COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARDS POVERTY AND INEQUALITY, 2023: SNAPSHOT REPORT

A POVERTY AND INEQUALITY PARTNERSHIP REPORT

DECEMBER 2023

UNSW SYDNEY

acoss

ISSN: 1326-7124

ISBN: 978-0-85871-104-4

Thank you to those people directly affected who shared their knowledge and insights for this project.

Community attitudes towards poverty and inequality 2023: Snapshot report is published by the Australian Council of Social Service, in partnership with the University of New South Wales.

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About this report: This report is part of the Poverty and Inequality Partnership between ACOSS and UNSW Sydney. Find out more at
http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au

This report should be referenced (or cited) as follows: Treloar C, Bradbury B, Naidoo Y, Cama E, Brener L, Caruana T, Calabrese S, Dorsch P, Phillips J, Goldie C, Broady T (2023), *Community attitudes towards poverty and inequality 2023: Snapshot report* Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney

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Foreword

Community attitudes towards poverty and inequality 2023: Snapshot report is the latest report from the Poverty and Inequality Partnership led by ACOSS and UNSW Sydney. It is the 22nd report published by the Partnership.

This report gives a snapshot of the findings of a survey of the general community on issues surrounding poverty and inequality in Australia, and related social policies.

The report shows that the majority of people agree that poverty is a big problem in Australia. It also shows that most people agree that unemployment payments are insufficient, and that they could not live on the payment.

We hope that this report helps policymakers understand the public's opinions on these issues and strong support for action to reduce poverty and inequality.

We wish to express our deep appreciation of the organisations that have supported this partnership, including that of 54 reasons (part of the Save the Children Australia Group), ARACY, cohealth (a Victorian community health service), Foodbank Australia, Jesuit Social Services, Life Without Barriers, Mission Australia, SSI, and The Smith Family. Furthermore, we are grateful for the backing provided by philanthropic partners Hart-line and the Social Justice Fund, both of which are part of the Australian Communities Foundation, along with the invaluable support of John Mitchell.

Our sincere thanks to UNSW President and Vice-Chancellor Professor Attila Brungs for his support for the Partnership's work, along with the ACOSS Board and Emeritus Professor Eileen Baldry.

Edwina Macdonald, Acting CEO, ACOSS

Scientia Professor Carla Treloar, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney

Introduction

Community attitudes can have a major impact on social policy. Understanding the attitudes of the general community towards issues of poverty and inequality can help address misinformation.

In 2023, a new survey was established to examine community attitudes towards key aspects of poverty and inequality, and related social policies.

The findings in this report are useful to reflect on our current policy settings and think about what we want for the future of Australia.

ACOSS CEO Cassandra Goldie stated on the release of the Robodebt Royal Commission report earlier this year that *"community attitudes towards people who receive income support are strongly influenced by their political leaders... the narrative of taxpaper versus welfare recipient must end for good."*[1]

The results of this survey show that some progress towards ending this narrative is already underway, but there is still some way to go.

Key findings

Overall, the results of this survey show that the majority of people in Australia agreed that:

- Poverty is a big problem in Australia.
- We should look after people in need.
- Nobody deserves to live in poverty.
- The gap between people living in poverty and those on high incomes is too great.
- Government policies can both cause and solve poverty.
- People receiving unemployment payments should have enough income to cover meals and visits to the doctor.
- Australia should be a country that looks after those in need.
- They could not live on the current unemployment income support payments. Less than a quarter indicated that they could live on this amount.

1 ACOSS (2023) *ACOSS welcomes the Robodebt Royal Commission's report* Media release, 7 July 2023. Available: ***https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/acoss-welcomes-the-robodebt-royal-commissions-report/***

Main points

Most people in Australia are concerned about poverty and inequality in Australia. The survey responses indicate that most people in Australia believe that governments are responsible for the problem of poverty and have the tools to fix it.

