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BIG AUSTRALIA, SMALL AUSTRALIA,
DIVERSE AUSTRALIA:

Australia's views on population

Report No. 28: January 2019

(ANUpoll data collected November 2018)

ANU Centre for Social
Research & Methods

ANU College of
Arts & Social Sciences

ANUPOLL

BIG AUSTRALIA, SMALL AUSTRALIA, DIVERSE AUSTRALIA: **Australia's views on population**

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About the poll

ANUpoll is conducted for The Australian National University (ANU) by the Social Research Centre, an ANU Enterprise business. The poll surveys a national random sample of the adult population (using the 'Life in Australia' panel), and is conducted via the Internet (88 per cent of respondents) and phone (12 per cent of respondents). The use of this mixed-mode frame is to ensure coverage of households without Internet access.

In this poll, 2,167 people were interviewed between the 19th of November and the 3rd of December, 2018. Among individuals who received the survey (ie members of the 'Life in Australia' panel), a completion rate of 77 per cent was achieved. Taking into account the recruitment rate to the panel, the cumulative response rate is calculated as 9 per cent. The results have been weighted to represent the national population. The poll's margin of error is ± 2.5 per cent.

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INTRODUCTION

Alongside their level of economic development, countries are often defined by their population size. Australia, with a population of around 25 million, was the 54th largest country by population in 2018 and around the upper-middle part of the distribution of countries.¹

Countries grow through a combination of an excess of births over deaths and an excess of immigrants over emigrants. Unlike many other developed countries, Australia has experienced a relatively rapid growth over the last decade or so. This has mainly been driven by a high rate of net migration.

The attitudes of Australians towards population growth is constantly changing. In the 28th ANUPoll, a representative sample of Australians show that more than two-thirds of adults do not think that Australia needs more people, a dramatic increase since a similar question was asked in 2010.

The things people take into account with regards to population growth are quite diverse and also appear to be changing. Most people are supportive of cultural diversity. But, crowding and housing affordability have become key issues. Australians also do not want population growth to come at the expense of Australia's natural environment.

The findings presented in this report contribute nuance to an area in which views and attitudes can often be quite heated. The ANUpoll series, conducted by the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods and the Social Research Centre, is designed to inform public and policy debate, as well as to assist scholarly research. It is an important contribution that ANU makes to public debate about the key social issues facing Australia and the type of country in which we want to live.

¹ <http://data.un.org/>

THE IMPACT OF POPULATION GROWTH

As many other rich countries grapple with ageing and declining populations, Australia has experienced a population expansion as large in scale as at any other time since colonisation. In 1981 the Australian population was around 14.9 million people. By June 2018 it had reached 25.0 million, with the last five million of that growth occurring since December 2004.²

A growing population presents opportunities and challenges. It increases the potential for economies of scale in many markets (so called 'agglomeration economies'—Puga (2010)) as well as the overall tax base. Furthermore, as much of that growth has been from immigration from a diverse range of source countries, a growing population increases the richness of life in Australia.

Perhaps most importantly from a global perspective, migration to a country like Australia has the potential to increase the economic circumstances and wellbeing of those who move here. Using experimental data from a migration lottery, Stillman, Gibson et al. (2015) showed that migration from a relatively poor to relatively rich country increased measures of objective wellbeing, with a more complicated but generally positive relationship with subjective measures of wellbeing. Using the same experiment, but focusing on children, Stillman, Gibson et al. (2012) found that 'migration increases height and reduces stunting of infants and toddlers, but also increases BMI and obesity among 3- to 5-yr-olds.'

A growing population also brings challenges. If that growth is concentrated in certain cities and suburbs within cities, then it can place pressure on services and infrastructure. There is mixed evidence for the effect of population growth in general and migration specifically on house prices. With a fixed stock of housing, population growth will lead to an increase in either crowding or house prices, or probably both. But housing stocks aren't fixed and there is likely to be some adjustment, especially in the medium and long term. Furthermore, the non-migrant population will adjust to inflows of migrants to cities and suburbs within cities, offsetting some of the increase in demand or displacing it to other areas. In net terms, Sá (2014) found in the UK that 'Natives respond to immigration by moving to different areas and those who leave are at the top of the wage distribution. This generates a negative income effect on housing demand and pushes down house prices.'

Using data on 20 large Italian cities, Accetturo, Manaresi et al. (2014) showed that the displacement effect could be within cities, not just across cities. Specifically, they found 'that immigration raises average house prices at the city level, while it reduces price growth in the district affected by the inflow vis-à-vis the rest of the city. We provide evidence that this pattern is driven by native-flight from immigrant-dense districts towards other areas of the same city.'

As the negative effects on the costs of housing are driven by the native-born population (or previous waves of migrants) moving out of the areas which migrants move into, the social attitudes of those in the host country is a key determinant of whether there is a net positive or negative effect. In the USA, which like Australia has had a long history of migration, it would appear that there is a positive effect of migration on house prices. Specifically, Mussa, Nwaogu et al. (2017) showed that 'an increase in immigration inflows into a particular MSA [Metropolitan Statistical Area] is associated with increases in rents and with house prices in that MSA while also seeming to drive up rents and prices in neighboring MSAs.'

There is also the potential for population growth to impact on the wages of the native-born population. Once again though, the net effect is ambiguous and depends on the responses of the existing population of workers and employers. Alongside migration, fertility affects the age distribution of a growing population. If the population growth is occurring at the lower part of the age distribution, then this will increase the dependency ratio (the number of people of non-working age relative to the working age population) and make it harder for those with caring responsibilities to engage in the labour market. As those children enter the labour market though, there is the opportunity for a country or area within a country to receive a 'demographic dividend.' However, the empirical evidence for such a dividend is mixed, with recent evidence provided by Cuaresma, Lutz et al. (2014) showing education more than age structure as being the driver of economic growth with 'improvements in educational attainment ... the key to explaining productivity and income growth and that a substantial portion of the demographic dividend is an education dividend.'

