

# A Framework for Understanding the Drivers of Cohesion and Polarisation in Australia

Authors: Tim Dixon,<sup>1,2</sup> and Professor Nicholas Biddle<sup>2\*</sup>

1. Co-founder, More in Common Global
2. Fellow, Governance and Public Affairs Centre, Australian Catholic University
3. Head, School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University

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\*Contact: [nicholas.biddle@anu.edu.au](mailto:nicholas.biddle@anu.edu.au)



Australian  
National  
University

## Acknowledgement and series note

In early 2024, the Australian Resilient Democracy Research and Data Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and applied research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia's democratic resilience. The network is dedicated to sharing the analysis publicly and to encourage the use of these ideas to prompt future research collaborations and actionable policy.

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## Abstract

Democracies around the world are confronting rising polarisation, driven by changes in media environments, political incentives, and social fragmentation. Australia has not experienced the severe divisions seen in some comparable democracies, but recent evidence shows emerging risks across political trust, social cohesion, and perceived fairness. These trends highlight the need for more systematic tools to understand how Australians relate to one another and to democratic institutions.

Australia benefits from a rich survey infrastructure, including Mapping Social Cohesion, the Australian Election Study, ANUpoll, the McKinnon Poll, and the Election Monitoring Survey Series. While these provide valuable insights, they do not consistently capture the psychological, social, and relational factors that underpin cohesion and polarisation. Existing monitoring efforts therefore remain fragmented.

This paper examines how values-based segmentation could offer an additional tool for understanding the drivers of cohesion and division in Australia. Drawing on comparative experience from the US, UK, Germany, France, Poland, and Brazil, the paper outlines the methodology and approach to understand population groups that cut across demographic and partisan categories, offering a sharper lens on shared values, areas of tension, and the dynamics that shape public responses to contested issues.

The paper reviews the current Australian data landscape, identify key gaps, and outline how a segmentation approach could be adapted to local conditions. This includes opportunities to link attitudinal and qualitative insights with Australia's administrative data environment. Used alongside existing programs and embedded within broader democratic-resilience efforts, such an approach may strengthen the evidence base for policy, communications, and civic initiatives seeking to support cohesion and moderate future risks of polarisation.

# 1 Introduction

Democracies across the world are confronting powerful forces that drive polarisation. While measures of polarisation have not risen universally either by country or by dimension (van der Veen 2023), it is clear that many democracies are experiencing new and emerging divisions that threaten social cohesion (Schedler 2023; Torcal and Stolle 2025).

Algorithmically-driven content streams are elevating emotionally engaging content based on outrage and division (Feezell et al. 2021; Kubin and von Sikorski 2021). The atomisation of our sources of news and information is weakening peoples' shared sense of reality, creating what have variously been referred to as epistemic or filter bubbles, and echo chambers (Figà Talamanca and Arfini 2022). Leaders come into office, often more focused on undoing the work of their predecessors rather than building on it: wasting resources, creating a sense of policy whiplash, and weakening morale within public agencies and departments. As societies become fixated on divisions and less able to resolve problems that people care most about, disillusionment deepens into political fatalism (Slothuus 2025).

Leaders committed to pluralism and democracy often find themselves acknowledging the constant need to improve democratic processes while also defending a discredited status quo; while polarising figures capitalise on public frustration—stoking division, pitting one group against another, and focusing debate on the issues of greatest difference.

In the face of these threats, societies need to find ways that strengthen the 'glue' that binds people together. When large majorities of people in a society experience a sense of connection to others and belonging in their everyday lives, societies are better able to resist the forces of polarisation and tackle real-world challenges (Delhey et al. 2023). More cohesive societies are more resilient democracies (Arase 2024). They are better able to respond to new threats, compromise when necessary, and act in their long-term interests even when this involves difficult tradeoffs.

Australia is experiencing growing forces of division, even if less severely than several similar democracies (Zheng and Bhatt 2022; Dehghan and Bruns 2022). Australia is also navigating the strengths and failures of the history of a multi-cultural and pluralistic identity, one where cultural pluralism is distinctly part of the Australian character and narrative, but also one where immigration has been used as a polarising issue for political gain, and where reconciliation with First Nation peoples and histories remains far from complete. To strengthen our democracy's resilience, we need new approaches and new tools that can help us navigate the growing forces of division. One such approach, deploying insights from behavioural science, looks at public attitudes through the lens of people's values and worldviews. This can bring many issues into sharper focus than relying on traditional approaches that analyse public attitudes only through conventional demographic and political categories.

Noting gaps in current approaches to measuring social cohesion and people's disposition towards society in Australia, this paper discusses how insights from social psychology and related fields might be utilised in understanding Australians' attitudes, using a model that has been deployed in several similar Western democracies. Over a period of almost a decade, this approach has been developed and deployed by More in Common, a nonprofit operating in seven countries in Europe, the US and South America. Drawing on experiences from these countries, this paper identifies how this methodology and the insights it produces could be utilised to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience in Australia.

## 2 More in Common's approach

More in Common has been publishing psychographic segmentation studies since 2018<sup>1</sup>, when the [Hidden Tribes study](#) was released in the US, and widely covered in national media including front-page coverage in the New York Times.<sup>2</sup> It explored how the US population divides into seven 'Hidden Tribes' rather than the two-way split (Republican / Democratic) that is often presented in the media. Since then, More in Common has published similar segmentation studies in five other countries: [France](#) (2019), [Germany](#) (2019), the [United Kingdom](#) (updated in 2025), [Poland](#) (2023) and [Brazil](#) (2025).

There are seven phases in the approach used by More in Common:

- **Research design, based on unique national contexts** - More in Common's team conducts a literature review of the biggest divides in that country, and speaks to local experts about the most important social dynamics in that country. These findings are then used to shape the inputs from More in Common's core values model, which draws on insights from social psychology and behavioural science. The dimensions most relevant for that geography are identified, and research instruments are then developed. This process also involves identifying the evaluation criteria for the segmentation – in other words, the issues of salience to the country's polarisation that are not used to build the segmentation, but are used to assess whether the segmentation offers predictive insights into the views of people.
- **Initial qualitative research** - A series of focus groups is then conducted, to help better understand the divides facing the country in people's own words, test assumptions in the research design phase, and to test that the survey design will be easily understood by that population.
- **Large quantitative study** - A large national representative sample, typically of at least 10,000 people, is then conducted. The precise fieldwork approach is tailored towards whatever is most appropriate for the country. For example, in places with high internet penetration this is usually done online, working with local vendors. In countries with lower internet penetration (such as Brazil) telephone and face-to-face interviews are also deployed. People respond to a range of questions about their social psychology and worldviews, using questions from the core values model.
- **Segmentation and classification** - A number of segmentation methods are explored (including, but not limited to, K-means and hierarchical clustering), typically returning around 6-8 segments that are distinct from demographic information and predictive of attitudes that drive divisions in a country. Machine learning algorithms are then used to create a classification algorithm that can predict someone's segment with at least an 80 per cent accuracy, using a shorter number of segmentation questions.
- **In-depth qualitative research** - Focus groups are recruited using the classification algorithm, to better understand the desires, motivations and attitudes of each of the new segments in

