



The  
Climate  
Institute

Climate of the Nation 2016  
Australian attitudes on climate change

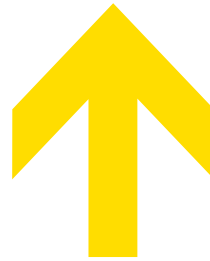
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# Climate of the Nation 2016

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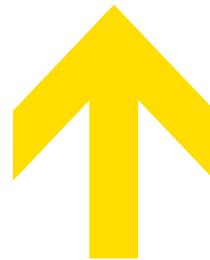
## Support for Australia leading in finding solutions

65 per cent of Australians think Australia should be a world leader in finding solutions to climate change, an increase from 59 per cent in 2015, 58 per cent in 2013 and 52 per cent in 2012. Currently, only 19 per cent of Australians judge the federal government's performance on climate change to be "fairly good" to "excellent". Only 3 per cent think Australia should not be taking action on climate change.



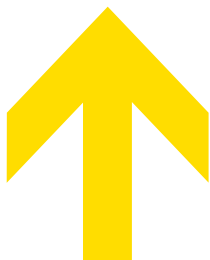
## Economic benefits, new jobs and investment to flow

73 per cent of Australians hold the view that economic benefits, such as new jobs and investment in clean energy, will flow from leadership on climate action and energy policy. This figure was 71 per cent in 2015 and 70 per cent in 2014. And when it comes to choosing the top three preferences for energy in Australia, 86 per cent include solar and 70 per cent include wind. Just 12 per cent choose coal.



## Awareness of climate change and trust in the science

77 per cent of Australians think climate change is happening. This continues an upward trend from 70 per cent in 2015, 66 per cent in 2013 and 64 per cent in 2012. 66 per cent of Australians also increasingly trust the science which suggests that climate change is happening due to human activities, up from 57 per cent last year, 51 per cent in 2013 and 46 per cent in 2012.



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# Foreword

Climate of the Nation is Australia's longest running survey benchmarking community attitudes on climate change.

Two weeks of, at times, simplistic sloganeering about an electricity "crisis" in South Australia became an ominous backdrop for conducting this year's research. Some were quick to blame the resultant price spike on the state's surging renewable energy and the closure of its coal-fired power stations.

Yet, our research shows this "crisis" didn't affect the continued growth in enthusiasm for renewable energy. It may, however, have played a role in the increasing levels of support for a better managed transition from coal-fired power to clean energy.

Indeed, while public support for renewable energy – including wind, but particularly solar – over coal and gas, has grown, so also has Australians' frustration with our politicians for not supporting it more.

There is widespread disappointment with the performance of all levels of government, as well as business. This is clearly articulated in the views Australians hold in relation to their performance in taking climate action.

What is interesting, particularly after a turbulent 10 years in national policy, is the strongly held view that government at the federal level should hold the lead responsibility for climate action. This view is held pretty consistently across the political spectrum of voting preference. Only a handful of people say governments – federal, state or local – should not take action.

Perhaps repairing this increasingly chronic distrust of politicians can start with climate action. In Australia, at least, climate and energy policy has been a major feature on the political stage for many years. Credible and, ideally bipartisan, climate action could also help with this broader distrust and alienation.

Our research, and that of others, has identified mid-2012 as marking the low point in support for climate action. Expectations have been rebounding since that point – when the scare campaigns met the reality of the carbon laws in action. Their repeal didn't halt this trend.

Today, public expectations are clearly that Australia should be an international leader in climate solutions.

A number of elements buttress this rebound. A growing realisation that the impacts of climate change are actually hitting us now has been accompanied by growing trust in the science. The myth that Australia was somehow acting alone has now been demolished, most notably via the public and strong Chinese and US climate partnership, as well as the success of the Paris climate negotiations.

Perhaps most powerfully, clean energy alternatives are now a very real part of our lives. This goes beyond the global investment reality where we have seen investments in renewable energy double investments in fossil fuels. Plunging costs for solar and wind technologies are being matched by the emergence of other more tangible technologies that people can directly interact with in their everyday lives – electric cars, and household batteries. People can see the clean energy future and they want to be part of it.

