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Survey evidence on Australia's democratic resilience

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Abstract and acknowledgements

This paper was prepared for a Roundtable discussion undertaken at the Australian National University in February 2024 titled: *Monitoring what matters to strengthen Australia's democratic resilience.* The paper has been updated based on discussion at the Roundtable, and introduces the literature on the 'democratic recession' and 'democratic resilience' and then discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different survey approaches to make inference about associated constructs for the Australian population. The paper then then introduces two surveys with a broadly representative sample of Australian adults, followed by the latest results from them. Using this data we discuss what we know about the demand for democracy in Australia and people's evaluation of whether the supply is sufficient to meet that demand.

1 Introduction

There is a growing concern that democracies and democratic norms are under severe strain and threat. This paper uses Australian survey data to explore the concepts of 'democratic recession' and 'democratic resilience', framing the discussion around the quality and applicability of survey data in assessing public sentiment and democratic health. A key aspect of the paper is an assessment of the quality of the various Australian data sources which are assessed using the Total Survey Error (TSE) Framework. This framework is useful for identifying the full range of factors that may contribute to "errors" in survey data.

Specifically, the paper provides:

- an introduction to some of the issues relevant to democratic resilience, including concerns expressed about declines internationally in democratic structures and institutions (or lack thereof).
- Some issues related to the applicability of this international discussion to the Australian context.
- A discussion of the importance of assessing the quality of survey data using the TSE approach.
- An overview of trends in the views of Australians about democracy and government and recent Australian data on democratic resilience.
- Concluding comments on the state of democratic resilience in Australia, and our ability to measure it.

2 What is the issue?

2.1 A democratic recession?

There is a growing concern that democracies and democratic norms are under strain and threat. A number of books including *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019), *Democracy and Its Crisis* (Grayling 2018), *Democracy Rules* (Müller 2021) and *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (Wolf 2023) take a pessimistic perspective, positioning the current moment in broader historical democratic trends highlighting how the growth in new democracies and strengthening of many democratic institutions that occurred after the end of the cold war has slowed or been reversed.

Based on analysis of data from a large number of countries, Larry Diamond coined the term *Democratic Recession* arguing that 'The world has been in a mild but protracted democratic recession since about 2006' (Diamond 2015).

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019: 231) in their book *How Democracies Die* concluded that: 'Previous generations of Europeans and Americans made extraordinary sacrifices to defend our democratic institutions against powerful external threats. Our generation, which grew up taking democracy for granted, now faces a different task: We must prevent it from dying from within'. Martin Wolf (2023) explicitly links economic trends to political outcomes, and doubts 'whether the U.S. will be a functioning democracy by the end of the decade.'

There are others who argue that this prevailing view is overly pessimistic, and selective in its choice of data and the historical baseline. For example, in a January 2024 opinion piece in the *Financial Times*[1] Janan Ganesh argues that while 'The number of democracies in the world, the

quality of the democracy within them, the share of humankind that lives under democratic rule …. have been getting worse over the past decade or so.', that 'the baseline [for this statement] is the historic, almost delirious peak of democratic expansion in the afterglow of the Cold War'. Ganesh argues that 'On many measures, in fact, democracy is back to where it was around the millennium. For all its swagger, its sense of historical momentum, the autocratic world is nowhere near to reversing the losses that it suffered in the second half of the 20th century.'[2]

Writing only a few years before the release of *How Democracies Die,* Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2015) concluded that 'There is little evidence that the democratic sky is falling … [and rather] The state of global democracy has remained stable over the last decade, and it has improved markedly relative to the 1990s.' Of course, what happened in between that statement and Levitsky's subsequent book was the election of the former US President Donald Trump, the narrow victory of the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum (Brexit), and the election of a number of populist parties (both right-wing and left-wing) in Europe either to govern in their own right, or as part of coalitions. These results do not though in anyway signal that democracy is in decline in the US, the UK and Europe, but rather that democracy delivered outcomes that were not the preferred ones of many commentators.

2.2 Democratic resilience

Even those who take an optimistic view towards the current state of democracy would concede that there are pressures on institutions in many countries, including countries with a long history of democracy. What is unclear is the ability of those institutions to withstand such pressure over the longer-term. This is captured by the concept of *democratic resilience*. According to Merkel (2023), the term resilience 'originates from materials physics, where it describes the ability of "materials to return to their original state after temporary deformation" (citing Bröckling 2017, p. 1). More generally, resilience means the ability of an object or a system to withstand external and internal disturbances, impositions and shocks without giving up its fundamental structures and functions.'

Holloway and Manwaring (2023) in a recent review of the literature conclude that resilience as applied to democracies is an undertheorised concept and that 'Where resilience is understood as democratic stability – as it often is in the literature – it is effectively a rebranding of existing concepts explaining democratic persistence, lacking conceptual distinctiveness.' They also note that 'democratic resilience appears a muddled concept, often lacking definition and clear operationalisation' (p. 69)

Distinct and robust definitions are, however, emerging in the literature. Holloway and Manwaring (2023) write

> 'What unites most definitions is positioning of democracy as resilient (or not) *to* or *against* particular threats or broader crises. These threats vary from general, system-level risks of autocratisation, to specified dangers of, for example, pernicious polarisation.' (*italics* in original). (p. 75-76)

More explicitly, Merkel (2023) uses the following definition:

> Democratic resilience is the capacity of a democratic regime to absorb external challenges and internal stressors and to dynamically adapt to the changing functional conditions of democratic governance without falling into regime change and abandoning or damaging democracy`s defining principles, functions

> and norms.