In relation to unemployment payments, most people in Australia agreed that the current rate of payment is not sufficient and that payments should be enough so that people don't have to skip meals or visits to the doctor. We know from other research and from reports of increased demand for foodbanks and other services that people living on income support payments are making very difficult decisions about whether they can afford to feed themselves and their families.[2]

A very high proportion of people in Australia (86%) agreed that nobody deserves to live in poverty. This support fell to 59% when respondents were asked their views on people who receive unemployment payments, even though 78% believed that people can find themselves needing unemployment payments through no fault of their own. Only 23% agreed that they could live on the current single person rate of the unemployment payment. This points to a complex picture of attitudes among the general public that needs careful consideration in efforts to discuss social policy that impacts people receiving income support payments.

There was strong concern about the gaps between those on high incomes and those living in poverty. The results indicate strong support for increasing incomes of those at the lowest point of the income scale, but more interestingly, also reducing incomes for those at the highest.

The insights into community attitudes towards poverty and inequality presented in this report provide an opportunity for contemplating existing policy configurations and how we might change them to create the Australia we want.

2 Foodbank Australia (2023) ***Foodbank Hunger Report 2023*** Foodbank, NSW; ACOSS (2023) ***"It's not enough": why more is needed to lift people out of poverty*** ACOSS, NSW

Who completed the survey?

- 2,000 people from around Australia aged 18 years and above completed the 2023 survey
- 51.6% female, 47.9% male, 0.7% nonbinary or different term
- Average age 46.8 years
- 4.8% were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 22.4% were born overseas
- 43.4% had completed a university degree

Methodology

Participants were recruited via a market research panel coordinated by Qualtrics which operates a panel of potential participants who have signed up to be contacted for research participation opportunities.

The proportion of participants reporting as “agreeing” include those who responded “strongly agree” and “agree” to the question.

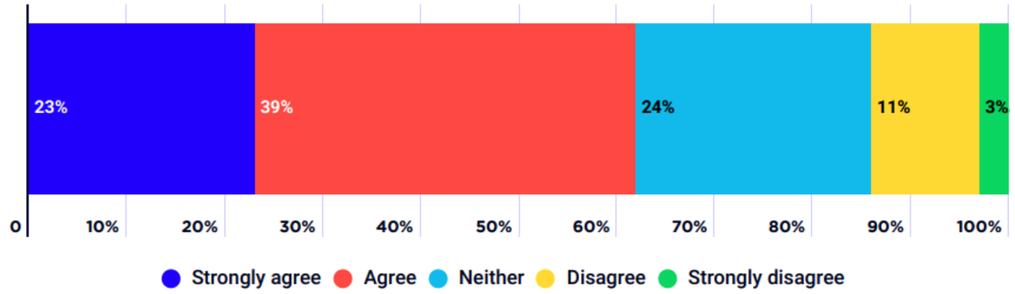
We applied a weighting method to the results of this sample so that the results are reflective of the general population (in relation to age and gender, voting preferences, education and income quintile) (see Appendix for details).

The percentages in the graphs below do not always add to 100% as a result of rounding.

Snapshot

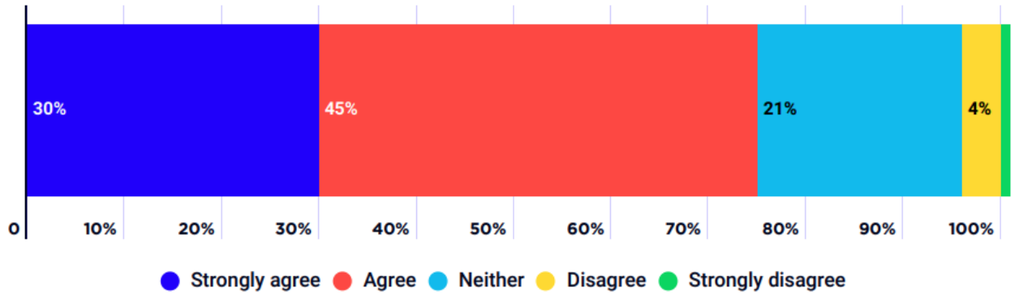
What are the attitudes of the community about the role of government policies in causing poverty in Australia?

Figure 1. Government policies have caused some people to be poor



62% of people in Australia agreed that agreed that government policies have caused some people in Australia to experience poverty.

