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THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT:
Australian views on government services

Report No. 26: April 2019

(ANUpoll data collected August 2018)

ANU Centre for Social
Research & Methods
ANU College of
Arts & Social Sciences

ANUPOLL

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT: AUSTRALIAN VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT SERVICES

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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 (the 'Life in Australia' panel), and is conducted via the Internet (76 per cent of respondents) and phone (24 per cent of respondents). The use of this mixed-mode frame is to ensure coverage of households without Internet access.

In this poll, 2,220 people were interviewed between 13 and 26 August 2018. Among individuals who received the survey (ie members of the 'Life in Australia' panel), a completion rate of 79 per cent was achieved. Taking into account the recruitment rate to the panel, the cumulative response rate is calculated as 9.2 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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SUMMARY

Some of the most important questions facing any government involve the extent of its role in service delivery: how services demanded by the public are funded and delivered and how new programs should be implemented. These questions go to the heart of how we organise ourselves as a society, and what we value most.

In the 26th ANUPoll, a representative sample of Australians shows that we generally think government has an important role to play in many aspects of society, with the greatest support for health care for the sick, border control and aged care. The lowest level of support is for providing a decent standard of living for the unemployed, providing a job for everyone who wants one and providing decent housing. Even still, more than three quarters of the population think government has a role in these areas.

Females are more likely to support an active role for government than males with large differences for housing, prices, male and female equality and providing a decent standard of living for the elderly. Other groups who support a strong role for government are the relatively old and young and those born overseas.

Most Australians think that many services – particularly health care, education, prisons, roads and public transport – should be paid for or provided by government, rather than the private or not-for-profit sectors. There is less support for government directly paying for or providing dental services, childcare and media services. There is a lot of debate about school funding at the moment. Australians are split almost perfectly evenly on whether primary and secondary school education should be delivered by state governments or the federal government.

The population is evenly split on whether if new programs are to be introduced, they should be provided to everyone, or whether they should be trialled on a small segment of the population.

The findings presented in this report contribute nuance to an area in which views and attitudes are dynamic, adapting to new technologies, changing standards of living, and international circumstances.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The extent to which governments should innovate and intervene or play only a minimal role in citizens' lives is at the heart of our national politics. The aim of this poll, the 26th in the ANUPoll series, is to measure the opinions of Australians on what government should do and how they should do it. We test how these attitudes vary by important demographic, geographic and socioeconomic characteristics and how they compare to other countries where similar questions have been asked.

Despite its relatively short history as a nation, Australia has introduced a number of innovative policy reforms or been a very early adopter of reforms tried in other countries. Some of these have been copied or adapted by other countries and that have continued as a fundamental part of Australia's policy approach are: the eight hour work day (for skilled workers), a national minimum wage, women's suffrage, income-contingent loans and an independent central bank.

Other policy approaches – such as the race-based 'White Australia' immigration policy or restrictions on women in the workplace – have been introduced but subsequently abandoned as attitudes and circumstances have changed.

Sometimes, as a nation we agree on the aim of public policy – educating Australian children, or providing public health – but disagree on what the policy should look like and how it should be delivered. Other times, Australians disagree fundamentally about whether government should or should not be involved in a policy area at all. The findings presented here show variation in our attitudes across time and between different demographic groups.

