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Australian views towards democracy: Comparisons through time and with the rest of the region

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<https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.26193/AXQPSE>

Abstract

There are concerns in many established democracies, including Australia, about an erosion of democratic institutions and falls in support for democracy. Having data over the medium to longer term on Australian's confidence in key institutions including government and views about democracy is crucial to both understanding how views are changing, whether there are differences between segments of society and reasons for changes in attitudes. It is also important to understand how confidence in institutions and views about democracy in Australian compare to other countries in the Asian region. This paper uses data from the ANUpoll series of surveys and the Asian Barometer to help answer these questions. While the majority of Australians are satisfied with democracy, there is evidence of some declines in the level of satisfaction with democracy amongst the Australian population with a substantial drop in the proportion who were very satisfied with democracy between 2008 and 2023. The fact that levels of satisfaction are lowest amongst those living in the lowest income households and those with relatively low levels of educational attainment should be a matter of significant concern. This is particularly in the context of growing perceived disparities in income and wealth in Australia.

1 Introduction

The Australian Prime Minister, the Hon Anthony Albanese, MP in a speech in late 2022 articulated significant concerns about threats to Australia's democracy and highlighted the importance of protecting Australia's democracy saying:

"I urge anyone who thinks our democracy is unassailable to have a look around the world. Even some of the oldest, most stable democracies have come under attack from whole range of corrosive, insidious forces. No one is immune. Our democracy is precious, something we have carefully grown and nurtured from one generation to the next. One of our core responsibilities is to make it stronger, and key to that strength is transparency and accountability."¹

Reflecting these concerns, in early 2023 the Australian Government established a taskforce to advise government on "what can be done —practically—to strengthen Australian democracy." The Strengthening Democracy Taskforce is being run out of the Department of Home Affairs and in announcing the Taskforce the Minister for Home Affairs the Hon Clare O'Neil said:

"Democracies around the world are under threat from a range of anti-democratising forces, including foreign interference, rising disinformation and discord online, populism and polarisation, and declining reserves of public trust.

Australian democracy is strong, but it is not immune to a range of emerging and evolving threats. Some threats are acute, others more chronic in nature; some emerge locally, others from abroad."²

In February 2023, the Treasurer the Hon Dr Jim Chalmers, MP released an extended essay on Capitalism after the crises (Chalmers, 2023). In the essay, the Treasurer outlined his view of the role of his own government in the following terms:

'Our mission is to redefine and reform our economy and institutions in ways that make our people and communities more resilient, and our society and democracy stronger as well.'

Dr Chalmers also talked about how 'People sincerely committed to democracy all share an unease at the rise of anti-democratic trends in developed countries.' (Chalmers, 2023). Chalmers tied some of these democratic trends to economic trends, and particularly the widening in inequality seen in many developed countries, though the evidence for this in Australia is much weaker (Productivity Commission, 2018).

The focus of the Prime Minister, the Treasurer, and the Minister for Home Affairs on Australian democracy being attacked included by foreign actors is striking, although it is clearly recognised that the threats are not only acute but also chronic in nature and include threats that emerge locally.

Australia is not alone in their being concerns about the strength of our democracy. Since the early 2000s there has been a weakening of democratic rule in a number of countries that had relatively recently transitioned to democracy. In a process that has been termed "democratic backsliding" this reflects a process of the "incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader" (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021: p. 1)

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For a number of years, it was generally thought that long-standing democracies in Western Europe and North America would be immune from democratic backsliding. This confidence has however been shaken in recent years and there are now significant concerns in many of the countries about a weakening of their democratic institutions and a loss of support for democracy (Diamond, Plattner and Walker 2016; Eatwell 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019).

Confidence and trust in key institutions is essential to binding a democratic society together. There is clear evidence, however, that this has been declining over the medium and longer-term in many long-standing democracies (see for example, Citrin and Stoker 2018; Dassonneville and McAllister 2021; van der Meer 2017). The level of political trust in Australia has historically been amongst the highest in the world. However, there is evidence that since 2013 political trust has been declining, although this decline is not consistent across elections or across the population. Cameron and McAllister (2022) find that political trust declined at the time of each election from 2013 to 2019, with a slight increase in 2022 as compared to at the time of the 2019 election.

The literature on democratic backsliding has identified a number of ways in which the checks and balances on the executive power of government are reduced including: reducing the power of the Parliament, courts and independent regulators; reductions in civil liberties and freedom of the press; an eroding of the norms of political behaviour and standards; and attacks on the integrity of the electoral system (Russell, Renwick and James, 2022).

Having data over the medium to longer term on Australian's confidence in key institutions including government and views about democracy is crucial to both understanding how views are changing, whether there are differences between segments of society and reasons for changes in attitudes. It is also important to understand how confidence in institutions and views about democracy in Australia compare to other countries in the Asian region.

To help answer some of these questions, this paper is based on data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) and the ANUpoll series of surveys which has been running since 2008. Specifically, data from Waves 5 and 6 of the Asian Barometer Survey are used. While the Asian Barometer commenced in 2001³, it was first conducted in Australian Wave 5. In Australia wave 5 was collected October 2018 to January 2019 and wave 6 was collected in February 2023. Wave 5 collected nationally representative samples of the voting age population from 16 countries⁴ plus Hong Kong using a common questionnaire.⁵ At the time of writing, Wave 6 of the survey included data from nine countries, with a number of other countries currently undertaking data collection or data processing.⁶

The ANUpoll commenced in 2008. In April 2020, the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods decided to use the ANUpoll to collect data on Australian's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the centre's COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Series.⁷ Following the April 2020 wave surveys were undertaken a further 13 times, with the final wave of the COVID-specific surveys undertaken in January 2023. Furthermore, surveys were conducted with many of the same group of respondents in January and February 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic started in Australia. This allows us to track outcomes for the same group of individuals from just prior to COVID-19 impacting Australia through to the post-pandemic period. Data from the 2008 ANUpoll on satisfaction with democracy is also used in order to provide data over changes in views over the medium term. More detailed information about the data sources used in this paper are provided at Attachment A.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reports trends in

confidence in the Federal government and in state and territory governments. Satisfaction with democracy in Australia is then examined (Section 3) and comparisons made between Australia and views on democracy in the Asian region (Section 4). The paper documents the extent to which Australians agree or disagree with a series of statements regarding populism and how this has changed between 2018 and 2023 (Section 5). The final empirical section links views about the fairness of Australia's income distribution to satisfaction with democracy in Australia (Section 6). The final section concludes.

2 Confidence in government

A core measure that underpins support for a particular democratic system is confidence in the government of the day. While such a measure is likely to fluctuate more than support for or confidence in the system as a whole, it is broader than whether someone would vote for the governing party if an election was held at that particular point in time. Someone can intend to vote for another party because they think it better represents their views or preferences, but still have confidence in the government of the day.

