade with confidence. We have a critical role to play in showing other countries that democracy works—and that it's a living, breathing thing that can be nurtured.

Australian democracy belongs to all Australians.

Democracy is a team sport; it requires every Australian citizen to hit the field. We need collective action, not only from our governments but from society as a whole. There are clear steps that Australians can take—around the dining room table and the board room table, across communities and businesses—to protect our democratic principles.

We are charting the course for a more optimistic future of democracy.

This report sets out five propositions emerging from the work of the Taskforce over the past 18 months. I invite all Australians to consider these ideas about the state of our democracy and how we can navigate the challenges ahead. And I invite you to reflect on Australian democracy—to recognise and celebrate its strengths, to acknowledge its vulnerabilities, and to join with common purpose and democratic spirit in our continuing traditions of protecting, nurturing and advancing our democracy, our most precious national asset.

Together, we can build a stronger democracy—and preserve it for future generations to come.

THE HON CLARE O'NEIL MP

Minister for Home Affairs
Minister for Cyber Security

Executive summary

1

Democracy is a national asset worth protecting.

Democratic values are deeply embedded in Australian ways of life. Personal freedoms and human rights. Civic responsibilities. Participation and expression. An inclusive spirit. A sense of humour. These characteristics enliven Australia's robust democratic institutions, from our trusted electoral system to our free media and vibrant civil society.

2

Australians can draw inspiration from our long traditions of strengthening democracy through ingenious means.

Throughout its history, Australia's democracy has been tested by the challenges of the times. Every generation has discovered that our democratic values need to be nurtured and safeguarded; every generation has risen to the challenge of protecting our democracy. Examples of Australia's democratic ingenuity include our electoral inventiveness, integrity innovations and vibrant civil society.

3

Australia's democracy today is strong, but vulnerable.

Australia ranks highly in international democracy indexes and national surveys indicate that Australians are satisfied with the overall performance of our democracy. Australians are overwhelmingly positive about the potential for democratic reform and innovation, but some have concerns about the trajectory of Australian democracy and issues such as foreign interference, emerging polarisation, and a weaker sense of belonging.

4

Like others around the world, Australia's democracy faces a new constellation of challenges.

Democracies around the world are struggling with a range of shared problems. Australia is not immune. Global trends are tangling with more localised issues to challenge the foundations of Australia's democratic strengths: trusted institutions, credible information and social inclusion. While none of these challenges is wholly new, in combination they pose complex and compounding threats to democracy.

5

A strong democracy is a resilient democracy. Practical approaches to democratic resilience should combine protection, engagement, and experimentation.

By embracing practical approaches to democratic resilience, Australia has an opportunity to continue our long tradition of strengthening democracy, continuously, together. Flourishing practical initiatives in Australia and around the world, combined with the democratic values and creativity of the Australian people, give us confidence that action is possible to ensure our democracy remains a beacon for decades to come.

Democracy is a national asset worth protecting.

Australians don't always talk a lot about the ideals of democracy, but democracy is deeply embedded in Australian ways of life. Community support for democracy, its principles and practices is strong: Australians overwhelmingly believe it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically.¹

But why do Australians value democracy so highly?

A recent study asked Australians to describe, in their own words, what democracy means to them. They most frequently mentioned three democratic principles: freedoms and rights; elections and the public's role in choosing *who* governs; and that people can have a say in *how* they are governed.²

The little dream that carried the big thought that mere mortals could organise themselves as equals into forums or assemblies, where they could pause to consider things, then decide on a course of action – democracy in this sense was a spine-tingling invention because it was in effect the first ever human form of government.

– John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, Simon & Schuster, London, 2009

Democracy is never perfect, and democratic principles – like all ideals – are rarely perfectly observed in practice. Yet part of democracy's value is that it gives people the right to call out practice that falls short, and a democratic toolkit to take action in response.

Freedoms and rights for all

Democracy underpins respect for the freedom and dignity of all, including freedom of expression, of religion and of association.

Democracy means people are free to make up their own minds, to express their preferences, and to make choices about their lives and their futures, within a common rule of law which applies equally to all. It connects individual wellbeing to social flourishing and the greater public good. And it underpins the success of our vibrant, multicultural society – a national strength and a central characteristic of a shared Australian identity.

Democracy means minority voices are heard and minority rights are protected, because the rights of all citizens are protected.³

Democracy promotes equality, dignity and respect for all – even, and perhaps most importantly, for those with whom we disagree. It means we can channel our disagreements peacefully, through agreed-upon rules by which we can live together, with protection from persecution, violence and intimidation.

Box 1: Freedom of political expression: Australia's cartooning traditions



Australians have a long history of viewing politics through the lens of humour. As early as the 1860s, cartoons were contrasting the rowdy crowds of open elections with the well-mannered civic ritual of ballot boxes in Australia.

Cartooning embodies the essential democratic right for the public to scrutinise and criticise those in power. Political cartoons are more than mere entertainment: they make complex issues accessible and visually compelling, contributing to our daily public conversations with their wit, creativity, and fearlessness.

Fiona Katauskas, *Horses for Courses* [cartoon], Behind the Lines exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House and *The Guardian Australia*, 2023.

Katauskas was named 2023 Political Cartoonist of the Year as part of the Behind the Lines exhibition at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, which included this cartoon.



A mother and baby at a voting booth at the Sydney Town Hall in 1963. Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia, NAA: A6315, K12/12/73/9.

Who governs? Free, fair and trusted elections and the right to choose

Voting for us is a family occasion, a duty fulfilled, as often as not, on the way to the beach, so that children, early, get a sense of it as an obligation but a light one, a duty casually undertaken.

– David Malouf (1998) *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*, The Boyer Lectures, 1998

Democracy gives people the right to choose their government through free and fair elections. It means that we accept the legitimacy of governments chosen through free and fair elections, and – crucially – the legitimacy of defeat, recognising the important role of opposition parties in holding governments to account.

Australians place high value on the importance of fair elections. Their confidence that elections are administered professionally and with unimpeachable integrity is an enduring strength of Australia's democracy. At the heart of this confidence is the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), responsible for maintaining an impartial and independent electoral system for eligible voters through active electoral roll management, efficient delivery of polling services, electoral boundary redistribution and targeted education and public awareness programs.

The AEC is a frontrunner when it comes to public trust and satisfaction. Nine in ten Australians say they trust the AEC, making it the most trusted provider of all national services, with the highest rates of public satisfaction.⁴ This is no accident. The AEC has invested heavily in maintaining voters' trust in Australian elections. The AEC's 'Stop and Consider' campaign urges voters to think critically about sources of electoral information, to support public understanding of the electoral process. In addition, the AEC delivers some of the largest education campaigns across the Australian Government, regularly sharing and promoting information about how eligible Australians can enrol to vote, and how to cast a formal vote in an election or referendum.⁵

When we reflect on everything happening in the world today, we can all give thanks that here in Australia we make the big decisions peacefully and as equals, with one vote, one value.

— The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, Prime Minister, press conference, 15 October 2023

How are we governed? Participation and the right to have a say

Democracy means people can hold their leaders to account, so they serve the public interest.

Democracy gives people a system they can rely on: a reliable — albeit never perfect — system of institutions and laws, of public services and rights, which Australians have trusted over generations to deliver wellbeing, prosperity and opportunity.

Democracy gives people the right to have a say about whether that system is working well or not — to deliberate and debate, to have their voice heard and to listen to others. It requires openness and transparency about the workings of government, and the free flow of information in the public realm, so that people have reasons to trust — or question — democratic institutions and processes.

And democracy empowers people to bring about change, to contest policies and practices, and to persuade others to act in pursuit of the public interest. It helps society form and protect its values and priorities.

Participation in democracy enables all Australians — with our different views, interests and ideas — to come together with a sense of common purpose and shared identity.

Box 2: Peaceful protests and the freedom of assembly

Protest and dissent are powerful tools of democracy. Non-violent demonstrations and public assemblies including marches, rallies, pickets, and sit-ins enable active citizenship, allowing people to express their ideas and concerns, and to advocate for government response. The right to protest and associated protections are enshrined in Australia's obligations under international law and reflected in domestic laws.⁶



Farmers protesting raising interest rates in Canberra [photograph], Canberra, 1986.

Image courtesy of the national Archives of Australia, NAA: A6135, K21/2/86/52

Democracy's value in times of crisis

Global shocks and geopolitical shifts, natural disasters and extreme weather events, pandemics and compounding socio-economic trends are defining the present era of instability and uncertainty. During times of crisis, demands for speed and extraordinary action can introduce pressures to curtail democratic processes and participation. Democracy then becomes even more important, providing the toolkit by which we can make better decisions together.

Democracy is underpinned by the belief that we can solve problems better when everyone can have their say – including and perhaps particularly amid conditions of uncertainty and unpredictability. Independent media, the free flow of information and open debate mean democratic governments can hear early about what's working and what's not amid the often unpredictable conditions of crisis response, and rapidly adapt crisis management to better meet the needs of society. Democracy reinforces a spirit of common community and belonging that enables people to cooperate and collaborate in order to help one another in times of crisis.

Australians can draw inspiration from our long traditions of strengthening democracy through ingenious means.

Australia's track record of inventiveness and stewardship has long sustained our democracy. Every generation of Australians has encountered democratic challenges, and every generation has discovered the need to nurture and protect their democracy.

Democracy never stands still; Australia's democracy is as dynamic and vibrant as its people.

No modern democracy has shown greater readiness to experiment with various electoral methods than Australia.

— Louise Overacker, *The Australian Party System*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1952

To understand this, Australians can look to the deep time span – over tens of thousands of years – of First Nations systems of governance and decision-making.⁷ There remains much to learn from Indigenous Australia's democratic histories which include 'complex and consultative governance and legal structures',⁸ 'extended deliberative processes',⁹ comfort with uncertainty and conflicting stories, and the 'networked system of trust [which] is unprecedented in human history as a basis for governance and economy'.¹⁰

Throughout its history, Australian democracy has been tested by challenges – some enduring, others episodic or new to their era. Every generation has discovered that their democracy cannot be taken for granted. And successive generations have risen to the challenge of ensuring democracy remains an active practice, continually adapting to changing conditions in order to safeguard and protect democratic ideals.¹¹ Often, Australia's democratic ingenuity has been world-leading, exemplified by its electoral inventiveness, integrity innovations and vibrant civil society.



Ross Dearing, *The secret ballot system at work in the by-election for the seat of Bass in the Australian Parliament in June 28 [photograph], 1975*. Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia, NAA: A6180, 30/7/75/32.

Pioneering electoral inventiveness

Australia was an early pioneer of modern electoral democracy. By the early 20th century, Australia was recognised globally for its leadership. Australia was what Judith Brett calls 'a laboratory for new ideas about democracy, and new methods of achieving them'.¹²

Australians pioneered use of the secret ballot, widely known as the 'Australian ballot' until it became taken for granted worldwide as the legitimate means by which voters could choose their representative, confident that they would be free from undue influence and intimidation. This transformed what it meant to protect the right of people to freely elect their government, not just in Australia but around the world.

Australian women were among the first in the world to have the right to vote, and the first to have the right to stand for parliament. The Parliament of South Australia first considered female suffrage in 1885 but it took three attempts and a constitutional change to become law in 1893, closely following the enfranchisement of women by New Zealand. But this law also gave women the right to stand for parliament – a world first. The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* enshrined these rights at the national level, with an egregious exception: the same law also disenfranchised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Australia was shamefully slow in correcting this failing and is still addressing the consequences today.

Box 3: First women in federal politics

In 1943, Dame Enid Lyons GBE became the first woman elected to the House of Representatives, representing the seat of Darwin in Tasmania. Lyons served as a Member of Parliament until 1951. In the same year, Dorothy Tangney became the first Australian woman elected to the Senate. Tangney was re-elected to the Senate four times and served for nearly 25 years.



Herald Newspaper, *Senator Dorothy M Tangney (left) and Dame Enid Lyons GBE entering the front door of the House of Representatives* [photograph], 24 September 1943. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, Accession Number: 139712.

