

ARTICLE

Narrowing the Trust Divide

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Mistrust between elected politicians and the electorate continues to widen, undermining faith in democracy itself. Political science scholar and University College London graduate Fergus Neilson presents proposals from political professionals and voters to narrow the “trust divide” and improve the internal resilience of western liberal democracy.

Reality and implications of a widening Trust Divide

The Trust Divide defines the gap between voters' expectations of, and their perceived satisfaction with, the performance of politicians and government institutions. It is held as axiomatic that the narrower the Divide, the healthier the democracy; because trust is absolutely crucial to a government's ability to govern effectively,¹ and most prosperous societies are invariably held together by a tight-knit social fabric of trust and cooperation.²

Some academics suggest that tracking trust and satisfaction in politicians and government shows little more than trendless fluctuation rather than long-term decline.³ However, it is hard to dismiss the decline revealed by two Australian surveys. In 2007, 86 per cent of citizens were satisfied with the way their democracy was working⁴ but by 2017 that had dropped to 41 per cent.⁵ Nor should it be possible to ignore the long-term trend in Britain, as measured by using time-series data from repeated

1. Baxter, 2021

2. Putnam *et al.*, 1993

3. Norris, 2011; Merkel, 2014; O'Neill, 2018

4. Bean *et al.*, 2017

5. Evans *et al.*, 2019

survey data and multiple poll series that reveals a steady increase in political discontentment; up from 46 per cent in 1966 to 60 per cent in 2016.⁶

This is not to suggest that democracy is broken nor that it has reached an end-state. And, although democracy is under pressure, it does contain the seeds of its own resurgence.⁷ Not the least because 74 per cent of Australians believe that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.⁸ Recovery, however, will be dependent on narrowing the Trust Divide between the dissatisfaction of democratic electorates and the self-satisfaction of elected parliamentarians.

The writer's concerns are endorsed by academic and other sources stating reasons for the decline in trust and highlighting the risk to liberal democracy posed by further decline. Academics and other commentators also propose a range of reforms aimed at reinforcing democracy against the dangers it faces, from illiberal democracy overseas and, at home, the election of poor leaders, particularly ones that threaten to erode the liberal aspects of western democracy.⁹

In this context, research employing multiple methodologies¹⁰ was applied to quantify satisfaction with the state of democracy today and confirm the extent to which trust in politics and government institutions has declined over the past decade. The first round of research involved face-to-face, Zoom and mobile phone interviews with Australian politicians (n=23); followed by an initial voter survey of (primarily urban) social, business and educational contacts across the Anglosphere (Australia, United Kingdom and the United States) (n=151); and a second survey of (primarily rural) Queenslanders (n=37).¹¹

Survey results suggest that low levels of voter satisfaction with democracy and declining levels of trust in government should give all politicians considerable pause for thought.

The research process also aimed at generating suggestions for political and institutional reforms intended to narrow the Trust Divide. To this end, a follow-up survey was sent by email to all previously interviewed public figures and all individuals who responded to the initial voter surveys. Recipients were requested to score (by Importance and Implementability) 20 primary reform initiatives derived from respondent proposals in the initial voter surveys. These primary reform initiatives were focused on building the operational efficiency and resilience of democracy. Scoring against Importance and Implementability generated two reform matrices (see tables 8 and 9) that allowed explicit comparisons between Australian and British perspectives on the matter.¹²

The overriding conclusion from respondent feedback is that the continued robust good health of liberal democracy depends on narrowing the Trust Divide.

That, in turn, will be dependent on maintaining the integrity of government institutions and on reinforcing their continued ability to operate independently in the face of executive creep by aspirant autocrats and their useful idiots.

Stating the Case across the Anglosphere

The writer cast a wide net beyond the requisite academic literature review to include public figure interviews, voter surveys, international commentariat and contemporary mainstream media coverage. These all confirm the widening of a Trust Divide and conclude that this widening

6. Jennings *et al.*, 2017

7. Levitsky and Way, 2016; Economist, 2020

8. Kassam, 2022

9. Plattner, 2017

10. Putnam *et al.*, 1993

11. See Supplementary material

12. See Supplementary material

poses risks for the future stability and strength of liberal democracy.

Doubts have been expressed as to the validity of surveys in tracking changing levels of trust, with claims that they only show fluctuation; but, over time, often show little evidence of decline.¹³ While Schmitter,¹⁴ has criticised reporting by *Freedom House*,¹⁵ by stating that such surveys could overstate the case.

However, the USA's *National Election Survey*, as reported by the Pew Research Centre, shows that under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, around 75 per cent of the surveyed population expressed trust in their government, with an intermediate peak of 50 per cent early in the George Bush presidency (after 9/11) and a drop-off to 25 per cent under Clinton. The most recent research reveals that only two-in-ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right.¹⁶

The long-standing *Australian Electoral Study* also shows that satisfaction with democracy is at its lowest level (59 per cent) since the constitutional crisis of the 1970s and that trust in government has reached its lowest level on record, with just 25 per cent believing that people in government can be trusted.¹⁷ It has also suggested, if current trends continue, that by 2025 less than 10 per cent of the Australian population could be expected to trust politicians and political institutions.¹⁸

Trust is also at historically low levels in the United Kingdom. In 1973, the *Edelman Trust Barometer*¹⁹

showed that 48 per cent of those surveyed thought that the British system of government worked well or extremely well. Twenty-five years later, that figure had halved to 24 per cent.²⁰ More recently, the *British Social Attitudes Survey* in 2019 suggested that only 15 per cent of respondents said they trust the government either most of the time or just about always.²¹ That is the lowest recorded level in over 40 years.

Identified causes of the decline in trust

In a world beset by climate change, mass migration, COVID-19, superpower rivalry, emergent despotism, growing social polarisation and slowing economic growth,²² it is hard to pinpoint the most potent driver of the evident decline of trust in and satisfaction with politicians and government. However, relevant literature identifies three broad causes: economic malaise; disillusion with politics, politicians and institutional performance; and the resultant social and intellectual polarisation.

