



RATIONALIST SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA



# Religiosity in Australia

## Part 1: Personal faith according to the numbers

Neil Francis — RSA Fellow

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Rationalist Society of Australia  
PO Box 1312  
Hawksburn  
Victoria 3142

[www.rationalist.com.au](http://www.rationalist.com.au)

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## About the RSA

The Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA) is the oldest freethought group in Australia, promoting reason and evidence-based public policy since 1906.

- We believe in human dignity and respect in our treatment of one another.
- We support social co-operation within communities and political co-operation among nations.
- We hold that morality is the product of human evolution, not dictated by some external agency or revealed in some written document.
- We say humankind must take responsibility for its own destiny.
- We think human endeavour should focus on making life better for all of us, with due regard to other sentient creatures and the natural environment.
- We promote the scientific method as the most effective means by which humans develop knowledge and understanding of the natural world.
- And we hold that human progress and well-being is best achieved by the careful and consistent use of science and evidence-based reasoning.

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The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG — a Patron of the RSA

## Foreword

When I was invited to become a patron of the Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA), I readily agreed. But I thought some people might regard it as inconsistent if they knew that I still regarded myself a Christian, specifically an Anglican. So I declared my dark secret and asked if that would disqualify me from patronage. I was assured that religiosity might be unusual amongst members of the RSA, but by no means unique. In return, I reassured the RSA that I strongly supported secularism in the public space. Indeed, I regard secularism as one of the greatest gifts of the British to Australia's constitutional ethos.

Yet in Australia's secularism, we are not extreme. The Queen, our Head of State, is (wearing another beautiful floral hat) the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Moderation in all things is the goal. Drawing lines is what society, and a constitutional court on its behalf, do all the time. As the Book of Common Prayer explains, we generally try to “keep the mean between two extremes of too much stiffness in refusing and of too much easiness in admitting” any change.

This is why I understand religious people. Searching for an explanation for our existence is not irrational. Embracing and protecting the rights of others to have beliefs different from one's own is not only rational, it's essential if we are to avoid the cruelties of extremes.

So where does one draw the line?

Answering this question is why the present study, commissioned by the RSA, is so important and interesting. I congratulate Neil Francis and his colleagues for undertaking and compiling this snapshot of contemporary Australians' values. The detailed statistics paint a rich and dynamic landscape that is changing radically from the Australia of my youth.

Politicians who seek to reflect in a general way the patterns and trends of Australian opinions on 'religious freedoms' will find guidance in this compendium for the proper direction of contemporary laws. Simply to impose one's own opinions constitutes an abuse of power. Trying to reflect the beliefs of earlier generations is bound to fail. Guessing modern attitudes without data would be perilous. Striving to reflect the changing convictions and needs of contemporary citizens will be assisted by this up-to-date research. It portrays a community in the throes of substantial change. And, in this, Australia is not alone.

The United States of America, which we would generally regard as a much more religious society than our own, is now also undergoing significant change in religious affiliations. A Gallup Poll released on 29 March 2021 indicated the proportion of Americans who consider themselves members of a church or synagogue has now dropped for the first time below 50%. According to John Dick, an American Catholic academic, "organised religion in the USA is clearly in recession". There is growing disinterest in traditional practice and belief and a decreased belief in God. Over the past 20 years, Protestants have declined 9% from 73% to 64%; and Catholics have shown the greatest decline with only 58% of those baptised now acknowledging church membership. More than half of American Catholics do not agree with official church teachings on key moral issues: abortion, homosexuality and so on. If it is still true that the voice of the people is the voice of God (*Vox populi vox dei*), it is important for church leaders, and law makers, to ask: "Why is this so?" And politicians need to ask: "Who is out of step?"<sup>a</sup>

A great Australian lawmaker, Sir Richard Bourke — third Governor of New South Wales — was a Protestant military leader from Ireland. From that divided land, in 1831 he brought the idea of 'national schools' to the convict colony in New South Wales. Protestants, Catholics and children of no religion would be educated together, so that they got to know one another. This provided the seeds for the big push for secular public schools in Australia from the 1870s. Bourke recognised the importance of secularism as essential to achieving peace and mutual respect.<sup>b</sup> Out of this concept, of drawing lines that respect one another's dignity and rights, Australia has tried to build a tolerant society that accepts and protects everyone's human dignity. It is why

today, as the research in this report shows, 82% of Australians are opposed to the expulsion of students by religious schools on the grounds of their sexual orientation and relationships. And why 79% are also opposed to permitting such schools to dismiss teachers because of these things.

Some Australians may believe in a God who condemns sexual minorities, although I do not. They may preach their beliefs in their temples; but once they enter the public space, the rights of others must also be respected and protected. And the lines of the law must be drawn accordingly. The right to swing my arm stops when I hit someone else on the chin. My entitlement to religious liberty must be accommodated to the rights of others to be themselves, to be safe and enjoy their own rights, and to hold their heads high with dignity as Australian citizens.

This is why this study is well timed. I support religious liberty. Indeed, I demand it for myself. But like most Australians I also support a secular state and understand that religious liberty is not absolute. Those who ignore the Australian values revealed throughout this compendium betray our nation's commitment to a 'fair go' for all. This report explains what we Australians regard as a 'fair go' today, especially for minorities.

I commend it to you.

Sydney  
3<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

Michael Kirby

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<sup>a</sup> Dick, JA 2021, *The religious recession*, Pearls and Irritations, viewed 22 Apr 2021, <<https://johnmenadue.com/contemporary-religious-recession/>>.

<sup>b</sup> Williams, R 2021, "Richard Bourke", in Lindsay, G. & Hudson, W., *Australian Jurists and Christianity*, Federation Press, p 55.





Neil Francis — a Fellow of the RSA

## About the author

Neil Francis brings a rich history of experience to bear in the development of this compendium. His early work in primary medical research facilitated ground-breaking developments in the understanding of rare genetic diseases, and publications in the peer-reviewed literature. Over subsequent decades he has led or assisted numerous professional marketing and social research projects for commercial, education and not-for-profit clients.

He blends the art of surfacing real insights from high-validity experimental design and deep data dives with his award-winning postgraduate teaching experience to communicate high-level insights to diverse stakeholders.

A vocal advocate for evidence-based decision making, Neil has also served in leadership roles in the dying with dignity law reform movement, as a former President of Dying With Dignity Victoria, foundation former Chair and CEO of Australia's national alliance of dying with dignity societies, and as a past President of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies. Through [DyingForChoice.com](http://DyingForChoice.com), he continues to publish reports, based on high-quality data, which correct misinformation promoted by opponents.

An agnostic, Neil has long held an interest in the balance of freedoms and responsibilities between the religious and non-religious, how legislatures and governments attempt to steward that balance, and how they might be better informed to pursue such important goals.



## 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.

## Introduction

*“Archbishop Coleridge says proposed bill allowing abortion at any time not a women’s health issue,”* proclaimed one headline (Bowling 2018). *“Churches on collision course with the government over AstraZeneca vaccine,”* reported another (Koziol 2021a). *“Presbyterian church head says Victorian ban on gay conversion practices should be ignored,”* said yet another (McGowan 2021).

Even though coverage of religion in Australia’s mainstream media is said to have diminished in recent years (Swartz 2016), clearly heads of religious institutions still manage to get their views in front of the public, as well as legislators and governments.

Australia’s religious right is ramping up its efforts to strongly influence debates in the public square by loading political parties — especially the conservatives — with “traditional” religious MPs (Koziol 2021b). *“It’s not branch stacking, it’s participation,”* they say, and *“it’s our turn.”* As the Australian public becomes less religious, parliament has become more so (James 2017).

However, the extent to which clerical and lobbyist claims represent the actual opinions of real, ordinary religious and other Australians is contentious. For example, many Catholic Australians who do not actively participate in their religion send their children to Catholic schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001).

These are questions of great significance as Australia grapples with fundamental issues of interconnected identity. There’s national law reform aimed at balancing religious alongside other rights and freedoms, and state reforms allowing or prohibiting practices — like anti-gay conversion “therapy” — favoured by some Australians but which damage others. There’s the issue of funding of religious counsellors in public schools, of prayers before parliamentary sittings, and reforms to permit abortion, or assisted dying for the terminally ill.

In recent decades too, Australia’s population has grown 40% by natural increase and 60% by net overseas migration, making our nation more culturally diverse — including religious diversity — than many (McCrindle 2014).

So who are the “real” religious and non-religious Australians, what are their key characteristics, and what do they think about these issues?

This detailed analysis aims to more fully inform the public, media, parliaments, governments, and other service providers about religion and religiosity in Australia. It seeks to dispel misperceptions, and to assist evidence-based public policy decision making regarding rights, freedoms, protections, and funding.

**Adults only:** Except where expressly noted and for ABS Census data, the discussion and statistics in this report are about *adult* Australians. Parental claims about the religion or religiosity of minors are not otherwise covered.

**Respect:** This report does not seek to either promote or demote personal religion or faith itself. Rather, it aims to report relevant facts *about* the breadth, depth and characteristics of religion and faith amongst adult Australians.

## Methodology

This report employs high-quality empirical evidence from government, university, and other professional research sources.

In particular, data from a number of studies run by expert scholars at the Australian National University (ANU) are utilised, including the Australian Election Study (years 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016 and 2019), the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (years 2018 and 2019), and the Australian Values Study (year 2018).

These data sources were statistically mined and analysed to surface important insights about religion and religiosity in Australia. Other high-validity sources were drawn in where appropriate.

**Note:** All analyses of ANU study (AES, AuSSA, AVS) raw data was conducted by Neil Francis, not the ANU. The ANU is not responsible for results from its study data conveyed in this report.

### Survey data

**Non-respondents excluded** — Unless otherwise noted, all results are net of non-respondents.

**Rounding** — Due to rounding, some reported statistics may not exactly add up to the total given, or to 100%.

## Abbreviations

- ABC — [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#)
- ABS — [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)
- AEI3 — Australian Economic Identity 3-Factor
- AES — [Australian Election Study \(ANU\)](#)
- ANU — [Australian National University](#)
- API7 — Australian Political Identity 7-Factor
- ARI6 — Australian Religious Identity 6-Factor
- ASI6 — Australian Social Identity 6-Factor
- AuSSA — [Australian Survey of Social Attitudes](#) (ANU)
- AVS — [Australian Values Study](#) (ANU)
- BSAS — [British Social Attitudes Survey](#)
- Chr. — Christian
- HILDA — [Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey](#)
- NCLS — [National Church Life Survey](#)
- Non-Chr. — Non-Christian religions
- NR — No religion
- ONS — [Office for National Statistics](#) (UK)

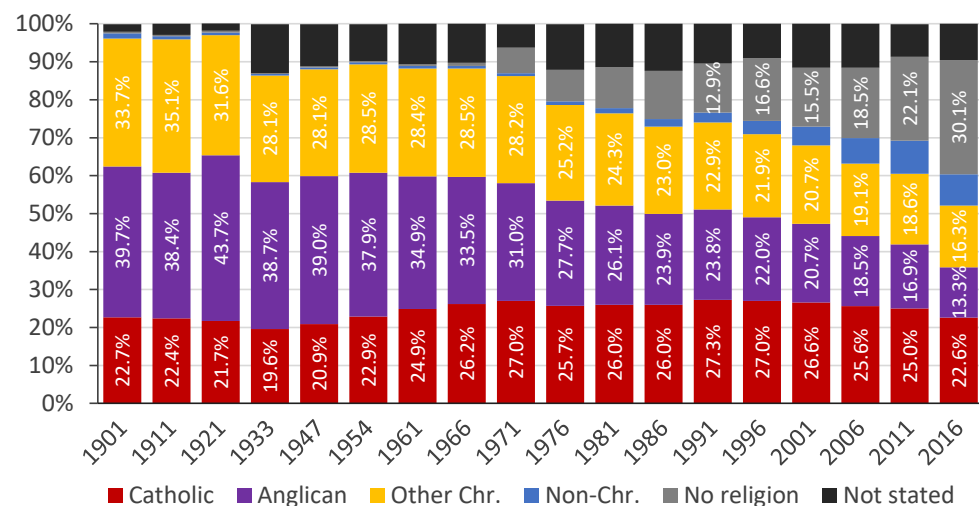
## Religious denominations in decline

Religion is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions. There are many ways to attempt to quantify its extent, including headline proxy measures.

The most common proxy measure for “religion” is people’s self-declared affiliation with one or other religious institution: the religious denominations. While affiliation is a crude and unsophisticated measure of “religion”, at minimum it provides a simple headline figure that can be tracked over time.

### Trends since Federation

Prior to the 1970s, Christian denominations comprehensively dominated Australia’s religious landscape, with a small percentage of Australians electing not to state their religion (Figure 1). “No religion” (NR) made barely an appearance. This was certainly due to high levels of religious affiliation at the time, but also to material methodological bias in the census.



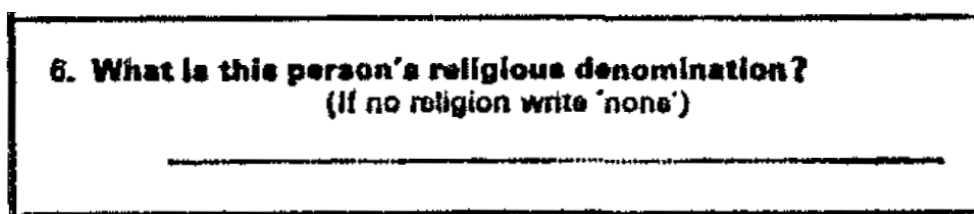
**Figure 1:** Religious affiliation by census year

Source: ABS census reports. Note: Includes ‘No response’ (“Not stated”)

Up to 1921, the census form asked the person to write down their religion, but didn’t mention either that NR was a possible answer, or that answering the question was optional (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1966). Only from 1933 onwards did the census form state that answering the religion question was optional — but still *presumed* a religion (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1933). The longitudinal data highlights the profound difference that questionnaire design can make to results.

*“(11) State the full name of the religious denomination. There is no legal obligation to answer this question.” — ABS Census form 1933.*

It wasn’t until the 1971 census that the form mentioned NR as a possible answer (Figure 2), and it is from then onwards that “no religion” begins to make a recognisable appearance in the data.<sup>a</sup>



**Figure 2:** The 1971 census form was the first to mention “no religion” as a possible answer to the religion question

Source: ABS 1971

The proportion of Australians reporting no religion has continued to grow, comprising 30% of census results in 2016: or 33% of those who answered the religion question.

At the same time, both major (Anglican, Catholic) and minor Christian faiths have lost a significant proportion of their flocks, while a small but significant growth has occurred amongst “other” (non-Christian) religions, mostly as a result of immigration (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017a).

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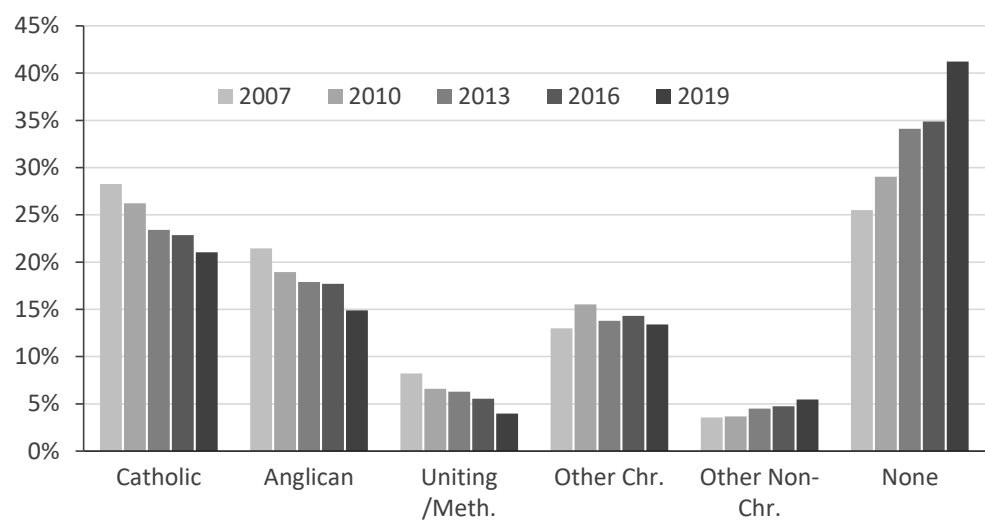
<sup>a</sup> As further demonstration of historical normative bias, the 1971 census form asked about babies born, *but only within marriage*. Those born outside wedlock were expressly disregarded and invisible, and appalling state of affairs for a *census*.

## Recent trends

At the 2016 census, 60% of Australians indicated a religious denomination (and 10% didn't answer the religion question).

More granular data from periodic Australian National University (ANU) studies at each federal election (Australian Election Studies: AES) provides a detailed picture across recent years from 2007 to 2019.

Clearly evident is a continued and significant abandonment of mainstream Christian denominations: Catholic, Anglican and Uniting/Methodist, with major increases in NR (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Religious affiliation by year

Source: AES

**Note:** Despite robust total samples sizes in these ANU studies, smaller individual faiths are not reported separately as their statistics would not be reliable with such small sample sizes. Instead, all minor Christian denominations are grouped together as “Other Christian”, and all non-Christian denominations are grouped together as “Other Non-Christian”.

Over just 12 years, Catholic affiliation dropped from 28% to 21%, a net loss of 26% of its congregation. Anglican affiliation dropped from 21% to 15%, a net congregational loss of 31%. And Uniting/Methodist affiliation dropped from 8% to just 4%, a net congregational loss of 54%.

At the same time, NR has climbed from 26% to 41%, a non-affiliation gain of 62%.

If these kinds of changes continue over the coming decade or more, the Uniting/Methodist church may strain to exist, the Anglican church would be a mere shadow of its former self, and even the Catholic church would struggle.

The net affiliation amongst minor Christian denominations has remained stable at around 13%, while the small rise in non-Christian denominations has also increased to around 5%.

**Summary:** In the 12 years to 2019, the Catholic church's congregation shrank by 26%, Anglican by 31%, and Uniting/Methodist by 54%. At the same time, the NR base has risen by 62%.

In 2019, NR was 41%, exceeding the proportion of Catholics (21%), Anglicans (15%), and Uniting/Methodists (4%) combined.

## Undermeasurement of 'No Religion'

The Australian census and the AES studies are also likely to have continued to underestimate the real incidence of NR as a “denomination” category. There are four main reasons: privacy, wording of the religion prompt, provided answer options, and parents answering for children. There is a further reason — tongue-in-cheek answers like “Jedi” or “Pastafarian” — but these accounted for less than 0.5% of responses to the Religion question in the 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017b).

### Privacy

This consideration applies to the census but not ANU polls. Until 2011, all census answers were completed in a single large booklet containing columns for each person present in the household. Anyone in the household could see any answers already completed by others.

A husband was unlikely to risk marital friction by answering “no religion” when his wife expected him to answer “Anglican”. Or vice versa. Or both.

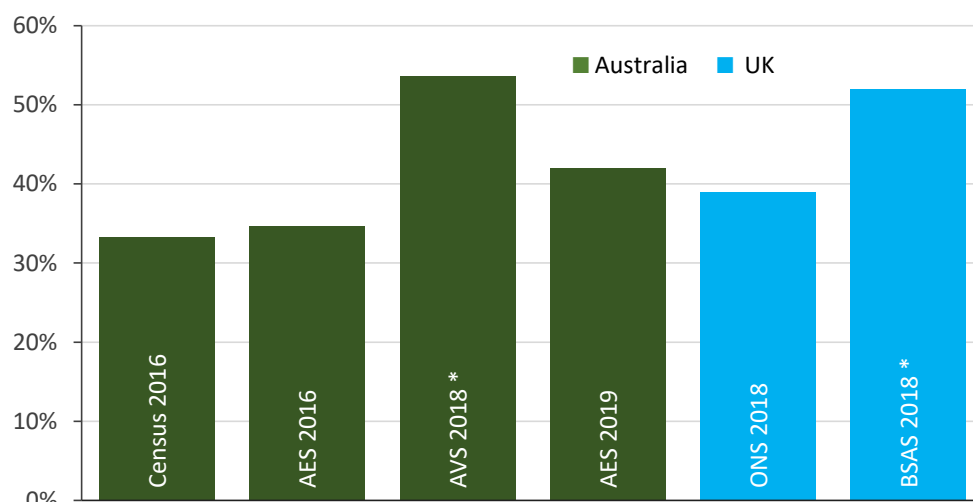
The 2011 census was the first in which some people completed the form privately online. Online completion was more extensive in 2016. It's likely to be much more extensive still in Census 2021, which would reduce the extent of the problem.

### Wording of the religion prompt

The Australian census standard prompt for religion is “*What is the person's religion?*” The AES prompt is “*What is your religion or faith?*” Both these prompts are highly biased in that they *presume* a religion. Nor does the question elicit whether the person merely comes from a family of that faith history, or whether they see themselves as a meaningful member. This can make a large difference to the results (Figure 4).

The Australian Values Survey (AVS) 2018 asked “*Do you belong to a religion or religious denomination? If yes, which one?*”. The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) 2018 asked “*Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?*”. Both questions provided a shortlist of significant denominations, with options for “Other” and “No religion”.

The AVS study returned an NR rate at least 11 percentage points higher than the other studies with presumptive wording. The UK BSAS study returned, *in the same year*, an NR rate 13% higher than the Office of National Statistics (ONS) study, with its biased wording “*What is your religion?*”.



**Figure 4:** “No religion” result by prompt used

Source: ABS, AES, ONS, BSAS. \* = Neutral, balanced question.

Further evidence establishing a higher rate of real NR in Australia is discussed in *Small minority of real “belonging”* on page 44.

## Answer options

As stated earlier, the 1971 census was the first to mention NR as a permissible answer to the religion question. Until 1986, the religion question was open-ended, meaning that the person had to write down their religion. In 1991 this changed to a shortlist of tick-boxes for the most common denominations, plus “No religion”, and “Other”, with space to write down that denomination.

In 2016, in response to earlier growth of the NR group, the “No religion” option was moved from the bottom to the top of the denomination list. This meant that non-religious respondents would be more likely to find and choose NR.

But the question wording still *presumes* a religion, meaning that a respondent whose family has always been Religion X, even though not having practiced or been involved for years, would likely answer Religion X instead of NR for weak cultural or historical, rather than meaningful religious, reasons.

Given the differences in results based on prompt wording and the order of presented options, it’s perhaps unsurprising that at least one senior religionist has called for the return of the “No religion” option to near the *bottom* of the denomination list (Jensen 2020), despite now being by far the largest “denominational” cohort.

Please use CAPITAL letters only.

06

Person 1

Person 2

**19 What is the person's religion?**

- Answering this question is **OPTIONAL**.
- Examples of 'Other - please specify' are: SALVATION ARMY, HINDUISM, JUDAISM, HUMANISM.
- If no religion, mark the 'No religion' box.
- Remember to mark box like this: ☐

☐ Catholic  
☐ Anglican (Church of England)  
☐ Uniting Church  
☐ Presbyterian  
☐ Buddhism  
☐ Greek Orthodox  
☐ Islam  
☐ Baptist  
☐ Lutheran  
☐ Other - please specify

☐ No religion

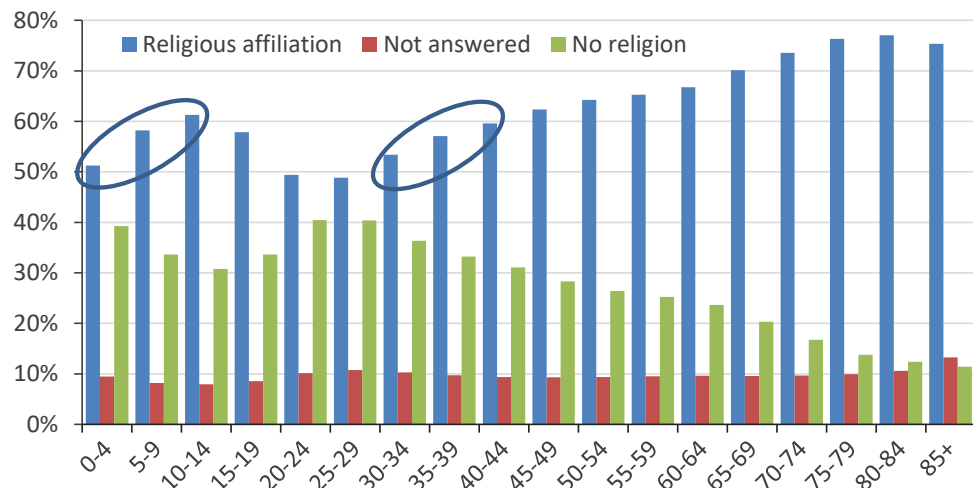
**Figure 5:** The 2011 Census household form religion question

Source: ABS. Notes: Columns for multiple people (four more on opposite page not shown). In 2016, ABS moved the "No religion" option, as the largest "denomination" category, from the bottom to the top of the options list.

## Parents answering for children

It's hard to establish a sound case that a child under the age of 5 has a bona fide religion, and contentious that a religious affiliation amongst those under 15 is maturely and independently formed. Nevertheless, significant numbers of parents record a religion for their children on the census form.

According to the ABS, the current peak maternal age for childbirth is the 30-34 year old group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Census data for religion by age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017b) suggests that parents answer on behalf of their children from ages 0-14, by nominating religion at their own rate (circled religion statistics in Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Religious affiliation by age group

Source: ABS Census 2016. Notes: Circled statistics are the current-and-recent peak child-bearing ages for women (right), and the children born relative to the peak age group (left).

By age 15–19 years, some young Australians have rejected the religious views of their parents, and religion in general. By early adulthood (20-24 years) and now less likely to be living under their parents' roof, influence and gaze, more young Australians report no religion.

This suggests that across the 0-19 years age group, religion is significantly overestimated in the census.

### Removing serious bias

To eliminate wording bias, the Census 2021 question wording should be changed at the very least to:

*What is the person's religion, if any?*

This wording recognises that many respondents won't have a religion and shouldn't be pressured into answering that they have one. It also avoids the confusion of listing "No religion" as a religion in a presumptive list of them.

Simply adding "*if any*" to the question strikes the right balance between economically removing bias, and promoting continuity of data comparison with previous census results. It also fits neatly within the space currently allocated for the question on the census form.

The correction is not difficult: some professional research organisations, like Pew Research, have included "*if any*" in their religion prompt for years (Pew Research Center 2018).

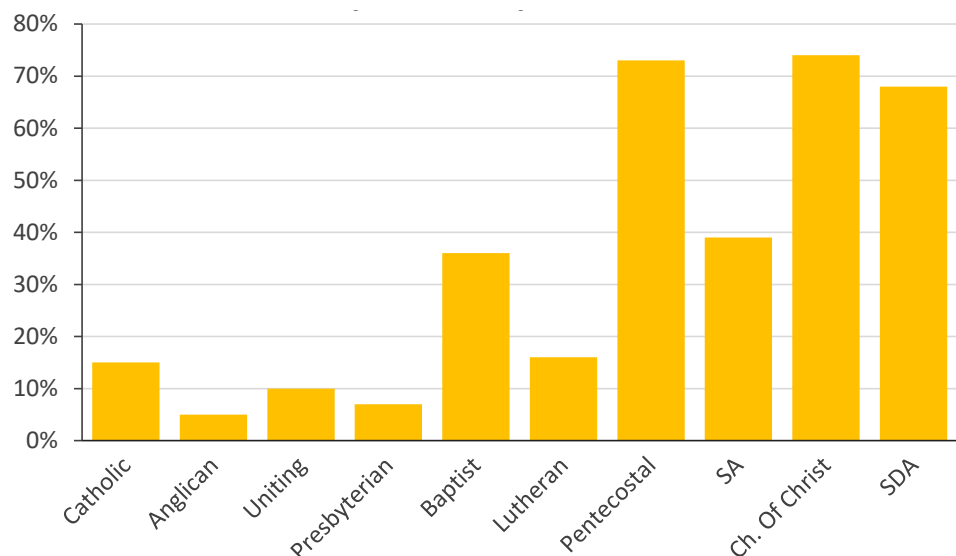
**Summary:** The current Australian census question on religion is biased, leading to undermeasurement of NR. To parsimoniously address the bias, the words "*if any*" should be added to the question.

## Religious behaviour in decline

Ticking a religious denomination box on a form says little about a person's real relationship with religion. Mr Jones may tick Anglican even though he doesn't really follow it and hasn't been to services for years. Ms Ng may tick Catholic, but that doesn't indicate whether she thinks Vatican doctrine is binding or to be dismissed. Mrs Benson may tick No religion, but that might disguise the fact that despite no institutional affiliation, she believes in God, and religion is somewhat important in her life.

A key way to gain further insights into people's relationship with religion is to ask about behaviour: their religious *practices*. The most common form of religious behaviour asked in censuses and surveys is religious service attendance.<sup>b</sup>

A 2001 National Church Life Survey found that weekly service attendance in Australia was very low amongst the major denominations: Catholic, Anglican, Uniting and Presbyterian/Reformed (Bellamy & Kastle 2004). Conversely, weekly attendance was high amongst some minor denominations including Pentecostals, Churches of Christ, and Seventh-day Adventists (Figure 7).

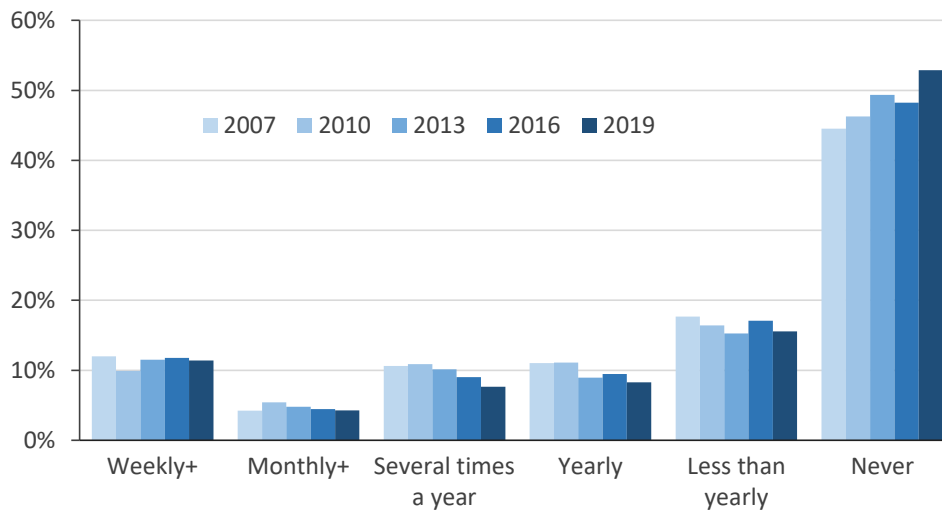


**Figure 7:** Incidence of weekly religious service attendance in 2001

Source: Bellamy and Kastle 2004. Denominations ordered by proportion of affiliated population in 2001. SA = Salvation Army, SDA = Seventh-day Adventist. Non-Christian faiths not studied.

<sup>b</sup> The question is usually asked “*excluding* attendance at weddings, funerals and baptisms”, because even when held at places of worship, these are most likely to be *social support* for loved ones, rather than dedicated religious worship by attendees.

AES data for recent years shows that while the proportion of those who regularly attend religious services (weekly+ and monthly+) has remained stable, those who attended less often are now even more likely to never attend religious services at all (Figure 8).



**Figure 8:** Frequency of religious service attendance

Source: AES. Note: Attendance exclusive of weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

In 12 years since 2007, 8% more Australians report that they *never* attend religious services, with now a majority (53%) staying away completely.

**Summary:** Religious service attendance in Australia has continued to decline, with a majority (53%) of Australians now *never* attending services.





## Australian Religious Identity (ARI6)

By combining multiple measures of religion we gain further insights into Australians' relationship with religion. This analysis uses a combination of the affiliation and behaviour measures that results in a new model comprising 6 distinct religious segments from low to high *religiosity*: from Rejecters and Socialisers, through Notionals and Occasionals, to Regulars and Devouts.

### Australian Religious Identity 6-Factor (ARI6)

The **Australian Religious Identity 6-Factor (ARI6)** model provides deeper psychographic — not merely dull demographic — insights into Australians' relationship with personal faith: their overall *religiosity*. It allocates each Australian into one of six segments:

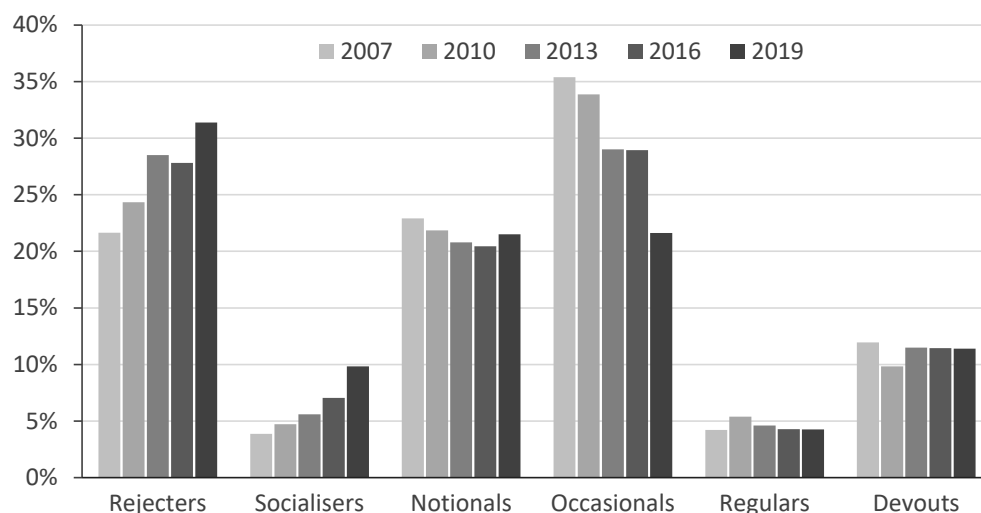
1. **Rejecters:** Have no religious affiliation and never attend religious services (31% of the population in 2019).<sup>c</sup>
2. **Socialisers:** Have no religious affiliation, but *do* attend religious services (10%).
3. **Notionals:** Have a religious affiliation, but *never* attend religious services (22%).
4. **Occasionals:** Have a religious affiliation and *occasionally* attend religious services (22%).
5. **Regulars:** Have a religious affiliation and *regularly* attend religious services (4%).
6. **Devouts:** Have a religious affiliation and *frequently* attend religious services (11%).

At times we'll refer to Regulars and Devouts combined together, as Committeds (15% of the population in 2019).

<sup>c</sup> A tiny proportion of Rejecters are personally somewhat religious: what they are rejecting is *institutional* religion.

## Recent trends

In the 12 years to 2019, the proportion of Rejecters has risen substantially from 22% to 32% of the population, a rise in the segment of 45% (Figure 9). Socialisers have also increased from 4% to 10%, a segment increase of 154%.



**Figure 9:** ARI6 religiosity segments by year

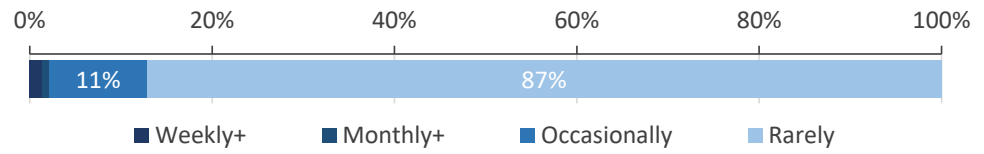
Source: AES

This net increase has come mostly from Occasionals, down from 35% of the population to 22%, a segment drop of 39%. There has also been a small drop in Notionals from 23% to 22%.

This is not to say that Occasionals have directly become Rejecters (and Socialisers), though it is possible. It is also possible that some Occasionals have become Notionals, while some Notionals have become Rejecters. The figures report only *net* changes.

Only the Committeds — Regulars and Devouts at a combined 15% of the population — have seen no significant change in their numbers over the 12 years.

A question arises as to whether Socialisers are really Regulars and Devouts who simply decline to state their religious denomination. This isn't the case: almost all Socialisers attend religious services rarely (87%) or only occasionally (11%) (Figure 10). That makes only 2% of Socialisers who may be classed as committed to religion — attending services at least monthly.



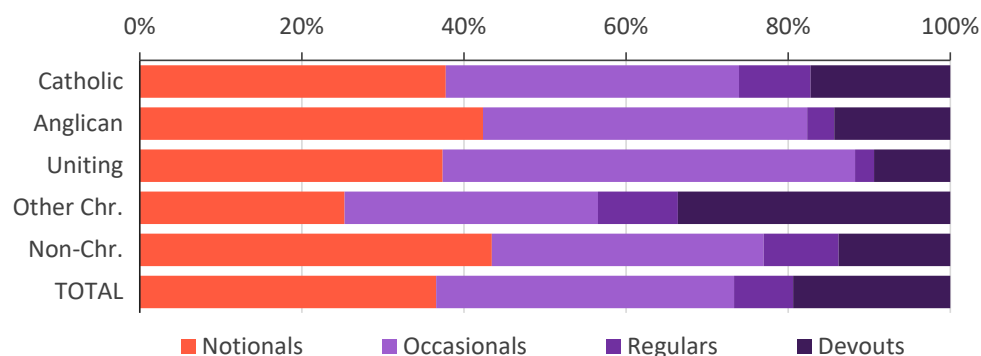
**Figure 10:** Frequency of Socialiser religious service attendance

Source: AES (average of 2007–2019 data due to small sample sizes)

**Summary:** Less committed religious Australians — Notionals and especially Occasionals — have been abandoning religion in recent years, either dropping their affiliation, or their affiliation *and* religious service attendance.