Compulsory voting is embraced comprehensively in Australia, arguably more so than anywhere else in the world. Very few countries have systems of compulsory voting, and Australia was among the first to introduce it.¹³ The introduction of compulsory voting over a century ago enshrined not just a right but a duty to vote in elections. While the law underpinning compulsory voting is important and rigorously enforced, the public embrace of this duty is perhaps more significant.¹⁴

Earlier electoral reforms had already ensured that voters could – with maximum ease – fulfil their civic duty at election time.¹⁵ Since 1912, voting in Australia has occurred on Saturdays. Voters can cast their ballot at any polling place in their state or territory on polling day, or at an inter-state voting centre, or by post, or overseas through Australian embassies, or they can vote early at designated early voting centres. Australians stationed in Antarctica or citizens who are blind or have low vision can vote by telephone.

Australia has been described as 'the most voter-friendly country in the world'.¹⁶ The uniquely Australian tradition of the 'democracy sausage' – a barbequed sausage served on a slice of bread, bought at a polling booth sausage sizzle on election day¹⁷ – is often a popular bonus.

Australians developed or refined all major preferential electoral systems.¹⁸ Compared with first-past-the-post systems, preferential voting has a powerfully moderating influence on politics – particularly when combined with compulsory voting. Preferential voting means voters are asked to rank-order candidates on their ballot papers. During the counting process, votes are transferred between candidates according to the preferences marked by voters, which means no votes are 'wasted': the way each voter ranks each candidate still contributes to the overall result. This makes results more reflective of consensus within each electorate – which has helped to avoid the political polarisation seen in other democracies.

Today, Australia's electoral system is, rightly, the envy of democracies around the world and a source of historic strength, innovation and renewal for Australian democracy.

While the precise origins of the democracy sausage are hard to pinpoint, the classic Australian sausage sizzle has been a common feature of election days since the 1980s.

Box 4: Democracy sausage

While the precise origins of the democracy sausage are hard to pinpoint, the classic Australian sausage sizzle has been a common feature of election days since the 1980s. The term was popularised on social media in the early 2010s and even named as the Australian National Dictionary Centre's word of the year in 2016.¹⁹ With many polling booths located in schools and other community hubs, the democracy sausage epitomises how elections bring together the community in a distinctively Australian way.

Democracy sausages on election day [photograph], 21 May 2022. Image courtesy of the Australian Electoral Commission.



Box 5: Independent, professional electoral authority: The Australian Electoral Commission

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is an independent statutory authority. It has one purpose and one outcome: to maintain an impartial and independent electoral system for eligible voters. The AEC achieves this through active electoral roll management, efficient delivery of polling services, and targeted education and public awareness programs.

As electoral service delivery becomes more complex and unpredictable, the AEC has worked continuously to introduce efficiencies and backend safeguards throughout the past three electoral cycles.²⁰ For example, the AEC launched its Reputation Management System in 2023, building on an earlier strategy, to further embed a focus on electoral integrity across all facets of AEC business. Operational excellence – which the AEC sees as the foundation of its approach to reputation management – includes modernising election systems and processes, open dialogue with stakeholders, security and accuracy of the electoral roll, educating citizens on electoral processes, conducting electoral boundary redistributions, and maintaining political and issue neutrality. This system is designed to support the AEC to go above and beyond to actively and transparently promote a positive, trusted reputation for the Australian electoral system.

THE SIX RMS PRINCIPLES

The Reputation Management System (RMS) guides, sustains and enhances internal awareness and capabilities relating to the key AEC **activities** and **priorities** which contribute to maintaining a positive and trusted view of the AEC and the Australian electoral process.



Operational Excellence

Exemplify operational excellence by consistently delivering professional, impartial, high integrity federal electoral services that Australians can trust.



Electoral Integrity

Maintain the perceived and actual integrity of Australian electoral processes and results.



Meeting Expectations

Strive to meet stakeholder expectations by adapting to changing information and electoral integrity environments.



Subject Matter Expert

Position the AEC as the foremost subject matter expert and authoritative source of information on federal electoral processes in Australia.



Communication

Communicate clear, targeted and transparent messaging to increase Australians' understanding of, and maintain their trust in, electoral processes, results and the AEC.



Monitor and Respond

Actively monitor and respond to potential threats to electoral integrity, manage reputational risks and plan for crisis situations.

The AEC's six reputation management principles aim to guide the active and transparent promotion of a positive, trusted reputation for the Australian electoral system.²¹

Integrity innovation and reform

Australia's national integrity system is based on foundational institutional strengths, including the separation of powers (which divides the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government); a public service providing independent advice to government; independent law enforcement, electoral management, ombudsman services, audit and anti-corruption agencies; and political parties, media and civil society.

Its earliest actions demonstrate Australia's commitment to a robust system of democratic checks and balances, and to the independent scrutiny of public administration and officials. For example, the Office of the Auditor-General was established in 1901 by just the fourth piece of legislation passed by parliament, *The Audit Act 1901*. Today, the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) supports the Auditor-General for Australia, an independent officer of the Parliament with responsibility under the *Auditor-General Act 1997* for auditing Commonwealth entities, ensuring the transparency that is so crucial to Australia's democratic strength.

Australia attracted attention as an 'integrity innovator' in the 1970s and 1980s following the introduction of comprehensive reforms – including many pioneered by state and territory jurisdictions – which were seen as instrumental to increasing opportunities for citizens to question and challenge decisions made by government.²² Among the reforms were the establishment of the Senate committee system to inquire into and report on government activity and spending; the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, to conduct independent reviews of government decisions; the Commonwealth Ombudsman, to investigate complaints about actions and decisions of government agencies; and legislation on judicial review (when courts are asked to decide on the lawfulness of government decisions), and on freedom of information (which provides the right to request access to government-held information) and privacy.

These integrity innovations and the accountability architecture underpinning them coincided with changing public expectations of democracy, reflecting and reinforcing a sense that citizens "increasingly looked to the government to provide a fuller sense of social citizenship and an enlarged meaning of democracy and the nation".²³

More recent federal integrity reforms have included the creation of the National Anti-Corruption Commission, establishing a new Commonwealth Fraud and Corruption Control Framework, and legislating the establishment of the Administrative Review Tribunal.²⁴

Box 6: National Anti-Corruption Commission

Established on 1 July 2023, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) is an independent Commonwealth agency with a mandate to detect, investigate and report on serious or systemic corruption in the Commonwealth public sector, including by ministers, parliamentarians and their staff, public servants, and contracted service providers. Its independence from government means government is not able to tell the NACC what to investigate, or how to do its job. The NACC's mission is to enhance integrity in the Commonwealth public sector through education, monitoring, investigation, reporting and referral. In its first year of operation, the NACC received more than 3,100 referrals, opened 26 investigations, and as at July 2024 was overseeing or monitoring 19 investigations by other agencies.

Similar integrity commissions operate in all Australian states and territories. The first was introduced in New South Wales in 1988.

Vibrant, participatory civil society

Throughout its history, Australian democracy has been strengthened and sustained by the diversity and dynamism of organisations and movements beyond government. Civil society refers to that part of society in which we engage as active citizens but which is neither part of the public sector (government) nor private sector (business). It is where Australians build community, interact to exchange ideas, and support one another.

Civil society organisations promote connection, inclusion and representation. Australian civil society supports democracy in many ways: representing diverse interests; informing public understanding and debate; monitoring the conduct of government and other democratic institutions; helping to develop democratic values of tolerance, moderation and compromise; promoting democratic participation and civics education; and helping to prevent and resolve social conflict.



Sean Davey, Rural Fire Service volunteers fight a bushfire in Braidwood, New South Wales [photograph], 2019.



The Country Women's Association set up baby health centres and women's rest rooms across the country.

Opening of the CWA "Violet Jennings Rest Room" [photograph], Merriwa, 1930. Image courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Call Number: At Work and Play – 06510, Reference Code: 394522

Faith-based organisations span the diversity of religious and spiritual communities throughout Australian society. Charitable organisations range from the large and long-established to the very many small, local charities around the country, as well as the philanthropic organisations who fund them. Voluntary associations such as veterans' or women's organisations have rich and enduring histories in Australian communities. Service organisations such as the State Emergency Services are critical in times of need, and despite declining rates of voluntarism nationally, Australians still turn out in remarkable numbers: for example, nearly 200,000 Australians are volunteer fire brigade members,²⁵ and the NSW Rural Fire Service is the world's largest volunteer firefighting organisation.²⁶ Similarly, with more than 314 clubs and more than 190,000 members, Surf Life Saving Australia represents the largest volunteer movement of its kind in the world.²⁷



Uncle Harry Allie (left) and Group Captain Christopher Dunstan at the 2024 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans Commemoration Service supported by RSL NSW. Image courtesy of RSL NSW.

Sports clubs and cultural groups provide opportunities for community connection and participation, from big national sporting associations to local football clubs and neighbourhood choirs. Community organisations connect, represent and serve the interests of particular groups, such as people living with disability and their carers, young people, First Nations people, and cultural and linguistic groups. Trade unions and business associations advance the interests of their members, and research organisations advance knowledge and understanding in the public interest. And a diverse range of other non-profit organisations are dedicated to specific issues, such as the environment, education, technology, human rights, employment, poverty, animal welfare, or international development.

In recent decades, knowledge networks like the Sydney Democracy Network, Democracy2025, Citizens for Democratic Renewal, and the Australian Democracy Network have continued these civil society traditions. Private philanthropy is growing in Australia, with philanthropies like the Susan McKinnon Foundation, newDemocracy Foundation and Mannifera supporting new initiatives to strengthen democracy.

Throughout its history, Australian democracy has been strengthened and sustained by the diversity and dynamism of organisations and movements beyond government.



In today's changing media environment, many Australians continue to admire and support our public broadcasters as constant sources of quality information and key players in our democratic arenas of public debate.

Australia's free, independent media has long underpinned its democratic strength, ensuring people have access to credible information about matters of public interest. In today's changing media environment, many Australians continue to admire and support our public broadcasters as constant sources of quality information and key players in our democratic arenas of public debate.

Launched in 1932, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has the mandate to provide informative, entertaining and educational services that reflect the breadth of our nation. The ABC developed into a multi-platform media operation spanning current affairs and investigative journalism, live debates with questions from the audience, and programs showcasing Australian stories. The ABC is also instrumental and adaptive in times of need. For example, during the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the ABC established fly-in radio stations for affected areas, providing emergency information and helping communities in the aftermath.²⁸

As immigration increased in the early 1970s, demand grew for media in languages other than English. Community-run radio and government-sponsored outlets catering to linguistically diverse audiences became more popular, and in 1978 the Australian Government established the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) for managing multicultural radio services, followed by full-time television transmission in 1980. SBS was founded on the belief that all Australians, regardless of geography, age, cultural background or language skills, should have access to high-quality, independent, culturally relevant Australian media. The remarkable linguistic diversity of SBS includes programming that services 63 languages across radio, podcasting, online and social media.²⁹



On-site learning at Old Parliament House in the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program. Image courtesy of the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House.

Australia has long recognised that a well-functioning democracy depends on active, informed and engaged citizens. This principle is reflected at the federal government level in the AEC's role in electoral education, the Department of Education's role in civics curriculum and school-based programs, and the role of Australia's national cultural institutions.

Australia's schools are one of the first places we encounter our civic rights and responsibilities. Within the classroom, many schools access trusted learning materials and resources such as the Get Voting program from the AEC for Schools website. This program provides election equipment and supporting resources to schools, so students can learn about Australia's electoral system and gain hands-on experience by voting in school elections.

Civics education extends beyond the classroom, too. Many Australian students have had the opportunity to witness democracy in action by visiting our national cultural and historical institutions, enabled by the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program. PACER was first established in 1989 to provide financial assistance for students in years 4 to 12 to travel to Canberra, the nation's capital. The program helps students and young people improve their knowledge and understanding of Australian democracy and citizenship through engagement programs and educational activities. As part of the program, students participate in on-site learning in democratic institutions including Australian Parliament House, the Australian Electoral Commission's National Electoral Education Centre, the Museum of Australian Democracy, and the Australian War Memorial.

Through exhibitions, events, community engagement and education programs, the Museum of Australian Democracy aims to increase understanding of Australian democracy and enable meaningful participation within it.

