Australian Leadership Index
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THE CIVIC HEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

A NATIONAL PORTRAIT IN 30 CHARTS

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

In recent years, as chronicled in countless news stories and reports into trust, integrity and accountability, leaders and institutions in general, and political leaders and institutions in particular, have become seen as self-serving, putting self and vested interests ahead of the wider public interest. There is now a deep and pervasive sense among Australian citizens that they are not well served by their social institutions or those who lead them.

Public trust in and satisfaction with Australia's institutions of government, including democracy itself, has declined sharply, with trust and satisfaction lowest among those who do not believe that our political system allows them to influence government decision-making and policy making.

Furthermore, social cohesion in Australia is declining. Many Australians say it has gotten to the point where we are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about the issues on which we disagree.

There is no shortage of information about these social trends. We see it reported in daily news stories, public opinion polls, annual research reports and assorted inquiries. However, this deluge of information can be difficult to integrate into useful knowledge, let alone a deep, integrated understanding about the state we're in and what to do about it.

In this review of publicly available reports from a variety of Australian and international research teams, we take a helicopter view of the state of civic health in Australia. Specifically, in a curated selection of charts that relate to core aspects of civic health, we present a general picture of the state of civic health of Australia.

We hope that this snapshot will help our readers find their bearings in an otherwise confusing sea of information. More importantly, we hope it will help our readers, as citizens and established and emerging leaders, understand how they can contribute to the regeneration of a thriving civic life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This review of Australia's civic health would not have been possible without the superb research and insights of the following researchers and research group, listed here in alphabetical order.

We encourage readers to read these excellent reports and research notes, which are listed in the reference section of this report, for more details.

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RESEARCH UNITS, CENTRES AND INSTITUTES

Australian Bureau of Statistics
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Australian Election Study
Australian Leadership Index
Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire
Democracy 2025
Edelman
Independent Commission Against Corruption SA
International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
Ipsos
Museum of Australian Democracy
Next25
OECD
Pew Research Center
Scanlon Foundation Research Institute
Sydney Policy Lab
The Ethics Centre
Trust and Transparency Unit, Australian Public Service Commission
Volunteering Australia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CIVIC HEALTH IN AUSTRALIA

WHAT IS CIVIC HEALTH?

WHAT IS CIVIC HEALTH?

As defined by Moore-Vissing and Mallory (2020), civic health refers to the ways in which the members of a community participate in activities that strengthen individual and community wellbeing, enhance connections, build trust, help each other, talk about important political and social issues, volunteer in social and civic organisations, stay informed about their society and communities, and participate directly in crafting solutions to various social and economic challenges.

Three basic categories need to be considered when assessing civic health:

- Civic awareness and engagement
- Sense of belonging and social connection
- Volunteering and giving

In this report, we consider all three dimensions. We begin with the global context to situate Australia in the wider world, followed by an examination of the national context, and conclude with an assessment of the civic context.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic awareness, engagement and participation refers to how people feel, learn about, and take actions related to political, societal or local issues.

Measures of civic awareness and engagement include receiving information about civics and citizenship, trusting government and government integrity, accountability and transparency.

BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Sense of belonging and social connection includes how people interact and talk with others about important community and societal issues, and how much they trust and help their neighbours.

Measures of belonging and social connection include trusting people in the community, connecting with people of different backgrounds, helping neighbours, and discussing important issues.

VOLUNTEERING AND GIVING

Volunteering and giving includes how much people are giving their time or money to serve the community or contribute to causes they care about.

Measures of volunteering and giving include volunteering for an initiative or organisation, charitable giving, political giving, and participating in community, civic, religious and sport organisations.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic awareness and engagement refers to how people feel, learn about, and take actions related to societal issues.

KEY FINDINGS

Distrust of politicians is deep and pervasive, and citizens are pessimistic about their ability to influence politics. Few see opportunities to participate in government decision-making.

Ordinary people are pessimistic about their ability to influence politics, with dissatisfaction with democracy highest among those who say our system does not allow them to influence policy making. Political voice is important to Australians, but people tend prefer to simple forms of political voice, such as signing a petition, rather than participating in marches and protests.

Nationally, satisfaction with democracy has declined sharply, with a steep decline in trust in politicians, political parties, and the institutions of government. Governments are widely seen as serving self and special interests ahead of the public good.

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BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Sense of belonging and social connection includes how people interact and talk with others about important community and societal issues, and how much they trust and help their neighbours.

KEY FINDINGS

Australians generally trust each other, with only a minority of our society regarding other people as untrustworthy.

Social cohesion in Australia has been quite resilient despite the challenges of recent years. Happily, Australians get on well with those in their community from different backgrounds and are willing to help their neighbours.

Nevertheless, social cohesion in Australia in under pressure. Almost half of us think Australian is more divided today than in the past, creating the risk of polarisation. Two-thirds say it has gotten to the point where we are incapable of having constructive debates about societal issues we disagree on.

Image credit: Leah Newhouse (pexels.com)

VOLUNTEERING AND GIVING

Volunteering and giving includes how much people are giving their time or money to serve the community or contribute to causes they care about.

KEY FINDINGS

Australians' participation in social, community and civic groups has been relatively stable over the last two years. However, the longer-term state of participation in community, civic, religious, hobby, and sports organisations gives cause for concern.

Participation in social, community, and civic groups has declined in recent decades. Whereas two-thirds of Australians were members of social groups twenty years ago, that proportion is now about half. Volunteering among Australians is in long-term decline. By and large, we are not joining in anymore.

When civic participation is not compulsory, simple forms of participation, such as signing a petition, are preferred.

Image credit: Julia M Cameron (pexels.com)

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

PUTTING AUSTRALIA INTO PERSPECTIVE

DEMOCRACY IS IN DECLINE GLOBALLY

DECADES OF GLOBAL ADVANCES IN DEMOCRACY HAVE BEEN WIPED OUT IN THE LAST DECADE

Research by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance reveals that, globally, the number of democracies has declined in recent years.

Presently, half the world's democracies are in retreat.

FIGURE 1. EXPANDING, STABLE AND CONTRACTING DEMOCRACIES (1980-2021)

Expanding democracy

Stable democracy

1980

2021

Moderately contracting democracy   Severely contracting democracy
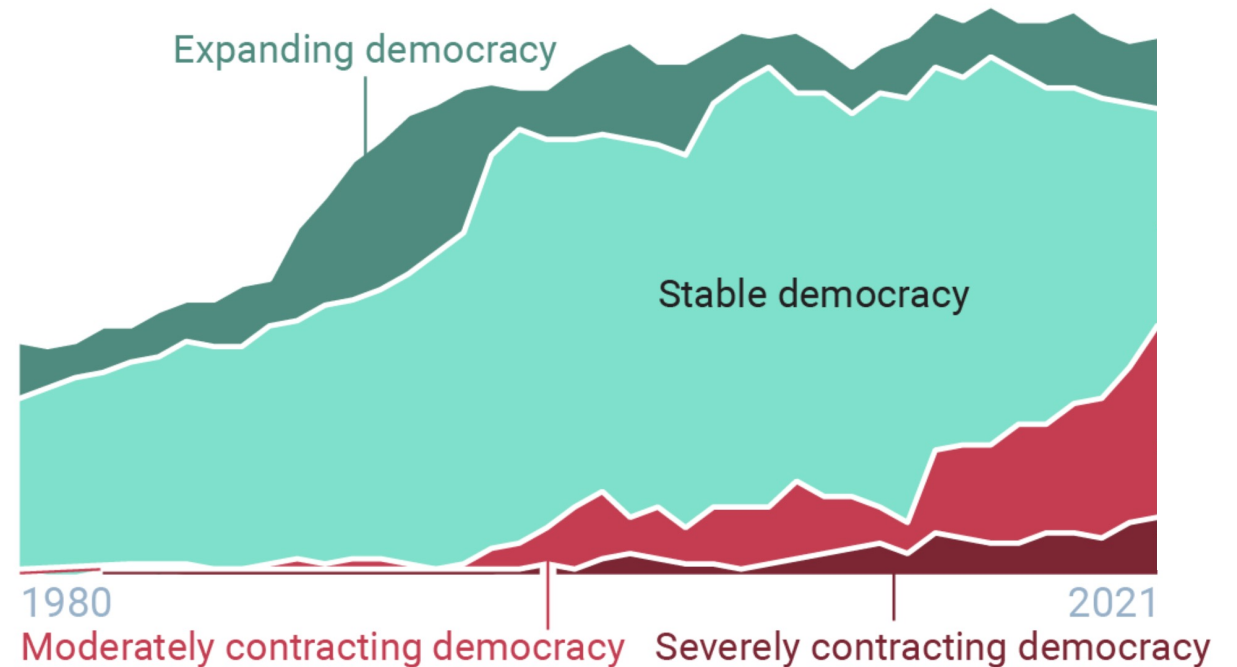
Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2022)

POLARISATION ON THE RISE

AUSTRALIA IS IN DANGER OF SEVERE POLARISATION

As revealed by the Edelman Trust Barometer, Australia is on a path to polarisation.

Almost half of Australians (45%) think that Australia is more divided today, than in the past.

The strongest drivers of perceptions of polarisation are distrust in government, perceived lack of shared identity, and perceived systemic unfairness.

FIGURE 2. POLARISATION AROUND THE WORLD

Source: 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer

LACK OF TRUST IN POLITICIANS IS A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

ALMOST NO ONE TRUSTS POLITICIANS

According to the Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index (2022), 12% of the world's people trust politicians and 64% regarding them as untrustworthy.

The results for Australian mirror these global figures: 12% of Australians regard politicians as trustworthy, whereas 58% regard them as untrustworthy.

Government ministers and cabinet officials do not fare much better.

In Australia, 16% of people regard government ministers as trustworthy, on par with the global average, and 50% regard them as untrustworthy.

FIGURE 3. TRUST IN POLITICIANS BY COUNTRY (%)

Country	Trustworthy (1-2)	Untrustworthy (4-5)
Global Country Average	12%	64%
India	28%	50%
Denmark	21%	43%
Germany	18%	48%
Malaysia	17%	52%
Great Britain	16%	60%
Sweden	15%	52%
Turkey	14%	68%
Canada	14%	56%
France	14%	57%
Netherlands	13%	47%
Australia	12%	58%
Belgium	12%	55%
Italy	11%	63%
South Africa	10%	76%
United States	10%	66%
South Korea	9%	69%
Colombia	9%	75%
Brazil	9%	76%
Mexico	9%	69%
Spain	8%	76%
Argentina	8%	82%
Japan	7%	56%
Poland	7%	74%
Chile	7%	79%
Hungary	7%	76%
Peru	7%	83%

Source: Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index (2022)

LACK OF POLITICAL VOICE IS A BARRIER TO PROGRESS

FIGURE 4. PERCEIVED ABILITY TO INFLUENCE POLITICS (%)

AUSTRALIANS ARE GIVING UP HOPE ON THEIR ABILITY TO INFLUENCE POLITICS

Globally, citizens are deeply pessimistic about their ability to influence politics.

According to research by the Pew Research Center, globally, fewer than 1 in 3 people say the political system in their country allows them to influence politics.

Two-thirds do not think they have much influence at all.

Unhappily, the situation in Australia is even worse that the global median.

Only 28% of Australians think they have an appreciable influence on politics.

Over two-thirds of Australians (71%) do not believe they have a political voice.

	Not too much /not at all	A great deal /fair amount
Canada	62%	38%
U.S.	71	27
Sweden	34	65
Germany	61	39
UK	62	37
Netherlands	65	35
Poland	63	31
France	74	26
Greece	73	26
Belgium	74	25
Hungary	73	25
Italy	76	23
Spain	83	16
Israel	51	48
South Korea	53	45
Singapore	58	42
Malaysia	57	42
Australia	71	28
Japan	72	26
19-COUNTRY MEDIAN	65	31

Source: Pew Research Center (2022)

FEW SEE OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN POLICY MAKING

THE VOICELESS POPULATION

Among the citizens of OECD countries, half say the political system does not let them have a say—termed 'voice'—in government decision making.

This trend exemplifies Australia. Unhappily, only 30% of Australians report that they are 'confident they can have a say' in decision making.

FIGURE 5. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF POLIICAL VOICE IN OECD COUNTRIES
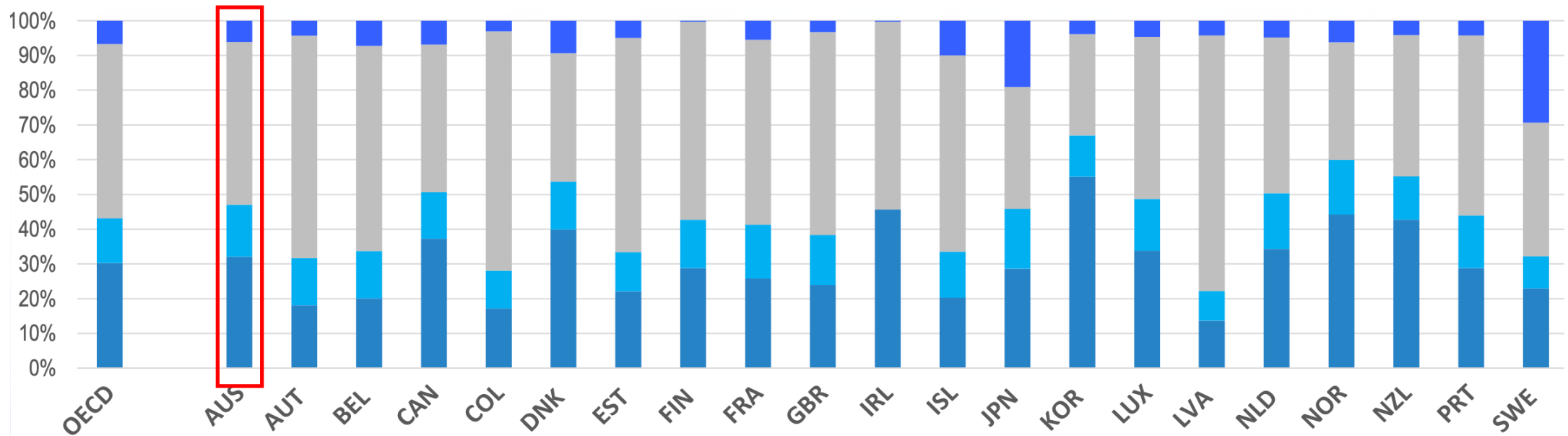
Legend: ■ Confident they have a say ■ Neutral ■ Not confident they have a say ■ Don't know

Source: OECD (2022)

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POLITICAL VOICE PROMOTES SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

EVIDENCE SHOWS THAT POLITICAL VOICE PLAYS A KEY ROLE TO SUSTAINING PEOPLE'S FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

Research by the Pew Research Center shows that people's beliefs about whether their political system allows them to influence politics in their country is strongly associated with their satisfaction with democracy.

In Australia, among those who say our political system allows them to influence politics, only 20% are dissatisfied with democracy.

