

Confronting the ‘Democracy Deficit’ and Long-term Environmental Threats

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Abstract

The world faces multiple long-term environmental threats that include: i) climate change; ii) biodiversity loss; and iii) water insecurities. Effective responses are hindered by the ‘democracy deficit’; deficiencies in democracy and the influence of powerful interests that undermine actions favoured by a majority of voters. Confronting the democracy deficit requires more active (deliberative *and* participatory) democracy to redistribute power and influence to citizens from privileged interests – the ‘push back’ triangle of; i) the Climatocracy (climate change), ii) the Biodiversocracy (biodiversity loss) and iii) the Hydrocracy (water insecurity). More active democracy requires but is not limited to: i) high-quality public education that allows most people to engage with complex problems; ii) effective and widely-available civic education; iii) fact-checking of publicly available information; iv) a diverse and free press; v) participatory processes around decisions of key public interest; and vi) transparent mechanisms that hold decision-makers fully accountable for their actions.



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The modern representative democracy was the best form of government that mid-18th-century technology could conceive of. The 21st century is a different place scientifically, technically and socially.

B. Schneier (2023)

The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 named three key environmental issues as critical threats: Extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse (World Economic Forum, 2024). Given the risks of catastrophic climate change, a possible anthropogenic mass extinction event, and severe and irreversible climate tipping points (Tollefson, 2023), a precautionary approach to reducing the drivers (e.g. GHG emissions, habitat loss) is urgently required.

Effective responses to global environmental threats that have local impacts require trust in institutions and cooperation across communities, nationally and globally. Yet more than half of respondents in the EU and North America are *not* 'satisfied with democracy'. Importantly, dissatisfaction with democracy appears to be increasing at a faster rate among the young and in some of the larger democracies (Nigeria, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the USA) (Foa et al., 2020). The decline in satisfaction with democracy is contemporaneous with declines in democratic performance in almost half of monitored countries in relation to: i) Credible Elections; ii) Effective Parliament; iii) Economic Equality; and iv) Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press over the period 2018-2023 (IDEA, 2024).

In Australia, 70% of voters in the 2022 Australian Electoral Study were satisfied with democracy but this proportion has declined from its peak in 2007 (Cameron and McAllister, 2022). Nevertheless, an increasing proportion of voters are not satisfied with democracy characterised as 'business as usual' as evidenced by a continuing decline in the proportion of those voting for the two major parties at federal elections (Cameron et al., 2022)

Over the past few decades there has been a decline in trust in governments, media, or trust in other people in several key democracies. For example, in the USA, trust in the national government declined from 73% in the 1950s to 24% in 2021. Across 62 high and middle-income countries, the proportion of people expressing 'Trust in Government' peaked in the early 2000s at one half and had declined to about one-third by 2019 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021). By comparison, in Australia only 30% of respondents in the 2022 Australian Electoral Study believed that governments "...can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time" (see Figure 1). Further, 54% of Australians in 2022 believed that 'government' is run for 'a few big interests', while just 12% believed that government is run for 'all the people' (Cameron and McAllister, 2022).

Multiple reasons can be attributed to increasing dissatisfaction with democracy and declining levels of trust in government. In large measure their proximate cause is a perceived (or actual) failure to deliver to citizens what they want (e.g. secure employment, affordable housing, effective climate change mitigation, etc.) and this perspective appears to be held in a greater proportion by younger adults.

Global environmental threats

Three key global environmental threats are: climate change, biodiversity loss and water insecurity. Much of the burden of these threats falls primarily on those with the fewest

resources to mitigate their own risks (Gupta et al., 2023). By contrast, those who are the most well-off, typically, have the greatest individual environmental (Alestig et al., 2024).

In 2023, global anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel use and industry (not including land use change) were 38 billion tons, a 6-fold increase from 1950, and are currently rising at about 1% per year (IEA, 2024). This has resulted in an atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide increasing by half from its pre-industrial level to over 420 ppm in 2024. CO₂ concentrations are currently higher than they have been for 800,000 years and this is the primary reason why 2023 was the hottest on recorded; about 1.5° Celsius warmer than the 1850-1900 global average (Berkeley Earth, 2024). Compared to the global average, Australia's temperature has warmed by about 1.6 (range: 1.4-1.6° Celsius) relative to 1850-1900 (BOM and CSIRO, 2024).

On the current trajectory of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the world is expected to warm by about 2° Celsius by 2050 and by 3.1° Celsius by 2100 (range: 1.9-3.8) noting that the chance of limiting warming to 1.5° Celsius is now virtually zero (UNEP, 2024). Global Net Zero by 2050 from 2024 requires, at a minimum, a reduction in global energy-related CO₂ emissions of 34% by 2030 and 84% by 2050 (IEA, 2024). By comparison, global CO₂ emissions fell by 1.4% in 2009, with the global financial crisis (Peters et al., 2011) and fell by 5.8% in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, and then rebounded by 6% in 2021 (IEA, 2021).