Box 7: The Museum of Australian Democracy



The Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at Old Parliament House is a contemporary museum located inside a heritage-listed building that was once home to Australia's national parliament. The museum aims to provide a 'people's place' where big ideas are explored. Through exhibitions, events, community engagement and education programs, MoAD aims to increase understanding of Australian democracy and enable meaningful participation within it. MoAD tells the story of Australia's democracy through its rich collection of stories, objects, and historic interpreted spaces, enabling audiences to learn about Australia's parliament and the people who played key roles in our social and political story.

In 2022–23, more than 347,000 visitors engaged with MoAD's onsite exhibitions and participated in its public programs and events, including more than 80,000 students and teachers participating in school programs. More than 26,000 people visited its travelling exhibitions across four states, and almost 574,000 people visited the MoAD website during the year.

Students visit the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House. Image courtesy of the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House.

Australia's democracy today is strong, but vulnerable.

Assessing the state of democracy is not easy. A complex system of formal and informal practices, processes, laws and institutions, democracy eludes simple measurement or straightforward conclusions.

Nevertheless, a rich array of data and evidence exists from which to draw appropriately nuanced assessment: Australia's democracy today is strong, but vulnerable.


Australian democracy ranks well in global indexes

When compared to other countries, Australia's democracy ranks highly. International indexes offer a starting point for assessing the state of Australian democracy, as they compare Australia's performance on democratic fundamentals such as the fairness of elections, the protection of rights, the degree of civic participation, and checks and balances on public officials and institutions.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project produces a Liberal Democracy Index, combining liberal and electoral aspects of democracy based on 71 indicators. Australia ranks 14th in the latest V-Dem (Liberal Democracy Index) results (2023). Over the past eight years, Australia's ranking has varied from a high of 7th (2016 and 2018) to a low of 20th (2020). Of note, substantial shifts in rankings among the world's most liberal democracies can occur with only minimal – and sometimes no – change in scores. For example, Australia's score remained the same in 2021 and 2022, but its ranking climbed from 14th to 11th.³⁰

Freedom House's global freedom index measures people's access to political rights (10 indicators) and civil liberties (15 indicators) in 210 countries and territories. Australia ranks 17th in the latest *Freedom in the World 2024* report. While its score has remained unchanged at 95 since 2022, its ranking over that time has declined (14th in 2022, 16th in 2023). Over the past decade, Australia's ranking has varied from 13th (2014) to a high of 6th (2017–2019) to its current low of 17th (2024).³¹

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2023 measures democracy across 60 indicators grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Australia ranks 14th in the latest EIU Democracy Index (2023) with a score of 8.66, rising from 15th in 2022 even though its score declined slightly from 8.71. During most of the past decade, Australia's rank and score remained steady, at 9th (8th in 2017, 10th in 2016) and around 9.0–9.1. Australia's score has declined since 2019 (9.09), and along with its ranking in 2022 and 2023, reflects the lowest point since the Index began in 2006.



A range of national studies indicate that the majority of Australians value democracy highly and are satisfied with the performance of their democracy.

Taken together, these global indexes provide confidence that Australia sits comfortably among the world's most liberal democracies. But they also indicate signs of vulnerability. Of course, comparative indexes like these inevitably have limits. For example, among advanced liberal democracies, variation is reasonably small: very minor differences in measurement can account for movement in rankings among the highest performing democracies. And the inputs used to quantify the strength of democracy are not always transparent or accessible, which makes it difficult to interpret why a country might have experienced movements in its score and/or ranking.

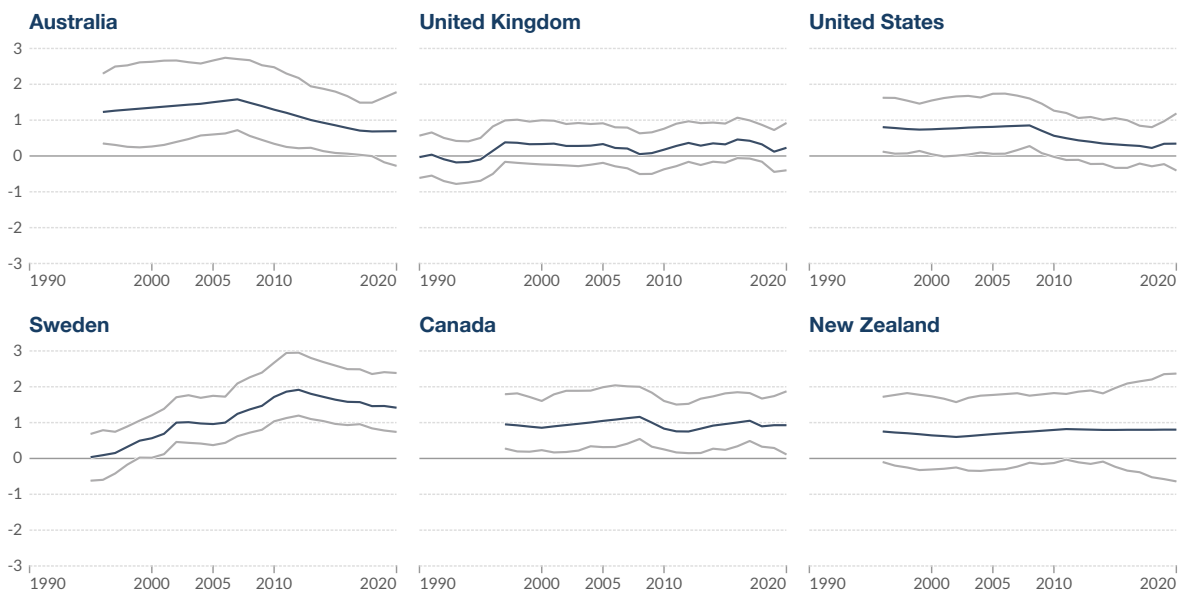
Qualitative research focused specifically on Australian democracy helps to illuminate a range of democratic strengths underpinning these rankings. These include a long tradition of democratic innovation and a 'national zeal for experimentation',³² enabled by 'a uniquely pragmatic political culture',³³ seen notably in the development of our distinctive electoral system and robust integrity institutions.³⁴ Research also reinforces that the cohesiveness of Australia's diverse society is a cornerstone of its democratic strength,³⁵ particularly when seen in global comparison.³⁶

Citizen satisfaction with democracy, 1990 to 2020

Our World
in Data

The scores capture the average extent to which citizens are satisfied with democracy in their own country. Higher scores indicate more satisfaction, positive scores indicate higher-than-average satisfaction across countries and years.

■ Central estimate ■ Upper bound ■ Lower bound



Data source: Claassen (2022)

OurWorldInData.org/democracy | CC BY

Compared to peer democracies, citizen satisfaction with democracy in Australia is reasonably high.³⁷

Australians overwhelmingly value their democracy, but see problems in practice

We can also assess the state of Australian democracy on its own terms, based on how Australians perceive, value and experience their democracy. A range of national studies indicate that the majority of Australians value democracy highly and are satisfied with the performance of their democracy.

Survey evidence shows that public satisfaction with democracy over recent decades has fluctuated but remained positive.

The long-running Australian Election Study, for example, found that Australians' satisfaction with democracy following the 2022 federal election was very close to the average of the previous 25 years – lower than its peak after the 2007 election, but higher than troughs in 1979 and 2019.³⁸

The ANUPoll finds similar stability in satisfaction since 2008, but noted lower rates of satisfaction among those who had not completed Year 12 education and those with lower income.³⁹

In the decade to 2022, Lowy Institute polls found that the proportion of Australians who believed that democracy was preferable to any other kind of government increased from 60% in 2012 to 74% in 2022; it declined slightly to 72% in 2024. Over the same period, these polls record a marked reduction in the gap between older and younger Australians' perceptions of the importance of democracy: whereas in previous years this gap had been as large as 28 points, in 2022 it had narrowed to a 14-point gap. Since then, however, this gap has widened slightly to 19 points.⁴⁰

Research commissioned in 2023 by the Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit on community sentiment about public services, civic engagement and democracy in Australia provides new insight into these questions.⁴¹ It found:

- **Overwhelming support for the importance of democracy:** 85% of Australians say it is very important (64%) or important (21%) to live in a country that is governed democratically; only 1% of respondents believed it is not important at all.
 - Those who report greater confidence in understanding how democracy works are significantly more likely to value it as very important.
- **Satisfaction with Australian democracy is much higher than dissatisfaction, but only one in two Australians say democracy is on the right track.** Many more Australians are satisfied (59%) with the way Australia's democracy works and believe it is on the right track (53%) than are dissatisfied (13%) or believe it is not on the right track (15%). Around one-third of Australians are unsure. Concerns about Australia's democracy include the following:
 - **Corruption:** 49% believe that corruption is widespread in Australia's democratic institutions and processes, while only 19% disagree with the statement.
 - **Misleading information:** 72% believe that most people don't understand when information in the media is misleading or fake during elections.
 - **Foreign interference:** 46% of Australians believe democracy is kept safe from foreign interference, while 21% believe it is not and 33% are unsure.

- **Australians are overwhelmingly positive about the potential for democratic reform and innovation to address perceived problems in their democracy.** A large majority of Australians (80%) believe it is worth trying to fix the problems that democracy may have.

- Of the 41% who did not report being satisfied with Australian democracy, more than one in four believe we can continue building on what we have to improve democracy in Australia, and about half are unsure what could be done, suggesting potential appetite for reform ideas.

- **Satisfaction with democracy is higher among some groups, including:**



- men (65%) than women (53%)
- those with above-median income (66%) than below-median income (56%)
- those employed (61%) than unemployed (45%)
- those born outside Australia (66%) than those born in Australia (57%)
- those who don't use publicly funded media (63%) than those who do (50%).

Of course, there are limits to the depth of insight that can be provided by survey methods on issues as complex as trust and satisfaction with democracy. More nuanced research is needed to understand patterns of satisfaction, and to discern to what extent, for example, lower satisfaction is due to perceived performance deficiency, or to higher expectations, particularly among different groups.

While these measures give confidence in the foundational strengths of Australian democracy, they also indicate areas of vulnerability. Australians are positive about their democracy, but are concerned about its direction of travel. As Idea 4 suggests, while Australian democracy is strong, it is not immune to challenges also facing other democracies around the world.

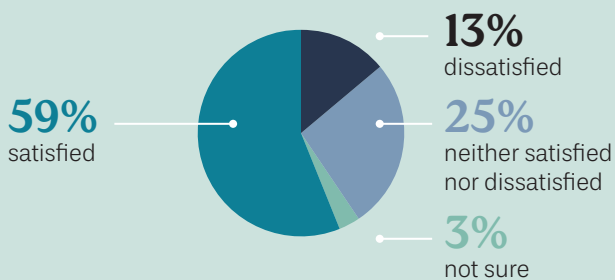
Is democracy important?



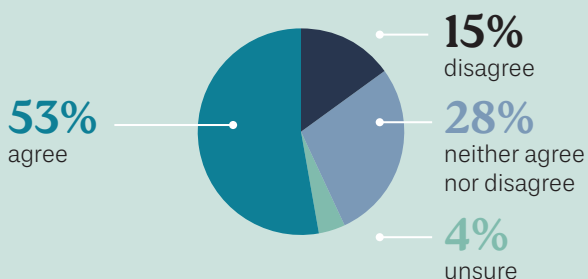
 Very important  Important

85% of respondents think that living in a democracy is **important or very important**

Satisfaction with the way democracy works



Australia's democracy is on the right track



Concerns about Australia's democracy



49%

believe that corruption is widespread in Australia's democratic institutions and processes, while only 19% disagree with the statement



72%

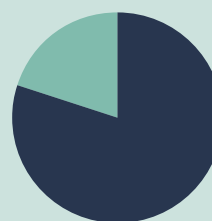
believe that most people don't understand when information in the media is misleading or fake during elections



46%

of Australians believe democracy is kept safe from foreign interference, while 21% believe it is not and 33% are unsure

Democratic reform and innovation



80%

believe it is worth trying to fix the problems that democracy may have

Box 8: The 2023 Referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

In 2023, Australians voted in a referendum about whether to change the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.⁴² The proposal was ultimately not carried with 39.94% of votes in favour and 60.06% of votes not in favour, nationally. It was the first Australian referendum of the 21st century and the first of the social media era.

