A third domain of political engagement: learning from Indi

I'd like to share with you some ideas about how we might tap into heightened public interest in what politics and policies will look like in post-corona Australia, in order to create something from the ground up that can generate real and beneficial change. After a long period of increasing disenchantment with politics and politicians, the virus's appearance and the need to respond effectively to it have precipitated massive and unexpected changes that have been in the main very appropriate. But there is no indication that these changes will last beyond the virus's containment, or that there will be adequate policies to deal even with the previous status quo, let alone the expected level of economic decline and the pain this will cause.

The ideas I discuss here draw heavily on what has happened in the federal electorate of Indi in the past eight or so years, but this is not just about getting community-backed independents elected to parliament. The Indi folks only took that step when they saw no other satisfactory options, and there are likely to be other options in other electorates. Rather, it's about the whole process of communities mobilising at the electorate level to do representative politics differently.

What happened in Indi has important lessons for Australian politics generally, suggesting how we might get better MPs who are also chosen more democratically, better two-way communication between MPs and constituents, a much-needed shake-up of the established party system, a revival of faith in democracy, and governments doing a better job of advancing our wellbeing.

The state of Australian politics – the many ways in which it has been deficient and voters' declining faith in it – is a frequent topic of discussion these days. According to one poll, 86% of voters had faith in government in 2007, but by 2018 only 41% did.[1] Those of us who campaign on specific policy issues generally feel frustrated that, despite a great need for policy change and clear evidence to support this need, results from specific-issue campaigning these days tend to be meagre and slow at best, and non-existent at worst. We wonder what more can be done.

I would argue that, although specific-issue campaigns are extremely important and definitely need to continue, we should also focus on another area at the same time: how our MPs are preselected as candidates and then elected to parliament, and the ongoing relationship between MP and constituents. Citizen political action in my lifetime – and perhaps yours – has seen a strong focus on specific-issue campaigning. The 1960s saw the emergence of 'new social movements' that brought into the political arena issues that had been peripheral or ignored to that point, issues such as the environment, various wars, and the rights of women, ethnic groups, the same-sex attracted, the disabled and other sectors of society. Innovative campaigning tactics were adopted to convey the message and pressure governments to adopt the changes advocated. These campaigns – when considered over time – met with a significant measure of success, often because the novelty of the tactics caught people's attention. But now mainstream politicians have learned that they can, to a large extent, ignore such campaigns and not suffer great political damage. With voters disenchanted with both sides of politics, this disenchantment does not really disadvantage either side electorally, and each side knows it can gain an edge at election times by appealing to the material interests or allaying the fears of key supporter groups.

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[1] https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report1.pdf

So specific issue campaigns have become much less effective, and mainstream parties – the ones that form government – have lost the electorate's confidence. Where do we go from here? Let me begin consideration of this question by presenting a hypothetical situation.

Imagine that democracy was 'starting again'. Imagine that our country was emerging from an autocratic system of government, and in our different electorates we were charged with the task of selecting someone to represent us in parliament. How would we go about it? Well naturally we would want, as our representatives, people we knew and respected, people who were very capable and had sound ideas, who had a record of serving the community and understood people's needs and aspirations. We might, through some sort of participatory process, arrive at a shortlist of candidates, and then, on election day, vote to select one of them as the best, most capable person to represent us in the wider political system.

Is that how it happens now? Of course it isn't. For a start, very few constituents know anything about candidates in their electorates before they first see their names on a ballot paper. In the main, the candidates with the best chance of being elected are those preselected within parties, through processes that may or may not involve local party members, processes that are not at all transparent to the roughly 99% of constituents who are not party members. In fact, fewer and fewer Australians belong to parties, with the combined membership of the two parties to which the great majority of Australian MPs belong now equalling much less than one per cent of Australian voters. Few MPs have distinguished themselves as pre-eminent community leaders before their election, and they mostly come from a narrow range of occupations, are predominantly male, and are much less ethnically diverse than the general population. In other words, they're not recognised and respected leaders, and neither do they 'look like Australia'. This means they're less likely to understand and identify with the concerns and aspirations of their constituents, and they are probably very different to the sort of people who would be elected if communities got together to choose their best and brightest to represent them, as just described. This is not to say that they are bad or incompetent people. Many, perhaps most, are quite capable and well-motivated, but that doesn't make them the best representatives of their constituents, or the people in whom constituents have the most confidence.