Boese et al. (2021) talk about a two-stage process of resilience. According to their conceptualisation

> In the first stage – *onset resilience* – some democracies are resilient by preventing autocratization altogether, meaning they have not experienced substantial or sustained declines in democratic qualities (such as Switzerland and Canada). If onset resilience fails, democracies experience an episode of autocratization. A democracy may then exhibit *breakdown resilience* by avoiding democratic breakdown in the second stage (such as South Korea from 2008–2016, and Benin from 2007–2012)' (*italics* in original) (p. 886)

Despite the importance of concept of democratic resilience, there does not appear to be a good measure of how resilient a democracy might be to future shocks, whether it be in the short or the long term. Citing Boese et al. (2021) again, 'we can only observe whether a democracy has exhibited onset or breakdown resilience *until now*.'

2.3 Relevance to Australia

Many of the pressures on democracies identified in the literature are relevant to Australia. For example, the rise of social media is seen as being both a protective and a corrosive factor for democracy, especially among the young (Jha and Kodila-Tedika 2020; Margetts 2019; Sunstein 2018). Establishing the net effect of the rise of social media on democracy is methodologically extremely challenging and the evidence is mixed. A number of studies have concluded that there is little evidence for an effect, but there remains a strong view that there is a relationship.

Other pressures on democracies are country specific or apply to certain "types" of countries and it cannot be assumed that what is happening in one country is or will happen in Australia. For example, Australian commentators are particularly attuned to what is happening in US, but Australia has a parliamentary rather than presidential system (the former being a positive predictor of democratic resilience (Boese et al. 2021)), and compulsory rather than voluntary voting. Relatively high rates of migration and the impact on social and political cohesion in the UK also have some resonance in Australia, however Australia has a much longer history of migration than the UK, a very different points-based system for accepting migrants, and a relative ease in gaining citizenship (that is most migrants have historically settled permanently, rather than as temporary migrants). Global, and even mature-democracy trends then need to be assessed against Australian data if there is to be an evidence-based Australian response.

A challenge in monitoring (and responding to) democratic trends in Australia, including in comparison to other countries, is the lack of a consensus as to how to measure the health and resilience of a democracy. Returning to the analogy of a recession, although there are limits to the concept of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), most people would agree that higher values of GDP are a good thing all else being equal, and that there is a well-established methodology that we can use to measure it (Lepenies 2016). No such universal metric exists in measuring democratic resilience.

Freedom House,[3] the Varieties of Democracy project (also known as V-Dem)[4] and the Economist Intelligence Unit[5] all provide data on the strength of democracy and how this is changing over time for all countries. These data sets allow for an assessment of the number or proportion of countries that meet particular thresholds as democracies (or not). For example, in 2023 according to Freedom House, 43.1 per cent of countries (84 of 195 countries) were

considered a 'Free Country', slightly lower than the peak of 46.6 per cent in 2007 and 2008, but much higher than the 25.3 per cent observed in 1975 (40 of 158 countries).

While these long-term cross-country datasets are useful, they have significant limitations, particularly when attempting to understand the situation in any particular country and specifically a country like Australia. Perhaps the most important limitation is that they are based in large part on the subjective assessment of a panel of experts, rather than objective criteria measured consistently through time (though this is less the case for V-Dem than for the other measures). Although considerable effort is made to validate the assessments of the experts[6] they are ultimately based on perceptions.

A second limitation of these cross-country metrics for a country like Australia, is that there is little if any variation over time. For example, according to the Freedom House index, since 1972 the period covered in the data base, Australia has always been listed as 'Free' and with a value of 1 (the highest) for political rights and civil liberties. There is a little more variation within the V-Dem database for Australia, but Australia is still ranked at the top of the distribution for the vast majority of indices.

With these limitations in mind, it may be that there have been changes in Australia but that they are smaller than in other countries and that the commonly used measures are not sensitive to pick up this change. Or it may be that changes in democratic strengths and resilience in Australia take a different form than in other countries and the standard measures are not optimal for the Australian context.

One of the few papers that considers the issue of resilience from an Australian perspective is Ablong (2024) who frames the issue in terms of national, rather than democratic resilience specifically. Ablong (2024: p14 defines national resilience as: 'the ability of Australia to plan for, adapt to, prepare for, resist, respond to and recover from crisis and change, whether natural or man-made or singly or concurrently' and conceptualises it as being made up of four elements:

- societal resilience—involving the resilience of the individual, community and whole of society
- economic resilience—involving firms, industry sectors and the national economy
- governance resilience—involving all three levels of Australian government and the institutions of the state
- systemic resilience—the interdependence and synthesis of societal, economic and governance resilience.'

2.4 Capturing aspects of democratic resilience using public opinion surveys

Public opinion surveys are used in many countries to provide measures of the health or resilience of a democracy. These surveys attempt to poll a representative sample of a country's residents, citizens, or voters on their views towards democratic principles as well as the current state of democracy in their country. Borrowing from economics, in the framework utilised by Heyne (2019) these can be thought of as the demand for democracy as well as views towards the equilibrium reached between supply and demand. In this context, the supply of democracy refers to the freedoms provided, and the efficacy of institutions.

Paul Kenny (2023) also talks about the 'political marketplace' but does so in the context of populism or anti-democratic regimes and institutions. Specifically, Kenny (2023) argues that 'Populism … is not a set of moral values or specific policies, but a low-cost political strategy

based on direct communication with voters.' That is, politicians or potential politicians will campaign using populist strategies not based on some underlying ideology or political philosophy, but rather if the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs.

The challenge with using public opinion surveys to capture demand for democracy/populism is knowing the right construct to be asking about, and how to ask questions that accurately capture that construct. Related, at a time of increasing survey cost and diminishing survey response rates (Daikeler 2020), a parallel challenge is finding a representative enough sample and one that allows analysts to make inference about the population. These twin challenges are captured in the Total Survey Error (TSE) Framework, developed over a number of years but explained in detail in Groves and Lyberg (2010). The TSE Framework starts with a construct of interest and the inferential population. Across these two dimensions of measurement and representation respectively, the aim then is to develop a survey instrument and a sampling strategy for which the difference between the eventual survey statistic and the true population value for the construct of interest is minimised.

