

CONFIDENCE IN POLITICAL PARTIES IN AUSTRALIA: EVIDENCE FROM THE AES

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Abstract

This article uses the 2010 Australian Election Study (AES) to explore the level of confidence citizens have in political parties. This article shows that citizens have very little confidence in political parties and sheds light on existing theories of political support by exploring some of the reasons for this. However, this article also shows that many citizens still care which party wins the election, still think parties are essential to the proper functioning of the political system and are broadly satisfied with and supportive of democracy. The evidence suggest that the ‘party is not over’ but the relationship between citizens and parties in Australia is a fractured one.

Introduction

Political support is best understood as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing a range of factors from (specific) attitudes towards politicians and government to (diffuse) support for the regime of democracy. Confidence in institutions like political parties is thought to be an important mid-range indicator of the broader concept of political support (see Easton, 1975). Yet, while a lot has been written about trust in politicians and government and support for democracy there is much less literature exploring attitudes towards political parties discretely. Furthermore, it is not clear whether factors such as declining party membership and declining levels of party identification are good measures of the confidence citizens have in parties, as is often implied (Norris, 2011: 75). This article uses the 2010 Australian Election Study (AES) to explore attitudes towards political parties and test theories that appear in the international literature as they relate to confidence in parties. This article shows that citizens in Australia have very little confidence in political parties and illuminates existing theories by showing that supply-side rational choice factors exert the largest effect on how much confidence citizens have in parties. However, when the broader

dimensions of political support are examined a different picture emerges. The latter section of this article shows that broad majorities still think parties are essential to the proper functioning of the political system and are broadly satisfied with and supportive of democracy – although these evaluations do seem to be being eroded by the lack of confidence citizens have in parties. The evidence suggest that the ‘party is not over’ but the relationship between citizens and parties in Australia is a fractured one.

The Importance of Political Parties and Attitudes towards Political Parties

At the earliest stages of democratization parties emerged as essential to democracy. ‘As the first wave of countries in Europe and North America took their cautious steps to democratisation—involving in particular the transfer of power to legislatures and the expansion of the electorate—political parties emerged as the primary linkage mechanism for facilitating the representative process’ (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011: 4). Since this time parties have developed and adapted. Today political parties play numerous essential functions. As Norris (2011: 35) writes:

Parties in the electorate, as organisations, and in parliament play an essential role in representative democracy. Parties serve multiple functions: simplifying and structuring electoral choices; organising and mobilising campaigns; articulating and aggregating disparate interests; channeling communication, consultation, and debate; training, recruiting, and selecting candidates; structuring parliamentary divisions; acting as policy think tanks; and organising government.

Like their European and North American counterparts parties emerged in Australia as lynch-pins of the democratic process. The centrality of political parties to political life in Australia has remained over time. McAllister (2002: 379) argues that ‘Placed in a comparative perspective, the hallmark of Australian politics is the dominance of party ...Australia is, then, a party-based polity *par excellence*’ (see also Jaensch, 1994: 1). E.E. Schattschneider’s (1942) conclusion that ‘modern democracy is unthinkable save

in terms of political parties' (cited in Dalton, 2006: 128) is an apt one as it relates to Australian politics.¹

Despite the continued centrality of political parties in Australia and elsewhere concerns have been expressed about the health of political parties. For decades, scholars and political pundits have 'prognosticated about the declining health of political parties, and titles about the end of political parties are commonplace' (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011: viii). This diagnosis has been based on declining voter turnout (Wattenberg, 2002), declining party membership, the personalization of politics (McAllister, 2009) and declining levels of party identification (Dalton, Flanagan and Beck, 1994; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Because of this it has become increasingly common to 'encounter references in academic literature, journalistic comment, and polemical assertion alike to the "decline of party," a contention usually predicated on the view that parties are "failing" in a variety of aspects' (Webb, 1992: 438).

A less explored aspect of this debate is exactly how much confidence citizens have in political parties. While a decline in party membership and party identification may have been accompanied by a decline in confidence in parties this assumption is rarely tested. Similarly, the literature showing declines in political trust would also seem to portend a decline in confidence in political parties but again confidence in parties is often only alluded to in passing. Despite political attitudes being a prominent theme beginning with the early literature on voter behaviour (Stokes, 1962; Almond and Verba, 1963) little has been said about confidence in political parties discretely.

