

The logo for ANU poll, with 'ANU' in blue and 'poll' in gold.

ANU **poll**

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Public Opinion Towards Defence Foreign Affairs

Results from the ANU Poll

REPORT 4

April 2009



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Professor Ian McAllister
Research School of Social Sciences
ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences

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Contents

Confidence in Defence	5
Support for Defence Operations	9
Terrorism	11
The US and the War in Afghanistan	15
Key Trends: Most Important Problems and Political Mood	19

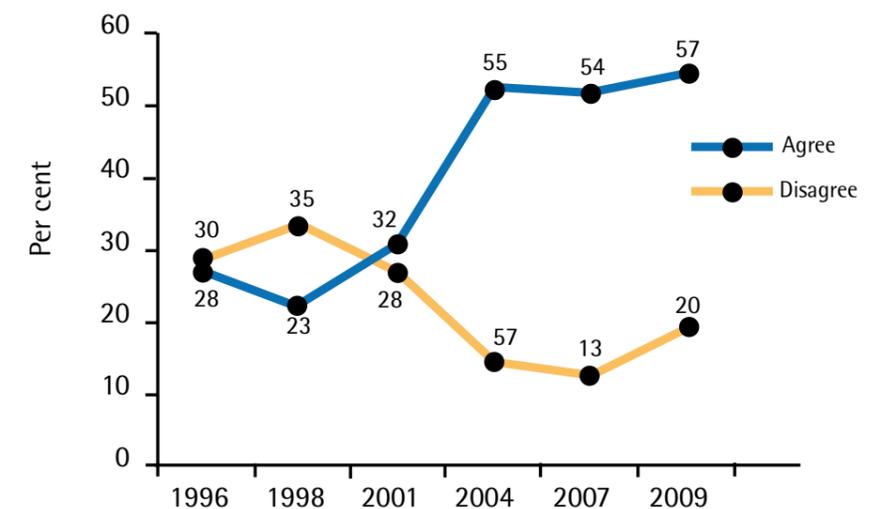
Confidence in Defence

Key points

- A majority of the public believes that defence is stronger now than it was 10 years before, and two-thirds would support a son or a daughter joining the military.
- The economic recession has made the public skeptical of more defence spending, with support for more spending at the lowest level for more than 20 years.
- A large majority—82 per cent—oppose tax increases to pay for more defence spending

Public opinion towards defence and foreign affairs is most responsive to events in the international environment. When there is international conflict and tension, support for defence is high; conversely, in periods of reduced tension and relative peace, public support is lower. Over the last half century, defence was most prominent as an issue for the public during the Cold War, and especially at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. With the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War, defence was less of a concern for the public during the 1990s, but re-emerged as an issue following the terrorist attacks in the United States (US) on 11 September 2001.

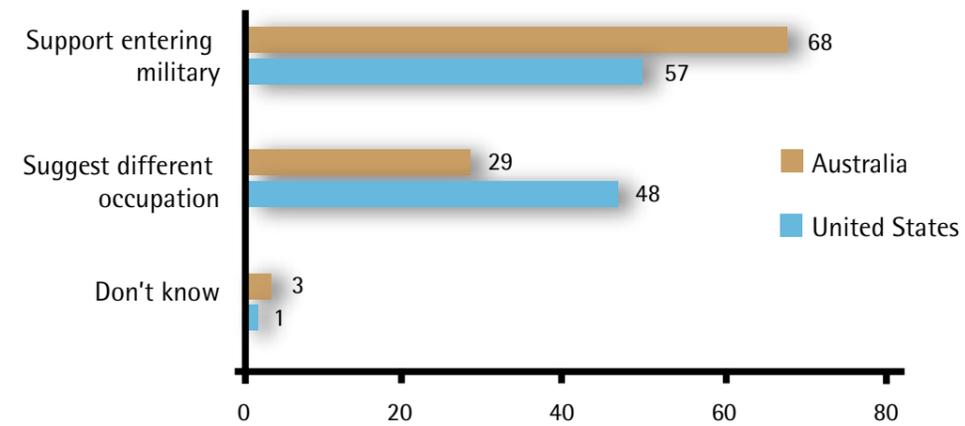
The public's views of the capabilities of Australia's defence show that in the period immediately after the end of the Cold War, opinions were evenly divided over whether defence was stronger now than it was 10 years before. With additional spending on defence and security following 9/11, the proportion believing that defence is stronger has risen significantly. In 2009, 57 per cent of the respondents believed that Australia's defence was stronger now than 10 years before, compared to just one in five who took the opposite view.