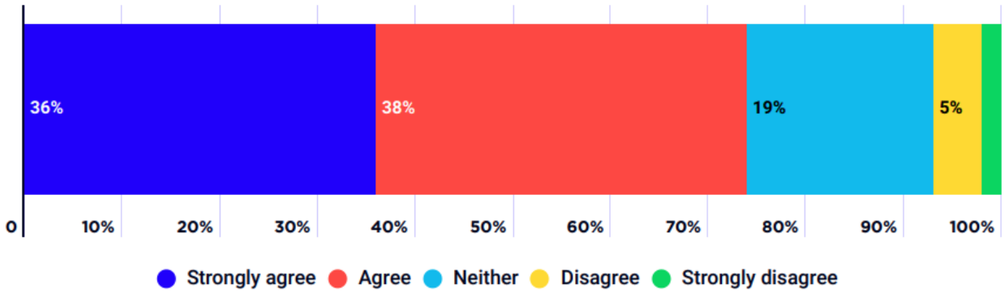
Figure 2. Poverty is a problem that can be solved with the right systems and policies



75% of people in Australia agreed that poverty is a problem that can be solved with the right systems and policies.

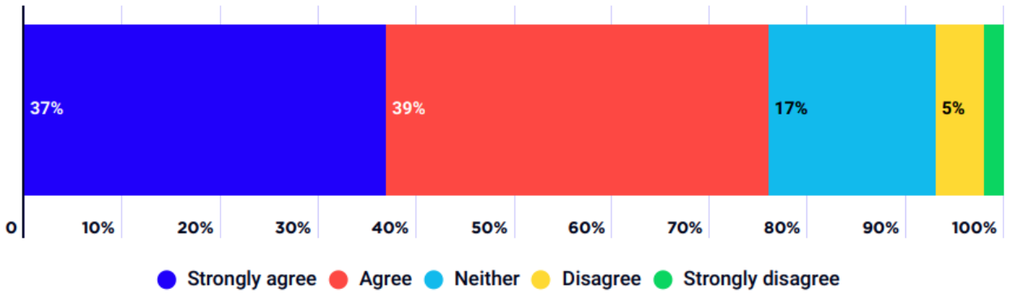
What are the attitudes of the community about inequality of incomes in Australia?

Figure 3. The gap between rich and poor is too great and should be reduced



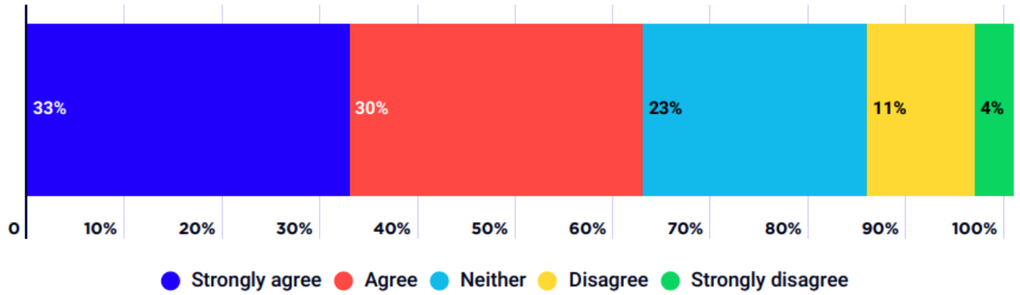
74% of people in Australia agreed that the gap between the wealthy and those living in poverty is too great and should be reduced.

Figure 4. Incomes at the bottom are too low and should be increased



76% of people in Australia agreed that the incomes of those on the lowest incomes are too low and should be increased.

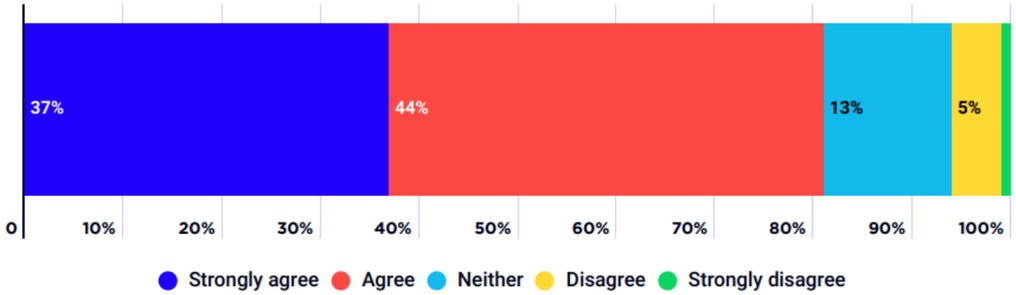
Figure 5. Incomes at the top are too high and should be reduced



63% of people in Australia agreed that the incomes of those with the most are too high and should be reduced.

