

A close-up portrait of Greta Thunberg, a young woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a dark blue and white patterned scarf. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

The Climate Institute

Climate of the Nation 2016
Australian attitudes on climate change

Executive summary



NINE OUT OF TEN AUSTRALIANS THINK RESPONSIBILITY FOR DRIVING ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE RESTS WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO AT LEAST SOME LEVEL, WITH 67 PER CENT THINKING THEY SHOULD TAKE THE LEADING ROLE.

The Climate Institute has been conducting our annual *Climate of the Nation* attitudinal research since 2007. It is the longest continuous survey of community attitudes about climate change. During this time we have charted the views of Australians about matters relating to climate change and energy policy, through the ups and downs of changing weather patterns, related natural disasters and the waxing and waning of the political landscape.

This year's research, conducted by polling over 2,000 people across the country, as well as holding focus groups in Brisbane, Melbourne and Newcastle, once again benchmarks the views of everyday people on these key issues. And we compare and contrast them to the findings over these past years.

For many years now, Australians have been through a heavily contested political and media climate change debate. They have been presented with views that intensely question and debate the scientific evidence about climate change, its projected impacts and the cost of solutions. Progress and reversals of government climate and energy policy have been a constant.

This has resulted in an erosion of the trust Australians have in leadership on this issue, predominantly at the federal government level, which people overwhelmingly indicate has the greatest responsibility to act.

For some, this has encouraged a lack of urgency. However, an increasing majority support action to reduce emissions and are frustrated with Australia's lack of commitment in developing renewable energy, especially solar and wind energy. People may have grown weary of the political debate, but they increasingly accept the science and want solutions. In fact, a large majority not only think climate change is happening, they increasingly trust the science that suggests it is due to human activity – a view that was in the minority in 2012.

Three quarters see economic benefits flowing from leadership on climate action and energy policy, including new jobs and investment in clean energy. The majority also think Australia should be a world leader in finding solutions to climate change.

In short, while Australians are frustrated by the debate they want action, see opportunities for our country in taking it, and want clarity about how they and their communities can contribute.

Science and impacts

Climate of the Nation 2016 finds that the majority of people who believe climate change is occurring continues to grow. In 2016, 77 per cent hold this view, up from 70 per cent last year, 66 per cent in 2013 and 64 per cent in 2012. Of these people, 90 per cent believe human activity is at least partly the cause, with a large 39 per cent now saying human activity is the main cause. Only 9 per cent blame natural cycles.

In fact, in an ongoing and steadily increasing trend, 60 per cent now either agree or strongly agree with the statement, "I trust the science that suggests the climate is changing due to human activities", while 10 per cent are undecided. This is up from 57 per cent in 2015, 51 per cent in 2014 and 46 per cent in 2013. Forty-eight per cent disagree with claims that the seriousness of climate change is being exaggerated, with a further 20 per cent neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This level of disagreement is also an upward trend from 44 per cent in 2015, 41 in 2014 and 33 in 2012. Yet, 57 per cent of people still feel they are receiving too many conflicting opinions about climate change to be sure about the claims being made.

At the same time, 79 per cent of people think Australia is experiencing the impacts of climate change, with a third agreeing we are experiencing them "a lot". In this regard, people are most

concerned about more droughts and flooding affecting food security (82 per cent), destruction of the Great Barrier Reef (82 per cent), more bushfires (78 per cent), increased extinctions of animal and plant species (77 per cent), extreme weather (76 per cent), impacts on coastal communities and beaches (76 per cent) and impacts on health, such as water issues, heatwaves and mosquito-borne viruses (76 per cent). A large majority (69 per cent) are concerned that further extreme weather events caused by climate change will cause cost of living rises in Australia, such as increased food prices and higher home insurance premiums, as well as cause economic impacts.

Responsibility and performance

When it comes to shouldering the responsibility for taking and driving action on climate change, the reality is that this will not come from a single part of the community. Our research shows people believe there is a role for all sectors to play. That said, 90 per cent believe this responsibility does rest with the federal government to at least some level, with 67 per cent thinking they should take the leading role. And only 19 per cent consider them to be doing a good job in this regard, with one third viewing their performance as fairly poor or terrible.

