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Holding together, Just: Wellbeing, Economic Strain, and Democratic Resilience in Australia, March 2026

Professor Nicholas Biddle¹ and Professor Matthew Gray²

1. Head, School of Politics and International Relations, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University
2. Director, POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University

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*Contact: nicholas.biddle@anu.edu.au

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from the March 2026 wave of the ANUpoll, conducted with 3,662 adult Australians between 11 and 26 March 2026, and draws on 28 prior waves stretching back to October 2019. Average life satisfaction has fallen to 6.22 out of 10, the lowest recorded in the series and below levels reached during COVID-19 lockdowns. For the first time, more Australians are dissatisfied with the direction of the country than satisfied, and nearly three-in-five believe life was better fifty years ago. Financial stress is at a record high, and employed Australians' expected probability of job loss has reached 26.8 per cent, statistically indistinguishable from pandemic-era levels, despite an unemployment rate of only 4.3 per cent. Fear of automation has nearly doubled since 2018 and is now a primary driver of employment anxiety. Against this backdrop, satisfaction with democracy has remained broadly stable and principled support for democratic norms is strong. Education emerges as the single most consistent predictor of positive outcomes across the paper. The paper concludes that Australia is not at the point of democratic unravelling, but the economic, security, and institutional pressures documented here establish a long-term time series against which future surveys will need to be read carefully.

Executive summary

This paper reports findings from the March 2026 wave of the ANUpoll, conducted between 11 and 26 March 2026 with 3,662 adult Australians. Data collection took place against a backdrop of considerable domestic and international disruption, including the ongoing war between the US/Israel and Iran, the subsequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and their effects on petrol and other prices. The paper draws on this most recent wave alongside 28 prior ANUpoll waves stretching back to October 2019 to track wellbeing outcomes, economic anxiety, democratic attitudes, and measures of social cohesion.

Wellbeing and outlook

Australia in March 2026 is a country under considerable strain. Average life satisfaction has fallen to 6.22 on a scale of 0 to 10, the lowest recorded in the ANUpoll series and below levels reached during COVID-19 lockdowns. Unlike the lockdown periods, this decline is not a sharp shock from a higher base: life satisfaction was already depressed, making the current reading the culmination of a sustained deterioration rather than a sudden fall. For the first time in the series, more Australians are dissatisfied with the direction of the country than satisfied. Nearly three-in-five Australians think life was better fifty years ago, and a similar proportion expect it to be worse in fifty years' time. The gap between those who think today's children will have worse lives than their own and those who think they will have better ones has widened to 46 percentage points, up from 19 percentage points in 2008.

Financial stress and economic anxiety

Financial stress and labour market anxiety compound this picture. A record 34.9 per cent of Australians are finding it difficult or very difficult on their current income, and the majority have taken at least one significant financial coping action in the past twelve months. Most striking is the level of employment anxiety: employed Australians' expected probability of losing their job has reached 26.8 per cent, statistically indistinguishable from the levels recorded during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020, despite the unemployment rate standing at only 4.3 per cent. Fear of automation is now one of the primary drivers of this anxiety, with the proportion of employed Australians specifically concerned that machines or computer programs will replace their jobs having nearly doubled since 2018, reaching 30.3 per cent in March 2026.

Democratic attitudes and social cohesion

Against this backdrop, the resilience of Australians' democratic attitudes is one of the more striking findings in this paper. Satisfaction with the way democracy works has remained broadly stable, and principled support for democracy has edged upward since May 2025, driven largely by younger cohorts (from a low base). Core democratic values command very strong support: more than nine-in-ten Australians agree that no one should be above the law, and more than eight-in-ten support the media's right to criticise the government. At the same time, democratic support is not without its precarious elements: one-in-three Australians support a strong leader who bends the rules to get things done, and confidence in the Federal Government has reached near-record lows at

32.0 per cent. Australia retains a broad sense of national belonging, with closeness to Australia widely shared across demographic and geographic lines, though a substantial majority of Australians perceive the country as divided on key issues.

Migrant Australians

A consistent and noteworthy finding across the paper concerns Australians born overseas in non-English speaking countries. Despite facing greater economic vulnerability, including an expected probability of job loss running 11.3 percentage points above the Australian-born average and higher levels of concern about automation, this group reports more positive orientations towards Australia on almost every attitudinal measure. They are substantially more satisfied with the direction of the country (59.0 per cent, compared to 44.1 per cent among the Australian-born), have higher levels of confidence in Australian institutions, and report a sense of closeness to Australia that is almost identical to that of the Australian-born (80.4 per cent compared to 80.9 per cent feeling close or very close). Notably, those born in English-speaking countries overseas report lower levels of closeness to Australia than either of these groups. On democratic attitudes, assumptions that migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds hold less favourable views of Australian democratic norms are not supported: across four separate models of democratic attitudes, country of birth was not a statistically significant predictor in a single instance.

Young Australians

A recurring theme across the analysis concerns young Australians. Contrary to widely held narratives, the results do not support the view that younger Australians are disengaged from democracy, intolerant of opposing views, or more anti-feminist than their elders. Those aged 18 to 24 are among the most satisfied with democracy, and are more likely than older Australians to support the right of those with extreme views to speak in public. Young men are less likely than older men to think that policies increasing women's political representation have gone too far. Young Australians also tend to be more optimistic and more satisfied with the direction of the country than those in the middle of the age distribution.

Education

Education is the single most consistent predictor of positive outcomes throughout this paper. Those with a university degree report higher life satisfaction, lower financial stress, greater confidence in institutions, higher satisfaction with democracy, and stronger principled support for democratic norms. Education appears to function not only as a source of economic security but as a buffer against the civic disengagement that often accompanies sustained economic strain.

Concluding comments

The paper concludes that Australia is not at the point of democratic unravelling, but the economic, security, and institutional pressures documented here establish a baseline against which future surveys will need to be read carefully. The question of whether Australia's democratic consensus holds will depend in significant part on whether these pressures are met with responses that Australians judge to be fair, competent, and commensurate with the challenges they face.

1 Introduction and overview

On the 9th of December 2025, the price of a barrel of Brent Crude oil was around US\$62,ⁱ Bondi was known mainly for its beach and lifestyle, and the Supreme Leader of Iran was still the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. At the ANU, we had also just commenced data collection for the December 2025 wave of ANUpoll in partnership with the Online Research Unit (ORU), expecting to collect information on around 3,500 Australians across a range of topics and social/economic outcomes.

Fast forward around three months to the 11th of March 2026 when the ANU and ORU began collection of the subsequent ANUpoll wave, with the same expected sample size, and a broadly similar set of topics. A lot had, however, changed in the interim. Oil on the 11th of March was then at around \$US97 a barrel and increased to well above \$100 a barrel over the subsequent few days, as the war between the US/Israel and Iran that commenced on the 28th of February with the assassination of the Supreme Leader continued. The closing of the Strait of Hormuz had also impacted Australians more directly through the average price of petrol paid at the bowser,ⁱⁱ with an average price in mid-March of AUD\$2.23 per litre, compared to AU\$1.57 the month before.

During data collection of the December 2025 ANUpoll (on the evening of 14 December) a horrific terrorist incident occurred in Australia that would change forever how Bondi is viewed. The shootings, which resulted in the deaths of 15 people (as well as one of the two perpetrators) appear to have been motivated by antisemitism and global ideologies related to conflict in the Middle East. On the 8th of January 2026, the Australian Prime Minister announced the establishment of a Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion, as the country grapples with how to deal with hateful ideologies and a fraying social fabric.

These domestic and international security events are not, however, the only changes occurring in Australia. On Thursday 12th March, a day after collection for the March ANUpoll commenced, Australia's largest IT company Atlassian announced the slashing of around 1,600 jobs internationally (approximately 10 per cent of the workforce), including around 500 Australian workers. These firings were tied explicitly to competition from Artificial Intelligence (AI), seen by many as a harbinger of greater disruption to the labour market to come, potentially focused on white-collar work in Australia.

Data collection for the March 2026 ANUpoll concluded on the 26th of the month. By then, 3,662 adult Australians from the ORU's Australian Consumer Panel (ACP)ⁱⁱⁱ had completed the survey.^{iv} Alongside the December 2025 ANUpoll, there have been eight waves of data collection using the ACP since October 2024, alongside 20 waves of data using the Life in Australia panel^v between October 2019 and January 2024. This provides an unparalleled source of data to track wellbeing outcomes, political attitudes, and measures of social cohesion.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 examines the state of wellbeing in Australia in March 2026, tracking changes in life satisfaction, satisfaction with the direction of the country, financial stress, and confidence in key institutions. It also draws on the pooled ANUpoll dataset spanning 2019 to 2026 to identify the longer-

run demographic and socioeconomic patterns in wellbeing across the COVID and post-COVID period.

Section 3 extends this analysis by examining how Australians reflect on the past and anticipate the future — both for their own lives and for the country as a whole — and constructs a composite optimism index that situates the March 2026 findings within a broader account of Australian hope and pessimism. Section 4 turns to economic anxiety, analysing the disconnect between relatively benign headline economic indicators and a subjective experience of financial strain and labour market risk that is running at levels not seen since the pandemic period, with particular attention to the role of automation in driving employment anxiety.

Section 5 examines views towards democracy, distinguishing between satisfaction with the way democracy is being delivered and principled support for democracy as a system of government, and situates Australia's democratic attitudes within the wider context of the war between the US/Israel and Iran and its implications for how Australians assess their own government's performance. Section 6 examines Australia's social consensus: Australians' sense of closeness to their country, their perceptions of whether the country is united or divided, and the attitudinal predictors of democratic satisfaction. Section 7 presents key findings and implications.

2 Wellbeing

Box 1 – Key findings on wellbeing

- Average life satisfaction fell to 6.22 out of 10 in March 2026 — the lowest recorded in the ANUpoll series dating back to October 2019, and below levels reached during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- The 3.7 per cent decline from December 2025 is comparable in magnitude to the drops recorded at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic — the difference is that satisfaction was already depressed going into this period.
- In income-equivalent terms, the drop in life satisfaction between December 2025 and March 2026 is worth approximately \$33,000 in annual household income.
- For the first time since the start of the ANUpoll series, more Australians are dissatisfied with the direction of the country (54.0 per cent) than satisfied (46.0 per cent).
- Financial stress is at a record high: 34.9 per cent of Australians are finding it difficult or very difficult on their current income.
- Specific financial coping actions remain elevated but are not significantly above their January 2024 peaks — Australians are feeling stressed but have not yet substantially changed behaviour.
- Confidence in the Federal Government has fallen to 32.0 per cent — near its lowest point in the series — while the Australian Defence Force, police, and hospitals retain strong public confidence.
- Over the long term, wellbeing is markedly lower for males, those without a degree, those aged 25 to 54, and those outside inner-metropolitan areas.

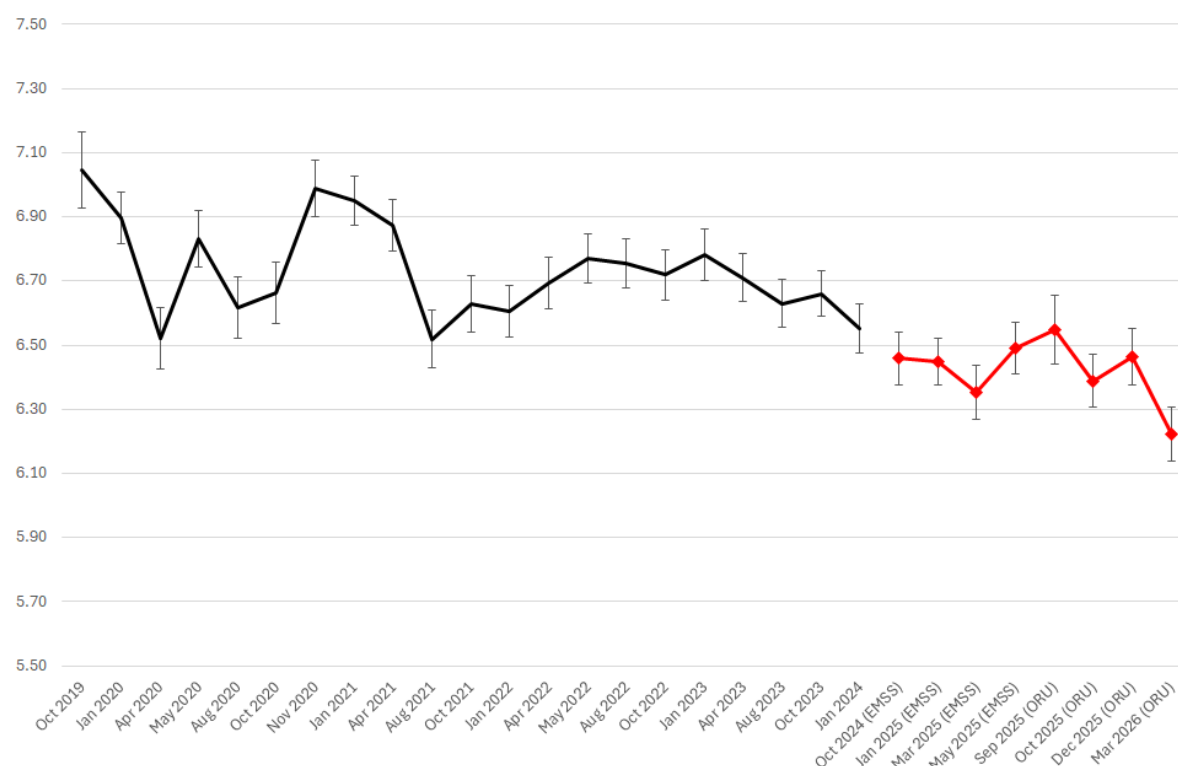
2.1 Life satisfaction

Between December 2025 and March 2026, Australia experienced the largest drop in wellbeing since the COVID-19 lockdowns. Average life satisfaction in March 2026 was lower than at any point since October 2019 when ANUpoll first included this question.

One of the first questions asked in the March 2026 ANUpoll, and in each of the 28 conducted since 2019, assesses overall life satisfaction. Respondents are asked *‘The following question asks how satisfied you feel about life in general, on a scale from 0 to 10. Zero means you feel ‘not at all satisfied’ and 10 means ‘completely satisfied’. Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?’*

In March 2026, the average value for Australians was 6.22 on a scale of 0 to 10 (Figure 1). This is a decline of 3.7 per cent since December 2025.

To place this recent decline in perspective, the fall in average life satisfaction between January and April 2020 when almost all of Australia went into lockdown was 5.4 per cent. A similar decline of 5.2 per cent occurred between April and August 2021, during lockdowns across much of the Australian East Coast. The most recent drop is only a little smaller than these earlier declines.

Figure 1 Average life satisfaction, October 2019 – March 2026, Australia (0-10 scale)

Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

One challenge in interpreting changes in life satisfaction is that, at the population level, the measure typically fluctuates within a relatively narrow band. Over the period October 2019 to March 2026, there were only six occasions in which the change between successive ANUpoll waves was statistically significant. Most of these statistically significant changes occurred either as Australia entered or emerged from COVID-19 induced lockdowns. These changes can be translated into more intuitive terms though by expressing them as income equivalents. This is done using a compensating differentials approach, following the methodology outlined by Blanchflower and Oswald (2004).

To do this, we estimate a simple relationship between household income and life satisfaction using the December 2025 ANUpoll (that is, before the most recent sharp decline, when life satisfaction was a bit more stable).^{vi} Based on this model, the predicted income required to attain the higher life satisfaction level observed in December 2025 (6.46) was around \$81,000. The annual household income that equates to having the March 2026 average life satisfaction of 6.22 (according to the December 2025 model) is around \$48,000. Interpreted through this income-life satisfaction relationship, the decline in life satisfaction over the three-month period is therefore equivalent to a reduction in household income in the order of \$31,000. While this amount should not be interpreted literally it does highlight how substantial the drop in average life satisfaction has been.

Although income is an important predictor of life satisfaction – with higher income associated with higher life satisfaction – it isn’t the only factor that matters. This is illustrated by the regression analysis, summarised in Table 1. Regression analysis allows us to identify which variables have an independent association with a particular outcome, attitude, or behaviour, while holding other factors constant.

In this analysis, life satisfaction is the dependent variable, while income and other socio-demographic variables are included as explanatory (independent) variables. The relationship between these variables is estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS). The coefficients reported in Table 1 are interpreted as the predicted change in life satisfaction associated with each characteristic, relative to the base (omitted) category, holding all other variables constant. The first model in this (and subsequent) tables does not include income as an explanatory variable. The second model includes the income quintile that a person’s household was in.

The results confirm that individuals with higher income tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction. Controlling for income, we find the highest level of life satisfaction for older Australians (aged 55 years and over), and to a lesser extent younger Australians (aged 18 to 24). This somewhat complicates the narrative presented in the *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al. 2026), which highlights a recent deterioration in wellbeing among younger populations globally, a point we will return to later in this section. However, this pattern found in the ANUpoll data is consistent with the long-standing finding that life satisfaction follows a U-shaped pattern over the life course (Blanchflower and Oswald 2008), with subjective wellbeing relatively high at both the beginning and end of adulthood. Despite the challenges of being young in the modern Australian society and economy, the U-shaped pattern persists.