Do you agree or disagree that Australia's defence is stronger now than it was 10 years ago?

One indicator of the standing of the defence forces in the view of the public is the confidence that they public express in defence in an occupation. Successive opinion polls show that defence has the highest ranking among the major professions, along with ministers of religion and teachers. Another indicator is the willingness of the public to encourage their children to join the military and to make it their career.

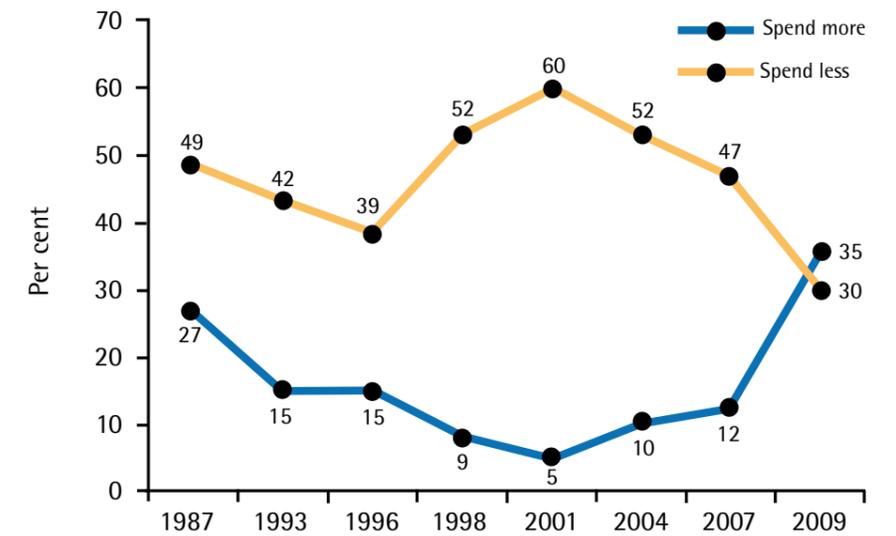
When asked if they would support the decision of a son or daughter to join the defence forces, 68 per cent of the respondents said they would support such a decision, with around one in three saying that they would suggest a different occupation. The same question asked in the US in 2005 resulted in a much lower proportion—51 per cent—expressing support for a son or daughter's decision to join the military. The lower figure in the US, of course, at least partly reflects the higher incidence of casualties in the US military.



If you had a son or daughter who was planning to enter the military, would you support that step or would you suggest a different occupation?

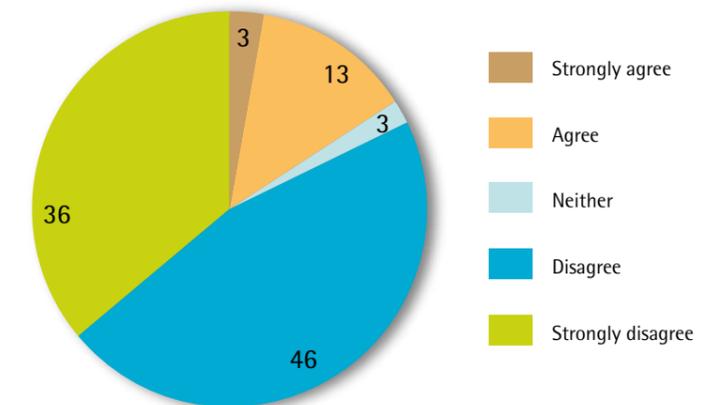
Paying for defence, particularly during an economic recession, is necessarily a divisive issue. Successive surveys have asked the public if they favour spending more or less money on defence, providing an important long-term barometer of the standing of defence in the eyes of the public, and of their willingness to pay for a strong and resilient defence force.

In the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, around four in 10 wanted to spend more on defence, with 15 per cent opting to spending less. The proportion favouring more spending on defence increased steadily following the Asian financial crisis in 1997-98, the East Timor crisis in 1999 and 9/11, peaking at 60 per cent in late 2001. The proportion favouring more spending has decreased steadily since then, to just half this figure in 2009. Indeed, over the more than 20 year period for which we have comparable data, this is the first time that the proportion wanting reduced spending has exceeded the proportion who have wanted more spending—clearly a sign of the difficult economic times.



Do you think that the government should spend more money or less money on defence?

