

Australian Politics and Policy

Senior Edition

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SYDNEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

First published 2019 by Sydney University Press

This is version 1.0

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Sydney University Press
Fisher Library F03
University of Sydney NSW 2006
AUSTRALIA
sup.info@sydney.edu.au
sydneyuniversitypress.com.au

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A catalogue record for this book is available
from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 9781743326671 pdf

ISBN 9781743326688 epub

ISBN 9781743326800 paperback

Cover design by Miguel Yamin.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
Introduction	1
Introduction	3
<i>Nicholas Barry, John R. Butcher, Peter J. Chen, David Clune, Ian Cook, Adele Garnier, Yvonne Haigh, Sara C. Motta and Marija Taflaga</i>	
A short political history of Australia	18
<i>Marija Taflaga</i>	
Australian political thought	32
<i>Nicholas Barry</i>	
Institutions	51
Executive government	53
<i>Marija Taflaga</i>	
Parliaments of Australia	70
<i>Tracey Arklay and Neil Laurie</i>	
Electoral systems	87
<i>Jill Sheppard</i>	
The Australian party system	106
<i>Zareh Ghazarian</i>	
The public sector	124
<i>Isi Unikowski and John Wanna</i>	
Media and democracy	143
<i>Mary Griffiths</i>	

Courts	163
<i>Grant Hooper</i>	
Federalism	183
Commonwealth–state relations	185
<i>Alan Fenna</i>	
Australian Capital Territory	202
<i>Robin Tennant-Wood</i>	
New South Wales	212
<i>David Clune and Rodney Smith</i>	
Northern Territory	233
<i>Robyn Smith</i>	
Queensland	245
<i>Paul D. Williams</i>	
South Australia	265
<i>Rob Manwaring, Mark Dean and Josh Holloway</i>	
Tasmania	281
<i>Richard Eccleston, Dain Bolwell and Mike Lester</i>	
Victoria	295
<i>Nick Economou</i>	
Western Australia	313
<i>Narelle Miragliotta, Sarah Murray and Justin Harbord</i>	
Local government	330
<i>Roberta Ryan and Alex Lawrie</i>	
Political sociology	351
Gender and sexuality in Australian politics	353
<i>Merrindahl Andrew</i>	
Government–business relations	373
<i>Michael de Percy and Heba Batainah</i>	
Indigenous politics	390
<i>Diana Perche and Jason O’Neil</i>	
Multicultural Australia	412
<i>Juliet Pietsch</i>	
Pressure groups and social movements	429
<i>Moira Byrne</i>	

Contents

Religious communities and politics <i>Marion Maddox and Rodney Smith</i>	452
Voter behaviour <i>Shaun Ratcliff</i>	470
Young people and politics <i>Philippa Collin and Jane McCormack</i>	487
Policy making	501
Making public policy <i>John R. Butcher and Trish Mercer</i>	503
Communication policy <i>Jock Given</i>	522
Economic policy <i>Alan Fenna</i>	541
Environmental policy <i>Brian Coffey</i>	559
Foreign and defence policy <i>Thomas S. Wilkins and Nick Bromfield</i>	580
Health policy <i>Ian McAuley</i>	603
Immigration and multicultural policy <i>Andrew Parkin and Leonie Hardcastle</i>	624
'Law and order' policy <i>Garner Clancey and Brenda Lin (with Brendan Delahunty)</i>	646
Regional policy <i>Fiona Haslam McKenzie</i>	668
Social policy <i>Greg Marston and Zoe Staines</i>	688
Urban policy <i>Madeleine Pill and Dallas Rogers</i>	708
Work, employment and industrial relations policy <i>Susan Ressler, Shalene Werth and David Peetz</i>	724

Acknowledgments

The *Australian Politics and Policy* Open Textbook project is made possible by the financial backing of Sydney University Press (SUP) and the University of Sydney Library. The editorial team would like to acknowledge the support of Professor Stephen Garton (Chair of the SUP Advisory Board); Professor Adam Bridgeman (Director of Educational Innovation at the University of Sydney); Lisa McIntosh (Director of Access Services at the University of Sydney Library), and Susan Murray (Manager, Scholarly Publishing at SUP).

