



ANUpoll

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Public Opinion Towards Rural & Regional Australia

Results from the ANU Poll

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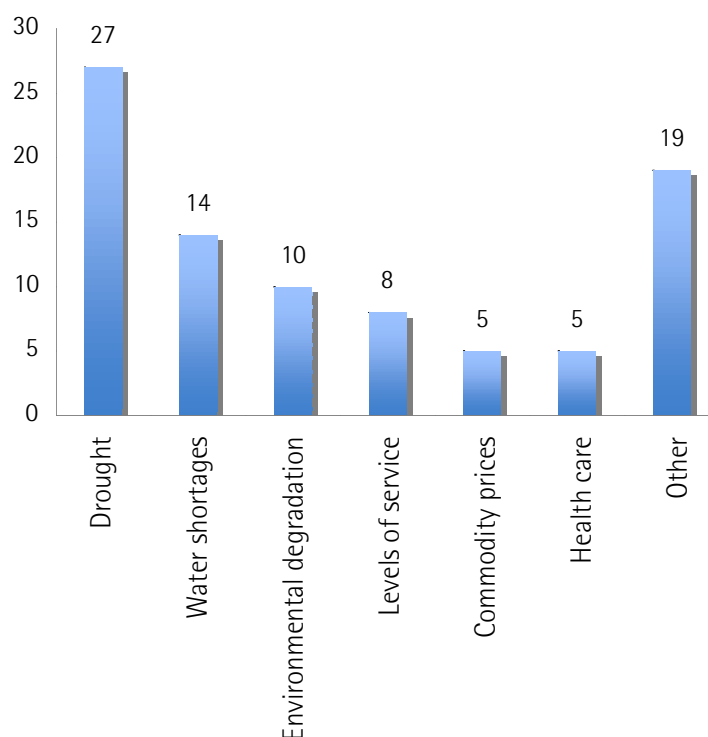
Problems Facing Rural Australia

Key points

- Drought and water shortages are regarded as the most serious problems facing rural Australia.
- The federal government is regarded as the agency most responsible for solving the problems of regional and rural Australia.

Rural and regional Australia has faced a wide range of problems in recent years. Many of these problems have been masked by the prolonged, severe drought that has affected many eastern parts of Australia, and in many cases this has brought about the movement of populations to the towns and cities. In the wake of the drought and the resulting rural de-population, the availability and quality of services and infrastructure has declined in many areas.

The ANU poll asked the respondents what they saw as the major problems facing rural Australia. Not surprisingly, about four out of 10 respondents mentioned drought and water shortages as the major issues, followed by environmental degradation (10 per cent), lower levels of service (8 per cent), and lower commodity prices and health care problems (5 per cent each). When asked what they considered to be the second most important problem, opinions were much more diverse, with the largest group (just 10 per cent) mentioning lower levels of service. Drought and water is therefore the main issue affecting rural Australia from the perspective of the public.



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

The respondents were asked who they considered to be responsible for solving what they nominated as the most important problem facing rural Australia. Again not surprisingly, a majority nominated the federal government. Around two in three of the respondents considered the federal government the appropriate body to deal with drought and water shortage problems, with slightly more nominating the federal government in the case of health. State governments were seen as less likely to have a role in resolving the various problems, with the partial exception of improving levels of service, where they were mentioned by one in four of the respondents.

Responsibility for Solving Rural Problems (Per cent)

	Federal government	State government	Other	Total	(N)
Drought	67	10	23	100	(316)
Water	65	16	19	100	(163)
Environmental degradation	65	10	25	100	(115)
Levels of service	55	24	21	100	(88)
Health	71	21	8	100	(56)
Commodity prices	57	18	25	100	(51)

Thinking of (most important problem facing rural Australia), who do you think is most responsible for providing solutions?

