



The State of Australian Democracy: ‘Culture of contentment’ or the ‘end of complacency’?

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Museum of Australian Democracy

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Democracy. Are you in?

If time series trends continue by **2025** fewer than 1 in 10 Australians will trust their politicians and key political institutions.

Democracy 2025 is driving a national conversation on how we can strengthen democratic practice, celebrate our democratic achievements and be the best democracy that we can be.

Democracy 2025 audits the qualities of Australian democracy, investigates and experiments with what works in terms of renewing our representative system of government and facilitates non-partisan conversations on how to improve our democratic practice.



Museum of
Australian Democracy
Old Parliament House



*Democracy
2025*

Argument – culture of contentment or the end of complacency ?

The “Corona-coma” has had both positive and negative impacts on democratic governance in Australia. But its’ ultimate impact will depend on the degree of social and economic dislocation caused by the pandemic and its ability to affect shock therapy to the isolated political class and prevailing culture of contentment.



A story in four parts

- Part one situates the research within the context of the decline of political trust between government and citizen and the prevailing culture of contentment.
- Drawing on survey and focus group research, parts two and three provide a snapshot of the state of democratic governance in Australia pre- and during Covid-19.
- Part four evaluates the implications of these developments for future democratic governance in Australia.



1. How do we understand political trust – an informal social contract between government and the people

Trust is about “keeping promises and agreements” and thereby holding positive perceptions about people in government and their actions. Marc Hethrington (2005: 1.)

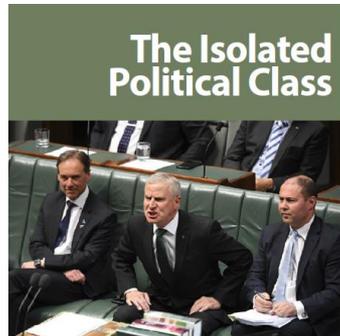
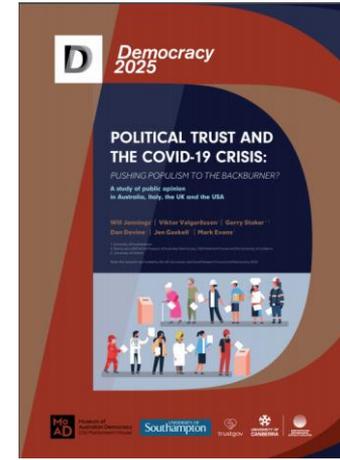
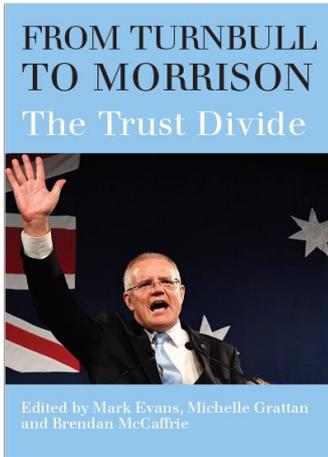
Note:

Distrust is a bad thing as it leads to low public confidence, risk averse, short-termist politics and democratic backsliding

Mistrust is a good thing; because we want to see critical citizens making informed choices



Democracy 2025 reports, articles, podcasts and blogs can be found at:
www.democracy2025.gov.au



If you ever thought that politicians are out of touch, then you're not alone. There is mounting evidence that Australia's political class is increasingly isolated from the citizens it serves.

The gap between how Australians perceive their politicians and political institutions, and how they would like their democracy to be, has widened to such a degree that there is an urgent need to pause, and reflect on what our political system needs to do to adapt to the realities of 21st-century governance

ARTICLE BY MARK EVANS AND MICHELLE GRATTAN

Amongst Australians, trust in people in government (25 per cent), federal government (30 per cent), government ministers (23 per cent), members of parliament (21 per cent), and political parties (20 per cent) is at an all-time low.

Honesty and integrity are qualities that Australian citizens highly prize in politics but we can also report that 89 per cent of citizens have a negative view of the standards of honesty and integrity held by politicians. Despite 28 years of economic growth, Australia is characterised as a 'distorted country' and sits below the median satisfaction rating when compared with other advanced industrial democracies.