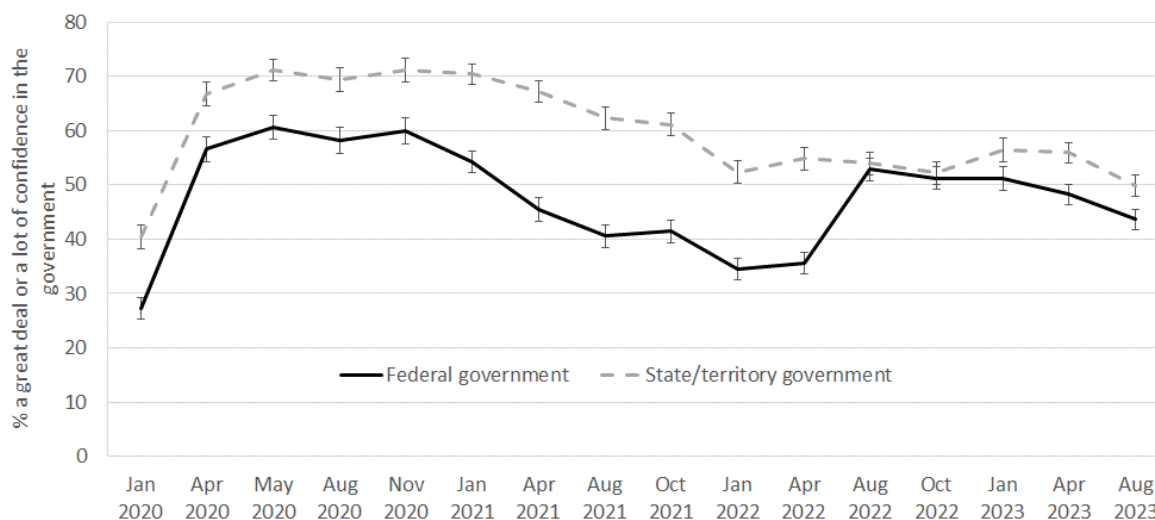
Figure 1 shows the proportion of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government between January 2020 and August 2023 (the bold line), as well as the per cent of Australians confident in the State/Territory government in which they live (the dotted line).

Confidence in the Federal Government increased substantially between January and August 2020, the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the government intervened heavily in the economy and a range of aspects of people's lives. From November 2020 onwards, confidence declined quite substantially, such that by April 2022 just prior to the Federal election confidence was only just above what it was pre-pandemic and during the Black Summer bushfire crisis of 2019/20. There was a substantial increase in confidence in the Federal Government following the change of government at the May 2022 Federal Election. The proportion of Australians who had quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the Federal Government increased from 35.6 per cent in April 2022 just prior to the election to 52.9 per cent in August 2022 (much higher than the Labor vote share at the election or voting intentions in that particular survey).

Between August 2022 and January 2023, confidence stayed reasonably steady and within the margin of error of the survey, but over the two most recent waves of data collection, confidence has declined. Between January and April 2023, confidence declined from 51.2 per cent to 48.3 per cent, and it declined again from April to August 2023 to 43.6 per cent. Australians still have more confidence in the Albanese Labor government than they did with the Morrison Coalition government in its last year, but the direction of change is not positive.

Confidence in the state/territory government in the jurisdiction in which a person lives also increased quite substantially in the first few months of the pandemic. It took longer for this confidence to decline (remaining high up until at least January 2021) and staying well above the January 2020 low. Confidence was quite steady between April and October 2022, and there was a small uptick in confidence in state/territory governments between October 2022 (52.2 per cent across Australia) and January 2023 (56.4 per cent). Confidence stayed high between January and April 2023 (55.9 per cent), but has declined again between April and August 2023 (to 49.8 per cent).

Figure 1 Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra and state/territory governments – January 2020 to August 2023



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January, April, August, October 2021; January, April, August, and October 2022; and January, April, and August 2023

In August 2023, not surprisingly, confidence in the Federal Government was higher amongst those who said that they would have voted Labor if an election was held at the time of the survey. However, it doesn’t line up as well as one might expect, with only 65.3 per cent of those who would have voted Labor having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government, compared to 30.8 per cent of Coalition voters and 28.9 per cent of those who would have voted for one of the minor parties (or did not know who they would vote for).

Whereas voting patterns vary substantially by age and sex, in August 2023 confidence in government did not. Males and females had very similar levels of confidence (44.6 and 43.2 per cent respectively) and the youngest age group in the sample (47.6 per cent for those aged 18 to 24 years) had almost exactly the same level of confidence as the oldest group in the sample (45.3 per cent for those aged 75 years and over). It is true that confidence dips in the middle part of the age distribution (38.6 per cent for those aged 35 to 44 years and 40.7 per cent for those aged 25 to 34 years), but for the most part age and sex is not the key explanation for variation in confidence in government across the Australian population.

If it is not age and sex, then what are the key factors that explain variation in confidence? It would appear that in August 2023 at least, it is education and income.⁸ If we take the middle part of the education distribution as those who have completed Year 12 but do not have a post-school qualification, then for this group confidence in government (45.8 per cent) is quite similar to the national average. Those in the ANUpoll with the lowest level of education also have the lowest level of confidence in government. That is, only 29.3 per cent of those that have not completed Year 12 have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal government. Interestingly though, those with some post school qualifications but not a degree also have a lower level of confidence (37.8 per cent) than those who have completed Year 12 only.

We also find quite large differences in confidence between the middle and upper part of the

education distribution. Those with a postgraduate degree (55.2 per cent) and those with an undergraduate degree (55.0 per cent) are far more likely to have confidence in the Federal Government than the rest of the population.

Differences by household income aren't quite as large as by education, but they are still significant and substantial. There is a fair bit of consistency across the lower and middle part of the income distribution. Those whose household income is in the first or lowest quintile have a similar level of confidence (40.0 per cent) as those in the second (40.4 per cent) and third quintiles (41.7 per cent). As we move into the upper part of the income distribution though, confidence increases substantially, with 47.6 per cent of those in the fourth quintile having confidence in the federal government, and 52.4 per cent of those in the fifth or highest income quintile having confidence.

3 Satisfaction with democracy in Australia

There is almost a separate industry that has developed on the specific crisis or crises of democracy, with books including *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019), *Democracy and Its Crisis* (Grayling 2018), and *Democracy Rules* (Müller 2021) all taking a historical perspective to position the current moment in broader democratic trends. *How Democracies Die* has perhaps gained the most attention of these books, and concludes: 'Previous generations of Europeans and Americans made extraordinary sacrifices to defend our democratic institutions against powerful external threats. Our generation, which grew up taking democracy for granted, now faces a different task: We must prevent it from dying from within' (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019: 231)

One of the grounds for pessimism in Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) is that 'Few societies in history have managed to be both multiracial and truly democratic.' It is puzzling, however, that Australia or New Zealand are rarely mentioned in the book, and indeed do not feature in the index at all (despite Argentina, for example, having five separate mentions). While neither country is free from challenges, they both are clearly multiracial, have been consistently democratic for far longer than all but a handful of other countries, and do not appear to be suffering a scale of decline in trust and satisfaction as the countries that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) use as their case studies.

