

South Australia

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South Australia (SA) is one of the country's oldest states, having been proclaimed as a freely settled colony in 1836 and assuming self-governing status in 1856. Much of its area remains sparsely inhabited, with Adelaide as the dominant population centre on the south coast. With 1.8 million people the state ranks fifth in size. Until the mid-1970s elections in the state were shaped by a significant malapportionment of its electoral boundaries, which over-allocated seats to rural and regional areas, with voters in Adelaide and its surrounds badly under-represented – a gerrymander nicknamed the 'Playmander' (after former Premier Playford). However, following electoral reforms in 1974 the state has been a more even battleground, although the Australian Labor Party (ALP) has tended to dominate the winning of elections.

What does democracy require of South Australia's political system?

- ◆ *An effective state constitution* to secure and underpin liberal democracy in the state.
- ◆ *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* should be afforded full individual civil and human rights.
- ◆ *Electoral systems* for the state's lower and upper houses should accurately translate parties' share of votes into seats in the state legislature, in different ways that are recognised as legitimate by most citizens. Ideally, the voting systems should foster the overall social representativeness of the two houses of the legislature. Elections and the regulation of political parties should be impartially conducted, with integrity.
- ◆ The *political parties* should sustain vigorous and effective electoral competition and citizen participation. Political parties should uphold the highest standards of conduct in public life.
- ◆ The *Parliament* should normally maintain full public oversight of government services and state operations, ensuring public and parliamentary accountability.
- ◆ *An effective bicameral system* (two chamber) to ensure that the legislative branch meets its representative and accountability functions.

How to cite this chapter:

Manwaring, Rob; Holloway, Josh; and Parkin, Andrew (2024) 'South Australia', in: Evans, Mark; Dunleavy, Patrick and Phillimore, John (eds) *Australia's Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit*, London: LSE Press, pp.432-452. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.ada.t> Licence: CC-BY-NC 4.0

- ◆ *The South Australian government* should govern responsively, prioritising the public interest and broadly reflecting state public opinion. Its core executive (premier, Cabinet, ministers and key central departments) should oversee a coherent and well-coordinated implementation of public policies and management of public services across government.
- ◆ The *core executive* and government should operate fully within the law, and ministers should be effectively scrutinised by and politically accountable to Parliament. The administration of public services should be controlled by democratically elected officials as far as possible.
- ◆ In the wider *state public service* officials should act with integrity, in accordance with well-enforced codes of conduct, and within the rule of law.
- ◆ The South Australian government should effectively and transparently represent its citizens' interests at *the Commonwealth level*.

The chapter begins by covering some recent developments, then the strengths and weaknesses of South Australia's democratic processes is summarised in a SWOT analysis. Following that, the state's electoral processes, constitutional and human rights issues, and relations between the executive and Parliament are considered in more detail.

Recent developments

The political management of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Australia in the early 2020s provided an interesting insight into the operation of executive government and on the degree to which it can be held to account via the parliamentary process. Important statutory powers were exercised by two non-elected public officials, the Police Commissioner in his capacity as State Coordinator (under the Emergency Management Act) and the Chief Public Health Officer (under the Public Health Act). Partly in recognition of these statutory powers, and partly as a matter of political judgement, the minority Liberal-National government under Premier Steven Marshall created a COVID-19 Transition Committee, including these two officers as key members, to advise on the imposition of border-closure and lockdown measures.

The Transition Committee decisions had significant impacts on South Australians (and indeed on anybody wanting to enter South Australia). They were largely exercised by public officials within the executive branch, albeit with the consent and collaboration of the premier and the Minister of Health. Parliamentary approval was required in April 2020 for the new *Covid Emergency Response Act 2020* to enable various policy and executive actions, such as protecting residential and commercial renters affected by the pandemic. Important concessions were forced on the government by virtue of its minority status in the House of Assembly. In September 2021, Labor and the crossbenchers succeeded in adding a regional representative to the Transition Committee while also limiting the extension period for special measures.

At the 2022 state elections, the incumbent Liberal government (which had been there only for a single term) fared badly and Labor under Peter Manlinauskas swept to power with a comfortable majority (27 of the 47 seats in the House of Assembly). However, as in 2018 the Legislative Council (LC) (with 22 seats) remained evenly divided between the top two parties, with two Greens and a One Nation member holding the balance.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>The state's constitution has provided for the stable and effective operation of liberal democracy and has been adjusted in a flexible manner. Government through the COVID-19 pandemic was effective, parliamentary consensus was maintained in support and policies did not create as much controversy or minority opposition as in some other states.</p>	<p>There is some lack of clarity about when a referendum should be used to amend the <i>Constitution Act 1934</i> (South Australia Parliament, no date a). As a result, Parliament can potentially change aspects of the Constitution without due deliberation. Some provisions included in the <i>Constitution Act 1934</i> have not operated as intended, for example, the state-wide winner of the two-party preferred vote was supposed to form the government under a 1997 'fairness' rule. This was removed in 2017.</p>
<p>The position of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been constitutionally recognised, and a state apology given in 1997 about past practices ignoring their rights. Several government activities and strategies have sought to redress the historical disadvantage that Indigenous people have suffered, with some recent progress. Longstanding legislation has secured key civil rights (for example, against sex discrimination, and equal opportunity for women (South Australia Parliament, no date b)). In 2023, South Australia became the first Australian state to have a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament.</p>	<p>To date, there has been no substantial progress in negotiating a Treaty with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as advocates demand. Few Indigenous Australians have ever been elected to Parliament.</p> <p>There have been governance issues with some Aboriginal-controlled bodies, and progress on remedying past inequalities has been slow. The state has no comprehensive human rights charter.</p>
<p>The state's Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system, applied in the House of Assembly, and proportional representation (PR), used in the LC, balance majoritarian and proportional elements. Elections have been conducted with a high level of integrity and have produced relatively stable periods of governments by one or other of the top two parties. Beyond the two-party axis some new dynamics in electoral competition have been growing, perhaps more slowly than in some other states.</p>	<p>There is a lack of clarity about whether the electoral system should facilitate two-party preferred majorities at the state-wide level producing House of Assembly majorities.</p> <p>In the recent past, long periods of single-party incumbency reflected a lack of competitiveness between the top two parties. The erratic votes for small parties in the LC elections also reflect their weakness as party organisations and difficulties in becoming established competitors.</p>
<p>A cap on party political donations has been in place since 2013, with relatively high levels of compliance. There has been little evidence of significant 'dark money' influence in state politics. South Australia has a well-established, albeit narrow, mainstream media landscape.</p>	<p>The compliance regime for political donations has been complex and the South Australian Electoral Commissioner has lacked the resources to investigate in penetrating ways. South Australia has the highest candidate deposit fees in the nation, which may somewhat inhibit new parties or independent candidates. As in other states, media diversity has been limited.</p>

