A tale of three Januarys. Political and policy attitudes during the bushfire and pandemic periods

ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

Professor Nicholas Biddle,[1] Professor Matthew Gray,[1] and Kate Sollis[1]

1 ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

Australian National University

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Acknowledgements

Extended abstract

In this paper we present data from a set of representative surveys of the Australian population (the ANUpoll series of surveys) to examine the changes in political and policy attitudes over three Januarys – January 2020 at the height of the Black Summer bushfire crisis, January 2021 as Australia was still pursuing a COVID-zero policy, and January 2022 towards the peak of the Omicron-wave of the pandemic and as borders had just begun to be opened and restrictions eased.

We find large swings in voting intentions. The per cent of Australians who said they would vote for the Coalition was quite low (35.4 per cent) in January 2020 relative to the results of the Federal Election that occurred in May of 2019. By January 2021, during the middle of Australia's COVID-zero era but before issues with vaccine supply had started to emerge, the per cent of Australians who said that they would vote for the Coalition had increased significantly to 40.3 per cent. By January 2022 however, the per cent of Australians who said they would vote for the Coalition was not only lower than the rest of the COVID-19 period, but was even lower than the Black Summer bushfire period. In January 2022, only 32.2 per cent of adult Australians said that they would vote for a Coalition member if an election was held then. This is significantly lower than the per cent of the sample who said they would vote for Labor (37.0 per cent), who would appear to have been in an election-winning position. In particular, the Coalition government appears to have lost support amongst females, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and young Australians.

Despite these political swings, we find a somewhat surprising level of stability over the period in terms of views on key policy issues. Even with a very large increase in the government's role in the lives of Australians during the pandemic period, we don't find any changes in the per cent of Australians who think governments should have an extensive role. Furthermore, there were no large changes between January 2020 and January 2022 in the per cent of Australians who thought environmental issues were serious, with a high degree of stability on views related to global warming. Views on key policy issues were, however, important in explaining changes in voting patterns.

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1 Introduction and overview

Late-December to late-January in Australia has historically been a time of low-stakes news coverage. Reporting tends to focus on sporting events, including the international and domestic cricket series', Sydney-Hobart yacht races, and the Australian Tennis Open. It is extremely rare for elections to be held over the period (either at the Commonwealth or state/territory level), and Prime Ministers, Premiers and their senior Ministers often use the time to have extended holidays, much like the rest of the country whilst schools and universities are on extended teaching breaks.

The last three Januarys in Australia (2020, 2021 and 2022) have been somewhat different. The bushfires that occurred over the 2019/20 Australian spring and summer (also known as the Black Summer fires) were unprecedented in scale and global in impact in terms of smoke and air quality,[1] release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (Jalaludin et al., 2020) and total area burned. The later was estimated to be 30.4 million hectares — 'a figure more than 7.5 times higher than the annual average percentage burnt for the past 18 years' (Bowman et al., 2020). Although there have been more fatalities in previous bushfires, the impacts of the Black Summer fires were felt across a much larger proportion of the population due to the unprecedented geographic range of the fires (Filkov et al., 2020), as well as the spread of air pollution over the continent and beyond (Di Virgillio et al., 2021). Throughout the fire season there were bushfires in every state and territory of Australian spanning almost 6 months (Filkov et al., 2020).

In January 2021, Australia was around 10-months into the worst global pandemic in living memory. While at that point in time, Australia had experienced lower COVID-19 cases and deaths than comparable countries in North America and Western Europe[2], the impacts of the pandemic were still felt across the country. Restrictions were in place in Sydney and throughout New South Wales due to an outbreak of COVID-19 that commenced in Sydney's Northern Beaches, subsequently spreading throughout the city. Restrictions included travel into and out of Sydney or the whole of New South Wales, the return of mask mandates, and the dramatic scaling down of many public events.[3] International borders which had effectively been closed to all but a trickle of international visitors since the beginning of the pandemic continued to be closed, with even Australians overseas finding it difficult to return home.[4]

While the eventual case numbers during the 2020/21 summer outbreak appear low in retrospect, it should be remembered that at the time the Australian and state/territory governments were effectively pursuing a COVID-zero policy. This was partly because a wide-spread vaccination program had not yet commenced in Australia, despite vaccinations already being in full-swing in the US and the UK at the time.

Leading up to the 2021/22 summer, many Australians were hopeful that the high rates of vaccination that had by then been achieved would lead to an opening up of the country. Furthermore, there was an expectation that many of the restrictions put in place to keep COVID-19 rates of infection (and hospitalisations/deaths) low would be eased.[5] This was hampered somewhat, however, by the arrival of the Omicron variant in Australia in late-November 2021.[6] The outbreak led to a more rapid increase in infections than had been anticipated, the maintenance of restrictions for those who tested positive to COVID-19 or who had been in close contact with someone who had. Furthermore, there was a widely reported shortage in Rapid Antigen Tests as well as long lines for Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests[7].

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The summer of 2021/22 also saw the convergence of the back (sports) and front (news) pages of the newspapers, with the favourite for the Men's version of the Australian Tennis Open (Novak Djokovic) deported from the country on the eve of the event due to his public stance against vaccine mandates and uncertain vaccination status[8].

These three summers in Australia are therefore very unusual, but also quite different from each other. There was widespread debate around how to deal with twin natural phenomena – widespread bushfires, and an ever-evolving global pandemic.

It has been argued by politicians, commentators, and others that the substantial increases in government expenditure, additional controls imposed on the day-to-day life of individuals, and social, economic, and environmental disruptions caused by COVID-19 may have impacted on the political attitudes and views of Australians regarding the extent and nature of the role of government (Anderson et al., 2021). It has also been argued that the widespread bushfires of 2019-20 and subsequent major floods may also have impacted on attitudes towards environmental issues and policy (UN Environment Program 2020).

A major report by the British Academy on COVID-19 and Society argues that "COVID-19 has been a catalyst for further movement towards more socially responsible capitalism." (British Academy 2021: 38). However, an emerging body of research about the impact of the pandemic on public opinion and values suggests otherwise (e.g., Nettle 2020; Reeskens et al. 2021). For example, Reeskkens et al. (2021: S163), using longitudinal Dutch data find that "it doesn't seem like the coronavirus crisis has shaken up values tremendously."

The existing evidence about the impact of previous economic recessions on political attitudes and policy preferences is that while there are some effects, these tend to be relatively small and tend to not last (e.g., Bartels 2013; Kenworthy and Owens 2011; Schlozman and Verba. 1979). Research into values and opinions argues that values which are developed at a young age will be relatively stable at the individual level over time. In contrast, whereas opinions during adulthood will vary much more over time at the individual level as they are less fixed and reflect changing circumstances and experiences (Inglehart 1977, Uslaner 2002). Given the cumulative natural disasters which have affected Australia over the last three years, it is important to understand how these may have impacted Australian's political and policy attitudes.

This paper uses data collected during January 2020, 2021, and 2022 to analyse how political and policy attitudes have varied over the three summers. The data was collected by the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, in partnership with the Social Research Centre from a representative sample of Australians as part of the ANUpoll series of surveys. Respondents are from the Life in Australia[TM] panel, Australia's only probability-based source of online and offline survey participants.