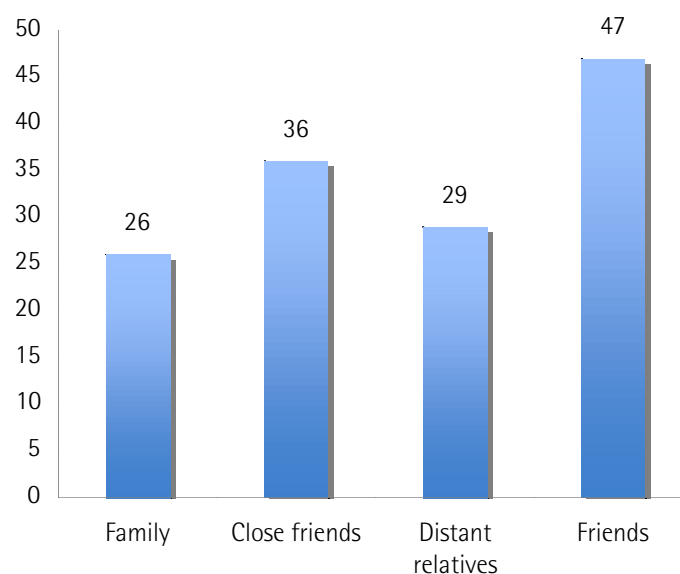
Rural Background & Knowledge

Key points

- There are strong social connections to people living in rural and regional Australia, with one in four respondents saying they had a family member living on a farm, and about half saying they had a family member living in a rural town.
- There is a large majority in support of the view that agricultural production and rural living are very important for Australia's future
- There is a moderately high level of factual knowledge among the public about rural affairs.

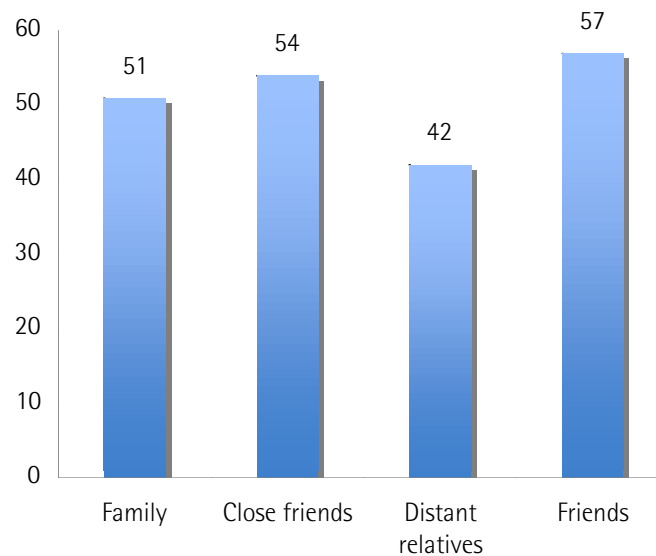
Throughout the twentieth century, Australia's economic reliance on regional and rural areas has declined. At the turn of the twentieth century, around one quarter of the labour force was employed in primary production, a figure which has declined to about 5 per cent now. Similarly, a century ago, 43 per cent of the population lived in rural areas, a figure which declined to 14 per cent in the 1970s and has remained relatively stable since then.

Despite these major shifts in employment and population, many Australians still retain strong family links to rural and regional Australia. The survey asked the respondents if they had family, close friends, distant relatives or casual friends living on a farm or living in a rural town. About one in every four of the respondents said that they had a family member living on a farm, rising to one in three for close friends.



Do you have any close family members/close friends/distant relatives/casual friends or acquaintances who live on a farm in Australia?

The proportions who had links to people living in a rural town are even higher, with just over half saying that they had a family member living in a rural town, a figure which is slightly higher for close friends. Overall, 63 per cent of the respondents had at least one connection with someone living on a farm, and 75 per cent a connection to someone living in a rural town. These strong social ties to the bush highlight Australia's historic reliance on rural industry.



Do you have any close family members/close friends/distant relatives/casual friends or acquaintances who live on a farm in Australia?

The respondents were also asked how important they considered agricultural production and rural areas to be for Australia's future. The results show that a large majority—more than eight out of 10—see both as important to Australia's future. Australia's historical legacy as a primary producing country has given agriculture and rural living a high profile among the public.

Importance of Agriculture and Rural Areas (Per cent)

	Agricultural production	Rural areas
Very important	85	84
Fairly important	13	15
Not very important	1	1
Not at all important	0	0
Don't know	1	0
Total	100	100
(N)	(1,200)	(1,200)

How important do you think agriculture production is for our future? How important do you think rural areas are for our future?

Finally, the survey asked the respondents how much knowledge they had of some basic facts about rural and regional Australia. The respondents were asked if five statements about rural matters were true or false, ranging from the size of the agricultural sector, to the level of urbanisation in Australia. A majority gave the correct answer for each of the five individual statements, but in four of the five cases this was just a bare majority. The exception was the number of workers employed on farms, where 72 per cent of the respondents gave the correct answer.

