

Public Opinion Towards Governance: Results from the Inaugural ANU Poll

Contents

Most Important Problems for Australia

Confidence in Institutions

Satisfaction with Democracy

Federal-State Relations

Priorities for Government Spending

Perceptions of Government Competence

Political Mood

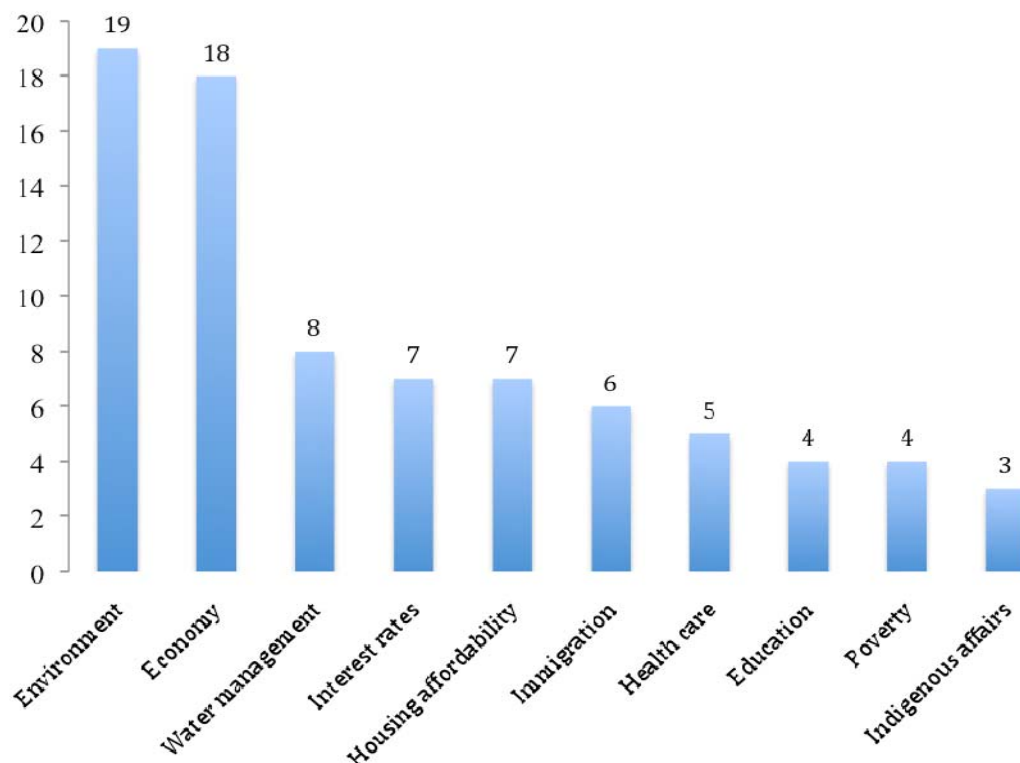
Most Important Problems for Australia

Key points

- The environment is viewed as the most important issue facing Australia, now and in five years' time.
- More than one in three adults believe that the environment is the most important issue that should be discussed at the Australia 2020 Summit.
- About four times more people mention the environment as the most important issue facing the country than mentioned it in the 1990s.

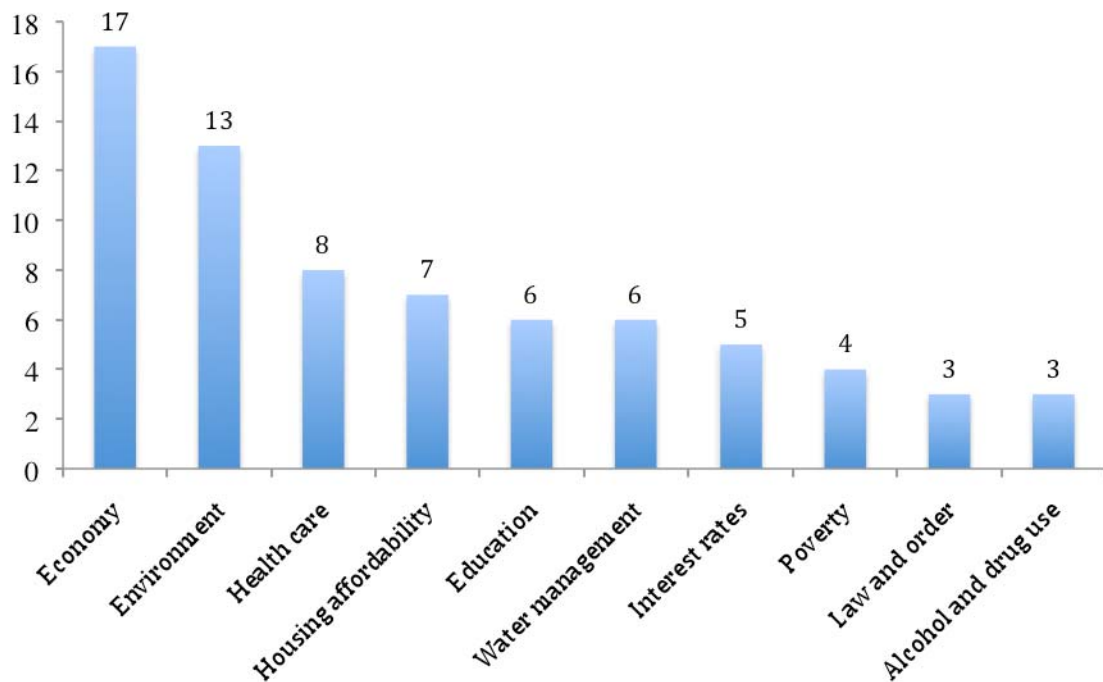
The environment has become the most important issue for Australians, just ahead of concerns about the economy and jobs. When asked in an open-ended question what are the most important problems facing Australia, 19 percent of the survey respondents mentioned the environment (including global warming and sustainability), and a further 13 percent mentioned the environment as the second most important problem. The economy was viewed as the main issue by 18 percent of the respondents, and as the second most important issue by a further 17 percent.

