



Trust, Parties and Leaders: Findings from the 1987-2016 Australian Election Study

Senate Occasional Lecture 25 August 2017

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Context

- Declining trust in politics around the democratic world
- Rising electoral support for populist parties and leaders
- Australia not immune from this worldwide phenomenon
- Important to monitor public opinion

Outline

- Views of democracy: satisfaction, trust
- The role of political parties
- Perceptions of political leaders
- How can the public be re-engaged?

Australian Election Study, 1987-2016

- 2016 survey 12th in the series, but also comparisons with 1960s
- National, post-election surveys asking \approx 250 questions about the campaign, vote and voting history, leaders, issues, general attitudes and social background
- 2016 survey sampled 2,818 respondents. Planned 2016-19 panel survey
- Results and methodology available from <http://australianelectionstudy.org>

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The Australian Election Study



The Australian Election Studies aim to provide a long-term perspective on stability and change in the political attitudes and behaviour of the Australian electorate. The surveys investigate the changing social and attitudinal bases of Australian politics as the society changes. In addition to these long-term goals, the AES examines the political issues and personalities in each specific election and evaluates their importance in shaping the election result.

[Learn More](#)

[Download 2016 Report](#)

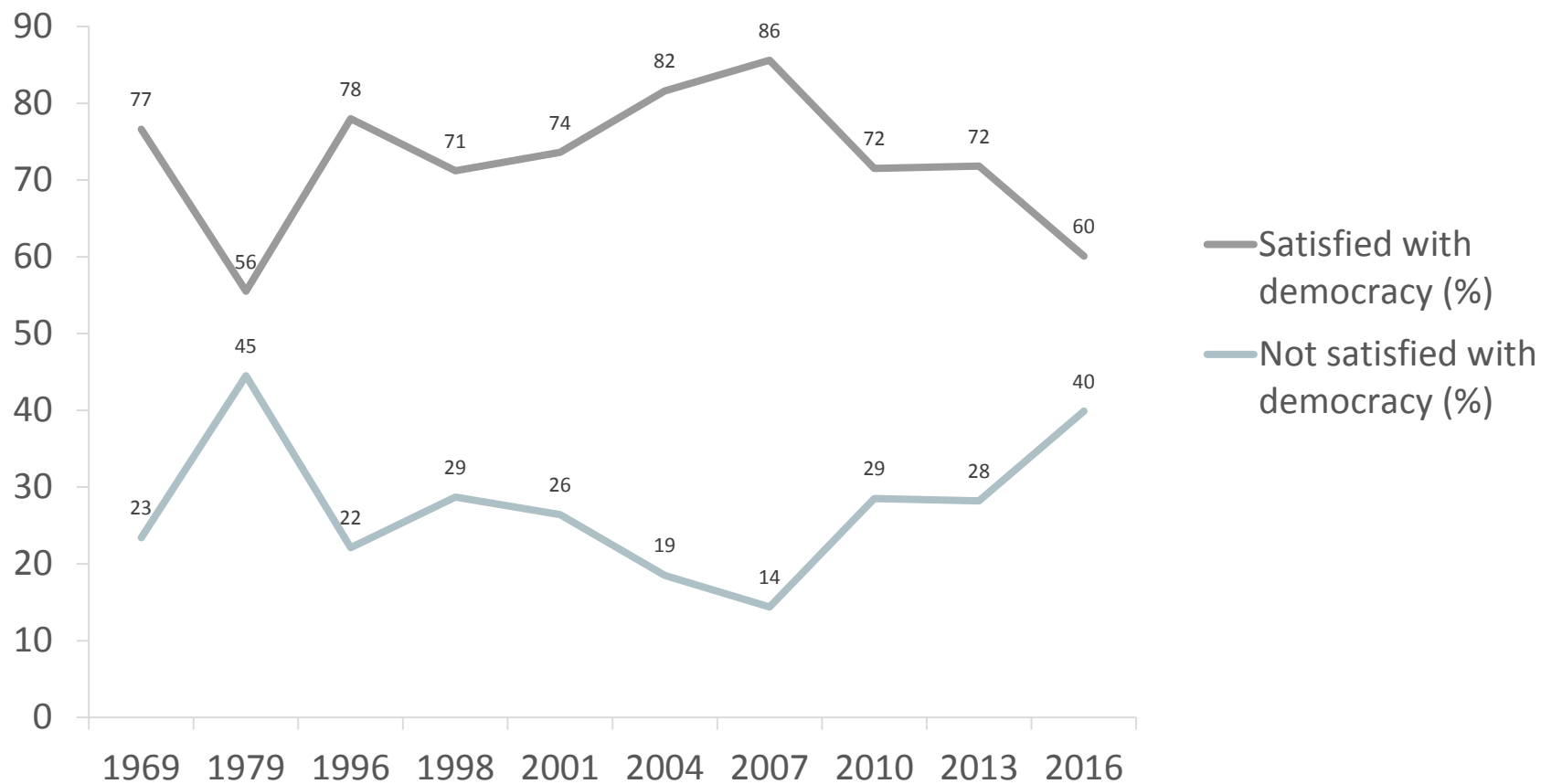
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1. Views of Democracy: Support for Democracy