Of course, realising this future isn't simple. Careful, fair and inclusive strategies need to accompany policies that will unlock markets which encourage modernisation and decarbonisation of electricity, transport, buildings and other sectors of the economy. Years of policy and political turbulence has sapped a sense of urgency, as well as the confidence people place in politicians. Yet the potential is clear.

Inconsistency, half measures or backtracking will undermine efforts to seize this community potential.

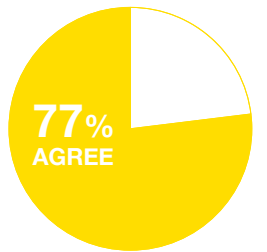
Australia will be reviewing its climate policies in 2017 and has also committed, internationally, to consider post-2030 emissions reductions targets at this time. It will do so, not only as other nations step up their activities in line with their commitments under the Paris climate agreement, but also as the global investor community becomes increasingly attentive to climate change risks and opportunities.

This will be our first national policy conversation for at least five years. It is an opportunity to connect a flailing political system with a growing and increasingly tenacious, if wary, resurgence in the community's desire for action – which is now the strongest it has been since 2008. It is highly likely support for renewable energy and climate action will also continue to grow. The big question we are left with is, how will our politicians respond?

**John Connor, CEO  
The Climate Institute**

# Aim + approach

**"I accept that climate change is occurring"**



## Who

The Climate Institute engaged leading firms in quantitative and qualitative research to undertake the analysis that underpins this report.

Throughout the report, results from the national quantitative polling are supported by findings from the qualitative focus group studies held in three cities, as well as direct quotes from participants.

We are grateful to John Scales and Jessica Lai from JWS Research and Peter Matthew from Galaxy Research for their depth of experience and professionalism when conducting the research. The author, Brinsley Marlay, would also like to thank them for their advice, insights and expertise that has assisted him in writing the *Climate of the Nation 2016* report, along with John Connor, Luke Menzies, Kristina Stefanova and Erwin Jackson.

We are also grateful to the financial assistance provided by our donors and research supporters, without whose generosity this analysis would not have been possible:

- + Lord mayor's Charitable Foundation
- + Planet Wheeler Foundation
- + Stephen Whately
- + The Digger & Shirley Martin Environmental Fund
- + Hamer Family Fund
- + Government of South Australia
- + Climate Media Centre

## How

### Qualitative

The qualitative research element was carried out by JWS Research, who ran mixed focus groups in early August in Brisbane, Melbourne and Newcastle. Locations were chosen on the basis of recruiting participants from a spread of areas ranging from inner metropolitan and regional areas, and coal and resource dependent areas.

### Quantitative

The quantitative research element was carried out by Galaxy Research, who administered an online survey of over 2,000 Australians, from 29 July to 7 August. Respondents were drawn from the I-view online panel. The data collected was then weighted according to the ABS Census data for location, gender and age.

The maximum margin of error on a sample of 2,000 is +/- 2.2 per cent, with a confidence level of 95 per cent.

All content related to this project is online at:  
[www.climateinstitute.org.au/climate-of-the-nation-2016.html](http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/climate-of-the-nation-2016.html)



# Executive summary



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Science and impacts

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

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

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

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

## Responsibility and performance

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

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

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

## Energy policy

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

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

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



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

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

#### **Australia and international climate action**

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

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

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

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

#### **Individuals and communities taking action**

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

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

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

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



# Key findings

77%

of Australians think climate change is occurring, up from 70% last year.

90%

of Australians think responsibility for driving action on climate change rests with the federal government to some degree (67% think full responsibility rests with the federal government).

73%

of Australians hold the clear view that economic benefits, such as new jobs and investment in clean energy, will flow from leadership on climate action and energy policy.

75%

of Australians think governments in Australia need to implement a plan to ensure the orderly closure of old coal plants and replace them with clean energy.

86%

of people place solar energy in their top three choices of energy for Australia, up from 81% in 2012.

