

Strengthening Democracy

Programs improving civic and political participation: A rapid review



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Executive Summary

Participation in civil society and political processes are indicators of a resilient democracy and a socially cohesive society. Although civic and political participation have remained at a high level in Australia over the past two decades, the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the economic, social and political challenges that Australia is facing. Safeguarding and bolstering civic and political participation are essential to identifying and implementing solutions to meet those challenges and ensure that Australia's democracy remains resilient and its society socially cohesive in the future.

This report presents findings of a rapid review of evaluations of programs that aim to improve civic and political participation carried out in the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Member States of the European Union and the European Free Trade Agreement, Australia, and New Zealand. The findings underscore that there is no singular (nor simple) way to improve civic and political participation. While there was an absence of evaluations of comprehensive civic education programs among the 48 included studies, evaluated programs focused on a wide range of areas (e.g., the environment, health, access to justice). Most of these programs were designed to build people's or communities' capacity to participate in political processes relevant to the focus area or develop leadership skills to improve collaboration and cooperation in the community. From this perspective, it is essential to provide people with the necessary resources, support, and skills to advocate for themselves and their communities to facilitate civic and political participation. Crucially, programs need to be sufficiently funded and resourced, and based on participatory and strengths-based approaches that are culturally appropriate and safe, respond to community needs, and are evidence-based.

The findings of this rapid review also point to limitations in the evidence base underpinning efforts to improve civic and political participation. Among the 48 included studies was only one based on a randomized controlled trial design; one based on an experimental design; and one based on a quasi-experimental design. Furthermore, few studies attempted to identify which program components contributed to the success or otherwise of the program as-a-whole. In the absence of detailed descriptions of program content and implementation, as well as rigorous evaluation methods, more research is needed to establish which programs work to improve civic and political participation, and why.

Beyond programs, we encourage policymakers to consider civic and political participation from a more holistic perspective. Our research on community discourses about democracy indicates that people appreciate the benefits of living in a democratic country like Australia but are critical about how it is working in the present and concerned for its future. There is a sense of dissatisfaction with elements of the democratic system and signs of declining trust in the work of governments. Programs are an appropriate way to remove some of the barriers to participation that people face and to enable people to participate in Australia's democracy more fully. However, addressing issues around dissatisfaction and declining trust requires more comprehensive solutions.

Introduction

Participation in civil society and political processes is crucial for democracy in Australia to thrive. There are various ways in which people participate, including by engaging in more formal (e.g., voting, volunteering) and more informal (e.g., posting political content online, helping a neighbour) activities. The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion surveys measure various forms of civic and political participation. While overall levels of civic and political participation have remained relatively consistent since the first iteration of the survey in 2007 (O'Donnell 2023: 58), participation in specific activities varies. For example, in 2023, while a large majority of about 80% had voted in an election in the last three years, only about 11% had attended a protest, march or demonstration (O'Donnell 2023: 59). Similarly, participation varies across different groups of the population. Specifically, younger and middle-aged people, as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, tended to participate less and tended to be less trusting of the Federal government than older and more affluent people (O'Donnell 2023: 62). Ensuring that people can participate in Australia's democracy fully, freely, and equally should be a key focus guiding the work of politicians and public officials.

Civic and political participation are important aspects of social cohesion because it is through participation that people come together to identify, negotiate and work towards common goals. The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (SFRI) views social cohesion as a process that evolves around cooperation and working towards common goals or a shared vision. In a multicultural society such as Australia's, from this perspective, social cohesion 'is not about having diversity but about how the community operates together in a diverse society' (SFRI, n.d.). This understanding of social cohesion underpins the annual Mapping Social Cohesion reports. Based on large-scale, annual national surveys, the reports have tracked social cohesion in Australia across the five domains of Belonging, Worth, Social Inclusion and Justice, Participation, and Acceptance and Rejection since 2007. According to the most recent Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 report, social cohesion in Australia has been 'under pressure and declining' (O'Donnell 2023: 7) from a peak during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the current context of cost-of-living pressures. Because social cohesion is a process that unfolds over time, continuous efforts need to be made to safeguard Australia's social cohesion against emerging and long-standing challenges. Indeed, as the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, it is critical for policymakers to bolster social cohesion in times of relative peace and prosperity for society to cope with and overcome any future challenges (Jewett et al. 2021). That is, it is important that policymakers adopt a proactive and forward-looking perspective when it comes to social cohesion.

