UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA | CENTRE FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Bridging the Gap:

Citizens, Elected Officials, and Deliberative Engagement in Australian Democracy

Adele Webb | Max Grömping | Emily Foley

Connecting to Parliament

Strengthening democracy through deliberative citizen engagement

Publication details

Published December 2025 by
Centre for Deliberative Democracy,
Faculty of Business, Government and Law,
University of Canberra,
ACT 2600.

Graphic Design
Liz Elton Studio

Suggested citation
Webb, A., Grömping, M., & Foley, E. (2025). *Bridging the Gap: Citizens, Elected Officials and Deliberative Engagement in Australian Democracy*, University of Canberra.

DOI
https://doi.org/10.26191/gte7-nz52

Acknowledgements

This report is an output of the Connecting to Parliament project, funded by Ohio State University's Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability and the University of Canberra's Centre for Deliberative Democracy. The chief investigators on the Connecting to Parliament project are Professors Selen Ercan and John Dryzek, and Dr Adele Webb.

The production of this report was also supported by the Australian Research Council's Discovery Project on democratic resilience (DP210102436), co-led by Professors Selen Ercan and John Dryzek, and the Faculty of Business, Government and Law at the University of Canberra.

The authors gratefully acknowledge Sebastian Kocar for his contribution to this report, as well as Selen Ercan, John Dryzek, Emanuela Savini, Jorden McSwiney and Hans Asenbaum for their input.

Notes on Authors

Adele Webb is Research Lead in Democracy and Citizen Engagement at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, University of Canberra.

Max Grömping is Senior Lecturer at the School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University.

Emily Foley is Postdoctoral Fellow in Democratic Resilience at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, University of Canberra.

Contents

Executive summary 04

01 What Is Deliberative Citizen Engagement and Why Does It Matter? 06
- 1.1 Introduction - The disconnection challenge 07
- 1.2 The Connecting to Parliament Project 08
- 1.3 Understanding deliberative citizen engagement 09
- 1.4 Australia's track record with deliberative engagement initiatives 10
- 1.5 Research approach and design 12

02 Australians' Attitudes Towards Democracy 13
- 2.1 Introduction - The state of Australian democracy 15
- 2.2 Satisfaction with democracy 16
- 2.3 Trust in the Federal Government 18
- 2.4 Confidence to participate 20
- 2.5 From social trust to democratic renewal 22

03 From Voting to Voice: Public Appetite for Deliberative Citizen Engagement 23
- 3.1 Australians' preferred model of democratic decision-making 26
- 3.2 Do Australians trust deliberative forums? 28
- 3.3 Do deliberative forums signal political responsiveness? 29
- 3.4 Are Australians willing to take part? 30
- 3.5 From disaffection to participation 31

04 Mechanisms for National-Level Deliberative Citizen Engagement 32
- 4.1 National Citizens' Assemblies 34
- 4.2 Citizen's Panels in Parliamentary Inquiries 36
- 4.3 Deliberative Town Halls with Elected Representatives 38

05 Next Steps 40
- 5.1 Overcoming political reluctance and future research 41

Executive summary

Australians value democracy, but many feel increasingly disconnected from the politicians and institutions that represent them. Trust in government has sunk to historic lows, satisfaction is patchy, and there is a widespread perception that the system serves powerful interests over the public good. In short, beneath the surface of Australia's well-rated democracy, warning signs are appearing: if trust continues to erode and citizens feel their voices don't matter, the foundations of Australia's democratic system will weaken.

At the heart of this challenge lies a widening gap between citizens and their elected representatives. Australians continue to believe in democratic ideals, but they want a system that listens, responds, and meaningfully engages them in the decisions that shape their lives. Bridging this disconnection is essential to rebuilding public trust and strengthening the resilience of Australian democracy.

This report forms part of the *Connecting to Parliament* project, one of the flagship initiatives of the Centre for Deliberative Democracy at the University of Canberra. The project's central goal is to find ways to involve more Australians in the processes of parliament by making democracy more deliberative: that is, building direct, informed, and consequential channels of engagement between citizens and their elected representatives.

Surveys and inquiries have repeatedly shown that citizens are frustrated with the status quo, yet these studies often stop short of asking: what should be done about it? This report goes beyond diagnosing democratic dissatisfaction to identify specific interventions and practical mechanisms to improve democratic resilience in the Australian context.

Contrary to the assumption that citizens are reluctant to be more involved in governance and policy decisions, our findings demonstrate a strong public appetite for democratic reform that enables the structured, deliberative participation of everyday people in political decision-making. Demand exists for the creation of deliberative spaces where citizens are recognised not merely as voters, but as contributors whose input and ideas can be meaningfully integrated into parliamentary work. Deliberative forums not only signal that leaders are listening; they also provide a constructive channel through which disaffection can be converted into democratic participation.

Together, our findings suggest that deliberative reform is constrained more by political hesitation or institutional stubbornness than by citizen apathy. Strengthening democracy will require political leadership to pilot, scale, and normalise new ways for governments and communities to work together.

Key findings

Australians value democracy but feel disconnected.	Democracy is widely endorsed in principle yet trust in government is low (about one-third), and overall satisfaction sits around half.
Democratic satisfaction and trust are unevenly distributed.	Younger people, those outside major cities, and those under financial pressure are the least satisfied with democracy and the least trusting of government.
A participation confidence gap persists.	Men are almost twice as likely as women to feel confident taking part in political discussions, signalling an inclusion challenge for engagement efforts.
Australians want a say in decisions – and in more deliberative ways.	Almost one in two prefer political decisions to be made through dialogue with citizens and affected groups, while very few favour decisions made by elected representatives without public input, indicating clear public appetite for democratic reform that creates more spaces for deliberation.
Deliberation appeals to the disaffected.	Among people dissatisfied with democracy or distrustful of government, a deliberative model is the preferred way to make decisions, well ahead of leaving decisions to politicians alone.
Citizen forums can build trust – if they are meaningful, not tokenistic.	Despite limited familiarity, more than a third would trust a representative deliberative forum of everyday people to produce sound recommendations on their behalf, especially when these processes are clearly connected to real decisions.
Deliberative engagement signals political responsiveness.	Over half view deliberative forums as evidence that politicians value ordinary people's input, suggesting these processes can visibly strengthen the perceptions of parliament's responsiveness and legitimacy.
There is latent willingness to participate.	A majority say they would join a deliberative forum if invited, with willingness strongest among those currently dissatisfied or distrustful, indicating an actionable opportunity to bring disaffected citizens into meaningful democratic engagement.

01

Chapter 1

What is deliberative citizen engagement and why does it matter?

1.1

Introduction:
The disconnection challenge

Across the world, democracies are grappling with a deepening sense of disconnection between citizens and those who govern.[1] Australia is no exception. Many Australians believe the political system no longer represents them or responds to their needs. This perception has fuelled frustration, mistrust, and disengagement, not from the idea of democracy itself, but from the institutions that enact it.[2]

Disconnection matters. When citizens feel unheard, trust erodes, participation declines, and the foundations of democratic legitimacy weaken. Rebuilding trust depends in large part on creating more direct, meaningful channels of interaction between citizens and their representatives.

Yet to interpret this moment as Australians withdrawing their support from democracy is to miss an important countertrend. Australians are not necessarily abandoning democratic ideals – they are instead seeking new, more effective and inclusive ways to practice them. This shift reflects a growing public desire for political systems that are not only symbolically representative but are also participatory, deliberative, and responsive.

In the face of this challenge, there is increasing pressure to expand citizen participation in decision-making processes as a response to the perceived crisis of democracy. While some progress has been made toward more inclusive institutions at local and state levels in Australia, at the national level democratic innovation remains rare. Yet it is at this level where decisions of national significance are made and where trust deficits, particularly among regional Australians, are most profound.