Migration also has a complicated effect on wages. On the one hand, as labour supply increases, there is likely to be a shift down the labour demand curve, decreasing wages. On the other hand though, the increase in spending from new migrants will shift the demand curve to the right, meaning that wages may actually increase, at least for some. Furthermore, it is likely that at least some migrants take up roles within the labour market that are not being filled by the existing population. Citing existing literature Breunig, Deutscher et al. (2017) showed that there is 'evidence for varying effects across population subgroups in the USA and UK respectively, with at times positive effects for native workers as a whole sitting alongside negative effects for less educated natives and past migrants.'

2 <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyCatalogue/D56C4A3E41586764CA2581A70015893E?OpenDocument>

For Australia, Breunig, Deutscher et al. (2017) concluded that 'Overall, we find little evidence that the labour market outcomes of Australian-born workers are negatively related to immigration. If anything, when we consider narrowly defined skill groups and compare the Australian-born to all immigrants, there is some evidence for small positive associations.'

As the world's driest inhabited continent with unique flora and fauna, Australia's environment may not be able to cope with rapid population growth. Hatfield-Dodds, Schandl et al. (2015) make the point that economic growth (which in Australia is strongly related to population growth) need not result in environmental costs. Specifically, they state that 'in the right circumstances, economic and environmental outcomes can be decoupled... However, we find no evidence that decoupling will occur automatically.'

Rapid migration can also lead to some people feeling that their culture or beliefs are under pressure. While a universally accepted disaggregation of the contribution of individual factors towards the surprise Brexit Referendum results in the UK and election of President Trump is a long way off and may never be arrived at, it is clear that views on the social effects of immigration were at least one important factor (Goodwin and Heath 2016).

Finally, if those who move to Australia are amongst the more skilled or productive of the source countries, there may be negative effects on those who remain in these countries. This so-called 'brain drain' effect occurs when the loss of skills from those who leave is not outweighed by combined effect of the freeing up of education opportunities for those that remain and the human capital investment made available by the remittances sent home (Beine, Docquier et al. 2001).

This brief summary of the literature shows that population growth has a complicated effect on the existing population of a country or region that is experiencing that growth, those who are contributing to that population growth by moving to the country that is growing, and those who remain in the source country. Discussion on the contribution of births (minus deaths) to population growth has not been absent from Australian policy, including the introduction and subsequent removal of the *Baby Bonus*, one of the more prominent policy interventions of the Howard Government, and particularly associated with the then Treasurer, Peter Costello. However, as migration has been the major source of population growth in Australia in recent years, that is the area that gets the most policy and popular discussion. Paul Collier (2013) summarised the literature as:

'the evidence does not suggest that migration has had significant adverse effects on the ... populations of host societies ... [but] without effective controls migration would rapidly accelerate to the point at which additional migration would have adverse effects, both on the ... populations of host societies and on those left behind in the poorest countries.'

DECLINE IN SUPPORT FOR POPULATION GROWTH

With such a rapidly growing population and diverse potential costs and benefits, it is not surprising that attitudes to population growth change through time and vary across the Australian population. These attitudes, however, may have a direct effect on the experience of migrants or births contributing to population growth through support for infrastructure investment, any internal migration responses, and social interaction. Furthermore, through the democratic system, attitudes towards population growth will impact on the level of growth that governments allow or aim for.

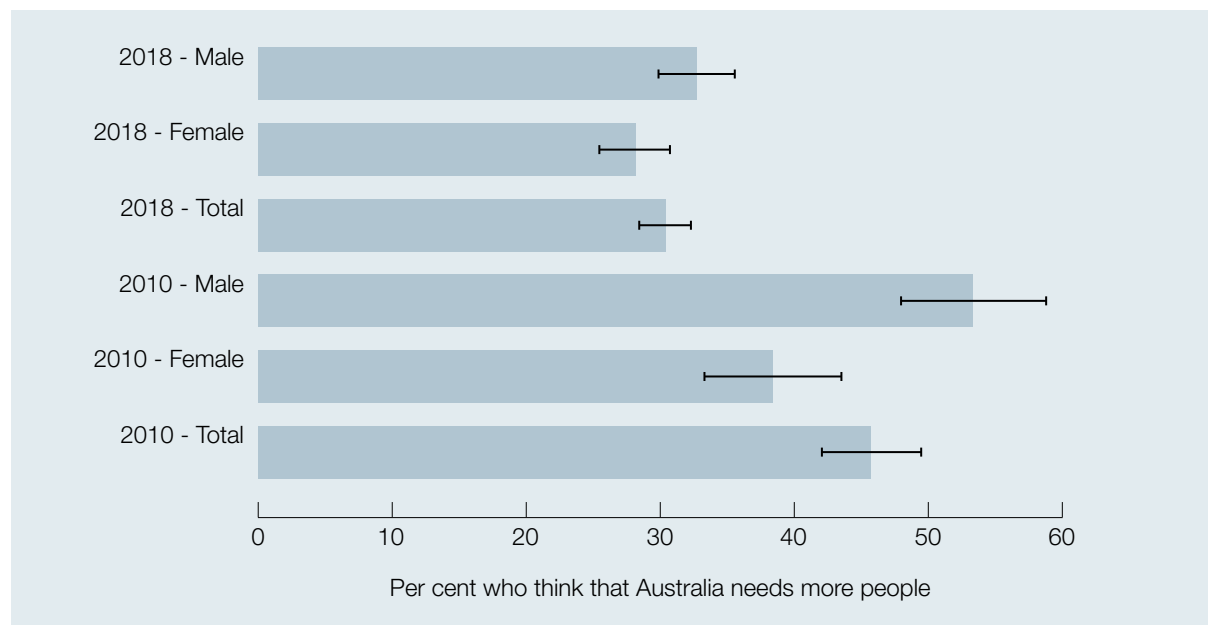
In the 28th ANUPoll, conducted between the 19th of November and the 3rd of December, the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods obtained information from a nationally representative sample of 2,167 Australian adults on a range of issues related to population in Australia. Questions were asked in a consistent way with previous surveys in order to be able to measure change through time, with additional questions asked to test for attitudes to policy responses to population growth.

