Strengthening Democracy

Understanding public discourses about democracy

Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

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Executive summary

How politicians talk about and news media report on Australia's democracy affects how people think about, feel towards, and engage with democracy in their day-to-day lives. Therefore, understanding discourses around democracy in parliament and news media offers important insights for policymakers wanting to address issues of distrust in government and dissatisfaction with democracy.

This report presents the findings of a quantitative analysis of discourses around democracy in parliamentary speeches and news media articles in Australia. Using literal and regular-expression (regex) matching strategies, we retrieved a total of 117,553 parliamentary speeches from Hansard (from 2006 to 2023) and 1,046,167 news media articles from newsapi.ai (from 2014 to 2023) on 16 issues related to democracy. We used similar matching strategies to identify a total of 24 minority groups within our text corpora. Our analyses focused on how discourses around democracy have changed over time, which issues were frequently discussed together, and which minority groups were commonly mentioned in relation to democratic issues.

Our analysis of parliamentary speeches and news media articles shows that discourses around democracy evolve over time. Discussions of democratic issues in parliamentary speeches and news media articles followed federal election cycles. In parliamentary speeches, discussions of democratic issues peaked in years in the lead-up to federal elections, whereas news media reporting on democratic issues peaked in federal election years. Parliamentary speeches and news media articles focused on the same democratic issues but differed in their priorities. While news media mostly discussed expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy, office holders tended to talk most about democratic processes. Similarly, there were minor differences in terms of which minority groups were discussed in relation to democratic issues. In discourses about democracy, there was often a focus on young people, First Nations people, religious minorities, and refugees and migrants. In parliamentary speeches, religious minorities were often discussed in relation to rights and freedoms, while in news media, they were written about in relation to threats to the democratic order, and expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy.

Our findings have significant policy implications. Addressing issues of distrust in government and dissatisfaction with democracy requires effective, targeted, and respectful public engagement and communication strategies. Understanding and reflecting on how office holders talk about democratic issues, and how they relate minority groups to these issues, is a necessary first step towards better strategies.

Introduction

Politicians and news media occupy privileged positions in the public sphere. They shape public policies and opinion. Therefore, how politicians talk about and news media report on Australia's democracy, including the challenges it is facing, offers an important perspective on contemporary issues of distrust in government, dissatisfaction with democracy, and polarisation, because those discourses affect how people think about, feel towards and engage with Australia's political institutions. For policymakers, analysing these discourses offers insights into how political messages are constructed, providing a basis for more informed decision-making and communication strategies. By focusing on parliamentary speeches and news media articles, this paper seeks to explore the characteristics of democratic discourse in Australia, and its evolution. Specifically, it aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are differences and similarities in public discourses in the media and in parliamentary debates?
2. How have public discourses about democracy in the media and in parliamentary debates in Australia evolved over time?
    a. How do national events shape public discourses about democracy?
    b. To what extent may international events shape public discourses about democracy?

We thereby aim to offer policymakers a detailed understanding of how democracy is discussed in influential forums, and how these discourses may contribute to shaping policy agendas and people's attitudes.

Methodology

This research project involved a quantitative analysis of discourses around democracy in the Parliament of Australia and Australian news media. The datasets used for analysis consisted of textual corpora of speeches in the House of Representatives and the Senate on the one hand and news media articles on the other. Parliamentary speeches held between January 2006 and October 2023 were retrieved from Hansard and news media articles published across 15 major Australian news outlets (see Table 1) between January 2014 and November 2023 were retrieved from newsapi.ai. Literal and regex term matching strategies based on terms co-developed by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (SFRI) and SoDa Laboratories at Monash University (SoDa Labs) were used to identify and retrieve relevant speeches and news media articles[1] about democracy (see Table 2).

Parliamentary speeches were obtained as "lines". We defined "lines" as contiguous speech segments between 300 and 1,000 characters long by a single speaker. If a speaker is interrupted, the line concludes and a new line is created if they speak on. The interruption (if audible) will

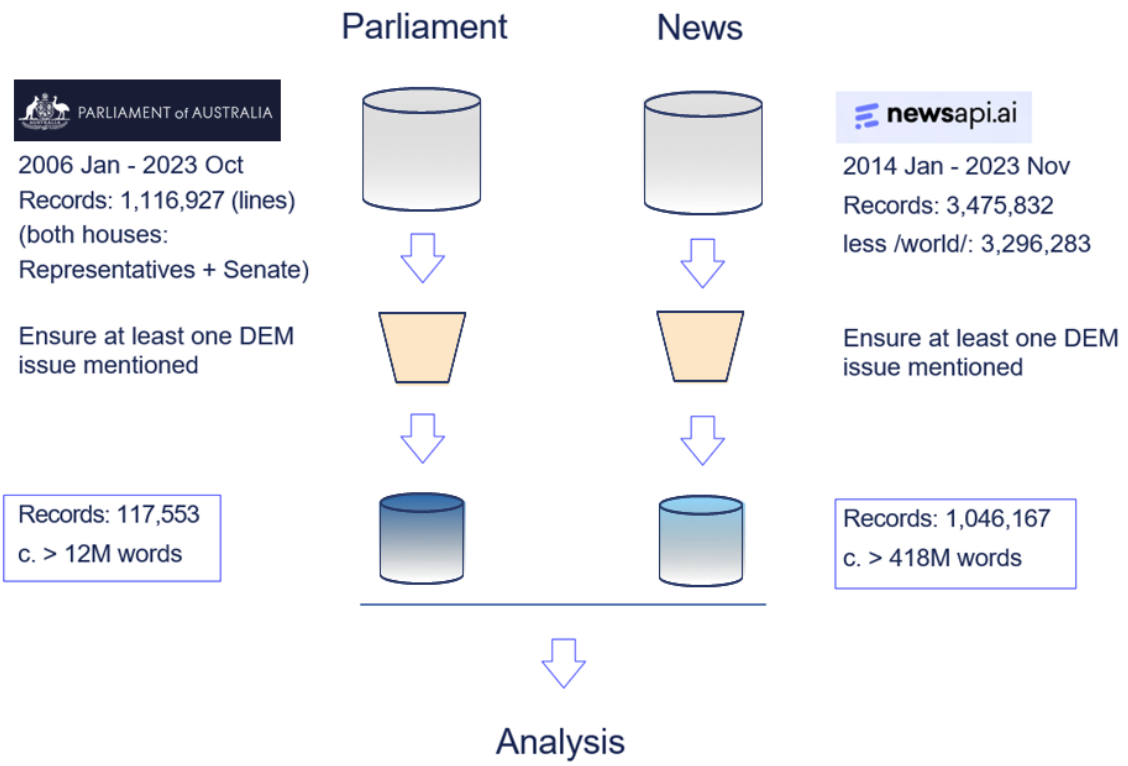
[1] Please note that for the retrieval of news media, the terms "parliament", "senate", "house of representatives", "high court", "federal court" and "government" were added to ensure that all relevant news media items on democratic issues would be identified. These terms were omitted in the retrieval of parliamentary speeches following pilot searches because they either did not retrieve a sufficient number of texts (in the cases of "high court" and "federal court") or too large a number of texts (in the cases of "parliament", "senate", "house of representatives" and "government").

