

AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP
CONFERENCE 2018

Trust and Political Behaviour

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Paper presented at the ASPG Conference held 18-20 July 2018 in Brisbane, Queensland

Decline in Trust

Trust is the most important asset in politics. Trust can generate community and business confidence, leading to economic growth and improved political success for an incumbent government. The more a government is trusted, the more people and business will generally spend and invest, boosting the economy. People are also more likely to pay their taxes and comply with regulations if they trust government. Trust promotes a social environment of optimism, cohesion and national prosperity.

When trust is lost, it is difficult to win back. Where it is eroded, a general malaise can develop that is destructive to the essential fabric of society and operation of democracy. Unfortunately, in Australia and internationally, there has been a growing erosion of trust in politicians and in politics. People are losing trust in institutions including governments, charities, churches, media outlets and big businesses. In a recent Essential Poll (Essential Report, 2017) 45% of those surveyed said they had no trust in political parties, 29% had no trust in state parliaments and 32% had no trust in federal parliament.

Since 1969, when Australians were first surveyed about their trust in politicians, the proportion of voters saying government in Australia could be trusted has fallen from 51% to just 26% in 2016, while the number of voters who believe 'people in government look after themselves' has increased from 49% to 75% (Cameron & McAllister, 2017). Australians increasingly believe politicians do not make decisions in the public's best interests, but instead favour their own agendas and self-interest.

Levels of trust in government vary around the world. Trust is generally high in Nordic countries and Germany, and low in other established democracies. Analysing global political trust is difficult, as illiberal regimes such as Uzbekistan, China, Azerbaijan, Qatar, Singapore, Indonesia & Malaysia score surprisingly high on levels of trust. This may be because public dissent is more dangerous in these countries or due to high economic growth. Generally, democratic regimes are judged on democratic principles, especially levels of corruption (van der Meer, 2017).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi leads one of the most trusted governments in the world, with almost three quarters of Indians saying they have confidence in their national government. Switzerland and Indonesia also enjoy high levels of trust in their government at 82%. This compares to only one third of Americans and 43% of Australians (Gray, 2017).

Since 2010, there has been a considerable decline in the popularity of both major parties and the party system in Australia. The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer showed Australians' average trust in government fell to 35% in 2018 from 45% in 2016, a fall of 10%, similar to Russia and Canada (Edelman, 2018). The proportion of voters who consistently vote for the same party has declined to its lowest level to date (Cameron & McAllister, 2017). This suggests people are making more conscious decisions when voting for the person or party they want representing them.

When trust in established political parties is damaged, new unknown and untried political parties can emerge. If people distrust the system they may embrace

charismatic leaders or protest parties, potentially leading to increased political instability. We have seen this in the conservative political arena in Australia. Pauline Hanson's One Nation, Cory Bernardi's Australian Conservatives and Dick Smith's Sustainable Australia have evolved and become more popular, largely due to widely shared public disillusionment with traditional political parties. Members of these new parties argue the traditional alternatives no longer represent their views and are unduly influenced by big business (especially mining and property development), unions and overseas interests. People have lost trust in conventional governments acting in their long term best interests, and seek alternatives that better represent their views and beliefs.

Italy is another good example. Recent world events including refugee crises have had a large impact and many Italians have become sceptical of their relationship with the European Union, especially rules forcing open borders. The resultant unregulated immigration has cost Italy financially while many Italians have continued to struggle since the Global Economic Crisis. This has contributed to a lack of trust in government and paved the way for a newly elected Italian government full of eurosceptics who are carefully listening to popular sentiment, a scenario which may become increasingly more common throughout the democratic world.

President Trump won the U.S. presidential election by appealing to widespread disillusionment with conventional politics and telling people they could trust him due to his patriotism and apparent success. However, Americans are losing trust in his ability to tell the truth about what is happening in government, with U.S. average trust in government currently at 33% (Edelman, 2018).

The UK's separation from the EU, popularly known as Brexit, was also influenced by low levels of trust in government. Many UK citizens no longer trusted the EU parliament to make decisions on their behalf. They wanted to take back control of government. Brexit may be a costly decision, but many in the UK believe it will better serve their future interests.