The first question we asked was 'The Australian population is now a little over 25 million... Do you think Australia needs more people?' Using population weights and excluding those who didn't answer the question, only 30.4 per cent of the population answered yes to this question, compared to 69.6 per cent who felt that Australia did not need more people.

This percentage has declined quite substantially since a similar question was asked in a similar survey in March/April 2010 (McAllister, Martin et al. 2010). Using a telephone-based interview on adult Australians, 712 respondents were directly asked 'Do you think Australia needs more people?' For that survey in 2010, 45.8 per cent of respondents (using weights) felt that Australia needed more people, excluding those who did not give an answer. Figure 1 below, which gives results for 2010 and 2018 by gender, shows that there has been a larger decline in support amongst males (53.4 per cent to 32.8 per cent) than for females (38.5 per cent to 28.2 per cent), with the former still having a greater level of support.

Figure 1. Support for population growth by year and gender

Source: ANUPoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019

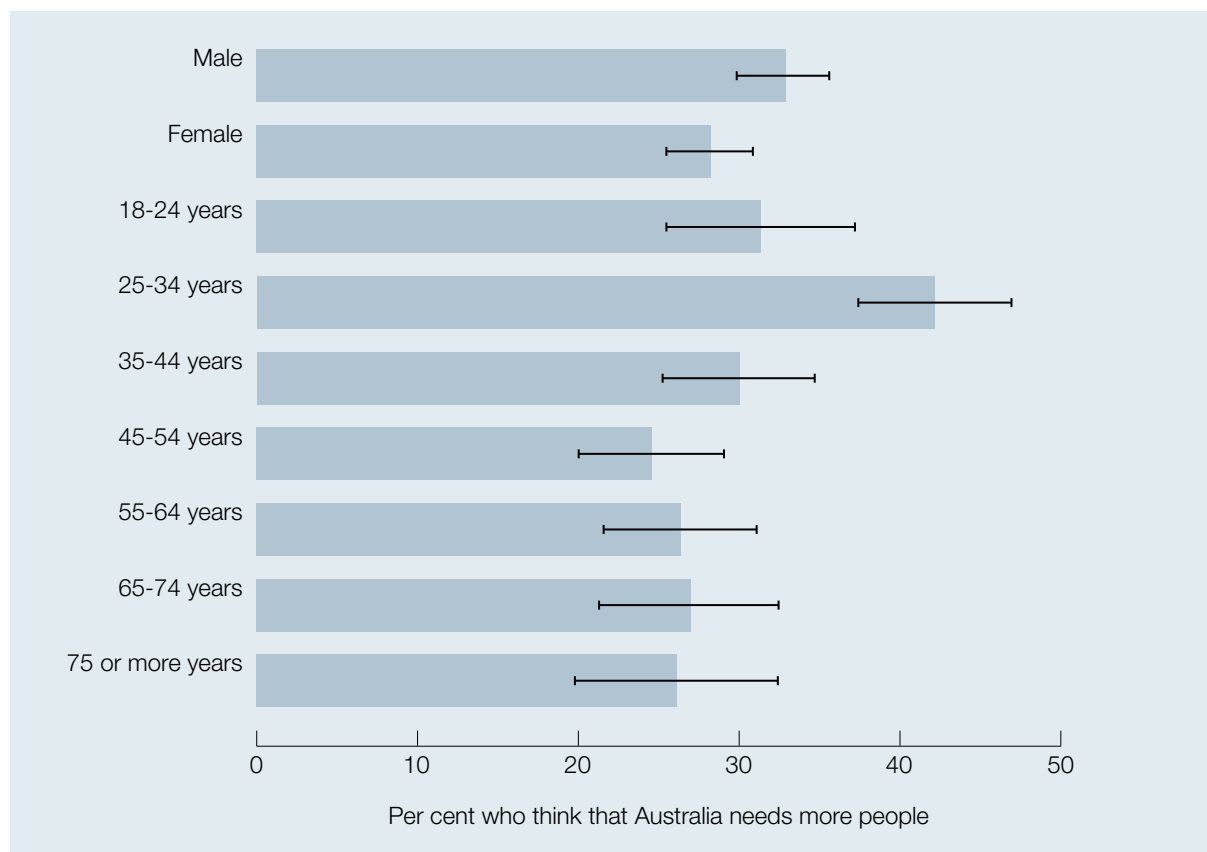


VARIATION IN SUPPORT FOR POPULATION GROWTH ACROSS THE POPULATION

There are significant differences in the level of support for population growth across different demographic and socioeconomic groups.³ Interestingly though, there are no substantial differences by geography. In general, males are more supportive of an increased population than females (32.8 per cent compared to 28.2 per cent), as are the young compared to the old. The age group with the greatest support for an increased population are those aged 25 to 34 years, with 42.2 per cent of that group saying that the population should be increased.

