

How to
talk about
**democratic
reform:**
a guide to changing
the story



About this handbook

This handbook is based on research conducted by an alliance of Australian civil society organisations, led by the Australian Conservation Foundation and Reveille Strategy.

It is designed for people working across civil society who are advocating for change that involves democratic decision making and participation.

Its purpose is to help us talk more effectively about government, democratic participation and reform, and to motivate people to get involved.

About this research project

This handbook is based on a six-month research project, drawing on the insights of a coalition of organisations from across civil society, working together to achieve legislative changes that limit the influence of money in our political system. The project was led by Jolene Elberth and Tessa Fluence at the Australian Conservation Foundation, with collaboration by the Human Rights Law Centre, the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Greenpeace Australia Pacific, GetUp and Common Cause Australia.

The dial testing was conducted by Troy Burton, Madeleine Holme and Holly McCarthy of Reveille Strategy.

We thank a much wider group for their feedback and insights along the way, including: Alliance for Gambling Reform, Centre for Public Integrity, Joan Staples, Australia ReMADE, Worldwide Fund for Nature, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, Public Services International, Australasian Centre for Corporate Responsibility, Public Health Association of Australia, Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Australian Marine Conservation Society, and BirdLife Australia.



Cover Photo. Parliament House, Canberra.
Photo: Dan Breckwoldt/Shutterstock.com



First Nations and democracy

In seeking to rebuild and renew our democracy, we must accept our history and the reality that Australian democracy is a system of government that has been imposed upon the First Nations people of this country. Whether a system that has been imposed upon others can ever be a truly just system is a question we must try to answer together. However, we can work to ensure that our democracy is more just, more inclusive, and more fair for First Nations people, by ensuring that First Nations perspectives, justice and reconciliation are central to any vision of rebuilding a healthy and vibrant democracy for Australia.

Kosciuszko National Park, NSW.
Photo: Heiko Otto/Unsplash.

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Why is talking about **democracy, government and money** in politics such a challenge?

From the climate crisis to soaring inequality, affordable housing to good schools and hospitals, democratic participation and government leadership are key to solving many of the challenges we face.

Yet again and again, even the best policy solutions fail to capture the public imagination, in part because people are cynical of our elected representatives' ability to deliver them. The influence of money in the political system is also a significant barrier to the changes we are advocating for, whether we work on climate solutions, human rights, economic justice or aid and development.

In Australia and around the world, social research shows there is record low trust in democracy. People are increasingly dissatisfied with government and fed up with adversarial, unresponsive and antagonistic politics. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that mainstream media often frames politics as a game or a brutal struggle for power, with citizens as passive, powerless spectators. Meanwhile, social media teems with cynicism that politics is fundamentally broken and there's nothing we can do about it.

By constantly criticising government, civil society organisations often inadvertently reinforce this cynicism and fatalism by repeating unhelpful messages. Every time we repeat a claim by our opponents, we repeat their message. When we say 'our democracy is not broken', people hear 'democracy' and 'broken' and associate them together.

To solve the biggest challenges we face, we must overcome a number of corrosive stereotypes around what government is and how politics can and should work. We must revitalise our democracy and the faith people place in it. And we must make a compelling case for democratic reforms that curb corporate influence, without reinforcing the dominant stories about politics being broken.

This messaging project examines how civil society organisations can talk about democracy, politics, and corporate influence. This report is a summary of the research project and findings, designed to inform communicators and campaigners across civil society.

A note on Coronavirus

This research took place between August 2019 and January 2020 – just before Covid-19 changed our world in ways that were unimaginable. Early social research suggests that both globally and in Australia, decisive actions by leaders in response to the pandemic have contributed to an increase in trust in government and government institutions. However, with the pandemic far from over, it is yet to be seen whether this trend of increased trust will be sustained.

As Australia moves out of an immediate crisis response and into rebuilding, communities and civil society will continue to advocate for bold policy and funding changes to lead us into the future we want. Simultaneously, corporations from mining, gambling, agriculture and other industries will continue to push to remove government regulations, lower corporate taxation rates and increase subsidies. We believe the democracy narrative research and advice in this report remain and will continue to remain relevant despite recent events.

Our approach

For this project, we explored how Australians understand democracy and democratic reform by reviewing existing research and undertaking elicitation interviews, discourse analysis, workshops, a quantitative survey and dial testing.

Literature review

In a literature review, we analysed Australian and international research, including academic articles, social and market research, polling and surveys, to understand the challenges, opportunities and research gaps, and to formulate a set of possible framing strategies to build on and test. We interviewed dozens of people working on democratic issues to understand how they frame problems and solutions.

Discourse analysis

To explore how Australians conceptualise democratic issues, we analysed hundreds of quotations from the media, social media, speeches from politicians, websites and reports, as well as materials from allies and those who oppose democratic reform. We reviewed these materials to identify common frames and characters, assumptions, values, gaps and opportunities.

Workshops

We ran a series of ‘battle of the story’ workshops with campaigners and communicators from alliance organisations, as well as with the public. In these workshops, we delved into the dominant stories and how they need to shift, as well as strategic framing possibilities to elevate new stories.

Message dial testing

Dial tests and an online survey were conducted in November 2019 to test a range of messages, frames, phrases and words. The audience for the survey and the dial tests was a nationally representative sample of 1,294 people which was representative of the adult Australian population by age, geography and gender. The objective of these dial tests was to find the words and messages that ring true with supporters, and which move the most people in the persuadable group towards supporting the idea of progressive democratic reform, including limiting the influence of money in our democracy.



Our terminology

In this guide, we use several terms when we talk about changing the story:¹

Term	Definition	Examples
Meta-narratives	<p>Meta-narratives, also called worldviews, tap into deeply embedded beliefs, paradigms, values, and assumptions we hold about the world. They bind together how entire societies interpret the way things work.</p> <p>Dominant meta-narratives are stubbornly intractable and we often unconsciously and unwittingly reproduce them.</p>	<p>Life is a battle</p> <p>Survival of the fittest</p> <p>Humans are inherently selfish</p> <p>It's all about the bottom line/the money</p>
Narratives	<p>Narratives are the collections or systems of interrelated stories that represent a central idea or belief. They are the deeper meanings that infuse our experiences, through which we analyse the past, make sense of the present and navigate towards the future – they shape what we see as possible, and restrict us from imagining what could be different.</p> <p>We can either reinforce these narratives, or challenge them and elevate new ones, ultimately aiming to change people's understanding and perceptions of the world.</p>	<p>Politicians are liars</p> <p>Government is inefficient</p> <p>Bi-partisan agreement is impossible in Australia</p>
Stories	<p>Humans are forever telling stories to transmit ideas, trends, myths, fables, and dreams. Stories are like mosaic tiles, each bringing narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible. In stories, something happens to someone or something, with a beginning, middle and end. They have characters, protagonists, a problem, a path, consequences, decision points and conclusions.</p> <p>When we hear stories, we try to fit them into narrative patterns we already understand. If the story doesn't fit the pattern, we can ignore the story or build an alternative pattern. Stories also reflect power – who gets to speak, which stories are omitted or silenced, which ones are celebrated.</p>	<p>Clive Palmer donated millions to polarise voters and change the election</p> <p>“Egg boy” expressed all our frustration by throwing an egg on Senator Fraser Anning</p>

¹ These definitions draw on The Narrative Initiative, Toward new gravity: Charting a course for the Narrative Initiative, 2017

See also Doyle Canning, Patrick Reinsborough & Jonathan Matthew Smucker, Re:Imagining Change: How to use story-based strategy to win campaigns, build movements, and change the world, PM Press 2017

Our terminology continued from previous page

Term	Definition	Examples
Frames	<p>Frames are different mental structures or word pictures that can be triggered by specific storylines, perspectives or words that convey a story in a particular way. For example, environmental protection versus environmental regulation triggers strikingly different frames and ideas even though they technically mean the same thing.</p> <p>We use frames in social change communications to activate shared values and foreground certain ideas and beliefs, while backgrounding others.</p>	<p>Democracy as a game</p> <p>Democracy as a battle</p> <p>Democracy as working together for our common good</p> <p>JuLiar</p> <p>Mr Harborside Mansion</p> <p>Lifters and leaners</p>
Messages	<p>The actual words you say to specific audiences and channels. Messages reflect frames, tell stories, and tap into narratives and worldviews.</p> <p>When writing messages, be mindful that your messages are not inadvertently reinforcing unhelpful frames and narratives.</p>	<p>When the people we elect to government represent us and reflect our values and concerns – that’s when democracy works best.</p>

Shelburne mangroves, Cape York, QLD. *Photo: Andrew Picone*



How do people in Australia think about government and democracy?