<p>Within Parliament, many MPs have had key skills and professional backgrounds suited for law-making roles.</p>	<p>There has been significant under-representation in Parliament of women (ECSA, 2023a), people from non-European ethnic minority backgrounds, working class backgrounds and people with disabilities.</p>
<p>South Australia saw a strong executive and public sector response to COVID-19. In the official view the ministerial code of conduct and the component of ministerial responsibility requiring acting with integrity both remained effective (South Australia Government, 2021). Parliament scrutiny provides stable and generally effective democratic accountability.</p>	<p>As in other states, there has been a tendency for the executive to dominate the relatively small Parliament, especially if a government has a comfortable majority of MPs in the House of Assembly. The component of ministerial responsibility where politicians answer for mistakes made by departments and agencies in their brief has weakened over time (Selway, 2003). In addition, a code of conduct for MPs has been lacking for many years, and parliamentarians voted unanimously in 2021 to reduce the scope of the Corruption Commission.</p>
<p>In the Weatherill Labor era (2011–2018) there was a focus on deliberative democracy and consultation arrangements remain active. Online consultation opportunities in relation to draft policy initiatives are now mostly routine.</p>	<p>There was a shift away from supplementing democracy with citizen juries and other deliberative processes since 2018, and no new initiatives have occurred since.</p>
<p>Future opportunities</p>	<p>Future threats</p>
<p>The <i>Constitution Act</i> has arguably become due for some ‘housekeeping’ reforms. Rights legislation can be enhanced and reformed. There could also be scope to find new mechanisms for citizen voice and input.</p>	<p>Parliamentary sovereignty may impede or veto any wider amendments to the Constitution. There has been only a limited appetite for more significant constitutional reform. The top two parties have been reluctant or unwilling to introduce reforms of citizen rights or democratic improvements.</p>
<p>Political parties could prioritise recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The Voice to the South Australian Parliament, established in 2023, has the potential to improve Indigenous representation and promotion of key issues.</p>	<p>Political parties have been reluctant to pre-select candidates from Aboriginal peoples, and slow to commit to combatting systemic racism and disadvantage compared with other priorities (like seeking the ‘law and order’ vote).</p>
<p>A review of the effectiveness of regulation of parties and political donations has become overdue (for example, to introduce ‘real-time’ disclosure of donations). The continued role of smaller parties and independents may improve competition in the House of Assembly. Scope also exists to innovate around electoral law and modernise to reflect digital technologies.</p>	<p>There remains a risk of ‘cartel’ behaviour by the two major parties to restrict competition where their interests are congruent. On the other hand, greater party fragmentation across the two houses could make the ‘balance of power’ dynamics in legislating more complex. In terms of diversity, some parties are reluctant to introduce mechanisms to improve representation such as quotas. Key demographic groups lack a direct voice in Parliament.</p>
<p>New developments in inter-governmental relations, such as the National Cabinet, strengthened the negotiating role of the state premier and ministers, especially since South Australia has been a strong financial beneficiary of arrangements.</p>	<p>Ministerial accountability on inter-governmental matters has been weaker at state level, with less parliamentary scrutiny.</p>

As in other Australian states, the separate electoral and party politics dynamics of South Australia have thrown up some distinctive democratic issues, especially around the party winning the House of Assembly state-wide two-party preference vote not necessarily forming government. The constitutional set-up in the state and the picture on human rights and diversity also merit a closer look. Finally, we explore how the executive and legislature have operated and some issues around public services.

Elections and electoral systems

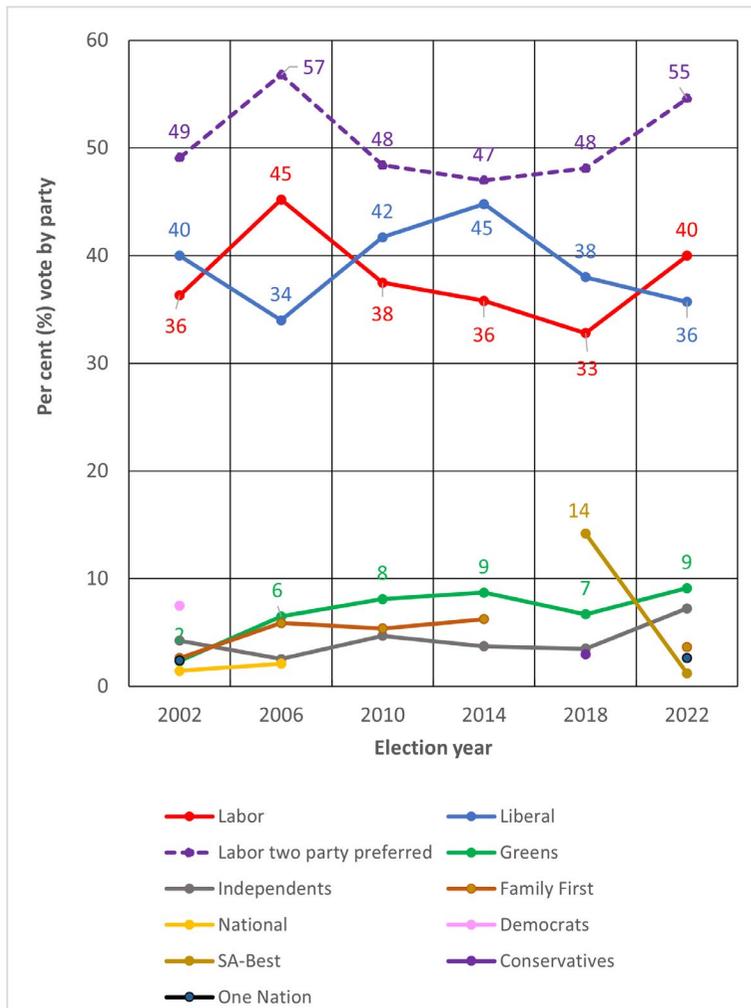
South Australia has the same system mix as most other states, with the majoritarian Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system used for the lower house (the House of Assembly) and proportional representation (the Single Transferable Vote (STV)) for the upper house (the LC) (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018). The differing electoral systems shape voting behaviour and the wider party system. Since 1970, the House of Assembly has had 47 members, and hence 24 votes are required to gain a majority there. All MPs in the lower house serve four-year terms. The LC has 22 members (MLCs), each serving eight-year terms, with half the upper house facing election on alternate cycles.