The first broad cause, economic malaise and the associated widening opportunity gulf between the haves and have-nots, can be linked to concern with slowing economic growth, the uneven distribution of its benefits, declining employment prospects (now and in the future) and the stagnation of living standards.²³ Suffering from all four, the voting public has become disenchanted with established mainstream parties and increasingly attracted to populist rhetoric.²⁴ Piketty even suggests that unless capitalism is reformed, the democratic order itself will be threatened.²⁵

13. O'Neill, 2018

14. Schmitter, 2016

15. Repucci, 2020; Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021

16. Pew, 2022

17. Cameron and McAllister, 2019

18. Evans, 2019

19. Edelman, 2021

20. Seldon, 2009

21. Sugue, 2020

22. Grayling, 2017; Keane, 2020

23. Mounk and Foa, 2018; Kershaw, 2019; Taylor, 2019

24. Tormey, 2016

25. Piketty, 2014

Disillusion is driven by a decline in the performance of democracies and a distrust of politicians who have failed to keep their promises²⁶ and who seem open to all forms of corruption, including sleaze, expenses scandals, second jobs and inappropriate lobbying. Inevitably, years of deteriorating standards of behaviour on both sides of politics have led to declining levels of trust in our politicians and lowering levels of respect for our leaders.²⁷ And, as stated bluntly by Jennings *et al.*, the most intense points of citizen disillusionment with the political class reside in perceptions of its flawed character and its bias to the protection of its own interests and those of the already rich and powerful.²⁸

The risk of state capture by corporate interests also remains an issue, as highlighted by Hellman and Schankerman,²⁹ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), and recent exposure of Uber's lobbying activity across the European Union.³⁰ All of which contribute to the widely held belief that court systems no longer treat everyone fairly and that elections bring little change.³¹

In the United Kingdom, disillusion is growing with the executive branch's overt pursuit of quasi-presidential power. This includes favouring the chumocracy, undermining the courts, co-opting the House of Lords, widening the coverage of the Official Secrets Act and limiting the rights of free assembly and protest.³²

This widespread disillusion, amplified by a 24-hour news cycle³³ and the echo chamber of social media, seems to have magnified social and intellectual

polarisation between hyper-partisan and mutually antagonistic groups at all levels. There is less and less space for compromise in the face of: a steady drift to populism;³⁴ intransigence between groups within society (e.g., Leavers vs Remainers); partisanship and division within government;³⁵ and disconnect between the governed and the government itself.

In the United States nothing could emphasise this polarisation more than: the executive capture and politicisation of the Supreme Court;³⁶ gridlock in Congress (vetocracy); and the reality that the preferences of the average American appear to have only a miniscule, near-zero statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.³⁷ All these factors contributing to the decomposition of society and the heightening of distrust and division within western liberal democracy.³⁸

Risks that a widening Trust Divide poses for liberal democracy

It should come as no surprise that public trust and mutual respect are at rock bottom when almost half the Australian population think that corruption is commonplace and that 94 per cent are of the strong view that politicians should resign if they lie, while 89 per cent are resigned to the fact that politicians are both likely to lie and likely to get away with it.³⁹

Thus, it would be hard to argue with the general principle that a public more distrustful of, less interested in, and less committed to democratic

26. John *et al.*, 2019

27. O'Mahoney, 2020

28. Jennings *et al.*, 2016

29. Hellman and Schankerman, 2000

30. Lewis *et al.*, 2022

31. Wike *et al.*, 2019

32. Helm *et al.*, 2021; Smyth, 2021; Taylor, 2021

33. Tingle, 2015

34. Gidron and Hall, 2017; Margalit, 2019

35. Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019

36. Reich, 2022

37. Gilens and Page, 2014

38. Fukuyama, 2020

39. Crabb, 2021

systems would be giving oxygen to groups that are hostile to democracy.⁴⁰ Weakening trust erodes civic engagement and conventional forms of political participation (voter registration and turnout), potentially impacting the peaceful transition of power after free and fair elections. Weakening trust then impacts the stability and quality of democracy, and will create space for the rise of authoritarian-populist forces.⁴¹ While the growing mistrust of government is associated with an increased support for populist political candidates,⁴² further delegitimising mainstream politics and undermining the independence of government institutions.

Growing levels of citizen distrust may also accelerate the bias of politicians towards short-termism⁴³ making it increasingly difficult for governments to deliver economic growth, social progress and procedural fairness;⁴⁴ and harder still for them to achieve the consensus required to solve problems such as regional inequality and climate change.

Has anything actually changed?

Perhaps it has ever been thus. We have been warned that when large numbers of people feel disenfranchised and disconnected from each other, from dominant social institutions and parliamentary government more generally, they become easy prey to populism, then autocracy and finally dictatorship. What happened to Germany⁴⁵ in the 1930s, as well as to Turkey⁴⁶ and Poland⁴⁷ in the

early twenty-first century, and is now underway in Modi's India, could well happen to the United States if Trump is re-elected in 2024.

The need for reform to assuage the evident dangers

Politicians are invariably trapped between the Scylla of belief in the essence of democracy and Charybdis, the urge to retain power. However, if the dangers outlined above genuine, then so is the need for reform.

If most individual politicians are temporary phenomena (both good and bad) bent on re-election and the electorate is an unreliable source of rational opinion;⁴⁸ then focus should turn to highlighting the role of institutions as rule-enforcing mechanisms that keep society from falling apart. With the expectation that these institutions are⁴⁹ willing to evolve alongside change in social values, and to stand above, and unequivocally independent from, political ideology. It is the resilience and cooperation of institutions at the heart of democracy that operationalises the checks that ensure the balance required in a stable society.

The writer suggests, however, that many reform proposals from academic literature are too generic. Prescriptions to rebuild trust with better government⁵⁰ by supporting principles of democratic integrity,⁵¹ adopting a mechanism by which parliamentarians can genuinely listen to and engage with Australians,⁵² enhancing the

40. Triffitt, 2019

41. Stoker *et al.*, 2018

42. Koerth and Thomson-DeVaux, 2021

43. Marsh and Miller, 2012; Bohn, 2018

44. Quilter-Pinner *et al.*, 2021

45. Arendt, 2017

46. Temelkuran, 2019

47. Applebaum, 2020

48. Zaller and Feldman, 1992

49. Elster, 1989

50. OECD, 2017

51. Evans *et al.*, 2019

52. Pickering and Niemeyer, 2020

competence of public servants,⁵³ or promote the growth of a vibrant civil society⁵⁴ are unlikely to resonate with a disenchanted voting public. Nor do they have any clear route to implementation.