The January 2022 survey collected data from 3,472 Australians aged 18 years and over. The January 2021 survey collected data from 3,459 people, and the January 2020 survey from 3,249 people. Of the January 2022 sample, 59.3 per cent had completed the January 2020 survey and 64.4 per cent had completed the January 2021 survey. There was an even greater linkage rate between the January 2020 and January 2021 surveys with 78.7 per cent of the respondents who completed the January 2021 survey also having completed the January 2020 survey. More detailed information about the January 2022 survey is provided in Biddle and Gray (2022).[9]

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In addition, data from the August 2018 ANUpoll is used to provide information on Australian's views about what the role of government should be. The August 2018 data provides baseline data to analyse the impact of the 2019/20 bushfires and COVID-19 on political attitudes.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss changes in voting intentions (at the Federal level) with a focus on the characteristics of those who said in January 2021 that they would vote for the Coalition government, but changed their voting intentions by January 2022. In Section 3 we focus on views on the role of government, with Section 4 focusing on views on environmental issues. In both these sections we relate these views to voting intentions. Section 5 provides some concluding comments.
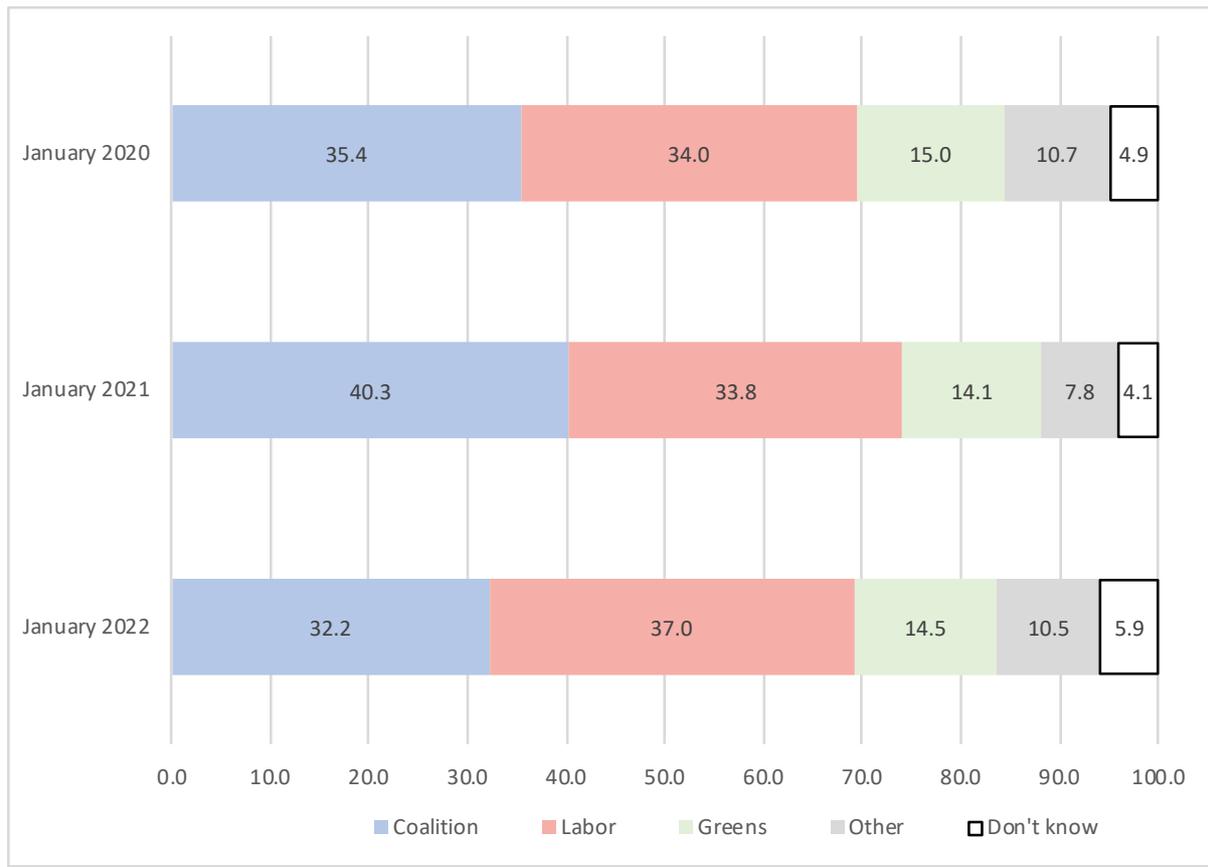
2   Voting intentions

At the start of each of our three January ANUpolls, respondents were asked 'If a federal election for the House of Representatives was held today, which one of the following parties would you vote for?' Respondents were given a short list of parties to choose from, and also provided the opportunity to type in the name of another party if their preference was not on the list.

Figure 1 presents the voting intentions of Australians in January 2020, 2021 and 2022. In January 2020, the Coalition government was suffering from negative perceptions based on their response to the Black Summer bushfires. This meant that the per cent of Australians who said they would vote for the Coalition was quite low (35.4 per cent) compared to May 2019 Federal Election at which the Coalition first preference vote was 41.4 per cent.[10] In January 2020, there was no statistically significant difference in the proportion of Australians who said that they would vote for Labor compared to the Coalition, with an election at that time likely to have been decided by preference flows and the distribution of votes across specific electorates.

By January 2021, during the middle of Australia's COVID-zero era but before issues with vaccine supply had started to emerge, the per cent of Australians who said that they would vote for the Coalition had increased significantly to 40.3 per cent. This relatively strong support for the incumbent Coalition Government is consistent with the election results in areas where COVID-19 rates and deaths were quite low (within both Australia and internationally), which saw the incumbent government returned (Paull 2021).[11] By January 2022, however, this position appears to have been reversed entirely. The per cent of Australians who said they would vote for the Coalition was 32.2 percent, lower not only than during the rest of the COVID-19 period, but also lower than during the Black Summer bushfire period.

This is significantly lower than the per cent of the sample who said they would vote for Labor (37.0 per cent), who appear to be in an election-winning position. The per cent of the population who said that they would vote for the Greens party stayed reasonably consistent over the last three Januarys, though there has been some fluctuation in the per cent of the population who said they would vote for another party. There has also been a statistically significant increase (since January 2021) in the per cent of Australians who did not know who they would vote for, from 4.1 per cent to 5.9 per cent. Although some of these respondents may not end up voting at all, or vote informally, a large share of them are likely to make their mind up much closer to the election, with the possibility that this will shape the final electoral outcome.