Most important problem facing the country (percent)



‘What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?’

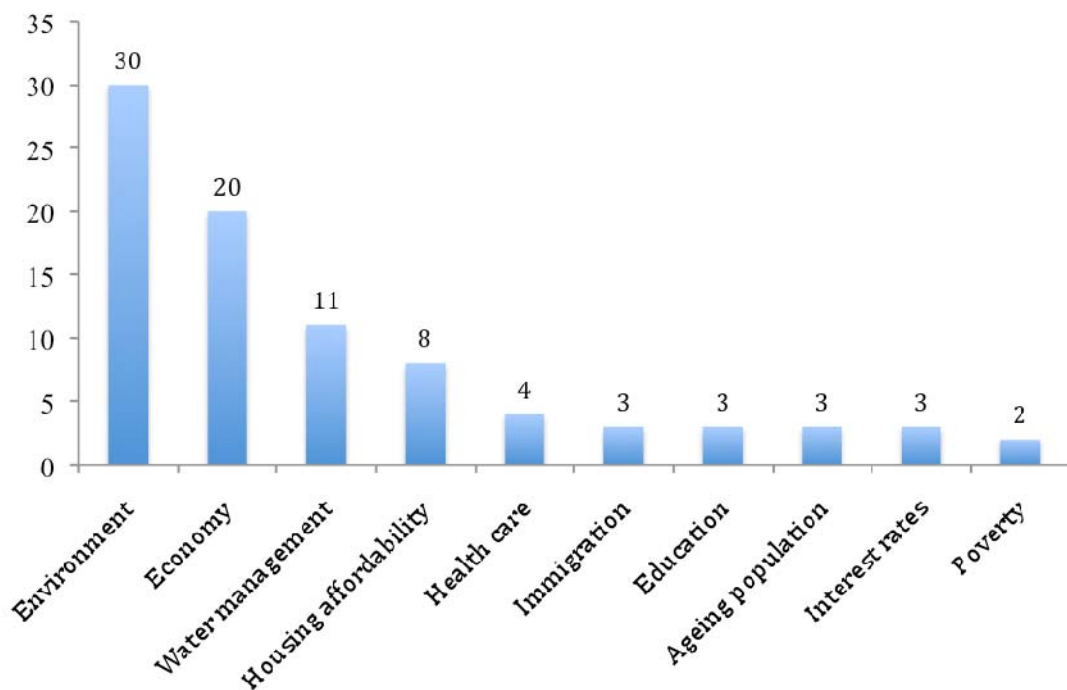
Second most important problem facing the country (percent)



‘And what do you think is the second most important problem facing Australia today?’

