

Annual Report 2020 – 2021

Tēnā Koutou Katoa

Building on the work of the New Zealand Social and Civic Policy Institute, Trust Democracy started operating during 2020. It aims to strengthen public discourse, education and research on the state of democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Our first year has been very much a building phase. We have worked hard to reach out to others with similar shared interests in democracy through deliberative forums, collaboration and conversations, and we have explored features of a democratic Aotearoa New Zealand to learn more about our research question: 'What does it take to make democracy work as it should?'

Democracy is not a given, it is a highly contested concept where the contests are often over a narrow set of features such as voting or elections. Prioritising such features limits our thinking about democracy. Two strategic questions have helped expand and structure our thinking to guide and inform practices and criteria essential to democracy.¹

1. *What problems does a political system need to solve if it is to function democratically?*

If a political system empowers inclusion, forms of collective agendas, and wills, and organises collective decision capacity, it will count as democratic.

2. *What are the strengths and weaknesses and ways and means of addressing these problems?*

Political systems that solve democratic problems make use of seven kinds of generic political practices: recognising, resisting, deliberating, representing, voting, joining, and exiting.

Trust Democracy has a focus on deliberative democracy, processes and innovation, particularly as these are important communicative responses to disagreement, preference formation and collective will formation.

Trust Democracy aims to work with, and harness the strengths and interests of, other organisations and individuals who share Trust Democracy's commitment to democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand; one that seeks to pursue the two criteria above. Trust Democracy wants to engage practically and creatively with questions of democracy through networks of others. To improve democratic practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, we intent to work in three areas of practice: Research, Education, and Demonstrating Democracy

The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has also shaken many of the institutions and practices e.g. the economy, globalisation, politics, leadership, ethics, health to name just a few. The pandemic has also cast a light on the ways in which different political systems have managed the crisis and how apparently successful they have been in reducing the health impacts of the virus and opening-up their economies. Those countries of a liberal democratic persuasion have had mixed responses in

¹ Warren, M. E. (2017). A problem-based approach to democratic theory. *The American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 39.

terms of how they combatted the virus. The US and England have been demonstrable failures whilst states such as Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Korea have demonstrated that liberal democracies can perform the key tasks assigned to them competently and with the overwhelming support and participation of their citizens.

Trust Democracy reflected on the Covid situation and how democratic practices could be used to inform new ways of working, understanding a post-Covid economy, the need for time to foster social relations, etc. We need to address these, and other pressing issues collectively. Technocratic/expert solutions or pathways to a newly envisaged future cannot be the way forward. Expertise is necessary, but it cannot be sufficient.

To prepare to work in a new future, we need democratic innovation, and this requires organised collective engagement and agreement to elicit features of a functioning democracy to serve the needs, preferences, desires, and ambitions of society.

Trust Democracy is now in a position to take a prominent role in improving existing democratic systems, and to collaborate with other organisations interested in promoting, encouraging and collaborating to deepen New Zealand's democracy in the years ahead.

Trust Democracy achievements and action in 2020

Establishment

- Inaugural meeting on 4 May 2020 and election of a committee
- 9 Committee meetings
- Developed a Trust Democracy brand including a digital workshop with members
- Administrative and communications infrastructure:
 - The <http://trustdemocracy.nz> website
 - Digital office tools including email, e-newsletter, file management, videoconferencing
 - Bank account, IRD registration

Research

- Maintained our links with the Kettering Foundation, a research organisation based in the USA, and plan to strengthen this relationship during 2021.
- Initiated the Build Back (Better) Democracy research project to find out how everyday people think about the state of New Zealand's democracy and how it could be improved. Research findings will be used to help develop Trust Democracy's strategic focus and to seed further 'discussions' about democracy
 - Nethui 2020 workshop, 12 October 2020
 - Workshop for Trust Democracy members and supporters, 25 November 2020
 - Applied for funding to develop and pilot an issue guide to support small group deliberation, March 2021

Education

- Collaborated with Hui E! Community Aotearoa, ComVoices, Sue Barker Charities Law and the Todd Foundation in the run-up to the 2020 election to organise a webinar featuring the portfolio holders for the community and voluntary sector from across the political parties to try and make sure sector concerns and aspirations after the initial COVID-19 crisis were on their agendas.
- Wrote to all Members of Parliament and to the leaders of our major political parties to draw their attention to the OECD's 2020 report: *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions Catching the Deliberative Wave*. Only a small percentage of these emails were opened and no substantive responses were received.

- Links to relevant local and international events and recent reports, webinars and resources included in e-newsletters

Demonstrating Democracy

- In collaboration with Sue Barker Charities Law, Trust Democracy facilitated the involvement of over 650 people and organisations in the 2019 review of the Charities Act via a survey, the production of sector friendly materials, 23 community engagement meetings with the Department of Internal Affairs and 7 other events organised by other organisations. It appears that this input played a part in the Government's decision to pause the review and reconsider its direction.
- One of 10 civil society organisations to sign an open letter to the Hon. Chris Hipkins, the Minister responsible for NZ's membership of the Open Government Partnership, expressing concerns about the current consultative approach to developing NZ's fourth National Action Plan and requesting a meeting to explore a co-creation approach. The other signatories were the NZ Council for Civil Liberties, Transparency International NZ, Hui E! Community Aotearoa, Environment and Conservation Organisations of NZ, Internet NZ, Amnesty International, Network Waitangi Otautahi, Public Services Association and Child Poverty Action Group.
- Trust Democracy members have been providing expert advice to groups interested in deliberative processes. For example, Simon Wright has been helping Te Reo o Ngā Tāngata - The People Speak with its efforts to convene a citizens assembly on climate.

Disclosures

No conflicts of interest were disclosed by Trust Democracy committee members during 2020-21.

On behalf of the Trust Democracy committee comprising Maureen Gillon, John Pennington, Dave Henderson, Ross Patel, Andrew Ecclestone and Simon Wright.

Ngā mihi, nā



Maureen Gillon (Chair)