There are no statistically significant differences in life satisfaction by sex, migrant status, or region; however, education shows a strong association. Average life satisfaction among those with a university degree was 6.44, compared to 6.13 for those without a degree. Higher education, and the high social status and income stability that typically accompany it, appears to insulate people from external economic factors. In this sense, those with a degree may be living in a “pre-war” world, less exposed to the uncertainty generated by recent macroeconomic shocks. For those without this buffer, by contrast, financial insecurity and economic volatility are likely to be experienced more directly and to have a more pronounced negative effect on subjective wellbeing.

Table 1 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with life satisfaction, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-0.783	***
			-0.414	**
			0.343	**
			0.834	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.250	*	0.550	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.056		0.195	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.003		0.017	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.175		0.398	**
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.991	***	1.479	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.339	***	1.760	***
Female	0.046		0.113	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.196		-0.165	
Has a degree	0.401	***	0.241	**
Born overseas – English speaking country	0.144		0.055	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.032		0.157	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.109		-0.094	
Employed	0.363	***	0.047	
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.097		-0.082	
Provincial Electorate	-0.167		-0.102	
Rural Electorate	-0.078		-0.001	
Constant	5.645	***	5.633	***
Number of respondents	3,449		3,015	

Notes: Linear regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

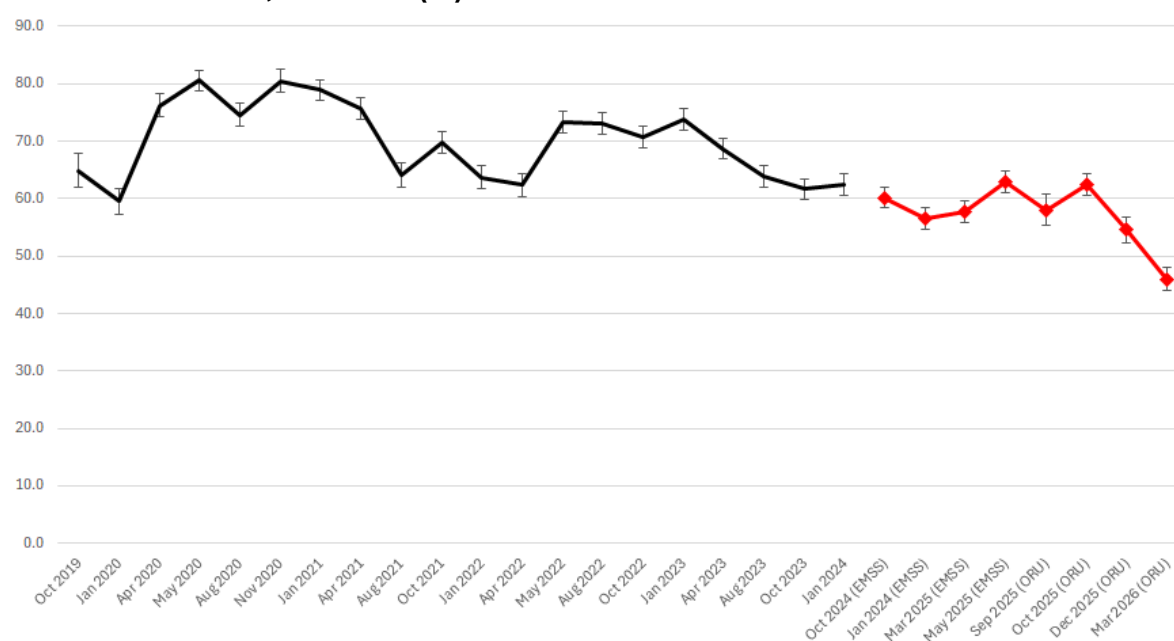
Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

2.2 Satisfaction with the direction of the country

Australians are far more pessimistic about their own lives than at any point since the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, they are even more pessimistic about the country as a whole. As shown in Figure 2, for the first time across more than six years of data collection, Australians are more likely to say that they are not very or not at all satisfied with the direction of the country (54.0 per cent) than they are to say that they are very or fairly satisfied (46.0 per cent).

Figure 2 Satisfied or very satisfied with the direction of the country, October 2019 – March 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

To understand who is, and isn't satisfied with the direction of the country, we estimate a regression model similar to that presented in Table 1, but with satisfaction with the direction of the country, measured on a four-category scale, as the dependent variable. Because this outcome is categorical rather than continuous, the model is estimated using an ordered probit model. In contrast to individual life satisfaction, there is no relationship between income and views about the direction of the country. The proportion of respondents in the bottom two income quintiles who are satisfied or very satisfied with the direction of the country is 43.2 per cent which compares to 43.7 per cent amongst respondents in the top income quintile.

Young Australians are the most satisfied with the direction of the country. This result holds both in the regression model and in the raw percentages. Among those aged 18 to 34, 52.7 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied, almost 10 percentage points higher than among the rest of the population (43.1 per cent).

Substantial differences are also evident by education, migration status, employment, and region of usual residence. Amongst those with a university degree, 55.3 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the direction of the country, compared to 41.7 per cent of those without a degree. The biggest difference by geography is between those that live in an inner metropolitan electorate (51.8 per cent satisfied/very satisfied) and those that live in the rest of the country (43.5 per cent).

Those born overseas in an English-speaking country are no more or less likely to be satisfied or very satisfied than those born in Australia (a combined average of 44.1 per cent). However, those who were born overseas in a non-English speaking country were far more satisfied (59.0 per cent). This is the first taste of a consistent finding across this

paper. Those born overseas in countries that are most different from Australia, often express views that are more positive towards the country and its norms.

Table 2 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with satisfaction with the direction of the country, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-0.196	**
			-0.162	**
			-0.045	
			-0.073	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.198	***	0.222	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.103		0.101	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.151	**	-0.154	*
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.169	*	-0.166	*
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.025		0.056	
Aged 75 years plus	0.093		0.119	
Female	0.006		0.003	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.016		-0.003	
Has a degree	0.253	***	0.225	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	0.143	*	0.119	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.294	***	0.327	***
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.090		-0.082	
Employed	-0.121	**	-0.171	***
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.120	**	-0.123	**
Provincial Electorate	-0.179	**	-0.163	**
Rural Electorate	-0.087		-0.093	
Cut-point 1	-0.986		-1.095	
Cut-point 2	0.066		-0.059	
Cut-point 3	1.382		1.238	
Number of respondents	3,289		2,887	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

2.3 Financial stress

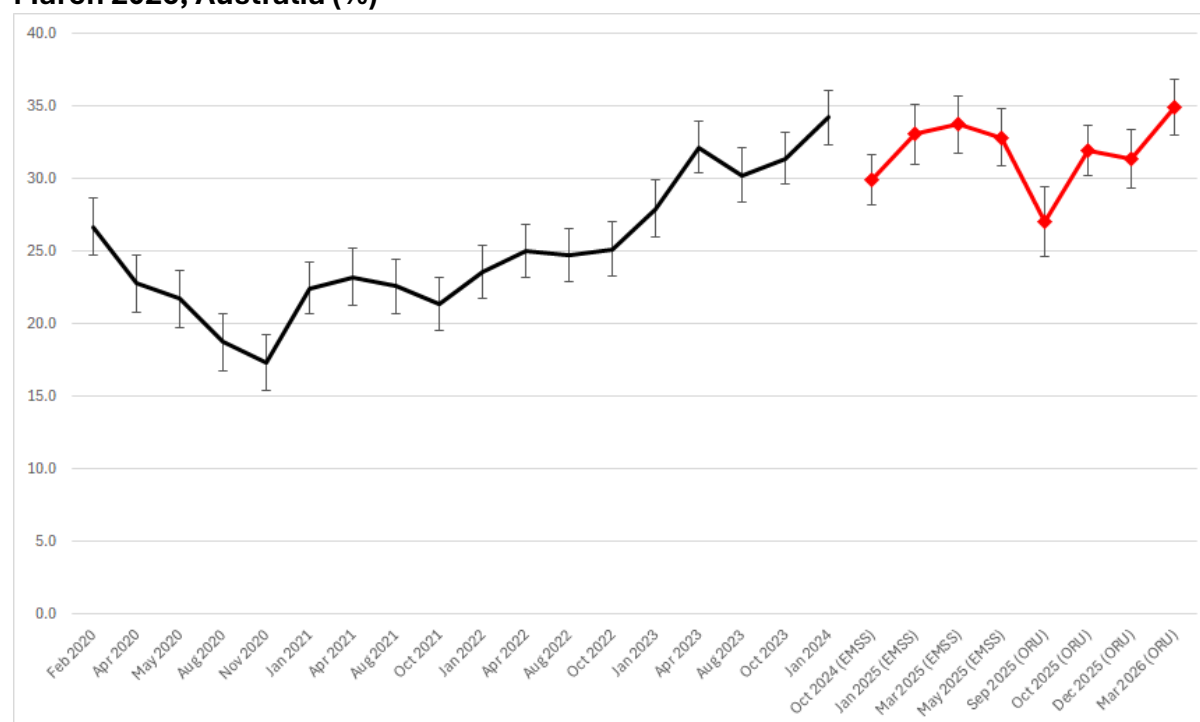
One important way in which income contributes to higher life satisfaction is by reducing the likelihood and severity of financial stress. In ANUpoll surveys conducted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents have been asked: *‘Which of the following descriptions comes closest to how you feel about your household’s income nowadays?’*

In March 2026, 20.6 per cent of Australians said they were living comfortably on their present income, while a further 44.5 per cent said they were coping on their present income, making this the largest single group. The remaining 34.9 per cent of Australians were experiencing financial stress by this measure, including 23.2 per cent who reported finding it difficult and a further 11.8 per cent who reported finding it very difficult on present income.

As shown in Figure 3, the prevalence of financial stress in March 2026 was slightly higher than in December 2025 (31.4 per cent). Indeed, while the 95 per cent confidence intervals overlap with some other periods, the proportion of Australians reporting finding

it difficult living on their present income in March 2026 is nonetheless at its highest over the period since February 2020.

Figure 3 Finding it difficult or very difficult on present income, February 2020 – March 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

Although the questions are not asked every wave, more detailed measures of financial stress have been included in the ANUpoll at regular intervals since April 2020, including in March 2026. Table 3 reports the percentage of respondents who reported taking each action in the 12 months prior to the relevant surveys.

The most common action was spending less on groceries and essential items. In the 12 months leading up to the March 2026 survey, 57.3 per cent of Australians reported doing so. While this remains high, it is slightly lower than the 62.3 per cent who reported this behaviour in the 12 months prior to the January 2024 survey. More than half of Australians (51.0 per cent) also reported postponing major purchases in the 12 months prior to the March 2026 survey, and nearly half (46.1 per cent) said that they cut back on non-essential services.

Table 3 Negative financial actions taken in the 12 months preceding the survey, April 2020 – March 2026

	April 2020	January 2021	January 2022	January 2023	August 2023	January 2024	January 2025	March 2026
	%							
Postponed major purchases	48.0	44.6	46.7	49.6	54.0	56.8	49.9	51.0
Borrowed money from friends or relatives	10.2	16.5	15.2	16.8	19.6	20.5	16.6	17.5
Received government assistance	24.1	37.6	32.7	26.7	25.6	25.2	21.2	23.2
Fallen behind paying bills	13.1	16.6	14.8	16.5	18.9	21.2	15.3	16.5
Spent less on groceries and essential items	41.3	42.2	42.8	51.6	57.3	62.3	57.0	57.3
Re-negotiated mortgage or rental payments to pay less	8.9	12.2	11.0	12.5	14.4	13.4	11.5	12.0
Re-negotiated other bills	10.3	14.0	14.6	16.2	21.5	22.0	18.4	20.0
Cut back on non-essential services	48.0	38.5	39.7	41.2	47.4	52.1	47.4	46.1
Drawn on savings for retirement	12.9	17.9	18.5	18.5	19.6	20.4	19.7	21.0
Accessed your superannuation early	4.3	13.3	10.2	5.9	6.8	6.8	6.5	7.3
Average number of actions (excluding gov't assistance)	1.97	2.16	2.14	2.29	2.59	2.75	2.43	2.48

Source: ANUpoll

People who reported undertaking at least one negative financial action also tend to report undertaking others. Correlations across the different actions are generally positive, and factor analysis indicates that all actions load heavily and positively on the first factor, which has an eigenvalue of 2.46 (compared to 0.50 for the second factor). This suggests that the cumulative number of actions provides a good summary measure of overall financial stress. The last line of the table gives the average number of financial actions taken in the previous 12 months, not including receiving government assistance (which is not necessarily a sign of hardship, and not as strongly correlated with the other actions).

Using this cumulative index, the average number of negative financial actions undertaken in the previous 12 months was 2.48. Only 24.8 per cent of respondents reported undertaking no actions, while 18.5 per cent reported undertaking five or more. The peak total average number of actions was reported in January 2024 (2.75). There has been a slight decline in the two years since, but Australians are still taking more negative financial actions in March 2026 than they were during the early part of the 2020s.

Table 4 examines the factors associated with the number of negative financial actions taken in the previous 12 months. As this measure is a count variable, the relationships are estimated using negative binomial regression.

The age group reporting the highest number of negative financial actions was those aged 25 to 34, with an average of 3.12 actions in the previous 12 months. This compares with 2.92 actions among those aged 18 to 24 and 2.69 among those aged 35 to 44. The prevalence of negative financial actions then declines steadily across the older age groups, reaching a low of 1.62 actions on average for those aged 75 and over.

Females reported a greater number of negative financial actions than males (2.63 compared to 2.31). Higher levels of financial stress were also observed among those with low and those with relatively high levels of education. Respondents who spoke a language other than English reported a greater number of negative financial actions than those who spoke English only. Geographically, respondents living in provincial electorates (mostly regional electorates, as classified by the Australian Electoral Commission) reported the highest average number of negative financial actions (2.70), while those in other geographic areas reported broadly similar levels.

Table 4 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with number of negative financial actions, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-1.252	***
			-0.339	
			0.110	
			0.761	*
Aged 18 to 24 years	3.446	***	4.017	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.985	**	1.234	**
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.037		0.145	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.470		-0.076	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.602		1.394	**
Aged 75 years plus	0.386		0.879	
Female	-1.028	***	-1.053	***
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.628		-0.886	*
Has a degree	1.790	***	1.632	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	0.428		0.403	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.607		0.994	*
Speaks a language other than English at home	1.230	***	0.841	*
Employed	-0.467		-0.849	**
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.592	*	-0.738	**
Provincial Electorate	-1.297	***	-1.318	***
Rural Electorate	-0.661	*	-0.645	
Constant	19.618	***	19.846	***
Number of respondents	3,458		3,017	

Notes: Negative binomial regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

2.4 Confidence in institutions

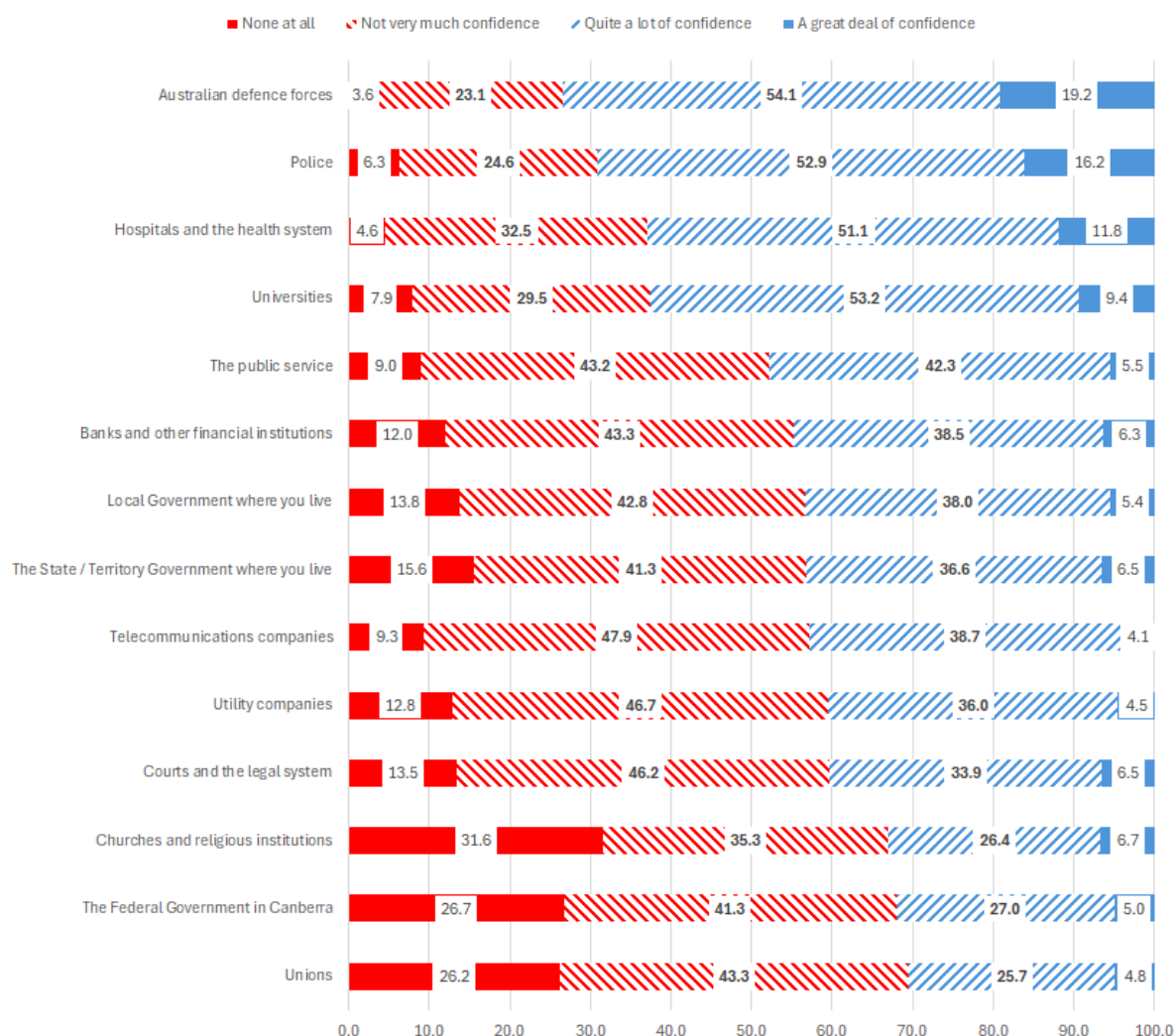
The wellbeing of Australians is closely linked to the confidence that they have in Australian institutions, with causality likely to run in both directions (Norris 1999). Well-functioning institutions directly improve the population's social and economic circumstances, thereby inspiring confidence. Conversely, low levels of confidence in institutions are likely to increase feelings of insecurity and vulnerability to negative external shocks.