3%

of people say coal is their preferred energy source for Australia.

65%

of people feel Australia should be a world leader in finding solutions to climate change, up from 59% last year.

67%

of people believe that Australia should enact a serious policy plan to deliver the commitment made in Paris to achieving net zero emissions (66% also believing it should include targets).

59%

of people do not agree that Australia should wait for other major emitting countries such as China and the US before we move on reducing emissions.

19%

of people judge the federal government's performance on climate change as "fairly good" to "excellent".

60%

of Australians trust the science that suggests the climate is changing due to human activities, compared to 46% in 2013.

77%

of Australians agree that state governments should put in place incentives for more renewable energy.



# Attitudes

## TO CLIMATE CHANGE

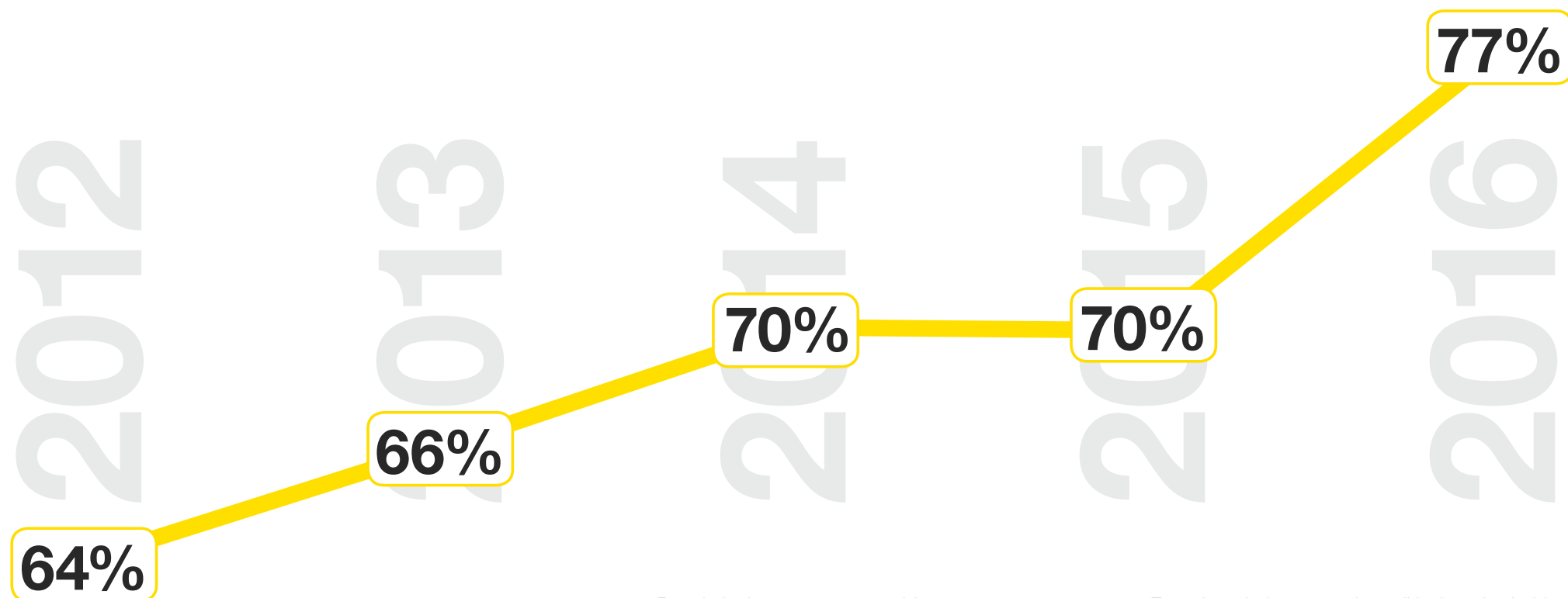


FIGURE 1  
AUSTRALIANS WHO THINK  
CLIMATE CHANGE IS OCCURRING

*“Oh, not again – I’m sick and tired of hearing about it. I’d like some simple, practical ideas.”*

Newcastle focus group participant, 55+ year olds

Australians have now lived through almost 10 years of vexing politicisation of the science of climate change and the policies to deal with it. Focus group participants reported a sense of climate change fatigue about the debate. Yet, this tended to be more about the arguing than the science or the solutions.