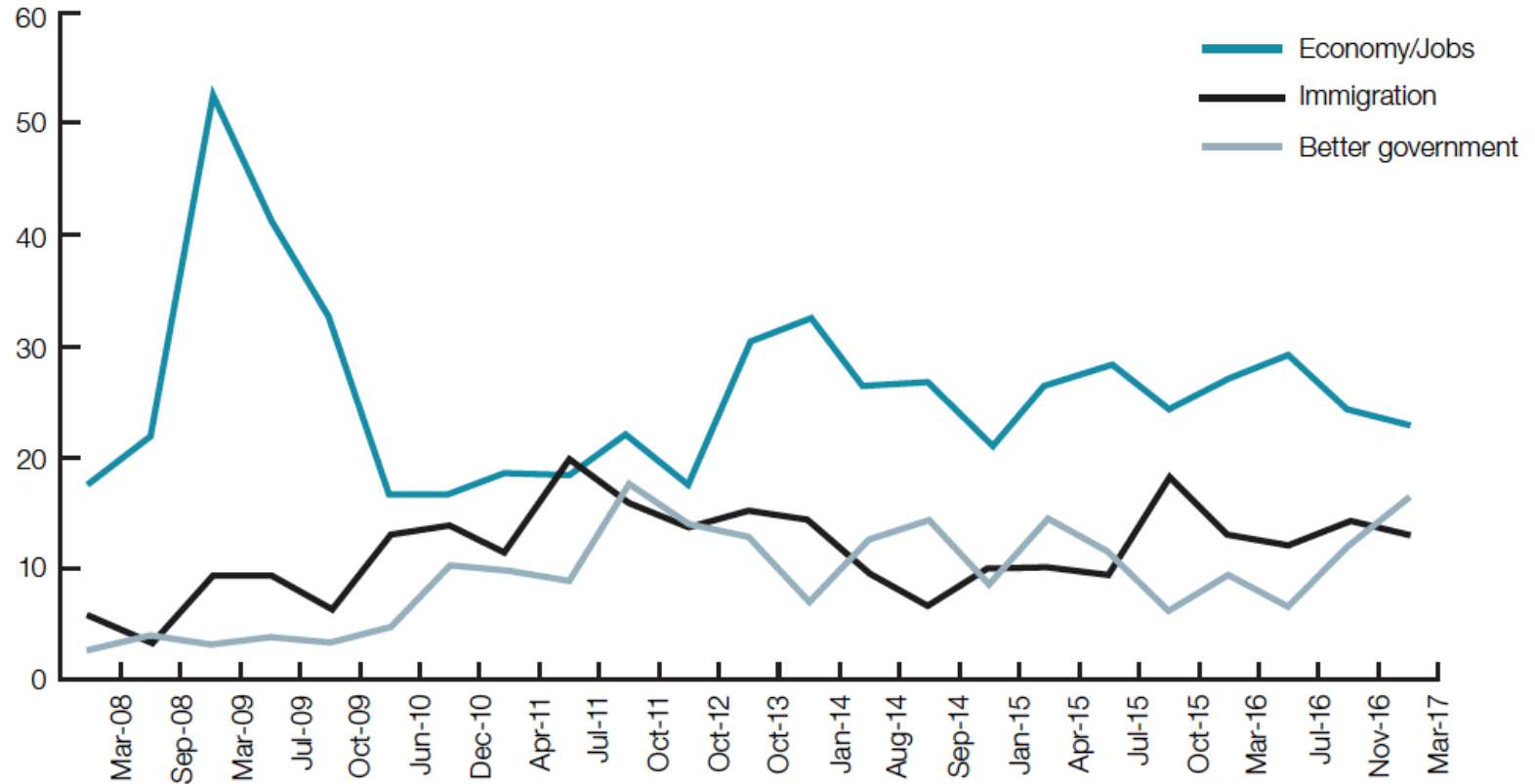
On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?

- At its lowest level since just after the 1975 Dismissal
- Just 60 percent in 2016 ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ satisfied with democracy in 2016, compared to 86 percent in 2007

Satisfaction with Democracy



“What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?”



Source: ANUpoll on Attitudes to Housing Affordability, March 2017

Satisfaction with democracy, international comparisons

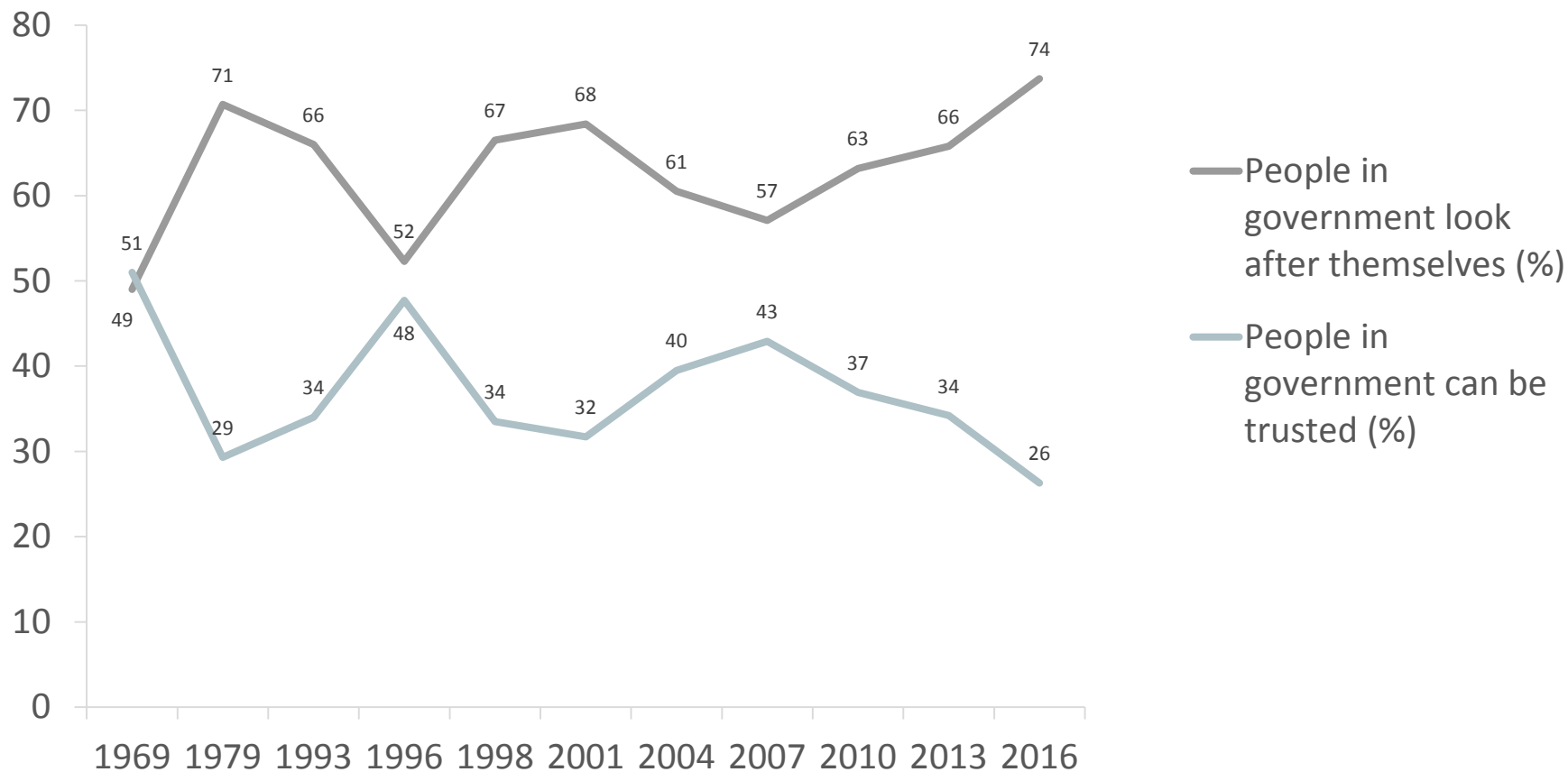
1. Norway	93	8. Canada	65	15. Korea	45
2. Switzerland	84	9. France	65	16. Portugal	40
3. United States	80	10. Germany	64	17. Czech Republic	35
4. Sweden	80	11. <i>Australia</i>	60	18. Turkey	33
5. Japan	74	12. Poland	55	19. Mexico	29
6. New Zealand	73	13. Ireland	54	20. Slovenia	16
7. Austria	67	14. Israel	54	21. Greece	6