In 2023, CO₂ global emissions rose 1.3% relative to 2022 and in 2024 are estimated to have risen 0.8% relative to 2023 (Friedlingstein et al. 2024). Of critical importance is that net-zero policies [at 2050] will *not* keep warming within 1.5° Celsius (Dyke et al., 2024). That is, even if Net Zero were achieved between 2030- 2060 globally, because of lagged effects including deep ocean warming, the *additional* global surface temperature in the coming centuries could be as much as 2.6° Celsius, or more than 4° Celsius warming relative to pre-industrial levels (King et al., 2024)

Biodiversity, if defined as average species abundance, has been in decline for centuries but appears to have accelerated since 1950. One estimate is that, directly or indirectly, humans have been responsible for the extinction of 7.5-13% of the 2 million known species since 1500 (Cowie et al., 2022). In terms of the measured wildlife populations (mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish), there has been a 69% decline in abundance since 1970 (WWF, 2022). Overlaying species extinction is the loss of ecosystem diversity from deforestation and increasing land use for agriculture and urban areas (Beyer and Manica, 2020). Of critical concern is that three important 2030 global conservation targets to reduce biodiversity loss will almost certainly not be achieved: i) halting deforestation (Chu et al., 2023); ii) ensuring "...at least 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of marine and coastal areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed" (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022 Target 3); and iii) restoring 350 M. ha. of degraded and deforested land by 2030 (Palomo et al., 2024).

Water insecurity exists at multiple levels; individual, household, catchment, national and global (Grafton et al., 2024). Despite improvements in the proportion of people with access to safe water and sanitation, unsafe water sources still result in 1.7 million deaths worldwide and create disabilities that affect more than 80 million people annually (Grafton and Fanaian, 2023) while as many as 4.4 billion people lack safe drinking water (Greenwood et al., 2024). Importantly, none of the key Sustainable Development Targets for water will be achieved by

2030 (Grafton et al., 2023). Further, the global area in wetlands is in decline (Fluet-Choinard et al., 2023), groundwater is diminishing in many key food-producing regions, and there are projected to be substantial streamflow declines globally (Jasecho et al., 2024).

The democracy deficit

In democracies where governments face genuine competition for power there should be incentives to spend on non-exclusive public goods, such as environmental remediation. By contrast, in autocracies and oligarchies key decision-makers are more likely to be incentivised to provide benefits to the most powerful and influential (Deacon, 2009) and there are more constraints on citizens to express their views (Acheampong et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of democracies to respond to environmental threats depends on multiple factors (see Figure 2): first, the strength of environmental non-governmental organisations (Binder and Neumayer, 2005), civil society (Lægreid and Povitkina, 2018), and green parties (Bernauer and Koubi, 2009); second, broad indicators of levels of education and income equality (Farzin and Bond, 2007); third, the visibility, ease and the speed of responding to environmental degradation, such as urban air pollution (Winslow, 2007) versus climate change; and, fourth, the quality of democratic institutions, such as freedom of the press (Shu and Kamah, 2021), lack of corruption (Wilson and Damania, 2005) and ‘good government’ (Lægreid and Povitkina, 2018; Young, 2013).

The democracy and the environment literature suggests that: i) democracies are not the same (Wolf, 2023) such that countries with liberal democracies (e.g. rule of law respected, protection of individual rights, dispersal of power, independent judiciary) and with elements of active democracy (e.g. well-informed and engaged citizens, participatory, transparent and accountable decision-making) are more effective at responding to environmental degradation or global environmental threats; and ii) environmental degradation and threats that require a long-term focus (e.g. climate change mitigation) do not fit well into a single-election cycle. That is, long-term environmental threats are subject to much greater ‘push back’ from privileged and influential interests (e.g. fossil fuel interest and their lobbyists) (Stoddard et al., 2021) over multiple election cycles (Lindvall, 2022). Together, deficiencies in democracy and powerful interests that undermine environmental actions favoured by voters result in the *democracy deficit*. This deficit impedes, or may even prevent, effective environmental actions even if they are a priority for most voters.

Overlaying the effects of the democracy deficit are social and economic trade-offs of pollution mitigation (Shen et al., 2024), including who are the winners and losers. These trade-offs matter in terms of both their scale - who are affected - and their magnitude. Irrespective of the size of the democracy deficit, the greater are the socio-economic trade-offs to long-term environmental threats, the less likely there will be an effective government response, all else equal (see Figure 2).