Every wave of ANUpoll since just before the COVID-19 pandemic has asked respondents about their level of confidence in key institutions, with response options being a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence, and none at all. In March 2026, respondents were asked about a broad set of institutions. Figure 4 shows the ranking of these 14 institutions from those in which Australians express the highest confidence to those in which confidence is lowest.

Many institutions continue to inspire confidence amongst Australians. The Australian Defence Force attracted the highest levels of confidence, with 73.3 per cent of respondents reporting quite a lot or a great deal of confidence. This was followed by the police (69.1 per cent), hospitals and the health system (62.9 per cent) and universities (62.6 per cent), all of which recorded high to moderate levels of confidence. Australians

were more evenly divided in their views of the public service, with 47.8 per cent expressing confidence. Confidence was considerably lower for the remaining nine institutions asked about in the survey.

Figure 4 Level of confidence in key institutions, March 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

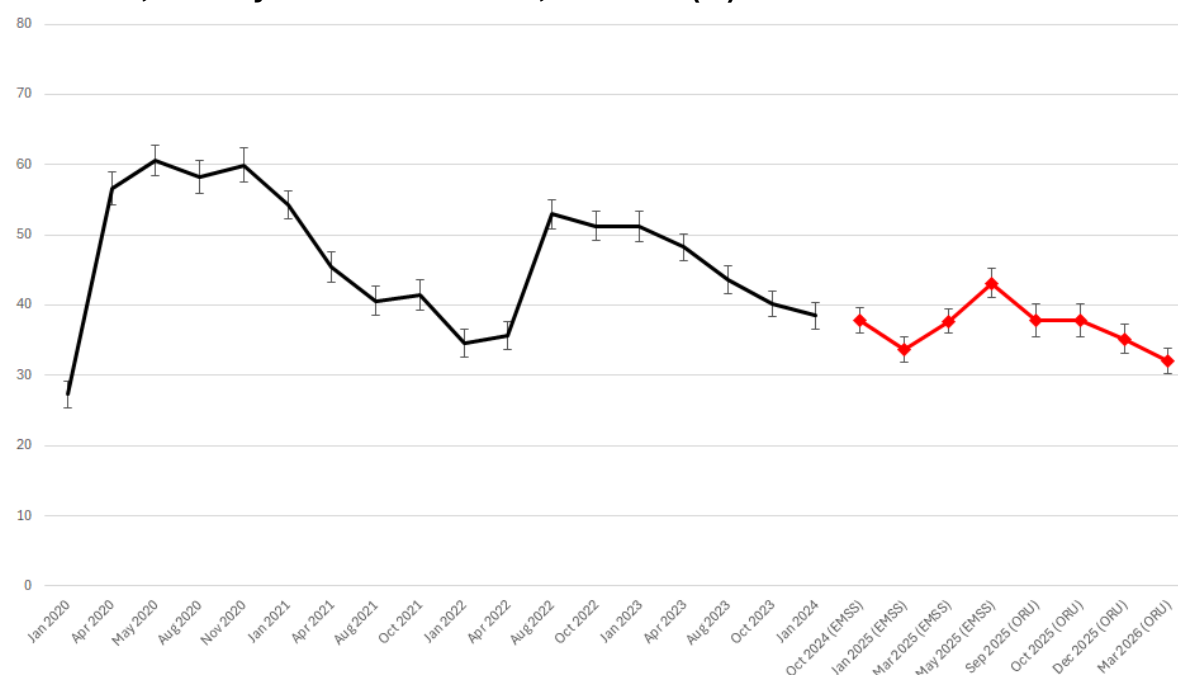
Apart from unions, the institution with the lowest level of confidence in March 2026 is the Federal Government in Canberra. Only 5.0 per cent of Australians reported having a great deal of confidence in their national government, with a further 27.0 per cent having quite a lot of confidence. Taken together, fewer than one-third of Australians report having relatively high confidence. The most common response was to have not very much confidence, reported by 41.3 per cent of respondents, while a further 26.7 per cent reported having no confidence at all.

Confidence in the Federal Government has been tracked in the ANUpoll since prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 5). With the exception of the Black Summer Bushfires in January 2020 and the final months of the Morrison Government, confidence has never been as low as in March 2026. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, confidence in the Morrison Government rose sharply, peaking at around 60 per cent. Following the 2022 federal election, confidence increased again to above 50 per cent,

before declining steadily in the lead up to and the aftermath of the unsuccessful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament Referendum.

There was a more modest increase in confidence following the May 2025 election, rising from 37.8 to 43.1 per cent, but confidence in the Albanese Government has since declined steadily. In March 2026, the combined share of Australians reporting quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the Federal Government has fallen to 32.0 per cent.

Figure 5 Quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra, January 2020 – March 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

To help understand who in Australia has the greatest confidence in a broad set of institutions, we calculate an additive index across the fourteen institutions from Figure 4. The minimum value is 14 (no confidence at all in all the institutions) to 48 (a great deal of confidence in all). The average value across the population is 33.9.

Analysing the factors associated with this index (Table 5) we can see that income does not have a strong correlation, apart from the very lowest income quintile having the lowest level of confidence. Younger and older Australians have a greater level of confidence than those in the middle part of the age distribution, whereas females have a lower level of confidence. Education is again important (those with a degree have higher levels of confidence). Again, those born overseas in a non-English speaking country look more favourably on Australian institutions than those born in Australia, or those born in an English-speaking country. Finally, those outside of inner-metropolitan electorates have the lowest level of confidence.

Table 5 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with average confidence in institutions, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-0.982	**
			-0.642	
			-0.142	
			0.199	
Aged 18 to 24 years	3.040	***	3.385	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	1.486	***	1.481	***
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.265		0.389	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.281		0.663	
Aged 65 to 74 years	1.195	*	1.832	***
Aged 75 years plus	2.412	***	2.667	***
Female	-0.497	*	-0.596	**
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.364		-0.480	
Has a degree	1.550	***	1.424	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	-0.040		-0.246	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	1.246	***	1.651	***
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.301		0.083	
Employed	-0.635		-0.888	**
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-1.053	***	-1.041	***
Provincial Electorate	-1.572	***	-1.501	***
Rural Electorate	-1.572	***	-1.342	***
Constant	33.855	***	34.263	***
Number of respondents	3,455		3,017	

Notes: Linear regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

2.5 Long-term patterns in wellbeing – The kids are alright, but older Australians doing best.

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 5 describe long-term patterns in measures of wellbeing since just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic through to March 2026. Earlier in this paper, we also presented descriptive evidence on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics associated with several of these outcomes. In this final section on wellbeing, we bring these two strands together by examining the factors associated with wellbeing outcomes over the entire period of January 2020 to March 2026.

Not all the questions analysed earlier in this section are asked in every survey wave. However, when combined, the data comprise 82,760 responses collected across 23 survey waves. Because some ANUpoll waves form part of nested longitudinal studies, not all observations are from unique individuals. In total, the data sets included 30,395 unique individuals, with 19,839 respondents having completed only one survey, and the remainder having completed two or more.

The analysis summarised in Table 6 examines the extent to which a set of demographic characteristics and socioeconomic factors are associated with four key outcomes. These

outcomes are life satisfaction (measured on a 0 to 10 scale) and three binary indicators: satisfaction with the direction of the country, finding it difficult on current income, and confident in the Federal Government. All explanatory variables are measured contemporaneously with each survey wave, and indicator variables for the survey wave are included to account for time-specific effects. Standard errors are adjusted to take into account clustering at the individual level.

Looking across the four regression analyses, several clear patterns emerge. Some of these complicate simple narratives about who fared well, and who fared poorly, during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic period. For example, with the exception of confidence in the Federal Government, females tend to have higher levels of wellbeing than males across the outcomes examined. Employment is also associated with higher wellbeing, even after controlling for age, education, and geographic location.

There are pronounced age differences across the wellbeing measures. Life satisfaction is lowest among those aged 25 to 54. Younger Australians have slightly higher levels of life satisfaction, while the highest levels are among those aged 55 years and over, particularly those aged 65 years and above. Satisfaction with the direction of the country follows a broadly similar pattern, though there is an even sharper age profile, with those aged 55 to 64 years having the lowest level of satisfaction with the direction of the country.

Financial stress has an inverted U-shape relationship with age. The age group with the highest proportion reporting that they find it difficult or very difficult on their current income is those aged 35 to 44. This pattern mirrors findings from other datasets, reflecting relatively lower financial obligations among younger cohorts and higher incomes and wealth among older cohorts. Individuals in this age group also have relatively low levels of confidence in government, although the lowest confidence in government is among those aged 25 to 34.

Taken together, the results suggest that it is those in the middle of the age distribution who have lower levels of wellbeing. The youngest age cohort (aged 18 to 24) generally report positive outcomes, while Australians aged 65 years and over tend to have substantially higher levels of wellbeing.

One of the strongest predictors of wellbeing is a person's level of education. Those with a university degree have higher levels of life satisfaction, satisfaction with the direction of the country, and confidence in the Federal Government, as well as lower levels of financial stress compared to those without a degree. Although the differences are smaller, those that have not completed Year 12 also have lower wellbeing than those that have completed Year 12 but do not have a degree.

The differences by education are perhaps unsurprising. It is arguably more notable that those born overseas have higher levels of wellbeing than those born in Australia. Patterns by language spoken at home are slightly more complicated. Respondents who speak a language other than English at home report higher satisfaction with the direction of the country and confidence in government, but also experience higher levels of financial stress. Geographic differences are similarly complex. Those living outside of capital cities report higher levels of life satisfaction on average, but also have higher levels of financial stress and lower levels of confidence in government than their counterparts in capital cities.

Table 6 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with measures of wellbeing, January 2020 to March 2026

Explanatory variables	Life satisfaction		Satisfaction with direction of country		Financial stress		Confident in government	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.101		0.081	*	-0.273	***	0.105	**
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.011		0.028		-0.073	*	-0.038	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.044		-0.035		-0.109	***	0.123	***
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.398	***	-0.041		-0.322	***	0.122	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	1.029	***	0.110	***	-0.606	***	0.276	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.381	***	0.103	**	-0.834	***	0.246	***
Female	0.066	*	0.056	***	0.094	***	-0.014	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.265	***	-0.074	**	0.084	**	-0.163	***
Has a degree	0.313	***	0.106	***	-0.340	***	0.179	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	0.147	***	0.168	***	-0.158	***	0.073	**
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.062		0.231	***	0.008		0.197	***
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.010		0.081	**	0.139	***	0.061	*
Employed	0.474	***	0.092	***	-0.414	***	0.012	
Lives outside of a capital city	0.060	*	-0.019		0.055	**	-0.056	***
Constant	6.154	***	0.031		-0.133	***	-0.796	***
Number of observations	79,576		79,015		79,576		78,610	
Number of respondents	28,876		28,315		28,753		28,054	

Notes: Linear regression model (life satisfaction) or Binary Probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in a capital city.

Month of interview is included as a dummy variable in the model, but not reported in the table

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

3 Optimism and reflection on life and the country

Box 2 – How Australians view their life now, compared to the past and the future

- Almost three-in-five Australians (59.1 per cent) believe life has worsened over the last 50 years, while only 15.3 per cent believe has improved. This is a sharp reversal from as recently as January 2023, when nearly half of Australians (48.5 per cent) thought it had improved.
- Looking ahead, pessimism about the long-term future closely mirrors views of the past. 58.5 per cent of Australians think life will be worse in 50 years' time, compared with only 21.3 per cent who anticipate improvement.
- Australians are deeply pessimistic about the prospects of the next generation: 65.0 per cent believe today's children will have worse lives than their own, compared with just 19.0 per cent who think they will be better off. The resulting gap has widened dramatically, from 18.6 percentage points in 2008 to 46.1 percentage points in 2026.
- In the short term, nearly twice as many Australians think their life has worsened since the start of 2025 (40.0 per cent) as think it has improved (21.4 per cent)
- For the first time since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australians expect the year ahead to deteriorate rather than improve. 39.2 per cent anticipate things getting worse over the next 12 months, compared with 25.4 per cent who expect improvement.
- Pessimism about the economy is particularly stark. Only 6.5 per cent of Australians believe the economy has improved since the start of 2025, compared with 76.5 per cent who think it has worsened - a 70.0 percentage point gap, up substantially from 44.8 percentage points in 2025 and 55.2 percentage points in January 2023
- Taken together, these retrospective and prospective views form a coherent and consistent picture. On a composite optimism index ranging from 8 (most pessimistic) to 40 (most optimistic), the average Australian scores 19.6, well below the neutral midpoint of 24.
- Despite this overall pessimism, outlooks vary systematically across the population. Younger Australians, particularly those aged 18–24, are considerably more optimistic than those aged 35 years and over, as are those with a university degree, those born overseas, and those speaking a language other than English at home.

A core wellbeing measure used in ANUpoll is life satisfaction. While this captures overall views of life, it does not involve comparisons with specific time periods. To provide greater insight, since 2020 we have annually asked a set of questions on how people perceive their own lives, and life in Australia, relative to the recent and more distant past and future. These questions are usually included in the January/February surveys and are identical to those used in the March 2026 survey.

3.1 Life in Australia in general, over the long term

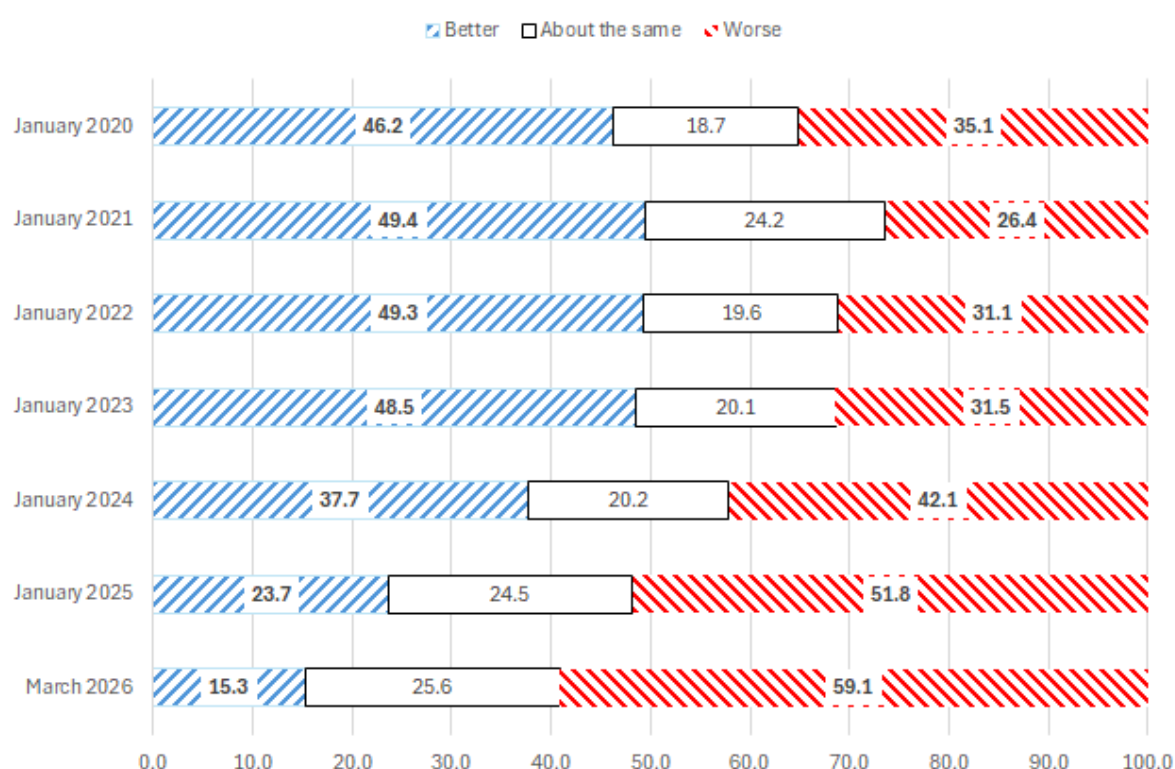
To capture the longest-term perspective, respondents were asked two questions. The first asks about how life in Australia compares to what it was like 50 years ago ('In general, would you say life in Australia is better, worse, or about the same as it was 50 years ago for people like you?') The second question asks about what they think life in Australia will be like in 50-years' time compared to what it is like now ('In general, would you say life in

Australia will be better, worse, or about the same in 50 years as it is now for people like you?').