By contrast, among those who say our political system does not allow them to influence politics, 52% are dissatisfied with democracy.
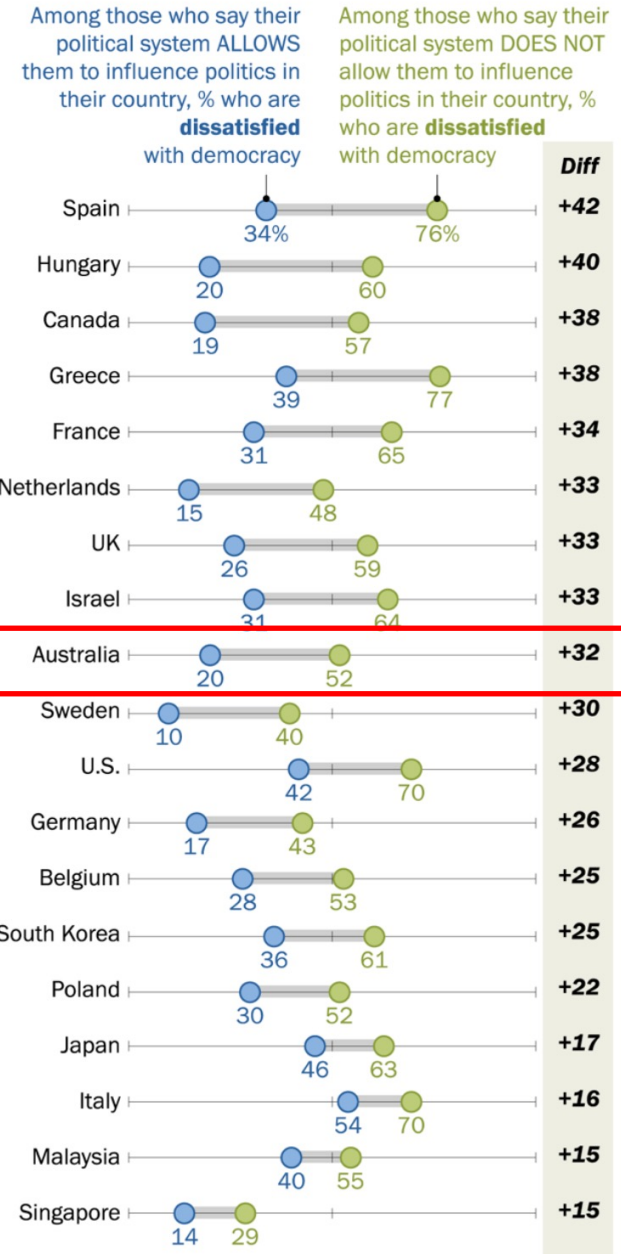
FIGURE 6. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL VOICE AND SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

Among those who say their political system ALLOWS them to influence politics in their country, % who are **dissatisfied** with democracy

Among those who say their political system DOES NOT allow them to influence politics in their country, % who are **dissatisfied** with democracy

Country	Allows (%)	Does not allow (%)	Diff
Spain	34%	76%	+42
Hungary	20	60	+40
Canada	19	57	+38
Greece	39	77	+38
France	31	65	+34
Netherlands	15	48	+33
UK	26	59	+33
Israel	31	64	+33
Australia	20	52	+32
Sweden	10	40	+30
U.S.	42	70	+28
Germany	17	43	+26
Belgium	28	53	+25
South Korea	36	61	+25
Poland	30	52	+22
Japan	46	63	+17
Italy	54	70	+16
Malaysia	40	55	+15
Singapore	14	29	+15

Source: Pew Research Center (2022)

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THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

A CLOSER LOOK AT AUSTRALIAN TRENDS

Q: WHO DO WE TRUST?

A: NOT GOVERNMENT

POLITICAL PARTIES MOST DISTRUSTED

Research by the Museum of Australian Democracy shows that our political institutions are among most distrusted of our social institutions.

Political parties are regarded as the most distrusted institution in Australia, second only to the federal government.

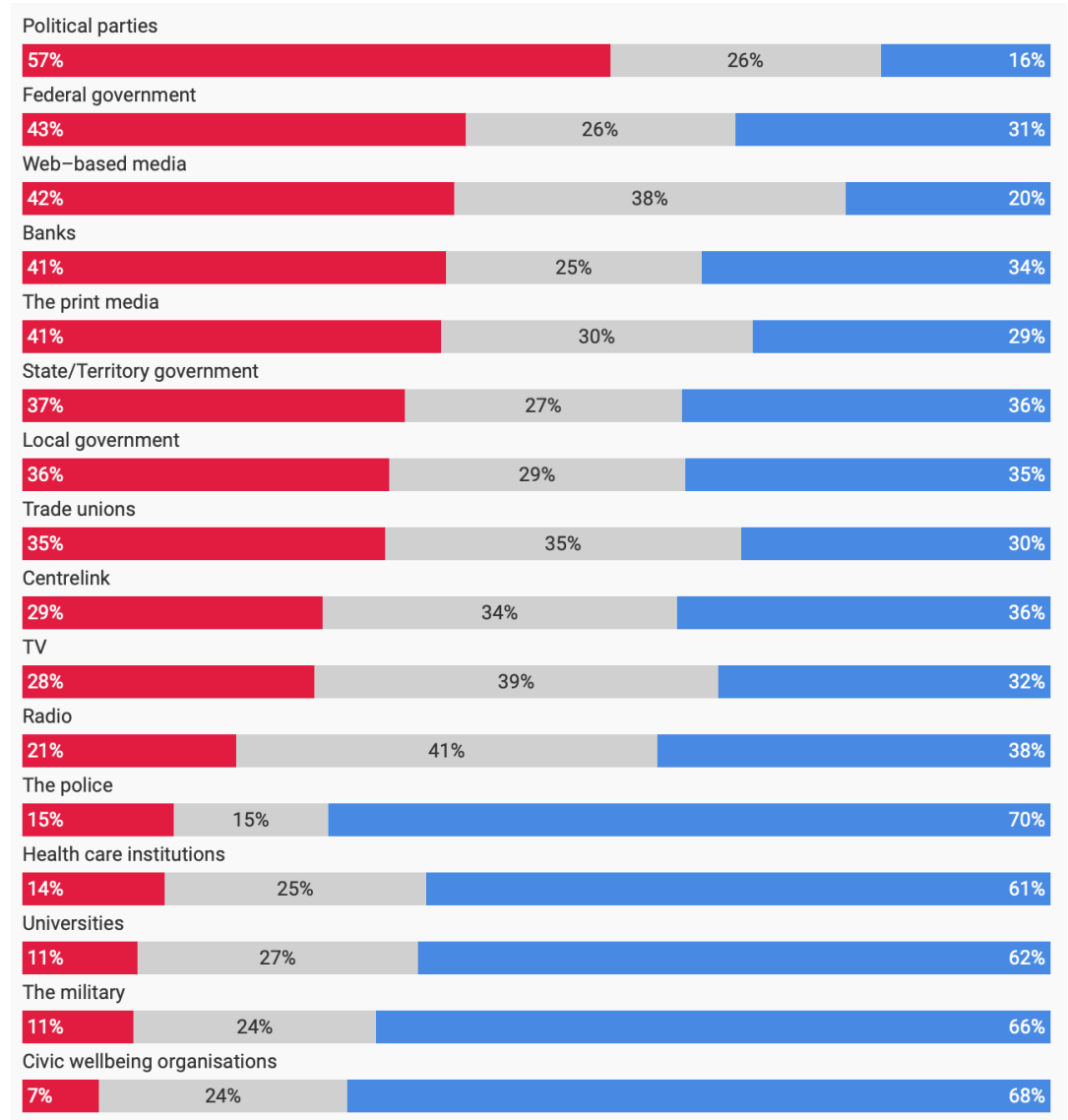State and local governments do not fare much better, although local governments are marginally more trusted than their state counterparts.

On balance, Australians are net distrusters of government.

FIGURE 7. TRUST AND DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC, PRIVATE AND NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS (%)

Political parties: Distrust 57% — Neither 26% — Trust 16%
Federal government: Distrust 43% — Neither 26% — Trust 31%
Web–based media: Distrust 42% — Neither 38% — Trust 20%
Banks: Distrust 41% — Neither 25% — Trust 34%
The print media: Distrust 41% — Neither 30% — Trust 29%
State/Territory government: Distrust 37% — Neither 27% — Trust 36%
Local government: Distrust 36% — Neither 29% — Trust 35%
Trade unions: Distrust 35% — Neither 35% — Trust 30%
Centrelink: Distrust 29% — Neither 34% — Trust 36%
TV: Distrust 28% — Neither 39% — Trust 32%
Radio: Distrust 21% — Neither 41% — Trust 38%
The police: Distrust 15% — Neither 15% — Trust 70%
Health care institutions: Distrust 14% — Neither 25% — Trust 61%
Universities: Distrust 11% — Neither 27% — Trust 62%
The military: Distrust 11% — Neither 24% — Trust 66%
Civic wellbeing organisations: Distrust 7% — Neither 24% — Trust 68%

Legend: ■ Distrust ■ Neither ■ Trust

Source: Museum of Australian Democracy (2018)

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SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

THE ROLLER COASTER OF PUBLIC SATISFACTION WITH AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY

As demonstrated by the Australian Election Study, Australians' satisfaction with democracy has been in steep decline in recent decades.

Despite the uptick in satisfaction with democracy in 2022—the year of the last federal election—in 2023, only 59% of Australians indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy works.

Moreover, Australians' satisfaction with democracy has fallen with each government, declining from 85.6% in 2007 (Howard), to 71.5% in 2010 (Rudd), 61.7% in 2013 (Abbott) and 58% in March 2016 (Turnbull).

Nevertheless, as recently demonstrated by the Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024), democracy is deeply valued by Australians.

In 2023, 95% of Australians report that living in a democratic country is important to them.

FIGURE 8. SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY (%)
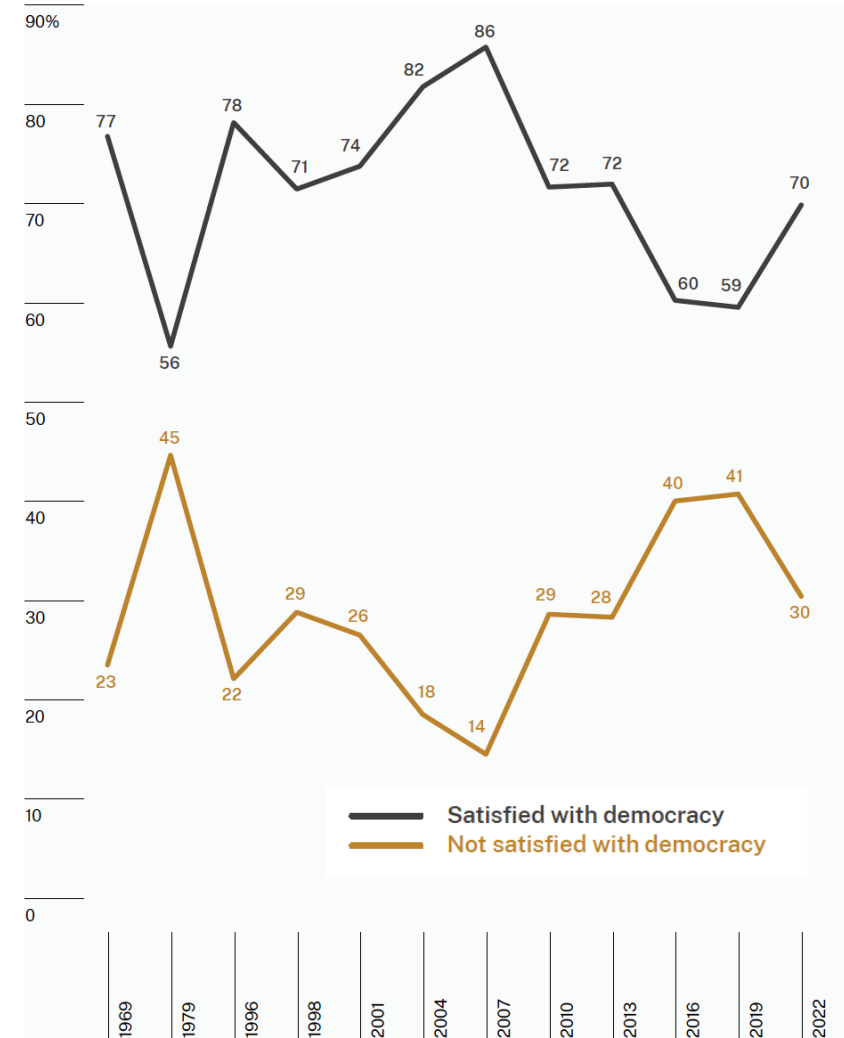
Source: Cameron & McAllister (2022)

DEMOCRATIC VALUES UNDER THREAT

SIGNIFICANT PERFORMANCE GAPS FOR SEVERAL KEY DEMOCRATIC VALUES

As reported in the recent Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit's *Trust and Satisfaction with Australian Democracy* report, Australians believe that our democratic system has both strengths and weaknesses.

The public highly rates Australia's performance for keeping elections fair (70%), protecting human rights (68%), and ensuring freedom of speech (67%).