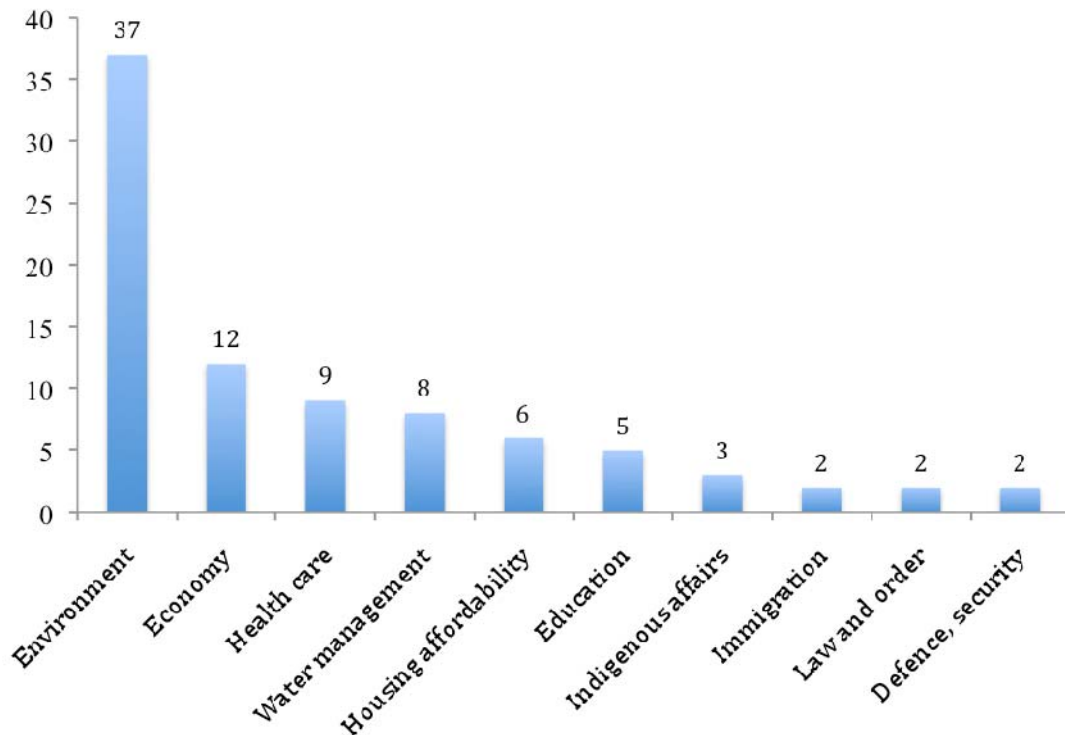
Asked about what they thought would be the most important problem facing Australia in five years’ time, the survey respondents again ranked the environment first, this time with three in 10 mentioning it. And when asked about what the Australia 2020 Summit should be discussing, no less than 37 percent mentioned the environment, followed by 12 percent who mentioned the economy, 9 percent health care and 8 percent water management.

Most important problem facing the country in five years (percent)



‘Thinking ahead about five years, what do you think will be the most important problem facing Australia then?’

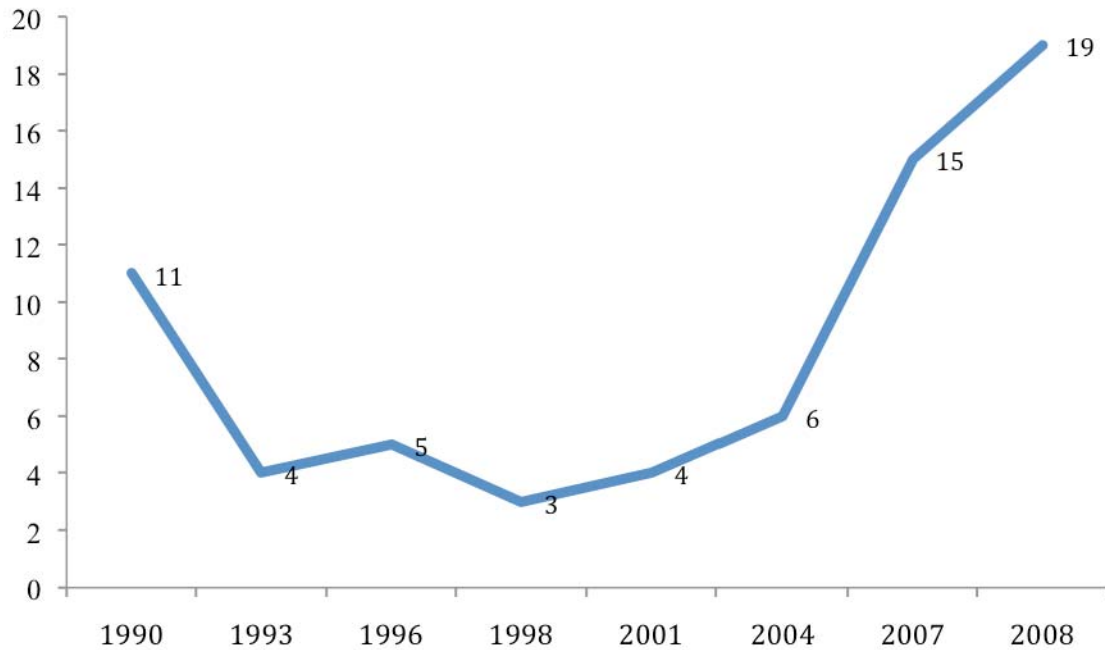
Main issue to be discussed at Australia 2020 Summit (percent)



‘What do you think is the most important issue that should be discussed at the Summit?’

