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MAPPING SOCIAL COHESION 2026

Finding the humanity in all of us



Foreword

Since the release of our Mapping Social Cohesion Report in 2025, there have been significant events both globally and here in Australia that have caused considerable and justified distress and concern. There has also been a marked increase in references to social cohesion and, in particular, whether it is fracturing and beyond repair in Australia. Others are more hopeful that Australia's nature is resilient and that the country will live up to its reputation as fair, respectful, welcoming, and embracing of multiculturalism.

Now in its 19th year, we are very pleased to bring you the 2026 Mapping Social Cohesion Report to provide a comprehensive understanding of Australia's social cohesion. This extensive resource gives Australia the most complete analysis of our social cohesion. Through a comprehensive breakdown of the experiences of our friends, neighbours, colleagues and those who choose to make Australia their home, the report is an invaluable study of Australians' expectations and concerns as well as their current economic and political perspectives.

Social cohesion involves complex dynamics. To respond to this, the Scanlon Institute asks more than 100 questions of over 10,000 respondents. As such, it is considered a global benchmark for understanding how these dynamics interplay and how they shape our views of our diverse society. This year's report, authored by Dr James O'Donnell, Dr Alice Falkiner and Trish Prentice, continues the tradition of excellence in survey methodology and analysis.

In the early 2000s, when the Scanlon Foundation was exploring social cohesion, before it became the much talked about topic it is today, Bruce Smith worked with Professor Andrew Markus AO to ensure the survey and its analysis applied methodological rigour, international expertise, and scholarly excellence. This year, Bruce Smith passed away. The Institute will be forever grateful for Bruce's diligence and the professional knowledge he brought to creating this extraordinary contribution to Australia's understanding of who we are.

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This report has been produced in partnership between the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute and the Australian National University.

Suggested citation:

O'Donnell, James, Alice Falkiner and Trish Prentice. *Mapping Social Cohesion 2026*. Melbourne: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2026.
https://doi.org/10.68552/FRRF5467

ISSN 2982-2114

Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 Highlights

The Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 study involved a survey of just over 10,000 Australian adults and 47 in-depth qualitative interviews.

The Scanlon Index of social cohesion has been used to monitor and track changes in social cohesion in every year since the first benchmark survey in 2007.

- The Scanlon Index of social cohesion was stable in the last year, recording a score of 78 in 2026 and in each year since 2023.
- The index is nevertheless 15% below 2007 levels (the first and benchmark year of Mapping Social Cohesion) and 14% below a COVID-19 related peak in index scores in November 2020.

Looking beneath the headline numbers, there are clear indications of increasing strain on Australia's social cohesion.

Many people believe that social cohesion is declining and are increasingly pessimistic about the future.

- Three-in-five (62%) adults believe that social cohesion in Australia has declined by a little (41%) or a lot (21%) in the last three or four years.
- Almost one-half (48%) of adults are pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future, an increase from 43% in 2025 and 31% in 2018.
- One-in-three (32%) adults believe their own life will be a little or a lot worse in the next three or four years, an increase from 29% in 2025 and substantially higher than its average and the highest levels recorded across the 2010s.

Distrust in government and other institutions is growing and is increasingly polarised along political lines.

- The proportion of adults who think the 'government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people' almost always or most of the time declined from 54% in 2020 to 31% in 2026, while the proportion who say they almost never trust the government increased from 6% to 22%.
- Of people who would vote for Pauline Hanson's One Nation if an election were held today, just 8% trust the Federal Government at least most of the time (compared with 62% of Labor voters), 73% believe the system of government needs major change or to be replaced (21% of Labor voters) and only one-third believe elections are fair (34% compared with 81% of Labor voters) or that the courts make fair impartial decisions at least most of the time (32% compared with 68% of Labor voters).

Attitudes to immigrants, immigration and diversity are also politically divided and increasingly negative.

- Three-quarters (76%) agree that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia', which while still a substantial majority, has fallen from 89% in 2023. The proportion who agree that immigrants improve Australian society has fallen from 85% in 2023 to 70% in 2026, while the proportion who agree that 'too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values' has increased from 52% to 66%.
- The proportion of One Nation supporters who believe multiculturalism has been good for Australia declined from 63% in 2024 to 44% in 2026, while the proportion who believe immigrants are not adopting Australian values increased from 89% to 96%.

People are increasingly likely to express negative attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people as well as immigrants from Asia and Africa.

- 43% of people say they have a somewhat (25%) or very (18%) negative attitude towards Muslim people in 2026, an increase from 29% in 2022 before the start of the current conflict in the Middle East. The proportion of people with a negative attitude towards Jewish people increased from 8% to 18% over the same period, while 36% have a negative attitude towards immigrants from Israel in 2026.
- More generally, people are more likely to have a negative attitude to immigrants from Asia and Africa than they are to people from European and north American backgrounds. The prevalence of negative attitudes to immigrants from India increased from 25% in 2024 to 33% in 2026, mirroring trends in attitudes to people of Hindu and Sikh faith, while negativity towards immigrants from Sudan, Iran and Palestine are at least as prevalent in 2026.

Most people have been happy or very happy in the last 12 months (79%), though longer-term and intergenerational trends suggest personal wellbeing is increasingly strained.

- Gen X adults born between 1965 and 1980 and Millennials born between 1981 and 1996 are less likely to report being happy in 2026 than they were in 2014 (declining from 81% to 77% for Gen X and from 84% to 75% for Millennials). Gen Z adults were as likely to be happy (76%) as Millennials in 2026. Gen X and Millennials are also more likely to say their life will be a little or a lot worse in the next three or four years now than they were in 2014.

Many people continue to face financial stress and hardship in ways that are likely harmful to social cohesion

- Two-in-five (40%) adults are dissatisfied with their financial situation in 2026, while the same proportion describe their situation as 'just getting along' at best. Almost one-in-three (30%) said they either went without meals, could not pay the rent or mortgage, could not heat or cool their home or could not pay for medicines or health care often or sometimes in the last 12 months, while one-in-four (25%) often or sometimes asked friends or family for money or pawned or sold something because they needed the money.

The experience of discrimination remains at high levels and appears to be impacting immigrants' sense of belonging in Australia

- A weighted average of 46% of respondents born in south and central Asia, 35% born in East Asia and the Pacific and 30% born in Africa and the Middle East reported experiencing discrimination on their basis of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the prior 12 months across 2024–2026.

Several indicators of social cohesion are at relatively low levels in the 20 year history of Mapping Social Cohesion – even if they have not declined further in 2026.

- Levels of national belonging, social justice and community participation have been stable in the last one to three years, though all have experienced longer-term decline over the last 15 to 20 years.

Amidst the challenges and divisions, there are some sources of strength that can be used to restore and maintain social cohesion in Australia.

Local and community connections and cohesion have been resilient and continue to support personal wellbeing and national-level cohesion.

- Four-in-five adults agree that their neighbours are willing to help each other (81%) and get on well together from different national and ethnic backgrounds (79%).

Australia's multicultural fabric is strained, though recognition of immigrants and their capacity to contribute to Australian society remain high.

- 87% agree that immigrants can make just as good a citizen as the Australian born and only one-in-ten believe that it is very important to be born in Australia to be 'truly' Australian (10%) or think it is greatly important to social cohesion that 'people come from similar cultural backgrounds (9%).

People who have immigrated to Australia continue to be an important part of Australia's social fabric.

- People who have immigrated from across Asia-Pacific and Africa are at least as likely as the Australian-born population to be actively involved in social and community groups, to get on well with their neighbours and to believe in the fair go.

Efforts to strengthen social cohesion are best focused on personal and social wellbeing, respect, empathy and our common humanity, rather than manufacturing sameness.

- Only 9% of survey respondents said that it was greatly important to social cohesion that 'people come from similar cultural backgrounds' and only 12% said that it was greatly important that 'people agree with each other on big social issues'.
- People – including One Nation supporters – were much more likely to say that happiness, safety, belonging and respect despite our differences were important to social cohesion.

Social cohesion in 2026

An introduction and summary

In a year of conflict, division and awful violence, the Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 study brings crucial information on how Australia is faring through national and global turmoil. Now in its 20th year, the 2026 edition involved a nationally representative survey of more than 10,000 Australians and 47 in-depth interviews. The findings certainly underscore the immediate and long-term challenges but also point to the enduring strength of Australia's diverse social fabric.

It has been a shocking year for Australia since the launch of our last Mapping Social Cohesion study. The Bondi terrorist event in December 2025 stands out in which 15 people lost their lives and many others were injured.[1] While incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia have been building in recent years and since the current conflict in Gaza and the Middle East, the horrific violence of Bondi has now shattered any complacency around the hatred that lurks in Australian society and the potential damage it can cause for people, families, communities and the country.

And yet, incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia have continued in 2026. Evidence to the Royal Commission on antisemitism and Social Cohesion have brought to public light shocking instances of abuse, vilification and ostracism of Jewish Australians[2], while reporting of Islamophobia, including by the *Tackling Hate Lab* and the *Islamophobia in Australia* reports, has done likewise for Muslim Australians.[3, 4]

Racism and our strained intercultural relations are by no means restricted to antisemitism and Islamophobia. The impact of current global opposition to immigration on Australia has been slowly building over time, but arrived in a very pronounced way in the last 12-18 months with the first of the 'March for Australia' rallies in August 2025 and remains ever present through polling support for Pauline Hanson's One Nation amidst the party's calls for an end to multiculturalism.[5, 6]

While immigration is a legitimate area for democratic debate, racial hatred, violence, stereotyping, othering and general ill-will have been common. Many communities have been affected, though the targeting of Indian and Indigenous Australians has been prominent and particularly troubling given the foundational importance of Australia's relationship to its first peoples and the growing demographic and cultural importance of Australians from Indian backgrounds.[7, 8]

The strains on Australia's multicultural fabric only add to a range of new and longstanding pressures on social cohesion. Chief among these for many Australians are financial and cost-of-living stress, emergent since 2023 and prolonged in 2026 by the war in the Middle East and rising interest rates at home.[9] Longer-term, the Mapping Social Cohesion study has been tracking a declining sense of belonging, social justice and fairness over the last 15-20 years[10] while other sources point to declining social and community participation[11], declining happiness and life satisfaction[12] and greater social disconnection[13].

In these difficult times, our common humanity and the power of social cohesion in bringing people together still shine through. From the heroes of the Bondi attack response to everyday acts of kindness, generosity, intercultural harmony and community spirit,[14, 15] we are often reminded of the goodness in most people and the personal and collective value of living in a society that cares for each other.[16] It may not be enough to completely hold back the tide of disaffection and division this year, though it can certainly be an inspiration in how we restore and strengthen Australia's connections and cohesion in coming years.

Mapping Social Cohesion 2026

The Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 study brings crucial new insight on how Australian society is navigating current challenges. This year's study continues to build on the pioneering work of the Scanlon Foundation and Monash University, led by Professor Andrew Markus AO and colleagues, in establishing the study 20 years ago (with the 20th anniversary in 2027).

Now delivered in partnership between the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute and the Australian National University, the 2026 edition continues to build and strengthen the study. In 2026, a nationally-representative survey was conducted with more than 10,000 Australian adults (aged 18 years and over), while in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 47 people across different social and demographic backgrounds.

Since 2018, most of our survey respondents have come from the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ panel. The Life in Australia™ panel is a probability-based panel, meaning that people are invited at random to join (and once on the panel can be asked to complete a survey up to once a month). Like every year, panel members were invited to complete the 2026 Mapping Social Cohesion survey in the middle of the year, in June and July. Most people complete the survey through an online questionnaire (99%), though they can also complete the survey by phone.

In the current political environment, it has also been important to ensure the study is representing the diversity of political opinion in Australia today – in addition to Australia's migrant, ethnic and wider demographic and socioeconomic diversity. The Life in Australia™ panel performs well on these fronts, though there are always difficulties with panels in capturing and representing newly arrived populations (including recent immigrants)[17] those that are less socially and politically engaged, as well as certain groups of conservative-minded people who often shy away from social surveys and political polling.[18]

Social, demographic and political representation has been enhanced in this year's Mapping Social Cohesion study through boost surveys of key population groups. These boosts were designed so that the total pool of respondents matched the outcome of the 2025 Federal Election in who they said they voted for. So in addition to 7,300 respondents from Life in Australia™, we recruited respondents in four key population groups:

1. People who voted for the Coalition at the election,
2. People who voted for a party outside the Coalition, Labor, the Greens or an Independent,
3. People who were eligible to vote but did not vote and
4. People who are not Australian citizens and ineligible to vote.

These additional respondents were sourced through another panel provider, the Online Research Unit (ORU).

The strategy proved successful. We met our targets and the voting patterns of our respondents match well to the 2025 Federal Election. The survey is also predicting voting intentions well, with for example, approximately one-quarter of Mapping Social Cohesion survey respondents indicating a voting preference for Pauline Hanson's One Nation party, similar to what the political polls were suggesting at the time.[19] Our estimates of social and community participation also closely match data from similar questions in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey 2025.[20]

We refer to the combined sample from Life in Australia™ and the ORU as the blended sample in this report. Importantly, we ran a pilot study of this blended approach in 2025 as well. Although we made some tweaks and improvements this year, the blended results are broadly comparable across years and have provided us with an important basis to compare and analyse changes in social cohesion over the last year.

It is also important to note that the surveys given to Life in Australia™ and the ORU panel members are all in English. It is difficult and costly to run surveys in multiple languages, but it is crucial to represent Australia's linguistic and cultural diversity. To this end and similar to previous years, we invited an additional 250 respondents to complete a shorter survey in one of four different languages, including English. These respondents were recruited through Polaron Connect.

As every year, we apply population weights to all our estimates. These weights help to adjust for any key demographic groups that may be under-represented on the survey. Each respondent is given a weight so that when the weights are added up, the demographic profile of survey respondents matches the profile of the total Australian population on several key benchmarks, i.e. age and education, gender, number of adults in the household, whether people speak a language other than English at home, their state or territory and whether or not they live in a capital city.

Full details of this study are provided in the accompanying Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 Technical Report.

What is important to Australians in 2026?

In these troubling times, social cohesion has been a buzzword of 2026. It has often been invoked – though rarely defined – by politicians, the media and public figures. Sometimes social cohesion is used to speak to how we create and maintain connections and bonds within our vast social, demographic and political diversity. Perhaps too often though, it is used to seek compliance, silence and consensus.[21]

With social cohesion being such a hot topic, we asked respondents this year about what things they think are important for living in a cohesive society. Overall, around one-half of people said that it is important to a great extent that 'everyone has the opportunity to be happy and have a good life' (51%) and that 'people are safe and communities are protected from harm' (48%), while around two-in-five said that it is greatly important that 'people respect others despite their different beliefs and cultures' (43%), that 'everyone feels they belong and has a place in society' (39%) and that 'everyone has the opportunity to have a say on government decisions' (36%). Three quarters of people or more said that each of these things were at least moderately important.

Conversely, only around one-in-ten people said that it was important to a great extent that 'people come from similar cultural backgrounds' (9%) and that 'people agree with each other on big social issues' (12%).

So, even in all the divisiveness and challenges of recent times, people generally agree. Social cohesion does not come from sameness in either our cultures or ideas. It comes from the extent to which society provides for happiness, safety, respect and belonging. This was true for people across the political spectrum. Just 15% of people intending to vote for One Nation said that it is important to a great extent that 'people come from similar backgrounds', less than half of the same group who said it was greatly important that 'people respect others despite their different beliefs and ideas' (31%).

Such sentiments also extend to what it means to be Australian and Australian values. In 2026, 71% of people said that it was 'not important' or 'not important at all' to have been born in Australia to be truly Australian and 87% agree that immigrants are just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in Australia (including 75% of would be One Nation voters).

Is social cohesion declining?

The strength and inclusiveness of Australian values is not to deny the strains on social cohesion that people are perceiving and experiencing. When we asked respondents, 62% said Australia is a little (41%) or a lot less cohesive (21%) now than it was three or four years ago, while 48% are feeling pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future – the highest level since the question was first asked in 2017.

Against public sentiment on what is important to social cohesion, the work of Andrew Markus and colleagues in defining and measuring social cohesion 20 years ago stands up remarkably well. The domains of belonging, worth, social justice, participation and acceptance of our differences and diversity that were created in the Scanlon Index of social cohesion in 2007 capture much of the importance people today place in the same and similar values.

However, the headline Index numbers this year diverge somewhat from where people think that social cohesion in Australia is heading. Despite most people saying that social cohesion has been declining, the overall Index of social cohesion was reasonably stable between 2025 and 2026 and has been so since 2023. Across the five domains and indexes used to understand and measure social cohesion:

- The Index of belonging increased by one point between 2025 and 2026, driven by stronger reported levels of pride in the Australian way of life and culture.
- The Index of worth was steady between 2025 and 2026, comprised of stable levels of personal happiness and financial satisfaction.
- The Index of social inclusion and justice decreased by one point between 2025 and 2026, driven by a decline in people's sense of the fair go and that hard work brings a better life.
- The Index of participation declined by three points between 2025 and 2026, though the underlying indicators suggest participation is fluctuating around reasonably stable levels in recent years – albeit, perhaps coming after longer-term declines.
- The Index of acceptance was steady between 2025 and 2026, driven by stability in our attitudes to First Nations Australians and stability on the particular measures of support for immigrant diversity that are used to calculate the Index.

Scratch beneath the surface of the data though and the pressures and pain points are apparent. While the overall Index of social cohesion has been steady, it remains at its lowest recorded level since 2007. Index scores for belonging and social justice may not have declined in the last year, but these domains have been the principal drivers of the longer-term decline in social cohesion over the last 20 years. So while the proportion of people who say they have a great sense of belonging in Australia increased from 44% to 47% over the last year, it remains well below what it was 15-20 years ago (averaging more than 70%).

The surprising stability of the Index of acceptance meanwhile belies a continued deterioration (albeit, not catastrophic) in support for Australia's ethnic and cultural diversity. In 2026, 64% agreed that accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger, a figure that was consistent with 2025, helping to prop up the Index of acceptance. However, this proportion has declined from 78% in 2023 and on several other indicators, support for multiculturalism and the contribution of immigrants to Australian society, culture and the economy has been declining.

Overall, Australians in 2026 are more likely to be pessimistic about the future, more divided and less trusting in people, government and political institutions, more discontent with immigrants and immigration, less happy and active in their communities than 10-15 years ago and just as likely to be facing financial stress as they were when cost-of-living pressures emerged in 2023. They are also more likely than not to believe that social cohesion is declining. So while there are certainly some sources of strength, the overriding picture is of a society under stress.

A polarised social and political climate

Polling support for One Nation is also pointing to an increasingly polarised social and political climate. This polarisation or division is apparent not only in Australians' attitudes to immigration but also across a range of indicators. This division is reflecting a sense of discontent and disgruntlement, especially among conservative-minded people.

At a national level, division and disgruntlement is reflected in growing mistrust in government and the political system. In 2026, 22% believe the Australian Government can be trusted almost never to do the right thing by the Australian people, a 6 percentage point increase since 2025 and a 16 point increase since 2020. Over the same period, the proportion who say the system of government needs major change or should be replaced has increased from 31% to 48%. The recent trend has been driven by conservative voters, creating a widening gap in Australians' trust in government and the system across the political spectrum.

The sense of economic fairness and opportunity in Australia has also deteriorated. Between 2025 and 2026, the proportion of adults who agree that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run hard work brings a better life' declined from 63% to 58%. This has been part of a longer-term decline reported across the social and political divide, though the decline over the last year has been driven specifically by Coalition and One Nation supporters.

While a welcome development, the increase in national pride and belonging is also being driven by One Nation supporters. The proportion of One Nation supporters in 2026 who take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture increased from 42% in 2025 to 55% in 2026, at the same time they became less trusting in people, government and the political system and less accepting of differences and diversity. So while national pride and belonging usually go hand-in-hand with trust and acceptance, they are shifting in opposite directions for One Nation supporters this year, suggesting a trade-off between the two. But in this trade-off, the increase in national pride and patriotism would seem somewhat inward, insular and exclusive.

Strains on Australia's multicultural fabric

Unsurprisingly in the current national and global climate, Australians have become more divided in their attitudes to immigration. In 2026, approximately three-in-five adults (59%) believe that the level of immigration to Australia is currently too high, the highest proportion in the history of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey and an increase from 52% in 2025 and an average of 39% in the 2010s. This is also a highly politically divisive question, with 93% of One Nation supporters believing that immigration is too high, compared with 24% of Greens supporters, 37% of Labor supporters and 66% of Coalition supporters. While these proportions have been stable among Greens and Labor voters since 2024, they increased from 58% to 66% for Coalition supporters and from 79% to 93% for One Nation supporters.

Most people are still able to distinguish their views on current levels of immigration from their attitudes to immigrants and immigration generally. In 2026, 87% agree that immigrants are just as likely to be good

citizens as the Australian-born, 76% agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia and 73% agree that immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy. These proportions have though been declining over the last 2-3 years, and once again driven specifically by One Nation supporters. Among One Nation supporters, the proportion who agree that immigrants make good citizens declined from 84% to 76% between 2024 and 2026, while the proportion who agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia declined from 63% to 44% – even as the proportions for other voting groups remained relatively stable.

Attitudes to people of different faiths and immigrant background have also continued to become more negative. In the context of the current conflicts in Gaza, the West Bank and Iran, and Islamophobia and antisemitism at home, negative attitudes towards Muslim and Jewish people continue to become more prevalent. The proportion of people with very or somewhat negative attitudes towards Muslim people had been declining before the current conflict, from 38% in 2018 to 29% in 2022, but have since increased to 43% in 2026. The proportion with negative attitudes towards Jewish people, meanwhile, increased from 8% in 2022 to 18% in 2026. In 2026, 36% expressed a negative attitude to immigrants from Israel. While the increase in anti-Muslim sentiment has been driven by politically centrist and conservative-minded people, negative attitudes to Jewish people have been increasing across the political spectrum. Importantly though, negative attitudes towards immigrants from the likes of India and Sudan and people of Hindu and Sikh faiths have also become more common, pointing to wide strains on Australia's intercultural and interfaith harmony.

Despite the political divisions, it is striking that three quarters of One Nation supporters continue to believe that immigrants can make just as good citizens as the Australian-born. They are also unlikely to believe that being born in Australia is important to being 'truly' Australian or believe that people having similar cultural backgrounds is important to social cohesion. One Nation supporters are however very likely to agree that 'too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values' (96%) and that immigrants take away jobs or increase house prices (89%) and are much more likely to have a negative view of Muslims and immigrants from Asia and Africa than they are to have a negative view of Christians and those immigrating from the United Kingdom and the United States. So while there is some symbolic support for immigrants and diversity among One Nation supporters, there appears to be a strong racial and cultural hierarchy for many.

Resilient but strained personal & economic wellbeing

As we have explained, people are most likely to think that happiness and the good life are important to social cohesion. So in all the political debate and division of the last year, one crucial barometer of social cohesion is the happiness and wellbeing of Australians. On this, the evidence is mixed, with recent resilience in happiness coming after longer-term and intergenerational declines. Approximately four-in-five (79%) adults say they have been happy or very happy over the last year, similar to levels recorded in recent years.

Over the longer-term though, happiness and life satisfaction appear to have declined on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey as well as other sources including the World Happiness Report and the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey. On Mapping Social Cohesion, happiness has declined most for Millennials (born between 1981–1996) and Gen X (born between 1965–1980) and mirroring similar generational declines in life satisfaction on the General Social Survey.[22] While this may reflect well known and debated spikes in unhappiness in middle-age around the world[23], it is noteworthy that Australia's global happiness ranking has been slipping in recent years, driven particularly by younger generations.[24]

Australians are also more likely to report feeling pessimistic. In 2026, one-in-three (32%) adults say their life in Australia will be a little or much worse in 3-4 years, an increase from 29% in 2025 and less than 20% throughout the 2010s. Pessimism is usually more common among older people on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, though over the last 15 years, there have also been large increases in pessimism among Gen X and Millennials. One Nation supporters are most likely to be pessimistic, with more than half (54%) believing their life will be a little or a lot worse.

Relatedly, many Australians continue to face strains on their financial wellbeing. As has been the case since the emergence of cost-of-living pressures in 2023, two-in-five adults are dissatisfied with their financial situation (40% in 2026) and one-in-ten describe themselves as 'poor' or struggling to pay the bills (11% in 2026). In 2026, similar proportions (13%) said they often or sometimes went without food in the last 12 months or could not pay their rent or mortgage on time. One-in-five (21%) people often or sometimes went without medicines or health care, while similar proportions could not afford to heat or cool their home (19%) or had to ask friends or family for money (20%). Financial hardship was particularly common for single parent families and renters, where approximately one-half sometimes or often went without food, medicines or healthcare in the last 12 months or could not afford to heat or cool their home or pay their rent or mortgage on time.

Financial hardship is strongly related to social cohesion though does not appear to be a strong driver of increasing social and political division in the last year. People experiencing financial hardship are substantially less likely to report being happy, to feel a sense of belonging and trust in society, are less connected with their communities and are less accepting of multiculturalism. It is also the case that One Nation supporters on the political right and Greens supporters on the left are more likely to be facing financial hardship than Coalition and Labor supporters. However, conservative-minded people on the right are expressing weaker trust in government and institutions and weaker support for immigration and diversity in 2026 regardless of whether they consider themselves to be financially struggling or well off.

Connected, safe & trusting communities

While debate and division rage online, in the media and in politics, neighbourhoods, communities, schools and workplaces are where the daily social interactions take place that help to shape our sense of trust, belonging, acceptance and wellbeing. Such emotional and practical community bonds are not so easily shifted in response to national and global events and trends and perhaps help to explain the resilience of social cohesion through difficult times. By the same token, our results suggest that local communities are not immune to challenges and particularly long-term strains.

People continue to report a strong sense of connection in their neighbourhoods. In 2026, four-in-five people agree that they feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods (80%), their neighbours are willing to help each other (81%) and that their neighbours get on well from different national and ethnic backgrounds (79%), while 64% agree that their neighbourhood has a strong sense of community. While some of these have declined from peaks recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic, they are still in line with or above their long-term averages. It is striking too that neighbourhood cohesion is widely reported across demographic and social groups, including young adults and overseas-born Australians.

Many people, especially women, nevertheless feel at least a little unsafe in their local communities. Almost one-half (47%) of women and a quarter (25%) of men report feeling at least a bit unsafe walking alone at night in their local areas, while 37% of women and 28% of men are fairly or very worried about becoming a victim of crime. Concern about crime has increased among women since 2020, though in 2026 at least remains in line with levels in 2018. Aside from women, Victorians, immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, One Nation voters and renters are the most likely to be worried about becoming a victim of crime.

People are also reporting somewhat less trust in people generally. In 2026, 42% of people believe that most people generally can be trusted, a steady decline from 54% in 2021. Although current levels of trust are in line with the average of the 2010s, the increase in trust recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic has now completely disappeared. Also noteworthy, two-thirds (68%) agree that people do not know who they can trust and rely on, a figure that has increased significantly since 2022.

While active participation in communities has been reasonably consistent in recent years, it appears to have declined over the longer term. Involvement in social and community groups has been reasonably consistent on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey since first asked about in 2021, with two-in-five adults actively involved in a social, sports or religious group in the last 12 months (41%), while one-in-five have been involved with community support groups such as St Vincent de Paul, the Australian Red Cross and State Emergency Services (20% in 2026). Similar questions on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey, however, suggest that these forms of participation have declined over the longer run, with involvement in social, sports and religious groups declining from 63% in 2010 to 45% in 2025 and involvement in community support groups declining from 35% to 20%.[22]

Migrant experiences in a more hostile environment

In a world divided in its attitudes to immigration, the experiences of migrants are of vital and important concern. They are of most importance for the wellbeing of migrants themselves, but also for the collective wellbeing and cohesion of countries like Australia. In Australia, where almost one-in-three people are overseas born[25] and approximately half have an overseas born parent[26], the impacts of racism, discrimination and general opposition to immigrants can impact on a very substantial section of the population and create strains and division for all of society, in addition to the impacts on individuals and communities.

While we have not yet recorded an increase in racism and discrimination on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in the current environment, they remain common and longstanding problems in Australia. Of all people who have immigrated to Australia, one-in-four (25%) reported experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months on the basis of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. This figure rises to 33% among people who have immigrated in the last 20 years, 36% among people from non-English speaking backgrounds (defined where a person reports their first language as a language other than English) and 37% among people born across Asia and Africa. Combining survey data over the last three years suggests that people born in south and central Asia (46%) are the most likely to experience discrimination, followed by those born in east Asia and the Pacific (35%) and Africa and the Middle East (30%).

When asked about different forms of mistreatment for any reason, people born in Asia and Africa are much more likely to say they have been treated less favourably by people, made to feel they did not belong, not offered a job or treated fairly at work and been called offensive names or verbally abused than people born in Australia, Europe, the Americas and New Zealand.

People who experience discrimination have a substantially weaker sense of belonging in Australia. While it is difficult to conclusively prove that discrimination causes a decline in belonging, we predict that people from Asian and African backgrounds are less likely to have a great sense of belonging in Australia by 8 percentage points if they have experienced discrimination in the past 12 months on the basis of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. Like the Australian-born population, overall levels of belonging have been reasonably stable for overseas born Australians in recent years though also look to have experienced longer-term decline over the last 15-20 years.

Despite the current challenges, overseas-born Australians report a high average degree of connection and trust. Discrimination and the time and stability required to establish social and community roots help to explain why migrants overall have a weaker sense of belonging in Australia relative to the Australian-born. Otherwise though, people from Asian and African backgrounds on average report high trust in government, national pride, belief in the fair go and acceptance of others, while being active and connected in their neighbourhoods and communities. While experiences, perceptions and behaviours are diverse, these results indicate that immigrants make an important contribution to the social and cultural fabric of Australia despite the challenges of the current environment.

Conclusion

The Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 study is pointing to substantial long-term strains on social cohesion that are amplified in the current division and discord. Australians have been reporting a weaker sense of belonging, social justice and personal wellbeing and less active involvement in their communities over the last 15 to 20 years, coupled with weaker support for immigration and diversity in the last one to three years, greater animosity toward people of different faiths and immigrant backgrounds, declining and highly polarised trust in government and institutions and increasing discontent with Australia's current trajectory.

Much of the recent deterioration has been driven by One Nation supporters. One Nation supporters are also reporting somewhat weaker connections in their neighbourhoods and local communities, less happiness and trust in others, greater financial stress and increasing pessimism for their own futures. Although this does not explain everything, it does point to one way in which long-run strains on social cohesion and personal wellbeing are potentially providing the conditions for growing division now.

It is important to remember that recent trends are reflecting, if not driven by, major global upheaval. The terrorist attack at Bondi Beach was a uniquely horrific global event, though the world has also struggled with antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism and deepening social and political divisions over issues like immigration.[27] The fact that three quarters of Australians still believe that multiculturalism has been good for the country even after three years of decline is perhaps testament to the symbolic value of multiculturalism in Australia and its potential – alongside community bonds – to hold social cohesion together during difficult times.

Symbolic support for multiculturalism evidently though does not protect Australia against racism, discrimination and animosity towards people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This shows that acknowledgement of multiculturalism is not enough and that the current threats to social cohesion are serious and in need of a concerted public and community response.

Social cohesion in Australia is unlikely to be strengthened or maintained through consensus or conformity. Australians are diverse socially, politically and culturally and each of us deserve the right to fight for what we believe in, to speak out for all that is important to us and against injustice, violence and harm in our communities and the world. By the same token, we must recognise that our words and actions can affect the happiness, safety and belonging of others – all of the things that survey respondents tell us are most important for social cohesion. A socially cohesive society is therefore not one where we think and look alike, but where we argue, debate, protest and fight against injustice, all while remembering the common humanity that binds us all.

What is important to Australians in 2026?

Social cohesion has been a hot topic in the news and in public debate this year – but usually without any explanation of what it means. While the Mapping Social Cohesion study has always operated on a multidimensional understanding, it is valuable to ask people what it means to them to live in a cohesive society, how they think cohesion has been tracking in Australia and what are the big challenges we face.

Social cohesion has been a major buzzword of 2026. The term has been regularly invoked by politicians, the media and public figures in response to the social turmoil and divisions of recent times.[28] The clearest example of this was in the insertion of social cohesion into the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion. The increasing prominence of social cohesion has left an impression on the public too, with internet searches for the term 'social cohesion' highly elevated this year relative to the past five years.[29]

With the notable exception of the Royal Commission[30], social cohesion has rarely been defined. Politicians and others have often used social cohesion to warn of the dangers to Australian society of division and discord but without usually explaining what they mean. However, the context in which it is invoked leads critics to argue that social cohesion is being used to manufacture cultural and ideological conformity and assimilation and silence debate, protest and uncomfortable conversations including around racism.[31] [32] [33] This is, in fact, a longstanding criticism of how social cohesion is used in public debate and reflected in the idea of social cohesion as a vague concept that is often twisted and interpreted to suit people's own personal and political preferences.[34]

Social cohesion in the *Mapping Social Cohesion* study has always been defined and measured as the never-ending product of people's collective sense of belonging, worth, social justice, acceptance of one another *and* active engagement in political and social life.[35] Social cohesion in this understanding is not about consensus or avoiding difficult debates. On the contrary, it is about having difficult debates – and acting on them including through protest and other forms of activism old and new – but in a context in which each of us can still find and maintain a sense of connection and wellbeing and that despite what differences we have, we each have a sense that Australia is a fair and just society and one in which we respect and feel respected for our differences.

The Mapping Social Cohesion definition is but one definition though and each of us have our own ideas about what social cohesion is and what it means to live in a cohesive society. These ideas reflect not only a matter of definition, but also what is important to people and what it means or should mean to live in Australian society today, while also providing interesting insight into our collective values. This is what we seek to explore in this chapter.

Happiness, safety, respect and belonging are viewed as more important to social cohesion than sameness

To explore what people think about social cohesion, we included a question on this year's survey where we asked respondents to rate how important they think eight outcomes are for living in a cohesive society. The eight outcomes are listed in Figure 1 along with the headline results.

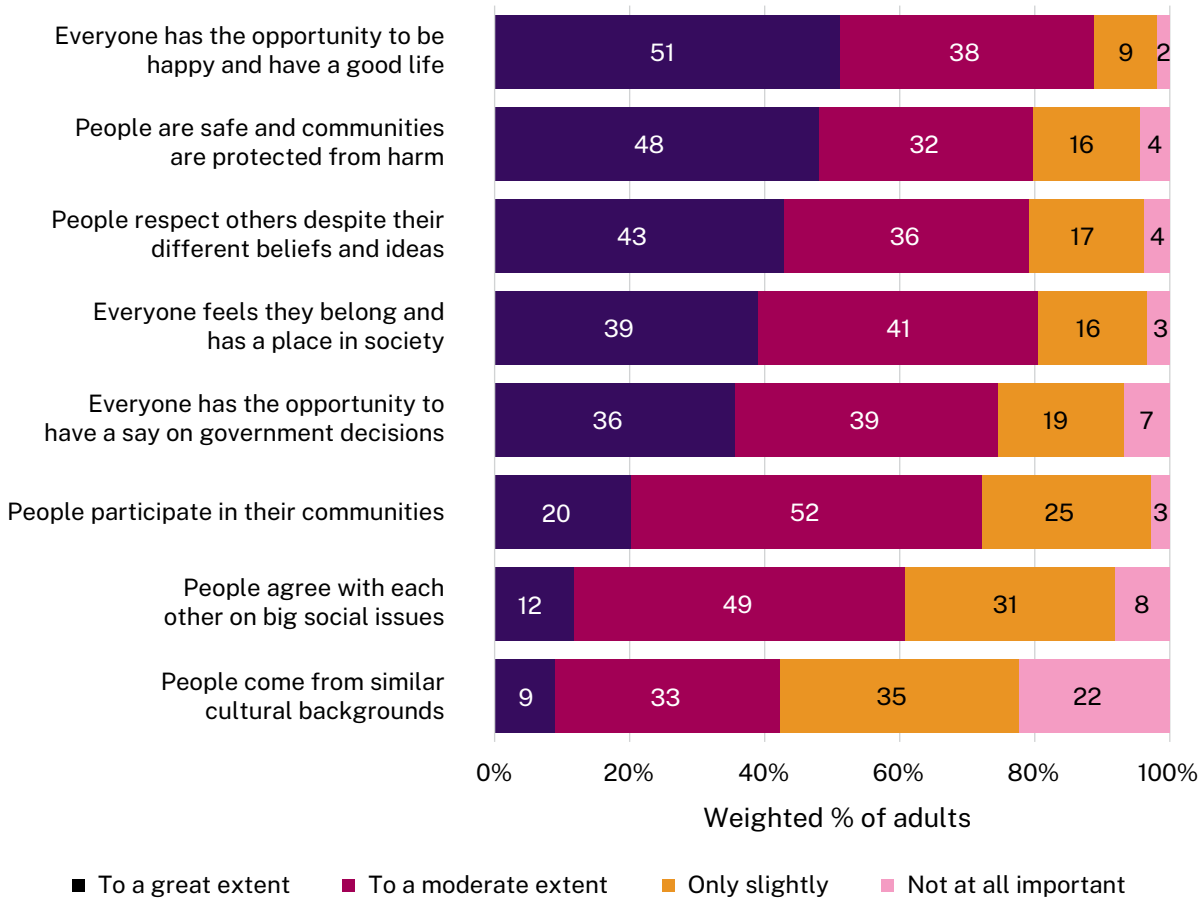
One of the striking initial findings from this question was that almost all respondents were able to give an opinion. Respondents were not given an explicit option to say they 'don't know', but as with all questions, responses are voluntary and respondents can choose not to answer.[36] Given the way social cohesion is used but rarely defined in public debate, we expected that a sizable share of respondents would not answer the question. In actual fact, more than 99% of respondents gave a response to any of the eight outcomes, suggesting a high level of engagement with the question – and the topic.

Equally striking was the importance that people attached to social cohesion in supporting happiness, safety, respect for our differences and belonging. One-half (51%) of people said that it was important to a great extent that 'everyone has the opportunity to be happy and have a good life', while 89% said that it was at least moderately important. Four-in-five people said that it was at least moderately important that 'people are safe and communities are protected from harm' (80%), that 'people respect others despite their different beliefs and ideas' (79%) and that 'everyone feels they belong and has a place in society' (80%).

Overall, 63% of people said that it was important to a great extent that either everyone has the opportunity to be happy and have a good life, that people are safe and communities are protected from harm, that people respect others despite their differences or that everyone belongs and has a place in society – while 94% said that at least one of these things was important to a moderate or great extent.

There was also reasonable support for the idea of social cohesion reflecting active engagement in social and civic life. Almost three-in-four people said that it was important to at least a moderate extent that 'everyone has the opportunity to have a say on government decisions' (74%) and that 'people participate in their communities' (72%). Interestingly, only one-in-five (20%) people said that it was important to a great extent that people participate in their communities, while 52% said it was moderately important. Of those who said community participation was moderately important, 62% said that at least one of happiness, safety, respect and belonging were greatly important. Active participation seems to be a secondary concern for these people – perhaps highlighting that in the modern world, social cohesion is less about people following rigid belief systems and behaviours and more about providing opportunities for each of us to flourish on our own terms.

Figure 1. ‘There has been a lot of discussion recently about social cohesion in Australia. To what extent are the following important for living in a cohesive society?’ Weighted % of adults, 2026



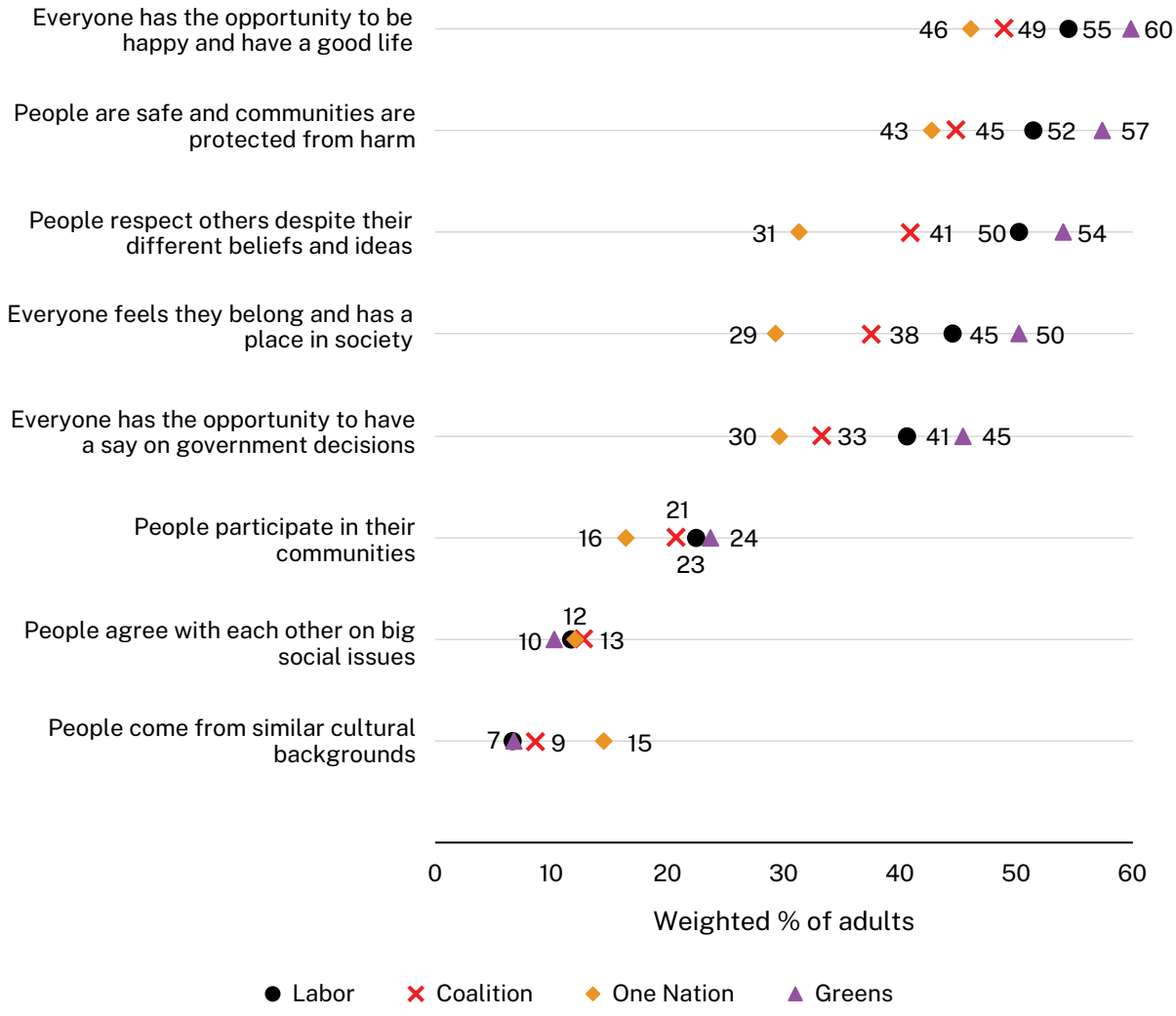
Notes: a small proportion of respondents (<1%) did not answer the question saying that they were not sure or would prefer not to say.

Few people think that cultural and ideological similarity are greatly important to social cohesion. Approximately one-in-ten people said that it was important to a great extent that ‘people agree with each other on big social issues’ (12%) or that ‘people come from similar cultural backgrounds’ (9%). Combined, one-in-six (17%) people said that either agreement on big issues or cultural similarity is important to a great extent, meaning that people were two and a half times more likely to say that it is greatly important that ‘people respect others despite their different beliefs and ideas’ (43%).

More people believe that it is important to at least a moderate extent that people agree with each other (61%) and come from similar cultural backgrounds (42%). It is striking though that among people who think that it is moderately or greatly important that people come from similar cultural backgrounds, 36% think it is greatly important that ‘people respect others despite their different beliefs and cultures’ and 84% think it is at least moderately important. Among people who think agreement on big issues is greatly important, 50% think respect for differences is greatly important and 90% think it is at least moderately important. So even among people who believe cultural and ideological similarity is important for social cohesion, they are still very likely to believe respect for each other through our differences is also important, if not more so.

