



Attitudes toward religious institutions

Australians' attitudes toward religious institutions regarding trust, power and intrusion in politics reveal a major divide between the most religious and other citizens.

Low trust in the churches

Australia's most religious, Devoteds (ARI5 Diligents and Ardents), comprising 12% of the adult population. Non-Devoteds have no, low or moderate religiosity and comprise 88% of the adult population. Devoteds and non-Devoteds generally trust a wide range of well-known institutions at about the same rate, although Devoteds are typically a little more trusting across the range of 25 institutions (Figure 49).

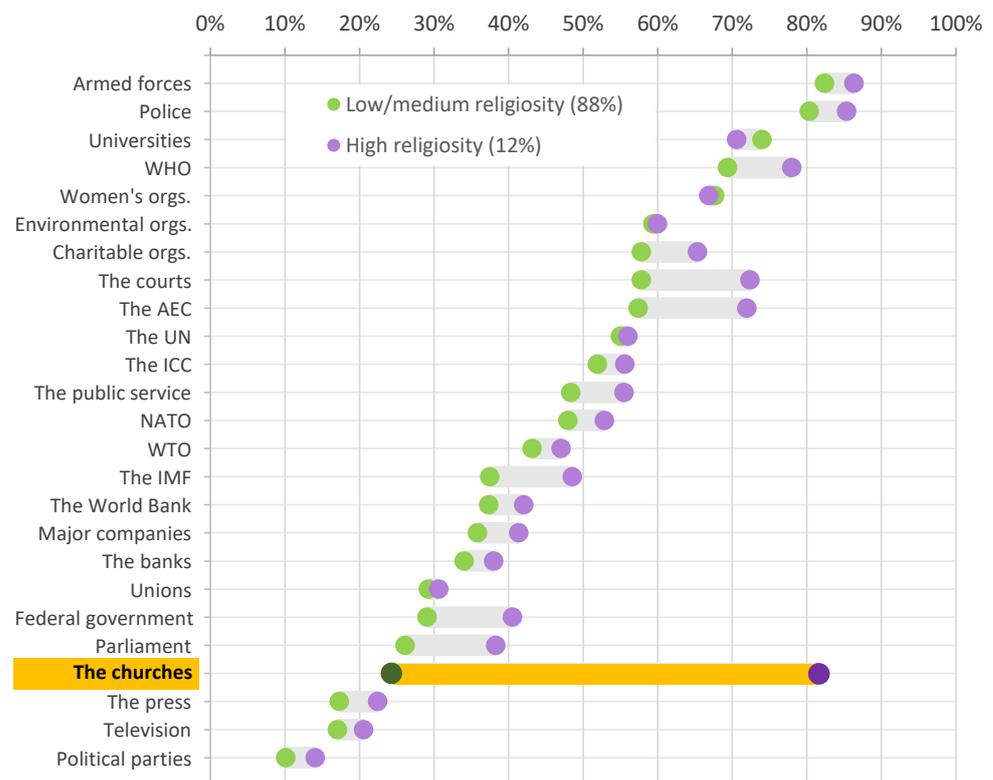


Figure 49: Proportions of Australian adults who trust various institutions
 Source: AVS 2018. WHO=World Health Organisation, AEC=Australian Electoral Commission, UN=United Nations, ICC=International Criminal Court, NATO=North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, WTO=World Trade Organisation, IMF=International Monetary Fund.

There is, however, one institution — the churches — where opinions differed *dramatically* between Devoteds and not-Devoteds. Devoteds rate the churches as their number three trusted institution (82% trust) after the armed forces (86%) and police (85%).

The other 88% of Australians, non-Devoteds, hold a vastly more negative view. Their trust in the churches⁴⁵ (24%) is the fourth lowest amongst 25 institutions: lower than trust in banks (34% and under a royal commission investigation at the time of the study), unions and government (29% each), and parliament (26%). Trust in churches is only higher than trust in the press and TV (18% each), and political parties (10%).

This indicates that Australian Devoteds hold a self-referential and highly favourable view of their own institution (churches) while being either unaware of, or impervious to, how poorly most other Australians view their institution. The churches have a severe reputation problem.

