

THE STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S DEMOCRACY

Understanding how
Australians think about the
threats and opportunities

Including common-sense actions to renew trust in politics



**DEMOCRACY
COUNTS**

POWERED BY MCKINNON



Introduction

Australia's democracy was built to ensure that everyday people have real power over the decisions that impact their lives. But as technology rapidly changes the way citizens get information, and democratic norms are challenged around the world, it's time for an honest assessment of how Australians feel our democracy is working.

The good news is, most Australians think our democratic foundations are strong. The research findings presented in this report show Australians think our democracy is holding up well compared to many others and has many positive aspects. Compulsory voting ensures almost all adults have a say, and preferential voting means your vote still matters, even if your first choice does not win. The results of elections are trusted, because of the independence of institutions like the Australian Electoral Commission. Research participants value the government services available to all Australians, which they see as the result of democratically-elected governments. These are strengths worth protecting.

Most Australians think our political system needs some reform but is fundamentally sound

Overall



- Our political system is working well
- Our political system needs some reform but is fundamentally sound
- Our political system needs fundamental change

“ Everyone above the age of 18 years of age has the right to vote. There is easy access to polling stations and early voting and postal votes. I have not heard of corruption in the way votes are counted and tallied in Australia ever.” - Research participant

While most Australians think our democracy has solid foundations, that does not mean it is immune to threats. Many of the rules around politics have not kept up with what the world looks like today. Online, misinformation moves faster than facts. It is easier than ever for actors both inside and outside Australia to spread lies, with social media platforms profiting from distortion. Outdated lobbying rules mean those with money and power have a louder say than they should. And Australians are sick of seeing political campaigns built on attack ads and spin rather than real plans and vision.

“ I don't know if anyone in politics really fights for me specifically, I feel like a lot of politicians only have their best interests at heart and say whatever they need to say to get elected next time.” - Research participant

“ Not all voices are always heard equally, especially those in disadvantaged communities.” - Research participant



KEY FINDINGS

76% of Australians think state and federal politicians are mostly focused on short-term gains and re-election rather than addressing long-term challenges

72% of Australians think state and federal politicians mostly serve themselves and vested interests

51% of Australians do not think politicians understand and represent the interests of people like them

Australians say the most important factors that influence who they vote for are which party or candidate has a plan to address Australia's long-term issues, and the integrity and accountability of parties or candidates

“ There is a reluctance for many politicians to be willing to embark on longer term projects which may not be completed in their time and as such the short-term vision is detrimental to Australians.” - Research participant

Building on the findings of the inaugural *McKinnon Index* released in November 2025, this report presents potential solutions for protecting Australia's democracy. Crucially, all of these solutions are supported by the majority of Australians. No matter who is in power at federal, state and local levels, **these are the common-sense changes governments of all stripes need to consider if they want to increase trust in politicians and politics**, and ultimately, protect the democratic foundations Australians have worked so hard to build.

Democracy counts – but only when we protect it.

KEY FINDINGS

85% of Australians think we need more education around Australia's preferential voting and political system

81% of Australians support a legislated requirement that political advertisements meet standards of truthfulness, and only **5%** oppose

67% of Australians support introducing a 5-year ban on politicians becoming lobbyists after their political career, and only **8%** oppose

67% of Australians support the government establishing an agency that has the power to track and remove disinformation campaigns, including foreign interference, from social media platforms, and only **12%** oppose

64% of Australians support imposing a tax on large social media companies to fund public interest journalism and re-establish local media, and only **10%** oppose

Updating the rules that protect our democracy is key to stopping Australia sliding into the dysfunction seen overseas. These simple, common-sense changes would mean voters would get reliable information, more transparency, and clearer choices. Young Australians will gain the practical tools, knowledge and confidence to participate in our system, and know they'll be heard. And Australians as a whole would benefit from decisions that are made in the public interest – not the interests of the rich and powerful.

Australians are invested in our democracy and want to see it succeed. **These are the reforms we need to make democracy count.**



About Democracy Counts

This report is the foundational evidence that is guiding a new civil society campaign: Democracy Counts.

