

Building a healthy democracy

Research Paper

We are
a powerful
force for
nature 



**AUSTRALIAN
CONSERVATION
FOUNDATION**

Photo: Parliament House, Canberra; James Thomas

Executive Summary

Together we aim to build a democracy where **power resides with the people**, where people can participate in a fair and clean process in an active and meaningful way, **and where decisions are made in the interests of the people and the planet.**

Top four opportunities for **democratic reform**:

1. **Donation and election finance reform**
2. **Broadening the parameters of government decision-making**
3. **Participatory and deliberative democracy**
4. **Civics education**

More people today live in democracies than any other time in history. But throughout the world, there are widespread concerns about how democracies are functioning to protect the things that matter most—wellbeing of people, planet and future generations. In Australia, our democratic system has failed to safeguard our landscape from crises like climate damage and habitat destruction, even though most Australians are concerned about these issues and want action. Political discontent and disempowerment are steadily rising with record low levels of trust in politics and political representatives across the country. This report explores the reasons behind these trends and articulates a vision and key principles for a healthier democracy, which can deliver on what really matters.

We spoke to prominent stakeholders from organisations across Australia to deepen our understanding of the obstacles to a healthy democracy and learn how we might move closer to our vision: **One where power resides with the people, where we can participate in a fair and clean process in an active and meaningful way, and where decisions and decision-making are made in the interests of the people and the planet.**

Participants came from universities, church groups, local government bodies and non-government organisations. They included farmers, journalists, bankers and law-makers. We asked them to articulate the principles for a healthy democracy, and to identify obstacles that prevent our current system from embodying those principles. We then asked them to name mechanisms and indicators they felt could transform us from the current system to the one we envision, and we backed this up with extensive research of our own.

The outcome was a list of ten principles for a healthy democracy highlighted by participants; a wide range of problems and obstacles that people identified as preventing our democracy from working better; and a list of mechanisms or interventions which our interviewees thought would help move Australian democracy in the right direction. The opportunities for reform which stakeholders saw as most important were:

Donation and electoral finance reform — reforms to control the influence of money and vested interests in Australian politics;
Broadening the parameters of government decision-making — different ways to represent interests who bear the consequences of risk but

have no political representation such as future generations, non-humans, people in other countries and ecosystems; **Supporting a more participatory and deliberative democracy** — an actively engaged citizenry who participate in communities and democracy outside of elections to rebuild democracy; **Civics education** — an informed citizenry trained in the art of citizenship, critical thinking and an understanding of their own agency. These were the mechanisms that were repeatedly and emphatically called for as priority actions – and which could also form the basis of an annual report on the state of democracy in Australia.

Australia has a strong and stable democracy that has delivered great prosperity. However, that prosperity and stability has not been shared equally, and it's time for reform. It's clear that a key obstacle to the ambitious policy reforms necessary to protect people and planet from climate damage, and restore nature, is the failure of our political systems itself. Democratic reforms can unlock the potential of our democracy to deliver important outcomes for our environment, and for the wellbeing of future generations.



Photo: Stop Adani Rally 2018; James Thomas



10 principles for a healthy democracy

1. **Popular sovereignty**

Power resides with the people.

2. **Ethos of long-term collective wellbeing**

Decisions are made for the long-term interest and common good of people and the planet.

3. **Honesty and integrity**

Democratic processes must be clean and honest. Money and power do not have undue influence over policy and politics. Citizens trust their elected representatives, democratic processes and institutions.

4. **Inclusive franchise**

Voting franchise is inclusive of all members of society — including permanent residents and people 16 years and over.

5. **Equity of participation**

People and civil society can participate actively, meaningfully and equitably in decision-making within and outside of election periods.

6. **Rights**

Fundamental human rights are recognised and protected.

7. **Information**

There must be a two-way flow of meaningful information between civil society and representative government so that both sectors can make informed decisions.

8. **Transparency and accountability**

Decisions and decision-making are transparent and accountable to the people.

9. **Representation and diversity**

Decisions-makers need to reflect the diversity of the community.

10. **Rule of law**

Just laws are fairly, consistently and impartially applied and enforced by an independent judiciary.

A healthy democracy can deliver on **what really matters**

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