POLITICAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF CORONAVIRUS: IS AUSTRALIA STILL THE LUCKY COUNTRY?

A Snapshot of the findings from a national survey

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POLITICAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF CORONAVIRUS: IS AUSTRALIA STILL THE LUCKY COUNTRY? 3
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%).

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.


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%).
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.

Australians continue to have low levels of trust in social media (from 20 to 19%) but trust in TV (from 32 to 39%), radio (from 38 to 41%) and newsprint (from 29 to 37%) have all marginally increased. Australians continue to exhibit high levels of trust in scientists and experts (77%).
POLITICAL TRUST AND DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF CORONAVIRUS: IS AUSTRALIA STILL THE LUCKY COUNTRY?

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. Mark McGowan from Western Australia (49%) is the highest performing state premier, followed by South Australia’s Steven Marshall (44%). The poorest rated state premier is Queensland’s Annastacia Palaszczuk (28%) followed by New South Wales Premier, Gladys Berejiklian (34%). 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.

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

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 percent 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.
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%) 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%).

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 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’.

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.

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%).

Lesson 2

Lesson 1

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 3: the significant increase in trust in the Australian Public Service (38 to 54%) 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 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.

Lesson 4: 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.

Lesson 4

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.
This report forms part of a broader comparative research collaboration between the Democracy 2025 initiative in the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House and the Trustgov Project at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom on political trust and democracy in times of Coronavirus.

We seek to investigate whether public attitudes towards issues of political trust, and democratic institutions and practices have changed in consequence of COVID-19 in Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US).

These countries have been selected as they include two countries (the UK and the US) that are viewed to be poor responders to the pandemic, one country (Italy) that began poorly but has subsequently demonstrated significant adaptive capacity and a further country (Australia) which appears to have managed the pandemic successfully from the outset. This sample of countries will allow us to generate high quality comparative data for measuring the significance of political trust in enabling effective government management and recovery from COVID-19.

We commissioned the Social Research Institute at Ipsos to process a nationally representative on-line national survey in Australia with population quotas aligned with the 2016 census. This comprised a representative sample of 1059 adults aged between 18 and 75 years for the main survey and a booster sample of 50 Adults aged 75 years+.

The four surveys were conducted between May and June 2020 in Australia, Italy, the UK, and the US using the same core questions to allow for comparison.

This report provides a snapshot of the high-level descriptive findings from the Australian survey. It foreshadows two more detailed reports to follow in August and September 2020 – one on the comparative findings and one on the Australian findings.

The report assesses whether the Australian system of governance has proved robust enough to win the trust of its citizens and enable them to follow the measures necessary to contain, eradicate and recover from the virus.

It is organised into three parts. Part one explains how we understand the concept of political trust. In part two we present the survey findings in response to four research questions:

1. Has the level of political trust changed during the pandemic?
2. How effective has COVID-19 management and leadership been in Australia?
3. Have Australians been compliant with COVID-19 measures?
4. Does Australia have the institutional resilience to meet the challenge of post-COVID-19 recovery?

The report concludes with a reflection on the lessons that can be drawn from Australia’s management of COVID-19 and what it needs to do in the recovery period to ensure that it remains a lucky country.

2. The TrustGov Project is funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council and is based at the University of Southampton (see: https://trustgov.net/). The About the TrustGov Project for an overview of its mission.
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY POLITICAL TRUST?

In keeping with our previous report\(^4\), we understand trust in a political sense as a relational concept about “holding a positive perception about the actions of an individual or an organisation” (OECD 2017: 16) that requires “keeping promises and agreements” (Hethrington 2005: 1).

There are three different components of trust that operate in a liberal democracy:

- **Trust** occurs when A trusts that B will act on their behalf and in their interests to do X in particular and more generally.

- **Mistrust** occurs when A assumes that B may not act on their behalf and in their interests to do X but will judge B according to information and context. This definition is associated with the notion of a critical citizen and active citizenship and is viewed to strengthen democracy.

- **Distrust** occurs when A assumes that B is untrustworthy and will cause harm to their interests in respect of X or more generally.

A healthy dose of mistrust is said to be good for a liberal democratic system designed around checks and balances to ensure good governance and democratic practice.