Trust in Politicians

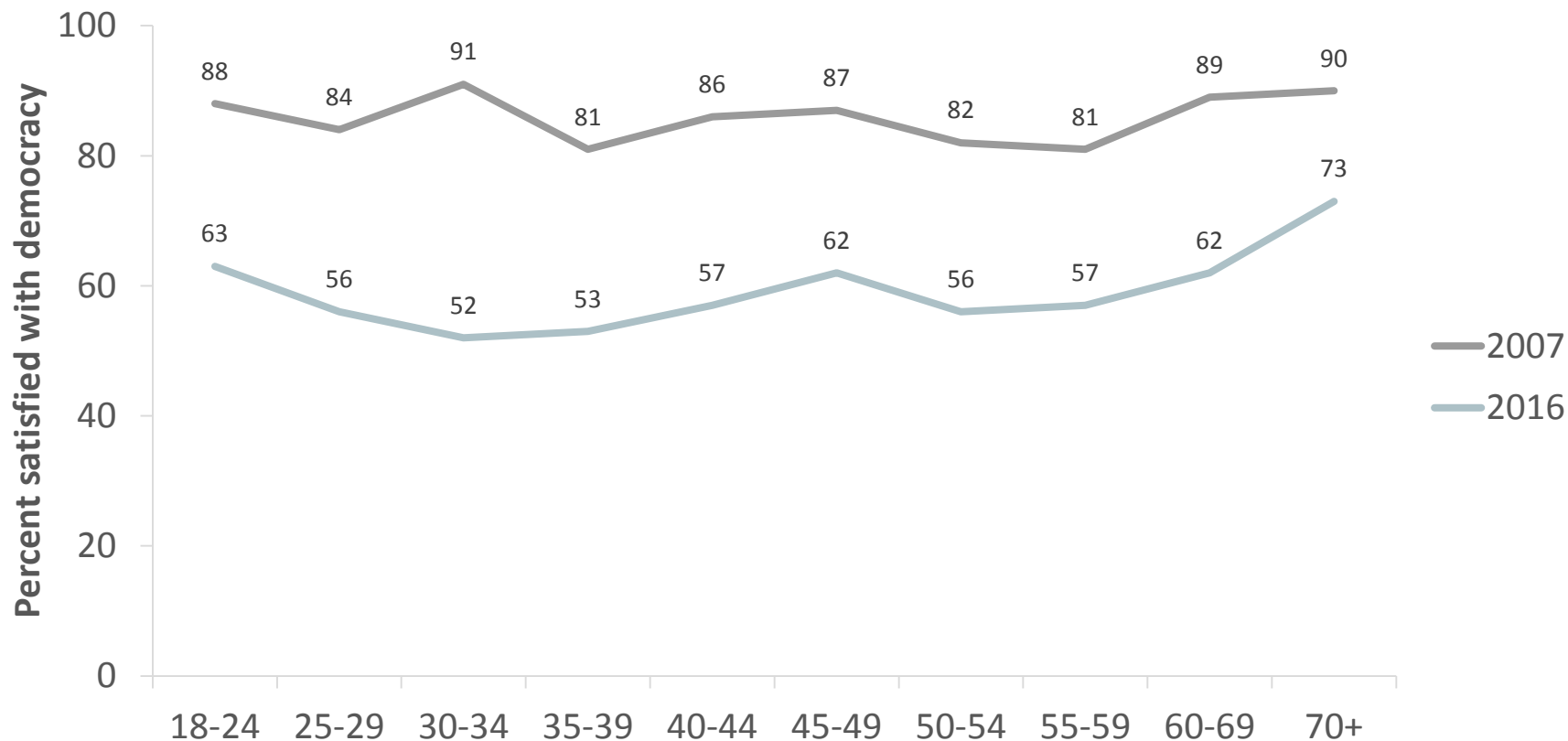
In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time?

- At its lowest level since the question first asked in 1969
- Almost three quarters in 2016 believed that ‘people in government look after themselves’

Trust in Politicians



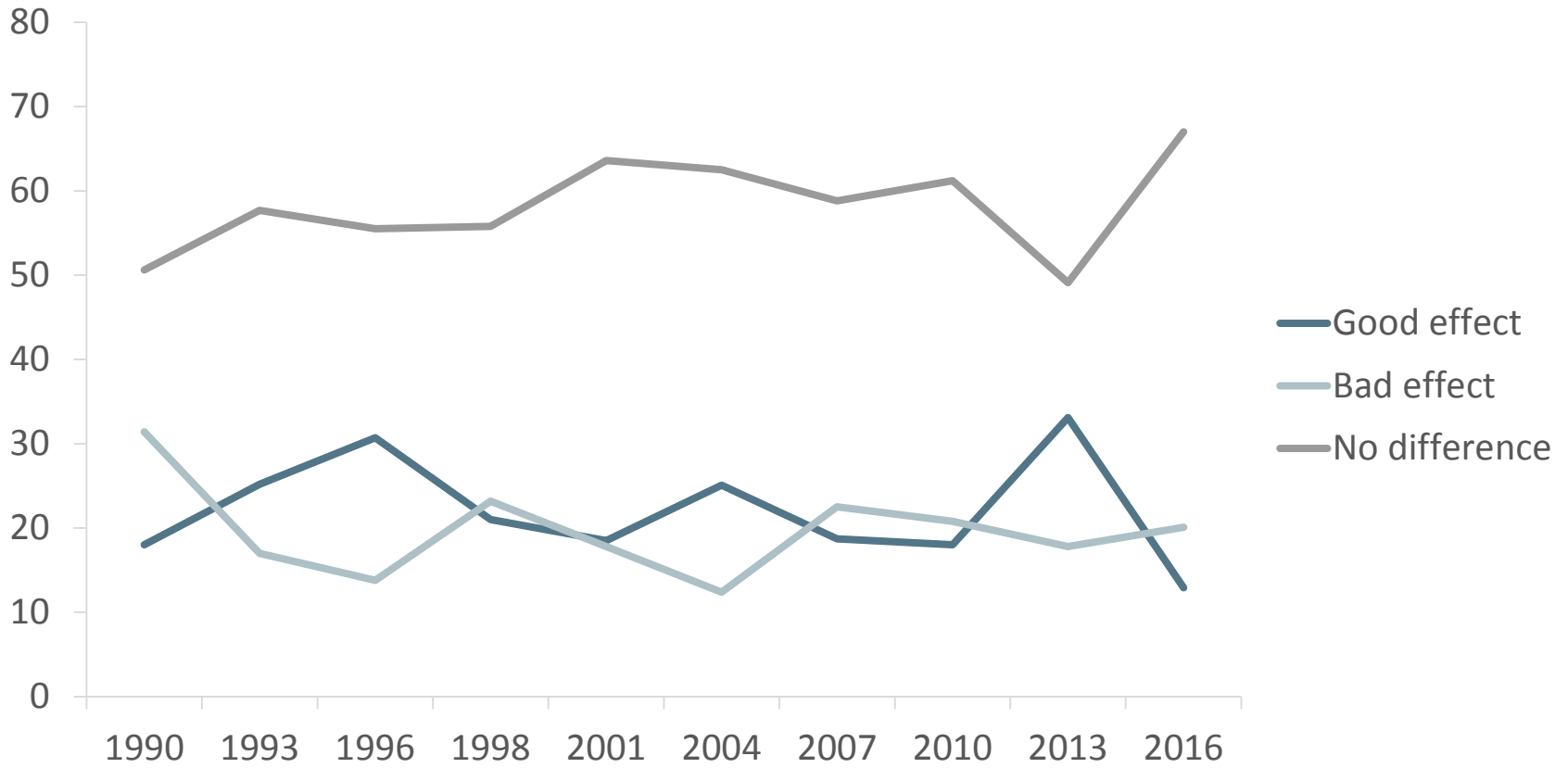
Age and Satisfaction with Democracy, 2007 and 2016



