

MEDIA RELEASE

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New report: Australians comfortable with diversity, but increasingly concerned about climate change

Australians' concern about climate change has seen a marked increase amidst a backdrop of mostly stable attitudes on immigration and democracy, according to the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion Report.

Released on Tuesday, the report is produced by Monash University researchers and uses a survey with some 90 questions to gauge a nuanced understanding of shifts in public opinion on social cohesion and population issues.

Now in its twelfth year, the report is the largest and longest-running research series of its kind, with a sample of more than 3,500 respondents in 2019, reached online and via telephone interviews.

Report author Professor Andrew Markus said this year's survey results found evidence of a large measure of stability, but also some concerning trends.

"In line with previous surveys, ninety per cent of respondents in 2019 reported a 'great' or 'moderate' sense of belonging in Australia, 84% indicated they have been 'very happy' or 'happy' over the last year, and 62% were 'very optimistic' or 'optimistic' about Australia's future," Markus said.

Concern over the quality of government as the most important issue facing Australia was at its lowest level (6%) since the question was first asked in 2011, and the proportion who believe Australian democracy 'works fine' or 'needs minor change' (58%) was consistent with previous years.

Concern about climate change, on the other hand, recorded a major spike in 2019.

"When asked about the most important issue facing Australia, in the context of 15 different issues, 19% of people – twice as many as last year – nominated climate change. This represents the equal largest increase in a year for any issue since the surveys began," Markus said.

Concern about the environment was most pronounced in young adults – 43% of 18-24-year-olds nominated it as the most important issue – and lowest amongst those aged 35-44 (12%) and 75+ (8%).

Immigration was a major political issue in 2018, but in line with the findings of two other recent surveys, the 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion results picked up a slight lowering in concern about the current immigration intake, with 41% of people feeling the intake was 'too high' (compared to 43% in 2018).

"Consistent with previous years, there is majority agreement that accepting migrants from different countries makes Australia stronger, and more than 80% of respondents agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia," Markus said.

"The area where there is concern, however, is on the impact of immigration on quality of life."

Negativity around these issues is more pronounced in self-completed online surveys than it is in telephone interviews. In the self-completed survey, a substantial majority of respondents were concerned about the impact of immigration on 'overcrowding in cities' (70%), 'house prices' (60%), government failure to 'manage population growth' (57%) and immigration's impact on 'the environment' (58%).

There also continues to be a relatively high proportion of respondents who have negative attitude towards Muslims. Respondents were asked for their attitudes towards four faith groups. In the self-completed online survey, 6% were negative towards Buddhists, 10% towards Hindus, 14% towards Christians, and a much higher 40% towards Muslims.

Over the course of the surveys, respondents have been asked if they have experienced discrimination in the last twelve months because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion; 42% of Muslims report experience of discrimination, 38% Hindu, 24% Buddhist, and 15% or less of the major Christian faith groups.

Though 2019 findings point to a largely positive outlook, close analysis of Scanlon survey responses over the last decade provide a long-term perspective and draw attention to potentially important shifts in opinion.

“While questions on sense of belonging and happiness have consistently obtained positive responses since the Scanlon surveys began, there has been a significant decline in the proportion with strongly held positive views.

“For example, the proportion who feel a sense of belonging to a ‘great extent’ has dropped from 74% in 2007 to 63% in 2019, and the number of people identifying as ‘very happy’ has dropped from 34% in 2007 to 23% in 2019. In 2007, 24% indicated that they expected their lives to be ‘much improved’ over the next three or four years, in 2019 a lower 17%.

New questions examining attitudes on globalisation and international affairs also uncovered emerging issues to be monitored over the coming years.

“From a list of four countries, respondents selected China by a large margin as Australia’s most important economic partner today, and the expectation was of increasing Chinese influence ten years from now. However, just 28% agreed that they had confidence in China doing the right thing regarding Australia’s economic interests,” Professor Markus said.

The 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion Report is available at scanloninstitute.org.au/research/surveys/ from Tuesday 26 November.

- Ends -

**** NOTE: In addition to the interviewer administered telephone survey, the full 2019 questionnaire was also administered online via the national probability-based Life in Australia™ panel. While this media release details findings of the interviewer administered survey (unless otherwise stated) in order to maintain consistency with previous years, the report includes detailed discussion on the impact of mode of surveying on estimates of public opinion.**

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About the Mapping Social Cohesion Report

The 2019 Mapping Social Cohesion Report is based on an annual survey undertaken for the Scanlon Foundation by Monash University researchers. It tracks Australian attitudes on issues including immigration, multiculturalism, discrimination and political trust.

Since 2013, the survey has employed a dual-frame sample methodology comprising both landline and mobile phone numbers. In addition to the interviewer administered telephone survey, the full questionnaire is now also administered on the probability-based Life in Australia™ panel, with the majority of participants self-completing the survey online. To our knowledge, this is the first major survey on social cohesion that has been conducted simultaneously in interviewer administered and self-administered modes.

The Mapping Social Cohesion research series – now in its twelfth year – is the largest study of its kind with a collective sample of more than 50,000 Australians since it was first run in 2007.

KEY 2019 FINDINGS

Politics and priorities

- When asked, 'What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?':
 - Economic issues continued to rank as the top issue, reported by 28% in 2019.
 - Concern over the environment and climate change jumped from 10% in 2018 to 19% in 2019, recording the equal largest annual increase since the surveys began.
 - Concern over quality of government and political leadership was mentioned by just 6% in 2019, its lowest level since the question was first asked in 2010 (and compared to 13%-15% between 2011-14).
- A low 30% of respondents trust the federal government 'to do the right thing for the Australian people,' though trust has not further declined since 2010.
- The proportion who considered that Australian democracy 'works fine' or 'needs minor change' was 58% in 2019, while 38% considered that it needs 'major change' or 'replacement'.

Views on immigration

- When asked, 'What do you think of the number of immigrants accepted into Australia at present?' 41% of respondents indicated 'too high'; while the proportion agreeing that the intake is 'about right' or 'too low' is at 53%.
- 68% agree that accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger,' while 57% agree that migrants should change their behaviour to be more like Australians.

Multiculturalism

- 85% agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, however only 41% agree that ethnic minorities in Australia should be given Australian government assistance to maintain their customs and traditions.
- 81% disagreed with discrimination in immigration selection based on race or ethnicity.

Happiness and belonging

- In 2019, 90% of people in Australia indicated feeling a sense of belonging to a 'great' or 'moderate' extent; and 84% said they had been 'very happy' or 'happy' over the last year.

Globalisation

- 71% of respondents indicated the growing economic ties between Australia and other countries was good.
- From a list of four countries, China was seen as 'Australia's most important economic partner' today, indicated by 58% of respondents, ahead of the United States of America at 19%, the United Kingdom 7% and Japan at 4%.
- When asked 'which country will have the most influence in the Pacific region' 'ten years from now,' the expectation was of increasing Chinese influence, indicated by 67% of respondents
- Just 28% were confident that the Chinese government would do the right thing regarding Australia's economic interests, compared to the Japanese government (50%), and the United States (40%).