## Denomination profile

ARI6 analysis also allows us to determine the relative religious commitment amongst each of the denominations (Figure 11).



**Figure 11:** ARI6 by religious denomination

Source: AES 2019

Overall, amongst Australians who are affiliated with a religious denomination, more than a third (37%) are Notionals: they *never* attend religious services. That includes 38% of Catholics, 42% of Anglicans, 37% of Uniting/Methodists, 25% of minor Christian denominations, and 43% of non-Christian religions.

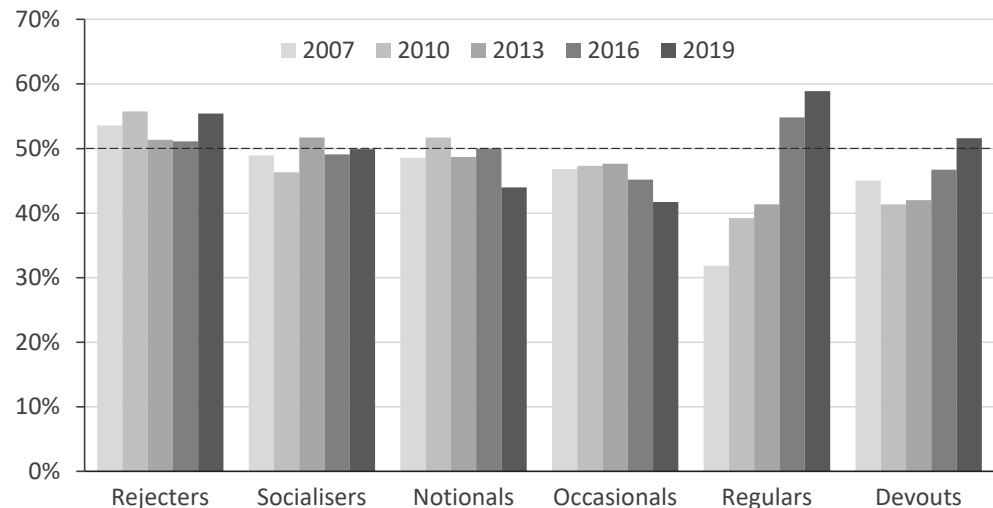
Further, another 37% of affiliated Australians attend religious services from less than once a year up to just twice a year: another 36% of Catholics, 40% of Anglicans, 51% of Uniting/Methodists, 31% of minor Christian denominations, and 34% of non-Christian religions.

Just a quarter of affiliated Australians (26%) are Committeds (Regulars and Devouts), including 26% of Catholics, 17% of Anglicans, 11% of Uniting/Methodists, 44% of minor Christian denominations, and 13% of non-Christian religions.

**Summary:** Just 15% of all Australians are religious Committeds. Among those affiliating with any denomination, only a quarter (26%) are Committeds, including 26% of Catholics and 17% of Anglicans. Even in the group with the highest rate of Committeds — minor Christian denominations — Committeds are in the minority (44%).

## Gender profile

From 2007 to 2019, the proportion of males and females amongst Rejecters and Socialisers (i.e. no religious affiliation) remained about the same. There were significant movements in the other segments, however (Figure 12).



**Figure 12:** Proportion of ARI6 segments that are male, by year

Source: AES. Note: Segment sizes are not equal, so genders do not balance equally across the national 50.2% gender split line.

By 2019, the proportion of males amongst Occasionals and Notionals decreased significantly. Conversely, it increased significantly amongst Regulars and Devouts. The patterns suggest that over recent years, Committed females have on average become somewhat less religious, while lesser-committed males have become more so.

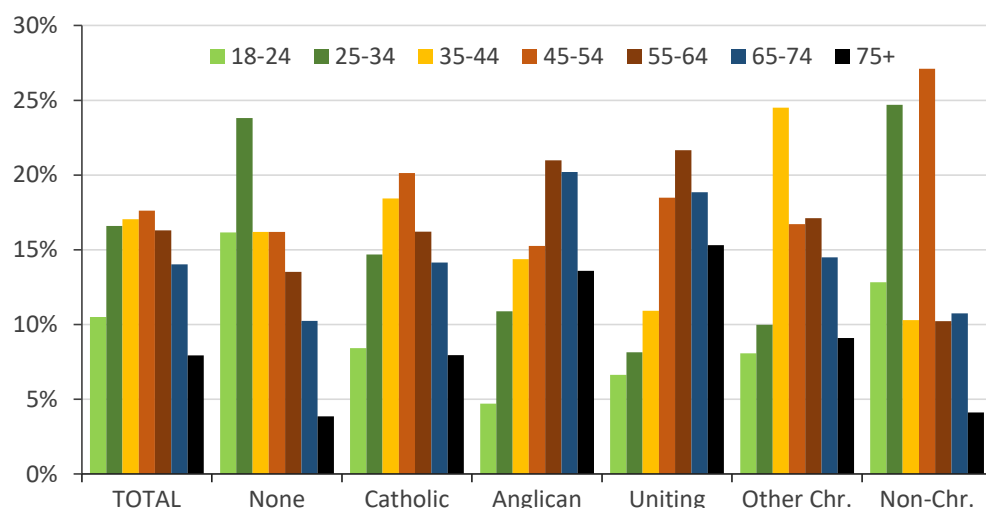
Given that the segment sizes of Regulars and Devouts has remained much the same over the period, this indicates a masculinisation-by-exchange with lesser-committeds in recent years, especially since 2016 when the issue of marriage equality was an election issue, and 2017 when it was approved by national plebiscite. This may help explain some Committeds' more "muscular" public stance towards religious "protections" in the past several years.

This theme is explored in greater detail in the section *Marriage equality* on page 112.

**Summary:** The proportion of males amongst Australia's Committeds (Regulars and Devouts) has increased in recent years, which may help account for the more "muscular" public stance of Committeds to religious "protections".

## Age profile

Age profiles differ significantly amongst religious denominations. NRs are weighted heavily towards younger ages, while Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists are heavily weighted to older ages (Figure 13).



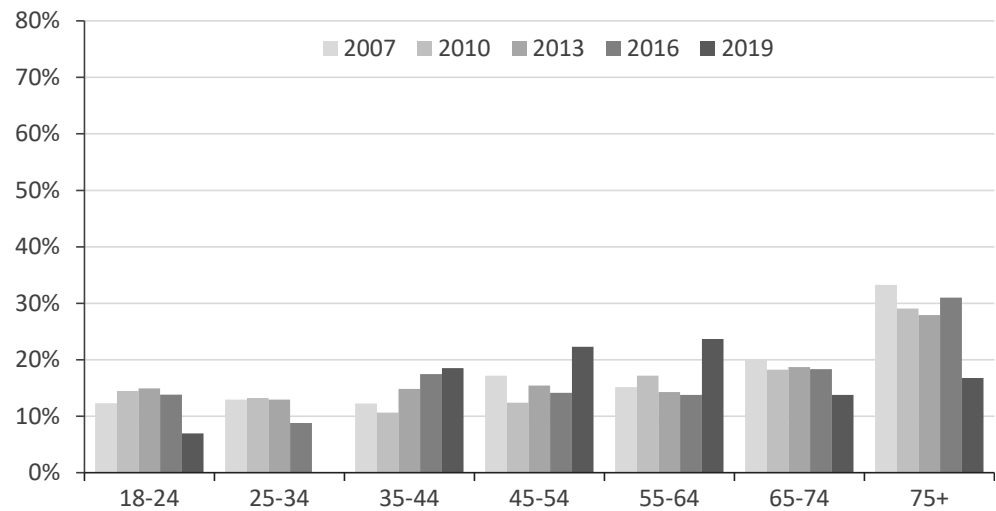
**Figure 13:** Age profiles of religious denominations

Source: AES 2016

Catholics and minor Christian denominations are weighted toward middle age, with slightly more younger ages amongst Catholics given its government-funded religious school system. Non-Christian denominations have a peak at middle age, with a matching peak amongst first-generation children.

The ageing demographic profile of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists indicates that these denominations may struggle to thrive, and possibly even survive, in coming years.

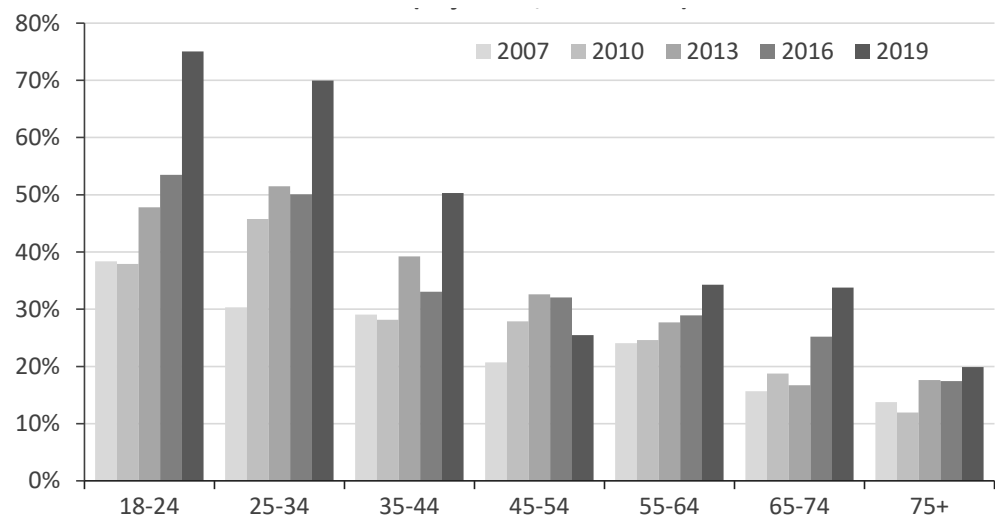
By ARI6 religiosity, from 2007 to 2019, religious Committeds numbers have decreased across both younger and older age groups (Figure 14). However, in the middle age groups 35–64 years, Committeds have increased, though 35–44 year more consistently, and 45–64 years only in 2019.



**Figure 14:** Proportion of Committeds by age group over time

Source: AES

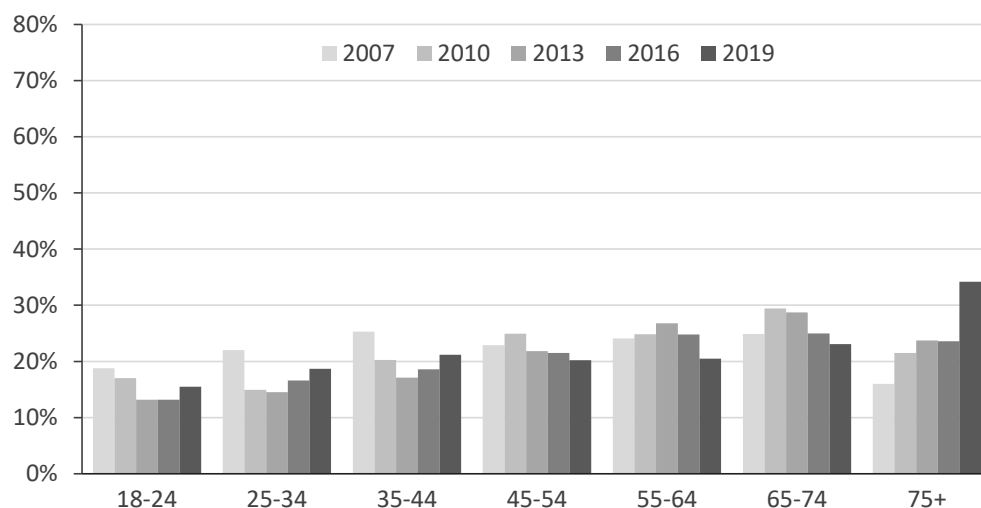
At the same time at the other end of the religiosity spectrum, the number of non-affiliated Australians (Rejecters and Socialisers) has increased significantly across all age groups except 45-54 years (Figure 15).



**Figure 15:** Proportion of non-affiliateds by age group over time

Source: AES

Amongst Notionals (state a religion but never attend services), numbers have decreased slightly amongst all age groups except 75+, which has increased substantially since 2016 (Figure 16).

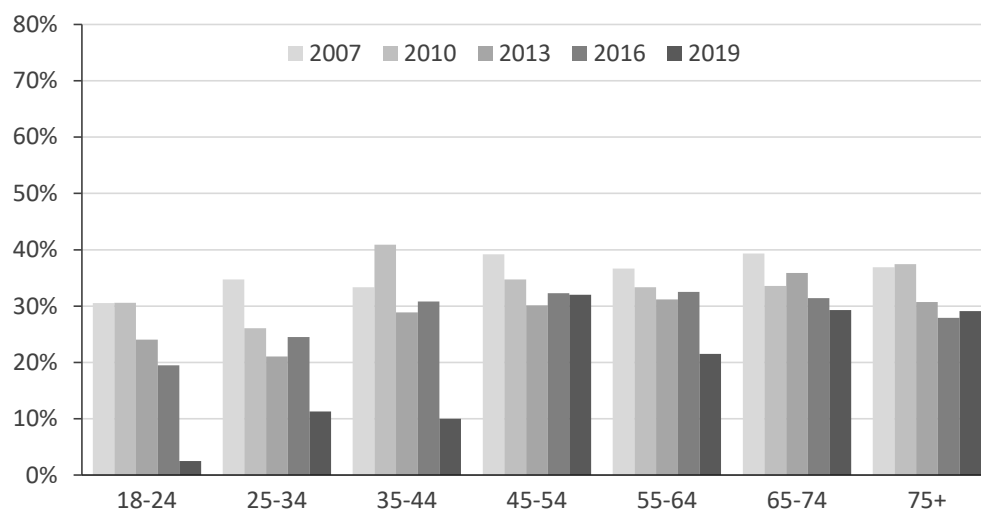


**Figure 16:** Proportion of Notionals by age group over time

Source: AES

The increase in 75+ since 2016 is consistent with the decrease, at the same time, in 75+ Committeds, indicating that a proportion of older Australians who attended religious services often now don't attend services at all.

But the largest change in recent years has been amongst Occasionals, whose membership has decreased significantly across all age groups, and radically after 2016 amongst younger (18-44 years) and late middle (55-64 years) age groups (Figure 17).



**Figure 17:** Proportion of Occasionals by age group over time

Source: AES

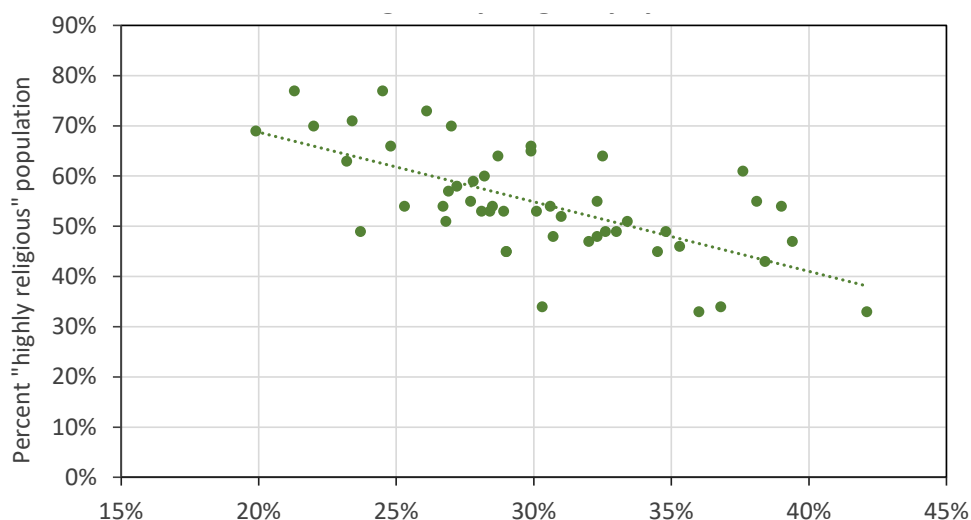
A very small proportion of older (75+) Australians who had stopped attending religious services regularly or frequently by 2019 had changed to attending only occasionally.

Overall, the pattern of decrease in religiosity and abandonment of religious affiliation in Australia is consistent with at least two main factors: a decrease in the relevance of religion, and that many Australians have not valued the experience of religious services. These themes will be explored further.

**Summary:** Nett decreases in Australians' religiosity have occurred across all age ranges, with the largest amongst under 35 years and over 75 years. In a polarisation across the middle years (25–64) there have been small increases in Committeds. The nett decreases are consistent with decreases in the personal relevance of religion and satisfaction with religious services.

## Education profile

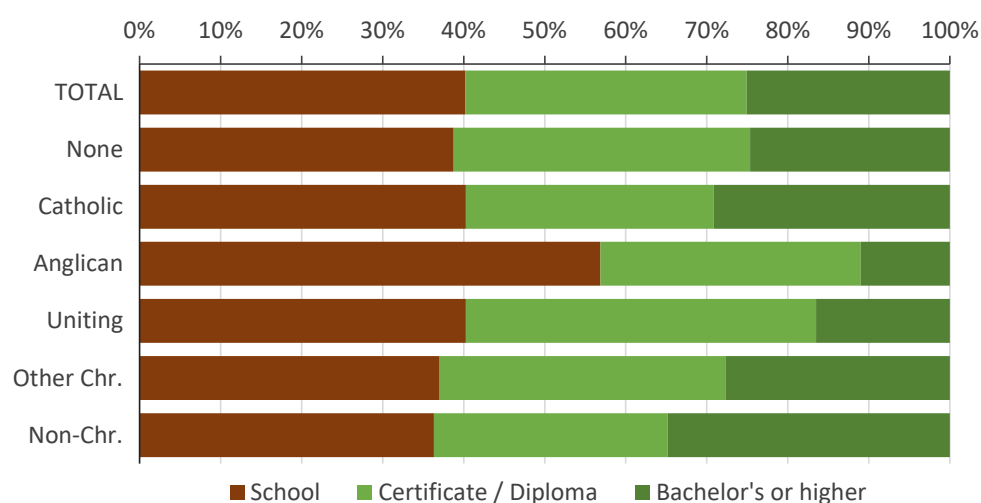
A common perception is that religion and religiosity correlate negatively with education level — that is, religious people tend to be less educated than the non-religious. This is generally true in the USA, where lower rates of bachelor's degree correlate with higher rates of religiosity (Figure 18).



**Figure 18:** Bachelor's degree or higher and religiosity, by USA state

Sources: Pew Research 2016, US Department of Education 2019

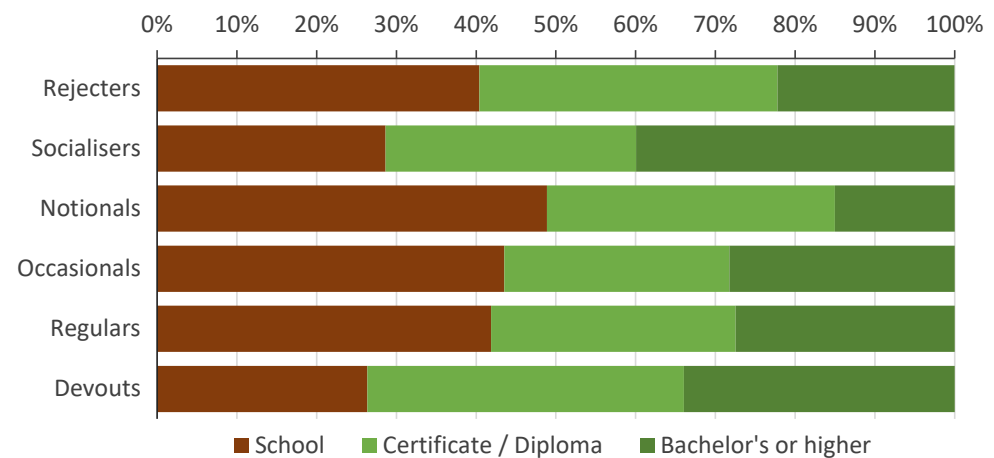
However, it is not generally true in Australia. On the one hand, Anglicans (11%) and Uniting/Methodists (17%) have significantly lower rates of bachelor's degree or higher than do NRs (25%). On the other, Catholics (29%), minor Christian denominations (28%) and especially non-Christian denominations (35%) have higher rates than NRs (Figure 19).



**Figure 19:** Religion by highest educational achievement

Source: AuSSA 2018

Further, more Occasionals (28%), Regulars (27%) and Devouts (34%) hold a bachelor's degree or higher than do NRs (22%) (Figure 20).



**Figure 20:** ARI6 by highest educational attainment

Source: AuSSA 2018

Far fewer Notionals, on the other hand, hold a bachelor's degree or higher (15%), and Notionals top the list on holding no qualification past school age.

**Summary:** Unlike the USA where religiosity correlates strongly and negatively with education, in Australia the picture is mixed. Notionals hold a bachelor's degree or higher at significantly lower rates (15%) than NRs (22%), but Occasionals (28%), Regulars (27%) and Devouts (35%) at significantly higher rates.

## Work profile

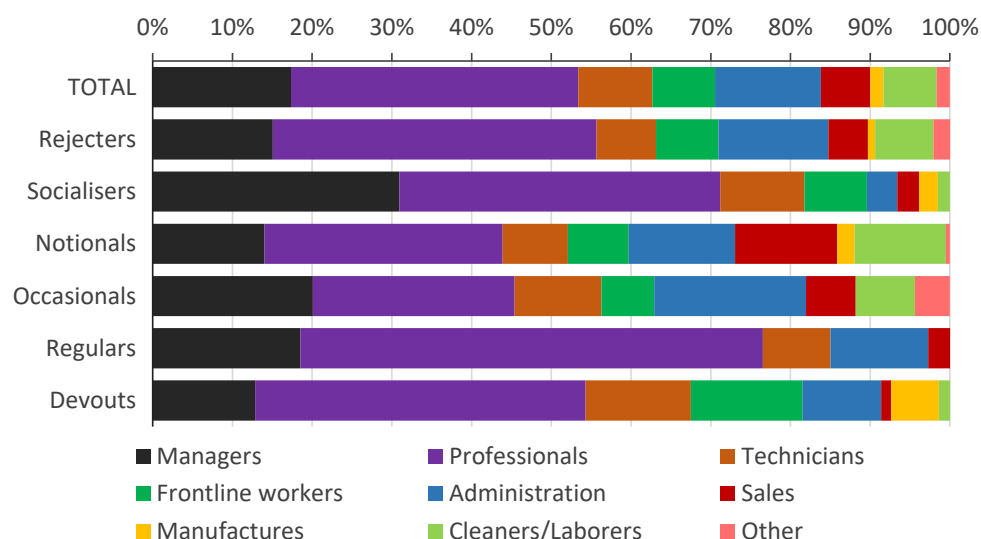
In 2019, Rejecters (64%) and Regulars (64%) were the most likely to be currently employed, with Devouts (9%) and especially Regulars (18%) the most likely to be seeking employment (Figure 21). Notionals (31%) and Occasionals (36%) were the most likely to be retired, while Devouts (16%) and Socialisers (10%) were the most likely to hold a family/carer role.



**Figure 21:** Current work status, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019. Note: Other = invalid pension, long-term illness, on leave, etc.

The most common work role (current or most recent past) in all segments was as a professional — for example accountants, architects, educators, engineers, scientists, lawyers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, religious ministers, etc. Socialisers were the most likely to be in management roles (Figure 22).

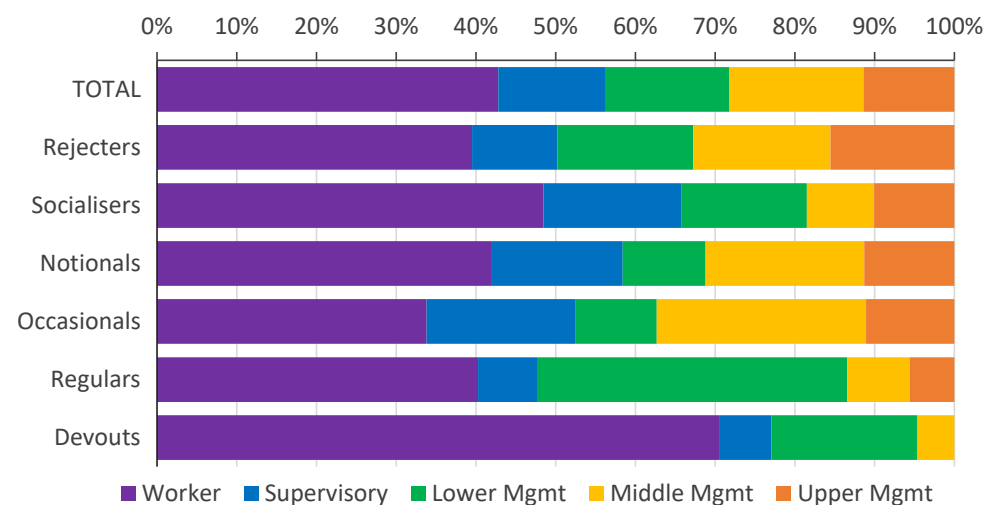


**Figure 22:** Current or most recent working role, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

Notionals and Occasionals the least likely to be a professional. Notionals were the most likely to work in sales or as cleaners/laborers (consistent with a lower average educational attainment), and Occasionals the most likely to work in administration. Devouts were the least likely to be in management careers.

Devouts and Regulars were by far the least likely to occupy middle and senior management roles (Figure 23). Indeed, in the 2019 sample, *no* Devouts were in upper management. Devouts were by far the least likely to hold a supervisory or management role. Regulars were the most likely to hold a lower management role (and twice as likely as all others (45%) to be a member of a trade union).



**Figure 23:** Current work seniority by ARI6

Source: AES 2019. Base: Currently working.

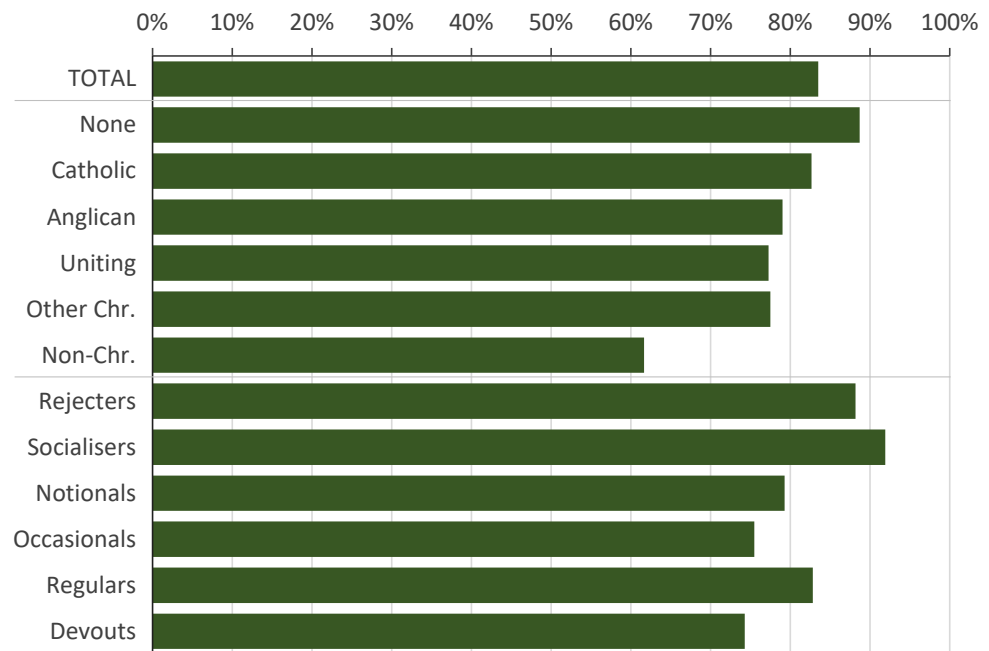
It would be expected that as workers get older, they generally rise to higher positions. Since Rejecters are heavily weighted to younger ages and Committeds (Regulars and Devouts) slightly to older ages and with higher average education, it would be expected that Rejecters would have lower numbers of senior managers and Committeds would have higher numbers. But the opposite is true.

This suggests that either Committeds are not interested in rising to higher levels, or have been unsuccessful in attempts to do so. The underlying reasons could not be elicited from available data, for example to separate out a *preference* for followership rather than leadership, and necessary leadership traits such as perspective-taking and welcoming diversity.

**Summary:** Regulars and Devouts were the most likely to be unemployed (and looking for work). They were also far more likely to have failed to reach middle and upper management, despite having an older age profile than Rejecters, and similar age profiles to the other segments.

## Feelings of self-determination

When asked to agree with the statement “*There is little that people can do to change the course of their lives*”, agreement signals fatalism and disagreement self-determination. Most Australians (84%) report feelings of self-determination (Figure 24).



**Figure 24:** Hold an attitude of self-determination

Source: AuSSA 2018

NRs report the highest rates of self-determination (88% of Rejecters and 92% of Socialisers). Notionals (79%), Occasionals (75%) and Devouts (74%) have significantly lower rates.

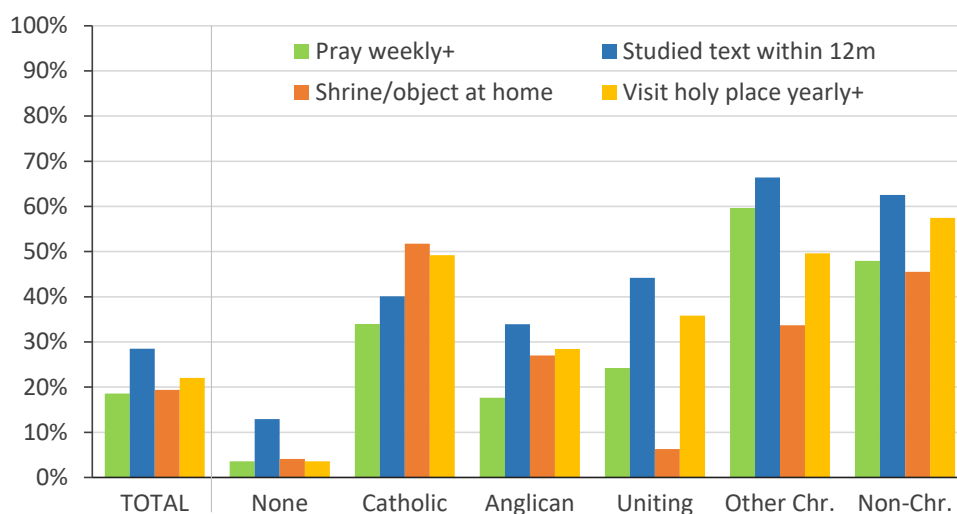
Non-Christian denominations reported by far the lowest rate of self-determination (62%). There was insufficient data to determine possible causes, such as higher rates of fatalistic themes among these faiths, or because of discrimination by others.

**Summary:** A great majority of Australians feel they have significant control over the course of their own lives. While still all in the majority, Religionists report significantly lower rates, especially Occasionals and Devouts, but most of all Non-Christian denominations.

## Other religious behaviours

Other modest religious behaviours include frequency of prayer (weekly or more often), having studied a religious text in the past 12 months not in a religious service, having a shrine or devotional object at home for religious purposes, and having visited one or more non-usual holy places for religious reasons in the past year.

On average, around one in five Australians (22%) reported each of these behaviours: that is, four out of five didn't (Figure 25).



**Figure 25:** Rates of other religious behaviours, by religion

Source: AuSSA 2018

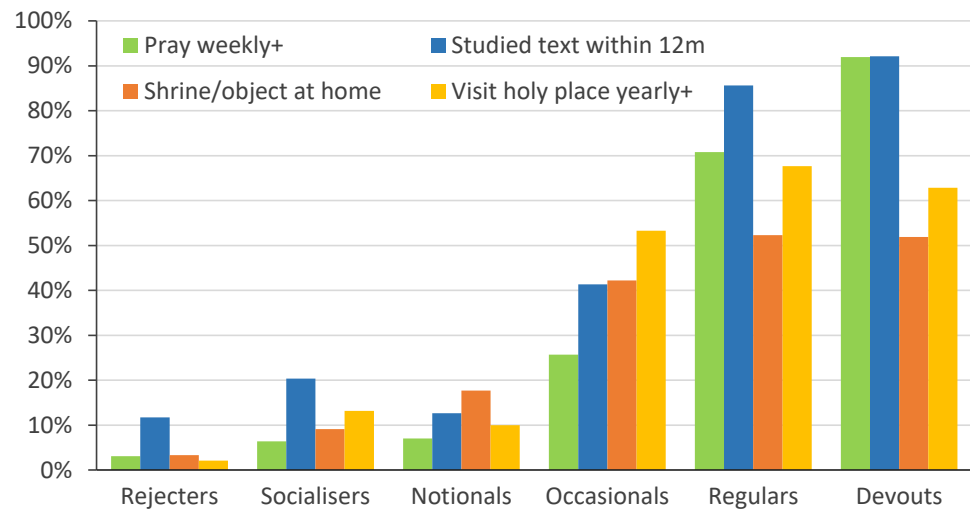
Catholic practice appears dominated by ritual and symbolism, with relatively high rates of both devotional objects at home, and visits to holy places.

Uniting/Methodists, on the other hand, display a more cerebral approach to religion, with a very low rate of devotional objects, and domination of religious text study. Of the religionists, Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists had by far the lowest rates of religious behaviour overall, and minor and non-Christian denominations the highest.

By religiosity, Socialisers and Notionals were only slightly more engaged than Rejecters, with most (88% average) not participating in the defined behaviours (Figure 26).

Occasionals were somewhat more engaged, though with minorities of all behaviours but visiting holy places.

Unsurprisingly, a majority of Regulars and Devouts reported these religious behaviours. Levels of most of the behaviours were very similar, except that Devouts were significantly more likely to pray more often.



**Figure 26:** Rates of other religious behaviours, by ARI6

Source: AuSSA 2018

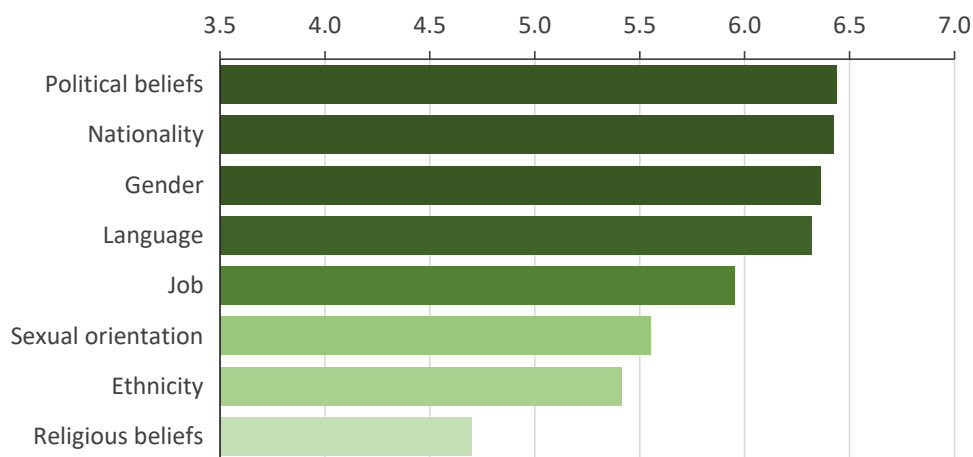
**Summary:** Only amongst Regulars and Devouts did a majority report engaging in the four modest religious behaviours (from 51% to 91%): weekly prayer, studying a religious text in the past year, having a religious shrine or object at home, and visiting a non-usual holy place in the past year. Occasionals reported significantly lower rates of the behaviours (average 36%), and Notionals and Socialisers very low rates (average 11%).

## Religion & God not so important

The ABC, in concert with social science scholars at VoxPox Labs, conducted the *Australia Talks National Survey* in 2019. It asked Australians about what was important in their lives, including religion (Crabb 2019).

Of eight given major attributes that can contribute to a sense of self and personal identity, Australians said that political beliefs, nationality, gender and language were most central (Figure 27). One's job, sexual orientation and ethnicity were also somewhat important, but less so.

Religion was far behind in last place.

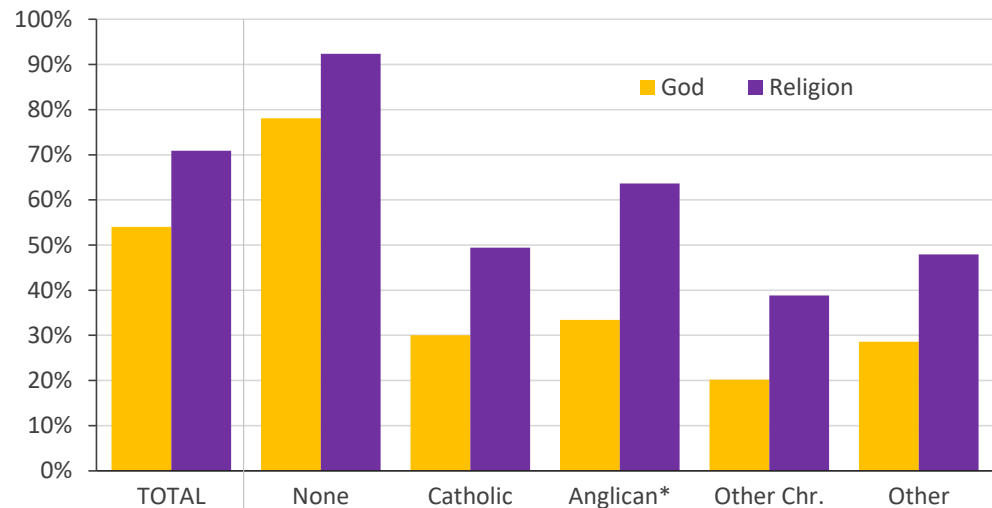


**Figure 27:** Centrality of attributes that define personal identity  
Source: Australia Talks National Survey 2019

Other data confirms that not only is religion not a leading element of most Australians' sense of identity, but also that its relationship with daily life is not especially strong.