The same is broadly true across the political spectrum, although there are important differences. The proportions of people who say that the eight outcomes are important to a great extent are shown in Figure 2 by their current voting preference. Among people who said they would vote for One Nation if an election were held today, 46% said that it was important to a great extent that 'everyone has the opportunity to be happy and have a good life'. One Nation supporters were generally the least likely to say that happiness, safety, having a say on government decisions and community participation were greatly important and much less likely than others to say that of respect through differences and belonging. One Nation voters were more likely than other voters to say cultural similarity is greatly important (15%) though they were still twice as likely to say that of respect through differences.

Figure 2. 'There has been a lot of discussion recently about social cohesion in Australia. To what extent are the following important for living in a cohesive society?' Weighted % of adults who say to a great extent by current voting preference, 2026



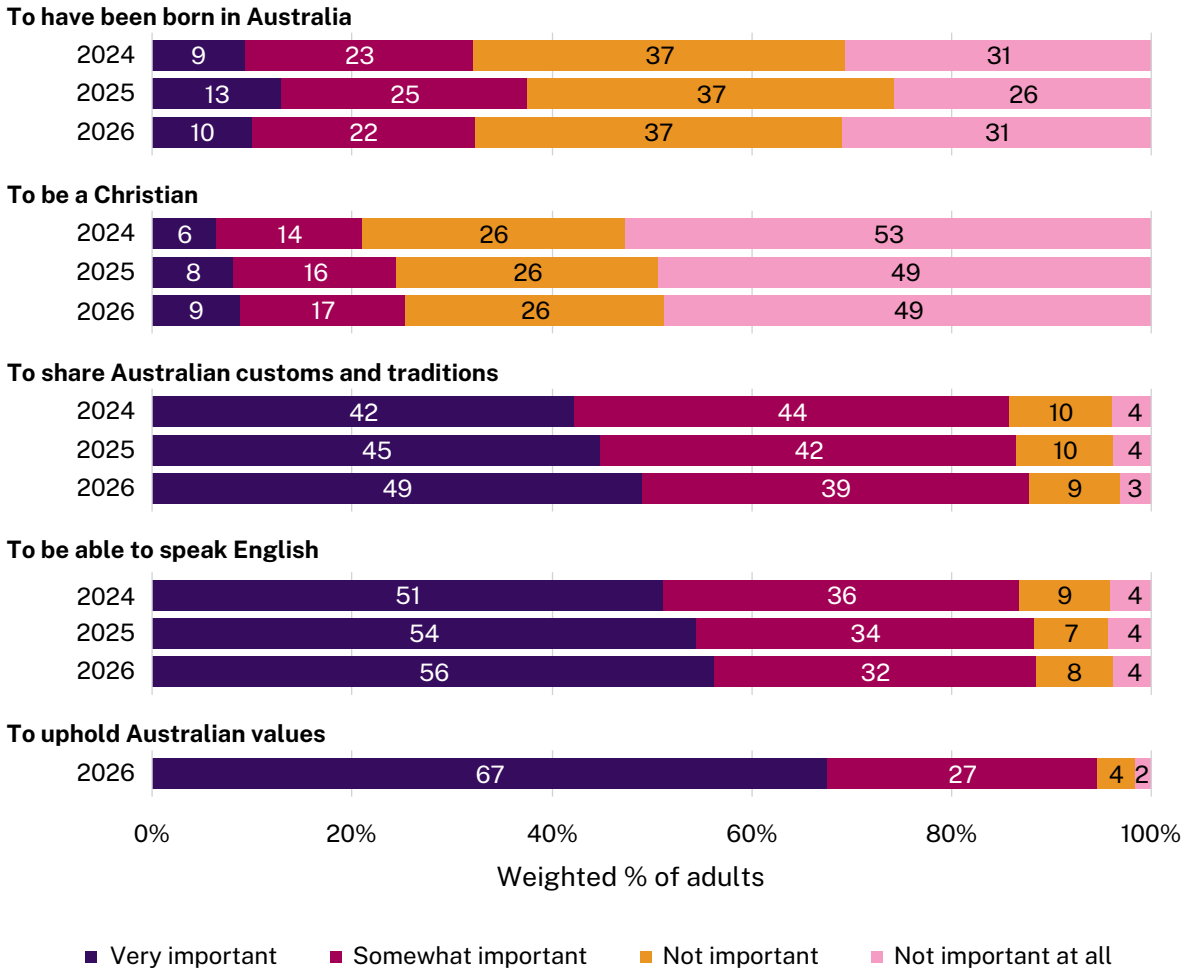
Notes: voting preference is based on who respondents said they would vote for if an election were held today.

Australian values and what it means to be Australian

In summary and in people's own judgments, social cohesion is not defined or determined by how much we look and think alike. Rather the importance of social cohesion lies in its ability to support the personal and social wellbeing and security of everyone. This together with the importance people attach to respecting each other through our differences speaks to Australian values. Values are never uniformly the same or true for all people, though happiness, safety, belonging and acceptance of differences are clearly prioritised over sameness or conformity in our culture or our ideas.

Inclusive rather than exclusive values are also reflected in the things that people believe are important for being truly Australian. On this point, people again place less importance on common backgrounds and beliefs and more importance on shared values, language, customs and traditions. Survey results are shown in Figure 3. In 2026, one-in-ten people said that it was very important to have been born in Australia (10%) or to be a Christian (9%) to be truly Australian, while half of the population or more said that it was very important 'to share Australian customs and traditions' (49%), 'to be able to speak English' (56%) and to uphold Australian values (67%).

Figure 3. 'How important do you think each of the following are for being truly Australian?' Weighted % of adults, 2024–2026



Notes: a small number of respondents (<1%) who refused to answer the question and responded that they 'don't know' have been removed from the denominator.

The importance people attach to upholding Australian values is a striking finding, but leaves open the question, what do people mean by Australian values? Although the survey does not ask respondents to spell that out, we can get some sense of what they mean from their responses to a wide range of other questions.

Of those who think that upholding Australian values is very important to be truly Australian in 2026, for example,

- 10% said it was important for social cohesion to a great extent that people come from similar cultural backgrounds, compared with 44% who said that it was important to a great extent that people respect others despite their different beliefs and ideas.
- 87% agree that immigrants are 'just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in Australia' and 73% disagree that it should be possible to reject people immigrating to Australia based on their race or ethnicity.
- However, compared with people who do not think upholding Australian values is very important, a smaller proportion agrees that 'we should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different ethnic and cultural groups in this country' (50% compared with 67% who do not think upholding Australian values is very important) and a larger proportion agrees that 'too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values' (78% compared with 57%).

In other words, people who place great importance on Australian values differ in whether those values are inclusive or exclusive of people from diverse backgrounds. Generally, they are inclusive to the extent that anyone can be Australian, though with expectations on immigrants to adapt and integrate and a perception that those expectations are often not met. As we will discuss later in the report, this is an important finding in this year's report and helps to explain current shifts in attitudes to immigrants, especially among conservative-minded people and those intending to vote for One Nation.

As we will also explain, the perception of unmet expectations can also be countered not only by the economic skills and contributions of immigrants but also by the social contribution of immigrants to the cohesion and fabric of local communities and the country (see the chapter 'Migrant experiences').

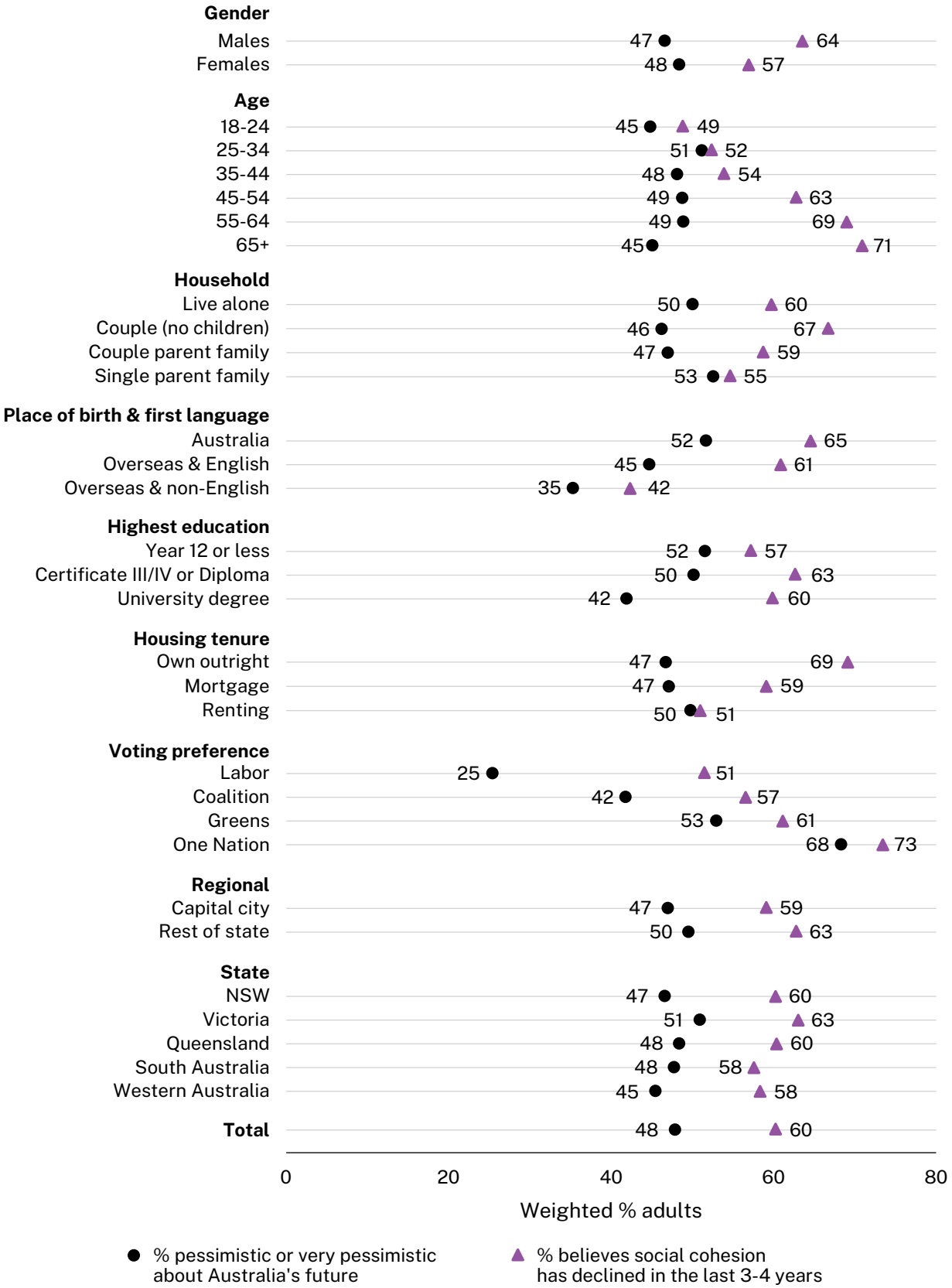
Most people believe that social cohesion is declining and are increasingly pessimistic about Australia's future

Despite the (conditional) inclusiveness of Australian values and people's understanding of social cohesion, economic pressures and social and political division including over immigration are contributing to a widely held view that social cohesion is declining in Australia. When people were asked to compare social cohesion in Australia today to three or four years ago, 21% said it was a lot less cohesive and 61% said it was a little or a lot less cohesive. Almost one-quarter (24%) of people, meanwhile, said that social cohesion was unchanged and 15% said it was a little or a lot more cohesive.

The Mapping Social Cohesion survey has also been tracking increasing pessimism in recent years. In 2026, 48% of people said they were pessimistic (40%) or very pessimistic (8%) about Australia's future, an increase of four percentage points since last year (43%) and 15 points since 2018 (31%).

There is a strong demographic and political dimension to perceptions of declining social cohesion and pessimism. Sociodemographic differences are shown in Figure 4. While there are few age differences in the shares of people who are pessimistic about the future, older Australians and those who own their home outright are substantially more likely to believe that social cohesion has declined by a little or a lot in the last three or four years, including 71% of people aged 65 years and over (compared with 49-54% of people aged 18-44) and 69% of outright homeowners (compared with 51% of renters). Relative to overseas-born Australians, the Australian-born are also substantially more likely to be pessimistic about the future and to believe social cohesion has been declining. The same is the case for One Nation supporters who are substantially more likely than Labor voters to believe that social cohesion is declining (73% versus 51%) and to be pessimistic about Australia's future (68% versus 25%).

Figure 4. Belief that social cohesion is declining and pessimism in Australia's future by sociodemographic characteristics, 2026



Notes: Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people said they would vote for if there were an election today. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

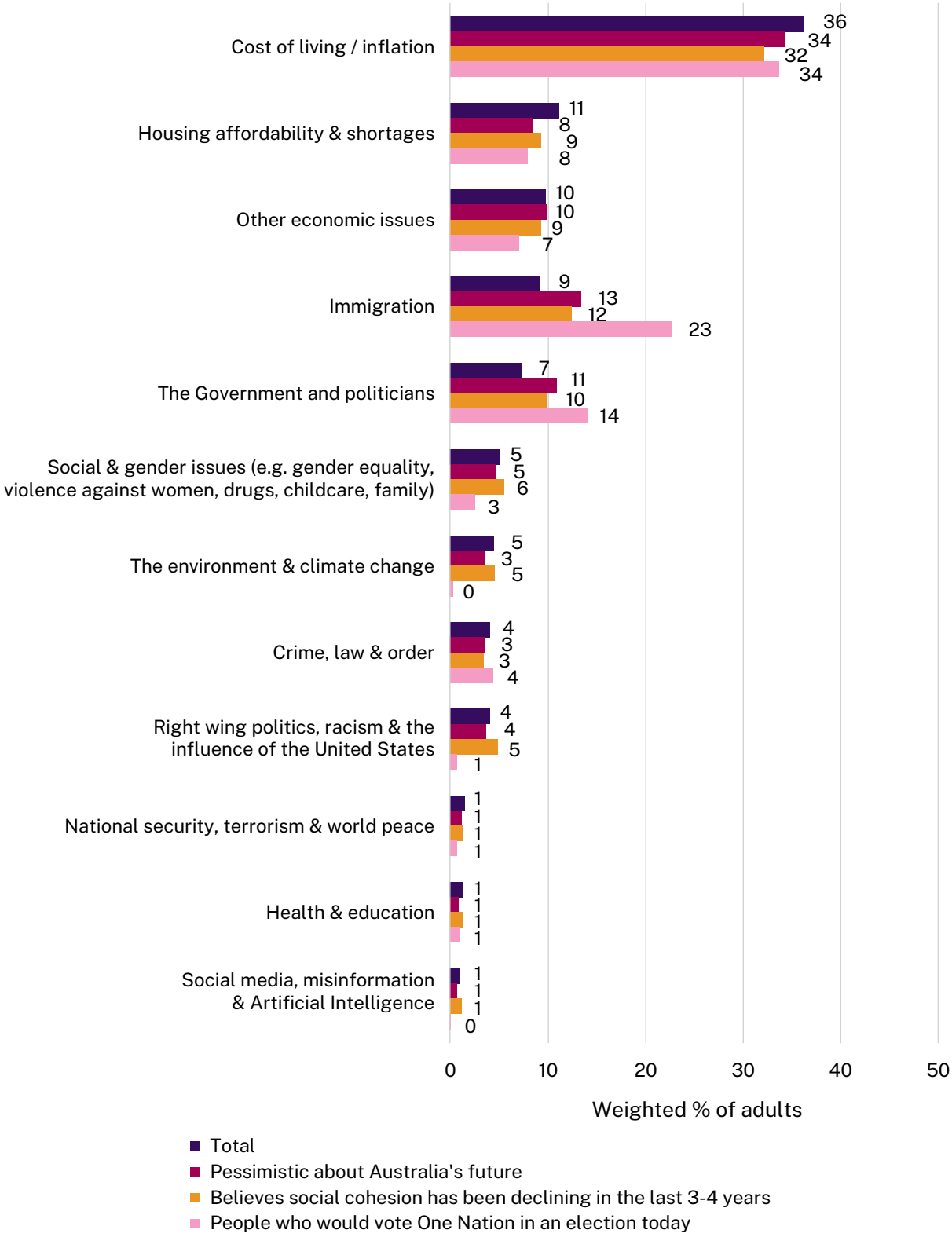
We can get a sense of where and how people think that social cohesion has declined by looking at the importance they place on each of the eight outcomes discussed above (listed in Figure 1). It is striking though that people who think social cohesion is declining are more likely to place great importance on each outcome. Almost one-in-five (18%) people who think social cohesion has declined a lot said that it was important to a great extent that people come from similar cultural backgrounds (compared with 7% of those who think social cohesion is unchanged or has improved), while 46% placed great importance on people respecting others despite their different beliefs and ideas (compared with 37%). Compared with people who thought social cohesion is unchanged or has improved, those who think it has declined a lot were also more likely to say the opportunity for happiness (57% versus 46%), belonging (45% versus 33%), safety (57% versus 39%), agreement on big social issues (17% versus 10%) and to have a say on government decisions (41% versus 30%) were greatly important to social cohesion. In other words, people who think that social cohesion is declining have a strong sense of what is important to social cohesion and provide no specific area in which social cohesion is declining.

Perceptions of social cohesion, pessimism and the major challenges facing Australia

We can also look at the relationships between pessimism and perceptions of declining cohesion and the issues that are most important to people. When asked to state the most important problem facing Australia today, 36% of people cited issues related to cost-of-living and inflation, 11% to housing shortages and affordability, 10% to other economic issues, 9% to immigration, 7% to the government and politicians, 5% to social issues such as drug use, childcare and family breakdown, and 5% to the environment and climate change. As shown in Figure 5, people who are pessimistic about Australia's future and those who believe social cohesion has been declining are also very likely to cite economic issues including the cost-of-living and housing, though are more likely to point to the government, politicians and immigration. This is driven by pessimistic One Nation supporters, 23% of whom cited immigration and 14% cited the government and politicians.

Nevertheless and despite national and global division, conflict, violence and concerns around issues such as social media, misinformation and Artificial Intelligence, the economy continues to stand out as the foremost issue for people. In 2026, 57% of all people cited the cost-of-living, inflation, housing affordability and shortages or other economic issues as the most important problem facing Australia. This was also true for 53% of people who are pessimistic about Australia's future, 51% who believe social cohesion has been declining and 49% of One Nation supporters. While the overall proportion citing economic issues (57%) has declined from a peak of 63% in 2024, it remains substantially higher than its average of 35% across the 2010s. Meanwhile, the proportion citing immigration increased sharply from 1% in 2023 to 9% in 2026, though is in line with its average of 8% between 2016 and 2019 –the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of international borders.

Figure 5. ‘What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?’ Weighted % of adults citing most common problems, 2026



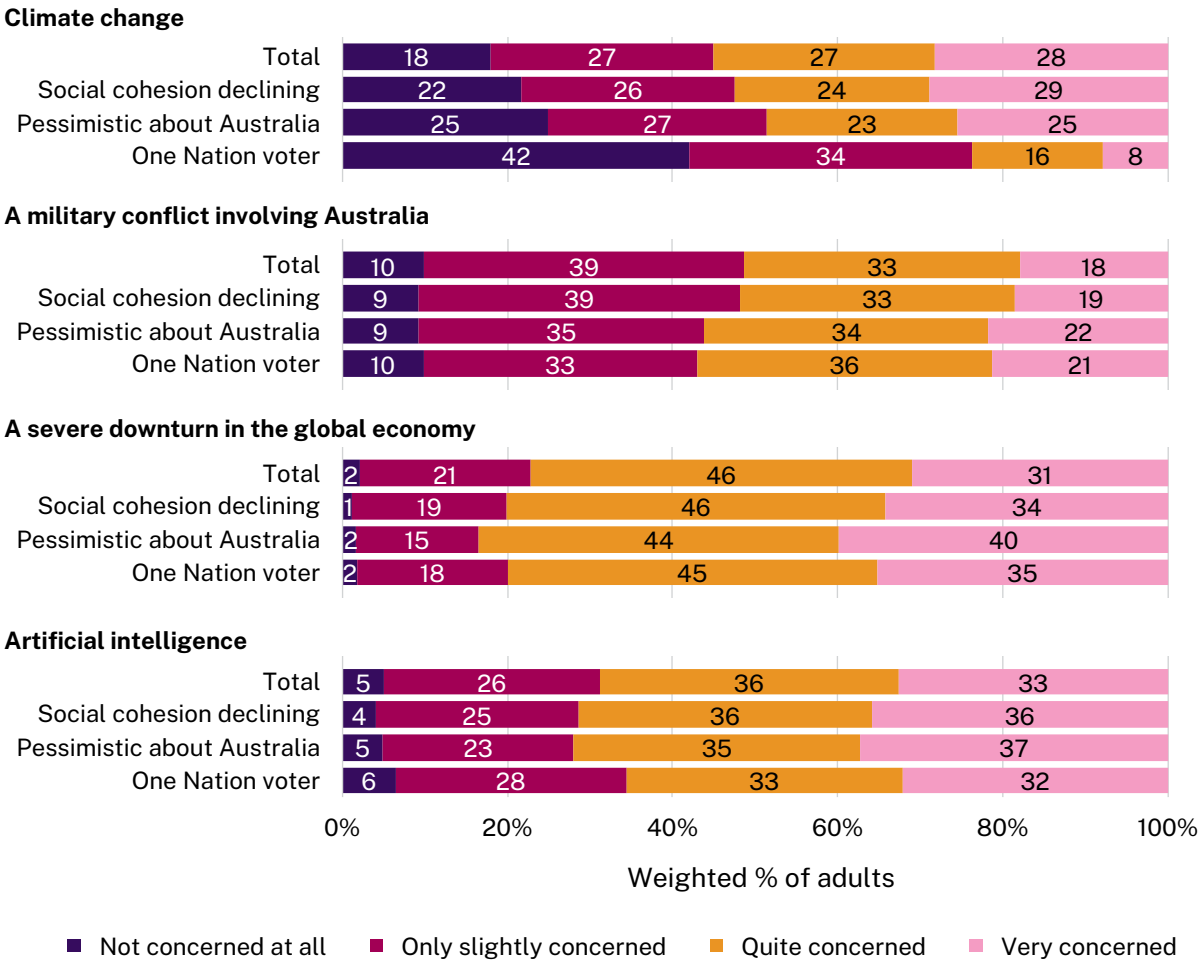
Notes: respondents answered this question through a free-text field. Responses were then coded to categories, including those listed by the Social Research Centre.

The prominence of economic issues is also reflected in concerns for the global economy. As shown in Figure 6, three-quarters (77%) of people are quite concerned or very concerned about the prospect of a severe downturn in the global economy, a figure that rises to 83% among people who are pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future.

The prominence of economic issues is not to say that people are not also worried about non-economic issues. Although few people raised it as their number one issue (<1%), one-in-three (33%) are very concerned about Artificial Intelligence and 36% are quite concerned, figures that are at least as high for people who are pessimistic about Australia's future.

Climate change, on the other hand, remains a polarising issue and people pessimistic about the future are less likely to be concerned about climate change than the overall population. In 2026, 55% of the total population are very or quite concerned about climate change, compared with 49% of those who are pessimistic about the future. This is driven particularly by pessimistic One Nation supporters. Among all One Nation supporters, just one-in-four (24%) are very or quite concerned.

Figure 6. 'When thinking about major issues facing Australia, how concerned are you about each of the following?' Weighted % of adults, 2026



Notes: 'Social cohesion declining' refers to respondents who said that social cohesion has declined by a little or a lot in the last 3-4 years, 'Pessimistic about Australia' refers to people who are pessimistic or very pessimistic about Australia's future, 'One Nation voter' refers to people who said they would vote for One Nation if there were an election held today and 'Total' is the total national population.

Social cohesion in a challenging and complex world

Social cohesion means many different things to many different people. As an idea and concept, social cohesion has a long history and, like today, has long been used to advocate for personal and sectional interests as well as public good. In a diverse society like modern Australia, where there is no prospect of us all thinking and looking alike and where there are important and widely felt social, political and economic pressures and challenges, it is useful to consider what people think are important to social cohesion. As we have explained in this chapter, there is a clear message on this. Amidst division and disgruntlement, conflict and financial stress, people most value the degree to which society provides for the happiness, safety and belonging of all of us, where people's active involvement in community is welcome but on their own terms and where differences are fine but mutual respect through our differences is vital.

The state of social cohesion in 2026

The Mapping Social Cohesion study has been measuring and tracking social cohesion in Australia since 2007. One of the primary tools for doing this is the Scanlon Index of social cohesion (previously the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion). Developed in collaboration between the Scanlon Foundation and Monash University under the leadership of Professor Andrew Markus AO, the Index is actually a set of six indexes, providing a measure of social cohesion across each of the five areas or domains of social cohesion, as well as an overall measure.

Social cohesion is complex and multidimensional and can never really be measured with a single number or set of numbers. As we show in this report, national headline measures disguise important dynamics and changes that can impact on overall social cohesion, including rising division and polarisation, difficult experiences and inequalities faced by particular communities and declines in some areas (e.g. acceptance) that are offset by increases in others (e.g. belonging).

For these reasons, we provide Index numbers in this chapter to provide a high-level gauge of how things are tracking across Australia and point to areas where deeper investigation and analysis are required.

The Scanlon Index of social cohesion measures social cohesion across five domains (in addition to the overall measure):

- **Belonging:** the sense of pride and belonging people have in Australia and in Australian life and culture, and the belonging they feel in their neighbourhoods.
- **Worth:** the degree of emotional and material wellbeing.
- **Social inclusion & justice:** perceptions of economic fairness and trust in government and institutions.
- **Participation:** involvement in political activities and participation in social, community, and civic groups.
- **Acceptance and rejection:** attitudes to immigrant diversity, support for minorities, and experience of discrimination.

Updating the Scanlon Index of social cohesion

The Scanlon Index of social cohesion has been undergoing a gradual process of re-development in recent years. In 2021, the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute commissioned the Social Research Centre to update the Index to incorporate current best practice in statistical techniques. The resulting Index is based on information that survey respondents give to 36 questions. Further information on the new Index is provided in the Technical Report accompanying this report.

We have gradually incorporated the new Index into our reporting since 2022. Under the authorship of the Australian National University, the annual Mapping Social Cohesion reports have used the new Index to analyse differences in social cohesion experienced and perceived by individuals. The new Index is also used in the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's Social Cohesion Compass[37], providing estimates of social cohesion for local government areas across Australia.

This report uses the new Index for the historical monitoring of social cohesion for the first time. It is not possible to use the new Index to monitor social cohesion over the entire 2007–2026 history of Mapping Social Cohesion as several survey questions were only introduced in 2021. Until now, we have continued to use the old Index for this purpose. However, now with six years of surveys to compare the new and old indexes, we can see they are shifting in tandem. This gives us great confidence this year to fully adopt the new Index moving forward. In this report therefore, we use the old Index to report social cohesion scores between 2007 and 2025 and the new Index for reporting scores from 2025 onwards.

It is important to recognise that the new index measures social cohesion as psychological perceptions and attitudes of individuals. These are then summed up over all individuals to come up with national estimates. Despite being measured for individuals, social cohesion is a quality of groups and especially of society as a whole.[38] Social cohesion also relates not only to psychological traits but to actual experiences and behaviours including the experience of discrimination, participation in community activities and organisations and active involvement in the political process.

While the new index enhances the statistical rigour of our measures, it loses some of the collective and behavioural quality of social cohesion. For example, the experience of discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, skin colour or religion has long been seen as an important complement of anti-immigrant sentiment and racial prejudice in the Mapping Social Cohesion study and incorporated in the measurement of acceptance. The people who report discrimination though are generally not the same people who report holding anti-immigrant and racial prejudices and both cannot be included in the new index where it is measured for individuals. Thus, the reporting of discrimination no longer appears in the measurement of the Scanlon Index of acceptance.

Participation, meanwhile, is measured in the new Index of social cohesion and has been expanded to include social, community and civic participation in addition to the historic measurement of involvement in political activities. Participation though is different in nature to perceptions and attitudes and does not neatly lend itself to the same kind of measurement in the new Index. The new Index is based on people giving generally similar responses to different questions in the same social cohesion domain. In the Belonging domain, for example, people who have a great sense of belonging in Australia are also likely to feel they belong in their neighbourhoods and to have a great sense of pride in Australia and strongly positive responses to each can be measured as a greater level of belonging.

We would not necessarily expect the same to be true for participation in different types of social, community, civic and political activities. If a person is heavily involved with one or more community support groups, for example, it does not automatically follow that they are also likely to be involved in other types of organisations and activities or that people involved in multiple types of activities are participating more than those participating in one type of activity. This is an important assumption of the new Index of participation, warranting caution in how the numbers are interpreted.

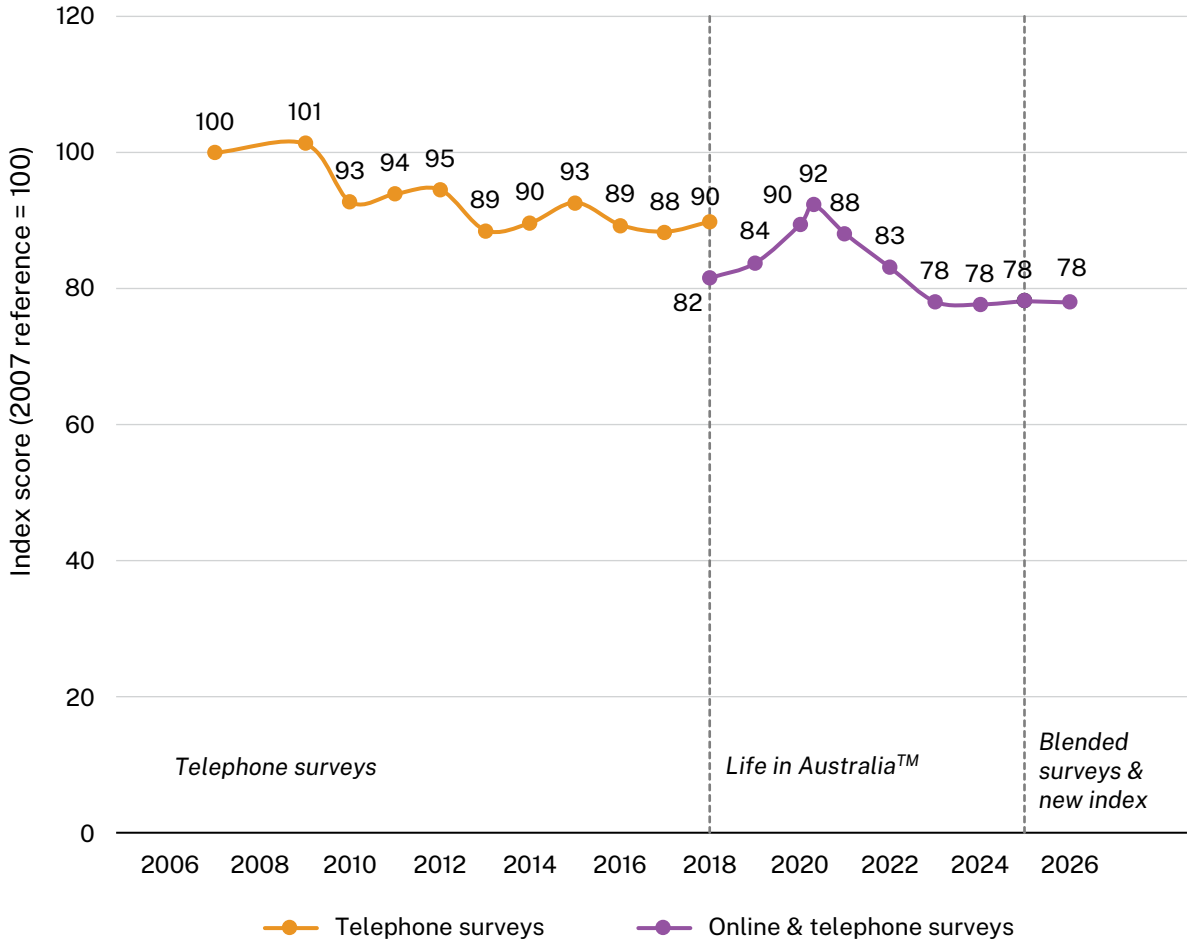
Overall, we stress the importance of not relying on a single set of Index numbers to understand social cohesion. The Index numbers are a useful barometer of how things are tracking but cannot replace the need for detailed and forensic analysis. The quantitative and qualitative components of the Mapping Social Cohesion study provide a powerful basis for this analysis, some of which we provide in this report – though in truth goes far beyond the information we are able to provide here.

The Scanlon index of social cohesion in 2026

The overall Scanlon Index of social cohesion since 2007 is shown in Figure 7. Index scores between 2007 and 2018 were calculated exclusively from phone surveys. Surveys since 2018 have been mostly completed online, firstly just to the Social Research Centre's Life in Australia™ panel (2018–2025) and then to the blended Life in Australia™ and the Online Research Unit panels (2025–2026).[39] The 2026 Index score is based on the new Index described above and indexed to the 2025 score to provide an indication of how scores have changed in the last year and relative to prior years.[40]

The overall Index sits at a score of 78 in 2026 (relative to a benchmark score of 100 in 2007). Perhaps surprisingly, this level is the same as scores reported since 2023, suggesting no marked decline in social cohesion in the last one to three years. Index scores are however, lower than they have even been recorded since 2007. After adjusting for the changes in the survey over the years, particularly the shift to mostly online surveys in 2018, we estimate that the overall index has declined by 15% since 2007 and 14% since a COVID-19 related increase in November 2020.[41]

Figure 7. Scanlon Index of social cohesion, 2007 to 2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel. See the Technical Report for more information.

The stability of overall Index scores since 2023 is driven by relative stability across all domains. However, index scores are near their lowest levels since 2007 and the transition to mostly online surveys in 2018 in each domain except Participation. Index scores in each domain are shown in Table 1 for the period 2018 to 2026.

Table 1. Scanlon Index of social cohesion by domain, 2018–2026

	Belonging	Worth	Social inclusion & justice	Participation	Acceptance	Overall
2018	85	77	88	95	63	82
2019	86	80	93	93	67	84
2020	88	84	112	96	68	90
2021	84	82	98	95	82	88
2022	81	78	86	97	74	83
2023	78	75	77	96	65	78
2024	77	74	74	100	63	78
2025	78	75	77	101	60	78
2026	79	75	76	98	60	78

Note: Two surveys were conducted in 2020, one in July and one in November. We show the results of the July survey in this table to be consistent with the timing of the survey in other years.

National pride and belonging remain at low levels – but increased this year, while local connections have been resilient

The Index of belonging declined by approximately 18% between 2007[42] and its low point of 77 in 2024, before modestly increasing to a score of 79 in 2026. As we explained in last year's report, the long-run decline in belonging is driven by younger and middle-aged Australians (Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z) reporting both a weaker sense of belonging relative to older Australians and a declining sense of belonging over time.[43]

The old index of belonging used to measure scores up to 2025 is exclusively focused on measures of national belonging and pride. The new index used to track change between 2025 and 2026 expands on this to incorporate measures of interpersonal and local belonging.

All the indicators of national pride and belonging have declined over the last 15-20 years, though increased between 2025 and 2026. Most notably, the proportion of adults who reported that they 'take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture' to a great extent increased from 33% in 2025 to 40% in 2026 (as opposed to a moderate extent, only slightly or not at all). As we will explain later in the report (see the chapter 'A polarised social & political climate'), much of this increase is focused among One Nations supporters and deeper analysis is required to understand the implications of increasing national pride on social cohesion.

The interpersonal and local indicators of belonging, meanwhile, have been stable. The proportion of adults who agree or strongly agree (as opposed to disagree or strongly disagree) with the statement 'I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood' was essentially unchanged between 2025 (79%) and 2026 (80%), along with the proportion who report they often or sometimes feel isolated from others (48% in 2025 and 47% in 2026).

See the chapters 'A polarised social & political climate' and 'Connected, safe & trusting communities' for more information.

The sense of worth is strained by social and economic pressures

Except for an increase during the COVID-19 pandemic[44], the Index of worth has gradually declined over time, reaching a low point of 74 in 2024 before stabilising. After adjusting for changes to the survey over time, we estimate that the sense of worth declined by 12% between 2007 and 2024 and remains 11% below 2007 levels in 2026.

The old and new indexes measure the extent of happiness and financial satisfaction in the worth domain. The steady decline in worth since 2007 against the old index is reflective of gradual declines in the proportion of people who say they are very happy since the early 2010s and a small increase in financial dissatisfaction. The new index incorporates additional measures of psychological, social and financial wellbeing and, like the old index, suggests relative stability in worth since 2023.

Financial wellbeing deteriorated between the end of the COVID-19 pandemic (and the removal of financial supports) and the emergence of cost-of-living pressures, inflation and rising interest rates. Between 2021 and 2024, the proportion of people who were satisfied with their present financial situation declined from 70% to 59%, while the proportion who reported they often or sometimes went without meals due to a lack of money increased from 9% to 13%. The relative stability of these measures since therefore points to persistent and stubborn cost of living pressures and provides little cause for comfort even if they have not worsened this year.

See the chapter 'Personal & financial wellbeing' for more information.

Perceptions of social inclusion and justice reflect high but polarised concern for inequality and fairness

The Scanlon Index of social inclusion & justice has stabilised in the last two years after a period of long-run decline. Overall though, the Index remains approximately 22% lower than 2007 levels in 2026. Having also fallen sharply between the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of recent social and economic discord, index scores reached a low of 74 in 2024 (down from 112 in 2020) before increasing modestly to 77 in 2025 and 76 in 2026.

The long run decline in the Index of social inclusion & justice has been driven in large measure by a decline in the sense of economic fairness in Australia. In 2026, 58% of people agree or strongly agree that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life' (as opposed to disagree or strongly disagree), which while still a majority is substantially below the 82% of people who consistently agreed with this statement in the period from 2007 to 2013. After removing the effect of the transition to the mostly online survey, we estimate that this proportion has declined by 21 percentage points since the early 2010s. The proportion also fell by five percentage points in the last year, driven by Coalition and One Nation voters.

Levels of concern for economic inequality have been reasonably consistent in recent years. In 2026, 80% of people agree or strongly agree that 'In Australia today, the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes is too large', while 43% agree that 'People living on low incomes in Australia receive enough financial support', both of which are at similar levels to the last 10 years. Most voters across the political spectrum believe the gap in incomes is too large including 88% of Labor voters, 69% of Coalition voters and 72% of One Nation voters, but are more evenly split on whether low income earners receive enough support (40% of Labor voters, 58% of Coalition voters and 48% of One Nation voters).

The Index of social inclusion & justice also includes measures of trust in government and other institutions. Most of these measures have declined over the last year, driven by an increasingly polarised political environment. In 2026, 31% said that the Federal Government can be 'trusted to do the right thing by the Australian people' almost always or most of the time, a proportion that is in line with its average of the 2010s, though has declined substantially since 2021 (44%) and in the last year (37% in 2025). Meanwhile, the proportion of people who believe the system of government needs major change or to be replaced increased from 39% in 2021 to 43% in 2025 and 48% in 2026, the proportion who believe elections are fair has steadily declined from 64% in 2021 to 59% in 2025 and 57% in 2026 and the proportion who believe the courts make fair, impartial decisions declined from 57% in 2021 to 51% in 2025 and 50% in 2026.

The deterioration in trust in government and institutions has been driven almost entirely by conservative-minded voters and particularly One Nation supporters. This is speaking to rising disgruntlement and dissatisfaction on the conservative side of politics and an increasingly divided and polarised social and political climate. This polarisation is not well captured in the Index of social inclusion & justice, as the Index measures an average overall level over the entire population (and so averages over the division). It is clear though that this polarisation is a major emerging trend and potential threat to social cohesion.

See the chapter 'A polarised social & political climate' for more information.

Recent stability in social, community and political participation is coming after a period of substantial decline

The Index of participation declined by three points between 2025 and 2026, after several years of being the most stable Index of social cohesion. The decline though is not particularly out of the ordinary and year-to-year fluctuations of this size have been common over the years. As shown in Table 1, the Index of participation has shifted by two or more points five times from one year to the next since 2018 even as the Index has stayed within the range of 93–101.

Looking beneath the headline Index numbers, the decline in the Index of participation looks to be driven by subtle shifts in political and community activity. The overall trend though is of reasonable stability and continuity in the degree to which people are actively involved in their communities and the political process. In 2026, 48% of people said they had been actively involved with a social, religious or community support group in the previous 12 months, similar to 2025 (48%) and the average since 2021 (49%). Measures of political participation, meanwhile, have been sensitive to the shifts in the administration of the survey as well as respondents' memory recall, though approximately one-half of respondents report signing a petition, participating in a boycott or attending a protest in the previous three years, which we estimate is in line with levels of recent years.

It is important to note that the new Index of participation used to report changes between 2025 and 2026 is substantively different from the old Index. The old Index, used to report national-level changes between 2007 and 2025, was focused purely on participation in the political process through activities such as voting, communicating with Members of Parliament and getting involved with protests, boycotts and petitions. As discussed above, the new Index broadens the measures to include involvement in social, community and civic activities and organisations. Changes in Index

scores between 2025 and 2026 therefore are different in nature and have a different meaning to changes reported in previous years.

While social and community participation has been reasonably stable in recent years, other data suggests this is coming after a period of longer-term decline. Measures of social and community participation were first asked on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in 2021 though mirror similar questions that have been asked on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey since 2006. On the General Social Survey, social and community participation declined markedly between 2010 and 2025, including by 18 percentage points for involvement in social and religious groups and by 15 points for involvement in community support groups.[45]

See the chapter 'Connected, safe & trusting communities' for more information.

The measured stability of the Index of acceptance is disguising declining support for immigration and multiculturalism

The Index of acceptance has been stable in the last year, recording scores of 60 in 2025 and 2026. The longer-run decline in the Index of acceptance since 2007 was driven by people becoming increasingly pessimistic about their own future and more frequently reporting discrimination on the grounds of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion. The proportion of people who believe their life in Australia will be a little or a lot worse in the next 3-4 years increased from an average of 21% in the early 2010s to 32% in 2026 (see the chapter 'Personal & financial wellbeing'), while the proportion experiencing discrimination increased between 2010 and 2020 (see the chapter 'Migrant experiences'). Neither pessimism nor discrimination is included in the new Index of acceptance, though remain important indicators of how social cohesion is experienced in Australia today.

The recent stability of the new Index of acceptance is being driven by three key survey items that inform the index,

- The proportion of people who agree that 'accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger' remained at 64% in 2026, similar to 2025 (65%) and the average of the 2010s, though has declined from a peak in 2023 (78%).
- The proportion who agree that 'the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for Australia as a nation' has declined from 90% in 2021 but was stable between 2025 (82%) and 2026 (83%).
- The proportion who agree that 'it is important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in the school curriculum' likewise declined from 88% in 2021 to 79% in 2025 and remained at 79% in 2026.

The stability of these items in the last year is very welcome in the current social and political environment – particularly for what they suggest about the strength and resilience of people's attitudes to First Nations Australians and the foundational importance of the relationship between Indigenous people and the wider community.

The stability of these indicators, however, is masking a substantial deterioration in people's acceptance and support for immigration and diversity on a range of other indicators. In 2026, 76% of people agreed that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia', a four percentage point decline from 2025 and a 13 point decline from 2023, 73% agreed that 'immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy', a decline of five percentage points since 2025 and 13 points since 2023 and 70% agreed that 'immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures', a decline of six points since 2025 and 15 points since 2023 – among several other indicators.

Importantly, almost all these indicators are declining from high levels and, in many cases, remain at high levels. The proportion who agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, for example, increased from an estimated average of 74% between 2013 and 2019 to 89% in 2023. The decline to 76% in 2026 has been substantial, though is still at least as high as it was in 2013–2019. In this age of heightened division over immigration, it is also noteworthy that people are still three times more likely to agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia than disagree and more than twice as likely to agree that immigrants are good for Australia's economy and improve society by bringing new ideas and cultures. And even as these measures decline, the great majority believe that people who immigrate to Australia make good citizens and can be 'true' Australians.

See the chapter 'Australia's multicultural fabric' for more information.