In contrast to mistrust, the evidence suggests that political distrust weakens democracy by: making the business of government more resource intensive (Fukuyama 1995); eroding civic engagement and conventional forms of political participation (Franklin 2004) such as voter registration or turnout; lowering public confidence in government, reducing support for progressive public policies and promoting risk aversion and short-termism in government (Diamond & Plattner, eds. 2015); and, it potentially creates the space for the rise of authoritarian-populist forces at a time when social cohesion is at a premium (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). There may also be implications for long-term democratic stability as liberal democratic regimes are thought most durable when built upon popular legitimacy (Stoker et al., 2018).

Trust in politics matters, it is argued, because governments need the trust of citizens to tackle challenging issues and problems confronting society. 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 in managing the virus.

FINDINGS

Has the level of political trust changed during the Coronavirus?

Just a short time ago, the 2019 Australian Election Study (AES) and the latest wave of the World Values Survey 2017–20 (WVS) recorded the lowest levels of trust in ‘people in government’ (AES, 2019) and ‘trust in federal government’ (WVS, 2017-20) on record at 25 per cent and 30 per cent respectively (see Table 1).^1

Table 1: Trust – Australia compared with other established democracies (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Political Trust %</th>
<th>Social Trust %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 2017–20

Measures:

POLITICAL TRUST

Could you tell me how much confidence in government you have: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? Trust responses taken as great/quite lot

SOCIAL TRUST

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people? Trust responses taken as ‘most people can be trusted’

We can now report that 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 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%).

### Table 2: Confidence in key institutions across four countries – percentage who say they have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Service</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Service</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural institutions</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australians continue to have low levels of trust in social media (from 20 to 19%) but trust in TV (from 32 to 39%), radio (from 38 to 41%) and newsprint (from 29 to 37%) have all marginally increased (see Figure 1). Australians continue to exhibit high levels of trust in scientists and experts (77%).


7. We decided not to collect data on the Federal Parliament as it didn’t convene during the period of data collection.
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 (see Table 3). Indeed, he possesses the strongest performance measures in our four-country sample.

He is deemed to listen to the advice of experts and other political views. He also performs well in comparison with his counterparts on empathy measures (‘[he] cares about people like me’), serving the national interest (‘[he] wants to do his best to serve the country in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak’) and public communication (‘[he] is open and transparent in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak’).
Table 3: Public perceptions of the quality of prime ministerial/presidential leadership during COVID-19 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UK (Johnson)</th>
<th>US (Trump)</th>
<th>Italy (Conte)</th>
<th>Australia (Morrison)</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listens to experts in how to handle the coronavirus/COVID-19 outbreak</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens to other politicians from government party/parties</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens to politicians from opposition parties</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares about people like me</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is handling the coronavirus situation well</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is handling the coronavirus outbreak competently and efficiently</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is handling the coronavirus outbreak poorly</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually acts in his own interests in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wants to do his best to serve the country in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is generally free of corruption in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is open and transparent in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of respondents in four countries who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with statements about how the leader of their country is handling COVID-19.

There is also strong support for the Prime Minister’s handling of COVID-19 across the federation (see Figure 2). Queenslanders (76%) are the most appreciative of the Prime Minister’s efforts and South Australians the least appreciative (62%). There were only 25 respondents in Tasmania, 22 in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and 10 in Northern Territory (NT) so we should not draw inferences from those responses to the general population in these states and territories, but it is interesting to note that all 10 respondents in NT agreed that the Prime Minister had been handling the crisis well.
The findings look very different when we look at perceptions of the quality of COVID-19 management by state and territory political leaders (see Figure 3). 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 attach to evidence-based decision-making.
In Figures 4 and 5, we present these measures by state and territory separately for those with and without sufficient number of respondents to make inferences to their populations. Mark McGowan from Western Australia (49%) is the highest performing state premier, followed by South Australia’s Steven Marshall (44%). Figure 4 shows that the poorest rated state premier is Queensland’s Annastacia Palaszczuk (28%) followed by New South Wales Premier, Gladys Berejiklian (34%), but Figure 5 shows that the few respondents in ACT (24%) and NT (33%) also rate their leaders poorly. The general assessment of the handling of the crisis by state and territory leaders is relatively low but they are deemed to perform much better in terms of ‘listening to experts’ and ‘caring about citizens’. 
Figure 4: Perceptions of the quality of leadership during COVID-19 by state (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>100%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- State prem. handling coronavirus well
- State prem. listens to experts
- Brendan Murphy handling coronavirus well
- State prem. cares ab. people like me
- State prem. listens to opposition

