Australian Government
Australian Public Service Commission

# Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy

## 2023 National Survey

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# Contents

# Executive Summary

In a world where democracies are increasingly facing challenges like civic disengagement, political polarisation, the spread of disinformation and concerns about the integrity of public institutions, Australia's commitment to democratic principles is more crucial than ever. Signing the Luxembourg Declaration on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy in November 2022 was a significant step for Australia. To deepen our understanding of public sentiment towards democracy, we launched the Survey of Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy in June 2023, engaging a nationally representative sample of 5,000 Australians, followed by a second wave with 1,000 people in November 2023.

Our findings paint a nuanced picture of democracy in Australia. Most Australians highly value and are satisfied with their democratic system. The vast majority say living in a democratic country is important to them, and three in five people indicate they are satisfied with the way democracy works in the country. Yet, this appreciation is coupled with concerns. Nearly half of Australians aren't confident the country is on the right democratic path and perceive widespread corruption in democratic institutions and processes. Despite these pressures, there is a resilient desire to strengthen our democracy – four in five Australians believe it is worth trying to fix the problems our democracy may have.

The vast majority of Australians hold the fundamental values of democracy in high regard, and the majority also think the country does well in keeping elections fair, protecting human rights and ensuring freedom of speech. However, there are areas where people's expectations haven't been met. Only half or less think Australia performs well when applying the law impartially, giving people a say on the government's priorities and conducting enough checks to ensure politicians and officials can't abuse their power. Additionally, while around three-quarters of Australians reported satisfaction across the various services they used in the past year, there is a high variation in trust levels towards public institutions, with ambulance, fire and other emergency services holding the trust of nine in ten Australians, and political parties at the other end holding the trust of a quarter. This underlines focal points of concern like transparency, accountability, equity, engagement and responsiveness.

When looking at drivers of public sentiment, our findings suggest that key factors like levels of civic education, social capital, wellbeing and life events play a significant role in shaping views about democracy. People who have received civic education in their primary or secondary school are more likely to say they understand democracy than those who have not. They also tend to be more satisfied with Australian democracy. Additionally, people who were involved in social activities have higher satisfaction levels compared to those who were not. A positive relationship between trust in others and satisfaction with democracy has also been observed. On the other hand, women, low-income individuals, the unemployed, and residents in regional areas have lower satisfaction levels. People who have experienced negative life events, such as having a mental health condition, facing financial hardship or having a disability, also report lower satisfaction with democracy and lower trust in public institutions.

Our survey also delves into the broader picture of civic engagement and barriers to participation in Australia. Civic engagement appears to be lower than ideal – only a quarter of the respondents in the June survey reported that they have participated in any civic activities in the prior 12 months. Barriers that prevent people from getting involved include a lack of interest, a belief that participation won't make a difference, and a lack of time. Our findings also reveal that those dissatisfied with democracy are at risk of disengaging from constructive contributions. This indicates key concerns revolve around corruption, integrity, fairness and foreign interference.

A nationally significant event like the referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice (the Voice referendum) is an important national moment to observe how democratic processes of direct participation influence public sentiment towards democracy. Our post-Voice referendum survey found no shift in the overall satisfaction with Australian democracy. Nevertheless, the Voice referendum did spark discussions and participation among Australians, with four in five respondents reporting they talked with others about the referendum or tuned into media and online opinions about it. One in five engaged in political activities such as contacting politicians, attending protests, or volunteering for political campaigns, with half of these activities being referendum-related. A quarter reporting participating in such political activities for the first time due to the referendum. Our results also reveal that those satisfied with Australian democracy were more likely to discuss and learn about the referendum regularly, including talking with people with the opposite view and listening to opposite opinions in the media. This indicates that engagement in public debate, especially with diverse opinions, may enhance satisfaction with the democratic process.

Looking forward, we identify areas that could benefit from ongoing monitoring, such as perceptions regarding integrity of our democratic processes, the prevalence of civic education and forms of civic engagement. Furthermore, exploring what constitutes a healthy democracy for Australians is a critical area for future study. This ongoing exploration will be an important input informing ways to shape a resilient democracy and better reflect the values, experiences and aspirations of the Australian people.

# Introduction

## Who are we?

We are the Trust and Transparency Unit. We provide a research and monitoring function at the heart of government focused on public trust. We conduct the Survey of Trust in Australian public services, which we have been delivering since 2019. Associated with this, we conduct research which broadens and deepens our understanding of public trust. Through our monitoring and transparent reporting we help to hold public institutions, the custodians of public trust, to account. You can access our latest annual report and other research on our website.

## Why did we conduct this survey?

In November 2022, Australia signed the Luxembourg Declaration on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy, a pivotal initiative by 42 countries and the European Union affirming the global commitment to preserve trust and advance democratic principles. Signed at the Ministerial Meeting of the 2022 OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) Public Governance Committee in Luxembourg, this action reflects Australia's active role in promoting democratic resilience and public trust in a new and fast-changing time. Further reinforcing its commitment to building trust and strengthening democracy, Australia launched the Survey of Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy in June 2023. The survey aims to provide a health check of Australian democracy by monitoring, at a high level, trust and satisfaction with democracy and its major components. It also helps identify issues which may be drivers of trust and satisfaction in Australia.

## Why is it important to measure public sentiment towards democracy?

Democracy means 'rule by the people'. Democracy encompasses many institutions, processes and shared values designed to enable people to decide, as equals, how they will live together. It safeguards individual rights and promotes a just and equitable coexistence. Central to democracy is the parliament, which plays the prime role in reflecting the people's will and ensuring the government's accountability. In a democratic system, people are empowered to make decisions that impact their lives, ensuring that the government serves their interests and is accountable to the people.

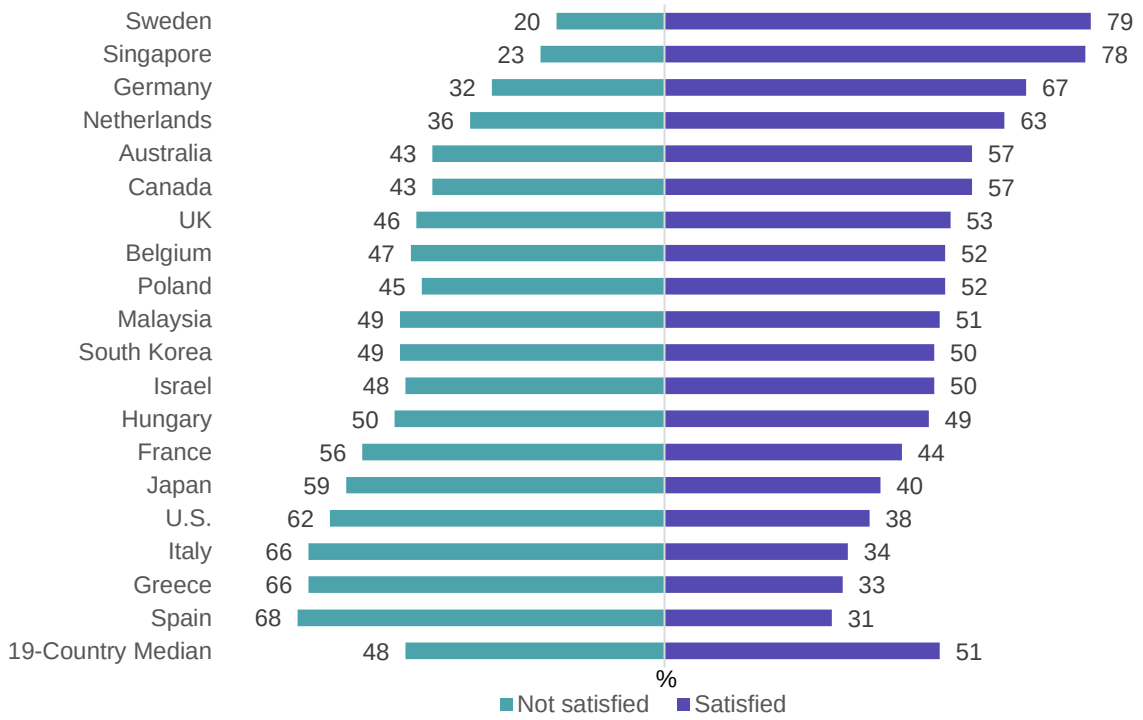
Trust and satisfaction play pivotal roles in democracy to ensure the functioning and sustainability of the government, as well as motivating people to participate actively in civic activities. When people have confidence in their government, it strengthens the legitimacy of its decisions and actions, thus promoting effectiveness. Trust is a powerful motivator for people to participate in activities such as voting, attending public meetings and engaging in community initiatives, as they believe their contributions will have a meaningful impact on the direction of society.

Global trends in democracy have shown both progress and challenges in recent years. Studies such as the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, Edelman Trust Barometer and the Pew

Research Center surveys have indicated growing pressures within democratic countries.[1] Declining trends in democracy may be attributable to various factors, including political polarisation, the spread of disinformation, concerns about the integrity of public institutions and global crises. These challenges can erode public trust in democratic institutions, hinder effective governance, and weaken democratic values.

Australia has a notable democratic legacy and has been recognised for its innovative practices, such as secret ballots and extending voting rights. Drawing on international comparisons, Australia has managed to maintain a relatively high level of trust and satisfaction in its democracy. The Pew Research Center's Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey shows that Australia maintains comparatively high level of satisfaction with democracy (Figure 0.1).[2] The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index has consistently ranked Australia as a 'full democracy' since its inception in 2006.[3]

**Figure 0.1. Satisfaction with democracy across 19 countries (Feb-Apr 2022)**




*Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey, Q3. How satisfied are you with the way democracy is working in (surveyed country)? Australian sample = 2,034*

Like many other democratic countries, Australia needs to maintain democratic resilience and strengthen public trust in the changing socioeconomic, digital and geopolitical environment. The

[1] OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Key Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions*, 2022, accessed 22 December 2023; Edelman, *2023 Edelman Trust Barometer: Navigating a Polarized World*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023; Pew Research Center, *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023.

[2] Pew Research Center, *Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier*, 2022, accessed 22 December 2023.

[3] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2022: Frontline Democracy and the Battle for Ukraine*, 2022, accessed 22 December 2023.

results from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions show Australians' trust in the public institutions is at or slightly below the OECD average against the key drivers of trust, including the responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness and fairness of institutions.[4] The latest Edelman Trust Barometer report also warns that while Australia has comparatively low levels of polarisation, slight shifts suggest growing risks, especially when there is low trust in institutions.[5]

These global studies are designed for comparison of standardised indicators, often unable to disaggregate findings or provide more nuanced analysis of the drivers at country level. In Australia, we have several ongoing surveys which provide perspectives on specific components of democracy. The Australian National University Electoral Study, the Australian Bureau of Statistics General Social Survey and the Scanlon Social Cohesion studies provide multiple years of surveys with questions on different components of democracy. Complementary to all of this, and drawing on it, there is a role for a general survey of public sentiment towards democracy in Australia.

The launch of the Survey of Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy supports efforts by the Australian government to deepen its awareness and understanding of the country's democratic landscape and enhance evidence-based policy-making. While research from universities, think tanks and other institutes offer valuable perspectives about Australian democracy, it is important for the government, the policy custodian, to build its own monitoring tool to assess public sentiment and identify areas of development to drive continuous refinement of our democracy. By collecting first-hand data and insights, we are also positioning Australia as an active participant in the global dialogue on democracy, contributing to international efforts to strengthen democratic resilience.

[4] OECD, *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Key Findings from the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions*, 2022, accessed 22 December 2023.

[5] Edelman, *Australia on a Path to Polarisation: Edelman Trust Barometer 2023*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023.

# About this survey

The survey was conducted in June 2023 and was completed online by a non-probability sample of 5,000 Australian adults who were nationally representative based on quotas for age, gender and location. A follow-up wave of 1,000 Australians was undertaken online in November 2023 with an additional module of questions focused on the Voice referendum.

The survey was designed to provide a baseline assessment, with potential to use it as a monitoring tool at regular intervals in the future. It provides an overview of public sentiment towards democracy in Australia, as well as key drivers of public sentiment in democracy. It has scope to provide deeper insights on pertinent issues affecting public sentiment on democracy such as the Voice referendum. In particular, the survey aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the general perceptions of democracy's importance and functioning in Australia, and what are the strengths and challenges?
- What are the public expectations of democratic values, processes and institutions, and how well do people think Australia is performing in these areas?
- How do factors like civic education, sources of information, people's social capital, wellbeing and life experience influence trust and satisfaction in Australian democracy?
- To what extent are Australians participating in democratic activities and what are the barriers to participation?
- How do significant events like the Voice referendum affect public sentiment, including people's satisfaction and engagement with Australian democracy?

The survey was designed by a joint project team, building from a largely global comparative field of surveys and indicators including but not limited to the World Values Survey, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, Edelman Trust Barometer, Scanlon Social Cohesion Survey, Australian Election Study, and Pew Research Center surveys. The questionnaire design was supported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (BETA) at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce within the Department of Home Affairs.

# About this report

This report is organised into six parts, each focusing on a research question mentioned in the previous section plus an additional part exploring the impact of the Voice referendum. This structure is intended to unpack the complexities of how Australians view and interact with their democratic system, from a high level through to the underlying drivers of change.

**Part 1: Overall perspectives on Australian democracy**

This section presents an overview of the perceived importance and satisfaction with democracy in Australia. It highlights general opinions on both the strengths and challenges of Australian democracy.

**Part 2: Public sentiment across the democratic landscape**

This section disaggregates different components of Australia's democracy and outlines public sentiment towards each of them. It dives into the specifics of people's expectations and perceptions of the core values and principles of democracy in Australia. It shows how Australians view different democratic processes and institutions and what the focal points of concern are across the landscape.

**Part 3: Drivers of public sentiment**

This section focuses on the potential determinants of public sentiment, examining the influence of critical factors in shaping people's opinions, especially their satisfaction and engagement with democracy. These factors include civic knowledge and education, sources of information, people's social capital, demographic characteristics, wellbeing and life events.

**Part 4: Democratic engagement and barriers to participation**

This section delves into civic engagement in Australia, identifying common types of civic participation and the factors that hinder people from participating in democratic activities. It explores the perspectives of those who are dissatisfied with democracy and are at risk of disengaging from constructive contributions, indicating key concerns revolve around corruption, integrity, fairness and foreign interference.

**Part 5: The Voice referendum**

Using data collected from an additional survey wave conducted in November 2023, this section analyses how the Voice referendum, including both the outcome and public debate around the referendum, has affected public sentiment towards democracy. It investigates the referendum's impact on people's satisfaction with democracy, their engagement behaviour and willingness to engage in the future, providing insights into the referendum's role and impact on perspectives of democracy in Australia.

**Part 6: Where to from here?**

Concluding the report, this section integrates the findings from previous sections, highlighting key areas to monitor in future and important avenues for deeper investigation. It underscores the importance of continuous scrutiny in domains including integrity, civic education, and civic engagement. It highlights the needs for additional exploration into areas such as the meaning of a healthy democracy for Australia.

# Part 1: Overall perspectives on Australian democracy

**Key points**

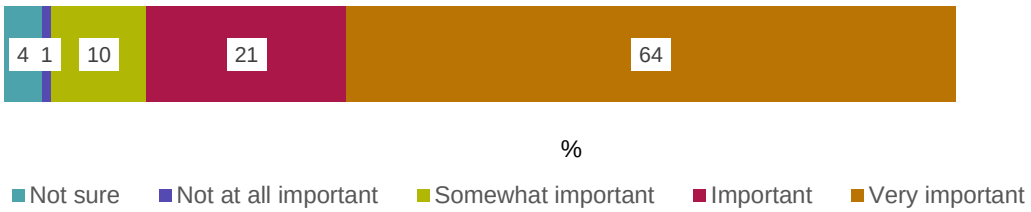
- Democracy is important to Australians and, for the most part, they are satisfied with the way it works in the country.
- While many are concerned we might not be on the right track, most Australians want to strengthen our democracy.
- Areas of concern differ between Australians who are satisfied overall and those who are dissatisfied overall with how democracy is working.

In an era where democracy's enduring role is both celebrated and scrutinised, understanding public sentiment towards this form of governance is more critical than ever. Does democracy still hold value for us? Are Australians satisfied with how their democracy is working? To find out, we asked Australians these fundamental questions at the beginning of our survey.

## Does democracy matter to Australians?

Our findings reveal a reassuring picture. Living in a democracy is very important to the vast majority of Australians. As Figure 1.1 shows, 95% of the respondents reported living in a democratic country to be at least 'somewhat important' to them while just under two-thirds said it is 'very important'. This reflects a strong commitment to democratic values and principles within the Australian population.