By any standards, the rise of the environment as a major issue for the public has been rapid. During most of the 1990s, between 3 and 5 percent of those interviewed in surveys mentioned it as the most important issue, rising to 6 percent in the 2001 federal election. In the 2007 federal election, 15 percent saw it as the most important issue.

The rise of the environment as a major issue (percent)



Sources Australian Election Study, 1990-2007; ANU Governance Survey, 2008.

International Comparisons

A similar open-ended question in a survey conducted by the CBS News/New York Times Poll in March 2008 found that the economy and jobs dominated the concerns of the US public, followed by the war in Iraq. The environment did not rate a mention among the top five issues.

‘What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?’ Open-ended question.

Issue	Percent
Economy/Jobs	37
War in Iraq	15
Gas/Heating oil crisis	7
Health care	6
Immigration	3
Other	30
Unsure	2

Source <http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>

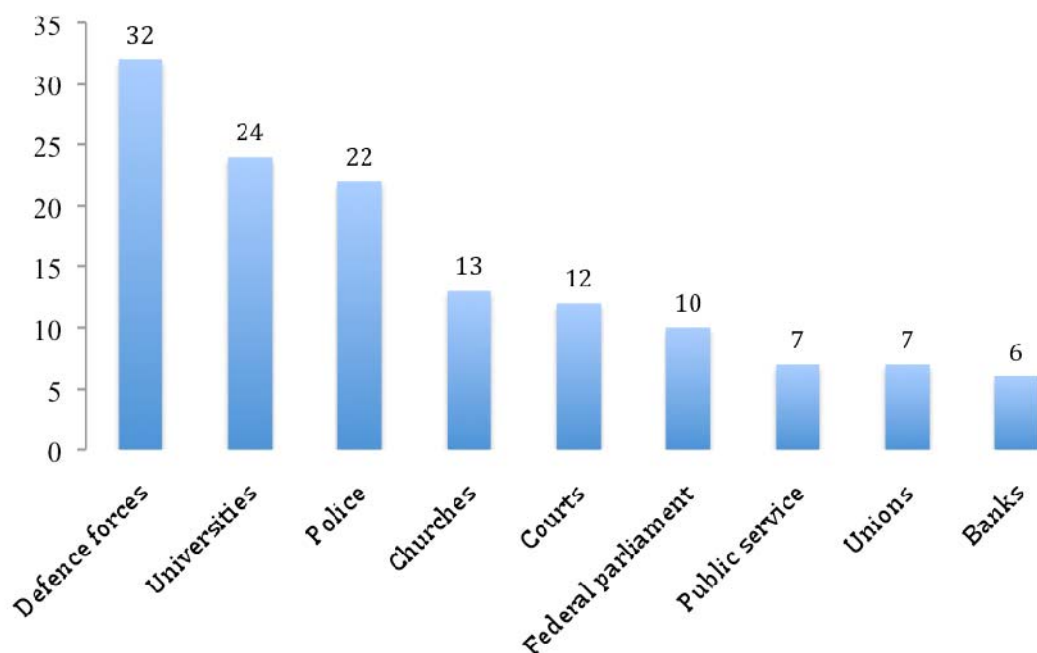
Confidence in Institutions

Key points

- Australians have most confidence in the defence forces, universities and the police, and least confidence in the public service, trade unions and banks.
- Universities have seen the largest increase in public confidence since 2001.
- In an international context, the confidence Australians express in their institutions is some of the highest in the world.

Public confidence in major institution is a key component of a strong democracy. When asked about their level of confidence in nine major institutions, the survey respondents expressed strongest confidence in the defence forces (32 percent saying they had a 'great deal of confidence') followed by universities (24 percent) and the police (22 percent). At the other end of the scales, there was least confidence in banks (6 percent), and trade unions and the public service (both 7 percent).

Confidence in institutions (percent 'great deal' of confidence):



'How much confidence do you have in...'

Since 2001, confidence in all of the main institutions has increased, in the case of universities by a substantial 13 percentage points. The smallest changes in confidence have been in the three institutions that the public have least confidence in—trade unions, the public service and banks.

Changes in confidence in institutions since 2001

	2001	2005	2008	(Change
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				2001-08)
Australian defence forces	26	25	32	(+8)
Universities	11	-	24	(+13)
Police	13	24	22	(+9)
Churches, religious institutions	-	7	13	
Courts, legal system	5	11	12	(+7)
Federal parliament	5	5	10	(+5)
Unions	3	3	7	(+4)
Public service	3	3	7	(+4)
Banks, financial institutions	2	-	6	(+4)

Sources Australian Election Study, 2001; Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2005; ANU Governance Survey, 2008.

International Comparisons

Comparisons of confidence in institutions in Australia with similar results in eight countries shows that Australia ranks first on four of the eight institutions—the defence forces, trade unions, parliament and the public service—and ranks second on confidence in the police. By international standards, therefore, Australia exhibits a high level of public confidence in major institutions.