Expectations are significantly less for this level of leadership from state and territory governments (47 per cent), global alliances and groups such as the United Nations (UN) (44 per cent) and Australian businesses and industry (32 per cent). The performance of state governments are viewed just as harshly as their federal counterparts, with 18 per cent nationally saying they are doing a good job and 29 per cent viewing their performance as fairly poor or terrible. These assessments are fairly consistently held across state lines. Business performance is also judged harshly, with just 16 per cent thinking they do a good job and 36 per cent as poor or terrible.

When it comes to the sort of leadership that Australians expect to be shown – in both climate action and the implementation of strong energy policy – the majority do not support delays or half measures. Sixty-one per cent of people think this will mean a point in time will come where urgent action becomes necessary, increasing the likelihood of shocks and sudden negative adjustments to jobs, electricity prices and energy security.

Energy policy

Despite its historical dominance in our energy mix, and strong support from major political parties in the past, support for coal is in sharp decline among Australians, as is support for gas. More than half (59 per cent) say solar is their most preferred source of energy, five times as many who nominate wind (11 per cent), which is the next most popular choice. Only 3 per cent nominate coal, which is half the number that nominate nuclear. Four per cent nominate gas.

When asked to rank their top three preferred sources of energy, 86 per cent include solar energy and 70 per cent include wind. In recent years, this has been a general upward trend from 84 and 69 per cent in 2015, 82 and 64 per cent in 2014 and 81 and 59 per cent in 2012. Only 12 per cent include coal among their top three energy choices. Twenty per cent include gas.

It is clear that distrust of markets is growing, as is the expectation for the federal government to develop a credible, effective plan to transition from coal to clean energy. A great majority, 72 per cent think it is inevitable that Australia's current coal-fired generation will need to be replaced with clean energy. When it comes to putting replacement into action, at 46 per cent, there is strong disagreement that the market and

energy companies should be the ones to decide when the old coal plants should be closed down. This is up significantly from the 35 per cent who held this view in 2015. Three quarters prefer that governments implement a plan to ensure the orderly closure of old coal plants and replace them with clean energy.

When asked whether they agreed with the proposition that state governments shouldn't act ahead of the federal government on both renewable energy and the phasing out of coal-fired power generation, only 28 and 29 per cent, respectively, agreed. Additionally, 77 per cent agree that, "State governments should put in place incentives for more renewable energy, such as wind farms".

Australia and international climate action

Though 50 per cent of people are aware that the 2015 UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris took place, knowledge of the outcomes and objectives of the international agreement appear limited.

However, when the Paris agreement is explained, there is also strong agreement (67 per cent agree) that Australia should enact a serious policy plan to deliver the commitment made in Paris to achieving net zero emissions. Further, 57 per cent do not agree with the idea that Australia should wait for other countries before we strengthen our post-2020 emissions reduction targets, and 59 per cent do not agree that we should wait for other major emitting countries such as China and the US before we move.

Seventy-three per cent hold the clear view that economic benefits, such as new jobs and investment in clean energy, will flow from leadership on climate action and energy policy. In fact, 65 per cent feel Australia should be a world leader in finding solutions to climate change. And 71 per cent think Australia should implement policies

to protect vulnerable people and natural systems from unavoidable climate change, with only 6 per cent in disagreement. Fifty-five per cent hold the view that Australia needs to help developing countries decrease their carbon emissions and adapt for the impacts of climate change.

Individuals and communities taking action

Australians want to do what they can to help. Though people see the actions they are already taking as predominantly assisting the environment and saving energy, there is acknowledgment that these actions also assist in reducing carbon emissions and tackling climate change. However, they want to know more about what they and their communities can do.

To this end, in expecting leadership from the federal government, people are also saying that modelling such behaviour would provide the motivation for individuals and communities, as well as other sectors, to take action and for this action to be more front-of-mind.

In fact, 68 per cent of people think individuals and households should be contributing to action on climate change, and a further 16 per cent think individuals and households should be the leading player.

In their day to day lives, across the board, the practices people are employing to take personal action are those that are easiest and least costly: 73 per cent are taking greater action on recycling and 72 per cent are using energy efficient devices in their homes. The next most common practice, at 48 per cent, is buying products that are labelled as sustainable or environmentally friendly. Eighty-five per cent see a product being environmentally friendly in terms of production, packaging and recyclability as quite or very important, holding equivalent status to price.

