

# **Trust, Parties and Leaders: Findings from the 1987-2016 Australian Election Study\***

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Monitoring the health of democracy is important in any political system. This can be done most effectively by using large-scale, national public opinion surveys. In addition to monitoring the health of the system, public opinion results are important in providing information to policymakers about how they can improve the effectiveness of the system.

This paper examines three aspects of the health of the Australian political system, namely public opinion towards trust in the institutions of government; views of the political parties; and feelings towards political leaders.

The context to this study is the growing international trends which show increasing public disaffection with established parties and leaders. Most dramatically, this has been manifested in the election of Donald Trump as president in the United States, but it is also apparent in Europe, with the election of a party outsider, Emmanuel Macron, as French president, and in Britain with the Brexit vote. These and other examples demonstrate that there is a strong and growing populist undertone to public opinion.

What is sometimes called this ‘anti-politics’ populist trend is also apparent in Australia. It has manifested itself in declining public trust in the political process, negative evaluations of political parties, and in declining support for the major political leaders. We examine these trends in Australia using, in some cases, almost 50 years of academic opinion polls.

## **The Data**

The evidence for our evaluation of public opinion across these three areas comes mainly from the Australian Election Study (AES), a large-scale national survey conducted after each federal election since 1987. In some cases, we also have comparability with surveys conducted in 1967, 1969 and 1979. This provides us with an unrivalled, almost half a century perspective on changing public opinion towards politics in Australia.

Each survey asked around 250 questions of the respondent, covering such topics as their perceptions of the election campaign, their vote in the election and past voting history, views of the leaders, general political and social attitudes, and their social background. This is easily the most comprehensive survey of political opinion conducted in Australia. Full details of the surveys, the files, and reports can be found at <http://australianelectionstudy.org>

## **Views of Democracy**

The surveys consistently ask a range of questions which tap into public opinion towards democracy. We focus on two questions here, satisfaction with democracy and trust in politics.

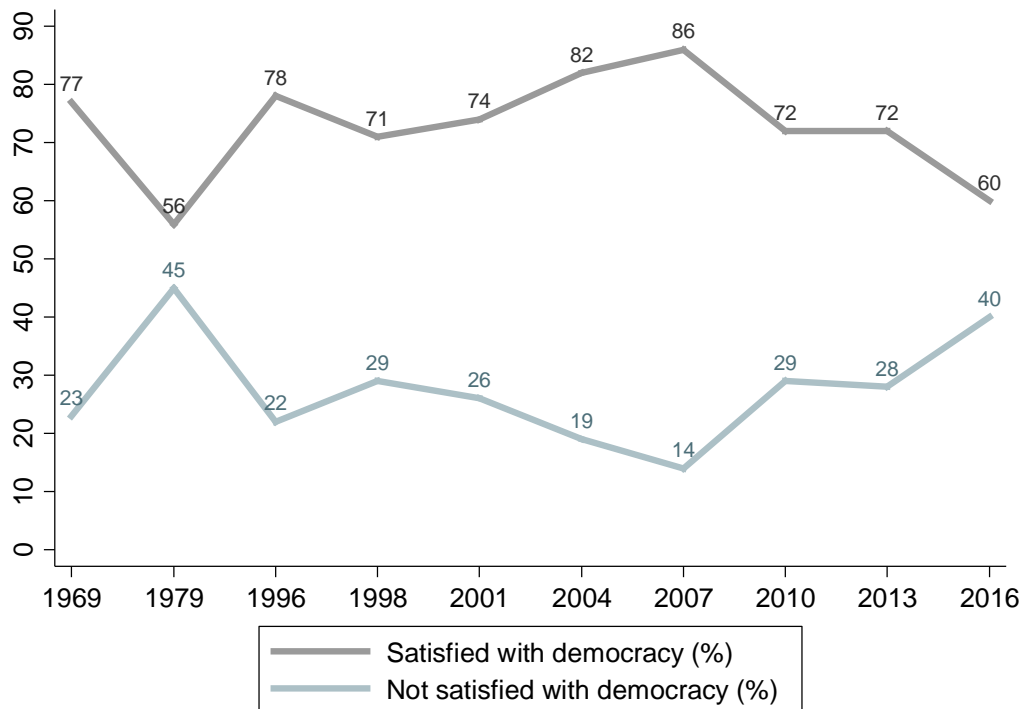
Satisfaction with democracy is measured by the question: *On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?* When this question was asked of the 2,818 respondents who answered the 2016 AES, we found that satisfaction with democracy was at its lowest level since shortly

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture for the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House, Canberra, on 25 August 2017.

after the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government. In 2016, just 60 percent of those interviewed were either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied with democracy, compared to a high of 86 percent in 2007 (see Figure 1). This represents very substantial 26 percentage point decline in satisfaction in less than 10 years.

**Figure 1: Satisfaction with Democracy**



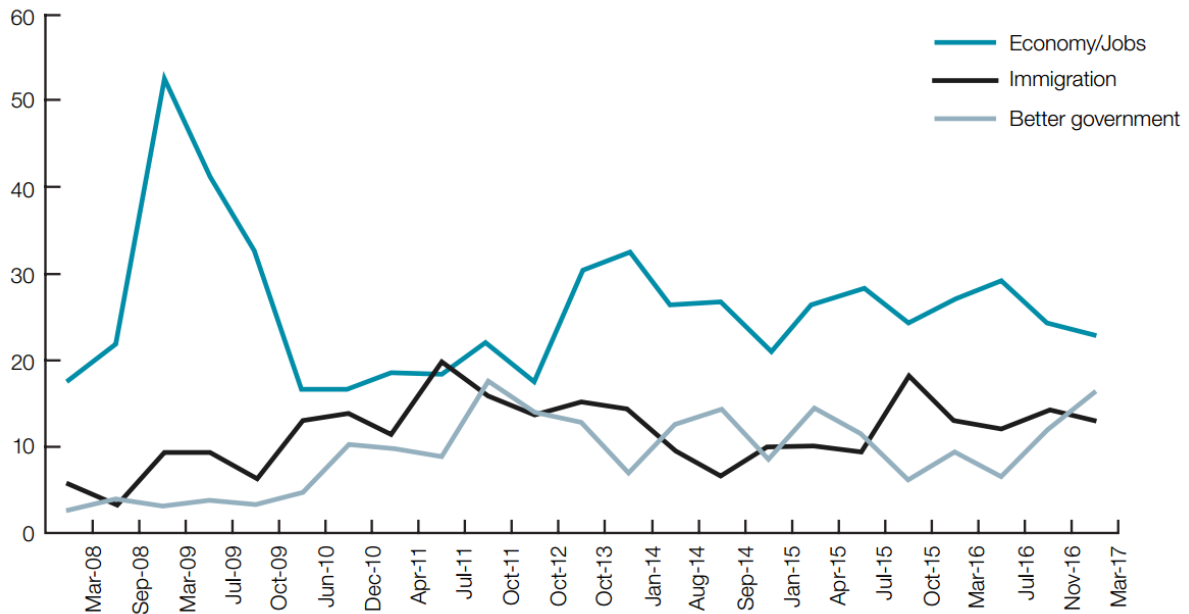
One objection to the satisfaction with democracy measure is that it is simply measuring changes in the electoral fortunes of the parties. The graph shows that there are two peaks in satisfaction: in 1996, when the Howard Liberal government was elected; and in 2007, with the election of the Rudd Labor government. There is certainly some correlation with partisanship in the measure, but we also have other survey evidence, using a different survey and a different methodology, which supports our conclusion that there is declining satisfaction with democracy.