The long-running Australian Election Study (AES), for example, found that the level of satisfaction with democracy in Australia just after the May 2022 election was very close to the average of the last 25 or so years, and within the standard error of values observed in 1998, 2001, 2010, and 2013 (Cameron and McAllister 2022). Satisfaction was lower than at its peak after the 2007 election, but Australians are broadly satisfied.

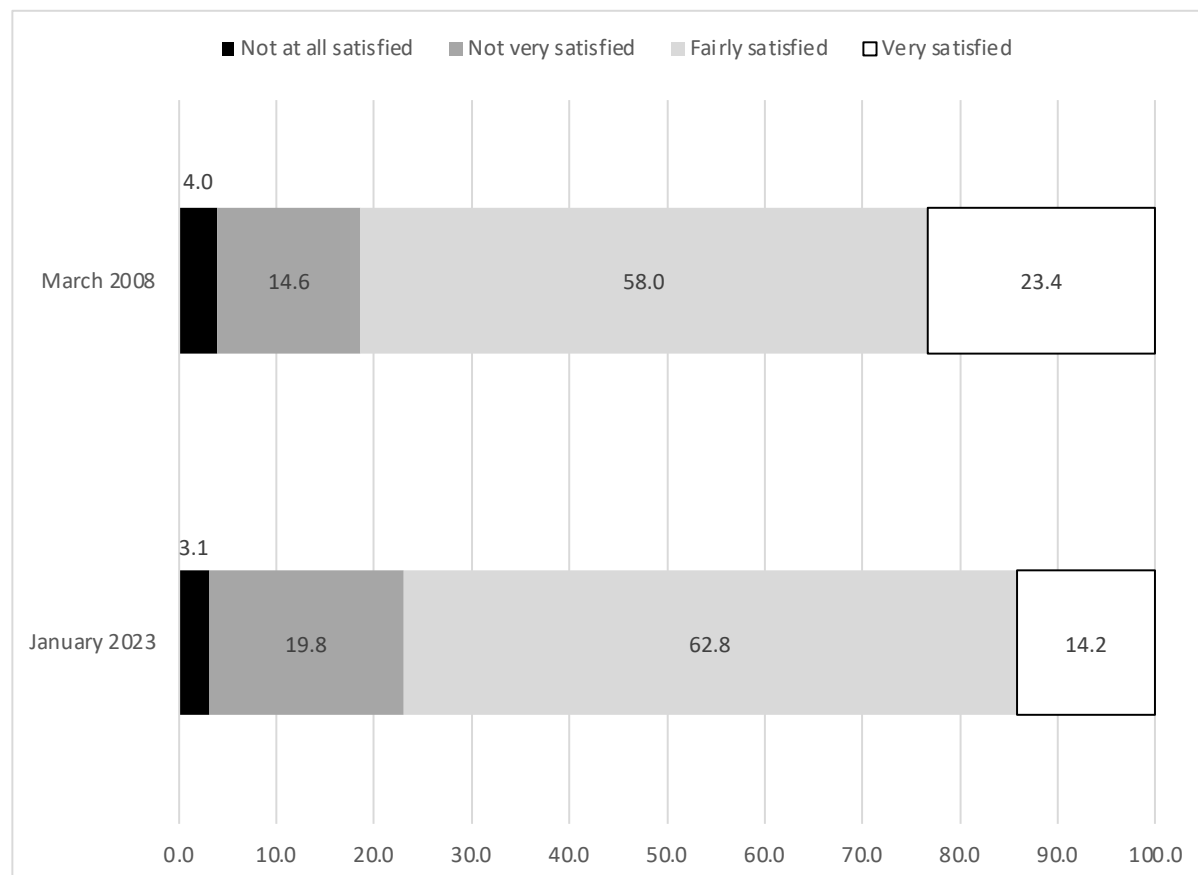
This relative stability is supported by ANUpoll data, based on a slightly larger sample size than the AES and also providing data for 2023. Respondents to the March 2008 ANUpoll were asked 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?' This question was repeated in the January 2023 ANUpoll, with the same response options.

There has been a marked decline in the per cent of Australians who were very satisfied in democracy (from 23.4 per cent in 2008 to 14.2 per cent in 2023) (Figure 2). However, there has not been a corresponding increase at the other extreme (there was actually a decline from 4.0 to 3.1 per cent 'not at all satisfied', though this difference is not statistically significant), with increases instead found in the middle two categories. What we might describe as whole-

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hearted satisfaction with democracy has declined, but in 2023 in Australia 77.0 per cent of adults are fairly or very satisfied, compared to 81.4 per cent in 2008. A concern, but far from a crisis.

Figure 2 Long-term change in satisfaction with democracy, March 2008 to January 2023



Source: ANUpoll: March 2008 and January 2023

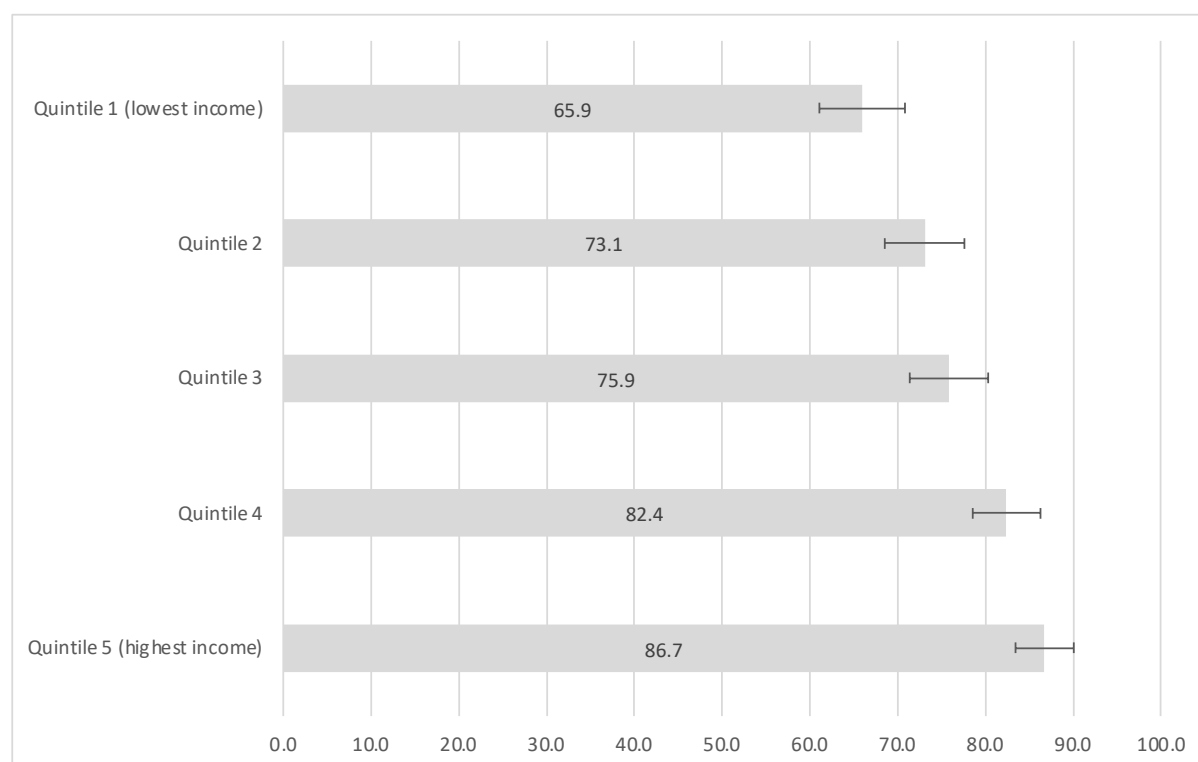
Satisfaction with democracy in Australia in January 2023 varied across three main dimensions – country of birth, education, and income.⁹ Those respondents who were born in Australia were the least satisfied with democracy, with 75.2 per cent reporting that they were fairly or very satisfied, compared to 81.6 per cent of those born overseas in an English-speaking country and 80.8 per cent of those born in a non-English speaking country. This is likely to reflect a selection effect, with people choosing to migrate to Australia based in part on the relative strength of the Australian system compared to their country of origin.