Democracy Counts is a growing alliance of organisations and Australians who care about the way democracy functions in Australia. Partners include the Centre for Public Integrity, Digital Rights Watch, the Local and Independent News Association and the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom.

The ultimate goal is to achieve simple, common-sense reforms that put people first: requiring political parties and politicians to clearly outline their policies so Australians can make informed choices at the ballot box, limiting the revolving door between politics and lobbying, protecting an impartial public service from political interference, modernising civics education to include digital and media literacy, and regulating social media while investing in public-interest journalism so Australians have access to reliable information.

The campaign is powered by McKinnon, an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to better governments for a stronger Australia.

To find out more and get involved, visit www.democracymcounts.org.au

About this research

The research presented in this report was commissioned by McKinnon and undertaken in 2025 by Essential Research.

Quantitative results (the percentages presented below) come from an online survey of 4,057 participants, weighted to be nationally representative of Australian residents aged 18 and over. Quotas were applied to be representative of gender, age, location, education and previous vote.

Qualitative results (the quotes presented below) are derived from two rounds of research conducted on an asynchronous online discussion board, with 139 participants.

All Essential Research staff hold Research Society membership and are bound by professional codes of behaviour. This research is also compliant with the Australian Polling Council Quality Mark standards.



About McKinnon

Founded in 2015 by Dr Sophie Oh and Grant Rule, McKinnon aims to empower better governments for a stronger Australia. As a truly independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation, McKinnon believes that real change is possible – but only if we take a long-term view in facilitating the development of political leadership, increasing public sector productivity, creating a thriving democracy and accelerating policy innovation.

