

**DISTRUSTFUL, DISENCHANTED,
DISENGAGED CITIZENS:
ARE AUSTRALIANS AND EXCEPTION?**

Leigh Gollop

School of Political and International Studies

Flinders University, Adelaide

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Please email any comments to author at lgollop@ozemail.com.au

Abstract:

Research has revealed a worrying level of political alienation of citizens from their governments in most western liberal democracies in the last few decades, particularly in English speaking nations. In Australia, however, there is still dispute as to whether the same degree of alienation exists here. There is a wide variation in opinion. Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, who bases his assessment on qualitative research, says the level of cynicism in the electorate has reached such a pitch that 'it might require some redefinition of our political institutions'. On the other hand, political scientist, Murray Goot, relying on quantitative data concludes that 'the extent of discontent has been exaggerated' and claims that there has been 'a serious erosion of public confidence in democratic and representative institutions... is a difficult to sustain'. This paper argues the sparseness of the data on political attitudes from all sources in Australia -- both quantitative and qualitative -- and the potential for error inherent in their collection and interpretation means that a researcher would be unwise to ignore any source of credible evidence in trying to reach a conclusion. Therefore an 'omnibus' approach is adopted in researching the level of political alienation which takes into account not only quantitative and qualitative evidence but also anecdotal evidence from long serving politicians and seasoned political journalists as well as declining support for the major political parties. When this done, the balance of the evidence supports Mackay's claim that thought needs to be given to reforming our political institutions to counter a corrosive level of political alienation.

Introduction

The successful “no” campaign in the Australian republic referendum used two slogans to considerable effect: “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it” and “don’t vote for the politician’s republic”. The fact that there is an underlying paradox in harnessing together these two slogans does not seem to have undermined their persuasive power. The first slogan, no doubt, was designed to tap into the innate conservatism in the electorate which has seen the people reject 80 per cent of the referendums put to them since federation (Uhr 2000, p.194). However, as well as raising the spectre of change, it also implied that no change was necessary: all is well with our political system and it should not be tinkered with. On the other hand, to exhort the people ‘not to vote for the politicians’ republic’ seems to imply just the opposite. The slogan, and the anti-republic argument it encapsulates, draws its potency from the perceived disdain the Australian people feel for politicians and their unwillingness to cede them more power. Here is the paradox: if politicians who are the primary actors in our political system are held in such low esteem that merely linking their name with the republic is enough to help sink it, doesn’t this raise wider questions about the continuing health of the political system itself? Perhaps it does need fixing after all, and the institutional changes required extend far beyond making an Australian our head of state, even a directly-elected one?

Nevertheless, though the body politic like the physical body is prone to disease, in both cases major surgery should be avoided if there is a reasonable chance of recovery without it. Any operation carries with it the risk of unintended and unforeseeable consequences.¹ Thus, the question of whether our political system—or elements of it—are in fact ‘broke’ or in danger of breaking without radical surgery is one that requires careful deliberation and diagnosis before any action is contemplated. Such deliberation must include consideration of this major theme of the referendum campaign—the public distrust of and disdain for politicians and even politics itself. Is this, as many overseas researchers believe, a growing phenomenon in advanced democracies, including Australia, that could threaten the stability of our political system and which needs to be addressed urgently?

In Australia there is a wide divergence of opinion on the answer to this question among leading researchers in this field. Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, who bases his assessment on qualitative research, says the level of cynicism in the electorate has reached such a pitch that "it might require some redefinition of our political institutions (Mackay 1993, p.169)." On the other hand, political scientist, Murray Goot, relying on quantitative data concludes that ‘the extent of discontent has been exaggerated’ and claims that there has been "a serious

¹The warning about avoiding unnecessary political change was perhaps most eloquently put by Burke: “[B]y this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the Commonwealth would be broken. No generation could link with another. Men would become little better than flies in Summer” Burke 1905). Long before Burke, Aristotle wrote that constitutional reform was inherently dangerous because it unsettled the polity, disturbed existing relationships, and creates unanticipated consequences (Book V, pp. 178-228).

erosion of public confidence in democratic and representative institutions... is a difficult to sustain(Goot 2002), p.43).” Long-serving politicians and seasoned political observers tend to support Mackay's view about the extent of cynicism about politics in the electorate, though not necessarily his opinion that this could require some redefinition of our political institutions. On the other hand, mainstream academic opinion in Australia tends to favour Goot's view that Australia is somehow insulated from this worldwide democratic malaise.

What evidence do we have?

The purpose of this paper is to review the quantitative and qualitative evidence supporting these competing views to try and provide a balanced assessment which will point to the probable truth of the matter. I will also be taking into account the opinions of long serving politicians and seasoned political observers, which I believe should be given some weight in the debate. Politicians, generally speaking, have no vested interest in acknowledging that they are less loved by the public than their counterparts in the past or that the political system of which they are the contemporary stewards is in trouble. Also, some of the politicians whose opinions I quote below have been political actors for longer than authoritative quantitative or qualitative data has been collected and available for academic analysis in this country. As politicians, they do have a vested interest in monitoring the mood of the electorate, and their opinions are based on their perception of what the people were thinking 30 years ago or more ago when they (the politicians) first entered politics and what the people are thinking now. The same point applies to some of our senior political journalists who make their living from observing politics, and in some cases have been doing so for an equally long period. Their views also deserve serious consideration.

The need to take all available evidence into account before trying to reach a conclusion on this important question is all more essential in the Australian situation because of the relative paucity of both quantitative and qualitative data available for analysis in this country, and the relatively short timeframe it covers compared with comparable advanced democracies, particularly the United States. There are also the problems inherent in the collection of data -- both quantitative and qualitative -- which make such evidence less reliable than it might seem on the face of it. It would be useful, therefore, to be able to give some weight to overseas data which is much more extensive and covers a much longer timeframe. Some academics would argue that evidence that political systems are in trouble in comparable democracies overseas cannot be given much or any weight in analysing the situation in Australia because of 'Australian exceptionalism' relating to differences in our political institutions and the character of our people. While having some sympathy for this view, I believe that it has been considerably overstated for reasons I outline below. Overseas data cannot, obviously, be extrapolated unquestioningly into the Australian situation, but I believe it should be given some weight, and proponents of Australian exceptionalism cannot merely claim that Australia is different. They have a case to prove, too.

Nobody loves a politician

First, it must be conceded that Australians have never been noted for their deference to authority figures, particularly politicians. (Headon 1998) p.83) has argued that a review of Australian social and political history for the last 150 years make it "difficult to avoid the conclusion that Australians have always

looked with either bemusement, apathy or the keen eye of disapproval at their political representatives—and politics in general.” Historian, Stuart Macintyre, also notes that at the time of Australian federation, “[i]n the populist rhetoric that was so powerful, politics was a process of ignoble and divisive self-interest, the politician a professional placeman (Macintyre 1998), p.11). Not too much significance should be read into these comments, however. Politicians have been the butt of criticism and ridicule since time immemorial, and not only in Australia.