Looking beyond the headline numbers

The overall Scanlon Index of social cohesion is currently at its lowest level in the 20-year history of the Mapping Social Cohesion study. The long run decline has been driven by a weakening sense of national pride, belonging and social justice, coupled with strains on happiness and personal and financial wellbeing, increasing pessimism and elevated levels of discrimination. Other evidence points to long-run declines in social and community participation and, in more recent years, sustained financial pressures, weaker and more polarised trust in government and institutions and support for multiculturalism and immigrant diversity.

The measured stability of the Index of social cohesion in 2026 reflects some areas of strength and resilience in these difficult times. This is particularly the case in terms of local and neighbourhood connections and a stabilisation in belonging, participation and personal and financial wellbeing – albeit, at lower levels than in the past. Nevertheless, increasing social and political division and weakening support for diversity is clearly present, even if not wholly captured in the Indexes. This is a reminder that social cohesion can never be captured in a single number or even a set of numbers and it is crucial to look deeper into the evidence, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This is what we seek to do in coming chapters.

A polarised social & political climate

The Mapping Social Cohesion study has been tracking an increase in political division in recent years. In a deeply divided world, this homegrown division appears to have sharpened further in 2026. Depending on their political views, people today are increasingly distrustful and discontent not only with the current government, but with elections, the court systems and the political system. Although political debate and differences are essential to democracy, deep polarisation can be detrimental where it starts to erode this trust in the wider system and our ability to work towards common goals.

One of the major pressures on social cohesion globally in recent years and decades has been an increase in division or polarisation over social and political issues. This polarisation plays out in 'cultural wars', political battles over issues like climate change, immigration and the current conflict in Palestine and the Middle East and distrust in governments and politicians from different sides of the political spectrum. Two types of polarisation have been increasing in many countries around the world, ideological polarisation, referring to the sharp differences between people in their beliefs and ideologies and affective polarisation, referring to dislike and distrust of governments and people who hold different ideas and ideological positions.[46, 47]

Polarisation is not new to Australia. Political battles have been fought over climate change, Indigenous rights, immigration and multiculturalism over many years and among many other issues. However, as we reported in the Mapping Social Cohesion 2025 report – and as often reported since in the media – social and political division seems to be accelerating relative to recent years.

To be clear, differences and debate over big social and political issues are foundational to a resilient and vibrant democracy – and indeed social cohesion. As we have already shown in this report (see the chapter 'What is important to Australians in 2026?'), relatively few people believe that agreement on big social issues is particularly important to living in a cohesive society and people are more likely to view respect for our differences as important.

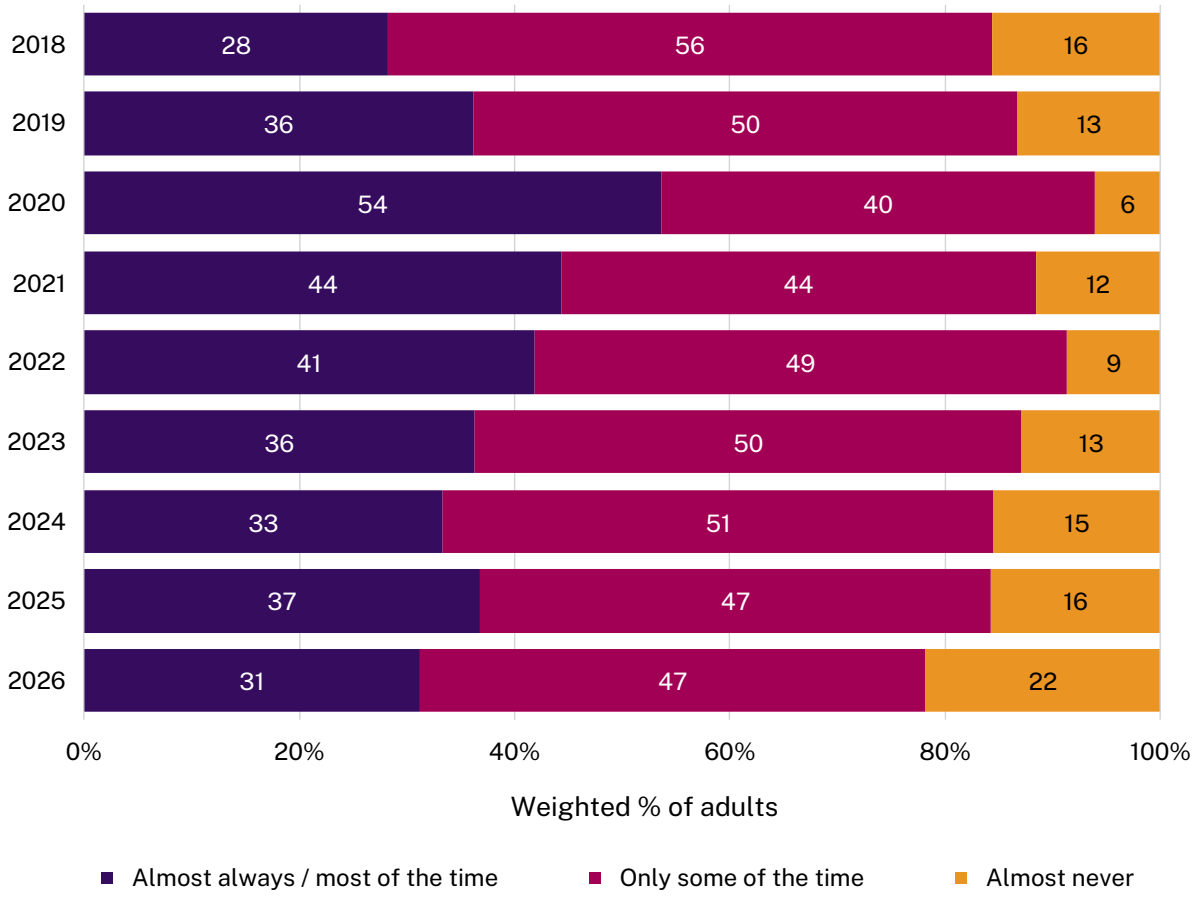
Polarisation is arguably detrimental to social cohesion not in its own right but where that respect is absent and starts to erode people's trust not only in the government of the day but in the wider political and institutional system, as well as in each other and our ability to work collectively for the common good. The extent to which this may be happening in Australia is the topic of this chapter.

Distrust in government is growing

People have become less trusting in government in the last year. This continues a trend of declining trust since the COVID-19 pandemic, but that is now being accelerated by current divisions.

Trends in trust in government are shown in Figure 8. The proportion of adults who think the 'government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people' almost always or most of the time declined from 54% in 2020 to 31% in 2026. At the same time, the proportion who say they almost never trust the government increased from 6% in 2020 to 22% in 2026. The 2026 level of distrust is higher than it has been since the politically tumultuous 2010s.

Figure 8. ‘How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people?’ Weighted % of adults, 2018–2026

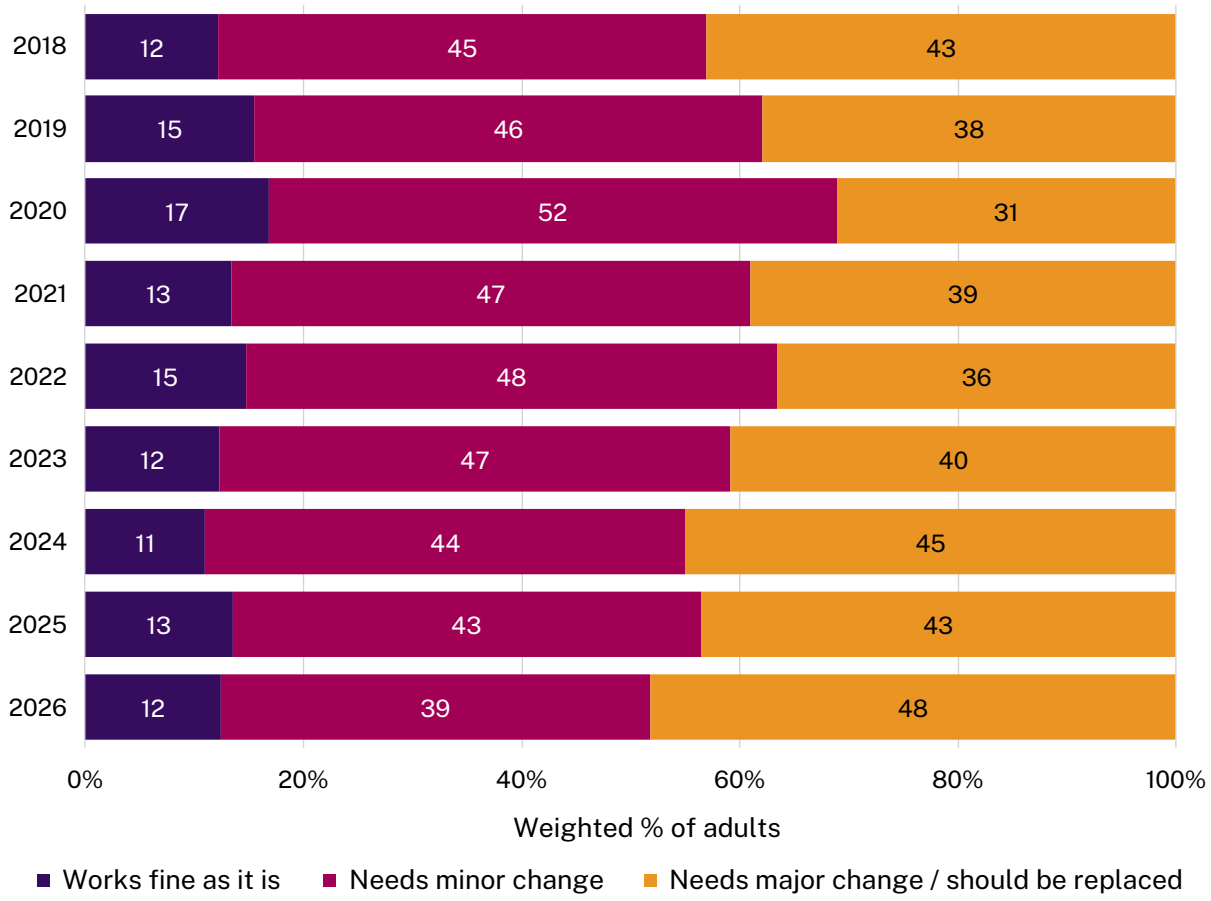


Note: A small number of people who did not answer the question (<1%) have been removed from the denominator.

Growing discontent has been recorded on other survey questions related to trust and fairness in society:

- 48% say the ‘system of government we have in Australia’ should be replaced or requires major changes (as opposed to needing only minor changes or works fine as it is), an increase from 43% in 2025 and at the highest level since the question was first asked in 2014 (see Figure 9).
- 37% believe government leaders in Australia abuse their powers all or most of the time in 2026, an increase from 32% in 2025 and at the highest level since the question was first asked in 2021.
- 42% believe that elections in Australia are fair only ’some of the time’ (24%), a little of the time (11%) or none of the time (8%), an increase from 40% in 2025 and an average of 36% between 2021 when the question was first asked and 2024.
- 58% agree or strongly agree that ‘Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life’, a decrease from 63% in 2025 and at the lowest level since the question was first asked in 2007.

Figure 9. ‘Would you say the system of government we have in Australia works fine as it is or…’ Weighted % of adults, 2018–2026

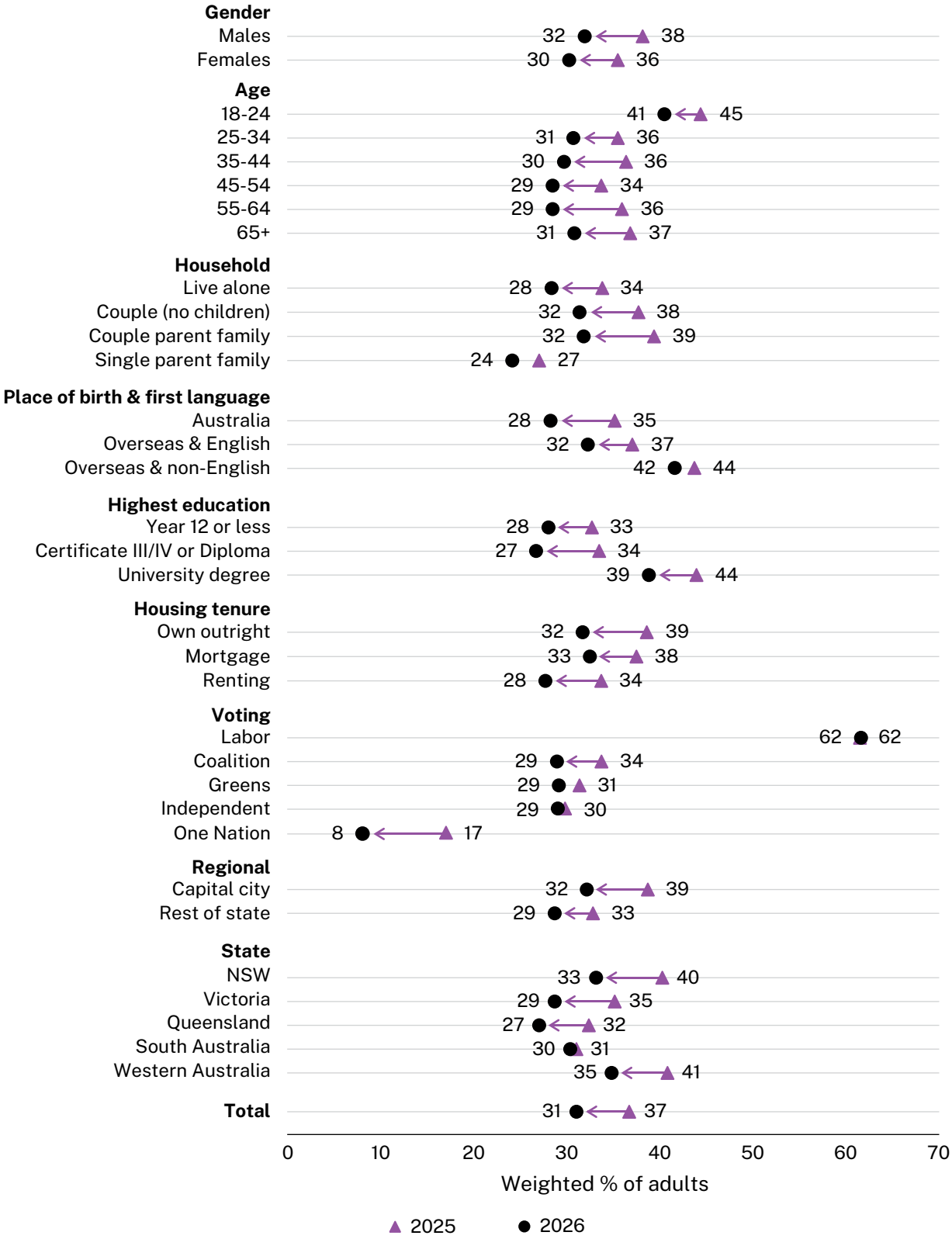


Note: A small number of people who did not answer the question (<1%) have been removed from the denominator.

Trust in government has declined across most groups over the last year. The proportion of people who trust the Federal Government to do the right thing by the Australian people at least most of the time is shown in Figure 10 for different sociodemographic groups in 2025 and 2026. Trust declined among men and women and across most age groups (we do not have a large enough number of respondents to report reliable estimates for non-binary people). The proportion who trust the government at least most of the time declined from 38% to 32% for males in the last year and from 36% to 30% for females, while declines ranged from 4 to 7 seven percentage points across age groups.

- Declining trust was more common among Australian-born populations. The proportion of the Australian born who trust the government all or most of the time declined from 35% to 28%, while the proportion for overseas-born Australians whose first language is a language other than English was relatively steady at 44% in 2025 and 42% in 2026.
- Declining trust was also common among people with Certificate and Diploma-level qualification (included Trades), people who own their home outright, One Nation and Coalition voters and people from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

Figure 10. 'How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people?' Weighted % of adults who say almost always or most of the time, 2025 and 2026



Notes: Arrows pointing away from the 2025 markers indicate statistically significant changes to 2026, i.e. changes are likely (with 95% confidence) real, reflecting more than random chance. Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people said they would vote for in 2026 if there were an election today if they completed the 2026 survey, otherwise who they voted for in the 2025 Federal election. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

Growing partisan cynicism in government institutions

Declining trust in government and the political system in the last year has been driven by One Nation supporters. Partisan trends in trust in government institutions are shown in Figure 11. Just 9% of One Nation voters trust the Australian Government to do the right thing by the Australian people almost always or most of the time in 2026 (Figure 11a). This proportion has halved since 2025, declining from 18% to 9%, while remaining steady for Labor voters (61% in 2025 and 62% in 2026). As a result, the gap in trust between Labor and One Nation voters increased from 43 to 53 percentage points in just the last year. The proportion who trust the current Labor Government also declined among Coalition voters, from 36% in 2025 to 29% in 2026.

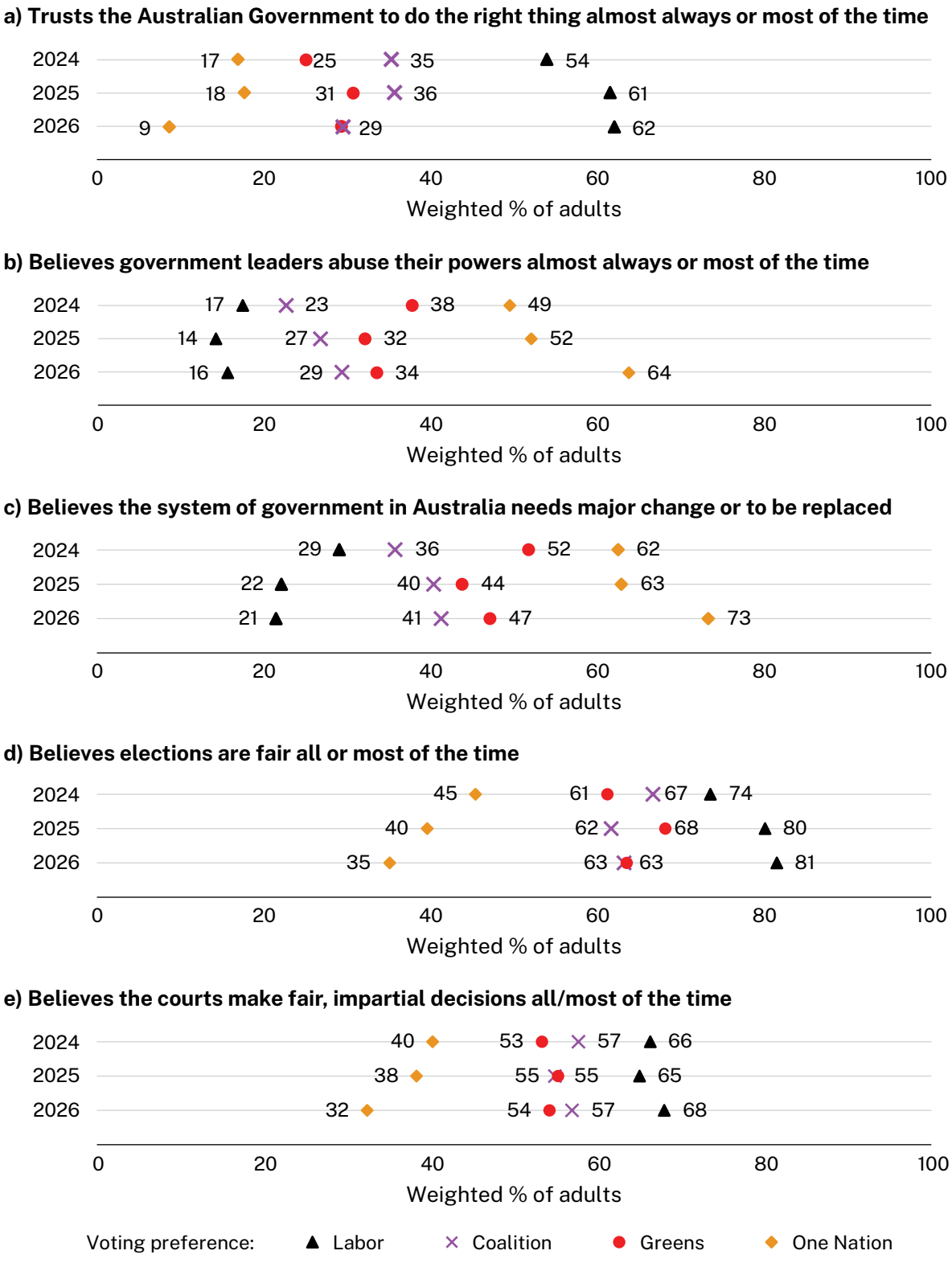
Almost two-in-three (64%) One Nation supporters believe government leaders abuse their powers almost always or most of the time, an increase from 52% in 2025 and compared with 16% among Labor voters (Figure 11b).

Partisan mistrust in the current Federal Government extends to disgruntlement with the wider political system and institutions of government. As shown in Figure 11c, the proportion of One Nation supporters who believe the system of government in Australia needs major change or to be replaced increased from 63% in 2025 to 73% in 2026, increasing the gap between them and Labor voters from 41 to 52 percentage points (Figure 11c).

Just one-in-three (34%) One Nation supporters believe elections are fair all or most of the time (Figure 11d), while a similar proportion (32%) believe that Courts in Australia make fair, impartial decisions all or most of the time (Figure 11e). In both cases, the trust of One Nation supporters has deteriorated in the last year and partisan differences have also widened.

The estimates in Figure 11 are based on survey respondents' most recently recorded voting preference. Respondents in 2026 were asked to state who they would vote for if an election were held today. For Life in Australia™ panel members who have previously completed the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, we are able to link their 2026 voting preference to their previous survey records and so track respondents over time by their current preferences. For respondents who did not complete the 2026 survey, we use their voting preferences and behaviours at the time of the survey they did complete. In producing the estimates in Figure 11, we make adjustments to account for whether respondents were members of the Life in Australia™ or the Online Research Unit panels and whether they completed the survey online or by phone.

Figure 11. Indicators of institutional trust by voting preference, 2024–2026



Notes: Voting is based on who people said they would vote for in 2026 if there were an election today if they completed the 2026 survey, otherwise who they voted for in the 2025 Federal election (if they completed the 2025 survey) or who they voted for in the 2022 election (if they only completed the 2024 survey).

Are social media and the cost-of-living driving polarisation?

Social media and financial pressures are two key factors that may help to explain increasingly polarised attitudes to government. We explore their potential roles through a regression model that predicts people's trust in institutions by their voting preferences, their financial wellbeing and their social media use. Trust in institutions is measured by combining people's responses to the five survey items listed in Figure 11.[48] The measure is calculated so that it ranges between 0 and 100. Financial wellbeing is measured by combining responses to questions on financial satisfaction and whether people consider themselves financially prosperous, comfortable or very comfortable, 'just getting along', 'struggling to pay the bills' or 'poor'.[49] Social media use is categorised into whether people use social media on an at least a daily basis or less than weekly.

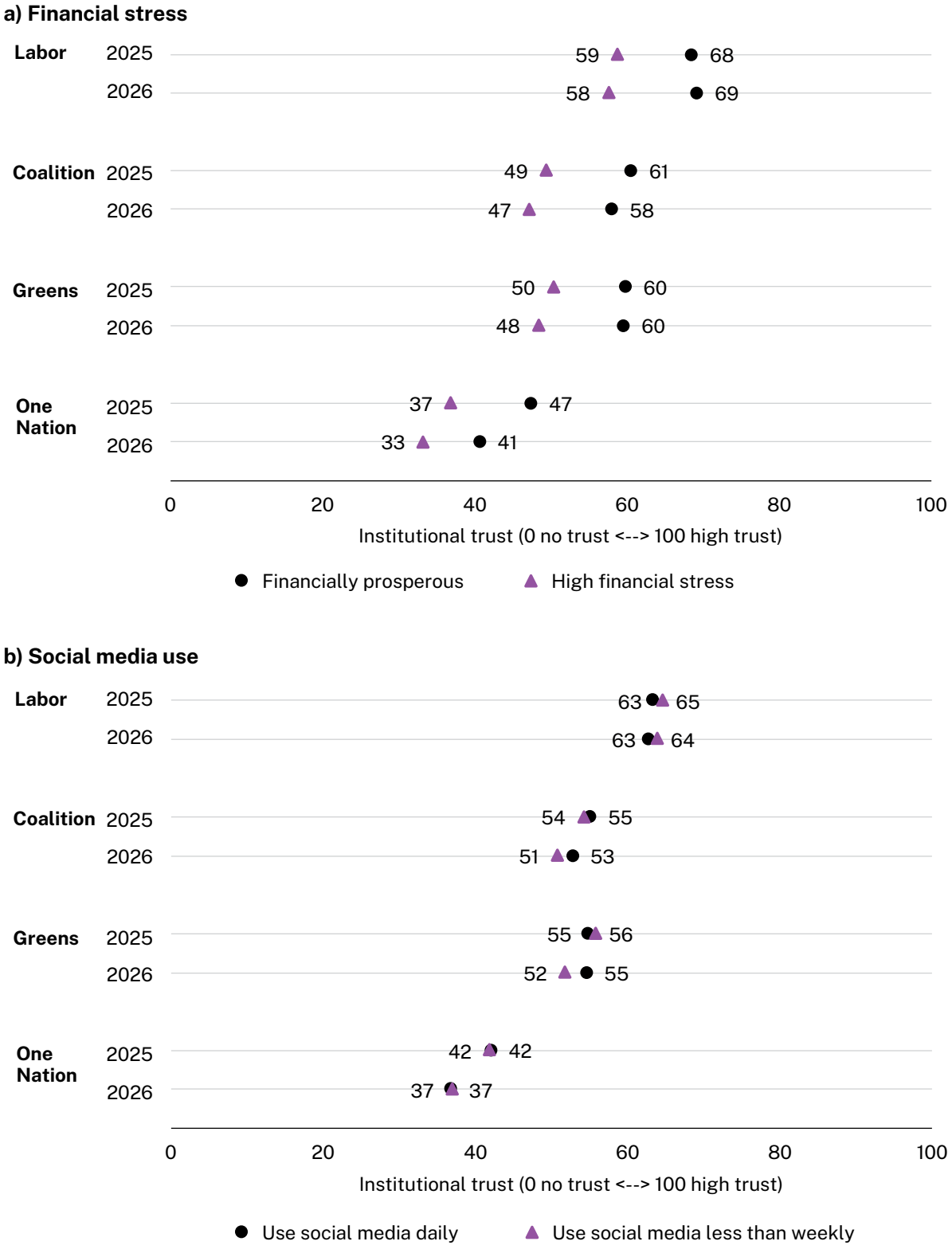
In the regression model, we control for respondent's age, their highest education, the city they live in, their gender, whether they have a spouse, whether they are Australian born or immigrated at different points in time, whether they completed the survey online or by phone, which survey panel they are a member of and other fixed characteristics. While our results cannot be used to conclude that social media or financial stress *cause* mistrust in institutions, we are able to say that our results are independent of and cannot be explained by these other characteristics.

Financial pressures are strongly related to partisan attitudes to government, though neither household finances nor people's own social media use explains why One Nation voters have become increasingly distrusting. Estimates from the regression model are shown in Figure 12 for a) financial stress and b) social media use.

Across all voting groups, people experiencing financial stress are predicted to have substantially weaker trust in institutions. Among Labor voters, for example, people who we classify as financially prosperous (their financial wellbeing is in the top 10% of people) are predicted to have an average trust score of 69 in 2026, while those experiencing financial stress (financial wellbeing is in the bottom 10% of people) have an average score of 58. Trust is much lower among One Nation supporters even those classified as 'financially prosperous' and declined across the financial spectrum between 2025 and 2026. Predicted trust scores declined from 47 to 41 among financially prosperous One Nation supporters and from 37 to 33 among those struggling financially.

Social media use makes no measurable difference to trust. Whether One Nation supporters use social media everyday or less than weekly, their trust in institutions is predicted to have declined from an average score of 42 in 2025 to 37 in 2026. That is not to say that social media has no effect on individuals or on political debate across the country – it is just that we cannot detect an effect based on how frequently individuals use social media.

Figure 12. Modelled estimates of institutional trust by voting preference in 2026, financial stress and social media use, 2025 and 2026



Notes: Trust in institutions is calculated from respondents' trust in the Federal Government, elections, the system of Government, the courts and political leaders in Australia. See Figure 11 and note 48 for the wording of these questions. Voting is based on who people said they would vote for in 2026 if there were an election today if they completed the 2026 survey, otherwise who they voted for in the 2025 Federal election.

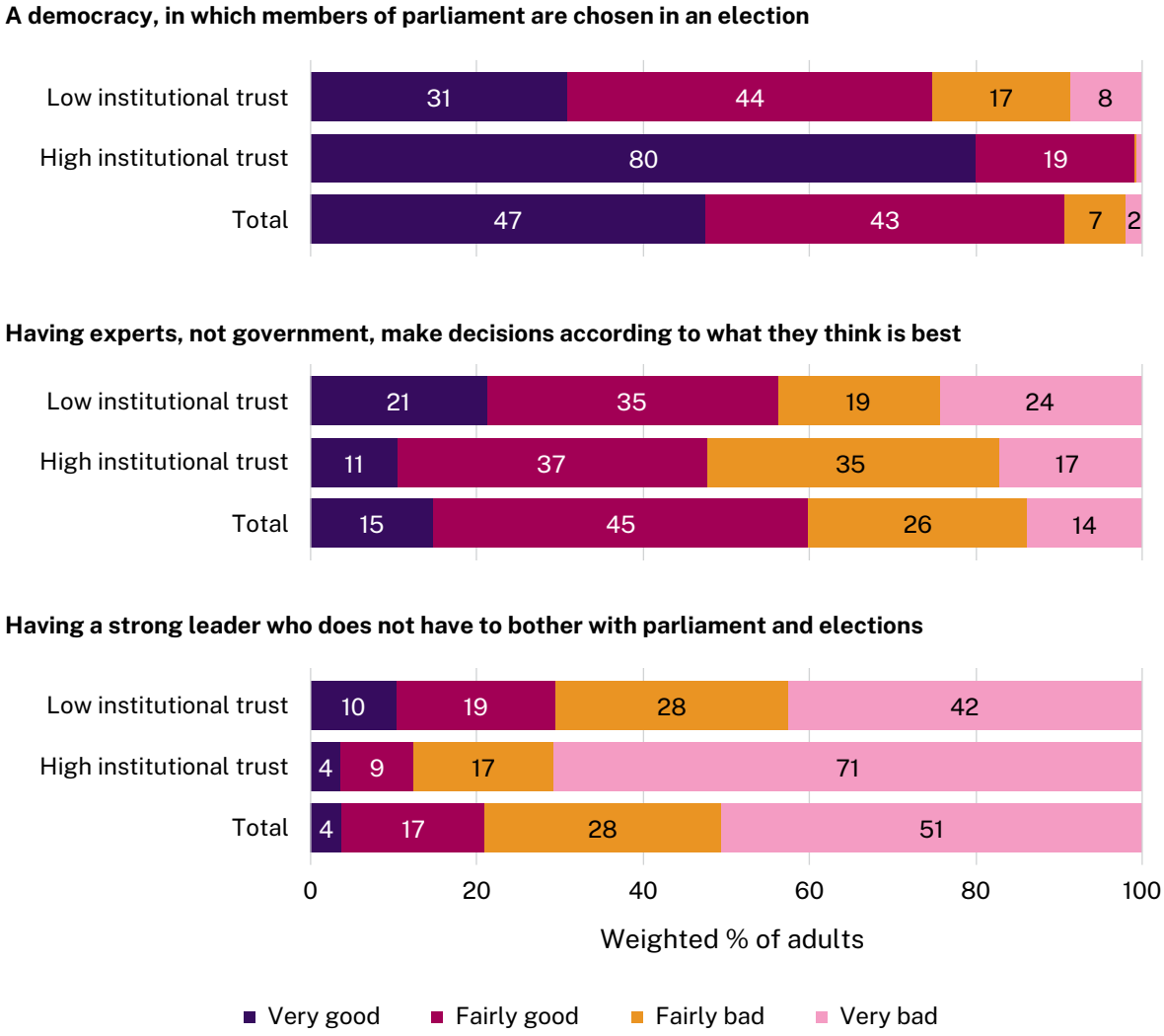
Support for democratic and non-democratic systems

People who are currently disgruntled with politics, institutions and the system of government have weaker support for democracy – though without necessarily preferring an anti-democratic or authoritarian systems. In Figure 13, we relate our trust in institutions variable (described above) to people's attitudes to three different types of political system.

Overall, 47% believe that 'a democracy, in which members of parliament are chosen in an election' would be a very good way to govern Australia and 91% believe it would be at least fairly good. These figures have been very similar in every year since the question was first asked in 2023. Approximately one-in-five (21%) people believe that 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections' would be at least fairly good, while 60% believe the same of a system in which 'experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country'. These proportions have also been very similar in recent years. In other words, there is a consistent level of support for less democratic systems. Support for democracy though has not deteriorated in recent years nor has support for non-democratic systems increased, even as Australians have become more distrusting and polarised in their attitudes to government.

People with low trust in Australian democratic and government institutions are much less likely to give strong support to democracy than high trust people. As shown in Figure 13, those with high trust in institutions, defined where people have levels of trust in the highest 10% of all respondents in 2026, are almost all likely to believe that 'a democracy, in which members of parliament are chosen in an election' is a 'very good' (80%) or 'fairly good' (19%) way to govern Australia. People with low institutional trust (lowest 10% of scores) are less than half as likely to believe that democracy is a 'very good' system (31%). Nevertheless, three-quarters believe that democracy is at least a 'fairly good' system, with one-quarter (25%) believing it is a 'fairly bad' or 'very bad' system.

Figure 13. Belief that different political systems would be a good or bad way to govern Australia by people's level of institutional trust, 2026



Notes: Low institutional trust is defined where respondent's levels of trust in institutions is in the lowest 10% of scores across all respondents in 2026. High institutional trust is defined where scores are in the highest 10%. Trust in institutions is calculated from respondents' trust in the Federal Government, elections, the system of Government, the courts and political leaders in Australia. See Figure 11 and note 48 for the wording of these questions.

People with low trust in Australian institutions are more likely to prefer less democratic systems though do not show any great preference for an authoritarian system. One of the most striking findings in Figure 13 is that people with low trust are much less likely than high trust people to think that 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections' would be a 'very bad' way to govern Australia (42% versus 71%). By the same token, only 10% of low trust people think that it would be a very good system and 29% think it would be at least fairly good. Even amongst people who think a strong leader would be at least fairly good and have low trust in Australian institutions, three-quarters say the same about democracy, so they are not necessarily expressing a preference for an authoritarian over a democratic system.

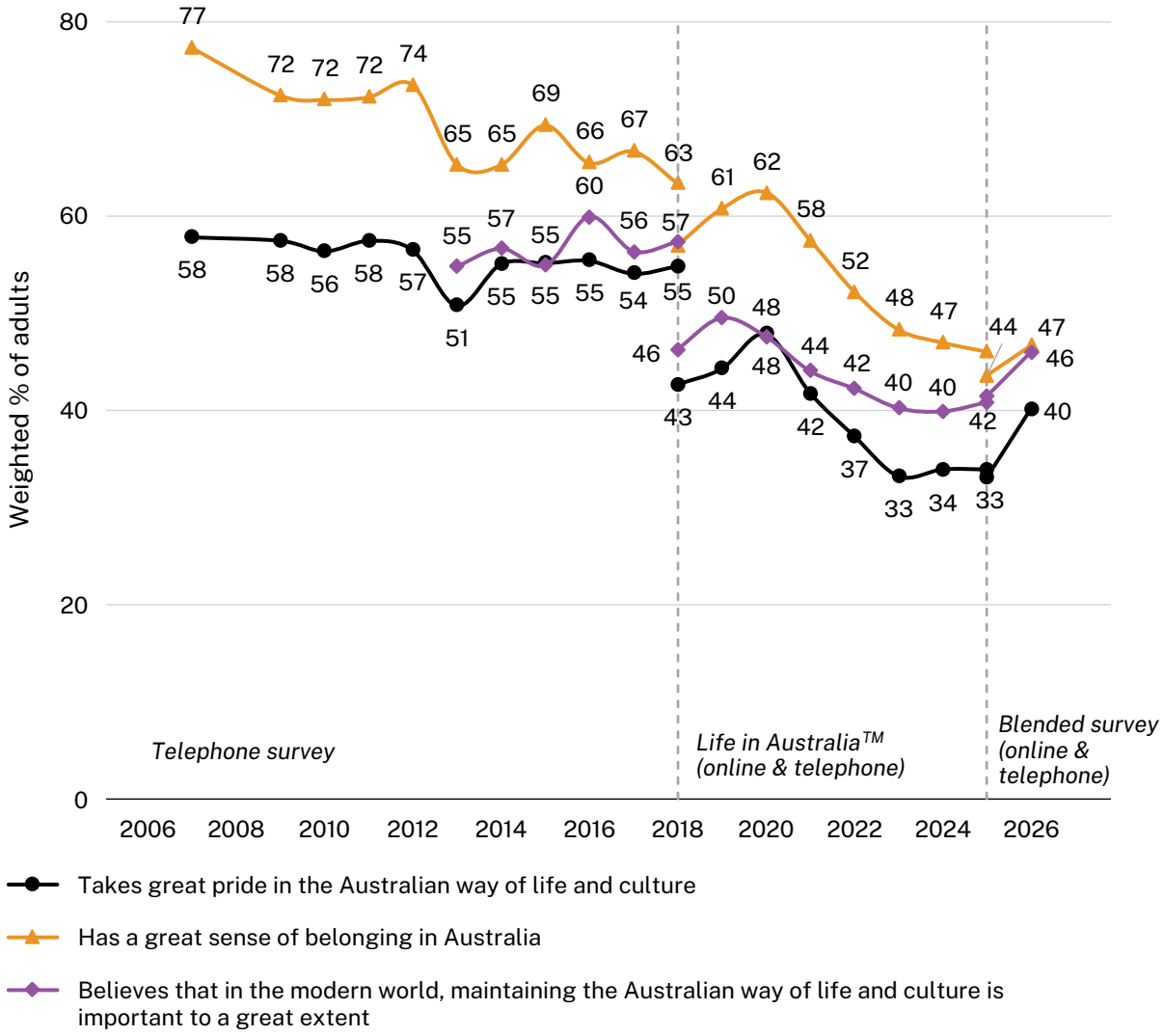
National pride and belonging have increased – despite (or perhaps related to) increasing political polarisation

As we have reported in previous reports, Australians' sense of national belonging has been declining over time and been one of the main contributors to the long-term decline in social cohesion. In 2026 though, belonging increased, reflected in a heightened sense of pride in Australian life and culture.

Trends on three key indicators of national pride and belonging are shown in Figure 14.

- The proportion of adults who reported that they 'have a sense of belonging in Australia' to a great extent increased from 44% in 2025 to 47% in 2026 (as opposed to a moderate extent, only slightly or not at all).
- The proportion of adults who reported that they 'take great pride in the Australia way of life and culture' to a great extent increased from 33% in 2025 to 40% in 2026 (as opposed to a moderate extent, only slightly or not at all).
- The proportion of adults who strongly agree that 'in the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important' increased from 42% in 2025 to 46% in 2026 (as opposed to agreeing, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing). The proportion who agree or strongly agree increased from 87% to 89%.

Figure 14. Indicators of pride and belonging in Australia, 2007–2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel.

Despite the recent uptick, Australians continue to report a weaker sense of national pride and belonging than they did 15 years ago. The indicators of national pride and belonging were strongly impacted by the shift from the telephone to the online survey in 2018 and to a lesser extent, the shift to the blended survey in 2025. Since these impacts do not reflect how people are feeling or thinking, but rather just how their responses are being recorded on the survey, we have to account for these mode effects before we can track the long-term trends in these questions.[50]

After removing the survey mode effects, we estimate that the proportion of people stating that they have a great sense of pride in the Australia in 2026 is approximately 7 percentage points lower that it was in 2009-2012, the proportion of people with a great sense of belonging in Australia is 19 percentage points lower and the proportion who say that it is important to a great extent to maintain the Australian way of life and culture has declined by 5 percentage points. So belonging in particular remains weaker than in the past, even with the increase this year.

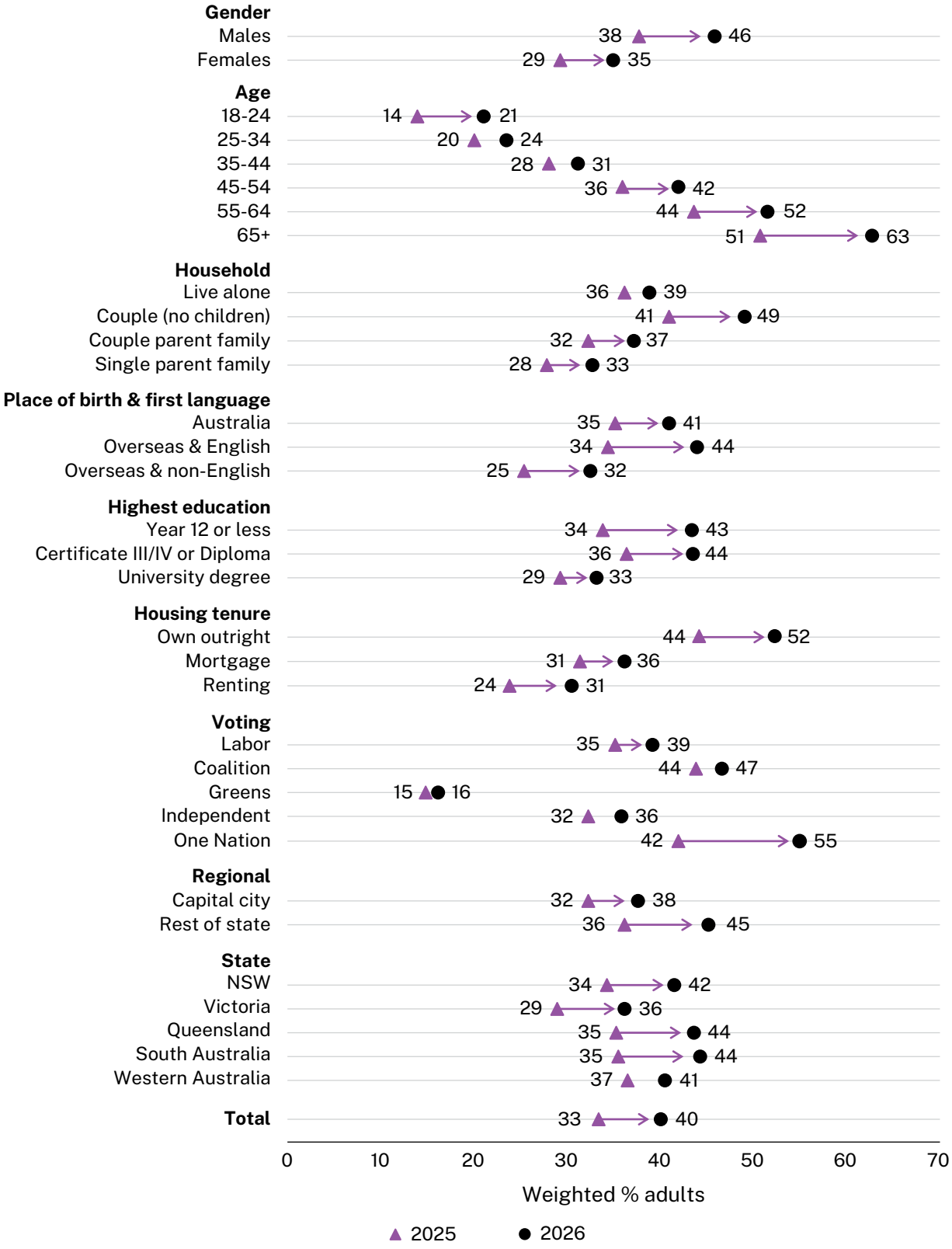
The increase in the sense of national pride and belonging this year is a welcome development, though perhaps surprising in the current social and political environment. Whether or not the increase represents a 'recovery', a temporary blip or is even a response to the current environment can only be determined over the next few years.

There is evidence this year though that the increase in pride is related to and perhaps responding to the increasing social and political polarisation. The proportion of people who take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture is shown in Figure 15 for different sociodemographic groups.