What then do we know about confidence (or trust) in political parties?² There is some research (based largely on univariate or bivariate analysis) which informs our

¹ Australia has two major parties the Labor Party and the Liberal Party who along with The Nationals (a rural based party) are often referred to the Coalition. As such, the Australian party system is often referred to as a two and a half party system – because of the Liberal/National party coalition.

² Here I use 'trust' and 'confidence' interchangeably because 'trust' is the term most commonly used in the literature (although 'support' and 'cynicism' are also sometimes used). Because the Australian Election Study asks about 'confidence' rather than 'trust' in parties I stick exclusively to this usage in the introduction and analysis section. These two concepts are obviously very closely related however there is a distinction between the two. Norris (2011: 19) argues that institutional confidence can be understood 'to represent belief in the capacity of an agency to perform effectively' whereas trust can be understood to reflect a 'rational or affective belief in the benevolent motivation and performance capacity of another party.'

expectations. Webb (1992: 441) writes that ‘there is a significant level of disaffection with, or cynicism towards, parties’ in the advanced democracies (see also Inglehart, 1997; Dalton, 1999). Hay (2008: 34) finds parties to be the least trusted public institution in the United States, European Union and the United Kingdom (see also Dalton, 2006: 255). Putnam, Pharr and Dalton (2000: 18) also show declining levels of trust in parties. This decline in trust has sometimes resulted in major reform. ‘Along with other factors, disenchantment with political parties fueled public demands for major electoral reforms in Japan, Italy and New Zealand’ (Putnam, Pharr and Dalton, 2000: 18). However, research also shows that although many citizens lack trust in parties they are still seen by significant majorities as being necessary for the proper functioning of democracy (Dalton and Weldon, 2005: 3). Based on this Webb (1992: 442) concludes that he is ‘inclined to believe that the problems parties in advanced industrial democracies now face in terms of popular legitimacy are probably chronic but rarely acute.’

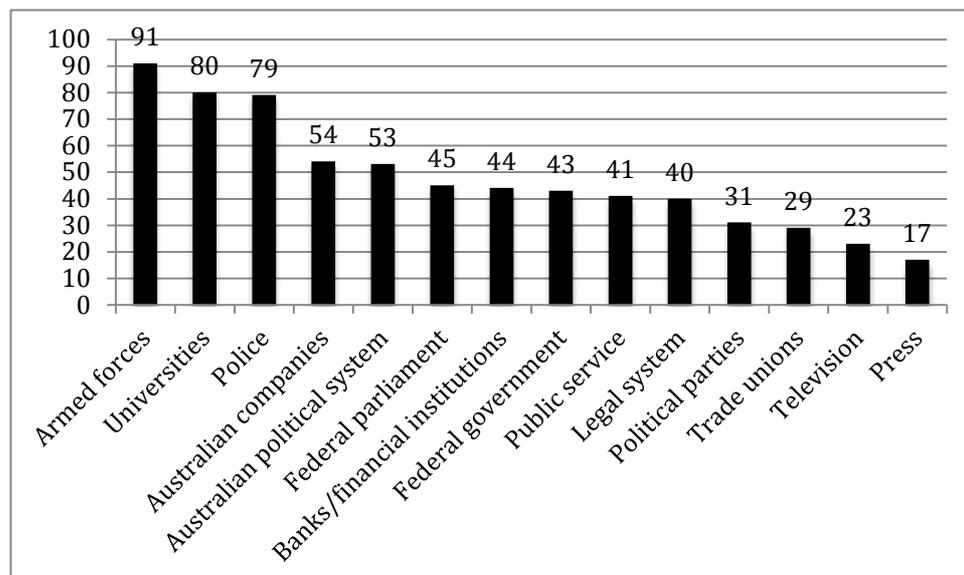
The data on Australia is less clear. In relation to Australia very little research has been done. Where it has Pusey (2003: 142) found that 60 percent agreed with the statement that ‘it doesn’t matter which party is in power, in the end things stay much the same’ (cited in Lavelle, 2004: 646). McAllister (2002: 380) argues that ‘While there is evidence of some cynicism towards parties ... the vast majority see parties as central for making democracy work. Such a belief in the utility of parties sets Australia apart from the other advanced democracies.’ In the analysis below I explore these findings, as well as the findings cited above, through regression analysis by applying theories that appear in the broader literature on political support to confidence in parties in Australia. I examine theories such as value change as well as exploring the effect of more immediate factors such as attitudes towards the tumultuous events surrounding the 2010 election (shortly before which the sitting Prime Minister (Kevin Rudd) was overthrown by his own party).

