

Left, right and centre

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

Social identity

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

This produces 6 segments from secular progressives to religious conservatives.

Australian Social Identity 6-Factor (ASI6)

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

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

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

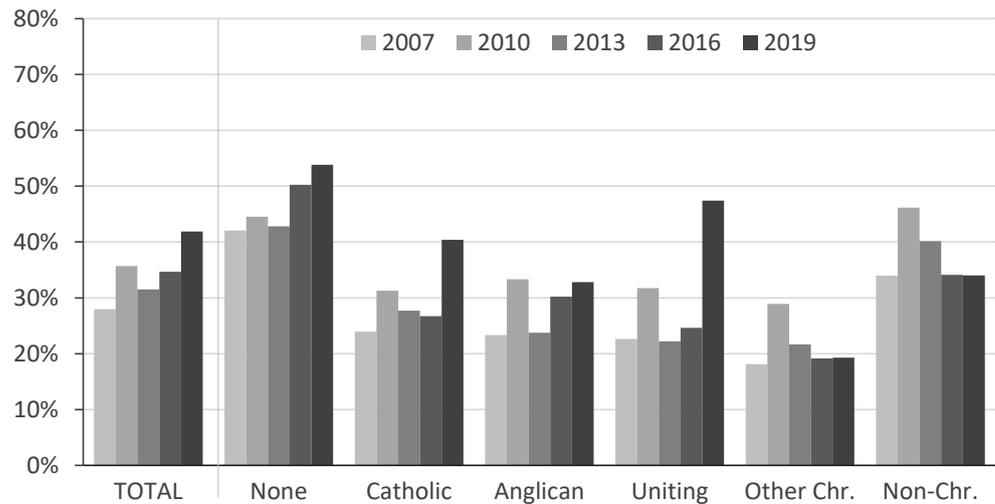


Figure 42: Denomination proportion of social progressives by year
Source: AES

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

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

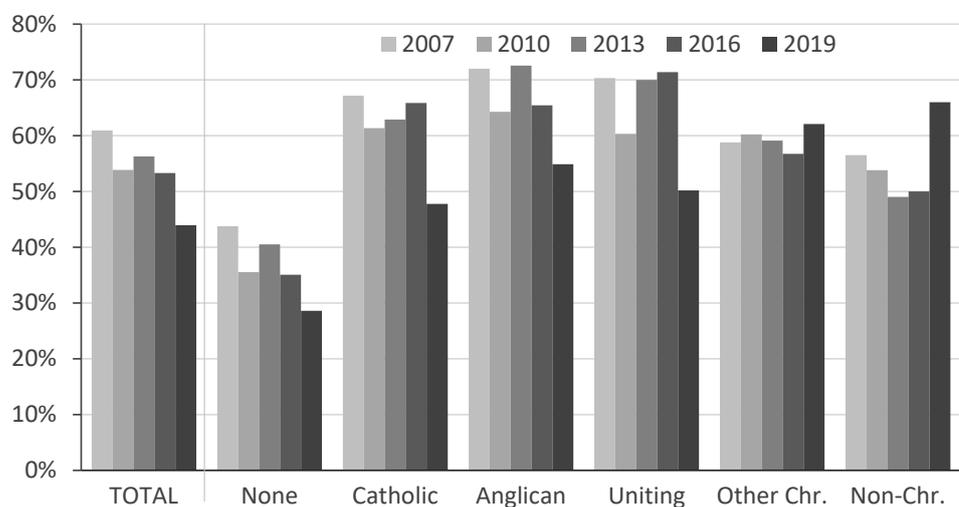


Figure 43: Denomination proportion of social moderates by year
Source: AES

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

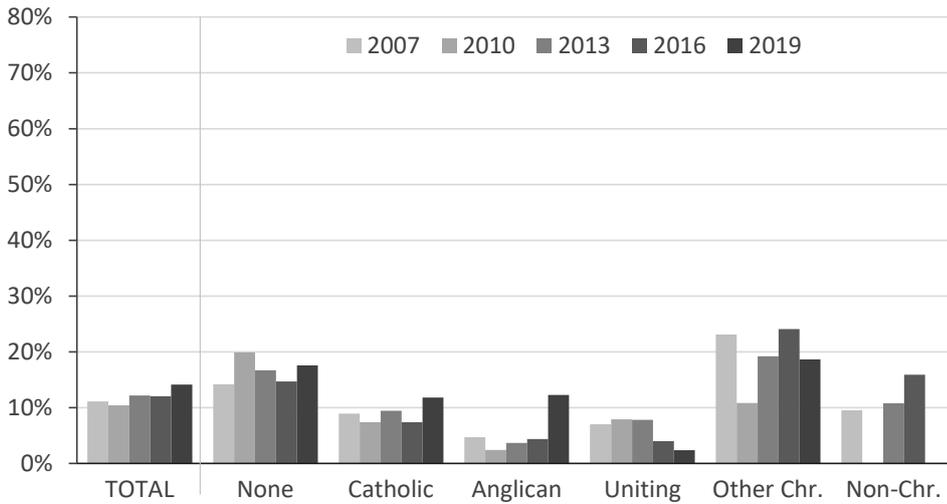


Figure 44: Denomination proportion of social conservatives by year

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

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

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

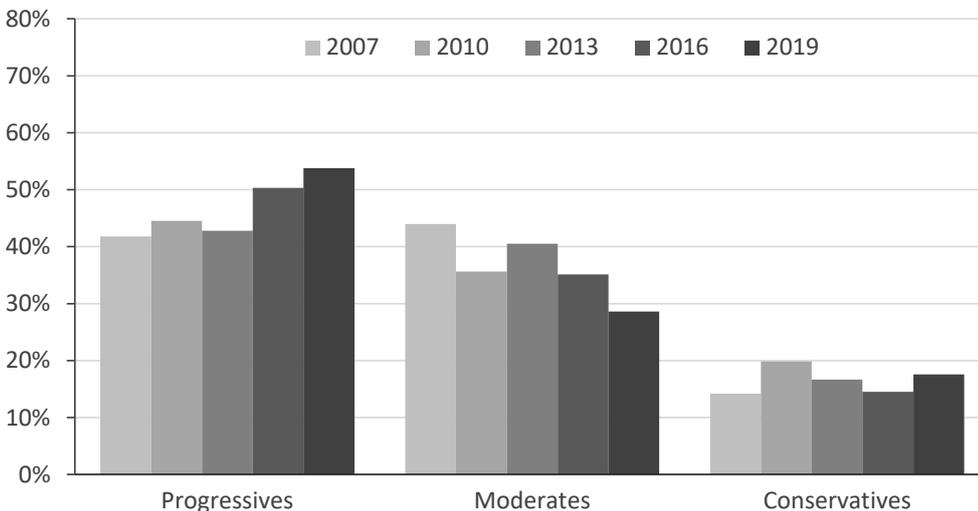


Figure 45: Proportion of social progressiveness amongst the not-affiliated

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

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

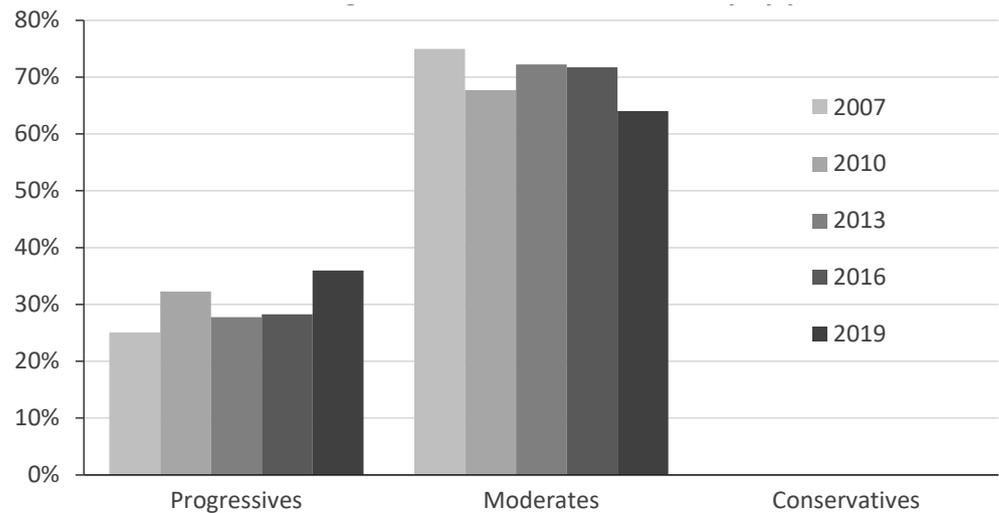


Figure 46: Proportion of social progressiveness amongst the weakly affiliated
 Source: AES. Note: Weakly affiliated = Notionals and Occasionals