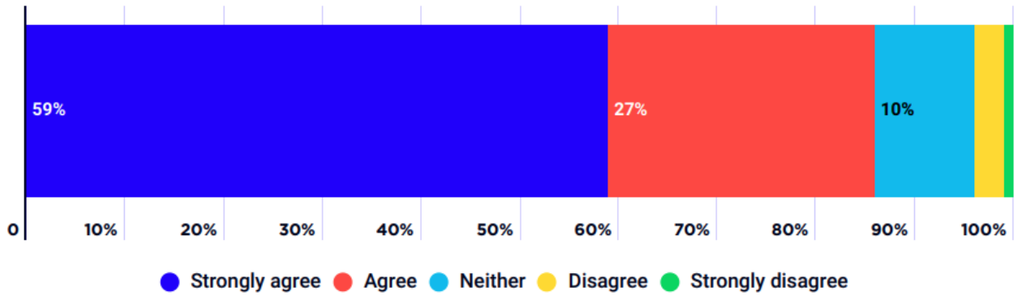
What are the attitudes of the community about people experiencing poverty?

Figure 6. People can experience poverty through no fault of their own



81% of people in Australia agreed that people can experience poverty through no fault of their own.

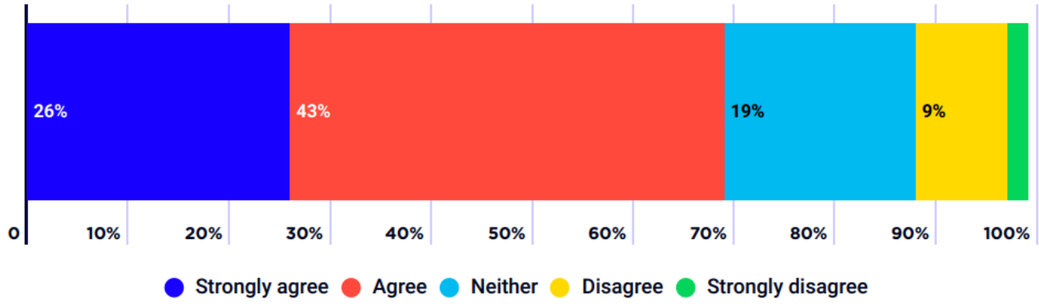
Figure 7. Nobody deserves to live in poverty



86% of people in Australia agreed that nobody deserves to live in poverty.

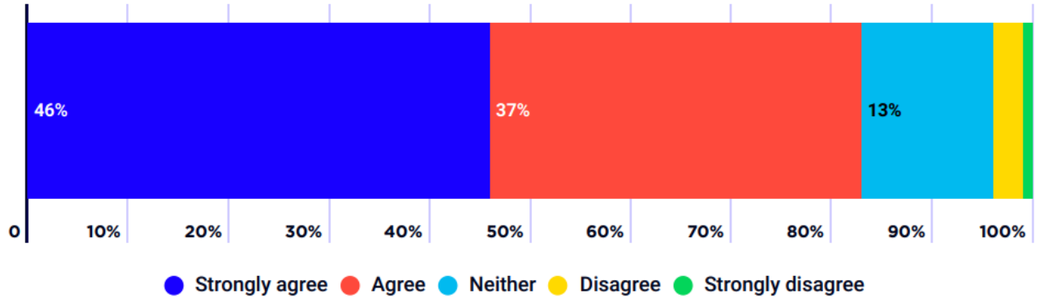
What are the attitudes of the community about poverty in Australia?

Figure 8. Poverty is a big problem in Australia today



69% of people in Australia agreed that poverty is a big problem in Australia today.

