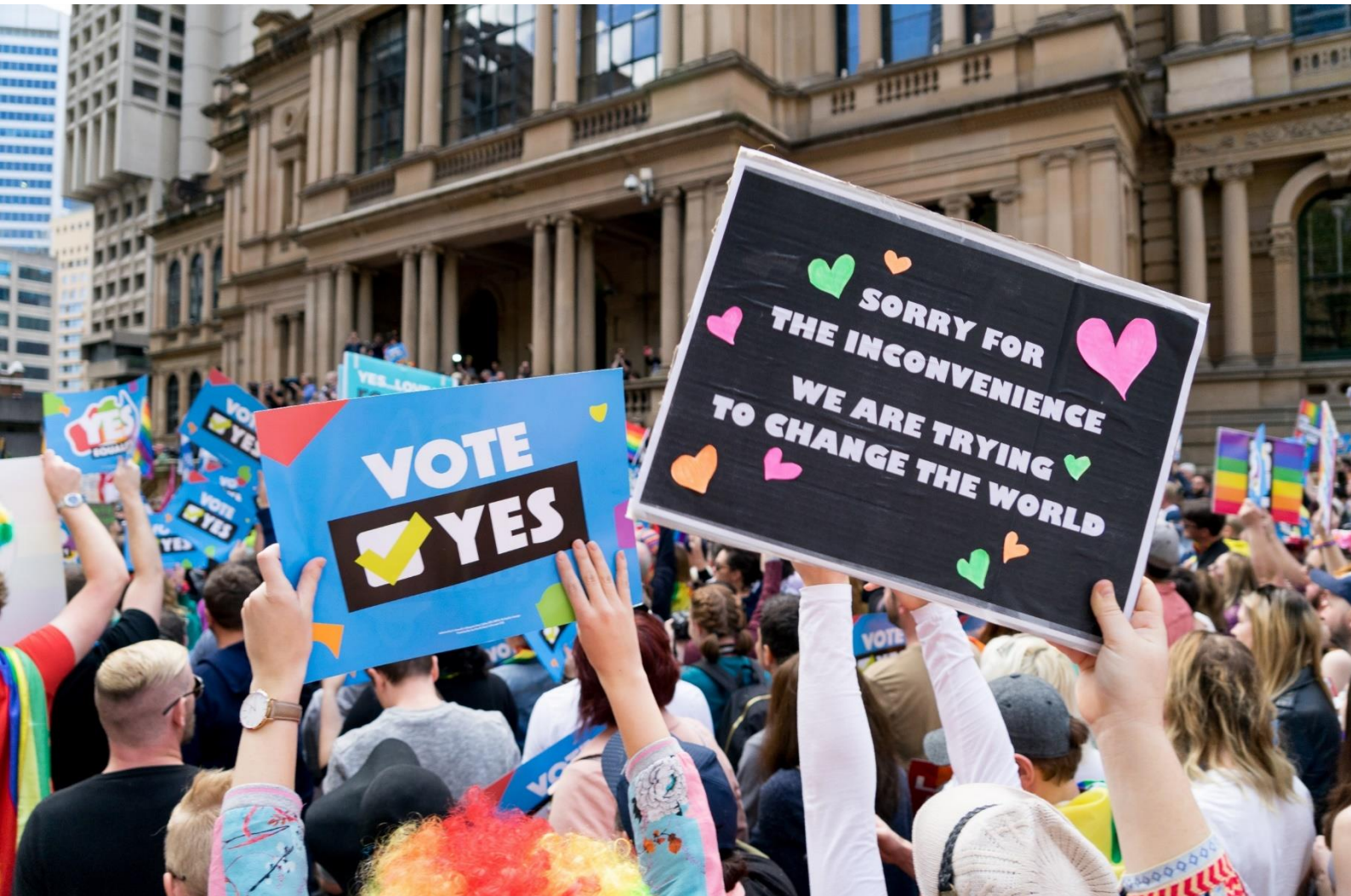




RATIONALIST SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA



Religiosity in Australia

Part 3: Religion and politics

Neil Francis — RSA Fellow

December 2022

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Cover image: A public rally in Sydney, Australia, in support of marriage equality law reform by the federal parliament. (Credit: Abril Felman)

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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Andrew Denton

Foreword

In May of 2022, as NSW's parliament was on the verge of becoming the last state legislature to make Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) law, veteran Labor MLC Greg Donnelly rose to urge institutions of faith to ignore that law.

Citing St Thomas Aquinas' declaration that '*a human law not rooted in eternal law*' is '*unjust*', Donnelly, a devout Catholic, did not mince words.

"As institutions, you should not cooperate at all with the implementation of the provisions of the legislation that would impact you as organisations ... You must not do that, and you have an obligation not to do that. The law with regard to this is wrong."

It was a revealing moment. A lawmaker of faith, urging like-minded institutions to bury a law being passed by the secular institution he was elected to serve.

His determination to act, not just politically in furtherance of a religious worldview, but against the clearly expressed views of the electorate, was a reminder that our nation's secularity is never guaranteed.

Which is why this third volume of the Rationalist Society's series '*Religiosity in Australia*', focussing on religion and politics, is both timeless, and timely.

I will come to that but, first, I should explain where I set my stall when it comes to faith:

My father, whose family was Jewish, renounced all faith and declared that “God didn’t believe in him”. My mother, born-and-bred a Catholic, saw her faith fall away to the point where, on her deathbed, she declined a priest because she was not “not that much of a hypocrite”.

Baptised Catholic, my education was largely Church schools, Catholic and Anglican. I can still hear the wooden screen sliding back as I took confession.

Now in my 60s, I have zero sense of God in the universe. Neither do I have an answer to what happened before the Big Bang. Some friends remain appalled by my agnosticism.

Evolutionary biologist, Robert Trivers, puts it well, I think: “As for this enormous universe and how it started, that’s way beyond my capacity to say anything of value, and it’s way beyond the capacity of humans to penetrate at the moment. All the alternative explanations you hear are equally absurd to me. The whole damn thing is incredible”.

Individual faith (gained and lost); the search for meaning; the ache for the numinous; the community of wonder: these often strike me as profoundly moving.

But individual faith, organised into powerful institutions or communities, and expressed politically? About this I have a more jaundiced view.

Having engaged closely in multiple parliamentary debates about VAD, I’ve seen up close how institutions and communities who claim to speak for the Divine, and of a higher morality, are capable of acting in ways that are profoundly human, and base.

So, while my faith compass may not point due south, as it does for many in the Rationalist Society, we are as one in our support for a genuinely secular Australia.

To me, this means a nation where people are free to follow any faith, and live by its tenets, as long as they are not in conflict with the laws of the land, and they do not impinge on the rights of others to lead the lives that are of value to them.

But it also means a society which, even as it values and protects the right to worship and individual belief, does not allow such rights to override, or obliterate, the rights and values of the wider community.

Enter, Neil Francis, and the extraordinary service he has performed in meticulously researching and documenting what contemporary Australians’ religious values actually are, and how much they have shifted over recent decades.

In **Part 1** of the series, he showed that, since the 70s, religiosity in Australia has weakened at a rate much greater than previously understood, and that many religious Australians are more socially progressive than leaders of their religions often claim.

In **Part 2**, he revealed a massive chasm in trust in churches between the trusting, very small minority of our most religious, and the deep distrust felt by most other Australians.

Now, in **Part 3**, he presents a detailed, empirically-researched, picture of the declining — sometimes surprising — role that religion has played in Australians' political engagement over recent decades.

We learn of a nation where the abandonment of religion has moved beyond the weakly committed, and into the ranks of those who previously held to stronger beliefs; where very little of our sense of personal identity comes from religion; and where support for socially progressive issues towards sexual expression and gender roles has more than doubled, while the number of religious conservatives in opposition has more than halved.

Even though people who identify as 'religious' are more likely to favour Coalition over Labor policies on issues like the economy, immigration, and global warming - and even though Christians (whose numbers are declining), are more likely to favour the Coalition to form a 'strong government' - Francis' research shows that it is an alignment of conservative, self-interested - rather than religious - values which drives this support.

His report also shows that religion and religiosity do not automatically translate to conservative social attitudes.

Most Australians, including a majority of religious conservatives, support some form of abortion service provision, as they do voluntary assisted dying. Across the socio-religious spectrum (other than the small percentage of religious and secular conservatives), Australians oppose religious schools discriminating against LGBTIQ staff and students.

Perhaps most strikingly, only 5% of Australians say that religion has a significant influence on their voting intentions. 86% say religion doesn't influence their vote "at all".

As Francis says, this "spells difficult times ahead for parties who promote [a] ...conservative religio-social agenda".

Yet, in the same period that religion has been all but vanishing from our political thinking, political decisions have continued to be made which preference religiosity, and religious institutions, in Australia. Three examples:

- Since 2006, the \$60 million a year given to the National Schools Chaplaincy Program by the Federal Government to put religious-based (mostly Christian) chaplains in schools.
- In 2012, the passing of legislation allowing religious entities to register as Basic Religious Charities, thereby avoiding the need to declare income or other financial details, and exempting them from governance standards enforced on other charities, all while receiving substantial taxpayer subsidies.
- Exemptions, in state abortion and assisted dying laws, which allow faith-based providers to refuse access to those services, even as they receive taxpayer funding.

Today, somewhat counter-intuitively, even as religiosity in Australia is in decline, concerted efforts are being made to force conservative Australian politics further to the religious right.

Earlier this year, Victorian Liberal MLC, Cathrine Burnett Wake, warned of political candidates with “extremist” views who were infiltrating the State party.

Despite being personally endorsed by Federal Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, Burnett Wake lost her spot on the ticket for the upper house to a member of the City Builders Church.

In Gippsland, which Burnett Wake represents, dozens of Liberal party members have reportedly left the party due to alleged branch stacking by a Pentecostal church group seeking to gain influence over the party’s internal direction.

In her valedictory speech, Burnett Wake said: “Ordinary Australians need to awaken to the threat from these groups. Their goal is to target faltering democratic institutions, where a well-organised minority can effectively disenfranchise the majority – removing moderate representative options from voters”.

At the same time, across the border in South Australia, Liberal Senator Alex Antic, a conservative Christian, was openly leading a campaign to drive moderates, who had supported legislation for abortion and assisted dying, out of the State party and replace them with ‘God-fearing conservatives.’

It is estimated that the scale of Antic’s recruitment drive is likely to result in these conservatives, many of them recruited from Pentecostal church communities, having full control of the state’s council.

As the pastor of one congregation put it: “It’s really simple – if Christians joined political parties many of these Bills would not even make it into parliament”.

While most Australians would be unaware of such concerted efforts at a state level to advance minority religious beliefs politically, many took note when our former Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, himself a member of an evangelical church, chose a Pentecostal gathering in Perth to give his first speech after losing office.

Invoking God, he said “We trust in Him. We don’t trust in governments. We don’t trust in the United Nations, thank goodness”.

That is why this report is so timely. Despite Francis’ research clearly showing a vast gulf between conservative Christian politics and the Australian electorate (exemplified by the failure of Cory Bernardi’s, *Australian Conservatives* party), the reality is that minority conservative religious forces have become more, rather than less, politically active across Australia.

In this, they have been emboldened by the success of fellow-travellers in the USA who, after decades of grass roots activism, succeeded in having *Roe v Wade* overturned, and reproductive rights for many American women set back half a century.

The lesson from America is also the lesson for us: A liberal democracy, particularly a two-party liberal democracy, is always open to being subverted by minority forces who are well-resourced, well-organised, and determined.

Preserving our genuinely secular society requires vigilance and engagement.

The picture that Neil Francis has painted in this report should be of deep interest to any politician, or political advisor, looking to defend, and strengthen, a secular Australia.

Andrew Denton
November 2022



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, 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

Many Australian political party operatives, pundits, and observers make statements about religion and its impacts on politics — particularly at the ballot box — that smack of conviction yet lack good evidence.

Claims on both sides of the political aisle confidently attribute significant effects to voters' religiosity, when in fact observed effects are usually caused by confounding factors such as income or non-religious social attitudes.

This report employs high-quality, university-led empirical studies of Australians' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours to reveal a more robust picture of the relationship between religion and how Australians are likely to vote on a range of issues.

Major trend away from religiosity

Contrary to the claims of some religious commentators, the abandonment of religion by large numbers of Australians doesn't involve only those who were weakly committed (Notionals). Robust empirical data shows that significant numbers of those who were formerly more religious (Occasionals, Regulars, and Devouts) have also abandoned religion.

In addition, significant numbers of those who say they still remain affiliated with their religion are now less religious than before. Only very small minorities of Australians have increased their religiosity.

Multiple indicators suggest that the substantial movement away from religion will continue, with non-religious Australians (Nones) soon to outnumber the religious. When measuring religion as faith rather than an historical family-culture vestige, Nones already outnumber the religious (55%, not 39%).

Sense of personal identity

Contrary to common opinion, religion is a weak or absent contributor to a sense of personal identity for most Australians. A sense of happiness, freedom, national (Australian) identity, occupation, and equality are seen as far more important.

When split into social Progressives, Moderates and Conservatives, and each of those into the religious (affiliated) versus not, religion itself *doesn't* rate as the most significant differential in sense of identity (polarisation) to the religious: *gender* does. Religion is the number two polarisation factor amongst Conservatives, and is even less important amongst Moderates and Progressives.

Indeed, importance of gender to one's sense of personal identity explains almost all of the variance in the importance of religion to identity.

Religion correlates with somewhat lower importance of freedom amongst Moderates and Progressives (but not Conservatives) — that is, a greater willingness to politically sacrifice freedoms for security. The difference is largely driven by the personality characteristic of greater “dangerous world” perceptions rather than by religious doctrine.

Major trend towards social progressivism

Over recent decades Australia has become more socially progressive, at least in attitudes toward sexual expression and gender roles. Since 1996, Progressives have increased from 20% of the population to more than double, 42% in 2019. Much of the nett change has come from a significant reduction of Religious Moderates, down from over half (53%) to a third (32%).

Over the same period, Religious Conservatives have dropped from 15% to 7%.

This spells difficult times ahead for parties and operatives who promote conservative social agendas, and especially so for conservative *religio*-social agendas.

“Religious” effects mostly caused by general policy attitudes, not faith

Religion correlates modestly but inconsistently with greater likelihood of feeling aligned with the Coalition (Liberals and Nationals) versus Labor.

When expressly asked, almost all Australian voters (86%) say that **religion doesn't influence their vote** at parliamentary elections *at all*, while a very small minority (5%) say it influences their vote “very much”.

Other social attitudes are far more significant in influencing voting behaviour.

Fear of change is an important factor amongst Australia's Christians, but not amongst other religionists or Nones. It is associated with a significantly greater likelihood of voting for conservative parties by Religious Progressives and Religious Moderates, versus their Secular counterparts. It isn't more greatly associated with Religious Conservatives because Secular Conservatives are more likely to vote for conservative candidates in any case. This factor alone helps explain the general success of “small target” (little change) election strategies: the Coalition in 2019 (and in which Labor promised a blizzard of significant changes) and Labor in 2022 (when it didn't).

Compared with their Secular counterparts, **Religious** Progressives, Moderates and Conservatives are significantly more likely to favour **Coalition** over Labor policies across **a wide range of policy areas**, not only in regard to economic

management, government debt and taxation, but also on immigration, asylum seekers, education, healthcare, environment and global warming. These “religious” (but not faith-based) effects are most striking amongst Progressives and Moderates.

Only Religious *Conservatives* are *less* likely than their Secular counterparts to think of themselves as Coalition-aligned, and to be less likely to have voted for the Coalition at the 2019 federal election. That is, Religious Conservatives demonstrated *less*, not more support than Secular Conservatives for the Coalition and the then overtly religious Prime Minister, Scott Morrison. The hard evidence runs counter to religious “miracle” narratives of the time.

Christians are significantly more likely to have **confidence in the Coalition** forming a “strong” government, while non-Christian religionists and Nones are more likely to believe Labor would form “strong” government. The effect amongst Christians is strongly associated with degree of religiosity. However, this is a weakness for the Coalition as Christianity continues to decline across the nation.

It's *my* money, thanks

Belief that high-income tax rates are a disincentive to working hard are highest amongst low-income earners, and lowest amongst the second-highest tax bracket. The highest income bracket is middling in attitude. This indicates that this political trope is a confection rather than reality. Much greater likelihood of this belief occurs amongst Religious Progressives and Moderates, but somewhat less so amongst Religious Conservatives, than among their Secular counterparts. Given that Religious Conservatives are a small voting population (7%), the Coalition’s divisive former “lifters versus leaners” platform was more attractive to Religious Progressives and Moderates.

In Australia, having a religion is more strongly associated with the belief that personal effort necessarily leads to success, economic rationalism, fast economic growth, limiting imports to “protect” the economy, belief in personal responsibility, opposition to redistribution of wealth, lower taxes, and harsher attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers: in other words, a raft of attitudes favouring the self or one’s in-group.

Little electoral appetite for religious representation

The comprehensive failure of Cory Bernardi’s Australian Conservatives party, founded to promote “traditional” Christian values, is recent evidence of just how little traction there is for overt religious crusading in contemporary Australian politics. The Western Australia Liberal party too, recently identified religious “fundamentalism” as a key contributing factor to its losses at the 2022 federal election.

The ballot box evidence contradicts claims of a resurgence in concern for conservative social values. Indeed, such values can be electoral poison.

Religion doesn't guarantee conservative social attitudes

Not only is the ballot box evidence clear, so is hard social research data. In fact, there is no *necessary* association between religion and socially conservative attitudes.

Most support legal abortion: Most Australians, *including* a great majority of Religious Conservatives, believe abortion services should either be readily available or available in limited circumstances. Just 3% each of Religious Progressives and Religious Moderates say abortion should never be available. Conservative religious commentators arguing for legal prohibition don't even represent Religious Conservatives voters, of whom just one in ten (10%) remain opposed in all circumstances. Just 1% of Australian Catholics oppose abortion in all cases and 66% say it should be readily available, meaning that Catholic healthcare institutions are suppressing the consciences of even a majority of its own flock by banning abortion services altogether, and doing so on the public dime.

