

Contested spaces: Australia, the referendum, and constructive discussion

Dr Clare Reddan

October 2023



Next25™

Executive Summary: Why Australia is struggling to have constructive discussions on the Voice, and what this means for the future	4
Key Findings	6
Summary Diagram: Key themes, sub-themes, and guidance	8
Guidance: How to spark more constructive discussions	9
Constructive Discussion and Australia Today	11
Project Design	13
Constructively Discussing the Voice and the Referendum: barriers and enabling	13
Theme 1: Awareness	14
1.1 Information Void.....	14
1.2 Apathy	15
1.3 Confusion	16
1.4 Relevancy.....	17
Theme 2: Risk	18
2.1 Emotional Risk	18
2.2 Emotion as Engagement	19
2.3 Relationships and Connections	20
2.4 Labour	21
Theme 3: Spaces for Exchange.....	23
3.1 Limited Spaces for Dissent	23
3.2 Echo Chambers.....	24
3.3 Positive Spaces for Engagement	25
3.4 Civic Responsibility	26
Theme 4: Performative Polarisation	27

4.1 Perceived Bias	28
4.2 Polarising Rhetoric on Show	29
4.3 Media.....	30
4.4 Behind the Scenes.....	31
The Future and Constructive Discussion	32
References	34
Annex.....	36
Methodology	36
Sample Profile	36

Acknowledgement of Country

Next25 acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

Next25 uses the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/s and First Nations people/s throughout this report, but does not intend to reduce or imply homogeneity among the distinct Nations, languages and cultures that make up our shared lands.

For more information see next25.org.au/recoded

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please email contact@next25.org.au

Suggested citation:

Reddan, C. (2023), *Next25 Recoded: Contested spaces: Australia, the referendum and constructive discussion in 2023*, (Report No. 2, Ed. 1), Next25.

Executive Summary: Why Australia is struggling to have constructive discussions on the Voice, and what this means for the future

For over a decade, independent think-and-do tank, Next25, has been committed to ensuring that Australia has what it takes to make the future its people want. In 2021, through a nationally representative social research study and conversations with more than 50 leaders and decision makers, Next25 concluded that one of the deep contributing factors to Australia's underperformance was a lack of constructive discussion (Fuller & Cheung, 2021).

In August 2023, the Australian Government's Voice [website](#) urged people to "be ready for the conversation" (Australian Government, 2023). What Next25 uncovered, was that despite the apparent intent for constructive discussion and dialogue, many people experienced confusion, apathy, bias, and were acutely aware of subjective echo chambers.

This report offers insights into the key barriers and enabling factors that have affected people's participation in discussions about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice and the upcoming referendum in Australia. It is based on interviews with 15 people who have professional experience with productive and unproductive conversations and who work across a diverse range of industries.

Our research finds that, in general, discussions on this topic have been inadequate and this is due to a range of factors. Next25 explores these factors through the analysis of 16 interconnected sub-themes across four key themes that highlight key barriers and enablers. These sub-themes and themes converge into 10 key findings that draw together the interconnections to provide rich insights about the state of constructive discussion in Australia in 2023.

Key themes in the research include:

1. Insufficient access to relevant information and concerns over its quality and reach
2. Varying forms of perceived risk that impact people's ability to discuss issues and opinions
3. The need for safe spaces to discuss opinions to avoid echo chambers and encourage exchange
4. That public discourse has been "performatively polarised" which involves a pattern of people across the media and politics who strategically leverage conflict, and this pattern filters down to everyday conversations

However, while Next25 identified many barriers to more constructive discussions about the Voice and the referendum, all interviewees emphasised the importance of having constructive discussions about complex and contested issues overall, despite their personal feelings of discomfort and polarisation.

In response to these findings, Next25 has developed four areas of [guidance](#) to spark improvement on constructive discussion in Australia. This guidance may inspire the public, and those in positions of leadership, to have their own constructive discussions.

While our research highlights the many issues that people in Australia face when it comes to constructively discussing complex and contested issues, it also shows us where there are opportunities for improvement. These opportunities are a source of hope that we can do better as a nation, and that we have agency as individuals to contribute to a flourishing future.

This report is one in a series about constructive discussion in Australia, and its findings and key concepts will be expanded in future research and activities, eventually feeding into the design of an intervention that will improve Australia's ability to make the future its people want.

Key Findings

The below findings highlight the complexities of engaging in constructive discussion in Australia.¹

- 1. Information accessibility impacts engagement:** People's ability to constructively discuss social issues is connected to access of relevant information. Levels of quality, volume, and reach of available information affected people's ability to engage in conversation about the Voice and the referendum. In response, some people actively sought out extra information, and many felt that more information *should* be available. Others felt apathetic or did not engage in conversation due to their limited exposure or belief that their experiences with the topic are limited.
- 2. Confusion leads to the exclusion of difference:** Confusion has plagued how many people have discussed the Voice. Some people have conflicting views on its perceived outcomes, and some do not even understand the basics. Exposure to polarising and binary, yes/no discussions did little to inform people's understandings of the topic, and binary discussions did not encourage interaction among perspectives. Indeed, exposure to polarisation and binary discussions meant many people limited their communications about the Voice to deliberately or organically formed echo chambers that provided little room for debate.
- 3. Social and emotional risk is powerful and contextual:** Various forms of risk have informed people's experiences of constructive discussion. Emotional risk can be a beneficial, connecting force that enhances personal relationships, but also has negative impacts when defensive or divisive rhetoric shuts down constructive discussion amongst people. When deciding whether to embrace any risk when discussing the Voice, people choose the degree to which they engage or disengage in conversation based on their sense of safety within a given space.
- 4. Safe spaces require trust:** Many people describe the difficulties of finding spaces to have constructive discussions and felt that they were risking personal relationships when they engaged in complex and potentially conflict-laden conversations. When people had higher levels of trust in those around them, they were more likely to take on the labour of having detailed, vulnerable, and constructive conversations.
- 5. Perceived effort is a limiting factor:** The combination of cognitive and emotional load, social risk, and lack of spaces to express dissent or explore partially founded opinions mean that people do not have the opportunity to practise constructive discussion in general. As a result, people have become "afraid to argue," or argue in contained and predictable environments that downplay diversity of thought.

¹ These 10 points represent the most significant findings from this research and are an active convergence of the four key themes and sub-themes in this study. They describe the patterns of meaning that are anchored in constructive discussion about the Voice and the conceptual boundaries of constructive discussion as a communicative process and activity.

6. Constructive discussion requires time, ability, and resources: In this study, there were a few examples of robust and constructive discussion about the Voice and the referendum. They involved people who proactively sought out higher quality information and those who were prepared to engage in meaningful efforts to learn and communicate with others about the topic. Some people want to be more involved in constructive discussions but felt they have been unable to due to their lifestyles and personal responsibilities. In this sense, civic engagement can be a privileged activity in which some people struggle to participate.

7. Conversations feature low trust, bias, and disinformation: The public discussion surrounding the Voice and referendum strongly or partially contains biases and disinformation that lowers people's trust in the democratic process and heightens issue fatigue. Widespread bias and agenda-pushing is so commonplace, and fake news so pervasive, that it has infiltrated everyday discourse and changed how people speak to each other – and not for the better. People report being less trusting in the validity of someone else's "facts" and are more likely to assume that opinions of dissent are somehow flawed or incomplete.

8. The media fuels and reflects: The media is a source and disseminator of polarised discussion. The media provides the arena for heightened conflict and features superficial coverage that is further complicated by people's bite-sized consumption habits. The combined effect of these factors is a barrage of binary discussions or where coverage is one-sided or unresolved and left as "agree-to-disagree." People are wary, but unsure how to combat the impact that the mainstream media has on shaping the national agenda and people's opinions. Some people have disengaged altogether, which further reduces the potential for constructive exchanges to occur.

9. Discomfort and confrontation is necessary: The Voice and the referendum highlights a key aspect of constructive discussion: it can be uncomfortable, confronting, and lack compromise. Some people felt that the referendum is an act of constructive discussion in the highest order because they have been compelled to talk about issues that have national ramifications. Others noted that, even when polarising and disrespectful, conversations containing friction are constructive for the nation overall and necessary for democracy – despite individuals' negative experiences. However, far more people agreed that aggressive emotional tactics and disrespect are not necessary for constructive discussions because they derail meaningful debate, intimidate or exclude people, and fewer people have a say overall.