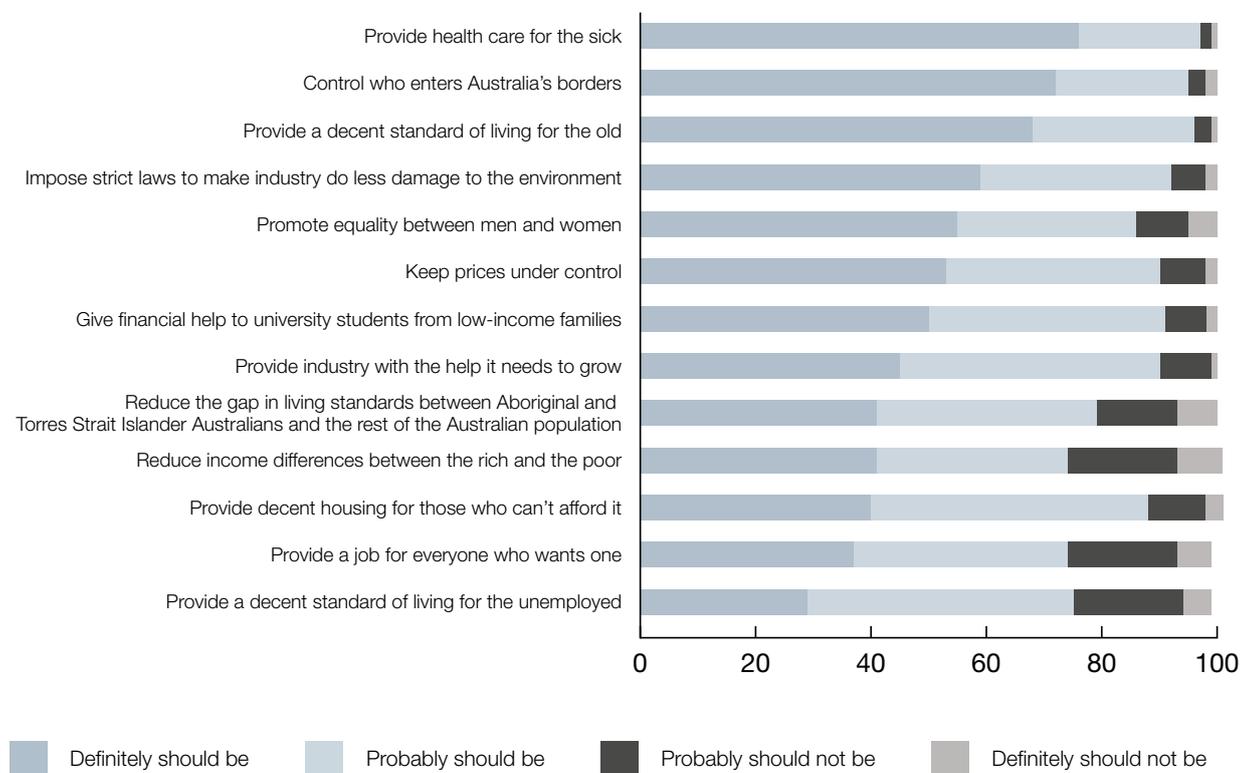
AUSTRALIANS' VIEWS ON THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

We first asked respondents, 'On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to ...?' with 13 possible roles of government. This question and the first 11 of the roles were taken from the Role of Government Module as part of the International Social Survey Program¹. We added two additional potential roles (on border control and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians) and randomised the order in which the different roles were presented.

Australians tend to agree that government should provide health care for the sick (76.3 per cent said that it definitely should) and control who enters Australia's borders (72.2 per cent). There is much less support for redistributive policies, with approximately one in four respondents saying that it is probably not or definitely not government's role to reduce income differences between the rich and the poor (26.6 per cent), provide a job for everyone who wants one (25.3 per cent), or provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed (24.4 per cent).

On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to...?

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018



¹ [gesis.org/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/role-of-government](https://www.gesis.org/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/role-of-government)