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<sup>1</sup> English language links for the first five of the country studies are listed below (an English language link for Brazil is not yet available):

- US - <http://www.hiddentribes.us/>
- UK - <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/shattered-britain/>
- France - <https://www.moreincommon.com/media/krjchzr5/finding-france-executive-summary.pdf>
- Germany - <https://www.moreincommon.com/where-we-work/more-in-common-germany/>
- Poland - <https://www.moreincommon.com/where-we-work/more-in-common-poland/>

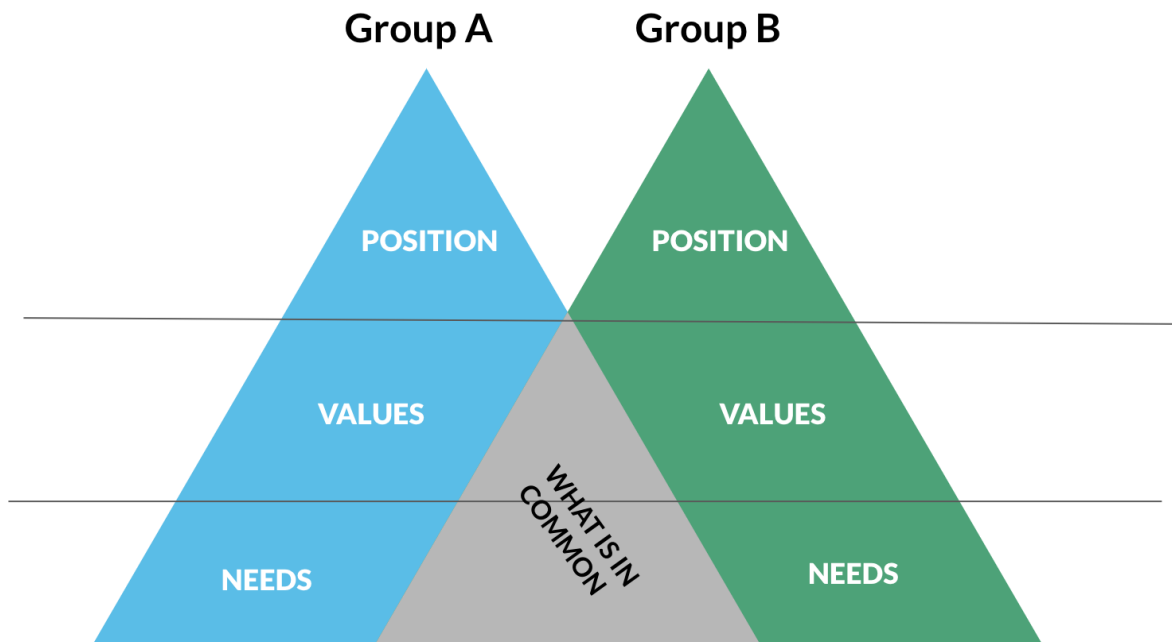
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/08/upshot/democratic-electorate-twitter-real-life.html>

their own words. This stage is used to put more 'colour' onto the descriptions of the segments to make them more familiar and understandable to the segments' future users.

- **Report writeup and dissemination** - An in-depth, within-country, report introduces the new segments. It plays several roles: providing a 'state of the nation' perspective on how people are feeling about their society and its future; introducing the distinctive population segments; explaining each segment's orientation to society (their different levels of trust, engagement, hope, views of others etc); how key issues of difference and commonality map across those population segments; and often addressing factors of specific interest to the country at that time.
- **Foundation for future projects and ongoing research** - The report provides a deep evidence base for More in Common's future work with leaders across society including with governments, nonprofits, businesses, philanthropies and community groups. This is introduced alongside a website and information tools such as quizzes that help explain the segment and allow individuals to identify the segment which most resembles them. The 'shelf life' for the segments has proven to typically be around five years or longer, depending on the extent of changes taking place in the society during that time. This long shelf life allows organisations to integrate the segments into their strategies, while More in Common shares further insights into the segments as new issues become more important over time.

The segmentation studies have proven powerful in supporting societies to navigate a wide range of issues. Consider the stylised example in Figure 1. When issues appear so divided that Groups A and B hold distinct positions that appear irreconcilable, a values-based segmentation makes it possible to go 'upstream' to better understand *why* people might hold those positions. In some cases, even if the two positions are polar opposites they are underpinned by shared values and even more so by shared needs. These more foundational constructs can be used as a way to navigate through divided topics and find common ground. For example, the immigration debate is defined by extremely strong views on either side, but More in Common has consistently found that across the population, the overwhelming majority of people – including both immigration sceptics and advocates – often share values of orderly migration and compassion towards individuals, but prioritise them differently.

**Figure 1**      **Stylised representation of needs, values and positions of two groups in society**



More in Common has found that this initial investment of time and resources into building a values-based segmentation offers unique insights that can deliver fresh perspectives for leaders who are grappling with how to navigate the dynamics of polarisation, whether they are in media or content roles, elected officials, leaders of civil society organisations, managing large public institutions, conducting campaigns, serving memberships, or in arts and entertainment.

Section 5 of this paper provides examples of how insights drawn from values-based segmentations have been deployed in some specific contexts. For some organisations, the segmentations have been useful in helping them to better understand their audiences, and ensure that their offerings are relevant to the people they aim to serve. This is especially important in the context of rapidly-changing information and media environments, where an objective evidence-based approach often exposes gaps between reality and the outdated perceptions of their audiences held by established institutions. For more campaign-focused organisations, the segments can be used for narrative testing, to ensure that campaigns are persuasive to a broad range of perspectives, rather than simply speaking to in-groups. And for politicians and policymakers, the segments are useful for identifying whether policies are likely to further division or will bring diverse audiences together.

By tracking the same segments over a number of years, it is possible for More in Common to identify whether an issue is becoming more divisive over time, or whether the segments are beginning to form a consensus. And because the segmentations are informed by worldviews and values, they provide insights into why this polarisation might be occurring, and how it might be addressed more effectively.

