



Democracy 2025

Democratic Conversations July 2020

Included in this edition

[Latest episodes of the Democratic Fundamentals podcast series on “Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus”](#)

[Launch of a unique crowdsourcing project: *10 Ways to Save Democracy*, and](#)

[Snapshot of the key findings from our latest report *Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus: is Australia still the lucky country?*](#)

LATEST PODCASTS



Democracy 2025-Conversation Democratic Fundamentals podcast with Michelle Grattan and Mark Evans

A series of panel discussions with leading thinkers from academia, political journalism, politics and practice on the big policy and governance questions of our time. Hosted by Michelle Grattan and Mark Evans.



Michelle Grattan AO



Professor Mark Evans

[Episode 1: Political trust in times of Coronavirus](#)

Mark Evans, Emeritus Professor Ian Chubb and Michelle Grattan dissect the Australian trust in government, compared with other modern democracies around the world. Drawing on the world values survey, the report notes the sharp focus on the quality of democratic governance, especially in the time of global crisis caused by coronavirus.

[Episode 2: What role will the Australian Public Service need to play in a Post COVID-19 World?](#)

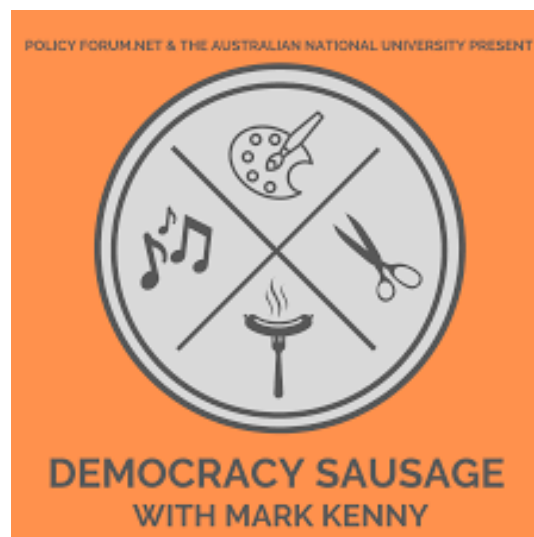
Renée Leon, former Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Human Services, and **Peter Shergold**, former Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, discuss the challenges and opportunities for the Australian Public Service as the world eases restrictions with hosts Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan.

[Episode 3: Trust, democracy and COVID-19: A British Perspective](#)

Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan explore differences in the management, experience and impact of the crisis in the company of three leading British academic thinkers and members of the Trustgov project at the University of Southampton – **Will Jennings** (Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton and elections analyst for Sky News); **Dr. Jennifer Gaskell** co-founder of Build Up; and **Gerry Stoker** (Professor of Governance at the University of Southampton and Centenary Professor at the University of Canberra).

[Episode 4: After the crisis: what lessons can be drawn from the management of Covid-19 for the recovery process?](#)

Michelle Grattan and Mark Evans explore the lessons that can be drawn from the management of Covid-19 for the recovery process with the ABC's **Norman Swan and Mark Kenny** from the Australian Studies Institute at the Australian National University.



Democracy Sausage on Political Trust in Times of COVID-19

Democracy 2025 also collaborated with **Mark Kenny and Marija Taflaga** in the Australian Studies Institute at the ANU on a new Democracy Sausage podcast on [Political Trust in Times of COVID-19](#).

This led to the publication of the lead article in the Canberra Times Forum on [“Is our democracy due for an upgrade?”](#).

JOIN A UNIQUE EXPERIMENT



There was already a [debate](#) about how to save democracy before the onset of COVID-19. Democracy was seen to be at risk in various ways. Declining public trust in politics, a failure to tackle the big public policy issues such as climate change, rising income inequality, and lack of diversity and inclusion in the make-up of the political class and in participation and engagement from citizens, were all stimulants to the need to change the way politics is done. But has the emergence of COVID-19 transformed the challenge once again?

