



ANUpoll

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Public Opinion Towards the Environment

Results from the ANU Poll

REPORT 3

October 2008

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Contents

Concern About the Environment	7
Environmental Behaviour	10
Global Warming	12
Nuclear Energy and Uranium Mining	15
Paying to Protect the Environment	17
Key Trends: Most Important Problems and Political Mood	19





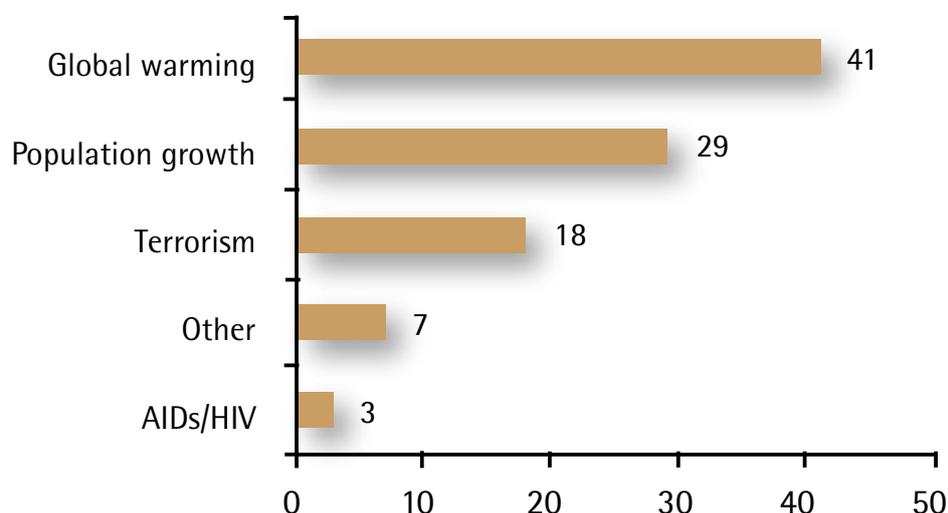


Concern About the Environment

Key points

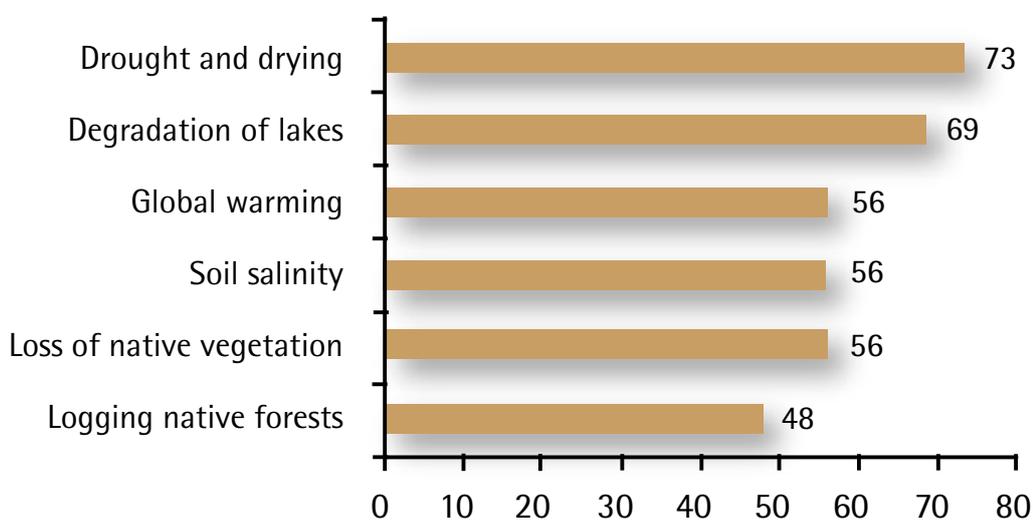
- The public views global warming as the most serious threat to the future well-being of the world.
- Drought is viewed as the most immediate environmental problem for Australia.
- A majority of the public believes that the government should be doing more to protect the environment.

Concerns about the long-term consequences for the planet of global warming dominate the public's thinking. Just over four out of every 10 respondents see global warming as the most serious threat to the future well-being of the world, with around three in 10 mentioning population growth and just under two in 10 terrorism. AIDs/HIV is mentioned as a concern by 3 per cent of the public, and 7 per cent mention some other concern. Global warming is perceived as a major long-term threat to the health of the planet by a significant proportion of the population.