Most support voluntary assisted dying (VAD): Most Australians support lawful VAD for the terminally ill, including across the major religious denominations. Even amongst the most opposed group, Religious Conservatives, a minority 40% are opposed to lawful VAD. Just 7% of Religious Progressives and 11% of Religious Moderates oppose lawful VAD. Just 13% of Australian Catholics oppose lawful VAD, meaning that Catholic healthcare institutions are suppressing the consciences of even a majority of its own flock by banning VAD services altogether, and doing so on the public dime.

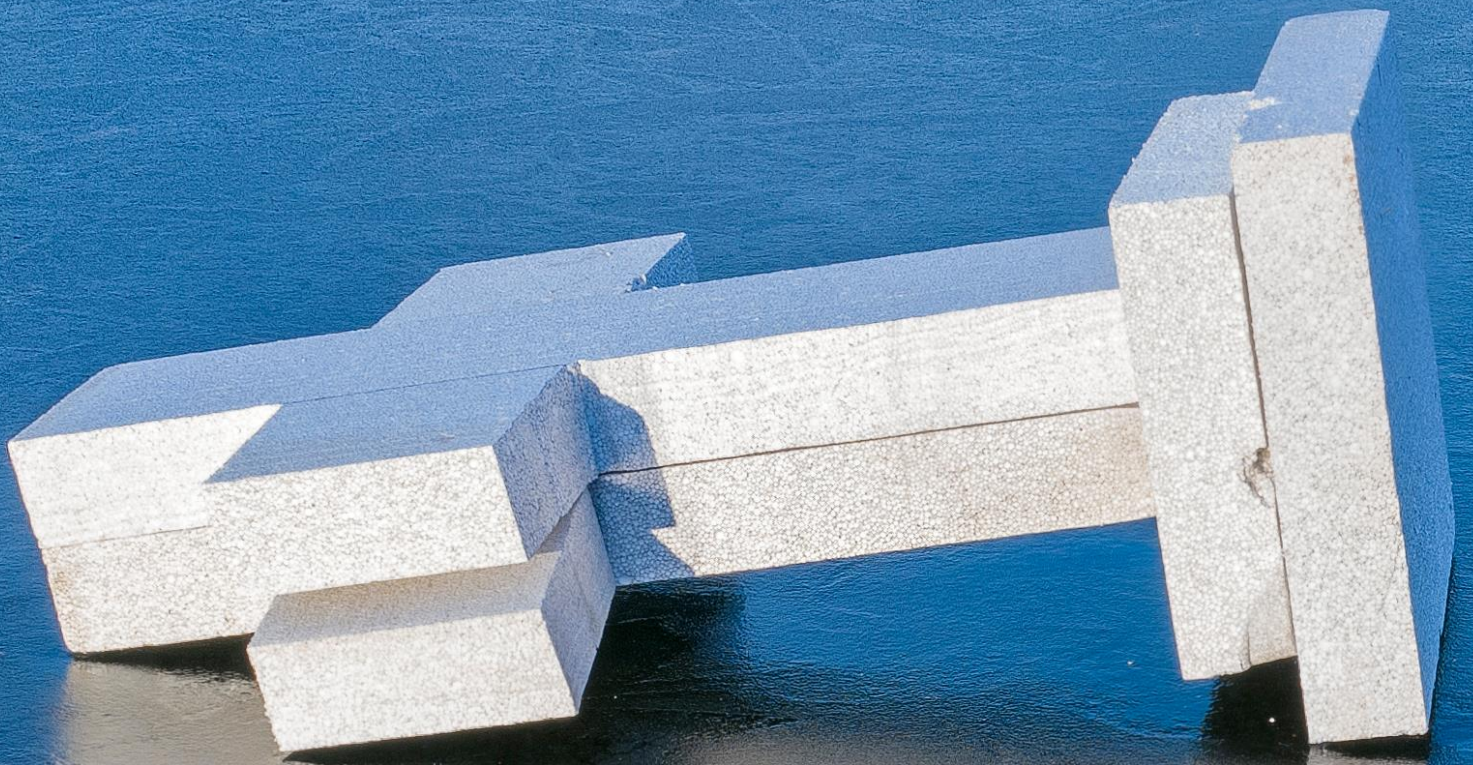
Most oppose school LGBTI discrimination: Most Australians oppose religious schools discriminating against LGBTI staff and students. Even amongst mothers of school-age children — those most likely to send their children to religious schools — fewer than one in ten (9%) of the non-religious, and around one in five (21%) of religious mothers hold negative attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality. Positive attitudes are in the majority across the socio-religious spectrum, except amongst Secular Conservatives (6% of the population) and Religious Conservatives (5% in this analysis). And across religious denominations, minorities ranging from just 13% amongst Catholics to less than a third (30%) amongst minor Christian denominations say that homosexuality is immoral, while majorities across the board hold favourable attitudes. Religious schools face a greater risk of student exodus through implementing rather than avoiding discriminatory policies.

Conservative religiosity correlates with science denial

Only amongst Religious Conservatives do a majority (60%) say that **climate change** *doesn't* present a serious challenge to their way of life, and only a tiny

minority (6%) say it's very serious. This flies in the face of increasingly urgent calls by climate scientists for a significant reduction in anthropogenic CO₂ production.

Overall and on the basis of hard evidence, it is clear that apparent associations between religion, political attitudes and voting behaviour, is largely founded on more conservative — including self-interested — attitudes rather than on religious faith itself. Political operatives and parties that fail to understand these real-world associations are likely to drive unintended voting consequences and perform poorly at the ballot box.



Introduction

In **Part 1** of this series, we discussed the decline of religiosity in Australia over recent decades — indeed since at least the 1970s¹ — and the much weaker relationship Australians have with religion, on average, than headline affiliation figures might imply. We also employed strong empirical evidence to further show how even religious Australians’ views on social reform matters such as abortion and voluntary assisted dying are in fact much more progressive than many religious leaders claim. And we revealed how deeper interests in taxation policy among Australia’s more religious led Labor to wrongly conclude it had a “problem with religion” that was incorrectly understood to have contributed to its unexpected loss at the 2019 federal election.

In **Part 2** of this series, we discussed a range of factors which predispose humans to religion and religiosity, the broad psychological “styles” of religiosity and how these correlate with important personality characteristics, beliefs and attitudes, as well as the psychological and social advantages religion brings to its adherents. We explored in more detail the nature of Australians adopting, changing and divesting themselves of one religion or another. We expressly challenged the notion that religious *organisations* have a “conscience” — they have rules and codes, not minds — and how those rules can extinguish the real consciences of even those within the group. And we explored the massive chasm in trust in the churches (or religious institutions and leaders more generally) between the trusting very small minority of the most religious Australians, and the deep distrust held by most other Australians.

In this **Part 3**, we examine the association between religious and political attitudes in Australia more closely, employing high-quality empirical research data to reveal for the first time very significant overlaps between religion and the kinds of attitudes Australians hold towards a wide range of matters that have little or nothing to do with organised supernatural faith.

The evidence is unequivocal: religious books (voters) should not be judged by their covers. Doing so is likely to bring grief for unwitting political operatives.

¹ Since Part 1 was published, ABS Census data from 2021 reveals that for the first time since federation, Christianity is in a minority, and that the next-largest “denomination” is No Religion.

Methodology

Most charts and figures in this report are derived from statistical analysis of the raw data of a range of studies conducted by scholars at Australian universities. These include the Australian Election Studies, the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, and the Australian Values Studies.

Other sources include peer-reviewed studies published in scholarly journals, and public opinion figures released by major third-party professional social research firms.

Remarks published in the mainstream media are also included.

Abbreviations

ABS — [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

ACOSS — [Australian Council of Social Services](#)

AES — [Australian Election Study](#) (ANU)

ANU — [Australian National University](#)

ARI6 — Australian Religious Identity 6-segment model

ASI6 — Australian Social Identity 6-segment model

AuSSA — [Australian Survey of Social Attitudes](#) (ANU)

AVS — [Australian Values Study](#) (ANU)

Chr. — Christian (in charts, tables)

Nones — People with no religion

“Polarisation” analysis

A number of analyses in this report employ “polarisation” analysis. This can be useful when comparing attitude differences by religiosity, social attitude, political party alignment, or other respondent characteristic.

It can be used where respondents choose from pre-set answers from positive (e.g. *strongly agree*), through neutral (*neither agree nor disagree*), to negative (*strongly disagree*). While “ignoring” the neutral responses, polarisation analysis subtracts the nett negative from the nett positive responses.

This provides a shorthand notation of the nett degree to which attitudes are indeed polarised at one or other end of the spectrum. Since polarisation can differ in the *opposite direction* amongst respondent characteristics, its value can exceed 100%, and technically can range up to 200%.

Segmentation models

This report employs specific attitudinal/behavioural segmentation models in the analysis of religious and social identity.

Australian Religious Identity 6-Segment model (ARI6)

This model segments people into cohorts from least to most religious, using religious affiliation, and religious service attendance besides weddings and funerals:

- *Rejecters*: No religious affiliation, never attend services.
- *Socialisers*: No religious affiliation, sometimes attend services.
- *Notionals*: Religious affiliation, *never* attend services.
- *Occasionals*: Religious affiliation, attend occasionally.
- *Regulars*: Religious affiliation, attend at least monthly.
- *Devouts*: Religious affiliation, attend weekly or more often.

Australian Social Identity 6-Segment model (ASI6)

This model segments people into socially *Progressive*, *Moderate* and *Conservative* cohorts based on attitudes toward sexual expression and gender roles. Each of these three segments is then split by religious affiliation — none (*Secular*) versus any (*Religious*), resulting in six segments from *Secular Progressives* to *Religious Conservatives*. Use of capitals signifies these particular model segments. The model can reveal a “**religious premium**” in attitudes within each of the three major social cohorts, which may not be apparent by religiosity (ARI6) alone.

Author analysis: Unless otherwise noted, all analyses of ANU/Dataverse study raw data (e.g. AES, AuSSA, AVS) were conducted by Neil Francis, not the ANU or study sponsors.

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

Rounding: Due to mathematical rounding of individual figures in a set, the sums of some reported percentage components may add up to slightly more or less than 100% or the expected total.

Respect: This report does *not* seek to disrespect or argue against religion or faith. Rather, it aims to report relevant facts *about* the breadth and depth of religion and faith and their significant impacts, using high-quality data.

FALTTT



Reading the religio-political landscape

Political parties in Australia continue to mis-read — and especially to over-read — the effects of religious faith on voters' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

For example, in the previous term of federal parliament, the Morrison Coalition government considerably overestimated appetite for enshrining special religious privileges in legislation. The Australian Human Rights Commission (2020) warned about the significant overreach of the proposed legislation. Even government members crossed the floor to oppose the more extreme elements of the reform agenda (Dalzell & Long 2022).

More recently in Western Australia, religious fundamentalism in the Liberal party has been recognised as a significant contributor to its near annihilation at the state's 2022 election (Perpitch 2022).

On the other side of the political aisle, Labor over-egged its interpretation of religious effects in its post-mortem of its unexpected 2019 federal election loss (Emerson & Weatherill 2019), wrongly concluding that religious faith rather than the confounding factors of income, security and general social attitudes caused a drop in its vote.

Rocha (2021) says that religion continues to play a prominent role in Australian politics, with those leaving religion merely rejecting *institutional* religion but not necessarily their faith, and inferring the “*spiritual but not religious*” (SBNRs) as somehow religious despite their “*not religious*” title. These assumptions are wrong. In Part 1 of this series, I showed not only a significant drop in religious affiliation, but religious belief (in god). In Part 2, I showed how SBNRs are very different from the religious and are not appropriately counted with them.

In Part 1, I also showed how religious Australians are more economically conservative, and more sensitive than the non-religious (“Nones”) to privileged taxation policies, creating a false impression of a “religious” vote against Labor, caused largely by reaction to its 2019 election tax policies to rein in dividend franking and real-estate negative gearing.

In this Part 3, further empirical evidence is employed to continue unpicking popular assumptions. We begin by reviewing correlates of the significant decline in religiosity in contemporary Australia, revealing that even of those still “affiliating” with a religion, a significant proportion have a non-practising or more casual relationship with their denomination than headline affiliation figures would suggest.

Correlates of religious decline in Australia

Australian data reveals important correlates of the decline of religious affiliation and religiosity in Australia. Unsurprisingly, compared to those who haven't changed their religiosity since childhood, differences in religious beliefs are greatest between people who've left religion compared with people who've increased their religiosity (Figure 1).

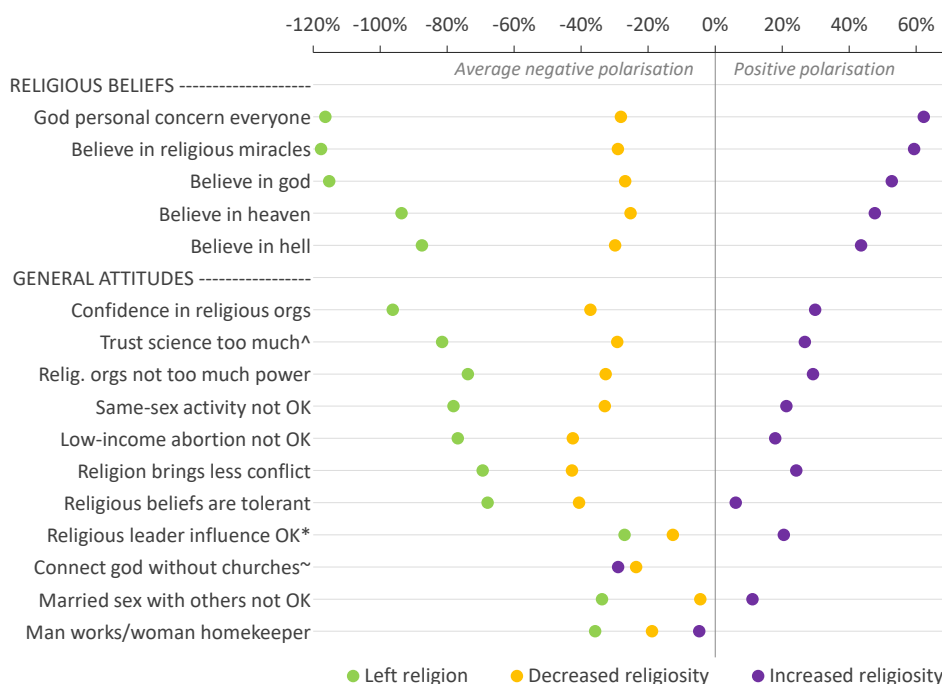


Figure 1: Average polarisation of beliefs and attitudes by change in religiosity since childhood, compared to those who didn't change

Source: AuSSA 2018. Notes: See page 20 for an explanation of "polarisation" methodology. Some statements have been reversed in valence from the original study so that chart figures are all the same polarity, ^ and religion not enough; * influence on how people vote in elections; ~ Left-religion omitted since most don't believe in god. Low-income abortion not OK means pregnancy termination for the *reason* of low income.

Religious correlates

Belief that god is concerned with everyone personally (narcissism), and belief in religious miracles (magical thinking), top the differences, followed by belief in god, heaven and hell.

Of considerable concern to religious institutions, both those whose religiosity hasn't changed, and those whose religiosity has increased, believe it is possible to connect to god without the churches. Australians are increasingly likely to "make their own way" even if they retain their faith.

Moral correlates: trusting churches, science, church power

In the domain of general attitudes, the top three differences in leaving religion versus increasing religiosity are confidence in religious organisations, trusting science too much and religion not enough, and whether religious organisations have too much power.

Confidence in religious organisations is strongly consistent with findings reported in Part 2 (Francis 2021b, p 137): levels of trust between the religious and non-religious doesn't vary much regarding most institutions, but trust in the churches is uniquely and strongly different amongst a very trusting highly religious 12% of the population, and strong distrust amongst the other 88%.

The importance of trust in science as a correlate of religious decline is consistent with Australia's more religious being somewhat more likely to hold a tertiary qualification (Francis 2021a, p 31). This is in contrast to the USA, where higher religiosity correlates overall with lower tertiary education (Pew Research Center 2017). The USA picture, however, is more complex by religious denomination, with higher average educational attainment amongst Pentecostals, black Protestants and Catholics, but not other Protestants (McFarland, Wright & Weakliem 2011). The USA's religious with greater educational attainment are more likely to attend religious services more often *and* are more likely to view the Bible as a book of fables not to be taken literally.

Sex, pregnancy termination

Next on the importance of attitudinal differences are sex and death: greater approval (decreased religiosity) or disapproval (increased religiosity) of same-sex activity, and abortion.

Conflict and tolerance

Also significant correlates in both directions of change in religiosity are perceptions of religion as engendering conflict, and religious beliefs as intolerant, consistent with trust in religious organisations.

Across almost all dimensions, the strength of negative polarisation of those who've left religion is significantly greater than the strength of positive polarisation of those whose religiosity has increased. This adds to evidence of abandonment and weakness in religiosity in Australia, and suggests that the decline in religious affiliation will continue.

Summary: A range of moral attitudes correlates significantly with changes in religiosity (since childhood) in Australia: trust in science versus trust in religious organisations, concern about church power, attitudes toward homosexuality and abortion, and perceptions about religion's contribution to conflict and intolerance.

Changes in attitudes suggest continued weakness of religiosity and a likelihood that religious affiliation will continue to decline in Australia.

Despite exodus, remaining religiosity relatively weak

Other data supports the polarisation findings. Since childhood, large swathes of now adult Australians have abandoned religion altogether, including significant majorities of those who were Socialisers and Notionals (less religious) in childhood, and large minorities of those who were Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts (more religious) (Figure 2). And, while small numbers have *increased* in religiosity since childhood, significantly more have *reduced* their religiosity in addition to those who left religion altogether.