## Across the denominations

God is **not** personally important amongst more than half (54%) of Australians, nearly a third (30%) of Catholics, a third (33%) of Anglicans, 1 in 5 (20%) of minor Christian denominations, and nearly half (48%) of non-Christian religions (Figure 28).



**Figure 28:** Religious denomination by **not** very/at all important in your life

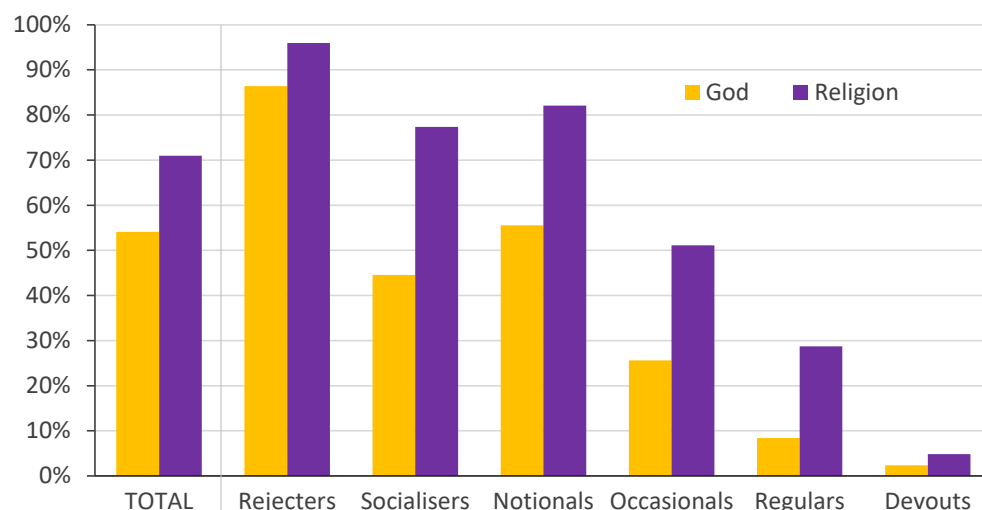
Source: AVS 2018. \* The survey methodology made identifying all Anglicans difficult. Some may be included in Other Christian.

The relationship is even weaker for *religion*, which is **not** personally important amongst seven in ten (71%) Australians, half (49%) of Catholics, nearly two thirds (64%) of Anglicans, over a third (39%) of minor Christian denominations, and nearly half (48%) of non-Christian religions.

This is consistent with the ARI6 denominational breakdown (Figure 10) that shows a weak relationship between a significant proportion of religionists and their religious institutions.

## By religiosity

Amongst the ARI6 segments, God is **not** important to most Rejecters (86%), less than half of Socialisers (45%), more than half of Notionals (56%), a quarter of Occasionals (26%), and a small minority of Regulars (8%) and Devouts (2%) (Figure 29).



**Figure 29:** ARI6 by **not** very/at all important in your life

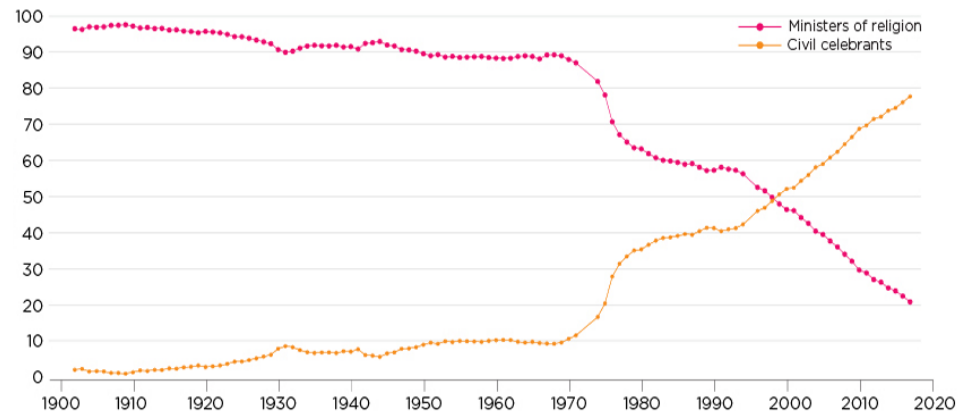
Source: AVS 2018

Equally, the importance of *religion* amongst the ARI6 segments is lower still: **not** important to most Rejecters (96%), more than three quarters (77%) of Socialisers, more than four out of five (82%) Notionals, half (51%) of Occasionals, more than a quarter (29%) of Regulars, and a small minority (5%) of Devouts.

Adding to the insights into the weak overall strength of Australian's religious convictions, a 2017 national survey also found a quarter (25%) of Australians either passionately opposed to or with "issues" about Christianity (McCrindle Research 2017). It also found that of those with no religion (now the largest "denomination"), half (49%) said they preferred science and evidence, almost 1 in 5 (18%) said religion is a crutch for the weak, and 1 in 7 (14%) said religion is outdated and traditional.

## Weddings and funerals

Wedding celebrant statistics are also consistent with dropping levels of religiosity. For seven decades since federation, most Australian weddings were conducted by ministers of religion. Since 2000, however, a majority have been conducted by civil celebrants, with the rate at nearly four out of five (78%) in 2017 (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2018) (Figure 30). In 2018, the rate increased to 80% (Statista 2021).



**Figure 30:** Percent religious versus civil marriage celebrants by year

Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies 2018

A 2014 survey also found that less than half (42%) of Australians would choose a religious minister or pastor to conduct their funeral ceremony, and only half of those (21%) would *definitely* choose a religious minister or pastor (McCrindle 2014).

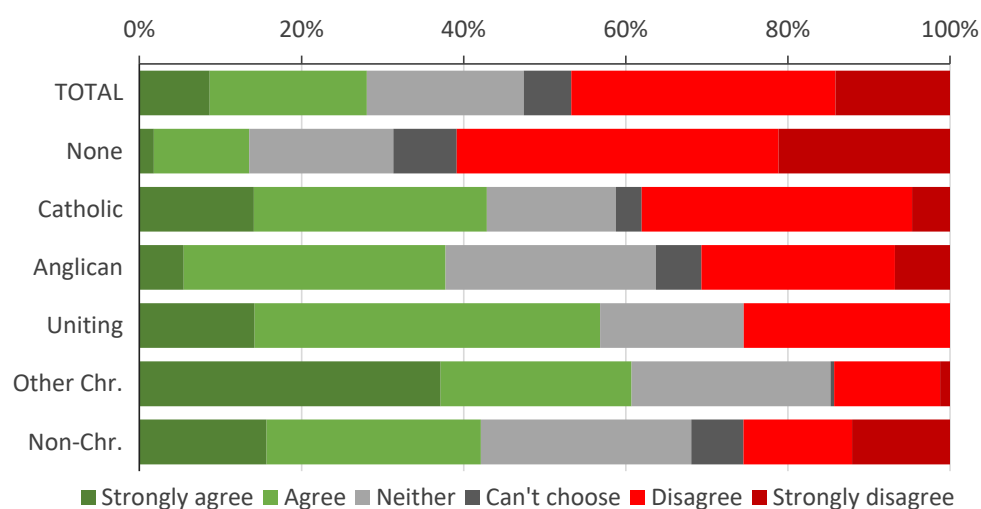
**Summary:** God is not personally important to more than half (53%) of Australians, and religion not important to nearly three quarters (71%). Significant proportions of religious denomination members don't think God or religion important. Amongst religionists, only a majority of Regulars and Devouts think religion is personally important, and a majority of Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts think God is personally important.

The proportion of civil weddings has risen to 4 in 5 (80%), and a majority of Australians (58%) would now not choose a religious celebrant for their funeral.

## Waning general relevance

Australians' belief in the general (versus personal) relevance of religion compared with the past is also relatively weak. A little more than a quarter (28%) agree that religion is now just as relevant in Australia as in the past, but nearly half (47%) disagree (AuSSA 2018) (Figure 31).

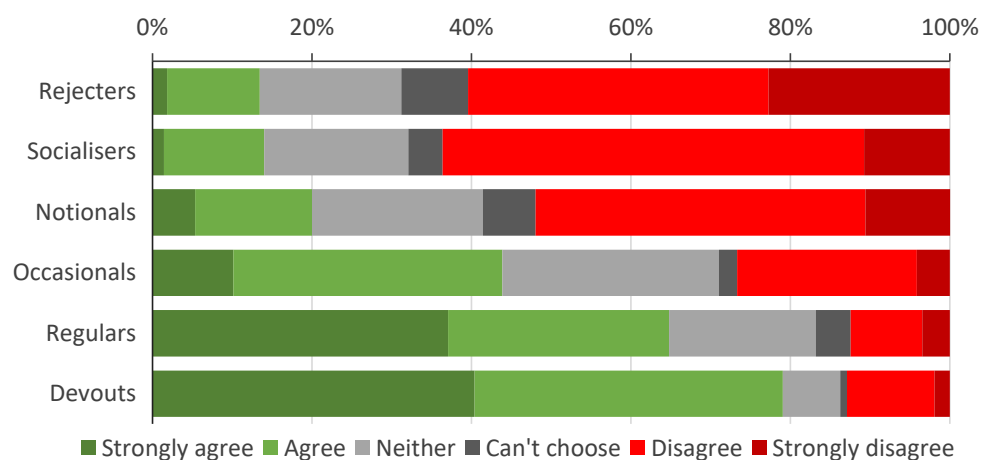
Significantly, fewer than half of Catholics (43%) and Anglicans (38%) say that religion is as relevant as ever. Amongst the non-affiliated, nearly two thirds (61%) say that religion has lost relevance.



**Figure 31:** Religion just as relevant as in past, by denomination

Source: AuSSA 2018

A majority of those with no religion or who never attend religious services — Rejecters (60%), Socialisers (64%) and Notionals (52%) — say that religion has lost relevance (Figure 32).



**Figure 32:** Religion just as relevant as in past, by ARI6

Source: AuSSA 2018

Only amongst Committeds — Regulars (65%) and Devouts (79%) — did a majority say that religion is as relevant today as in the past.

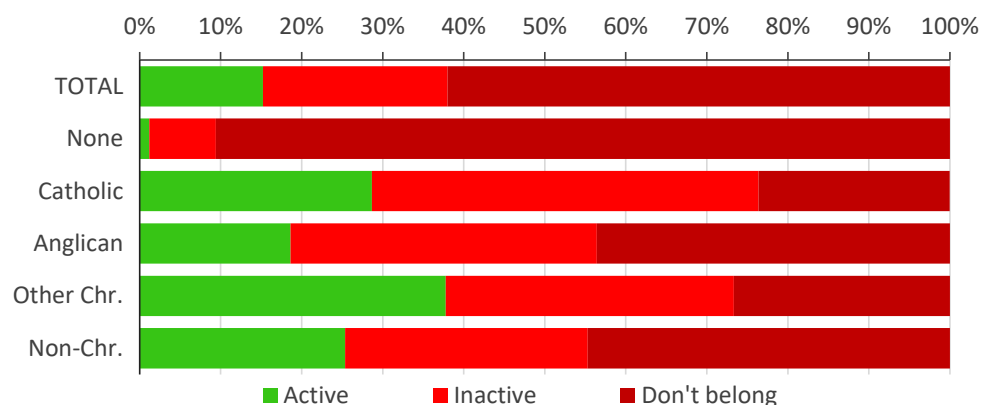
In addition, a minority of one in three Australians (33%) say that Jesus is personally important in their lives (McCrindle Research 2017). Even amongst *Christian* Committeds — who attend church at least monthly if not weekly or more often — one in ten (11%) *don't* say that Jesus is personally important.

**Summary:** Slightly more than a quarter of Australians (28%) think religion is as relevant as in the past, while nearly half (47%) say it has lost relevance. Only a majority of Regulars (65%) and Devouts (79%) say religion in Australia is as relevant as ever. A minority one in three Australians (33%) say that Jesus is personally important in their lives.

## Small minority of real “belonging”

Remember that the AVS 2018 study measured “religion” by asking about “belonging” to a religious denomination. This results in significantly lower rates of self-identified religious affiliation than simply asking “what is your religion?” However, even self-identified belonging to a denomination doesn’t specifically mean practical membership of its religious group.

Only a small minority of Australians (15%) say they are active members of a religious organisation (Figure 33). Fewer than one third (31%) of all affiliated — those who say they “belong” to a religious denomination — see themselves as active members of their religious organisation, including just 19% of Anglicans, 29% of Catholics, 25% of non-Christian denominations, and 38% of minor Christian denominations.

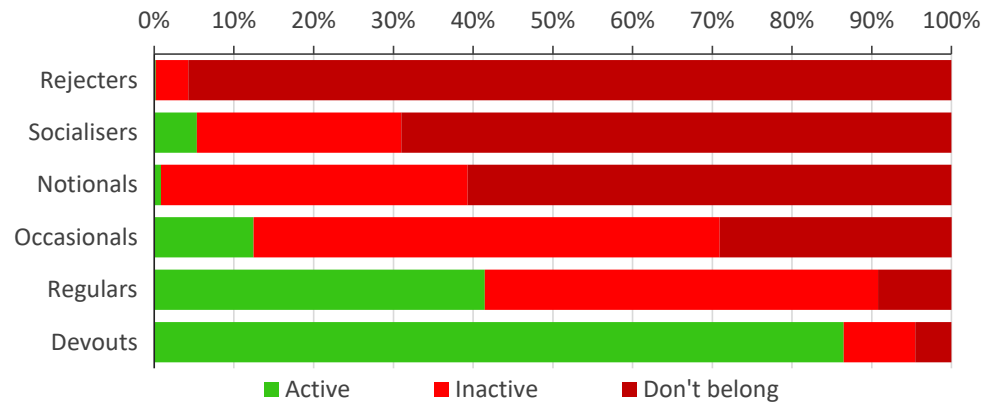


**Figure 33:** Self-stated membership by religion

Source: AVS 2018

Indeed, nearly two thirds of Australians (62%) expressly say they *don't* belong to a religious organisation, including 24% of Catholics, 44% of Anglicans, 27% of minor Christian denominations, and 45% of non-Christian denominations. The “inactive member” remainder includes 48% of Catholics, 38% of Anglicans, 36% of minor Christian denominations, and 30% of non-Christian denominations.

By religiosity, just 1% of Notionals, 12% of Occasionals, less than half of Regulars (41%), and most but not all Devouts (85%) say they are active members of their religious organisation (Figure 34).



**Figure 34:** Self-stated membership by ARI6

Source: AVS 2018

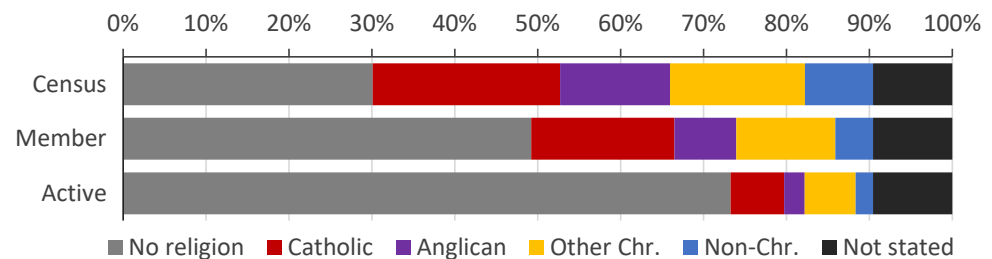
That is, when 14% of Devouts, 59% of Regulars and 88% of Occasionals attend religious services, they do not attend as active members of the religious institution. Further, 5% of Devouts, 9% of Regulars and 29% of Occasionals don't see themselves as members *at all*. This suggests a significant level of service attendance for private reasons of faith rather than endorsement of the institution's religious doctrines.

Amongst Notionals (who never attend religious services) nearly two thirds (61%) see themselves as *not* belonging to their religious organisation at all, and most of the remainder (38%) see themselves as inactive members.

This confirms that in Australia, the relationship between “ticking a religious denomination box” and meaningful membership is indeed quite weak.

Adjusting the original 2016 census religious affiliation data by the proportion of Australians who identify as a *member* of their religious organisation (whether active or inactive), the 30% NR figure becomes almost half, 49% (Figure 35).

Adjusting further for only those who are *active* in their religion, the NR figure becomes nearly three quarters (73%). Therefore, only a small minority (27%) of Australians are active in and specifically endorse their religious organisation — but even then not all its religious edicts as explored later.



**Figure 35:** Census 2016 religion, adjusted by membership and activeness

Sources: Census 2016, AVS 2018

The “actual member” rate of the 2016 census religion data produces an NR rate of 49%, much closer to the 54% found in ANU’s AVS study two years later in 2018 (in the context of increasing NR). The discrepancy indicates that almost 1 in 5 Australians (19%) indicate a religious affiliation for cultural heritage, rather than active religious, reasons.

The AVS study asked for meaningful membership of a religious denomination, rather than mere cultural heritage. See *Wording of the religion prompt* on page 13.

**Summary:** Across the religious spectrum, more than two thirds (69%) of those who self-report a religious affiliation do *not* see themselves as active members of their religious institution, including 71% of Catholics, 81% of Anglicans, 62% of minor Christian denominations, and 75% of non-Christian denominations. Active membership is only in the majority amongst Devouts (86%), but even then is not universal, revealing 15% inactive and non-members.

The 2016 census reported less than a third (30%) of Australians as NR. However, the figure is nearly half (49%) when excluding those who do not think themselves *members* of their religious organisation, and nearly three quarters (73%) when including only those who are specifically *active* in their religious organisation. This indicates that only a minority of Australians (27%) actively endorse their religious organisation.

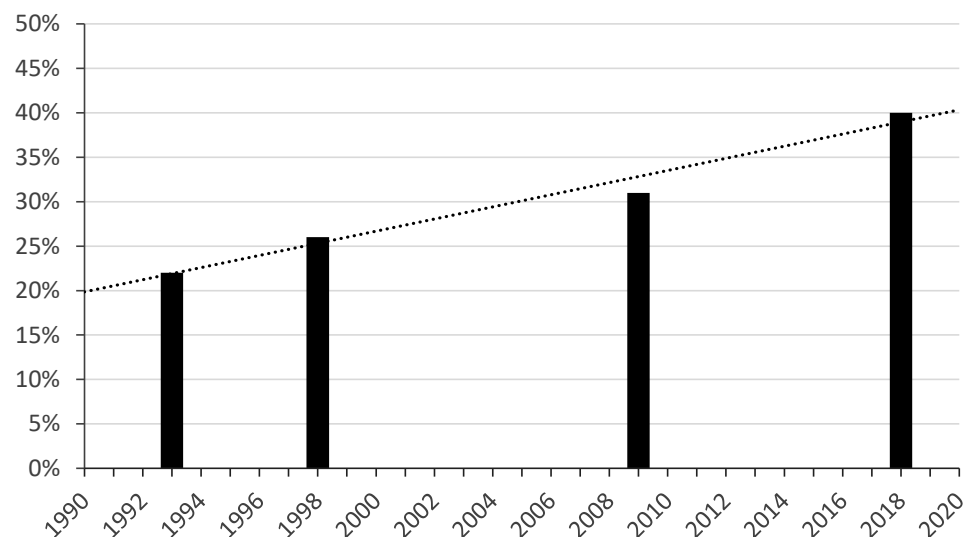




## Little enduring religious certainty

Clergy often make public statements as though with congregational authority and certainty. Such narratives create the impression that many tenets and positions of their faith are beyond doubt or challenge — that they are universal and eternal — and that their denominational flocks either do or ought to agree with them. That confidence is misplaced regarding even the most fundamental tenets of many faiths.

Trend data from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) (Powell & Pepper 2017) and the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2018 show that the rate of **no** belief in either a specific God or an abstract ‘higher power’ has nearly doubled from 1993 (22%) to 2018 (40%) (Figure 36).



**Figure 36:** Percent of Australians with no god or ‘higher power’ belief

Sources: 1993–2009 Powell and Pepper 2017; 2018 AuSSA 2018.

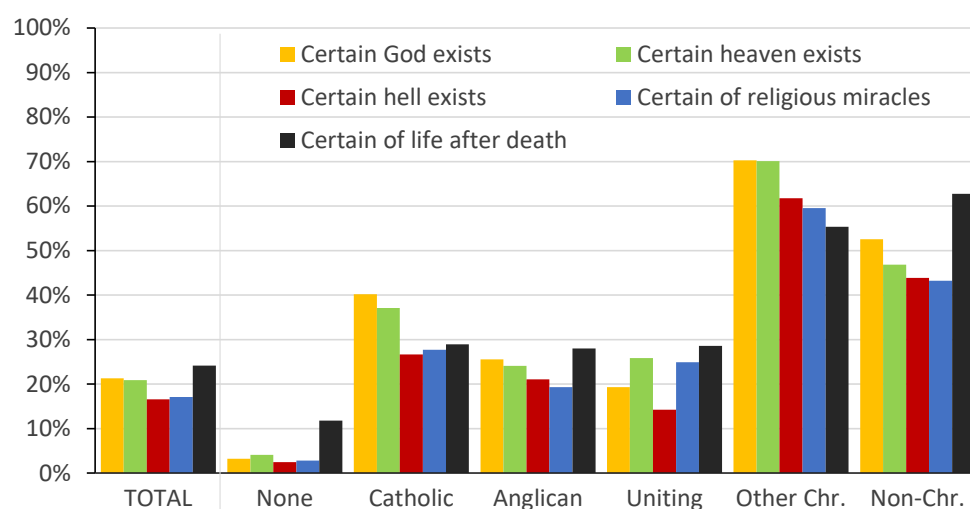
Thus, at the same time bishops, rabbi and mufti proclaim their God’s apparent position on one or other matter, now not only do at least 40% of Australians not believe in *that* specific version of God, they don’t believe in a generic deity or metaphysical superpower of any kind.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>d</sup> Many religious beliefs research questions in western countries presume monotheism (God: singular). This may make it difficult in some contexts for polytheists (e.g. Hindu) and non-theist (e.g. Buddhist) religionists to answer some questions exactly. However, since polytheistic and nontheistic religionists comprise a small minority of Australia’s population — around 5% at the 2016 census — this has only a minor effect on overall research clarity.

## Across the denominations

Even the support of fundamental religious tenets is limited. On average, just 1 in 5 Australians (20%) are certain that God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death are real (Figure 37). That includes on average just 1 in 3 Catholics (32%), and around 1 in 4 Anglicans (23%) and Uniting/Methodists (23%).

Only amongst non-Christian religions (average 50%) does it reach equality, and a majority amongst minor Christian denominations (average 63%).



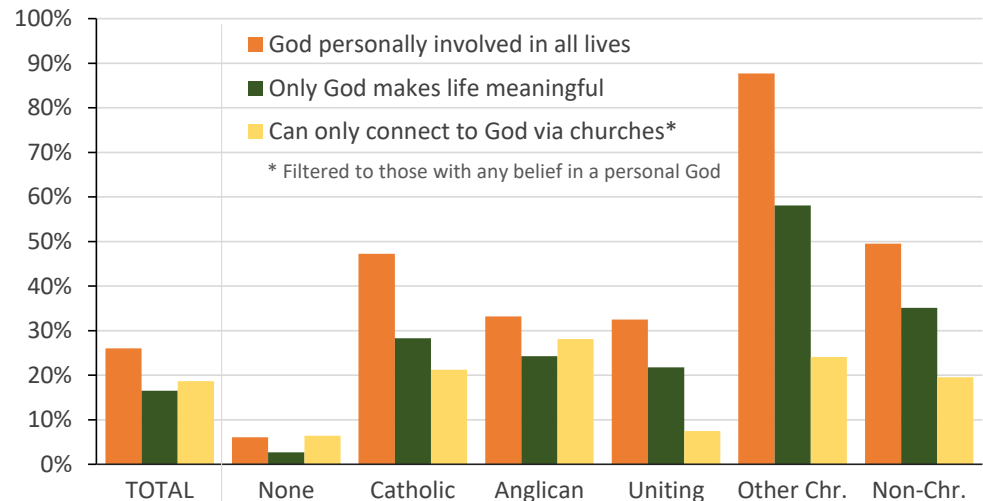
**Figure 37:** Religion by certainty of beliefs

Source: AuSSA 2018

Regarding other religious tenets the figures are similar (Figure 38). Around 1 in 5 Australians (26%) say that God is personally involved in all lives, including fewer than half of Catholics (47%) and around a third of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists (33% each). Only amongst non-Christian faiths does agreement reach equality (50%), and for most among the minor Christian denominations (88%).<sup>e</sup>

On the question of life having meaning only because of God, a small minority of Australians (17%) agree. That includes around a third of non-Christian faiths (35%), around a quarter of Catholics (28%) and Anglicans (24%), and just over a fifth of Uniting/Methodists (22%). Only amongst minor Christian denominations does it reach a majority (58%).

<sup>e</sup> Some of these figures are higher than the *Certain in God* figures because these figures include people who somewhat believe (harbour *doubts*) that God exists.



**Figure 38:** Religion by overall beliefs

Source: AuSSA 2018. Base: Total agree

On the question of whether it is possible to connect with God only via churches, Australians' agreement was low across all denominations.<sup>fg</sup> Slightly more than 1 in 4 God-believing Anglicans (28%) agreed, as did a quarter of minor Christian denominations (25%), a fifth of Catholics (21%) and non-Christian faiths, and just 1 in 13 Uniting/Methodists (8%).

**Summary:** Certainty about the existence of God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, life after death, whether God is personally involved in people's lives and only God giving life meaning — core tenets of major faiths — is far from universal. Indeed, such certainty is mostly in the minority, except amongst minor Christian denominations.

Belief that it is possible to connect to God only via church is the weakest belief amongst God-believers, with just 8%–28% agreeing. This adds to doubts about the continued relevance and survival of institutional religion in Australia.

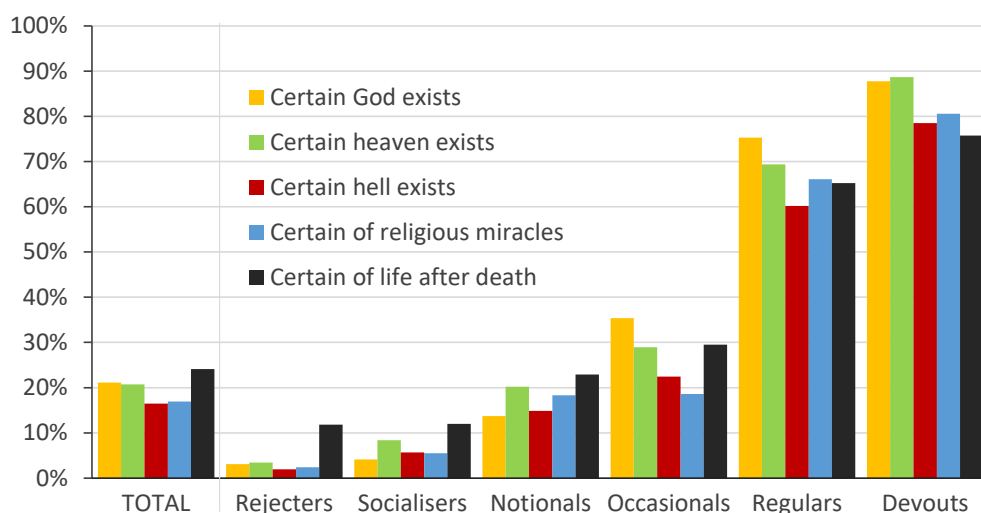
<sup>f</sup> It was apparent that non-religionists had answered this question *conceptually* in respect of their *perceptions* of religionists. Therefore, the answer to this question was filtered to only people with any belief in God (including with doubts).

<sup>g</sup> The question was specifically worded as "church". It is unclear to what extent people of non-Christian faiths interpreted this question literally, resulting in a likely negative answer, or generically (synagogues, mosques, temples, etc as equivalents), giving a balanced answer.

## By religiosity

Unsurprisingly, certainty about the existence of God, heaven, hell, religious miracles and life after death correlates strongly and positively with religiosity.

Only amongst Committeds (Regulars and Devouts, a combined total of 15% of the population), is certainty of these beliefs in the majority (60%–89%) (Figure 39). Amongst the other 85% of the population, certainty was in a small minority: from 2% to 35%.



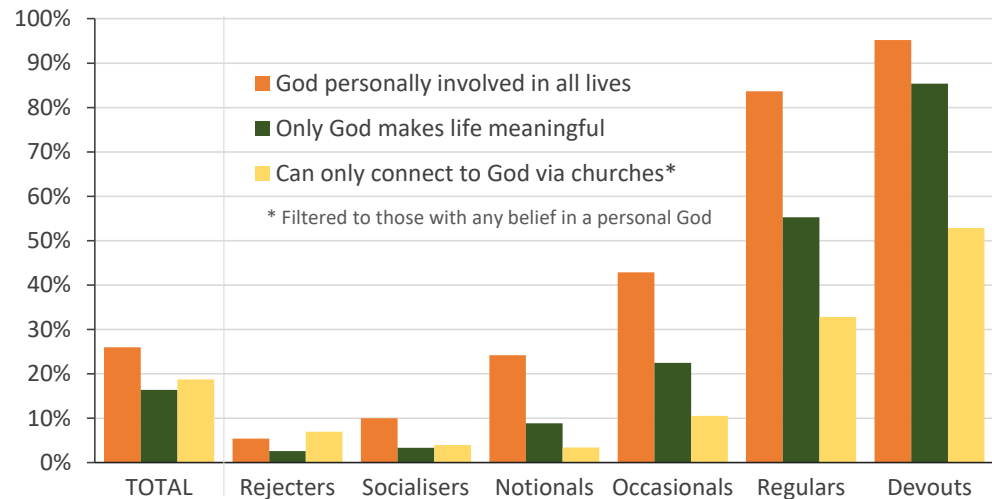
**Figure 39:** ARI6 by certainty of beliefs

Source: AuSSA 2018

Even amongst Committeds, roughly one in three Regulars and one in five Committeds were not certain of such beliefs.

Equally, on the questions of God’s personal involvement in all lives and only God making life meaningful, Committeds agreement was in the majority (57%–95%) and all others in the minority (3% to 43%) (Figure 40).

Of significance is that exclusive of Australia’s 15% Committeds, the highest rate of belief in only God making life meaningful was less than a quarter (23%) amongst Occasionals, with other segments well below 10%. This indicates that most Australians (77%) find meaning in life beyond a deity.



**Figure 40:** ARI6 by overall beliefs (total agree) in 2018

Source: AuSSA 2018.

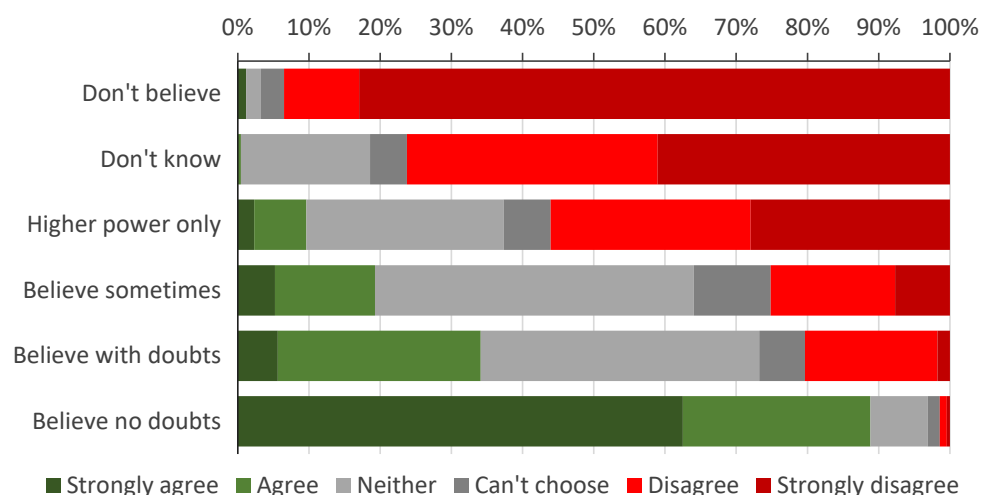
On the question of being able to connect to God only through churches, agreement was in a slight majority (53%) only amongst Devouts. Even amongst Regulars, agreement was in the minority (33%), and at 10% or less amongst the other ARI6 segments.

**Summary:** Only amongst Australia's 15% of Committeds is certainty of belief in God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, life after death, a personally-involved God, and only God making life meaningful, in the majority, but even then, not universal (55%–95%). Amongst all other segments, those beliefs were in the minority (2%–43%).

Only amongst Devouts was the belief that one can only connect to God via churches in the slight majority (53%). Only 1 in 3 Regulars (33%) and 1 in 10 or fewer of others agreed. Belief in the necessity and relevance of institutional religion is low amongst Australians.

## For true believers, it's personal

Most “true believers” — the one-in-five Australians (21%) who believe without doubt that God exists — say that God is concerned with everyone personally (89%), including a majority (63%) who *strongly* agree (Figure 41).



**Figure 41:** Belief in God, by God is concerned with everyone personally

Source: AuSSA 2018

However, only small to negligible minorities amongst all others agree. Just a third (34%) of those who believe in God but with doubts say that God is concerned with everyone personally, and just 6% or fewer of all those who doubt or disbelieve *strongly* agree.

This indicates that for those with no doubt that God exists, it's a matter of personal relevance for everyone, believer or not. This may account for the degree of moral intrusiveness that Australian devouts often express in presuming that their views ought to prevail over the private lives of everyone, even those who actively disagree with those devout views.

**Summary:** For those who believe in God without doubt, most say that God is concerned with everyone personally. This may account for their moral intrusiveness into the personal lives of others, even those who actively disagree with such beliefs.

## Talking about religion

A slight majority of Australians (55%) talk about religion and spirituality with friends (McCrindle Research 2017). This includes often (25%) or occasionally (18%) discussing spirituality, and less often other subjects such as church or Jesus. The remainder (45%) never discuss religion or spirituality with friends.

Younger generations are slightly more comfortable talking, though given young adult Australians are the least religious, their conversations may not be as positive towards institutional religion as amongst older generations.

Nevertheless, the higher inclination amongst younger Australians to openly discuss issues of religion and faith bodes well for the frankness and scope of public square debates in future years.

Meanwhile, care is warranted. ABC's *Australia Talks National Survey* found that a broad majority of Australians (60%), even more (73%) amongst NRs, and a majority of Catholics (53%), would prefer that people keep their religious views to themselves (Crabb 2019).

**Summary:** Depending on the survey, around half of Australians are happy to talk about religion and spirituality. The other half prefer not to talk about it and to just keep it a private matter.

## Left, right and centre

Profiles of Australians' religion and religiosity by other important attributes provide further insights. This includes their social identity, left/right fit on the political spectrum, and their political identity: how they align with political parties and how they form opinions about how to vote in elections.

### Social identity

A key explanatory factor of changes in religiosity in Australia is attitudes toward social issues. The Australian Social Identity model groups people into segments on the basis of religious affiliation and attitudes towards gender equality and sexual morality.

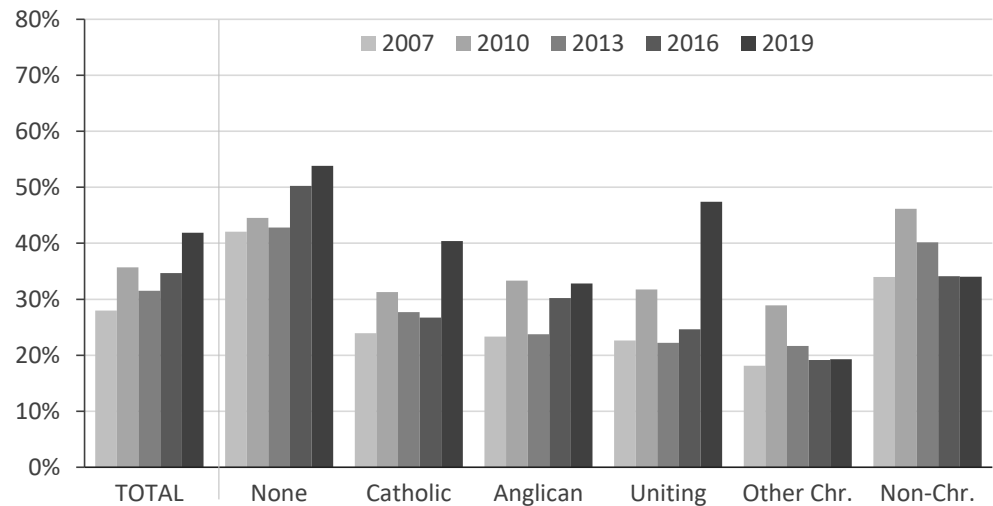
This produces 6 segments from secular progressives to religious conservatives.