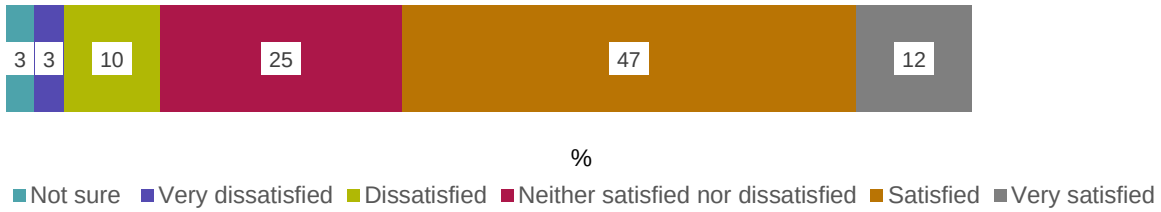
**Figure 1.1: Importance of living in a democratic country (June 2023)**




*Source: Q2. To you, how important is it to live in a country that is governed democratically? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

When asked about people's general view of the way democracy works in Australia, 59% indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied, while 13% report they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, and 25% held a neutral view (Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2: Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia (June 2023)**




*Source: Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Consistent with our findings, a 2022 report from the Pew Research Center found that across 19 surveyed countries, the median satisfaction with democracy stood at 51%, with Australia being one of the countries where a majority are satisfied (57%).[6] Australia's satisfaction rates suggest a relatively stable and positive view of democracy among its people. Moreover, current satisfaction levels are a significant increase compared to the equivalent figure in the last national survey conducted in Australia on satisfaction with democracy. The 'Democracy 2025' study conducted in 2018 found that 41% of people were satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia.[7]

# What are the specific areas of concern?

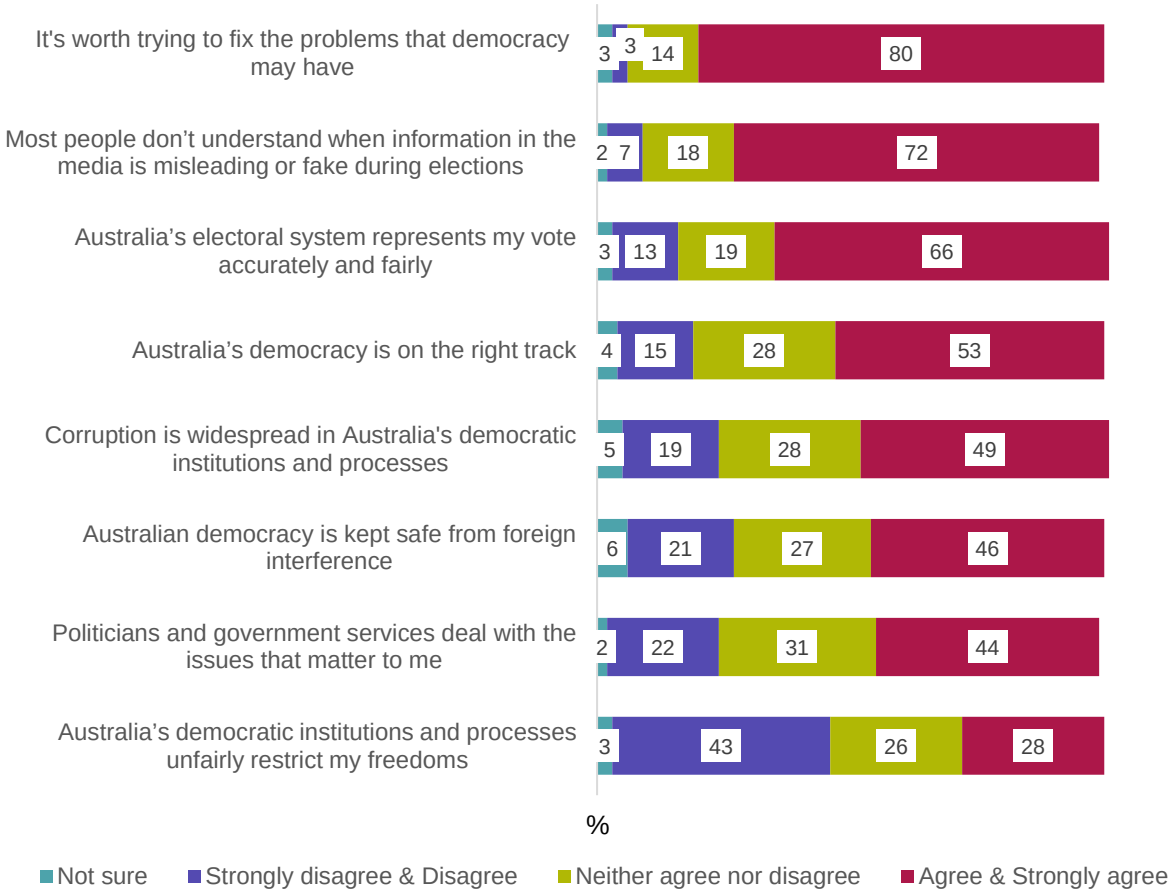
This level of satisfaction is relatively high, but it could be improved. Our survey highlights specific areas of concern from Australians where improvements could be made. In particular, respondents in our survey indicated they perceive issues such as uncertainty about democratic direction, corruption, misinformation, and lack of knowledge of democracy. As shown in Figure 1.3, we found:

- 53% of the respondents agree that Australia's democracy is on the right track while 15% disagree and 28% report neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Put another way, this indicates almost half of Australians aren't sure democracy is progressing in the right direction.
- 49% believe that corruption is a widespread issue in Australia's democratic institutions and processes.
- 72% believe that most people don't understand when information in the media is misleading or fake during elections.

Despite identifying areas of concern with our democratic system, our survey reveals a promising outlook overall. Most Australians (80%) believe it is worth trying to fix the problems democracy may have. This strong majority represents a collective commitment to enhancing and preserving our democracy, and affirms that Australians not only recognise the importance of a healthy democratic system but are also supportive of efforts to continually improve it.

[6] Pew Research Center, *Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier*, 2022, accessed 22 December 2023.
[7] Stoker, G., Evans, M., and Halupka, M., *Democracy 2025 Report No.1 – Trust and Democracy in Australia: Democratic decline and renewal*, 2018, accessed 22 December 2023.

**Figure 1.3: Views on different statements about Australia's democracy (June 2023)**



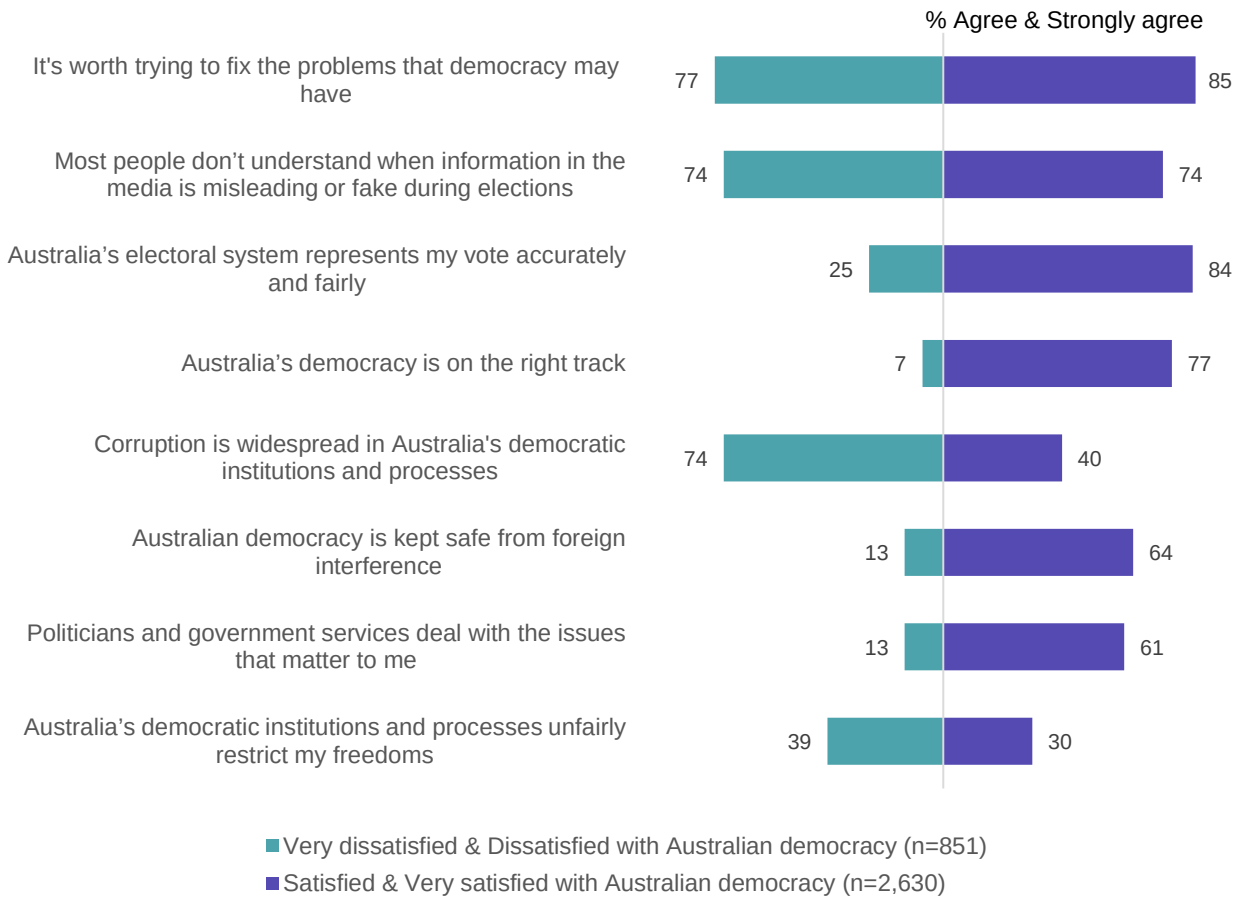

*Source: Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

As we look toward improving our democratic system, our survey finds substantial concerns among those dissatisfied with how democracy works in Australia. When compared to their satisfied counterparts, stark differences emerge (Figure 1.4).

- The most significant gap is in the belief that Australia's democracy is on the right track, with only 7% of the dissatisfied group agreeing, against 77% of the satisfied.
- The second concern is regarding the electoral system's accuracy and fairness, 25% of dissatisfied respondents agree, in contrast to 84% of satisfied respondents.
- On safeguarding Australian democracy from foreign interference, 13% of dissatisfied agree that our democracy is kept safe from foreign interference, while the figure is 64% for those satisfied.
- Whether politicians and government services address issues that matter to people is another concern, only 13% of the dissatisfied feel represented, as opposed to 61% of the satisfied respondents.
- The perception of widespread corruption in democratic institutions and processes is held by 74% of the dissatisfied group, compared to 40% of the satisfied.

Despite these concerns, there is a reason for optimism: 77% of dissatisfied people still believe in the value of striving to fix the problems that our democracy may have. This showcases a resilient and hopeful outlook towards improving the democratic system in Australia.

**Figure 1.4: Respondents' satisfaction levels with Australian democracy and their views on different statements about Australian democracy (June 2023)**

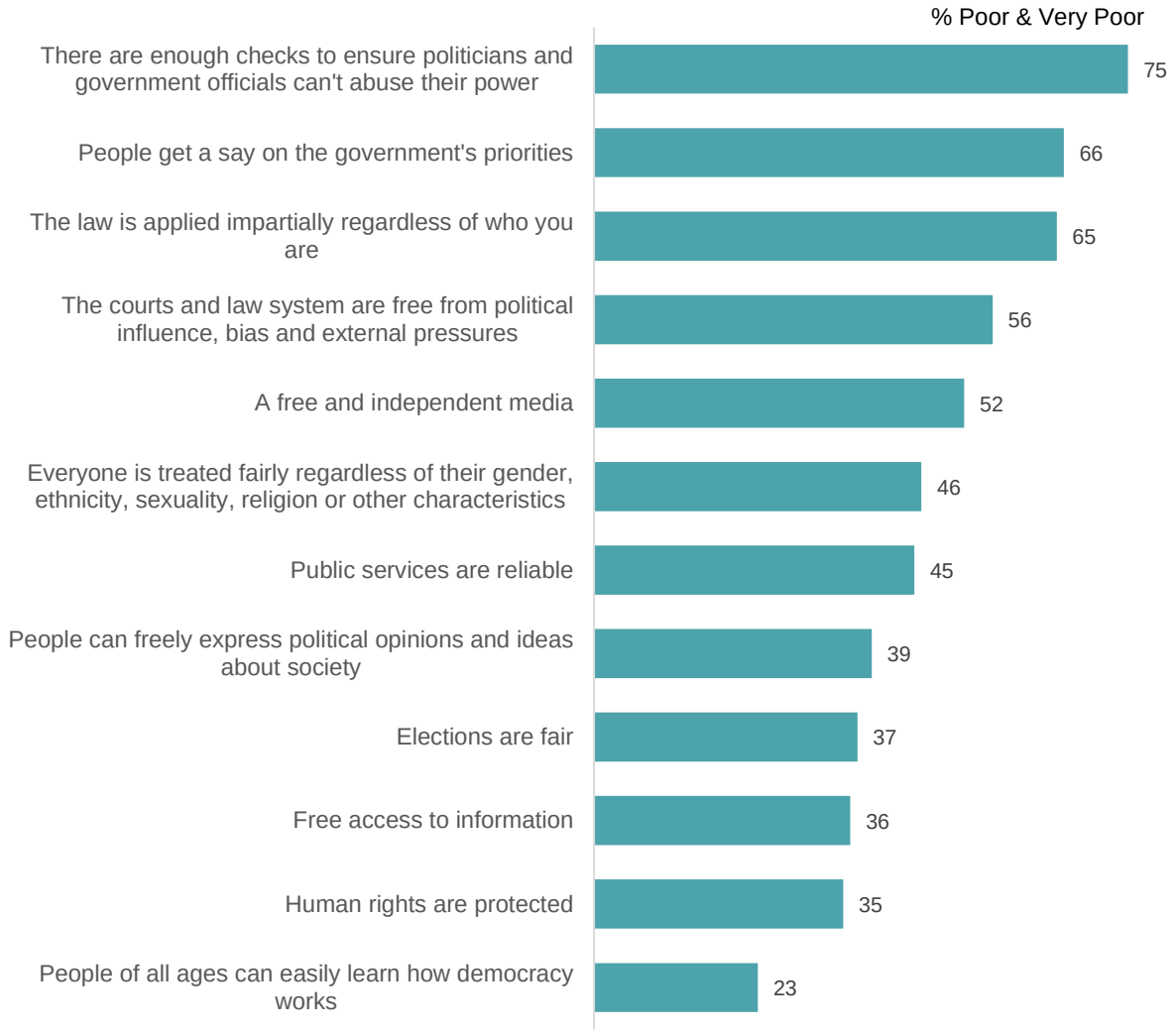



*Source: Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Reflecting on the hopeful stance of the 77% of dissatisfied people who still see merit in trying to improve democracy, we turn our focus to their specific concerns (Figure 1.5).

- This group predominantly worries about the abuse of power, with 75% thinking Australia doesn't have enough checks to ensure politicians and government officials can't abuse their power.
- The second concern from this group is the engagement of people in public affairs, with 66% questioning that people get a say on the government's priorities.
- The third concern is the judicial system, with 65% questioning that the law is applied impartially regardless of who you are, and 56% doubting the courts and law system are free from political influence, bias and external pressures.
- Additionally, over half of this group rate Australia low in guaranteeing a free and independent media (52%).

**Figure 1.5: Areas of concern for those who are dissatisfied with how democracy works, but worth fixing (June 2023)**




*Source: Q4. How well do you think Australia performs in each of the following areas of democracy? Base: Those dissatisfied with the way democracy works + Q.8 Agree & Strongly agree 'It's worthy trying to fix the problems democracy may have' (n=649)*

# Part 2: Public sentiment across the democratic landscape

**Key points**

- Australians value the fundamental elements of democracy.
- Some of the most valued elements of Australia's democracy are also regarded as its highest performers, while others are identified for improvement.
- Most people are satisfied with the public services they've used in the past year.
- We observed a high degree of variation in people's trust in public institutions and some focal points of concern across institutions.

Democracy is both a concept and a practice, each of which comprises multiple elements in turn. As a concept, democracy is a philosophy comprising various *values*, such as equal representation, individual rights and collective decision-making. In practice, democracy is a set of *institutions*, such as parliament, the government and the judiciary, each with separate powers and responsibilities to uphold these values. Although there are many democratic processes carried out by Australian public institutions, those most commonly experienced by Australians are *public services*, such as education and healthcare.