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

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

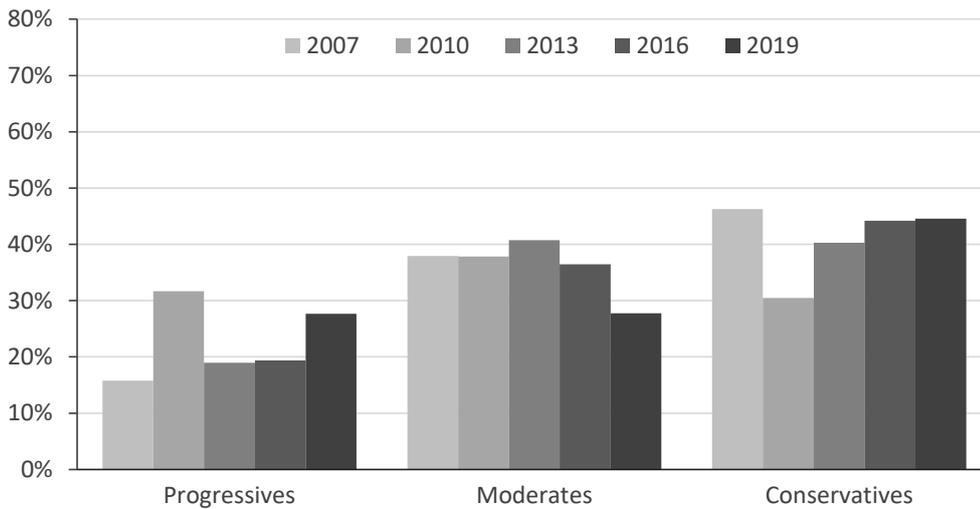


Figure 47: Proportion of social progressiveness amongst religious Committeds
 Source: AES. Note: Committeds = Regulars and Devouts