itself become a line, attributed to a given speaker. The final datasets of parliamentary speeches and of news media articles consisted of 117,553 and 1,046,167 records, respectively. Figure 1 shows the full data pipeline.

Table 1: List of 15 major Australian news outlets

News outlet
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Mercury
Perth Now
Northern Territory News
The West Australian
The Courier Mail
The Australian
The Daily Telegraph
Australian Financial Review
Herald Sun
The Examiner
The Age
The Advertiser
The Sydney Morning Herald
The Canberra Times

Figure 1: Data pipeline



Note: *DEM stands for democratic.*

Table 2: List of democratic issues with examples

Democratic issue	Examples
Democratic institutions	Institutions like parliaments, governments and courts, and the public service; concepts related to the functioning of institutions, like checks and balances, separation of power and judicial independence
Democratic processes	Parliamentary processes like question time as well as inquiries in the House of Representatives and Senate; other processes like Royal Commissions
Democratic social justice	Principles like equal opportunities, equity, equality, and duty of care
Democratic values	Principles like sovereignty, legitimacy, pluralism, and rule of law
Election day traditions and voter analysis	Election-related terms like swing voter and marginal or safe, urban or rural seat
Election types	Elections at various levels of government and its parliaments, as well as referendums and plebiscites
Electoral bodies and processes	Institutions overseeing the voting process and related functions like the Australian Electoral Commission
Expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy	Dissatisfaction expressed through public interest disclosures and whistleblowing, voting behaviour, protests and demonstrations, grassroots organising and campaigning, as well as boycotts and industrial action; concepts like political dissent and civil disobedience
Political parties and campaigning	Party-political processes like preselection; Campaign-related issues like how-to-vote cards, donations and lobbying
Rights and freedoms	Rights like human rights, right to privacy and right to protest; freedoms and liberties like freedom of speech, freedom of the press and civil liberties
Threats to democratic rights and freedoms	Threats like the erosion of civil liberties and restrictions on freedom of speech or freedom of assembly
Threats to electoral processes	Threats like electoral interference; issues like voter disenfranchisement
Threats to freedom of information	Threats like censorship, mis- and disinformation, and surveillance; issues like media concentration and bias, as well as lack of transparency
Threats to legitimacy of democratic institutions	Issues like corruption, nepotism and cronyism, branch-stacking and “pork barrelling”, as well as abuse of power and process
Threats to social cohesion	Issues like inequality, polarisation, economic instability and political violence
Threats to the democratic order	Threats like authoritarianism, terrorism and extremism, constitutional crises, foreign interference and declarations of war

Note: *The examples provided in this table illustrate the range of topics covered by our literal and regex matching strategies.*

Results

This report examines how often democratic issues and minority groups are mentioned in parliamentary speeches and news media articles. It distinguishes between 16 democratic issues and 24 minority groups. Like democratic issues, SFRI and SoDa Labs co-developed lists of terms to identify mentions of minority groups in text (see Table 3 for a list of minority groups), based on previous work by SoDa Labs. Frequency was measured as the proportion of text units that contained any of the group- or issue-specific terms in the corpus of parliamentary speeches and news media articles[2].

Table 3: List of minority groups

Minority group
Older people
Young people
First Nations people
Linguistic minorities
Migrants and refugees
Racial minorities
Religious minorities
LGBTIQ+ people
People with chronic health conditions
People with disabilities
People with drug problems
People with gambling problems
Aged-care residents
People affected by the justice system
People experiencing homelessness
People living in poverty
People on welfare
Unemployed or precariously employed people
Working-class people
People living in regional or remote areas
Single parents
Survivors of domestic violence
War veterans
General disadvantaged groups

[2] To ensure comparability between analysis of parliamentary speeches and news media articles, identical term lists were used – that is, the terms “parliament”, “senate”, “house of representatives”, “high court”, “federal court” and “government” were not counted for the purpose of analysis.

Discussions of democratic issues in parliamentary speeches and news media articles follow federal election cycles.

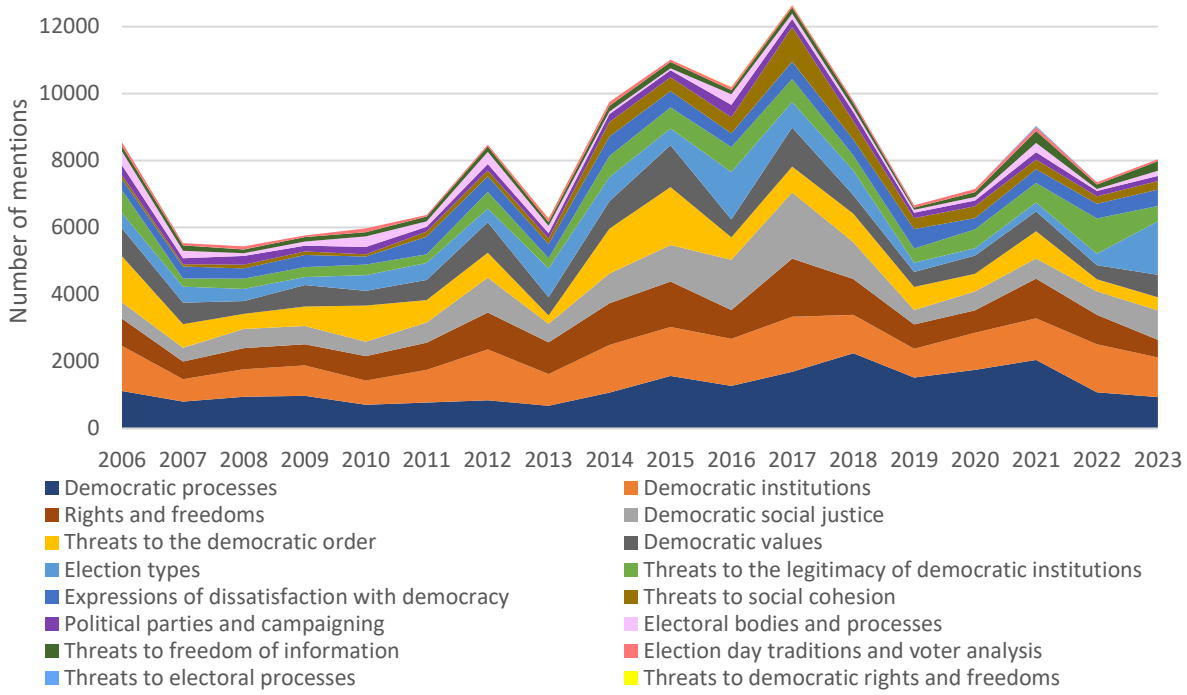
Figures 2 and 3 show mentions of democratic issues in parliamentary speeches and news media articles over time. In parliamentary speeches, discussions of democratic issues peaked in the year prior to and declined in the year of a federal election. For example, there were peaks in 2006, 2012, 2015 and 2021, followed by steep declines in 2007, 2013, 2016 and 2022. However, there were also exceptions, as there were no peaks in 2009 or 2018. In the case of the 2019 federal election, however, the total number of mentions of democratic issues had dropped from a peak in 2017. Whereas in the case of the 2010 federal election, there had been an overall upwards trend in discussions of democratic issues in parliament that had started in 2008 and lasted until 2012.

