

Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report
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Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report is a welcome analysis of Australians' attitudes on a range of public policy, lifestyle and values-based issues. Very little Australian research has been done on this subject. The main reason is the paucity of reliable public opinion data.

America's 'General Social Survey' has been a useful source since the 1960s, while Britain's 'Social Attitudes Survey' has produced a substantial annual publication since the 1980s. In contrast, Australian research has tended to rely on commercial polling (with very little longitudinal research

on policy issues), the National Social Science Survey (NSSS) and the Australian Election Studies (AES). Both beginning in the 1980s and based at the Australian National University (ANU), the NSSS and the AES formed rival polling research organisations. The NSSS, formed as a member of the International Social Science Survey, conducted major attitudinal surveys in 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90 and 1993. The AES have been conducted following each federal election since 1987.

In 2003, the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research (ACSR) in the Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, conducted the first Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA). The survey was designed by a 17-

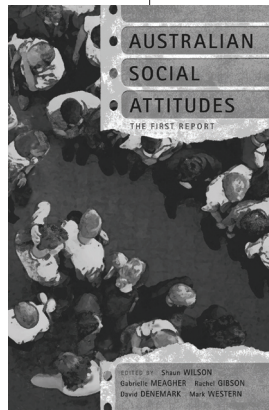
member AuSSA Advisory Team, with another five international advisers. It takes the form of 'a mail questionnaire sent to more than 10,000 Australian citizens every two years' (p.6). *Australian Social Attitudes* is an edited volume based largely on the 2003 AuSSA data, with contributions from several members of the Advisory Team.

The book's 13 chapters (excluding the introduction) present survey findings on a wide range of policy issues and social attitudes. It would help if the policy-based chapter on welfare (7), economic reform (10), immigration (11), genetics (12) and globalisation (14) were presented separately from those on lifestyle and values voluntary associations and political participation (5), post-materialism (6) and trust (8). The 2003 AuSSA survey results make for interesting reading:

- Sixty-two percent of respondents believe that 'management and employees have good relations in my workplace' (p.44). 88% think it 'not too likely' or 'not at all likely' that they will lose their job or be retrenched in the next 12 months.
- Forty-five percent of respondents disagree that 'my hours of work interfere with my family and personal life', while 52% agree that 'most people who work long hours choose to do so' (p. 52). Fifty-nine percent of single parents believe their standard of living is better compared to their parents: 42% believe their children's standard of living is better compared to their own (p.39). Seventy-six percent of all respondents believe that

their standard of living is better compared to their parents at the same age (p. 173).

- There is strong support for *both* the award system and enterprise bargaining. Sixty-six percent of respondents agree that 'award wages are the best way of paying workers and setting conditions': 64% believe that 'employers and employees should negotiate pay directly' (p. 171).
- 'Australia is a nation of joiners', with 86% of respondents belonging to at least one voluntary association and little variation by age, gender or location (p. 66). Members of associations are more likely than non-members to have engaged in political activity (p. 72).
- Seventy-four percent of respondents list their family or marital status as one of the three groups most important to who they are (p. 31). Fifty-five percent of respondents choose work as one of their three responses. As for what constitutes a family, 74% agree that a single-parent family is a household while only 34% agree that the law should recognise same-sex couples (pp. 17–19).
- Seventy-three percent of respondents believe that 'people who receive welfare benefits should be under more obligation to find work' (p. 112). The survey found a continuation—since the early 1990s—of public preference for more spending on services (48%) over less tax (28%), and particularly strong support for tax increases to fund 'health and Medicare' and 'primary and secondary schools' (pgs. 105, 109).



- Forty percent of respondents agree that 'the federal government is run for the benefit of all', up from 35% in 1995. Forty-eight percent of respondents identifying themselves as 'middle class' agree with this statement (pp. 128–29). A large majority believe the federal government should either have more power (24%) or the same amount of power (56%) (p. 133).
- Seventy percent of respondents believed that crime had increased over the past two years (2001–2003), a perception at odds with official statistics which show decreasing crime (p. 143). Thirty-one percent of respondents either agree or strongly agree that immigrants increase crime rates; 42% disagree or strongly disagree (p. 145).
- Twenty-six percent of respondents believe 'the number of immigrants allowed into Australia nowadays should be increased', 31% believe it should stay the same, and 38% favour a decrease (p. 184). Nearly 70% of respondents believe that 'immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy'. Only 25% believe that 'immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in Australia' (p.186).
- Roughly 90% of respondents believe that to be 'truly Australian', one must 'speak English', 'feel Australian', 'have Australian citizenship' and 'respect Australia's political institutions and law'. Only 58% believe it is important to be born in Australia to be considered 'truly Australian' (p.188). Murray Goot and Ian Watson conclude that the view

that the events surrounding *Tampa* made the public more wary of immigration 'turns out to be mistaken' (p. 199). On the contrary, 'The Howard years have seen not just diminishing opposition to immigration, but the longest period of majority support for the program since the heyday of immigration between the late 1950s and the early 1970s'.

- Forty-seven percent of respondents prefer a mix of private and public ownership of major services (for example: Telstra, electricity, public transport, Australia Post) compared with 39% preferring 'only public' ownership and 13% 'only private' (p. 167).
- Fifty-eight percent of respondents believe that 'Australia should continue to use tariffs to protect its industry' (p.169).
- Eighty-one percent of respondents believe that media ownership is too concentrated: 70% agree that the media should have less power (p. 233).
- 66% of respondents believe that genetic testing 'should be allowed because it gives new hope in detecting, treating and even reversing serious medical conditions' (p.209); 75% of respondents either disagree or strongly disagree that employers should be able to genetically test employees (p.214); 77% either disagree or strongly disagree that insurance companies should genetically test applicants to determine health risks (p.212).

For all the interest in the chapters' findings, the book would benefit from a more sustained initial and concluding focus on the issue

of policy–opinion congruence. There is an important international literature on this issue which, among other things, identifies various *forms* of policy-opinion concordance. For example: governments may implement a policy knowing it already has the support of majority opinion (for example: welfare reform, immigration policy); public support may build or weaken after the policy has been implemented (for example: Iraq War); public opinion may consistently reject, or partially reject, a policy (for example: tariff policy, Telstra privatisation); or a hybrid policy may garner public support for its different elements (for example: health insurance, industrial relations policy). Discussing these possibilities in the introduction would enable a final chapter that systematically assesses 'the connections, tensions and feedback' between policy and opinion (p.8). This chapter might also review the evidence across all surveyed issues that age, gender, education, region of residence, income, class and party identification are influential in the shape of public opinion in Australia. Further AuSSA surveys will aid these tasks, aligning the shifts in opinion and policy over time. These changes will mainly benefit public opinion and 'pure' academic research. Ultimately, as Ian McAllister points out, 'AuSSA's success will depend on the extent to which it comes to influence the policy discourse' (p.viii).

Reviewed by
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