

'In freefall': Satisfaction with democracy hits new low

SMH 5 December 2018

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Satisfaction with Australian democracy has halved over the past decade and entered “freefall” since 2013, according to a new survey.

During the final year of the Howard government, 85.6 per cent of Australians expressed satisfaction with how Australian democracy was working, according to a report to be released on Wednesday by “Democracy 2025”, a joint initiative between the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House and the University of Canberra’s Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis.

Satisfaction fell sharply - to 72 per cent - in 2010, after the knifing of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister.

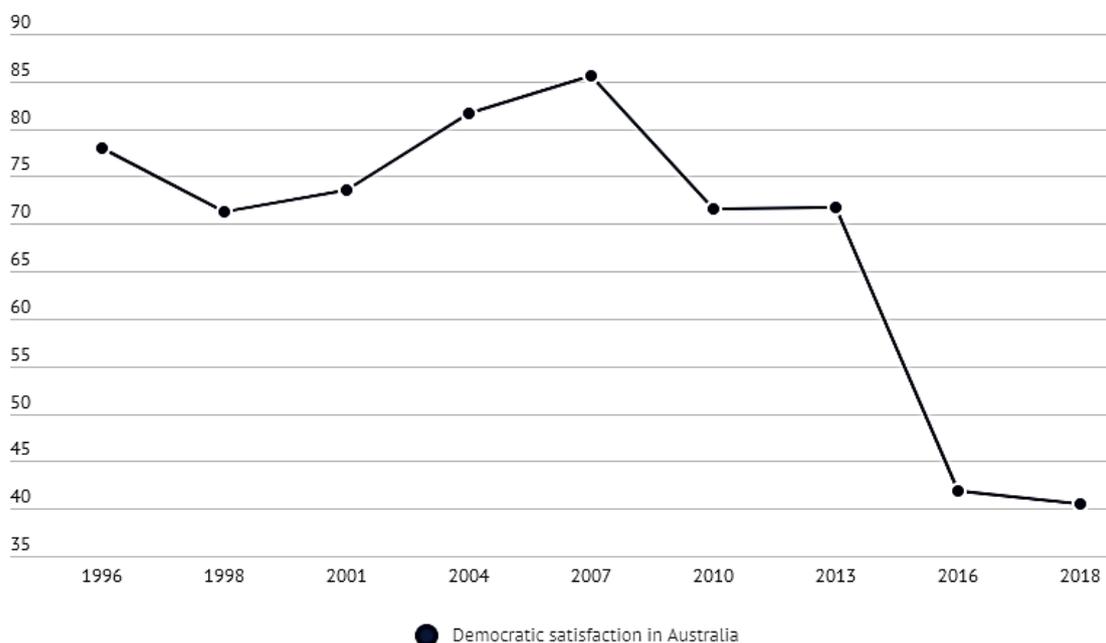
Julia Gillard took over the leadership from Kevin Rudd in 2010 before the latter returned, briefly, to the top job in 2013.

But satisfaction entered a “freefall” between 2013 and 2016, tumbling to 42 per cent, where it has remained in this year’s survey.

"Satisfaction with how democracy works has been in decline since the end of the Howard era in 2007, but has been in freefall since 2013," the report finds.

A decade of democratic decline

Q: How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Australia?



Source: Democracy 2025, "Trust and democracy in Australia", December 2018.

“The majority of Australians dislike conflict-driven politics in Canberra which they perceive to be disconnected from their everyday lives.

"We continue to find compelling evidence of an increasing trust divide between government and citizens reflected in the decline of democratic satisfaction, receding trust in politicians, political parties and other key institutions (especially media) and lack of public confidence in the capacity of government to address public policy concerns."

This year's survey was conducted by Ipsos in July, amid rumours of a Liberal Party leadership spill, which would ultimately depose Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister the following month.



Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the man he replaced in the top job in August, Malcolm Turnbull. CREDIT: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

“This problem must be addressed as a matter of urgency,” according to Daryl Karp, the director of the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House, which recently took custody of Julie Bishop’s red high heels.

“By 2025 if nothing is done and current trends continue, fewer than 10 per cent of Australians will trust their politicians and political institutions – resulting in ineffective and illegitimate government, and declining social and economic wellbeing.”

Distrust of politicians is also feeding lower levels of "social trust", the survey finds. "There appears to be a significant relationship emerging between declining political and social trust."

When asked, 77 per cent of Australians agree or strongly agree that "people mostly look out for themselves". However, 63 per cent also think "most of the time people try to be helpful".

Women are most pessimistic about the state of Australian democracy, with only 38 per cent satisfied. “Sexism is viewed to be most prevalent in politics,” compared to other spheres of life, the report finds.

Baby boomers are the most satisfied with democracy (50 per cent) with Generation X the least satisfied (31 per cent).

High-income earners and immigrants are united in feeling more satisfied about democracy.

“Those born overseas tend to be more satisfied with Australian politics than native born,” the report finds. “They see Australian democracy as a sanctuary and are excited at the prospect of a new life.”

Internationally, Australians emerge as some of the most dissatisfied in the developed world with the state of their democracy.

A Pew Research Centre survey in 2017 found 70 per cent of Canadians, Swiss, Dutch and German citizens were satisfied with their democracy.

Even in the wake of the Brexit referendum, United Kingdom citizens reported higher levels of satisfaction with democracy (50 per cent) as did United States citizens in the wake of the election of Donald Trump (46 per cent).

Of developed nations surveyed, only the French (34 per cent), Italians (31 per cent), Spanish (25 per cent) and Greeks (21 per cent) were more dissatisfied than Australians.

When asked to nominate their biggest grievances with the system, respondents said first that politicians “are not accountable for broken promises, second that politicians “don’t deal with the issues that really matter” and third that “big business has too much power”. On the last point, Coalition voters were more likely to identify trade unions as having too much power.

When asked what they like about Australian democracy, respondents said first that Australia has provided “good education, health, welfare and other public services”, secondly that Australia has “a good economy and lifestyle” and third that “elections are free and fair”.

Top reforms selected by respondents included: limiting political donations, a right for voters to recall ineffective local MPs, a free vote for all MPs in Parliament, more co-designing of policies with “ordinary Australians” and more use of “citizen juries”.

The report will be launched in Canberra on Wednesday.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/in-freefall-satisfaction-with-democracy-hits-new-low-20181204-p50k4d.html>