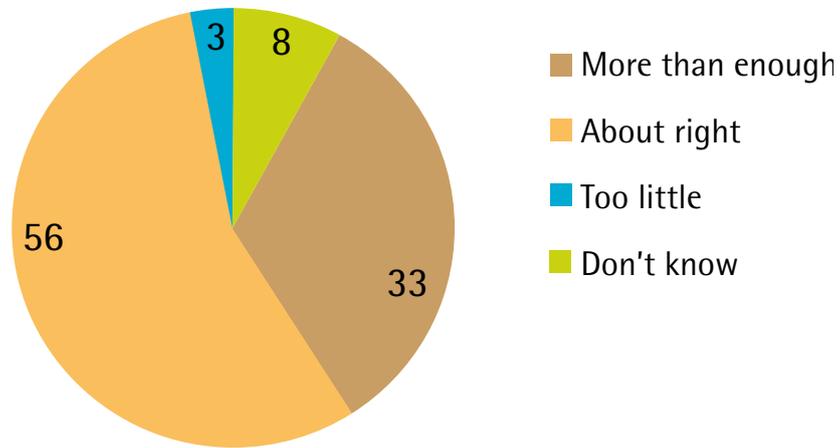
Which of the following is the most serious threat to the future well-being of the world?

Which environmental problems are viewed as most serious for Australia? The survey asked the respondents how seriously they regarded six aspects of environmental damage. Drought is one of the most visible aspects of climate change, affecting urban as well as rural respondents, and it comes at the top of the list, with 73 per cent seeing the problem as 'very serious.' A further 69 per cent regarded 'the degradation of rivers, lakes and oceans' as very serious. Of the six environmental problems that were mentioned, the logging of native forests was regarded as the least serious, although it was still mentioned as very serious by almost half of the respondents.



How serious do you consider each of the following to be for Australia? Global warming or the greenhouse effect... Loss of native vegetation or animal species or biodiversity... Degradation of rivers, lakes and oceans... Soil salinity and erosion... Environmental damage resulting from logging of native forests... Drought and drying.

Does the public believe that the government is doing enough to protect the environment? A majority—56 per cent—consider that the government is doing too little, and one-third see the government as doing about the right amount. Just 8 per cent see the government as doing too much. The public has greater expectations of the government's role in protecting the environment than is currently being delivered.



Some countries are doing more to protect the world environment than other countries are. In general, do you think that Australia is doing...?

International Comparisons

When asked about the most serious threats to the future well-being of the world, British respondents in a 2007 survey opted for global warming (45 per cent), followed by terrorism (32 per cent), population growth (14 per cent) and AIDs/HIV (7 per cent).

Australian opinion is very similar to US opinion in the proportions who believe that the government should do more. In a 2008 US survey, 61 per cent believed that the government should be doing more to protect the environment.

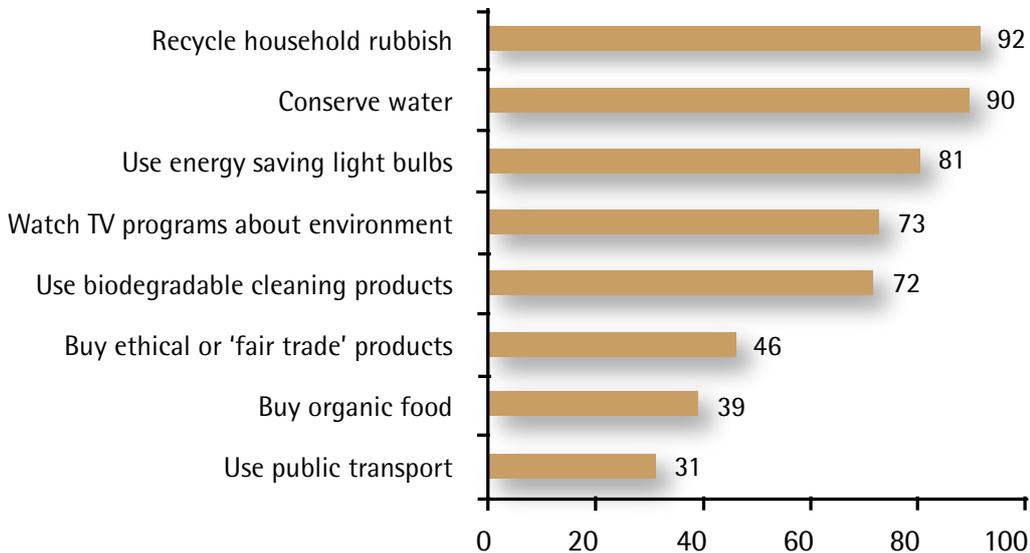
Sources: IPSOS/MORI, *Tipping Point or Turning Point?* Available at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/reportsandpublications/socialresearch.ashx>. <http://www.pollingreport.com/enviro.htm>