Plato may have had Socrates refer to ‘the noble art of politics’ but Aristotle thought the politicians of his day were venal, and Cicero considered his colleagues (if not himself) inconstant. Long before the breed evolved into its modern form Shakespeare was raising a wry smile if not a laugh with the lines, “Get thee glass eyes; and like a scurvy politician seem to see things thou dost not.” More cruelly, the American poet, e. e. cummings wrote three and a half centuries later, “A politician is an arse upon which everyone has sat except a man.” There is evidence that nearly half of Americans may well have agreed with cummings. At a time when the United States was ruled by one of its most revered presidents—Franklin Delano Roosevelt—48 percent of respondents in a national opinion poll agreed with the statement, “It is almost impossible for a man to stay honest if he goes into politics (Ladd and Bowman 1998).”

Thus, to say that the people have always been prone to say unkind things about their politicians is to say not very much at all. The peasants will always find a way of pricking the pomposity of their putative masters which is why political satire is as old as politics itself. And to argue, as some commentators do that disrespect for our leaders is a peculiarly Australian trait is problematic to say the

least. If we accept that there always has been and, perhaps, always will and always should be an underlying level of skepticism about the motives of our political leaders, then the real question is whether that skepticism is developing into a corrosive cynicism which could prove a threat to political stability.

What do the politicians say?

Politicians have been concerned about a perceived increase in public alienation from the political system for some time. More than a decade ago a standing committee of the House of Representatives reported 'widespread cynicism about many aspects of parliamentary government' among the public and 'feelings of frustration and helplessness' among members of parliament, themselves (House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long-term Strategies 1991), p.1). A Commission on Government in Western Australia reported in 1995 that in "conducting hearings and seminars around the state we become aware of how far the operation of Parliament has fallen in the esteem of the general public (Commission on Government (Western Australia) 1995), p.158)."

Party leaders, senior ministers and opposition front benchers on both sides of the political divide have expressed similar concerns. While most are not prepared to cry *mea culpa* (the burden of their complaints is 'we are being unfairly blamed' rather than 'we are guilty'), they are concerned at what they perceive as an increasing public cynicism about their profession. The leaders of the major parties made the issue a major theme of their speeches at the commemorative sitting of federal parliament in Melbourne in 2001 to mark the centenary of the parliament. The National Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson said in his view "our traditional healthy skepticism about politics and politicians is...

tending to spill over into an unhealthy cynicism." He told the house he agreed with the view of eminent British historian Kenneth Clark that 'society is fragile and we can destroy ourselves with cynicism and disillusionment just as effectively as by bombs'. The Prime Minister, John Howard who told the House he did not think 'we should yield to the overwhelming cynicism of some in the community' had earlier warned that "there is a greater level of disenchantment with government... than at any stage of the history of the 20th century (Johnson 2000, p.145)." The then Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, warned that 'the confidence of the people in the established institutions of this nation – not least this parliament – is perilously low', adding that this could not be 'healthy for our democracy' (Henderson 2001a).

Mark Latham, before he became Leader of the Opposition, described representative democracy as being 'chronically sick' (ABC TV Lateline 2000) and identified the 'most pressing task in the Australian Parliament' if our system of government was not become 'a race to the bottom' as being to restore the public's faith in politics (Latham 2002b). The Federal President of the ALP and former West Australian Premier, Carman Lawrence, believes the public mistrust of politicians and political elites has broadened to include the political regime and political institutions (Lawrence 2001). A former Labor State Attorney General, Chris Sumner, agrees that politics has become a 'dirty word' and 'government is almost seen to be illegitimate' and believes, "if these views... become a generally accepted wisdom of the community ... there is a potential for democracy to be undermined (Sumner 2003)." Federal Labor frontbencher, Bob McMullan, has said that many Australians feel alienated from mainstream politics, and "[t] here is evidence that respect for the political process, the political institutions and politicians in general is at a very low level (McMullan

1999).” At the local government level, ALP notable and former Gunnedah mayor, Noel O'Brien, said before the referendum on the republic that there was a new mood "reeling all around the bush... They hate politicians; they absolutely hate them (Stevenson 1999).”

On the Liberal side, former senior minister in the Howard government, Peter Reith, has spoken of people's sense of disillusionment with the political process and his belief that "probably the overwhelming majority... feel disenfranchised by the system (Reith 1999).” A senior South Australian Liberal backbencher, Mark Brindal, gave as his reason for considering quitting politics his disillusionment with the parliamentary process (Kelton 2003). Former Attorney-General in Kennett Liberal government and senior Victorian public servant, Joan Wade has warned:

Unless the current level of disillusion [with politicians] is reduced, it is possible that Australians of the future will be tempted to change our system of government in ways that may be detrimental (Wade 2002).

The media's view

It does not take the professional skills of a politician, however, to sense a profound disquiet in the community with politicians and the practice of politics. Distrust of government coupled with a desire by ordinary people to have more say in the way they are governed seems to inform virtually every current debate on politics in contemporary Australian society. In Australia, one has only to turn on the radio or television, or pick up newspaper to catch a contemptuous reference to our politicians. This lack of esteem for our elected representatives is

a cause for concern for media commentators, as well as for the politicians themselves. The three doyens of political journalism in Australia seem to be agreed that public cynicism about politicians is running at a high level. The Sydney Morning Herald's Michelle Grattan, has written that, "Cynical politicians and political parties have increased—in spades—the cynicism of the electorate.(Grattan 1999)." Political journalist and author, David Solomon, believes that though "the system may not be completely, 'broke'... it is in desperate need of repair(Solomon 1998)." And Ninemsm's Laurie Oakes, who also writes for The Bulletin, has acknowledged that many people have detected a 'great tide of political cynicism... among the voters'(ABC Radio National Background Briefing 1999). The Australian's Paul Kelly believes 'the public is cynical, dissatisfied, and restless [and] complains all the time about the politicians and the political system' (Kelly 2001) and that the survival of parliamentary democracy could be a 'close-run thing' (Kelly 2000), p.9). In his view:

...distrust of politicians has turned into a deeper issue: a crisis in the democratic method of government. The universal gripe is against the system, not just the practitioners. Nobody wants to admit the obvious: that democracy itself is in trouble....(Kelly 2000), p.130).