Australian and global social research finds consistently and overwhelmingly that people have low trust in government. This falling trust is especially the case in mature, rich democratic nations.

People feel politicians do not listen to them, represent their views or address their concerns and grievances. They believe politicians are self-interested and are more concerned about being re-elected than solving big societal challenges. They see politics as a partisan battle focused on short-term and short-sighted decision making, and they don't see much difference between the major parties.

FrameWorks Institute, an American research body, found people in America see government as either:

"them"

Partisan politics with politicians and elected leaders

or

"it"

A huge, monolithic, bureaucratic blob

Both of these lenses offer narrow, distorted and unhelpful views of government. FrameWorks found even the term "government" itself is loaded with negative baggage and deep-seated cynicism across all demographics. Strong, entrenched frames influence thinking about government, particularly that government is chronically unavailable, corrupt, partisan, elite and bloated. Neither of these two frames allow consideration of a role for citizen involvement or impact, and makes it possible to view government as:

"us"

A tool to implement the common good and improve quality of life

When citizens see government as separate to 'us', the people, they view themselves as spectators rather than actors. In the FrameWorks research, people generally exaggerated partisanship and ignored consensus, and did not think of public institutions like schools, libraries and parks as part of government.

Although the FrameWorks research is American and from 2006, it is consistent with the Australian context and Australian social research. Both global and Australian research indicates cynicism over government has in fact increased considerably over the past decade – although public trust in government globally improved significantly after Covid-19.² Edelman found trust in government (65 percent) surged 11 points since January making it the most trusted institution for the first time in 20 years of the Edelman study. However, as levels of trust start from a low base and the pandemic and economic uncertainty look likely to be protracted and challenging to solve, it is unclear how long this trend will continue.

Despite the pandemic changing attitudes towards government, decades of neoliberal language and attitudes have had a significant impact on how people perceive government. The view that people are primarily motivated by economic imperatives and the market (rather than human imperatives like social, intellectual and spiritual needs) has become the dominant framework for public discourse. Consistent with this neoliberal shift, research shows people in Australia are open to the belief that the private sector is more accountable and efficient than government, and therefore to the idea that the government should be "run like a business". This frame is particularly problematic because it frames citizens as merely consumers.

However, the Progress Economic Messaging Project research in April 2018 found people are equally open to the view that the government should actively care for the needs of people and the planet. In fact, compared to other countries, this research

² Edelman, Government trust surges to an all-time high amid Covid-19 pandemic making it the most trusted institution, News & Awards, 4 May 2020

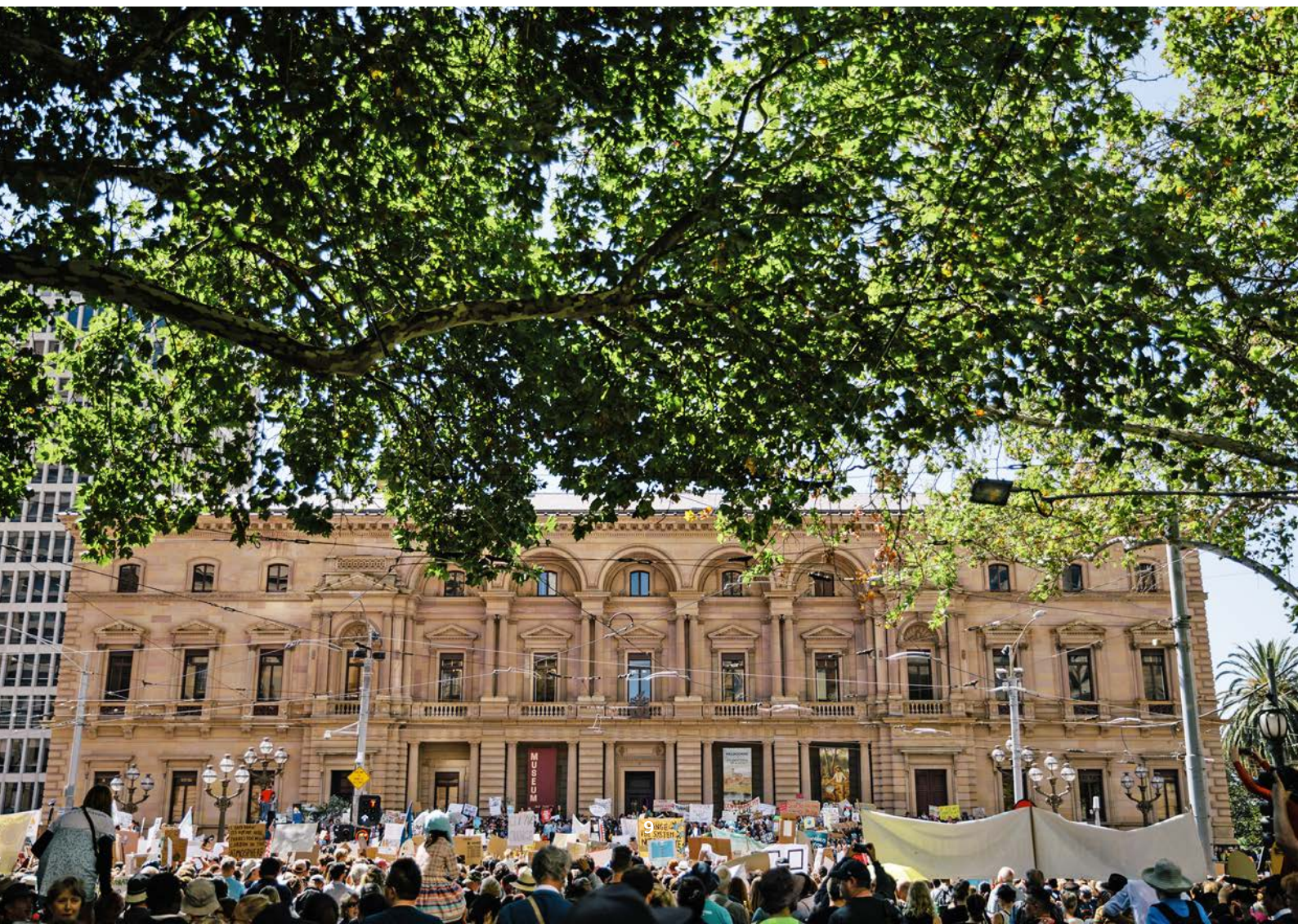
shows Australians express a strong desire for the government to provide comprehensive services, when they are prompted with options. This desire is especially strong for health, education, aged care, public transport and childcare.³ This increased expectation of government appears to have also grown since Covid-19 started.

Most people do not experience a regular or sustained connection to the process of government – a “we the people” experience – which makes

government seem far away and impossible to influence. Both Australian research and FrameWorks Institute suggests people want to see a role for themselves as responsible and engaged citizens. They want to engage in long-term problem solving and offer views, but they aren’t sure how. In order to do this, however, they must overcome the notion of corruption and money in politics and believe in a narrative where they also have input into the system.

³ Australian Progress, *How to Talk about Economics: A Guide to Changing the Story*, 23 April 2018

School strike for climate, Melbourne. *Photo: James Thomas*



Dominant democracy narratives

The cynical voter narrative

Our literature review found a number of consistent narratives and frames across media, social media and campaign material – whether from progressive civil society organisations or our opponents.

Particularly prevalent on social media and comments on news articles, a ‘cynical voter story’ reinforces the idea that politics is broken and that politicians can’t be trusted. This story might look like:

I don’t pay much attention to politics – it’s full of corrupt politicians arguing with each other. They’re only in it for themselves – they don’t listen to or represent people like me. I vote in elections every few years, but I’m only one person so my vote can’t change anything.

I don’t trust politicians to solve big issues, they’re hopeless and just say soundbites to get reelected. They’re all hypocrites breaking promises and playing the game. It’s a joke – we change Prime Ministers every 5 minutes. Big business has too much power. They’re buying Canberra with secret handshakes. I think the system is broken. The political parties are broken and undemocratic, but there’s nothing I can do about it, and the politicians won’t fix it.

Another version of this story blames fellow citizens for the failure of politics:

Politicians have to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Voters get the political party they deserve. Other people can’t be trusted – they don’t make good decisions. They’re too selfish and stupid to know what’s good for them. I care about the big issues but most people don’t. If I was a dictator, the country would be in much better shape.

