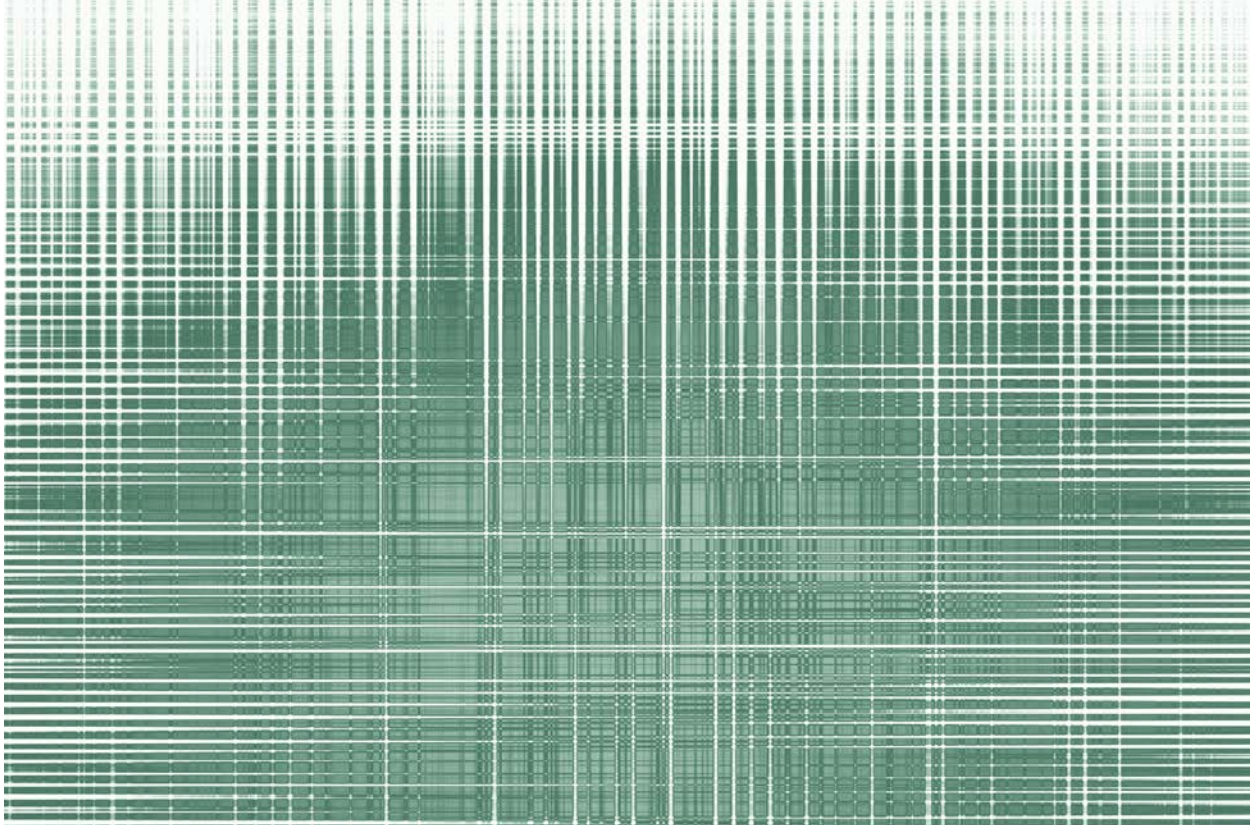Australian
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The role of government: Australian and international views on what government should do

N Biddle, M Gray and J Sheppard

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May 2019

The role of government: Australian and international views on what government should do

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Abstract

This paper uses data from the 26th ANUPoll, conducted in August 2018, to analyse opinion about a range of roles that government could be responsible for, who should deliver services and who should pay for them. Australians generally think that the government has an important role to play in many aspects of society, with the greatest support for health care for the sick, controlling Australia's borders and supporting the elderly.

The lowest level of support was for providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed, providing a job for everyone who wants one and providing decent housing. Some comparisons are also made between Australian attitudes and those in selected other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, as well as how attitudes vary within the Australian population.

Acknowledgments

Acronyms

ANU   Australian Natuional University

BiG   belief in government

CSRM   Centre for Social Research & Methods

ISSP   International Social Survey Programme

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Contents

Tables and figures

1 Introduction

Despite its relatively short history as a nation state, Australia has introduced a number of innovative policy reforms. Some of these have been copied or adapted by other countries, whereas others have remained unique to Australia. Some enduring policy examples that Australia was the first or one of the first countries to introduce include the 8-hour work day (for skilled workers) in the 19th century, a national minimum wage, voting rights for women, income-contingent loans (where university fees are paid back through the tax system once a person's income reaches a certain threshold) and an independent central bank (Bashford & Macintyre 2013, Ville & Withers 2014). Other policy examples, such as a race-based immigration system (the White Australia Policy), have been introduced and then later repealed in favour of a different policy approach (Jupp 1995).

Australia has a number of internationally distinctive policy settings. For example, Australia has one of the largest proportions (among wealthy countries) of students who attend fee-paying private schools (Campbell & Proctor 2014); however, unlike in most other countries, these schools receive significant resources from government. Australia has one of the most targeted social security schemes in the world, with a much larger proportion of income support payments going to those in the lower part of the income distribution (Whiteford 2010).

The role of government has always been debated, with significant variation across time and across countries (Arikan & Bloom 2015, Berend 2016). Where there is agreement that the government should act on a particular issue, there can also be varied views about what policies or programs the government should put in place, and about the appropriateness and effectiveness of particular policies and programs (McDonnell & Valbruzzi 2014, Caramani 2017).

Some of the debates in Australia about these policy decisions have been argued on technical or procedural grounds – we mostly agree on the aim, but disagree on how to achieve it. Other policy debates have been from first principles and about what government should or should not do, and in what aspects of people's lives or the economy it should intervene. As will be shown in this paper, population groups in Australia vary in their views as to what the role of government should be.

This paper focuses on opinions about a range of possible roles that government could be responsible for, who should deliver services and who should pay for them. Some comparison are made between Australian attitudes and those in selected other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It uses data from the 26th ANUPoll, conducted in August 2018.

Using these data, the paper aims to document the attitudes of a representative sample of the Australian population towards what government should do and how it should do it. We also test how these attitudes vary by important demographic, geographic and socioeconomic characteristics, as well as attitudes related to populism. In addition, we compare the attitudes of Australians and people from other countries using data from the 2016 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

Section 2 provides an overview of the datasets used in the paper and the key measures analysed. Section 3 considers Australians views on the role of government, and Section 4 compares the views of Australians with those in selected other OECD countries. Section 5 examines Australian's attitudes to who should provide and who should pay for particular services. Section 6 analyses the relationship between the extent to which people support government intervention and political attitudes. Section 7 concludes.

2 Overview of data and key measures

In the 26th ANUPoll, 2220 Australian adults were interviewed between 13 and 26 August 2018. Among individuals who received the survey (i.e. members of the 'Life in Australia' panel), a completion rate of 79% was achieved. Taking into account the recruitment rate to the panel, the cumulative response rate is calculated as 9.2%. The results have been weighted to represent the national population.[1]

2.1 Responsibilities of government

The ANUPoll asked respondents:

On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to …?

- *Provide a job for everyone who wants one*

- *Keep prices under control*

- *Provide health care for the sick*

- *Provide a decent standard of living for the old*

- *Provide industry with the help it needs to grow*

- *Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed*

- *Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor*

- *Give financial help to university students from low-income families*

- *Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it*

- *Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm/impact*

- *Promote equality between men and women*

- *Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population*

- *Control who enters Australia's borders*

The response options are 'definitely should be', 'probably should be', 'probably should not be' and 'definitely should not be'. The order of the potential roles for government and the order of the response options were randomised. Those who did not respond were excluded from the analysis.

2.2 Who should provide and who should pay for services

Respondents to the ANUPoll were split into two roughly equal samples, with half the sample asked who should provide services and the other half asked who should pay. Eleven types of services were listed, with the specific questions as follows:

- *People have different opinions on who should provide services in Australia. If you had to choose, who do you think should primarily provide …?*

- *People have different opinions on who should provide services in Australia. If you had to choose, who do you think should primarily pay for …?*

The respondents were not given the option of choosing that the individual themselves should provide (or pay for) the service, because the intention was to find out about additional support that someone might need (and for most of the questions it is not feasible for an individual to provide for themselves). The services asked about were:

- health care for the sick
- care for older people
- dental services
- social housing
- primary school education (for children aged between about 5 and 11)

- secondary school education (for children aged between about 12 and 17)
- child care for children whose parents are working
- prisons or juvenile justice facilities
- roads
- train, light rail or bus services
- media services (television, radio, newspapers).

The response options for each of the types of services were as follows:
- Commonwealth Government
- state/territory government
- local governments
- private companies/for-profit organisations
- non-profit organisations/charities/cooperatives
- religious organisations
- family, relatives or friends.

The order in which the services were presented to respondents was randomised.

2.3 Populism scale

The ANUPoll asked 10 questions about support for populist ideas. There is no agreed definition of populism, and Müller (2017) argues that 'We simply do not have anything like a *theory* of populism, and we seem to lack coherent criteria for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful sense' [emphasis in original]. There is much variation in populism, and certainly no neat position on the classic left–right political spectrum. Nonetheless, people likely to support those who are often labelled as populist share a number of characteristic attitudes, even if not all supporters agree with all the propositions.