10. Conversation gatekeeping: There is public suspicion that the polarisation and conflict surrounding the Voice and the referendum is performative or "for show." Many people felt that different types of conversations have been happening "behind the scenes." Alongside frustration and cynical amusement at being excluded, this gatekeeping was also a source of hope that, in some spaces at least, productive debate is occurring. People felt that these constructive discussions frequently involved elements of withholding and scarcity. This involves varying degrees of gatekeeping – gatekeeping of ideas, discussion, progress, and access. Some people can more readily access constructive discussions, while others feel excluded.

Summary Diagram: Key themes, sub-themes, and guidance

Below is a diagram of the study's key aspects. It displays the guidance, sub-themes, sub-theme status (as a barrier or enabling factor), and themes concerning constructive discussion about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Voice and referendum.

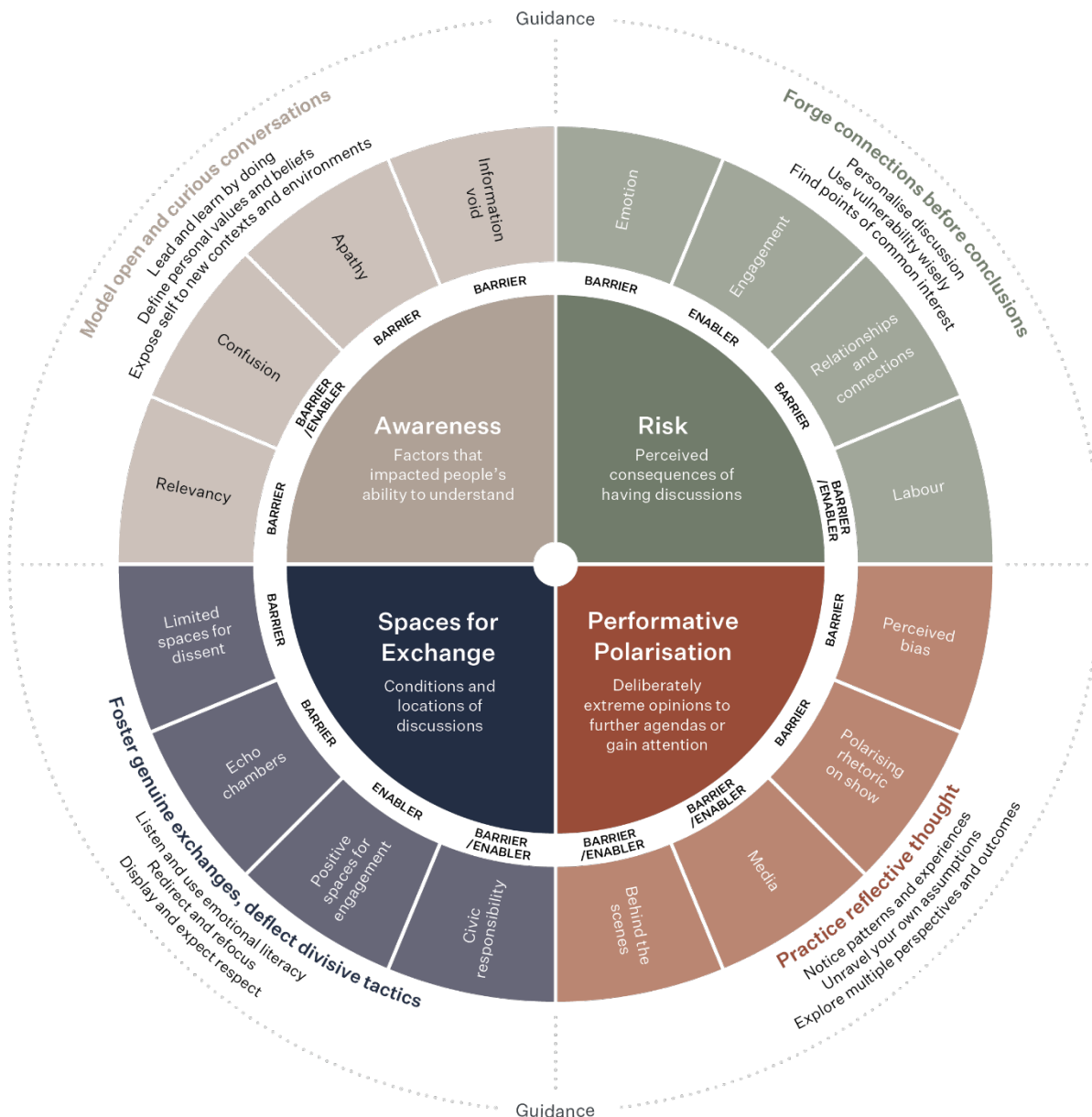


Diagram 1: Constructive Discussion, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Voice, and 2023 Australian Referendum: guidance, sub-themes, sub-theme status, and themes.

Guidance: How to spark more constructive discussions

The findings from this research highlight the key barriers and enabling factors that people face when having constructive discussions about the Voice and the upcoming referendum. In response, Next25 has provided the below guidance to improve constructive discussion in an everyday context. This guidance may inspire the public and those in positions of leadership to have their own constructive discussions while recognising that individuals alone do not bear this responsibility.

Guidance	
Model open and curious conversations	Improving constructive discussion requires both inward and outward tasks: outwardly modelling open and curious conversations, and inwardly defining one's personal values while being flexible with one's beliefs.
	Constructive discussion is like a muscle: the more we do it, the better we are at it. Even if we don't really know how, we can learn by doing in a variety of scenarios that ideally have lower pressure. However, when the stakes are higher, it is useful to be aware that the elevated sense of consequences changes conversational dynamics. The dynamics of higher stakes conversations may mean that people use more cautious or more reckless styles of communication.
Forge connections before conclusions	People are more open and generous in constructive discussions when they can relate to or personalise their discussion with another person, so learning more about the person behind the opinion is valuable, and this can take time.
	Displaying vulnerability can be a gesture or technique that is a powerful connecting force but also something that can be taken advantage of. As an adaptive skill, the use of emotion can be subtle or involve more direct techniques.

Guidance	
Practise reflexive thought	Using reflexivity involves taking a step back from an argument to consider the experiences, motivations, and preferences of the people communicating. What assumptions are being made by you and the person you're conversing with?
	People's understanding of the facts will always be filtered through their interpretations and history. This means there is not a single correct "answer" when it comes to social issues.
Foster genuine exchanges, deflect divisive tactics	Genuine exchange involves absorbing and responding to someone else's views. People don't have to agree, but taking time to explore others and your own perspectives is crucial. When people use binary, confrontational or incendiary tactics, emotion can take over – but you choose how to respond. Displaying and expecting respect is essential.
	Constructive discussion is not a synonym for consensus, nor is it all people having an equal say but having learnt nothing from the interaction. Constructive discussion is an active process where perspectives are compared, rather than tolerated. Comparison is most constructive when further action or evolution of thought can occur.
	Constructive discussion occurs on a continuum of spaces, time, and outcomes. There is no set formula for success; rather, practice, adaption and responding situationally will provide a foundation for more productive exchanges.

Constructive Discussion and Australia Today

Why study the Voice, the referendum, and constructive discussion?

This study is concerned with the state of public discourse and focuses on individual, community, and national dialogue using the lens of constructive discussion. Constructive discussion is a communicative activity and process where people have the space and opportunity to share perspectives and explore difference in a reflexive, productive manner.² Next25's research has identified it as crucial for the exploration of complex and contested issues.

Next25 was curious to uncover the barriers and enablers to constructive discussions in Australia. In short, we wanted to know: **how well are we talking about national issues?** We asked interviewees to share both their experiences about talking through challenging issues in general, and then about the specific example of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament and upcoming referendum on this topic.

The findings in this report represent a snapshot in time. We collected data from mid-July to September 2023. This was after the constitutional alteration bill had been [passed by parliament](#) (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023), and the question and proposed amendment to the Constitution had been confirmed, but before the date of the referendum had been announced.

On paper, it was a time of national reflection where the mechanics of democracy would be on display: civic engagement, public debate, and the anticipation of the first referendum [since 1999](#). (Parliamentary Library, 2022). In practice, people's experience of this time was quite different. It was marked by a lack of awareness and safe spaces for discussion, perceptions of bias and mistruth in public forums, and frustration at the perceived agendas of the media and politicians. As one interviewee surmised "How did it get this difficult?"

What did we learn?

This research shows that consensus is not the focus of constructive discussion. Rather, constructive discussion involves the process of being heard and affording others time and safe spaces to express themselves. However, when issues spark strong emotional reactions from people and are perceived as "contaminated" by biased information, it is exceedingly difficult for people to agree on the facts of a debate and many people get "stuck" or disengage with efforts to constructively explore a topic.