Important issues for Australian voters in the 2002 federal election were the ‘Environment’ (see Figure 1), with 88% considering it either ‘Extremely Important’ or ‘Quite Important’ in their voting decision, and ‘Climate Change’, with 76% considering it either ‘Extremely Important’ or ‘Quite Important’ in their voting decision (Cameron and McAllister, 2022). In 2024, 95% of Australian respondents wanted a ‘better budget for Nature’ while 63% wanted a mandatory assessment and consideration of carbon emissions on major projects through national environmental law (Biodiversity Council, 2024).

Notwithstanding Australian voter preferences about the environment, the responses by Australian governments are, relative to the scale of the challenges, inadequate. A summary of the key interventions in relation to climate change, biodiversity loss and water insecurity in Australia are: i) Net Zero by 2050 which allows for carbon offsets to compensate for GHG emissions (DCCEEW, 2024a); ii) Nature Positive for which the Australian Government has committed by 2030 to protect 30% of Australia's land and water consistent with the Kunming-Montreal Global Diversity Framework, achieve effective restoration of 30% of Australia's degraded ecosystems, and ensure zero new extinctions; and iii) implementation of the 2004 National Water Initiative that included the commitment by Australian governments "...to ensure the health of river and groundwater systems by establishing clear pathways to return all systems to environmentally sustainable levels of extraction" (Council of Australian Governments, 2004).

The success of these interventions can be judged in terms of their likelihood of achieving their stated goals. In terms of Net Zero by 2050 target, Australia's CO₂ fuel-related emissions in 2022 of 355 Mt (about 80% of total Australian CO₂ emissions) were 9% lower than their peak in 2010 and 2% lower than their level in 2005 (IEA, 2023); total CO₂ emissions, however, were virtually unchanged between 2022 and 2023 and decreased by only 0.6% from end of March 2023 to end of March 2024 (DCCEEW, 2024b).

In terms of Australia delivering Nature Positive by 2030, the number of mammals, bird, reptile, amphibian, fish and other species listed as endangered (likelihood of extinction is 20% over the next 20 years) or critically endangered (likelihood of extinction is 50% over the next 10 years) increased from the period 2011 to 2015, and again from the period 2015 to 2020 (see Figure 3). Further, many Australian ecosystems, because of cumulative pressures and business as usual environmental policies and regulation, are suffering from important function losses (DCCEEW, 2022).

In terms of water insecurity, for the period ending 2022, most environmental water requirements in the Murray-Darling Basin (MDB) have not been achieved (Sheldon et al., 2024) and 18 of 20 Indigenous, environmental, social and compliance indicator targets in relation to the MDB have not been met (Colloff et al., 2024). This is despite the expenditure to date of A\$ 7.7 billion on water recovery for the environment (Wheeler, 2024), a Basin Plan that was legislated in 2012, and a commitment in 2007 by Prime Minister John Howard: "...to confront head on and in a comprehensive way, the over-allocation of water in the Murray-Darling Basin." (Howard, 2007).

Confronting the democracy deficit

Confronting the democracy deficit is based on three inter-linked hypotheses (**H1**, **H2** and **H3**).

H1: Decline in trust in government and satisfaction with democracy is explained, primarily, by a decline in the ability (or willingness) of democratic governments to deliver what citizens want, including mitigation of long-term environmental problems.

H2: The nature of democracy (e.g. illiberal versus liberal democracy) matters, including the levels of regulatory capture (Grafton and Williams, 2020) by privileged and influential interests (private and public), the degree of political competition (Wilson and Damania, 2005), and the time frame to deliver effective mitigation responses (e.g. whether it requires multiple election cycles or not).

H3: Greater active democracy, especially within liberal democracies (Wolf, 2023), would mitigate the effects of 'push back' by privileged interests (Gilens and Page, 2014) to slow or halt

effective responses to long-term environmental threats, typically mediated through the political process of party donations (Thompson, 1993). These privileged interests, in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss and water insecurity are, respectively, labelled the 'Push Back Triangle' consisting of the *Climatocracy* (Evans and Stevens, 2009), the *Biodiversocracy* and the *Hydrocracy* (Wester et al., 2009) (see Figure 4).

The most well-known privileged interests with climate change are those enterprises and organisations that oppose or hinder effective climate change mitigation. Strategies of the Climatocracy include: i) denying anthropogenic climate change; ii) creating doubts and uncertainty around projected climate change (Oreskes and Conway, 2010) and, most recently, iii) highlighting that climate change mitigation is 'sorted' with Net Zero targets. All these approaches have the same goal - to slow down or halt meaningful mitigation, or at least mitigation imposed on the Climatocracy. In Australia, the principal focus of privileged interests wanting to slow down or halt effective climate mitigation has been to influence key decision- especially within governments (Flannery, 2020; Wilkinson, 2020).

