

# Strengthening Democracy

**Understanding community discourse about democracy**



**Scanlon Foundation Research Institute**

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## Executive summary

Australia's democracy is highly regarded around the world. Considered one of the first "genuine liberal democracies," its institutions and practices are considered world leading when it comes to their "robustness, adaptability, functionality and resilience."<sup>i</sup> On international governance measures, like the World Bank's Governance Indicators, Australia continues to rank highly (above the 90th percentile) when it comes to voice and accountability, government effectiveness, the rule of law and control of corruption.

Yet a significant proportion of people in Australia are not satisfied with how Australia's democracy is functioning.<sup>ii</sup> The desire to protect Australia's democracy and to build democratic resilience has therefore grown as a policy and civil society objective.

This study investigates community discourses around democracy, with the aim of understanding how different segments of the community talk about democracy. By documenting such narratives and analysing them, it aims to reveal how different components of the community understand democracy (including its key elements or features), differences (or similarities) in understandings between them and levels of support for democracy among different cohorts. In its attempt to understand community narratives, it also documents individuals' concerns about how Australia's democracy is functioning and what individuals believe to be future threats. These insights, as well as those related to understandings of democracy, can be used to inform public discussions about Australia's democracy and to target initiatives that go towards strengthening democracy. Indeed, strengthening democratic resilience necessarily involves understanding and shaping narratives as well as policy and programmatic efforts.

### *Methodology and analysis*

This study employs a non-probability mixed methods approach to understanding community narratives, using an inductive approach to determine studied cohorts. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted nationally with a group of young people and older Australians in different income brackets and housing situations (renters and home owners) to document narratives and determine whether there were differences in understandings of or support for democracy between these groups. A further investigation examined the views of migrants, allowing comparison between recent arrivals and longer-term residents and between migrant Australians and the general population group. Finally, the understandings and views of individuals from Chinese and Indian backgrounds—Australia's two largest and growing migrant populations—were measured in a survey, with understandings explored more deeply through a small number of semi-structured qualitative interviews. In total, across the three investigations, 108 interviews and 308 surveys were conducted to inform this study.

Insights from the data were obtained using frequency and comparative analysis, and indicative narratives are presented in each section to demonstrate framings of narratives among different cohorts. The report concludes with some observations regarding substantive trends, use of language and how the results compare to selected recent studies on democracy.

## *Findings and observations*

The study found democracy is a familiar term in the community and most individuals can clearly articulate what it means to them. Understandings, however, vary in terms of detail and sophistication, often coinciding with level of education or English language proficiency, as might be expected.

Individuals focus on different features of democracy when articulating what it means. Some focus on democratic processes. Others focus on democratic values or rights or freedoms. Generally speaking, the migrant cohort in this study placed greater emphasis on rights or freedoms in their understandings of democracy, notably freedom of expression (with freedom of assembly and freedom of religion also mentioned). In contrast, the general population tended to emphasise features of democracy (democratic processes).

Understandings of democracy in the community across all cohorts tended to focus on democracy at a federal level, with very little mention of the state or local government. This may indicate less knowledge of or engagement with democratic processes at a state or local level (although in conversations about political participation, individuals are certainly engaging in democratic activities beyond the federal level), that such processes are less front of mind when speaking about democracy or that there is greater importance placed on democracy at a national/federal level.

Support for democracy is high among the three cohorts, with majorities in the general population group and among Indian and Chinese individuals saying that living in a democracy is important to them. Democracy was also spoken about favourably by the migrant cohort. In the general population group, support for democracy was commonly framed in the context of situations or systems of government in other countries.

However, this does not mean individuals do not have concerns about democracy in Australia. The migrant population had the most positive view of how democracy is working, yet all cohorts expressed dissatisfaction with Australia's democracy. Among survey participants (individuals from Chinese and Indian background), the Indian cohort showed greater dissatisfaction with Australia's democracy. This may be because of their familiarity with democratic processes or because of expectations brought with them to Australia about how democracy should function. Among the general population group, major concerns include the influence of corporations on government decision making and dissatisfaction with democratic processes, including 'not having a say', lack of representation, lack of differentiation between the major parties and political fragmentation. The predominant concerns in the general population about how democracy is working in Australia and potential threats to it in the future lie within Australia and the political system; they are not external to Australia.

The Chinese cohort in this study showed the greatest trust in the Australian government. These individuals also gave the most positive response (compared to the other groups) when asked about whether they felt represented by the government or political parties.

Representation means different things to different individuals. For some, it is a direct relationship between the vote they cast and the election result. For others, it is about the relevance of policy issues or having shared values with politicians/political parties. For others it

is about being ‘heard’, sharing personal commonalities with public officials (gender, cultural background, class etc.) or political outcomes.

Most individuals are consuming some form of traditional media, however there is significant distrust among each of the cohorts of such sources. The most common reason cited for the view that traditional media is untrustworthy was that it presents “biased” or sensationalised information. Young people showed a particular distrust of traditional media sources and are turning to other sources like free news services (like News.com), news apps (like Apple News) and YouTube social or political commentary for news or political information.

Social media is being consumed by the majority of interviewees, but somewhat critically. Many individuals engage in a fact checking process when it comes to the news or political information they are exposed to on different platforms, and distinguish between social media as entertainment/social connection and as a trustworthy source of information.

Finally, individuals are engaging in democratic processes beyond voting. Many people see following politics or being informed about political issues in Australia as a form of political participation. Some will choose low effort forms of engagement if the opportunity arises, such as signing a petition on an issue of relevance to them (often on animal rights or climate change). Others will proactively choose to advocate for a particular cause by attending a protest or rally or contacting a local member. There appears to be very little interest in formal relationships with political parties (i.e. membership).

# Introduction

This report analyses community discourses about democracy. Discourses about democracy can be observed in the media (print, radio and social) and occur at a national, state and local level. They are a feature of political debate and policy focus and also take place at a grass-roots level, in forums from local or community-based media to community consultation. Discourses about democracy also arise away from the public eye, in conversations, reflections and information shared among individuals. Both have the power to shape individuals' understanding of or views about democracy. By studying community discourses we can gain understanding of perceptions (or misperceptions) of the democratic system, processes and institutions and consider how language and the framing of discussion can strengthen (or undermine) democratic resilience.

Few studies have explored Australians' understanding of democracy. Of note, Pew Research Centre recently conducted a survey of 1,127 adults using the Life in Australia panel to explore what people mean when they talk about democracy and whether there are shared understandings.<sup>iii</sup> This comparative study (with the UK) found that people frequently associated "freedom and human rights, elections and procedures and having a voice in government"<sup>iv</sup> with democracy. Another earlier study of note explores the views of immigrants to Australia about democracy, finding that individuals from authoritarian regimes (having had little exposure to democratic systems or processes) participate to a similar extent to the rest of the population in "electoral activities."<sup>v</sup> Another study found high rates of political participation among Chinese-born migrants to Australia.<sup>vi</sup>

This study investigates community discourses around democracy using narrative analysis, with the aim of understanding how different communities talk about democracy. By documenting such narratives and analysing them, it aims to reveal how different segments of the community understand democracy (including its key elements or features) and any similarities or differences in understanding between them, as well as to observe levels of support for democracy among particular cohorts. In its attempt to understand these discourses, it documents individuals' concerns about how Australia's democracy is functioning and what individuals believe to be future threats to it.

Human beings create meaning by structuring their experiences into narratives. Community narratives about democracy reflect community understandings and community understandings, in turn, shape behaviours. Understanding Australian narratives about democracy is therefore crucial because they are intimately connected to how individuals, as actors within the democratic system, interact with its systems and processes. Community narratives inform understandings of democratic resilience because they reflect individuals' commitment to democratic institutions and practices and will ultimately shape their participation.

These insights, therefore, can be used to shape public discussions about Australia's democracy, alongside initiatives that go towards strengthening democracy. Indeed, strengthening democratic resilience necessarily involves understanding and shaping narratives as well as targeted policy and programmatic initiatives.

## Research objectives

This study aims to understand:

- How do different segments of the Australian population understand democracy. For them, what are its key elements or features?
- What are the differences and similarities in understandings of democracy between different communities or demographics?
- Do levels of support for democracy vary between different segments of the population?
- How are conversations about democracy framed?

## Methodology and analysis

This study employs a non-probability mixed methods approach to understanding community narratives, using an inductive approach to determine the studied cohorts. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to provide insights into communities' understanding of democratic norms, processes, systems and institutions; the language they use to describe democracy; how their understandings were framed; and underlying elements that were either emphasised or valued (or de-emphasised/de-valued). Additionally, a survey was used to capture views from a larger sample of culturally diverse individuals.

The first investigation (General population study) was conducted nationally, focusing on the views of young people (18-24 year-olds) and older Australians (50 years plus) in different income brackets (low, middle and high). A commercial recruiter was used to source interviewees, which used a screening questionnaire to recruit participants (Appendix 1). Effort was made to ensure that individuals recruited for the interviews had voted for a range of different parties, including the two major parties, independents and smaller conservative groups. Forty-two interviews were scheduled by the recruiter and conducted by the Senior Researcher (Trish Prentice) on Zoom. The discussion guide is attached (see Appendix 2).

The second study (Migrant population study) was conducted in association with the [Australian Cohesion Index](#) qualitative study. In total, 53 interviews were conducted, covering the states of Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. Interviewees came from a range of different cultural backgrounds. The largest cohort came from East Asia. Six interviews with individuals from Chinese cultural background were conducted in Mandarin with a bilingual interviewer. Individuals in the African regional group came from Central Africa, Southern Africa, Northern Africa, East Africa and West Africa. Middle Eastern interviewees came from Kurdish and Iraqi backgrounds; those from the Americas came from the United States of America, Colombia and Honduras. The European interviewees were predominantly from Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Italy and Armenia. Individuals came from different gender backgrounds and had been in Australia different lengths of time, from recent arrivals to long term residents.