Even once MPs are elected, constituents won't get to know much about them unless they become a minister or some kind of political maverick. Sixty-one per cent of voters don't even know the name of their MP,[2] most will never see their MP in person, and MPs rate very low on surveys of the public's respect for different occupations.

I am not arguing here that we should have parliaments full of independents. Parties are inevitable in democracies, and thus they exist in every one of them today. They exist because MPs of like mind will always group together and cooperate to achieve their shared political goals. And, once formed, parties become institutions through which much of representative politics happens. (But it happens differently in different parts of the world, as I describe later.)

So it's not just about putting up independent candidates. There could be community processes in each electorate that, as well as, or instead of, putting up independents:

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[2] https://www.tai.org.au/content/australian-democracys-catch-22

- better articulate shared values and concerns, policy preferences for local, national and global issues, and expectations of the local MP
- articulate the kind of two-way communications constituents expect with candidates, and with the MP once elected
- convey to the rest of the electorate relevant information about candidates in order that voters might be better informed
- demand of parties that the wider community – that is, the vast majority who are not members of that party – be able to participate in the preselection process for party candidates (which happens in US primaries, and has occurred in Australia and the UK[3]).

If you think parties would just ignore these expectations and demands, imagine that, over a period of a two or three election cycles, community-backed independents have been elected in half a dozen federal lower house seats and, quite possibly, hold or share the balance of power. Parties would know that if they simply ignore the demands of these organised groups of voters at electorate level then such groups might back their own independent candidates and get them elected.

Let's return now to our MPs who have been elected in the current manner. Collectively, they are charged with the task of making decisions on a huge array of complex and difficult policy matters. We talk proverbially about how things that are difficult are 'rocket science' or 'brain surgery', but politicians have to attend to the regulation of, support for and relationships between rocket science, brain surgery and a thousand other domains of human activity. It's easy to do politics badly, but hard to do it well. Participants in citizens' juries often comment that the experience made them realise how complex and difficult governance is, and how often there are unavoidable trade-offs to be made.

But our MPs facing these difficult challenges start with very little political capital. As individual MPs, they are generally not well-known or well-respected. As groups – that is as parties – they may be well-known but are usually not well respected. This means that if they make decisions that have costs for sections of the community, or costs for much of society in the short-term, then voters will be much less likely to tolerate this, to 'cut them slack'. Starting without the confidence of voters, they know they can easily be out on their ear at the next election. So the temptation is to make decisions that are populist, that are immediately appealing but probably not very effective, in order to save their political skin. And there's also a temptation to make decisions that please powerful media, and please potential financial backers, because these interests can speak up for them, or give them money for self-promoting advertising. But there's a political cost to populism as well, because it rarely results in good policies, and this too will antagonise many voters, often leading to a rapid turnover of governments and all the policy discontinuity and short-termism that this involves.

Now imagine that the MPs confronting these complex and difficult tasks of governance have been selected through the alternative process I just described, and they have good ongoing communication with constituents. Whether they are independent or party MPs, they will be better known and more respected by the electorate. They will often have a record of distinguished service to the community, and/or be experts in some field. Their diversity will reflect the diversity of their community, and they will

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[3] For example see:
https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2011/July/Pre-selecting_candidates_using_US-style_primaries

know that community better. Thus, the community will know and respect them better, they will speak with greater personal authority and their judgments will be taken more seriously by voters, even if those voters don't initially agree with them or if voters' interests are adversely affected. As a result, it will not be as politically costly for them to make sound but potentially unpopular decisions.

Moreover, the process of communities organising like this at the electorate level will generally provide opportunities for voters to discuss and learn more about policy issues, which will mean they will be better informed. Even if only a small proportion of voters in an electorate are actively engaged in this process – in Indi it has been about one per cent – there will be ripple effects from people talking with family and friends, and from information distributed through social and other media.

What's more, it's far more effective to select MPs who already share our values and policy preferences than it is to just try and persuade whoever gets elected to take on our values and policy preferences through specific-issue campaigning. It's like the difference between calling a taxi to take you to the airport, and jumping into someone's car at the traffic lights and telling the driver to take you to the airport. Putting aside for the moment the fact that the latter is illegal and likely to scare the driver half to death, another reason why drivers would not be very receptive to this is that *they would already be going somewhere*, and would not want to deviate from their intended path. In like fashion, elected MPs *are already going somewhere* in the sense that they had taken a set of policies to the election and, once elected, they would see the implementation of those policies as their political mandate. More broadly, political parties, to which most MPs belong, each have an ideology, a culture, a history and a set of supporters that determine the sort of policies they support and those they don't. And if candidates do support different policies to your own, the next best option is to start dialoguing with them *before the election* rather than waiting till after the election when the successful ones have, as MPs, started on their parliamentary 'journey'.