The demonisation of young Australians for engaging in climate protest, the absence of the Prime Minister at the early stages of the bushfire crisis, wrangling over the leadership of the National party and the emergence of the 'Sports rorts' scandal – all at a time of national emergency – have served to further erode public trust and heighten the need for a moral



Health Expertise and Covid-19 Managing the Fear Factor

“66% amount of expert evidence will see a rapid pivot to equality and unanimity to a given conclusion.”
 Peter Lee, 2017, p. 207

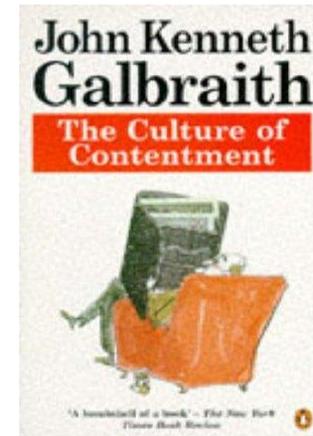
ARTICLE BY MARK EVANS AND MICHELLE GRATTAN

A Covid-19-ravaged across the globe, the leaders of almost every country were forced to rely on their health experts to advise them on the sudden threat. Of course, the degree of that reliance and the nature of the leader's relationship with their advisers varied.

US President Donald Trump notoriously fought with his health professionals, as he sought to downplay the virus. In contrast, both Australia's federal and state governments were at pains from the start to stress that policy prescriptions were evidence-based, driven by the expert advice.

What do we mean by a culture of contentment?

- Australia's ability to evade the worst excesses of the global financial crisis (GFC) and seize comparative advantage in a period of affluence has stifled innovation in democratic governance.
- The absence of a burning platform for change has given rise to what renowned American economist John Kenneth Galbraith termed a 'culture of contentment'.
- Galbraith shows how a contented class—"not the privileged few but the socially and economically advantaged majority—defend their comfortable status at all costs. Middle-class voting against regulation and increased taxation that would remedy pressing social and environmental problems has created a culture of immediate gratification, leading to complacency and hindering long-term progress".
- For Galbraith, "only economic or military disaster, or the eruption of an angry underclass who have been left behind by globalisation, seem capable of changing the status quo."



2. Pre-Covid-19: democratic inertia

‘A property of matter by which it continues in its existing state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line, unless that state is changed by an external force’



Evidence of two decades of policy inertia

- **Failure of representative politics** – absence of constitutional recognition and representation of Indigenous Australians, poor representation of other minorities (groups of Asian heritage make up 12.5% of the Australian population), failure of political parties to deliver community linkage and integrity roles, the role of the monarchy as a symbol of inequality, and the imbalance of power in the Federation (Commonwealth-State-Local). **“The most centralised federal state in the world.”**
- **Domestic policy sclerosis** – limited progress in addressing long-term challenges associated with demographic change, income inequality, productivity growth, energy policy and climate change.
- **Foreign policy** – failure to look East and greater risk of a hard landing with China due to the special relationship with the US.
- **Bad governance** – Westminster principles under challenge – mounting integrity challenges, the increasing politicisation of the Australian public service and gridlock between the political class and the bureaucratic class on the way forward reflected in the abortive 2019 APS review.

Australians remain happy with underlying democratic values

Country	How democratic is the country?	How much freedom does it have?	How important is democracy?
Indonesia	70	74	80
Bangladesh	69	70	79
China	68	67	86
AUSTRALIA	68	72	86
South Korea	65	66	77
Pakistan	64	74	82
Malaysia	56	69	80
Thailand	54	57	76

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

Compulsory voting has addressed the problem of low turn-out bedevilling other democracies



But masked other problems such as

uncontrolled government advertising in the run-up to the 2019 election and problems with our political funding and disclosure scheme and growing concern about political donations made by vested interests and their influence on public policy.

