Democratic Resilience: Moving from Theoretical Frameworks to a Practical Measurement Agenda

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Acknowledgement and series note

In early 2024, the Resilient Democracy Data and Research Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and actionable research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia's democratic resilience. The network is dedicated to making research findings and insights widely available. This paper has been written to prompt ideas for future collaborative research of the network.

The network is coordinated by the Centre for Social Policy Research and the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University (ANU) and co-chaired with the Department of Home Affairs' Office of Community Cohesion, formerly the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce. This discussion paper series is being published by the ANU with the support of the Department of Home Affairs.

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Abstract

Global indices and media narratives indicate a decline in democratic institutions, values, and practices. Simultaneously, democratic innovators are experimenting with new ways to strengthen democracy at local and national levels. These both suggest democracies are not static; they evolve as society, technology and the environment change.

This paper examines democracy as a resilient system, emphasizing the role of applied analysis in shaping effective policy and programs, particularly in Australia. Grounded in adaptive processes, democratic resilience is the capacity of a democracy to identify problems, and collectively respond to changing conditions, balancing institutional stability with transformative. It outlines the ambition of a national network of scholars, civil society leaders, and policymakers to equip democratic innovators with practical insights and foresight underpinning new ideas. These insights are essential for strengthening both public institutions, public narratives and community programs.

We review current literature on resilient democracies and highlight a critical gap: current measurement efforts focus heavily on composite indices—especially trust—while neglecting dynamic flows and causal drivers. They focus on the descriptive features and identify weaknesses, they do not focus on the diagnostics or evidence to what strengths democracies. This is reflected in the lack of cross-sector networked, living evidence systems to track what works and why across the intersecting dynamics of democratic practices. To address this, we propose a practical agenda centred on three core strengthening flows of democratic resilience: trusted institutions, credible information, and social inclusion.

The paper reviews six key data sources and several analytic methods for continuously monitoring democratic institutions, diagnosing causal drivers, and building an adaptive evidence system to inform innovation and reform. By integrating resilience frameworks and policy analysis, we demonstrate how real-time monitoring and analysis can enable innovation, experimentation and cross-sector ingenuity.

This article presents a practical research agenda connecting a national network of scholars and civil society leaders. We suggest this agenda be problem-driven, facilitated by participatory approaches to asking and prioritising the questions that matter most. We propose a connected approach to collectively posing key questions that matter most, expanding data sources, and fostering applied ideation between communities, civil society, government, and academia—ensuring democracy remains resilient in an evolving global and national context.

1 Introduction and overview

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 2024 was the 'biggest election year in human history' with nearly 4 billion people–over half the world's population—voting in local or national elections. While elections are central to democracy, they are only one dimension of the broader democratic process. The 2024 V-Dem Democracy Report (Nord et al., 2024) categorises the world's population into four different governance types from the least to most democratic as follows:

Table 1 World population by governance type

Type	Description	% of world population
Closed Autocracies	No multiparty elections for the executive; absence of fundamental democratic components such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and free and fair elections.	27
Electoral Autocracies	Multiparty elections for the executive exist; insufficient levels of fundamental requisites such as freedom of expression and association, and free and fair elections.	44
Electoral Democracies	Multiparty elections for the executive are free and fair; satisfactory degrees of suffrage, freedom of expression, freedom of association.	16
Liberal Democracies	Requirements of Electoral Democracy are met; judicial and legislative constraints on the executive along with the protection of civil liberties and equality before the law.	13

Source: Nord et al., 2024

Although nearly three-quarters of the world's population live under some form of multiparty elections, only 13%—including Australians—reside in fully Liberal Democracies.

Current indices that measure democratic health show deterioration across more countries than those that are strengthening. According to Nord et al., (2024) "Since 2009 – almost 15 years in a row – the share of the world's population living in autocratizing countries has overshadowed the share living in democratizing countries." These trends show no signs of slowing or reversing, although their underlying pressures continue to evolve.

While democratic indicators serve as a warning system, and there are platforms for global policy comparisons, they do not provide actionable insights for innovation or to guide policy design and implementation at national or sub-national levels.

Rising concerns about democracy's strength are reflected not only in public discourse, but in declining measures of trust in institutions. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) cross-country survey found that in 25 out of 28 countries over half the population report feeling low to moderately low trust in their national government. Around the world, questions are shifting from how to promote democracy to a more defensive position of how protect and strengthen democracies.

Although key democratic indices point to backsliding, the specific drivers of decline vary across national contexts. There is a helpful and growing literature on these questions of drivers of democratic backsliding, ranging from institutional (Waldner & Lust 2018) to behavioural (Bartels 2023) to psychological (Druckman 2024) dimensions.

What is arguably lacking is applied research and actionable analysis for policy-makers,

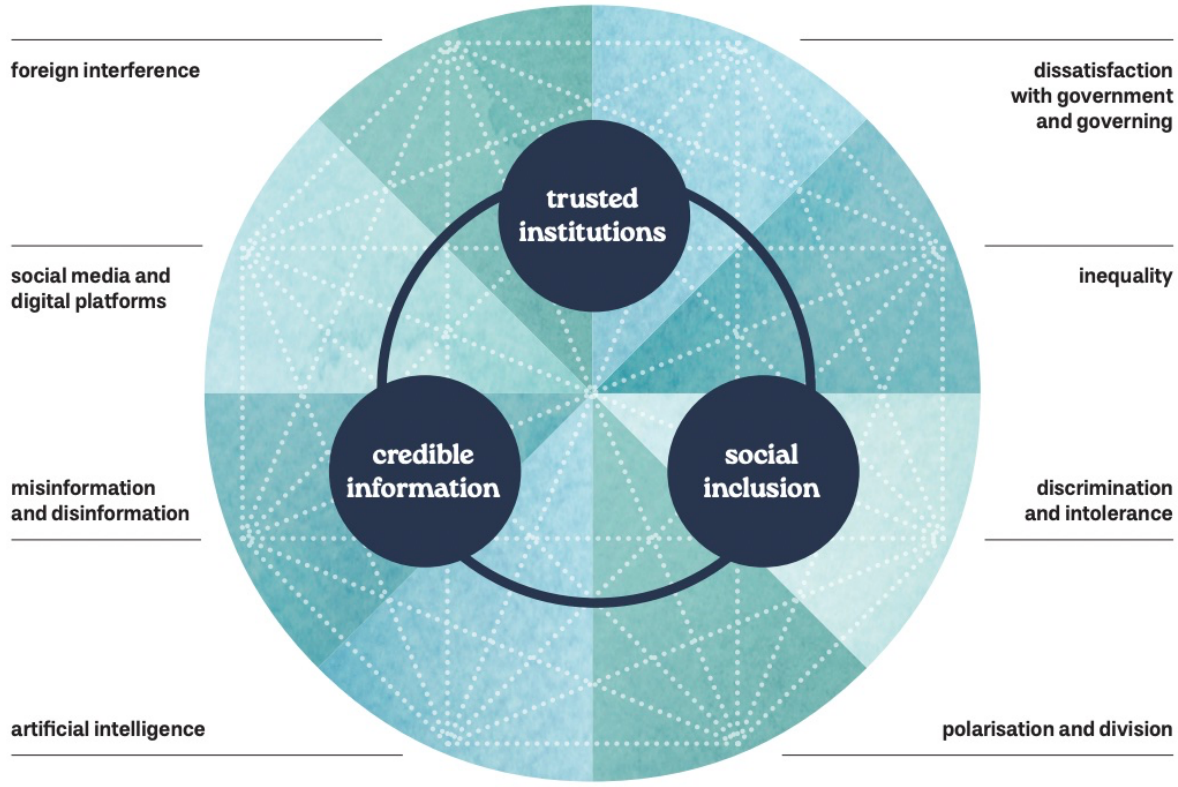
communities and politicians whose goals are to strengthen rather than weaken democracy.