Rank	Armed forces	Unions	Courts	Parliament
1	Australia (74)	Australia (42)	Japan (62)	Australia (52)
2	USA (70)	France (39)	Canada (57)	Canada (40)
3	Britain (65)	Italy (38)	Britain (52)	Britain (39)
4	Canada (62)	USA (37)	USA (52)	France (38)
5	France (56)	Canada (35)	Australia (49)	Germany (38)
6	Italy (58)	Germany (34)	Italy (48)	Italy (38)
7	Japan (57)	Japan (34)	Germany (48)	USA (34)
8	Russia (57)	Russia (32)	France (40)	Japan (32)
9	Germany (44)	Britain (32)	Russia (38)	Russia (32)

Rank	Public service	Churches	Police
1	Australia (51)	Germany (64)	Canada (68)
2	France (48)	Italy (64)	Australia (67)
3	Canada (47)	USA (60)	Germany (62)
4	USA (45)	Canada (57)	Italy (62)
5	Russia (43)	Russia (54)	USA (60)
6	Britain (42)	Australia (46)	Britain (60)
7	Germany (42)	Britain (44)	France (58)
8	Italy (42)	France (43)	Japan (55)
9	Japan (36)	Japan (19)	Russia (36)

Countries are ranked by their score on a zero to 100 scale, where 'great deal of confidence' = 100, 'some confidence' = 67, 'not much confidence' = 33, 'no confidence at all' = 0.

Sources World Values Survey, 2005; ANU Governance Survey, 2008

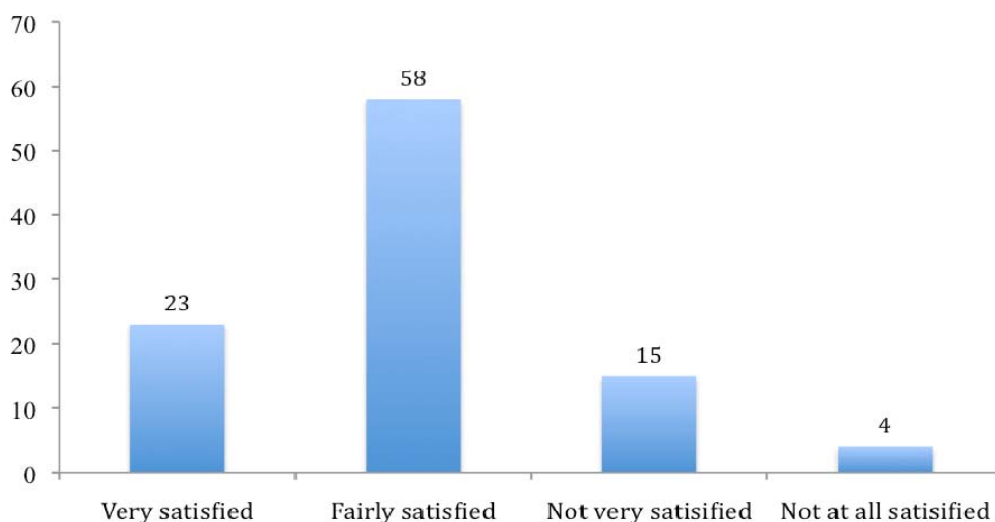
Satisfaction with Democracy

Key points

- There is a high level of satisfaction with democracy in Australia.
- Satisfaction has been consistently high since the late 1960s, with the partial exception of the period immediately after the 1975 constitutional crisis.
- Australia ranks as one of the countries with the highest levels of satisfaction with democracy in the world.

The public's level of satisfaction with democracy represents a collective judgement about the performance of the political system in dealing with problems. It is also a judgement about how effective the public believes democracy is when compared to other possible alternatives. Surveys consistently show strong public support for democracy in Australia. The ANU Governance Survey is no exception and found that almost one in four of the respondents were 'very satisfied' with democracy, and more than one half were 'fairly satisfied.' Just 4 percent said that they were 'not at all satisfied.'

Satisfaction with democracy (percent)



'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?'

Placed in an overtime perspective, satisfaction with Australian democracy has been high for almost four decades. The sole exception is the period immediately following the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government when support dipped to 56 percent. Thereafter, support has been gradually increasing; the 2007 federal election represents a peak of 86 percent, with a slight decline to 81 percent in the ANU Governance Survey.

Satisfaction with democracy since 1969 (percent 'very satisfied')



Sources Australian National Political Attitude Surveys, 1969, 1979; Australian Election Study, 1987-2007; ANU Governance Survey, 2008.

International Comparisons

By international standards, Australia has a high level of public satisfaction with democracy. Australia ranks second in satisfaction with democracy, after Denmark, and just ahead of the United States.