Since 2008 the ANU has also conducted the ANUpoll, a national survey of public opinion conducted several times per year. A question that we consistently ask is ‘*What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today*’. This is an open-ended question so, unlike the one used in the AES, the respondents have complete freedom to mention a problem which is at the top of their concerns.

The two major problems that are mentioned by the ANUpoll respondents are the economy/jobs, and immigration, However, since 2010 (which broadly corresponds to the election of the Gillard minority Labor government) we have seen the rise of ‘better government’ as one of the three major concerns of the Australian public (see Figure 2). Indeed, in several of the surveys, ‘better government’ is ranked second only to the economy/jobs, and in the most recent ANUpoll, conducted in early 2017, 16 percent of the respondents mentioned ‘better government.’ This provides important confirmation that there

is indeed a widespread concern among the public about how politics is conducted in Australia.

**Figure 2: “What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?”**



Source: ANUpoll on Attitudes to Housing Affordability, March 2017

Where does this place Australia in the international rankings about public views of democracy? Comparative evidence to address this question can be found in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project, of which the AES was a founding member. Placed in a broad comparative perspective, Australia now ranks around the middle of a range of mainly OECD countries, just behind Germany and France and just ahead of Poland and Ireland. However, if we were to insert the high point of 2007 into the table, Australia would have ranked near the top along with the mainly Scandinavian countries.

**Table 1: Satisfaction with democracy, international comparisons**

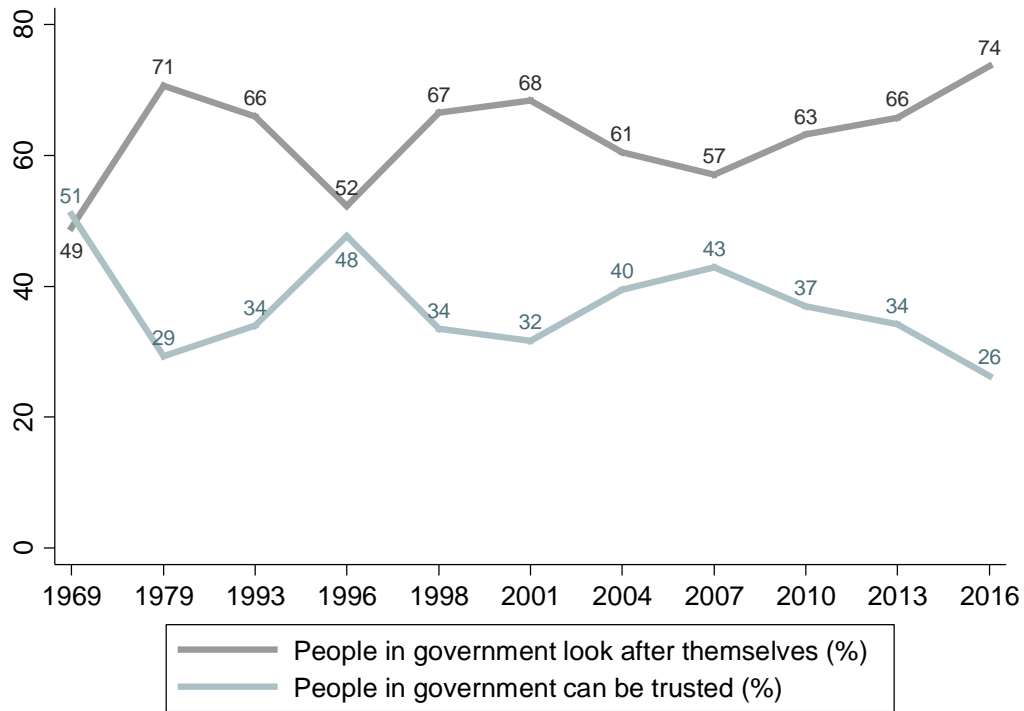
1. Norway	93	8. Canada	65	15. Korea	45
2. Switzerland	84	9. France	65	16. Portugal	40
3. United States	80	10. Germany	64	17. Czech Republic	35
4. Sweden	80	11. <i>Australia</i>	60	18. Turkey	33
5. Japan	74	12. Poland	55	19. Mexico	29
6. New Zealand	73	13. Ireland	54	20. Slovenia	16
7. Austria	67	14. Israel	54	21. Greece	6

Note: Table shows percentages.