The qualitative evidence

Social researcher, Hugh Mackay, has reached a similar conclusion based on qualitative research to plumb the 'mind and mood' of middle Australia. What

Mackay was hearing in his 'focus'² group discussions led him to conclude as early as 1993 that Australia's two-party system had 'lost its way, or perhaps lost its point', and that the electoral cynicism this engendered was 'now so high that it might well stimulate some demand for a redefinition of our political institutions' (Mackay 1993 p.169). By 2001 Mackay's focus groups were delivering even worse news about the health of our political system. In his annual Mind and Mood report for that year Mackay summed up their feelings with these words: "If it [the report] were a family newspaper, we would scarcely be able to print the things Australians are saying about their politicians (Gordon 2001)." Mackay's findings have been supported by a national survey, The Silent Majority conducted by advertising agency, Clemenger BBDO, which combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods and has been conducted periodically over the last quarter century. The 2002 survey confirmed earlier findings in 1989 and 1997 that Australians have lost respect for and don't trust politicians and traditional political institutions:

The average Australian believes that the days of trusting traditional institutions like government... are over... [and] are resigned to the fact that change is unlikely... We have lost trust in our government, institutions and employers. We can depend on no one but ourselves (Upward 2002), p.4)

The quality of political leadership, which was one of the biggest worries on respondents in the 1989 and 1997 surveys, did not even make the top forty in the list of concerns in the first Silent Majority conducted in 1977. This worry was still present in 2002 but was now accompanied by a pervasive feeling that 'there is

² Mackay uses his own method of focus-group based qualitative research, bringing together groups of middle Australians who already know each other as workmates, family members or neighbours, and allowing largely undirected discussion on general topics.

nothing we can do' (Upward 2002, p.19). An in-depth series of interviews with a cross-section of voter in marginal electorates conducted by The Australian newspaper in the run-up to the 2001 federal election also detected a deep-seated distrust of politicians and political parties (Rintoul 2001).

What the academics say—Australia versus the Rest

The phenomenon of an apparent increase in alienation of the people from their governments (while retaining a strong attachment to the concept of democracy) has been noted worldwide in recent decades, particularly in mature English-speaking mature liberal democracies. The majority of overseas researchers accept that there has been a real upward trend in the level voter disaffection with politicians and political institutions since the 1960s, and that it has reached worrying levels (Nye, Zelikow et al. 1997; Klingemann 1998; Norris 1999b; Pharr and Putnam 2000a; Bok 2001). Norris calls them 'critical citizens', Pharr and Putnam 'disaffected democracies' and Klingemann 'dissatisfied democrats, but all agree their numbers are growing and the level of discontent is high enough to create pressure for constitutional reform of the political systems in mature democracies, such as Australia.

There is no such unanimity in academic circles in Australia about loss of confidence in governments presenting any threat to political stability. Rather the opposite in fact (e.g., (Wanna and Keating 2000), p.231; (Uhr and Wanna 2000), p.42; (Burchell and Leigh 2002). Some Australian academics have expressed concern; Jaensch, for instance, believes that Australians' skepticism about politics and politicians has hardened into cynicism since the 1970s, and sees this as a worrying trend.

When voters lose faith in their representatives, it is only a short step to losing faith in the democratic institutions themselves, even in the concept of democracy (Jaensch 2003), p.18)

(Warhurst 1996), (Young 2000), (Sawer and Zappala 2001) and (Slattery and Murray 1999) have expressed concerns about the possible effects of the growing alienation of the public from politics and politicians, but it would be fair to say, generally speaking, that their assumption that the problem is a real one is not based on in-depth research into the problem. The prevailing sceptical view that the case has been overstated is, perhaps, best summed up in the title of Ian McAllister's review of one of the recent American books—Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries? The editors of this book, which presents the research of 14 leading political scientists in the US and Europe conducted over several years into growing disaffection with politicians and political institutions in most western liberal democracies in recent decades, characterise the phenomenon as 'one of the central problems...of the twenty-first century' (Pharr and Putnam 2000a), p.xv). McAllister's review article is entitled—somewhat dismissively—The Crisis in Democracy—Again.

Australian exceptionalism?

McAllister's article (subtitled, 'Can Australia avoid the debilitating effects of declining public confidence in politics found elsewhere? The evidence suggests that it can') suggests that though the democratic 'malaise' exists in Australia with some evidence of decline in voter support for the major parties, trust in government and confidence in politicians 'it is neither as deep-seated nor is widespread as elsewhere'. He further suggests Australia may be protected from

any crisis in democracy emerging here because of institutional and cultural reasons. Voting is compulsory in state and federal elections, and voters are required (by international standards) to go the polls fairly frequently, thus keeping parties in the forefront of voter's minds. Culturally, McAllister argues that Australia's "utilitarian political culture... produces a robust view of politics...in which citizens see the democratic system as the best available... to be supported come what may (McAllister 2001), p.49)."

To deal with first point relating to nature of Australian institutions: while it is true that Australia is one of a minority of democracies which have compulsory voting, the assumption that compulsory voting necessarily leads to stable government is questionable. In Italy, which has had a record for unstable governments and where voting is optional, voter turnout since 1945 has averaged 90 per cent, just 5 per cent less than Australia; on the other hand, Fiji, the subject of recent coups, has had an average turnout of 81 per cent , greater than that of Norway which averages 80 per cent (Pintor, Gratschew et al. 2002), p.78). Norway's citizens scored the highest marks after United States for their attachment to democracy of the OECD countries in the 1995-1997 World Values Survey. Norway also rated highest on an index designed to measure support for regime performance compared with support for democracy as a form of government—70 compared with Australia's score of 23. The United States scored 25 (Klingemann 1998).

The claim that political stability is enhanced because Australians have more opportunity to participate in elections than citizens in comparable democracies seems equally problematic. Opportunities for the voter participation for Australians are not as great as for Americans who, as well as voting every two

years in state, federal, gubernatorial and presidential elections, also vote for judges and other officials, including local government officials who have much more responsibilities than their counterparts in Australia. Nevertheless, as has already been noted (and as McAllister himself notes) in the United States—the centre of academic concern and research into voter alienation—support for democracy as a form of government remains strong, stronger in fact, according to 1995-1997 World Values Survey, than in Australia or any of the other OECD countries included in the survey.

In fact, in the World Values Survey more than three quarters of the respondents in the 38 countries taking part gave a positive response to the question designed to probe support for democracy as a form of government (Klingemann 1999). This is the central paradox exercising the minds of overseas researchers working on the problem of the voter alienation: “why, in some of the world’s oldest democracies, in an era in which democracy has triumphed worldwide, is public confidence in leaders at or near an all-time low? (Pharr and Putnam 2000a), p.xv).”

The major question being addressed in this paper is whether, as McAllister and others claim, Australia is somehow an exception to this worldwide trend? Australia is often touted as being one of the most stable and long-lived in the modern world. This is undoubtedly the case, but perhaps more emphasis should be placed on the words 'one of'. After all, the United States and Britain, for example, can also claim the status of stable democracies, as can New Zealand, which many would argue has recently undergone a radical restructuring of one of its political institutions with the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system. Does Australian 'exceptionalism' residing in its political

structures and the nature of its people protect this country from the destabilising forces that are impacting on other western liberal democracies?

A doyen of US political science, Seymour Lipset, in a paper entitled 'The End of Political Exceptionalism?' argues that all economically advanced democracies at the beginning of the new millennium are tending to follow the American path and that, notwithstanding important local variations, 'the similarities among the polities are considerable' (Lipset 1999). An international poll conducted in 11 countries in 2003 found that many people agree with Lipset's thesis. In Australia, for instance, 81 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that Australia was becoming more like America (Sydney Morning Herald, 18 June 2003).

