



***Democracy  
2025***

# HOW DOES AUSTRALIA COMPARE: WHAT MAKES A LEADING DEMOCRACY?

*TWO PARADOXES FOR AUSTRALIAN  
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE*

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## CONTENTS

1	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
3	1. INTRODUCTION
5	2. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TRUST?
6	3. HOW DOES POLITICAL AND SOCIAL TRUST IN AUSTRALIA COMPARE?
11	4. PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION
14	5. DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS AND FREEDOMS
17	6. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
20	7. IN CONCLUSION: TWO PARADOXES FOR AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY
21	REFERENCES
23	ABOUT THE AUTHORS
25	ABOUT DEMOCRACY 2025
26	ABOUT THE TRUSTGOV PROJECT

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

### Figures

- 09 Figure 1: Political and social trust compared
- 13 Figure 2: Perceptions of corruption and trust in government
- 19 Figure 3: Political trust and liberalism

### Tables

- 06 Table 1: Trust – Australia compared with other established democracies
- 07 Table 2: Trust – Australia compared with selected “neighbours”
- 08 Table 3: Trust in assemblies, political parties and public servants in Australia and the USA
- 11 Table 4: Perceptions of corruption, various countries, 2018-onwards
- 15 Table 5: Freedom and democracy assessed in Liberal Democracies
- 16 Table 6: Freedom and democracy assessed among Australia’s neighbours
- 17 Table 7: An index of social liberalism
- 18 Table 8: The global dominance of social liberalism

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracy 2025<sup>1</sup> has partnered with the Trustgov Project<sup>2</sup> to investigate how Australian attitudes towards issues of trust and democratic practices compare both with other mature liberal democracies and nation states in our region.

To understand your own country, and the quality of its democratic governance, it is valuable to be able to place its experiences in a comparative context. This report does that using the most recent data from the gold standard World Values Survey<sup>3</sup> and we use it to explore whether Australia is a democracy in a position to lead.

The quality of democratic governance has come into sharp focus during the global crisis precipitated by coronavirus. Although Australia will beat the pandemic, is the Australian system of governance robust enough to win the trust of its citizens and enable them to negotiate the measures necessary to contain, eradicate and recover from the virus in good time? Are other democracies responding more effectively to the challenge?

The quality of democratic governance is also important in determining the standing of a system

and the extent to which it can offer leadership across the world and with its regional neighbours.

We find many positives that reflect the standing of Australia as a long-established liberal democracy. Citizens in Australia have a comparatively high sense of the achievements of their democracy, its importance and its delivery of freedoms. They do not perceive their political system to be as prone to corruption as citizens of many other countries.

Yet notwithstanding the lack of focus on corruption, Australians exhibit greater distrust in their political system compared to many other countries. What they lack in trust in politicians contrasts with their degree of trust in science.

Australians have developed strong socially liberal values (based on the notion of free choice and a “live-and-let-live” outlook) which match those of many other democracies but contrast with many of their regional neighbours.

In limited democratic societies where there is a weak commitment to liberal values trust in government can more often than not be found. In

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1. See: [Democracy2025.gov.au](https://democracy2025.gov.au), and *About Democracy 2025* on page 25 for an overview of its mission.

2. The TrustGov Project is funded by the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council and is based at the University of Southampton (see: <https://trustgov.net/>). See *About the TrustGov Project* on page 26 for an overview of its mission.

3. The World Values Survey (see: [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)) is a global network of social scientists studying changing values and their impact on social and political life, led by an international team of scholars. The survey, which started in 1981, seeks to use the most rigorous, high-quality research designs in each country. The WVS consists of nationally representative surveys conducted in almost 100 countries which contain almost 90 per cent of the world's population, using a common questionnaire. As full partners, the TrustGov Project has full access to data from the latest wave of the survey.

socially liberal societies trust is not automatically granted to government, it needs to be earned.

Democracy carries different meanings in different countries and Australians back a view of democracy that prizes it most for the freedoms it brings in contrast to the understandings of other countries.

These findings suggest there are two paradoxes confronting democratic governance in Australia:

### **Paradox 1: the democratic values-practice legitimacy gap**

Comparatively speaking Australians do not trust government but value their freedoms. In good times (and given that democracy requires checking the power of government and authority) this combination might be viewed as admirable. In times of crisis or national emergency a combination of low political trust and high commitment to freedom may create a more challenging governing context that will require careful and skilful political management. In short, a legitimacy gap has emerged in delivering the ideals of democracy through the institutions of Australian democracy and the practice of democracy.

Lack of social trust is not an issue, as trust between Australians stands well in comparison with most other liberal democracies and often exceeds regional neighbours. It is the quality of democratic practice that is struggling in Australia and not its society. The legitimacy gap is not insurmountable, as at present the judgements of Australians about their system are not nearly as harsh, negative and polarised as those emerging out of the USA. However, the evidence presented here is an urgent wake-up call to pause and reflect on what Australia's

political system needs to do to adapt to the realities of 21st-century governance.

