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PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS DATA GOVERNANCE IN AUSTRALIA

Report No. 27: February 2019

(ANUpoll data collected October 2018)

ANU Centre for Social
Research & Methods

ANU College of
Arts & Social Sciences

ANUPOLL

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS DATA GOVERNANCE IN AUSTRALIA

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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, 2,150 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 nine 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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Never before has more data been held about us by government or companies that we interact with and never before has this data been so used, or so useful for analytical purposes.

In order to maintain a social licence for this data to be used for research and policy purposes, it is important to monitor the changing views of the public towards how data is used, stored and shared.

In this survey, the 27th in the ANUPoll series, we asked a representative sample of Australian residents a range of questions about their views and attitudes towards data governance in Australia.

Although there is generally a high level of support for government to use and share data, there is much less confidence that the current government has the right safeguards in place or can be trusted with people's data.

If government, researchers and private companies want to make use of the richness of new types and sources of data, there is an urgent and continuing need to build up trust across the population and to put policies in place that reassure consumers and users of government services that data can be stored and managed with appropriate security and access safeguards in place.

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.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE NEW DATA AGE

We are living in the Data Age. Never before has more data been about us held by government or companies that we interact with and never before has this data been so heavily used, or so useful for analytical purposes. Governments, social media companies, banks, supermarkets, telecommunications companies, utilities and many other organisations can (if they choose) identify where we are at any time, how much we spend on particular products and the types of services we receive.

Never before have we had access to so much information about ourselves. If we so desire (and we have the resources), we can track our steps, our expenditure, our caloric intake, our smartphone use or any number of other metrics.

This Data Age presents enormous opportunities for improving the evidence base for public policy development; for assessing policy alternatives and for evaluating the targeting, delivery and outcomes of government services. If well managed, it will provide new means to hold governments to account.

The private sector is already using personal data to create new products and services and to personalise offers to the desires or needs of consumers. For example, financial institutions' tracking of how much we spend on our credit cards and how long it takes to pay them off makes it easier for them to offer us services that are better tailored to our individual needs. In addition, if we are able to access our own data, we can make more informed decisions about the services that we are most interested in, potentially increasing competition and decreasing prices across a range of sectors.

Data therefore has enormous economic and political value, creating incentives to intentionally or unintentionally misuse the data. These risks need to be traded off against the potential benefits. For example, commercial organisations can use our data to offer us services or products that might increase their profit margin and obscure products that are in our best interest. If a third party accesses our data in a way that we have not consented to, they might use the data to steal our identity or target us in ways that we would rather they did not.

If government uses our data to make decisions about us without giving us the ability to validate these decisions – or if that ability is unevenly distributed across the population – we may be excluded from services that we are entitled to, or put under undue stress or financial pressure. Debate and concerns are ongoing about the use of state surveillance using personal information for security purposes and the potential abuse of these powers and personal data.

Like with many risks, the negative consequences of data breaches may be more likely to affect the more vulnerable segments of the population (Eubanks 2018) as they have more to lose from being cut-off from essential services and less of a capacity to monitor or have rectified errors that are not in their favour.

People generally have a greater awareness of data misuse and the harm that can occur from such misuse than of the beneficial uses of data. An example of widespread misuse of data is Cambridge Analytica's use of the personal information of Facebook users to target personalised political advertisements prominent in the public consciousness.

Governments across the world are attempting to craft and implement legislation that manages these competing risks and opportunities. In May 2018, new legislation came into force in the European Union, with the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). According to an explanatory website,¹ the aim of the GDPR is to:

- > Harmonize data privacy laws across Europe
- > Protect and empower all EU citizens' data privacy
- > Reshape the way organizations across the region approach data privacy.

While Australians who use companies that operate in the EU will have been impacted indirectly by the GDPR, the legislative environment in Australia is much more of an accumulation of multiple overlapping rules and regulations. However, at the time data was collected for this publication, the Commonwealth Government was in the middle of an extensive consultation process related to a proposed overarching Australian Government Data Sharing and Release Legislation.²

In the Issues Paper that was released to support this consultation, it was recognised that 'Existing data sharing arrangements across the public service are complex and hinder the use of data,' whereas it was argued that 'New data sharing and release arrangements will benefit Australians by streamlining the way public data is shared and released within government and with trusted users.'