As the evidence for global warming has become irrefutable, the fossil fuel producers and their lobbyists have adopted what is called 'greenwashing'. In the context of climate change, greenwashing is the pretence of, or an exaggerated claim about, effective climate change mitigation. Greenwashing is especially widespread in terms of voluntary mitigation commitments by large emitters and with the verification of carbon offsets (Lowe, 2024).

A 2023 United Nations report identified that "...net zero is entirely incompatible with continued investment in fossil fuels. Similarly, deforestation and other environmentally destructive activities are disqualifying... actors cannot buy cheap credits that often lack integrity instead of immediately cutting their own emissions across their value chain." (United Nations' High-Level Expert Group on the Net Zero Emissions Commitments of Non-State Entities, 2023: 7). There also is increasing economic evidence that, at a global scale, Net Zero by 2050 is impossible at current economic growth trajectories (Kompas et al., 2024). The major beneficiary of carbon greenwashing is the Climatocracy, the large emitters of GHG emissions.

Given asymmetries in land and ocean CO₂ uptake, one ton of CO₂ emissions is more effective at raising atmospheric CO₂ concentrations than a one-ton removal of CO₂ from the atmosphere, or what is called a 'negative emission'. And this difference increases the larger the magnitude of emissions and their removal. Thus, even *if* every ton of CO₂ removed from the atmosphere were fully verifiable and of high integrity (MSCI Carbon Markets, 2024), permanently sequestered (Brunner et al. 2024), and the timescale of emissions and sequestration perfectly matched (Fankhauser et al., 2022; Johannessen and Christian, 2023), none of which is true, its impact on climate change would still be *less* effective than a ton of emissions reductions (Zickfeld et al., 2021).

West et al. (2023) in an analysis of 26 carbon offsets projects in six countries, concluded that most of the projects had failed to result in 'additionality', that is additional carbon sequestration from reduced deforestation. Where additionally was identified, the actual benefits were lower than claimed. Notwithstanding possible co-benefits (e.g. biodiversity, soil health, ecosystem resilience) of carbon offsets (Milne et al., 2024) and the potential of Nature-based solutions to restore ecosystems with Indigenous land practices (Russell-Smith et al., 2024), exaggerated or false claims about the effectiveness of carbon credits used as offsets poses an important challenge for Australia to genuinely achieve Net Zero by 2050. In Australia, notwithstanding 'creative accounting' around base years and land-use changes not attributable to climate

mitigation policies (Merzian and Hemming 2021), current reductions in national energy-related CO₂ emissions are grossly inadequate to meet Net Zero, *without* heroically assuming large negative future emissions which includes wide-spread use of carbon credits to offset emissions (Hemming et al., 2022).

One of the key challenges with Net Zero targets, and negative emissions, is that the world's voluntary carbon markets may only generate a small fraction of the claimed real emissions reductions (Probst et al., 2023). In Australia, Macintosh et al. (2024a) found, in an assessment of 143 carbon offset projects (80% of the total projects), that there was either zero or negative change in woody cover, yet they generated 22.9 million carbon credits. In their assessment of 3.4 M ha. of the carbon credited area in Australia, the authors only found evidence of increased woody cover in 28,155 ha (0.8% of the total area). In a related study of Human Induced Regeneration projects that generate Australian Carbon Credit Units (ACCU), MacIntosh et al. (2024b) found that: i) most projects were non-compliant; ii) projects had very limited effect on woody vegetation; and iii) there were major failures with respect to Australia's carbon credit scheme. The major beneficiaries of carbon credits that do not sequester carbon are landowners that receive a payment for credits and large emitters that do not reduce their GHG emissions by the amount of the purchased credits that offset their emissions.

The increased use of biodiversity offsets and other economic instruments are highlighted as a key part of Nature Repair Markets intended to deliver Nature Positive. Nevertheless, there are identified weaknesses with biodiversity offsets in England (Mancini et al., 2024; Rampling et al., 2023) while Ermgassen et al. (2023) investigated the effects of biodiversity offsets under Victoria's Native Vegetation Framework (2002–2013). Ermgassen et al. (2023) concluded that what gains that did occur in Victoria would have happened in the absence of the biodiversity offsets program. In neighbouring New South Wales, its Biodiversity Offsets Scheme has been described by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists (2024a, p. 2) to: "...not align with international best practice for biodiversity offsetting, it provides for significant variation to like-for-like rules which undermines the ability to genuinely offset impacts on affected species and places, the mitigation hierarchy is not consistently or rigorously applied, the scheme allows proponents to make a payment into a fund for impacts that are not offsettable..."