The second measure we have to monitor public opinion towards democracy is trust in politicians (see Figure 3). The AES has consistently asked the question: ‘*In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time?*’ Once again, we

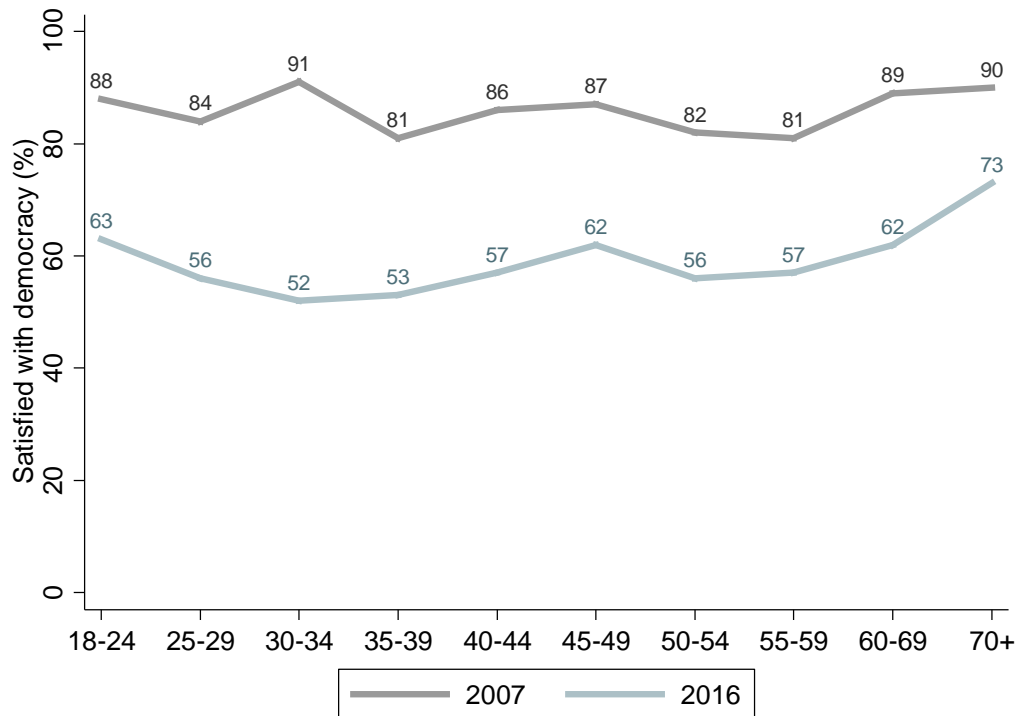
have comparisons to surveys conducted before 1987. The patterns show that in 2016, trust was at its lowest level since the question was first asked in 1969. In 2016 no less than three quarters of the respondents believed that ‘people in government look after themselves.’

**Figure 3: Trust in Politicians**



What explains this declining level of political trust? One argument that has been advanced is that the decline is largely accounted for by the young, and that changing inter-generational norms and values about politics accounts for the decline. There is some partial support for this argument from the data. Comparing satisfaction with democracy across the lifecycle, separately for the 2007 and 2016 surveys, shows little lifecycle variation in 2007, but some variations in 2016 (see Figure 4). In 2016 we observe two declines in satisfaction: among those aged in their 30s, and among those aged in their 50s. Each decline has different causes. Among those aged in their 30s, weak economic performance and housing affordability are the main drivers; among those aged in their 50s, government changes to superannuation and taxation generally are the main drivers.

**Figure 4: Age and Satisfaction with Democracy**



Weak economic performance does, then, appear to be a factor in declining satisfaction with politics. This is reflected in higher levels of economic insecurity registered in the AES, along with a view that governments are unable to influence the economy positively. For example, in 2016, just 19 percent of the respondents believed that the government would have a positive impact on the economy over the coming year. This compares with almost twice that number in the previous election. Moreover, just 25 percent of Coalition voters believed the government could have a positive impact in 2016, down from 62 percent in 2013.

In addition to weak economic performance, other factors underpinning declining trust in the system include the rise of the career politician. This is reflected in a view that politicians are unable to keep promises, and by the perception that they are motivated less by public interest than their own personal electoral survival. Also reinforcing this view is the overly partisan nature of political debate. Finally, politicians consistently increase voters' expectations about what they can do if elected to government; when these expectations are unfulfilled, this increases the public's dissatisfaction with them.

## **Political Parties**

In addition to declining trust in the political system, the Australian Election Study highlights significant changes in how voters view and engage with political parties. The survey has asked a number of questions on voters' assessments of the parties; across these measures we see evidence that political partisanship is at its lowest level since the questions were first asked, in some cases going back as far as the 1960s. The data shows that: voters like the major parties a good deal less than they have done in the past; partisanship for the major parties has reached record lows; fewer voters than ever are using the 'How to Vote' cards in determining their vote; and the proportion of voters that consistently cast their vote for the

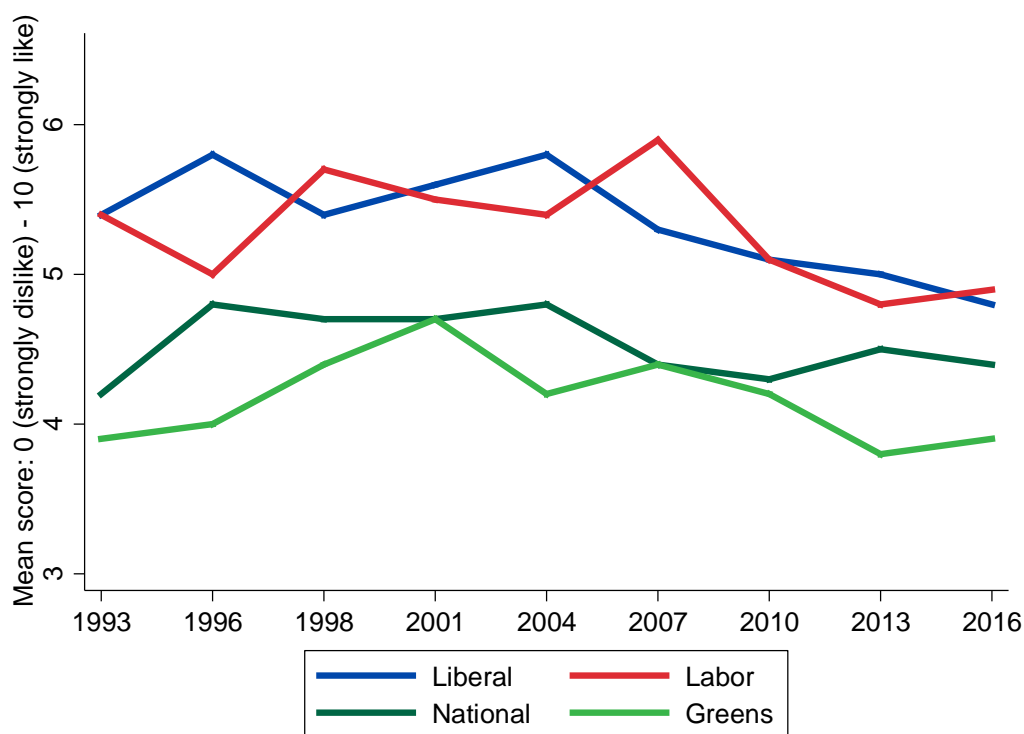
same party has declined to its lowest level to date. A number of charts demonstrate these dynamics over time.