Interviewees were asked:

1. What has been your impression of government in Australia [local, state and federal]?
2. Do you feel that politicians and governments here do the right thing by people from different cultural communities?

3. What is your impression, generally, of democracy in Australia and the political system?

The third study (Chinese and Indian communities study) was conducted in partnership with [Bastian Insights](#). Two surveys were administered in-language to their Golden Voice panel, a national online panel of Chinese and South Asian migrants (see Appendix 3). Approximately 150 respondents from each community completed the survey. To supplement the survey results, qualitative interviews were conducted with a small number of respondents to gain further insights and understanding of their views about democracy.

Further details of each cohort can be found in Appendix 4.

Insights from the data were obtained using frequency and comparative analysis, and indicative narratives are presented to illustrate framings of discourses among different cohorts.

## Results - General population study

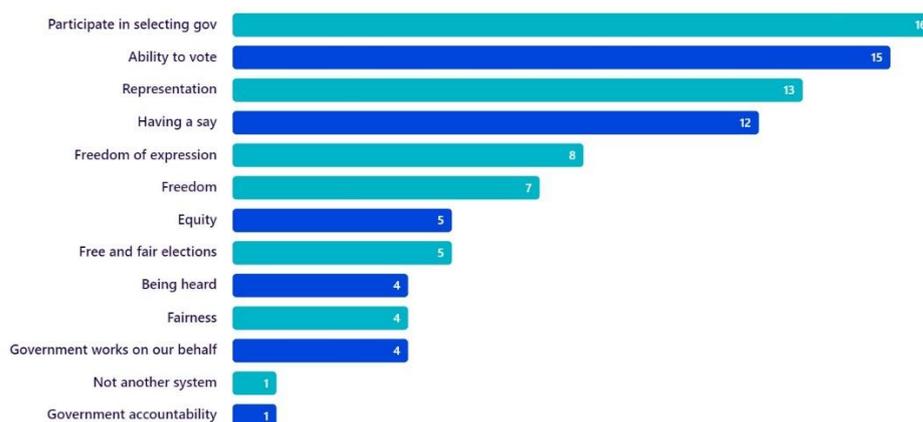
### Views about democracy in Australia

#### Understandings of democracy

Interviewees were asked to respond to the question, “What does the word democracy mean to you?” The majority of individuals were able to articulate their understanding of democracy without seeking clarification or explanation, suggesting they were familiar with the term and felt they knew what it meant.

The most common aspects of democracy described by interviewees were being able to participate in the process of selecting government; the ability to vote; representation, having a say (in the way the country works or about the things that influence my life) and freedom of expression.<sup>vii</sup>

**Figure 1: What does the word democracy mean to you (frequency of response)**



#### *Participating in the selection of government*

Participating in the process of selecting government was the most mentioned element of democracy:

It means where everybody in the country gets a say in who governs the country. I mean, we don't say what's going to happen, the government does, but we have a say in who's going to govern us or we hope that we're going to have a say in who governs us. (60 year old female, NSW)

Other common responses (in order of frequency, from most frequent) included the following.

#### *The ability to vote*

Probably just having the ability to vote and have a say. (23 year old female, QLD)

#### *Representative government*

Obviously the people are represented by representatives in government. They seek the input of the citizens; they understand the needs of the citizens; they're charged with that responsibility, so that they can better and best represent their interests. I think then they're supposed to balance the competing interests, because there will always be competing interests. And to try and do what's best for the country based on what people want, based on what the people want.... (52 year old male, VIC)

#### *Having a say*

Democracy to me means just the ability for the people to choose and decide, the fact that it's up to us. It's a system where we can make the decisions that are relevant to us. (22 year old male, WA)

#### *Freedom of expression*

Rights of citizens to make their opinions known and felt in society within reasonable limits. (58 year old male, SA)

There were no evident patterns of response when comparing understandings of democracy according to age, income, gender or geographical location (state).

The majority of individuals interviewed—83 percent—said that it was very important for them to live in a democracy. More than half referenced the situation or political system in another country to clarify why it was important to them.

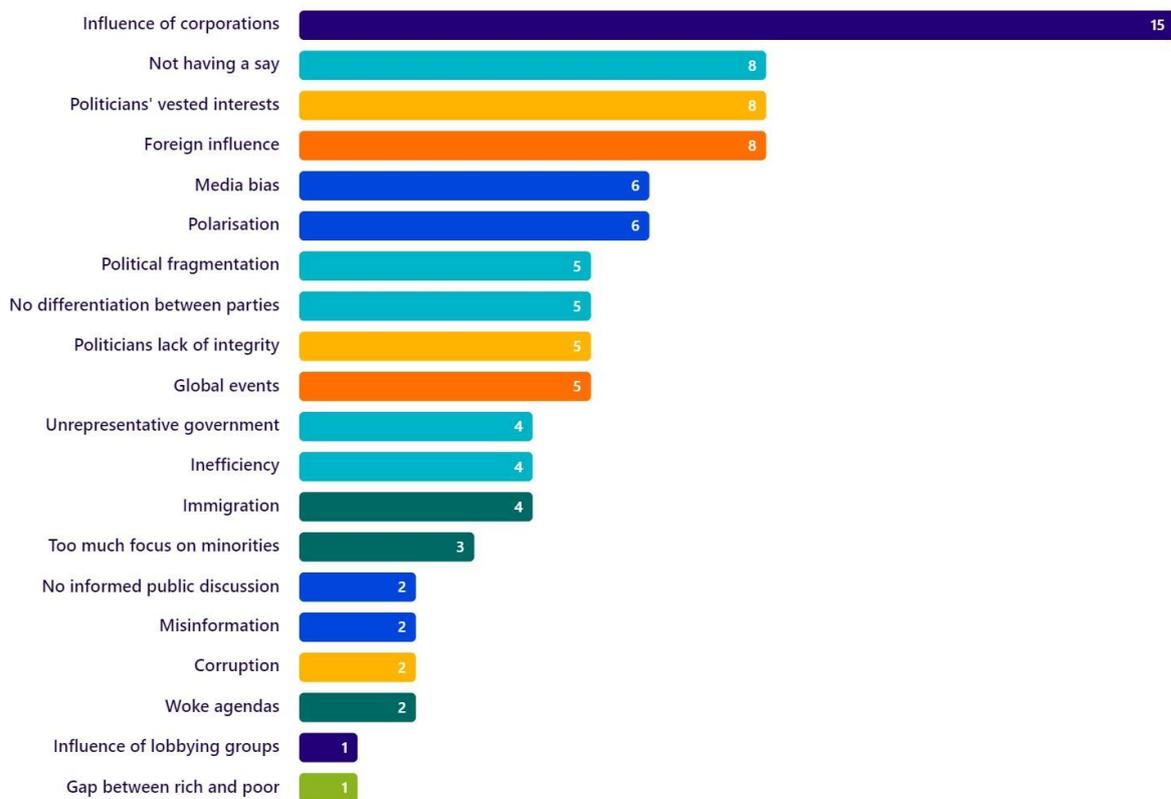
#### **Is democracy working? What are the future threats to Australia's democracy?**

Slightly less than half of those interviewed (42 percent) said they believed democracy was working in Australia. The remaining interviewees said democracy in Australia was working somewhat (37 percent) or not working at all (21 percent).

Those who said they believed democracy in Australia was working often cited systems of government in other countries as a point of comparison. Several interviewees cited The Voice referendum as an example of democratic processes in Australia.

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on what they felt were elements of Australia's democratic system that needed to change. As the question after this was, "what do you think are the biggest threats to Australia's democracy" and there was considerable overlap between the responses to each question, the results are presented together in this section.

**Figure 2: Elements of Australia’s democracy that need to change, threats to Australia’s democracy (frequency of response)**



These responses can be categorised into the following areas of concern or threat (and are colour coded accordingly): problems with the democratic system or processes (light blue); inadequate public discourse, including the media’s role in this (medium blue); private interests influencing democratic processes (yellow); concerns related to expectations of office holders (dark blue); foreign or global influences (orange); ‘the other’ (dark green) and inequality (light green).

