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Steady, but not recovering: Wellbeing, Democratic Attitudes, and Interpersonal Trust in Australia, June 2026

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July, 2026

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Extended Abstract

This paper reports findings from the June 2026 wave of the ANUpoll, conducted with 3,543 adult Australians between 18 June and 6 July 2026, and draws on 29 prior waves stretching back to October 2019. It is the second wave of a new longitudinal cohort, with 1,851 respondents also having completed the March 2026 survey. Analysis finds that wellbeing is steady, but at a low base, and that stability is not the same as recovery. Life satisfaction remained flat between March and June 2026, at 6.22 out of 10 in both waves. Financial stress was similarly stable (33.0 per cent finding it difficult or very difficult in June, compared to 34.9 per cent in March), and satisfaction with the direction of the country ticked up slightly, from 46.0 to 46.6 per cent, though not significantly so. March and June 2026 remain the only two quarters since January 2020 in which more Australians were dissatisfied than satisfied with the direction of the country. As in previous ANUpolls, age, education and employment are the strongest predictors of wellbeing, with older Australians, degree holders and the employed reporting more positive outcomes across measures.

Satisfaction with democracy fell over the quarter, but principled support for democracy held. Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia fell significantly, from 65.7 to 62.8 per cent, the lowest reading since the question began to be asked regularly in January 2023, driven by a rise in the proportion dissatisfied rather than very dissatisfied. Drawing on the longitudinal sample, the decline was smaller for younger Australians and degree holders, both groups whose satisfaction was already higher in March, meaning pre-existing gaps are widening rather than narrowing.

Principled support for democracy, by contrast, held steady and has increased significantly over the past year, from 66.9 per cent in May 2025 to 72.0 per cent in June 2026. Agreement with core democratic norms, such as that no one should be above the law, remains very high and largely unchanged since March. Across sixteen democracy-related statements, the one significant movement was a rise in support for the right to join peaceful protests, from 72.6 to 77.0 per cent. Australians are becoming more critical of how democracy is being delivered without withdrawing their commitment to democracy itself.

The most worrying finding from the paper was that interpersonal trust has fallen to 5.32 on a scale of 0 to 10, the lowest value recorded in ANUpoll during the 2020s. This sits below the pre-COVID value of 5.53 recorded in October 2019 and reverses the increase in trust observed during the pandemic. All three underlying measures declined, with the sharpest fall in the proportion saying that most people can be trusted. As with other measures, trust is higher among older Australians, degree holders and the employed.

Bringing these measures together, satisfaction with democracy is far more closely associated with how Australians view their country and each other than with their own material circumstances. There is a 45.1 percentage point gap in satisfaction with democracy between those satisfied with the direction of the country and those who are not, and a 43.4 percentage point gap between those with low and high levels of interpersonal trust. Both are substantially larger than the differences associated with a person's own economic position, which suggests that responses framed solely around household economic conditions may not be sufficient to shift democratic sentiment.

1 Introduction and data overview

March 2026 ANUpoll data revealed an Australian population under considerable strain. Average life satisfaction had fallen to its lowest level in the history of the series, below even the levels recorded during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Biddle and Gray, 2026). For the first time since we began asking the question, more Australians were dissatisfied with the direction of the country than were satisfied. Financial stress was at a record high, and employed Australians thought their chances of losing their job were about as high as they did in the middle of 2020, despite an unemployment rate of only 4.3 per cent.

The March survey was conducted in the shadow of the conflict between the United States, Israel and Iran, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the flow-on impacts on petrol and diesel prices, the aftermath of the Bondi terrorist attack, and the announcement by Australia's largest IT company that it was cutting around 500 Australian jobs in response to competition from Artificial Intelligence.

Three months later, Australia's focus had turned somewhat more to domestic matters, with the May 2026 budget including a number of tax changes (particularly related to housing and other investments) and the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion undertaking a number of public hearings. The question we ask in this paper is what happens to wellbeing, and to attitudes towards democracy and towards each other, once the sharpest edge of a period of disruption has passed.

There are, broadly, three possibilities. The first is that the March 2026 results captured a temporary response to an unusually concentrated set of events, and that Australians recover as those events recede. The second is that March 2026 marked a new and lower baseline, and that the deterioration recorded over the preceding two years has settled rather than reversed. A third possibility is that results have continued to deteriorate, as the cumulative impact of external shocks and internal debates compound. The results reported in this paper are more consistent with the second possibility – a ratcheting down and new and lower baseline having been established.

The June 2026 ANUpoll also marks a change in how we collect our data. Alongside the cross-sectional sample that has been the basis of the ANUpoll series since October 2019, this wave contains data from a new longitudinal cohort, with respondents to the March 2026 survey invited to complete the June survey and to be followed through to January 2027. This is a similar approach to what we used over the 2025 Election period (October 2024 to May 2025) and will eventually allow us to observe change within individuals rather than only across successive samples of the population. It will allow us to say something more direct about whether it is the same Australians who are becoming less satisfied, less secure, and less trusting, or whether the aggregate picture masks considerable movement in both directions.

In this paper we make limited use of that longitudinal design, mainly to test whether the changes we observe are concentrated in particular parts of the population. Its full value will become apparent in subsequent waves. Specifically, we provide a summary of the main results from the June 2026 ANUpoll on wellbeing, satisfaction, democratic attitudes, and interpersonal trust, making comparisons with previous waves.

Data collection commenced on 18 June 2026 with a pilot survey of 61 respondents. After confirming there were no issues or concerns and that the survey had run as planned, respondents to the March 2026 ANUpoll were invited to complete the survey on 19 June. This represented the beginning of a new longitudinal cohort, which we intend to follow and supplement until January 2027.

New additions to the sample were invited from 30 June. Data collection finished on 6 July, with a total sample of 3,543 respondents. A total of 1,692 respondents in the sample had not completed the March 2026 survey, leaving 1,851 respondents that are part of the longitudinal sample (50.5 per cent retention from the 3,662 people collected in the March 2026 survey).

All adults in Australia are in scope for the survey, across urban and regional areas, and all states/territories. Two sets of weights are calculated – a cross-sectional weight (for all June 2026 respondents) and a longitudinal weight (for those that completed both March 2026 and June 2026 surveys). Both sets of weights are calculated using iterative proportional fitting (raking) using four benchmark variables: age and sex benchmarks (sourced from ABS population estimates), education (from the 2021 Census), and current employment status (from the Labour Force Survey). Standard errors are calculated using bootstrap standard errors with 250 replications.