Knowledge of Rural and Regional Australia (Per cent)

	True	False	Don't know	Total
More than one in five Australian workers are working on farms.	18	72	10	100
Most of Australia's exports are farm products	38	53	9	100
Australian farmers produce more than three times as much food and fibre as Australia consumes.	53	26	21	100
The average age of Australian farmers is approximately 35.	38	50	12	100
Australia is the one of the most urbanised countries in the world.	56	34	10	100

For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you think it is true or false. (The correct answers are in bold.)

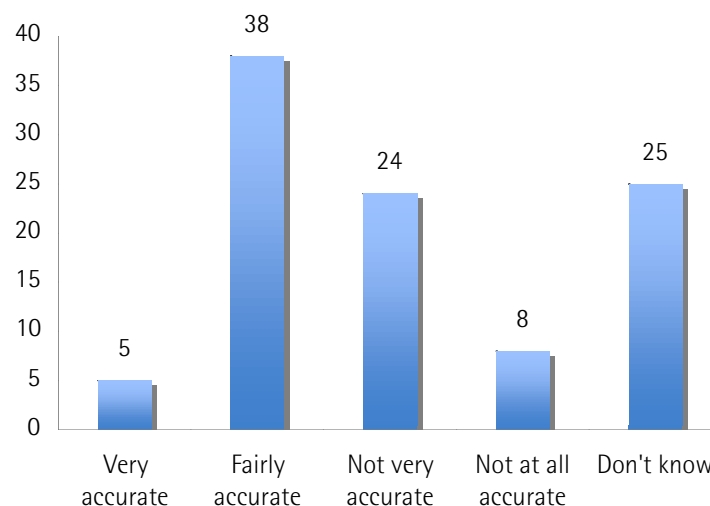
The overall levels of knowledge about rural affairs shows that the median respondent was able to correctly answer three of the five statements, with 9 per cent correctly answering all five. Just 3 per cent of the respondents gave incorrect answers for all five statements. Knowledge of rural affairs is also significantly correlated with having links via family and friends to rural Australia; the correlation between knowledge and links with farms is .18 ($p < .00$) and with those living in rural areas, .15 ($p < .00$).

Perceptions of Rural Australia

Key points

- Opinions are divided about the accuracy of the portrayal of rural life in television dramas.
- Opinion is generally more positive about the qualities that apply to rural residents than to their urban counterparts.

Australia's long involvement with the bush has meant that it is often the topic of television dramas, and for those less acquainted with rural life, this provides an important source of information about rural affairs. The survey respondents were asked if they believed that the portrayal of rural life in these television shows was accurate. Opinions were divided, with just 5 per cent believing them to be 'very accurate', and 38 per cent 'fairly accurate'. However, 32 per cent thought they were 'not very accurate' or 'not at all accurate', with one in four saying that they did not know.



There have been several television shows set in rural areas. Do you believe the portrayals of rural Australia on television shows is very accurate, fairly accurate, not very accurate or not at all accurate?

To investigate the sorts of qualities that people associate with rural life, the survey then asked the respondents if they thought 11 qualities applied best to people living in rural residents, or to city dwellers. In general, the survey respondents had no difficulty in assigning these qualities to one or other of the two groups; the main exceptions were where general qualities were involved, such as family, work or loyalty, and here around four out of 10 of the respondents said that the qualities applied equally to both groups.

How Well Qualities Describe Rural and City Residents (Per cent)

	Rural areas/ small towns	Cities/ suburbs	Both	Neither don't know	Total
Commitment to community	75	7	16	2	100
Strong sense of family	56	4	36	4	100
Strong religious beliefs	29	21	31	19	100
Hard working	45	7	46	2	100
Loyal to their country	48	4	42	6	100
Tolerant of others	44	30	20	6	100
Sophisticated	4	78	12	6	100
Tough or resilient	77	7	14	2	100
Self-sufficient	78	9	11	2	100
Behind the times	54	8	10	28	100
Lacking initiative	12	43	13	32	100

Now I am going to read you a list of phrases. For each phrase, please tell me whether you associate it with people who live in rural areas and small towns, or with people who live in cities and suburbs.