The respondents were asked:

Now for a series of statements about politicians and politics in Australia. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each?

- *Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people*

- *Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job*

- *The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics*

- *The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves*

- *Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives*

- *Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked*

- *You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics*

- *The people I disagree with politically are not evil*

- *The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed*

- *Politicians should lead rather than follow the people*

The response options are 'disagree strongly', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

The report also uses data from ISSP 2016 to examine how Australians' attitudes to the role of government compare with attitudes in other countries. Eleven of the questions in the ANUPoll on what the role of government should be were also asked in ISSP 2016. The questions on whether government should control who enters Australia's borders, and reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population were not asked in ISSP 2016.

Although the wording of the questions in the ANUPoll and ISSP 2016 are identical, implementation of the questions differed between the surveys. This means that the ANUPoll numbers should not be directly compared with the ISSP 2016 numbers, but that the ISSP data can be used to compare across countries. The key differences are that the ANUPoll randomised the order in which the questions were asked (the ISSP 2016 did not do this), and that data were collected through both online self-complete and interview-administered telephone interview (the ISSP 2016 was mailout hard copy self-complete). The ordering of presentation of response categories was also reversed randomly in the ANUPoll. Analysis of the ANUPoll data reveals both question order effects and mode effects.

3 Australian views on the role of government

There was very strong agreement among Australians that the government should provide health care for the sick (76.3% said that it definitely should) and control who enters Australia's borders (72.2%) (Figure 1). Support for redistributive policies is much less, with around one-quarter of respondents saying that it is probably not or definitely not government's role to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor (26.6%), provide a job for everyone who wants one (25.3%) or provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed (24.4%) (Figure 1).

People who thought that government definitely or probably should have responsibility in one area tended to also agree that the government should have responsibility in other areas. The only exception to this was the question on whether government should 'control who enters Australia's borders'. Attitudes on this issue did not correlate highly with attitudes on other issues. This suggests that there is an underlying belief about whether government should or should not intervene that varies across the population and affects people's attitudes to particular policy domains.

A technique that researchers often use to estimate such underlying beliefs is factor analysis (Lewis-Beck et al. 2003). Using this technique, which is based on the correlation across the responses to the questions asked in the ANUPoll, we constructed an index of support for government intervention. The response on border control was dropped from the index, based on the low correlation (mentioned above) and because it has a low loading in a preliminary factor analysis.[2]

The final factor analysis indicates a 1-factor solution (the eigenvalue for factor 1 was 3.88, and for factor 2 it was 0.61). The factor loadings for each of the responses are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix. The index, which we label belief in government (BiG), is scaled to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. The greater the level of support for government intervention, the higher the value of the BiG index.

How this underlying factor varies across different population groups is examined using regression models. The factors associated with the BiG index are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS). OLS is appropriate given that the BiG index is a continuous variable.

The factors associated with whether respondents say that controlling who enters Australia's borders should definitely be a responsibility of government were estimated using a probit model. The probit model is appropriate because the dependent variable is binary (i.e. takes the value of zero or 1). The full results of the probit model are presented in Table A2. Given the nonlinear nature of the probit model, the magnitudes of the coefficients are difficult to interpret and so, in addition to the coefficient estimates, 'marginal effects' are presented. The marginal effects show the impact of the explanatory variable on the dependent variable, holding constant the value of continuous variables at their mean value and binary variables at a value of zero (the base case, or omitted category).

For both dependent variables, two specifications are estimated. In the first, the models include the explanatory variables sex, age, age squared, Indigenous status and whether living outside a capital city, as well as variables for whether born in Australia or overseas in an English-speaking country or a non-English-speaking country, highest level of educational attainment and socioeconomic status of the geographic area in which living. The second specification adds voting intention; results are discussed in Section 6.

The results of the regression modelling for the BiG index and support for government having responsibility for who enters Australia's borders are summarised in Figures 2 and 3, respectively.[3] For the BiG index, support for government

Figure 1   On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to ...?
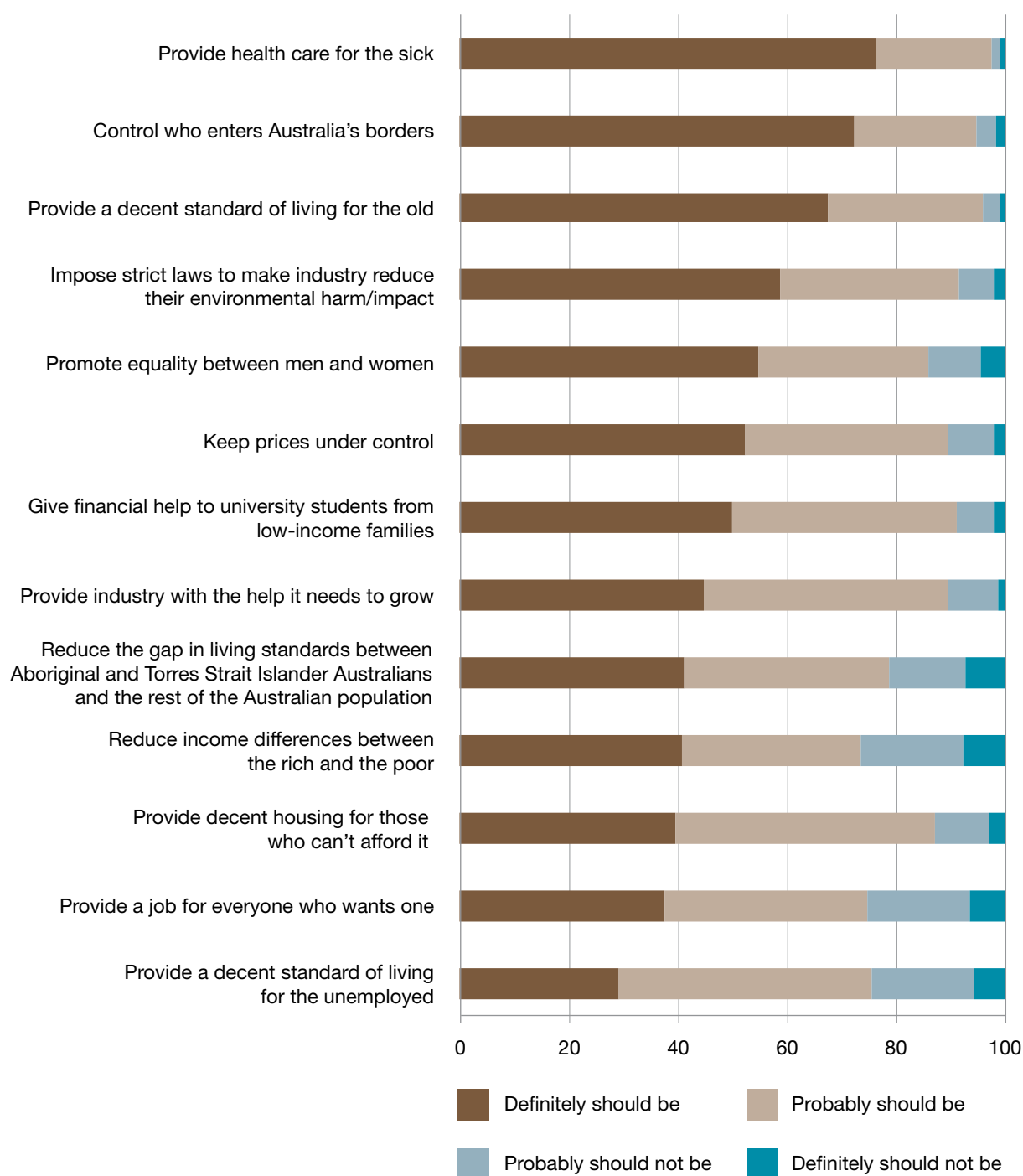
Provide health care for the sick
Control who enters Australia's borders
Provide a decent standard of living for the old
Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm/impact
Promote equality between men and women
Keep prices under control
Give financial help to university students from low-income families
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow
Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population
Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor
Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it
Provide a job for everyone who wants one
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed

Legend:
- Definitely should be
- Probably should be
- Probably should not be
- Definitely should not be
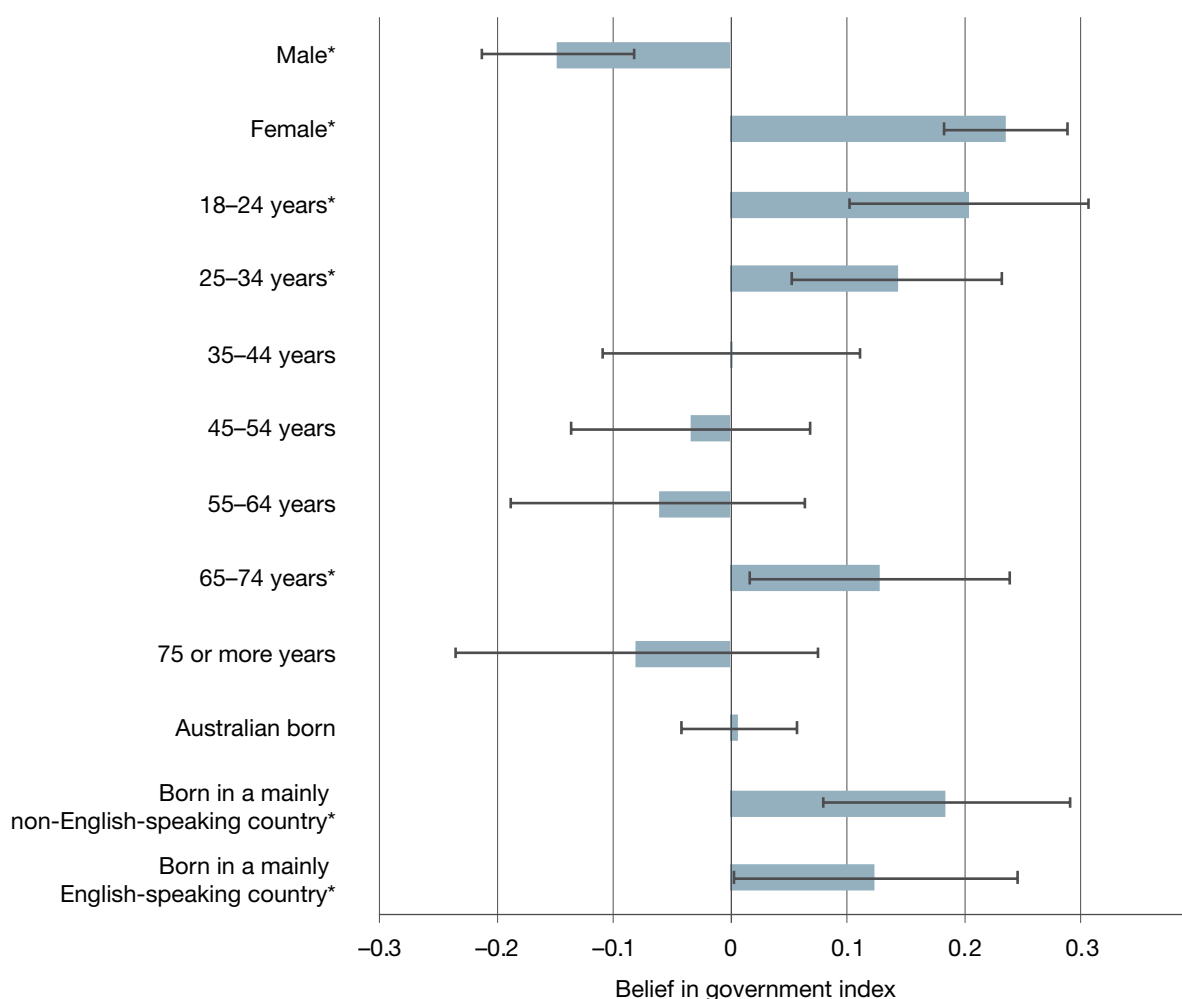
Notes:
1.   Values that are significantly different from the survey average (at the 5% level of significance) are marked with *.
2.   Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018

intervention was found to vary most by sex, age, migration status and voting intention. When these factors were controlled for, there was very little variation by education or geography.

To summarise the results, Figure 2 gives the raw, unconditional mean index value for specific groups across the population.

Females are more likely to support government intervention than males; support is greatest among the young (aged 18–34 years), among those of around retirement age (aged 65–74 years) and among those born outside Australia, particularly in countries that are predominantly non-English speaking (Figure 2).

As outlined above, responses to the question about whether it should be a government responsibility to control who enters Australia's borders do not correlate with responses to the other potential areas of government responsibility, and so this variable is considered separately. The characteristics of the population that correlate with agreeing that this is definitely a role for government also vary. Age and country of birth were still important, but sex was not. By contrast, Indigenous status, having a postgraduate education and geography mattered much more for this variable. Unconditional results are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3 **Variation in support for government being responsible for controlling who enters Australia's borders, by demographic characteristics**

SEIFA = Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas

Notes:

1. Values that are significantly different from the survey average (at the 5% level of significance) are marked with *.

2. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
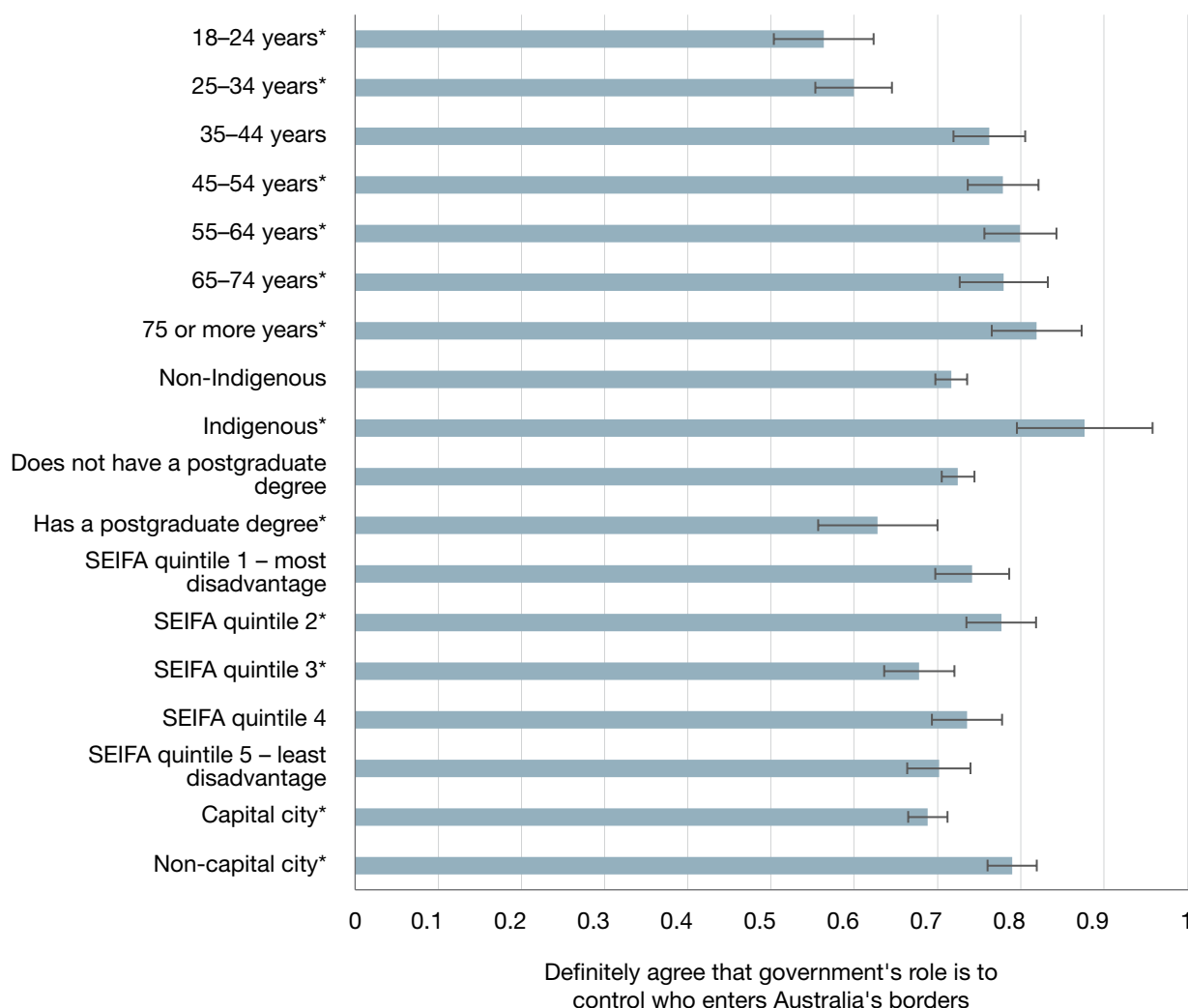
Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018

There is a clear gradient by age, with those who are relatively young being much less supportive of the government having responsibility for controlling borders, and those who are relatively old having greater support. The Indigenous population is much more supportive of that being a role of government than the non-Indigenous population, whereas those with a postgraduate degree are less likely to definitely agree.

The relationship between geography and support for strong border control as a role of government is reasonably complex. There are no differences between those living in geographic areas at the bottom and top end of the distribution of the socioeconomic status of the area, but there is variation in the middle. Those in the second most disadvantaged quintile strongly support border control as a role of government, whereas those in the middle quintile are significantly less likely to. The level of support also varies depending on whether the person lives in a capital city (less likely to agree) as opposed to another part of Australia (more likely to agree).

4 How Australians' attitudes on the role of government compare with attitudes in other countries

Australians' views on the role of government can be compared with views in other countries using data from the ISSP 2016 wave. The ISSP provides comparable data across a number of countries, including Australia. Figures 4–8 provide comparison between Australia and other ISSP countries in the OECD for selected potential roles for government.

Australians' support for government being responsible for reducing income differences between the rich and the poor was among the lowest, with 60% saying it definitely or probably should be a responsibility of government (Figure 4). This compares with 77% across all

OECD countries in the ISSP and was third lowest of the ISSP countries. Other countries with broadly comparable agreement to Australia are the United States, New Zealand, Denmark, Czech Republic, Japan and Sweden.