² This definition of constructive discussion has been analytically conceived through the patterns of meaning developed from interviews conducted for this research. It will evolve over time and respond to changing modes of communication, social-political contexts, and broader global patterns. Constructive discussion cannot have a single bounded definition as it involves people's dynamic experiences but is outlined using the above parameters to guide the exploration of a multi-faceted concept.

In this study, the people most inclined to participate in healthy, constructive discussions on the topic of the Voice and the referendum proactively sought out opportunities to converse with others, engaged with varied and high-quality information, and had the capacity to overcome any barriers to participation in these discussions. They deemed it their personal, civic responsibility to constructively discuss issues of national importance and described it as a vital aspect of their individual lives.

Overall, whether people perceived that Australia was faring okay or poorly when it came to constructively discussing the Voice, all expressed concerns about the nature of how discussions have been held.

There is hope and drive to do better. What we have documented represents a wider pattern concerning national discourse: there's too little, it's too divisive, and much of the public is frustrated or disengaged (Fuller & Cheung, 2021). Australia is capable of better. It's not about tolerating different opinions but learning from them to build more constructive relationships where we can exchange our hopes about the many possible futures and prioritise action on what we collectively desire. This is the value of constructive discussion and an opportunity that invites contributions from all Australians.



Everyone's going to have different opinions. Everyone's going to have different levels of priorities.

But, yeah, it needs a lot more communication.

And I guess it comes back to relationships. So, it's like, if that's our relationship with the government or with Australia, then it needs to have better communication because we all know that relationships fail without good communication.

- Recoded 2023 Interviewee -

There's lots of great evidence around the benefits of at least coming together and starting to talk and having the conversation.

But it's just the start and the need for that, you know, that opportunity to be tuned in... that's deliberately about developing the skill and building the muscle rather than just sitting around and "oh, yes, we've had a nice conversation and we've agreed to disagree"—that that actually doesn't get us anywhere.

- Recoded 2023 Interviewee -

Project Design

The interviews for this study were conducted in a semi-structured format and included Evaluation H (Guy & Inglis, 1999), which encouraged interviewees to identify varying positions and perspectives that different actors might have on the topic of the Voice and the referendum.

All interviews lasted 60 minutes on average resulting in 15 hours of recorded interview material that was transcribed, with detailed methodology and sample profile contained in the [annex](#) of this report. The transcripts were processed and coded by the research team using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This exploratory analysis focused on communication-specific ideas and concepts related to productive and unproductive discussions about the Voice and referendum, but also harvested perspectives about constructive discussion in general across people's wider experiences in personal and national contexts.

Using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) involved the research team's active development of different themes that "connect and build on each other" (Braun & Clark 2022). In this context, this study does not identify the inherent qualities of constructive discussion which Next25 claims as the "essence," or singularly true facts of a phenomenon. Rather, the themes and sub-themes are interpreted as analytic outputs that intersect at varying points and converge within the 10 key findings to present selected patterns that are relevant to our study aim. Our findings adopt a constructionist lens and, following Braun & Clark's reflexive TA (2022), describe particular patterns of meaning that are anchored by a shared idea of constructive discussion, rather than serving as an exhaustive (and static) summary of the concept.

This process resulted in an exploratory examination of the current state of constructive discussion in Australia in general and makes specific reference to the Voice and referendum. It identifies the key conditions that might be improved and further understood so that more constructive discussions about complex national issues may occur in the future.

Constructively Discussing the Voice and the Referendum: barriers and enabling

The analysis in this study develops four key themes related to constructive discussion. Each theme contains a central organising concept (Braun & Clark, 2022) of awareness, risk, space for exchange, and performative polarisation.

Each theme informs the next and is divided into four sub-themes that contain detailed examples, analytic observations and narrative interpretations that explore the barriers and enabling factors concerning constructive discussion about the Voice and upcoming referendum in Australia.

While they are a series of sequential headings in our report, each theme is multi-faceted and straddles intersecting ground. This reflects the conceptual complexity of constructive discussion and the reality that many of us encounter intersecting difficulties when we set out to productively talk about complex and contested national issues.

Theme 1: Awareness

On the topic of the Voice and the upcoming referendum, the majority of our interviewees mentioned that information access was an issue, especially around the availability of quality information. Many suspected that more information and discussion would be available soon or that they personally needed to do a better job of getting involved in the issue. Some interviewees thought that there was a lot of information available, but it has had limited reach.

Alarming, other interviewees expressed concern that apathy, the relevancy of content, and confusion had already caused irrevocable damage to everyone's ability to constructively discuss the upcoming referendum. Many interviewees thought it would be difficult to “cut through the noise” to figure out the key facts that would enable them to properly discuss and inform their opinion.

1.1 Information Void

Individually, many interviewees felt **they lacked awareness about the key aspects and implications of the referendum** or that their community had a generally limited understanding of what the Voice involves. One interviewee noted “I don’t feel like, well, I know we’ve still got some time to run, but I don’t feel like there’s genuine awareness amongst people.”

The information void is also linked to volume. Many interviewees noted that the **amount of information available to them was limited**, so discussion within their peer and professional networks was constrained

[I]ike one of my clients said, I have questions. So I think she actually emailed some questions because she said “I don’t want to give my vote until I know more about it.” It’s like, you know, how can you vote for something when you have no information?

However, not everyone characterised their awareness of the Voice and the upcoming referendum as incomplete or uninformed. Others observed that many outlets had overall or somewhat discussed the referendum constructively but that the messaging had limited reach or was ill-received. One interviewee reflected that “[t]here’s half hour sessions on SBS, social channels and the Prime Minister, you know, really gives it a, you know, big go. But I don’t think that’s enough for 25 million people.”

Regarding the awareness of media coverage, such as advertising on commercial TV and radio, several interviewees felt that **the constructive discussion they had**

witnessed had insufficient impact due to its limited scale. Interestingly, the perception of limited reach (rather than information availability) shows that while public debate might exist in particular spaces, it had not filtered down to people's general consciousness. One interviewee observed that "[i]t's like, anyone who has wanted to look for the information could possibly find it, but in terms of like being like, yeah, enough conversation [about the Voice] I'd say no."

This demonstrates a link between the constructive discussion of national issues and the 'everyday'. The more removed from someone's frame of reference and experiences of daily life, the less likely someone is to engage in or feel like they have witnessed, constructive discussion in action. This shows **how vital public touchpoints are if constructive discussion is to improve at a national level.**

Next25's analysis of awareness demonstrates that many Australians are conscious that they are not armed with enough information to meaningfully talk about the Voice, and for some, that a "benchmark" for healthy constructive discussion involves whether an issue has organically entered public consciousness, which raises the questions of space and constructive discussions.³

1.2 Apathy

A lack of awareness did not always involve an information void. Other interviewees admit that they assumed a reasonable amount of content and information about the Voice must be available, but they had not proactively sought it out.

As a result, when asked to consider how well the Voice has been constructively discussed in Australia, some interviewees admitted that due to their limited exposure, by default, they had not been involved in productive discussions on the topic, with one interviewee disclosing "I don't know enough about it, and I haven't had time to even give it a second of thought."

Others were more reflexive and noted that they **avoided constructively discussing it due to their focus on other priorities** such as the cost of living or due to their personal habits, such as being media avoidant

And probably about eight years ago I just chose to kind of turn off the news in in most forms just because it just wasn't serving me. And, kind of, the approach if I want to find out about subject matter, is go find subject matter experts and invite them for lunch and invite them for coffee [but for the Voice]...I haven't done that.

It is important to note that the apathy that some interviewees had towards the Voice and referendum did not reflect hostility towards First Nations people or the perceived aims of the Voice. In some instances, apathy reflected our interviewees' sense of despondency that they could not individually contribute to tangible change, and, therefore, avoided engaging on the topic.

³ Explored in this report at [Theme 3: Spaces for Exchange](#)

However, many interviewees who described a sense of apathy were highly self-aware and noted that their apathy was due to a sense of distance or lack of lived experience about the Voice. They had “no skin in the game.” Indeed, one interviewee described their distance from the issue as somewhat liberating when it comes to exploring the specifics of the upcoming referendum, reflecting that “[w]e had, I would say, quite a good discussion, actually, in some ways, [but] we didn’t have anything to lose.”