Rather, it is bounded, digestible and (feasibly) implementable reforms that could work at narrowing the Trust Divide. Such reforms could include: ensuring better disclosure of political funding;⁵⁵ creating a comprehensive legislative plan to fight corruption;⁵⁶ limiting Supreme Court terms to 18 years;⁵⁷ requiring compulsory education in the democratic way of government;⁵⁸ and repealing Section 230 (US *Communications Decency Act* 1996) to ensure that social media networks are legally responsible for the content of posts.

All of them reforms that the voting public is more likely to understand are aimed at making democracy work more effectively on behalf of those being governed, rather than benefitting the governing.

Data collection and research methodologies

As noted, the starting hypothesis in this research is that a widening Trust Divide between the elected and electorate threatens liberal democracy. Several different methodologies were aimed at testing the extent to which there was genuine public and political concern with that divide, the extent to which it has widened over the last ten years, and the level of support on each side of the debate (the elected and electorate) for reforms aimed at narrowing the divide.

It is emphasised that the writer's research was directed at both sides of the issue – the views of politicians as well as the views of voters – by applying a different research methodology to each.

Between July and October 2021, 23 current and former Australian politicians participated in long-form interviews. An initial voter survey was sent by email during the third week of May 2022 to 574 social, business and educational contacts. A second voter survey was distributed by email and Facebook in early June 2022 to the Queensland contacts of an Australian social scientist teaching at James Cook University in Townsville. The two voter surveys generated a total of 188 completed responses.

A follow-up survey requested feedback from the 23 public figure respondents and all 151 of those who had participated in the initial voter survey (time constraints prohibited inclusion of the Queenslanders); with a total of 87 individuals responding in full. The follow-up survey permitted the scoring by Importance and Implementability of 20 primary reform initiatives aimed at narrowing the Trust Divide.

Public figure interviews – current and former Australian politicians

Unsolicited email does not appear to be the best way to access Australian federal politicians. A total of 225 emails generated just two responses, one suggesting that “you read my book, which you can buy on Amazon” and the other declining the opportunity to talk.

A second approach (snowballing⁵⁹) depended on the willingness of personal contacts in Australia to ask current or former politicians of their acquaintance if they might be willing to talk about the Trust Divide with a mature-age postgraduate student. Of 33 politicians contacted by these intermediaries, 23 agreed to talk and the resulting interviews were transcribed into an 80,000-word anonymised research resource.

53. Stoker *et al.*, 2018

54. Chalmers, 2013

55. Grattan, 2018

56. Brown *et al.*, 2020

57. Packer, 2020

58. Dennis, 2018

59. See Supplementary material

TABLE 1: Synopsis of public figure coverage

Party	Coalition	Labor	Other	Total
Interviewees	9	8	6	23
Level	Federal	State	Other	Total
Interviewees	9	8	6	23
Role	Minister	Backbench	Other	Total
Interviewees	12	5	6	23

Although the interviews were weighted to male and former politicians (70 per cent each),⁶⁰ the mix of party, level and parliamentary role was considered sufficiently evenly balanced to validate the process used and the conclusions drawn from it.

All 23 public figure interviews were structured around the following three questions:

- **Question 1:** What specific actions and initiatives, aimed at changing the behaviour of our politicians and the performance of political institutions, do you think would have the most immediate impact on building trust between politicians and voters?
- **Question 2:** What specific actions and initiatives, aimed at building the participation of Australian

voters in the political process, do you think would have the most immediate impact on closing the Trust Divide between voters and our parliamentarians?

- **Question 3:** On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 = totally dissatisfied and 5 = totally satisfied) please score your satisfaction with democracy as it currently operates in Australia.

Voter survey questionnaire – initial and second survey feedback

The initial voter survey questionnaire was emailed to 574 personal social and business contacts, including high school alumni and UCL postgraduate political science students. Survey response rate was 26.3 per cent. See table 2 following.

TABLE 2: Initial voter survey response rates

Respondent category	Catchment	Requests	Responses	Returns %
Social and business contacts	Australia	260	87	33.46
High school alumni ⁶¹	United Kingdom	180	34	18.89
Social contacts	United Kingdom	59	20	33.90
UCL postgraduate students	Various	52	2	3.85
Social contacts	North America	23	8	34.78
Totals		574	151	26.31

60. Female representation in Australia's current parliament: 38 per cent in the House of Representatives and 57 per cent in the Senate

61. High school alumni all spent at least one school term of their secondary school education coincident with that of the writer

Using the Qualtrics Survey Maker, a second Voter Survey was issued by email and Facebook to 380 (primarily rural) Queensland contacts. Although response rates were significantly lower, at under 10 per cent, than for the initial Voter Survey, the Queensland contacts added much-needed gender and age balance with 78 per cent female and other, and 41 per cent aged between 18 and 45.

Both voter survey questionnaires included three discrete elements. First, five questions about voting behaviour, trust in government and satisfaction with democracy as it currently operates. Second, an open-ended request for suggestions on reform. Finally, five contextual questions relating to respondent home country, age, work status, gender and highest education level achieved.⁶²

Follow-up survey – scoring 20 primary reform initiatives

Participants in the initial voter survey proposed 537 individual suggestions for change. These were culled (for duplication and ambiguity), before categorisation and grouping into 20 primary reform initiatives. The follow-up survey was then issued to all 23 public figure interviewees and to 151 initial voter survey respondents. All 174 were requested to score the 20 primary reform initiatives against Importance and Implementability. Of the 174 recipients of the follow-up survey, 87 returned completed scoring forms. See table 3 following.

TABLE 3: Follow-up survey response rates

Respondent category	Recipients	Responses	Rate %
Australian social and business	87	44	50.58
United Kingdom social and alumni	54	30	55.56
North America	10	6	60.00
Australian public figures	23	7	30.44
Totals	174	87	50.00

62. See Supplementary material

Respondent scoring on Importance and Implementability then drove construction of two reform matrices (one each for Australia and the United Kingdom), allowing a relative prioritising of 20 primary reform initiatives aimed at narrowing the Trust Divide (see Tables 8 and 9).