#### Australian Social Identity 6-Factor (ASI6)

The **Australian Social Identity 6-Factor (ARI6)** model provides deeper psychographic insights into Australians' attitudes towards gender equality and sexual morality. It allocates each Australian into one of six segments in a 2 x 3 matrix — non/religious, and progressive/moderate/conservative:

1. **Religion:** Secular — no religious affiliation, Religious — has a religious affiliation.
2. **Progressives:** Supportive attitudes toward gender equality and wider expressions of sexuality.
3. **Moderates:** More neutral attitudes toward gender equality and wider expressions of sexuality.
4. **Conservatives:** Unsupportive attitudes toward gender equality and wider expressions of sexuality.

Overall, Australians became significantly more *socially progressive* — at least in terms of gender equality and sexual morality — between 2007 and 2019, increasing 14% overall from 28% to 42% of the population (Figure 42). That includes amongst Catholics (from 24% to 40%), Anglicans (from 23% to 33%), and Uniting/Methodists (from 23% to 47%). Particularly striking is the major increase in social progressiveness since the 2017 plebiscite and legalisation of marriage equality.

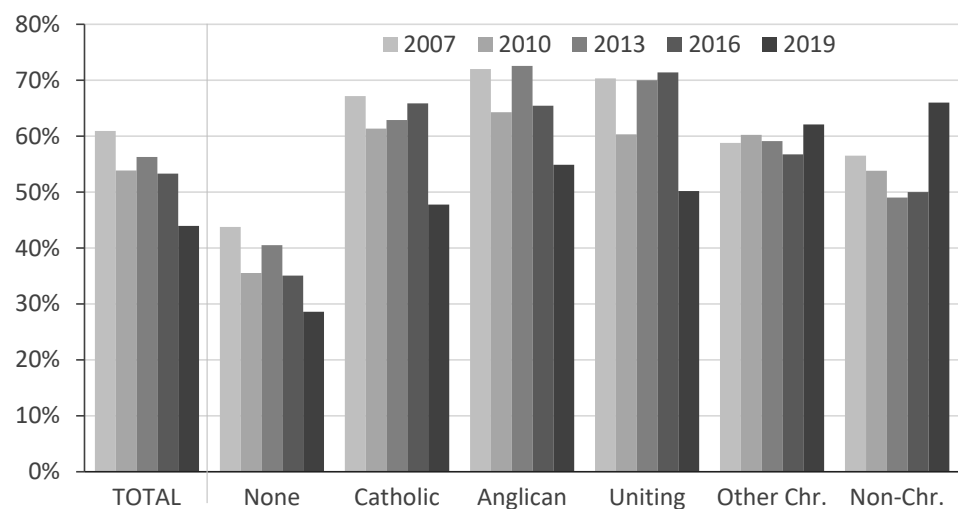


**Figure 42:** Denomination proportion of social progressives by year

Source: AES

These increases are all the more striking as the figures are amongst those who have *remained* affiliated with their denomination: significant numbers of Australians have *left* the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting/Methodist churches over the same period.

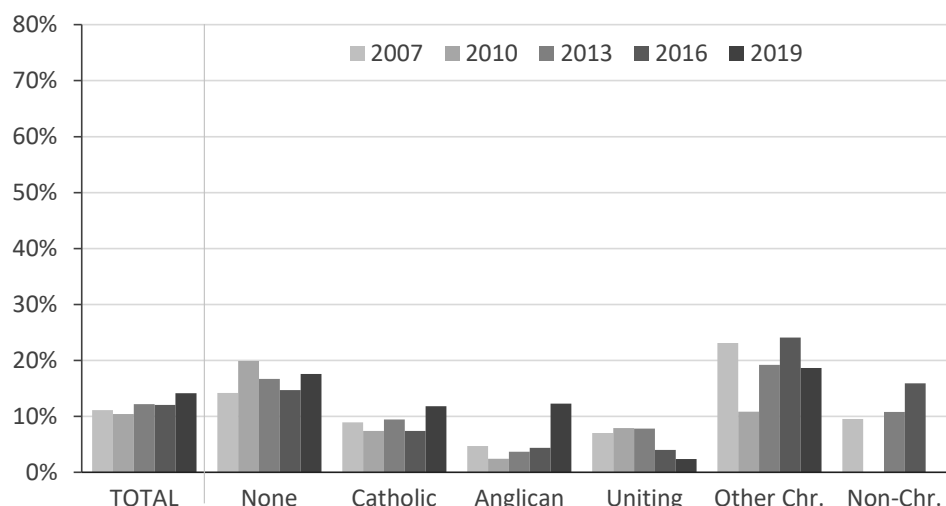
The proportion of Australians who are *social moderates* has decreased 17% from a majority (61%) to a minority (44%) (Figure 43).



**Figure 43:** Denomination proportion of social moderates by year

Source: AES

The proportion of *social conservatives* increased slightly, but with statistical significance, between 2007 and 2019 (up 3% from 11% to 14%) (Figure 44). This 3% increase of social conservatives is overshadowed by the much greater increase in social progressives (14%).

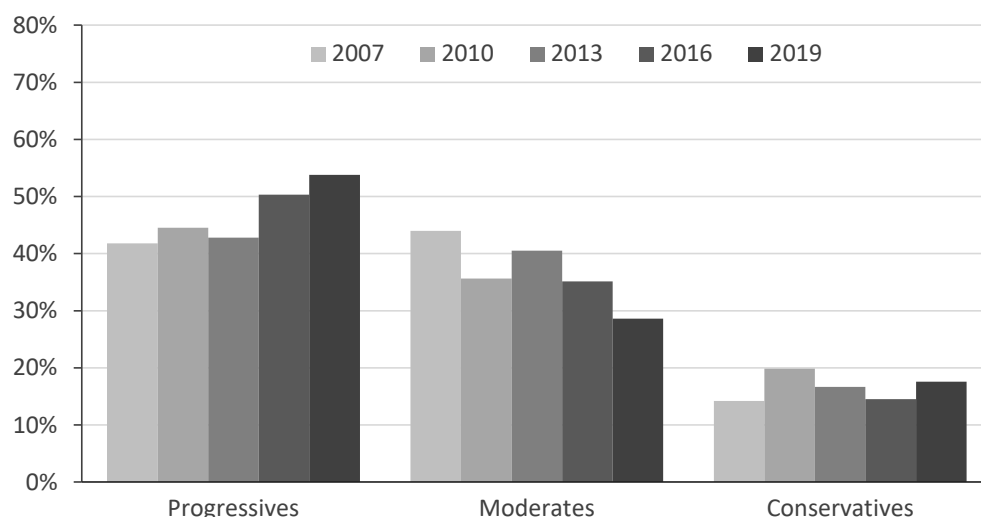


**Figure 44:** Denomination proportion of social conservatives by year

Source: AES. Note: the Non-Christian data is unreliable due to a very small sample size of social conservatives amongst this denomination cohort.

Of note is a small but significant increase since the legalisation of marriage equality in 2017, of social conservatives amongst the diminishing proportion of Catholics (5%) and Anglicans (8%).

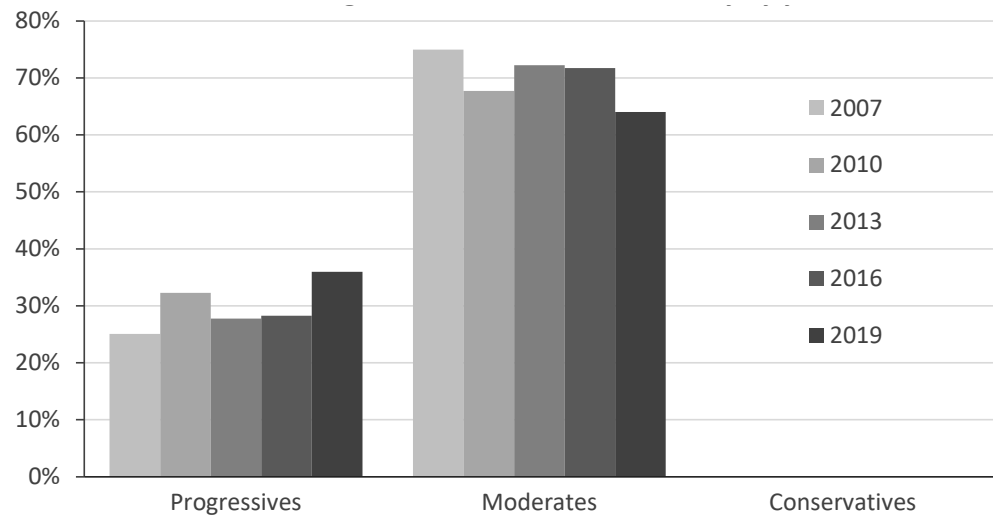
By ARI6, social progressiveness increased amongst the not-religiously-affiliated (Rejecters and Socialisers) from 42% to 54% from 2007 to 2019 (Figure 45). This was a movement from a moderate social identity: there was no significant trend in social conservatives.



**Figure 45:** Proportion of social progressiveness amongst the not-affiliated

Source: AES. Note: Not affiliated = Rejecters and Socialisers

There was also an increase in social progressives amongst the weakly affiliated (Notionals and Occasionals) from 25% to 36% (Figure 46). This movement was entirely from social moderates.

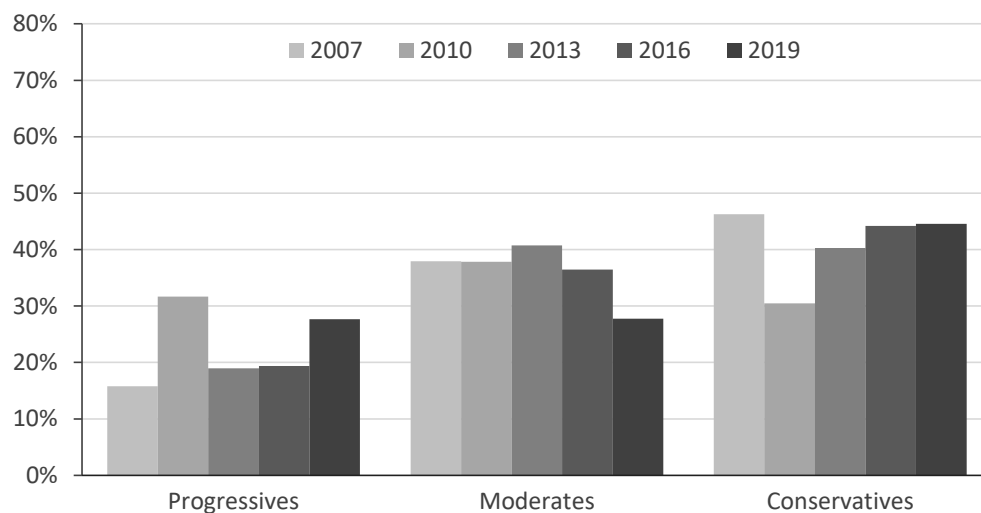


**Figure 46:** Proportion of social progressiveness amongst the weakly affiliated

Source: AES. Note: Weakly affiliated = Notionals and Occasionals

Of great significance is that amongst more than twelve thousand respondents over the study period, *not one* amongst the weakly affiliated identified as socially conservative. This may help explain why large numbers of Occasionals have abandoned religious affiliation.

Social identity changes amongst Committeds, however, were less clear overall, though there was a moderately polarising trend away from socially moderate to progressive and conservative stances (Figure 47).



**Figure 47:** Proportion of social progressiveness amongst religious Committeds

Source: AES. Note: Committeds = Regulars and Devouts

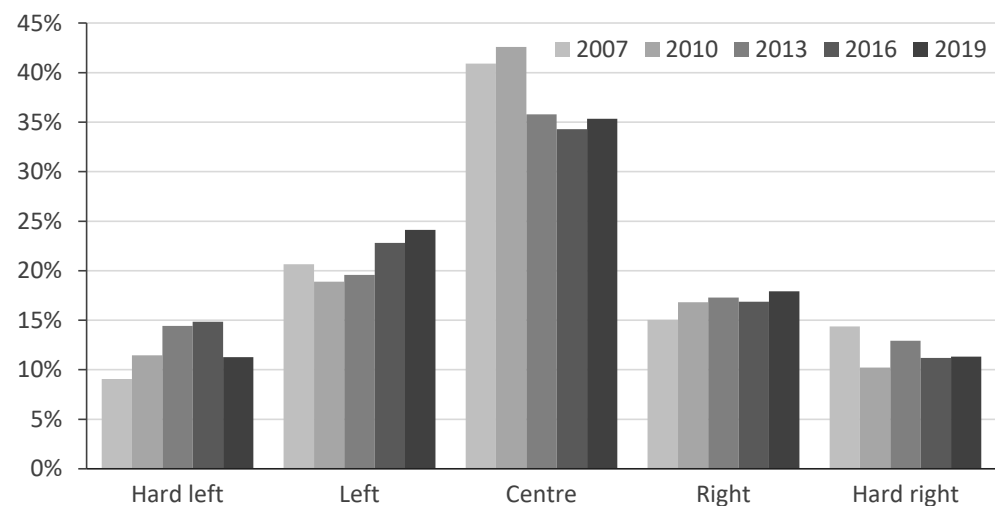
**Summary:** Between 2007 and 2019, Australians moved on average to a more socially progressive stance in respect of gender equality and sexual morality. Social progressives increased from 28% to 42%, moderates decreased from 61% to 44%, and conservatives increased slightly from 11% to 14%.

The most striking factor is that *no* Australians in the weak-religious-affiliation group (Notionals and Occasionals) identified as social conservatives. This may help explain why Occasionals in particular have abandoned religious affiliation in large numbers.

## Political left/right spectrum

Australians can be segmented according to where they say they fall on the political spectrum: Hard Left, Left, Centre, Right and Hard Right.

Recall that the majority of Australians (85%) are **not** ARI6 religious Committeds: that is, they are Rejecters, Socialisers, Notionals or Occasionals. Amongst the **Not** Committeds from 2007 to 2019 there was a modest drop of 6% of Centres, with a 3% rise in each of Lefts and Rights (Figure 48).



**Figure 48:** Left/right political spectrum amongst **Not** Committeds, by year

Source: AES

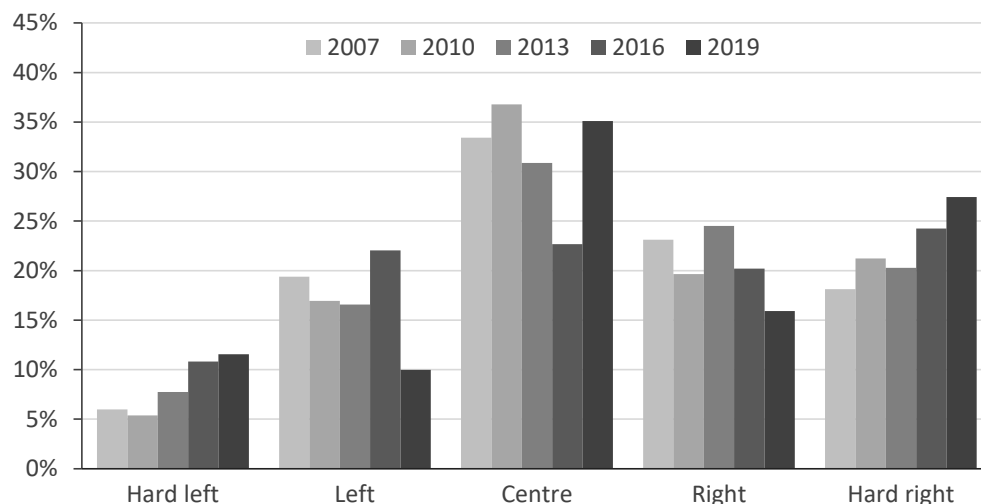
There has also been a slight drop in Far Rights (-3%) and a slight rise in Far Lefts (2%) amongst Not Committeds.

Therefore, amongst Not Committeds overall, there has been a small movement away from the Centre towards the Left and Right, with slightly more to the left than the right.

Note that 2016 was not a remarkable (federal election) year for Not Committeds.

However, the picture is quite different amongst the 15% of the population who are Committeds (Figure 49). Centres fell precipitously (-14%) from their peak in 2010 to the 2016 election, at which then conservatives Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull promised to hold a plebiscite on marriage equality.

However, since the marriage equality issue was resolved in the affirmative through the 2017 plebiscite and subsequent legislation, Committeds have returned largely to the Centre but have also polarised hard left and right.



**Figure 49:** Left/right political spectrum amongst Committeds, by year

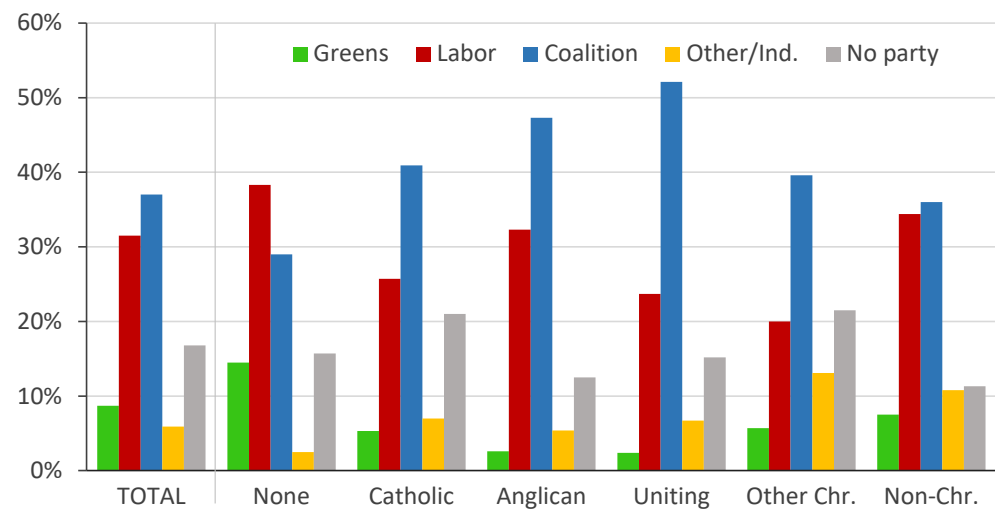
Source: AES

Overall from 2007 to 2019, Committeds moved slightly to the right (Total Right up 2%, Total Left down 4%). Not Committeds, however, moved slightly to the left (Total Right no change, Total Left up 6%).

**Summary:** Between 2007 and 2019, Not-Committeds moved slightly to the left, while Australia's 15% of Committeds moved slightly to the right and with greater hard-spectrum polarisation. The data is consistent with some Committeds being unhappy with the legalisation of marriage equality, while most Australians were not.

## Political party identification

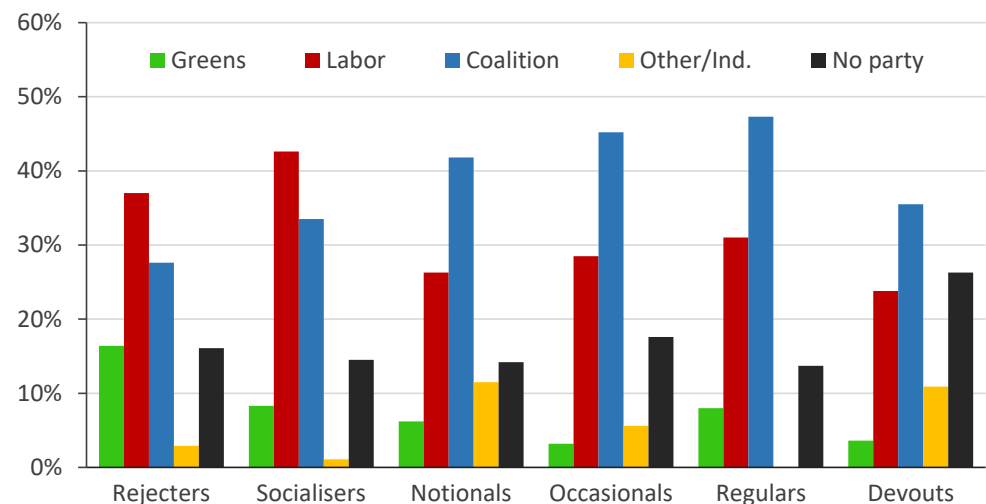
Voting intentions are influenced strongly by the party, if any, that the voter feels mostly aligned with. In 2019, only amongst non-religionists was self-alignment with Labor greater than with the Coalition (Figure 50). Major party alignment was nearly equal amongst non-Christian denominations, but a significant majority in favour of the Coalition amongst Christian denominations. This difference was more pronounced in 2019 compared with earlier election years.



**Figure 50:** Proportion of religions aligned with political party

Source: AES 2019

This pattern is similar by ARI6 religiosity (Figure 51).

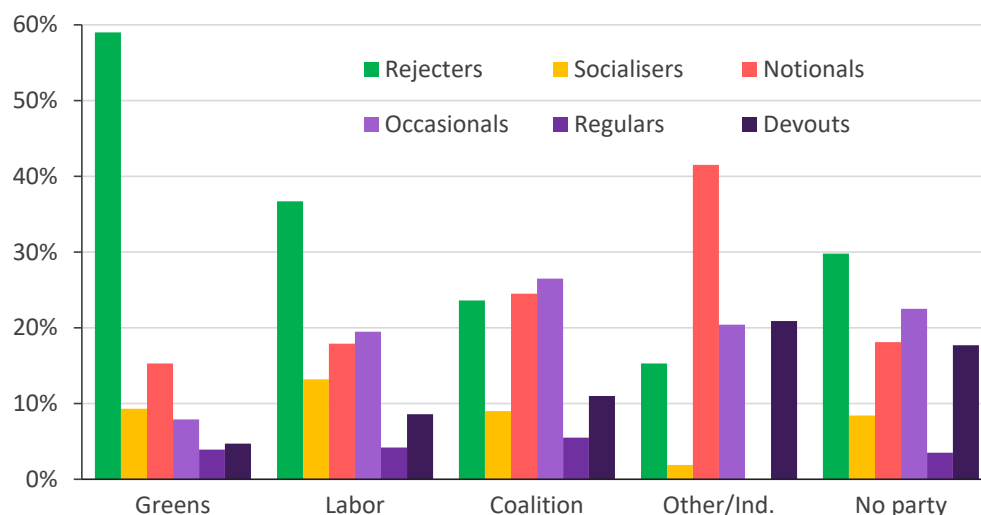


**Figure 51:** Proportion of ARI6 aligned with political party

Source: AES 2019

Only amongst Rejecters and Socialisers was self-alignment with Labor greater than with the Coalition. Amongst all other, more religious, segments, Coalition alignment was in a significant majority. Amongst Devouts, voters self-aligned to no party exceed those aligned with Labor.

Looking at political party alignment the other way, the majority of those self-aligned with the Greens were Rejecters (59%) (Figure 52). The largest segment among Labor were also Rejecters (37%).



**Figure 52:** Proportion of party self-aligned who are ARI6 segment

Source: AES 2019

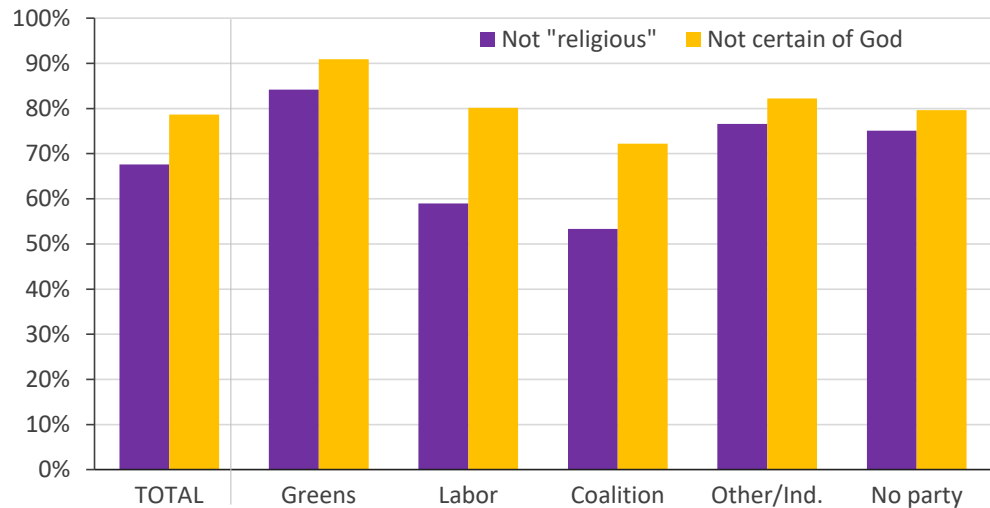
In contrast, the proportion of those self-aligned with minor parties who were Devouts (21%) exceeded the proportion of Labor (9%) and Coalition-aligned (11%) Devouts, combined.

Those aligned with minor parties and independents were most likely to be Notionals (42%).

## Attitudes toward religion and God

More than two thirds of Australians (68%) describe themselves as not “religious” (not at least “somewhat” religious) and nearly four out of five (79%) are not certain God exists (Figure 53).

Being non-religious is in the majority but lower amongst those aligned with Labor (59%) and the Coalition (53%). Uncertainty of God’s existence is lower amongst Coalition aligned (72%) but not amongst Labor aligned (80% vs 80% for non-aligned).



**Figure 53:** Religious attitudes by political party self-alignment

Source: AuSSA 2018

Therefore, while overall, religion is more relevant amongst those aligned with Labor and somewhat more so the Coalition, majorities of all do not count themselves as “religious” nor are certain that God exists. This suggests caution for major political parties in handling policies that attempt to balance religious versus non-religious interests.

Around 4 out of 5 of those aligned with minor parties and independents, and the non-aligned, say they are not religious and are not certain God exists. Since these rates are significantly higher than for Labor and the Coalition, this suggests that those casting their vote for a minor party or independent at an election do so largely due to reasons *other* than religion.

**Summary:** Currently, religionists are significantly more self-aligned with the Coalition than with Labor, though the difference has not always been so striking. A majority of all aligned and non-aligned Australians say they are not religious, and most say they are not certain God exists.

Around 4 out of 5 of minor-party aligned, and the non-aligned say they are not religious nor certain God exists — more so than both Labor and Coalition-aligned — indicating that election votes for minor parties and independents are less likely to be in respect of religious policies.

## Political identity

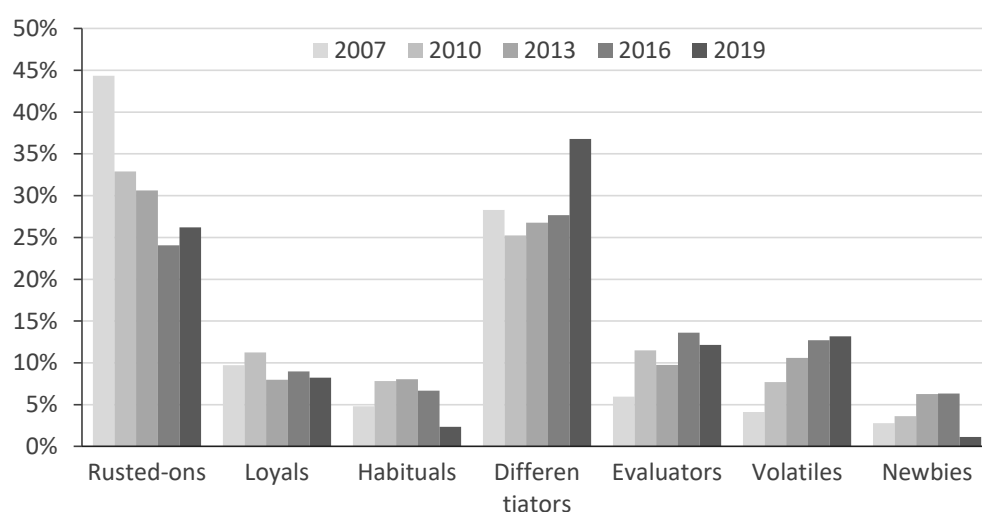
The Australian Political Identity 7-Factor model classifies each Australian into one of seven segments according to their attitudes toward who's in government and how they vote from election to election.

### Australian Political Identity 7-Factor (API7)

The **Australian Political Identity 7-Factor (API7)** model segments Australians on the basis of their attitudes toward who's in government and the consistency of who they vote for:

1. **Rusted-ons:** Greatly care who's in office and vote the same (26% of adults in 2019).
2. **Loyals:** Care who's in office and vote the same (8%).
3. **Habituals:** Don't care who's in office but vote the same (2%).
4. **Differentiators:** Greatly care who's in office and change party (37%).
5. **Evaluators:** Care somewhat who's in office and change party (12%).
6. **Volatiles:** Don't care at all who's in office and change party (13%).
7. **Newbies:** People voting for the first time (1%).

From 2007 to 2019 there was a major shift in Australia's political identity, away from party loyalty (Rusted-ons, Loyals and Habituals), and towards swinging votership (Differentiators, Evaluators and Volatiles) (Figure 54).

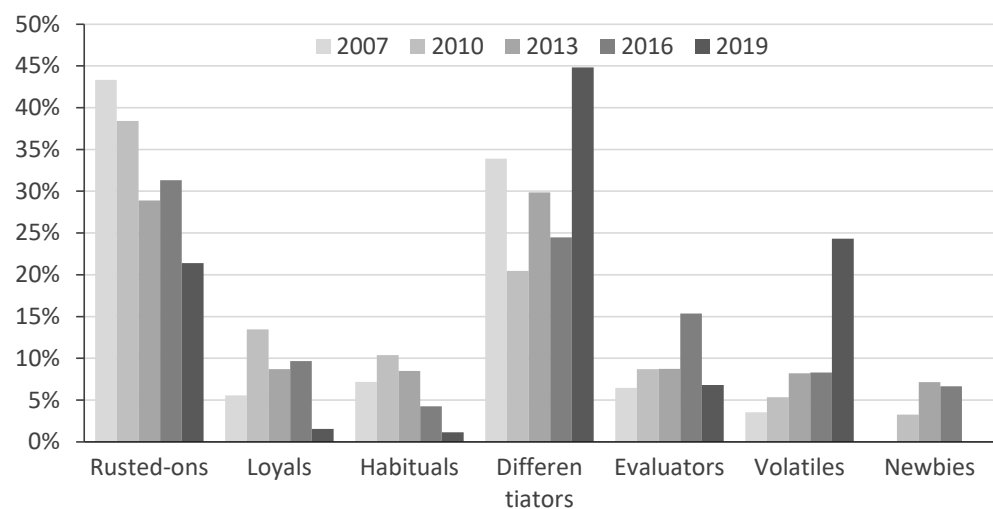


**Figure 54:** All adults, API7 segments by year

Source: AES

**Political polling insight:** Volatiles see no practical difference between political parties, are disengaged from the political process, and tend to decide who to vote for at the last minute. They now comprise some 14% of Australian adults. Given their lower likelihood to agree to participate in an election opinion poll, and give more random answers if they do, it is no longer reasonable for political pollsters to employ a mere 1–3% lead of one party (or worse, two-party preferred) over another to predict an election outcome.

This pattern was exaggerated amongst Devouts, with steeper declines amongst the more loyal segments. In 2019 in particular, there were major jumps in Differentiators *and* Volatiles — that is, those who were discerning carefully amongst policies, as well as those who saw no difference between parties (Figure 55).



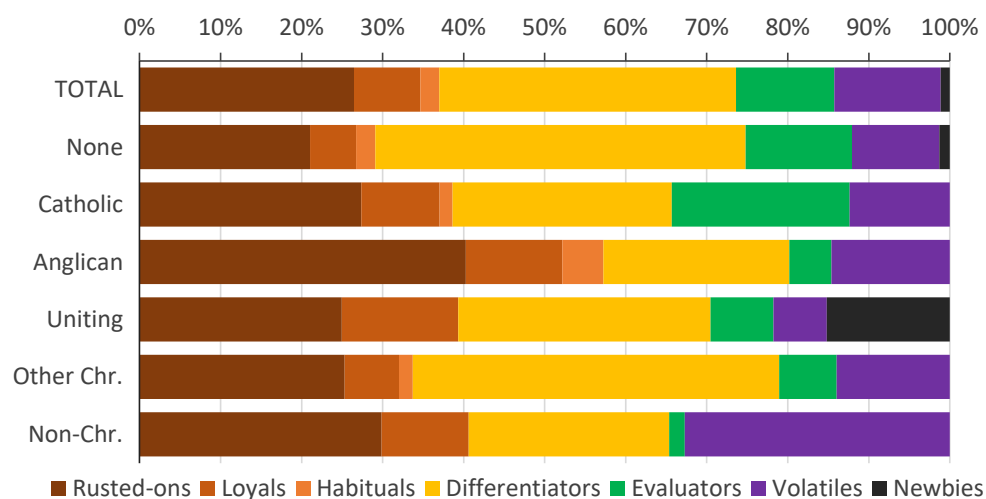
**Figure 55:** Devouts, API7 segments by year

Source: AES

Devouts who said they were self-aligned with the Coalition moved mostly to Differentiators, while Labor-aligned moved largely to Volatiles. This suggests that more political-right Devouts were carefully weighing options, while more political-left Devouts saw the two parties largely the same. Reasons for this will become evident later.

Amongst the religious denominations, Anglicans were the most likely to be Rusted-ons (40%); NRs the least likely to be Rusted-ons (21%) or Loyals (6%); NRs (46%) and minor Christian denominations (45%) the most likely to

be Differentiators; and non-Christian denominations the most likely to be Volatiles (33%) (Figure 56).



**Figure 56:** API7 distribution amongst the religious denominations

Source: AEI 2019

**Summary:** Between 2007 and 2019 there were significant changes in Australians' political identity, away from loyalty and towards policy discrimination and to volatility. These changes were more pronounced amongst Devouts.

Anglicans are the most party loyal and NRs the least. Non-Christian denominations have by far the largest proportion of Volatiles.





## Federal voting preferences

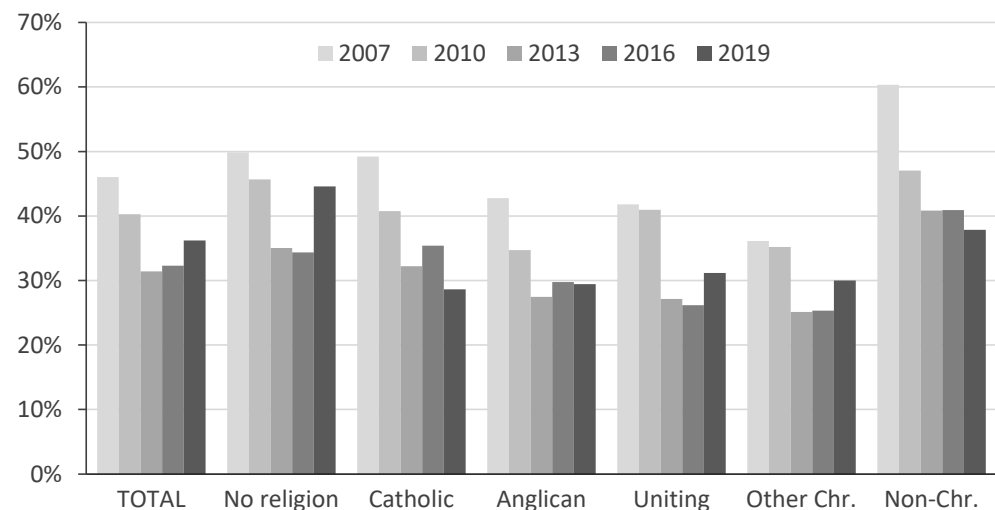
Nowhere in the national sphere is understanding Australia's religiosity more important than in the representation of its people — both religious and non-religious. Both parliament and government attempt to strike an appropriate balance when there are conflicts between the interests and positions of those of faith and those who eschew it.

### House of Representatives 2019

The impact of religion and religiosity on voting intention is not well understood in Australia, with opinions ranging from “profound effect” to “not much at all”.

An analysis some years ago (West 2013) concluded that Australia's religious were more concerned about the treatment of asylum seekers (today that's true of Regulars but not Devouts) and not so much concerned about marriage equality (today some are concerned, but does it change their vote?).

In 2007, Australians gave their first preference for the House of Representatives to Labor in relatively high numbers (Figure 57), with Labor winning office from the Coalition.