The referendum demonstrated the robustness of Australia's mechanisms to uphold electoral integrity and maintain public trust in the results.⁴³ Public engagement was strong: in a post-referendum survey, four in five respondents said that they talked with others about the referendum or tuned into relevant media and online opinions. One in five engaged in political activities such as contacting politicians, attending protests, or volunteering for political campaigns; a quarter of those did so for the first time due to the referendum.⁴⁴

Yet in this digital information age, false and misleading information was a challenge. The AEC set up a 'disinformation register' for the referendum to address disinformation regarding the electoral process.

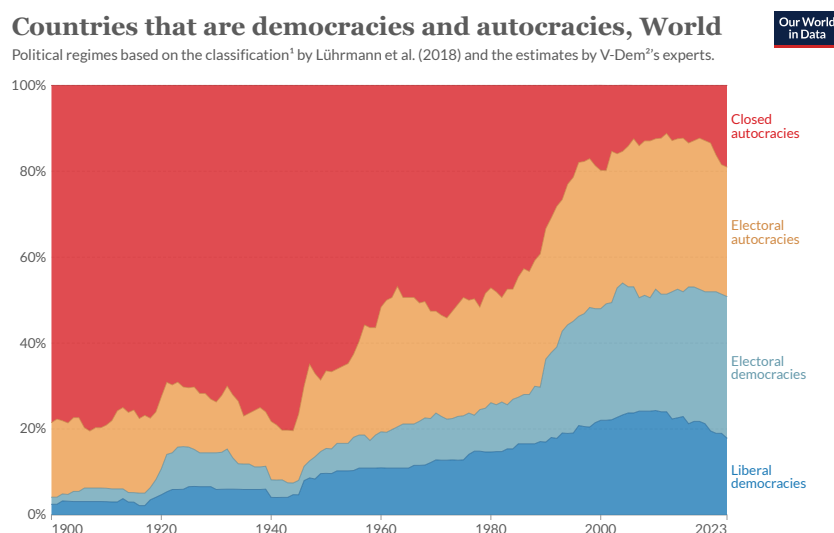
An Australia Institute exit poll in October 2023 found seven in ten Australians (72%) said that they were concerned about lies and misinformation circulated on social media during the referendum period.⁴⁵ As part of its role in providing voter education, the AEC ran advertising and provided resources such as fact sheets and videos encouraging people to stop, check and think about a source viewed via digital and social channels. This led to around 300,000 click-throughs to the AEC website. The campaign supported voters' media and digital literacy as they navigated an increasingly complex and contested information environment.

The referendum preparations demonstrated public demand for more civics information. In the lead up to the referendum, research showed that more Australians wanted to better understand our democracy and the Constitution. To meet this demand, the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) launched the 'A-Z of Australian Referendums' civics awareness digital campaign and travelling exhibition. MoAD engaged with nearly 33,000 people across seven community hubs through its travelling exhibition, and reached 9 million people through its digital campaign. In addition, to explain the purpose and process of referendums, the AEC ran a dedicated education phase as part of its national advertising campaign and over 300 community education sessions ahead of the voting day.

Like others around the world, Australia's democracy faces a new constellation of challenges.

Democratic backsliding around the world

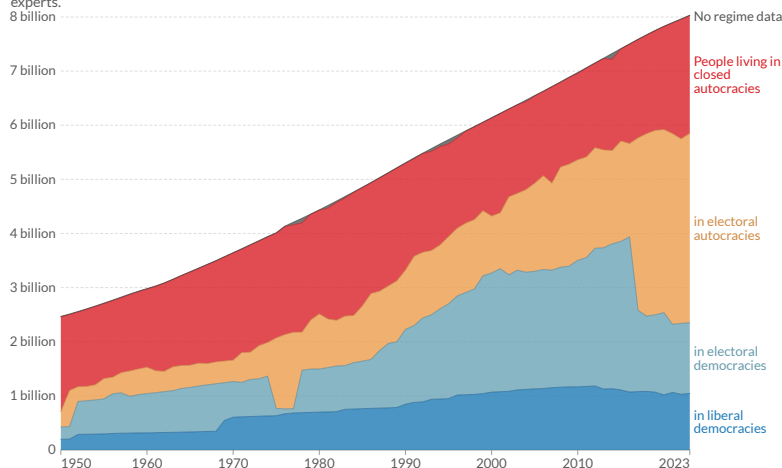
Globally, democracies are struggling. After a long period of democratic advancement, the present era is one of stagnation, even decline.⁴⁶ There are fewer liberal democracies in the world today than there were fifteen years ago, and fewer people live in countries that are governed democratically; nearly 70% of the world's population now live under a form of autocratic rule.⁴⁷



The number of liberal democracies has declined since 2009.⁴⁸

People living in democracies and autocracies, World

Political regimes are based on the classification¹ by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the estimates by V-Dem²'s experts.




After a long period of advance, the number of people living in democracies has declined since 2016.⁴⁹

Shared global challenges, amplified and accelerated by rapid technological change

Democracies are facing an alarming set of challenges. Anti-democratic sentiment and polarisation are tangling with disinformation and discord, growing citizen discontent with the performance and conduct of their governments, and geopolitical tensions and power shifts. Global trends are combining dangerously with more localised issues in democracies around the world, like the corrupting influence of financial interest and private gain, electoral disenfranchisement, radicalisation and political violence.

The internet was once considered an open door to democracy and liberty. Today, it is seen as an agent of democratic erosion.

– Lydia Khalil, *Overcoming Digital Threats to Democracy*, Lowy Institute, 2024



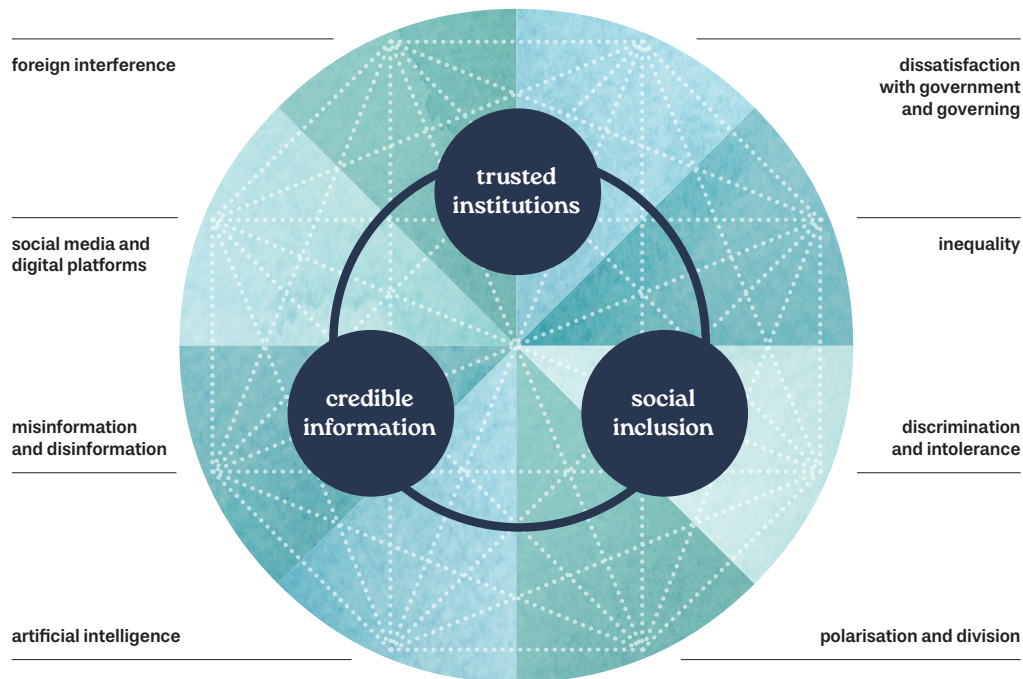
Global trends are combining dangerously with more localised issues... While none of these challenges is wholly new, in combination they offer complex and compounding threats to democracy.

While none of these challenges is wholly new, in combination they offer complex and compounding threats to democracy, now magnified by the unprecedented influence of social media – a powerful new transmission vector for diseases to which democracy has always been vulnerable. Rapid developments in the use and potential of artificial intelligence (AI) compound these challenges.

Digital platforms and continued technological advances are not inherently anti-democratic, but they can amplify a range of influences that are hostile to democracy with unprecedented speed, scale and intensity. Of benefit to democracy, social media increases political participation, expands opportunities to gain political knowledge, and exposes people to diverse viewpoints, different sources of news, and new connections. But social media can also be used to erode trust in political institutions, to spread harmful disinformation, and to incite hate, polarisation and anti-democratic sentiment.⁵⁰

These risks are increasingly recognised around the world. For example, democracy-related issues have risen rapidly in the World Economic Forum's annual *Global Risks Report*, which in 2024 ranks mis- and disinformation as the most severe risk facing the world over the next two years – after including it for the first time just two years earlier. Societal polarisation ranked third on this year's list, reflecting longer-running concerns relating to the breakdown of trust in institutions, ideological polarisation, and the marginalisation of younger generations alongside more recent drivers of rapid economic and technological change and post-truth political debate.⁵¹

A new constellation of challenges to Australia's democracy



Australia's democracy is not immune to a range of anti-democratising influences – acute and chronic, emerging locally and abroad – which our existing policies, practices and capabilities are ill-equipped to meet.

These challenges threaten three sources of strength that have historically sustained Australian democracy:

1. **Trusted institutions:** the security, integrity, legitimacy, responsiveness, and performance of democratic institutions
2. **Credible information:** the accuracy, relevance, accessibility, transparency and civility of information flows within a deliberative public sphere
3. **Social inclusion:** a society that is connected, cohesive, participatory, engaged and respectful, reinforcing and reflecting a sense of common purpose and shared identity

Over the coming decade, Australia faces a new constellation of connected, often reinforcing challenges. Some are unequivocally detrimental to democracy, like foreign interference, disinformation, polarisation and intolerance. Others have complex, compounding effects, like inequality and distrust. A practical agenda of democratic resilience must begin by grappling with these (potential) harms, not in isolation but as part of a joined-up constellation of challenges, in order to respond with an equally joined-up, coherent response.

Deteriorating conditions of public trust

Historically, Australia has had among the world's highest rates of political trust – that is, the extent to which people trust their political leaders, when in government, to do the right thing.⁵² Flourishing enquiry into the state of trust in government over the past decade has shown clear patterns of decline.⁵³ And although healthy scepticism toward government is part of any well-functioning democracy, many observers of Australian society are becoming increasingly alarmed by levels of concentrated distrust.⁵⁴

Public trust in government is an indication of people's confidence that their interests will be at the heart of action by government, by leaders and by the governing institutions they oversee. Trust reflects people's expectation that a government has the integrity and competence to do what it says it will.

*Democracy is not only a form of state...
democracy is a view of life, it requires a
belief in human beings, in humanity...
I have already said that democracy is
a discussion. But the real discussion is
possible only if people trust each other
and if they try fairly to find the truth.*

– Tomáš Masaryk, former President of
Czechoslovakia, 1929, cited in M Albright, *Fascism:
A Warning*, HarperCollins, New York, 2018

Trust underpins democratic resilience. A strong democracy also generates trust; that is, trust is an *input* to democratic resilience. A strong democracy generates trust; that is, trust is an *output*. And democratic resilience can be measured in terms of trust; that is, trust is a *metric*.


Of course, mistrust also has an important role in democracy. It motivates citizens to monitor and question their governments and hold the powerful to account through elections, checks and balances, and the free flow of information.

But these kinds of healthy scepticism can harden into entrenched distrust and anti-democratic sentiment. If that occurs not due to weaknesses in the conduct and performance of democratic governments – which can be corrected through democratic means – but through intentionally deceptive disinformation campaigns, foreign interference operations, and attempts to incite polarisation, division and incivility, then democracy is at risk.

As such, issues of trust, mistrust and distrust cut across all of the challenges outlined here. Inevitably, a concept as slippery as trust is hard to measure, but existing evidence suggests that, in Australia:

- **Conditions of political trust have deteriorated.**

The Australian Election Study found that political trust declined from 2013–2019 before slightly increasing in 2022.⁵⁵ The 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion report finds that, after increasing during the pandemic, trust in government and the political system has subsequently declined; it also finds that four in five Australians believed government leaders abuse their powers at least some of the time.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, there are many examples of highly trusted democratic institutions providing public services, such as the Australian Electoral Commission (trusted by nine in ten Australians).⁵⁷



Public trust in government is an indication of people's confidence that their interests will be at the heart of action by government, by leaders and by the governing institutions they oversee.