By contrast, only half think Australia performs well when it comes to applying laws impartially (51%), giving people a say on the government's priorities (45%), and conducting enough checks to ensure that politicians and public officials cannot abuse their power (41%).
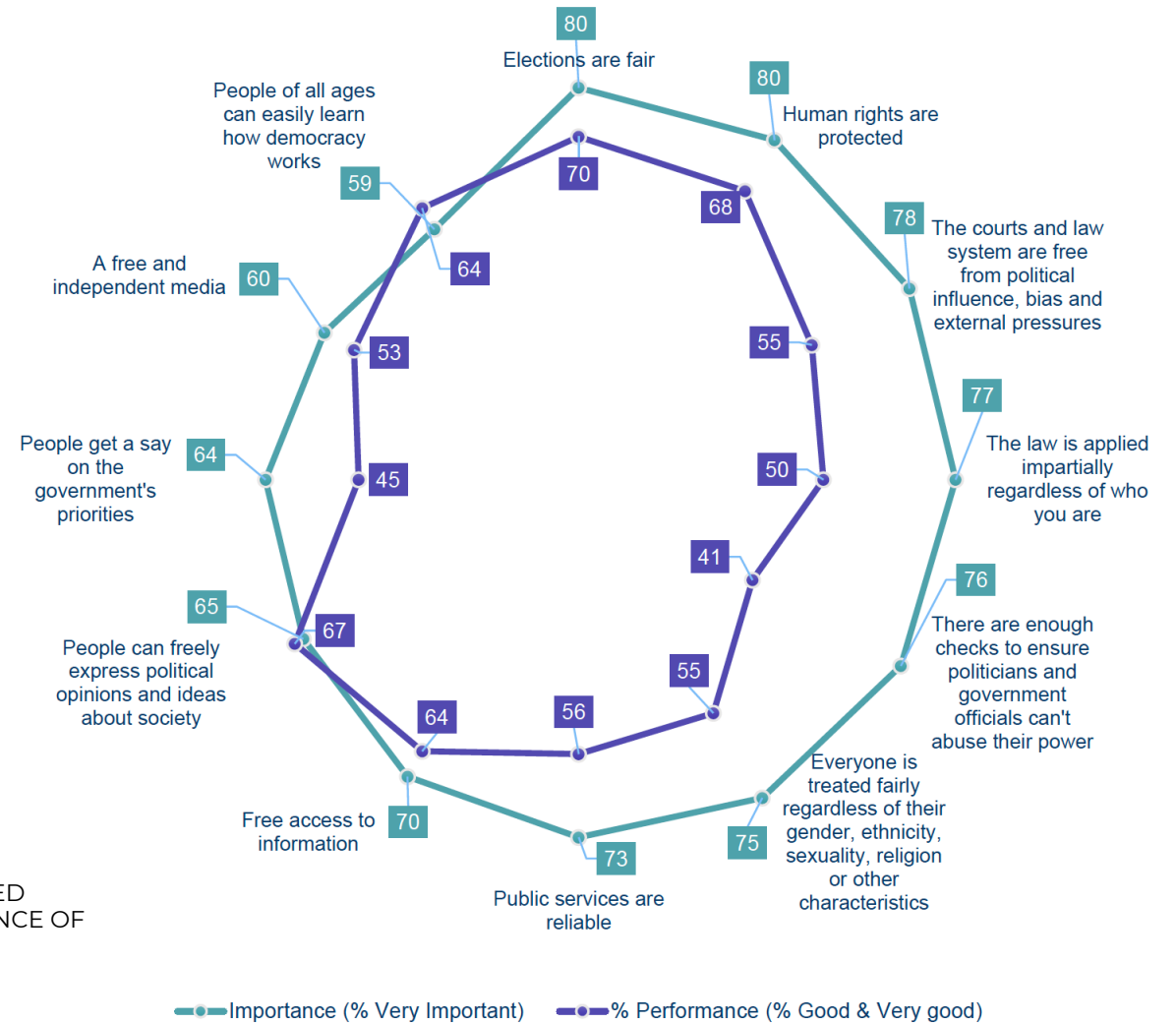
FIGURE 9. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REPORTED IMPORTANCE AND PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE OF CORE DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Elections are fair — 80 / 70
Human rights are protected — 80 / 68
People of all ages can easily learn how democracy works — 59 / 64
The courts and law system are free from political influence, bias and external pressures — 78 / 55
A free and independent media — 60 / 53
The law is applied impartially regardless of who you are — 77 / 50
People get a say on the government's priorities — 64 / 45
There are enough checks to ensure politicians and government officials can't abuse their power — 76 / 41
People can freely express political opinions and ideas about society — 65 / 67
Everyone is treated fairly regardless of their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion or other characteristics — 75 / 55
Free access to information — 70 / 64
Public services are reliable — 73 / 56

Importance (% Very Important)   % Performance (% Good & Very good)

Source: Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024)

WHO SPEAKS FOR AND PROTECTS THE PUBLIC INTEREST?

POLITICIANS SEEN TO HAVE THE BIGGEST SAY BUT THE WEAKEST COMMITMENT TO THE PUBLIC GOOD

According to research by Next25, those with the biggest say in setting priorities have the weakest commitment to acting in the public interest.
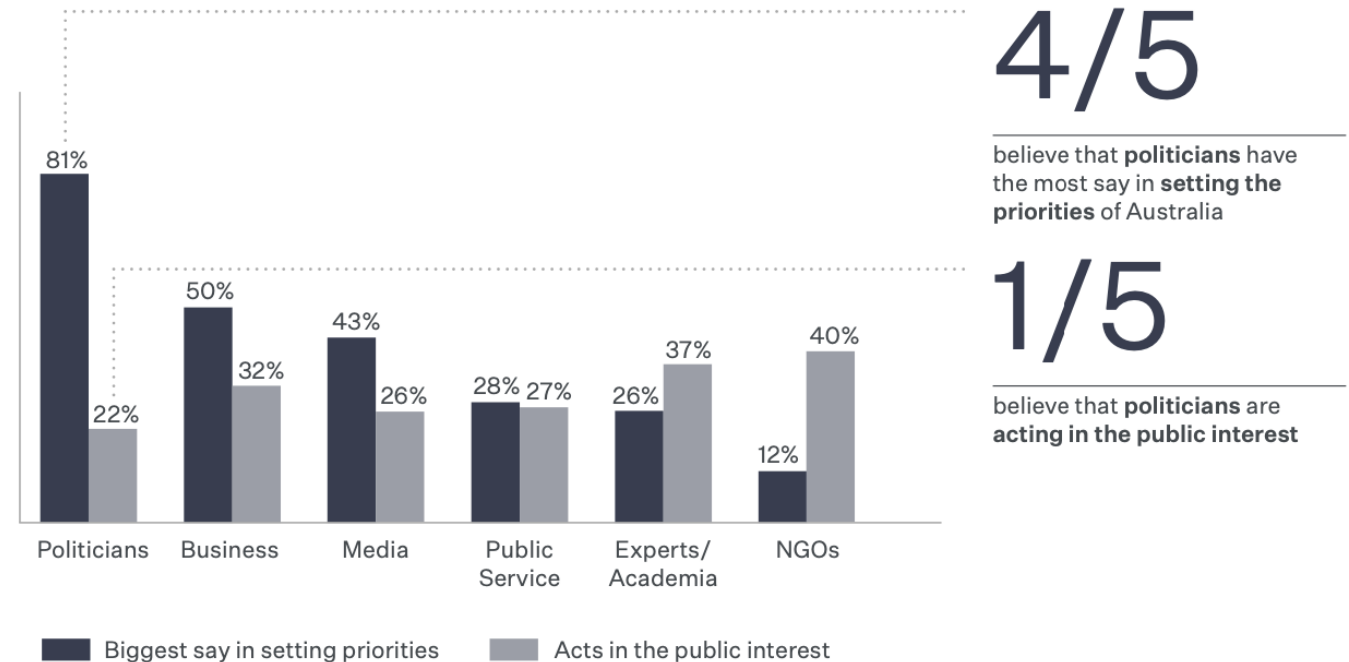
81% of Australians think politicians have the biggest say in setting priorities for the nation, but only 22% think politicians act in the public interest.

Overall, none of Australia's social institutions are seen as committed to acting in the public interest.

Of the institutions examined by Next25, NGOs, such as charities, and academia are judged as most inclined to act in the public interest.

However, even these institutions are not regarded by most Australians as serving the public good.

FIGURE 10. INFLUENCE OVER PRIORITIES AND COMMITMENT TO THE PUBLIC INTEREST

	Biggest say in setting priorities	Acts in the public interest
Politicians	81%	22%
Business	50%	32%
Media	43%	26%
Public Service	28%	27%
Experts/Academia	26%	37%
NGOs	12%	40%

Source: Next25 (2023)

4/5 believe that **politicians** have the most say in **setting the priorities** of Australia

1/5 believe that **politicians** are **acting in the public interest**

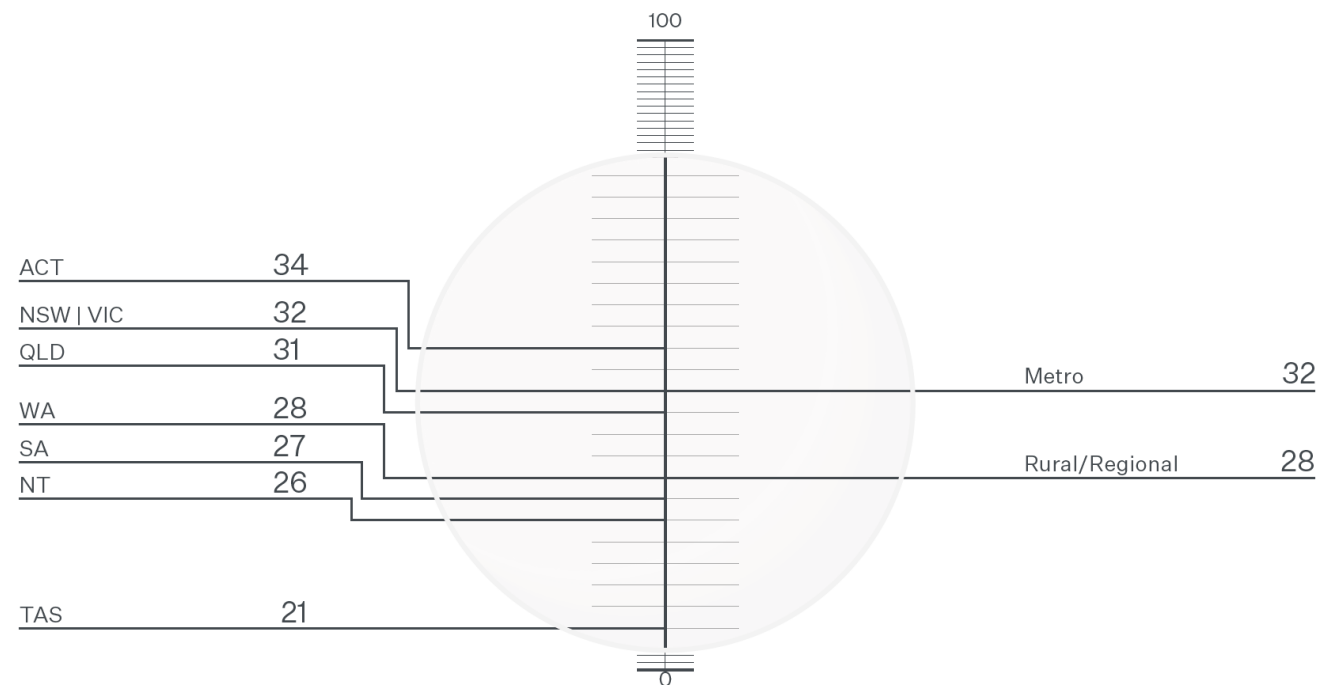# PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL NEGLECT OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST WIDESPREAD

INSTITUTIONAL DISREGARD OF THE PUBLIC GOOD APPARENT NATIONWIDE, BUT WORST IN SMALLER STATES AND REGIONAL AREAS

According to research by Next25 (2023), public beliefs that institutions do not act in public interest are widespread.

Notably, the further away from Canberra people live, the worse perceptions become, with residents of Tasmania and the Northern Territory reporting the lowest beliefs about institutional commitment to acting in the public interest.

Moreover, people who live in rural and regional areas take a dimmer view of institutional commitment to the public good than those who live in metropolitan areas.

FIGURE 11. PUBLIC INTEREST INDEX (STATE AND TERRITORY)

100	
ACT	34
NSW | VIC	32
QLD	31
WA	28
SA	27
NT	26
TAS	21
Metro	32
Rural/Regional	28
0	

Source: Next25 (2023)

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PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD PEAKED DURING COVID-19

THE RISE AND FALL OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

Research by the Australian Leadership Index reveals that Australians view the federal government as the worst performer in terms of leadership for the public good.

After a stunning reversal of historic trends in 2020—the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic—perceptions of federal government leadership for the public good fell throughout 2021.

In general, Australians regard the federal government as self-serving and uncommitted to leading for the public good.

FIGURE 12. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD (2018-21)
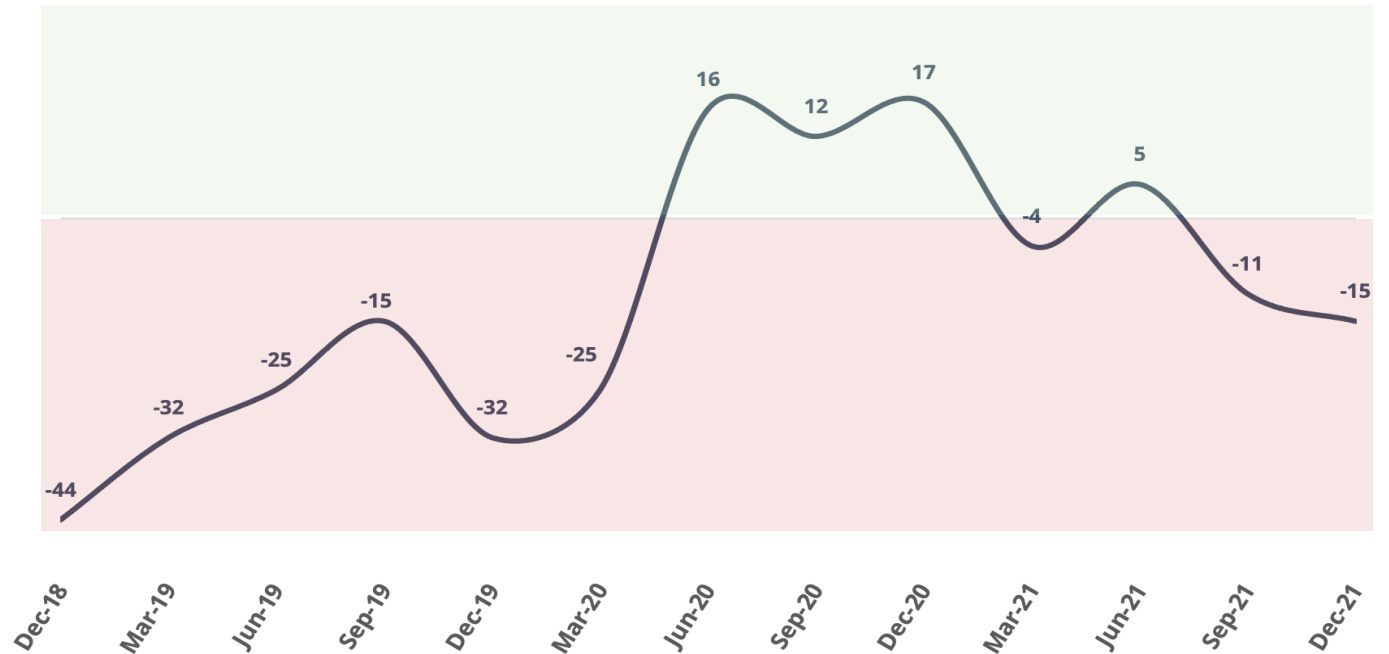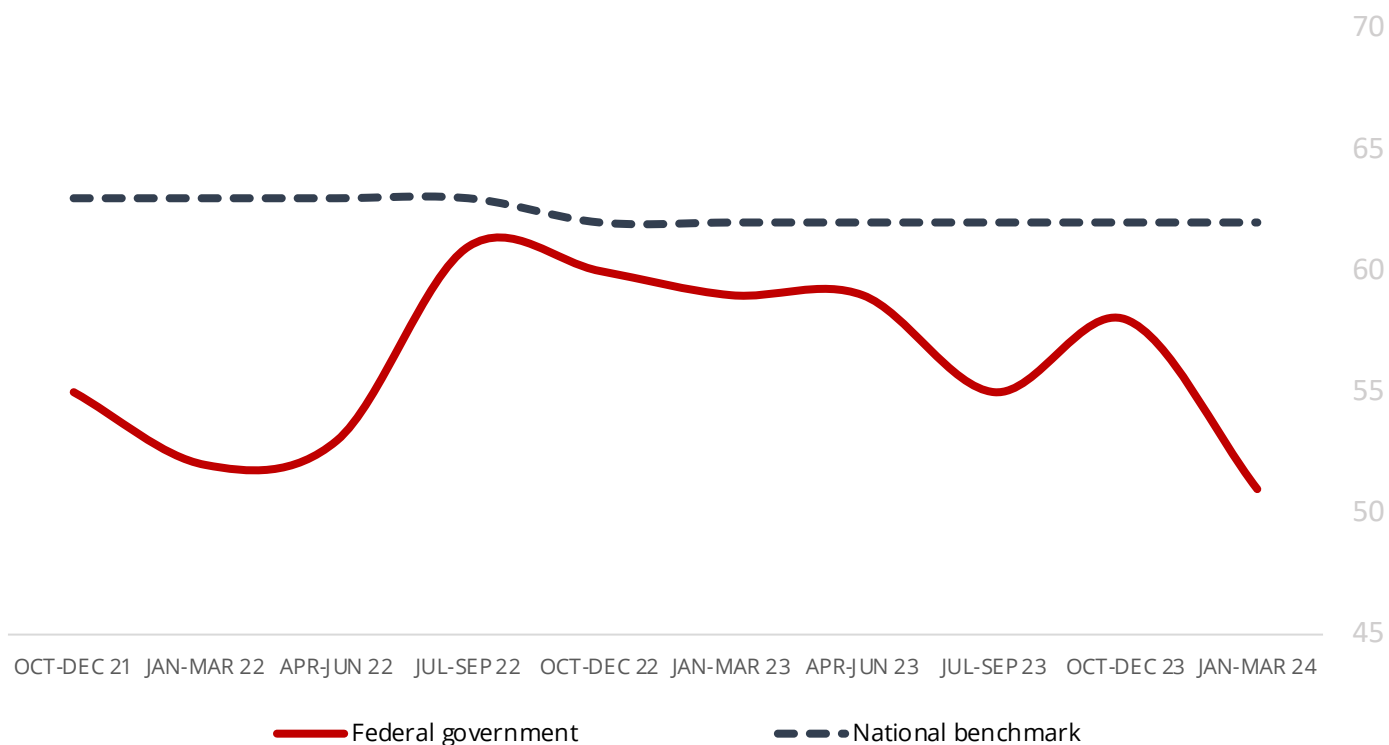