People hear criticism of ‘this Government’ as criticism of both government and democracy in general. These stories further reinforce cynicism and erode trust in democracy, and yet, they remain popular even amongst those who support democratic reforms. To see a role for themselves, people must overcome the notion of corruption and money in politics. Government therefore should not be framed as both the problem and the solution because it weakens trust in government and makes our solutions seem unbelievable.

This story also undermines the truth that people want active government. Australians are pragmatic yet aspirational. Across demographics, Australians want the government to step up and solve big challenges. They value the services that the government is able to provide, such as education, healthcare, welfare and other public services.

The neoliberal narrative

Decades of neoliberal language and attitudes have significantly shaped how people perceive government. As discussed in previous sections, the view that people are primarily motivated by economic imperatives and the market is a dominant framework for public discourse. This story tells us that the best way to bring greater benefit to all Australians is to reduce the role of government in the daily business of life and give free reign to business.

This story further erodes trust in government and decreases collective self-efficacy. It lowers expectations that the government will take on the big challenges we face, so voters come to demand and accept less than they would otherwise. This story also paints citizens as consumers, undermining the true story that people in Australia actually do want to participate in their democracy. This in turn diminishes government’s willingness and social license to implement bold and visionary reforms to the problems we face, particularly those that challenge neoliberal ideas.

Our narrative

Rather than repeating and reinforcing cynical voter or neoliberal narratives, we are more effective when we share stories, craft messages and shape narratives that reinforce that:

- **Government is us.** We elect people to listen to and represent us and trust them to make decisions on our behalf. They answer to us.
- **There are many ways we participate in democracy.** That's how we make a world that works for everyone.
- **Government helps to create a healthy, vibrant society.** Government looks after the public good.
- **It's important to limit corporate power** and influence so our democracy works for the common good.
- **We're best when we work together.** The people impacted by decisions should be involved in making them.
- **We have a responsibility** to care for each other, our planet and support vulnerable people in our community.

Our story versus the dominant stories

	OUR STORY	NEOLIBERAL STORY	CYNICAL VOTER STORY
Vision/ values	<p>A great life for everyone is our shared goal.</p> <p>The primary aim of a functioning democracy is to make collective decisions on behalf of the public to provide the foundation for our way of life – like public health, basic safety, city parks, good libraries and schools.</p>	<p>A great life for everyone is our shared goal.</p> <p>The primary aim of a functioning democracy is a strong economy. Small government equals a stronger economy which means more for all. If business prospers we all prosper (wealth will trickle down).</p>	<p>A great life would be nice, but a better system is never going to happen.</p> <p>The primary way democracy works is to serve politicians and the powerful. Politicians may have power to change the system, but choose not to, making change impossible.</p>
Barrier	<p>Some self-interested corporations can get in the way of that goal. They use their wealth and power to influence democratic decision making for their own private benefit, rather than the common good.</p>	<p>Government often gets in the way of that goal. Government is incompetent and inefficient and puts our democratic freedom and choice at risk.</p>	<p>Corrupt and inefficient politics are in the way. Politicians are selfish, greedy liars. It's a dog eat dog battle for power, and power corrupts, so whoever ends up inside the Canberra bubble ends up corrupted.</p>
Solution	<p>A vibrant and healthy democracy, where our elected representatives reflect the values and needs of the communities they represent, is the best way to make sure everyone has a great life.</p>	<p>Competition and choice is the best way to make sure those who work hard get what they deserve. Government needs to remove restrictions, so that business can freely provide jobs and wealth for the people.</p>	<p>Change is impossible, but independent protesters can disrupt the system and expose its corruption.</p>
Outcome	<p>Everyone can have a great life if we have an active, democratic government. Good government gives everyone within society a say and makes decisions for our common good.</p>	<p>You can get what you want if we allow the market to be free.</p>	<p>The system is broken and will continue to be a corrupt game. The outcome may be climate collapse, war, the end of humanity.</p>

National **survey** and **dial testing**

In November 2019, we conducted a national survey and a dial test of sample messages about democratic reform.

Survey questions focused on respondents' views about democracy, corporate capture and the influence of money in the political system. In dial tests, respondents were played four messages in random order and asked to continuously indicate whether what they were hearing was convincing – or unconvincing – to them at that moment. At the end of each message, respondents were asked to

also give an overall rating of how convincing they found the message. The results therefore include a moment-by-moment visceral reaction to words and phrases, as well as a more considered overall impression of the message. We also included a sample opposition message as a comparison.

The audience for the survey and the dial tests was a national sample of 1,294 people which was representative of the adult Australian population by age, geography and gender. Based on answers to a series of initial survey questions, we segmented our audience into three categories:

Supporters: 26% of total	Persuadable: 48% of total	Opposition: 26% of total
<p>People who agree there is a problem with our democracy, and that money in the political system is a cause of that problem.</p> <p>This group is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More likely to identify as progressive and to vote ALP or Green• Rank both climate change and the environment as top three issue• More likely to be over 65 and living in a regional area	<p>People who are open to being convinced of a particular solution but who could also be convinced to oppose the solution if exposed to a successful opposition message.</p> <p>This group is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Largely reflective of the general Australian population in both demographics and political preferences	<p>People who believe our democracy is functioning well and did not identify money as an issue. This group is opposed to our policies and very unlikely to change their minds.</p> <p>This group is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More likely to be male• More likely to identify politically as centre or slightly right of centre• The least engaged with news and current events

Respondents views on democracy and corporate influence

Democracy

For the past few decades, trust in democracy has been declining, both in Australia and around the world.

Citizens are dissatisfied with government and fed up with adversarial, unresponsive and antagonistic politics. This is a significant global trend. However the local situation in Australia is a little more nuanced.

In our nationally representative survey, we asked participants a number of questions to better understand their views of government and democracy.

Key Insights:

- **People are not confident the system is working well, but are reluctant to acknowledge that democracy is broken or that our democracy isn't working.** Seventy-nine percent of supporters and 60% of persuadables believe our current political system lets down too many people. However, persuadables also believe that our democracy is in better shape than our opposition or supporters.

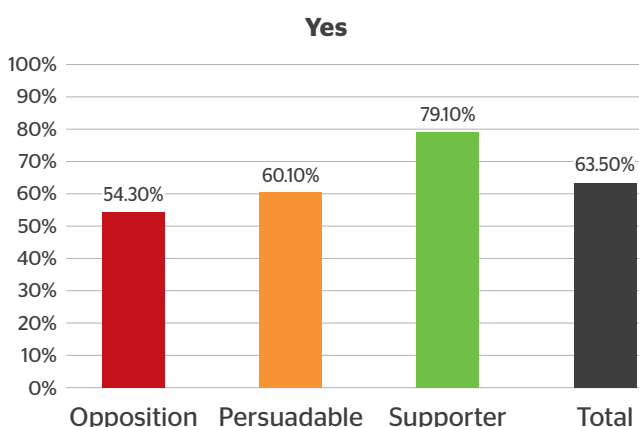
The testing indicates a lack of believability among persuadables of messages around our democracy being fundamentally broken or not working. While messages which strongly critique our government or democracy tend to activate our supporters, these messages risk alienating persuadable audiences and so should be used with care.

Messages which focused on democratic values such as fairness, equality and care, while speaking to a positive vision of what we want our democracy to achieve, performed best.

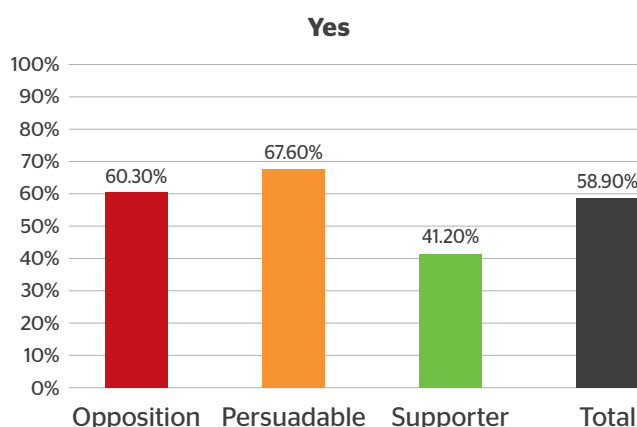
- **A large percentage of people hold conflicting views on the state of democracy in Australia.** While a majority of persuadables (60%) thought the current political system lets down too many people, 68% of persuadables also believed that the current system works well for most people and that it is fair.

While at first glance contradictory, it is not necessarily at odds to believe that the system works well for most people while still letting down too many people. This reinforces the idea that persuadables are perceptive to current issues in our democratic system, but are hesitant to directly critique the system.