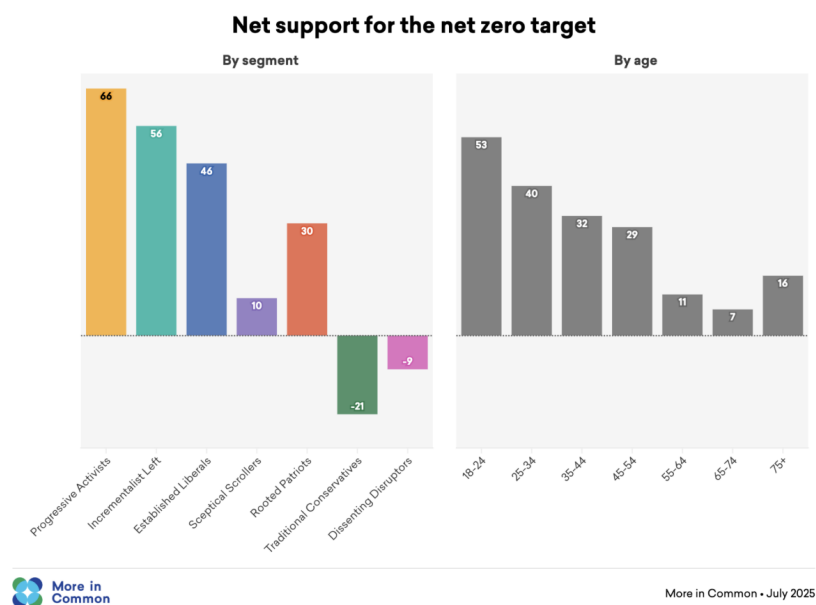
### 3 Lessons from More in Common’s Global Work

Drawing on More in Common’s international research, this section summarises key insights from other country contexts, highlighting the utility and application of innovative methodologies used to uncover hidden social fault lines and identify bridging opportunities. It also reflects on what has been learned from the distinctive More in Common approach.

In every country in which More in Common has worked, the segmentations have often proven more predictive than traditional demographics or political party scales on many of the most important problems in each country. For example, when analysing attitudes to ‘net zero’ climate policies in the UK, demographics do not tell the whole picture. Across every conventional demographic group such as age, education level, or gender, majorities have been in support of the net zero target. However, the segmentation model has identified groups that are more sceptical, with two groups in Figure 2 (Traditional Conservatives and Dissenting Disruptors) having negative net support.

In this particular example, the segmentation analysis allows efforts to bring the community along with net zero policies to be more specific in how they target and tailor their messages, with better understanding of the starting points and values of their audiences than would be possible using simple demographic analysis.

**Figure 2** Example of policy attitudes by segment and by age, UK, 2025



Almost a decade of conducting these psychographic segmentation studies has identified which insights from social psychology are particularly useful across different geographies. Drawing on research from academic literature, these scales have been used as inputs into the segmentations, and used in combination act as the ‘secret sauce’ that produce segmentation models that can be so predictive of attitudes on so many different issues:

- **Moral foundations theory** (based on Jonathan Haidt’s (2012) *Righteous Mind*)
- **Threat perception** (Stein 2013)
- **Authoritarian dynamic / Parenting styles** (Stenner 2005)
- **Belief in individual agency**
- **Group identity**
- **Need for cognitive closure** (Webster and Kruglanski 1994)

More recent segmentation studies have also experimented with newer theories from social psychology literature, which we have found to be helpful in some of the countries we work in:

- **Need for chaos** (Petersen et al. 2023)
- **Conspiracy beliefs** (Brotherton et al. 2013)
- **Insider / Outsider perspectives**
- **Social media engagement**
- **Trust in experts**

While the insights from the segmentation studies are always interesting for the intellectually curious, the real impact of this work depends on embedding the segmentation within the wider leadership ecosystem of each country. A segmentation on its own only becomes valuable when it is actively taken up by organisations, institutions, and practitioners as part of their day-to-day work. This requires moving beyond a static report and building the scaffolding that enables others to understand, adopt, and apply the framework in their own contexts. In the best cases, the segmentation becomes a common language across sectors, supporting organisations to work with a deeper understanding of the communities they are trying to reach. More in Common's goal is to make it a valuable part of the national infrastructure supporting social cohesion and democratic resilience.

In practice, this embedding work involves a set of deliberate activities. More in Common ensure that the segments are explained in clear and accessible ways, offering practical guides, case studies, and ready-to-use tools. Considerable effort is made in naming the segments, developing visuals, and providing insights that are intuitive, memorable, and usable beyond the research community. Webinars and training programs are customised to a wide range of organisations, from government departments to grassroots community groups, national NGOs to professional organisations, philanthropies to special interest groups. This helps leaders and their organisations to apply segmentation insights in ways that are most effective for their context, such as through policy design, campaigns, service delivery, community mobilisation or policy advocacy.

Finally, embedding the segmentation means keeping it alive and current. This involves continually polling and tracking the same segments in response to unfolding events and issues, so that organisations can understand how different groups are reacting in real time. This longitudinal cohort approach allows the segmentation to remain relevant over years, rather than fading after the initial publication.

As discussed in detail below, segmentation analysis has been used in countries across Europe and North America to turn abstract attitudes into practical design choices for policy, service programs, and communication strategies. Agencies can use it to identify and disaggregate communication approaches, what messages work for whom and under different circumstances, and where backlash might form with different framings. Research using such an approach shows a set of shared values which should be reinforced, but how to avoid pitfalls or encourage attachment to these points of mutual visions for the future. If the underlying construction of the segmentation is made available, it improves recruitment for consultations, strengthens delivery to low-engagement groups, and guides cross-portfolio coalitions. A simple cadence of segment-based tracking gives leaders early warning on legitimacy and cohesion. The result is policy that meets people where they are, builds trust, and reduces avoidable conflict.

## 4 Applying the More in Common approach to Australia: Current evidence and data gaps

Australia is well supported by large scale, representative surveys, and other data assets that collect information on democratic resilience broadly, and political beliefs and social attitudes in particular. While there are important national surveys, administrative data, and community-based indicators, critical gaps remain—particularly around how people experience cohesion and polarisation; how Australians perceive other groups within society; the ways that local contexts affect polarisation, and early warning signs of fragmentation. In this section we outline the current data environment, identify data gaps, and summarise what we know about population segmentation in Australia.