Rank	Country	Percent satisfied
1.	Denmark	94
2.	Australia	81
3.	USA	78
4.	Germany	73
5.	Japan	72
6.	Canada	71
7.	New Zealand	70
8.	France	57
9.	Poland	44
10.	Israel	36
11.	Brazil	30
12.	Bulgaria	23

Sources Comparative Study of Electoral Systems module 2; ANU Governance Survey, 2008

Federal-state relations

Key points

- Public opinion is equally balanced between support for the states and support for the federal government.
- Compared to the late 1970s, public opinion has moved very strong in favour of the federal government taking powers from the states.

Federal-state relations have long been a contentious issue, most notably when different parties are in office at the federal and state levels of government. There have been recent debates about the appropriate balance of power between the federal and state governments. What does the public see as the right balance between the two levels of government? And how have these views changed over time?

Federal-state powers

	1979	2008	(Change 1979-2008)
States should give more powers to Federal government	17	40	(+23)
Federal government has enough power already	66	39	(-27)
Depends/No opinion	17	21	(+4)
Total	100	100	
(N)	(2,014)	(996)	

'Do you think the state governments should give some powers to the federal government, or do you think the federal government has enough powers already?'

Sources Australian National Political Attitudes survey 1979, ANU Governance Survey, 2008

The ANU Governance Survey replicated two questions about federal-state relations which were originally asked in a 1979 survey, also conducted at ANU. In 2008, the public was equally divided between support for the federal and state governments. Four out of 10 respondents believed that the states should transfer power to the federal government, while slightly fewer—39 percent—believed that the federal government had enough power already. This represents a significant shift in public opinion from 1979, when just 17 percent believed that the states should transfer power to the federal government.

The ANU Survey shows, therefore, an almost equal balance between support for the states and support for the federal government. This represents a significant change from public opinion almost thirty years ago, when the balance was very much in favour of the states.

Federal-state funding

(Change

	1979	2008	1979-2008)
Federal government should provide more money	49	37	(-12)
State governments have enough	30	38	(+8)
Depends/No opinion	21	25	(+4)
Total	100	100	
(N)	(2,014)	(996)	

‘Do you think the federal government should provide more money to the state governments, or do you think the states have enough already?’

Sources Australian National Political Attitudes Survey 1979, ANU Governance Survey, 2008

On the vexed issue of funding for the states, again opinions are equally divided in the ANU Governance Survey, with 37 percent taking the view that the federal government should give more to the states, and 38 percent believing that the states are already adequately funded. This also represents a contrast with 1979, though not as dramatically so; in that earlier survey, nearly half of those interviewed believed that the federal government should provide more money to the states.

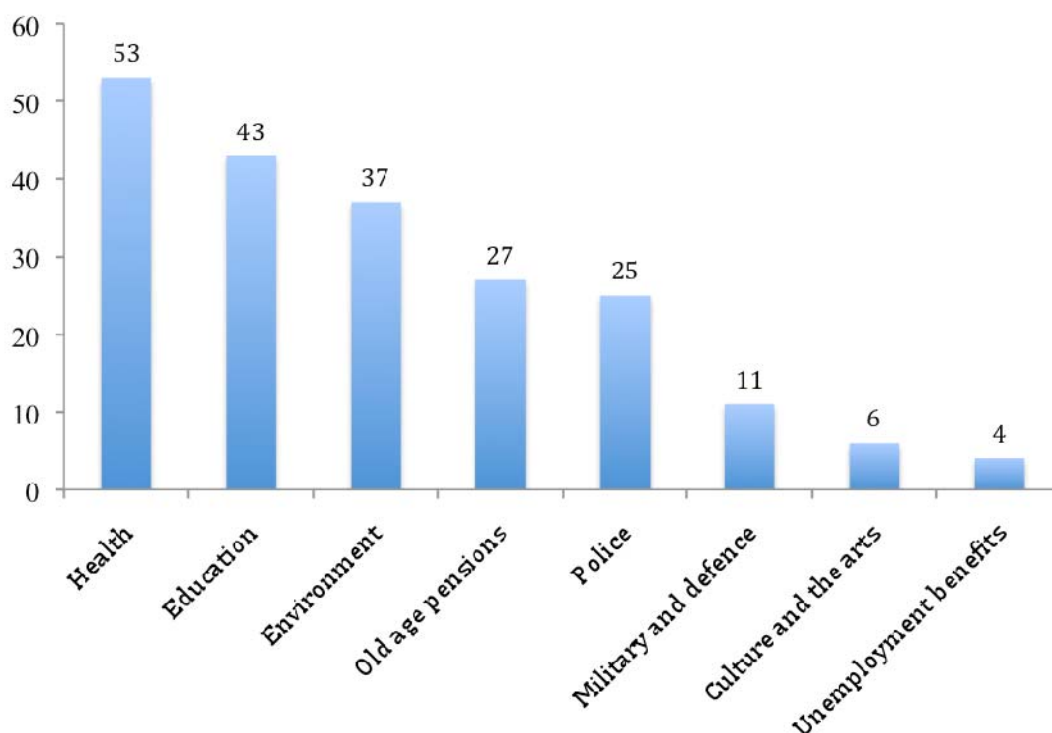
Priorities for government spending

Key points

- The public favours increased government spending on health, education and the environment.
- The least popular areas for more government expenditure are defence, culture and the arts, and unemployment benefits.
- Compared to their international counterparts, Australians strongly favour increased government spending across a range of areas.