The question of how policymakers can bolster social cohesion has become even more pertinent in the context of challenges to democracy and its institutions. Trust in democracy is a central aspect of social cohesion (O'Donnell 2023). More broadly speaking, it involves a consensus around which sources of information are trustworthy and thus form a widely accepted basis for public discourse and debate; trust in Australia's democratic institutions and the conduct of officeholders across all levels of government; and how people access, engage with and participate in democracy in their day-to-day lives. Contemporary phenomena that undermine trust in the functioning of democratic institutions and processes and their legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, thus also represent challenges to social cohesion. Improving civic and political participation is one way in which social cohesion in Australia may be strengthened.

Conversations around social cohesion and ‘democratic resilience’ (Holloway & Manwaring 2023) converge around issues of trust in democracy and participation in its processes and institutions. In academic literature on democratic resilience, public political participation is commonly regarded as an important source of democratic resilience (Holloway & Manwaring 2023: 82). At the same time, however, democratic resilience has largely remained under-theorised, providing little clarity as to what the concept refers to and how it is different from other concepts in the wider literature on democratization (Holloway & Manwaring 2023). In their systematic review, Holloway and Manwaring (2023: 82-83) caution against an understanding of resilience ‘centred wholly on stability or prevention’, instead suggesting that resilience is about the ‘capacity of a system to absorb and recover, adapt, innovate, or transform in response to shock or crisis’. Like social cohesion, this capacity is best built in times of relative peace and prosperity, and it is important that policymakers adopt a proactive and forward-looking perspective. Actively building democratic resilience is vital for social cohesion to thrive, and vice versa.

Strengthening social cohesion is a crucial part of building democratic resilience in Australia. Both rely on trust in the institutions and processes that underpin Australia’s democracy and their legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Strengthening social cohesion is therefore essential to safeguard against the many challenges Australia is facing that seek to erode trust in and the legitimacy of our democracy. Civic and political participation are arguably key cornerstones of both social cohesion and democratic resilience. This rapid review seeks to provide a preliminary evidence base to guide the work of policymakers and practitioners in improving social cohesion and strengthening democratic resilience in Australia by addressing the question of what programs work to increase civic and political participation.

Methodology

This research project is a rapid review of evaluations of programs that may contribute to improving social cohesion, and in turn to strengthening democratic resilience in Australia. It is based on the assumption that increasing civic and political participation among the Australian population improves social cohesion and in turn strengthens democratic resilience. Rapid reviews are a type of systematic review that are suited to producing preliminary syntheses of research evidence within relatively short project timeframes and with limited resources — that is, in circumstances where more comprehensive systematic reviews are not feasible (King et al. 2022). Nonetheless, well-designed rapid reviews underpinned by clear research questions and objectives can inform complex policy issues (Wilson et al. 2021). The research questions guiding this rapid review were:

1. What evaluation research has been carried out to assess the effectiveness of programs aiming to improve civic and political participation?
2. Based on the evaluation research, what are the characteristics of programs effective at improving civic and political participation?

The domain of Participation of the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion informs the definitions of civic and political participation that underpin this rapid review¹. The definitions are as follows:

¹ The definitions exclude the provision of social support to reflect a focus on formalised or institutionalised forms of participation, whereas social support reflects more informal forms of participation. Although vital

- Civic participation: Participation in groups or activities that aim to contribute to what may be understood as the “common good”. This includes volunteering and membership in a range of religious, social, civic or political groups as well as taking part in community or neighbourhood activities.
- Political participation: Participation in the process of democratic decision making. This includes formal (e.g., voting or running for a political office) and informal activities (e.g., contacting an elected representative).

To identify evaluations of potentially relevant programs, we systematically searched three academic databases and included studies from two recently published systematic reviews on social capital (Centre for Thriving Places, 2022) and social cohesion (Orazani et al., 2023). After identifying and removing duplicates, we retrieved a total of 2,589 records. Subsequently, we systematically screened these records in two stages (first titles and abstracts, then full texts) for relevance. Out of those 2,589 records, we deemed 48 to be relevant. To be considered relevant, evaluations had to meet the following criteria:

1. They had to be published in or after 2012.
2. They had to be written in English.
3. They had to evaluate programs implemented in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Member States of the European Union or the European Free Trade Agreement, Australia or New Zealand.
4. They had to consider whether the program had any impact on civic and/or political participation.

More detail on the process of identifying relevant evaluations can be found in the Technical Appendix. The Technical Appendix contains information about the search strategy, including academic databases and citation indices as well as search terms. It also contains an overview of the study selection process, including why studies were excluded at each step.

What evaluation research has been carried out to assess the effectiveness of programs aiming to improve civic and political participation?

Below is a summary of key findings of the rapid review. More information about evaluation outcomes as well as program descriptions can be found in the Evaluation and Program Details Appendix. The Evaluation and Program Details Appendix contains more information about each of the 48 evaluations included in this rapid review, including their methods and results, as well as brief descriptions of each of the evaluated programs.