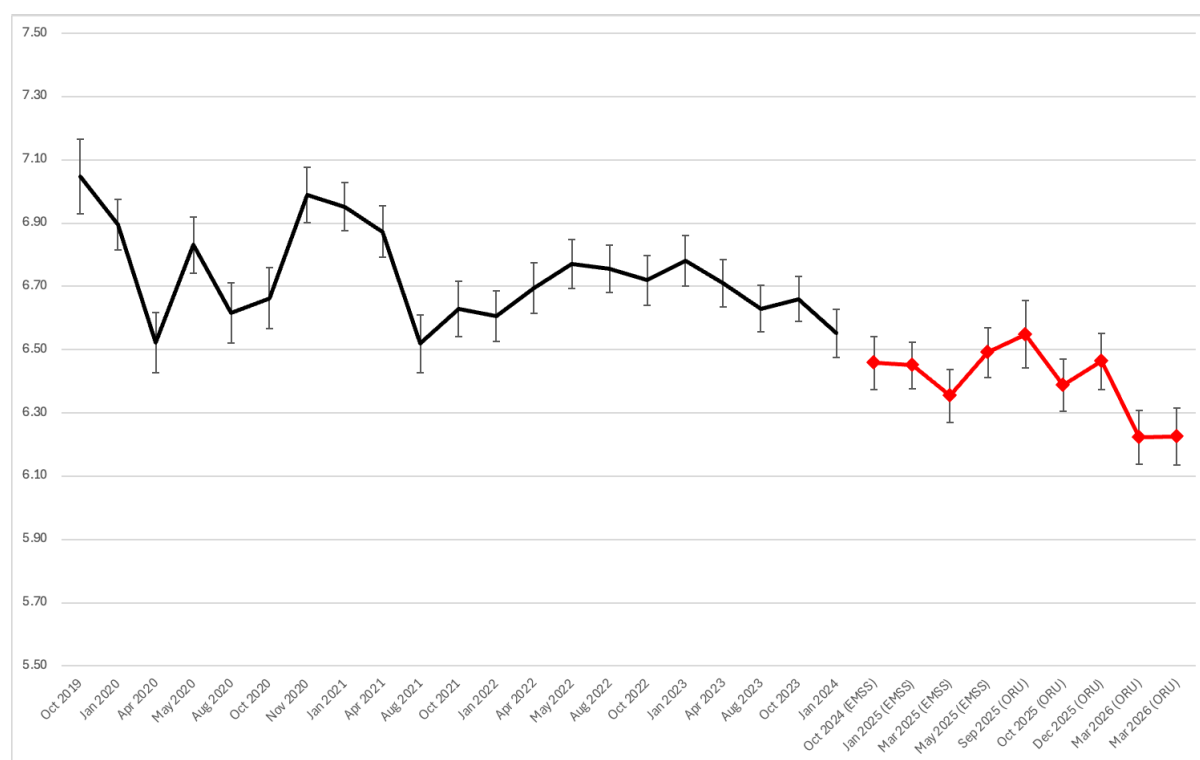
The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the state of wellbeing in Australia in June 2026, tracking life satisfaction, satisfaction with the direction of the country, and financial stress, and identifying the demographic and socioeconomic factors associated with each. Section 3 turns to views on democracy, distinguishing between satisfaction with the way democracy is being delivered in Australia and principled support for democracy as a system of government, and examining attitudes towards a set of core democratic norms. Section 4 reports on interpersonal trust, which is at its lowest level in the 2020s and is the most concerning finding in the paper. Section 5 brings these strands together, asking which of the wellbeing, economic, and social measures examined in the preceding sections are most predictive of satisfaction with democracy. Section 6 presents key findings and implications.

2 General wellbeing measures

The regular tracking data from the ANUpoll shows that measures of wellbeing have been stable over the last three months, but at a low base. A core tracking measure used in ANUpolls going back to late 2019 is life satisfaction. The relevant question is as follows: *The following question asks how satisfied you feel about life in general, on a scale from 0 to 10. Zero means you feel 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied'. Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?*

Figure 1 shows that life satisfaction has remained steady between March and June 2026, continuing at a low value of 6.22. This is identical to the March 2026 estimate to two decimal places; there has clearly been no increase in life satisfaction over the period.

Figure 1 Life satisfaction – October 2019 to June 2026



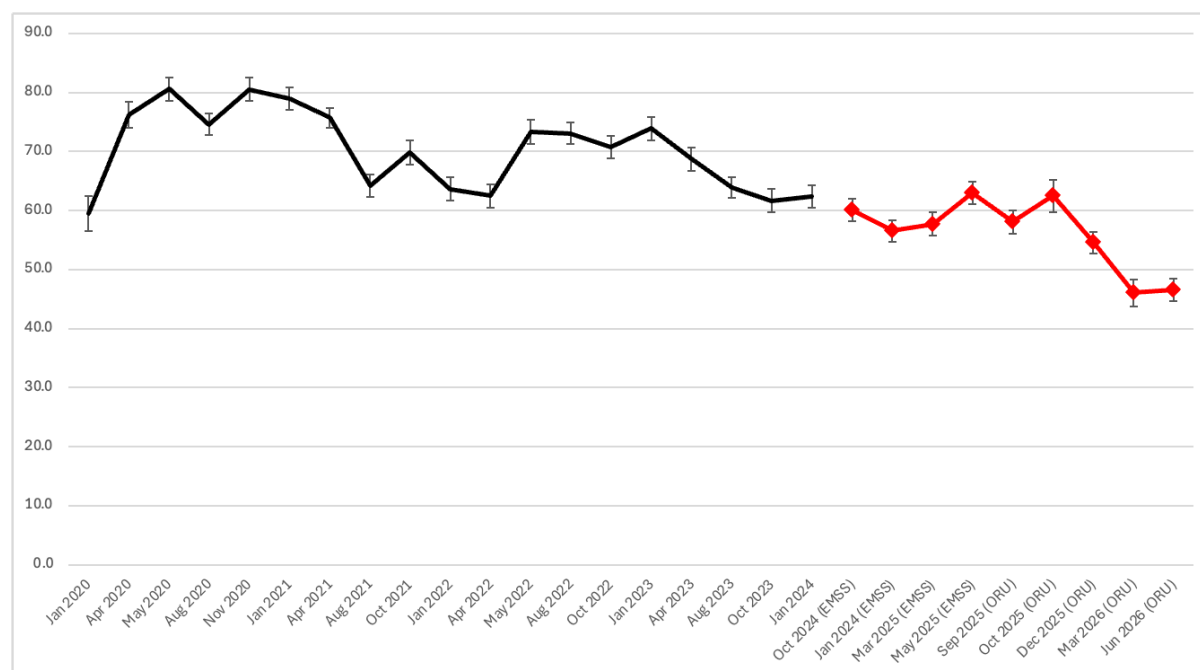
Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