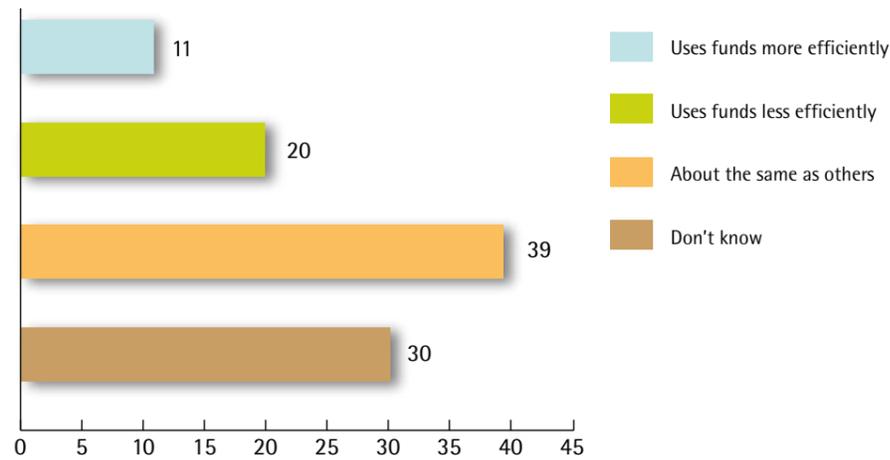
A further indicator of the public's reluctance to pay more for defence is strong opposition to a question asking the respondents if they would be willing to pay more in taxes to improve Australia's defence forces. A total of 82 per cent disagreed with the statement, 36 per cent of them strongly so, with just 16 per cent supporting paying more taxes for defence.



Do you agree or disagree that Australians should pay more taxes to improve Australia's defence forces?

Support for Defence Operations

How efficiently does the public believe that the Department of Defence uses its funding? Recent concerns about the management of defence funding and some questionable funding decisions have undoubtedly influenced the public's views, although not perhaps as much as might be expected. Around one in five believe that the Department of Defence is less efficient than other government departments, while the largest group—nearly four out of 10—believe that Defence is no different from any other government department; just 11 per cent believe that it is more efficient than other departments. It is also notable that 30 per cent said that they did not have enough information to be able to answer the question.



Compared to other government departments, do you think the defence department uses its funds more efficiently, less efficiently, or about the same?

International Comparisons

Recent US opinion polls show the same decline in support for more defence spending that has emerged in Australia. When asked about defence spending in a February 2009 Gallup poll, 31 per cent said there was too much spent on defence, 24 per cent too little, and 41 per cent said that the current level was about right. The long term trend observed in Australia is also similar in the US.

Sources: Gallup Poll, February 2009. Available at www.pollingreport.com/defense.htm

Key points

- There has been little change between 2000 and 2009 in the types of activities that the public sees as important for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to carry out.
- The public views disaster relief as most important, followed by defending Australia. The public considers United Nations (UN) operations to be the least important.

The Australian Defence Force is engaged in many different types of operations in Australia and overseas. These range from peacekeeping activities, particularly following the East Timor crisis in 1999, to participation in UN operations across the world, to assisting with emergency relief in Australia and overseas. The ANUpoll repeated a series of questions originally fielded in a Department of Defence opinion survey conducted in 2000 to identify what sort of operations the public considered to be important. In the 2000 survey, the respondents were asked about five operations; in the ANUpoll these five activities were repeated, with the addition of an extra item dealing with disaster relief in Australia.

Operations Considered 'Very Important' (Per cent)	2000	2009	Change
Engaging in disaster relief in Australia	-	86	-
Defending Australia against a foreign aggressor	82	79	-3
Stopping illegal immigrants and drugs coming into Australia	79	72	-7
Peacekeeping within our region	67	70	+3
Assisting our allies against attack	45	39	-6
Participating in UN operations anywhere in the world	36	38	+2

Which of these activities performed by Australia's defence forces do you rate as being 'very important'?

The results show considerable consistency in what the public thought were priorities for the ADF in 2000, and what they considered the priorities to be nine years later, in the ANUpoll. Among the five common items between the two surveys, there is most support for the defence of Australia, protecting borders against illegal immigrants and drugs, and for peacekeeping. There is least support in both surveys for assisting allies and, least popular of all, participating in UN operations. With the exceptions of stopping illegal immigrants and assisting allies, the changes between the two surveys are within sampling error.

The new item in the 2009 survey—disaster relief in Australia—enjoys widespread support among the 2009 respondents, and with 86 per cent saying it is 'very important', is easily the most supported activity, surpassing even the defence of Australia. Indeed, only one per cent of the respondents regarded it as 'not very important' and none said it was 'not at all important'. The public's support for disaster relief even surpasses its support for the defence of Australia.

