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Social Cohesion and Support for Democracy in Australia: Assessing recent polling data and frameworks

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between support for democracy and social cohesion in Australia. There is a long history of Australian policy efforts to strengthen social cohesion, including policies since the 1970s associated with social citizenship, ongoing debates around immigration and multiculturalism, and more recent shifts toward place-based and devolved approaches to community leadership. Following the terrorist attack in Bondi in December 2025 targeting Jewish Australians, the Federal Government expanded social cohesion to be a more central policy concern through the Terms of Reference of the Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion.

Recent national disasters, including floods and fires, have further exposed pressures on community infrastructure and highlighted persistent patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Together, these developments have elevated social cohesion within public and policy narratives, often framed around Australia's pluralistic communities and democratic traditions. In this context, and alongside the announcement of the Royal Commission, this paper examines current community attitudes in the lead up to, and overlapping with the terrorist attacks, as a baseline and contextual analysis. While we use a specific set of widely accepted definitions, we note their limitations.

Drawing on recent ANUpoll data and using the pillars of the OECD framework as a baseline approach, the paper distinguishes between satisfaction with democracy and principled support for democracy as a system of government and situates democratic attitudes within broader dimensions of social cohesion: social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility.

The findings show that Australians remain broadly supportive of democracy in principle, even where satisfaction with democratic performance is weaker. However, this support is unevenly distributed. The strongest divides are structured by age and education. Support is lowest not among young Australians per se, but among younger Australians without Year 12 or post-school qualifications—an age–education interaction that reveals substantial social polarisation in democratic commitment. Specifically, among Australians aged 18–34 without Year 12 or post-school qualifications, fewer than one in four regard democracy as always preferable, compared with nearly two-thirds of those with a degree. Once age is controlled for, education is positively associated with democratic support, indicating clear social polarisation by education.

Economic insecurity is modestly associated with principled democratic support but strongly associated with dissatisfaction with democratic performance. Institutional and interpersonal trust are strongly associated with support for and satisfaction with democracy; trust in social media is associated with weaker democratic commitment. Perceptions of unfairness and limited opportunity further explain variation in support. Furthermore, persistent economic disadvantage among Indigenous Australians remains a structural challenge to inclusive cohesion.

Overall, the results suggest that Australia's democratic consensus is present but socially stratified. The findings suggest that Australia's democratic consensus is durable but uneven, concentrated among older and more educated Australians and more fragile where educational disadvantage, economic insecurity, and low institutional trust intersect.

The analysis provides a baseline against which we can track democratic attitudes and social cohesion over the next year. Ultimately though, while the Royal Commission can play an important agenda-setting role, strengthening social cohesion requires a broader, whole-of-system policy approach spanning education, economic inclusion, institutional trust, information environments, and civil society.

1 Introduction and overview

Democratic resilience refers to a democracy's capacity to identify problems, and respond collectively to changing conditions, maintaining a balance between institutional stability and necessary policy change. Merkel (2023) describes democratic resilience as the capacity of a democracy to absorb external challenges and internal stressors while adapting dynamically to shifting governance conditions.

Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and the targeting of many other communities with hateful ideologies have been identified in Australia as significant threats to democratic principles (Jones 2004, Rutland 2023, Vergani et al. 2022). Although national measures of social cohesion, outlined below, generally indicate a strong level of resilience, communities and analysts have highlighted a rise in certain forms of extremism and hate. How Australia responds collectively, individually, and institutionally to these internal and external pressures is critical to democratic resilience. These responses have the potential to shape not only community safety and trust but also long-term satisfaction with, and commitment to, democratic values.

On the evening of 14 December 2025, a horrific terrorist incident occurred in Bondi. The shootings, which resulted in the deaths of 15 people (as well as one of the two perpetrators) appear to have been motivated by antisemitism and global ideologies related to conflict in the Middle East. On 8 January 2026, the Australian Prime Minister announced the establishment of a Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion (RC).[i] The announcement included the name of the Commissioner,[ii] releasing the Terms of Reference,[iii] and the timeline (completion by 14 December 2026). This Royal Commission represents a direct institutional response to the attacks and has the potential to strengthen trust, satisfaction, and engagement in Australian democracy.

The first focus of the Commission (as set out in the Terms of Reference) is to assess government approaches to protecting Jewish communities. While the Royal Commission will examine the past actions of Australia's institutions and their capacity to respond to antisemitism, it will also consider broader strategies for strengthening social cohesion.

Clearly most Australians would prefer a more socially cohesive society to a less cohesive one. The more substantive question, and the one central to the Royal Commission's work, is what do we mean by social cohesion, and what the available data reveals about the specific dimensions of cohesion the Royal Commission has been asked to examine?

To address these questions, the remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the concept of social cohesion. We then propose the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) framework as a starting point for empirical work on social cohesion. Section 3 presents new data on support for, and satisfaction with democracy in Australia-the primary dimension of social cohesion on which the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference focuses on, and a core component of many existing frameworks. Section 4 considers the predictors of the support for democracy using the OECD definitional and indicator framework, while Section 5 explores the relationship between democratic support/satisfaction and three additional dimensions of social cohesion: social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility. The final section provides a summary and a brief discussion of implications for the Royal Commission, and Australian public policy more broadly.

2 What do we mean by social cohesion?

The implicit definition of social cohesion in the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference[iv] is that enhancing social cohesion involves 'Strengthening the national consensus in support of democracy, freedom and the rule of law.' This is directly linked to the Commission's central focus: strengthening this aspect of social cohesion is described as providing 'the strongest defence against antisemitism and other forms of religious and ideologically motivated extremism.'

Most definitions of social cohesion in the research literature are considerably broader. A foundational contribution from Chan et al. (2006: p.290) defines social cohesion as a 'state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.'

More generally, social cohesion is understood as a multi-dimensional concept that cannot be captured by a single measure (Dragolov et al. 2016). Across the major frameworks, social cohesion typically encompasses positive social relationships, a sense of connectedness and belonging that extends beyond narrowly defined groups. Some frameworks include an orientation towards the common good. These frameworks emphasise that cohesion is not simply the absence of conflict, but the presence of social bonds and shared norms that enable cooperation within a nation or some other community.

A recent review of the empirical literature by Delhey et al. (2023: p.98) argues that the concept of social cohesion should be limited to 'how well fellow citizens—and the various groups society is composed of—relate to each other, to major societal institutions, and to the common good.'

The OECD (2011: p.51) adopts a more expansive definition of social cohesion. It describes a cohesive society as one that 'works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.' The OECD approach frames social cohesion around three interrelated dimensions:

- **Social inclusion**: measured by such aspects of social exclusion as poverty, inequality and social polarisation.
- **Social capital**: combines measures of trust (interpersonal and societal) with various forms of civic engagement.
- **Social mobility**: measures the degree to which people can or believe they can change their position in society.