Almost three-in-five Australians (59.1 per cent) believe that life has gotten worse in the last 50 years (that is, since 1976). A further one-quarter (25.6 per cent) think that life is about the same, while only 15.3 per cent of Australians think that life has improved. Although there is a well-documented tendency for people to view the past more positively and to be more pessimistic about the future than objective indicators would suggest (Duffy 2018, Pinker 2018, Gifford et al 2009), the data presented in Figure 6 shows that Australians were not always so negative, including in the very recent past.

As recently as January 2023, a larger share of Australians believed that life had improved over the past 50 years (48.5 per cent) than believed it had worsened (31.5 per cent). This pattern had remained relatively stable since just prior to the pandemic in January 2020. However, from January 2024 onwards, perceptions shifted markedly, with Australians becoming more likely to view long-term change negatively than positively; a trend that has accelerated over the last fourteen months.

Figure 6 Long term retrospective on life in Australia (perceived changes in the last 50 years), January 2020 to March 2026, Australia (%)

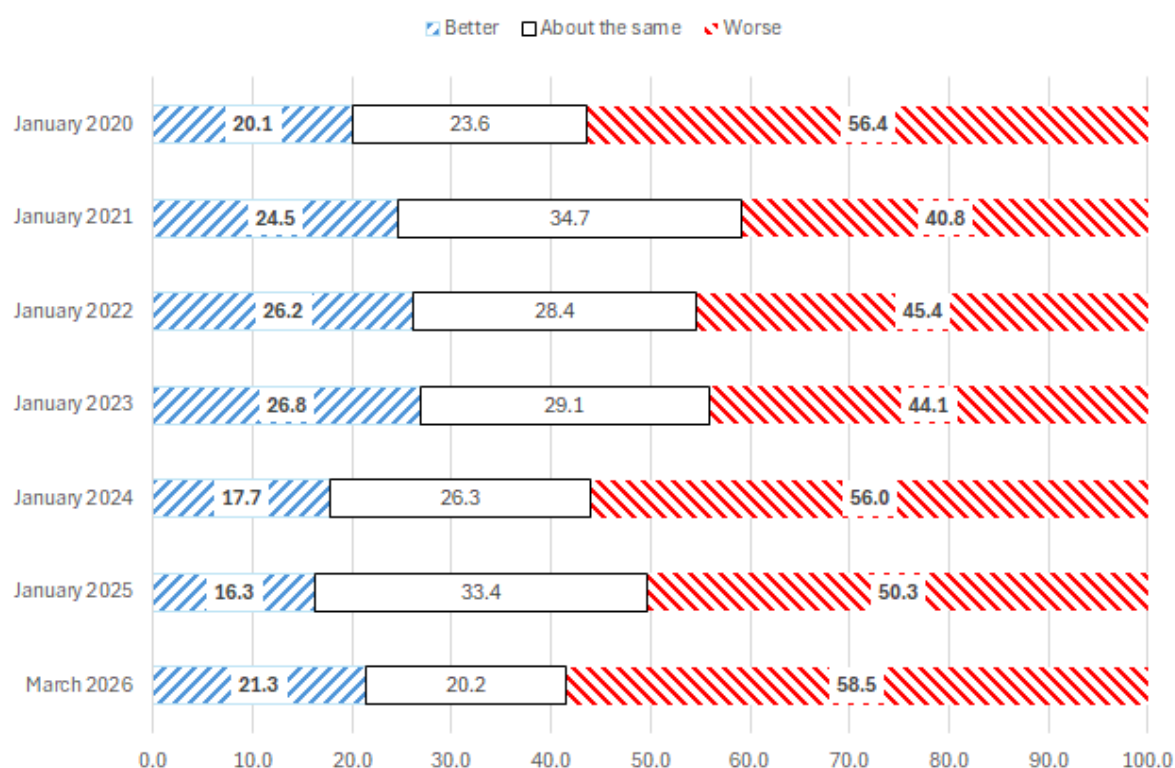


Source: ANUpoll

Australians also tend to believe that the quality of life will continue to deteriorate over the next 50 years (Figure 7). Around 58.5 per cent think that life will be worse in 50 years' time, compared to only 21.3 per cent that think it will be better. This relativity has been a bit more consistent over the last six years. Indeed, the distribution of responses in March 2026 is strikingly very similar to the January 2020 data. However, the biggest drop over that period is the proportion of Australians sitting-on-the-fence. As recently as January

2025, around one-third of Australians (33.4 per cent) thought that life would be neither better nor worse. In our most recent data, this had dropped to only 20.2 per cent.

Figure 7 Long term predictions of life in Australia (perceived changes in the next 50 years), January 2020 – March 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

A subsequent question examines respondents' long-term expectations for future generations: 'Compared with your life, do you think that the lives of today's children will be ... ?' This question was first asked in an ANUpoll in March 2008 and has been asked a number of times since, allowing analysis of changes in outlook over an extended period.

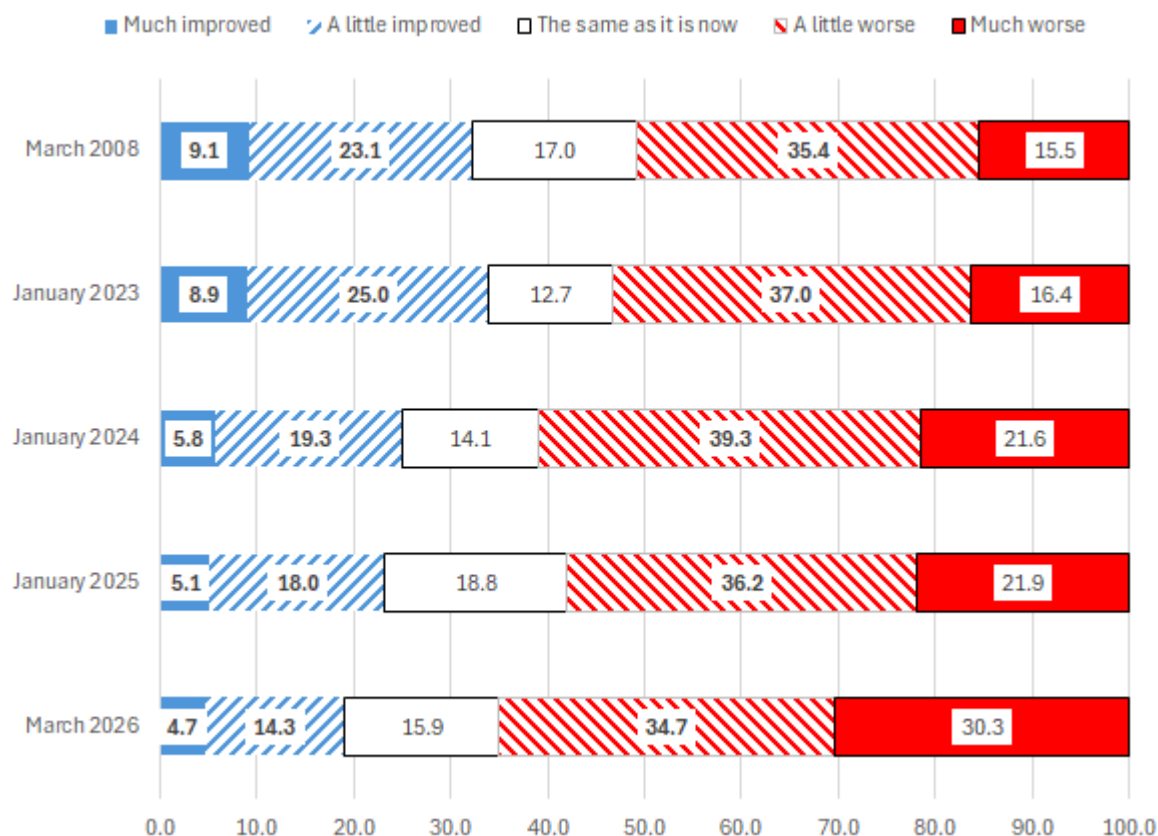
In March 2008, almost half of Australians thought that life for children in Australia would be worse than their own lives with 15.5 per cent saying that they thought that life for children of the day would be much worse and 35.4 per cent expecting it to be a little worse (Figure 8). Almost one-in-five (17.0 per cent) thought the lives of Australia's children would be the same as it was for the respondents, one-quarter (23.1 per cent) thought children's lives would be a little improved and about one-in-ten (9.1 per cent) thought children's future lives would be much improved.

When the question was asked in January 2023, the distribution of responses had hardly changed. The pessimism gap had increased slightly to 19.5 percentage points, while the proportion expecting an improvement in children's lives rose marginally from 32.2 to 33.9 per cent. Overall, attitudes during this period suggest relative stability in long-term expectations.

Since January 2023 views about the future lives of children have become significantly more negative. By March 2026, 30.3 per cent of respondents believed children's lives would be much worse and 34.7 per cent believed they would be a little worse. In contrast,

only 4.7 per cent expected life to be much better, while 14.3 per cent anticipated it would be a little better. The resulting pessimism gap widened sharply to 46.1 percentage points, representing a substantial deterioration in expectations relative to earlier waves.

Figure 8 Views on the lives of Australia's children compared to respondents', March 2008 to March 2026 Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

3.2 Life in Australia in general over the last few years

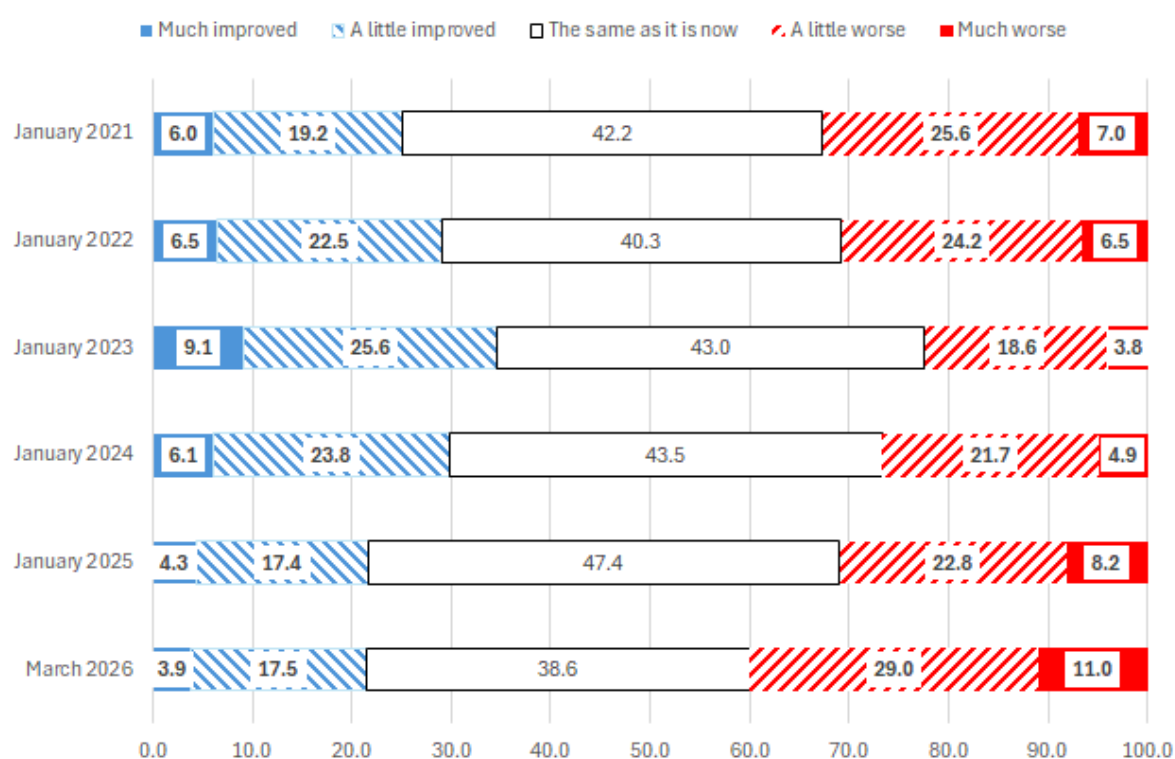
In addition to these questions about the longer-term change in outcomes for Australians, we also asked about perceptions of more recent change. Specifically, respondents were asked: ‘*Since the start of [the preceding year], do you think that your life is...?*’ (Figure 9). Respondents were also asked: ‘*In [the subsequent year], do you think that your life in Australia will be...?*’ (Figure 10). These questions were first asked in the January 2021 ANUpoll.

Given that the January 2021 survey was conducted during one of the most uncertain periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not surprising that more respondents thought life had worsened (32.6 per cent) than thought it had improved (25.2 per cent), a gap of 7.5 percentage points. This gap narrowed to 1.7 percentage points by January 2022. By January 2023, more people thought that life had improved over the previous 12-months (34.6 per cent) than thought it had worsened (22.4 per cent).

This positive short-term retrospective view did not persist. By March 2026, almost twice as many people thought that life had worsened over the previous 12-months (40.0 per

cent) than thought it had improved (21.4 per cent), representing an 18.6 percentage point gap.

Figure 9 Short term retrospective on life in Australia (perceived changes since start of the preceding year), January 2021 – March 2026, Australia (%)



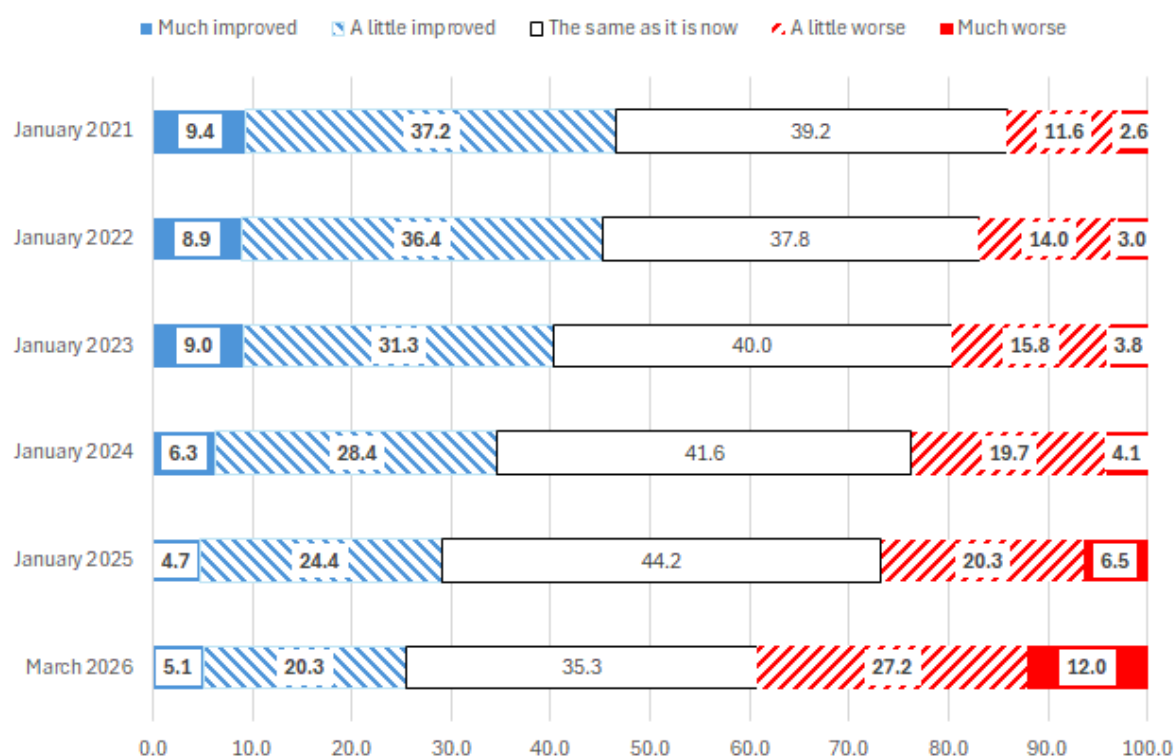
Source: ANUpoll

While short-term retrospective views have fluctuated over the last 5 years, Australians' prospective views have shown a steady deterioration. Given the dramatic upheaval experienced during the first 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the imminent availability of vaccines, it is not surprising that in January 2021 far more Australians thought life would improve in the subsequent 12 months (46.6 per cent) than thought it would worsen (14.1 per cent).