Between 2006 and 2023, discussions of democracy in parliament primarily evolved around democratic institutions – the judiciary, public service, and anti-corruption bodies – and processes (e.g., question time, parliamentary and Senate inquiries, and Royal Commissions). Mentions of democratic social justice issues, that is, issues around equality and fairness, increased between 2013 and 2017. To a lesser extent, a similar trend was observed for mentions of rights and freedoms. Discussions of threats to the democratic order remained at similar levels throughout the Rudd/Gillard Labor governments but grew in volume under the Abbott Coalition government before declining again after Turnbull became Prime Minister. Parliamentary mentions of election types peaked twice: In 2016, when parliament negotiated the exact form of a national vote on legalising same-sex marriage the following year, and in 2023, the year of the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum.

Different to the patterns observed in parliamentary speeches, mentions of democratic issues in news media articles peaked in federal election years (2016 and 2019). 2022 was a notable exception, recording the lowest number of mentions of democratic issues between 2014 and 2023. Overall, there was a steady decline in mentions of democratic issues in news media articles on democracy from the highest peak in 2016. While further analysis of this decline is beyond the scope of this study, one cannot conclude that it is a result of a declining interest in, or coverage of, democratic issues in Australian news media because the same news media article might mention multiple democratic issues, each of which would have been in turn counted towards the total. Thus, a decline in the total number of mentions could in part reflect a shift in news reporting from focusing on multiple issues to focusing on a single issue. Therefore, further analysis is required to examine the reasons for the observed decline.

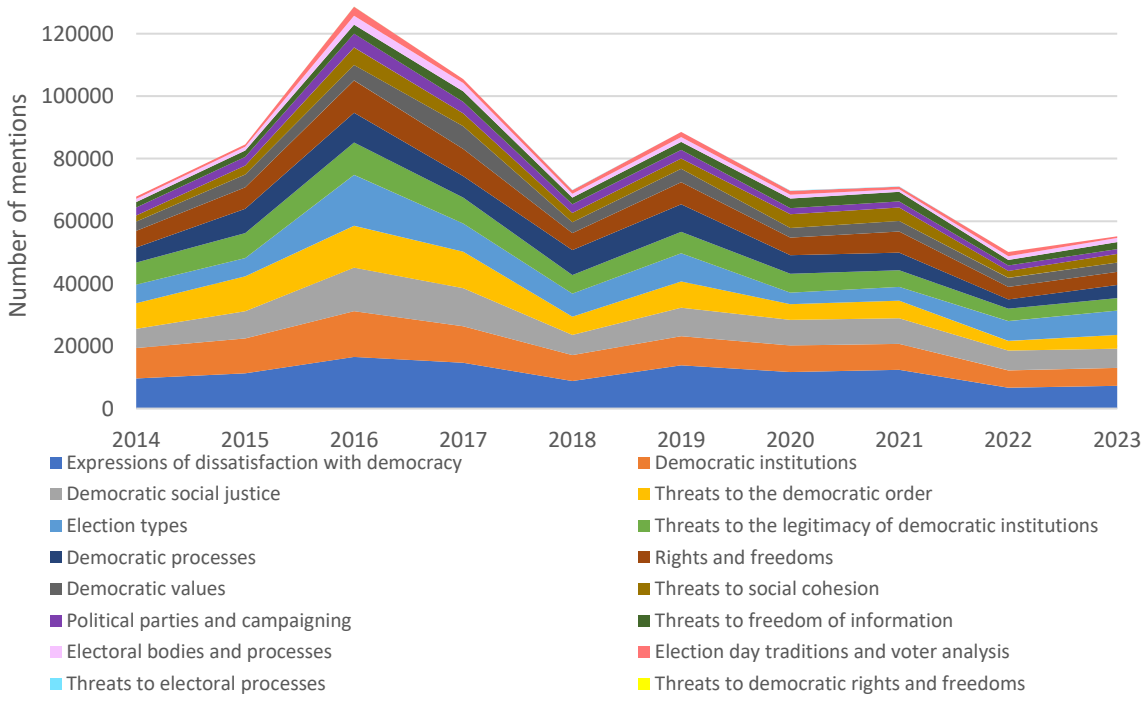
Topical differences between parliamentary speeches and news media included a stronger focus on expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy, as well as democratic social justice issues among the latter. Differences and similarities in parliamentary and news media discourses around democracy will be explored further below.