While not agreeing that all advanced democracies are following the 'American path' (Nevitte 1996), pp.294-5), Canadian researchers Nevitte and Gibbins, following a book-length study of the five Anglo-American advanced democracies concluded that despite,

...countless national arguments to support, for example, the expectation that the political culture of Australia will differ significantly from that of Britain, and that of Britain from the political culture of the United States...our analysis offers strong evidence for the case that the Anglo American democracies do share common patterns of political beliefs, and that the similarities across the five countries outweigh, and by a wide margin, national differences... and national differences, when found, are seldom significant (Nevitte and Gibbins 1990), ch. 7).

An analysis of citizen values in the Pacific Rim region based on the 1995-98 and 2000-2001 World Values Surveys (Dalton and Ong 2002) also demonstrates a remarkable similarity between the attitudes of American and Australian citizens on a range of political attitudes.

In Klingemann's index, previously mentioned, constructed to map political support on a cross-national basis, Klingemann found that there were more 'dissatisfied democrats' in Australia and United States than in most other established democracies, with Australia faring slightly worse. In Australia, 23% only of the respondents in the World Values Survey conducted in the 1990s gave a positive rating to the performance of the country's political regime, compared with 25% of Americans (Klingemann 1998). In another cross-a national study Dalton also found evidence of a general erosion of support for politicians and political institutions in most advanced democracies, including Australia (Dalton 1998b). A comparison of responses American and Australian respondents to questions in the 1996 International Social Science Survey also indicates a somewhat higher level of dissatisfaction with the specifics of government in Australia. To the statement 'People like me have no influence on government', 51 per cent of Australian respondents agreed or strongly agreed compared with 47.5 per cent of Americans. Only 22 percent of Australians agreed that 'the average person has considerable influence on politics' compared with 32 per cent of Americans (International Social Science Survey: Role of Government III 1996).³

³ It should be borne in mind, however, in weighing the significance of this data that the results represent only a snapshot of political attitudes of the population at the time the survey was taken, and may have been significantly influenced by particular political events occupying the attention of the populace at the time. This 'problem with polls' is dealt with in more detail below.

Problems with quantitative data

Quantitative data scientifically presented in neatly arranged in tables and graphs tends to take on the character of 'hard' evidence compared with the anecdotal nature of quantitative data and the considered opinions of the seasoned political players and observers (Bryman 1998), p.145. See also (McCloskey 1985; Bazerman 1987).⁴ But this appearance that can be deceptive and sanitise and disguise the very real problems associated with its collection and interpretation. These problems are a myriad. First there are the response effects associated with the wording of questions and the context in which they are placed. Do the people to whom the survey is administered have a common understanding of what the questions mean given the wide range of life experiences a representative sample would encompass? As Clark and Schober explain such response effects have been the bane of researchers for years:

Rerword a question and the answers often change. Move a question from one survey to another and the answers often change. Switch the order of two questions and the answers often change. Alter the response alternatives for a question and the answers often change(Clark and Schrober 1992), pp.25-6).

⁴ It is not my intention to suggest that qualitative data should be privileged over quantitative data when considering whether Australia has somehow been protected from the democratic malaise overseas researchers have detected in comparable advanced industrial democracies and in Australia itself. Qualitative methodology has its problems too, some similar to those present in quantitative research, some peculiar to itself as I have already acknowledged. Goot provides a critique of Mackay's methods, and their limitations in a review of Mackay's work, and argues that "[a]t every turn... [they] need to be checked or validated by quite different methods (Goot 2002, p.11)." I agree, but I would apply the same stricture to quantitative research, particularly when the data we have available in Australia are sparse and full of flaws. The reason that I have focused on a critique of Goot's analysis of the quantitative data in this paper is because it proved to be the "odd man out" when I reviewed the available evidence for a democratic malaise in this country. Quantitative researchers, seasoned politicians and journalists all seem in general agreement that we do have a problem. Goot's analysis not only pointed in the opposite direction, but also appeared to have achieved widespread acceptance in the academic literature. This is the reason I have placed it under particular scrutiny, and have not undertaken a similar exercise in regard to the qualitative evidence.

People interpret words and phrases differently. For instance, what does 'a few' mean in the context of a number of years? In one experiment different respondents interpreted 'a few' as meaning anything from 'no more than two years' to 'seven years or more' (Belson 1981). In other surveys, researchers found that 'people' meant 'everyone' to just over half the respondents, and just 'a certain class' to one third (Cantril 1944) and that the term 'energy crisis' was interpreted by respondents in nine distinct ways (Fee 1979). Phrasing questions, which are asking essentially asking the same thing, in different ways can also dramatically alter responses (Rugg 1941). The Gallup Organisation found that support for the death penalty varied by as much as 60 per cent depending on how the question was asked (Newport 2001c). Even small changes in the wording of questions or the order in which they are presented can lead to substantial differences in survey results (McLaughlin 1999; Walton 1999).

If respondents are given a wider range of options in answering questions, for instance 'don't know' or 'don't have enough information', support or opposition to a proposition will be significantly changed (Schumann and Presser 1981). Survey researchers have also found that many people feel that they have to give an opinion if they are asked a question even if they can have no valid information, or can have no valid information because the question is a trick one, e.g. about a country or law which does not exist (Hartley 1946; Schumann and Presser 1981). There is also a tendency for respondents to give what they believe are socially desirable responses to questions rather than truthfully self-report their actions or offer their genuine opinion. This is a particular problem in researching voting intentions or actual voting patterns because up to 30 per cent

of respondents are likely to report that they voted when they didn't, or that they intend to vote and do not (Goleman 1993).

There is also the question of whether most polls and surveys obtain results that are truly representative of the views of the population as a whole. Pollsters are reporting response rates as low as one in six for some polls which makes it unlikely that the sample obtained is a true cross-section of the population (Lewis 2000; Sparrow 2001). The Australian Election Study held after each the Federal election, on which Australian political researchers rely on heavily for their data, reports response rate of more than 60 per cent (ACSPRI Newsletter 1996).

Nevertheless, despite this relatively high response rate, the sample is likely to be skewed towards people who have a higher than average interest in politics, and therefore more likely to spend the considerable time required to fill-in and return the survey form. The probability that this is so is strengthened by the results of a detailed analysis of the participants who agreed to take part in the 1994 Deliberative Poll on crime in Britain. This showed that the participants had a similar level of knowledge to a control group on all items tested for except on those to do with legal and political knowledge. On these items in the participants were up to 11 per cent of more likely to know the right answer (Luskin, Fishkin et al. 2002).

The problems are not just technical blips in statistical research: they can lead to different researchers to reaching dramatically conflicting conclusions (McLaughlin 1999). For instance, surveys conducted by Sweeney Market Research and the Australian Bureau of Statistics purporting to measure participation in similar sporting activities have routinely returned results varying by 100 per cent and more, with responses to one question about

participation in roller sports differing by a whopping 2000 per cent between polls taken by the two organizations. (ABC Radio National: The Sports Factor 2002).