Governments, including the Australian Government, have taken an active approach to both measuring and improving social cohesion. The Department of Home Affairs[v] argues that Australia's 'inclusive national identity is built around our shared values including democracy, freedom, equal opportunity and individual responsibility' and that 'We celebrate this diversity and at the same time strive for a unified and harmonious nation. It is this social cohesion that underpins our prosperity.'

The Australian Government also provides funding to the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute[vi] to undertake the Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) project.[vii] This survey-based program adopts a more expansive approach to measuring social cohesion. The most recent report by O'Donnell et al. (2025) continues a methodology applied consistently since 2007, drawing on multiple indicators across five broad domains:

- **Belonging**: the sense of pride and belonging people have in Australia and in Australian life and culture, and the belonging they feel in their neighbourhoods
- **Worth**: the degree of emotional and material wellbeing
- **Social inclusion and justice**: perceptions of economic fairness and trust in government
- **Participation**: involvement in political activities and participation in social, community, and civic groups
- **Acceptance and rejection**: attitudes to immigrant diversity, support for minorities, and experience of discrimination

Many definitions of social cohesion do include shared democratic norms as one component, and in this respect overlap with the approach outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission. For example, Delhey et al. (2023) distinguish social cohesion from the earlier concept of social capital (Putnam 1995) by emphasising that social cohesion includes the acceptance of political institutions of which support for democracy is a central element. However, such acceptance is typically only one dimension of social cohesion, and not necessarily its primary focus. This does not diminish the importance of shared norms; rather, it highlights that they form part of a broader constellation of relationships, attitudes, and behaviours that underpin a cohesive society.

With this measurement complexity in mind, it is important to reflect on what existing data reveals about support for democracy in Australia and how this support relates to other dimensions of social cohesion. Understanding these relationships provides an essential foundation for interpreting the Commission's findings and assessing the broader implications for democratic resilience.

3 Data and summary measures – Support for Democracy and Satisfaction in Australia

Satisfaction with democracy is not the same as support for democracy. An individual may hold strong normative support for democratic ideals yet feel that their country is failing to live up to those ideals, or that democratic institutions are not delivering in terms of economic or social outcomes (Norris 1999, Anderson et al. 2005). Conversely, citizens may report relatively high levels of satisfaction with regimes that exhibit authoritarian or hybrid characteristics, particularly where those regimes deliver economic growth, stability, or administrative effectiveness. Singapore is frequently cited as a relevant case of performance-based legitimacy without liberal democracy (Huat 2017).

Satisfaction with democracy is, however, measured more frequently in Australian population surveys. As a result, we have a much longer and more frequent time series for satisfaction with democracy than support for democracy. Looking at satisfaction, the long-term picture is one of fluctuation rather than sustained change, The Australian Election Study (AES)[viii] finds that 70 per cent of Australians were satisfied with democracy just after the 2025 election. If one were to compare only with 2007, this might appear to represent a significant long-term fall. However, satisfaction levels in 2025 were broadly similar to those recorded after the 1998, 2001, 2010, 2013, and 2022 elections, and substantially higher than those following the 1979, 2016, and 2019 elections.

For more recent time trends, the summary statistics in Figure 1 draw on data collected through the ANUpoll survey series. The data reported in Figure 1 were collected in partnership with the Online Research Unit (ORU) using the Australian Consumer Panel. All adults in Australia are in scope for the survey, across urban and regional areas, and all states/territories. Each wave of data is weighted 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 ANUpoll data shows that there has been remarkable stability in the level of satisfaction with democracy over the last fourteen months. Across seven waves conducted between October 2024 and December 2025, between around two-thirds and three-quarters of Australians reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy is working. This consistency suggests that, despite political and economic fluctuations over the period, overall satisfaction with democracy has remained relatively steady.

Figure 1   **Satisfaction with Democracy – October 2024 to December 2025 (%)**
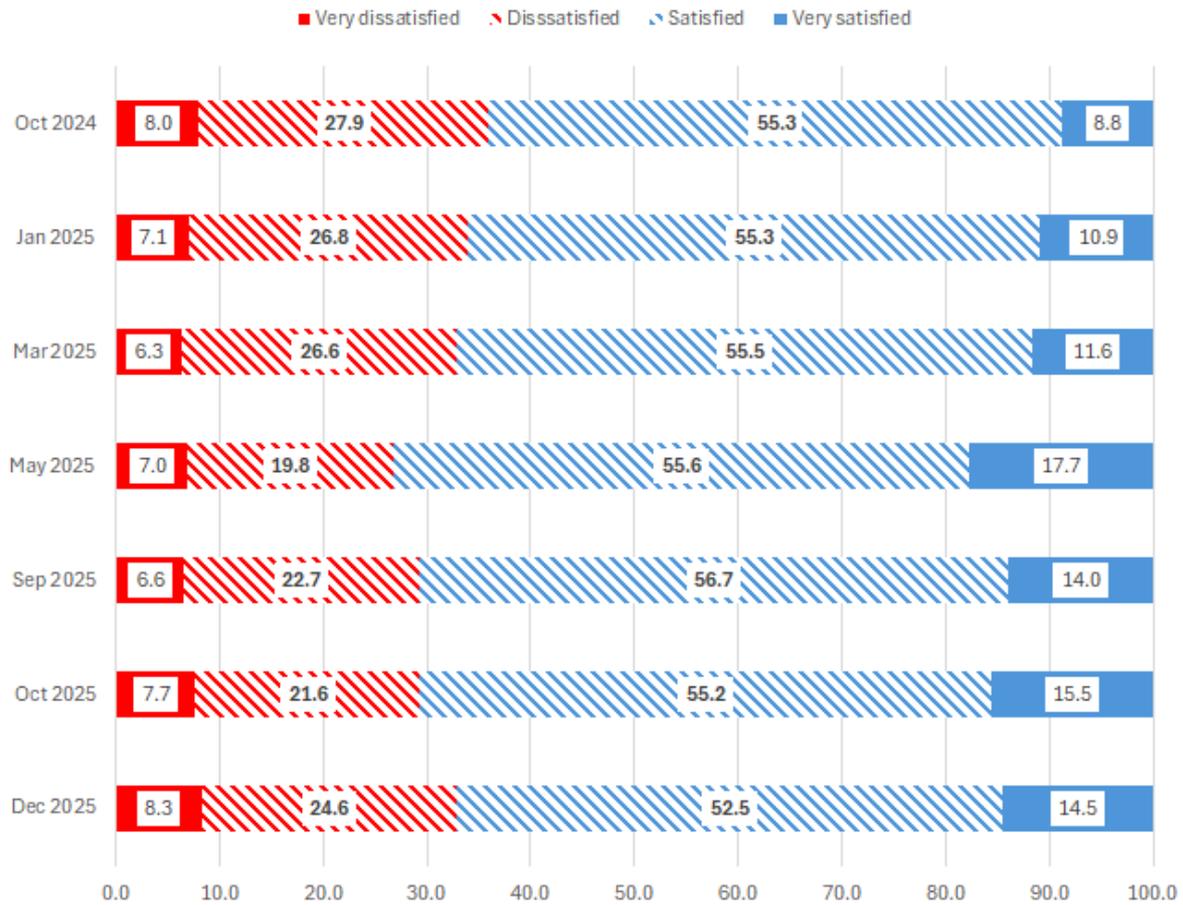
Source: ANUPoll

It is more difficult to track a population's support for democracy than their satisfaction with it. Individuals who reject democratic ideals are less likely to participate in the types of surveys used to measure social and political attitudes, whereas those that are dissatisfied with democratic performance may be more motivated to express that dissatisfaction to survey organisations. In addition, responses about democratic norms are more susceptible to social desirability bias. More anecdotally, because support for democracy tends to be more stable through time (Norris 1999), there has been less impetus, and therefore less funding, to include repeated measures of democratic support in large-scale surveys.