An analysis to identify the underlying structure of these opinions shows that 'hard' defence operations—defending Australia, assisting allies against attack and border protection—formed one group of related opinions. The other three 'soft' defence operations—peacekeeping, participating in UN operations, and disaster relief—formed a second group of related activities. The public therefore views these types of activities as falling into two distinct categories, depending on what degree of force may be required to carry them out.

International Comparisons

The Australian public's scepticism about the UN is also observed in the US. In a February 2009 Gallup poll 65 per cent said that they thought the UN was doing a poor job, 26 per cent a good job, and nine per cent were unsure.

Source: www.pollingreport.com/defense.htm

Terrorism

Key points

- There is widespread public concern about the threat of terrorism. Around one in six are 'very concerned' about being the victim of a terrorist attack, and one in five are 'very concerned' about a terrorist attack in Australia.
- About half of the respondents believe that the government is doing all it can to counter the threat of terrorism.
- Opinion is divided about taking stronger legal measures to counter terrorism, although a narrow majority favours the more stringent measures.

Since 9/11 in the US and the Bali bombings in October 2002, terrorism has become a major preoccupation for the government and for public opinion. The public has become concerned about the possibility of a terrorist attack, and has looked to the government to reduce that risk. The government has responded by introducing heightened security measures and by enacting counter-terrorism legislation to manage the risk of terrorist attacks and to deter future attacks.

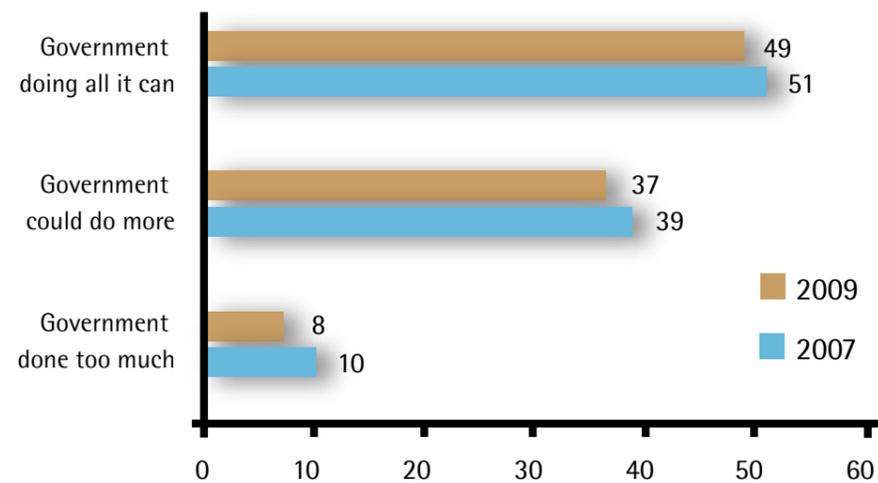
Notwithstanding the absence of a major attack on Australian soil, there is widespread public concern about the possibility of a terrorist attack. In the ANUpoll, 15 per cent of the respondents said that they were 'very concerned' about themselves or a family member becoming the victim of a terrorist attack, with a further 29 per cent saying that they were 'somewhat concerned'. These figures are very similar to those in the 2007 Australian Election Study, which found that 14 per cent were 'very concerned' and 36 per cent 'somewhat concerned' about becoming a victim of terrorism.

	You or family member	Terrorist attack in Australia
Very concerned	15	21
Somewhat concerned	29	34
Not very concerned	35	32
Not at all concerned	20	11
Total	100	100

How concerned are you about you or a family member being the victim of a future terrorist attack in Australia? And how concerned are you that there will be a major terrorist attack on Australian soil in the near future?