### **Paradox 2: bridging the democratic cultural values gap**

When offering to provide a leadership role it is valuable to understand how you differ from those you are offering leadership to and Australia has regional neighbours who in many cases place much less emphasis on the virtues of social liberalism and understand the nature of democracy in different ways. Leadership, again in this context to bridge the cultural values gap, is going to demand subtle skills to establish the common ground necessary to forge progress. This suggests the need to find consensus around those democratic values that transcend cultural divisions such as electoral integrity, public accountability, transparency and the rule of law.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Australia is a federation, a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy and, according to the Freedom House Report for 2019, it can boast a position of sixth out of 86 independent nation states that display the qualities of a liberal democracy (Freedom House 2019: 16). The democratic element is expressed primarily through the mechanism that its leaders are chosen in free, fair and regular elections and the liberal element is reflected, at a minimum, in citizens having effective access to a wide range of civil and political rights. This ranking bolsters the idea that Australia has a sound base for its democratic system and a strong case for playing a role as a leading promotor and champion of democracy around the world and especially among its regional neighbours.

When reflecting on the leadership potential of Australia it is valuable to consider, alongside the formal arrangements for democracy, the cultural dimensions of democratic practice. These factors condition democracy and matter to its creation and maintenance. The Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen suggests that it is useful to distinguish between democratic ideals, institutions and practices. Ideals express a commitment to action; institutions deliver some mechanisms to support that commitment but “how these opportunities are realized is a matter of democratic practice” (Drèze and Sen, 2002: 6). Practice is reflected in how citizens perceive the everyday operation and customs of politics. Do the cultural dimensions and practices of Australian democracy support or weaken its role as promoter of democracy?

To explore these issues, we use data from the latest wave of the World Values Survey (WVS). This is a global research project that explores people’s values and beliefs, how they change over time, and what social and political impact they have. Its great strength is the coverage of many countries (over 100) and the latest wave of results that started to emerge from 2018 onwards which allow for contemporary comparisons to be drawn. Like all surveys the interpretation of data needs to be treated with caution but WVS is rightly still regarded as a gold standard resource.

Talk of leadership of democracy often gives rise to discussions of the global role of the United States of America (USA) but it appears that this leadership role might no longer automatically rest comfortably with that nation. Larry Diamond, America’s leading scholar of democracy, was moved to write in 2019:

*“Wherever I met people struggling to achieve democracy or build democracy, I heard the same hope: that the United States would somehow support their cause...And now, we had a President elected whose world view was “America First,” whose policies were rooted in contempt for immigrants and refugees, and whose rhetoric was suffused with praise for dictators” (Diamond, 2019: 4).*

Digging a little deeper it can be suggested that doubts about the leadership capacity of the USA reflects underlying trends in its political system. The repositioning under President Trump is as much a symptom as a cause. The narrative is complex, and the evidence not always aligned but two themes are regularly repeated:

1. Low trust in politicians, parties and the political system has helped create a gridlocked and highly partisan democracy (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015 & 2017; Citrin and Stoker, 2018). The established view is that democracies require a reservoir of trust to maintain themselves (Easton, 1965; Almond and Verba, 1963) and the first order trust problem is then viewed as evidence of decline. Here it “is beyond dispute that Americans’ trust in their national government has declined over the past 50 years” (Citrin and Stoker, 2018: 51). A second area of concern is the emergence in the USA of low trust combined with the granting of trust only on a polarised basis. Republican voters, to an increasing extent, trust Republican leaders but no others, a pattern matched by Democrat voters for their leaders. Motivated reasoning and cognitive biases encourage supporters to see only the positives on their side and only the negatives on the others side. The result is political stalemate that combines cynicism with unrestrained partisanship.
2. A cultural and identity clash between “liberal” and more “authoritarian” values is deconsolidating democracy (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Mounk, 2018). Division is at the heart of democracy but access to economic growth and the framing of a responsible media environment helped to contain divisions within boundaries. Delivering growth that is beneficial for most citizens is proving trickier and the rise of social media and other changes in the communication landscape make for a more challenging political context. Into this environment has arrived an increased emphasis on a politics of identity based on fundamental and non-negotiable differences in values and outlooks. The USA is mobilised by a politics

driven by resentment and grievance in which its President breaks “just about every basic rule of democratic politics” (Mounk, 2018: 119) and yet has proved remarkably successful at mobilising support for a set of authoritarian values drawn around social conservatism, a focus on security from threat and a commitment to loyalty to the leader (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

The challenges facing a liberal democracy such as the USA are not unique. As Diamond (2019: 11) comments, “In every region of the world ... established democracies are becoming more polarized, intolerant, and dysfunctional”. Are there signs that Australia could have some of the same issues with its democratic politics as those facing the USA? Or are its problems of a different order and heading in a different direction? Is it in a position to assume global or regional leadership for democracy in a post-American world?

We explore these questions by comparing Australia’s democracy with other nations over four issues: trust, concern about corruption, strength of democratic standards and the depth of liberal values. But before we move on to this discussion we should first explain how we understand the concept of trust.



## 2. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TRUST?

We understand trust in a political sense as a relational concept about “holding a positive perception about the actions of an individual or an organisation” (OECD 2017: 16) that requires “keeping promises and agreements” (Hethrington 2005: 1).