1.3 Confusion

The lack of awareness about the Voice was also linked to individual and community feelings of uncertainty. One interviewee reported that their community was **divided about what it would mean for the future**. They described a mix of people which included those who expressed optimism for tangible and measurable change and those who cynically thought of the Voice as rhetoric-based that was “not going to change anything.” This interviewee also noted that while there was a relatively strong understanding that there would **be** a referendum, there was widespread confusion about specifics, and noted that “[j]ust speaking to a lot of people – they don’t understand. They are totally lost. And people in the country areas have totally no understanding.”

Several interviewees described a similar pattern within their community: there was a lack of individual awareness about what the Voice would achieve, which led to community confusion, and the confusion impeded constructive discussion because people were more focused on telling others to vote in a particular way because they did not have “facts” to debate. One interviewee linked people’s limited knowledge with the development of binary thinking and noted that

[i]t’s sort of an awareness of – you know what’s involved – but it doesn’t feel informed, like, it feels polar again. It’s another thing that feels polarising and the arguments, I suppose, they’re getting messy, they’re getting- it’s all getting mixed up. People are losing sight of what it’s about.

The attention on polarising opinions and binary, Yes/No voting preferences confused people – how could the Voice be both the right and the wrong choice for Australia? This confusion meant that the main thing that was clear in many discussions was that everyone had different opinions. **There was little interaction among perspectives**, and no agreement regarding the perceived outcomes of a Voice to parliament.

Interviewees considered constructive discussion as involving the general qualities of exchange, active listening, and empathy, yet in terms of the Voice and referendum, they reported low levels of any of these qualities in action.

However, for some people, the perceived confusion around the Voice encouraged them to do their own research beyond what was readily available. In this sense, confusion may also be a motivating force and prompt people to be more proactive so they could better inform themselves and the conversations they had on the topic.

1.4 Relevancy

The correlation between constructive discussion and the lack of issue awareness also focused on quality. One interviewee stated that the discussion on this topic was subpar – not because there was too little discussion per se – but because the discussions that **do** occur contain largely irrelevant information

Well, there's not enough discussion, equal discussion, across all mediums [so] I also think the messages have not got the impact... Information would give me some relevancy to make a decision...but they haven't demonstrated the relevancy and the potential, like, benefits in terms of impact to really get people... but I am happy to go along with what I think is the right thing to do.

Another person felt that the issue has been hijacked where the spaces to discuss the Voice have become largely politicised

... it's been turned into a political agenda. And I like, I don't understand, I don't know, I don't understand how we got to that other than, you know, possibly the parties. I'm trying not to be biased, but you know, the desperation to be in power and [the referendum] is perhaps deceived [*sic*] as an opportunity to shore that up.

These comments highlight another common thread amongst our interviewees: that constructive discussion of the Voice and referendum suffered because **the spaces that are designated for the public discussion of issues are hijacked** and conversational redirection is frequently deployed by people as a tactical means to avoid difficult and complex discourse.

Ultimately, people understood that more information was likely to be available closer to the referendum date, but there was a general sense of surprise that a referendum was scheduled without more *accessible*, practical or neutral, “fact-based” resources to consult from the beginning.

In fact, some interviewees expressed that they believed that the volume and quality of relevant information about the Voice was a deliberate strategy to control the narrative and that this had sabotaged the potential to have informed, constructive discussions on the issue. Others thought that published information available was one-sided and showed bias, with one interviewee commenting “[d]on't try and put an angle on it to sway someone's opinion. Yeah, just report the facts and then, you know, like let people make up their own mind and own opinions.”

Others describe bias within the context of a more alarming global phenomenon, and noted that

[t]here are some pretty silly untruths [about the Voice] that just shouldn't be out there. And so you can sort of see that demon lurking...with AI and all the doctored images. It's just going to be harder and harder to tell what's real and fake. [For] now it's still relatively easily – easy if you're an educated person and you kind of got decent news sources.

These excerpts link to the wider global trend concerning how our consumption of information is rapid, asynchronous and in a post-truth world, operates within a cycle of

distrust of politics and the media.⁴ And these factors of trust and temporality have affected us. The manner and pace in which Australians find, process, and engage with truth and untruth has a new edge that has changed how we have national conversations and for many, it is not for the better.

Theme 2: Risk

Our interviewees described many forms of risk related to their ability, or other people's ability, to constructively discuss the Voice and the referendum. Some experienced risk in a social sense, such as the threat of isolation from colleague or peers that caused interviewees to filter their interactions on this topic. Others discussed their experiences of Voice-related discussions as involving emotional risks when they faced heightened moments of tension and conflict.

Across these examples, risk is context-dependent, and people who reported higher levels of psychological safety were more inclined to productively engage in challenging discussions on this topic. This demonstrates that the emotional and social risks that are negotiated when people are engaged in constructive discussion are a form of labour. As a form of labour, therefore, constructive discussion requires work and investment to sustain or "do properly."

2.1 Emotional Risk

The role of emotion in constructive discussion is particularly fascinating. Across many instances, interviewees describe how their own and others' emotions negatively limited their ability to have constructive discussions. This includes frustration due to the lack of fact-based information about the Voice (discussed above), or exasperation, and even anger, at people's opposing viewpoints when discussing the Voice with peers or family. In these examples, emotions prevented the productive exploration of relevant issues because the heightened emotion caused people to defensively react and impaired people's cognitive processing abilities to listen, understand and respond.

In short, heightened emotions frequently "shut down" constructive discussions.

One interviewee recalls her reaction to someone's comments in an informal discussion amongst neighbours about the Voice, commenting "I was completely I was like, oh my God. And I in fact didn't know how to respond. Like I was just like a bear with my eyes open and I couldn't believe that he was saying such a ridiculous thing."

⁴ Edelman. (2022). *Edelman Trust Barometer: the Cycle of Distrust*, Daniel J. Edelman Holdings, Inc. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>

With wry exasperation, another interviewee describes our ability as a nation to talk about the Voice as embarrassingly poor, lamenting that “[c]onstructively discussing it, *publicly*, you know, like, it’s, ‘[o]h, it’s a shit show!’”⁵

Another compares the state of discourse about hot-button issues in informal social settings in America to Australia, saying

You don’t talk about politics. You don’t talk about guns. And you don’t talk about like, Trump. So you just kind of like stay away from these hotbeds. And I feel the Voice is getting close to that territory where you just don’t bother talking about it because, yeah, it’s not constructive. It’s just this cesspool of blame.

In these instances where emotion runs high or when people anticipate a situation where emotions might escalate, emotional risk is palpable, and people do not feel safe to discuss their opinions. To mitigate this, the most common tactics our interviewees described were to avoid situations or lines of conversation that might inflame emotional responses or to only speak out when they were sure their opinion would be accepted. This is a common barrier to constructively discussing the Voice, especially amongst close friends and family.

2.2 Emotion as Engagement

However, the role of emotion in constructive discussion is not always problematic. Several interviewees frame constructive discussion as indivisible from human feelings, especially when it concerns issues of national significance.

In these examples, the ability to connect with others through displays of empathy, vulnerability, and courage is a strong enabler of constructive discussion overall

If you really want to get into like the realm of social change, then typically something that can be really effective is one person has the courage to be vulnerable...so people feel safe enough to say what they really think... in a way which the other person can hear. And it’d be more than that, though because then you know, the other condition is that the other person listens.

Therefore, displays of emotion are a gesture and can function as an invitation for people to be open and to share the opinions and thoughts that make up their worldview, and encourage others to do the same.

The positive links between emotion and constructive discussion were evident when interviewees described how healthy connections led to effective communication. One interviewee described this as talking to people on their own terms, such as through the use of influencers and sporting celebrities to foster “gateway engagement” to have better public discussions about the Voice. They note

⁵ The phrase “shit show” is linked to Harry G. Frankfurt’s work on bullshit in the contemporary public sphere. Frankfurt notes that public relations and politics “are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated” that they are disruptive and involve “program[s] of producing bullshit to whatever extent the circumstances require.” See: Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton University Press, pp. 33–51.

So I think they need to be attacking it [the Voice] in just every which way – not the easy way. But if our discussion, the landscape, has changed so significantly that people are getting their communication via Facebook and Instagram – so that’s where it needs to be.

Using popular culture to have constructive discussions is an example of soft power. Soft power techniques involve leveraging people’s emotional attachments to appealing cultural icons to generate productive conditions for further conversations, and eventually, action.⁶

2.3 Relationships and Connections

However, while many interviewees discussed that constructive discussion requires an empathetic lens so people can meaningfully relate to alternative viewpoints, emotions can be exploited and present social risks in group contexts. One interviewee notes that “...if you show up courageously and you’re the only person, you know, showing up for constructive conversation, you’ll get screwed over pretty quickly.”