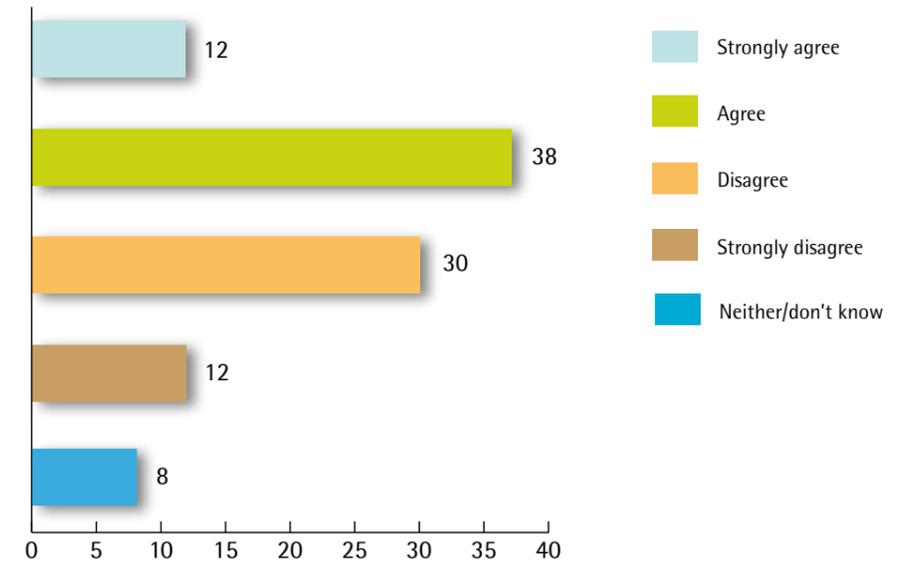
There is also a widely-held belief that there will be a terrorist attack in Australia in the future; 21 per cent said that they were 'very concerned' about this possibility and a further 34 per cent said they were 'somewhat concerned'. Again, these figures are very close to those recorded in 2007 in the Australian Election Study. By any standards, then, there is a significant and widespread public concern about the threat of terrorism, and about being the victim of a terrorist attack—however unlikely, statistically, that may be.

Does the public believe that the government is doing enough to counter this threat? Around half of those interviewed believe that the government is doing enough, with 37 per cent believing that the government could do more; just eight per cent believe that the government is not doing enough. Once again, these figures are very close to those recorded two years before, indicating consistency in the public's views on the issue.



Do you think the government is doing all it reasonably can do to prevent terrorist attacks in Australia, do you think it could do more, or do you think it has done too much?

The extent to which the public is resigned to future terrorist acts is also demonstrated by the responses to a question about the probability of future attacks. When asked if they believed that terrorist acts would be part of life in Australia in the future, half of the respondents agreed with the statement, and 42 per cent disagreed. With just eight per cent taking an intermediate position or saying that they don't know, this is an opinion on which the public has clearly formed views.



Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement:
1. Acts of terrorism in Australia will be part of life in the future.

How should governments respond to the threat of terrorism? Since 2001, most Western governments have introduced a range of counter-terrorism measures, such as increasing the powers of the police to detain and question suspects. The ANUpoll contained two questions designed to measure the public's views on such increased police powers to deal with terrorist suspects, one measuring support for searches of terrorist suspects' houses without a court order, the other measures to restrict freedom of speech for terrorist sympathisers.

In each case, the public is divided, with a narrow majority supporting each of the measures. A total of 51 per cent support searches without a court order, and 50 per cent support restricting freedom of speech. However, it is notable that proportionately more respondents are strong supporters of increased counter-terrorism measures than are strong opponents. Once again, these figures are very close to those found in the 2007 Australian Election Study, which showed that 57 per cent supported restricting freedom of speech, and 51 per cent supported house searches without a court order.

