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Integrity of Australia's democratic institutions



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Key issues

- Democracies around the world are currently facing a range of significant challenges. Research suggests that, at the global level, there has been a net decline in the quality of democratic governance in recent years.
- However, democratic performance varies significantly by region and country, and Australia's democracy ranks highly when compared to other nations.
- Nevertheless, Australia's democratic institutions do face their own complex problems, which parliamentarians will need to consider, including declining trust and engagement, ideological extremism, external interference and misinformation, and electoral inclusivity and diversity.

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Introduction

In recent years, concerns have increased about various challenges being faced by democracies around the world, including declining trust and engagement and threats to electoral integrity. This article explores these challenges, the extent to which they affect Australia's democratic institutions, and possible reforms that might address them.

Australian democracy in the global context

Approximately 3 billion people voted in national elections in 2024, an unusually large number created through coinciding election cycles. [Analysis of these elections and of governance more broadly](#) (p. 9) suggests that, at a global level, improvements in the quality of democracy in some countries have been outweighed by declines elsewhere, with a trend of net decline in global democratic quality that [can be traced back to 2017](#) (p. 13). Additional long-term declines in average turnout at elections and increased [election-related protests](#) are also evident. While these trends are concerning, [democratic performance varies significantly by region](#) (p. 9) and country, and potential solutions must be tailored to each nation's specific circumstances.

Measuring the quality of democracy

Each democratic government has a unique structure and context. Measuring or assessing comparative 'quality' is accordingly complex and results differ depending on the methodologies used. For example, [International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Index](#) (p. 10), [V-Dem](#) (p. 4), and [the Economist Intelligence Unit's index of democracy](#) use different conceptual frameworks to assess democratic performance. These different methods, and Australia's relative performance, are [discussed in detail by Dunleavy and Evans](#) (p. 578).

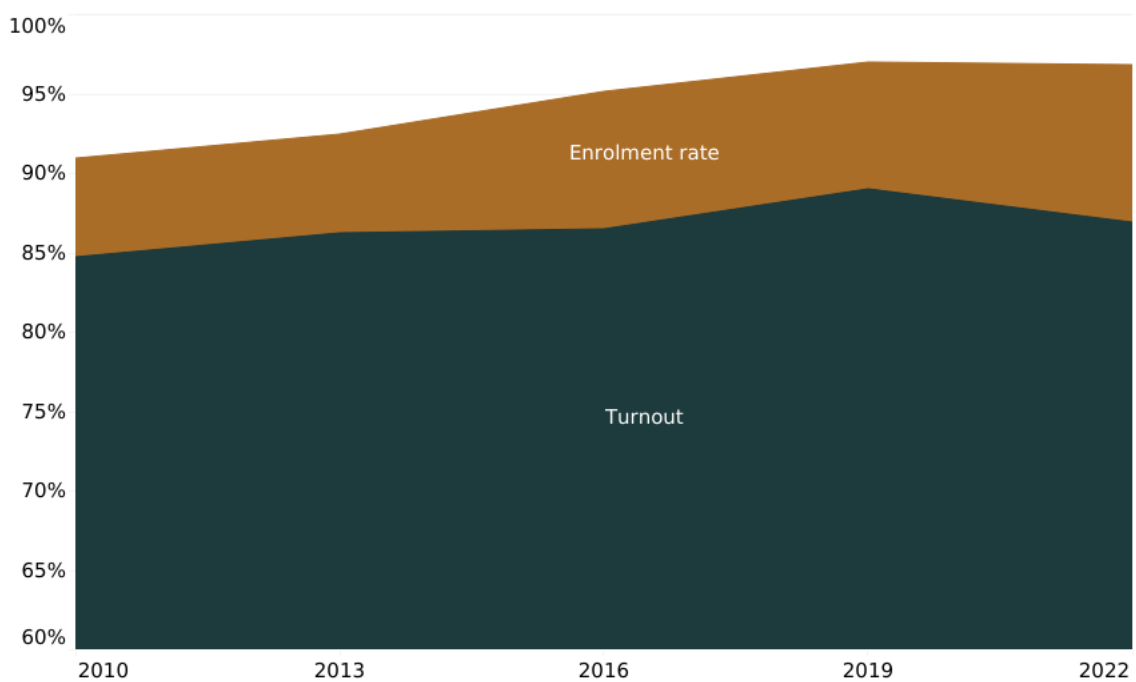
[Australia ranks as a 'relatively high-performing liberal democracy'](#) (p. 578) in democratic indices, with its precise ranking varying depending on the methodology. Despite expressing low levels of trust in government, [Australians remain strongly supportive of fundamental democratic values](#), including free and fair elections, the rule of law and representative democracy. Some characteristics of Australian democracy may help moderate problems that have become acute in other countries – for example, Australia's use of compulsory voting, frequent elections, different electoral systems for the House of Representatives and the Senate, and professional and apolitical electoral administration. These factors have contributed to high voter turnout rates, minor party representation and [relatively low levels of affective polarisation](#) (p. 18) (negative feelings towards opposing political parties). In contrast, polarisation has become a [particular concern in the US](#) and [Latin America](#). Similarly, while social media platforms and unmoderated online communications are [concerns in Australia](#), they likely [pose greater challenges in highly contested or polarised democracies](#). Despite this positive record, Australia's democratic institutions are not entirely free from threats, as outlined in the following sections.

