



FLINDERS SOCIAL MONITOR



Monitoring and analysing our community and social life to explore future options for society and policy

In 2006-7 the Flinders Social Monitor is using the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (AuSSA) to monitor changes in social life and examine their impact on everyday lives in South Australia. AuSSA is a biennial mail survey that gathers opinions from approximately 4,000 Australians aged 18 or above who are selected randomly from the Electoral Roll. It is managed by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU (<http://aussa.anu.edu.au/>). In 2005, the Flinders Social Monitoring and Policy Futures Network commissioned a special sample of South Australians resulting in 1,019 SA respondents. Details about this survey can be found in the Social Monitor 'About AuSSA'.

Religious affiliation and moral conservatism in Australia and South Australia

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The endurance and in some cases resurgence of religion as a source of meaning in Western society has prompted new questions about its character and influence in contemporary society. For example, many observers have asserted with little evidence that religious identification corresponds to support for moral conservatism. Using AuSSA attitudinal data this Social Monitor article examines the diversity of political beliefs within and between the major religious groups in Australia and South Australia. In particular we focus on the contentious issues of Christian values in politics and the right of women to choose an abortion. The data demonstrates that social progressivism remains a vital force in Australia and South Australia.

Religious affiliation

A large percentage of Australian respondents nominate having a religion (71.7%). The South Australian sample reflects this majority (67%). Of those that had a religious affiliation in Australia, the major denominations were Catholic (33%), Anglican (29%), and Uniting Church/Methodist (11.9%). This compares to the South Australian population sample of Catholic (27%), Anglican (24.7%) and Uniting Church/Methodist (18.8%). However, less than a quarter of members of the major Christian denominations attend church weekly: Catholics (23.7%), Anglican (5.7%), Uniting Church/Methodist (14.9%). Church attendance in South Australia follows this trend with Catholics (21%), Anglicans (5%), and Uniting Church/Methodist (19.5%) indicating that they attend a religious service at least once a week. We can conclude that while there is a high level of religious affiliation there is not a strong level of commitment to religious institutions in both Australia and South Australia.



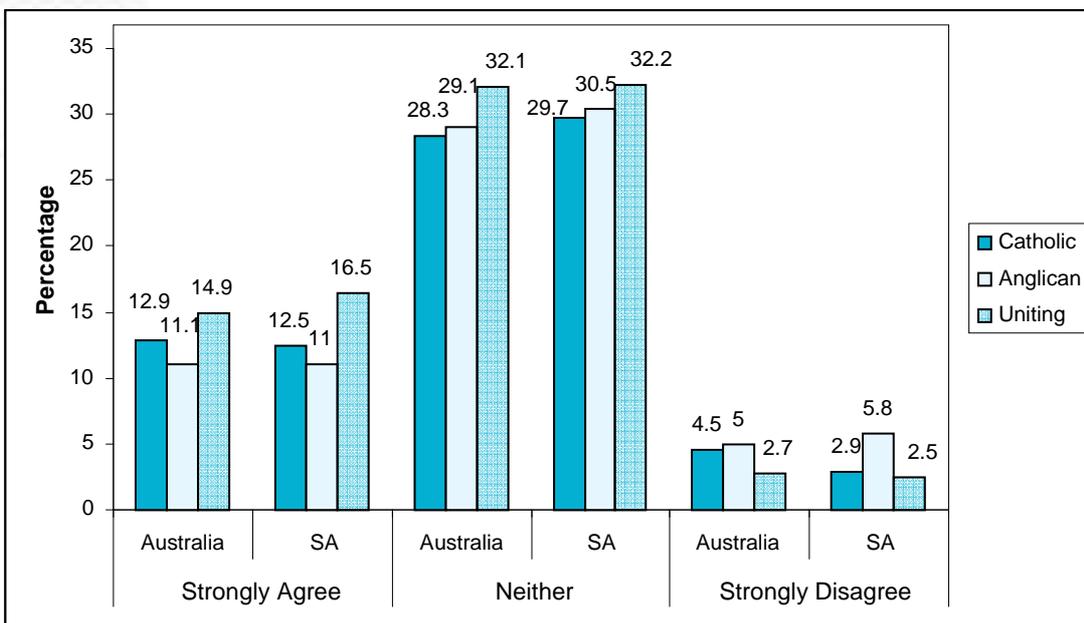
Church and state

The following section considers the relationship between religious affiliation and attitudes towards Christian values in politics. Church/state relations have been central to the debate regarding religious conservatism in contemporary society. In his influential book *Culture Wars* (1991) James Davison Hunter argued that along with other "hot-button" issues such as abortion, censorship and gun politics, the separation of church and state had come to polarize the electorate in the United States between those that have "progressive" and those that have "orthodox" impulses. Journalists, politicians and scholars alike have also suggested that there is a 'culture war' underway in Australia, resulting in a dramatic polarization of moral worldviews (Manne 2005; McKnight 2005; Wark 1997).