*Problems with the democratic system or processes*

The most frequent concerns mentioned by interviewees about Australia’s democracy related to the democratic system or processes. These included apprehension about having no/insufficient say on matters of concern (public health decision making during the pandemic was cited by several individuals in this regard); the lack of differentiation between the major parties, which meant that it was difficult to make a meaningful choice when it came to choosing representative government; and fragmentation between levels of government, which impacted the effectiveness or efficiency of government functioning:

Years and years and years ago, like in the '80s, I remember you could tell the difference between Liberal and Labor. Now there's no difference anymore. If one gets kicked out, the other one just almost carries on the story from the last one, do you know what I mean? There's no difference. So I feel as if they just do whatever they want these days.... (51 year old male, TAS)

### *Inadequate public discourse*

The next most frequently mentioned concerns related to inadequate public information and discussion, including the media's role as a key source of information and public narrative. Here, individuals felt that unbalanced information, biased information (or misinformation in the public sphere (including on social media) was limiting Australians' ability to make informed decisions.<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, increased polarisation meant that it was difficult to have reasoned public or private discussions that challenged dominant narratives or even invited discussion about them:

No debate leads to no intelligent decision-making.... (53 year old male, NSW)

So increasing polarization. You've got at the moment an opposition that is absolutely just saying no to everything for the sake of saying no. It feels inconceivable that these political parties could ever align on anything. But I'm sure they would probably align on many things, but they just won't. If one says black, the other says white.... You pick a side, and then the other side is evil and terrible and whatever. (52 year old male, VIC)

A big one is definitely biased media sources. So News Corp is a good example of that. So the people who control the information that the general public has access to can have a big square of what people think. The information that's out there being biased or certain issues not being discussed, I think that's a big issue because again, it's those same groups of people who are in power are having the power to influence how people would vote. (24 year old non-binary person, VIC)

### *Private interests*

The next most frequently cited concerns related to private influences on democratic processes:

I believe, in the current parties that we have, I would say that neither are great at achieving what they say or what they say that they will do. I think they're very much influenced by outside factors. They're no longer for the people. It's more whoever has the most money. That's how I see our current, I guess, democracy: whoever the biggest bidder is in buying their power. (23 year old male, QLD)

Individuals spoke about the influence of large corporations and lobbying groups in particular:

It's become really clear and it almost doesn't matter what government you have, that there are very much corporate interests that drive decisions that make absolutely no sense to me. And I guess I'm revealing my opinions here, but it doesn't matter (51 year old female, NSW)

Oh, I think, look, there's many examples of politicians acting in their own interest or lobby groups exercising undue power over politicians or maybe just kind of competing interests, that kind of thing. But I think overall it does act in Australia's, in our best interests (21 year old male, ACT).

### *Expectations of office holders*

Another category of concern was related to the conduct of office holders, which individuals felt interfered with the functioning of Australia's democracy, either by impacting decision making or representation or causing people to distrust democracy as Australia's system of government:

I reckon the biggest threat to Australia's democracy is the political parties themselves. I think they are not, like I said before, they're not exactly doing as what they promise, and thus people believe in the system less and less. (23 year old male, QLD)

Look, I don't know if I'm doing the typical old thing, in the old days, but I have the impression that before, politicians were more honest. Whilst now, they just come out and can lie willfully, even in the face of it's obvious that it's a lie, and it doesn't seem to matter. I think that that one is really scary. (51 year old female, NSW)

Several individuals were also concerned about foreign influences on Australia's democracy:

Frankly, we're worth influencing. We have a lot of resources here. We have a country and a climate that is highly desirable. If it can be influenced in some way by another sovereign state, a group controlled outside of this country for their interests and not Australia's, then that is probably a risk, a genuine risk. And we've seen... I believe we've actually seen enough evidence to say it's occurred in other first world nations. (58 year old male, SA)

Others expressed concern about the influence of global events, like conflict, which were impacting or had the potential to impact Australia. For these individuals, their concerns lay in the potential for such events to impact Australia's way of life (taking away choices from individuals) or to cause division (which could curtail public discussion or other rights):

Terrorism, the China situation. Just other world politics, us getting involved in what's going on in the rest of the world. That can sort of... Even what's going on in Israel and Palestine at the moment, that could divide the country, (59 year old female, TAS)

### *The 'other'*

Some individuals were also concerned about the influence of immigration on democracy or about the priority given to the rights or concerns of 'minorities' at the expense of the broader Australian population. Here the reasoning was that those voices or concerns are not indicative of the majority, which democracy is supposed to represent. The Voice referendum was cited by several individuals as an example in this regard:

People often talk about immigrants coming in and changing the cultural landscape. And I guess the whole point of democracy is that a majority wins. And as more non-Australians come into this country with different views, and I guess theoretically you could impact what was once a white Australia. I guess you could impact that voice because I know my parents have a very different mindset to the average Aussie. That's the whole point of democracy, but that will change as the population changes and the majority changes, I guess. (24 year old male, NSW)

And unfortunately, it's usually the smaller minorities that are the ones who get the loudest, that seem to be coming across the loudest, or that's what you see outworked in a lot of the mainstream media. And I think it should be a bit more balanced in what's going on instead of just hearing one side of something all the time. (58 year old female, QLD)

## Trust in government

Forty-five percent of the interviewees felt the government tends to do the right thing by the Australian people. Twenty-two percent felt the government tends to do the right thing some of the time and thirty-three percent answered they didn't believe the government tends to do the right thing. Some of the reasons cited for this included inadequate representation of the people, decision making based upon their own or others' interests (not that of the electorate), short term thinking (including a focus only on the electoral cycle, not beyond that) and political fear, meaning politicians failed to make hard decisions.

## Representation

The interviewees were asked whether they felt represented by the government. Only one third of individuals said they did. Half of the interviewees said they felt unrepresented and another 17 percent said they felt somewhat represented.

It is worth noting that out of those who said they felt represented by the government, only one third had voted Labor in the last federal election. This suggests that representation is regarded by individuals as more than having the party you voted for in government.<sup>ix</sup> As an illustration of these responses, two interviewees (one a Liberal voter and one a Greens voter) explained why they felt represented:

I think there's enough sectors for each component of a person I suppose that speaks to certain values. There is at least someone, whether they're within different parties or whatnot, that hold the same value that I might hold for something that I think is important. And I guess there are already laws and things out there or initiatives within the government about things I'm passionate about. So I feel like they've heard me in that sense or they value something that's important that needs to change or those sorts of things. So yeah, I think so. (23 year old female, QLD)

I would probably say yes. I would feel confident that they would do something to help me get home. You know what I mean? I know my kids were in America when Covid broke out and they were notified, "You should get home." And I thought, well that's good. At least our country's looking after our people to help them, to encourage them, "Come home now, it is the time you need to come home." And I know not everybody did it, but it was good to see that they cared enough to say, "Come home. It's time to come home." (58 year old female, QLD)

## Representation according to income level and home ownership

There was no difference between age groups when it came to feelings of not being represented. However, the majority of those who felt unrepresented were from the low income bracket. Also, a majority were renters.

Segmenting responses according to income, more individuals in the high or medium income brackets (earning from \$80,000 upwards) said that they felt represented by the government. Reasons cited for this (beyond that the party or person they had voted for was in power) included that the government was “doing a good job” for people like me; that the government was making decisions that were in line with their views, values, needs or social class/socio-economic bracket; that individuals felt comfortable the government would act on their behalf in the case of an emergency or that they felt “safe” or “secure:”

It's unfortunate, but I definitely think it's because I am of a middle-class working background. I'm not a migrant. I was born and raised in Australia. I definitely feel like from my perspective, that I am represented, but I can very well identify other people that aren't (24 year old female, SA)

I suppose I do. I'm very lucky in that I'm in a good secure job, I've got a steady income, I'm secure, I'm safe. Unless I do something really naughty, I'm not going to lose my job. (58 year old female, QLD)

In the lower income bracket (earning less than \$80,000 per year), those who said they felt unrepresented gave reasons such as politicians not “doing the right thing,” not being able to identify with government representatives (because of differences in age, cultural background or values), the government not making decisions that were relevant to their life or which did not reflect their views or values, or because of a lack of transparency in decision making:

I mean, technically yes, because it's the way the representative system works, but you don't really see lots of young people in government. So in that sense, no. (24 year old female, QLD)

Well, I think there's a lot of people who enter parliament with great intentions. But at the end of the day, they're pulled into line to follow party rules. And it's only a few rebel parliamentarians who make noise, and they're usually not there very long for reasons... But at the end of the day, you wouldn't hear from them. And rarely would you get represented in something. (53 year old male, QLD)

Similar narratives were present among renters, among whom slightly more (compared to home owners) said they felt unrepresented by government:

I don't know. I just don't feel like he's [the prime minister] genuinely trying to look after 80%-ers. (52 year old female, QLD)

## What makes people feel more represented?

From the discussions on representation, the following factors appear to be important to individuals in contributing to their sense of feeling represented. Representation, for some individuals,<sup>x</sup> is a direct relationship between the vote they cast and the election result. For others, it is about the relevance of policy issues or about shared values. For others it is about being 'heard', sharing personal commonalities (like gender, age or social class) or political outcomes.

## Political participation

When asked whether they would consider themselves politically active, interviewees were split roughly down the middle. As individuals were not given any particular prompt as to what was meant by being politically active, the responses shed light on their understandings of democratic participation.<sup>xi</sup>

Many individuals distinguished between political awareness and political activity. Some interviewees felt that political awareness (reading information or having conversations about politics) was a form of political activity, while others believed that only direct action (such as handing out leaflets, writing a letter, going to protests etc) constituted participation:

No, I don't go to rallies and I don't go to politicians rallies, I don't go to activist rallies. I don't engage with that. I'd say I'm aware, but I'm not necessarily active, no. (53 year old male, NSW)

I'm engaged in the political landscape. I understand who the politicians are, what the policies are, what's happening with the government of the day. I'm not volunteering for parties, doing protests, that kind of stuff. I'm just aware of everything that's happening. So I follow affairs very closely. (21 year old male, NSW)

Of those who described themselves as not politically active, one of the most common reasons given for this was they felt participation would not lead to the outcome they were seeking or because they didn't know how to become involved:

No, but I would like to be, but you never know how to. I feel like... How would I explain... There's millions of us in Sydney and how does one person really change things or get involved? It's very hard.. (24 year old female, NSW)

I know this probably doesn't sound great, but I don't think there's anything I could do that would make any difference at all. I think it's a closed shop. I think that the decisions are made, as I said, about what they're going to do based on all where the money's coming from. I think anything I'm going to do, it's not going to move the needle on anything. I guess I used to probably think more about politics. I used to want to get more engaged or more involved. I used to want to care a lot, and I used to almost want to be passionate about it, and I guess I kind of was in a way but then at some point I realized that it's like bashing your head against a brick wall. What's the point really? (52 year old male, VIC)

Of those who considered themselves politically active (apart from voting), these individuals had (in order of frequency of response) signed a petition (usually about animal rights or climate change), taken efforts to be informed about politics, attended a protest or a political rally, had political conversations with others or written to a local member.