There are three different components of trust that operate in a liberal democracy:

- **Trust** occurs when A trusts that B will act on their behalf and in their interests to do X in particular and more generally.
- **Mistrust** occurs when A assumes that B may not act on their behalf and in their interests to do X but will judge B according to information and context. This definition is associated with the notion of a critical citizen and active citizenship and is viewed to strengthen democracy.
- **Distrust** occurs when A assumes that B is untrustworthy and will cause harm to their interests in respect of X or more generally.

A healthy dose of mistrust is said to be good for a liberal democratic system designed around checks and balances to ensure good governance and democratic practice. In contrast to mistrust, the evidence suggests that political distrust weakens democracy by: making the business of government more resource intensive (Fukuyama 1995); eroding civic engagement and conventional forms of political participation (Franklin 2004) such as voter registration or turnout; lowering public confidence in government, reducing support for progressive

public policies and promoting risk aversion and short-termism in government (Diamond & Plattner, eds. 2015); and, it potentially creates the space for the rise of authoritarian-populist forces at a time when social cohesion is at a premium (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). There may also be implications for long-term democratic stability as liberal democratic regimes are thought most durable when built upon popular legitimacy (Stoker et al., 2018).



### 3. HOW DOES POLITICAL AND SOCIAL TRUST IN AUSTRALIA COMPARE?

Trust in politics matters, it is argued, because democracies need a reservoir of trust and governments need the trust of their citizens to tackle challenging issues and problems confronting society. Social trust – trust between people – is seen in a similar way as the glue that makes human societies function effectively.

Tables 1 and 2 below show Australia's position on these issues in contrast to other established liberal democracies and its regional neighbours. Broadly the evidence in Table 1 shows trust in government is low in Australia compared to many liberal democracies for which we have recent data. Social trust is also comparatively low compared to other liberal democracies. According to the WVS data, Australia has lower political trust than the USA and many other established democracies, with only Spain and Italy recording lower levels of political trust.

Table 1: Trust – Australia compared with other established democracies

Country	Political Trust %	Social Trust %
Spain	22	41
Italy	24	27
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>49</b>
France	32	27
United States	34	37
Germany	37	47
Austria	39	50
Denmark	40	77
Finland	45	71
Netherlands	46	58
Switzerland	67	59
Sweden	67	64

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

Measures:

POLITICAL TRUST

Could you tell me how much confidence in government you have: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?

SOCIAL TRUST

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?

Table 2 shows that political trust in Australia is also relatively low compared to regional neighbours, but that social trust is towards the higher end of the spectrum compared to its neighbours. In order to increase our observations of this issue we have taken the latest data point from different countries from WVS 6 and WVS 7. Among neighbours for which we have up-to-date data, Australia is one of the worst performing countries in terms of political trust, with a lower trust score only recorded in Japan. Where Australia recovers in trust measurement is in terms of social trust where it outstrips its regional neighbours apart from China

and New Zealand. Australians trust each other more than they do their governments. A civic culture of mutual support and volunteering would appear to still be observable in Australia. Figure 1 demonstrates a broad cross-country comparison of the extent of political trust in contrast to social trust present in a broad range of countries.

Table 2: Trust – Australia compared with selected “neighbours”

Country	Political Trust %	Social Trust %
Japan*	24	36
<b>AUSTRALIA *</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>AUSTRALIA **</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>49</b>
Taiwan*	45	30
India**	46	17
New Zealand**	47	56
Malaysia*	50	20
South Korea*	51	33
Thailand**	54	31
Philippines**	58	3
Hong Kong**	60	48
Indonesia*	79	5
Singapore**	80	37
China	95	64

Sources: \* World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010–14) and \*\*World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20). Questions as outlined in Table 1.

Lack of political trust compared to other established democracies and regional neighbours would appear to be a feature of Australian democracy. Political trust measured as confidence in government is lower than the USA. Just to complete the picture, the WVS provides data on trust in parliament/congress, parties and the public service. Table 3 breaks down the figures for Australia and the USA in terms of expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot of confidence” in legislative assemblies, political parties and public servants. Trust in political institutions in both countries is low, although trust in public servants in both cases finds greater confidence among citizens. That cynicism has become embedded in both democracies is difficult to deny. What is not clear from the data is whether lack of political trust has developed a strong partisan bias in Australia to match that of the USA.