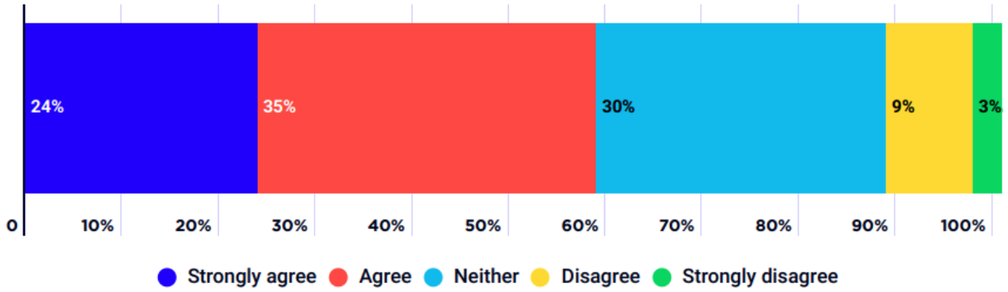
Figure 9. Australia should be a country that looks after those in need



83% of people in Australia agreed that Australia should be a country that looks after those in need.

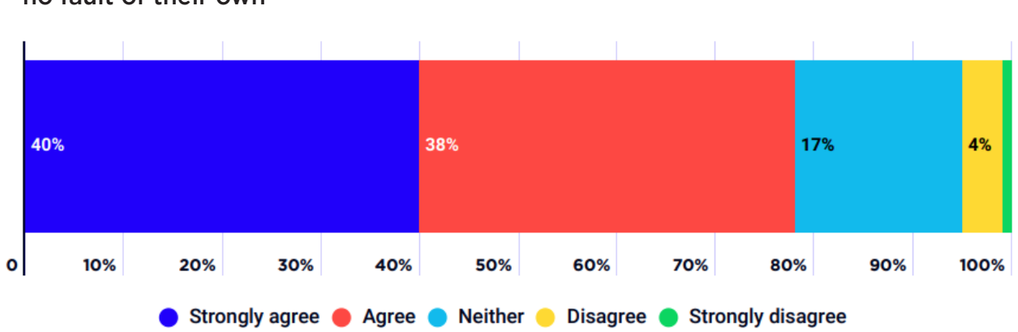
What are the attitudes of the community about people receiving unemployment payments?

Figure 10. People who receive unemployment payments do not deserve to live in poverty



59% of people in Australia agreed that people who receive unemployment payments do not deserve to live in poverty.

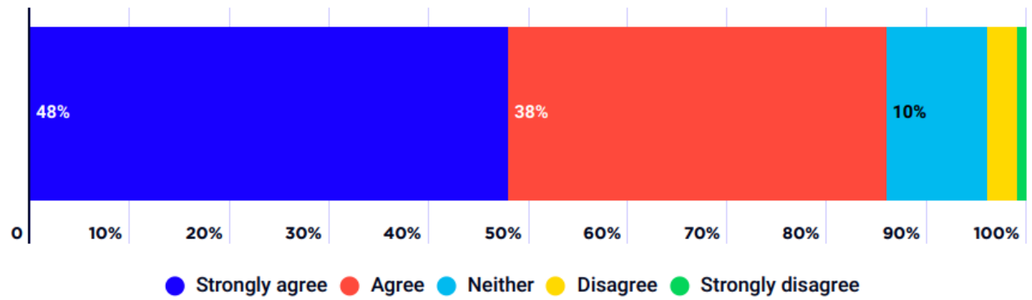
Figure 11. People can find themselves needing unemployment payments through no fault of their own



78% of people in Australia agreed that people can find themselves needing unemployment payments through no fault of their own.