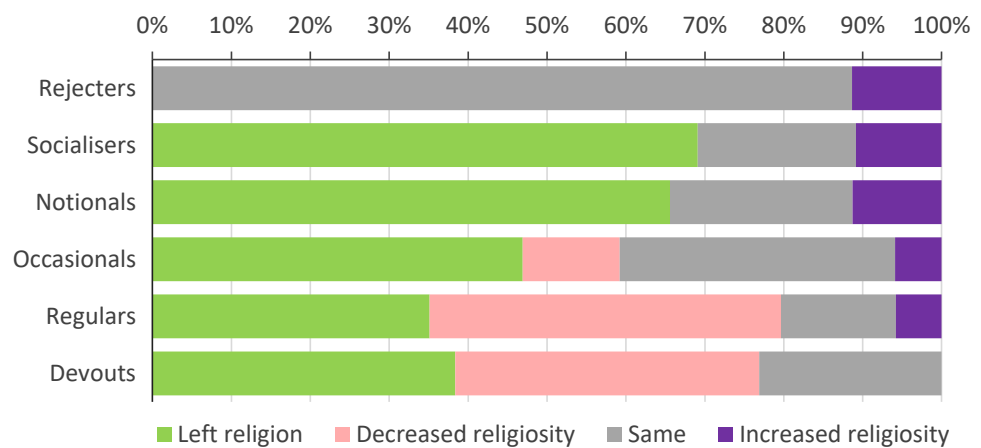


Figure 2: Childhood ARI6 religiosity by change in religiosity as of 2018

Source: AuSSA 2018. Note: The ARI6 model is explained in Segmentation Models on page 21.

These changes have occurred across the religious denominations (Figure 3). Note that leaving religion for non-Christian religions overall is relatively low, consistent with much of the non-Christian religion sector having immigrated from places with less accommodating cultures, including those who were persecuted for their religious beliefs.

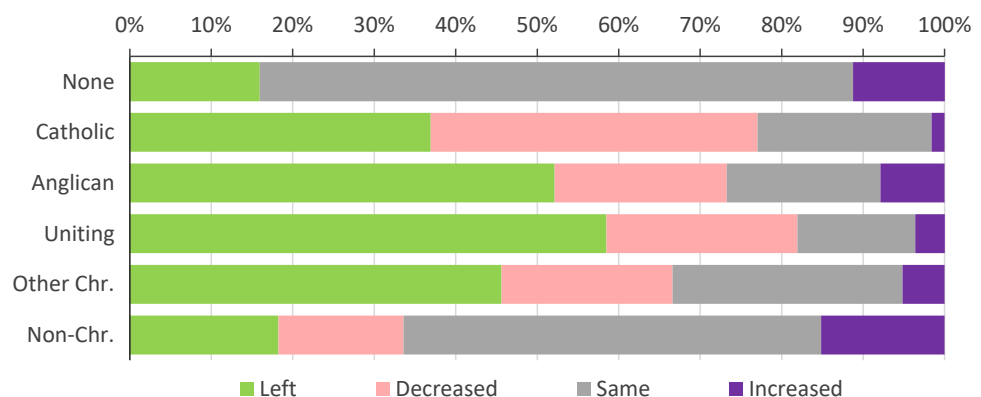


Figure 3: Childhood religion by change in religiosity as of 2018

Source: AuSSA 2018

Most whose religiosity has increased are not “very” religious

Even amongst those who have *increased* their religion since childhood, a minority (33%) describe themselves as very or extremely religious (Figure 4).

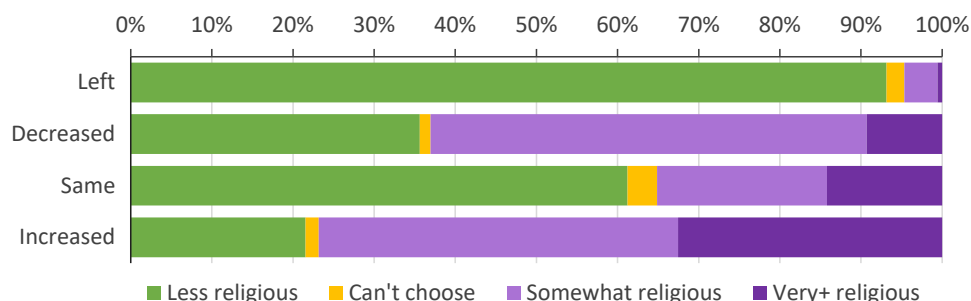


Figure 4: Self-description of religiosity by change in religiosity since childhood
Source: AuSSA 2018

Weak or modest religious commitment

Figure 5 shows attendance of religious services by religious denomination. Across the denominations, large proportions (almost three-quarters or 73%) of those with a religious affiliation either *never* attend religious services, or attend typically only once or twice a year (“Occasionally”).

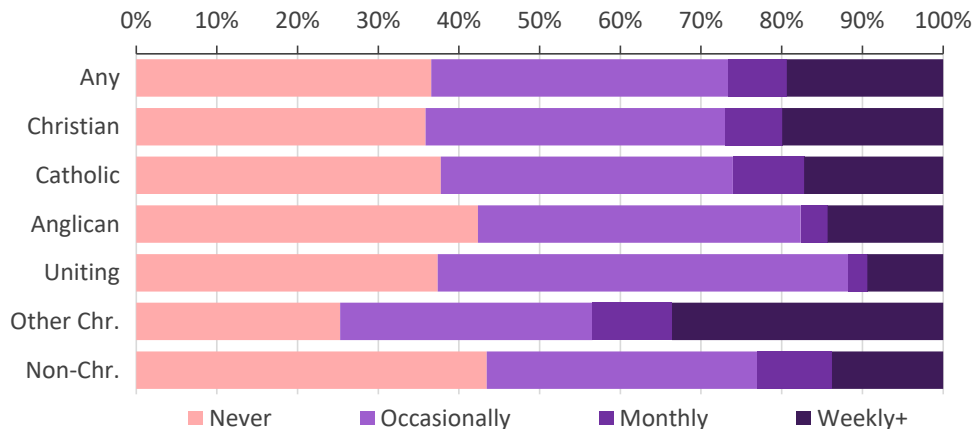


Figure 5: Religious service attendance by religious denomination
Source: AES 2019

Headline “religious affiliation” figures — including census figures produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics — create the false impression that Australians’ overall relationship with religion is considerably stronger than it is in practice.

Religionists acknowledge many weren't "committed" in the first place

Mr Barney Zwartz, a senior fellow of the Centre for Public Christianity, recently stated that despite the major drop in religious affiliation revealed by the 2021 census, "*core Christianity*" will continue (Zwartz 2022).² He also asserted that "*the vast majority of those leaving were not committed believers but had a merely cultural attachment*".

This is revealing for two reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges that religious affiliation is a poor measure of religiosity, creating a falsely high impression of Australians' religious faith. But at the same time, other religionists claim as firm and faithful members *all* those who tick their denominational box, as though affiliation equals devoutness and agreement, particularly regarding a "spokesperson's" claims about their religion's supposedly agreed doctrines. Prime examples include the Australian Christian Lobby and Family Voice Australia.

Secondly, it's evidentially misleading as discussed in the previous section. It's true that amongst those with a religious affiliation but who never attended services as children (Notionals in childhood), two thirds (66%) have subsequently abandoned religious affiliation (Figure 2). Yet, *even amongst those more committed*, nearly half (47%) of Occasionals, and more than a third of Regulars and Devouts (35% and 38% respectively), also abandoned religious affiliation. That is, many of the formerly quite religious — not only those who were weakly affiliated in childhood — have also abandoned religion.

Even amongst those who remain affiliated, there have been significant decreases in religiosity. Amongst Childhood Regulars and Devouts, those with now decreased religiosity (45% and 39% respectively) outnumber those whose religiosity remains unchanged (15% and 23%), or has increased (6% of Regulars).

The great majority of those who have left religion describe their religiosity as "less": little or no religiosity (Figure 4). Amongst those whose religiosity has decreased (that is, they still affiliate with a denomination), more than a third (36%) report little to no religiosity; as do a clear majority of those whose religiosity has remained the same since childhood (61%); and more than one in five (22%) of those reporting an *increase* in religiosity since childhood.

² Mr Zwartz doesn't define what "core Christianity" means, despite claiming it "will continue" and suggesting that it will "evolve" and "reinvent itself". The narrative suggests he merely means "those of us who are left". Also note that defining those who are "committed" as "core" is a circular argument, adding little real insight.

The hard data simply does not support a picture of widespread and robust religious devotion amongst Australians *still* affiliated with a religion today. The continued underlying weakness in religious devotion, even amongst those remaining, suggests further declines in religiosity in Australia are likely.

Census 2021 confirms underlying weaknesses

At the 2021 national census, the religious Nones (39%) outnumbered the largest single religious denomination, Catholic (20%), by nearly two to one. Indeed, the Nones are no longer far behind the proportion of all Christians (44%), and the total proportion nominating any religious affiliation was only just above half (53%).³

Further decreases are likely. By the 2026 census, if current trends continue, Religion total will drop below 50% in the census figures, and Nones will significantly outnumber Christians (Figure 6).

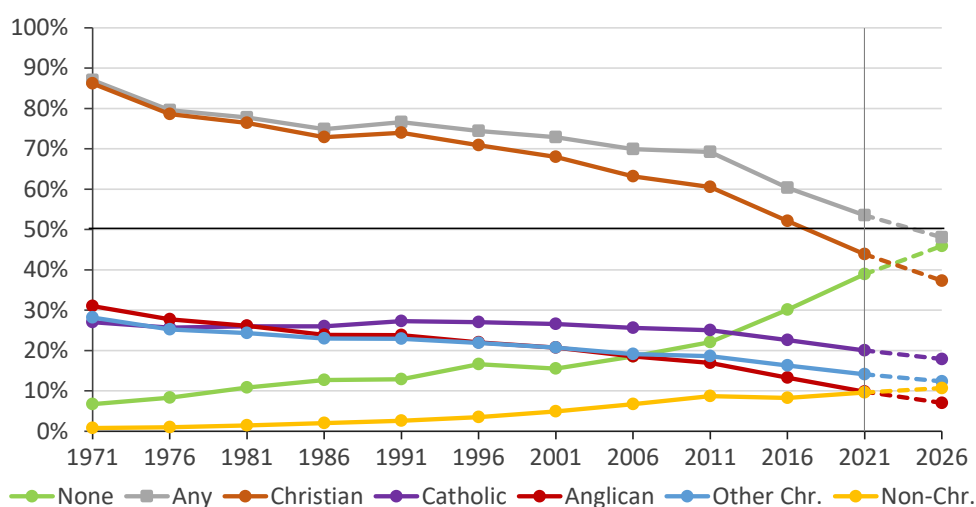


Figure 6: Changes in religious affiliation at the national census, by year

Source: ABS. Note: 2026 is a forward estimate based on more recent trends.

³ And, due to bias in the ABS census Religion question, religious affiliation overall is overestimated, with Nones underestimated at 39% in 2021 versus a correct figure of 55% (Gladman 2022), as discussed later.

Summary: Despite a substantial decline in religious affiliation in recent decades and the suggestion that Christian affiliation at least is now down to its “core”, robust data indicates continued substantial weakness in underlying devoutness, pointing to the likelihood of further significant decreases in affiliation.

Religionists’ claims that most of those who have left religion were not formerly committed believers are not supported by the evidence. Significant proportions of Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts — not just Notionals — have abandoned religion since childhood, and more who are still affiliated now have lower religiosity.

Headline figures significantly overstate religiosity

The headline Australian census figures overstate the religiosity of Australians in two major ways.

Headline census figure misleading

Firstly, the religion question on the census form offends modern social research standards by asking a highly biased question — “*What is the person’s religion?*”⁴ This results in a significant overstatement of religious affiliation for historical family reasons (a form of “acquiescence” bias), rather than matters of practical faith. The size of the bias effect of the religion question ranges around the world from around 13% to 19% (research by this author, reported in Gladman 2022).

Thus, correcting the base census 2021 religious affiliation figure of 54% to 58% — to account for those who didn’t answer the religion question (“Adjusted affiliation” in Figure 7) — and then subtracting the *minimum* bias effect of 13% gives a real religious affiliation of 45% (“Corrected affiliation” in Figure 7). That is, more than half (55%) of Australians are already Nones (no religious affiliation). These figures are very close to those obtained in the university-run Australian Survey of Social Attitudes in 2020, which returned 54% Nones using a *non*-biased form of religion question (Gladman 2022).

Correcting for bias in the ABS census religion question shows that religious Nones are already in the majority (55%) in Australia; not in the minority (unadjusted 39% ABS headline figure).

A closer look under the bonnet

Of course, even amongst those who identify with a religious denomination, the depth of religiosity varies widely. Figure 7 shows Australia’s religiosity according to the hard numbers. While a minority (45%) indicated affiliation with a religious denomination at the 2021 census, even smaller numbers reported a more robust relationship with religion:

- Fewer than 4 in 10 (38%) say they “belong” to a religion, and more than half of those say they are inactive members;
- Around one third (32%) describe themselves as religious;

⁴ Professional practice dictates that questions be unbiased, which includes avoiding presuming an answer in one or other direction. At a minimum standard, this question would be better worded “What is the person’s religion, *if any?*”.

- Fewer still (29%) say that religion is important in their lives;
- Fewer than a quarter (23%) attend religious services twice or more a year.
- Only around 1 in 5 (21%) feel certain that God exists.
- Fewer than 1 in 5 (18%) say that their religion is spiritual.
- One in six (16%) attend religious services monthly or more often.
- Just 15% describe themselves as active members of their religious group.

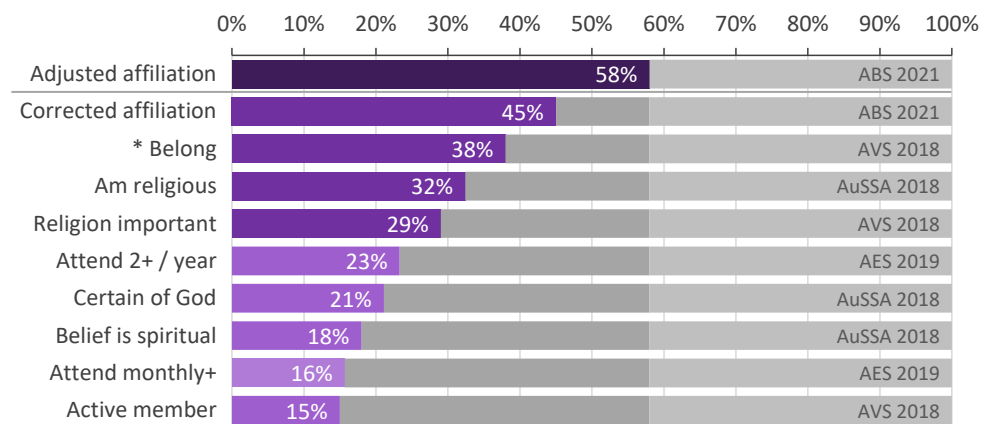


Figure 7: Religious affiliation, attitudes and behaviours of Australians

Sources: As shown on the chart. * More than half (56%) of religious “belongers” say they are *inactive*. See the previous page for a discussion of “adjusted” and “corrected” affiliation.

Summary: The rate of religious affiliation in Australia as of 2021, correcting for bias in the census religion question, is 45%. That is, Nones are in the majority (55%). Only modest numbers of Australians are significantly invested in their religion, with 21% certain God exists, 18% whose religion is spiritual, 16% who attend religious services monthly or more often, and just 15% who say they’re active members of their religious group.

Gender, religion and personal identity

As discussed in Part 1 of this series (Francis 2021a, p 38), the Australia Talks National Survey (Crabb 2019) found that of nine domains contributing to a sense of personal identity, religion was by far the least important.

So too, respondents were asked about a range of personal identity domains in the 1998 Australian Election Study (AES). Deeper insights are also afforded through the Australian Social Identity 6-segment model (ASI6). The model is described under Segmentation Models on page 21. The model makes it possible to isolate and examine the religious “premium” within a social attitude cohort (e.g. attitudes of Religious Moderates compared with Secular Moderates).

The religious premium in regard to the importance of various domains to one’s sense of identity is shown in Figure 8.⁵

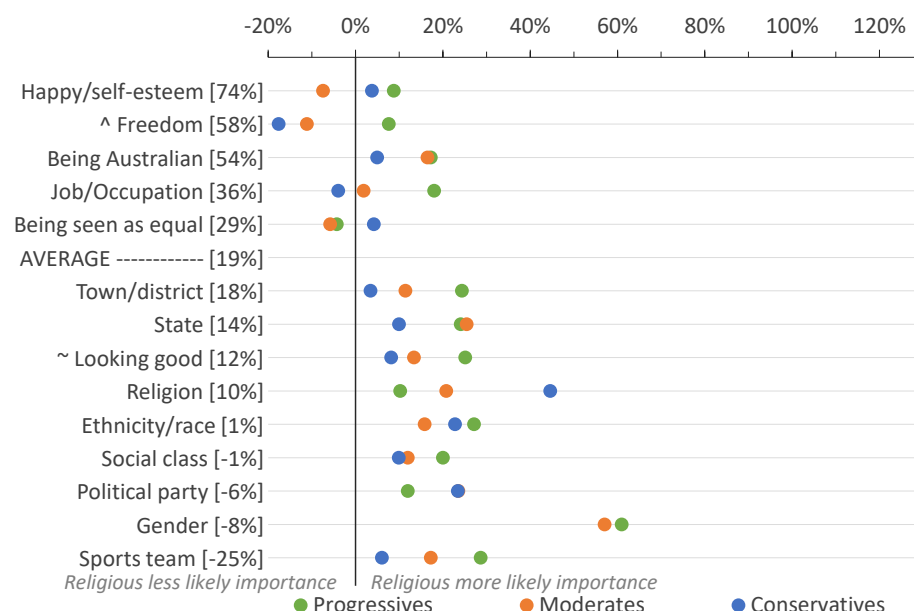


Figure 8: ASI6 religious premium in polarisation of the importance of domains to personal identity

Source: AES 1998. Notes: Polarisation = Very important – Not important at all. ^ to do what you want. ~ Looking stylish or fashionable. Label percentages in brackets are overall polarisation.

The most notable difference by far between Australia’s non-religionists and religionists, across the social spectrum of Progressives, Moderates, and Conservatives, is the importance of *gender* to one’s identity. We’ll return to this factor shortly.

⁵ Attitude toward each domain was asked separately; not by sacrificing one for another.

Vigilance towards norm violations and out-groups

The most consistent difference across the social spectrum is that on average the religious rate *most* dimensions (all except self-esteem, freedom, and equality) as significantly more important than do the non-religious. This suggests that the religious are generally more sensitive to categories and their membership of them, consistent with findings that they are on average more vigilant regarding norm violations and towards out-groups.