Source: Wilson, Wheeler & Demsar (2022b)

POST-COVID, THE LEADERSHIP ROLLER COASTER CONTINUES

CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT NOT ENOUGH TO SUSTAIN PUBLIC LEADERSHIP PERCEPTIONS

After briefly rebounding following the 2022 federal election, public perceptions of federal government leadership for the greater good have returned to pre-election levels.

By and large, Australians do not believe that the federal government, whatever its stripes, makes decisions or develops policies that foster the welfare and well-being of society at large.

FIGURE 13. PERCEPTIONS OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP FOR THE GREATER GOOD (2021-24)

OCT-DEC 21 JAN-MAR 22 APR-JUN 22 JUL-SEP 22 OCT-DEC 22 JAN-MAR 23 APR-JUN 23 JUL-SEP 23 OCT-DEC 23 JAN-MAR 24

—— Federal government   - - - - National benchmark

Source: Australian Leadership Index (2023)

WITHER LEADERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD?

PEOPLE IN GOVERNMENT JUDGED TO LOOK AFTER THEMSELVES

As revealed by research by the Australian Election Study, a majority of public believe that people in government look after themselves, putting self-interest before the public interest.

Notably, there is an inverse relationship between perceptions that people in government are self-serving and trust in people in government.

The more people in government are thought to serve self-interest over the public interest, the less they are trusted.

FIGURE 14. TRUST IN AND PRIORITIES OF PEOPLE IN GOVERNMENT (%)

Legend:
— People in government look after themselves
— People in government can be trusted

Source: Cameron & McAllister (2022)

OurVoice

Australian Leadership Index
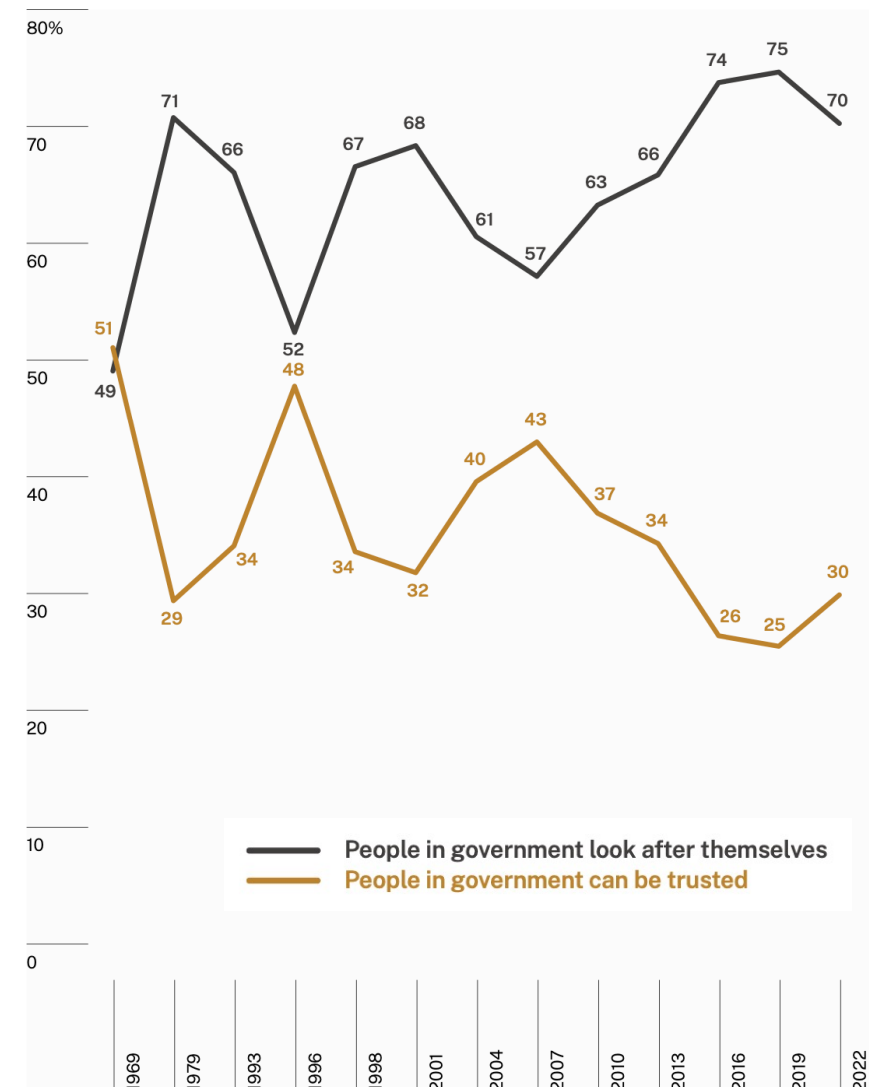
# GOVERNMENT SEEN TO SERVE SPECIAL INTERESTS OVER THE PUBLIC INTEREST

GOVERNING FOR THE GOOD OF THE FEW OVER THE MANY

Research by the Australian Election Study, also reveals that half of the public believe that government serves a few big interests rather than the wider public interest.

Again, there is an inverse relationship between public perceptions that government serves big interest and perceptions that government serves the public interest .

In other words, the more people in government are seen to serve special interests, the less committed they are seen as governing in the interests of all Australians.

FIGURE 15. WHOSE INTERESTS DOES THE GOVERNMENT SERVE? (%)

Source: Cameron & McAllister (2022)

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28
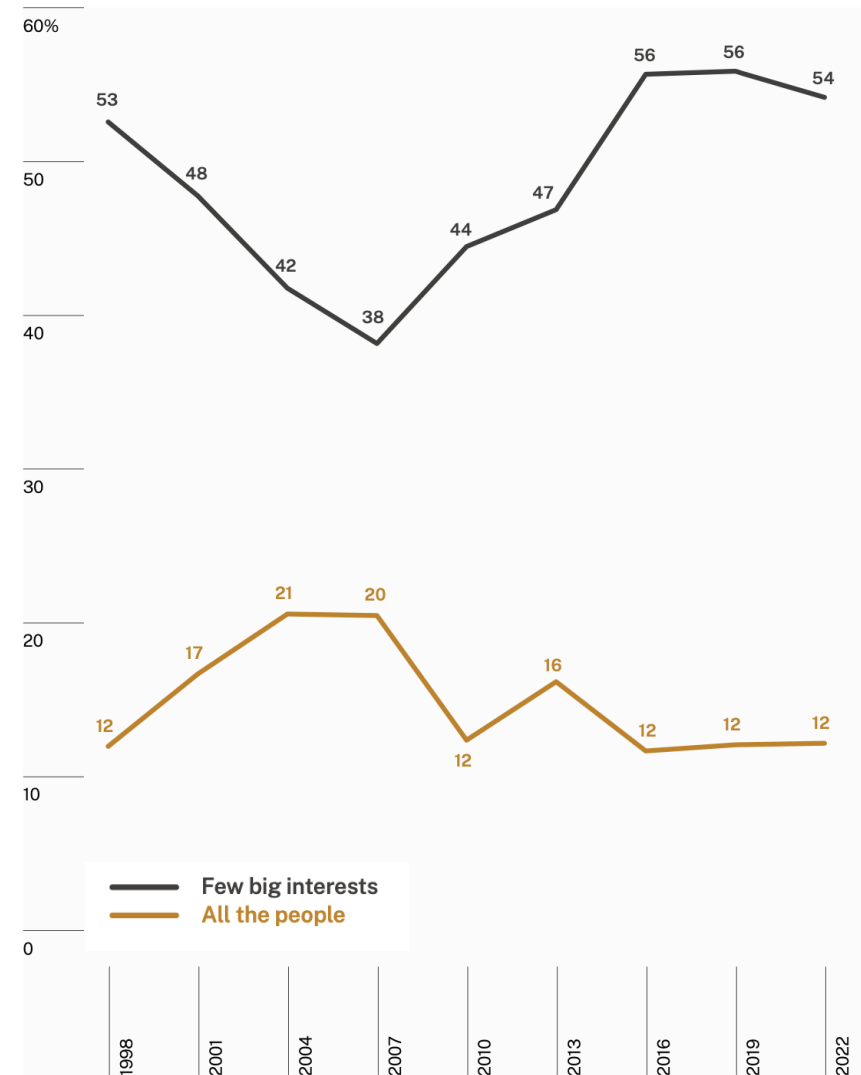
GOVERNMENTS LACK SOCIAL LICENCE TO OPERATE

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SEEN AS LEAST LEGITIMATE, CREDIBLE, AND TRUSTED

According to The Ethics Centre (2018), social licence to operate refers to the acceptance granted to a company or organisation by the community. Increasingly, this concept applied to government.

Social licence to operate is made up of three core components: legitimacy, credibility, and trust.

The Australian Leadership Index reveals that all levels of government are granted levels of social licence to operate well below the national benchmark. The federal government fares the worst while local governments fare best, although well below the national benchmark.

There is pervasive sense among Australians that governments are illegitimate and untrustworthy.

FIGURE 16. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT SOCIAL LICENCE TO OPERATE

Legend: National benchmark, Federal govt, State govts, Local govts
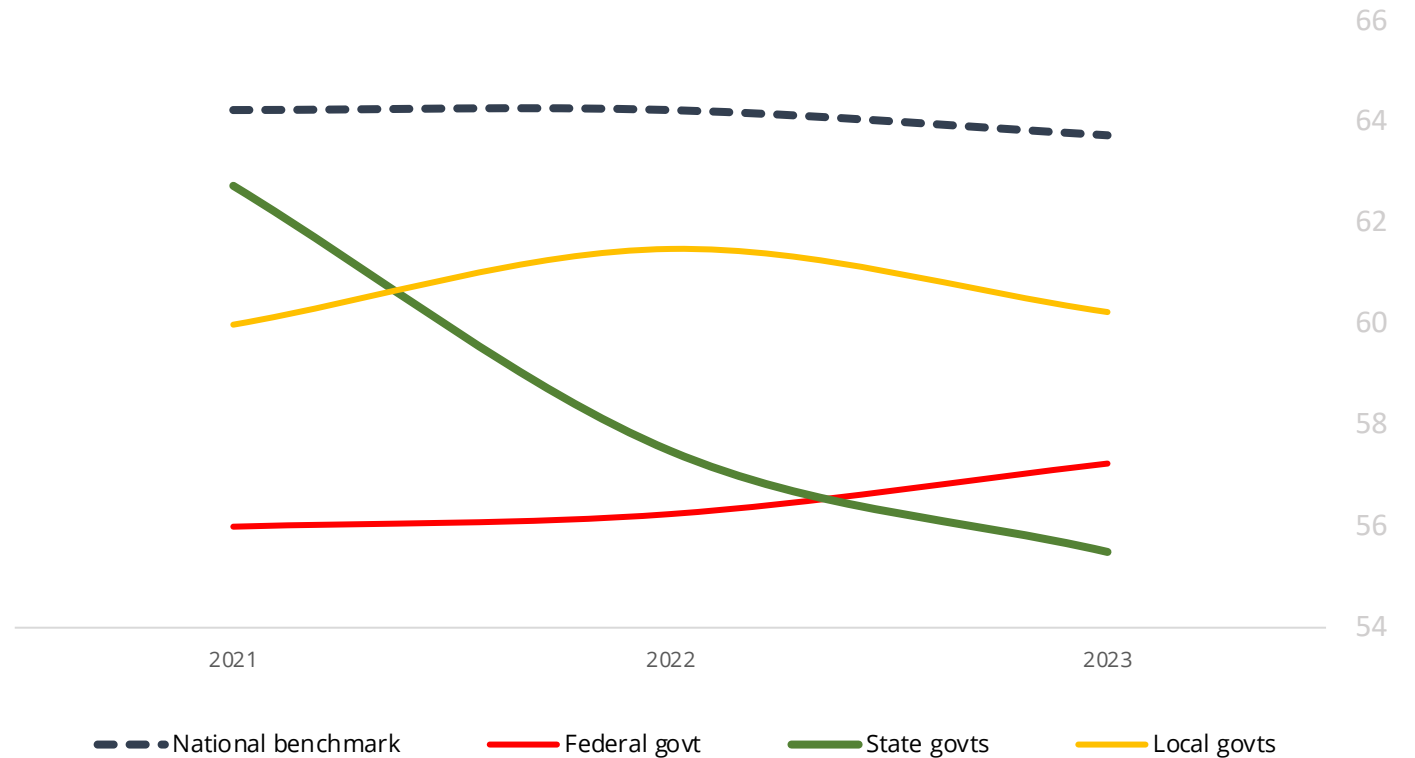
Source: Australian Leadership Index (2023)

# FAITH IN THE INTEGRITY OF GOVERNMENT HAS COLLAPSED

THE PUBLIC INTEGRITY GAP IS WIDENING

The steep decline in perceptions of the federal government's leadership has been matched by the collapse of perceptions of their public integrity.