Figure 5 shows the trends in how much voters like the parties on a scale from zero to 10, measured by the question:

*‘We would like to know what you think about each of our political parties. Please rate each party on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If you are neutral about a particular party or don’t know much about them, you should give them a rating of 5.’*

The results demonstrate that the popularity of the two major parties have in recent years reached their lowest levels since the question was first asked in the early 1990s. Until 2007 the relative popularity of the two major parties fluctuated; since 2010 there has been a considerable decline across both parties. In the most recent election for the first time evaluations of both major parties fell below the half-way point on the scale (Labor: 4.9/10; Liberal: 4.8/10). In particular, the popularity of the Labor party steeply declined during the years of Labor government from when Kevin Rudd won the election in 2007 to when he lost to Tony Abbott in 2013—amidst the Rudd-Gillard leadership changes and the Labor minority government. The popularity of the Greens has declined over the same period of time, particularly since Bob Brown stepped down as leader in 2012.

**Figure 5: Feelings about Political Parties**

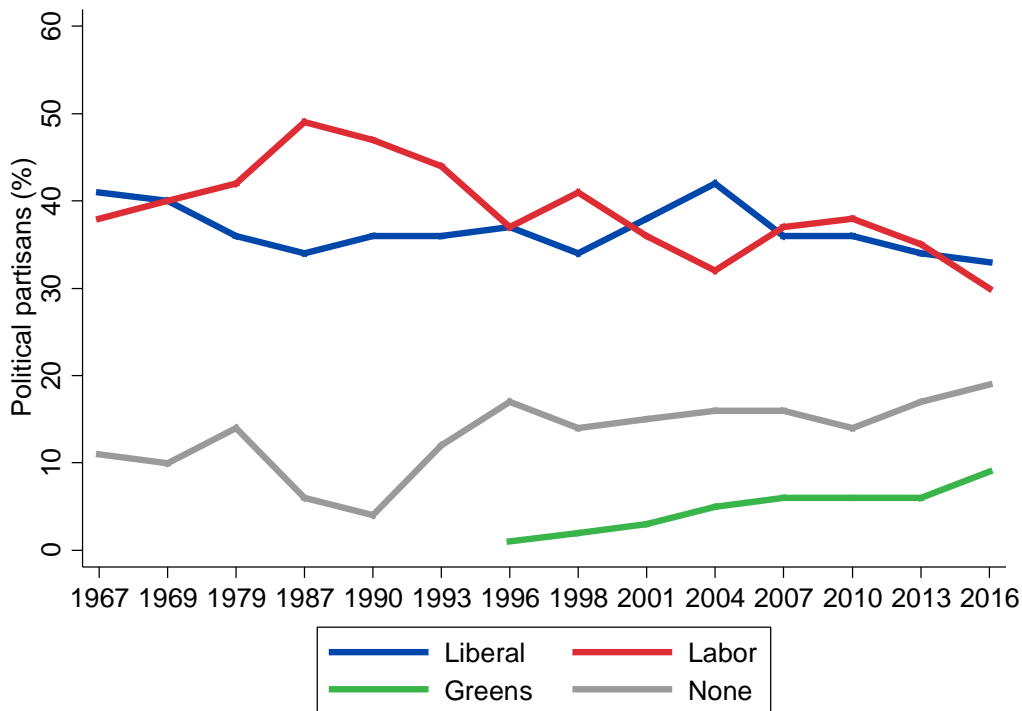


Note: Estimates are means. The scale runs from 0 (strongly dislike party) to 10 (strongly like party) with a designated midpoint of 5 (neither like nor dislike).

The trends in political partisanship over time are shown in Figure 6. The results are based on a question that asks: ‘Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as Liberal, Labor,

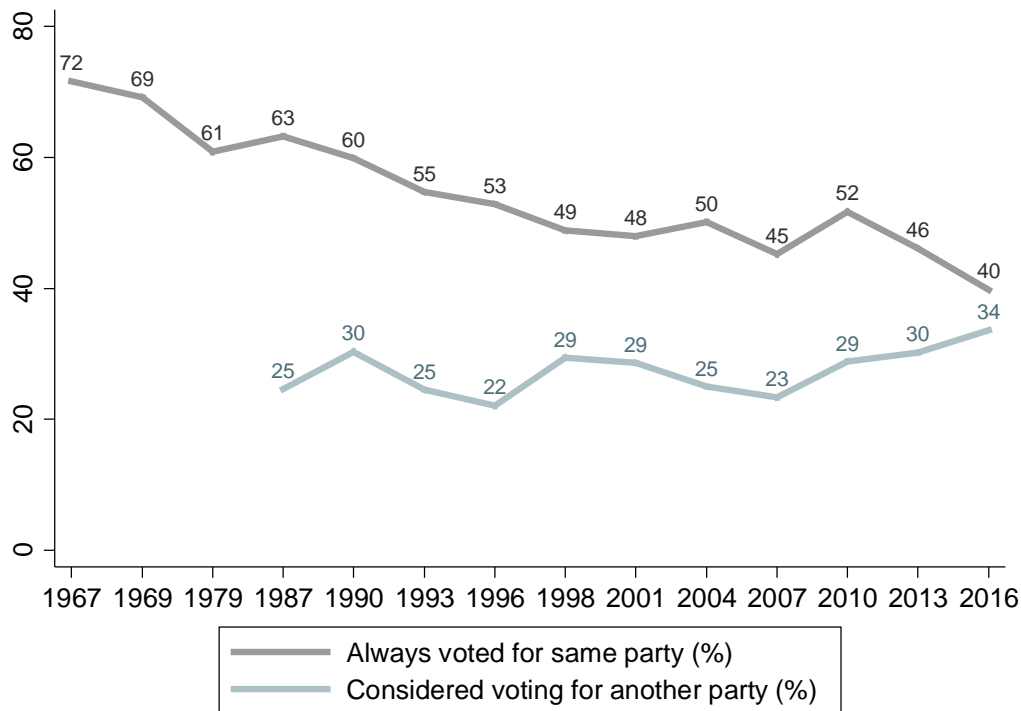
*National or what?* The data reveal a gradual long-term decline in partisanship. For both of the two major parties there are fewer partisans than at any other time in the last 50 years. Around one third of voters identified with each of the two major parties in 2016 (33 percent Liberal; 30 percent Labor). The proportion of Greens' partisans has meanwhile risen over time to 9 percent in 2016. There is also an increasing proportion of voters that do not align with any party at all (19 percent in 2016). Overall, these findings indicate that the influence of the major parties is in decline as voters look for alternatives.