(Electoral Integrity Project, 2019, <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/>)

Australians were highly distrustful of people in federal government and adversarial politics (AES 1990 to 2019, D25 2020)

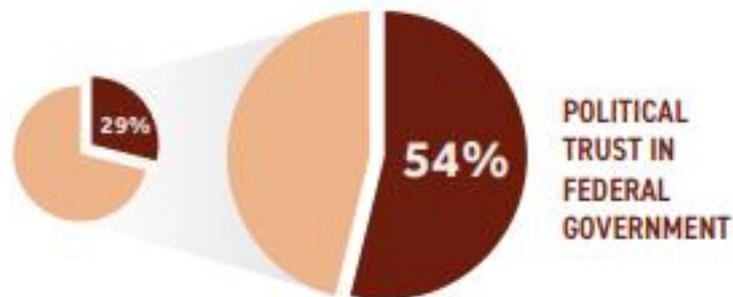


Trust in people in federal government

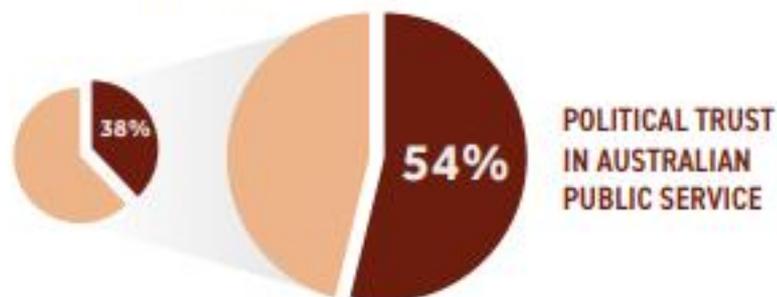
3. Political trust in times of coronavirus



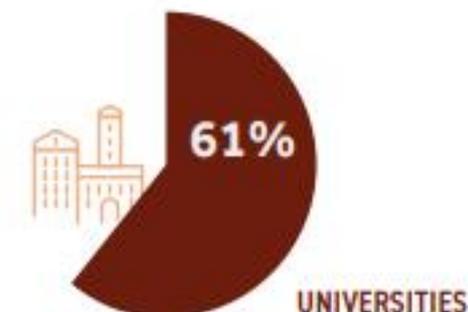
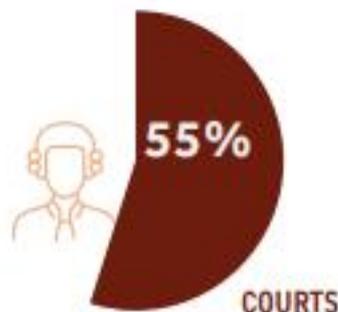
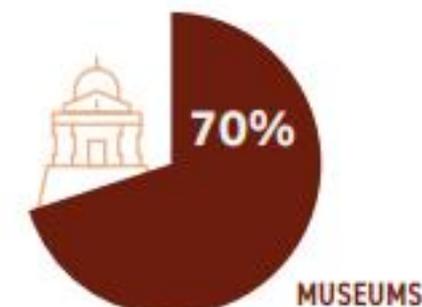
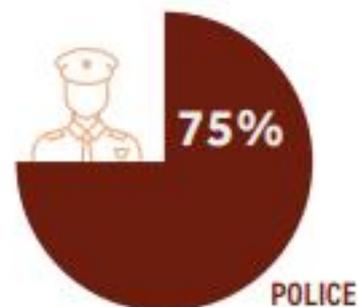
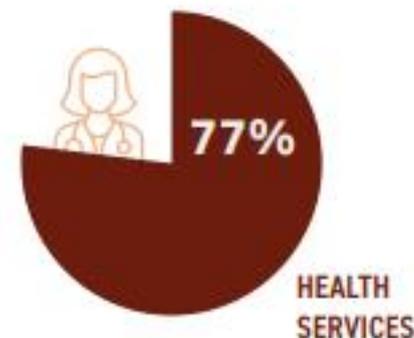
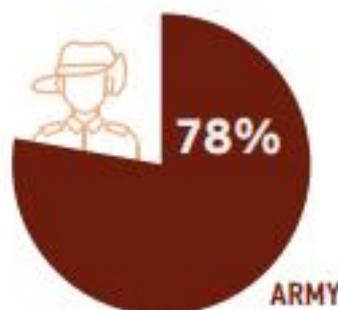
HAS THE LEVEL OF POLITICAL TRUST CHANGED DURING THE CORONAVIRUS?



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 (from 29 to 54%), and the Australian Public Service (from 38 to 54%).