Up until now we have tended to think that, if you want to influence who gets preselected and then elected to parliament, you need to join a party to do so. But the movement in Indi has shown us that this may not be the case. You can influence who does and doesn't get elected from outside a party through an organised process of community mobilisation. This is what I mean by a *third domain of political engagement*, the first two domains being party membership and specific-issue campaigning. Both of these domains have significant limitations on their effectiveness. I have just described the limitations of specific-issue campaigning. As for party membership, there are very many people who have joined parties in the hope of having some say in the candidates preselected and the policies adopted, only to have those hopes frustrated by hierarchies, factions and sclerotic processes.

So let's imagine that these electorate level mobilisations were common across Australian electorates. What would they look like? And what impact might they have? To give this scenario some concreteness, let's first take a quick look at what happened in Indi, generating what has been called "The Indi Way".[4] In

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[4] The ideas about this in this paper draw on data, analysis and argumentation in the excellent chapter and article by Carolyn Hendriks and colleagues: Hendriks C.M., Ercan, S.A., and Boswell J. (2020, in press) *Mending Democracy: Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780198843054; and Hendriks C.M. (2017) 'Citizen-led democratic reform: Innovations from Indi'. *Australian Journal of Political Science.* 52(4): 481-99. In addition, much was learnt from a splendid forum I attended, *Indi Shares,* put on by Voices4Indi in Oxley in 2014, and open to people from outside Indi.

2013, the voters of Indi, a regional and rural federal electorate in north-eastern Victoria, voted out an unresponsive and ineffective Liberal MP and replaced her with a progressive, community-backed independent, thus ending 82 years of continuous occupancy of the seat by conservative parties. They did this through a process that saw over 400 constituents meeting together in 'kitchen table conversations', in which they articulated what they liked about their community, the concerns they had, the values they shared, and what they expected of their MP. This was then collated into a report and presented to their MP. When the MP showed no interest in engaging with them, they decided to put forward their own candidate, and chose Cathy McGowan. The campaign to get Cathy elected was supported by 600 volunteers, and she won that election, plus the next one in 2016 with the help of 800 volunteers. During those two parliamentary terms she delivered a range of significant benefits for her electorate, was a new voice of integrity in the federal parliament, and maintained excellent two-way communication with her constituents in a wide range of often innovative ways. She retired prior to the 2019 election and her community-backed replacement, Helen Haines, was subsequently elected with the help of 1700 volunteers. The group that has run this campaign over these three elections is known as Voices4Indi.[5]

If there were mobilisations like this in many electorates across Australia, we might see a range of possible outcomes. For a start, given the level of disaffection with existing (usually party-endorsed) MPs, a number of communities might choose to nominate a candidate and a number of these might get elected. And given that it's common for the major parties to win only a few more seats than their main party rival, these community-endorsed independents may even hold the balance of power, or share the balance of power with other independents and/or small party MPs. These balance-of-power MPs could then expect either to be a part of a coalition or, at the very least, to be able to choose what legislation was passed and what wasn't – in other words, to have real power. The lack of a government majority is already common in the Senate and state upper houses, given proportional representation, but it could also become common in lower houses, the houses of government.

Now as soon as you start talking coalitions in Australia people get nervous and think 'political instability', with visions of short-lived Italian governments. But this is in fact a myth. Apart from the fact that conservative parties in this country have governed in coalition for decades, and have probably been no less stable than the Labor Party, the broader record of coalitions in democracies across the world does not substantiate this fear. The main way through which coalitions have occurred is through proportional representation electoral systems. A study of the stability of governments in OECD countries found that, over a 50 year period, the average number of elections in countries using winner-take-all voting systems was 16.7, whereas, in proportional representation systems – which feature coalitions much more often – the number was 16. In other words, these governments lasted slightly longer.[6] Italy is just an outlier, possibly as a result of cultural factors.

And these two systems generate different political behaviour. In winner-take-all systems parties need to persuade voters of the faults of all other parties – even politically close ones – and the virtues of their own. On the other hand, in systems or arrangements where coalitions are more likely, parties don't want to burn their bridges by unduly antagonising potential coalition partners, and so there is a

[5] For further information on Voices4Indi, see their website: https://voicesforindi.com/.
[6] https://www.fairvote.ca/a-look-at-the-evidence/

tendency to be less adversarial, less ideologically rigid and more cooperative. It is probably because of this that the 80% of OECD countries using proportional representation have an average record of greater income equality, better environmental policies, fewer deficits and higher scores on the UN Human Development Index.