Lower house

The House of Assembly is elected via 47 single member seats using AV. This system favours the top two parties who almost alone can win the required majority (whether on primary votes or redistributed preference votes) in local seats, although there can also be a handful of independents. Figure 20.1 charts the first-preference votes received by the Liberal-Liberal Country League and Labor parties this century in the lower house elections using AV. It also shows the support for independents and small parties – which here includes the Greens. Despite regularly receiving 8 or 9 per cent of votes across the state this century, the Greens have yet to win a seat, which in practice would require getting into the top two in the AV primary vote and then, if necessary, winning a majority via the distributed preferences of the eliminated major-party candidate. A similar fate has befallen Family First with around 4 per cent support. Another feature of the state has been the absence of the Nationals as a separate party (except in one seat): their rural supporters at national level need to vote Liberal in state elections (a situation explained historically by the Liberal Party having evolved from the Liberal and Country League label).

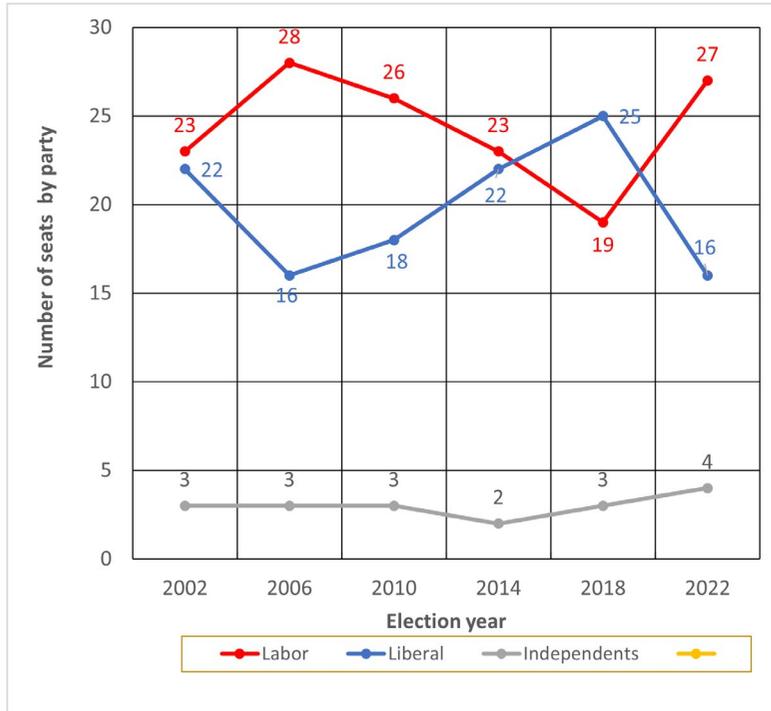
The lower house is a relatively small body, with 47 seats and hence a majority line of 24. It is elected every four years and in terms of parties winning seats it has always been dominated by the Liberals and Labor; recent elections have proved no exception (Figure 20.2). At each recent election three or sometimes four independents have been elected, in seats where their local reputation was strong. Unusually, they held the balance in the house from 2014–2018, and one member gained a ministerial post in the Labor government. The Nationals have not won any seats across the three elections since 2010.

Figure 20.1: Party first-preference vote shares (and the two-party preferred vote for Labor), South Australia House of Assembly, 2002–2022



Source: Compiled from data in Electoral Commission of South Australia (ECSA) (2023a).

How accurately does the AV electoral system translate movements in public opinion between elections into changes of seats? The pre-1974 history of gross malapportionment being maintained for decades in South Australia (when Labor was disproportionately disadvantaged, and metropolitan Adelaide badly under-represented) gives some insight into more recent concerns with the ‘fairness’ of electoral boundaries. Ideally, on democratic grounds the party winning the state-wide two-party preferred vote for the House of Assembly would also be the party gaining most seats, and thus form the government. Until recently a boundary fairness provision was included in the *Constitution Act*. Introduced by Labor in 1991 (magnanimously, after it had been returned to government with a minority of the two-party preferred vote), the provision mandated a post-election redrawing of electoral boundaries to ensure ‘as far as practicable’ that the party securing 50 per cent or more of the two-party-preferred vote should be able to be ‘elected in sufficient numbers to enable a government to be formed’ at the next election (Lynch, 2016, 7). Yet in December 2017, the ‘fairness’ provision for AV elections was removed from the *Constitution Act*, following a successful bill proposed by the Greens in the Legislative Council.

Figure 20.2: Party seats in the House of Assembly, 2006–2022

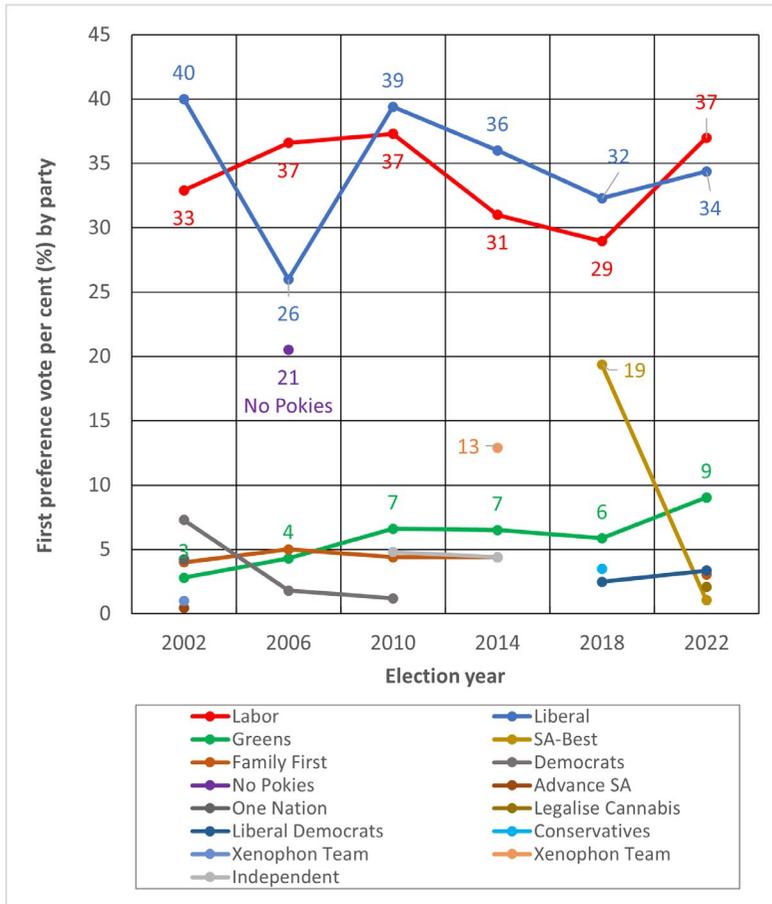
Source: Compiled from data in Electoral Commission of South Australia (ECSA) (2023a).