The Resilient Democracy Research and Data Network (RDRDN) has advanced a framework that seeks to assess our collective ability to monitor, diagnose and evaluate the strengthening flows of democratic resilience in Australia. This includes understanding what is happening and changing (monitoring), what causes and drives stronger democratic systems, and what works. The following sections rapidly assess each of these in the context of understanding the dynamics that drive both social cohesion by starting with dynamic process the causal factors of our current social fragmentation and polarisation.

More in Common’s approach above provides both the monitoring of changing dynamics and trends, but also the causal drivers. Below we explore what we currently know in Australia, and discuss what additional insight could be gained by an approach similar to that undertaken by More in Common in other countries.

### 4.1 Australia’s social and political survey environment

Broadly speaking, surveys involve identifying a representative sample of respondents from a population of interest, asking them a series of consistent questions, and analysing that data using quantitative methods to identify levels and associations between variables. Australia has an abundance of existing surveys that allow for limited population segmentation, with official surveys, other government funded surveys, and large academic or think-tank sponsored surveys.

Importantly, many of these surveys are available for secondary analysis by researchers not involved in the original project, either through the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ DataLab (describe below) or through the Australian Data Archive (ADA).<sup>3</sup> If done carefully with the removal of any personal identifiers, by making data available in this way, it is possible to verify and critique the data analysis undertaken by the data collectors, and explore new insights and research questions that they may not have considered.

Some of the larger or more prominent surveys are described below:

- Official surveys
  - The **General Social Survey (GSS)** ‘asks important questions about the social characteristics and well-being of people living in Australia’<sup>4</sup> The GSS collects data on a range of social dimensions from the same individual to enable analysis of the interrelationships in social circumstances and outcomes, including the exploration of multiple advantage and disadvantage experienced by that individual.<sup>5</sup> As the survey is collected under the Census Act, there is a very high response rate, and government

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ada.edu.au/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/participate-survey/household-survey/general-social-survey>

<sup>5</sup> <https://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/657469>

funding ensures a large sample size. However, information on political and social attitudes is limited.

- Other government funded and administered surveys
  - The Australian Public Service Commission’s **Survey of Trust in Australian Public Services** is a regular, national survey. It provides measures ‘of public satisfaction, trust and experiences with Australian public services across departments and agencies.’<sup>6</sup> It also includes more generalised trust measures, as well as a range of demographic and socioeconomic predictors. Similar to other government surveys, information on political and social attitudes is limited.
- Large academic/civil-society surveys
  - The McKinnon Poll has run since 2021, with more than eight surveys on significant policy issues and a typical sample of 3,000 Australians aged 18+. In 2024 it released the largest single-issue survey to date on polarisation in Australia. Although conducted once on this topic, it offers recent insights into public views on partisan animosity, comfort discussing difficult issues, social cohesion and belonging. The 2024 study combines qualitative interviews and online focus groups with a nationally representative survey, and reports results disaggregated by age cohort, gender, location, education, income, CALD status, and voting intention. It also analyses patterns by marginal seats and uses segmentation to classify respondents (left/progressive, centre/moderate, right/conservative) and to identify “moderate” and “extreme” outlier groups.
  - The **Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC)** survey series have been conducted since 2007 either by or on behalf of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. The surveys focus on ‘social cohesion, immigration and population issues.’<sup>7</sup> The surveys have a particular focus on Australia’s immigration program, but also contain data on other aspects of social cohesion. The most recent survey with results available (conducted in 2025) had over 8,000 respondents, with more than 100 questions, with many of these questions allowing for segmentation of the population. Although the 2024 and 2025 MSC surveys are not yet available in the Australian Data Archive, the unit record data is available for the 2023 survey, alongside the questionnaire.<sup>8</sup> There was information on demographic background, political participation, financial and other measures of wellbeing, as well as a range of social and political attitudinal questions.
 

While arguably the most comprehensive survey for segmentation analysis that currently exists in Australia, there are a number of questions from the existing literature or that have been shown to be useful in other More in Common surveys that are not available. In particular, there is limited social psychological questions. Furthermore, the particular focus on immigration is useful for understanding social cohesion in Australia, but may not capture all relevant domains for other political and social issues. Importantly, the targeted qualitative interviewing that the More in Common approach takes was not carried out. Ultimately, the MSC survey has been collected for a specific purpose that is related to a segmentation-style analysis, but that does not completely align.
  - The **Australian Election Study (AES)** is a long-standing survey that has ‘surveyed

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.apsc.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/workforce-information/research-analysis-and-publications/state-service/state-service-report-2023/agency-benchmarking/trust-and-satisfaction-australian-public-services>

<sup>7</sup> <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/research/mapping-social-cohesion/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataverse/scs>

voters from 1987 to the present, providing an unparalleled source of evidence on voter attitudes towards politics in Australia.<sup>9</sup> The survey is carried out after every election, with a focus on detailed information on voting behaviour and predictors of voting behaviour. The most recent survey from 2025 has just been released, and there are questions on attitudes to political and social issues, though they tend to be skewed towards issues that were a focus of that particular election or campaign. The data is available for secondary analysis in the Australian Data Archive, and also aligns with international election surveys. Like with the MCS survey, there is limited social psychological questioning on the AES.

- The **ANUpoll**<sup>10</sup> and the **Election Monitoring Survey Series (EMSS)** provide additional sources of high-quality evidence on Australian attitudes and aspects of democratic resilience. ANUpoll has been conducted regularly since 2008, with surveys timed to address contemporary issues of public and policy interest. While not as extensive in scope as the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, ANUpoll has provided valuable insights into Australians' trust in institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and views on pressing social and political debates, often enabling rapid assessments of shifts in public sentiment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ANUpoll series played a particularly important role in tracking wellbeing, political attitudes, and views towards government (Biddle et al. 2024).

The Election Monitoring Survey Series, first fielded in 2024, was designed to systematically track attitudes to democracy, political parties, social wellbeing, and inequality in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2025 election. With repeated waves and large samples, the EMSS allows for longitudinal analysis of political behaviour and attitudes, and provides an evidence base for identifying early warning signs of democratic strain or resilience. Together, these surveys complement the long-running AES by capturing a broader set of attitudes relevant to social cohesion and polarisation, and by responding more flexibly to the emerging challenges facing Australia's democracy

- Alongside these national surveys, Australia also participates in a number of important international survey programmes. The **World Values Survey (WVS)**<sup>11</sup> has included Australian data in several waves, enabling comparison of Australians' values, trust, and political orientations with those of other countries worldwide. The **International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)**<sup>12</sup> similarly provides high-quality comparative data, with Australia participating (via the **Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, or AuSSA**<sup>13</sup>) in modules on topics such as citizenship, government, and social inequality, allowing for both through-time and cross-national analyses. More recently, in the Asia-Pacific context, Australia has been included in the **Asian Barometer Survey**,<sup>14</sup> which focuses on attitudes toward democracy, governance, and social trust across the region.