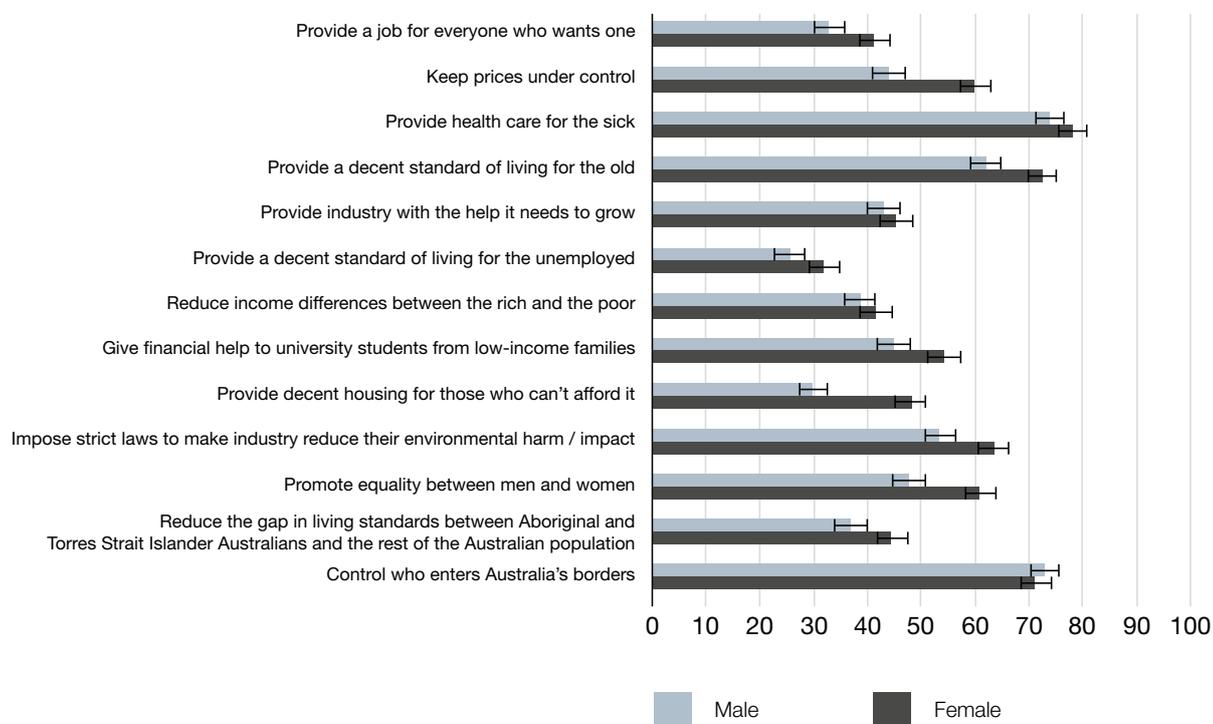
Australians who believe that government definitely or probably should have a role in one specific area tend to extend this belief to all other policy areas. The only exception to this is whether government should 'control who enters Australia's borders.' Australians who believe that the government should definitely have responsibility to control our borders do not necessarily think that government should intervene in other areas.

Using this correlation, we were able to construct an Index of Belief in Government, which summarised the variation across the 12 potential roles, excluding border control. When we analysed this variable, those who were most supportive of a role of government are: females; the relatively old and young (with lowest support amongst those in their late 50s); and those born overseas.

On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to...?

Percentage responding 'definitely should be', by gender

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, August 2018



The differences by gender are not always consistent across the different roles. Looking at those who responded 'definitely should be' to the different roles, the biggest differences are for 'Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it', 'Keep prices under control', 'Promote equality between men and women', and 'Provide a decent standard of living for the old', all of which had more than a 10 percentage point gap between males and females. There are a number of different ways in which government can deliver services. It can directly fund services while others deliver them, or deliver services themselves on a user-pays basis. Alternatively, it can step back entirely and leave it to the market to provide services.

WHO SHOULD PAY, AND WHO SHOULD PROVIDE PARTICULAR SERVICES?

In the Australian context a further decision needs to be made: whether responsibility should fall to the federal government, state and territory governments, or local governments. While in some policy areas one level of government has clear constitutional responsibility, the more common situation is that two or sometimes three levels of government are required to co-operate. This is the current situation with regard to health, education, and roads and transport, among other policy areas.

Respondents to the ANUPoll were randomly split into two groups, with half of the sample asked who should *provide* services and the other half being asked who should *pay*. There were eleven types of services listed, with the specific questions as follows:

- 'People have different opinions on who should provide services in Australia. If you had to choose, who do you think should primarily provide...?'
- 'People have different opinions on who should provide services in Australia. If you had to choose, who do you think should primarily pay for...?'