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Figure 1   Voting intentions of Australian adults, January 2020, 2021 and 2022 (%)

Source: ANUpoll: January 2020, 2021, and 2022

2.1   Factors associated with voting intention

As we approach a Federal election (due in May 2022), it is interesting and important to test how voting intentions vary across the population and the extent to which these differences hold when controlling for other characteristics. Broadly speaking, voting intention can be used as a proxy for views on the policy settings of particular parties, as well as public trust and confidence in how those parties might react to future circumstances.
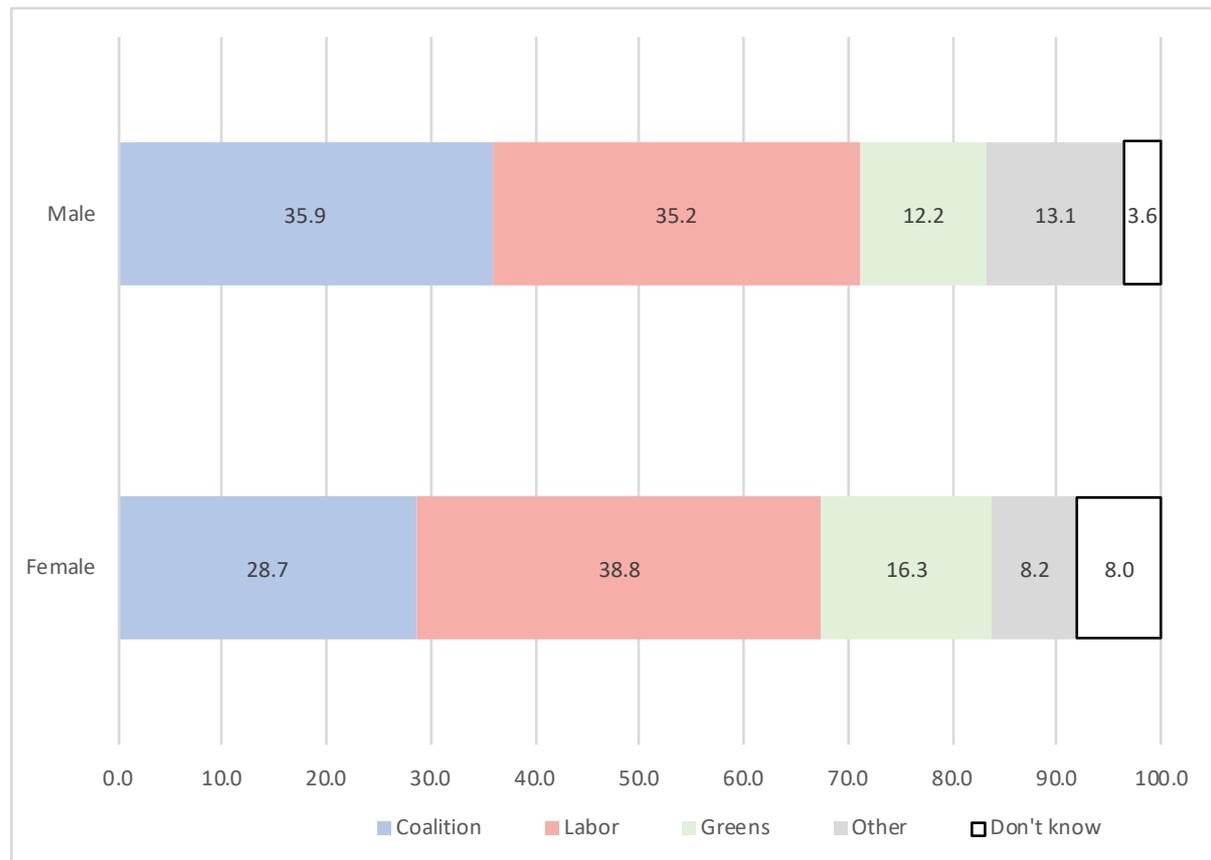
To examine these factors, we start with an analysis of voting intentions in January 2022 and then turn our attention in the next sub-section to those who have changed their voting intentions over the last two years. The demographic, socioeconomic and geographic factors associated with voting intentions in January 2022 are estimated using a multinomial probit regression model. This statistical technique allows us to analyse the association between a particular characteristic and the probability of intending to vote for a particular party compared to a base category (in this case, saying they would vote for the Coalition) holding constant all other characteristics.

The results of the multinomial regression model are presented in Appendix Table 1. While the modelling itself is reasonably complex, it is possible to take a straightforward interpretation of the results. A positive coefficient indicates that a person with that characteristic is more likely to intend to vote for that particular party as opposed to the Coalition, compared to someone with the 'base case' characteristic. A negative coefficient indicates that they are less likely to vote for that particular party.

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Looking first at a person's sex, females have a relative preference for Labor and the Greens compared to males and are also far more likely to not know who they would vote for. Females are, however, less likely to say that they would vote for another party. Figure 2 demonstrates the size of this difference, albeit without controlling for other characteristics. Looking at the two largest parties, 35.9 per cent of males said they would vote for the Coalition if an election was held in January 2022, compared to 28.7 per cent of females. By contrast, 38.8 per cent of females said they would vote for Labor compared to 35.2 per cent of males. We will return to sex differences when we look at changes in voting intentions over time.

Figure 2   Voting intention of Australian adults by sex, January 2022

Young Australians were no more or less likely to say they would vote for Labor than were those aged 35 years and over. However, young Australians were more likely to say they would vote for the Greens. Older Australians, on the other hand, were less likely to say they would vote for all of the parties apart from the Coalition than those in the middle part of the age distribution, with the difference greater for Greens and the Don't Know categories. In regard to the demographic variables, those who were born overseas in an English-speaking country were more likely to say they would vote Labor (relative to Australian born), whereas those who speak a language other than English at home were less likely to say they would vote Greens (relative to those who speak English only).

Education has a complicated relationship with voting intentions. Those who have not completed Year 12 were less likely to vote Labor (relative to those who have completed Year 12) and also less likely to vote Greens. There is weak evidence that they are more likely to vote for another party, though that difference is not quite significant at the 10 per cent level of

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significance. Post-school education has no association with whether or not a person says they would vote Labor compared to the Coalition. However, those with degrees were more likely to say they would vote Greens, and slightly more likely to say they would vote for another party. Those with another form of post-school qualification were also more likely to say they would vote for another party.

Area-level disadvantage is also not predictive of differences in voting patterns for the two major parties. However, those in disadvantaged areas were less likely to vote for the Greens, but more likely to vote for another party. Whether or not a person lives in a capital city does appear to be associated with two-party preference, with those who live outside of capital cities less likely to vote Labor than the Coalition.