Although this optimism declined in each subsequent survey, as of January 2025 there were still slightly more Australians who thought life would get better (29.0 per cent) than thought it would worsen (26.7 per cent). This net optimism was no longer the case in March 2026. In the most recent survey, 39.2 per cent of Australians thought that life was going to get worse over the next 12 months, 13.8 percentage points higher than the proportion who thought life would improve.

Taken together, the results suggest that Australians not only think that life in Australia has worsened over the past 12 months, but also expect conditions to further deteriorate.

Figure 10 Short term predictions of life in Australia (perceived changes by end of following year), January 2021 – March 2026, Australia (%)

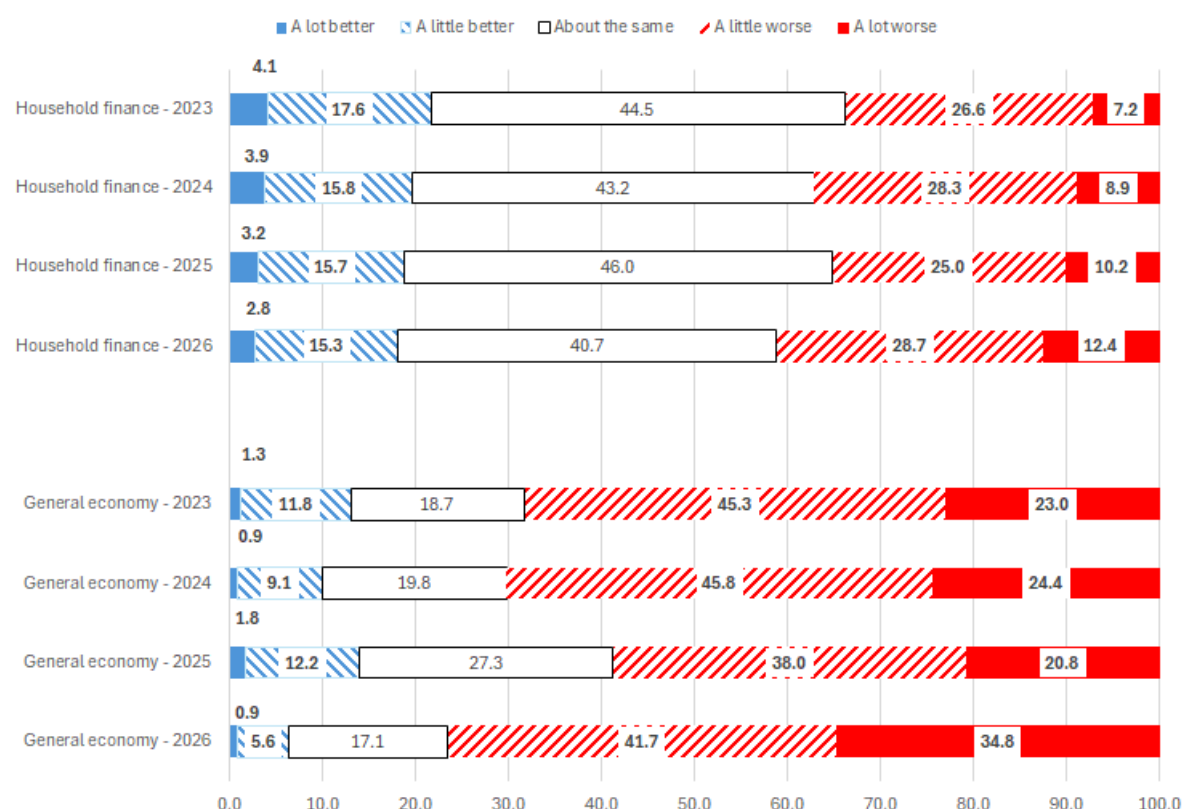


Source: ANUpoll

In the March 2026 survey, respondents were also asked for their retrospective views on economic conditions. The first question asked, *‘How does the financial situation of your household now compare with what it was 12 months ago?’*. The second question asked *‘And, how do you think the general economic situation in Australia now compares with what it was 12 months ago?’* These questions were first asked in ANUpoll in January 2023, with Figure 11 presenting responses to both questions over the period 2023 to 2026.

Australians’ views of their own household finances have been relatively consistent over time, with more respondents thinking that their financial situation will get worse than who think their financial situation will improve over the next year, and with this gap widening between 2023 and 2026. However, Australians are far more pessimistic about the general economy. In March 2026, only 6.5 per cent of respondents thought that the general economy will get better, compared to 76.5 per cent who think it will get worse. This 70.0 percentage point difference in 2026 is much larger than it was in 2025 (44.8 percentage points), as well as the start of the period (55.2 percentage points in January 2023).

Figure 11 Short term retrospective on household finances and the general economy (perceived changes since start of 2025), 2023 – 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

3.3 Australia's optimists and pessimists

In general, people who believe that life has worsened over a given period are also likely to expect further deterioration over the same time period into the future. Short-term retrospective views are likewise strongly correlated with long-term prospective views. There is a strong positive correlation between all the measures included in this section.

Indeed, when an eighth variable, medium-term prospective views (over the next five years), is included, a factor analysis of these variables strongly suggests the presence of a single underlying latent variable capturing general optimism and pessimism.^{vii}

Given this strong correlation, we construct an additive index to summarise individuals' general optimism about both the past and the future. Each component variable is coded from 1 (most pessimistic) to 5 (most optimistic), with a mid-point of 3 representing neutrality. The resulting index ranges from 8 (most pessimistic) to 40 (most optimistic), with a value of 24 indicating an average neutral outlook. Across all Australians, the mean index value is 19.6, with a standard deviation of 6.82.

More informative, however, is how this index varies across key demographic and socioeconomic variables. These differences are summarised in Table 7.

Younger Australians are far more optimistic than the rest of the population. Controlling for other characteristics, someone aged 18 to 24 has an index value 3.45 higher than those aged 35 to 44 (the base case), with those aged 25 to 34 having an index value 0.98 higher. Females are less optimistic than males, and those that speak a language other

than English at home are more optimistic than those that speak English only. Those with a degree are more optimistic than those without, and those that live outside of inner metropolitan areas are less optimistic.

Table 7 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with index of optimism/pessimism, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			0.409 ***	
			0.078	
			-0.091 *	
			-0.404 ***	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.040		-0.070	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.165 ***		0.113 **	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.104		-0.143 **	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.233 ***		-0.346 ***	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.441 ***		-0.656 ***	
Aged 75 years plus	-0.567 ***		-0.764 ***	
Female	0.147 ***		0.107 ***	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.102		-0.135 **	
Has a degree	-0.117 ***		-0.058	
Born overseas – English speaking country	0.003		0.005	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	-0.020		-0.072	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.147 ***		0.147 ***	
Employed	-0.055		0.104 *	
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	0.060		0.029	
Provincial Electorate	0.182 ***		0.126 **	
Rural Electorate	0.065		0.019	
Constant	0.934 ***		0.949 ***	
Number of respondents	3,261		2,873	

Notes: Linear regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

4 Economic anxiety

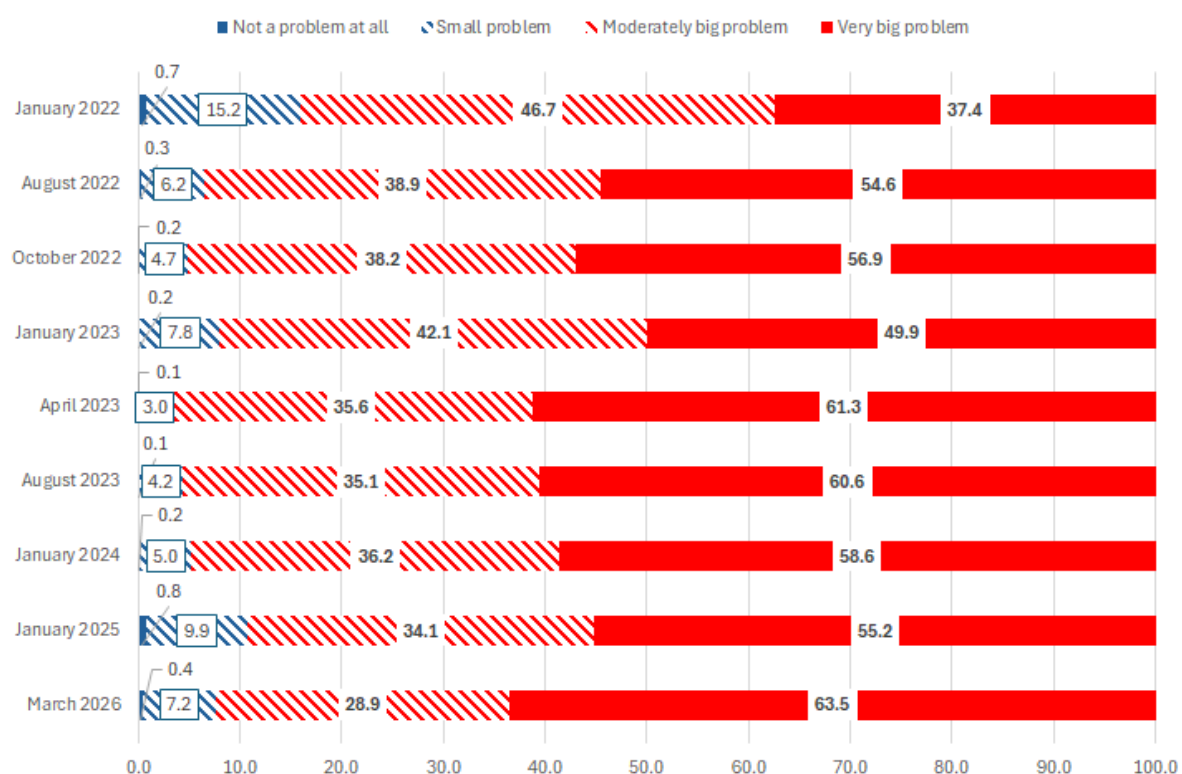
In January 2025 the (seasonally adjusted) unemployment rate in Australia was 4.1 per cent. In the 12 months to December 2024, prices had increased by 2.4 per cent (using the quarterly CPI), right in the middle of the Reserve Bank's inflationary target. By February 2026 unemployment had edged up to 4.3 per cent and the annual rate of inflation had increased to 3.7 per cent (using monthly CPI).^{viii}

While there has been a worsening in economic conditions since January 2025 the economic indicators remain strong and are stronger than they were during the pandemic period. In June and July 2020, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 7.4 per cent. In the 12 months up to December 2022, the change in the (quarterly) CPI was 7.9 per cent. However, as the previous section started to introduce, economic anxiety appears to have reached a much higher level than it has been at any time since the pandemic period.

Starting with prices, respondents to the March 2026 ANUpoll were asked 'How much of a problem do you think rising prices are in Australia?' Figure 12 presents responses to this question over time. When the question was first asked in January 2022, only 37.4 per cent of Australians thought that rising prices were a very big problem. This proportion increased steadily to April 2023, when 61.3 per cent of respondents identified rising prices as a very big problem. It then declined steadily through to January 2025, broadly in line with the inflation rate, with 55.2 per cent of Australians holding this view at that time.

Although at the time of writing inflation data for the twelve months leading up to March 2026 was not available, Australians have already identified rising prices as a renewed and significant concern. In the most recent survey, 63.5 per cent of Australians reported that rising prices were a very big problem. This is the highest proportion seen across the nine ANUpolls in which views on price changes have been measured.

Figure 12 Views on the extent to which rising prices are seen as a problem, January 2022 – March 2026, Australia (%)



Source: ANUpoll

The increase since January 2025 in concern about rising prices is both statistically significant and large, particularly given that it is coming off a much higher base than when the question was first asked in January 2022. However, the increase in concern about unemployment is larger still.

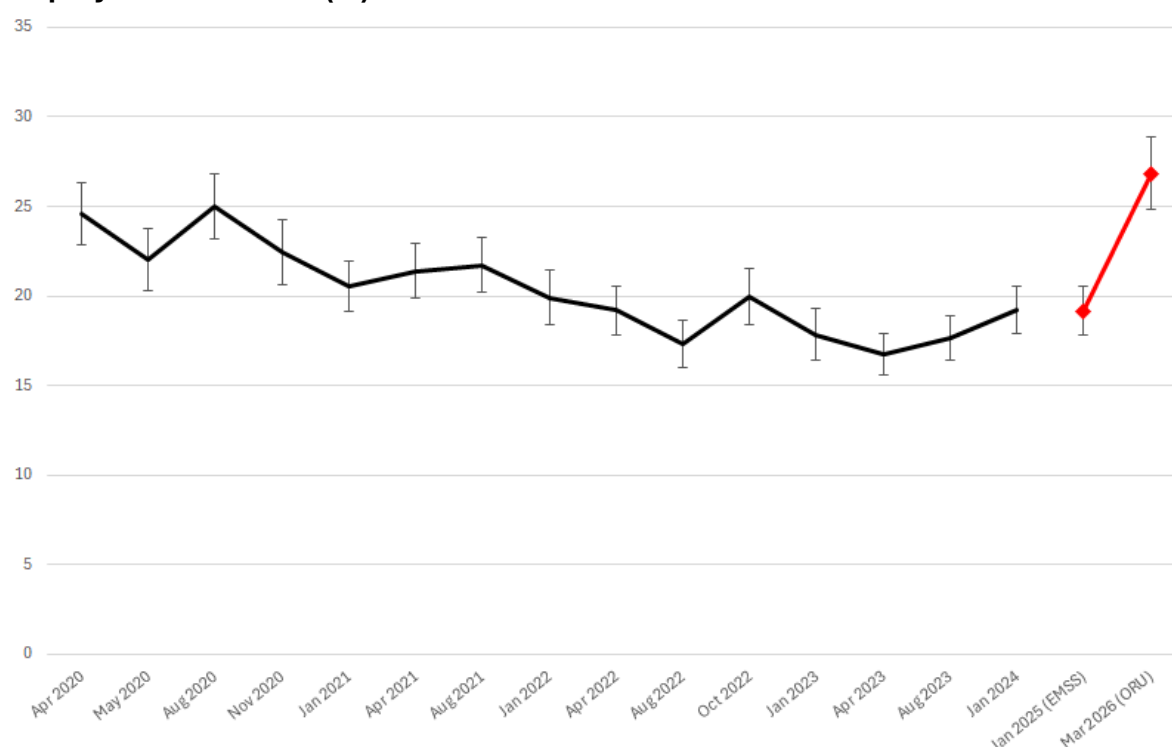
Immediately following the question on financial stress (summarised in Figure 3), employed respondents were asked: *'I would like you to think about your employment prospects over the next 12 months. What do you think is the per cent chance that you will lose your job during the next 12 months? That is, get retrenched or fired or not have your contract renewed.'* Respondents were asked to enter a percentage chance (in whole numbers), with the clarification that '0% = no chance; 100% = absolute certainty.'

In January 2025, averaging across all employed respondents, the expected chance of losing one's job was 19.2 per cent. By March 2026, this figure had increased to 26.8 per cent across all employed Australians (Figure 13). The January 2025 estimate was very similar to those observed in the previous three years, back to January 2022. In contrast, the March 2026 estimate is the highest recorded since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and is not significantly different from the levels observed in April and August 2020.

This level of employment anxiety in March 2026 is extraordinary. During the two earlier peak periods at the start of the pandemic, either Australia as a whole was in lockdown (April 2020) or the entire state of Victoria was (August 2020). At that time no COVID-19 vaccine was available anywhere in the world, and many businesses faced uncertainty about their survival. Despite these circumstances, Australians now think their

employment prospects are at least as bad as they did during those periods, and if anything worse.

Figure 13 Expected likelihood of losing one's job, April 2020 – March 2026, Employed Australians (%)



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

It is not possible to rule out the possibility that heightened anxiety among Australians in March was partly driven by broader labour market uncertainty associated with the war in the Middle East. However, Figure 14 gives some evidence that at least part of the increase in employment anxiety reflects growing concern about the anticipated impact of automation and AI.

In April 2018, employed ANUpoll respondents were asked *'Following are some reasons why people might worry about losing a job. For each one, please answer how concerned, if at all, you are about potentially losing your job for this reason?'* Figure 14 focuses on respondents who said they were very or somewhat concerned (as opposed to not too concerned or not concerned at all). In particular, it shows that for five of the six potential concerns asked about, there was not a statistically significant increase between April 2018 and January 2025 nor between January 2025 and March 2026. However, the per cent of Australians that were concerned that their 'employer uses machines or computer programs to replace human workers' increased from 16.8 per cent in April 2018 to 24.4 per cent in January 2025, and then again to 30.3 per cent in March 2026.

Australians are still slightly more concerned about their overall industry shrinking or the company they are working at being poorly managed. However, fear of automation is fast becoming one of the key drivers of employment anxiety in Australia.

Figure 14 Specific labour market concerns, April 2018, January 2025 and March 2026, Employed Australians (%)

Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

Table 8 examines which groups of Australians are most concerned about job loss. Using a regression-based approach, the first part of the table analyses factors associated with respondents' expected probability of losing their job over the next 12-months (see also Figure 13). The second table reports the results of an ordered probit model which is used to estimate the factors associated with the level of concern about the impact of automation (see Figure 14).