Explaining the Decline in Trust

- Weak economic performance
 - economic insecurity
 - belief government cannot improve the economy
- The rise of the career politician
 - inability to keep promises
 - overly partisan nature of debate
 - voters' expectations about government
- Turnover of political leaders since 2007
- Weaker partisanship

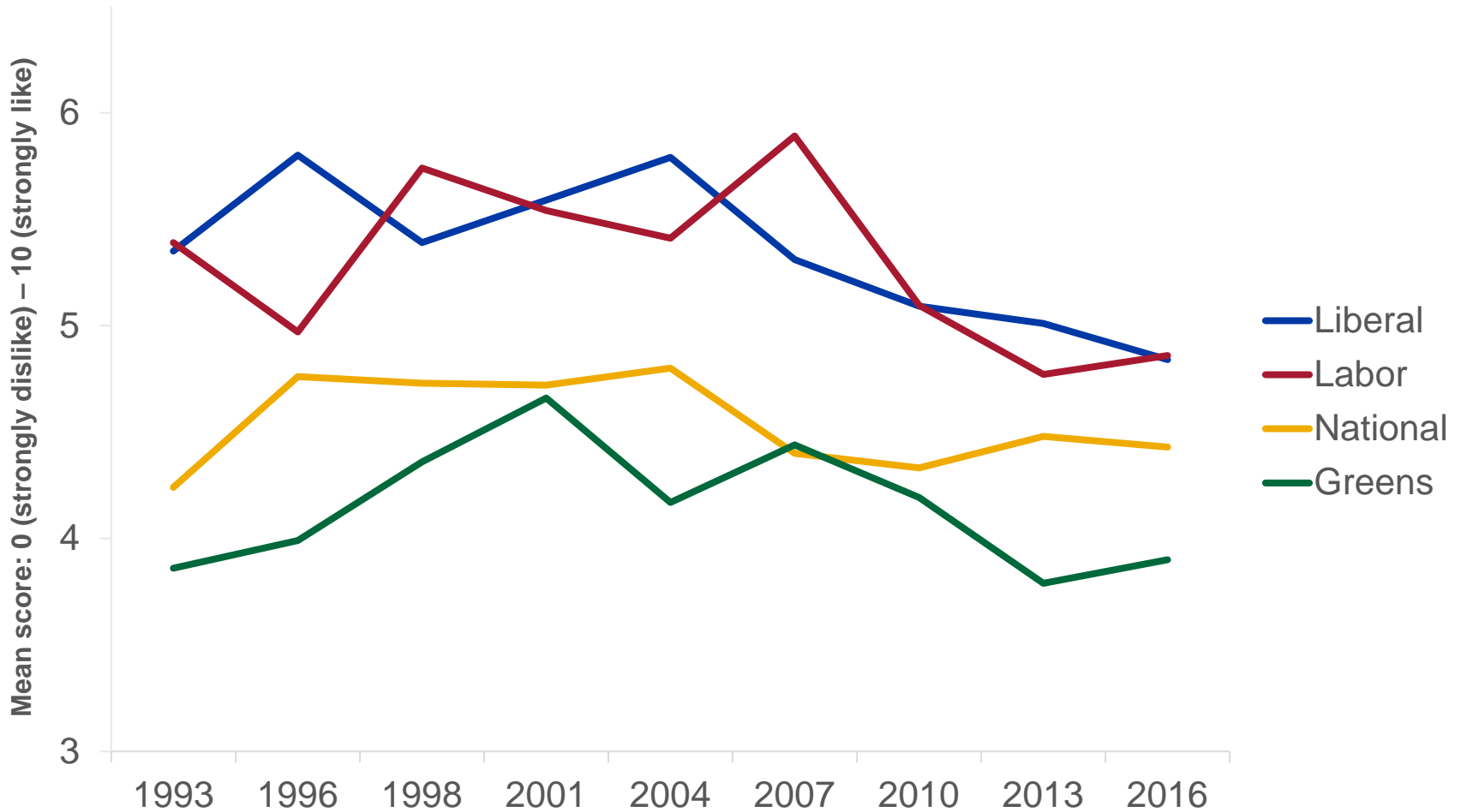
Government's effect on country's economy