- **Age and socio-economic status are correlated with trust.** People who are younger and/or financially struggling are less likely to trust in government and democracy (or believe 'the system works for me') than those who are older and/or financially comfortable. Experiences of complex disadvantage are strong predictors of weak trust of multiple kinds.⁵⁸
- **Anti-democratic sentiment is low in Australia.** Evidence indicates that, overall, support for anti-democratic notions – like rule by a strong leader, one political party, the military or experts – is low and has declined in recent years.⁵⁹ But there are worrying signs emerging and aggregate measures of trust and distrust may miss outliers that reveal more alarming threats to democracy.

There is a cohort of individuals motivated by a toxic cocktail of conspiracies, grievances and anti-authority beliefs... The reach of extremist content online means individuals are radicalising very quickly – in days and weeks – so the time between flash to bang is shorter than ever.

– Mike Burgess, *Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment*, 21 February 2023

People who distrust government report lower levels of social cohesion in several other areas. People who trust the Federal Government only some of the time or never are significantly and substantially less likely to believe that people generally can be trusted, less likely to take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture, less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia and less likely to believe migrant diversity makes Australia stronger. Trust in government therefore is at the heart of our social cohesion, intersecting with multiple aspects of Australian society and culture.

– James O'Donnell, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023*, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2023

Foreign interference

Foreign interference and espionage are now Australia's principal security concern. Australia has been subject to multiple foreign interference attempts targeting our diaspora communities, universities and political system.⁶⁰ Through these attempts, foreign powers are seeking to serve their own strategic, political, military, social and economic goals by improperly influencing decisions of government and planting seeds of social division and distrust in our institutions.

The Australian community is increasingly aware of these dangers. The 2024 Lowy Institute Poll found that 53% of Australians view foreign interference as a critical threat.⁶¹

Australia is facing an unprecedented challenge from espionage and foreign interference and I'm not convinced we, as a nation, fully appreciate the damage it inflicts on Australia's security, democracy, sovereignty, economy and social fabric.

— Mike Burgess, *Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment*, 21 February 2023

While the terrorism threat level is POSSIBLE, if we had a threat level for espionage and foreign interference it would be at CERTAIN – the highest level on the scale.

— Mike Burgess, *Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment*, 28 February 2024

Other countries' experiences show that this threat to our democracy is growing. According to Freedom House, at least 47 governments deployed human commentators (including private for-hire services) to manipulate online discussions in their favour over the year to May 2023, and at least 16 countries experienced the effects of artificial intelligence-based tools for sowing doubt, smearing political opponents, and influencing public discussion.⁶²

Misinformation and disinformation

The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media and messaging platforms is a threat to the health of the information environment – the space in which people make sense of the world.⁶³ False and misleading information are not new but technology has accelerated their reach and made their dissemination at scale cheaper and easier. For democracies, the same free flows of information so important to fostering public debate and holding elected representatives to account can carry false and misleading narratives that distort people's understanding, erode trust in our shared reality, and undermine the integrity of political processes.

Around the world, misinformation and disinformation have weakened confidence in elections, fused with hate speech to incite violence, and been weaponised by political actors to consolidate power and influence. Research indicates misinformation and disinformation can also intensify polarisation,⁶⁴ and algorithms that prioritise user engagement can contribute to 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers'.⁶⁵

In Australia, false information has fuelled conspiracy theories about the government's response to fires and floods,⁶⁶ and prompted protests against 5G technology. On social media and in private messaging groups, electoral events have been subject to claims of vote rigging.⁶⁷ In some cases, these are localised versions of myths that originated in other countries.

Whether spread intentionally or unintentionally, the pervasiveness of false and misleading content is eroding trust in information online and making it harder for people to know who and what to believe.⁶⁸ The implications for social cohesion and democracy are far-reaching.

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence is augmenting human capabilities in diverse fields. As one of the transformative digital technologies that can help to drive productivity growth in Australia,⁶⁹ the safe and responsible deployment and adoption of AI presents significant opportunities for Australia to improve economic and social outcomes.⁷⁰ The already numerous applications are an indication of the potentially rapid uptake of AI into industries and the public sector.⁷¹

Yet AI is also raising important ethical, policy and regulatory issues. Its problems are well documented: AI systems can replicate biases from training data, generate unfair outcomes and reproduce existing social inequalities. Inscrutable 'black box' functions can make life-altering judgements in a manner that undermines privacy, security and human rights without the accountability and transparency expected of human decision-making processes.

Generative AI – the complex systems that generate novel content such as text, images and video in response to a user prompt – could have a powerful democratising influence, but evidence is currently pointing in the other direction. Their ability to rapidly produce immense volumes of content at low cost and without regard for accuracy or intent is a major threat to democratic representation, accountability and trust, particularly during election periods.⁷² A roundtable of 30 AI experts convened by the University of Technology Sydney's Human Technology Institute in 2023 shared this concern about the effect on citizen access to credible information and the ability to engage constructively in democratic processes and civic debates.⁷³

Box 9: Generative AI's threats to democracy⁷⁴

Threat to representation: Generative AI allows anyone – from passionate citizens to malicious actors – to create unique letters, emails and social media posts that could skew elected officials' perceptions of constituent sentiment, undermining genuine representation.

Threat to accountability: AI-generated information operations and smear campaigns could unfairly influence community perceptions of elected representatives, undermining elections as a mechanism of accountability since the basis for people's vote is factually dubious.

Threat to trust: A proliferation of false and misleading information may make people sceptical of the entire information ecosystem, in turn eroding the trust that fuels civic engagement, political participation and confidence in institutions, and potentially exacerbating polarisation.

The government is taking steps to ensure AI adoption in Australia strikes a balance between fostering innovation and addressing concerns about the safety of AI systems, including impacts on democratic processes. Through its *Safe and Responsible AI* agenda, government is considering regulatory options to ensure the use of AI in legitimate but high-risk settings is safe and can be relied upon, while ensuring the use of AI in low-risk settings can continue to flourish largely unimpeded.

Box 10: Risks of generative AI to the information environment

OpenAI, one of the world's leading AI companies, has warned that its technology is capable of generating harmful content in multiple languages, including material that is graphic, hateful, or favourable to autocratic governments, and could aid in influence operations and violent attacks. In early 2023, OpenAI noted that the profusion of false information from large language models like its own ChatGPT – whether from hallucinations, reproduction of erroneous training data, or misuse by malign actors – could 'cast doubt on the whole information environment, threatening our ability to distinguish fact from fiction' and disproportionately benefit those who stand to gain from widespread distrust.⁷⁵ While the company noted it had implemented safety measures, it acknowledged the model's fundamental capabilities to generate harmful content remained latent.

- Industry collaborations such as the Content Authenticity Initiative are seeking to address AI-generated misinformation and disinformation by adding digital watermarks or 'fingerprints' to identify whether visual content is real or synthetic, and help audiences decide what they can believe. It is hoped that the same technology which was so disruptive to trust could help restore it.⁷⁸
- The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act is expected to be the first comprehensive law on AI by a major regulator anywhere in the world. The legislation takes a graduated, risk-based approach, with no regulation for AI applications that carry minimal risk, transparency obligations and regulation for 'limited' and 'high-risk' AI systems respectively, and a prohibition on AI activities that carry an 'unacceptable' level of risk. The majority of obligations fall on developers of high-risk AI, such as systems intended for the administration of justice and democratic processes. An AI Office has been established within the European Commission to monitor implementation and compliance.⁷⁹

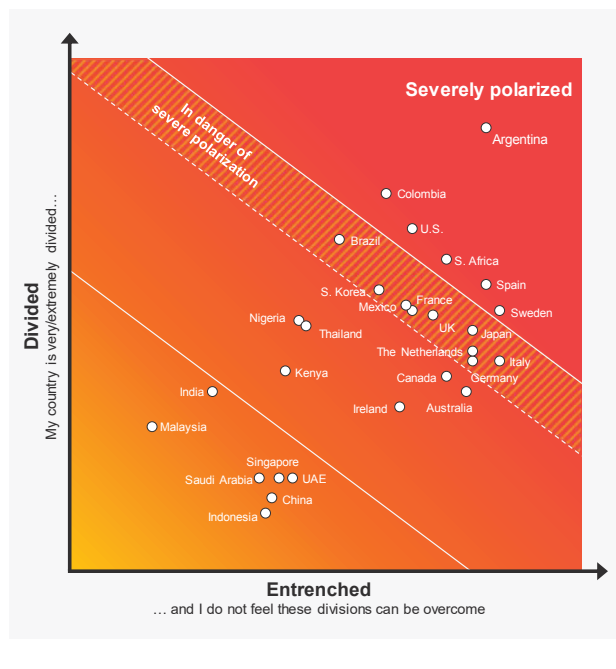
The government is working closely with likeminded partners who are also exploring ways to establish oversight and encourage transparency of AI systems.

- In November 2023, Australia joined the European Union and 27 countries, including the United States, United Kingdom and China, in signing the Bletchley Declaration affirming that AI should be designed, developed, deployed and used in a manner that is safe, human-centric, trustworthy and responsible.⁷⁶
- In October 2023, US President Joe Biden issued an executive order requiring AI manufacturers to provide the government with information about their systems' risks and the steps taken to address them.⁷⁷

Social dynamics of division

Democracy's value is evident in the ways it allows for a rich diversity of views, experiences and interests within a unifying system of politics and governance. Divisions across society on different issues are natural, and even required for democracy to truly flourish. But when social divisions turn into more entrenched and extreme polarisation, groups can become so hostile and so fixed in dislike and distrust for those with whom they disagree that democratic deliberation, tolerance and compromise become impossible.

Australia has so far avoided these most pernicious forms of polarisation. The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer rates Australia as only 'moderately polarised', but unlike many of our democratic peers, neither 'severely polarised' nor 'in danger of severe polarisation'.⁸⁰



The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer rates Australia as 'moderately polarised'.⁸¹

Yet the Barometer also declares that Australia is on a path to polarisation. This is a worrying trend, given the compounding effects of polarisation on other challenges to democracy. Australians today report feeling that the country is more divided today than in the past. While division remains relatively low by international standards (7th lowest of 28 countries), the *entrenchment* of division appears relatively high (8th highest), suggesting that although Australians do not perceive Australia to be extremely divided, the divisions that do exist may be difficult to bridge.⁸² This is particularly concerning given other evidence that experiences of isolation and disengagement are correlated with lower levels of satisfaction with democracy.⁸³

Many Australians are experiencing slowly eroding conditions for community life and connectedness.

Levels of social isolation and loneliness have increased in recent years.⁸⁴ The proportion of Australians participating in social, community and political groups has also fallen over time, and we are less likely to volunteer, attend religious services, join political parties, become trade union members, or play team sports than we were decades ago.⁸⁵

Community concerns about economic inequality are connected to a waning sense of national belonging.

The Scanlon Foundation's *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023* report found that a fall in people's sense of national belonging from 63% in 2020 to 48% in 2023 was in part due to increasing concerns about economic fairness and a decline in the belief that 'hard work brings a better life'.⁸⁶

More broadly, patterns of inequality are reflected in deteriorating conditions of public trust: young people, people who have not finished high school, and people facing financial hardship, social isolation, mental health difficulties and other forms of complex disadvantage are less likely to trust in government, institutions or one another.⁸⁷

Social exclusion, intolerance and discrimination continue to drive division.

Prejudice on the basis of ethnicity, religion and migrant status remains common in Australia. The *Mapping Social Cohesion 2023* report found that while Australians have an overwhelmingly positive view of multiculturalism overall, 63% of respondents held negative attitudes towards one or more migrants groups, or one of the non-Christian religions.⁸⁸ The *2019 Inclusive Australia Social Inclusion Index* also found nearly one in four Australians experience some form of discrimination on a weekly or more frequent basis, particularly young people, LGBTQI people, racial minorities, First Nations peoples and people with disabilities.⁸⁹

A strong democracy is a resilient democracy. Practical approaches to democratic resilience should combine protection, engagement, and experimentation.