Most non-religious Australians (87%) and nearly two thirds (62%) of non-Christian religionists have little or no trust in the churches (Figure 50). But poor trust in the churches isn't limited to non-Christians. Nearly half (49%) of all Catholics, well over half (60%) of Anglicans, and nearly four out of ten (38%) of minor Christian denominations don't trust the churches.

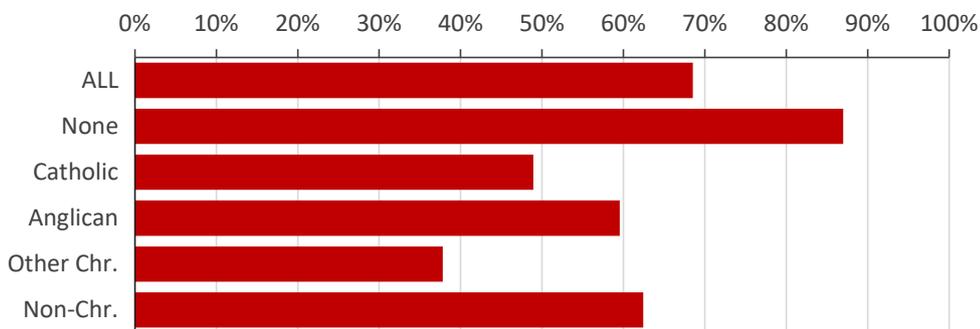


Figure 50: Little or no trust in the churches, by religious denomination

Source: AVS 2018

Summary: Devoteds and non-Devoteds trust most institutions around the same. The one glaring exception is the churches, which Devoteds (12% of the population) trust very much, and non-Devoteds (88%) trust very little. The churches have a severe reputation problem with most Australians: those who are not highly religious.

⁴⁵ The question was worded as “the churches”, in reference to the great majority of Australian religious denominations being Christian. It is not known to what degree respondents may have interpreted “churches” to include non-Christian religious institutions as well.

Low trust in religious leaders

These attitudes are reflected in Australians’ similarly limited trust in religious leaders generally — not just Christian ones. Overall, while fewer than a third (31%) trust “the churches”, 29% trust religious leaders (clerics) — a lower rate than union leaders (32%) (Figure 51) (Crabb 2019).

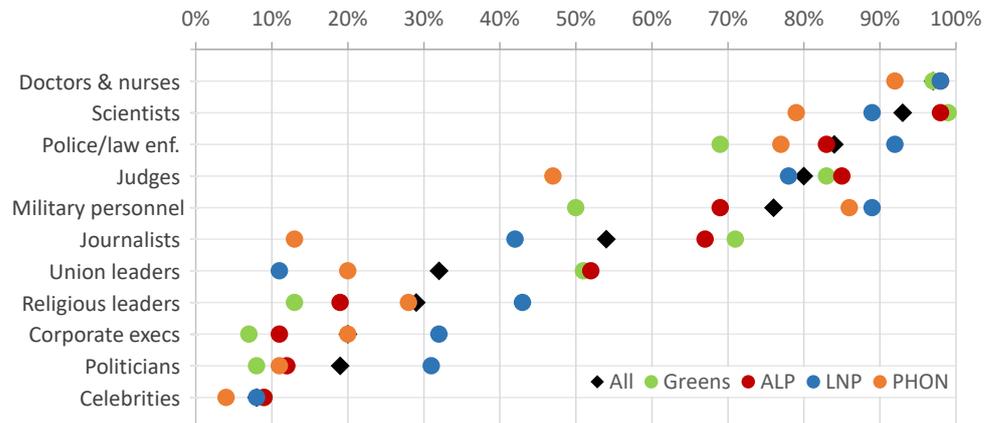


Figure 51: Trust in categories of people

Source: ABC Australia Talks 2019. ALP=Labor, LNP=Coalition, PHON=Pauline Hanson’s One Nation.