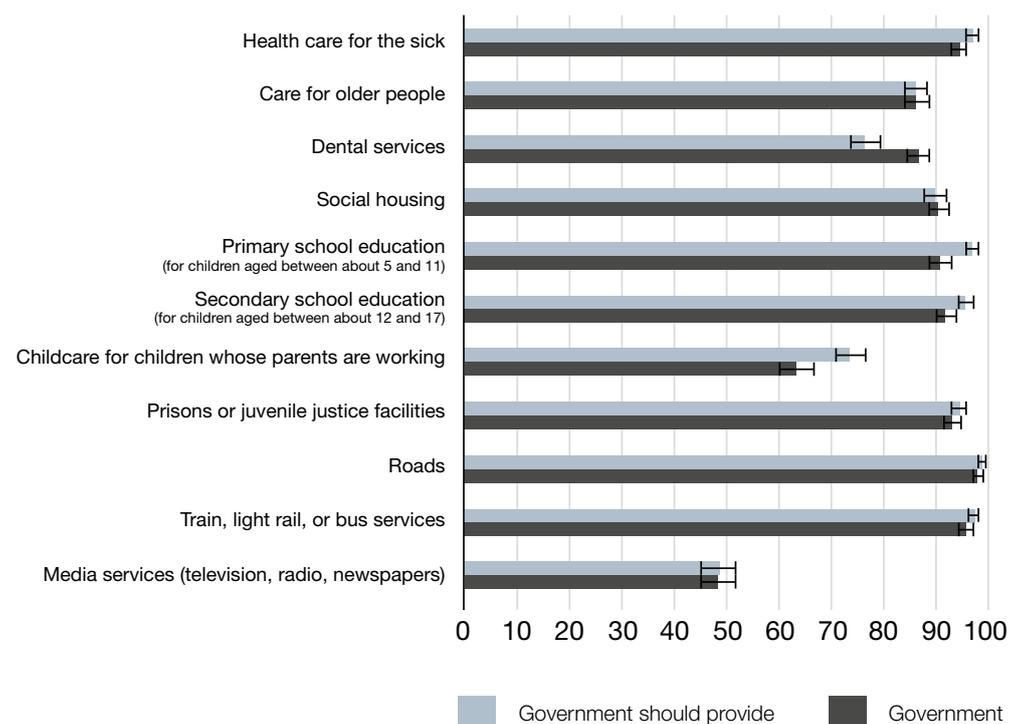
The respondents were intentionally not given the option of choosing that the individual themselves should provide (or pay for) the service, as the aims of the questions were to find out about additional support that someone might need (and for most of the questions it is not feasible for an individual to provide for themselves). The possible responses for each of the types of services were:

1. Commonwealth government
2. State / Territory government
3. Local governments
4. Private companies / for-profit organisations
5. Non-profit organisations / charities / cooperatives
6. Religious organisations
7. Family, relatives, or friends

One way to look at the data is to compare support for provision or payment by government (combining Commonwealth, State/Territory, and Local) compared to the remaining four options.²

Per cent responding that government (rather than the private sector, non-government organisations, religious organisations, or friends and family) should provide/pay for services

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, October 2018



² Families, relatives, or friends' was only asked for those services where this is a realistic option: Health care for the sick; care for older people; primary school; secondary school; and childcare for children whose parents are working.'

There are a number of services which Australians clearly and strongly believe government should fund: health care for the sick; care for older people; social housing; primary school education; secondary school education; prisons or juvenile justice facilities; and train, light rail, or bus services.

The question phrasing matters in some areas. A significantly lower percentage of respondents believe that government should *pay* for as oppose to *provide* primary and secondary school education.

Similarly, a significantly higher proportion of respondents think the government should pay for (86.7 per cent) compared to provide (76.4 per cent) dental services. The effect of question wording is the opposite for childcare: 73.7 per cent of respondents think government should provide the service, but only 63.3 per cent thinking government should pay.

Approximately half of the population think that media services should be either provided by or paid for by government (48.7 per cent and 48.4 per cent respectively).