**Figure 57:** Denomination gave House first preference to Labor, by year

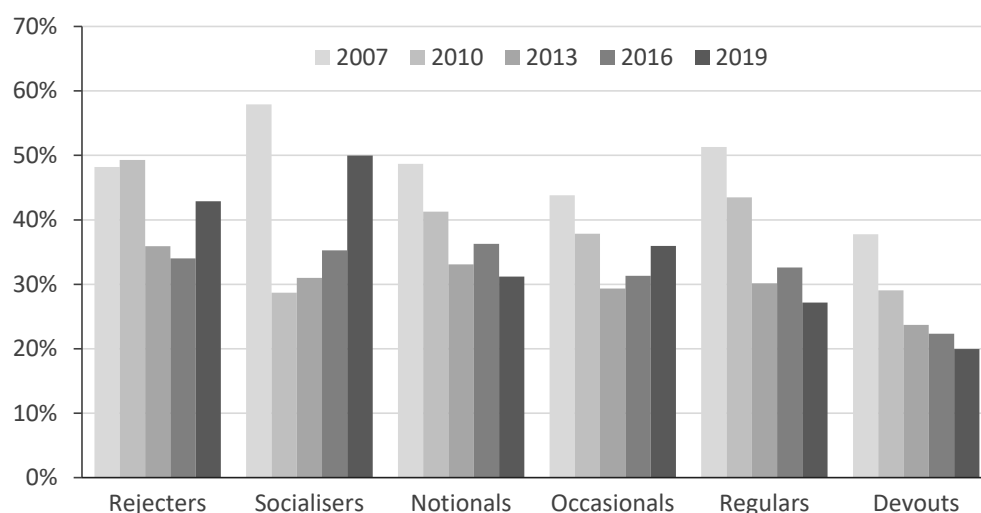
Source: AES

That base dropped at the 2010 election, which Labor again won. However, it plummeted in 2013 when the Coalition won office after the Canberra bubble of the Rudd–Gillard–Rudd ructions.

Since then, there has been a modest return to Labor first preferences, but mostly amongst NRs, and a little among Uniting/Methodist and minor

Christian denominations. In 2019, Labor votes had deteriorated further amongst Catholics and non-Christian denominations.

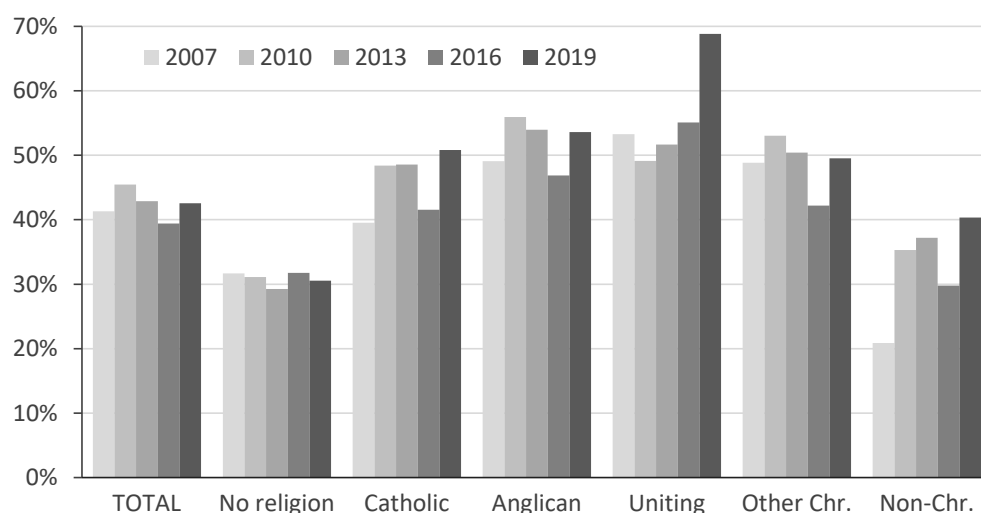
By religiosity (ARI6), Labor first preferences had robustly recovered amongst the religiously non-affiliated (Rejecters and Socialisers) in 2019 and a little amongst Occasionals, but had deteriorated further amongst Notionals, Regulars and Devouts (Figure 58).



**Figure 58:** ARI6 gave House first preference to Labor, by year

Source: AES

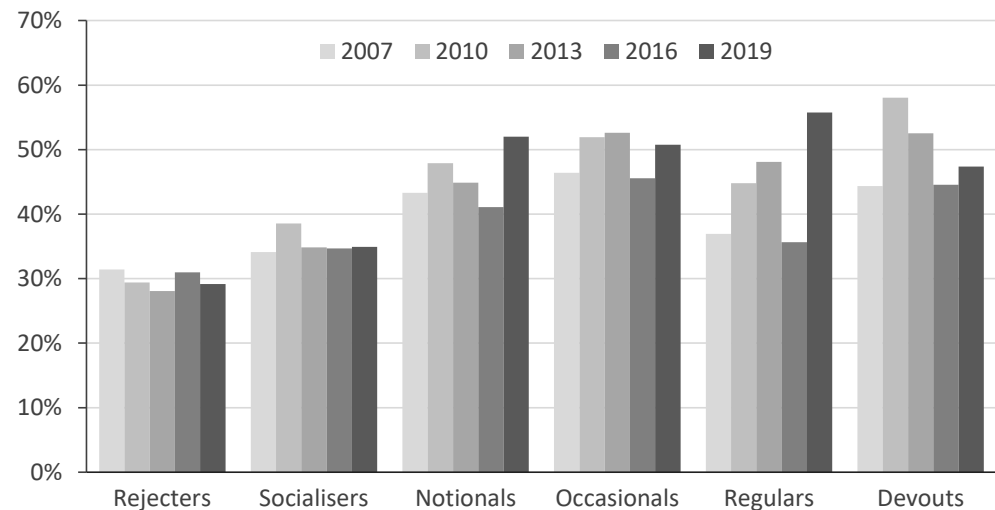
Conversely, NRs did not give their House of Representatives first preference in increased numbers to the Coalition at the 2019 election, but *all* the religion denominations did (Figure 59).



**Figure 59:** Religion by gave House first preference to the Coalition, by year

Source: AES

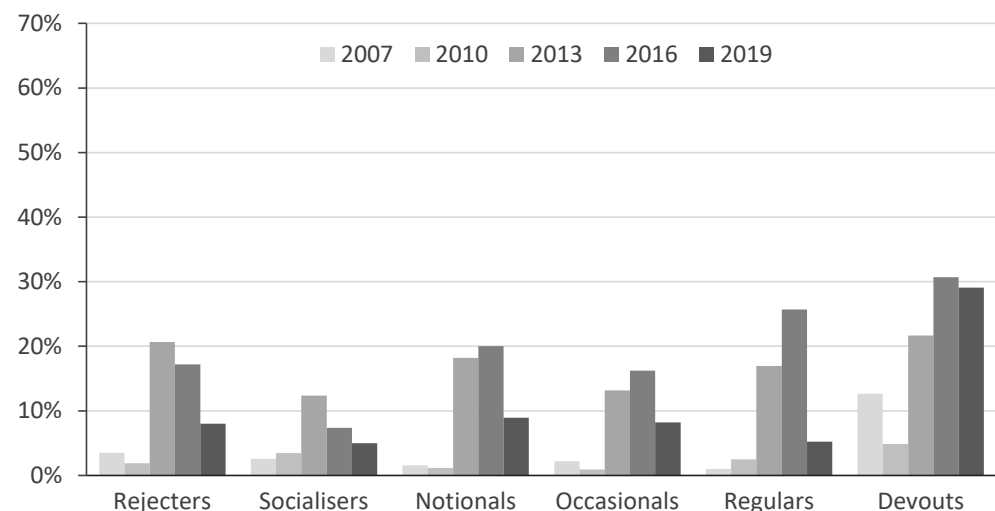
Similarly, by religiosity, Rejecters and Socialisers didn't vote for the Coalition in increased numbers in 2019, but all religionist segments (Notionals, Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts) did (Figure 60).



**Figure 60:** ARI6 by gave House first preference to the Coalition, by year

Source: AES

At the 2016 election — Turnbull v Shorten — a small but significantly higher number of Australians across the religious spectrum gave their first preference for the House of Representatives to minor parties and independents (Figure 61). Only amongst Devouts did that increase remain at the following 2019 election.



**Figure 61:** ARI6 by gave House first preference to Other/Independent, by year

Source: AES

## First impressions are misleading

Much of the available evidence presented so far in this report creates an overall impression that the Coalition is the natural home of religionists, and that Labor has something of a problem with them.

Labor's 2019 election loss post-mortem report suggests a moderate problem with Christian voters (Emerson & Weatherill 2019):

*"On the whole, people of faith did not desert Labor, but Labor lost some support among Christian voters..."* — Emerson & Weatherill 2019

and

*"When all other variables were controlled for, SA1s [ABS small statistical areas] with a high proportion of [Christians] were associated with a swing against Labor."* — Emerson & Weatherill 2019

While the correlations may appear persuasive, correlation doesn't equal *causation*. The statistical analyses conducted by ALP's analysts were not able to correlate motivations by *individual* to provide a meaningful picture, as the AES data does.

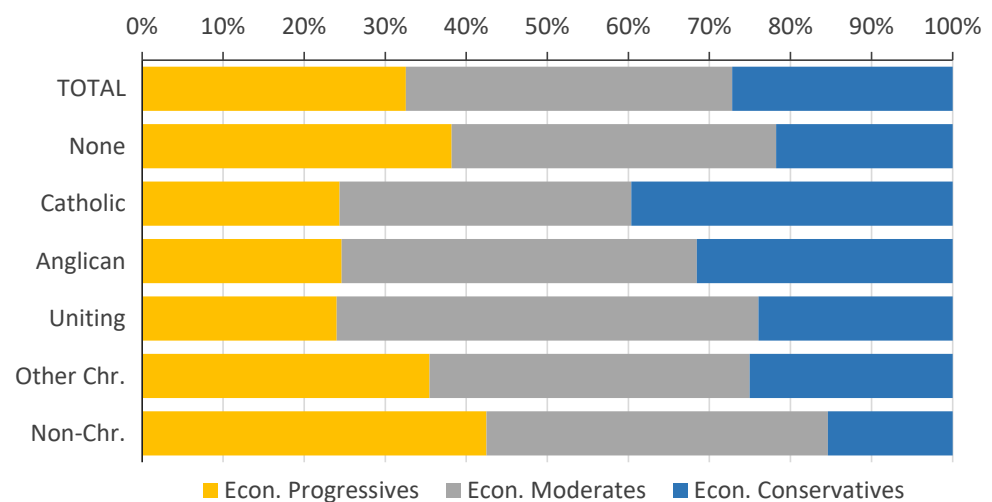
And the AES data is clear: yes, somewhat fewer Christians gave Labor their first preference at the 2019 federal election, *but that was not born of religious reasons*.

**Summary:** Voting figures create an overall impression that Labor has an image problem amongst religionists. That is *statistically* true. But a correlation doesn't establish causation. There are other, non-religious, reasons which drove the apparent drop in the "religious" vote.

## Economic Identity

The Australian Economic Identity 3-Factor model allocates each Australian into one of three segments — progressive, moderate or conservative — on the basis of attitudes toward taxation, spending on public services, and importance of economic policy to their election vote.

In 2019, 33% of Australians were economic progressives, 40% economic moderates, and 27% economic conservatives (Figure 62). Mainstream Christians — Catholics and Anglicans — were significantly less likely to be economic progressives (24% and 25% versus 38%, 36% and 43% NR, other Christian and non-Christian respectively). They were significantly more likely to be economic conservatives (40% and 32% versus 22%, 25% and 15% NR, other Christian and non-Christian respectively).



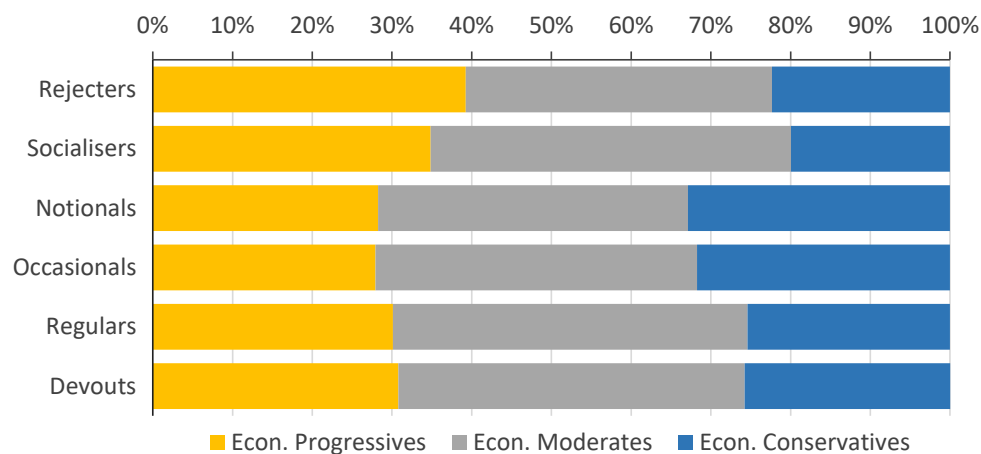
**Figure 62:** Australian Economic Identity 3-Factor, by religion

Source: AES 2019

A majority of Uniting/Methodists were economic moderates (52%), with lower levels of both progressives and conservatives (24% each).

In addition to being Australia's most economically conservative denomination, Catholics also informed their 2019 election votes on the basis of promised education funding. The Coalition promised \$4.6bn funding for Catholic and independent schools over ten years. If Catholic schools' share was 57% (as a proportion of Catholic/independent enrolments), that equates to \$260m per year for the Catholic school sector over ten years. In comparison, Labor offered \$250m over two years: that is, \$125 per year for two years, with no specific promised funding beyond that (Murphy et al. 2019). In addition, the Catholic church is not shy of urging its flock to vote one way or another in parliamentary elections (Savage 2018).

By ARI6 religiosity, the religiously affiliated were less likely to be economic progressives and more likely to be economic conservatives (Figure 63). Notionals and Occasionals were the most likely to be economic conservatives and least likely to be economic progressives.



**Figure 63:** Australian Economic Identity 3-Factor, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

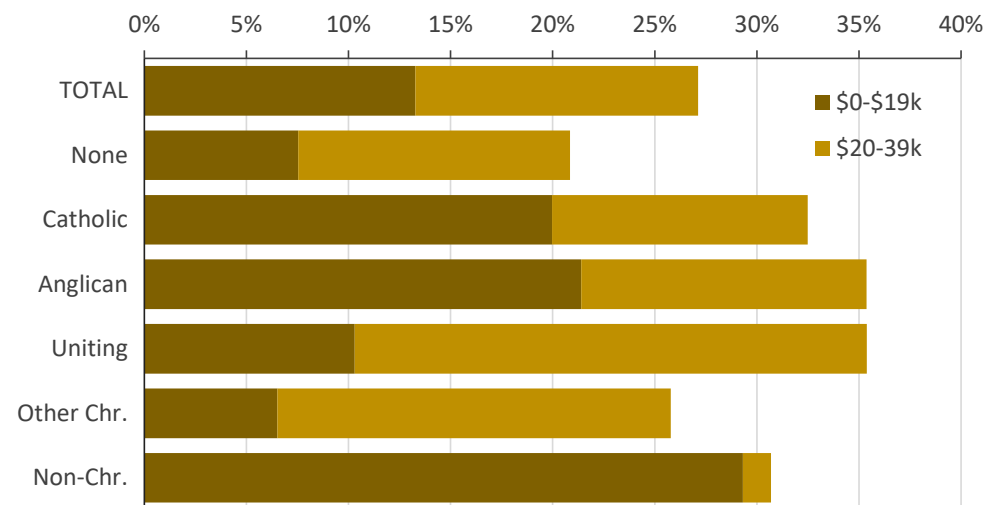
This suggests that economic identity is associated more with denominational economic characteristics than with depth of faith, with Catholics and Anglicans in particular tending away from economic progressiveness and towards economic conservatism for reasons other than religiosity.

**Summary:** Mainstream Christians (Catholics and Anglicans) are the most likely to be economic conservatives, with NR and non-Christian denominations the least. By religiosity, middle-of-the-religious-road Notionals and Occasionals are the most economically conservative, more so than both Rejecters and Committeds.

## Low-income households

An analysis by The Guardian found several major national correlations with voting for the Coalition, including lower household incomes, and higher proportions of those not in work or study (Evershed 2019).

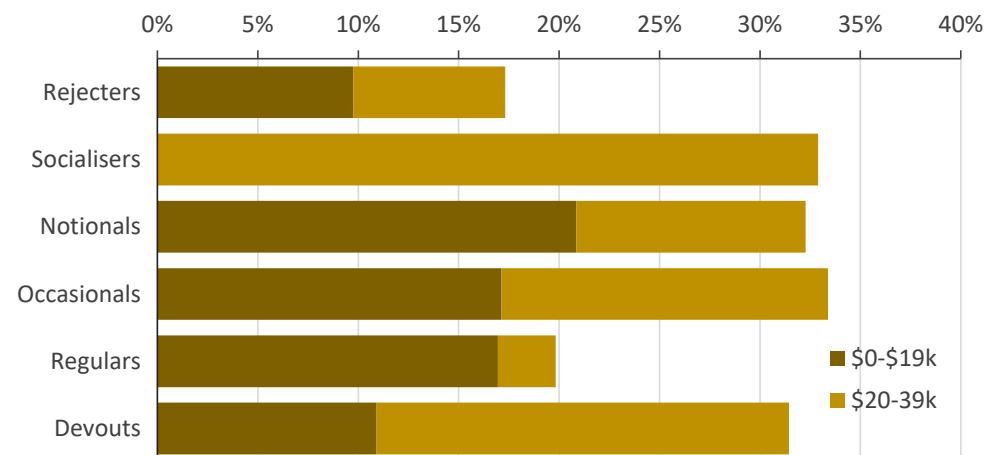
By religion, compared with NRs (8%), Catholics (20%) and Anglicans (21%) had significantly higher rates of gross annual household income under \$20k, as well as, along with Uniting/Methodists, under \$40k (Figure 64). Non-Christian-religion households topped the list at 29% under \$20k.



**Figure 64:** Household gross annual income by religion

Source: AES 2019

By ARI6 religiosity, Rejecters were less likely than all others except Socialisers to have a household income of less than \$20k, and less likely than all others to have a household income of less than \$40k (Figure 65).



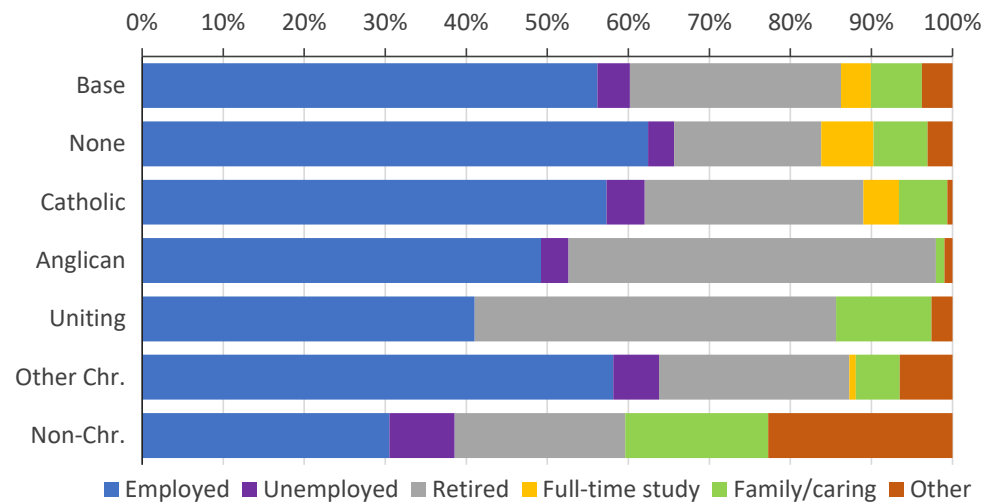
**Figure 65:** Household gross annual income by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

**Summary:** Australians who are affiliated with a religious denomination are significantly more likely than Rejecters to have a low household income.

## Jobs, jobs, jobs

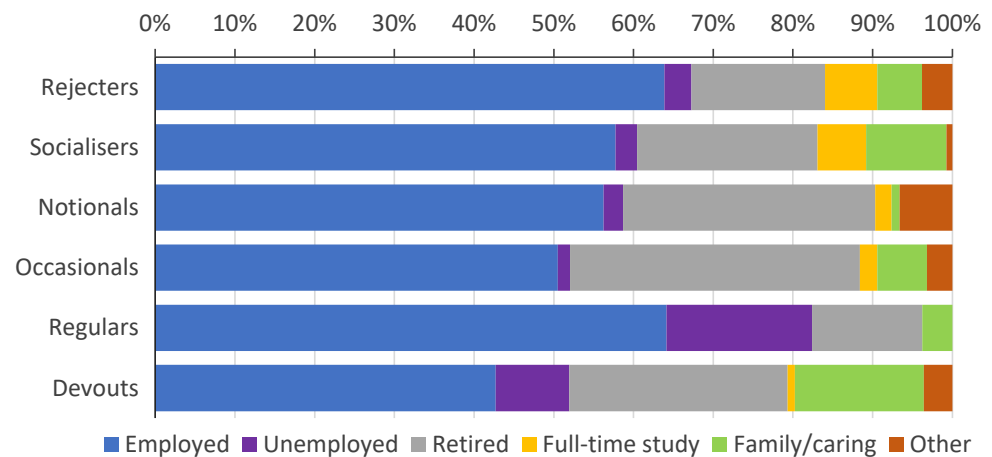
The rate of unemployment differs amongst the religions, with minor Christian (6%) and non-Christian (8%) denominations having higher rates of unemployment than Catholics (5%), Anglicans (3%), NRs (3%) and Uniting/Methodists (0%) (Figure 66).



**Figure 66:** Main work by religion

Source: AES 2019. Note: "Other" includes disability pension, illness, on leave, etc.

Devouts (9%) and Regulars (18%) had higher rates still (Figure 67).

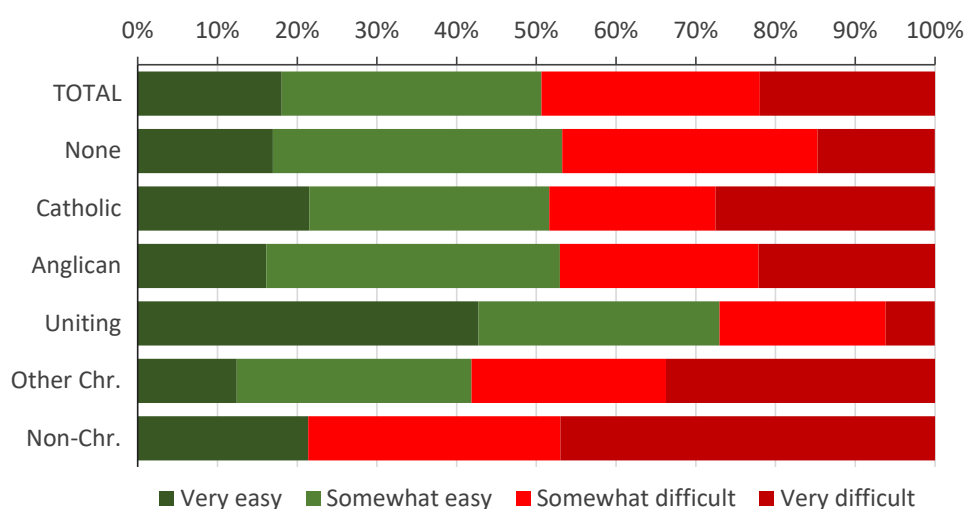


**Figure 67:** Main work by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

Added to this is the personal belief of how hard it would be to get another job. Amongst those employed or looking for work, minor Christian (34%) and non-Christian (47%) denominations were significantly more likely than NRs (15%) to say that getting another job would be *very hard* (Figure 68). Indeed, since non-Christian denominations hold university education qualifications at

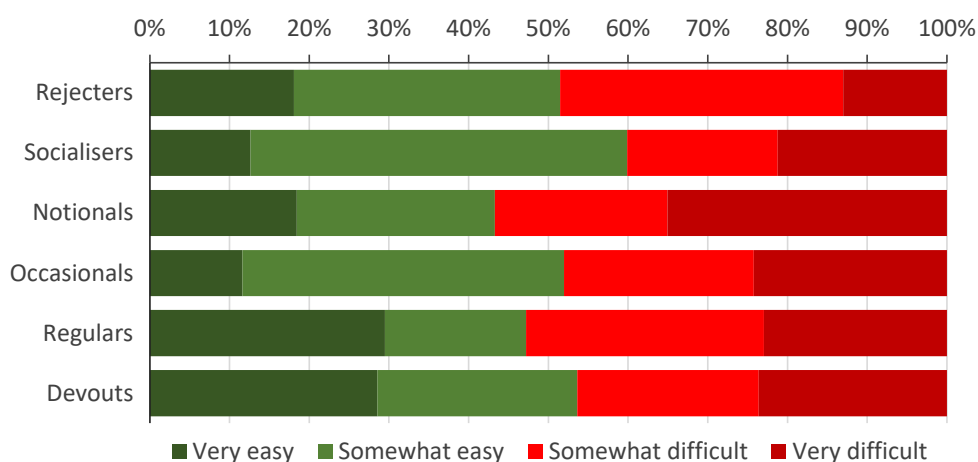
higher rates than all others, this suggests that this group may experience employment discrimination.



**Figure 68:** Belief in ease/difficulty of finding another job, by religion

Source: AES 2019. Base: Employed or looking for paid work

On the religiosity spectrum, Rejecters (13%) were significantly less likely to think getting another job very hard (Notionals 35%, Occasionals 24%, Regulars 23%, Devouts 24%) (Figure 69).



**Figure 69:** Belief in ease/difficulty of finding another job, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019. Base: Employed or looking for paid work

Therefore, on the counts of lower household incomes, higher unemployment rates, and fear about the difficulty of getting another job, religious denominations and segments are more naturally drawn to the Coalition, with its reputation (rightly or wrongly) for better economic management.

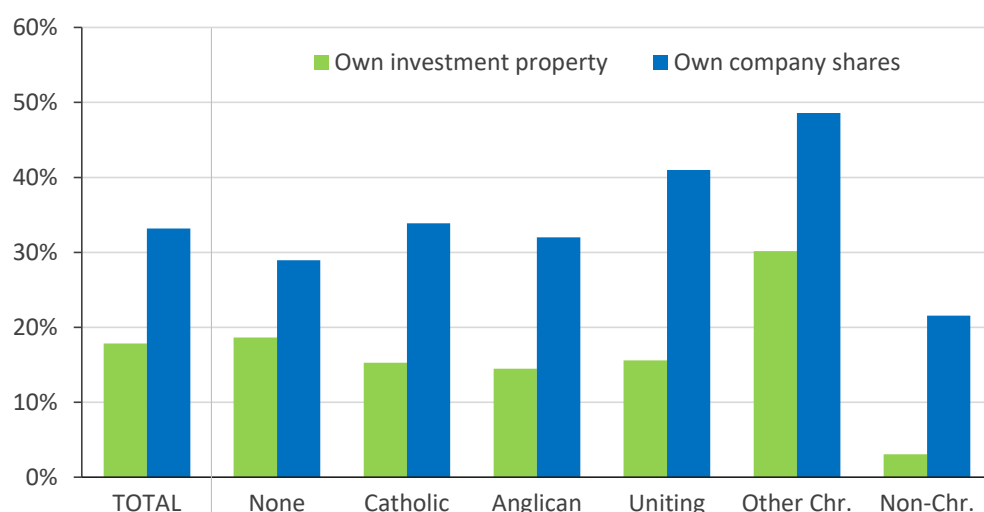
**Summary:** The unemployment rate amongst Devouts (9%) and especially Regulars (18%) is significantly higher than others. Religionists are also more likely on average than NRs to say that getting another job would be *very* hard. Non-Christian (47%) and minor Christian (34%) denominations, and Notionals (35%), are the most likely to say so, with Uniting/Methodists (6%) and Rejecters (13%) the least.

## Investment properties, company shares

There's a further economic or financial explanation of religionists' greater voting for the Coalition at the 2019 federal election: levels of personal investment.

Labor's key election pledges included reining in negative gearing for property investment, for the cash payment of company tax refunds for dividend holders who don't pay tax, and to halve the 50% capital gains tax discount rate.

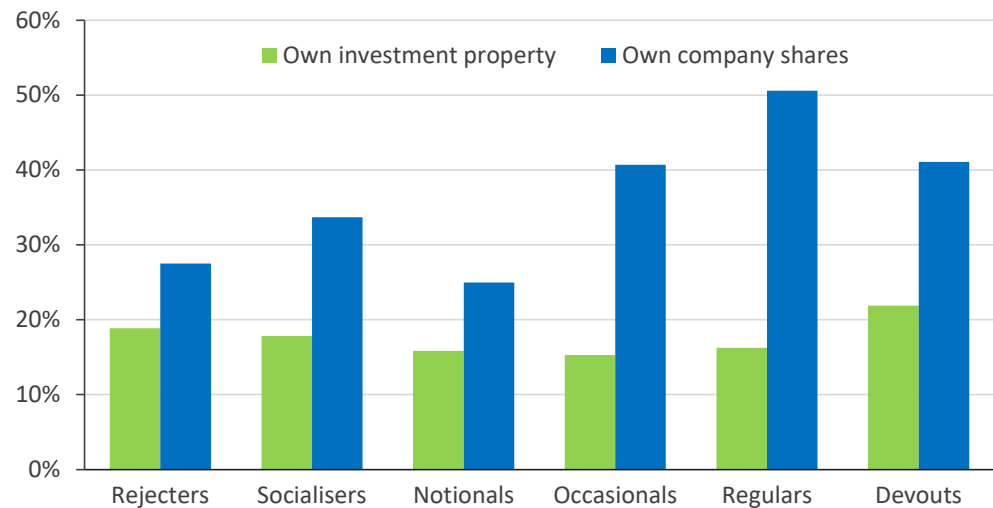
Apart from non-Christian denominations, NRs were the least likely to own company shares, and minor Christian denominations by far the most likely to own investment property or company shares (Figure 70).



**Figure 70:** Rates of investment property and share ownership by religion

Source: AES 2019

By religiosity, Devouts were most likely to own investment property, and Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts far more likely than Rejecters, Socialisers and Notionals to own company shares (Figure 71).



**Figure 71:** Rates of investment property and share ownership by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

**Summary:** Regulars and Devouts had the highest rates of company share ownership, and Devouts the highest rates of ownership of investment properties. Labor's policies to reduce the financial performance of these asset classes for their owners contributed to a movement of Regulars and Devouts to the Coalition at the 2019 federal election.

## Election policies about money

Like the AEI3, Australians' attitudes toward government financial policies illustrate differences between NRs and religionists.

Table 1 shows the three most important policy areas people reported at the 2019 election, by religiosity (AES 2019). Economic management was in the top two across the spectrum. However, financial issues including taxation were *two* of the top three amongst only Committeds (Regulars and Devouts), while other non-financial issues such as the environment and health appeared amongst the other segments.

**Table 1:** Top three 2019 election policy priorities, by ARI6

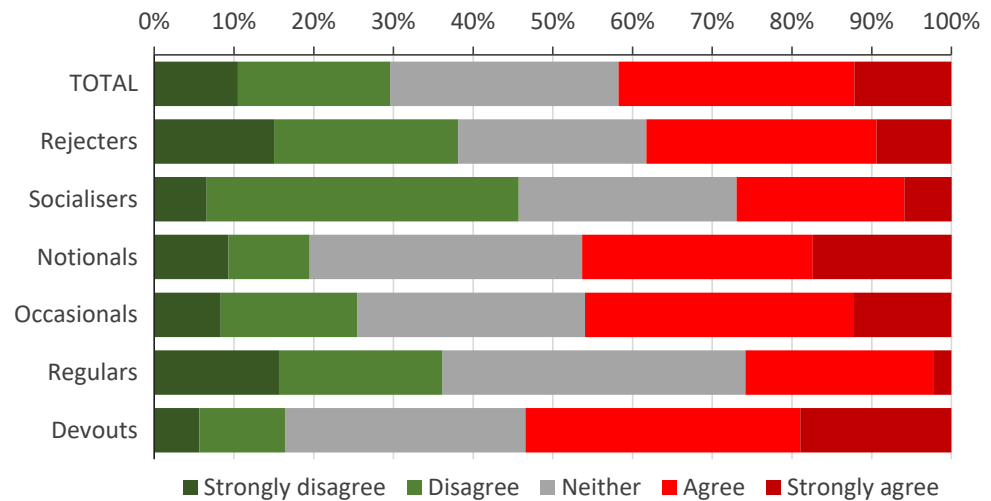
Segment	Policy 1	Policy 2	Policy 3
Rejecters	Economic management 22%	The environment 21%	Global warming 18%
Socialisers	Economic management 26%	Health/Medicare 22%	Global warming 20%
Notionals	Health/Medicare 28%	Economic management 18%	The environment 16%
Occasionals	Economic management 30%	Health/Medicare 23%	The environment 12%
Regulars	Economic management 32%	Taxation 30%	Refugees & asylum seekers 19%
Devouts	Economic management 33%	Health/Medicare 13%	Taxation 11%

Source: AES 2019

Thus, the previously established financial interests of Australia's religionists, especially Regulars and Devouts, is reflected in their policy areas of primary interest.

On the matter of taxation, Devouts were by far the most likely to say (53%) that high income taxation makes people less willing to work hard (Figure 72), suggesting that monetary motivation amongst Australia's most religious dominates other motivations to work hard.

Nearly half of Notionals and Occasionals (46% each) also linked high income taxation with reduced work motivation. In contrast, somewhat more than a third of Rejecters (38%) agreed, as did a quarter of Socialisers and Regulars (27% and 26% respectively).



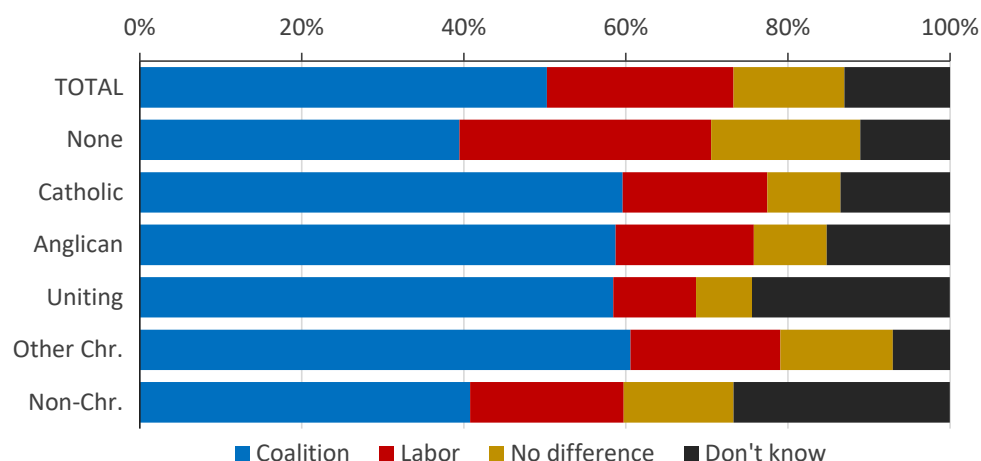
**Figure 72:** High income tax = less willing to work hard, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

Net agreement (agree – disagree) that higher taxation discourages hard work was in the slight positive (12%) overall, neutral amongst Rejecters (0%), negative amongst Socialisers (-19%) and Regulars (-10%), but highly positive amongst Notionals (27%), Occasionals (20%) and especially Devouts (37%).

These attitudes amongst not only religious voters, but religious MPs in the current federal Coalition government, may help explain why it went to the last two elections with policies to substantially reduce income taxation.

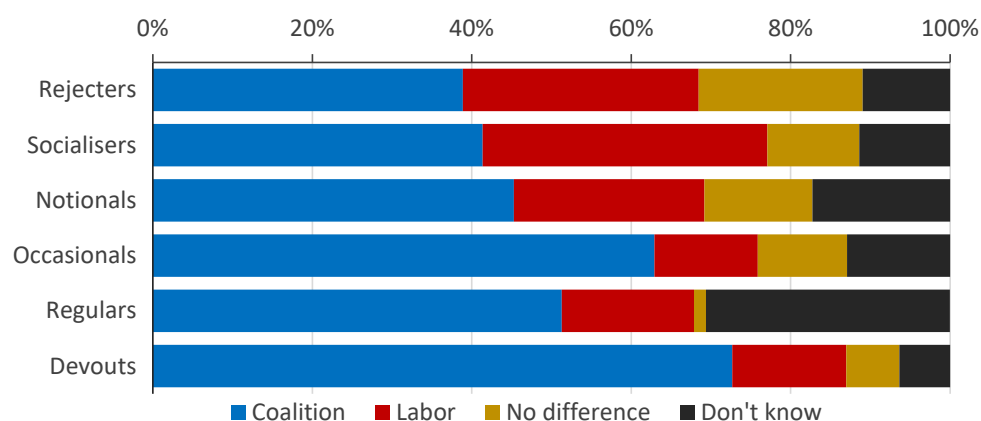
Indeed, looking at which political party Australians think is closer to their own views on economic management, Christian denominations clearly all align in the majority with the Coalition (Catholics 60%, Anglicans 59%, Uniting/Methodists 58% and minor Christian denominations 61%) (Figure 73). Far fewer NRs (39%) and non-Christian denominations (41%) aligned with the Coalition, although in all cases alignment was higher than with Labor.



