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Australian voters' views since the voice referendum: key messages

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Australian voters' views since the voice referendum: Key messages

Katharine Betts and Bob Birrell

Tapri's December 2023 survey provides a window on voters' opinions since the voice referendum. The survey is the basis for our reports on these opinions and their wider political implications. This paper presents the key messages. A full report is available on the Tapri website.

Key messages - a summary

On the 14th of October the Australian Government held a referendum on whether Indigenous Australians should have a separate voice to parliament, enshrined in the constitution. Just over 60 per cent voted 'No'. The main reason that 53 percent of them gave for this was that they thought the proposed voice would undermine Australian solidarity. Only 14 percent said that the government should rather be focussing on the cost of living.

This finding was important because 57 per cent of all voters said that they had a strong sense of belonging to Australia.

Thus, most voters do not support movements which might diminish this solidarity, such as the expansion of Aboriginal political autonomy by way of a separate chapter in the constitution. Nor do they support causes such as gender self-identification or other plans to increase diversity, all of which enhance minority causes.

There is a huge age gap on these issues. A significant factor is that older voters report a far higher sense of belonging to Australia than do younger voters. Some 77 percent of 60-74 year olds felt a sense of belonging to Australia to 'a great extent', compared with only 32 per cent of voters aged 18-29.

This link is evident with voters' positions on proposals to change the date of Australia Day. Only 22 percent of voters aged 60-74 were in favour of changing the date compared with 48 per cent of those aged 18-29.

A high share of voters born overseas, including 59 per cent of those born in Europe, also felt a sense of belonging to Australia to 'a great extent'.

These people were once mostly Labor supporters, because of the party's support for multiculturalism. This European-born group are now predominately supporters of the Coalition.

This is not (yet) the case for Asia-born voters, who are much more likely to be Labor voters.

Many voters oppose high immigration levels. Some 49 per cent want a drastic cut, compared with 38 per cent who favour either current levels or 'somewhat lower levels' (a further 13 per cent had no opinion).

Most voters do not support a Big Australia. A decisive 71 per cent say Australia does not need more people.

Despite these results, there is a far more volatile issue, one capable of changing voters' preferences. This is the impact of the current cost-of-living and housing crises.

Forty-eight per cent of voters say that they are only just getting by, or doing so with difficulty, or great difficulty.

This group is in favour of higher taxes on high-income earners and big business to help deal with their problems. They also favour Labor and the Greens relative to the Coalition.

The housing crisis has even greater political implications. Young voters face a lifetime of renting and long-term financial insecurity.

They too favour Labor and the Greens. However, they are swinging more towards the Greens. A startling 26 per cent of voters aged 18-29 intend to vote Greens, almost as high as the 30 per cent who intend to vote Labor.

This outcome explains why, between the May 2022 vote in the Federal election and December 2023, there has been an overall four percentage points swing of voters from Labor to the Greens.

This is likely to continue because the housing crisis will deepen as housing supply continues to fall behind housing demand. The Greens, with their radical proposals to solve the shortfall in housing supply, are more competitive than Labor in attracting the younger cohort of voters. The Greens' refusal to consider the impact of migration is also largely in tune with the attitudes of younger voters.

Key messages from the Tapri December 2023 Survey

The context for the December 2023 Tapri survey
In May 2022 Labor was elected on a progressive agenda. This featured action on climate change and support for Aboriginal aspirations for a separate voice to Parliament, one to be preserved in the constitution. Labor was also committed to supporting wage growth and dealing with voters' concerns about the cost of living.

After the election many political commentators thought Labor's lead was unassailable. It was built on support from young people as well as the growing constituency of university graduates. Added to these were the many diverse minorities, including the surge in Asian migrants, minorities keen to advance the interests of their communities. These migrants have tended to support Labor, because of its embrace of immigration and multiculturalism.

The Coalition's constituency was based on older voters, most of whom had for years opposed Labor's progressive cultural agenda. This group, it was said, would decline as the older generation moved on. According to our December 2023 survey 49 per cent of 60-74-year-old voters intended to vote Coalition, compared with just 31 per cent of 18-29 year old voters and 36 per cent of 30-44 year old voters (Table 12 below).

Most commentators also thought that Australia would be immune from the surge in right-wing populism in Europe and the US, a movement which has rejected much of the prevailing progressive agenda there. Immigration, which has been a prominent trigger for right-wing movements in Europe and the US, was barely mentioned during Australia's 2022 election.

Events since May 2022 have challenged these expectations. To the surprise of its supporters, voters rejected the proposed voice amendment with 60 percent voting No.

Second, there has been an extraordinary surge in Australia's net overseas migration, up to 518,000 in 2022-23, a surge which is yet to abate. These migrants have been arriving during a serious housing crisis.