Those in high income households (the top quintile) were less likely to vote Labor and the Greens compared to those in the middle part of the income distribution, and less likely to not know who they would vote for. Those in the lower part of the income distribution were more likely to vote Greens, another party, and to not know who they would vote for.
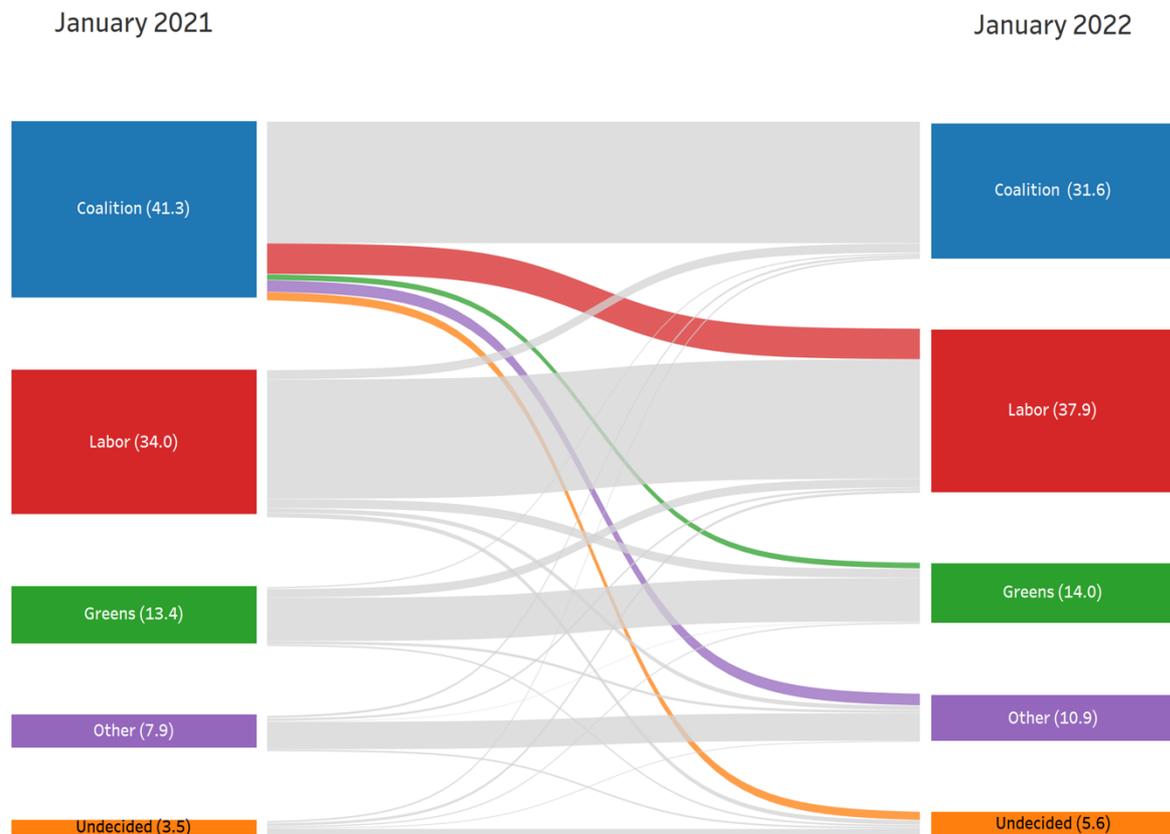
2.2   Voting dynamics

The results on changes in voting intentions between January 2020, 2021, and 2022 line up closely with published data from the major cross-sectional political polls. For example, Newspoll[12] data, which reports two-party preferred data on a relatively frequent basis, found in January 2020 a small lead for Labor (51/49), no difference between the two parties in January 2021 (50/50) and a large lead for Labor in January 2022 (56/44). While we do not estimate two-party preferred rates due to lack of information in our survey on preference flows, these results are consistent with our first preference findings.

Not only can our data look at more detailed voting determinants than the major political polls, the fact that we collect data on the same group of individuals over time (longitudinal data) allows us to examine the individual-level characteristics that predict changes in voting intentions. We begin this analysis at the aggregate level by showing voting intentions in January 2022 according to voting intentions in January 2021 (or vice-versa) (Figure 3). Based on a longitudinal sample of 2,203 respondents, the numbers in brackets on the left and right hand side of the figures give the distribution of voting intentions for the two particular points in time. While these are slightly different from Figure 1 due to the analysis in this section being restricted to the sample that responded to both waves, the trends are similar. The 'ribbons' that link these endpoints, however, are only able to be estimated using the longitudinal data and are scaled to represent the size of the flows.

Quite clearly, we can see that the biggest flow is from those who said that they would have voted for the Coalition in January 2021, but by January 2022 said they would vote Labor. This flow represents 7.1 per cent of adult Australians in total, or 17.2 per cent of those who would have voted Coalition in January 2021. The flow in the opposite direction (Labor to Coalition) is much smaller, and represents only 2.1 per cent of adult Australians, or 6.1 per cent of the Labor-voting baseline. There were also relatively large flows from the Coalition to another party (2.7 per cent of the adult population).

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Figure 3   Voting flows, January 2021 to January 2022

By focusing on those who would have voted Coalition in January 2021, we can start to understand the characteristics of those who have withdrawn their support from the Coalition over the last 12 months. Specifically, of the 923 people in the longitudinal sample who said they would have voted for the Coalition in January 2021, 31.7 per cent said they would vote for a party other than the Coalition in January 2022.

One of the predictors of this change is who the person said they would have voted for prior to January 2021. Of those who said they would have voted for the Coalition in **both** January 2020 and January 2021, only 18.8 per cent said that they would vote for a party other than the Coalition in January 2022. However, for those would have voted for the Coalition in January 2021 **but not** the Coalition in January 2020, 65.2 per cent changed their vote between 2021 and 2022. The longitudinal data highlights the presence of swing voters, or those who change their voting intentions back and forth over a relatively short period of time.

Appendix Table 2 provides a more detailed description of the factors associated with the probability of this change (using a binary probit model) the demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic variables from the analysis in the previous sub-section used as explanatory variables.

Keeping in mind that the focus is only on those who would have voted Coalition in January 2021, females were more likely to have changed their vote than males. Without controlling for other variables, 38.0 per cent of females who said they would have voted for the Coalition in January 2021 changed their preference by January 2022, compared to 25.3 per cent of males.

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The Coalition has lost the greatest amount of support amongst females.

There was a higher probability of vote change for those aged 25 to 34 years compared to those aged 35 to 44 years, but a lower rate of vote change for those aged 75 years and over. One of the biggest changes, however, was amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, with two-thirds of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in our sample who said they would have voted Coalition in January 2021 no longer saying they would vote for the Coalition in January 2022.

The final finding from Model 1 is that those who have an undergraduate degree (and who voted for the Coalition in January 2021) were less likely to have changed their vote over the following 12-month period.

In Model 2, we introduce a number of COVID-19 specific variables (as observed in January 2022) and test whether they are associated with changes in voting patterns. Given the relatively small sample sizes, we remove groups of variables that were not statistically significant in Model 1, or which were not statistically significant when included with the additional variables. After testing and dropping variables that were not significant when included,[13] we found three variables that were either statistically significant in predicting changing from voting for the Coalition or that had a large coefficient/marginal effect and therefore provided weak evidence for an association.

We find that those Australians (who would have voted for the Coalition in January 2021) who felt anxiety or worry due to COVID-19 in the three months leading up to January 2022 or who felt that it was likely or very likely that their city or town would go into lockdown were more likely to say that they would vote for a party other than the Coalition in January 2022. We also find that those who said they 'needed or wanted to get a test for COVID-19 but haven't been able to' in the three months leading up to the January 2022 survey had a greater probability of changing their voting intentions away from the Coalition. However, it should be noted that in the model with the full set of controls, the difference is not statistically significant (p-value of 0.212 in Model 2, compared to a p-value of 0.022 without any controls). It would appear from Model 1 in Appendix Table 3 that views and experiences with COVID-19 are an important determinant of the loss of support for the Coalition between January 2021 and January 2022.

3   Views on the role of government

One of the characteristics that separates the major parties in Australia is the extent to which they believe, or say they believe, that government should play a role in aspects of society. This traditional divide between left-of-centre and right-of-centre governments has been turned on its head during the COVID-19 period, as governments across the world of all political persuasions have increased their expenditure to provide greater levels of public health interventions and to cushion the economy from the negative impacts of the pandemic. This section presents data on the extent to which Australian's views about the role of government has changed, and how this has impacted on other attitudes.