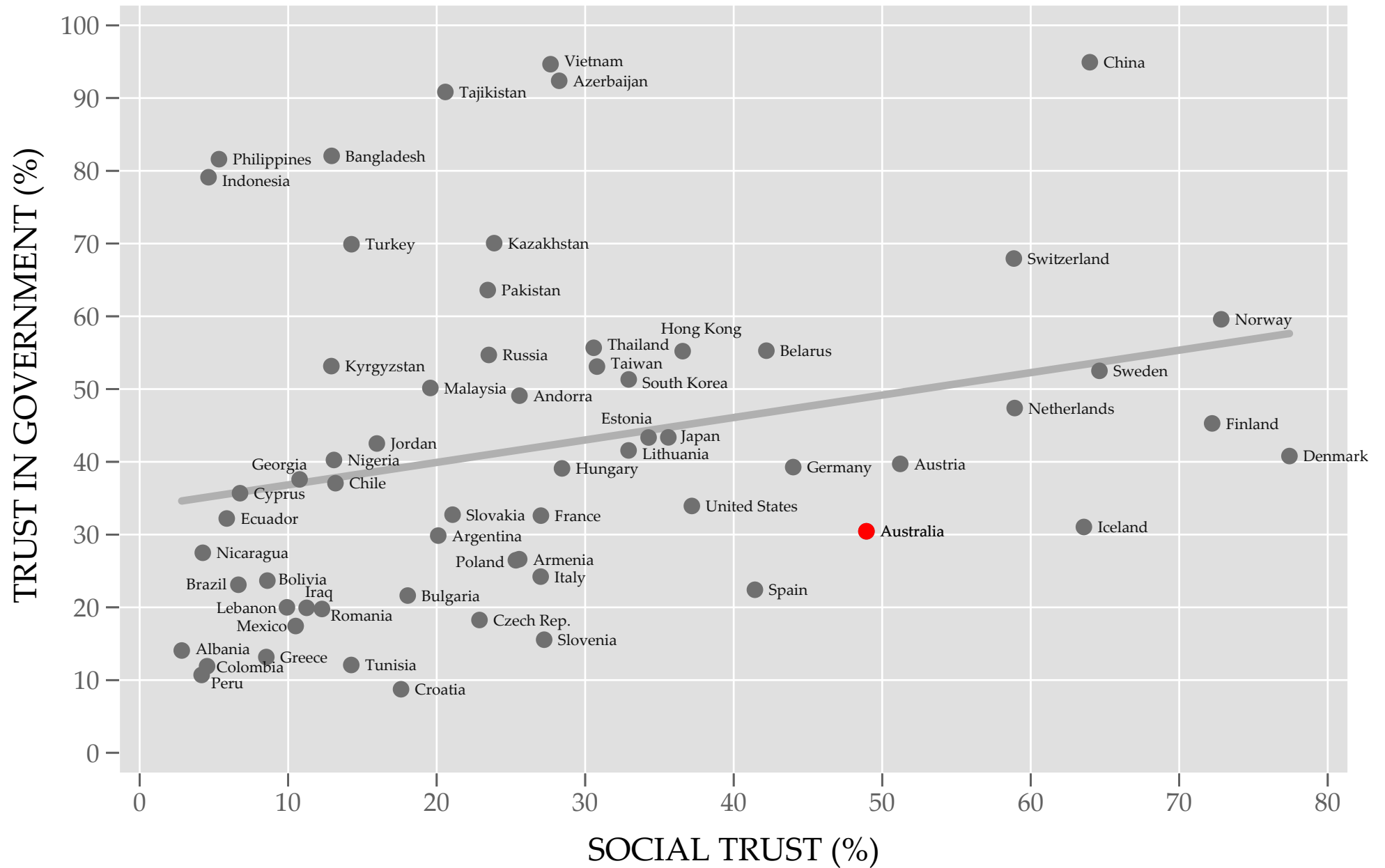
Can a country be a leading democracy and have low levels of political trust? A country where there was no trust in government might be viewed as one in trouble. But equally a country where all citizens express trust might also be viewed as having citizens that are too compliant or too easily misled. We will return to this issue after interrogating more evidence.

**Table 3: Trust in assemblies, political parties and public servants in Australia and the USA**

	Australia	USA
Legislative assemblies	28	15
Political parties	11	11
Public servants	49	42

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

Figure 1: Political and social trust compared



The findings about the comparative lack of trust in government in Australia are confirmed by evidence from the Wellcome Global Monitor (WGM) in 2019. The WGM ran a survey on trust in science and scientists in over 140 countries, also including a question on trust in national government. Australia ranks just 85th out of 134 countries for its level of political trust, but 14th out of 144 for trust in scientists, suggesting that in relative terms it has a high level of trust in technocratic elites.

## 4. PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

A sense among citizens that the political system and wider society is corrupt is seen as a key driver of lack of political and social trust (Rothstein, 2011; Clausen et al., 2011). So how does Australia fare in comparative terms in regard to perceptions of corruption? Using only the data available from the most recent wave of the WVS from 2018 onwards reveals responses to two questions. The first asks about whether respondents agree that there is corruption in their country and the second asks about whether state or public authorities, or government bodies, are involved in corruption.

Table 4 presents the results and reveals that at least in comparison with other countries Australians do not see government or public institutions as prone to corruption, although two thirds do think that corruption is present in the wider society and economy. Even here though, the figure is lower than most other countries for which we have data.

Table 4: Perceptions of corruption, various countries, 2018-onwards

Country	% Agree corruption present in country	% Agree that public authorities involved
Germany	49	14
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>24</b>
Thailand	70	45
South Korea	75	40
USA	85	37
Indonesia	86	70
Malaysia	86	50
Pakistan	87	56
Greece	92	71

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

There are some observers that connect declining trust in Australian Government with a growing perception of corruption (see: Griffith University and Transparency International, 2018), but here the value of placing survey findings in a broader comparative context really does come into play. In Wave 6 of the WVS there is another question which asks how often people pay:

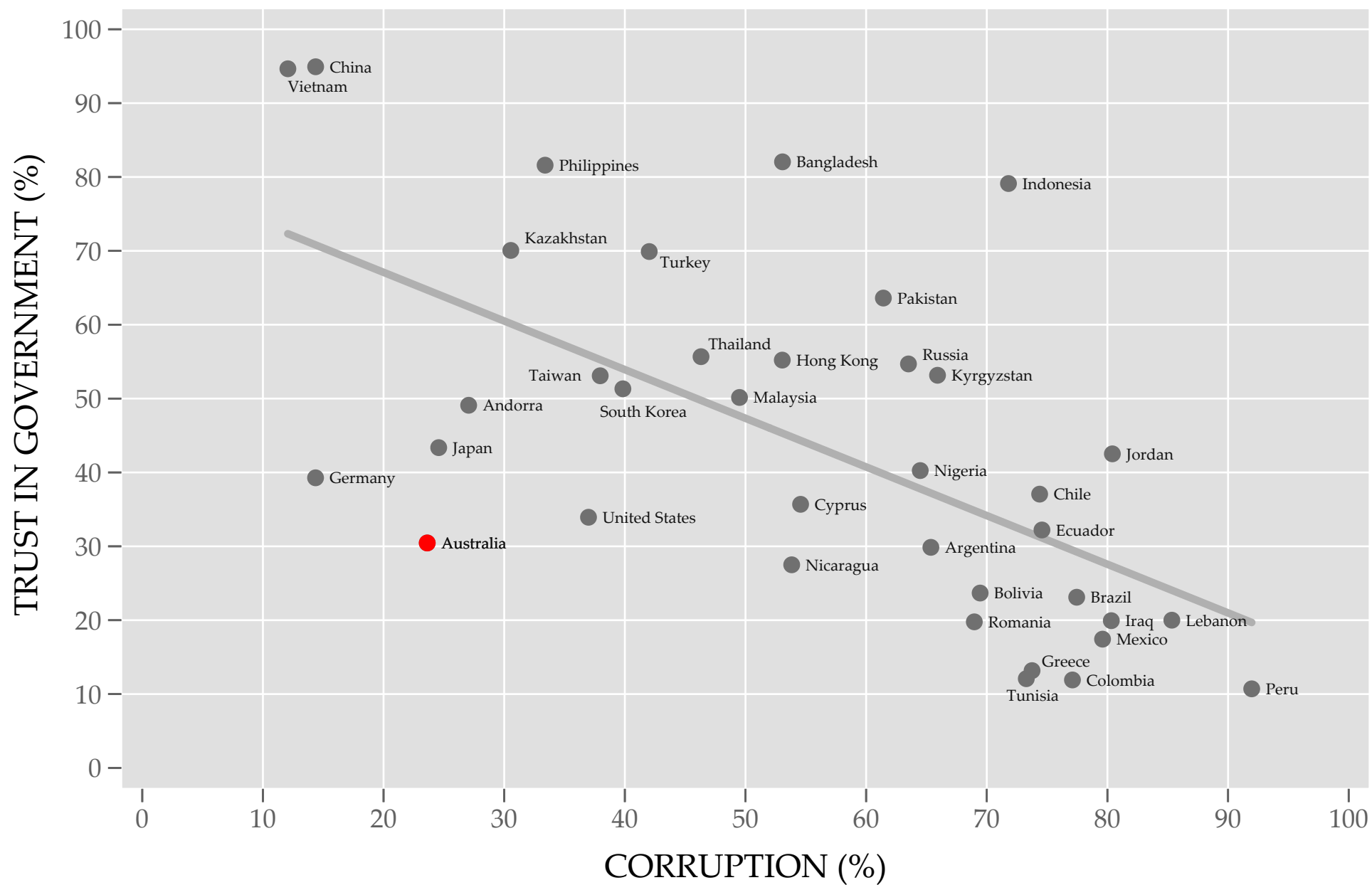
1. A bribe,
2. Give a gift, or
3. Do a favour for a local official.

The results are strongly correlated with perceptions of the level of corruption in a country in general and of state authorities in particular (see Table 4). In terms of public perceptions of corruption, Australia is perceived by its citizens to be less corrupt than 32 other countries (out of a sample of 38), and 2<sup>nd</sup> lowest in terms of how often bribes are perceived to be paid to local officials. Plotting the perceived level of corruption against political trust the results presented in Figure 2 present an interesting story: Australians do not think there is much corruption in public authorities, but still do not trust government.

There is, as previous research suggests, a correlation between lack of trust in government and the perception of corruption. That finding is particularly strong for a range of countries in Latin and Central America. But what Figure 2 reveals is that in the cases of Australia, and indeed the USA, that trend is not followed. There are, as we suggest later, other explanations to consider for what might be driving lack of trust in democratic politics.



Figure 2: Perception of corruption and trust in government



## 5. DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS AND FREEDOMS

A citizen in a liberal democracy or another type of polity could reasonably hold distinctive views on both the quality of their democracy and the level of freedom they enjoy. They might hold a further view over the strength of their support for the ideals of democracy. The WVS has three questions that address these issues.

- a) How democratically is this country being governed today? Again, using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is “not at all democratic” and 10 means that it is “completely democratic,” what position would you choose? We rescaled for Tables 5 and 6 the responses from 0 to 100, where 0 is “not at all democratic” and 100 is “completely democratic”.
- b) Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means “no choice at all” and 10 means “a great deal of choice” to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out. Again, for Tables 5 and 6 we rescaled the responses from 0 to 100, where 0 means “no choice at all” and 100 means “a great deal of choice”.
- c) How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is “not at all important” and 10 means “absolutely important” what position would you choose? Responses in Tables 5 and 6 were rescaled from 0 to 100, where 0 is “not at all important” and 100 “absolutely important”.