Figure 2: Hansard – Mentions of democratic issues, 2006-2023



Note: *Democratic issues are shown in descending order by total number of mentions between 2006 and 2023. The bottom layer corresponds to the most mentioned and the top layer corresponds to the least mentioned topic.*

Figure 3: News media – Mentions of democratic issues, 2014-2023

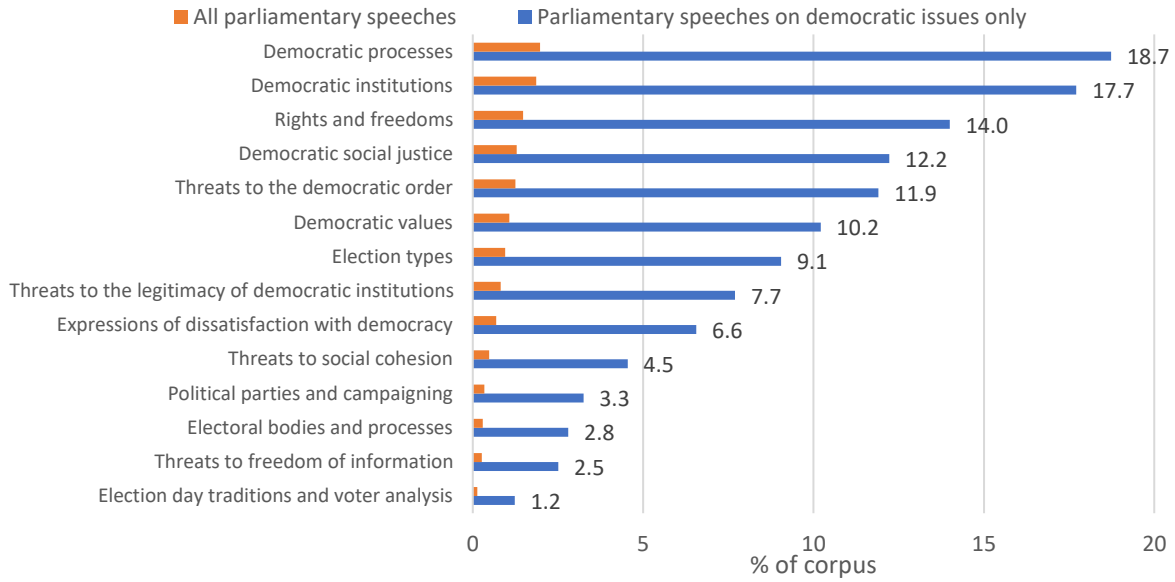


Note: *Democratic issues are shown in descending order by total number of mentions between 2014 and 2023. The bottom layer corresponds to the most mentioned and the top layer corresponds to the least mentioned topic.*

Parliamentary speeches and news media articles focus on similar democratic issues but differ in their priorities.

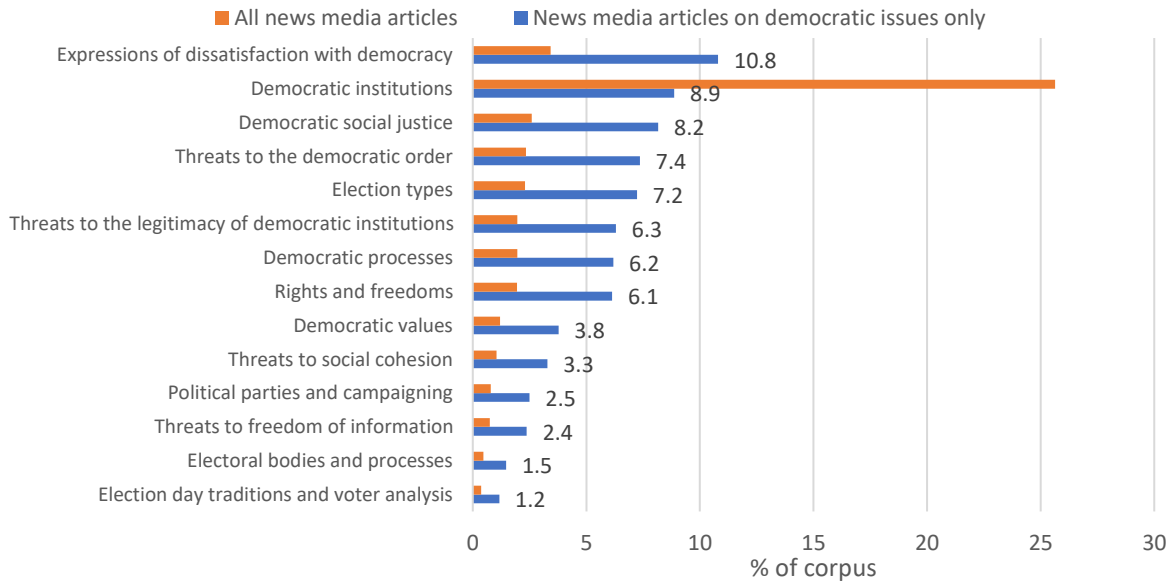
Parliamentary speeches mentioned democratic processes, followed by democratic institutions, rights and freedoms, democratic social justice issues and threats to the democratic order most frequently (see Figure 4). In comparison, news media articles mentioned expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy, democratic institutions, democratic social justice, and threats to the democratic order most frequently (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Hansard – Issue occurrences



Note: *For readability, only percentages of mentions in parliamentary speeches on democratic issues are shown.*

Figure 5: News media – Issue occurrences



Note: *For readability, only percentages of mentions in parliamentary speeches on democratic issues are shown.*