3 Overview of the January 2024 ANUpoll

The ANUpoll series of surveys regularly collect data on trust in institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and broader views on Australia's government and institutions. It has been undertaken roughly quarterly since 2008. The most recent survey (described below) took place in January 2024, with the survey that preceded it being the Australian Constitutional Referendum Survey (ACRS), which took place in October 2023 as part of the ANUpoll series. Prior to these surveys, the ANU also collected data for the Australian Barometer, which was the local version of Wave 6 of the Asian Barometer.[7]

Unlike many other surveys on related constructs, ANUpoll is undertaken using probability sampling (on the Life in Australia panel). Here, individuals are recruited to participate in a survey with some known probability of selection. This allows analysts of the data to make some inference about the population, based on the Central Limit Theory (CLT). Essentially, the eventual sample is one of a close to infinite number of potential samples. The CLT tells us what the distribution of those potential samples is likely to be, and therefore how likely it is that the survey statistic generated from a particular sample (of a known size) is within a particular range of the true population value.

An alternative form of sampling is a non-probability sample, where respondents are recruited based on some deterministic factor, or where people opt-in to completing a particular survey or set of surveys (Vehovar et al. 2016). Careful comparisons with known demographic and other benchmarks provides strong evidence that surveys from non-probability panels have more error than surveys on populations recruited using probability-based methods. This is true in Australia (Lavrakas et al. 2022) and in cross country analyses (Cornesse and Blom 2023).

Data collection for the January 2024 ANUpoll commenced on the 22nd of January with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 23rd of January and was completed by the 5th of February. The final sample size for the survey is 4,057 respondents. A total of 5,579 respondents were invited to take part in the survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 72.7 per cent.

More than half of the sample (52.9 per cent) had completed the survey after the first two full days of data collection with only 10.0 per cent completing between the 1st and 5th of February. The average survey length for those completing the survey was 23.5 minutes. The Social

Research Centre collected data online and through Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) in order to ensure representation from the offline Australian population. Around 1.2 per cent of interviews were collected via CATI.

The contact methodology adopted for the online Life in Australia™ members is an initial survey invitation via email and SMS (where available), followed by multiple email reminders and a reminder SMS. Telephone follow up of panel members who have not yet completed the survey commenced in the second week of fieldwork and consisted of reminder calls encouraging completion of the online survey. The contact methodology for offline Life in Australia™ members was an initial SMS (where available), followed by an extended call-cycle over a two-week period. A reminder SMS was also sent in the second week of fieldwork.

One of the benefits of collecting data through the Life in Australia™ panel is the ability to track responses at the individual level through time. Of those who had completed the January 2024 survey, 3,757 respondents (92.6 per cent) had completed the October 2023 survey.

Data from the survey is weighted to population benchmarks. For Life in Australia™, the standard approach for deriving weights generally consists of the following steps:

1. Compute a base weight for each respondent as the product of two weights:
    a. Their enrolment weight, accounting for the initial chances of selection and subsequent post-stratification to key demographic benchmarks
    b. Their response propensity weight, estimated from enrolment information available for both respondents and non-respondents to the present wave.
2. Adjust the base weights so that they satisfy the latest population benchmarks for several demographic characteristics.

The ethical aspects of the survey were approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (2021/430).

4 Some recent trends and patterns in views on democracy and government

Confidence and trust in key institutions is essential to binding a society together. There is clear evidence, however, that this has been declining over the medium and longer-term in many long-standing democracies (see for example, Citrin and Stoker 2018; Dassonneville and McAllister 2021; van der Meer 2017). The level of political trust in Australia has historically been amongst the highest in the world. However, there is evidence that since 2013 political trust has been declining, although this decline is not consistent across election cycles or across the population. Cameron and McAllister (2022) find that political trust declined at the time of each election from 2013 to 2019, with a slight increase in 2022 as compared to at the time of the 2019 election.