Influences on Trust

Public perceptions of trust are influenced by:

1. Parliamentary and other institutional frameworks, which can provide protections and encourage an environment conducive to building trust.
2. People's socialisation and public mindset.
3. The actual behaviour of politicians.

Each of these three factors influences each other and the overall systemic level of trust in politics. This paper examines each of them, particularly focusing on the third, with examples from federal, state and local government.

Institutional Protections

The first of the three main factors that influence trust in politics are parliamentary and other institutional frameworks. Strong checks and balances that allow for public involvement and scrutiny need to be enforced by parliaments to counter potentially undue influence by wealthy individuals, big business, unions and foreign interests.

If the public loses trust in individual politicians or political parties, their residual trust in political institutions such as parliaments will generally enable a democracy to continue to reasonably operate. Parliaments provide an environment for building trust. They do this through their transparent, accountable and ethical processes that mitigate the risk of inappropriate behaviour of politicians and parties within the parliamentary system.

Relevant institutional protections include anti-corruption laws, fundraising or donation laws, regulation of lobbyists, open government measures, as well as accountability oversight by Ombudsmen, Auditor-Generals, anti-corruption bodies and parliamentary committees. Such measures were covered in considerable detail in my 2016 ASPG conference paper (O'Dea, 2016) that highlighted areas where institutional protections at a parliamentary level should be reinforced through reform to increase trust. Recommendations included a federal ICAC, fixed election cycles, tighter and more consistent donation laws, improved parliamentary processes and greater public expenditure transparency.

Sometimes trust in institutions relies on effective communication. When media outlets do not publish confidence-inspiring information, more 'newsworthy' but potentially damaging information or events may dominate the news and erode trust. Parliaments arguably should become more proactive in their dissemination of trust-promoting information to the public and not rely on traditional media support.

Late last year the NSW government reiterated its commitment to transparency by embracing new technology to empower people with accurate information. It introduced a draft Model Code of Meeting Practice, which was recently open for consultation with the local government sector. It focuses on improving transparency and public involvement in council meetings and the decision-making process, by proposing mandatory webcasting of ordinary meetings by all NSW Councils. The NSW Parliament currently webcasts all parliamentary sittings, but this could extend to web/podcasting of committee hearings to help increase community confidence in elected representatives.

Public Mindset & Socialisation Influences

Individual and group perceptions of public figures and institutions have significant influences on political trust. Every individual has a unique combination of cultural, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, with varied life experiences that shape their attitudes towards politicians and political institutions.

In the Australian context, it seems urban dwellers, religious people, professionals and managers, highly educated people, males, as well as those with a higher self-perceived socio-economic status all express greater trust in MPs and public officials (Huang, 2012). Interestingly, individuals with larger social networks tend to have lower levels of political trust, believing the treatment people receive from public officials depends on who they know.

A majority of Australians believe elected politicians have low and declining ethical standards of honesty and integrity. Museum of Australian Democracy and Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis surveys found those who identified with the political right-wing, the politically engaged and those who spoke a language other than English were substantially more likely to assess elected politicians' ethical standards as high (Evans, Halupka & Stoker, 2017). However, older Australians and those on a low income were more likely to rate their standards as low. Younger people, those aligned with the political left, Indigenous people and those who speak a language other than English were also significantly more likely to say these standards are improving (Evans, Halupka & Stoker, 2017).

A lack of parliamentary representation from traditionally under-represented groups continues to contribute to an erosion of trust in politicians. The fact that women, young people and people from diverse cultures are not well represented in parliament has been another top reason cited by Australians for the steady decline in citizen trust in governments since 2007 (Evans, Halupka & Stoker, 2017).

In a modern democracy, citizens play an important role in scrutinising the actors and mechanisms of government. Political awareness, healthy scepticism and sensible critique of decisions are all traits that strengthen representative democracy. However a more dangerous cynical malaise of disengagement and active hostility towards politicians and the political system increasingly characterises the public arena.

There are a number of external economic factors that also affect levels of trust in politicians and governments worldwide. As a general rule, trust increases with better

property rights, more extensive labour market regulations, lower levels of corruption, higher levels of education and income, and lower unemployment. India, China and Indonesia all enjoy high levels of trust in government. They also share a trending reduction in poverty levels and a rapidly expanding middle class. They believe their lives are getting better as governments are responding well to their needs.