Therefore, while emotional displays of courage and vulnerability are **productive pre-conditions** of constructive conversation, when they are not reciprocated, they also present personal risks, which not everyone is prepared to tolerate or equipped to manage.

Another example of social risk concerns the level of engagement that people commit to when constructively discussing complex and potentially controversial issues. In these instances, rather than being associated with an issue’s specifics, risk is experienced in relation to the discussion process itself such as wariness of people’s reactions or concern about being challenged or “called out” during a debate.

When talking about the Voice, some people who are normally outspoken chose to filter their responses to people who hold opposing views, like at social gatherings

[Person A] is never backward in coming forward. He said himself that he actually didn’t want to counter it because he just didn’t want the discord in the group... They’ve been meeting for 25 years and really at the end of the day, just great blokes [who] get together and they’ve been together for a long time and they probably, they would never be friends normally, but they have become firm friends.

In this example, someone’s partner actively abstained from constructive discussion about the referendum because, at that moment in time, the cohesion of the group was more important to them. Others note that the risk to one’s social status is another critical barrier to honest discussion of the referendum

I get the sense that most people just say, yes, they’re gonna vote... not because A, they know anything about it or B, because they necessarily care that much. It’s more social suicide [if your

⁶ Typically understood within foreign policy, soft power also applies in a domestic context to describe the technique in which attractive ideas, cultures, products, and people can be deployed to affect others to set the agenda, or “pave the way” so you can have the conversations that you want. See Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave Commun.* 3 (17008) <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>

opinion differs in your group]. I feel if you get them in a safe, safe enough to share, most of them will [be more open with their opinions].

This highlights how constructive discussion is constrained when people are in environments in which they do not feel safe to share, and it is linked to the formation of echo chambers, discussed later in this study.

Like emotion, social relationships can be both a barrier and an enabler of constructive discussion. Pre-existing relationships based on trust typically fostered productive conversations, while varying factors, including group dynamics, a sense of mental safety in a given environment, and personal risk tolerances test the limits of how people engage in conversation.

2.4 Labour

The role of emotional and social risk demonstrates the precarious terrain that people must navigate when having constructive discussions. People can feel isolated when they do speak up, constrained when they don't, and the role of emotion paradoxically helps in some situations and is a liability in others.

Ultimately, this highlights the real effort and investment required of people to be open and truly engaged in the discussion of social issues. They also consistently mention affording others space to also be heard. One interviewee admits “[y]ou know, it takes a lot to stay in a constructive discussion like you have to feel very sound. I think as well, being, you have to feel quite whole to be able to stay and make yourself safe in that.”

Therefore, constructive discussion is also a form of labour, especially in terms of a cognitive or mental load. This is especially evident in the definitions that our interviewees provided about the purpose of constructive discussion. They agreed that it is not necessarily an activity that leads to consensus or even an “agree to disagree” scenario but rather a process with uncertain outcomes that change depending on the focus of a given conversation.

When constructive discussion is characterised as challenging and demanding, it is perceived as work and a “duty” or job that requires a degree of personal bandwidth or headspace to contemplate.

Many interviewees discussed their inability to focus on the demands of constructive discussion due to their own circumstances or lack of environments that are appropriate to engage in such conversations. And when people simply lack capacity, they do not have the luxury of being able to devote so much of themselves to robust conversation

I think a constructive discussion takes a lot of courage and it takes a lot of skill and you know, a truly rigorous constructive discussion would demand that of people. That's something that's healthy but you know for a lot of people I think is somewhat daunting you know, it can be daunting. I think it probably hasn't been constructive if you haven't felt challenged, you know, in some form.

As a duty or job, many people experience a disconnect when it comes to constructive discussion – they like the idea of it but lack the bandwidth or skills to execute it. As one interviewee notes, this results in the phenomenon of “superficial constructive discussion,” that involve lightweight attempts at talking, but little forward movement. Remembering that consensus is not the objective, our interviewees noted **that the absence of actual exchange of ideas was problematic**, where “[t]here’s no time for, you know, the exploration of each other’s point of views.” The notion of a lack of exchange overwhelmingly characterised people’s experience of discussing the Voice and the referendum across their personal interactions with others and the media

They’re not, they’re not entertaining the other idea. If they just entertain the other idea and talk it through, you know. But that does require time and often media doesn’t give it the time. And maybe people these days don’t give the time to discussion either because maybe that’s another factor... where we’re all in such a hurry to tick things off the list.

While one cannot know if a kernel of a conversation might transpire into constructive, progress or action in years to come, at present, constructive discussion is limited. It is limited because **our attention and ability to navigate perspectives tends to focus on tolerating, rather than negotiating, our differences.**⁷ One interviewee surmises that “sort of we have constructive discussion but it is probably a little bit more responsibility on the individual to be proactive about it.”

Given this emphasis on mental labour and the rapid flow of information in today’s globalised world, it is unsurprising that most interviewees consider the state of constructive discussion in Australia to be unsatisfactory. It is a **labour of time that many people feel they cannot afford, are unable to take responsibility for, or assume others will do on their behalf.**

However, that was not the case for everyone. Some interviewees characterise the labour involved in developing an informed opinion as part of their civic duty and normal expectation of living in a democracy. One interviewee, in particular, highlighted their proactive role in contributing to the conversation around the Voice as something everyone can and should do. They viewed constructive discussion and reasoned opinions as things that ultimately ensure that our “power” as individuals is yielded. They refuse to surrender to disinformation, polarising tactics, and hyperbolised rhetoric

[i]t's not because I have these exquisite research skills. There's two things about me :#1 I actually care about my community, and a simple hour or two reading and exploring what's out there will give you the answers that you're seeking. #2 I refuse to give my power away to government and media, but I think that's the problem. I think people just expect that the government and the media are just going to dangle [constructive information] in front of them.

Ultimately, when examined in terms of risk, constructive discussion represents a continuum where the layers of emotion, social relationships and labour affect our ability to communicate about social issues. People who are wary may withdraw from

⁷ The distinction between difference and tolerance is explored through the concept of culture in the work of post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha. See Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

having conversations about the Voice due to perceived social and emotional risks at a point in time; some people lack the capacity, and some don't want to put the work in. But that is not everyone, and constructive discussion can thrive when people involved are engaged and care passionately about the community, and this takes commitment and confidence.

Theme 3: Spaces for Exchange

Another major theme concerning the Voice and the upcoming referendum is the availability and access to spaces where constructive discussions can occur. Many interviewees report being limited in where they can discuss social issues or have done so in particular spaces with unsuccessful results, which limits their future endeavours.

This leads to a narrowing of space where constructive discussions are limited due to a lack of arenas to host them, and people who are not inclined to use existing familiar spaces to have constructive discussions (due to factors like social risk). It also leads to the formation of echo chambers where people feel safe to converse because their opinions are relatively aligned.

However, we did hear positive examples of spaces where exchange did occur and fostering these in future is central to improving people's access to and desire to inhabit spaces for constructive discussion.

3.1 Limited Spaces for Dissent

In connection to social risk, many interviewees shared that their ability to have constructive discussions about the Voice was constrained due to their environments. **People felt there was limited spaces to have constructive discussions** due to the negative impacts of conflict.

Many felt that they were implicitly prevented from discussing the Voice or the referendum at work or with family and friends because they felt that it was a risky conversation that could derail their social or work relationships

...[on] work related, I'm very careful about what I say because at the end of the day it's a client, you know, [I] don't wanna cause any issues or bad feelings or anything because at the end of the day, you want them to come back.

Between work, social, and home environments, there are few spaces where individuals felt they could thoroughly discuss the topic. Many interviewees made comments about the potentially harmful outcomes that might or do occur, especially in terms of expressing dissent

[t]he Voice is just trending down. Because I think I think it's quite complex and it's not clear, but I think more than that, it's just it's being... if you don't vote yes, you're instantly a racist-type thing. I just, I don't know if that's helping anyone because no one wants to be called a racist.

The lack of space for constructive discussion was also evident in terms of respect for others. Another interviewee noted that the role of misinformation meant that it was also difficult to find spaces to *accurately* discuss issues

[y]ou do need to call out the lying for what it is. But then you also risk coming across as being... you need to be the person who displays the empathy first. You risk, kind of, condemning the other side just for purely personal or political opposition. It risks coming across as, like, talking down to them or saying, you know, we're better than you. Which definitely doesn't work as a constructive discussion.