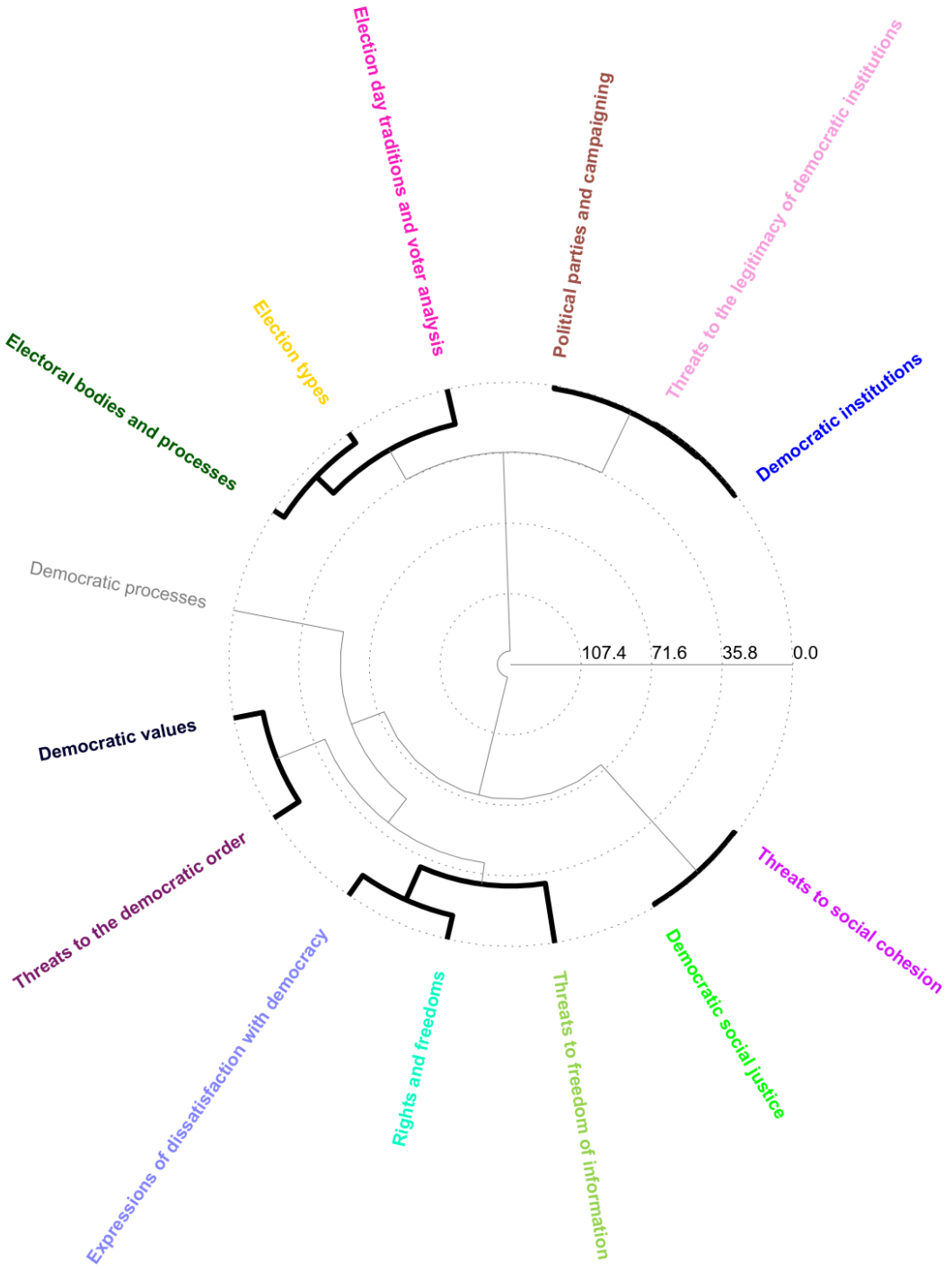
Parliamentary speeches and news media articles are similar in terms of which democratic issues they mention alongside each other.

Despite prioritising different democratic issues, parliamentary speeches and news media articles were similar in relation to the democratic issues that were mentioned together. Figures 6 and 7 show clusters of democratic issues that were discussed together in parliamentary speeches and news media. In each text corpus, there were five clusters of democratic issues. In parliamentary speeches as well as news media articles, democratic values and threats to the democratic order were frequently mentioned together, as were democratic institutions, threats to the legitimacy of democratic institutions as well as political parties and campaigning[3]; electoral bodies and processes, election types and election day traditions and voter analysis; democratic social justice and threats to social cohesion. There was only a minor difference in relation to the cluster of expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy, rights and freedoms and threats to freedom of information in parliamentary speeches, which in news media articles also included the issue of threats to electoral processes[4]. Democratic processes did not form part of any issue cluster in either parliamentary speeches or news media articles.

[3] Upon review of our analytical steps, we noticed that the democratic issues of threats to the legitimacy of democratic institutions and political parties and campaigning shared regex keywords ("corrupt[ion]" and "anti-corrupt[ion]"). This meant that parliamentary speeches and news media articles containing these words were labelled with both democratic issues. This overlap would have played a role in the clustering of threats to the legitimacy of democratic institutions and political parties and campaigning. In a separate analysis, we omitted the democratic issue of threats to the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Political parties and campaigning and democratic institutions also formed a cluster in that analysis, and there were no changes to any of the other clusters.

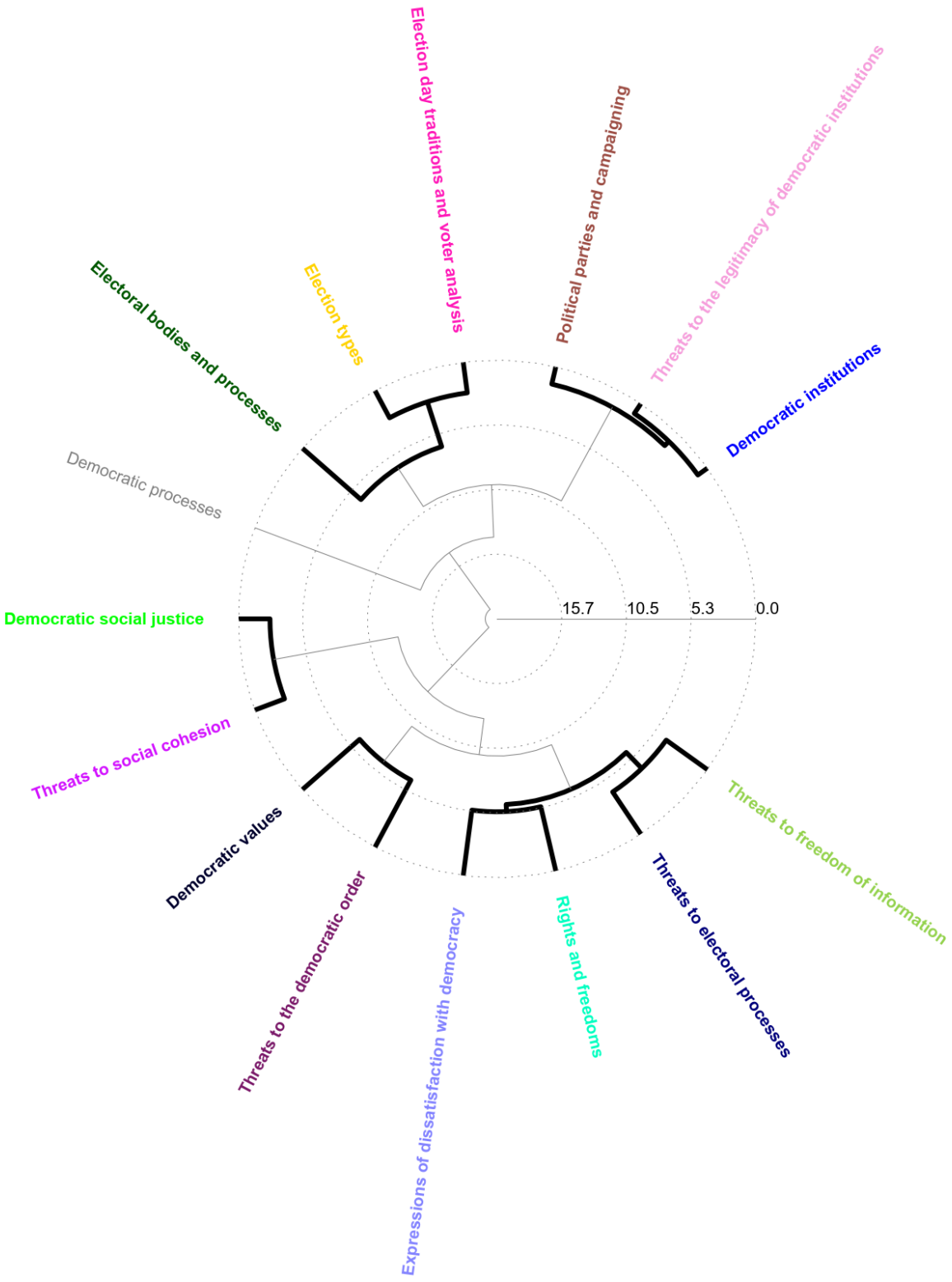
[4] The issue of threats to electoral processes was mentioned in less than 100 parliamentary speeches and omitted from the cluster analysis.