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

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

Political left/right spectrum

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

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

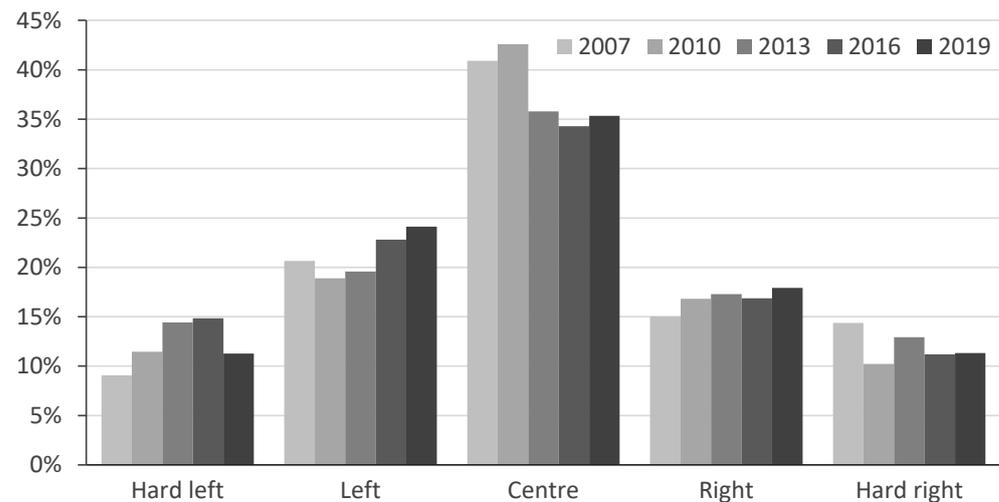


Figure 48: Left/right political spectrum amongst **Not** Committeds, by year

Source: AES

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

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

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

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

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

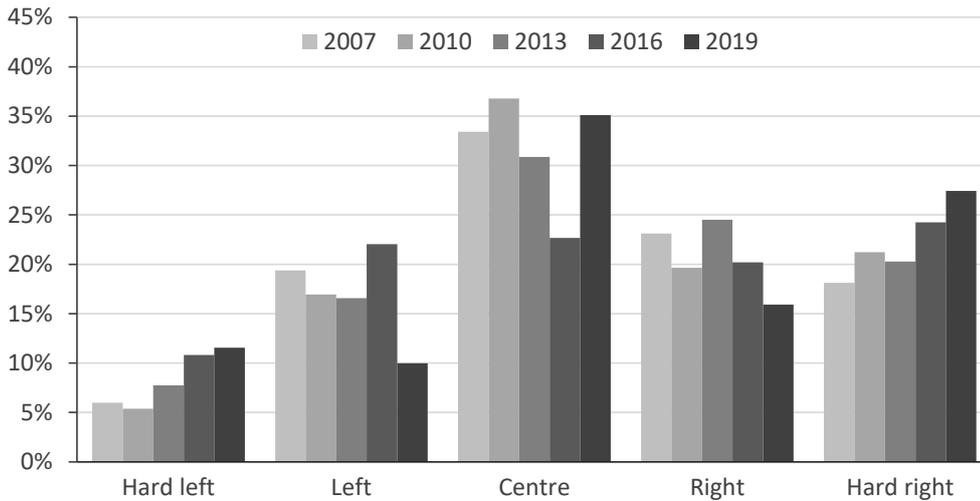


Figure 49: Left/right political spectrum amongst Committeds, by year

Source: AES

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

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

Political party identification

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

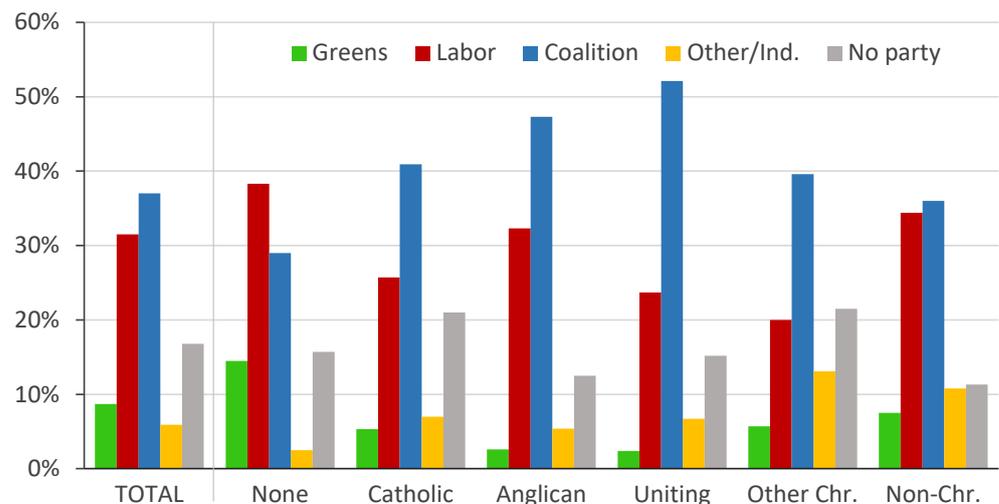


Figure 50: Proportion of religions aligned with political party
Source: AES 2019

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

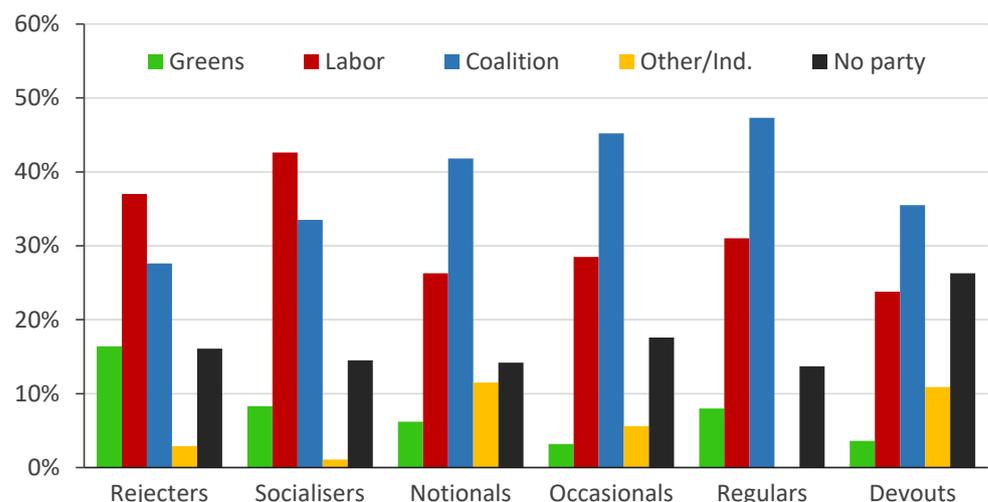


Figure 51: Proportion of ARI6 aligned with political party
Source: AES 2019

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

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

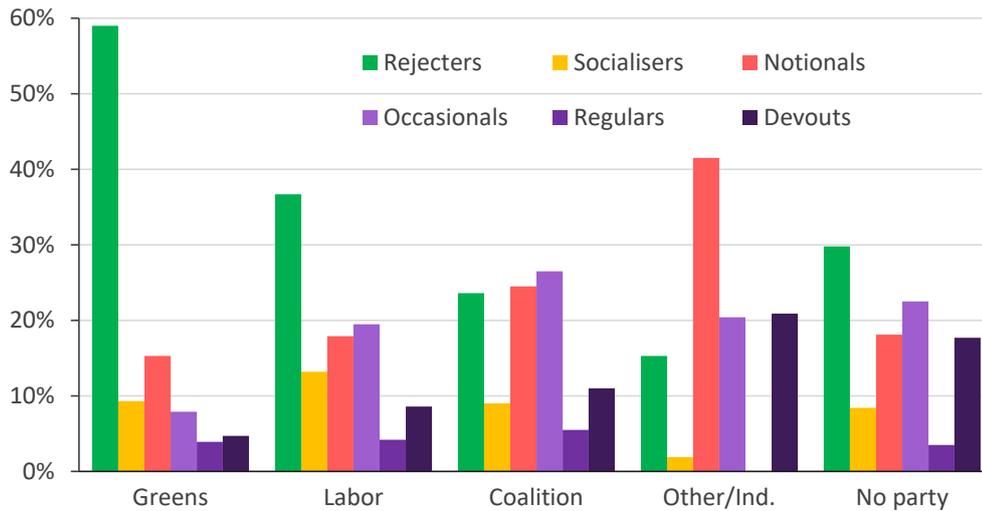


Figure 52: Proportion of party self-aligned who are ARI6 segment
Source: AES 2019

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

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

Attitudes toward religion and God

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

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

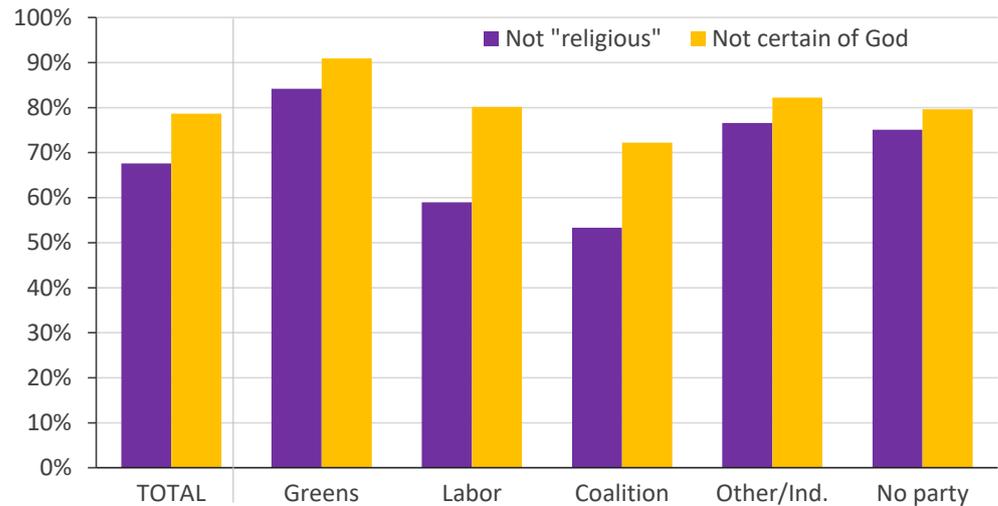


Figure 53: Religious attitudes by political party self-alignment

Source: AuSSA 2018

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

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

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

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

Political identity

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

Australian Political Identity 7-Factor (API7)

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

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

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

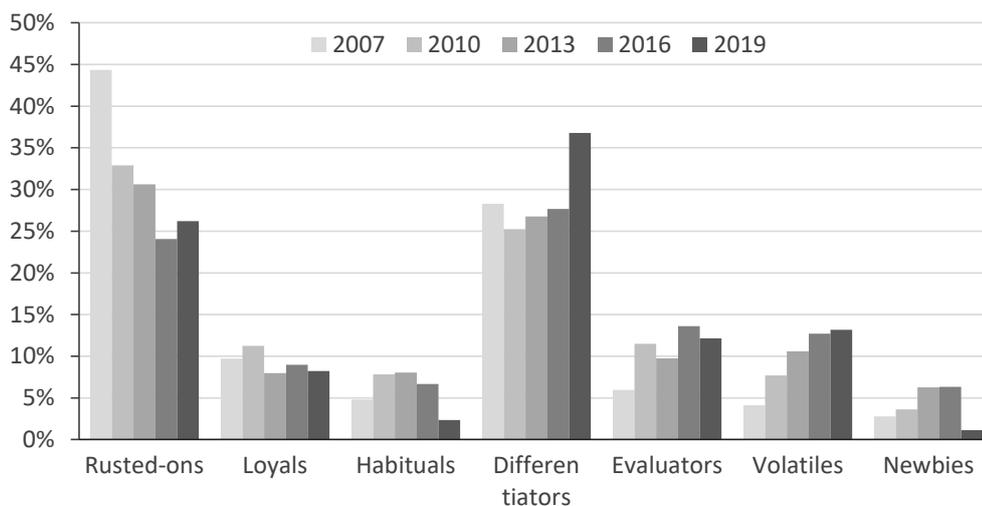


Figure 54: All adults, API7 segments by year

Source: AES

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

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

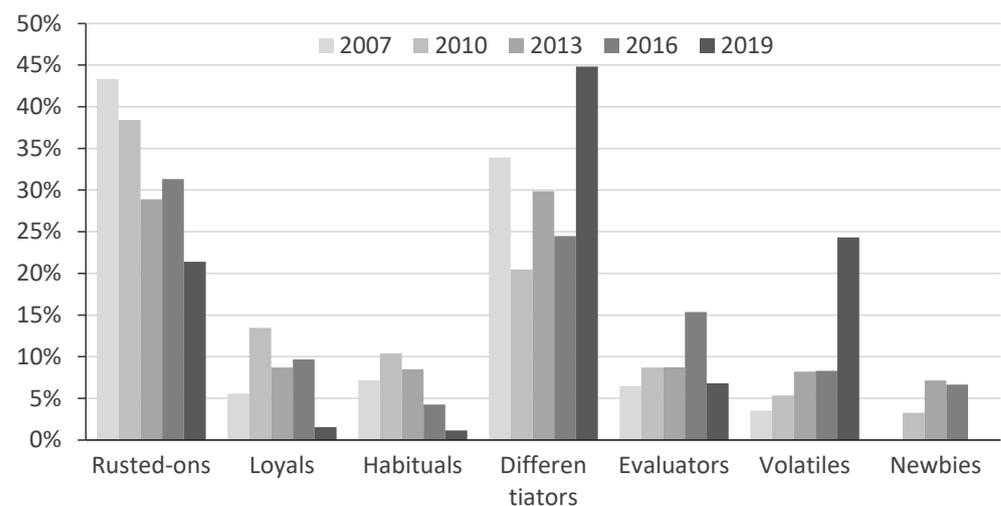


Figure 55: Devouts, API7 segments by year

Source: AES

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

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

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

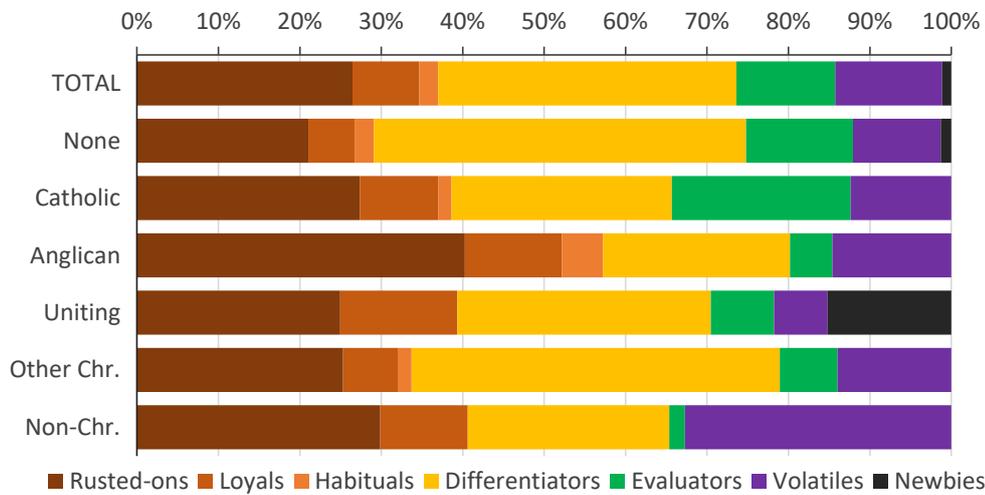


Figure 56: API7 distribution amongst the religious denominations
Source: AEI 2019