A relatively low proportion of Australians (56%) think it definitely or probably should be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed (Figure 5) – the third lowest of the countries examined in this paper. The average across the countries examined is 70%. Australians are also relatively less likely than people in many other countries to think it definitely or probably should be the responsibility

Figure 4 **Proportion responding that it definitely or probably should be the government's responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor, by country, 2016**
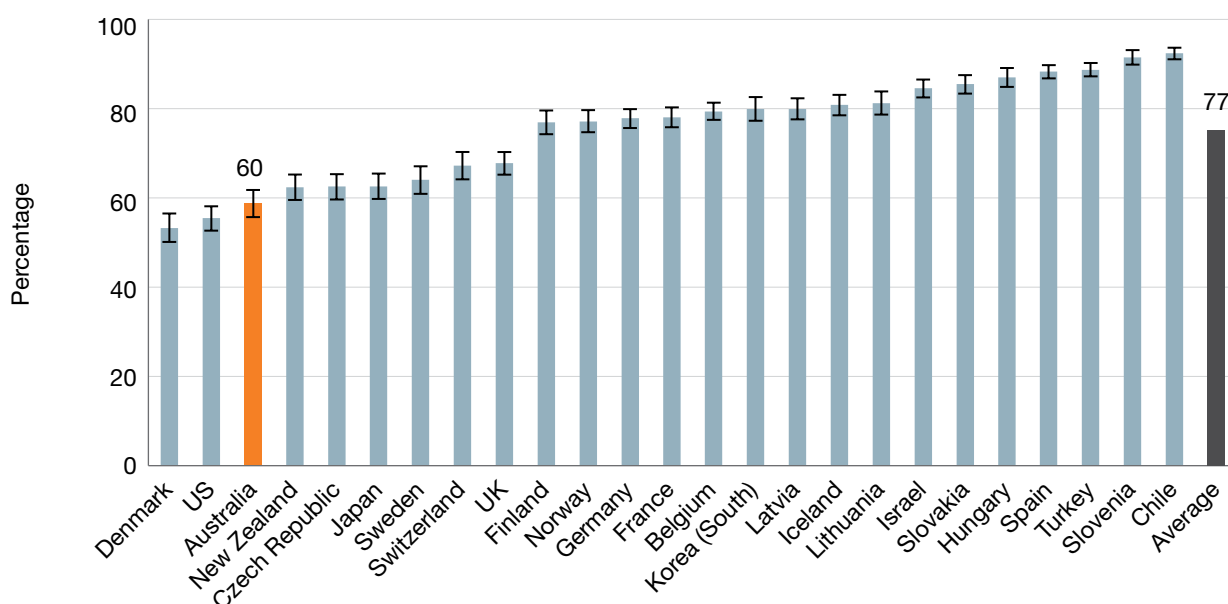
Notes:

1. The countries reported are ISSP-participating countries that are members of the OECD.
2. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
3. Estimates are weighted.

Source: ISSP 2016

Figure 5 Proportion responding that it definitely or probably should be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed, by country, 2016

Notes:

1. The countries reported in the figure are ISSP-participating countries that are members of the OECD.
2. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
3. Estimates are weighted.

Source: ISSP 2016

of government to give financial help to university students from low-income families, provide decent housing for those who cannot afford it or provide a job for everyone who wants one.

Australians show a similar level of support to people in other countries in thinking that it definitely and probably should be the government's responsibility to provide health care for the sick (97.4% in Australia and an average of 95.1% across countries; Figure 6). Australians' views about whether it is the government's role to provide industry with the help it needs to grow are also towards the middle of countries, with 84% of Australians saying this definitely or probably should be. The average across countries is 78% (Figure 7). Similarly, Australians have strong support for government having responsibility for providing income support for the aged (Figure 8).

Figure 6 **Proportion responding that it definitely or probably should be the government's responsibility to provide health care for the sick, by country, 2016**

Notes:

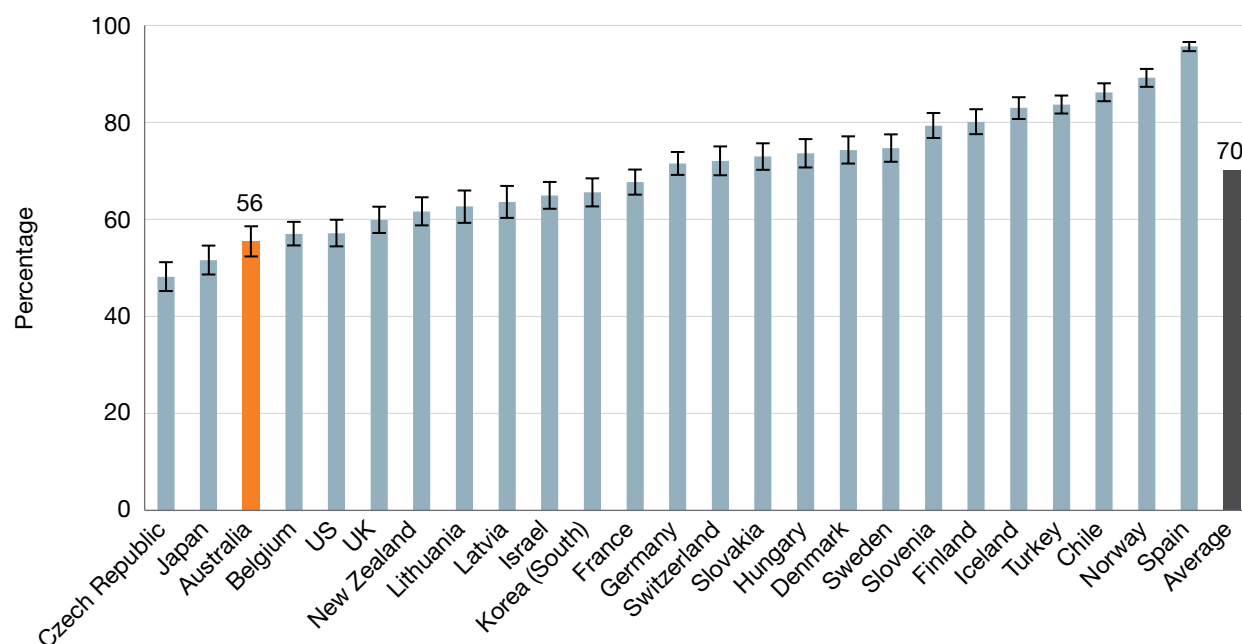1. The countries reported in the figure are ISSP-participating countries that are members of the OECD.
2. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
3. Estimates are weighted.

Source: ISSP 2016

Figure 7 **Proportion responding that it definitely or probably should be the government's responsibility to provide industry with the help it needs to grow, by country, 2016**

Notes:

1. The countries reported in the figure are ISSP-participating countries that are members of the OECD.
2. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
3. Estimates are weighted.

Source: ISSP 2016

Figure 8 **Proportion responding that it definitely or probably should be the government's responsibility to provide a decent standard of living for the aged, by country, 2016**

Notes:

1. The countries reported in the figure are ISSP-participating countries that are members of the OECD.
2. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.
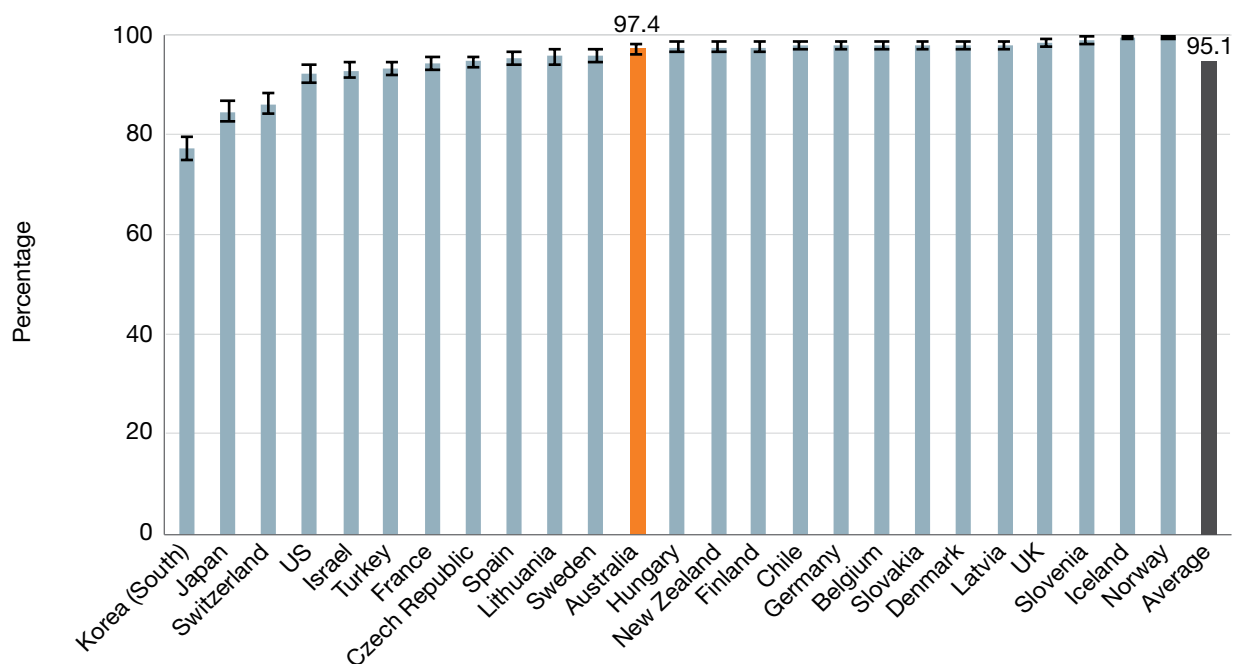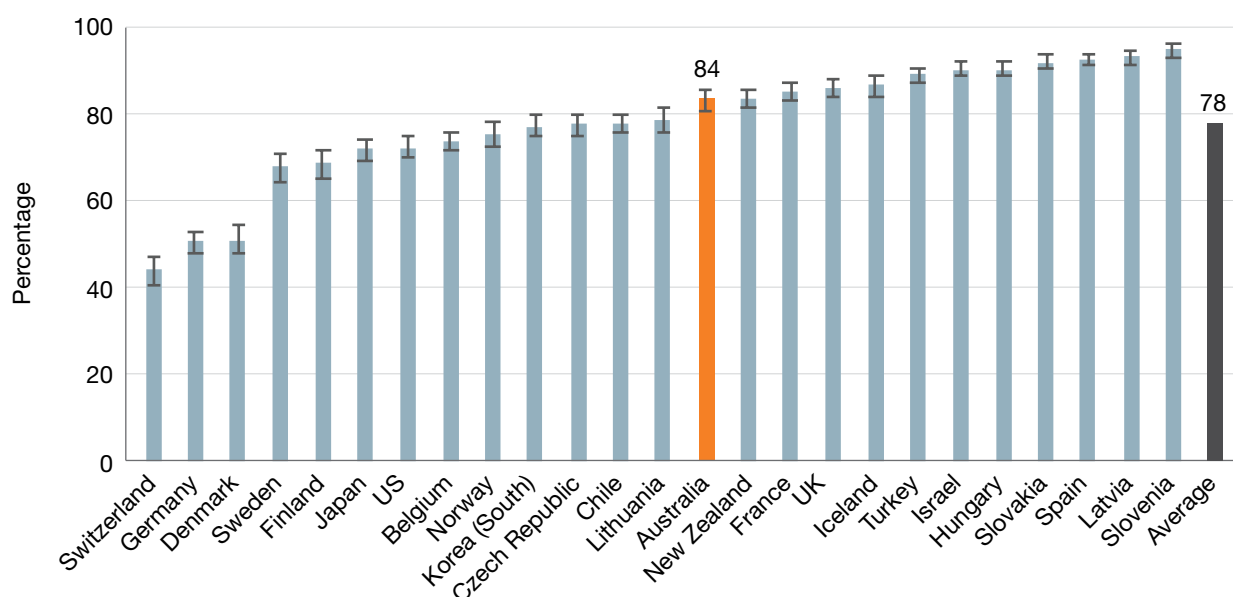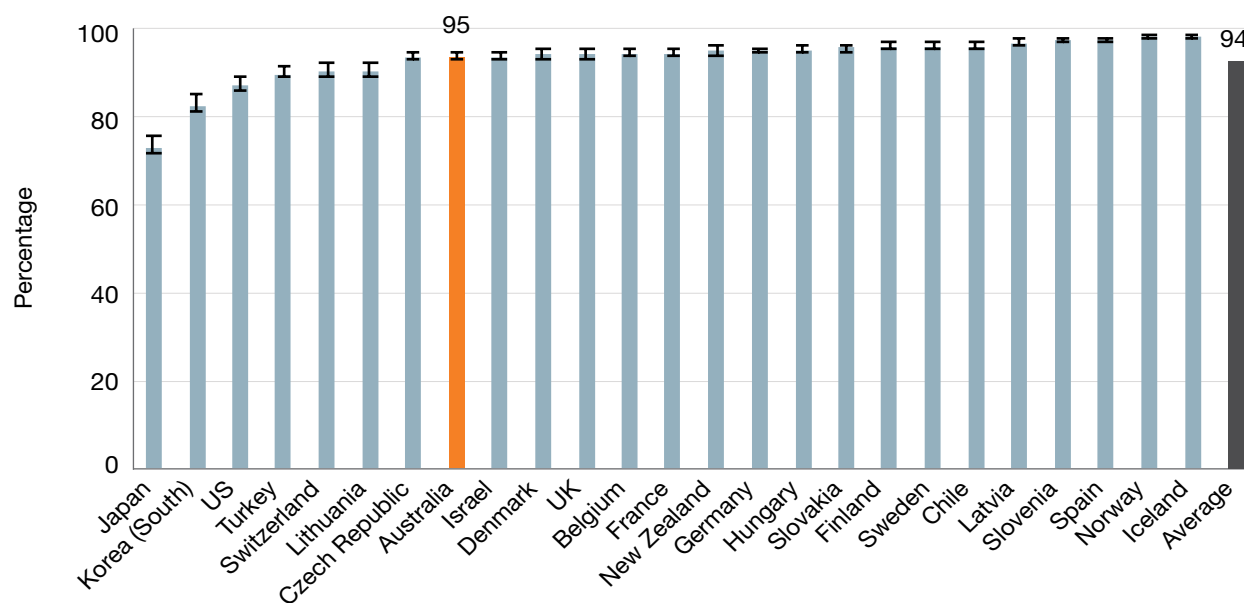3. Estimates are weighted.

Source: ISSP 2016

5 Who should pay, and who should provide particular services?

Government could perform some of the roles outlined above in a number of different ways – by directly funding the services and making them free to citizens while others deliver them (as with employment services at the moment), or by delivering services with a user charge (e.g. with roads or public transport). Alternatively, government could fund and deliver the services, and make them free to citizens, or step back entirely and simply provide a legislative framework.

In the Australian context, a further decision needs to be made in terms of which level of government should provide or fund services – the Australian Government, states and territories, or local government. Although there are a few examples where one level of government has sole jurisdiction (e.g. defence), the more common situation in Australia is for two or sometimes three levels of government to interact. This includes some of our major policy areas such as health, education, roads and transport, and other infrastructure.

One way to look at the data is to compare support for provision or payment by government (combining Commonwealth, state/territory and local) with the remaining four options in the question (private companies/for-profit organisations; nonprofit organisations/charities/cooperatives; religious organisations; and family, relatives or friends).[4]

Respondents to the ANUPoll strongly supported government both providing and paying for (over 90% for both) a number of services: health care for the sick; social housing; primary school education; secondary school education; prisons or juvenile justice facilities; roads; and train, light rail or bus services (Figure 9). Of these, a significantly lower proportion of people said that primary and secondary school education should be paid for by government, as opposed to

provided by government (although both are still above 90%).

Looking at the remaining four services, around half of the population think that media services should be either provided or paid for by government (48.7% and 48.4%, respectively), whereas 86.2% of respondents thought that care for older people should be provided and paid for by government. For dental services, a significantly higher proportion of respondents thought the government should pay for (86.7%) compared with provide (76.4%) the service. However, for child care, 73.7% of respondents thought that government should provide the service, but only 63.3% thought that government should pay.

A longstanding debate in Australia relates to which level of government should provide or pay for a particular service. Focusing on those respondents who reported that either the Commonwealth or the state/territory government should provide or pay for the given service, we analysed the extent to which respondents felt that it should be the former rather than the latter.

For all 11 services, there was no statistically significant difference between the proportion of the population who felt the Australian Government should provide the service and the proportion who said the Australian Government should pay for it. This is an interesting finding, since one of the evolving aspects of Australia's federal system is that the Australian Government collects a large proportion of revenue for the public sector, whereas the states and territories continue to administer many of the programs.[5] The consistency of who should provide and who should pay responses suggests that the Australian population may have a preference for a more consistent approach.

Leaving aside the distinction between paying for and providing services, there is considerable

Figure 9   **Who do you think should primarily provide/pay for ...?**

Health care for the sick

Care for older people

Dental services

Social housing

Primary school education (for children aged between about 5 and 11)

Secondary school education (for children aged between about 12 and 17)

Childcare for children whose parents are working

Prisons or juvenile justice facilities

Roads

Train, light rail or bus services

Media services (television, radio, newspapers)

0   0.1   0.2   0.3   0.4   0.5   0.6   0.7   0.8   0.9   1

■ Government should provide   ■ Government should pay

Note: Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018

variation in people's responses as to which services should be a Commonwealth or state/territory responsibility (Figure 10). Most respondents felt that health care for the sick and care for older people should be a Commonwealth as opposed to a state/territory responsibility (among those who thought it should be at least one of the two). Dental services and media services were also seen to be a primarily Commonwealth responsibility. The split for housing, schooling, child care and prisons was roughly even, with most respondents feeling that it should be the state/territory government that provides roads and public transport.