The strength of Australia's democracy will be tested in the decade ahead. We can expect the challenges facing democracies to interact and tangle with other shared global challenges, like accelerating technological transformation, climate change, energy transition and demographic shifts. Though we can foresee an era of complexity, the shape and form of its effects on our society are uncertain.

In times of challenge and uncertainty, a strong democracy is a resilient democracy – one able to withstand, adapt to, and evolve and learn from threats to democracy, in ways that reduce future exposure and vulnerability to risk.

What is democratic resilience?

Democratic resilience is about the ability of people, communities and institutions to respond to challenge *democratically*. It means society can endure threats to democracy without succumbing to anti-democratic influences, or weakening or abandoning democratic practice. And it means embracing opportunities to transform democratic processes to better safeguard the values of democracy amid changing conditions.

The most defining characteristic of a democratically resilient public sphere is its capacity to sustain integrative and tolerant public discourse when subjected to external shocks, such as violent extremist threats and acts. Resilient public spheres can contain and process provocations in a fashion that maintains or even strengthens democratic integrity. By contrast, fragile public spheres descend into polarization, fragmentation and lose their capacity for the inclusive and cross-cultural deliberation on which a functioning democracy depends.

— Selen A. Ercan, Jordan McSwiney, Peter Balint and John Dryzek, *Building Democratic Resilience: Public Sphere Responses to Violent Extremism*, State of New South Wales, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2022

At any point in time, any democracy will be subject to both democratising (strengthening) and anti-democratising (weakening) influences. Whereas democratic strength is often measured by focusing on the component parts of democracy, democratic resilience directs attention to the balance of these strengthening and weakening influences. When anti-democratising influences rise – like those associated with foreign interference, disinformation or societal polarisation – sustaining democratic resilience requires more investment in democratising influences – like trust in institutions, credible information, and social inclusion.

Some theoretical approaches to democratic resilience define it more narrowly as the absence of democratic backsliding, or the 'persistence of democratic institutions and practices'.⁹⁰ But others, particularly those interested in practical approaches, share the more expansive approach to democratic resilience articulated here. For example, a 2023 report from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems describes democratic resilience as 'an ongoing process' requiring 'democratic systems and actors to build and sustain capacities to respond to and recover from crises, possibly by transforming themselves of innovating in permanent ways'.⁹¹ Leading Australian research on community and social aspects of democratic resilience emphasises 'the wellbeing of the public sphere' and public discourse,⁹² community resilience, civic participation and public trust.⁹³

The OECD *Reinforcing Democracy Initiative* recommends governments pursue a comprehensive, practical agenda of democratic resilience with three priorities:

1. build on democratic strengths such as citizen and stakeholder participation and representation;
2. reinforce key governance competencies to support delivery in the context of multiple crises; and
3. protect against active threats to public trust arising from failings in public integrity and mis- or disinformation.⁹⁴

What does democratic resilience look like in practice?

In Australia and around the world, a wide range of established initiatives and emerging practice reflects and illustrates the potential impact of a practical agenda for democratic resilience. The examples presented here are drawn from both government and non-government sectors, and span media, research, community, philanthropic, business and cross-sector collaborative initiatives. They range in scale from local pilots to international strategies.

Where we have highlighted an existing Australian initiative, it is to show what we are doing well and to inspire further effort – perhaps at a different level of government or to engage another part of the community. Where we have spotlighted programs from abroad, it is to inspire confidence that action is possible, and to show what might work here, if we are bold enough to try. Above all, we seek to emphasise that protecting and invigorating our democracy is not a matter just for government, nor can it be achieved through business as usual. In a rapidly changing world, we will need to catalyse the efforts of all parts of our society to ensure Australia's democracy remains a beacon for decades to come.

Protecting democratic strengths

Safeguarding electoral integrity

- **The Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce**
Protecting the integrity of Australia's electoral processes is critical to maintaining public trust in Australia's democratic processes. The purpose of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (EIAT) is to provide consolidated and coordinated information and advice to the Australian Electoral Commissioner on matters that may compromise the real or perceived integrity of a federal electoral event. These matters may include cyber and physical security incidents, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and perceived and actual interference in elections. The EIAT did not identify any foreign interference, nor any other interference, that compromised the delivery of the 2022 federal election or the 2023 referendum.
- **The Australian Electoral Commission's Defending Democracy Unit** was established in 2022 as a permanent function to safeguard the integrity of the AEC's processes. Through the Defending Democracy Unit, the AEC responds in a coordinated and consistent manner to any threats to electoral integrity and Australia's democracy, including proactive campaigns around specific electoral events. The Defending Democracy Unit provides the secretariat function for the EIAT.
- **Canada's Plan to Protect Democracy and the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections** was announced ahead of the 2019 Canadian federal election. It seeks to defend Canadian democracy and protect its electoral system against cyber and other threats. The Plan comprises four pillars of action: enhancing citizen preparedness, improving organisational readiness, combatting foreign interference, and building a healthy information ecosystem.⁹⁵

- **Estonia's State Electoral Office** created an interagency taskforce in 2016 to combat the influence of false messaging on its democratic processes. Notable for its lightly resourced 'network' approach, the taskforce created partnerships with government agencies, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, social media companies and traditional media to identify and monitor disinformation, and worked collaboratively with journalists to correct falsehoods. The approach leveraged Estonia's strengths in civics education and media literacy to promote public awareness, while the transparency and openness of the country's digital transformation agenda, known as 'e-Estonia', contributed to wider public trust in the democratic system.⁹⁶
- **The Pennsylvania Election Threats Task Force**, comprising federal, state and local security, law enforcement and election administration entities, was established in February 2024 to bring together partners seeking to mitigate threats to the election process and provide voters with accurate election information ahead of the November 2024 election.⁹⁷
- **Civil society monitoring and analysis** is important in the period around elections, when democratic governments are often at their most vulnerable. Non-governmental democratic institutions have crucial roles to play during this time in support of electoral integrity, civic participation, credible information and public trust. For example, the civil society organisation Purpose, in partnership with the Susan McKinnon Foundation and the Online Hate Prevention Institute, conducted practical, real-time research into online threats to election integrity during the 2023 election in the state of New South Wales, and published a report with recommendations for combatting threats in the future.⁹⁸

Defending the integrity of the information environment

Social media and messaging services have in many ways democratised the information environment, enabling anyone with a smart phone and an internet connection to reach a global audience. Yet those same technologies have also entrenched power, spread propaganda and disinformation, and become tools of oppression. Meanwhile, traditional sources of information – media organisations – have been weakened by financial pressures and trust deficits. These shifts have created complexities in the information environment, making it more difficult for people to know what to believe and share.

- **Support for journalism** – With high-quality journalism struggling to remain profitable, media organisations have increasingly relied on philanthropy to sustain journalistic quality. A free and rigorous press is essential for the accountability not only of government, but also of the private sector and social institutions. Funding and resources can be supplied by private donors, governments or organisations.
- **International journalism networks** – The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists is a network of 290 reporters from 105 countries and territories. Nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, it offers collaboration opportunities, assistance, and protection for journalists worldwide, and has been responsible for major transparency building cases such as the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers.⁹⁹ It is funded by philanthropic and government donations, including from the governments of the US, Norway, and Sweden.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project supports the investigation of crime and corruption by offering training, tools, and infrastructure to over 100 partner outlets.¹⁰¹ It is supported by donations from philanthropic foundations and the Dutch, French, Slovakian, UK, and US governments.

- **Public Interest Journalism Initiative** – The PIJI is a non-partisan, specialist think tank in Australia that aims to sustain the health, diversity and plurality of public interest journalism.¹⁰² The PIJI supports the widespread availability of credible and trustworthy news that educates, inspires and brings communities together – key features of a healthy democracy. This is especially important given the changing nature of the media landscape including shrinking revenue and digital disruption.
- **International Panel on the Information Environment** – This panel of more than 250 researchers provides actionable scientific knowledge on threats to the world's information landscape. Launched at the Nobel Prize Summit in 2023, it analyses systems of information manipulation and bias, assesses the state of the global information environment, evaluates policy solutions, and offers recommendations to policymakers.¹⁰³
- **Regulation** – The European Union's *Digital Services Act* regulates digital services (including social media platforms). It aims to promote a healthy information environment, encourage more transparency, counter illegal and harmful content, and mitigate the risks of disinformation and election manipulation. Australia's *News Media Bargaining Code* came into effect on 2 March 2021 to address bargaining power imbalances between Australian news media businesses and 'designated' digital platforms.¹⁰⁴ A 2022 review found that Google and Meta had reached 30 voluntary commercial agreements with news businesses which were highly unlikely to have been made without the code.¹⁰⁵
- **Media literacy and critical thinking** – Media literacy, digital literacy and critical thinking skills are important foundations for democratic participation. So are shared facts on which people can base their decisions and, during elections, their votes. Among 150 academic experts surveyed about the effectiveness of interventions to address misinformation, the most popular individual-level intervention was media and digital literacy training – though system-level actions such as platform design changes were more widely agreed-upon solutions to the problem of misinformation.¹⁰⁶ The Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) is a collective of national public institutions including museums, archives, libraries, public broadcasters, schools and universities that supports media literacy for all ages. Grounded in research from leading academics at Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and Canberra University, AMLA delivers programs, events and initiatives.

Countering foreign disinformation

- **France** established the Vigilance and Protection Service against Foreign Digital Interference (known as 'Viginum') in 2021, aiming to preserve free speech by separating functions that detect foreign information manipulation from those that respond to them. Viginum's four lines of effort focus on the detection and analysis of the involvement of foreign actors, manifestly inaccurate or misleading content, artificial amplification of content, and harm to France's fundamental interests. The agency also has a mandate to protect digital public debate that could be exploited by malicious foreign actors.
- **Sweden** implemented measures to protect its electoral system against disinformation campaigns following concerns about the risk of foreign interference in its 2018 general election. These included training civil servants, bolstering interagency coordination, coordinating with traditional and social media, raising public awareness, and monitoring the digital information environment. The investments paid off: the election ran smoothly, despite a cyberattack on the Swedish Election Authority which prompted claims of fraud and home-grown political disinformation. The government expanded its resilience-building approach ahead of the 2022 election by creating the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency. The agency aims to identify, analyse, prevent and counter foreign malign information influence, build the population's ability to detect and resist malign influence and disinformation, work preventatively and operationally, and pursue a whole-of-society approach to disinformation.¹⁰⁷
- **Taiwan** takes a whole-of-society approach to countering disinformation and building resilience to foreign information. Initiatives include Taiwan FactCheck, which fact-checks public interest issues; Cofacts, which allows citizens to submit information from social platforms for rapid fact checking; Doublethink Lab, which uses computational tools to track and analyse influence operations conducted by non-democratic regimes; and FakeNewsCleaner, which holds media literacy workshops to help people discern misinformation and disinformation.¹⁰⁸
- **Canada** launched a series of measures in 2023 to combat foreign interference and strengthen confidence in democratic institutions, including appointing an Independent Special Rapporteur on Foreign Interference, establishing a public inquiry into foreign interference in electoral processes and democratic institutions, and investing in civil society capacity to counter disinformation.¹⁰⁹
- **The United Kingdom** established a Defending Democracy Taskforce in 2022 to coordinate cross-government activity against the threats of foreign interference, including to elections, diaspora communities, and the cyber security of elected officials, mitigate the threats of AI and develop new means of tackling misinformation and disinformation during elections.¹¹⁰
- **In Lithuania**, persistent Russian disinformation campaigns gave rise to a unique civic movement of cyber activists, self-described 'Elves', who identify disinformation and fake accounts linked to Russian troll farms. In their spare time, these groups of ordinary citizens (some counting as many as 22,000 members) alert others to misinformation and disinformation or other propaganda circulating online and report posts to social media platforms for removal. Lithuania's Ministry of Defence has said the Elves' actions are 'very helpful in exposing damaging propaganda'.¹¹¹

Public narratives about democracy and social cohesion

The language used by leaders in the public domain about threats to democracy or in response to shocks like a violent extremist attack plays a crucial role in protecting and sustaining democratic resilience. Both government and civil society communications offer opportunities to promote unity and cohesion, which strengthen democratic resilience. Of course, public narratives can also be inflammatory and polarising, and undermine public trust.¹¹²