The contents of the volumes are the result of the good will of the chapter authors and reviewers. This includes several independent researchers who freely provided their time and expertise to contribute to this book.

Centred on the customisable web interface, we benefited from web design expertise of Deepak Chandran, Savio Barretto, Anirudha Shinde, Mahadev Jadhav, Santan D'souza, Joseph D'souza, Arup Barman, Milan Bishwakarma, Govind Satpute and Richard Pipe.

Symmon Natour, Pat Norman and Michelle Harrison kindly assisted the project with the development promotional video material, which Student Ambassador Salina Alvaro generously volunteered to appear in as the face of our project.

Production of the volume is the result of the hard work of Chelsea Sutherland and John Mahony, and the editors thank them for their invaluable support in finalising the text and layout of the volume. Dr Agata Mrva-Montoya, the Publishing Manager at SUP, served as our project lead, advocate, and linchpin at SUP. The editors thank her for all her work in in realising this project.

Introduction

Introduction

Nicholas Barry, John R. Butcher, Peter J. Chen, David Clune, Ian Cook, Adele Garnier, Yvonne Haigh, Sara C. Motta and Marija Taflaga

Australia is a 'small' nation of 25 million people occupying a large geographic space. It is the 53rd most populous country and has the 13th biggest economy in the world.¹ Australia continues to play an important role in geopolitical affairs, particularly in the South Pacific. Importantly, it is home to one of the world's oldest continuing Indigenous peoples; these peoples carry wisdom with which to contribute to re-thinking our conceptions of politics, political subjectivity and sovereignty.

This book is a broad introduction to Australian politics and public policy. This field of study is important for Australians to understand the exercise of political power, their history and the scope for change. It is also important for analysts outside Australia looking for comparative cases. Within this volume are diverse topics and perspectives, demonstrating that the study of Australian politics and policy is not 'fixed'. Rather, it is a contested field of academic scholarship. Indeed, the volume's editors do not all agree on the content of this introduction!

Viewed from outside, Australia's political and policy landscape is both familiar and unusual. Like many former British colonies, Australia retained Westminster traditions after it gained independence. Australia's trajectory was like other Commonwealth countries: from direct military administration to advisory 'upper house' legislative councils, to expanded councils with partial elected representation, to expanded elected representation and 'lower house' legislative assemblies, and, finally, to the acquisition of full 'responsible government' and the shift of authority from colonial governors to premiers. As with many settler-colonial states, Australia's

Barry, Nicholas, John R. Butcher, Peter J. Chen, David Clune, Ian Cook, Adele Garnier, Yvonne Haigh, Sara C. Motta and Marija Taflaga (2019). Introduction. In Peter J. Chen, Nicholas Barry, John R. Butcher, David Clune, Ian Cook, Adele Garnier, Yvonne Haigh, Sara C. Motta and Marija Taflaga, eds. *Australian politics and policy: senior edition*. Sydney: Sydney University Press. DOI: 10.30722/sup.9781743326671

1 World Bank 2018.

history is predicated upon genocidal policies, logics and practices² that attempted to erase a people and a culture. Indigenous sovereignties were not ceded, and issues of sovereignty, history and reconciliation continue to be important and contested fields of politics.³

Looking at political debate in Australia over the last half-century, there is much that would be familiar to international observers: particularly the growth and contraction of the welfare state, economic deregulation and global integration, and the changing status of women and sexual and ethnic minorities. Australia hews close to the policy and political currents of those nations with which it shares strong political and cultural ties within what has been referred to as the political 'Anglosphere'⁴: a sphere of interaction wherein history and shared language increases the tendency for direct policy comparison, learning and transfer. More recently, Australia's diverse society has tempered this Anglo-Celtic linguistic and cultural dominance with influences from the continuing presence of Aboriginal ways of life⁵ and from an increasing number of migrants from non-Western nations arriving after the end of the 'White Australia' policy in the 1960s.