The strongest increases in national pride this year have come from more conservative groups. Most strikingly, the proportion of One Nation supporters who have great pride increased from 42% in 2025 to 55% in 2026. Great pride may have increased for other voting groups (e.g. from 36% to 39% among Labor voters), though the differences are of a much smaller magnitude.

Increasing national pride has also been stronger among older Australians. In 2026, 63% of people aged 65 years and over said they take great pride in the Australian way of life and culture, a 12 percentage point increase from 2025. Increases were also recorded across other age groups, though smaller and, in the case of 25-34 and 35-44 year olds, not distinguishable from random noise. Older people had a stronger sense of pride to begin with, so the changes this year have increased age differences, with for example, the gap between 18-24 year olds and those aged 65 years and over in the proportion who have great pride expanding from 37 to 42 percentage points since 2025.

Figure 15. ‘To what extent do you take pride in the Australian way of life and culture?’ The weighted proportion of adults who say ‘to a great extent’ by sociodemographic characteristics, 2025 and 2026



Note: Arrow pointing away from the 2025 markers indicate statistically significant changes to 2026, i.e. changes are likely (with 95% confidence) real, reflecting more than random chance. Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people said they would vote for in 2026 if there were an election today if they completed the 2026 survey, otherwise who they voted for in the 2025 Federal election. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

A more insular and inward sense of pride and belonging?

The increase in national pride and belonging among One Nation supporters in the last year at the same that their trust in institutions and support for immigration has declined, opens the possibility that the stronger sense of pride and belonging being expressed is somewhat insular and inward looking. In other words, people and particularly One Nation supporters are proud, patriotic and connected to a vision of Australia that does not include immigrants or more progressive governments.

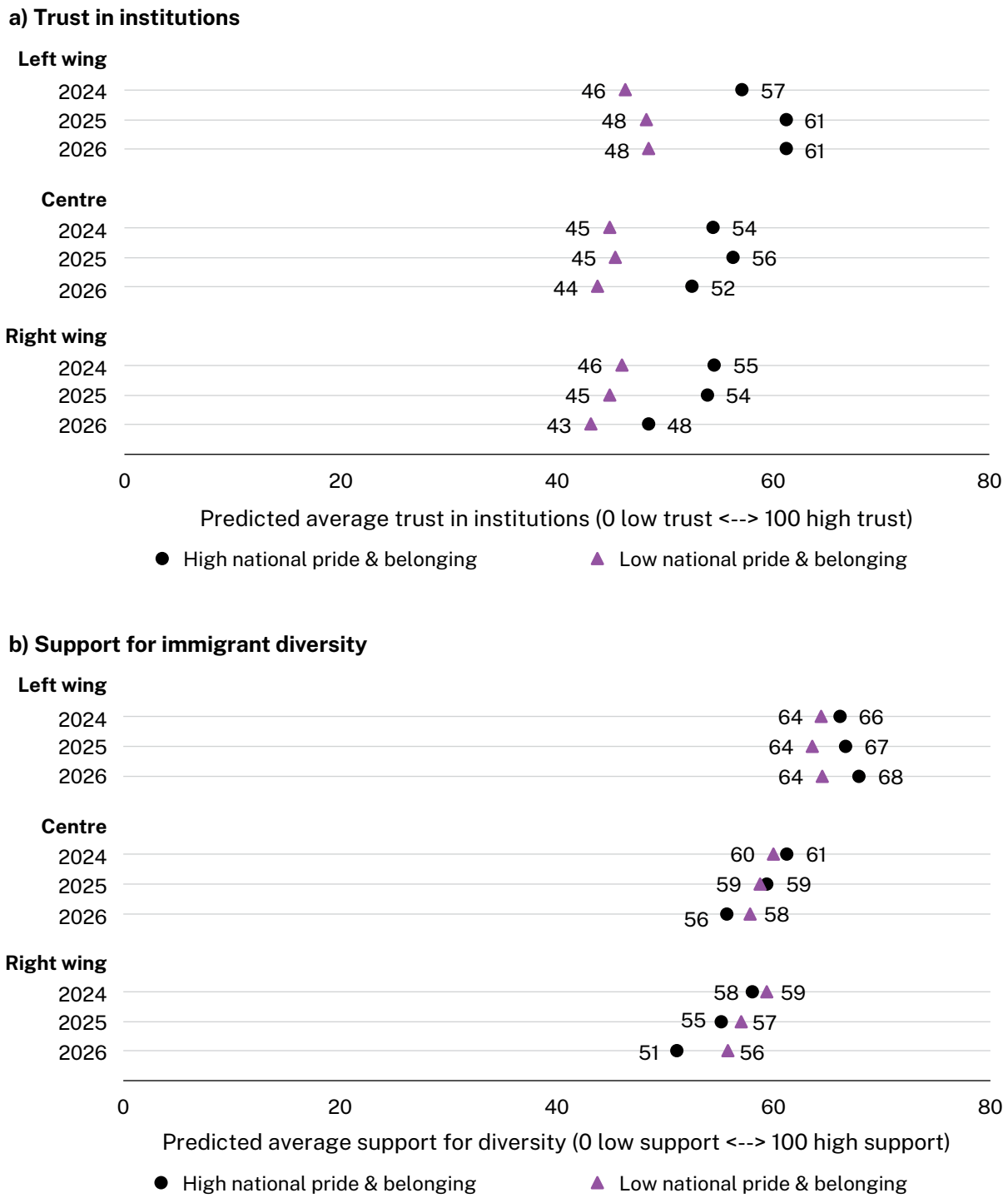
As we show elsewhere in this report though, weakening trust in government and support for immigration has not yet been coupled with a more exclusive and inward sense of national identity. Relatively few people believe that it is very important to be born in Australia to be 'truly Australian', more people including One Nation supporters believe that respect for differences in beliefs and ideas is more important to social cohesion than sameness in either our cultural backgrounds or agreement on big social issues (see the chapter 'What is important to Australians in 2026?') and the great majority of people believe immigrants can make just as good a citizen as the Australian born (see the chapter 'Australia's multicultural fabric').

We can also show that people with a greater sense of national pride and belonging are substantially more likely to trust in institutions, irrespective of their political preferences. The relationship between national pride and belonging and support for immigration is more mixed and on this, there is evidence to suggest that among conservative-minded people, support for diversity has deteriorated the most among those with a greater sense of pride and belonging.

We demonstrate this with a regression model that seeks to predict trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity for people at different ends of the political spectrum and with different levels of national pride and belonging and in different years. Predicted results are shown in Figure 16.

- National pride and belonging is measured by combining people's responses to the three statements listed in Figure 14[51], trust in institutions combines the responses to the items in Figure 11[48], while support for immigrant diversity is measured from 10 survey items.[52] These variables are all scaled so the range from 0 (lowest trust, national pride and belonging and support for diversity) to 100 (highest trust, national pride and belonging and support for diversity).
- People are also grouped into left wing (scores <5), right wing (scores >5) and centrist (scores = 5) political orientations based on how people score themselves on a scale from 0 (very left wing) to 10 (very right wing).
- The regression models seek to measure associations between trust, support for diversity and pride and belonging in ways that take account of, or control for, respondents' gender, age, household composition, housing tenure, education, city of residence, immigration background, whether they have a disability, their self-assessed health, the survey panel they are a member of and their level of financial wellbeing.

Figure 16. Predicted trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity for people with high and low levels of national pride and belonging by their political orientation



Notes: Estimates represent marginal predictions from a mixed effects regression model. A description of the variables is provided in the text of the report and notes 48, 49, 51 and 52. Regression results are provided in the technical report. Left wing is defined by people who give themselves a score of 0 to 4 on a survey question that asks people to place themselves on a scale from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right). The centre is defined by people who give themselves a score of five and right wing is defined by people with scores of 6 to 10.

The results show that national pride and belonging is positively related to trust in institutions across the political spectrum (Figure 16a). More progressive-minded people on the left wing who have low national pride and belonging (with scores in the bottom 10% of people) have an average predicted trust in institutions score of 49 in 2026 compared with 61 for people on the left with high pride and belonging (scores in the top 10%). On the right wing or more conservative end of the spectrum, pride and belonging also go hand-in-hand with trust in institutions. Nevertheless, the gap has perhaps weakened over the last year as trust in institutions has declined most among those with a high sense of pride and belonging.

- People on the right wing who have low national pride and belonging have an average predicted trust in institutions score of 43, compared with 48 among those with high pride and belonging, a gap of 5 points that has narrowed from 9 points in 2024.

Declining support for immigrant diversity among people on the right wing, meanwhile, has been strongest among those with greater national pride and belonging (Figure 16b). Support for diversity is predicted to have declined from an average score of 58 in 2024 to 51 in 2026 among right wing people with high pride and belonging, a seven point decline relative to a three point decline among right wingers with low pride and belonging and a two point increase among left wingers with high pride and belonging.

In sum, national pride and belonging are positively related to trust in institutions. While the relationship may have weakened in 2026 for conservative-minded people, it remains the case that people with higher pride and belonging are also more trusting on average in institutions. The same does not appear to be the case for support for immigrant diversity with the evidence suggesting that national pride and belonging is increasingly running counter to support for diversity among conservatives.

A more divided and polarised Australia

Australia in 2026 is a more politically divided and polarised society than it has been in recent years. Conservative-minded people, particularly those indicating support for One Nation, are substantially less trusting not only in the government of the day, but in politics and politicians generally, the political system, elections and the courts system. While trust usually goes hand-in-hand with a national sense of pride and belonging, the relationship between the two has weakened in 2026, indicating that the increase in pride and belonging on the conservative side of politics has come at the expense of declining institutional trust, as well as a weaker acceptance and embrace of Australia's multiculturalism and diversity.

As we will explain in later chapters, many people are doing it tough financially, socially and personally and these are major factors related to trust and acceptance. Financial circumstances though cannot explain why trust and acceptance have declined, nor can social media use. This speaks to a hardening of social, cultural and ideological values, perhaps related more to public and political discourse and debate and growing concern with Australia's future direction. Such values and differences are not necessarily bad for democracy or social cohesion, though can certainly have a detrimental impact where they erode our collective trust in each other and in society and impact on the experiences, wellbeing and social connection of individuals, including racism and discrimination.

Australia's multicultural fabric

Australia is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world.[53] Almost one in three Australians were born overseas,[54] while many more have at least one parent born overseas[55] and almost one-quarter speak one of more than 350 languages at home other than English.[56] Aboriginal Australians form part of one of the oldest continuous populations outside Africa on earth and continue to speak more than 200 languages.[56, 57] How Australians feel about immigration, about people from different countries and faiths, and about First Nations Peoples is therefore central to social cohesion. It shapes not only whether we accept and value our differences, but also the sense of safety, belonging and worth of all Australians.

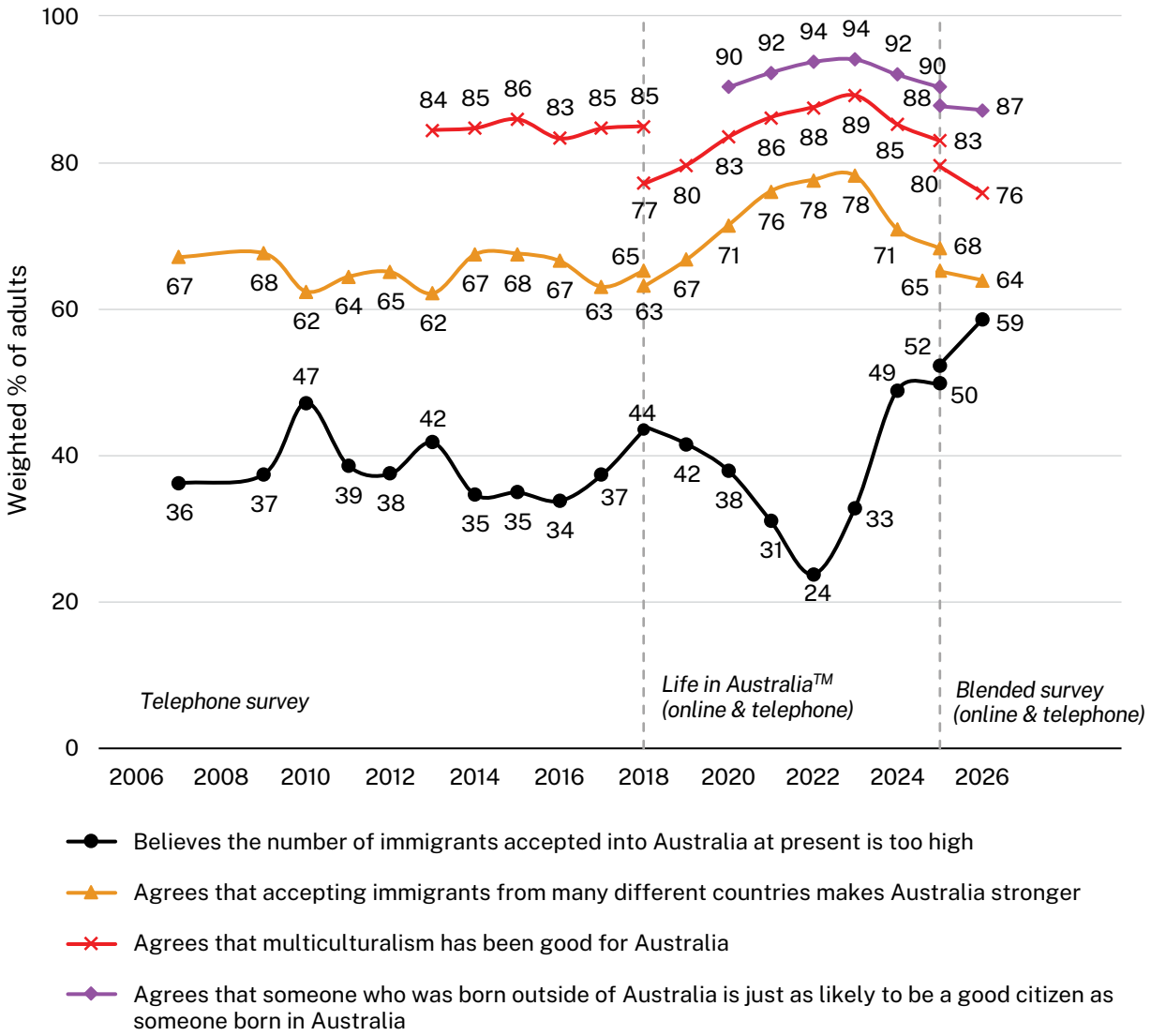
In recent years, Australia's multicultural fabric has come under growing strain. Debate over immigration has intensified, and ongoing conflict in the Middle East has been accompanied by antisemitism and Islamophobia.[58, 59] As we showed earlier in this report, the Index of acceptance has been stable in the last year, but this stability is masking a weakening of support for immigration and diversity on a range of other measures.

In this chapter, we look beneath the Index at how some specific attitudes have changed in Australia. We examine attitudes to immigration levels and to immigrants themselves, how these attitudes differ across the political spectrum and sociodemographic groups, attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and how Australians feel about people from different countries and faiths, including Jewish and Muslim people.

More Australians think immigration is too high, but most still value immigrants

There is a clear divide between Australians' attitudes towards *immigration levels*, and their attitudes towards the *inherent value* of immigration, but this gap has reduced in recent years. Figure 17 illustrates that while concern about the level of immigration has risen sharply over the last four years, the majority of Australian adults still hold views that are supportive of the value of immigrants and immigration. However, this symbolic support for immigration has weakened somewhat in the last three or four years.

Figure 17. Attitudes to immigration and immigrant diversity, weighted % of adults, 2007-2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel.

Australians' attitudes towards immigration levels are illustrated by the black line in Figure 17. This line, which shows that the share of adults who believe that the number of immigrants accepted into Australia is too high, has followed a volatile path. With fluctuations in the 30s and 40s from 2007 to 2021, the proportion of those who believe immigration levels were too high fell to an all-time low in 2022, of just 24%. As we have noted in previous reports, this reduction in worry about immigration levels coincided with international border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and sharp reductions in actual immigration.[60] However, since the re-opening of borders in 2022, increasing immigration levels and public debate around those levels, Australians' concerns about immigration levels have grown each year. By 2026, the share of Australians that felt that immigration levels were too high had more than doubled, to 59%.

Most people are still able to distinguish their views on the number of immigrants coming to Australia at the present time from the social, cultural and economic benefits of immigration. Support for the latter though has softened in recent years.

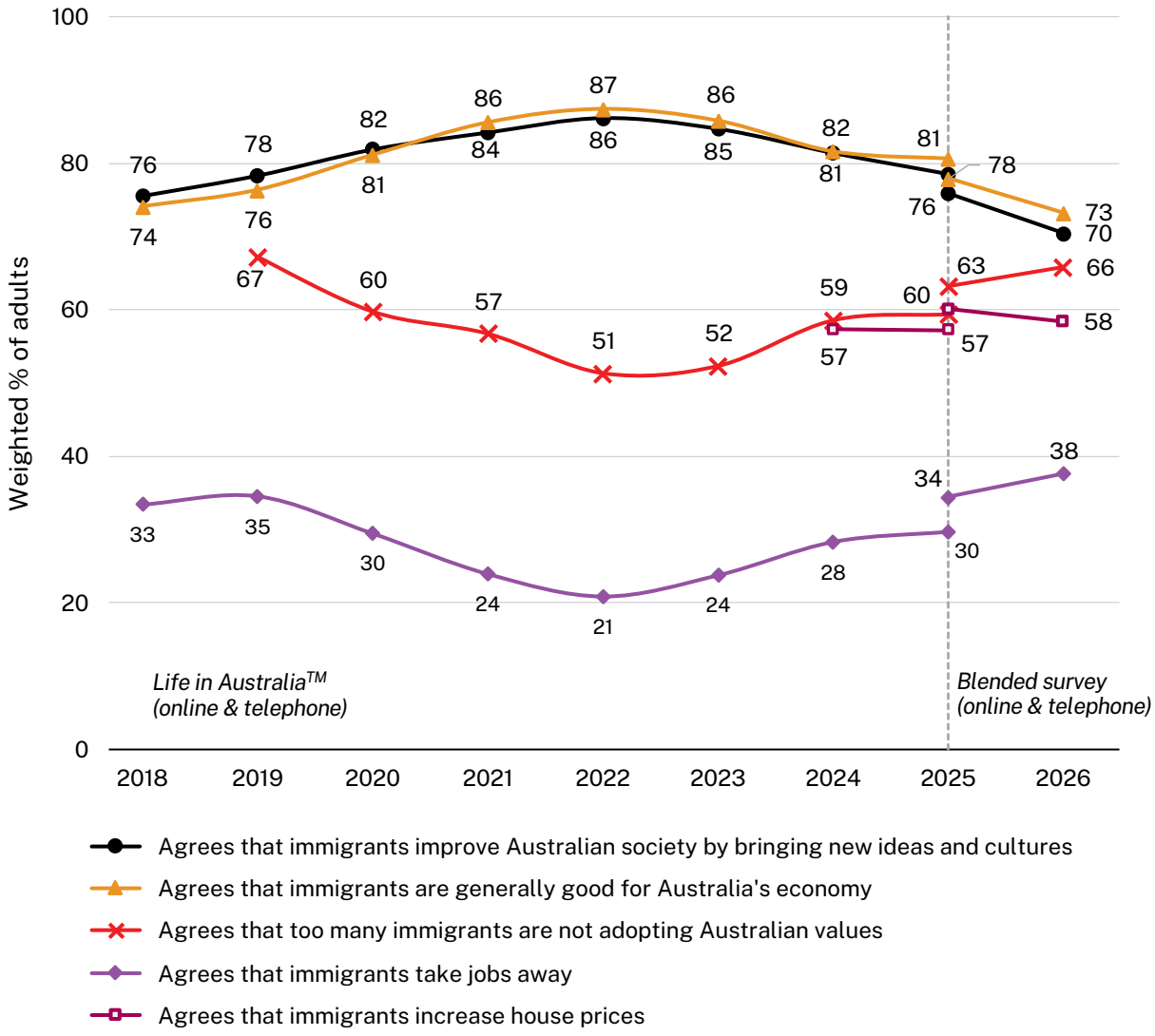
While still a substantial majority, the proportion of adults who agree that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia' has now dropped to 76%, in line with 2019 levels, though wiping out the gains that had been made since 2020. Similarly, while 87% of Australians still agree that 'someone born outside of Australia is just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in Australia', this figure declined by 7 percentage points from a high of 94% in 2022. Agreement with the idea that 'accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger' was steady between 2025 (65%) and 2026 (64%), though has declined by approximately 11 percentage points since 2023 (after taking into account the shift to the blended survey).

Most Australians still see the benefits of immigrants, but perceived economic and cultural threats are growing

People have mixed perceptions of the costs and benefits of immigration, though appear to have a weaker sense of the overall net benefits in 2026. While most Australians still disagree with the idea that immigrants take jobs away, agreement has been on the rise since 2022, alongside a high but declining sense of the perceived overall economic benefits of immigration. Conversely, most people believe that immigration increases house prices, though this has been relatively unchanged since 2024. People continue to value the social and cultural benefits of immigration, though are increasingly likely to believe immigrants are not sharing Australian values.

Figure 18 charts five measures of the perceived economic and cultural threat of immigration, as held by Australian adults from 2018 to 2026. Three of these measures (agreement about immigrants improving Australian society, agreement that immigrants are taking jobs and agreement that immigrants are good for the economy) were recorded consistently across the period presented. Agreement that immigrants are not adopting Australian values begins the following year (2018). The final measure, concern about the impact of immigration on house prices, was first included in 2024. All measures transition to the blended survey in 2025.

Figure 18. Perceived benefits and threats of immigrants, 2018–2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel. See the technical report for more information.

Belief that immigrants take jobs away (the purple line) and do not adopt Australian values (the green line) have followed very similar trajectories over the last six years, with both dipping to a low in 2022 and steadily climbing afterwards. However, agreement with the idea that immigrants take jobs away has consistently sat at less than half of the level of agreement that immigrants are not adopting Australian values. This gap has remained fairly consistent even as both measures have moved in tandem over the years.

Overall, agreement that too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values has remained the most widely held of the three views, increasing by three percentage points between 2025 and 2026, to 66% of Australians agreeing in 2026. Conversely, agreement that immigrants take jobs away has been, and remains, the lowest of the three measures. From 2025 to 2026, the share of Australian adults who agree that immigrants take jobs increased by four percentage points. However, even with this recent high, fewer than two in five adults (38%) agree that immigrants take jobs away, so most Australians continue to disagree with this view.

Concern about the impact of immigration on house prices was only added to the survey in 2024, when 57% of Australians expressed agreement on this issue. Agreement rose to 60% in 2025 (new survey measure) and then reduced to 58% in 2026. This is the only threat measure to decrease in the last year, with the other two threat measures (not adopting values and taking jobs) both increasing.

Overall, the patterns illustrated here reinforce the distinction drawn earlier in this report between attitudes towards the number of immigrants, and attitudes towards immigrants and diversity themselves. Although many Australians may think immigration levels are too high, they still endorse multiculturalism and believe immigrants make good citizens in large numbers. Similarly, the majority of Australians still believe that immigrants are good for the economy and are not taking jobs away from Australians.

Rather than necessarily reflecting a hardening of anti-immigrant sentiment, the negative changes in the measures presented in Figure 18 over the last one to three years may instead reflect a broader climate of cost-of-living and housing stress colouring Australians' fears about the economic threat of immigration. As we show later in the report (see the chapter 'Personal & financial wellbeing'), people who are reporting high levels of financial stress have substantially weaker support for multiculturalism and diversity than more affluent and financially comfortable people. However, support for diversity has declined among conservative-minded people in recent years even where they are financially well off. So while rising economic anxiety may chip away at public confidence in immigration, wider social, political and ideological shifts are driving weakening and increasingly polarised support for immigration. All the same, there remains a strong underlying reservoir of support for diversity, multiculturalism and the contributions of immigrants to Australia.

Attitudes to immigration are increasingly divided along political lines

Attitudes towards immigration differ markedly depending on how people vote, and these differences have been increasing since 2024. Figure 19 illustrates the ways in which these attitudes differ between people who would vote for Labor, the Coalition, the Greens and One Nation.

Voting preference is measured by a question on the 2026 survey asking respondents who they would vote for if an election were held today. We trace survey respondents backwards in time to capture their attitudes to immigration in 2024 and 2025 based on their voting preference in 2026. For respondents who completed a survey in 2025 but not 2026, we measure their preference by who they say they voted for at the 2025 election. For those who did a survey in 2024 but not 2025 or 2026, we measure their preference by who they said they voted for at the 2022 Federal election.

The largest shifts have been among One Nation supporters. The share of One Nation supporters who believe that immigration is too high rose from 79% in 2024 to 93% in 2026. Over the same period, One Nation supporters' agreement that multiculturalism has been good for Australia fell from 63% to 44%. Almost all One Nation supporters (96%) now agree that too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values.

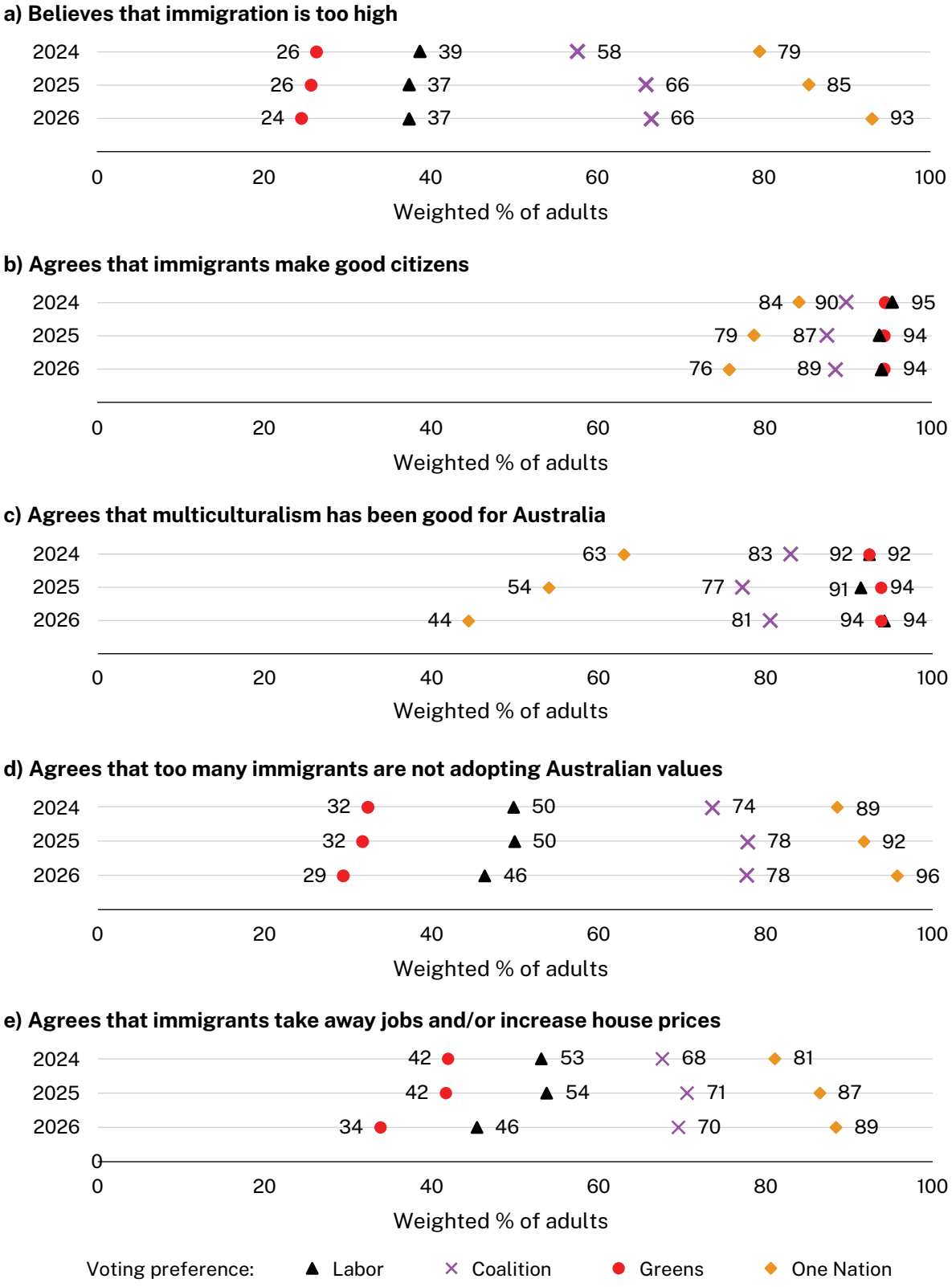
Among Coalition voters, concerns about immigration levels have also risen, from 58 per cent in 2024 to 66 per cent in 2026. However, Coalition voters' overall views on multiculturalism and immigrants have generally remained steady since 2024.

Labor and Greens voters' views, by contrast, have become slightly more positive. Agreement that immigrants take away jobs and/or increase house prices fell from 53 to 46 per cent (Labor voters) and from 42 to 34 per cent (Greens voters).

As a result of these changes at each end of the voting spectrum, the gap between voters on immigration has widened. One specific example of this widening gap can be found between One Nation voters and Labor and Greens voters. In 2024, the difference between these two groups on agreement that multiculturalism is good was 29 percentage points. By 2026, this difference was 50 percentage points.

Despite these divisions, there is still common ground between groups of differing voter preferences. Large majorities of voters for all four parties agree that immigrants make good citizens, ranging from 76 per cent of One Nation voters to 94 per cent of Labor and Greens voters. This common ground demonstrates that even among those most concerned about immigration levels, most Australians still continue to see immigrants as valued members of the community.

Figure 19. Indicators of support for immigration and diversity by voting preference, 2024–2026



Notes: Voting is based on who people said they would vote for in 2026 if there were an election today if they completed the 2026 survey, otherwise who they voted for in the 2025 Federal election (if they completed the 2025 survey) or who they voted for in the 2022 election (if they only completed the 2024 survey).

Support for immigrant diversity has declined across almost all groups

Figure 20 illustrates the average support expressed for immigrant diversity, across a range of different sociodemographic groups. As explained earlier in this report, support for immigrant diversity is measured by combining people's responses to 10 survey items on immigration and multiculturalism. Scores range from 0 (lowest support) to 100 (highest support).[52]

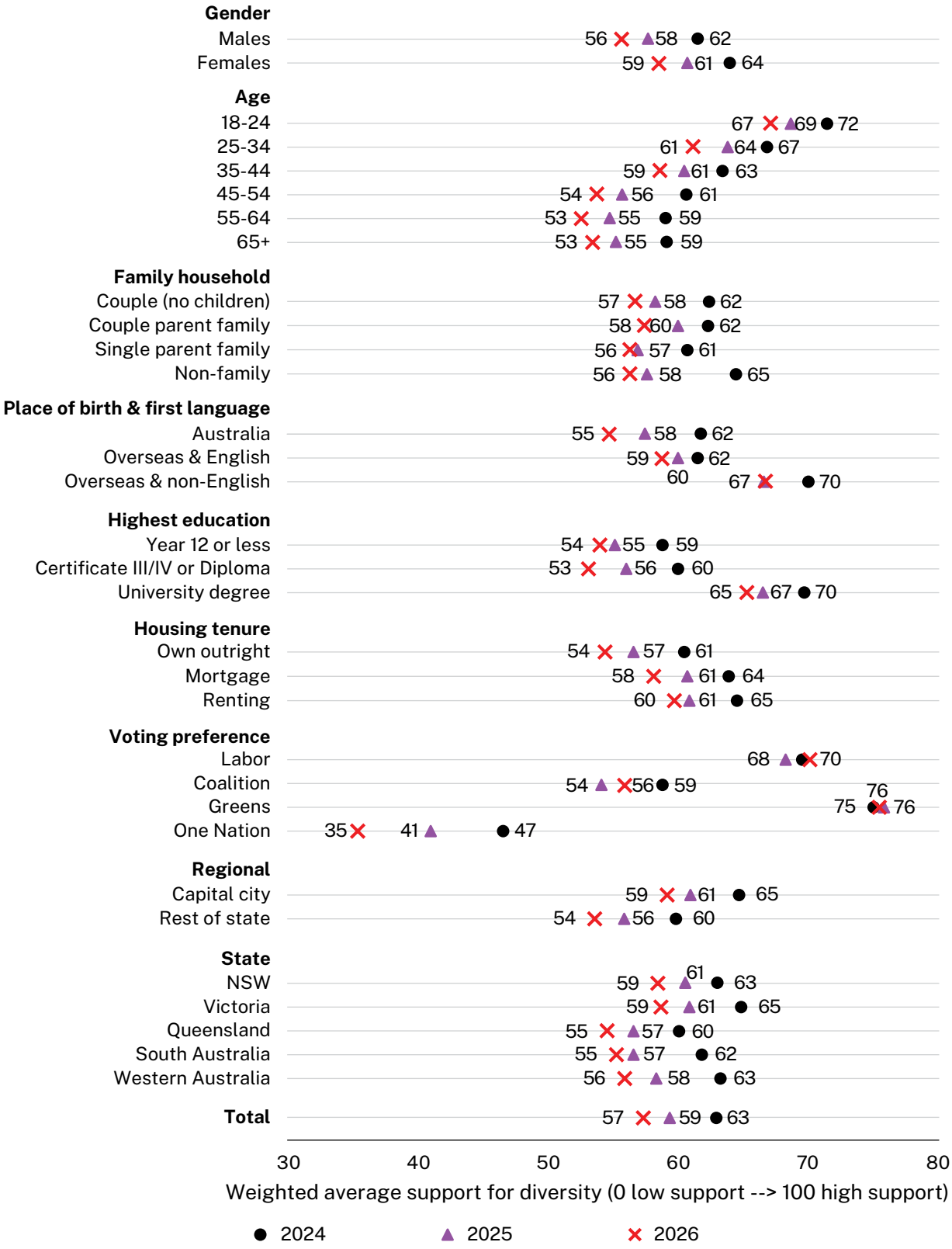
Across all Australian adults, the average support for diversity declined consistently, from 63 in 2024, to 59 in 2025 and 57 in 2026. Figure 20 shows that this average decline in support was widespread, with a drop in nearly every sociodemographic group between 2024 and 2026. For both men and women, every age group, all types of households, every education level and housing tenure and each of the mainland states (where we have a large enough number of respondents), this drop in average support for immigrant diversity was mostly between three and seven points.

There is one clear exception to this widespread decline in support, found in voting preferences. Support for immigrant diversity amongst Labor and Greens voters was largely unchanged between 2024 and 2026, while Coalition voters fell from 59 to 54 between 2024 and 2025 and then increased to 56 in 2026. One Nation supporters, however, showed the largest decline in support for immigrant diversity of any group, falling 12 points from 47 in 2024 to just 35 in 2026. As a result, the gap in average support between One Nation and Greens supporters widened from 29 points in 2024 to 40 points in 2026. This means that voting preference is now by far the strongest dividing line in attitudes toward immigrant diversity, which is consistent with the growing political divide on immigration outlined previously in Figure 19.

Smaller, but still notable differences remain across the other groups featured in Figure 20. Younger adults continue to be more supportive of diversity than older adults, with an average support score of 67 for 18-24 year olds in 2026, compared to 53 for those aged 65 and above. Support for immigrant diversity is also higher among university graduates (65) than for those with Certificate level qualifications (53). Support is five points higher in capital cities (59) than it is in the rest of the country (54). The overseas born and those from non-English speaking backgrounds remain one of the more supportive groups for immigrant diversity, with a score of 67 in 2026, placing them alongside young adults, the University educated and Labor/Greens voters, as the groups most supportive of immigrant diversity.

Overall, Figure 20 shows that the decline in support for immigrant diversity is particularly concentrated among conservative-minded people, especially One Nation supporters. With rising support for One Nation across the country, declining average support for diversity has been widespread, recorded across almost every sociodemographic group. The steepest declines have been from groups that were already less supportive, particularly One Nation voters. These results add support to previous findings in this report of a widening divide across political lines.

Figure 20. Support for immigrant diversity by sociodemographic group, weighted average scores, 2024–2026



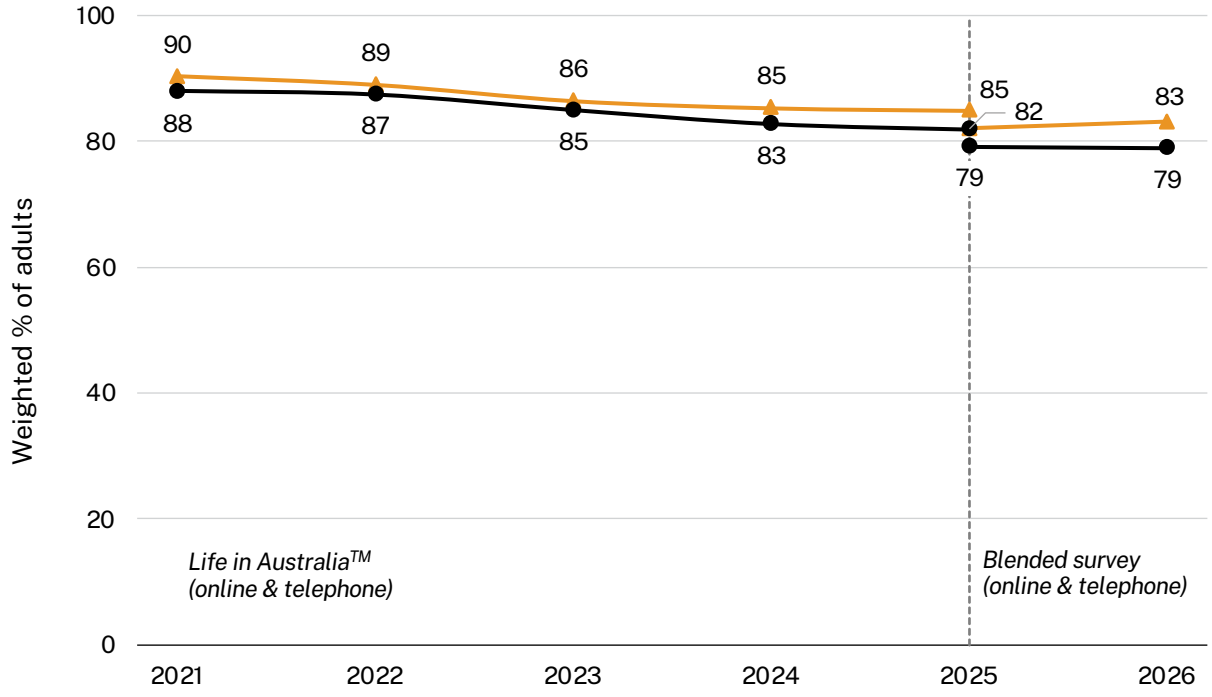
Notes: Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people said they would vote for in 2026 if there were an election today if they completed the 2026 survey, otherwise who they voted for in the 2025 Federal election (if they completed the 2025 survey) or who they voted for in the 2022 election (if they only completed the 2024 survey). The support for diversity variable is explained in note 52. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

Most Australians remain supportive of First Nations Peoples

Attitudes towards Australia's First Nations Peoples continue to be positive in the majority of the adult Australian population. However, as illustrated in Figure 21, recognition of the importance of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community, and support for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in schools have both declined since 2021.

Agreement that 'the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for Australia as a nation' (the orange line) declined between 2021 and 2026, from 90% to 83%. Agreement that 'Indigenous histories and cultures should be included in the school curriculum' (the black line) followed a similar trajectory over the same period, reducing by nine percentage points (from 88 to 79%).

Figure 21. Indicators of attitudes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, weighted % of adults who agree or strongly agree, 2021–2026



Agrees that the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community is very important for Australia as a nation

Agrees that it is important for Indigenous histories and cultures to be included in the school curriculum

Notes: Surveys conducted between 2021 and 2024 were administered exclusively to the Life in Australia™ panel. Surveys in 2025 and 2026 were administered to a blended sample of Life in Australia™ and non-probability panel respondents. The effect of the shift in administration is shown in the overlap in 2025.

The general consistency of this decline suggests a gradual weakening in sentiment over this period rather than a significant shift related to a specific moment. Discourse around the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum is a potential contributing factor in reducing positive public sentiment towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Although the decline has been gradual overall, the steepest year-on-year falls in both measures occurred around 2023, coinciding with the lead-up to and aftermath of the fractured debate over the referendum.

A hierarchy in how Australians accept immigrant and faith communities persists and is growing wider

How Australians feel about people from different countries and faiths offers one of the clearest views the Mapping Social Cohesion study has of intercultural relations. Each year, we ask respondents if they would say their feelings are positive, negative or neutral towards immigrants from a selection of countries, and how they feel about people of the major religious faiths. When asked consistently over time, these questions can show us whether people from certain backgrounds are regarded differently from others, and if those differences are growing or shrinking. In 2026 immigrants from Israel, Iran and Palestine were added to the list. Although we only have one year of data on attitudes to these groups, we can least compare attitudes across groups.

Importantly, while the Mapping Social Cohesion survey asks about people's attitudes toward Muslim and Jewish people and immigrants from different backgrounds, these questions are not direct indicators of Islamophobia, antisemitism and racism generally. The indicators are based on the attitudes that people are willing to admit to and do not necessarily equate to actions or behaviours and certainly not to the lived experiences of affected communities. Rather, they give an insight to self-reported attitudes and how those sit alongside actual instances of racism reported elsewhere.

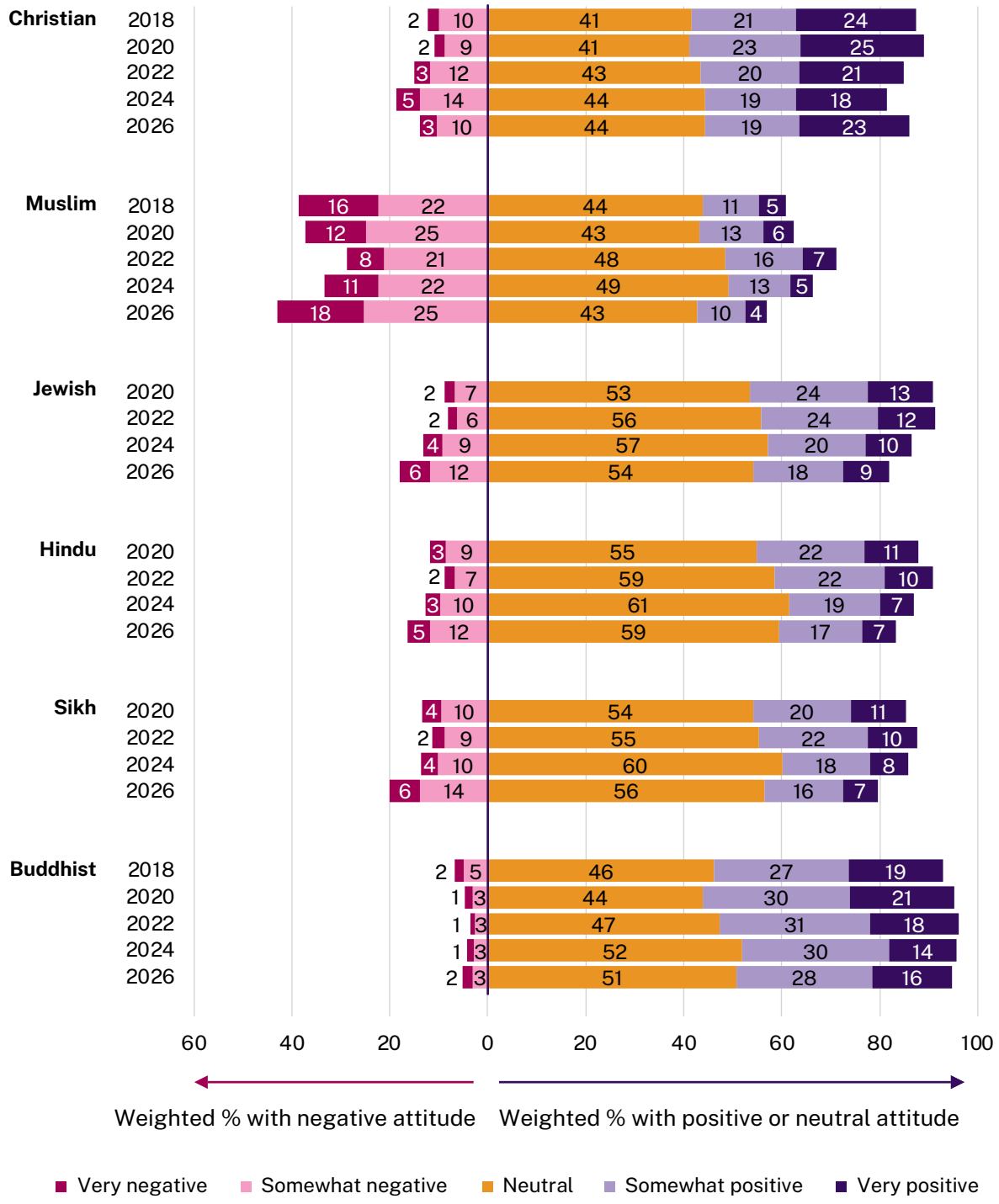
A range of other resources provide a fuller sense of Islamophobia, antisemitism and racism in Australia today. These include the Crossroads25 report, authored by Emeritus Professor Andrew Markus[61] and the works of the Tackling Hate lab[62, 63] and the Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia.[64] The results of the Mapping Social Cohesion study complement these works by giving a sense of the overall national mood and sentiment, how that is changing and how it relates to Australia's broader multicultural fabric and social cohesion.