The ABC’s recent Australia Talks study found that clerics (overall, not just Christian ones) are expressly distrusted by more than two thirds (70%) of Australians, with more than a third (35%) not trusting them “at all”. Only 23% of 25–29 year-olds trust clerics, and amongst the most trusting age group, 75+ year-olds, fewer than half (47%) do.

And while a large minority of Coalition voters (43%) trust clerics, fewer than one in five Labor (19%) and Greens (13%) voters do.

Distrust is widely evident amongst the denominations, with less than half (47%) of Catholics, somewhat more than half of Protestants (58%), and around half of all other faiths (49%) trusting clerics.

This places the public’s views of clerical trustworthiness in a sobering light, particularly regarding clerics’ putative moral leadership.

Summary: Like trust in the churches, Australians’ trust in religious leaders is low (29%), and lower than trust in union leaders (32%). That includes nearly half (47%) of Catholics and non-Christian religionists, and more than half (58%) of Protestants. This places clerics’ putative moral leadership in a sobering light.

On balance, too much power

A majority of Australian adults (51%) believe that religious institutions have too much power. Just 6% disagree (Figure 52). Unsurprisingly, Nones are the most likely to agree (70%), and none of them disagree.

The only denomination category whose members disagree more (30%) than agree (12%) is the minor Christian denominations.

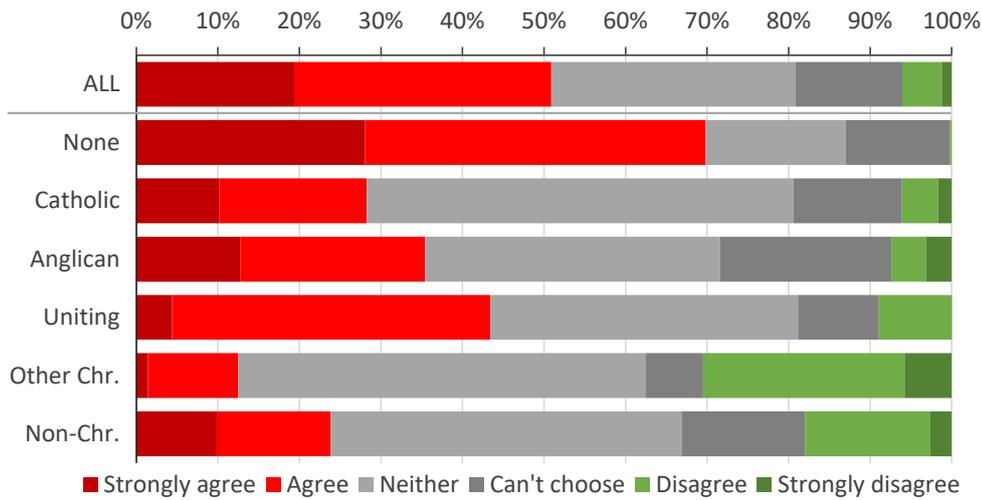


Figure 52: Religious institutions have too much power, by religion
Source: AuSSA 2018

Saying that religious institutions have too much power correlates strongly and negatively with religiosity (ARI6) (Figure 53). Considerably more Rejecters (71%), Socialisers (64%), Notionals (47%) and Occasionals (25%) agree than disagree (0%, 0%, 6%, and 10% respectively).