Democratic innovation is urgently needed. And understanding the sources of institutional and political inertia to democratic reform is critical.

Disconnection matters. When citizens feel unheard, trust erodes, participation declines, and the foundations of democratic legitimacy weaken. Rebuilding trust depends in large part on creating more direct, meaningful channels of interaction between citizens and their representatives.

[1] V. Valgarðsson, W. Jennings, G. Stoker, H. Bunting, D. Devine, L. McKay, and A. Klassen, "A Crisis of Political Trust? Global Trends in Institutional Trust from 1958 to 2019," *British Journal of Political Science* 55 (2025): e15, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000498; OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – *2024 Results: Building Trust in a Complex Policy Environment* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en; R. Foa, A. Klassen, M. Slade, A. Rand, and R. Collins, *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020* (Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020).

[2] R. Dassonneville and I. McAllister, "Explaining the Decline of Political Trust in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2021): 280–297; N. Biddle, *Shifting Trust and Satisfaction: Monitoring a Key Dimension of Democratic Resilience in Australia* (October 2024 to May 2025), Australian Resilient Democracy Research and Data Network Discussion Paper 7 (Australian National University, 2025); McKinnon, *2025 McKinnon Index: An Annual Dashboard of Democratic Health* (Melbourne: McKinnon, 2025).

1.2

The Connecting to Parliament project

This report is based on research led by political scientists at the University of Canberra's Centre for Deliberative Democracy as part of the *Connecting to Parliament* project, funded by the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability at Ohio State University. The project adapts and extends the successful *Connecting to Congress* project in the United States led by Professor Michael Neblo, which leverages digital technology and deliberative principles to improve representative democracy.[3]

The *Connecting to Parliament* project in Australia aims to:

- Assess the attitudes of citizens in Australia toward deliberative citizen engagement, including the key drivers of political disconnection and practical strategies to address it.
- Develop a framework for implementing deliberative citizen engagement practices in Australia, identifying the most suitable models to strengthen representative democracy.

This report draws on findings from the second phase of research (2024-2025), which brings together data on Australians' level of support for deliberative engagement with analysis of how deliberative practices influence the public's political attitudes and participatory behaviour.

[3]See https://connectingtocongress.org/

1.3

Understanding deliberative citizen engagement

Deliberative citizen engagement involves integrating citizens' voices more directly into the ongoing work of democratic governance.[4] While such practices can be embedded into public administration and used by public servants to improve local governance, service delivery, and community well-being, this report focuses on deliberative engagement in representative settings, where the aim is to strengthen connections between the voices of citizens and elected parliaments.

Research shows that citizens don't want to be limited to conventional participatory practices in representative settings, namely casting a vote every few years; they want more regular, meaningful opportunities for public participation in political decision-making.[5]

Around the world, deliberative innovations from citizens' assemblies to participatory budgeting have demonstrated the potential of deliberative citizen engagement to strengthen the capacity of everyday people to become involved in politics, build trust and confidence in parliaments, and make political decision-making and governance more accountable and responsive to the public.[6] The global platform, *Participedia*, documents a rich variety of experiments in democratic participation, recording over 2,300 cases across over 160 countries, including Australia.[7]

Deliberative democratic innovations go beyond more conventional reforms such as changes to electoral rules, improvements in voting accessibility, or even transparency measures. They tackle the deeper challenge of how citizens can exercise meaningful, ongoing influence over the policies that shape their lives.

Deliberative citizen engagement is often situated within the broader field of *democratic innovations*, a well-established body of scholarship and practice concerned with improving the ways in which citizens engage with political decision-making beyond the act of voting.[8] Commonly grounded in the theory of deliberative democracy, democratic innovations emphasise a communicative, or 'talk-centric' approach to democracy, rather than relying primarily on the aggregation of votes to register public preferences. On this account, the legitimacy of a democratic system depends not only on periodic elections but also on the quality of public conversations that take place between them.[9] Democratic innovations create new opportunities for everyday citizens to shape public decisions through constructive and informed dialogue, both among citizens and between citizens and political actors.

[4] S.A. Ercan, J. McSwiney, L. Parry, N. Curato, H. Asenbaum, A. Webb, E. Savini, and J. McCaul, *Guidebook for Deliberative Engagement: Key Features and Practical Insights* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2025), 26.
[5] McKinnon, *2025 McKinnon Index* (see Top 10 solutions to challenges facing Australia's government).
[6] N. Curato, J. S. Dryzek, S.A. Ercan, C. M. Hendriks & S. Niemeyer, "Twelve Key Findings in Deliberative Democracy Research," Daedalus 146, no. 3 (2017): 28–38.
[7] See https://participedia.net/
[8] There are various ways to categorise democratic innovations. Elstub and Escobar, for example, propose a typology that identifies four broad families: mini-publics, participatory budgeting, referenda and citizen initiatives, and collaborative governance. Each of these models seeks to redistribute power and improve democratic outcomes through more inclusive, transparent, and deliberative processes. See S. Elstub and O. Escobar, "Defining and Typologising Democratic Innovations," in *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, ed. S. Elstub and O. Escobar (Edward Elgar, 2019), 12, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786433862.00009
[9] J. S. Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

1.4

Australia's track record with deliberative engagement initiatives

Australia has a rich, if uneven, history of experimentation with deliberative engagement methods.[10] At the subnational level, Australia boasts world-leading examples of deliberative processes. Since the mid-2000s, local and state-level public authorities and statutory agencies have been experimenting with deliberative engagement methods to give communities a more direct role in agenda-setting and decision-making.[11] Take, for example, the implementation of participatory budgeting by several local councils, including one of the largest, the City of Melbourne.[12] In these processes, residents are invited to help determine how a portion of the municipal budget is allocated, giving communities direct influence over spending priorities in areas such as infrastructure, public space, and community services. While the scale of these programs varies, they demonstrate the feasibility of devolving decision-making power to citizens in a structured and transparent way.

Most recently, Victoria's *Local Government Act* 2020 mandated the use of "deliberative engagement practices" by local councils.[13] Under the Act, councils must employ these practices when engaging communities on their community vision and council plans, bringing deliberative innovations explicitly into state legislation for the first time.

Another significant sub-national milestone came in 2016, when the Victorian Government opened a dialogue with First Nations peoples that culminated in the creation of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria - an autonomous, democratically elected body representing the interests of Traditional Owners and First Nations peoples across the state.[14]

While the scale of these programs varies, they demonstrate the feasibility of devolving decision-making power to citizens in a structured and transparent way.

The nation-wide yarning process that culminated in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (2017) was itself a significant form of enclave deliberation,[15] bringing together members of a historically marginalised group to confer among themselves before engaging in broader public discussion. Emerging from 12 regional dialogues and a National Constitutional Convention, the Statement called for a constitutionally enshrined *Voice to Parliament* and a *Makarrata Commission* to facilitate truth-telling and agreement-making between governments and First >

[10] C. M. Hendriks, "The Field and Study of Deliberative Democracy in Australia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Australian Politics*, ed. J. M. Lewis and A. Tiernan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198805465.013.28; L. Parry, J. Alver, and N. Thompson, "Democratic Innovation in Australasia," in *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, ed. S. Elstub and O. Escobar (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019), chap. 29, https://www.elgaronline.com/display/edcoll/9781786433855/9781786433855.00041.xml

[11] Notwithstanding such processes at the sub-national level have often been led by and depended on individual champions and therefore still face considerable challenges in making meaningful and sustained impact.

[12] H. E. Christensen and B. Grant, "Participatory Budgeting in Australian Local Government: An Initial Assessment and Critical Issues," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 75, no. 4 (2016): 457–75, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-850012219

[13] Government of Victoria, *Local Government Act* 2020 (Melbourne: Government of Victoria, 2020), https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/local-government-act-2020/019

[14] First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, "The Assembly," First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, accessed 16 November 2025, https://firstpeoplesvic.org/

[15] S.A Ercan et al., *Guidebook for Deliberative Engagement*, 126.