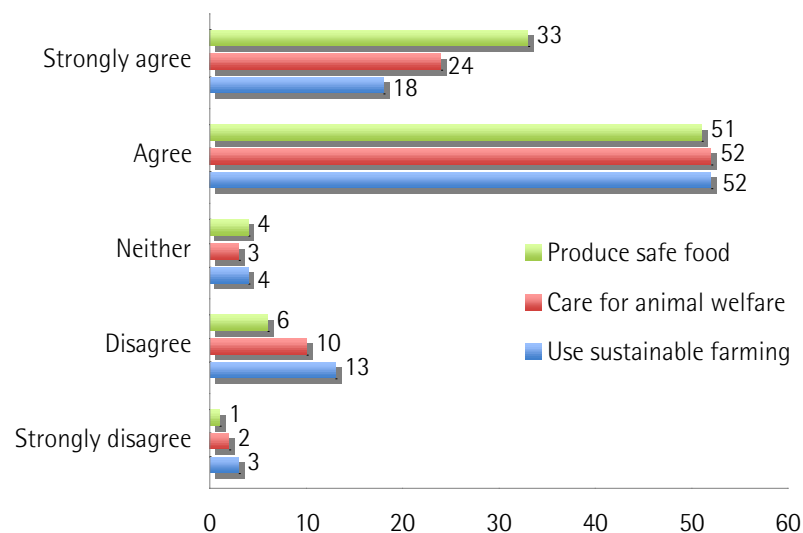
People living in rural areas were most associated with qualities such as being 'self sufficient' (78 per cent), 'tough and resilient' (77 per cent), and having a 'commitment to community' (75 per cent). The quality seen as least likely to apply to rural residents was being 'sophisticated' (4 per cent), and they were also seen as being much more likely to be 'behind the times' (54 per cent) than people living in urban areas. In general, however, rural residents are seen as possessing more positive qualities than their urban counterparts.

Agriculture, Farming & Food

Key points

- A large majority of the public believe that food production is safe, sustainable and that farmers care about animal welfare.
- About six out of 10 believe that government assistance for farmers should be increased.
- Opinions are divided on the use of biotechnology in food production with 50 per cent supporting and 39 per cent opposing it. Almost one in three of those interviewed thought that foods produced through biotechnology posed serious health risks

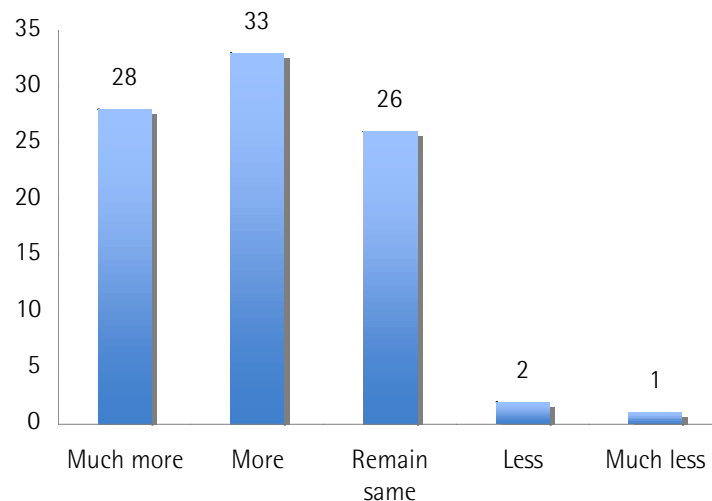
A major goal of the ANU poll on rural and regional Australia was to map public opinion towards the production of food by the agricultural sector, particularly in terms of its cost, quality and sustainability. There have been major debates in recent years, internationally as well as in Australia, about the sustainability of current farming practices, about the ethics of animal welfare, and about the costs and quality of the food that is produced by farmers.



I'm now going to read you some statements about Australian farming. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree... Australian farmers are generally undertaking sustainable farming practices. ...Australian farmers are adequately looking after animal welfare. ... Australian farmers are producing clean and safe food.

In general, the public has a very positive view of food production in Australia. The vast majority of people believe that the food that is produced is clean and safe to eat, and a large majority believe that farmers care about animal welfare and use sustainable farming practices. Relatively few people take a negative view of food production, and very few say that they have no opinion, suggesting that not only is the public's view of farming practices positive, but that they believe that they are well informed about the subject.