Satisfaction with direction of the country is similarly stable. The first substantive question in the ANUpoll is: *Firstly, a general question about your views on living in Australia. All things considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the country is heading?*

Figure 2 shows a small, but not statistically significant increase in the per cent of Australians satisfied or very satisfied, from 46.0 to 46.6 per cent. Both months are the only months since January 2020 when more people are dissatisfied than satisfied.

Figure 2 Satisfaction with direction of country – January 2020 to June 2026

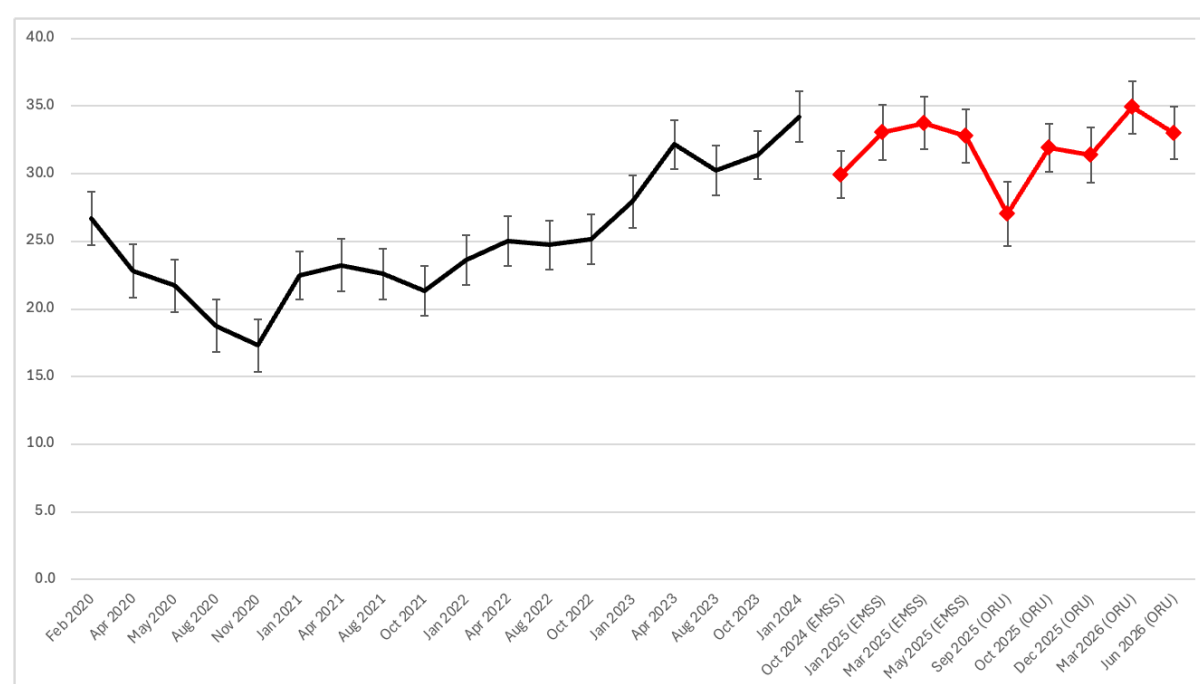


Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

Financial stress was also stable between March and June 2026. The question asked is: *Which of the following descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?*

Figure 3 gives the per cent of Australians finding it difficult or very difficult on their current income, with if anything a slightly smaller per cent in June 2026 finding it difficult or very difficult compared to March 2026 (33.0 and 34.9 per cent respectively). However, this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 3 Financial stress – February 2020 to June 2026

Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

In order to understand how these three wellbeing measures varied across the population, we undertook a regression analysis, using a consistent set of demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic factors as explanatory variables. Life satisfaction can be treated as a continuous variable, and we therefore analysed using a linear regression model. Satisfaction with the direction of the country and financial stress are both categorical variables, so we estimated using the ordered probit model.

Results are presented in Table 1 as coefficients, which are not directly comparable across models. We therefore provide some descriptive statistics alongside the regression analysis, in order to help understand the magnitude of the differences.

Regression analysis suggests that life satisfaction is substantially higher for older Australians. For those aged 18 to 64, average life satisfaction (without controlling for other characteristics) is 6.06. For those aged 65 years and over, on the other hand, it is 6.82.

Life satisfaction also varies by education. Compared to someone that has either completed Year 12 or has a post-school qualification, but doesn't have a degree, life satisfaction is higher for those with a bachelor degree, but lower for those that have neither completed Year 12 nor have a post-school qualification. Finally, life satisfaction is higher for those employed, as well as those born overseas (particularly in an English-speaking country). There are no differences by sex, nor by geography.

There are some similarities between the predictors of satisfaction with direction of the country and life satisfaction. Specifically, satisfaction with direction of the country is higher for those with a bachelor degree, as well as those born overseas (particularly for those born in a predominantly non-English-speaking country, in this case). There are some differences by geography in the case of satisfaction with the direction of the

country, with the regression analysis showing lower values for those that live outside of an inner metropolitan area.

One of the big differences between the regression analysis for life satisfaction and the analysis for satisfaction with the direction of the country is that for the latter, younger Australians are more satisfied than other age cohorts. More than half of those aged 18 to 34 are satisfied or very satisfied (53.6 per cent) compared to much less than half for the remainder of the population (43.5 per cent).

In the final column of coefficients in Table 1, we can see from the regression analysis (using the ordered probit model with four categories) that older Australians (aged 65 plus) are less likely to be experiencing financial stress, as are those with a bachelor degree, those born overseas in an English-speaking country, and those that were employed. This is the only one of our wellbeing dependent variables where there are differences by sex. Although the magnitude of the difference isn't large, we can still see that females are significantly more likely to experience financial stress than males (35.0 per cent finding it difficult or very difficult compared to 31.1 per cent).

