Income inequality and democratic resilience – Impacts and policy choices

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Acknowledgement and series note

In early 2024, the Resilience Democracy Data and Research Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and actionable research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia's democratic resilience. The network is dedicated to making research findings and insights widely available. This paper has been written to prompt ideas for future collaborative research of the network.

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between income inequality and democratic resilience in Australia, focusing on how perceptions of economic disparity influence public satisfaction with democratic institutions. Utilising data from the Asian Barometer Survey and ANUpoll series, the study reveals a significant association between the perception of unfair income distribution and dissatisfaction with democracy. While income inequality in Australia has not markedly increased, the research highlights that public concern over income gaps persists, influencing attitudes towards the government's role in addressing these disparities. The analysis also demonstrates that demographic factors, such as age, education, and income, are important predictors of democratic satisfaction, but perceptions of income inequality and beliefs about the government's responsibility in reducing these gaps play a crucial role.

1 Introduction

1.1 The 'fair go' in Australia

Most people applying for a visa to live in Australia, must sign an Australian Values Statement.[1] According to the Australian Government, 'Australian values based on freedom, respect, fairness and equality of opportunity are central to our community remaining a secure, prosperous and peaceful place to live. Our values define and shape our country and they are a reason why so many people want to become Australian citizens. Our democratic institutions and shared Australian values have created our peaceful and stable society.' One of the values that applicants need to agree to is 'a 'fair go' for all that embraces: mutual respect, tolerance, compassion for those in need, equality of opportunity for all.'

According to Howard (2023), the concept of a *Fair Go* is 'one of the most distinctive expressions in Australian cultural and political discourse [which] … first emerged in the nineteenth century and has persisted as a key feature of political and policy debate.' While Howard (2003) points out that original uses of the term were not related to egalitarianism but rather a level sporting playing field, more recent uses of the term have been in the context of policies or practices that promote equality in the economic sphere, either in terms of outcomes or opportunity (Bolton 2003, Cox 2011, Lawrence 2017). Indeed, a recent report from the Australian Government's Productivity Commission on economic mobility stated up front that 'Most Australians are keen to ensure that everyone gets a 'fair go'' and a slightly older paper looking at intergenerational earnings elasticity in Australia (Huang et al. 2016) is framed around the question of whether Australia is indeed *A land of the 'fair go'*.

Part of the mythologising of a 'fair go' in the Australian context has been the somewhat unique form of income redistribution and social support that has taken shape in Australia, at least since Federation in the early 20th Century. In their review of the first 100 years of social security policy in Australia, Herscovitch and Stanton (2008) note that 'there are strong elements of continuity' over the period, 'particularly the prevalence of means tests, the use of funding from general revenue, and the strong emphasis on participation.' Whiteford (2010) points out that social spending in Australia is highly targeted compared to other OECD countries and that 'Australia has the most 'target-efficient' system of cash transfers in terms of inequality reduction of any OECD country'.

As will be shown later in this paper, despite this belief in the importance of 'a fair go', there is a perception that not enough is being done in Australia to narrow inequality gaps. Despite this perception, however, the evidence for widening income inequality in Australia is quite mixed. Geoff Gilfillan, writing for the Parliamentary Library[2] concluded that 'Various data sources show income inequality has fallen marginally in Australia' in the 21st Century, 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.'

Estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) come to a similar conclusion. Official statistics from the Survey of Income and Housing (SIH) suggest[3] that the Gini coefficient, which is a summary measure of the distribution of income ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality), was 0.324 in the 2019/20 financial year. This is very similar and if anything, slightly lower than inequality in 2009/10 (0.329).

More recently, the Productivity Commission (2024) report concluded that 'Australia has high

relative income mobility – a person's rank in the income distribution is less influenced by their parents' rank than in many other countries, including Scandinavian countries.' They also found that 'each new generation has earned more income than the last at a given age, and reaches the same level of income earlier in life.' For example, taking three overlapping age cohorts – those born in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s – the average income when those cohorts were around 35 years of age was around $30,000 for the oldest cohort, a little under $40,000 for the middle cohort, and around $50,000 for the youngest cohort (adjusting for inflation).

An important proviso to the positive picture on income inequality is the much higher rates of inequality in wealth. The ABS found using the SIH, for example, that the Gini coefficient for household net worth was 0.611 in 2019/20, almost double the level of income inequality. The ABS and the Productivity Commission have also shown that wealth inequality is edging up slightly, with the ABS finding that their most recent data was slightly above the value of 0.602 estimated for 2009/10, and the Productivity Commission reporting a slight increase using HILDA from 2002-03 to 2014-15. The Productivity Commission did show though that Australia had low wealth inequality compared to many other countries, including the main English-speaking countries (Canada, New Zealand, UK, USA).

In addition to innovations in social security, Australia has a long history of democratic innovations, many of which have been exported internationally. This includes being the first or one of the first countries to incorporate combinations of secret ballots, compulsory voting, preferential voting, a highly expansive male suffrage, female suffrage, and an independent and well-funded electoral commission (Brett 2019, Farrell and McAllister 2012, Reilly 2016). These innovations have put Australia in good stead in terms of the strength of its democracy. According to the Freedom House index, [4] since 1972 Australia has always been listed as 'Free' and with a value of 1 (the highest) for political rights and civil liberties. In the Varieties of Democracy project (also known as V-Dem)[5], Australia is ranked at the top of the distribution for the vast majority of indices.

There is a concern that both of these aspects of the Australian political situation are at risk. Think Tanks that are broadly speaking either on the left,[6] the centre,[7] or the right[8] of the political distribution have argued that Australia is no longer or moving away from being the land of the fair go. Concerns about Australia's democratic strength and resilience are even more commonplace, with the Department of Home Affairs commissioning a *Strengthening Democracy Taskforce* that recently released a report with a forward from the then Minister (Clare O'Neill) stating that 'democracy is facing challenges of incredible scale and complexity' and that 'Australia's democracy is facing new threats—both acute and chronic, local and global—which existing policies, practices and capabilities are ill-equipped to meet.'