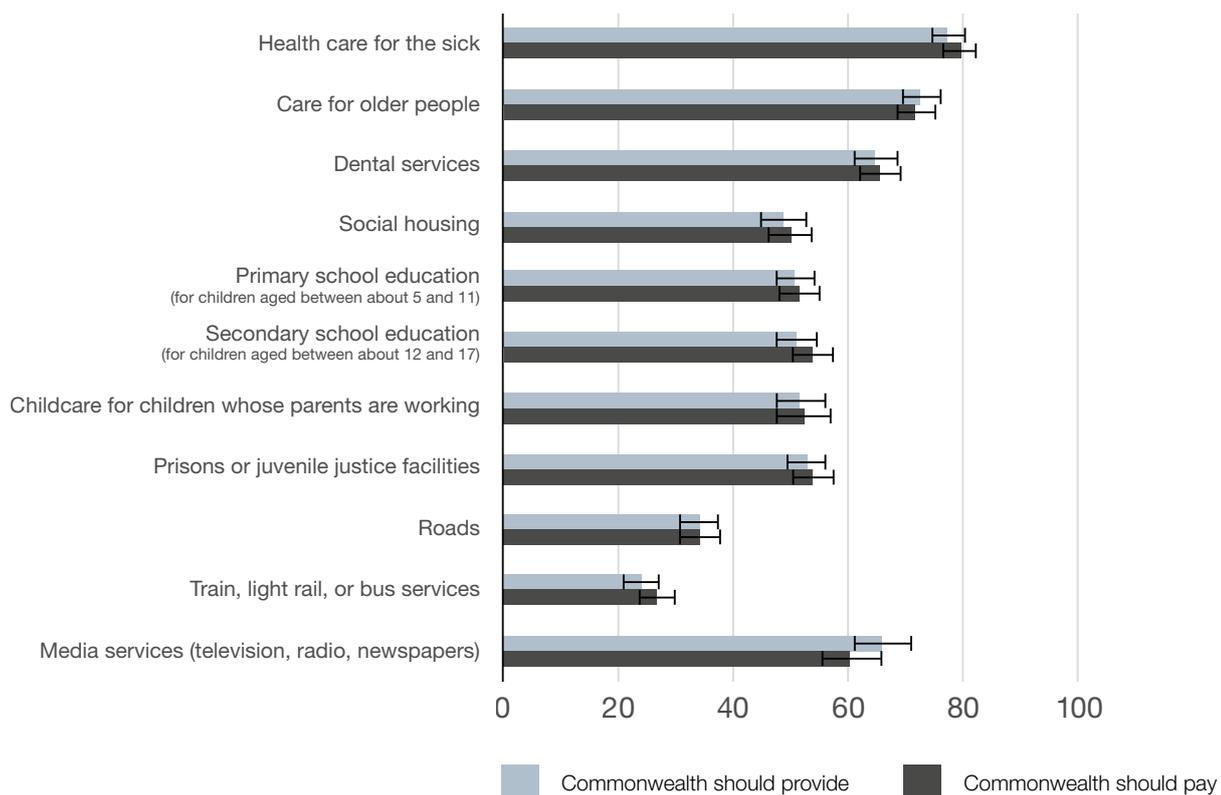
A perennial debate within Australia relates to which level of government should provide or pay for a particular service. Over the course of Australia's Federation, there has tended to be an increase in the role of the federal government with a diminishing role for state, territory and local governments.

This ANUPoll finds distinct preferences for which level of government delivers different public services. Australians are split almost perfectly evenly on whether primary and secondary school education should be delivered by state governments or the federal government. They are much more certain that health care should be delivered by the federal government, with 73 per cent choosing this option.

Leaving aside the distinction between paying for and providing services, there is considerable variation in people's responses as to which services should be a Commonwealth or State/Territory responsibility. Most respondents feel that health care for the sick and care for older people should be a Commonwealth as opposed to a state/territory responsibility (among those who thought it should be at least one of the two). Dental services and media services were also seen to be a primarily Commonwealth responsibility. The split for housing, schooling, child care and prisons was roughly even, with most respondents feeling that it should be the state/territory government that provides roads and public transport.

Who should primarily provide/pay for particular services: the Commonwealth compared to States/Territories?

