



Executive summary

This detailed analysis of Australians' relationship with religion, by the numbers, aims to help inform legislatures, governments, regulatory authorities, media and the public about Australians' *actual* religious attitudes and behaviours. It aims to dispel misconceptions about religion promoted by vested interests, and to help ensure that policy formulation, funding and the balance of rights and freedoms amongst all Australians, religious or not, are based on sound evidence.

At the 2016 census, 60% of Australians indicated an affiliation with a religious denomination. This is widely assumed a reliable headline indication of Australians' religiosity. It isn't. Bias in the census religion question leads to overstatement of affiliation on weak family historical grounds, rather than actual religious belief and practice.

When expressly asked if they *belong* to their religious organisation, a majority (62%) of Australians say they don't, including 24% of Catholics, 44% of Anglicans, 27% of minor Christian denominations, and 45% of non-Christian denominations. A further 48% of Catholics, 44% of Anglicans, 27% of minor Christian denominations, and 30% of non-Christian denominations report that they are *inactive* members of their denomination. Only amongst Australia's Devouts (11% of the population in 2019), do a majority (but still not all) say they are active members of their religious organisation.

Religious affiliation continues to decline. There are strong indications, including the predominance of greater religiosity amongst older generations, and no-religion (NR) amongst younger generations, that the decline will continue and possibly accelerate.

On a range of factors that contribute to a sense of personal identity, Australians put religious beliefs well behind in last place. Seven in ten Australians (71%) say that religion is not personally important, including around half of Catholics (49%) and non-Christian denominations (48%), nearly two thirds (64%) of Anglicans, and around one in four of minor Christian denominations (39%).

Most weddings (80%) are now conducted by civil celebrants, not ministers of religion, and a majority of Australians now say they would not choose a religious minister to officiate at their funeral.

The number of Australians who expressly do not believe in a specific deity or even a generic "higher power" continues to increase, comprising 40% of the population in 2018. Overall, just one in five Australians feels certain that God,

heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death are real. Even amongst religious Committeds, certainty is far from universal. This raises serious questions about the validity of faith-based arguments in moral and ethical debates. In such debates, of the minority who are certain of God's existence, almost all (89%) believe that their God is concerned with everyone personally, offering an explanation of why they often expect their views to prevail over the beliefs of others who disagree.

Of those Australians with any belief in God, only small minorities say it is possible to connect to God only via their religious institution. Even amongst the most religious, Devouts, only a slight majority (53%) agree. Most Australians, including Devouts, reject religious authorities as the ultimate interpreters of law. These factors, amongst others, are likely to fuel an existential crisis for religious institutions in coming years.

Since at least 2007, Australians have on average become slightly more socially progressive, but economically conservative. Politically, polarisation to the hard left and somewhat more to the hard right has occurred amongst religious Committeds but not other Australians. However, claims that religion itself has had a significant impact on federal election outcomes, particularly regarding Coalition support, are misguided.

In fact, there are a number of underlying causative mechanisms — not religion itself — that explain why Australia's religionists increased support for the Coalition, especially at the 2019 federal election.

Australia's Christians, especially Catholics, are more economically conservative than NRs. Religious households, including Notionals, Occasionals and Regulars, are also the most likely to have low incomes, and Regulars and Devouts have by far the highest rates of unemployment. Religionists are also much more likely than NRs to say that finding another job, if they lost theirs, would be *very* difficult. Ironically, Regulars also have the highest rates of investment property ownership, and Regulars, Devouts and Occasionals the highest rates of company share ownership.

It is commonly perceived that the Coalition is better at economic management than is Labor, though empirical analysis shows they're fairly level overall. Labor pledged at the 2019 election to remove taxation benefits of investment property and share asset classes, and to pare back the discount on capital gains tax. These factors naturally led more of Australia's religionists, more heavily interested in jobs and financial "protection", to identify with and vote for the Coalition.

Australia's religionists are more happy, and NRs less happy, with the nation's democratic governance. Mainstream Christians (Catholics, Anglicans,

Uniting/Methodists) nominated “maintaining the order of the nation” as their top of four national priorities, consistent with self-referential normative bias. Conversely for NRs, the top priority was to give people more say in important government decisions. These factors suggest overall bias in favour of religious policy at the expense of non-religious Australians. Given the rapidly growing rate of Australia’s NRs, legislators and governments would do well to adjust their thinking.

The top national priority (of four) for Australia’s Devouts was to fight rising prices. Next, they were likely to nominate freedom of speech. At the same time, they were the *least* likely to nominate people having more say in important government decisions, and the *most* likely to say they were happy with current democratic governance. Thus, Devouts were uniquely the least likely to favour greater democratic representation, but by far the most likely to favour *themselves* as having a right to a say. These factors further confirm Devouts’ self-referential normativity, as exemplified by conservative religious ginger group, the Australian Christian Lobby.

Most Australians are in favour of progressive social reforms such as availability of abortion, voluntary assisted dying (VAD), marriage equality, smoking marijuana and addressing global warming. Indeed, support for many of these reforms continue to grow, including amongst Australia’s religious who do not endorse clerical opposition.

Even amongst Devouts, only a small minority are opposed to abortion in all circumstances, and to VAD. Clerics are out of touch with their flocks in these policy areas. For example, the Catholic Bishop of Townsville, Tim Harris, wrote to all Queensland MPs to urge them to oppose VAD on behalf of his Catholic flock, despite empirical data showing 79% of them in favour.

Support for marriage equality has continued to increase since its legalisation in 2017. Only amongst Devouts is opposition still in the majority, but now with more than a third of Devouts (35%) and two thirds of Regulars (65%) supporting it. This raises major questions about *whose* “religious tradition” is being given priority in Australia’s debate to entrench the right of the religious to discriminate against LGBTI+ people, including married ones.

Most Australians (74%–82%) oppose religious schools having the legal right to expel students or sack staff on the basis of sexual orientation or relationship status. Majorities of schoolchild parents across the religious denominations hold strong positive rather than negative attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality, posing a potential enrolment danger to religious schools if they choose to actively discriminate.

Across the religious spectrum, only Devouts are majority opposed to the legalisation of marijuana for personal use, though with more than a quarter of them (26%) in support. Overall, support outweighs opposition by 27%.

Regulars, and especially Devouts, were far less likely than other Australians to say that global warming was important to their 2019 federal election vote. This correlated strongly with their lesser belief that global warming would negatively impact their own way of life, and with favouritism towards Coalition rather than Labor or Greens environmental policies. Nevertheless, major religious institutions including the Catholic church and the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change are urging major action to combat global warming.

This report reveals for the first time a comprehensive analysis of Australians' contemporary connection with religion, by the numbers. It exposes a much smaller and softer base of religiosity than headline affiliation statistics imply, a rapidly growing rate of no religion, lack of certainty of religious belief, connections between religiosity and a focus on financial issues, and majority social opinions — even amongst the religious — at odds with the vocal pronouncements of conservative clerics.

When, for example, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney states that Christian parents expect “Christian values” to be taught at religious schools — including the claimed right to evict “unsuitable” staff and students — the rhetorical strategy reflects the doctrines of his Vatican masters, not those of actual Australian Christians, even the more committed ones.

Legislators and governments would be wise to keep clearly in focus the real attitudes of all Australians, religious or not, rather than focusing on or favouring Australia's most vocal religious conservatives. Failure to do so would not only be an affront to democratic principles, but would increasingly lead to electoral backlash.