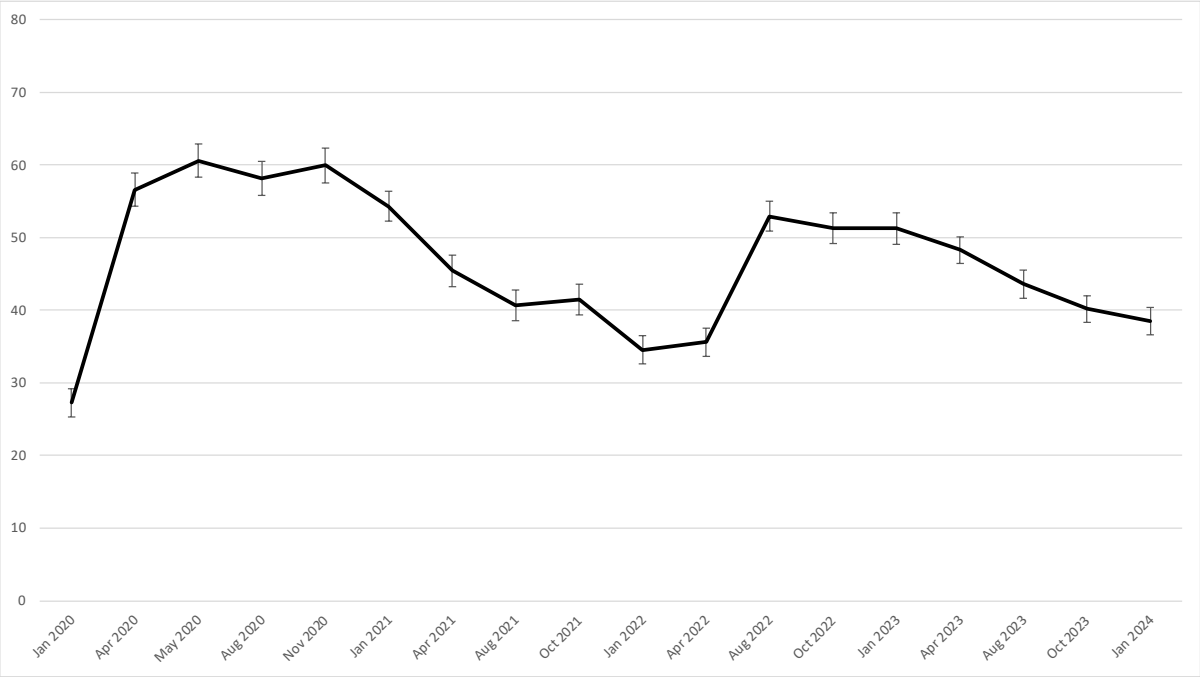
4.1 Confidence in government

A measure that is commonly used as a proxy for support for a particular democratic system is confidence in the government of the day. This measure is broader than whether someone would vote for the governing party at an election. Someone can intend to vote for another party while also having confidence in the government of the day. The empirical evidence is this measure fluctuates more than support for or confidence in the system as a whole.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government over the period January 2020 to January 2024. Confidence in the Federal Government increased substantially between January and August 2020, the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the government intervened heavily in the economy and a range of aspects of people's lives. From November 2020 onwards, confidence declined quite substantially, such that by April 2022 just prior to the Federal election confidence was only just above what it was pre-pandemic and during the Black Summer bushfire crisis of 2019/20. There was a substantial increase in confidence in the Federal Government following the change of government in May 2022. The proportion who had quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the Federal Government increased from 35.6 per cent in April 2022 just prior to the election to 52.9 per cent in August 2022 (much higher than the Labor vote share at the election or voting intentions in that particular survey).

Between August 2022 and January 2023, confidence in the Federal government was steady and within the margin of error of the survey. However, since January 2023 confidence has steadily declined from 51.2 per cent in January 2023 to 38.5 per cent in January 2024. Australians have only a marginally higher level of confidence in the Albanese Labor government than they did in the Morrison Coalition government in its last year.

Figure 1 Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra – January 2020 to January 2024



Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January, April, August, October 2021; January, April, August, and October 2022; January, April, August, and October 2023; and January 2024

There have been recent concerns about the increases in support for the 'populist radical right.' amongst men, with men now being much more likely that women to support the populist radical right (see for example Harteveld et al. 2015). An article in the *Financial Times*[8] concluded that 'A new global gender divide is emerging' and Rachel Kleinfeld writing for *Persuasion*[9] pointed out that 'Over the past fifteen years, men across the globe have voted for radical right-wing parties at much higher rates.' However, whereas Australian voting patterns

vary substantially by sex, in January 2024 confidence in government did not. Males and females had very similar levels of confidence (38.9 and 38.5 per cent respectively).

There is no clear relationship between age group and confidence in the Federal Government. For example, according to the January 2024 ANUpoll data, 39.7 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 years had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government which is very similar levels to the level of confidence amongst those aged 65 to 74 years (41.5 per cent). Age and sex do not appear to be important in explaining the variation in confidence in government across the Australian population.

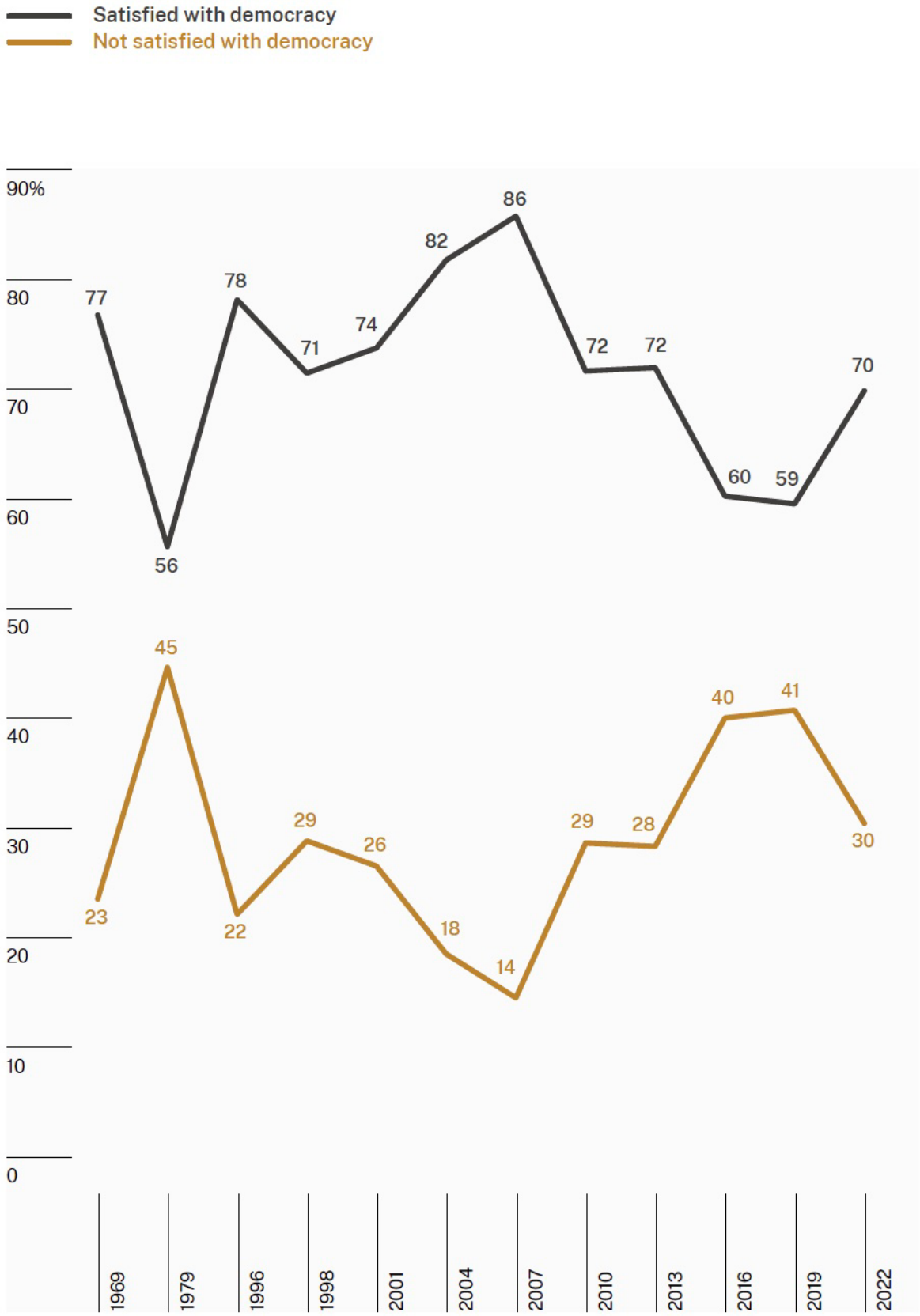
Education level and income are much more strongly related to the level of confidence in the Federal Government. According to the January 2024 ANUpoll data those with the lowest level of education have the lowest level of confidence in government. Only 29.9 per cent of those that have not completed Year 12 have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal government compared to 37.5 per cent of those whose highest level of education is year 12. Confidence in the Federal Government is markedly higher amongst those with an undergraduate degree (49.3 per cent) and a postgraduate degree (47.9 per cent). Interestingly though, those with some post school qualifications but not a degree also have a lower level of confidence (33.4 per cent) than those who have completed Year 12 only.