Public figure concerns with the existence and widening of a Trust Divide

No participant in the public figure interviews downplayed the significance of the Trust Divide. Of the 23 interviewees, 13 were explicit in their concern that a widening Trust Divide posed a real threat to liberal democracy. Some of their verbatim comments follow. Transcripts of all 23 interviews are held as an anonymised 80,000-word research resource.

Current Federal Minister

“We are in a weird period. With COVID-19, people have now found that they need to trust in government. Last year, trust in government did improve. Last year, we probably had the highest level of trust in government that we have seen in a long time. But now, we are in the process of seeing that come crashing down. Because some of those things designed to improve the levels of trust ultimately do not.”

Former Federal Minister

“That goes back to my point about the breakdown of trust. If people don’t think they can trust our politicians to lead and the institutions of government to do the right thing, they will look elsewhere for security.”

Former Federal Minister and Party Whip

“I think the broader issue is that the institutions that make up the fabric of Western societies are being constantly eroded over the passage of time. These institutions are being challenged by society, with a lot of that challenge coming through the fifth estate. (Interviewer interjection: *You mean social media?*) Yes, and as a consequence, trust is diminishing. In this more complex world, where I believe citizens are being overloaded with information, they retreat back to their own small community or their own family unit as the source of trust. (Interviewer interjection: *And does that put Western liberal democracies at risk?*) Yes, it does. Absolutely. And this is where the challenge lies.”

Former State Minister

“You may be disappointed by the lack of profundity in my analysis. But at the same time, I think the Trust Divide has got a lot wider over the last 20 years. Now people think the only way to become a successful politician is to leave the major parties, because you will build more direct trust with the community by being outside the majors.”

Current State Backbencher

“I am coming from a point of view where I accept there is a Trust Divide. I also acknowledge that it is getting worse. But, for me, that means getting closer to the community. I think being closer to community is what will bridge your Trust Divide and start putting more faith back into community politics.”

It would be fair to conclude that a sampling of current and former Australian politicians reveals concerns about the reality and potential widening of the Trust Divide, as well as a belief that this widening divide poses real risks to the ongoing health of liberal democracy.

Public figure proposals for narrowing the Trust Divide

The seven highest priority reform initiatives identified through the public figure interview process were not significantly different from those highlighted in literature search and by voter survey respondents. However, it is revealing to note that the four highest priority items identified by public figure interviewees were all aimed at enhancing public participation, not at changing the behaviour of politicians: enhance mechanisms for community engagement; curtail influence of social and other media; widen the pool of potential candidates; and introduce politics/civics into secondary education

Other lower priority reforms suggested during the public figure interviews included: modify the influence and access of lobbyists; support codes of conduct and anti-corruption initiatives; widen the membership of significant parties; increase the support for women in parliament; and introduce processes that drive greater consensus between parties.

Public figure satisfaction with democracy

The public figure interviewees scored satisfaction with democracy in Australia at an average of 3.4 out of 5 (where 1 = totally dissatisfied and 5 = totally satisfied). This is a better result than the initial voter survey respondent score of 3.0, as generated by 87 mostly male (77 per cent), middle-class, and older (66 per cent aged sixty and over) social and business contacts. The 37 Queensland contacts, 78 per cent of whom identified as female or other, recorded the same satisfaction score (3.0) as the Australian social and business contacts. Which makes it clear that Australians are more satisfied with the state of their democracy than British and North American respondents (scoring just 2.5). See table 4 following.

TABLE 4: Relative ranking of satisfaction with democracy

Score on satisfaction with democracy: where 1 = totally dissatisfied and 5 = totally satisfied

Respondent category	Respondents	Satisfaction
Australian public figures	23	3.39
Australian social and business contacts	87	3.03
Queensland contacts	37	3.00
High school alumni (UK)	34	2.51
United Kingdom social contacts	20	2.54
North America social contacts	10	2.50
Total/Average	211	2.90

The Australian government has changed since the public figure interviews were recorded. And with that change it might be expected that opinions on the operation of democracy have also changed for the better. Particularly as the federal election in May 2022 has shown that it is possible for a working democracy to deliver a peaceful transition of government. It would seem that mutual toleration and organisational restraint, as well as the soft guardrails of democracy can and do still play a stabilising role.⁶³

A selection of relevant commentary from public figure interviewees on satisfaction with democracy is included below. Note that the satisfaction with democracy scores (out of 5) are as nominated by each of the individual respondents during the interview process.

Current Federal Senator

Score 4.9 (out of 5). “I think Australia is an incredibly strong democratic nation. I would score 5.0 but there are always ways in which we can improve.”

Former Mayor of a Sydney suburban municipality

Score 4.5. “The Australian system of federal government has proven to work very well in comparison with other Western democracies. And it is heartening, for the first time in many years, that the NSW ICAC⁶⁴ and the Courts have done their job. Clearly demonstrating that the system now works well.”

Current State Backbencher

Score 3.5. “I think our democracy is far better functioning than many other countries, but I do think we need to work on it. We have taken a backward step in terms of people’s satisfaction with democracy and trust in politicians. I am concerned about that because of the instability that it creates within our political processes.”

Former State Minister

Score 4.9. “Australia has been and is enormously successful. No riots. Tiny demonstrations. And 95 per cent voter turnout. The most amazing thing is the wide acceptance that we have an elected government that we can vote out if and when they don’t perform.”

Former Federal Minister

“Our constitution and our political arrangements score a 4.8. However, the way we are working them is probably a 3 out of 5. I think the dangers to the future are massive. I would still sound a warning bell because I think we are sleepwalking and need to be woken up.”

63. Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019

64. NSW ICAC = New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption

Current Federal Shadow Minister

“Out of 5, we would be a 3. We are still a functioning democracy, even if there are many horrible aspects to it. Furthermore, we can still get our message out, even if the media landscape has become much, much more difficult for us.”

Former Federal Party Leader

“Oh, it’s just a 1. Depressingly, depressingly hopeless. It is depressingly hopeless because, for the first time in my life, I see nothing left to protect. Everywhere you look, the remedies have been taken out of our hands, and I have never felt more powerless as a citizen.”