The January 2022 survey asked respondents 'On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to...?' with 13 different potential roles of government asked about (listed in Figure 4). This question was previously asked in January 2021 and August 2018.[14] Response options were 'Definitely should be'; 'Probably should be'; 'Probably should not be'; and 'Definitely should not be.' Figure 4 reports the per cent of respondents in August 2018, January 2021 and January 2022 who thought that that particular role of government

should definitely be a responsibility, with the 'whiskers' around the estimates representing the 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Despite the very substantial increase in in the level of government expenditure during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic period, by 2021 there had been a general decline in the per cent of Australians who thought that specific roles should definitely be the responsibility of government compared to August 2018 pre-pandemic data. There were statistically significant declines in the per cent of Australians who thought it definitely should be the government's role for the following objectives:

- provide a job for everyone who wants one;

- keep prices under control;

- provide a decent standard of living for the old;

- provide industry with the help it needs to grow; and

- promote equality between men and women.

By contrast, in the roughly two and a half years leading up to January 2021, there was only one role that increased in support: Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm / impact. We will return to views on the environment in the next section.

There was less change in Australian's views about the role of government between January 2021 and January 2022 than between August 2018 and January 2021. There was an increase in the per cent of Australians who thought it should be government's role to 'Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor', from 40.4 per cent to 44.7 per cent. Furthermore, although the confidence intervals slightly overlap, there was also a reasonable increase in the per cent of Australian's who thought it was definitely the government's role to 'Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population' from 43.6 per cent to 46.9 per cent.

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Figure 4   Per cent of Australians who think that each role is definitely a responsibility of government, August 2018, January 2021 and January 2022

■ August 2018   ☐ January 2021   ■ January 2022

Role	August 2018	January 2021	January 2022
Provide a job for everyone who wants one	38.2	33.5	36.0
Keep prices under control	52.8	46.0	48.7
Provide health care for the sick	76.7	75.8	77.7
Provide a decent standard of living for the old	67.4	62.8	63.3
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow	43.9	37.1	35.3
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed	29.6	33.5	34.4
Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor	41.6	40.4	44.7
Give financial help to university students from low-income families	41.6	40.4	43.2
Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it	40.3	40.5	42.1
Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm / impact	58.4	63.7	62.1
Promote equality between men and women	54.5	49.3	48.0
Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population	41.2	43.6	46.9
Control who enters Australia's borders	71.9	69.2	67.7

Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: August 2018; January 2021; and January 2022

To measure the overall view of Australians about the breadth and extent of the role of government, and index was created based on responses to each of the thirteen potential roles for government. To create this index, for each potential role of government a value of 3 is ascribed for those who think a particular role should definitely be the responsibility of government, and 0 for those who think it definitely should not be. The individual items are then summed to create an additive index which measures how extensive the respondent thinks the role of government should be.[15] This index varies from a value of 0 to 39, with higher values indicating the view that the government should have a more extensive role.

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Between August 2018 and January 2021, this index declined slightly from 30.51 to 30.21. While this difference is significant at the 10 per cent level of significance, the small change over that period highlights that while specific views may have changed, overall there was not a dramatic change in belief in government in general. This was also true when comparing data from January 2021 to January 2022 (a small, but statistically insignificant increase from 30.21 in January 2021 to 30.42 in January 2022).

We can also use this index to estimate the factors associated with views about the role of government ,and whether these views have changed at the individual level over time. Using linear regression, two models are estimated, as shown in Appendix Table 4. The first model (Model 1) is estimated using only the January 2022 survey and the dependent variable is the index measuring views about what the extent of the role of government should be. A range of demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic outcomes are included as explanatory variables. The second model (Model 2) adds as an explanatory variable views about the extent of the role of government in January 2021 and is thus in effect modelling the factors associated with changes in views about the extent of the role of government.

The results of Model 1 show that in January 2022, women and those in low-income households believed in a greater role for government (higher index-value), whereas older Australians, those who haven't completed Year 12, and those in high income households believed in a lesser role of government.

The results of estimating Model 2 are that when controlling for views about what the extent of the role of government should be in January 2021, women have become more likely to believe in a strong role of government over time compared to men, whereas those who have not completed Year 12 have become less likely to believe in a greater role for government over time.

3.1 Views on government and voting intentions

It would also appear to be the case that thinking that government should have a more extensive role is associated with changes in voting preferences. We can see this by extending the analysis presented in the previous section, focusing on those who said they would have voted for the Coalition when asked in January 2021 and then looking at the factors associated with the probability of intending to vote for a different party in January 2022.

Model 2 in Appendix Table 3 shows that those who thought that the government role should be more extensive were more likely to have changed which party they would have voted for between January 2021 and January 2022. That is, those who changed their vote from the Coalition were more supportive (on average) of a stronger role of government in Australia than they had been previously.

Just as the change in views on the role of government between January 2021 and 2022 depended on the specific role, there were also different associations with voting intentions. That is, those who thought certain roles should definitely be the responsibility of government were more likely to change their vote from the Coalition, whereas other roles were associated with a lower probability of change (Model 3, Appendix Table 3). Specifically, those who thought that government should definitely: keep prices under control; and control who enters Australia's borders were more likely to continue intending to vote for the Coalition. However, those who had a belief that government should definitely provide a decent standard of living for the old; and Impose strict laws to make industry reduce their environmental harm / impact

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were more likely to have changed their vote from the Coalition.

