

# Purpose of Government Pulse

Australian attitudes towards government and democracy



Curtis Moore  
Mara Hammerle

**Cpd** CENTRE  
FOR POLICY  
DEVELOPMENT

# ABOUT CPD

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is an independent, not-for-profit policy institute with staff in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Jakarta.

Our vision is a fair, sustainable society and wellbeing economy that serves current and future generations in Australia and Southeast Asia.

Our mission is to help create transformative systems change through practical solutions to complex policy challenges. We tackle the hard questions, working towards change that is systemic and long-term.

Through our work, we aim to contribute to governments that are coordinated, collaborative, and effective, with an eye to both the near and longer term. We strive to build a social services system that helps people and communities to thrive now and in the future, and drive shifts in policy making practice with a focus on wellbeing and sustainability rather than primarily economic growth.

CPD uses a distinctive Create-Connect-Convince method to influence government policy making.

We acknowledge and celebrate Australia's First Peoples.

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# FOREWORD

ANDREW HUDSON

Democracy is built on trust — trust that elected governments act in the public interest, serve people fairly, and effectively address long-term challenges. Across the world, that trust is being tested.

Recent events have made the fault lines more evident. Wars in Ukraine, the Middle East and elsewhere have laid bare the fragility of a global order that is increasingly shaped by the whims of a few. Governments are struggling to respond to rising inequality, growing economic uncertainty, and extreme weather events driven by climate change.

In many democracies, public institutions struggle to keep pace with overlapping crises, while politics is stuck in short-term cycles, and more focused on spin and political point scoring than delivering solutions. Australia is not immune to these pressures.

For nearly a decade, the Centre for Policy Development's Purpose of Government Pulse has tracked public expectations of government and democracy. Our latest findings offer a degree of optimism and suggest future directions for government.

Australians continue to believe in fairness and equality as the core, guiding values of democracy. They see ensuring a decent standard of living as the primary role of governments and want governments to directly deliver social services to support that standard. They want governments to make the long-term wellbeing of the population a top priority in decision making. Australians want their governments to have an active, direct hand in supporting people to live decent lives.

But our findings also reveal growing unease. Australians feel politics is increasingly detached from their day-to-day experiences and that politicians do not serve their interests. Australians perceive that politicians prioritise short-term gains over lasting progress. Many feel disenfranchised and want a greater say in policymaking. This may explain why so many Australians turned away from the two major parties at the last federal election, and may do so again in 2025.

Restoring trust in government and democracy needs more than rhetoric. Governments must show that they can govern for the long term. This requires bold action that restores confidence in public services and prioritises wellbeing and fairness as the foundations of decision making.

In the run up to the 2025 federal election, the Purpose of Government Pulse offers a critical window into Australian public sentiment and shows that faith in democratic government must be actively sustained, and never taken for granted. We hope these insights will be a valuable resource for decision-makers, researchers, and all those working to strengthen democracy in Australia.



## KEY FINDINGS

### **Australians see the primary role of government as ensuring a decent standard of living.**

Since March 2023, this has been the top priority, with roughly one in three (31%) selecting this response. The shift likely reflects rising financial pressures and growing expectations that governments should address immediate economic concerns.

### **Fairness and equality remain at the heart of Australians' understanding of democracy.**

Despite shifting political and economic conditions, most Australians (33%) see upholding fairness and equality as the core purpose of democracy, reflecting the enduring ideal of a 'fair go.'

### **Wellbeing should be the top priority for governments.**

76% of Australians believe governments should put people's wellbeing ahead of short-term political or economic goals, reinforcing public expectations that governments should be focused first and foremost on supporting people to live with dignity and security.

### **Australians want governments to retain the capability to deliver social services directly.**

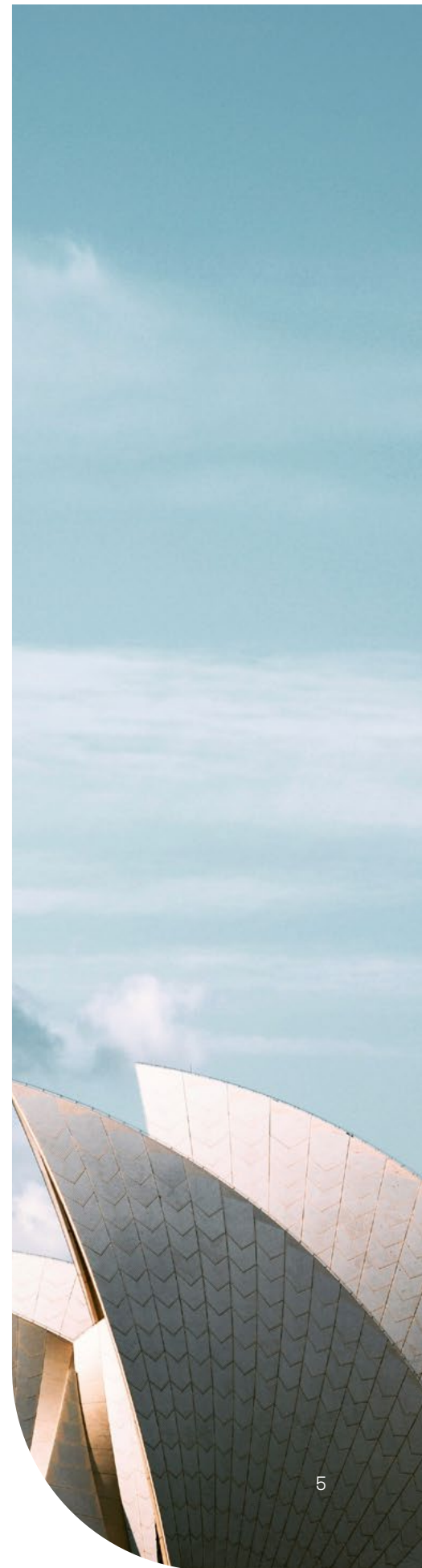
Despite high profile failures like the Robodebt scheme and aged care crises, 85% of Australians want governments to maintain the capacity to provide essential services such as healthcare, education and emergency services, particularly in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Australians think politics prioritises short-term gains over long-term challenges.**

Australians aren't convinced that long-term, existential challenges like climate disasters and housing affordability are top priorities, with 63% believing that quick wins are favoured in politics.

### **Australians feel unrepresented by politicians and want a greater say in policymaking.**

55% of Australians believe that politicians are focused on the wrong issues and do not serve the public interest. Australians are dissatisfied with how decisions are made, and 62% want more public involvement in setting government priorities.