**Figure 6: Direction of Political Partisanship**



Further evidence of declining partisanship can be found in responses to a question on whether voters always vote for the same party: *‘Before this current Federal election for the House of Representatives, had you always voted for the same party, or had you sometimes voted for different parties?’* In the 1960s stable voters represented over 70 per cent of the electorate, but by 2016 this had declined to 40 percent (see Figure 7). Over ten percent of the decline took place over the last two election cycles. Meanwhile, the proportion of Australians who seriously considered voting for another party during the election campaign has risen over time to 34 percent, indicating a greater degree of voter volatility.

**Figure 7: Voting Volatility**



In summary, across a range of different measures voters are now less likely to align with one of the major parties. What we are seeing across these trends in partisanship is not so much a case of drastic change since the previous election in 2013, rather it is a case of gradual change over time with voters drifting away from the major parties.

There are a number of factors that explain this decline in partisanship. A major factor is generational change. Younger generations engage in politics differently—they are less likely to enrol to vote or join a political party, but more likely to engage in politics in other ways, through joining a protest, or engaging in online activism. Commentators sometimes lament young people’s disengagement with politics, though there is a good degree of evidence that young people are not disengaged, they are just engaged differently.

Another factor is rising support for the Greens. Whilst there are still fewer than 10 per cent of Australians that identify with the Greens, the emergence of the Greens has chipped away at support for the major parties. Negative perceptions of the parties also contribute to the decline in partisanship. Visible party infighting is associated with declining support; for example, the Labor party lost a good deal support during the Rudd-Gillard years. Moreover, the election study data shows that voters have the impression that the government is run for ‘a few big interests’ rather than ‘all the people’, which could be expected to contribute to the distance between voters and the major parties.

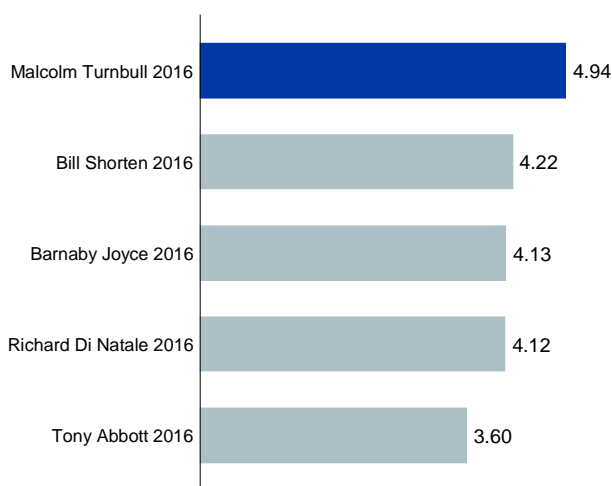
## Political Leaders

Voter disaffection with politics is similarly evident in evaluations of Australia’s political leaders. Although Australia has a parliamentary system, politics has become increasingly personalized over time. Governments are often referred to by the name of their leader, and the media gives increasing attention to the political leaders. Leaders may not be the primary determinant of electoral outcomes, though they do influence votes.



At each election since 1987 the AES has asked voters to evaluate how much they like the party leaders on a scale from zero to 10. A response of zero means they strongly dislike the politician, a response of 10 means they strongly like the politician, and a response of five would indicate that they neither like nor dislike the leader. The average results from the 2016 survey are presented in Figure 8. In 2016 not one of Australia’s party leaders’ average ratings reached the midpoint of five on the scale. Malcolm Turnbull achieved the highest rating out of those leaders measured, with a score of 4.9. Following the election, the prime minister was considerably more popular than the Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten, whose average evaluation was 4.2 out of 10. Barnaby Joyce and Richard Di Natale were each evaluated at 4.1 out of ten. At the time of the survey, former prime minister Tony Abbott was the least popular of these political leaders, with an average evaluation of 3.6 on the scale out of 10.

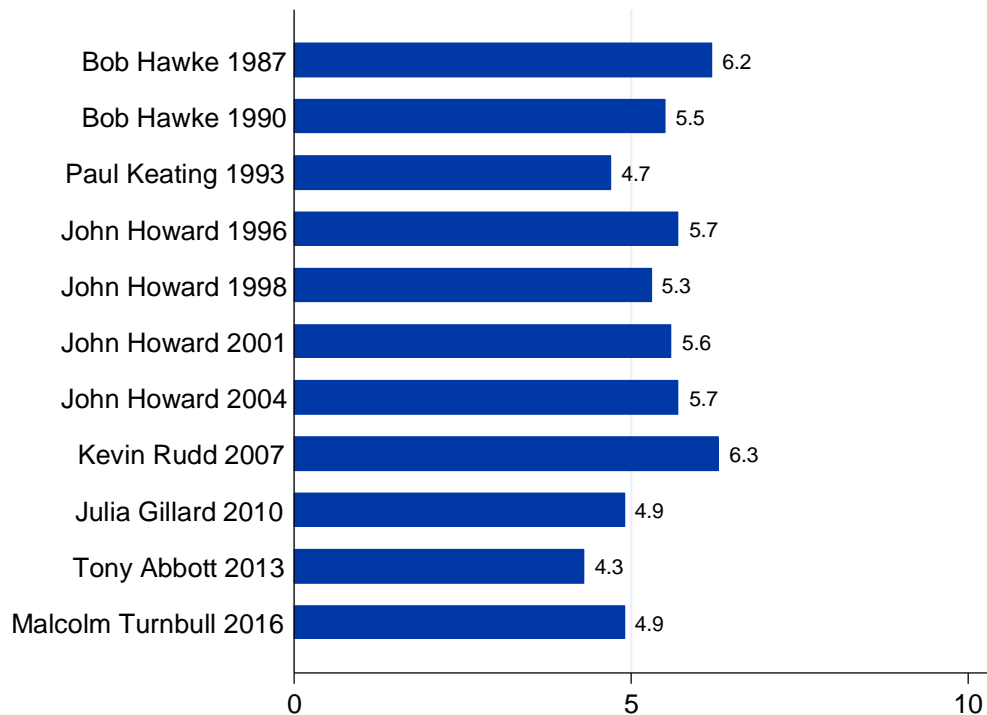
**Figure 8: Leader Evaluations 2016**



Note: Estimates are means. The scale runs from 0 (strongly dislike politician) to 10 (strongly like politician) with a designated midpoint of 5 (neither like nor dislike).