1.1 Australia's Role in Democratic Innovation

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for innovation. Australia is recognised as a global leader in democratic innovation. On the 15th of July, 2024, the then Minister for Home Affairs the Hon. Clare O'Neil MP launched a major report from the Department's Democracy Taskforce entitled *Strengthening Australian Democracy: a practical agenda for democratic resilience (Department of Home Affairs, 2024)*. The report acknowledged that "Australia's democracy today is strong, but vulnerable' and that, "Like others around the world, Australia's democracy faces a new constellation of challenges."

The report identifies a constellation of eight interconnected pressures and suggests three enduring strengths of Australia's democratic resilience (Figure 1 below), The report acknowledges these are not the comprehensive set of challenges, rather those of immediate focus. The three strengths align with what scholars of democracy, such as Mark Warren (2017) identified as problems that a political system needs to solve to function democratically. These strengths serve to empower inclusion of diverse views and identities, forms of collective knowledge and agendas, and organise collective decision capacity.

Figure 1 Constellation of challenges to Australia's democracy, and sources of democratic strength. Source: Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (2024: 29)



As discussed in the next section, resilience is increasingly recognised as a practical lens for strengthening democracy and a framework to connect analytic approaches. The three sources of democratic strength in the Taskforce Report provides a framework to consider democracy as an adaptive system encountering a set of changing challenges, allowing for a broad analysis of processes (e.g., elections, deliberative capacity, or forms of government), culture (e.g., civic engagement and political participation), values (e.g., rights and inclusion), and liberties (e.g.,

freedom of speech). Rather than viewing democracy as a fixed model, focusing on its core strengths allows for a more flexible, problem-based approach, as Warren (2017) suggests. This enables democracies to integrate different democratic traditions, adapting and blending elements from various conceptions to address contemporary challenges more effectively.

Holloway and Manwaring (2022) offer a systematic review of multiple disciplinary approaches to democratic resilience, highlighting key distinctions in its conceptualisation. They differentiate between resilience as "adaptability"—where systems absorb disturbances and maintain their core functions—and resilience as "transformability", where disruptions lead to new development trajectories. As explored in this paper, this conceptual framing directs attention to the ever-changing context in which democracy enables adaptive and collective decisions. It further highlights the factors that both strengthen and potentially weaken our democratic institutions, values, and systems. Despite a growing body of academic literature framing democracy as dynamic and resilient, many of these approaches focus on weakening flows, or what is undermining democratic strength not what is strengthening it.

While much of the existing research focuses on democratic decline, fewer studies examine what actively strengthens democracy. Hollway and Manwaring (2023) further argue that democratic resilience is not a fixed trait but a process of "patterned adjustments" (Bourbeau, 2015). Despite increasing academic interest in resilience, existing measures remain broad and imprecise, often overlooking policy demand for applied research. There is no systematic tracking of democratic resilience, nor an integrated data system to assess factors that reinforce or weaken it.

1.2 Purpose of Discussion Paper

To fill this gap, a clear cross-disciplinary and shared research agenda is needed, with better measurement tools and guiding questions that inform both policy and civil society initiatives. This paper aims to advance an applied research approach to democratic resilience in Australia, equipping policymakers and democratic innovators with the insights needed to strengthen institutions, public service, and community programs.

More specifically, this discussion paper:

1. Explores the conceptual issues related to democratic resilience;
2. Sets out an approach to monitoring democratic resilience, diagnosing drivers of democratic strength and evaluating the evidence of what works; and
3. Outlines a research and data agenda to address interconnected challenges and generate actionable insights.

We structure the paper to explore the agenda as follows:

- Review our current conceptual approaches to defining problems and questions grounded in what we currently know from Australian and international research.
- Design a measurement approach to connect existing data and guide future data collection. Key aspects of this information is to ensure descriptive monitoring, diagnostic and evaluative metrics.
- Identifying specific areas that require further research such as the institutional and social capacity to absorb shocks, or innovative practices that enhance collective decision making.

2 What is democratic resilience and why measure it?

The history and evolution of democratic practices has been categorised as three broad stages by John Keane (2022): assembly (direct) democracy, representative democracy, and monitory democracy. At the core of these models is the idea that democracy enables collective decision-making, ensuring societies organize themselves while safeguarding broad citizen participation. The idea of self-governance, as reflected in Keane's work, is also fundamental to deliberative conceptions of democracy, which emphasize inclusive, informed and reflective communication as essential to collective decision-making.

The way democracy is conceptualised has implications for how democratic resilience is understood and measured, as different models prioritize different aspects of democratic performance. John Dryzek (2009), for instance, distinguishes between liberal and deliberative notions of democracy, arguing that liberal, electoral definitions overlook a crucial dimension: deliberation. From this perspective, democracies vary in their 'deliberative capacity', which he defines as "the extent to which a political system possesses structures to host deliberation that is authentic, inclusive, and consequential" (Dryzek 2009: 1382).

The application of the concept of resilience arises from moments of transition and crisis. Political science has drawn from fields such as ecology, engineering and psychology (Merkel 2023) to examine questions of how democratic systems responded to internal and external threats and shocks. At far back as Easton's (1965) *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* political systems were recognised as requiring inputs (support and demands), which they transform into outputs (authoritative rules and policies). Stress on these systems occur when support wanes, when processes turning inputs into outputs fail, or when feedback loops between inputs and outputs are distorted. Together, these dynamic considerations suggest that democratic resilience can be viewed through the lens of complex adaptive system science (Ruhl, 1996).

As democratic backsliding became evident in the early 2000s, alongside an increased presence of internal and external threats, resilience was increasingly analysed as a means of understanding how democracies withstood crises (Diamond 2015; Pettit 2000; and Ganghof 2012). By the early 2010s, research circles emphasised erosion of democratic institutions from within, and the limits of formal institutions when populist leaders challenged constitutional norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Scholars highlighted the role of informal institutions, discursive practices and civic engagement, including the role of public trust in maintaining stability while managing crises. This phase also recognised the socio-historical context of many democracies, and thus while they may be strong and resilient, there are still weaknesses in need of continual adaptation.

2.1 Definitional Literature

As befits a new but important field, distinct and robust definitions are starting to emerge. Scholarly definitions of democratic resilience vary but generally position democracy as capable of withstanding threats without regime collapse. Merkel (2023) defines it as the capacity of a democracy to absorb external challenges and internal stressors while adapting dynamically to shifting governance conditions. Boese et al. (2021) conceptualize resilience as a two-stage process: *onset resilience*, where democracies prevent autocratisation, and *breakdown resilience*, where they avoid systemic collapse during crises.