It is clear, from an admittedly small sample and with one notable exception, that the interviewed public figures were reasonably satisfied with the state of democracy in Australia. Although it is also clear that they were acutely aware of problems and risks that need addressing now and in the future.

Analysis and findings from voter survey questionnaires

The social capital that comes from more than 50 years of education, a career in business and residence across the Anglosphere made

it possible to access over 570 social, business, school and university contacts. Remarkably, 151 (26.5 per cent) of the initial voter survey contacts responded voluntarily to an unsolicited request to participate in “a brief survey on democracy”. A further 37 responses were generated from 380 Queensland recipients of the second voter survey, giving a combined dataset of 188 respondents.

In spite of modest respondent numbers (n=188), the case is made that the maturity and educational levels of survey respondents make up for the raw numbers generated. Specifically, because the survey was not just about the numbers, it was also about asking survey respondents to generate suggestions for changing the way that politicians and parliaments work. Specifically, suggestions for change that you [the respondent] believe will enhance the degree to which you would trust the system. See table 5 below.

However, several questions linger as to the validity of any online survey. Are the responses sufficient to achieve statistical significance? Is the dataset close to representing society (in this case, the Anglosphere) as a whole? Moreover, might not the relative simplicity of the questions, the open-ended answer required for some of them, and even the biases of the writer (in unconscious highlighting

TABLE 5: Educational achievement of voter survey respondents

Respondents with graduate or postgraduate qualifications as their highest educational level

Catchment	Respondents	Graduate +	Percentage
Australia social and business	87	73	83.91
Queensland contacts	37	31	83.78
United Kingdom social contacts	20	15	75.00
High school alumni (UK)	34	26	76.47
North America social contacts	10	10	100.0
Totals	188	155	82.44

of priority issues) undermine the validity of the process? Particularly as the dataset might also be considered silo-trapped by its insufficient reach beyond the writer's comfort zone, social circle and status.⁶⁵

The dataset may also be considered flawed by its gender weighting and cohort distribution, as female and other respondents account for only just over a third of returns. While the bias towards Baby-Boomers,⁶⁶ (61 percent) reflects both my own age and the declining interest of Millennials and Gen Xers in mainstream politics.⁶⁷

In a rebuttal to these concerns, the writer highlights three factors. Firstly, the educational level of the respondents. Secondly the ambiguity surrounding sample sizing. If the *Edelman Trust Barometer* considers 1,150 respondents in a population of 1.4 billion as sufficient to assess China's community trust level,⁶⁸ then 188 respondents to the voter survey could be statistically sufficient. And thirdly, although low on numbers, the North American responses gave useful insight into a society where liberal democracy faces its greatest threats. Therefore, the writer would argue that the survey process, reach and response were sufficient to purpose.

Variations in voter satisfaction and voting stability

The voter survey sought responses on the level of trust in the respondent's respective national governments. There is a noticeable difference between the satisfaction levels recorded by each of the different party affiliation groups, with

conservatives showing higher levels of satisfaction with democracy (3.1) than left-leaning voters (2.3).

This satisfaction gap (between right and left) is reflected in voting behaviour. Conservative voters in Australia and in Britain stated a lower inclination to change their vote, with only 19 per cent of conservatives reporting a preparedness to switch, compared to voters for the mainstream Left (Australian Labor/UK Labour) at 26 per cent.

Voter trust in government and supporting institutions

Central to the voter surveys was quantification of the extent to which citizens across the Anglosphere trusted their respective governments and institutions of government. To this end, respondents were asked two questions:⁶⁹

- What is **your level of trust** in your national government **today**? Where 1 = very low and 5 = very high? and
- Has **your level of trust** in your national government **changed** over the past 10 years? Where minus 2 = much lower, 0 = not changed and plus 2 = much higher?

It would seem clear that trust in government has declined across the Anglosphere and is now defined as Low or Very Low by 53.5 per cent of voter survey respondents. Only 15.5 per cent of all respondents expressed a trust score of High or Very High. In Australia, just 18.6 per cent of 124 respondents scored their trust in government as High or Very High; and it was only Queenslanders who scored Very High.

65. Hennick et al., 2011

66. See Norris and Inglehart, 2019: Baby Boomers born 1946/64, Generation Xers 1965/79, and Millennials 1980/96

67. Blais and Rubenson, 2013

68. Edelman, 2021

69. See Supplementary material

TABLE 6: Voter trust in government

Average levels recorded by voter survey respondents

Trust level in national government: where 1 = very low and 5 = very high

Trust change over past decade: where minus 2 = much lower and plus 2 = much higher

Catchment	The current level of trust where 3 = undecided	Change over the past 10 years where 0 = unchanged
North America	3.00	(0.90)
Queensland contacts	2.76	(0.65)
Australia social and business	2.45	(0.95)
High school alumni	2.16	(1.15)
United Kingdom social contacts	2.10	(1.05)

The potential for reform

The two voter surveys confirm the findings of academia, credible polling and the international commentariat as to the poor state of trust in and satisfaction with governments across most liberal democracies; and the extent to which levels of trust and satisfaction are on the decline. The issue that lingers is what can be done to rectify the matter.

The voter surveys therefore requested respondents to suggest reform proposals that a government (with a solid majority or open to bi-partisan cooperation) could implement and, having done so, feasibly raise the level of voter trust in government and its supporting institutions. Voter suggestions for reform were generated using an open-ended and unstructured enquiry format.

Out of 151 initial voter survey respondents (Australian, UK and US social and business contacts), only 11 declined to make suggestions on reform. These respondents put forward a total of 537 individual suggestions for reform that were culled down to 310 after review and evaluation. These, in turn, were grouped by common attributes into the 20 primary reform initiatives as listed in table 7 following.

Personal judgement was applied when grouping 310 individual respondent proposals into 20 primary reform initiatives. Buthe and Jacobs, warn against the risk of allowing personal values and expectations to affect the prioritising of respondent suggestions for change.⁷⁰ However, as caution was used to minimise the risk of overweighting toward such biases and although risks remain, they are arguably within acceptable limits.

Grouping the respondent suggestions into 20 initiative categories was necessary to identify coherent reforms potentially adoptable on a bipartisan basis and unambiguously aimed at rectifying any backsliding in the effectiveness and appeal of liberal democracy.