Over 100 submissions regarding the legislation were received, providing some data on public attitudes towards data governance.³ Most submissions, however, were made by organisations rather than individuals, and many of those are likely to be beneficiaries of greater access to data. While the views of those organisations are important, they do not by their nature capture the diversity of views held by the general public. One of the aims of this ANUPoll was to provide a summary of opinions held by a larger and more representative sample of Australians with regards to the potential benefits and risks of government use of data.

1 <https://eugdpr.org/>

2 <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/public-data/issues-paper-data-sharing-release-legislation>

3 <https://www.pmc.gov.au/public-data/data-sharing-and-release-reforms/submissions>

WHAT GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO WITH DATA

Among the biggest holders of data about individuals in Australia are the Australian and state and territory governments. What governments can use these data for is constrained by the law, but is also often the subject of public debate and can become an election issue.

The first question relating to data governance in the 27th ANUPoll was ‘Governments across Australia collect a range of information on Australian residents. On the whole, do you think the Commonwealth Government should or should not be able to do the following?’.⁴ Six potential data uses were given. We asked half the sample questions in the basic form below, and the other were half randomly assigned specific ways that data could be used. Figure 1 summarises the results for the control group.

In general, respondents to the survey were quite supportive of the Australian Government using data (in general) for the specified purposes (Figure 1). Respondents were slightly less certain about providing data for researchers. Only 31–32 per cent of respondents said that government definitely should be able to provide data to researchers, compared with 46–55 per cent for the questions relating to using data within government. However, when the ‘Definitely should be’ and ‘Probably should be’ categories are combined, at least 85 per cent of the population are supportive, regardless of the use.

Figure 1. Do you think the Commonwealth Government should or should not be able to ... ?

Source: ANUPoll on Data Governance in Australia, November 2018



Factors associated with support for government use of data

Although support for the use of government data is generally high, the level of support varies considerably across the population.⁵ However, variation is not consistent across the specific type of data use.

Age has the strongest association with support for data being provided to researchers, though the relationship is nonlinear. Support for providing data to researchers is highest for the relatively young and the relatively old, demonstrating that it is not just the millennials who are comfortable with government making heavy use of data. A similar nonlinear relationship was found for use of data to evaluate the effectiveness of government programs and target resources to those who need them most. There was no strong relationship with age for the final two questions.

No other individual variables were consistently related to support for government sharing of data with researchers. However, the socioeconomic characteristics of the area in which a person lived did have an association, with those living in areas in the second most advantaged quartile having the greatest support.

A greater number of factors were associated with government’s internal use of data. Indigenous Australians tended to be more supportive of government using data, with the major exception being use of data to ensure that residents are not claiming benefits they are not entitled to, where there was no difference by Indigenous status. Education also had an association: those with higher levels of education tended to be more supportive (especially for using data for evaluation). Area-level disadvantage also had an association, with those who lived in the most disadvantaged areas tending to be more supportive of government using data to ensure that residents are not missing out on their entitlements and to ensure that residents are not claiming benefits they are not entitled to.

4 We randomised the order of the specific questions.

5 We tested this using a regression-style analysis, with the dependent variable being the four categories presented in Figure 1, estimated using an ordered probit model. Full results are given at the longer Working Paper version of this report: <http://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/public-attitudes-towards-data-governance-australia-0>

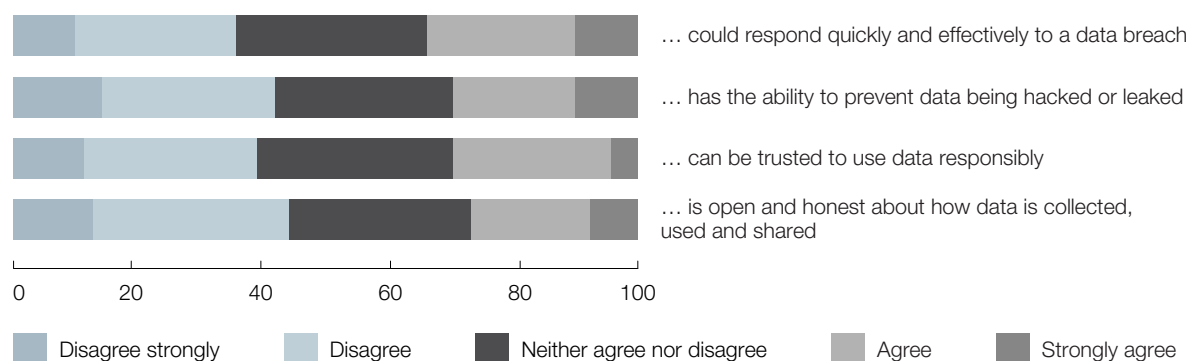
PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT CAPABILITY & APPROACH TO DATA