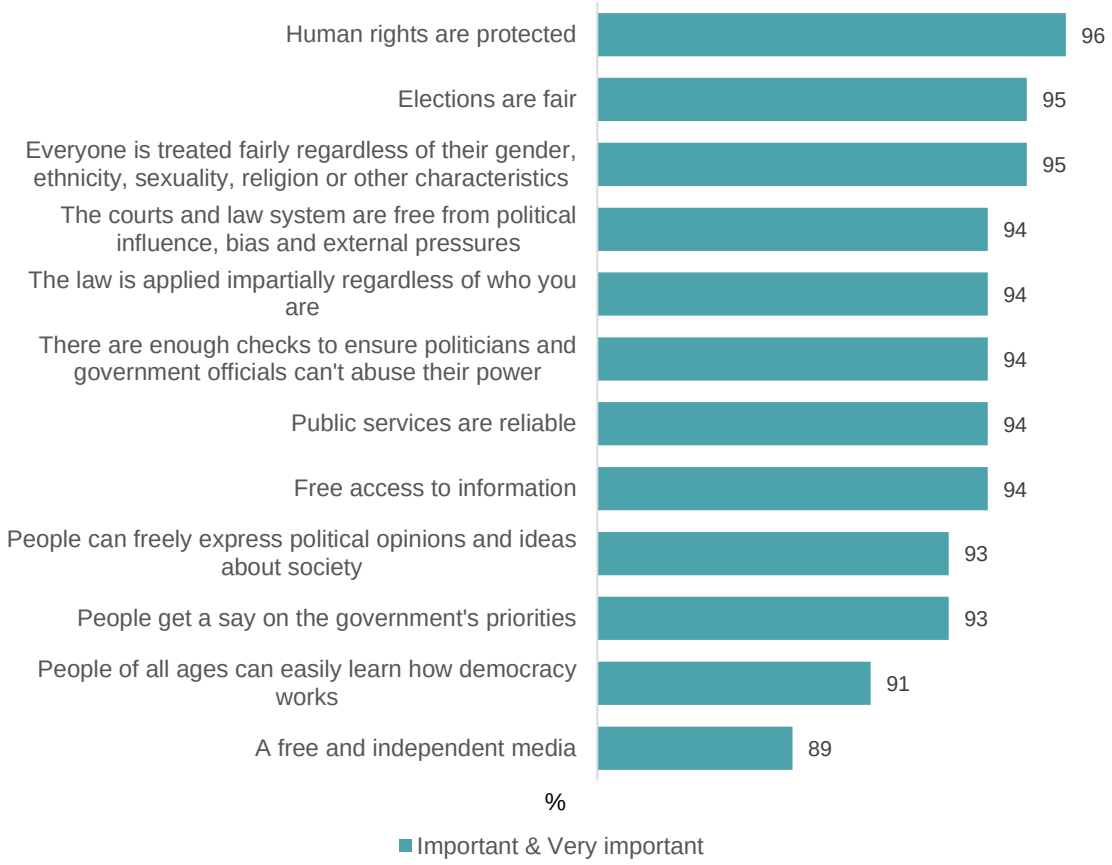
What are Australians' views on democratic values? Do they think Australia has done a good job in performing them? Do they trust their public institutions? Are they happy with the public services they receive?

In order to ascertain public sentiment across the democratic landscape, we asked survey participants about their views on the elements of each of these three major components of democracy (democratic values, public institutions, and public services).

## Democratic values

Noting it is not feasible to cover all democratic values, we presented participants with 12 that are commonly identified and asked people to rate how important they consider each to be. We found that Australians appreciate all values that form the backbone of democratic systems. Nearly all democratic values we listed have been considered 'important' or 'very important' by over 90% of the respondents (Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: Importance of democratic values to Australians (June 2023)**



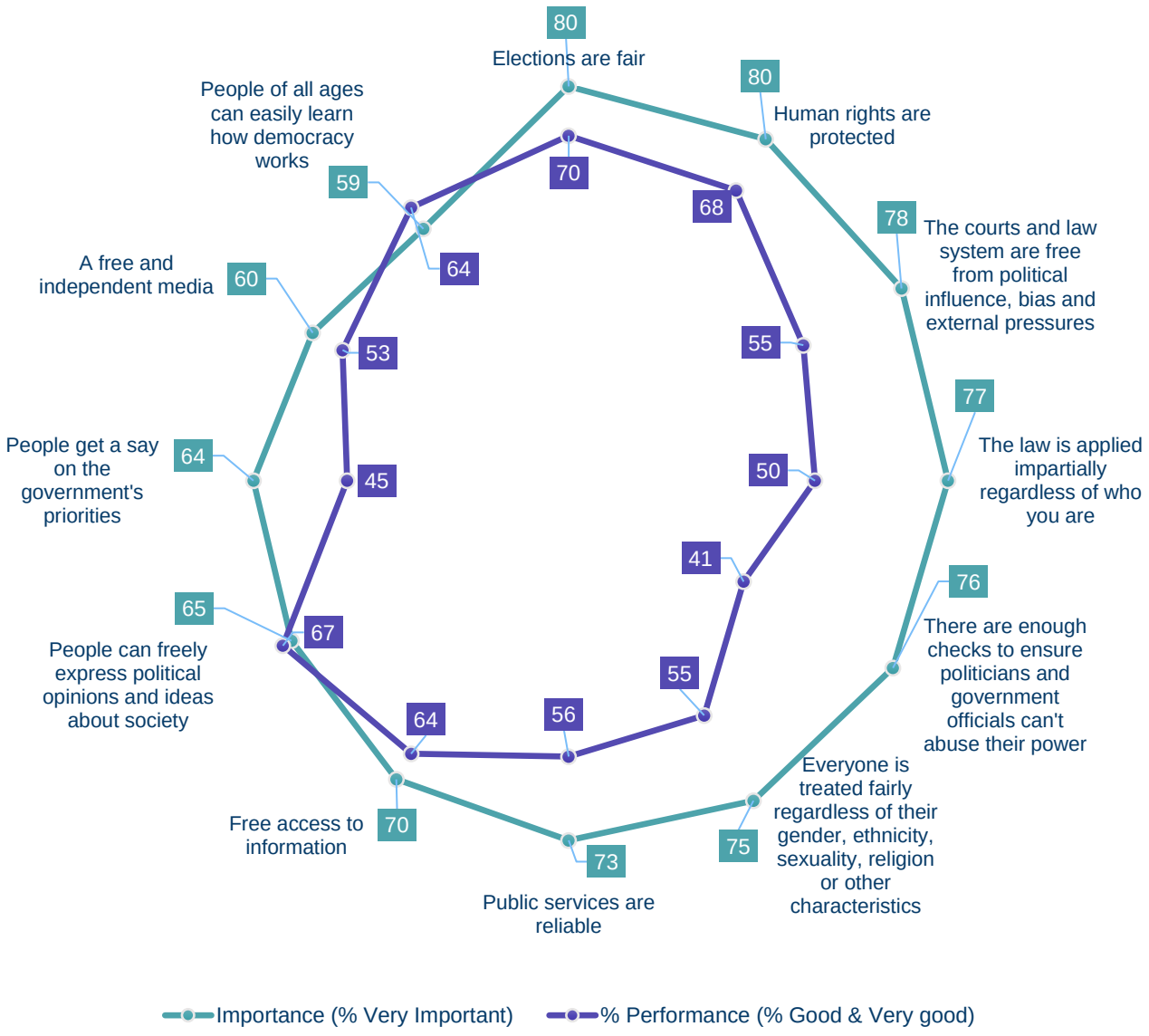

*Source: Q3. In thinking of what democracy means to you, how important do you consider each of the following elements of democracy? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Following the question about the importance of democratic values, we then asked respondents to assess how well they think each is being upheld in Australia. The results show both strengths and weakness of our democratic system (Figure 2.2). People rate highly the country's performance for keeping elections fair (70%), protecting human rights (68%), and ensuring freedom of speech (67%). In contrast, only half or less think that Australia performs well when it comes to applying laws impartially (51%), giving people a say on the government's priorities (45%), and conducting enough checks to ensure politicians and officials can't abuse their power (41%).

By comparing the degree of importance that respondents placed on the different elements of democracy with their performance rating, we can identify where expectations are not being met.

- The most substantial difference pertains to checks and balances. More than three-quarters (76%) of respondents think it is 'very important' to have enough checks to ensure politicians and government officials can't abuse their power. However, only 41% rate Australia as performing 'good' or 'very good' in this aspect.
- The second largest difference relates to the rule of law. While 77% of the respondents agree that the impartial application of laws is very important, only 50% think Australia does a good job of that. People also have high expectations of judicial independence. More than three-quarters (78%) think it's 'very important' that the courts and law system are free from political influence, bias and external pressures. Yet, only 55% indicate Australia is performing well in this.

**Figure 2.2: Difference between reported importance and perceived performance of core democratic values (June 2023)**




*Source: Q3. In thinking of what democracy means to you, how important do you consider each of the following elements of democracy? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q4. How well do you think Australia performs in each of the following areas of democracy? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

**Side Box 2.1: Elections remain a national strength for Australia**

Australia has had a long history of democratic innovation in our election system. Australians invented the secret ballot, which transformed what it meant to protect the right of people to freely elect their government, not just in Australia but around the world. We pioneered the introduction of compulsory voting as a democratic responsibility. Our survey finds that the majority of Australian's continue to value our electoral system as a national strength.

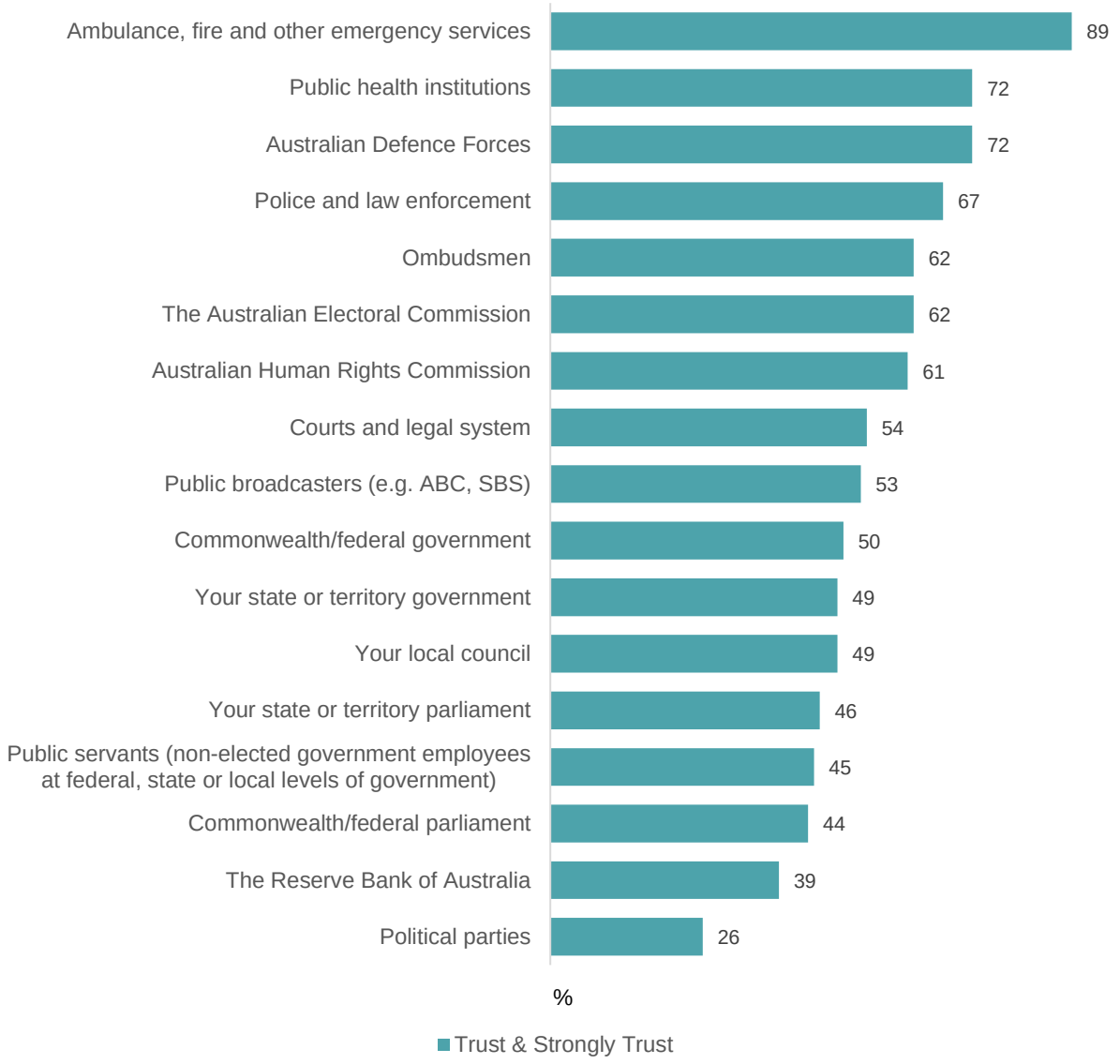
- 70% of the respondents think Australia performs 'good' or 'very good' when it comes to having fair elections.
- 66% agree or strongly agree that Australia's electoral system represents their vote accurately and fairly, while 12% disagree or strongly disagree, 3% are unsure, and 19% express a neutral view.
- 69% would still have been likely or very likely to vote in the most recent elections if it hadn't been compulsory.
- With compulsory voting, Australia demonstrates a much higher voter turnout of 90%, compared to other countries. By comparison, there are lower turnout rates in Canada (62%), France (46%), Japan (56%), Russia (52%), and Switzerland (47%).[8]

# Public institutions

There is a high degree of variation in Australians' trust of public institutions. Institutions which deliver tangible services are among the most trusted. Ambulance, fire and other emergency services are the most trusted institutions in Australia, with 89% of respondents expressing trust in them. This is followed by public health institutions (72%) and the Australian Defence Force (72%). In contrast, only 26% of Australians say they trust or strongly trust political parties. This level of trust in political parties is lower than the trust reported for all other institutions.

[8] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Voter Turnout Database*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023.

**Figure 2.3. Trust in different public institutions (June 2023)**




*Source: Q6. How much do you trust or distrust each of the following institutions? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

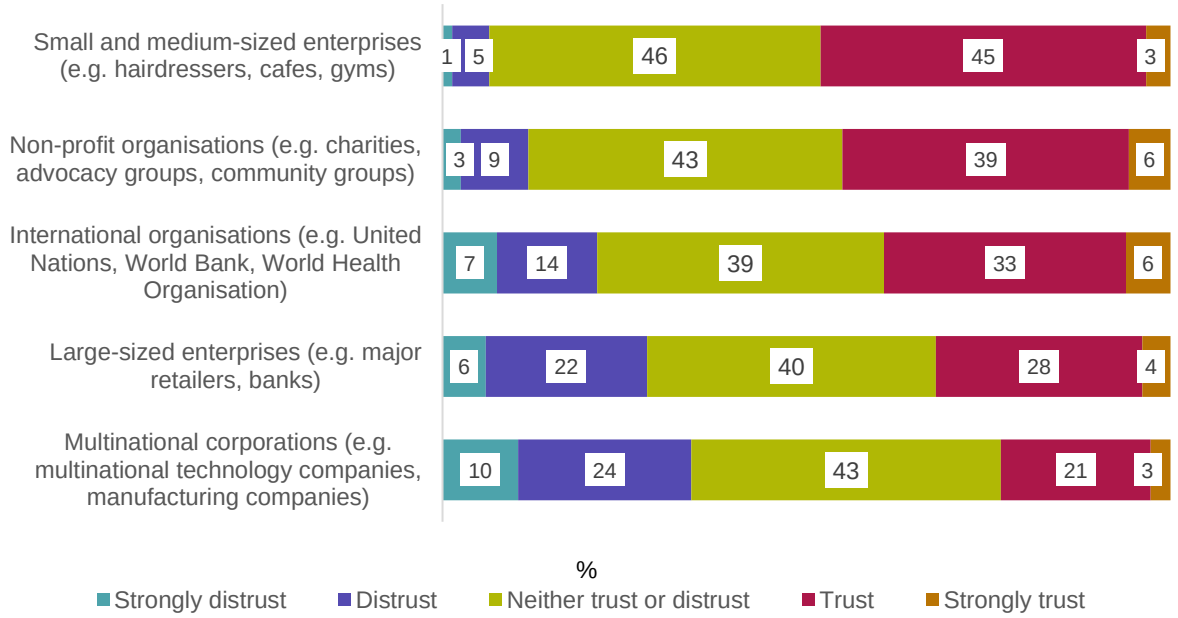
What are the underlying reasons contributing to these trust levels across public institutions? In the survey, we followed up participants regarding the institution for which they expressed the least trust, and asked them to identify concerns from a list of seven major drivers of trust. The results suggest some focal points of concern across institutions:

- The greatest concern people have for the Commonwealth government, Commonwealth parliament, political parties, and defence force is transparency. For example, almost half of the respondents (49%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Commonwealth government is 'transparent, inclusive and willing to engage with people'.
- When talking about the state or territory government and parliament, local councils and public servants, the key focus is whether they listen and respond to people's needs. For instance, over half of the respondents (56%) don't think their state or territory government listens and responds to the needs and concern of people.