To that last point, we did not ask about support for democracy in the three most recent ANUPolls. We did, however, ask respondents in May 2025 to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statement: 'Democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other kind of government.'

So, what did Australians think about democracy as a form of government immediately after the 2025 election? Very few Australians disagreed that democracy is always preferable to other forms of government. In May 2025, only 1.4 per cent of Australians strongly disagreed with the statement, and a further 5.5 per cent disagreed. Another 26.3 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. This leaves 66.9 per cent of Australians who either

agreed (39.0 per cent) or strongly agreed (27.9 per cent) that democracy is always preferable to other forms of government.

These two views of democracy, satisfaction with it and support for it, are related. Among respondents to the May 2025 ANUpoll who were satisfied with democracy in Australia, 73.2 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that democracy is always the preferred form of government. Among those who were not satisfied with democracy, this proportion falls to 52.1 per cent. When comparing the full five-category classification, the relationship is moderately strong, with a polychoric correlation[ix] of 0.325. In short, the two concepts are empirically connected but far from identical, reflecting their underlying conceptual distinction.

Is this level of support and satisfaction sufficiently strong? Probably not. On the one hand, only a very small proportion of Australians (6.8 per cent) think that other forms of government might sometimes be preferable. On the other hand, the fact that only a little over one-quarter of Australians strongly agree with the statement suggests considerable scope for strengthening support for democracy. Strong endorsement remains a minority position, indicating that while outright rejection of democracy is rare, deep normative commitment is far from universal.

# 4 Factors most strongly linked to support for democracy

To be effective, policies that strengthen support for democracy need to be informed by an understanding of where consensus is strong, and where it may be broken or faltering. It is not only the overall level of support for democracy, which is important, but also how that support varies across the population. If support, or lack of support, is broadly consistent across groups, a general policy response is likely to be required. However, if particular segments of the population exhibit notably lower levels of support, a more targeted approach is required. While survey data like the ANUpoll cannot identify the most extreme anti-democratic groups within a society, it can be used to identify larger population segments where support might be wavering or contingent.

Regression analysis is a useful way to isolate the variables or characteristics that have an independent predictive association with a particular attitude or behaviour. Although there is some historic work looking at the predictors of support for democracy in Australia (for example McAllister 2011) and more recent work on satisfaction with democracy, there appears to be no recent analysis of the predictors of democratic support in Australia. To fill this gap, we use an ordered probit model to examine how a range of demographic, geographic, and political attitudinal characteristics relate to support for democracy. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 at the end of this section.

Before turning to the variables that do have an association with support for democracy, it is worth highlighting two that do not. In the modelling framework, residents of outer metropolitan, regional/rural, or remote residents did not differ in their support for democracy from those in inner metropolitan areas. Migration status also did not have an association, with those born overseas having neither higher nor lower support than those born in Australia (in raw percentage terms, 66.8 per cent of those born in Australia agree/strongly agree, compared to 67.9 per cent of those born overseas).

What does matter then, in terms of predicting support for democracy? Age and sex are two clear factors. As shown in Figure 2, only 43.8 per cent of Australians aged 18-24 agree or strongly agree that democracy is always preferable to other forms of government. This is less than half the rate for the oldest age cohort (89.1 per cent for those aged 75 years and over). Older Australians may have more individual memories of Australia's interaction with non-democratic regimes, and who may also have lived through periods when outcomes in democracies were far superior to those in non-democratic regimes. Sex differences are also evident. Females report lower level for support for democracy (63.1 per cent) than males (70.7 per cent).

Figure 2 **Support for democracy by age and sex, May 2025 (%)**
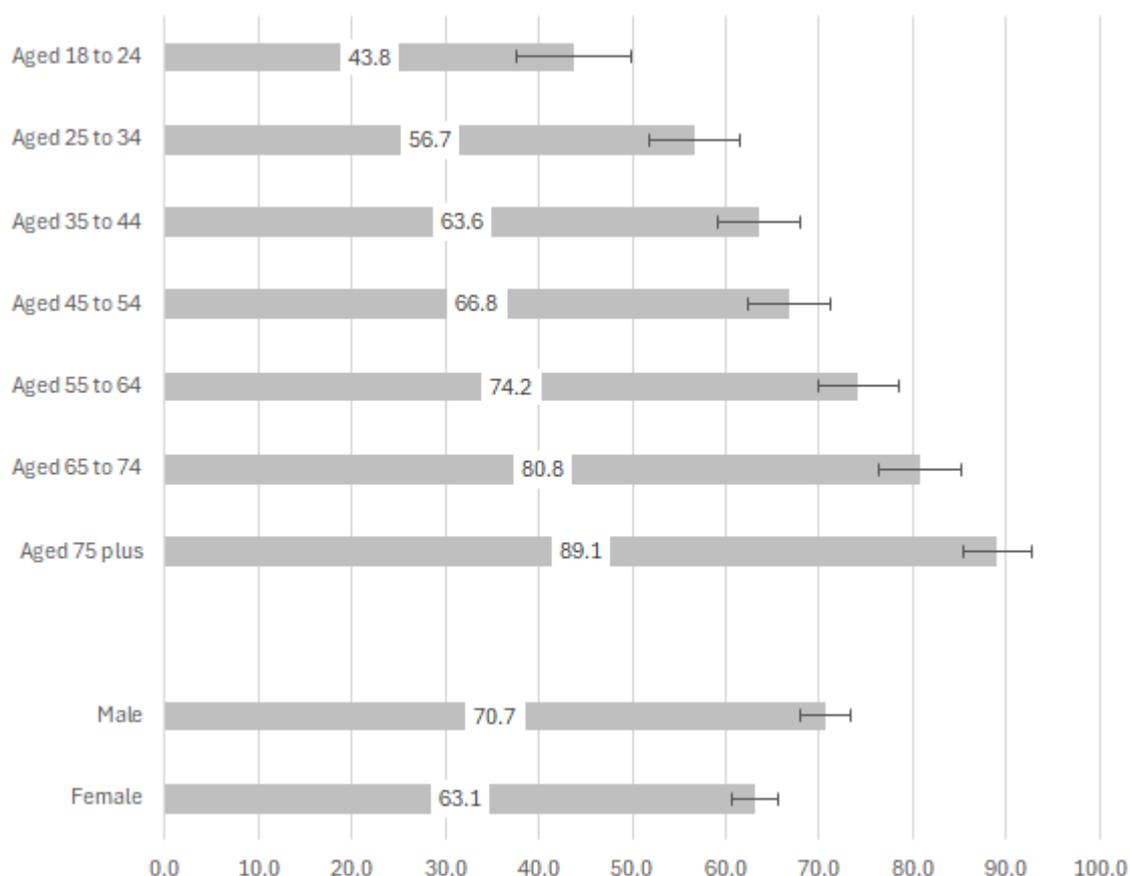
Source: ANUpoll.