There is now [mounting evidence](#) of increasing risk to democratic practice. To combat the pandemic, governments have limited civil liberties. This has included the right to vote caused by electoral disruptions in Ethiopia, as well as 15 US states. And Texas and Ohio state governments have moved to delay non-essential medical procedures that include abortions impacting on women's pro-choice reproductive rights.

We have also witnessed increased state surveillance through use of smartphone location tracking, facial recognition and social media monitoring undermining freedoms of expression and association and exacerbating imbalances in [military-security-civil relations](#). Most significantly, the long-term impact of unemployment and economic turbulence as part of the fallout from the pandemic may well create a difficult environment for [positive political change](#).

At the same time, in certain areas, we have [witnessed democratic advance](#). Women are leading the way in the successful management of COVID-19. Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, Angela Merkel in Germany, Sanna Marin in Finland and Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan have shattered the myth that male, Churchillian leadership is best in times of crisis management leaving silver-back male leaders such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson lurching from crisis to crisis in their wake.

The emergence of the virtual Parliament in the United Kingdom and the National Cabinet in Australia built on collaboration and consensus are two progressive institutional examples in this regard. We have also seen a renewed public faith in science and evidence informed policy-making. Even the media has enjoyed greater public confidence in its reporting, particularly public broadcasters.

Moreover, after a decade of disappointment with digital democratic innovation, governments and citizens around the world are beginning to embrace opportunities for digital participation. More and more citizens appear to be up for digital citizenship than ever before. And, governments are increasingly recognising the need to institutionalise citizen voice in pandemic recovery processes.

Select Committees in the UK Parliament, for example, have used online “evidence checks” to scrutinise the basis for policy. The evidence checks operate for one-month and use targeted outreach and social media strategies to invite comments from knowledgeable stakeholders and members of the public about the rigour of evidence underpinning new policy proposals.

Trust appears to have been affected in various ways. Longer term there is [some evidence](#) that COVID-19 and other pandemics causes a loss of trust among younger generations and that might in turn impact on future willingness to both comply with government rules and engage with politics. Citizens also seem to be judging their political systems by how well they performed in the context of the pandemic. There is [evidence](#) of an initial surge in support for governments and politicians of all kinds as the anxiety and threat created by the pandemic led citizens to fall back on a fragile level of implicit trust in government but this has broken down to various degrees especially in countries where government has appeared indifferent or slow to respond by their citizens. This justified scepticism might be healthy for democracy, or it might develop into a negative partisan blame game that diminishes the prospects for political dialogue still further.

The crudest forms of populism have not fared well in managing the human cost of the pandemic, but experts and expertise seems to have come back into public favour. Yet the manipulation of evidence and what some politicians kept on referring to as ‘the science’ suggests that expertise may be playing the role of crutch rather than enlightenment. But the re-legitimisation of experts does open-up the possibility of a different type of political dialogue and deliberation.

Maybe that bodes well for dealing with demanding and long-term issues such as climate change. Governments have shown that that can borrow and intervene which seems to blow away the restrictions imposed by a neo-liberal framing of what can be done to tackle climate change. On the contrary, however, climate change as an issue has moved down the political agenda and may be swept aside by the pressing need to restart economies no matter what the environmental cost.

COVID-19 has changed the context for democratic reform with a mix of positive and negative developments. To make the most out of the positive we need to refocus debate away from valuable but limited new practices and reforms to a better understanding about how to transform systems of democracy. The disruption caused by the pandemic has reminded us how interconnected our societies are and the same goes for our political system. We need to not only improve the access of all citizens, but also get elected officials and their advisors to be more open and engaging and then above all make sure that good ideas get translated into better practice on the ground. Only by transforming the system and making improvements to inputs, throughputs and outputs can we help democracies meet the continuing challenges of COVID-19 and future pandemics, climate change, social and economic inequalities and create political systems that are trusted by their citizens.

The systems approach referred to above, underpins our ideas in *Ten Ways to Save Democracy Post-COVID-19* (Palgrave Macmillan). Faced with pandemics, protests and global upheaval, democracy is under threat, but we also have an opportunity to reflect on how we can do things differently in the future.