- For the police and law enforcement, half of the individuals express concern about whether they value fairness and equity and treat people with respect and dignity. People also have concerns about transparency – 48% of the respondents disagreed that police and law enforcement 'are transparent, inclusive and willing to engage with people.'
- A high proportion (73%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Reserve Bank of Australia listens and responds to the needs and concerns of people in a timely and effective manner. The same concern was raised for our courts and legal system by 42% of respondents.

Where do the public institutions stand in the broader spectrum of trust? Do Australians trust them more than other organisations? To contextualise the trust levels in public institutions, we also asked survey participants about their trust in a range of organisations. The results show that Australians have a higher trust in public institutions compared to certain other organisations. For instance, trust in multinational corporations is lower at 23%, falling behind political parties (26%). Large enterprises, such as major retailers and banks, have a lower trust level of 32%. In contrast, small and medium-sized enterprises provide a benchmark of 48% trust, placing them in the middle of the spectrum if included among the public institutions (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4: Trust in other organisations (June 2023)**

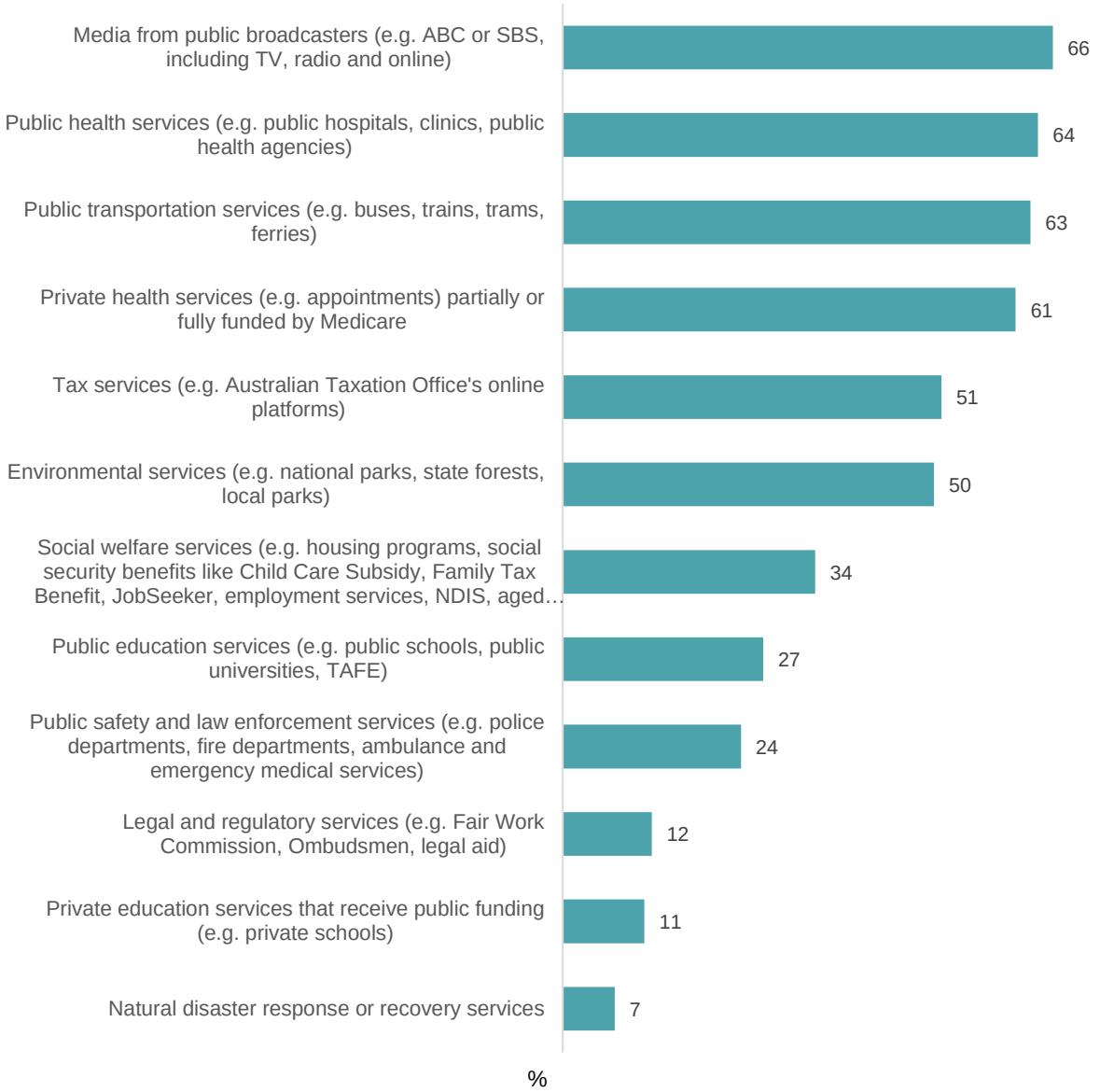



*Source: Q21. How much do you trust or distrust each of the following organisations? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

# Public services

As shown in Figure 2.5, Australians use a broad range of public services. The most common is media from public broadcasters, with 66% of respondents in our survey reporting they have used this service in the last year. This was followed by public health services (64%), and public transport (63%). Usage is lowest for legal and regulatory services (12%), private education services (11%), and natural disaster response (7%).

**Figure 2.5: Use of public services in the past 12 months (June 2023)**



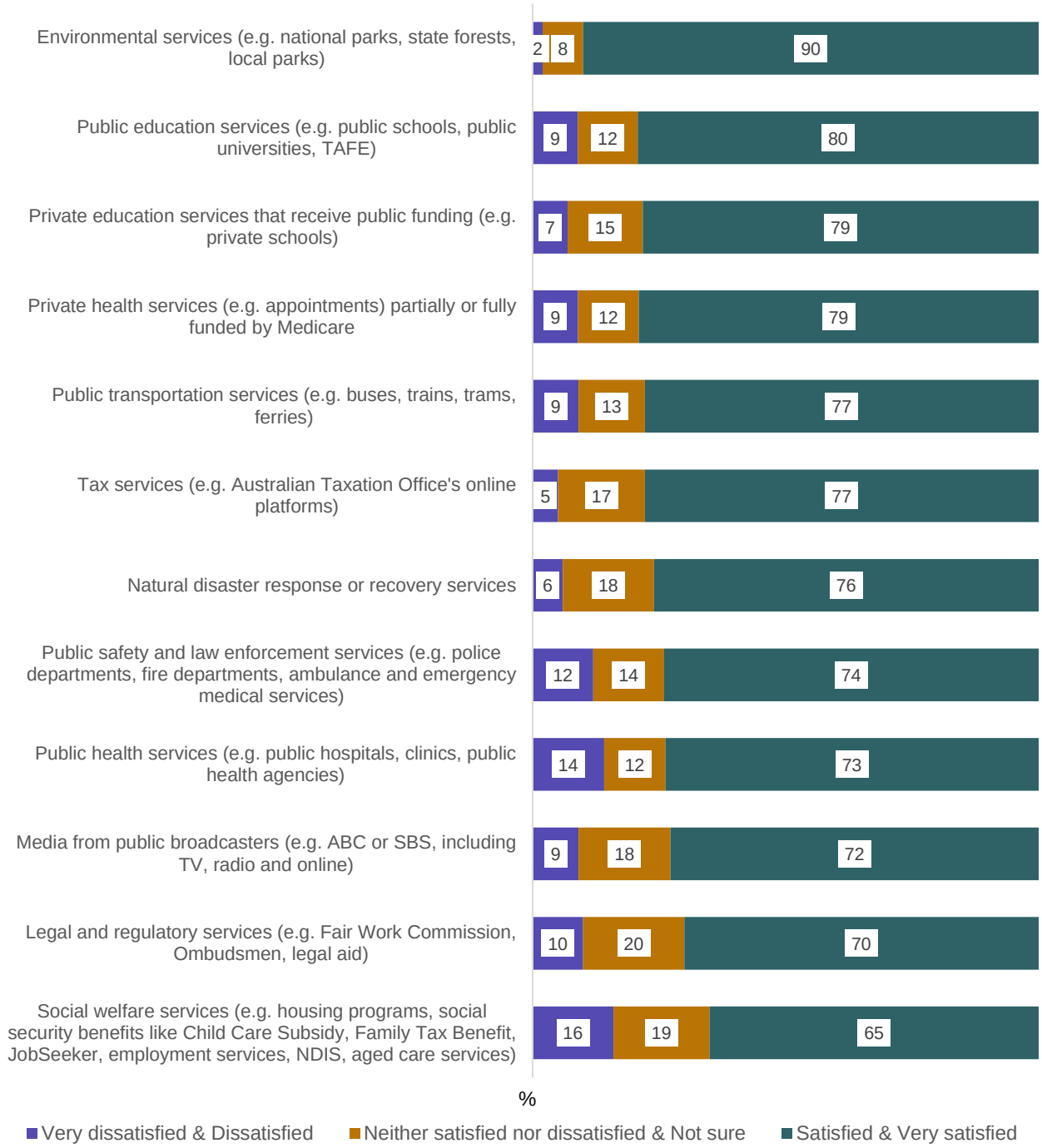

*Source: Q5. In the last 12 months, have you used any of the following? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

When asked about their satisfaction with services they used in the past year, most people reported being satisfied. The highest level of satisfaction, at 90%, is reported among users of environmental services; social welfare services users express the lowest level of satisfaction at 65% (Figure 2.6). Social welfare services, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Aged Care, cater to a vulnerable population. We often observe that individuals with greater vulnerabilities express lower trust and satisfaction levels in their interactions with services.[9] One reason for this is that greater

[9] Australian Public Service Commission, *Trust in Australian public services: 2023 Annual Report*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023.

vulnerabilities mean there is a higher bar for services to be trustworthy and higher standards they need to strive for to satisfy needs.

**Figure 2.6: Satisfaction with public services being used in the past 12 months (June 2023)**




*Sources: Q5a. How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with your most recent experience with each of the following?*
*Base: Q5. Those who had used the services in the last 12 months (n=632 to 3,370).*

# Part 3: Drivers of public sentiment

**Key points**

- It is important to understand and alleviate the factors that are associated with people's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with Australian democracy.
- Some factors are more closely connected with people's satisfaction or dissatisfaction than others. These include people's civic knowledge and education level, social capital and their wellbeing and life events.

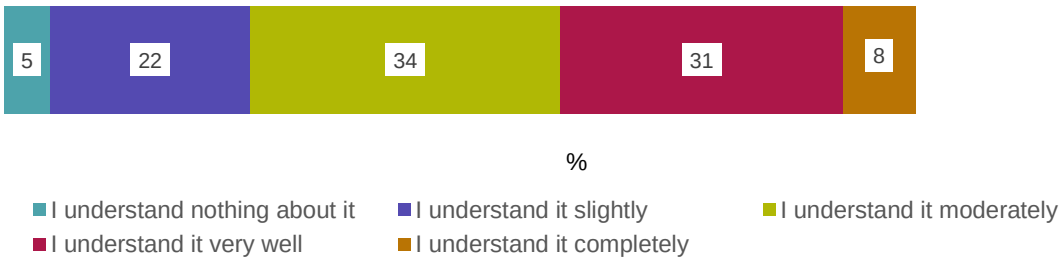
What drives a person's sentiment toward democracy, shaping their degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction? In this part of the report, we present findings regarding drivers that are known to influence sentiments in five broad categories, including civic knowledge and education, sources of information, social capital, wellbeing and life events. In each, we report the status quo of those drivers in Australia, such as the extent of civic knowledge, and strength of association with public sentiment.

## Civic knowledge and education

Civic knowledge refers to an understanding of democratic process, rights and responsibilities. Civic education, on the other hand, is the process of educating people about these aspects. It equips people with the knowledge necessary to understand and participate effectively in their democracy. Australia has a long history of stable democratic governance, but how well do its people understand the workings of their democracy?

Our survey shows that most Australians believe they possess a basic understanding of Australian democracy, with 39% mentioning they understand it 'very well' or 'completely'. On the contrary, 5% of respondents say they understand nothing about Australian democracy (Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1: Understanding of Australian democracy (June 2023)**

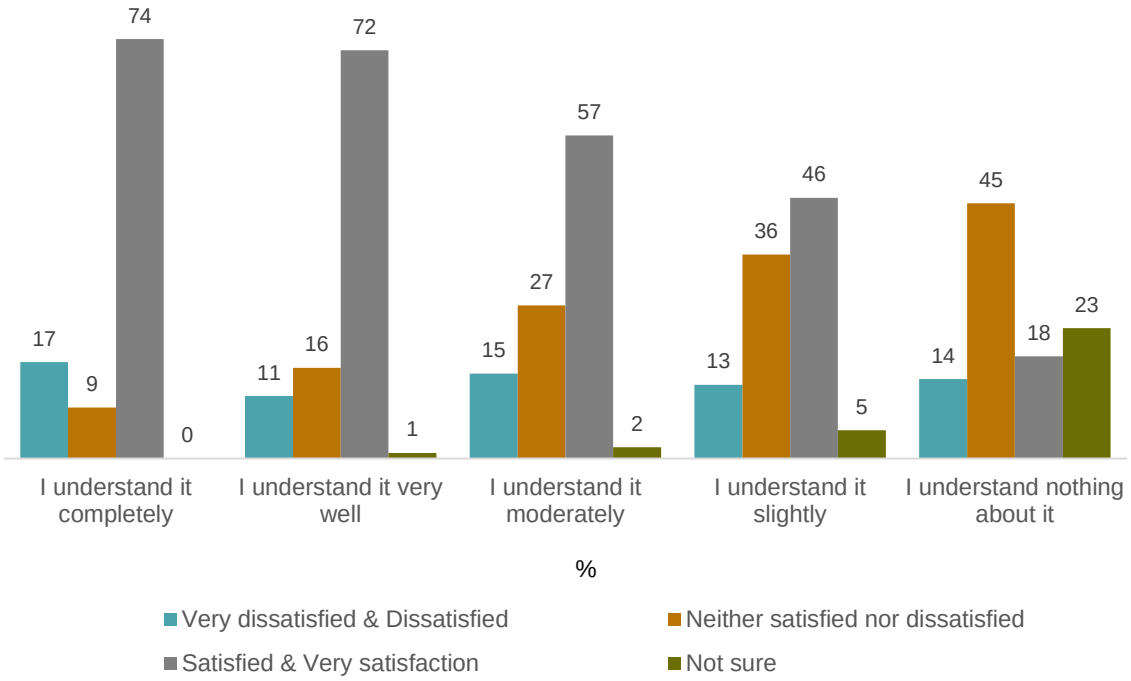



*Source: Q1. To start with, how would you describe your understanding of how democracy works in Australia?*
*Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Does people's knowledge about democracy contribute to their satisfaction with it? The short answer is yes. As Figure 3.2 shows, the 8% who indicate they understand Australian democracy completely also express the highest levels of satisfaction with its functioning at 74%. There is also an association between lower understanding and indifference. Among those who say they do not understand democracy, 45% report feeling 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' with the way it works, and a further

23% report they are 'Not sure'. In contrast, among those with the most extensive knowledge, only 9% express neutrality, 17% express dissatisfaction, and none are uncertain about their satisfaction levels.

**Figure 3.2: Understanding of democracy and satisfaction with democracy (June 2023)**




*Source: Q1. To start with, how would you describe your understanding of how democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

In Australia, civic education has been integrated into school curricula, particularly in primary and secondary education. Civic knowledge is also gained through experiential activities, such as visiting Australia's state, territory or federal parliament, touring cultural institutions or engaging in school elections. Beyond formal schooling, people can participate in civic education through community education programs and adult education courses provided by government bodies, NGOs and universities.