For those who had not completed Year 12, satisfaction with democracy was quite low, with only 67.5 per cent fairly or very satisfied. Those with a degree or higher were the most satisfied, with 84.0 per cent of those with an undergraduate degree reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied and 82.3 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree doing the same. In the middle were those that had completed Year 12 but with no post-school qualifications (78.2 per cent) and those with a certificate or diploma but no degree (75.0 per cent). Figure 3 shows equally large differences by income. Under two-thirds of those in the lowest income quintile are satisfied with democracy. This rises to 86.7 per cent for those in the highest income quintile, with a reasonably consistent gradient in between.

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Interestingly satisfaction with democracy does not vary age group.

Figure 3 Per cent fairly or very satisfied with democracy by household income quintile, January 2023



Notes: Income quintile are based on weekly disposable (after-tax) household income.

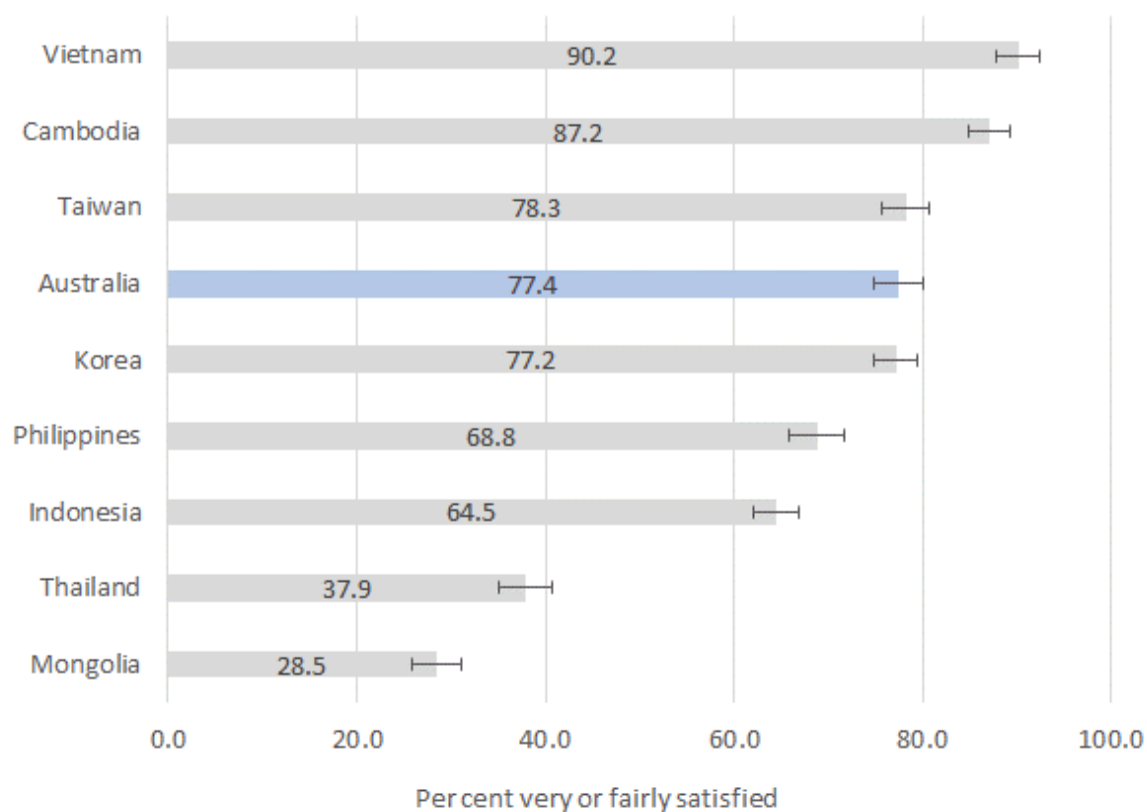
Source: ANUpoll: January 2023

4 Comparing views on democracy in Australia with the Asian region

Although satisfaction with democracy is still relatively high in historical terms in Australia, data from the ABS suggest that Australians level of satisfaction with democracy are not exceptional within in the region. In Wave 6 of the ABS, respondents in all countries were asked a similar question to the above. Specifically, they were asked: 'On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia. Are you ...?' Respondents are given the same response options as in the ANUpoll and the per cent who answered that they were satisfied or very satisfied in the Australian Barometer (77.4 per cent) was within the margin of error of the ANUpoll.

Figure 4 shows that although there are a number of countries where respondents have very low satisfaction with democracy in their country (in particular Mongolia and Thailand), there are also countries like Vietnam and Cambodia where satisfaction is much higher. This is despite neither of these countries being designated as an electoral democracy (in 2023) by Freedom House¹⁰ or similar institutions, but may reflect a genuinely positive economic performance for both countries.¹¹¹²