Environmental Behaviour

Key points

- The vast majority of the public have made small changes to their behaviour in order to assist the environment, such as recycling household rubbish.
- More substantial changes in behaviour, such as greater use of public transport and cutting back on car use, are much less common.

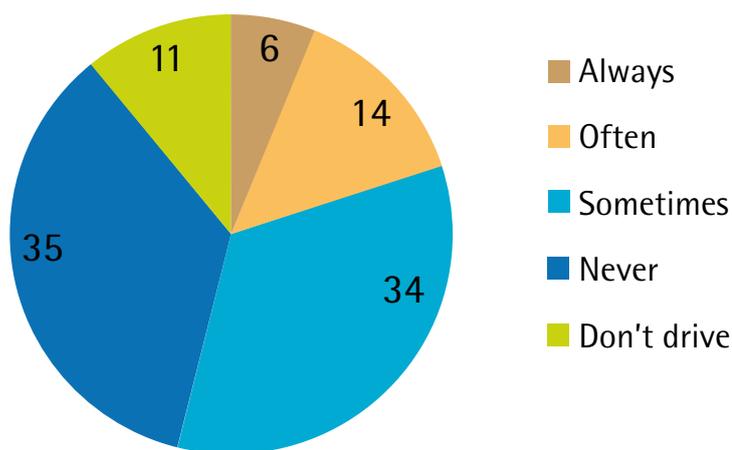
Responses to concerns about the environment can take a variety of forms, from advocating more government action to combat the problem, to making small changes in personal behaviour. The survey respondents were asked if they regularly participated in any of eight activities in order to help protect the environment. The median person said that they regularly participated in five of the eight activities. Only two of the 1,000 people interviewed in the survey said that they did not participate in at least one activity, and at the other end of the scale, 5 per cent said that they participated in all eight activities.



Which, if any, of the following do you do on a regular basis?

Most popular was recycling household rubbish and conserving water, which nine out of 10 respondents said they did regularly. Around eight out of 10 said that they used energy saving light bulbs, and seven out of 10 regularly used biodegradable cleaning products. Just under half said that they bought ethical or 'fair trade' food products, and about four in 10 purchased organic food. The least popular activity was using public transport, which was mentioned by just 31 per cent of the respondents.

Most of these activities represent small, incremental changes to behaviour that are relatively easy to adopt. Activities such as relying on public transport are more difficult behavioural changes to make, and that is reflected in the figures. The survey also asked the respondents about the extent to which they were cutting back on car use to help the environment. This is clearly something that many people have difficulty with, since they rely on car use to commute to work and for family activities. Just 6 per cent said that they cut back on their car use 'always', and 14 per cent said 'often'. By contrast, 34 per cent said 'sometimes' and 35 per cent 'never'.



How often do you cut back on driving a car for environmental reasons?

International Comparisons

Environmental behaviour is higher in Australia than in Britain. In a 2002 British survey, just 58 per cent said that they recycled household rubbish. Australian respondents had a consistently higher rate of environmental behaviour on all eight measures than their British counterparts.