To put the 2016 leader ratings in perspective, Figure 9 shows evaluations for the election winners over a 30 year period, from 1987 through to the most recent election. The data over time demonstrates that Prime Ministers are lot less popular than they used to be. Up until 2007 newly elected Prime Ministers generally enjoyed a high degree of popularity and support. For the initial twenty years the question was asked (1987–2007), leaders were evaluated at an average of 5.6 out of ten on the scale. Since 2010 Prime Ministers have gained office despite low popularity; Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull won elections and secured the Prime Minister’s office with approval ratings that were below the halfway point on the ten point scale. The average evaluation for the newly elected prime minister over these past three elections is just 4.7 out of ten. The last popular prime minister was Kevin Rudd at the time he won the election in 2007.

**Figure 9: Election Winner Evaluations 1987–2016**

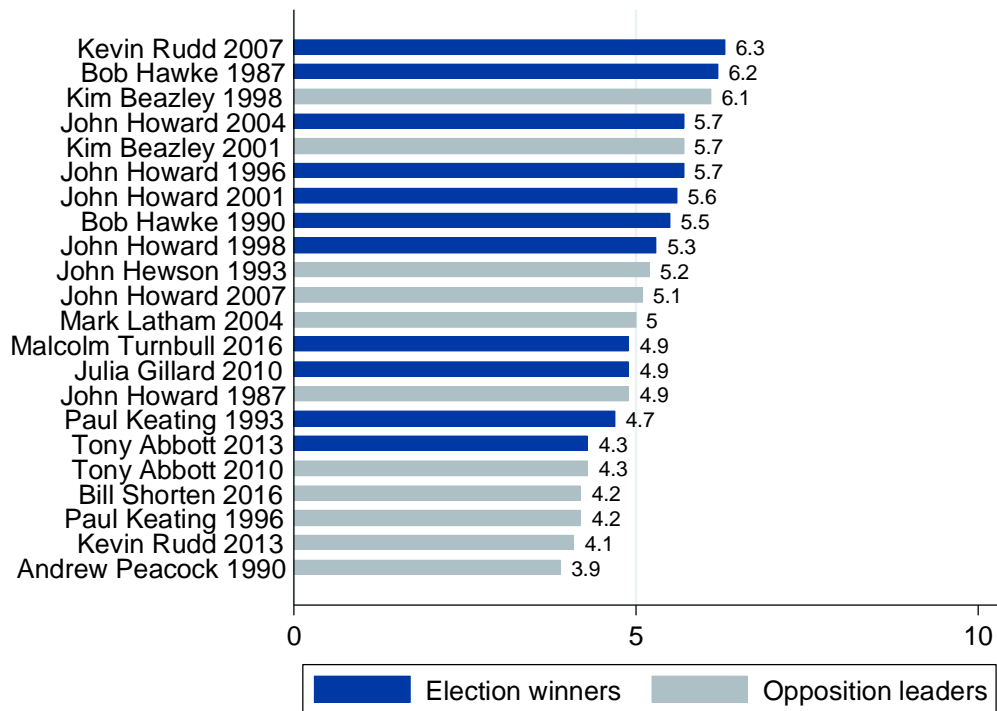


Note: Estimates are means. The scale runs from 0 (strongly dislike politician) to 10 (strongly like politician) with a designated midpoint of 5 (neither like nor dislike).

In order to provide further context on these leadership evaluations, Figure 10 incorporates the popularity ratings of both election winners and opposition leaders, as measured in post-election surveys since 1987. The leaders are ranked based on their evaluations. Kevin Rudd in 2007 had the highest popularity rating, at 6.3 out of ten, however by the time he went for re-election in 2013, his evaluations had fallen by around one-third to 4.1.

In almost all cases the winner of the election was evaluated more favourably than the opposition candidate. Of the 11 elections covered by the AES, there are just three exceptions. In 1993, Paul Keating won against a more popular John Hewson, and in the 1998 and 2001 elections John Howard won against a more popular Kim Beazley. More often than not the party with the most popular leader wins the election, although these exceptions demonstrate that it is not necessary to be a popular leader to win. This is further demonstrated in recent elections. Tony Abbott did not become more popular between the 2010 and 2013 elections, the latter of which he won, rather he became more popular relative to the Labor party leaders, as Labor lost a good deal of support between the two elections.