Evidence for an Australian culture war is often sought in the controversial initiatives by the Howard government to encourage the involvement of religious institutions in civil society. These include the appointment of the former Anglican Archbishop Peter Hollingworth as Governor General, preferential treatment to church-conducted employment agencies, and the recent allocation of funds supporting Chaplaincy in schools. However, it is unclear if such controversies equate to a widespread desire by Australian Christians for religious influence in politics.

In the AuSSA Survey, when those with a religious affiliation were asked if "Politicians should make decisions that follow Christian values", only a minority strongly agreed with this statement; Catholics (12.9%), Anglicans (11.1%) and Uniting Church/Methodist (14.9%). The most popular response for members of all three denominations was that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement; Catholic (28.3%), Anglican (29.1%), Uniting (32.1%). South Australian data also showed no great level of support for Christian values in politics with only 12.5% Catholic, 11% Anglican and 16.5% Uniting Church/Methodist strongly agreeing with this statement. Far from there being political polarisation around the separation of the church and state, the survey results indicate that amongst the majority of Australians with a religious affiliation there seems to be a healthy respect for secular government.

Diagram 1: Politicians should make decisions that follow Christian values

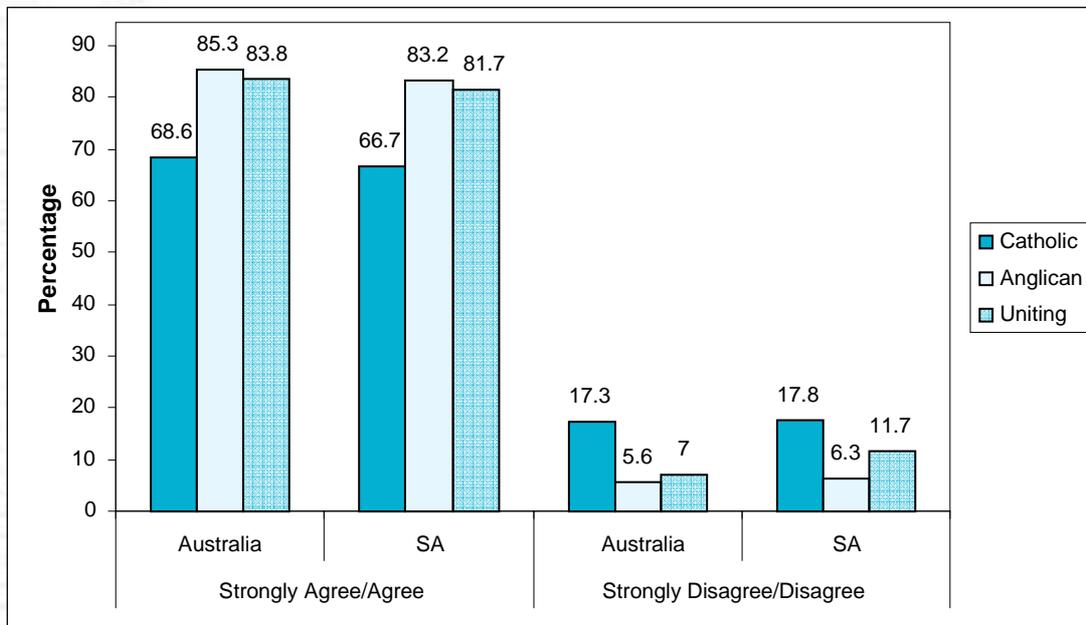




Attitudes towards abortion

In recent decades there have been few issues more controversial than abortion. However, what is the distribution of this political polarisation? In the AuSSA survey, when asked whether they agreed that “women should have the right to choose an abortion” a large majority of those with a religious affiliation either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement; Catholic (68.8%), Anglican (85.3%), Uniting Church/Methodist (83.8%). Very few disagreed or strongly disagreed: Catholic (17.3%), Anglican (5.6%), Uniting Church/Methodist (7.0%). The South Australian sample was as progressive with a similar overall majority in the Christian denominations agreeing or strongly agreeing that women should have the right to choose an abortion; Catholics (66.7%), Anglican (83.2%), and Uniting Church/Methodist (81.7%). Again only a minority disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement; Catholics (17.8%), Anglican (6.3%), Uniting Church/Methodist (11.1%).

Diagram 2: Women should have the right to choose an abortion



Concluding remarks

Using AuSSA survey data this article finds little evidence to suggest that religious affiliation in itself corresponds with moral conservatism or that social opinion can be easily divided between secular and religious values. Examining responses to survey questions regarding Christian values in politics and the issue of abortion, we find a diversity of moral judgements by those with a religious affiliation. Where a vast majority of Australians and South Australians nominate a religious affiliation there is not widespread support amongst this population for politicians to adopt or reject religious convictions. The issue of abortion also indicates the strength of social and religious progressivism in Australia with a clear majority of Christians supporting the right of women to choose an abortion. If such topics of debate are a source of a ‘culture war’ in Australia then we must appreciate that there is considerable fragmentation of social opinion amongst those affiliated with a religious institution.



References

Hunter, James Davison. (1991) *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.

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McKnight, David. (2005) *Beyond Right and Left: New Politics and the Culture Wars*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

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All data from this publication is sourced from:

Wilson, S. et. al. (2006) *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2005* [computer file] Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, Canberra