Method and Data

To explore this issue I employ data from the 2010 Australian Election Study (AES) which asked about confidence in parties. The 2010 AES asked respondents: How

much confidence do you have in ... Australian political parties? Respondents had the option of answering 'none at all,' 'not very much confidence,' 'quite a lot of confidence' and 'a great deal of confidence.'³ The AES also asked about confidence in other public and private institutions allowing us to compare confidence in political parties as compared to other institutions. In relation to the drivers of confidence in political parties the AES included a number of items which allow us to look at the effect of political events and evaluations versus more long-running factors (such as value change) as they relate to confidence in parties. For example, the AES asked such questions as whether respondents agreed with the way Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was overthrown by his own party shortly before the election, the performance of the party the respondent voted for over the past 3 years, leadership evaluations, postmaterialism as well as questions about age, education level and rural/urban location. The following analyses uses confidence in 'Australian political parties' as the dependent variable to test the bases of confidence in parties (as outlined below). I then explore broader evaluations of the political system including whether citizens see a difference between the parties and whether parties are seen as an important part of the political system.

Confidence in Parties



³ Unfortunately, this was only the second time this question was asked which prevents any meaningful across time analysis being done. This also prohibits us from looking at confidence as it relates to policy performance over time.

Figure 1: Confidence in Various Organizations

Source: Australian Election Study, 2010

Figure 1 shows the level of confidence citizens have in various institutions in Australia. The first thing to note is that citizens express very little confidence in political parties. Only 31 percent of respondents expressed 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in 'Australian political parties.' This is lower than any other political institution. For example, higher numbers of people expressed confidence in the Australian political system (54), Federal parliament (45), Federal government (44) and the public service (41). However, trust in other institutions such as the armed forces, universities and the Police registered high levels of confidence. This is consistent with the finding that citizens in advanced democracies express more confidence in non-political institutions rather than political institutions (Dalton, 2006: 255). Figure 1 clearly shows that political institutions are generally held in low esteem with political parties faring the worst.⁴

Explaining Confidence in Political Parties

In the section below I test explanations for the lack of confidence citizens have in political parties (as seen in Figure 1). I develop a series of theoretical models that I test using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. These theories are largely derived from the more general literature on political support because, as previously argued, there is relatively little literature on attitudes towards political parties specifically. The same factors that have been used to explain political support could be assumed to be related to attitudes towards political parties, an assumption that is tested below.

The first model I develop relates to the deprivation approach. The deprivation approach maintains that attitudes are informed by feelings of frustration and political

⁴ It is also worth pointing out that some citizens may have a fair degree of confidence in various organizations but faced with the choice of responding whether they have 'quite a lot of confidence' and 'not very much confidence' they choose 'not very much confidence.' Regardless of this, that political organizations are rated so poorly is a cause for concern.

alienation (Dalton, 2006: 69). Age (in years) is the first variable entered into the model as young people could be thought to be a politically deprived group and young people in Australia have been shown to have very low levels of political trust (Print, Saha and Edwards, 2004), as has also been found to be the case in other advanced democracies (see Abramson, 1983: 237; Dalton, 2004: 93; Pattie et al., 2004: 65).⁵ I then enter education (years of tertiary education) as the next variable as those with lower levels of education may have less confidence in the political parties as a result of feeling alienated and frustrated with the political parties as a consequence of their socio-economic position. The final variable in this model is the rural/urban variable (1 = rural area or village – 4 = a major city (over 100,000 people)). Given the concentration of the Australian population residing in cities those living in rural areas may feel they are less represented and therefore have less confidence in parties. Therefore, we can hypothesise that age, education and living in a rural area would all be factors associated with lower levels of confidence in parties.