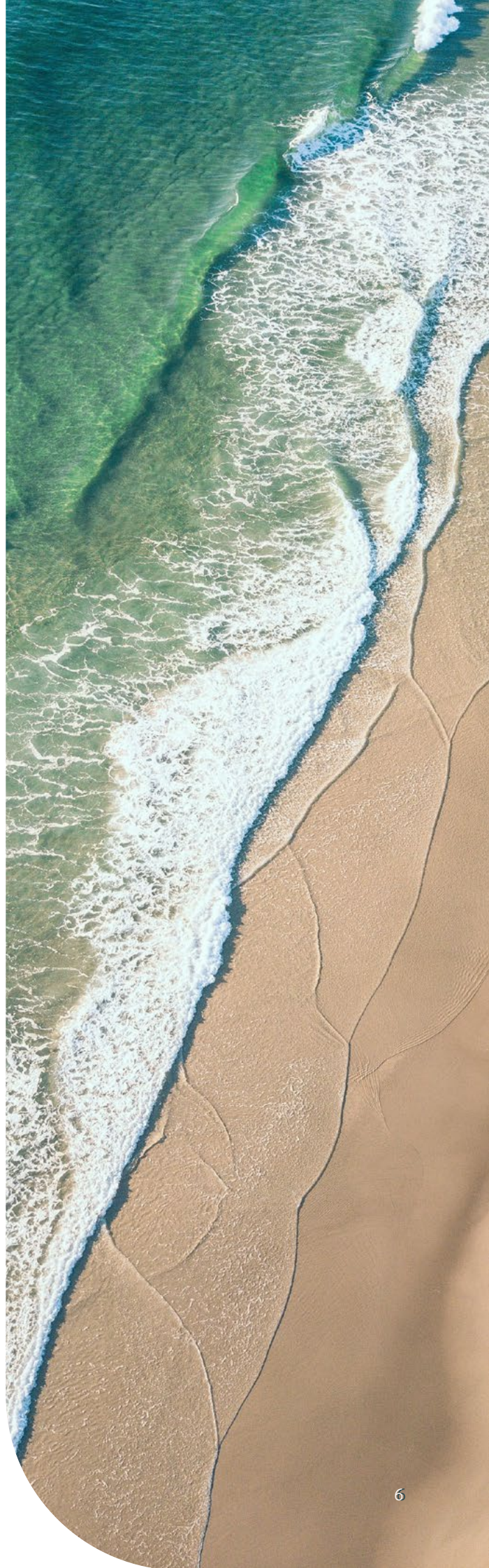
## OVERVIEW AND METHODS

This report examines the perspectives of Australians aged 18 and older on the purpose and functions of government, democracy, and the roles of federal, state/territory, and local governments.

The data is drawn from nine survey waves conducted by Essential Research between October 2015 and January 2025. Unless otherwise noted, findings reflect consistent trends across multiple waves, though most references highlight the latest polling results from January 2025. A full breakdown of results across all survey waves is available via the interactive data visualisation at [cpd.org.au](https://cpd.org.au).

Weighting is applied to the data using information sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The factors used in the weighting are age, gender, location (all from the latest ABS Census), previous vote (from the May 2022 Federal Election) and, starting with the late October 2023 poll, education (from the latest ABS Census).

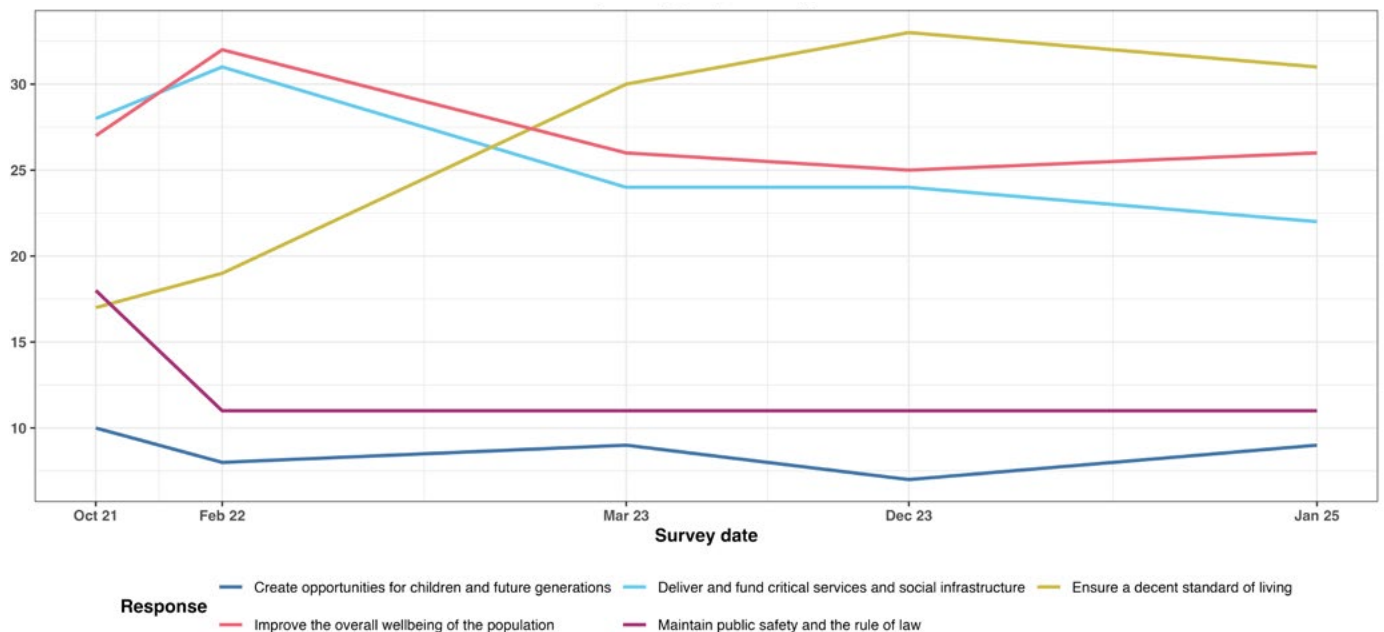
Unless otherwise stated, survey questions referring to 'government' did not specify a particular level, political party, or other distinction, allowing respondents to interpret the term as they saw fit.





## PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT

What do you think is the primary purpose of government?



### Overview

One in three (31%) respondents believe the primary purpose of government is to ensure a decent standard of living. Since March 2023, this has consistently ranked as the leading priority, maintaining a 3 to 8 percentage point margin over other options.

This marks a significant shift from earlier survey waves. In October 2021, “ensure a decent standard of living” ranked fourth (17%). By March 2023, as financial pressures associated with global inflation mounted, it had risen to first place (30%), where it has remained since. This shift likely reflects the sharp increase in the cost of living since early 2022, with economic challenges becoming a more immediate concern that Australians expect their governments to address.

This trend is further supported by a decline in respondents selecting “improve the overall wellbeing of the population” and “deliver and fund critical services and infrastructure”, the two previous leading responses. While these remain important, Australians may now view them as secondary, longer-term priorities, with more immediate economic concerns taking precedence.

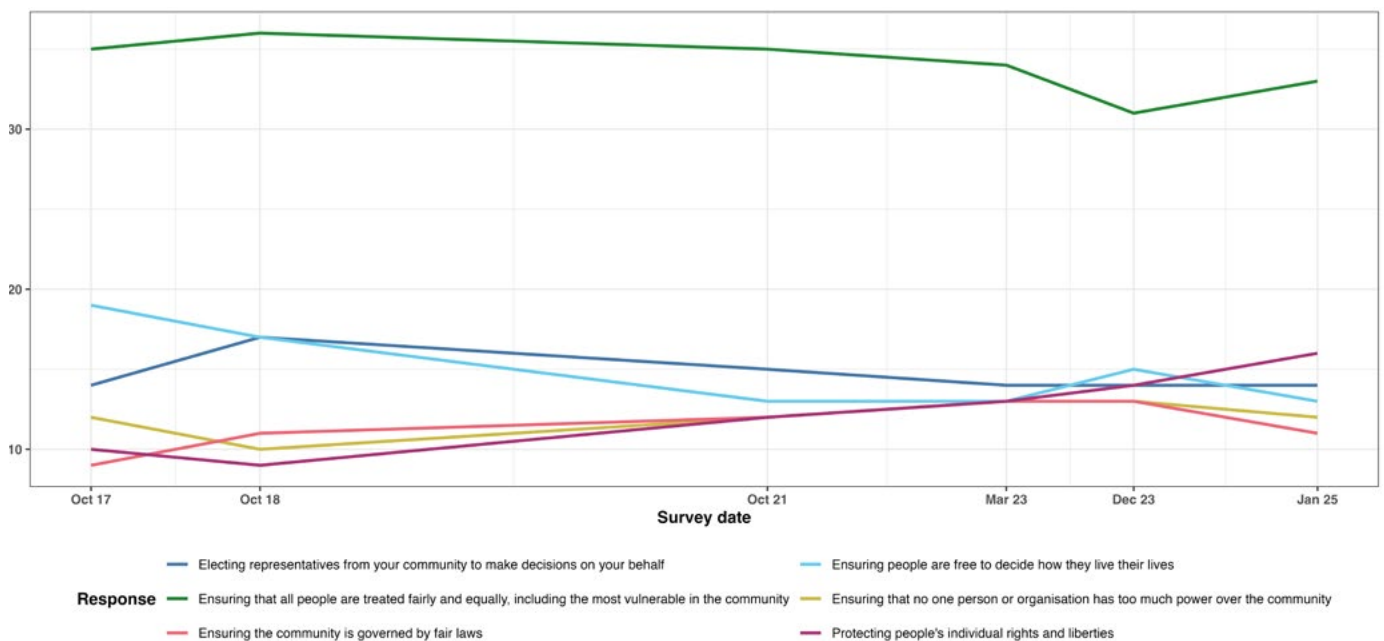
### Demographic differences

Notable differences across demographic groups:

- » **Gender:** Men are less likely than women to select “ensure a decent standard of living” as the primary purpose of government, with a 7-point gap in January 2025 (27% vs. 34%).
- » **Age:** Younger respondents (18-34) are considerably more likely than older respondents (55+) to select “create opportunities for children and future generations”, with a 13-point gap in January 2025 (16% vs. 3%).
- » **Education:** Respondents with a Year 12 or below education are more likely than university-educated respondents to select “ensure a decent standard of living”, with a 16-point gap in January 2025 (37% vs. 21%).
- » **Employment:** Compared to those respondents in paid work, respondents not in paid work (e.g. because they are retired, studying, unemployed etc.) are more likely to select “deliver and fund critical services and social infrastructure”, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (26% vs. 20%).

## PURPOSE OF DEMOCRACY

*What do you think is the main purpose of our democracy?*



### Overview

Australians have consistently viewed “ensuring that all people are treated fairly and equally, including the most vulnerable in the community” as the primary purpose of democracy, with 33% of respondents selecting this option in January 2025, 17 percentage points higher than the next most selected response. This has remained consistent across all survey waves since October 2017.

The persistence of this view suggests that fairness and equality are seen as core democratic values for Australians, largely unchanged by shifting economic or political conditions. This contrasts with views on the purpose of government, which have fluctuated over time in response to immediate pressure like a rising cost of living. The emphasis on fairness may also reflect the deeply held Australian ideal of a ‘fair go’.

Since October 2021, the rankings of the other five responses have remained relatively stable, with no single option exceeding 19% in any survey wave.

### Demographic differences

*Notable differences across demographic groups:*

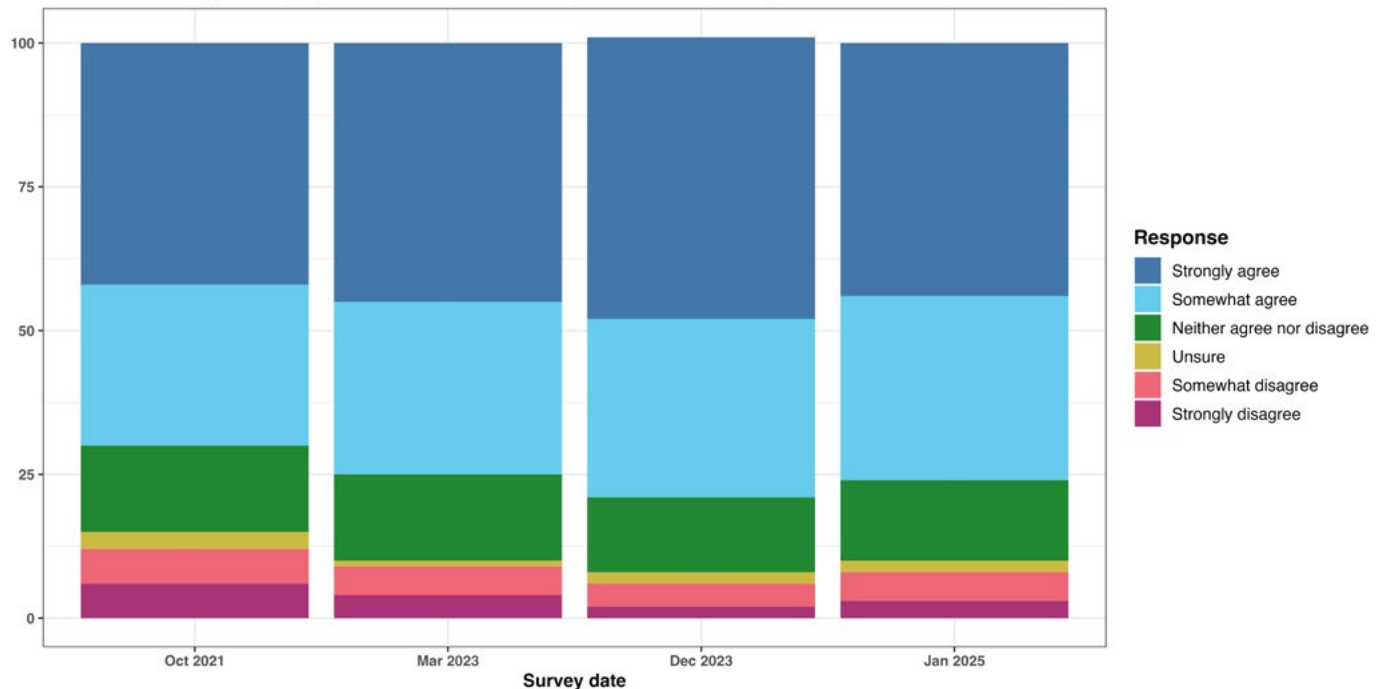
- » **Gender:** Men are less likely than women to view “ensuring that all people are treated fairly and equally, including the most vulnerable in the community” as the main purpose of democracy, with an 8-point gap in January 2025 (29% vs. 37%).
- » **Age:** Older Australians (55+) are more likely to prioritise fairness and equality as the core purpose of democracy than other age groups, particularly those aged 35-54, with a 12-point gap in January 2025.
- » **Vote:** From October 2017 to December 2023, Labor voters were consistently more likely than Coalition voters to select fairness and equality as democracy’s primary purpose, with a median 9-point gap. However, by January 2025, this trend had reversed, with Coalition voters now more likely than Labor voters to select this response, with a 5-point gap (30% vs. 35%).



## WELLBEING IN GOVERNMENT DECISIONS

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

The wellbeing of the population should be the top consideration in government decision making, above other concerns.



### Overview

Since this question was first asked in October 2021, a clear majority of Australians have consistently agreed that “the wellbeing of the population should be the top consideration in government decision-making, above other concerns,” with 76% agreement in January 2025.

The consistency of this response over time suggests a deeply held belief that people’s wellbeing should take precedence over other economic or political priorities. This view aligns with other findings in the survey, including strong support for fairness, equality, and the government’s role in ensuring a decent standard of living – pointing to a public expectation that government should play an active role in helping people lead good lives.

Disagreement with the statement remains low, with just 8% of respondents disagreeing in the most recent survey.