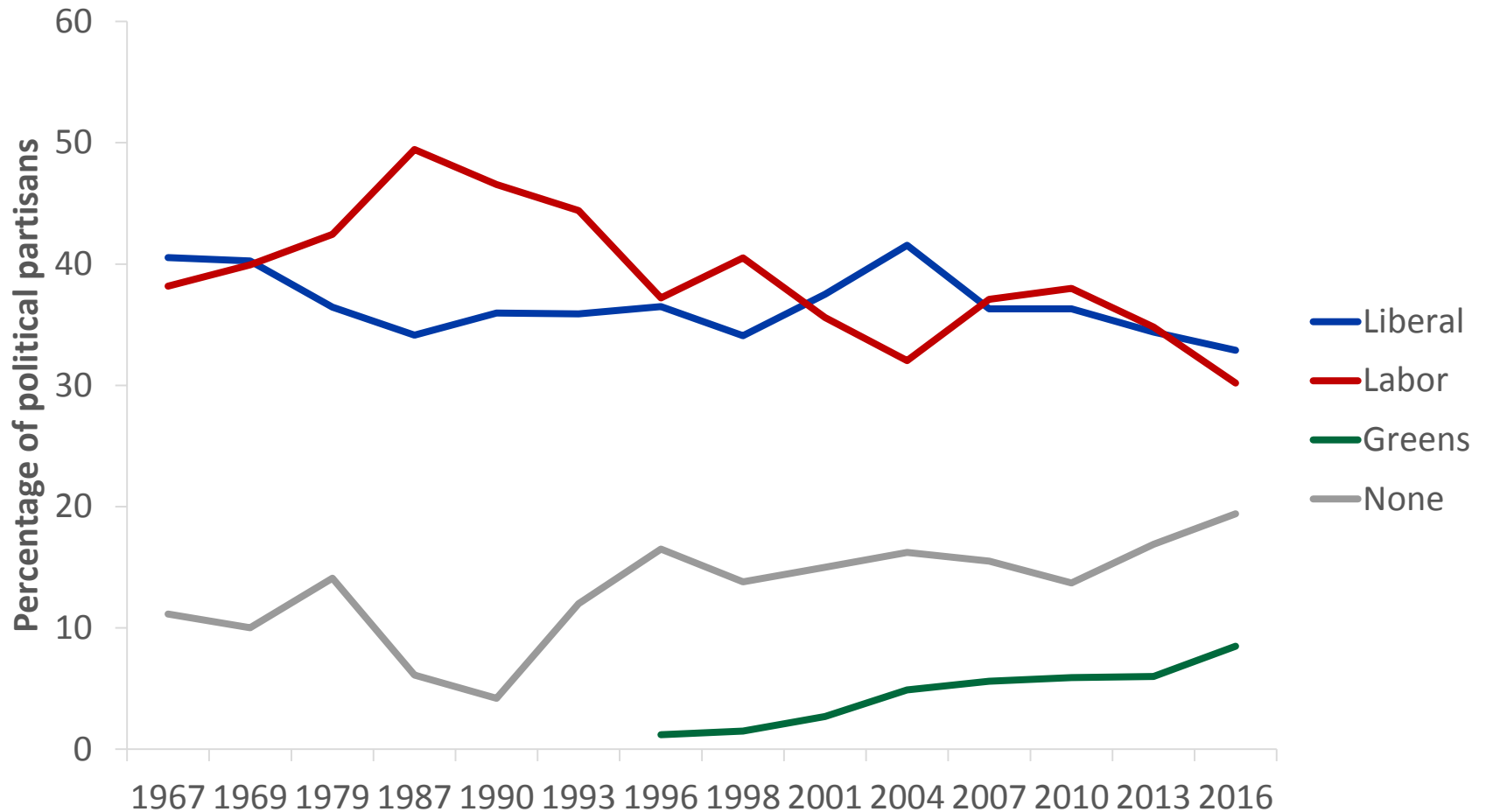
2. Political parties and partisanship

- Partisanship for the major parties at its lowest level since questions were first asked (from the 1960s)
 - Record low in how much voters like the parties
 - Record low Labor (30%) and Liberal (33%) partisans
 - Record low of 34% using ‘How to Vote’ cards
 - Record low of 40% who always vote for the same party