The story here has been that the electoral pursuit of this aspect of ‘fairness’ proved problematic and difficult to achieve. Despite the fairness provision, the Liberal Party narrowly won the two-party-preferred vote in the 2002, 2010 and 2014 elections with 51–52 per cent state-wide, yet the party did not form the government because it lagged Labor in terms of House of Assembly seats won (see Figures 20.1 and 20.2). By contrast, in 2006 and 2022, Labor won the ‘Two party preferred’ (TPP) vote state-wide, and both times formed majority governments. There was no deliberate design behind these apparent ‘wrong winner’ anomalies; rather the results demonstrated the limits of the ‘as far as practicable’ aspiration embedded in the provision. South Australia and its electorate have a distinct geography, with a highly concentrated urban population (particularly in and surrounding Adelaide). The formation of government therefore tends to be determined by a handful of marginal seats in metropolitan areas. This poses an ongoing challenge for the Liberal Party in particular, as its voters over recent elections disproportionately reside in rural and regional areas, piling up large majority wins in safe seats, while Labor’s vote is more ‘efficiently’ spread across the seats it needs to win. Despite conscientious efforts by the Electoral District Boundaries Commissioners to redraw boundaries in a way that could accommodate this geographic pattern at the next election, this was not consistently achieved.

Upper house

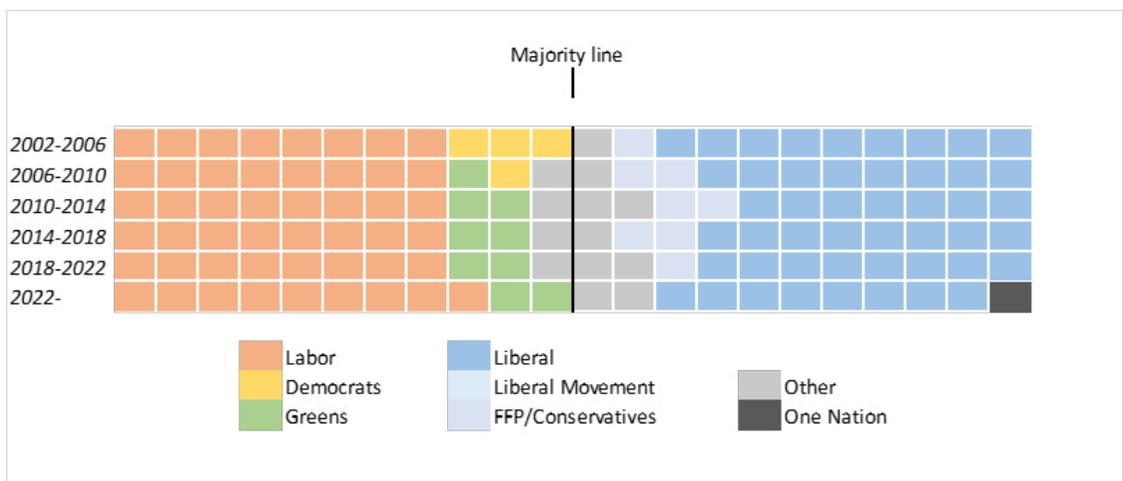
Turning to the upper house, the LC is much smaller in size at 22 seats and is elected in halves every four years, in one state-wide constituency with 11 seats. Following significant electoral reforms by the Dunstan Labor government in the 1970s, both voting behaviour for the LC and its composition shifted dramatically. There has been a noteworthy shift in first-preference votes

Figure 20.3: Party first-preference vote shares under STV in the South Australia Legislative Council (upper house) elections, 2002–2022



Source: Compiled from data in ECSA (Electoral Commission of South Australia) (2023a).

Figure 20.4: The balance of seats in the Legislative Council (upper house) 2002–2023



Source: Compiled from data in Electoral Commission of South Australia (ECSA) (2023a).

Note: Each square represents a seat: 12 are required for a majority in a chamber with 22 seats.

for the upper house towards smaller parties and independents, as [Figure 20.3](#) shows. The top two parties continued to dominate in most years, but there were blip results too for parties that appear and then vanish – like 21 per cent for the ‘No Pokies’ party in 2006, and 19 per cent for SA Best in 2018. Initially, the Democrats and later the Greens helped to deny any clear majority to either major party, and small-party elected members have almost always held the ‘balance of power’, as the seats map in [Figure 20.4](#) shows. Therefore, South Australians have demonstrated a strong tendency to vote for a more diverse LC, creating an upper chamber where neither major party holds a majority of seats and new legislation must be negotiated through. The breakthrough of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation at the 2022 state election was notable, given that South Australia, and the country more widely, have not experienced the electoral growth of radical-right populist parties to the same extent as countries, such as the UK and Sweden.

Parties and the party system

As explained in [Chapter 5](#), political scientists have developed ways of counting parties for party system analysis, and not merely tallying them, but weighting them since not all parties are equally significant ([Laakso and Taagepera, 1979](#)). To examine party dynamics, in [Figure 20.5](#), we apply the ‘effective number of parties’ measure to the party vote shares, and to resulting seats won, at elections from 2002 to 2022. There was far greater fragmentation in votes (measured in the electoral index) than in terms of seats (measured by the parliamentary index), pointing to the lack of proportionality in translating votes into seats – particularly in 2018 in the House of Assembly. While expected in a majoritarian setting like the House, the ‘proportional’ electoral system used for the LC has still not resulted in a chamber as diverse in party profile as voters’ aggregated preferences. The difference in fragmentation between the lower and upper houses highlights the differing representative configurations of the two chambers. However, in 2022 the number of parties (ENEP) also dropped back considerably for both chambers.

Figure 20.5: The effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) and parliamentary parties (ENPP), in the House of Assembly and the Legislative Council

Election year	House of Assembly		Legislative Council	
	Electoral ENEP score	Parliamentary ENPP score	Electoral ENEP score	Parliamentary ENPP score
2002	3.3	2.4	3.5	2.8
2006	3	2.2	4	3.9
2010	3.1	2.2	3.2	3.5
2014	2.9	2.2	4.2	3.5
2018	3.6	2.2	4.3	3.3
2022	2.2	2.2	3.1	3.3

Source: Author’s calculation from data in [Figures 20.1 to 20.4](#).