An alternative, yet complementary, perspective on democratic resilience places deliberative approaches at its core. McSwiney et al. (2024) define democratic resilience as the 'ability of

the public sphere [institutions and actors] to respond to extremist attacks and threats without losing its democratic capacity, understood in deliberative terms: reflective, competent, and inclusive'. This perspective shifts the focus from structural endurance to the quality of public discourse, emphasising how democratic systems navigate crisis through inclusive and reflective dialogue. While McSwiney et al focus on democratic resilience in the aftermath of extremist attacks, their insights have implications for contexts marked by division and polarization in the public sphere (see also Ercan et al 2022, a technical report on democratic resilience, commissioned by the Department of Premier and Cabinet) Holloway and Manwaring (2023) write 'What unites most definitions is positioning of democracy as resilient (or not) *to* or *against* particular threats or broader crises. These threats vary from general, system-level risks of autocratisation, to specified dangers of, for example, pernicious polarisation.' (*italics* in original).

Despite this widespread adoption of resilience as a concept, its meaning and practical value remain contested. Holloway and Manwaring (2022) identify key characteristics of how resilience has been applied to democracy including but not limited to dynamic decisions-making institutions; socio-historical awareness; diversity of groups and individuals; acceptance of uncertainty and change; effective institutions; community participation and inclusion; and high equity across individuals and group. Bourbeau (2018) provides a typology of resilience differentiating expectations:

- Resilience-as-maintenance | returning to the status quo.
- Resilience-as-marginality | making incremental changes.
- Resilience-as-renewal | embracing transformative change.

Holloway and Manwaring (2023) in a recent systematic review of the literature conclude that resilience as applied to democracies is an under theorised concept and 'Where resilience is understood as democratic stability – as it often is in the literature – it is effectively a rebranding of existing concepts explaining democratic persistence, lacking conceptual distinctiveness.' They also note that 'democratic resilience appears a muddled concept, often lacking definition and clear operationalisation.'

Key tensions include:

- Resilience of what? This tension centres on defining the resilience target. Some literature focuses on institutional processes for collective decision making, others on the civic infrastructure that enables participation of various forms, others on shared values and social cohesion.
- Resilience for whom? This question asks which groups benefits from democratic resilience and are all members of society included?
- Crisis management versus ongoing change. Should resilience focus primarily on handling acute crises and shocks, or on fostering continuous, adaptive changes that make democracy more robust over time?
- Change or preservation? A key tension exists between maintaining current democratic structures versus experimenting with or embracing new, potentially transformative approaches and processes.

- Internal and/or external threats? Democracies are challenged by threats that arise both from within (e.g., populism, authoritarianism, far-right extremism) and from external forces (e.g., foreign interference, global economic pressures).

Other tensions remain with this agenda. Misalignment in definitions hinders comparative studies and complicates tracking of democratic trends and evaluating programs effectiveness and impact in cross-program and cross-sector ways (Volacu and Aligica 2023). Yet, a shift towards problem-based approaches, as outlined by Warren (2017) would re-focus on a changing set of issues one is trying to improve, followed by deciding which practices are needed and monitored. Verhulst et al. (2024) suggest that we need a new question science to enable adaptive focus and the collecting of data that matters most. Standardisation and adaptive focus are not incongruent, but are difficult in limited resource environments.

Within Australian policy discussions, there is a continued focus on national resilience where democratic resilience is defined as a core part of this wider framework. Specifically, democratic resilience is framed within a broader national resilience framework (Ablong 2024), aligning with governance resilience—one of four resilience dimensions:

1. *societal resilience—involving the resilience of the individual, community and whole of society.*
2. *economic resilience—involving firms, industry sectors and the national economy.*
3. *governance resilience—involving all three levels of Australian government and the institutions of the state.*
4. *systemic resilience—the interdependence and synthesis of societal, economic and governance resilience.*

In addition to the definitional components, Holloway and Manwaring (2023) identified 20 sources of democratic resilience, with the most studies (23 publications) focused on political culture, norms, and attitudes towards democracy, followed by rule of law (15 publications), constitutional design (14 publications) public institutions (14 publications), party system and opposition strategies (14 publications), political parties and leaders (12 publications), and civil society (12 publications). Sources such as free press, accountability, political participation, rights and freedoms, public awareness, social and economic equality all had under 10 publications.

The Australian Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (2024) has drawn attention to three key strengthening flows that have historically sustained Australian democracy – trusted institutions, credible information, and social inclusion. They are grounded in extensive literature but change the focus of effort towards how, where, and when democracy is strengthened or weakened. Table 2, below, attempts to align the sources of resilience from Holloway and Manwaring (2023) with the strengthening flows from the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (2024).

Table 2 Aligning systematic literature review sources of democratic resilience with policy strengthening flows

Strengthening Flow	Characteristics of resilient system	Sources to measure
Trusted Institutions	• Effective/responsive institutions • Learning • Community participation • Openness to experimentation	• Political culture, norms and attitudes towards democracy • Rule of Law, independent judiciary • Constitutional design • Public institutions • Party system • Political parties and leaders • Political Trust • Accountability of political processes • Free and Fair elections • Public political participation • Open economy
Social inclusion	• Diversity • High equity across individuals and groups • Social values, structures and norms • Sense of belonging • Opportunity to participate in public deliberation	• Civil Society • Social Trust • Rights and Freedoms • Social and economic equality • Social cohesion
Credible Information	• Learning • Acceptance of uncertainty and change • Free flow of credible information in the public sphere	• Free Press • Transparency and integrity • Civic education and media literacy • Public awareness of threats to democracy

The purpose of this table, adapted from Holloway and Manwaring (p72 and p. 82), is indicative of two current frameworks, but seeks to evolve both. By consolidating multiple strengthening flows, democratic resilience can be more effectively understood as both a stabilizing force and a dynamic process of change, ensuring democratic governance endures and evolves in response to contemporary challenges.

2.2 Key Factors Influencing Policy and Data Collection to Inform Resilient Democracies

The above literature reveals several factors which should be considered when aligning research agendas around democracy as a resilient system:

- ***Democracy as dynamic, not static:*** Strengthening and weakening flows of democracy involve dynamic mechanisms and processes that enable adaptability and ensure inclusiveness. For example, a weakening flow might be the steady loss of trust in government services due to targeted misinformation, while a strengthening flow might

be the broadening and deepening of social connections and civic awareness through opportunities of civic participation and deliberative engagement. Observing these flows relies on continuous monitoring and analysis, not single point-in-time measures.