Only modest additional importance of religion to identity

The second notable difference is that despite the “religious premium” comparing attitudes of the Religious versus the Secular, *religion* as a source of identity overall falls at number *nine* of important factors. Religion was significantly more important for Religious Conservatives, but amongst Religious Progressives and Moderates, the religious premium of religion was around the same as for most other identity domains, including their social class and sports team. This is consistent with findings that a significant proportion of Australia’s religionists don’t rate religion as particularly important in their lives.

Significantly, religion itself is a very much *less* important contributor than gender to a sense of personal identity of the religious compared with the non-religious. And religion was number two in importance (after gender) only amongst social Conservatives, less so for Progressives and Moderates.

Less freedom

There is a modest negative religious premium for valuing freedom amongst Moderates and Conservatives. This is consistent with their relatively higher rates of authoritarianism.

Reputation management

Also of note is the significant premium the religious, across the social spectrum, give to “looking good”, which entails being stylish and fashionable. Therefore, while some religious conservatives *claim* that non-religious consumers are more superficially focused on worldly matters, in practice it is the religious who are more “worldly” in matters of appearance. This is consistent with other findings that the religious are more concerned with reputation management and self-enhancement.

The exceptional importance of gender (again)

The exceptional importance of gender to identity amongst religionists is also consistent with other findings, to be published in Part 4 of this series, that place sexuality at the top of the list of moral attitude differences between the religious and non-religious.

Indeed, by Australian Religious Identity 6-segment (ARI6) religiosity, the polarisation of the importance of gender is vastly greater than all other dimensions to a sense of identity (Figure 9): by far the least important amongst Rejecters while by far the most important amongst Devouts.

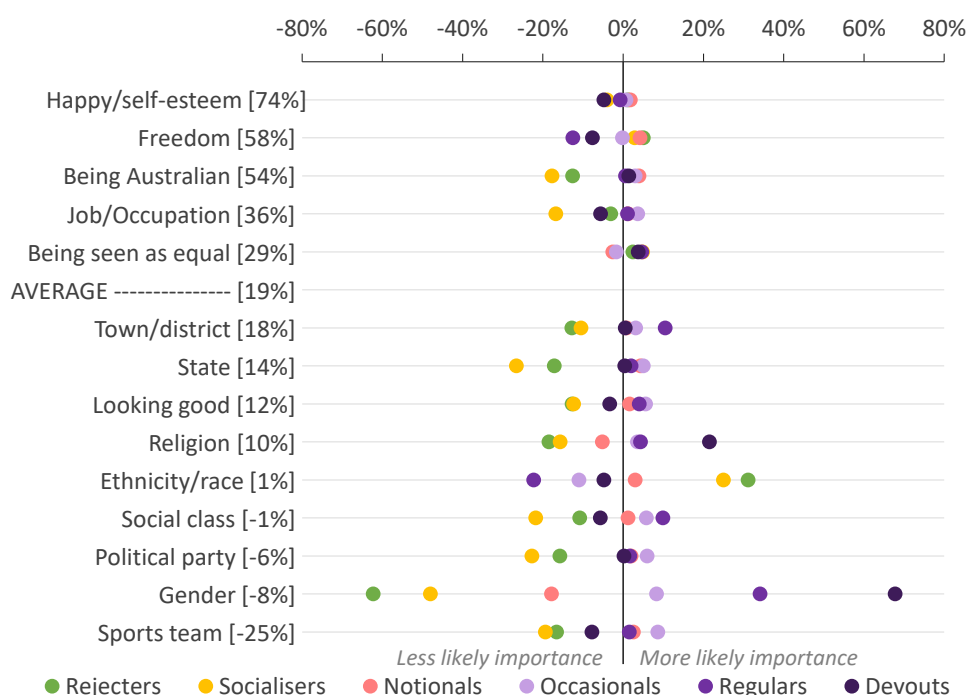


Figure 9: Polarisation of the importance of domains to personal identity, by ARI6 religiosity

Source: AES 1996. Legend percentages in brackets are overall polarisation.

Gender is the only measured identity domain to have a strongly linear relationship with religiosity — that is, to range in a consistent pattern from low to high religiosity.⁶ This relationship is illustrated in Figure 10.

⁶ The importance of religion to identity also has a clear positive association with religiosity, but it is less linear, and considerably less strong, than gender.

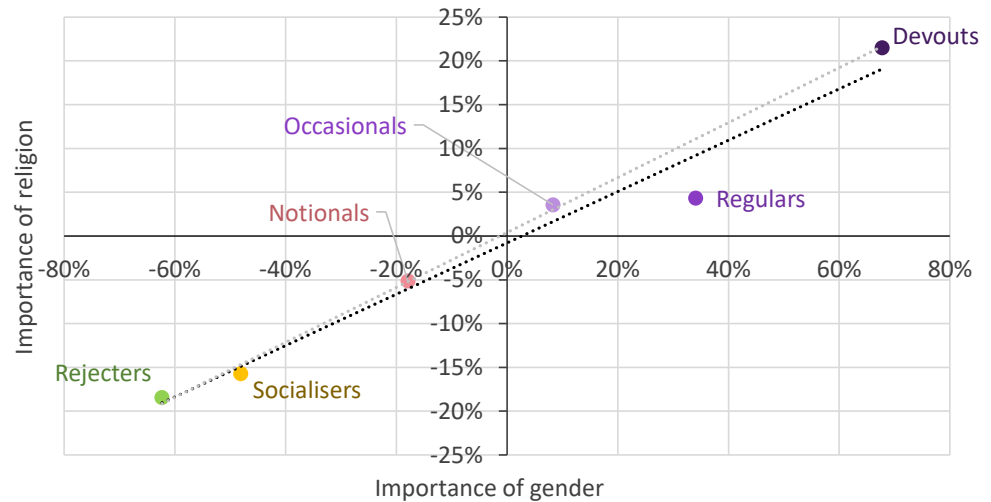


Figure 10: Relationship between the importance of gender and (separately) religion to one's sense of identity

Source: AES 1998. Note: Regulars (second-right data point) has a much smaller sample size than the others and therefore is subject to the greatest potential error. Dark trend line includes, and faint trend line omits, Regulars.

Statistically in this association, the polarisation of the importance of gender to one's identity predicts almost all (96%) of the variance in the polarisation in the importance of one's religion ($p < 0.001$). Indeed, if Regulars are omitted due to small sample size/large potential error, the relationship is 99.6% of the variance explained ($p = 0.0001$).

The importance of one's gender to a sense of personal identity predicts almost all (96%+) of the variance in the importance of religion to identity.

While such relationships are complex and may involve additional factors, this finding amplifies other findings regarding the greater salience of sexual expression and gender roles to the highly religious.

By ARI6 religiosity, the polarisation range for gender importance was 130% (and by far the greatest range), while the range for religion was 40%. This suggests (but doesn't prove) a more likely direction of causation: that attitudes toward sexuality and gender roles are more likely to influence religiosity, than the other way around.

In addition, ethnicity/race has a generally inverse relationship with religion in importance to personal identity (Figure 9). That is, the less important religion is to identity, the more important ethnicity/race is, though the relationship isn't entirely linear.

Summary: Australian identity data is strongly consistent with other findings that the religious are more greatly vigilant towards norm violations and out-groups. They place some, but less-than-expected, importance on religion but exceptional reliance on their gender as features of their personal identity: gender importance explains almost all (96%) of the variance in religion's importance to identity.

Religionists also exhibit greater interest in appearing stylish and fashionable than do their non-religious counterparts, consistent with reputation management and self-enhancement — and at odds with conservative religionists' criticisms of a supposedly greater worldly consumerism amongst the non-religious.

A significant trend towards social progressivism

Australian Election Study data reveals significant trends in socio-political attitudes. The Australian Social Identity 6-segment model (ASI6) — which measures attitudes toward sexual expression and gender roles — reveals a very significant movement of moderates to progressivism from 1996 to 2019 (Figure 11).

Most significantly, the Religious Moderates segment has shrunk considerably, particularly in the 2019 election after marriage equality was legalised in 2017 (and the sky didn't fall), while there has been a significant steady increase of Secular Progressives and a fall of Religious Conservatives.

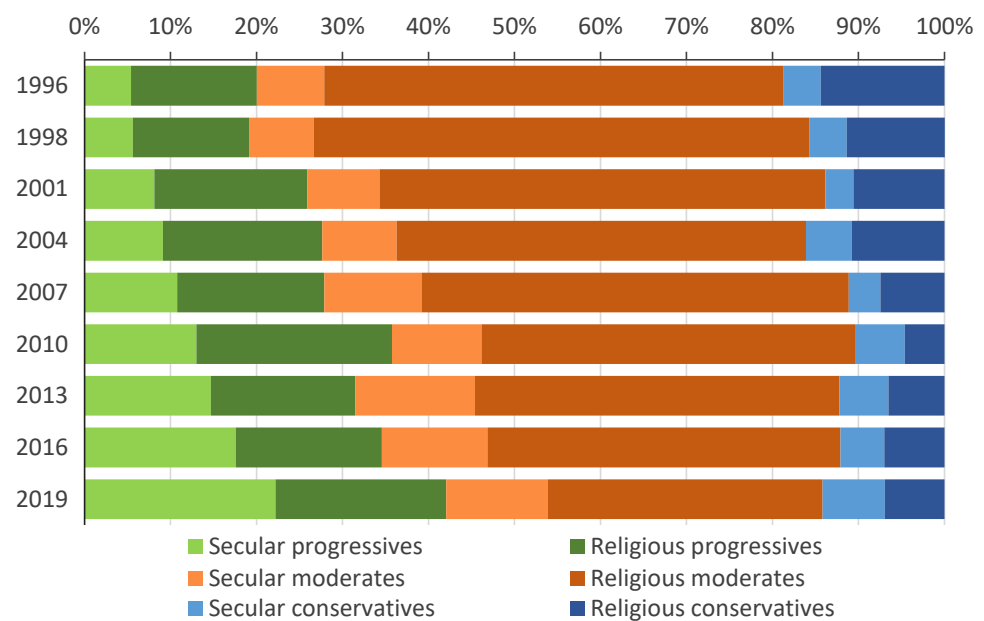


Figure 11: ASI6 social identity segment sizes by election year

Source: AES

Secular progressives are Labor's most significant single base, and they compete with the Greens for it (Figure 12). It would be a courageous Labor party indeed that decided to alienate this growing base by entertaining conservative socio-religious policies.

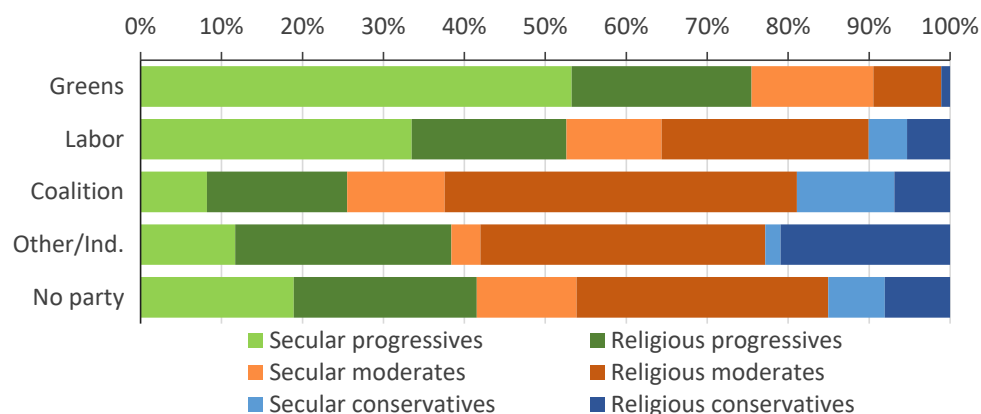


Figure 12: “Usually think of yourself as [political party]” by ASI6 social identity
Source: AES 2019

Also worth noting is that in 2019, at the same time more than half (53%) of progressives thought of themselves as Labor, fewer than one in five (19%) conservatives thought of themselves as Coalition. This makes pursuing socially conservative policies a risky political proposition indeed for the major parties, and possibly for many of the minor ones.

Advancing conservative social agendas will become harder over time. Figure 13 shows the generational differences in ASI6 social identity. There is a major trend away from social conservatism amongst younger generations.

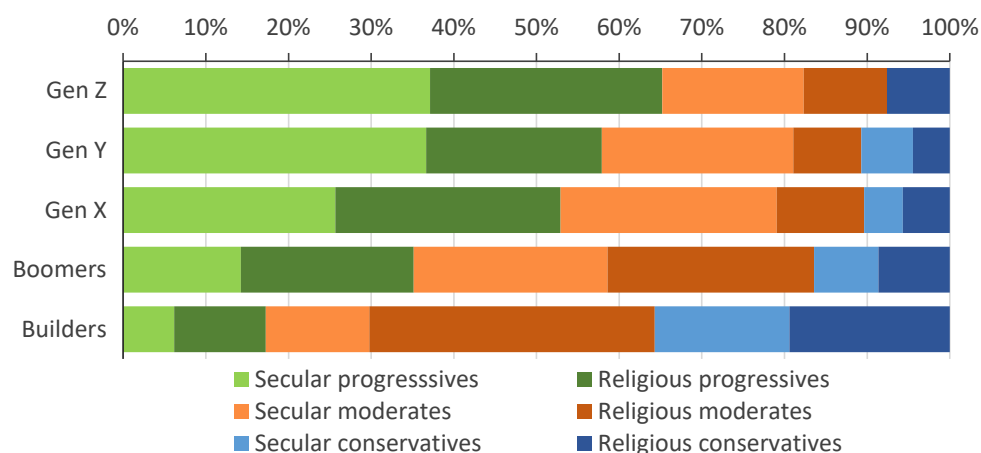


Figure 13: Generational differences in ASI6 segments
Source: AVS 2018. Years of birth: Builders 1918–1945; Boomers 1946–1964; Gen X 1965–1980; Gen Y 1981–1996; Gen Z 1997–2012.

It might be tempting to explain this away as mere changes in preference across the lifetime. Certainly, some changes in either direction may occur. However, other research, for example on an individual’s approach to the libertarian/authoritarian moral domains, shows that it doesn’t change much with age (Tilley 2005). Add to this that 23% of social conservatives, and 25%

of religious conservatives are Builders. They're now 78 or older, and many will have died within a decade or so.

Thus, conservative political parties are unlikely to make much headway in future elections if they choose to continue pursuing conservative, religion-privileging policies as they did under the Morrison federal government. Since the 2022 election, there hasn't been much signalling that this lesson has been learned, except in Western Australia. But time will tell.

Summary: Social progressivism is increasing significantly in Australia and is Labor's natural home. Conservative parties will need to adapt and realign their social policy platforms or likely be consigned to opposition for quite some time.



VOTE

Religion and voting

Cognitive biases widely influence moral judgement, and that includes while voting in parliamentary elections. In the USA at least (and likely elsewhere), citizens have a parochial perception of their voting duty: to express their own personal values (ideological inputs) rather than focus on outcomes (practical outputs) (Baron 2009). Some are willing to impose their views on others regardless of the consequences particularly for out-groups (“moralistic values”). And some expect personal values to be fully protected from trade-offs in the political process, leading to sub-optimal outcomes.

In addition, USA Senators’ personal religiosity correlates not only with voting for conservative social policies, but also for conservative *economic* policies and hawkish *foreign* policies, even after adjusting for confounding factors (Arnon 2018). These preferences may reflect attitudes of the wider USA voting public.

But what are the real effects of religion on attitudes and voting in Australian federal parliamentary elections?

Political party alignment and voting

A common perception in Australian political circles is that the Coalition (Liberals and Nationals) is the “natural” home of religious voters. It is true that amongst social Progressives and Moderates, more of the religious than the Nones feel themselves aligned with the Coalition (Figure 14).

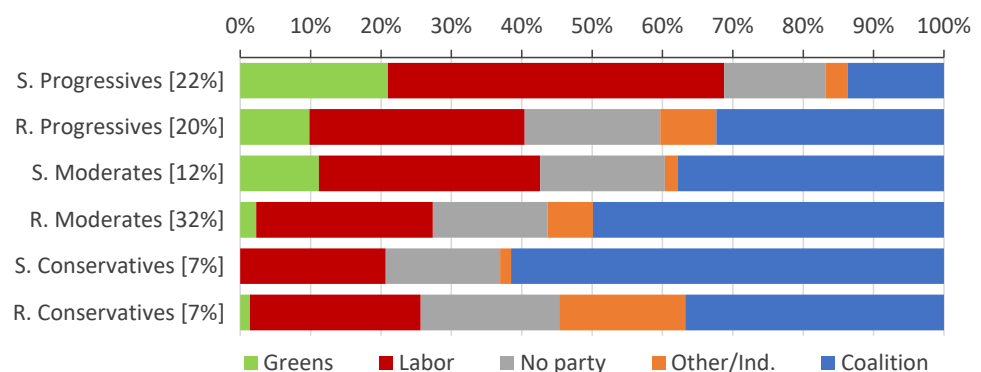


Figure 14: ASI6 social identity by “Think of self as aligned with political party”

Source: AES 2019. S. = Secular (no religious affiliation); R. = Religious (affiliation). Label percentages in brackets are proportion of respondents.

However, this is not to say that the association is driven by religious faith. Indeed, *Religious* Conservatives are somewhat more likely than *Secular* Conservatives to feel aligned with Greens/Labor, and *Secular* Conservatives are by far the most likely to feel aligned with the Coalition.

If the effects were founded on religious faith, the feelings of Coalition alignment ought to occur by far the most amongst Religious Conservatives. Obviously, other factors are at play.

Little effect of religion on election voting

Indeed, a 2015 poll found that almost all Australian voters (86%) said religion doesn't influence their vote at all or wasn't relevant because they didn't have a religion (Figure 15). Just 9% said religion influenced their vote "somewhat", and a mere 5% said religion influenced their vote "very much" (Blackford 2015).

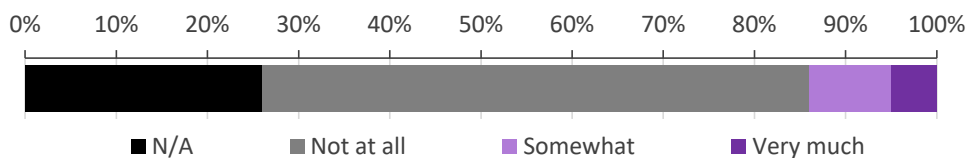


Figure 15: Influence of religion on Australian election voting, 2015
Source: Blackford (2015)

We will explore other important factors, including fear of change, attitudes toward economic and a raft of other policy domains, and confidence in "strong" government formation.