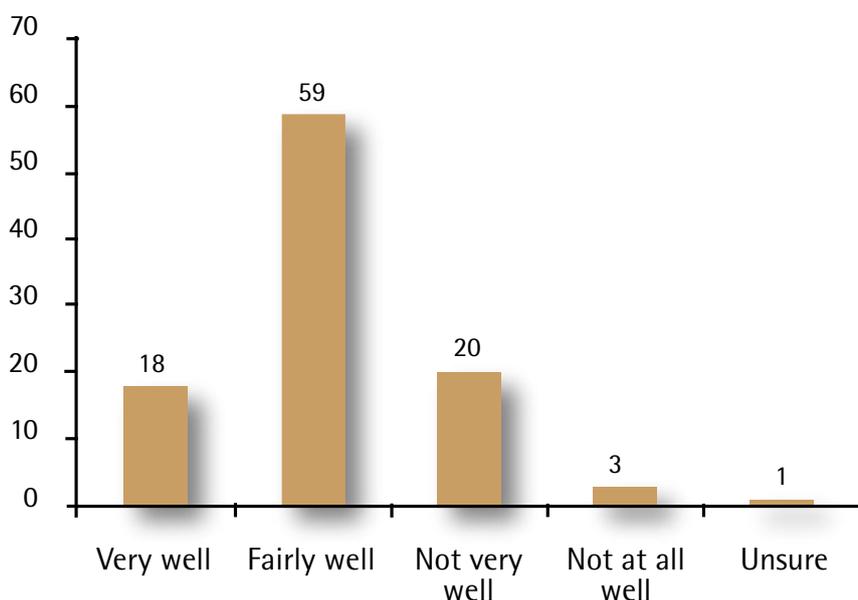
Source *The Day After Tomorrow: Public Opinion on Climate Change*. MORI Social Research Institute, available from <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/the-day-after-tomorrow-are-the-british-too-cool-on.ashx>

Global Warming

Key points

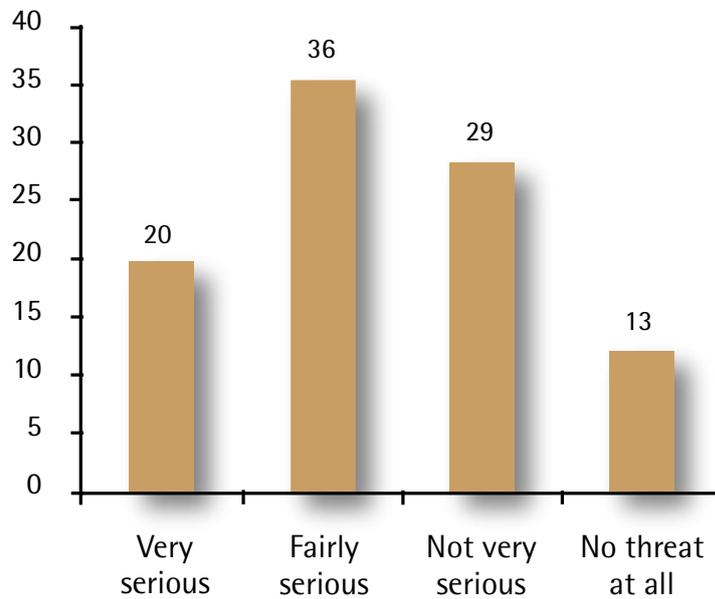
- A large majority of the public consider themselves to be well informed about the issue of global warming.
- Just over half of the public views global warming as a serious threat to themselves or to their way of life.
- A majority of the public—54 per cent— support the Emissions Trading Scheme, with 34 per cent opposed to it.

Over the past decade, terms such as 'global warming' and 'climate change' have entered everyday discussion. But to what extent does the public feel that they understand the issue of global warming? Despite the scientific complexities and debates surrounding the whole topic of global warming, a large majority of the public—77 per cent—feel that they understand the issue 'very well' or 'fairly well'. Only about one in four feel that they are not well informed.



Next, thinking about the issue of global warming, sometimes called the 'greenhouse effect', how well do you feel you understand this issue?

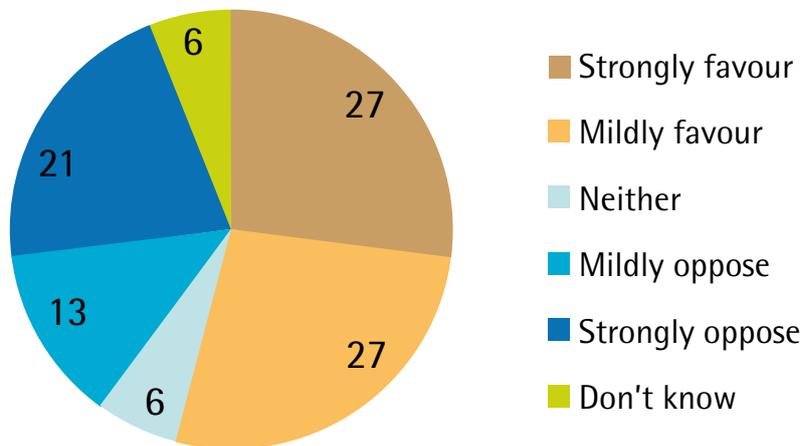
In addition to considering themselves to be relatively well informed about the issue, a narrow majority of the public also believes that global warming poses a 'very serious' or 'fairly serious' threat to everyday life in the future. One in five of the respondents considered it a 'very serious threat', and 36 per cent a 'fairly serious threat'. Taking the opposite view, 29 per cent said that they considered it a 'not very serious' threat and 13 per cent 'no threat at all'. Public opinion is therefore still divided on the long-term threat that global warming may pose to living standards.