Our current political system lets down too many Australians. **Do you agree?**



Our current political system works well for most Australians. **Do you agree?**



- A majority of supporters (88%) and persuadables (54%) **believe that our democratic system works for the benefit of politicians and wealthy individuals**, at the expense of everyday people. While 60% of persuadable audiences felt that our democracy lets down too many people, only 54% felt that it worked unfairly to the benefit of certain people.

Persuadables are more likely to believe that individuals have earned their success, rather than the system being flawed, however they can be activated by evoking values of fairness or unfairness. Again, giving specific examples of bad behaviour is important for convincing persuadable audiences that there is undue influence in our democracy or that our democracy is not working as it should.

- **People have very negative views of politicians and lobbyists.** This gives rise to a particular communications challenge, as people are much more confident attributing blame for the problems with democracy to these groups than they are to wealthy individuals or corporate donors who are seeking to influence political outcomes.

However, it's not helpful to focus the blame on politicians in general, as this feeds into the dominant narrative about politics as broken. Instead, testing showed that using specific examples of bad behaviour by corporations or industries worked better.

- However, **the majority of people do feel that democracy in Australia is strong**, and that it is important to protect our democracy. **People see democracy as important** and believe there is an obligation to participate, but are not sure their vote makes a difference. Dial testing suggests people are confused – the view that everyone has a responsibility to participate in Australia could reflect a limited view of compulsory voting, or a broader obligation to participate in democracy in big and small ways.

Corporate influence

The survey also asked respondents questions to determine how they understand the issue of corporate influence, such as the influence of money and lobbyists in the political system, and how they viewed the solutions.

- **People are confident that corporations and wealthy individuals are able to influence our democracy**, and believe that taking corporate money out of politics will make it more representative.
- While the **majority of people are uncomfortable with large political donations**, they are unsure what impact political donations have on our democracy. We can't assume that people's concern will translate into widespread support for action. However, people can be convinced.

Net Agree (negative indicates net "disagreement")	Opposition	Persuadable	Supporter	Total
Politicians in Australia can be easily influenced by industry and wealthy individuals.	22.5%	80.6%	92.8%	68.6%
Large political donations are undermining Australia's system of democratic government.	- 3.0%	52.1%	90.7%	47.8%
Taking corporate money out of politics will make it more representative.	- 9.9%	63.5%	95.8%	52.8%

Overall, there is very strong support amongst persuadables and supporters for democratic integrity reforms:

Net Agree	Opposition	Persuadable	Supporter	Total
Political lobbyists should be tightly regulated including having to report who they lobby and how often.	23.0%	80.0%	91.9%	68.3%
There should be limits on how much money political parties can spend on election campaigns.	18.5%	87.0%	97.3%	71.9%
There should be limits on how much money corporations, individuals and other organisations can spend on election campaigns.	3.6%	85.9%	99.7%	68.2%
Limiting large political donations will make our democracy fairer.	4.8%	66.7%	88.4%	56.3%
An independent national agency to investigate possible corruption should be set up.	19.4%	79.2%	90.4%	66.6%
Australians should know who is donating money to politicians.	14.0%	94.9%	100.0%	75.3%

Voters at Melbourne polling booth. *Photo: Nils Versemann/Shutterstock.com*



Tested messages

Key:

- Positive but not polarising
- Effective – positive polarisation where persuadables follow supporters
- Ineffective – neutral
- Effective – negative polarisation where persuadables follow opponents

Message 1: Fairness and balance

Our democracy works best when everyone has the opportunity to have a fair and equal say on the issues that matter to them.

But big corporations and the super-rich are pouring millions of dollars into elections to buy a bigger say. This risks throwing our whole democratic system out of balance and leaving everyday Australians struggling to make our voices heard.

By capping the amount of money that can be spent during elections we can stop corporations and wealthy individuals from trying to dictate our democracy. This will level the playing field and make our democracy fairer for all Australians.

Intention	Results
This message tested a focus on fairness as a key value and the effectiveness of a 'system out of balance' metaphor. We also wanted to test the reaction to 'capping' election expenditure and to different ways of describing the actions of corporations and wealthy individuals.	This message worked well for the target audiences and had the highest Convincing/Very Convincing rating for Persuadables (84%) and Supporters (90%).

What worked well

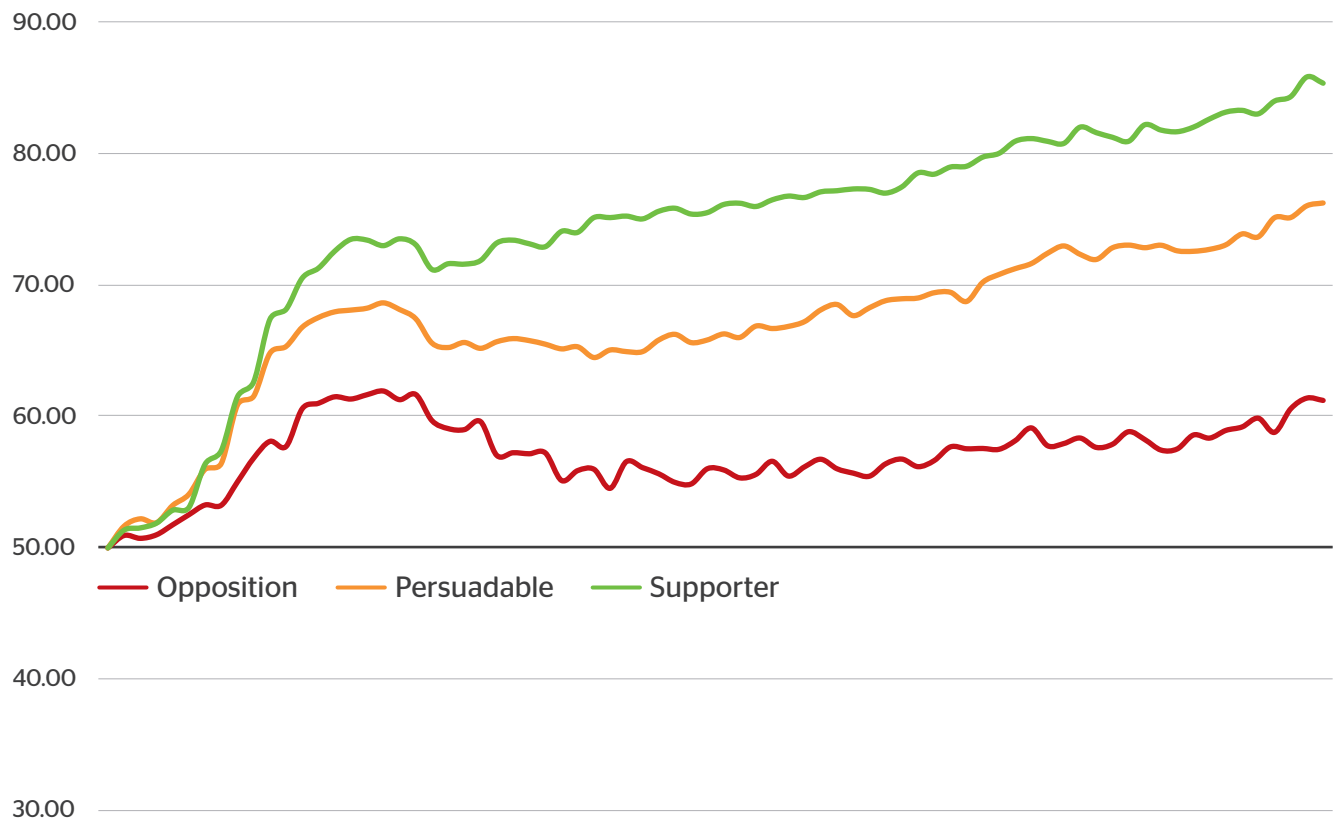
- Fairness as a value – the phrase “fair and equal”
- The metaphor of a system out of balance
- Highlighting that “everyday Australians are struggling to have their voices heard”
- Naming the solution: Capping the amount of money that can be spent during elections to reduce influence of big corporations
- Specifically, ‘capping’ money spent on elections

What didn't work

- The phrase “buy a bigger say”
- The term “super-rich”

Message 1: Fairness and balance

Dial test results



Red-tailed cockatoos. Photo: Holgi/Pixabay



Message 2: Government is Us

Australia works best when we work together to get things done – whether it's providing Medicare, quality schools for our kids, clean air and safe food, or bushfire protection.

We do all of this together, **through government**.