One explanation why legitimate and well-constructed surveys genuinely seeking unbiased information on the phenomena being studied can return such conflicting results can be found a relatively new theory about cognitive processes relating to political attitudes: this is that rather than possessing a single attitude toward an issue people ‘carry around in their heads a mix of only partially consistent ideas and considerations’ (Zaller and Feldman 1992), p. 579). Thus, when answering survey questions, respondents comb their memories for relevant beliefs and feelings and integrate them on the spot to select a survey response. In doing so, people have been shown to oversample from memories triggered by the prior survey context, resulting in item context effects (Lavine and Feldman 2000. See also (Tourangeau, Rasinski et al. 1989). The same process could be triggered by recent news items with similar effects.

Thus, when a researcher is trying to track changes in political attitudes over time, a major problem with quantitative polls is that at the time that any single poll is taken an issue dominant in media coverage may have a significant short-term effect on the political attitudes of the survey sample. If one of the purposes of a poll was to measure trust in government and it was taken at a time when a particularly juicy political scandal was dominating the news, wouldn’t this factor have impact on responses to this question? Evidence about recency effects adduced by Zaller and Feldman and others considered above suggest that the answer to this question is a definite yes. Conversely, if the poll was taken during a time of national crisis, then the ‘rally-around-the-flag’ would have a positive

effect on responses to questions related to trust in government.

A recent dramatic illustration of this was the effect on public opinion of 9/11 which, in the United States, saw trust not only in the President but also in Congress soar to record heights, and then relatively quickly return to more 'normal' levels (Moore 2003b). This catastrophic terrorist assault appeared to have a similar, albeit lesser effect on public opinion about political leadership and institutions in Australia which quickly evaporated as other news involving government scandals began to dominate the news (The Bulletin 2001; Shanahan 2002). Recency effects would also come into play with questions about when respondents are asked whether they care who wins an election, see any difference between parties, or identify with one party or another depending on whether that have just voted after an intensive election campaign or are asked these questions mid-term.⁵

Paucity of reliable data

The problem of responses to particular questions in polls being contaminated by uncharacteristic and highly publicised events at the time the poll was taken is a very real one when it comes to tracking trends in political attitudes, particularly in countries such as Australia where there is such a paucity of such time-series data available. The lack of adequate time-series data is a problem which still worries United States researchers where surveys and polls have been conducted much more frequently, and for a much longer period than in Australia. In view of Skocpol and Fiorina:

Surveys are powerful tools for getting at relationships

⁵ I go into this point in greater deal below when I review Goot's quantitative data.

among the attitudes, reported attitudes, and socioeconomic characteristics of individual respondents at a given point of time but they can be used to measure change over time only when survey organizations have posed the same or very similar questions to national samples again and again.

Scholars now studying civic patterns in the United States have to rely on just a few surveys that happen to have been done in the past. At best, surveys such as the National Election Studies and the General Social Survey have repeated questions only since the late 1970s (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999), p.7-8).

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse also refer to “the unsatisfactory nature of existing [United States] data, consisting as they do of little more than poorly-worded, sporadically asked survey questions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), p.xii.” Australian researchers should be so lucky! In Australia, the Australian Election Study surveys did not begin until 1987, and even now many questions are not repeated in every survey and questions which are repeated are often couched in different terms. Australia was not even included in all the cross-national General Social Science surveys.

An integrated approach

Overseas researchers, including those researching political attitudes, are increasingly trying to overcome the problems with both quantitative and qualitative research methods, by operating them in tandem, using qualitative surveys to help interpret the quantitative data (Mathews 1994; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Center on Policy Attitudes 1999). This approach also has the

support of the author of well-regarded Australian textbook on survey methods, David de Vaus, who acknowledges the problem of interpreting the meaning of people's responses, and suggests that while difficult to eliminate, it "should... cause survey researchers to supplement their questionnaires studies with more in-depth collection techniques (de Vaus 1995), pp.57-8)."

United States social researcher, Jesko Hentschel notes that:

The desirability and usefulness to combine qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze social realities is pretty much accepted in the literature today; voices of segregation – still quite powerful in the 1980s – have subsided notably (Hentschel 2001).

Leading British expert on opinion polls and surveys, Professor Robert Worcester includes both quantitative and qualitative techniques in the 'kit bag' of the well prepared researcher (Worcester 1999) while Professor of Social Research, Alan Bryman, in 1988 identified ten different approaches to blending quantitative and qualitative research in the literature (Bryman 1988), pp.131-52). British sociologist, Patrick McNeill, wrote two decades ago that 'British sociology's wars of religion' seemed to be over and "most researchers would now accept that it is sensible to use a mixture of methods [quantitative and qualitative], and use the strengths of one method to compensate for the weaknesses of another (McNeill 1985), pp. 6, 115)."

The Australian debate

Some academics in the social sciences in Australia, however, appear to be unaware that peace has been declared. To my knowledge there has been no

major academic project to probe Australians political attitudes which combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods. On the issue which this paper is considering—the level of cynicism about politician and distrust of government, and its possible effect on political stability— an analysis quantitative data has been undertaken, notably, by politics professor, Murray Goot, while social researcher, Hugh Mackay, used qualitative research techniques, supplemented by quantitative polling to probe the ‘mind and mood’ of middle Australians, including their attitudes to politicians and government (Mackay 1993). However, as far as I am aware, no systematic attempt has been made to date to make combined use of the results of their separate research efforts to try to establish whether Australia has been infected by the democratic malaise identified by overseas researchers.

Goot refers to Mackay’s work in articles in which he (Goot) publishes the results of his own analysis of the quantitative data in what can only be described as a dismissive manner. He is equally dismissive of opinions of the senior political journalists as well as academics whom he accuses of accepting Mackay’s findings uncritically.⁶ He does not mention the opinions of the politicians themselves (except once in a quote identified in a footnote). As I have argued earlier, I believe that the paucity of ‘hard’ data this phenomenon, and the problems which are (and always will be) inherent in its collection and interpretation mean that we cannot afford to ignore any evidence relevant to gaining an understanding of the problem. This includes quantitative and qualitative research, as well as the opinions of long serving political actors and observers.

⁶ Academics whom Goot accuses of ‘uncritical renderings of Mackay’s argument’ include Ian Marsh, John Warhurst and James Walter (Goot 2002, p.44, Note 4)

The evidence I have adduced so far indicates that Australia's leading political journalists believe we have a problem; so do many of our most prominent and longest serving politicians; so do overseas researchers who have included Australia in their cross-national studies of the phenomenon; and so does our leading expert on qualitative research into social issues, whom even Goot (perhaps with a hint of sarcasm) refers to as 'the country's most lionised social researcher' (Goot 1999), p.18), Hugh Mackay. On top of this we have the remarkable similarity of Australian political attitudes to those of the United States revealed in GSSS surveys and other cross-national polls which, in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, might suggest that there is some substance to the views of senior journalists, politicians, and qualitative researchers that our citizens are becoming just as disenchanting with the way they are governed as the citizens in other advanced democracies. Against this we have Goot's finding based on an analysis of quantitative data that claims of 'serious erosion of public confidence in the democratic and representative institutions...is difficult to sustain' and that 'the extent of the discontent has been exaggerated and decontextualised'.⁷

Why believe politicians, journalists and 'pop?' sociologists?