Figure 5: Perceptions of the quality of state and territory leadership during COVID-19 by state and territory noting small numbers of respondents (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>100%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- State prem. handling coronavirus well
- State prem. listens to experts
- Brendan Murphy handling coronavirus well
- State prem. cares ab. people like me
- State prem. listens to opposition
Have Australians been compliant with COVID-19 measures?

In terms of compliance with COVID-19 measures, most Australians comply with the key interventions (see Figure 6). Australians are marginally less compliant across the range of interventions (i.e. taking the average of the seven questions, measured on a scale where 10 stood for having change their behaviour ‘very much’ and 0 ‘not at all’) than their counterparts in UK and Italy but equal with the US (see Figure 7). 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. 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.  

Victorians are the most compliant with anti-COVID-19 measures; a somewhat ironic observation given the recent upsurge in COVID-19 cases in Victoria (see Figure 8). 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 (ACT: 0; Tasmania: 0, and the Northern Territory: 1).

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

This section evaluates public perceptions of COVID-19 recovery, focusing on social, economic and political confidence issues.

THE ECONOMY

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 (28%) (See Table 4). 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 (see Figure 10), with most of them believing that Australia is more resilient than most other countries (72%) or even best in the world (8.7%). Women, young people, Labor voters, and those on lower incomes with lower levels of qualifications are the most pessimistic on all these confidence measures.
The impact of COVID-19 on democracy

We also assessed whether views about democracy had changed in consequence of COVID-19 (see Figure 10). Although 55 per cent of Australians think that ‘we need Australian democracy to be business as usual’, ‘in a post-Coronavirus world’ there is emphatic support for making politicians ‘behave with more honesty and empathy and discharge their responsibilities fairly’ (87%), be more ‘decisive but accountable to the citizenry for their actions’ (82%) and ‘collaborative and less adversarial’ (82%).

There is also strong support for ‘experts to have a greater say in decision-making’ (70%), for politicians to ‘be freer from political party machines and more responsive to their constituents’ (76%) and for ‘more participatory democracy where citizens have a greater say in decision-making’ (67%).

There was less support for decentralising power within the federal system (47%) or getting ‘rid of democracy and replac[ing] it with a strong leader’ (17%) but strong support for continuing with the National Cabinet (66%).

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 more inclusive, cleaner, collaborative and evidence-based.
Figure 11: Perceptions of how Australian democracy should change post-COVID-19 (%)

- As usual: 55%
- More representative: 78%
- More participatory: 67%
- More decisive but accountable: 82%
- More collaborative: 82%
- Experts have more say: 70%
- Politicians more honest and fair: 87%
- More responsive to constituents: 76%
- Less centralised: 47%
- Get rid of democracy: 17%
- Continue with national cabinet: 66%
IN CONCLUSION: STAYING LUCKY

Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second rate people who share its luck. It lives on other people’s ideas, and, although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise (Horne 1964).

Context matters. On 5 May 2020, the British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab announced that the number of people killed by the coronavirus in the UK stood at 32,313, the second highest death toll in the world.\(^\text{11}\) By the time of writing (6 July 2020) the number of fatalities had reached 44,305 in the UK\(^\text{12}\) and the number of deaths from COVID-19 in Australia stood at 104. Critics have accused a “complacent” British government of “massively underestimating” the gravity of the coronavirus crisis.\(^\text{13}\) The prominent Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera reported that the situation in the UK was “like a nightmare from which you cannot awake, but in which you landed because of your own fault or stupidity”. London correspondent Christoph Meyer writes that Britain has emerged as Europe’s “problem child” of the COVID-19 crisis.\(^\text{14}\)

Competent management of COVID-19 in Australia appears to have impacted positively on levels of trust and confidence in the future and negatively on compliance rates with containment measures. There is of course 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 but, as noted above, the figures still pale into insignificance compared with Italy, the UK, and the US.\(^\text{15}\)

Although international comparison of COVID-19 death tolls are problematic there can be no doubt that the lived citizen experience of the pandemic has been dramatically different in the UK, Italy and the US when compared with Australia. Every citizen in those countries hit hard by COVID-19 has a heart-breaking personal story to tell about a friend, colleague or family member who has perished or suffered in the pandemic. In Australia, such stories are a rarity and most of us have been fortunate onlookers on the pandemic further perpetuating its image as the Lucky Country.