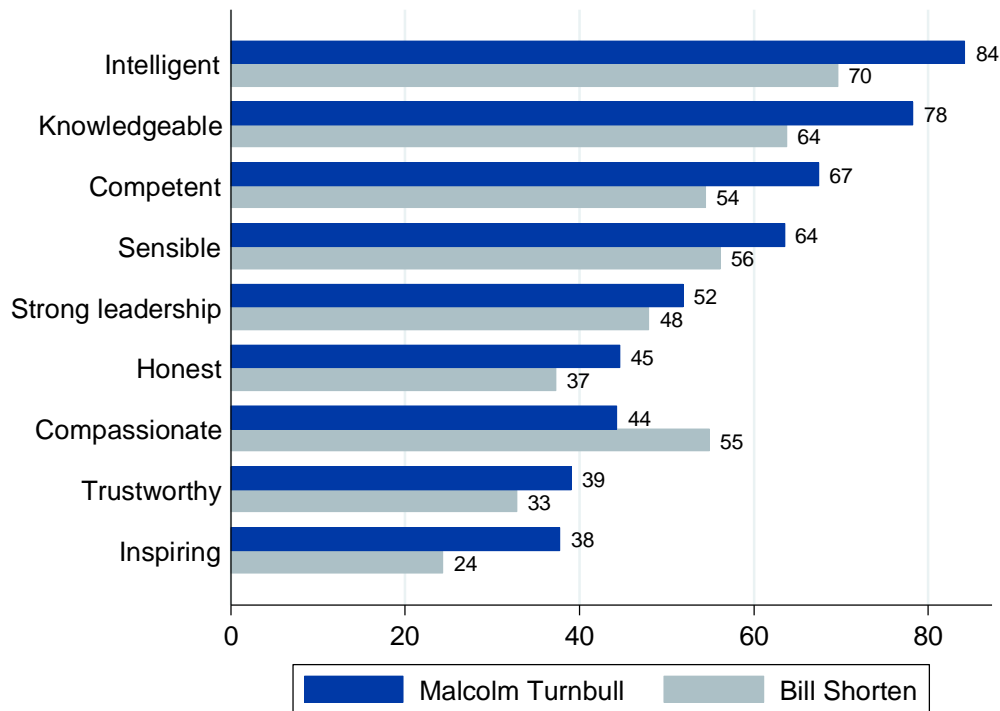
**Figure 10: Leader Evaluations 1987–2016**



Note: Estimates are means. The scale runs from 0 (strongly dislike politician) to 10 (strongly like politician) with a designated midpoint of 5 (neither like nor dislike).

The AES also asks Australians to evaluate how well various characteristics describe the party leaders, including intelligence, competence and trustworthiness. Figure 11 presents the 2016 evaluations for Malcolm Turnbull and Bill Shorten. The chart shows the percentage of respondents who thought each characteristic described the leader either ‘quite well’ or ‘extremely well’.

**Figure 11: Leader Characteristics 2016**



Note: Estimates are the percent who responded ‘extremely well’ or ‘quite well’ in response to the following question: ‘Here is a list of words and phrases people use to describe party leaders. Thinking first about Bill Shorten, in your opinion, how well does each of these describe him - extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all? Now thinking about Malcolm Turnbull, in your opinion how well does each of these describe him - extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all?’

Both party leaders were perceived as being reasonably knowledgeable and intelligent, although fewer than half of voters evaluated the leaders as honest, trustworthy or inspiring. Comparing the two leaders, Malcolm Turnbull was evaluated more positively on all of the characteristics except for compassion. In terms of electoral outcomes, some of these characteristics are thought to matter more than others. Research in the US context has demonstrated that traits including competence and strong leadership are associated with positive electoral outcomes, whereas compassion, for instance, is not.

These evaluations can be put into context over time as the AES has asked the question on leader characteristics since the 1990s. Echoing the finding of unprecedented disaffection with politics and politicians, the data over time shows that the current party leaders receive some of the lowest evaluations to date. In particular, both leaders score poorly on trustworthiness, honesty and strong leadership in comparison to previous leaders.

The final aspect of Australia’s political leaders we explore concerns the frequent leadership changes of recent years. Australia has had five prime ministers since 2010, including Kevin Rudd twice, and only one change of prime minister occurred as a result of an election. Data from the AES and the ANUpoll has investigated voters’ approval of the way the parties handled the leadership changes in 2010, 2013, and 2015, respectively. Citizens’ approval for these changes is presented in Table 2. A large majority of voters disapproved of the way the Labor party handled its leadership changes. In particular, when Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd in 2010 three in four Australians did not approve. On the other hand, the electorate was

divided in its evaluations of Malcolm Turnbull replacing Tony Abbott, with 49 percent approving of the change.

**Table 2: Approval of leadership changes, 2010–2015**

	2010 Gillard replaced Rudd	2013 Rudd replaced Gillard	2015 Turnbull replaced Abbott
Strongly approve (%)	4	12	13
Approve (%)	21	30	35
Disapprove (%)	37	25	33
Strongly disapprove (%)	37	34	18
Total (%)	100	100	100
(N)	(2046)	(1075)	(2658)

Note: Question wording as follows:

*2010: Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Labor Party handled the leadership change in June of this year, when Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd? (percentage of respondents)*

*2013: Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Labor Party handled the leadership change in June of this year, when Kevin Rudd replaced Julia Gillard? (percentage of respondents)*

*2016: Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Liberal Party handled the leadership change in September of last year, when Malcolm Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott? (percentage of respondents)*

What explains these differences in approval? First, leader popularity mattered. Kevin Rudd was a popular prime minister, so voters did not approve of the way he was replaced. When Malcolm Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott on the other hand, a majority of voters preferred Turnbull over Abbott so fewer disapproved of the change.

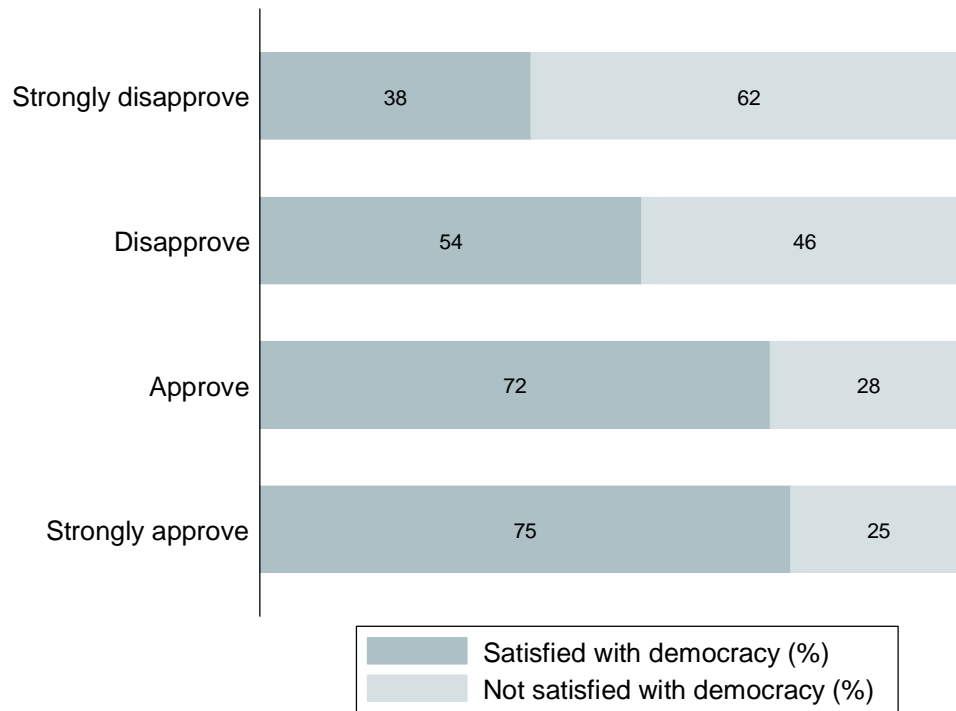
There has been discussion in the media as to whether public disapproval of Julia Gillard's replacement of Kevin Rudd in 2010 stemmed from gendered expectations. The AES data does show some gender differences in approval for the three leadership changes. Men were more approving of the leadership changes than women in all three cases. The gender gap was considerably greater when Kevin Rudd replaced Julia Gillard, where men approved of the change by 10 percentage points more than women. This finding would suggest that gender played a role, although it is by no means the only factor, as leader popularity was important.