Goot argues that his research "represents a departure from both pop sociology and speculative commentary (Goot 1999), p.18)." In a later version of the article he writes:

I want to move beyond both the punditry of journalists and
the evidence pulled together from conversations in small

⁷ I am not arguing, of course, that Goot is alone in this view. As I have acknowledged above, he certainly has the support of other academics, but it is his work that is most widely in the literature and even, on occasions, in the media.

groups to look at the findings of large-scale sample surveys
(Goot 2002), p.12).

Here he seems to be dismissing Mackay's qualitative research as real evidence, which puts him at odds with many overseas researchers who, as explained above, believe they can better understand political attitudes by using quantitative and qualitative research in tandem. The punditry ('spray' is another word Goot uses)⁸ would also, presumably, refer also to the pronouncements of politicians. Therefore before moving on to examine whether the data Goot draws on should be given the 'gold standard' status he appears to claim for it so that all other evidence, no matter how extensive, should bow down before it, I would like to say a little more about why I think the opinions of such experienced political players should be given some weight in the debate.

The days when politicians divined the mood of the electorate by so-called political instinct have long since passed. Since the 1980s they have been using sophisticated polling techniques to probe the political attitudes of electors (Mills 1986). The results of their polling and exactly how they are arrived at it is part of the political parties' secret electoral armoury and are not available for academic scrutiny. Nevertheless, we do know from the writings of electoral pollsters such as President Clinton's former electoral adviser, Dick Morris, that they do rely heavily on qualitative as well as quantitative techniques to gauge likely voter response to policy issues and the presentation of candidates, particularly leaders. We also know they have such faith in the efficacy of these techniques that they spend a lot of money to keep themselves informed in this way. Clinton's constant

⁸ The original meaning of pundit was a very learned person, expert or authority. In Australian colloquial usage it has come to mean "one who sets up as an expert". This is the only definition The Macquarie Dictionary (3rd edn) gives for pundit and I assume that Goot is using the word in this pejorative sense.

fund-raising efforts while he was President were in large part to fund such polling and the advertising campaigns their results generated well in advance of elections (Morris 1999), pp.146-50).

Predictions by Australian political leaders that elections will be a close-run thing although conventional polls are predicting a shoo-in are, in part, no doubt to counter complacency among their supporters, but sometimes it's because they know something that conventional pollsters don't because of the sophisticated polling techniques they use. Kennett appeared to be the only person who believed he could lose the 'unlosable' 1999 Victorian State election. Keating was almost alone in thinking he still had a chance in the "unwinnable" 1993 Federal election in part because Hugh Mackay, basing his opinion on qualitative research, told him that 15 per cent of voters were still undecided, and there would be a big swing to the government (Watson 2002), p. 330). Thus, when politicians, particularly political leaders, give opinions about political trends, these opinions cannot be dismissed as just 'speculative' punditry. They are based, not only on long experience and a critical interest in the matter (their livelihoods depend on it) but also on privileged access to dearly-bought polling information that is not generally available to the rest of us. The same, to a lesser extent, is true of political journalists who receive background briefings on some of the polling data collected by political parties.

Goot's evidence: a critical analysis

To return to a review of the quantitative data Goot uses to reach his conclusions and his assertion that this is 'the best evidence we have': First it should be said that Goot does acknowledge there are problems inherent in quantitative polling

in but argues that “[p]roperly understood these limitations are far from fatal (Goot 2002), p.12)”.⁹He does not, however, subject his own data, in any systematic way, to analysis of the prevalence of these flaws, and to what extent they should indicate caution drawing conclusions from the data, nor does he include such a warning in reporting his own overall conclusion. He does, however, very commendably, include enough detail in his tables to allow alert and informed readers to do so for themselves.

What then does an examination of the tables Goot has meticulously produced to support his case reveal? Most notably, virtually all of the time-series data he draws on are affected by several of the problems which make accurate interpretation of trends problematical. In most cases the time-series is relatively short by international standards for advanced democracies and often with large gaps between surveys—more than two decades in case of one question about interest in political campaigns; the wording of the questions has been changed from survey to survey, in some cases quite substantially; and the answer options offered to respondents often differ. Goot’s claim to have data ‘the most useful stretching back 50 years’ (Goot 1999), p.18) appears to apply to just one table—that measuring the perceptions in the electorate of the difference between parties between 1946 and 1998. Here we find a gap of nearly two decades between surveys, and substantial differences in the way questions are asked. As I have noted earlier, research has shown that even one of these flaws can significantly alter results making it problematical to compare the results of one survey in a series with another. If surveys contain a number of these flaws, as they do, with Goot’s data, then any conclusions should be treated with even greater caution.

⁹ Goot’s reference Zaller for support for this contention is somewhat puzzling. On my reading, Zaller’s work does suggest ways quantitative research can be improved, but this cannot be done retrospectively. Flaws in the methodology used in collecting existing data remain just that: flaws.

If we turn to the question of what Goot identifies as his research question and the evidence he uses to prove his case, we also find problems. Goot's avowed intent seems to be the challenge what he sees as 'the common wisdom of political commentary that interest in politics is waning, that the standing of politicians is woefully low, and that for the populace at large it no longer matters which party wins' —that there is a malaise in the political sphere that is palpably new (Goot 2000), p.2). It is this perceived malaise that has led Mackay to conclude that the two party-system 'has lost its way, or, perhaps lost its point', and that the electoral cynicism this is this engendered was 'now so high that might well stimulate some demand for a redefinition of political institutions' (Mackay 1993) p.169)—a conclusion to which Goot takes particular exception.

An underlying concern—perhaps the underlying concern— of the media commentators, and academics whom Goot has in his sights in his critique, as well as the politicians to whom I have referred, is the threat a growing level of cynicism could pose to political stability. In light of this, it is strange that Goot should spend the first and a major part of his rebuttal of such views in proving that political interest is as high as it ever was in Australia as far as we can judge from the historical records. First, none of those responsible for the journalistic 'spray' Goot complains of make any claim that that political interest is waning—not in the quotes Goot uses to back his claim, anyway.