1.4

Nations peoples. The process exemplified a deliberative democratic innovation, showing how such approaches can help to articulate long-term, community-driven visions for reform beyond electoral cycles. However, the subsequent referendum failed. Among other factors,[16] this outcome can be linked to the absence of sufficient opportunities for informed public deliberation grounded in credible information and respectful listening across difference.[17]

The Australian Citizens' Parliament (2009) marked a landmark deliberative initiative that brought together 150 citizens from across the country for a four-day assembly tasked with developing recommendations to improve Australia's political system. The process not only generated substantive proposals, such as measures to improve political accountability, government transparency, and public participation, but also demonstrated that diverse Australians can productively engage in complex policy discussions when provided with sufficient time, resources and institutional support.[18]

Despite these promising one-off initiatives, national-level politics in Australia continues to rely primarily on representative and elite forms of deliberation. Mechanisms that allow for regular, informed citizen input are largely absent, despite public appetite for them. This imbalance between institutional design and public expectation reinforces the perceived and real disconnection between ordinary citizens and elected representatives. It underscores the need for more embedded and sustained deliberative citizen engagement practices to strengthen Australian democracy. The Department of Home Affairs' recent *Strengthening Australian democracy* report pointed to deliberative practices including Citizens' Assemblies and Deliberative Town Halls as ways to improve citizen engagement and embrace democratic innovation.[19]

In summary, while Australia has experimented with some promising forms of deliberative citizen engagement over recent years, initiatives remain sporadic, unevenly distributed, and rarely institutionalised. Moving from isolated experiments to systemic reform requires a clearer understanding of public appetite for change, the readiness of institutions, and the barriers that stand in the way.

[16] A. Carson, R. Strating, S. Jackman, M. Grömping, P. Hayman, and T. B. Gravelle, Influencers and Messages: Analysing the 2023 Voice to *Parliament Referendum Campaign* (Melbourne: La Trobe University, 2024), https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/N2H5A

[17] R. Levy, J. Dryzek & S.A. Ercan, "In a Voice campaign marked by confusing, competing claims, there's a better way to educate voters", *The Conversation*, June 19, 2023, https://theconversation.com/in-a-voice-campaign-marked-by-confusing-competing-claims-theres-a-better-way-to-educate-voters-206193

[18] J. Dryzek, "The Australian Citizens' Parliament: A World First," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy 5*, no. 1 (2008): 1, https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.73

[19] Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, *Strengthening Australian Democracy: A Practical Agenda for Democratic Resilience* (Department of Home Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia, 2024).

1.5

Research approach and design

This report presents results from a nationwide representative survey and experiment to assess Australians' attitudes to deliberative engagement and the effects of such practices on confidence and political trust.[20]

The national survey was conducted in October 2024 with 4,200 individual Australian respondents aged 18 years or older. It was hosted on the Qualtrics platform and was administered online to respondents by Accent Research. Representativeness of the sample was ensured through quotas on state, gender, age, education, and interlocking quotas for age x gender, and age x state.[21] The project received ethics approval for the research from the University of Canberra's Human Ethics Committee (project no. 4677).

Along with questions about political interest, partisanship, satisfaction and trust, the survey examined public perceptions of deliberative processes, levels of support for deliberative citizen engagement in Australia, and how people's conceptions of democracy shape responses to deliberative democratic innovations.

[20] The survey was pre-registered at https://osf.io/yeu78/overview?view_only=293e332d06ae47c8baffb65563570b97

[21] Respondents were screened out if they failed any one of three attention checks. In addition, those who completed the questionnaire more than 3x faster than the median respondent are screened out. Rim weighting was used to apply weights for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. The design effect was 1.14, providing an effective sample size of N = 3,691.

02

Chapter 2

Australians' attitudes toward democracy

Half of Australians are **satisfied with how democracy works** (51%), but this satisfaction is unevenly distributed. It is **notably higher** among university-educated (58%) and economically secure Australians (59%) than among those with up to secondary education (50%) and those who are **economically struggling** (38%).

Younger Australians are **significantly less satisfied** with how democracy works than older Australians: 60% of Australians over 55 are satisfied, **compared to fewer than half of Australians aged 18 to 54**.

Only one in three Australians trust the government (33%). Trust declines for Australians living in regional or remote areas (28%) and for **those who are struggling financially** (24%).

There is a **pronounced gender gap** in the levels of confidence to **participate in political discussions** (62% of men feel confident compared with 35% of women).

2.1

Introduction:
The state of Australian democracy

Our democratic institutions look strong on paper, with Australia performing well in global rankings,[22] but beneath the surface there are signs of deepening strain. Many Australians feel that politics is failing to respond to their concerns, that governments are too often serving powerful interests over the public good, and that their own voices matter less than they should in shaping the country's direction. This disconnect is feeding a growing sense of dissatisfaction and mistrust.

Research points to several causes behind the drops in trust and satisfaction. The *New Democratic Audit* of Australia's democracy published in 2024 highlights a lack of transparency in decision-making, perceptions of inefficiency and corruption in government and government agencies, and a growing sense of disconnect between politicians and citizens.[23] The 2025 report by the McKinnon Foundation finds that trust clusters around independent institutions such as the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), courts, or regulatory agencies, rather than governments and politicians, and that effectiveness and delivery are pivotal to trust.[24] Similarly, research by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC)[25] points to a growing gap between expectations of traditional "checks and balances" designed to sustain trust - such as accountability mechanisms to prevent abuses of power - and their perceived performance, raising questions about whether these mechanisms are keeping pace with contemporary challenges.

While declines in political trust have historically been cyclical, with trust typically rebounding after a change of government, in Australia that cycle has been broken since 2013 when trust failed to rebound after the election. It continued to decline through the federal 2016 and 2019 cycles leading to claims of a "structural erosion of trust in political institutions".[26]

> Erosion of trust in government has been compounded by the perception that they have failed to deliver solutions to core issues.

Even when satisfaction and trust do rebound, such as after the 2025 election, perceptions of representation remain unequal. For instance, Australians perceive Parliament as representing "rich voters" more than "poor voters", reinforcing the view that political voice is closely tied to socioeconomic position.[27]

The erosion of public trust in government has been compounded by the perception that successive governments have failed to deliver meaningful solutions to core issues such as the cost of living and climate change. Around half of Australian voters believe the government is run for the benefit of a few major interests rather than all Australians, and that politicians are out of touch with ordinary people.[28]

[22] International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy 2024: *Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2024), https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.55; Transparency International Australia, "Global Corruption Ranking," Transparency International Australia, accessed 16 November 2025, https://transparency.org.au/global-ranking/

[23] M. Evans, P. Dunleavy, and J. Phillimore, *Australia's Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit* (London: LSE Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.ada

[24] McKinnon. 2025 *McKinnon Index.*

[25] Australian Public Service Commission, *Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy: 2023 National Survey* (Canberra: Australian Public Service Commission, 2024), https://www.apsreform.gov.au/resources/reports/trust-and-satisfaction-australian-democracy-survey-report

[26] Dassonneville and McAllister, "Explaining the Decline of Political Trust in Australia."

[27] Biddle, *Shifting Trust and Satisfaction.*

[28] S. Cameron, I. McAllister, S. Jackman, and J. Sheppard, *The 2022 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2022).

2.2

Satisfaction with democracy

Satisfaction with democracy in Australia is on a downward trend. While the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) finds that over 95% of Australians say living in a democracy is important to them, this attachment to the ideal of democracy coexists with growing dissatisfaction about how it functions in practice.[29]

[29] Australian Public Service Commission, Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy; S. Cameron et al., *The 2022 Australian Federal Election.*

Table 2.2 'On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia?'