The results show how negative attitudes are commonly expressed towards people from minority backgrounds and faiths. In 2026, attitudes have become increasingly negative. Figure 22 illustrates shifts in attitudes towards people of different faiths, while Figure 23 does likewise for people from different immigrant backgrounds.

Taken together, the views presented in Figure 22 and Figure 23 suggest that there is a hierarchy of acceptance in Australia that has not only persisted, but also sharpened. British immigrants sit at the top receiving primarily positive perceptions, while Muslims, immigrants from Africa and the Middle East all face significantly more widespread negative attitudes. Furthermore, this gap between the most and least favourably viewed communities has widened.

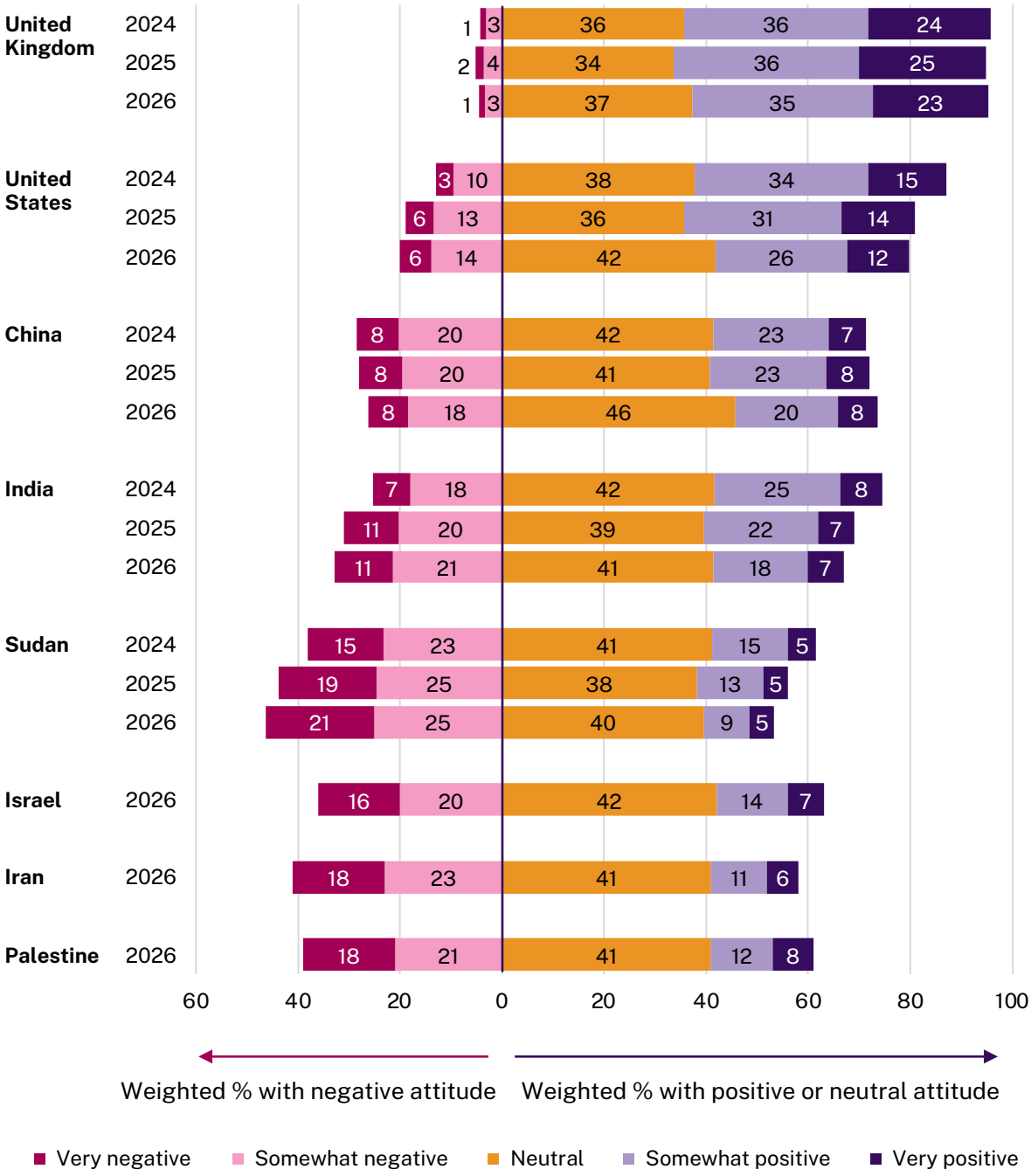
At the same time, neutral responses remain the most common answer for almost every group. While some neutral responses may reflect uncertainty or unfamiliarity with some groups that could be at risk of turning negative in future, the consistency of neutral responses across a wide range of countries and faiths suggests that many Australians do not see background as a reason to feel differently about people. In this sense, neutrality reflects a form of acceptance that sits alongside (and perhaps underpins) broad support for multiculturalism.

Figure 22. 'Is your personal attitude positive, negative, or neutral towards... [people of the following faiths]?' Weighted % of adults, 2018–2026



Notes: Surveys conducted between 2018 and 2024 were administered exclusively to the Life in Australia™ panel. Surveys in 2026 were administered to a blended sample of Life in Australia™ and non-probability panel respondents. The time series does not appear to be affected by the shift in survey administration. Attitudes to people of Jewish, Hindu and Sikh faith were not asked in 2018, so no results are available.

Figure 23. ‘Would you say your feelings are positive, negative or neutral towards immigrants from…[the following countries]?’ Weighted % of adults, 2024–2026



Notes: Surveys conducted in 2024 were administered exclusively to the Life in Australia™ panel. Surveys in 2025 and 2026 were administered to a blended sample of Life in Australia™ and non-probability panel respondents. The time series does not appear to be affected by the shift in survey administration. Attitudes to immigrants from Israel, Iran and Palestine was only asked in 2026, so no results are available for prior years.

Negative attitudes are most commonly held towards ethnic and racial minorities

Immigrants from the United Kingdom remain the most warmly regarded group in our survey. In 2026, 96% of adults held a positive or neutral view of British immigrants, with only around 4% reporting a negative one, largely unchanged from recent years. The United States, while still remaining the second most positively viewed immigrant origin country, has seen a cooling of Australians' sentiments since 2024, with negative views increasing by 7 percentage points (from 13% in 2024 to 20% in 2026).

Attitudes towards immigrants from China are the only sentiment to move in a positive direction since 2024, although this has been a minor shift. Specifically, the share of Australians reporting a negative view of Chinese immigrants dropped by 3 percentage points, from 29% in 2024 to 26% in 2026.

Attitudes towards immigrants from India and Sudan have trended negatively since 2024, with immigrants from Sudan continuing to face the most negative views of any country tracked over time. Almost half of Australian adults (around 46%) now hold a negative view of Sudanese immigrants, up from 38% in 2024 and 44% in 2025. Around one in five adults (21%) now say their feelings are very negative.

Views of immigrants from the three countries added to this year's survey (Israel, Iran and Palestine) are similar to one another, with immigrants from Iran facing the most negative views of the group. Around 36% of Australians hold negative views towards immigrants from Israel, 41% towards Iran and 39% towards Palestine. For each country negative views outnumber positive views by roughly two to one, with around one in six adults reporting very negative attitudes. These results are potentially bound up with attitudes towards the current conflicts in the Middle East, though we do not have enough data points to measure their effects.

Negative attitudes towards people of Islamic and Jewish faiths continue to rise – alongside other faith groups

Perhaps the most striking change in Figure 22 is the change in attitudes towards Muslims. The share of adults with a negative view of Muslims had been declining, from 39% in 2018 to 29% in 2022, but has since risen sharply, to 33% in 2024 and 43% in 2026. The 10 percentage point increase between 2024 and 2026 is the largest rise in negative attitudes towards any group in the survey. The share with a very negative view has more than doubled since 2022, from eight to 18%, meaning nearly one in five adults now say their attitude towards Muslims is very negative. Over the same period, positive views fell from 23 to 14%. For the first time, negative views of Muslims (43%) are now as common as neutral views (43%).

Attitudes towards people of Hindu, Sikh and Jewish faiths have all continued to decline since 2022. Since the low of 2022, negative views of Hindus have grown from nine percent to 16% in 2026. Negative views of Sikhs rose by nine percentage points over the same period (from 11 to 20%), while negative views of Jewish people have more than doubled, from eight percent to 18%.

For each of these faiths, a majority of Australian adults remain neutral, and positive views still outnumber negative ones. However, the general direction of change has been consistently negative since 2022.

Buddhists remain the most positively regarded faith, though positive views have eased slightly since 2020. In 2026, around 44% of Australians hold a positive view towards Buddhists and only 4% report a negative view.

Attitudes towards Christians were the only faith group to see recent movement in a positive direction. Between 2024 and 2026, positive views towards Christians grew by five percentage points, from 37% to 42%.

Negativity towards Muslims reflects social and political polarisation, while negativity towards Jewish people is more evenly spread

Increasingly negative attitudes towards Jewish and Muslim people in recent years have occurred alongside significant global and national events, including the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East, and the 2025 Bondi Beach shooting targeting the Australian Jewish community.

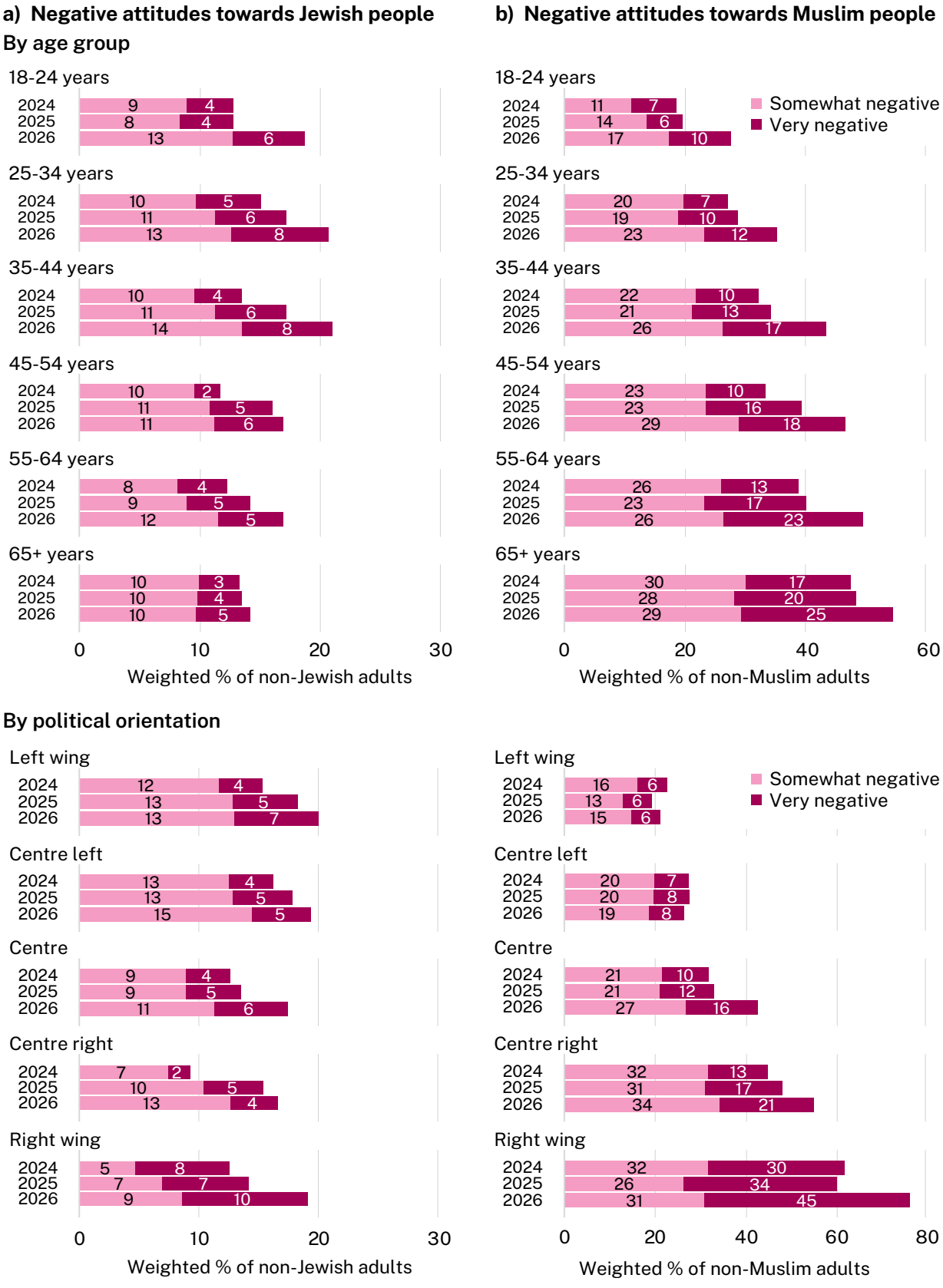
The response to recent crises has been highly polarised in Australia in public debate and activism. In 2026, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey asked respondents who their sympathies lie with in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Overall, one-in-six (17%) people said their sympathies mostly or entirely lie with the Israeli people, a figure that rises to 38% among those who describe their political views as right wing and 33% among people aged 65 years and over. Meanwhile, 35% said their sympathies mostly or entirely lie with the Palestinian people, a figure that rises to 67% among left wingers and 49% among those aged 18-34 years. Across the total population, 19% said their sympathies were with the Palestinian and Israeli people equally and 28% said they had sympathy with neither of them. Neither the left nor the right were particularly likely to have equal sympathy (15% and 17% respectively compared with 25% of centrists), while sympathy with neither was particularly common among centrists (41%) and right wingers (28%), relative to the left (12%).

Whether polarised attitudes to the conflict give rise to anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment on the left and right then becomes an important question for the wellbeing of those communities in Australia and overall social cohesion. Attitudes by age and self-identified political orientation are shown in Figure 24.

Between 2024 and 2026, negative views of Jewish people became more common across young and middle aged adults. The largest shift is seen for people aged 35-44 years, 14% of whom expressed negative views in 2024, increasing by eight percentage points to 22% in 2026. Negative attitudes towards Jewish people increased by 5-6 percentage points for 18-34 and 45-64 year olds. Negative attitudes were least common amongst older Australians (aged 65 and over), a group that also saw the least amount of change in attitudes over time.

Reported attitudes towards Jewish people do not vary substantially by political orientation. In 2026, negative views ranged from 17% for the centre right (the lowest) to 20% for the left (the highest). The largest increases since 2024 were on the centre right and right, which saw increases of 8 and 7 percentage points respectively. So while attitudes to the current conflict are sharply polarised along demographic and political lines, anti-Jewish sentiment appears to be a society-wide problem.

Figure 24. Negative attitudes to people of Jewish and Islamic faiths by age and political orientation, 2024, 2025 and 2026



Notes: political orientation measured by people's self-described score on a scale from 0 to 10. Left wing: scores of 0-2; Centre left: 3-4; Centre: 5; Centre right: 6-7; Right wing: 8-10. Note that attitudes to Jewish and Muslim people are on different scales.

Negative attitudes towards Muslims exhibit a different pattern, with sharp differences by age and political orientation. Here, negative views rise steadily alongside age, with 54% of those aged 65 plus expressing a negative view in 2026, compared to just 27% of those aged 18–24. Every age group has become more negative towards Muslims since 2024, with most of the increase occurring in the last year.

The divide across the political spectrum is even more apparent. Among people who identify as politically right wing, three quarters held negative views of Muslims in 2026, with nearly half (45%) reporting their views as 'very negative'. Compared to 60% of the right wing who expressed negative views of Muslims the previous year, this group exhibited the largest attitudinal shift of all the groups represented in Figure 24. Negative views also rose sharply amongst those in the centre and centre right of the political spectrum, while those on the left and centre remained stable, with around one in four (or slightly fewer) reporting negative attitudes towards Muslims. Notably though, people on the left are still at least as likely to have a negative view of Muslims as they are to Jewish people.

Overall, Figure 24 illustrates that there are two differing patterns of rising prejudice towards Muslim and Jewish people in Australia. Negative views of Jewish people have grown across Australian society. Conversely, negative views towards Muslims have become increasingly concentrated in older Australians and those who identify with the political centre and right. Both patterns are of concern for social cohesion, and mostly importantly, for the safety and sense of belonging for Muslim and Jewish Australians. There are not enough Muslim and Jewish Australians to address this directly in the Mapping Social Cohesion study, though in the chapter 'Migrant experiences', we are at least able to analyse the experiences of migrant Australians generally.

Australia's multicultural fabric is strained by new and longstanding pressures - but remains vital to efforts to strengthen social cohesion

In the current global age of rising anti-immigrant politics, Australia's symbolic support for multiculturalism, diversity and the social, cultural and economic contribution of immigrants has been a shining light and a source of strength for social cohesion. However, while this is vital to Australia in its vast ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, social cohesion in this country is also built on a troubled and violent history with its first peoples and ongoing issues of racism and discrimination directed at both first peoples and more recent arrivals. As the last one to three years has reminded us, Australia is also not immune to the division over immigration that plays out around the world, and 2026 has seen a continued decline in symbolic support for immigration and multiculturalism and increasingly negative attitudes to people of Islamic and Jewish faiths, as well as those of Asian and African background. In seeking to strengthen intercultural bonds and Australia's multicultural fabric, we start from a reasonable place though, a place where most Australians can see past a person's birthplace, faith and cultural background in assessing their character and contribution to society and where while support for diversity and multiculturalism are strained in the current environment, most still recognise their importance to modern Australia.

Personal & financial wellbeing

One of the best indicators of a socially cohesive society is happiness where each of us draws a sense of purpose, fulfillment and satisfaction from living in communities and a society that look out for each other. On this front, Australians are typically a happy and resilient population. However, on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey and other datasets, we are seeing indications of declining happiness and wellbeing, particularly for younger and middle aged adults. At the same time, cost-of-living pressures continue to strain our financial wellbeing, which in turn looks to be pressuring our perceived sense of social cohesion.

Arguably one of the most important functions and purposes of social cohesion is in providing for the happiness and personal wellbeing of people. In policy-oriented and public facing definitions of social cohesion, like the Mapping Social Cohesion study and the Scanlon Index of worth, personal wellbeing is often measured as a component of social cohesion itself. The reverse is also true where perceptions of social cohesion are incorporated into definitions and measurements of holistic wellbeing.[64, 65] In academic research, wellbeing and cohesion are typically treated as separate, though researchers often agree that cohesive societies are generally happy societies.[66, 67] Respondents to this year's Mapping Social Cohesion survey also agree. As previously reported, people are most likely to say that providing for the happiness and good life of everyone is greatly or at least moderately important to what it means to live in a cohesive society.

Personal wellbeing is often understood to be multidimensional. Definitions and measurements vary but often incorporate a sense of happiness and life satisfaction in the moment (known as hedonic wellbeing), a sense of long-term purpose and fulfilment (known as eudaimonic wellbeing), a sense of connection and belonging with others (social wellbeing) and financial satisfaction and wellbeing (material wellbeing), among others. In the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, measures of each are collected and combined into a single Index of worth. As we show in this chapter, we also have the capacity to track individual measures and dimensions and explore how they relate to broader social cohesion.

Happiness and wellbeing have steadily declined over the last decade

Australians' personal wellbeing has not collapsed by any means but is under pressure. In 2026, 79% of adults said they had been happy (65%) or very happy (13%) over the last 12 months. As shown in Figure 25, this proportion is similar to where it has been in the last five to six years but is below where it was in the 2007–2015 period. Part of the difference between then and now looks to be related to the fact that the survey was a purely telephone survey until 2017 and people were perhaps reluctant to admit to a person interviewing them over the phone that they were unhappy. Comparing results when the survey was run in tandem as a phone and online survey in 2018 and 2019, we estimate that the telephone surveys added approximately five percentage points to the proportion of people who said they were happy or very happy.

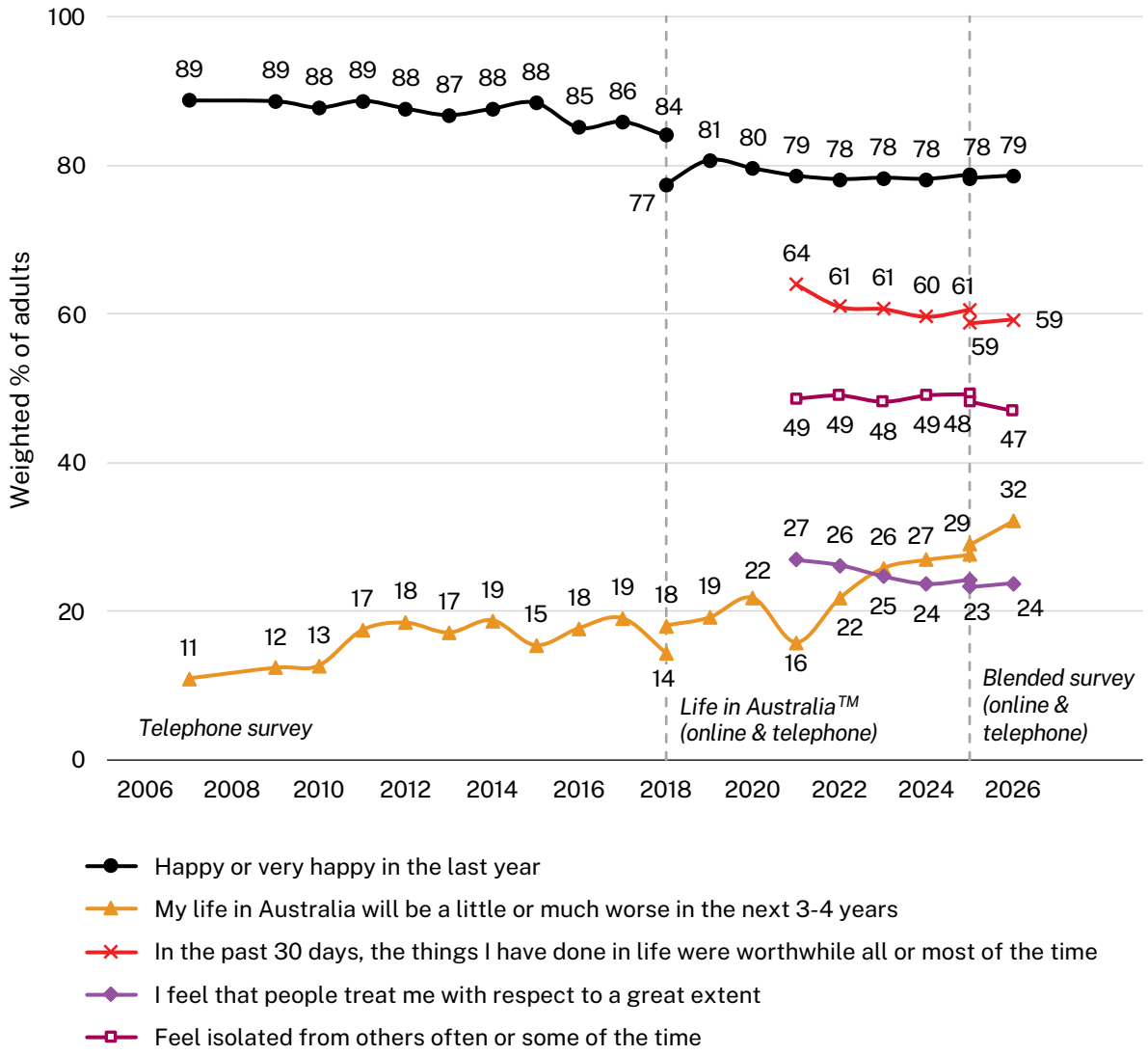
Removing the effect of the transition to the mostly online survey, we estimate that the proportion of people who say they are happy or very happy has declined by approximately five percentage points since 2015, declining from around 84% to 79% today.

Importantly, the steady decline in personal happiness has been mirrored in other major studies and surveys in Australia. The World Happiness Report also shows a decline in happiness both in absolute terms and in relation to other countries. In the latest report, Australia's global happiness ranking has slipped from 9th in the world in 2015 to 15th in 2025.[68]

Declining life satisfaction has also been reported in the ANU Poll[69] and on the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey. On the General Social Survey, Australians' average life satisfaction has declined on a scale between zero and 10 from 7.6 in 2014 to 7.1 in 2025, a decline that has been similar for men (0.5 points) and women (0.4 points).[70]

People are also increasingly pessimistic and worried about their own future. In 2026, one-in-three (32%) adults said their life in Australia will be a little (22%) or a lot worse (10%) in the next 3-4 years, a proportion that has doubled since 2021 and is substantially higher than it has been since the first survey in 2007 (see Figure 25). Another one-third of people (33%) said in 2026 that life will be about the same in 3-4 years, while the remaining one-third (35%) believe life will be a little (27%) or much improved (7%). The proportion who think life will be the same has been consistent through time, though the proportion who think life will be improved has declined by 16 percentage points in the last five years and by approximately 8 percentage points from the average of the 2010s.

Figure 25. Indicators of personal wellbeing, 2007–2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel.

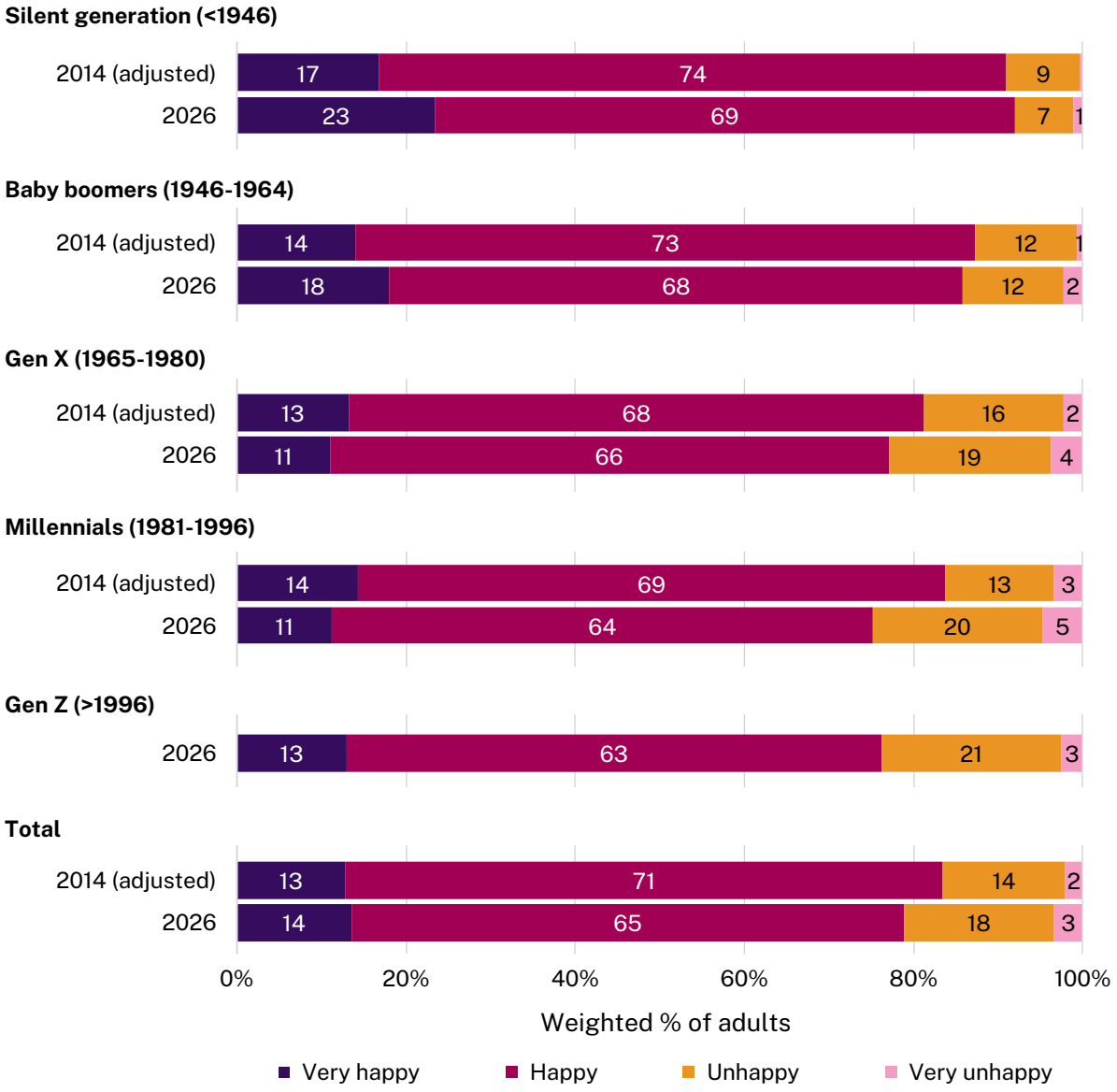
Other indicators suggest that people's sense of purpose and worth has been stable in the last few years, though are perhaps at lower levels than they were during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2026, 59% of adults reported that during the past 30 days, the things they 'have done in life have been worthwhile' all or most of the time as opposed to some (29%) or a little of the time (12%) and 24% reported that people treat them with respect to a great extent (63% said to a moderate extent and 13% said only slightly or not at all). As shown in Figure 25, these proportions are similar to levels since 2023 and below those of 2021. Almost one-half (47%) of people say they feel isolated from others often or some or the time in 2026 (as opposed to never or hardly ever), a proportion that has been consistent in recent years.

Declining happiness and increasing pessimism across generations

Happiness has declined most for Millennials and Gen X. Our estimates are shown in Figure 26 where we compare reported happiness across generations between 2014 and 2026. Our estimates for 2014 (when the youngest Millennials turned 18 years) have been adjusted to remove the effect of the transition in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey from a telephone to a mostly online survey in 2018.[71] Doing so suggests that since 2014, the proportion of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996 inclusive) who are happy or very happy declined from 84% to 75%, while the proportion who are unhappy or very unhappy increased from 16% to 25%.

Among Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980), the proportion who are unhappy or very unhappy increased from 19% to 23%. Levels of happiness were stable for older generations, though, if anything, they have become more likely to say they are very happy. The younger Gen Z population meanwhile were too young to complete the survey in 2014, though by 2026 were similarly likely to be happy as Millennials and Gen X.

Figure 26. Happiness in the prior 12 months by generation, 2014 and 2026



Note: Figures for 2014 are estimates that have been adjusted and smoothed to remove the effect of the transition from a telephone to a mostly online survey. See note 71. A small number of respondents who refused to answer the question or said they 'didn't know' have been removed from the denominator.

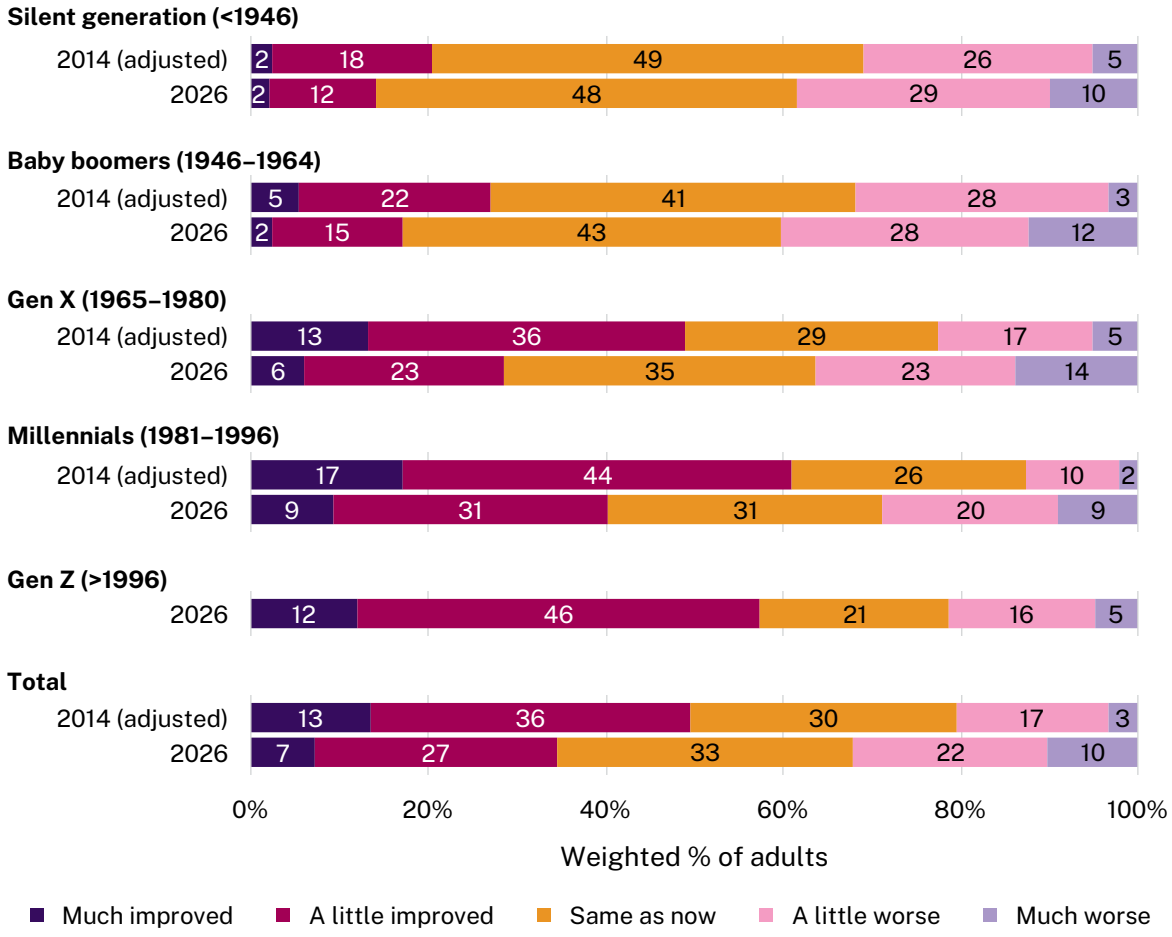
Declining happiness among younger generations is also reflected in the General Social Survey.[72] Although headline results from the General Social Survey are not currently available by generation, we can get a rough sense of generational declines by comparing average life satisfaction scores by age group and time.

- People aged 35-44 years in 2025 (i.e. people born in the 1980s and forming part of the Millennial generation) had an average life satisfaction score of 7.0 (on a scale of zero to 10) in 2025, compared with a score of approximately 7.7 in 2014 (reflecting the score of those aged 25-34 at the time).
- The average score of people born in the 1990s, meanwhile, crossing both the Millennial and Gen Z populations declined from approximately 7.7 in 2014 to 6.8 in 2025 and from 7.5 to 6.9 among those born in the 1970s (Gen X).
- There was also a smaller decline from 7.4 to 7.1 among those born in the 1960s (Baby boomers and Gen X).

Across all generations, people are increasingly pessimistic about their future. Typically, older generations are more likely to say their life will be a little or much worse in 3-4 years than younger generations. That is still generally true, though there has been an increase in the proportion of younger generations who are worried about the future.

As shown in Figure 27, we estimate that the proportion of Millennials who believe their life will be a little or much worse has increased from approximately 13% in 2014 to 29% in 2026, while the proportion among Gen X has increased from 22% to 36%. The proportion has also increased among older generations, to the point that 40% of Baby boomers believe their life will be a little or much worse, up from 32% in 2014. Gen Z are the most optimistic generation with 57% believing their life will be much or a little improved in the next 3-4 years and a further 21% believing it will be about the same. It is striking though that one-in-five (21%) Gen Zs believe their life will be a little or much worse, substantially higher than it was for Millennials in 2014.

Figure 27. ‘In three or four years, do you think your life in Australia will be… improved, the same as now or worse?’, weighted % of respondents by generation, 2014 and 2026

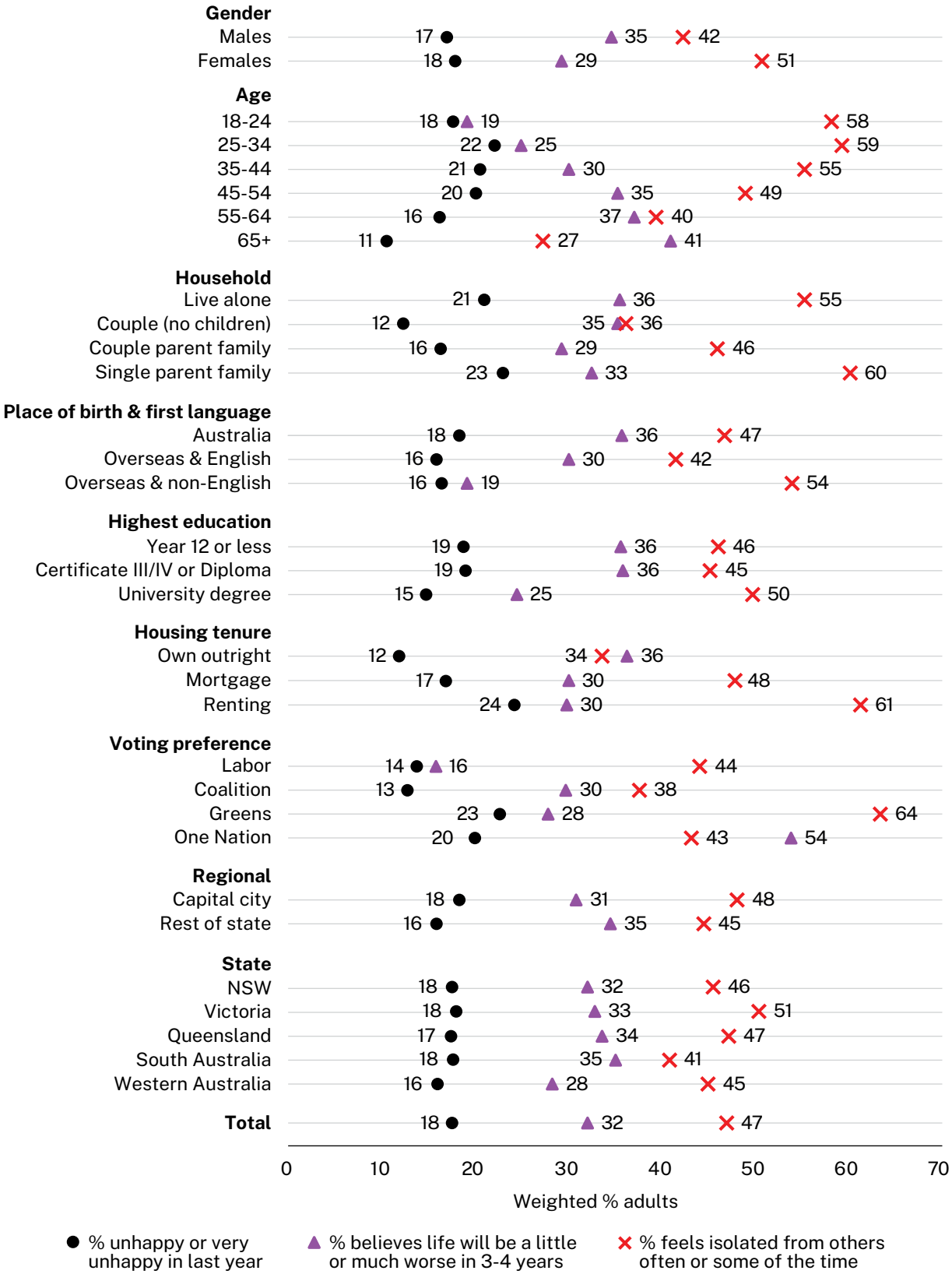


Note: Figures for 2014 are estimates that have been adjusted and smoothed to remove the effect of the transition in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey from a telephone to a mostly online survey (see note 71). A small number of respondents who refused to answer the question, said they ‘didn’t know’ or said they would not be living in Australia in 3-4 years have been removed from the denominator.

Average levels of unhappiness, pessimism and social isolation are shown in Figure 28 for different sociodemographic groups. Mirroring the generational patterns discussed above, young and middle aged adults are the most likely to report feeling isolated from others often or some of the time in 2026 (including 59% of 25-34 year olds), more likely to say they have been unhappy or very unhappy in the past year (including 22% of 25-34 year olds), but less likely to believe life will be a little or much worse in 3-4 years (including 25% of 25-34 year olds).

Single parent families, people who live alone and renters report relatively high levels of social isolation and unhappiness. In 2026, 60% of adults in single parent families felt isolated from others often or some of the time, while 23% said they were unhappy or very unhappy, similar to people who live alone and substantially higher than for couples and couple parent families. The pattern is similar for renters, with high levels of isolation and unhappiness relative to homeowners.

Figure 28. Indicators of personal wellbeing by sociodemographic characteristics, weighted % of adults, 2026



Note: Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people would vote for if there were an election today. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

Overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds also report relatively high levels of social isolation, though are generally optimistic about the future with only one-in-five (19%) believing that life in Australia will be a little or much worse in the next 3-4 years.

There looks to be a strong political influence on people's sense of pessimism. Labor voters are the least likely to believe their life will be worse in 3-4 years (16%), while One Nation supporters are more than three times more likely to believe that to be the case (54%). One Nation supporters are just as likely as Labor voters to feel isolated at least some of the time (43% and 44% respectively), though are significantly more likely to report being unhappy (20% versus 14% for Labor voters).

We use a regression model to analyse potential reasons for the differences across voters in their pessimism and unhappiness. The models predict the probabilities of believing life will be worse in 3-4 years and being unhappy across different voting groups and after taking into account a range of demographic, social and economic characteristics.[73]

We find that people who report higher levels of financial stress and loneliness are substantially more likely to believe that their life will be worse in 3-4 years, while people with higher levels of neighbourhood cohesion and national pride and belonging are less likely to believe their life will be worse.

However, none of these factors substantially explain voter differences in pessimism. Even when we attempt to remove the effects of financial stress, loneliness, neighbourhood cohesion, national pride and belonging, along with people's age, gender, household composition, housing tenure, education levels, migration history, city of residence, self-reported health, employment status and neighbourhood economic disadvantage, we estimate that the proportion of One Nation voters who believe their life will be worse is still 31 percentage points higher than for Labor voters.