Our results show that the involvement of Australians in civic education activities, or at least their recollection of it, is quite limited. Only 25% of the respondents reported having participated in school-run civic or citizenship learning activities in primary or secondary school while 31% have had the opportunity to visit a state, territory or federal parliament for civic learning. Additionally, 25% have engaged in civic learning outside their primary or secondary education.

How does civic education shape people's views on democracy? Our survey results point to a notable association between civic education and people's perceptions and engagement with democracy. In particular:

- People who have received civic education in their primary or secondary school are more likely to say they understand democracy. More than half (53%) of those with this education feel they understand Australian democracy 'very well' or 'completely', compared to 34% without such education.

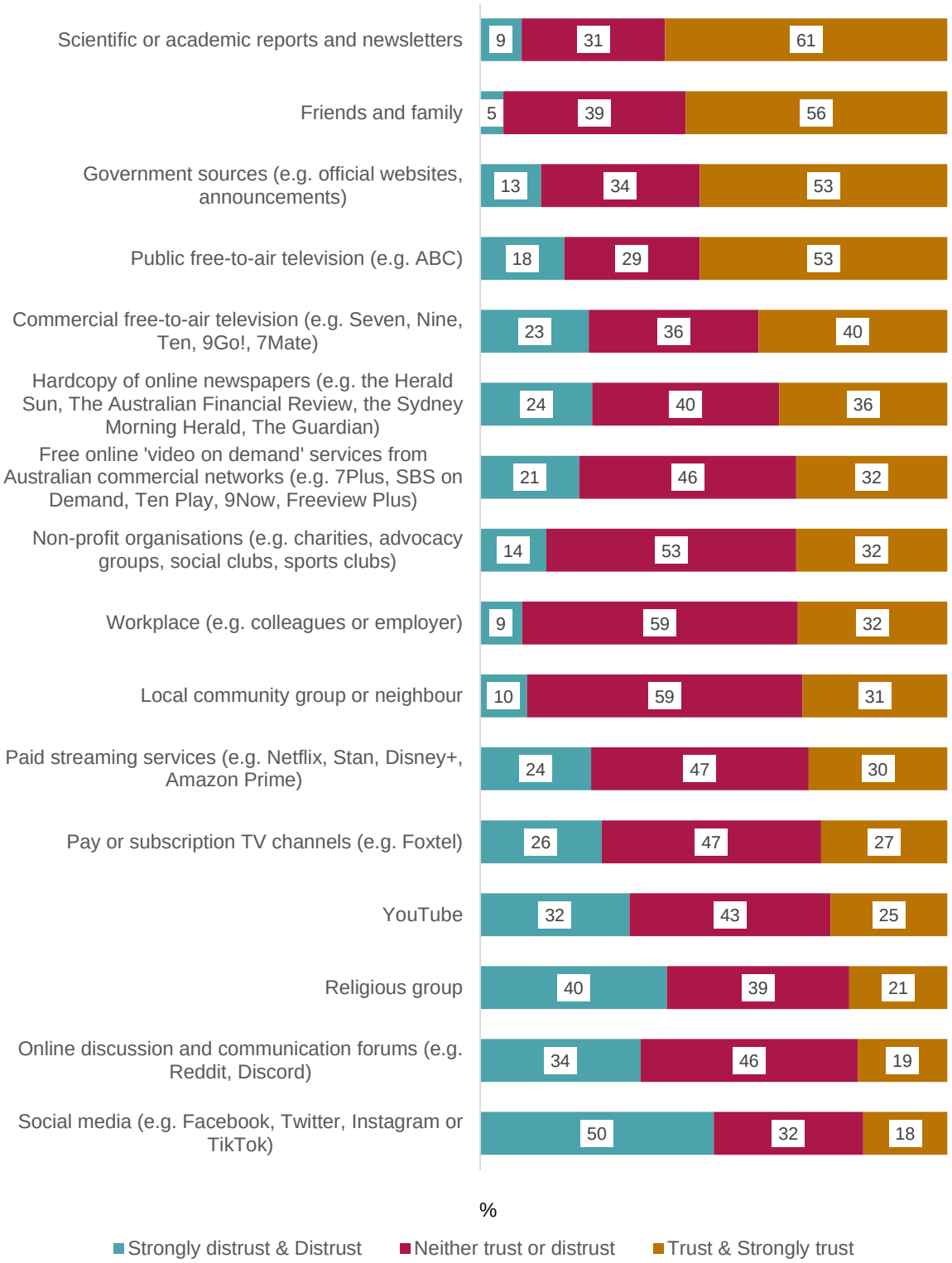
- People with civic education tend to be more satisfied with how democracy works in Australia – 72% satisfaction among those reporting civic education versus 54% among others.

# Sources of information

By ‘sources of information’, we mean the source where individuals obtain their news and information about politics and government. These sources include traditional media (e.g. newspapers, television), social media platforms (e.g. Twitter/X, YouTube), family and friends, or government websites. We seek to understand whether people’s trust in different sources of information affects their attitudes towards Australian democracy.

In our survey, among 16 sources listed, scientific or academic reports and newsletters were found to be the most trusted source of information, with 61% of respondents reporting trust. Also ranked highly were friends and family (56%), and government sources (53%). In contrast, social media was perceived as the least trusted, with only 18% of the respondents reporting trust. Online discussions and religious groups were just above this, with 19% and 21% reporting trust respectively (Figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.3: Trust in different sources of information (June 2023)**




*Source: Q19. How much do you trust each of the following as a reliable source of information? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Does people's trust in various information sources influence their views on Australian democracy? Our survey suggests it does, with a trend of those more satisfied with democracy showing greater trust

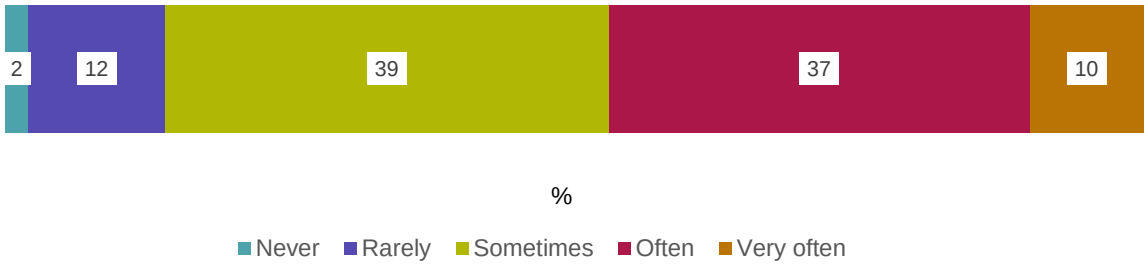
across all listed information sources. This trend, however, also reveals disparities. The most pronounced is in the trust of government sources like official websites and announcements – 69% of those satisfied with Australian democracy trust them, in contrast to just 21% of the dissatisfied. Public free-to-air television (e.g. ABC) and scientific or academic sources also show notable gaps in trust levels between those satisfied and dissatisfied (65% vs. 24% and 74% vs. 39%, respectively).

# Social capital

Social capital refers to the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. In our survey, we measure social capital by asking people about their participation in social activities and levels of trust in others.

Our findings indicate a moderate level of social participation among Australians, with 47% reporting that they engage in family and community activities 'often' or 'very often'. Thirty nine per cent 'sometimes' participate in social activities and 14% 'rarely' or 'never' participated in these activities. (Figure 3.4)

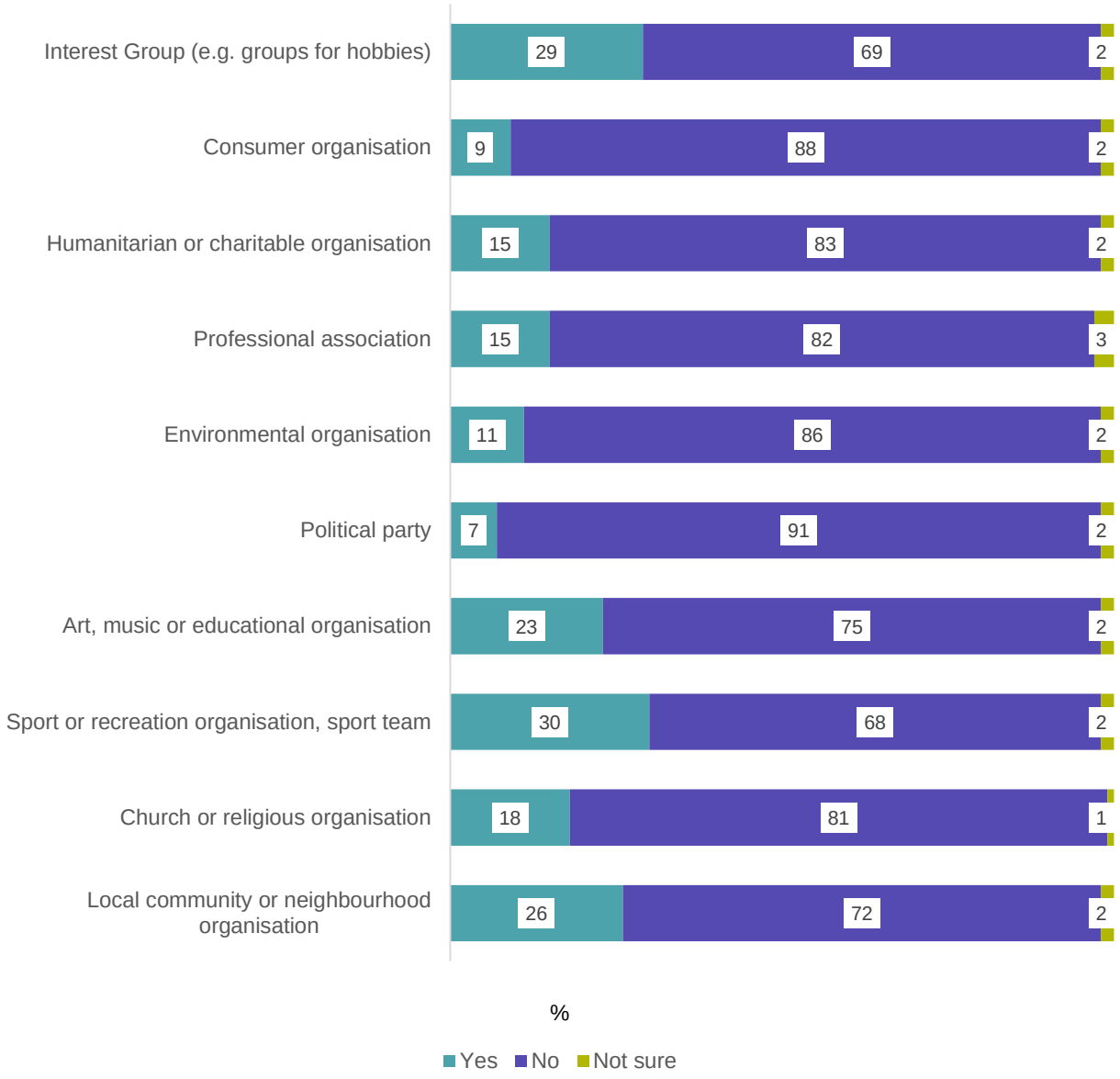
**Figure 3.4: Frequency of participation in social activities (June 2023)**




*Source: Q29: Overall, how often do you take part in social activities (e.g. spending time with family, seeing friends, participating in community events)? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

We also asked respondents whether they engaged in activities hosted by various groups in the past year (Figure 3.5). The results reveal an overall limited interest of the respondents to participate in community social events. Thirty six per cent of the respondents have not participated in any activities hosted by the 10 social groups we listed in the past year. Among those who have participated, engagement is highest in sport or recreation activities, with a participation rate of 30%. This is followed closely by involvement in interest groups at 29%, and participation in local community or neighbourhood organisations at 26%. The lowest engagement level is in events organised by political parties, where only 7% have attended in the past year. Activities by consumer and environmental organisations also attract lower participation, at 9% and 11% respectively.

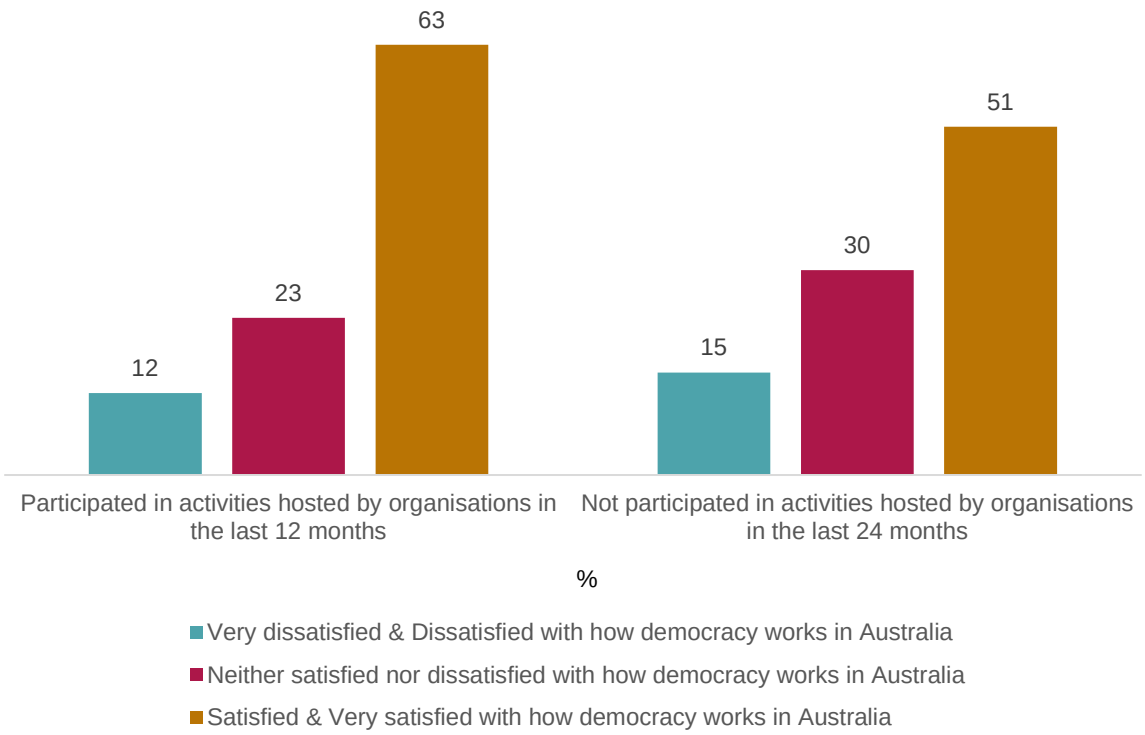
**Figure 3.5: Participation in social activities hosted by external organisations (June 2023)**




*Source: Q28. In the last 12 months, have you participated in activities hosted by the following groups? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Our findings show that being involved in social events organised by external groups does impact how satisfied people are with democracy. Sixty three per cent of respondents who actively took part in social events organised by external groups expressed being very satisfied or satisfied with democracy, while the satisfaction level of those who didn't participate in activities was 51% (Figure 3.6).

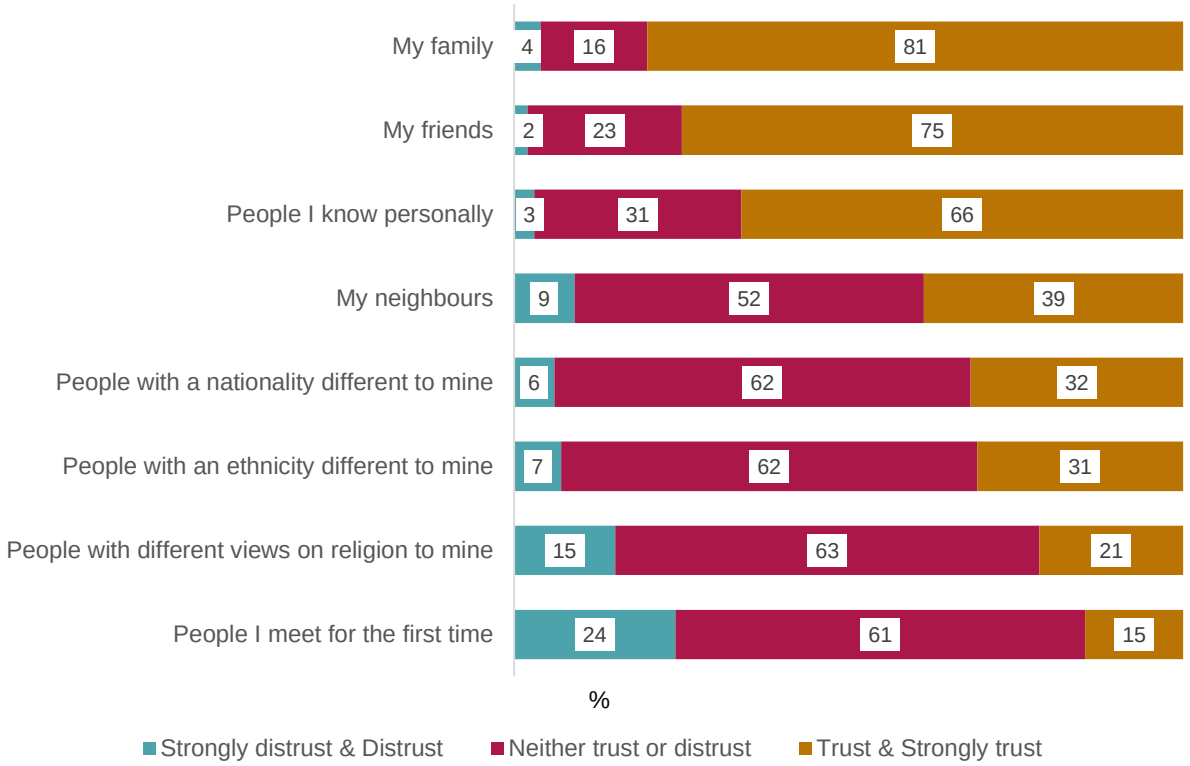
**Figure 3.6: Participation in social activities and satisfaction with democracy (June 2023)**




*Source: Q28. In the last 12 months, have you participated in activities hosted by the following groups? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

In terms of trust in others, as Figure 3.7 shows, a majority of people expressed a high level of trust towards their family (81%) and friends (75%), as well as individuals they know personally (66%). This sense of trust decreased when considering neighbours, people with different nationality, ethnicity and religion, and individuals meeting for the first time.