	Dissatisfied	Neither	Satisfied	Total
Total (%)	**19%**	**30%**	**51%**	**100%**
Age* **				
18–34	21%	34%	45%	100%
35–54	20%	34%	46%	100%
55+	17%	23%	60%	100%
Gender* **				
Female	19%	34%	47%	100%
Male	19%	25%	56%	100%
Non-binary/Other	33%	33%	33%	100%
Indigenous				
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	26%	24%	49%	100%
Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	19%	30%	51%	100%
Location* **				
Metropolitan	18%	29%	53%	100%
Regional or Remote	23%	32%	45%	100%
Education* **				
Primary or secondary schooling	19%	31%	50%	100%
Technical	21%	31%	48%	100%
University	16%	26%	58%	100%
Employment **				
Employed	19%	31%	50%	100%
Unemployed	24%	38%	38%	100%
Student, Carer or Retiree	18%	26%	56%	100%
Economic security* **				
Able to save	15%	26%	59%	100%
Not able to save	20%	30%	50%	100%
Struggling	27%	35%	38%	100%
Political interest* **				
Interested	21%	17%	62%	100%
Not interested	18%	40%	43%	100%
Total (N)	**808**	**1.252**	**2,165**	**4,225**

Notes
'Dissatisfied' = 'Very dissatisfied' and 'Fairly dissatisfied'; 'Neither' = 'Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'; 'Satisfied' = 'Fairly satisfied' and 'Very satisfied.' Cells show percentages of satisfaction categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted χ^2 test p-values for association between satisfaction and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

2.2

Just over half of Australians (51%) express satisfaction with how democracy works, while the remaining are either dissatisfied (19%) or ambivalent / unsure in their assessment (30%).

Gender differences are evident: women (47%) report significantly lower satisfaction than men (56%). Age is a clear divide: older Australians are much more likely to be satisfied, with 60% of over-55s reporting satisfaction. Geography also differentiates attitudes: among regional or remote Australians, only 45% are satisfied; a majority (55%) are either dissatisfied (23%) or unsure (32%).

Socioeconomic factors are strong predictors. Respondents with a university education, who are in employment and able to save are significantly more likely to be satisfied with how democracy works in Australia; whereas respondents who are struggling to make ends meet are disproportionately dissatisfied (27%) compared to the wider public.

Finally, political interest is associated with higher satisfaction, but it does not strongly affect the level of dissatisfaction. In other words, greater interest seems to boost approval among those who are already positive about democracy, rather than reducing discontent among those who are dissatisfied.

2.3

Trust in the Federal Government

The 2019 Australian Election Study recorded the lowest public trust in government since the 1970s, with just 25% of voters believing that those in government can be trusted.[30] Although satisfaction experienced a boost after the 2025 federal election, returning close to the 25-year average, trust remains at historically low levels.[31]

[30] S. Cameron and I. McAllister, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study* 1987–2019 (Canberra: Australian National University, 2019).
[31] S. Cameron, I. McAllister, S. Jackman, and J. Sheppard, *The 2025 Australian Federal Election*. Results from the Australian Election Study (Canberra: Australian National University, 2025).

Table 2.3
'How much do you trust or distrust the Australian Government? (consider the Australian Government in general, rather than the current government or any specific political party)'

	Distrust	Neither	Trust	Total
Total (%)	**32%**	**35%**	**33%**	**100%**
Age* **				
18–34	33%	34%	32%	100%
35–54	34%	37%	30%	100%
55+	29%	35%	36%	100%
Gender* **				
Female	32%	38%	30%	100%
Male	32%	32%	36%	100%
Non-binary/Other	53%	27%	20%	100%
Indigenous				
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	36%	31%	34%	100%
Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	32%	35%	33%	100%
Location* **				
Metropolitan	30%	36%	34%	100%
Regional or Remote	40%	32%	28%	100%
Education* **				
Primary or secondary schooling	33%	37%	30%	100%
Technical	35%	35%	30%	100%
University	27%	33%	40%	100%
Employment **				
Employed	33%	35%	32%	100%
Unemployed	37%	36%	28%	100%
Student, Carer or Retiree	29%	35%	37%	100%
Economic security* **				
Able to save	27%	35%	38%	100%
Not able to save	32%	36%	32%	100%
Struggling	44%	33%	24%	100%
Political interest* **				
Interested	30%	28%	42%	100%
Not interested	33%	41%	25%	100%
Total (N)	**1,341**	**1,492**	**1,392**	**4,225**

Notes
'Distrust' = 'Strongly distrust' and 'Distrust'; 'Neither' = 'Neither trust nor distrust'; 'Trust' = 'Trust' and 'Strongly trust.' Cells show percentages of trust categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted χ^2 test p-values for association between trust and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

2.3

Our results indicate that, overall, Australians are more likely to distrust the Federal Government than to trust it.

One in three respondents in our survey reported distrust or strong distrust. While levels of distrust remain relatively stable across age cohorts, geography is a particularly strong divider: in regional or remote areas, 40% express distrust and only 28% express trust.

Socioeconomic position is also influential. Respondents with a university education and those with economic security are considerably more likely to trust government, whereas less than a quarter (24%) of those who are economically struggling express trust in the Government. Consistent with other attitudes, political interest is a strong determinant of trust.

2.4

Confidence to participate

To design a stronger democratic system, we need to understand people's confidence in their own political knowledge and their ability to make a difference, what political scientists call 'political efficacy.' Suppose people don't feel confident engaging in political discussions or believe their input doesn't matter. In that case, they are less likely to want to involve themselves in democratic processes or be open to new, more participatory approaches to democracy.

Table 2.4 'I have confidence to take active part in a discussion about political issues'

	Not confident	Neither	Confident	Total
Total (%)	**22%**	**30%**	**48%**	**100%**
Age***				
18–34	29%	29%	42%	100%
35–54	23%	30%	47%	100%
55+	16%	30%	54%	100%
Gender***				
Female	31%	34%	36%	100%
Male	13%	26%	62%	100%
Non-binary/Other	40%	13%	47%	100%
Indigenous				
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	19%	32%	50%	100%
Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	22%	30%	48%	100%
Location***				
Metropolitan	22%	29%	49%	100%
Regional or Remote	24%	32%	44%	100%
Education***				
Primary or secondary schooling	27%	32%	41%	100%
Technical	20%	30%	50%	100%
University	17%	26%	56%	100%
Employment**				
Employed	22%	30%	48%	100%
Unemployed	23%	36%	41%	100%
Student, Carer or Retiree	22%	28%	50%	100%
Economic security***				
Able to save	20%	29%	51%	100%
Not able to save	23%	29%	49%	100%
Struggling	24%	32%	44%	100%
Political interest***				
Interested	3%	19%	77%	100%
Not interested	37%	38%	25%	100%
Total (N)	**928**	**1,259**	**2,038**	**4,225**

Notes
'Not confident' = 'Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree'; 'Neither' = 'Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Confident = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree.' Cells show percentages of efficacy categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted X^2 test p-values for association between confidence and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

2.4

From our survey, overall confidence to participate in political discussions stands at 48%, leaving just over half of Australians either lacking confidence or feeling ambivalent/unsure.

However, this feeling of confidence is not evenly shared. Young people aged 18–34 report the lowest levels of confidence. Gender gaps are also very pronounced: 62% of men feel confident compared with 35% of women. Socioeconomic resources and orientations matter as well. University-educated respondents are more likely to be confident (56%), and higher political interest is likewise associated with greater confidence.

The findings indicate a moderate but uneven sense of political efficacy among Australians. Research shows that both real and perceived political competency is not fixed but rather can be cultivated through participation.[32] New participatory mechanisms can equip people with the skills, confidence, and collective experience that enables them to view themselves as capable contributors to public decision-making.