Differences by household income are also significant and substantial. Those whose household income is in the lowest income quintile have a similar level of confidence (33.5 per cent) as those in the second- and third-income quintiles (36.0 and 36.9 per cent respectively. Confidence in the Federal Government is, however, much higher amongst those in the fourth income quintile (44.0 per cent) and those in the highest income quintile (47.2 per cent).

4.2 Satisfaction with democracy

The long-running Australian Election Study (AES) reveals that the level of satisfaction with democracy in Australia just after the May 2022 election was very close to the average of the last 25 or so years, and within the standard error of values observed at the time of the 1998, 2001, 2010, and 2013 elections (Cameron and McAllister 2022). Satisfaction was lower than at its peak after the 2007 election, but Australians are broadly satisfied (Figure 2, repeated with permission).

Figure 2 Long-term change in satisfaction with democracy, 1969 to 2022



Source: Cameron and McAllister (2022: 100) reproduced with permission

This relative stability in satisfaction with democracy is also found using ANUpoll data, based on a slightly larger sample size than the AES and also providing data for 2023/24. Respondents to the March 2008 ANUpoll were asked the same question as the AES: 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?' This question was repeated in the January 2023, October 2023 and January 2024 ANUpolls, with the same response options.

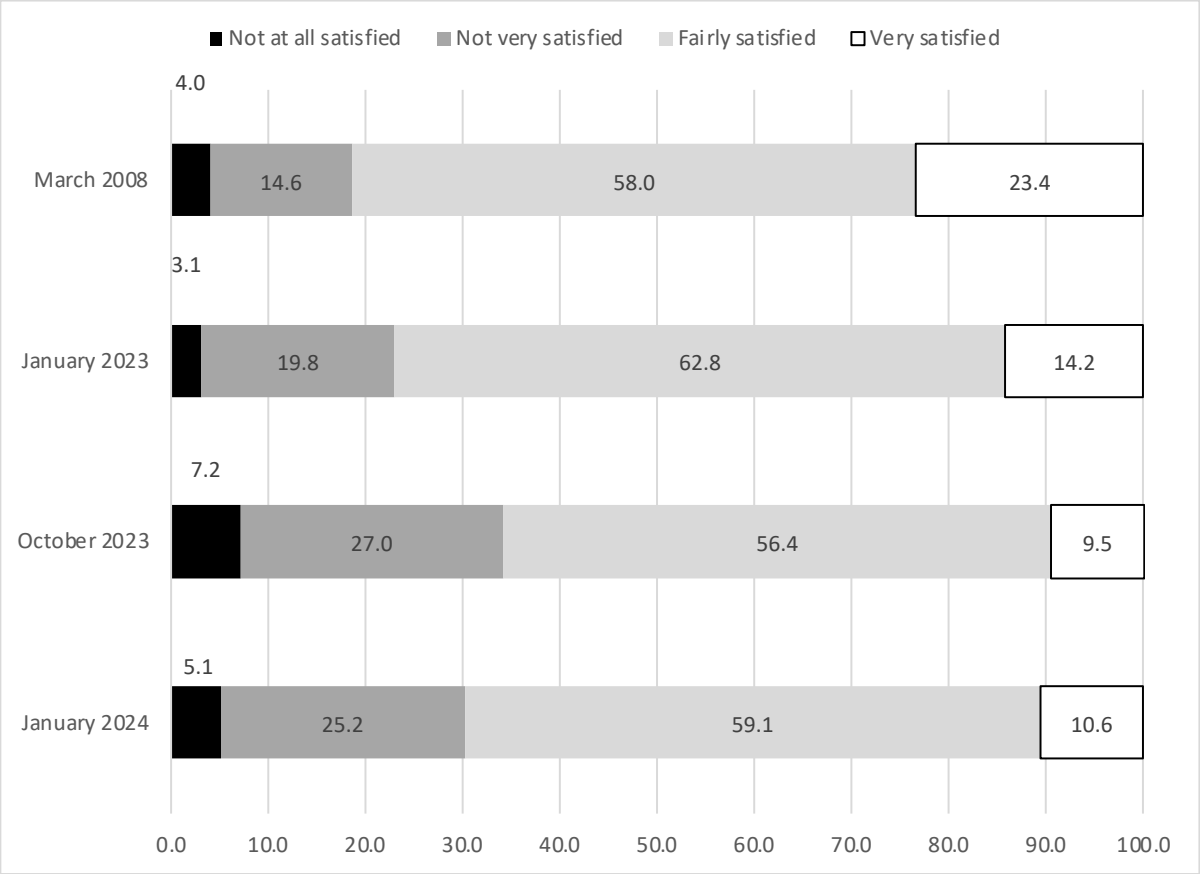
There was a marked decline in the per cent of Australians who were very satisfied in democracy (from 23.4 per cent in 2008 to 14.2 per cent in January 2023) (Figure 3). However, there has not been a corresponding increase at the other extreme (there was actually a decline from 4.0 to 3.1 per cent 'not at all satisfied', though this difference is not statistically significant), with increases instead found in the middle two categories. What we might describe as whole-hearted satisfaction with democracy has declined, but in January 2023 in Australia 77.0 per cent of adults are fairly or very satisfied (the measure used by Cameron and McAllister 2022), compared to 81.4 per cent in 2008. A concern, but far from a crisis.