Second, and more importantly, Goot himself acknowledges that "[i]nterest in politics...may have little to do with trust in the politic process (Goot 2000), 12)."¹⁰

I would go much further, and argue the evidence is mounting that political interest and even political engagement may be related to trust in the political process, but in a negative sense. In Britain a major study, described as ‘the most thorough study of participation’ in that country (Norris 1999b), p.259, found that the more cynical citizens were the more likely they were to be engaged in a wide range of political activities including voting (Parry, Moyer et al. 1992). In a time-period cross-national study Nevitte found that “[i]n every advanced industrial nation considered, citizens became more interested in politics [while]...confidence in a whole array of governmental institutions...dwindled (Nevitte 1996), p.288.” An investigation by the British Electoral Commission concluded that the near-record low turnout in the last British General election did not mean that Britons no longer cared; the problem was their dislike of politics and their belief that their vote would make no difference (White 2002). A 1996 survey in the United States also found that non-voters were no more alienated than voters, and both groups felt equally alienated from the political process (National Catholic Reporter 1996). Unless Australia is an exception to this malaise, this is not good news for those who would argue there is no call for some consideration being given reforms to our political system, particularly when more than half (51 per cent) of respondents to the 2001 Australian Election Study (AES) expressed little or no confidence in our Federal Parliament (Bean et al 2001).

Leaving aside political interest then, let us look indicators where there is little dispute about their links to the level of public alienation from politicians and traditional political institutions—confidence in the ethics and honesty of politicians, trust in government and support for the major parties. Not much need be said about the question of confidence in politicians, because time-series

data we have on this question is most reliable we have on political attitudes. The poll has been conducted since 1976—annually from 1983—and the question has remained the same. It shows an uneven but steady decline from 1976 when 19 per cent of respondents believed federal MPs deserved this rating till 1998 when only seven per cent did. It then rose again, and in 2000 stood at 11 percent. Goot acknowledges the decline but seems to imply that its significance is somehow reduced because it comes off a very low base and that politicians were not the only professions to suffer a decline in trust. On these points, I would argue first, that the size of base is irrelevant in making statistical comparisons of this type (Lange 2004).¹¹ The fact is that while nearly one in five Australians gave high ratings to politicians in 1976 about one in nine did in 2000—a difference of around 40 per cent. On the second point, I do not see how the fact that other professions have also lost esteem in the eyes of the public in any way lessens any risk that this trend might pose to our political institutions.

The tenor of this debate had been altered somewhat, however, by the results of the last three polls which has seen a substantial rise in public confidence in federal MPs with around 16 per cent of respondents now giving them a high rating for ethics and honesty (Morgan Poll 2003b). It must be said, though, that this rating is still uncomfortably low when the highest rated profession—nurses scored 94 percent in the 2003 survey.

An obvious explanation for the rise in public esteem experienced by politicians is the ‘rally-around-the-flag effect’ of 9/11 and the continuing terrorist threat which creates a psychological need in people to feel they can trust their leaders. This

¹¹ Lange is a statistical consultant employed by Flinders University, Adelaide.

explanation is undercut somewhat, however, by the fact that in the 2001 AES the number of respondents saying they trusted the government do the right thing some or most of the time dropped to 32 percent (Bean et al 2001)—an all time low except for what appears to be an anomalous result in a 1979 survey.¹² The Australian parliament received only a 49 per cent confidence rating and the Australian political system did a little better with 54 per cent of respondents expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in it. Nevertheless, 73 per cent said they were satisfied with Australian democracy, slightly more than in the 1998 AES (Bean, Gow et al. 1999). Nevertheless, these figures represented a drop in satisfaction when compared the 1996 AES when Australian democracy was given 78 per cent rating. In the 1996 survey, however, 11 per cent more respondents (89 per cent) said they were proud of Australian democracy than said they were satisfied with it (Jones, McAllister et al. 1996). It should also be said these survey results, taken together, would seem to consistent with the pattern of Norris' critical citizens, Pharr and Putman's disaffected democracies, and Klingemann's dissatisfied democrats uncovered in other advanced democracies.

Australian exceptionalism—in reverse?

To return briefly to the claim that Australian exceptionalism ensures greater

¹² If attention is focused solely on the Australian situation, this anomaly seems to be fairly easily explained by a little historical research. Around the time the survey was taken the then deputy Leader of the National Country Party, Ian Sinclair, one of the most respected figures in Australian politics, was embroiled in a financial scandal (of which he was subsequently cleared) and forced to resign as minister. The Sinclair scandal followed two equally damaging scandals involving senior politicians, forcing the resignation or dismissal of two senior Victorian ministers and another federal minister. However, a review of the cross-national data shows the United States suffered a similar catastrophic loss of trust in government about the same time, falling to a then record low of around 25 per cent in 1980. This seems to indicate that the explanation lies, at least in part, the state of affairs outside as well as inside Australia at time. Just what this state of affairs was remains to be uncovered.

political stability in this country; this also seems to be undermined when the trends in trust in government in Australia are compared with those in America. The most remarkable thing about the quantitative data measuring this variable in Australia is how closely it follows a similar pattern to comparable data collected in the United States at around the same time (See (Goot 2002), p.27, Table 1.8; (Leigh 2002), p.49, Table 2.2.). This trend diverges sharply in 1996 with trust in Australia going up Australia in 1996 (probably due the “honeymoon effect that follows the election of a new government) and down in the United States where President Clinton was elected for a second term. However, trust in government had moved more or less back into sync in the two countries by the end of the millennium until 9/11 sent the measure zooming up in the United States to 54 per cent in the 2002 National Election Study (Center for Political Studies 2002) while, in Australia, it went down to 32 per cent in a survey taken soon after the Twin towers catastrophe that rocked the world (Bean et al 2002). The ‘children overboard’ scandal which embroiled the Howard Government during and after the election probably goes some way to explaining this paradox, but a qualitative survey, had it been taken in conjunction with the AES, may have been able to confirm or refute such speculation. Thus, while Australian citizens are now showing a sharp divergence from their American counterparts in their willingness to trust government this trend is taking us towards the possibility of more political instability rather than less.

Parties in decline

Another indicator that is commonly used by political analysts to gauge support for the political system in western liberal democracies is the level of voter attachment to the major political parties which take turns in governing. Goot,

maintains that '[s]upport for the parties has stood up relatively well' in Australia (Goot 2002), p.43). Against this, a cross-national study of 18 democracies in advanced industrial nations found evidence of declining major party support in virtually all of them, including Australia (Dalton 1998b). In Australia the major parties' share of first preference votes for the House of Representatives averaged more than 90 per cent in the decades between the 1940s to the 1980s but dropped to 84 per cent in the 1990s (Goot 2002), p.42, Table 1.18) and now hovers around the 80 per cent mark. Papadakis and Bean concluded from this trend nearly a decade ago that though "Australia has had one of the most stable party systems in the world...in recent times signs have emerged of a weakening of the system (Papadakis and Bean 1995), p.97)." Bennett and Newman also see definite signs of increasing electoral volatility (Bennett and Newman 1999) and Bennett has suggested that 'significant and probable long-term changes in...voting behaviour...may be weakening the place of major parties' and 'this seepage of votes may be very difficult for the major parties to withstand' (Bennett 1999a).