The results presented in Table 5 place Australia in a middle-ranking position compared to other liberal democracies. An expressed commitment to the importance of democracy edges towards 9 in 10 of respondents, not as high as some countries but still a strong values statement. Comfortable majorities exist for the idea that Australia functions effectively as a democracy and delivers a felt sense of freedom.

The comparison with regional neighbours reveals a pattern that is more difficult to immediately understand (see Table 5). Several countries that, according to the Freedom House measures of the democratic legitimacy of political systems, are not full liberal democracies have citizens who perceive that their country is democratic and that they value democracy as much as Australians do. There are two explanations on offer here. One is that in all countries there is a commitment to liberal democracy and freedom and that all citizens have the ambition to see their regime move in that direction (see: Fukuyama, 1992). That type of thinking was perhaps a factor in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and other interventions in, for example, Afghanistan and Libya and has been a more or less unstated assumption of the Washington Consensus where undermining autocracies is seen as paving the way to democracy in those countries, in fulfilment of their people’s longing for Western style democracy.

The second and counter argument, developed using evidence from WVS (see Kirsch and Welzel, 2018), is that in different contexts people develop different ideas of democracy. Broadly in liberal democracies citizens understand and prize democracy as the protector of their freedoms, whereas in more

authoritarian cultures people view democracy as a guarantee of good leadership, or even benign leadership that should be obeyed, turning democratic thinking on its head.

The broader point behind the counter argument is that “democracy always has been and continues to be a strongly culture-bound phenomenon” (Welzel, 2017:30) and at its core is people’s commitment to emancipatory values and their willingness to live

by the principles of freedom for themselves and others. These values include wanting children to express themselves autonomously, commitment to gender equality, tolerance around issues such as divorce and homosexuality and a strong commitment to the right to participate. Welzel (2017: 30) concludes: “public support for democracy exerts no positive influence on democracy in disjunction from emancipative values; it only does in close connection with these values”.

Table 5: Freedom and democracy assessed in Liberal Democracies

Country	How democratic	How much freedom	Democracy is important
Norway	76	74	94
Sweden	76	74	92
Switzerland	76	71	92
Austria	71	68	90
Finland	69	76	91
Germany	69	68	94
Netherlands	69	66	87
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>86</b>
Spain	63	71	88
France	61	67	85
Estonia	59	68	85
Italy	56	68	91
USA	56	75	81
Poland	52	67	90
Greece	49	55	92
Hungary	48	67	88

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

Table 6: Freedom and democracy assessed among Australia's neighbours

Country	How democratic is the country?	How much freedom does it have?	How important is democracy?
Indonesia	70	74	80
Bangladesh	69	70	79
China	68	67	86
<b>AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>86</b>
South Korea	65	66	77
Pakistan	64	74	82
Malaysia	56	69	80
Thailand	54	57	76

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

## 6. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

We build on the idea of an emancipatory outlook by asking how far liberal social values are dominant in different societies. We construct an index of social liberalism from various WVS questions (for a similar list see Norris and Inglehart, 2018). Details of the questions are presented in Table 7 below. All of the responses were rescaled on a scale of 0-100 to construct an overall score for social liberalism, (taking the average across the items), with a higher score indicating a stronger commitment these values.

Table 7: An index of social liberalism

Survey Item:	Measured by % response
1. When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women	Disagree
2. Homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples	Agree
3. How would you evaluate the impact of these people on the development of your country?	Good
4. Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between. Homosexuality	Always
5. Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy: People obey their rulers	Not essential
6. As above, followed by: Women have the same rights as men	Essential

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

Using this index to compare results from WVS for different countries leads to the conclusion that Australia’s democracy is marked by a robust socially liberal culture (see Table 8). It shares that distinction with several Nordic and other European countries, the former achieving the highest scores. We can then identify a group of countries where the levels of support for socially liberal values are high but where those values are rejected or challenged by a substantial number of opponents. In this group, the USA can be found, alongside several Eastern European democracies as well as Italy and Greece. Several of Australia’s regional neighbours are in this group, including South Korea, China and Thailand, all with scores for social liberalism that put them close to the final group. This final group of countries can be categorized as dominantly not socially liberal and using contemporary data we find that all the examples come from Australia’s regional neighbours.