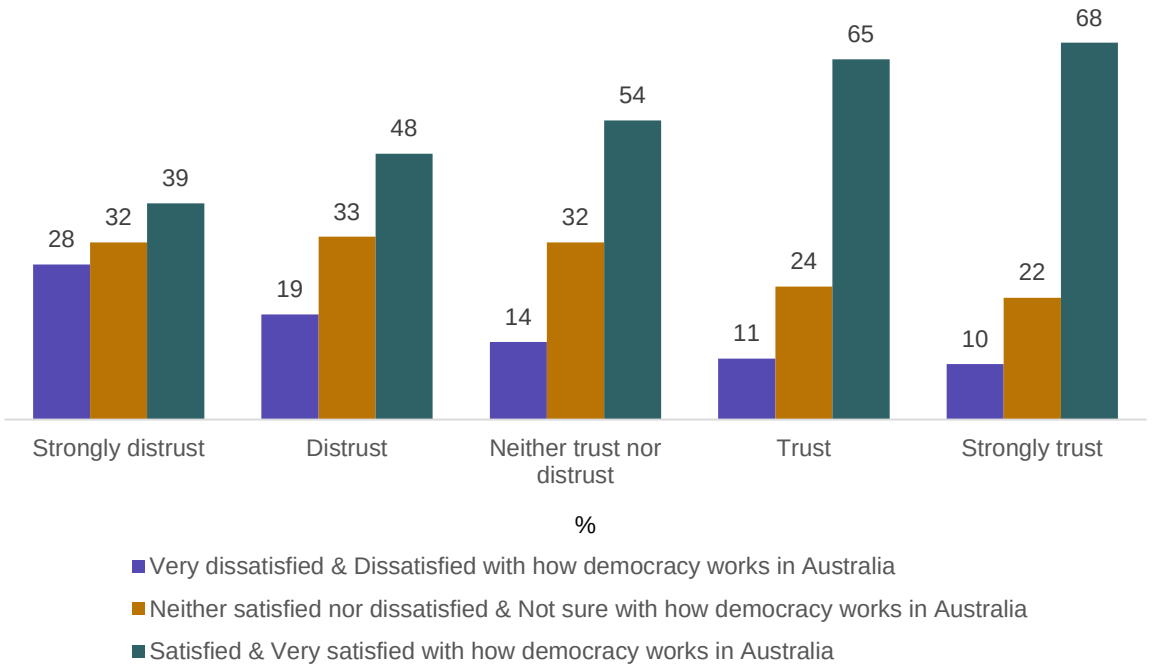
**Figure 3.7: Trust in others (June 2023)**




*Source: Q20. How much do you trust or distrust the following groups? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

A positive relationship between trust in others and satisfaction with democracy has been observed. As Figure 3.8 shows, among individuals who expressed trust in others, 65% said they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with how democracy works in Australia; for those who indicated strongly trust in others, this satisfaction level was 68%. In contrast, only 48% of those who expressed distrust in others and 39% of those who expressed strong distrust in others said they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with Australian democracy. This highlights the fundamental relationship between trust in others and satisfaction with democracy.

**Figure 3.8: Satisfaction with Australian democracy and trust in others (June 2023)**




*Source: Q20. How much do you trust or distrust the following groups? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

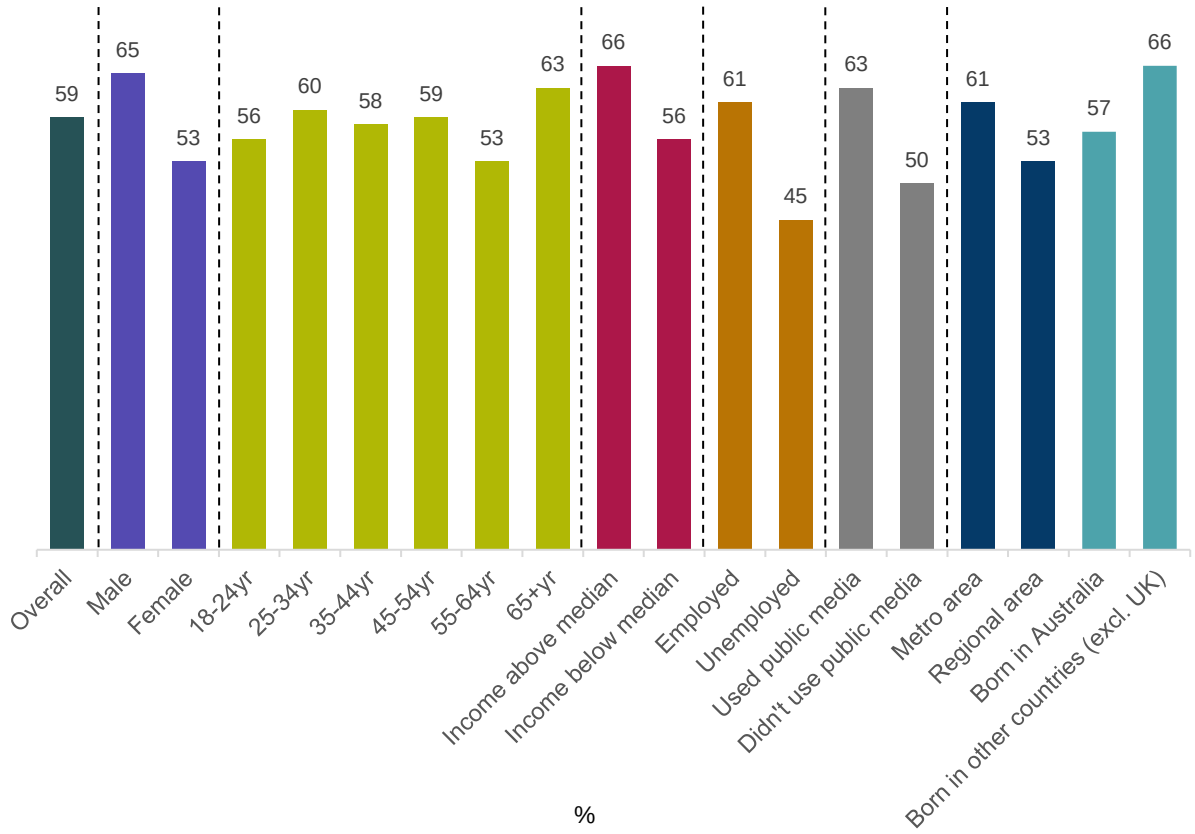
# Wellbeing and life events

Our survey asked about various facets of wellbeing including physical and mental health, satisfaction with life, and socioeconomic status. It also canvassed significant occurrences in a person's life that happened in the prior 12 months, such as marriage, the birth of a child, a career change or the loss of a loved one, which we refer to as 'life events'. For the purposes of analysis, we group these life events into negative (e.g. experiencing injury, illness or chronic conditions), neutral (e.g. travelling overseas), and positive categories (e.g. starting a new job or returning to work).

Our results showed that satisfaction levels are comparatively lower among women, low-income individuals[10], the unemployed, and residents in regional areas. Respondents aged 55-64 and those who didn't use public media in the last year reported lower satisfaction levels. Additionally, satisfaction levels among individuals born in Australia are comparatively lower than immigrants, except those from the UK (Figure 3.9).

[10] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Characteristics of Employment, Australia: Weekly earnings of employees, casual workers, independent contractors, trade union membership, labour hire, job flexibility, job security*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023.

**Figure 3.9: Satisfaction with democracy by demographics (June 2023)**




*Source: Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

Are wellbeing and life events associated with the way people feel about democracy? Our survey suggests they are. As Table 3.1 shows, among all respondents, 13% are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with Australian democracy overall. There is almost double this rate of dissatisfaction in some disadvantaged groups. Those experiencing social isolation tend to show the lowest satisfaction levels in Australian democracy (25%), followed by those who have experienced financial hardship (24%), self-employed (23%), and unable to work (23%). Additionally, higher dissatisfaction rates are observed in those facing discrimination in Australia (21%), individuals with disabilities (21%), individuals with mental health conditions (20%), and those with an education level lower than Year 12 (16%).

**Table 3.1: Dissatisfaction with Australian democracy and negative life events (June 2023)**

| | *Social isolation* | *Financial hardship* | *Self-employed* | *Unable to work* | *Discrimination* | *Disability* | *Mental health* | *< Year 12* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Total* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *13%* | **25%** | **24%** | **23%** | **23%** | **21%** | **21%** | **20%** | **16%** |
| | Felt isolated from others 'all the time' in the last four weeks | Has experienced financial hardships in the last 12 months | Self-employed | Unable to work | Has experienced discrimination in Australia | Has or has had a disability in the last 12 months | Has or has had a mental health condition in the last 12 months | Highest year of primary or secondary school was less than year 12 |
| | n = 81 | n = 210 | n = 272 | n = 188 | n = 465 | n = 131 | n = 294 | n = 275 |

*Source: Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q31. Have you ever experienced discrimination or been discriminated against in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + D7. What is the highest year of primary or secondary school you have completed? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + D10. Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

In addition to satisfaction, our survey found that experiencing negative life events also affects people's trust in public institutions, as shown in Table 3.2. Trust in most institutions is lower among individuals recently unemployed and those facing recent financial hardships, and those with disabilities or mental health conditions. For example, 35% of people facing financial hardship report trusting the federal government, compared with 50% of the general population.

**Table 3.2: Negative life events and trust in public institutions (June 2023)**

Significantly lower | Significantly higher | %

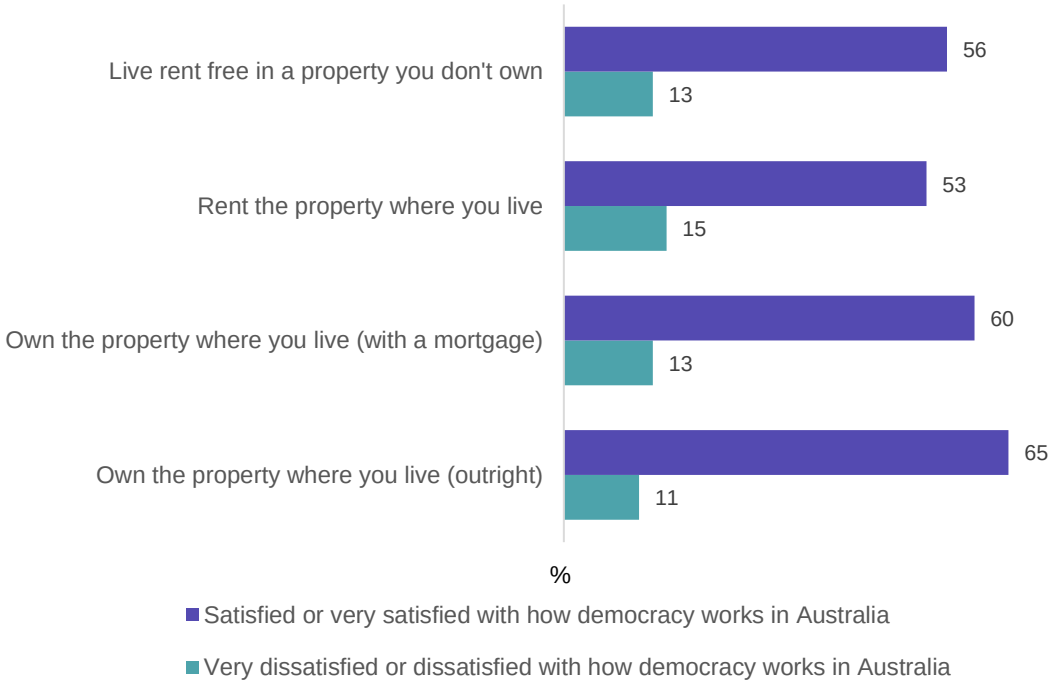
| Life events experience | Federal govt. | Federal Parliament | Your state / territory govt. | Your state / territory parliament | Your local council | Public servants | Courts and legal system | Public health institutions | Ambulance, fire and other emergency services |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experienced an injury, illness, or chronic condition | 46 | 38 | 47 | 41 | 43 | 43 | 51 | 74 | 92 |
| Applied for or renewed a licence, permit or card | 47 | 40 | 47 | 43 | 46 | 42 | 52 | 74 | 93 |
| None of the above | 51 | 46 | 48 | 46 | 52 | 47 | 55 | 71 | 86 |
| Have or had a mental health condition | 39 | 34 | 42 | 38 | 39 | 37 | 43 | 69 | 90 |
| Travelled overseas | 56 | 50 | 55 | 52 | 54 | 50 | 64 | 78 | 90 |
| Experienced a death in the family | 42 | 37 | 42 | 39 | 46 | 40 | 48 | 68 | 90 |
| Started a new job/returned to work | 48 | 43 | 51 | 47 | 52 | 49 | 53 | 71 | 86 |
| Experienced financial hardship | 35 | 30 | 36 | 33 | 37 | 33 | 36 | 63 | 87 |
| Paid a fine or debt to the Australian government | 43 | 39 | 48 | 44 | 49 | 45 | 48 | 71 | 86 |
| Have or had a disability | 43 | 36 | 42 | 38 | 37 | 39 | 44 | 69 | 92 |
| Changed usual place of residence in Australia | 40 | 36 | 46 | 40 | 43 | 38 | 50 | 68 | 86 |
| Became or are currently unemployed | 40 | 35 | 38 | 38 | 40 | 38 | 44 | 64 | 82 |
| Entered or continued university or vocational training | 51 | 45 | 49 | 49 | 55 | 49 | 52 | 72 | 85 |
| **Overall trust level** | **50** | **44** | **49** | **46** | **49** | **45** | **54** | **72** | **89** |

*Source: D10. Which of the following have you experienced in the last 12 months? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q6. How much do you trust or distrust each of the following institutions? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

**Side Box 3.1: How does property ownership affect the way Australians feel about democracy?**

Property owners (outright) demonstrate a higher satisfaction rate with democracy in Australia, recording 65% satisfaction level. In contrast, renters exhibit a lower satisfaction level at 53%, suggesting a potential relationship between home ownership status and satisfaction with the democratic system (Figure 3.8).

**Figure 3.8: Property ownership and satisfaction with democracy (June 2023)**




*Source: D5. Which of the following best describes your housing situation? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

The trust levels in public institutions vary significantly between property owners (outright) and renters. Outright property owners exhibit a higher propensity for trust across most public institutions, whereas renters tend to express lower levels of trust in these entities. The most significant gaps have been seen with trust in police and law enforcement (76% vs. 60%), the Australian Electoral Commission (73% vs. 55%) and the Reserve Bank of Australia (48% vs. 35%).

# Part 4: Civic engagement and barriers to participation

**Key points**

- The prevalence of civic engagement is low.
- An exploratory attempt at differentiating drivers of more or less constructive approaches to reforming democracy indicates key concerns revolve around corruption, integrity, fairness, and foreign interference.