WE THEREFORE NEED YOUR HELP

This is a call for champions of liberal democracy to have a say in a new project on strengthening democratic practice – *Ten Ways to Save Democracy Post-COVID-19*.

Over the next six months:

We’ll post a draft chapter every three weeks for YOU to comment on in either a [Facebook group discussion](#) or via [our website](#).

We will then post a rejoinder on the lessons that we will draw upon for the redrafting of the chapter and publish the next draft chapter for your comment.

Throughout the process we will publish panel discussions and host live chats around key sections of the book.

Join the group now to participate in this unique, crowd-sourced experiment to help us answer the question, 'How can we save democracy in a post-COVID 19 world?'

Mark Evans and Gerry Stoker

NEW REPORT



Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus: is Australia still the lucky country?

Public trust as a political resource is particularly important in times of Coronavirus. Without it the changes to public behaviour necessary to contain and ultimately prevent the spread of infection are slower and more resource intensive. People need to trust the government to support more government intervention that makes a difference. Has the Australian system of governance proved robust enough to win the trust of its citizens in times of Coronavirus? This report tackles this question through the presentation of the high-level findings from a survey of a representative sample of 1059 Australians aged between 18 and 75 years. The survey was conducted between May and June 2020 in Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States to allow for comparison.

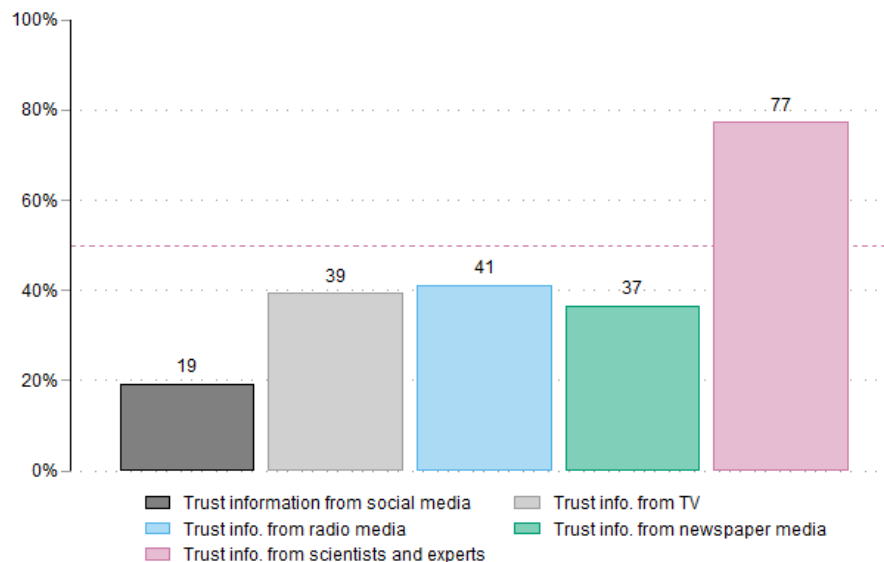
Has the level of political trust changed during the Coronavirus?

Political trust has increased significantly in Australia in times of Coronavirus and compares strongly with Italy, the UK and the US. For the first time in over a decade, Australians are exhibiting relatively high levels of political trust in federal government (up from 29 to 54 per cent), and the Australian Public Service (from 38 to 54 per cent).

Australians have the highest level of confidence in defence and law and order organisations such as the army (78 per cent), police (75 per cent) and the courts (55 per cent). Levels of trust are also high in health services (77 per cent), cultural institutions such as museums (70 per cent) and universities (61 per cent).

Australians continue to have low levels of trust in social media (from 20 to 19 per cent) but trust in TV (from 32 to 39 per cent), radio (from 38 to 41 per cent) and newsprint (from 29 to 37 per cent) have all marginally increased. Australians continue to exhibit high levels of trust in scientists and experts (77 per cent).