Together, these international surveys provide essential comparative benchmarks for understanding Australia's experience of democratic attitudes and social cohesion. They highlight both where Australia shares common patterns with other democracies, and where its dynamics are distinctive, offering a global context to the nationally focused surveys described above.

<sup>9</sup> <https://australianelectionstudy.org/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataverse/anupoll>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

<sup>12</sup> <https://issp.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.acspri.org.au/aussa>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.asianbarometer.org/>

## 4.2 The linked data asset environment

In addition to the survey data described above, the data environment in Australia has experienced a rapid growth in the quality, depth, and availability of large, linked administrative datasets. Access to that data has also expanded, partly through the introduction of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS') DataLab.<sup>15</sup> This remote access environment allows for real time analysis of detailed microdata, under the five safes framework.<sup>16</sup> Data is made available with relatively light deidentification, although information with very little analytical purpose but that is highly disclosive (like names and addresses) is not available. Output from analysis is cleared by authorised ABS officers, ensuring that 'the benefits of each release (its utility or usefulness for research and statistical purposes) must substantially outweigh its risks and be clearly understood.'

There are two major linked data assets available for researchers. The Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA), previously known as the Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP) is a nationally representative administrative data asset combining information on population demographics, income and taxation, employment, and health. The unit of analysis is the individual, but information can also be aggregated to families, households, and geographic communities. The other major asset is the Business Longitudinal Analysis Data Environment (BLADE), which is a linked dataset for firms from 2001/02 to 2020/21. The dataset combines administrative records from the ATO with firm survey data from the ABS and the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science.

The linked data environment includes limited survey information at present. While it includes the Census of Population and Housing (as a cross-section and in its 5% longitudinal form), the Census has very limited information on attitudes, social psychological factors, or political views. Nor should it. There are currently two more detailed surveys in PLIDA – the National Health Survey and the Survey of Disability and Carers. There is also work being done to link the Labour Force Survey as well as the Household, Income, and Labor Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey into PLIDA. None of these include the rich information required for the More in Common style segmentation analysis. It is highly unlikely that any of the administrative data within PLIDA or Blade would be useful to segment the population in a way that would explain the drivers of cohesion and polarisation. However, if a targeted survey was undertaken using the methodology outlined in Section 2, and it was able to be linked into PLIDA, then this would allow for analysis of predictors of segment identification, service usage of those segments, and the tracking of longer-term outcomes.

## 4.3 Narrative Analysis

There are further opportunities to use the frameworks from the interviews and surveys to design natural language processing tools to monitor public narratives, both from media and political figures. This could track and understand which narratives strengthen shared values and alignment, and which events or dynamics are accelerating or amplifying.

In a recent RDRDN paper, Angus (2024) demonstrates how AI-augmented narrative analytics can track policy-relevant frames across news, social media, and official texts at scale. The approach combines computational linguistics for narrative extraction with large language models to cluster storylines, measure their salience and coherence over time, and detect inflection points that matter for policy design and strategic communications. The method supports dashboards that surface emerging narratives, map who is amplifying them, understand the relationship between narrative strands, and flags when there are shifts towards polarising framings. The analysis could also be expanded to understand the flow between public narratives, understanding how they influence each other, and measure when strengthening narratives become dominant or influential. This could create more real-

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/microdata-tablebuilder/datalab>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/about/data-services/data-confidentiality-guide/five-safes-framework>

time early warning indicators for agencies, and a shared evidence base to coordinate responses across portfolios when combined with the More in Common reporting.

## 4.4 Some Australian data on shared views and policy disagreements

Although there is a considerable amount of data in Australia, for reasons described above there is no existing dataset that has the focus, scope, depth or combination of practical applications of the data collected as part of the More in Common work in the US, UK, France, Germany, Poland, or Brazil (forthcoming). However, there are a few key data insights that can help shape and guide what an approach in Australia might look like.

First, there is a relatively high level of trust/satisfaction in government in Australia, and relatively low levels of political polarisation (Biddle 2025). In a recent paper by the Pew Research Center, Wike et al. (2025) showed that ‘Public dissatisfaction with democracy continues to outweigh satisfaction across 12 high-income countries that Pew Research Center has surveyed consistently since 2017.’ However, that list of 12 countries did not include Australia with 61 per cent of Australians feeling satisfied, equal fourth highest amongst 23 countries.

A second point though is that there are substantial divisions within Australia on measures of social cohesion and political attitudes. For example, consider the issue of migration, one of the policy areas with substantial tension across established democracies. In the most recent MSC report (O’Donnell et al. 2024) 49 per cent of Australians think that the number of immigrants accepted in Australia is too high, with 40 per cent thinking it about right, and 9 per cent thinking it is too low. If one looks in depth at the data in the MSC, then a clear story emerges amongst Australians with regards to migration – there are downsides of too high a rate of migration, there should be tight controls on who comes into the country to live permanently, but migration policy should be non-discriminatory. Moreover, the vast majority of Australians (85 per cent) agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia.

The MCS shows that views on migration are complex. ANUpoll data shows that there are also important predictors of migration attitudes across the Australian population. In Biddle et al. (2025) showed that younger Australians, those born overseas in a non-English speaking country, and those with high levels of education were more likely to think that migration makes Australia a better place to live.

To do the type of segmentation analysis that has been so successful across the More in Common country studies requires the in-depth data collection described in Section 2. However, even with the available data, we can see quite clearly that political and social psychological measures are often more predictive of views on public policy questions. One of the key policy questions that all countries grapple with is the relative size of government.

Respondents to Wave 4 of the 2025 EMSS (collected after the May 2025 election) were asked ‘If the government had a choice between reducing taxes or spending more on social services, which do you think it should do?’ The most common response of the five options was the neutral one – it depends (given by 31.7 per cent). Combined though, 36.3 per cent said they were strongly or mildly in favour of reducing taxes, with 32.0 per cent saying they are strongly or mildly in favour of spending more on social services. In other words, a core policy question, that seemingly splits the country into roughly equal segments.