- **Norwegian Government response to the 22 July 2011 attacks** – The immediate response of the Norwegian Government, and in particular Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, to the 22 July 2011 attacks is illustrative of a democratically resilient reply to violent extremism. Prime Minister Stoltenberg's addresses following the attack aimed to reassert a liberal and tolerant expression of Norwegian national character: 'Our response is more democracy, more openness, and more humanity.'¹¹³

- **Civil society promotion of democratic narratives** – Civil society plays crucial roles in shaping, promoting and celebrating democratic beliefs, values and conversations among people, particularly at grassroots levels. For example, in response to the mobilisation of far-right extremists in the Swedish town of Ludvika, civil society organisations encouraged dialogue among citizens about the challenges of far-right extremism, created meeting spaces to both speak with the community and present a vocal, public 'counterforce' to the extremists, organised a joint march through the town in support of inclusivity and human rights, and encouraged residents to support local businesses whose owners had been threatened by the extremists. In Bosnia–Herzegovina, the Press Council, in partnership with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, developed guidelines for journalists reporting on violent extremism and terrorism. The guidelines recommend a victim– and survivor–centred approach, taking care to avoid anti–hero framings of the perpetrator(s), and an attentiveness to social responsibility by avoiding linking acts of violence to a group identity.¹¹⁴

Telling our stories

How we talk about ourselves and our society reinforces who we are and what we value. Telling stories of the past, present and our hopes for the future through media, exhibitions and events are vital parts of building, affirming and evolving our sense of what it means to be part of the Australian community.¹¹⁵

Recent analysis of the connection between cultural activities and democracy finds a clear link between cultural participation, civic engagement and social cohesion.¹¹⁶ When people participate in cultural activities – such as choral and theatre groups, fairs, festivals, exhibitions, music events, carnivals, storytelling, literature and dance – they're also more likely to vote and volunteer, uphold civic values such as community belonging, tolerance, trust and empathy for people of different backgrounds, and develop skills for democratic participation such as self-expression, the ability to listen to others, and understanding of different perspectives.

- **National Library of Australia** – In accordance with the *National Library Act 1960*, the Library collects and preserves documentary resources, particularly relating to Australia and the Australian people, so Australians can discover, learn and create new knowledge, now and in the future. The Library is a respected custodian of Australia's published, written, oral, visual and digital heritage, and a world-leading provider of access to that heritage. The Library's vision is to connect all Australians with national collections, enriching our understanding about who we are and our place in the world.

- **National Archives of Australia** – The most significant records of the Australian Government are selected as its national archives. They tell the story of Australia and illustrate how the government shapes, and is shaped by, its society. The national archival collection is a critical resource for knowledge creation and sharing, which enables open interactions between the community and a transparent, responsive and accountable government. The archives are preserved for government and community, and made accessible to be reused in ways that help build public trust in government and benefit the community.
- **Creative Australia** is the Australian Government's principal arts investment and advisory body. Founded as the Australia Council for the Arts in 1968, Creative Australia invests in creative talent and stimulates the market for Australian stories to be told on a national and international scale, sharing our rich culture with the world. The artistic and creative endeavour enabled by Creative Australia is a powerful force for connection throughout the nation.
- **The Australian Children's Television Foundation** provides assistance to create content for young Australian viewers that reflects Australia's diversity, culture and values. By supporting the production of shows which reflect our landscapes and diverse communities, the Foundation fosters inclusion, resilience and a sense of belonging.¹¹⁷
- **Commemoration and memorialisation practices** can be designed to create and deepen a sense of belonging, unity and collective identity towards a shared future. After shocks to or attacks on democracy, public memorials and commemorations can encourage reflection and collective grieving.¹¹⁸ Public commemoration activities can also celebrate the strengths of democracy; the International Day of Democracy (15 September) provides a platform for many celebratory activities around the world.

Invigorating civic engagement

Civic engagement is about how people take an active interest in public life. Democracy depends on the ability and willingness of citizens to participate in a shared democratic society – including but certainly not limited to voting in periodic elections. That is, democracy depends on:

- **Civic literacy:** the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to participate in democratic life, which in turn helps people safely navigate and be resilient to threats to democracy.
- **Civic participation:** the actions and behaviours that represent contribution to public life, whether through community service and voluntarism, or by expressing democratic preferences and holding governments to account, including the public exchange of ideas, voting, peaceful protests, collective action and problem-solving, and corresponding with elected representatives. Civic participation helps people become familiar with, shape and thereby be more willing to trust democratic processes and institutions.
- **Civic connection:** the sense of belonging, agency, cohesion and responsibility within larger democratic society, which encourage mindsets that help people and communities prevent and overcome division, fragmentation, polarisation and harmful discriminatory and exclusionary behaviours.

The quality of civic engagement has long been understood to drive the quality of democratic society, including the dynamics of public trust that underpin it. Given the challenges facing democracies around the world, civic engagement (literacy, participation and connection) is at the heart of many practical strategies for building democratic resilience.

Civic engagement...	
builds democratising strength	disrupts anti-democratising influences
Embeds and reinforces democratic values, including tolerance and respect for opposing views	Prevents and overcomes attempts to sow division, discord, distrust and anti-democratic narratives
Promotes informed democratic viewpoints and decisions, by citizens and by the democratic institutions that represent them	Safeguards individuals and democratic processes from undue influences, interference or abuses of power
Helps effective collective problem-solving, particularly by including the diversity of voices throughout society	Prevents exclusionary and discriminatory actions that undermine social cohesion
Monitors and holds to account governments and political power	Counters distrust by promoting transparency and justifications

Next-generation approaches to civics and citizenship education

- **High Resolves** is a non-governmental organisation offering world-class learning experiences using AI-enabled technology to promote citizenship education and human responsibility. It seeks to help young people overcome division, inequality and fear, and prevent hateful and divisive ideologies like racism taking root.¹¹⁹
- **Civix** is a Canadian charity providing school students with authentic learning experiences that help develop the habits of active and informed citizenship. Civix programming takes real-life political events and turns them into teachable moments that bring democracy alive in the classroom, including on themes of elections, government budgets, elected representatives, digital media literacy and civic discourse.¹²⁰
- **High school civics education** in the United States has been shown to increase the likelihood that young people will vote in elections and participate in other civic activities such as volunteering. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University, young people who reported having been encouraged to vote and/or register to vote were more knowledgeable about voting and more invested in election processes.¹²¹

Encouraging civic participation and active citizenship

- **Scottish Children's Parliament** – A national charity established in 1996, the Children's Parliament is Scotland's centre of excellence for children's civic participation and engagement.¹²² Dedicated to the realisation of children's human rights in Scotland, the Children's Parliament uses creative, participatory methods to support children to meaningfully engage in decision-making processes. It provides younger children up to 14 years of age from diverse backgrounds with opportunities to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings so that they can influence positive change in their lives at home, in school and in the community.
- **2168 Children's Parliament** – Inspired by the Scottish Children's Parliament, in 2017 the Liverpool City Council in partnership with the charity Mission Australia launched the 2168 Children's Parliament to build children's capacity to actively engage in civic life by giving voice to their ideas and aspirations and increasing knowledge and understanding of their rights and responsibilities. It gives children aged 9 to 12 years who live in the 2168 postcode area the opportunity to participate in decisions that are impacting their lives.¹²³
- **Young Mayors Program in local councils around Australia** – This program provides young people aged 11 to 17 with training, mentoring and funding to run campaigns and other initiatives. Democratically elected by their peers, young council members work together to define priority action areas. Together, the youth council serves a 12 to 24 month term working with their council to implement projects and events, and influence decisions that impact their community.¹²⁴

- **Local Heroes** – The Australian Government supports Australia's Local Hero Award (a category of the Australian of the Year Award), which recognises outstanding role models who go out of their way to support others in their local communities and help build a cohesive society. The award acknowledges active citizenship and seeks to both inspire and encourage everyday Australians to make a difference in their local community.¹²⁵
- **Girls Takeover Parliament** created the opportunity for young Australian women from a wide range of backgrounds to experience 'behind the scenes' of their political system in a three-day incubator program.¹²⁶ Partnering with more than 250 politicians across seven parliaments, the program involved skills-based training in leadership and civic engagement, direct engagement with political mentors, and practical experience through expert-guided mock parliaments and crisis simulations. Following the program, 98% of participants felt more confident raising issues with politicians and 95% felt more confident in their abilities to be leaders both in the short and longer term.
- **The Office for Youth** is a dedicated unit within the Australian Government that is responsible for supporting young people to have their voices heard on the issues that impact them, through implementation of the Australian Government's Youth Engagement Model. The model is underpinned by the youth engagement strategy *Engage!*, which outlines the whole of Australian Government commitment to engage with young people. Youth Advisory Groups are a key element of the strategy. Comprising members 16–25 years of age, each advisory group partners with a government agency to share experiences and provide direct advice on their area of focus.¹²⁷
- **Temporary election workforce** – During a federal election, more than 100,000 Australians are employed and trained as part of the AEC's temporary election workforce. They play a vital role in upholding Australian democracy by helping to manage over 8,000 polling places, as well as providing mobile polling and remote voter services to eligible voters all across Australia.¹²⁸ Supporting and promoting this critical aspect of civic participation is particularly important in fostering understanding of and community trust in the integrity of our electoral processes.

Fostering community connection

- **More in Common's anti-polarisation initiatives** – More in Common, an international non-profit research organisation, published a study in 2018 that found the United States is not neatly divided into two polar opposites – instead, people have formed multiple political 'tribes' around several core beliefs and identities.¹²⁹ Informed by their finding that most Americans are tired of the 'us-versus-them' mindset, More in Common designs and tests initiatives with a wide range of partners to influence the stories that people hear, the conversations that people have, and the activities that people do together.
- **Disagree Better** – Amid intense political polarisation in the United States, the National Governors Association (NGA) is encouraging governors across the country to reduce partisan animosity and 'disagree better' by fostering respectful debate and modelling positive ways of working through policy problems. Building on the promising effects of a video which featured two opposing governor candidates advocating for bipartisanship and pro-democratic norms, the NGA has designed a toolkit of customisable public-facing interventions such as organising 'service projects' to bring communities together through volunteerism, recording an ad or writing an op-ed with someone from another party, and hosting debates at colleges and universities that model healthy conflict.¹³⁰

Investing in civic spaces

- **Civic spaces** such as libraries, schools, city halls and community centres allow people to meet, access information, learn new skills, exchange ideas and debate issues. Increasingly, academics and civil society groups are advocating for digital civic spaces to serve as alternatives to privately-owned social media platforms.¹³¹

Embracing democratic experimentation and innovation

Addressing misinformation and disinformation

- **Inoculation games** – Online games such as 'Go Viral', 'Bad News' and the Australian-made 'Cranky Uncle' build resilience to misinformation and disinformation through 'inoculation theory', which holds that showing people examples and techniques of information manipulation will equip them to spot and question it, just as vaccines train the immune system against viruses. Inoculation games demonstrate the techniques used to spread false or misleading information in engaging ways, helping players identify and combat those tricks in the future. A Cambridge study of one game found that participants were better able to identify misinformation and disinformation than the general population, and the effect lasted up to three months after playing the game.¹³²
- **Prebunking** draws on inoculation theory to debunk false information or expose manipulation tactics or low-quality sources before they can take root in people's minds. Journalists, fact-checkers and organisations that engage in public communication can 'prebunk' with a view to empower people, rather than simply correcting facts. For example, First Draft's *CrossCheck Australia: Election Watch* project used prebunking techniques ahead of the 2022 federal election. By identifying data voids and anticipating information needs, this project provided journalists with daily alerts and prebunks of election misinformation to use in their reporting.¹³³

- **Text message courses** – Academics from Stanford University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology collaborated with the Information Futures Lab to test the impact of a five-day, low-cost, scalable text message educational course with 9,000 participants in Kenya. They found that the course decreased misinformation sharing by 28%, and that treating the emotional drivers of misinformation-sharing was more effective than teaching about reasoning-based techniques. Follow-up surveys two months later showed 88% of the treatment effect persisted.¹³⁴ A similar, two-week text message course was run in the US ahead of the 2020 presidential election.¹³⁵
- **Trusted messengers** – 'Shots at the Shops' was a US initiative that engaged 1,000 barbershops and hair salons to dispel misinformation about COVID-19 and host vaccination clinics. With White House backing, this partnership between academia, civil society and a haircare brand sought to overcome vaccine hesitancy using trusted messengers.¹³⁶

Involving more people in deliberation

A 'deliberative wave' has been building around the world since the 1980s.¹³⁷ More governments at every level are embedding deliberative practices into their decision-making processes.