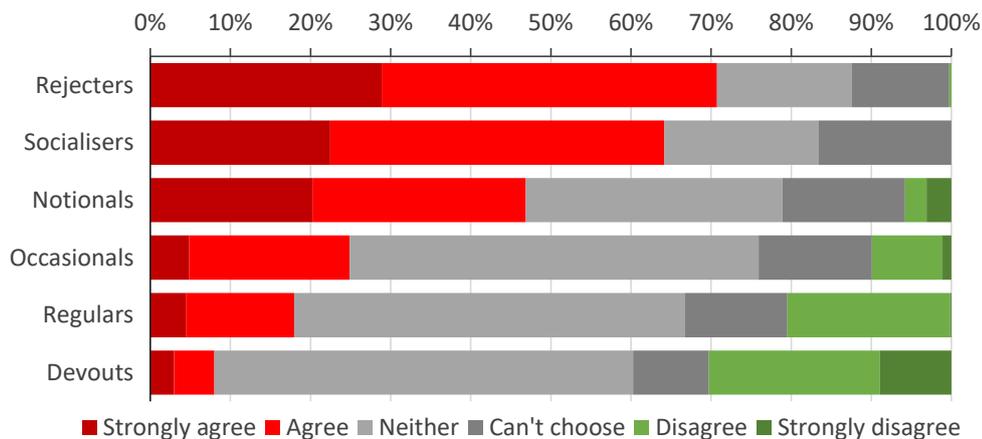


Figure 53: Religious institutions have too much power, by ARI6
Source: AuSSA 2018

Only amongst Committeds (Regulars and Devouts), do those who say religious institutions *don't* have too much power (20% and 30% respectively) outnumber those who say they do (18% and 8%). Yet even amongst the group with the most positive attitudes towards religious institutional power, Devouts, fewer than a third (30%) expressly say religious institutions *don't* have too much power.

Summary: A majority of Australians (51%) say that religious institutions have too much power, while only a tiny minority (6%) expressly say they don't. Unsurprisingly, favourable attitudes toward the power of religious institutions are strongest amongst Committeds (Regulars and Devouts), as well as amongst minor Christian denominations. Yet even amongst these groups, fewer than a third (30% each Devouts and minor Christian denominations) expressly say that religious institutions *don't* have too much power.

Intrusion into politics unwelcome

The Australian Study of Social Attitudes (AuSSA 2018) asked people how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement that religious leaders should *not* try to influence how people vote in parliamentary elections. Most Australians (80%) disapproved of clerical influence (Figure 54).

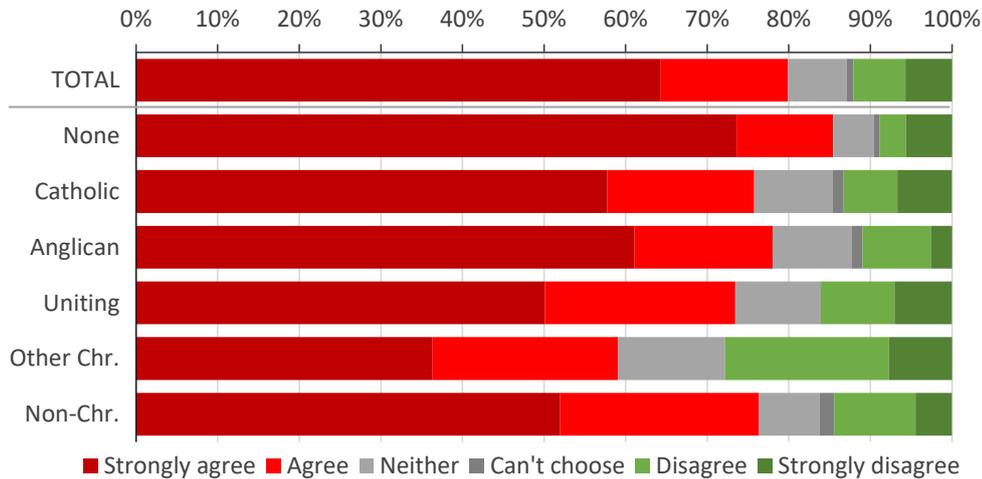


Figure 54: Clerics shouldn't try to influence how people vote, by religion
Source: AuSSA 2018

Across the denominational spectrum, significant majorities from 59% to 78% agreed. Indeed, a majority *strongly* agreed amongst non-affiliateds (74%), Catholics (58%), Anglicans (61%), Uniting/Methodists (50%) and non-Christian religions (52%).

Those who disagreed were in a small minority from 9% to 28% (overall 12%), with *strong* disagreement well below 10% across the spectrum.