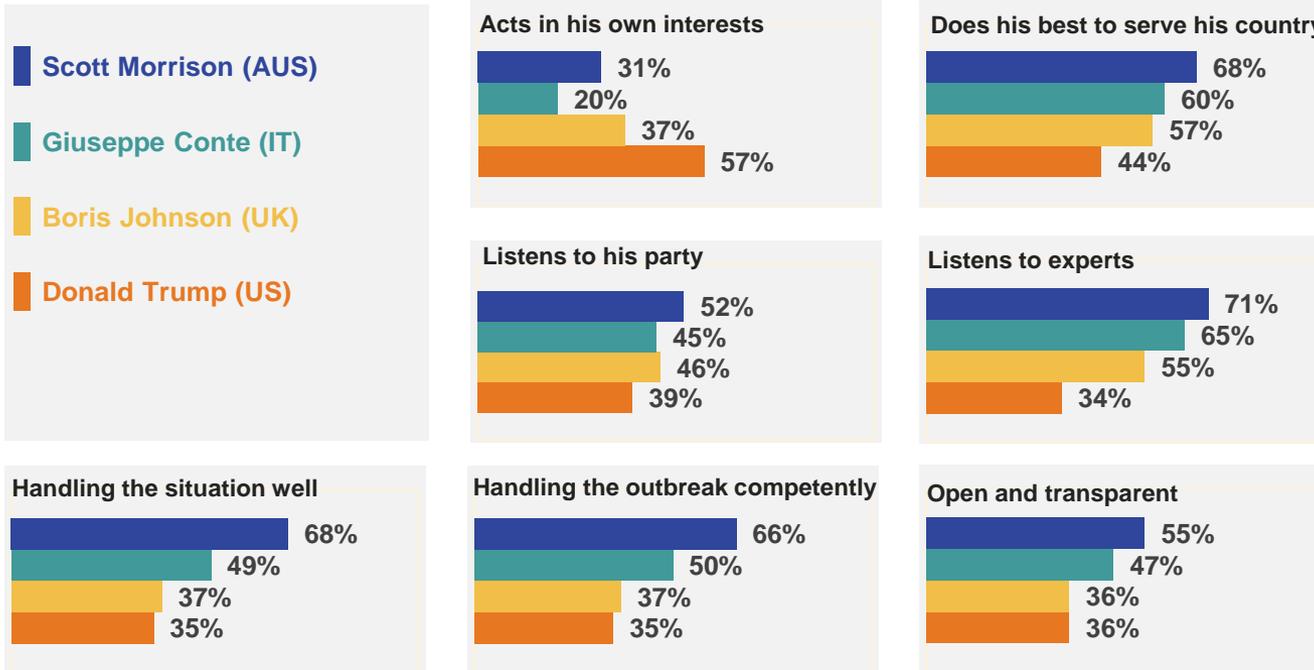


Australians have the highest level of confidence in defence and law and order organisations such as the army (78%), police (75%) and the courts (55%). Levels of trust are also high in health services (77%), cultural institutions such as museums (70%) and universities (61%).



Heightened trust is reflected in positive perceptions of Morrison's handling of COVID-19 (and a "rally around the flag" phenomenon)

% "Agree" or "strongly agree"