1.2   Existing evidence on the relationship between inequality and democratic resilience

There are two ways to look at the relationship between democratic resilience/strength and perceptions of inequality. One avenue of research takes the causal arrow from democratic resilience to inequality, and ask whether democratic societies (using binary or continuous measures) have lower levels of inequality than autocratic ones. That is, does democracy matter for normatively desirable outcomes? A recent global systematic review by Gerring et al (2022) found that across '30 distinct outcomes pertaining to social policy, economic policy, citizenship and human rights, military and criminal justice, and overall governance… most studies report either a positive or null relationship with democracy.' In the Gerring et al. (2022) study,

inequality was one of the outcomes with a weaker relationship with democracy, with a median t-statistic of 0.6 (most studies use a value of 1.96 or above as a measure of statistical significance). The greatest number of studies (49) found no relationship, but there were more studies that found a positive and significant relationship (32) than found a negative and significant relationship (19).

The second form of study takes the causal arrow as going in the alternative direction, and looks at the impact on measures of democratic resilience of high economic insecurity and inequality. It contributes to a larger body of work, with Engler and Weisstanner (2020) finding that 'rising income inequality increases the likelihood of radical right support' and, geographically closer to the Australian context, Lee et al. (2020) found that 'an individual's perception of their economic well-being or inequality is the critical determinant of political trust.' Andersen (2012) included Australia in their sample of countries, finding that 'citizens from countries with relatively low levels of income inequality tend to be more likely than others to support democracy.'

Han and Chang (2016) used variation in economic inequality to help explain the extent to which those whose parties lose an election experience a drop in their satisfaction with democracy relative to those whose parties win, finding 'the gap in satisfaction with democracy between electoral winners and losers widens as income inequality increases.' Širinić (2016) looked at another source of variation in the relationship, finding that 'higher levels of income inequality are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with democracy, but with a disproportionate negative influence on young adults compared to older citizens and also on the 1990s cohort compared to all other cohorts.'

An important finding in the context of this paper is Wu and Chang (2019) that used a large sample of countries in East Asia and Latin America to look at the relationship between inequality and satisfaction with democracy, considering both objective and subjective measures of the former. They found that 'subjective measures of inequality, perceived unfairness of income inequality in particular, provide a better explanation of people's dissatisfaction with democracy than the Gini index, a commonly used objective measure of inequality.' This is important because, as noted above, inequality in Australia does not appear to have changed by the standard objective measures of inequality.

Stoetzer et al. (2023) tried to identify the specific causal mechanism for this empirical finding, testing four possible explanations – 'economic insecurities, social integration, trust in political elites, and national identity.' All had some empirical support, but none were found to be 'sufficient to understand the impact of income inequality on support for populists.'

1.3 Overview of paper

As far as we are aware, there is no existing study that explores this relationship in a specific Australian context. The aim of this paper then is to explore the relationship between perceptions of income inequality, the perceived role that government should play in reducing income differences, and how both related to satisfaction with democracy. To explore these issues, we make use of two broadly nationally representative datasets collected in 2023 and 2024, described in the appendix to this paper.

The first of these sources of data, the Asian Barometer series of surveys, was conducted in Australia from October 2018 to January 2019 (Wave 5 – 1,630 respondents) and in February 2023 (Wave 6 – 1,217 respondents), with the latter collected on the Life in Australia panel. The second set of data, the ANUpoll series of surveys, regularly collect data on trust in institutions,

satisfaction with democracy, and broader views on Australia's government and institutions. The most recent survey (and the one utilised in this paper) took place in January 2024 (4,057 respondents), with the survey that preceded it being the Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey (ACRS), which took place in October 2023 as part of the ANUpoll series (4,219 respondents).

Results in this paper are spread across Section 2 that describes trends in satisfaction with democracy, Section 3 that details perceptions of income inequality in Australia, Section 4 that outlines the beliefs of Australians towards whether the government should be responsible for reducing income differences between rich and poor (amongst other potential roles), and Section 5 that ties these data items together. Section 6 provides some concluding comments.

2 Satisfaction with democracy

The long-running Australian Election Study (AES) reveals 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 at the time of the 1998, 2001, 2010, and 2013 elections (Cameron and McAllister 2022). Satisfaction with democracy was lower than at its peak after the 2007 election, but Australians are broadly satisfied.

From a cross-national perspective, Australia's satisfaction with democracy also comes out very well. In a recent set of surveys by the Pew Research Center (2024)[9], out of 24 middle- and high-income democracies, Australia had the third highest level of satisfaction with the way democracy is working (behind India and Sweden). The median values for the 24 countries surveyed was 40 per cent satisfied and 59 per cent not satisfied. For the Australian survey, 67 per cent were satisfied and 33 per cent were not satisfied. Across countries with a similar political history to Australia that often align in terms of political values, only 51 per cent of Canadian respondents were satisfied, 40 per cent of UK respondents, and 33 per cent of respondents from the US.

The Pew Research Center (2024) analysis included 16 countries with data from both 2022 and 2023. Australia was one of only 2 countries alongside Italy that had an increase in satisfaction over that period, with a much larger increase in Australia (10 percentage points) than Italy (2 percentage points). A more recent survey undertaken by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC)[10] asked a similar question in June and November 2023, and found that around 61 per cent of Australians in their survey were satisfied or very satisfied with Australian democracy in both waves.

This relative stability in satisfaction with democracy is also found using ANUpoll data, based on a slightly larger sample size than the AES and also providing data for 2023/24. Respondents to the March 2008 ANUpoll were asked the same question as the AES: '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, October 2023 and January 2024 ANUpolls, with the same response options.

There was 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 January 2023) (Figure 1). 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-hearted satisfaction with democracy has declined, but in January 2023 in Australia 77.0 per

cent of adults are fairly or very satisfied (the measure used by Cameron and McAllister 2022), compared to 81.4 per cent in 2008. A concern, but far from a crisis.

Figure 1 also shows, however, that short term events have the potential to disrupt long-term stability. Although from March 2008 to January 2023, satisfaction with democracy was quite stable, between January and October 2023 there was a more than doubling in the proportion of Australians who were not at all satisfied in democracy (to 7.2 per cent), a smaller increase in those who were not very satisfied (to 27.0 per cent, a small decline in those who were fairly satisfied (to 56.4 per cent), and a large decline in those who were very satisfied (to 9.5 per cent).