As outlined by South Australia's Independent Commission Against Corruption (2018), public integrity comprises several core themes: public trust, public interest, morality, impartiality, transparency and accountability.

Across all these metrics, there is a large and growing gap between public perceptions and expectations of government public integrity.

FIGURE 17. THE GAP BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF GOVERNMENT ETHICALITY

— Perceptions of ethicality   — Expectations of ethicality
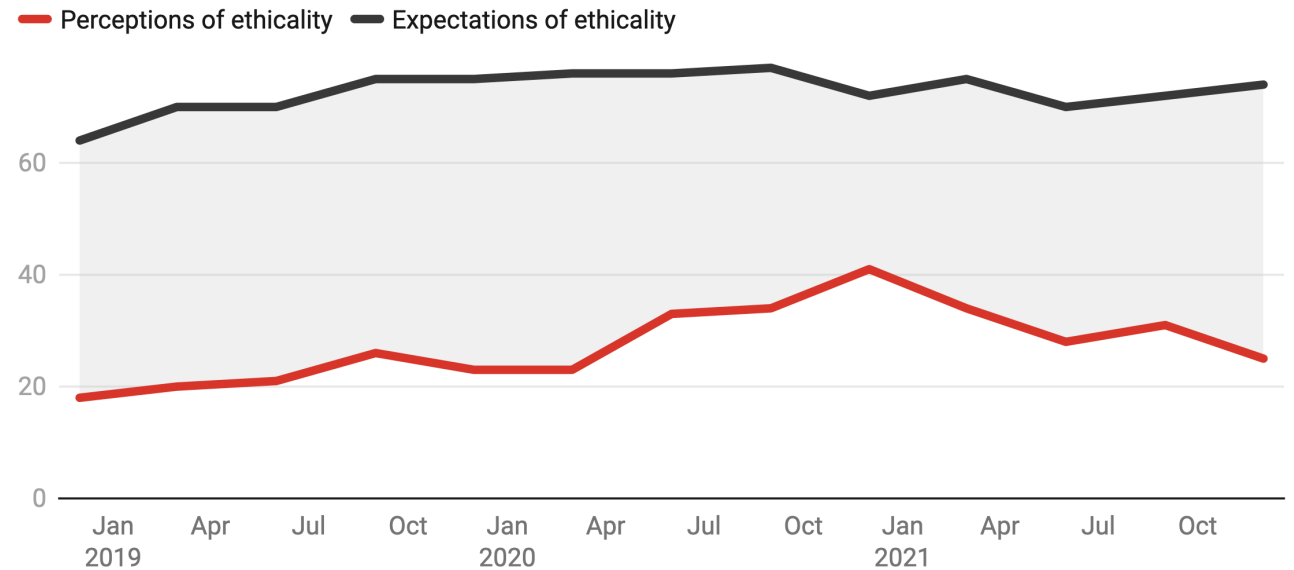
Source: Wilson, Wheeler & Demsar (2022a)

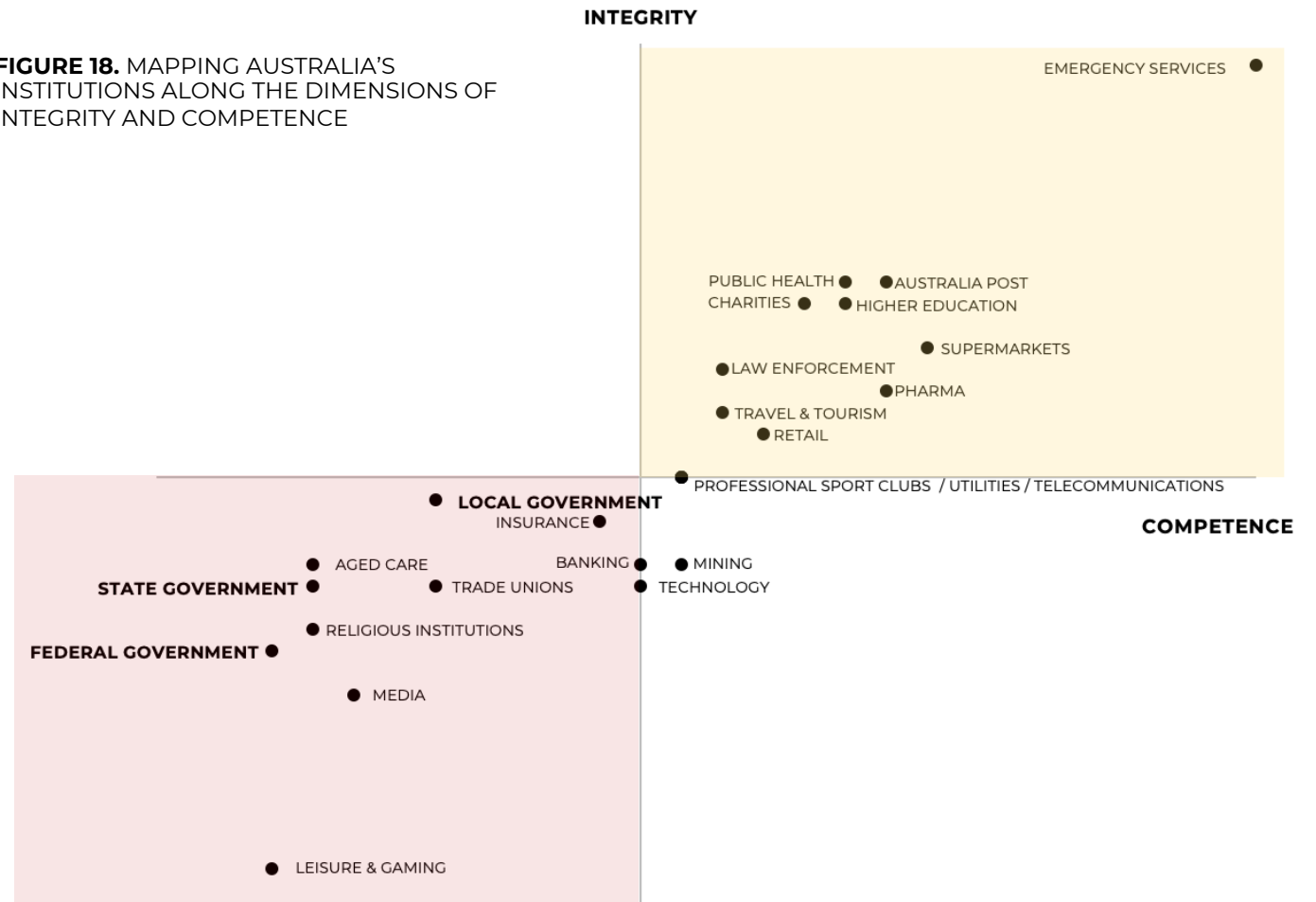# GOVERNMENT SEEN TO LACK COMPETENCE AND INTEGRITY

ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT SEEN TO LACK COMPETENCE AND INTEGRITY

Institutions in the 'golden quadrant' are viewed as having both good intentions and high integrity, as well as the ability to enact these good intentions; all of which are powerful drivers of public trust.

Institutions like charities, hospitals and especially emergency services (e.g., ambulance, fire and other emergency services) exemplify these esteemed, golden quadrant institutions.

By contrast, governments could hardly be further away from the golden quadrant in the public mind.

FIGURE 18. MAPPING AUSTRALIA'S INSTITUTIONS ALONG THE DIMENSIONS OF INTEGRITY AND COMPETENCE

INTEGRITY

EMERGENCY SERVICES ●

PUBLIC HEALTH ● ● AUSTRALIA POST
CHARITIES ● ● HIGHER EDUCATION

● SUPERMARKETS
● LAW ENFORCEMENT
● PHARMA
● TRAVEL & TOURISM
● RETAIL

● PROFESSIONAL SPORT CLUBS / UTILITIES / TELECOMMUNICATIONS

COMPETENCE

● **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**
INSURANCE ●

● AGED CARE   BANKING ● ● MINING
STATE GOVERNMENT ●   ● TRADE UNIONS   TECHNOLOGY

● RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ●

● MEDIA

● LEISURE & GAMING

Source: Wilson, Wheeler & Demsar (2023)

THE CIVIC CONTEXT

WHAT DO WE THINK ABOUT OURSELVES?

SOCIAL CAPITAL IN AUSTRALIA

A MODERATE PROPORTION OF AUSTRALIANS ENGAGE IN SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES
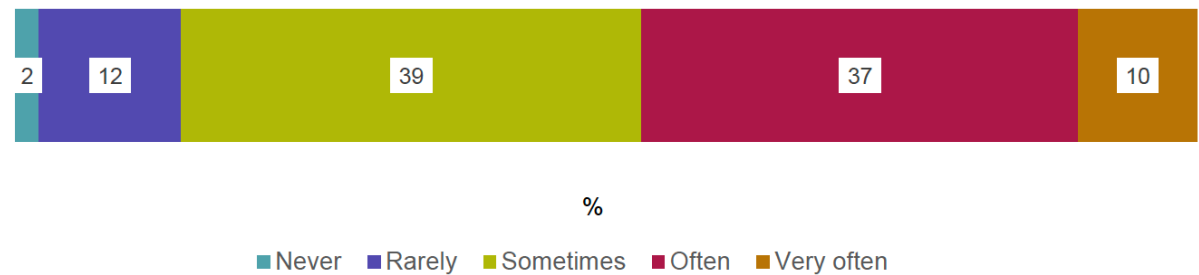
Social capital refers to the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

According to the Trust and Transparency Unit of the Australian Public Service Commission, there are moderate stocks of social capital in Australia.

Using a measure of social capital that involved asking people about their participation in social activities and levels of trust in others, it was found that only 47% reported that they engage in social or community activities 'often' or 'very often'.

By contrast, 39% report that they 'sometimes' participate and 14% reported that they 'rarely' or 'never' participated.

FIGURE 19. FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES (%)

| 2 | 12 | 39 | 37 | 10 |

%

■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ Very often

Source: Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024)

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WHAT TYPES OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION ARE PRACTICED?

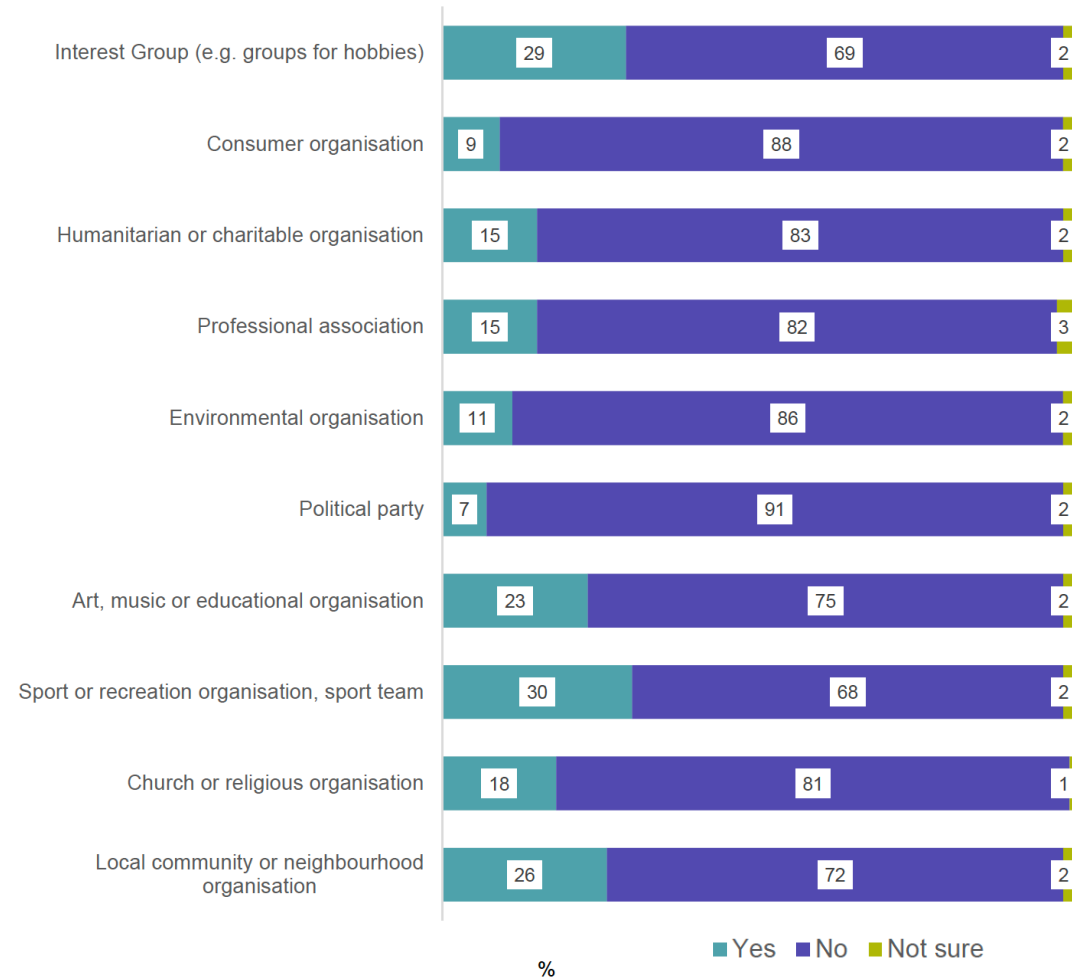## 9 IN 10 REFUSE TO ATTEND EVENTS ORGANISED BY POLITICAL PARTIES

According to the Trust and Transparency Unit of the Australian Public Service Commission, Australians have limited interest in participating in community and social events and activities.

36% of respondents report not participating in any activities or events hosted by the ten social groups in the chart to the right.

Among those who have participated in social groups, engagement is highest in sport or recreation activities, with a participation rate of 30%. This is followed closely by involvement in interest groups at 29%, and participation in local community or neighbourhood organisations at 26%.

The lowest level of engagement level is observed for events organised by political parties, which only 7% have attended in the past year.