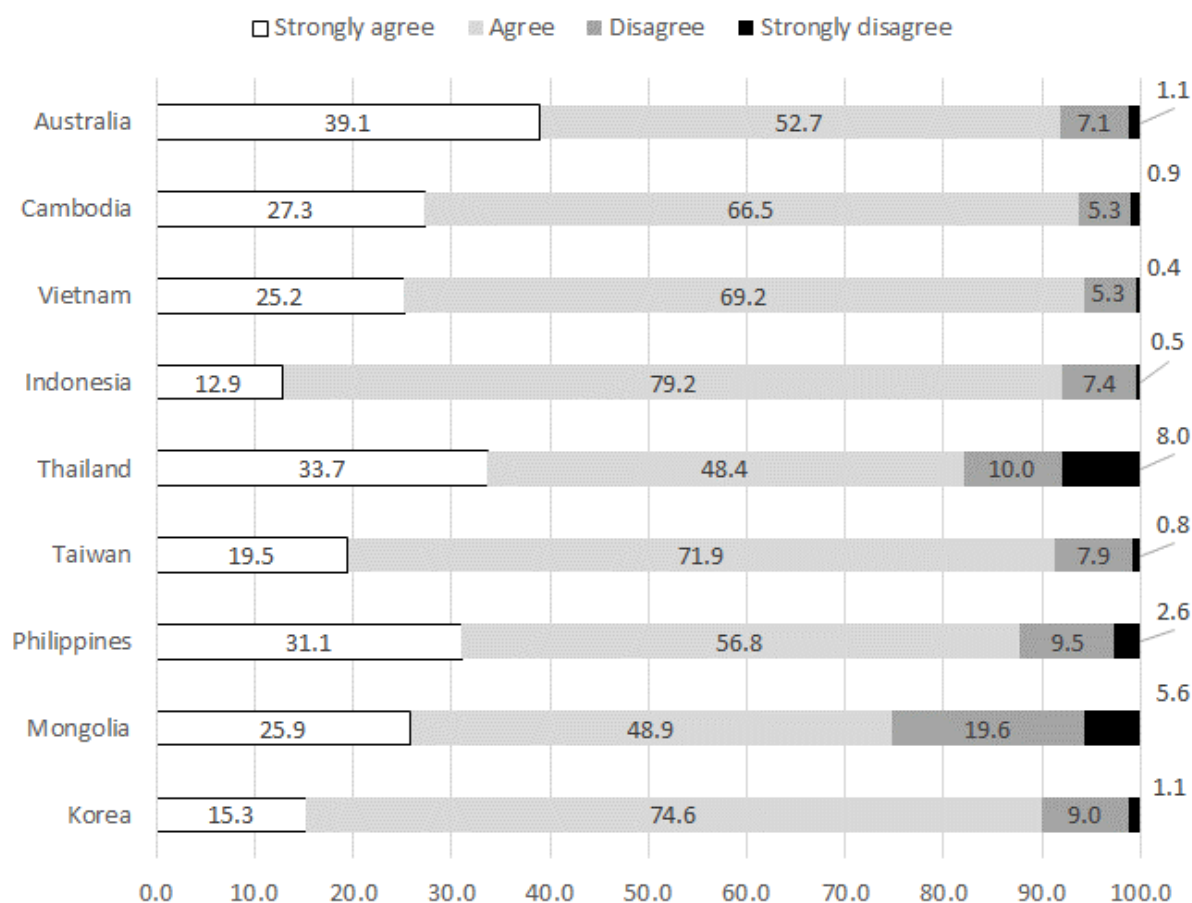
Figure 4 Satisfaction with democracy, by country, 2022/23 (%)



Source: ABS: Wave 6

Respondents to the ABS were also asked 'To what extent do you agree or disagree that democracy may have its problems but it is still the best form of government?' Figure 5 shows that for most countries in the region, the vast majority of the population agrees that democracy is best, with only Mongolia, Thailand, and the Philippines having less than 90 per cent support. The figure does show, however, that Australia has the highest share of people who strongly agree with the statement (39.1 per cent), with much more lukewarm support in Indonesia and Korea.

Figure 5 Views on whether democracy is the best form of government, by country, 2022/23

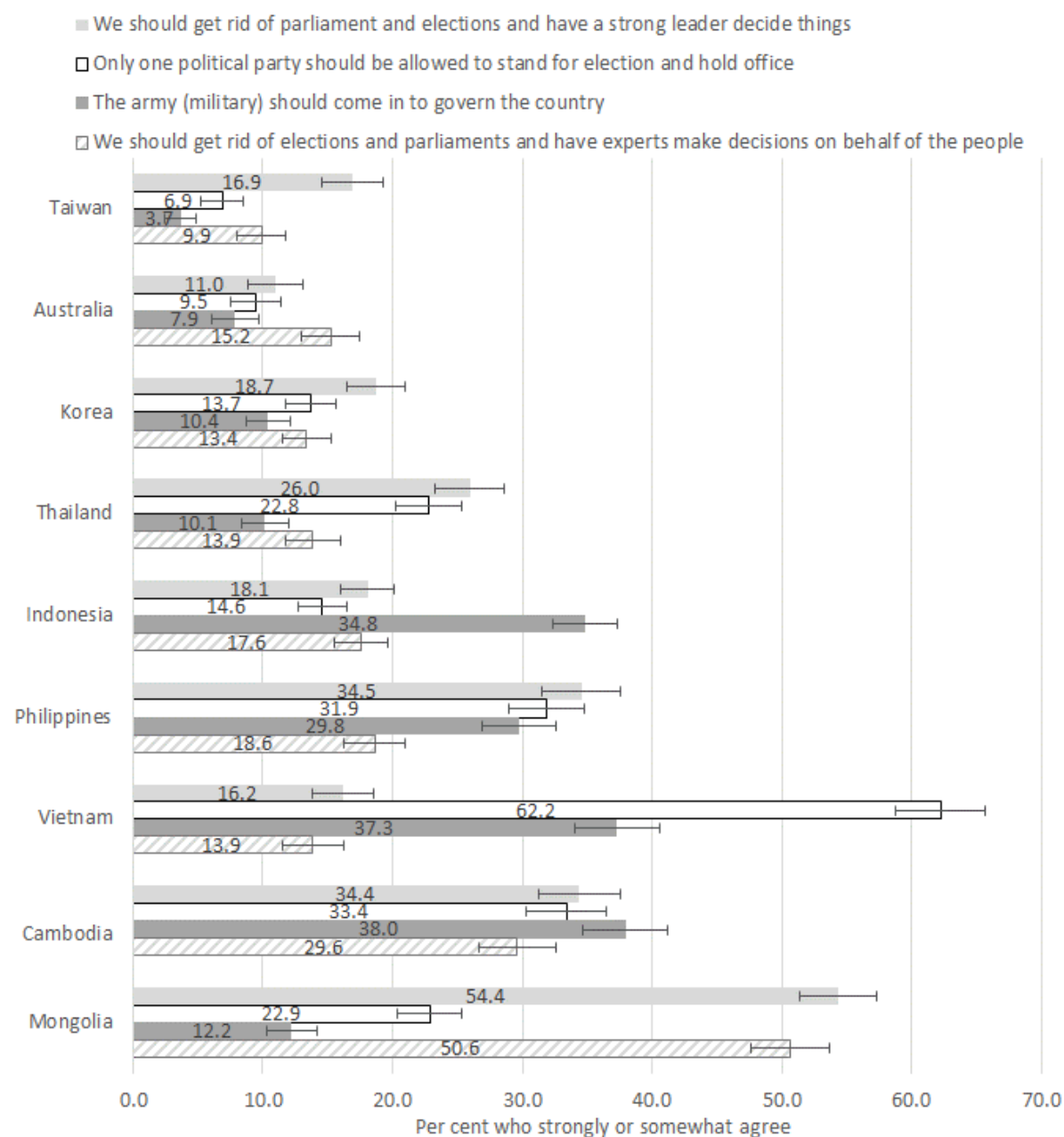


Source: ABS: Wave 6

Although citizens across the region are strongly supportive of the broad concept of democracy, residents in Australia and Taiwan were by far and away the most likely to reject anti-democratic alternatives when asked in a subsequent question. Specifically, respondents were asked ‘There are many ways to govern a country. To what extent would you approve or disapprove of the following...?’. Figure 6 reports the per cent of respondents that strongly or somewhat approved of the four questions that followed, with the countries sorted by the average per cent across the four questions asked.