A socio-demographic analysis suggests that age is one of the key determinants of where one stands on this issue, with older Australians more likely to support spending more on social services. Females were also more likely to, but there were no other major differences (including by country of birth, education, or location). If we subtract the per cent of Australians that were in support of increased taxes from those that were in support of increased services, then we get a net difference of -4.3 per

cent. The net difference for the youngest age group in our survey (18 to 24 year olds) is -11.3 per cent, whereas for the oldest age group (those aged 75 plus) it is +25.9 per cent.

A segmentation analysis is likely to be far more predictive. Consider responses to the question 'Some people say that political parties in Australia care what ordinary people think. Others say that political parties in Australia don't care what ordinary people think. Where would you place your view on this scale from 1 to 5?' Even using that single political variable, the net support for those who gave a value of 1 (Political parties in Australia care what ordinary people think) was +25.3 per cent in favour of services whereas the net support for those who gave a value of 5 (Political parties in Australia don't care what ordinary people think) was -27.2 per cent. This is a much bigger range.

Of course, this is just one policy view along one demographic dimension compared to one political attitude dimension. However, it is indicative of the insight that can be gained from carefully segmenting the population, and using empirical data to identify who across what dimensions are most predictive of attitudes towards our major policy challenges.

## 5 Towards Action: What This Approach Can Offer Policy and Practice

There are no simple solutions to the challenge of growing social fractures in societies such as Australia's. But tools that help us understand people on their own terms, and therefore understand our societies better, can help our society become more resilient to the forces of division. They provide a valuable evidence base on which to build policies and programs, and they can help to inform cultural and communications initiatives. They also play a key role in countering the distortions that are being entrenched within information ecosystems and media environments, where more extreme content that draws small but highly committed audiences is given more attention than more mainstream content that serves larger audiences whose approach to media consumption is more casual.

The tool of values-based population mapping has proved effective across different countries, issues and population groups. More in Common has seen its insights deployed by policymakers, civil society, communicators, media organisations, philanthropy and community leaders. In this section of the paper, we highlight some examples that illustrate the ways in which this tool has generated unique insights which have then been deployed by different actors.

<p><b>Motivating people to action by showing the appetite for cohesion: Structures that facilitate social cohesion initiatives</b></p>	<p>Philanthropic leaders behind the establishment of the largest social cohesion funder table, New Pluralists, often describe More in Common as the key source of insights for the bridging or social cohesion ecosystem in the US. This standing was established by the Hidden Tribes segmentation map, which remains the foundation for other insights work on perception gaps, people's <a href="#">appetite for social connection</a> and <a href="#">social trust</a>. Because public debate is so often dominated by small groups who oppose each other, what is needed is a widely-understood framework for understanding why the public is not as divided as people assume, even when there are similar numbers of people in favour of and against one specific proposition. National segmentation maps provide this framework because they often show a very similar story across different issues, giving leaders the confidence to support initiatives that strengthen cohesion with the knowledge that they are not working against overwhelming odds.</p> <p>This infrastructure has similarly been useful for a diverse range of actors including public broadcasters, educational networks, museums, faith organisations, public health leaders, farmers, nutrition experts and other groups that can find themselves suddenly drawn into highly polarising debates. For example, a public broadcaster seeking to review its programming priorities and concerns about bias has found that More in Common's segmentation maps well to their audience insights maps, providing them with deeper insights about the values and priorities of audiences that they are not reaching effectively with existing content.</p>
<p><b>Providing a focus for cohesion efforts, through a deeper, more dynamic understanding of the public that goes beyond simple and</b></p>	<p>For leaders, one of the most important uses of More in Common's population mapping is how it provides a deeper understanding of civil engagement and voting behaviour. Population segments are often more enduring and more predictive than demographic categories or people's self-declared political identity, and they allow us to move beyond simplistic narratives about people that understand them only through the lens of how they have voted on one occasion. Too often, wrong</p>

<p><b>inaccurate categories</b></p>	<p>assumptions about voters’ motivations are widely adopted, such as perceiving people in groups as homogeneous (whether those groups are based on party, issue, membership etc), and this assumption leads to increased polarisation and less effective engagement approaches, from overestimating some concerns to underestimating others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In Germany, traditional analysis of voters has centred on the East-West spectrum. The segmentation mapping found that this was overlooking other important fault lines in German society. Four of the six population segments mapped in Germany are actually distributed across East and West fairly evenly. The segmentation map also revealed three functional roles that better explain social dynamics than East/West geography: Stabilisers (34%), Polarised (35%), and Invisible Third (30%).</li> <li>● Segmentation mapping can unpack the distinct motivations that drive different groups toward the same party or issue perspective, revealing more nuanced and dynamic coalitions. For example, in many countries the rise of populist parties is often presented as inevitable or driven by a single sentiment like “anti-immigration” or “anti-elite” feeling. But values-based segmentation mapping has shown that support comes from very different places, and this analysis cultivates a greater curiosity about their views that demonstrates the limitations of trying to understand people simply through the lens of partisan politics.</li> <li>● More in Common’s new 2025 UK segmentation has identified one group (‘Dissenting Disruptors’) that is drawn to Reform UK because they want to tear the system down and are energised by Nigel Farage’s confrontational style. By contrast, another group (‘Rooted Patriots’) is more committed to fixing the system. But while they are sceptical that Reform will actually fix things, they also feel that their communities have been overlooked for too long and are willing to roll the dice on something new. This distinction matters: currently, these two groups are saying that they will vote the same way, but their motivations are different, and their future behaviour is also likely to diverge.</li> <li>● In November 2025 in the US, the first of a three-stage update to the 2018 Hidden Tribes mapping of Americans’ worldviews will be released. This new segmentation of Americans who voted for President Trump in 2024 identifies five different types of Trump voters, with differences as much as 50 points or more between those segments on issues including on immigration, the economy and the value of democratic norms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Moving beyond the old left/right spectrum and understanding low engagement groups</b></p>	<p>Algorithmically-driven news feeds promote the most emotionally engaging content, which often comes from fringe voices. This distorts public perceptions, making extreme opinions appear more widely-held than they actually are. It also contributes to misperceptions about the views of people who are disengaged or uninterested in politics.</p> <p>One of the most widely-used insights from More in Common’s population</p>