\(^\text{14}\) See Donald Horne’s ironic discussion in The Lucky Country (1964), evaluated by Ian Lowe (2016) and others in The Lucky Country? Reinventing Australia.

So how far can we put Australia’s strong performance down to luck rather than design?

Australia has been lucky in so far that it benefits from its relative geographical isolation which has tempered the spread of the virus. Eight out of the 10 busiest international airports in the world are based in countries with the highest levels of fatalities from the pandemic. It is also lucky to be able to look both East and West for progressive policy ideas to combat the virus. But unlike the Global Financial Crisis where Australia’s interdependent economic relationship with China buffered the worst impacts of the recession, during COVID-19 the Australian system of governance has proved robust enough to win the trust of its citizens and enable them to negotiate the measures necessary to contain and manage the virus.

Where national leaders have not completely bungled their pandemic response (exceptions include the UK, the US and Brazil) the popularity of elected leaders has risen due to a ‘rally around the flag’ phenomenon originally proposed by American political scientist John Mueller (1970). The characteristics that Mueller linked with the surges of popular support for incumbents were inspired by Cold War events but have substantial resonance with the COVID-19 outbreak. As Will Jennings notes:

For a rally-round-the-flag to occur, the event had to be international, involve the country and its leader directly, and be ‘specific, dramatic, and sharply focused’. The global significance of the COVID-19 pandemic – and the fact that the fight against it can (and has been) likened to a war – fits perfectly with this definition.

As to what drives this rally-round-the-flag at times of national crisis, patriotic feelings led the public to view the incumbent as the focus of national unity, leading to greater support as citizens set aside their partisan biases. This has been markedly so in Australia, where 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.

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

18. Ibid.
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%).

Lesson 3: the significant increase in trust in the Australian Public Service (54 from 38%) 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.¹⁹

Our survey data shows that Australians are fearful of negative economic impacts from COVID-19 (see Table 4 and Figure 9) which is likely to constrain consumer spending and private investment and (in line with Krugman’s New Keynesianism) to keep the economy afloat public investment and spending will need to bridge the gap.

There are also some sobering lessons to be drawn from the GFC in this regard. Nobel prize winner Paul Krugman argued in The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008 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. ‘Austerity mania’ as Krugman calls it, fatally damaged elite credibility because ordinary working families no longer believed that they cared about people like them. In Eastern Europe, white nationalist parties came to power after centre-left governments alienated the working class by letting themselves be bullied into austerity policies. In Britain, support for right-wing extremists is strongest in shrinking communities hit hardest by fiscal austerity. And would we now have Trump if years of austerity hadn’t delayed economic recovery under Barack Obama?

There are also some more speculative insights about COVID-19 interventions that are worth making here that are not aligned with our survey findings. The Australian government’s smart decision to close the international borders quickly demonstrates that the case for re-opening international borders and ceasing quarantine measures needs to be based on ‘overwhelming’ evidence. Striking the right balance between the possibility of perpetual quarantine and opening-up for international trade and tourism will be a significant governance challenge in the recovery period.

¹⁹. See Stoker et al., 2018b.
It is also evident from the recent upsurge of cases in Victoria that social distancing measures are likely to become a new fact of life beyond the pandemic. And given that our survey data suggests that Australians are pragmatic compliers there is strong evidence that Australians will make the necessary behavioural changes.

After a decade of disappointment with digital democratic governance, governments and citizens around the world are embracing opportunities for digital participation. More and more citizens appear to be up for digital citizenship and engagement than ever before. The outstanding success of Australian telehealth services during the pandemic in easing the burden on health providers and the relative success of the COVID-SAFE application for contact tracing, provides strong evidence for extending and mainstreaming digital services nationwide.