Do you think that global warming will pose a serious threat to you or your way of life in your lifetime?

The government response to global warming has been to propose an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) which would contribute to reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions by placing a cost on emissions-intensive industries. A discussion paper was released in March, and the final report was presented to the government on 30 September.

On balance, a majority of the public favours the ETS; 27 per cent said they were 'strongly in favour' of the scheme, and the same proportion 'mildly in favour'. Among those opposed to the scheme, 13 per cent were 'mildly opposed' while 21 per cent were 'strongly opposed'. Reflecting the intense publicity and debate surrounding the proposal, only 12 per cent did not have an opinion on the ETS, despite its complexity.



The government has proposed a plan called an Emissions Trading Scheme to reduce global warming. The government would set a limit on the amount of carbon emissions that companies could produce each year. Companies that exceed that limit could avoid penalties by paying money to other companies that produced fewer emissions than allowed. Do you favour or oppose this proposal?

International Comparisons

Australians generally consider themselves to be less well informed about global warming than their US counterparts. In a 2007 survey, 32 per cent of US public said that they understood global warming 'very well' and 47 per cent 'fairly well'.

Australians see global warming as a bigger threat to their way of life than does the US public. In a 2008 survey, 40 per cent of US respondents said that global warming posed a 'serious threat', compared to 56 per cent of Australians.

Australians hold similar views about an Emissions Trading Scheme as does the US public. In a 2008 survey, 52 per cent of Americans favoured such a plan (compared to 54 per cent of Australians) and 45 per cent opposed it.

Source www.pollingreport.com/enviro.htm

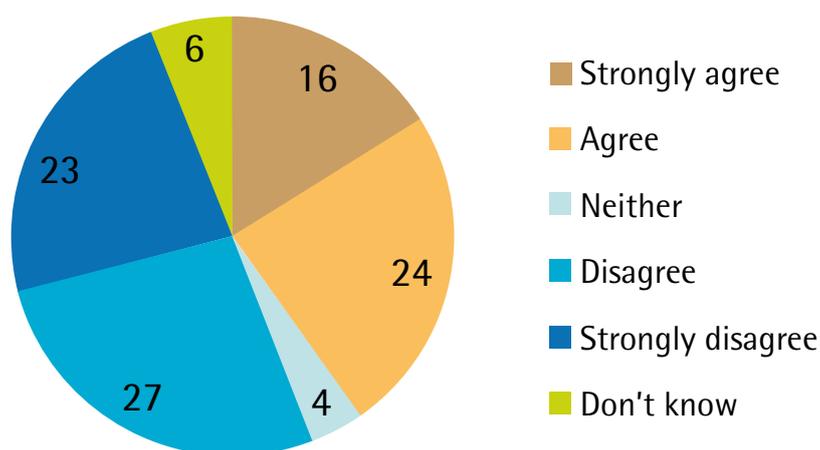
Nuclear Energy & Uranium Mining

Key points

- Around half of the public opposes the use of nuclear energy, while 40 per cent supports it.
- Just under half of the public support the mining of uranium, while 36 per cent opposes it.
- Over the last two decades, public support for nuclear energy has declined, while support for uranium mining has remained relatively stable.