Figure 3 also shows, however, that short term events have the potential to disrupt long-term stability. Although from March 2008 to January 2023, satisfaction with democracy was quite stable, between January and October 2023 there was a more than doubling in the proportion of Australians who were not at all satisfied in democracy (to 7.2 per cent), a smaller increase in those who were not very satisfied (to 27.0 per cent, a small decline in those who were fairly satisfied (to 56.4 per cent), and a large decline in those who were very satisfied (to 9.5 per cent).

It is not possible to attribute the change in satisfaction with democracy to the Voice Referendum outcome or the campaign (either partially or in full). There have been a number of local, national, and international events over the period that may also have impacted on satisfaction. It can, however, be shown that changes in satisfaction were quite different depending on how the respondent voted in the referendum. For the sample of respondents that completed the January and October 2023 ANUpolls, there was a much larger decline among those who voted yes to the referendum question – 85.3 per cent to 72.2 per cent – compared to those who voted no to the referendum question – 71.8 per cent to 67.5 per cent.

In the three months that followed the referendum, there was a partial return to the levels of satisfaction with democracy observed over the longer-term. Combined, 30.3 per cent of Australians were not at all or not very satisfied with democracy (compared to 34.2 per cent in October 2023). This is still well above the January 2023 levels of dissatisfaction (22.9 per cent) and even more so the March 2008 levels (18.6 per cent).

Figure 3 Medium-term change in satisfaction with democracy, March 2008 to January 2024



Source: ANUpoll: March 2008; January and October 2023; and January 2024

Satisfaction with democracy in Australia in January 2024 varied across three main dimensions – age, education, and income. The relationship with age is once again non-linear, with younger Australians the most likely to say that they are fairly or very satisfied with democracy (76.7 per cent for those aged 18 to 24). Older Australians are also relatively satisfied with a value of 73.3 per cent for those aged 65 to 74 years and 73.6 per cent for those aged 75 years and older. All other age groups, however, have values below seven-in-ten, with the lowest level of satisfaction amongst those aged 25 to 34 years (63.4 per cent satisfied or very satisfied).

For those who had not completed Year 12, satisfaction with democracy was quite low, with only 61.1 per cent fairly or very satisfied. Those with a degree or higher were the most satisfied, with 78.2 per cent of those with an undergraduate degree reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied and 76.7 per cent of those with a postgraduate degree doing the same. In the middle were those that had completed Year 12 but with no post-school qualifications (72.0 per cent) and those with a certificate or diploma but no degree (64.6 per cent).

There are equally large differences in satisfaction by income. Under two-thirds of those in the lowest income quintile are satisfied with democracy (64.7 per cent). This rises to 79.0 per cent for those in the highest income quintile, with a reasonably consistent gradient in between.