Summary: Overall, religion is a weak factor in Australian general elections, despite phantom correlations arising via confounding factors. Most Australian voters (86%) say that religion is *not at all* a factor in casting their election ballots. In the following sections, a number of confounding factors that give rise to the *appearance* of "faith-based" voting are discussed.

Fear of change

A political advertisement from the 2019 federal election campaign provides a potent backdrop to understanding the realities (Figure 16).



Figure 16: A Coalition campaign advertisement at the 2019 Australian federal election

The advertisement, given heavy media expenditure by the federal Coalition, pitched then Labor leader Mr Bill Shorten as “*the Bill Australia can’t afford*”. It’s a clever slipstream of the adage “*the bill you can’t afford*”, and it created FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) about Labor’s credentials to manage the economy. In particular, it spoke to major changes that Labor proposed in regard to taxation.

Added to this was the *blizzard* of Labor policies announced during the 2019 federal election campaign, pitching reform across a wide range of portfolios.

The sum of all this manoeuvring was a sea of *changes*, many of them quite significant.

How is this relevant to religiosity?

It is Australia’s *Christians* who are vastly more fearful of change than are Nones and non-Christian religionists (Figure 17). Suggesting a normative comfort of the majority, the two largest religious denominations, Catholics and Anglicans, are most likely to fear change and support the status quo.

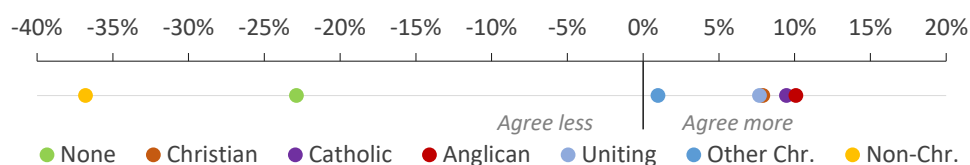


Figure 17: Net polarisation of attitude “Strong changes usually make things worse” by religion
Source: AES 2004

Fear of change also correlates strongly with religiosity (Figure 18). Rejecters and Socialisers fear it considerably less than all of the more religious. Notionals, who on average have fewer resources than others (e.g. lowest average incomes), are the most fearful of change.

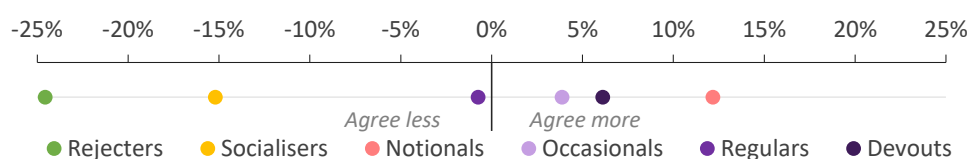


Figure 18: Net polarisation of attitude “Strong changes usually make things worse” by ARI6 religiosity
Source: AES 2004

Australia’s religious, specifically amongst ASI6 Progressives and Moderates, are *very significantly* more likely to say that “*Strong changes usually make things worse*” (Figure 19). That is, compared with their Secular counterparts, Religious Progressives and Moderates are significantly more fearful of change.

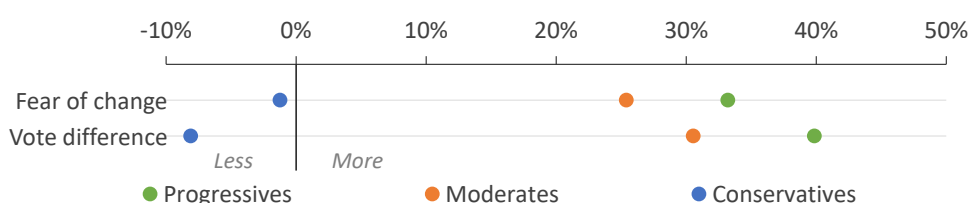


Figure 19: ASI6 religious premium of attitudes towards change, and votes favouring the Coalition over Labor
Sources: Fear of change, AES 2004; Vote difference: first preference House, Coalition over Labor, AES 2019

This fear is directly reflected in their increased proportion of votes for the Coalition at the 2019 federal election: not on the basis of religious morality and its entrenchment in statute, but on the basis of keeping things the same. That is, practical self-interest rather than moralistic conservatism.

This helps explain why the Coalition’s “small target” approach to the 2019 election was successful despite wide predictions of a Labor win.

The added influence of media consumption

A further adjustment to the fear-vote relationship can be made in regard to how voters may have been influenced by differences in TV consumption.

Religious Progressives and Moderates are very significantly more likely to watch commercial TV (editorial tending to favour the Coalition), while Secular Progressives and Moderates are more likely to watch public TV (mandated balanced editorial; some claim political left bias).

When the voting differences are adjusted for the difference in TV message exposure, the association between religious fear of change, and vote movement from Labor to the Coalition, becomes stronger (Figure 20) for Moderates (positive) and Conservatives (negative). While Religious Progressives' votes were significantly swayed by fear of change and by TV exposure, their tendency to vote progressive appears less influenced towards the Coalition than expected.

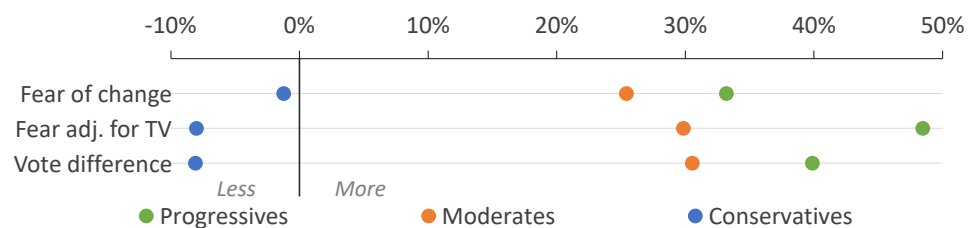


Figure 20: ASI6 religious premium of attitudes towards change, adjusted for TV exposure, and votes favouring the Coalition

Sources: Fear of change, AES 2004; Vote difference: first preference House, Coalition over Labor, AES 2019. ^

The finding that Religious *Conservatives* were *less* likely than their secular fellows to vote for the Coalition is augmented by findings of voter sentiment towards the two leaders: Mr Bill Shorten for Labor and Mr Scott Morrison for the Coalition (Figure 21).

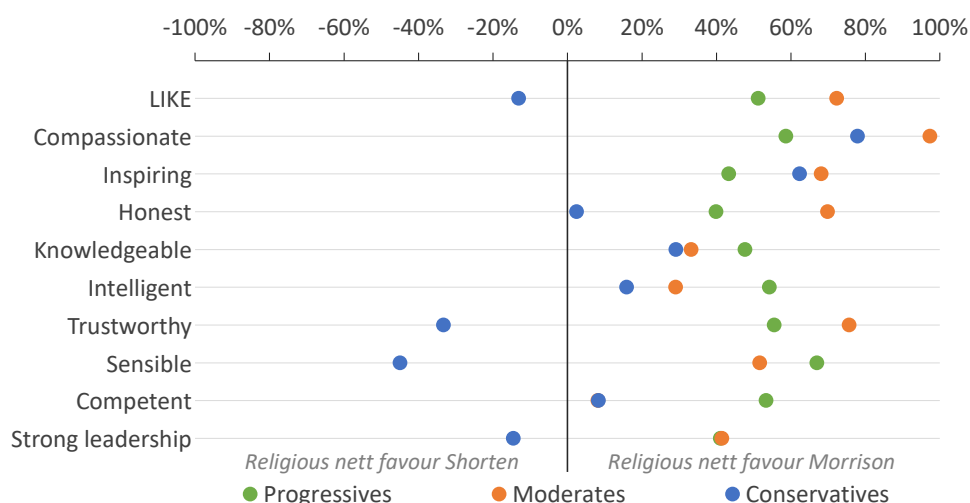


Figure 21: Religious premium of rating Morrison higher than Shorten on “like” and a range of personal attributes

Source: AES 2019

With several notable exceptions, Religious Progressives, Moderates and Conservatives were significantly more likely to rate Mr Morrison higher on a range of attributes, and to like Mr Morrison more than Mr Shorten.

Notable exceptions were that overall, Religious Conservatives were *less* likely than their Secular counterparts to like Mr Morrison or see strong leadership qualities, and very substantially less likely to rate him as trustworthy or sensible, compared with Mr Shorten. Trustworthiness in particular is a measure of the perception of moral character.

The average religious premium ratings for the four attributes Inspiring, Trustworthy, Sensible, and Strong Leader, across the ASI6 spectrum (Progressives 52%, Moderates 59%, and Conservatives -8%), reflect the Like rating (51%, 72%, and -13% respectively).

History might suggest that religious conservatives were on to something, as Mr Morrison’s conduct during the term of parliament led to the lowest popularity scores for a party leader (himself) seen in Australia since 1987, at the following 2021 election (Australian National University 2022).

Religious worry about terrorism

Consistent with the Religious Progressives’ and Moderates’ greater fear of change compared to their Secular counterparts, and fear of “subversive forces” in general, they also exhibit greater worry — negative rumination — about a potential terrorist attack in Australia (Figure 22).

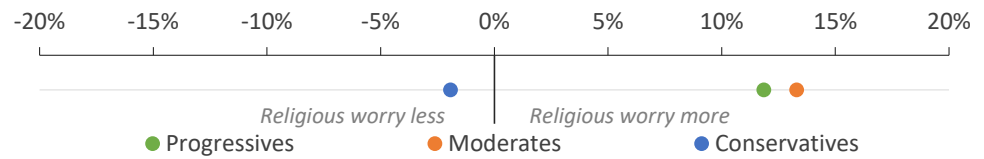


Figure 22: ARI6 religious premium of worry about a terror attack in Australia

Source: AVS 2018. Note: Nett Worry very much – Not at all.

Under this effect too, election campaigns that promise a more personally secure and safe nation may give the *appearance* of a religious effect in terms of votes, but in fact represent a general cognitive disposition rather than a reflection of beliefs about supernatural forces or in any claimed tenets of god/s.

Summary: *Fear of change* is significantly elevated amongst Australia's Religious Progressives and Moderates compared with their Secular counterparts. The effect occurs amongst *Christians*, not non-Christian religionists, who fear change even less than do the Nones.

Religious Progressives and Moderates are also significantly more likely than their Secular counterparts to worry about an “unsafe world”, at least in terms of a terror attack in Australia.

At the 2019 federal election, fear of change correlated strongly with disavowing Bill Shorten and Labor's blizzard of economic and social reform policies.

Economic attitudes

The effects of religious affiliation on attitudes toward election policies extend beyond fear of change and perceptions of an unsafe world, too. Attitudes toward a raft of economic domains differ significantly by religion. Tested dimensions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Economic attitude measures

Label	Description (study source)
<i>Effort --> succeed</i>	In Australia, anyone who is prepared to make an effort can succeed [vs disagree] (AES 1996)
<i>Hard work over luck</i>	A better life comes from hard work [vs it comes from personal connections and luck] (AVS 2018)
<i>Rational economics</i>	Above all, government policies should be based on rational economic calculation [vs disagree] (AES 1996)
<i>Fast econ. growth</i>	There should be fast economic growth [vs there should be economic redistribution] (AES 1996)
<i>Top issue Economy</i>	Top or second-top problem facing Australia today: economy (AuSSA 2020)
<i>Top issue Poverty</i>	Top or second-top problem facing Australia today: poverty (AuSSA 2020)
<i>Competition is good</i>	Competition is good [vs bad] (AVS 2018)
<i>Limit imports</i>	Limit foreign product imports to protect the Australian economy (AuSSA 2020) ⁷
<i>Private ownership</i>	Ownership of business and industry should be more private [vs more government] (AVS 2018)
<i>Private enterprise</i>	Private enterprise is the best way to solve Australia's economic problems [vs disagree] (AuSSA 2020)
<i>Redistribute wealth</i>	Income and wealth should be redistributed to ordinary working people [vs disagree] (AES 2019)
<i>Personal provided for</i>	People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves [vs government should provide] (AVS 2018)
<i>Personal responsibility</i>	It is personal responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for [vs it is the government's responsibility] (AVS 2018)
<i>Individual incentives</i>	There should be greater incentives for individual effort [vs incomes should be made more equal] (AVS 2018)
<i>High tax disincentive</i>	High income tax makes people less willing to work hard [vs disagree] (AES 2019)

A word about poverty in Australia

Poverty in Australia is a significant social problem despite its limited media attention. According to the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS 2022),

⁷ We'll set aside for now the *presumption* that limiting imports protects the Australian economy: reciprocal restrictions by trading partners could damage it.

3.2 million Australians live below the poverty line, including more than one in eight adults and one in six children. Rates are higher amongst single-parent households. Australia's poverty rate is in the top half of OECD nations. This might be expected to draw elevated attention and empathy from Australia's religionists. But the opposite is true (Figure 23).

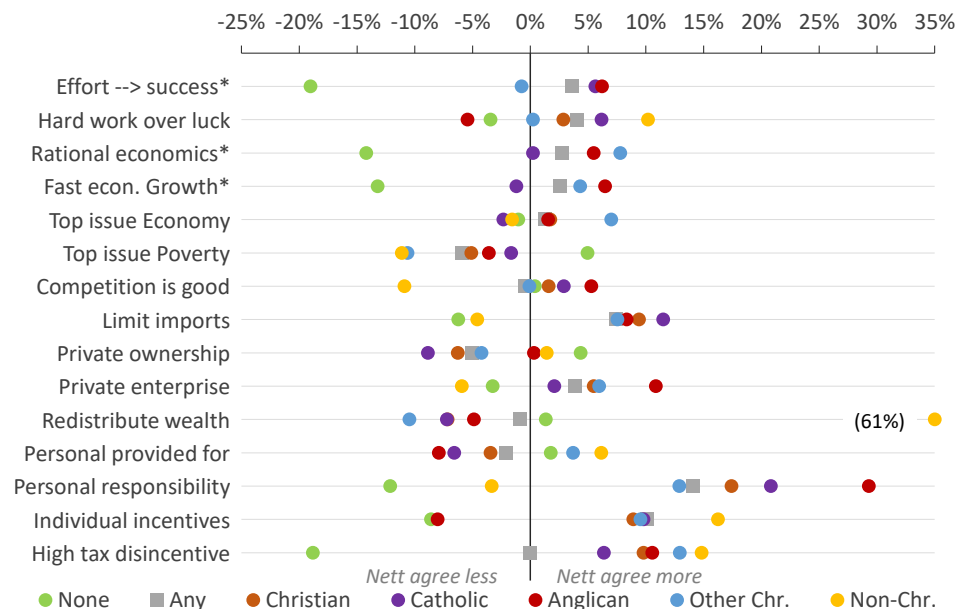


Figure 23: Nett polarisation of attitudes toward various economic domains by religion

Sources: See descriptions in table 1. * The AES 1996 data set did not adequately differentiate between all minor Christian denominations and non-Christian religionists. Therefore, neither Christian nor non-Christian statistics are calculated for these attitude domains.

In fact, Australia's Nones are by far the most likely to rate poverty amongst their top two concerns facing Australia, with minor Christian denominations and non-Christian religionists rating it the lowest. At the same time, minor Christian denominations are the most likely to rate "the economy" as one of their top two concerns.

Australia's Christians are far more likely than Nones to subscribe to "economic rationalism" in the assessment of all government policies, and to favour fast economic growth.

Minor Christian denominations are amongst the least likely to see Australia's significant poverty rate as a major concern, but the most likely to rate "the economy" as their top priority and the most likely to endorse "economic rationalism".

In addition, Australia's religionists are also vastly more likely than the Nones to believe that high income tax is a disincentive to work hard.

These findings are consistent with the data for favouring "personal responsibility" for ensuring "all are provided for". Australia's Christians rate personal responsibility far higher than do the Nones and Non-Christian religionists. This may be influenced by Christians' generally narrower view of "all": favouring their in-group — themselves and their own families — at the expense of a more substantial "all", for example a woman and her children fleeing domestic violence, or a household's breadwinner losing their job or the capacity to work.

By ARI6 religiosity (Figure 24), the more religious are also far less likely than Rejecters and Socialisers to rate poverty as a top priority, at odds with religious claims of greater prosociality (intention to benefit others).

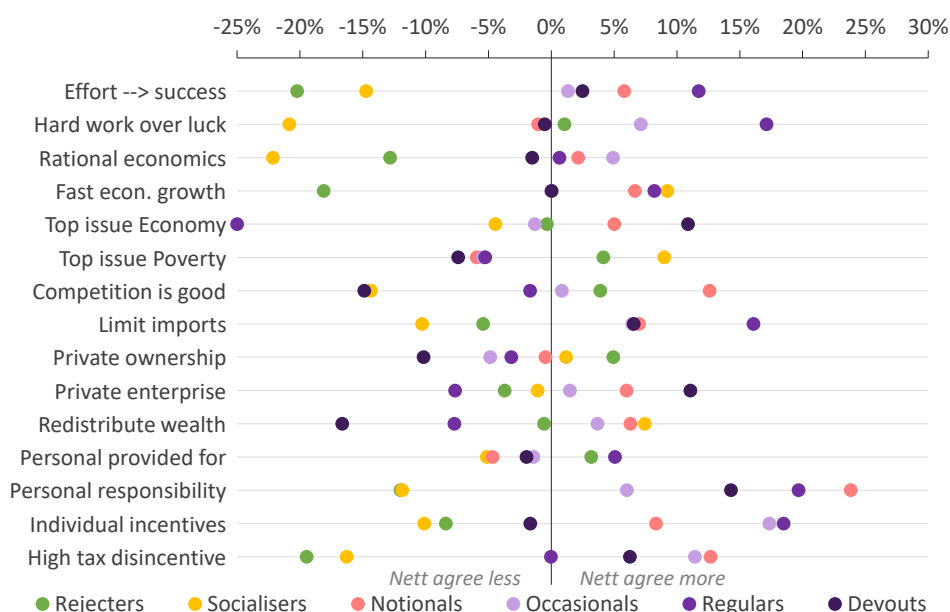


Figure 24: Nett polarisation of attitudes toward various economic domains by ARI6 religiosity

Sources: See descriptions in table 1.