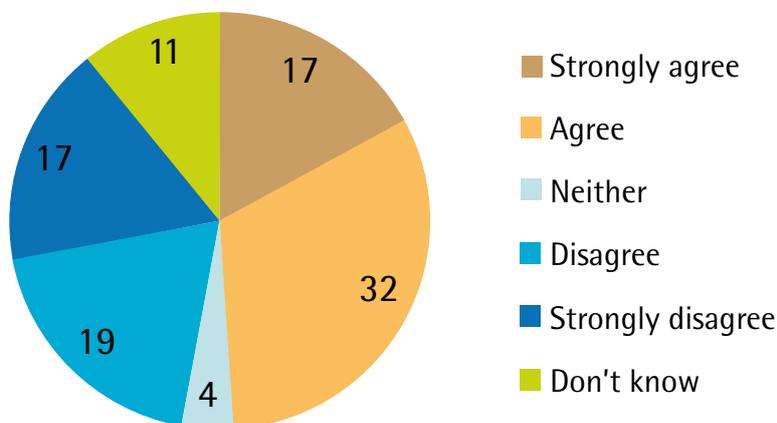
The debates surrounding climate change and particularly the carbon that is emitted by coal-fired electricity generation, have increased attention on cleaner alternatives. One alternative to coal-fired electricity generation is nuclear power, and the former Liberal government commissioned a report on the topic from a task force headed by Dr Ziggy Switkowski.

The public is divided about the benefits of nuclear energy, and in total, 50 per cent oppose it while 40 per cent say that they favour it. In general, those who oppose nuclear energy are stronger in their views than those who favour it. Just one in 10 of those interviewed have no opinion, suggesting that most respondents felt they had enough knowledge about the issue to express an opinion.



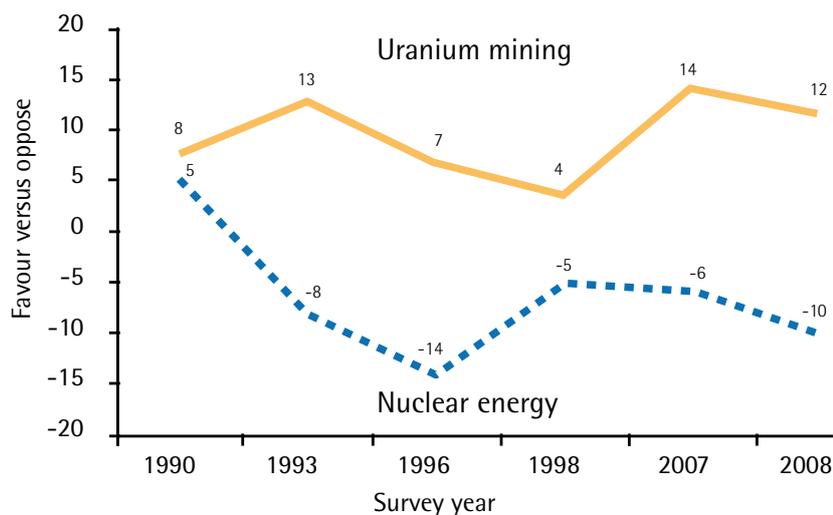
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Nuclear energy is a real necessity for the future.

Nuclear energy is also associated with the issue of uranium mining in Australia, which has had a complex history for both the state and federal governments. The public is more open to uranium mining than nuclear power, and 49 per cent favour mining Australia's uranium, while 36 per cent oppose it; 15 per cent have no opinion.



How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Australia should mine its uranium.

Placed in a longer-term perspective, public opinion towards uranium mining has been more stable than opinions towards nuclear energy. Since 1990, those in favour of uranium mining have consistently outnumbered those opposed to it, by between 4 and 14 percentage points. By contrast, those in favour of nuclear energy in 1990 outnumbered those opposed to it by 5 percentage points, but since then, support for nuclear energy has generally declined, and opponents have consistently outnumbered supporters.



International Comparisons

Australians are much less supportive of the use of nuclear energy to generate electricity than the US public. In 2006, 56 per cent of Americans favoured the nuclear generation of electricity, while 34 per cent opposed it.