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

Education, religion, and English-language experience are also strongly predictive of support for democracy. For language background, 58.1 per cent of Australians who speak a language other than English at home agree or strongly agree that democracy is always preferable. This is more than 10 percentage points lower than among those who speak only English at home (70.0 per cent). Religion also shows a clear association: 75.0 per cent of those who report belonging to a religion support democracy, compared to 63.2 per cent of those who report no religious affiliation.

Education is a little more complex. In the raw percentages there are no differences in support for democracy by education level. However, that is because education is strongly associated with age and younger Australians are both more educated, and less supportive of democracy than their older Australians. Once age is controlled for in the regression model, a positive association emerges – higher levels of education are associated with greater support for democracy.

When we look within age cohorts, which is essentially what regression analysis does, large differences by education become clear. Consider the youngest two age cohorts in our data. For those aged 18 to 34 years that have not completed Year 12 or post-school qualifications, only 22.0 per cent think that democracy is always preferable - less than one-quarter. This rises to 46.5 per cent among those in the same age group who have

completed Year 12 or a non-degree qualification and increases further to 62.9 per cent for those with a degree.

There is not really an age-related issue with support for democracy; rather the challenge lies in the interaction between age and education.

The final variable in the model that is strongly associated with support for democracy is political ideology. Respondents were asked:

> 'In politics, people sometimes talk about the 'left' and the 'right'. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?'

Slightly more Australians (37.3 per cent) placed themselves right-of-centre than right in the middle of the distribution (35.4 per cent), with a smaller proportion identifying as left-of-centre (27.4 per cent). Of this smaller left-leaning group, however, there was greater support for democracy with 74.5 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that democracy is always preferable, compared with 67.2 per cent of those on the right and 62.2 per cent at the centre of the ideological distribution.

Table 1   Regression model estimates of the factors associated with support for democracy, May 2025

Explanatory variables	Coefficient	Significance
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.515	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.218	***
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.016	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.373	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.564	***
Aged 75 years plus	0.958	***
Female	-0.095	**
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.246	***
Has a degree	0.125	**
Born overseas	-0.032	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.199	***
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.071	
Provincial Electorate	-0.048	
Rural Electorate	-0.123	*
Has a religious affiliation	0.263	***
Identifies as being on the left of political spectrum	0.399	***
Identifies as being on the right of political spectrum	0.072	
Cut-point 1	-2.175	
Cut-point 2	-1.402	
Cut-point 3	-0.302	
Number of respondents	3,105	

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; and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate and identifies as being in the centre of the political spectrum.

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 Support for democracy and other concepts related to social cohesion

As discussed earlier, support for democracy is only one component of most conceptualisations of social cohesion used in government and the academic literature. The implied definition in the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference includes two additional elements – consensus in support of freedom and consensus in support of the rule of law. We have also seen that support for democracy is positively, but far from perfectly, correlated with satisfaction with democracy (another commonly used aspect of social cohesion). The question, then, is what the empirical relationship looks like between the democratic consensus that is the focus of the Royal Commission and other aspects of social cohesion.

Drawing in particular on the OECD and the *Mapping Social Cohesion* approaches, which adopt more expansive understandings of social cohesion, we present below the trends in some of the other concepts related to social cohesion and how they relate to support for democracy (where available) or satisfaction with democracy (where measures of support are not available). For clarity and consistency, we group these indicators using the OECD three-part conceptualisation of social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility.

5.1 Social inclusion and support for democracy

One characteristic of a social inclusive society is that people's incomes are sufficient for them to meet their perceived needs. To capture this, respondents to the ANUpoll series are asked which of four descriptions best reflects how they feel about their household's income. In the most recent survey (December 2025), 26.6 per cent of Australians reported that they were living comfortably on their income, with a further 42.0 per cent saying they were coping. This leaves 31.4 per cent of Australians whom we classify as experiencing some form of financial stress: 20.7 per cent said that they were finding it difficult, and 10.7 per cent said they were finding it very difficult.

Figure 3 shows that since around mid-2023, this measure of financial stress has fluctuated within the 30-35 per cent band. This apparently new equilibrium is significantly higher than the pre-COVID benchmark of 26.7 per cent and almost double the low of 17.3 per cent measured in November 2020, when government payments were high, and opportunities to spend money were low.

Figure 3 **Finding it difficult to get by on current income, Australia (%)**
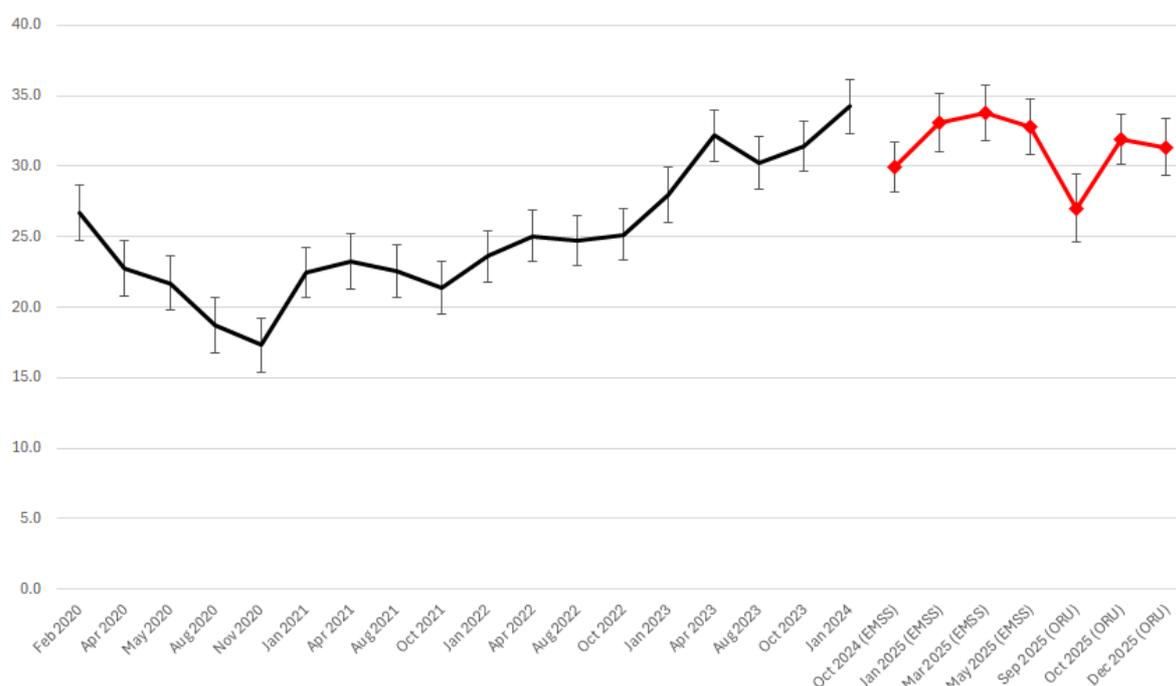
Source: ANUpoll

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

In May 2025, when both the financial stress question and the question on support for democracy question were asked, there was a modest relationship between the two. The largest difference was at the more well-off end of the distribution: 75.8 per cent of those who said they were living comfortably agreed that democracy is always preferable, compared with 66.3 per cent of those who said they were coping. Among those experiencing financial stress, however, levels of support were more similar: 61.8 per cent among those finding it difficult 65.2 per cent among those finding it very difficult.