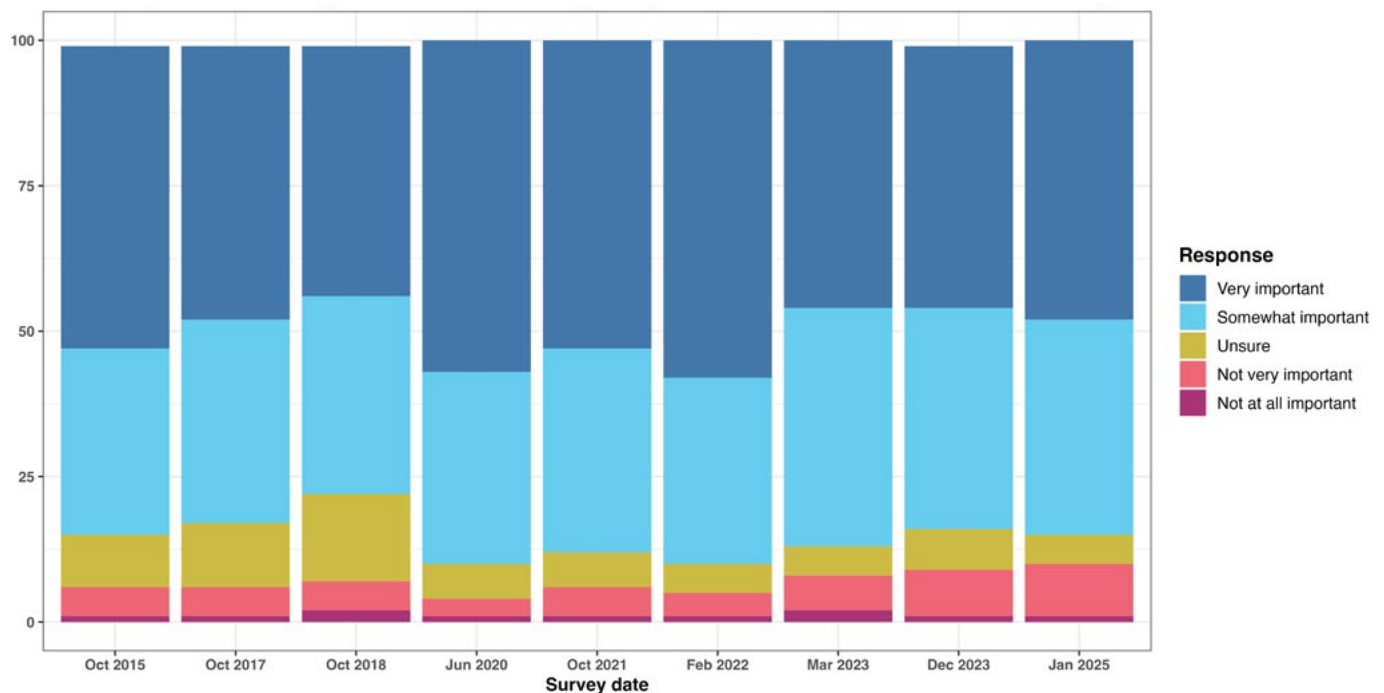
### Demographic differences

Notable differences across demographic groups:

- » **Age:** Younger Australians (18–34) are significantly less likely to agree with the statement than older Australians (55+), with a 23-point gap in January 2025 (64% vs. 87%).
- » **Education:** University-educated respondents are more likely to agree with the statement (81%) compared to those with a Year 12 or below education (75%) or a trade qualification (74%) in January 2025.
- » **Employment:** Australians not in paid work show higher agreement than those employed, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (80% vs. 74%).

## SERVICE DELIVERY CAPABILITY

*In the long term, how important is it that the government maintains the capability and skills to deliver social services directly?*



### Overview

Australians have consistently viewed it important for governments to maintain the capability and skills to deliver social services directly. In January 2025, 85% of respondents agreed it was important.

This sustained support suggests that Australians continue to value governments' role in providing social services, particularly in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic. This aligns with broader findings showing strong public expectations for government involvement in supporting wellbeing, fairness, and a decent standard of living.

While support for government service delivery has remained high — ranging from a low of 77% in 2018 to a peak of 90% in 2022 — there has been a gradual, albeit small, increase in those who view this as less important, rising from 5% in 2022 to 10% in January 2025. This shift may reflect growing public concern about well-publicised failures such as issues in aged care and the Robodebt scheme, which may have influenced perceptions of government performance over time.

### Demographic differences

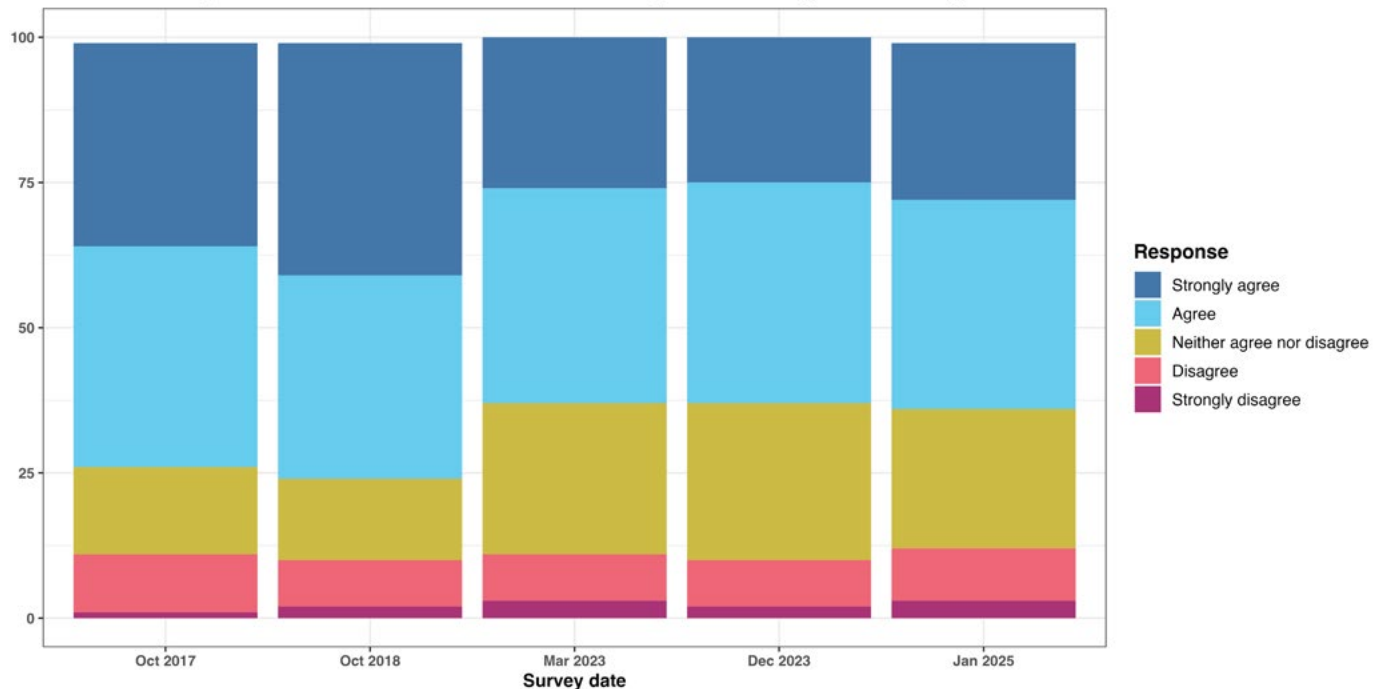
*Notable differences across demographic groups:*

- » **Age:** Younger respondents (18-34) are considerably less likely than older respondents (55+) to view this capability as important, with a 14-point gap in January 2025 (77% vs. 91%).
- » **Vote:** Labor voters are slightly more likely than Coalition voters to consider this capability important, with a 4-point gap in January 2025 (89% vs. 85%).

## SHORT-TERMISM IN POLITICS

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Our politics is more concerned with short-term gains than addressing long-term challenges affecting us, for example in ten years time.



### Overview

A clear majority of Australians continue to agree that politics is more focused on short-term gains than addressing long-term challenges, with 63% agreement recorded in January 2025.