Source <http://www.pollingreport.com/energy2.htm>

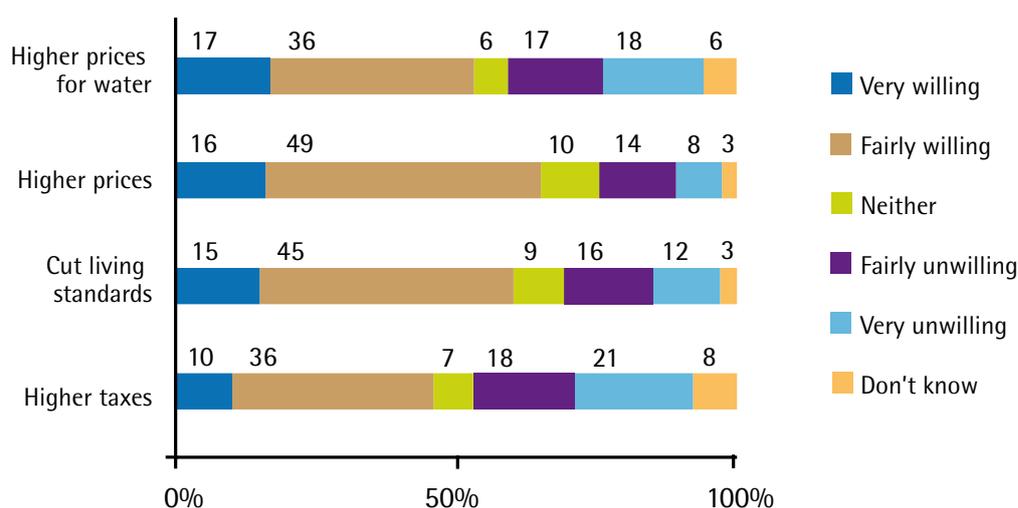
Paying to Protect the Environment

Key points

- A majority of the public say that they are prepared to pay higher prices or to accept reduced living standards in order to protect the environment.
- Opinions are more evenly divided over paying more taxes in order to protect the environment.

Advocating more government action to protect the environment is one way of expressing concern, and the survey results have already shown that a majority of the public believes that the government is not doing enough. However, advocating more government action involves little or no immediate cost to the individual. A more direct way to gauge the public's willingness to pay for protecting the environment is to ask the survey respondents if they would be willing to make a material sacrifice in particular circumstances.

The public is generally willing to pay more or to accept reduced living standards in order to protect the environment. There is most support for paying higher prices generally, and higher prices for water specifically. In the case of the former, 65 per cent support the proposition, and in the case of the latter, 53 per cent support it. With higher prices, just 22 per cent are opposed to the idea.



How willing would you be to pay much higher prices for water if mandatory water restrictions were abolished? How willing would you be to pay much higher prices in order to protect the environment? How willing would you be to pay much higher taxes in order to protect the environment? And how willing would you be to accept cuts to your standard of living in order to protect the environment?

There is also majority support for accepting a cut to living standards if it would protect the environment; 60 per cent support this view. However, support is much less for paying higher taxes to protect the environment. In this scenario, opinions are more evenly divided, with 46 per cent supporting the idea and 39 per cent opposing it. The conclusion must be that the public are more willing to pay for protecting the environment themselves, through higher prices and reduced living standards, and less willing to see their money used for this purpose through higher taxes and charges that flow to the government.

International Comparisons

Australians are more willing to pay higher prices to protect the environment than either British or US respondents. In a 2000 British survey, 42 per cent were willing to pay higher prices and in the US, 45 per cent. This compares with 65 per cent in Australia.

Sources <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/esds/variables/bsa/bsa4486/prenvir/>
<http://www.webuse.umd.edu/sdaweb/gss2000/Doc/gss20078.htm>