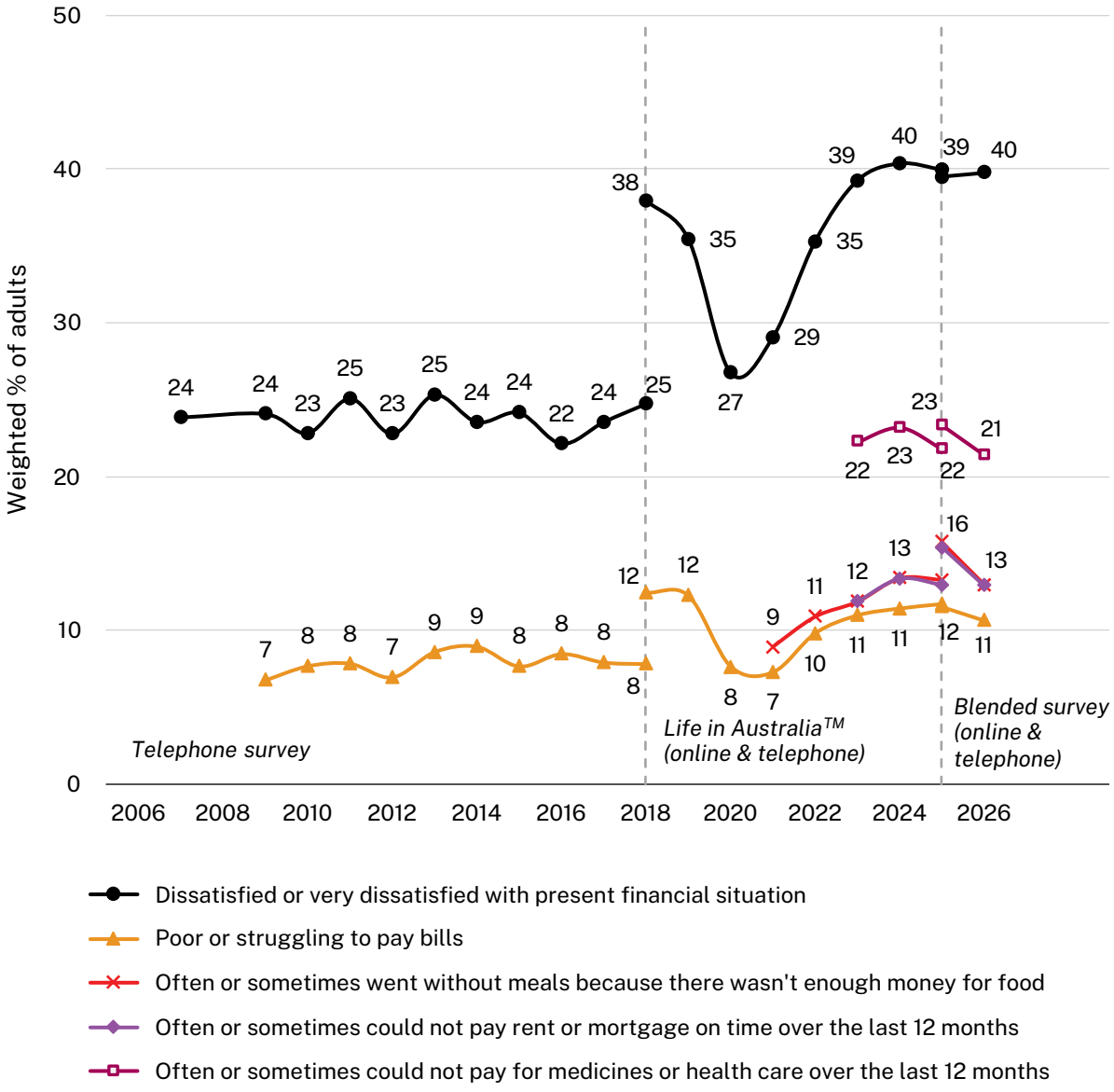
Political factors appear to be stronger predictors of this difference. We estimate that the difference between One Nation and Labor voters reduces to around 11 percentage points when we remove the effects of lower levels of trust in government and the political system and weaker support for multiculturalism and diversity – in addition to all the previously mentioned factors. So while it is difficult to conclusively prove, it looks to be the case that differences in pessimism in people's own lives across voting groups is more related to political disgruntlement and dissatisfaction with government and the political system than to people's own personal circumstances, at least as far as we can measure them.

Many Australians continue to struggle financially

Indicators of financial wellbeing are shown in Figure 29. Two-in-five (40%) adults said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their present financial situation (as opposed to satisfied or very satisfied), a proportion that has been consistently at that level since the emergence of cost-of-living pressures in 2023. Over the longer run and after removing the effect of the transition to the mostly online survey, we estimate that financial dissatisfaction since 2023 is approximately 4 percentage points higher than its average across the 2010s and 13 points higher than its low point in 2020.

One-in-ten (11%) adults described their financial circumstances as poor or struggling to pay the bills in 2026, while a further 29% said they were 'just getting along' as opposed to 'living reasonably comfortably' (45%) or 'living very comfortably' or 'prosperous' (16%). The proportions who are poor, struggling or just getting along at best have increased significantly between 2020 and 2023, though are reasonably in line with their average across the 2010s.

Figure 29. Indicators of financial hardship, weighted % of adults, 2007-2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel. See the technical report for more information.

People's overall subjective financial wellbeing is also coupled with a number of serious and important material hardships.

- 13% of adults said they often or sometimes went without meals in the previous 12 months because there was not enough money for food, a proportion that grew from 9% in 2021 when the question was first asked and in line with emergence of cost-of-living pressures in 2023.
- 13% said they often or sometimes could not pay rent or mortgage payments on time in the previous 12 months. This has followed an almost identical trajectory to the proportion who have gone without meals since the question was first asked in 2023.
- One-in-five (21%) adults said they often or sometimes could not pay for medicines or health care in the last 12 months. This proportion has been consistently at this level since the question was first asked in 2023.
- One-in-five (19%) adults said that it was often or sometimes true over the last 12 months that they could not heat or cool their home because they could not afford to.
- Overall, 30% of adults said they either went without meals, could not pay the rent or mortgage, could not afford to heat or cool their home or could not pay for medicines or health care often or sometimes in the last 12 months.

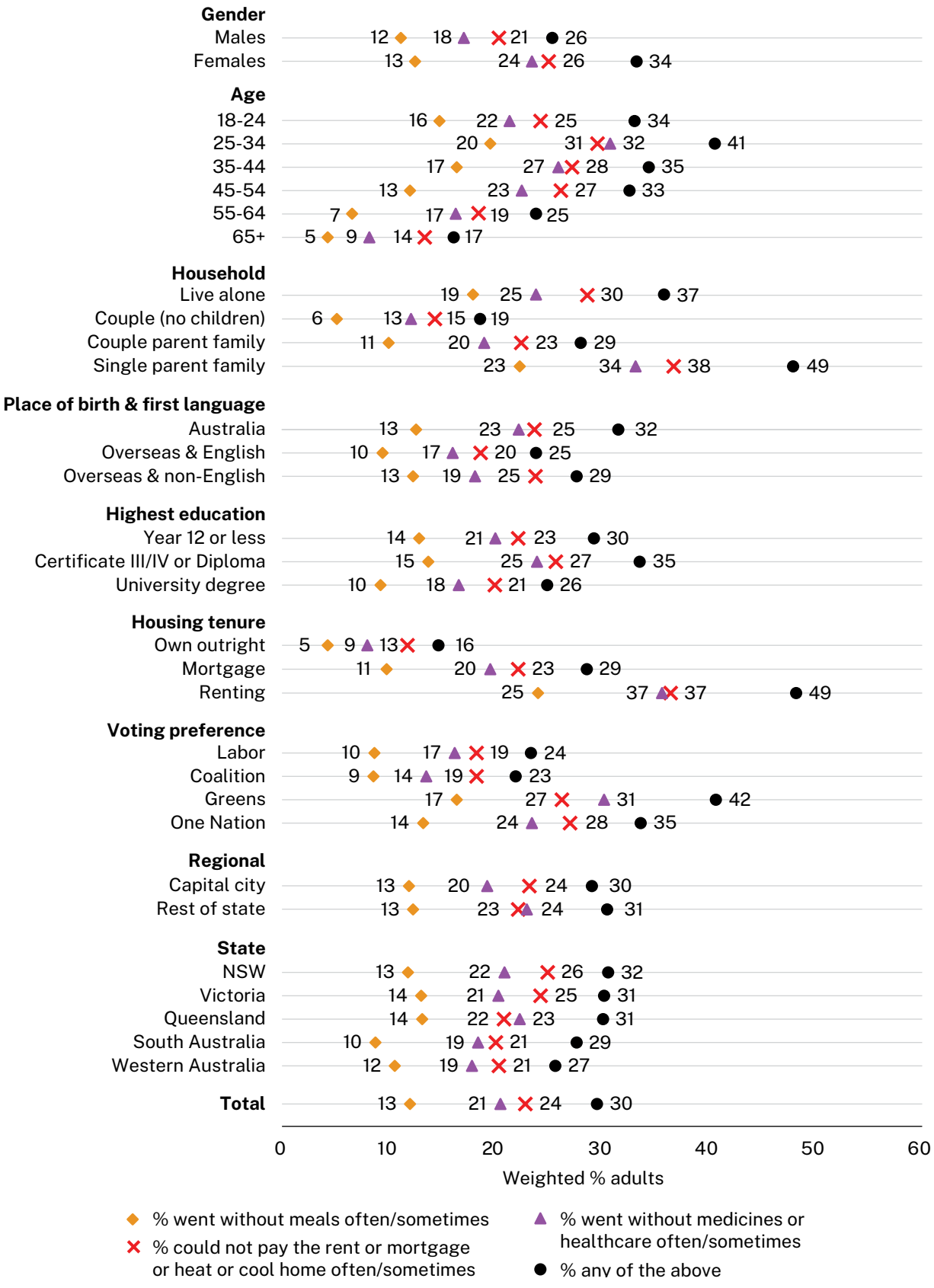
People commonly had to seek help or raise money over the last 12 months. In new questions asked in 2026:

- One-in-five (20%) said that they often or sometimes asked friends or family for money because they needed it.
- One-in-six (16%) said they pawned or sold something because they needed the money.
- Combined, 25% of adults either often or sometimes asked friends or family for money or pawned or sold something.

Experiences of financial hardship are shown in Figure 30 for different sociodemographic groups. Hardship is common among young and middle aged adults, particularly for women and single parent families, and related to housing pressures for mortgagees and renters. In 2026,

- One-in-five (20%) 25-34 year olds went without meals often or sometimes in the previous 12 months, 31% could not pay the rent or mortgage on time and 32% went without medicines or healthcare. Overall, 41% of 25-34 year olds experienced hardship in any one of these areas, somewhat higher than the proportions for 18-24 year olds (34%), 35-44 year olds (35%) and 45-54 year olds (33%) and substantially higher than those for people aged 55-64 (25%) and 65 years and over (17%).
- Approximately one-half (49%) of adults in single parent families experienced financial hardship, including 38% who said they could not pay the rent or mortgage on time or heat or cool their home, 34% who went without medicines or health care and 23% who went without meals.
- One-half (49%) of renters and 29% of mortgage holders experienced financial hardship, including 37% of renters who went without medicines or health care and 25% who went without meals.

Figure 30. Financial hardships in the last 12 months, weighted % of adults, 2026



Note: Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people would vote for if there were an election today. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

People who are experiencing financial hardship are more likely to be Greens or One Nation voters. In 2026, 42% of Greens voters and 35% of One Nation voters (based on their current voting preferences) experienced hardship in terms of going without meals or needed health care, missing rent or mortgage payments or not being able to heat or cool their home, compared with approximately one-quarter of Labor (24%) and Coalition (23%) voters.

Financial hardship is potentially contributing to a shift in voting preferences away from the major parties. People who are experiencing financial hardship are significantly more likely to prefer the Greens, One Nation or other minor parties and Independents even after accounting for their social and demographic characteristics including their gender, age, education, housing tenure, household composition and whether they live in capital city or not. Among people who voted for Labor or the Coalition at the 2025 Federal Election, we estimate that 47% who are experiencing financial hardship now prefer some other party or candidate compared with 36% of people who reported no hardship. Of those major party voters, 28% now prefer One Nation among those experiencing hardship compared with 24% who report no hardship.

Financial hardship is likely a major drag on wellbeing and social cohesion

People experiencing financial hardship are substantially less likely to report being happy, to feel a sense of belonging and trust in society, are less connected with their communities and are less accepting of differences and diversity. To demonstrate this, we count up the number of hardships that people have experienced in the last 12 months and instances of having to raise money by borrowing from friends or family or by pawning or selling things. People who say they *often* experienced that hardship or had to raise money count for double relative to those who say they *sometimes* experienced it (i.e. a score of 2 when it is often and 1 when it is sometimes). We find that 10% of adults report five or more hardships, which we classify as severe hardship, while 64% report no hardships.

Of those experiencing relatively severe financial hardship in 2026, we estimate that:

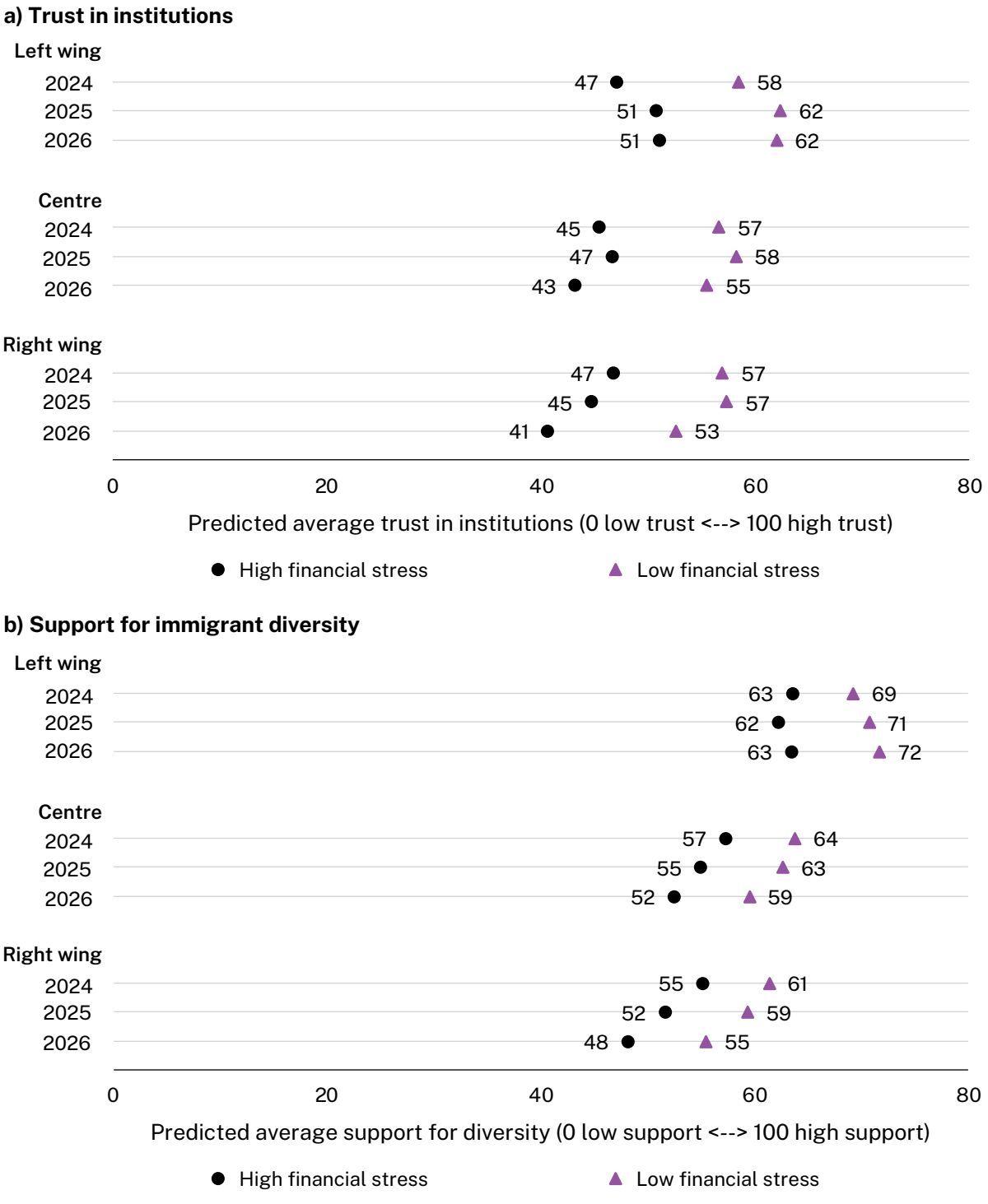
- 47% have been happy or very happy in the previous 12 months compared with 88% of people who reported no financial hardships.
- 26% have a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 52% of people with no hardships.
- 24% trust the Federal Government to do the right thing by the Australian people almost always or most of the time, compared with 35% of people with no hardships.
- 62% agree or strongly agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, compared with 78% of people with no hardships.
- 53% agree or strongly agree that their neighbours help one another and get along well from different backgrounds compared with 75% of people with no hardships.

While it is difficult to prove that financial hardship is the underlying cause of these differences, we find that they remain significant (i.e. more than just random chance) and substantial after taking into account a range of social and demographic characteristics including people's age, gender, education, self-reported health, housing, household composition and immigration history.[74] Pooling together responses across multiple waves of the survey, we also find that when people become financially stressed, they become moderately but significantly less happy, trusting, connected and supportive of multiculturalism. This is an important result because it suggests that fixed personal characteristics such as positive personality types cannot alone explain why financial stress is associated with weaker social cohesion and suggests that as financial hardship increases, social cohesion is likely to deteriorate.

In saying that, financial stress does not look to be explaining declining and increasingly polarised trust in government and support for immigrant diversity in 2026. As shown in Figure 31, trust in institutions and support for diversity is predicted to have declined among right wing conservative-minded people between 2024 and 2026, irrespective of their level of financial stress. Among conservatives, trust in institutions declined from a predicted average score of 57 in 2024 among those with low financial stress (defined where scores are in the lowest 10% of all respondents) to 53 in 2026, while declining from 47 to 41 among those with high financial stress (highest 10% of all scores). Support for immigrant diversity declined by an average of 6–7 points among conservatives, little different between those experiencing high and low financial stress.

- Results in Figure 31 are estimated with regression models that predict trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity for people at different ends of the political spectrum and with different levels of financial wellbeing.[75] The estimates control or take account of other factors that might explain associations between these variables, including age, gender, household composition, education, city of residence, migrant background, disability, self-rated health, year of the survey and the survey panel they are a member of.
- The trust in institutions variable is explained in note 48 at the end of this report, financial wellbeing is explained in note 49, while support for immigrant diversity is explained in note 52.
- Left/centre/right wing political orientation is determined from a question that asks 'In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?' Left wing is defined by people who give themselves a score of 0 to 4, centre is defined by people who give themselves a score of five and right wing is defined by people with scores of 6 to 10.

Figure 31. Predicted trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity for people with high and low levels of financial stress and by political orientation



Notes: Estimates represent marginal predictions from a mixed effects regression model. A description of the variables is provided in the text of the report and notes 48, 49 and 52. Regression results are provided in the technical report. Left wing is defined by people who give themselves a score of 0 to 4 on a survey question that asks people to place themselves on a scale from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right). The centre is defined by people who give themselves a score of five and right wing is defined by people with scores of 6 to 10.

The pressures on happiness and wellbeing speak to the challenges and priorities for a socially cohesive Australia

While related to social cohesion and broader social challenges and pressures, personal wellbeing for Australians, as for others, is generally resilient and not easily shifted. As we have shown in this chapter, changes in happiness and wellbeing are generally slow moving and influenced by personal and life stage changes more than society-wide change. There does though appear to be a long-run trend towards a weaker sense of wellbeing in Australia, particularly among younger and middle-aged adults. This shift is also reflected in several other sources of information including the Australian Bureau of Statistics General Social Survey, the World Happiness Report and the ANUPoll series. There do not appear to be easy explanations or solutions, though the collective evidence points to personal and societal changes that have diminished social connections and belonging and have combined with economic changes to increase financial and other pressures and uncertainties of modern life. The results have not been catastrophic to date, though as people attest, addressing these pressures and providing a stronger foundation for the happiness and good life of all are among the most important priorities for a cohesive society.

Connected, safe & trusting communities

Major national and global events, trends and forces can impact on social cohesion in Australia in various ways. Conflict, violence and political division fill the world and our news and social media feeds, if not also our personal lives, shaping our sense of security, social justice, hope for our collective future and views on government and the wider world. At the heart of socially cohesive societies, however, are cohesive communities and the daily interactions people have with friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers. So while the wider world has its impacts, many of the things that are foundational to social cohesion – including a sense of belonging, acceptance and trust in others, as well as active participation and social engagement – are formed and maintained in daily life and in communities and not easily shifted in the face of the troubles of the wider world.

The potentially protective effect of cohesive communities has been a recurring theme in recent Mapping Social Cohesion reports. The wider world has been for some time now struggling with conflict and division including over immigration and the COVID-19 pandemic. Until recently at least, these divisions had seemingly not gained the same foothold in Australia.[76] So while we were recording long-run declines in national belonging and social justice and declining trust in government in the post-pandemic period, Australia's strength of support for its diversity and the perceived positive contribution of immigrants to Australian society, culture and the economy continued to grow, happiness was resilient even as financial and cost-of-living pressures emerged and people's sense of connection and cohesion in their neighbourhoods strengthened. While we could not be certain whether neighbourhood cohesion was the precise cause, we could show that people were much more likely to be happy in the face of financial pressures if they lived in close-knit communities.

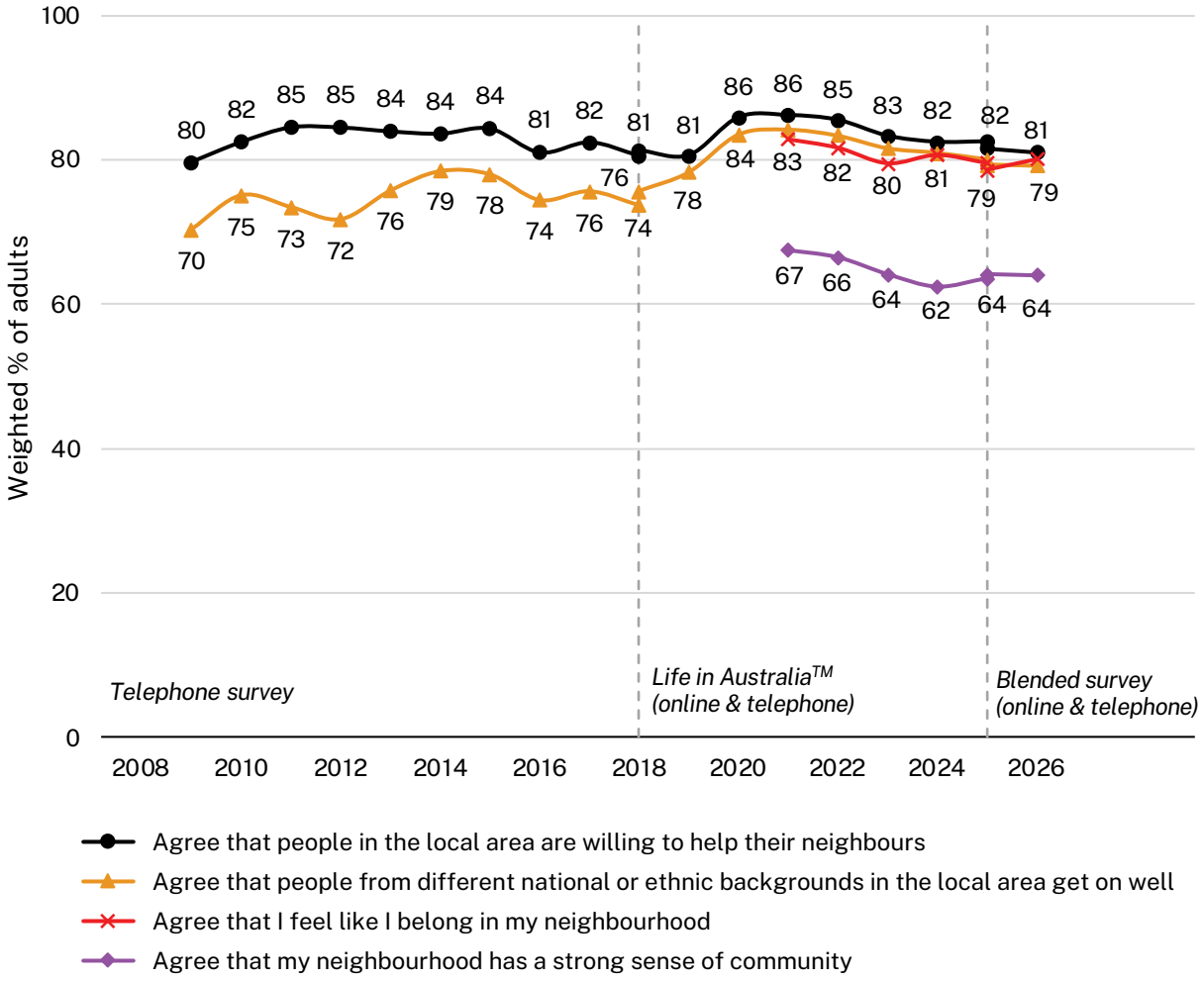
In a world in which pressures and conflicts have intensified, the importance and burden on communities in 2026 is only enhanced. How communities are faring and their potential to help weather the world around us is the topic of this chapter.

Local belonging and cohesion continue to be resilient

People's emotional and practical connections in their local communities have been an important source of resilience to social cohesion in Australia in recent years. Key indicators of neighbourhood belonging and cohesion are shown in Figure 32. In 2026,

- 81% of people agree or strongly agree (as opposed to disagree or strongly disagree) that people in their 'local area are willing to help their neighbours'. This proportion has come down from a peak of 86% in 2020 and 2021 but remains in line with its longer-term average.
- 79% agree or strongly agree that in their local area 'people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together'. This proportion has also declined from a peak of 84% in 2020-2021 though remains above its long-term average.
- 79% agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood', four points lower than when it was first asked in 2021 but in line with its average since 2023.
- 64% agree or strongly agree that 'my neighbourhood has a strong sense of community', in line with its average since 2023 and three percentage points lower than when it was first asked in 2021 (67%).

Figure 32. Indicators of local belonging and cohesion, 2009–2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel.

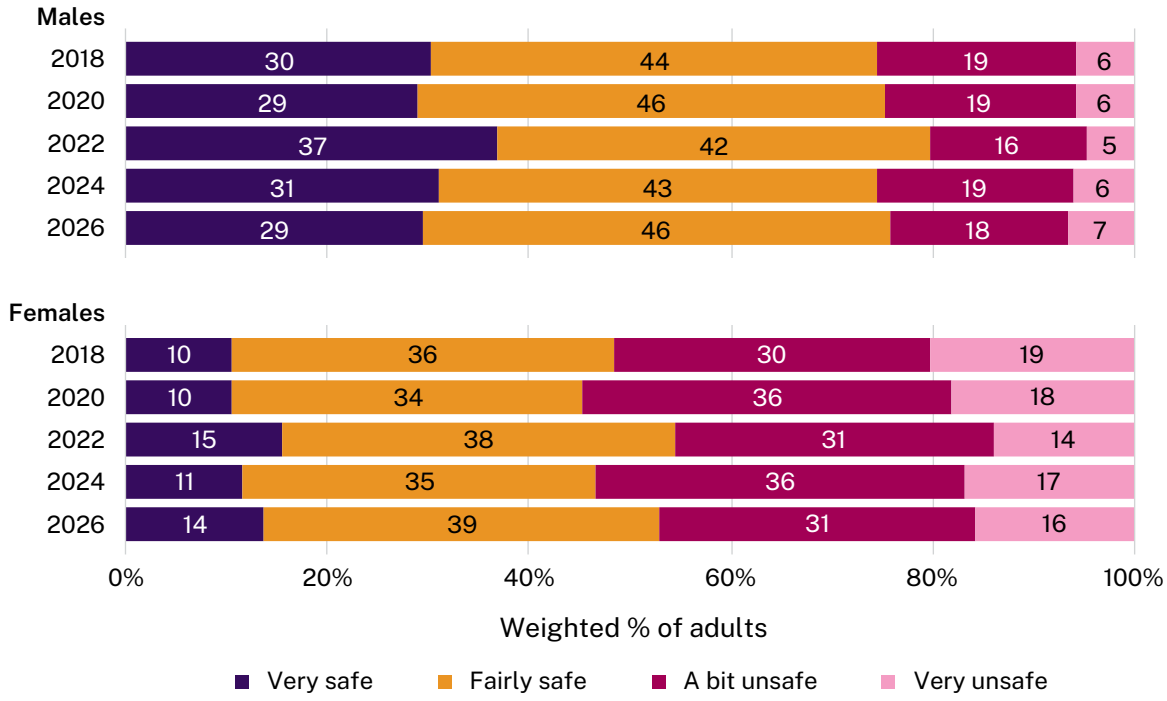
Perceptions of safety

The strength of neighbourhood connections notwithstanding, many people, especially women, feel somewhat unsafe or worried about crime in their local areas. Indicators of perceived safety are shown in Figure 33 for males and females.

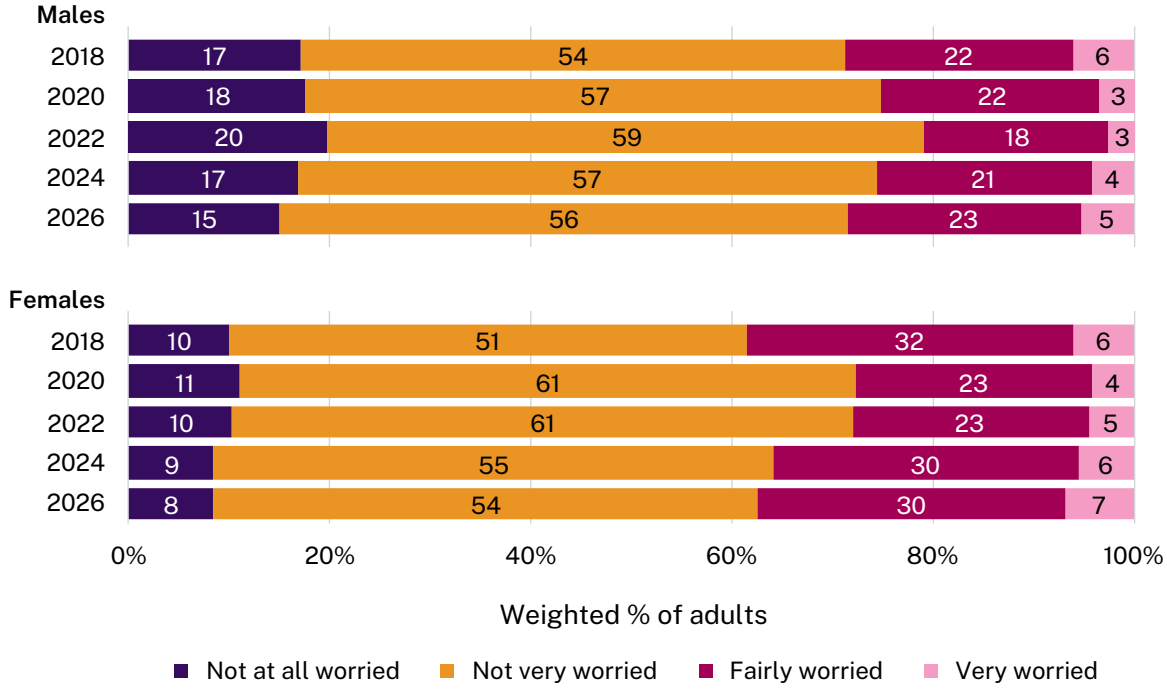
- 16% of females said they felt very unsafe walking alone at night in their local area and 47% said they felt at least a bit unsafe (25% for males). This is generally in line with or lower than in past years, including 2020 (54% for females and 25% for males) and 2024 (53% for females and 25% for males).
- 37% of females (and 28% of males) said they were very or fairly worried about becoming a victim of crime in their local area. Worry among females has generally been increasing since 2020, though is at levels similar to the late 2010s.

Figure 33. Indicators of safety in the community, males and females, 2018–2026

a) 'How safe do you feel walking alone at night in your local area?'



b) 'Thinking about all types of crime in general, how worried are you about becoming a victim of crime in your local area?'



Notes: A small number of people who did not answer the question, said they felt neither safe nor unsafe or said they never go out at night (<1%) have been removed from the denominator. We do not have enough respondents to report separate estimates for people who identify as neither male nor female.

Trust in each other

Foundational to social cohesion, particularly within local communities, is a sense of trust in one another. For people to be able to engage and connect with others and in their communities and to work collaboratively on common problems and goals, people need to have at least some trust in the people they are connecting and working with.

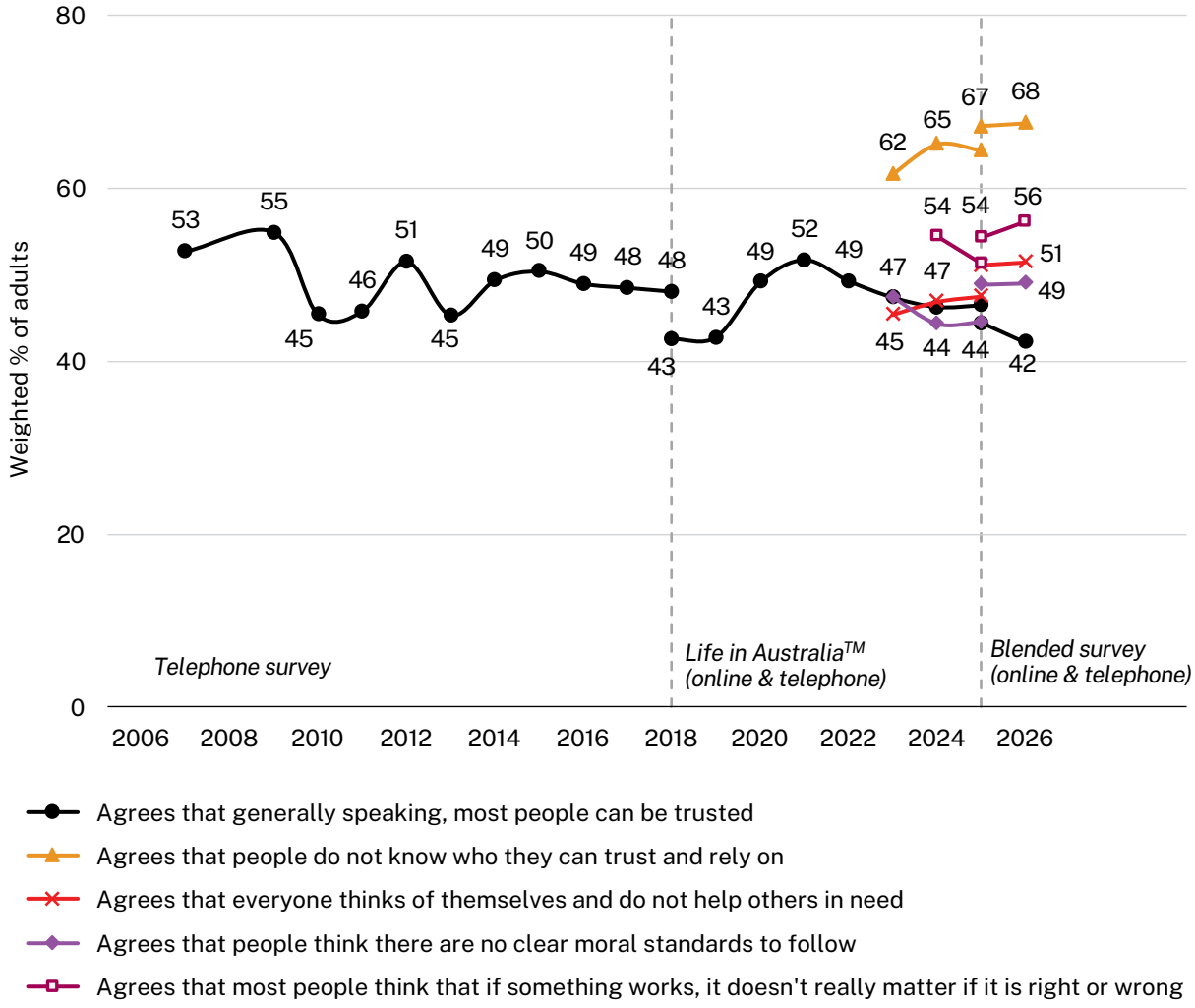
The degree to which Australians trust others has been declining in recent years though, at least since the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2026, 42% of adults said that 'generally speaking, most people can be trusted', a figure that was 52% in 2021. In saying that, the 2021 estimate looks to have been impacted by an increase in trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. After we remove the effect of the transition to the mostly online survey, we estimate that this form of generalised trust is similar to pre-pandemic levels and the average of the 2010s (42%). Nevertheless, any social benefits to trust that emerged from the pandemic appear to have now been lost and trust remains on a downward trajectory.

This measure of generalised trust has been a longstanding question on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey, asked in every year since 2007 and is one of the most widely used indicators of trust in the world. At an international level, Australia is a reasonably trusting country, higher than much of Europe, Asia and the Americas but behind northern European countries, China, Switzerland, New Zealand and Canada.[77]

Recognising the fundamental importance of trust to social cohesion, we have expanded our measures of trust between people in recent years. In particular, we have incorporated measures of distrust related to the concept of 'anomie' or the sense in which social norms, rules and cohesion are deteriorating.[78] A summary of the results is shown in Figure 34. In 2026,

- 68% of adults agreed or strongly agreed that 'people do not know who they can trust and rely on', an increase from 62% in 2023.
- 56% agreed or strongly agreed that 'most people think that if something works, it doesn't really matter if it is right or wrong', similar to levels in 2024 (54%).
- 51% agreed or strongly agreed that 'everyone thinks of themselves and do not help others in need', an increase from 45% in 2023.
- 49% agreed or strongly agreed that 'most people think there are no clear moral standards to follow', reasonably similar to levels since 2023 after taking account of the shift to the blended probability/non-probability sample in 2025.

Figure 34. Indicators of trust and distrust in people, weighted % of adults, 2007–2026



Notes: The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre's probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel.

Active involvement in communities

The degree to which people are active in their local communities has been reasonably consistent in recent years. In 2026,

- Two-in-five (41%) adults said that they had been actively involved in a social or religious group in the last 12 months, such as a sports club, ethnic or multicultural club, arts, hobby or religious group. This proportion has been reasonably consistent since 2021.
- One-in-five (20%) adults said they had been actively involved in a community support group in the last 12 months, such as Rotary, St Vincent de Paul, the Australian Red Cross, State Emergency Services and Rural Fire Services. This proportion has perhaps been on a downward trend since 2022 when it was 24%.
- Combined, approximately one-half (48%) of adults have been actively involved in social, religious or community support groups in the past 12 months, reasonably consistent with its average since 2021 (49%), though has perhaps moderately declined since 2024 (51%).
- Importantly, these estimates do not take into account the frequency or time commitment of community participation, nor the qualitative contribution to the communities in which they live and we cannot say how much these have changed over time.

Although any recent declines in participation have been modest, there is evidence of substantially larger declines over the longer term. The questions on social and community participation have only been included on the Mapping Social Cohesion survey since 2021.

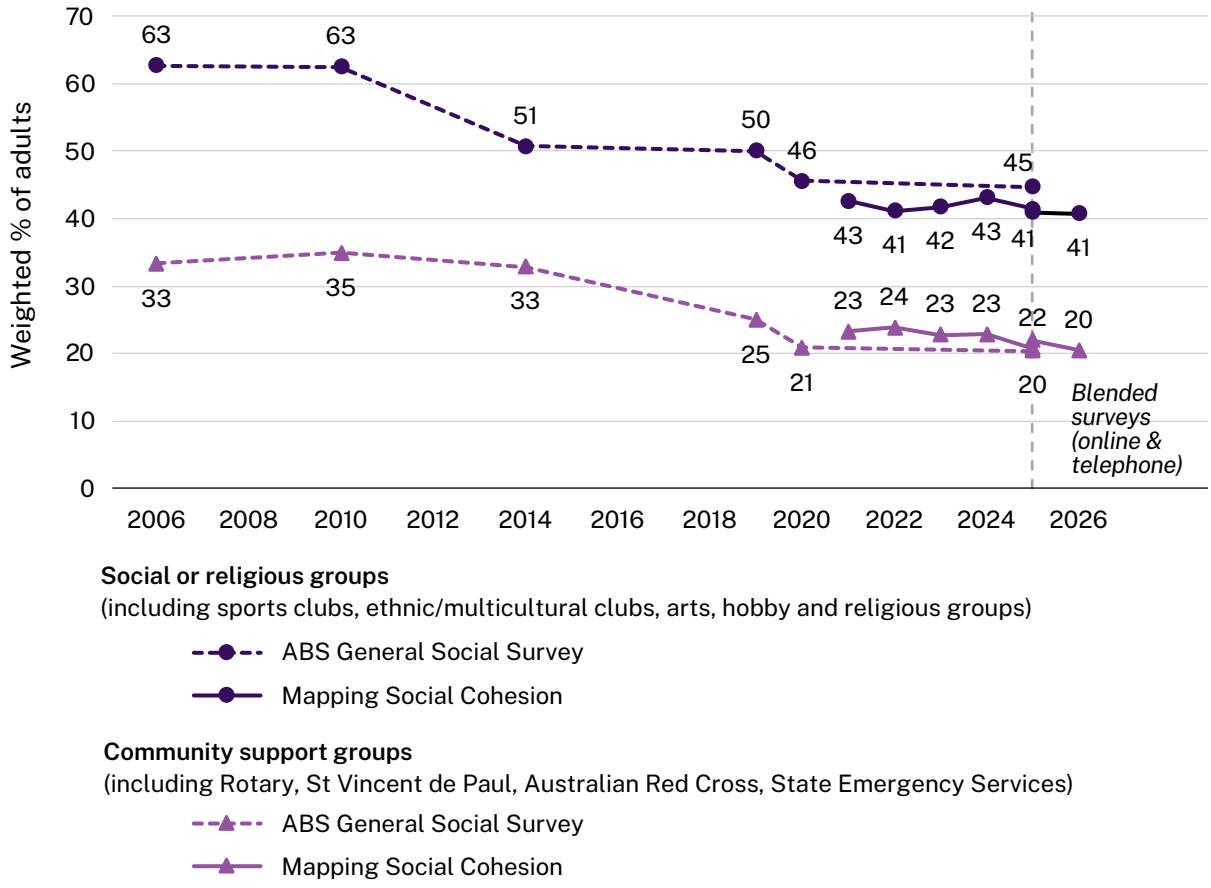
However, they replicate questions that have been included in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) General Social Survey since 2006.[79] The General Social Survey has had an uneven history, though the participation questions have been asked in every survey since, namely surveys conducted in 2006, 2010, 2014, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2025.

Measures of social and community participations across both the Mapping Social Cohesion survey and the General Social Survey are shown in Figure 35. The results are reasonably consistent across the two surveys, though note that differences in the design and administration of the surveys, as well as random chance, might give rise to differences in results across the surveys.

Estimates from the General Social Survey agree that participation in social and community support groups has been consistent in recent years – albeit only by comparing the COVID-19 pandemic-affected 2020 survey with the 2025 General Social Survey. Since 2010 though, the proportion of adults who are actively involved in social or religious groups declined from 63% to 46% in 2020 and 45% in 2025, while the proportion involved in community support groups declined from 35% in 2010 to 21% in 2020 and 20% in 2025.

While we need to be careful in comparing across surveys, we estimate that 68% of adults said they were actively involved in a social, religious or community support group in the 2010 General Social Survey, against our estimate of 48% in the 2026 Mapping Social Cohesion survey. Declining participation in social and community groups, sports and volunteering has been reported elsewhere and appears to be a real trend in Australia[80, 81, 82, 83, 84] though we perhaps need to do more work to understand the shift and its importance and meaning, including its implications for social cohesion.