Notwithstanding the problems with biodiversity offsets, and especially the challenge of like-for-like comparisons, there is still potential for Nature Repair in Australia to directly fund Traditional Owners, but not as offsets, for their custodianship of their Country (Russell-Smith et al., 2024). The scale of the Nature Repair payments in Australia has been estimated by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists (2024b, pp. 6-7) at \$7.3 billion per annum (in 2022\$) over 30 years. Notably, the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists recommends that some of this multibillion-dollar funding be spent on: "...public investment for stewardship programs, Indigenous land managers and threatened species recovery".

Land clearing has a major and negative impact on threatened species. Consequently, the pretence that regulation of land clearing is effective, when it is not, is a form of greenwashing concerning biodiversity and habitat loss. Despite multiple reviews since land clearing regulations first became regulated in New South Wales in 1990, the evidence is that state regulations have "...played only a minor role in limiting land clearing rates" (Heagney et al., 2021: 10). Heagney et al. (2021) show that, in contrast to policy and regulations around land clearing, high commodity prices for agricultural products have had a major impact on land clearing. Nevertheless, when the New South Wales Native Vegetation Act was managed by

regional catchment authorities, from 2004-2012, the rate of land clearing (Ha/year) halved (Heagney et al., 2021, Figure 3).

In Northern Australia, there is evidence that much of the land cleared where there is threatened species habitat has been undertaken without the approvals required under the federal Environmental Protection and Conservation (EPBC) Act (Slezak, 2024a). The major beneficiaries of land clearing and ineffective or unenforced regulations are the Biodiversocracy; primarily large dryland and cattle enterprises (Slezak, 2024b).

In the context of water reform, there is substantial evidence that reform has slowed, in some cases even halted needed change and contrary to the stated intentions of decision-makers. For example, Prime Minister John Howard (Howard, 2007) had wanted to: i) spend almost \$6 billion in water infrastructure subsidies and grants in the 2007 National Plan for Water Security, to save more than 3,000 billion litres of water but the actual increases in stream flows may be as little as 10% of this target ; ii) spend \$3 billion on buybacks of tradeable water rights from willing sellers to increase stream flows but the actual amount spent was less because the volume of water allowed to be recovered for the environment was capped by the federal parliament at 1,500 billion litres in 2015; iii) spend \$225 million for irrigation water meters to stop water theft, yet in 2017 an independent review of the Northern Murray-Darling Basin found that between half to three-quarters of water diversions were unmetered (Grafton, 2024a).

A consequence of misdirected water reform in Australia has been: “Explicit environmental protections in existing water management legislation are neither enforced nor reflected in current policy and operations.” (New South Wales Office of the Chief Scientist and Engineer, 2023: 3). The major beneficiaries of failing water reform (Grafton, 2019) in the public interest (Grafton, 2024b) are the Hydrocracy, primarily irrigators who own most of the water rights in Australia, worth some \$26 billion in 2020 (Productivity Commission, 2021), and who were initially allocated these rights gratis.

Towards active democracy

In many countries without compulsory voting, there has been a decline in the proportion of the voting-age population voting. It fell from, on average across 173 countries, 65% in 2008 to 55% in 2023 (IDEA, 2024). While Australia has compulsory voting its voters are increasingly shifting their votes from the major political parties towards independents (Cameron et al., 2022). In Australia, voters have also signalled their preference for an alternative to business-as-usual democracy; more than 90% of voters in the 2022 Australian Electoral Survey wanted a national anti-corruption body, limits on donations, and legal protections for human rights (Cameron et al., 2022).

Democracy reform is about reimagining how democracies operate and what they deliver to citizens to become “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Lincoln, 1863). That is, reform is about promoting good governance that ensures people have a genuine voice in decision-making. Such reform should adapt the best practices of deliberation from Athenian democracy some 2,500 years ago (Jones, 1960). For example, in the digital age (Spinney, 2024) citizens can communicate among themselves and with decision-makers at very low cost. This, in turn, allows for the possibility of much greater inputs by citizens into government decision-making than in the person-to-person meetings of the Agora in Ancient Athens (IDEA, 2024).

A shift to greater deliberative democracy involves more citizen engagement in democracy processes that goes well beyond the basic responsibility of voting in elections. The literature on deliberation shows that: i) if well-informed, citizens are capable of deliberation with respect to complex policies and decisions; ii) deliberation reduces polarisation of views; and iii) citizens will engage in decision-making processes if the deliberation is meaningful (Dryzek et al., 2019). At a national scale, Klein (2023) contends that deliberation is about i) improving the solutions available; ii) evaluating the possible solutions; and iii) selecting the best solutions.