Australia has a highly educated population with solid property rights, extensive labour market regulations, comparatively low levels of perceived corruption, low unemployment rates and relatively high incomes and growth prospects. Yet trust in politicians and government is low. Why? It could be because of perceived cost of living issues in Australia. The inability to buy a house, the high cost of electricity, wage stagnation, property sales to foreign owned entities, limited employment opportunities for young people and financial difficulties for self-funded retirees all contribute to lifestyle challenges and potentially a lack of trust in government. People question whether the government is listening to them.

Political Behaviour

In the digital age of instant gratification and denigration, it is tempting for politicians to pursue short term and minor wins over more substantial long term strategic governance plans. The 24/7 media cycle constantly demands new content for publication. An absence of policy announcements may be viewed as government inaction. However, many of Australia's problems are complex and multifaceted and cannot be solved by politicians expressing a thought bubble in less than 280 characters. They require intelligent, sober analysis and patient perseverance.

Despite the seductive appeal of a short term media focus, a lack of serious policy discussion and thoughtful, collaborative action ultimately undermines public trust in politicians to deliver.

This dynamic is further complicated by the age-old attraction of masking a lack of substance with bravado and a lack of direction with spin. Some would argue Donald Trump has epitomised this art with his campaign slogan, 'Make America Great Again' and unconventional leadership. Trump's celebrity and political rise capitalised on a mounting sense of public alienation from the 'Washington elites' and disengagement from highly polarised media outlets. This populist phenomenon serves as an omen for democracies that do not enjoy the trust of their citizens.

The influence of social media on political trust cannot be understated. 'Fake news' investigations have revealed that Russian automated social media accounts spread misinformation to up to 126 million Americans on Facebook both during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Solon & Levin, 2017). There is likewise a growing threat of players attempting to manipulate Australian elections and destabilise our democracy through microtargeting voters with emotional messages on social media (Miller, 2018).

In March 2018 it was revealed the data analytics firm used in both Brexit and Trump's election campaign, Cambridge Analytica, harvested millions of Facebook profiles of U.S. voters. They then used this data to build a software program to predict and influence voter behaviour. This allowed the development of a marketing

campaign which could identify swinging voters, target them and ultimately send messages which resonated with them (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).

Former Facebook executive, Chamath Palihapitiya, recently said, “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works: no civil discourse, no co-operation, misinformation, mistruth” (Wang, 2017). The paradox of the digital age is that people have access to more information than ever before in human history, yet are more entrenched in their opinions (Coombes, 2017).

The very structure and engineering of social media platforms can often reward misleading or inconsequential viewpoints to the detriment of other reasoned perspectives. 52% of Australians indicate that they get some of their news through social media and a growing 17% say that social media is their main source of news. However there is discord between the method of news consumption and trust, as only 24% of Australians think they can trust social media news most of the time (Liddy, 2018).

People who consume a lot of media often trust government less than those who use media less or not at all (Pietsch & Martin, 2011). This is a particularly challenging environment for the promotion of political trust. Yet it remains vital to communicate the integrity and vision of politicians for contemporary politics to successfully address the complex issues of modern society. The most effective way to accomplish this is for politicians and parliaments to effectively work with the media to deliver positive key messages to the electorate.

Brexit promised a similar refrain to Trump, 'Take Back Control', as well as controversial 'Leave' bus advertisements pledging to fund the NHS with the £350 million allegedly otherwise sent to the EU. After an apparent failure to deliver the funds promised for the NHS, those within the 'Leave' camp, including Foreign Minister Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, later disowned their words by insisting it was "wilful distortion" to interpret their advertisement as promising to give £350 million to the NHS and said they couldn't guarantee the funds would be allocated to public health (McCann, 2016, Lichfield, 2017). In the wake of this and struggling EU negotiations, dissatisfaction within both the 'Remain' and 'Leave' camps continues to grow, sowing political mistrust and uncertainty amongst British voters (Matthews-King, 2017). Though exaggerated promises and overblown rhetoric can quickly capture public imagination and turn the tide of opinion polls, the truth generally prevails in the long run.