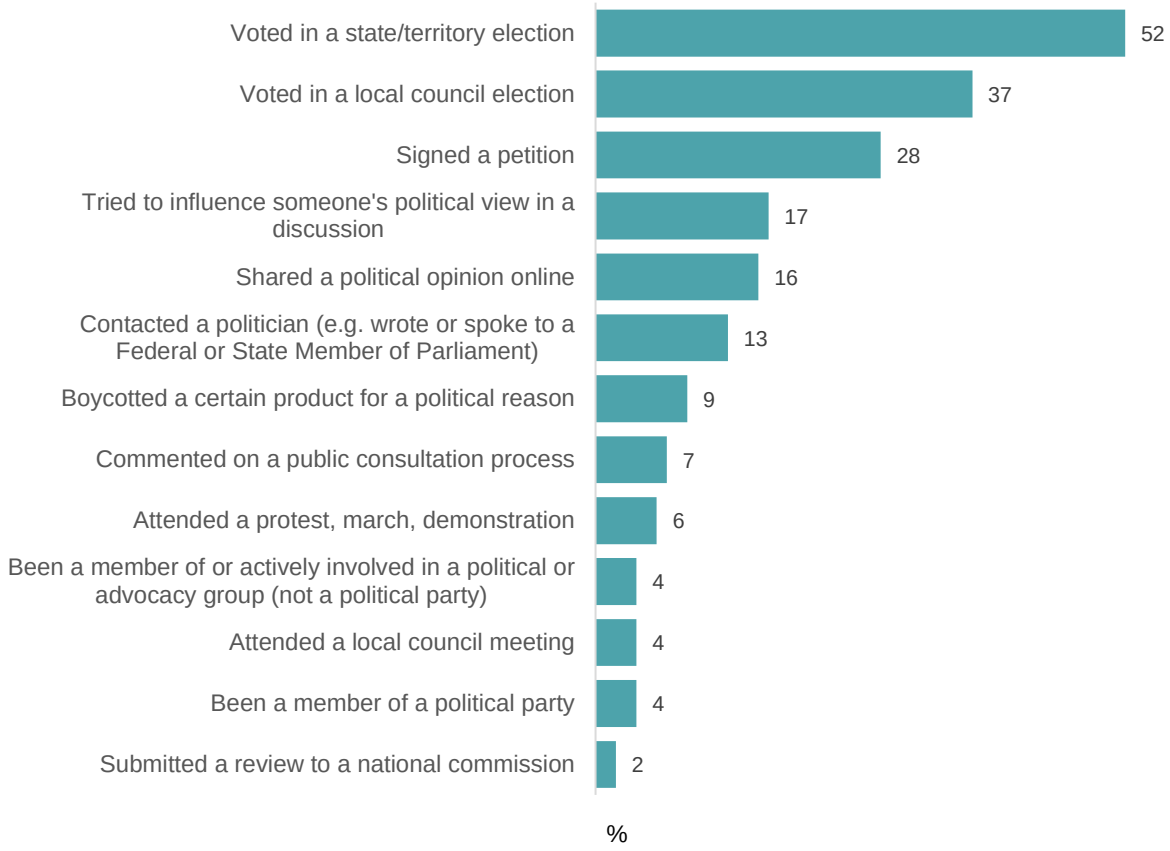
When people are dissatisfied with the way democracy works, there are many ways in which they can engage and participate in democracy to affect desirable changes. The long-term health and sustainability of democracy relies on them doing so. It is therefore important to understand the extent to which Australians engage in civic activities and, in instances where they don't, what the barriers are to doing so.

## Civic engagement and participation

Our survey listed 13 civic activities, such as voting, attending public consultations, protests and advocacy campaigns, and asked respondents about their participation over the last 12 months. The results show that civic engagement among Australians is relatively low, with limited involvement in democratic activities.

At the time of the survey in June 2023, the most common type of participation for the period of covering the prior 12 months was voting, with 52% in state and territory elections and 37% in local council elections. The next most frequent activity was signing petitions, reported by 28% of respondents. Other forms of participation, such as attending a protest, march or demonstration, being a member or actively being involved in a political or advocacy group, attending a local council meeting, or commenting on a public consultation process were less common, with less than 10% engagement. In contrast, 24% of the respondents stated that they haven't participated in any of these activities in the past year (Figure 4.1).

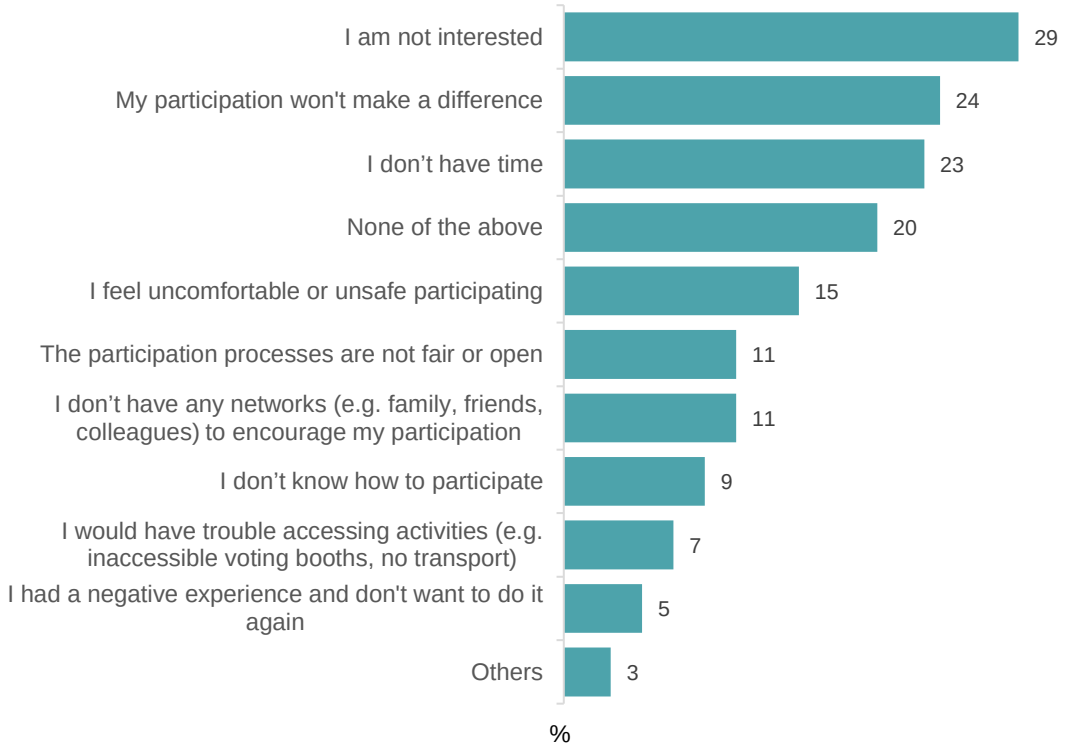
**Figure 4.1: Participation in civic activities in the past 12 months (June 2023)**




*Source: Q17. Which of the following have you participated in over the last 12 months? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

What are the barriers that prevent people from getting involved? As Figure 4.2 shows, the primary reason is a lack of interest. Twenty nine per cent of the respondents mentioned they are not interested in participating in civic activities. The second most common reason, cited by 24%, is the belief that their participation would yield little impact. Additionally, 23% pointed to a lack of time inhibiting their participation in civic affairs.

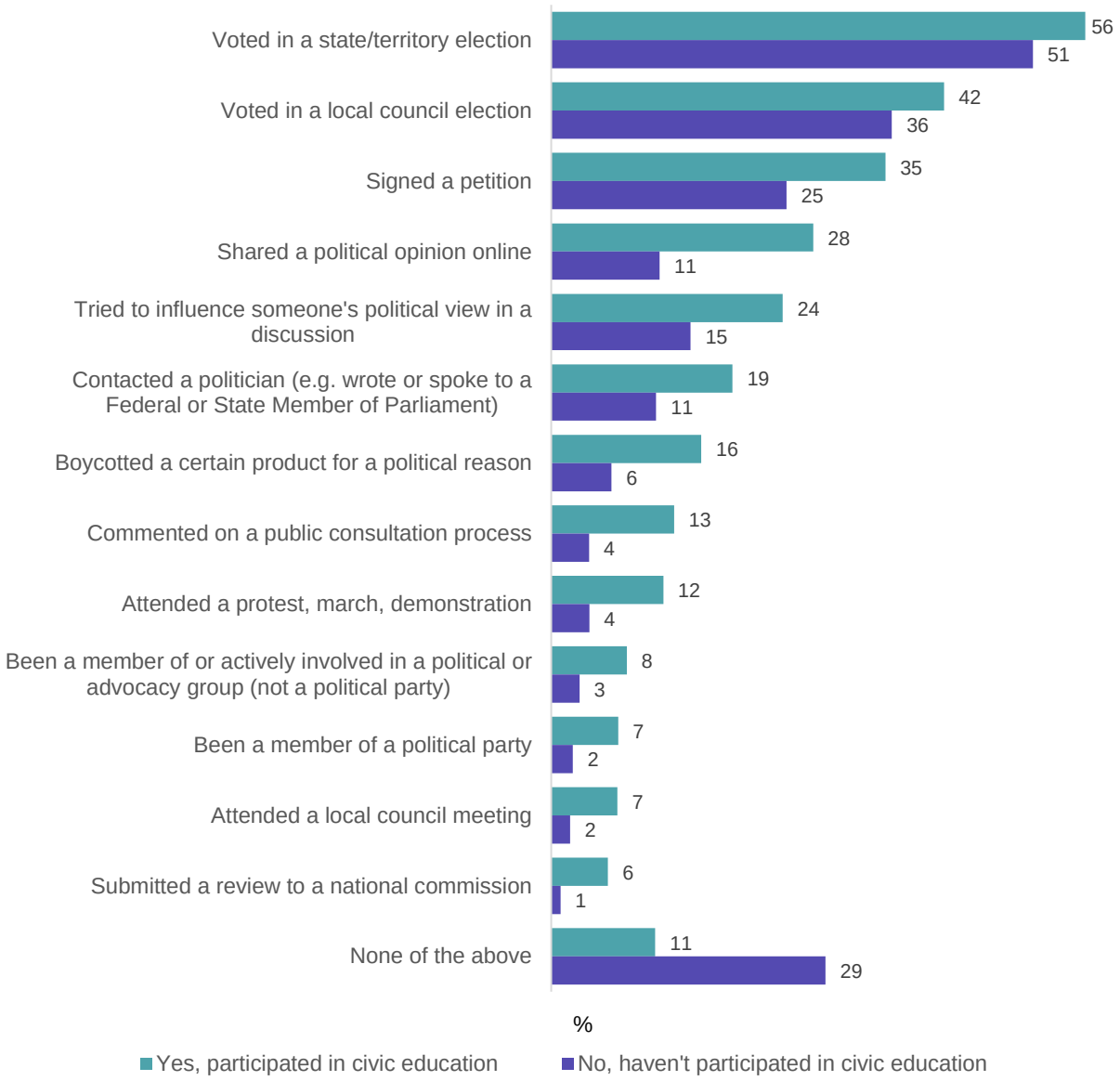
**Figure 4.2: Barriers to civic participation (June 2023)**




*Source: Q17a. Which of the following (if any) discourages you from participating in activities in the previous question? (n=5,039)*

Building on the questions regarding civic education, we found that civic education is associated with higher participation in democratic activities. Across all the democratic activities we measured, individuals who reported having had civic education consistently show higher levels of participation. For example, 28% of those with civic education have shared political opinions online in the past year compared with just 11% of others (Figure 4.3).

**Figure 4.3: Respondents' civic education levels and their participation in civic activities in the past 12 months (June 2023)**




*Source: Q11. In primary or secondary school, did you participate in any school-run civic or citizenship learning activities? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q17. Which of the following have you participated in over the last 12 months? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

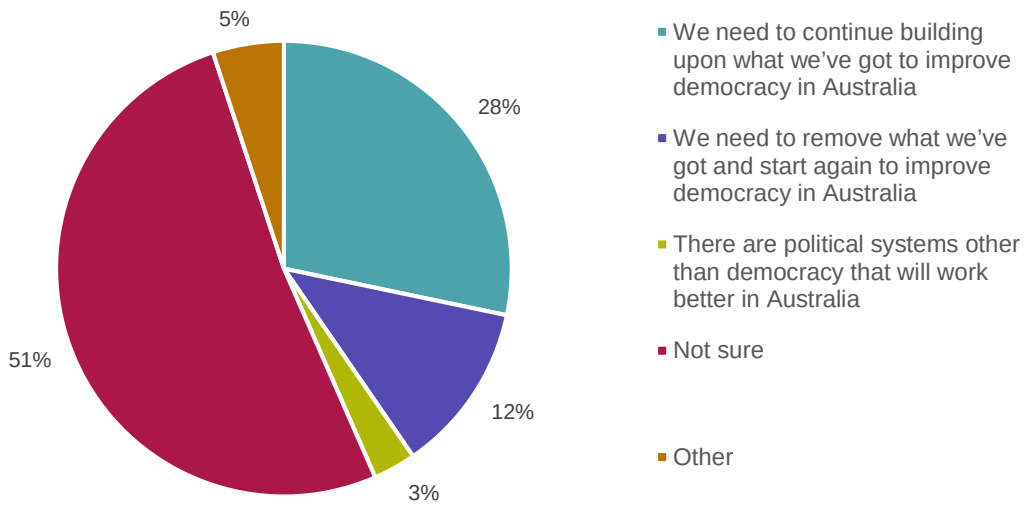
# Exploring fundamental concerns

The mindset of an individual who chooses to be democratically engaged has a duality in terms of trust. On the one hand, their dissatisfaction and desire to affect change implies a degree of scepticism towards the system. On the other hand, their willingness to participate in democratic processes implies a degree of trust that the system can and will change. Australian democracy can sustain some degree of transient dissatisfaction, so long as it is responsive and improves on itself. But when dissatisfaction precipitates disillusionment and individuals no longer trust the system to reform itself, then democracy faces challenges.

After asking participants in our survey about their level of satisfaction in the way democracy works in Australia, we followed up those who did not express satisfaction ('very dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied', 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', and 'not sure') with a question about their overall sentiment towards reforming democracy in Australia. We asked respondents to select from a range of statements the one which best reflects their opinion. These were (Figure 4.4):

- '*We need to continue building upon what we've got to improve democracy in Australia*' which was selected by 28% of respondents
- '*We need to remove what we've got and start again to improve democracy in Australia*' which was selected by 12% of respondents
- '*There are political systems other than democracy that will work better in Australia*' which was selected by 3% of respondents
- *'Not sure'* which was selected by 51% of respondents.

**Figure 4.4: Opinions about how to move forward from those who didn't express satisfaction with Australian democracy (June 2023)**




*Source: Q10. You indicated that you are ['very dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied', 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' with] / ['not sure' with how you feel about] the way democracy works in Australia. Which of the following best reflects your opinion about democracy in Australia? Base: Those who are not satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia (n=2,409)*

This was an exploratory component of our survey, aimed at helping us differentiate drivers of healthy scepticism and belief in the system's ability to continually improve from drivers of more fundamental concerns and disbelief in the system's ability to improve.

Looking at the pattern of responses across a bank of attitudinal and demographic questions, we found that the difference between those who reported wanting to 'start again', relative to those who wanted to 'continue building', was characterised by concerns regarding corruption, integrity, foreign interference, and fairness. For example, as shown in Table 4.1, 30% of people in the 'start again' group believe that Australia's electoral system represents their vote accurately and fairly, compared with 50% of those in the 'continue building' group and 84% of those who were satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia.

The magnitude of the group who reported they were 'not sure' (51%) in response to the question regarding democratic reform was surprisingly large. This group appears to have similar concerns to the other groups which were not satisfied, but a notable difference is characterised by the finding that they had the lowest proportion of people who reported being users of public media (50%) and the lowest proportion of people agreeing with the statement 'Most people don't understand when information in the media is misleading or fake during elections' (62%).