**Figure 73:** Religion by who's closer to you on economic management

Source: AES 2019

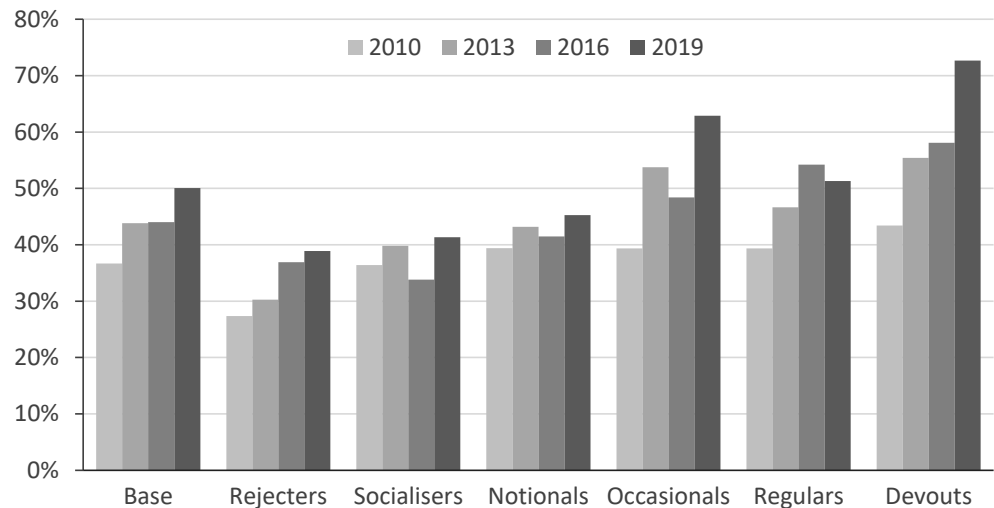
The pattern is more exaggerated by religiosity. Across the more religious half of the spectrum, a majority of Occasionals (63%), Regulars (51%) and especially Devouts (73%) said the Coalition was most closely aligned with their views on economic management than Socialisers (41%) or Rejecters (39%) (Figure 74).



**Figure 74:** ARI6 by who's closer to you on economic management

Source: AES 2019

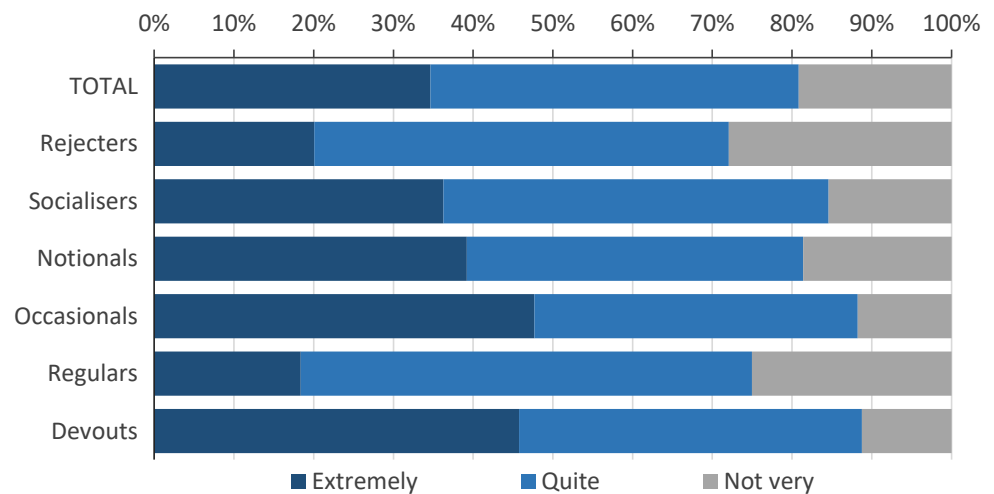
Indeed, while favouring the Coalition for economic management increased broadly across the population between the 2007 and 2019 elections (up 13%), by far the greatest increases were amongst Occasionals (up 24%) and Devouts (up 29%) (Figure 75).



**Figure 75:** ARI6 by coalition is best economic manager, by year

Source: AES. Note: The question was not asked in 2007.

Occasionals (48%) and Devouts (46%) were also the most likely to say government (not private) debt policy was extremely important to their election vote, while Rejecters (20%) and Regulars (18%) were the least likely (Figure 76).



**Figure 76:** Importance of government debt policy at 2019 election, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

**Summary:** There were significant associations between religion, religiosity and preferences for Coalition over Labor economic policy. This suggests that election analyses which attempt to explain the effects of religion and religiosity on voting patterns and election outcomes but fail to take this association (and others) into account, would significantly overestimate religion's effects.

The most religious, Occasionals and Devouts in particular, are the most concerned about economic management and government debt, while Regulars and Devouts were significantly more likely to prefer favourable personal tax policies (income tax, property ownership negative gearing, and company dividend cash payments) but be relatively unconcerned about government debt.

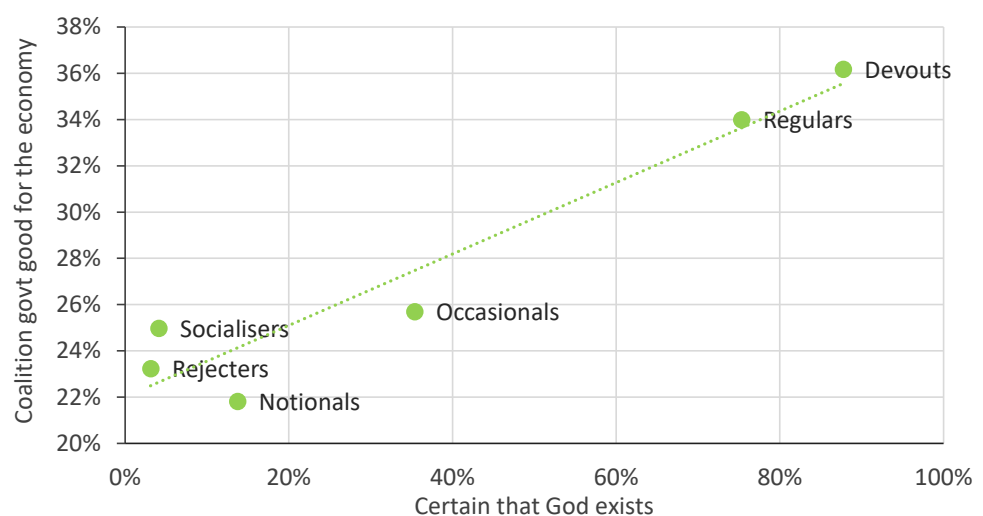
## Faith in Coalition economics

It is generally assumed by many Australians that the Coalition are better economic managers than is Labor, a message often reinforced by some media outlets. However, based on empirical analyses, the assumption is hotly contested (e.g. Austin 2019; Koukoulas 2018; Walker & Walker 2019).

Professor Mark Crosby of Monash University, who's researched the subject since at least 1995, says there was little difference between the parties back then, and there's still little difference (Crosby 2019). The Australia Institute also paints a nuanced picture: that when examining longitudinal data relative to terms of office, the Coalition appeared to be better at unemployment and the current account deficit, while Labor appeared better at economic growth, inflation and real interest rates (Junankar 2005).

Politics can make for eye-catching contradictions. It's ironic that Labor, the "workers' party", was judged worse at employment, and better at economic growth for which the Coalition is often assumed the superior party. Conversely, it's telling that the Coalition isn't now literally driving its "debt truck" billboard around the country as it did when Labor was in office (28% of GDP in 2012), highlighting the Coalition's own performance on government debt (60% in 2020) (International Monetary Fund 2021). Equally, it was a federal *Labor* government that deregulated markets, and a federal *Coalition* government under which marriage equality was legalised.

On religion and economic management beliefs, in 2019 there was a strong positive correlation between certainty in God, and belief that the Coalition government (having won office again) would make the economy better over the next year than it had in its past three years in office (Figure 77).



**Figure 77:** Certainty of God's existence & praising Coalition economics, by ARI6  
Source: AES 2019

Even despite a significant positive deviation amongst Socialisers (who tend to optimism) and negative deviation amongst Notionals (pessimism), the correlation coefficient ( $r^2$ ) was 0.92 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The converse was not true, however: there was no statistically significant correlation (positive or negative) between religiosity and thinking the Coalition would make the economy *worse* — that is, Labor would be better at economic management.

Thus, while Australia's most religious are more likely to favour the Coalition overall, that favouritism is underpinned by a significant foundation of economic — not religious — faith.

**Summary:** Higher religionist rates of economic conservatism, low household income, unemployment, and worry about the difficulty of getting another job all contributed greater rates of religionists voting for the Coalition at the 2019 federal election. Added to this was Labor's tax policy platform hostile to investment property and company share ownership, which is higher amongst minor Christian denominations, Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts. Thus, much of the change in the "religious" vote was in fact driven by more bread-and-butter issues of jobs, income, and economic faith.

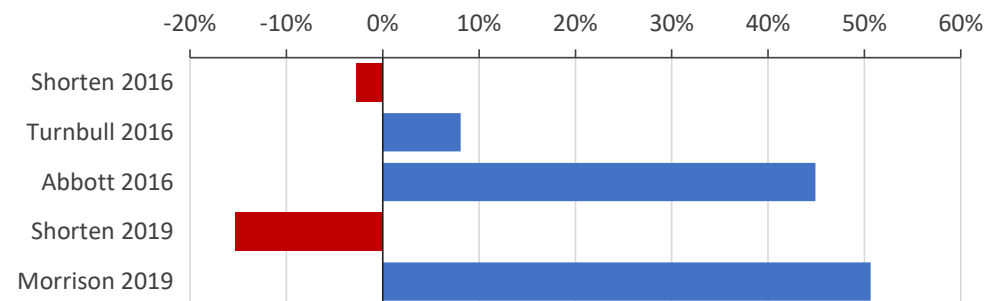
## What's not to like?

Across the Australian voting population, the most important factor in deciding how to vote is policy issues (amongst 66%), parties as a whole (17%), the specific candidates in the voter's own electorate (9%), and the party leaders alone (8%) (AES 2019).

However, amongst Devouts (11% of voters), a significantly higher proportion (17%) decide by their attitudes toward the party leaders alone.

At the 2019 election, Coalition leader Scott Morrison's nett approval rating (likes over dislikes) amongst all voters was +5%, while Labor leader Bill Shorten's was -29%. But for Devouts the picture was vastly more polarised, with Morrison at +55% and Shorten at -44%; a functional lead of 100% for Morrison. Comparing the leaders' own Devouts "premium" (Devouts approval over average approval), Morrison's was +51%, while Shorten's was -15%.

At the 2016 election, Coalition leader Malcolm Turnbull's overall nett rating was +6% to Shorten's -15%. In comparison, deposed Coalition leader Tony Abbott's was -31%. Again, the picture was more polarised amongst Devouts, with nett +14% each for Turnbull *and* Abbott, and -17% for Shorten. Turnbull's own Devouts premium was +8%, Abbott's was +45%, and Shorten's -15% (Figure 78).<sup>h</sup>



**Figure 78:** Devouts party leader net likes "premium" by election

Source: AES

All four politicians are said to be practicing Christian believers, and yet their Devouts approval ratings differ dramatically. Shorten was raised Catholic and converted to Anglicanism; Turnbull was raised Presbyterian and converted to Catholicism; Abbott was raised and stayed a Catholic; and Morrison is Australia's best-known Pentecostal.

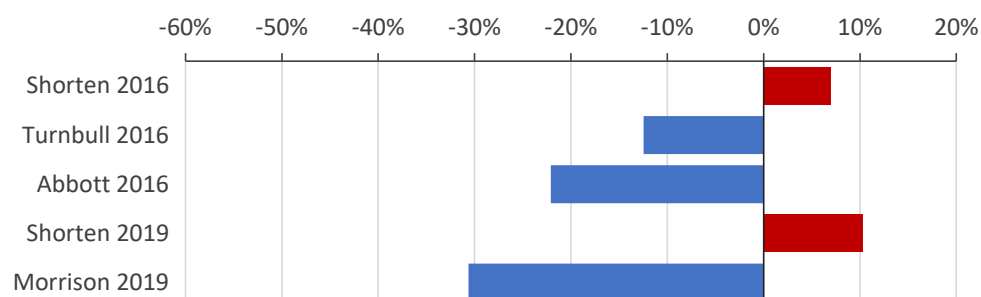
<sup>h</sup> Of course, not all likes and dislikes will be about religion. But notice (a) the size of the religious premium by degree of religious signalling, especially Abbott vs Turnbull in the same year, and (b) that Shorten's disapproval premium amongst Devouts is proportional in size to their approval of his election opponent.

Both Turnbull and Shorten, with the smaller Devouts approval polarisation (+8% and -15%) rarely talk publicly about their faith (West 2016). Abbott (+45%), however, is not shy of wearing his own version of Catholicism on his sleeve (Price 2017). Morrison (+51%) literally waves his faith in the air (Almond 2019).

Thus, religious signalling is nectar for Australian Devouts: they clearly and strongly approve. What effect might this have had on the 2019 election?

At the 2019 election, 60% of Devouts disliked Shorten, and 11% disliked Morrison. Assuming that 17% (party leader is most important voting criterion) of 11% (proportion of Devouts which is remaining stable) *all* changed their votes between Shorten and Morrison (nett 60%-11% = 49% to Morrison), that would make a *maximum* total nett 0.92% difference in favour of the more religiously overt leader. But *faith in Coalition economics* is good reason to discount that amount.

However, there are also downsides for religious signalling of party leaders. Rejecters and Socialisers tend to *disapprove* of overtly religious leaders (Figure 79). Rejecters comprise 31% of voters; 6% vote for party leaders; and 46% disliked Shorten and 55% disliked Morrison. Using the same calculations as above, that would make a *maximum* total nett 0.19% difference in favour of the *less* religiously overt leader.



**Figure 79:** Rejecters party leader net likes “cost” by election

Source: AES

**Summary:** Specific religious election policies aside, by party leader nett likes, the effect of religious signalling on federal elections is very small — well under 1% maximum nett swing when comparing the most engaged for and against: Devouts and Rejecters. Faith in Coalition economics, which is by far the highest amongst Devouts, is a good reason to discount the effects of *religious* faith as a significant source of apparent pro-religion swings.

## Democratic governance and priorities

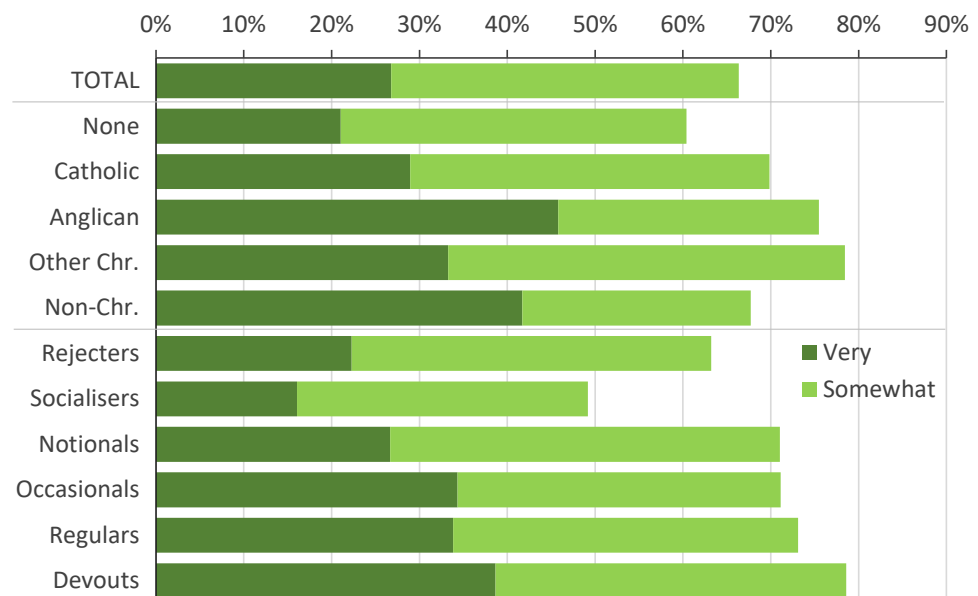
There are significant differences of attitudes between religious and non-religious Australians on a range of national issues.

### Secular democracy

Australia is, politically, a secular democracy. The nation's constitution is not premised in favour of any particular religion, and despite ongoing public debate about the balance of rights and counter-rights, laws generally protect freedom of religion and non-religion.

### Satisfaction with democratic governance

Nevertheless, attitudes toward how democratically the nation is being governed today reveal potential biases in governance. Amongst Australian religionists, nearly three quarters (71%) of Notionals and Occasionals say that democracy is well governed, as do 73% of Regulars and four out of five (79%) of Devouts. Anglicans (76%) and minor Christian denominations (79%) are the most likely denominations to be satisfied (Figure 80).



**Figure 80:** The country is governed democratically, by religion and ARI6  
Source: AVS 2018

However, a smaller number of Australians not religiously affiliated feel the same. Fewer than two thirds of Rejecters (63%), and just half of Socialisers (49%), say that Australia is being democratically governed.

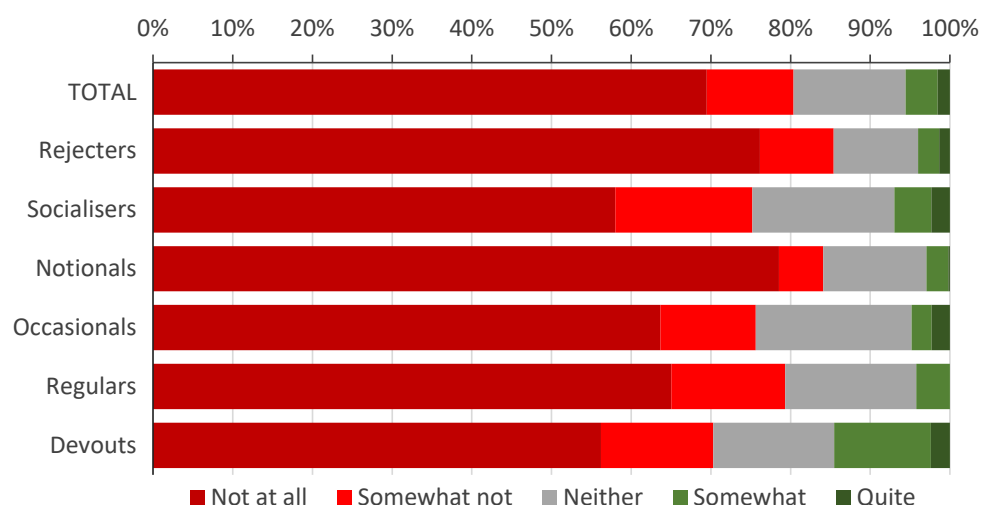
In summary, religionists — and the more religious the more so — feel the nation is being managed to their satisfaction, while non-religionists are

significantly less likely to feel satisfied. This suggests that Australian democracy may currently fail to balance the representation of religious and non-religious citizens, with significant favouritism towards religion.

**Democratic bias:** Attitudes indicate that Australia currently fails to democratically balance the representation of religious and non-religious interests, with significant favouritism towards religion.

## Most Australians reject religious authority over laws

Just 15% of Devouts versus 4% of Rejecters say that ultimate interpretation of the laws by religious authorities is a quite or somewhat essential feature of democracy (Figure 81). Although it is unclear *which* laws are referred to (for example state law versus religious canons) and to what degree “interpretation” means to inform versus enforce decisions, that makes an 11% “premium” for religious authority amongst Australia’s most religious.



**Figure 81:** Feature of democracy: Religious authorities ultimately interpret laws  
Source: AVS 2018

Overall, rejection of religious authority over Australia’s laws was in the majority across the religiosity spectrum, including Committeds: four out of five Regulars (79%) and more than two out of three Devouts (70%).

Support for ultimate religious interpretation was highest amongst non-Christian (11%), and minor Christian (8%) denominations, versus 5% of NRs, 4% of Catholics, and 2% of Anglicans.

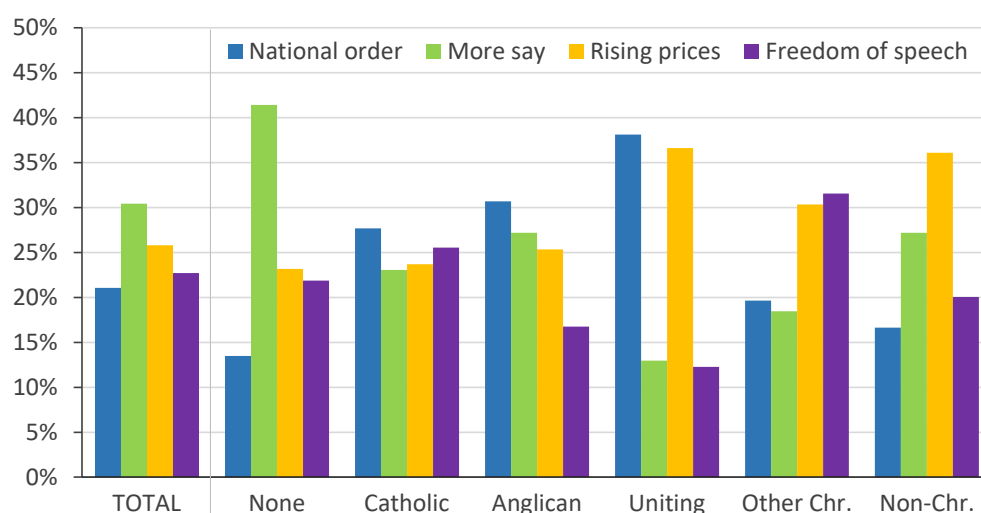
**Summary:** Citizen satisfaction with democratic governance suggests there may be net bias in favour of religious and against secular interests. Yet most Australians (94%) and even Devouts (85%) reject religious authorities as the ultimate interpreters of law, suggesting the net bias in favour of religion is more subtle.

## Top 4 national priorities

In 2019, the AES asked people to rank four national priorities:

- Maintain order of the nation.
- Give people more say in important government decisions.
- Fight rising prices.
- Protect freedom of speech.

Amongst mainstream Christians (Catholics, Anglicans, and Uniting/Methodists), the top priority was to maintain order of the nation (Figure 82).<sup>i</sup> Conversely, amongst NRs, the top priority by far was to give people more say in important government decisions: a large perceived deficit in opportunities to participate.



**Figure 82:** Religion and top national priority of four options

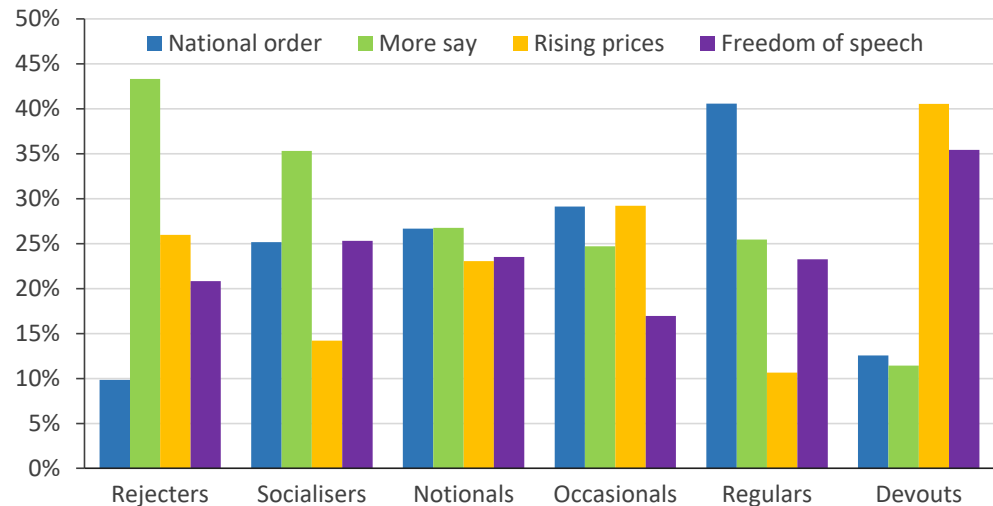
Source: AES 2019

This further suggests, along with attitudes towards secular democracy, there may be normative bias towards favouring mainstream religious interests at the expense mostly of non-religious interests.

Amongst non-Christian denominations, the top priority was to fight rising prices.

By ARI6 religiosity, both Rejecters and Socialisers were most likely believe that having more say in important government decisions was the most important of the four priorities (Figure 83).

<sup>i</sup> Specifically note that “maintain” means to protect the current “order”, not to question, challenge or alter it.



**Figure 83:** ARI6 and top national priority of four options

Source: AES 2019

Amongst Regulars, by far the most important priority was maintaining the national order. This was also equal top for Notionals and Occasionals.

Amongst Devouts, however, the clear top priority was to fight rising prices. This adds to other evidence that Devouts are, on average, more focused than other Australians, on financial considerations.

### Protecting freedom of speech

Some 21% of Rejecters nominated protecting freedom of speech as the top national priority of the four. Given that Rejecters don't affiliate with any religious denomination and never attend religious services, we might assume for the most part that their interest is in the wider democratic principle of freedom of speech, rather than for any religious form.

Socialisers (25%), Notionals (24%), and Regulars (23%) were slightly more likely to say freedom of speech was the top national priority. Occasionals (17%), however, were the least likely to say so. This might also help explain the major exodus of Occasionals from religious participation — if they were not pleased with the kind of ideas espoused by clerics.

Devouts were by far the most likely to nominate freedom of speech as their top national priority (35%), and by far the least likely to nominate having more say in important government decisions (13%). Compared with Rejecters, Devouts allocated a 14% “premium” to freedom of speech, and a 32% “discount” to having more say.

Given that Devouts (79%) were the most likely religiosity segment to say they were happy with current democratic governance, it is unsurprising that they were also the least likely to nominate giving people more say.

In all ARI6 segments *except* Devouts, giving people more say had higher average priority than freedom of speech (a negative gap). Amongst Devouts the gap was a striking positive 24%. Thus, Devouts were uniquely the least likely to favour general democratic participation, but by far the most likely to favour *themselves* as having the right to a say.

This self-referential normativity, especially as exclusive holders of “truth” and God’s claimed concern with everyone personally, is well-illustrated by devout religionist statements like those of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) (2021):

*“In Australia as well as across the western world, truth in the public square is being attacked and suppressed. ... Christian institutions are being undermined. Churches are being pressured by new moral and legal norms.”* — **Australian Christian Lobby**

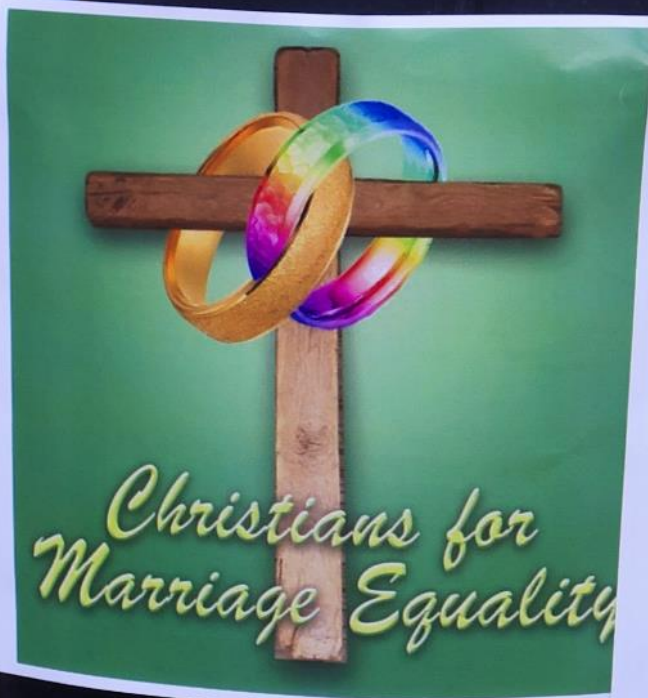
The ACL also operate the Lachlan Macquarie Internship, a training program designed to steward and coach devout Christians into public office (Lachlan Macquarie Internship 2012), whose prospectus notes that:

*“There is also a growing concern among Christians that Australia is moving away from its Judeo-Christian heritage and that like cut flowers, the principles that undergird our country will wither without their biblical foundation.”* — **Lachlan Macquarie Internship prospectus**

Other Australians, including the Australian Council of Churches, have “expressed dismay at the one-sided view of Christianity” portrayed by the ACL (Uniting Church in Australia 2011).

**Summary:** Devouts are by far the most likely to say that fighting rising prices is their top national priority. They’re also the least likely to prioritise people having more say in important government decisions but the most likely to argue for freedom of their own “truth” speech, revealing self-referential normativity.





I'm a Christian and...

acl

australian christian lobby  
voice for values

... does not speak for  
me.

## Attitudes towards major social issues

We established using the Australian Social Identity 6-Factor model (see page 56) that Australian religionists hold more conservative views on matters of gender equality and sexuality. It is generally accepted that on average, Australian religionists also hold more conservative views across a range of more controversial social issues.

Conservative religious opposition is particularly visible regarding matters that have been the subject of public debate and legislative change in recent years. Clerics often speak in the media against such reforms, but the degree to which they represent the views of their flocks — actual voters — has been generally not well understood.

Here, we examine and explore the *real* views of religionist versus NR Australians about abortion, voluntary assisted dying, marriage equality, smoking marijuana, and global warming.

## Abortion

The proportion of pro-choice Australians supporting access to abortion services was found to be 55% in 1996, 57% in 1996, and 65% in 1998 (Betts 2004). Another poll in 1996 found 30% of Australians in favour of availability on demand, with another 40% in favour of availability in special circumstances (a total of 70% approval), with just 7% opposing it in all circumstances.

Nevertheless, in the early 2000s, some public commentators were suggesting that pro-choice public opinion regarding abortion had begun to wane (Betts 2004).

A fresh poll (AuSSA) in 2003 found 82% of Australians pro-choice, and just 9% opposed. Amongst non-religionists the figures were 93% and 2% respectively; amongst Catholics 72% and 15%; amongst Anglicans, Uniting and Presbyterians (collectively) 86% and 6%; and amongst Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, and Jews (collectively) 81% and 6%. Only amongst Baptists, Lutherans and Pentecostals (collectively) was support more modest though still in the majority (53%), with just over a third (36%) opposed in all circumstances (Betts 2004).

Clearly, the proportion of pro-choice Australians was growing.

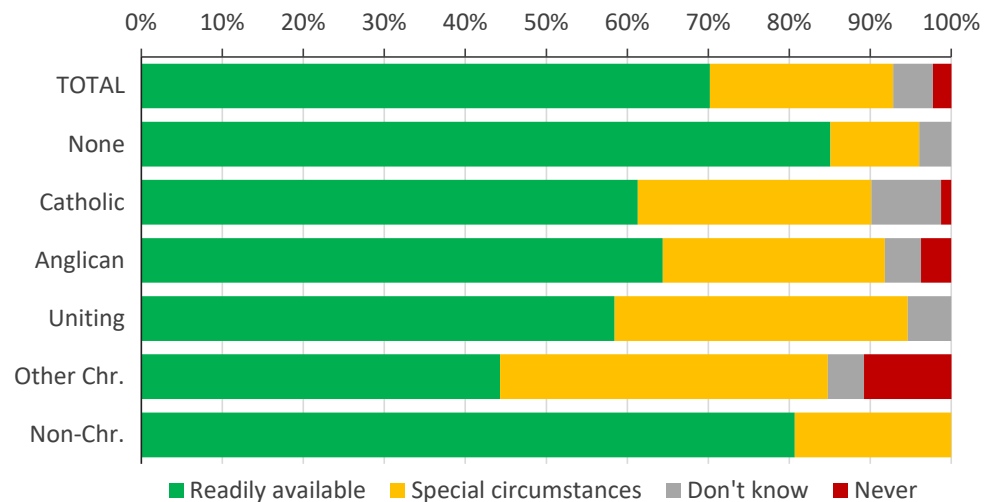
Now again, in 2021, the Catholic church suggests that concern about abortion, at least amongst Catholics, is increasing:

*“Abortion is increasingly becoming an issue of great concern for Catholics.”*  
— (Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne 2021)

However, this seems to be wishful thinking on the part of Catholic bishops, who maintain a vocal and active hostility to freedom of choice for all Australians, Catholic or not.

In 2019, 93% of Australians were pro-choice, including 96% of non-religionists, 90% of Catholics, 92% of Anglicans, 95% of Uniting/Methodists, 85% of minor Christian denominations, and 100% of non-Christian religionists (Figure 84).

Anti-choicers (“Never”) were hardly present, at just 2% overall, 1% of Catholics, 4% of Anglicans, and 11% of minor Christian denominations.

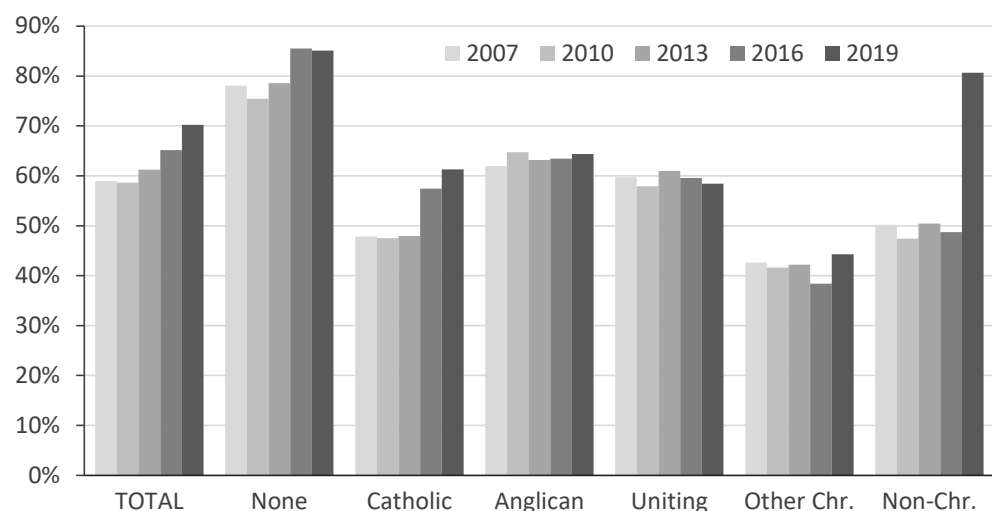


**Figure 84:** Attitudes toward abortion by religion

Source: AES 2019

More than two thirds of Australians support abortion *availability on demand* (70%). That includes a majority of religionists: 61% of Catholics, 64% of Anglicans, 58% of Uniting/Methodists and 81% amongst non-Christian denominations. Only amongst the minor Christian denominations is on-demand support in the minority, but even then nearly half (44%).

Nor is support for abortion choice in decline (Figure 85). Since 2007, the proportion of Australians who say that abortion should be readily available has increased, mostly amongst NRs and Catholics. Therefore, any statement by clerics about a seeming decrease in pro-choice attitudes is misplaced.

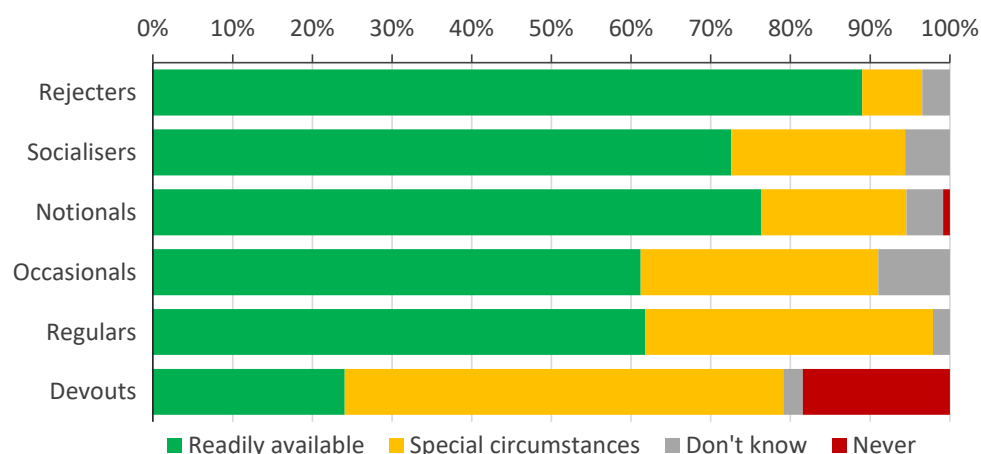


**Figure 85:** Abortion should be readily available, by religion

Source: AES

Unsurprisingly, an anti-choice stance correlates strongly with religiosity (Figure 86). Across the ARI6 spectrum, “readily available” attitudes were in a

considerable majority, from 89% of Rejecters to 62% of Regulars. Only amongst Devouts is “readily available” in the minority. But even amongst this most religious cohort, one in four (24%) were fully pro-choice, and four out of five (79%) supported choice overall.

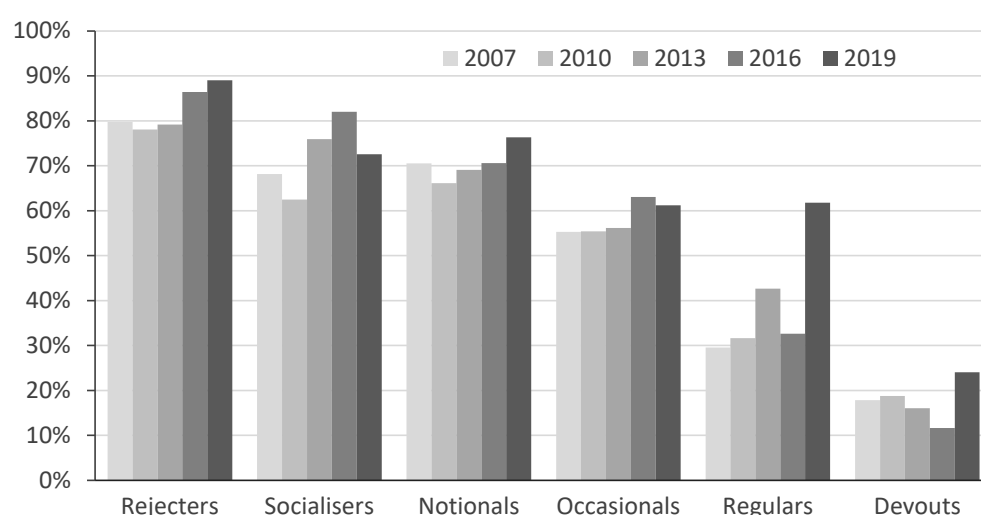


**Figure 86:** Attitudes toward abortion by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

Almost all anti-choicers in 2019 (92%) were Devouts, with the tiny remainder amongst Notionals. Differences by sex are especially pronounced amongst Committeds (Regulars and Devouts), among whom nearly half of females (46%) but only a tiny minority of males (17%) supported readily available abortion.