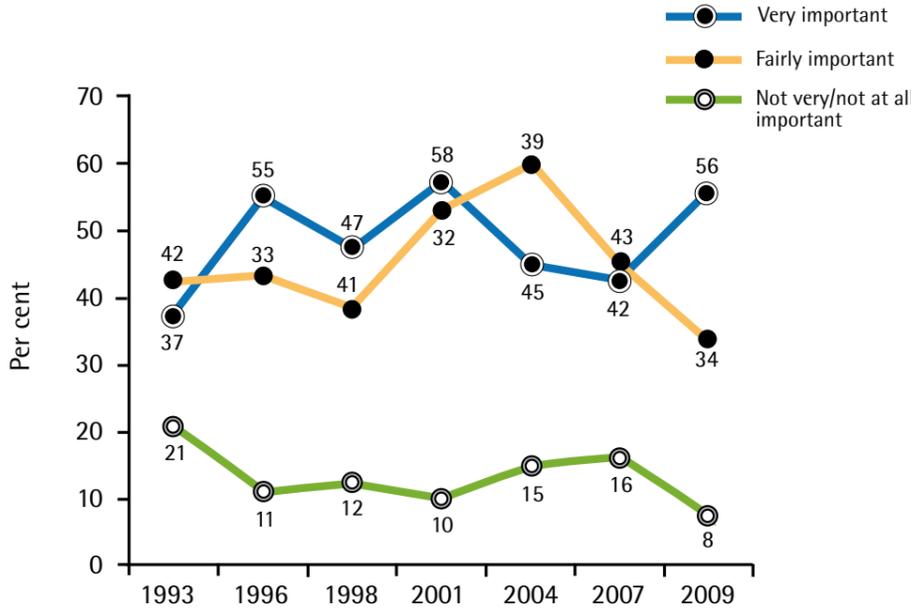
The US & the War in Afghanistan

Key points

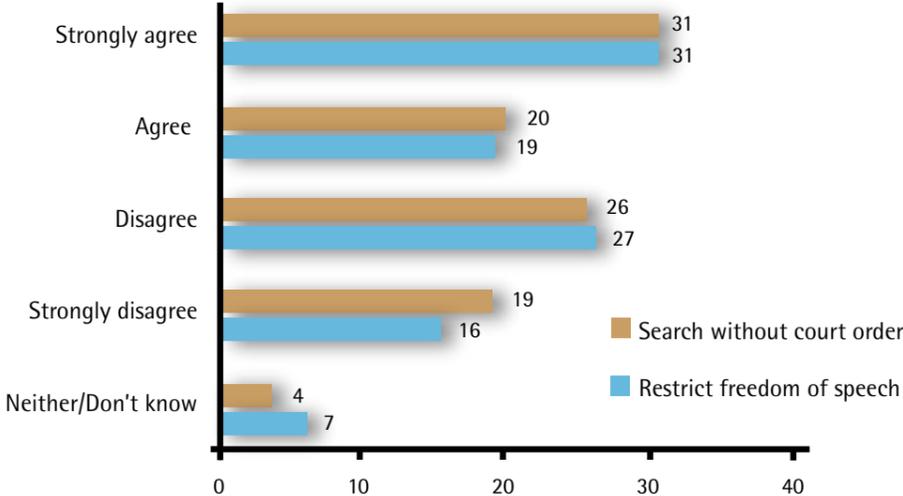
- Following the election of Barack Obama, support for the defence link with the US remains high, and equals the peak recorded immediately after 9/11.
- Trust in the US to assist Australia also remains high, although the strength of that trust has moderated in recent surveys.
- A narrow majority approve of Australia's participation in the war in Afghanistan, but most believe that the US and its allies are losing the war.

Ever since the ANZUS defence treaty was signed in 1951 between Australia, the US and New Zealand, the link with the US has been a cornerstone of Australia's defence policy and has been reaffirmed by successive governments. The defence link with the US has also been widely supported by the public, and has been relatively unaffected by short-term policies or events.

When asked how important they considered ANZUS to be for Australia's security, a majority of the ANUpoll respondents—56 per cent—said that they considered it 'very important', with a further 34 per cent regarding it as 'fairly important'. Just eight per cent saw it as unimportant. Placed in a longitudinal perspective, these figures are similar to those recorded just after 9/11, when sympathy for the US was at a peak. Undoubtedly, the election of Barack Obama is a major factor underpinning the 2009 figures, following the relatively unpopular foreign policies pursued by the previous Bush administration.



How important do you think the Australian alliance with the US under the ANZUS treaty is for protecting Australia's security?



Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:
 1. Freedom of speech should not extend to groups that are sympathetic to terrorists.
 2. The police should be allowed to search, without a court order, the houses of people who might be sympathetic to terrorists.

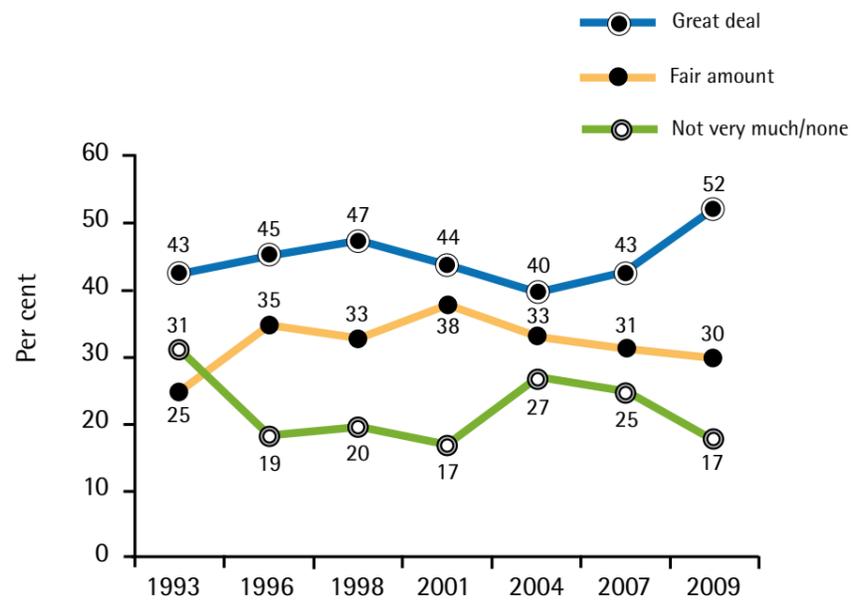
International Comparisons

Australians are similar to Americans in their concern about being the victim of a terrorist attack. A December 2005 Gallup poll found that 11 per cent of those interviewed said that they were 'very worried' about being a terrorist victim, and 30 per cent were 'somewhat worried'.