## Consumption of media and other sources of political information

Seventy-one percent of interviewees said that they consumed some form of traditional media regularly. Twenty-nine percent of individuals consumed traditional media infrequently and fourteen percent said that they did not consume any traditional media at all. Ninety-eight percent of interviewees said they consumed some form of social media.

**Figure 3: Types of media consumed (frequency of response)**



The most frequent form of traditional media consumed was television news—most commonly the ABC, followed by news on commercial channels (7, 9 or 10), SBS or Sky news. The next most frequent form of traditional media consumed was online or print newspapers or online political commentary (such as the Guardian or the Conversation), followed by online news services or applications, such as News.com, AppleNews or NineMSN. Only three individuals listened to radio news, usually in the car.<sup>xii</sup>

The most frequently used social media platform among the interviewees was Facebook, followed by Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, X/Twitter and Snapchat.<sup>xiii</sup>

### Trustworthiness of media

Interviewees were asked whether they considered traditional media to be trustworthy in terms of the accuracy or reliability of the information presented. One in two interviewees said that they did not believe traditional media was trustworthy. Thirty-seven percent of interviewees said it was somewhat trustworthy, qualifying their response. The most common reason cited for the view that traditional media is untrustworthy was that it presents “biased” or sensationalised information:

I'd be reading a newspaper and I just found they were a bit biased I thought. And yeah, I'd read the newspaper and then I sort of backed off and I'd only read a Sunday newspaper and I was just finding more and more, not disillusioned, but I just thought they were just talking crap. You'd be reading the stories, you'd be thinking, oh really? I just didn't think they had all the facts sometimes... so I don't know, stopped. I just stopped reading the papers completely and just watched the news, as I said, social media and if I see a

particular story on social media, then I'll sort of follow it and read up more about it. (59 year old female, TAS)

[The] newspaper, I just have never read. Even when I was a kid, I used to always watch news on the TV. We would watch it every night, and I was very interested in it, but ultimately, all of them were being funded by somebody, and typically you could tell who was helping fund them, because they would be quite biased. I think probably the ABC was the main one, but even then... I think it's unavoidable when money is involved, there is a bias, definitely. Same with online. It's even my own bias. I'm getting fed what I already think I know. So I don't feel there is one sort of trustworthy source. (23 year old female, QLD)

Young people showed distrust of traditional media sources, considering them to be “untrustworthy,” “biased,” “swayed,” “affiliated with particular political leanings,” “quick to push certain views,” “not producing their own thoughts,” and driven by the interests of their corporate owners. Those who consumed traditional media had a preference for ABC news, either on TV or online (because of the lack of a paywall), followed by SBS or The Guardian.

**Figure 4: Views on the trustworthiness of social media (frequency of response)**



Forty-two percent of interviewees said they believed social media to be untrustworthy as a source of information (in terms of its accuracy and reliability). Twenty-nine percent of individuals said they believed it to be somewhat trustworthy. Two individuals considered it to be more trustworthy than traditional media:

I guess, it's the same sense that I would trust those platforms more, only because the people who are on them are closer to the people, I guess, I follow and I listen to. [They] are more close to my age and would share my view. And they're independent creators. There's no one paying them to make their content, they're just making it. They're making it to, I guess, get views, but they're making it to get their point across. They're not being paid by an outside source. And of course, you can't trust every single one of them. You have to have, like with newspapers or news broadcasters, you have to have a wide source of information. You can't just trust the one, sole person. That's what I believe. You can't trust a single thing. (23 year old male, QLD)

Those who said they believed social media to be somewhat trustworthy distinguished between different content, explaining they believed posts from friends and family members about their personal lives to be trustworthy; likewise posts from journalists they trusted or other “reputable” sources, or reports about events that were happening in real time (like updates on natural disasters). A number of young people distinguished between social media as an entertainment tool and as a factual source of information.

I suppose I use social media as more of a distraction or just for fun, for lighthearted content. And the news is often not that. So unless it's something that has really piqued my interest or that I really care about, I will often just ignore it or scroll past, because it's not that fun. (24 year old female, QLD)

I don't really trust social media as my key information source. (21 year old female, ACT)

Many interviewees (particularly young people) deliberately engage in a fact checking process when they consume political or news information on social media, looking to other sources to confirm (or deny) what they have read, showing some critical reflection on what they are reading:

If it is something that's actually happening, I think it typically is pretty accurate. If it is not just a completely fake situation, I think it is typically pretty accurate. But I'd usually have to research to check if it's not just something that's been blown out of proportion entirely. (23 year old female, Qld)

If I see a particular story on social media, then I'll sort of follow it and read up more about it. I call it going down the rabbit hole. A lot of the time I'll be reading a story and then you sort of read more into it and then you read more... I sort of try to find out the facts for myself, not really trust just one source. Like what's going on in Israel. I've got friends and they'll be posting things up and it's like, oh God, you're an idiot. Why? Because they've obviously been reading one source of information and they just think, oh, that must be true.... And that's what I think I like to do is read up more and find out what exactly is going on and make up my own mind. (59 year old female, TAS).

### **The rise of new voices**

Along with traditional media and what we'd typically consider social media (platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok), interviewees are also consuming news and political information from other sources.

#### *YouTube and Podcasts*

Many interviewees were regularly consuming news and political information on YouTube.<sup>xiv</sup> Several young people mentioned influencers they follow whom they consider to be more trustworthy, relevant and authoritative than traditional news sources or other forms of social media content:

Personally, I like a lot of younger sources. Sometimes I'll jump on YouTube, and there's this guy Friendly Jordies. I don't know what his actual name is, but I like the younger sources because they go through and they'll actually call out some of the biggest sources for leaning in certain directions and trying to push a narrative. I just find a lot of the younger, I guess you could call it journalism, it's a new form but they seem to be trying to look at everything as a whole and actually call out certain things that are being hidden. So that's where I prefer to look. (22 year old male, NSW)

Facebook [is] complete trash and not even remotely useful or accurate. On TikTok, if you are familiar with the journalist and you've seen them on other platforms, it's quite a good way to consume their content.... YouTube I actually find to be the best. It's where I've found what seem to be the most reliable independent journalists that either represent my beliefs or are on the ground in a certain area or a situation... They're not necessarily blocked by wider groups or bodies that may impact the information they are providing. (23 year old male, VIC)

Along with Australian commentators such as Friendly Jordies and The Party Room (ABC), interviewees were regularly consuming overseas content produced by individuals such as Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, Ben Shapiro, Bill Maher, Dave Rubin, Dr Gad Saad and Andrew Callaghan (Channel 5), who produce social or political commentary. For some interviewees, these authorities were considered more trustworthy than traditional media:

I think it also shows with that size and how big they've become, but I think they're very trustworthy... So I do watch a lot of American stuff as well. There's a guy in America, he's almost my ideal of what journalism would be. Instead of, say for example, with all the protests in America over the last few years, instead of just standing on the side, doing a quick report and then pushing a certain narrative, he's actually going in and interviewing multiple people, getting proper opinions from multiple people, trying to tell the story properly, which is the way that I personally think news should be. Getting the real story instead of just getting the script that's written from a higher up. (22 year old male, NSW)

## Results - Migrant population study

### Views about democracy in Australia

#### **Understandings of democracy**

Interviewees were asked to respond to the question, “What does the word democracy mean to you?” Most individuals were able to articulate their understanding of the term. Only three individuals were not able to explain what democracy means.

Like the general population study, individuals expressed their understanding of democracy with different degrees of detail and confidence. As might be expected, those who had less fluent English gave less detailed or confident responses.

The most common meaning of democracy articulated by interviewees was freedom of expression, including the ability to disagree with or criticise the government without fear of negative consequences:

Expressing your thoughts and [to] criticize something when you don't agree with something without being punished for it.... A few days ago I watched a video of the previous prime minister. I guess they were doing an interview with some journalist in front of someone's house, and the guy came out of his house and said you are on my personal property. I guess they were walking on the grass or something and just asked him to get off the thing. When you can do that with a prime minister... I guess that is democracy for

me, comparing to undemocratic countries where you will be punished for just expressing your opinion. (Male from Afghanistan, 2 years in Australia)

Well, to me, democracy is having the ability to speak up whenever in a safe environment. And having been heard, because that's so important. You can speak is one thing, but listening to your perspectives, your point of views is so important. And that's democracy... (Female from Sri Lanka, 4 years in Australia)

Other responses (in order of frequency) included being able to vote, being able to influence decisions that impact my life, being heard, representation, having a mechanism to hold the government to account, participating in the process of selecting government, human rights, equality, and the right to protest or freedom of religion.

So democracy for me is you take into account what people say, you listen. It doesn't matter. You're not gonna make everybody happy 'cause it's impossible. But at least you take that time to listen to what others are saying about your projects or your ideas or your proposals or whatever. (Female from Colombia, 9 years in Australia)

Democracy is really good... they give people the right to talk... To vote. So things are done in peace and everything like that. I think it is really amazing. (Female from Burundi, 16 years in Australia)

No trends were evident in terms of understandings of democracy according to an individuals' length of time in Australia. In the highest response category (freedom of expression), individuals who were newer arrivals, more established migrants or longer-term residents all explained democracy in terms of freedom of expression.

Many individuals referenced their country of origin as a negative counterpoint when it came to explaining what democracy meant. This tendency was equally evident among longer-term residents as it was amongst newer arrivals.