Note: The effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) is another name for ENP votes, and the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) is another name for ENP seats.

Figure 20.6: Parties' seats in the Legislative Council and their index of voting power scores, since 2002

Party	Seats held [and per cent (%) of all voting power]				
	2002–2006	2006–2010	2010–2014	2014–2018	2018–2022
Labor	8 [28]	8 [28.6]	8 [33.9]	8 [28.6]	8 [28.6]
Liberal	9 [36]	8 [28.6]	7 [23.2]	8 [28.6]	8 [28.6]
Democrats	3 [28]	1 [7.1]			
Xenophon/ SABest	1 [4]	2 [14.3]	2 [12.5]	1 [7.1]	2 [14.3]
FFP/ Conservative	1 [4]	2 [14.3]	2 [12.5]	2 [14.3]	1 [7.1]
Greens		1 [7.1]	2 [12.5]	2 [14.3]	2 [14.3]
Other			1 [5.4]	1 [7.1]	1 [7.1]
<i>Effective number of relevant parties (ENRP)</i>	3.5	4.7	4.6	4.7	4.7

Source: Author's calculation from seats data in [Figures 20.2](#) and [20.4](#).

Note: Table cells show the number of LC seats held by each party, with the resulting per cent of voting power shown by the standardised Banzhaf index (shown in brackets). The effective number of relevant parties (ENRP) in the bottom row counts all parties able to change vote outcomes and is calculated for each LC term.

Modern South Australia electoral competition has been quite different from a 'two-party system', with the decisions by smaller parties on whether to stand and their success in winning votes having significant effects. However, control of state ministries and government formation has remained with the two major parties. Historically, political stability was one of South Australia's defining features, with often long periods of rule by one party (especially in the period before 1968). Since then, there have also been long periods of rule for the Liberals (under three premiers Brown, Olsen and Kerin) from 1994–2002, and Labor (under Dunstan and Corcoran) from 1970–1979, (under Bannon and Arnold) from 1982–1994 and (under Rann and Weatherill) from 2002–2018. The single Liberal term from 2018–2022 was thus unusual.

Focusing on the Labor versus Liberal contest alone could obscure the enduring impact of independent Members of Parliament (MPs), whose presence contributed to several minority governments – including the 2021–2022 Marshall Liberal government. Significant, too, has been the expansion of small party and independent influence in the passage of legislation through the LC. We can gain some insight by calculating the relative legislative 'bargaining power' of parties and independents (see [Figure 20.6](#)). Bargaining power here is determined not only by the number of seats, but also the broader configuration of seats across all parties in the chamber. (We use the best-known voting power measure the normalised Banzhaf (1965) index.)

The 'voting power' index shows the top two parties as well ahead of other actors, but as rarely having more than around 30 per cent of the voting power each. And (looking back also to [Figure 20.4](#)) we can see that in 2002–2006, for instance, the three Democrats in the LC held as much influence as the eight Labor Councillors on this measure, due to the Democrats' crucial 'balance of power' role. What these calculations make clear, across each parliamentary term, was the relatively limited capacity of government or opposition alone to determine LC outcomes.

Finally, we can also use these bargaining power figures as bases for an alternative measure of party system fragmentation, weighting them as in the ‘effective number of parties’ index used above to create the ‘effective number of relevant parties’ (ENRP), devised by Dumont and Caulier (2005). Shown in the bottom row of Figure 20.6, this is a weighted estimate of how many parties matter in determining overall outcomes: it suggests that a truly multi-party legislative environment has emerged, and arguably consolidated, in the state’s powerful upper chamber.

Regulating political parties

The regulation of political parties is vexed and complex. A range of issues applicable to Australia as a whole were set out in Gauja and Sawyer (2016). While some of the more serious concerns were directed at the more populous Australian states and at the national-level situation (see Chapter 1), concerns have remained about the potential role and influence of ‘dark money’ influencing parties and candidates. The regulation of political parties in South Australia is governed by the *Electoral Act 1985*, administered by the Electoral Commission of South Australia (ECSA, 2023b). The entry barriers for registering a political party are comparatively low. Within the state, parties must pay an annual fee of A\$500, have a constitution and have 200 registered members – or a parliamentarian (by contrast, federal parties require 1,500 members, while Victoria and Western Australia require 500 members). It is notable, too that South Australia has the highest candidate deposit fees of any state and territory (in South Australia, candidates must pay A\$1,000, whereas the costs elsewhere range from A\$250 to A\$500). The deposit is returned if the candidate wins more than 4 per cent of the total number of formal first-preference votes.

The same legislation also governs campaign finance and donation regulations in South Australia. All parties, candidates and third parties must create a designated account. All donations, gifts and loans to state parties over the indexed threshold (A\$5,310 in 2023) must be declared, along with gifts of A\$200 or more, or loans in excess of A\$1,000. Donors must also declare gifts over the threshold limit. Political gifts are broadly defined, and political event tickets are capped at A\$500 per person. South Australia’s disclosure scheme involves two reporting cycles. In an election year, returns are required by 5 February, and then on a weekly basis until 30 days after the election. These regulations are relatively recent, and transparency around donations was only introduced in 2013. There remain some concerns about the complexity of the requirements, which has led to some double-reporting (ABC, 2018). In June 2021, the Marshall Liberal government introduced new legislation to tighten up aspects of the regime, including enhancing the powers of the Electoral Commissioner to oversee the system. The Malinauskas government has indicated, in 2024, that it seeks to ban all political donations to political parties in the state.

Media diversity

A healthy and vibrant media system is increasingly seen as an essential aspect of a strong democracy. While much of the regulation around the media and press freedoms are federal government issues, along with some key media protections, there are still issues at the state level. A key area of concern in South Australia has been the issue of media diversity and ownership. In effect, South Australia has only one daily newspaper – the *Adelaide Advertiser* and its sister paper *The Sunday Mail*, both owned by News Corp, the company in which the Rupert Murdoch family has a controlling interest. Their only real competition has been the online

news source *InDaily*, which reports on state politics and related matters. However, its scope and reach are much more limited. There are also ongoing concerns about the changing media environment of the digital era, where local newspapers have been closed in South Australia (*InDaily*, 2020a), as across the nation. While ABC News and the commercial TV channels run dedicated South Australian news-desks, there have been ongoing concerns about jobs cuts to the sector (*InDaily*, 2020b), centralisation of editorial decision-making to the eastern states, and potentially negative impacts on news coverage of political events.