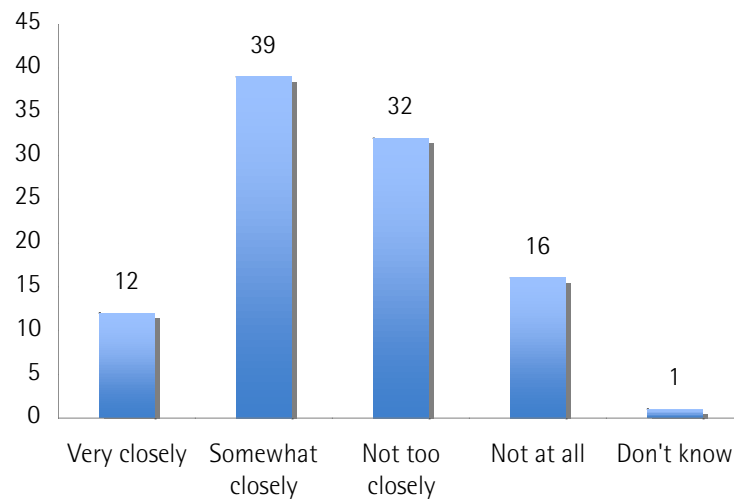
Opinions are more divided on whether farmers should receive more government assistance. About six in 10 believe that farmers should get more assistance, but one in four believe that it should remain the same. Just 3 per cent believe that assistance should be reduced.



Do you think farmers should receive more, less or the same amount of financial assistance from the government?

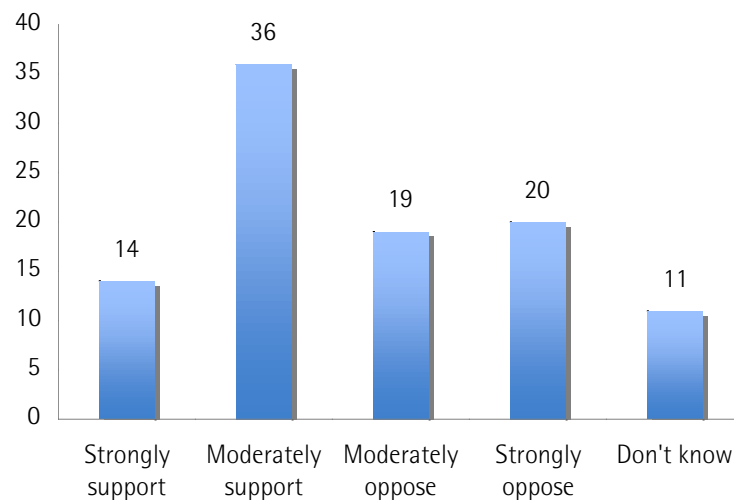
Since it first became a commercial possibility in the 1980s, the genetic modification of crops to obtain greater yields has been a contentious issue. Trials of genetically modified crops have produced strong, sometimes violent, opposition from those who see it as potentially dangerous to food supply.

When asked how closely they followed the area of biotechnology, only around one in 10 of the respondents said that they followed the subject very closely, with a further four in 10 stating that they followed it somewhat closely. Just under half said that they did not follow the subject closely. Just 1 per cent of those interviewed said that they did not know, suggesting a high level of awareness of the topic.



As you may know, some food products and medicines are being developed using new scientific techniques. The general area is called 'biotechnology' and includes tools such as genetic engineering and genetic modification of food. How closely have you been following the news about this issue?

Opinions are divided on the use of biotechnology in agriculture. About half of the respondents in the ANU poll supported it, but 39 per cent opposed it, almost equally divided between moderate and strong opponents. It is perhaps significant that those in support were predominantly moderate supporters, suggesting the strong feelings were likely to be generated in opposition to the new technology.



There is also a significant minority view that foods produced through biotechnology poses serious health risks. When asked if they believed that foods produced in this way posed a risk, 31 per cent said that they did pose a risk, and 46 per cent said that they did not pose a risk. However, almost one in four of the sample said that they did not know.

Key Trends: Most Important Problems & Political Mood

Key points

- The economy and jobs are viewed by the public as by far the most important problems facing Australia, with 32 per cent mentioning them. This is a decline of 21 percentage points since the highpoint recorded in the March 2009 ANU poll.
- The large majority of Australians are satisfied with the way the country is heading, with little change since we first asked the question in early 2008.