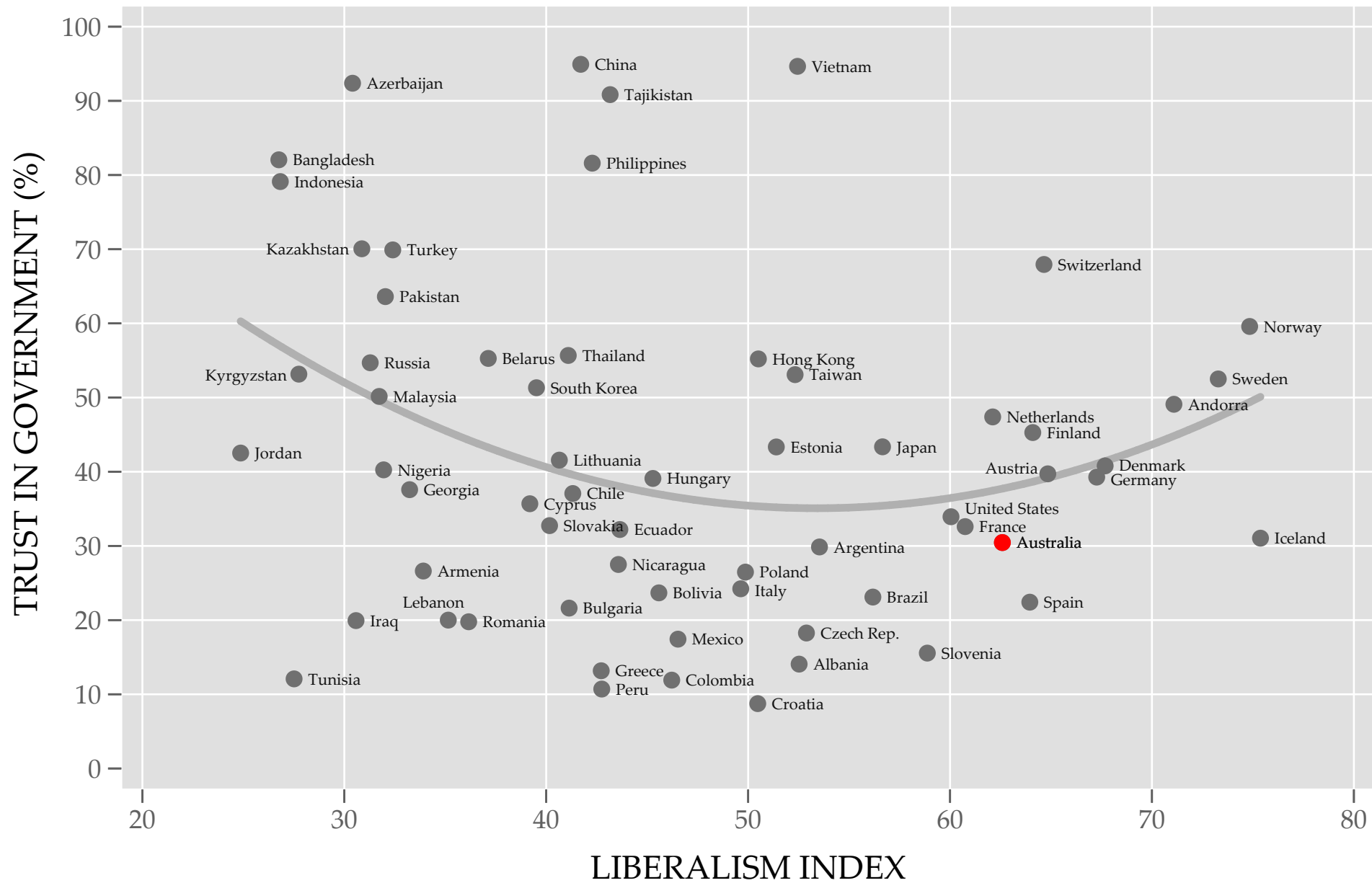
The weak liberal values held by citizens favours trust in government as Figure 3 shows, although some countries match liberalism with trust in government. This suggests that liberalism is the enemy of blind trust or trust granted without judgement of performance and practice. In countries that value freedom and choice it cannot be surprising that this freedom is sometimes used to be critical of government if it is seen to be performing badly.

Table 8: The global dominance of social liberalism

	Liberal Democracies	Regional Neighbours
Robust Socially Liberal Countries (+60)	Norway (75), Sweden (73), Denmark (68), Finland (64) Switzerland (65), Germany (67) Austria (65), Spain (63) <b>AUSTRALIA (63)</b> , France (61), Netherlands (62)	
Disputed Socially Liberal Countries (60-40)	USA (60), Slovenia (59), Croatia (50) Poland (50), Italy (50), Hungary (45) Greece (43)	South Korea (40), Thailand (41), China (42)
Weak Socially Liberal Countries (-40)		Bangladesh (27), Indonesia (27), Malaysia (32), Pakistan (32)

Source: World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–20).

Figure 3: Political trust and liberalism





## 7. IN CONCLUSION: TWO DEMOCRATIC PARADOXES FOR AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY

The evidence presented in this report suggests that Australia is a leading democracy in terms of the existence of robust formal democratic arrangements (e.g. free and fair elections, protection of individual and group rights and the rule of law). However, its capacity for promoting democracy, especially among its regional neighbours, is potentially undermined by two democratic paradoxes. This issue has come into sharp focus given the evidence of increased doubts about the willingness and indeed potential for the USA to perform the role of democracy's global cheerleader.

### **Paradox 1: the democratic values-practice legitimacy gap**

The first democratic paradox is that a legitimacy gap has emerged in delivering the ideals of democracy through the institutions of Australian democracy and the practice of democracy. That legitimacy gap is reflected in the relatively low levels of trust in political actors and institutions in Australia compared with many other liberal democracies and most of its regional neighbours. Lack of social trust is not an issue, as trust between Australians stands well in comparison with most other liberal democracies and often exceeds regional neighbours. It is the quality of democratic practice that is struggling in Australia and not its society.