Figure 2. Variation in support for population growth by gender and age

Source: ANUpoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019



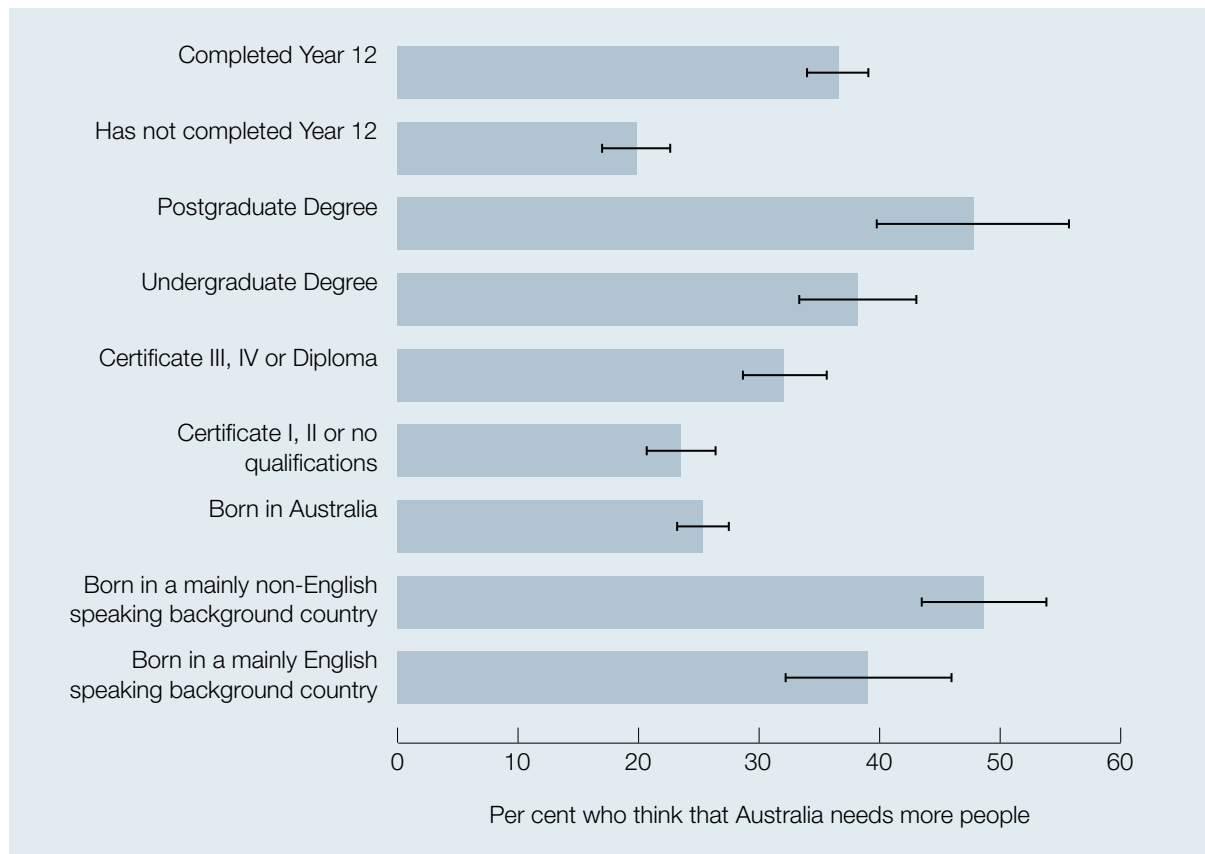
There were even larger differences in support for population growth by an individual's education and own migration status. Those individuals who have completed Year 12 are about 1.9 times as likely to say that they support an increased population as those who have not completed Year 12 (36.5 per cent compared to 19.7 per cent). There are also large differences by post-school qualifications, with those with a postgraduate degree 2.0 times as likely to support a growing population as those with a Certificate I, II or no qualification only (47.7 per cent compared to 23.4 per cent). Those with an undergraduate degree only (38.1 per cent) and a Certificate III or IV (32.1 per cent) fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

As beneficiaries of migration (and hence contributors to past population growth), those respondents who were born overseas have a greater level of support for population growth than those born in Australia (25.6 per cent). Within the overseas born population, there is a higher level of support amongst those born in a country with a predominantly non-English speaking population (48.6 per cent) compared to those who were born in a predominantly English speaking country (39.0 per cent).

³ Although we present results as univariate comparisons, differences in Figures 2 and 3 hold when they are included in a regression-style model (specifically, a probit model) that also includes and controls for the socioeconomic characteristics of the area in which a person lives, as well as whether or not they live in a capital city.

Figure 3. Variation in support for population growth by education and country of birth

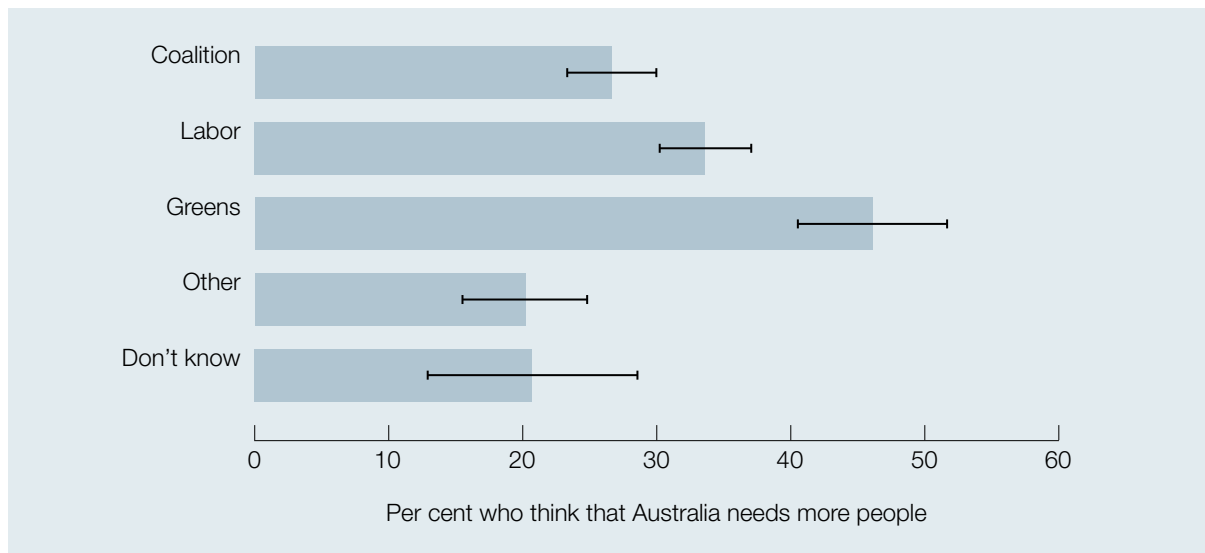
Source: ANUpoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019



In addition to asking people for their views on population growth and background sociodemographic information, respondents in every ANUPoll are asked at the start of the survey ‘If a federal election for the House of Representatives was held today, which one of the following parties would you vote for?’ Based on those responses, we collapse respondents into five groups – Coalition (Liberal or National); Labor; Greens; Other; and Don’t know. We did not include this variable in the regression analysed above, as party voting is as likely to be affected by views on population growth as to have an effect on population growth. That is, the causality is likely to run in both directions. Nonetheless, as shown in Figure 4 below, there is substantial variation in views on population growth by voting intentions.