	<p>maps is to improve understanding of large groups of people whose identity is based on practical concerns rather than political views, and whose worldviews are not captured in traditional left-to-right analyses that focus more on the noisier and more engaged groups. This practical rather than abstract or conceptual way of thinking is often not reflected in public debates.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In the US, the Hidden Tribes study identified an 'Exhausted Majority' (67 per cent of Americans) who are fatigued by polarization, feel forgotten in political debates, and are more ideologically flexible. Hidden Tribes is widely regarded as a landmark study that changed perceptions of America's polarisation, challenging narratives focusing only on polarised wings and demonstrating where common ground exists. Since its release, candidates at both state and national levels have campaigned as representatives of the Exhausted Majority.</li> <li>● In Germany, an 'Invisible Third' group was identified, made up of two disengaged segments, which represents around one-third of the population and more than half of non-voters. They feel neglected by elites and institutions, and have a low sense of agency and civic engagement. The Invisible Third focus has been adopted by the President of the Federal Republic, the Chancellor's office (which commissioned More in Common to develop a social cohesion framework for Germany) and by some of the largest German grant-making foundations.</li> <li>● In the UK and France, segmentation revealed that members of the politically disengaged segments were among the most vulnerable to misinformation online. This informed interventions to reach them with media literacy information training in ways that are likely to land best with these groups, including using social media influencers and video games.</li> <li>● 'Culture wars' issues are often amplified by small minorities with outsized influence in media channels, who frame debates in stark 'us-versus-them' terms. By elevating other voices in segments representing a much larger proportion of society, engaged audiences become more resilient to false binaries of being simply 'pro' or 'anti' an issue, and this awareness of false polarisation builds support for more nuanced approaches, and strengthens the confidence of leaders that they do not need to pick a side in issues that are falsely polarised.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Designing cohesion initiatives for impact: engaging not the already-committed but the harder-to-reach</b></p>	<p>Segment mapping makes it possible to identify what approaches work with parts of the population most relevant to actors who are focused on strengthening democracy and cohesion. Segmentation maps are more effective than traditional approaches of relying on demographic categories such as age, gender or race, or political partisanship. Focusing on the deeper values and psychology that drives people's behaviour makes it possible to test initiatives with key audiences who are most critical to achieving positive impact.</p>

	<p>More in Common’s partnership with the US civic nonprofit StoryCorps illustrates this point. Starting with the objective of not just reaching the population segments who already agreed with StoryCorps’ pro-cohesion values, the Hidden Tribes mapping was used to identify Americans who are more pessimistic about America’s polarisation. Creative content testing drawn from StoryCorps’ recorded conversations between strangers has been able to identify the characteristics of conversations that most resonate with these target groups, which often differ from what appeals to those who are already supportive. StoryCorps has since embraced this content strategy as their main approach in building out their One Small Step program.</p>
<p><b>Revealing non-obvious alliances or tensions</b></p>	<p>Segmentation mapping helps uncover surprising groupings and coalitions that are not visible when looking at individual’s positioning on the left/right political spectrum. Mapping issues onto a segmentation map helps to identify the role of values, priorities and worldviews in shaping people’s starting points. This provides insights into how an issue may evolve in public discourse, or where new political alliances might form.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In the US, past analysis identified weak levels of support for many aspects of the ‘woke agenda’ among minority groups, just as More in Common’s forthcoming analysis shows weak levels of support for the enforcement aspects of the Trump Administration’s policies of detention and deportation among parts of the 2024 Trump voter coalition. Both insights run counter to prevailing assumptions that these groups are monolithic in their views.</li> <li>● In the UK, the cosmopolitan and politically engaged “Progressive Activists” often seem worlds apart from the patriotic and socially conservative “Loyal Nationals”. But More in Common’s segmentation has identified that there are many issues on which these groups find common ground, such as on the need to address economic inequality.</li> <li>● In Poland, More in Common’s segmentation found that while most Poles view abortion as "always a tragedy," 57 per cent also still support women's right to choose for personal reasons. This report showed unexpected common ground across political divides on the abortion issue, which typically is portrayed in binary terms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strengthening organisations’ effectiveness by helping them identify the distance between their views and those of their target audiences</b></p>	<p>Across countries, training sessions of leaders have repeatedly witnessed significant ‘aha!’ moments as they have connected the way that people think about specific issues with their broader values and social identities. This often unlocks insights about misunderstandings and false assumptions that result from so many people living in their own echo chambers – participants realise that often <i>they</i> are the atypical group with views that differ from the majority.</p> <p>This happens because government and civil society roles often attract people who are more politically engaged and opinionated than the average person. This motivation and drive is essential, but it often creates</p>

	<p>blind spots. Segmentation maps help organisations identify how their team differs from the people they’re trying to serve. People working in nonprofit and campaign groups are often overrepresented in segments like Progressive Activists, whose views on issues like race, gender and patriotism are outliers compared to the rest of the public. Public interest in the segmentations is reflected by the fact that in the past year more than 12,500 people in Germany and 55,000 in the UK have opted-in to undertake More in Common’s segment quiz.</p> <p>This insight has been used by dozens of UK nonprofits in response to More in Common’s 2025 Progressive Activist report, which helped them think more carefully about internal culture, staff expectations and campaign tone. In particular, organisations have used the findings to manage internal pressures to take a public position on polarising issues, and to recognise when their messaging is likely to resonate within the sector but fall flat with the public.</p>
<p><b>Preventing backlash by going ‘upstream’ to identify values</b></p>	<p>Unlike standard top-line polling, the segmentation lens helps to identify the values behind public attitudes, and how views about an issue map across a whole population – including whether its distribution maps to a different ‘upstream’ issue or value. Segmentation maps help identify smaller groups who will pick a side based on tribal loyalties, alongside larger groups who are more nuanced. For example, More in Common’s work in several countries has identified significant differences between larger groups who prioritise control over immigration but support a ‘both and’ approach of also creating new orderly legal pathways, versus much smaller groups who opposed immigration and only want stronger enforcement and border control (or on the other side, much more open immigration). This insight has helped governments to focus on public concerns around orderly migration rather than reflexively advancing anti-immigration policies.</p> <p>In many countries, climate denialism typically represents a small proportion of the public, which has resulted in actors not taking seriously the concerns of those groups, and failing to anticipate backlashes against climate policies perceived to be unfair or ineffective (such as in Germany in 2024). By focusing on the groups where backlash is concentrated it is possible to better understand the strongest drivers of opposition and develop strategies to strengthen public confidence and avoid backlash.</p>
<p><b>Avoiding preventable backlash by testing messaging across values-groups</b></p>	<p>One of the most practical uses of segmentation is in message testing for communications efforts. By understanding how different groups respond to the same idea, potential pitfalls can be identified and communications designed to better land across the board.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In the UK, informed by the segmentation mapping, the peak refugee nonprofit (the Refugee Council) changed its imagery and communications to reach broader audiences than the narrower progressive base that has been their traditional focus. Testing of different versions of this communications strategy with more socially conservative groups found that different language and</li> </ul>