There is a much stronger relationship between satisfaction with democracy and financial stress than there is between support for democracy and financial stress. Using the most recent data from December 2025 76.4 per cent of those that are living comfortably on their income were satisfied with democracy. Satisfaction declines sharply as financial stress increases: it falls to 70.7 per cent among those that who are coping, 60.6 per cent among those finding it difficult, and 43.1 per cent among those finding it very difficult. The pattern is very similar in May 2025.

Taking together, these results show that Australians experiencing financial stress are only a little less likely to still see democracy as the preferable form of government. However, they are substantially less likely to be satisfied with how democracy is currently performing in Australia. In other words, financial stress appears to have a modest association with normative support for democracy, but a much stronger association with evaluations of democratic performance.

5.2 Social Polarisation

Within the OECD's broader concept of social inclusion sits the concept of social polarisation. Although the OECD does not define it in a way that can be directly measured

in general population surveys, the term is typically used to describe situations in which two or more groups in a society have economic outcomes that do not substantially overlap. One group might have a distribution concentrated toward the most advantaged end (for example, high incomes or low financial stress), while another group may be clustered toward the disadvantaged end (low incomes and high financial stress).

Polarisation therefore distinguishes between a society in which socioeconomic outcomes are good overall and good for all groups, and one in which outcomes are good on average but very good for some, and not so good for others. It differs slightly from inequality, in that inequality looks at the distribution of outcomes across all individuals, whereas polarisation looks at the distribution of outcomes between particular groups. A society may have a relatively narrow distribution of financial circumstances, but if one identifiable group is consistently doing poorly and another consistently doing well, with little overlap between them, then that society is polarised.

In this sub-section, we examine social polarisation by looking at how two measures of population diversity – ethnicity and education – relate to financial stress. In the September 2025 ANUpoll, respondents were asked:

> 'A few questions in this survey ask about your own experiences related to your ethnicity. Do you identify with any of the following ethnic groups...?'

The survey listed eight possible ethnic groups that people could identify as belonging to, with respondents able to identify as belong to multiple ethnic groups.[x]

The three most common ethnicities identified in the sample were Anglo-Australian (36.4 per cent), European-Australian (31.1 per cent), and Asian-Australian (12.9 per cent). There were no differences in financial stress between those that identified with the latter two groups and the rest of the population. Asian-Australians (26.0 per cent) were no more or less likely to report that they were in financial stress compared to the non-Asian population (27.2 per cent). Those that identified as European-Australian were also no more or less likely (26.6 per cent) compared with the non-European population (27.2 per cent).

Where we do see a difference is between the Anglo-Australian population and the rest of the population. Significant at the 1 per cent level of statistical significance, 23.1 per cent of Anglo-Australians reported they were finding it difficult to get by on their current income, compared with 29.3 per cent of the rest of the population.

Those who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander were also far more likely to identify as finding it difficult to get by on their current income (38.8 per cent compared to 26.8 per cent for non-Indigenous respondents). This group makes up a small percentage of the survey sample, and the estimated Indigenous population[xi] was only 3.8 per cent of the total Australian population as of 2021. Nonetheless, the long-term socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population[xii] is an undeniable form of social polarisation in Australia, and a clear challenge to social inclusion and social cohesion more broadly.

The very important situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians aside, social polarisation by ethnicity doesn't appear to be as pronounced in Australia as in some of the countries discussed in the OECD report, at least when using financial stress

as the outcome measure. However, this does not mean that social polarisation is absent. Rather, it is operating across different dimensions in Australia.

One dimension of social cohesion we have already touched on is the much lower levels of support for democracy among those with lower levels of education (at least once age is controlled for). These educational differences are also evident in satisfaction with democracy: only 57.0 per cent of those without Year 12 or any post-school qualification were satisfied, compared with 75.8 per cent of those with a degree. There is strong evidence of social polarisation by education in Australia in other contexts (Morris 2024), and the ANUpoll data shows that this extends to financial stress. In the December 2025 ANUpoll, 37.2 per cent of those of those without a Year 12 or other qualifications reported finding it difficult on their current income compared to 23.0 per cent of those with a degree.

5.3 Social capital and support for democracy

There is a complicated conceptual relationship between social capital and social cohesion. In some context the two terms are used interchangeably; in others, social capital is treated as a predictor or a determinant of social cohesion. The OECD framework, however, positions social capital as one of the three core components of social cohesion, alongside social inclusion and social mobility.

One important aspect of social capital is trust. Across several ANUpolls, including the December 2025 survey, we have asked three questions that capture generalised trust using a scale of 0 to 10, as follows:

- 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?

Taking the average response to these three questions provides a robust and comparable-through-time measure of one aspect of social cohesion. Figure 4 shows how this average measure has changed across eight ANUpoll surveys from February 2020 to December 2025. Comparing the two end points, generalised trust has been remarkably stable over the 2020s. The average of the three questions in late 2025 (5.47) is almost identical to that recorded in early 2020 (5.53). In between, however, trust was more volatile. It rose substantially during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, before returning to its longer-term average as the vaccine roll-out progressed and other policy challenges, such as inflation and the rising cost of living, became more salient.