The 20 primary reform initiatives selected for ranking against Importance and Implementability are not seen as statements of ideological party policy targeted at winning votes in marginal seats. Rather, they represent reforms considered by voter survey and public figure respondents as being capable of narrowing the Trust Divide and strengthening liberal democracy against threats from autocracy abroad and the growing appeal of populism at home. Thereby making democracy more likely to be trusted and supported by the voting public in the future.

70. Buthe and Jacobs, 2015

TABLE 7: Primary reform initiatives circulated for scoring in the follow-up survey

Nos = number of individual reform suggestions grouped into each primary reform initiative
PR = Proportional representation and *FPTP* = First past the post

Twenty primary reform initiatives	Nos
Reform the electoral system (in the UK to PR and in Australia to FPTP)	36
Introduce effective controls over corruption in politics and government	27
Raise the quality standard of candidates for office	24
Require more transparency in government processes	22
Apply more explicit limits on and declaration of all political donations	21
Lift the level of parliamentary behaviour and performance	18
Reform a range of parliamentary rules	15
Introduce forms of direct democracy , or at least greater levels of citizen input	15
Pursue a more representative balance in parliament	15
Extend fixed parliamentary terms	14
Reform membership and role of the Upper House	14
Reform media ownership and coverage	12
De-politicise the Australian Public Service/UK Civil Service	9
Require voter education in politics, government and ethics	8
Apply stricter limits on lobbyist access and influence	7
Place more emphasis on future focused planning and policy	7
Apply same rules for truth in political advertising as applied to private sector	6
Facilitate ease of access to voting	6
Consider greater degree of regional devolution	6
Apply limitations on access and influence in post- parliamentary careers	6

Scoring 20 primary reform initiatives by Importance and Implementability

The 20 primary reform initiatives aimed at narrowing the Trust Divide were presented for respondent scoring in the follow-up survey. Respondents to the follow-up survey (n=87) assigned two scores (for Importance and Implementability) against each of the 20 primary

reform initiatives, with scoring for Importance and Implementability defined as follows:

- **Importance (X axis)** of each reform initiative in building barriers against resurgent illiberalism and autocracy, where a score of 1 = initiative would have little beneficial influence (in the short term) and 5 = initiative would make a fundamental difference; and

- **Implementability (Y axis)** of each reform initiative in the context of current political and social circumstances, where a score of 1 = initiative has little chance of being implemented in the short or medium term and 5 = implementation feasible within one parliamentary term.

Note that scoring from North American (n=6) and Australian public figure (n=7) respondents was not used in Reform Matrix construction.

The reform matrix and its implications for policy setting

Results from the follow-up survey created a hierarchy of feasible reforms and allowed construction of reform matrices for Australian (n=44 with response rate 50.6 per cent) and British respondents (n=30 with response rate 55.6 per cent). See table 8 and 9 following. Both reform matrices suggest the possibility that a mainstream party seeking to re-build trust with its constituents might focus on:

- adopting manifesto statements that, **in the Short-Term Commit to Implement & Maintain** reform initiatives located in the high/right quadrant of the reform matrices;
- working towards reforms intended to **Rebuild Trust Over the Medium Term** that are contained within the low/right quadrant; and
- future-proofing democracy with planning for programmes that **Fortify the Institutions Over the Longer Term**.

Despite some differences, it is worth noting that Australian and British respondents both place high emphasis (**Implement & Maintain**) on the need for anti-corruption initiatives, greater transparency on donations and the enhanced facilitation of voting.

Country-to-country coincidence on reforms with applicability to the medium terms (**Rebuild Trust**) included limitations on lobbyist access, the requirement for truth in political advertising, the need for greater transparency in policy decision-making, and on slowing the revolving door in post-ministerial careers. Australian respondents also favoured the retention of longer parliamentary terms. While British respondents placed a higher emphasis on limiting the whip, applying better criteria for candidate selection and reforming the upper house.

Australian and British respondents both place electoral reform in the mid-range of scoring on both axes; but the Australians showed interest in conversion to full First Past the Post, while British respondents expressed support for a move to Proportional Representation. It would seem that the grass is always greener in other pastures.

Regional devolution, education in politics, citizen participation, stricter candidate selection criteria, electoral system reform and quotas were all acknowledged as being longer-term issues.

Both respondent groups acknowledged, consciously or unconsciously, the need to reinforce the integrity and independence of institutions charged with operations at the heart of liberal democracy. This includes the performance and behaviour of parliamentarians themselves.

Survey response amplified the importance of integrity and independence within those government institutions responsible for enforcing codes of conduct, dealing with corrupt behaviour, managing elections, tracking donations and curtailing the influence of lobbyists, and even reviewing the evolution of democracy as it seeks to keep up with social, economic and political change.

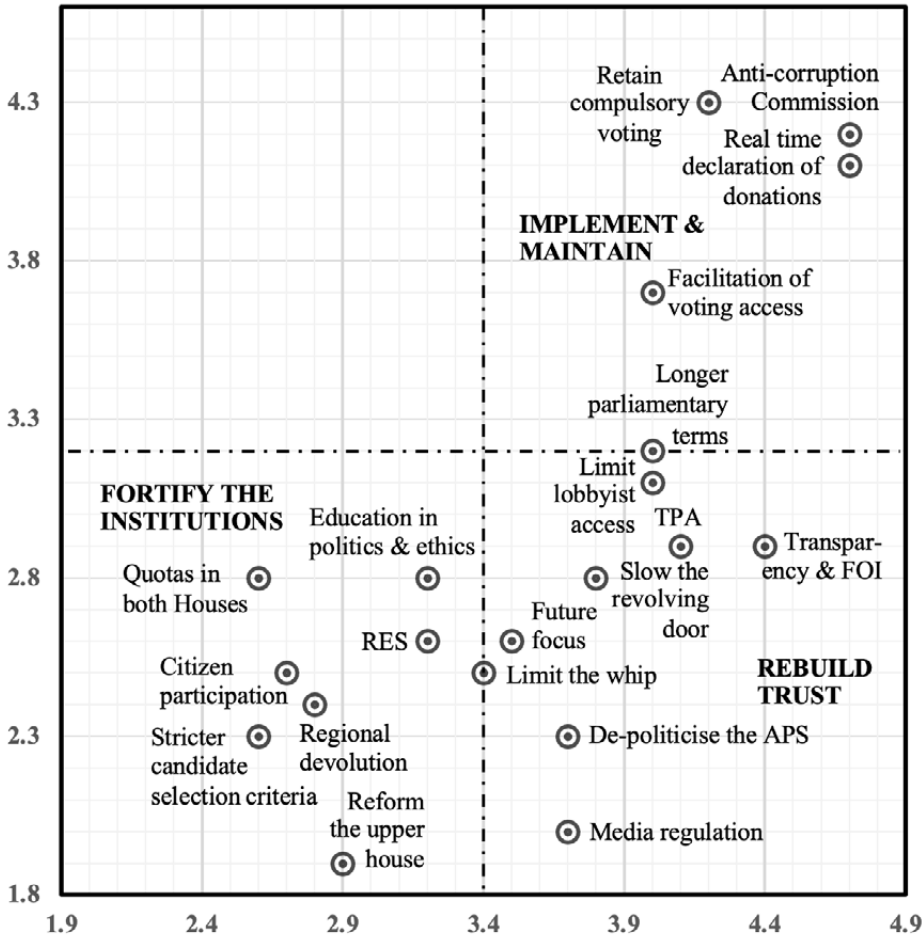
Notably, however, British respondents overall scored lower than Australians on the Importance of reforms and on the prospects for Implementability.

