

# Democracy v self interest?

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When it comes to electoral reform, are political parties more concerned about proposing reforms to suit their own agenda, or do they have the greater good at heart?

This very question forms the basis of a research theory currently being explored by Flinders University PhD candidate Sarah John (pictured).

Ms John, an International Studies and Laws (Honours) graduate, is investigating the [relationship](#) between [political parties](#) and the rules that govern our elections, both in Australia and overseas.

“The legislature determines a range of [election](#) laws from counting rules

to campaign finances, and as a result political parties have indirect control to pick and choose how elections are run,” Ms John said.

“For example, campaign finance laws govern who parties can seek money from, how they spend that money and whether they have to declare it publicly,” she said.

“So a party who generates most of its funds from large corporate donations would probably want to keep it that way for their own self-interest but there are also instances where such a party has sought to eliminate corporate donations by arguing they make parties beholden to the donor, which is a democracy-based idea.”

As part of her PhD, Ms John has spent the past three years conducting predominantly archival research – including a summer scholarship at the National Library of Australia as well as several overseas study trips to the US and Canada – to scour the archives for party records.

She said preliminary findings had shown political parties were more inclined to propose election reforms based on political culture.

“The conclusion I’m coming to is that political culture matters,” she said.

“Political parties are increasingly looking towards election reform to make parliament more relevant, revive interest in politics and ultimately reduce cynicism which is an endemic problem in [Australia](#).

“Where a society expects people to behave properly, political parties are much more cautious about pursuing their own interests but if the public expects a party to manipulate election laws they probably will because they’re not disappointing anyone.”

Provided by Flinders University

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