Experienced politicians and media commentators appear to agree with this assessment. John Howard has been reported as saying that the number of swinging voters has doubled to 40 percent since he first entered politics three decades ago (Atkins 2000). One of Australia's leading media commentators, Paul Kelly, commented after a series of upset defeats in state elections that, "The voters are very independently-minded. There are no safe bets any more ([ABC TV Insiders](#) 2001)." In fact, minority governments with independents or minor party candidates holding the balance of power have become practically the norm in recent state elections when control of government passes from one of the major parties to the other. It hasn't happened at Federal level since the two-and-half party system has held sway in Canberra, but this is not to say it won't happen.

Canada had a two-and-a-half party system too until the governing party, the Progressive Conservative Party, which swept to power in 1983 winning 211 seats and recording the largest majority in the nation's history, was virtually wiped out in the 1993 election retaining two seats only.

Goot's reproduction of data tracking voters' perceptions of ideological difference between the parties and how much they care which party wins and election, tends to support his position that claims voters 'no longer see any great difference between the parties' (Young 2000, p.179) are somewhat overblown (Goot 2002, p.36-7). There has been a substantial drop in the percentage of respondents to AES surveys who 'care a great deal' who wins a federal election since the 1993 election (from 82 to 65 per cent in 2001). As Goot argues, however, the reasons for these differences could be associated with the saliency of election issues in particular elections (Goot 2002, p. 36-7). It is too early to pronounce it as a definite trend.

The data Goot reproduces on party identification, however, shows that the number of strong party identifiers has steadily fallen from around 30 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s to 23 per cent in the 1980s and 16 per cent in the 1990s. A similar, though not such dramatic trend is evident in the figures for strong and fairly strong identifiers are combined (Goot 2002, p.40.) The percentage of strong identifiers rose to 18 per cent in 2001, but the downward trend since the mid 1980s is still present and the increase is not necessarily explained by major party supporters returning to the fold. It is just as likely, perhaps more likely, to be explained by the rise of the Greens as a real force in federal politics. The slump in the numbers of strong identifiers is especially significant in relation to political volatility because research has shown that strongly-held beliefs and attitudes are

resistant to the strongest pressure towards change, while more weakly held preferences are more vulnerable to situational pressures and are not good predictors of an individual's actions (Krosnick and Abelson 1992), p.177. See also (Knower 1936; Fine 1957; Rhine and Severance 1970; Gorn 1975). If this is so, then the loss of each 'strong identifier' to even the 'fairly strong' category could increase the pool of potential swinging voters.

This raises the question of why party identification should have shown such a convincing drop when the majority of voters still appear to see at least some difference between the parties, and to care which party wins. There could be a number of explanations for this but one likely factor is the timing of the AES surveys from which most of the data post 1987 is drawn and the National Science Survey and Don Aitkin's surveys which provided the data prior to that date. The Australian Election Study is held immediately after a federal election; the questionnaires are sent out on the Monday following the Saturday election day (ACSPRI Newsletter 1996). The respondents have just been through an election campaign and been flooded with election material as the major parties sought to differentiate themselves one from the other; they have also cast a vote for (and thus identified themselves with) the party which they think, on balance, will provide the better government. In these circumstances it seems more than likely that they would give positive answers to questions about whether they care which party wins and how much difference such a win would make, than they would if asked similar questions mid-term after the election effects have worn off.

Only one of Aitkin's surveys was conducted after a federal election (Aitkin 1982), pp.355-8). It is hardly surprising, therefore that his surveys returned lower

positive numbers for all variables (other than party identification) and to extrapolate trends, or lack of them, using these data as a starting point could produce misleading conclusions. Using the same reasoning, the downward trend in the percentage of strong party identifiers could well have been larger if Aitkin's surveys had been conducted immediately after an election.

There is also the question of the massive decline of party membership in the last six decades as an indicator of support for the major parties. In the view of Weller and Young membership numbers have shrunk to such a level that '[t]he major parties can barely be called mass membership parties' any more (Weller and Young 2000, p.156). They estimate that in the late 1990s membership of the Labor Party stood at around 57 thousand and that of the Liberal Party 64 thousand—a collective total representing barely one per cent of the voting public. The Labor Party had a membership of 350 thousand in 1939. If growth in membership had kept pace with growth in population it would have around a million members now.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to address the question of whether Australia is an exception to a world wide trend discerned in most mature western democracies in recent decades for citizens to become increasingly discontented with their politicians and the way they are governed while still retaining a very strong attachment democracy. The reason for undertaking this project is the sharp difference of opinion on this issue between quantitative researchers, particularly Murray Goot, and qualitative researchers such as Hugh Mackay and seasoned political observers and actors, and the lack of consensus in the academic

community on whether we have a problem.

Mackay has said that the level of cynicism in the electorate is so high that it could require reform of our traditional political institutions. Goot, on the other hand, has argued that claims there has been serious erosion public confidence in democratic and representative institutions is difficult to sustain. Seasoned and experienced political players and media have tended to express similar concerns to Mackay about increasing cynicism about politicians and politics, while not necessarily endorsing his view that institutional reform is required. I have argued in this paper that there is a paucity of reliable evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, on this question available in Australia compared with the North American and western European democracies. This makes it essential that we take note of both qualitative and quantitative evidence trying to reach a conclusion about this important issue. This is an approach which is being increasingly adopted by overseas researchers. I have also argued that we cannot afford to ignore the opinions of expert players and observers such as long-serving senior politicians, some of whom has have been active in politics for as long, or longer than accurate comparable data has been collected on political attitudes.

When such and 'omnibus' approach is adopted, and the flaws in the quantitative data are taken into account, then a reasonable conclusion from an analysis of the available evidence is that arguments based on the view that 'Australian exceptionalism' has protected this country from the 'democratic malaise' infecting comparable overseas democracies cannot stand. We do have a problem in Australia, and it is serious enough to warrant serious attention being given to what should be done about it, not only from our political leaders, but from our

social scientists too. This is not to suggest that our democratic political system is on the point of imminent collapse. Attachment to the democratic ideal among the people is as strong, probably stronger, than it has ever been. Prior to 9/11, and the atmosphere of fear and crisis the continuing threat of terrorism has engendered in western democracies, it could have been predicted, with some confidence, that any change would be towards more democracy rather than less. However, it has become a truism that ‘9/11 changed everything’. People want to trust their leaders more, and are less likely to support changes to the political system in such uncertain times when the perceived threat comes from outside this country.

Nevertheless, most people would hope that this fear too will pass, and when it does then pressure for change—for the people to have more say about how they are governed—will be renewed. This being so, the answer to the question I have addressed in this paper assumes real importance. If our political institutions are to be redefined, how should they be redefined? This is a question we should be thinking about, and proposing solutions for. If workable and desirable options for change are not on the table (and I, personally, do not include citizen-initiated referendums in the category), then as Joan Wade has warned, ‘Australians of the future will be tempted to change our system of government in ways that may be detrimental’.¹³

¹³ My reasons for opposing CIR and well as the ‘task force government’ approach favoured by Third Way advocates for giving people more say and have proposed instead a new institution—the Deliberative People’s Assembly—are outlined in a paper prepared for the 2002 APSA conference. This can be accessed at <http://arts.edu.au/sss/apsa/Papers/gollop.pdf>

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