Figure 4. Variation in support for population growth by voting intention

Source: ANUpoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019



The greatest level of support for population growth is held by those who say they would vote for the Greens party if an election were to be held at the time of the survey, with 46.1 per cent answering yes to the question. Of the other major parties, Coalition voters have the lowest level of support (26.6 per cent) with Labor voters somewhere in between (33.6 per cent). Importantly though, those who say they would vote for another party or candidate have the lowest level of support (20.2 per cent) with low values (but high standard errors) for those who do not know who they would vote for (20.7 per cent).

The final variable from the survey that we analysed was satisfaction with how the country is going. The specific question (asked first on the survey) was '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?' Of those who said they were satisfied or very satisfied, 33.5 per cent thought Australia needed more people. Of those who weren't satisfied, on the other hand, this fell to 25.7 per cent, a difference that is statistically significant. Satisfaction with how the country is heading would appear to give people confidence that more people could be added through either migration or higher rates of fertility.

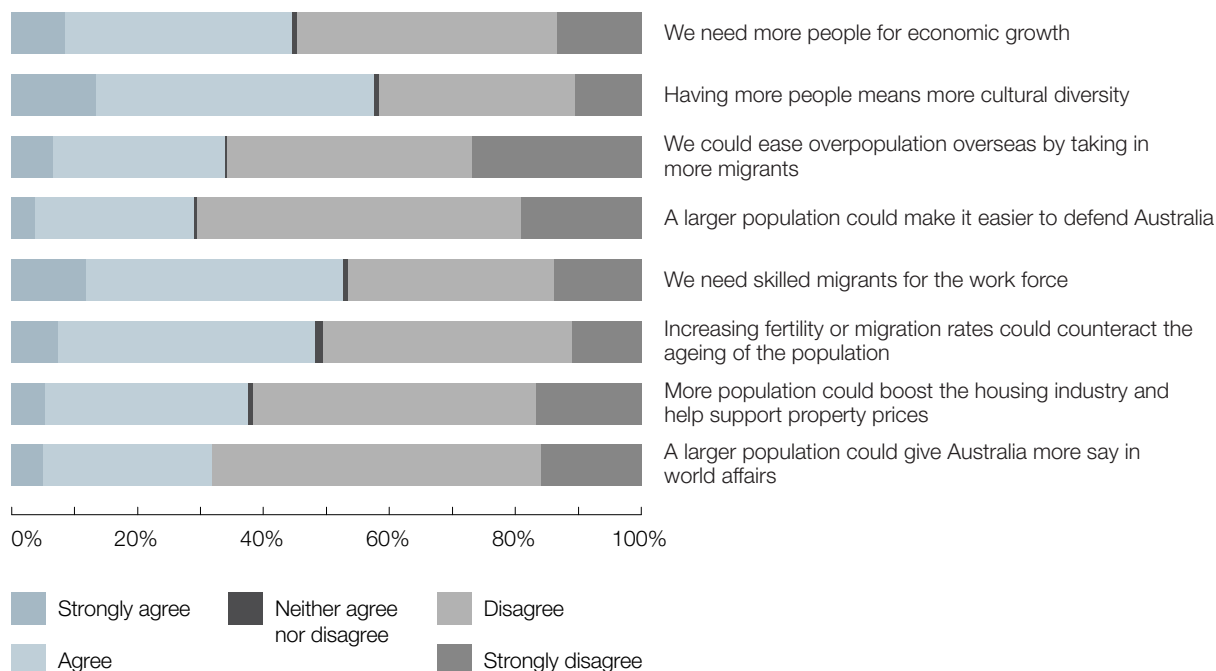
REASONS FOR AND AGAINST A GROWING POPULATION

Given the potential costs and benefits of a growing population identified earlier, it is important to understand the aspects that shape people's views on potential reasons for supporting or not supporting population growth. Not only does it bring depth to our analysis of the question of population, it also makes it easier for policy makers to design a population policy that leverages the positives but avoids the negative of either a growing or stable population.

The first question on this topic we asked was 'Various reasons have been given **for** increasing Australia's population. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements...'⁴ The two reasons with the greatest level of support or where more than half of the population are in support are cultural diversity (57.7 per cent agree or strongly agree) and a skilled workforce (52.7 per cent). The two reasons with the lowest level support or where less than one-third of the population agree are for defence (28.9 per cent) and a greater say in world affairs (31.8 per cent).