[32] M. F. Scudder, S. A. Ercan, and K. McCallum, "Institutional Listening in Deliberative Democracy: Towards a Deliberative Logic of Transmission," *Politics* (advance online publication, December 29, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211060691

2.5

From social trust to democratic renewal

Even as Australians report historically low confidence in political institutions and leaders, horizontal or social trust (trust towards one another) remains comparatively strong, particularly by global standards.[33] This reservoir of trust among citizens is a valuable civic asset and a key foundation for a stable and resilient democracy. Rather than treating social trust as separate from institutional trust, the question is how the relational infrastructure of trust between citizens can be leveraged, through institutional design, to renew trust in political institutions.

Australia is well placed to expand citizen engagement in governance through participatory and deliberative mechanisms in which peers can operate as "trusted information proxies",[34] helping to strengthen confidence in collective decision-making and public perceptions of government legitimacy. The next chapter examines public support for deliberative citizen engagement and its potential to convert horizontal trust into tangible improvements in democratic practice.

Rather than treating social trust as separate from institutional trust, the question is how the relational infrastructure of trust between citizens can be leveraged, through institutional design, to renew trust in political institutions.

[33] M. Kumove, "Political Crisis and Social Trust: The Case of Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 2 (2024): 161–178, https://doi.org/101080/10361146.2024.2352044; Biddle, *Shifting Trust and Satisfaction*.

[34] See M. E. Warren and J. Gastil, "Can Deliberative Minipublics Address the Cognitive Shortcomings of Democratic Systems?" *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 2 (2015): 442–455.

03

Chapter 3

From voting to voice: public appetite for deliberative citizen engagement

Nearly one in two Australians (48%) think the best way to make political decisions in a democracy is through dialogue with citizens and affected groups, while **only 9%** believe decisions should be left to elected representatives without public input.

More than half (54%) of Australians view deliberative forums as a sign that politicians are **responsive** – that they value input and ideas of ordinary people.

People who are **dissatisfied with democracy and distrusting of government** support a **deliberative model** of democracy **(49%)** followed by a **direct model** including more referendums **(28%). Only 5%** support decision-making by elected officials without public input.

A majority (56%) report they **would be likely to participate in a deliberative forum if invited**, indicating an unmet demand for more direct, participatory engagement.

Despite limited public familiarity with such mechanisms, **36%** of Australians say they would trust a **deliberative forum of everyday citizens** to produce sound recommendations on their behalf.

This desire for more participatory channels is **strongest among the disaffected: 63%** of those dissatisfied and **59%** of those distrusting say they would be willing to take part in a deliberative forum.

There is growing recognition that strengthening citizen participation in political decision-making is essential to reinvigorating trust in democratic institutions.

This requires more than rhetorical commitments to transparency or consultation: it calls for institutional changes that make decision-making processes and administrative channels more accountable and responsive to public input.[35]

Democratic reform also depends on securing public support. A substantial body of research highlights that democratic innovations are more likely to succeed when they are not imposed in a top-down manner, but rather reflect the priorities, expectations and concerns of the public.

Recent work using Australian Election Study data shows that Australians are increasingly eager to explore alternative ways of doing politics.[36] The APSC 2023 Trust in Democracy Report similarly showed that, rather than giving up on democracy, four out of five Australians believe it is worth trying to fix the problems our democracy has.[37]

Against this backdrop, our survey examined public support for reforms that strengthen the connection between political leaders and institutions on the one hand, and the voices and opinions of everyday citizens on the other.

[35] Evans et al., *Australia's Evolving Democracy*, 599.
[36] Cameron et al., *The 2025 Australian Federal Election*, 24.
[37] Australian Public Service Commission, *Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy*.

3.1

Australians' preferred model of democratic decision-making

People judge democracy not only by its performance, but by what they believe democracy should be and how collective decision-making should operate.[38] To understand the drivers of public dissatisfaction and distrust, as well as support for various forms of interventions, it is crucial to grasp the public's varied expectations of democratic institutions and leaders.

We asked respondents to rank four models of democratic decision-making, presented in random order, from best to worst:

1. **Put important questions to referendums;**
2. **Develop policies in close dialogue with citizens and affected groups;**
3. **Let elected representatives make decisions; and**
4. **Let experts in different areas make decisions.**

We coded these as direct, deliberative, trustee, and technocratic models, respectively.

The results indicate that nearly one in two Australians believe that decision-making about policies should occur in close dialogue with citizens and those directly affected. That is, most Australians want democracy to involve dialogue between citizens and decision-makers. **Table 3.1** shows that this preference for deliberative democracy holds across variations in attitudes of satisfaction, trust and confidence.

Among those dissatisfied with democracy and distrusting of government, support for a deliberative model is on par, or slightly higher than, the population average. These respondents are also disproportionately more likely to favour direct-democratic mechanisms (e.g. referendums) and are least supportive of the existing trustee model of representative democracy. Taken together, these attitudes suggest that participatory designs – both deliberative processes and direct-democracy tools – are central to re-engaging this cohort and restoring their confidence.

Most Australians want democracy to involve dialogue between citizens and decision-makers.

[38] J. Lu and Y.-h. Chu, *Understandings of Democracy: Origins and Consequences Beyond Western Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); B. Geissel, *The Future of Self-Governing, Thriving Democracies: Democratic Innovations By, With and For the People* (London: Routledge, 2023).

3.1

Table 3.1
'Your opinion on how political decisions should be made in a democracy'

	Deliberative	Technocracy	Trustee	Direct	Total
Total (%)	**48%**	**22%**	**9%**	**21%**	**100%**
Satisfaction* **					
Dissatisfied	49%	19%	5%	28%	100%
Neither	45%	24%	8%	23%	100%
Satisfied	49%	23%	11%	18%	100%
Trust* **					
Distrust	49%	20%	5%	26%	100%
Neither	48%	23%	10%	20%	100%
Trust	46%	24%	11%	18%	100%
Confidence to participate **					
Not confident	45%	26%	7%	23%	100%
Neither	46%	23%	8%	22%	100%
Confident	50%	20%	10%	20%	100%
Total (N)	**2,009**	**941**	**372**	**903**	**4,225**

Notes
Question prompt was 'We would like to know your opinion on how political decisions should be made in a democracy. Some examples of political decisions include regulating pharmaceutical prices, spending on infrastructure, or establishing protected nature reserves. Provide your opinion by ranking the following options from 1 (= the best way of making political decisions) to 4 (= the worst way of making political decisions). Drag and move options into desired order.' Preference categories according to what respondents ranked first: 'Deliberative' = 'Develop policies in close dialogue with citizens and affected groups'; 'Technocracy' = 'Let experts in different areas make decisions'; 'Trustee' = 'Let elected politicians make decisions'; 'Direct' = 'Put important questions to referendums.' Cells show percentages of preference categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted X^2 test p-values for association between preferred model and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

3.2

Do Australians trust deliberative forums?

Next, we presented a portion of our respondents with a brief description of a deliberative forum: "a group of ordinary people, selected on a random basis, come together to discuss important issues with elected politicians". We asked respondents a series of questions to gauge their level of support.

We asked respondents if they would trust a deliberative forum to come up with good recommendations on their behalf.

Overall, just over one-third of respondents (36%) say they would trust a deliberative forum to produce sound recommendations on their behalf. Although modest, this level of trust sits against a backdrop of low political trust.

Trust in deliberative forums is highest among those with greater institutional trust (51%) and among those satisfied with democracy (43%). A substantial share of respondents are either ambivalent or unsure (43%), consistent with limited public familiarity with deliberative mechanisms and a knowledge gap in what such processes involve.