FIGURE 20. PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES HOSTED BY EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

Organisation	Yes	No	Not sure
Interest Group (e.g. groups for hobbies)	29	69	2
Consumer organisation	9	88	2
Humanitarian or charitable organisation	15	83	2
Professional association	15	82	3
Environmental organisation	11	86	2
Political party	7	91	2
Art, music or educational organisation	23	75	2
Sport or recreation organisation, sport team	30	68	2
Church or religious organisation	18	81	1
Local community or neighbourhood organisation	26	72	2

■ Yes ■ No ■ Not sure

%

Source: Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024)

AUSTRALIANS AREN'T JOINING IN ANYMORE

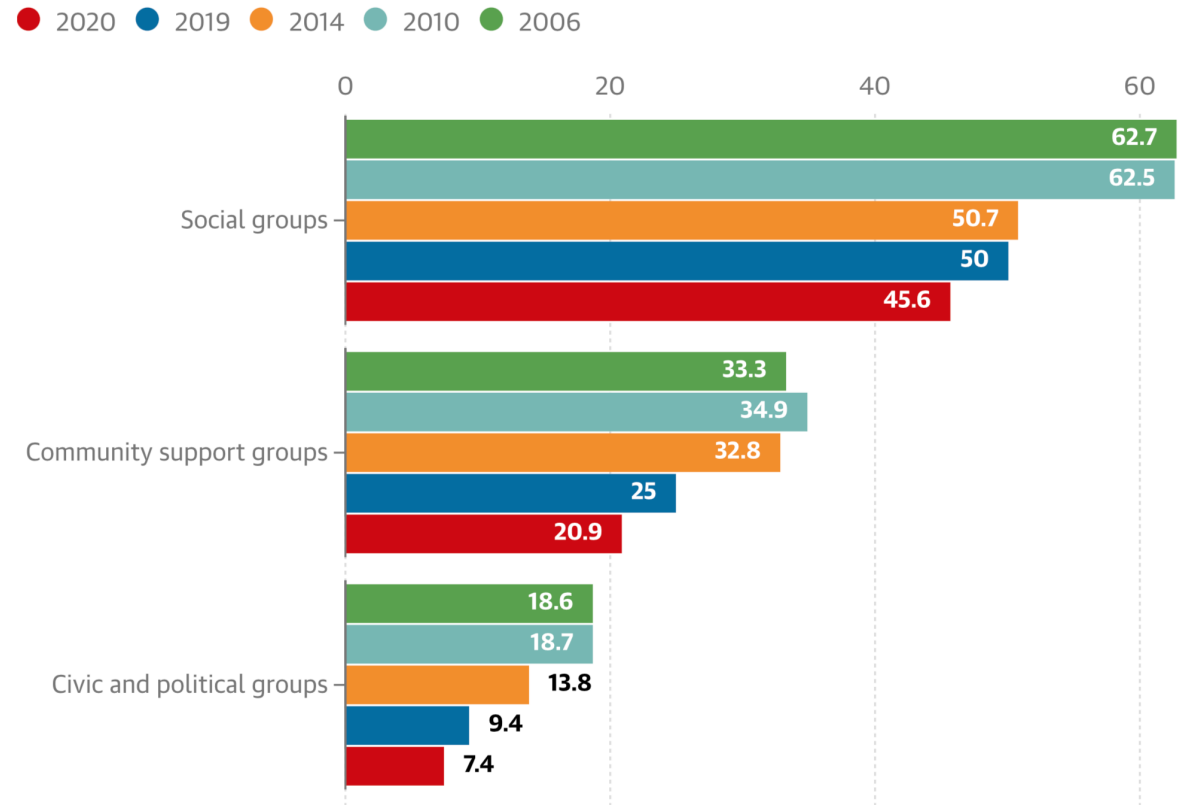## ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL, COMMUNITY AND CIVIC GROUPS HAS DECLINED IN RECENT DECADES

As recently reported *The Guardian*, drawing on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost two-thirds of Australians were members of social groups in 2006, but that is now about half.

According to the Sydney Policy Lab (2021), people who actively seek connections outside their own personal bubble of friends and family are more civically engaged.

According to the Sydney Policy Lab Civic Engagement Index:

• Younger people who grew up in a home where English is not the primary language are the most engaged citizens.

• People with children rate significantly higher on civic engagement than people without children.

• The ability to form new relationships with people outside one's existing network of family and friends is one of the strongest indicators of an engaged citizen.

FIGURE 21. PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL, CIVIC AND COMMUNITY GROUPS (2006-2020; %)

● 2020 ● 2019 ● 2014 ● 2010 ● 2006

Social groups
- 62.7 (2006)
- 62.5 (2010)
- 50.7 (2014)
- 50 (2019)
- 45.6 (2020)

Community support groups
- 33.3 (2006)
- 34.9 (2010)
- 32.8 (2014)
- 25 (2019)
- 20.9 (2020)

Civic and political groups
- 18.6 (2006)
- 18.7 (2010)
- 13.8 (2014)
- 9.4 (2019)
- 7.4 (2020)

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, General Social Survey, cited in The Guardian (2023)
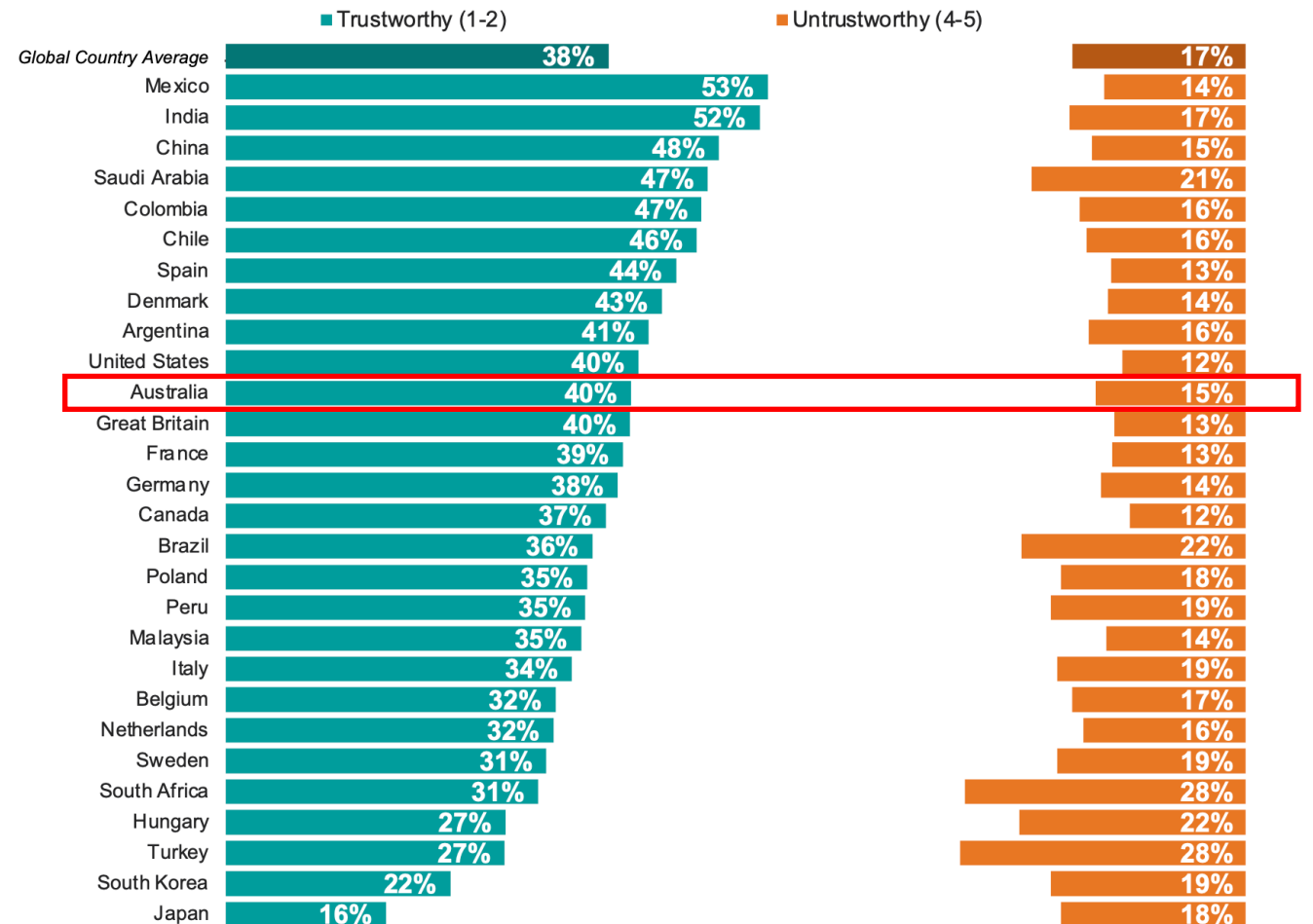
DO AUSTRALIANS TRUST ONE ANOTHER?

FIGURE 22. TRUST IN OTHERS (%)

FOR THE MOST PART, YES

According to the Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index (2022), Australians have a moderate degree of trust in one another.

Only 40% of Australians regard other people as trustworthy, putting Australians just above the global average and on par with other Anglo-American countries.

Country	Trustworthy (1-2)	Untrustworthy (4-5)
Global Country Average	38%	17%
Mexico	53%	14%
India	52%	17%
China	48%	15%
Saudi Arabia	47%	21%
Colombia	47%	16%
Chile	46%	16%
Spain	44%	13%
Denmark	43%	14%
Argentina	41%	16%
United States	40%	12%
Australia	40%	15%
Great Britain	40%	13%
France	39%	13%
Germany	38%	14%
Canada	37%	12%
Brazil	36%	22%
Poland	35%	18%
Peru	35%	19%
Malaysia	35%	14%
Italy	34%	19%
Belgium	32%	17%
Netherlands	32%	16%
Sweden	31%	19%
South Africa	31%	28%
Hungary	27%	22%
Turkey	27%	28%
South Korea	22%	19%
Japan	16%	18%

Source: Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Index (2022)

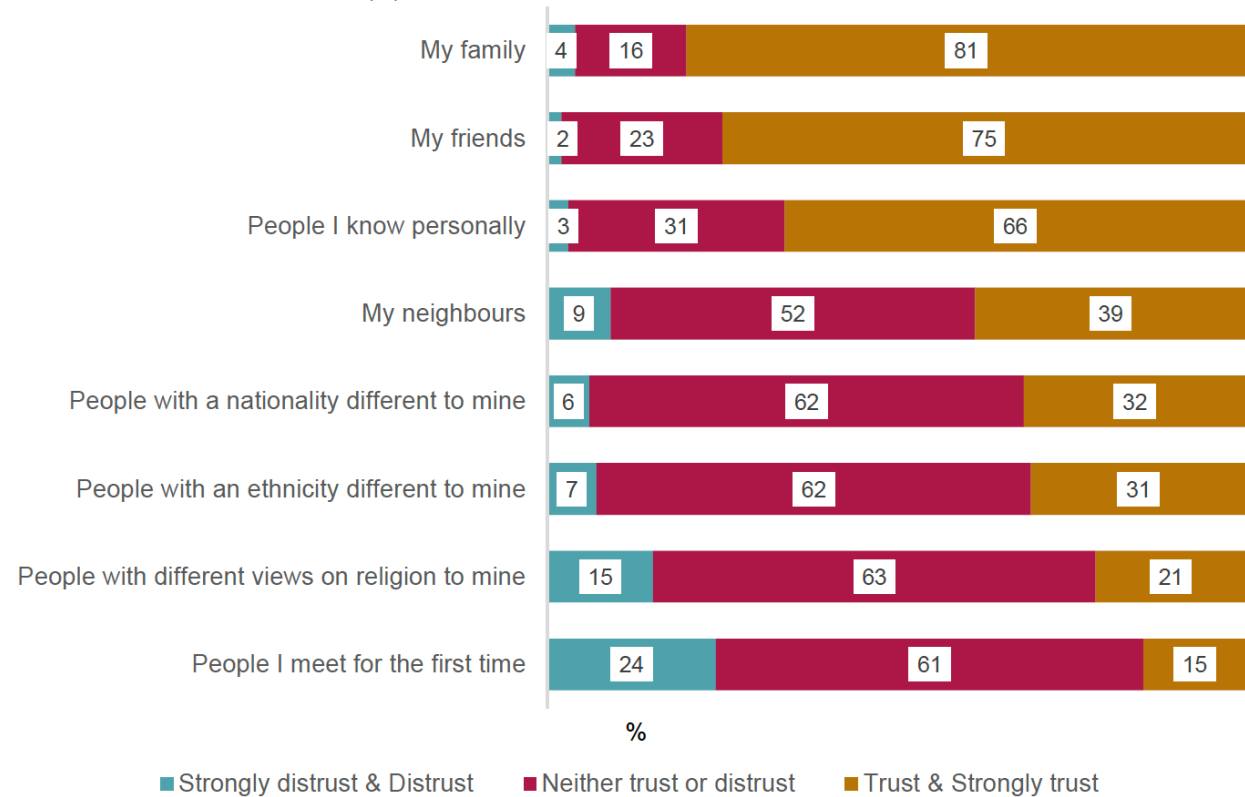# WHOM DO WE TRUST MOST (AND LEAST) IN THE COMMUNITY?

TRUST IS A FUNCTION OF FAMILIARITY AND INTIMACY

As shown by recent research by the Trust and Transparency Unit of the Australian Public Service Commission, and consistent with common sense, trust is not indiscriminate.

Specifically, this research reveals that most people express a high level of trust towards their family (81%) and friends (75%), as well as individuals they know personally (66%).

However, this general sense of trust decreased when respondents turned their minds to their neighbours, people with different a nationality, ethnicity and religion, and individuals meeting for the first time.

FIGURE 23. TRUST IN OTHERS (%)

	Strongly distrust & Distrust	Neither trust or distrust	Trust & Strongly trust
My family	4	16	81
My friends	2	23	75
People I know personally	3	31	66
My neighbours	9	52	39
People with a nationality different to mine	6	62	32
People with an ethnicity different to mine	7	62	31
People with different views on religion to mine	15	63	21
People I meet for the first time	24	61	15

%

■ Strongly distrust & Distrust   ■ Neither trust or distrust   ■ Trust & Strongly trust

Source: Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024)

SOCIAL COHESION UNDER PRESSURE

SOCIAL COHESION TRENDING DOWN

Social cohesion is a construct comprising sense of belonging, worth, social justice, participation and acceptance and rejection.

According to the most recent report of Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, social cohesion in Australia is under pressure and declining, generally trending down since measurement commenced in 2007.

Since a peak in social cohesion during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, social cohesion has declined by 13 points.