Figure 5. Reasons for increasing Australia's population

Source: ANUpoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019

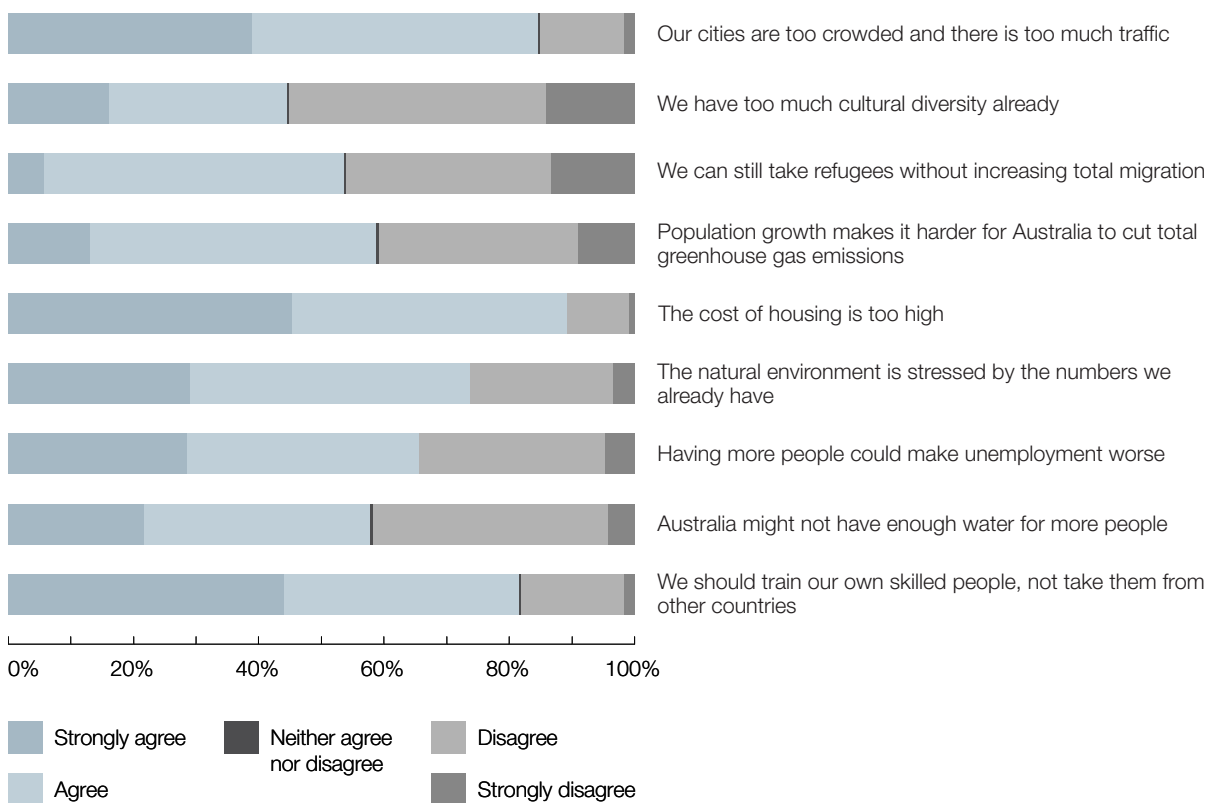


4 Bolding was in the original question. Unlike in previous surveys, we asked questions on reasons for and against population growth for all respondents, regardless of their previously stated support.

The second question we asked was 'Various reasons have been given to **not** increase Australia's population. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements...

Figure 6. Reasons for not increasing Australia's population

Source: ANUPoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019



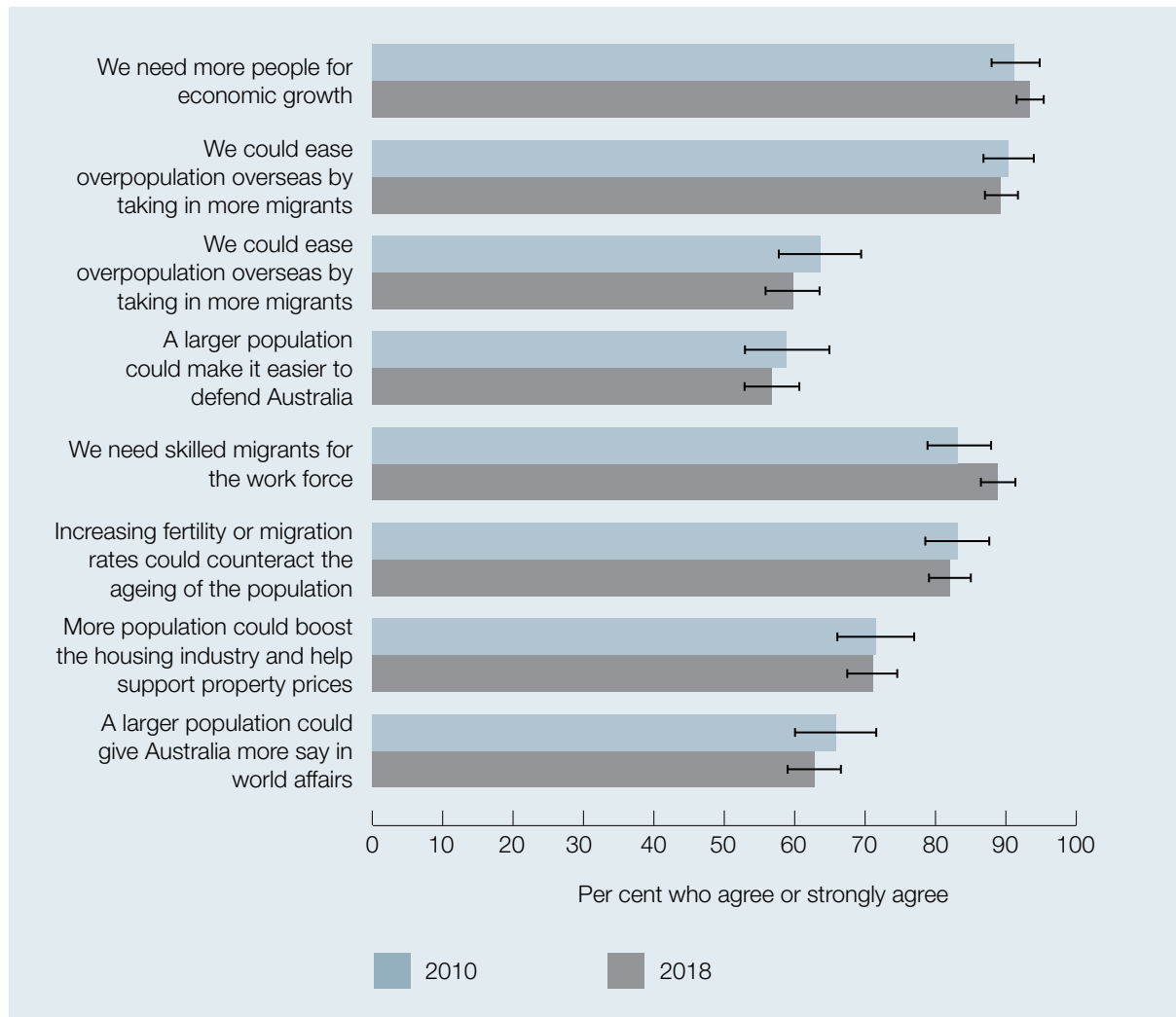
The three reasons against population growth that people are most likely to agree or strongly agree with relate to services and policy delivery. Nearly nine out of ten people (89.2 per cent) agree or strongly agree that the fact that 'the cost of housing is too high' is a reason for not increasing the population, alongside 84.6 per cent who agree or strongly agree that 'our cities are too crowded and there is too much traffic.' While it is unclear as to whether people are thinking about investment in Australia's workforce, or the negative effect on the skilled workforce of others (the so called "brain drain" mentioned earlier), 81.5 per cent of people agreed or strongly agreed that 'we should train our own skilled people, not take them from other countries.'

