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**ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN AUSTRALIA: CRISIS, RESILIENCE  
AND RENEWAL<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the state of Australian democracy and considers some mechanisms that have been said to have the potential to improve democratic representation.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Viewed from the outside, and especially against a global trend of rising authoritarian populist parties and political forces, and governments opposed to key tenets of liberal democracy, Australia appears as a relatively resilient outlier.

For instance, most democracy assessment indices (although far from perfect as reflections of reality) have not registered any declines for the past decade. The country enjoys extremely high levels of voter enrolment and participation – 96.8 per cent of eligible voters were enrolled for the last federal election, and 91.9 per cent voted. In addition, the tampering with polling, electoral laws, and gerrymandering seen in a range of democratic states worldwide, is not a feature.

That said, a dominant narrative of crisis, paralysis and even decline has taken hold in recent years regarding the deficiencies of Australia’s political system. The federal government and parliament’s public image has been tarnished by a variety of factors including: the increasingly regular ousting and resignation of prime ministers (since 2007 Australia has had six prime ministers, as compared to six prime ministers in the previous 36 years (1971-2007)).

In addition, the composition of parliament still does not reflect the diversity of the Australian community. For example, women remain very underrepresented in parliament: they comprise 36.6 per cent of the federal parliament after the May 2019 elections; and the proportion of women in senior leadership positions in parliament is far lower.

Some polls suggest that public faith in the political system and democracy has plummeted: A broad survey of polling data in December 2018 showed that fewer than 41% of Australian citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia, a stark drop from 86% in 2007.

## **A CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION?**

Australia’s political system is facing similar challenges to many democratic systems worldwide. The political-party system has undergone significant shifts over recent electoral cycles, including declining support for the two mainstream parties (the Liberal-National Party Coalition and Labor), and a rise in support for smaller parties including the nationalist anti-immigrant Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party, the Greens and newer parties such as the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers (SFF) Party.

The most recent data on voting volatility by the Australian National University shows that in 1987, 72% of voters always voted for the same party, but by 2016 that number had dropped to 40%. This voter volatility has translated into a number of minority governments, or governments with only a slim majority, at a federal level since 2010. Before 2010, there hadn’t been a hung parliament followed by the formation of a minority government for almost 70 years.

Further, over the past 12 months, state elections in Victoria in November 2018 handed a landslide victory to the Victorian Labor party – making Daniel Andrews the first premier to win a second term for over a decade (2006). In the March 2019 state elections in New South Wales the sitting Liberal government retained power, albeit in a minority government. In May this year, the incumbent federal Coalition Government defied widespread predictions by pollsters and commentators by retaining government – albeit with only a two seat majority.

Mirroring trends worldwide, the power of parliament is seen as diminishing in recent decades, *vis-à-vis* the executive and external organs (e.g. corporations).

## **OR A CRISIS OF PARTICIPATION?**

Many critics of Australia's political system focus not just on how representative the existing structures are but on the need for a thorough reform of how we manage citizens' capacity to be heard. Increasingly, reformers look beyond parliament for solutions. Beyond voting in elections, there are few avenues for citizens to directly participate in governance – referendums being the main additional mechanism.

Citizens' assemblies, in particular, are increasingly touted worldwide as a way of re-energising public participation in the political process and improving policy itself. Australia has seen a variety of experiments with citizens' assemblies and participatory decision-making in the past decade, from the Citizens' Parliament on strengthening Australia's political system in 2009 to more localised current bodies including the Geelong Citizens' Jury and Melbourne People's Panel.

Australian reformers have also noted the global spread of such bodies, especially in Europe. In Ireland, experiments with deliberative bodies are viewed as key to achieving key constitutional reforms (e.g. introducing marriage equality). A range of assemblies are emerging in the UK, on issues such as climate change and the constitutional future of Scotland.

Perhaps most strikingly, as against the temporary nature of all such experiments worldwide to date (including in non-European states from Canada to Australia to Mongolia), February 2019 saw the world's first permanent Citizen Council established by the Parliament of the German-speaking community in Belgium as a co-equal institution to parliament. This Council will set the agenda and monitor follow-up by elected politicians of the recommendations of a number of citizens' assemblies (comprising 25 citizens each, selected by sortition).

## **THE END OF PARLIAMENT?**

All of these questions prompt reflection on the end of parliament. That is, not the idea that the very *existence* of parliament is under threat, but that its end – its *purpose* – as a technology of representative government needs fundamental re-thinking to respond to multiple contemporary challenges.

Regarding the promise of citizens' assemblies, it is too early to tell whether current experiments will be successful. However, a range of recent analysis gives pause for thought.

Experts on Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, convened from November 2016 to March 2017, and which broke a longstanding political deadlock regarding the vexed issue of abortion reform, voice caution about seeing these bodies as a panacea. They identify multiple deficiencies and

limitations in the operation of the Assembly. Practical shortcomings included difficulties in even securing enough citizens to participate, in the selection processes (which were not quite as random as envisaged) and selection of who would appear before it. More widely, some experts offered that the Assembly itself could not shore up the severe inadequacies of the political system and that its impact as an exercise in wider civic education is open to doubt.

We also need to consider whether these bodies are simply being used as ‘bypass institutions’ to avoid the difficult and overdue work of reforming existing underperforming political structures such as parliament by creating a new body to replicate what, ideally, parliament should do. Without dismissing the value of citizens’ assemblies out of hand, it is worthwhile to ask whether, to some extent, they are little more than institutional sticking plaster. For some, the challenge is how to achieve a good marriage of the two: maximising the potential of citizen participation without overstressing its capacity, or displacing the need for collective organs like parliament.

Like parties, for all we may talk of reform, parliaments are here to stay, in Australia (at both federal and state level) as well as elsewhere. That is all the more reason to seek reform that ensures they can thrive as a truly representative organ worthy of a democratic state.