The ANU Governance Survey asked the respondents to state their priorities for government spending. Health was viewed as the top priority for government spending; 53 percent said the government should spend ‘much more’ on health. The next priority was education, mentioned by 43 percent, and the environment (37 percent). Least popular areas for government spending were the military (11 percent), culture and the arts (6 percent) and unemployment benefits (4 percent).

Priorities for government spending (percent say ‘much more’)



‘Would you like to see more, the same or less government spending on ...’

Judged against the results from a 2006 survey, the public wants to see more spending in almost all of the areas of government responsibility, though the least popular areas remain the military and unemployment benefits. The largest increase between the two surveys is in support for more spending on the environment, which has increased by a substantial 21 percentage points.

Priorities for government spending 2006-2008 (percent ‘ much more’)

Rank	Spending area	2006	2008	(Change 2006-08)
1	Health	39	53	(+14)
2	Education	31	43	(+12)
3	Environment	16	37	(+21)
4	Old age pensions	15	27	(+12)
5	Police and law enforcement	20	25	(+5)
6	Military and defence	5	11	(+6)
7	Culture and the arts	-	6	
8	Unemployment benefits	2	4	(+2)

Sources Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2006; ANU Governance Survey, 2008

International Comparisons

By international standards, Australians are generally in favour of high levels of government expenditure. Judged against seven other countries, Australians rank highest in wanting more spending in four out of five areas of government responsibility. The exception is defence, where Australians rank third, after Russians and Americans.

Rank	Health	Education	Environment	Police	Defence
1	Australia (53)	Australia (43)	Australia (37)	Australia (25)	Russia (29)
2	Russia (46)	Russia (43)	Japan (24)	USA (16)	USA (13)
3	USA (36)	USA (41))	Russia (24)	Britain (15)	Australia (11)
4	Japan (29)	Germany (40)	France (18)	Russia (13)	Canada (9)
5	Britain (26)	Britain (21)	USA (17)	Germany (12)	Britain (9)
6	Canada (23)	France (20)	Britain (12)	Canada (10)	Japan (7)
7	France (22)	Japan (19)	Germany (11)	France (9)	Germany (3)
8	Germany (19)	Canada (16)	Canada (10)	Japan (8)	France (2)

Sources International Social Survey Program, 2006; ANU Governance Survey, 2008

Perceptions of government competence

Key points

- The public views the government as most effective in handling security and unemployment, and least effective in health care and housing affordability.
- Since 2006, there has been a significant decline in the public's view of the government as competent in handling health.
- Internationally, Australia ranks at or near the top in handling problems, the main exception being in its handling of health care.

How competent do citizens think the government is in dealing with problems.? To answer this question, the ANU Governance Survey asked the respondents how successful they thought the government was in dealing with several problems, ranging from national security to housing affordability.

The results show that in four of the seven areas, the government was seen as more successful than unsuccessful. The government was seen to be most successful in dealing with security (66 percent more people thought they were successful than unsuccessful), followed by fighting unemployment and controlling crime. The government was seen as least successful in dealing with providing a decent standard of living for the old, in health care for the sick and in ensuring housing affordability

In general, most of the survey respondents viewed the government as having been more competent in 2008 than in 2006, particularly with regard to fighting unemployment. The biggest negative change was in health care, where 27 percent fewer thought the government had been successful in 2008 as took the same view in 2006.

Changes in perceptions of government competence (percent say 'successful' minus percent say 'unsuccessful')

Rank	Area	2006	2008	(Change 2006-08)
1	Dealing with threats to Australia's security	+52	+66	(+14)
2	Fighting unemployment	+9	+40	(+31)
3	Controlling crime	+5	+17	(+12)
4	Protecting the environment	-9	+4	(+13)
5	Decent standard of living for the old	+9	-10	(-19)
6	Health care for the sick	+10	-17	(-27)
7	Ensuring affordable housing	—	-63	

'How successful do you think the government is in ?'

Sources Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2006; ANU Governance Survey, 2008

International Comparisons

Compared to most other countries, Australia ranks favourably in how the public views the government competence. The Australian government is rated first in its handling of security and unemployment, and second in its handling of crime and the environment. However, it is ranked fifth out of eight countries in its handling of aged care, and sixth in its handling of health care.