But this is all under **threat** from powerful corporate lobbyists using their **oversized wallets** to skew public decision-making for their own gain, rather than for the common good of all Australians.

By taking big money out of politics we can make sure people, not corporate profits, are at the heart of our democracy. And that our government represents all of us.

Intention	Results
This message tested a frame of the government as something that we are all a part of. We also wanted to test the metaphor of people as being at the heart of our democracy and to test responses to the idea of government acting for the “common good” of all Australians.	This message was well supported by both Persuadables (82%) and Supporters (89%). The “common good” is a powerful phrase that should be utilised by advocates – it's particularly effective when supported by known examples of services and actions undertaken for the common good.

What worked well

- Australians
- Providing clear, known examples of the benefits of working together was very effective i.e. Medicare, schools
- Explicit mention of intent to take big money out of politics
- The positive vision of government that represents all Australians

Positive language triggers:

- Together
- For our kids
- Clean air
- Through government

What didn't work

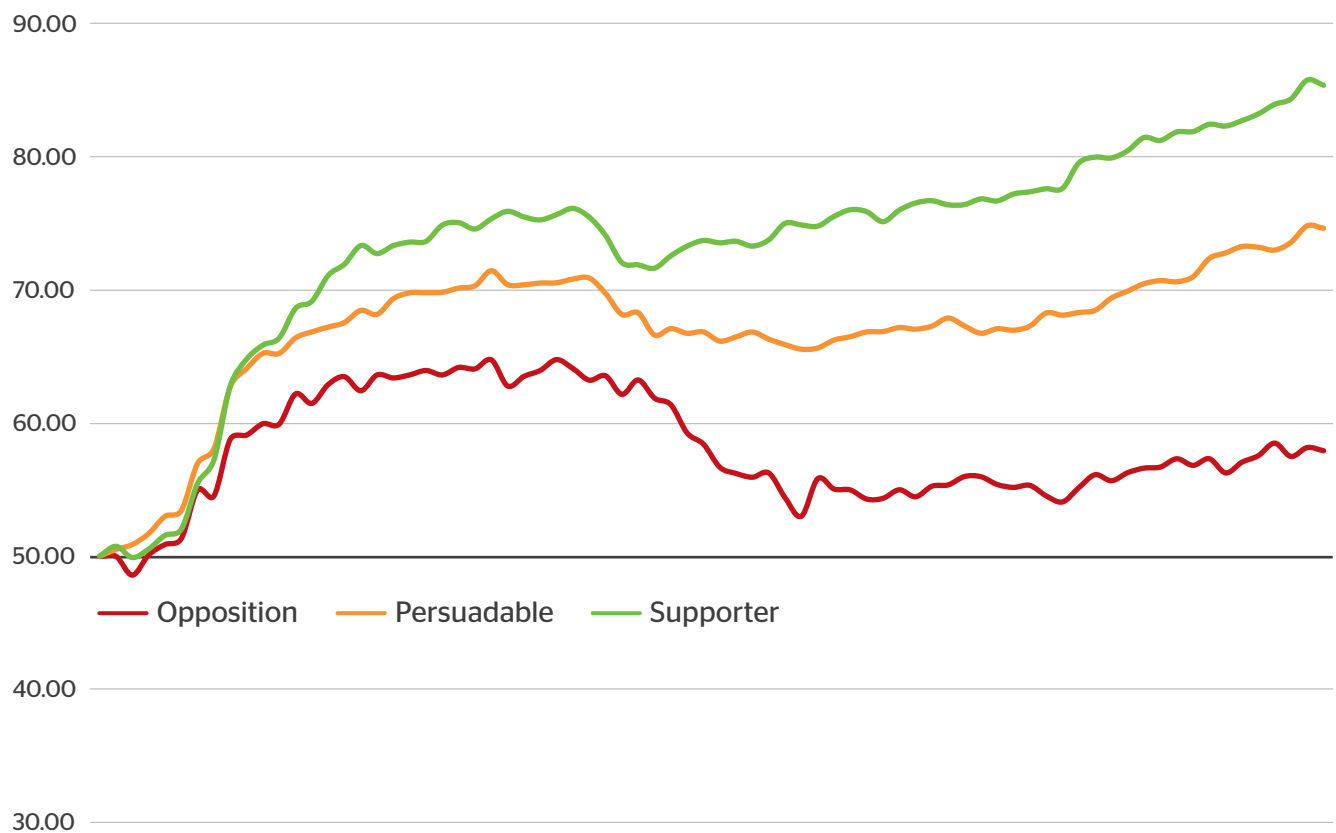
- The idea that government is responsible for Australians working together and supporting one another
- The notion that democracy / government is under threat wasn't believable

Negative language triggers:

- “we do all of this together..”
- Threat
- Using oversized wallets
- All Australians

Message 2: Government is Us

Dial test results



Volunteers share scorecards on election day, Melbourne. *Photo: James Thomas*



Message 3: Caring for our common good

Australians are good at taking care of one another – whether it's fighting fires, checking in on our neighbours when they need it, or being there for our friends and family.

People working together to care for each other is also at the heart of our democracy.

This is how we ensure great education and healthcare, vibrant communities and a healthy environment.

But large corporations and wealthy individuals are attempting to buy special treatment at the expense of everyone else. This is because our laws today are allowing them to fund election campaigns and flood the political system with big money.

By placing limits on political donations and expenditure we can strengthen our democracy and ensure that together we continue to make decisions that take care of all of us.

Intention	Results
This message sought to test the frame of 'caring' – both for individuals and for the common good. This was presented in contrast to the current imbalance between regular people and big corporations/wealthy individuals. We also sought to test reactions to the phrases 'big money' and 'limiting' money in politics.	This message was again convincing for both Persuadables (82%) and Supporters (90%). Framing a message around caring – for each other, for the common good and for our democracy works very well.

What worked well

- Emphasis on working together and taking care of each other
- The concept of a power imbalance between people and big organisations (government or business)
- Conveying a sense of ownership i.e. "our" democracy, "our" government
- Notion of being a good neighbour

Positive language triggers:

- Neighbours
- Care for each other
- Heart of our democracy
- Wealthy individuals
- Flood the political system
- Our democracy
- Together
- Take care

What didn't work

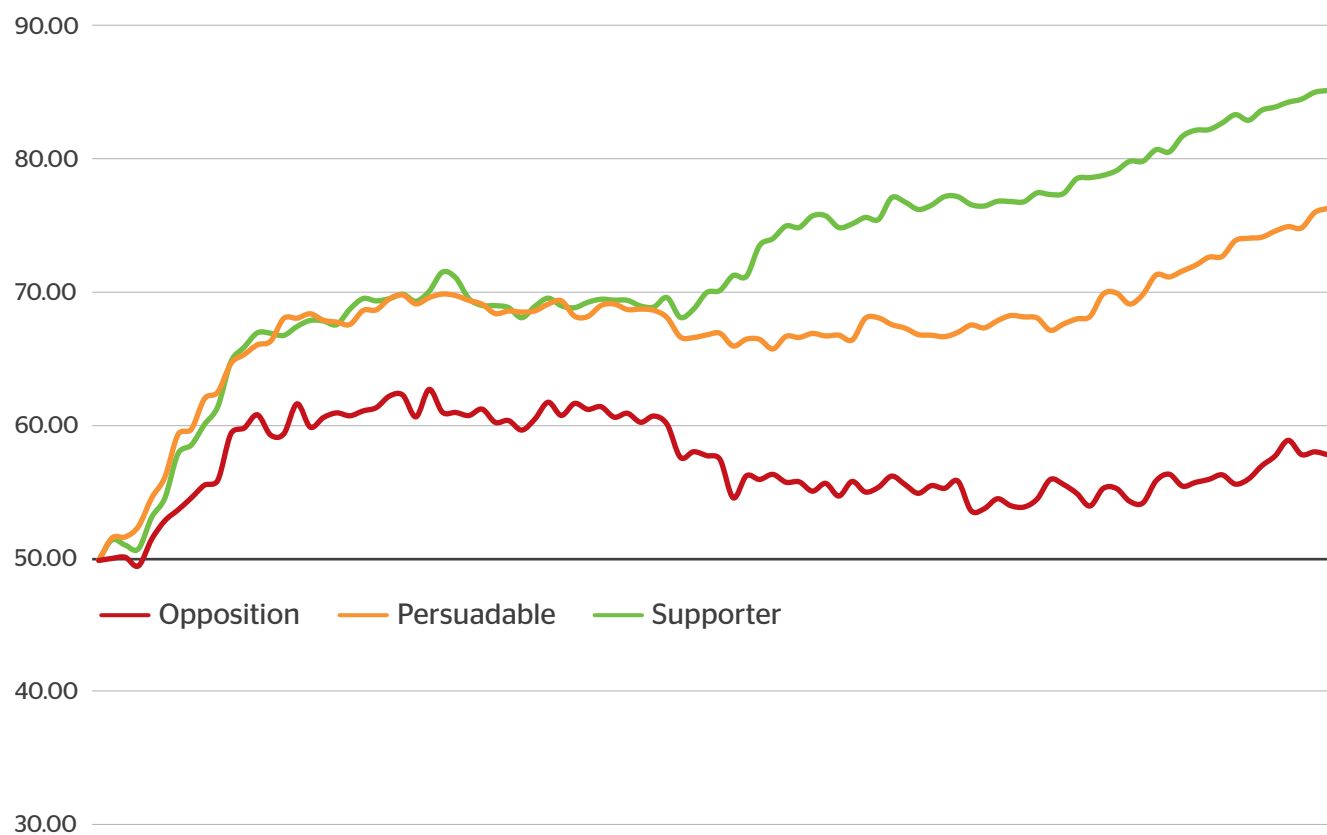
- Again, the attribution of malintent – the idea that wealthy individuals and corporations are "attempting to buy" influence – was unconvincing for people.