One of the factors that is likely to influence community attitudes to use of data by government is views about the capacity of government to protect the security of personal data and whether government is transparent and can be trusted to use personal data.

To measure views of the Australian population on these issues, respondents were told 'Following are a number of statements about the Australian Government and the data it holds about Australian residents'. They were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the Australian Government could respond quickly and effectively to a data breach; has the ability to prevent data being hacked or leaked; can be trusted to use data responsibly; and is open and honest about how data are collected, used and shared.

Figure 2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Australian Government ... ?

Source: ANUPoll on Data Governance in Australia, November 2018



Although respondents were generally supportive of government using data (in Figure 1), they were in less agreement that the Australian Government is able to protect people's data or is using data in an appropriate way. Combining the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' categories, only 34.0 per cent of people think that the Australian Government could respond effectively to a data breach (Figure 2). An even smaller percentage think that the Australian Government has the ability to prevent data being hacked or leaked (29.7 per cent); can be trusted to use data responsibly (29.3 per cent); or is open and honest about how data are collected, used and shared (26.8 per cent).

LEVEL OF CONCERN ABOUT DATA HELD

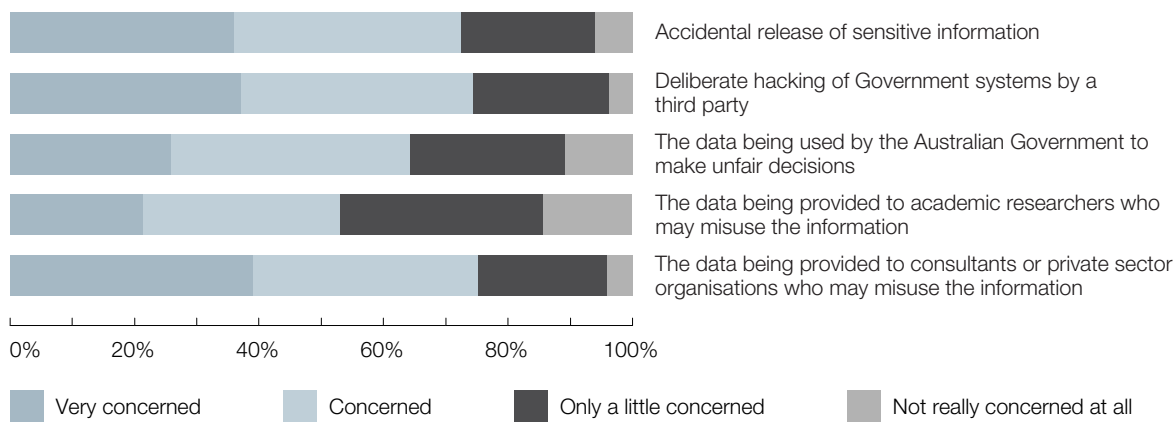
The Australian population is generally supportive of government using or sharing data. However, that does not mean that they believe that the Australian Government is currently doing what it should be doing with the data it has. To delve a little deeper into the concern that Australians might have about their own data, we asked respondents to think ‘about the data about you that the Australian Government might currently hold, such as your income tax data, social security records, or use of health services’. We then asked for their level of concern about five specific forms of data breaches or misuse of their own personal data.

Answers to these questions are likely to be influenced by the perceived likelihood of an outcome, as well as the level of severity of the consequences of that outcome. There may be some individuals who are very concerned about the data breaches or misuse if they did occur, but think it is unlikely. There may be others who think the implications of data breaches or misuse aren’t too large, but think that the probability is reasonably high. Given the time constraints of the survey, it was not possible to ask about likelihood and severity separately. It is, however, a distinction that is worth testing with future surveys.