- **Finnish National Dialogues** – As a rapid and creative response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 111 parties (including government, municipalities, religious and spiritual groups, civil society, businesses and private individuals) organised dialogues using online conferencing tools such as Zoom, Teams and Skype. These dialogues provided opportunities for citizens to come together to share their personal experiences of lockdown, provide support and learn from one another, and build trust in the nation's ability to steer through the crisis. All dialogues were documented, providing all levels of government and civil society with important information on how the situation was evolving in Finland.¹³⁸

- **Irish citizens' assemblies** – The Government of Ireland established the practice of citizens' assemblies in 2016 to bring together citizens to look at a range of political and constitutional reforms on issues such as drug use and biodiversity loss.¹³⁹ Each assembly consists of a randomly selected group of 99 residents who aim to take draft recommendations to parliament for debate. These processes have so far resulted in two successful constitutional amendments related to marriage equality and abortion rights.¹⁴⁰
- **Parisian participatory budgeting** – In 2014, the Paris City Council set up a participatory budgeting scheme called 'Madame Mayor, I Have an Idea' to allocate €500 million to projects divided among the 20 districts between 2014 and 2020. The scheme responded to growing distrust in officials' ability or desire to deliver on promises. While most participated by submitting and voting for project proposals online, the Council also offered workshops and one-on-one meetings for those needing help with internet access and skills. From 2014 to 2018, Parisians submitted 11,253 proposals and the Council approved 416 projects.¹⁴¹
- **vTaiwan and Pol.is** – Responding to student protests in 2014, a Taiwanese civic technology community developed the vTaiwan online platform, an open consultation process that brings Taiwanese citizens and government together to deliberate on national issues. The Pol.is software has been key to vTaiwan's success, building consensus by visually mapping opinions from large groups of people and using machine learning to highlight mainstream and non-mainstream opinions and points of consensus.¹⁴²

- **Portuguese Participa.gov** – Launched in 2021, Participa.gov is a centralised, cross-cutting platform for facilitating participatory processes at all levels of government in Portugal. The one-stop-shop platform allows public entities to launch challenges, and then allows citizens to present their proposals and vote on submissions. Participa.gov employs secure eID mechanisms and blockchain technology to ensure security, auditing and transparency from start to finish.¹⁴³

Australia's deliberative wave

Australian-based scholars and practitioners have been at the forefront of the intellectual and practical development of deliberative democracy for the past 30 years. Our experts continue to experiment with and champion the many tools and approaches of democratic deliberation, making Australia an important global hub for deliberative innovation.¹⁴⁴ Participedia, a crowd-sourced database of democratic innovations around the world, lists more than 100 cases of deliberative forms of citizen engagement in Australia.¹⁴⁵ They occur primarily at local and state levels and cover various topics including planning, energy, waste, insurance, health and water quality.

- **The Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP)** in 2009 was Australia's largest deliberative exercise at the national level. Led by Professor John Dryzek with partnership from the newDemocracy Foundation and support from the Australian Research Council,¹⁴⁶ the ACP met to discuss 'how could Australia's political system could be strengthened to serve us better'.¹⁴⁷ A group of 150 randomly selected participants representing each of Australia's federal electorates developed a series of recommendations which were presented to the Prime Minister. While the ACP did not result in policy change, participants reported an increase in their awareness and understanding of democracy and their political engagement.¹⁴⁸

- **The City of Melbourne People's Panel** was commissioned in 2014 by the City of Melbourne Council to make recommendations for its ten-year \$5 billion financial plan.¹⁴⁹ A citizens' panel of 43 randomly selected Melburnians met over six weekends, receiving briefings by experts, senior bureaucrats and councillors. The process, facilitated by newDemocracy Foundation, recommended 11 actions (including crucial budget cutting measures to respond to the projected deficit) for the Council and Mayor. Ten recommendations were accepted and implemented. In addition to its policy impact, a review of the panel found that many participants became more politically involved following the process. Victoria later mandated all local councils to engage in deliberative engagement when developing plans.¹⁵⁰
- **Deliberative Town Halls** are non-partisan processes that bring together elected representatives with their constituents. In 2020 the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance based at the University of Canberra held two Deliberative Town Halls with the Hon Dr Andrew Leigh, MP.¹⁵¹ These deliberative processes focused on mitochondrial donation, a medical procedure – illegal at the time – set to undergo a conscience vote in Parliament. In two town hall meetings, one online and one face-to-face, a randomly selected group of constituents from Dr Leigh's electorate of Fenner weighed up the issues surrounding mitochondrial donation. Prior to these events, Dr Leigh agreed that his vote would be guided by the conclusions of these Deliberative Town Halls. Participants in both town halls overwhelmingly believed that mitochondrial donation should be made legal in Australia. The majority of the House of Representatives, including Leigh, voted in favour of the *Mitochondrial Donation Law Reform (Maeve's Law) Bill* in December 2021. Mitochondrial donation became legal in Australia in October 2022. This deliberative model builds on town halls designed as part of the Connecting to Congress project run by the Ohio State University.¹⁵²
- **South Australian Dog and Cat Citizens' Jury** was commissioned by the Government of South Australia in 2015 to explore measures for reducing the number of unwanted dogs and cats in the state.¹⁵³ Composed of randomly selected citizens and facilitated by DemocracyCo, this jury produced seven recommendations (including mandatory desexing) of which all but one was accepted in amendments to the *Dog and Cat Management Act 1995*.
- **City of Sydney citizens' jury on its 2050 strategic plan** – In 2018, the City of Sydney began a multi-phase engagement process to gain insights and feedback from the community to create a shared vision for the future. Key to this process was a citizens' jury, organised and facilitated by newDemocracy Foundation, consisting of 43 randomly selected people from across Sydney who met six times over several months. The jury considered evidence from experts and some 2,500 submissions from the public. Released in 2022, the City of Sydney's long-term strategic plan (*Sustainable Sydney 2030–2050 Continuing the Vision*) incorporated almost all of the jury's recommendations via '10 ambitious project ideas'.¹⁵⁴
- **Open Government Partnership** – The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a multilateral initiative that aims to secure commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. Australia became a member of the OGP in 2015. The Australian Government worked with civil society through the Open Government Forum to develop a Third National Action Plan, which was published on 15 December 2023 and captures an ambitious plan for open government, transparency and accountability.

Labs, incubators and accelerators

Innovation labs are 'spaces' (both physical and digital) that take many institutional forms and employ a range of methods and tools such as behavioural economics, human-centred design and agile project management.

- **The United Kingdom** has a number of dispersed teams which offer services across the public sector. What Works Centres provide evidence on specific policy areas, innovation agency Nesta designs and tests solutions to social challenges, the Policy Lab supports civil servants to deliver innovative policies, and the Government Digital Service helps departments to make better online public services.¹⁵⁵
- **The Australian Centre for Evaluation** was established in July 2023 to work with departments and agencies across the Australian Public Service and beyond to integrate high-quality evaluation into all aspects of program and policy development, supporting continuous learning about 'what works, why, and for whom'.
- **Brazilian e-Democracia portal and LABHacker innovation lab** – The Chamber of Deputies of Brazil established the e-Democracia (e-democracy) portal in 2009 in response to declining trust and disengagement. The portal aims to make legislation more transparent, improve citizens' understanding of the legislative process, and enable the public to comment on policy or legislative matters and suggest amendments via web conversations and direct commenting. LABHacker is an in-house social innovation lab which provides a vehicle for parliamentarians and civil society to collaborate on experimental projects and facilitates citizen engagement through the e-Democracia portal.¹⁵⁶
- **Germany's 'Live Democracy!' program** was established in 2015 by the Federal Government of Germany to fund research and innovation to develop and trial new ideas that promote democracy, shape diversity and prevent extremism. This learning program supports more than 700 projects across the country and builds in scientific monitoring and evaluation into each project.¹⁵⁷

- **Stanford University's Polarization and Social Change Lab** conducts research on actionable solutions to tackle rising polarisation and incivility in the United States. The Lab's multidisciplinary team theorises interventions, rigorously evaluates these with experimental and observational data, pursues partnerships with organisations to directly intervene, and disseminates findings to political leaders and the general public. Stanford also runs a **Strengthening Democracy Challenge** which brings together academics, practitioners and industry experts to identify ways to reduce partisan animosity and anti-democratic attitudes.¹⁵⁸ One winning intervention was the Correcting Democracy Misperceptions quiz, which asked participants what they believed Republicans and Democrats thought about democracy.¹⁵⁹ This quiz was designed to show that others are unlikely to support actions that undermine democracy, such as rejecting election results if defeated at the polls.
- **The Hunt Laboratory's SWARM Project**, based at the University of Melbourne, is an example of a cloud-based 'group-sourcing' platform where diverse teams can collaborate online to develop different 'takes' on a task, refine their analyses by looking at biases, assumptions, and alternatives, and then vote to select the best ideas.¹⁶⁰ While this project emerged from the intelligence domain, democratic societies can use digital tools like SWARM for facilitating civic engagement in collective intelligence and decision-making (and improving policymaking within government) through independent exploration, information exchange, integration of various solutions and voting.

Philanthropic support for democracy

- **newDemocracy Foundation** is an independent, non-partisan research and development organisation focused on restoring citizens' trust in public decision-making through deliberation. newDemocracy has been the driving force behind many citizens' assemblies in Australia and around the world.¹⁶¹
- **The Susan McKinnon Foundation** is an Australian philanthropic foundation explicitly focused on strengthening our democracy.¹⁶² Building on the belief that outstanding political leadership is crucial in a world-leading, resilient democracy, the Foundation partnered with Monash University in 2019 to create the **McKinnon Institute for Political Leadership**, combining pragmatic practitioner expertise with academic rigour. The Institute designs and delivers professional development courses for members of Australia's federal, state and territory parliaments including new MP training to supplement existing induction programs and political leadership courses tailored to current strategic policy contexts and personal leadership needs and challenges.¹⁶³
- **Mannifera** is a collaborative initiative enabling Australian philanthropists to pool their funding to support civil society organisations seeking to strengthen Australia's democratic systems, advance policy experimentation and promote community engagement.¹⁶⁴
- **Civitates** is a philanthropic initiative bringing together a network of more than 20 civil society actors in Europe seeking to address the key challenges impacting democracies across the continent. Civitates provides financial support and capacity building programs.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

This year – 2024 – marks one hundred years of compulsory voting in Australia, a century in which Australians have had not only the right but the responsibility to participate in elections for their national representatives. The spirit with which Australians continue to embrace the ritual of voting – so often capped off with a ‘democracy sausage’ – is just one among many crucial strengths that sustain our democracy through times of challenge.

The Strengthening Democracy Taskforce was established in 2023 to determine what could be done, practically, to safeguard and sustain Australia's democracy, in the near term and for the long term.

This report presents its answers. Recognise, celebrate and protect our democratic strengths. Invigorate the participation of Australians in our democratic life and enable their contribution to a shared, connected Australian community, from the grassroots to national institutions. And embrace the long traditions of experimentation and practical innovation that have throughout history nurtured and stewarded Australian democracy.

This report highlights the many ways in which Australians can continue to strengthen their democracy. It doesn't draw definitive conclusions or make directive recommendations. It is certainly not the first word on these issues, but by no means will it be the last. The ideas outlined here are presented with the hope that others will reflect and build on them, fill the gaps, and make the inevitable corrections to help tell richer and more diverse stories of Australian democracy.

We, the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, hope that these ideas contribute to flourishing conversations about the strengths and strains of Australia's always-evolving democracy. We hope this report advances our collective understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing our democracy, so we might together be better equipped to respond. And we hope the result is the endurance of our confident, vibrant and resilient democracy – a precious national asset, which we all have a responsibility to protect.

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