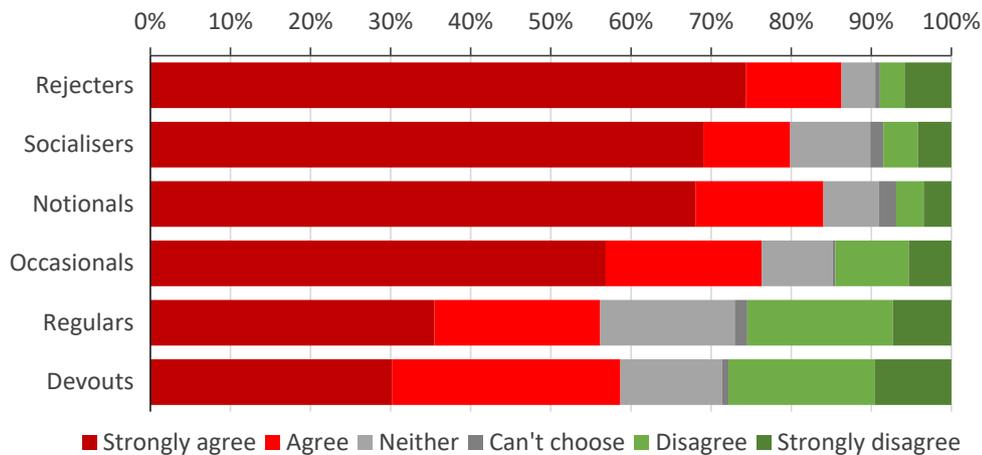


Figure 55: Clerics shouldn't try to influence how people vote, by ARI6
Source: AuSSA 2018

As expected by religiosity, Committeds (Regulars and Devouts) were the most likely to say that clerics should be able to try to influence voters (Figure 55).

Yet even amongst Australia's most religious, a majority of Regulars (56%) and Devouts (59%) disapproved of clerical influence in how people vote, while just 7% to 28% approved.

Despite the clear expectation of non-interference by most Australians, some prominent Australian religionists still attempt to impose their own doctrines on the whole of society through parliamentary elections. For example, a week before the 2020 Queensland election, Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge, launched a blistering attack on the Palaszczuk government's pledge to legislate for VAD (Livingstone 2020). This, despite three quarters (74%) of Australian Catholics approving of the reform (Francis 2021, p 109).

As previously discussed, these unwanted attempts at clerical influence in elections and parliamentary process are adding to Australians' generally poor attitudes towards the churches and clerics, as well as contributing to the abandonment of religious affiliation.

Summary: Four out of five Australians (80%) say separation of church and state is important: that clerics shouldn't attempt to influence how people vote in parliamentary elections. Even a clear majority of Devouts (59%) agree. Yet some prominent clerics continue to attempt to impose their own doctrines on the whole of society through such intrusions. This contributes to negative attitudes towards religious institutions and clerics, and the abandonment of religion by an increasing proportion of Australians.

Mixed views about evangelism

When asked whether “the government should *not* interfere in any religion attempting to spread its faith”, 34% of adult Australians agreed and 38% disagreed (Figure 56).