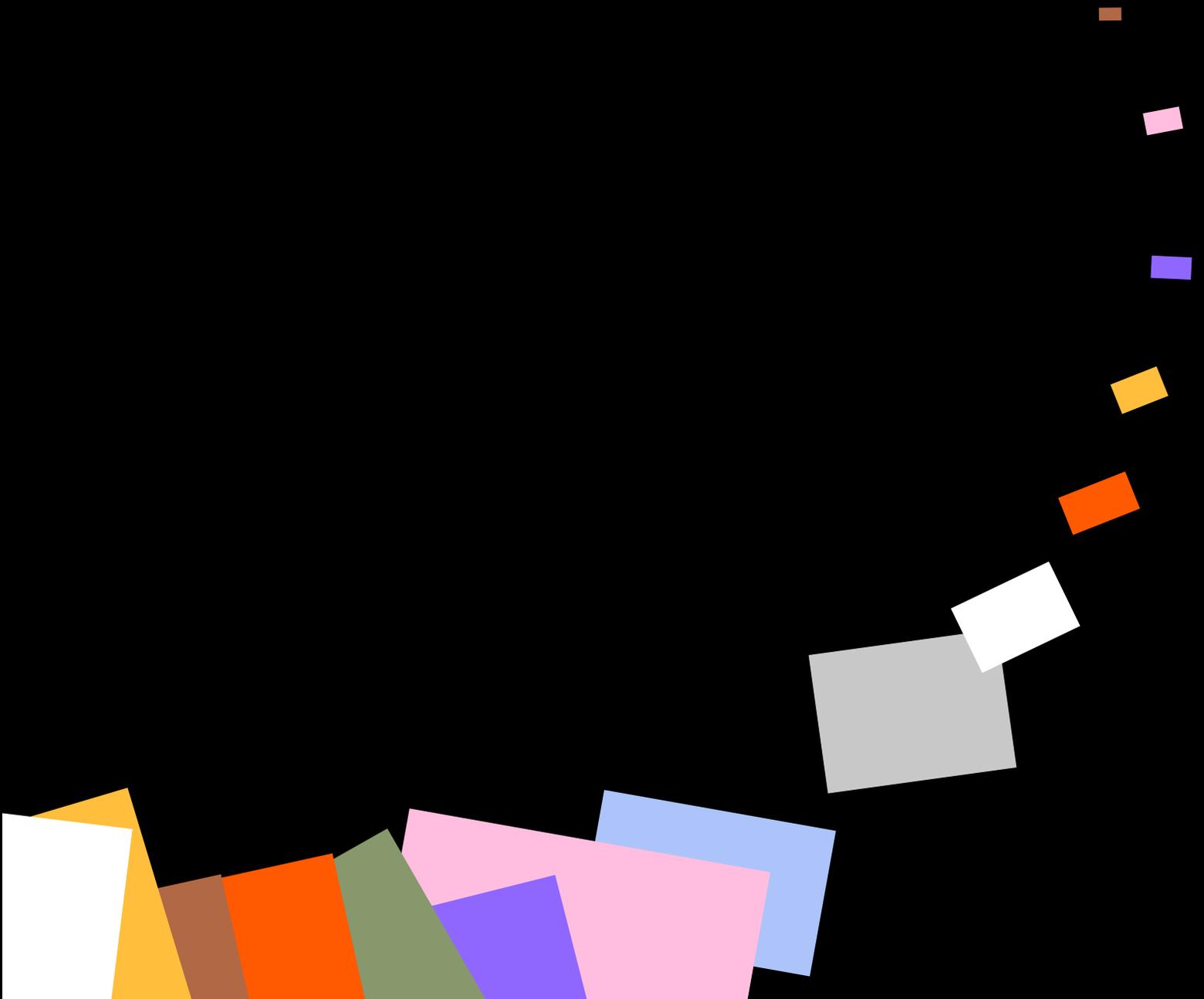
To find out more visit www.mckinnon.co

“ McKinnon’s ambition is not to dictate the shape of Australian democracy, that is for the Australian community to determine. Our goal through the Democracy Counts campaign is to support the excellent work the sector is doing, by amplifying its work and together building the political momentum to achieve the democratic renewal we all want to see. ”

- Sophie Oh, Co-Founder, McKinnon



SOLUTIONS AUSTRALIANS CAN GET BEHIND





1 Civics education and media literacy

Australia's democracy has strong foundations – but it relies on people understanding how it works and being able to tell fact from fiction. Younger Australians are coming of voting age in an environment dominated by social media, polarised content and disinformation. The latest scores from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (essentially the NAPLAN of civics education) were the lowest they have been since testing began in 2004. Trust in politicians and political debate is going down, and it's easy for people to disengage from a system they feel powerless to shape.

“ I would be more encouraged to be engaged in democracy and politics if politics was less confusing. I think that more education in high school would have been beneficial about the voting system and how it all works once you turn 18.” - Research participant

85% of Australians want more civics education

Do you think we need more education around Australia's preferential voting and political system?

Overall



More investment in civics education and media literacy – for young people and others who may face barriers to political participation – would help voters understand our democratic system and think critically about what they see online.

“ Young Australians still believe in democracy, but they've lost trust in the systems that were designed to deliver it. They're more engaged in politics than ever - but the digital square where they meet is reigned by unregulated algorithms that seek to divide and destabilise. Without political understanding and reform, we stand to lose humanity's greatest achievements. Australians are at the ready to engage - but they need the tools, information and pathways to do so. ”

- Holly Rankin, *Sentiment*





2 Protect news that's in the public interest

A strong democracy that makes good decisions needs informed and robust debate. But large social media companies have taken audience and advertising revenue from news media, and unlike news media, they have not re-invested that revenue back into journalism. Advertising revenue that once funded Australian journalism now goes to foreign and unaccountable entities.

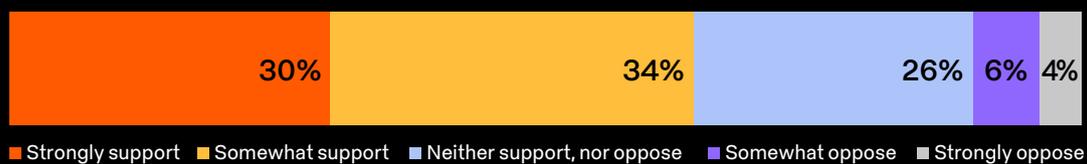
That means Australian media no longer has the resources to cover federal, state and local politics in much depth, depriving citizens of the ability to know what is going on. When transparency and accountability are lost, democracy loses the capacity to debate its future.