Remembering that citizens of Vietnam had some of the highest levels of support for democracy in general, it is instructive that more than three-in-five respondents from that country (62.2 per cent) thought that there should only be one political party, and that 37.3 per cent thought that the military should govern the country. In Australia, by contrast, very few respondents supported these two questions. There was a slightly higher per cent of Australians who supported rule by experts (15.2 per cent), but in general Australians rejected most of the anti-democratic notions from the survey.

Figure 6 Support for anti-democratic views, by country, 2022/23



Source: ABS: Wave 6

5 Support for anti-democratic populist attitudes

The survey evidence in Australia suggests that support for anti-democratic or populist notions is lower than in many other countries, and the data summarised below suggests that support is if anything declining.

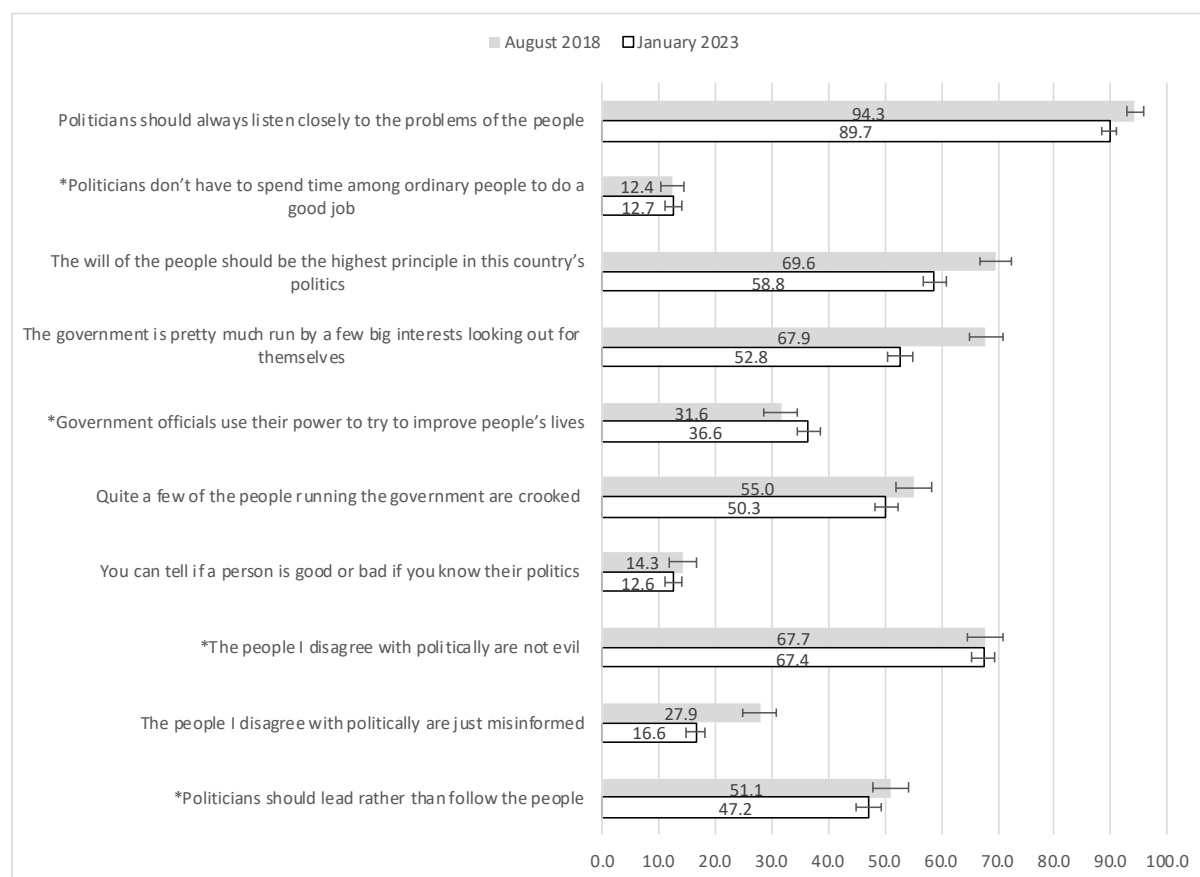
Although the differences aren't always statistically significant, when we compare responses by Australians in Wave 6 with Wave 5 of the Australian Barometer, we can see that support for the four anti-democratic notions has declined over the intervening period. There were fewer Australians in support of a strong leader (11.0 per cent in Wave 6 compared to 13.5 per cent in Wave 5), one political party (9.5 compared to 12.2 per cent), rule by the military (7.9 compared to 11.2 per cent), rule by experts (15.2 compared to 17.8 per cent).

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Utilising a larger sample, in the August 2018 ANUpoll, we utilised a new nine-item scale populism scale developed by Silva et al. (2018) with three dimensions – people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook. Each of the constructs had two positively worded and one negatively worded question, and we added a tenth negatively worded question that summarises a more general perception of populism related to politicians versus the people leading a country.

Figure 7 shows that there has been a decline from August 2018 in agreement for a number of the positively worded statements, and an increase for at least one of the negatively worded statements (marked with an *). Specifically, there are fewer Australians in January 2023 compared to August 2018 that think that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves (from 67.9 in August 2018 to 52.8 per cent in January 2023), the people I disagree with politically are just misinformed (27.9 to 16.6 per cent) and the will of the people should be the highest principle in this country’s politics (69.6 to 58.8 per cent). On the other hand, more Australians think that Government officials use their power to try to improve people’s lives, increasing from 31.6 per cent in August 2018 to 36.6 per cent in January 2023.

Figure 7 Per cent of Australians who agree or strongly agree with statements regarding populism – August 2018 and January 2023.



