

# IO

## CHANGING ORIENTATIONS TOWARD AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY

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The Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) addressed a single broad issue—the nation's political system. How did participation in this unique event influence participants' orientations toward that system?

We begin by describing our approach to measuring attitude change— involving an extended version of Q methodology. We then identify the basic orientations that Australians have toward politics and examine how those changed over the course of the ACP. We find that participants' orientations changed significantly, most notably through increased contentment with Australia's liberal democracy. This finding is perhaps a bit surprising in the context of a process that subjected aspects of Australia's political system to critical scrutiny. We consider the factors that might have accounted for this shift, as well as their implications.

### Q Methodology

We measure and describe participants' orientations to Australia's political system using one of the most well-developed systematic approaches to the study of human subjectivity, Q methodology. This method is appropriate because it enables fine-grained measurement of participants' subjective beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Q methodology begins by drawing a sample of statements relevant to the issue or phenomenon under study to implement as a "Q sort." A Q sort represents an individual's reaction to a set of statements about a particular

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domain—in this case, Australian democracy; it is therefore a model of the *entirety* of an individual's orientation to that domain. We gathered statements from actual dialogue using a wide range of sources—including old and new media, World Cafés conducted by the newDemocracy Foundation in the lead up to the Citizens' Parliament, and a report from the 2020 Summit (a gathering run by the Australian government in 2008; see chapter 2).

We drew a sample of forty-eight statements from this larger pool to comprise a manageable number for use in the Q sort at the ACP.<sup>2</sup> These items were selected to encompass the broadest possible range of potential orientations toward Australian politics. The set included statements originally used in a prior study of Australian discourses of democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Participants completed the Q sort at four stages during the ACP process. At each stage each participant was asked to order the statements into a set of eleven categories along a scale from “most disagree” to “most agree.” In doing so, participants assigned a score to each statement from  $-5$  to  $+5$ , with the requirement that their ratings approximate a normal distribution (i.e., fewer statements can be placed in the extreme categories).

The first Q sort was done as soon as participants consented to be selected; the second (stage 2) at the regional meetings that were conducted around Australia in the lead up to the main event. The third and fourth Q sorts (stages 3 and 4) were obtained, respectively, immediately before and immediately after the main meeting of the ACP.<sup>4</sup> The number of Q sorts at each stage varies considerably.<sup>5</sup> Forty-eight individuals provided usable Q sorts at all four stages of the research, and it is these individuals whom we examine in this chapter.

#### Four Orientations Toward Politics

Using inverted-factor analysis combining the Q sorts of the forty-eight who completed all four stages, we sought to identify patterns across the individual ACP participants.<sup>6</sup> Each factor represents an ideal type position, how a hypothetical individual whose beliefs perfectly matched the factor in question would sort the forty-eight statements.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 10.1 represents schematically the main characteristics of each of the four factors, which appear as partially overlapping rectangles. Each rectangle contains the main elements of its corresponding factor as represented by selected Q-sort statements. Statements that fall within two or more factors appear in the areas of overlap.