Australia was a leader in the development of the welfare state at the turn of the 20th century⁶ and in undertaking radical re-engineering of public service delivery as the century came to a close.⁷ The latter changes, broadly informed by what some call 'neoliberal' public administration, continue to fuel debate.⁸ Democratic values, such as universal suffrage, took early root in colonial Australia.⁹ While there is a commitment to broad British liberal traditions, nationhood saw the importation of political ideas from the USA, leading to the creation of an Australian Federation.¹⁰ Yet, there have been enduring social conflicts over who gets to come to Australia and who gets to participate politically, as seen in the political exclusion of Indigenous peoples and specific ethnic groups during much of the 20th century and the countervailing tendencies of ongoing 'racialisation' – creation and policing of racial categories – in the Australian settler state and society.

2 This perspective is contested by some working outside of Indigenous/decolonising political theories and even within the editorial team itself. Although a number of the policies and practices of colonial and Australian governments (including state and territory administrations) can be interpreted as 'genocidal' within the meaning of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (UNOHCHR 2019), their portrayal as 'genocide' is not universally accepted.

3 Harrison et al. 2017.

4 Gulmanelli 2014.

5 Watson 2014.

6 Castles and Uhr 2007.

7 Halligan and Wills 2008.

8 Spies-Butcher 2014.

9 Pickering 2001.

10 Maddox 2000.

The study of politics and policy

The study of politics and public policy in Australia embodies diverse approaches, with different underpinning objectives and methods for making knowledge claims.

Some of the earliest studies concentrated on the formal institutions that are the most visible sites of political practice:¹¹ parliaments, bureaucracies, political parties, unions and businesses. This has been matched in recent decades by the study of other structures of collective action, such as pressure groups and social movements.¹² While the study of institutions first emphasised the way strict rules and laws shaped organisational practices, over time it has come to accommodate more sociological views of how organisations operate, accounting for organisational norms and culture.

Australian political science increasingly recognises that government power is becoming distributed throughout society. In some cases, this has been the result of deliberate choices by politicians and legislatures, such as the outsourcing of previously state-provided services to charities or private companies. In other cases, political scientists recognise that the capacity to influence how state power is realised exists in places that are ‘in between’ formal institutions.

Those who conceive of political power as ‘distributed’ see politics and policy not simply as government activity, but as the more expansive process of ‘governance.’ A governance perspective focuses on the way power is distributed across different networks of social actors and organisations, shaping the nature of the policies that emerge (such as the study of young people’s use of new media to influence politics).¹³ Governance considers a range of relationships (involving regulation, economic exchange and collaboration) and often views elected officials as people who are engaged in ‘steering rather than rowing’ to achieve their objectives, and not in exercising top-down power.¹⁴

The recent National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is a good example. Originally developed under Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard (2010–13), it aims to ensure that Australians with significant disabilities receive care aligned with their personal needs. Importantly, the development and implementation of this policy was not something that a federal government could do alone. The financing and provision of these services spans federal, state and territory governments, requiring collaboration and co-funding. This made the policy highly political, involving the influence of the prime minister, her Cabinet, her party and its allies, but also of a grassroots campaign by people with disabilities and their supporters to encourage leaders in the states and territories to sign on to the plan.¹⁵ Rather than establish a centralised bureaucracy to deliver standardised care, an expanded ‘market’ of

11 Crozier 2001.

12 Boreham 1990.

13 Vromen 2017.

14 Rhodes 2016.

15 Al-Alosi 2016.

commercial and non-profit providers was fostered to compete to provide services.¹⁶ Thus, while key ‘institutions’ were critical in initiating the policy, its implementation sits in the world of politics and governance, with multiple actors influencing and shaping the eventual welfare model, which was crucial to the lives of over 450,000 Australians.

Australia also has a longstanding tradition of study of individual and group political behaviour that is less concerned with the role of institutions and organisations. This ‘behaviouralism’ has asked questions about how individual citizens conduct themselves as political actors (expressing themselves, voting, joining organisations), how people are ‘socialised’ into political knowledge and practices, and how political knowledge and opinion changes over time. Often, this asks: how do people come to know and express their individual and collective interests in the political world? This approach to the discipline has interests in culture, media and the study of public opinion.