Declining trust and engagement

Australia's system of compulsory voting (first legislated in 1924) creates [world-leading rates of voter participation](#) and [remains extremely popular](#). It incorporates preferential voting for the House of Representatives (shown to [boost voter participation](#)) and [proportional representation for the Senate](#) (which works to [avoid election 'winners' and 'losers'](#)). By mandating participation from even those self-described as 'uninterested' in politics, [compulsory voting can build widespread trust](#) in Australia's democratic system.

Some [commentators have noted](#) that voter turnout has fallen slightly at recent elections. However, Australia's electoral roll has also increased (above the general population growth rate), partly due to [legislation passed in 2012 allowing the Australian Electoral Commission \(AEC\) to directly enrol eligible](#) citizens. Figure 1 shows changes in enrolment and turnout over recent Australian federal elections as a proportion of the total estimated population eligible to vote. There appears to be no imminent threat of turnout in Australia declining to the significantly lower levels seen in other democracies such as the [US](#) or [UK](#). It is also notable that [long-term declines in voter turnout have either reversed or stabilised](#) in many democracies.

Figure 1 National enrolment and turnout rates, federal elections 2010 to 2022



Source: Australian Electoral Commission, '[National enrolment figures by state/territory](#)'.

The number of informal votes cast can also be a measure of engagement. However, determining the intent behind informal votes is more problematic and it has been almost a decade since the [AEC published an analysis](#) on this issue. Informal voting is related to [ballot paper length and complexity](#), and some commentators have called for [greater restrictions on who can be listed on a ballot paper](#). However, such reforms would constrain challengers to incumbent members and parties. Likewise [reforms allowing party logos on ballot papers](#) were intended to reduce confusion but [may disproportionately bias party candidates](#). The

'[simplifying](#)' [removal of group ticket voting in 2016](#) amplified differences between the House of Representatives and Senate voting systems and increased potential confusion.

[Declining participation in political parties](#) is a long-term trend, observed both in Australia and internationally, as ([particularly young](#)) people increasingly [choose other means to express their political views](#). This decline is mutually reinforced by the 'cartelisation' of political parties, marked by a smaller membership base, [centralised decision-making](#) (such as '[head office](#)' [pre-selections](#)), and a shift to paid employees over volunteer campaigners. The long-term impact of these changes remains unknown.

Trust in politicians and politics generally has also declined in the past 2 decades. [The Australian Election Study has found](#) (p. 99) that between 2007 and 2022:

- respondents who believe politicians 'know what ordinary people think' has fallen from 23% to 14%
- those saying that government is run for 'a few big interests' has increased from 38% to 54%
- general satisfaction with democracy has fallen from 86% to 70%.

Additionally, the belief that people in government can be trusted has declined from 48% in 1996 to 30% in 2022.

While these results are concerning on their face, the possible consequences of declining trust levels remain [contested among experts](#). Some [contend that declining trust](#) in politicians and political institutions can precipitate declining trust in broader society and impact [social cohesion](#). Other researchers have noted that although survey respondents consistently report low trust in democratic politics and politicians, [incumbent governments are being returned globally at similar rates](#) in recent decades; if trust were irreversibly low, we might expect clear electoral repudiation of people in power. However, [these findings may need to be reconsidered in light of 2024 election results](#), which saw many incumbent national governments either defeated or reduced to minority status.