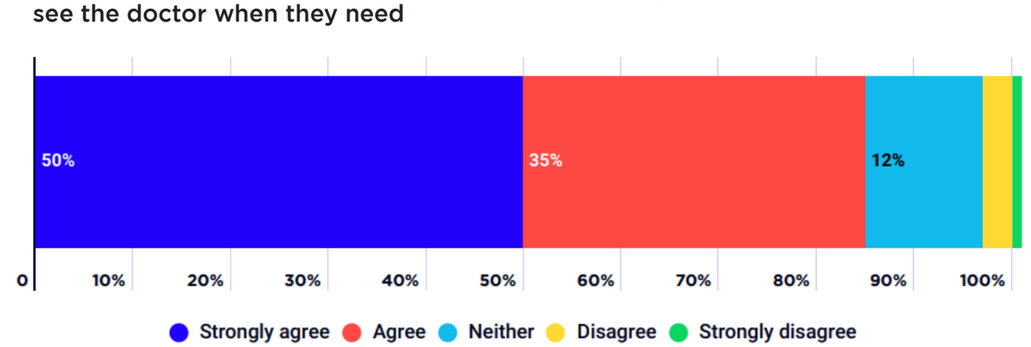
What are the attitudes of the community about policies to support people receiving unemployment payments?

Figure 12. Unemployment payments should be enough so that people don't have to skip meals



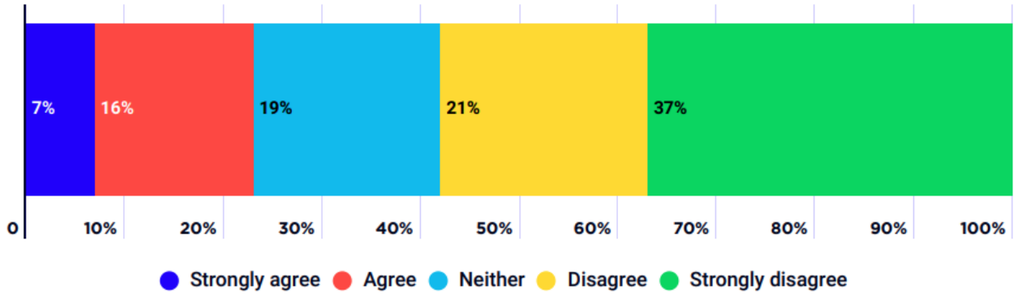
86% of people in Australia agreed that unemployment payments should be enough so that people don't have to skip meals.

Figure 13. Unemployment payments should be enough for people to be able to see the doctor when they need



84% of people in Australia agreed that unemployment payments should be enough for people to be able to see the doctor when they need.

Figure 14. I would be able to live on the current rate of unemployment payment



When asked if they would be able to live on the current rate of unemployment payment, 58% of people in Australia reported that they could not live on that amount, and 19% were unsure. Only 23% agreed that they could live on the current rate.

Appendix: Survey weighting methodology

Weights have been calculated to ensure that the distribution of key characteristics in the survey matches national aggregates.

Calibration variables

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample across age and gender, voting preferences, education and income quintile. Compared to the Estimated Resident Population (ERP), the survey under-sampled young men and older women while having a corresponding excess sample of older men and younger women.

To indicate political preferences, we asked respondents to recall to which party they gave their lower house first preference in the last federal election (in 2022). Around 12 per cent reported that they did not vote or did not remember. This is much smaller than the difference between the count of voters and the ERP – which is about 28 per cent. This latter gap comprises people who were under age 18 at the time of the election, people who were residents but not citizens, others who were not registered to vote, those who were registered but did not vote and those who voted informally. This is consistent with the assumption that the survey sample is more likely to comprise people who have a preference for expressing their opinion. We did not correct for this pattern – we define our weighting target to ensure that people reporting that they didn't vote are given an average weight. The other target percentages are set to match the relative votes for the different parties.

Among those voting, this implies that we have over-sampled Labor voters, but under sampled independent and other voters – with the percentage of Coalition and Greens voters close to the national fraction.

With respect to education, the survey under-samples people with less education: 11.5 per cent of the sample did not complete high school, compared to 21.1 per cent in the population.[1]

The survey also asked respondents to report their household gross income (before tax deducted). This information, together with information on the number of adults and children in their household, has been used to calculate a predicted household disposable income quintile group – based on a model estimated in the 2019-20 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Household Income Survey.[2] The sample included more lower-income households than the population. However, this calculation does involve many approximating calculations, and so we are less confident of this result.

