

# The Canberra Times

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## Trust in politicians hits a two-decade low

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Adversarial politics has eaten away at Australians' trust in democracy, with more and more voters breaking away from the major parties, a survey has revealed.

Despite two decades of economic growth, Professor Mark Evans, of the University of Canberra Institute for Governance and Public Analysis, said Australians' trust in government and politicians are now at their lowest levels since 1993 - and loathing of political "blood sports" is to blame.

"We found [Australians] are interested in politics but they're not interested in the type of politics that are on offer in Canberra," he said.

"There are similar patterns and trends elsewhere in the world but the trends are worse in Australia despite the fact we've had good times economically."

In another blow to the two-party system, the joint survey with the Museum of Australian Democracy revealed only 37 per cent of Australians subscribe to a particular party, the lowest level since 1967.

"That means there's a significant number of floating voters who aren't attached to a party, and given those other findings, these are voters who are disillusioned with the mainstream political parties and have little trust in politicians," Professor Evans said. "Remarkably, disaffection increases with age so older Australians who've benefited most from the social entitlements of the postwar settlement and economic growth and superannuation are now the most disaffected group along with Indigenous Australians."

Just 5 per cent of voters older than 50 said they trusted politicians "very much" while twice as many aged 18 to 29 felt the same.

Almost a quarter of older Australians had no trust, compared with 15 per cent of younger voters.

Faith in Australia's democratic political system was once robust for 22-year-old Canberran Sophie Roper, but has weakened in recent times.

"I definitely have general confidence that the government will do what is best for Australia," she said.

"But as I get older and witness more broken promises, it has become harder to know what each party stands for and how much is really about effective policies and how much is about political goals and stepping on others to get to the top."

This increased frustration by the adversarial nature of Australian politics has made Ms Roper a "floating voter". "I think the days of being a loyal supporter of one party for your whole or most of your life are over for a lot of people," she said.

"I vote based on the issues I care about, like health, education and taxes, not because of the party and especially not the politician because they might be replaced tomorrow."

With her political engagement falling as politics begins to seem like the lesser of two evils, Ms Roper said she would consider voting for a minor party.

While the survey found fewer than half (42 per cent) of Australians are happy with how our democracy is operating, it revealed new citizens are the biggest champions of Australian democracy. "They have significant beliefs in democratic values and a lot more emotional attachment," Professor Evans said.

Minor parties and independent candidates also escaped most of the ire levelled at members of the major political parties and were predicted to fare better on election day as a result. "There's a significant number of floating voters who aren't attached to a party, voters who are disillusioned with the mainstream political parties and have little trust in politicians. That provides fertile conditions for independent or minority parties who are able to develop political projects around trust building with their communities," Professor Evans said.