Agreement was higher in earlier surveys, with 75% in October 2018 and 73% in October 2017. The key shift over time has been an increase in respondents selecting "neither agree nor disagree," which has grown from 16% in 2018 to 24% in January 2025.

This change is likely influenced by a survey design adjustment prior to the March 2023 poll, when the "don't know" option was replaced with "neither agree nor disagree". This appears to have drawn some respondents away from "agree", without affecting the level of disagreement, which has remained steady at around 10-12% across all survey waves.

### Demographic differences

Notable differences across demographic groups:

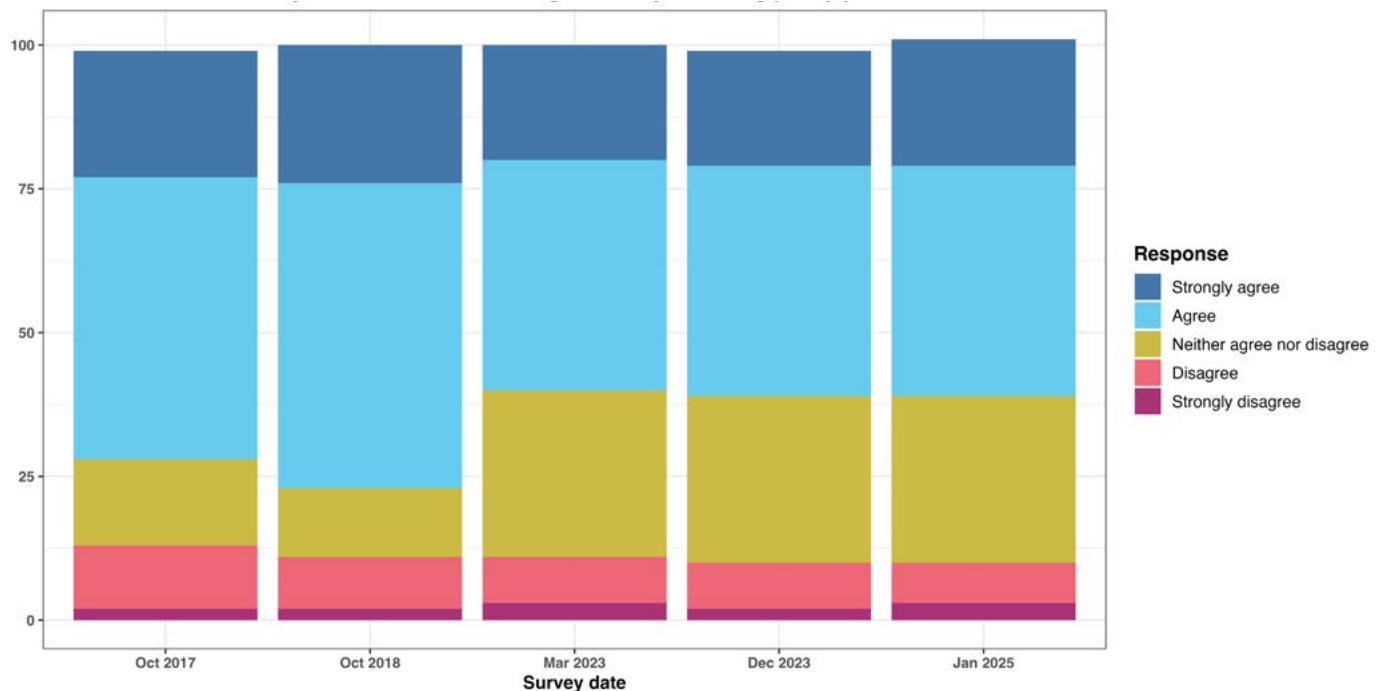
- » **Age:** Younger respondents (18-34) are less likely to agree with the statement than older respondents (55+), with a 26-point gap in January 2025 (49% vs. 75%).
- » **Education:** University-educated respondents have been more likely to agree with the statement than those with a Year 12 or below education, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (67% vs. 61%).
- » **Vote:** Labor voters are less likely than Coalition voters to agree with the statement, with a 10-point gap in January 2025 (60% vs. 70%).



## CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Ordinary citizens should have a greater say in setting the policy priorities of government.



### Overview

A clear majority of Australians continue to agree that ordinary citizens should have a greater say in setting the policy priorities of their governments, with 62% agreement recorded in January 2025.

While support remains strong, agreement was higher in earlier surveys, reaching 77% in October 2018. The decline since then has been largely driven by an increase in respondents selecting "neither agree nor disagree", which grew following a survey design change prior to the March 2023 poll that replaced the previous "don't know" option. This adjustment appears to have shifted some respondents away from "agree", while disagreement has remained stable at around 10-12% across all survey waves.

### Demographic differences

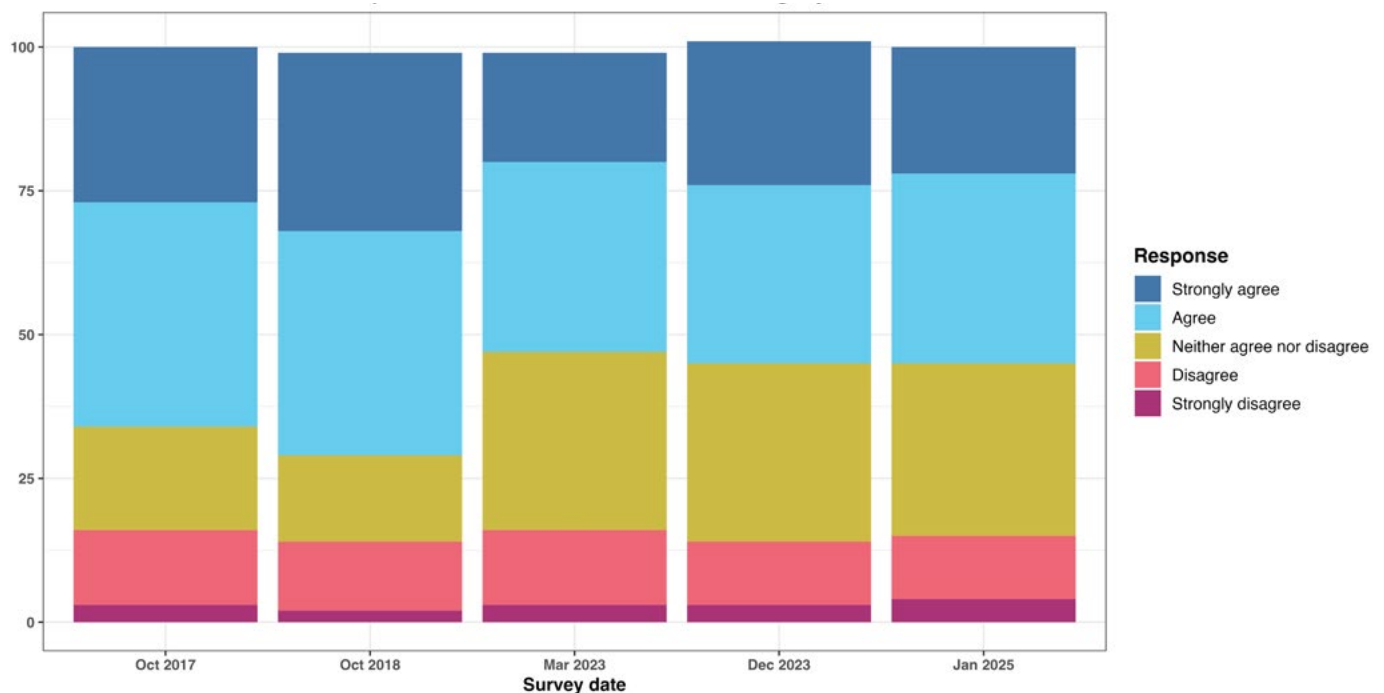
Notable differences across demographic groups:

- » **Age:** Middle-aged respondents (35-54) are less likely to agree with the statement than older respondents (55+), with a 13-point gap in January 2025 (58% vs. 69%).