The second model relates to value change in the form of postmaterialism (Inglehart, 1990; 1997). Postmaterial theory posits that value change has occurred across the advanced democracies owing in large part to the growing affluence of western societies and the increased education levels that have accompanied this change. As a consequence postmaterialists have higher expectations of government and are less deferential to elites (Inglehart, 1997; Dalton, 2006). Postmaterialists are unlikely to see their interests sufficiently represented in the contemporary party system and are more likely to ‘criticize contemporary democracies for their corporatist tendencies and lack of representation for minorities and counter-cultural groups’ (Dalton, 2004, 100). As such, postmaterialists may favour social movements and single-issues interest groups over political parties. Postmaterialism, therefore, ‘clearly represents a critique of the established political order’ and we would expect postmaterialists to have less confidence in parties, as found by Dalton (2004: 106). To test this theory I include a measure of postmaterialism in the regression model below (0 = materialist – 1 = postmaterialist).⁶

⁵ For counter evidence see Martin (2012), Putnam (2000: 261), Galston (2007: 626) and Gidengil et al. (2003: 3).

⁶ I include age in a separate model because age has not been found to be correlated to postmaterialism in Australia (see Tranter and Western, 2003).

While the deprivation and postmaterialist models account for demographic factors and value change (that may have occurred over time) more immediate evaluations of government are also likely to exert an influence on confidence in political parties. Supply-side rational choice theories 'lay the blame for public dissatisfaction with either the process or the policy performance of democratic governments' (Norris, 2011: 7). Therefore, aligned with rational choice theory, citizens should make more instrumental evaluations of government based on political events and whether or not they see parties as being vested to certain interests. How the leadership change (as noted earlier) was perceived is likely to have had an effect on confidence in parties. On this subject the AES asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Labor Party handled the leadership change in June of this year, when Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd (1 = strongly approve – 4 = strongly disapprove). But other evaluations of government might affect confidence in parties as well. Hay (2008: 37) argues that 'citizens do not trust politicians and political parties, since they project on to them instrumental motives' (see also Fiorina, 1981). To tests this theory I use an item which asked AES respondents: How well did the party you voted for then (i.e. in the 2007 election) perform over the past three years? Has it done ... (1 = a very good job – 4 = a very bad job). Beyond these evaluations parties have also been criticised, in a Rousseauian vein, for serving narrow interests instead of the interests of the wider community (Webb, 1992: 452). Therefore, there is a strong 'likelihood that popular distrust of parties stems in part from the widespread perception that they are self-interested, unduly privileged and inclined to corruption' (Webb, 1992: 455). This could manifest itself in citizens responding that big business has too much power. The AES asked: Please say whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of these...big business in this country has too much power (1 = strongly agree – 5 = strongly disagree). The belief that parties serve a narrow set of interest could also manifest itself in citizens perceiving little difference between the parties. In regards to this the AES asked: Considering everything the Labor Party and the Liberal Party stand for, would you say there is ... (1 = a good deal of difference between the parties – 4 = no difference between the parties). And finally, given the increased importance of political leaders (see McAllister, 2009), leadership evaluations may have an effect on confidence in parties. The AES asked about leadership evaluations by asking respondents: Again using a scale from 0 to 10, please show how much you like or dislike the party leaders. If you don't know much

about them, you should give them a rating of 5 (0 = strongly dislike – 10 = strongly like). I include here evaluations of Julia Gillard (the Prime Minister) and Tony Abbott (the Opposition leader). Because these evaluations are likely to be separate to the deprivation and postmaterialism models I enter these variables in the second model only in Table 1.

Table 1: Confidence in Political Parties (OLS)

	b	s.e.	beta	sig.	b	s.e.	beta	sig.
<u>Deprivation approach</u>								
Age	.000	.001	-.004	.857	-.002	.001	-.056	.017
Education	.007	.007	.025	.320	.006	.006	.022	.342
Rural/urban	.021	.012	.043	.089	.015	.011	.031	.177
<u>Value change</u>								
Postmaterialism	-.081	.053	-.038	.126	-.030	.050	-.014	.557
<u>Rational choice explanations</u>								
Leadership change					-.069	.019	-.092	.000
Party performed well					-.130	.025	-.122	.000
Difference between major parties					-.099	.019	-.122	.000
Big business has too much power					.094	.018	.125	.000
Feelings about Julia Gillard					.051	.006	.246	.000
Feelings about Tony Abbott					.047	.006	.227	.000
Constant	2.230 (.136) ***				2.892 (.122) ***			
Adjusted R-square	.002				.143			
n	(1640)				(1640)			

Table 1 shows the regression model which includes the variables mentioned in the previous section. We can see in Table 1 that the deprivation approach variables have no effect on confidence in political parties with none of these variables coming out as statistically significant. This supports Newton and Norris (2000: 65) and Orren's (2000: 86) findings that trust in parties is not confined to any particular group but rather cuts across groups. Nor does postmaterialism have an effect on confidence in parties. This finding refutes Inglehart's (1997) suggestion that postmaterialists are more critical of political parties. Therefore, background factors and postmaterialism are poor explanations for the lack of confidence many citizens have in the political parties in Australia.