Australians believe large social media companies should be forced to pay their fair share of tax. Some of that money should be allocated to public interest journalism – to both support Australian media outlets to give citizens the information they need in ways that suit them, and to replace local media outlets that have been lost over the last decade.

Almost two-thirds of Australians want social media companies to pay a tax to fund public interest journalism

To what extent would you support or oppose a tax on large social media companies to fund public interest journalism and re-establish regional media where it has been lost?

Overall (Total: Support: 64%)



“ I don't believe these massive social media companies should not be paying tax as they create a platform that is so etched into our everyday living. It becomes second nature for us to check these platform for news updates local or international. They are making millions of dollars with advertising on these platforms so they shouldn't be exempt from paying tax.” - Research participant



“ Platforms need be held to account for their impact in the information environment. Social media companies have capitalised on news content shared while hollowing out the industry that produces it. A levy on that revenue to counter the impact on public interest journalism would help address that power imbalance in the interests of the Australian public. ”

- Claire Stuchbery, *Local and Independent News Association*



“ Journalism is a critical service that serves the public. As voters, we employ our elected representatives to run the government on our behalf, and as with all bosses, we have a right to know what they get up to. We've got to recognise that journalism is a part of the way our democracy functions and ensure it is trustworthy, sustainable and properly resourced. ”

- Peter Greste, *Alliance for Journalists' Freedom*



3 Prevent disinformation on social media

Social media has become the main way many Australians consume and share the news and information they need to participate in our democracy. While social media has many benefits, the current system rewards sensationalism, polarisation and speed over accuracy. To protect democracy, we need common-sense standards that make platforms more transparent and accountable – so Australians can trust the information environment they rely on.

In recent years we have witnessed social media becoming a vehicle for disinformation campaigns, including foreign interference in elections. Australians are entitled to know fact from fiction, but many large social media companies like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have removed most content moderation and fact-checking from their platforms.

Australians support the creation of an independent regulator with access to platform data to find the bad actors, clean up information networks people rely on, and block foreign interference in our democracy. This is not about policing opinions or censoring debate. It's about stopping deliberate deception and covert interference so voters can make up their own minds.

Only 13% of Australians think people should be able to say and share whatever they want online, with no limitations

Overall



- People should be able to say and share whatever they want online, with no limitations
- People should be able to express their views and opinions online, however there should be some limitations for misinformation
- There should be consequences for people who deliberately engage in untrue speech online that causes demonstrable harm

More than two-thirds of Australians want more done to stop foreign interference and misinformation campaigns

To what extent would you support or oppose the Australian government establishing an agency that has the power to track and remove foreign interference and disinformation campaigns from social media platforms?

Overall (Total: Support: 67%)



- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support, nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

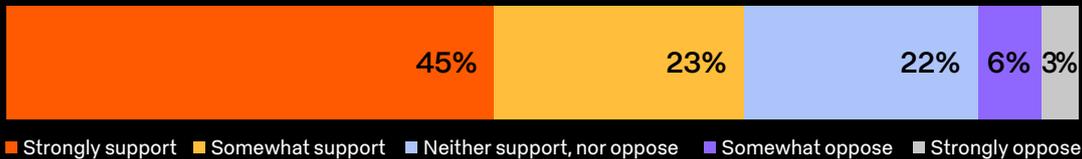


Just like any other big company that impacts our lives, social media companies should have to meet minimum standards about how they operate. They should also pay their fair share of tax. Currently, large social media companies use a range of legal international tax minimisation strategies to pay an average of 1% tax on revenue in Australia.

More than two thirds of Australians want the government to intervene to ensure social media companies are paying enough tax

To what extent would you support or oppose government intervention to ensure that large social media companies pay their fair share of tax in Australia?