Interpreting the results (Figure 3) with that in mind, it is clear that there are considerable concerns about different forms of data breaches or misuse, with more than 70 per cent being very concerned or concerned about accidental release of personal information, deliberate hacking of government systems, and data being provided to consultants or private sector organisations who misuse the data (Figure 3). More than 60 per cent of the population are very concerned or concerned about their data being used by the Australian Government to make unfair decisions and more than half are very concerned or concerned about their data being provided to academic researchers who may misuse their information.

Figure 3. Level of concern about specific forms of data breaches or misuse of a person’s own data

Source: ANUPoll on Data Governance in Australia, November 2018



Age once again has a strong association with the likelihood of being very concerned or concerned about the misuse of an individual’s personal data, with the level of concern generally higher the older the respondent. Although other factors had an association with specific types of concern, these relationships were less consistent.

Those with lower levels of education tended to be more concerned. The relationship with education was particularly strong for accidental release of data, using data to make unfair decisions, and data being given to academic researchers who may misuse the information. For the last of these variables (academic researchers), the relationship is particularly strong with post-school qualifications – those with a degree in general and a postgraduate degree in particular are much less likely to be concerned. Geography also has an association – an interesting finding from the analysis is that those who live outside capital cities have lower levels of concern than those living in capital cities.

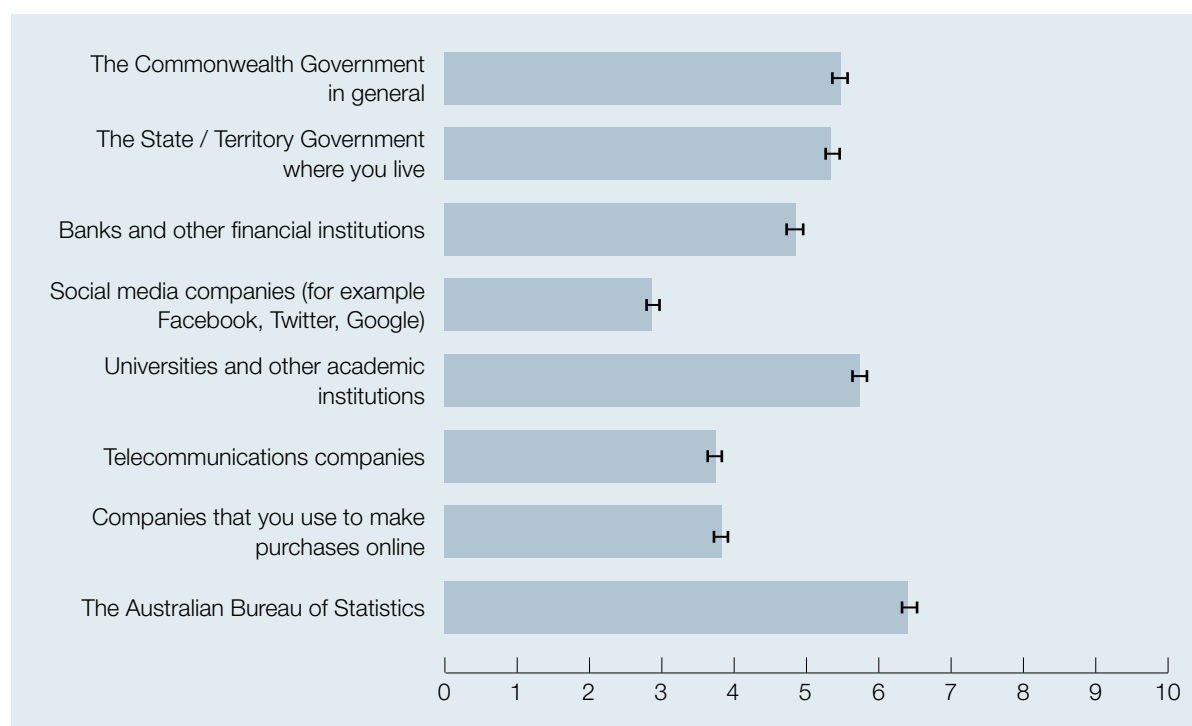
TRUST IN DATA HOLDERS

Governments are not the only entities that hold data about us. Indeed, an increasingly large amount of data is held by commercial entities, with the data forming a large part of their commercial value. Academic institutions also hold data about individuals – some of the data are provided by government or the private sector but a large amount is collected by the institutions themselves.