Figure 10 Support for the Commonwealth or state/territory governments providing/paying for particular services
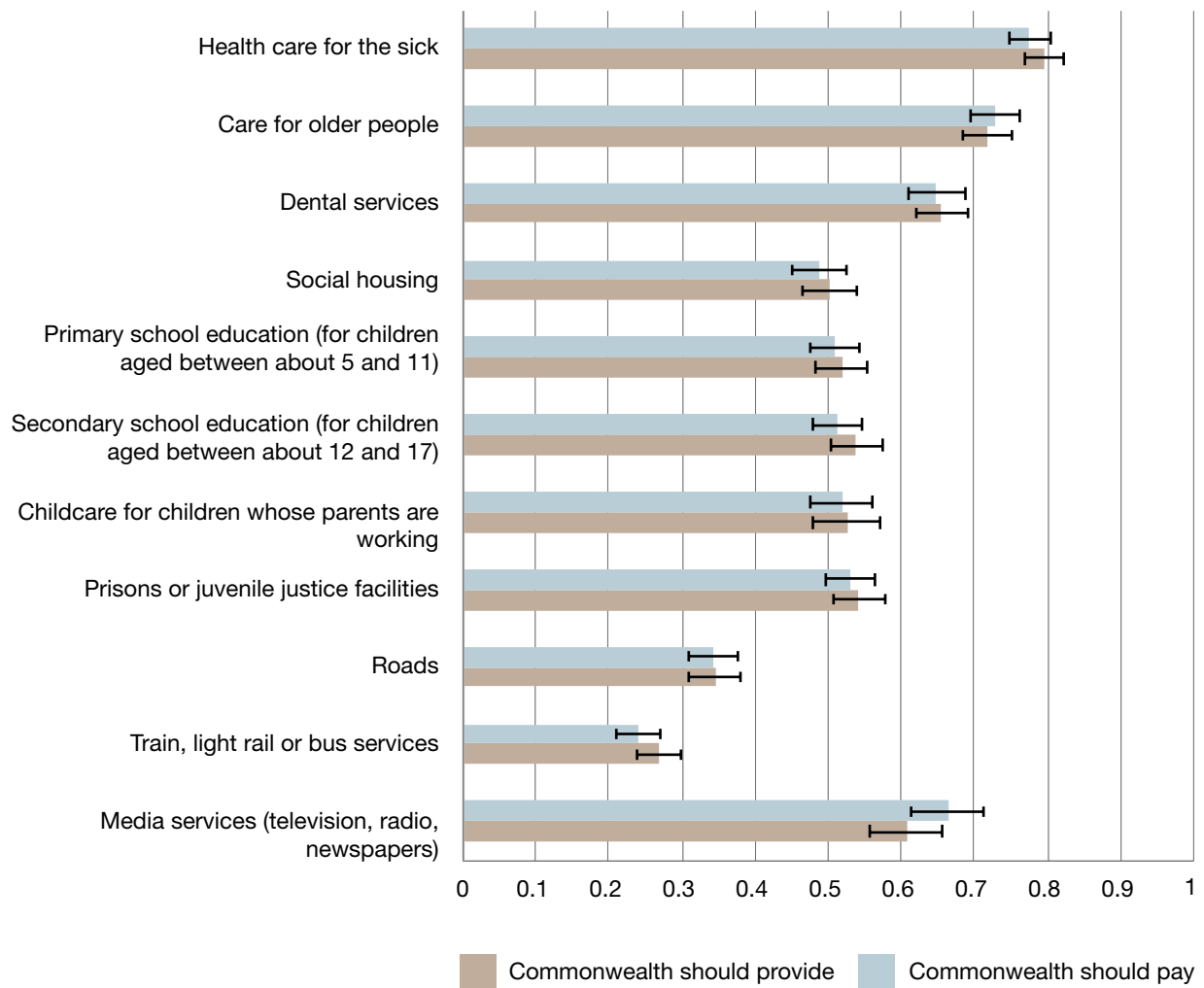
Notes:

1. Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

2. Proportions are of those who say that either the Commonwealth or states/territories should provide/pay for service.

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018

6 Relationship between belief in government and political attitudes

In addition to the demographic factors discussed above, support for government intervention also varies substantially by voting intentions. In the ANUPoll, respondents were asked 'If a federal election for the House of Representatives was held today, which one of the following parties would you vote for?' Responses have been grouped into five categories – Coalition (Liberal, National or Liberal National Party) with 31.4% of respondents, Labor with 34.2%, Greens with 14.2%, 'Other' with 13.7% (with One Nation making up the largest proportion) and 'Don't know' with 6.5% of respondents. These were included in the second model as additional explanatory variables in Table A2, and summarised in Figures 11 and 12 (without controlling for other characteristics).

Not surprisingly, Coalition voters are much less supportive of government intervention, as measured by the BiG index, than those who say they would vote Labor or Greens. Voting intentions also have a strong correlation with views on border control (Figure 12). Around 83% of those who would have voted for the Coalition definitely agreed that border control is the government's responsibility. For Labor voters, this was only around 68%, whereas for Greens voters it was even lower at around 53%. The 'Other' and 'Don't know' groupings look much more like Coalition than Labor or Greens voters on both these issues.

Several other questions in the ANUPoll were related to political attitudes. There was no relationship between satisfaction with the direction the country is heading[6] and the BiG index. Respondents were also asked to indicate 'how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out' on a scale of 1 to 10.[7] When this variable is regressed against the BiG index and controls for demographic variables are included, there is no linear relationship between control and BiG.

There are some differences at the extremes of the variable for self-perceived control, with a mean value of the index of –0.33 for those who report 'no choice at all' and a BiG index value of 0.12 for those who report 'a great deal of choice'. However, there is significant variation across the rest of the distribution.

As with the questions on belief in government, there is a strong correlation across the populism questions, which means that we can estimate a single factor that captures a large amount of the variation and compare the two indices. The eigenvalue for factor 1 was 1.64 and for factor 2 it was 0.50. The factor loadings for the populism index are provided in Table A3.

There is a very strong correlation between the BiG index and the populism index, and the relationship holds even after controlling for demographic characteristics. Specifically, without controlling for other characteristics, a one unit increase in the populism index (representing a 1 standard deviation increase) is associated with a 0.132 increase in the BiG index. When other characteristics are controlled for, the association increases to 0.152 (full results available in Table A4). In directional terms, this means that those who hold beliefs associated with populism are much more supportive of a greater role for government.

Further investigation reveals that there is a nonlinear relationship between the populism and BiG indices. When we include both a linear and quadratic term for the populism index, both are statistically significant at the 5% level of significance, as demonstrated in models 3 and 4 in Table A4. The relationship (without controls) is plotted in Figure 13, over a 2 standard deviation range above and below the mean value of the populism index (set to zero).

Figure 11   Variation in belief in government index, by voting intention
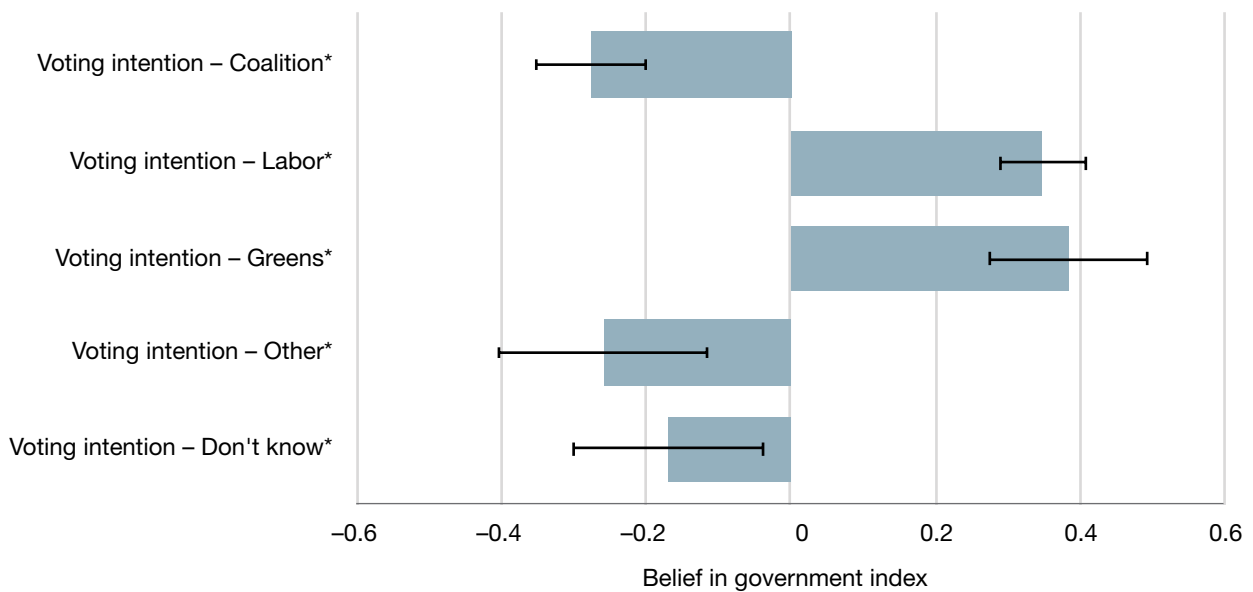
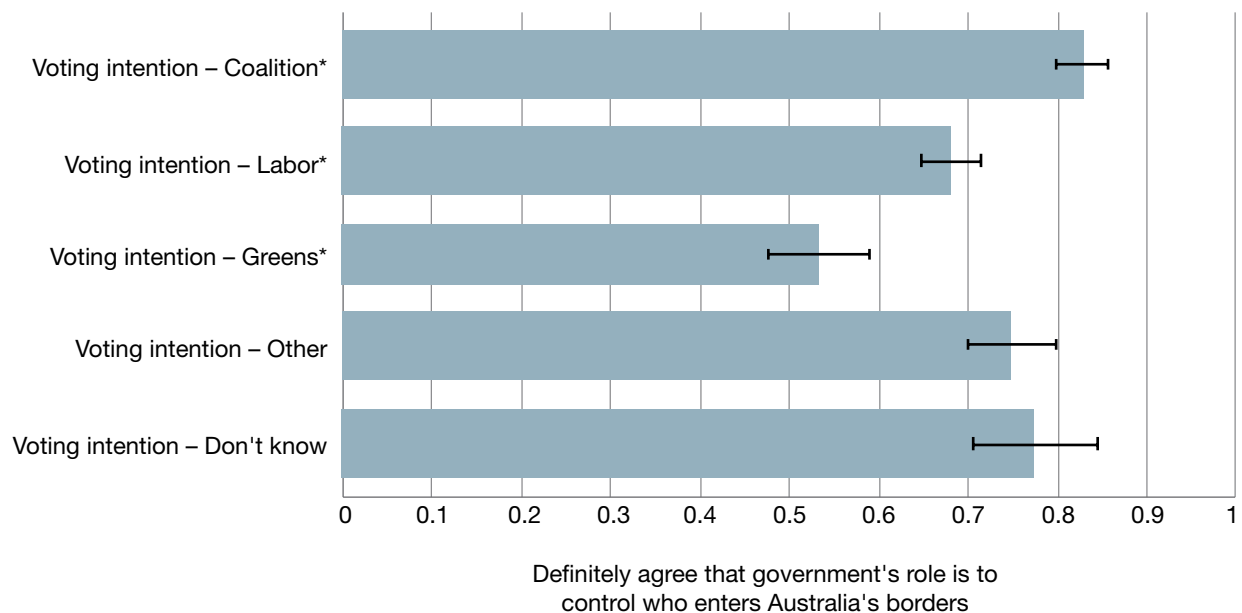Belief in government index