Overall (Total: Support: 69%)



“ The spread of misinformation on social media is a feature of the business model rather than a bug. These platforms are built to maximise engagement. And what drives engagement – what keeps people scrolling – is content that provokes a strong emotional reaction. So the goal should be to change the incentive structure that makes misinformation spread so effectively in the first place. To do that, we need strong restrictions that protect privacy and restrict data profiling, genuine algorithmic transparency and an independent regulator with real enforcement powers - not a toothless complaints mechanism, but an institution with access to platform data and the authority to act on it. ”

– Lizzie O'Shea, *Digital Rights Watch*





4 Ensure public money for campaigns is well-spent

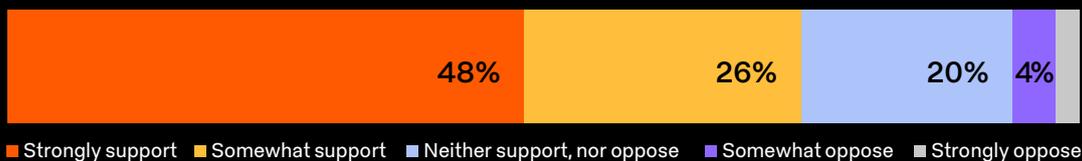
The current electoral funding system sees eligible political parties, candidates and senate groups paid public funds for reimbursement of 'electoral expenditure', alongside any other private donations. Whilst public funding aims to support fairer outcomes for a range of political campaigns and reduce reliance on private donors, there is also little regulation of how this money can be used.

There is strong support for the idea that to receive public funding, parties and candidates should produce a complete policy statement that has been fully costed and lays out the plan for the future. In this way we can shift election campaigning away from short-term political advantage and towards the real long-term issues faced by Australia.

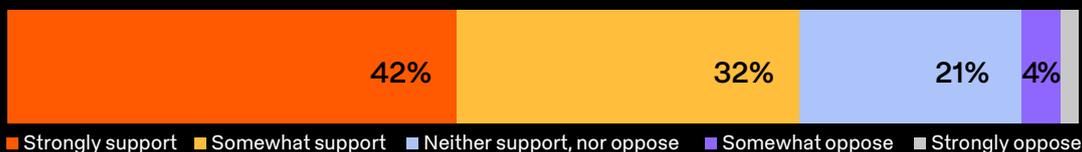
Three quarters of Australians want properly-costed policies and an end to political attack ads being paid for with public money

Currently, many political parties and candidates receive public funding to use for their election campaigns but there are few restrictions on how this funding can be used. To what extent would you support or oppose the following reforms around how political parties and candidates use public funding?

Restrict public funds given to political parties from being used for attack/negative political advertisements (Total: Support: 74%)



Political parties and candidates who receive public funding should be made to produce properly costed policy programs 3 months prior to an election (Total: Support: 74%)



“Public money shouldn't be spent this way. Win by having better policies, not by tearing down the political opponent.” - Research participant



Australians are tired of politics that rewards deception. If parties receive public money to campaign, there should be basic standards that increase transparency. But current political advertising laws allow for individual candidates or political parties to promote misleading or untrue information, as they are not legally obliged to ensure accuracy of their claims in their ads. Such weak political advertising laws threaten fundamental principles of truth, trust and freedom in Australian democracy.

81% of Australians support the introduction of truth-in-political-advertising laws

To what extent would you support or oppose legislation that would require political advertisements to meet standards of truthfulness?

Overall (Total: Support: 81%)



All I can really do is keep myself informed, read the news. I do find that difficult due to the tactics politicians employ through lies and manipulation. If that was made illegal, maybe I could build some trust." - Research participant



5 Limit the revolving door from politics to lobbying

Australia's democracy was built to give ordinary people real power. However, money can buy access to power and rules around lobbying have not kept up with today's reality. This manipulation of politics means decisions become increasingly shaped for private interests.