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

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



Federal voting preferences

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

House of Representatives 2019

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

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

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

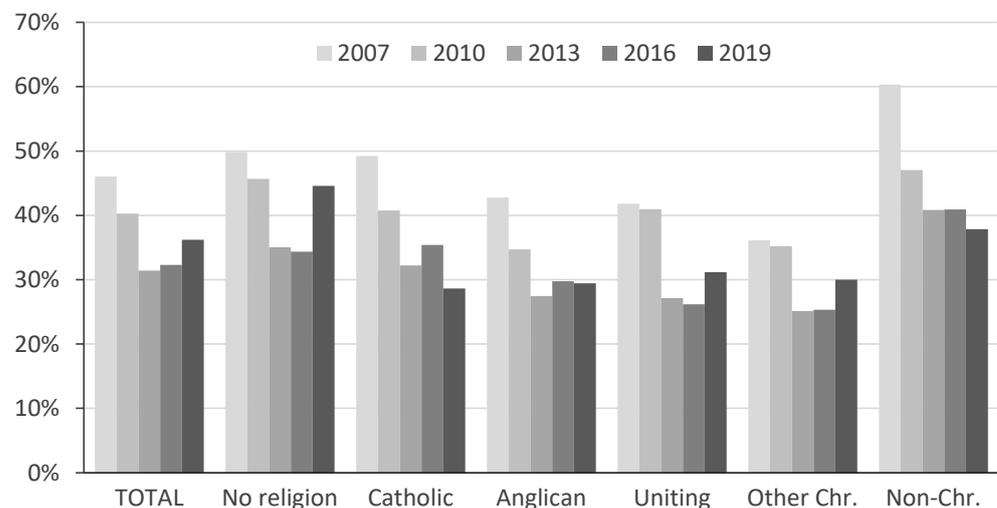


Figure 57: Denomination gave House first preference to Labor, by year

Source: AES

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

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

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

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

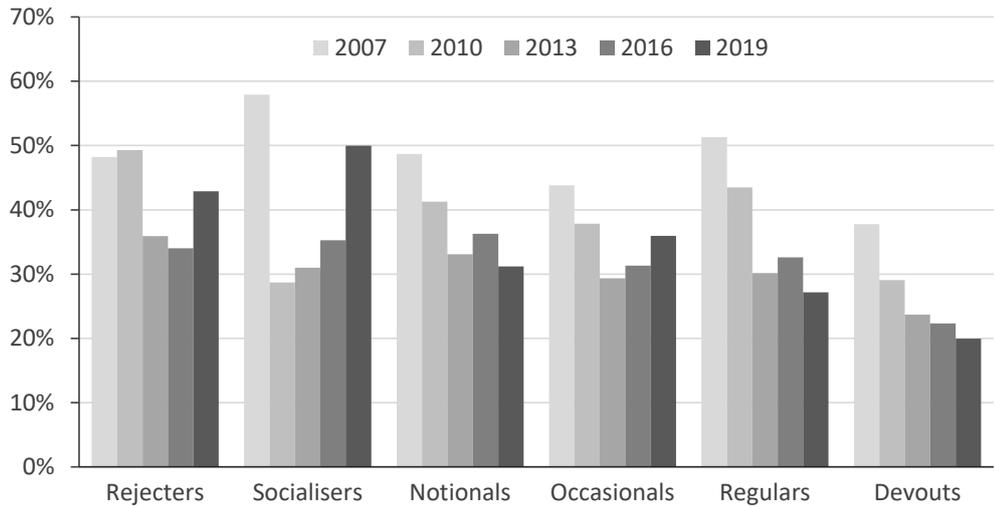


Figure 58: ARI6 gave House first preference to Labor, by year

Source: AES

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

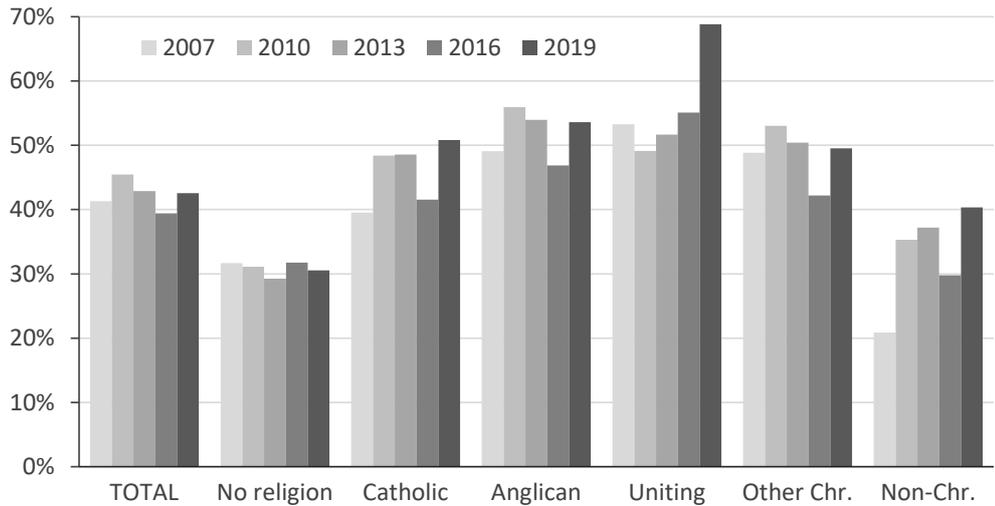


Figure 59: Religion by gave House first preference to the Coalition, by year

Source: AES

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

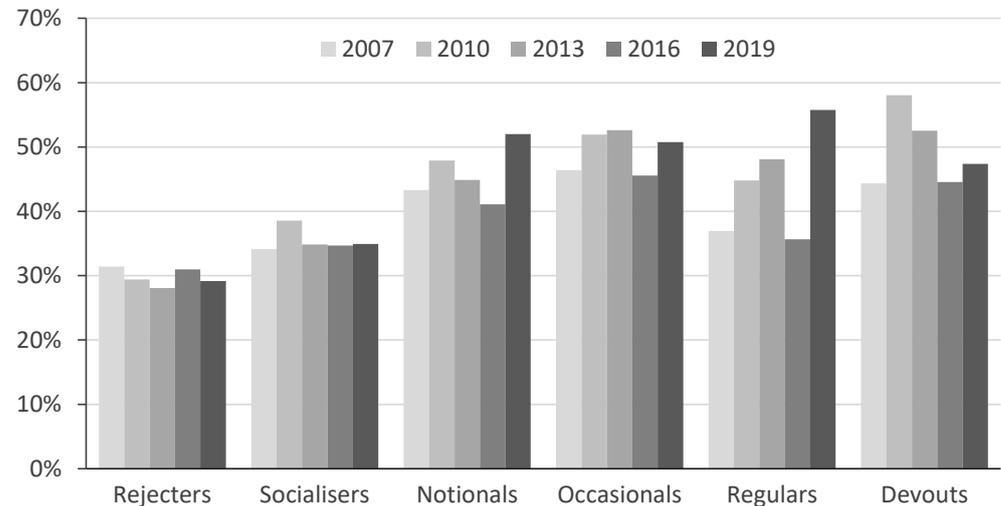


Figure 60: ARI6 by gave House first preference to the Coalition, by year
Source: AES

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

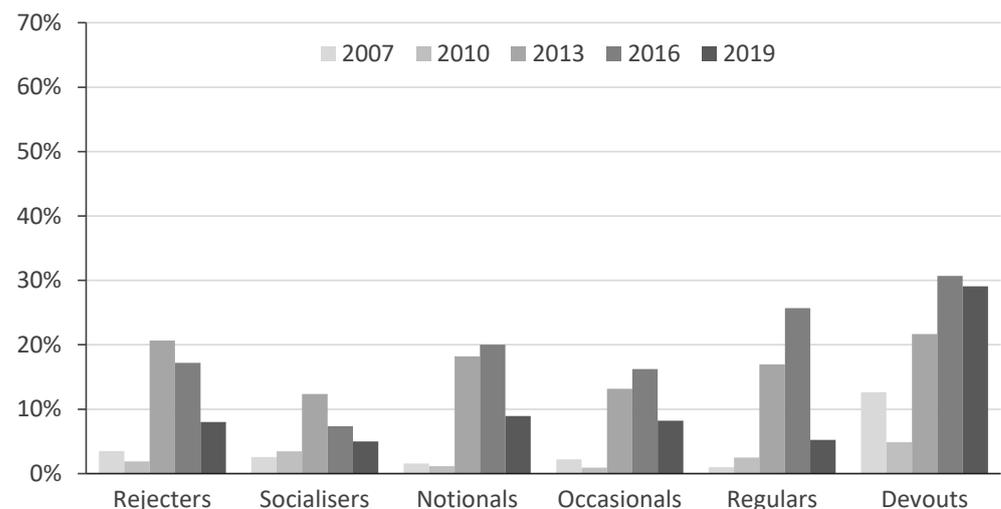


Figure 61: ARI6 by gave House first preference to Other/Independent, by year
Source: AES