Rational choice explanations are much more powerful predictors of confidence in parties (as seen in the second model).⁷ All of the rational choice explanation variables come out as statistically significant. The disapproval of the way Kevin Rudd was overthrown as Prime Minister has an effect on confidence in parties in the expected

⁷ There is the issue of endogeneity and causal ordering here but it is not overly problematic. The independent variables are considered to be causally prior to the dependent variable. That is, respondents are likely to have little confidence in parties *because* of perceptions of the leadership coup or *because* they see little difference between the parties (not the other way around). Similarly, respondent's confidence in parties is likely to develop based on perceptions of leaders although there is likely to be some correspondence between the two. In regards to endogeneity (and multi-collinearity) the correlation between the all variables included in the model never exceeded .3.

direction (those who disapproved of the way the leadership change was handled have less confidence in parties). Those who did not think their party performed well over the last 3 years also had less confidence in parties. Those who thought big business had too much influence and those who thought there was little difference between the parties also had less confidence in parties. Even more important that this (as expressed by the beta coefficients) are evaluations of the leaders. Those who liked the major party leaders (Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott) had much more confidence in political parties than those who did not like the leaders. This latter finding, but also the results more generally, suggest that evaluations of parties and their leaders affect the level of confidence citizens have in the political parties more generally. When asked about confidence in political parties respondents draw on evaluations of the existing political parties and the current events surrounding these parties as well as their leaders. Age also becomes significant in this second model although its effect is quite modest. Here we can see that in the second model the adjusted r-square value jumps from .002 in the first model to .143 in the second model (i.e. 14 percent of the variation of confidence in political parties is explained by these variables). It is clear then that confidence in government is not strongly affected by long-running factors like demographic or value change but rather political events and leaders (and the evaluations that form in response to these factors).

Broader Attitudes Towards the Political System

So far this article has examined confidence in political parties. However, if we adopt an Eastonian framework and examine the concept of political support more generally we can explore broader attitudes towards the political system. In this section I examine whether respondents care which party wins the election; whether citizens think political parties are essential to make the political system work; and whether citizens are satisfied with Australian democracy. Figure 2 shows the responses to these questions.