As these analyses are restricted to respondents who were employed at the time of the survey and therefore have relatively small sample sizes, broader categories are used for some of the explanatory variables included in the model compared to the previous analysis. The sample is also restricted to those aged under 75.

Respondents in the middle part of the age distribution are most likely to expect to lose their job in the next 12-months. Controlling for other characteristics, those aged 18 to 34 have a 5.2 percentage point lower expected likelihood than the reference group (35 to 64 years), whereas those aged 65 to 74 have a 10.4 percentage point lower expected probability of losing their jobs in the next 12-months. There are no statistically significant differences between males and females. However, having a university degree is associated with a lower expected probability of job loss (by 3.9 percentage points), while living outside inner metropolitan areas is associated with a higher expected likelihood (4.5 percentage points).

The largest difference in the expected probability of job loss is by country of birth. Those born overseas in an English-speaking country have a 2.7 percentage point higher probability, although this difference is not statistically significant. In contrast, respondents born overseas in a non-English speaking country have a much higher expected probability of job loss, at 11.3 percentage points above the Australian-born reference group (controlling for other characteristics).

Those born overseas in a non-English speaking country are also more likely to be specifically concerned about losing their job due to automation, with an additional association for those that speak a language other than English at home. By contrast, neither age nor education appears to be significantly associated with personal concern about automation. Females and respondents living outside of inner metropolitan areas report lower levels of concern about the impacts of automation.

Table 8 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with employment concerns, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Per cent job loss		Automation concern	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
Aged 18 to 34 years	-5.187	**	0.008	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-10.401	**	-0.213	
Female	2.800		-0.206	***
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-2.520		-0.171	
Has a degree	-3.896	*	0.069	
Born overseas – English speaking country	2.721		-0.045	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	11.296	***	0.216	**
Speaks a language other than English at home	2.145		0.182	**
Outer Metropolitan/Provincial/Rural Electorate	4.508	**	-0.202	***
Constant	23.813	***		
Cut-point 1			-0.373	
Cut-point 2			0.366	
Cut-point 3			1.222	
Number of respondents	2,247		2,201	

Notes: Linear/Ordered Probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 64 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

Taken together, the results in this section show that economic anxiety in Australia in March 2026 is running at levels not seen since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in some respects exceeds those earlier peaks. Nearly two-thirds of Australians (63.5 per cent) now regard rising prices as a very big problem, the highest rate recorded across nine waves of ANUpoll data, and even higher than the peak of measured inflation in 2022–23. Employed Australians' expected likelihood of losing their job has reached 26.8 per cent, again the highest ever recorded, and statistically indistinguishable from the levels recorded in April and August 2020, when the country was in lockdown and no vaccine was in sight. That this level of employment anxiety has emerged against an unemployment rate of only 4.3 per cent and inflation of 3.7 per cent, well short of the economic extremes of recent years, makes it all the more striking.

A particularly notable driver of this anxiety is fear of automation. While concerns about industry contraction, poor management, and other traditional labour market risks have remained broadly stable since 2018, the proportion of employed Australians worried about being replaced by machines or computer programs has nearly doubled over the same period, rising from 16.8 per cent in April 2018 to 30.3 per cent in March 2026.

Those most exposed to employment anxiety overall – particularly those workers born overseas in non-English speaking countries – are also among the most concerned about automation. Together, these findings suggest that economic anxiety in Australia is not simply a cyclical response to current conditions but reflects deeper and more structural concerns about the future of work.

5 Satisfaction with democracy and support for democratic norms

Box 3 Views of Australians towards democracy stable, precarious, and complicated

- Despite the largest decline in wellbeing since the onset of COVID-19, record levels of financial stress, and falling confidence in the Federal Government, satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia has remained broadly stable. There was no statistically significant change between December 2025 and March 2026.
- Support for democracy as a principle has edged upward since May 2025, with 69.2 per cent of Australians agreeing that democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other form of government. This increase has been driven largely by younger Australians (aged 18–34), who are now more supportive than they were ten months ago.
- Core democratic norms enjoy very strong support. More than nine-in-ten Australians (91.2 per cent) agree that no one should be above the law, and more than eight-in-ten (80.4 per cent) support the media’s right to criticise the government. Fewer than one-in-ten believe that the government should be able to restrict public criticism.
- At the same time, democratic support remains precarious in important respects. Only around two-in-three Australians believe democracy is always preferable, and more than one-in-three support having a strong leader even if that leader bends the rules to get things done (35.7 per cent agree or strongly agree).
- Contrary to common narratives, younger Australians are not more censorious about political speech. Those aged 18–34 are more likely to support the right of people with extreme views to speak in public (47.2 per cent) than those aged 35–64 (39.4 per cent) or 65 and over (36.4 per cent).
- Similarly, young men aged 18–24 are less likely than men aged 25 and over to believe that policies to increase women’s representation in politics have gone too far (32.6 per cent compared to 37.8 per cent), challenging claims of a distinctive anti-feminist shift among young Australian men.
- Gender differences in attitudes towards democratic principles are complex and multidirectional. Neither males nor females emerge as consistently more supportive of liberal-democratic norms across the range of measures examined.
- Education stands out as the most consistent predictor of democratic attitudes. Australians with a university degree are more likely to support democracy as a principle, more likely to support free speech for people with extreme views, less supportive of rule-bending leaders, and less likely to think that policies to increase women’s representation in politics have gone too far.

There is a substantial body of research suggesting that citizens in democracies evaluate both their governments and their broader system of government through a fundamentally retrospective lens, rewarding or punishing incumbents based on perceived performance. This evaluation is particularly focused on the economy, with Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000) showing that ‘Although voters do not look exclusively at economic issues, they generally weigh those more heavily than any others, regardless of the democracy they vote in.’

Voters, however, do not assess economic performance in isolation. Kayser and Peress (2012) show that citizens actively engage in cross-national benchmarking, finding that ‘When many economies contract, voters turn against their governments much less frequently.’ To the extent that Australians recognise that the economic pressures they are experiencing, such as higher petrol prices, rising inflation and employment anxiety, are partly the product of a geopolitical shock affecting comparable countries in similar ways, and in many cases more than Australia, they may moderate the extent to which they attribute responsibility to the Albanese Government.

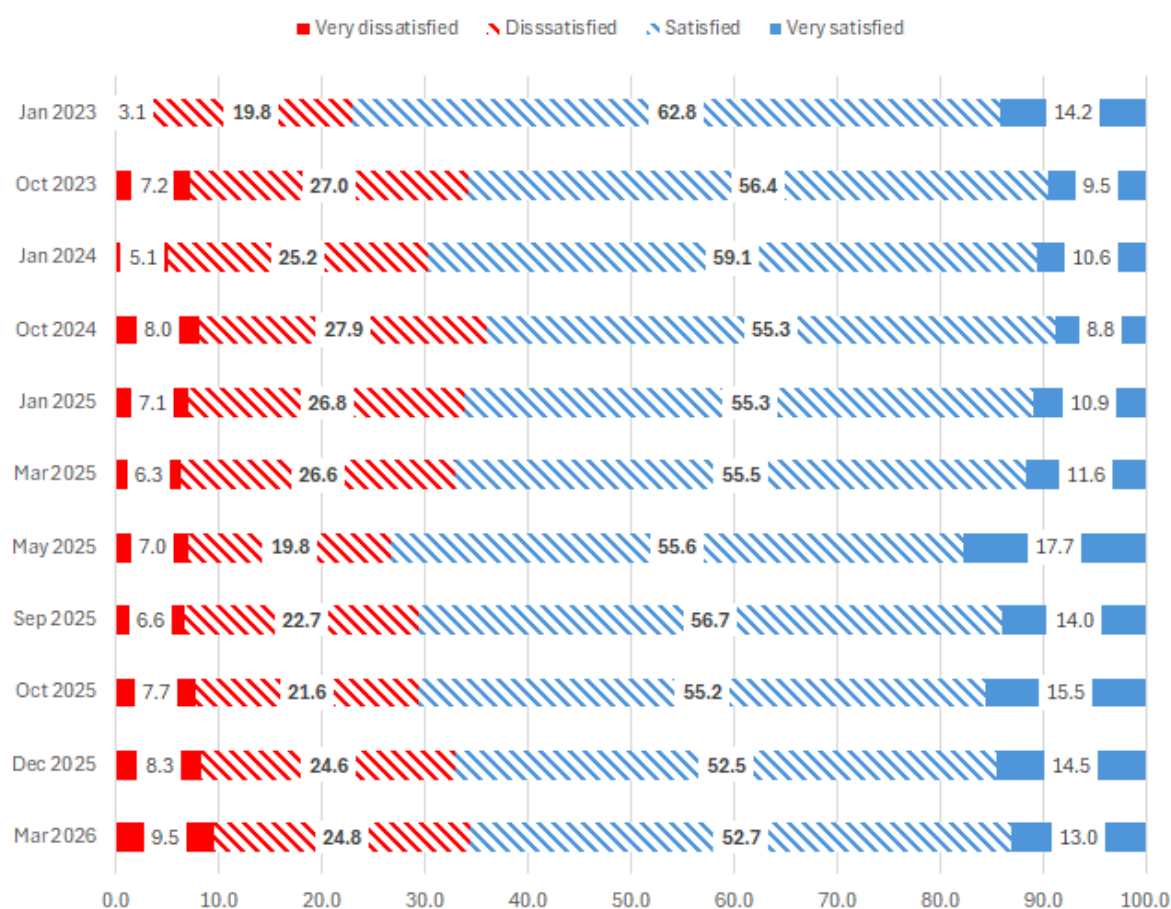
We have already shown that confidence in the Federal Government declined between December 2025 and March 2026. In this section, we extend the analysis beyond evaluations of the incumbent government to the political system itself, examining Australians’ views towards democracy in Australia.

5.1 Satisfaction with democracy

Our core tracking question on democracy, asked in every ANUpoll since January 2023 is *‘On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?’* As shown in Figure 15, satisfaction with democracy was highest in the first wave of data collection, with 77.0 per cent of respondents reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied in January 2023. Since then, however, there has been no clear trend.

Satisfaction declined following the failed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament referendum, falling to 65.9 per cent, and remaining relatively low in the lead up to the 2025 federal election. This was followed by a short-term post-election increase, with 73.3 per cent of respondents reporting being satisfied or very satisfied in May 2025.

Focussing on the two most recent survey waves, despite declines in wellbeing, increases in financial stress and economic anxiety, and falling confidence in the Federal Government, there was very little change in overall satisfaction with democracy between December 2025 and March 2026. While satisfaction did edge down slightly over this period, the change was not statistically significant.

Figure 15 Satisfaction with democracy, January 2023 – March 2026, Australia (%)

Source: ANUpoll

When we analyse the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy using an ordered probit model (summarised in Table 9), age, education, and location emerge as the key predictors. Younger and older Australians continue to report higher levels of satisfaction with democracy than those in the middle of the age distribution, a pattern that has been consistent across multiple ANUpolls. For example, almost three-quarters (73.7 per cent) of Australians aged 18 to 24 report being satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy works.

Interestingly, when considering the combined proportion who are satisfied or very satisfied, there is little difference between those aged 25 to 64 (64.5 per cent) and those aged 65 and over (65.5 per cent). Within these broad categories, however, older Australians are considerably more likely to report being very satisfied (16.8 per cent) than those aged 25 to 64 (11.8 per cent), which helps explain the positive coefficient on older age groups in the regression analysis.

Differences by educational attainment are more straightforward. Respondents who have not completed Year 12 and do not hold a post-school qualification are the least satisfied with democracy, with only 54.0 per cent reporting that they are satisfied or very satisfied. At the other end of the distribution, those with a university degree are the most satisfied (76.0 per cent), while respondents who have completed Year 12 or hold a non-degree post-school qualification fall between these two groups (63.9 per cent).

Location-based differences are also pronounced. Australians living in inner metropolitan electorates report the highest levels of satisfaction with democracy (72.7 per cent satisfied or very satisfied), whereas those living outside inner metropolitan areas are consistently less satisfied (62.6 per cent).

Table 9 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-0.228	***
			-0.124	
			0.061	
			0.097	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.303	***	0.361	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.123		0.161	*
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.001		0.010	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.020		0.123	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.292	***	0.440	***
Aged 75 years plus	0.301	***	0.444	***
Female	-0.052		-0.030	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.320	***	-0.355	***
Has a degree	0.326	***	0.305	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	-0.044		-0.086	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.114		0.145	*
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.055		-0.046	
Employed	-0.076		-0.131	**
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.115	**	-0.112	**
Provincial Electorate	-0.229	***	-0.187	**
Rural Electorate	-0.115	*	-0.073	
Cut-point 1	-1.367		-1.391	
Cut-point 2	-0.430		-0.440	
Cut-point 3	1.149		1.150	
Number of respondents	3,242		2,859	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

5.2 Support for democracy and democratic principles

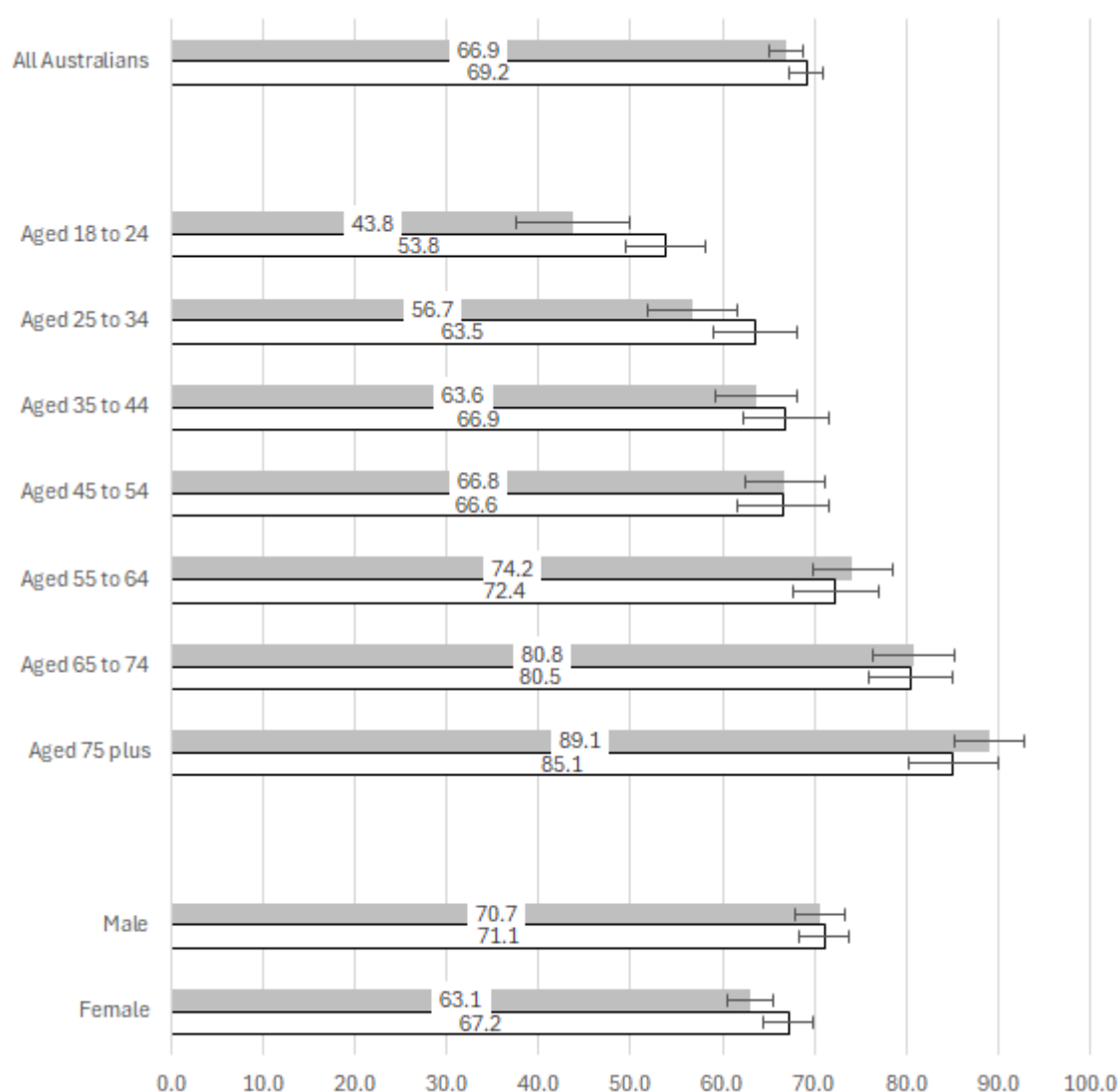
In a previous paper (Biddle and Gray 2026), we drew a clear distinction between satisfaction with the way democracy is functioning in practice and the more stable underlying support for democratic principles. Although these two concepts are highly correlated, they capture subtly different dimensions of democratic legitimacy.

In that paper, which drew in part on data from the May 2025 ANUpoll, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement: *‘Democracy is always and under all circumstances preferable to any other kind of government.’* This question was repeated in the March 2026 survey. As shown in Figure 16, support for democracy as a form of government has, if anything, increased slightly over this period – from 66.9 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing in May 2025 to 69.2 per cent in March 2026.

While the confidence intervals around these estimates overlap, indicating that the increase is not statistically significant, there is nonetheless strong evidence that support for democracy has not declined over the past ten months.