Table 1 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with wellbeing measures, June 2026

Explanatory variables	Life satisfaction		Satisfaction with direction		Financial stress	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.125		0.317	***	-0.114	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.019		0.149	**	-0.057	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.061		-0.047		-0.022	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.290		-0.110		-0.146	*
Aged 65 to 74 years	1.125	***	0.167		-0.351	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.383	***	0.097		-0.410	***
Female	0.092		0.003		0.110	**
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.290	*	-0.137		0.120	
Has a degree	0.301	***	0.201	***	-0.261	***
Born overseas – English-speaking country	0.301	**	0.201	***	-0.271	***
Born overseas – non-English-speaking country	0.218		0.416	***	-0.021	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.075		-0.085		0.027	
Employed	0.400	***	-0.018		-0.221	***
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.129		-0.128	**	0.081	
Provincial Electorate	-0.068		-0.082		0.102	
Rural Electorate	-0.066		-0.112		0.016	
Constant	5.576	***				
Cut-point 1			-0.888		-0.993	
Cut-point 2			0.179		0.195	
Cut-point 3			1.641		1.018	
Number of respondents	3,353		3,206		3,319	

Notes: Linear and ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

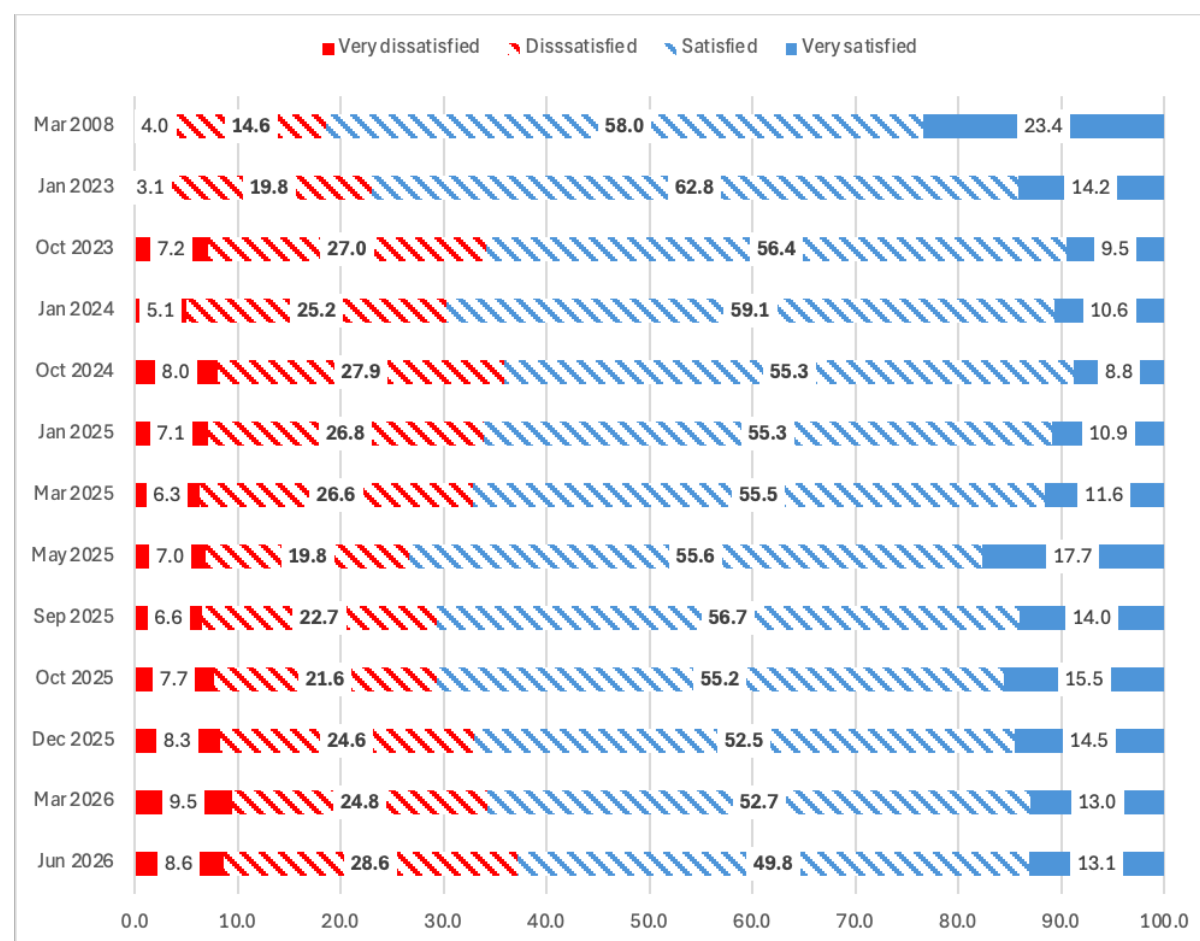
Source: ANUpoll

3 Views on democracy

Our key tracking measure for the views of Australians towards democracy is satisfaction. In ANUpolls going back to January 2023, and with one data point in March 2008, we ask: *On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?*

Figure 4 shows that there was a noticeable and statistically significant drop in satisfaction with democracy between March and June 2026 (from 65.7 per cent satisfied or very satisfied to 62.8 per cent respectively). This drop appears to be due to an increase in the proportion dissatisfied, rather than very dissatisfied. While there has been some fluctuation over the time period during which satisfaction with democracy has been asked somewhat regularly, June 2026 is the point at which the smallest proportion of Australians are satisfied or very satisfied.

Figure 4 Satisfaction with democracy – March 2008, and January 2023 to June 2026



Source: ANUpoll

We analyse the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy in June 2026 in two ways. Using the ordered probit model both times, in Table 2 we look at the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy in June 2026 as a cross-section, as well as using the March to June longitudinal sample. For the latter, we control for levels of

satisfaction in March 2026, which means we are essentially capturing the factors that are associated with individual-level change in satisfaction with democracy.

Cross-sectionally, satisfaction with democracy is higher for younger Australians (aged 18 to 24) and older Australians (aged 65 years and over), with satisfaction with democracy lowest amongst those aged 25 to 64. Satisfaction is also higher for males compared to females, those with higher levels of education compared to lower levels of education, those born overseas and in particular those born in a non-English-speaking country, and those who live in inner metropolitan areas.