Figure 6: Hansard – Democratic issue clusters



Note: *Issues mentioned in less than 100 texts were excluded from the cluster analysis.*

Figure 7: News media – Democratic issue clusters

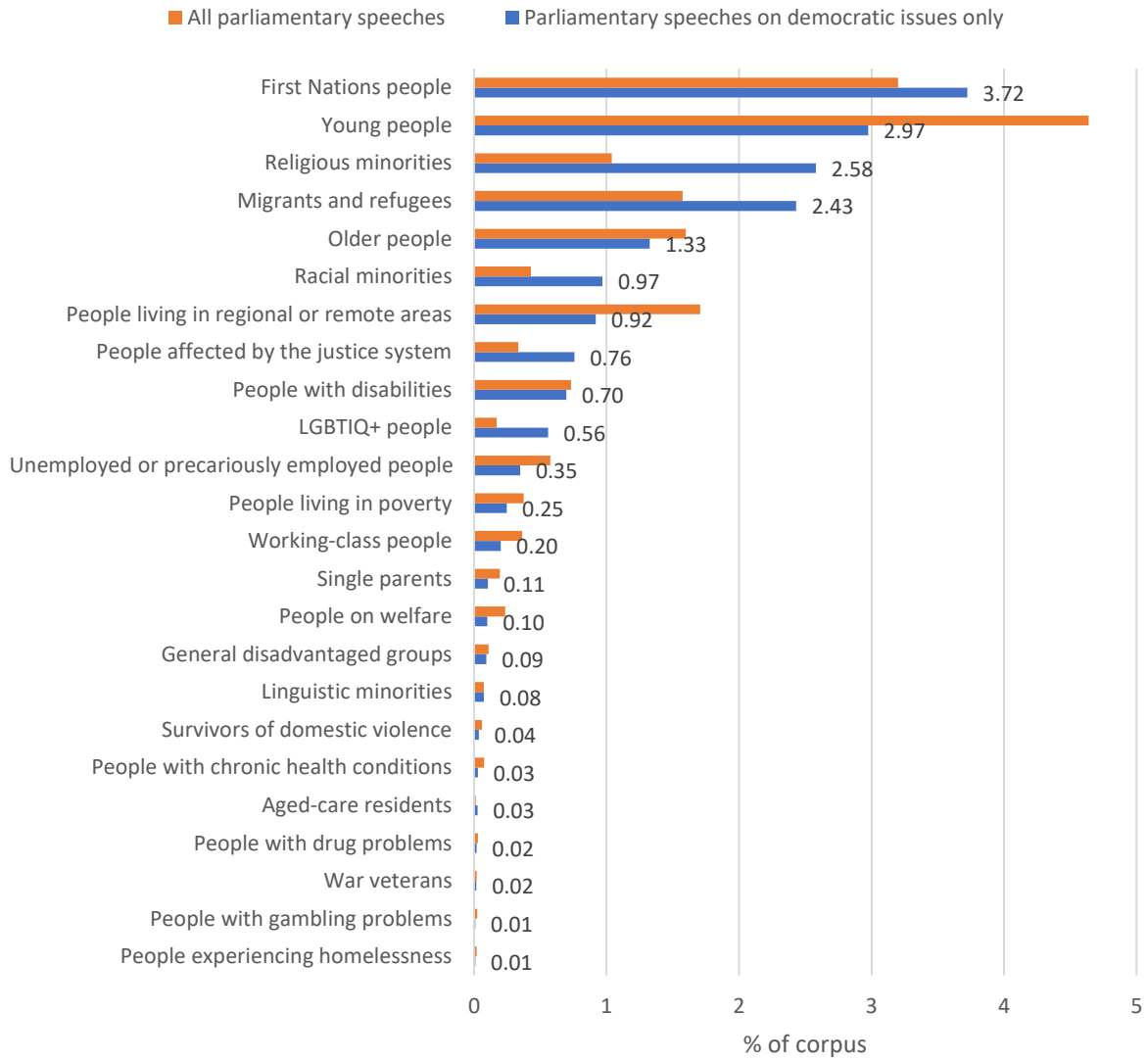


Note: *Issues mentioned in less than 100 texts were excluded from the cluster analysis.*

Parliamentary speeches and news media articles mostly mention the same groups in relation to democratic issues.