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: August 2018 and January 2023

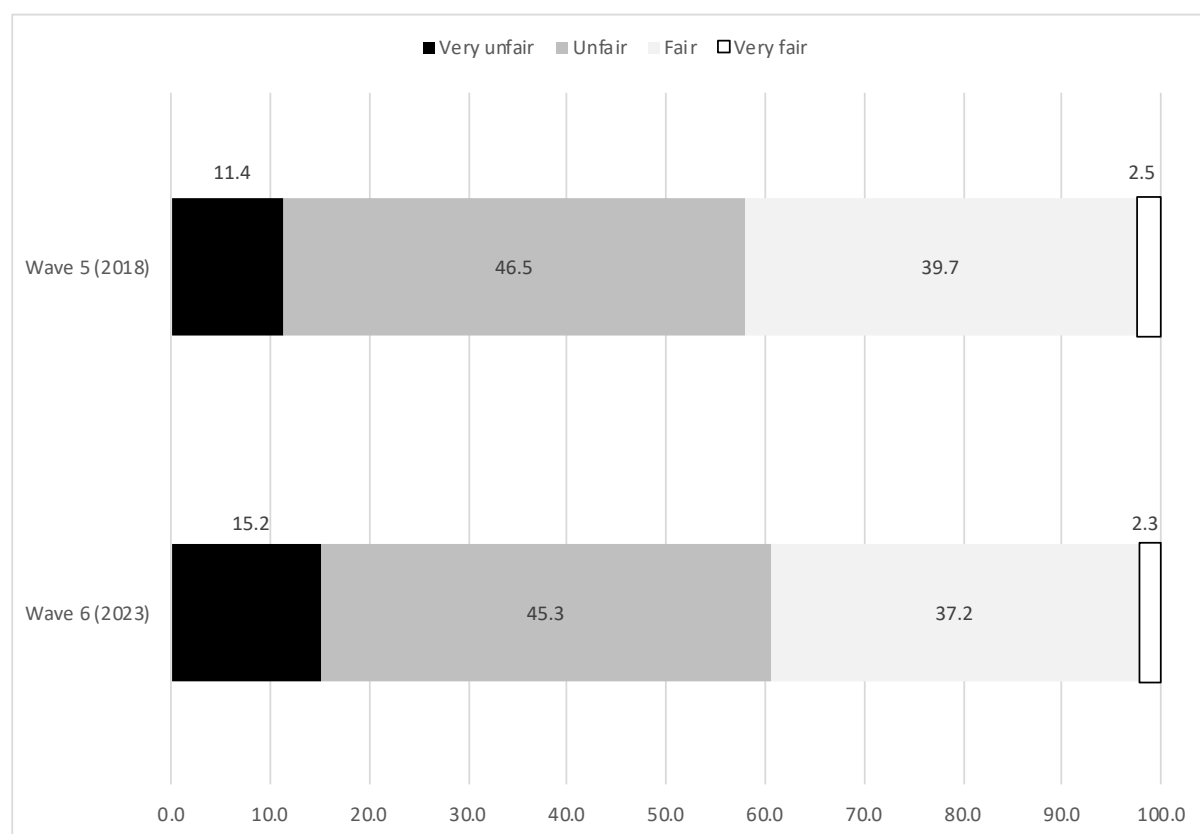
6 Inequality, social status and satisfaction with democracy

One of the potential explanations for a lack of support for democracy is growing inequality

within a country. This explanation is explicit in some of the statements of senior government ministers made in the introduction to this paper, and is also an explanation given in some of the academic papers cited earlier. The evidence for widening income inequality in Australia is quite mixed. Geoff Gilfillan, writing for the Parliamentary Library¹³ concluded that ‘Various data sources show income inequality has fallen marginally in Australia’ with the longest time series of data coming from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey showing that the ‘Gini coefficient for equivalised household income were relatively stable between 2001 and 2019.’

Accurately capturing trends in inequality is notoriously challenging, as changes only occur slowly, and definitions of income change subtly but importantly across collections. However, data from the Australian Barometer suggests that in terms of levels if not trends, Australians are far more likely to think that levels of income inequality are too high. In both waves 5 and 6 of the survey, respondents were asked ‘How fair do you think income distribution is in Australia?’ Figure 8 shows that more Australians think that the income distribution is unfair or very unfair (60.5 per cent) than think it is fair or very fair. This gap has widened slightly since 2018, particularly in terms of those who think the distribution is very unfair.

Figure 8 Perceptions on the fairness of Australia’s income distribution



Source: Australian Barometer: 2018 and 2023.

Results presented in Figure 8 raise the question of whether this perceived unfair distribution in income is driving dissatisfaction with democracy in Australia, and in particular variation across the population. The data suggests that in some ways it does, but not completely. Looking at the first of these questions, only 51.2 per cent of Australians who think the distribution of income is very unfair are satisfied or very satisfied with democracy in Australia. This increases to 77.8 per cent of those that think it is unfair, 87.1 per cent of those that think

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it is fair, and 95.8 per cent of the very small per cent of Australians that think the distribution of income is very fair.

These results also hold in a more detailed regression framework, showing that perceptions of inequality matter. However, they don't appear to be explaining much if all of the difference by education in perceptions of democracy, one of the key cleavages in Australia documented in this paper and elsewhere. This is because differences in perceptions of the fairness of the income distribution do not vary that much by education. The education group in Australia that is most likely to think that the income distribution is fair is those that have not completed Year 12 (44.8 per cent), followed by those with a postgraduate degree (42.7 per cent). Indeed, in a regression model with basic demographic controls, there are no differences by education in perceptions of the fairness of the current distribution.

Where there is variation though, is people's perceived social status. Respondents were asked 'Which of the following best describes your social status in relation to most of your social contacts?' Around one-quarter of Australians (24.8 per cent) thought that their status was lower only one-in-twenty (5.4 per cent) thought it was higher, with most Australians (69.9 per cent) thinking it was equal.

This variable is also correlated with satisfaction with democracy with the Australian Barometer data showing that 65.7 per cent of those with perceived low status being satisfied with democracy, compared to 79.6 per cent of those with perceived high status, and 81.5 per cent of those with perceived equal status. However, the important point is that those who had not completed Year 12 and those that had completed Year 12 but had no post school qualifications were far more likely to think they had low status (30.2 per cent and 30.7 per cent respectively) than those with a postgraduate degree (13.7 per cent) or an undergraduate degree (22.4 per cent).

Combined, this data suggests that reducing income inequality may improve perceptions of democracy. However, if this reduction leaves the status distribution by education intact (that is, doubling down on meritocracy), then differences in perceptions of democracy by education will remain.

7 Concluding comments

Despite some short term rises due to early handling of the pandemic in 2020 and the election win for the Labor government in 2022, Australian's level of confidence in the Federal Government and state/territory governments has declined over the long-term. This is something which we as a society should be concerned about. This is a longer-term change which is consistent with the experience in many other countries. While it is true that is consistent with the experience in many other countries, this does not mean that we have to accept that this is inevitable in Australia.

There have been some declines in the level of satisfaction with democracy amongst the Australian population with a substantial drop in the proportion who were very satisfied with democracy between 2008 and 2023 (from 23.4 per cent to 14.2 per cent) and increases in the proportion of Australians who are fairly satisfied and the proportion who are not very satisfied.

It is perhaps startling that about one-in-seven Australians think that "we should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people" and about one-in-ten think "we should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things" and about one-in-ten think that "only one political party should be allowed to stand for

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election and hold office". These attitudes would appear to reflect a profound dissatisfaction with our current leaders and form of government and are profoundly anti-democratic attitudes.

It does appear though that there has been a fall in anti-democratic and populist views in Australia between 2018 and 2023, but the falls are small and it is uncertain in some cases whether they are real falls or simply reflect uncertainties in our estimates.