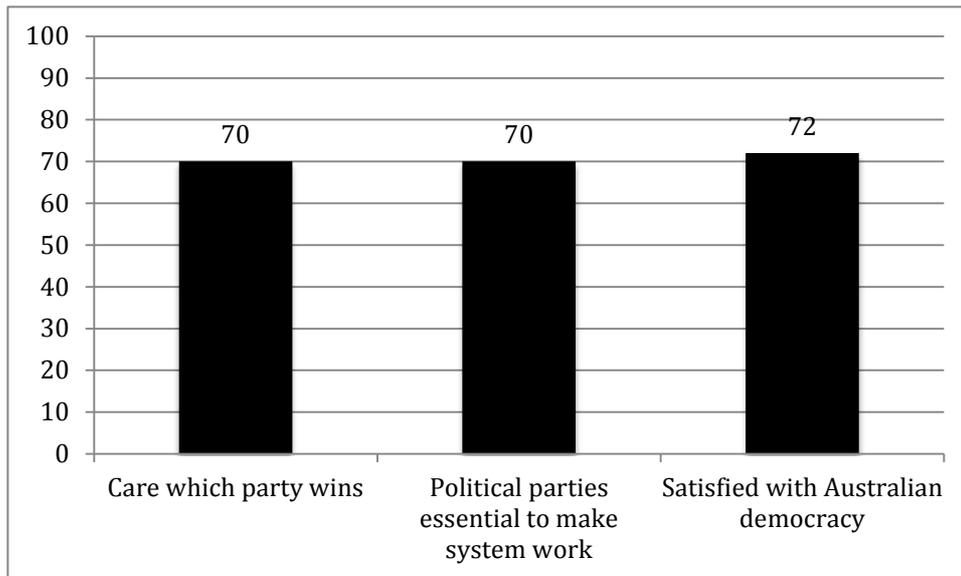


Figure 2: Broader attitudes to the political system

Source: Australian Election Study

Figure 2 shows that a significant majority still care what party wins the election (70 percent), still think political parties are essential to make democracy work (70 percent) and are satisfied with Australian democracy (72 percent). Therefore, it seems that although citizens have very little confidence in parties they still see them as important and are broadly satisfied with democracy. Furthermore, in the 2007 AES a full 94 percent agreed that democracy is the best form of government.⁸ The lack of confidence citizens have in parties (as revealed in Figure 1) is concerning. However, that the broad majority remain satisfied with democracy suggests that what citizens are responding to when asked about the ‘confidence’ they have in political parties is not the confidence they have in political parties as core institutions of representative government but rather evaluations of the existing parties and their leaders. At the moment these seem largely separate evaluations. However, if parties perform badly over time these feelings may generalize and feed into more diffuse attitudes towards the political system.

⁸ This question was not asked in the 2010 AES.

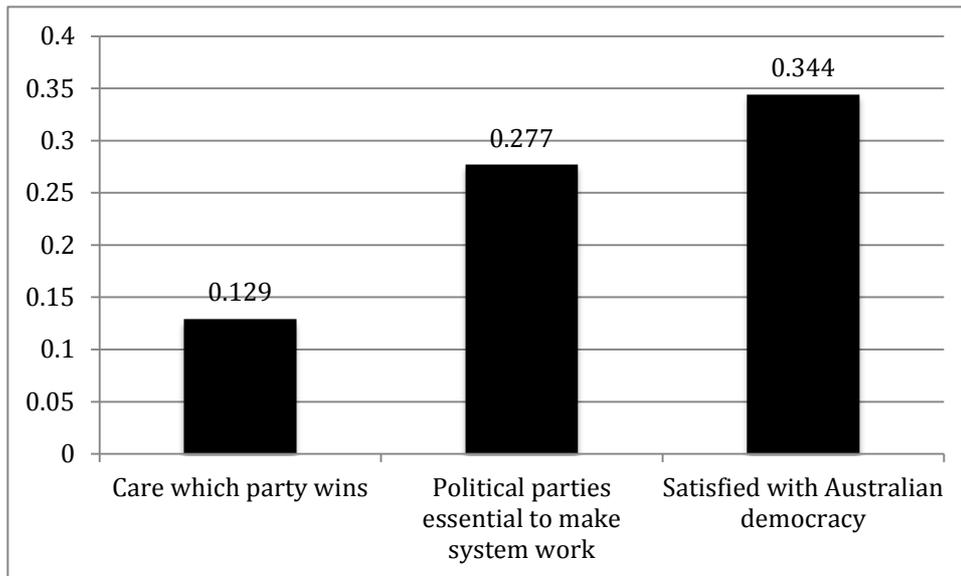


Figure 3: Bivariate correlations between broader attitudes to the political system and confidence in parties

Source: Australian Election Study

A question remains as to whether confidence in parties has an effect on these evaluations. To test this theory Figure 3 shows bivariate correlations (Pearson's r) between confidence in parties and whether respondents cared which party won, whether they see political parties as important and whether they are satisfied with Australian democracy. The results show that there is weak positive correlation (.129***) between confidence in parties and whether respondents cared which party won. The correlation between confidence in parties and whether political parties are seen as important to make the political system work (.277***) is stronger and the correlation between confidence in parties and whether respondents are satisfied with democracy (.344***) is stronger again. Thus, these findings suggest that while a strong majority of respondents still care what party wins the election, still see parties as important and remain satisfied with democracy, confidence in political parties does seem to be having an effect (albeit a mild one) on these broader political attitudes. The correlation between confidence in parties and whether they are seen as important to the proper functioning of the democratic system is perhaps the most concerning because believing that political parties are essential to make the system work is a far more consequential attitude than not having confidence in the parties. These results in Figure 3 suggest that not only do citizens have little confidence in parties but these

evaluations are exerting an influence (albeit a mild one) on broader attitudes to the political system.