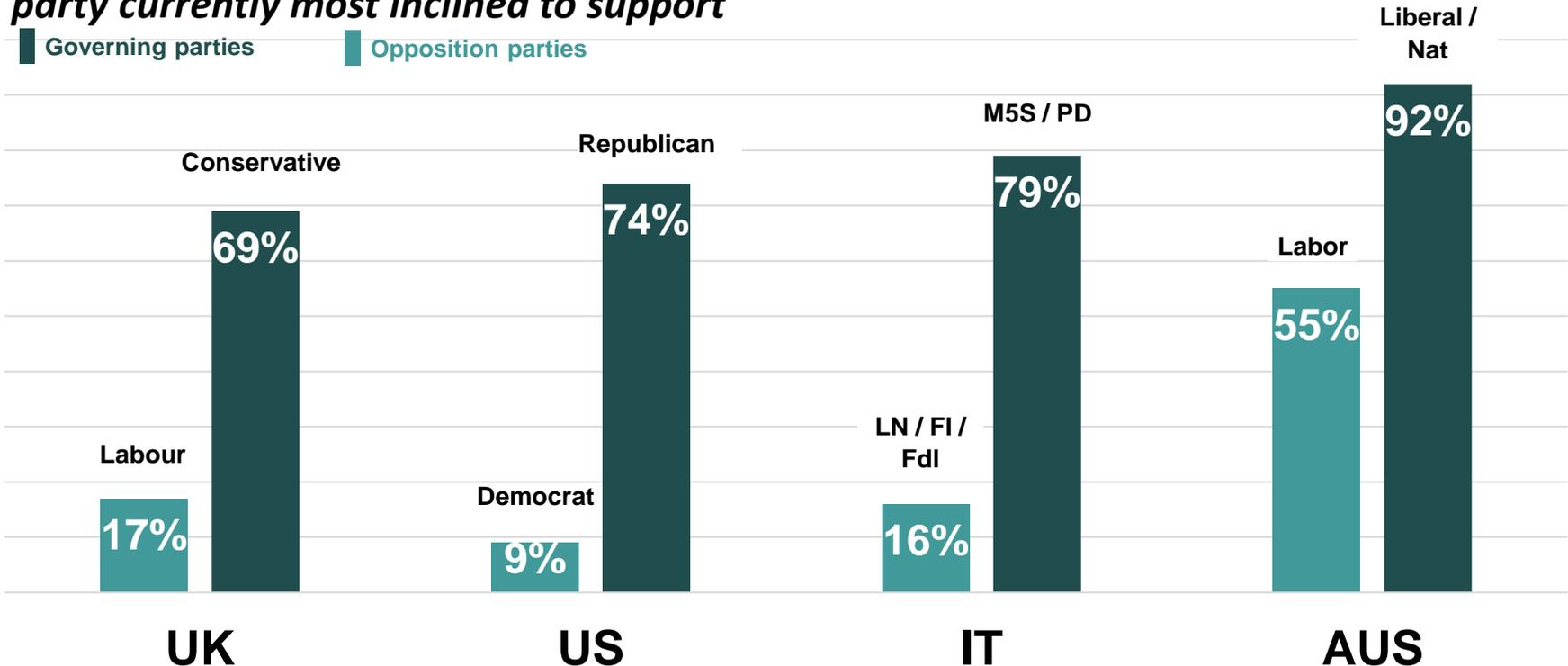


Base: 1,134 adults in Italy 21-22 May, 1,061 adults in Australia 28 May – 15 June, 1,167 adults in the UK 18-19 May, 1,150 adults in the USA 19-23 May



And shows that Australia is less polarised than other liberal democracies

% 'agree' or 'strongly agree' the leader is handling the coronavirus situation well by party currently most inclined to support



Base: 393 M5S/PD supporters, 267 LN/FI/Fdi supporters in Italy 21-22 May, 295 Labor supporters, 430 Liberal/Nat supporters in Australia 28 May - 15 June, 306 Labour supporters, 350 Conservative supporters in the UK 18-19 May, 483 Democrat supporters and 430 Republican supporters in the USA 19-23 May



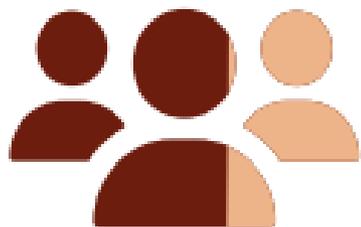
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DOES AUSTRALIA HAVE THE INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE TO MEET THE CHALLENGE OF POST-COVID-19 RECOVERY?

Here we consider issues of **SOCIAL**,
ECONOMIC and **POLITICAL**
CONFIDENCE.



60%
AUSTRALIANS

Although a significant majority of Australians (60%) 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%), to them personally (19%), or to their job or business (29%).

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%) or even 'best in the world' (8.7%).