Third, cost-of-living and housing affordability issues reached crisis point during 2023.

The Tapri national survey of voters in December 2023 was designed to explore these issues and their impact on voting intentions.

The voice referendum

The voice referendum was lost resoundingly. Some commentators have argued that this said more about voters' cost-of-living problems than about any rejection of Aboriginal aspirations for a separate community and identity.

The Tapri survey shows that this was not the case. Those who voted 'No' were asked what prompted their vote. The dominant factor was challenges to voters' view 'that we are one country'. Cost-of-living issues were only a minor influence on their decision.

Table 1: Most important reason for voting No ('No' voters only) %

Responses	%
We are one country, and no legal or political body should be defined only on the basis of race or ethnicity.	53
I don't think the idea of First Peoples makes any sense. We are all Australians. The country belongs to all of us	18
There are other things such as the cost-of-living that are more in need of fixing in Australia.	14
I voted No because the party I usually vote for in Federal elections was backing No.	5
The Uluru Statement from the Heart indicated that this constitutional change was just the beginning. There would be treaties, truth telling, and costly reparations to be paid.	5
I didn't understand what this referendum was about.	4
The people backing No are the people whose values were closest to mine.	1
Voting No is what the friends and family who are closest to me are doing.	1
Total %	100
Total N	1565

Note: Respondents were asked to number their reasons for voting No from 1 (most important) to 2 (second most important) and 3 (important, but less important). Table 1 presents the results for the most important reason (1) only.
For 'Yes' voters' reasons see Table A1 in the main report

The results of the referendum shocked many of its supporters. They struggled to believe that a majority of voters did not share their view that the Aboriginal cause deserved higher priority relative to feelings about national solidarity.

Pollsters have found it hard to find a measure that would assess feelings about national solidarity. We tried a new question that explores voters' sense of belonging to Australia. The hypothesis was that if voters had a strong sense of belonging, this would imply reluctance to support causes such as enduring favoritism for particular minority interests.

With this measure, voters could choose between the options of a sense of belongingness to 'a great extent', 'a moderate extent', 'only slightly' or 'not at all'.

A major finding was how strong the sense of national belongingness is amongst Australian voters.

Another major finding was that these voters included many migrants. Table 2 shows that some overseas-born voters, including those born in Europe (which includes Western, Southern and Eastern Europe) were just as strong in their attachment to Australia, if not more so, that were the Australia-born. The question was: 'To what extent do you have a sense of belonging to Australia?'

Table 2: The extent of a sense of belonging to Australia by country of birth %

Has a sense of belonging to Australia to..	*Australia*	*ESB**	*Europe*	*Asia*	*Middle East, Israel & Africa*	*Other, including don't know***	*Total*
A great extent	58	60	59	42	34	47	57
A moderate extent	32	30	29	50	49	47	33
Only slightly	8	9	13	7	11	6	8
Not at all	3	2	0	1	6	0	2
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	2482	208	80	145	35	51	3001

Notes: Table A4 in the main report shows that these findings hold true of the second generation as well.

*ESB stands for English-speaking-background countries: 70% were from the UK or Ireland, 24% New Zealand, 6% North America.

**Three respondents did not know their country of birth.

Many of these European migrants have, in the past, been drawn to Labor because of its advocacy for migrant communities and multiculturalism. However, as these migrants have integrated into the mainstream Australian community, they have shifted their attachment towards Australia.

In the process many have moved away from the Labor party. Table 3 shows that, as of December 2023, voters of European origin (and those from English-speaking-background (ESB) countries) were even less likely to support Labor or the Greens than were the Australia-born, and more likely to support the Coalition. This is not the case for Asia-born voters. However, on this analysis it may be that, as these voters integrate further within the Australian community, they will repeat this pattern.

Table 3: Intended vote in December 2023 by country of birth %

Intended vote in December 2023:	*Australia*	*ESB**	*Europe*	*Asia*	*Other, including Middle East, Israel, Africa & don't know***	*Total*
Labor	34	31	30	50	29	34
Greens	15	11	7	10	20	14
Labor & Greens	***49***	***42***	***37***	***61***	***49***	***48***
Coalition	34	43	40	27	41	34
One Nation	6	5	10	0	1	6
Coalition & One Nation	***40***	***48***	***49***	***27***	***42***	***40***
Other	12	10	14	13	9	12
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	2481	207	81	143	86	3001

Notes: * ESB stands for English-speaking-background countries.
** Three respondents did not know their country of birth.

What about younger voters? Table 4 shows the response to the question 'To what extent do you have a sense of belonging to Australia?' by age group.