The study of Australian politics also has a rich tradition of ‘critical’ analysis. This broad school includes an array of feminist political theorists,¹⁷ Marxist political economists¹⁸ and, more recently, decolonial and indigenising perspectives.¹⁹ These traditions question common assumptions about the political order. Thus, for example, instead of assuming the inevitable existence of the liberal nation-state and market economy, they ask about the historical formation of these structures. Critical scholars are often associated with ‘action research’: not simply analysis, but developing theory with the subjects of the research, with the aim of empowering these communities to change the social and political order. These approaches commonly focus on questions of race, class, gender and intersectionality (where interlocking systems of power affect individuals and communities).

Politics and the study of power

Politics is commonly defined as ‘the science or art of political government.’²⁰ This definition highlights the importance of politics as the acquisition, use and effects of social *power* across a range of settings. Underlying this simple definition, however, are at least three different ‘meta’ (high level) concepts of power that are employed in understanding Australian politics.

The first perspective conceives politics as a practice that both expresses and explains political conflict and co-ordination as the result of incentive structures that shape the behaviour of individuals and groups. Individuals, like groups, have their own preferences, interests and goals that they pursue. But often they are unable to solve their problems due to barriers to collective behaviour. In this view, human

16 Foster et al. 2016.

17 Pateman 1990; Plumwood 1993; Salleh 2017.

18 Humphreys 2019; Meagher and Goodwin 2015.

19 Harrison et al. 2017; Maddison and Brigg 2011; Motta 2016; Strakosch and Macoun 2012.

20 *Macquarie Dictionary* 2018.

nature tends towards individualistic rational calculation. Power is the ability to explicitly or implicitly shape the behaviour of organisations and groups of people.²¹ As such, the prospect of the few dominating the many can only be prevented by broad-scale participation or through contestation between competing elites with different goals and objectives.

This perspective sees the 'public good' as a by-product of the participation of and competition between many citizens and groups in the political process, and sees political institutions as either sites of conflict (consider the famous nickname of the New South Wales parliament: 'the bear pit') or the enduring outcome of previous battles that provided spoils to the winners.²² While this perspective can be seen very negatively, it can be argued that, in all its imperfection, competitive politics in open societies 'works' in that it delivers participatory government through which individuals can act to protect their interests from the risk of an authoritarian state.²³

The second view of politics focuses on the role of groups or collectives engaged in mutual adjustment to act in concert and restrict social conflict, without which human society would amount to little more than a war of 'all against all'.²⁴ Conflict is not seen as automatically constitutive of politics; rather, agreement and compromise are necessary to achieve any significant objectives and humans are seen as fundamentally social creatures.²⁵ Within this conception humans are viewed as able to engage, in the right contexts, in truly co-operative forms of decision making to achieve common goals and objectives. This approach tends to assess the extent to which political practices facilitate or impede collaboration and treats poor government performance as stemming from failures of decision making, consensus formation and collaboration.

The third perspective examines how dominant political structures, logics and rationalities determine who has the capacity to control their lives and futures. It historicises and critiques the form of organising politics, sovereignty and political community. In this critical reading, the liberal nation-state and market economy structurally reproduce systematic exclusions along lines of race, gender and class. One key example of this critical reading of politics is the indigenising–decolonising perspective. This perspective challenges taken-for-granted conceptualisations of politics that can devalue, elide and invisibilise Indigenous and colonised peoples' epistemologies, ethics and modes of organising political and social life.

Understanding public policy

These perspectives on politics address debates about human nature and about how political power is organised, acquired, maintained and deployed. Studying politics

21 Dahl 1957.

22 Machiavelli 2014 [1531].

23 Crick 1992.

24 Hobbes 2014 [1668].

25 Arendt 1958.

without considering the programs and policies of government, however, reduces it to 'sport': calculating winners and losers without ever asking 'What is at stake?' The study of public policy adds an understanding of the outputs of the political process and asks questions about the historical foundations and reproduction of exclusions and inequalities.