It is not possible to attribute the change in satisfaction with democracy to the Voice Referendum outcome or the campaign (either partially or in full). There have been a number of local, national, and international events over the period that may also have impacted on satisfaction. It can, however, be shown that changes in satisfaction were quite different depending on how the respondent voted in the referendum. For the sample of respondents that completed the January and October 2023 ANUpolls, there was a much larger decline among those who voted yes to the referendum question – 85.3 per cent to 72.2 per cent – compared to those who voted no to the referendum question – 71.8 per cent to 67.5 per cent.

In the three months that followed the referendum, there was a partial return to the levels of satisfaction with democracy observed over the longer-term. Combined, 30.3 per cent of Australians were not at all or not very satisfied with democracy in January 2024 (compared to 34.2 per cent in October 2023). This is still well above the January 2023 levels of dissatisfaction (22.9 per cent) and even more so the March 2008 levels (18.6 per cent).

Figure 1   Medium-term change in satisfaction with democracy, March 2008 to January 2024
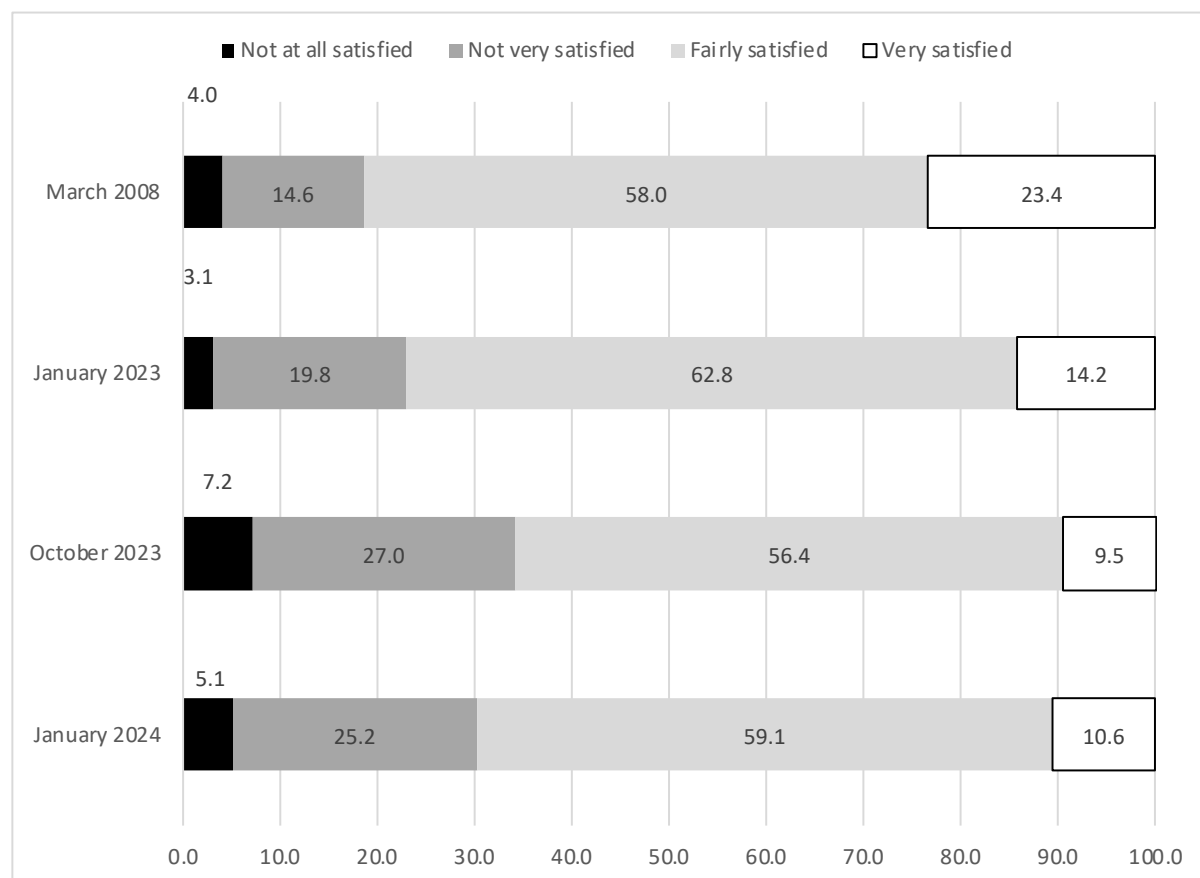
Source: ANUpoll: March 2008; January and October 2023; and January 2024

Satisfaction with democracy in Australia in January 2024 varied according to age, education attainment, and income. The relationship with age is non-linear, with younger Australians the most likely to say that they are fairly or very satisfied with democracy (76.7 per cent for those aged 18 to 24). Older Australians are also relatively satisfied with a value of 73.3 per cent for those aged 65 to 74 years and 73.6 per cent for those aged 75 years and older. All other age groups, however, have values below seven-in-ten, with the lowest level of satisfaction amongst those aged 25 to 34 years (63.4 per cent satisfied or very satisfied).

For those who had not completed Year 12, satisfaction with democracy was quite low, with only 61.1 per cent fairly or very satisfied. Those with a degree or higher were the most satisfied, with 78.2 per cent of those with an undergraduate degree reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied and 76.7 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 (72.0 per cent) and those with a certificate or diploma but no degree (64.6 per cent).

There are equally large differences in satisfaction by income. Under two-thirds of those in the lowest income quintile are satisfied with democracy (64.7 per cent). This rises to 79.0 per cent for those in the highest income quintile, with a reasonably consistent gradient in between.

3   Perceptions of inequality

Data summarised earlier in the paper suggests that income inequality has not increased substantially in the 21st Century. Data from the Australian Barometer, however, suggests that

Australians are quite 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 2 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 as opposed to just unfair.