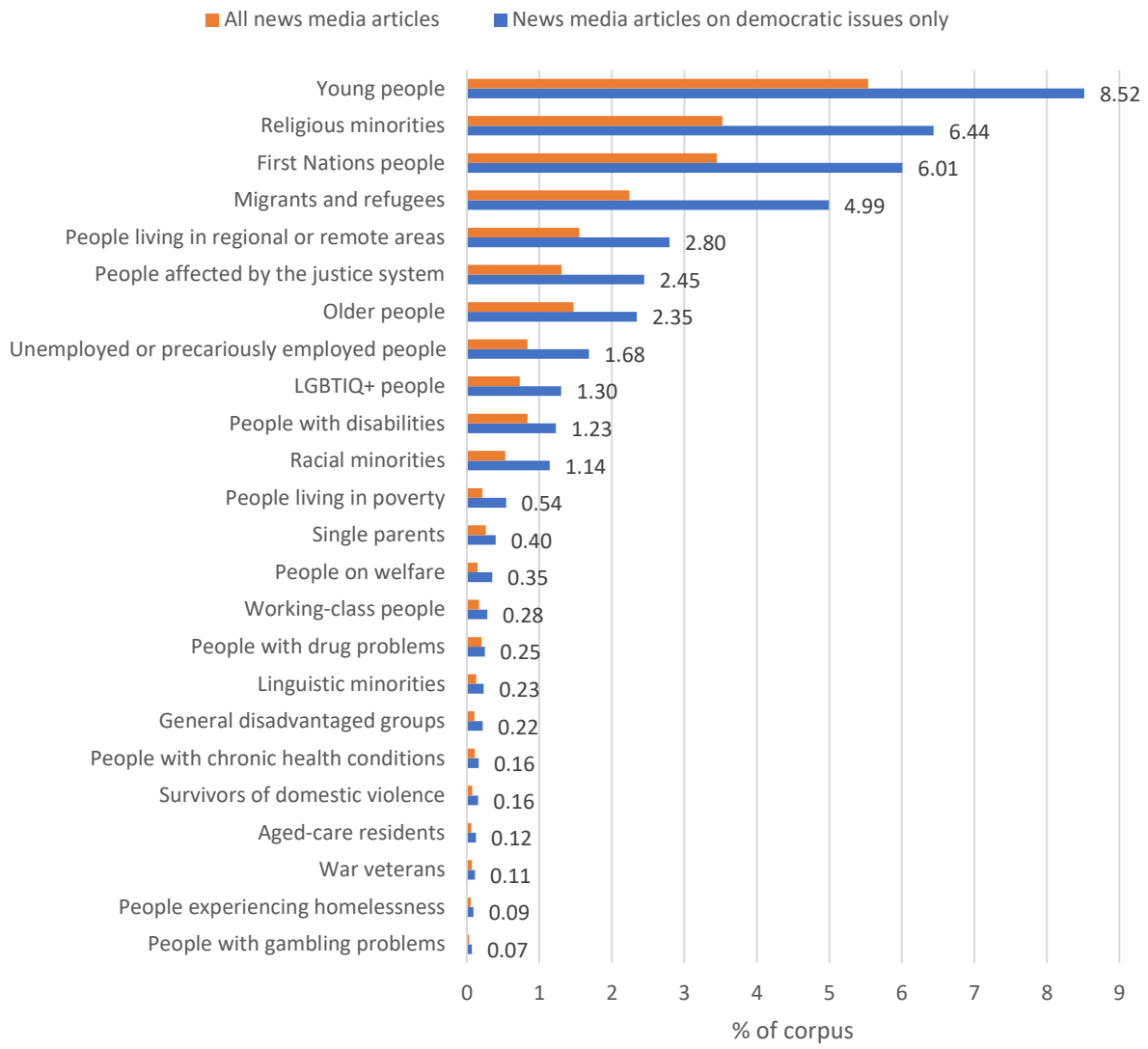
In parliamentary speeches on democratic issues, First Nations were most often mentioned, followed by young people, religious minorities, migrants and refugees, and older people (see Figure 8). In news media articles about democratic issues, the five most mentioned groups were similar, except for people living in regional and remote areas. In news media, however, the most mentioned group in relation to democratic issues were young people, followed by religious minorities, First Nations people, and migrants and refugees (see Figure 9).

Figure 8: Hansard – Group occurrences



Note: *For readability, only percentages of mentions in parliamentary speeches on democratic issues are shown.*

Figure 9: News media – Group Occurrences

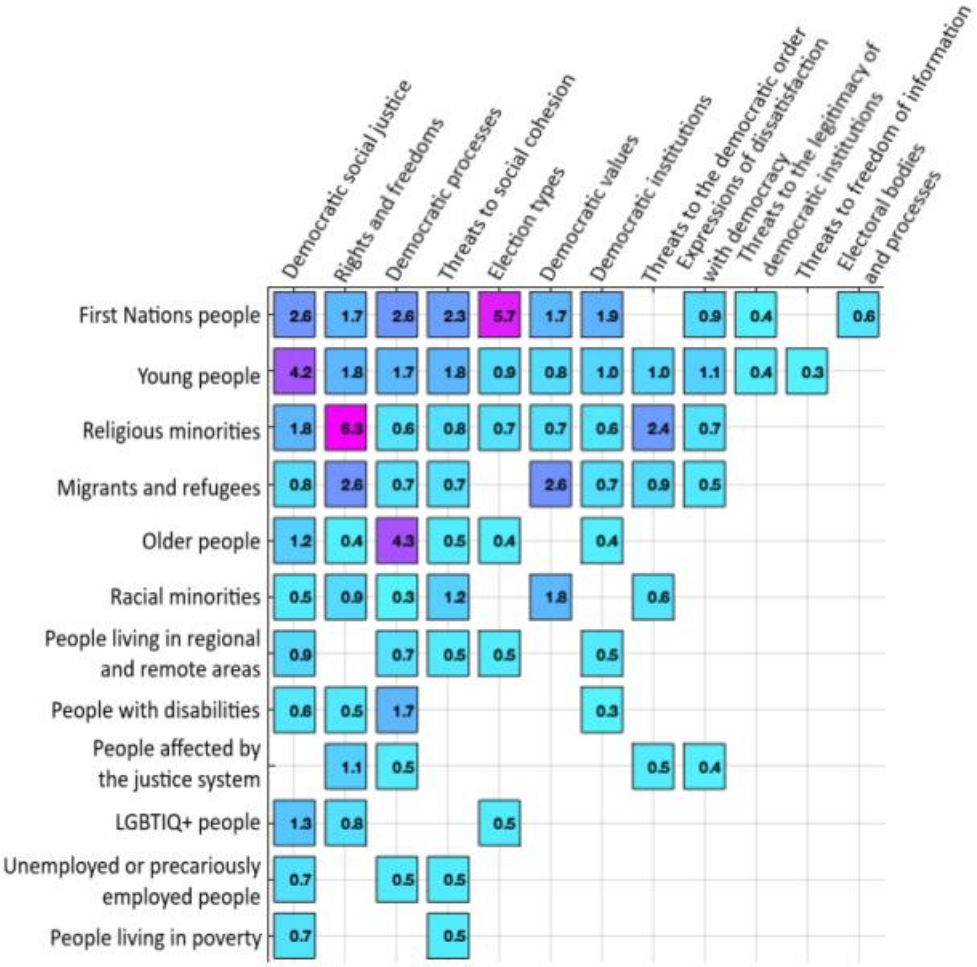


Note: *For readability, only percentages of mentions in parliamentary speeches on democratic issues are shown.*

Parliamentary speeches most commonly mention religious minorities and democratic rights and freedoms together.