### **Is democracy working in Australia?**

Most of the interviewees (68 percent) had a positive impression of democracy in Australia or said they believed it was working. Those who were critical of Australia's democracy (16 percent) were either more established migrants (6-11 years in Australia) or longer-term residents (12 years plus).<sup>xv</sup>

### **Trust in government**

Approximately half of the interviewees (52 percent) expressed a positive impression of the government in Australia. A similar number of individuals (50 percent) said they believed the government tends to do the right thing by people from different cultural communities. One third of interviewees (31 percent) had a negative impression of government; while 25 percent believed the government does not tend to do the right thing by people from different cultural communities.

The interviewees were asked to elaborate on their views about government. The most common explanation of positive sentiment towards the government concerned the provision of social security or financial support. Other explanations included the provision of public services, education or health care; the absence of corruption (compared to other countries) and the promotion of multiculturalism.

The most common concerns about the way democracy or the government was functioning in Australia were (from highest frequency): it not looking after the needs of migrants (including length or difficulty of visa/citizenship processing) or the way government or democratic processes were working, (such as inefficiency, fragmentation between different portfolios or levels of government, being unrepresentative or being out of touch). Other concerns centered around expectations of office holders and the influence of private or corporate interests on government decision making:

#### *Not looking after the needs of migrants*

I think they [the government] show their care [to the Indigenous communities]. I feel like they at least trying to support [them]. But for the migrant -- not sure -- It feels like they sometimes open the window, but they also often close the windows to these people, so it often doesn't feel like they actually care about people. (Female from Japan, 7 years in Australia)

#### *Problems with democratic processes or systems*

It's almost half the population is multicultural -- half the Australian population. 47% they have at least just one parent born overseas.... So they need, at least, to have someone from different backgrounds in the council or in the government or in the parliament just to give this insight, this opinion about multicultural people. Some sort of representation so when they want to make a decision, they need to put to mind everyone. We are one nation, right, and everyone needs to be considered. (Female from Iraq, 17 years in Australia)

#### *Expectations of office holders*

No, I don't feel like politicians and government necessarily does the right thing by the people. I mean, they're people, they're humans self-interested. They seem self interested, whether they're voting in the interest of an influence or their own personal bias clouds the reality of the local community. (Male from USA, 16 years in Australia)

#### *The influence of private or corporate interests*

There are lots of things that, uh, as a politician, you can say to the public, or sometimes you have to cover it and say it in another way but do something else, because there are a lot of factors that force you to do something. So you're not alone in making decisions. You have to consider a lot of other things like donors and those who contribute before the election for your party. (Male from Afghanistan, 2 years in Australia)

## Results - Chinese and Indian communities study

### Views about democracy in Australia

#### Understandings of democracy

A number of respondents were interviewed in language to ascertain their understandings of democracy. Their explanations (translated) are provided below:

I think it (democracy) was a very important factor for me. I wanted to come here to study and live a good life, make money for me and my family but at the same time not be told or controlled by extreme ways of running things. (Male, Indian background, permanent resident)

Living in a democracy was a priority for sure. I'm not a citizen and can't vote yet and I know that, but I can still express myself and take some action, especially if it concerns me. (Female, Indian background, temporary resident)

When I came to Australia, and became a citizen, I knew that I could vote now. That I can now vote in elections. (Male, Chinese background, citizen)

In Australia, I can say what I want and talk among my friends without worry. I can have an opinion and I don't get in trouble. (Male, Chinese background, citizen)

Australia is the first place where I am experiencing this. People voting and talking freely is something new that I experienced here when I first migrated. (Female, Chinese background, permanent resident)

Democracy to me is still a new system. But to me, it means that I have the ability to speak up and even choose my own leader through a vote. (Male, Chinese background, citizen)

#### Survey results

- How important is it for you to live in a democracy?

88% of Chinese respondents and 82% of Indian respondents gave a positive scale response between 7 and 10 (where 10 is absolutely important).

- Would you say the democratic system in Australia is working?

38% of Chinese respondents and 18% of Indian respondents said it works fine as it is. 46% of Chinese respondents and 46% of Indian respondents said it needs minor change. 15% of Chinese respondents and 29% of Indian respondents said it needs major change.

- How important is it for you that everyone in Australia can freely express their opinion on political or social topics?

96% of Chinese respondents and 63% of Indian respondents said it was very important or somewhat important; 4% of Chinese respondents and 28% of Indian respondents said it was somewhat unimportant or very unimportant.

- Biggest threat/s to Australia's democracy

For Chinese respondents, the biggest perceived threats to Australia's democracy were (in order of frequency) economic inequality, the rise of misinformation and fake news, the influence of trade unions, the influence of radical groups or election interference from foreign powers.

For Indian respondents, the biggest perceived threats were economic inequality, the influence of 'big' business, corruption, the rise of misinformation and fake news, the influence of radical groups or the quality of Australian political parties.

## Trust in government

### Trust

- In general, does the government tend to do the right thing by the Australian people?

83% of Chinese respondents and 53% of Indian respondents said the government tends to do the right thing by the Australian people almost all or most of the time. 17% of Chinese respondents and 47% of Indian respondents said the government tends to do the right thing only some of the time or almost never.

## Representation

- How well do any of the political parties represent your views?

68% of Chinese respondents and 42% of Indian respondents felt political parties represent their views very well or reasonably well. 32% of Chinese respondents and 58% of Indian respondents felt political parties represent their views not very well or not at all.

## Consumption of media and other sources of political information

76% of Chinese respondents and 42% Indian respondents said they had a good deal of trust or some trust in the media to report news fully, accurately and fairly. 24% of Chinese respondents and 58% of Indian respondents said they had not much trust in the media or none at all.

## Discussion and observations

### *Understandings of democracy*

Democracy is a familiar term in the community. There was no need to prompt or provide clarification about the term. This was the case among the young people and older Australians, migrant cohort (recent arrivals and longer term residents) and Chinese and Indian individuals who participated in this study. Differences in understanding were apparent (as might be expected) according to levels of education and English proficiency but these differences did not indicate a lack of understanding (just a less detailed or sophisticated articulation).

There was considerable overlap in understandings of democracy between the cohorts but different emphases. The general population cohort tended to focus more on democratic processes, including participation, voting and representation. The migrant sample, on the other hand, placed greater emphasis on rights/freedoms in their understandings of democracy, especially freedom of expression (with freedom of assembly and freedom of religion also mentioned). Rights narratives were present in the general population study but less frequently. Likewise, key features of democracy such as the ability to vote, representation, participation and governmental accountability were also mentioned in the migrant population study, but not as frequently as rights/freedoms narratives.

Voting and freedom of expression were the most common understandings of democracy among the Indian and Chinese interviewees, transversing both the democratic processes and rights discourses of the other cohorts. There was no mention of separation of powers or the independence of the judiciary in the responses of any cohort.

The majority of participants across the three studies indicated that living in a democracy was important to them, often in comparison to the situation or system of government in other countries. It is evident that experiences in 'home' countries or countries of previous residence sit heavily on migrants to Australia and frame their understanding of democracy here and also have some influence on the broader community's perception of democracy. However, perceptions of democracy only tended to be positive when framed against other possibilities or experiences, not when examining how democracy was functioning within Australia.

### *Is democracy working?*

The migrant population had the most positive view of how democracy is working in Australia, compared to other cohorts, although those who had been residing in Australia longer had a more critical view. Chinese and Indian respondents were less positive about how democracy was working in Australia, with most saying it needed at least minor change. The Indian cohort were the least positive about Australia's democracy, possibly because of their familiarity with democratic processes or the expectations about democracy they had brought with them to Australia.

### *Concerns and threats<sup>xvi</sup>*

There were some differences, but also overlap, about the concerns individuals had about how democracy was working in Australia and what might threaten its functioning in the future. All of

the dominant concerns cited by individuals (now and in the future) were internal to Australia and the political system. External threats (like conflict or foreign influence) were mentioned but ranked lower in the frequency of responses for each group. For both the general population and migrant cohorts, problems with democratic processes were a significant area of concern. This included fragmentation between levels of government, lack of differentiation between the major parties, lack of representation and having insufficient say on matters of concern. Indian respondents also expressed concern about the quality of Australian political parties. Other key areas of concern included private interests influencing government decision making and expectations of office holders (including their conduct) that were not being met.

Another significant concern for all groups was misinformation and fake news, polarisation in political and public debate and the failings of the media to provide balanced and impartial information to inform discussion in the public sphere. As might be expected, the migrant sample had concerns about how its needs and interests were being responded to, with visa processing and citizenship requirements being key areas of dissatisfaction.

### *Trust in government*

Overall, the Chinese cohort showed the greatest trust in the government, with the majority of respondents stating that the government tends to do the right thing by the Australian people. For the other cohorts, respondents were generally split down the middle on this question.<sup>xvii</sup>

### *Representation*

Again, the Chinese sample gave the most positive response when asked about whether they felt represented by the government/political parties. The general population cohort and Indian respondents felt much less represented.

In the general population study, the notion of representation was explored in further detail. For many individuals, representation is not simply the outcome of the voting process. It often involves seeing commonalities like such as shared values or similar characteristics (gender, age, socio-economic status) in government representatives. This may explain the greater feeling of being unrepresented within the lower income bracket and among renters.

### *Consumption of and trust in the media*

The Chinese cohort expressed the greatest trust in the media as a vehicle for full, fair and accurate reporting of news or political information. Other groups (the Indian and general population cohort)<sup>xviii</sup> expressed significant distrust.<sup>xix</sup> For the general population group, this also extended to social media. In addition to traditional news media and social media platforms, many individuals are consuming news and political information on YouTube and via Podcasts.