Table 4: '... a sense of belonging to Australia?' By age group %

To what extent do you have a sense of belonging to Australia?	*18-29*	*30-44*	*45-59*	*60-74*	*75 plus*	*Total*
A great extent	32	52	57	77	84	56
A moderate extent	53	34	33	18	15	33
Only slightly	12	11	7	4	1	8
Not at all	3	3	3	1	0	2
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	621	810	750	558	264	3001

Just 32 per cent of voters aged 18-29 report a great extent of belonging to Australia, compared with 77 per cent of voters aged 60-74.

As argued, this means that younger voters are much more likely to support the advancement of minority causes. The main report shows this is true across a spectrum of these causes, including gender diversity (Tables 8 and 11, main report).

On markers of Australian patriotism, the debate about changing the date of Australia Day shows a stark divide between younger and older voters. For older voters a change in the date (from that of the arrival of the first fleet in Sydney on January 26, 1788) is seen as a challenge to their pride in Australia's past and their affection for it in the present. Not so with younger voters. As Table 5 shows, young voters are the strongest supporters for a change in the date.

Table 5: Attitudes to changing the date of Australia Day by age group %

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60-74	75 plus	Total
Strongly support	21	19	13	12	7	16
Support	26	24	15	11	7	18
Total support	***48***	***43***	***28***	***22***	***15***	***34***
Oppose	16	18	19	18	19	18
Strongly oppose	12	23	37	47	58	32
Total oppose	***28***	***40***	***56***	***65***	***77***	***49***
No opinion	25	17	16	13	9	17
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	621	811	749	558	262	3001

These results confirm the claims of most commentators that young voters are being drawn towards Labor and the Greens, in part because they are in tune with these parties' relatively strong progressive views on cultural and social issues.

Immigration

What about voters' attitudes to immigration? Have these been affected by the huge recent influx? The survey shows that there is a large and growing voter constituency concerned about the level of immigration. This is mainly composed of older voters and non-graduates.

This constituency has expanded, despite support from Business, Labor Government and Treasury for a high intake, and despite the consensus among many opinion leaders that any criticism of immigration is probably racist.

The Tapri question on immigration levels began with some information: 'Since Australia's borders were re-opened after the pandemic, net migration (arrivals minus departures) has increased. In the year to May 2023 net migration reached 454,000. This is the highest number on record.' Respondents were then asked 'What is your opinion about immigration?'

Table 6: 'What is your opinion about immigration?' By education, grouped %

	University student	Graduate	Non-graduate	Total
1 I want the high numbers to continue	21	18	11	14
2 We should return to net migration at somewhat lower levels	32	27	23	25
1 & 2: High numbers or somewhat lower numbers	**53**	**46**	**34**	**38**
3 We should return to net migration at much lower levels	16	23	25	24
4 We should keep migration low enough so that new arrivals just balance out departures (nil net migration)	15	20	28	25
3 & 4: Much lower numbers or nil net migration	**31**	**42**	**53**	**49**
5 Don't know	16	12	13	13
Total %	100	100	100	100
Total N	159	816	2025	3001

By December 2023, some 49 per cent of voters wanted much lower levels, or no net increase in immigration at all (this means new arrivals are balanced out by departures).

By comparison, 38 per cent of voters favoured either no cut or 'somewhat lower levels' (which we interpret as support for continued high migration). Another 13 per cent of voters did not have an opinion.

The 49 per cent opposed to high immigration is well up on the 42 percent share who felt this way in Tapri's September 2022 survey.

We also asked questions which probed why voters supported or opposed immigration. Those opposed thought immigration was contributing to congestion, deteriorating access to services, notably hospital services, and to higher costs of housing. The strongest concern was about the implications for the cost of housing (shown in Table 7).

Table 7: 'Adding more people will push up the cost of housing' %

	%
Agree strongly	34
Agree	37
Agree strongly and agree	**71**
Neither agree nor disagree	20
Disagree	7
Disagree strongly	2
Disagree and disagree strongly	**9**
Total %	100
Total N	3001

Most voters also do not think population growth is vital for Australia's future. They are out of tune with Big Australia advocacy. A decisive 71 percent said that Australia does not need more people (Table 8).

Table 8: 'Overall, do you think Australia needs more people?' %

	%
Yes	29
No	71
Total %	100
Total N	3001

At the time of writing (April 2024) immigration had not become a major political issue. This is partly because no major political party has tried to make it an issue.

Another factor is that though many home owners share a concern about the plight of young people in the housing market, the fact is that they are on the winning side of migrant-induced competition for housing. Some 67 per cent of our sample of voters owned or were buying their home. This level may seem high, but it is because we are referring to voters, not residents. The losers are among the third of voters who do not own a home. They are mainly young people. We explore their politics in the context of the current cost-of-living and housing crisis.