Negative language triggers:

- Healthcare
- Attempting to buy
- Our laws
- strengthen

Message 3: Caring for our common good

Dial test results



Shine a light for the reef rally, Melbourne. *Photo: James Thomas*



Message 4: When we are represented

When the people we elect to our Parliaments represent us and reflect our values and concerns - that's when government works best.

But too often in recent years, big corporations have been using their oversized profits to try to influence our democratic processes. The gambling lobby spends millions of dollars lobbying to block common sense gambling reforms. And big mining corporations continue to throw money at political parties to influence votes on laws to protect our environment.

By stopping corporations and super wealthy individuals from making huge donations to political parties and splashing cash on elections, we'll ensure our elected representatives can focus on listening to our communities and thinking beyond the next election cycle to the next generation.

Intention	Results
This message was testing representation as a frame. We also wanted to test whether including concrete examples of big money attempting to influence politics would be more convincing than general examples or statements and to test the impact of some additional phrases including "making huge donations", "splashing cash" and responses to "elected representatives".	This was another convincing message. The "elected representatives" and "our Parliament" terms elicit a good response and positively position government as the solution. The examples of the problem work well on their own and don't need the stronger language around "oversized profits".

What worked well

- Straightforward examples of big corporations influencing democracy - this works
- A focus on the "next generation"
- The idea that "elected representatives" should be representative of "our values and concerns"
- Referring to "big corporations"

Positive triggers:

- Parliaments
- Values and concerns
- Government
- Big corporations
- Mining Corporations
- Laws
- Elected representatives
- Next election cycle
- Next generation

What didn't work

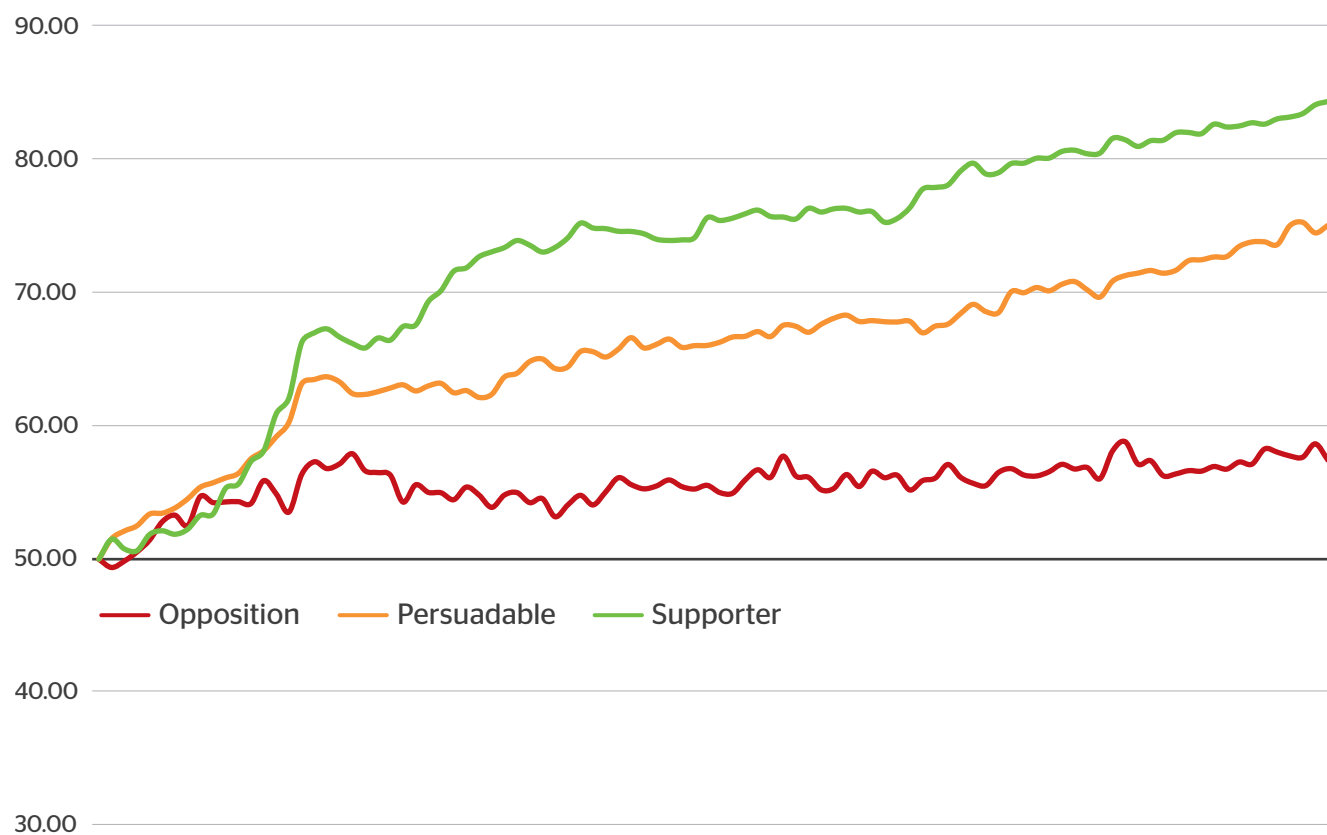
- The argument that big corporations try to "influence votes"
- The term "stopping corporations..."
- Reference to corporations using 'oversized profits'.

Negative triggers:

- Oversized profits
- Lobbying
- Stopping (corporations)
- Splashing cash

Message 4: When we are represented

Dial test results

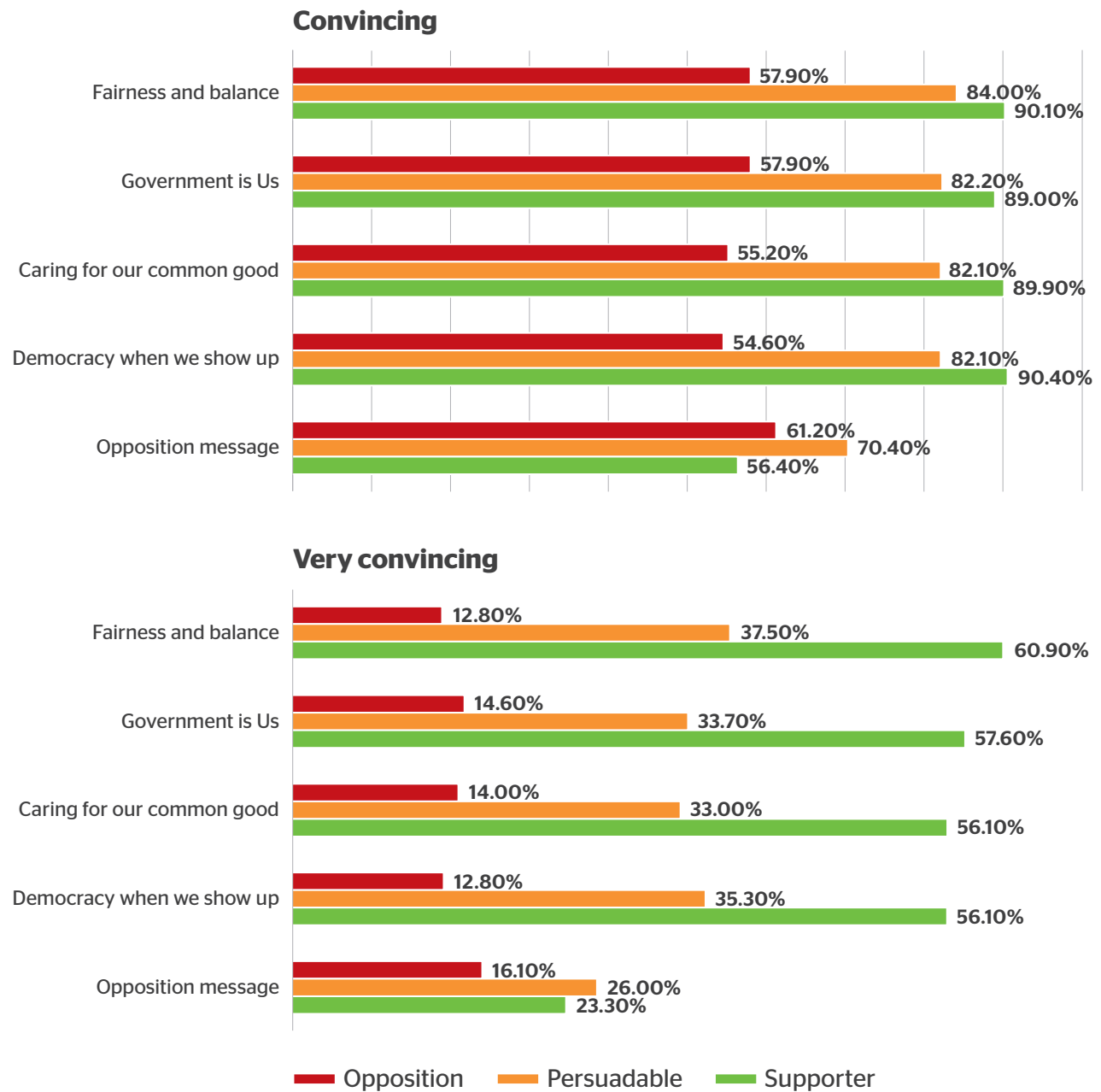


Volunteers put their put hands up for action, Melbourne. *Photo: James Thomas*



Key results

Overall effectiveness of each message:



Overall, our research found:

What worked well

- Evoking values of honesty, compassion, fairness and justice
- Talking about “the common good” for all Australians
- Keeping democracy in “balance”
- Ensuring everyone has a “fair and equal say”
- Inclusive language that gives a sense of ownership i.e. “our government” “our elected representatives”
- Explicit mention of the solution: to cap large political donations
- Relatable examples of the benefits of working together for the common good
- Specific examples of how large corporations and wealthy individuals are using their power to influence politics
- Emphasis on the importance for elected representatives to reflect the “values and concerns” of everyday Australians
- Positive tone, focus on the future and “the next generation” (i.e. WHY the solution is important)

What didn't work

- Implication that big corporations and wealthy individuals are “attempting to buy” more influence
- Evoking authority, responsibility and loyalty values (e.g. “stopping politicians from...”)
- The notion that our democracy / government is under threat
- Politically loaded terms e.g. “Lobbying”
- Hyperbole e.g. “splashing cash” “oversized wallets”

School strike for climate, Melbourne. Photo: James Thomas



Putting it all together: a message framework that works

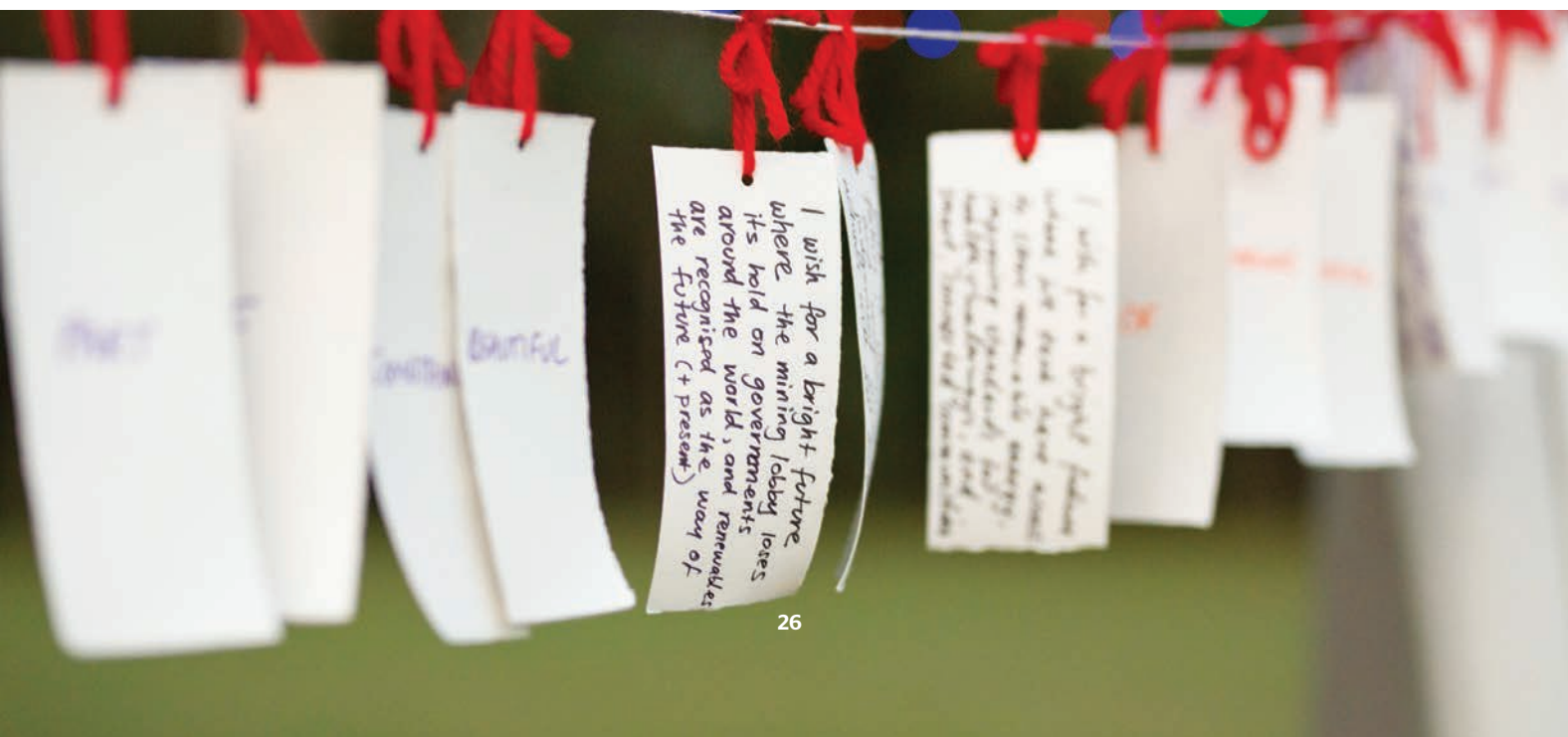
While it may be tempting to lead with outrage, especially when talking about democracy and political reform, it is important to lead with a positive vision and the values we share before listing barriers and problems.

Always include who the actors are and lay out a clear solution and path forward.

A useful framework is the ‘narrative sandwich’ in which the problem we are seeking to solve is ‘sandwiched’ between our shared values and vision. Our research found this sample message worked well:

What we share Lead with what we value, a clear vision of how our democracy should work	When the people we elect to government represent us and reflect our values and concerns – that’s when democracy works best.
The problem or barrier and who is responsible	<p>But when mining companies and other large corporations are able to make large political donations, they can put the whole system out of balance.</p> <p>Like coal baron and Liberal Party donor Trevor St Baker, who lobbied our Environment Minister for public money to keep burning coal in his coal-fired power station in NSW.</p>
The solution Our pathway to action, what we can do together	<p>By working together to cap the amount of money that can be spent during elections* (or other specific action) we can put people back at the heart of our democracy.</p> <p>This will make our democracy fairer and ensure that our elected representatives serve the whole community – not just big businesses.</p>

An ACF volunteer shares their vision. *Photo: Eddie Safarik*



1. Start with what we share – the kind of democracy we value

Lead with shared values and the outcome of what you seek – the kind of democracy we want to be part of.

Our research found leading with problems and processes is less activating for both supporters and persuadables. Emphasising that democracy is under attack or failing reinforces a sense of hopelessness, suggesting the system itself is fundamentally broken, rather than specific aspects of the system which we can change. It also primes a fatalistic cynical voter story that makes our

solutions (such as elected representatives putting caps on corporate donations) seem unbelievable.