Moreover, given the degree of concern about corruption among government officials within the Australian citizenry, Australia appears to have a profound challenge to tackle when it comes to improving its democratic practice. Indeed while 86 per cent of Australians place a high value on

democracy, their judgement of the standing of their democratic practice and the freedoms it delivers are lower. The legitimacy gap is not insurmountable, as at present the judgements of Australians about their system are not nearly as harsh, negative and polarised as those emerging out of the USA. However, the evidence presented here is an urgent wake-up call to pause, and reflect on what Australia's political system needs to do to adapt to the realities of 21st-century governance.

### **Paradox 2: Bridging the democratic cultural values gap**

The second democratic paradox is that democracy, the evidence indicates, does not mean the same thing to citizens in different countries. Culturally Australia's democracy is marked by a strong commitment to the values of social liberalism matching a cultural trend in most liberal democracies. But that development has put it out of step with many of its regional neighbours who remain much weaker in their support for the values of social liberalism. Recognising that complexity when promoting democracy means you are promoting a cultural as well as an institutional system: an act that requires self-awareness not always displayed by Western leaders. Leadership to bridge the democratic cultural values gap is going to demand subtle skills to establish the common ground necessary to forge progress. This suggests the need to find common ground around those democratic values that transcend cultural divisions such as electoral integrity, public accountability, transparency and the rule of law.

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## ABOUT DEMOCRACY 2025

Across the world trust in institutions has been in decline. This matters. Trust is the basis of institutional support. It is the glue that facilitates collective action for mutual benefit. Without trust we don't have the ability to address complex, long-term challenges or build integrated and cohesive communities. Trust is closely tied to democratic satisfaction; a crucial indicator of the health of democracy. The Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD)'s recent research, *Trust and Democracy in Australia*, shows that satisfaction in our democracy has more than halved over the past decade and that trust in key political institutions and leaders recently reached its lowest level since measurements began. In response to this, MoAD, together with the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra (UC-IGPA), established *Democracy 2025 – strengthening democratic practice*. Its purpose is to ignite a national conversation on how we can bridge the trust divide, strengthen democratic practice, and restore the confidence of Australians in the performance of their political institutions. Achieving these goals will require us to understand why trust has declined, and what will need to be done to rebuild it.

MoAD holds a unique position on the frontline of democracy, civic agency and change. We are a museum not just of objects but of ideas. We seek to empower Australians through exhibitions, schools' learning programs and events that both stimulate and inspire. Trusted by the public, government, public service and business alike, we are uniquely able to advance national conversations about democracy, past, present and future.

This report, written in collaboration with TRUSTGOV, investigates how Australian attitudes towards issues of trust, and democratic institutions and practices compare both with other mature liberal democracies and democracies in our region – adding fresh and unique insights to the growing body of applied research that underpins our activities helping us drive a process of national reflection, understanding, and renewal of Australia's democratic practice.

Find out more at: [democracy2025.gov.au](https://democracy2025.gov.au).

### Daryl Karp AM

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## ABOUT TRUSTGOV

The TrustGov Project was established at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom in 2019 through a grant from the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council and support from the University of Southampton and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. It has five key aims and objectives.


1. To reframe theoretical debates. The project uses a 'trust but verify' notion as the normative yardstick to assess how far rational citizens form judgments about the trustworthiness of the agencies and the institutions of national and global governance.
2. To develop innovative concepts and expand scientific evidence. We do so by developing and gathering data for novel and innovative indices of trust in, and trustworthiness of, political institutions that complement the existing measures that form the basis of much of our knowledge. We document patterns and trends of trust in political institutions around the world – especially using survey data to map public confidence in the executive, judicial and legislative branches of national governments and in global governance agencies like the UN, World Bank and IMF. Comparisons are extended far beyond the boundaries of contemporary democracies to examine the evidence in a global context, covering a spectrum of regimes from the authoritarian to the democratic. The TrustGov project uses a multimethod and multilevel research design to examine new empirical evidence available from (i) exploratory focus groups, (ii) cross-national time-series survey observational data gathered in many countries, sub-regions, and types of regime worldwide, and (iii) randomized experimental data.
3. To expand knowledge about the drivers of trust. We do so by analyzing and comparing public evaluations of procedural and policy performance with governance indices at global, national and regional levels, along with processes of communication and information, to assess how far the public is capable of making knowledgeable judgments about the trustworthiness of national and global government agencies. What are the reasons why Type I and Type II errors occur?
4. To test empirical evidence about the spatial drivers of political trust. In addition, we seek to determine how far trust in political institutions varies by place – such as among nations, regions within a country, and among rural and urban communities. In particular, we seek to explore the relationship between support for national and global agencies of governance and place-based cultural identities and economic divides among citizens.
5. To inform multiple stakeholders about our findings. The project uses the lessons of our research to reframe public debate about trust, trustworthiness, and critical citizens who 'trust but verify', sharing evidence-based knowledge about practical reforms and best practices that multiple stakeholders can use to restore trust.

The core team of Principal Investigators for the TrustGov Project includes Professor **Will Jennings** (University of Southampton), Professor **Pippa Norris** (Harvard University and the University of Sydney), and Professor **Gerry Stoker** (University of Southampton and the University of Canberra).


For further information see: <https://trustgov.net/>



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