Rank	National security	Unemployment	Crime	Environment
1	Australia (+66)	Australia (+40)	Germany (+27)	Germany (+8)
2	Germany (+50)	Canada (+12)	Australia (+17)	Australia (+4)
3	France (+36)	Britain (0)	Canada (+1)	USA (-4)
4	Britain (+28)	USA (-7)	USA (-2)	Canada (-8)
5	Canada (+18)	France (-35)	France (-5)	Britain (-18)
6	USA (+16)	Japan (-40)	Britain (-27)	France (-22)
7	Russia (+12)	Russia (-45)	Japan (-35)	Japan (-23)
8	Japan (-23)	Russia (-71)	Russia (-42)	Russia (-40)

Rank	Age care	Health care
1	Canada (+13)	Britain (+27)
2	Germany (+6)	Canada (+25)
3	Britain (-4)	France (+16)
4	France (-5)	Germany (+12)
5	Australia (-10)	Japan (-8)
6	USA (-12)	Australia (-17)
7	Japan (-17)	USA (-22)
8	Russia (-63)	Russia (-42)

Figures are the percent who view the government as successful, minus the percent who view the government as unsuccessful.

Sources International Social Survey Program, 2006; ANU Governance Survey, 2008

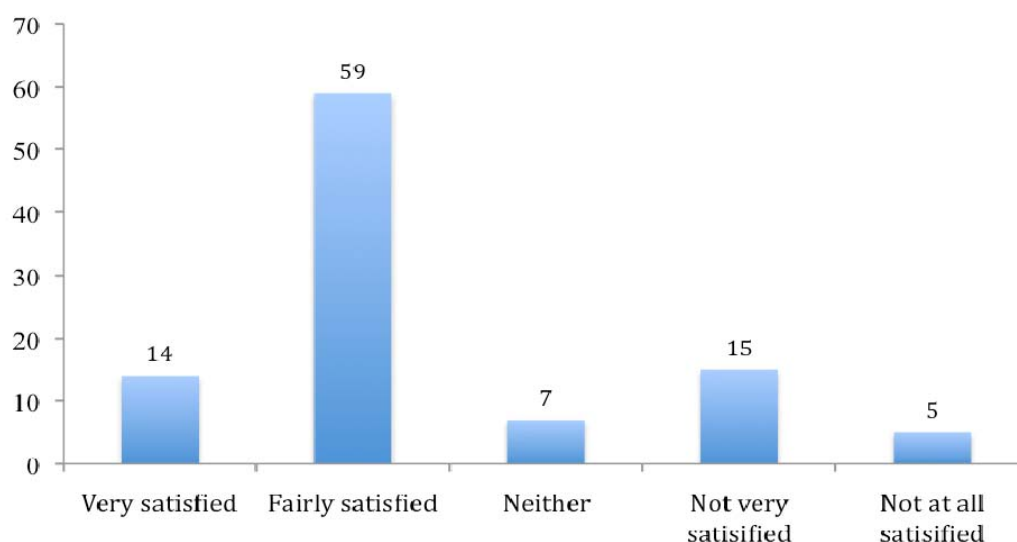
Political Mood

Key points

- The majority of Australians are satisfied with the way the country is heading.
- In contrast, a majority of Americans and Britons are dissatisfied with the way their countries are heading.

The public's mood matters in politics, and once there is a generally-held belief that a country is heading in the wrong direction, it is difficult for politicians to reverse it. Almost three in four Australians are satisfied with the way the country is heading. Just one in five are dissatisfied.

Views of the way Australia is heading



‘All things considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the country is heading?’

International Comparisons

United States: ‘All in all, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country today?’ (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey, March 2008)

	Percent
Satisfied	22
Dissatisfied	72
Unsure	6

Britain: ‘Generally speaking, would you say things in this country are heading in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?’ (Populus Survey, April 2008)

	Percent
Right direction	25
Wrong track	70

About the Surveys

The *ANU Poll* was conducted by the Social Research Centre, Melbourne. The survey was a national random sample of the adult population aged 18 years and over. 1,000 people were interviewed between 16 March and 30 March 2008 by telephone. The results have been weighted to represent the national population. The survey's margin of error is ± 3 percent. Full details of survey can be found at <http://www.anu.edu.au/anupoll/> The website also includes frequencies for all questions, and crosstabulations for key variables.

The comparative data used here are all based on national public opinion surveys conducted in ANU's College of Arts and Social Sciences. The *Australian Election Study* is a national survey of political opinion which has been conducted after each federal election since 1987. The *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* has been conducted since 2003. ANU is a member of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), International Social Survey Project (ISSP), and the World Values Study (WVS), whose surveys are also used here.