Figure 1: Public trust in various media, scientists and experts (%)



How effective has COVID-19 management and leadership been in Australia?

Prime Minister Scott Morrison is perceived to be performing strongly on most measures of COVID-19 management and leadership by a significant majority of Australians. Indeed, he possesses the strongest performance measures in our four-country sample.

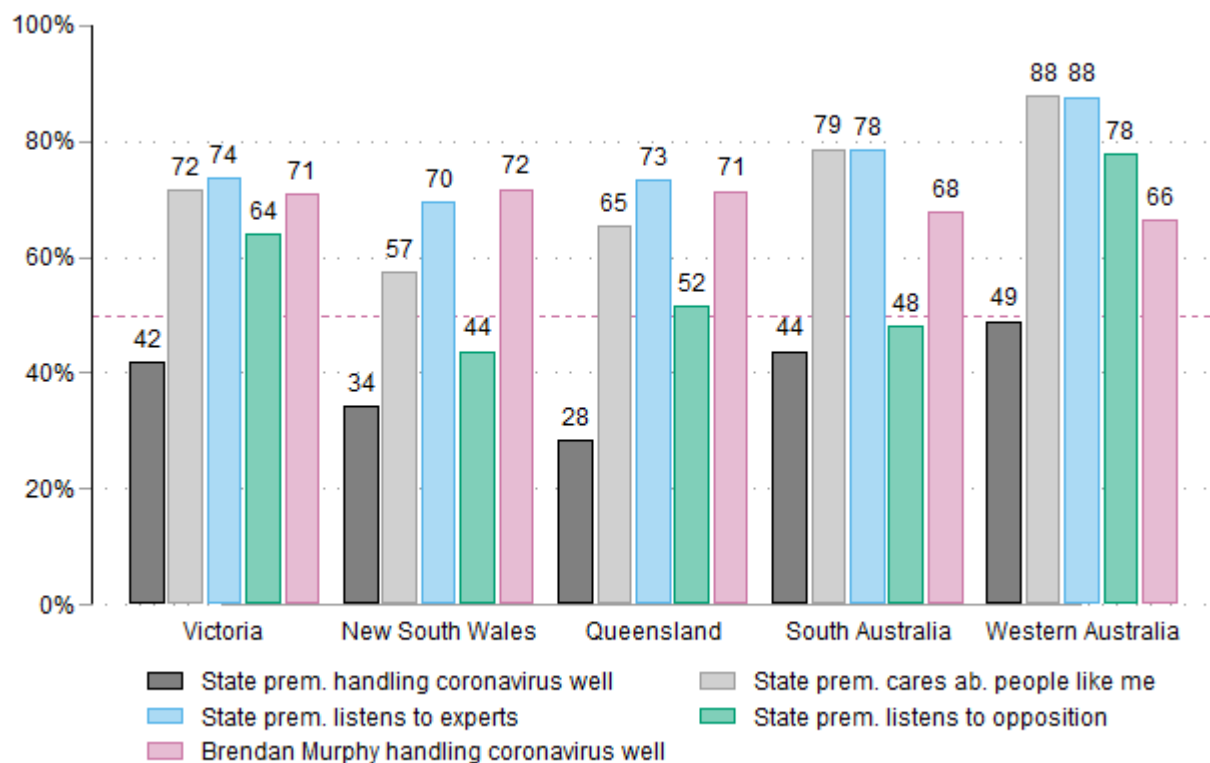
There is also strong support for the Prime Minister's handling of COVID-19 across the federation. Queenslanders (76 per cent) are the most appreciative of the Prime Minister's efforts and South Australians the least appreciative (62 per cent).

In contrast, the general assessment of the handling of the crisis by state and territory leaders is much lower but they are deemed to perform much better in 'terms of listening to experts' and 'caring about citizens'. On average, only 37 per cent of Australians think their state premier or chief minister is 'handling the coronavirus situation well'. In contrast, 71 per cent consider former Chief

Medical Officer Brendan Murphy to be ‘handling the coronavirus situation well,’ demonstrating the importance that Australians now attach to evidence-based decision-making.