Figure 12   Variation in support for government having a role in controlling who enters Australia's borders, by voting intention
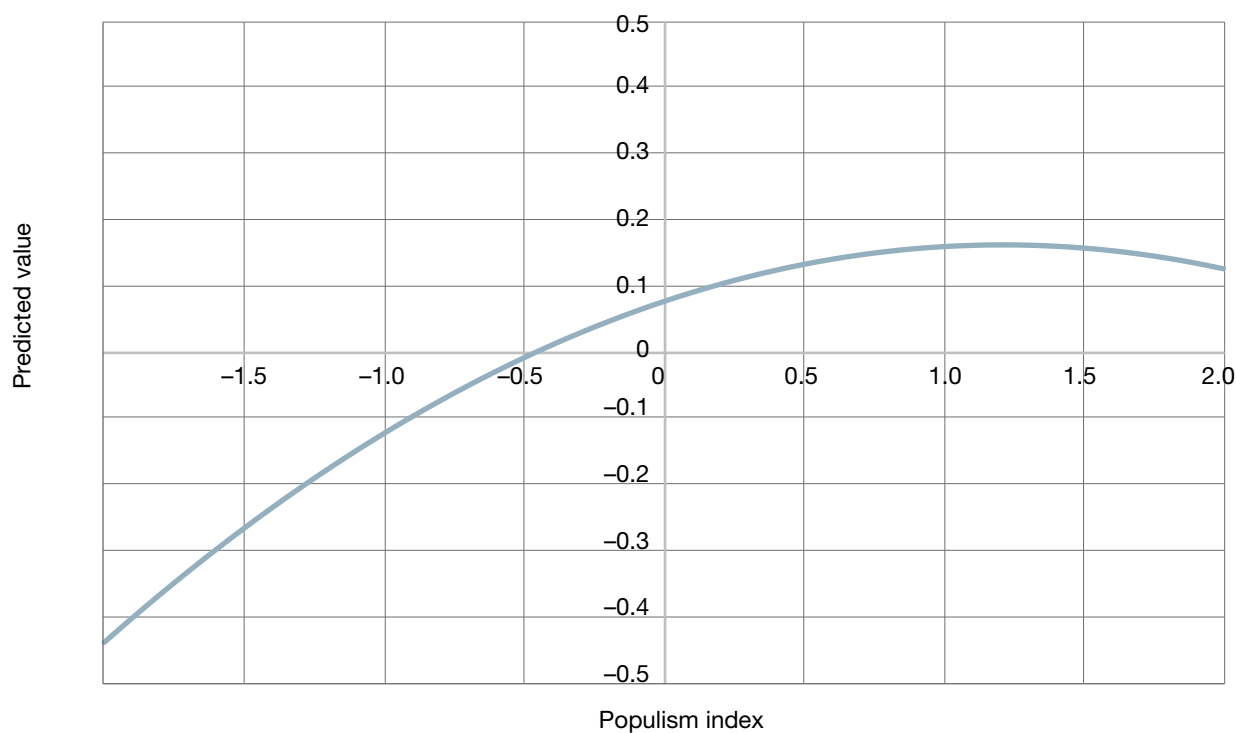

Definitely agree that government's role is to
control who enters Australia's borders

Figure 13 **Predicted value for the belief in government index by the populism index**

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018

The extent of support for a strong role for government increases to around 1 standard deviation of the populism index. It then plateaus and is estimated to decline slightly up to the second standard deviation beyond the mean. To put this another way, those who are the least likely to indicate agreement for the populism questions might have the lowest support for a strong role for government, but those with the highest likelihood to indicate agreement for the populism questions do not necessarily have the highest support for a strong role for government.

The statements 'politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people' and 'the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves' have a particularly strong relationship with the BiG index. These are summarised in Figure 14, with associated standard errors.

Both of the populism questions have a positive loading on the populism index, with agreeing or strongly agreeing predicted by a higher index value. Furthermore, very few people disagreed strongly with the two propositions (0.5% and 1.6% of the sample, respectively); hence the very

large standard errors. Keeping this in mind, if an individual strongly agrees that either 'politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people' or 'the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves', then they are also likely to strongly support the government having a greater role in society.

Figure 14 Variation in the belief in government index, by selected populism questions
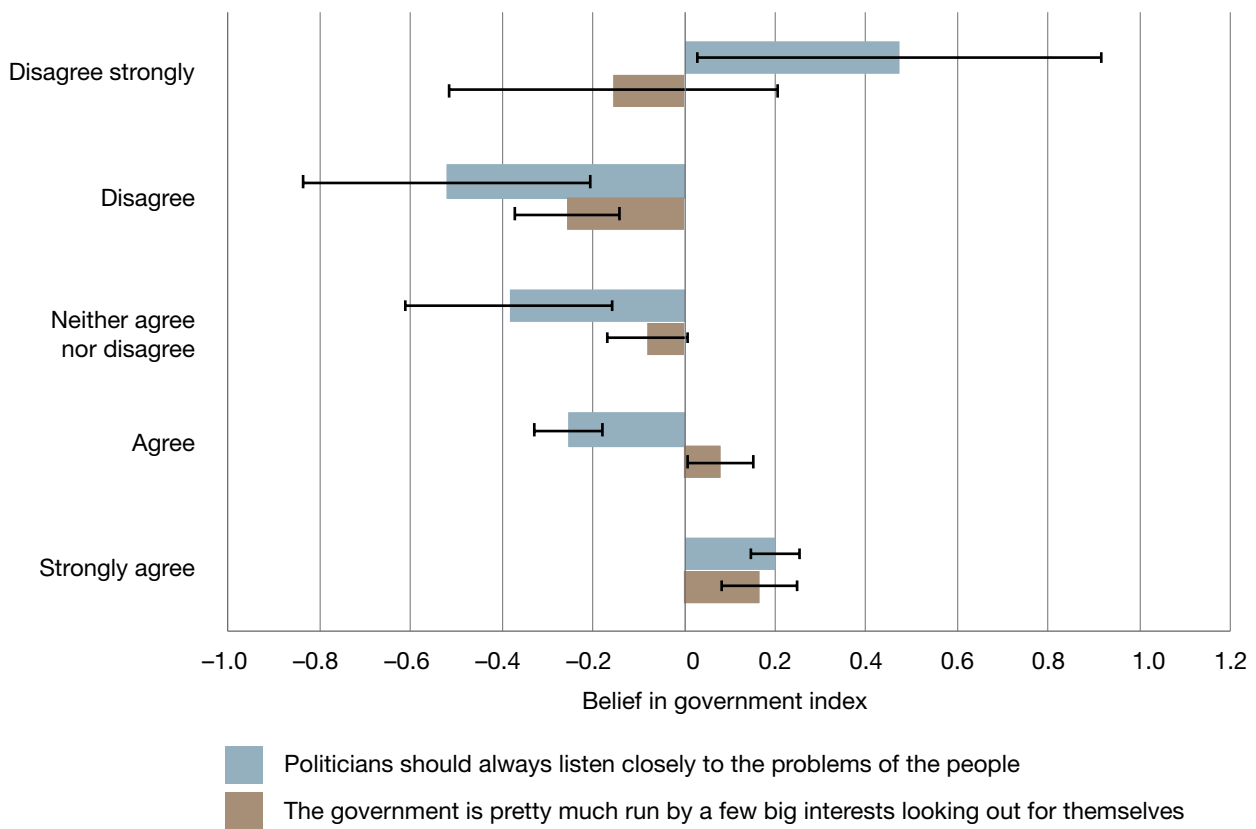
Note: Error bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals.