Key Trends: Most Important Problems & Political Mood

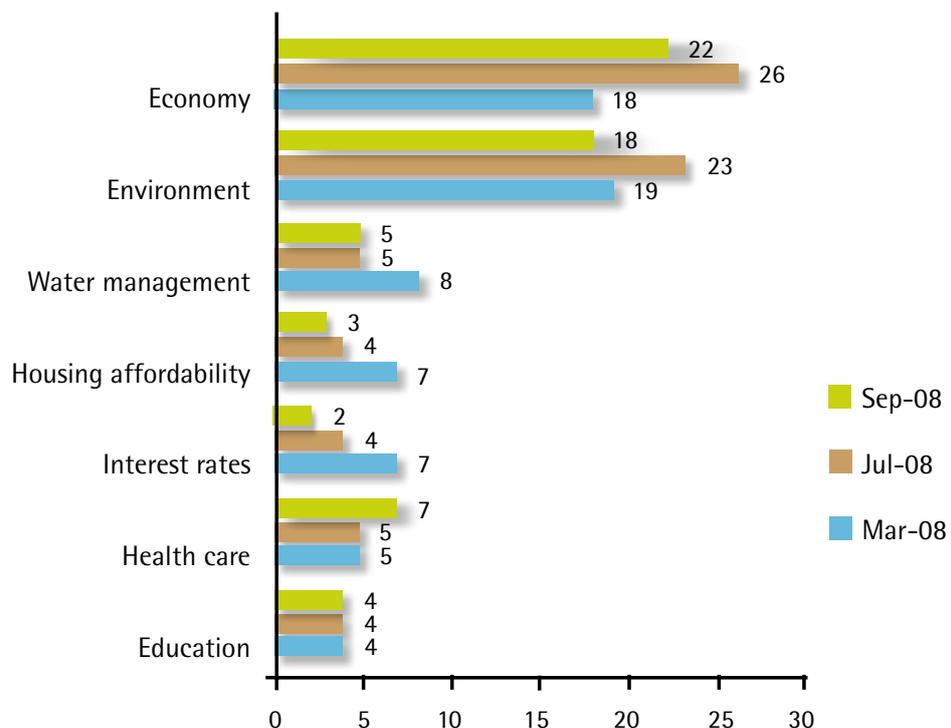
Key points

- The economy and the environment are viewed by the public as the two dominant problems facing the country.
- Levels of satisfaction with the direction in which the country is heading remain high.

The economy and the environment are seen as the two dominant problems facing the country, with the economy slightly ahead (mentioned by 22 per cent) of the environment (mentioned by 18 per cent). At the time of the first ANU poll in March 2008, the environment was ranked first by respondents, followed by the economy and in the second ANU poll in July, the economy moved ahead.

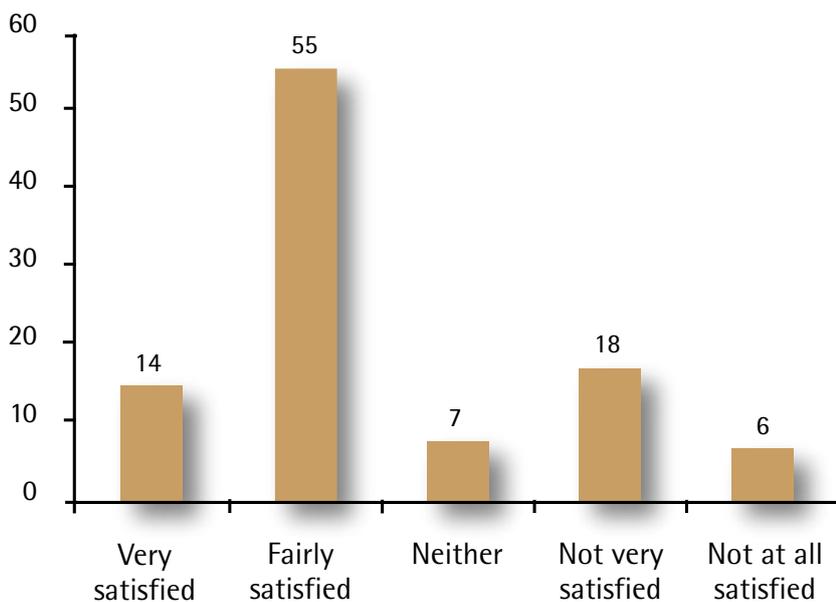
Housing affordability and interest rates have receded in importance for the public, while health and education are consistently mentioned as problems by between 4 and 7 per cent of the population. In the current poll, water management was mentioned by 5 per cent of the respondents as the major problem compared to 8 per cent in March 2008.

This poll confirms the finding that the public is focusing its attention on the economy and the environment as the two major problems facing Australia.



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

Around two in every three respondents are satisfied with the way the country is heading, with just over one in four saying that they are not satisfied. Subtracting the proportions of unsatisfied respondents (24 per cent) from the satisfied respondents (69 per cent) produces an index of +45, which is down from the figure of +53 recorded in the first ANU Poll in March.



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

About the Survey

The *ANU Poll* is conducted for The Australian National University by the Social Research Centre, Melbourne. The survey is a national random sample of the adult population aged 18 years and over conducted by telephone. In this survey, 1,000 people were interviewed between 5 and 21 September 2008, with a response rate of 30 per cent. The results have been weighted to represent the national population. The survey's margin of error is ± 3 per cent. Full details of survey can be found at <http://www.anu.edu.au/anupoll/>.



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