Just as we can discern different perspectives on politics, we can also identify different ways of thinking about policy. For some, public policy reflects the distribution of resources in a society. For others, it reflects wider cultural norms that tell us a lot about what a society truly values.

A 'materialistic' view of public policy sees policy as a set of decisions, rules and institutions that allocate benefits (and costs) within society. As with news reporting on the federal budget ('This year's winners and losers!'), policy can be seen as choices about who gets the 'spoils' of political victories. Often policy is about the provision of direct material resources (e.g. industry subsidies), but it can also include less tangible benefits such as favourable laws or regulations. By way of example: the rise of the labour movement at the end of the 19th century saw a corresponding increase in policy designed to redistribute resources towards the working class (via mechanisms like welfare and progressive taxation systems), as well as the first significant industrial relations laws regulating the relationship between employers and employees. From this perspective, policy can be evaluated in instrumental terms (Did the allocation of resources effectively achieve the program goals?), and in terms of power (Who benefits from this policy?).

Alternatively, a 'values' view of public policy is less concerned with accounting for the distribution of public resources and more concerned with the social meaning of policy. Mark Considine highlights the role that the values of voters and officials play in directing government action. For him, 'a public policy is an action which employs governmental authority to commit resources in support of a preferred value.'²⁶ This recognises that the material aspects of a policy may be less important than its 'symbolic' meaning.

A good example of this view is the heated debate over the implementation of LGBTIQ+²⁷ education programs in Australian schools. The 'Safe Schools' initiative provided teaching materials to help schools reduce instances of bullying of students who do not identify with heteronormative standards. From a strictly rationally calculating perspective, this program represented an infinitesimally small part of education budgets, yet it became a contentious political issue due to its explicit acceptance of gender and sexuality as non-binary. It became a lightning rod for social conservatives and a point of principle for program advocates, who saw recognition as important in ensuring the physical and psychological wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ young people.²⁸ While the materiality of the program was small, its

26 Considine 1994.

27 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer/questioning.

28 McKinnon, Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2017.

existence represented a strong statement of values as to what type of people were seen as worthy of societal care.

‘Critical’ perspectives look at policy in terms of its impact on extending or remediating systemic power inequalities and exclusions. An example is an indigenising-decolonising perspective, which interrogates core settler-colonial state structures and their underlying logics in economic, social, cultural or public order areas. In doing so, it demonstrates their deeply racialised (as well as gendered and classed) nature and the role of policy in the (re)production of exclusions, dehumanisation and racialised interventions.²⁹ A second strand of this research focuses on alternative practices, processes and understandings of decision making and sovereignty, demonstrating their survival despite historical and continued attempts at erasure and control, and raising questions about the possibility of thinking differently about sovereignty, authority, political subjectivity and political decision making.³⁰

What do Australians think about ‘politics’?

On the surface, it would appear that we know a lot about what the public thinks about politics. Australia’s political journalists are quick to refer to public opinion polls to explain the daily currents of political debate and elite behaviour. Polling has become a near real-time process surveying public attitudes, feeding reports about ‘what the public thinks’ back into political discourse.³¹ Political elites are quick to refer to the currents of public opinion to justify their actions (when it suits them) and to downplay polling in favour of ‘true leadership’ (also, when it suits them).

At the most fundamental level, there is considerable uncertainty about whether the ‘average’ Australian knows very much about core aspects of the political system, history and the debates of the day. Rodney Smith has called the average Australian’s knowledge of the political system ‘sketchy’, at best,³² a problem partially exacerbated by the complexity of our three-level political system.

The Australian Electoral Study, a survey of Australian voters undertaken at each federal election, has found that the public remains comparatively interested in politics, with 77 per cent reporting they have a ‘good deal’ or ‘some’ interest.³³ But the survey also found that voters may have only partial levels of ‘hard facts’ about the Australian political system. Indeed, less than half of voters can answer specific questions about the Constitution and the composition of parliament (see Table 1).