First impressions are misleading

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

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

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

and

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

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

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

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

Economic Identity

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

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

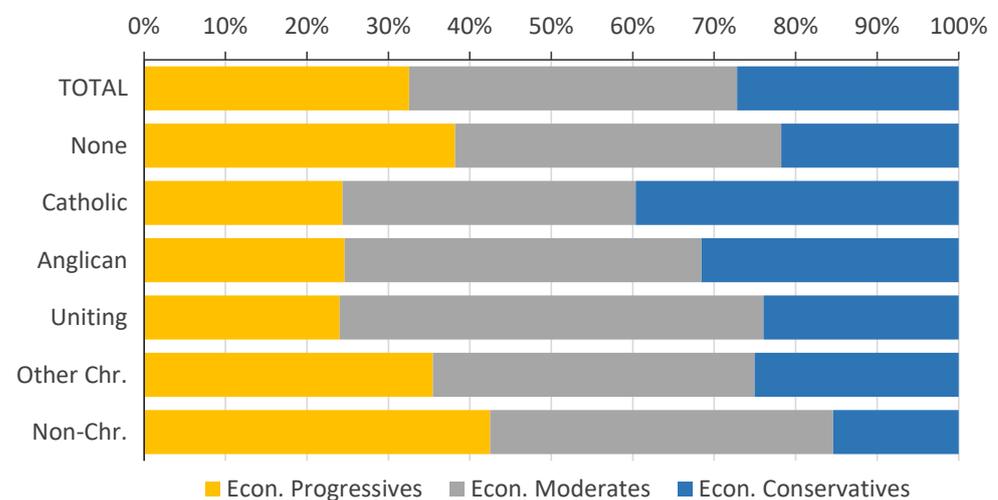


Figure 62: Australian Economic Identity 3-Factor, by religion

Source: AES 2019

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

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

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

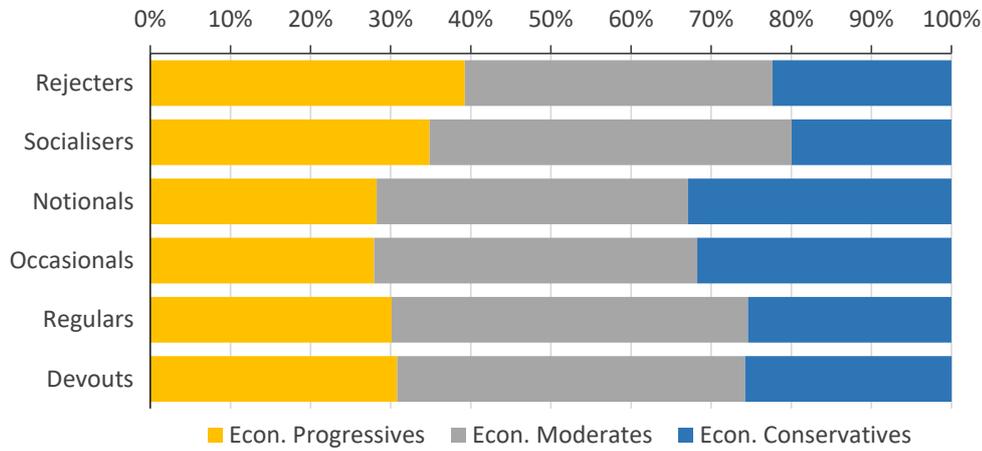


Figure 63: Australian Economic Identity 3-Factor, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