4 Views on the environment and bushfires

At the height of the Black Summer bushfires, the January 2020 survey asked Australians whether they had experienced anxiety or worry due to the fires. At that point in time, 53.4 per cent of all adult Australians said that they had. When asked again in January 2021 (about any fires since September 2020), the level of anxiety and worry declined to 30.1 per cent, with a further decline to 22.9 per cent when asked in January 2022 (regarding the time since September 2021). Although bushfires are less of an immediate concern in 2022 compared to 2020, the fact that nearly a quarter of Australians still experienced anxiety and worry highlights the lingering impact of fires on the Australian consciousness.
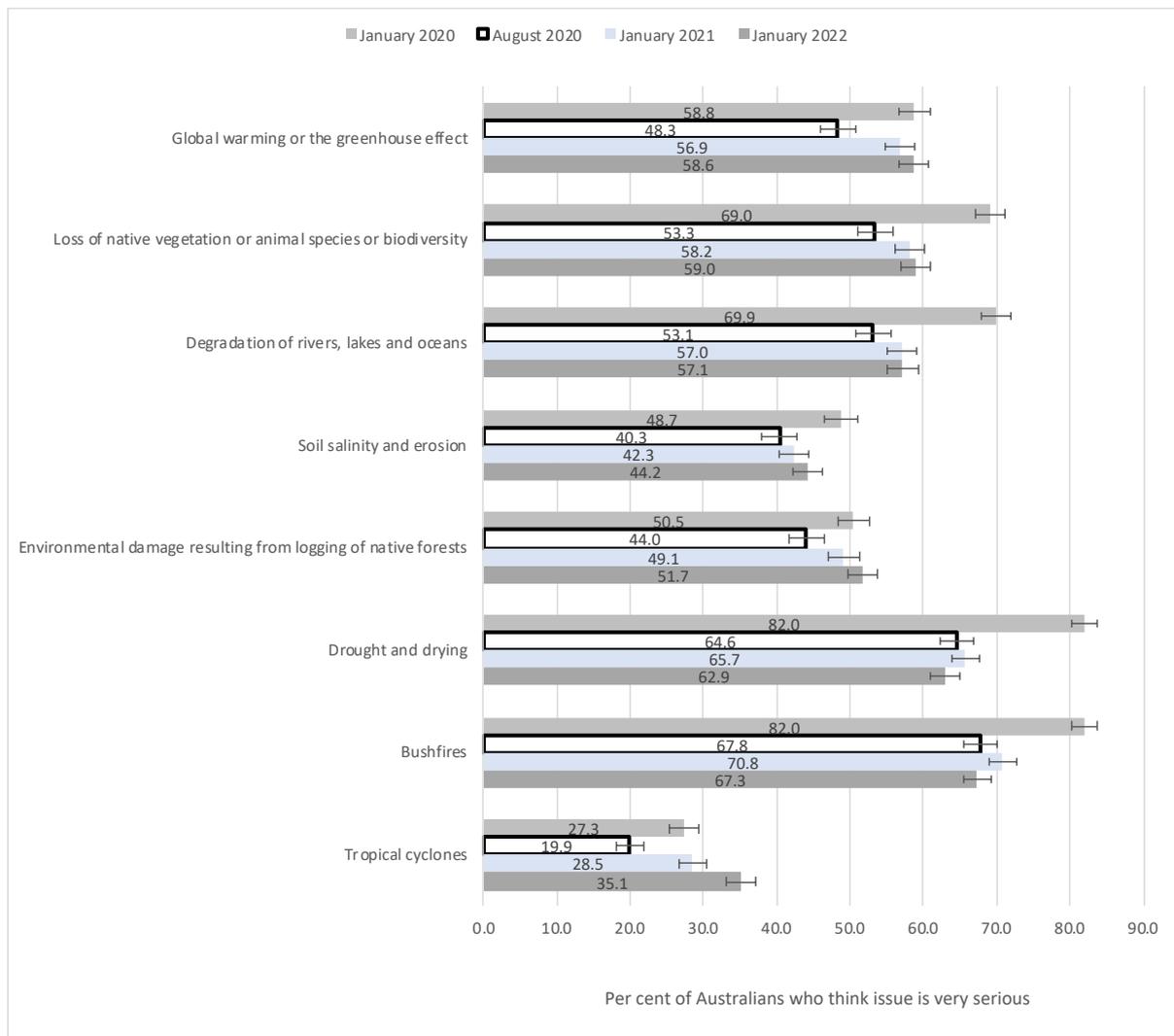
While it is difficult, if not impossible, to attribute single events to climate change, the available scientific evidence indicates that man-made climate change, through the emission of greenhouse gases, has led to an increase in the likelihood of such events occurring at a given time and at a given place (van Oldenborgh et al., 2021). What were previously seen as 1/100 or 1/1000 year events are becoming increasingly commonplace.

At the national level, the Coalition government has slowly changed its views and policy stance on issues of the environment and climate change. There is some conjecture that this change is due in part to the aforementioned environmental events. But either way, the need for a 'net zero' by 2050 as a bare minimum is now accepted by all major parties. That does not mean, of course, that there are still not major differences across the parties in terms of timing and policies to reach net zero, but there has nonetheless been some convergence over the last three summers. As shown in Figure 4, belief that the government should use strict laws to reduce the harm done to the environment by industry increased amongst the general population between August 2018 and January 2022.

In January 2020, 2021, and 2022 respondents were asked 'We are now going to ask you some questions about the environment. How serious do you consider each of the following to be for Australia…?' with eight options given in each wave. These questions were also asked in August 2020 at the peak of the second wave of COVID-19 in Australia. Figure 5 shows the per cent of Australians who identify each of these environmental issues as being very serious (with the other options being somewhat serious, not very serious, or not serious at all).

Over the pandemic/bushfire period, concern for the environment was at its highest in January 2020. In the early stages of the pandemic (between January 2020 and August 2020), concerns for the environment tended to decline. This is perhaps not surprising, as the focus of society was very much on dealing with the immediate impact of the pandemic. Furthermore, as summers in Australia tend to be the time when environmental issues are most salient (especially fires and drought), the environment may have become less front of mind during that winter. There was an increase again, however, between August 2020 and January 2021 with global warming seen as serious an issue in January 2021 as it was in January 2020. Views have been relatively more stable over the subsequent 12 months, apart from tropical cyclones which have been seen as a more serious issue, and declines again in views on the seriousness of bushfires.

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Figure 5   **Per cent of population who think specific environmental issues are very serious – January 2020, August 2020, January 2021, and January 2022**

Legend: ■ January 2020   ▢ August 2020   ■ January 2021   ■ January 2022

Issue	January 2020	August 2020	January 2021	January 2022
Global warming or the greenhouse effect	58.8	48.3	56.9	58.6
Loss of native vegetation or animal species or biodiversity	69.0	53.3	58.2	59.0
Degradation of rivers, lakes and oceans	69.9	53.1	57.0	57.1
Soil salinity and erosion	48.7	40.3	42.3	44.2
Environmental damage resulting from logging of native forests	50.5	44.0	49.1	51.7
Drought and drying	82.0	64.6	65.7	62.9
Bushfires	82.0	67.8	70.8	67.3
Tropical cyclones	27.3	19.9	28.5	35.1

Per cent of Australians who think issue is very serious

Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: January and August 2020; January 2021; and January 2022

We construct an additive index of environmental concerns by ascribing a value of 1 for not serious at all and 4 for very serious for each specific environmental issues asked about and by then summing across the eight questions. This results in an index ranging from 8 to 32, with higher values representing greater concern for environmental issues. The environmental concern index was at its highest in January 2020 with a mean value of 28.0. The environmental concern index dropped to 26.7 in August 2020, but had risen again to 27.3 by January 2021. The value of the environment concern index was stable between January 2021 and January 2022.

In January 2021 and January 2022, we included a ninth source of environmental concern – floods. The per cent of Australians who thought floods were a serious environmental issue increased over the 12 months up to January 2022 from 36.9 per cent to 46.2 per cent, reflecting the La Niña conditions that prevailed over that time period. At the time of writing, much of the east coast of Australia from just south of Sydney northwards had recently experienced severe flooding. It is important to return to views on the impact of floods in a

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subsequent survey.

In the January 2020, 2021, and 2022 surveys, respondents were asked 'Some countries are doing more to protect the world environment than other countries are. In general, do you think that Australia is doing…?' with three possible response options: more than enough; about the right amount; and too little.

Figure 6 shows that in January 2020, a very small minority (9.6 per cent) of adults Australians said Australia was doing more than enough, whereas 25.2 per cent thought that Australia was doing about the right amount, and 65.2 per cent thought Australia was doing too little. Between January 2020 and January 2021, there was an increase in the per cent of Australians who thought Australia was doing about the right amount (25.2 per cent to 34.1 per cent), counterbalanced by decreases in those who thought Australia was doing too little and those who thought that Australia was doing too much. By January 2022, the per cent of Australians who thought the country was doing too little had edged up again (to 61.6 per cent) with a decline in the per cent who thought Australia was doing about the right amount (to 30.8 per cent).