Religiosity also correlates positively with the belief that personal effort automatically leads to success and ought to be rewarded by individual incentives; belief in economic rationalism and fast economic growth; belief that high income tax is a disincentive to working hard; and in opposition to redistributing income and wealth.

In another indicator of in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice, Australia's religionists are significantly more in favour of limiting imports to "protect the Australian economy".

Multiple indicators are consistent with Australia's religious being more self-minded than prosocially minded across a range of economic and social domains, and which are typically closer to more conservative political attitudes favouring the Coalition over Labor.

Religious effects across the ASI6 social identity spectrum are consistent with these findings (Figure 25). (Some studies did not facilitate calculating the ASI6 and so are not included in this comparison.)

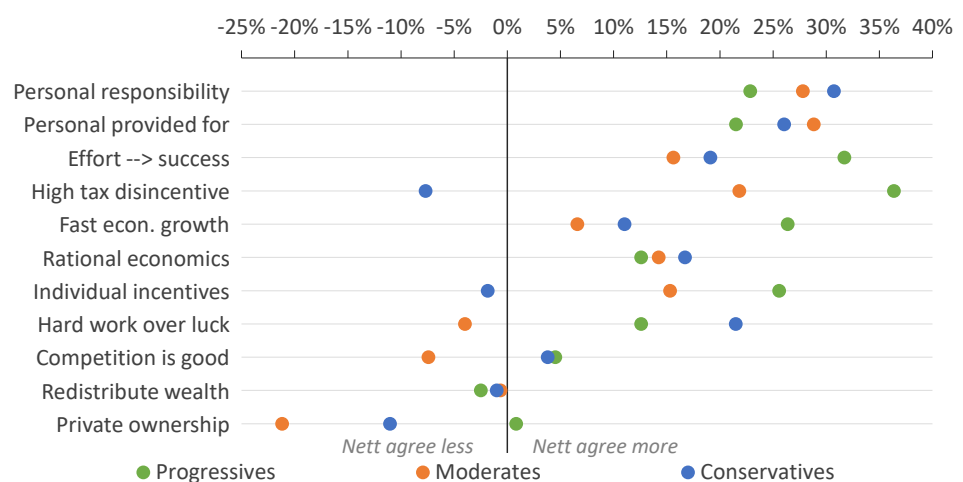


Figure 25: ASI6 religious premium of attitudes toward various economic domains

Sources: See descriptions in table 1. Note: Attitude domains whose studies did not permit ASI6 segmentation are not included. Sorted by average nett religious polarisation.

Religious Progressives, Moderates and Conservatives are considerably more likely than their Secular counterparts to believe that providing for “all” is a personal responsibility; that personal effort naturally leads to success; and in economic rationalism. Religious Progressives and Moderates are also more likely than their Secular counterparts to believe that high income tax is a disincentive to hard work, and that individual incentives are important.

Summary: Multiple findings regarding economic attitudes are consistent with religionists' higher rates of economic self-interest and lower appreciation for, and interest in, others who may be doing it tough. Some factors are especially heightened amongst Christians, and the minor Christian denominations. Citizens holding such attitudes are more likely to vote for the Coalition than for Labor.

High income tax a disincentive to hard work?

In relation to the claim that high income tax is a disincentive to hard work,⁸ the question arises as to whether attitudes reflect a *real* effect of “high” taxation rates. The 2016 Australian Election Study provides insights (Figure 26).

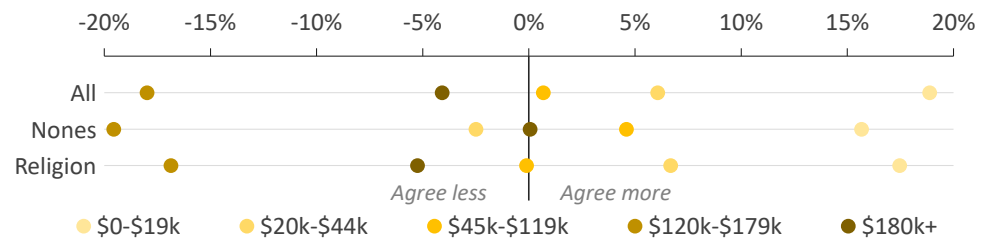


Figure 26: Nett polarisation “High income tax makes people less willing to work hard” by income tax band

Source: AES 2016. Note: Polarisation = Agree – Disagree. Income bands are closest approximation to actual tax bands possible via source data income brackets.

In fact, it is Australians in the *lowest* income brackets who are most likely to believe that high income tax is a disincentive. Those in the second-top income tax bracket are very substantially *less* likely to think that high income tax is a disincentive. Although those in the top (\$180k+) tax bracket are more concerned than those in the second-top bracket (\$120k–\$179k), they’re no more concerned than the *average* Australian. And they are on average *less* concerned about income tax disincentives than are those two tax brackets lower (\$45k–119k).

There are only small differences in attitudes between religionists and Nones. In the top tax bracket, religionists are *less* likely than Nones to think high tax a disincentive. In all other brackets religionists are *more* likely to believe in the disincentive, though for each of these brackets individually the difference is not statistically significant.

Further, answers associating high income tax with less willingness to work hard have dropped by nearly half, from 76% in 1998 to 42% in 2019, despite only a minor change in the top tax bracket (Figure 27).

Likewise, a preference for cutting income tax rates has dropped, while its alternative, spending more on services, has increased although it drops during the tenure of Labor governments and rises during Coalition governments.

⁸ Setting aside for now the presumptive virtue of “hard work” versus *smart effort*, *engaging coalitions*, or other disposition towards “getting ahead” or “making a contribution”.

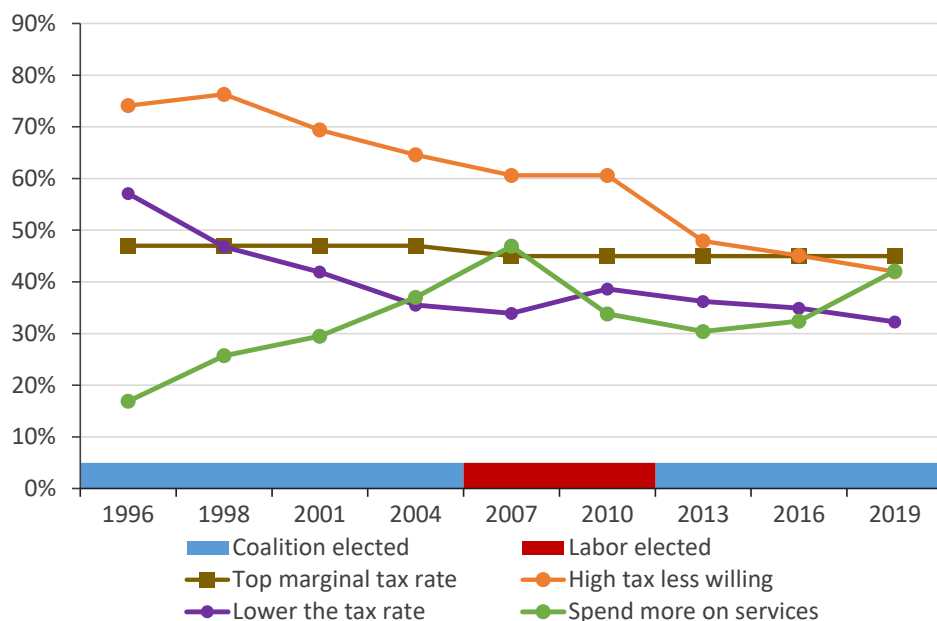


Figure 27: Attitudes toward taxation and services by election year

Source: AES. Notes: "Lower the tax rate" and "spend more on services" are a sacrificial choice in a single question.

The lower tax/greater services pendulum strongly indicates that Labor ought to have won the 2019 federal election — as it actually did in 2022. This suggests that voters' appetite for rebalancing tax versus services was negated in 2019 by the greater fear that Australia's religionists felt towards Labor's blizzard of high-change policies, but not negated by its small-target strategy in 2022.

Nevertheless, there are important differences in attitudes toward high tax rates by religiosity. Australia's religious (Notionals through Devouts) are vastly more likely than Nones (Rejecters and Socialisers) to link high income tax rates and lower willingness to work hard (Figure 28).

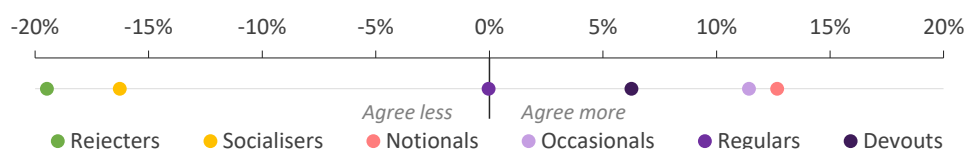


Figure 28: Nett polarisation "High income tax makes people less willing to work hard" by ARI6 religiosity

Source: AES 2016. Note: Polarisation = Agree – Disagree.

Religious Progressives and Moderates are vastly more likely than their Secular counterparts to make this association (Figure 29), while Religious

Conservatives are slightly less likely to. Differences in income levels do not explain these associations.

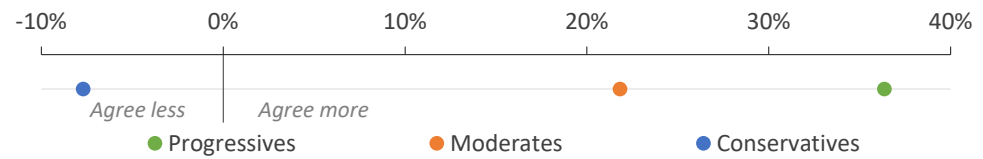


Figure 29: Religious premium for “High income tax makes people less willing to work hard” by ARI6 religiosity

Source: AES 2016

The former Coalition government’s “lifters versus leaners” rhetoric would have been most attractive to Religious Progressives and Moderates compared to their Secular counterparts, and less attractive to Religious Conservatives.

Summary: High income tax is far less a work disincentive to Australians on high incomes than it is believed to be by those who don’t pay it: those on low incomes. Attitudes toward income tax cuts and government spending on services vary markedly over time and not much in relation to changes in the top marginal tax rate.

Whereas in the 1990s there was consistently greater favour for lowering taxes than delivering services, recent public opinion is more balanced, and with service delivery more greatly favoured in 2007 and 2019. This suggests that future conservative party reliance on lowering income tax as an election winner is likely to be met with muted voter favour, and potentially with disfavour.

Currently, beliefs about high income tax rates and lower willingness to work hard are associated most with Religious Progressives and Moderates. This suggests that Australia’s religious are more self-interested than the Nones when it comes to keeping their own income versus funding public services.

Broader policy domains

Differences in political attitudes between religious and non-religious Australians is not limited to economic attitudes. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, attitudes favouring the Coalition over Labor (or vice versa) vary strongly by a person's self-identified position along the left/right political spectrum. Average support (positive = favouring the Coalition, negative = favouring Labor) varies widely by policy domain (Figure 30).

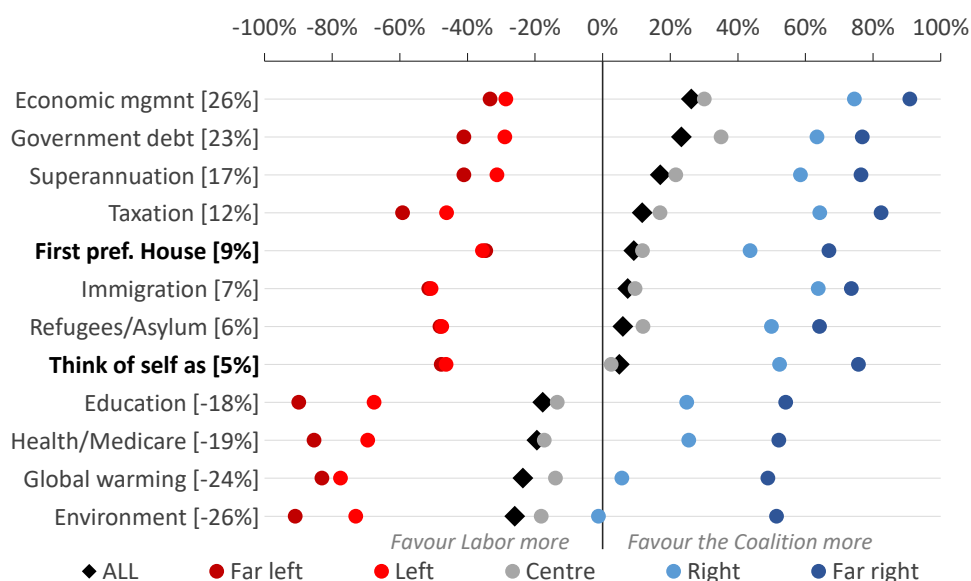


Figure 30: Polarisation of support for the Coalition (+) over Labor (-) by domain and own position on the left/right political spectrum

Source: AES 2019. Notes: Label percentages in square brackets are the average rating in favour of the + Coalition (- Labor). First pref. House = first preference given for the House of Representatives at the 2019 election; Think of self as = feel aligned with Coalition versus Labor.

When these attitudes are split out by the Australian Social Identity 6-segment model (ASI6), a major effect is apparent (Figure 31). Across *all* policy domains, Religious Progressives, Religious Moderates and Religious Conservatives are significantly more likely than their Secular counterparts to say they feel closer to the Coalition than Labor. Most of these effects are quite substantial, *especially* amongst Religious Progressives and Moderates.

Amongst Religious Progressives and Religious Moderates, this effect translates into greater likelihood of feeling aligned with the Coalition than Labor ("think of self as"), and to vote for the Coalition than Labor ("First pref. House").

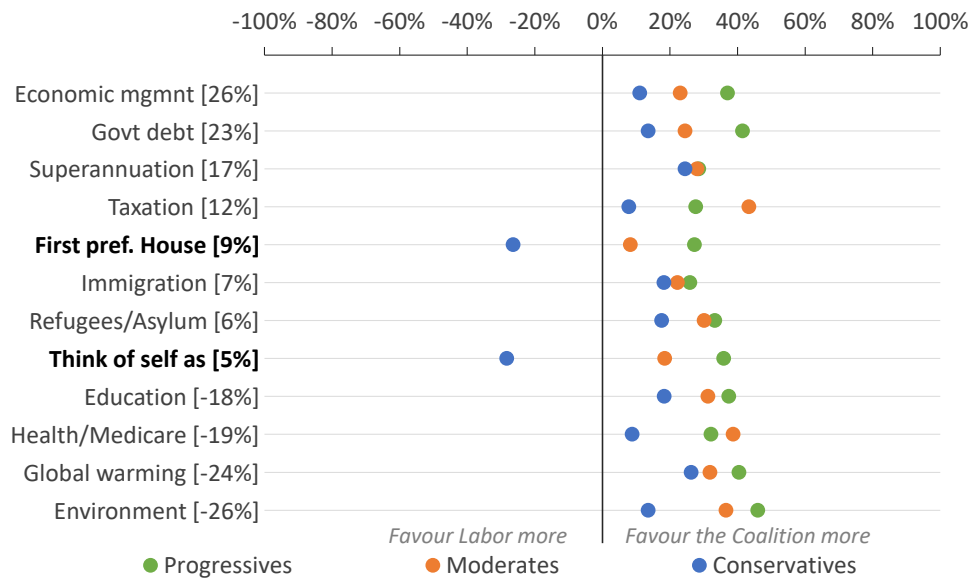


Figure 31: ASI6 religious premium in the polarisation of support for the Coalition (+) over Labor (-)

Source: AES 2019. "First pref. House" is the party for whom the respondent cast their first preference for the House of Representatives at the 2019 federal election.

Only amongst Conservatives do *alignment* and *voting* occur in the reverse — that is, the Religious nett favoured Labor in 2019. This is most likely due to the factors covered earlier in this section, that Religious Conservatives were more likely than their Secular counterparts to rate Prime Minister Scott Morrison significantly worse than leader of the opposition Bill Shorten on trustworthiness, being sensible, strong leadership, and likeability. The evidence runs counter to narratives of religious “miracles” favoured at the time (Grattan 2019).

The effect of more negative Religious versus Secular Conservative opinions is amplified at the ballot box by Religious Conservatives being by far the most likely to give overriding importance to the party *leader* in casting their ballot (Figure 32).

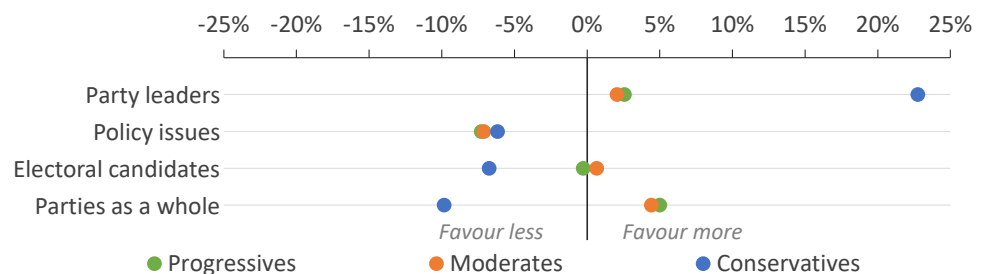


Figure 32: ASI6 religious premium in the most important factor for one's vote at the 2019 federal election

Source: AES 2019. Note: "Electoral candidates" = the candidates in your own electorate.

Also apparent is a propensity for Religious Progressives and Moderates to rely more heavily than their secular counterparts on “parties as a whole” and less on “policy issues”, that is, more on intuitive overall impressions than on the cognitive effort required for more detailed or specific policy analysis.

Election data is consistent with the principle that religious Australians are more likely to rely on intuitive and fast judgement — consistently resorting less than non-religious Australians to the cognitive effort of policy analysis.

The focus of Religious Conservatives on party leaders is moot because there were significant differences of opinion about the two leaders at the 2019 federal election: Mr Scott Morrison for the Liberals/Coalition, versus Mr Bill Shorten for Labor. While Religious Progressives and Moderates held far more favourable opinions than their Secular counterparts of Morrison versus Shorten, Religious Conservatives were *less* likely than their Secular counterparts to like Morrison, and judged him more harshly on being sensible, trustworthy, and on strong leadership (Figure 33).