Figure 4   Average of responses (on 0-10 scale) of trust, perceived helpfulness, and perceived fairness - February 2020 to December 2025
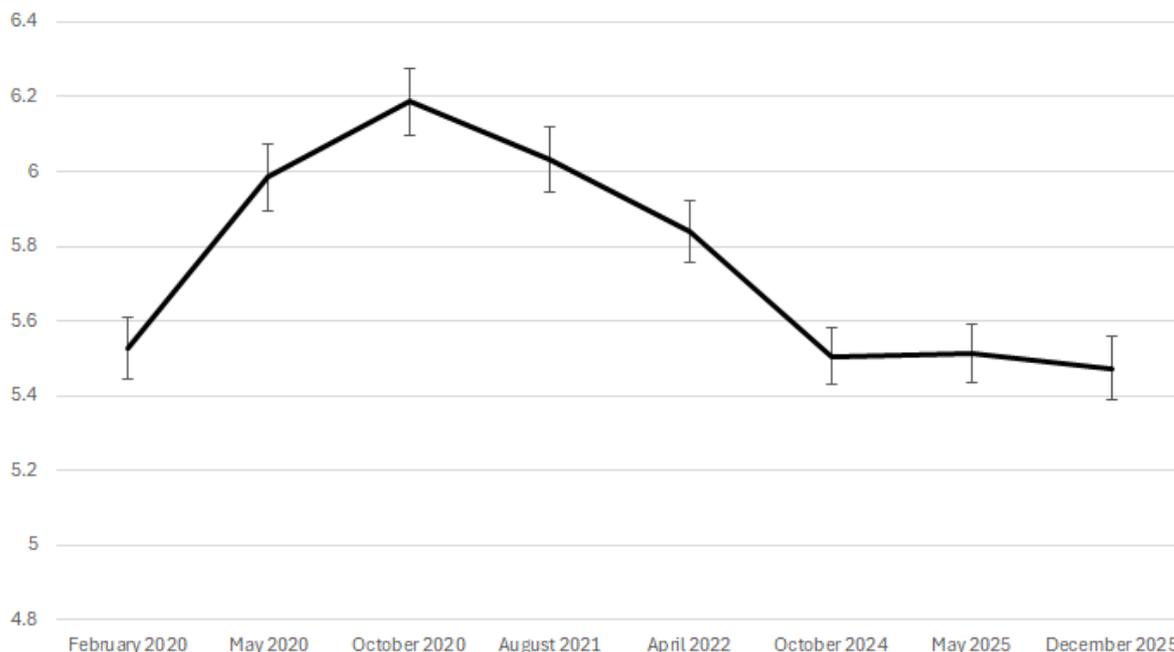
Source: ANUpoll

Those who report a higher level of trust tend to have a higher level of support for democracy. In May 2025, respondents were asked, on a scale of 0 (you can't be too careful) to 10 (most people can be trusted), about their generalised trust. Just over half of the population (56.0 per cent) gave a score of 6 and above, indicating high trust. The remainder were split between moderate trust (18.3 per cent, scoring 5) and low trust (25.7 per cent, scoring below 5). While there is no statistically significant difference in support for democracy between the low and moderate trust group, there is a clear difference between those with high trust (72.3 per cent saying democracy is always preferable) and those with low or moderate trust combined (60.0 per cent).

Once again, satisfaction with democracy shows an even wider spread across trust levels than support for democracy. Only 57.0 per cent of low-trust Australians are satisfied with democracy, compared with 70.8 per cent of those with moderate trust and 81.6 per cent of those with high generalised trust.

Some forms of institutional trust are associated with support for democracy. Those who trust Parliament, the federal government, or the judiciary are each more likely to say that democracy is always the preferred form of government, with margins of 12-17 percentage points. The relationship is, however, in the opposite direction for those who trust 'Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter (now called X), or WhatsApp.' Among respondents who trust social media, only 55.9 per cent say that democracy is always preferable, compared with 69.9 per cent among those who do not trust social media.

Like many of the relationships examined in this paper, the direction of causality between support for democracy and trust in social media is difficult to establish. Those who do not support democracy may be more inclined to seek out non-traditional media sources, including social media. Conversely, individuals who get much of their information from social media may have their support for democracy undermined by the content they

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encounter. Regardless of the causal direction, any policy aimed at increasing support for democracy among those with low trust will need to heavily engage with social media, given its role as a key trusted information source for this group.

In addition to trust, the OECD framework identifies civic engagement is another aspect of social capital that contributes to social cohesion. Using ANUpoll data, we showed that rates of volunteering dropped substantially during the early parts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Biddle and Gray, 2023). Although participation recovered slightly as the impact of the pandemic receded, volunteering remains well below pre-pandemic levels and has fallen even more substantially over the longer term. In the May 2025 ANUpoll, only 24.8 per cent of adult Australians said they had undertaken volunteer work in the previous 12 months. Differences in support for democracy between volunteers (70.5 per cent) and non-volunteers (66.4 per cent) were small, and only statistically significant at the 10 per cent level of significance (p-value = 0.078).

Civic engagement also includes social interaction more broadly. In the May 2025 ANUpoll, respondents were asked:

> 'How many people, if any, are there with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matter?'

and

> 'Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?'

Only 9.3 per cent of Australians reported having no one they could confide in, while 7.8 per cent said they have seven or more confidants. Most Australians fell somewhere in between, with one to six people they could confide in. A sizeable minority (17.0 per cent) felt that they took part in social activities much less than most people their age, compared with only 1.9 per cent who believed they participated much more often.

Neither of these measures – the number of people can confide in or perceived frequency of social activities – has a strong association with support for democracy. That does not mean that they are unimportant from a policy perspective. Low levels of social isolation and loneliness are widely recognised as being key aspects of social cohesion. However, they do not appear to be closely related at the broad population level to support for democracy.

5.4 Views on social mobility

The final component of the OECD framework is social mobility, defined as the extent to which 'people can or believe they can change their position in society.' This dimension is used less frequently in discussion of social cohesion than social inclusion or social capital, but it overlaps with several related concepts: 'perceptions of economic fairness' in the Mapping Social Cohesion framework, 'equal opportunity' in the Australian Government's approach, and the idea of the 'common good' in some academic definitions.

The most targeted measures of social mobility and perceptions of fairness in the ANUpoll series were asked in December 2025. While this survey did not also ask about support for democracy, we can relate some of these measures to satisfaction with democracy - a close, albeit imperfect correlate discussed earlier.

One straightforward question asked in December 2025 was: 'How fair do you think income distribution is in Australia?' Only 2.8 per cent of Australians thought it was very fair. A further 39.3 per cent thought it was fair, leaving almost three-in-five Australians (57.9 per cent) who believed the income distribution was either unfair (44.4 per cent) or very unfair (13.5 per cent). Australians are far more likely to think the distribution of income unfair than fair.

A second question asked respondents the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'In Australia everybody has a chance to make it and be economically successful.' Responses to this question paint a somewhat more positive picture of social mobility and social cohesion. While only 10.6 per cent strongly agreed, a further 44.5 per cent agreed. That is, more than half of the adult population in Australia believes everyone has a chance at success. Among those who did not agree, the most common response was to neither agree nor disagree (21.2 per cent). Just under a quarter of Australians either disagreed (19.1 per cent) or strongly disagreed (4.6 per cent) that everyone has a chance at success.

There is a strong relationship between perception of fairness of the income distribution and satisfaction with democracy. Among those who believe the income distribution is fair or very fair, 77.9 per cent are satisfied with democracy. Among those who believe it is unfair or very unfair, satisfaction falls to 58.7 per cent. The relationship between perceived economic mobility and satisfaction with democracy is similarly aligned. Among those that agree or strongly agree that everyone has a chance of success, 72.4 per cent are satisfied with democracy. Among those who do not agree, satisfaction with democracy is lower at 61.1 per cent.