Figure 6   Views on whether Australia is doing too much, too little, or the right amount regarding the environment – January 2020, January 2021 and January 2022
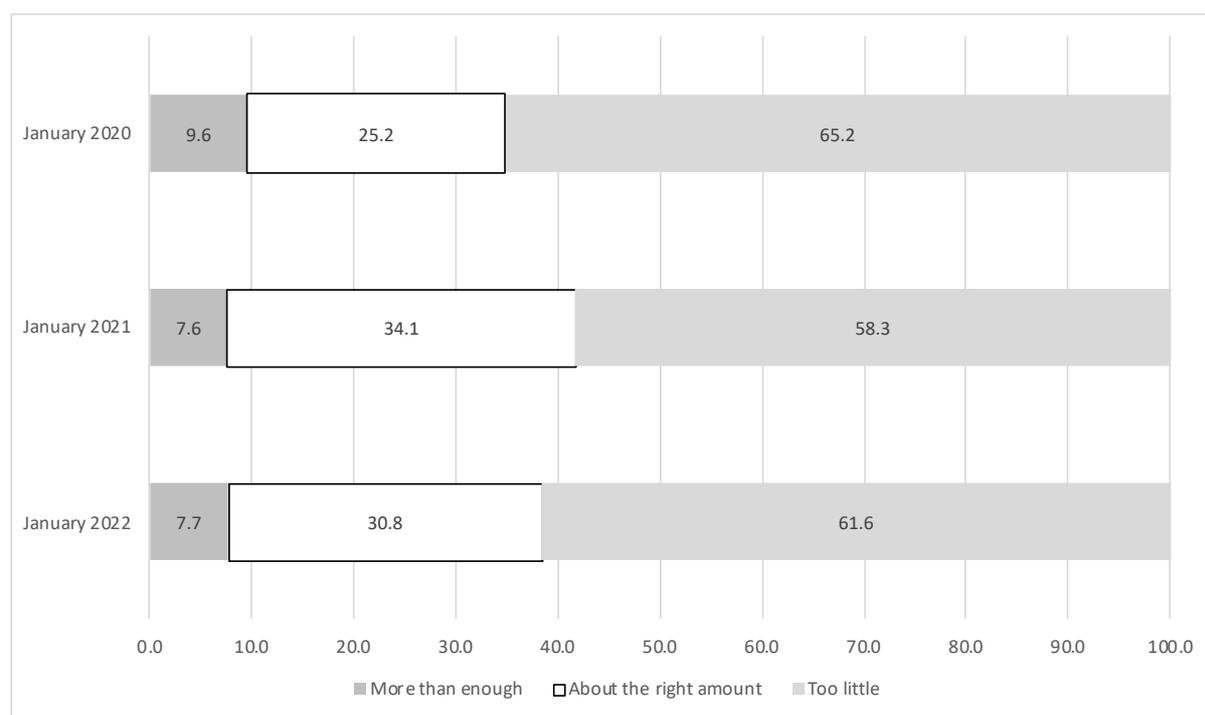
Source: ANUpoll: January 2020; January 2021; and January 2022

4.1   Views on the environment and voting intentions

In the final set of analysis of changes in voting intentions, we look at the relationship between the environmental seriousness index, as well as the individual measures. Once again, we focus on those who said they would have voted for the Coalition when asked in January 2021 and then look at the factors associated with the probability of intending to vote for a different party in January 2022 (Appendix Table 3). In Model 4 we include the index of environmental concerns as an additional explanatory variable, whereas in Model 5 we use whether the respondent thinks each of the specific environmental concerns are serious.

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The results show that those who are more likely to think that environmental issues are serious were more likely to have changed their vote from the Coalition between January 2021 and January 2022 (Model 4, Table 3). Interestingly though, there was only one specific environmental concern that had an association with voting change – global warming and the greenhouse effect (Model 5, Table 3). Although views on whether global warming was a serious issue has not changed since January 2021, holding that view does seem to be associated with a decline in support for the Coalition.

5 Concluding comments

There has not been a two-year period in Australia's history that compares with what occurred between the summer of 2019/20 and the summer of 2021/22. That is not to say that there have not been times with greater political upheaval (for example the dismissal of the Whitlam government), economic shocks (the Great Depression) or existential threats and loss of life (the two World Wars and the 1918 Influenza pandemic). However, the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 global pandemic created a unique set of circumstances that had the potential to change the views of Australians regarding the role of government in the country, the effectiveness of the government of the day, and the seriousness of environmental concerns.

In this paper, we have used data from three representative surveys of the Australian population (the ANUpoll series of surveys), supplemented by other datasets to examine the changes in political and policy attitudes over the period of the 2019/20 bushfires and the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, we document quite substantial swings in voting intentions, with the Coalition government having a low level of support in January 2020 (relative to their previous election win), large increases in support during the pandemic, but a dramatic loss in support between January 2021 and 2022. At that time, the main Opposition party (Labor) was seemingly in an election winning position.

On the other hand, we find a somewhat surprising level of stability over the period in terms of views on key policy issues. Despite a very large increase in the government's role in the lives of Australians during the pandemic period, we don't find large changes in Australians' views about what the government's role should be or the extent of the government's role. While there was some decline in the level of concern about environmental issues during 2020 as the pandemic became front of mind, the per cent of Australians who thought environmental issues were serious was similar in January 2020 and January 2022. There is a high degree of stability on views related to global warming, which is what many would people argue to be the greatest current environmental threat.

Views on key policy issues have been important in explaining changes in voting patterns though. Essentially, those who were concerned about aspects of the pandemic (particularly the likelihood of lockdowns), those who were more supportive of a more extensive role for government, and those who thought a series of environmental concerns were more serious were more likely to withdraw their support from the Coalition government. In addition to these factors, the Coalition government appears to have lost support amongst females, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and young Australians.

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Appendix   Regression Tables

Table 1   Factors associated with the party a person would have voted for if an election was held in January 2022

Explanatory variables	Labor Coeff.	Labor Signif.	Greens Coeff.	Greens Signif.	Other Coeff.	Other Signif.	Don't know/Undecided Coeff.	Don't know/Undecided Signif.
Female	0.219	**	0.302	***	-0.177	*	0.488	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.223		0.410	*	-0.210		-0.396	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.172		0.419	**	-0.016		0.118	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.220		-0.619	***	0.047		-0.152	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.067		-0.579	***	-0.029		-0.201	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.363	**	-1.060	***	-0.559	***	-0.929	***
Aged 75 years plus	-0.699	***	-1.509	***	-0.711	***	-1.448	***
Indigenous	0.263		0.427		0.456		0.498	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.278	**	0.252		0.172		0.161	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.024		-0.014		-0.148		0.046	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.181		-0.530	***	-0.200		-0.257	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.290	*	-0.576	***	0.326		-0.309	
Has a post graduate degree	0.132		0.579	***	0.296		0.228	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.217		0.297	*	0.288	*	0.086	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.001		-0.054		0.313	*	-0.004	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	0.146		-0.322	*	0.164		-0.325	*
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.213		0.121		0.339	**	-0.088	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.075		-0.140		0.130		-0.388	**
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.144		-0.170		0.084		-0.284	
Lives in non-capital city	-0.253	**	-0.184		0.069		-0.030	
Lives in lowest income quintile	-0.077		0.128		0.162		0.390	**
Lives in second income quintile	0.099		0.320	*	0.320	**	0.188	
Lives in fourth income quintile	-0.078		-0.286	*	-0.007		0.039	
Lives in fifth income quintile	-0.267	*	-0.343	**	-0.214		-0.427	**
Constant	0.242		-0.227		-0.987	***	-0.995	***
Sample size				3,117				