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

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

Low-income households

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

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

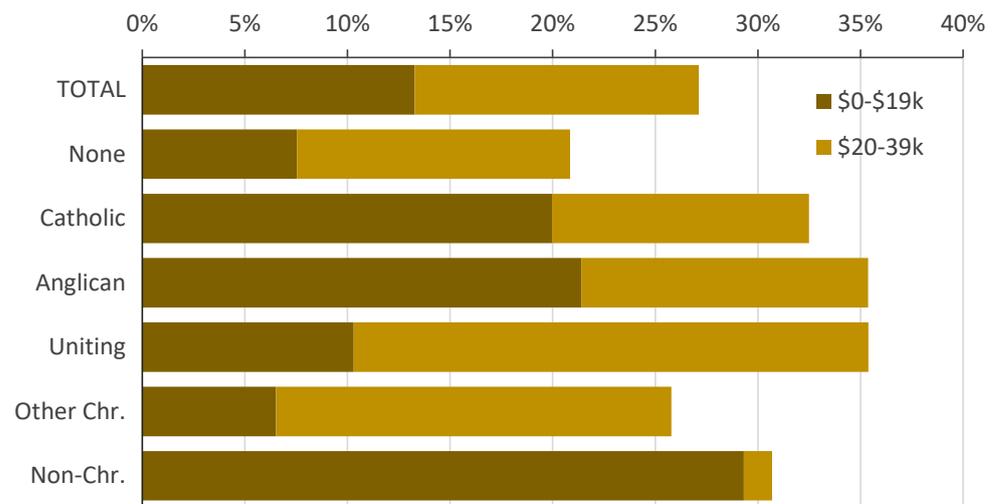


Figure 64: Household gross annual income by religion
Source: AES 2019

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

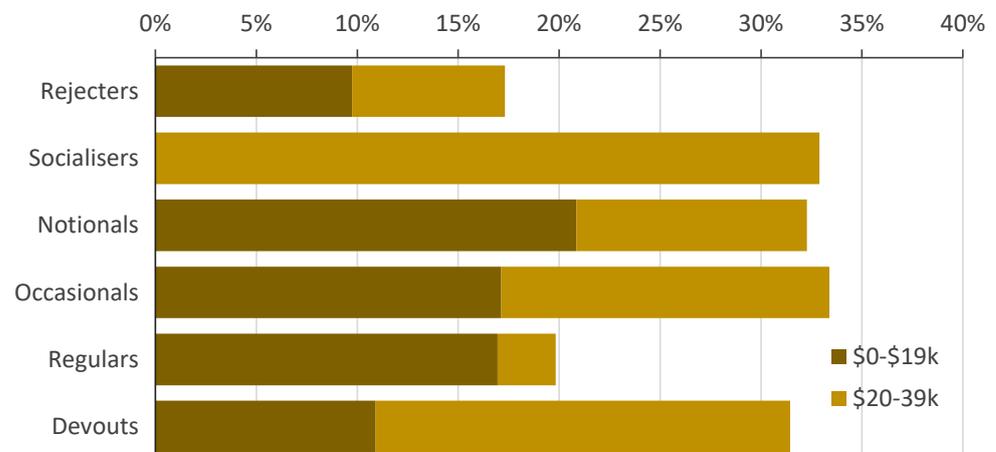


Figure 65: Household gross annual income by ARI6
Source: AES 2019

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

Jobs, jobs, jobs

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

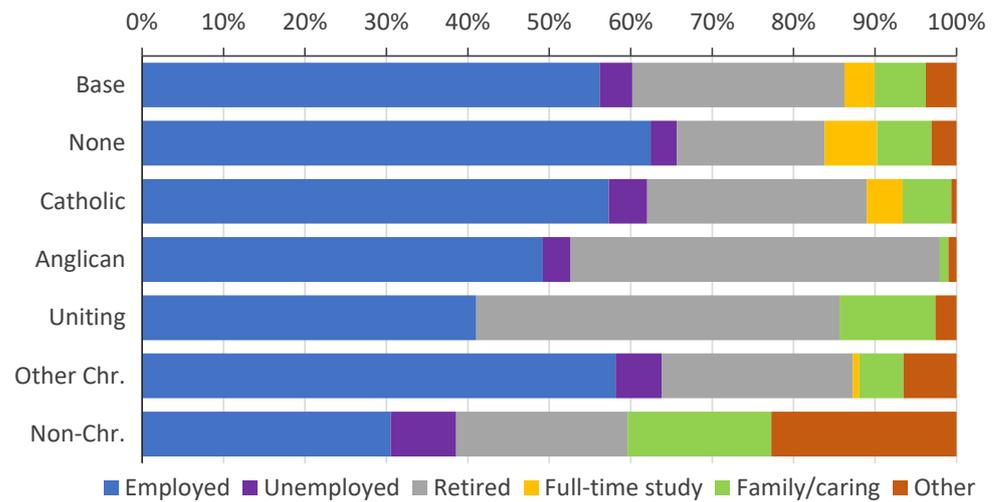


Figure 66: Main work by religion

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

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

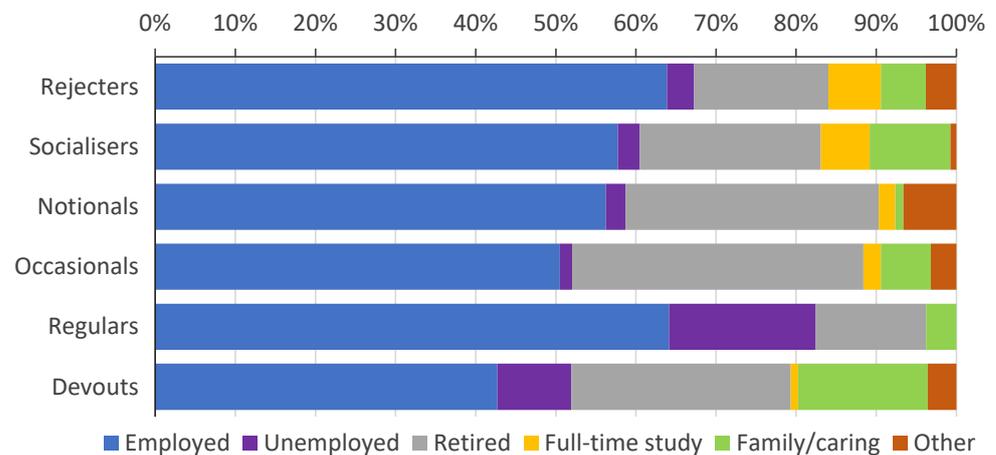


Figure 67: Main work by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

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

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

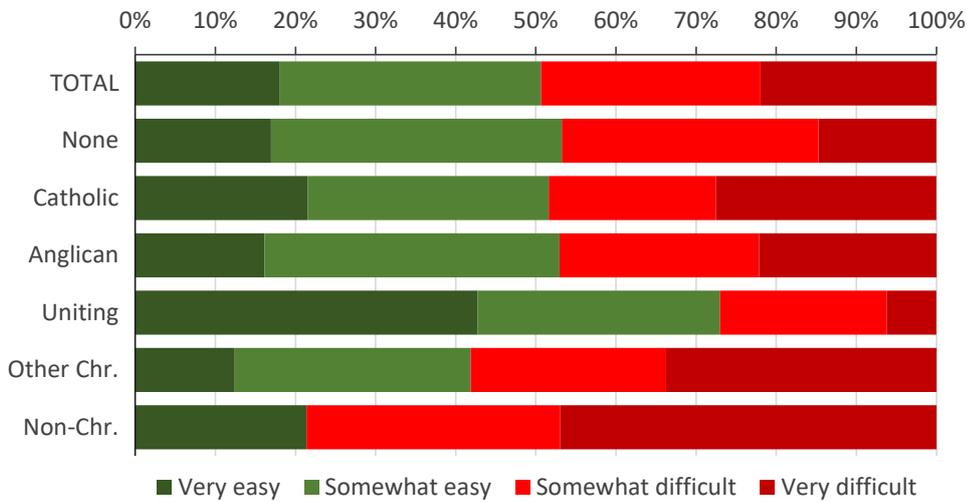


Figure 68: Belief in ease/difficulty of finding another job, by religion
 Source: AES 2019. Base: Employed or looking for paid work

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

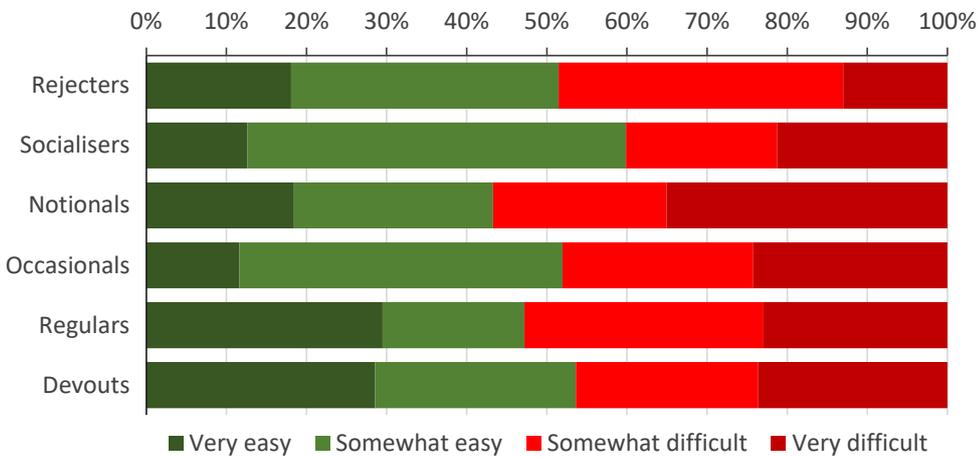


Figure 69: Belief in ease/difficulty of finding another job, by ARI6
 Source: AES 2019. Base: Employed or looking for paid work

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

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

Investment properties, company shares

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

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

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

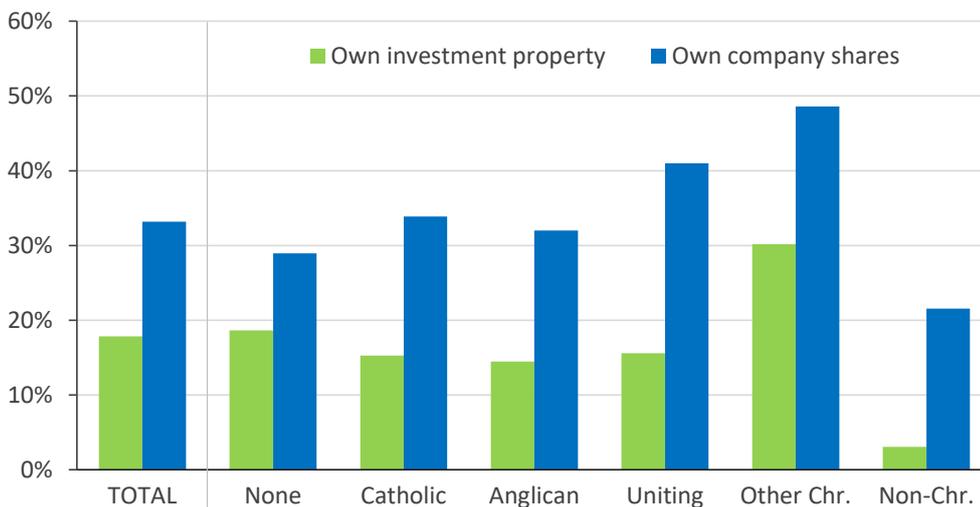


Figure 70: Rates of investment property and share ownership by religion

Source: AES 2019

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

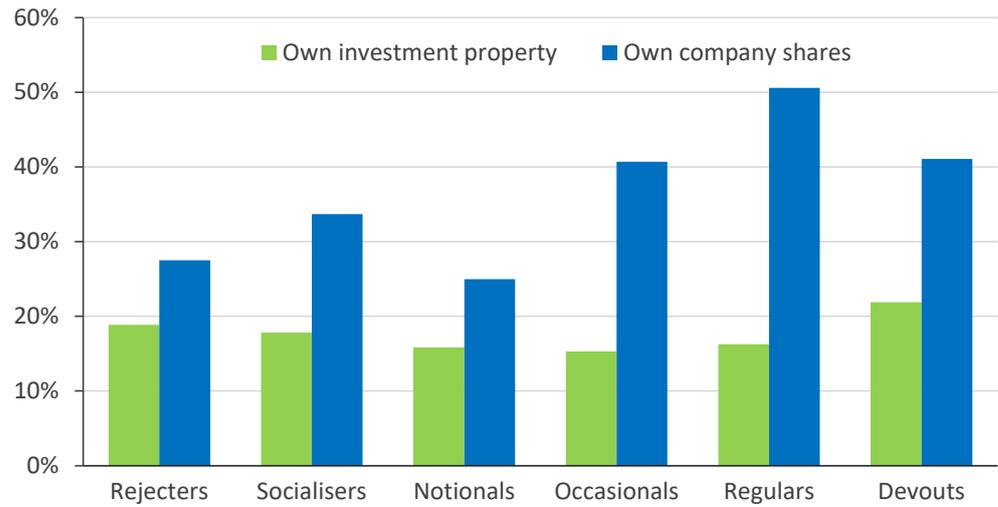


Figure 71: Rates of investment property and share ownership by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

