

Good Governance for the Public's Health

Policy Position Statement

Key messages: The mechanisms of democracy and standards of governance have a direct impact on public policy making on public health matters.

Democracy and governance mechanisms in Australia are not poor by world standards, but there are important ways in which they can be improved.

Key governance reforms include:

- reforming electoral systems to prevent sectional interest and 'marginal seat'-driven distortion of campaigns, ensuring equal vote influence, and ensuring majority-backed parliaments, and representation of a broader array of interests
- making improvements to parliamentary processes
- measures to control the influence of vested interests
- policies to support democratically active communities.

Such reforms can be expected to improve equity, justice, wellbeing, health and protection of the environment.

Key policy positions: PHAA will collaborate with other organisations to:

1. Promote awareness in the community and among policy makers of the importance of good governance for good health
2. Promote discussion about governance reform in Australia and its relationship with public health goals

Audience: The public, civil society, Federal, State and Territory Governments and policy makers.

Responsibility: PHAA Political Economy of Health Special Interest Group (SIG).

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This policy should be read in conjunction with the existing PHAA policy position statements on *Primary Health Care, Health Equity and Unhealthy Political Influence*.

PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Societies require governance to ensure the good order and stability that underpins social and economic activity that is the basis for prosperity, health and wellbeing. Government is the institution that governs.
2. An important role of government is to balance the competing interests and powers within society to ensure that the benefits and disbenefits of the social enterprise are shared equitably.
3. Democracy is the form of governance that delivers the most equitable and just outcomes for a society.
4. Modern democratic governance systems are founded on principles including:
 - equality of influence
 - deliberative mechanisms
 - avoidance of tyranny¹
 - reflection²
 - adaptability³
 - accountability
 - subsidiarity and connectivity (where the decisions are made closest to the level of effect and services are delivered at levels best providing economies of scale and scope)^{4, 5}
 - inclusivity.
5. Principles of democracy should be applied to all the political, economic, social and environmental realms.⁶
6. The interests of less powerful, less advantaged or oppressed societal groups,⁷ future generations and other species should be represented in democratic decisions.
7. PHAA's Health Equity Policy Position Statement includes the following principle:

*Ensuring that people and communities are engaged in decisions affecting their lives, health and wellbeing is fundamental to good health. This is particularly the case for socially and economically excluded populations who are also most likely to have been politically excluded as well. The provision of accurate information and engagement of civil society to promote these objectives are integral to achieving this outcome.*⁸
8. It is a fundamental public health vision that healthy people are grown in a healthy society grounded in a healthy natural and physical environment. We know that many vested interests, particularly corporate interests, operating in an economic system dominated by a neoliberal

worldview, often run their businesses in ways that undermine the health of society and the environment. Unhealthy food, tobacco and alcohol, asbestos, substandard pharmaceuticals, chemical pollution and greenhouse gas emissions are all examples of how some corporations behave in ways that undermine health.⁹

9. In line with historical recognition of the importance of good government for the public's health and the public good supported by the literature, there is a need for greater action by the public health movement to raise awareness about this and to advocate and organise for government for the public good.

PHAA notes the following evidence:

10. Governance may be defined as “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs”¹⁰ or “Governance refers to theories and issues of social coordination and thenature of all patterns of rule” (p.1).¹¹
11. Democracy is variously defined but the core element of all definitions is that democracy is a governance method for collective or community decision making ^{7, 12, 13} that can operate across a variety of scales from community, local region, to the nation state and even international level. Fotopoulos argues that to be fully democratic, a society / polity also must practice this form of decision making across all “realms” of society: they are the political, economic, social including the domestic, and environmental.⁶ This builds democratic practice into the fabric of the society. More specifically democracy is a system of governance wherein decisions pertaining to governance of a community or polity are taken collectively by those people with an interest in, that is are affected by, the outcomes of those decisions.
12. Modern democracies use a variety of electoral representative models. Of these a proportional electoral system, rather than systems based on single-member geographic divisions, is necessary prevent sectional interest and ‘marginal seat’-driven distortion of campaigns, ensure equal vote influence, ensure majority-backed parliament, and represent a broader array of interests.¹⁴
13. A democratic governance system promotes health, as grounded in the Primary Health Care principles. The Primary Health Care approach underpins the social determinants to health approach. This puts fairness and control over one's life, including meaningful participation in decision making about one's life, as essential to health, which is essential for wellbeing.¹⁵
14. A reasonable evidential foundation for the public health movement to focus on governance exists. Core to generations of public health theory and practice has been recognition that good governance is important. In the Alma Ata Declaration, the governance focus is on participation in health care planning and implementation (Article IV).¹⁶ The Ottawa charter puts it “... to achieve better health ... [communities need] ... ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies.”¹⁵
15. The WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health recognised the necessity of both political empowerment (democracy) (chapter 14) and good global governance (chapter 15).^{15, 17} The *Lancet*–University of Oslo Commission on Global Governance for Health focuses on global

governance for health recognising that the commercial and political determinants of health operate at that level.¹⁹ The United Nations Development Program identifies the importance of governance across the scale from local to global in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.²⁰ Indeed, the Goals identify the components of good government “effective, accountable and inclusive institutions” and “democracy, good governance and the rule of law as well as an enabling environment at national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development” (Goal 16).²¹