## Observations

There are several observations that emerged from the three studies.

First, there is greater awareness of democracy as it applies at the federal level. Unless prompted, most individuals confined their views (and concerns) about democracy, trust in government and representation to the federal level. This may suggest greater knowledge of or

familiarity with governance or democratic process at the federal level or the assumption that democracy is more important or relevant at that level. Discussion of the state government was most notably in the context of the pandemic. The absence of reference to local government in the context of democracy is notable.

Second, dominant narratives about democracy are about processes but also about values. Shared values (or the lack of them) came up in discussions about representation, trust in government and concerns about or future threats to democracy. Individuals, particularly in the general population, are examining the values of individual politicians and political parties, as well as those underpinning democratic decision making. Values like looking after the vulnerable, concern for future generations and concern for the planet are important to individuals, as are specific democratic values like fairness, equality and freedom.

Third, there is significant distrust of the media as a vehicle for reliable and trustworthy information and it is worth reflecting on what the ramifications of this might be for democracy in Australia, considering the links between the media and public discourse, informed debate and freedom of expression. In its place alternative spheres of content and discussion are rising up, many of which sit outside of Australia's control. Social media is being consumed by the majority of interviewees, but it may not be having the influence (at least consciously) that many commentators suppose. Many interviewees noted that social media can be untrustworthy as an information source and that fact checking is required when it comes to news or political information, but individuals seem to be distinguishing between its entertainment value, its value as a tool for social connection and its utility as a provider of information. For the migrant, Indian and Chinese communities, freedom of expression is very important and considered a core feature of democracy.

Forth, individuals are engaging in democratic processes beyond voting. Many people see following politics or being informed about political issues in Australia as a form of political participation. Some individuals will choose low effort forms of engagement if the opportunity arises, such as signing a petition on an issue of relevance to them (often on climate change or animal rights). Others will proactively choose to advocate for a particular cause by attending a protest or rally or contacting a local member. There appears to be very little interest in aligning with a particular political party by pursuing membership. Moreover, there appears to be a lack of clarity around what political participation involves beyond voting. Some individuals feel they do not know how to become more involved in democratic processes. Others feel informed, but that their efforts may not lead to meaningful contribution.<sup>xx</sup> Again, it is worth noting here the lack of emphasis on state or local democratic processes in community narratives about democracy.

Finally, consistent with other studies, there appears to be dissatisfaction with governance in Australia and individuals have significant concerns about the future of democracy. At one level this is a positive finding. It shows that Australia's democracy is working. Individuals feel confident to voice their concerns without fear of recrimination or reprisal. However, many individuals feel that democracy involves listening and responding to their needs and concerns. Moreover, narratives shape behaviour, which means there may be a danger that concerns and distrust may lead to disengagement with democratic processes or erosion of support for democracy over time.

A final note on methodology. Qualitative research is by its very nature unrepresentative. Its value, however, is in capturing the nuances and the narratives that cannot be expressed through large-scale survey research or data analysis alone. This report aims to provide details of attitudes and opinions within particular cohorts about democracy, government and the media.

It is deliberately narrative heavy; data is presented in great detail to illustrate its analysis. Alongside other studies on democracy, government and trust, this research provides examples of the language and framing of individuals' views about democracy in Australia and some of their key concerns. Its results can be viewed in the context of larger-scale Australian quantitative studies that indicate declines in satisfaction with democracy, trust in government and the media.

## Results in the context of other studies

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion survey found trust in government has declined. Belief that 'the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people' all or most of the time declined from 56 percent in 2020 to 36 percent in 2023, while the proportion who believe the system of government in Australia works fine declined from 21 percent to 12 percent. In 2023, 30 percent of people believe that government leaders abuse their power most or all of the time, while 83 percent believe powers are abused at least some of the time.<sup>xxi</sup>

Pew Research's 2021 study on 'Freedom, Elections Voice...'<sup>xxii</sup> asked individuals to respond to the open-ended question, "In a few words, what does democracy mean to you? What comes to mind when you think about democracy?" In this study, 38 percent of Australian respondents explained democracy in terms of freedom or human rights (with freedom of expression being the most frequent response). About one third of individuals referenced features of democracy, including being able to choose the government, voting and free and fair elections. Another frequent response was having the power to influence decision making (17 percent). Overall, the understandings of democracy presented by the Pew study and this research fell into similar categories, although the emphases were slightly different between the two pieces of research.

Pew research's 2022 online survey on social media and democracy found a slightly more positive view of democracy in Australia when respondents were asked "How satisfied are you with the way democracy is working in Australia?" (4 point scale response),<sup>xxiii</sup> although the different methodologies of each study should be taken into account here.

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# Appendix 1



## Survey/Screening Document

Survey: 1410-23 Job Survey

<b>Job Information</b>	Job 1410-23 – Democracy		
<b>Project Manager</b>	Penny Yates		
<b>Client</b>	Scanlon Foundation Research Institute		
<b>Client Contact</b>	Trish Prentice	<b>Incentive</b>	EFT from Farron – 70-45 mins
<b>Client Email</b>	tprentice@scanlonfoundation.org.au		

### Question 1

#### Type – Staff Text

Staff/Internal use only

### Question 2

#### Type – Thumbs Up Down

All calls are recorded for training and quality assurance. Are you comfortable with this?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Thumbs Up	Go to next question	Must code
Thumbs Down	Go to next question	Close

### Question 3

#### Type – Numbers

Please specify your best contact number

### Question 4

#### Type – Multi-Select

Do you or anyone in your immediate family or household work or have studied in any of the following industries or occupations?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Marketing/Market Research/Advertising	End Survey	Close
Public Relations/Media	End Survey	Close
Politics	End Survey	Close
Journalism/Broadcasting	End Survey	Close
Energy/Electricity Industry	End Survey	Close
None of the above	Go to next question	Must Code

### Question 5



### Type – Thumbs Up Down

This session will be conducted via an online platform, Zoom. Can you please confirm you have either a desktop/laptop device with a functioning camera and microphone, with reliable internet access and comfortable meeting in a video conferencing environment? If there are technical issues and the video fails to work, the interview will not go ahead. Can you confirm this is okay with you?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Thumbs Up	Go to next question	Must code
Thumbs Down	End Survey	Close

### Question 6

#### Type – Multi-Select

Which of the following dates are you available to attend a 45 minute online session paying an incentive of \$70 EFT from Farron Research? Sessions will be held between 9am and 5pm AEDT.

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Wednesday, 1 November 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 2 November 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 3 November 2023	Go to next question	
Monday, 6 November 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 7 November 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 8 November 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 9 November 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 10 November 2023	Go to next question	
Monday, 13 November 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 14 November 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 15 November 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 16 November 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 17 November 2023	Go to next question	
Monday, 20 November 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 21 November 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 22 November 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 23 November 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 24 November 2023	Go to next question	
Monday, 27 November 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 28 November 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 29 November 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 30 November 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 1 December 2023	Go to next question	
Monday, 4 December 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 5 December 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 6 December 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 7 December 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 8 December 2023	Go to next question	
Monday, 11 December 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 12 December 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 13 December 2023	Go to next question	
Thursday, 14 December 2023	Go to next question	
Friday, 15 December 2023	Go to next question	

Monday, 18 December 2023	Go to next question	
Tuesday, 19 December 2023	Go to next question	
Wednesday, 20 December 2023	Go to next question	
All of the above	Go to next question	
None of the above	End Survey	Close

### Question 7

#### Type – Multi-Select

Please specify the gender you identify as:

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Female	Go to next question	
Male	Go to next question	
Transgender male	Go to next question	
Transgender female	Go to next question	
Transgender	Go to next question	
Gender fluid	Go to next question	
Non binary	Go to next question	
Other (Please Specify)	Go to next question	

### Question 8

#### Type – Button Single Select

Which of the following age categories do you fit into?

*Staff Notes: Equal numbers of younger (18-24) and older (50-65) participants from a higher income bracket (above the average Australian income) and lower income bracket (below the average Australian income – happy to specify this).*

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Under 18 years old	End Survey	Close
18-24	Fill quota and go to next question	N=20
25-39	End Survey	
40-49	End Survey	
50-59	Fill quota and go to next question	N=20 here
60-65	Go to question 0	or here
66+ years old	End Survey	Close

### Question 9

#### Type – Single Choice

Which state do you currently reside in?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
NSW	Go to next question	
VIC	Go to next question	
QLD	Go to next question	
WA	Go to next question	
SA	Go to next question	
ACT	Go to next question	

NT	Go to next question	
TAS	Go to next question	

### Question 10

#### Type – Yes/No Type

Are you registered to vote in Australian elections?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Yes	Go to next question	Must Code
No	End Survey	

### Question 11

#### Type – Single Choice

In the last Federal election (May 2022), which party did you give your first preference vote in the House of Representatives (Lower House)?

*Staff Notes: Aim for a mix*

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Labor	Go to next question	
Liberal	Go to next question	
Greens	Go to next question	
Pauline Hanson's One Nation	Go to next question	
United Australia Party	Go to next question	
Independent Candidate	Go to next question	
Unsure	End Survey	
Prefer not to say	End Survey	

### Question 12

#### Type – Single Choice

Which of the following best describes your current living situation?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Renting	Go to next question	Continue
Own my own home – with a mortgage	Go to next question	Continue
Own my own home – no mortgage	Go to next question	Continue
Living at home/ with family	End Survey	Close

### Question 13

#### Type – Single Choice

What is the total of all wages/salaries, government benefits, pensions, allowances, and other income that your household usually receives (GROSS – before tax and superannuation deductions)?