Just as there are various causes of declining political engagement, [there is no single solution](#). Accordingly, political scientists and commentators have identified multiple evidence-backed reforms to help rebuild trust and engagement in Australian democracy. For example, increased opportunities to participate in politics outside of elections has been shown to [increase trust and efficacy](#) among participants (the belief that [they can influence political outcomes](#)). Examples include [citizens' assemblies](#), submissions to [parliamentary committees](#), or [engaging directly with parliamentarians](#). However, it is unclear whether the [benefits occur only among citizens who are already politically engaged](#) or also improve the engagement of those who do not currently participate.

[Australian Public Service Commission survey results indicate](#) (p. 15) that a large proportion of those who are dissatisfied with how democracy works in Australia believe that corruption is widespread in democratic institutions and processes. Further, [perceived corruption is associated with reductions in the perceived legitimacy](#) (p. 16) of public officials. Integrity reforms may go some way to addressing these perceptions. Experts have suggested that recent reforms, such as the [National Anti-Corruption Commission](#) (established in mid-2023), have contributed to Australia's improved performance in the [most recent global corruption perceptions index](#). [Reforms to the regime governing political donations](#) were passed in early 2025, which experts suggest [will improve integrity and transparency in some areas](#), but leave other areas unaddressed. Further integrity reforms may include [reform of lobbying regulation](#)

and [greater protection for whistleblowers](#) (including through proposed [reforms to Public Interest Disclosure legislation](#)).

Ideological extremism

While engagement and trust have declined among Australians generally, there has also been [an apparent increase in ideological extremism among a very small minority](#). [The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation has stated](#) that acts of politically motivated violence have become more common recently, and that this trend is expected to continue. While the prevalence of extremist views is hard to quantify, it is a pressing policy problem. A more detailed discussion of the relevant tensions is provided in the *Issues & insights* article, '[Navigating a world more prone to conflict](#)'. For Australia's democratic institutions, ideological extremism poses 2 key threats: undermining election administration and disrupting parliamentarians' work.

Running federal elections in Australia already poses significant logistical challenges due to geographic vastness, the [wide range of languages used other than English](#), and an expectation that voting is convenient and quick, as a condition of compulsory voting. The AEC has been remarkably successful in [delivering elections that meet or exceed community expectations](#), with serious mistakes, such as [the 2013 WA Senate election, few and far between](#). This record is [underpinned by a temporary workforce](#) of more than 100,000 employees who participate in the country's '[largest peacetime logistical exercise](#)'.

However, [the AEC has warned](#) (p. 2) of a 'marked increase in those questioning elements of democracy, legitimacy of government agencies and electoral processes and in turn undermining trust in electoral officials and workers'. This could hamper future AEC recruitment, making it difficult to raise such a large election workforce in circumstances where employees may be exposed to threats and harassment.

[The Australian Federal Police](#) has also reported increasing levels of harassment, abuse, and threats against parliamentarians. Some parliamentarians' offices have [recently been damaged in politically motivated acts of vandalism](#). These developments may threaten [parliamentarians' ability to interact freely](#) with their constituents.

While the threat of extremist ideology cannot be completely removed, some additional measures have been proposed, particularly to mitigate its effects on electoral integrity. [Recent reforms to the Criminal Code](#) strengthened protections for frontline Commonwealth employees (including election workers and electorate office staff). [Recent changes to electoral law](#) clarified that unauthorised filming inside a polling place without permission may be unlawful misconduct, but acknowledge the [need to balance worker protections with transparency and accountability](#).

Foreign interference and misinformation

Alongside challenges from ideological extremists, '[bad actors](#)' seek to [undermine democracies for geopolitical reasons](#). The internet and social media provide these actors with pervasive channels for interfering in democratic elections. For example, [calls to ban TikTok](#) are often predicated on [the threat of foreign actors](#) spreading misinformation or disinformation that threatens Australia's political and democratic systems.

Forms of interference such as manipulating election results or electronic voting systems, or directly funding candidates, [have an obvious impact](#). The [Australian Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce](#) works to mitigate such direct threats, while foreign [political donations were banned in 2018](#). Other threats, such as sowing distrust or spreading partisan misinformation, are less direct, and distrust and partisanship exist to some extent in Australia (and in all democracies) without external interference. The taskforce's recent [Election security environment overview](#) (p. 3) notes that, while it expects voters to face an increase in mis- and disinformation during elections, 'most disinformation does not involve a foreign power'. Strong democratic institutions (free and fair elections, stable political parties, and compulsory voting, for example) [help mitigate threats from bad actors](#), while [media literacy](#) and [civics education](#) are also often cited as reducing the impact of mis- and disinformation.

