

Chapter 17

Measuring the Mysteries of Federal Political Culture in Australia

AJ Brown

I Introduction

Are Australian citizens culturally divided when it comes to their vision of tomorrow's federation? Are there detectable differences in the federal political culture shared by individuals and groups within the Australian community – and if so, what do these differences indicate about how Australians think their political system should evolve?

These questions are made important by recent evidence that a majority of citizens believe not only that their political system is underperforming, but that it could benefit from fundamental structural reform. The first and second Australian Constitutional Values Surveys, conducted by the author and colleagues in May 2008 and March 2010, provide empirical evidence to this effect.¹ They revealed that large majorities of Australians are unsatisfied with how the federal system works in practice and would, if given the choice, structure the system of government differently in the future.² The strength of reform sentiment revealed by these surveys suggests that when it comes to their system of government, many citizens are seeking to be set free of something – but of what? Possibly, citizens are seeking relief from a political discourse in which the problems of federalism are often bemoaned, but realistic paths toward improvement remain elusive.

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2 See AJ Brown, 'Escaping Purgatory: Public Opinion and the Future of Australia's Federal System' in Nicholas Aroney, Gabrielle Appleby and Thomas John (eds), *The Future of Australian Federalism: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) Table 2.

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