TABLE 8 Reform Matrix – Australia⁷¹

n=44

Y-axis – Implementability

Where 1 = challenging and 5 = achievable



X-axis – Importance

Where 1 = optional and 5 = crucial

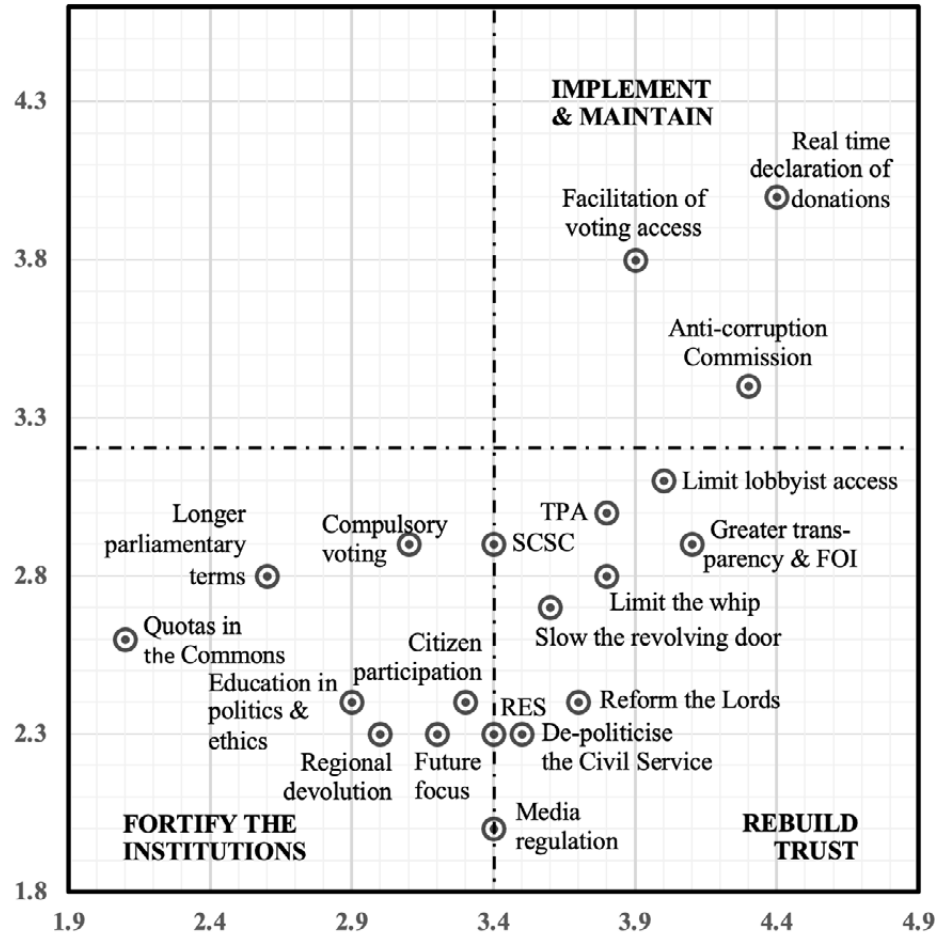
71. FOI = Freedom of information; RES = Reform the electoral system (move to full FPTP); TPA = Truth in political advertising; APS = Australian Public Service

TABLE 9 Reform Matrix – United Kingdom⁷²

n=30

Y-axis – Implementability

Where 1 = challenging and 5 = achievable



X-axis – Importance

Where 1 = optional and 5 = crucial

72. RES = Reform the electoral system (move to PR); FOI = Freedom of information; TPA = Truth in political advertising; and SCSC = Stricter candidate selection criteria

Public figure policy positioning

Australian public figure respondents also highlighted some of the reforms identified by voters to the follow-up survey. Although the sample was small ($n=7$ out of 23), public figure respondents did assign high scores to the Importance of: extending parliamentary terms (4.6 out of 5); establishing (what is now) the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) (4.4); requiring more significant control over, and real-time reporting on, donations (4.3); retaining compulsory voting (4.3); and introducing compulsory education in politics and ethics during the final two years of high school (4.0).

The widest gaps between Australian public figures and Australian voters in scoring for Importance were on the need for better access to voting (digital voting), the level of attention to be paid to the future (climate change), support for legislation on truth in political advertising, and better control over the revolving door in post-ministerial careers. All were scored high by voters and low by the public figure respondents.

Conclusions

Reform proposals put forward by the voter survey respondents, their broad coincidence with open-ended responses from the public figure respondents, and their scoring for Importance and Implementation in the follow-up survey should not, however, be seen as a menu of solutions. Rather, they are a pointer for thinking by mainstream parties seeking to re-engage with an increasingly untrusting and dissatisfied public. The voter's voice is clear, but are the elected, outside a small group of independent thinkers, willing to listen?