To investigate the potential influence of these leadership changes on satisfaction with democracy, the relationship between the two is presented in Figure 12. The chart shows levels of satisfaction with democracy according to whether respondents approved of Malcolm Turnbull replacing Tony Abbott as prime minister in 2015. This demonstrates that those who strongly disapproved of the leadership change were less satisfied with democracy, while those who approved of the changes were more satisfied with democracy.

A similar trend can be observed for the leadership change between Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard in 2010.<sup>†</sup> Moreover, using the measure of political trust instead of democratic satisfaction reveals a similar trend. Although the data presented in Figure 12 is correlational, this would suggest that the frequent leadership changes over 2010 to 2015 may have contributed to the dramatic declines in satisfaction with democracy and political trust observed over the same period of time.

<sup>†</sup> The data is not available for 2013 when Kevin Rudd replaced Julia Gillard.

**Figure 12: Approval of Malcolm Turnbull replacing Tony Abbott in 2015 and Democratic Satisfaction**



Note: Shows whether or not respondents were satisfied with democracy in 2016, broken down according to whether they approved or disapproved ‘of the way the Liberal Party handled the leadership change... (in 2015) when Malcolm Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott’.

To conclude, a range of indicators are pointing to citizens’ disaffection with politics in Australia. Satisfaction with democracy and trust in government have reached historic lows. The popularity of the major parties, and the major party leaders has been in decline, and voters are more likely to consider alternatives rather than consistently vote for the same party. We are seeing less popular leaders win elections, and have not had a popular leader since Kevin Rudd’s win in 2007. Voters have largely disapproved of the frequent changes of prime minister that have taken place outside of the electoral cycle since 2010. Some of these dynamics are unique to Australia, such as the nature of the party system and the recent leadership changes, though declining satisfaction with democracy and government is also occurring in other advanced democracies for reasons including poor economic performance and generational change.

### **Re-engaging the Public**

The analyses presented here have suggested that there has been an unprecedented decline in satisfaction with democracy, and increasingly negative views of parties and politics. While survey evidence always needs to be carefully evaluated, our findings—using the most comprehensive political surveys conducted in Australia and extending over an almost 50 years—do suggest that there has been an unprecedented change in public opinion over the last decade. This trend also fits with the international evidence from the United States and Europe. How can we reverse this trend and improve the health of Australian democracy?

There are a number of possible institutional changes, all of which have their advantages and disadvantages. We are concerned here primarily with possible reforms to political institutions, rather than what political parties could do (such as changing their candidate selection procedures) and what informal arrangements could be put in place (such as more use of citizens' juries). We identify six possibilities.

*Parliamentary terms.* The current Commonwealth parliamentary term is three years; a 1988 referendum to increase the term to four years was defeated. The advantage of a four term would be that it would provide governments with a better opportunity to implement a legislative program, and thereby give voters more information on which to either 'reward or punish' the government at an election. This is in line with the theory of responsible party government.

Currently Australia is the only major democracy, apart from the United States and El Salvador, which does not have a parliamentary term of four or more years. The disadvantage to four year terms is that it would provide less opportunity to vote out an unpopular or ineffective government. It would also complicate the terms of senators.

*Senate reform.* The Senate was designed to be the guardian of the interests of the states and territories. However, since the 1983 change to the Senate electoral system—allowing a vote 'above the line'—the electoral system has become in practice a party list system.

The 2016 change to the electoral rules has not changed this. Accordingly, election to the Senate has been more a matter for the parties, and an increasing number of career politicians and former party employees have gained election to the Senate. The partisan nature of the Senate would not matter for public policy, except that it is one of the four most powerful upper houses in the world, along with Germany, Switzerland and the United States. If the current electoral system is retained, then consideration should be given to what powers the Senate should possess.

*Term limits.* Term limits for elected politicians have been widely used in the United States for governors and other politicians, and they are widely used around the world for presidents and (occasionally) prime ministers. Currently, only one country, the Philippines, uses term limits for its legislators, in the form of a limit of three terms. Term limits could encourage more civic minded politicians to stand for election. The disadvantage would be that effective and skilled politicians would be forced to retire after their period in office.

*Recall elections.* These are again widely used in the United States at the state level, but they are also used in Canada, Switzerland, and Taiwan. The concept involves a proportion of an elected representative's constituents signing a petition to force the seat to become vacant and a by-election held.

*Voluntary voting.* Political parties have two main functions: mobilization and conversion. Mobilization involves encouraging voters to turnout to vote (in a voluntary system), while conversion is the effort to persuade citizens to vote for the party. In a compulsory voting system, parties do not need to mobilize; this is carried out for them by the design of the electoral institutions.

As a result, the Australian political parties have some of the lowest mass memberships of any OECD country, with consequences for the pool of eligible election candidates and for the development of party policy generally. A move to voluntary voting could encourage parties to broaden their membership base and work harder to engage the wider public.

*Reform of parliamentary procedures.* Finally, there are a range of reforms to parliamentary procedures which could help to weaken the overly partisan nature of many debates, and the view of many voters that parliamentary debate simply involves squabbling politicians.

Among a wide range of possible measures is the election of an independent speaker, as occurs in other systems. Another possibility is to limit prime minister's question time in the House of Representatives to a short period held on one or two days per week, as occurs in the British House of Commons.