Figure 2   Perceptions on the fairness of Australia's income distribution
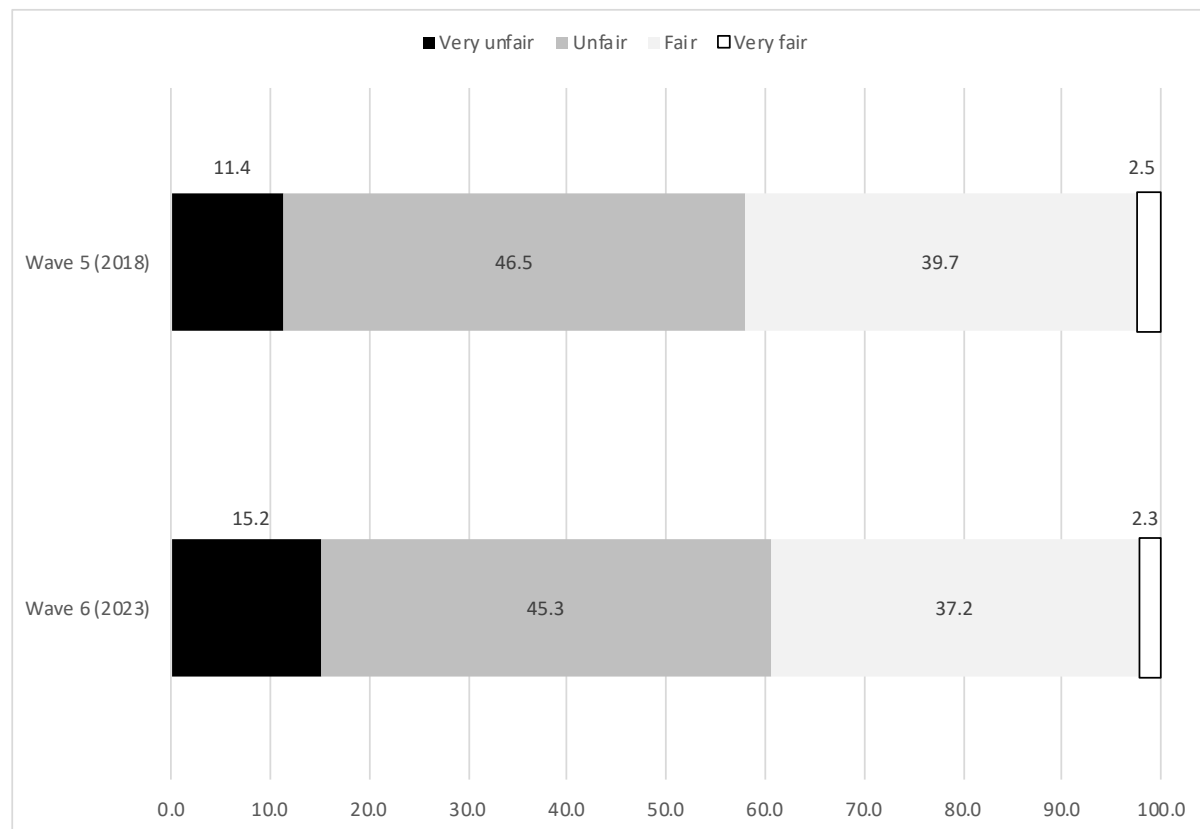
Source: Australian Barometer: 2018 and 2023.

Unlike many of the other measures on the Australian Barometer, perceptions of the fairness of the income distribution in Australia do not vary by education. Those with a degree are roughly as likely to think that Australia has a fair distribution (38.4 per cent) as those without a degree (40.7 per cent). The socioeconomic characteristics of the area in which a person lived appears to have a slightly larger association with 36.6 per cent of those in the two most disadvantaged quintiles (the bottom 40 per cent of the distribution) thinking that Australia had a fair distribution, compared to 41.2 per cent of the rest of the population.

There were larger differences by sex with females being less likely to think Australia had a fair distribution (35.8 per cent) than males (43.6 per cent). The largest differences though were by age. Young Australians (aged 18 to 24 years) were the least likely to think that Australia has a fair income distribution (30.7 per cent), and older Australians the most likely to (45.1 per cent of those aged 55 years and over thought Australia has a fair income distribution).

4   Public attitudes on the role of government in reducing inequality Australia
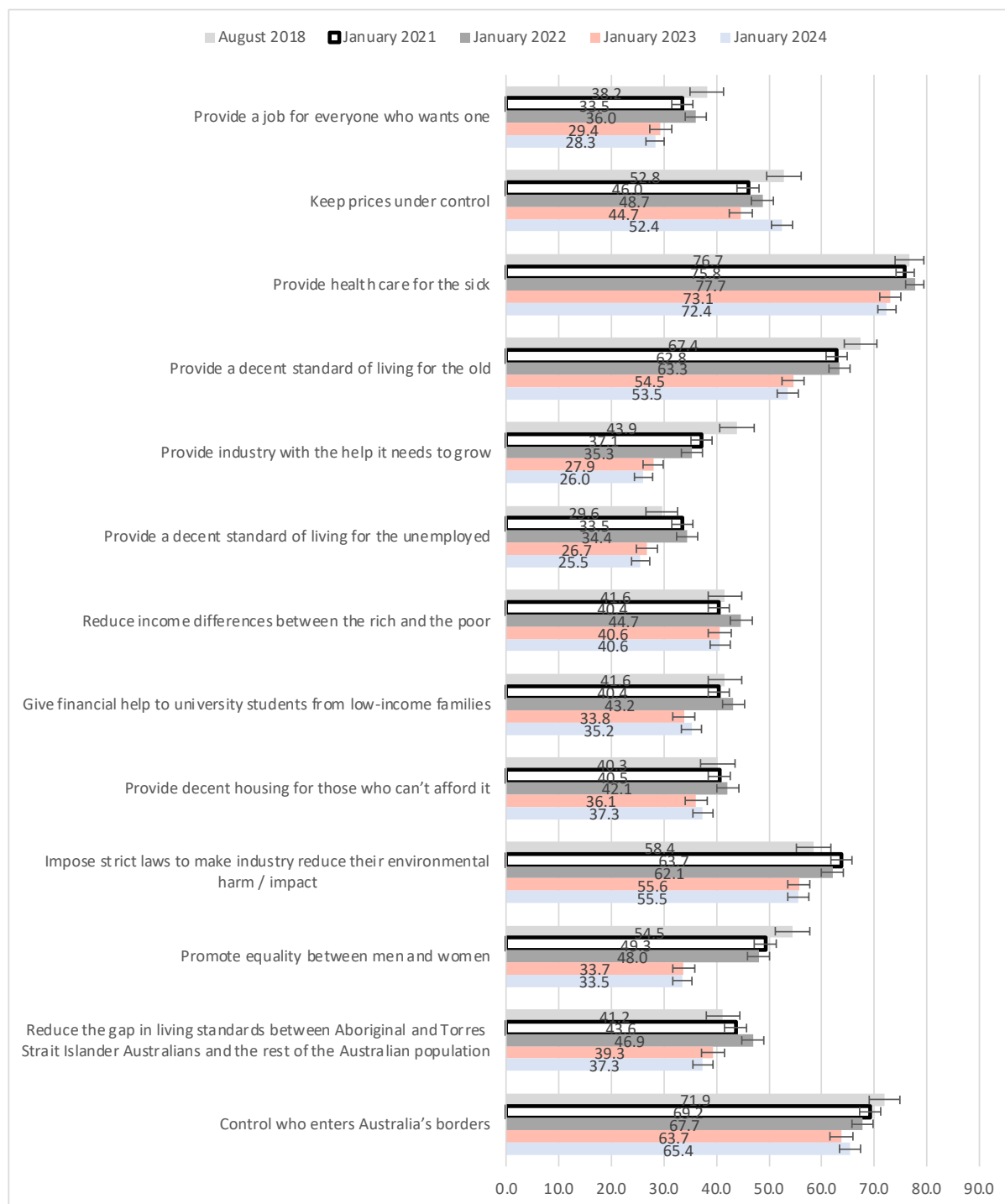
In August 2018, respondents to the ANUpoll were asked with regards to thirteen specific roles