Figure 35. Active involvement in social, religious and community support groups in the last 12 months, weighted % of adults, Mapping Social Cohesion and the General Social Survey



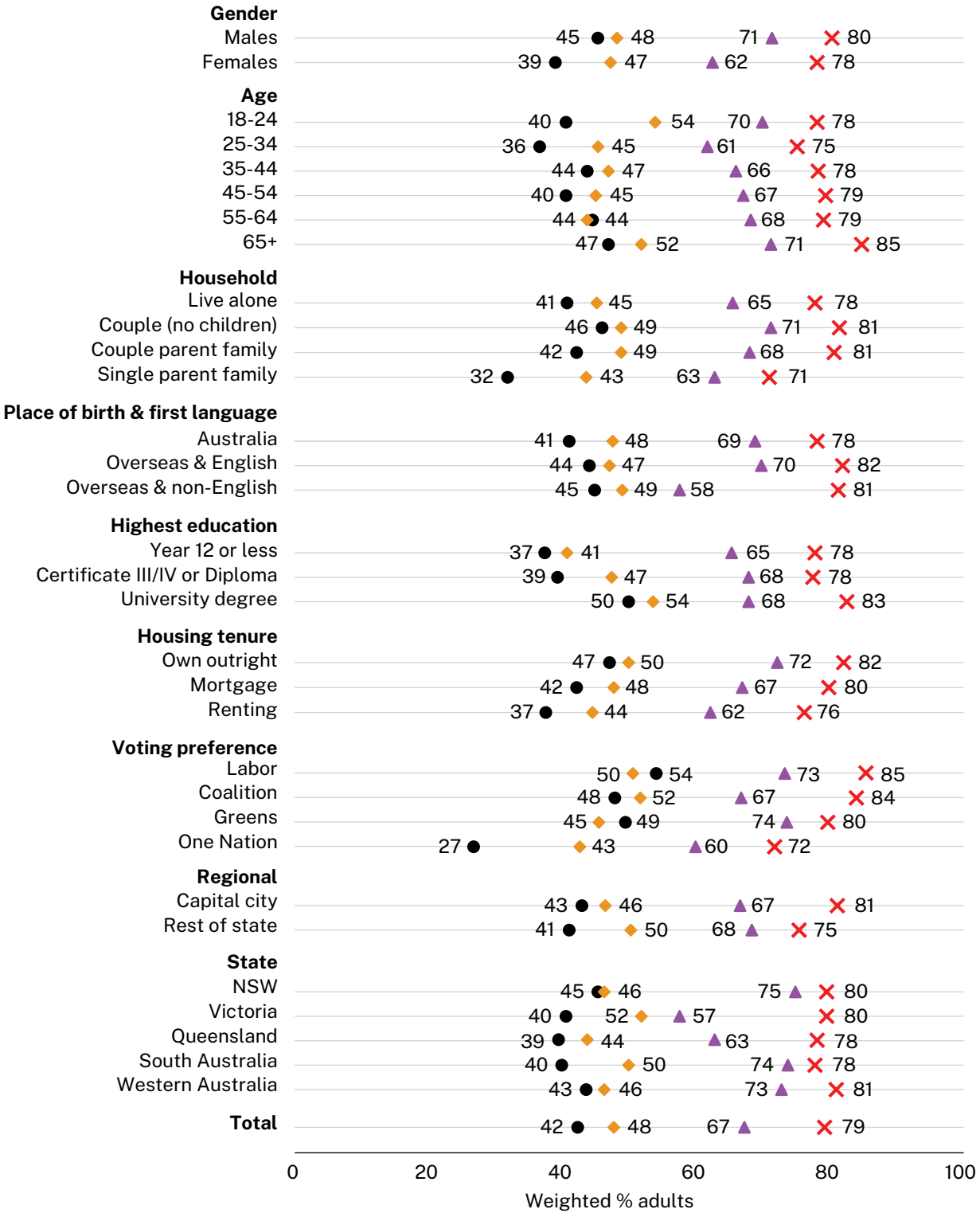
Notes: Results are reported from the General Social Survey when it was run in 2006, 2010, 2014, 2019, 2020 and 2025. See note 79. The Mapping Social Cohesion survey shifted to a blended sample in 2025, combining respondents from the Life in Australia™ panel with those from a non-probability panel.

Differences in community connections

Indicators of trust, safety, neighbourhood connection and participation are shown in Figure 36 for different demographic and social groups. Women and young adults (especially 25-34 year olds) are relatively less trusting in people, along with people in single parent families, those without University degrees, renters and, perhaps above all, One Nation supporters. In 2026, 27% of One Nation supporters said that people generally can be trusted, less than half that of Labor voters (54%) and substantially less than Coalition (48%) and Greens (49%) voters.

Participation is highest among 18-24 year olds (54%) and those aged 65 years and over (52%) and relatively lower among people in key working ages (44-47% among ages 25-64). Adults aged 25-34 years are also more likely to be worried about becoming a victim of crime in their local area (61% are not worried) and less likely to agree that neighbours get on well (75%). It is nevertheless striking in this digital age that at least three-quarters of people in each age group believe their neighbours get on well together, including 78% of 18-24 year olds. Likewise, 79% of 18-24 year olds and 73% of 25-34 year olds agree or strongly agree that their neighbours are willing to help each other.

Figure 36. Indicators of trust, safety, neighbourhood cohesion and participation for sociodemographic groups, 2026



Note: Some categories, e.g. Tasmania, not shown due to small sample sizes and wide ranges of uncertainty. Voting is based on who people would vote for if there were an election today. Margins of error are provided in the Technical Report.

The importance of communities for social cohesion

It is striking that across all indicators in Figure 36, One Nation supporters are less trusting, less active in their communities, more worried about being a victim of crime and less likely to believe that neighbours from different backgrounds get on well together. Indeed, combining all of our indicators of neighbourhood cohesion, One Nation voters are the least likely to feel connected within their neighbourhoods and have reported the largest decline in the last two years. At the same and else shown elsewhere in this report, One Nation supporters are increasingly distrustful of government and people generally and less accepting of differences and diversity.

This gives rise to the potential that the connections and engagement that are formed and maintained at local levels potentially help to support national-level social cohesion. Local and neighbourhood connections and cohesion in particular potentially help to support individuals through challenging and difficult times and perhaps help to guard against deeper political polarisation and division while supporting individual wellbeing.

We demonstrate this with a regression model that predicts life satisfaction, national pride and belonging, trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity. Life satisfaction is measured from a survey question that asks people to rate their life satisfaction on a scale from 0 to 10. National pride and belonging, trust in institutions and support for multiculturalism are measured by combining responses to multiple survey questions. We transform these variables so they all range from 0 to 100, allowing for easy comparison of results. In the regression models, we predict these for different levels of financial wellbeing[49] and neighbourhood cohesion[85], two other variables that we create from responses to multiple survey questions.

We also control or take into account a range of other personal and local characteristics including people's age, gender, education, household composition, housing tenure, immigration history, their self-rated health, whether they have a disability and the level of socioeconomic disadvantage in their postcode. While we cannot be certain from our results that financial wellbeing and neighbourhood cohesion are underlying causes of life satisfaction, belonging, trust and support for immigrant diversity, we can say that the relationships we measure cannot be explained by these other characteristics.

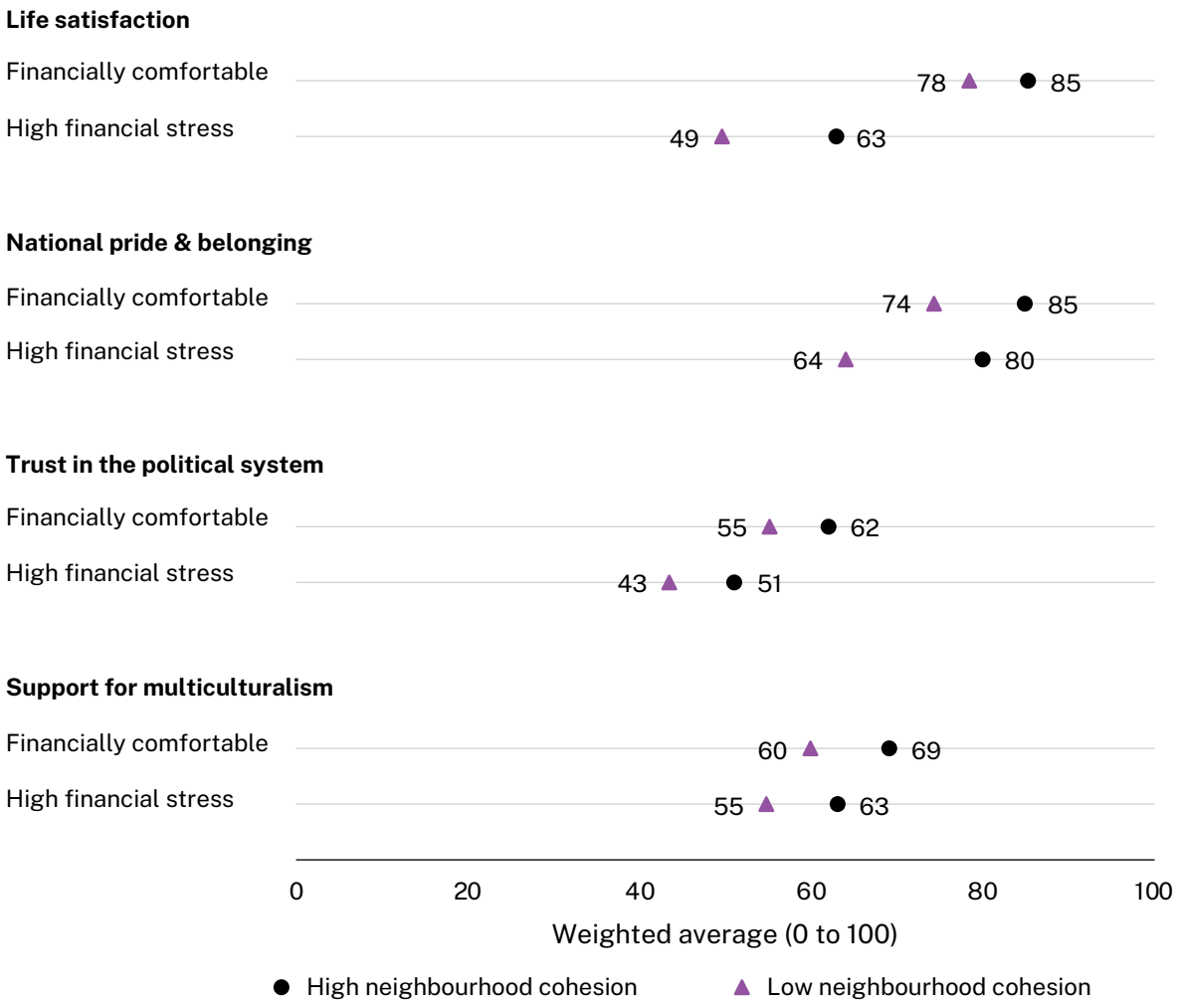
The results are shown in Figure 37. People who perceive high cohesion in their neighbourhoods (defined as neighbourhood cohesion scores in the top 10% of all scores) have substantially higher average life satisfaction, national pride and belonging, trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity, both in cases where they are highly financially comfortable and experiencing high financial stress. Average trust in institutions scores among people experiencing high financial stress, for example, are 51 for people in high cohesion neighbourhoods, compared with 43 in low cohesion neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood cohesion potentially has a particularly protective effect against financial stress in terms of life satisfaction and national pride and belonging. We predict that financial stress is associated with a 29 point reduction in average life satisfaction in low cohesion neighbourhoods (from 78 to 49) compared with an 22 point reduction in high cohesion neighbourhoods (from 85 to 63). Similarly, financial stress is associated with a 10 point reduction in national pride and belonging in low cohesion neighbourhoods (from 74 to 64) but only a five point change in high cohesion neighbourhoods (from 85 to 80). This suggests that the potential detrimental effect of financial stress on life satisfaction and belonging is considerably weaker in highly cohesive neighbourhoods, suggesting the bonds between people in local communities may protect against financial stress both at personal levels and for overall social cohesion.

Evidence of this protective effect is less pronounced for trust in institutions and support for multiculturalism. It remains the case though that people in highly cohesive neighbourhoods have substantially greater trust in institutions and support for immigrant diversity.

High neighbourhood cohesion, for example, is associated with an 8-9 point increase in average support for immigrant diversity among people both for those who are financially comfortable and those experiencing high financial stress.

Figure 37. Predicted life satisfaction, belonging, institutional trust and support for immigrant diversity by financial wellbeing and levels of neighbourhood cohesion



Notes: Life satisfaction is measured from a question that asks respondents to rate their life satisfaction on a scale from zero to ten that is then re-scaled to range from zero to 100. National pride and belonging, trust in institutions, support for multiculturalism, financial wellbeing and neighbourhood cohesion are measured by combining multiple survey questions. See notes 48, 49, 51, 52 and 85. Regression results are provided in the Technical Report. High neighbourhood cohesion and high financial stress are defined as scores in the highest 10% of scores. Low neighbourhood cohesion and financially comfortable are defined as scores in the lowest 10%.

Community connections are resilient and vital to national social cohesion – but in need of continual support

Communities are at the coalface of social cohesion in providing the environment for daily social interaction, connection and participation and providing a basis for belonging, acceptance and trust in people. In this way, communities potentially help to guard against the effects of crises and conflict on wellbeing at a personal level and social cohesion at a national level. While it is difficult to prove conclusively, this continues to be the case – at least on the available evidence – in Australia today. Neighbourhood connection and cohesion continue to be resilient in 2026, one of the few unquestionably positive points to emerge from this year's study. And although increasingly isolated among mostly bad news, the strength of neighbourhood connection this year remains related to wellbeing, belonging, trust and acceptance and, if nothing else, may be helping to prevent deeper decline and division in these areas. That said though, general trust in people is under pressure if not weakening, while active participation in social and community life appears less common than it was 16 years ago. These trends sit alongside others recorded in the Mapping Social Cohesion study and other sources, including declining happiness and social connection, suggesting that communities continue to be relevant and important – though also vulnerable and not to be taken for granted or treated as the only resource to underpin national social cohesion.

Migrant experiences

In a world divided over immigration, the attitudes and actions of people for and against immigration have taken centre stage. The experiences of migrants through this tumult have not been so prominent. In a country like Australia though where almost one-in-three people are overseas-born[86] and one-half have at least one overseas-born parent[87], such experiences and their personal and social impacts, including racism and discrimination, are at least as important to social cohesion as wider debate and division.

The history of the Mapping Social Cohesion study suggests that overseas-born Australians contribute positively to social cohesion overall. The overseas-born are at least as likely as the Australian-born on average to trust people and governments, to have a strong sense of social justice, to be happy and, perhaps unsurprisingly, to be accepting of differences and diversity. This is not a particularly uncommon or unusual finding, with international research suggesting that immigrants typically have positive evaluations of their new countries on account of their often high skills and education, their choice to immigrate and their ability to relate experiences in their new countries with experiences in their places of birth.[88]

Overseas-born Australians appear highly resilient, though racism, mistreatment and difficult experiences appear detrimental to their wellbeing and contribution to social cohesion. Immigrants typically face personal and social challenges in establishing a sense of belonging in new countries, which is often aided by time, education and social and economic success – though in ways that can also expose them to higher levels of perceived discrimination and mistreatment.[89] Discrimination and racism, in turn, appear to weigh heavily on immigrants' sense of belonging and trust. Research using the Mapping Social Cohesion dataset suggests that immigrant trust in Australia deteriorates over time and in response to unfair and inequitable treatment, including that which was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the current period of heightened opposition to immigration and anti-immigrant sentiment.[90] Such experiences and their potential implications for social cohesion are the subject of this chapter.

Discrimination remains common

Across the whole population, almost one-in-six (16%) people in 2026 said they experienced discrimination on the basis of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months. As shown in Figure 38, this proportion has been reasonably consistent in recent years, shifting between 16% and 19% since 2018.

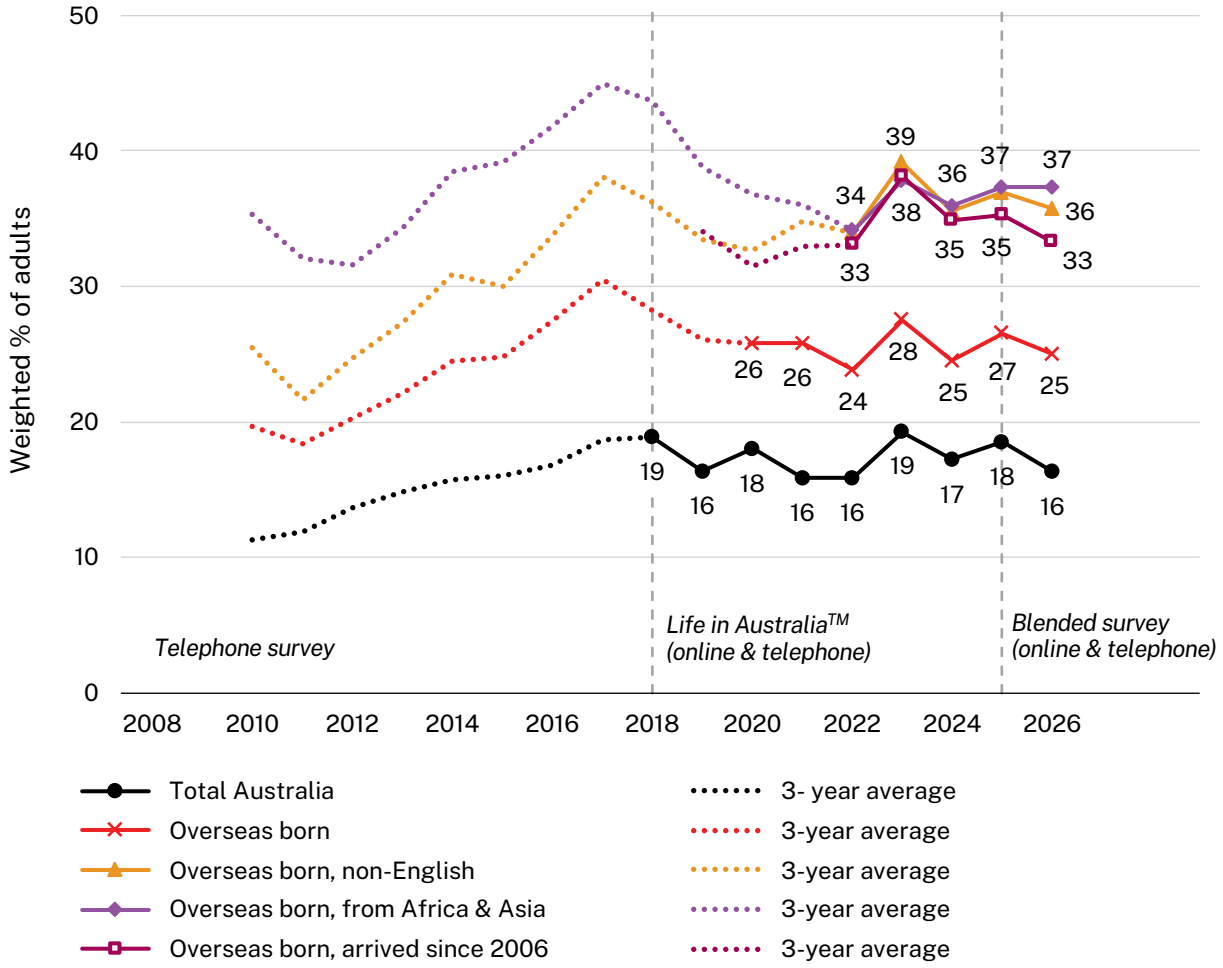
Predictably, discrimination is substantially more common among people who immigrated to Australia and particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Of all people who were born overseas and immigrated to Australia, one-in-four (25%) report experiencing discrimination, a figure that rises to 33% among people who have immigrated in the last 20 years, 36% among people from non-English speaking backgrounds (defined where a person reports their first language as a language other than English) and 37% among people born across Asia and Africa.

Reported discrimination has been reasonably consistent in recent years across different groups. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia associated with the conflict in Gaza and the Middle East and the recent rise in anti-immigration sentiment, we are yet to observe a notable increase in reports of discrimination. As shown in Figure 38, between 30% and 40% of overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking and African and Asian backgrounds since 2018 have consistently reported experiencing discrimination in the prior 12 months. So while reported discrimination on the survey has not increased, it remains very common.

Discrimination appears to be more common now than in the early 2010s. This is also shown in Figure 38. In the early years of the survey, there often was not a large number of survey respondents in different groups and year-to-year estimates fluctuated. We create average estimates of discrimination over three-year periods to smooth out these fluctuations in Figure 38 – for example, the earliest estimates for 2010 are calculated by taking average estimates from 2009, 2010 and 2011. In doing so, while also adjusting for the shift to the mostly online survey in 2018, we estimate that 20-25% of overseas-born Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds reported discrimination in the early 2010s, compared with 36% in 2026.

The relative stability of reported discrimination in recent years is not to say that discrimination and mistreatment have not become more common in specific communities or that they have not become qualitatively worse. While the Mapping Social Cohesion survey is a large nationally representative survey, we do not have enough respondents in specific communities, such as Muslim and Jewish Australian communities, to provide reliable estimates of the discrimination they have faced over time, nor can the survey dig deeply into their lived experiences. For this reason, the Mapping Social Cohesion survey complements and should not be seen to contradict or replace the need for in-depth information from within communities.

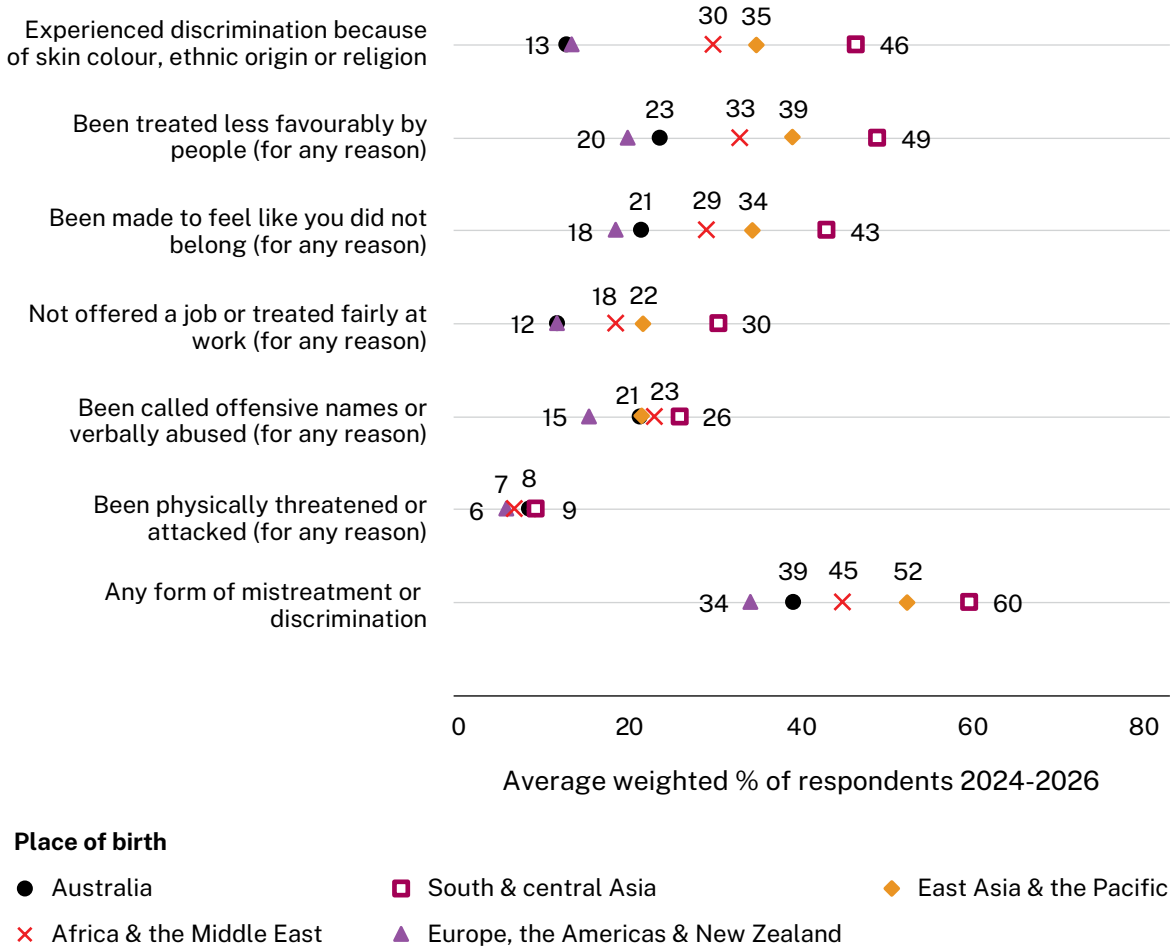
Figure 38. ‘Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the last 12 months?’ Weighted % of adults who have experienced discrimination by immigration characteristics, 2007–2026



Notes: Data points for individual years are shown where we have a large enough number of respondents, otherwise we take an average of three years of data points (e.g. the average of 2009, 2010 and 2011). The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre’s probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel. Estimates have been adjusted to remove the effects of these changes. ‘Non-English’ refers to people whose first language is not English.

With the growth of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey in recent years and the additional surveys performed in migrant communities, we can though say more about the current experiences of people who have immigrated to Australia from different regions of the world. In Figure 39, we report estimates of discrimination and different types of mistreatment directed at people based on the region of the world they were born. Discrimination is specifically on the basis of skin colour, ethnic origin or religion, while the other forms of mistreatment can be for any reason. To smooth out random year-to-year volatility, we calculate these estimates as averages over 2024, 2025 and 2026.

Figure 39. Experiences of discrimination and mistreatment in the previous 12 months by place of birth, average weighted proportions, 2024–2026



Notes: average weighted proportions are estimated by calculating values in 2024, 2025 and 2026 and taking the average over all years.

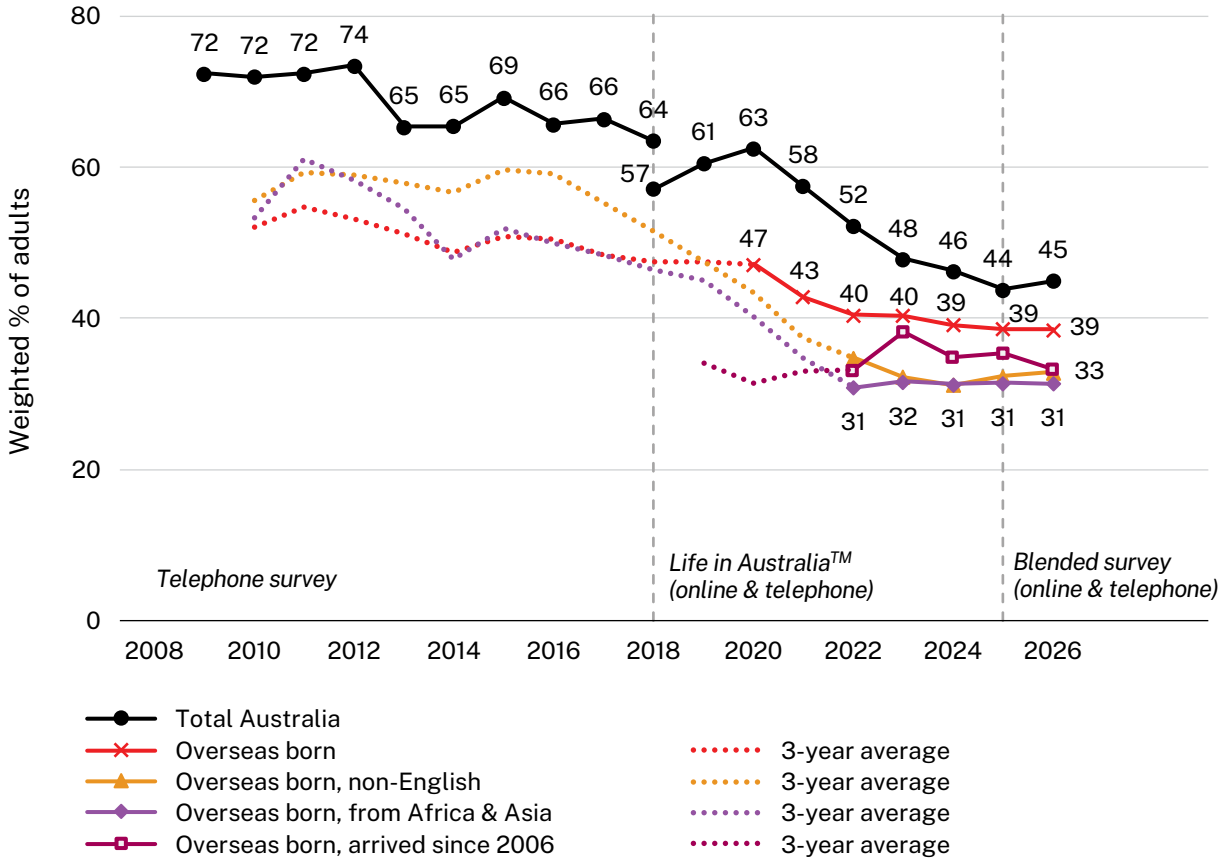
The results reinforce how common discrimination and mistreatment is for people from Asian and African backgrounds. For people born in south and central Asia, including India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal, almost one-half consistently report experiencing discrimination in the previous 12 months (an average of 46% in 2024–2026). A similar proportion (49%) said they were treated less favourably by people, 43% said they were made to feel as if they did not belong, 30% were not offered a job or treated fairly at work, 26% were called offensive names or verbally abused and 9% were physically threatened or attacked in the past 12 months.

Discrimination and mistreatment are likewise more common among those born in East Asia and the Pacific (including China, Vietnam, Malaysia and Fiji, but excluding New Zealand) and Africa and the Middle East (including South Africa, Iran, Israel and Palestine). As shown in Figure 39, 30–35% of people born in these regions reported experiencing discrimination in the previous 12 months in 2024–2026 and 45–52% experienced discrimination or mistreatment.

While these forms of mistreatment can be for any reason, not just racial, ethnic or religious, they are all more likely to be reported – and in many cases, substantially so – by people born in south and central Asia than they are by people born in Australia, Europe, the Americas or New Zealand. Overall, 60% of people from south and central Asia reported some form of discrimination or mistreatment in just the last 12 months, compared with 34% of those born in Europe, north or south America or New Zealand and 39% of the Australian-born.

Patterns of belonging among overseas-born Australians mirror those for discrimination. As shown in Figure 40, 39% of overseas-born adults report a great sense of belonging in Australia, compared with 45% of the Australian-born. This falls to 33% of overseas-born adults from non-English speaking backgrounds and those immigrating since 2006 and 31% of those born across Asia and Africa. Although these proportions have been reasonably stable since 2022, they declined substantially in the five to ten years prior to that (see Figure 40).

Figure 40. ‘To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia’, weighted % of adults who say ‘to a great extent’ by immigration characteristics, 2009–2026

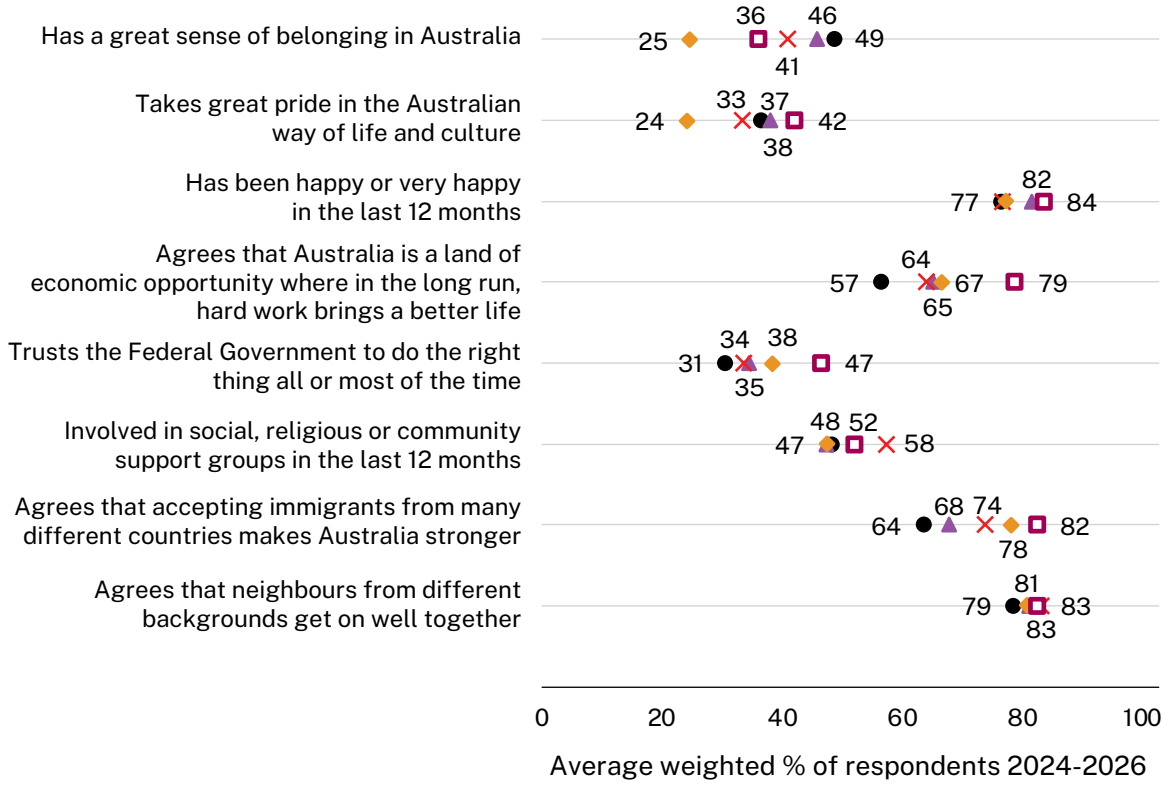


Notes: Data points for individual years are shown where we have a large enough number of respondents, otherwise we take an average of three years of data points (e.g. the average of 2009, 2010 and 2011). The Mapping Social Cohesion survey was administered as a telephone survey between 2007 and 2017, before it transitioned to an online and telephone survey administered to the Social Research Centre’s probability panel, Life in Australia™ in 2018-2019. The blended surveys in 2025 and 2026 refer to additional surveys conducted with members of a non-probability panel. Estimates have been adjusted to remove the effects of these changes. ‘Non-English’ refers to people whose first language is not English.

Despite discrimination and a weaker sense of belonging, overseas-born Australians overall have a stronger sense of social cohesion across most domains. Across 2024-2026, overseas-born Australians have been at least as likely as the Australian-born to take pride in the Australian way of life and culture, to participate in their communities and to get on well with their neighbours and more likely to believe in the fair go, to trust the Government and political system and to support diversity and Australian multiculturalism.

Estimates of social cohesion indicators in 2024-2026 are shown in Figure 41 by respondents' place of birth. Averaging over 2024, 2025 and 2026, 79% of those born in south and central Asia and 64-67% of those born in East Asia and the Pacific, Africa and the Middle East and Europe, the Americas and New Zealand agree that 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life', compared with 57% of those born in Australia. An average of almost one-half (47%) of those born in south and central Asia and 34-38% of other overseas-born Australians trust the Federal Government all or most of the time compared with 31% of the Australian-born. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 74-82% of those born across Asia, Africa and the Pacific agree that 'accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger', all higher than for the Australian-born population (64%). At least four-in-five (81-83%) meanwhile agree that their neighbours from different backgrounds get on well together, in line with if not slightly above the figure for the Australian born (79%). Overall then and despite the challenges faced in establishing a sense of place and belonging in Australia, people who have immigrated to the country provide a valuable source of connection and cohesion.

Figure 41. Indicators of social cohesion by place of birth, average weighted proportions, 2024-2026



Notes: average weighted proportions are estimated by calculating values in 2024, 2025 and 2026 and taking the average over all years.

The estimates in Figure 41 represent *average* experiences and perceptions of social cohesion across migrant groups and it is important to recognise that there are considerable differences and diversity across individuals. In our analysis, for example, we find that people's sense of belonging in Australia grows over time on average and the longer they have lived in the country, but that when they face discrimination, financial stress and social isolation – among the factors that we can measure - their sense of belonging is substantially weaker. We estimate that the probabilities of Asian and African born Australians having a great sense of belonging in Australia are approximately:

- 8 percentage points lower among those who report experiencing discrimination on the basis of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religion in the prior 12 months.
- 7 percentage points lower among those who describe their financial circumstances as struggling to pay their bills or 'poor' compared with those who are financially comfortable or prosperous and 3 points lower among those who say they are financially 'just getting along'.
- 17 percentage points lower among those who say they feel isolated from others often or some of the time compared with those who say they never feel isolated.

On the other hand, people are more likely to have a strong sense of national belonging where they have connections and social networks within their communities. The probabilities of Asian and African born Australians having a great sense of belonging in Australia are estimated to be:

- 4 percentage points higher among people who agree that their neighbours get on well together from different backgrounds.
- 3 percentage points higher among people who have been involved with social, religious or community support groups in the past 12 months.

Importantly, these estimates were calculated with regression models that take account of people's place of birth, when they arrived in Australia, their gender, education, marital status, when they were born, the year of the survey and whether they completed the survey online or by phone.[91] So while we cannot say for certain that discrimination, financial stress and social isolation cause a weaker sense of belonging or that neighbourhood cohesion and participation cause people to have a stronger sense of national belonging, they look to be strong associations that cannot be explained by other factors.

Migrants continue to contribute to Australia's social fabric – despite the challenging environment

Discrimination and racism remain as common problems in Australia. Although we have not detected an increase in discrimination in the current climate of hostility to immigrants, the fact that 45-60% of immigrants from different parts of Asia, Africa and the Pacific experience discrimination or mistreatment in just a 12 month period speaks to a longstanding problem and challenge. Although the Mapping Social Cohesion study does not currently have the capacity to assess discrimination and racism for First Nations Australians, we know from other sources that this is likewise a major ongoing challenge.[92] We also do not have the capacity to measure discrimination faced by particular communities, including Muslim and Jewish Australians and others impacted by global conflicts, though this again is very well illuminated by other sources.[93]

While difficult to conclusively prove, discrimination appears to be detrimental to the sense of connection and belonging immigrants have in Australia. This, coupled with the time and stability required to develop social and community roots for new arrivals helps to explain why overseas born Australians have a lesser sense of belonging. Even so, overseas born Australians are highly connected and engaged in their neighbourhoods and communities on average, they believe in the fair go and are accepting and trusting of others. There are lots of differences and diversity beneath these averages, but overall and despite the challenges, immigrants make an important contribution to the social and cultural fabric of Australia.

What Australians are holding on to

A qualitative examination of identity, values and visions of Australia's future

By Trish Prentice

By many accounts, the past year has been a challenging and uncertain period for Australians. Cost-of-living and housing pressures have affected everyday life, while geopolitical instability, changing international norms and rapid technological change have contributed to a sense that the future is becoming less predictable. Reports of increasing anxiety, declining happiness and growing pessimism suggest that these pressures are also affecting how Australians feel about their own lives and the direction in which the country is heading.

Periods of uncertainty and rapid social change have long raised questions about social cohesion and about what holds societies together when established norms, institutions and ways of life appear to be under pressure. This chapter takes these questions as its starting point. Based on a qualitive study of 47 Australians, it explores what people believe it means to be Australian, the things individuals value about Australia and Australian life and which evoke a sense of national pride, how people are thinking about their personal and collective futures and their sense of connection to others. In doing so, this year's qualitative research seeks to understand not only the stress points that may be placing Australia's social cohesion under pressure, but also the protective factors that continue to provide a source of stability and strength.

Methodology and sample

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 47 individuals across Australia in July 2026 (the Discussion Guide can be found in the Technical Report (Part D)). Interviewees were drawn in almost equal numbers from metropolitan and regional areas and were categorised into three age groups: young people (18–30 years), individuals of prime working age (31–64 years), and individuals of retirement age (65 years and over). The sample included both men and women, as well as participants who reported voting for different political parties at the most recent federal election, with an approximately equal split in the sample between Labor and Greens voters, on the one hand, and individuals who voted for the Liberal, National or One Nation parties, on the other. Household income levels varied from less than $50,000 per year to over $200,000. Almost half the sample earned in the $50,000-$100,000 annual income bracket. No recruitment criteria or quotas were applied in relation to interviewees' ethnic background, religious or cultural identity. However, approximately three quarters of the interviewees were born in Australia, while a quarter were born overseas. Most individuals live in eastern states of Australia.

Interviews were conducted in-house by the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. Interviewees were recruited through a commercial recruitment agency with no connection to the Institute, who recruited, screened and selected all interviewees independently. To be eligible to participate, interviewees were required to be aged 18 years or over and to be Australian citizens. The Institute was given a first name and a summary of demographic details for each interviewee prior to their interview.

The subsections below summarise the main findings.

National identity - what does it mean to be Australian?

Typically, the interviewees described 'being Australian' as associated with certain interpersonal characteristics, a distinctive way of relating to others or attachment to a particular way of life. For most individuals, being Australian was not grounded in a particular ethnic or racial identity or formal citizenship, or associated with national symbols or traditions. This general sentiment was communicated by Interviewee 33:

> "It's not really a particular type of person. I think Australian is your continuing on of a tradition and of a culture that has evolved to be able to create the society we live in, based on values and a certain way of life that's encouraged.

(Prime working age group, regional Qld, Liberal voter[94])

Only five out of 47 interviewees referred to symbols or traditions associated with being Australian. These included Indigenous art, the Southern Cross tattoo (two interviewees), ANZAC Day, Australia Day, the Australian flag and bush dancing.

Instead, and almost universally, individuals described Australia's national identity as based upon a way of relating, a way of being (interpersonal qualities) and a quality of life.

A way of relating

Across the interviews, being Australian was defined in strongly relational terms. Interviewees described a characteristically Australian way of relating to others, grounded in friendliness, kindness and an attitude of welcome and acceptance.

For several interviewees, this way of relating was demonstrated in a willingness among Australians to interact with people they didn't know. For Interviewee 12, a young person from metropolitan NSW, being "pretty chill" and willing to "have a chat with a random stranger" while picking up a coffee was distinctly Australian. Another young person from regional Qld reflected similarly: "it really stands out to me how friendly we are and open, just willing to have a chat to people in the street." Such everyday interactions, reflected in these sentiments, were part of what Interviewee 12 described as Australia's "own unique way of being who we are socially."

Closely related to this was the view that Australians were generally considered accepting of others. For some interviewees, this way of relating involved treating others equally; for others, it meant making room for difference or not requiring everyone to be the same. As Interviewee 12 put it, "we're all Australian in our own weird, different way." Similarly, Interviewee 16 noted that Australia encourages "freedom to be who you are." Several interviewees remarked that Australia had an open culture, one that was accommodating, in that it was "flexible" and "constantly evolving" (13). Acceptance often extended beyond simple tolerance of difference to deeper relationships, including a willingness to "take people on as mates" (31).

Another way of relating that emerged prominently in the interviews was that Australians were willing to help and support others. Interviewees said that Australians generally looked out for each other, were happy to help and were willing to extend effort for someone else. Support, the interviewees commented, typically extended beyond immediate family and friends to the wider community and also to strangers. Times of adversity often brought out this characteristic in Australians and people could be seen rallying around others to lend a hand or to "put a smile" on their faces (8). Difficult circumstances were seen by the interviewees to bring out underlying community strength and unity in Australians, characterised by mutual support and generosity. These comments are typical of the sentiments expressed:

> "a lot of us know that when we have to stand up, we will, there's this Australianness where we can get together...

(Prime working age group, regional Qld, One Nation voter)

> "People want to help... That feeling of coming together when times are tough.

(Retiree, metropolitan Qld, Greens voter)

> "People looking after each other, supporting each other through all sorts of trials, tribulations, floods and bushfires and good things as well.

(Retiree, regional NSW, Liberal voter)

Several interviewees elaborated with examples of when they had seen this way of relating, including during bushfires and floods, in the wake of misfortune or accidents and, most recently, in the aftermath of the Bondi massacre. One interviewee reflected on what she had observed nationally and in her own state:

> "I mean, the lady that was attacked by the shark in New South Wales, I mean, the money they raised, like over half a million dollars to help her and her family. There was something here in Brisbane a couple of weeks ago. There was a motorcycle and a car ran over the motorcycle and all these people stopped and they got out of the car, all these men, and they lifted the car up to get the motorcycle and save the man's life by the time the emergency people got there. I don't think I would have heard of that happening in days gone by and it was just incredible. And he was just forever indebted to them for saving his life.

(Retiree, metropolitan Qld, Greens voter)

Support and assistance were not just seen as acts reserved for the most adverse circumstances. Australians were depicted as generous in their daily lives as well:

> "here we've got a really healthy blood bank where you get very generous people going in and just giving blood or plasma or whatever just because they can. It's not because you get paid... It really represents how generous Australians are.