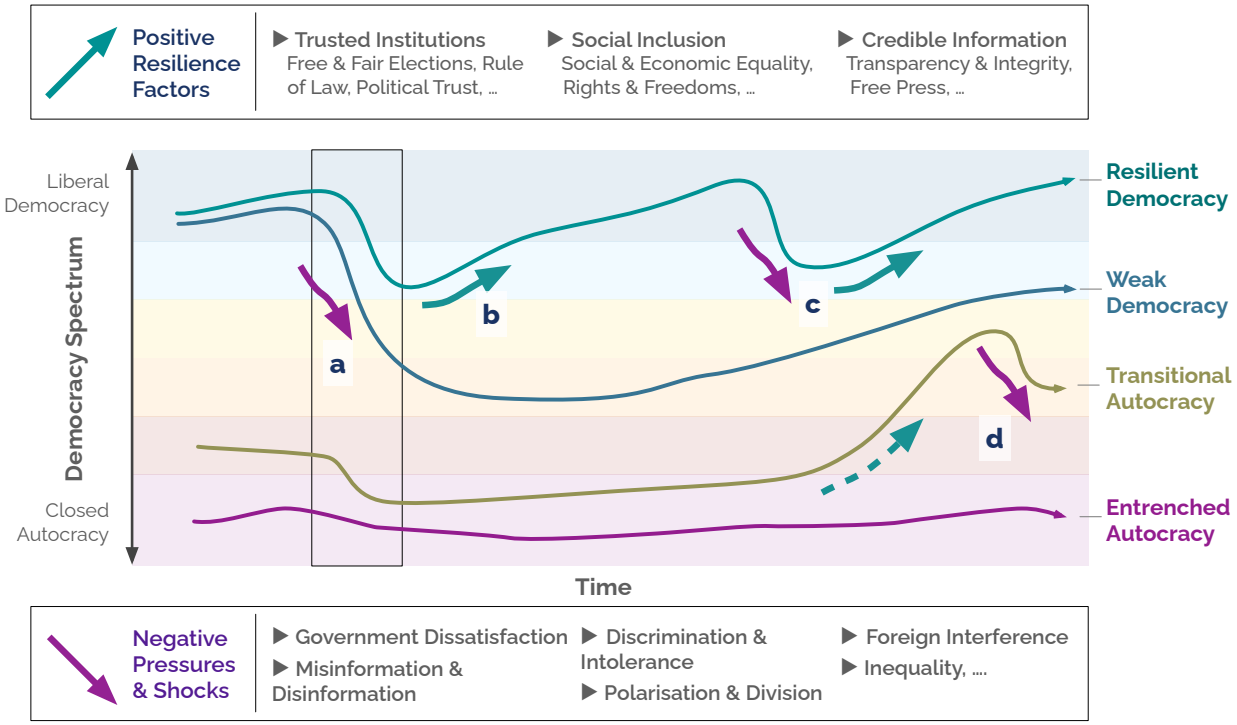
- ***Interplay of causal drivers:*** Resilience is not a single factor, rather the constellation of multiple drivers. Understanding resilience requires analysing causal pathways, prioritising early interventions, and addressing upstream risks.
- ***Pragmatic responses building around enduring strengths:*** Democracy's ability to adapt to change requires problem-solving and flexible responses focused on what strengthens democracy. This adds an additional frame and approach for policy, program and individual responses away from solely protective actions.

2.3 Measurement Purposes

Resilience measures serve three primary functions:

- Monitoring – Detecting early warning, trends, measuring descriptive performance indicators, and informing collective intelligence;
- Diagnosing – Identifying causal pathways, testing what matters most, informing strategic priorities, and informing innovators;
- Evaluating – Assessing evidence from experiments and programs to understand what works or doesn't work in different contexts and informing decisions to determine scalability.

Figure 2 Democratic Resilience as dynamic flow



Resilient Democracy as a Dynamic System

In Figure 2 (above) we conceptualise theoretical and definitional considerations of democratic resilience covered so far. We begin by conceptualizing democratic resilience as a dynamic property, and so, track democratic strength (y-axis) over time (x-axis). We imagine a suitable point-in-time measure of democratic strength from low to high on the y-axis, and trace trajectories over time for countries in this space. Typically, negative pressures arise rapidly, while long-term progress is gradual, creating a volatile trajectory. However, prolonged negative pressures (e.g., technological shifts) or short-term strengthening flows can also occur.

We illustrate how four different events could have different impacts on countries.

Negative pressures can be macro pressures affecting multiple countries at the same time (point a, in the Figure). For example, global conflict or major economic recessions can erode trust in government and create social fragmentation. Under this stressor, a resilient democracy would draw on its stores of cohesion, trust, and credible information to mitigate the weakening trajectory, and chart a path back to a stronger democracy (point b). By contrast, a less resilient democracy might not have sufficient social cohesion or be unable to decide which economic responses are preferred and thus only partially recover after a much longer time has elapsed.

Negative pressures and shocks can also be localised (point c), affecting a single community, sub-national region, or nation. For example, a political scandal, findings of institutional malpractice (e.g. Royal Commission findings in the Australian context), or government failures in how they respond to natural disasters could trigger break-downs in democratic support or engagement. A resilient democracy potentially emerges strengthened due to transformational experimentation in response to the event.

Finally, entrenched autocracies are likely less impacted by positive or negative shocks due to their governing approaches (freedoms, access to information, rights to protest, etc). Transitional, electoral, or competitive autocracies may exhibit some democratic progress,

however, this progress is often fragile (point d).

3 Measuring democratic resilience

3.1 Methodological challenges

One shared measurement challenge is determining the unit of analysis. Early definitions focused on public attitudes and opinions. Burnell and Calvert (1999), for example, defined it as occurring when 'an attachment to democratic ideals persists and such ideals continue to be canvassed in some quarters, in spite of hostility from the officially prescribed values and norms and apparent indifference from many elements in society.' That is, a resilient democracy is one where citizens maintain pro-democratic views, despite external or internal pressures.

Volacu and Aligica (2023) refers to this as an *Attachment Account* of democratic resilience, denoting it as 'a certain type of attitude shared by some significant portion of citizens in a society.' This "Attachment Account" is relatively easy to measure through surveys.

However, strong democratic attitudes do not always correspond to strong democratic institutions. Recent approaches emphasize system-level resilience, where democratic structures compensate for weaknesses (Poyet et al., 2024). While conceptually appealing, measuring institutional resilience is more complex.

Another challenge is assessing vulnerability and resilient capacities. Boese et al. (2021) note that resilience can only be observed retrospectively, as there is no established measure of a democracy's capacity to withstand future shocks. This difficulty stems from democracy being a *Modally Demanding Value* (Southwood, 2015), meaning its resilience depends on how it would respond to hypothetical threats. Southwood (2015) defines these as 'values the instantiation of which depends not only on what actually happens but also on what *would* happen in certain non-actual circumstances' (*italics* in original). That is, for a democracy to be resilient, it must not only not have avoided a sustained decline in democratic qualities from external or internal threats that have transpired, but also convincingly be likely to withstand threats that have not yet but could plausibly transpire. By definition, we cannot observe this counterfactual scenario and its results, but rather the results from plausible scenarios need to be inferred. There are methods emerging to stress test systems and values, as well as identify trends.

To address these challenges, some scholars attempt an *ex ante* evaluation by identifying certain features that have been shown or inferred to be protective factors. The trickiness of such approaches was highlighted by the Volacu and Aligica (2023) through a thought experiment. For example, if Country A ranks highly on ex ante resilience but later experiences democratic erosion while Country B does not, can we still consider Country A more resilient?

To make this distinction clearer, Volacu and Aligica (2023) distinguish between a country having the 'capacity for democratic resilience', which is an *ex ante* measure of resilience, and their preferred *ex post* measure of resilience as follows: 'A democratic system is resilient if it maintains its democratic identity through a challenge aiming to undermine it.' This distinction is also made by Croissant and Waldner (2025), who identify the key difference as being between resilience capacity and resilience performance, both of which should be measured separately.