Assessing the significance of this pattern of ownership and control among the mainstream media outlets is, in South Australia as elsewhere, now complicated by the advent of well-patronised social-media platforms providing alternative channels for the promulgation and communication of political information and comment.

Diversity in political representation

The principle of political equality is strongly linked to the value of representation. In a modern democracy, the elected representatives should broadly reflect the communities they seek to speak for. On a number of demographic characteristics, the South Australian Parliament has under-represented key groups. In 2020, the Electoral Commission for SA research found that only 29 per cent of parliamentarians were women, the lowest rate across *all* Australian parliaments, and below the national average at 37 per cent (*Marx*, 2020). Critically, the report found that overall female representation had declined since 2006, and that South Australia also had one of the lowest rates of female representation in its Cabinet. In 2022, Labor increased its number of female MPs, but the Liberals did not, with signs of long-run difficulty for the party in addressing this matter (*ABC*, 2023).

MPs from culturally and ethnically diverse communities have also been under-represented in the current South Australian Parliament. According to the 2021 Census, about 24 per cent of South Australians were not born in Australia, with the percentages for the most common other countries of birth being England 5.3, India 2.5, China 1.4 and Vietnam 1.0 (*Australian Bureau of Statistics*, 2022 and no date). While MPs with Greek and Italian heritage have been elected over time, there were only two members in the 54th Parliament from non-European backgrounds, Jing Lee (Liberal) and Tung Ngo (ALP), both in the LC.

In other characteristics, most MPs now have a university undergraduate degree (*Figure 20.7*), a considerably higher proportion than for South Australians as a whole. Similarly, certain professions and employment backgrounds have been over-represented compared with the wider South Australian population. Some backgrounds were clearly linked to partisanship.

Figure 20.7: South Australian Parliament 2018–2022 – MPs with university degrees

Chamber	Total number	Number with university degrees	Degree per cent (%)
House of Assembly	47	35	75
Legislative Council	22	15	68
<i>Total</i>	69	50	72

Source: Compiled by the authors from 54th Parliamentary directory for South Australia.

Note: Based on MPs stating they have a university undergraduate degree.

Figure 20.8: South Australian Parliament 2018–2022 – MPs’ and Legislative Councillors’ employment backgrounds

Background	Number with university degrees	Per cent (%)
Business	19	28
Law	12	17
Unions	9	13
Public Sector	9	13
Other/unclassified	5	7.2
Farming/Primary Industries	4	5.8
Media/Journalism	4	5.8
Local Government	4	5.8
Staffer	3	4.3
Total (both houses)	69	100

Source: Compiled by the authors from 54th Parliamentary directory for South Australia.

Eighteen of the 19 MPs from the business/private sector were either Liberals (or former Liberals), and all nine MPs from a trade-union background were from the ALP. In sum, using education and employment backgrounds as proxy indicators for class, these data suggest a strong over-representation of MPs coming from middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

While data on some other demographic groups has been lacking, there are signs of under-representation among MPs of other vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities. A notable exception was Kelly Vincent, who has cerebral palsy, was elected to the upper house in 2010 and served until 2018. Her term as an MP saw Parliament install ramps and adapt equipment to meet her needs as a wheel-chair user. In common with other parliaments, young people also tend to be under-represented (Kelly Vincent was also the youngest ever South Australian MP at 21 years old). And we note below that only one MP has identified as having an Aboriginal heritage.

Constitutional issues and human rights

The **Constitution Act 1934** is the foundation of South Australia’s political system, and it sets out the main framework of South Australia’s political system. The doctrine of responsible government entails that the executive branch (the premier and their government) is held accountable to the legislative branch (the Parliament), and in turn, through free and fair regular elections, to the voters of South Australia. In South Australia’s bicameral system where there is a breakdown between the two houses, section 41 of the *Constitution Act* provides for a ‘deadlock’ provision. In effect, if a government bill was to be consistently blocked in the Legislative Council then it can trigger the government to seek permission to dissolve Parliament and cause

new elections. From time to time, there have been calls to abolish the upper house in South Australia, and in 2015 the then Labor Premier Mike Rann considered but backed away from holding a referendum on the issue. However, there has been very limited elite or public demand for a unicameral system, such as that in Queensland.

Section 8 empowers the South Australian Parliament to vary the *Constitution Act*. There are a few limits to this, for example, Parliament cannot abolish the upper house without approval by a referendum. Otherwise, the effect has been that Parliament has shown a willingness to change the constitution via legislation, on a regular basis (no less than 14 times since 2000). Most recently, there was a push to introduce a new provision to ensure that the Speaker of the House must be independent of any political party. There have been concerns that while there are benefits to a parliamentary capability, which allows the constitution to be amended on a regular basis, key reforms can take place without due consideration. In addition, a case could be made that the Constitution is due some ‘tidying up’ or housekeeping reforms (for example, around section 48, which guarantees the franchise for women, a legacy of the suffragette struggle to ensure constitutional protections for women). The last time a Constitution Convention was held in South Australia was in 2003, following the unexpected win of the Rann Labor government. The proposed reforms that came out of this occasion, including greater use of Citizen Initiated Referenda, failed – in part, because there was not significant ‘widespread desire’ for constitutional change (Bastoni, 2007).

First Nations peoples

Unlike the Australian federal constitution, the South Australian Constitution recognises its First Nations peoples (Part 1), and explicitly notes that the establishment of South Australia ‘occurred without proper and effective recognition, consultation or authorisation of Aboriginal Peoples of South Australia’. An Apology was delivered on 28 May 1997 to the First Nations peoples, which acknowledged ‘past injustice and dispossession’. However, this section of the *Constitution Act* does not have legal force. In some respects, South Australia has been a state that has taken a lead in securing Aboriginal rights. For example, in 1966 the South Australian government was the first in the country to introduce path-breaking land rights legislation for First Nations peoples (MOAD, no date). In 2023, South Australia was the first state government to constitutionally enshrine a Voice to Parliament.

A wide range of public institutions and activities have sought (and still seek) to address Aboriginal disadvantage and give voice to First Nations people in South Australia. The 2018–2022 Premier Steven Marshall held the portfolio for (South Australia Government, 2023), and was supported by, the South Australian Aboriginal Advisory Council (SAAAC). Efforts were also got under way, for the first time, to enable Aboriginal people to directly elect representatives to SAAAC (InDaily, 2020c). The South Australian government produced an Aboriginal Affairs Action Plan, and in 2021 refreshed its implementation strategy, as part of the relaunched ‘closing the gap’ agenda. Yet, an ongoing area of concern are issues relating to the governance of Aboriginal-controlled bodies. In the face of some criticism, the government approved a Parliamentary Inquiry into the governance issues of Aboriginal-controlled organisations (NITV News, 2021).