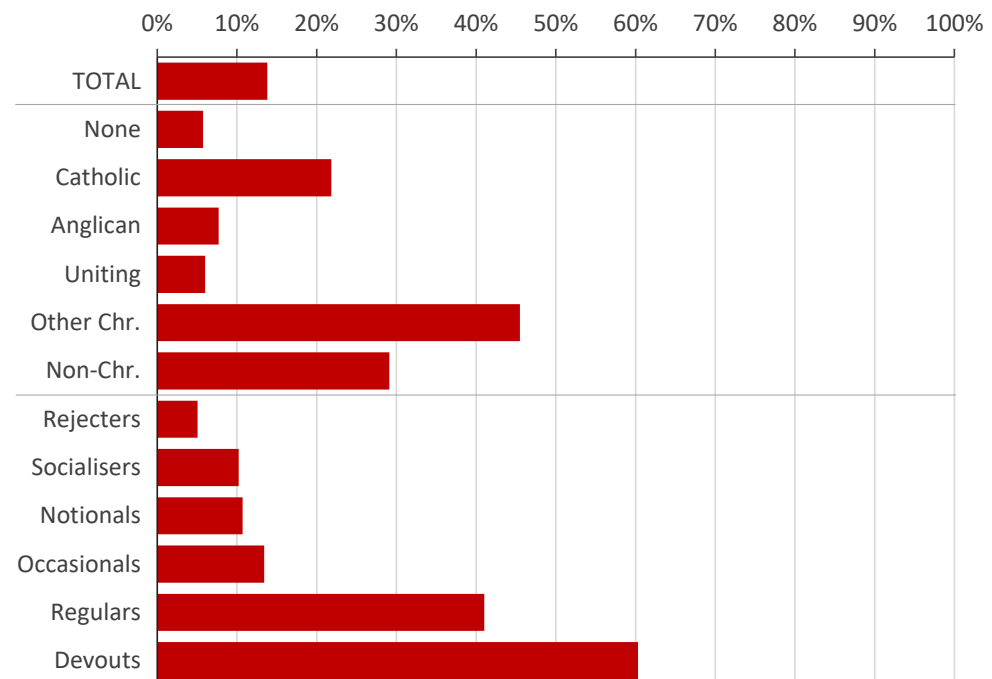
Attitudes towards readily available abortion increased across the religious spectrum between 2007 and 2019 (Figure 87).



**Figure 87:** Support for readily available abortion by ARI6, by year

Source: AES

In the case of abortion because of low household income, only a modest majority of Devouts (60%) said it was always wrong, with a minority of Regulars (41%) and minor Christian denominations (46%) saying likewise (Figure 88). Fewer than one in four Catholics (22%), and even fewer Anglicans (8%), Uniting/Methodists (6%) and NRs (6%) said abortion because of low household income was always wrong.



**Figure 88:** Abortion for reason of low household income is always wrong

Source: AuSSA 2018

Given the exceptionally high levels of support for abortion choice across Australian society, it's remarkable that abortion technically remained in the criminal code of some Australian jurisdictions until very recently.

Those clerics continuing to actively oppose abortion choice are still speaking in terms of religious "tradition". However, even amongst those remaining in their flocks — for many have left — most don't agree that prohibition of abortion services is a valid part of their religious tradition.

In relation to refusal of abortion services in faith-based, notably Catholic, hospitals, this begs the question as to who the prohibition policy is serving.

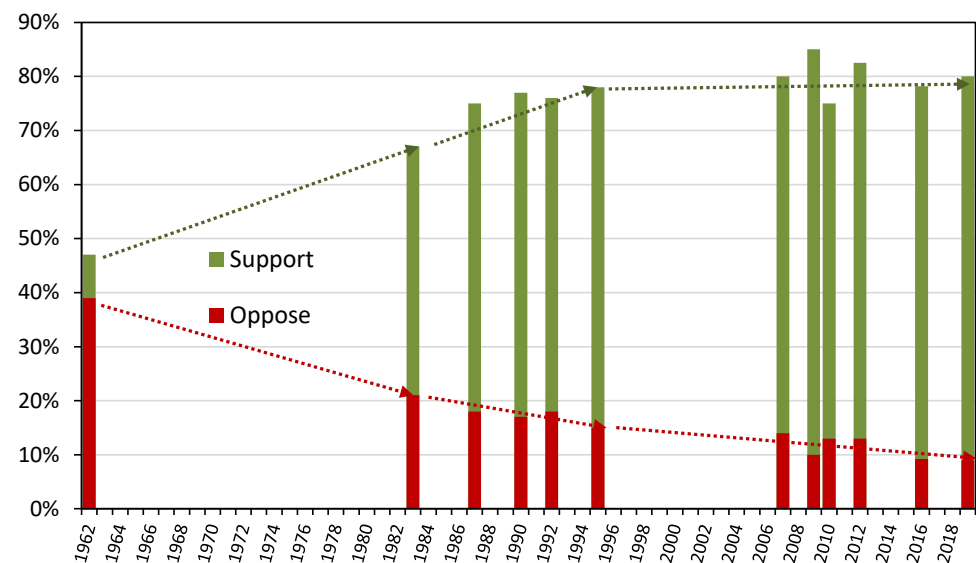
Overall, 93% of Australians, including 90% of Catholics, believe abortion should be available, 70% and 61% "readily on demand". Just 2% of Australians and 1% of Catholics believe it should never be available. Thus, prohibitive abortion policy clearly serves the particular interests of the church's senior hierarchy at the expense of the interests of the Australian — *including Catholic* — public.

**Summary:** Pro-choice attitudes towards abortion have been in the majority for several decades and support is higher than ever. Now, most Australians (93%) are pro-choice, including 70% who believe abortion should be readily available on demand, and majorities across all major religions. Opposing clerics are out of touch with their flocks and represent only a small proportion of Devouts — and their “head office” — on this issue.

## Voluntary Assisted Dying

Lawful Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) allows a person under restricted circumstances such as a terminal illness with intolerable suffering, to peacefully bring about their death with lethal medication. At the time of writing, it had been legalised and implemented in Victoria, and legalised but not yet implemented in Western Australia and Tasmania.

Historical data shows that support for and opposition to VAD had almost reached present levels by the mid-1990s (Figure 89).



**Figure 89:** Attitudes toward VAD since the 1960s

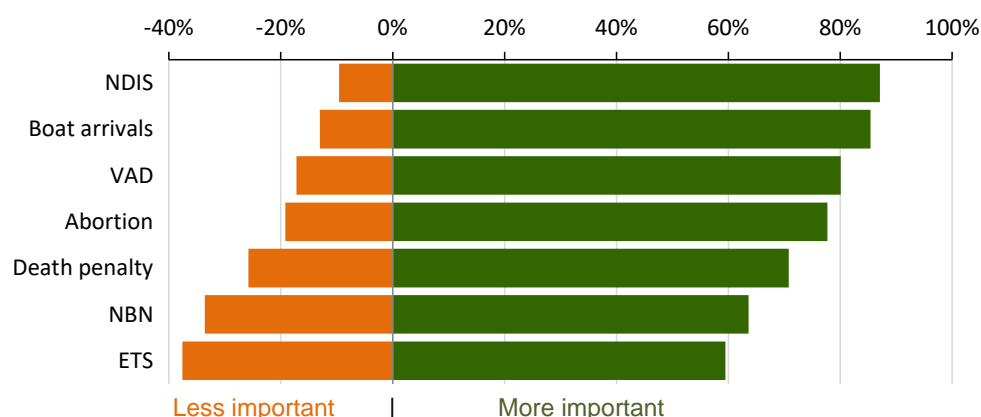
Sources: Roy Morgan, ASRB, Newspoll, AES

Given that a majority of Australians have approved of VAD with only a small minority opposed since the early 1980s, and most in support by the mid-1990s, it's remarkable that still a majority of Australian states haven't legalised the choice.<sup>j</sup>

It's even more remarkable when considering the results of a 2012 Newspoll<sup>k</sup> which found the personal importance of whether or not VAD (80%, and abortion 78%) were legalised was higher than the personal importance of the now National Broadband Network (NBN 64%), or a carbon emissions trading scheme (ETS 58%) (Figure 90).

<sup>j</sup> Under a prohibition Act of the federal parliament, at present the territories are unable to consider or enact legislation for VAD.

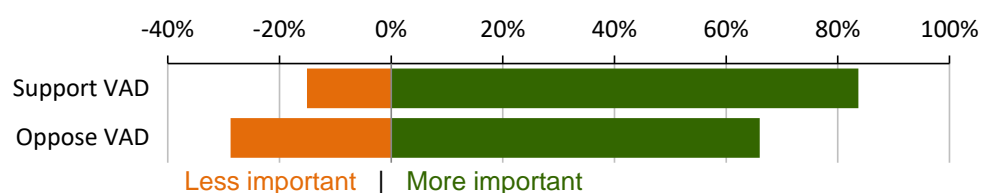
<sup>k</sup> Disclosure: As then CEO of the national alliance of Australian VAD societies, I commissioned Newspoll to conduct the research.



**Figure 90:** Personal importance of whether or not policy is dealt with, 2012

Source: Newspoll 2012. Notes: NDIS = National Disability Insurance Scheme, Boat arrivals in respect of asylum seekers, VAD = voluntary assisted dying, NBN = a national broadband network, ETS = an emissions trading scheme or carbon tax.

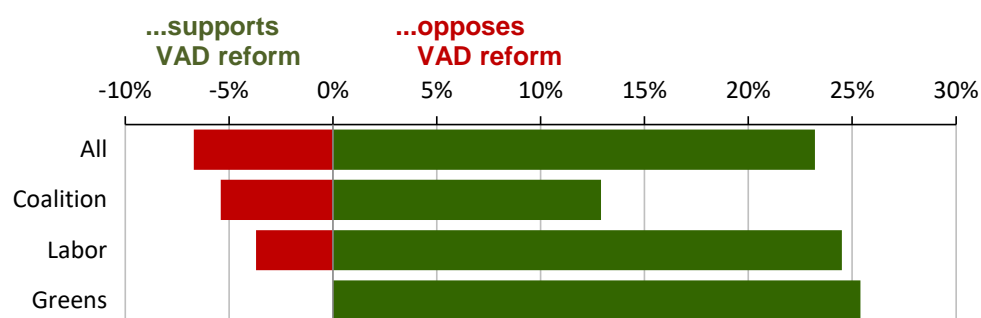
Personal importance was significantly higher amongst those who favoured VAD law reform (84%), than amongst those opposed (66%) (Figure 91).



**Figure 91:** Personal importance of VAD by support or opposition, 2012

Source: Newspoll 2012

This personal importance was also reflected in voters' intentions to change their election vote should their own usually-preferred electoral candidate hold the opposite VAD position as themselves (Figure 92).



**Figure 92:** Intention to change vote if otherwise preferred candidate ...

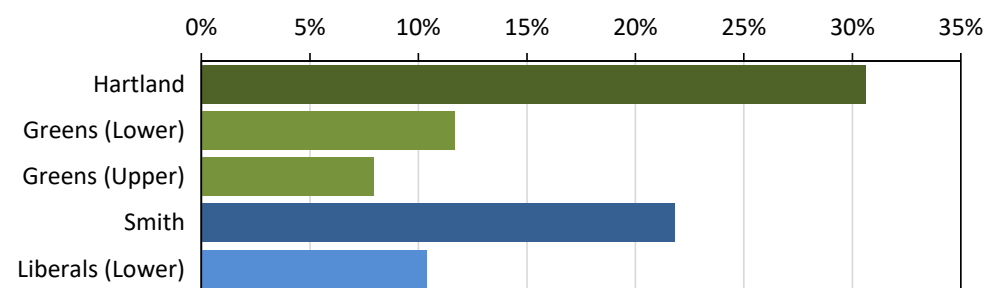
Source: Newspoll 2012

That is, amongst VAD-supporting voters, 23% said they would change their vote if their usually-preferred candidate opposed VAD, while just 7% of VAD-opposed voters would change if their usual candidate supported VAD. That's a

net ratio of more than 3 to 1 in favour of supportive candidates. The ratio was positive by a factor of more than 6 to 1 amongst Greens voters, more than 4 to 1 amongst Labor voters, and more than 2 to 1 amongst Coalition voters.

This intention seems to be born out in practice. In an unlikely political alliance in 2008, MLC the Hon. Colleen Hartland (Greens) and MLA the Hon. Ken Smith (Liberal), co-sponsored Victoria's first VAD parliamentary bill. The bill was ultimately defeated. Religious conservatives, especially a Catholic institution in Mr Smith's electorate, resolved to campaign against the bill's sponsors at the next election.

However, despite the campaigning — and perhaps because of it — both Ms Hartland and Mr Smith were returned with major increases in their votes at the 2010 election, increases much greater than their parties' (Figure 93).



**Figure 93:** Percent increase in MPs' election votes in 2010 vs 2006

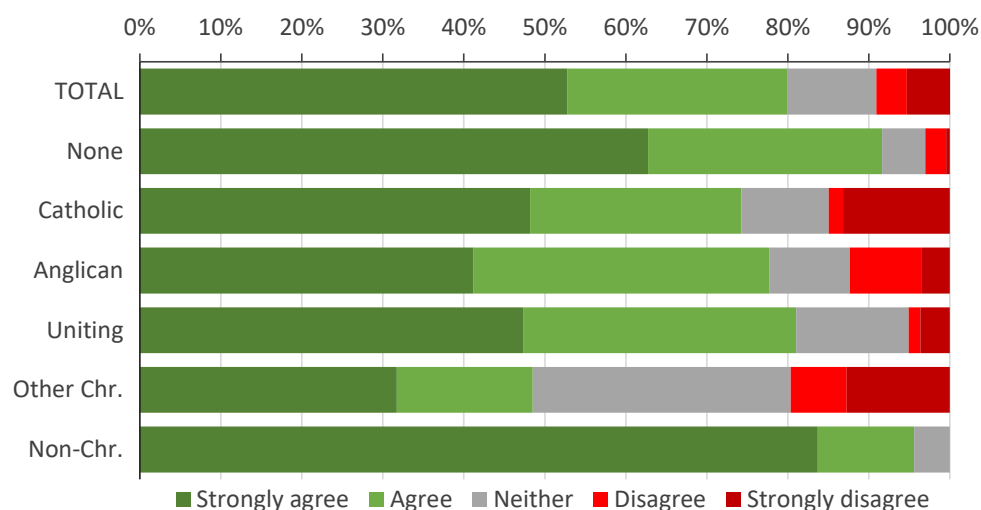
Source: Victorian Electoral Commission

In addition, while obviously many factors are at play in elections, after Victoria's Labor government sponsored a VAD bill which was passed in 2017, and Western Australia's Labor government did likewise in 2019, both governments were returned with increased majorities at their following elections. Legalising VAD is clearly not the vote-loser that opposing religionists and politicians have assumed.

In 2019, 80% of Australians were in favour of legalised VAD choice, including most Nones (92%) and non-Christian denominations (96%), three quarters (74%) of Catholics, four out of five Anglicans (78%) and Uniting/Methodists (81%), and nearly half of minor Christian denominations (48%) (Figure 94).

Those opposed to VAD were in a small minority, 9% overall, 3% of Nones, 15% of Catholics, 12% of Anglicans, 5% of Uniting/Methodists, and 20% of minor Christian denominations.

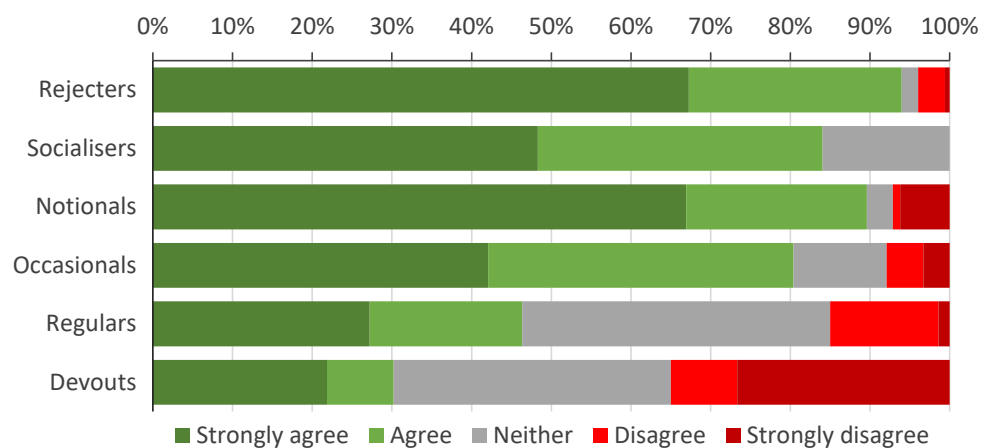
Across all non/religious categories, strong support outweighed strong opposition by a factor of ten to one.



**Figure 94:** Attitudes toward VAD by religion, 2019

Source: AES 2019

As for abortion, attitudes toward VAD correlated strongly with religiosity. Support for lawful VAD is in a considerably majority amongst Rejecters (94%), Socialisers (84%), Notionals (90%) and Occasionals (80%) (Figure 95). Only amongst Committeds is support in the minority: nearly half of Regulars (46%) and nearly a third of Devouts (30%). Only amongst Devouts does opposition outweigh support, even though nearly a third (30%) support law reform.



**Figure 95:** Attitudes toward VAD by ARI6, 2019

Source: AES 2019

Compared with the AES 2016 results, in 2019 there was a net movement towards *strong* support for lawful VAD of 7%, 12% amongst Catholics, 9% of Rejecters, 13% of Notionals, 8% of Regulars and 9% of Devouts. Also significant were decreases of opposition to VAD amongst regulars (-10%) and Devouts (-12%).

Thus, while headline rates of attitudes toward VAD remain somewhat similar from year to year, the underlying strength of support for VAD has increased

and opposition has diminished. That includes amongst Australia's most religious.

### Case example: Queensland bishops' misleading claims

At Queensland's 2020 state election, Labor pledged to bring a VAD bill before the state's legislature if re-elected. Brisbane Catholic Archbishop Mark Coleridge described this as "rushed", broadcasting his view in the media, and having his statement read out at masses (Livingstone 2020).

However, nation-wide, public attitudes in favour of VAD law reform have been in the majority since at least the early 1980s (see Figure 89), with many parliamentary attempts to legalise it. Claims that legalisation is "rushed" is merely a rhetorical device — a attempted filibuster.

Since Labor was returned to office in Queensland, the Catholic bishop of Townsville, Tim Harris, who is the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference delegate on VAD, said that with 80,000 Catholics in the Townsville diocese, he was compelled to write to Queensland MPs on their behalf to caution against the reform (Ng 2020).

But analysis of 2019 VoteCompass data based on 6,766 respondents in his own diocese, comprised of 8 state electoral Districts, reveal that 81% of its voters support VAD law reform, including 79% of *his own Catholic constituents*!<sup>1</sup> Just 8% of all diocesan voters, and 11% of diocesan Catholic voters, oppose VAD.

The evidence suggests that Catholic bishops either haven't listened to their own congregation, or listened only to those who agree with them.

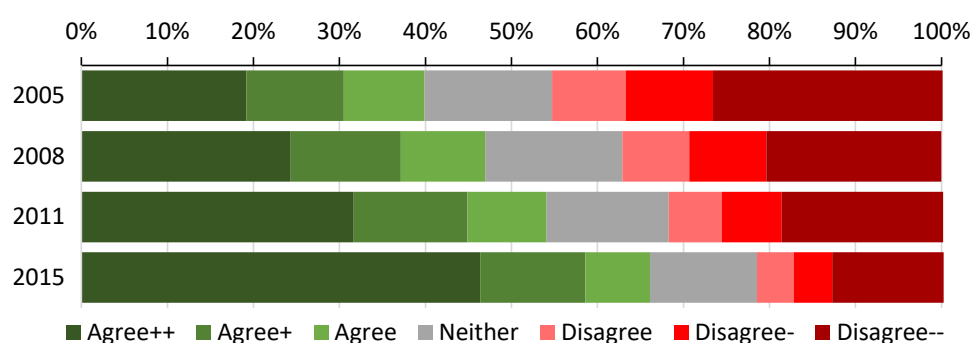
**Summary:** Net support for lawful VAD in Australia has held around 75%–80% since the mid-1990s. Currently, support stands at four in five (80%) and opposition at around one in ten (11%). In just the past three years there have been significant increases in *strong* support and decreases in opposition, including amongst Australia's most religious: Regulars and Devouts.

<sup>1</sup> Publication of this analysis is pending.

## Marriage equality

State recognition of marriage between LGBTI+ persons, previously only permitted between a male and a female, was legalised by the federal parliament in 2017, after a plebiscite asking all Australians for their opinion on the matter returned a majority (62%) in favour (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017c).

Data from Melbourne University’s longitudinal HILDA study shows how radically public opinion had changed over a decade in regard to the question “*Homosexual couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples do*” (Figure 96).



**Figure 96:** Attitudes toward LGBTI+ equal rights by year

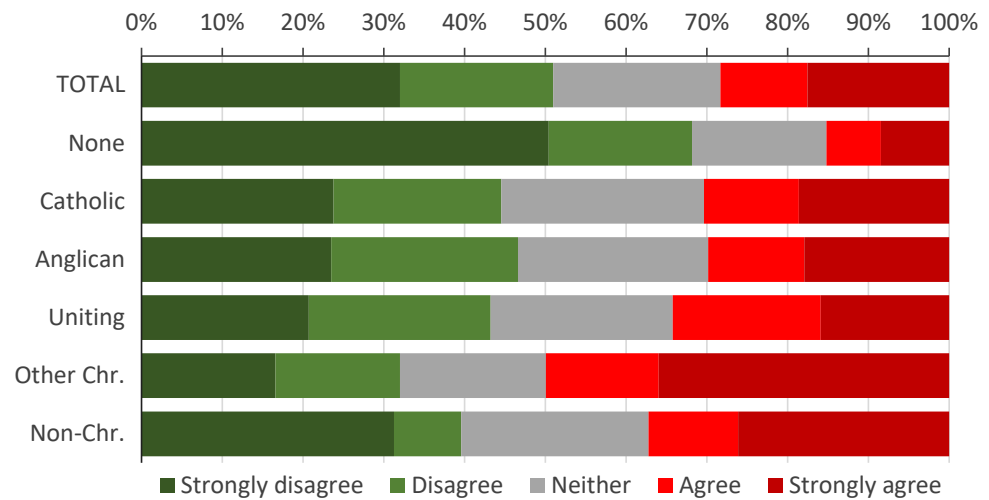
Source: HILDA

While the question posed is not expressly or only about marriage equality, this was the major topic of equality discussion over the period. In just a decade, public opinion changed from 40% in support and 45% opposed in 2005, to 66% in support and 22% opposed in 2015.

Similar results were obtained from the AES 2013 survey, which expressly asked for a response to the normative statement “*Same sex marriages should be prohibited by law*” (Figure 97). Results fell in between those of HILDA 2011 and 2015.

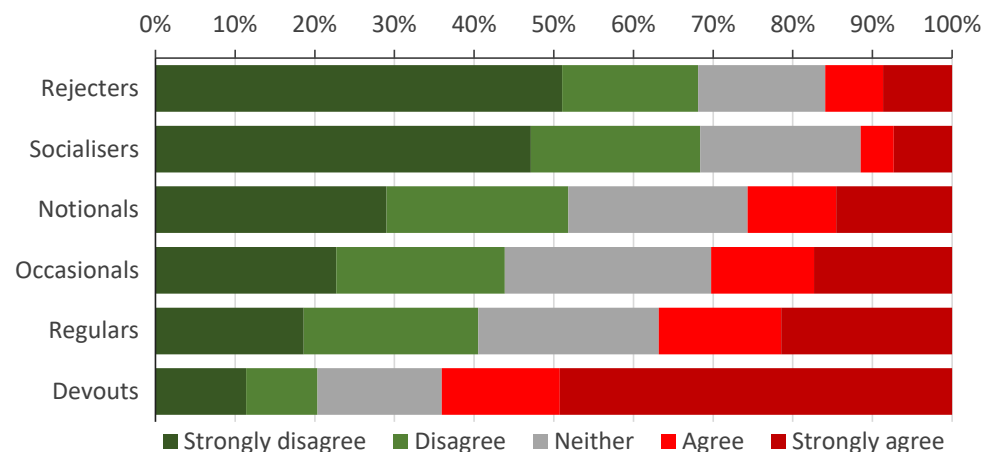
Significantly, even in 2013, more religionists supported marriage equality than opposed it: 45% vs 30% of Catholics, 47% vs 30% of Anglicans, 43% vs 34% of Uniting/Methodists, and 40% vs 37% of non-Christian denominations.

Only amongst minor Christian denominations was opposition to marriage equality greater — 50% vs 32%.



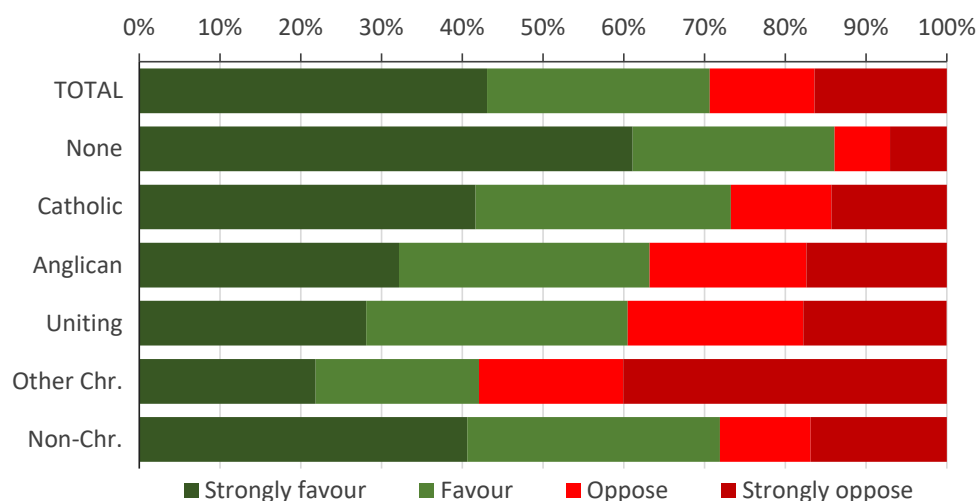
**Figure 97:** "Same sex marriage should be prohibited by law", by religion 2013  
Source: AES 2013

By religiosity, opposition to marriage equality was in the majority only amongst Devouts (64%), but even then, one in five Devouts (20%) were expressly in favour of equality (Figure 98).



**Figure 98:** "Same sex marriage should be prohibited by law", by ARI6 2013  
Source: AES 2013

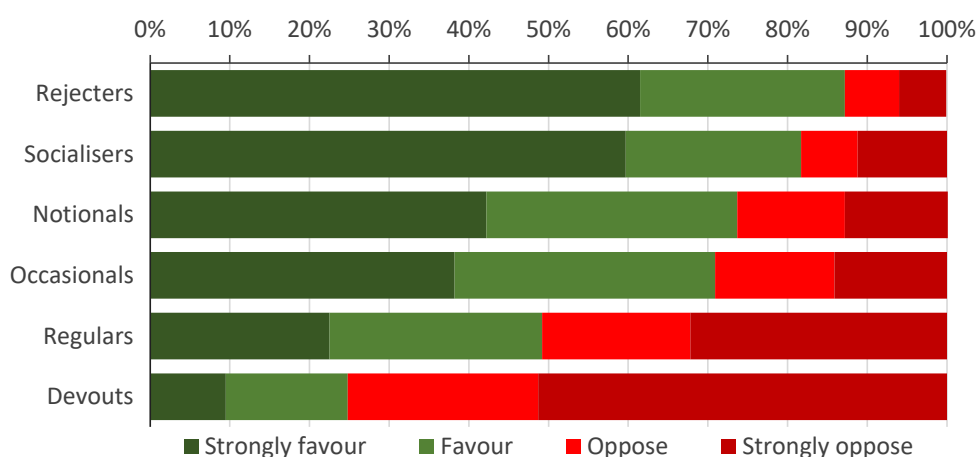
In 2016, the AES asked a more specific question about same sex couples being given the same rights to marry as heterosexual couples, and without the "Neither agree nor disagree" option so that an opinion had to be expressed. In this context, agreement was at 71% overall, including 86% of NRs, 73% of Catholics, 63% of Anglicans, 61% of Uniting/Methodists, and 72% of non-Christian denominations (Figure 99). Only amongst minor Christian denominations was support in the minority (42%).



**Figure 99:** Equal marriage rights for same sex couples, by religion 2016

Source: AES 2016

In terms of religiosity, most Rejecters (87%), Socialisers (82%), Notionals (74%) and Occasionals (71%) favoured marriage equality (Figure 100). Only amongst Committeds was support in the minority: 49% amongst Regulars, and 25% amongst Devouts. That is, even amongst Australia's most religious, a quarter to a half favoured marriage equality.



**Figure 100:** Equal marriage rights for same sex couples, by ARI6 2016

Source: AES 2016

A 2014 survey commissioned by *Australian Marriage Equality* and conducted by the Liberal's polling firm, Crosby Textor, identified the most common reasons for opposition to marriage equality. It found that among the top ten reasons, a loss of religious freedoms was last, mentioned by just 16% of respondents (Cox 2014) (Table 2).

Significantly, nearly a quarter (23%) said that marriage was a religious institution, and no changes should be made to it against the wishes of religious groups. This exposes a presumptive privilege about religious groups, because

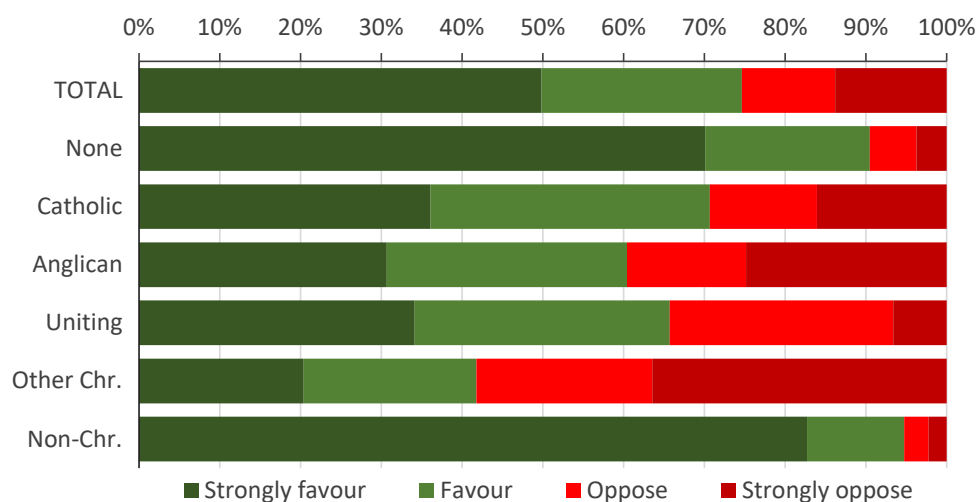
marriage is *not* a religious institution in Australian law. Indeed, by 2018, four out of five marriages (80%) were conducted by civil celebrants rather than ministers of religion (Statista 2021).

**Table 2:** Possible reasons for opposition to marriage equality

People who choose to be gay know that their choice means they cannot get married	30%
It is fine for same-sex couples to have a ceremony, but it should not be called “marriage”	30%
The recognition of de facto relationships and civil unions is enough; we don’t need same-sex marriage too	29%
Children need both a mother and a father, and legalising same-sex marriage could break that down	29%
The institution is already under threat and should not be further undermined by this	24%
Marriage is only meant to be between a man and a woman, so this is wrong and should not be encouraged	24%
Marriage is a religious institution and no changes should be made to it against the wishes of religious groups	23%
Same-sex marriages could devalue traditional marriages	22%
Allowing same-sex marriage is a slippery slope and could lead to issues like polygamy	17%
Allowing same-sex marriage will lead to some people losing their religious freedoms	16%

Source: Crosby Textor 2014. Note: Percentages are of all respondents, multi-response.

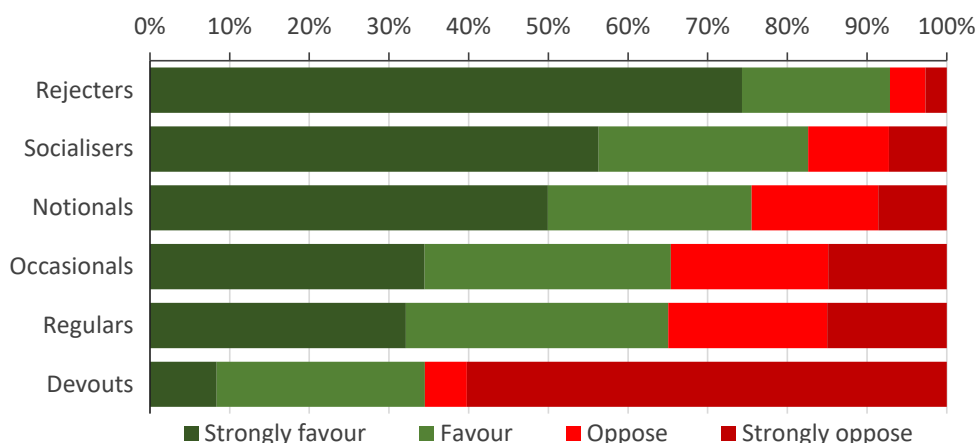
By 2019, overall support for marriage equality had increased from 71% to 75%, and amongst those with no religious affiliation from 85% to 91% (Figure 101). Very small increases of opposition amongst religious denominations were marginally statistically significant and are likely associated with the significant drop in religious affiliation (down net 6% over three years), with those most likely to have left not supporting their religious institution’s stances against social reforms.



**Figure 101:** Equal rights for same sex couples by religion, 2019

Source: AES 2019

For religiosity, the most significant results are changes in opposition to marriage equality amongst Australia's Committeds (Figure 102).



**Figure 102:** Equal rights for same sex couples by ARI6, 2019

Source: AES 2019

Amongst Regulars, opposition was down 16%, with support up from just under half (49%) to two thirds (65%) over the three years. Amongst Devouts, opposition was down 10%, with support up from a quarter (25%) to more than a third (35%).

This indicates that even amongst Australia's most religious, opposition to marriage equality may continue to decline.

With more than a third of Devouts (35%) and two thirds of Regulars (65%) supporting marriage equality, the question arises as to *whose* "religious tradition" is being given priority in Australia's debate to entrench the right to discriminate against LGBTI+ people, including married ones.

Indeed, senior faith leaders from around the world are increasing their support for the LGBTI+ community. Last year, a global community of them called for decriminalisation of LGBT+ people, and a ban on conversion practices (Sherwood 2020).

**Summary:** Three quarters of Australians (75%) are in favour of marriage equality, including most non-religionists (90%) and majorities amongst most religious denominations: 71% of Catholics, 60% of Anglicans, 66% of Uniting/Methodists and 95% of non-Christian denominations.

Between 2016 and 2019, since marriage equality was legalised (in 2017), the most significant shift in attitudes has been a growth in support amongst Committeds: from just under half (49%) to two thirds (65%) of Regulars, and from a quarter (25%) to more than a third (35%) of Devouts. This suggests that public approval of marriage equality is likely to continue to increase. It also raises the question of *whose* “religious tradition” is being served by moves to further legally protect religious discrimination against LGBTI+ Australians.

## Casting out homosexuals

Ahead of the national marriage equality plebiscite in 2017 and in order to address conservative anxieties, the federal government established a national “religious freedom” inquiry and appointed former Coalition minister Philip Ruddock as its Chair.

The inquiry’s final report expressly encouraged the federal government to proceed with legislation that would, amongst other things, protect the right of religious schools to discriminate against its employees and contractors (Recommendation 6) and its students (Recommendation 8) on the basis of sexual orientation or relationship status (Ruddock 2018).

After significant backlash (Hilkemeijer 2018), the government said that it would not permit religious schools to discriminate against gay students — but remained silent in regard to employees and contractors (Elton-Pym 2018).

While the Australian Association of Christian Schools says no school has the desire to expel students because of their sexual orientation (Crowe 2018), it didn’t say what approach its members *would* take when faced with such circumstances. Yet it continues to argue that schools should retain the ability to hire and fire teachers based on their beliefs and adherence to doctrine (Karp 2018a).