Australians believe the rise of the career politician has also contributed to the steady decline in citizen trust in government since 2007 (Evans, Halupka & Stoker, 2017). Work experience outside of the political realm educates aspiring politicians in public social norms and values, and exposes them to differing points of view. The echo chambers of ministerial and political offices, unions and party rooms often reinforce preconceived beliefs and can discourage robust discussion. It is therefore important politicians possess varied life and work experiences. A more inclusive and democratic candidate selection process might encourage preselection of more diverse, well-rounded political candidates that truly represent the communities they

live in, and who are committed to acting in the best interests of their constituents over themselves.

Examples of Behavioural Characteristics

Some attitudes and behaviours of politicians threaten to undermine the community's trust in them and parliaments. Desired behavioural characteristics that engender and cultivate public trust include: acting with integrity and honesty, demonstrating openness and transparency, delivering competent and fair performance, and collaborating in the public interest.

This paper will now examine the importance of these types of behaviours in building trust, with reference to recent Australian political history.

Acting with Integrity and Honesty

Personal integrity is vital for the modern public figure. The essence of integrity is staying true to one's promises, values and beliefs, even under mounting pressure to capitulate.

The perceived loss of integrity suffered by former Prime Minister Julia Gillard over the carbon pricing issue severely impacted Australians' trust in her leadership and irrevocably damaged her political standing. Then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott and conservative media outlets unearthed a damning 2010 pre-election press conference where she had emphatically declared, "There'll be no carbon tax under the

Government I lead” (Sydney Morning Herald, 2010). From an initial explanation that it was “effectively like a tax”, to her admission that it was indeed a “carbon tax”, public support for the scheme eroded from 43% at the time of her election to 34% by the time of implementation (Crosby, 2016).

Abbott gained cut-through to the Australian public with a simple slogan, “She lied”, and Gillard was dubbed ‘Juliar’ by radio shock jock Alan Jones. The damage to her reputation contributed to her downfall and replacement by Kevin Rudd in June 2013. Economist Ross Gittins (2011) summarised the events fracturing public trust: “If ever there was a case where the quest for personal, commercial and party advantage is damaging our trust in politicians and the media, it’s the unending brawling over the carbon tax.”

Abbott then inflicted self-damage once he became Prime Minister by breaking his election promises to reduce the national deficit with “no cuts to education, no cuts to health, no change to pensions, no change to the GST” and “no cuts to the ABC or SBS” (SBS, 2014). The first Hockey-Abbott budget decreased spending for education, health, pensions, the ABC and SBS, and proposed GST changes. This generated a strong public backlash (Crosby, 2016). In 2014, the Edelman Australia Trust Barometer dropped from 56% at the time of Abbott’s election to 49% after the budget, the third largest decline of trust in government in the world that year.

The public questions the integrity of politicians who trigger by-elections during a parliamentary term without sufficient justification. In that respect, State Premiers should help establish appropriate behavioural standards. Former NSW Premiers

Mike Baird and Kristina Keneally resigned from Parliament upon losing their leadership positions. This caused costly and inconvenient mid-term by-elections in their seats, arguably breaching commitments to constituents and diminishing public trust. In contrast, former Premiers Barry O'Farrell and Nathan Rees completed their terms as Members of Parliament after they lost the NSW leadership. Their approach better reflects the integrity of politicians honouring an election commitment to serve a local electorate.

Politicians are empowered to make decisions in the best interests of the public and it is crucial that governance is not corrupted by undue influences. While bad behaviour is certainly not the preserve of any particular political party, the corruption headlines surrounding the behaviour of former NSW Labor Ministers, especially Eddie Obeid and Ian McDonald, had a devastating effect on trust levels in NSW politics.

Obeid, a NSW Upper House member, used his factional leadership power to guide policy, fundraise, and control pre-selections and MP promotions to the frontbench. Diary entries by Obeid presented to the ICAC hearings showed a revolving door of developers, union bosses, and business figures meeting with him.

Obeid was shown to have influenced the State Maritime Authority over Circular Quay leases without revealing his family interests in a number of these leases. Consequently Obeid was sentenced to five years jail for misconduct in public office. The public was justifiably angry at his advancing private business dealings through his parliamentary position, but some trust in the parliamentary system was restored when he received a jail sentence.