MORE RESILIENT THAN MOST OTHER COUNTRIES
72%



BEST IN THE WORLD
8.7%

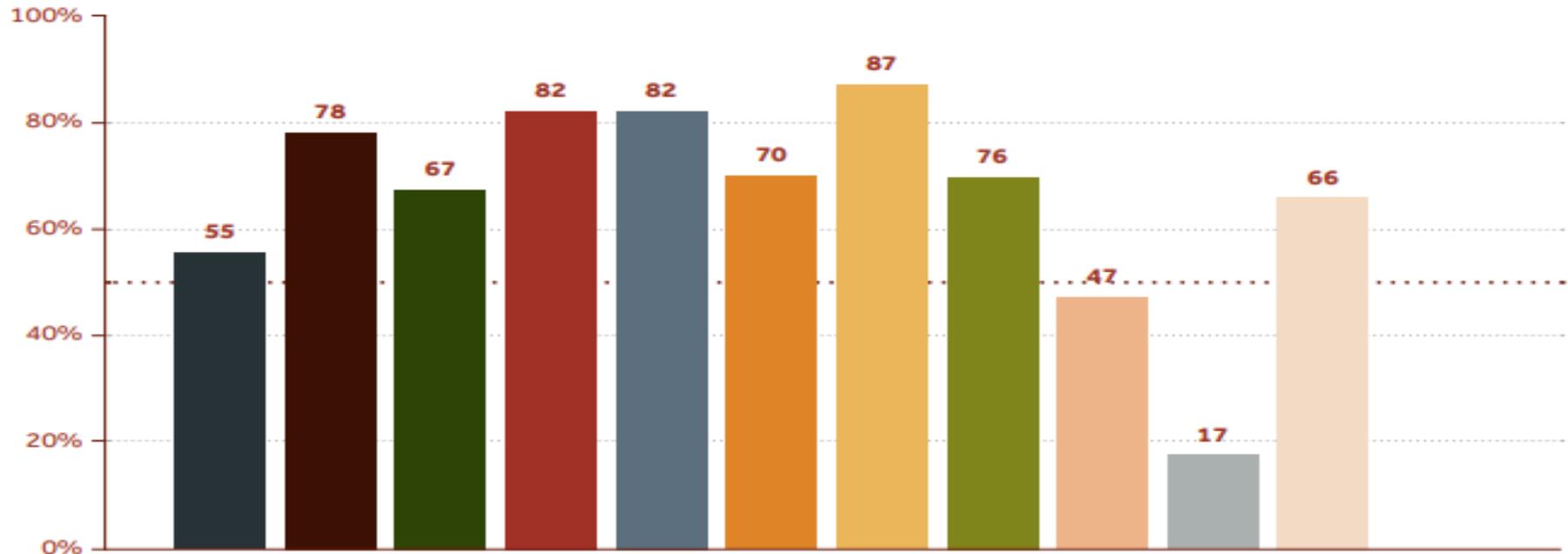
We also assessed whether views about democracy had changed as a consequence of COVID-19. In general, there is overwhelming support for representative democracy but with a focus on making the representative system of government more representative, accountable and responsive to the citizenry and underpinned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

And democratic backsliding

- In 2020, the “sports rorts” case, the weakening of political donation laws, and widespread allegations of harassment and sexual misconduct show that the poor behaviour of politicians has become culturally embedded in the practices of the political class.
- We have also witnessed the erosion of civil liberties due to the withdrawal of certain individual rights during lockdown, increased state surveillance through the use of smartphone location tracking, and social media monitoring.
- And the power and prestige of Parliament has taken a backseat to the Executive in times of crisis management and will need to reassert itself in the recovery process.



4. Future democratic governance: culture of contentment or the end of complacency?



- As usual
- More representative
- More participatory
- More decisive but accountable
- More collaborative
- Experts have more say
- Politicians more honest and fair
- More responsive to constituents
- Less centralised
- Get rid of democracy
- Continue with national cabinet

What would you like Australian democracy post-Covid-19 to look like?

Common ground reform trajectories

Green = emerging majority support for reform; amber = increasing minority support for reform; red = small minority support for reform

Diverse representation

- Elected Head of State
- Representation for Indigenous Australians
- Representation for other marginalised groups
- Reduce the age of voting to 16
- Equality of representation on the basis of gender, generation and location