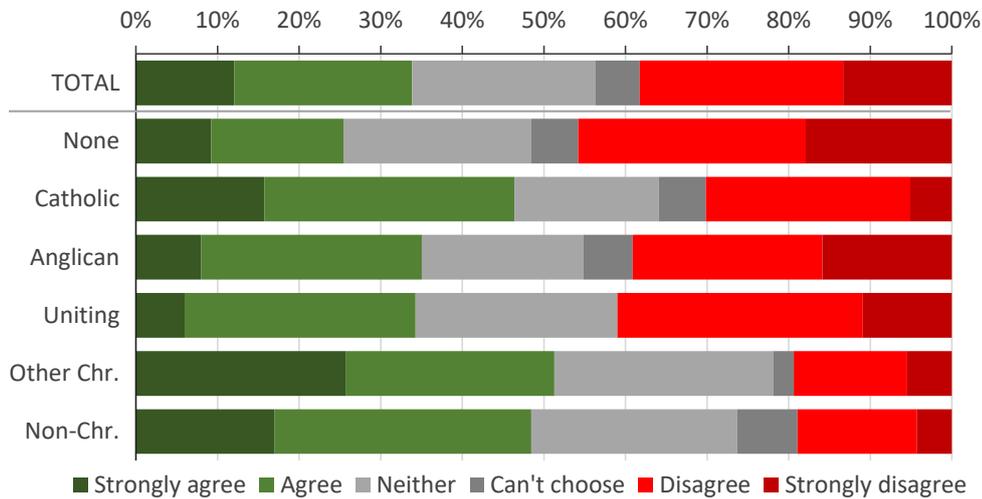


Figure 56: Government should *not* interfere in evangelism, by religion

Source: AuSSA 2018

Minor Christian denominations (53%), non-Christian faiths (48%) and Catholics (46%) were the most likely to say the government shouldn’t impede evangelisation. A quarter (25%) of Nones said likewise.

Nearly half (46%) of Nones disagreed, as did, significantly, 41% of Uniting/Methodists, 39% of Anglicans, 30% of Catholics, and 19% each of minor Christian and non-Christian faiths. Around one in five Australians (22%) had no specific view either way.

Overall, nearly two thirds of Australians (62%) hold a positive or neutral attitude towards the right to evangelise.

As expected, support for unfettered evangelism correlated strongly and positively with religiosity (Figure 57). Support was in the majority only amongst Committeds (57% of Regulars and 69% of Devouts), and lowest amongst Rejecters and Socialisers (25% each) and Notionals (28%).

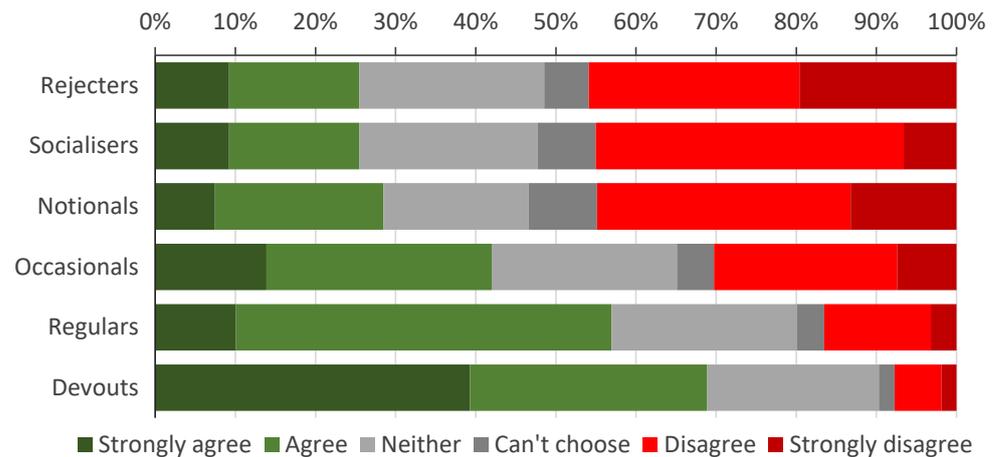


Figure 57: Government should not interfere in evangelism, by ARI6

Source: AuSSA 2018

Religion a private, not public, affair

Support for the right to evangelise comes with caveats.

While only 38% of Australians think it's appropriate for the government to interfere in the right to evangelise, at the same time more than half (60%) would prefer not to hear the religious views of others (Crabb 2019).

In contrast, most Australians oppose clerics attempting to influence parliamentary elections (just 12% think it's appropriate), and oppose clerics being the final authority over Australia's laws (just 6% think it's appropriate) (Francis 2021, p 94). Far more Australians say that the churches have too much power than say they don't.

This richly illustrates that most Australians accept that religion is a matter of personal choice, but equally that most believe the imposition of religious doctrine on the whole of society is inappropriate and unwelcome. Some clerics seem not to have grasped this difference, with dogmatic and dominionistic behaviour continuing to provoke significant declines in their religious franchises.

Summary: Some 38% of Australians support the government restrictions on the right to evangelise. Slightly fewer (34%) oppose government interference, while one in five (22%) hold no view either way. Evangelism is seen largely as a private matter. A majority of Australians (60%) don't want to hear the religious views of others, just 12% agree clerics may attempt to influence elections, and a mere 6% think clerics should be the final interpreters of law.