16. There is an extensive literature that identifies a positive correlation between good governance defined in several ways and good health or wellbeing outcomes.^{22, 23, 24, 25, 26} Even the type of electoral system contributes to social and environmental wellbeing outcomes.^{23, 24, 26}
17. The recommendation of the WHO Commission of the Social Determinants of Health which states: “*Action Area 1: Empower all groups in society through fair representation in decision-making about how society operates, particularly in relation to its effect on health equity, and create and maintain a socially inclusive framework for policy-making.*”¹⁷
18. A ‘Governance for Health’ framing is essential to achieving health as a component of wellbeing, and is to be distinguished from governance of health systems. Five interdependent facets of smart governance for health, combined in whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, are:
 - “Governing by collaborating”,
 - “Governing by engaging citizens” (including a commitment to informed and participating citizens),
 - “Governing by mixing regulation and persuasion”,
 - “Governing through new independent agencies and expert bodies”, and
 - “Governing through adaptive policies, resilient structures and foresight”²⁷
19. Australia’s current governance system is one of representative democracy using a variety of preferential and proportional electoral systems, with universal suffrage through comprehensive enrolment to vote and compulsory voting for all eligible voters above the age of 18.
20. The current electoral systems using single-member electoral divisions:
 - a. advantages sectional interest and ‘marginal seat’-driven distortion of campaigns, as well as wasteful ‘pork-barrelling’
 - b. limits the range of interests that can be represented in Parliament.
21. Current regulatory arrangements for control or transparency of political donations and spending, and for transparency in the lobbying activities and undue influence by corporations and other vested interests, are weak at federal level (some effective reforms have been adopted in some states and territories).
22. There is a case to lower the age of voting to 16, as has happened in some other nations.²⁸ Despite Australia’s very high rates of electoral enrolment there have persistently been lower enrolments in younger people,²⁹ although the situation has been improving in recent years.³⁰

PHAA seeks the following actions:

23. Advocacy by the public health sector for processes of reform of the current governance system to make governance more transparent, accountable, aligned with democratic principles. This would comprise discussion of ideas for reform of existing governance institutions and social organisations along the lines of (but not limited to) the items listed in Table 1 below, as well as the reforms advocated in PHAA's *Unhealthy Political Influence* policy position statement.

Table 1: Governance Reform-Transformation Options

Process	Details
Voting Reform	<p>Maintain the highest possible enrolment of all voters, with special attention to historically under-enrolled categories including younger voters and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce proportional representation voting systems (such as multi-party proportional, mixed member proportional (MMP) or Hare-Clarke) that improve representation of broader community interests to and equal vote value for all voters. • Avoid wherever possible ballot formality rules which needlessly invalidate any vote. • Standardise voting systems across federal, state/territory and local government elections to reduce confusion amongst voters. • Reject attempts to remove compulsory voting.
Parliamentary Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit the power of the government executive and act outside of Parliamentary debate and approval, for example in relation to declaring war and for decisions with major ecological impacts. • Mandate greater transparency of corporate lobbying. • Review the government/opposition system with a view to establishing more multi-partisan 'public interest' forms of governance.
Political Party Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure registration as political parties is as inclusive as possible. • Publicly fund political parties to support their long-term policy development, assist party members to debate and democratically determine their party policies, and attract and empower individual party members. • Strengthen party registration and candidate nomination rules. • Require political parties to democratise internal party structures and processes, including parliamentary candidate selection. • Mandate standards for political advertising, supporting promotion of vision and policies, but constraining false advertising by means of truth in political advertising legislation.
Establish Community Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalise deliberative methods such as citizen jury processes for important societal decisions and standing citizen assemblies for community input to governance at local, state/territory and federal government levels. • Using the transition movement as a model, and kitchen table conversations as a process, and building on other community initiatives, grow community (neighbourhood or community of interest) investment in the skills of self-governance. • Support electorate-based methods to enable electorate communities to improve input to governance and to hold their MP accountable. • Build electorate-based community governance structures to choose candidates (noting the 2020 community independent processes in multiple electorates).
Build subsidiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review responsibilities of the various levels of government to devolve decision making and delegate effective service delivery to the most effective level.
Build networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore ways to build self-governance capacity in communities. • Build regional and global networks between self-governing communities.

24. PHAA will support and work with other organisations to develop and promote local initiatives to build democratic capacity in local neighbourhoods and organisations.

PHAA resolves that:

25. PHAA will, through advocacy and collaboration with other relevant organisations:

- a) Promote awareness in the community and among policy makers of the importance of good governance for good health
- b) Promote discussion about governance reform in Australia and its relationship with public health goals, including the reform ideas listed in Table 1 above.

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* Errata note: The 2023 version of this document was updated April 2026 to correct four minor errors and add errata note, with no other changes made at this time. This document will undergo a full review process in 2026, to be finalised in late 2026.

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