An example of how citizen-based deliberations could work include citizen assemblies and ‘mini-publics’ (Riedy and Kent, 2017) where members are randomly selected from a representative sample of the population. Those selected as members are charged with providing recommendations on key decisions. Another deliberative approach is the use of facilitated online platforms, such as a *Delibratorium*, in which participating citizens, through a transparent process, arrive at a series of collective decisions (Klein, 2006). In terms of furthering active democracy, there must also be effective ways to transfer understanding, recommendations and solutions from the public space to the empowered space where decisions of public importance get made (Riedy and Kent, 2017).

Going beyond deliberation is active democracy that includes participatory approaches for meaningful citizen engagement in democracy. A key benefit of active democracy is to balance the particular interest of the privileged few (e.g. Climatocracy, Biodiversocracy, Hydrocracy) with the public interest such that the citizenry has a greater influence than they would otherwise in matters of public importance (local, regional, national and global). In Australia, there are successful examples, such as catchment management authorities in New South Wales, that between 2004-2012 brought together communities in planning and managing their landscapes and water allocations (Williams, 2011). The success of local, catchment or regional decision-making, however, requires multi-level governance (Thom and Steinfeld, 2024) including accountability and ownership of the decision-making outcomes, good and bad, and independent audits and oversight.

Active democracy requires reform at multiple levels of government. Actions to support active democracy include but are not limited to: i) ensuring public education is to a standard such that most citizens can capably engage with complex problems (e.g. climate change) (Sabarwal et al., 2024); ii) ‘fact-checked’ publicly available information analogous to ‘truth in advertising’ - this fact checking requires adequate monitoring, compliance and enforcement to mitigate against public misinformation and falsehoods with respect to incontrovertible scientific and historical facts along with the empowerment of citizens to help them make well-informed judgements even in the presence of misinformation (Ecker et al., 2024); iii) civic education, participation and connection (Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, 2024) such that citizens can more effectively engage with decision-makers and among themselves; iv) diversity of ownership and views for all media and freedom of the press (Bennett, 2021); v) transparent participatory processes and dialogues (Russmann and Lane, 2020) on matters of key public interest (e.g. water insecurity) and vi) transparent mechanisms (e.g. effective public integrity commission) to hold decision-makers, and those that influence them, to account for their decisions (The Centre for Public Integrity, 2021).

Conclusion

Many democracies, including Australia’s, face substantial and long-term environmental threats for which voters want meaningful actions. Effective solutions to these threats require actions

over multiple election cycles and, thus, are vulnerable to ‘push back’ that either slows or halts reform by vested interests; the Climatocracy (climate change), Biodiversocracy (biodiversity loss), and the Hydrocracy (water insecurity).

The remedy to the ‘push back’ by the privileged few against the wishes of many voters, which is contrary to the public interest, requires a change in how democracy is currently practised in Australia and many other countries. Using the best practices of deliberation and participatory approaches, Australia needs to move towards a more active (deliberative *and* participatory) democracy. This shift is about redistributing power to the people, away from the privileged few, such that the long-term collective needs of the many are met.