The fact that levels of satisfaction are lowest amongst those living in the lowest income households and those with relatively low levels of educational attainment should be a matter of significant concern. This is particularly in the context of growing perceived disparities in income and wealth in Australia.

Despite all this, satisfaction with democracy is still relatively high in Australia, though not exceptional within in the region.

None of this suggests that Australia can afford to be complacent. Protecting our key democratic institutions is vitally important. It is easier to damage confidence in institutions than it is to rebuild confidence. Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres said at a press conference on 13 September 2023:¹⁴

"We are witnessing in many countries of the world governments restraining the civic space, the rights of opposition, the rights of press, undermining the democratic nature of the regimes. And we are seeing even in democratic countries, because of misinformation, hate speech, polarization and many other aspects, we are seeing how democracy can be undermined from the inside. And so these are two main concerns that we have, and I believe it's extremely important to fight those that are abusing their authority to limit democracy, but also to address the root causes of the loss of trust in democratic societies that are undermining also the functioning of those democratic societies, at least in many countries in the world."

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Attachment A. Data sources

Asian Barometer Survey

The ABS commenced in 2001 and is part of the Global Barometer Surveys (GBS) series.¹⁵ Australia became part of the ABS in Wave 5 and the Wave 6 survey has been completed in Australia.

Wave 5 of the ABS was conducted in Australia October 2018 to January 2019. The in-scope population for Wave 5 was adults (18 years of age or over) who are residents of private households in Australia. The sampling approach used address-based sampling with mail as the primary mode of contact. A sequential mixed-mode (push to web) design was applied to data collection with participants self-completing via an online or paper-based survey. The total achieved sample size was 1,630, equating to a response rate of 27.2% among all selections. Excluding ineligible sample (return to sender, no eligible respondent, etc.), a participation rate of 32.0% was achieved.

Wave 6 of the ABS was collected in February 2023 using the Life in Australia panel. A total of 2,183 active panel members were invited to take part in the survey and 1,217 (55.7%) completed the survey. Data for the Australia Barometer is available for download through the Australian Data Archive.¹⁶ The survey was conducted from February 14th to February 21, 2023.

ANUpoll series

The August 2023 survey collected data from 4,204 Australians aged 18 years and over.¹⁷ Data collection for this most recent ANUpoll commenced on the 6th of August 2023 with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 7th and concluded on the 20th of August. 57.6 per cent of the sample had completed the survey by the 10th of August (i.e., after the first three full days of data collection).

The Social Research Centre collected data online and through Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) in order to ensure representation from the offline Australian population. Around 1.2 per cent of interviews were collected via CATI.¹⁸ A total of 5,797 panel members were invited to take part in the August 2023 survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 72.5 per cent. Of those who completed the April 2023 survey (the next most recent survey), 85.6 per cent completed the August 2023 survey.

Table 1 gives the number of respondents for each of the fourteen waves of data collection during the COVID-19 period, the two pre-COVID waves, and the two post-COVID waves. The table also gives the survey window for the data collection. In between the April and August 2022 surveys, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey was undertaken on the Life in AustraliaTM panel, with a limited range of data items available for analysis in this paper.

Table A1 Survey details – January 2020 to August 2023

| Wave | Survey window | Sample size |
|--------------------------|--|-------------|
| January 2020 | 20 th January to 3 rd February, 2020 | 3,249 |
| February 2020 | 17 th February to 2 nd March, 2020 | 3,228 |
| 1 – April 2020 | 14 th to 27 th April, 2020 | 3,155 |
| 2 – May 2020 | 11 th to 25 th May, 2020 | 3,249 |
| 3 – August 2020 | 10 th to 24 th August, 2020 | 3,061 |
| 4 – October 2020 | 12 th to 26 th October, 2020 | 3,043 |
| 5 – November 2020 | 9 th to 23 rd November, 2020 | 3,029 |
| 6 – January 2021 | 18 th January to 1 st February, 2021 | 3,459 |
| 7 – April 2021 | 12 th to 26 th April, 2021 | 3,286 |
| 8 – August 2021 | 10 th to 23 rd August, 2021 | 3,135 |
| 9 – October 2021 | 12 th to 26 th October, 2021 | 3,474 |
| 10 – January 2022 | 17 th to 30 th January, 2022 | 3,472 |
| 11 – April 2022 | 11 th to the 24 th of April, 2022 | 3,587 |
| CSES | 23 rd May to 5 th June, 2022 | 3,556 |
| 12 – August 2022 | 8 th to 22 nd August, 2022 | 3,510 |
| 13 – October 2022 | 10 th to 24 th October, 2022 | 3,468 |
| 14 – January 2023 | 16 th to 30 th January, 2023 | 3,370 |
| ANUpoll 48 – April 2023 | 11 th to 23 rd April, 2023 | 4,469 |
| ANUpoll 49 – August 2023 | 7 th to 20 th August, 2023 | 4,204 |

Data in the paper (from both the ANUpoll and the Australian Barometer) is weighted to population benchmarks. For Life in Australia™, the approach for deriving weights generally consists of the following steps:

1. Compute a base weight for each respondent as the product of two weights:
 - a. Their enrolment weight, accounting for the initial chances of selection and subsequent post-stratification to key demographic benchmarks
 - b. Their response propensity weight, estimated from enrolment information available for both respondents and non-respondents to the present wave.
2. Adjust the base weights so that they satisfy the latest population benchmarks for several demographic characteristics.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/woodford-folk-festival>
- 2 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/taskforces/strengthening-democracy-taskforce>
- 3 <https://www.asianbarometer.org/>
- 4 The countries are Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.
- 5 The voting age population in each country is 18 years except for Taiwan (20 years), Indonesia (17 years) and Singapore (21 years).
- 6 The nine countries currently available in Wave 6 are Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Korea, Mongolia, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.
- 7 <https://csrc.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/covid-19>
- 8 These difference by education and income hold when estimated using a regression model.
- 9 These differences hold when estimated using a regression model.
- 10 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world#Data>
- 11 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/08/10/vietnam-s-economic-growth-slows-due-to-global-headwinds-and-internal-constraints>
- 12 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview>
- 13 https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook47p/InequalityDisadvantageAustralia
- 14 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sgsm21938.doc.htm>
- 15 <https://www.globalbarometer.net/>
- 16 <https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.26193/1SGK50>
- 17 The unit record survey data will soon be available for download through the Australian Data Archive (doi:10.26193/AAZ3QI).
- 18 The contact methodology adopted for the online Life in Australia™ members is an initial survey invitation via email and SMS (where available), followed by multiple email reminders and a reminder SMS. Telephone follow up of panel members who have not yet completed the survey commenced in the second week of fieldwork and consisted of reminder calls encouraging completion of the online survey. The contact methodology for offline Life in Australia™ members was an initial SMS (where available), followed by an extended call-cycle over a two-week period. A reminder SMS was also sent in the second week of fieldwork.