Americans believe that their government could do more about terrorism, in contrast to Australia. An ABC Newspann poll conducted in September 2006 found that 38 per cent believed that the government was doing all it could, 60 per cent said that the government could do more, and two per cent were unsure.

Source: www.pollingreport.com/terror4.htm

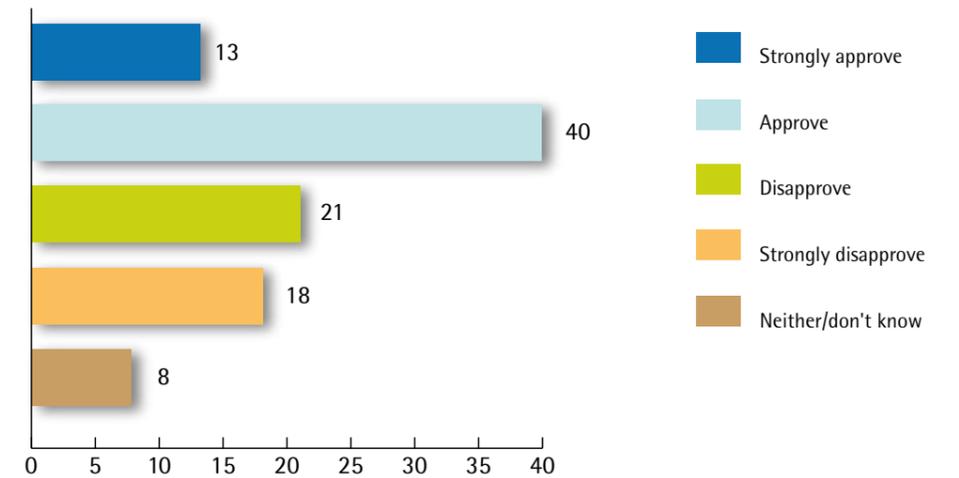
There is also an increased level of trust in the US to come to Australia's defence; a total of 82 per cent express a 'great deal' or 'a fair amount' of trust in the US. Once again, these figures are the same as those immediately following 9/11. It is notable that what has increased in recent years is a moderate level of trust—a 12 point increase since 2004—while the highest level of trust has slowly declined since the immediate post-9/11 highpoint.



If Australia's security was threatened by some other country, how much trust do you feel Australia can have in the US to come to Australia's defence?

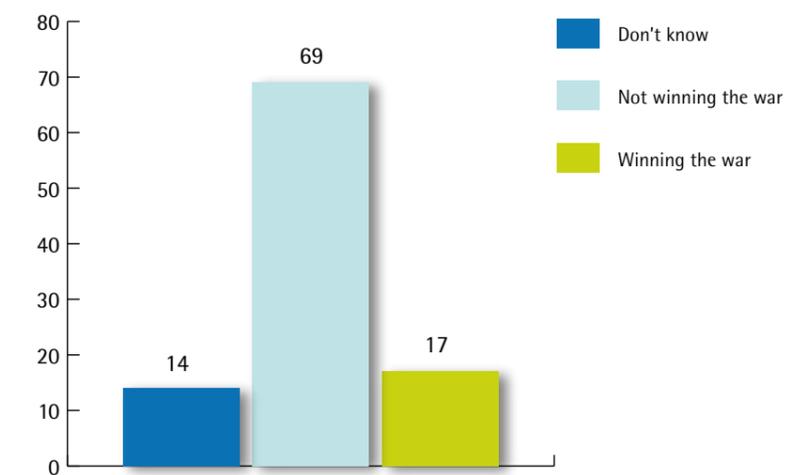
Successive opinion polls have traced the increasing unpopularity of the Iraq war among the Australian public since the invasion in 2003, and the polls have also shown that most Australians believe that the war has not been worth the cost. In particular, by the time of the 2007 election, a majority believed that the war in Iraq had actually increased the threat of terrorism to Australia rather than reduced it, contrary to one of the key goals of the invasion.