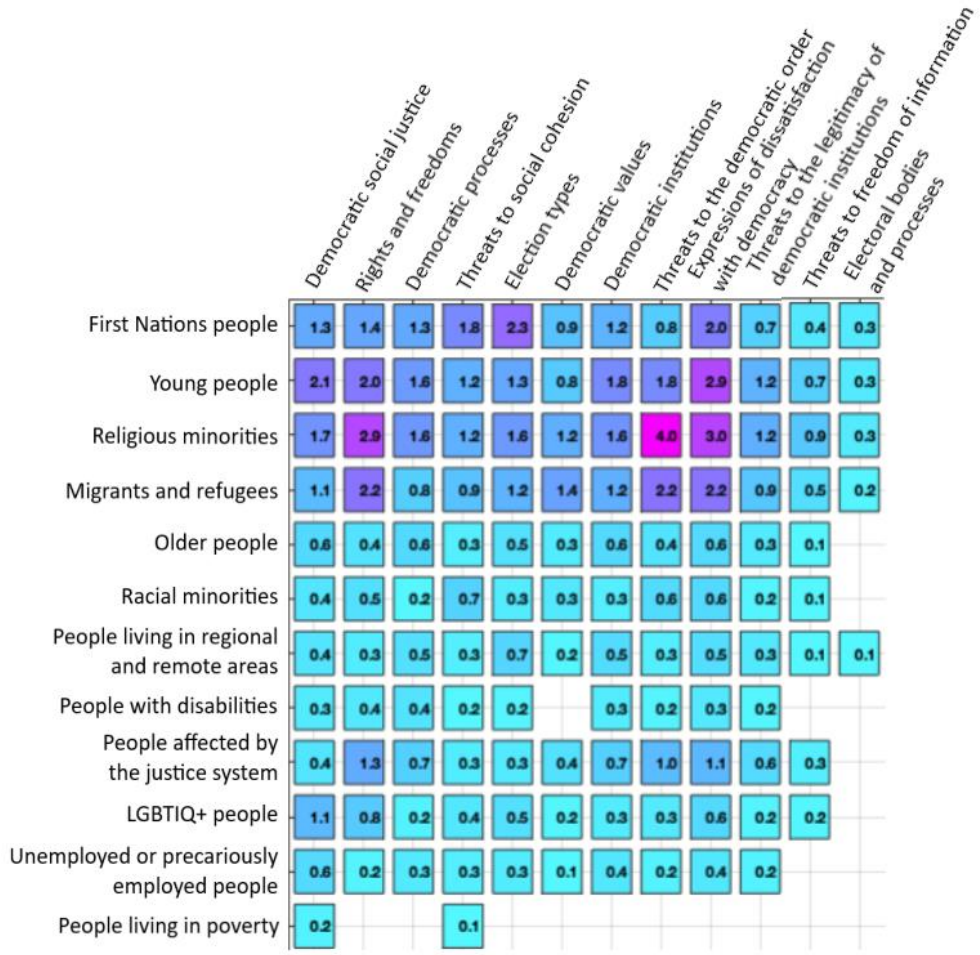
Figures 10 and 11 show the fraction of texts in the given corpus where the given group-issue pair exists. In parliamentary speeches, religious minorities and rights and freedoms are the most mentioned group-issue pair, followed by First Nations people and election types (see Figure 10). In news media articles, religious minorities and threats to the democratic order are the most mentioned group-issue pair, followed by religious minorities and expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy (see Figure 11).

Figure 10: Hansard – Group-issue heatmap



Note: *Warmer colours (positive values) indicate that a group-issue pair is mentioned more frequently. To ensure comparability, only Hansard data since 2014 is used to match the range of news media data.*

Figure 11: News media – Group-issue heatmap



Note: *Warmer colours (positive values) indicate that a group-issue pair is mentioned more frequently.*

Discussion

Our quantitative analysis of parliamentary speeches and news media articles showed how discourses around democracy in Australia evolved over time, how minority groups were discussed in relation to democratic issues, and which democratic issues were discussed together. We found that discussions of democratic issues in parliamentary speeches and news media articles followed federal election cycles, with discussions in the former peaking in years in the lead-up to federal elections and those in the latter peaking in federal election years. Although parliamentary speeches and news media articles focused on the same democratic issues, news media most discussed expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy, whereas politicians tended to talk most about democratic processes. In discourses about democracy, there was often a focus on young people, First Nations people, religious minorities, and refugees and migrants. In parliamentary speeches, religious minorities were often discussed in relation to rights and freedoms, while in news media, they were written about in relation to threats to the democratic order, and expressions of dissatisfaction with democracy.

This research involved a quantitative analysis of discourses around democracy in Australian parliamentary speeches and news media. Data collection and analysis were based on literal and regex matching strategies. Thus, our methodology had limitations. Although we assessed our matching strategies to identify search terms that were too broad or too narrow, we did not validate our list of search terms. Thus, our list of search terms could be expanded upon to ensure that topics are more comprehensively covered in the future. Similarly, future research could revisit, evaluate and expand upon our classification of democratic issues by applying it to other discursive arenas, for example social media or interviews and focus groups with members of the public. Furthermore, due to time and resource constraints, we opted for literal and regex matching strategies instead of more time- and resource-intensive, but more sophisticated machine-learning approaches.

The findings of this research underscore the significant role that parliamentary speeches and news media play in shaping democratic discourse in Australia. The nuanced interplay between political speeches and news media reporting has significant implications for policymaking and public engagement. Specifically, policymakers can use these insights to devise strategies that enhance public engagement with democratic processes. By understanding which discourses around democracy resonate with the public, governments can improve their communication strategies, making policy debates more accessible, inclusive and engaging. Understanding and reflecting on how politicians speak about democratic issues, and which minority groups they talk about in relation to these issues, are a necessary first step towards more effective public engagement and better communication.