Mark McGowan from Western Australia (49 per cent) is the highest performing state premier, followed by South Australia’s Steven Marshall (44 per cent). The poorest rated state premier is Queensland’s Anastacia Palaszczuk (28 per cent) followed by New South Wales Premier, Gladys Berejiklian (34 per cent). This suggests that in Australia, the politics of national unity (‘rally around the flag’) come to the fore in times of crisis and this has penalised states or territories seen to be pursuing self-interest.

Figure: Perceptions of the quality of state and territory leadership during COVID-19 by state (%)

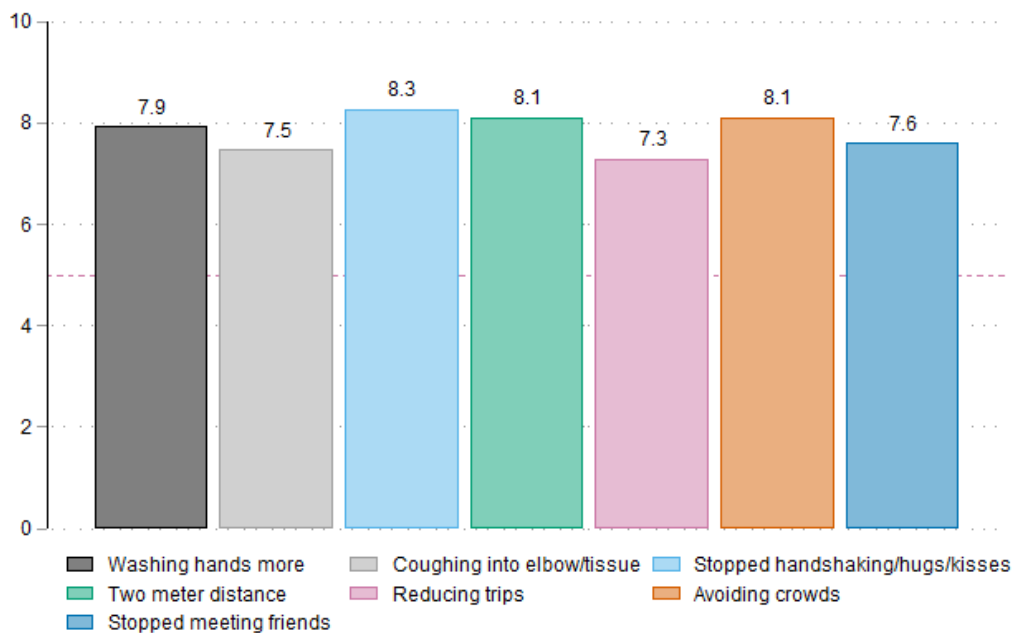


Have Australians been compliant with COVID-19 measures?

Most Australians comply with the key measures to combat COVID-19 (e.g. social distancing) but are marginally less compliant across the range of interventions than their counterparts in UK and Italy but equal with the US. This is likely to be due to lower perceptions of the risk of infection given the significant differences in the number of COVID-19 fatalities.

Victorians are the most compliant with anti-COVID-19 measures; a somewhat ironic observation given the recent upsurge in COVID-19 cases in Victoria. The ACT, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory, are the least compliant. Again, this is in line with the low level of reported cases in these states and territories and by implication lower public perception of the risk of infection.

Figure: Compliance with key anti-COVID-19 measures in Australia (%)



Does Australia have the institutional resilience to meet the challenge of post-COVID-19 recovery?

Here we consider issues of social, economic and political confidence.

Although a significant majority of Australians (60 per cent) expect COVID-19 to have a 'high' or 'very high' level of financial threat for them and their families, they are far less worried than their counterparts in Italy, the UK, and the US about the threat COVID-19 poses to the country (33 per cent), to them personally (19 per cent), or to their job or business (29 per cent).