Until the 2023 Voice to Parliament, South Australia has lagged some other states and territories. Under the Weatherill Labor government, there was a push to establish a Treaty with South Australia’s Aboriginal People. However, the election of the Liberal government in 2018 ‘paused’

and brought an end to this process ([Guardian, 2018](#)). In other areas, South Australia has made little progress, and counted only one among Australia's Indigenous parliamentarians ([Gobbett, 2017](#)) – Kyam Maher ([Wikipedia, 2023](#)), appointed to fill a casual vacancy in the Legislative Council in 2012, making South Australia the last state and territory in the country to select an Indigenous MP. Maher became Leader of the Government in the LC and Attorney-General following the March 2022 election.

Human rights

The protection of civic rights and key freedoms are key defining characteristics of a strong liberal democracy. Traditionally, in Westminster-inspired political systems, rights protections have been within the prerogative of Parliament rather than constitutionally based, with legislation introduced to protect citizens from discrimination on the grounds of sex, race and ethnicity. Australia remains one of the few advanced industrial nations without a codified Bill of Rights or Human Rights Charter at the national level. In recent times, there has been a push for state governments to introduce human rights charters ([Staub, 2019](#)), and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Victoria and Queensland have adopted various human rights charters. In South Australia, an attempt to introduce a bill of rights on similar lines was made in a 2004 private members bill, but this failed, and civil rights advocates would argue that South Australia lags in this respect.

Consultation and deliberative democracy

Much modern democratic theory has emphasised the importance of consultation and deliberation as valued components of democratic decision-making. Since the Rann era (2002–2011), there has been a dedicated focus on improving consultation, and the South Australia government's 'YourSay' website has been a key portal for citizen input ([South Australia, 2023](#)). In recent years, there has also been a strong focus on 'deliberative' democracy. The main ideas here have been that voters should have more influence between elections, and that the quality of government decisions can be enhanced by better deliberation, or discussion. Labor Premier Jay Weatherill was a noted fan of this movement, and under his government instigated a range of 'new' deliberative techniques, including citizens' juries in 2015 ([South Australia Government, 2015](#)). The effect of this was mixed, with criticism particularly directed at the process relating to a citizen jury on the nuclear fuel cycle ([Donaldson, 2016](#)). Yet, it showed a rare willingness to enhance South Australia's core democratic institutions. The Marshall government elected in 2018 showed little to no enthusiasm for these kinds of 'new' deliberative and democratic techniques, and the post-2022 Labor government has yet to signal much change.

The executive and Parliament

The executive branch of the South Australian government features familiar Westminster-style institutions. In formal constitutional terms, the executive branch is headed by the State Governor, representing the Crown, and executive power is technically exercised by an Executive Council over which the Governor presides. However, as is true nationally (see [Chapter 1](#)) and in other Australian jurisdictions this formal constitutional description is misleading and

anachronistic. The political and administrative control of the South Australian executive branch has lain in the hands of the premier and the ministers who comprise the state Cabinet (even though the Cabinet is not mentioned in South Australia's *Constitution Act*). The Cabinet members have generally been drawn from the elected parliamentary members of the party or coalition that controls the House of Assembly. However several times over the past twenty years Labor Cabinets have also included Independent members, either to support a minority Labor government (2002–2006) or later simply to bolster Labor's majority. These Independent members of Cabinet have been conceded the in-principle capacity to vote against the government (of which they have formally become a member) in the House of Assembly, a practice in serious tension with Westminster-derived norms of responsible government. Cabinet can exercise a range of executive powers. These include prerogative powers arising from its embodiment of the authority of 'the Crown' as well as statutory powers arising from authority explicitly delegated or entrusted to the executive through past legislation (Selway, 1997, p.104). This all adds up to a considerable scope for the exercise of executive decision-making. The position of premier has always been especially significant and sits at the apex of executive power.

The primary mechanism for executive accountability is through the state Parliament, and ongoing concerns have remained about the extent to which such potentially dominant executive power can be held to proper account through parliamentary scrutiny. Yet, some political factors have provided a level of constraint and democratic accountability. Parliament can constrain the operations of the executive branch in some enduring ways. The maximum size of the Cabinet is not in the gift of the premier but is explicitly limited to 15 members by section 65(1) of the *Constitution Act*, which is essentially a piece of legislation passed by, and subject to amendment by, the Parliament. Increasing from the previous size of 13 required both houses of the state Parliament to approve the necessary amendment in December 1997. However, as in other Westminster systems, unwritten conventions of collective and individual ministerial responsibility have remained vital. The doctrine of collective ministerial responsibility for government actions (and associated ministerial solidarity in public) has worked reasonably well in South Australia.

However, greater concerns have focused on the effectiveness of the doctrine of individual ministerial responsibility for matters within their departmental brief. In the traditional conception each minister ought to be considered responsible not only for the appropriateness and integrity of their own individual actions but also for any mistakes or maladministration made by the departments and agencies for which they are responsible. In the case of serious mistakes, ministers were expected to resign from Cabinet. This aspect of the doctrine has undoubtedly weakened over recent decades. For example, the ministers with responsibility for child protection in successive recent South Australian governments have sadly had to deal with well-documented cases of child neglect or abuse (for example, ABC, 2022), to which serious administrative errors or oversights made in their periods of office have arguably contributed. None of these ministers resigned.

On the other hand, the expectation has remained strong that ministers should act with integrity as individuals, as embodied in a Ministerial Code of Conduct under which 'Ministers are expected to behave according to the highest standards of constitutional and personal conduct in the performance of their duties' (South Australia Government, 2021). And resignations from the South Australia Cabinet on matters relating to personal integrity are not uncommon. Three ministers resigned from the Marshall Cabinet in July 2020 over matters relating to their entitlement to accommodation allowances payable to non-metropolitan MPs (Slessor, 2020).

The collective and individual dimensions of ministerial responsibility come together to afford some protection to ministers when implementing Cabinet-endorsed decisions. Premier Stephen Marshall was particularly mindful of this important principle. After the Murray Darling Basin Royal Commission report in early 2019 made critical remarks about actions taken by his Minister for the Environment, Marshall was quick to defend the minister: ‘David Speirs [had] the support of Cabinet. ... It was a position supported by Cabinet and it was the right decision’ (Siebert, 2019). Later he remarked: ‘We don’t leave ministers hung out to dry. If there are issues, we work on how to collectively solve the problem’ (Richardson, 2019).