Integrity reform

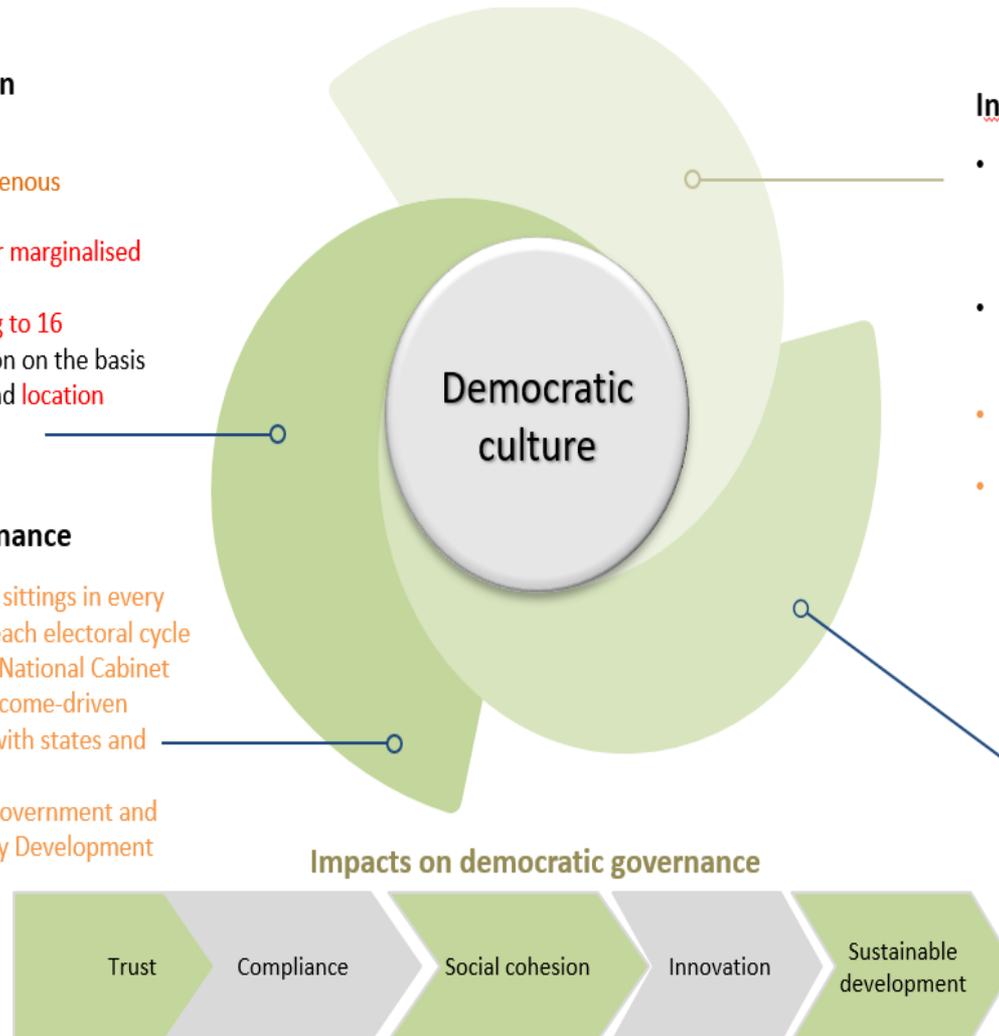
- Co-design parliamentary pledge, performance and integrity reviews for parliamentarians and staff, power of recall, Parliamentary Watch
- Strengthen national integrity system through Federal ICAC and Active Integrity Agency model
- Introduction of Fairness Act to ensure balanced media reporting
- Open government reforms to ensure fair access for the media to the machinery of government

Collaborative governance

- Federal parliamentary sittings in every state and territory in each electoral cycle
- Power sharing via the National Cabinet
- Co-government of outcome-driven public policy process with states and territories
- Recognition for local government and Indigenous Community Development Councils

Co-production with citizens and experts

- Evidence-based test for regulation, policy, programs and services
- Lay membership of Parliamentary Committees
- Citizen/expert co-design by default in program and service design
- Establishment of citizen public service jury system
- Heightened role for Parliamentary Petition



Culture of contentment or the end of complacency?

We have identified examples of both advances in governance and democratic backsliding.

The evidence also suggests that Australian citizens think that participatory reforms can be used to bolster the legitimacy of representative democracy and enhance trust between government and citizen.

However, there is only limited evidence so far to suggest that the pandemic and associated economic peril is compelling Government or Opposition to end the age of complacency and challenge the established culture of contentment.