The majority of Australians are pessimistic about Australia's short-term economic prospects with close to a majority expecting the economy to get worse over the next 12 months; this percentage is slightly lower in the US but much higher in the UK and Italy.

Nonetheless, Australians remain confident that Australia will bounce back from COVID-19, with most of them believing that Australia is 'more resilient than most other countries' (72 per cent) or even 'best in the world' (8.7 per cent).

Women, young people, Labor voters, and those on lower incomes with lower levels of qualifications are the most pessimistic on all of these confidence measures.

We also assessed whether views about democracy had changed in consequence of COVID-19. In general, there is overwhelming support for representative democracy but with a focus on making the representative system of government more representative, accountable and responsive to the citizenry and underpinned by a new politics which is 'cleaner', 'collaborative' and 'evidence-based'.

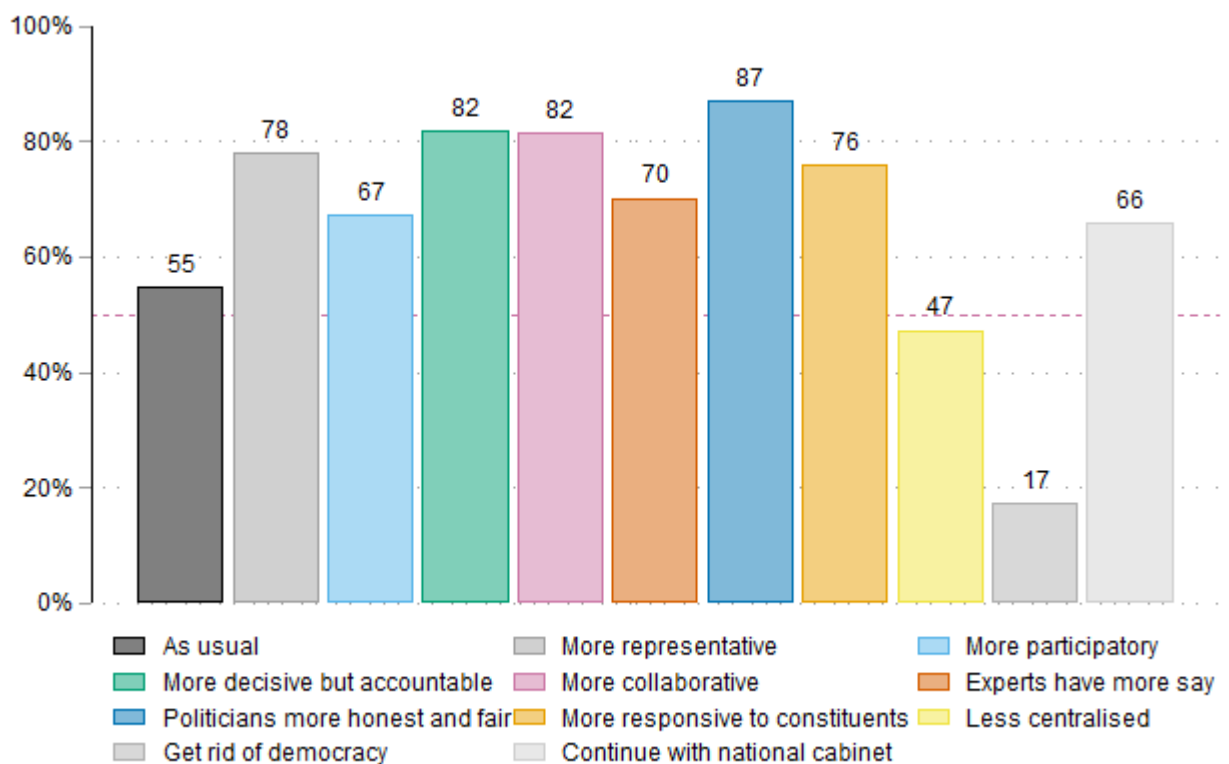
Staying lucky

Although there is a cautionary tale currently brewing in Victoria with the introduction of a six-week lockdown of metropolitan Melbourne in response to the report of a second wave of 191 cases, the fatality figures in Australia still pale in significance compared with Italy, the UK, and the US. At the

time of writing (6 July 2020) Australia has incurred 104 fatalities compared with 129,891 in the US, 44,305 in the UK, and 34,861 in Italy.