Discussion

In the introduction I noted that while a lot has been written about trust in government and politicians much less has been written about confidence in parties discretely. This article set out to explore attitudes towards political parties in a more systematic way by using the 2010 Australian election as a case study. This is important because ‘political culture—in the broadest sense of a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that exists within the mass electorate—is central to ensuring the continuing legitimacy of parties in Australian politics’ (McAllister, 2002: 385). Yet, this article showed Australians have very low levels of confidence in the political parties. In fact, political parties inspire less confidence than almost any other institution, political or non-political. Supply-side rational choice factors seem to be having the largest effect on whether or not citizens have confidence in parties. This suggests that absent politicians and government ‘performing’ better or elevating leaders who citizens ‘like’ confidence in parties will remain low.

Perhaps more concerning is how the low esteem parties are held in is feeding (albeit mildly) into broader evaluations of the political system. Easton (1975: 437) observed that ‘not all expressions of unfavorable orientations have the same degree of gravity for a political system. Some may be consistent with its maintenance; others may lead to fundamental change.’ While this article showed that broader attitudes towards the political system are still largely positive it should be concerning that the lack of confidence in parties is feeding negatively into these broader evaluations. The Australian political system has been marked by high levels of satisfaction with democracy (McAllister, 2011) but the lack confidence citizens have in parties seems to be undermining this. This does not mean citizens do not support democracy. In the 2007 AES a full 94 percent agreed that democracy is the best form of government. This suggests that democratic principles coexist next to negative perceptions of parties. Therefore, the lack of confidence in parties seems to have come about ‘because many citizens today believe that it is important to live in a democratic state,

yet remain dissatisfied when evaluating how democracy works' (Norris, 2011: 19). There seems then to be a dissonance between what citizens want and what parties are delivering which is creating a democratic deficit in the form of low levels of confidence in political parties yet strong support for democratic principles. Looking at the measures of political support more broadly Australian democracy still receives high grades but the lack of confidence citizens have in parties has the ability to undermine this in the future.

All of this is important because parties have been essential components of democracy. Parties continue to be seen as important and 'Leading scholars continue to describe political parties as being "at the heart" of the political system' (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2011: 4). Conceptually it is difficult to conceive of a political system absent political parties. Empirically, political parties and the partisan politics that parties engage in has been shown to have demonstrable effects. Boix (1998: 219) shows that partisan politics plays a more fundamental role than traditionally granted in regards to economics. Bartels (2008) shows the overwhelming importance of parties on income growth and distribution in the US. Bartels (2008: 293) writes: 'the fact of the matter is that partisan control of government has been of consistent, substantial importance to the economic fortunes of the "have-nots" over the past half-century.' This also holds for Australia: evidence shows that the Labor Party and the Liberal Party did perform differently on different issues (Goot, 2004). Dowding et al. (2012) also show that parties have had a decisive impact on the policy agenda.

Conclusion

In an address to the US Congress in 1990 Vaclav Havel argues that 'democracy in the full sense of the word will always be no more than an ideal; one may approach it as one would a horizon, in ways that may be better or worse, but it can never be fully attained' (cited in Dalton, 2006: 262). Democracy in Australia, by many citizen's evaluations, appears to have performed well over time. Australia has traditionally had higher levels of satisfaction with democracy than other advanced democracies (McAllister, 2011). However, the 2010 election saw very low levels of confidence in parties and this, more troublingly, seems to have affected (albeit mildly) broader

evaluations of the political system. This article has shown that while citizens still think democracy is the best form of government and remain broadly satisfied with democracy attitudes towards the political parties have the potential to further undermine attitudes that are vital to the continued success of the Australian political system. Whether the 2010 election (which was clearly an exceptional one) signals a broader rupture in attitudes or is an outlier remains to be seen. What is known is that political events like the Labor Party leadership coup, the perception that parties are not performing well and are self-interested as well as leadership evaluations can have an effect on attitudes. Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011: viii) argue that the alleged death of political parties 'seem greatly exaggerated ... Political parties are still the central actors in electoral politics, still structure electoral competition, and still manage the activities of government in most democracies.' This is no less true of Australia. 'Politics in Australia, almost entirely, is party politics' (Jaensch, 1994, 2). However, the success of democracy has come from keeping a eye on the horizon, so to speak. The continued success of Australian democracy relies on parties being both aware of the attitudes revealed in this article and making attempts to improve the stature that they are held in among the broader public.

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