FIGURE 24. SOCIAL COHESION IN AUSTRALIA (2007-2023)
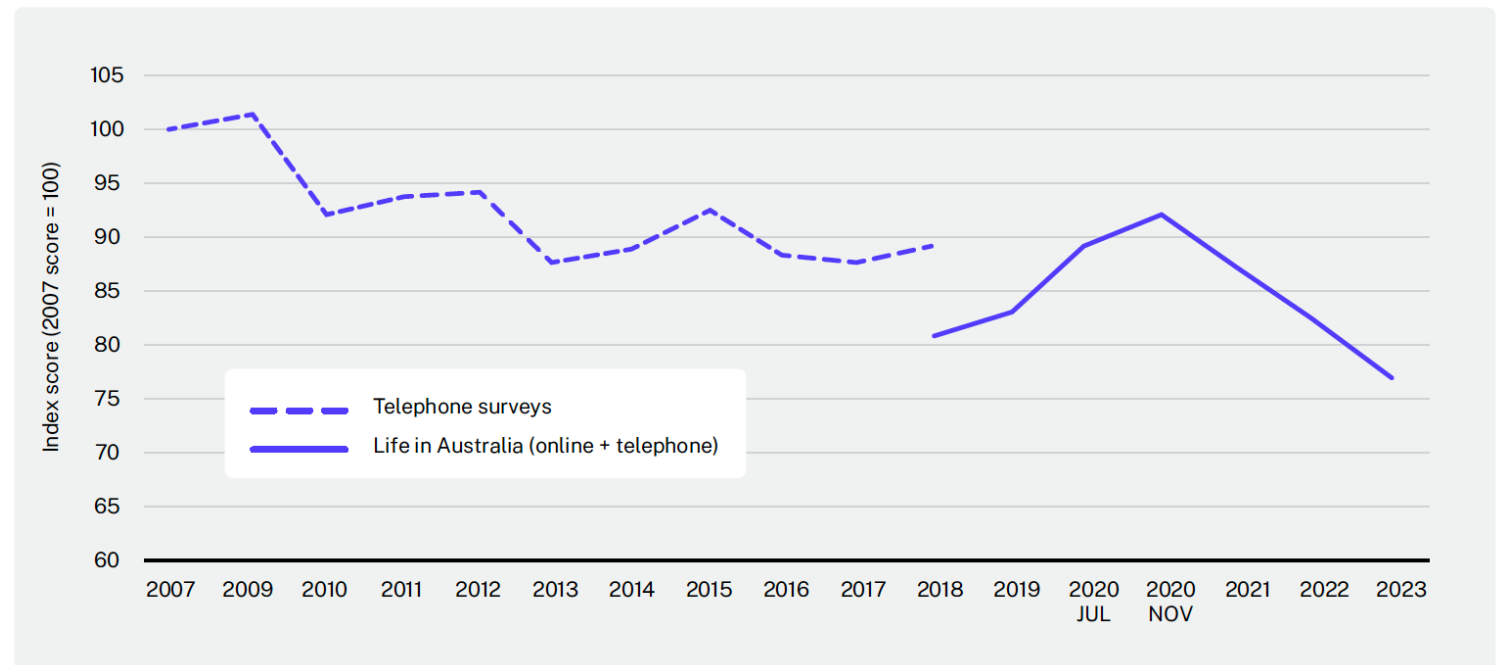
Source: O'Donnell (2023)

HOWEVER, SOCIAL COHESION IS STRONG IN COMMUNITIES

LOCAL COMMUNITIES OFFER HOPE

Happily, social cohesion remains strong within local communities.

As revealed by the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion, Australians believe that people in their community are willing to help their neighbours.

Connections across racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds are also generally strong, with most Australians reporting that people in their community get on well with people from different national and ethnic backgrounds.

FIGURE 25. SOCIAL COHESION IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES (2009-2023)
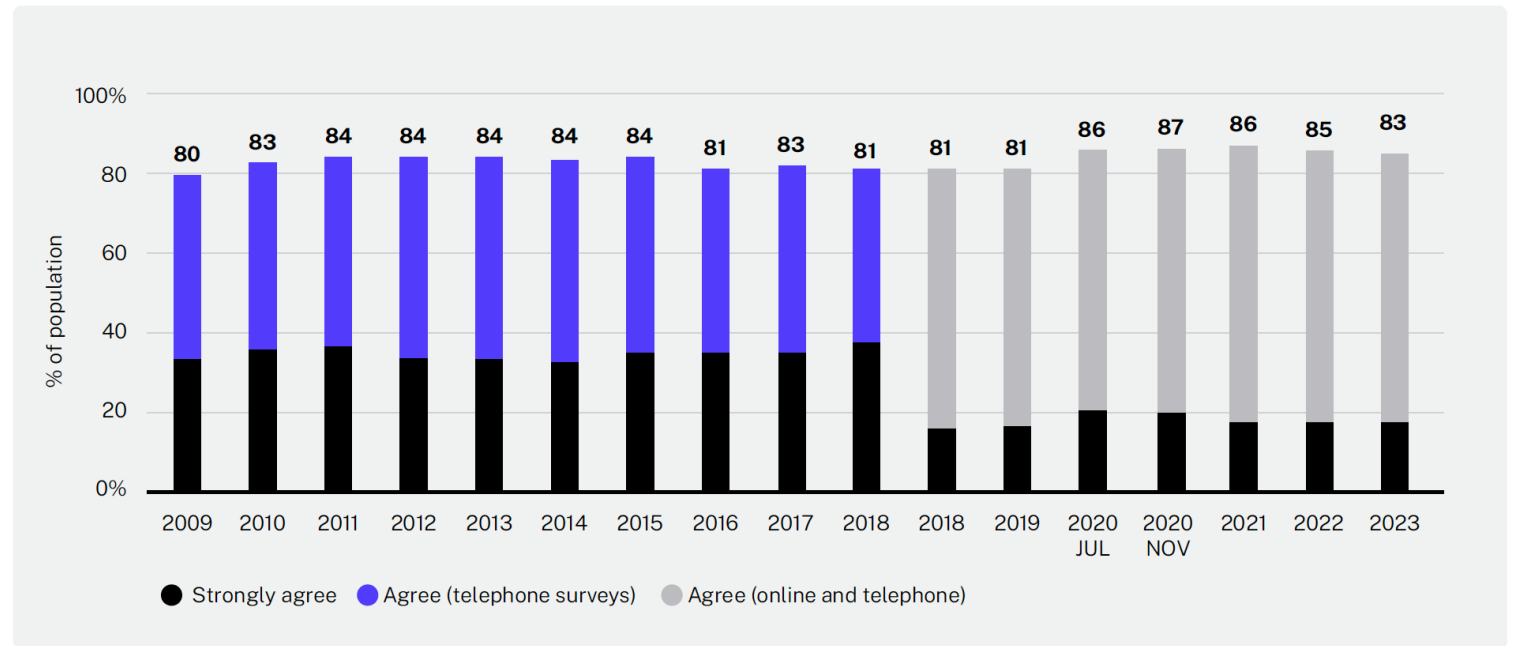
Source: O'Donnell (2023)

GROWING GENDER DIVISION IN POLITICAL LEANINGS

WOMEN BECOMING INCREASINGLY PROGRESSIVE IN THEIR POLITICAL BELIEFS

As reported by Chowdhury (2024), drawing on data from the Australian Election Study, Australian women are significantly, and increasingly, more likely to be progressive than men.

These results are consistent with the substantial global gender gap that has opened in the recent years, following decades of roughly equal ideological distribution across the genders.

Moreover, across generations and political views, the gender gap has widened.

According to Chowdhury, Gen Z—the most recent generation—appears to be the most progressive, with women strongly leaning left in their political beliefs.

FIGURE 26. AUSTRALIAN GENDER DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL LEANINGS

Based on the AES 11-point ideological scale, where 0 is extremely left, 10 is extremely right and 5 is centre
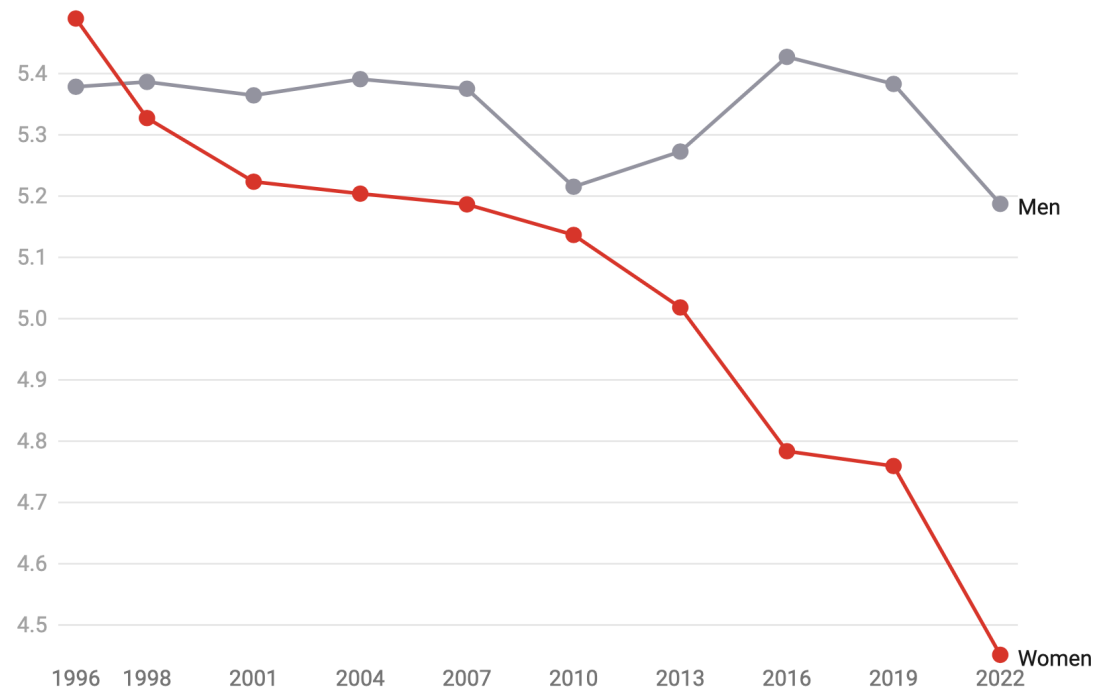
Source: Chowdhury (2024)

VOLUNTEERING IS IN LONG-TERM DECLINE

PEOPLE ARE VOLUNTEERING LESS THAN THEY WERE 15-20 YEARS AGO

According to research by Volunteering Australia (Zhu, 2022), the average rate of formal volunteering among Australians is in long-term decline.

This trend is apparent across a range of demographic factors, including age, gender, education and occupational status.

These declines in participation were most noticeable among Australians aged 45–60, women, and those without a university degree.

FIGURE 27. FORMAL VOLUNTEERING IN AUSTRALIA (2006-2020; %)
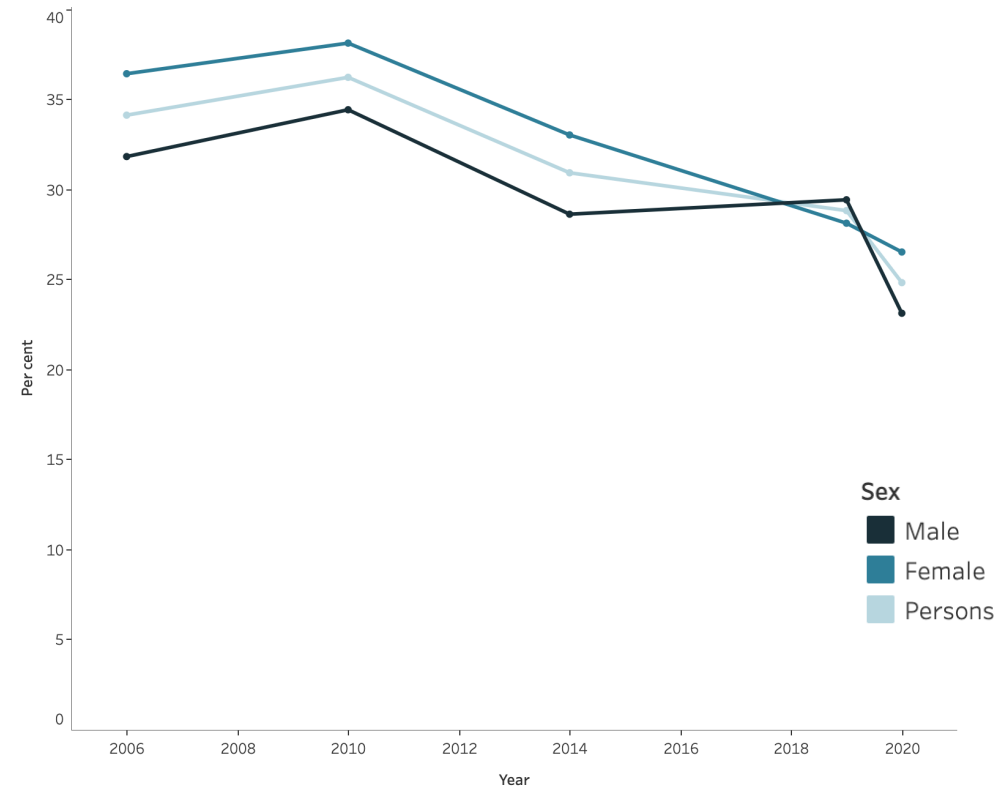
Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023)

PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC ACTIVITIES

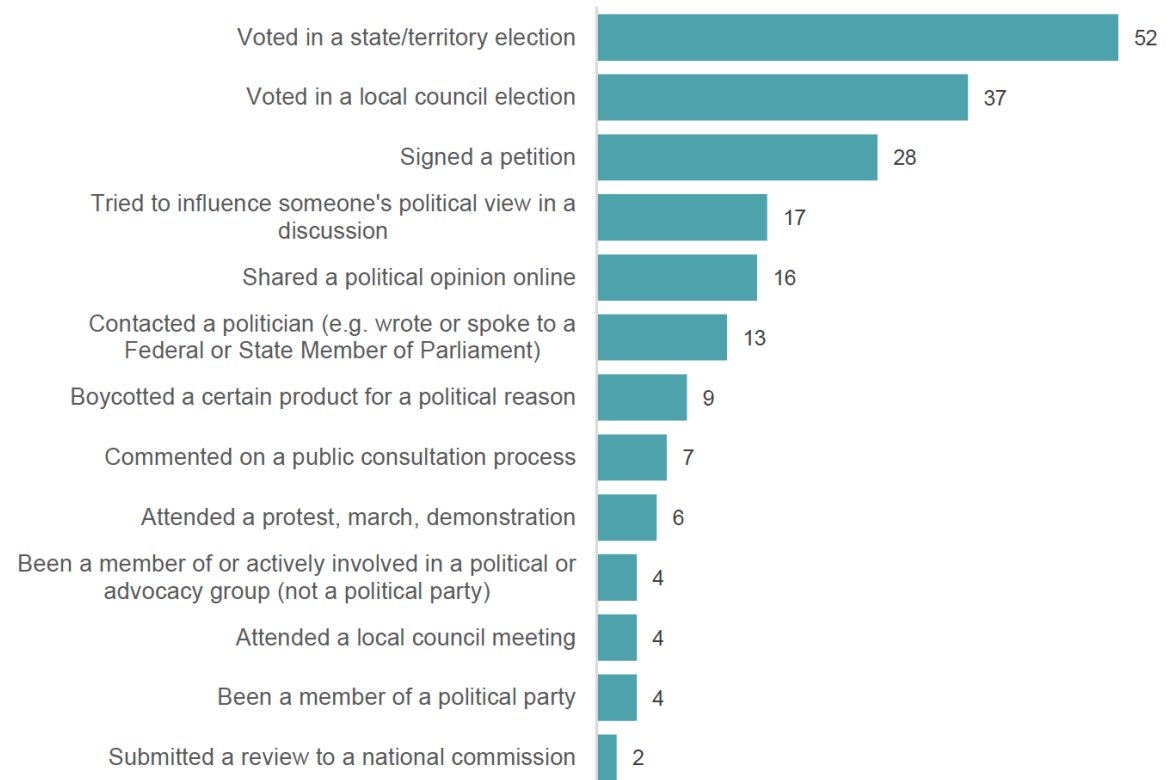## PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC ACTIVITIES HIGHEST WHEN COMPULSORY

As shown by the Trust and Transparency Unit of the Australian Public Service Commission, participation in civic activities is highest when compulsory.