While the war in Afghanistan attracts the support of a narrow majority of the public, 53 per cent, a significant minority remain opposed. That opposition is likely to increase if Western military intervention in Afghanistan does not bring tangible gains. The fact that disproportionately more respondents express strong opposition to the participation in the war than strong support suggests that public approval could shift to disapproval if there were significant casualties or setbacks.



Do you approve or disapprove of Australia's military participation in the war in Afghanistan?

The public is also very pessimistic about the changes of success in Afghanistan, perhaps reflecting the public's experience with the Iraq War. Just 17 per cent of the ANUpoll respondents believe that the US and its allies are winning the war, and a large majority, 69 per cent, believe that they are loosing the war. Again, this creates the conditions for a rapid shift in public opinion in the absence of positive news about the progress of the war.



Do you think the US and its allies are winning or not winning the war in Afghanistan?

International Comparisons

Similar numbers of Americans as Australians believe that the US is losing the war in Afghanistan. A CNN/Opinion research poll conducted in February 2009 found that 64 per cent believed the US was losing the war, 31 per cent that the US was winning the war, and five per cent were unsure.

Source: www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm

Key Trends: Most Important Problems & Political Mood

Key points

- The economy and jobs is now viewed by the public as by far the most important problem facing Australia.
- The majority of Australians are satisfied with the way the country is heading, although there has been a slight decline in satisfaction since March 2008.

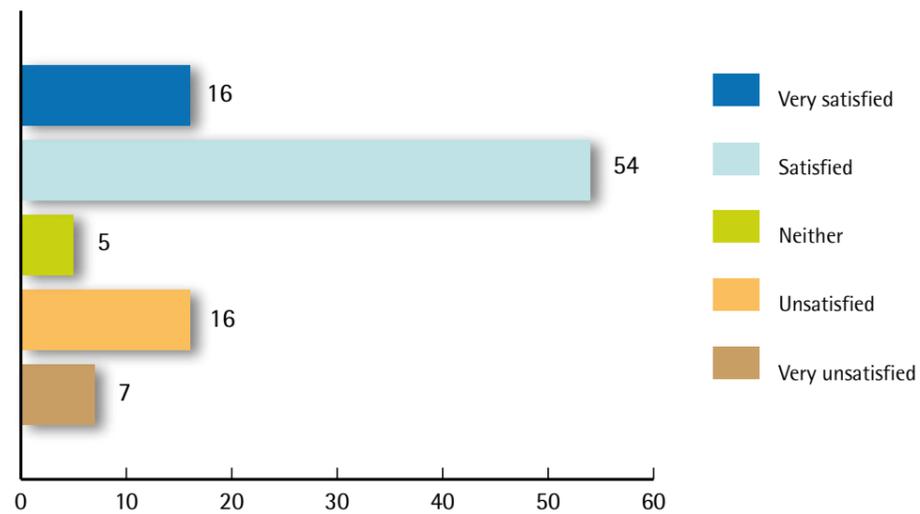
Throughout 2008, the two main problems mentioned as priorities by the ANUpoll respondents were the economy and the environment, the latter also encompassing global warming. Indeed, in the first ANUpoll conducted in March 2008, the environment was slightly ahead of the economy as the most important problem mentioned by the respondents. With the global recession, that has now changed, and now by far the most frequently mentioned issue is the economy and jobs.

In the current ANUpoll, 53 per cent of the respondents mentioned the economy as the most important problem facing Australia, with the environment attracting mentions from just 12 per cent of the sample. No other issues gained any significant mentions; immigration ranks third, but with just six per cent, and is followed by better government and health care, with three per cent each. This is a remarkable turnaround in the priorities of public opinion in a relatively short period of time. Indeed, if we take into account mentions of the second most pressing problem facing Australia, then only 32 per cent of the respondents did not mention the economy and jobs as either a first or second priority.

Rank	Issue	Per cent mentioned
1	Economy/jobs	52
2	Environment/global warming	12
3	Immigration	6
4	Better government	3
5	Health care	3
	Other	24

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

Despite the public's preoccupation with the economy and jobs, the political mood remains positive, and a remarkably high 70 per cent are satisfied with the way the country is heading. Just 16 per cent say that they are unsatisfied, and a further seven per cent are 'very' unsatisfied. However, the predominant picture remains one of the general satisfaction, with relatively little change since the last poll in October 2008, when 69 per cent said that they were satisfied.



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, 1,200 people were interviewed between 17 March and 1 April 2009, with a response rate of 32.5 per cent. The results have been weighted to represent the national population. The survey's margin of error is ± 2.5 per cent. Full details of survey can be found at www.anu.edu.au/anupoll/



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