Finally, there is no clear consensus on which democratic model is the basis for measurement to compare democratic systems. In measuring democratic resilience, it is unclear whether one

should make use of a thin or minimalist measure of democracy (free, fair and regular elections) or a "thick" measure, that incorporates additional constitutional, institutional, or social criteria (Geisel et al 2016). If one focuses on a thin, or parsimonious measure of democracy, then measurement becomes easier, but differentiation is lost. A large number of countries would cluster towards the right of the resilience distribution with very little to separate them. A thick or expansive measure of democracy may allow for more disaggregated measures, but at the cost of a clear consensus.

Volacu and Aligica (2023), in weighing up these methodological considerations, explicitly take a systems, *ex post*, minimalist approach as follows:

> A democratic system is resilient if political decision-making power (other than the power to decide and operate changes in the constitutional framework) continues to be channelled via representative offices accessed by means of fair electoral competition, when confronted with a challenge aiming to undermine the institutions which safeguard such a competition.

3.2 What we might measure

Initially, democratic resilience was measured through public support for democracy. While relatively simple to measure with public opinion surveys, recent approaches focus on assessing institutional resilience, which is harder to quantify. Furthermore, while we can observe resilience in hindsight (i.e., whether a democracy has survived challenges), there is no way to reliably predict how resilient a democracy might be to future threats.

Future measure of resilience must balance trade-offs between simplicity and precision, and recognise that no single measure of democratic resilience will be optimal for all analytical purposes. For instance, some metrics required for established democracies will differ from those for emerging ones. Similarly, measures that are of relevance to understanding onset resilience, preventing autocratization in Boese et al.'s (2021) framework differ from breakdown resilience, recovering from a crisis. Furthermore, different measures might need to be used for descriptive, diagnostic and evaluative purposes.

The concept of democratic resilience is not and need not always be used empirically. Comparative case studies can be used to help interpret events or to advocate for policy action. For example, Poyet et al. (2024) used the Finnish experience of the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate how 'scholars can go beyond comparative statistical indicators.'

While comparative case studies are useful, in order to meet the challenges highlighted in the previous section, it is necessary to construct measures of democratic resilience at a national, institutional, or sub-national (States/Territories, communities) level.

Table 3 Initial list of what is and what is not currently being measured, by strengthening flows of democratic resilience. This table requires further elaboration by the Network.

	Trusted Institutions	Credible Information	Social Inclusion
Currently measuring consistently	Trust Satisfaction in public service Voter registration and turnout	Media coverage	Indicators of economic/health/political inequality Belonging Volunteering Political participation
Measuring but not systematically	Feeling heard Values vs performance perceptions	Trust in Media Open Data access and use	Volunteering rates Social Capital Polarisation and social fragmentation
Not measuring	Civic infrastructure Public narratives Political culture De facto institutional performance	Media consumption National education Civics knowledge Prevalence of mis/disinformation	Access to civic and deliberative opportunities

4 The Australian measurement context

Australia provides a strong case study due to its democratic longevity and history of innovation in the face of challenges, what historian Judith Brett (2019) labelled "a laboratory for new ideas about democracy, and new methods of achieving them."

Australia's democratic system includes a written Constitution, a federal structure with state and territory governments, and compulsory preferential voting. Despite historical voting restrictions for Indigenous Australians, the country has generally ranked highly on democratic indices and was one of the first countries for universal enfranchisement for women.

The following section reviews different sources of data and the questions they are currently answering to help strengthen democratic resilience in Australia. They recognise the three different broad uses of data: descriptive monitoring; causal driver analysis for what matters; and evidence of what works.

Verhulst et al. (2024) provide a comprehensive framework that connects various methodologies to identify and prioritize key questions in democratic resilience, ensuring that data collection and analysis directly address critical challenges to democratic systems. While we outline data types below to help align agendas, we presume that each data collection approach is responding to the questions and problems that have been prioritised, updated and refined as mattering most to supportive democratic innovation and adaptive approaches. We identify the starting point of those shared questions in section 5, after describing the current capacity of data sources.

4.1 Australian performance in global indices

Global democracy indices continue to rank Australia as a democratic lighthouse. Freedom House, the Varieties of Democracy project (also known as V-Dem) and the Economist Intelligence Unit all provide data on the strength of democracy and how this is changing over time across multiple countries, including Australia. Across all of these databases, Australia ranks very highly and at or near the top of the distribution on the various measures of democratic strength.

According to the Freedom House index, since 1972 the period covered in the data base, Australia has always been listed as 'Free' and with a value of 1 (the highest) for political rights and civil liberties. There is a little more variation within the V-Dem database for Australia, but Australia is still ranked at the top of the distribution for the vast majority of indices. For example, Australia is ranked 14th (in the top 10%) in V-DEM's Liberal Democracy Index.

4.2 Data and methods options and opportunities

There are six potential (overlapping) types of data that could be used to measure democratic resilience in Australia.

4.2.1 Survey data

Surveys are the most frequent data collection tool used to assess democratic conditions. They are used to collect representative samples from a population of interest, using consistent questions to describe broader patterns and analyse associations between variables. Australian public service and civil society conduct numerous annual surveys relevant to democratic resilience including:

- national statistical agency surveys (e.g. General Social Survey),
- government funded surveys (e.g. Australian Public Service Commission's Trust and Satisfaction with Australian public services survey, or the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey)
- and large academic or think-tank sponsored surveys (including the Australian Election Study, ANUpoll, the Scanlon Social Cohesion Survey, the Lowy Institute Poll, to name just a few).

While capturing aspects of democratic resilience, these surveys are designed for broader purposes and do not fully capture changes in democratic practices, values, or diverse community perspectives.

To strengthen surveys for democratic resilience, consideration is required for what is being measured (content and questionnaire design), frequency of those surveys, and the trade-offs required for sampling representativeness. The Total Survey Error (TSE) Framework provides some guiding principles on making these trade-offs (Groves and Lyberg 2020).

Best methodological survey practices involve probability-based sampling. Here, individuals are randomly recruited to participate in a surveys with some known probability of selection. This allows analysts of the data to make some inference about the population, based on the Central Limit Theory (CLT). An alternative form of sampling is a non-probability sample, where respondents are recruited based on some deterministic factor, or where people opt-in to completing a particular survey or set of surveys (Vehovar et al. 2016). Inference for the population of interest is not as straight forward using non-probability-based sampling. However, these sampling approaches tend to have lower costs per respondent, or a greater

number of respondents for a given cost.

Other methods include sampling of individuals defined as experts, reflected in many of the method used to create international indices. Other survey methods include longitudinal tracking of individuals, enabling questions of personal development and drivers of changing perspectives.

With a wide range of existing surveys in Australia, as summarised in Table 4 below, various aspects of democratic resilience are assessed through non-standardised questionnaires and at different intervals. This includes measuring factors ranging from satisfaction with democracy, to confidence/trust in institutions, to political behaviour, to extent of support for non-democratic values, to measures of social cohesion and individual or community-level resilience. These measures are by themselves limited, and more targeted instruments are needed to coherently assess democratic resilience.