Context therefore matters. The lived citizen experience of the pandemic has been dramatically different in Australia when compared with the UK, Italy and the US. Australia has been lucky in terms of its relative geographical isolation from international air passenger traffic and its ability to be able to look both East and West for progressive policy ideas to combat the virus. However, Australia has also benefitted from effective governance. Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s approval rating has soared on the back of effective handling of the threat, facilitated by strong political bipartisanship from Labor, and by atypical coordination of state and federal governments via the National Cabinet. However, the big question remains as to whether the Prime Minister can sustain strong levels of public trust in the recovery period.

Figure: Perceptions of how Australian democracy should change post-COVID-19 (%)



Lessons to draw

There are some positive lessons to be drawn from the government’s management of COVID-19 hitherto which need to be adopted in the recovery process.

Lesson 1: the politics of collegiality and collaboration reflected in the creation and then the institutionalisation of the National Cabinet has played well with an Australian public fed-up with conflict-driven adversarial politics. It is noteworthy that the states which have been seen to pursue self-interest rather than the national interest during the pandemic, such as Queensland, have the lowest public approval rates in our survey. This suggests that in Australia, the politics of national unity (‘rally around the flag’) come to the fore in times of crisis and potentially dissipate in times of recovery and stability when regional self-interest becomes more evident in the contestation for scarce resources.

Lesson 2: the Australian public expect their governments to continue to listen to the experts, as reflected in the high regard that Australians have for evidence informed decision-making observed in our survey (77 per cent).

Lesson 3: the significant increase in trust in the Australian Public Service (38 to 54 per cent) bolsters the case for public services becoming a critical space for enhancing the relationship between government and citizen. Public trust aligns strongly with the trustworthiness of government. It is the supply of government – delivering goods and services like economic growth, welfare and security – that matters most in orienting the outlooks of citizens. The quality of public service production is a critical dimension of trust-building with the citizenry.

Our survey data shows that Australians are fearful of negative economic impacts from COVID-19. How the federal government's manages public finances in the recovery period is pivotal to maintaining long-term public trust. The crucial lesson from the Global Financial Crisis is that those countries that introduced austerity measures too quickly in the wake of fiscal stimulus – such as Italy, Greece, the UK, Portugal, Spain or the US – paid for it in terms of declining political trust and social cohesion and the rise of populism.

The fourth lesson then is to resist introducing austerity measures until you know that the economy has stabilised as it has a lasting negative impact on public attitudes towards the political class.

Although it is heartening to see the Australian public's attachment to the importance of expert advice driving policy responses to the pandemic; it would be wrong to view post-COVID 19 recovery as a simple fix between political and technocratic elites. Building on the burst of covert political trust in the Australian system there is support in our survey for building a national post-COVID-19 consensus featured by more inclusive, clean, collaborative and evidence-based politics.

The critical lesson is clear – Australia needs to avoid reverting to the old conflict-driven adversarial politics and use its historical adaptive capacity and guile to remain a lucky country. Economic recovery needs to be anchored in a new politics to ensure good outcomes for all Australians. Waiting until 2022 for a federal election to legitimate a Coalition or Labor vision for the future could well be too late.

[Read the full report](#)

OTHER NEWS AND ARTICLES



Australian Quarterly: Common-ground is emerging between citizens and federal politicians on democratic renewal

In the [April issue of the Australian Quarterly](#), Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan observed that, although Australia's political class is perceived to be isolated from the citizenry it serves, it does share similar views about democratic strengthening.

STAY IN TOUCH

Are you interested in the future of democracy?

Do you have some ideas or links you'd like to share?

We'd love to hear from you. Send us an [email](#).