The cost-of-living and housing crises

Table 9 shows that a remarkable 48 per cent of voters saw themselves as financially insecure, in that they were just about getting by financially or finding it quite, or very, difficult to get by.

Table 9: 'How well are you getting on financially these days?' %

	%
Living comfortably	14
Doing alright	37
Living comfortably or doing alright	**52**
Just about getting by	28
Finding it quite difficult	13
Finding it very difficult	8
Just about getting by or finding it quite, or very, difficult	**48**
Total %	100
Total N	3001

Voters who were financially insecure were the most likely to look to the government for support and thus to favour higher taxes on the well off to help finance this support (see Table 34, main report).

Table 10 shows, not surprisingly (given the Coalition's strong stance on lower taxes), that they mainly intended to vote for Labor or the Greens. However, it is notable that, relative to Labor, the Greens are winning a high share of the vote from those 'finding it quite difficult' or 'very difficult'.

Table 10: 'If a federal election were held today (December 2023) which of the following would you vote for?' By 'How are you getting on financially these days?' %

	Living comfortably	*Doing alright*	*Just about getting by*	*Finding it quite difficult*	*Finding it very difficult*	*Total*
Labor	37	35	34	29	29	34
Greens	10	14	14	17	23	14
Labour and Greens	***47***	***49***	***48***	***46***	***52***	***48***
Coalition	42	36	33	31	22	35
One Nation	3	5	6	7	9	6
Coalition and One Nation	***45***	***41***	***39***	***38***	***32***	***40***
Other	7	10	13	16	16	12
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	426	1122	832	379	238	3001

The Labor Party is surely aware of this competition from the Greens. Thus Labor's willingness (announced in January 2024) to cut taxes for middle- and lower-income taxpayers. This was at the expense of higher-income taxpayers despite their earlier election promise that they would not do this.

The overall political situation

By December 2023, the published polls had indicated that Labor had lost some ground since the May 2022 election.

Our December 2023 poll is consistent with this judgement. Table 11 compares voters' intentions in December 2023 with how they remembered their vote at the time of the May 2022 election.

Table 11: Vote in May 2022 as remembered and intended vote in December 2023 %

	Vote as remembered in May election 2022	*Intended vote in December 2023*
Labor	38	34
Greens	10	14
Labor and Greens	***48***	***48***
Coalition	29	34
One Nation	4	6
Coalition and One Nation	***33***	***40***
Other	9	12
Can't remember or didn't vote in 2022	10	NA
Total %	100	100
Total N	3001	3001

But Table 11 indicates that Labor is still safe, at least in two-party-preferred terms, since most Greens' preferences flow to Labor.

However, the Greens' share of the primary vote had advanced by a huge four percentage points relative to Labor.

The Tapri survey results imply that this trend away from Labor towards the Greens will deepen. The cost-of-living crisis may abate as inflation declines. But the housing crisis will undoubtedly worsen. This is because the level of construction is falling well behind housing need.

To repeat, young voters are serious losers. As their prospects of home ownership decline, so a life of renting beckons and so does the prospect of financial insecurity later in life.

Who are they going to turn to? It is likely to be the Greens. This was already evident by December 2023. Table 12 shows that by this time 26 per cent of 18–

29-year-olds intended to vote Greens, almost as high as the 30 per cent share intending to vote Labor.

As voters in the 30-44 age group also find it difficult to buy a home (already evident in Sydney) or are struggling with mortgage payments, this group too, who already show a high propensity to support the Greens (19 per cent as of December 2023) could swing further towards the Greens.

Table 12: Intended vote in December 2023 by age group %

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60-74	75 plus	Total
Labor	30	34	36	37	32	34
Greens	26	19	10	4	5	14
Labor and Greens	***56***	***53***	***46***	***41***	***37***	***48***
Coalition	27	30	34	43	51	35
One Nation	4	6	7	5	2	6
Coalition and One Nation	***31***	***36***	***41***	***49***	***53***	***40***
UAP	2	2	1	1	0	1
Other	10	9	12	10	10	10
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total N	621	810	750	557	262	3000

The Greens have proposed radical solutions to the problem of increasing the supply of housing, which include the government replacing private developers as the main home builder. The Greens claim these policies will provide for residents and migrants alike. They assert that any focus on high immigration as part of the problem is mere scapegoating. This stance is also largely in tune with the sentiments of younger voters.

Labor is unwilling to match the Greens' offers. It will continue to be the loser, relative to them, in attracting the youth vote.

The Coalition is not a player in this political game. It is secure in its hold of older voters, and may attract even more should it embrace strong migration reduction policies. However, its housing policies offer little on the housing supply side.