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

Election policies about money

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

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

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

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

Source: AES 2019

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

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

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

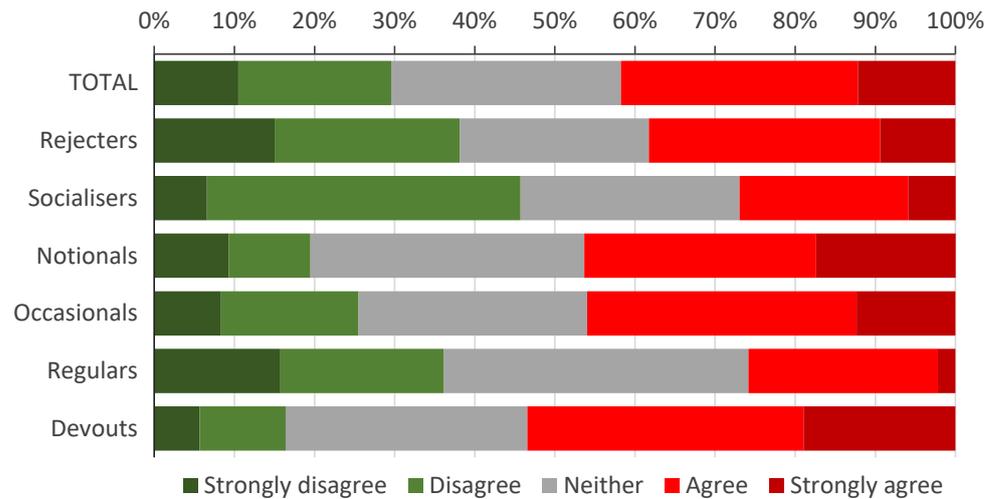


Figure 72: High income tax = less willing to work hard, by AR16
 Source: AES 2019

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

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

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

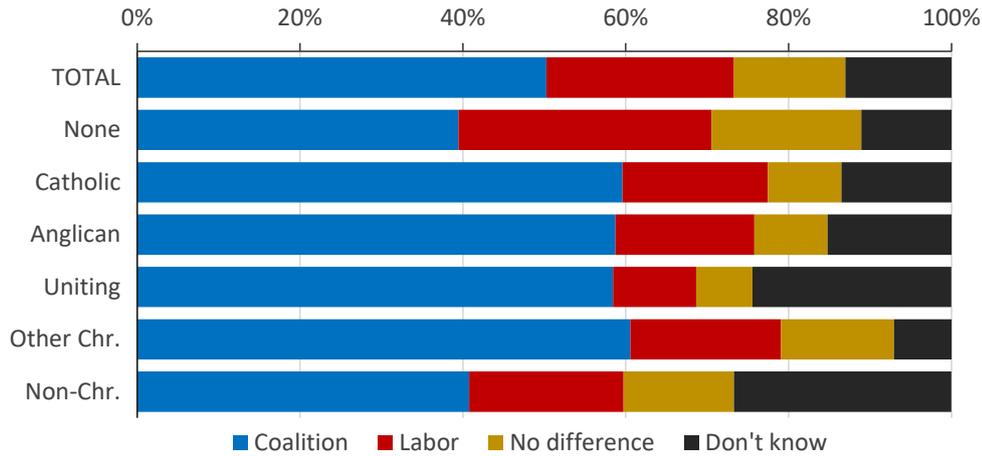


Figure 73: Religion by who's closer to you on economic management
Source: AES 2019

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

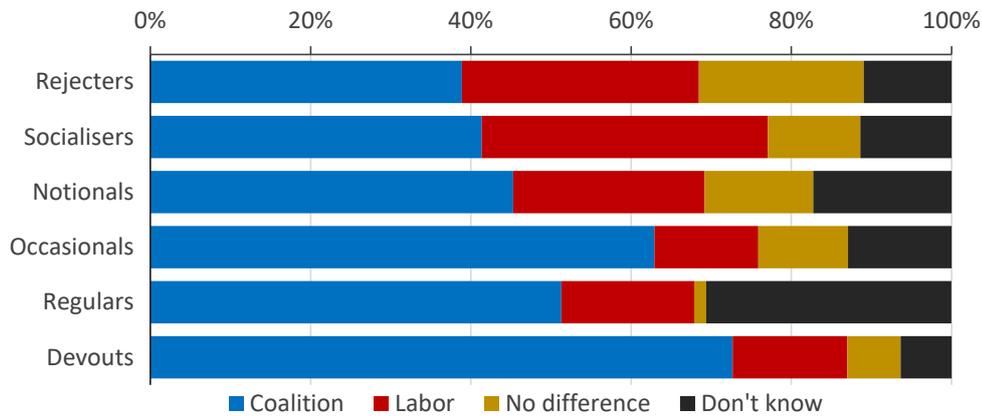


Figure 74: ARI6 by who's closer to you on economic management
Source: AES 2019

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

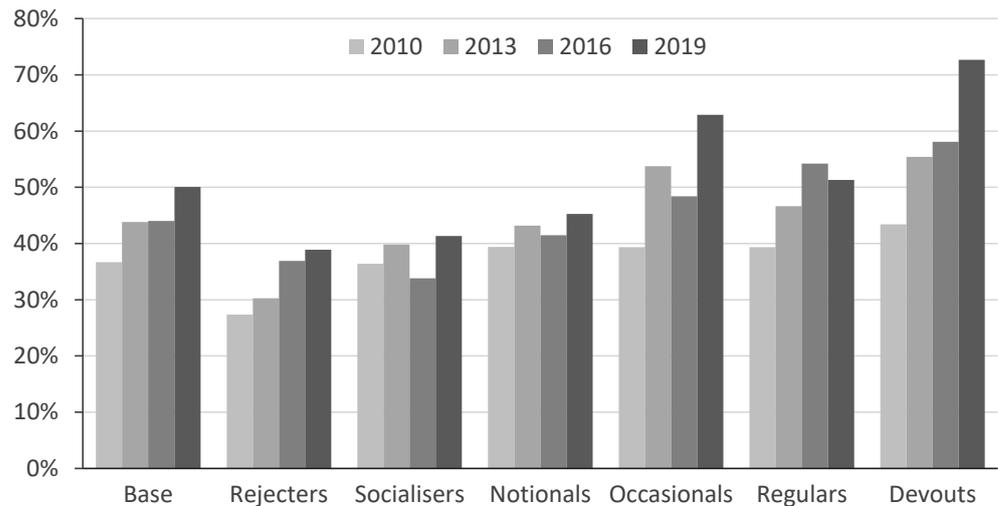


Figure 75: ARI6 by coalition is best economic manager, by year

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

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

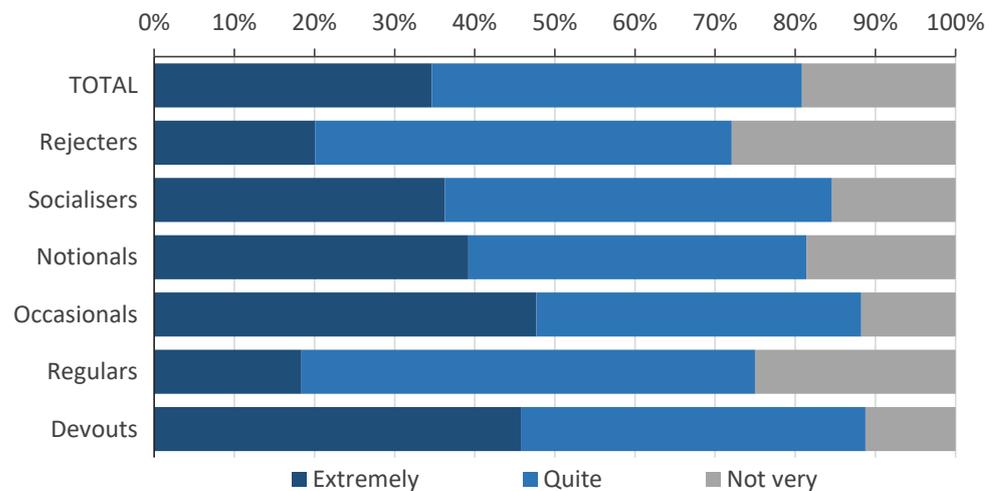


Figure 76: Importance of government debt policy at 2019 election, by ARI6

Source: AES 2019

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

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

Faith in Coalition economics

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

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

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

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

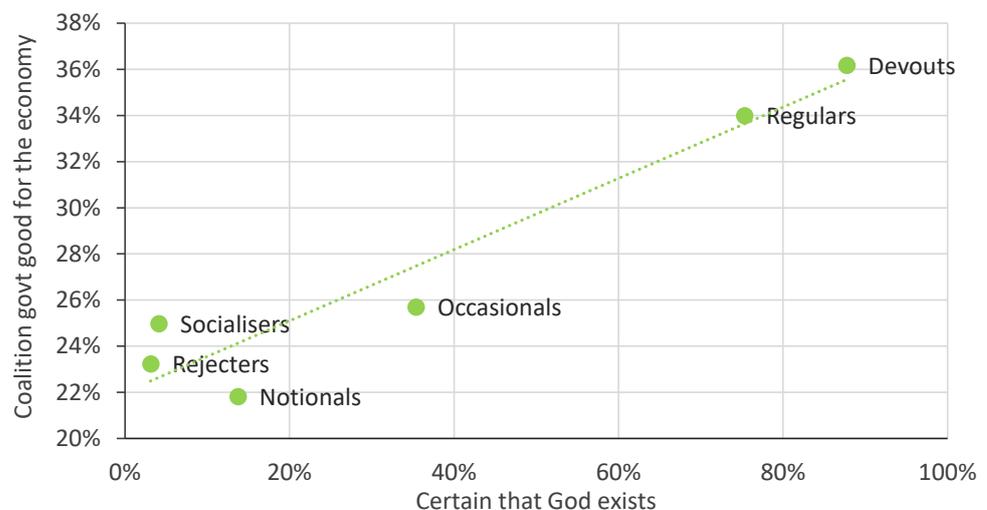


Figure 77: Certainty of God's existence & praising Coalition economics, by ARI6
Source: AES 2019

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

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

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

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

What's not to like?