What is particularly notable is that much of the increase in support has occurred among demographic groups that were previously less supportive of democracy. Support increased substantially among respondents aged 18 to 24, rose more modestly among those aged 25 to 34, and increased slightly among females. As a result, age and sex differences in support for democracy are less pronounced in March 2026 than they were in May 2025.

Figure 16 Agree or strongly agree that democracy always preferred form of government, March 2026, Australia, by age and sex (%)



Source: ANUpoll

Note: The 'whiskers' around the estimate represent the 95 per cent confidence interval

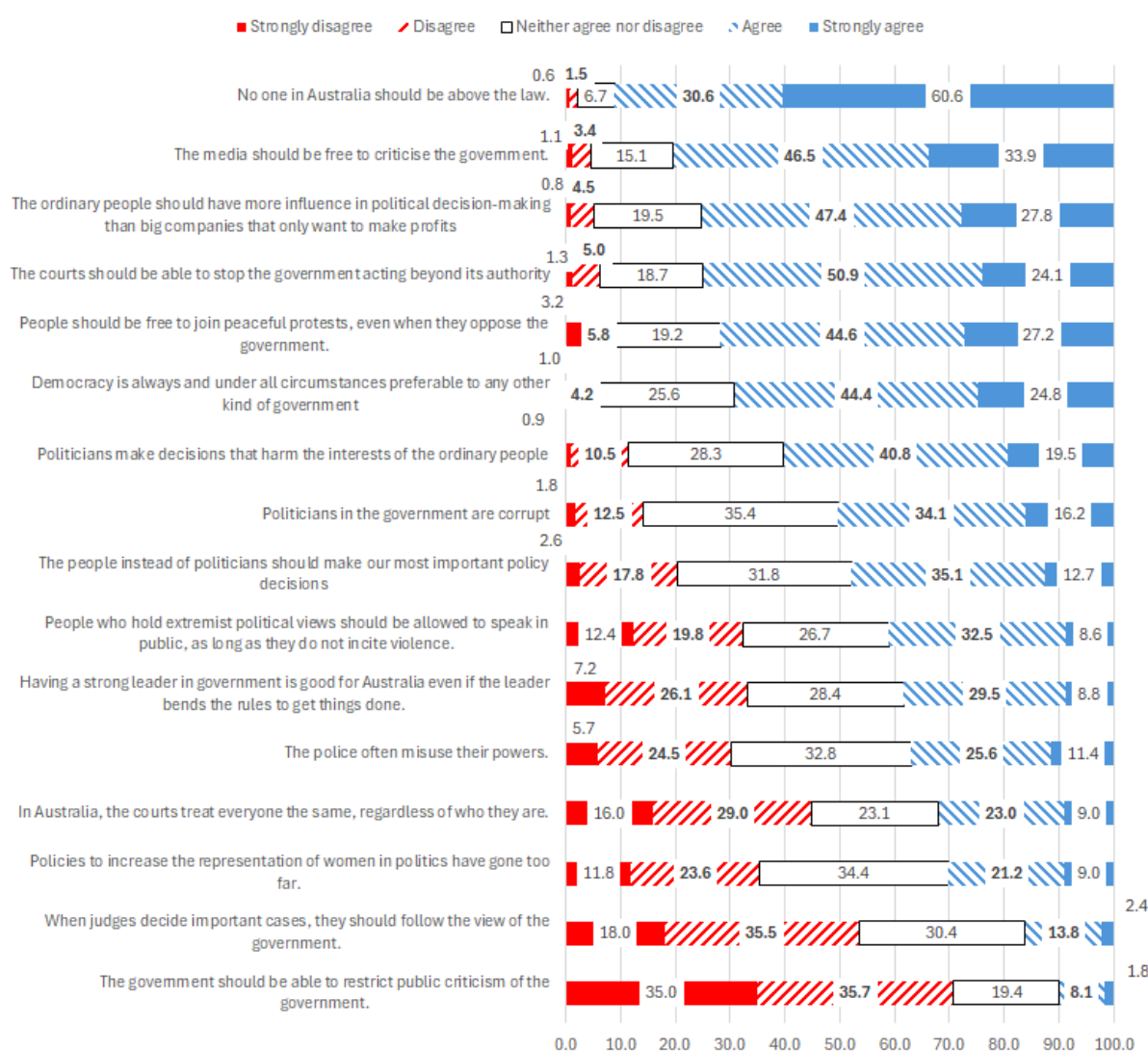
Part of the motivation for the analysis in Biddle and Gray (2026) was the Terms of Reference for the *Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion*, announced by Prime Minister Albanese on 8 January 2026.^{ix} The implicit definition of social cohesion

in the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference^x is that enhancing social cohesion involves 'Strengthening the national consensus in support of democracy, freedom and the rule of law.'

By the time the Terms of Reference were announced, the December 2025 survey had already been completed and therefore included relatively few questions directly related to support for democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. In response to the announcement of the Royal Commission, we expanded the relevant module in the March 2026 survey to include a broader set of statements relating to democratic principles. In total, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with 16 democracy-related statements, with Figure 17 ranking these statements from highest to lowest in terms of their level of agreement across the country.

There are a number of statements that either the vast majority of Australians agree with, or very few people do. More than nine-in-ten Australians (91.2 per cent) agree or strongly agree that no one in Australia should be above the law, while eight-in-ten (80.4 per cent) agree or strongly agree that the media should be free to criticise the government. At the other end of the distribution, less than one-in-ten (9.9 per cent) agree or strongly agree that the government should be able to restrict public criticism, and less than two-in-ten (16.1 per cent) agree or strongly agree that judges should follow the view of the government.

Together, these items capture core elements of a democratic system. The results indicate that the overwhelming majority of Australians continue to support fundamental democratic principles, including the independence of the rule of law and strong protections for media and political freedom.

Figure 17 Level of agreement for statements related to democracy, Australia (%)

Source: ANUpoll

Some survey questions have a more even split between agreement and disagreement across the population, reflecting more contested aspects of democracy. One such example is the statement that *‘Having a strong leader in government is good for Australia...’*, where responses are distributed evenly across those who disagree, neither agree nor disagree, and agree. This attitude is a central focus of the populist-authoritarian literature (Norris and Inglehart 2019, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In important respects, these questions also touch on the distinctions drawn in the V-Dem framework between liberal democracies, electoral democracies, and electoral autocracies.

Setting aside more evaluative questions (such as perceptions of political corruption), we analyse in a bit more detail below four questions that go to the core challenges of governing a modern democracy. None of these questions attracts overwhelming majority agreement or disagreement, and notably, they are not strongly correlated with each other. In Table 10, we analyse the factors associated with each of these attitudes using separate ordered probit models.

Reflecting the lack of correlation across these attitudes, there are also notable differences in their predictors. As shown earlier in Figure 16, younger Australians are less likely than older cohorts to agree that democracy is always the preferable form of government. At the same time, there is a common view that younger people are somehow more censorious when it comes to political views than older generations or in previous times. This was the focus of Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) in their book on the *Coddling of the American Mind*. Former US President Barack Obama also said in 2019 that:

‘I do get a sense sometimes now among certain young people and this is accelerated by social media, there is this sense sometimes of “The way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people,” and that’s enough.’^{xii}

There is no evidence in our data that younger people are more censorious, at least in the Australian context. In fact, those aged 18 to 34 are more likely to agree or strongly agree that *‘People who hold extremist political views should be allowed to speak in public, as long as they do not incite violence’* (47.2 per cent) than those aged 35 to 64 (39.4 per cent) or those aged 65 plus (36.4 per cent).

There are similar views emerging that younger males are more likely to have anti-feminist views than older males.^{xiii} Again, there is no evidence for this in our data. It is true that males aged 18 to 24 are more likely to agree or strongly agree that *‘Policies to increase the representation of women in politics have gone too far’* than females of the same age (32.6 compared to 9.1 per cent). However, they are less likely than males 25 years and over to have that view (37.8 per cent).

Females are in general, not surprisingly, less likely to say that women’s representation has gone too far (23.3 compared to 37.2 per cent). However, gender differences across the other variables are quite complicated. We have seen from Figure 16 that females are less likely to think that democracy is always preferable, but they are also less likely than males to think that people should be able to express extreme views (35.8 compared to 46.0 per cent) or that *‘Having a strong leader in government is good for Australia even if the leader bends the rules to get things done’* (33.4 compared to 43.1 per cent). It would be hard with this data to claim that either males or females are more supportive of liberal democratic principles.

Null findings can also be very informative. Following a key thread found throughout this paper, assumptions that those who have moved to Australia from countries that are quite different to ours (proxied by being non-English speaking) have different attitudes to the native born are not supported in the data. Across the four regressions, there was not a single incidence where being born overseas in a non-English speaking country had a significant difference.

Where there are more consistent (significant) findings is by education. Across the four models, those with relatively high levels of education are more likely to say that democracy is always preferable, more likely to say that people with extreme views should be able to express them, less supportive of leaders that bend the rules, and less likely to think that policies to increase female representation have gone too far.

Table 10 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with views towards democratic principles, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Support for democracy		Those with extremist views should be allowed to speak		Strong leader is good		Policies to increase female representation too far	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.232	***	0.311	***	0.090		-0.388	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.069		0.180	**	0.133	*	-0.032	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.067		-0.048		-0.109		0.011	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.276	***	-0.024		-0.045		0.150	*
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.535	***	-0.126		0.127		0.043	
Aged 75 years plus	0.684	***	0.002		0.312	***	0.280	**
Female	-0.091	**	-0.207	***	-0.177	***	-0.446	***
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.208	***	-0.162	**	0.139	*	0.081	
Has a degree	0.093	*	0.000		-0.158	***	-0.222	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	-0.094		0.110		-0.034		0.000	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.052		-0.022		0.009		0.112	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.103		0.087		0.229	***	0.067	
Employed	-0.017		0.023		0.138	**	0.124	*
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.092		0.019		-0.029		0.087	
Provincial Electorate	-0.146	**	-0.006		-0.055		0.156	**
Rural Electorate	-0.020		0.059		-0.074		0.123	**
Cut-point 1	-2.391		-1.209		-1.444		-1.319	
Cut-point 2	-1.698		-0.498		-0.402		-0.464	
Cut-point 3	-0.533		0.186		0.333		0.460	
Cut-point 4	0.702		1.359		1.409		1.316	
Number of respondents	3,249		3,302		3,297		3,290	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

6 Australia's consensus – Closeness, division, and what predicts satisfaction with democracy

The previous sections of this paper have painted a picture of considerable strain across Australian society. Life satisfaction is lower than at any point since before the COVID-19 pandemic, economic anxiety is running at pandemic-era levels, confidence in the Federal Government has fallen sharply, and Australians are deeply pessimistic about the direction of both their own lives and the country's future. Against this backdrop, the analysis of democratic attitudes in Section 5 revealed an important, and perhaps unexpected finding: despite these pressures support for the democratic system itself has remained broadly stable, and support for democracy as a principle has, if anything, strengthened slightly.

This final substantive section explores whether this resilience extends beyond democratic attitudes to broader measures of social cohesion. Specifically, we explore Australians' sense of connection to the country and their perception of whether Australia is united or divided. In a context of acute stress, these questions get at something fundamental: whether shared identity and a sense of common Australian citizenship can serve as a stabilising force, or whether the economic and social strains documented in earlier sections are beginning to fray Australia's social fabric.

6.1 Closeness to Australia

Respondents to the March 2026 ANUpoll were asked: *'How close do you feel to Australia?'* This is the first time that this question has been asked in the ANUpoll, meaning that time-series comparisons are not possible. Nevertheless, the results provide a valuable snapshot of how feelings of national attachment vary across the population and establish a baseline for future tracking.

The overall picture is one of considerable attachment. The majority of Australians report feeling either close (45.1 per cent) or very close (35.3 per cent) to Australia. This suggests that, despite the anxiety and pessimism documented in earlier sections of this report, a broad sense of national belonging remains intact.

The regression analysis summarised in Table 11 reveals which groups feel more or less connected to Australia. Controlling for other characteristics, older Australians feel closer to Australia than younger Australians, continuing the pattern seen elsewhere in this paper where age is associated with more positive orientations towards the country and its institutions. More than twice the proportion of Australians aged 45 years and over report feeling very close to Australia (48.3 per cent), compared with those aged 18 to 44 (21.2 per cent).

Education is positively associated with feelings of national closeness, consistent with findings in Sections 4 and 5 that education is broadly protective of positive civic orientations. These differences are most pronounced at the lower end of the education distribution. Australians who have not completed Year 12 or who have a post-school qualification are more than twice as likely to say they do not feel close at all to Australia (5.5 per cent), compared with those with a university degree (2.1 per cent).

Perhaps the most notable findings relate to country of birth. Those born overseas in non-English speaking countries report levels of closeness to Australia that are almost identical to those of Australian-born respondents (80.4 per cent compared with 80.9 per cent reporting feeling close or very close). By contrast, those born overseas in English-speaking countries report lower levels of closeness (76.3 per cent), and feel less connected to Australia than both of the other groups.

Several interpretations are possible. One is that migrants from English-speaking countries who may retain strong cultural, linguistic and family ties to their country of origin, maintain a more divided sense of national belonging. Another is that migrants from non-English speaking countries, having made a more significant cultural transition to Australia, develop a stronger sense of identification with their adopted country over time. Whatever the underlying mechanism, the results challenge simple assumptions about which migrant communities are most and least integrated into Australian society.

Importantly, there are no statistically significant differences by sex, employment status, or location. In this respect, national attachment appears to be a relatively consistent sentiment, shared across genders and across the urban-regional divide.

Table 11 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with feeling close to Australia, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-0.007	
			-0.023	
			0.105	
			0.289	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.067		-0.033	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.079		-0.044	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.176	**	0.216	**
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.490	***	0.554	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.730	***	0.875	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.062	***	1.166	***
Female	-0.034		-0.029	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.142	*	-0.139	
Has a degree	0.200	***	0.159	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	-0.327	***	-0.347	***
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	-0.017		-0.013	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.155	*	-0.128	
Employed	-0.066		-0.060	
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.008		-0.052	
Provincial Electorate	-0.032		-0.020	
Rural Electorate	0.073		0.087	
Cut-point 1	-1.714		-1.609	
Cut-point 2	-0.736		-0.637	
Cut-point 3	0.573		0.695	
Number of respondents	3,328		2,922	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

6.2 Perceptions of unity and division

Feeling attached to Australia does not necessarily mean that Australians believe the country is pulling together. Across many democracies, there is a perception of political and social polarisation, fuelled in part by an increasingly adversarial style of disagreement (Iyengar et al. 2019). Respondents to the March 2026 ANUpoll were therefore asked: *'Overall, to what extent do you think Australians are united or divided on key political, economic and social issues today?'*

The results point to widespread perceptions of division. Far more Australians think that Australia is divided (17.3 per cent very divided, 47.1 per cent divided) than think it is united (1.0 per cent very united and 10.7 per cent united). At the same time, nearly one-quarter of Australians (24.0 per cent) are on-the-fence, reporting that Australia is neither united nor divided.

The regression analysis presented in Table 12 reveals several notable patterns in who perceives Australia as divided. In contrast to feelings of national closeness, where older Australians tend to feel more connected, younger Australians are actually less likely to view Australia as divided. Amongst those aged 18 to 34 years, 56.9 per cent think Australia is either divided or very divided. While this still represents a majority, it is substantially lower than among Australians aged 35 years and over, of whom 67.7 per cent believe the country is divided.

This is a striking finding given that younger Australians have grown up in an era of pronounced culture war politics and social media-driven polarisation. One possible explanation is that younger Australians who tend to be embedded in more diverse social networks and less anchored to older political divisions, may experience their social worlds as less polarised than older Australians do.

A similar dynamic applies to language spoken at home: those who speak a language other than English at home are less likely to think Australia is divided. This may reflect a mode of engagement with Australian public life that is less shaped by the dominant media and political narratives, which often emphasise conflict and division in national affairs.

Unlike the consistent education effects seen throughout this paper, education shows no statistically significant association with perceptions of division, and neither does sex or location. The absence of a location effect is particularly striking. Despite well-documented differences in political attitudes between inner-metropolitan and regional Australians, residents across both areas report broadly similar perceptions of whether Australia is united or divided.

Table 12 Regression model estimates of the factors associated with perceptions of Australia being united/divided, March 2026

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.	Coeffic.	Signif.
			-0.031	
			0.049	
			0.076	
			0.187	**
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.273	***	-0.214	***
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.216	***	-0.173	**
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.052		0.073	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.067		0.111	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.052		0.020	
Aged 75 years plus	0.151		0.222	*
Female	0.021		0.025	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.114	*	0.107	
Has a degree	-0.027		-0.057	
Born overseas – English speaking country	0.054		0.044	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	-0.084		-0.100	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.162	**	-0.147	*
Employed	0.123	**	0.094	
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	0.011		0.015	
Provincial Electorate	0.097		0.108	
Rural Electorate	0.012		0.015	
Cut-point 1	-2.327		-2.260	
Cut-point 2	-1.156		-1.071	
Cut-point 3	-0.322		-0.243	
Cut-point 4	1.021		1.095	
Number of respondents	3,291		2,894	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

6.3 Pulling it all together – What attitudes predict satisfaction with democracy

Taken together, the two measures examined in this section tell a nuanced story of contemporary Australian attitudes. Australians remain broadly attached to their country. A sense of belonging to Australia is widely shared and not strongly structured by the usual fault lines of sex, employment status, or geography. At the same time, perceptions that Australia is a divided society are also widespread, particularly among older and employed Australians. These findings are not contradictory. It is entirely possible to feel close to Australia as an idea, a place, and as a community of which one is a part, while simultaneously recognising that Australians disagree deeply about politics, economics, and social values.