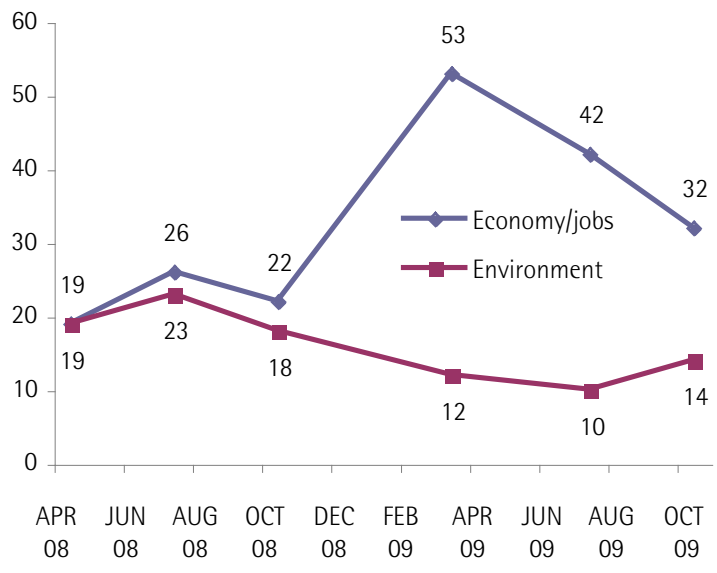
Since the ANU poll started in early 2008, the two main problems mentioned as priorities for Australia by the survey respondents have been the economy and the environment, the latter also encompassing global warming. The global financial crisis and the recession have resulted in the economy dominating the mentions of the most important problems facing the country.

In the current ANU poll, 32 per cent mentioned the economy as the most important problem, a decline from the 42 per cent of the respondents who mentioned the economy in the July 2009 ANU poll, itself a decline of 11 points on the March 2009 poll. The environment and global warming were mentioned by 14 per cent of the respondents, an increase of 4 percentage points, followed by immigration (down 2 points) and health care (up 2 points).

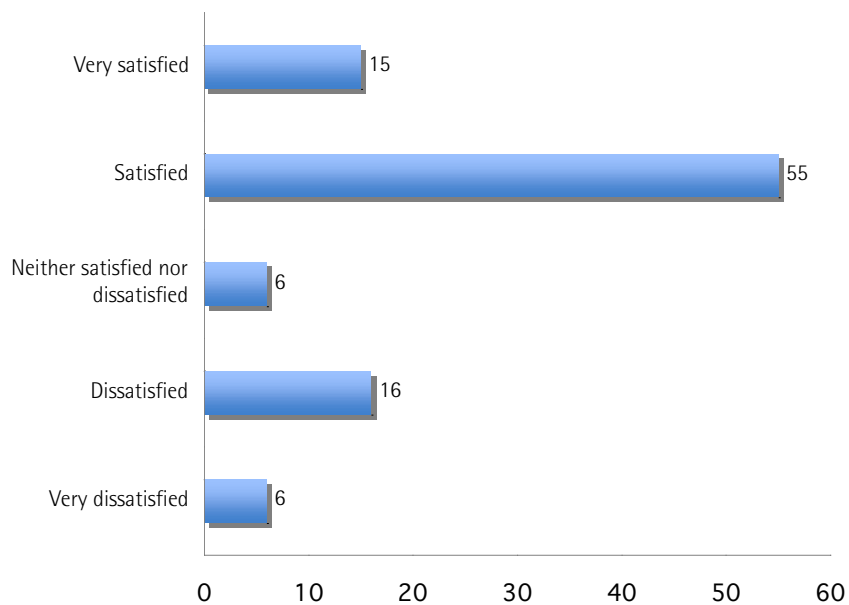
Rank	Issue	Per cent mentioned	(July-Oct Change)
1	Economy/jobs	32	(-10)
2	Environment/global warming	14	(+4)
3	Immigration	7	(-2)
4	Health care	7	(+2)
5	Law and order	4	(+2)
	Other	26	(-4)

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

Placed in a longitudinal context, the graph shows that the public were most concerned about the economy and jobs in the first quarter of 2009, and those concerns have declined consistently thereafter. The trends also suggest that concerns about the environment and global warming have declined over the period, though it remains the second ranked issue for the public.



The political mood has been remarkably positive over the period of the ANU poll surveys, and this poll is no exception. A remarkably high 70 per cent are satisfied with the way the country is heading, compared to 71 per cent in July and 70 per cent in March. Just 16 per cent say that they are unsatisfied, and a further 6 per cent are 'very unsatisfied'. However, the predominant picture remains one of general satisfaction, with relatively little change over the six polls. The economic concerns registered most clearly in the first poll in 2009 have apparently had little effect on the predominantly positive political mood of the country.



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

Full details of the survey can be found at www.anu.edu.au/anupoll

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 31 August and 15 September 2009, with a response rate of 40.3 per cent. The results have been weighted to represent the national population. The survey's margin of error is ± 2.5 per cent.



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