In the final question on data governance in the 27th ANUPoll, we asked respondents ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is no trust at all and 10 is trust completely, how much would you trust the following types of organisations to maintain the privacy of your data?’⁶

Figure 4. Level of trust in organisations for maintaining privacy of data (1 = no trust, 10 = trust completely)

Source: ANUPoll on Data Governance in Australia, November 2018



With regard to data, the most trusted organisation in Australia is the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), with a mean trust value for respondents of 6.4 (Figure 4) and 38.9 per cent of respondents giving a value of 8/10 or higher. Universities are the next most trusted organisation (mean = 5.7), followed by the Australian and state and territory governments (mean = 5.5 and 5.4, respectively).

In general, there is far less trust in commercial entities than in public sector institutions. The lowest level of trust is in social media companies, with a mean value of 2.9. Around two-thirds of respondents (66.5 per cent) gave a value of 3/10 or less for these organisations, and only 3.2 per cent gave a value of 8/10 or higher. Telecommunications companies (mean = 3.7), online shopping providers (mean = 3.8), and banks and other financial institutions (mean = 4.8) fall somewhere in between.

Age has a strong association with trust, with the young tending to be more trusting than the old. Apart from telecommunications companies and online shopping providers (where there was no statistical difference), females tended to have higher rates of trust than males; the biggest difference related to trust in universities and government. Those who had not completed high school tended to be less trusting in institutions with regard to their data than those who had completed Year 12, with the difference greatest for non-commercial institutions (government in general, universities and the ABS specifically). There were also large differences by education, with those living in the most disadvantaged parts of the country the least likely to trust government with their data.

6 The order of the institutions that were presented to respondents was randomised

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The data environment in Australia is changing rapidly. More digital information about us is being created, captured, stored and shared than ever before, and there is a greater capacity to link information across multiple sources of data and across multiple time periods. Although this creates opportunities, it also creates the risk that the data will be used in a way that is not in our best interests.

There is policy debate at the moment about how data should be used and shared. Not making use of the available data has costs in terms of worse service delivery and less effective government. Locking data up is not a cost-free option. However, sharing data or making data available in a way that does not protect people's privacy is also not cost free and doing so in an unsafe way has the potential to create a significant (and legitimate) public backlash, which would reduce the chance of data being made available in any form.

The results of the public opinion survey presented in this paper show that Australians are generally supportive of data being made available to researchers (especially those in universities) and being used within government. These findings are consistent with overseas research (Bickers et al. 2015) and recent findings by the Productivity Commission (Productivity Commission 2017).

Although the level of support for government to use and share data is generally high, there is much less support for the propositions that the current government has the right safeguards in place or can be trusted with people's data. Having said that, government in general and the ABS in particular are much more trusted than commercial entities; levels of trust in social media companies are particularly low. These findings are consistent with the 2017 survey on community attitudes to privacy (OAIC 2017) – which found that government had high levels of trust and that social media companies had particularly low levels of trust – and with the broader international findings.

It is unclear from the survey results whether that low level of trust is driven by a lack of knowledge about what government does (and does not do), as opposed to a lack of support and trust based on specific knowledge. It is probably a combination of both for different individuals. Trust and support tend to be lowest for those with low levels of education, the relatively old and males. In a somewhat concerning but perhaps not surprising finding, those who live in relatively disadvantaged areas are the least likely to trust government with their data. In some ways, individuals in these areas are likely to benefit the most from their data being used sensibly and effectively by government. But perhaps because of past experiences or perceptions from others, those in these areas perceive the greatest risk.

Regardless of the reasons and the distribution, if government, researchers and private companies want to be able to make use of the richness of the new Data Age, there is an urgent and continuing need to build up trust across the population, and to put policies in place that reassure consumers and users of government services.

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