Keeping in mind that there was an overall decline in satisfaction with democracy between March and June 2026, a negative coefficient for the longitudinal analysis in the second column of data indicates a greater decline for someone with that characteristic, whereas a positive coefficient indicates a smaller decline (but not necessarily an improvement).

Longitudinally, when we control for satisfaction with democracy in March 2026, there was a smaller relative decrease in satisfaction for younger Australians and for those with a degree. Again, the descriptive statistics are helpful here. For those aged 18 to 24 years in our weighted longitudinal sample, the per cent of those that were satisfied or very satisfied declined from 72.1 to 68.6 per cent between March and June. For the rest of the population, it declined from 67.1 to 60.9 per cent. For those with a degree in our weighted longitudinal sample, satisfaction declined from 77.1 to 73.4 per cent between March and June. For the rest of the population, it declined from 62.9 to 55.6 per cent.

Given that in March 2026 satisfaction with democracy was higher for younger Australians and those with a degree, the longitudinal analysis suggests that pre-existing satisfaction gaps widened between March and June.

Table 2 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy, June and March-June 2026

Explanatory variables	Cross-sectional		Longitudinal	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
Dissatisfied in March 2026			1.126	***
Satisfied in March 2026			2.528	***
Very satisfied in March 2026			3.689	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.332	***	0.244	*
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.081		0.066	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.065		0.229	*
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.086		0.107	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.475	***	0.365	***
Aged 75 years plus	0.323	***	0.176	
Female	-0.084	*	0.092	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.255	***	0.043	
Has a degree	0.339	***	0.220	***
Born overseas – English-speaking country	0.119	*	0.148	
Born overseas – non-English-speaking country	0.146	**	0.043	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.028		0.093	
Employed	-0.036		0.040	
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.116	**	0.103	
Provincial Electorate	-0.112		0.038	
Rural Electorate	-0.169	**	0.125	
Cut-point 1	-1.350		0.194	
Cut-point 2	-0.253		1.838	
Cut-point 3	1.256		3.791	
Number of respondents	3,190		1,655	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

While satisfaction with democracy declined somewhat in the three months between the March and June 2026 ANUpolls, principled support for democracy has stayed steady. This is demonstrated in Figure 5, which gives (by age and sex and for all of Australia) the per cent that agree or strongly agree with the statement that *‘Democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other kind of government.’*

There was a slight increase in principled support between March and June 2026 (from 69.2 to 72.0 per cent). However, the difference is not quite statistically significant at the 5 per cent level of significance. Furthermore, the difference between the May 2025 and March 2026 samples was not statistically significant. Over the slightly longer time period (May 2025 to June 2026), however, there was an increase of around five percentage points, which was statistically significant. What this means intuitively is that we can’t be sure that there was an increase in each of the intervals, but we can be very confident that cumulatively there has been an increase in principled support for democracy in the year since the May 2025 election.

In addition, if we focus on the longitudinal sample (March to June 2026) and measure the change through time in the five-category underlying variable, the change in average value is positive (3.92 in March 2026 and 3.98 in June 2026), and significantly different from zero (p-value = 0.021).

Figure 5 Principled support for democracy, by age and sex – May 2025, March and June 2026



Source: ANUpoll

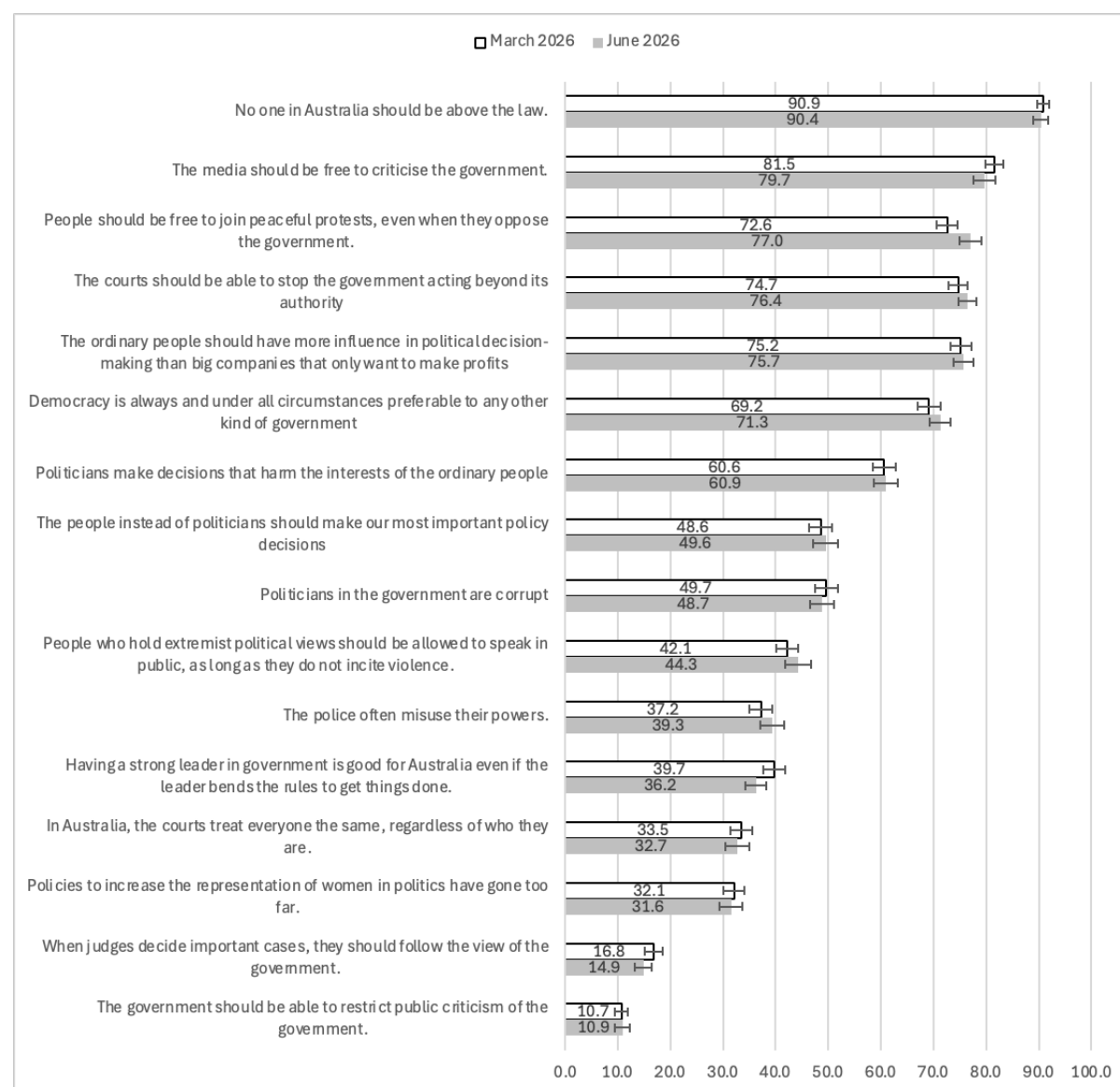
Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