I'm not arguing here for proportional representation – though it sounds like a good idea – but rather for great community engagement at the electorate level, something that could have the effect of generating more coalitions made up of a party or parties *and* independents. I have not seen any studies that assess multiple examples of coalitions that include independents, but the Gillard/Rudd Government of 1910-13, and the Bracks Government in its first term were both minority governments relying on independents, and both ran their full term and were quite productive.

You may be wondering why – of all the possible aspects of, and avenues for, political reform – I should be arguing that this particular focus on electorate level mobilisations is so important. In response I would say this. There's an urgent need for reforms to the way democracy functions in this country. We need political donations reform, better regulation of lobbyists, strengthening of regulations around politicians moving to lobbying jobs, a federal integrity commission, reforms to parliamentary question time, laws to encourage more media diversity, and more citizens' juries and the like at all levels of government, to mention just a few of dozens of possible reforms in this area. If such reforms were achieved, we would have a much better chance of getting good policy enacted by governments, and increased faith in government, because the corrupting influence of powerful vested interests would be curbed, standards of political behaviour would be required to be higher, political processes would be more transparent, and evidence and reasoned deliberation – often involving representative groups of citizens – would play a bigger part in policy making.

But unfortunately many – perhaps most – of these reforms to democratic functioning happen to be relatively dry and technical in nature. They are not the sort of issues – like climate change or various foreign wars – that get large swathes of the population fired up. And if campaigns on democratic reforms are simply left to a few activists and policy wonks, that will rarely be enough to achieve success.

That is where the sort of process that occurred in Indi comes into its own. What they did there was to bring together a large number of fairly average constituents – only some of them politically active to that point – and engaged them in a very convivial process of community-cum-political activity. Drawing on extensive qualitative research with residents from Indi, Hendriks and colleagues found that this was a two-way process with participants articulating their values and their expectations from the political system, and movement leaders (and particularly Cathy McGowan as their MP) informing participants about political processes and how change might be achieved.[7] For example, Cathy communicated via a weekly newsletter, videos, social media, a website, postal surveys, and all sorts of face-to-face contact with constituents, such as 'listening posts' where she would hear whatever matters constituents wanted to share. She organised, post-election, another round of 'kitchen table conversations'. She ran 'budget impact tours', coached people on how to engage with the political system to advance their particular causes, took on graduate interns to give them political experience, and arranged for groups of constituents to spend four days with her in parliament and her Canberra parliamentary office.

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[7] Hendriks et al, *Mending Democracy: Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times.*

Participants signed 'values statements' committing themselves to norms of respect, trust, courage, integrity, positivity and inclusivity. They were asked to be 'their best selves' and to refrain from negative and personal politics, and instead to 'engage in positive conversations about possibilities and potential'.

And the political engagement processes in Indi incorporated a lot of fun, local culture and social activity. Things like bush dances, singing circles, craft groups and movie nights were organised to raise money, get jobs done, build solidarity and engage more people. Campaigning had a playful quality to it with the orange cockatoo symbol everywhere (including on jewellery, handicrafts and clothes), lots of food and decorations. Shopfront campaign offices became social hubs.

This kind of congenial environment makes it possible to engage people who would not normally be active in public deliberations on political issues, and, as part of this, to provide – through talks, videos and written material – the sort of information people need to make informed judgements on these issues. Conversely, if this congenial environment did not exist, most of these people would not come within cooee of this kind of informed deliberation. But participation by this broader section of society is absolutely vital, because it is this broader involvement that can generate the critical mass necessary to achieve change. Just imagine if there were such organised mobilisations of constituents in most electorates in Australia, or even every electorate!

What's more, Indi's focus on political education, and on respectful, inclusive and positive campaigning behaviour – if replicated in other electorates – would greatly reduce the chances of electorate-level community mobilisations taking on a more populist, uninformed, Hansonist character.

If we look at this topic from a theoretical perspective, we can see that the three domains of political engagement that I have described are all essential, but for different reasons.

Specific issue campaigning is essential because it brings into the political process ever-emerging and ever-changing political issues so that they can then be deliberated on by the broader polity alongside other issues with which they need to be integrated to generate coherent policy. The specific issues are introduced by those who either are experts in them, are affected by them or feel strongly about them, and they are then taken up by the broader population, politicians, the media and so on.