1 The survey used a single education question while the Census uses separate questions for school and non-school education. We assume that people with a highest qualification of a certificate level I/II would choose the diploma/certificate option in our survey (Census reporting typically reports these people as having a less than year 12 qualification).
2 Compared with this single question approach, income is measured with a series of questions for each component for each household member in the income survey and income tax imputed by the ABS. A model was estimated predicting disposable income levels as a function of gross household income and composition, and this compared with the quintiles of the distribution. Income was assumed to have increased by 10% between the 2019-20 income survey and the survey in Q3 2023, based on trends in household disposable income per capita.

Weighting methods

To ensure the simultaneous attainment of all four sets of targets we use an iterative proportional fitting method as implemented in the ABS GREGWT algorithm.[3] This estimates a weight for each case which is as close as possible to the original weight (the total population divided by the sample size for all cases) while ensuring that the weighted percentage distributions match the target distributions. The estimates here use the exponential distance function. The procedure also generates replicate weights which can be used for calculating variance estimates for weighted estimates.

The weight distribution generated by our preferred model is shown in the right-hand half of Table 1. As required, the percentage distributions in the weighted survey perfectly matches the target distributions, with the mean relative weights equal to the ratio between the survey and target percentages. The smallest weights are 0.2 times the average weight, and the largest weights around nine times the average weight.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000), *GREGWT and TABLE macros – Users Guide.*

Table 1. Survey and calibration data distributions for preferred weights

		Survey	Target	Ratio	Weighted survey	Relative weight		
		%	%		%	mean	min	max
Age and Gender (ERP)								
18-34	Male	8.6	15.3	1.8	15.3	1.8	0.6	8.8
35-64	Male	25.3	24.0	1.0	24.0	1.0	0.3	4.4
65+	Male	14.4	9.9	0.7	9.9	0.7	0.2	4.0
18-34	Female	21.3	14.9	0.7	14.9	0.7	0.2	3.5
35-64	Female	24.8	24.7	1.0	24.7	1.0	0.3	3.1
65+	Female	5.8	11.1	1.9	11.1	1.9	0.5	9.6
Total		100.0	100.0	1.0	100.0	1.0	0.2	9.6
First preference in last election (AEC)								
Labor		39.2	28.5	0.7	28.5	0.7	0.2	3.2
Liberal/Nationa/Lib nat/Country L		30.4	31.2	1.0	31.2	1.0	0.3	4.9
Greens		10.1	10.7	1.1	10.7	1.1	0.3	5.1
Independent/Other		7.9	17.0	2.2	17.0	2.2	0.6	9.6
Missing		12.5	12.5	1.0	12.5	1.0	0.3	4.7
Total		100.0	100.0	1.0	100.0	1.0	0.2	9.6
Highest education level (Census)								
Up to year 11		11.5	21.1	1.8	21.1	1.8	0.7	9.6
Completed year 12		17.0	17.5	1.0	17.5	1.0	0.3	5.5
Diploma/certificate		28.2	30.2	1.1	30.2	1.1	0.3	5.0
Undergraduate/postgraduate		43.4	31.3	0.7	31.3	0.7	0.2	3.3
Total		100.0	100.0	1.0	100.0	1.0	0.2	9.6
Estimated quintile of equivalent household disposable income								
1		27.3	20.0	0.7	20.0	0.7	0.2	4.9
2		18.1	20.0	1.1	20.0	1.1	0.4	7.4
3		18.1	20.0	1.1	20.0	1.1	0.4	8.8
4		20.5	20.0	1.0	20.0	1.0	0.4	5.1
5		16.1	20.0	1.2	20.0	1.2	0.5	9.6
Total		100.0	100.0	1.0	100.0	1.0	0.2	9.6

Note: Survey N=2000. National Estimated Resident Population target (for age 18+)= 20,510,517. Mean weight = 10,255. Relative weights are weights relative to this mean. Calibration data sources (for the target column): Age and gender: estimated resident population of people aged 18+, ABS, Population clock and pyramid (estimates for October 2023). (Gender randomly imputed for non-binary responses). First preference vote for House of Representatives in 2022 as recorded at ***https://results.aec.gov.au/27966/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-27966-NAT.htm***. Vote distribution only applied to those who reported a vote. (Missing vote fixed at survey %). Highest education level from ABS Census 2021 (for those aged 18+). Quintile of income imputed from survey responses and ABS income survey data.

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