*Staff Notes: Equal numbers of younger (18-24) and older (50-65) participants from a higher income bracket (above the average Australian income) and lower income bracket (below the average Australian income – happy to specify this).*

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
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\$3,500 or more per week (\$182,000 or more per year)	Go to next question	
\$3,000-\$3,499 per week (\$156,000-\$181,999 per year)	Go to next question	
\$2,000-\$2,499 per week (\$104,000-\$129,999 per year)	Go to next question	
\$1,500-\$1,999 per week (\$78,000-\$103,999 per year)	Go to next question	
\$1,250-\$1,499 per week (\$65,000-\$77,999 per year)	Go to next question	
\$1,000-\$1,249 per week (\$52,000-\$64,999 per year)	Go to next question	
\$800-\$999 per week (\$41,600-\$51,999 per year)	Go to next question	
\$600-\$799 per week (\$31,200-\$41,599 per year)	Go to next question	
\$400-\$599 per week (\$20,800-\$31,199 per year)	Go to next question	
\$300-\$399 per week (\$15,600-\$20,799 per year)	Go to next question	
\$200-\$299 per week (\$10,400-\$15,599 per year)	Go to next question	
\$1-\$199 per week (\$1-\$10,399 per year)	Go to next question	
No income	Go to next question	
Negative income	Go to next question	
Prefer not to say	Go to next question	

#### Question 14

##### Type – Single Choice

What is your current employment status?

*Staff Notes: Record*

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Employed, working full-time (at least 35hr/week)	Go to next question	
Employed, working part-time (less than 35hr/week)	Go to next question	
Not employed, looking for work	Go to next question	
Not employed, not looking for work	Go to next question	
Student	Go to next question	
Retiree	Go to next question	
On welfare	Go to next question	
At home duties (parenting, carer, etc.)	Go to next question	
Other (Please Specify)	Go to next question	

#### Question 15

### Type – Single Choice

What is your highest level of education?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Year 12 or less	Go to next question	
Year 12 and/or VET cert 2 or 4 complete	Go to next question	
Bachelor or above	Go to next question	
Other (Please Specify)	Go to next question	

### Question 16

#### Type – Single Choice

Which of the following best describes your cultural background?

Your cultural background is the cultural/ethnic group(s) to which you feel you belong or identify. This background may be the same as your parents, grandparents, or your heritage, or it may be the country you were born in or have spent a great amount of time in, or you feel more closely tied to.

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
Indigenous Australian (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander)	Go to next question	
Australian (Excl. Indigenous Australian)	Go to next question	
Māori, Melanesian, Papuan, Micronesian and Polynesian	Go to next question	
European	Go to next question	
South East Asian	Go to next question	
North East Asian	Go to next question	
Southern and Central Asian	Go to next question	
North American	Go to next question	
South and Central American and Caribbean Islander	Go to next question	
North African and Middle Eastern	Go to next question	
Sub-Saharan African	Go to next question	
Other (Please Specify)	Go to next question	

### Question 17

#### Type – Free Text

Do you regularly speak another language other than English in your home or at work?

*Staff Notes: Record*

### Question 18

#### Type – Free Text

Were you born in Australia?

*Staff Notes: Record*

### Question 19

### Type – Single Choice

When was the last time you participated in a market research session?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
In the last 3 months	Go to next question	Ensure not with client / on same topic
Between 3 and 6 months ago	Go to next question	Ensure not with client / on same topic
Between 6 and 12 months ago	Go to next question	
More than 12 months ago	Go to next question	
Never	Go to next question	

### Question 20

#### Type – Multi Thumbs Up Down

Can you please select if you agree or disagree with the statements below?

Statement	Action	Staff Notes
The research will be audio and video recorded for research purposes only and you may be required to sign a non-disclosure/consent form to protect your privacy and also the privacy of the client, are you comfortable with this?	Go to next question	Recruiter to disqualify if do not agree
Do you give Farron Research permission to pass on your full contact details (inclusive but not limited to your name, email and contact number) to the client and any third party involved in this research study if required? Due to some clients' security, we may need to pass on your full name and mobile number for you to gain access to the building where the session is being held.	Go to next question	Recruiter to disqualify if do not agree
Do you give Farron Research permission to pass on your answers to the survey to the client and any third party involved in this research study if required? Farron may also pass on your survey answers to the client if we feel you may be a suitable candidate but may not meet all the criteria for the clients' final decision.	Go to next question	Recruiter to disqualify if do not agree
Please ensure you are ready at least 5 minutes prior to the start time of your session on a desktop/laptop with a functioning camera and microphone. It is important that during the interview you are situated on a chair, upright at a table, in a room without distraction (from family/pets/friends/colleagues/ home environment). The researcher may cancel the session if these are not met.	Go to next question	Recruiter to disqualify if do not agree

<p>Are you aware of any other commitments that may prevent you from attending, as your attendance is critical to the success of the project? Have you checked your calendar to ensure you have no conflicting appointments? Your attendance is imperative to the success of the research. If for any unforeseeable reason you are unable to attend the session, please contact our office urgently on 02 9651 4660.</p>	<p>Go to next question</p>	<p>Recruiter to disqualify if do not agree</p>
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# Appendix 2

## GENERAL POPULATION STUDY – DISCUSSION GUIDE

### 1. Explanation of the project (2 minutes)

- Introduce the interviewer/researcher and explain the project. *Do you have a copy of the Explanatory Statement?*
- Explain recording of participant information; seek consent for the audio-recording of the interview and explain the steps taken to ensure anonymity: interview transcripts and recordings will not include identifying names and will not be made public. No individuals will be identified in the report that is produced, which will discuss findings in general terms.
- Explain how the data will be used and stored
- Explain the importance of honest opinions, no right or wrong answers
- Explain the maximum length of the interview is 60 minutes
- Any questions before starting?

### 2. Subject of interview – (3 minutes)

- Tell me about yourself. [Prompt – state, family composition, employment {full or part time}, education level, cultural background]

### 3. Views about democracy in Australia (10 minutes)

- What does the word ‘democracy’ mean to you?
- How important is it for you to live in a democracy? Are there other characteristics of Australia that are more important to you? [Prompt – economic situation] Which is more important to you – a strong economy or a strong democracy? For you, what are the most important aspects of Australia’s democratic system? What are the least important aspects?
- Would you describe the Australian government as democratic? Why/why not?
- Is Australia’s democracy working? Are there any parts of Australia’s democratic system that you think need to change?
- What do you think are the biggest threats to Australia’s democracy?

### 4. Views about the Australian government (10 minutes)

- Do you feel the Australian government tends to do the right thing by the Australian people? Why/why not?
- Do you feel the government is representative of you? If not, what would make you feel more represented?
- How well would you say that any of the political parties in Australia represent your views?

### 5. Political Participation (5 minutes)

- Did you vote in the last federal election? How did you decide who to vote for (what were the important considerations)?
- Where do you get political information from?
- Would you describe yourself as politically active? Why/why not? Are there other ways you participate politically (aside from voting)?

## **6. Consumption and views on media and information sources (10 mins)**

- What kinds of media do you access regularly [Prompt: tv news, YouTube, social media, print media, podcasts]?
- How trustworthy would you say traditional news media (such as newspapers, news magazines, TV and radio news) is when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?
- How trustworthy would you say Social media (such as Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) is when it comes to reporting the news fully accurately and fairly?

## **7. Wrap up and close**

- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your views about Australia's political system or government?

# Appendix 3

## SURVEY



Questionnaire

Scanlon Foundation: Democracy Amongst CALD

Job# 2000073

October 2023

### Section A. Summary

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Sample breakdown

- n=150 Southern Asians & n=150 Chinese diaspora
- Minimum n=50 Australian citizens per cultural group
- n=50 per cultural group to be less than 5 years in Australia
- Must have not been born in Australia.
- Must have been living in Australia for over 5 years.

### Section B. Screening & Profiling

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#### Q1 Where were you born? SR.

China Mainland	1
Hong Kong / Macao	2
Taiwan	3
Singapore	4
Malaysia	5
Vietnam	6
India	7
Pakistan	8
Bangladesh	9
Sri Lanka	10
Nepal	11
Afghanistan	12
Bhutan	13
Maldives	14
Australia	15
Other (please tell us)	99

*If code 15 or 99 selected, thank and close*

**Q2 Which cultural ethnic background do you most identify with?**

Chinese	1
Indian	2
Pakistani	3
Bangladeshi	4
Sri Lankan	5
Nepali	6
Afghani	7
Bhutanese	8
Maldivian	9
Other (please specify)	99

*If code 99 selected, thank and close*

**Q3 How long have you been living in Australia?**

Less than 1 year	1
1-2 years	2
2-4 years	3
5-9 years	4
10-14 years	5
15-19 years	6
20-24 years	7
25+ years	8

*Check quotas*

**Q4 Which of the following best describes you?**

I'm an Australian citizen	1
I have Australian PR	2
I'm on a work visa	3
I'm on a student visa	4
I'm on a spouse/de facto visa	5
I'm on a bridging visa/temporary visa	6
Other (please tell us)	7

*Check quotas*

## Section C. Democracy in Australia

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**Q5** Please tell us, what is your understanding of democracy? Please be as detailed as possible.

*Open ended*

**Q6** How democratic do you think the Australian system of government is?

Please indicate on the scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is “not at all democratic” and 10 means that it is “completely democratic.”