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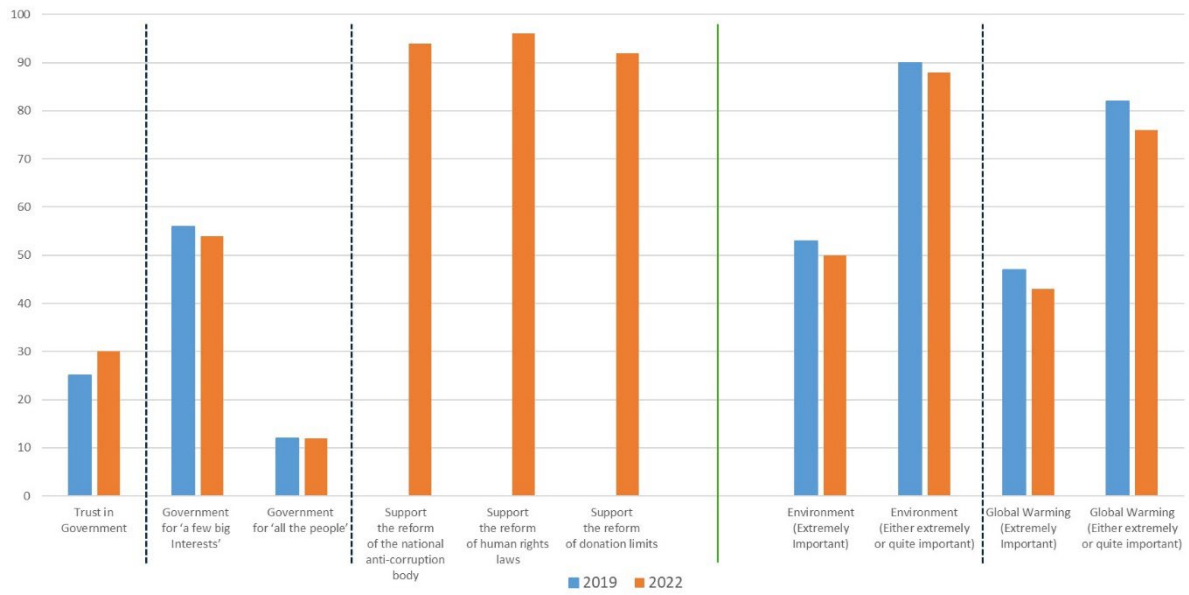
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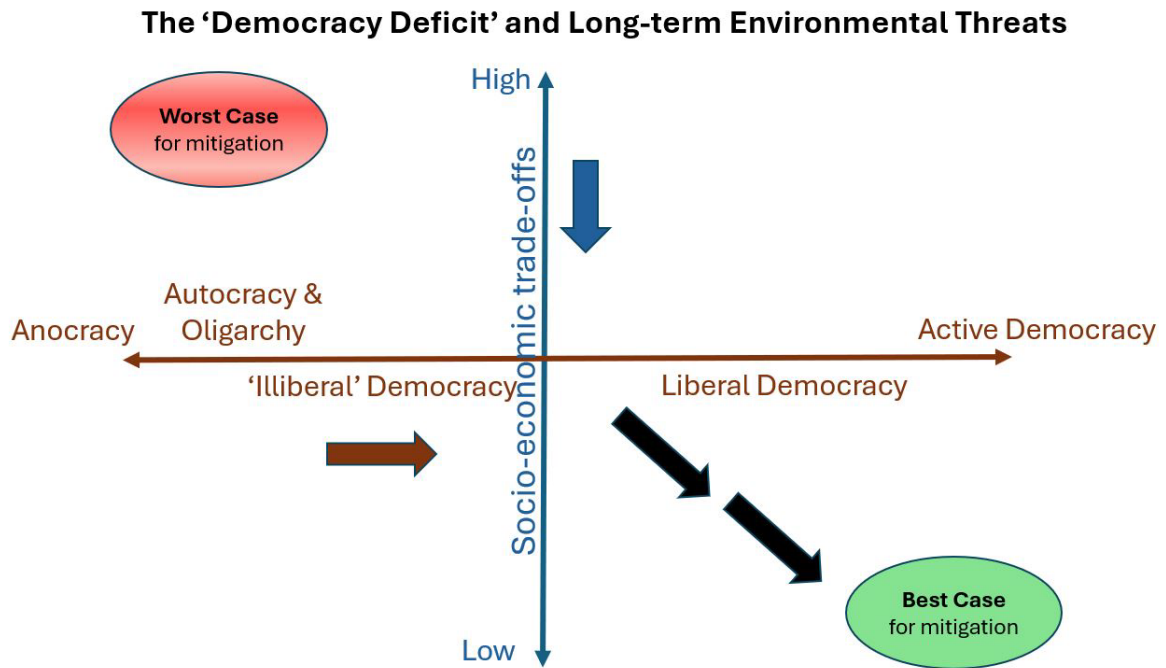
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Figure 1: Selected Responses from the 2022 Australian Electoral Study



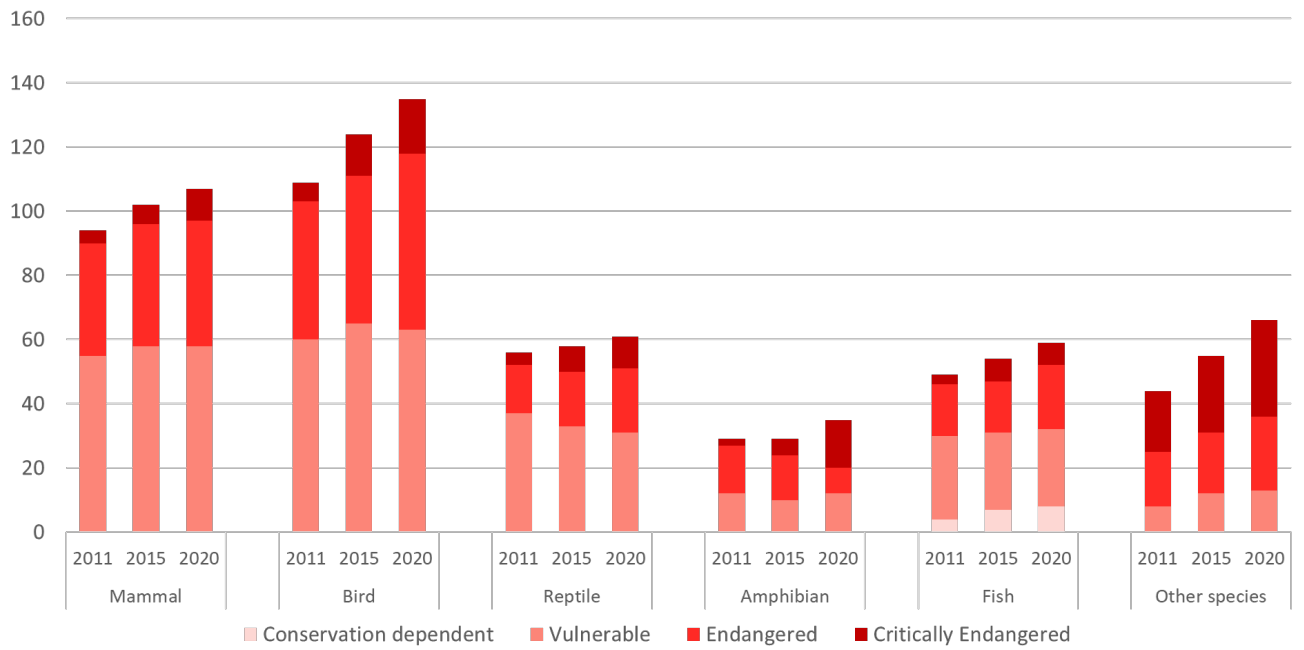
Data source: Cameron and McAllister (2022)