Table 4 Current multi-year measurement sources in Australia

Data Source	Instrument	Data Related to Strengthening Flow		
		Institution	Information	Inclusion
AUSTRALIAN SURVEYS				
Australian Bureau of Statistics	General Social Survey	X		X
Trust and Transparency Unit, Australian Public Service Commission	Trust and Satisfaction in Democracy	X		
Australian National University	Australian Election Study	X		
	ANUpoll	X		X
ANU- Hu Fu Centre	Asian Barometer Survey	X		
Lowy Institute	Lowy Institute Poll	X		
Susan McKinnon Foundation	McKinnon Poll		X	
Melbourne Institute	Taking the Pulse of the Nation			
Melbourne Institute	HILDA study		X	
SBS	Viewer surveys		X	X
Scanlon Foundation Research Institute	Mapping Social Cohesion Study	X		X
University of Canberra	Digital News Report		X	
GLOBAL SURVEYS- Australian Data				
OECD	Population Survey on Drivers of Trust	X	X	X
V-DEM	Expert Survey	X		
World Values Survey	Population Survey	X		X
Freedom House	Expert Survey on democracy and human rights	X	X	
Edelman	Trust Barometer			X

This table is not comprehensive on surveys in Australia and combines different survey methodologies. This is a table that authors seek to continue to build and assess, looking for strategic connection between surveys, and collaboration around analysis.

4.2.2 Electoral data

Administrative data from elections provides another source of data that is frequently used to assess democratic resilience. The Australian Election Commission (AEC) provides this extensive electoral data in Australia. While voting patterns are less relevant for measuring democratic resilience, data on voter enrolment, participation and validity are important.

Australia's compulsory voting system results in high participation: in the 2023 Constitutional Referendum (AEC 2023), 97.7% of eligible Australians were enrolled, 90% voted, and 99% submitted a formal ballot. These high participation rates indicate democratic resilience or predict related measures.

Electoral data, available at granular geographic levels (e.g., Electoral Divisions, voting booths), can assess resilience variations within Australia. For instance, Biddle et al. (2023) found higher informal voting rates in electorates with larger migrant and lower-income populations, highlighting areas for targeted resilience-building. This does not mean that these two characteristics necessarily cause high informal voting (and hence lower democratic resilience), but rather at the very least that those areas with high migrant or low income populations could be of particular focus in reinforcing resilience. Other variables that could be considered are age and other demographics, educational factors, and access to civic engagement programs.

There are further opportunities to link analysis of these voting patterns with dynamics at local government areas to strengthen civic participation programs.

4.2.3 Large, linked administrative data

Linked administrative data has not been used widely to assess dimensions of democratic resilience but has potential for both descriptive measurement and assessing the drivers of change at individual and community cales. Australia's data environment has rapidly expanded the quality, depth, and availability of large, linked administrative datasets under the Australian Bureau of Statistics' DataLab (ABS 2021a) with stronger access rules through the Five Safes Framework (ABS 2021b). A key data asset is the Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA), a nationally representative administrative data asset combining information on population demographics, income and taxation, employment, and health at the individual and household levels. The other major asset is the Business Longitudinal Analysis Data Environment (BLADE), combining administrative records from the Australian Tax Office (ATO) with firm survey data from the ABS from 2001–2021.

Local councils, service organizations, and nonprofits generate significant data that is crucial yet often underutilized due to a lack of aggregation or accessibility to support democratic programs. There is potential to use this data for tracking political violence or threats to identifying key concerns voiced by communities across digital platforms. Further, data provided by non-governmental organisations offer additional sources of data. There are other data that would be relevant to monitoring democratic resilience, including administrative data on registered and operational community organisations and non-government organisations, registers of lobbying activities and political donations, or granular data on citizen-government contracts. Further administrative data that reports crime victimisation or safety and instances of anti-social behaviour could be used for measuring societal and economic resilience, as outlined in Ablong's (2024) framework.

While these datasets may not directly measure democratic resilience, they offer descriptive and predictive insights at both individual and community levels which are currently underutilized in resilience research.

4.2.4 Causal evidence from labs, experiments and evaluations

Many dimensions of democratic resilience require assessing the uncertainty of how multiple actions impact intersecting outcomes that enable democracies to be resilient. The ability to understand what works to strengthen democratic resilience, or counter weakening flows, requires evaluated experimentation and living bodies of evidence. These are both data inputs

and methodological approaches which consider uncertainty and probability across those systems.

One of the challenges in measuring democratic resilience at a national or systems-level is that you can only observe a nation or a system in one state at one point in time. Measuring democratic resilience at the national level presents challenges, as only one state of a system is observable at a time, rather than all plausible ones (Southwood, 2015). This poses a particular problem when we are trying to quantify the impact of past policy decisions on a country's current or future democratic resilience.

The potential outcomes framework, which is often what is used in policy evaluations, quantifies causal effects by comparing treated and untreated groups through randomization (VanderWeele, 2016). However, random assignment of national policies is infeasible as it is unrealistic to randomly assign a country to a treatment or a control group. For instance, assessing the impact of compulsory voting requires statistical controls rather than experimental randomization.

With those limitations, there are several closely linked settings and designs that could help advance collective understanding of how to strengthen democratic resilience include:

- Lab experiments: Controlled, artificial settings where as much of the variation in settings and information as possible is held constant to isolate causal effects.
- Field experiments: Randomized studies conducted in real-world settings (see Gerber & Green, 2012) to enhance external validity.
- Survey experiments: Combine experimental manipulations while people are providing other survey responses (Mutz, 2011). Further, we note that emerging open-source digital deliberative technologies present new opportunities for running 'digital-field' experiments at considerable scale, yet with very low (next to zero) treatment costs (Barandiaran et al. 2024).
- Bayesian adaptive trials: Experimental designs that use Bayesian updating to dynamically adjust treatment allocation based on emerging evidence, optimizing learning and decision-making in complex democratic systems.

Druckman & Green (2021) note the rise of experimental methods in political science, with studies increasingly addressing democratic resilience. For example, Wappenhans (2024) found that citizen assemblies in Germany enhanced political trust and participation while reducing conspiracy theory receptiveness. There is considerable scope to expand the number of all types of experiments (lab, field, and survey) in Australia, with a particular focus on democratic resilience.

When randomisation is not possible due to lack of control over treatment or not ethical, quasi-experimental designs provide an alternative approach. A useful description is given by Harris et al. (2006). Although written for health researchers it is still of relevance for understanding democratic resilience, and uses the following description:

> Quasi-experiments are studies that aim to evaluate interventions but that do not use randomization. Similar to randomized trials, quasi-experiments aim to demonstrate causality between an intervention and an outcome. Quasi-experimental studies can use both preintervention and postintervention measurements as well as nonrandomly selected control groups.

Harris et al. (2006) describe these methods and limitations including (with examples):

- Natural experiments: Exploit external events or institutional rules that create treatment variation. However, they lack counterfactuals and can focus on answering what is possible, not what is unknown.
    - For example, Martin et al. (2022) exploit the 'as-if random' drawing of a post-conflict ceasefire boundary over 2002 to 2011 in Côte d'Ivoire to examine the causal effect of local exposure to rebel rule during the conflict on political attitudes in a 2018 survey.
- Instrumental variables (IV): Use theory-driven exogenous factors to identify causal effects, such as resilient versus non-resilient system (Acemoglu et al., 2019).
- Regression discontinuity design (RDD): Compares groups above and below a cutoff point.
- Difference-in-differences (DiD): Assesses treatment effects by comparing changes over time between affected and unaffected groups. This can be used to compare changes in key indicators (e.g. institutional trust, civic engagement, perceived performance) between countries or sub-state regions that experience distinct democratic crises (e.g. corruption scandal, electoral dispute, judicial intervention) and those that do not.
    - Larreguy and Lui (2023) study the causal effect of schooling on political participation in Senegal via a DiD design by leveraging variation in the intensity of a large-scale school construction program and the age of children at the time of the program.