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

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

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

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

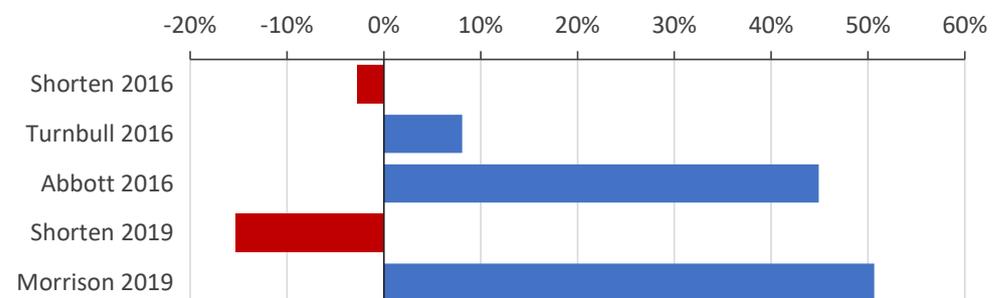


Figure 78: Devouts party leader net likes "premium" by election

Source: AES

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

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

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

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

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

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

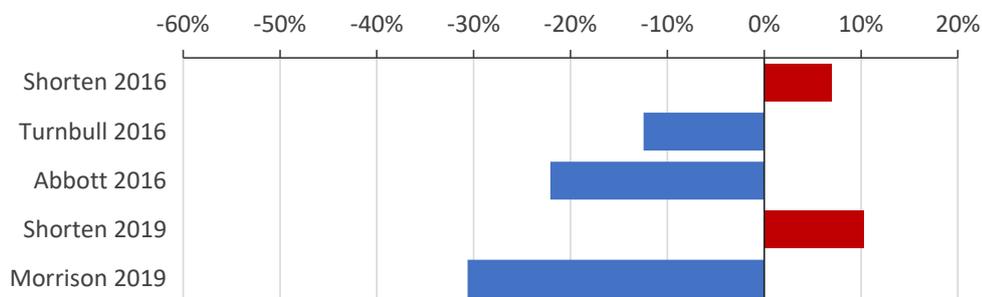


Figure 79: Rejecters party leader net likes “cost” by election
Source: AES

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

Democratic governance and priorities

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

Secular democracy

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

Satisfaction with democratic governance

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

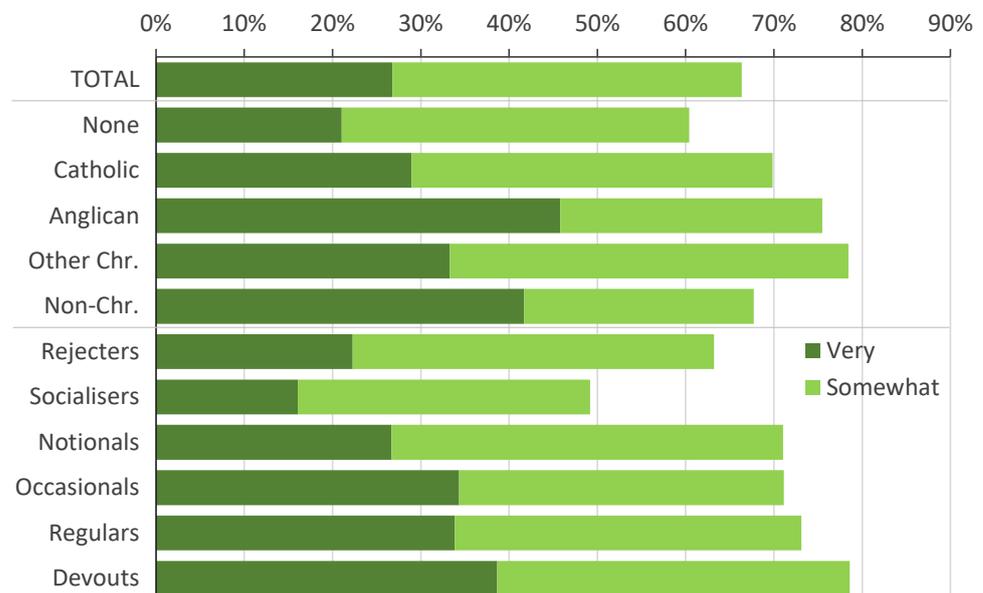


Figure 80: The country is governed democratically, by religion and ARI6
Source: AVS 2018

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

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

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

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

Most Australians reject religious authority over laws

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

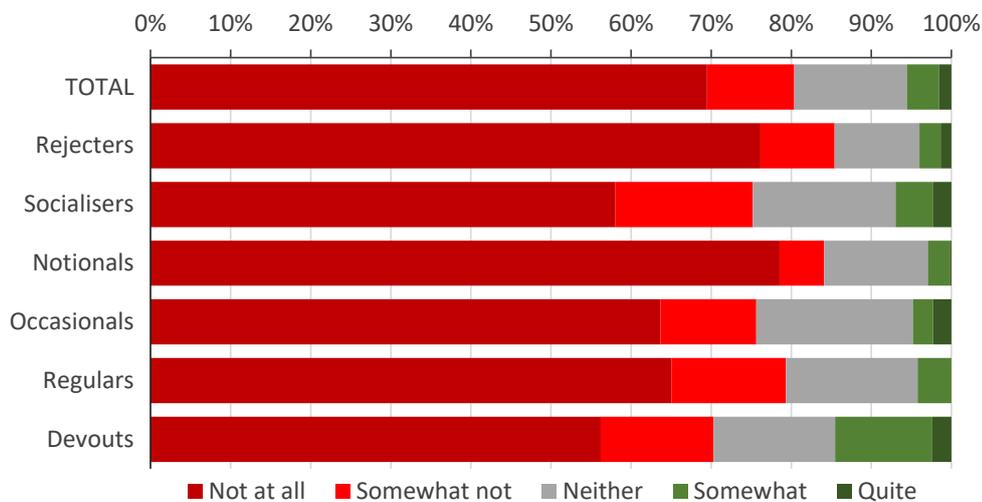


Figure 81: Feature of democracy: Religious authorities ultimately interpret laws
Source: AVS 2018

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

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

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

Top 4 national priorities

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

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

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

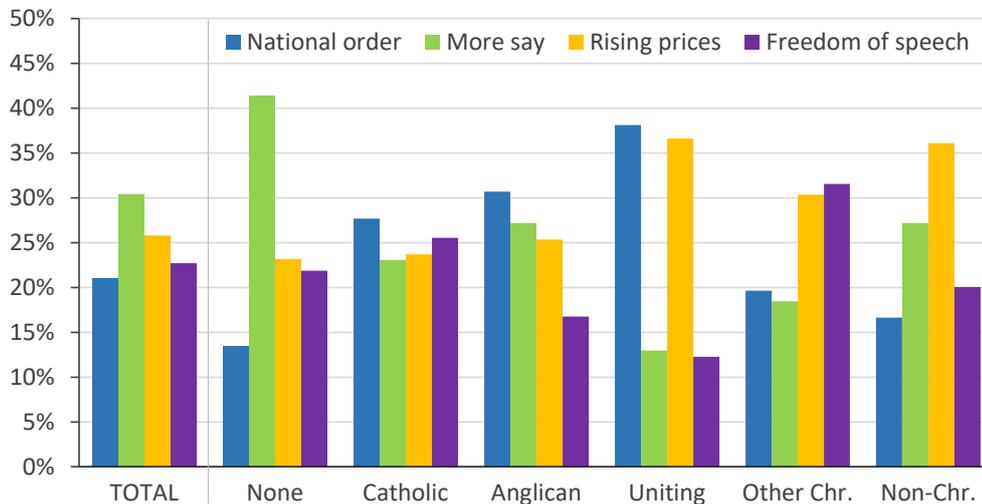


Figure 82: Religion and top national priority of four options

Source: AES 2019

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

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

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

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



Figure 83: ARI6 and top national priority of four options

Source: AES 2019

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

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

Protecting freedom of speech

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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