Figure 2: Confronting the 'Democracy Deficit' and the Socio-Economic Trade-offs



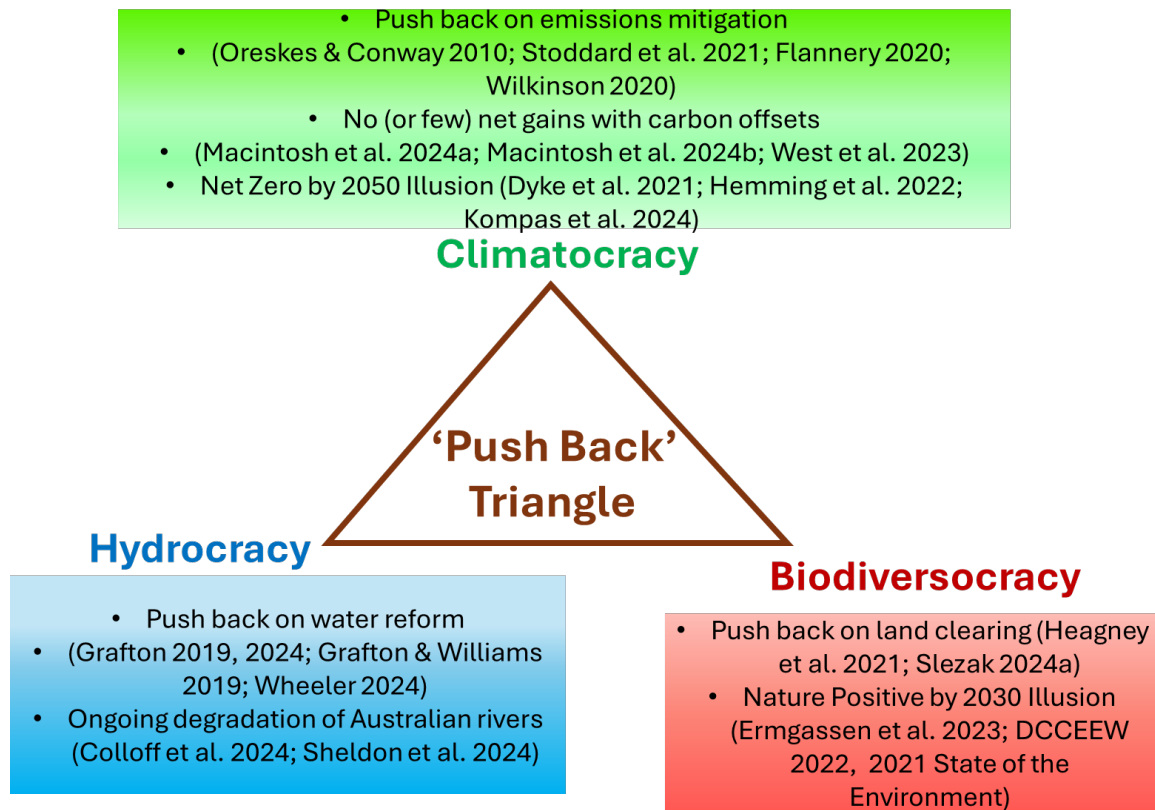
Source: The Author

Figure 3: Australia's Endangered Species List, 2011-2020



Dats source: DCCEEW (2021,bio-081-epbc-fauna-forplot1.xlsx)

Figure 4: The ‘Push Back’ Triangle by the Climatology, Biodiversocracy and Hydrocracy in Response to Long-term Environmental Threats



Source: The author