These barriers meant that dissenting voices were less likely to emerge because people either didn't feel comfortable expressing them in a given space, or people have expressed views previously and due to polarisation (which is discussed in theme four of this study), there is little room for constructive progress to be made. This narrowing of space means that the conversation that does occur is more likely to happen in spaces shared by similarly-minded people or within echo chambers.

3.2 Echo Chambers

Many of our interviewees were aware that they inhabit echo chambers. This was due to a variety of reasons, such as the need for safe space and the work or leisure-based circles they are currently connected to. Interviewees also mentioned the desire to confirm that their opinion was valid and acceptable as a quasi-litmus test, or as a tactical means to protect themselves from professional or social risk.

At an individual level, some people even describe them as almost unavoidable “[b]ut you're also aware that... if you're in sort of an echo chamber, everyone will have their own echo chambers.”

Others characterised their own echo chamber as a deliberate action based on their desire for self-preservation

[I]n different groups, if I know that they think the same way as me, I'll be a lot more open. If I know that they've got a different opinion to me, I just won't talk about it because I just think there's no point. Not no point, but I just, I don't wanna start anything, I don't wanna give any negative feelings, and I don't want anyone to think differently of me or whatever.

Whether organic or orchestrated, everyone agreed that echo chambers about the Voice were problematic, and they impeded constructive discussion “[w]e've created this echo chamber and there's not true voices surfacing. What are we gonna do about that?”

In some instances, echo chambers led to basically zero conversation on the topic of the Voice and the referendum altogether “[b]ut to be honest I, I think again, because of the homogeneity of Canberra, it's not really discussed, it's assumed...most people will agree with you... at work we're not meant to really show our colours too much.”

These excerpts demonstrate that the interviewees were aware and had a degree of acceptance that they inhabit spaces with people who share similar values and opinions. One interviewee attributed this to confirmation bias which leads to further

siloeing of opinions that do not evolve or interact “I find that I don’t really want that. Like, I don’t want to just to have my opinion echoed, do you know what I mean? I want, I want facts. And then I’ll choose to go which way I want to go.”

The connection between echo chambers and narrowing of space is not good news for constructive discussion. As other research demonstrates,⁸ the formation of like-minded enclaves leads to a lack of understanding of alternative viewpoints and heightened distrust of those who do not share similar opinions.

3.3 Positive Spaces for Engagement

While there were numerous examples about the lack of space for the Voice and the referendum to be constructively discussed, there were some examples of where productive and positive exchanges occurred.

Some interviewees described their plans to be involved in information-based door knocking campaigns to raise awareness about the referendum, and others outlined their discussions in their local community.

Other examples of exchange and engagement include people proactively seeking out additional information about the Voice, such as attending in-person lectures at universities and another had joined an action group for the Voice hosted by their local member. They describe this group as “a bipartisan platform of people coming together wanting to spread, have open, have good discussions, and to go door knocking [with] handouts so people are informed and making informed decisions.”

Another interviewee agreed that constructive discussion on the topic in Australia was reasonable at a conceptual level

I think what they have been doing well is they’ve been talking about, um, just the concept. They’re just saying look, all it is, is that what we’re doing now isn’t working and we want to try something new. And this is what the Uluru dialogues told us they wanted. So this is what we’re going with. And I think that is a strong message.

This indicates that there are pockets of engagement where healthy discussion occurs. However, one issue that impedes this process is profile and reach. One interviewee hypothesised that visibility is the problem because, while they were aware of groups and movements that were trying to engage various communities on the topic of the Voice, they were “not getting much traction in the media.”

This observation raises interesting questions about access and constructive discussions. While interviewees had a unified understanding that constructive discussion happens to varying degrees in the operation of government (where there are designated places for formal debates, such as question time), when it occurs at the

⁸ Nguyen makes the valuable distinction between epistemic bubbles as social epistemic structures where particular voices have been deliberately or accidentally left out, and *echo chambers* that are a type of social epistemic structure where specific, relevant voices have been *actively* excluded and/or discredited. Nguyen, C T., (2020). Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles, *Episteme*, 17(2), 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>

community level, there are barriers to participation including the lack of awareness and ability to contribute.

On a macro level, this reflects a disconnect between the civic responsibility of individuals and the role of the state to facilitate and communicate with its public. The perceived lack of constructive discussion surrounding the Voice mirrors the impact that contemporary forms of communications have had on public discourse:⁹ there has been a rapid evolution of the spaces where public debate traditionally occurs, and as a result, some people struggle to participate. Today, this leads us to consider, whose role is it to foster constructive discussions?

3.4 Civic Responsibility

As this study has outlined, many interviewees reported a frustrating situation where they felt they rarely had the opportunity to, or were prevented from, constructively discussing issues important to the wider community and nation due to a variety of internal and external pressures. In terms of the Voice and upcoming referendum, awareness, forms of risk, and limited spaces have impacted people's ability to discuss this topic.

Overall, interviewees reported being more disengaged due to these barriers or they expressed cynicism about the realities of democracy in action versus their ideal. Two of the key ideas of democracy, as described by Australia's Parliamentary Education Office, are having "active and engaged citizens" and "an inclusive and equitable society" that is underpinned by freedom of speech.¹⁰ However, many people felt that vast improvements were needed so they could better exercise their democratic expression to discuss topics like the Voice in a more productive and inclusive manner.

However, how much of this rests with personal responsibility, and how much is it a fault of the wider system? When it concerns spaces for constructive discussion, the results are mixed. Some interviewees reported that they want to engage but can't or only partially engage in spaces that foster constructive discussion, but others, to varying degrees, actively neglect the task of participating in debate about the Voice. One interviewee candidly revealed "[I make an] excuse to not pay attention...[and] not

⁹ See Bennett & Pfetsch for discussion of the disruption to the public sphere and communication and politics and the role of hybrid media systems, Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga for a discussion of technology and the democratic sphere, and Crouch for a neo-liberal critique of post-democracy and disconnection with mass publics. Bennett, W. L., & Pfetsch, B. (2018). Rethinking Political Communication in a Time of Disrupted Public Spheres, *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 243–253. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx017> Bimber, B., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2020). The unedited public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 22(4), 700–715. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893980> and Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Polity Press.

¹⁰ The Parliamentary Education Office outlines four key ideas for Australian Democracy: active and engaged citizens; an inclusive and equitable society; free and franchised elections; and the rule of laws for both citizens and the government. See Australian Parliamentary Education Office. (n.d.). Democracy Factsheet, Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Education Office. <https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/how-parliament-works/system-of-government/democracy/#:~:text=This%20fact%20sheet%20introduces%20the,opposing%20ideas%20and%20representative%20government>

really give a shit. So it's probably, like, I'm passive in all that. I just couldn't be bothered."

Avoidance such as this is not unique. Australia has above world average levels of news avoidance and recent research finds that Australians are also the most likely to avoid news stories about social issues.¹¹ In this context, civic disengagement is a logical outcome: we are not actively seeking out information about social issues, we lack spaces to talk about issues, or won't take the risk to talk about issues when we are in potentially suitable spaces.

This indicates a double bind: there are impaired levels of engagement in the spaces that do exist and we have reservations about compromising spaces we already inhabit that might be alternative sites of discussion. This results in the formation of echo chambers or elevated levels of personal responsibility on individuals to seek out and find places to more fully engage in productive debates, and this involves personal labour.

Given these reflections, as one interviewee surmised, are we actually just afraid to argue, or do we not know how? They ponder

Do we have it too easy and we're bored and we're just looking to, you know, make trouble? Or is there a genuine fear about the future that is running, you know, through the country, but also, you know, running globally? We're just really grappling with how to respond to stuff.

The severed connection between civic engagement and constructive discussion is pervasive and multi-faceted, and the final major barrier that this study analyses when it comes to discussing issues of national importance concerns the display of conflict and polarisation.

Theme 4: Performative Polarisation

The key themes that our interviewees described include limited awareness and engagement, perceived social risks and a lack of safe spaces when they constructively discuss the Voice. In this final theme, our interviewees described being frustrated with the tone and tactics of national debate and felt that it needs vast improvement, especially concerning the use of polarising or divisive rhetoric, which some categorised as performative or "for show."

While in a global context some interviewees reported that Australia does a reasonable job of constructively discussing issues, in a domestic context, the majority of

¹¹ University of Canberra's Digital News Report: Australia 2023 notes that news avoidance within Australia was steady in 2023 (69%, +1) and is 6 percentage points above the global average. The most common ways of avoiding news were 'checking the news less often' (32%), 'ignoring, scrolling past' (31%), and 'avoiding particular news sources' (30%). See Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2023). *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*, University of Canberra, News and Media Research Centre, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-06/apo-nid322606_1.pdf pp. 11–12.

interviewees felt that the Voice had been publicly discussed to a good standard, and they were also suspicious that this standard was an intentional type of performance.