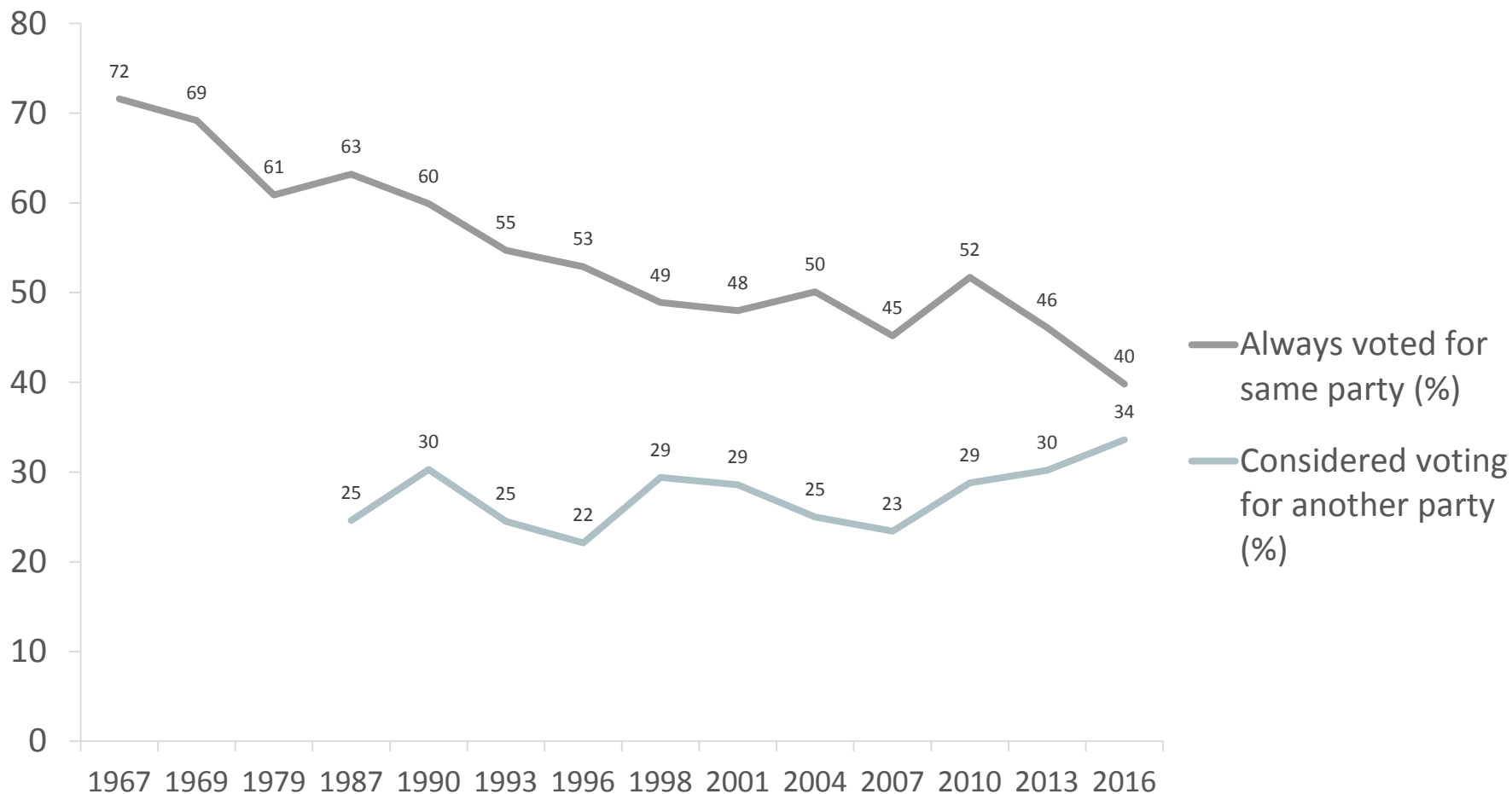
Feelings about political parties



Direction of political partisanship



The extent of voting volatility

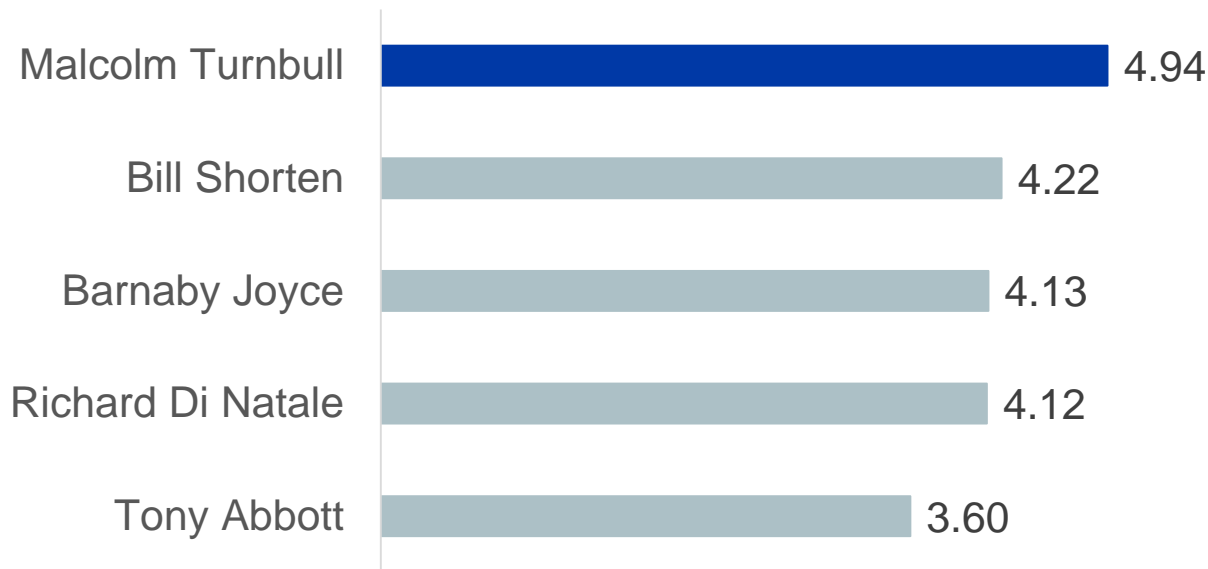


Understanding changes in partisanship

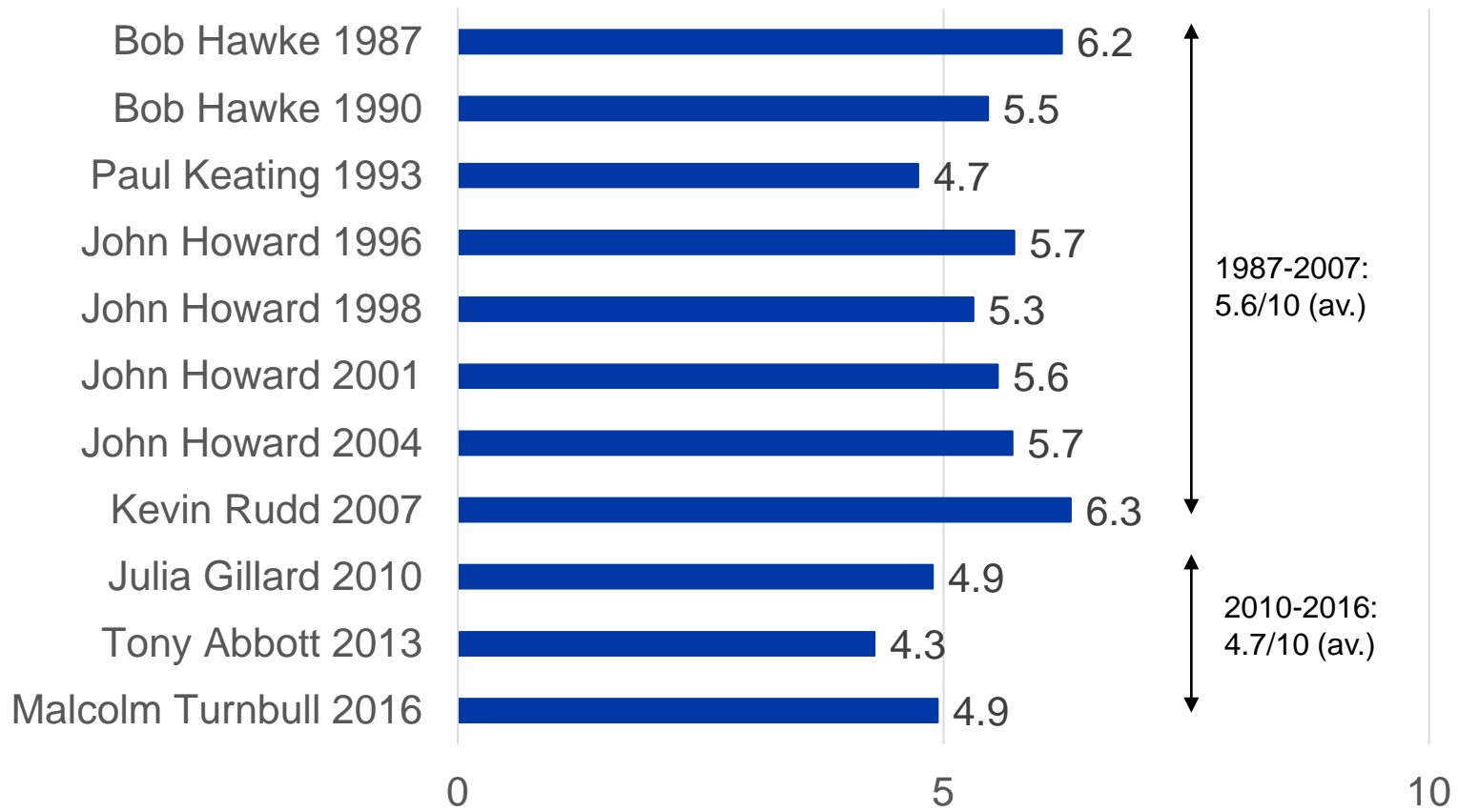
- Generational change:
 - Younger people less likely to enrol to vote or join parties
 - More engaged in other types of political activity e.g. protest, online activism
- Rising support for minor parties
 - 9% of Australians identify with the Greens
- Negative perceptions of the parties
 - Party infighting
 - Seen as governing for a ‘few big interests’ (56%), rather than ‘all the people’ (12%)