## POLITICIANS DO NOT SERVE MY INTERESTS

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Our elected representatives do not seem to be serving my interests.



### Overview

A majority of Australians agree that politicians do not seem to be serving their interests, with 55% agreement recorded in January 2025.

While agreement has remained steady over the past three survey waves (from March 2023 to January 2025), this marks a noticeable decline from earlier years, when 70% of respondents agreed in October 2018. This decline has been largely driven by an increase in respondents selecting "neither agree nor disagree", following a survey design change prior to the March 2023 poll that replaced the previous "don't know" option. This appears to have shifted some respondents away from "agree", while disagreement has remained stable at around 14-16% across all survey waves.

### Demographic differences

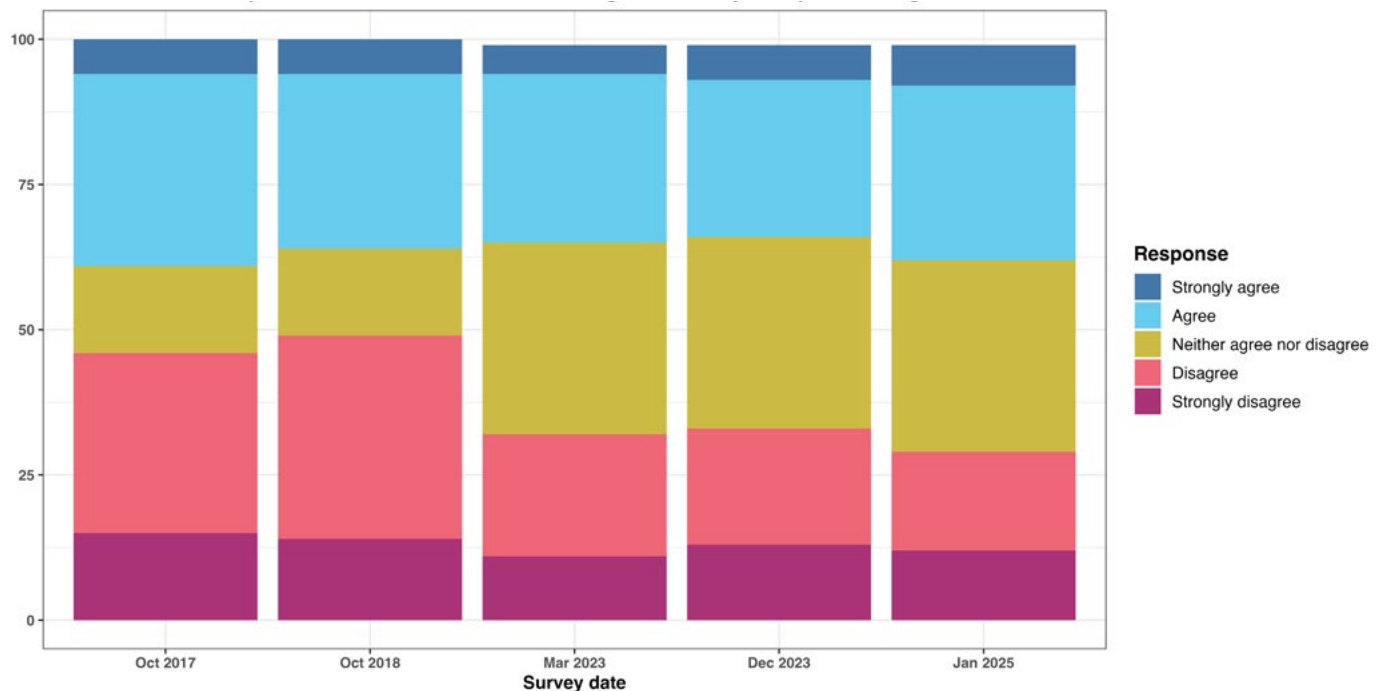
Notable differences across demographic groups:

- » **Age:** Younger respondents (18-34) are less likely to agree with the statement than older respondents (55+), with a 17-point gap in January 2025 (44% vs. 61%).
- » **Vote:** Agreement levels between Labor and Coalition voters tend to align with the party in power. In January 2025, with Labor in government, Labor voters were less likely than Coalition voters to agree with the statement, with a 22-point gap (41% vs. 63%). This has remained consistent since the March 2023 survey. In October 2018 however, when the Coalition was in power, Coalition voters were less likely than Labor voters to agree, with a more modest 8-point gap (68% vs. 76%).

## PARLIAMENTARY EFFECTIVENESS

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Our elected parliaments are generally effective at tackling major challenges for the country.



### Overview

Responses to this question are fairly evenly divided, with slightly more agreeing that elected parliaments are generally effective at tackling major challenges for the country. In January 2025, 37% of respondents agreed, while 29% disagreed and 33% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Since the previous survey in December 2023, there has been a modest shift in sentiment, with agreement increasing by 4 points (from 33% to 37%) and disagreement falling by 4 points (from 33% to 29%).

While results have been stable in recent years, there was a notable shift between 2018 and 2023, with the share of respondents selecting "neither agree nor disagree" rising from 15% to 33%. This coincided with a survey change prior to the March 2023 poll, replacing the "don't know" option, which likely moved some respondents away from "disagree", while agreement remained relatively steady between 33% and 39%.

### Demographic differences

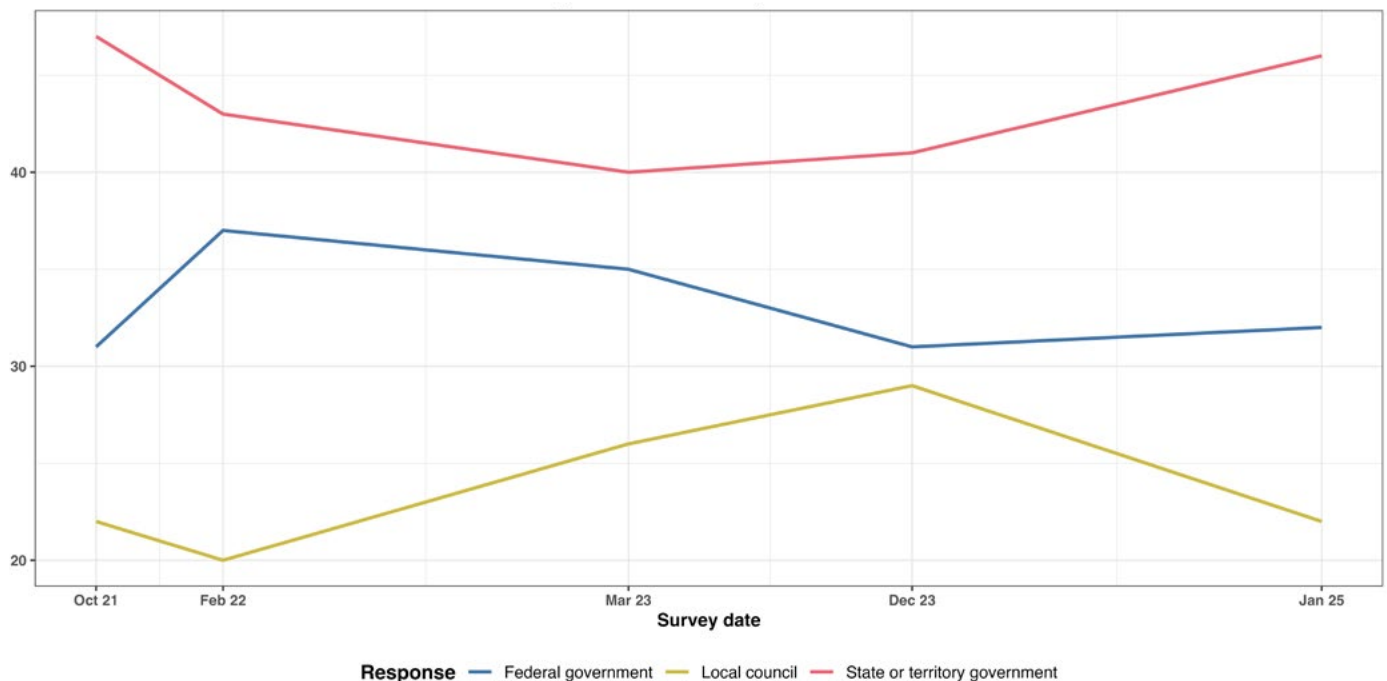
Notable differences across demographic groups:

- » **Age:** Older respondents (55+) are more likely to disagree with the statement than younger respondents (18-34), with an 8-point gap in January 2025 (35% vs. 27%).
- » **Vote:** Agreement levels tend to align with the party in power. In January 2025, with a Labor government in power, Labor voters were more likely to agree with the statement than Coalition voters, with an 18-point gap (54% vs. 36%). In October 2018, when the Coalition was in power, Labor voters were less likely to agree than Coalition voters, with a 26-point gap (30% vs. 56%).
- » **Education:** Respondents with a university level of education are more likely to agree with the statement than other respondents, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (44% vs. 37%).



## SERVICE DELIVERY (LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT)

*This level of government is most responsible for delivering services to the community.*



### Overview

Australians have consistently seen state and territory governments as primarily responsible for delivering services to the community. In January 2025, 47% of respondents identified state and territory governments as the most responsible for service delivery, 17 percentage points higher than the next most selected response of local council.

This likely reflects the visibility of the services states manage – such as schools, hospitals, public transport, and emergency services. It also helps explain why more respondents continue to associate service delivery with local councils than with the federal government, with a 7-point gap in January 2025 (30% vs. 23%). Like state governments, councils are closely linked to highly visible, everyday services, while the federal government's role tends to be less direct, focused on funding, policy, and coordination.

However, the gap between local and federal government has narrowed over time to 7 points, falling from 12 points in December 2023 (33% vs. 21%) and 11 points in March 2023 (33% vs. 22%).

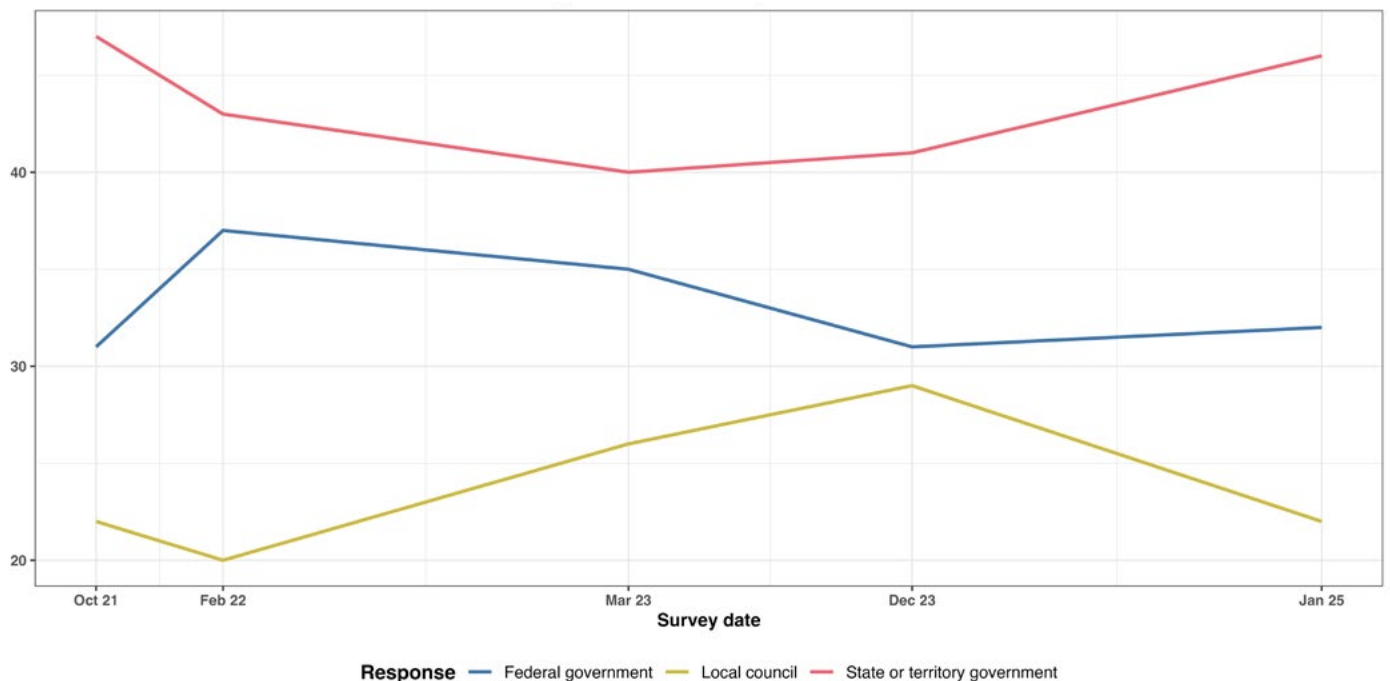
### Demographic differences

*Notable differences across demographic groups:*

- » **Gender:** Men are consistently more likely than women to associate service delivery with the federal government, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (26% vs. 20%).

## DIRECT BENEFIT (LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT)

*This level of government directly benefits me the most.*



### Overview

Australians continue to see state and territory governments as delivering the most direct benefit, with 46% of respondents selecting this option in January 2025. This maintains a 14-point lead over the next most selected option, the federal government, at 32%.

This again likely reflects the visibility of state-managed services, shaping perceptions of where the greatest benefit is received.

The January 2025 results also mark a shift from December 2023, when the gap between the three levels of government was narrower. In particular, the difference between the federal government and local councils has widened – from just 2 points in December 2023 (31% vs. 29%) to 10 points in January 2025 (32% vs. 22%).

This may reflect recent federal initiatives, such as tax cuts, energy bill relief and pay rises for public servants, which have provided more tangible benefits at a national level, while local councils have fewer opportunities to deliver large-scale direct benefits.