Table 3.2
'I would trust a deliberative forum to come up with good recommendations on my behalf'

	Don't trust	Neither	Trust	Total
Total (%)	**21%**	**43%**	**36%**	**100%**
Satisfaction***				
Dissatisfied	31%	41%	28%	100%
Neither	18%	54%	28%	100%
Satisfied	20%	38%	43%	100%
Trust***				
Distrust	26%	45%	28%	100%
Neither	22%	50%	28%	100%
Trust	15%	34%	51%	100%
Confidence to participate**				
Not confident	26%	43%	31%	100%
Neither	19%	50%	31%	100%
Confident	20%	39%	41%	100%
Total (N)	**255**	**523**	**431**	**1,209**

Notes
Question prompt was 'I would trust a deliberative forum to come up with good recommendations on my behalf;' 'Don't trust' = "Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree'; 'Neither' = "Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Trust' = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' Cells show percentages of trust categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted χ^2 test p-values for association between trust and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

3.3

Do deliberative forums signal political responsiveness?

We next asked whether deliberative forums are perceived as evidence that politicians value ordinary people's input and ideas.

A majority (54%) agreed, while only 15% disagreed. However, disagreement was disproportionately concentrated among respondents who are most dissatisfied and low in political trust, suggesting that disaffected citizens are more sceptical about the genuineness of such forums. By contrast, agreement was strongest among those with highest satisfaction with democracy (62%) and highest trust in government (71%), indicating that deliberative forums are most readily interpreted as responsive by those who already feel positively about the system.

Table 3.3
'Deliberative forums show that politicians value input from ordinary people'

	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Total
Total (%)	**15%**	**31%**	**54%**	**100%**
Satisfaction* **				
Dissatisfied	28%	26%	45%	100%
Neither	14%	42%	43%	100%
Satisfied	12%	26%	62%	100%
Trust* **				
Distrust	25%	28%	46%	100%
Neither	15%	40%	45%	100%
Trust	6%	23%	71%	100%
Confidence to participate **				
Not confident	16%	32%	53%	100%
Neither	16%	37%	46%	100%
Confident	15%	27%	58%	100%
Total (N)	**187**	**374**	**648**	**1,209**

Notes
Question prompt was 'Deliberative forums show that politicians value input from ordinary people. Disagree' = "Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree'; 'Neither' = "Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Agree' = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' Cells show percentages of trust categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted X^2 test p-values for association between perceived responsiveness and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

3.4

Are Australians willing to take part?

Finally, we asked respondents how willing they would be to participate in a deliberative forum if invited. Overall, 56% of Australians say they would be likely to take part. Notably, willingness is higher than average among those dissatisfied with democracy (63%) and among those who distrust government (59%), indicating a clear opportunity to engage the currently disaffected. As expected, the lowest levels of willingness are found among respondents with the least confidence in their own ability to participate, underscoring the importance of supportive design and facilitation.

Table 3.4
'If I was invited to a deliberative forum, I would probably take part'

	Probably not	Neither	Probably yes	Total
Total (%)	**20%**	**23%**	**56%**	**100%**
Satisfaction* **				
Dissatisfied	20%	17%	63%	100%
Neither	26%	29%	45%	100%
Satisfied	18%	22%	60%	100%
Trust* **				
Distrust	23%	19%	59%	100%
Neither	25%	29%	45%	100%
Trust	13%	21%	66%	100%
Confidence to participate **				
Not confident	45%	21%	34%	100%
Neither	20%	36%	44%	100%
Confident	9%	17%	74%	100%
Total (N)	**247**	**282**	**679**	**1,208**

Notes
Question prompt was 'If I was invited to participate in a deliberative forum, I would probably take part' 'Probably not' = "Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree'; 'Neither' = "Neither agree nor disagree'; 'Probably yes' = 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' Cells show percentages of participation likelihood categories within each level of the covariate. Percentages weighted for age interlocked with gender and education, and age and gender interlocked with location. Total (%) are overall weighted proportions (column totals); Total (N) are overall weighted counts (column totals). Stars indicate Rao–Scott adjusted X^2 test p-values for association between willingness to participate and the covariate. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

3.5

From disaffection to participation

Deliberative democracy is not merely a scholarly ideal: it resonates with the public as a credible and desirable way to narrow the distance between citizens and political leaders.

Public support for deliberative democracy points to a desire for participatory mechanisms that create space for reasoned discussion and the incorporation of diverse perspectives into policy outcomes. This desire is strong among the most dissatisfied and distrusting segments of society. Despite scepticism about the trustworthiness and genuineness of deliberative forums, those same dissatisfied and distrusting citizens are more willing than the average to give them a go.

In short, deliberative forums not only signal political responsiveness; they provide a constructive channel through which disaffection can be converted into democratic participation.

These attitudes mirror a wider global trend in which people express frustration with a purely electoral mechanism of representation and seek more meaningful opportunities to shape decisions that affect their lives. This desire is particularly strong among the disaffected, who are on average more supportive of such deliberative innovations.[39] They do not want deliberative forums to replace elected politicians, but to complement and enhance existing representative institutions.[40]

Despite scepticism about the trustworthiness and genuineness of deliberative forums, those same dissatisfied and distrusting citizens are more willing than the average to give them a go.

[39] J.-B. Pilet, D. Bol, D. Vittori, and E. Paulis, "Public Support for Deliberative Citizens' Assemblies Selected through Sortition: Evidence from 15 Countries," *European Journal of Political Research* 62, no. 4 (2023): 873–902, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12541

[40] D. Talukder and J.-B. Pilet, "Citizens' Support for Citizens' Assemblies," in *De Gruyter Handbook of Citizens' Assemblies*, ed. M. Setälä, G. Smith, and L. B. Larsen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 313–324.

04

Chapter 4

Mechanisms for national-level deliberative citizen engagement

While Australia has led the way in experimenting with deliberative processes at local and state levels, the national system remains largely untouched by these innovations: beyond the efforts of a few interested actors, there has been little appetite to embed more inclusive and deliberative forms of citizen engagement.

This stands in contrast to the growing global interest in national-level democratic innovations. In Ireland, for example, citizens' assemblies have shaped constitutional reform on marriage equality and reproductive rights.[41] In Germany, the national parliament has convened citizens to advise on deliberative democratic renewal.[42]

Deliberative citizen engagement at the federal parliament level allows Australians to weigh in directly on big national questions – such as climate policy and constitutional reform - while helping close the trust gap between Canberra and regional or remote communities whose day-to-day realities are often overlooked. Without pathways for engagement, confidence in federal democracy is likely to continue slipping. Rebuilding trust between citizens and their representatives takes more than minor institutional tweaks; it requires practical, proven ways to connect everyday Australians to federal decision-making.

This chapter sets out three such citizen-centred mechanisms.

These are not simply theoretical constructs, but approaches shown in Australia and elsewhere to bring citizens into closer dialogue with decision-makers. They respond to three distinct but related dimensions of connection to parliament:

- **How citizens can meaningfully contribute to complex national debates.**
- **How public voices can inform Parliamentary committee inquiries.**
- **How elected representatives can maintain a channel for dialogue and connection with their constituents between elections.**

[41] D. Courant, "Citizens' Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms: Is There an 'Irish Model' for Deliberative Democracy?," *Frontiers in Political Science* 2 (2021).
[42] R. Dean, F. Hoffmann, B. Geissel, S. Jung, and B. Wipfler. 2024. "Citizen Deliberation in Germany: Lessons from the 'Bürgerrat Demokratie" *German Politics* 33 (3): 510–534. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2022.2088732

4.1

National Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' Assemblies are a type of mini public that bring together a broadly representative group to deliberate on a policy issue and formulate recommendations.[43] Such assemblies are typically convened to address issues of national or international significance. They are especially valuable when a prominent public concern calls for solutions shaped by ordinary citizens rather than partisan or vested interests. Guided by principles of inclusion and public influence,[44] they typically begin with a learning phase, followed by a phase where the assembly hears from a broad range of opinions on the issue. Members then deliberate either in small groups, an open plenary or a mix of both, before voting for decisions or recommendations.