Finally, knowledge isn't static and policy makers and communities seek evidence for different decision-needs in different contexts and conditions. We therefore need searchable and identifiable evidence repositories, and constantly updated evidence synthesis. Elliott et al (2021) present examples of how to build collective intelligence networks that come together to quickly consolidate robust evidence to answer evolving questions, particularly when linked to decision-needs. This draws on the analysis of the methods above, acknowledging uncertainties while using expertise to guide design or briefings.

4.2.5 Qualitative data and mixed-methods research

Qualitative data, gathered through interviews, focus groups, case studies, ethnographic observations, and textual analysis—offers essential insights to inform the questions being asked and complement numerical indicators by uncovering additional insights into how democracy is experienced, contested, and strengthened at various levels of society. Some recent examples include Croissant and Waldner (2025) using Qualitative Comparative Analysis, Dunleavy and Evans (2024) in their concluding section in *Australia's Evolving Democracy*.

Empirical data at national or institutional levels often obscure the variation in democratic resilience across communities and different groups and localities. Qualitative approaches on the other hand enable researchers to explore how individuals and communities perceive, experience, and respond to democratic challenges in everyday life. Surveys may indicate declining trust in institutions, but they rarely explain all the reasons why. Narrative analyses and in-depth interviews allow for a more detailed examination of the potential causal pathways leading to trust or distrust, shedding light on factors such as government responsiveness,

political culture, civic education, or misinformation. Qualitative research can also detect subtle yet critical early warning signs—such as shifts in political discourse, declining civic engagement, or rising polarisation—before they become evident in national statistics.

Integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches through mixed-methods research (Bryman, 2016) offers a holistic understanding. Examples include:

- Triangulating survey trust indicators with focus group discussions can reveal why trust is eroding.
- Combining case studies with experimental data can assess democratic innovations.
- Using discourse analysis alongside social media sentiment tracking can uncover how democratic norms are evolving and how interventions are countering misinformation.

4.2.6 Text data at scale

Large-scale text analysis could enable real-time monitoring of dimensions of democratic resilience. Since at least the early 2000s computational text analysis, natural language processing (NLP), and machine learning have enabled new insights from the digitisation of political discourse, news media, and electoral communications (Laver et al. 2003). While access barriers to big text data still remain, the application of these methods allow new scale and frequency of assessing public sentiment, political polarisation, and shifts in democratic norms in near real-time.

- Media narratives: Digitised newspapers, radio, and television provide large-scale qualitative datasets to understand the events, issues and priorities framed in different media outlets.
- Political speech: Computational analysis of legislative debates highlights changing discourse around democratic resilience, transparency, and institutional reform. Hansard publishes the verbatim proceedings of the Australian Parliament while parties often release electoral platforms. Analysis of these bodies of text can reveal shifts in rhetoric on democracy and party positions.
- Social media: Platforms such as X (Formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, Truth Social and Reddit provide data to analyse different dimensions of community sentiments and what matters most to those communities. It also allows for analysis of the spread of mis and disinformation, use of hate speech, and political extremism (Carson and Grömping 2024).

Recent advances in large-language model (LLM) artificial intelligence technology, provide powerful new avenues for tracking narratives of democratic resilience in text at scale (Angus 2024, Angus & O'Neill 2024).

A recent report by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (Prentice 2024) posed the question, "How do Australians Talk about Democracy?" The analysis, relevant for strategic communications and segmentation of how different communities and regions have different framings, shaped a second study "Understanding public discourses about democracy" which quantitatively tested the qualitative findings against media and parliamentary speech over 20 years (Link 2024).

By integrating these text sources with quantitative democratic indicators, policymakers can develop early warning systems for democratic decline and assess the effectiveness of

interventions aimed at bolstering resilience.

4.3 Simulation as a complementary research tool

All six of the foregoing measurement approaches serve the purposes outlined earlier (monitoring, diagnosing, and evaluating). And, whilst each approach will be strengthened by prior theorising around democratic resilience, the dynamic, interconnected and adaptive nature of democratic resilience (see Sec. 2.2) presents severe challenges for traditional theorising. Reductive assumptions concerning dynamics (e.g. two-period versus many-period), interconnectedness (e.g. two or three connected factors, rather than many), and adaptiveness (e.g. best-response or maximising behaviour versus heuristic learning and change) required by theoretical modelling means that our ability to explore many alternative scenarios, or examine likely outcomes from interventions in a complex adaptive democracy, or handle high heterogeneity or complex interactions is limited. However, computational simulation, or agent-based modelling (ABM), as a natively complex adaptive system modelling framework (Miller and Page 2007), has a long-standing track-record in providing a middle ground between reductive theory on the one hand, and models of statistical aggregates pursued by quasi-experimental approaches on the other.

Since at least the early work of Kollman, Miller and Page (1998), researchers have been building artificial computational societies to examine the kinds of resilience questions that are the focus of this work. As such, there is a complementary role for this 'third way' in research (beyond theory, and empirical work) to enhance the effectiveness of other approaches. Rightly, Murray Gell-Man (p.313, 1994), a founder of complexity science and Nobel laureate, has argued that the ABM approach should not simply be a 'thought-experiment', but must contribute insights on real-world phenomena,

In the end, though, what really matters is the relevance of the simulations to the real-world situations that they imitate. Do the simulations supply valuable intuition about real situations? Do they suggest conjectures about real situations that could be tested by observation? Do they reveal possible behaviours that had not been thought about before? Do they indicate new possible explanations of known phenomena?

Recent ABM work related to democracy aims to do just this, for example, Davies and Peura (2024) use an ABM to study the role of social-networks on voter opinion adjustment, in particular the impact of vote-seeking behaviour on election rationality, or Petrov et al. (2023) use an ABM to study the complex interplay between voter identity, participation and repressive tactics of the incumbent. And, ABMs can also bridge research methods, as shown by Thomas et al. (2024) who build a theoretically-founded, empirically grounded ABM of protester movements, in which both a conventional and disengaged but radicalised population can emerge, depending on authority action. Common to these approaches is the treatment of the democratic system as dynamic, adaptive, and complex, demonstrating the potential of ABMs to support the democratic resilience research agenda.

5 Articulating a research agenda

Democratic resilience, like many other constructs in the social sciences, presents significant measurement challenges across the different uses and changing questions. As noted above, there is a need to assess democratic resilience at multiple levels (individuals, communities, systems, nations); at different frequencies to measure before a potential shocks (*ex ante*) or after a specific shock (*ex post*) has occurred; and to measure the likelihood of impact against

different plausible scenarios. Beyond these structural decisions, it is necessary to develop and validate specific instruments that can be utilised in various forms of data collection, including surveys, administrative data, and experimental evaluations.