4.3 Support for anti-democratic populist attitudes

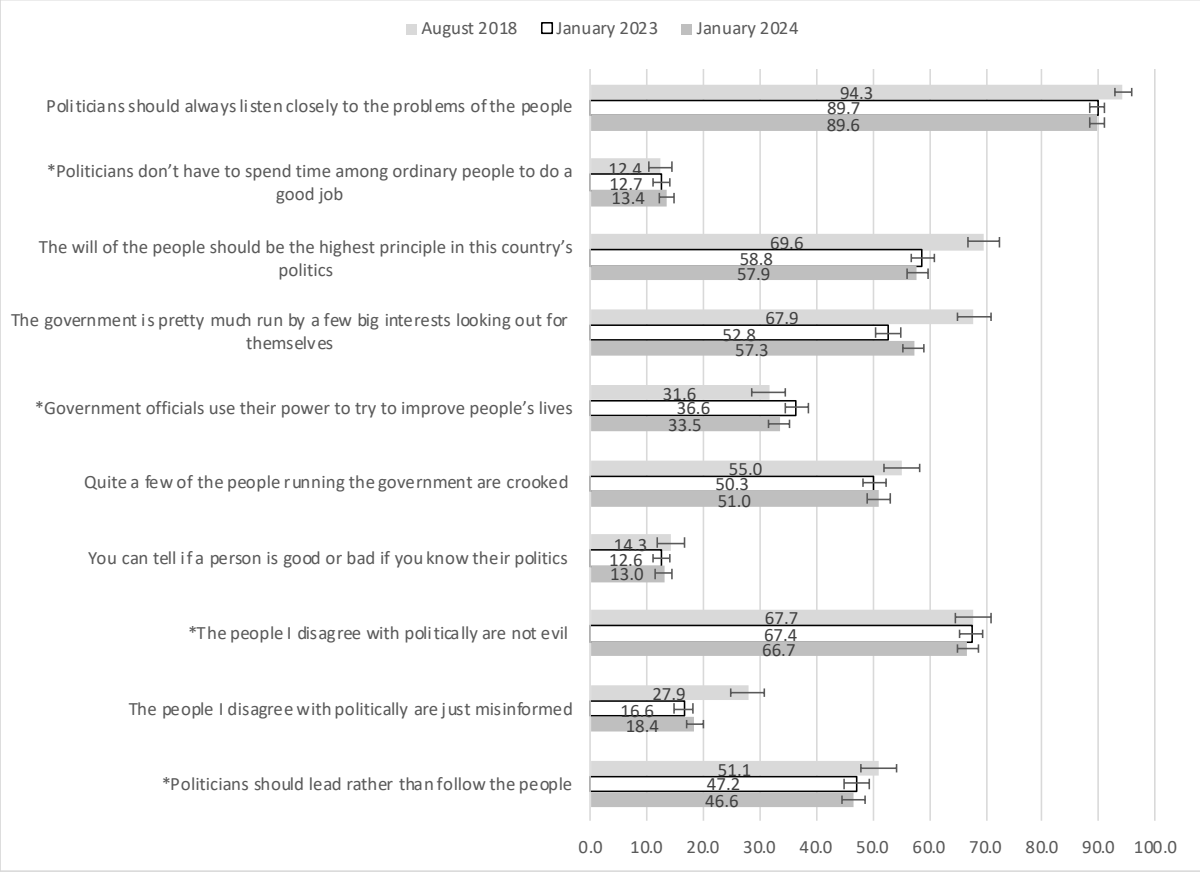
The survey evidence in Australia suggests that support for many anti-democratic or populist notions has, if anything declined, over the last 5-6 years.

The August 2018 ANUpoll, included a new nine-item scale populism scale developed by Silva et al. (2018). We added a tenth negatively worded question that summarises a more general perception of populism related to politicians versus the people leading a country.

Figure 4 shows that there has been a decline in agreement for a number of the positively worded statements, and an increase for at least one of the negatively worded statements (marked with an *) since August 2018. Specifically, there were fewer Australians in January 2023 compared to August 2018 that think that 'the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves' (from 67.9 in August 2018 to 52.8 per cent in January 2023), 'the people I disagree with politically are just misinformed' (27.9 to 16.6 per cent) and 'the will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics' (69.6 to 58.8 per cent). On the other hand, more Australians think that 'Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives', increasing from 31.6 per cent in August 2018 to 36.6 per cent in January 2023.

There was much less change in views between January 2023 and 2024, clearly reflecting the shorter time interval. However, there was a slight increase in the proportion of Australians that thought that "the government is run by a few big interests" (from 52.8 to 57.3 per cent) and a decline in the proportion that thought that "government officials use their power to try and improve people's lives" (from 36.6 to 33.5 per cent).

Figure 4 Per cent of Australians who agree or strongly agree with statements regarding populism – August 2018, January 2023, and January 2024



Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: August 2018; January 2023; and January 2024

We create an index of populism by aggregating the positively worded statements and reverse coded values for the negatively worded statements. Thus, a higher value for the scale indicates more populist views. The lowest possible value for the index is 10, and the highest possible value is 50. In January 2024, the mean value was 32.0, with a standard deviation of 4.3.

This index provides an overall sense of how views in support of populism vary across the population. There are no differences between men and women. Older Australians are the least supportive of populism across the age groups, with those with higher levels of education and income also having relatively low levels of support for populism values.

4.4 Insights from the Australian Barometer

The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) commenced in 2001 and is part of the Global Barometer Surveys (GBS) series.[10] Australia become part of the ABS in Wave 5 and the Wave 6 survey has been completed in Australia.

Wave 5 of the ABS was conducted in Australia between October 2018 to January 2019. The in-scope population for Wave 5 was adults (18 years of age or over) who are residents of private households in Australia. The sampling approach used address-based sampling with mail as the primary mode of contact. A sequential mixed-mode (push to web) design was applied to data collection with participants self-completing via an online or paper-based survey. The total achieved sample size was 1,630, equating to a response rate of 27.2% among all selections. Excluding ineligible sample (return to sender, no eligible respondent, etc.), a participation rate of 32.0% was achieved.

Wave 6 of the ABS was collected in February 2023 using the Life in Australia panel. A total of 2,183 active panel members were invited to take part in the survey and 1,217 (55.7 per cent) completed the survey. Data for the Australia Barometer is available for download through the Australian Data Archive.[11] The survey was conducted in February 2023.

Returning to the TSE framework, because of the much smaller sample size, there are more likely to be errors of representation in the Australian Barometer relative to the ANUpoll datasets. However, compared to ANUpoll where survey took a little over 20 minutes, respondents to the Australian Barometer took on average 42.8 minutes to complete. This means that there are more questions on democratic demand and views on the extent to which demand exceeds supply. In other words, there are more constructs with small errors of measurement.

The Australian Barometer has a number of modules that relate to people's demand for democracy and assessments of the interaction between demand and supply. Respondents are asked for their economic evaluations; their level of trust in institutions; their own participation in elections and other democratic processes; perceived access to public services; regime preference; meaning to respondents of democracy; satisfaction with government and democracy and the perceived quality of governance; and international relations. The survey also has a range of background characteristic and broad attitudinal measures.