Sliding scale 1-10- 1 = not at all democratic and 10= completely democratic

**Q7** Would you say the system of government we have in Australia...?

Works fine as it is	1
Needs minor change	2
Needs major change	3
Should be replaced	4

**Q8** How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people? Would you say...?

Almost always	1
Most of the time	2
Only some of the time	3
Almost never	4

**Q9** How well would you say that any of the political parties in Australia represent your views?

Reasonably well	1
Very well	2
Not well at all	3
Not at all	4

*Ask if Australian citizen*

**Q10** Who did you vote for in the last federal elections?

Liberal/National	1
Labor	2
Greens	3
Other (Please tell us)	4
I don't remember / I would rather not say	5

**Q11** Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Democracy in Australia is threatened by....

Randomise statements

- Economic Inequality
- Limitations on Free speech
- Influence of big businesses
- Influence of trade unions
- Election interference from foreign powers
- Corruption
- The quality of our political parties and representatives
- The rise in misinformation and fake news
- The influence of radical groups with extreme point of views

Use the following scale – scale per statement

Strongly Agree	1
Agree	2
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	4

## Section D. Political Action / Involvement

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**Q12** How important is it for you to live in a democracy? Please indicate on the scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means “not at all important” and 10 means “absolutely important”?

Sliding scale 1-10 – 1 = not at all important 10 = Absolutely important

**Q13** If you had to choose between a good democracy or strong economy, which would you say is more important?

A good democracy	1
A strong economy	2

**Q14** We now have some questions about different forms of political action people can take. Please indicate which, if any, of the following you have done over the last three years or so?

MR and Randomise statements.

Voted in an election	1
Signed a petition	2
Written or spoken to a Federal or State Member of Parliament	3
Joined a boycott of a product or company	4
Attended a protest, march or demonstration	5
Got together with others to try to resolve a local problem	6
Posted or shared anything about politics online	7
None of these	8

**Q15** And in the last 12 months, have you been actively involved in any civic or political groups, such as...

MR and Randomise statements.

Trade union, professional / technical association	1
Political party	2
Environmental or animal welfare group	3
Human or civil rights group	4
Body corporate or tenants' association	5
Consumer organisation	6
None of these	7

**Q16** How important is it for you that everyone in Australia can freely express their opinion on political and social topics?

Very important	1
Somewhat important	2
Somewhat unimportant	3
Very unimportant	4
Don't know	5

## Section E. Media

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**Q17** In general, how much trust do you have in...

Randomise statements

a. Traditional news media (such as newspapers, news magazines, TV and radio news) when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?

b. Social media (such as Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) when it comes to reporting the news fully accurately and fairly?

Use the following scale – one scale per statement

A good deal	1
Some	2
Not much	3
None	4

## Section F. Demographic Questions

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A few more questions about you...

**Q18** How old are you?

Insert Numeric/Text box.

**Q19** Are you...

Male	1
Female	2
Non-Binary/Other	3

**Q20** Which of the following best describes your living situation?

Single, living with parents	1
Single, living alone or sharing	2
Couple, no kids	3
Single, with kids at home	4
Couple, with kids at home	5
Single/ couple, kids left home	6
Other (please specify)	7

**Q21** Which of the following best describes your occupation status?

Student	1
Working full-time	2
Working part time	3
Entrepreneur/Business owner	4
Homemaker	5
Retired	6
Other (Please tell us)	7

**Q22** Which of the following best describes your education level?

Primary Education	1
Year 10	2
Year 12	3
Trade/ Apprenticeship	4
TAFE/ Technical Certification	5
Diploma	6
Bachelor's Degree	7
Post-Graduate Degree	8
Doctorate/ PhD	9
Others (Please specify)	10
Prefer Not to answer	11

## Section G. Qualitative Questions (Pre-quant)

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Qualitative research is, by its very nature, exploratory. The following questions are meant to provide an overview of the type of questions that will be asked. This may also lead to additional lines of questioning that have not been articulated below but occur organically as a result of the conversation with participants.

- When you hear the word democracy, what does it mean to you?
- What are the most important elements of democracy for you?
- How would you define democracy?
- What is the main challenge to democracy in Australia?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges to democracy in the future?

# Appendix 4

## Sample characteristics

### General population study

- **Gender:** 22 men, 19 women, 1 non-binary
- **State representation:** 12 Queensland, 10 New South Wales, 5 Victoria, 5 ACT, 4 South Australia, 2 Western Australia, 2 Northern Territory, 2 Tasmania
- **Age:** 20 Younger Australians (18-24 years old), 22 older Australians (50 +)
- **Home ownership:** 25 Renters, 17 home owners
- **Educational attainment:** 22 University educated, 11 TAFE or certificate educated, 9 completed Year 12 or less
- **Income level:** 8 high income (above \$150,000), 14 medium income (between 80,000 and 130,000), 18 low income (less than \$79,000), 2 didn't say
- **Voting preference:** 11 Labor, 12 Liberal/National, 12 Greens, 4 conservative minor parties (Palmer United, One Nation), 3 independents

### Migrant population study

- **Gender:** 25 women, 20 men
- **State representation:** 13 Victoria, 11 Queensland, 8 New South Wales, 5 South Australia, 4 Western Australia, 4 Tasmania
- **Length of time in Australia:** recent arrivals (1-5 years) 29 percent; more established residents (6 to 11 years) 42 percent; long term residents (12 years plus) 29 percent.
- **Visa status:** temporary visa holders, permanent residents and citizens

### Chinese and Indian communities study

- **Chinese respondents:** 157
- **Indian respondents:** 151
- **Gender:** 65% women, 35% men
- **Visa status:** 36% Australian citizens, 36% permanent residents, 13% student visa holders, 9% on an employment visa, 6% temporary visa holders
- 75% university educated
- Average length of time in Australia, 5-9 years

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> John Lee, *The Risks to Australia’s Democracy.*” (2021). Available <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-to-australias-democracy/> (19 March 2024).

<sup>ii</sup> See, for instance, Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Christine Huang, Sarah Austin, Laura Clancy and Sneha Gubbala, *Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier.* (2022). Available <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/12/06/satisfaction-with-democracy-and-political-efficacy-in-advanced-economies-2022> (accessed 6 March 2024).

<sup>iii</sup> Most commonly people mentioned three broad concepts: freedom and human rights, elections and procedures and having a voice in government.

<sup>iv</sup> Pew Research Centre, *“Freedom, Elections, Voice: How People in Australia and the UK Define Democracy”* (2021) Available <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/freedom-elections-voice-how-people-in-australia-and-the-u-k-define-democracy> (last accessed 27 July 2023).

<sup>v</sup> Antoine Bilodeau, Ian McAllister, and Mebs Kanji, *“Adaptation to Democracy among Immigrants in Australia.”* (2010) 31(2) *International Political Science Review*, 141.

<sup>vi</sup> Jill Sheppard, Marija Taflaga, Liang Jiang, *“Explaining High Rates of Political Participation among Chinese Migrants to Australia.”* (2020) 41(3) *International Political Science Review*, 385-401.

<sup>vii</sup> Individuals may have mentioned one or more of these in their response.

<sup>viii</sup> The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer study found the media was commonly viewed as more divisive than unifying for society. See *2022 Edelman Trust Barometer* (2022). Available <https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatuss381/files/2022-02/Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%202022%20-%20Australia%20Country%20Report.pdf> (accessed 6 March 2024), 13.

<sup>ix</sup> The data did not allow us to break down these responses further to determine, for example, whether individuals were being represented in their electorate by the individual they had voted for.

<sup>x</sup> But not for all, see above comment.

<sup>xi</sup> Aside from voting.

<sup>xii</sup> Interviewees often consumed more than one source of media.

<sup>xiii</sup> Interviewees often used more than one platform.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Many commentators would describe YouTube as social media, yet the interviewees distinguished YouTube from platforms like Facebook or Instagram.

<sup>xv</sup> The shortest time of residence in Australia for those who were critical was 9 years.

<sup>xvi</sup> As the Indian and Chinese cohorts responded to this question in a survey format, their responses were limited by the responses offered (i.e. it was not an open ended question).

<sup>xvii</sup> The migrant sample were asked a slightly different question “Does the government tend to do the right thing by people from different cultural communities?”

<sup>xviii</sup> The migrant cohort was not asked this question.

<sup>xix</sup> This is consistent with other studies such as the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer, which showed significant distrust of the media. See *2022 Edelman Trust Barometer* (2022). Available <https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatuss381/files/2022-02/Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%202022%20-%20Australia%20Country%20Report.pdf> (accessed 6 March 2024), 7.

<sup>xx</sup> A similar pessimism can be seen in Pew’s 2022 study on social media and democracy, where 71 percent of respondents said they did not believe they could influence politics in Australia. See Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Christine Huang, Sarah Austin, Laura Clancy and Sneha Gubbala, *Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier*. (2022). Available <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/12/06/satisfaction-with-democracy-and-political-efficacy-in-advanced-economies-2022> (accessed 6 March 2024).

<sup>xxi</sup> J. O Donnell, “Mapping Social Cohesion 2023” Available <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2023> (accessed 6 March 2024), 8.

<sup>xxii</sup> Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Moira Fagan, Christine Huang, Aidan Connaughton, Laura Clancy and Sneha Gubbala, *Freedom, Elections, Voice: How People in Australia and the UK Define Democracy*. (2021) Available <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/freedom-elections-voice-how-people-in-australia-and-the-uk-define-democracy/#:~:text=These%20are%20among%20the%20key,tied%20to%20views%20about%20authoritarianism> (assessed 6 March 2024).

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Christine Huang, Sarah Austin, Laura Clancy and Sneha Gubbala, *Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier*. (2022). Available <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/12/06/satisfaction-with-democracy-and-political-efficacy-in-advanced-economies-2022> (accessed 6 March 2024).