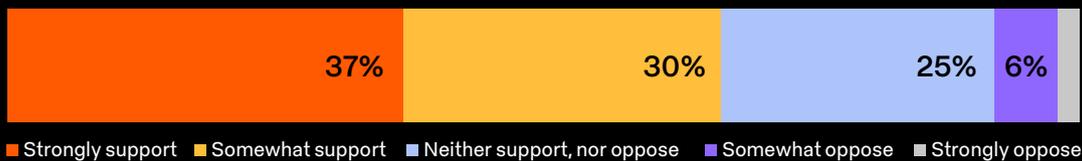
Former ministers from both major parties have become lobbyists for the industries they once regulated. This raises the potential that they may be making decisions favourable to an industry while still in office, because they have their eye on their next job, and exacerbates the belief that politicians are working in their own self-interest rather than working for the greater good. Ultimately, this has the potential to further undermine public confidence and trust in democracy and all politicians.

“It feels like they are after their own interests or the mega-rich and corporations.”
- Research participant

Two thirds of Australians support a 5-year ban on politicians becoming lobbyists

To what extent would you support or oppose a 5-year ban on politicians becoming lobbyists following the end of their political career?

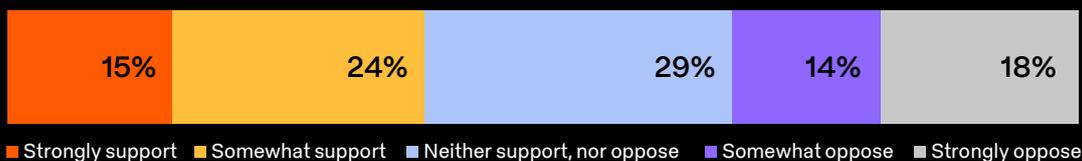
Overall (Total: Support: 67%)



More Australians support than oppose the introduction of a benefit scheme for retired politicians

To what extent would you support or oppose re-introducing the parliamentary pension scheme to discourage and limit politicians from becoming lobbyists after their political career?

Overall (Total: Support: 39%)





“ Around 40 per cent of registered third-party lobbyists previously held political roles. Our current cooling-off rules are 18 months, narrowly enforced, and almost never breached on paper because the code is written so loosely that breaches are barely possible. We need longer cooling-off periods, broader coverage, and an independent regulator with real enforcement powers. The thread connecting all of this is transparency. When the public can see who is funding politicians and who is meeting with ministers, the behaviour changes. Sunlight is still the best disinfectant. ”



- Dr Catherine Williams, Centre for Public Integrity



6 Ensure public service independence

A strong democracy depends on a capable, impartial public service and public sector.

In Australia there is a lack of transparency around senior public service appointments. Recent scandals have further undermined public confidence.

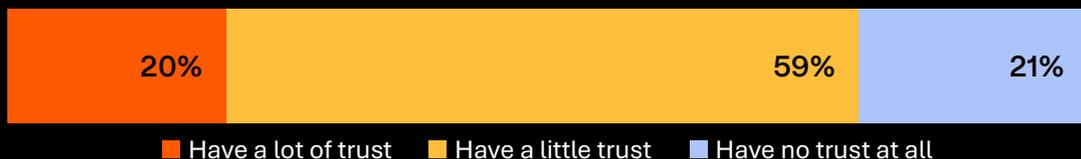
Most Australians agree public servants should be impartial

To what extent do you agree or disagree that public servants should be impartial, without any affiliation to political parties?

Overall (Total: Agree: 68%)



How much trust do you have in the public service to act in the best interests of everyday Australians?



We need a strong public service which commands the confidence of the Australian people. We believe this requires rules around public service appointments to protect its independence and ensure the public service is able to provide frank and fearless advice to the government of the day. Stronger rules and parliamentary oversight must be put in place to ensure there is greater transparency and scrutiny on high-level public service appointments.

With stronger rules, Australians would gain more confidence in the individuals that are being appointed to high-level public service roles. This renewal will ensure that Australians understand that individuals are in senior public service roles because of their qualification and not because of their power, money or connections.

“Impartiality in the public service is essential for maintaining trust and balance ... if advisers are politically affiliated that risks bias, short-term thinking and decisions that favour party interests over the public good.” - Research participant

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Visit www.democracymcounts.org.au to learn more



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