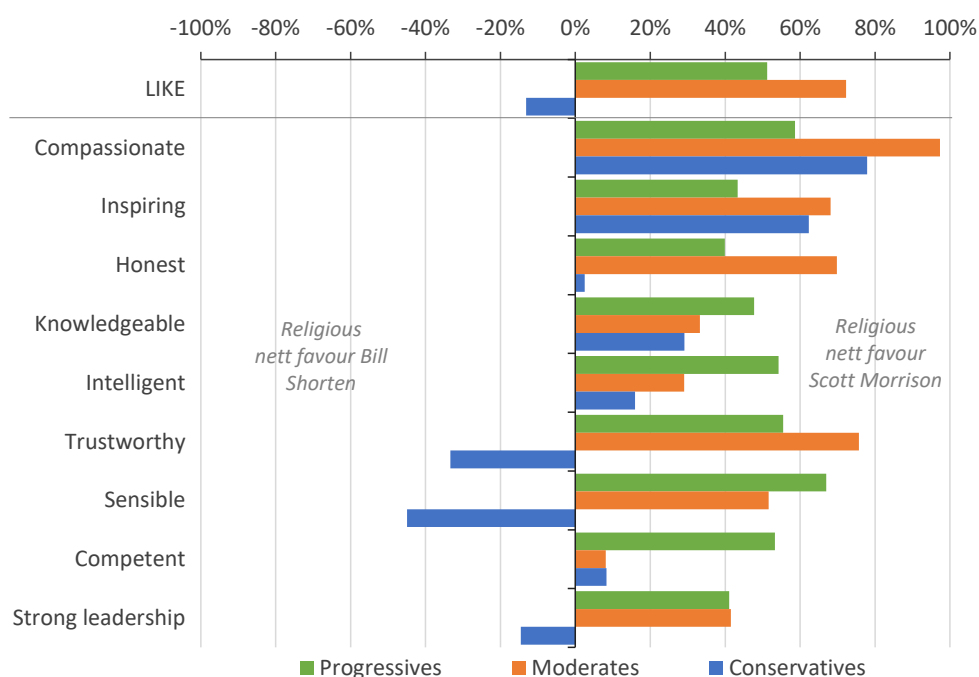


Figure 33: ASI6 religious premium in attitudes toward Scott Morrison versus Bill Shorten at the 2019 federal election
Source: AES 2019

Given subsequent revelations about Morrison’s conduct in office including “secret” appointments to multiple portfolios and reports of government

funding of self-preferential programs, perhaps Religious Conservatives were insightful not to see him as “one of their own”.

This major party analysis doesn’t take into account the effects of minor parties. That is mostly beyond the scope of this report. However, several observations are pertinent: (1) Devouts are by far the least likely to think of themselves as aligned with a political party; (2) in 2019, Devouts (only) voted for minor parties to a much greater extent; (3) Devouts (only) were far more likely to direct their secondary preferences toward the Coalition than Labor; and (4) Nones who voted for a minor party were vastly more likely to direct their secondary preferences to Labor.

The most striking religious associations across the board

But the most striking associations of Australia’s religionists favouring the Coalition over Labor is by ARI6 religiosity, where nett feelings about the Coalition’s policies being closer across the full gamut translates into first preferences for the House of Representatives, beyond the nett difference of thinking of oneself as aligned with the Coalition (Figure 34).



Figure 34: Polarisation of support for the Coalition (+) over Labor (-) by domain and ARI6 religiosity

Source: AES 2019

In this sense Labor does indeed have “a problem with religion”. But it’s not a problem with the content of religious (predominantly Christian) belief — not only because those beliefs vary enormously among each denomination’s members (for example on abortion and marriage equality) — but because Australia’s religionists are significantly more likely than Nones to prefer Coalition (non-religious) policies across the policy spectrum.

Nor is that to say the Coalition doesn't have "a problem with religion" either. The more it pursues conservative religious agendas, the more likely it is to alienate not only the middle ground, but the growing proportion of Australians who are social progressives.

The challenge for both the left and right of politics is to attempt to both defend important ground — Rejecters and Socialisers for Labor and Devouts for the Coalition — *and* attract those a little further away — middle religionists for Labor and Nones; Notionals and Occasionals for the Coalition.

This dynamic is likely to engage political scientists and election pundits alike for years, especially since religion in Australia is in significant decline.

Summary: Across the Progressive, Moderate and Conservative social spectrum, having a religion (and especially higher religiosity) is associated with an increased likelihood of feeling aligned with Coalition versus Labor policies across a wide range of policy domains, and with voting for the Coalition.

Thus, when "religious effects" are seen at a federal election, they are most likely related to somewhat more conservative and self-referential attitudes toward a *full raft of policy domains*, and to religionists' *greater fear of change and perceptions of a dangerous world*, than to a purported desire to advance conservative religious agendas.

Religious Conservatives were *less* likely than their Secular counterparts to favour Morrison over Shorten at the 2019 federal election, marking Morrison down for leadership and especially for trustworthiness and being sensible. At least in these domains they were less likely to see Morrison as "one of their own".

Confidence in potential government

Given the associations between religion and feelings of alignment with Coalition policies across a full range policy domains, it's then not surprising that Australian religionists were more likely at the 2019 federal election to believe the Coalition, more so than Labor, would be able to form a strong government.

This effect, however, was limited to *Christians*, since the Nones and non-Christian religionists were both significantly more likely to express confidence in a Labor government (Figure 35).

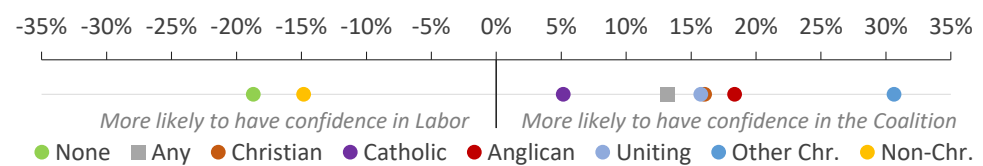


Figure 35: Nett difference in confidence of a strong Coalition over a strong Labor government at the 2019 federal election, by religion

Source: AES 2019

Like attitudes toward a raft of policy domains, there is a very strong positive relationship between religiosity and more likely belief that the Coalition would form a strong government, compared with Labor (Figure 36).

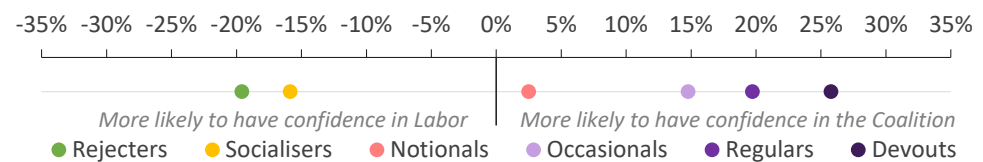


Figure 36: Nett difference in confidence of a strong Coalition over a strong Labor government at the 2019 federal election, by ARI6 religiosity

Source: AES 2019

And separating out effects across the ASI6 social spectrum, Religious Progressives and Moderates, but not Conservatives, are vastly more likely than their Secular counterparts to believe in a strong Coalition rather than Labor government, with Religious Conservatives slightly favouring Labor (Figure 37).

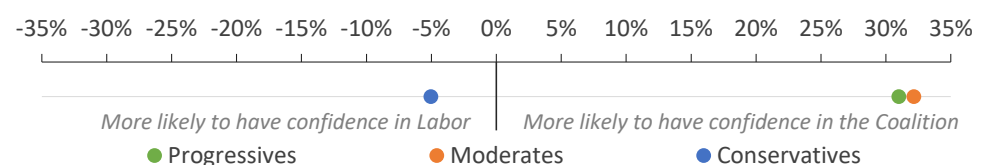


Figure 37: Nett difference in confidence of a strong Coalition over a strong Labor government at the 2019 federal election, by ASI6 religious premium

Source: AES 2019

Summary: Being Christian versus a None or non-Christian religionist, being more devout, and having a religion compared with one's own non-religious social cohort, correlate significantly with greater confidence in a conservative Coalition rather than progressive Labor government. In addition to somewhat more conservative attitudes of Australia's religious toward a full gamut of election policy domains, these differences are underwritten by religionists' *fear of change*, fuelled by Labor's blizzard of sometimes radical policy announcements at the 2019 federal election.

These insights help explain why "small target" election strategies can help win elections: the Coalition in 2019, and Labor in 2022.

Little electoral appetite for religious representation

These multiple domains of differences in attitudes, creating the illusion of — but not founded on — faith beliefs affecting voting behaviour, are punctuated by recent religio-political experiments.

In 2017, Senator Cori Bernardi quit the Liberal party in response to his perception that it was too liberal. A devout Catholic, Mr Bernardi opposed abortion and marriage equality and had expressed hostility towards Islam, suggesting that multiculturalism in Australia had failed. He told the Senate that “*concern about the direction of our nation is very, very strong*” and that “*the body politic is failing the people of Australia*” (Massola 2017).

New political party to represent the Christian right

Mr Bernardi established the Australian Conservatives party, which, while conservative on a range of issues, was largely a religious and specifically Christian alliance. Mr Lyle Shelton, then managing director of the Australian Christian Lobby, quit his post to become the federal communications director of the party.

Conservative party Family First, co-founded by Pastor Andrew Evans of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God and promoting “Christian heritage”, then merged with the Australian Conservatives party. So did the Australian Christians party, and individuals from other Christian-right organisations such as the Democratic Labour Party and the Q Society of Australia.

Despite polls showing that majorities of voters in even the most conservative Coalition seats backed marriage equality law reform (Massola & Peatling 2017), the Australian Conservatives party vigorously opposed it.

Voters reject the party

In South Australia’s 2018 election, Family First, now the Australian Conservatives party, lost more than half its primary vote, down from 6.2% to 3.0% (ABC News 2018). Former Family First MLC Robert Brokenshire lost his seat. The other former Family First MLC, Dennis Hood, defected to the Liberal party a few days after the election (Harmsen & MacLennan 2018). None of the 33 candidates it stood for the lower house came anywhere near being elected.

In the March 2019 NSW election, the Australian Conservatives achieved just 0.5% of primary votes for the lower house, and 0.6% for the upper house, electing no candidates (NSW Electoral Commission 2019).

At the 2019 federal election, the Australian Conservatives didn’t field candidates for the House of Representatives. The remaining Christian right parties lost significant portions of their already small primary votes for the

House of Representatives: the Christian Democratic Party down from 1.31% to 0.68%, the Australian Christians down from 0.32% to 0.17%, and Rise Up Australia down from 0.51% to 0.10%. The Australian Conservatives ran candidates for the Senate in every state but failed to win any seats.

Australian Conservatives party folds

Two years after its registration, in 2019 Mr Bernardi deregistered the Australian Conservatives party, citing poor electoral performance and financial challenges (Figure 38) (Doran 2019).

Mr Bernardi formally resigned from the Senate in early 2020. Mr Shelton had been tapped to replace the Rev. Fred Nile in the NSW parliament, on Mr Nile's retirement (O'Mallon 2021), but has subsequently been named National Director of Family First. The party had re-established itself in South Australia but achieved just 3.8% of votes, with none of its candidates elected.



Figure 38: The *Australian Conservatives* party is deregistered after two years
Source: Doran (2019)

Senator Cori Bernardi — and other religious politicians — grossly overread Australia's appetite for a profoundly socially conservative political party based on religious ("Christian") values.

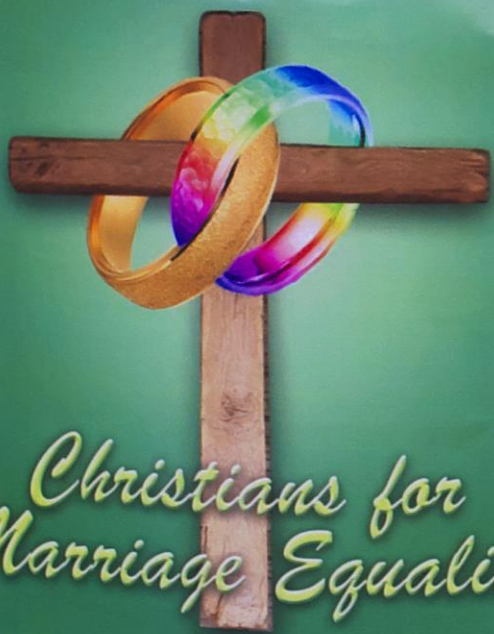
Other direct evidence takes this further: that conservative religious representation can be poison at the ballot box.

In the Liberal party's analysis of its poor 2022 federal election performance in Western Australia (also following the Liberal's decimation at the previous WA state election), religious "fundamentalism" was identified as a key contributing factor (Perpitch 2022).

This doesn't bode well for the Liberal party in relation to claims of religious infiltration and branch stacking. For example in Victoria, Mormons (LDS or Latter Day Saints) are said to occupy 13% of the Liberals' organisational positions versus just 0.3% representation in the general population (Schneiders & Tomazin 2018). More recently there have been claims of Pentecostals infiltrating the Victorian Liberal party (King & Burns 2022). Any such moves are unlikely to endear the party to the state's voters, given Victoria is the most socially progressive in the nation.

Summary: Cori Bernardi's experiment in conservative Christian political representation swiftly and comprehensively failed. Religious fundamentalism has also been identified as a significant factor in the Liberals' loss of seats at the 2022 federal election, yet reports of religious infiltration of the Liberal party continue.

Previously assumed associations between religious affiliation and necessarily social conservative attitudes are not supported by election performance results. Nor are they supported by hard social research data. In the next section, we'll examine the *actual* social attitudes of religious and non-religious Australians.



*Christians for
Marriage Equality*

I'm a Christian and...

acl

australian christian lobby
voice for values

... **does not speak for
me.**

Religion and social attitudes revisited

Even though religious, particularly Christian, affiliation is associated with greater confidence in Coalition versus Labor government, it would be a significant mistake to believe that this also translates into majorities of the religious being in favour of conservative social policies. They aren't.

In this section, we'll review the hard evidence about religiosity and attitudes toward a range of contemporary social issues:

- Abortion.
- Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) for the terminally ill.
- Marriage equality for non-heterosexual couples.
- Religious school discrimination against LGBTI+ staff or students.

We'll also look at the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward the seriousness of climate change.

Attitudes toward abortion

Many of the career religious voice strong opposition to the availability of abortion services, for example, the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge, who in 2018 sent a letter to parents at 141 Catholic schools, linking abortion with child abuse (Courier Mail 2018). Coleridge claimed that nearly 90% of received parents' responses opposed abortion, overlooking the self-selecting nature of the response method.

Coleridge drew the invalid link between abortion and child abuse again (Courier Mail 2020), adding with breathtaking insensitivity that the Church had "*learned at great cost in recent years*" about the need to protect children.

However, despite confident pronouncements and claims of representing their flocks, such clerics represent the views of hardly any Australians at all. Just 3% of Religious Progressives and Religious Moderates oppose abortion in all circumstances (Figure 39).

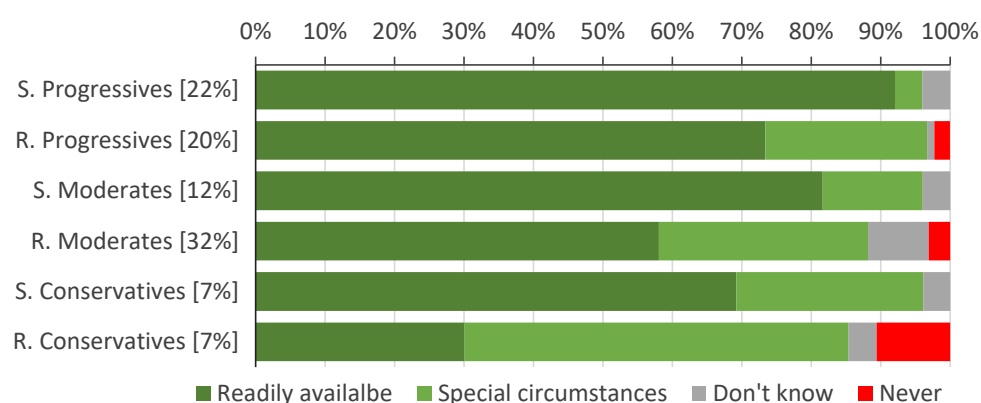


Figure 39: Attitudes toward abortion by ASI6 social identity

Source: AES 2019. Note: S. = Secular (no religious affiliation); R. = Religious (any religious affiliation). Label percentages in brackets are proportion of respondents.

Even amongst Religious Conservatives at 7% of the population, just one in ten (10%) always oppose abortion, nearly a third (30%) say it should be readily available, and a further 55% say it should be available in some circumstances.

Nor do Catholic healthcare institutions that prohibit anyone providing lawful abortion services on their premises represent their own flock. Even amongst Australian Catholics, just 1% oppose lawful abortion in all circumstances, while a clear majority (61%) say it should be *readily available* and a further 29% say it should be available under special circumstances (Figure 40). This is an egregious prohibition over lawful services, on the taxpayer's healthcare funding dime, to protect the views of hardly anyone.

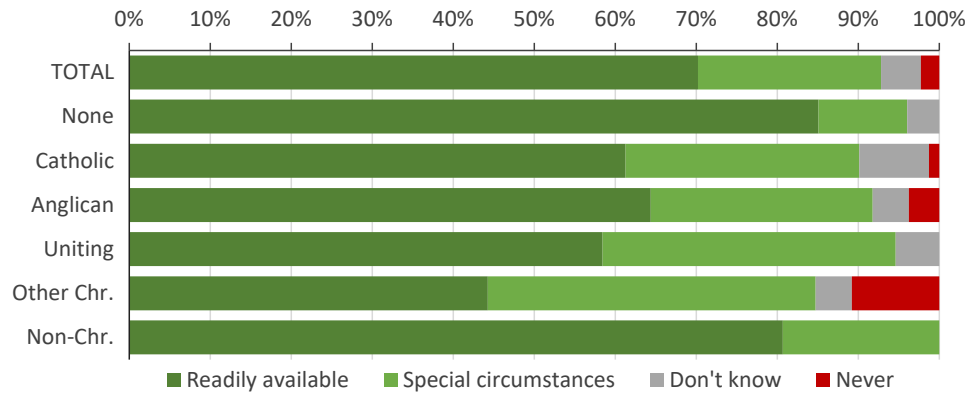


Figure 40: Attitudes toward abortion by religion

Source: AES 2019

Summary: Clerics who loudly oppose abortion services represent hardly any Australians, *including hardly any Religious Conservatives*, most of whom believe it should be readily available or permissible in some circumstances.