**Table 4.1: Proportion of individuals with democratic beliefs and demographic characteristics grouped by democratic satisfaction category (June 2023)**

| Agrees with the statement: | Group 1: Satisfied | Group 2: Not satisfied but let's continue building | Group 3: Not satisfied and let's start again | Group 4: Not satisfied and not sure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Australia's electoral system represents my vote accurately and fairly* | 84% | 50% | 30% | 36% |
| *Corruption is widespread in Australia's democratic institutions and processes* | 40% | 62% | 77% | 55% |
| *Politicians and government services deal with the issues that matter to me* | 61% | 25% | 14% | 21% |
| *Australia's democratic institutions and processes unfairly restrict my freedoms* | 30% | 23% | 43% | 23% |
| *Australian democracy is kept safe from foreign interference* | 64% | 24% | 14% | 20% |
| *Most people don't understand when information in the media is misleading or fake during elections* | 74% | 77% | 79% | 62% |
| *It's worth trying to fix the problems that democracy may have* | 85% | 85% | 81% | 64% |
| **Is a self-reported user of public media** | 71% | 73% | 62% | 50% |
| **Is female** | 46% | 60% | 47% | 61% |
| **Has below median income**[11] | 55% | 63% | 65% | 65% |

*Source: Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + Q5. In the last 12 months, have you used any of the following? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + S3. What is your gender? Base: All respondents (n=5,039) + D6. What is the total of all personal income you usually receive each year, before tax? Base: All respondents (n=5,039)*

[11] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Characteristics of Employment, Australia: Weekly earnings of employees, casual workers, independent contractors, trade union membership, labour hire, job flexibility, job security*, 2023, accessed 22 December 2023.

# Part 5: The Voice referendum

**Key points**

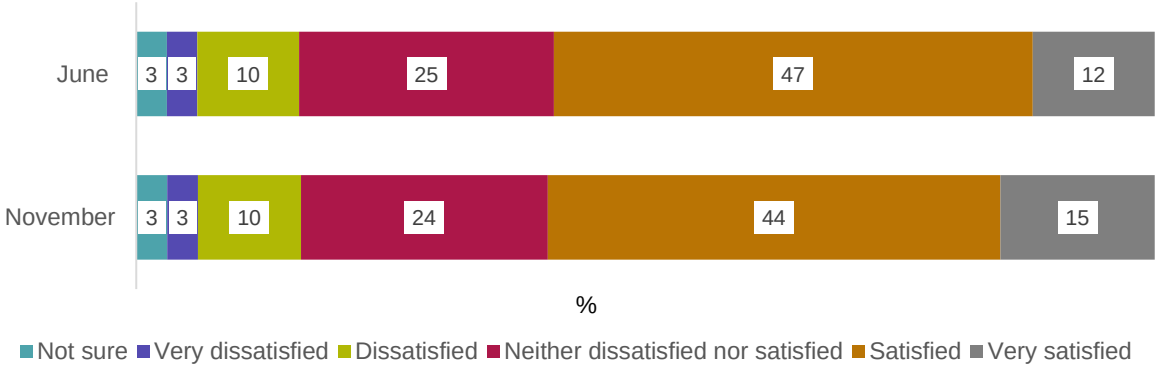
- Overall satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia remains unchanged following the Voice referendum.
- The majority of Australians have talked about the Voice referendum with other people and listened to opinions in the media or online about the referendum.
- Engaging in public debate with people who have a different opinion may be beneficial to an individual's satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia.

In November 2023 we conducted a second wave of the Survey of Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy, comprising a nationally representative sample of 1,044 adult Australians. We included additional questions with the aim of identifying how the Voice referendum affected satisfaction with democracy and civic participation.

## Overall satisfaction with democracy

Overall satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia remains unchanged since the first wave in June, with 59% of Australians reporting that they are either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the way democracy works in Australia (Figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1 Satisfaction with Australian democracy in June and November 2023**




*Source: Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=5,039, Jun 2023) + Q9. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=1,044, Nov 2023)*

## Public debate during the referendum

Our results show that most Australians have been involved in discussions surrounding the Voice referendum. When asked how often they talked about the Voice referendum with people (e.g. your family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, people you meet online), 16% reported never. It was most common for respondents to report 'sometimes' (44%), followed by 'weekly' (24%), and 'daily' (14%).

When asked about talking with people with an opposite view, respondents most frequently said 'never' (23%).

As shown in Table 5.1, there was a similar distribution of results when asking about engaging with the media, however there was no difference associated with engaging with media containing opposite views to one's own.

**Table 5.1: Frequency of engagement in public debate on the Voice referendum (November 2023)**

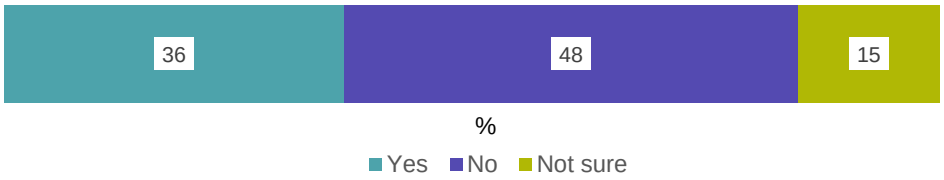
| | Talk - Anyone[1] | Talk – Opposite[2] | Media – Any[3] | Media – Opposite[4] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Never | 16% | 23% | 16% | 15% |
| Sometimes | 44% | 47% | 42% | 44% |
| Weekly | 24% | 16% | 19% | 20% |
| Daily | 14% | 7% | 20% | 18% |
| Not sure | 2% | 5% | 2% | 2% |

*Note: Percentages are of the group titled in the column header. Each column adds to 100%. 1 = "How often did you talk about the Voice referendum with people (e.g. your family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, people you meet online)?" 2 =" How often did you talk to people with the opposite opinion about the Voice referendum to you?" 3 = "How often did you listen to opinions in the media or online about the Voice referendum?" 4 = "How often did you listen to opinions in the media or online about the Voice referendum that were opposite to your opinion?"*

We followed up individuals who reported having talked about the Voice referendum with other people (82% of respondents) to find out how comfortable they felt sharing their opinions. The majority of these people (61%) reported feeling comfortable, only 10% felt uncomfortable and 28% reported feeling neither comfortable nor uncomfortable.

Following the questions about talking with other people and listening to the media on the Voice referendum, we described the combination of all these interactions as the 'public debate'. We then asked respondents whether the public debate has impacted their satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia. As Figure 5.2 shows, 36% of the respondents reported an impact of the public debate on their satisfaction levels, while nearly half (48%) said no, and 15% were not sure. Of those reporting an impact, the direction of effect was evenly split between those who reported increased satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia (48%) and decreased satisfaction (52%).

**Figure 5.2: Impact of public debate around the Voice referendum on the satisfaction level (November 2023)**




*Source: Q24. Has the public debate around the Voice referendum affected your satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia? Base: All respondents (n=1,044)*

Similar to the questions about impact of the public debate, we asked respondents whether the outcome of the referendum impacted their satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia. We found that 35% reported 'yes', 52% reported 'no', 12% were 'not sure'. Of those who reported an

impact, 58% said that it increased their satisfaction and 42% reported that it decreased their satisfaction.

# Civic participation

We asked respondents whether they had participated in various civic activities in the last 12 months. We found that 20% of all respondents reported that they either ‘Contacted a politician’, ‘Attended a protest, march, demonstration’ or ‘Volunteered or worked for a political campaign’.

We followed this group up with a question as to whether the activities related to the Voice referendum. For 55% of that sub group, it was in relation to the referendum. Of those again, 55% reported it was the first time they have ever participated in any activity related to an Australian election or politics. This first-timer group comprised 6% of the total population.

We also asked respondents whether the Voice referendum had affected their intentions to participate in political and civic activities in the future. We found that 17% reported ‘yes’. Of those, 57% reported intentions to be more engaged in future while 23% were intending less, and 20% said it would depend on the subject matter.

When asked whether they would have voted in the referendum if they didn’t have to vote, 67% reported ‘yes’, 22% ‘no’, 7% ‘not sure’, and 4% ‘not eligible to vote’.

# Public debate and satisfaction with democracy

We found that engagement in public debate around the Voice referendum is associated with people’s satisfaction with Australian democracy. Those who are satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia are more likely to report talking to other people about the Voice referendum at least weekly than those who are dissatisfied (43% vs. 34%), as well as more likely to talk with people with the opposite view at least weekly (29% vs. 17%), listen to the media about the referendum at least weekly (44% vs. 37%) and listen to opposite opinion in the media at least weekly (45% vs. 37%).

We found that people who are more satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia are more likely to report the public debate increased their satisfaction with democracy than those who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works (64% vs. 18%). And similarly, but to a lesser extent, people who are satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia are more likely to report the outcome increased their satisfaction with democracy than those who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works (67% vs. 48%).

The more people talked with others and engaged with the media, the more likely they were to report an impact on their satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia. For example, 52% of people who talked with others about the referendum at least weekly reported an impact on their satisfaction, compared with 26% of the population who ‘never’ or ‘sometimes’ talked with others. The same was true for talking with someone with the opposite opinion (55% vs. 30%), listening to media (49% vs. 28%), and listening to opposite views in the media (50% vs. 28%).

Engaging with different viewpoints seems to positively influence satisfaction with democracy. Our findings show that talking weekly to someone with an opposing view led to increased satisfaction for 31% of respondents. In contrast, less frequent discussions with opposing views resulted in a satisfaction increase for only 13%. Media engagement mirrored this trend, suggesting that exposure to

diverse opinions is key. In summary, actively participating in conversations with those of differing views appears to enhance how satisfied people feel about Australian democracy.

# Part 6. Where to from here?

**Key points**

- Some important areas could benefit from ongoing monitoring, such as integrity, civic education, and civic engagement.
- There are promising areas for further exploration, including what a healthy democracy means to Australia.

Our survey affirms the importance of democracy to Australians. Even among people who are dissatisfied with the current state of Australian democracy, the vast majority believe it is worth trying to fix the problems that Australian democracy may have. Our main takeaway from these findings is that Australian democracy is in a reasonably healthy state, but that there are areas for improvement.

Within the scope of our research and monitoring remit, our role in helping bring about improvements in this regard is to share these findings both publicly and within government through more tailored briefings for relevant areas. For transparency, the data from the survey will be shared through the Australian Data Archive to enable third party researchers to conduct further analyses.

It is also our role to consider and advise whether more needs to be done to research and monitor public sentiment towards Australian democracy. Overall, we think there is, and there are four main areas we can improve in:

**1) There is value in having a more robust time-series of data.**

Data on public sentiment towards Australian democracy has historically been collected at irregular intervals and without standardised questions and methods. In seeking to determine the answer to simple questions like ‘what is good?’, ‘what is concerning?’ and ‘what is normal?’ when it comes to levels of public trust and satisfaction, we cannot be confident without a more systematic collection of data. Noting that the headline figure regarding satisfaction with the way democracy in Australia was unchanged between June and November following the Voice referendum, it is unlikely that there is a need to monitor changes at a rate more frequently than annually. However, until we have a clearer understanding of the drivers of public sentiment, conducting surveys annually, plus waves for notable democratic events, may be an appropriate cadence. It will also be useful to facilitate greater insights from international comparisons.

**2) There are factors we need to be better at measuring.**

How do people get information and interact with others to shape their opinions on democracy? How do factors such as information sources, social capital, wellbeing and demographic characteristics interact to transform a potentially healthy dissatisfaction with democracy, typically addressed through civic engagement, into less constructive sentiments? And vice versa, what promotes resilience? These are complex and hard-to-measure indicators which will require further work in collaboration with academia and other experts. Our survey is a useful vehicle for high level monitoring of pertinent issues. But identifying the most pertinent factors to be monitored may require complementary exploratory studies with a greater focus on qualitative data collection, validation of measures and empirical studies of behaviour.

**3) There are areas which would benefit from the transparency of ongoing monitoring.**

Concerns regarding corruption, abuse of power and a lack of transparency are among the strongest factors we identified in our survey associated with dissatisfaction with democracy. This was particularly the case at the federal level. It is likely normal for there to be greater trust in some public institutions, such as emergency services, than others. However, it is unclear how large is reasonable to expect that gap to be, and whether there are tipping points at which the perceived trustworthiness of an institution becomes irredeemable without significant intervention.

**4) There is an opportunity to enhance civic education and reduce barriers to civic participation.**

Our survey highlighted the positive relationship between civic education and people's satisfaction with democracy. However, we also identified a relatively low level of participation in civic education programs in Australia, low levels of civic engagement and various barriers to participation. Surveys are not only useful for monitoring the prevalence of these factors, but also to help identify misunderstanding which may be contributing to less than ideal rates of civic engagement, that could be addressed through educational campaigns.

# Appendix A: Method detail

## Survey administration and method

Administration of the survey and recruitment of participants was undertaken by a third party provider - Painted Dog Research. Participants completed the survey between 14 and 30 June 2023, and then again from 9 to 23 November. The average length of the survey was 18 minutes and 52 seconds in June and 15 minutes and 19 seconds in November. All participants completed the survey online. The questionnaire was in English only. Participants received a small remuneration for their time.

## Recruitment, sample and weighting

All participants were recruited via the online research panel provider Dynata. This is an established online panel consisting of people who answer surveys in exchange for minor rewards (e.g. gift cards, airline miles). This is a non-probability based sample.

### June 2023

For the June wave, we recruited a total sample of 5,039 participants. The total sample comprised two subsamples. One sample, comprising 3,024 participants was recruited based on nationally representative quotas for age and gender (interlocking), state and territory, and metro vs regional. This was based on Australian Bureau of Statistics benchmarks. A second sub-sample, comprising 2,015 people, was recruited to over-sample on people who reported low interpersonal trust. Specifically this was based on a screener question in which participants were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement ‘generally speaking, most people can be trusted’. Once the general population sample had been recruited, we screened out all people who did not select ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’ regarding this statement. This second sample was merged into the general population sample with weights benchmarked off the proportions of people reporting low trust in the general sample, for the characteristics age, gender, state and territory and metro vs regional status.

The aim of this additional sub-sample was to boost the sample size of people who reported dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia. Based on prior research, we expected there to be a correlation between low interpersonal trust and dissatisfaction with public institutions. We were not able to design the survey so as to screen for dissatisfaction per se, so this served as a proxy.

**Table A.1 Unweighted characteristics of the total June 2023 sample**

| Gender | Sample | State and territory | Sample |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 2,310 | Australian Capital Territory | 104 |
| Female | 2,700 | New South Wales | 1,343 |
| Non-binary/ Other | 29 | Northern Territory | 44 |
| **Age** | **Sample** | Queensland | 991 |
| 18-24 | 711 | South Australia | 531 |
| 25-34 | 1,087 | Tasmania | 160 |
| 35-44 | 993 | Victoria | 1,292 |
| 45-54 | 798 | Western Australia | 573 |
| 55-64 | 618 | Other Territories | 1 |
| 65-74 | 609 | **Location** | Sample |
| 75-84 | 205 | Metro | 3,515 |
| 85+ | 18 | Regional | 1,524 |
| | | Total | 5,039 |

# November 2023

For the November wave, we recruited a total sample of 1,044 participants. In order to have a sufficient sample size to make confident inferences about findings in different states and territories, we aimed to recruit 150 people from each state/territory, with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Tasmania where we aimed to reach a combined sample of 250. We also used quotas based on nationally representative benchmarks for age, gender and metro vs. regional status. The sample was weighted back to population benchmarks.

**Table A.2 Unweighted characteristics of the total November 2023 sample**

| Gender | Sample | State and territory | Sample |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 493 | Australian Capital Territory | 69 |
| Female | 544 | New South Wales | 162 |
| Non-binary/ Other | 7 | Northern Territory | 28 |
| **Age** | **Sample** | Queensland | 166 |
| 18-24 | 107 | South Australia | 150 |
| 25-34 | 190 | Tasmania | 155 |
| 35-44 | 189 | Victoria | 159 |
| 45-54 | 161 | Western Australia | 155 |
| 55-64 | 160 | Other Territories | 0 |
| 65-74 | 160 | **Location** | Sample |
| 75-84 | 70 | Metro | 728 |
| 85+ | 7 | Regional | 316 |
| | | Total | 1,044 |

# Ethics and privacy

In accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, we determined this research to be low risk and considered the ethical aspects of this research through a committee of peers.

Data collection and storage complies with Australian Privacy Principles.

# Analysis that was not included

## Questions on Artificial Intelligence

The June wave of the survey included a module of questions regarding use of artificial intelligence by the Australian Public Service. Data from these questions was fed into the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Long-term Insights Briefing (LTIB) function. Reporting the findings of these questions is included in a report from the LTIB on the subject of 'How might artificial intelligence affect the trustworthiness of the public service delivery?' available here [link].

## Questions on the framing of statements

The June wave of the survey also included a small behavioural experiment section involving two questions. Respondents were randomly shown one of two statements about Australian democracy – one positive and one negative – and asked to agree or disagree. Subsequently, we examined if the statement's framing influenced respondents' intended civic engagement for the next 12 months. The results showed that about half of the respondents agreed with the statement they saw, regardless of its framing. Additionally, we found no significant difference in their intention to engage in the listed

democratic activities, no matter what statement has been shown. Given its lack of significant impact, we did not include a detailed analysis of this section in the main report.

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