Ultimately, the continuation of a government in office depends on the continuing support of that government by a majority of members of the House of Assembly. A vote of no confidence by a House majority would mean that the government would need to resign. This can be an important constraint on the work of the premier and ministers. While usually the premier and ministers can count on the support of other parliamentary members of their own political party, this cannot be taken for granted. For example, the Marshall government lost its majority in the House of Assembly as a result of various events where several members left the Liberal Party and moved to the crossbenches. Even though these crossbench members could probably have been relied upon to support the Marshall government on any confidence vote, they were also in a position to demand policy concessions or otherwise constrain governmental decision-making. For example, in March 2021, the crossbenchers with the support of the Labor opposition were able to win a House of Assembly vote setting up a parliamentary inquiry into the land access granted to mining companies for mining and exploration (Harmsen, 2021). South Australia has become accustomed to periods in which the government has not enjoyed a party majority in the House of Assembly (notably the Rann Labor government from 2002–2006). In all these cases, the scope of Cabinet decision-making was being constrained by the balance of power within the House of Assembly. Irrespective of their House of Assembly support, it has also been common for South Australian governments to not control a majority in the Legislative Council (see earlier).

The Ombudsman and the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption

In South Australia’s parliamentary democracy, there are two other lesser but still key sources of executive accountability – the Ombudsman and the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption (ICAC). The State Ombudsman is an independent agency established to investigate complaints about administrative decisions of the South Australian government departments and authorities (Ombudsman SA, 2021). During 2021–22, the office managed more than 5,000 complaints (OmbudsmanSA, 2022, p.10).

Problems of corruption have historically tended to be more severe at the state government level than federally. In South Australia, the office of the ICAC and the Office of Public Integrity (OPI) were established in September 2013. Their motivating purpose was to take a proactive role in building integrity and tackling corruption and maladministration. The OPI supports the Commissioner by receiving and processing complaints or allegations for investigation by the Commissioner. The *ICAC Act 2012* mandated that public officials must refer to ICAC any suspected cases falling within ICAC’s purview. During the 2019–2020 financial year, ICAC initiated 25 new corruption investigations, referred a further 44 matters to the SA Police, and referred six cases to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ICAC and OPI, 2020, p.6).

In principle, ICAC and OPI should be important bodies in ensuring integrity in government and politics and, in this way, contributing to democratic accountability. The work of the ICAC has

led to some prominent prosecutions of not only senior public servants but also several MPs. However, the role of ICAC in South Australia has been controversial. In late 2021, in a rare display of unanimity among all members of the SA Parliament in both Houses of Parliament, the scope of the ICAC's role was significantly reduced. Its critics argued that the powers entrusted to the ICAC were too broad ranging, leading it to focus on relatively unimportant matters better left to the normal justice system. Several high-profile prosecutions collapsed in court due to insufficient evidence. ICAC's powers were said to be too wide-ranging. Some of its investigations had caused significant reputational damage and did not afford individuals due procedural fairness ([Fewster and Henson, 2021](#)). Consequently, the amendments to the *ICAC Act 2012* unanimously approved by Parliament in September 2021 limited ICAC's jurisdiction to matters of corruption. Matters of maladministration and misconduct in public office were henceforth confined entirely to the State Ombudsman.

This stripping away of some ICAC powers was controversial, with the serving ICAC Commissioner arguing that it put 'politicians out of reach' ([Vanstone, 2021](#)). She pointed out that, because there was no 'code of conduct' applicable to MPs, politicians appeared to have removed themselves from the Ombudsman's jurisdiction ([Lee, 2021](#)). The development of a code of conduct for MPs had been under active consideration by a parliamentary committee since the early 2000s, although a draft was published in October 2021 ([Lee, 2021](#)).

Commonwealth-State relations

Commonwealth-State relations also raise interesting questions about democratic accountability. Much of the intergovernmental negotiation happens within the realms of executive government through meetings of ministers and/or public officials, rather than through more transparent parliamentary processes. Intergovernmental agreements can be reached by the executive branch without requiring parliamentary debate or parliamentary assent to legislation. Relatively low-population states like South Australia arguably benefit disproportionately (relative to their population) from intergovernmental transfers and relations. In intergovernmental forums, each state more-or-less counts equally, and in this way South Australia gets a strong say in the adoption of new regulatory regimes, policy reforms or funding arrangements. South Australia can also benefit from national governments seeking to shore up their local electoral popularity in federal seats that matter to them, a common explanation for why so much national defence spending (such as submarine construction and maintenance) has been directed to Adelaide.

Ministers involved in intergovernmental meetings or inquiries that involve 'significant policy or program issues, or issues that have a cross portfolio impact' are expected to inform the state Cabinet via a note or submission seeking Cabinet approval ([DPC, 2021](#)). This mechanism was intended to ensure that a coherent SA whole-of-government position was maintained with Cabinet authorisation, without which norms of responsible government – and, in turn, democratic accountability – might be weakened. South Australian premiers have also been long accustomed to meeting with the federal PM and other state premiers in occasional meetings to discuss matters of mutual concern, typically on issues where a coordinated national approach is sought. In a notable development during the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Cabinet was established in March 2021 and consolidated in 2022 (see [Chapters 13](#) and [16](#)), with the SA premier as an automatic member. It has become a permanent feature of Australian governance, and yet has no clear accountability relationship to any particular representative or legislative body, although the SA premier reports briefly on its deliberations to Parliament (with five meetings in 2023).

Conclusion

South Australia has clearly operated as a stable and largely effective democratic state, without major problems and using processes to ensure a good deal of integrity. Recent global trends have arguably seen democracy in retreat across the globe (see [Chapter 28](#)), although this claim of an overall ‘democratic backsliding’ trend is disputed by other political scientists (for example, [Little and Meng, 2023](#)). The South Australian political system has not experienced any broader challenges associated with democratic backsliding or political over-polarisation, even during the intensified debates and strong government interventions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Political partisanship has remained relatively constrained. The political succession of premiers and governments occurred in uncontroversial ways in 2018 and 2022. And corruption and maladministration problems in the public service have broadly been controlled, if not eliminated. However, there is still clear scope to improve democratic practice, especially in the realm of greater government accountability, protecting civic and human rights, regulating the conduct of elected politicians themselves, diversifying political representation, and extending consultation and deliberation processes.

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