In March 2017 former Minister Ian McDonald was found guilty of criminal misconduct and sentenced to 10 years jail over his decision to grant a mining licence to a company run by a former union boss. McDonald, Obeid (and his son) have all also been charged with conspiracy over their alleged involvement in this coal deal. The hearing is set for March 2019 and is predicted to take 6 months.

Corruption has potentially dire effects on public trust, and politicians must strive to always act with integrity, consistent with strong public expectations of accountability and honesty.

Demonstrating Openness and Transparency

Politicians should be inclusive and sincere. They are elected in good faith and should act openly to retain trust. A positive example of this was when then NSW Premier Mike Baird went to the 2015 election with a plan to divest electricity infrastructure and use the proceeds to improve transport, health, education and other government services and infrastructure. He was honest and upfront about the government's intention and the electorate rewarded him by re-electing the Coalition government, despite the unpopularity of the long term lease of the 'poles and wires'.

However, when Mike Baird unexpectedly banned greyhound racing in NSW he was not as open in indicating the government's intention before announcing a decision. In response, the electorate was not kind and this decision led many in NSW, including

some in his own government, to lose trust in him. As the saying goes, “trust takes years to earn, seconds to break and forever to repair”.

Information should be disseminated through both traditional and online media to convey justifications for multibillion dollar government decisions, especially in light of competing priorities. It is also important for politicians to be inclusive. They should to listen to, and represent, the diversity of people and views within their electorates. Actively listening to community views and genuinely engaging with the public generally leads to higher levels of trust and goodwill, and enables politicians to discern policies more likely to achieve positive outcomes for a broader cross-section of the community.

Consensus conferencing or citizens’ juries are examples of intensive public engagement strategies that invest significant resources into representative groups of citizens reaching a deliberated outcome. It is not always practicable or necessary to use such mechanisms, but a transparent process can help to consider complex issues affecting a particular community.

As Chair of the NSW Public Accounts Committee in 2012, I led an inquiry into the Economics of Energy Generation. As part of this inquiry the Committee accepted a proposal from newDemocracy to use deliberative democracy processes as part of the Committee’s stakeholder engagement.

The Committee collaborated with the newDemocracy Foundation to run citizens’ policy juries comprising randomly selected voters. They heard evidence from

experts, deliberated and made findings which were incorporated into the Committee's final report to Parliament. The citizens' jury findings valuably informed the Committee of the public's educated views on different types of energy generation and other aspects of managing electricity, including demand management initiatives.

Other parliamentary committees could incorporate this type of deliberative process into future inquiries and encourage citizens to be more active in the decision-making process. Using citizens' juries in committee proceedings allows groups of citizens to constructively work together by engaging with policy experts and legislators to learn, innovate and recommend solutions both from and for their communities.

In 2016 newDemocracy oversaw a large public deliberation in South Australia (SA) on nuclear waste storage, encouraging non-government organisations or businesses to work with Government and the community to consider policy issues. Two thirds of the citizens' jury rejected the Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission's finding and refused SA storage of high-level nuclear waste "under any circumstances". The Premier subsequently abandoned the proposal in June 2017. This behaviour engendered trust by including the public in the decision-making process and delivering on their preferred outcome.

Genuine public engagement allows a clear representation of wider community views, above the partisan views of those with vested interests. Inclusion is integral to the success of generating public trust in politicians. One way to promote this is through blockchain technologies, which are increasingly being touted as efficient, safe and revolutionary in their ability to securely register and store votes. Some argue the

introduction of this technology will enable citizens to enjoy a more interactive relationship with their parliaments and potentially allow the public to digitally vote on individual Bills.

This might be democratically progressive, but certain risks warrant careful consideration within the parliamentary framework. For example, it may lead to budget overexpenditure and selective interest groups might unduly generate vote swaying via social media, direct email communication and vote trading.

More conscience votes of parliamentarians could be guided by a popular vote, as occurred with the same sex marriage plebiscite. These types of votes could be administered with the use of blockchain voting. If everyone was able to participate in conscience votes, maybe trust in government would increase overall.