	<p>tone, while still reflecting the organisation’s mission and values, was far less polarising and yet did not lose support among existing core supporters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Across six European countries, we explored how to engage the general public around aviation emissions. Regulating flying is a potential flashpoint and could erode trust in the climate transition more broadly. But by focusing first on private jets, our work tapped into a widely shared concerns about the need for everyone to make a fair contribution to reducing emissions, and found a way to build consensus without alienating key audiences.</li> <li>● In France, the Parlons Climat initiative tested climate messaging across six French values-based segments. We developed an evidence-based toolkit showing how to engage each segment on climate issues, avoiding polarising issues while building broader support for climate action.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focusing democracy trust-building efforts on lower trust segments</b></p>	<p>More in Common US has played the role of insights provider for the <b>*Democracy Communications Collaborative*</b> (DCC), a nonpartisan initiative focused on preventing election violence, which includes more than 200 of America’s leading democracy and civic engagement organisations. The DCC shares resources, develops insights into the social and psychological drivers of polarisation and distrust, and designs and funds evidence-based strategies to improve trust in the democratic and electoral process and decrease polarisation.</p> <p>During the 2020 and 2024 presidential election cycles, More in Common deployed the Hidden Tribes segmentation in its election violence prevention work, identifying key influences on attitudes towards democracy among population segments most likely to doubt the election process. These insights were deployed in designing and launching scenario planning exercises with democracy groups, preparing for possible events during and after elections and developing evidence-based communications tools for deployment among at-risk population groups throughout the 2020 election cycle.</p>

## 6 Conclusions, reflections, and next steps

Strengthening democratic resilience in Australia requires more than diagnosing the forces of cohesion and polarisation—it requires action. The evidence presented here, and the methodological learnings from existing segmentation analysis in comparable contexts, underscore the need to include additional methods beyond demographic and partisan framings to further ground policy in a deeper understanding of people’s values, worldviews, and lived experiences. This shift creates opportunities for leaders in government, civil society, media, and business to design initiatives that do not inadvertently deepen divides but instead build bridges across them.

While the international experience offers compelling evidence about the potential of values-based segmentation, it is important to acknowledge that the approach only takes policy makers and community leaders so far. Segmentation does not eliminate disagreement, nor does it replace the need for sustained policy development, democratic deliberation, and institutional reform. Moreover, the predictive power of segmentation varies across issues and contexts, and its effectiveness depends on the quality of underlying data, careful model design, and ongoing evaluation. For Australia, further empirical testing is needed to determine which psychological, social, and contextual dimensions meaningfully distinguish groups and how stable these distinctions are over time. This is an empirical question, and a data-driven exercise.

Importantly, a values-based segmentation should be seen as complementing rather than replacing existing tools for understanding the Australian public. Established survey programs, administrative datasets, and qualitative research practices already provide rich insights into attitudes, behaviours and community dynamics. A segmentation framework adds another layer of interpretive depth, but it remains only one part of a broader analytical ecosystem. Ensuring complementarity will help avoid over-reliance on a single method and maintain the pluralism of approaches that is essential for robust democratic analysis.

Notwithstanding the ongoing value of existing data survey programs of research, our strong recommendation is for a segmentation-style approach to be considered in the Australian context, with a methodological expansion to include linkage with the rich administrative data available in Australia and to explicitly incorporate narrative framing.

The next step after data collection and analysis is also vital. Embedding values-based segmentation into public policy mechanisms increases the likelihood of informing how public institutions engage with communities, how messages are crafted on contentious issues, and how programs are designed to reach those who are disengaged or distrustful.

Introducing new analytic tools into the democratic space also requires careful attention to ethical considerations. Segmentation approaches carry risks if used to target groups in manipulative or overly instrumental ways, or if the labels assigned to populations become stigmatising. Safeguards around privacy, transparency, data governance, and responsible communication are therefore essential. The aim should be to support constructive civic engagement, not to harden divisions or encourage political micro-targeting. A clear ethical framework would help ensure that any segmentation work undertaken in Australia strengthens democratic practice rather than inadvertently undermining it.

Investment is also needed in the infrastructure to translate those insights into practice. Continued support for social science infrastructure like the Australian Data Archive (ADA) and encouragement to deposit data there enables external robustness checking of the analytical methodology, in particular a testing of whether the insights and policy conclusions are conditional on the methods used. Furthermore, depositing of data in the ADA allows for the answering of research questions that may not have been considered or may not have been in scope of the original data collection team.

More broadly, the proposed analytical approach should be understood as one component of an emerging national effort to improve the evidence base on democratic resilience. Other strands of

work—including narrative analysis, community-embedded research, experimental approaches to institutional reform, and monitoring of political trust—are equally important. Integrating segmentation insights with these parallel streams would allow for a more holistic understanding of the conditions shaping cohesion and polarisation and provide a more comprehensive foundation for cross-sector collaboration.

Training for policymakers, accessible tools for community leaders, and communications strategies tested across diverse groups are also important supports for data collection in order to maximise value and insight generation. Segmentation analysis also requires supporting civic and cultural organisations that can model inclusive dialogue and foster everyday experiences of belonging. By combining rigorous evidence with practical application, Australia can take proactive steps to strengthen social cohesion, resist the pressures of polarisation, and build the democratic resilience needed to meet the challenges ahead.

## 6.1 Next steps

To operationalise the segmentation-approach, we propose six immediate steps:

1. Pilot a limited number of questions on existing surveys, including but potentially not limited to the November 2025 ANUpoll
2. Conduct qualitative interviews and run a pilot survey to generate a framework for Australia (commencing as early as January 2026).
3. Solicit input on unique dimensions that should be taken into account in Australia when deploying for a values-based segmentation methodology.
4. On this basis develop design Wave 1 survey, linked with administrative data and future narrative analysis.
5. Deposit the data in the Australian Data Archive, and make available in a safe, privacy preserving way.
6. Conduct a workshop after initial analysis in 2026 to present these findings to a network of policy makers and civil society leaders.

Ultimately, strengthening democratic resilience depends not only on new analytical tools but on sustaining public trust in the research and institutions that use them. Transparency, open data, rigorous evaluation, and clear communication of findings are central to that task. By embedding segmentation within a broader democratic resilience research framework, and by ensuring its insights are used to support inclusion, fairness and constructive engagement, Australia can enhance its collective capacity to navigate future challenges without presenting any single method as a definitive solution.

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