4.1 Perceived Bias

Many interviewees felt that uneven and, at times, blatantly false information had been reported by the media. They also identified instances of implicit and overt bias,⁹ or mistruths have been expressed by political leaders. However, while many interviewees were conscious of misinformation and felt confident identifying it but were unsure how best to combat it.

One interviewee questioned the motivations of misinformation campaigns, characterising the injection of confusion surrounding the referendum as a deliberate strategy to impede constructive discussion

And it's not even just the major parties, you know, just the hijacking that's gone on for people to grandstand or use it as a platform for other agendas I just find fascinating. Like, how did it get this difficult?

Others noted that bias in political commentary was so blatant and the misrepresentations of facts fuelled by the media so dangerous, that there have been impacts in other areas of society. Many noted that bias has infiltrated everyday discourse. In other words, **destructive and polarising techniques across politics and the media have changed how we speak to each other in an everyday sense, and not for the better**

I don't think I have that with people who [are] dear friends of mine, we never get to a point where it's like, "you know what - I really respect what you're saying. Obviously, we're going to just have to disagree." It kind of all explodes before then and we end up, not calling each other stupid, but kind of inferring that like, you're an idiot for believing it or you're idiot for believing fake news or whatever. And so, I would say they've, yeah, not been constructive discussions.

Others described the inability to relate to or see the relevancy of opposing opinions on the topic of the referendum, which caused rapid escalation and emotional exchanges

[o]ne of our neighbours brought a friend, a very good friend, and we started talking about the Voice. We started talking about, you know, the vote. And of course, in amongst us, I think there was just sort of this assumption that it was a safe space, I guess. [The friend argues their perspective] and I couldn't believe he was saying such a ridiculous thing...and [the friend] who brought him along, said, I can't believe what he would be thinking, I just refuse. I cannot stay here and listen to this. I'm sorry, I'm off. And so we're sitting there. We're left sitting there.

In conjunction with emotions and the role of social risk, the perception of media, political, and personal bias is another barrier to more constructive discussion about the Voice and other issues of national importance, especially when the discussion that is available is already highly charged and polarising. But how much of this is for show?

4.2 Polarising Rhetoric on Show

Our interviewees' initial suspicions were centred around why there was not a higher volume of information available about the Voice and the referendum (outlined earlier in this report).

However, an added dimension to the volume of information is that people also felt that information has been strategically designed to elicit emotive reactions and therefore, is a type of spectacle or performance. Characterising the current state of discourse as conflict-for-the-sake-of-conflict, one interviewee observed

One of them is arguing against the Voice because they think it goes too far and the other one is arguing against it because they're saying it doesn't go far enough. So they're targeting new demographics and clearly they don't actually have a specific ideology or idea about it. They just don't want it to happen. They don't have any real reasons for that. They just don't want it. So you know, that's the exact opposite of a constructive discussion where you're not even listening, you're just saying no for and not even revealing your reason, your genuine reasons why and lying and misinformation, disinformation, all that kind of stuff. The Yes campaign also has its problems as well.

Another felt that polarising rhetoric has caused irrevocable damage to any chance of civil debate about the Voice "...there is potentially an information vacuum, but it's almost like it's too late. That vacuum got filled with divisive points."

The references to polarising rhetoric highlight that conflict surrounding the Voice exists, but more importantly demonstrates our interviewees' awareness that this conflict is also a display of highly curated narratives that deliberately give 'the appearance' of disagreement. Performative polarisation, in this sense, involves an awareness of the deliberate and often exaggerated displays of extreme opinions that are for attention or in the pursuit of particular ideological agendas. At the political level, many interviewees were frustrated by this tactic

Say what it is and then we can make up our decision like our own opinion and just be like don't hide anything either, like, just be open with it. And then, yes like with the politicians, just stop bagging the other one out. Just tell me what [it is].

While conflict, whether manufactured or not, is a hallmark of a healthy democracy, the majority of interviewees felt that the display of conflict about the Voice and the upcoming referendum had been distracting and not led to understanding or healthy progress. The solution? Some believed that we should be doing better as individuals to counter this

I think it's also about someone being empowered enough to see past the headlines and look past the comments that are being made and look to the authors of those comments, look to their standing, look to their experience, look to what their agenda may or may not be. Not from a judgmental point of view, but in just sort of trying to understand the landscape.

Therefore, people's ability to critically analyse the information and debates concerning the Voice and the referendum is essential. Yet for most of our interviewees, the highly bounded nature of polarised discussion at a political and

media level has taken over, filtered down, and narrowed the possibility for the public to meaningfully exchange opinions with each other on the issue

[I]t's so easy to divide our communities because some someone... someone's just come up with this kind of singular story or message around what you will lose as a result of this [the Voice]. And that's enough for people, right? It's like, "well I don't want that to happen." And so unless we're able to replace it with a better possible future, really, then [polarising tactics are] not going to give up.

Polarisation was also evident in our interviewees' experiences concerning the role of the media and how they were discussing the upcoming referendum and the Voice.

4.3 Media

Performative displays of polarity concerning the Voice and the upcoming referendum are not limited to politicians. The majority of interviewees identified the media as an extensive source of hyperbole and heightened conflict

You know their role and the way they understand their role is to take stories and real sort of events and news and then filter them through the journalistic process. And that will be sort of contextualising it historically, politically, economically, socially. And they add all of these details to it through the gatekeeping process and out the outcome of that is the is the discourse and that I don't necessarily think that is reflective of real discussions that are happening between just ordinary people.

Others note the difficulty of contemporary journalism to capture the public's attention, and describe it as a reason why our constructive discussion is so poor, because of

...a pushing the agenda sort of thing. You know in a debate there's probably going to be, you know, applause lines that that work for both sides [of the Voice]. So to speak to that and then suddenly the people that are so called sort of providing independent analysis can snip the one hour or the 90 minute session into a 32 second bite that then play over social media and suddenly that's what people think, "well I've seen the I've seen the highlights of the debate and it was very clear that [which] vote won." So yeah because of what they've consumed as opposed to the sort of the independent analysis that purportedly was being done.

While interviewees acknowledged that filtering and gatekeeping occurs in the media due to the public's consumption habits, they were also frustrated that this equated to the pursuit of specific media agendas "[y]ou know, when the media reports it, you can see it's so obvious and where, yeah, the angles are coming from." Many described these agendas as incomplete, biased, or using outright fake news. There was also concern that these techniques are on the rise

...big media is taking, you know, taking on a bigger role. And, you know, it's all [feeding] the way we get polarisation in terms of like News Corp versus ABC. And OK arguably there's some healthy like middle ground there, but they seem to be like both point stretching as far as possible in the to the other polarities. So, media could be playing a much better role than it seems to be [in improving the quality of dialogue in Australia].

While exchanges about the Voice and the upcoming referendum were generally described as unproductive, with some promising pockets of friction or higher-quality debate, the connection between what the media has reported and what the media has

access to it also critical. Many people were curious about what was happening “behind closed doors.”

4.4 Behind the Scenes

The performative understanding of polarisation was also a source of curiosity. One interviewee pragmatically stated that what happens in public does not reflect the reality of closed-door, political discussions about the Voice

Like, you know, there’s got to be constructive discussion going on. There has to be... and then there’s this thing that gets played out publicly, this game of, you know, opposition, he said, she said. Or, you know, this divisive [talk], which is, of course, all around.

The realisation that healthier constructive discussion does occur away from the public indicates gatekeeping where some people have access and others are denied. Gatekeeping of conversations, or the appearance of gatekeeping them, can make discussions seem harder or more polarising than they actually are, and undermines trust amongst politics, the media, and the public

Another issue I think within this constructive discussion thing is, you know, truth. How do we, how can we foster truth in in terms of the facts and how can we trust that? And I think the level of trust is lost. This is decreased because, you know, people have not shared the right thing. Sometimes that gets to be found out or just generally, you know, can I trust that view?

This is a disconnect between how the Voice and referendum is discussed openly and thought to be negotiated in private, and it undermines the public's perception of what is “real.” In Australia right now, there is a degree of confidence that constructive discussion occurs in some spaces, but overwhelmingly, is not visible or well-modelled, especially across the media and politics.

As this study has outlined, many interviewees reported a frustrating situation. They have lacked opportunities or were prevented from constructively discussing issues important to their wider communities due to a variety of internal and external pressures. The result? Limited exchange on the topic, issue fatigue, gatekeeping and a lack of trust in the information that is available.