of government 'On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to …?' Possible response options were definitely should be; probably should be, probably should not be, and definitely should not be. These questions were repeated in the last four January surveys. Figure 3 gives the per cent of Australian adults who think it definitely should be a role, and in this paper we pay particular attention to whether or not Australians think that it should definitely be the government's responsibility to 'Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor.'

For the most part, the roles of government which have the greatest level of support have stayed relatively consistent over the last five-and-a-half years. The roles that have the greatest level of support are providing health care for the sick, controlling who enters Australia's borders and providing a decent standard of living for the old. Those with the lowest levels of support are providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed, providing industry assistance, and providing a job for everyone who wants one.

Over the medium term (from August 2018 to January 2024), there has been a drop in the level of support for more roles of government than there has been an increase in support. The greatest declines were for promoting equality between men and women, providing industry with the help it needs, and providing a decent standard of living for the old. Over the shorter-term (between January 2023 and January 2024) views on the role of government were reasonably stable. There were no roles that experienced a decline in support, however there was an increase in the per cent of Australians that thought keeping prices under control was definitely a role of government – increasing from 44.7 per cent in January 2023 to 52.4 per cent in January 2024. This is not surprising given the high rate of inflation over that period.

Figure 3   Per cent of Australians who definitely think particular roles should be the government's responsibility – August 2018 to January 2023.

■ August 2018   □ January 2021   ■ January 2022   ■ January 2023   January 2024

Provide a job for everyone who wants one	38.2 / 33.5 / 36.0 / 29.4 / 28.3
Keep prices under control	52.8 / 46.0 / 48.7 / 44.7 / 52.4
Provide health care for the sick	76.7 / 75.8 / 77.7 / 73.1 / 72.4
Provide a decent standard of living for the old	67.4 / 62.8 / 63.3 / 54.5 / 53.5
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow	43.9 / 37.1 / 35.3 / 27.9 / 26.0
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	29.6 / 33.5 / 34.4 / 26.7 / 25.5
Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor	41.6 / 40.4 / 44.7 / 40.6 / 40.6
Give financial help to university students from low-income families	41.6 / 40.4 / 43.2 / 33.8 / 35.2
Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it	40.3 / 40.5 / 42.1 / 36.1 / 37.3
Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm / impact	58.4 / 63.7 / 62.1 / 55.6 / 55.5
Promote equality between men and women	54.5 / 49.3 / 48.0 / 33.7 / 33.5
Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population	41.2 / 43.6 / 46.9 / 39.3 / 37.3
Control who enters Australia's borders	71.9 / 69.2 / 67.7 / 63.7 / 65.4

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

Source: ANUpoll: August 2018; January 2021; January 2022; and January 2023

We can summarise this general medium-term decline through a 'Belief in Government' Index, which is simply an aggregation of the thirteen measures, where we have a value of 0 if the person thinks that role should definitely not be the responsibility of government and a value of 3 if it definitely should be. Across individuals, therefore, the index ranges from 0 to 39. In August 2018, the average value for this index was 30.5. This dropped to 30.2 in January 2021,

increased slightly to 30.4 in January 2022, but then dropped again to 28.9 in both January 2023 and 2024.

5   Inequality and satisfaction with democracy

We now turn to the substantive research questions for this paper, which is whether a perception that there is an unfair distribution in income is a factor in explaining dissatisfaction with democracy in Australia, and separately whether views on the role of government (and particular a belief that government should be reducing income gaps) explain variation in satisfaction.

5.1   Views on the distribution of income and satisfaction with democracy

There is a very strong relationship between views on income inequality in Australia and views on democracy. In the Australian Barometer data 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 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 (Table 1). Specifically, we run a model with satisfaction with democracy as the dependent variable. This variable is categorical, with higher values indicating a greater satisfaction with democracy. For this reason, we estimate the factors associated with satisfaction using an ordered probit model.

The first model in Table 1 includes background demographic and socioeconomic characteristics only. Factors that were found to be associated with satisfaction are sex (females less satisfied), age (older Australians more satisfied), education (those with higher levels of education more satisfied), and income (those in higher income households more satisfied). Thus the estimates of the relationship between perception of inequality and satisfaction with democracy takes into account the respondents own position in the income distribution.

The second model includes perceptions of the income distribution as an additional explanatory variable. Not only is this variable associated with satisfaction with democracy, but when it is included in the model the association with sex is no longer statistically significant, and nor is the relationship with household income. However, views on the income distribution do not appear to be explaining much if all of the difference by education in perceptions of democracy. This is because differences in perceptions of the fairness of the income distribution do not vary that much by education.