Source: ANUpoll, January 2022

Notes: Multinomial Probit Regression Models. The base category is vote Coalition. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city; and lives in a household in the middle quintile of the income distribution. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

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Table 2   Factors associated with the not voting for the Coalition if an election was held in January 2022, for those who would have voted Coalition in January 2021 (vote switchers)

Explanatory variables	Model 1	
	Coeff.	Signif.
Female	0.411	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.565	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.446	**
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.168	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.287	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.358	
Aged 75 years plus	-0.497	*
Indigenous	0.917	*
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.304	*
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.099	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.184	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.043	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.063	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.481	**
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.148	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.219	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.042	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.038	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.164	
Lives in non-capital city	-0.103	
Lives in lowest income quintile	-0.070	
Lives in second income quintile	-0.186	
Lives in fourth income quintile	-0.005	
Lives in fifth income quintile	-0.097	
Constant	-0.582	*
Sample size	809	

Source: ANUpoll, January 2021 and 2022

Notes: Probit Regression Model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city; and lives in a household in the middle quintile of the income distribution. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

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Table 3 Additional factors associated with the not voting for the Coalition if an election was held in January 2022, for those who would have voted Coalition in January 2021 (vote switchers)

Explanatory variables	Model 1 Coeff.	Model 1 Signif.	Model 2 Coeff.	Model 2 Signif.	Model 3 Coeff.	Model 3 Signif.	Model 4 Coeff.	Model 4 Signif.	Model 5 Coeff.	Model 5 Signif.
Needed a COVID-19 test but unable to find one	0.198									
Experienced anxiety and worry due to COVID-19	0.206	*								
Thinks it likely or very likely that city/town will lockdown	0.250	**								
Belief in government index			0.031	***						
Provide a job for everyone who wants one					0.169					
Keep prices under control					-0.245	*				
Provide health care for the sick					0.125					
Provide a decent standard of living for the old					0.330	***				
Provide industry with the help it needs to grow					-0.175					
Provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed					0.172					
Reduce income differences between the rich and the poor					0.203					
Give financial help to university students from low-income families					0.219					
Provide decent housing for those who can't afford it					-0.126					
Impose strict laws to make industry do less damage to the environment					0.238	*				
Promote gender equality					0.166					
Reduce the gap in living standards between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and the rest of the Australian population					0.031					
Control who enters Australia's borders					-0.372	***				
Environmental concern index							0.036	***		
Global warming or the greenhouse effect									0.296	**
Loss of native vegetation or animal species or biodiversity									-0.058	
Degradation of rivers, lakes, and oceans									0.131	
Soil salinity and erosion									-0.054	
Environmental damage resulting from logging of native forests									-0.109	
Drought and drying									-0.019	
Bushfires									0.108	
Tropical cyclones									0.100	
Floods									0.130	

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Female	0.337	***	0.272	**	0.243	**	0.281	**	0.283	**
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.302		-0.437		-0.689	**	-0.417		-0.376	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.401	*	0.377	*	0.385	*	0.412	*	0.432	**
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.074		0.054		-0.009		0.080		0.082	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.181		0.204		0.182		0.189		0.210	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.422	**	-0.462	**	-0.469	**	-0.457	**	-0.444	**
Aged 75 years plus	-0.522	**	-0.557	**	-0.556	**	-0.539	**	-0.509	**
Indigenous	1.207	***	1.097	***	1.182	***	1.128	***	1.131	***
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.400	***	0.336	**	0.296	**	0.353	**	0.324	**
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.171		0.177		0.120		0.188		0.137	
Constant	-1.015	***	-1.582	***	-0.792	***	-1.653	***	-0.945	***
Sample size	919		901		901		916		916	

Source: ANUpoll, January 2021 and 2022

Notes: Probit Regression Models. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city; and lives in a household in the middle quintile of the income distribution. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

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Table 4   Factors associated with belief in government index, January 2022

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Belief in government index in January 2021			0.706	***
Female	1.352	***	0.608	**
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.676		0.079	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.403		-0.324	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.033		0.130	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.941	**	-0.592	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.646		-0.115	
Aged 75 years plus	-1.962	***	-0.346	
Indigenous	0.777		0.296	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.350		0.238	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.045		-0.135	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.046		-0.362	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-1.288	**	-0.909	*
Has a post graduate degree	0.071		-0.349	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.055		-0.327	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.052		0.166	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.122		-0.225	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.069		-0.144	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.284		-0.037	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.323		0.065	
Lives in non-capital city	-0.070		0.223	
Lives in lowest income quintile	1.153	***	0.283	
Lives in second income quintile	0.549		0.445	
Lives in fourth income quintile	-0.486		0.114	
Lives in fifth income quintile	-1.167	***	-0.006	
Constant	30.091	***	8.652	***
Sample size	3,105		1,947	

Source: ANUpoll, January 2021 and 2022

Notes: Probit Regression Model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); lives in a capital city; and lives in a household in the middle quintile of the income distribution. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

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Endnotes

1   https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-51101049

2   https://ourworldindata.org/covid-cases

3   https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-northern-beaches-last-day-lockdown-restrictions-easing/bd683fb3-056c-48ea-bdab-dcef28f5d7f4

4   https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-19/calls-for-more-help-as-international-border-stays-closed/13068366

5   https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/nsw-eases-restrictions-for-pubs-and-weddings-ahead-of-holidays-20201202-p56jwv.html

6   https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-02/child-among-eight-omicron-covid-19-cases-in-nsw/100668408

7   https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/dec/29/run-on-rapid-antigen-tests-leaves-australian-governments-scrambling-for-supplies

8   https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-17/novak-djokovic-australia-open-visa-cancelled-what-happened/100760594

9   There have been two previous papers which have analysed data from the January 2022 ANUpoll. The first focused on the tracking of wellbeing outcomes and a range of COVID-19 specific measures (Biddle and Gray 2022). The second focused on vaccine uptake (Biddle and Sollis 2022)

10   https://results.aec.gov.au/24310/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-24310-NAT.htm

11   https://nexusapac.com.au/2020/11/06/elections-in-2020-the-covid-19-incumbency-effect/

12   https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/newspoll

13   Variables that were tested but excluded due to them not being significant were whether or not a person thought the worst of COVID-19 was behind us, a person's expected likelihood of infection, a person's expected likelihood of their family having to isolate, and geographic measures of government stringency and cases.

14   The question was not asked in January 2020.

15   A Principal Component Analysis was undertaken using the January 2022 wave in order to test how many latent variables may present. The results of this analysis suggests that the most of the individual measures are correlated and that the use of a single additive index is justified. The use of a single additive index also has the advantage of simplifying intertemporal comparisons.

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