The 20th century saw democracy spread across the developed and developing world. Herre and Roser reporting an increase from 14 countries out of 55 (25 per cent) qualifying as such in 1900 to 119 out of 193 (62 per cent) in 2021.⁷³ However, over the past 30 years, trust in governments and the expressed level of satisfaction with democracy have been in evident decline. Furthermore, since the GFC in 2008 the picture is one of considerable disruption and a tendency to overlook or fail to attend to the principles of democratic government and parliamentary integrity.

Over barely six weeks for example, from late June and into August 2022, the US Supreme Court again demonstrated the determination of constitutional originalists to overturn precedent and put religion ahead of government.⁷⁴ Dominic Raab (former UK justice secretary and deputy PM) was reported to be proposing further curbs on judicial independence and oversight.⁷⁵ Joe Manchin exposed the extent to which corrupt money can be used to hold democratic government to ransom.⁷⁶ While Scott Morrison (former Australian PM 2018/22), urged a Pentecostal congregation in Perth to put their faith in God, for: "We trust in Him. We don't trust in governments. And we don't trust in the United Nations, thank goodness".⁷⁷

On a more positive note, Australia's new Labor government committed to rectifying board stacking at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Australia's Administrative Appeals Tribunal,⁷⁸ and to establishing the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC). It has also signalled possible changes that would require truth in political advertising, place caps on campaign contributions and enforce tougher disclosure provisions on the sources of campaigns donations.⁷⁹ While the

73. Herre and Roser, 2021

74. Greenhouse, 2022; Paul, 2022

75. Siddique, 2022

76. Krugman, 2022

77. Parkes-Hupton, 2022

78. Knaus, 2020

79. Clark, 2022

Queensland premier recently announced strict limitations on lobbyists' access to state government departments and politicians.⁸⁰

Regardless, the starting hypothesis stands: that the decline in trust and widening of the Trust Divide are evident and pose genuine risks to liberal democracies. It is also clear from the research that voters, academics and many politicians all acknowledge this reality and agree that much must be done to rectify some of democracy's more apparent flaws.

However, resistance remains present and powerful. As stated by one of the public figure interviewees

“I am deeply opposed to nearly all of your voters’ reform suggestions. Most of them would, if enacted, dramatically reduce the sovereignty of parliament, and place it in a subservient position to some sort of council of experts.”

Thus, it would seem that opposition from embedded power may still hinder the prospects for reform. In marked contrast, however, voter survey respondents highlighted the need for changes to ensure the continued independence and integrity of those institutions charged with responsibility for, at the very least, elections, political donations, corruption control, limitations on lobbyist access, enforcing truth in political advertising and ensuring higher levels of transparency on government decision-making. It should also be emphasised that the permanence of these reforms cannot be guaranteed unless judicial independence is ensured.

If liberal democracy is to overcome its current tribulations, it is advised that reforms be directed at rebuilding the strength of government institutions at the heart of democracy,⁸¹ and that the necessary reforms be introduced within the short term. The liberal West can no longer pay long-term lip service

to open-ended statements in anodyne support of restoring trust in democracy. This is, and always has been, a meaningless and empty promise that is just too easy to pass on to the next incumbent.

However, until our politicians acknowledge that their re-election prospects are, at least in part, dependent on a revival of trust in democracy and the continued independence of those institutions that underpin democracy, it will remain ever thus.

Supplementary material

Neilson, F. (2023), Voter Survey Questionnaire, Appendix to 'Narrowing the trust divide', BESS, 5(1), https://globalaccesspartners.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Neilson_Supplementary_Material.pdf

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80. McKenna, 2022

81. Disraeli, 1866: “Individuals may form communities, but it is institutions alone that can create a nation.”

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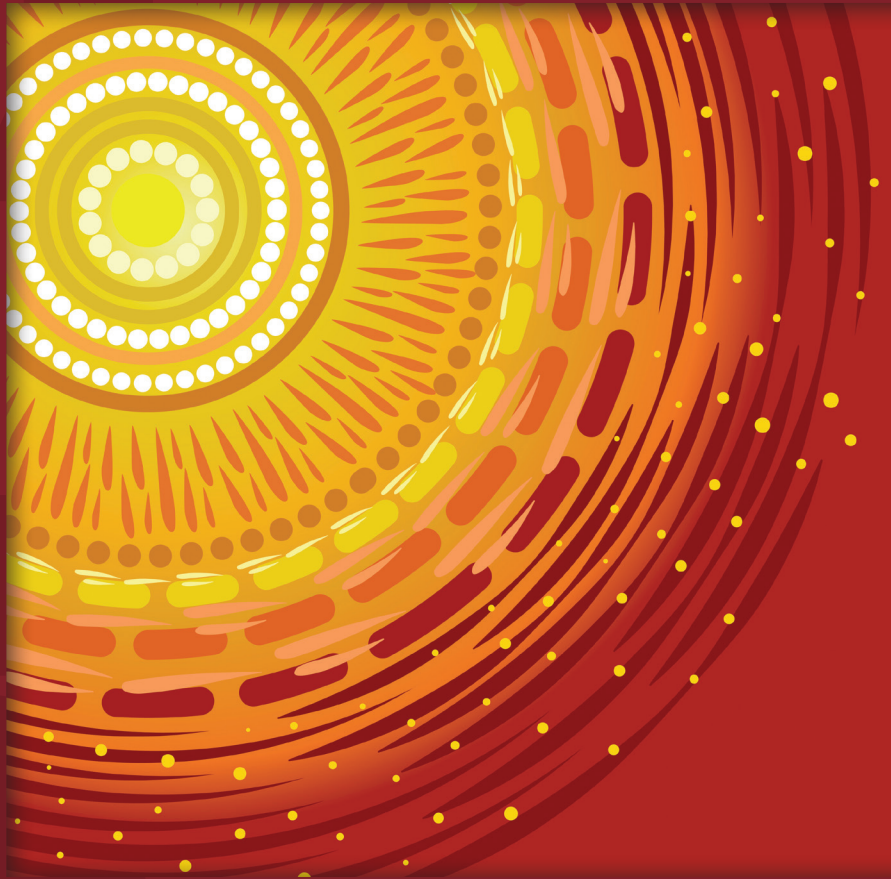
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