Most studies were about programs in the United States.

Of the 48 studies, 24 studies were about programs conducted in the USA, eleven in the United Kingdom, five in Australia and four each in Canada and European Union Member States.

to social cohesion and democratic resilience, the more informal forms of participation captured by the concept of social support are beyond the scope of this rapid review to ensure its feasibility within time and resource constraints.

Capacity-building programs were the most common.

Half of the 48 studies assessed programs aiming to contribute to community development, including through leadership training and capacity building. Seven studies were evaluations of youth development programs, with six of these being annual evaluations of the National Citizen Service. A further seven studies assessed the effectiveness of public engagement programs and another five investigated the impact of university courses and course components.

Evaluations used a wide range of study designs.

Our rapid review was based on a broad understanding of evaluation research and inclusive of a wide range of study designs. Eighteen of the included studies employed qualitative designs, 19 employed quantitative designs (including surveys with both closed- and open-ended questions) and eleven employed mixed-methods designs. There was little use of randomised, experimental, or quasi-experimental designs: Only one study employed a randomised controlled trial design (a cluster randomised trial; Phillips et al. 2014), another used a field experiment design (Mahéo 2017) and a third was based on a quasi-experimental design (Spitzer & Weber 2023). Other robust study designs included evaluations of the National Citizen Service, which employed propensity score matching and a difference-in-difference design to examine changes in NCS participants resulting from participation in the NCS.

Most evaluations considered a program's impact on both civil and political participation.

Twenty-three evaluations considered impacts on both civil and political participation. Out of those 25 studies that only focused on one type of participation, 17 looked at a program's impact on civil participation and eight looked at a program's impact on political participation.

What are the characteristics of programs effective at improving civic and political participation?

The included studies assessed a wide range of programs that may improve civic and political participation, across different countries, targeting different groups of the population, and employing a variety of study designs. These factors make it difficult to derive universal design principles for programs that are effective at improving civic and political participation. In addition, few of the included studies empirically tested which components and characteristics made a program effective.

Therefore, the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute proposes the following principles for programs effective at improving civic and political participation, based on the Scanlon Foundation's extensive expertise in supporting similar programs.

1. Effective programs are based on participatory approaches that involve stakeholders and community members throughout all stages, from design through to evaluation.

This ensures that programs are culturally appropriate and safe, respond to community needs and have community support.

2. Effective programs adopt a strengths-based approach. This involves building on and amplifying existing community resources, such as interpersonal relationships and interorganisational partnerships.
3. Effective programs are based on pedagogical approaches that continue to build community capacity to proactively identify and collaboratively solve problems as they arise.
4. Effective programs are evidence-based. This involves specifying the mechanisms through which the desired changes will be achieved, how program components and characteristics are intended to facilitate these changes and evaluation of program processes and outcomes.
5. Effective programs receive appropriate levels of resources, including infrastructure, funding and staffing.

Discussion

Our rapid review identified evaluations of a wide range of programs, employing a wide range of study designs. In terms of the kinds of programs that have been evaluated, there are some notable observations. First, the wide range of evaluated programs highlights that there are multiple approaches to improving civic and political participation. Indeed, many of the programs aimed to improve outcomes in areas other than civic and political participation, but also improved civic and political participation. Second, there was an absence of general and comprehensive civic education programs. Rather, civic education tended to be incorporated in capacity-building and other programs as deemed necessary. In these cases, civic education would be specific to the program area. For example, a program aiming to build young people's capacities to work towards environmental justice incorporated modules on relevant legislative provisions as well as political processes and responsibilities across levels of government (Sampson et al. 2021).

In terms of the evaluation research included in this rapid review, the most notable observation is the lack of randomised controlled trials (except for Phillips et al. 2014). This may be in part a result of the search strategy underpinning this rapid review because the search strategy did not include trial registers. Another limitation of the search strategy was its focus on published, peer-reviewed literature. Many programs effective at improving civic and political participation may not have been evaluated, or their evaluations may not have been published through peer-review processes or not at all. Future systematic reviews on this topic should therefore employ a more comprehensive search strategy. This would specifically involve a targeted search strategy for so-called grey literature and unpublished evaluations.

At the same time, such an observation may also point towards gaps in our understanding of how to strengthen social cohesion and build democratic resilience by improving civic and political participation. More research is needed to explicate and empirically test the theoretical relationships between civic and political participation, social cohesion and democratic resilience. That is, these theoretical relationships should guide the design, implementation and evaluation of programs aiming to strengthen social cohesion and build democratic resilience.

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