Table 1   Regression model estimates of the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy, including views on income distribution – Coefficients, January 2023

Explanatory variables	Model 1 Coeff.	Model 1 Signif.	Model 2 Coeff.	Model 2 Signif.
Not at all satisfied with democracy			-0.740	***
Fairly satisfied with democracy			0.371	***
Very satisfied with democracy			1.019	***
Female	-0.146	*	-0.082	
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.232		-0.163	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.211	*	-0.218	*
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.099		0.136	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.304	**	0.283	**
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.752	***	0.702	***
Aged 75 years plus	0.833	***	0.796	***
Indigenous	-0.108		-0.294	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.157		-0.043	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.110		0.061	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.144		-0.151	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.379	***	-0.495	***
Has a post graduate degree	0.274	*	0.305	**
Has an undergraduate degree	0.162		0.237	*
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.169		-0.196	*
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st/2nd quintiles)	-0.038		0.027	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (4th/5th quintiles)	0.069		0.113	
Lives outside of a capital city	-0.089		-0.109	
Not an Australian citizen	-0.228		-0.331	**
Lives in lowest income households (1st/2nd quintiles)	-0.109		-0.042	
Lives in highest income households (4th/5th quintiles)	0.224	**	0.181	
Cut-point 1 (ordered probit)	-2.015		-2.070	
Cut-point 2 (ordered probit)	-0.847		-0.801	
Cut-point 3 (ordered probit)	1.200		1.386	
Number of observations	1,114		1,101	

Notes: Ordered probit models. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city; is a citizen, and lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged household (third quintile).

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: Australian Barometer

5.2   Perceived role of government and satisfaction with democracy

In this last section of results, we consider whether views on the perceived role of government is associated with satisfaction with democracy, and in particular whether views on income distribution are important factors. To answer this question, we once again employ a regression-analysis framework with satisfaction with democracy as the dependent variable (estimated again using the ordered probit model).

The first model includes similar explanatory variables to the baseline regression analysis of the Australian Barometer. We find some similar results to that analysis, though there are some exceptions. Those in households with high income still have a higher level of satisfaction, as do those in the upper part of the age distribution. However, with the most recent data, sex no longer has an association, and the relationship with education is also no longer statistically significant.[11] Furthermore, the youngest age cohort did not have a statistically significant

association in the Australian Barometer data, but was found to have a greater level of satisfaction with democracy (controlling for other variables) in the larger and more recent ANUpoll data.

In the second model in Table 2, we include the 'Belief in Government' Index as an additional explanatory variable. This has a significant positive correlation with satisfaction with democracy, indicating that those who think that there should be a greater role for government in society are more likely to be satisfied with democracy. It should be emphasised that this is not necessarily a causal relationship. It may be that those who are more satisfied with democracy see government as being effective and are therefore more likely to support additional roles (that is, the causality goes in the opposite direction). Nonetheless, the results show that there is some form of relationship, even after controlling for an extensive set of control variables.

In the final model in Table 2, we explore whether belief in specific roles of government are separately associated with satisfaction with democracy. Although the different variables in Figure 3 are correlated with each other, this correlation is far from perfect. For example, there is a very strong relationship between thinking that government should 'Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor' and thinking that it should 'Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed' (correlation coefficient of 0.45). However, there is a much weaker relationship with belief in income redistribution and belief that government should 'Provide industry with the help it needs to grow' (correlation coefficient of 0.09) or that government should 'Control who enters Australia's borders' (correlation coefficient of -0.08).

To test for the potential for belief in different roles of government having a different association, we ran a preliminary model with binary variables for all thirteen roles of government as explanatory variables (in addition to the variables from Model 1). These binary variables are equal to one if the person thought that role should definitely be the government's responsibility, and zero otherwise. From this initial model, there were six roles of government that had a p-value of less than 0.1, two that had a p-value between 0.1 and 0.2, and five that had a p-value of more than 0.2. We re-ran the model dropping the variables in the final category (those with a p-value greater than 0.2), and found that the two variables in the middle category were still not statistically significant at the 10 per cent level of significance. We then drop these variables from our final model, which then only includes the six variables that had a p-value of less than or equal to 0.1.[12]

In this final model there were three roles of government that were positively correlated with satisfaction with democracy. Specifically, those who thought that the following roles were definitely the responsibility of government were more likely to be satisfied with democracy in Australia (in descending order of absolute value of coefficient) – Promote equality between men and women, Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm / impact, and Provide health care for the sick. One interpretation of this relationship is that those who thought these were important responsibilities are relatively satisfied that democracy in Australia is delivering on these outcomes.

By comparison, there were three roles that had a negative correlation (in descending order again) – Keep prices under control, Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor, and Provide a job for everyone who wants one. Extending the interpretation from above, those who thought these were important responsibilities are relatively **dissatisfied** that democracy in Australia is delivering on these outcomes. More specifically in the context of this paper, if

you think that the government should be reducing income gaps between the rich and poor, then even controlling for a range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as well as belief in other roles of government, then you are less likely to be satisfied that democracy is working in Australia.

It can be quite difficult to interpret the scale of the association in ordered probit models like the one presented in Table 2. A simple cross-tabulation, however, shows that only 65.7 per cent of those that think that reducing income differences between the rich and the poor is definitely a role of government are very or fairly satisfied with democracy, compared to 72.3 per cent of the rest of the population.