The lack of knowledge with respect to these very specific questions relates to a broader debate about the ‘competence’ of citizens: to what extent can the public identify policy issues that are of significance to them and act collectively to put

29 Maddison and Brigg 2011; Motta 2016.

30 Harrison et al. 2017

31 Goot 2018.

32 Smith 2001.

33 Cameron and McAllister 2018.

	Correct	Incorrect	Not sure/ don't know
Australia became a Federation in 1901	76.5%	2.7%	20.9%
There are 75 members of the House of Representatives	45.9%	22.9%	31.2%
The Constitution can only be changed by the High Court	40.4%	27.0%	32.6%
The Senate election is based on proportional representation	49.5%	13.3%	37.2%
No-one may stand for federal parliament unless they pay a deposit	25.1%	34.8%	40.0%
The longest time allowed between federal elections for the House of Representatives is four years	26.5%	56.7%	16.8%

Table 1 Australian political knowledge, 2016.

these on the political agenda (either through voting behaviour or political activities outside of the electoral cycle)? Evidence on this question is mixed and complex, demonstrating that the public is sensitive to economic conditions, and acts accordingly, but can be ‘led’ by political elites on other issues (e.g. immigration).³⁴

Importantly, Australians appear to be increasingly cynical about politics. However, Evans et al. see them as conflicted; many maintain positive views of Australia’s democratic system in broad terms but question the integrity of many of its core players (political parties, media and organised interest groups) and the policy outcomes it delivers.³⁵

Whether or not greater knowledge about the realities of the Australian political system, its actors and its policy – the type of information contained in this volume – would positively or negatively affect Australians’ attitude to politics remains an open and contested question. However, Smith et al. identify a strong normative argument that links improved political knowledge with enhanced political efficacy (efficacy is the sense that you have the power to control your life and make meaningful decisions).³⁶

Conversely, the extent to which any representation of Australian politics and policy speaks to those who have been excluded and misrepresented, and whether

34 Dowding and Martin 2016.

35 Evans, Halupka and Stoker 2017.

36 Smith et al. 2015.

it reflects the knowledges and contributions of those on the political and epistemological margins, are of ethical importance to critical political analysts and frameworks. From these perspectives, the validity of political analysis and theory derives from its capacity to be useful to those in movements and communities struggling for social justice, inclusion and decolonisation.

About the open textbook

The volume you are reading is a customised textbook created from a collection of chapters on the topic of Australian politics and public policy. This collection was initially created by a team of 60 authors and editors. To ensure quality, each chapter has been subjected to peer review, a process in which chapters are anonymised and evaluated by other scholars who are experts in the field.

The purpose of the project is to:

- enhance the understanding of Australian politics and public policy with an extensive, well-written, and comprehensive contribution to teaching materials in Australia
- provide, with a no-cost option, access to high-quality teaching materials to students of Australian politics
- develop a system for the delivery of bespoke textbooks customisable to the needs of instructors.

Accessing more materials from this project

This book is only one small part of a larger collection of available materials. The *Australian Politics and Policy* website (tiny.cc/australianpolitics) allows you to access all the available chapters in the project's database (see Table 2).

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Section	Chapters
Introduction	Introduction
	A short political history of Australia
	Australian political thought
Institutions	Executive government
	Parliaments of Australia
	Electoral systems
	The Australian party system
	The public sector
	Media and democracy
	Courts
Federalism	Commonwealth–state relations
	Australian Capital Territory
	New South Wales
	Northern Territory
	Queensland
	South Australia
	Tasmania
	Victoria
	Western Australia
	Local government
	Political sociology

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	Government–business relations
	Indigenous politics
	Multicultural Australia
	Pressure groups and social movements
	Religious communities and politics
	Voter behaviour
	Young people and politics
Policy making	Making public policy
	Communication policy
	Economic policy
	Environmental policy
	Foreign and defence policy
	Health policy
	Immigration and multicultural policy
	‘Law and order’ policy
	Regional policy
	Social policy
	Urban policy
	Work, employment and industrial relations policy

Table 2 Complete contents of *Australian Politics and Policy*.

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