(Young person, regional Qld, Greens voter)

A quality of life

Another element of being Australian, for many interviewees, consisted of enjoyment of a particular way of life. For these interviewees, being Australian was associated with favourable living conditions. They described being Australian as sharing in a prosperous and developed country that offered a high standard of living, opportunities, choices and services. Peace, freedom and safety were underpinned by strong institutions that supported individuals and provided a safety net for those struggling. Australia, in contrast to elsewhere, stood apart, and for this reason many interviewees connected their description of Australia to a profound sense of gratitude. They had 'won the lottery' by being born here or being able to live here, and they felt fortunate to share in the 'luck' of the 'lucky country.' Interviewees 42 and 11 expressed their feelings about Australia in this way:

> "We're fortunate that we don't live in a place like Israel or Ukraine. How lucky are we? And when people grizzle about some minor thing, I'll say the sun is coming up tomorrow. We can go and get a coffee when we want it. We haven't got bombs dropping on us...

(Retiree, regional Victoria, Labor voter)

> "I'm grateful for what we have here. We are sheltered in some way and for that I enjoy the peace that we have. I am grateful for the fact that there is support if we need it for health [or] hospitals... You've got avenues that in this country help the needy.

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Labor voter)

At the same time, Australia's way of life was not just described in material terms. It involved appreciation of its favourable climate and natural beauty and connection to the land. Interviewees described Australian life as simple, relaxed and carefree, characterised by sunshine and time outdoors. Swimming, surfing, barbeques and camping were elements of Australian life, facilitated by a work-life balance where Australians worked hard but still prioritised having "a good time" (21).

A way of being

Finally, the interviewees described being Australian as having particular interpersonal qualities. The most frequently mentioned quality centred around being laid back, down to earth and not taking themselves too seriously. These descriptions conveyed the sense that Australians were relaxed, unpretentious and approachable. Interviewees expressed it in this way:

> "We don't sort of blow our own trumpet, or most of us don't.

(Retiree, regional NSW, National Party voter)

> "You know, it means, we have this laid-back attitude. We do simple things. It's a simple life... They don't overthink things, they're not extreme, they're not over the top, they're just kind of relaxed...

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

Closely connected to this was a characteristically Australian sense of humour. Interviewees described this as self-deprecating and reciprocal, in that Australians could "give" as much as they "got" (49). For some interviewees, a sense of humour was also an important tool for managing times of adversity. Interviewee 40 spoke about how she observed it during the cyclone season in northern Australia:

> we can get together and still make light of a heavy situation... I do love that about Australians. We have a pretty wicked sense of humour.

(Prime working age group, regional Qld, One Nation voter)

Australians were also regarded as generally optimistic and resilient, qualities that some interviewees associated with an 'Australian spirit.' This encapsulated the idea that Australians were able to face difficulty and hardship with positivity and cope with adversity. Interviewee 40 used the well-known expression 'she'll be right' to describe this sentiment. Interviewee 38 described Australians' resilience in this way:

> Australians have the ability on the whole to just pick themselves up off the ground and say, okay, moving on. You know, I think that kind of identifies us

(Retiree, metropolitan Qld, Liberal voter).

Other themes

An additional theme that arose frequently in the discussion about what it means to be Australian was the notion of 'a fair go.' For many interviewees, fairness was closely associated with Australia's and Australians' identity. In general, when interviewees spoke about fairness, they described the view that everyone should be given a genuine chance to make something of their life, regardless of their background. However, the interviewees differed in what they understood fairness to require in practice.

For several interviewees, a fair go was associated with equality of opportunity: everyone should have the opportunity to improve their circumstances to build a future for themselves through their own efforts. Interviewee 22's response is illustrative of this perspective:

> And the things that come to mind are the traditional fair go values, having a crack, giving everyone a fair go. And I still believe in that and still believe that you have the ability in this country to make whatever you want to make out of your life and your future. Having come from a migrant family and from nothing, to where we're at now, nothing was given to us, nothing was handed to us. It was just off your own bat.

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

Other interviewees understood fairness as fair treatment regardless of class, gender or country of birth; in other words, as non-discrimination. For other individuals, a fair go involved not leaving people to succeed on their own but providing additional support as necessary. As Interviewee 14 phrased it, "giving people a leg up" when they needed it.

The question of whether being Australian is associated with a particular racial or cultural identity also came up in some interviews. Just prior to the fieldwork period Pauline Hanson had given her address at the Press Club where she asserted that Australia must "exist as a monocultural society."[95] A number of interviewees took the opportunity to frame their response to the question of what it means to be Australian in the context of that claim. All the interviewees who brought this up rejected the notion that Australia is (or could ever be) a monoculture. Their responses, instead, recognised and affirmed Australia's cultural diversity. Interviewee 36's comment reflects this sentiment:

> I don't believe there's, as Pauline Hanson said, I don't believe there's a typical Australian... We've never been really monoculture. We've always been a country of immigrants.

(Retiree, regional VIC, Labor voter)

A smaller cohort of interviewees provided qualified responses. While acknowledging that Australia had a diverse cultural identity, they argued that being Australian came with some expectation of adaptation or integration into Australian society. Interviewee 10, for instance, expressed the view that being Australian required some degree of cultural adaptation. For him, this had been the expectation placed on his father when he migrated to Australia. His father had maintained his cultural identity but had also adopted aspects of the Australian way of life. Similar sentiments were expressed by other interviewees who stated that their own experience had been one of adaption, where they had retained some aspects of their original cultural or religious identity but had also taken on elements of an Australian identity as well. They consequently expressed the expectation that other migrants should do the same. For other interviewees, the expectation of adaptation was framed in terms of values or behaviours. They did not support or want to see ways of behaving or living that they perceived to be incompatible with the Australian way of life.

Australia's perceived strengths – what are Australians proud of?

The majority of interviewees expressed a sense of pride in being Australian. For the interviewees that did not feel proud, their hesitancy was related to the word pride, which some felt carried nationalistic connotations, like "beating my chest and saluting the flag or whatever" (17). Instead, these interviewees preferred to express their sentiments as being happy or grateful to live in Australia.

Having been asked whether they felt a sense of pride in being Australian, the interviewees were asked to reflect on where that sense of pride came from. The most common responses were pride in Australia's quality of life, in Australia's institutions and in Australia's rights and freedoms.

Australia's quality of life

For almost half the interviewees, their sense of pride stemmed from the quality of life that Australia afforded them. This included conditions like safety and economic opportunities, as well as an appreciation of the physical environment and natural beauty of the country. A strong thread running through these responses was a comparison with other countries. The interviewees often described Australian conditions in relative terms: other countries were perceived to be less safe, more impacted by conflict or offering fewer educational, employment or material opportunities.

Australia's institutions, rights and opportunities

Closely connected to recognition of Australia's quality of life was mention of Australia's institutions. When interviewees said they felt proud of Australia's quality of life or lifestyle, frequent mention was also made of the institutions that underpinned opportunities for progression, a safety net during times of difficulty or the rights and freedom that individuals enjoyed. Most frequently, the interviewees expressed pride in Australia's healthcare and education system (particularly free public education) and democracy. They also mentioned there were safety nets around housing and food if people need them (although, at the same time, recognising shortages or difficulties in accessing them), and that Australia afforded rights, freedoms and openness. Interviewee 10 expressed it in this way:

> I think this is the best country in the world to be born in. I mean, I've got free public healthcare, I had free public education... I went to uni for, well, not for free, I went to uni, the government paid for it, and I paid them back for it. I think every time I hear about stories about things happening in other countries, I just go, well, that wouldn't happen here. And I'm like, that makes me really happy.

(Young person, metropolitan VIC, Labor voter)

Interviewee 49, who had not been born in Australia, expressed a similar sentiment:

> Like I said before, I feel incredibly lucky to be able to come to work and be safe. And I think we've got an amazing lifestyle. And the governments, they're here to keep us safe. We've got things in place.

(Young person, regional NSW, Liberal voter)

Moments of national pride – when do Australians feel most connected to their national identity?

Interviewees were also asked about the moments when they felt a sense of pride in being Australian. Most frequently this was felt during sporting events or in sporting achievements, when travelling overseas, when providing (or hearing about the provision of) assistance to others and during national events or on commemorative occasions.

Sporting events or achievements

The most frequently mentioned context where interviewees felt a sense of national pride was in sporting events. A large cohort of interviewees expressed feeling proud of their country while watching, attending or speaking about Australia's sporting achievements. Underpinning this sense of pride were several elements. One was a sense of pride in what Australia was able to achieve. As a relatively small country, interviewees said Australia was seen to 'punch above its weight' in several sports, and this evoked a particular sense of pride in some individuals. Another element was observing sportsmanship, whereby Australian athletes or sportsmen/women demonstrated qualities like fairness or mateship on the field that also evoked a sense of pride. These were values that resonated with the interviewees or which they connected to Australian identity, and observing these in their team made them feel a sense of pride. The positive behaviour of Australian sports fans at matches also evoked similar feelings.

Another element connected to this sense of pride was the collective experience of being together, with others, sharing in the experience of rallying together and vying for a particular outcome. The interviewees valued the sense of community and camaraderie that this evoked and in this environment, they felt more connected to their national identity. Two responses are illustrative of this sentiment:

> Australia excelling at the international level when our swimming team are killing it. At the Olympics, they always put up the ladder, the tally based on population, and Australia does very well. ...But I do feel a sense of pride when that happens, yeah.

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

> I guess maybe like if it's an event where I'm seeing what other Aussies do and I think like, oh, I'm so, you know, happy for that person, whether it's like Olympics or sport or whatever it is that I think like, oh, you know, glad to see Australians up on that podium with other places and representing us in that sense.

(Young person, regional Qld, One Nation voter)

Travelling overseas

Another context where the interviewees particularly experienced a sense of pride in Australia was when travelling overseas. Being away from home brought their Australian identity into sharper focus, especially when being asked where they were from, when they met other Australians abroad or when they encountered other peoples' positive perceptions of Australia. Interviewee 43's response was typical of this sentiment. She commented that she didn't feel particularly "nationalistic" at home but travelling gave her a reason to "play up" her "Australianisms."

Travel also provided an opportunity for individuals to reflect on what they valued about Australia. For some interviewees, encountering different societies and circumstances made them more conscious of the opportunities, freedoms and way of life they experienced at home. For others, being overseas prompted them to reflect on the values their country represented:

> I think I'm a very proud Australian and you carry that with you when you go overseas and people ask you where you're from and you're very proud to say that you're Australian. And I like to think you carry the Australian values with you and what they might be is just I think as a nation, we are kind people...

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

Providing assistance to others

Being involved in or hearing about instances when people had come together to support others during times of need were also moments when individuals felt a sense of national pride. This sentiment strongly resonated with many interviewees because, for them, it was a tangible representation of what they perceived to be an Australian quality. Their pride came from seeing Australians live out values that they believed characterised the nation. For instance, Interviewee 52 remarked that these actions reflected the sense of coming from a fair and welcoming place that cares about others:

> I feel like, okay, I come from somewhere that cares about other people and that really shapes who we are as people.

(Young person, regional Qld, One Nation voter)

This same sense of pride was also felt when interviewees saw such qualities represented in government actions:

> So, it might seem a bit of a funny thing to go back to, but when they had that tsunami in 2006, those sorts of things when we've helped other countries... I know we've, like, helped a lot of countries in the Pacific, that's when I'm really happy that, you know, Australia's done a really good job.... So, that's sort of more when I've been proud that we've done that sort of work and helped them. We haven't had any of those things that were really, really bad... you know, something that's a total, absolute disaster. But we probably will one day. And I think when that happens, Australians will help. You know, I'm sure they will

(Retiree, ACT, Greens voter)

National events/commemorative occasions

Another context where interviewees felt a sense of national pride was during national events or commemorative occasions like ANZAC Day, Australia Day, Order of Australia awards and during citizenship ceremonies. For a cohort of interviewees, these occasions helped them to feel particularly connected to their national identity. However, pride came not only from the event itself but from the sense of belonging it evoked to the nation. It helped them feel connected to others or to a shared past, or it gave them a sense of coming together with others around a common purpose, such as recognising service or sacrifice.

ANZAC Day was the most frequently mentioned occasion in this group of responses, along with military service. These were circumstances, for the interviewees, that represented hardship, sacrifice and putting the community first. Interviewee 50 elaborated that for him, military service made him feel proud because it was associated with "being part of a diverse group of people" who were "working towards a common cause," united by the purpose of serving Australia. Singing the national anthem and Australia Day celebrations similarly provided some interviewees with an occasion to come together and just celebrate being Australian.

When national ideals are challenged – where is Australia perceived as falling short?

The interviewees were also asked to reflect on aspects of Australia or Australian life they felt were negative and on occasions when they had felt less proud to be Australian.

One of the strongest themes in the interview responses was the perceived gap between what the interviewees saw as qualities or characteristics associated with Australia and what they saw being lived out in practice. These interviewees' concerns and disappointments centred around fairness, acceptance and equality.

For instance, Interviewee 16, a young person from regional New South Wales, mentioned that one of the negative qualities of Australia, for him, was the growing inequality in the country. Similar sentiments were communicated by other interviewees living in metropolitan areas who echoed similar points of view but added their expectation that there should be fairness in Australia. For Interviewee 3, a young person from metropolitan Victoria, the understanding that "everyone got a fair go" was no longer a given, as it was when she was younger. This was something that made her anxious about her future. Interviewee 11, an individual from the prime working age group living in metropolitan NSW, saw inequality in government actions that were perceived to prioritise certain age group initiatives over support for others.

Another cohort of interviewees characterised the lack of acceptance of others as either a negative characteristic of Australia or as something that didn't make them feel proud to be Australian. These interviewees mentioned racism, negative views about other people, xenophobia, hatred or being "anti" towards different ethnic groups (9), "being mean" to others (30), not being "open" (43), the blaming of migrants and people not being as "tolerant as they could be to different groups" (33) as negative characteristics of Australia. Connected to this was disappointment about anti-immigration sentiment and the views of Pauline Hanson, for several interviewees, as well as observations of broader social division. For a number of interviewees, the Bondi massacre represented the epitome of this sentiment. Interviewee 12 explained that she was aghast that something like this could happen in Australia:

> "If I think back in terms of news, like when the Bondi attacks happened, I think there was a bit of moment where we all collectively were like, oh... you just kind of can't believe that this happened in Australia. I think there's bits of like, I wouldn't say you're not proud to be Australian, but there's definitely probably bits of a little bit of shame or shock. Like you can see it reported across the world and it's just like, oh my gosh, that happened in Australia... it was so targeted and so racially or religiously motivated, you just kind of can't help but feel a little bit of shame in terms of stuff like that.

(Young person, metropolitan NSW, Labor voter)

Another negative characteristic of Australia mentioned by interviewees, particularly those within the prime working age group but also by young people, was the cost of living. Interviewees typically described how expensive things were in Australia, including housing, petrol prices, interest rates and the price of groceries. Interviewee 25 noted the impact the cost of living was having on his day-to-day life and relationships:

> "Because all we do, all we do here is just work, work hard and go home, work hard and go home, work hard and go home. Like even my mates now, like I'm 25 and all my mates are like, I can't be bothered, man. I've got to go wake up early for work tomorrow and everyone's got bills coming out of their brain and it's just hard.

(Young person, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

Related to this was the sentiment, expressed by some interviewees, that the relationship between working hard and reward was no longer guaranteed. Interviewee 3 expressed it in this way:

> "And I think after graduating, I thought life was gonna look good. Yeah. And it's been pretty bleak, I suppose, to look to the future.... the cost of living and housing prices are just actually insane. Like I've done six years of tertiary education and I am struggling. And that makes no sense. And like affording property is just something that's really not on the cards for so many people, when not that long ago you could have just had a chill job and done that and it would have been fine.

(Young person, metropolitan Victoria, Greens voter)

A number of interviewees framed the high cost of living as an institutional failure, describing it as the government failing to "protect" or "provide" "for locals" (21), as failing to maintain a balance between supporting workers and providing social security (funded from the tax taken from those who are employed) or as taking actions that had directly contributed to inflation, resulting in cost of living pressures.

Other institutional concerns mentioned by interviewees included disappointment in the media (due to perceived biased reporting), in politicians, including political behaviour, a lack of action or will to address complex societal issues and a lack of transparency in decision-making, perceived failures of the justice system, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales, and perceived failure of the immigration system.

A final theme that arose in the responses was disappointment in or concern about how Australian society was functioning. For these interviewees, Australian society had or was changing, and they framed this as a negative quality of Australia or as something they were not proud of. Concerns centred around several issues. The most frequently mentioned was crime, including violent crime, organised crime, youth offences, violence against women and road rage. Interviewees felt that the country was less safe than it had been previously. Two interviewees expressed this sentiment in this way:

> "Yeah, the road rage, the anger, the shootings, the just being mean and when you can see someone in need... So you have to really watch out. You've got to lock everything up. You can't trust anymore. So it's not like what we were when we were growing up.

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

> "... and currently the wave of crime... very violent crime that seems to be sweeping parts of Australia. In Victoria, in particular, you know people being violently assaulted with machetes and knives and things like that. Yeah that doesn't make me very proud. You know there is quite a bit of fear, actually

(Retiree, NSW, Labor voter)

Several interviewees felt a sense of shame that these images portraying Australia were being communicated overseas. Others were concerned about what had changed in Australian society for such acts to become more frequent:

> "Yeah, the things that worry me at the moment, there's all this violence with teenagers. And I used to think it was in your city, in Melbourne, you see... and then you see the same thing happening in Brisbane, then something happens in Sydney. So I worry about the teenage crime, and I really worry about where are these kids' parents? Some of these teenagers, you know, the police chase them in a car and they crash and they're 13-year-old kids driving these cars.

(Retiree, metropolitan NSW, Labor voter)

Another area of concern was a perceived loss of common identity. This cohort of interviewees felt Australia had lost a sense of shared values or shared identity due to increases in cultural diversity. Interviewee 14 described it in this way:

> And, and in this sense, this is what Pauline talks about, the monocultural aspect. She's not, she's not entirely wrong. And this is one of the problems, why you think to yourself like, okay, there's so many people here, like what the hell is Australia anymore? Because it doesn't seem like this group has an identity. It seems like all these people here, they put another country first and at times don't even put Australia second.

(Prime working age, metropolitan NSW, Greens voter)

A final cohort of interviewees expressed concern about a perceived deterioration in social relations and expressed disappointment in what they saw to be an increase in social tension, more anger in society and less interpersonal trust.

What are Australians holding on to - visions of Australia's future

The interviewees were asked to reflect on what kind of society they hoped Australia would be in the future, and on the values and qualities they would like to see present in Australian society then. Here, the interviewees were free to mention qualities and values they currently saw in Australian society that they wanted to continue, as well as those they felt were absent or should be more present going forward. Both responses are collated below.

The most frequently mentioned quality was acceptance. The interviewees wanted to see Australian society characterised by welcome and the acceptance of other cultures, sexualities and genders. Individuals desired to see harmony between different groups, openness to others and the celebration of difference. Several interviewees connected more acceptance to greater social harmony, which in turn would lead to, from their point of view, better public safety. Interviewee 24 expressed the sentiment in this way:

> And like, I think people's feelings are important and that's one of the number one factors for quality of life. If people are like happy and treating each other well and I think, when we embrace other cultures and people feel safe in this country, that's the really key thing for both Australians and people who migrate here. So yeah, I think that it's important for people to feel like safe and accepted in this community. Yeah, and people will.

(Young person, metropolitan Victoria, Liberal voter)

However, for some interviewees, acceptance was framed as conditional upon integration. Integration meant different things for different interviewees, including the building of relationships outside of one's own cultural community, adherence to societal norms or laws, or respect for the Australian way of life. For others, it meant the equal protection of all groups in society, not just a focus on certain cultures or communities.

Another group of qualities frequently mentioned by interviewees in describing the society they hoped Australia would be were kindness, care, mateship and respect for others. These interviewees wanted to see a society characterised by greater concern for others and solidarity and empathy, expressed through everyday actions and interactions. They gave tangible examples of what this might look like, including showing good manners, checking on neighbours, offering help to those in need, respecting women and older people and resolving disagreements without resorting to abuse or violence. More broadly, this cohort envisaged a society where people looked beyond their own individual interests and placed greater emphasis on building community, caring for others and contributing to the common good. For interviewee 3, these individual acts were important because of their broader benefits for society:

> “Everybody should... we want to feel that we're all taking care of each other. And that's because that's like your community. I guess if you're thinking of a country and you're thinking of where you live and having ownership of and belonging to that place, we all should belong. We don't want to split that up. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel good to have a like a sectioned society, right? Like we all want to be doing good together

(Young person, metropolitan Victoria, Greens voter)

Fairness, financial opportunity and material security emerged as another important theme in interviewees' descriptions of the society they hoped Australia would be. This cohort of interviewees wanted Australia to be a country where wealth inequality was reduced, where people experiencing disadvantage were supported and where individuals had opportunities to work, pursue education and improve their circumstances. They also expressed the expectation that working hard should enable individuals to achieve a certain quality of life. Affordability, access to housing, education and healthcare, public services, employment opportunities and a reasonable cost of living were all connected to the interviewees' notions of fairness and equality. However, there was also some disagreement among the interviewees about how fairness and equality should be achieved, what these qualities looked like in practice, who should benefit from social support and on what basis, and on where the balance was between providing social support and taking personal responsibility for achievement and material security.

An envisioned future - what do we need to do to get there?

The interviewees were asked to reflect on what they thought needed to be done to create (or to maintain) the type of society they hoped Australia would be in the future. The interviewees responses centred around community-level actions, changes to public institutions or services and changes to political life and decision making.

Community-level actions

At a community level, individuals spoke of the need to foster a sense of belonging and welcome, as well as genuine acceptance of others and connection between different societal groups. Individuals felt that showing respect for others, manners, encouraging social interaction between different groups, proactive efforts to look after other people and the promotion of shared values or other commonalities between people would contribute to achieving this. Interviewee 5, from Darwin, expressed this sentiment in his explanation of what he hoped Australian society would be:

> Well, I hope that those good things about the Australian identity: mateship, camaraderie, being welcome. I hope they remain. Yeah, and I hope we can become a multicultural, not a monocultural, a multicultural society where everybody - I don't think it's idealistic to say live in harmony - but we have a sense of shared values, irrespective of your background, your origin, and your religion... That those things that make us and give us our common humanity are recognized and shared

(Retiree, metropolitan NT, Labor voter)

Related to this was the importance of maintaining or building a sense of local community, for several interviewees. This cohort of interviewees wanted to feel deeper and greater connection with others in the future Australian society they envisioned. Rural interviewees particularly emphasised the value of building relationships with people living nearby and of being involved in others' lives:

> I just want it to be more balanced in terms of not losing our Australian culture and all this friendliness... To be able to chat to your neighbour. Like here where we live, our neighbours just come and help out. If we're doing a job, they'll just offer, do you need some help carrying that? Or do you want to borrow my trailer? I just hope that the future of Australia is more like that, where people help each other, more like a community. Just talking to each other and just having some sort of connection or friendship to the people in your street is that something I see as the Australia that I would hope for the future. Because those kinds of things for me are the traditional Australian ways.

(Prime working age group, regional NSW, Liberal voter)

Several interviewees reflected that their ideal society was a "traditional" one or an Australia of the past, characterised by "family values" (21), where people felt more connected, life was less driven by consumption and there was less technology.

Several interviewees worried that different generational (i.e. young people vs older people) or cultural values would impede the development of connected communities in the future:

> “Yeah, I think it’s probably going to be more divided, actually go the other way. More people are coming in who sort of have different values to maybe the core Australian values as I remember them and keep to themselves or, I don’t know, they’re just, you know, different, just different. Everyone keeps to themselves, they don’t get to know their neighbours. It’s harder to make connections with people from other cultures. Not all cultures, not all people, but just with so much migration and so many different cultures coming in and making some suburbs really different. A different place to live. Yeah

(Prime working age group, regional NSW, Liberal voter)

Institutions and public services

Frequently, interviewees mentioned Australian institutions in their vision of what they hoped Australia to be. One in four interviewees mentioned the importance of education. For some, public education was a core Australian institution that represented the principle of equality. Individuals emphasised its importance as a tangible way of addressing disadvantage and preventing “alienation” caused by differing financial circumstances (5). For other interviewees, education represented a vehicle by which to achieve the kinds of societal changes they hoped to see. For these individuals, education represented an investment in people and they advocated, variously, for the teaching of acceptance of diversity, openness, knowledge of other cultures, community-mindedness, community contribution and values to create the kind of future society they wanted to see.

Like public education, there was strong support expressed for Australia’s health system, particularly Medicare. The interviewees perceived subsidised access to the medical system as a crucial Australian safety net, something that differentiated Australia from other countries. Typically, the interviewees valued not only what Medicare provided in material terms but what the provision of universal healthcare said about Australian values and priorities. At the same time, many interviewees acknowledged the public system was under strain and there were many crucial shortcomings. Still, the interviewees wanted to see public healthcare remain an important element of Australia’s future.

Social security was acknowledged as another important safety net by several interviewees. Although many individuals hadn’t needed to draw upon Centrelink payments or the like themselves, they saw them as an outworking of the principle of “looking after each other.” Interviewee 37 expressed it in this way:

> “...getting some help if you need it. Being able to get help from government organisations if you need it and having some security in your life, with certainty [that] if you need help with whatever it may be

(Retiree, regional NSW, Liberal voter)

Another theme to emerge in the interviewees’ responses was the issue of public safety. Individuals desired Australia to be a safe country in the future and they suggested there needed to be changes to the justice system and better law enforcement to achieve this. Several individuals advocated for being “tough on crime” (38), for appropriate penalties for violent criminal acts, especially for youth offenders, and better resourcing of police. Amongst these interviewees was a feeling that more had to be done to recognise the harmful repercussions of violence against individuals and communities and to protect public safety. Interviewee 6 expressed fear that things might “spiral out of control” if these issues were not addressed.

The final institutional change mentioned by interviewees concerned immigration. About a quarter of interviewees said that restricting migration was important and necessary for facilitating the kind of society they hoped Australia to be in the future. Individuals' concerns around immigration numbers were framed as related to housing shortages, pressure on infrastructure and what individuals perceived to be unfair or unnecessary access to social security payments, as well as attempts to meet skills shortages in Australia through immigration rather than supporting local training. Generally speaking, this cohort of interviewees wanted to see smaller numbers of migrants and more evident government population planning.

Political life and decision making

Interviewees also mentioned qualities they wanted to see reflected in Australia's political leadership and characterising political decision making. These interviewees expressed support for "bolder" or "stronger" political leadership, which meant, variously, Australia holding its own on the international stage and not being influenced by other powers, political initiatives that led to less reliance on other countries, political leadership that inspired cultural change in Australian society or which inspired hope towards the future or leadership that reflected long term thinking about what was in Australia's best interests. Interviewee 9 commented that he just wanted someone to inspire him:

> "We don't have any big leaders that we can aspire to and say, well, he can see that the world's going to be better, let's go along with him and work towards that. There's nobody holding up a torch to make that happen that I can see at the moment

(Retiree, metropolitan VIC, Labor voter).

Several interviewees wanted to see cohesion within political parties (rather than leadership challenges) and bipartisan support for "good initiatives," instead of opposition criticism for criticism's sake. Interviewee 22 expressed it in this way, drawing a connection between negative politics and Australia's future progress:

> "I hope that we have stronger leaders, sustainable leaders, that aren't being stabbed in the back and being ousted and being cut down to size, where we can have an opposition that supports the good, positive plans that those that are in power put forward, as opposed to trying to cut down everything that they do, and it just sets us back.

(Prime working age group, metropolitan NSW, Liberal voter)

Other qualities or acts the interviewees wanted to see in political life included transparency in political decision making, limitation on the powers and reach of large corporations and protection of the vulnerable.

Conclusion

This year's qualitative research gives us much to reflect upon. Many interviewees expressed disappointment about how Australian society is functioning and, as a result, concern about the future. However, the research also provides us with some positive insights to reflect upon.

The findings of this study suggest that Australians continue to share important understandings of what it means to be Australian and of the kind of society in which they want to live. These understandings are closely connected to the conditions that enable people to live well: positive interpersonal relationships, strong communities, social harmony and safety, fairness, strong institutions and opportunities for individuals and their children to improve their circumstances. At an everyday level, this was also reflected in a willingness to help others and a belief that people should not be left to suffer unnecessarily. The simple act of lending someone a trailer, checking on a neighbour or helping a stranger can therefore be understood as an everyday expression of a broader commitment to mutual support that interviewees wanted to see.

There was also a strong sense of gratitude for life in Australia. Interviewees recognised the comparatively high standard of living they enjoyed, alongside Australia's natural environment, lifestyle, freedoms, safety and institutional strengths. Comparisons with other countries, which will no doubt continue, given the current geopolitical environment, reinforced an appreciation of these qualities and a desire to protect Australia from the violence, poverty, instability and social division evident elsewhere. Yet this desire for protection did not generally translate into a rejection of openness. Acceptance, cultural diversity and the capacity to accommodate difference remained important features of the Australia many interviewees valued. Importantly, many of these understandings of what it means to be Australian and what Australian life entails crossed demographic, generational and cultural differences and were not confined to one part of the political spectrum. People disagreed about why Australia was changing or about the appropriate response to this change but still expressed similar aspirations for the society they want Australia to be.

It is here, however, that an important tension emerges. Alongside agreement about what was valued in Australia was the concern that some of these qualities are being eroded. Interviewees attributed this to different causes, including political leadership, immigration, generational change, economic pressures and declining community connection. At times, these concerns also involved blame being directed towards particular groups, including migrants and younger people. As anxiety about social change increases, there is a risk that societal problems will be attributed disproportionately to particular sections of the population.

Despite these concerns, the interviews were not characterised by hopelessness. Rather, interviewees expressed clear expectations that Australia's institutions and communities could play an active role in protecting and strengthening social cohesion. Democratic processes, effective political leadership, equitable access to public services and opportunities and efforts to rebuild community connection were all seen as part of the way forward. The findings therefore point not only to concern about what may be slipping away, but also to a substantial shared foundation upon which Australia's future social cohesion can continue to be built.

Conclusion

Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 is pointing to a society under strain. People are more divided, less trusting, more pessimistic and less supportive of Australia's multicultural fabric. In a troubled world and after a difficult few years, this is perhaps not surprising, but a cause for concern and action nonetheless. In seeking to reinvigorate and strengthen social cohesion, Australia may draw on several strengths particularly community cohesion and the inclusive nature of Australian identity – alongside the insight of many that social cohesion does not come from sameness, but from our respect, kindness, empathy and common humanity, even as we fight for what we believe in.

The Mapping Social Cohesion 2026 study is pointing to substantial long-term strains on social cohesion that have been amplified and expanded in the current division and discord. Australians are reporting a weaker sense of belonging, social justice and personal wellbeing and less active involvement in their communities, not necessarily in the last one or two years but over the last 15 to 20. In more recent times, Mapping Social Cohesion has recorded weaker support for immigration and diversity, greater animosity toward people from different faiths and immigrant backgrounds, declining and highly polarised trust in government and government institutions and increasing pessimism, both in Australia's future direction and in people's own lives. While indicators in these domains point to a deterioration in the last year, they by and large continue a negative trend of the last three or four years.

The shifts in social cohesion in the last year are tightly related to growing social and political division, particularly on the conservative side of politics. One Nation voters and those who have gravitated towards One Nation over the last year are reporting increasing distrust in government and institutions and opposition to immigration and a heightened sense of the country heading in the wrong direction. Perhaps relatedly, One Nation supporters also report somewhat weaker connections in their neighbourhoods and local communities, less happiness and trust in others, greater financial stress and increasing pessimism towards their own futures. While personal social and economic pressures cannot explain everything, these patterns are giving the sense that in a modest but important way, such personal pressures are fuelling discontent and anger directed at the political system, systems of government and immigration – all of which point to the way that long-run strains on social cohesion and personal social and economic wellbeing are potentially acting as tinder for growing division now.

In amongst the bad news, there continue to be bright spots and silver linings. Local and community connections remain strong and potentially help to protect against deeper divisions and detrimental impacts on personal and social wellbeing. On a whole range of indicators, from belonging to happiness, participation and reported discrimination, cohesion has declined over the longer term though at least has not deteriorated further in the present turmoil. It is also the case that in what would appear to be an increasingly hostile environment, overseas born Australians continue to contribute positively to the social and civic life of their communities and Australian social cohesion as a whole.

Australia is also far from unique in the world in facing social and political division. The terrorist attack at Bondi Beach in 2025 stands out as a horrific global event and instance of antisemitism. By the same token, antisemitism, Islamophobia and opposition to immigration have been experienced around the world, often with violent and damaging consequences. Australia has arguably been slow and half-hearted in joining much of the world in relation to opposition to immigration, not least as support for multiculturalism, diversity and the social, cultural and economic contribution of immigrants continued to grow up to 2023, several years after the acceleration of anti-immigrant sentiment and political movements in Europe and north America.

Even in 2026, three-in-four Australians believe multiculturalism has been good for the country, including 44% of One Nation supporters. That this is treated as an indicator of growing anti-immigrant sentiment speaks as much to the great symbolic value Australians place in multiculturalism and the relatively inclusive nature of Australian values and identity as it does to recent declines. The trends and events of the last 12-24 months underscore that this value is not fixed or to be taken for granted or that it necessarily guards against racism, discrimination and animosity towards people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Even under strain though, recognition and appreciation of diversity remains an asset and source of strength to Australia's social cohesion.

People's own views on what matters to social cohesion provides telling insights into how we should think about social cohesion and go about restoring and strengthening it. True social cohesion cannot be created and certainly not maintained in Australia through 'sameness' either in our beliefs, backgrounds or what we feel able to say and how we act in public. We are not the same and we each deserve the right to fight for what we believe in, to speak out for all that is important to us and against injustice, violence and harm in our communities and the world. That understanding has always underpinned the definition and measurement of social cohesion in the Mapping Social Cohesion series. The importance people attach to happiness, safety, belonging and mutual respect through our difference over cultural and ideological similarity in this year's study suggests that most Australians agree.

The challenge for all of us across the social and political spectrum is to speak and fight and act in a way that allows others to do the same, that recognises our common humanity, that we come from different places and perspectives and that our words and actions affect the rights and needs of all of us to be happy, to feel safe, to belong, to be heard and to live as our true selves.

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40. We calculate 2026 scores as equal to the score in 2025 on the old Index multiplied by the proportionate change scores on the new Index between 2025 and 2026. Scores on the new Index range from 0 to 100.

41. The shift to a mostly online survey is estimated to have reduced overall Index scores by seven percentage points.

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48. The trust in institutions variable is measured from the following five survey questions, 1. 'How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people?' i) almost always, ii) most of the time, iii) only some of the time, iv) almost never; 2. How often do you think government leaders in Australia abuse their power?' i) all of the time, ii) most of the time, iii) some of the time, iv) a little of the time, v) none of the time, 3. Would you say the system of government we have in Australia i) works fine as it is, ii) needs minor change, iii) needs major change, or iv) should be replaced? 4. In your view, are Australian elections fair… i) all of the time, ii) most of the time, iii) some of the time, iv) a little of the time or v) none of the time? 5. In your opinion, how often do the courts make fair, impartial decisions based on the evidence made available to them? i) all of the time, ii) most of the time, iii) some of the time, iv) a little of the time, v) none of the time. Responses are given scores ranging from 0 to 1, added up and rescaled to range from 0 (low trust in institutions) to 100 (high trust in institutions). The variable has good internal validity measured by a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.84 in 2026.

49. The financial wellbeing variable is measured from the following two survey questions, 1. How satisfied are you with your present financial situation? i) very satisfied, ii) satisfied, iii) dissatisfied, iv) very dissatisfied; 2. Which of the following best describes your financial circumstances today? i) prosperous, ii) living very comfortably, iii) living reasonably comfortably, iv) just getting along, v) struggling to pay bills, vi) poor. Responses are given scores ranging from 0 to 1, added up and rescaled so scores can range from 0 (low financial stress/high prosperity) to 100 (high financial stress). The variable has good internal validity measured by a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.77 in 2026.

50. We estimate that the 2018 shift to the mostly online Life in Australia™ survey reduced the proportion of people stating that they have a great sense of pride in the Australia by nine percentage points while the 2025 shift resulted in a further one point reduction.

51. The national pride and belonging variable is measured from three survey questions, 1. To what extent do you take pride in the Australian way of life and culture? i) to a great extent, ii) to a moderate extent, iii) only slightly, iv) not at all; 2. To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia? i) to a great extent, ii) to a moderate extent, iii) only slightly, iv) not at all; 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement, 'In the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life and culture is important'? i) strongly agree, ii) agree, iii) disagree, iv) strongly disagree. Responses are added up and rescaled so scores can range from 0 (low pride and belonging) to 100 (high pride and belonging). The variable has good internal validity measured by a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.75 in 2026.

52. The support for immigrant diversity variable is measured from 10 survey questions that ask for respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements, i) accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger, ii) ethnic minorities in Australia should be given Australian government assistance to maintain their customs and heritage, iii) multiculturalism has been good for Australia, iv) someone who was born outside of Australia is just as likely to be a good citizen as someone born in Australia, vii) immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy, viii) immigrants take jobs away, ix) immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures and x) too many immigrants are not adopting Australian values. Responses are given scores ranging from 0 to 1, added up and rescaled so scores can range from 0 (low support for diversity) to 100 (high support for diversity). The variable has good internal validity measured by a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.90 in 2026.

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71. Estimates for 2014 were derived through a multinomial logistic regression model that predicted levels of reported happiness and pessimism for different birth generations by year and controlling for the transition to the online and telephone survey in 2018 and the blended survey in 2025. Based on this model, predictions were created for 2014 by birth generation and as if the 2014 survey was administered as it is now (e.g. an online and telephone survey administered to a blended sample). This adjustment allows the results to be compared over time, though note they are approximate and indicative estimates only and caution should be taken in their interpretation. Note that no estimates are available for Gen Z in 2014 as this cohort was too young at the time to be in the 2014 survey. A full set of model results are provided in the Technical Report.

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74. Regression models that predict happiness, belonging, trust in government, support for multiculturalism and belief that neighbours get on well for different levels of financial stress and controlling for people's age, gender, education, self-reported health, housing, household composition and immigration history. A full set of model results are provided in the Technical Report.

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85. The neighbourhood cohesion variable is measured from four survey questions that ask for respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement with the statements, i) People in your local area are willing to help their neighbours, ii) My local area is a place where people from different national or ethnic backgrounds get on well together, iii) I am able to have a real say on issues that important to me in my local area, iv) I feel like I belong in my neighbourhood and v) My neighbourhood has a strong sense of community. Respondents are given the following response options, a) strongly agree, b) agree, c) disagree, d) strongly disagree. Responses are added up and re-scaled so that scores range from 0 (low neighbourhood cohesion) to 100 (high neighbourhood cohesion). The variable has good internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83.

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Acknowledgements

The Mapping Social Cohesion study is made possible with the financial support and vision of the Scanlon Foundation and the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. Special thanks to the Scanlon family and the Board and staff of the Foundation and Institute.

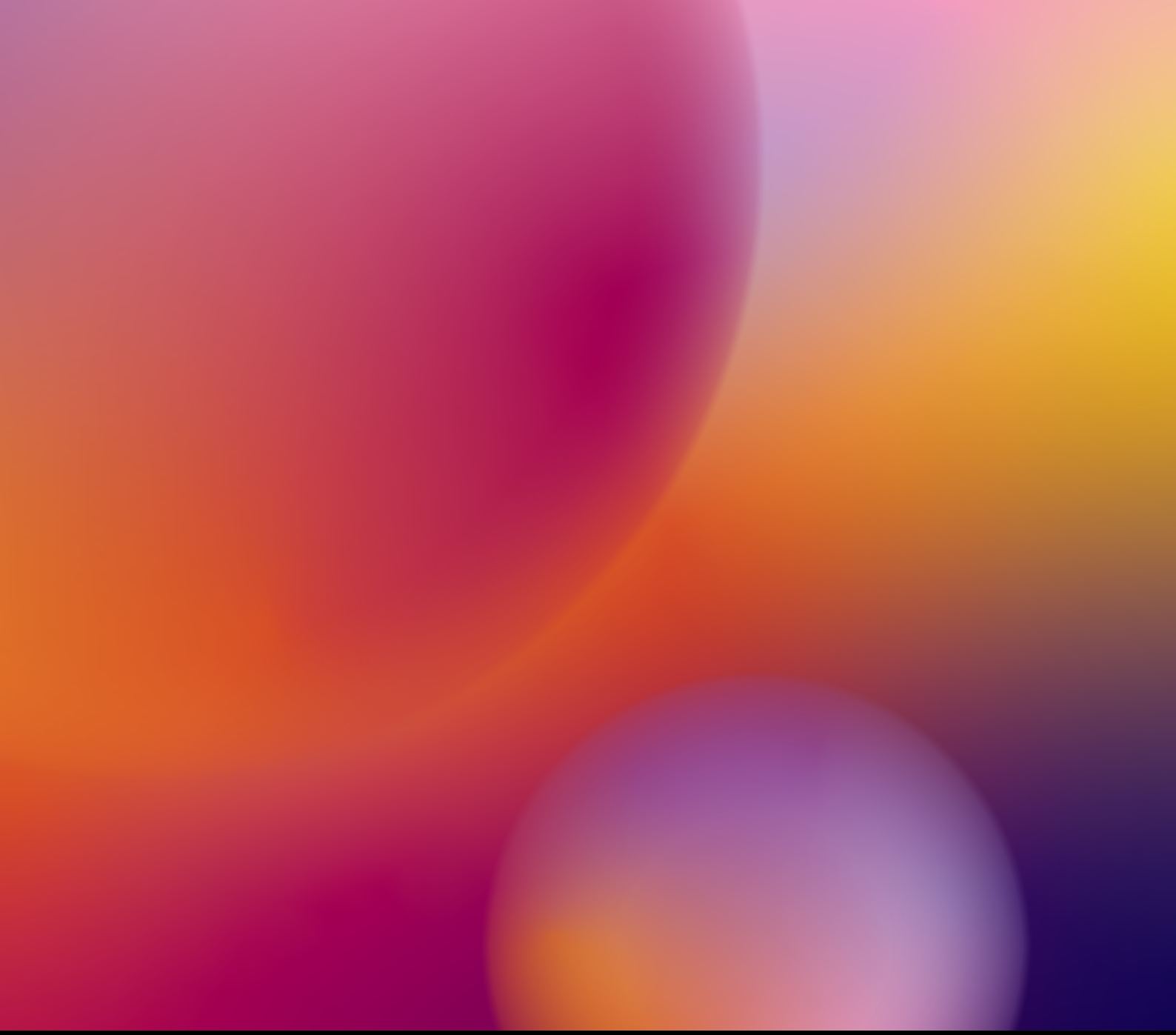
Since its inception, the Mapping Social Cohesion project has been designed and led in conjunction with the Scanlon Foundation by Emeritus Professor Andrew Markus AO and with the support of Monash University. This leadership has provided the critical foundations and a powerful legacy for the ongoing conduct of the project.

The research underpinning the analyses of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey was conducted by James O'Donnell and Alice Falkiner of the Pop Lab in the School of Demography at the Australian National University (ANU). The qualitative interview component was designed, developed and undertaken by Trish Prentice of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. Trish, Matthew Skidmore and Laura Gobey of the Institute carried out the interviews and Trish authored the qualitive chapter, 'What Australians are holding on to: identity, values and visions of Australia's future'.

The Social Research Centre managed and administered the Mapping Social Cohesion survey to the Life in Australia™ panel. Boost surveys were administered through the Online Research Unit (ORU) and Polaron Connect, managed in partnership with the Social Research Centre. The design, formatting and content for the final report and the website was created by Green Scribble.

An expert advisory group, the 'Brains Trust' continues to guide and oversee the Mapping Social Cohesion study. The group is comprised of Andrew Markus, Darren Pennay, Henry Sherell, Trish Prentice, Rouven Link, John van Kooy, Phoebe Johnston and Anthea Hancocks. Special thanks to this group for their expertise across the project.

In 2026, we lost one of the founding members of the Brains Trust, Bruce Smith. Bruce was, in fact, one of the pioneers of the Mapping Social Cohesion study from the very beginning, working with the Scanlon Foundation and Andrew Markus to establish the very first study in 2007. In every year since and right up to his passing, Bruce was a constant source of wisdom, experience and capability in guiding the Mapping Social Cohesion study to where it is today. Mapping Social Cohesion and all who worked with Bruce are saddened by our loss but richer for his 20 year contribution.



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