Similarly, the Catholic church has issued an ultimatum to its 180,000 employees that “total” obedience to church doctrine was expected, and that transgressors could be sacked (Koziol 2017).

However, Peter MacLeod-Miller, Anglican Archdeacon of Albury, asks a pertinent question (Crowe 2018):

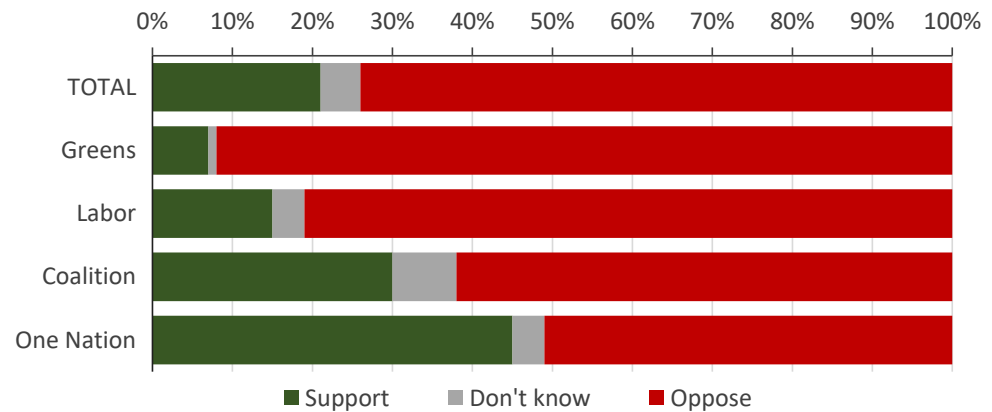
*“If discrimination is bad for children, at what age does it become good for adults?”* — Peter MacLeod-Miller, Anglican Archdeacon of Albury

So far, religious schools have failed to provide an answer.

The parliamentary bill that is intended to enact revisions to religious freedom laws is currently stalled. Political appetite is likely to have been dampened by at least two polls showing very strong national opposition to allowing religious schools to discriminate against LGBTI+ staff and students.

A 2018 Fairfax/Ipsos poll asked Australians if they supported or opposed laws to allow religious schools to select teachers and students based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, or relationship status (Elgood 2018). It found

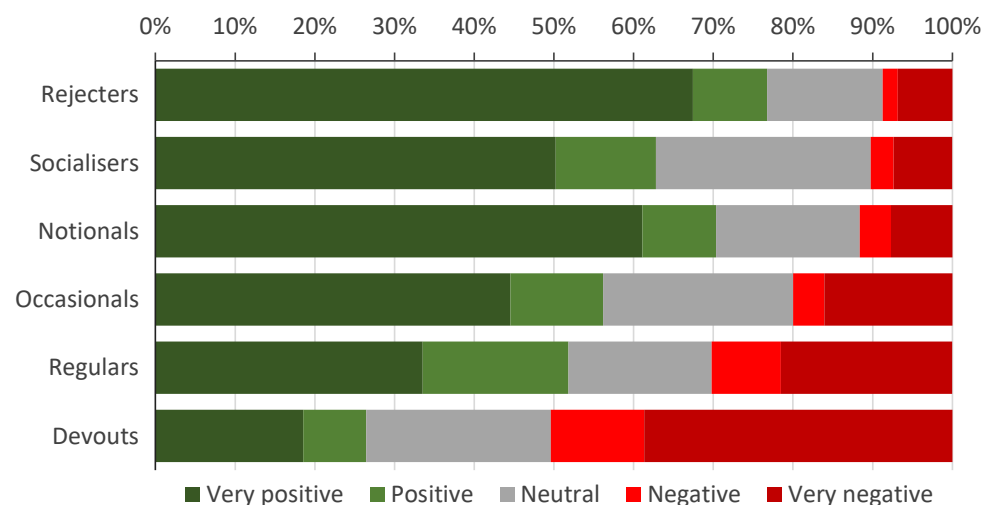
three out of four Australians (74%) opposed, with just one in five (21%) in support (Figure 103). Opposition to permitting discrimination was in the minority across the political spectrum, though close to parity amongst One Nation voters.



**Figure 103:** Attitudes toward religious school discrimination against LGBTI+  
Source: Fairfax/Ipsos 2018

A separate study by YouGov/Galaxy in 2018 returned similar results. It found 82% of Australians were opposed to existing discrimination law exemptions that allow expulsion of gay and lesbian students, and 79% opposed to religious school ability to fire teachers if they marry a person of the same sex (Karp 2018b).

Unsurprisingly, negative attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality — as one of a number of dimensions in the discrimination debate — correlate with religiosity (Figure 104). Only amongst Devouts (11% of the population in 2019) do negative attitudes reach half (50%).



**Figure 104:** Attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality  
Source: AVS 2018

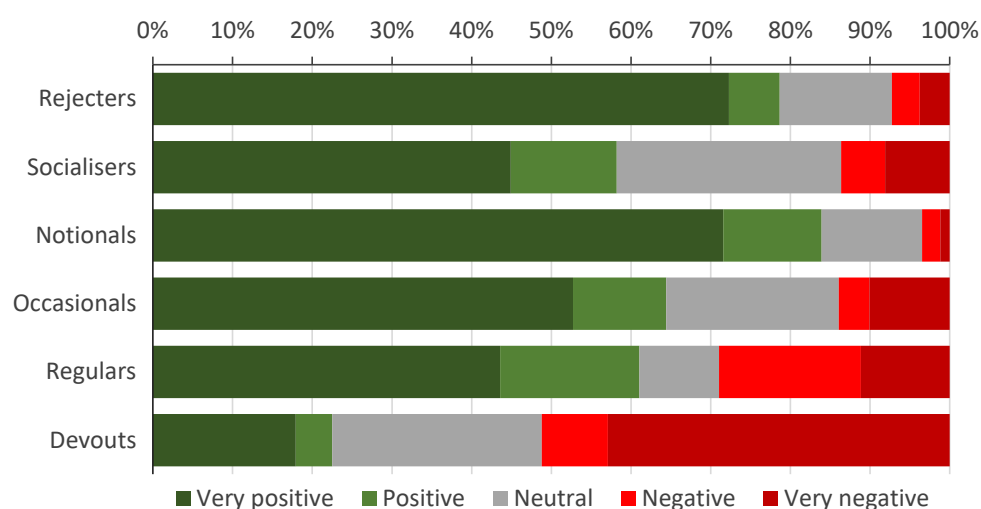
And yet, even amongst this most opposed group — Devouts — more than a quarter (27%) hold positive attitudes towards the morality of homosexuality. Thus, even amongst Australia’s most religious, opinions are divided and some believe homosexuality to be moral.

Even amongst Australia’s most religious — Devouts — opinions are divided. Half (50%) hold negative attitudes towards the morality of homosexuality, while more than a quarter (27%) hold positive attitudes.

### Risks for clerics and school boards

Clerics and religious school boards might think, on the basis of these polls, that their own constituencies exclusively or at least mostly hold negative attitudes towards homosexuality, and those with positive attitudes would send their children to public schools. For example, Sydney’s Catholic Archbishop, Anthony Fisher, says Christian parents expect “Christian values” to be taught at religious schools (Bolt 2019). By “Christian values” he would be referring rhetorically to Vatican doctrine rather than the views of the majority of real Australian Christians.

By religiosity, most parents of Australia’s school children<sup>m</sup> think homosexuality moral (Figure 105).

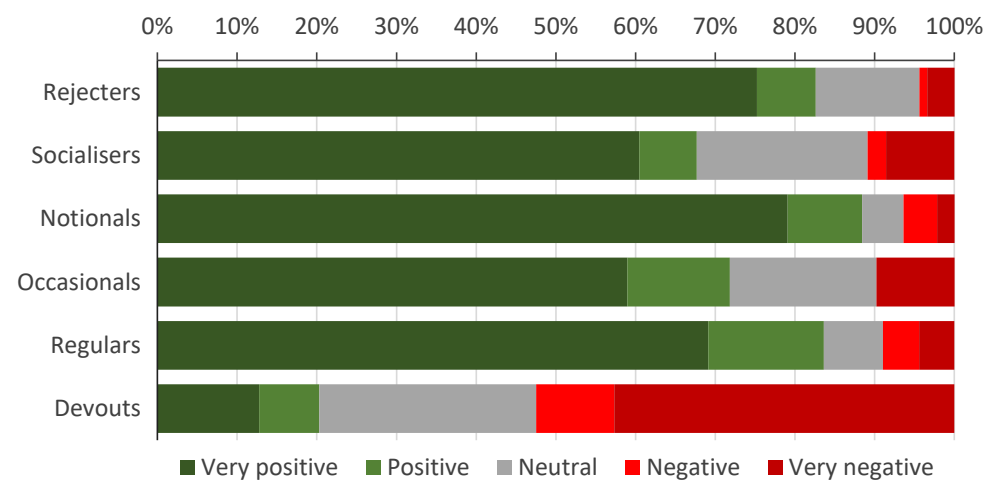


**Figure 105:** Schoolchild parent attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality  
Source: AVS 2018

<sup>m</sup> In the study data, adults 25-54 with at least one child (person under 18) in the household.

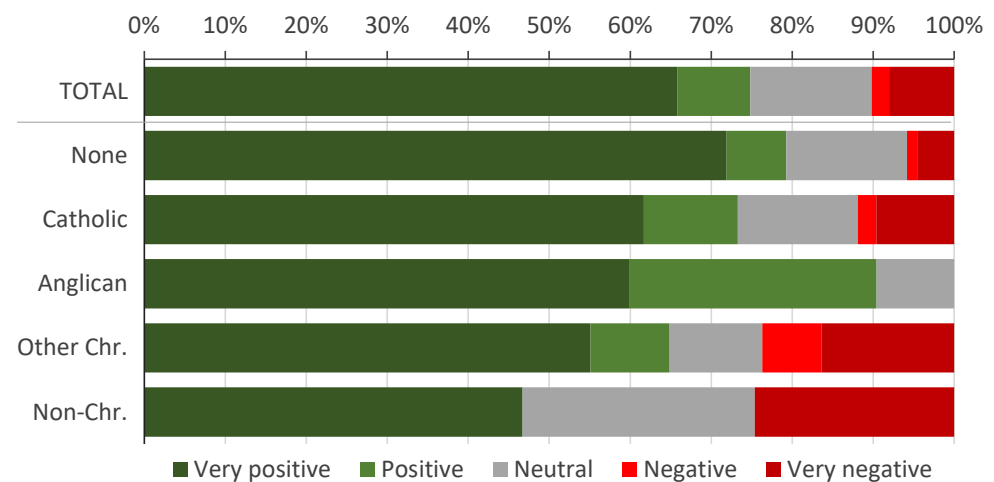
Except amongst Devouts, significant majorities of religionists — 84% of Notionals, 64% of Occasionals and 61% of Regulars — think homosexuality moral, with small minorities (3%, 14% and 29% respectively) opposed.

Of considerable importance to school boards and admissions teams, mothers are generally far more involved in school selection than are fathers (Schwarer 2016), including the selection of Catholic schools (Warren 2015). Except amongst Devouts, mothers hold significantly more positive attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality, with very small minorities holding negative attitudes (Figure 106).



**Figure 106:** Schoolchild *mother* attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality  
Source: AVS 2018

Amongst schoolchild mothers, 88% of Notionals, 72% of Occasionals and 84% of Regulars think homosexuality moral, with just 6%, 10% and 9% (respectively) opposed.



**Figure 107:** Schoolchild *mother* attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality  
Source: AVS 2018

This pattern is reflected across the religious denominations (Figure 107). Amongst religious mothers, favourable attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality outweigh unfavourable attitudes from roughly two to one, to more than six to one.

Devouts comprise 11% of the general adult population, but they comprise only 9% of the schoolchild parent population, and 7% of the schoolchild mother population (AVS 2018). While just 9% of schoolchild parents are Devouts, some 19.4% of Australia's school students attend Catholic schools and a further 15% attend independent (mostly religious/Christian) schools, a total of more than one third (34.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020).

This means that even if all the children of Devouts households (9%) attend religious schools (34.4%), nearly three quarters of all religious school students are *not* from Devouts households; rather from households with considerably more favourable attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality.

This indicates a significant risk for schools — including Catholic — that may want to discriminate against LGBTI+ staff, contractors or students: the potential loss of significant numbers of enrolments from less doctrinal households who hold positive attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality, and who disapprove of such discrimination.

**Summary:** A significant majority (74%–82%) of Australians are opposed to religious schools having the legal right to discriminate against staff and students on the basis of sexual orientation or relationship status.

Clerics and religious school boards would be unwise to pursue rights to sack or expel LGBTI+ staff or students. Mothers of Australian school children are far more involved in school selection than are fathers, and negative attitudes towards the morality of homosexuality are held only by a slight majority (52%) by Devouts mothers, with one in five (20%) holding positive attitudes. Negative attitudes are held by only in a tiny minority (10% or less) of Notionals, Occasionals and Regulars mothers, who represent nearly three quarters of religious school student families. Amongst this group, *strong* support for the morality of homosexuality is in a clear majority (59%–79%).

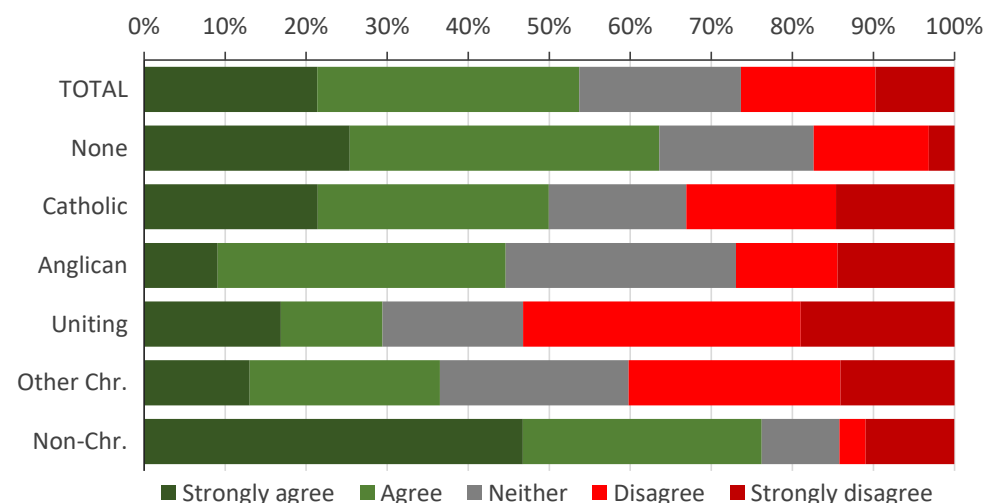
## Smoking marijuana

Most Australians (87%) support the legal use of marijuana for medical purposes (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020), and it was legalised by the federal parliament, with a strict licensing scheme, in 2016.

Legalisation of the non-medical smoking of marijuana is more controversial. Possession and personal use of small amounts has been legalised in only the ACT, a reform that several federal ministers have slammed as “crazy”, “unconscionable” and “trendy” (ABC 2020).<sup>n</sup>

In 2019, a majority of Australians (54%) agreed with decriminalisation (Figure 108), split between nearly two thirds of NRs (64%) but slightly less than half of all religionists (47%). Overall, nett agreement (agree – disagree) was in the affirmative at +27%.

Those most likely to approve were non-Christian religionists (76%) and NRs (64%), with minor Christian denominations (including Uniting/Methodist) the least supportive (37% and 29% respectively).



**Figure 108:** Smoking marijuana should be legalised, by religion

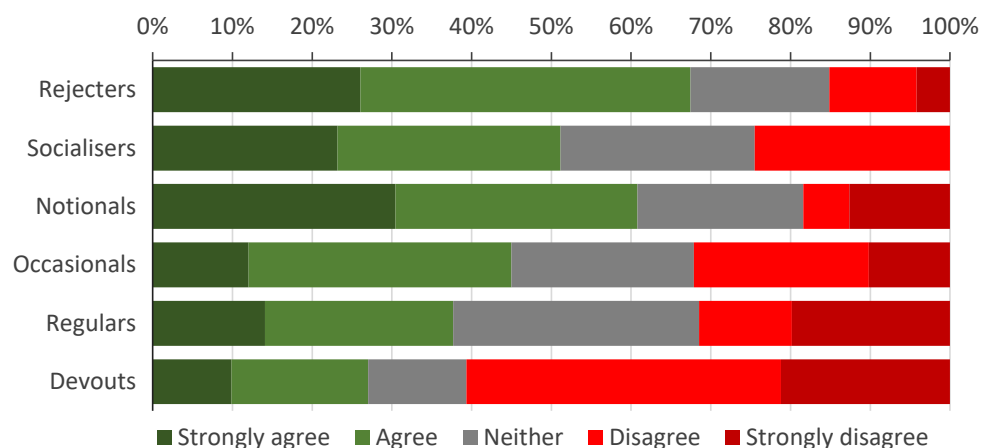
Source: AES 2019

Only amongst Uniting/Methodists was opposition in the majority (53%).

Nett agreement (over disagreement) was positive amongst NRs (46%), Catholics (17%), Anglicans (18%) and non-Christian denominations (36%), but in the minority amongst Uniting/Methodists (-24%) and minor Christian denominations (-4%).

<sup>n</sup> Possession of marijuana for personal use has also been decriminalised (not legalised) in South Australia and the Northern Territory for nearly 30 years (Lee & Bartle 2021).

By religiosity (ARI6), nett agreement was in the majority amongst most: Rejecters (52%), Socialisers (27%), Notionals (42%), Occasionals (13%) and Regulars (6%) (Figure 109).



**Figure 109:** Smoking marijuana should be legalised, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

Only amongst Devouts was nett opposition greater (-34%), and only amongst Regulars and Devouts did *strong* opposition outweigh *strong* support (-6% and -11% respectively).

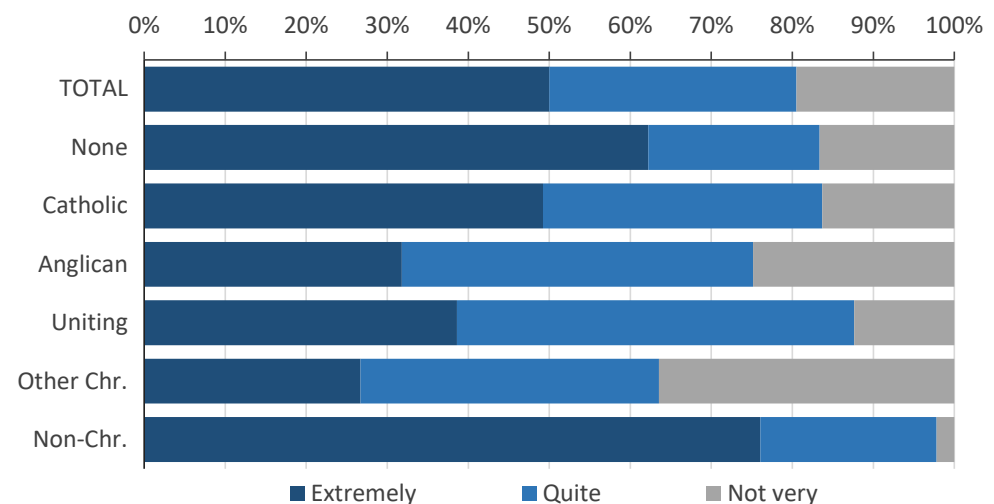
Overall, these results regarding the decriminalisation of smoking marijuana are somewhat more favourable than those from the National Drug Strategy Household survey (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020) , which found, using a different methodology, 41% of Australians in favour of legalisation of marijuana for personal use.

**Summary:** A majority (54%) of Australian public support the legalisation of smoking marijuana (outside medical use). Rejecters (68%), Notionals (61%) and non-Christian denominations (76%) were far more likely to approve, while Devouts were least likely (27%). Devouts were also the only religiosity segment with a nett negative approval (-34%), compared with +6% to +52% for all others.

## Global warming

The proportion of peer-reviewed scholarly articles on the anthropogenic nature of global warming through most of 2019 was essentially 100%, up from 84% in 2009 and 97% in 2016 (Powell 2019).<sup>o</sup> That is, there is no significant doubt amongst climate specialists that the planet is warming, and a significant contributing factor is human activity. While there may be minor differences regarding the results of different change models, the time for arguing “the science isn’t settled” as a basis for inaction, is past.

At the 2019 federal election, four out of five voters (81%) said that global warming policy was extremely or very important in deciding how to vote, ranging from almost all non-Christian denominations (98%) and most NRs (83%) and Catholics (84%), to nearly two thirds (64%) of minor Christian denominations (Figure 110).



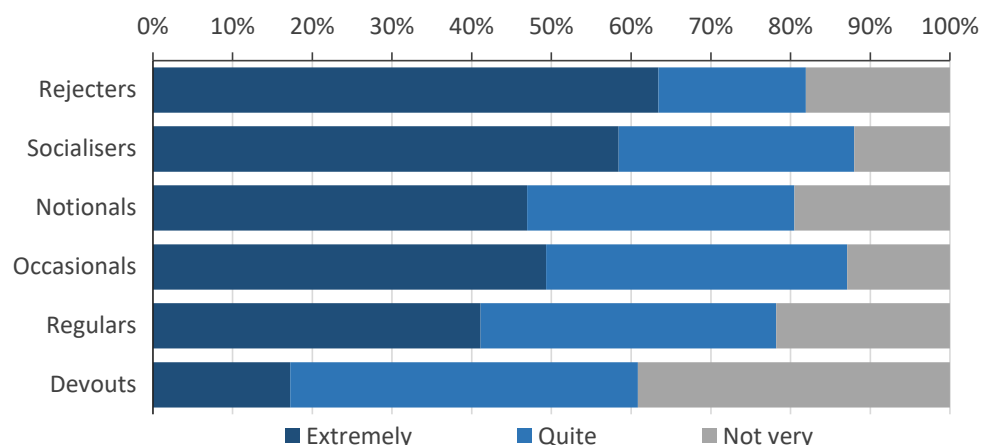
**Figure 110:** Importance of global warming policy to 2019 vote, by religion  
Source AES 2019

While three quarters of non-Christian denominations (76%), nearly two thirds of NRs (62%), and nearly half of Catholics (49%) also said global warming policy was *extremely* important to their vote, only smaller minorities of Uniting/Methodists (39%), Anglicans (32%) and minor Christian denominations (27%) said likewise.

By ARI6 religiosity, attitudes toward global warming’s importance correlated negatively (Figure 111). While nearly two thirds (63%) of Rejecters and well over half (58%) of Socialisers said global warming policy was *extremely*

<sup>o</sup> The terminology used here is “global warming” because this was the term used in the AES 2019 study. The related issue “climate change” refers to increasing changes in average climate patterns over time, such as temperature, wind velocity, cloud cover and precipitation, and consequences such as sea level change and frequency of natural disasters.

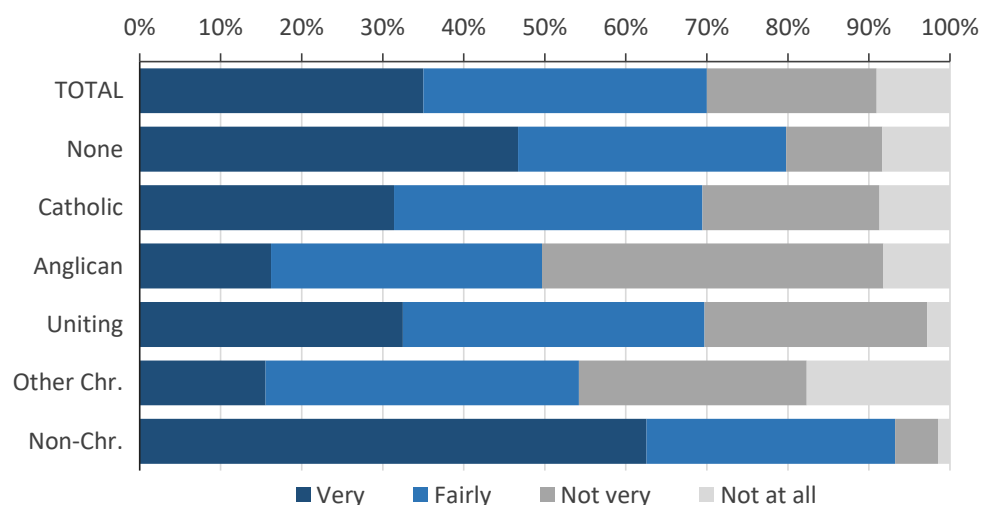
important to their vote, only around half of Notionals (47%) and Occasionals (49%) said so. Amongst Committeds, 41% of Regulars agreed, and just 17% of Devouts agreed.



**Figure 111:** Importance of global warming policy to 2019 vote, by ARI6

Source AES 2019

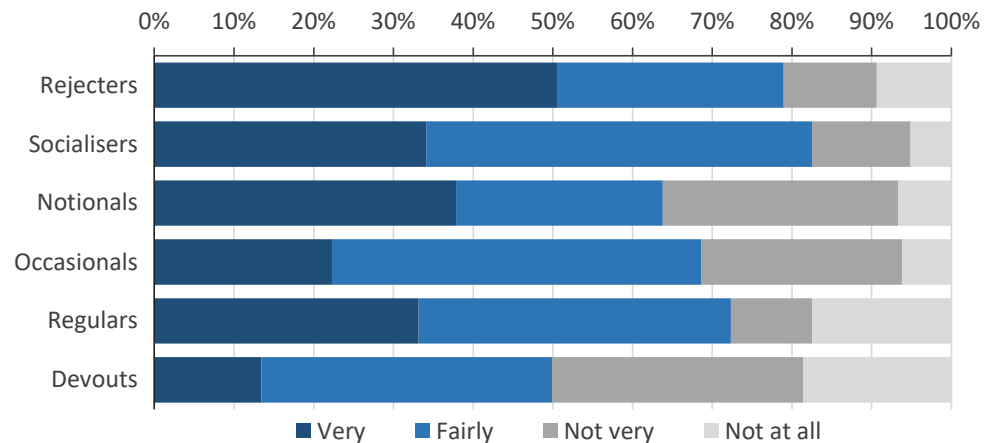
The importance of global warming policy was, unsurprisingly, largely (though not exclusively) based on attitudes to how serious global warming would be to the respondent's way of life (Figures 112 & 113).



**Figure 112:** Seriousness of global warming to your own way of life, by religion

Source: AES 2019

Overall, the proportion of those who said global warming policy was *extremely* important to informing their vote, was mathematically equivalent to the proportion of respondents who said global warming was *very* serious to their way of life plus 65% of those who said *fairly* serious.



**Figure 113:** Seriousness of global warming to your own way of life, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

While a majority of Rejecters (56%) and Socialisers (61%) thought themselves closer to Labor on global warming policy, fewer religionists did, with just a third of Notionals and Occasionals (34% each) and a large minority of Regulars (41%) saying likewise. Amongst Australia's most religious, Devouts, just one in six (17%) felt closest to Labor on global warming policy, compared with 39% favouring the Coalition — the only segment to favour the conservatives.

While more Devouts (11% of Australia's population) than any other segment don't support action on climate change, religious institutions have been busy helping their flocks understand the importance of action. For example, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference vocally supports stronger policies (Catholic Australia 2021), as does the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (2021), an alliance of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and other denominations.

**Summary:** Four out of five Australians (81%) say that global warming policy is extremely or very important to informing their federal election vote. Importance correlated strongly and negatively with religiosity, with Devouts being the only segment to net favour the Coalition's global warming policies over Labor's. This correlates with Devouts' much more sceptical views as to how serious global warming is to their own way of life. Many religious institutions urge stronger action on climate change.



## Summary

While religion remains a feature of life for some Australians, the extent and general nature of religion and religiosity across the nation is widely misperceived.

### **Overestimation of the prevalence of religion**

The most common headline measurement of religion, denominational affiliation, is poorly measured and significantly overestimates religion in Australia. The wording for the religion question on the ABS census form is biased in favour of religion. Along with non-confidential administration of the census form to most Australians, it has produced an inflated headline figure of religious affiliation.

The most recent census, 2016, pegged “religion” at 70% of the population. If this figure is adjusted to the proportion of Australians who say they are either active or inactive members of their religious organisation, the “religion” figure drops to just 51%. Restricted to only those who say they are *active* members, it drops to around a quarter (27%).

### **Religion in long-term, and recent steep, decline**

Religious affiliation is in decline, with significant growth in the number of NR Australians and abandonment of “mainstream” Christianity: the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting/Methodist churches. Religious attendance is in decline even amongst those who remain affiliated.

In 2019, just 15% of Australians were Committeds (Regulars or Devouts). A majority of all affiliated Australians are either Notionals who *never* attend services, or Occasionals who rarely attend. Committeds have the oldest age profile, while Australia’s youngest adults have the highest proportions of NRs.

Multiple indicators suggest Australia’s steep decline in religion will continue, and that even some major churches may struggle to thrive, even to survive.

### **Australia’s most religious are typically more, not less, educated**

Contrary to the opinion of some, Australia’s Devouts are not lesser-educated. In fact, they have the highest rate of bachelor’s degree after Socialisers, and the highest rate of all post-school qualifications.

Regulars are the most likely to work in the professions, while Devouts also have a significant proportion of professionals but also are the most likely to include technicians, frontline workers and administrators, with post-school but not bachelor’s degree qualifications.

Despite this, Devouts are the least likely to be working in leadership roles despite a slightly older age profile than others, suggesting that they are either uninterested in such roles, or judged by their superiors not to hold the necessary attributes for promotion.

### **Religion of limited importance to Australians overall**

Amongst a range of factors contributing to personal identity, Australians say religion is a distant last. Only a quarter say that religion is as important now as in the past. Seven in ten say that religion is not personally important, and more than half say God is not important in their lives.

Most Australians (85%) now say that they are *not* active members of a religious organisation, and even amongst the most religious, Devouts, active membership is not universal (88%).

Now, most weddings are now conducted by civil celebrants rather than ministers of religion, and a majority of Australians would *not* have their funeral conducted by a religious celebrant.

### **Declining belief**

Contrary to claims of some clerics, Australians are not just abandoning institutional religion: they are also abandoning religious belief. The proportion of Australians *not* believing in a specific God or even an undefined “higher power” has grown over decades and is now four in ten.

Certainty of belief in God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death is in a minority — around one in five Australians. That includes just a third of Catholics and a quarter of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists. Only amongst minor Christian denominations, Regulars and Devouts, is certainty of such beliefs in the majority.

Only majorities of Regulars and Devouts feel certain that God exists, that God is personally involved in all lives, and that only God makes life meaningful. This may help explain their propensity to inappropriately proclaim their own moral judgements to hold over all others, including those who reject their religious beliefs.

### **Talking about religion**

About half of Australians are comfortable talking about religion with others. On the other hand, NRs especially, would prefer Australians to keep their religion to themselves.

### **Socially left and right**

Between 2007 and 2019, Australians moved somewhat to the left (more progressive) in *social* identity, at least in regard to attitudes toward gender equality and sexual behaviour. That included members of the major Christian denominations. *No* Australians weakly affiliated with religion (Notionals and Occasionals) in the study data classed themselves as social conservatives. This may help explain why Occasionals in particular have abandoned religion in droves over recent years: disagreement with conservative social stances proclaimed by their (now former) clerics.

### **Politically left and right**

While not-Committed Australians have moved very slightly from the centre to the near left and right, Committeds (Regulars and Devouts) have significantly polarised to the hard left and hard right: with more to the hard right.

Rejecters and Socialisers tend to identify more with Labor, while the religiously affiliated tend to associate with the Coalition, and Devouts with minor parties. But of those mostly favouring minor parties, the great majority were Notionals: affiliateds with the weakest religious commitment, suggesting that much of the recent move towards minor party first preferences (which ebbed at the 2019 election) was not based on religious preferences.

### **Election attitudes and voting**

From 2007 to 2019, the proportion of political party-aligned Australians declined significantly, with drops in Rusted-ons, Loyals and Habituals, and increases in Differentiators, Evaluators and especially Volatiles. Volatiles now comprise 14% of adult Australians, making the reliable prediction of election outcomes a fraught pursuit.

First preferences given to the Coalition increased significantly amongst religionists (not Rejecters and Socialisers), particularly in the 2019 election. *There are other significant factors, not religion, that underpin this change.*

### **Economic identity**

Firstly, Australia's Christians, especially Catholics, are more economically conservative than NRs (and non-Christian denominations). Since the Coalition holds overall favourable public preference on economic management (though expert analysis suggests no overall difference with Labor), this naturally creates a Coalition appeal.

Secondly, Australia's religious households (especially Notionals, Occasionals and Regulars) have higher rates of low household annual gross income than NRs, another preference for the Coalition economic brand value.

Thirdly, Regulars and Devouts have far higher rates of unemployment than do all other religiosity segments, another factor creating favour for the Coalition.

Fourthly, Regulars have the highest rates of investment property ownership, and Regulars, Devouts and Occasionals the highest rates of company share ownership. Both these asset classes were the subject of taxation-relief reduction policies by Labor at the 2019 election.

These factors naturally led religionists, Devouts in particular, to think the Coalition closer to themselves on economic management. Regulars and Devouts were the only segments to have two of their three top policy priority areas focused on financial matters. All the other segments mentioned only one financial item in their top three.

Faith that the Coalition in office would improve the economy — more than it had in its previous term of office — correlated strongly and positively with faith that God exists.

Devouts in particular are the most likely to decide who to vote for on the basis of the party leader alone, and religious signalling appeals to them. Dislike of the lesser religious leader is proportional to their like of the more religious leader. However, since the NR segment is growing rapidly and NRs disfavour religious candidates, political parties will need to tread carefully in selecting their leaders and religion policies.

### **Democratic governance**

Australia's Christians are by and large more satisfied with Australia's democratic governance than are NRs, suggesting a bias in favour of religion to the detriment of other Australians.

Most Australians, including Devouts, reject religious authorities as the ultimate interpreters of law.

Devouts are by far the most likely to say that fighting rising prices is their top national priority, adding to the financial underpinnings of their increased Coalition votes. They are also the least likely to prioritise having more say in important government decisions, but the most likely to argue for freedom of their own "truth" speech. This suggests a self-directed normativity in their attitudes.

### **Attitudes toward major social issues**

**Abortion:** Contrary to the claim of some clerics, Australia's support for abortion services is increasing, not decreasing. Most Australians (93%) are now pro-choice, with 70% supporting ready access on demand, and majorities

in favour across the religious spectrum. Opposing clerics are well out of touch with their flocks on this issue.

**VAD:** Most Australians (75%–80%) have supported VAD since the mid 1990s. Current opposition is just 11%. Between 2016 and 2019, overall support remained the same, but *strong* underlying support increased, including amongst Australia's most religious: Regulars and Devouts. Claims by opposed clerics that their flocks are opposed, are very significantly uninformed.

**Marriage equality:** Attitudes toward marriage equality for LGBTI+ Australians warmed considerably between 2005 and 2015. In 2013, only a majority of Devouts opposed marriage equality. Marriage equality was legalised in 2017.

Since then, opposition to marriage equality has dropped significantly amongst all religiosity segments including Devouts, although a majority of Devouts still oppose it.

**Casting out homosexuals:** Most Australians (74%–82%) are opposed to religious schools having the right to expel LGBTI+ students or to sack LGBTI+ staff and contractors. Significant majorities of school child parents — and especially mothers who are more involved in school selection — across the religious denominations view the morality of homosexuality positively rather than negatively. Schools moving to actively discriminate may face subsequent enrolment challenges.

**Smoking marijuana:** In 2019, just over half of Australians (54%) approved of the legalisation of small amounts of marijuana for personal use. Across the religiosity spectrum, all segments but Devouts had a net positive attitude towards legalisation.

**Global warming:** Most Australians (81%) said at the 2019 election that global warming was an important policy domain to inform their vote. Regulars and Devouts were the least likely to say so. This correlated strongly with their lower rate of saying that global warming would negatively affect their own way of life.

### **Two final considerations**

Firstly, this detailed and comprehensive review of Australian religion by the numbers reveals that religion in Australia is considerably less prevalent than indicated by the census and as claimed by clerics. The incidence of religion has dropped considerably in recent years and the indications are that the drop will continue, if not accelerate.

Furthermore, even those who say they are affiliated with one or other denomination mostly disagree with their clerics on a range of social issues such as abortion, VAD, and marriage equality, and few are even certain about fundamental tenets of their religion, such as the existence of God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death.

So when Sydney's Catholic Archbishop says Christian parents expect "Christian values" to be taught at religious schools (Bolt 2019), he would be referring rhetorically to the Vatican's canonical dictates rather than the views of the majority of actual Australian Christians.

Secondly, it's worth emphasising that it is the minor Christian denominations — not for the most part Catholic and Anglican laity — who hold the most devout beliefs, harsher attitudes towards their fellow Australians, most strongly oppose social reforms, express the greatest interest in money matters, and are most likely to say that God is concerned with everyone personally, even those who reject God.

Thus, it's important to distinguish between the views of the religious hierarchy, especially of the Catholic church, from its lay flock. It is mostly bishops, rabbi and mufti who espouse highly conservative views, while the views of their flocks are significantly more progressive and clearly disagree with organisational doctrine.

These are matters of great significance as legislators and governments develop and refine policy regarding religious matters, especially the balance between religious and non-religious rights and freedoms.

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