Because they were not asked in the same wave, we don't know for sure whether these two measures are associated with support for democracy (as opposed to satisfaction). Nonetheless, we can still see how they vary across the population.

One difference between the two measures is the relationship with age. Perceived fairness of the income distribution varies only modestly across the age groups. Perceived economic mobility, however, shows a much stronger relationship. Only 39.7 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 agree that everyone has a chance at success in Australia. This rises to 53.8 per cent for those aged 25 to 64, and to 66.9 per cent for those aged 65 years and over. Without the questions be included in the same survey, we cannot be definitive, but these age-based patterns suggest that perceptions of economic mobility, or lack thereof, may help explain why younger Australians are less supportive of democracy than older Australians (as shown in Figure 2).

The one variable consistently associated with both perceived fairness of the income distribution and perceived economic mobility is gender. As shown in Figure 5, 65.5 per cent of females believe that the income distribution in Australia is unfair or very unfair, compared with only 50.3 per cent of males. Again, we would need the relevant questions asked in the same survey to draw firm conclusions, but this provides circumstantial evidence that the lower levels of support for democracy reported among women in Figure 2 may be linked to perceptions of social mobility.

Figure 5   Perceived fairness of the income distribution in Australia by gender, December 2025 (%)
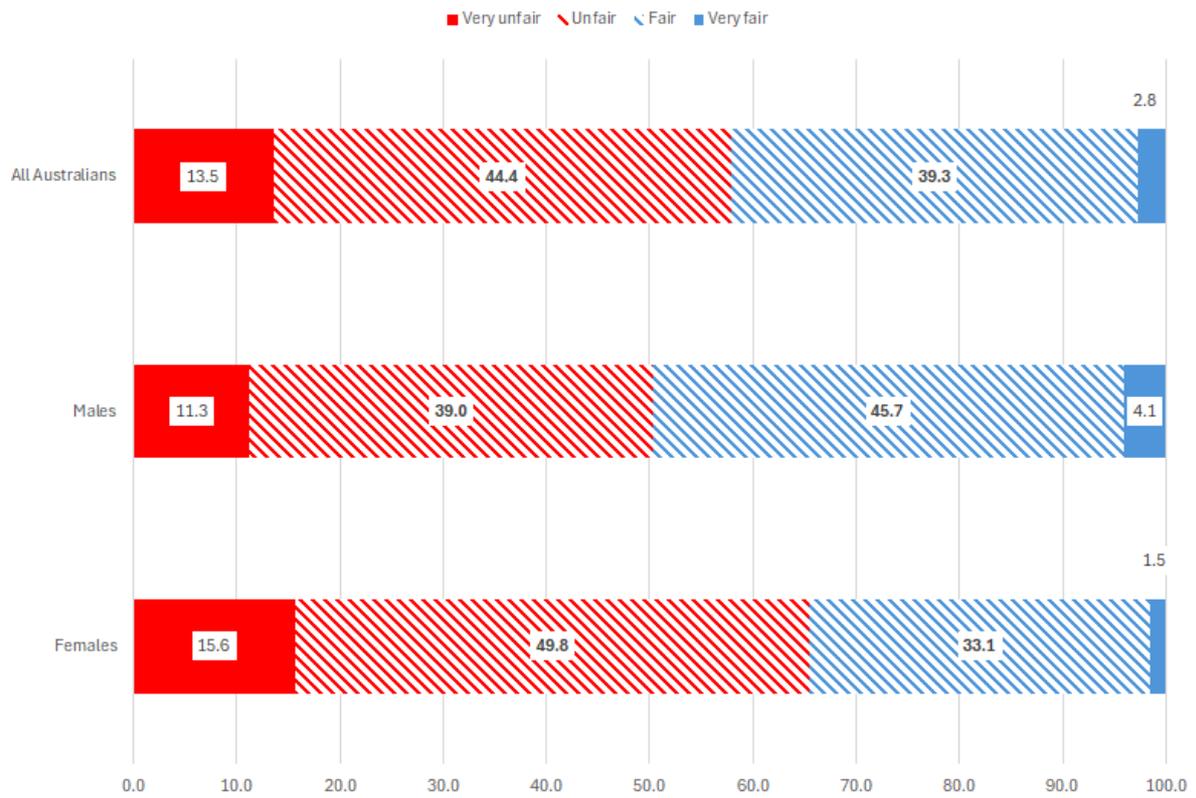
Source: ANUpoll.

6 Summary and concluding comments

6.1 Summary of key findings

This paper has examined the relationship between support for democracy and broader dimensions of social cohesion in Australia. Drawing on recent ANUpoll data and guided by the framing in the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion's Terms of Reference, we have focused on the component of social cohesion that frames it as a national consensus on support for democracy. We then relate this specific aspect of social cohesion to other frameworks, particularly the OECD framework, which conceptualises social cohesion as comprising social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility.

Our aim is not to endorse or critique either the Royal Commission's framework or the other frameworks used by government or in the academic literature. Rather, we consider what the data reveals about the relationship between commonly used measures of social cohesion, and how these measures vary across the population.

The first key finding is that Australians remain broadly supportive of democracy as a system of government, even as satisfaction with democratic performance varies. In May 2025, two-thirds of Australians agreed or strongly agreed that democracy is always preferable to other forms of government, with fewer than seven per cent actively rejecting that view. Support for democracy and satisfaction with democracy are empirically related but conceptually distinct: even among those dissatisfied with how democracy is working, a majority continue to endorse democratic principles.

Second, the paper shows that support for democracy is unevenly distributed, with particularly strong differences by age and education. Younger Australians are less supportive than older cohorts, but this is best understood as an age–education interaction rather than an age effect alone. Among Australians aged 18–34 without Year 12 or post-school qualifications, fewer than one in four regard democracy as always preferable, compared to nearly two-thirds of those in the same age group with a degree. Once age is controlled for, education is positively associated with democratic support, indicating clear social polarisation by education.

Other characteristics, such as region and migration status, show little independent association, while political ideology, religion, and language background do contribute to variation. Those who put themselves to the left of the distribution, those who identify as being religious, and those that do not speak a language other than English at home are all more supportive of democracy.

Third, the results demonstrate that economic inclusion and material security are closely linked to democratic experience, particularly satisfaction with democracy. Financial stress has only a modest association with principled support for democracy, but a substantial association with how well democracy is perceived to be working. Those living comfortably on their income are far more likely to be satisfied with democracy than those experiencing hardship. Patterns of disadvantage also reveal important forms of social polarisation: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians remain more likely to experience financial stress, and Australians with lower levels of education are both more

economically insecure and less satisfied with democracy. Educational stratification thus emerges as a central axis of social polarisation in Australia.