The proliferation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) will arguably compound exposure to [dubious information](#), from both malicious and non-malicious sources. Similarly, social media engagement is becoming an [increasingly unreliable source of information](#). In seeking to counter these developments, [the AEC's 'Stop and Consider' campaign](#) aims to give voters tools to recognise misleading information, including AI-generated content.

[The AEC also maintains a 'disinformation register'](#) of common and widely distributed misinformation about the electoral process. The AEC uses [a 'prebunking' strategy](#) for these sorts of claims, preparing videos and statements in advance of misinformation taking hold, and trying to debunk specific claims as they emerge. [Prebunking is increasingly popular](#) for its 'inoculation' effects: once someone hears the 'prebunked' information, they are arguably less likely to subsequently believe the untrue claim. However, evidence for its effectiveness is still limited and it [should not be considered a panacea](#).

While the AEC remains the centre of electoral information, when it comes to truth in political advertising, the [AEC has warned](#) that requiring it to adjudicate 'truth in political advertising' would damage perceptions of its neutrality and electoral integrity. In 2024, [government legislation proposed measures](#) to address misleading electoral communications, including a requirement to label AI-generated electoral material. However, other proposed measures are contentious, since adjudicating the accuracy of claims made by election candidates, parties, and third parties can be subject to interpretation. The South Australian Electoral Commission has overseen [the state's truth in advertising laws](#) since 1985 and reports '[no obvious harm](#)'. However, it is not clear that election campaigns in South Australia are any more 'honest', nor that the laws would scale easily to the Commonwealth level.

Inclusivity and diversity in elections

While Australian elections have broadly high rates of voter participation, some aspects of the electoral system can make voting difficult for minority and marginalised communities. The combination of single-member House of Representatives electorates and multi-member Senate electorates [balances stability and diverse representation](#) and is [well-regarded by democracy researchers](#). However, these differing systems for each chamber (both more complicated than in most other democracies) is a challenge for many voters and compounded by compulsory voting. Areas with [high rates of newly nationalised Australians](#) and [low rates of English literacy consistently show](#) (p. 53) lower voter turnout and more informal ballots.

Electoral participation by Indigenous Australians is [a related challenge](#). The electoral division with the highest proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander residents, Lingiari, [consistently reports comparatively low turnout rates](#). In 2022, [only 67% of those enrolled in Lingiari voted](#) (down from [73% in 2019](#)), compared to [a national rate of 90%](#). Two explanations are offered for low Indigenous voter participation rates. First, remote and rural voters face greater obstacles to enrolling and voting. To address this, the AEC's [Indigenous Electoral Participation Program](#) provides educational information and employs local staff to engage with Indigenous communities, facilitating [enrolments and understanding of the electoral process](#). During elections, the [remote voter service](#) conducts mobile polling in many remote Indigenous communities to reduce the need to travel to larger towns. However, the process has been criticised for [a lack of publicity](#) and [under-resourcing](#). Secondly, low national engagement and trust is likely to be [exacerbated among Indigenous voters](#). This was seen in the 2023 referendum on Indigenous representation, where, despite [unprecedented remote and rural voter assistance](#), turnout among Lingiari voters [further declined](#).

Conclusion

Australia's democracy ranks highly when compared to other nations and the challenges faced by its democratic institutions do not appear to be as acute as those experienced elsewhere. However, despite this generally good performance, in the areas discussed above – declining trust and engagement, ideological extremism, external interference and misinformation, and electoral inclusivity and diversity – Australia faces challenges that will require the ongoing attention of parliamentarians if they are to be mitigated or resolved.

Further reading

- Holly Ann Garnett, Toby S. James and Sofia Caal-Lam, [Electoral Integrity Global Report 2024](#), (Electoral Integrity Project, July 2024).
- Mark Evans, Patrick Dunleavy and John Phillimore (eds), [Australia's Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit](#) (London: LSE Press, 2024).
- Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy*, '[Chapter 5 – Australia's Democracy: Trust, Satisfaction and Belief](#)' (Canberra: Senate, 2021).
- Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, [From Classroom to Community: Civics Education and Political Participation in Australia](#) (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, January 2025).

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