Table 2   Regression model estimates of the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy, including belief in government variables – Coefficients, January 2024

Explanatory variables	Model 1 Coeff.	Signif.	Model 2 Coeff.	Signif.	Model 3 Coeff.	Signif.
Belief in government index			0.021	***		
Provide a job for everyone who wants one					-0.151	**
Keep prices under control					-0.177	***
Provide health care for the sick					0.136	**
Reduce income differences between rich and poor					-0.156	***
Impose strict environmental laws on industry					0.191	***
Promote equality between men and women					0.203	***
Female	-0.024		-0.062		-0.051	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.338	***	0.325	***	0.285	**
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.076		0.067		0.073	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.119		0.115		0.088	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.347	***	0.338	***	0.289	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.476	***	0.478	***	0.423	***
Aged 75 years plus	0.526	***	0.525	***	0.427	***
Indigenous	0.069		0.078		0.121	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.021		0.025		-0.006	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.154	*	0.149	*	0.170	**
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.047		-0.035		-0.005	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.162		-0.129		-0.121	
Has a post graduate degree	0.103		0.088		0.014	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.070		0.063		0.013	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.118		-0.124		-0.125	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.133		-0.127		-0.103	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.078		-0.094		-0.082	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.023		-0.031		-0.029	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.017		-0.018		-0.025	
Lives outside of a capital city	0.031		0.045		0.032	
Lives in lowest income household (1st quintile)	-0.167	**	-0.198	**	-0.145	*
Lives in next lowest income household (2nd quintile)	-0.034		-0.051		-0.004	
Lives in next highest income household (4th quintile)	0.185	**	0.202	***	0.185	**
Lives in highest income household (5th quintile)	0.353	***	0.374	***	0.350	***
Cut-point 1 (ordered probit)	-1.501		-0.924		-1.499	
Cut-point 2 (ordered probit)	-0.322		0.254		-0.302	
Cut-point 3 (ordered probit)	1.473		2.062		1.524	
Number of observations	3,453		3,403		3,428	

Notes: Ordered probit models. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged household (third quintile).

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

6   Summary and concluding comments

In this final section of the paper, we reflect on the main findings from the analysis, discuss the implications of the results, and outline a number of recommendations. These recommendations are presented separately for data collection, policy, and research.

6.1   Summary of results

This paper explores the relationship between income inequality and satisfaction with

democracy in Australia. It highlights how perceptions of economic disparity and views on how government should respond to inequality shape public attitudes towards democratic institutions and governance. Using data from the Asian Barometer Survey and ANUpoll series, the paper has shown that a significant portion of Australians perceive the distribution of income as unfair, and this perception strongly correlates with dissatisfaction with democracy.

The paper further shows that those who support an expansive role for the government, particularly in reducing income gaps, tend to be more dissatisfied with how democracy functions in Australia. This dissatisfaction is particularly pronounced among younger Australians, women, and those with lower incomes. This suggests that expectations, in relation to personal experiences and characteristics, are key factors in how people assess democracy.

Through regression analysis, the paper establishes that while demographic factors like age, education, and income are significant predictors of satisfaction with democracy, the perception of income inequality is a critical factor. Moreover, the belief in the government's responsibility to address inequality also plays a crucial role in shaping democratic satisfaction, albeit with varying effects depending on the specific governmental roles in question.

6.2 Implications

The findings of this paper are an important diagnostic of the factors and personal experiences associated with lowering satisfaction with democracy, and policy delivery, in Australia. They underscore the complex interplay between economic inequality and democratic resilience in Australia. While Australia has a long-standing tradition of egalitarian values and strong democratic institutions, the perceived high level of income inequality poses a threat to public satisfaction with democracy. This threat is exacerbated by the belief that the government is not doing enough to bridge the income divide, particularly among vulnerable groups in society. The findings reinforce the perspective that democracy resilience is weakened as real and perceived inequality grows.

The results suggest that experiences of inequality and degree of economic concerns are a weakening flow for wider democratic resilience. Policymakers should be aware of the impact of economic concerns across the public, particularly those related to income distribution. This includes not only implementing policies that reduce inequality but also ensuring that those experiencing economic challenges are heard and able to fully participate within democratic processes. That is, it is equally important to consider public narratives defining expectations that democracy itself is a driver of specific outcomes, as well as situations when that relationship isn't as clear cut but democratic processes and elected officials are not adequately engaging all members of society.

Furthermore, the study indicates that addressing the disconnect between public expectations and government action on inequality could enhance democratic satisfaction. In a time when democracy globally is facing numerous challenges, the Australian experience provides valuable insights into how addressing income inequality can contribute to the strength and resilience of democratic institutions.

6.3 Recommendations

There are a number of specific recommendations that flow from the analysis presented in this paper. We separate these into recommendations for data collection, policy design and delivery, and research.

Recommendations for data collection:

- Expand Survey Coverage: The survey data presented and summarised in this paper were able to highlight some of the geographic and demographic differences in views on democracy and inequality. There are, however, a number of population groups that make up only a small share of the total Australian population and therefore are estimated with a fair degree of uncertainty from a general population survey. We suggest expanding the coverage of surveys on these topics to capture a more diverse range of opinions, particularly from underrepresented groups such as younger Australians and lower-income households. This includes incorporation of key questions in national surveys run by the ABS, but also revisiting ongoing survey sample methods and added questions on satisfaction to surveys focused specifically on community wellbeing.

- Include and analyse a broader set of questions on satisfaction with democracy alongside questions on inequality. The APSC commission survey mentioned earlier included a range of additional questions on democracy, rather than simple satisfaction. Excluding the not sure, the survey found, for example, that 82 per cent of Australians agreed or strongly agreed that 'It's worth trying to fix the problems that democracy may have.' It would be beneficial to include similar questions on surveys that also ask about inequality, and analyse the two concepts together. Other monitoring questions can be introduced to differentiate expectations of democratic systems versus perceived performance, and better diagnose when and how individuals actively engage or disengage in democratic systems.

- Longitudinal Data Collection: The data collected in this paper were part of the longitudinal Life in Australia panel. We recommend continuing to track the individuals in the survey to track changes in public perception over time, which can help identify causal relationships between views on income inequality and satisfaction with democracy. In addition, we recommend where possible for similar questions to be asked on existing longitudinal surveys, including but not limited to HILDA.

- Incorporate Qualitative Data: The paper is focused on analysis of population-representative survey data. We recommend integrating qualitative methods, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, to better understand the reasons behind public dissatisfaction with democracy and perceptions of income inequality. This could better inform policy responses and identify hypotheses that could be tested using administrative and/or survey data.

Recommendations for policy design and delivery:

- Addressing Income Inequality: The fundamental issue identified in this paper is that the Australian population has identified the income distribution in Australia as being unfair, and that this appears to be impacting views on democracy. There are many potential reasons to reduce inequality, including the impact of inequality on health, wellbeing, and development (Stiglitz 2012; Atkinson 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010) and this could potentially be done through progressive taxation, increased or better targeted social welfare spending, and targeted economic support for disadvantaged groups. This paper highlights that one other potential benefit is an improvement in the level of satisfaction with democracy.