Even amongst Australian Catholics, just 1% oppose abortion in all circumstances. This means that the religious dictates of the Vatican prevail in Australian Catholic healthcare institutions over all citizens, on the taxpayer's dime. This is especially egregious when the only available facility in a region is Catholic.

Attitudes toward voluntary assisted dying (VAD)

At the time of writing, all Australian state parliaments had legalised VAD for the terminally ill, under restricted circumstances, and returning powers to so legislate to the Territories was being debated in federal parliament.

As for abortion, conservative clerics have been vocal in their opposition to VAD's legalisation. This too, fails to represent Australians' views — including the religious (Figure 41).

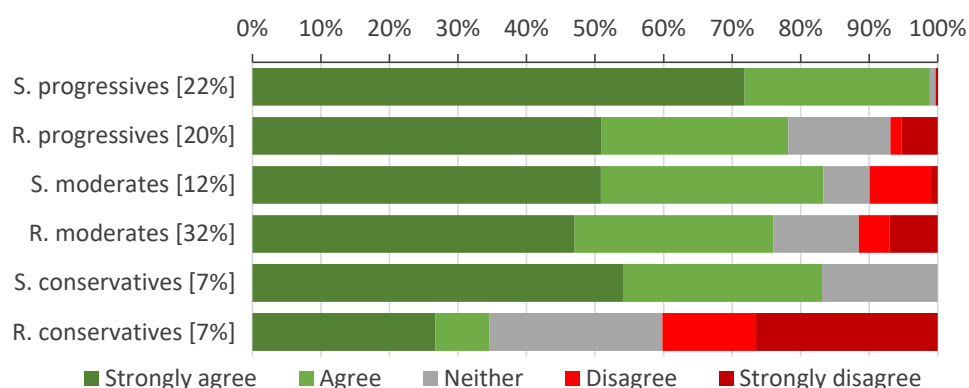


Figure 41: Attitudes toward VAD by ASI6 social identity

Source: AES 2019. Note: S. = Secular (no religious affiliation); R. = Religious (affiliation). Label percentages in brackets are proportion of respondents.

Only tiny minorities of Religious Progressives (7%) and Religious Moderates (11%) oppose lawful VAD. Even amongst Religious Conservatives, only four in ten (40%) are opposed, while a third (34%) support it and the remainder are neutral.

Nor do leaders of Catholic healthcare institutions that prohibit anyone providing lawful VAD services on their premises represent their own flock: even amongst Australian Catholics, just 15% oppose lawful VAD (Figure 42).

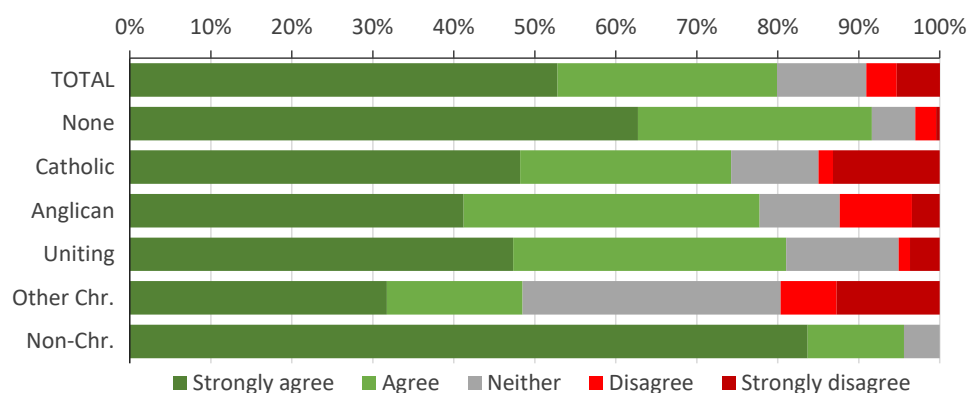


Figure 42: Attitudes toward VAD by religion

Source: AES 2019

Like abortion, this too is an egregious prohibition that suppresses the conscience of requesting patients, and doctors who are willing to investigate and accommodate the patient's request.

Summary: As for abortion, clerics vocally opposing lawful VAD represent hardly any Australians, *including failing to represent a diversity of views even amongst Religious Conservatives*, of whom only four in ten oppose and three in ten support. Also as for abortion, opposing religious healthcare institutions demand doctrinal religious absolutes must prevail in the face of overwhelming public support and on the taxpayer's dime.

Attitudes toward marriage equality

Marriage equality (ME) for non-heterosexual couples was legalised by the federal parliament in 2017, after a divisive plebiscite sponsored by the conservative Coalition government.

By the 2019 federal election, when ME had become law, thousands of non-heterosexual couples had tied the knot and the sky hadn't fallen in, attitudes toward ME have become more supportive than ever before (Figure 43).

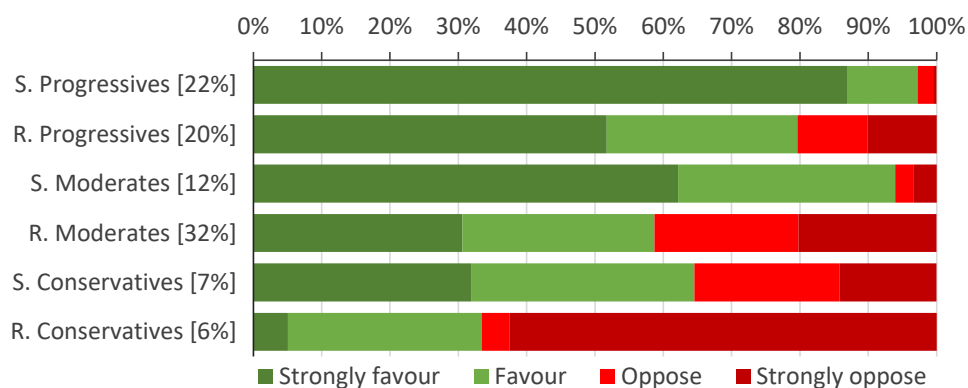


Figure 43: Attitudes toward marriage equality for same-sex couples by ASi6 social identity, 2019

Source: AES 2019. Note: S. = Secular (no religious affiliation); R. = Religious (any religious affiliation). Label percentages in brackets are proportion of respondents.

One in five Religious Progressives (20%) were still opposed to ME in 2019, as were four in ten Religious Moderates (41%). That is, amongst these groups, a majority were in favour of ME.

Only amongst Religious Conservatives (7% of the population) did a majority of two-thirds (67%) continue to oppose ME: that is, one-third (33%) of Religious Conservatives *supported* ME in 2019. In 2016, prior to the legalisation of marriage equality, nearly all Religious Conservatives (86%) opposed it.

Overall, as of 2019, nine in ten non-religious Australians (90%), and nearly two-thirds (64%) of religious Australians, support ME. This suggests continued growth of more accepting attitudes toward minority sexuality groups and their personal lives.

By religion, only amongst minor Christian denominations (collectively) is there minority support (42%) to marriage equality, with clear majorities of others in favour: seven in ten Catholics (71%), six in ten Anglicans (60%),

two-thirds of Uniting/Methodists (66%), and most non-Christian religionists (95%)⁹ (Figure 44).

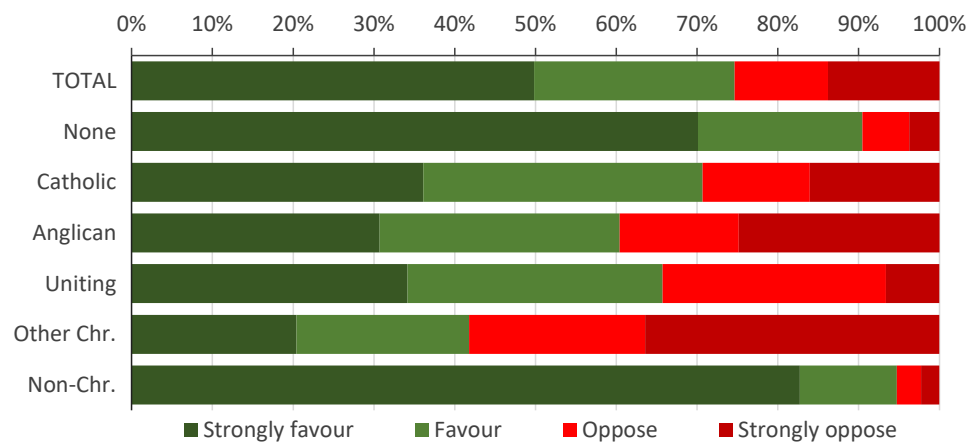


Figure 44: Attitudes toward marriage equality for same-sex couples by religion
Source: AES 2019

Summary: Since marriage equality was legalised in 2017, Australian attitudes toward it have continued to become more supportive. As at 2019, even one-third of Religious Conservatives support marriage equality, despite the continued protestations of some.

⁹ The sample size for the non-Christian cohort is smaller, so the certainty of the result is lower.

Attitudes toward religious school LGBTI discrimination

Several polls of attitudes amongst the general public indicate that a majority of Australians are opposed to religious schools having the right to discriminate against LGBTI+ staff and students. For example, a YouGov Galaxy poll in 2018 found that 4 in 5 Australians oppose legalised discrimination against LGBTI and transgender staff and students at religious schools (Hinton-Teoh 2021). Almost the same proportion said that teachers should not be sacked even if they marry a same-sex partner, *and* that those schools that do discriminate should not receive public funding.

A separate YouGov Galaxy poll found more than three-quarters (77%) of Australians opposed religious school “statements of belief” that would humiliate, intimidate, insult or ridicule people based on protected attributes (which includes gender and sexual orientation) (Karp 2022).

And a peer-reviewed study published in 2022 found that nearly three-quarters (73%) of Australians disagreed that “*conservative Catholic, Anglican, Jewish and Muslim schools should be allowed to refuse to employ a teacher because they are LGBT+*”, with just 19% agreeing (Ezzy et al. 2022). Note that these results are in regard to (a) “refuse to employ” but silent on the matter of sacking those already employed, (b) the ‘justifying’ qualifier “conservative”, and (c) the naming of specific religions which grants them more ‘personal’ status.

These results highlight attitudes amongst the general population, most of whom don’t send their children to religious schools. What about the attitudes of religious parents?

Vocal, conservative religious leaders claim that religious parents send their children to religious schools in support of the restrictive LGBTI attitudes of such schools. Since mothers make most of the decisions as to which schools the household’s children attend, it is *their* attitudes that are most relevant.

A proxy measure for supporting discrimination against LGBTI staff and students is the belief that homosexuality is immoral (total “Negative” in Figure 45). Small minorities of one in eleven Australian Nones (9%), and one in five religious Australians (21%), hold expressly negative attitudes, with positive attitudes in the majority amongst both groups (74% and 61% respectively).

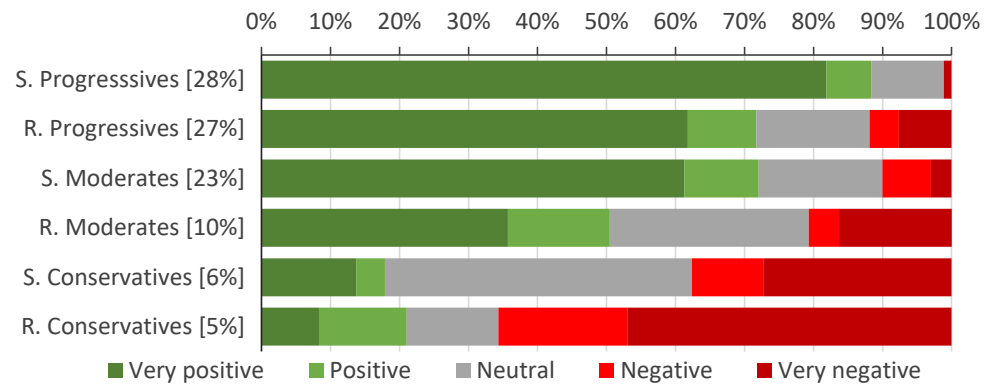


Figure 45: Attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality amongst mothers of school-age children, by ASI6 social identity

Source: AVS 2018. Note: “Mothers” = females aged 25-54y with children under 18y living in the household. Label percentages in brackets are proportion of respondents.

Only amongst Religious Conservatives — just 5% of the population in the AVS 2018 study — is there a majority, two-thirds (66%), hold negative attitudes that might support such discrimination, while one in five (21%) would oppose it.

Nationally, just over one-third (34.9%) of school children attend religious (15.4% independent¹⁰ and 19.5% Catholic) schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Therefore, a significant proportion of students of religious schools must come from Religious Progressives and Religious Moderates families,¹¹ amongst whom only a small minority hold expressly negative views about homosexuality.

By major religion, a small minority of Australia’s religious believe that homosexuality is immoral, ranging from just 13% amongst Catholics to less than a third (30%) amongst minor Christian denominations, while majorities across the board hold favourable attitudes (Figure 46).

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, independent schools are not necessarily religious, but most are.

¹¹ Some students may come from Secular families, but the numbers are likely to be very small.

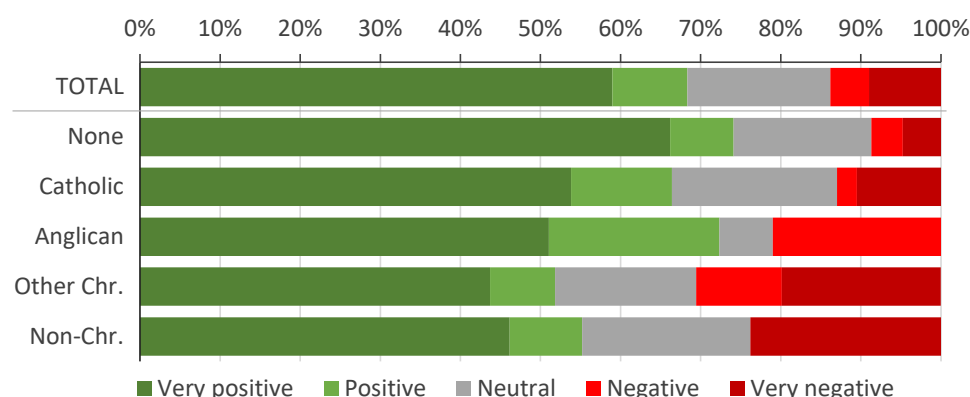


Figure 46: Attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality amongst mothers of school-age children, by religion

Source: AVS 2018. Note: “Mothers” = females aged 25-54y with children under 18y living in the household.

Anti-LGBTI discrimination represents a significant risk for religious schools. Those that attempt to implement hostile and punitive policies toward LGBTI staff and students are likely to ostracise, offend and prompt many of their more progressive parents to look elsewhere for their children’s education.

In a case making national headlines for weeks, Citipointe Christian College in Brisbane discovered this the hard way, with many of its parents vocally criticising the school for its stance, and some withdrawing their children (Concerned Parents of Citipointe Christian College 2022; Kwan 2022).

Summary: Most Australians oppose religious school discrimination against LGBTI staff and students.

Small minorities of Australia’s religious — across the religious denominations — harbour distinctly negative attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality, including amongst those who are most likely to send their children to religious schools: religious mothers of school-aged children. Only amongst the tiny 5% of schoolchild mothers who are Religious Conservatives is there a majority who believe that homosexuality is immoral.

With just over a third (34.9%) of Australia’s children attending religious (independent and Catholic) schools, a majority of children at religious schools will be from Religious Progressive and Religious Moderate families, who hold more accommodating perspectives.

Attitudes toward the seriousness of climate change

Climate scientists are more settled than ever that the earth's climate is warming, that much of the warming is the direct result of human activity (anthropogenic), and that warming of just 1.5 Celsius degrees will cause major challenges for humanity (Pörtner et al. 2022).

When asked how serious climate change is to “your way of life”, significant majorities of most ASI6 social identity segments say “very” or “fairly”, including most Secular Progressives (86%) to nearly two-thirds of Secular Conservatives (62%) (Figure 47). The exception is Religious Conservatives, amongst whom only a minority (40%) recognise the risks.

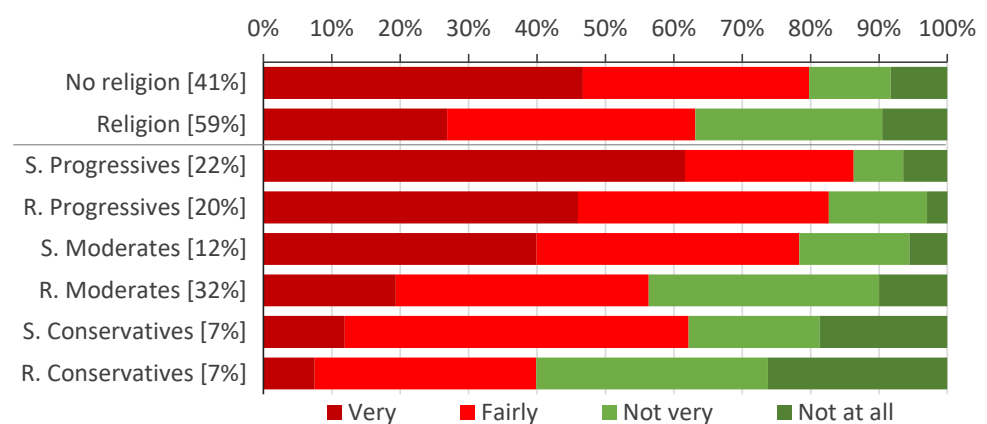


Figure 47: Attitudes toward the seriousness of climate change to your way of life, by ASI6 social identity

Source: AES 2019. Note: S. = Secular (no religious affiliation); R. = Religious (any religious affiliation).

Almost no Religious Conservatives (6%) say that climate change is “very” serious regarding their way of life, demonstrating unreasoned optimism in the face of extensive and compelling scientific evidence for catastrophic change if we don’t radically alter our behaviour regarding CO₂ emissions.

Summary: Majorities of all Social Identity segments — *except* amongst the 7% of the population who are Religious Conservatives — say that climate change represents a serious challenge to their way of life. A majority of Religious Conservatives harbour unreasoned optimism that poses a major risk for avoiding catastrophic impacts on human (and other) life on earth.

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