Although it is heartening to see the Australian public’s attachment to the importance of expert advice driving policy responses to the pandemic (see Table 3 and Figures 4 and 5); it would be wrong, as Krugman suggests, to view post-COVID 19 recovery as a simple fix between political and technocratic elites. Our survey findings suggest that the Australian citizenry expect a new style of politics post-COVID-19 (see Table 4). In focus group research that we conducted during the Eden Monaro by-election campaign at the end of June 2020, the vast majority of participants (17 out of 19) did not believe that any political party was offering a clear COVID-19 recovery plan and were surprised that there hadn’t been a national conversation on the issue.20

We have made the case elsewhere for convening a citizen’s assembly on the subject,21 but building on the burst of covert political trust in the Australian system there is support in our survey for a 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 legitimize a Coalition or Labor vision for the future could well be too late.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ABOUT DEMOCRACY 2025
– STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

Democracy 2025 – strengthening democratic practice was established by the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD), together with the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra (UC-IGPA), in October 2018. It was launched in the context of the lowest level recording of public trust and satisfaction with Australia’s democratic arrangements and set against the global rise of debased semi-democracies.

Democracy 2025 audits and celebrates 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 and be the best democracy that we can be.

MoAD holds a unique position on the frontline of democracy, civic agency and change. We are a museum not just of objects but of ideas. We seek to empower Australians through exhibitions, schools’ learning programs and events that both stimulate and inspire. Trusted by the public, government, public service and business alike, we are uniquely able to advance national conversations about democracy, past, present and future.

This report, the first of three written in collaboration with TRUSTGOV on the theme Political Trust in Times of Coronavirus, investigates whether Australian attitudes towards democratic institutions and practices have changed as a consequence of COVID-19. It will add fresh and unique insights to the growing body of applied research that underpins our activities helping us drive a process of national reflection, understanding, and renewal of Australia’s democratic practice.

Find out more at: democracy2025.gov.au.

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Director
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ABOUT TRUSTGOV

The TrustGov Project was established at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom in 2019 through a grant from the British Economic and Social Research Council and support from the University of Southampton and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. It has five key aims and objectives.

1. To reframe theoretical debates. The project uses a ‘trust but verify’ notion as the normative yardstick to assess how far rational citizens form judgments about the trustworthiness of the agencies and the institutions of national and global governance.

2. To develop innovative concepts and expand scientific evidence. We do so by developing and gathering data for novel and innovative indices of trust in, and trustworthiness of, political institutions that complement the existing measures that form the basis of much of our knowledge. We document patterns and trends of trust in political institutions around the world – especially using survey data to map public confidence in the executive, judicial and legislative branches of national governments and in global governance agencies like the UN, World Bank and IMF. Comparisons are extended far beyond the boundaries of contemporary democracies to examine the evidence in a global context, covering a spectrum of regimes from the authoritarian to the democratic. The TrustGov project uses a multimethod and multilevel research design to examine new empirical evidence available from (i) exploratory focus groups, (ii) cross-national time-series survey observational data gathered in many countries, sub-regions, and types of regime worldwide, and (iii) randomized experimental data.

3. To expand knowledge about the drivers of trust. We do so by analyzing and comparing public evaluations of procedural and policy performance with governance indices at global, national and regional levels, along with processes of communication and information, to assess how far the public is capable of making knowledgeable judgments about the trustworthiness of national and global government agencies. What are the reasons why Type I and Type II errors occur?

4. To test empirical evidence about the spatial drivers of political trust. In addition, we seek to determine how far trust in political institutions varies by place – such as among nations, regions within a country, and among rural and urban communities. In particular, we seek to explore the relationship between support for national and global agencies of governance and place-based cultural identities and economic divides among citizens.

5. To inform multiple stakeholders about our findings. The project uses the lessons of our research to reframe public debate about trust, trustworthiness, and critical citizens who ‘trust but verify’, sharing evidence-based knowledge about practical reforms and best practices that multiple stakeholders can use to restore trust.

The core team of Principal Investigators for the TrustGov Project includes Professor Will Jennings (University of Southampton), Professor Pippa Norris (Harvard University and the University of Sydney), and Professor Gerry Stoker (University of Southampton and the University of Canberra).

For further information see: https://trustgov.net/