Delivering Competent and Fair Performance

It is essential for politicians to demonstrate they can deliver under pressure, through competent and fair performance. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan's economic management during the Global Financial Crisis is a good example. After the global downturn from December 2008, a \$10.4 billion stimulus package was introduced, which included cash handouts for eligible Australian individuals, and a second stimulus package of \$41.5 billion occurred in February 2009.

Nobel Prize winner and former World Bank Chief Economist, Joseph Stiglitz, commended Australia on the size, design, timing and distribution of the stimulus packages (Crosby, 2016). Australia was the only advanced economy to not experience a technical recession during the tumultuous global upheaval, in part due to the Government's apparently competent financial management. This increased the public's trust in the Government's leadership, and partly explains Rudd's popularity at the time.

The current NSW Berejiklian Government practises sound economic management (Nicholls, 2011). In April 2018, the CommSec State of the States report ranked NSW in first place for the 15th consecutive quarter, having inherited a ranking from NSW Labor of last place of all the states and territories. Competent economic management demonstrates the Government's commitment to the well-being of NSW citizens, which is reciprocated through a higher level of trust in the government.

Fairness and delivering on promises is vital for trust. The NSW solar scheme implemented by the NSW Labor Government in 2010 was unsustainable and heavily criticised by the NSW Auditor General as financially irresponsible and subject to cross subsidies. The way the scheme was handled by the new O'Farrell Government in 2011 honoured the promised policy despite pressure to scale it back. Many NSW residents had made a large financial commitment to purchase solar panels under the scheme and the Government recognised the faith many people placed in the policy. The new government met the prior government's commitment to those who had already signed up, but reduced potential benefits for those who entered new

contracts. This fairly allowed more people to pursue solar solutions and responsibly managed the future of the industry, while not retrospectively removing rights.

Collaborating in the Public Interest

An effective government is underpinned by collaboration at all levels of the political system. Co-operation across the political spectrum and alignment between different levels of government generally leads to effective policy outcomes. When the public observes politicians from all backgrounds dealing with each other in good faith on key issues, they are more inclined to trust the democratic workings of government and politicians themselves.

The recently formed Board of Treasurers formed across all states and territories signifies a collaborative approach to Australia's financial management. The inaugural meeting held in November 2017 discussed productivity reforms, health and education funding and the States' relationship with the Commonwealth. This federalist group promotes constructive dialogue between states and territories and with the federal government. The Board should help improve the quality of decision-making by respective treasuries across Australia and increase the level of public trust.

There has also been a strong partnership between federal and state governments during the transition to the new model of disability services delivery, with the National Disability Insurance Agency and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). NSW was the first state to sign up to the NDIS and more than 85,000 people in NSW are

now benefitting from the scheme, with capacity for up to 140,000 people when fully operational. Comprehensive planning and ongoing collaboration between different levels of government assists a successful transition to individualised NDIS funding packages. Ultimately, the aim of delivering well-informed, integrated care for people with disabilities and support for their families and carers will be better served through a coordinated process.

Although it may take longer and use extra resources to reach consensus decisions using collaborative methods, the public are more likely to appreciate politicians' coordinated efforts to reach robust solutions and trust them to govern well. So collaboration can be a key attribute of a trustworthy politician.

Conclusion

The decline of trust in parliaments, politics and politicians is worth serious consideration. Though institutions and the public's experiences and perceptions play a large role in this decline, the attitudes and behaviours of politicians themselves ultimately underpin the fabric of trust between people and government. Model politicians exhibit trust-building behaviours of acting with integrity and honesty, demonstrating openness and transparency, delivering fair and competent performance and collaborating in the public interest.

By acting in a trustworthy manner, politicians can show the Australian public they are fit to govern, legislate and represent the best interests of the public. Parliaments also play an important part in engendering trust by passing measures to foster economic

prosperity, address governance risks and fairly assist disadvantaged people. To regain the trust, confidence and respect of the community, we need demonstrated action and changes in behaviour that resonate with grassroots community members. If Australian politicians and parliaments increasingly adopt these behaviours, a consequent rise in political trust should strengthen the social fabric of society and promote our progress as a nation.

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