The Future and Constructive Discussion

People in Australia define and experience constructive discussion in myriad ways, yet, as this research has explored, there are many barriers to participating in productive conversations about the upcoming referendum and the Voice. This is due to a range of contributing factors across the themes of awareness, risk, spaces for exchange, and performative polarisation. There are many aspects that any future work into constructive discussion should consider, including the most effective ways to improve how we can communicate with each other about contested or complicated issues, and to provide further data on the following questions:

What is holding us back from constructive discussion?

Some don't know how. Some don't feel safe. Some don't have the energy. Some have the energy but are frustrated that no one else seems to want a "fair fight."

Sometimes, it's because politics and the media does not value or promote thoughtful discussion and in-depth exploration of complex social issues. Sometimes that level of exploration is inaccessible to us.

The state of polarisation and combative discussion has filtered down to our everyday discussions and made us think that we have little in common to share.

Why can't we change now?

We don't practise constructive discussion enough. For some of us, it's because we haven't been taught, or it has not been modelled to us enough, or well enough. There are wider social movements and global events such as COVID-19 and the privatisation of public space that make people fearful to speak up, or hesitant to speak on behalf of others when they lack the lived experience about a particular topic. There is a pervasive and deep-seated belief that the large media outlets and politics has changed the way we speak and relate to each other and that polarisation is still a source of revenue.

How to change?

Change needs to occur on a number of levels.

In fact, to improve constructive discussion, change is needed across the entire system. We need to learn how to argue, we need to learn to negotiate difference, and we need to make space to talk about key issues that have affected us in the past, in the present, and will continue to affect us into the future.

Currently, many people do not feel safe discussing their opinions unless they are with like-minded peers or family. Some feel they lack the knowledge to warrant their expression of a "valid" opinion, and others are dismayed at the politics of display and

see our conversational exchanges as rife with mistruth and conflict but are, at the same time, bemused that the country continues to function.

Perhaps most alarmingly, due to the state of discourse in Australia, some have even completely switched off from the noise to preserve themselves or focus on more positive aspects of their lives. The labour associated with having truly constructive discussions about issues such as the Voice and upcoming referendum is frequently perceived as too substantial or deemed to be an inappropriate form of conversation in someone's immediate surroundings, such as work or social events.

With a lack of safe spaces and increase in polarising rhetoric, finding places and time to discuss issues of national importance is a form of labour that is fraught with social risk that many avoid or only partially engage in.

Where can I start?

We know it is a daunting task, and one that cannot be completed in a day, or perhaps even a year. But as this research has demonstrated, there are things that we can do to pave the way for a future where more of us are comfortable and experienced in having constructive discussions. This includes:

- Modelling open and curious conversations
- Forging connections before conclusions
- Practicing reflexivity of thought, and understanding that your perspective will always affect your interpretation of the facts
- Fostering genuine exchanges and deflecting divisive tactics

The upcoming referendum has been a polarising and confusing time for many people in Australia, and this research has explored the contributing factors and people's desire to improve how we constructively discuss topics that affect the nation, such as the Voice and 2023 referendum.

When we find spaces to practise constructive discussion, we afford ourselves the ability to engage with issues that are bigger than ourselves. It is not enough to merely seek out or create space for viewpoints to collide. Constructive discussion requires a dynamic process of exchange if we are to make progress on social issues.

For the Voice and the upcoming referendum, focus not on the conflict, but where we might develop modes of communication that see possibilities between different points of view. Constructive discussion challenges us to seek and work with difference to drive positive change that will help us to build and stay on track for the future that Australia wants.

References

- Australian Government. (2023, August). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice*, Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, National Indigenous Australians Agency. <https://voice.gov.au/>
- Australian Parliamentary Education Office. (n.d.). *Democracy Factsheet*, Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Education Office, <https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/how-parliament-works/system-of-government/democracy/#:~:text=This%20fact%20sheet%20introduces%20the,oppo sing%20ideas%20and%20representative%20government>
- Bennett, W. L., & Pfetsch, B. (2018). Rethinking Political Communication in a Time of Disrupted Public Spheres, *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 243–253. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx017>
- Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Bimber, B., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2020). The unedited public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 22(4), 700–715. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893980>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis, *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Polity Press.
- Edelman. (2022). *Edelman Trust Barometer: the Cycle of Distrust*, Daniel J. Edelman Holdings. Inc. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling, *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton University Press.
- Fuller, J., & Cheung, H. (2021). *Next25 Recoded: Understanding and improving how Australia makes its Future*, (Report No. 1, Ed. 1). Next25. [https://files.next25.org.au/Next25 Recoded Report V1E1.pdf](https://files.next25.org.au/Next25%20Recoded%20Report%20V1E1.pdf)
- Guy, S., & Inglis, A. S. (1999). Tips for trainers: Introducing the “H-form” – a method for monitoring and evaluation. In I. Gujit, & S. Braden (Eds.), *Learning from Analysis, Participatory Learning and Action Notes* (34, pp. 84–87). International Institute for

Environment and Development.

<https://www.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/6150IIED.pdf>

National Indigenous Australians Agency. (2023, June). *Parliament passes the Constitution Alteration Bill*, Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, National Indigenous Australians Agency. <https://www.niaa.gov.au/news-centre/indigenous-affairs/parliament-passes-constitution-alteration-bill#:~:text=The%20Parliament%20passed%20the%20Constitution,the%20end%20of%20the%20year>

Nguyen, C T. (2020). Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles, *Episteme*, 17(2), 141–161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>

Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave Commun.* 3 (17008). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.82>

Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2023). *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*, University of Canberra, News and Media Research Centre, https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-06/apo-nid322606_1.pdf

Parliamentary Library. (2022). *Referendums and Plebiscites*, Australian Government Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliamentary Handbook for the 47th Parliament. <https://handbook.aph.gov.au/Referendums>

Annex

Methodology

To explore constructive discussion, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, and the upcoming referendum, this study conducted in-depth interviews with the following people: a subsection of the Australian public who work (or have worked) in a job where they talk to people when the stakes are high or have important matters to address.

Interviewees were identified following a purposive sampling process that asked people to identify their particular experience with having ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ conversations. We deliberately left this categorisation open and self-defined, so not to exclude people who assumed that formal qualifications (such as being a professional mediator) was required.

Participants were recruited on the basis of their experience managing conflict, facilitating dialogue, and having effective conversations, but we focused on their use of professional or personal strategies rather than on specific actors or details of the issues they have managed.

Sample Profile

All participants were over 18 years of age and interviews were conducted between mid-July to September 2023. Sample size was determined by saturation (Etikan et al., 2016) and an iterative, exploratory analysis protocol was repeated until the themes and connections between the themes were exhausted (Charmaz, 2006).

Malterud et al’s (2016) information power also guided the sample size and was considered adequate based on two factors. First, the clear dialogue between researchers and interviewees resulted in sufficiently strong and rich data that enabled reflexive thematic analysis. Second, the interviewees had specific expertise in productive conversations, yet sufficient variation of experience, age and gender to enable diversity of thought. This led to the following pool:

15 people with professional experience having productive conversations

The pool included people who worked across the following sectors: corporate, public service (including law and order, health, social services, emergency management), and not-for-profit.

There were several people with customer service experience across hospitality, aviation, arts and culture, and social services, while others worked for charitable foundations, in Aboriginal health, aged care, advocacy, or as professional facilitators and entrepreneurs.

The pool represented a range of professional experience and included people who operated in director, manager, intermediate, and entry-level capacities.

The following information was also represented in the pool:

Age Range	Percentage of Pool	Total
18-24 years	20%	3 out of 15
25-39 years	13%	2 out of 15
40-54 years	27%	4 out of 15
55-69 years	33%	5 out of 15
70+ years	7%	1 out of 15

Report Pronoun	Percentage of Pool	Total
She/her	47%	7 out of 15
He/him	40%	6 out of 15
Self-described	13%	2 out of 15

Think future. Act today.

For further information or to enquire about engaging [Next25](#) to deliver a tailored keynote presentation, interactive strategy workshop, or bespoke advisory service, please contact:

Chloë Spackman
CEO
chloe@next25.org.au
+61 421 514 366
next25.org.au

This report was prepared by Next25.
For feedback, please email contact@next25.org.au
Citation: Reddan, C. (2023), *Next25 Recoded: Contested spaces: Australia, the referendum and constructive discussion in 2023*, (Report No. 2, Ed. 1). Next25.

Next25 acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

ACN 605 648 977