Fourth, trust is a critical correlate of democratic cohesion. Higher levels of interpersonal and institutional trust are associated with stronger support for democracy and higher satisfaction with its performance. Trust in core democratic institutions predicts greater democratic commitment, while trust in social media is associated with weaker support. Other aspects of social capital—such as volunteering, social participation, or network size—show little independent relationship with democratic support, suggesting that it is institutional trust and information environments, rather than social connectedness alone, that underpin a national consensus on support for democracy.

Finally, perceptions of fairness and social mobility help explain emerging vulnerabilities. Majorities of Australians view the income distribution as unfair, and belief that 'everyone has a chance to succeed' is markedly weaker among younger Australians and women. These perceptions are strongly linked to dissatisfaction with democracy and mirror the demographic patterns in democratic support. Taken together, the findings suggest that support for democracy in Australia is most fragile where educational disadvantage, economic insecurity, low institutional trust, and pessimism about opportunity intersect.

6.2 Implications for the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion.

The findings of this paper suggest that the cross-government policy and programs should incorporate support for democracy not as a background constant, but as a socially uneven resource that requires an active policy focus. While most Australians continue to endorse democracy in principle, they don't always think democracy is serving them well. The establishment of a Royal Commission is one of many ways that a response to crisis and pressures should reinforce and strengthen support for democracy, which might require intentional design and communication.

Furthermore, the consensus is markedly weaker among specific groups, particularly younger Australians with lower levels of education, those experiencing economic insecurity, and those with low institutional trust. These are precisely the social locations in which international research has shown democratic norms to be most vulnerable to erosion and where ideologically motivated extremism is more likely to find resonance.

For the Royal Commission, this implies that strengthening social cohesion cannot rely solely on enforcement, surveillance, or post-incident responses to antisemitism. It must also address the structural and attitudinal conditions that weaken democratic legitimacy: educational stratification, persistent financial stress, declining trust in political institutions, and pessimism about social mobility. Policies that reinforce democratic literacy, institutional fairness, and inclusive economic opportunity should therefore be seen as part of the preventative architecture against antisemitism and other forms of ideologically or religiously motivated hate.

At the same time, the analysis points to several practical priorities for the Royal Commission. First, interventions to strengthen social cohesion should be targeted rather than purely universal, with particular attention to younger Australians with low educational attainment, who show strikingly low levels of principled democratic support.

Second, because trust in core institutions is strongly associated with democratic commitment, the Royal Commission should consider how government agencies, education systems, and public communication practices can be made more transparent, accountable, and credible, especially in communities experiencing disadvantage. Third, the negative association between trust in social media and support for democracy highlights the importance of information environments: efforts to counter antisemitism will be limited unless they also address the platforms through which distrust, polarisation, and extremist narratives circulate.

Finally, the Royal Commission's definition of social cohesion as consensus around democracy, freedom and the rule of law would be strengthened by recognising that such consensus is sustained through material inclusion and perceived fairness, not only through normative statements. In this sense, policies that reduce educational and economic polarisation are not peripheral to the Royal Commission's remit, but central to building the democratic resilience that underpins a cohesive, pluralist Australia.

6.3 Implications for data collection

The analysis in this paper also highlights several implications for the design and interpretation of future data collection on social cohesion and democratic support in Australia. First, it reinforces the importance of measuring principled support for democracy separately from satisfaction with democratic performance. While closely related, the two capture distinct dimensions of democratic legitimacy and respond differently to economic, institutional and informational conditions.

Second, cohesion frameworks should avoid relying on single headline indicators. As shown in this paper, social inclusion, social capital, and perceptions of mobility intersect in complex ways, with some dimensions (such as institutional trust and perceived fairness) more strongly associated with democratic commitment than others (such as social participation or network size). Data collection efforts should therefore combine attitudinal, behavioural and structural measures within a coherent framework, enabling both cross-sectional diagnostics and trend analysis.

Finally, there is a need for greater integration across surveys and time series. At present, key measures are distributed across instruments and waves, limiting the ability to model interactions between support for democracy, economic stress, trust, and perceived opportunity within the same dataset. A more deliberate, coordinated approach would allow for more robust causal inference and better-informed policy responses.

One practical response that the ANU is committed to undertaking is to implement a structured longitudinal survey program across 2026 and early 2027, aligned with the timeline of the Royal Commission. By collecting such data and making it available in the Australian Data Archive, researchers would be able to track both short-term reactions and medium-term shifts in democratic attitudes. The survey could combine a stable core module (support for democracy, satisfaction with democracy, institutional and interpersonal trust, financial stress, perceived fairness and mobility) with rotating modules focused on information environments, experiences of discrimination, civic engagement, and perceptions of government responsiveness.

Maintaining consistent question wording across waves would permit the estimation of change at the population level, while a partial panel component would enable analysis

of individual-level attitude stability and transition. Such a design would make it possible to distinguish temporary fluctuations from structural shifts in democratic support, assess whether specific events or policy interventions are associated with changes in cohesion, and identify emerging vulnerabilities among particular demographic groups. In doing so, it would move the debate beyond static benchmarks toward a dynamic understanding of social cohesion (and democratic resilience) in Australia.

6.4 Broader public policy implications

While the Royal Commission can play an important agenda-setting role, the evidence in this paper makes clear that no single inquiry, however well designed, can by itself rebuild or sustain social cohesion. Indeed, the primary focus of the Royal Commission is antisemitism and the response to the Bondi Terrorist Shootings. This inevitably leads to a narrowly defined framing of social cohesion.

The social foundations of democratic support identified here (education, economic inclusion, institutional trust, and perceived fairness) sit across the responsibilities of local, state and federal governments, and extend well beyond the remit of law enforcement or security agencies. Equally, cohesion is not produced by government alone: schools, universities, media organisations, community groups, religious institutions, employers and digital platforms all shape the environments in which democratic norms are reinforced or weakened.

If social cohesion is understood in part (as the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference imply) as a national consensus around democracy, freedom and the rule of law, then it must be treated as a whole-of-system policy challenge, requiring coordinated action across government and civil society. Without such an integrated approach, even well-targeted responses to antisemitism and extremism risk missing the deeper conditions that sustain democratic resilience.

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Endnotes

[i] https://www.ag.gov.au/about-us/publications/royal-commission-antisemitism-and-social-cohesion

[ii] https://www.hcourt.gov.au/justices/s/virginia-bell-ac

[iii] https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-01/letters-patent-royal-commission-on-antisemitism-and-social-cohesion.pdf

[iv] https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-01/letters-patent-royal-commission-on-antisemitism-and-social-cohesion.pdf

[v] https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/social-cohesion/about-social-cohesion

[vi] https://www.scanlonfoundation.org.au/research-institute/

[vii] https://scanloninstitute.org.au/research/mapping-social-cohesion/

[viii] https://australianelectionstudy.org/

[ix] https://library.virginia.edu/data/articles/understanding-polychoric-correlation

[x] Across the sample 504 respondents (14.3 per cent) did not identify with any of the eight ethnicities listed. The vast majority (80.7 per cent or 2,855) identified with one only, and the remaining 5.1 per cent identified with two or more (179 respondents in total).

[xi] https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release

[xii] https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report/2025/