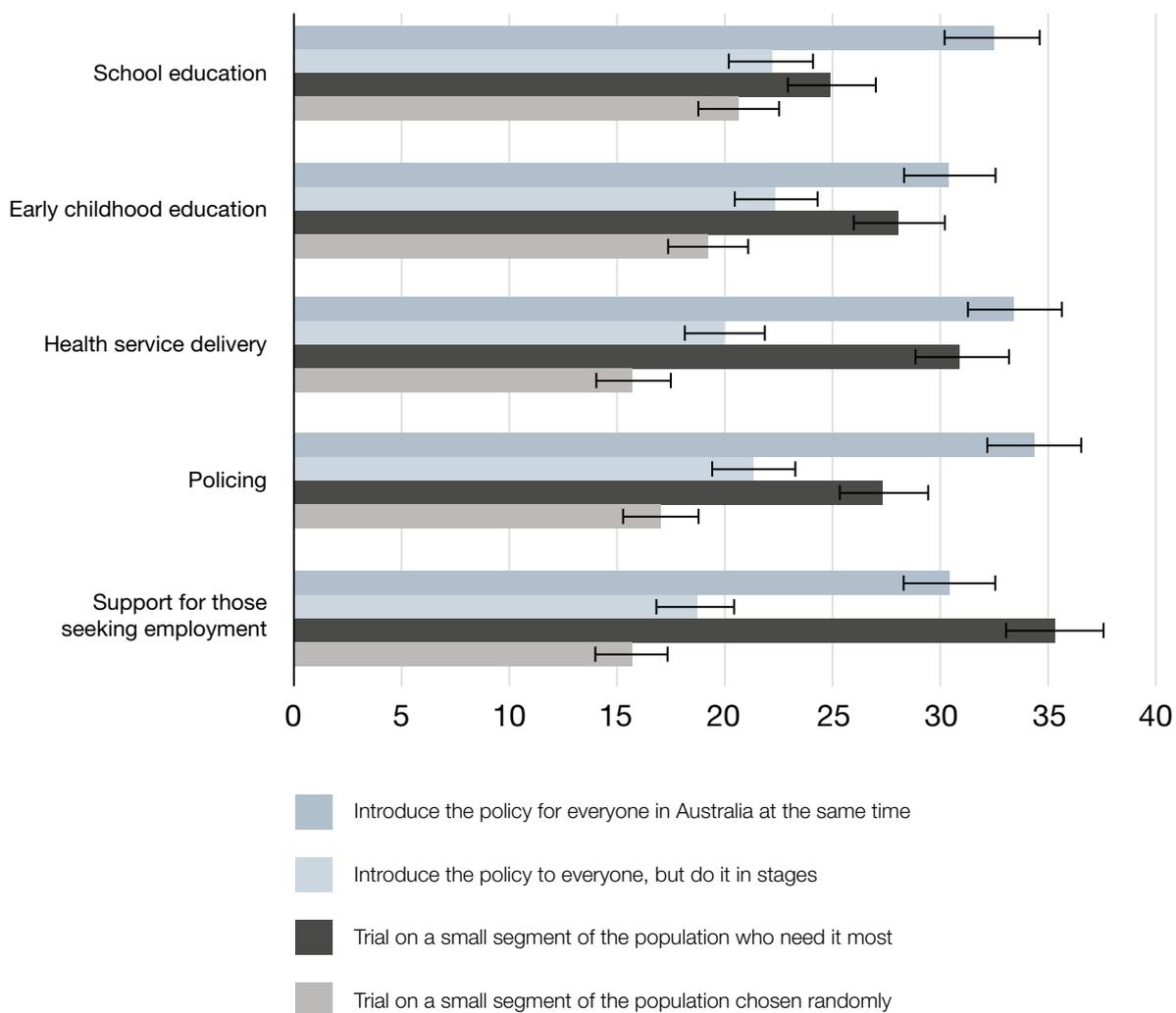
Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, October 2018



HOW SHOULD NEW POLICIES BE INTRODUCED?

The general public is often asked about its views on different policy directions, as well as prioritisation across different policy options. Partly based on this polling, but also based on the views and ideology of the different parties, elections are often fought over which direction to take. In addition though, elections are also fought retrospectively on how these policy options have been implemented. These implementation questions are rarely, however, asked of the population either prospectively or generally.

Respondents to ANUPoll were asked to ‘consider a hypothetical proposal to reform’ one of five policy areas. We then asked ‘which of the following approaches do you think the government should take?’



Which approaches should the government take for a hypothetical policy reform

Source: ANUPoll on the Role of Government, October 2018

There are quite different responses from the public depending on the policy area. For school education and policing, respondents are most likely to say that the government should introduce the policy for everyone at the same time. For employment policy on the other hand, respondents thought the government should trial the reform on those who need it most. For the remaining two options – early childhood education and health service delivery – there was no (significant) difference between these two options, but both are more common responses than introducing to everyone in stages or as a trial on a random segment of the population. For all five policy areas, trialling the program on a small segment of the population chosen randomly is the lowest (health service delivery, policing) or equal lowest response.

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