3. The Political Leaders: Leader Evaluations 2016

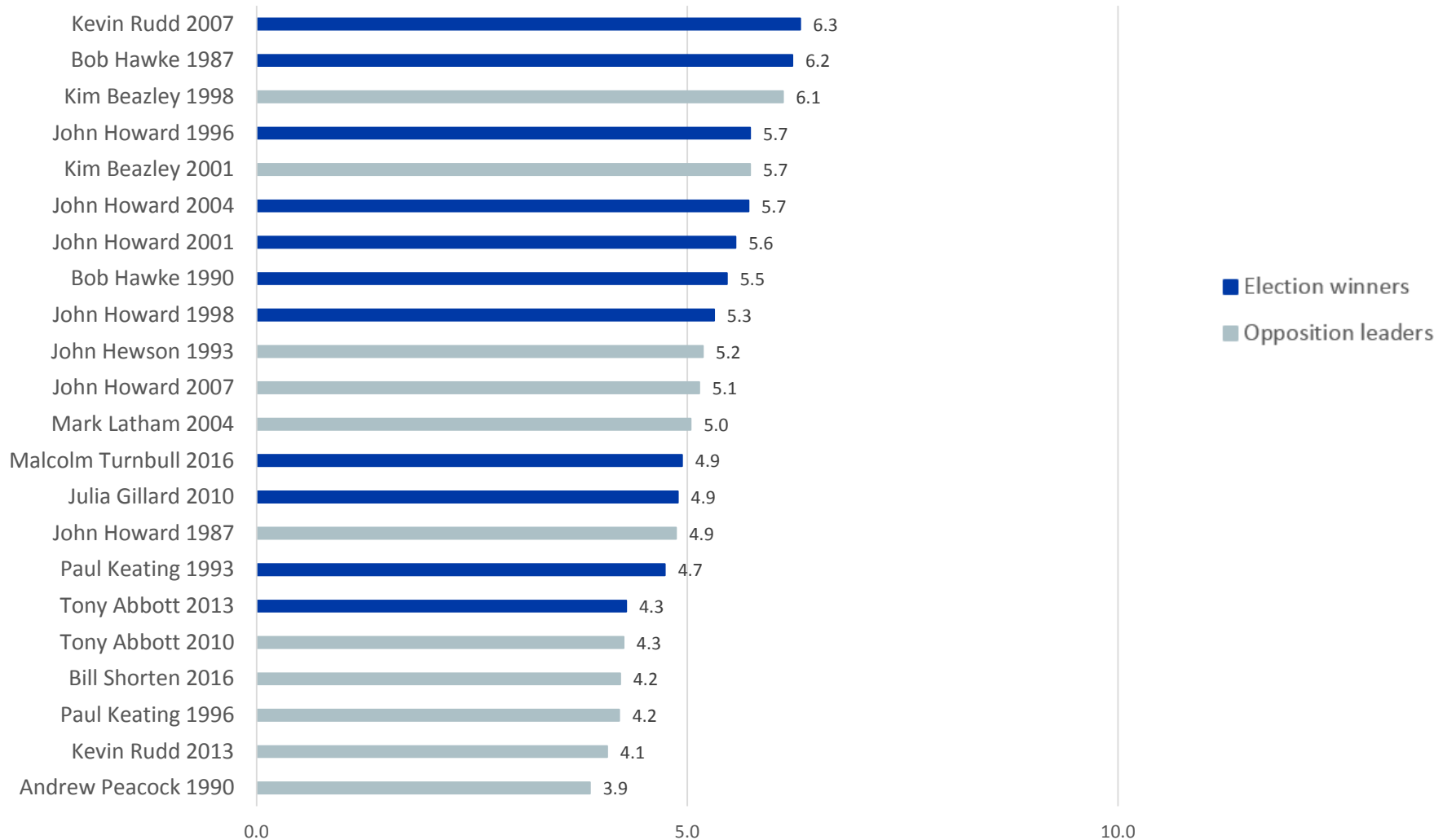
- Using a scale from 0 to 10, please show how much you like or dislike the party leaders. If you don't know much about them, you should give them a rating of 5. How do you feel about:*



Election winner evaluations 1987 – 2016



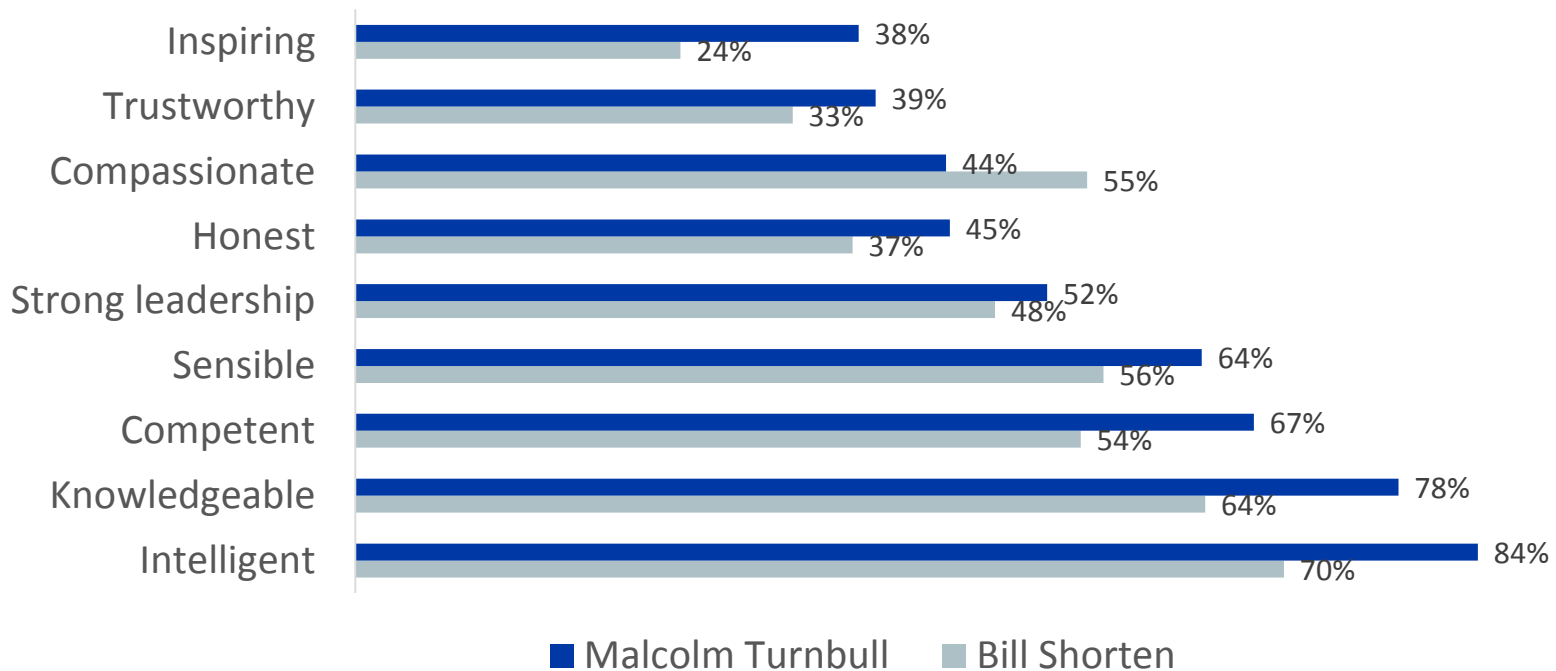
Leader evaluations 1987 – 2016



Leader characteristics 2016

Thinking first about..., in your opinion how well does each of these describe him—extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all?

