The ACT Community Democracy Ecosystem

In the ACT, several organisations and many individuals are working for better community and electorate level democratic practice with a focus on ensuring good representation. This is an ecosystem of people and organisations in a political environment. Within the organisations are people with varying levels of time, energy and interest. Some people may participate in different groups at different phases of the electoral cycle.

Good representation might be defined as representation that ensures community participation in the political process so that community views influence government policy for outcomes that enhance the public good.

The purpose of this document is to help people active in this arena see how connections within the ecosystem might be and work. It is focused at this stage on the ACT and existing organisations. I hope it contributes to discussions about the future possible roles of and relationships between organisations active in this ecosystem. A secondary purpose would be to help people interested in participating in these groups decide where they might join in.

Ecosystem overview

There are six sets of factors in this ecosystem:

- Levels of government
- Accountability of sitting representatives
- Selecting and supporting candidate and representatives
- The phase of the election cycle
- The active organisations
- The people who participate in the organisations formally and those who periodically volunteer their time, ideas, resources and effort during particular phases of the election cycle.

Accountability, candidate aspects, organisations, people's participation and election cycle phase operate across all levels of government.

Ecosystem components described

Levels of government

In the ACT there are three formal levels of government. These are:

- The Senate
- The House of Representatives, and
- The ACT Assembly

Accountability of sitting representatives

Elected representatives operate as both delegates and trustees of their constituency. They need to balance these roles. Political party representatives also have direct accountability to their party and indirect accountability to donors to their party.

Within the accountability domain are the following functions:

- Collecting and communicating the collective views of the electorate communities to the representative so the representative knows what their communities want.
- Facilitating electorate community deliberations on topics to ascertain what needs to be communicated to the representative.
- Perhaps facilitating questions and information from the representative to the community, although most representatives seem to have avenues to do this themselves.
- Reporting representative's parliamentary behaviour and values to the electorate community; this can include:
    - How the representative votes in relation to the community's identified important issues and topics
    - The representative's more general voting patterns
    - The representative's adherence to standards, values and integrity
    - Other factors identified by an electorate community as important to them

Nationally there are several individuals and organisations that provide websites that people can access to monitor what their representatives are doing. These include:

- Political gadgets – draws information from multiple sources to a dashboard (free)
- Polipedia – draws information from multiple sources (some free and some commercially available)
- Open Australia – draws information from multiple sources to a dashboard (free)
- Open Politics – draws information from multiple sources to a dashboard (free)
- #AusGovInfo – draws information from multiple sources to a dashboard (free)
- They vote for you – reports voting patterns (free)
- And others.

Selecting and supporting candidate and representatives

Pre-selecting candidates

Active selection

In the event that an electorate community decides to run a community independent candidate, this is a primary focus in the lead up to an election and in the campaign phases.

Inactive selection

In the case of a major or minor political party candidate, the presence of an active electorate group may put some pressure on the party pre-selectors to pick a candidate likely to be acceptable to the electorate community.

Assessing candidates

In the lead into the election phase and during the campaign candidates across all layers of government need to be assessed according to a set of criteria that communities choose which may include:

- Experience and skills that qualifies the candidate for office
- Demonstrated adherence to a set of values and standards of integrity
- Demonstrated or promised methods for facilitating community participation in their representative role; clearly sitting members have an advantage here

Supporting representatives

Political party representative

- Direct personal accountability
- Information, policy support, policy ideas, prioritising issues

Community independent representative

- Direct personal accountability
- Information, policy support, policy ideas, prioritising issues
- Volunteer workforce

The phase of the election cycle

The participation of, focus of and level of activity of organisations will depend on the phase of the election cycle.

There phases are:

- Lead up to / pre-election
- Campaign (including election day)
- Post-election reflection
- Between elections.

It is worth noting that that each level of government has its own independent cycle and so these phases may not synchronise.

Active Organisations

In the ACT there are several organisations active in the electorate democracy space. These have separate although broadly overlapping objectives and different focuses.

The **active, grassroots organisations** are:

- CAPaD – promotes thoughtful choice of candidates based on abilities to do their job
- proACT – promotes community candidates at the federal electorate level
- Active Democracy Bean (with the possibility of further Active Democracy groups) – promotes working with and holding existing MPs accountable
- DemocracyCo is temporarily organising the Canberra Forum with Alicia Payne; they are an example of an organisation that facilitates participation

Political parties

Political parties and their members and supporters are involved in party business and policy development through all phases of the election cycle, and select candidates and campaign for them during the pre-election and campaign phases. They are a particular type of grassroots organisation.

National organisations that play in this space include:

Active Democracy Australia provides a website with information about each Australian electorate, tools for electorate groups to use and the opportunity for all electorate groups to put up information about themselves.

#OurDemocracy is a campaign run by the Australian Democracy Network that promotes its Framework for a fair democracy.

Voter-assist organisations include:

- Elections ACT also has a legislated responsibility to provide a platform for candidates to put up information about themselves for voters to access.
- The ANU Smartvote sometimes provides an avenue for voters to find which candidates align most closely with their values and policy positions.
- Voteeasy is a company that offers a platform for candidates to put up information about themselves for voters to access.
- The ABC Vote Compass also sometimes provides an avenue for voters to find which candidates align most closely with their values and policy positions.
- Additionally, Elections ACT and the AEC set the rules for how these organisations can behave in relation to elections.

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People who participate

Active organisations, political parties and other entities only operate because people are either employed (political parties and some of the national organisations) or continuously or periodically volunteer their time, ideas, resources and effort during all or some phases of the election cycle in grassroots organisations. The majority of these people are local community members who seek to make their communities better by getting their preferred candidate elected and then holding their representative to account.

Getting involved

If you would like to be active in this system, please contact one of the groups that sits in the space your interest and passion lies. If you are in a group not on this map, please let us know where you fit in and we can add you.

Organisation contacts

- CAPaD - https://canberra-alliance.org.au/, secretary@canberra-alliance.org.au
- proACT – https://www.proact.org.au/, https://www.proact.org.au/contact
- Active Democracy ACT - https://activedemocracy.org.au/active-democracy-act/,
- Active Democracy Bean https://activedemocracy.org.au/2021/10/08/bean/, activedemocracybean@canberra-alliance.org.au

For political parties, see their websites.

ACT Community Democracy Ecosystem Map

This figure seeks to summarise the aspects of the ecosystem that each ACT organisation is active in at some phase in the electoral cycle. It is based on current roles and activities which may well be subject to change. People who are active fit into one or more of these organisations.

ACT Community Democracy Ecosystem Map Organisation key:	CAPaD	Active Democry	Facilitating entities: eg democracyCo	proACT	Campaig-ning entities	Political parties
	■	■	■	■	■	
Levels of Government						
The Senate		■		■	■	■
The House of Representatives	■	■			■	■
The ACT Assembly	■	■				■
Accountability of sitting representatives						
Collecting and communicating	■	■				
Electorate community deliberations	▨	■	■			■
Questions and information from representative		▨				
Reporting on representative's behaviour	■					
Selecting / supporting candidate & representatives						
Pre-selecting candidates - active				■	■	■
Pre-selecting candidates - in active				■		
Assessing candidates	■	▨		■	■	■
Supporting representatives						
Political party representative	▨	■				■
Community independent representative	▨	■		▨		
The phase of the election cycle						
Lead up to / pre-election	■	▨		■	■	■
Campaign (including election day)	■	▨			■	
Post-election reflection	■	■				
Between elections.	■	■	■			■
	(shading indicates a partial role)					

For comment, contact the Secretary of CAPaD.