Instead, talk to our best selves and the kind of democracy we want to be part of. Language such as democracy being ‘under attack’ or ‘under threat’ evoke values of power and security. These frames activate our opponents and can pull persuadables toward opposition messaging. Frames evoking ideas of balance/imbalance and fairness/unfairness are far more powerful for both supporters and persuadables.

✓
Interdependence, cooperation, power shared
Common good, wellbeing, community
Collective rules
Our democracy works best when everyone gets a fair and equal say.

✗
Competition, authority
Self-interest, isolated individuals
Freedom to harm
Our democracy only works when everyone steps up and takes responsibility for their role.

Offer relatable, tangible examples of the benefits of working together for our common good, rather than processes or generalities:

✓
No matter where we were born, the colour of our skin or the size of our wallets, in our democracy, we should all have an equal say in the decisions that impact us.
When the people we elect to our Parliaments represent us and reflect our values and concerns – that’s when government works best.
Australia works best when we work together to get things done – whether it’s providing Medicare, quality schools for our kids, or bushfire protection.

✗
Democracy is under attack from corporate interests
Your ability to participate in democracy is at risk.

2. The barrier and who is responsible

Our challenge is motivating people to take action on a specific, concrete ask (such as joining the campaign to remove money from politics) without further increasing cynicism and disillusionment with government.

If we lead with messages about how big business is flooding Australian politics with money, we risk reinforcing the belief that politics is broken.

When it comes to democracy, it is important to be clear about who is doing what to whom, as well as the agents who have the power to intervene and fix this. This may look like:

- A specific corporation or lobbyist – such as a mining corporation or a big pharma lobby

✓
Big pharma lobby groups [make this specific] give millions to the major political parties each year, as all of us continue to pay higher prices for medication.
Coal and gas lobbyists are making large donations to our elected representatives, while calling for them to weaken environmental protection laws like [add specific example].

However be careful to show, rather than tell. Our research found hyperbolic language and exaggeration backfired, especially for persuadable audiences. It is more convincing to describe a situation than to theorise on the intentions of the actors:

✓
Big mining corporations and gambling corporations spending millions of dollars on elections risks throwing our whole democratic system out of balance and leaving everyday Australians struggling to make our voices heard.
Last year, the gambling lobby spent almost a million dollars lobbying in order to influence policy outcomes and block gambling reforms.

group – doing a specific action – such as donating money to our elected representatives – which has a specific tangible, consequence

- Elected representatives who need to listen to the people, and act
- We the people, citizens, who can work together to stop the specific corporation or lobbyists doing the wrong thing, by asking our elected representatives to act.

When we leave out who is responsible for why things are the way they are, we make problems seem inevitable and we become powerless to solve them.

Use specific examples of how actors are doing specific things, and how this is impacting specific policies.

✗
Money is flooding the political system (money is not an actor)
Dirty politicians (it is unhelpful to position politicians as the villain)
Big money is distorting politics (not specific enough)

✗
Big corporations are splashing cash with their oversized wallets. The super rich are buying influence. Big business is dictating politics.
The wealthy are attempting to buy elections (attributing malintent).

A note on talking about government

Research suggests people often go to corrosive stereotypes when they think about government (i.e. “them” or “it”). To restore trust in government and overcome fatalism, avoid reinforcing these stereotypes.

Instead, remind people that government is “us” – an expression of the people’s voice, a way of working together to implement the common good and improve our quality of life. Make vivid and concrete the important work we all appreciate that only happens through collective efforts on behalf of our communities – such as safeguarding our foods, our medications, our clean air and water, hospitals, roads and schools, setting fair conditions for workers, protecting public safety and planning for the future.



Government is something we create together – it’s the one thing we all belong to. We all contribute to our society and get things done we can only do together.

Through democracy, we all have a fair and equal say to shape the decisions that impact us – like schools, laws, roads and hospitals.

Use inclusive language. Frame government as “our elected representatives” or “our government”, with inclusive language that gives a sense of ownership – and remember, government is not the villain. Also avoid politicised and partisan language. Phrases linked to nationalism and national identity tested poorly.



Elected representatives

Our government

People across Australia, all of us

Together, we can make our democracy work for all of us.

It’s also important to be clear what you are referring to when discussing ‘the government’. ‘The government’ can mean the Liberal / National Coalition. It can also mean public servants working for the common good, and services that we all rely on such as Medicare.

Game and battle metaphors also dominated the way that the public and civil society organisations spoke about government and politics. However, these frames suggest that politics has winners and losers, and legitimise a scenario where those who are the most powerful or who play the game best, deserve to win.

Some game metaphors can invoke values of fairness. For example, ‘rigging the rules’ suggests a player is cheating, while ‘level the playing field’ can evoke values of fairness and egalitarianism.’ Invoking values of fairness may be useful, and tested well. However, these metaphors should be used with caution as using them invokes all values of that frame.



Politicians are untrustworthy liars who do not keep their promises.

Politics is a battle.

Government is inefficient and ineffective. Reducing red tape will strengthen the economy and increase jobs and growth.

The game is rigged, we must stop the money game.



Politicians

The government

Australians, as a nation

3. The solution and pathway forward

Offer a path forward – a simple action, a first step to begin to solve the problem.

Present your vision as inevitable, not exceptional. Rather than framing your desired outcome as something radical, normalise it and present it in a way that makes people feel it's only a matter of time before it is achieved.

✓
When we limit the amount of money corporations can hand to political parties and spend on election campaigns, our elected representatives will listen to our communities and think beyond the next election cycle to the next generation.
With a lobbyist register, citizens will be able to see who is meeting our elected representatives and why, and public deliberations will be open, robust and vibrant.
When a national body, like a federal integrity commission, has the power to investigate corruption and uncover deep networks of influence, we will clean up politics.
Capping donations will ensure everyone has the opportunity to have a fair and equal say on the issues that matter to them.

Research shows when people hear criticism of government (and even specific politicians), they hear it as “politics and politicians are failing, and democratic government is not working.” They are left to conclude that government cannot solve big problems and private corporations are a viable option.

✓
Our governments should represent us and reflect our values and concerns. We call on [specific action]...
A good government would...
When our elected representatives...

Explicitly mention the solution and give tangible examples of how democracy will work better with this solution.

Say what government can and should do, not just how government is failing. However, avoid regulatory and controlling language, as it tested poorly – instead of ‘banning’, it is more effective to talk about ‘capping’ political donations.

✗
Our government must stop big corporations from making donations
Banning donations to political parties
Our democracy is under threat. Government has failed to stop the corrosive influence of corporate interests.

Of course, call out bad decisions by specific people, but do so in a way that focuses on what government should do to restore trust in democracy.

✗
Politicians are failing
The political system is under attack from big money and governments have failed to intervene for decades.

Focus on restoring balance, rather than fixing the broken.



Together we will ensure our democracy represents all of us

This will keep our democracy in balance.

By taking big money out of politics we can make sure people, not corporate profits, are at the heart of our democracy.



This will help fix our broken democratic system

People's climate march, Melbourne. *Photo: James Thomas*



Conclusion

Changing the story is no simple task. The corrosive stereotypes about government and democracy this research explored are stubbornly persistent.

There is no perfect message that will galvanise Australians to advocate for democratic reform, nor is there a silver slogan that will remove cynicism.

The dominant narratives about our democracy are messy, and nonlinear. They are made up of a number of different ideas that, together, represent and reinforce central beliefs in our society about the way our democracy works. Most importantly, they help us to define what is possible and what is not possible, limit the public conversation, and impact our appetite for change. We must avoid reinforcing these negative dominant narratives whenever possible.

Instead, there are countless new mosaic tiles for us to craft, with care. We must tell stories that help us to imagine the way things can be, and the type of democracy we would like to live in. By elevating stories of democracy at its best, we can begin to make this vision of a democracy seem inevitable rather than an exception – a democracy that represents all of us, cares for everyone, and that we are all a part of.

Our research found that Australians want this kind of democracy. The stories we tell, and the messages we use, can move us towards this reality.

This research is a work in progress. It primarily focuses on one possible solution to renewing our democracy – reducing the influence and power of corporate vested interests over our democratic processes and institution. We recognise that this is only one of the many solutions necessary to revitalise our democracy, and that we must pursue these different solutions in unison. We invite others to build off of this research and, most of all, to continue to grow and expand the narratives that will help us to build a healthy, vibrant, and just democracy for all.