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018

7 Concluding comments

What should we do collectively as a society (through government), and what should we do for ourselves as individuals? Who should deliver services, and who should pay for them? These are fundamental questions that go to the heart of how societies should be organised, how much taxes we need to collect, and whether a political party or candidate should be supported or not.

The 26th ANUPoll asked a representative sample of 2220 individuals their opinions about what should be government responsibilities, who should deliver services and who should pay for them. This paper reports on people's views on these issues and how the responses varied across demographic, socioeconomic and geographic groupings. Using data from the separate ISSP 2016, we compared responses from Australians with those who live in other OECD countries. We found significant variation, but also a number of clear patterns.

Australians showed that they generally think that government has an important responsibility for many aspects of society, with the greatest support for health care for the sick, controlling Australia's borders and supporting the elderly. The lowest level of support was for providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed, providing a job for everyone who wants one and providing decent housing. Even so, it is estimated that more than three-quarters of the population think that government has a responsibility in these areas.

Australians think that many services should be paid for or provided by government, particularly health care, education, prisons, roads, public transport and dental services. There was less support for government directly paying for or providing child care and media services.

One of the defining issues of the second decade of the 21st century is the supposed rise in populism in rich, previously democractic societies in the West. A potential explanation for this is changing views on the role of government and whether governments in recent times have been living up to our expectations. There is some cross-sectional support for there being at least a correlation between those who support ideas associated with populism and those who support a greater role for government in society. Of course, corrrelations do not demonstrate causation, and there is much more empirical (and theoretical) work required to understand these related constucts. By making the ANUPoll dataset available to others, it is hoped that more nuance and detail on these issues will emerge.

Appendix Data tables

Table A1   Factor loadings for the belief in government index

Variable	Factor loading
Provide a job for everyone who wants one	0.509
Keep prices under control	0.517
Provide health care for the sick	0.541
Provide a decent standard of living for the old	0.595
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow	0.408
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	0.629
Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor	0.580
Give financial help to university students from low-income families	0.596
Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it	0.685
Promote equality between men and women	0.532
Impose strict laws to make industry do less damage to the environment	0.589
Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population	0.598

Table A2 Factors associated with the belief in government index and that government should 'definitely' 'control who enters Australia's borders'

| | BiG index value (OLS) | | | | Control who enters Australia's borders (probit) | | | | | |
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
Explanatory variable	Coeff	Sig	Coeff	Sig	Coeff	Marginal effect	Sig	Coeff	Marginal effect	Sig
Female	0.3946	***	0.3688	***	−0.1017	−0.0302	*	−0.0837	−0.0190	
Age	−0.0257	***	−0.0184	***	0.0626		***	0.0609		***
Age squared	0.0002	***	0.0002	***	−0.0005		***	−0.0005		***
Indigenous	0.1251		0.1828		0.7801	0.1514	***	0.6798	0.0975	***
Born in Australia (omitted category)										
Born overseas in an English-speaking country	0.1446	*	0.1528	**	0.0104	0.0029		0.0137	0.0030	
Born overseas in a non-English-speaking country	0.2539	***	0.2473	***	0.2953	0.0738	***	0.2719	0.0503	***
Speaks a language other than English at home	−0.1498	**	−0.1190	*	0.0179	0.0051		−0.0268	−0.0059	
Has not completed Year 12	−0.0013		−0.0080		0.1125	0.0306		0.1101	0.0224	
Does not have a qualification (omitted category)										
Has a Certificate I or II as highest qualification	−0.1799	*	−0.0290		−0.1263	−0.0378		−0.2362	−0.0579	
Has a Certificate III or IV, or a diploma as highest qualification	−0.0518		−0.0170		0.0858	0.0236		0.0646	0.0135	
Has an undergraduate degree	−0.0651		−0.0890		−0.0964	−0.0285		−0.0679	−0.0153	
Has a postgraduate degree	−0.0665		−0.0851		−0.3147	−0.1006	***	−0.3047	−0.0772	**
SEIFA quintile 1 – most disadvantaged	−0.0809		−0.1074		−0.1779	−0.0543	*	−0.1772	−0.0422	*

continued

Explanatory variable	BiG index value (OLS)				Control who enters Australia's borders (probit)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1			Model 2		
	Coeff	Sig	Coeff	Sig	Coeff	Marginal effect	Sig	Coeff	Marginal effect	Sig
SEIFA quintile 2	0.0825		0.1392	**	−0.0306	−0.0088		−0.0776	−0.0175	
SEIFA quintile 3	−0.0205		−0.0851		−0.2520	−0.0789	***	−0.2360	−0.0579	***
SEIFA quintile 4	−0.0081		0.0251		−0.0358	−0.0104		−0.0651	−0.0146	
SEIFA quintile 5 (omitted category)										
Lives outside a capital city	−0.0207		−0.0098		0.2793	0.0703	***	0.2764	0.9783	
Vote for Coalition (omitted category)										
Vote for Labor			0.6250	***				−0.3768	−0.0987	***
Vote for Greens			0.6159	***				−0.6752	−0.1991	***
Vote for 'Other' party			0.0212					−0.2862	−0.0719	***
Did not know who they would vote for			0.0337					−0.0666	−0.0150	
Constant/ probability of base case	0.5183	***	−0.0490		−1.0549	0.7938	***	−0.6385	0.8654	
Sample size	2058		2058		2145			2145		
Adjusted/pseudo R-squared	0.0495		0.1344		0.0634			0.0850		

* = significant at 10% confidence level; ** = significant at 5% confidence level; *** = significant at 1% confidence level; BiG = belief in government; OLS = ordinary least squares; SEIFA = Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas

Table A3 Factor loadings for the populism index

Variable name	Factor loading
Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people	0.365
Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job	−0.231
The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics	0.474
The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves	0.680
Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives	−0.465
Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked	0.651
You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics	0.287
The people I disagree with politically are not evil	−0.114
The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed	0.092
Politicians should lead rather than follow the people	−0.145

Table A4   **Conditional and unconditional relationship between the belief in government index and the populism index**

Explanatory variable	Model 1 Coeff	Model 1 Sig	Model 2 Coeff	Model 2 Sig	Model 3 Coeff	Model 3 Sig	Model 4 Coeff	Model 4 Sig
Female			0.4171	***			0.4103	***
Age			−0.0268	***			−0.0263	***
Age squared			0.0002	***			0.0002	***
Indigenous			0.0968				0.0993	
Born in Australia (omitted category)								
Born overseas in an English-speaking country			0.1825	**			0.1719	**
Born overseas in a non-English-speaking country			0.2481	***			0.2468	***
Speaks a language other than English at home			−0.1414	**			−0.1523	**
Has not completed Year 12			−0.0617				−0.0622	
Does not have a qualification (omitted category)								
Has a Certificate I or II as highest qualification			−0.2710	**			−0.2734	**
Has a Certificate III or IV, or a diploma as highest qualification			−0.0567				−0.0625	
Has an undergraduate degree			−0.0426				−0.0509	
Has a postgraduate degree			−0.0140				−0.0067	
SEIFA quintile 1 – most disadvantaged			−0.1434	**			−0.1395	*
SEIFA quintile 2			−0.0020				−0.0070	
SEIFA quintile 3			−0.0529				−0.0562	
SEIFA quintile 4			−0.0418				−0.0445	
SEIFA quintile 5 (omitted category)								
Lives outside a capital city			0.0299				0.0295	
Populism index – linear	0.1321	***	0.1522	***	0.1418	***	0.1585	***
Populism index – quadratic					−0.0585	***	−0.0398	**
Constant/probability of base case	0.0171		0.5308		0.0763		0.5696	
Sample size	2058		1996		2058		1996	
Adjusted R-squared	0.0176		0.0735		0.0226		0.0756	

* = significant at 10% confidence level; ** = significant at 5% confidence level; *** = significant at 1% confidence level; SEIFA = Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas

Notes

1. Data from this report are available for download from the Australian Data Archive (www.ada.edu.au).

2. The factor loading for this variable was 0.1673, with the next lowest factor loading being 0.4194.

3. The full results of the regression analysis are presented in Table A2.

4. 'Families, relatives, or friends' was only asked for Health care for the sick; Care for older people; Primary school; Secondary school; and Childcare for children whose parents are working.

5. In 2016–17, the Australian Government received 79.8% of all government revenue (www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/5506.0).

6. Respondents were asked 'Firstly, a general question about your views on living in Australia. All things considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the country is heading?' None of the five potential response categories (from very dissatisfied through to very satisfied) had a value that was significantly different from zero.

7. The full question was 'Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means 'no choice at all' and 10 means 'a great deal of choice' to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out'.

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