In this final results sub-section, we bring together the analyses from across the paper to assess whether these broader orientations – closeness and perceptions of national division – help explain satisfaction with the way democracy works. We also consider

whether other factors examined earlier in the report, including demographic, geographic and socio-economic factors as well as civic attitudes are more powerful predictors of democratic satisfaction.

Specifically, we replicate the ordered probit model presented in Table 9, in which satisfaction with democracy is the dependent variable. In addition to the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables included in that model, we include seven additional binary explanatory variables. These variables are drawn largely from the analyses presented in Sections 2 through 6.2. For categorical measures we adopt what we consider is the most intuitive dichotomisation. For the continuous hope-pessimism index, we divide respondents into those with relatively low levels of hope (scores of 8 to 16) and those with moderate or high levels of hope (scores greater than 16, up to 40).

Full regression results are reported in Table 13. Figure 18 complements these results by showing the raw distribution of satisfaction with democracy responses across the two binary categories for each variable, without controlling for other characteristics.

In the regression analysis, the only additional variable that was not statistically significant was whether or not a person thought Australia was divided. Consistent with this, Figure 18, which presents unconditional differences, shows that this variable is also associated with the smallest gap in the proportion satisfied with democracy. By contrast, all other variables are statistically significant predictors in the model and display substantial differences in satisfaction levels in the descriptive results shown in Figure 18.

It is important to emphasise that these findings should not be interpreted causally. It may be that variation in the explanatory variable leads to differences in satisfaction with democracy. Equally, it may be that individuals' views about democracy shape their broader attitudes, including life satisfaction and confidence in institutions. Setting this caveat aside, however, the analysis controls for a large set of demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic variables, as well as the full range of other attitudinal variables included in the model. As a result, the associations identified are likely to be strong and robust, regardless of the direction of causality.

The magnitude of these associations is quite large. If you are satisfied with the direction of the country, then you are 44.5 percentage points more likely to be satisfied with democracy. If you are confident in the Federal government, you are 43.4 percentage points more likely. Financial stress, life satisfaction, and optimism all also have a strong association. Feeling close to Australia is in some ways the variable in the model that is furthest conceptually from satisfaction with direction of the country. Even still, those who feel close to Australia are 35.4 percentage points more likely to be satisfied with democracy.

Figure 18 Satisfaction with democracy, By democratic and other attitudes (%)

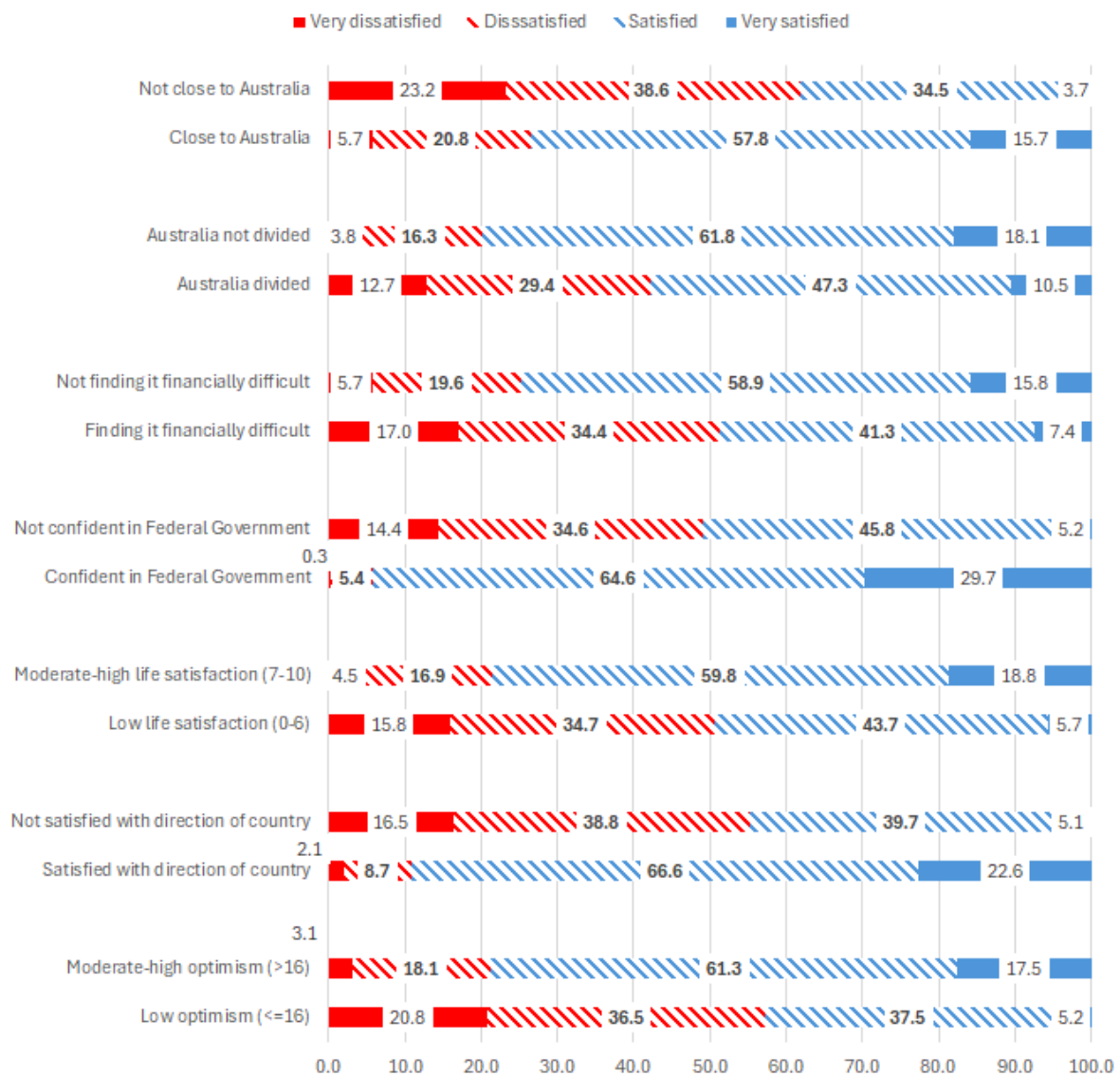


Table 13 **Expanded regression model estimates of the factors associated with satisfaction with democracy, March 2026**

Explanatory variables	Model 2	
	Coeffic.	Signif.
Feels close to Australia	0.543	***
Thinks Australia divided	-0.058	
Finding it financially difficult	-0.184	***
Confident in Federal Government	0.788	***
Low life satisfaction	-0.227	***
Satisfied with direction of country	0.491	***
Low optimism	-0.357	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.143	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.062	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.011	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.018	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.160	
Aged 75 years plus	0.147	
Female	-0.052	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.235	***
Has a degree	0.192	***
Born overseas – English speaking country	-0.046	
Born overseas – non-English speaking country	0.013	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.106	
Employed	-0.008	
Outer Metropolitan Electorate	-0.060	
Provincial Electorate	-0.095	
Rural Electorate	-0.041	
Cut-point 1	-1.176	
Cut-point 2	0.011	
Cut-point 3	2.024	
Number of respondents	2,786	

Notes: Ordered probit regression model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a degree; is not employed, and lives in an Inner Metropolitan Electorate.

Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *

Source: ANUpoll

7 Concluding comments

7.1 Summary of key findings

Australia in March 2026 is a country under considerable strain. Average life satisfaction has fallen to 6.22 out of 10 — the lowest recorded in the ANUpoll series going back to October 2019, and below even the levels reached during COVID-19 lockdowns. Unlike the lockdown periods, however, this decline is not a sharp shock from a higher base: life satisfaction was already depressed, making the current reading the culmination of a sustained deterioration rather than a sudden fall.

For the first time in the data we have been collecting in the 2020s, more Australians are dissatisfied with the direction of the country than satisfied. Both short-term and long-term outlooks are bleak. Nearly three-in-five Australians think life was better fifty years ago, and a similar proportion expect it to be worse fifty years from now. This pessimism about the national trajectory extends to views about the next generation: there is a striking 46-percentage-point gap between those who think today's children will have worse lives than their own and those who believe they will be better off.

Financial stress and labour-market anxiety further compound this picture. More than one-third (34.9 per cent) of Australians report finding it difficult or very difficult to live on their current income (a record across our ANUpoll series), and the majority have taken at least one significant financial coping action in the past twelve months. Most striking is the level of employment insecurity. Among employed Australians, the expected probability of losing one's job has risen to 26.8 per cent, a level statistically indistinguishable from that recorded during the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020. This is despite the unemployment rate remaining relatively low at 4.3 per cent.

A significant and growing driver of this anxiety is fear of automation. The proportion of employed Australians who are concerned that machines or computer programs will replace their jobs has nearly doubled since 2018, reaching 30.3 per cent in March 2026. These concerns suggest that Australians are not responding solely to current economic conditions, but are increasingly anxious about the future structure of the economy and the place of work within it.

Against this backdrop, the resilience of Australians' democratic attitudes stands out as one of the paper's most striking findings. Satisfaction with the way democracy works in Australia has remained broadly stable despite sharply falling confidence in the Federal Government and record low wellbeing, while in-principle support for democracy has increased slightly since May 2025. Core democratic values continue to command very strong support: more than nine-in-ten Australians agree that no one should be above the law, and more than eight-in-ten support the media's right to criticise the government. Australians also retain a broad sense of national belonging, with feelings of closeness to Australia widely shared across demographic and geographic lines. Taken together, these findings suggest that while Australians are not confident in key government institutions and pessimistic about their collective future, they have not lost faith in the democratic system itself.

A recurring theme throughout the analysis concerns younger Australians. Contrary to widespread narratives, the data do not support the view that younger Australians are

disengaged from democracy, intolerant of opposing views, or more anti-feminist than their elders. Australians aged 18–24 are among the most satisfied with democracy, and the increase in principled support for democracy since May 2025 has been driven largely by younger cohorts.

There remains a concerning finding that young Australians are still the least likely to think that democracy is always a preferable form of government. However, this gap has narrowed over time, and is moderated by a range of more positive findings. Australians aged 18–34 are more supportive than older Australians of the right of those with extreme views to speak in public, provided they do not incite violence. In addition, young men are less likely than older men to think policies increasing women's political representation have gone too far.

The combination of relatively high satisfaction with democracy among younger Australians and their lower principled support for democracy as a system of government highlights the complexity of tracking and understanding democratic attitudes. At first glance, these findings appear contradictory: how can someone be satisfied with how democracy is working, while simultaneously being less certain that democracy is always preferable?

The existing literature offers a well-established framework for understanding this apparent paradox. Norris (2011), building on the concept of "critical citizens" first advanced in Norris (1999), draws a foundational distinction between the demand for democracy (aspirations and principled support for democratic ideals) and the supply of democracy, understood as satisfaction with how democracy performs in practice. Within this framework, a "democratic deficit" arises when demand outstrips supply: when what citizens believe democracy should deliver exceeds what they perceive it actually delivers.

Applied to the Australian context, however, the pattern observed here suggests something subtly different: younger Australians appear relatively satisfied with the current supply of democracy. This may be in part because they have not experienced an earlier period of higher institutional trust or democratic performance against which to compare the present. At the same time, they are less certain of democracy's principled superiority to alternative forms of government (the demand side). This may reflect a more questioning, conditional relationship with the system overall, or less of a historical experience with highly dysfunctional authoritarian regimes (the USSR or Eastern Germany prior to the collapse of communism, Maoist China, Pinochet and other military regimes in Latin America).

This interpretation is consistent with what Norris (2011) describes as a generational shift from "dutiful citizens," who accept democratic norms as given obligations, to "engaged citizens" or "critical citizens" who evaluate democratic systems against higher and more demanding standards of performance and accountability.

This interpretation is supported by several other findings in this paper. Young Australians are more likely than older Australians to support free speech for those with extreme views, less likely to support leaders who bend democratic rules, and show relatively strong attachment to Australian national identity. The pattern is also consistent with cross-national evidence. A cross-European study found that young people aged 18–24 were in fact less likely to hold attitudes opposing democracy than those aged 25–34, advancing a non-linear relationship between age and democratic opposition, and that

young people's critical views on democracy rarely translate into democratic disengagement (Cammaerts et al., 2014).

The picture that emerges for young Australians is not one of democratic rejection, but of a generation that is engaged, questioning, and conditionally supportive, which may, in the long run, be a healthier basis for democratic resilience than passive acceptance.

Young Australians are also relatively more optimistic, more satisfied with the direction of the country and, including when pooling data across the ANUpoll surveys conducted throughout the 2020s, report somewhat higher life satisfaction than those in the middle of the age distribution. While the challenges facing young Australians are real and should not be understated, the evidence suggests that they are not experienced uniformly across the cohort.

7.2 Implications

The most immediate implication of these findings concerns the mismatch between measured economic conditions and experienced economic anxiety. With an unemployment rate of 4.3 per cent and inflation of 3.7 per cent (well within historical ranges) the standard macroeconomic indicators would not suggest a population under acute economic stress. Yet 34.9 per cent of Australians are finding it difficult or very difficult on their current income, a record high, and employed Australians' subjective probability of job loss has reached 26.8 per cent, matching COVID-19 pandemic-era levels.

The gap between the headline numbers and lived experience is real and widening, and it demands responses calibrated to perception and anxiety as well as to objective conditions. Part of this reflects a structural rather than cyclical dynamic: fear of automation has nearly doubled since 2018 and is now one of the primary drivers of employment anxiety, affecting some workers far more than others (for example those born overseas in non-English speaking countries). Policies aimed at managing the labour market transition driven by AI will need to be especially attentive to these differential impacts if they are to prevent economic anxiety from deepening into more lasting forms of disengagement and disadvantage.

The relationship between education and nearly every outcome in this paper carries a second, urgent implication. Those with a degree report higher life satisfaction, lower financial stress, greater confidence in government, higher satisfaction with democracy, and stronger principled support for democratic norms. Education is not merely associated with economic security, although it is that, it also appears to serve as a buffer against the civic disengagement that often accompanies economic strain.

The third implication is perhaps the most important for the long-term trajectory of Australia's democratic resilience. The data show that the current period of acute stress has not, as yet, produced a broad erosion of democratic values. Satisfaction with democracy is stable, principled support has edged upward, and core commitments to the rule of law and media freedom command overwhelming consensus. But democratic resilience is not costless to maintain, and the data contain several warning signs.

Confidence in the Federal Government has reached near-record lows (32.0 per cent), one-in-three Australians support a strong leader who bends the rules to get things done,

and pessimism about the national future is now more pervasive and deeply held than at any point in the ANUpoll series.

The literature on democratic support is clear that satisfaction with performance and principled support for the system are distinct but connected: sustained failures of governmental responsiveness do eventually erode the deeper commitment to democracy itself. Australia is not at that point, but the current data establish a baseline against which future surveys will need to be read carefully. The question of whether Australia's democratic consensus holds will depend in significant part on whether the economic, security, and institutional pressures documented in this paper are met with responses that Australians judge to be fair, competent, and commensurate with the challenges they face.

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Endnotes

- i <https://tradingeconomics.com/commodity/crude-oil>
- ii https://www.globalpetrolprices.com/Australia/gasoline_prices/
- iii <https://www.theoru.com/panels.htm>
- iv All adults in Australia are in scope for the survey, across urban and regional areas, and all states/territories. Each wave of data is weighted using iterative proportional fitting (raking) using four benchmark variables: age and sex benchmarks (sourced from ABS population estimates), education (from the 2021 Census), and current employment status (from the Labour Force Survey). Standard errors are calculated using bootstrap standard errors with 250 replications.
- v <https://srcentre.com.au/lifeinaustralia/panel/>
- vi The estimated equation is $\text{LifeSatisfaction}_i = 3.113219 + 0.4561571 * \ln(\text{Income}_i)$
- vii Specifically, the Eigenvalue for the first factor is 3.79, and the second factor only 0.43. All factor loadings for the eight individual variables are greater than 0.5.
- viii Monthly CPI data was not available for the 12 months leading up to the earlier time period. As of the time of writing, monthly CPI is more up-to-date than quarterly CPI for the most recent time period.
- ix <https://www.ag.gov.au/about-us/publications/royal-commission-antisemitism-and-social-cohesion>
- x <https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-01/letters-patent-royal-commission-on-antisemitism-and-social-cohesion.pdf>
- xi <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/us/politics/obama-woke-cancel-culture.html>
- xii See, for example, John Burn-Murdoch's article on 'A new global gender divide is emerging' <https://www.ft.com/content/29fd9b5c-2f35-41bf-9d4c-994db4e12998?syn-25a6b1a6=1>