Environmental issues were important reasons for a majority of people for not growing the population (although not as important as the infrastructure and other issues mentioned above). However, the lowest level of agreement was for the statement that 'We have too much cultural diversity already.' Less than half of the weighted sample agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (44.6 per cent), much less than the per cent mentioned earlier who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "having more people means more cultural diversity" being a reason for an increased population.

In 2010, when questions on population-related issues were last asked in an ANUPoll, the reasons for and against increasing Australia's population were only asked of those who did/did not support a growing population (respectively). In the 2018 survey, on the other hand, we asked everyone about reasons for, and everyone about reasons against. It is possible, however, to subset the 2018 data in order to make the samples comparable. Results are summarised in Figures 7 and 8, focusing on those who agree or strongly agree with that particular reason.

Figure 7. Reasons for increasing Australia’s population, 2010 and 2018 for those who said Australia needs more people

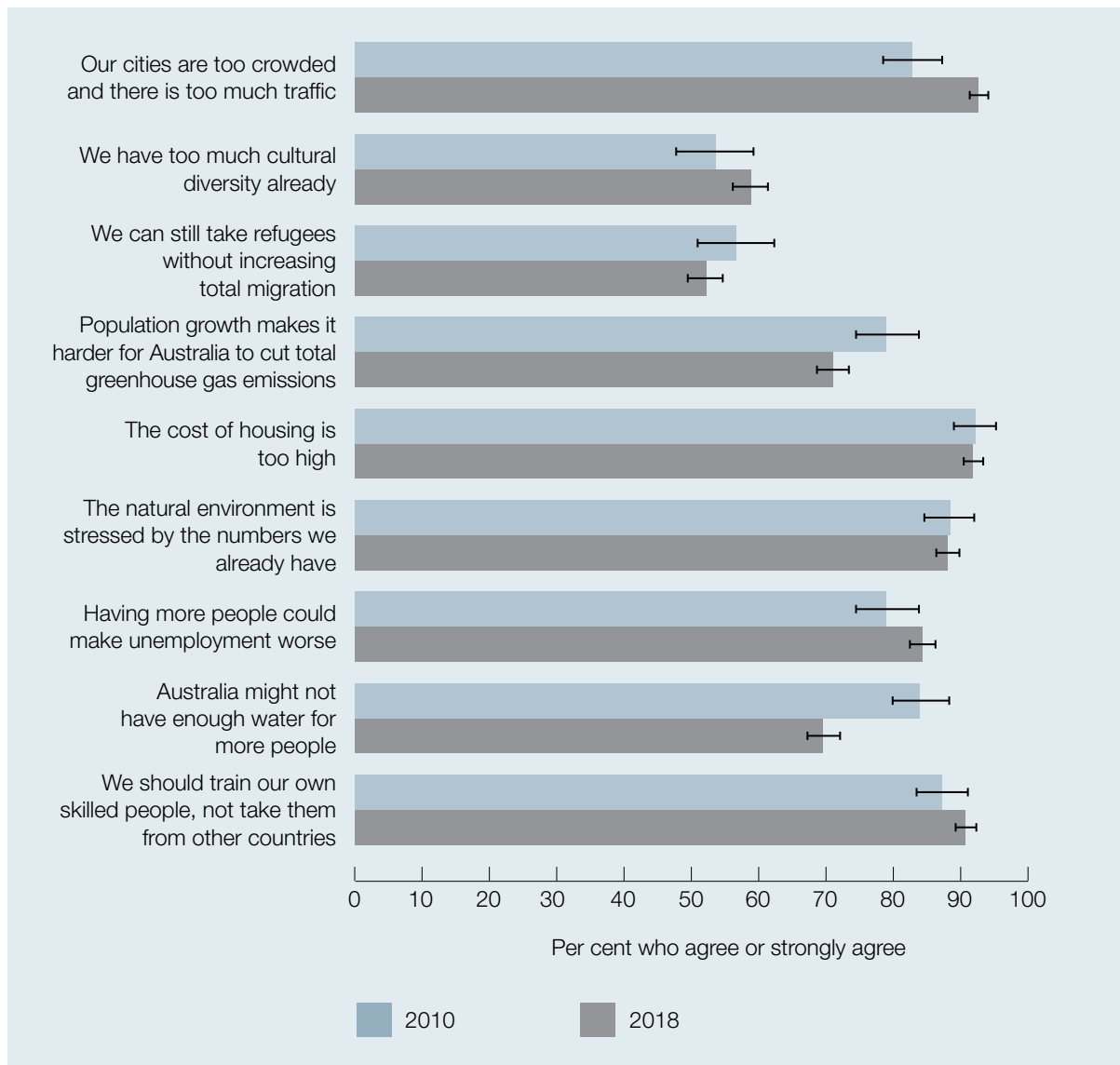
Source: ANUpoll on *Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia*, January 2019



Despite there being a decline in the per cent of people who said that Australia needs more people (between 2010 and 2018), there was very little difference in the reasons for saying so over the period. There was a small increase in the percentage of people who said ‘We need skilled migrations for the work force’, but this was only statistically significant at the 10 per cent level of significance. All other differences aren’t close to being significant.

Figure 8. Reasons for not increasing Australia’s population, 2010 and 2018 for those who said Australia does not need more people

Source: ANUpoll on Big Australia, small Australia, diverse Australia, January 2019



There was a much greater change in the reasons for not supporting an increase in Australia’s population (amongst those who said that Australia does not need more people). There was a very large increase in people saying that ‘Our cities are too crowded and there is too much traffic’, and a smaller increase in those saying that ‘Having more people could make unemployment worse.’ On the flipside, there was a large decrease in those who cite environmental reasons, particularly amongst those who say ‘Population growth makes it harder for Australia to cut total greenhouse gas emissions’ and ‘Australia might not have enough water for more people.’