- Enhancing Public Perception: The discussion in this paper pointed out that income

inequality in Australia has not risen as fast as in some other countries, and by some measures is relatively low. Nonetheless, a majority of Australians think that the current income distribution is unfair. The government could improve transparency and communication regarding its efforts to reduce income inequality, as public perception plays a critical role in democratic satisfaction.

- Strengthening Democratic Institutions: While inequality is one of the identified drivers shaping public perceptions of democracy, not all institutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic institutions focus on economic wellbeing. Rather, many focus on the ability of all segments of the population to participate in democratic processes. There are numerous electoral reforms and measures to increase public participation in government, particularly among those who perceive income inequality as high. The Strengthening Australian Democracy report outlined a number of practical initiatives (summarised below) that have been put in place in Australia or internationally to strengthen resilience, and the results of this paper suggest that these reforms could be enhanced if tied to reductions in income or wealth disparities:

    o Safeguarding electoral integrity,

    o Defending the integrity of the information environment,

    o Countering foreign disinformation,

    o Public narratives about democracy and social cohesion,

    o Encouraging civic participation and active citizenship,

    o Addressing misinformation and disinformation, and

    o Involving more people in deliberation.

Recommendations for Future Research:

- Exploring Causal Mechanisms: The analysis in this paper has looked at the association between the key relevant variables, controlling for other observable characteristics. This does not, however, demonstrate a causal relationship from views on inequality to views on democracy. Future work could take a more explicit focus on identifying the causal mechanisms linking income inequality to democratic resilience, using alternative statistical methods and explicitly experimental designs. A simple population-based survey experiment would be to randomly assign information to respondents of a nationally representative survey on the level of income inequality in Australia, and then test for differences between those who receive this information and those that don't in terms of satisfaction with democracy.

- Linking admin and survey data: An important set of analysis would be to make use of the rich and expanding administrative data[13] to calculate local measures of income or wealth inequality that could then be linked to survey data that includes inequality perceptions and satisfaction with democracy (or related measures). This data would be useful to test whether inequality between or within regions is associated with satisfaction with democracy, and whether such a relationship might explain some of the associations presented in this paper.

- Comparative Studies: This paper has focused on analysis within Australia. However, the Australian Barometer is part of the broader Asian Barometer series of surveys, and a

simple next step would be to replicate the analysis across multiple countries to test whether variation in inequality perceptions is associated with variation in satisfaction with democracy.

- Impact of Government Interventions: Future research should also explicitly evaluate the effectiveness of specific government interventions aimed at reducing income inequality and their subsequent impact on public satisfaction with democracy.

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Appendix – Describing the data

This paper is based on data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) and the ANUpoll series of surveys which has been running since 2008. Data for both surveys is available through the Australian Data Archive[14]

Asian Barometer

While the Asian Barometer commenced in 2001[15], it was first conducted in Australia during 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 countries[16] plus Hong Kong using a common questionnaire.[17] 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.[18]

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.[19] The survey was conducted from February 14th to February 21, 2023.

ANUpoll

The ANUpoll series of surveys regularly collect data on trust in institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and broader views on Australia's government and institutions. The ANUpoll commenced in 2008. The most recent survey took place in January 2024, with the survey that preceded it being the Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey (ACRS), which took place in October 2023 as part of the ANUpoll series.

Data collection for the January 2024 ANUpoll commenced on the 22nd of January with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 23rd of January and was completed by the 5th of February. The final sample size for the survey is 4,057 respondents. A total of 5,579 respondents were invited to take part in the survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 72.7 per cent.

More than half of the sample (52.9 per cent) had completed the survey after the first two full days of data collection with only 10.0 per cent completing between the 1st and 5th of February. The average survey length for those completing the survey was 23.5 minutes. 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.

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.

One of the benefits of collecting data through the Life in Australia™ panel is the ability to track responses at the individual level through time. Of those who had completed the January 2024 survey, 3,757 respondents (92.6 per cent) had completed the October 2023 survey.

Data from the survey is weighted to population benchmarks. For Life in Australia™, the standard 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.

The ethical aspects of the survey were approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (2021/430).

Endnotes

1   https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/social-cohesion/australian-values

2   https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook47p/InequalityDisadvantageAustralia

3   https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/finance/household-income-and-wealth-australia/latest-release

4   https://freedomhouse.org/

5   https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/

6   https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/poor-policies-stopping-our-fair-go/

7   https://grattan.edu.au/news/on-health-some-australians-dont-get-a-fair-go/

8   https://ipa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPA-The-Fair-Go-Going-Gone-Jan-2021.pdf

9   https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/02/28/satisfaction-with-democracy-and-ratings-for-political-leaders-parties/

10   https://www.apsreform.gov.au/resources/reports/trust-and-satisfaction-australian-democracy-survey-report

11   The p-value for the variable indicating someone has not completed Year 12 is 0.103, indicating that it is on the margins of being statistically significant. Furthermore, when income is not controlled for in the model, education is highly significant. Given the high correlation between income and education, it would appear that with regards to satisfaction with democracy, education and income are capturing similar aspects.

12   In a separate study, we are analysing the relationship between measures of housing stress/satisfaction and satisfaction with government. While we find housing circumstances to be an important predictor of satisfaction with democracy, when we include the housing variables alongside the role of government measures, both sets of variables remain significant, with the association in the same direction, and coefficients of roughly equal magnitude as the equations estimated separately. We conclude, therefore, that housing and views on the role of government are both important, but separate determinants of satisfaction with democracy.

13   See, for example, the recently created Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA), that includes information on the location of all Australians, as well as a range of wealth and income measures - https://www.abs.gov.au/about/data-services/data-integration/integrated-data/person-level-integrated-data-asset-plida

14   https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataverse/anupoll and https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataverse/asianbarometer

15   https://www.asianbarometer.org/

16   The countries are Australia, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.

17   The voting age population in each country is 18 years except for Taiwan (20 years), Indonesia (17 years) and Singapore (21 years).

18   The nine countries currently available in Wave 6 are Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Korea, Mongolia, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.

19   https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.26193/1SGK5O