A comparable complexity is seen over two decades ago when seeking to measure social capital. Stone and Hughes (2002) described social capital as an 'empirically elusive concept' that can nonetheless be 'understood as networks of social relations which are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity and which lead to outcomes of mutual benefit.'

In response to the complexity inherent in the concept of social capital, the approach of Stone and Hughes (2002) developed 'empirical meaning and measurement validity' in order to:

- articulate a theoretical structure and conceptual framework;
- conduct a dedicated survey on a representative sample with theoretically-informed questions;
- construct and test the reliability of measures of social capital;
- assess different analytical approaches to measuring social capital; and
- provide recommendations on measurement approaches and specific measures based on the question and question purpose.

While social capital and democratic resilience differ conceptually, there are potential lessons about the trajectory of interdisciplinary collaborations to strengthen a field and applied practice.

Building on the conceptual frameworks outlined earlier and understanding of the available data, several research questions emerge for Australia cutting across the needs for descriptive, diagnostic and evaluative analysis:

RQ.A1 Which components of Australia's democratic institutions, values, and processes becoming more, or less, resilient to internal and external pressures?

RQ.A2 What are the strengthening flows across different dimensions of Australia's democracy, and

RQ.A3 Where are there current responses versus gaps in policy, regulation, or programs?

RQ.A4 How are Australia's democratic innovations strengthening the core drivers of stronger democracy, and how do other countries innovative practices compare or relate to Australia?

More focused diagnostic or analytical questions arise from these descriptive questions. Specifically:

RQ.B1 What are the current risk factors that undermine Australia's democratic resilience?

RQ.B2 What are the protective factors that strengthen Australia's democratic resilience?

RQ.B3 What are the causal pathways that strengthen institutional trust, credible information and social cohesion?

Alongside the identification of Australia's strengths, weaknesses and threats with regards to democratic resilience, there are a further set of public policy or evaluative questions:

RQ.C1 What has been the impact of past policy decisions on Australia's democratic resilience?

RQ.C2 What are some potential future evidence-based policy changes that will reduce the number of threats to Australian democracy?

RQ.C3 What works to build institutional trust, social cohesion and credible information?

6 Conclusion: Advancing a Practical Agenda for Democratic Resilience

This paper has sought to advance a collective agenda that builds adaptive analysis to inform multiple decision-points underpinning resilient democratic systems. The paper frames how current conceptualisations of democratic resilience can connect practical agendas for measurement, monitoring, and policy innovation. We identified key tensions in existing scholarship and emphasized the need for a dynamic and applied analysis that moves beyond static indices and instead focus on the flows and intersecting systems that actively strengthen democracy. Ultimately, ensuring the resilience of democracy in an era of uncertainty requires not just monitoring its weaknesses, but actively investing in its strengths and experimental nature.

Three core strengthening flows—trusted institutions, credible information, and social inclusion—were identified as essential components of a resilient democracy. We explore how these elements interact in shaping both institutional durability and democratic adaptability. In doing so, we emphasized the importance of continuous monitoring to capture real-time shifts in public trust, civic engagement, and institutional effectiveness.

To translate theory into practice, we articulated the need for adaptive and participatory question and problem definition linked to, or drawing from, a comprehensive measurement agenda that integrates survey data, electoral data, administrative records, experimental and quasi-experimental research, qualitative data collection, and large-scale text data analysis. And, we introduced the complementary role that simulation science might play in supporting each approach. A collaborative, interdisciplinary approach –one that engages academics, policymakers, civil society leaders, and the broader public in co-producing knowledge and fostering innovation—is crucial for establishing a living evidence system for democratic resilience.

In the remainder of this section, we summarise some practical, ongoing research projects being undertaken as part of the Australian Resilient Democracy Research and Data Network and by its' members.

6.1 Establish a monitoring observatory for Australia's democratic resilience

Connect and sustain a national research network including academics, policy makers, civil society and philanthropy to advance a collective and coherent monitoring approach to democratic resilience. This network will boost interoperability of existing measurement surveys while integrating new data and analytic tools to address gaps in understanding what matters but is not being measured. In the first half of 2025 we seek to include several components:

- **Collectively define the questions that matter most:** Collaborate across sectors to refine the research questions outlined above, ensuring they are targeted and directly address the decision-making needs of communities, policymakers, media, and other stakeholders. Recognize that these questions will evolve over time and with changing contexts, allowing the network to provide relevant insights. This approach promotes problem-driven analysis within a structured and strategic framework.
- **Survey interoperability and development:** Collaborate within the network to harmonise several core survey questions, enhancing comparability across studies. Additionally, design a new survey module to be incorporated into an existing (or new) representative sample of Australian adults.
- **Tracking factors enabling resilient democracy:** Building upon the APSC Trust and Satisfaction in Democracy Survey, we plan to extend and test a series of questions in survey modules related to democratic resilience. The goal is to monitor trends over time, assessing changing to the factors that predict the attitudes, norms, and behaviours that relate to individual, community and institutional resilience (RQ.A1). The unit-record data from the surveys that these modules will be embedded in will be made available to registered researchers through the Australian Data Archive.
- **Analysing narrative trends:** Utilize advanced language models, supplemented by focus groups and interviews, to monitor real-time discourse on democracy within Australian communities, media, and parliamentary debates. This approach aims to establish early warning indicators for emerging issues, enabling proactive responses to declining trust in specific services or democratic values.

6.2 Foundations for a Living Evidence System

The Network is committed to developing a dynamic evidence system that continuously updates and integrates new findings. Initial steps include:

- **Synthesizing existing knowledge and identifying gaps:** Produce a series of discussion and policy papers addressing practical questions from policymakers, communities, and network members. These publications will offer new insights while summarising what we already know across the extensive expertise already present in Australia.
- **Enhancing data sharing infrastructure:** Facilitate access to diverse datasets by strengthening platforms like the Australian Data Archives, ensuring appropriate safeguards and protections are in place. The effort promotes collaborative research and comprehensive analysis.
- **Explore new evaluation collaborations:** Pursue partnerships to incorporate democratic resilience and community cohesion outcomes into program evaluations. These efforts may involve expanding the use of adaptive learning approaches and experimental evaluation designs to enhance service and program implementation.

6.3 In-Depth Diagnostic Analysis

The Network seeks to support existing or new research initiatives that help inform cross-sector collaborations address drivers of democratic innovation.

- **Facilitate Hack-a-thons:** In response to emerging questions or new concepts—such as the recent exploration of Civic Life Journeys (Prosser and Mycock, 2025)—the Network will convene research analysts, students, policymakers, and civil society data experts

for focused, time-bound exploratory analyses. These events will capitalize on newly available datasets, opportunities for data linkage, or specific innovation challenges.

- **In-depth analysis of administrative data:** A review of the existing research in Australia suggests that spatial analysis of indicators of democratic resilience is limited or dated. Researchers in the Network are involved in ongoing projects that will identify the relationship between societal and economic resilience factors (for example economic resources, equity, labour market change) and democratic resilience measures. They are also identifying partnerships with councils and states level services where analysis of existing administrative data.

6.4 In-depth analysis of case studies and theoretical refinement

Develop an empirically grounded notion of democratic resilience by integrating insights from the normative theory of deliberative democracy with case study analyses. A specific focus in the case studies could be on the evolution of the public sphere, strengthening civic spaces and its key actors and institutions, such as the media and community leaders.

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