According to this research, the most common type of participation, when restricted to the period of covering the prior 12 months, was voting, with 52% reporting voting in state and territory elections, and 37% in local council elections.

The next most frequent activity was signing petitions, which was reported by 28% of respondents. Other forms of participation, such as attending a protest, being actively being involved in a political group, attending a local council meeting, or commenting on a public consultation process were far less common, with less than 10% engagement.

24% of respondents reported that they haven't participated in any civic activities in the past year.

FIGURE 28. PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC ACTIVITIES IN THE PAST 12-MONTHS (%)

Activity	%
Voted in a state/territory election	52
Voted in a local council election	37
Signed a petition	28
Tried to influence someone's political view in a discussion	17
Shared a political opinion online	16
Contacted a politician (e.g. wrote or spoke to a Federal or State Member of Parliament)	13
Boycotted a certain product for a political reason	9
Commented on a public consultation process	7
Attended a protest, march, demonstration	6
Been a member of or actively involved in a political or advocacy group (not a political party)	4
Attended a local council meeting	4
Been a member of a political party	4
Submitted a review to a national commission	2

Source: Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024)

WHERE DO I SIGN?

SIMPLE FORMS OF POLITICAL VOICE PREFERRED

As revealed by research by the Australian Election Study, only 1 out 7 Australians report that they attend protests; a figure that has remained stable for over 30 years.

When civic participation is not compulsory, as it is with voting in local, state and federal government elections, simple forms of political voice, such as signing a petition, are strongly preferred.

Recent decades have witnessed steep declines in the proportion of people who report signing a written petition in the past five years, with a corresponding rise in those who report signing an online petition.

FIGURE 29. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THE PAST FIVE YEARS (%)
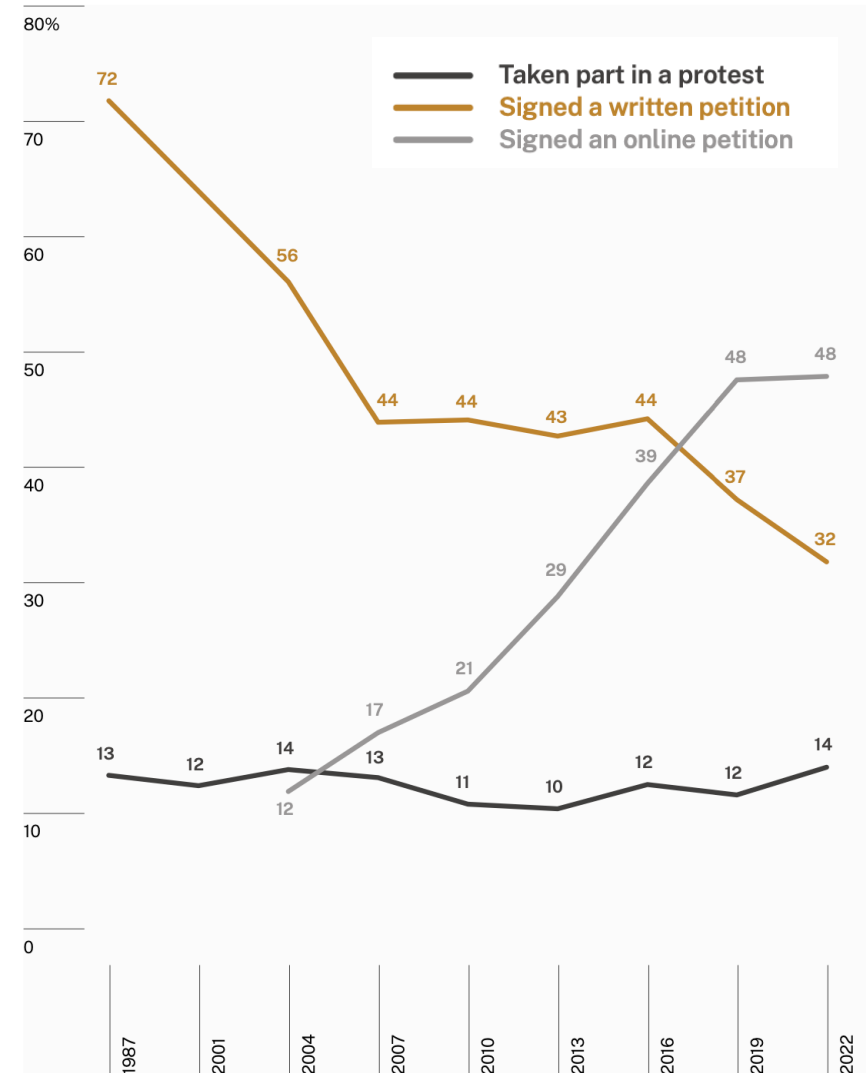
Source: Cameron & McAllister (2022)

KNOWLEDGE OF CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP IS LOW

YOUNG PEOPLE ILL-EQUIPPED TO PARTICIPATE IN DEMOCRACY?

Civic knowledge refers to an understanding of democratic process, rights and responsibilities.

According to Ghazarian, Laughland-Booy and Skrbis (2021), Australian teenagers have a limited understanding of our democratic system.
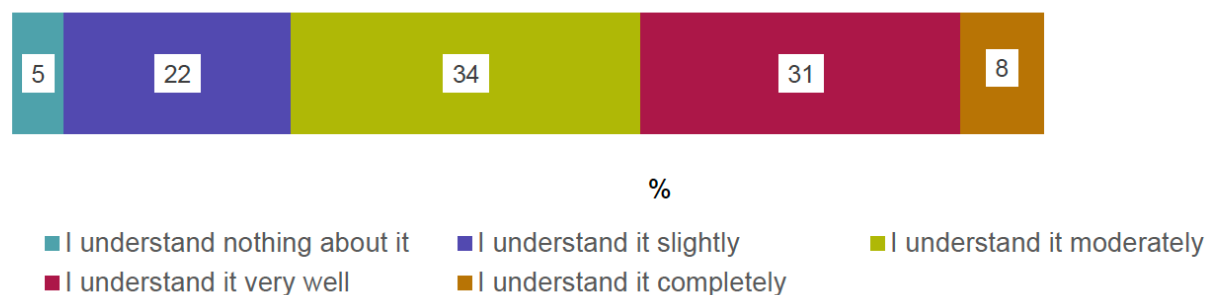
Knowledge of civics and citizenship is assessed via the National Assessment Program–Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC), which assesses students' understanding of topics such as Australian politics, government, history, and legal system, as well as their knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

Results from the 2019 NAP-CC reveal that only 38% of year 10 students reached the standard of knowledge on civics and citizenship required for their year level in 2019 and, in year 6, only 53% achieved the benchmark.

GENERAL PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY

Nevertheless, as reported in the recent Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit', most adult Australians believe they possess a basic understanding of Australian democracy, with 39% reporting they understand it 'very well' or 'completely.

FIGURE 30. UNDERSTANDING OF AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY

5	22	34	31	8

%

■ I understand nothing about it ■ I understand it slightly ■ I understand it moderately
■ I understand it very well ■ I understand it completely

Source: Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Transparency Unit (2024)

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AFTERWORD

Against a backdrop of unethical conduct, irresponsible leadership and deep distrust of institutions, there is a pervasive sense that we are not well served by our institutions or those who lead them. Institutions across the board, but especially political and government institutions, are widely seen as more concerned with self and special interests than they are with the wider public interest. At the same time, there are growing concerns about our sense of belonging and social connection. Social cohesion is under pressure and at risk of declining further as polarisation increases and our ability to constructively discuss difficult social, cultural and political issues recedes.

There is no shortage of information about all this. It is reported in myriad news stories, public opinion polls, and research reports. However, we seem, as a society, to have difficultly integrating this sea of information into useful knowledge, a situation not helped by persistent uncertainty and disagreement about what constitutes information, disinformation and misinformation. The difficulty of elevating this information into knowledge is only matched by the difficulty of elevating it into a disinterested understanding of the state we're in and practical wisdom about what to do about it.

This report is a first step towards the integration of this information into knowledge, and this knowledge into practical wisdom and action. By drawing on a wide variety of publicly available reports that used robust research methods, and by selecting key charts whose findings are independently corroborated by different research groups, this report presents a general portrait of the civic health of Australia.

Crucially, our selection of charts was motivated by the goal of revealing the types of high-level trends and patterns that we can all agree on even if we disagree about the underlying explanations or causes of these phenomena and the corresponding solutions.

THE STATE OF AUSTRALIAN CIVIC HEALTH

As explained by Moore-Vissing and Mallory (2020), civic health refers to the ways in which the members of a community participate in activities that strengthen individual and community wellbeing, enhance connections, build trust, help each other, talk about important political and social issues, volunteer in social and civic organisations, stay informed about their society and communities, and participate directly in crafting solutions to various social and economic challenges.

Three basic categories need to be considered to assess civic health:

- civic awareness and engagement, which refers to how people feel, learn about, and take actions related to societal issues;

- sense of belonging and social connection, which refers to how people interact and talk with others about important community and societal issues, and how much they trust and help their neighbours; and

- volunteering and giving, which refers to how much people are giving their time or money to serve the community or contribute to causes they care about.

Each of these aspects of civic health is considered in turn.

CIVIC AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION IN DECLINE

As shown by countless studies, distrust of politicians, political parties, and government is deep and pervasive. Australians are pessimistic about their ability to influence politics. Unhappily, few see opportunities to meaningfully participate in and influence government decision-making and policy making, yet political voice is vital to both the health of, and satisfaction with, democracy.

Nationally, satisfaction with democracy has declined sharply in recent decades, with a corresponding decline in trust in politicians, political parties, and the institutions of government. Government institutions at all levels—but especially federal government—are widely perceived as serving self and special interests ahead of the long-term welfare and well-being of the general population; the public interest. These beliefs are reflected across a host of indicators, including integrity, transparency, accountability, and social licence to operate. Indeed, most people believe that government does not have a social licence to operate.

Although Australians are pessimistic about their ability to influence politics, dissatisfaction with democracy is highest among those who think our system does not allow them to influence policy decision-making. Political voice is important to Australians, but most people prefer simple forms of political voice, such as signing a petition. Indeed, civic participation is highest when it is compulsory, such as it is with voting in local council, state and federal government elections. A quarter of Australian have not participated in any civic activities in the past year.

THE STATE OF AUSTRALIAN CIVIC HEALTH

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND SOCIAL COHESION UNDER PRESSURE

In stark contrast to how Australians view the institutions of the public, private and nonprofit sectors, and especially their institutions of government, Australians regard each other and their communities much more favourably. By and large, Australians trust each other, with only a small minority regarding other people as untrustworthy.

Social cohesion in Australia has been quite resilient, especially at the local level, despite the challenges of recent years. In general, Australians generally believe that people in their community get on well with people from different national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and are very willing to help their neighbours.

Nevertheless, social cohesion in Australia is under pressure and at risk of declining. Almost half of us think that Australian is more divided today than in the past, creating the risk of further division and polarisation. Unhappily, two-thirds of Australians believe it has gotten to the point in Australia where we are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about difficult social, cultural and political issues we disagree on.

VOLUNTEERING AND GIVING IN LONG-TERM DECLINE

Australians' engagement in social, community and civic groups has been relatively stable over the last two years. However, when we take the longer view, the reported rates of volunteering and participation in community, civic, religious, hobby and sports organisations gives cause for concern.

Participation in social, community and civic groups has declined in recent decades. Whereas two-thirds of Australians were members of social groups twenty years ago, that proportion is now about half.

Moreover, formal volunteering among Australians is in long-term decline. People are volunteering significantly less than they were 15-20 years ago. Australians are not joining in anymore.

When civic participation is not compulsory, as it is with voting in elections, simple forms of civic participation, such as signing a petition, are preferred.

THE FUTURE OF CIVIC HEALTH IN AUSTRALIA

Overall, this report paints a somewhat pessimistic picture about the state of civic health in Australia. Across three interlocking dimensions, civic health in Australia is under pressure. Nevertheless, it is a truism that challenges create opportunities, and this is no exception.

The widespread sense that leaders and institutions do not act in the public interest—a sense most pronounced with respect to political leaders and governments—creates the opportunity for both new leaders and new forms of leadership for the public interest (e.g., integrative public leadership; Crosby & Bryson, 2010; 2014; Sun & Anderson, 2012); forms that are more suitable for the conditions of complexity and pluralism encountered in a shared-power world (Crosby & Bryson, 1992).

Moreover, this generalised concern about the state of the public or common good creates an opportunity for renewed engagement with this ancient but vital concept. Although the concept of the common good seems familiar and commonplace, the concept is difficult to define or articulate in a precise or comprehensive way. Nevertheless, we have a shared sense of its conceptual structure (Wheeler et al., 2024), and thus common ground for thinking about the general nature of the good.

However, in complex, pluralistic societies, it is important to recognise that there is no single, determinate public or common good (Sluga, 2014) but rather a diversity of often-competing (Mansbridge, 2013) and paradoxical (Wilson, 2023) conceptions of the good. This leaves us with the search for the common good, in which the role of citizens is central.

Although experts from philosophers to psychologists can inform the discussion and deliberations that occur as part of the search for common good, in democracies, responsibility for the search for the common good falls to citizens—the ultimate source and locus of legitimacy in such societies.

Although public trust is a critical resource in democracies, and although important connections exist between declines in public trust and declines in public participation, social cohesion, and support for democracy (Devine, 2024), the distrust with political leaders and institutions also raises questions about whether trust/distrust are appropriate dispositions to hold toward agents and entities that are disinclined to serve the public good. Instead, it raises the question of whether a stance of mistrust may be more fitting, reflecting a posture of caution or scepticism (Citrin & Stoker, 2018).

Furthermore, given that half of Australians think that our society is more divided today than in the past, and the fact that many say it has gotten to the point where we are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about challenging social issues, the current dismal state of civic health in Australia presents us with an opportunity to learn how to have constructive disagreements and civic debates about the issues on which we disagree.

Finally, there are opportunities to use new and emerging technologies, including AI, to support and enable new forms of civic engagement and participation, as well as facilitating the types of discussion, deliberation and constructive disagreement necessary to sustain a truly civil society. There are myriad opportunities to foster our capacity for constructive dialogue to take us off the path to polarisation and onto the path of a thriving civic life.

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