(Percentages combine 'extremely well' and 'quite well')



Leader characteristics, 1990s-2016

- Current party leaders receive some of the lowest evaluations to date
- Poor evaluations of trustworthiness, honesty and strong leadership.

	Honest
Howard 1996	31.1
Howard 1998	23.4
Howard 2001	21.5
Rudd 2007	20.1
Beazley 1998	18.0
Beazley 2001	17.8
Howard 2007	15.1
Howard 2004	14.5
Abbott 2013	12.5
Latham 2004	9.7
Gillard 2010	9.0
Abbott 2010	8.7
Turnbull 2016	7.8
Rudd 2013	6.7
Keating 1996	6.5
Shorten 2016	5.2

Percent describes leader 'extremely well'

Leadership changes, 2010-2015

- *Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Liberal Party handled the leadership change in September of last year, when Malcolm Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott?*

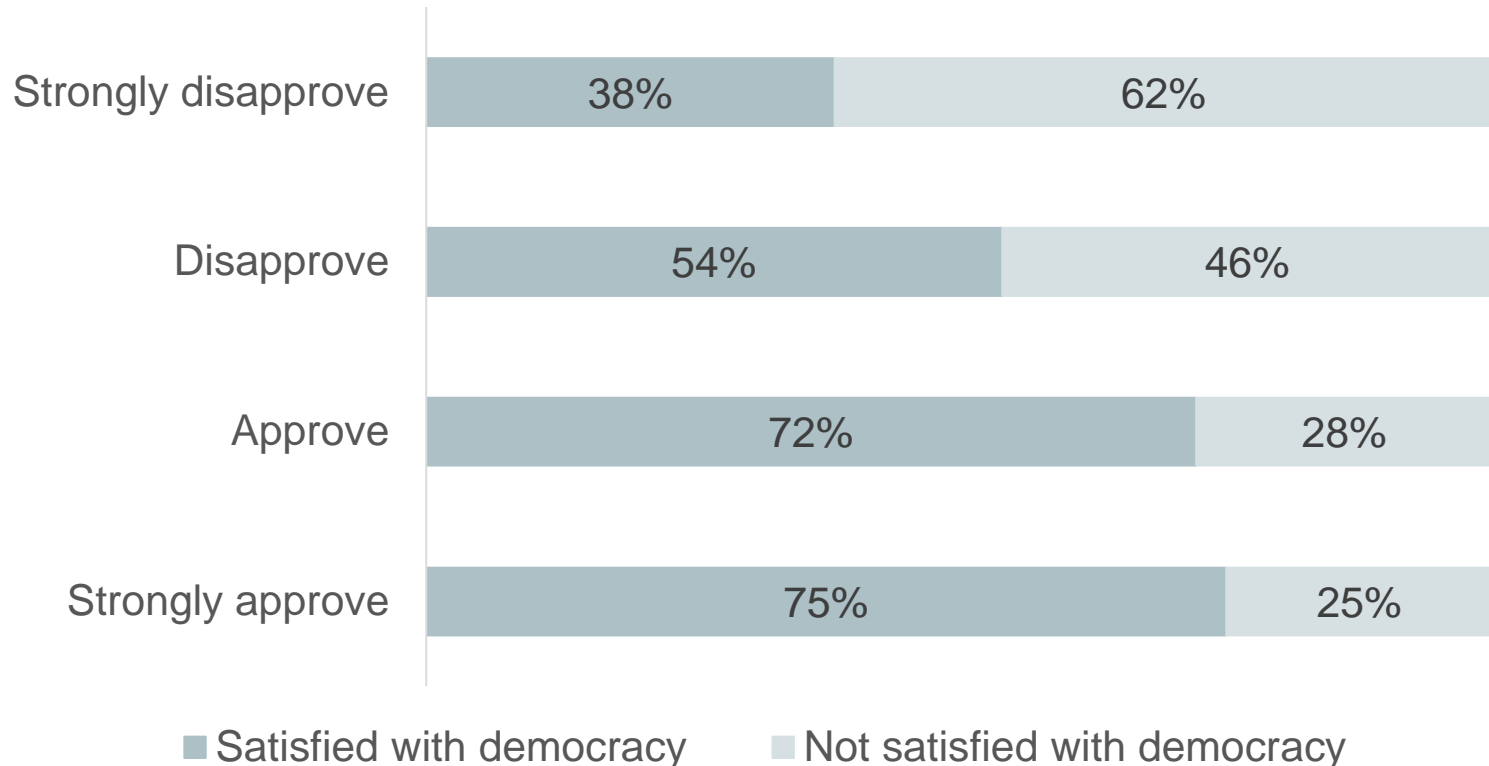
	2010 Gillard replaced Rudd	2013 Rudd replaced Gillard	2015 Turnbull replaced Abbott
Strongly approve (%)	4	12	13
Approve (%)	21	30	35
Disapprove (%)	37	25	33
Strongly disapprove (%)	37	34	18
Total (%)	100	100	100
(N)	(2046)	(1075)	(2658)

Understanding views of leadership changes

- *Disapproval* of the changes of Prime-Minister:
 - Gillard replaced Rudd (2010, 74%)
 - Rudd replaced Gillard (2013, 59%)
 - Turnbull replaced Abbott (2015, 51%)
- Leader popularity mattered. Rudd was a popular Prime-Minister, whereas a majority of voters preferred Turnbull to Abbott.
- Gender differences:
 - Women were more disapproving of the changes ($\approx +5\%$).
 - Particularly when Rudd replaced Gillard in 2013 ($\approx +10\%$).

Leadership change and democratic satisfaction

Approval of Malcolm Turnbull replacing Tony Abbott as PM
(2015)



Overview

- Popularity of both major parties at record lows
- Voters more likely to consider alternatives
- When both main party leaders are unpopular it takes less to win an election
- Dissatisfaction with the parties, leaders and frequent leadership changes feeds into lower political trust.

Possible Solutions to Re-engage the Public...

- Four year parliamentary terms
- Senate reform
- Term limits for elected politicians
- Recall elections
- Introduction of voluntary voting
- Reform of parliamentary procedures (eg, independent speaker, limit prime minister's question time)