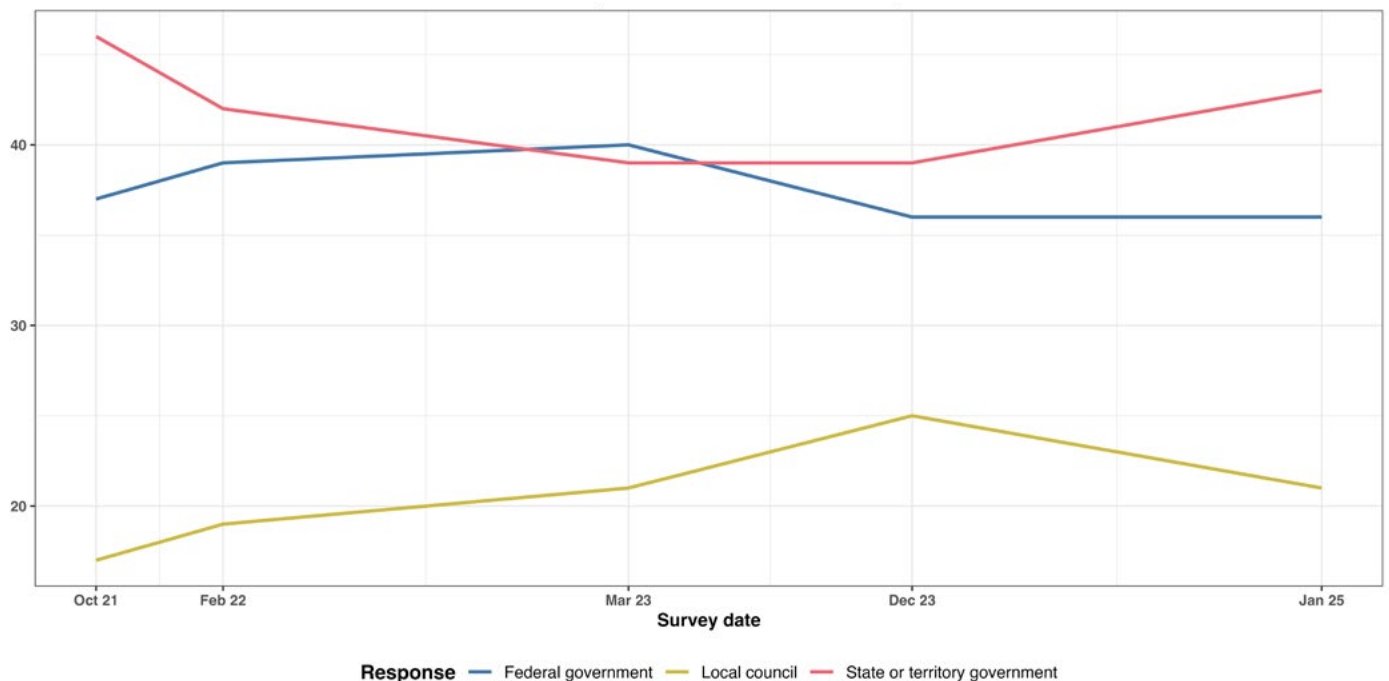
### Demographic differences

*Notable differences across demographic groups:*

- » **Gender:** While men and women both see state and territory governments as providing the most benefit, there is a noticeable difference in opinions on federal and local government. Men are more likely than women to believe the federal government provides the most direct benefit, with a 10-point gap in January 2025 (37% vs. 27%).
- » **Age:** Younger respondents (18-34) are more likely than older respondents (55+) to view state governments as providing the most direct benefit, with a 7-point gap in January 2025 (49% vs. 42%). They are also less likely to select the federal government, with a 9-point gap (26% vs. 35%).

## COMPETENCE (LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT)

*This level of government is the most competent.*



### Overview

In January 2025, state governments were seen as the most competent level of government, with 43% of respondents selecting them – 7 percentage points ahead of the federal government (36%).

Over time, perceptions of competence have remained relatively close between state and federal governments, suggesting Australians see both as playing significant and capable roles in managing services and responsibilities. Local governments, by contrast, have consistently been rated as the least competent, with just 21% of respondents selecting them in January 2025.

### Demographic differences

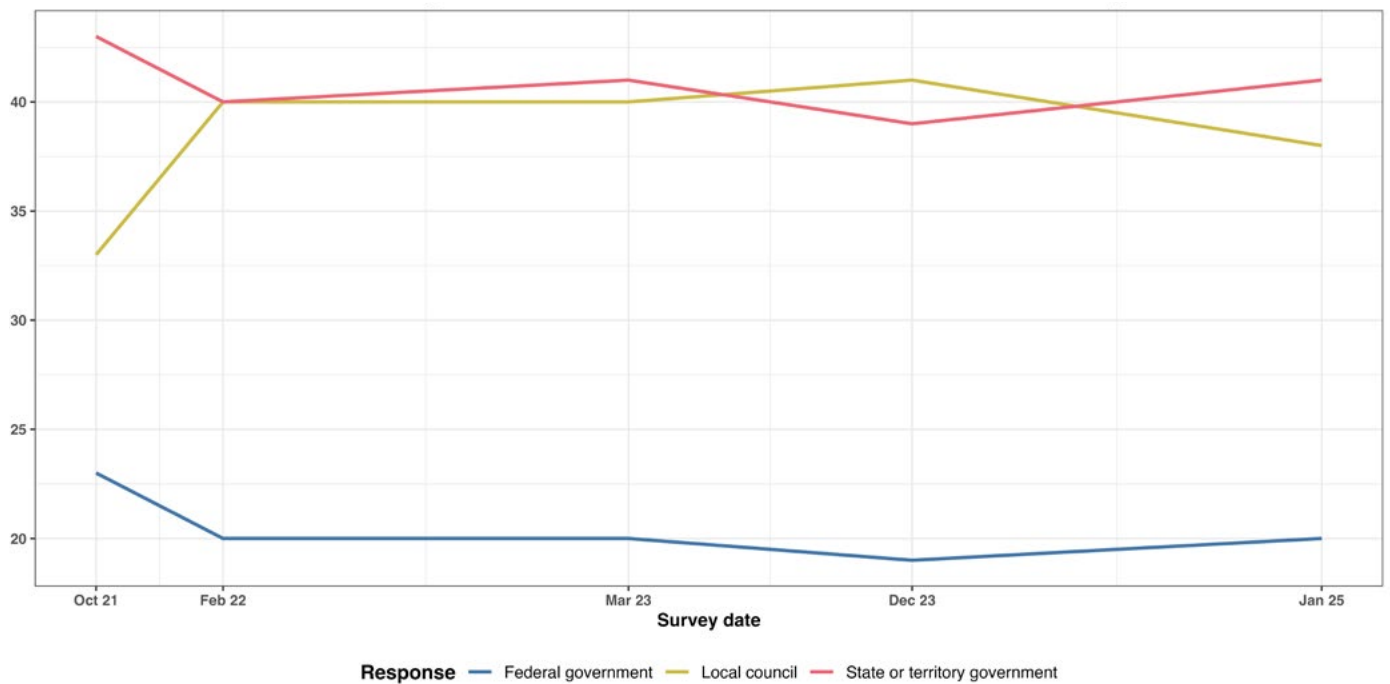
*Notable differences across demographic groups:*

- » **Vote:** Perceptions of government competence appear to align closely with the party in power. Between October 2021 and February 2022, when the Coalition was in government, Coalition voters were, on average, 28 points more likely than Labor voters to view the federal government as the most competent (55% vs. 27%). From March 2023 to January 2025, with Labor in government, Labor voters were, on average, 11 points more likely than Coalition voters to view the federal government as the most competent (45% vs. 34%).
- » **Gender:** Men are more likely than women to view the federal government as the most competent, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (39% vs. 33%).
- » **Age:** Older respondents (55+) are more likely than younger respondents (18-34) to see the federal government as the most competent, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (38% vs. 32%).



## COMMUNITY NEEDS AND INTERESTS (LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT)

*This level of government best reflects the interests and needs of the community.*



### Overview

State and local governments are consistently seen as better reflecting community needs and interests than the federal government. In January 2025, 41% of respondents identified state governments as best reflecting community needs – slightly ahead of local governments at 38%, with both levels well ahead of the federal government (20%).

This likely reflects the closer proximity of state and local governments to people's everyday lives. Both are responsible for services and infrastructure that directly affect communities – such as schools, hospitals, emergency services, roads, parks, and local planning – which can make them appear more responsive and attuned to local priorities. In comparison, the broad national policy focus of the federal government may be seen as more distant and less responsive to the needs of individual people and communities.

### Demographic differences

*Notable differences across demographic groups:*

- » **Gender:** While men and women rank state governments similarly, women are more likely to select local government as best reflecting community needs, with a 6-point gap in January 2025 (41% vs. 35%).



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