Party membership is essential because it is this, alongside voting, that gives our political system its formal democratic credentials. Political parties must be formally accountable to any citizens who wish to join them.

However, as early 20th century sociologist Robert Michels described how parties, as formal organisations, become bureaucratised and, with their leaders acquiring particular knowledge and contacts that followers don't have, they turn into oligarchies.[8] Moreover, leaders come to agreements and accommodations with business, the media and other established groups through which favours and compromises are, in effect if not explicitly, exchanged for donations, positive media coverage and other support. As a result, they tend to disproportionately advance the interests of certain powerful groups, generally at the expense of the interests of the general public or of particular disadvantaged sectors.

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[8] Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Free Press, 1966.

So a third domain of engagement is essential as a countervailing force to these oligarchical tendencies that are inevitable within democracies, and that is what I am writing about here. *Electorate level mobilisations of constituents* can stand outside parties, articulating and campaigning for policies determined through their group processes, and using their political power as organised voters to induce parties to take them seriously. As one of their sanctions they can, if necessary, encourage the election of community-backed independents *instead of* party candidates, and those independents elected in this way can provide a further check on the power of parties through their voice and vote in parliament. Constituents engaged in this way cannot be controlled by parties as party members can. They don't have to demonstrate loyalty to the party, vote for it or obey its rules. They have no attachment to its history, its culture or the people in it. Thus they can act independently of it and, arguably, have more political power.

How might this be initiated?

If you and others think this idea has merit, it can be developed further and shared with a wider circle of people.

The aim, I think, should be to try and organise constituent mobilisations in a few seats initially. I would suggest focusing on federal seats at first. This is the level of government people are most interested in and most dissatisfied with.

What seats to choose? The authenticity of the Indi mobilisation derived in large part from the fact that it was wholly generated within Indi, by Indi constituents. So the electorates chosen would need to be those where there was a kernel of interest among constituents there, and a willingness by those constituents to help get mobilisation going there.

The seats chosen would not have to be ones with particularly unsuitable existing MPs who sorely needed to be replaced. I've tried to stress here that the idea is not just to elect community-backed independents, but is more broadly about improving the processes of preselection and election of MPs, the quality of MPs, and communication between MPs and constituents. At least some of this can happen in any electorate, even those with very good MPs. And a constituent mobilisation could strengthen the arm of a good MP if, say, that MP was more inclined than their own party was to support policies that were evidence-based and reflected constituents' values, concerns and needs.

I think it would be important for people to run their own show in each seat engaged in this, so that it is, and is seen to be, a genuinely local effort, and so that different types of activities can be tried across all these electorates. However, it would also be valuable to have good communication and cooperation between mobilising groups in the different electorates.

As to what might actually happen in these electorates, I would see that as something to be worked out in those electorates. However, if they saw Indi as a model to draw ideas from, they might include any of the things I have describes as occurring there, including:

- 'Kitchen table conversations' (even online ones given the current restrictions) with some sort of written report coming from each set of conversations – a report that summarised the values, hopes, concerns and policy preferences of participants (relating to both local and national matters) and their expectations of their MP.
- Other informative and/or deliberative events addressing matters of interest or concern.

- Efforts to communicate with candidates (including existing MPs) about all these matters, and thus to both learn what sort of representatives these people might be, and to inform them of what this group of constituents expects of them.
- Deliberations prior to each election to determine the position the group takes on their electorate's representation. (For example: Should they put up a community candidate or not? Should they disseminate information about the different candidates? Should they seek opportunities for community input in preselection processes? Should they just dialogue with each candidate, and later with the elected MP, about their values, concerns, preferred policies, expectations of their MP and so on?)
- The creation of a social context within which all these things occur, one that attracts and sustains the involvement of ordinary people, that offers pleasant and supportive social contact, interesting activities, fun, learning, and the trying out of new roles and challenges.

So there you have it. I see this as a practical, realistic way through which ordinary people concerned about our shared societal future can mobilise other such ordinary people to act together at the electorate level and try and achieve better political representation, and thus the implementation of better policies that can contribute to greater wellbeing for all. I would very much appreciate your response to this proposal. What do you think of it – generally and in specific areas? Is it something that you would like to be part of? And are there others you know who might also be interested in it? If so, please send it to them or pass on their names to me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Rob Salter

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