POLICY RESPONSES TO MANAGE POPULATION GROWTH AND MIGRATION

The responses summarised in Figures 6 and 7 point to the policy balance that needs to be made for Australians to be supportive of population growth. For some of the positive reasons covered in Figure 6 to be worthwhile (diversity, a skilled workforce, and mitigation of an aging population), Australians need to be convinced that traffic and house prices won't increase unduly, that there will be limited effects on the environment, and that Australia's existing workforce will still receive adequate training.

There is considerable policy debate as to how to achieve this balance, with Australia's points-based migration policy and heavy use of temporary visas the existing response (Miller 1999, Gregory 2015). Another policy option that has received more recent (and historically intermittent) discussion is increasing the geographic spread of recent migrants. Although not exclusively the case, the vast majority of migrants to Australia (and hence the fastest growing areas) tend to be in our large capital cities, with particular stress believed to be occurring in Sydney and Melbourne. There are other cities that have experienced less growth than the heads of the State/Territory or Local Governments might like. While the specifics are very different to Australia and have varied through time, particular provinces within Canada have run an independent migration policy to attract (or dissuade) international migrants.

As there is no specific policy proposal on how this might occur in Australia, it is hard to gauge levels of support for such an approach. However, we asked half of the ANUPoll the following question: 'Governments in Australia are considering requiring some new migrants in Australia to live in regional towns or cities for a period of time. Do you agree or disagree with this policy?' In total, 70.0 per cent of respondents who were asked this question either agreed or strongly agreed.

Agreement was highest amongst males compared to females (73.9 per cent compared to 66.8 per cent); much lower for those aged 18 to 24 years (60.8 per cent) compared to the rest of the age distribution; and lower for those who had not completed Year 12 (65.4 per cent) compared to those who had (72.5 per cent). Geographically, those in relatively disadvantaged parts of the country (based on the Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) created by the ABS) have the lowest level of support for the policy proposal. Interestingly, those who live outside of the capital cities, who would be the recipients of an increase in migrants under such a policy approach, were less supportive than those who lived in one of Australia's capital cities (66.1 per cent compared to 71.9 per cent).

There were significant differences in support for such a policy response based on a person's voting intentions. However, these differences aren't necessarily as one would expect. The greatest level of support (80.4 per cent) was amongst those who did not know who they would vote for if an election were held at the time of interview. As this is a reasonable small part of the sample though, the standard errors are reasonably high and there is considerable uncertainty around this estimate. There were, however, statistically significant differences between Coalition and Greens voters on the one hand (75.9 per cent and 74.2 per cent respectively) and Labor and Other voters on the other hand (64.7 per cent and 62.9 per cent respectively). Support for such a policy proposal does not appear to fit a neat left/right distinction.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from this question is that support for the policy proposal for new migrants being required to live in regional towns or cities is significantly and substantially higher for those who support a growing population (82.5 per cent) compared to those who do not (64.0 per cent). While we didn't test this explicitly, it may be the case that such policies consolidate support for a growing population.

In order to gauge experimentally the reasons behind people's support or lack thereof, we gave the other half of the sample the same question, with two separate prefaces. For one-quarter of the sample, the preface was 'The population has grown very rapidly in some of Australia's large capital cities'. For Treatment Group 1, 73.5 per cent said that they agreed or strongly agreed. While this difference is reasonably large, it is not quite statistically significant (p-value of 0.142).

For the second treatment, the preface was 'The population has grown very rapidly in some of Australia's large capital cities. Many people feel that this has increased house prices and put pressure on infrastructure.' For the group that received this preface, 76.0 per cent of people said they agreed or strongly agreed that migrants should live in regional towns or cities for a period of time. This difference is not only larger, but also statistically significant (p-value of 0.011).

Many of the criticisms of such a policy approach are that it is either unworkable or that it will be ineffective. While such a policy would need to be carefully thought through and evaluated for its positive and negative effects, results from the ANUPoll show that such a policy has general support, and particular support amongst those who support a growing population or those who are reminded of the potential effect of migration on house prices and infrastructure.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

It is worth reflecting on the support for population growth and the reasons for and against increasing Australia's population in light of Australia's history of population policy. At the time of Federation in 1901, Australia had a specific policy aim to reduce the level of ethnic diversity with Attorney General Alfred Deakin stating⁵ in 1901 'That end, put in plain and unequivocal terms ... means the prohibition of all alien coloured immigration, and more, it means at the earliest time, by reasonable and just means, the deportation or reduction of the number of aliens now in our midst. The two things go hand in hand, and are the necessary complement of a single policy – the policy of securing a 'white Australia'".

During and immediately after World War II, there was a real fear that Australia had too small a population for its land mass and was vulnerable during the next Pacific conflict. Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell wrote⁶ in 1945 that 'If the experience of the Pacific War has taught us one thing, it surely is that seven million Australians cannot hold three million square miles of this earth's surface indefinitely' and that 'Population is our number one problem [and if] we are determined to develop our country, maintain and increase its living standards, and avoid depressions, those of us who will be alive when the next storm breaks over the Pacific Ocean may have less reason to be as apprehensive than we were about our lives and our liberties when the Japanese stood on the wrong side of the Owen Stanley Range less than 40 miles from Port Moresby – and when bombs were falling on Broome and Townsville, and Darwin was being reduced to rubble.'

21st Century Australians and those that represent them in Parliament still clearly see population as an important issue. However, the issues that are feeding into that debate seem to have changed quite substantially. Most people are now more supportive of, rather than worried by cultural diversity. Geopolitics, defence and population pressures overseas are now less likely to factor into someone's decision than they might have in the past. Australians are now more likely to support population growth if it increases our skills base, mitigates the ageing of the population and increases our economic growth and diversity. However, they do not want that population growth to cause crowding or affordability issues, or come at the expense of training our own workforce or the natural environment.

5 <http://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/white-australia-policy>

6 http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/calwell_2.pdf

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