One of the questions asked that captures demand for democracy is which of three statements related to democracy comes closes to representing a person's view. According to the Australian Barometer, 73.8 per cent of Australians think that 'Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.' While this is the clear majority, this still leaves 13.9 per cent of Australians that think that 'Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one' and 12.3 per cent of Australians that think that 'For people

like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a non-democratic regime.'

Loosely following the supply/demand modelling of Heyne (2019) we can cross-tabulate the democratic demand data (support for democracy) with the expectation surplus/deficit data (satisfaction with democracy). We find that in February 2023 those who always prefer democracy are much more likely to be satisfied with democracy (83.8 per cent) than those who do not (60.8 per cent). The causal direction of this relationship is complicated, however the cross-tabulation also shows that there was a sizable proportion of Australians (12.0 per cent) that might be referred to as frustrated democrats, in that they think that democracy is always preferred, but are not satisfied with democracy at present.

A further question asks about the extent to which people think that 'democracy may have its problems but it is still the best form of government.' In February 2023, 39.1 per cent of respondents strongly agreed with that statement and a further 52.7 per cent agreed. This left only 7.1 per cent of people who disagreed, and 1.1 per cent of people who strongly disagreed.

The Australian Barometer also includes questions about the demand for alternative forms of government, or the political marketplace in Kenny's (2023) framing. Specifically, respondents were asked 'There are many ways to govern a country. To what extent would you approve or disapprove of the following…?' with four specific questions following. In Australia in February 2023, very few respondents signalled high demand for these anti-democratic forms of government. That is, the per cent that strongly or somewhat approved were:

- 11.0 per cent for 'We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things;'
- 9.5 per cent for 'Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office;'
- 7.9 per cent for 'The army (military) should come in to govern the country'; and
- 15.2 per cent for 'We should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people.'

There are significant differences within the Australian population in their support for anti-democratic views. If we take the aggregate of these four questions (with a value of 1 if the person strongly disapproves and 4 if they strongly approve), we can run a regression model to see which factors predict anti-democratic views.[12] Compared to males, females were found to be significantly more likely to support the anti-democratic views. Across the age distribution, there appears to be two groupings, with those aged 18 to 44 more likely to support anti-democratic views than those aged 45 years and older, with particularly low levels of support for those aged 75 years and older.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, those born overseas in a non-English speaking country, and non-citizens were all more likely to support the views. Once again, one of the biggest differences is by education, with those that have not completed Year 12 having much greater levels of support for the views, and those with a degree much lower levels. Finally, those who live in relatively advantaged areas were slightly less likely to support the views outlined above than those in the middle-quintile areas or those in the most disadvantaged areas.

In addition to the question on satisfaction with democracy (which has similar levels and correlates with the questions on the AES and ANUpoll), respondents were asked a number of

additional evaluative questions. Many of these provide variation across the population, allowing for more nuanced analysis. For example, following the satisfaction question, respondents were asked how much of a democracy they think Australia is. While only 15.2 per cent thought that Australia was a full democracy, a further 64.7 per cent thought that Australia was 'A democracy, but with minor problems.' A further 18.1 per cent thought Australia was 'A democracy, with major problems' with only 2.0 per cent thinking that Australia was 'Not a democracy.' Combined, responses to these (and other) questions on the Australian Barometer suggest that there is a high demand for democracy in Australia, and that while most people think that the supply gets close to this demand, a significant proportion think there is still room for some improvement.

5 Concluding comments

This paper has used a number of analogies from other fields to understand democracy in Australia. The concept of resilience can be used to measure the extent to which democracies can withstand internal and external pressures (particularly of populism and autocratisation) and the extent to which they can bounce back from a negative shock. From economics, there is debate in the literature as to whether the world is in a democratic recession, whether there even is a metric similarly universal to GDP to capture democratic trajectories, the extent to which the demand for democracy exceeds supply, and whether the costs of populism to those in the political system exceed the benefit.

Another economic analogy is that of marginal benefit decision making, which suggests that we can maximise net benefits by choosing the quantity of investments at which marginal benefit equals marginal cost. There are institutional actors in a country like Australia who wish to invest in supporting democratic principles, norms, and institutions. To maximise those returns, it is important to be able to monitor what matters when it comes to concepts like Australia's democratic resilience, consolidation, or deconsolidation.

In this context, the paper makes six key points as a starting point for our understanding of democratic resilience in Australia:

1. There are clear recent negative international trends in democratic strength and resilience, although levels are still much higher than even 20 years ago;
2. These measures are not very sensitive to what is happening in Australia;
3. The survey data that we have in Australia is not always of high quality, and non-probability panels in particular are difficult to make inference on;
4. The evidence that we do have in Australia suggests a high level of demand for democracy and a relatively small gap between demand and supply;
5. There are some groups that are more likely to have low demand and a low evaluation of the extent to which supply is sufficient for demand;
6. There are things that are missing from survey data, particularly the quality of institutions, external threats, and effectiveness of policy. We need to make use of a range of datasets.

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Endnotes

1 https://www.ft.com/content/05121d84-4c22-4959-9444-a878d7ff57d3

2 There has been an ongoing debate on this issue in the *Journal of Democracy*. The following link provides the original references, as well as the responses - https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Journal-of-Democracy-Web-Exchange-Foa-and-Mounk-reply-2_0.pdf

3 https://freedomhouse.org/

4 https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/

5 https://services.eiu.com/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/

6 https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology

7 https://www.asianbarometer.org/

8 https://www.ft.com/content/29fd9b5c-2f35-41bf-9d4c-994db4e12998

9 https://www.persuasion.community/p/why-men-are-drifting-to-the-far-right

10 https://www.globalbarometer.net/

11 https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.26193/1SGK5O

12 The model is estimated using Ordinary Least Squares, and in addition to the statistically significant variables discussed, the model also controls for language spoken at home and regional of usual residence.