Ireland is arguably the best documented case of using national level Citizens' Assemblies to address major policy questions. Following a Constitutional Convention (2012-2014) that considered socially and politically salient issues, including same-sex marriage and the voting age, a permanent body of 100 randomly selected citizens was established by parliamentary resolution in 2016 to enhance citizen involvement in Irelands political decision-making. The Resolution committed the Government to fully support the Assembly, both by providing funding and by reviewing and giving serious consideration to its recommendations. A joint committee of both Houses was established to facilitate the examining of Assembly reports. Although the Government is not legally bound to adopt the Assembly's recommendations, it is required to issue a formal response to the legislature. Where a recommendation is accepted, the Government must also set out a timetable for holding a public referendum on the matter. Since 2016, Ireland has held national assemblies on abortion, climate change, the conduct of referendums, fixed-term parliaments, challenges of an ageing population, gender equality, biodiversity loss, and drugs use.[45]

Although the Government is not legally bound to adopt the Assembly's recommendations, it is required to issue a formal response to the legislature.

Australia has also experimented with this model. The 2009 Australian Citizens' Parliament brought together 150 randomly selected Australians to deliberate on how to strengthen the nation's political system. Participants developed proposals to improve accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.[46] Although the initiative was not repeated, it demonstrated that diverse Australians can seriously deliberate on national policy questions and that institutional support, rather than public capacity, is the missing ingredient. >

[43] S.A. Ercan et al, *Guidebook for Deliberative Engagement*, 93.
[44] J. Vrydagh, 2023. "Citizens' Assemblies: An Introduction." In *De Gruyter Handbook of Citizens' Assemblies*, ed. M. Reuchamps, J. Vrydagh, and Y. Welp. De Gruyter. https://doi.org/101515/9783110758269-003
[45] Courant, "Citizens' Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms."
[46] Dryzek, "The Australian Citizens' Parliament."

4.1

Half a decade later, in 2014, the City of Melbourne's People's Panel offered another striking demonstration of deliberative potential within an Australian context. Forty-three citizens, selected through stratified random sampling to reflect Melbourne's diverse community, were tasked with advising on the city's 10-Year Financial Plan, a $5 billion budget strategy. Over several weekends, participants engaged with experts, questioned councillors, and deliberated on competing priorities. The panel produced 11 recommendations, many of which were adopted in the final plan, helping shape long-term financial and infrastructure decisions. Independent evaluation found the process to be inclusive, transparent, and "good value for money," with participants reporting high trust in both the process and council responsiveness.[47] While local in scale, the Melbourne case shows what is possible when governments entrust citizens with genuine deliberative authority. It demonstrates that Australians can grapple with complex policy trade-offs, and that deliberative processes can produce credible, publicly legitimate outcomes.

National Citizens' Assemblies in Australia would not only extend democratic participation beyond electoral cycles, but they would create new opportunities for citizens to learn from one another, to weigh complex trade-offs, and arrive at community-generated recommendations. By providing politicians with carefully considered proposals that carry public legitimacy, such assemblies can help break political deadlock on contentious issues, strengthen trust between citizens and institutions, and generate reforms rooted in the lived experiences of diverse communities. Importantly, Citizens' Assemblies can complement, rather than replace, parliamentary decision-making, ensuring that elected representatives remain central to democracy while better reflecting the values and priorities of the broader public.

[47] Christensen and Grant, "Participatory Budgeting in Australian Local Government."

4.2

Citizens' Panels in Parliamentary Committee Inquiries

Parliamentary committees and their inquiry processes represent promising spaces to expand the opportunity and capacity of citizens to scrutinise the elite deliberations of parliamentarians. Committees already serve as important forums for public input; however, when it comes to parliamentary inquiries, committees rely on conventional methods of consultation, such as establishing terms of reference, calling for submissions, and holding public hearings. While these processes invite expert testimony and contributions from affected groups, they are limited in scope and often dominated by well-resourced interest groups, raising concerns about whose voices are heard and how evidence shapes outcomes of elite deliberation.[48]

The challenge is to design the public engagement process of committees in such a way that it moves beyond passive listening by politicians and one-way information flows. This could be done by formally integrating deliberative citizens' panels into committee inquiry processes. Embedding such a deliberative process within a committee inquiry would ensure that members hear not only from organised interests but also from an informed, diverse cross-section of citizens who have critically reflected on the issues.[49]

Citizens' Panels (or Juries) usually involve around 12–30 people, randomly selected to consider a specific policy question and develop recommendations. They are not designed as statistically representative samples of the population but are recruited to reflect a broad mix of experiences and backgrounds from the community.

In 2012, the NSW Parliament convened a Citizens' Jury as part of its inquiry into the future of energy generation. Around 30 randomly selected citizens deliberated over several weekends, heard from experts and stakeholders, and ultimately produced recommendations to inform the parliamentary committee's work. While the process had limited policy impact, it demonstrated the potential for citizen deliberation to complement a legislative inquiry.[50] >

The challenge is to design the public engagement process of committees in such a way that it moves beyond passive listening by politicians and one-way information flows.

[48] C. M. Hendriks, and A. Kay, "From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees," *Government and Opposition* 54, no. 1 (2019): 25–51, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2017.20

[49] Hendriks and Kay, "From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal."

[50] C. M. Hendriks, *Elected Representatives and Democratic Innovation: A Study of Responses to Citizens' Juries Embedded in the NSW Parliament's Public Accounts Committee* (Sydney: newDemocracy Foundation, 2013).

4.2

International examples also demonstrate the benefits. In Taiwan, citizens deliberated online with members of the Social Welfare and Environmental Legislative Committee on public health policy,[51] resulting in greater transparency and responsiveness. In Scotland, a jury on land management is now embedded permanently within the Scottish parliamentary committee system.[52]

This innovation would require adjustments to resourcing, staffing, and committee procedures, but more fundamentally, it calls for a cultural shift in how political elites conceive their role in representative democracy, and the recognition of citizens as active contributors to parliamentary deliberation, not just passive consultees.[53] For such an innovation to be meaningful, committees must also be clear about how citizens' recommendations will be used: whether they will directly shape decisions or be formally acknowledged and considered. Without this, the legitimacy and trust-building potential of these processes would be undermined.

[51] M.-F. Fan, *Deliberative Democracy in Taiwan: A Deliberative Systems Perspective* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2020), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/latrobe/detail.action?docID=6354412

[52] S. Elstub et al., "Democratic Innovation in the Scottish Parliament: An Evaluation of Committee Mini-Publics," *Scottish Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2021): 4, https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/198171/

[53] Hendriks and Kay, "From 'Opening Up' to Democratic Renewal."

4.3

Deliberative Town Halls with Elected Representatives

Deliberate Town Halls (DTHs) blend elements of traditional town hall meetings convened by elected representatives, with the features of deliberative mini publics, including random selection, independent facilitation and the use of non-partisan background information. The purpose is to generate informed public opinion and to strengthen the connection between elected representatives and their constituents.[54]

DTHs depend on the active participation of elected representatives who are prepared to engage in the process and commit to considering citizens' views in their subsequent decision-making. Much like the traditional town hall format, DTHs typically focus on a single policy issue. Participants are provided in advance with a non-partisan information guide to review, and at the event are reminded by independent moderators of the respectful and non-partisan basis of the discussion. Moderators gather participants' questions and present them directly to elected representatives for response and debate.

The number of participants can vary, depending on the format, with online formats being able to host thousands of participants, and the event usually lasts for approximately one to two hours. Conducting DTHs online offers advantages for participants by making it easier for citizens who might otherwise face barriers to in-person engagement, such as people with young children, those with mobility challenges, or individuals balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, to take part.