The question on support for democracy is one of sixteen questions asked in March and June 2026 that touch on aspects of democracy in Australia. Some of the additional questions are similarly related to preferences and principled views, whereas others are focused on evaluations of the current state of democracy and institutions in Australia. Figure 6 gives the per cent of Australians that agree or strongly agree with each of these sixteen questions in both waves, ordered by the most to least supported in June 2026.

Figure 6 shows a fair degree of stability between March and June. At one extreme, a little over nine in ten Australians agree that no one in Australia should be above the law. At the other extreme, only a little over one-in-ten agree that the government should be able to restrict public criticism.

The only question where the confidence intervals do not overlap is agreement as to whether *‘People should be free to join peaceful protests, even when they oppose the government.’* There was an increase by 4.4 percentage points in agreement with that statement between March and June 2026, from 72.6 to 77.0 per cent.

Figure 6 Agreement with democracy-related statements – March and June 2026



Source: ANUpoll

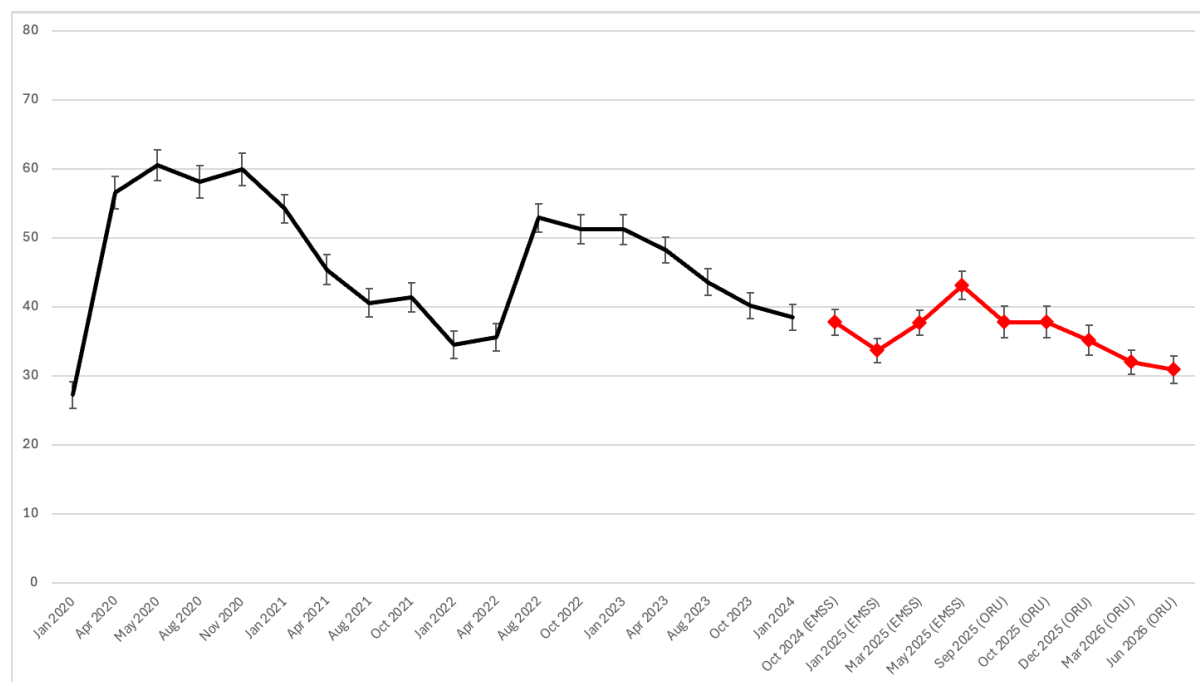
Note: The ‘whiskers’ around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

Our final tracking measure is the extent to which people report confidence in three types of institutions: the Federal Government in Canberra; the public service; and the State/Territory Government [where the person lives]. The public service has the most confidence of these three institutions (44.1 per cent with a great deal or quite a lot of

confidence), followed by state/territory governments (41.4 per cent). The lowest level of confidence is with the Federal Government, at 30.9 per cent.

Taking a longer-term perspective (Figure 7), confidence in the Federal government in June 2026 is almost exactly the same as it was in March 2026, which is slightly above the low observed during the Black Summer bushfire crisis, but lower than at any other point since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 7 Confidence in the Federal Government – October 2019 to June 2026



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

4 Interpersonal trust

To measure interpersonal trust, we take the average of three measures, all measured on a scale of 0 to 10:

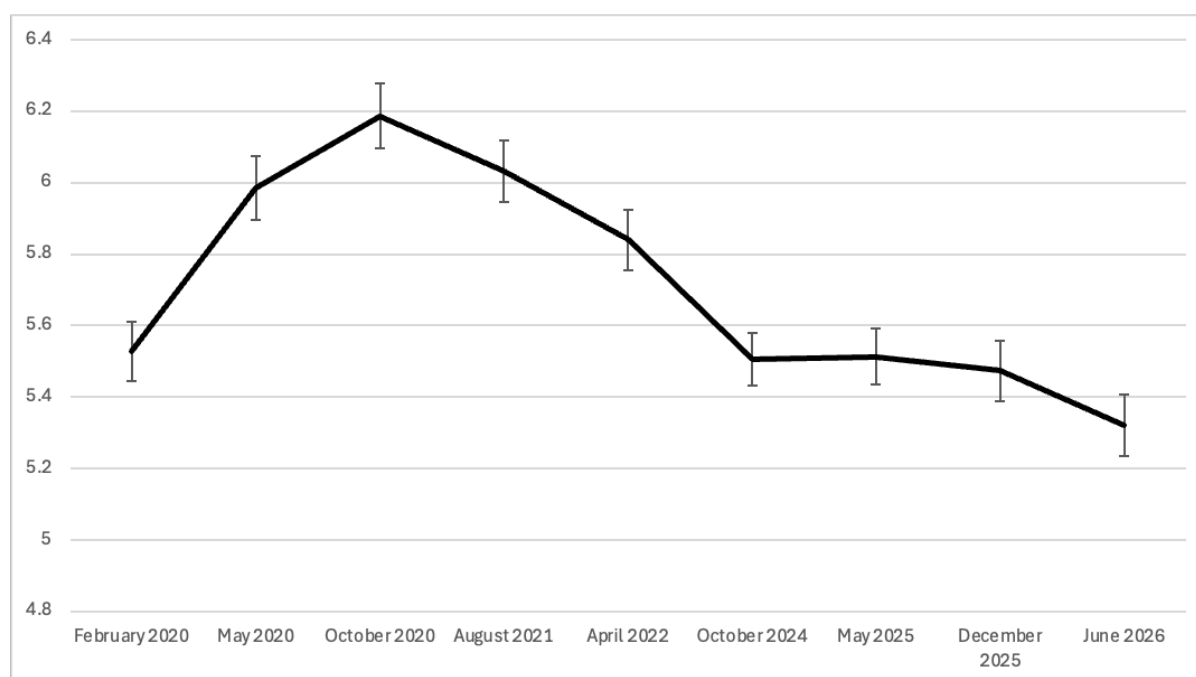
- *Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*
- *Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?*
- *Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?*

Looking across the three underlying variables, Australians were slightly more likely to say that people are fair (5.35 on a scale of 0 to 10) or helpful (5.33) than to say that people could be trusted (5.27). However, there is a very strong correlation across all three variables, and therefore they can be usefully analysed as a single variable.

The average value of these three measures in June 2026 was 5.32 (Figure 8). The previous three times this question was asked on the ANUpoll (October 2024, May 2025 and December 2025), the value stayed within a reasonably narrow band of 5.47 to 5.51, which was quite similar to the pre-COVID value of 5.53. During the pandemic, interpersonal trust rose quite substantially. However, the June 2026 figure is the lowest recorded in ANUpoll in the 2020s.

The decline is greatest for trust (from 5.48 in December 2025 to 5.27 in June 2026), but the other two variables also declined over the period (from 5.49 to 5.35 for fairness and 5.45 to 5.33 for helpfulness).

Figure 8 Interpersonal trust – October 2019 to June 2026



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

We did not collect interpersonal trust data in March 2026, so it is not possible to look at longitudinal change through time. However, it is possible to look at the factors associated with interpersonal trust cross sectionally in June 2026 (Table 3). Based on linear regression analysis, it is significantly higher for older Australians, those with a degree, and those who are employed.

Table 3 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with interpersonal trust, June 2026

Explanatory variables	Coeffic.	Signif.
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.055	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.197	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.049	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.615	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	1.304	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.339	***
Female	0.011	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.206	
Has a degree	0.477	***
Born overseas – English-speaking country	-0.029	
Born overseas – non-English-speaking country	0.162	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.148	
Employed	0.213	*
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	0.064	
Provincial Electorate	0.064	
Rural Electorate	-0.146	
Constant	4.674	***
Number of respondents	3,293	

Notes: Linear regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

5 Predictors of satisfaction with democracy

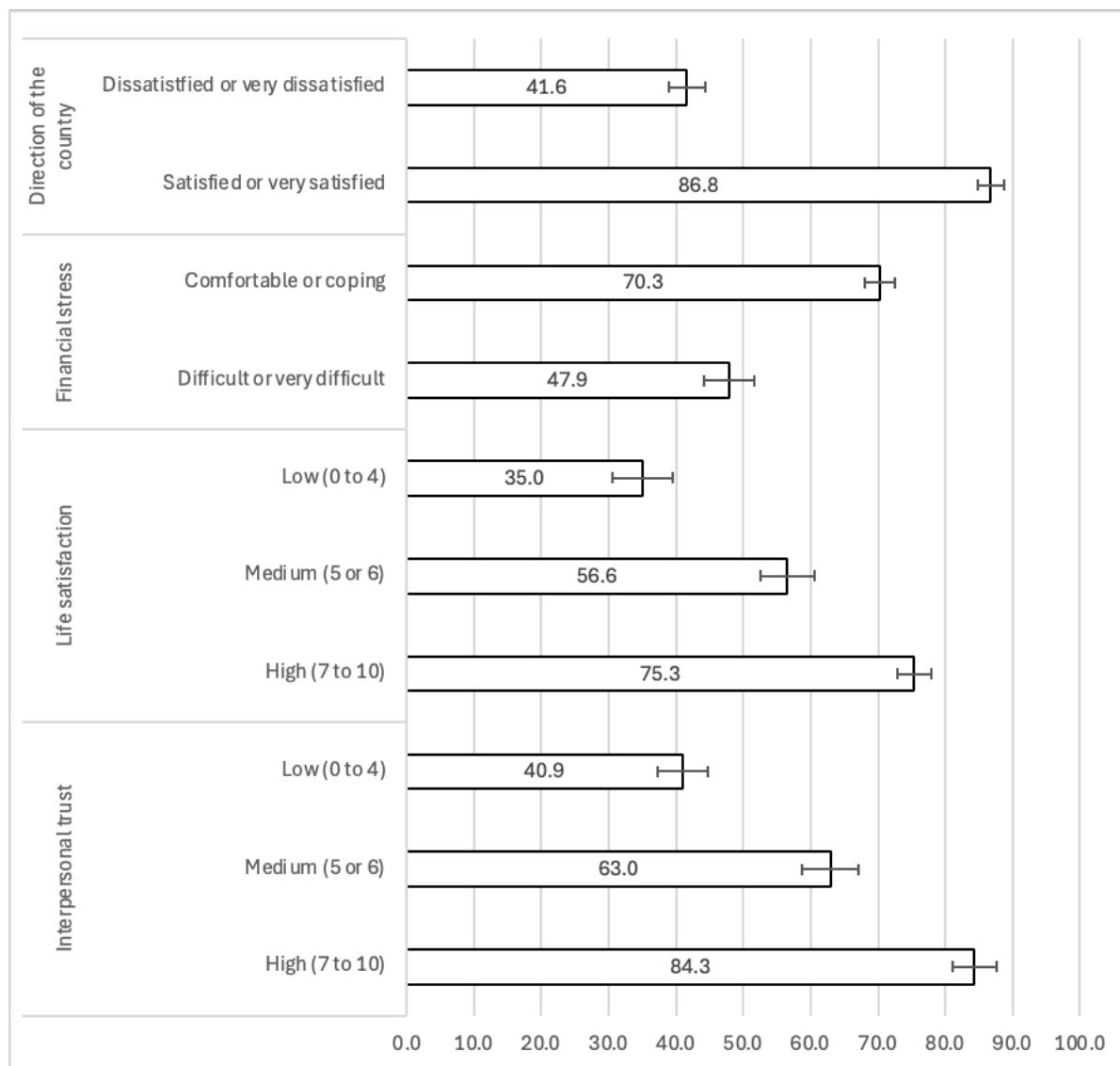
The previous sections have demonstrated that between the end of 2025 and the middle of 2026, there have been declines in life satisfaction, satisfaction with the direction of the country, financial stress, and interpersonal trust. While much of that worsening occurred in the early part of the year, there does not appear to be any evidence of improvements between the March and June 2026 ANUpolls. Over the same period, there was a decline in satisfaction with democracy, with the evidence more definitive that there was an increase in dissatisfaction between December and March, as well as between March and June.