During the Covid-19 emergency, online DTHs were trialled in the United States, through the 'Connecting to Congress' project.[55] Researchers who have surveyed participants in such processes found that DTHs, by enabling constituents to directly engage with elected representatives, can enhance perceptions of political responsiveness, strengthen trust and mutual understanding, and improve the legitimacy of representative decision-making.[56] >

DTHs depend on the active participation of elected representatives who are prepared to engage in the process and commit to considering citizens' views in their subsequent decision-making.

[54] S.A. Ercan et al., *Guidebook for Deliberative Engagement*, 99.
[55] M. A. Neblo, K. M. Esterling, and D. M. J. Lazer. 2018. *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy*. Cambridge Studies in Public Opinion and Political Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316338179
[56] M. A. Neblo, K. M. Esterling, R. P. Kennedy, D. M. J. Lazer, and A. E. Sokhey. 2010. "Who Wants to Deliberate—and Why?" *American Political Science Review* 104 (3): 566–83. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055410000298

4.3

Australia has also trialled this model with promising results. In 2020, the Centre for Deliberative Democracy convened a deliberative town hall in the ACT electorate of Fenner with the Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP on the topic of mitochondrial donation.[57] Over two days, constituents deliberated on the issue, and their recommendations later influenced parliamentary debate, with Dr Leigh citing their input when casting his conscience vote in line with their conclusion. In 2021, Alicia Payne MP hosted an online Deliberative Town Hall on increasing youth engagement in politics,[58] which not only sparked further initiatives such as the Canberra Forum,[59] but also provided a model for sustained dialogue between citizens and their representatives.

Regular use of Deliberative online Town Halls would deepen connections between MPs and their communities, create more responsive channels for democratic engagement between elections, and help ensure that representative decision-making is informed by a broad and considered spectrum of public perspectives. By participating in such forums, parliamentarians can demonstrate a commitment to listening and responding to citizens in meaningful and consequential ways.

[57] N. Alnemr, S. A. Ercan, N. Vlahos, J.S. Dryzek, A. Leigh, & M. A. Neblo. 2024. "Advancing Deliberative Reform in a Parliamentary System: Prospects for Recursive Representation." *European Political Science Review* 16 (2): 242–59. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773923000292

[58] N. Alnemr, S.A. Ercan, and A. Vromen. 2022. "Undoing the Disconnect: New Pathways to Engaging Young People in Politics." *The Sociological Review Magazine*, April 5. https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.swun5233

[59] A. Payne. 2022. "Announcing the Canberra Forum." Alicia Payne MP, July 7, 2022. https://aliciapayne.com.au/news/articles-and-opinion-pieces/announcing-the-canberra-forum

05

Chapter 5

Next steps

5.1

Overcoming political reluctance

While there is strong public appetite for deeper involvement in decision-making, one of the main barriers to embedding deliberative citizen engagement is the inertia of political institutions and the reluctance of political elites.

Public expectations for accountability, transparency and meaningful involvement in government decision-making have grown sharply in recent years. Yet looking at the 'supply side' of democratic innovations, elected representatives are often resistant, seeing democratic innovations as incompatible with representative democracy, or continuing to doubt citizens' capacity to contribute meaningfully.[60]

The term *democratic innovations* can sound technocratic and potentially alienating to those in government, particularly leaders already tasked with reforming institutions. More importantly, when these innovations are framed as shifting the balance of power from elected representatives to citizens, thus breaking from longstanding traditions, they can provoke caution or even outright resistance.

From the perspective of older established political parties, resistance to deliberative citizen engagement exposes ideological differences in the way the representative role of elected officials is understood. It is also impacted by the logic of party competition, whereby self-interest is the main determinant of reluctance or support for democratic reform.[61]

A deeper issue explaining political reluctance may be one of trust. Trust is a "two-sided and reciprocal relationship".[62] While most of the trust research focuses on citizens' trust of government, the level trust held by governments and decision-makers towards citizens is equally crucial. Governments often struggle to view communities as competent partners, particularly in high-stakes or complex policy domains.[63] Without confidence in citizens' capacity to engage constructively, political leaders are unlikely to champion reforms that meaningfully expand public influence.

> One of the main barriers to embedding deliberative citizen engagement is the inertia of political institutions and the reluctance of political elites.

Where deliberative practices have been embraced, the motivations for doing so are often instrumental. For example, deliberative citizen engagement practices can be used to lend legitimacy to decisions that have already been made, or to test recommendations or advice received from public servants, or to offer political protection for reforms that may otherwise be contentious.[64] In these cases, deliberative engagement functions >

[60] C.M. Hendriks, and J. Lees-Marshment. 2019. "Political Leaders and Public Engagement: The Hidden World of Informal Elite–Citizen Interaction." *Political Studies* 67 (3): 597–617. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718791370

[61] L. Núñez, C. Close, and C. Bedock. 2016. "Changing Democracy? Why Inertia Is Winning over Innovation." *Representation* 52 (4): 341–57.

[62] A. Mikhaylovskaya, and É. Rouméas. 2024. "Building Trust with Digital Democratic Innovations." *Ethics and Information Technology* 26 (1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-023-09736-4

[63] N. Eilers, F.-X. Demoures, J. Eichhorn, and D. Kenealy. 2023. "(Not) Talking about a Revolution: Engaging with Political Decision-Makers about Democratic Innovation in Germany, France and the UK." Berlin: d|part – Think Tank for Political Participation.

[64] Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, "Political Leaders and Public Engagement."

5.1

as consultation to support existing political aims, rather than as a reimagining of citizens' role in governance. Another related barrier to the uptake of democratic innovation is the perception of politicians that outcomes of citizen deliberation are impractical and unusable by leaders.[65]

However, research suggests that the perceptions of political officials towards deliberative engagement shift when they have direct political involvement in designing or participating in such processes. For example, a 2024 survey of elected local government officials whose organisations had implemented deliberative engagement found 89% of politicians who had participated directly believed it produced better-informed recommendations, while only 53% of those kept at arm's length held the same view.[66]

Similarly, in Ireland's constitutional citizens' assemblies, representatives of political parties were included as a minority among participants, providing politicians with first-hand experience of the deliberative process while ensuring deliberation was still community-driven. This direct interaction gave elected officials practical insight into the process and outcomes, helping them to overcome initial scepticism and demonstrate the value of citizen deliberation.

Even more hopeful, a recent study conducted across 14 European countries found 70% of Members of Parliaments indicated they would find it 'fairly' or 'very' desirable to "increase the number of deliberative events, where groups of ordinary citizens debate and decide on a particular issue".[67]

In short, as democratic innovations become more familiar and their track record better understood, political actors come to view them less as a challenge to their authority and leadership and more as a set of practical instruments for governing. Rather than threatening representative institutions, they are increasingly seen as complementary mechanisms that can enhance responsiveness, broaden the range of voices feeding into decision-making, and help to rebuild citizens' confidence in the political system.

Future research

The next phase of the Connecting to Parliament project will pay greater attention to the preferences of political actors; in particular, the attitudes of parliamentarians and political parties towards deliberative citizen engagement, and the determinants of reluctance or support. Such attitudes will be cross-referenced against broader democratic orientations, including preference for participatory/deliberative models vs classical representative models and existing arrangements, as well as parliamentarians' assessments of where democratic legitimacy primarily resides in the political process.

[65] J. Lees-Marshment. 2015. *The Ministry of Public Input: Integrating Citizen Views into Political Leadership*. Palgrave Studies in Political Leadership. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
[66] E. Savini. 2024. *Institutionalising Democratic Innovations through the Victorian Local Government Act 2020: Exposition, Analysis, and Implications*. PhD diss., University of Technology Sydney.
[67] S. Gherghina, C. Close, and C. Carman. 2023. "Parliamentarians' Support for Direct and Deliberative Democracy in Europe: An Account of Individual-Level Determinants." *Comparative Politics* 55 (2): 219–38.

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA | CENTRE FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Connecting to Parliament

Strengthening democracy through deliberative citizen engagement