Between March 2026 and January 2027, we will be tracking these measures longitudinally, which will make it much easier to see how changes through time relate to each other at the individual level. In our June 2026 data, however, we are able to see cross-sectionally which of these key variables are most predictive of satisfaction with democracy.

Figure 9 suggests that when it comes to predicting satisfaction with democracy, views on the country and views on others have a much stronger relationship than individual circumstances.¹ There is a 45.1 percentage point gap in satisfaction with democracy between those that are satisfied with the direction of the country and those that are not. Between the 34.9 per cent of Australians with low levels of interpersonal trust (values of 0 to 4) and the 31.6 per cent with relatively high levels (values of 7 to 10), there is a 43.4 percentage point gap in satisfaction with democracy.

¹ Regression analysis looks at the direct associations and shows that variables are statistically significant, with the magnitude of differences similar to Figure 9.

Figure 9 Per cent of Australians satisfied or very satisfied with democracy, by key wellbeing measures



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

6 Summary and implications

The question posed at the outset of this paper was how wellbeing, democratic attitudes and interpersonal trust would evolve once the sharpest edge of a period of disruption has passed. Of the three possibilities we set out, the June 2026 data are most consistent with the second scenario: stability but no improvement.

While the immediate shocks of early 2026 had receded at the time the June 2026 ANUpoll data was collected, the uncertainty, a heightened sense of risk and the impacts on Australians' lives continue. As a result life satisfaction, financial stress, confidence in the federal government, and satisfaction with the direction of the country were all essentially unchanged since March 2026. A period of acute disruption has passed without wellbeing returning to where it was beforehand, which is the clearest indication available to us that what we recorded in March 2026 was not a temporary response to an unusually concentrated set of events.

Taken together, the results from the June 2026 ANUpoll when viewed alongside the longer time series point to a distinction that matters for how policymakers interpret democratic sentiment. Satisfaction with the performance of democracy has fallen, but principled support for democracy as a system has held, and over the past year has actually strengthened. This is consistent with the pattern identified in previous papers based on ANUpoll data and suggests that short-term dissatisfaction with government performance should not be read as evidence of weakening commitment to democratic government itself.

The finding that declines in satisfaction with democracy have been smaller for younger Australians and degree holders, and larger for the rest of the population, is worth flagging for anyone monitoring social cohesion. Pre-existing gaps in satisfaction are widening rather than narrowing, which means that whatever is driving the recent decline is not being experienced evenly across the population.

The one democracy-related attitude that moved significantly between March and June 2026 was support for the right to join peaceful protests, which rose by 4.4 percentage points to 77.0 per cent. This shift is worth interpreting against the events that occurred between the two waves. The period saw sustained public debate over the restriction of assembly rights, most notably the NSW Court of Appeal's decision in *Jarrett v State of New South Wales* [2026] NSWCA 62 striking down the public assembly restriction declaration scheme enacted in the wake of the Bondi attack, on the ground that it impermissibly burdened the implied constitutional freedom of political communication. Protest and policing will also be examined by the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion in its August 2026 hearings.

While we cannot attribute the shift to any particular event, the direction of change is notable. A period in which protest rights were curtailed, litigated, and publicly contested was accompanied by an increase, rather than a decline, in public support for those rights.

A troubling finding from the June 2026 ANUpoll is that interpersonal trust has reached its lowest recorded value in the 2020s. Trust of this kind is not something that responds quickly to policy intervention, but a sustained decline over multiple waves would be a reasonable basis for closer attention. If the social fabric continues to fray while

commitment to democratic principle holds, the risk is not that Australians abandon democracy, but that they increasingly approach it, and each other, from a position of wariness rather than confidence.

The analysis at the end of the paper suggests where attention might most usefully be directed. When we ask which of the measures examined in this paper are most strongly associated with satisfaction with democracy, it is views about the country and views about other people that dominate rather than a person's own material circumstances. These associations are cross-sectional and we cannot infer the direction of causation from them. They do, however, raise the possibility that responses framed solely around household economic conditions will not be sufficient to shift democratic sentiment, and that the relationship between economic improvement and civic confidence is less direct than is often assumed. Education is the one characteristic that appears consistently across almost every measure in this paper, which is a reminder that the factors shaping how Australians assess their democracy are formed well upstream of any particular policy response.

There are limits to what a single wave can establish. Much of what we report here concerns change in the aggregate, and aggregate stability can conceal considerable movement in opposing directions at the individual level. The longitudinal cohort recontacted for the first time in June 2026 and running through to January 2027 is designed to address precisely this, and will allow us to observe whether it is the same Australians who are becoming less satisfied, less secure and less trusting, or whether the population is churning beneath a stable surface. What the June 2026 results describe is a country whose sense of confidence and optimism has stopped falling without beginning to recover, and whose commitment to democratic principle remains more robust than its satisfaction with democratic practice. Whether that combination holds is the question the next three waves are best placed to answer.

References

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