Despite the public debate, the great majority of people – 77 per cent – believe that climate change is occurring. This is a trend that has been on the increase in recent years from 64 per cent in 2012, 66 per cent in 2013 and 70 per cent in 2015.

This view is highest among young people aged 18 to 34, at 83 per cent, though around three quarters or more of people in other generations have the same view. Overall, 90 per cent of these people accept human activity is at least partly the cause, with 39 per cent saying humans are the main cause and only 9 per cent blaming natural cycles. Only 8 per cent of people say they do not think climate change is occurring, with the remainder unsure.

Today, a third of people perceive that we are experiencing “a lot” of impacts of climate change in Australia, while a further 46 per cent think we are only experiencing these impacts to “a little” extent. More women (37 per cent) hold the “a lot” view than men (29 per cent). Around half as many Liberal voters (22 per cent) think this as Labor (42 per cent) and Green (58 per cent) voters.

*“Science is in. I don’t subscribe to the notion of scare tactics. The ones that are trying to scare us are the ones with a vested interest who aren’t looking to protect the planet. It’s a great pity. People have a vested interest in the status quo.”*

Newcastle focus group participant, 55+ year olds

Though questioning the science about the causes of climate change has been a focus of debate over much of the last decade in Australia, any impact it has had is waning. In an ongoing and steadily increasingly trend, 60 per cent of people now either agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I trust the science that suggests the climate is changing due to human activities”, while 10 per cent are undecided. This is up from 57 per cent in 2015, 51 per cent in 2014 and 46 per cent in 2013.

People in the 18 to 35 year old age group agree most strongly (69 per cent) and those aged 65+ least (48 per cent); Labor (69 per cent) and Green (87 per cent) voters significantly more so than Liberal (47 per cent).

This viewpoint is reinforced by attitudes held about whether the seriousness of climate change is exaggerated, with just under double the number of people (48 per cent) disagreeing with this notion as opposed to agreeing (27 per cent). A further 20 per cent neither agree or disagree. Far less Liberal voters (32 per cent) disagree that the seriousness of climate change is exaggerated than Labor (56 per cent) and Green (81 per cent) voters. This level of disagreement has increased since 2015, when 44 per cent disagreed. In 2013 and 2012, the figure was 41 and 33 per cent respectively.

A further perspective on this situation may be provided by the number of people who feel they are receiving too many conflicting opinions to be sure about the claims made about climate change. Over half of respondents (57 per cent) still feel they are in this position. Fifty-four per cent of people felt this way in 2014, 60 per cent in 2013 and 66 per cent in 2012.

*“When I think of things about climate change, it’s a big unknown. Everyone’s an expert on these things and it’s hard to know who to trust.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 18-54 year olds

Even though the two major political parties hold positions on climate change and action that are relatively distanced from one another, politically, these above-listed trends are still generally held, regardless of which of the two parties people align with. Despite the volatile public debate, 85 per cent of ALP voters believe climate change is occurring, with 43 per cent of these people holding the view that humans are the main cause of climate change. For Liberal voters, these figures are 69 and 27 per cent respectively. The thinking becomes much closer if we extend the analysis to the number of people who consider climate change is caused by a mix of human activity and natural cycles, with ALP on 50 and Liberal 57 per cent. Thinking only comes closer to reflecting party positions on climate change when we consider voters who feel they are subjected to too many conflicting opinions – Liberal voters feel this most acutely (68 per cent) compared to Labor (50 per cent) and Green (37 per cent) voters.

Overall, the prevailing attitude held by three quarters of Australians is that ignoring climate change is simply not an option because to do so increases the risk of the situation getting worse. This viewpoint was strongly held across gender, age, voting preference, location and income. This is a further increase from last year when 69 per cent of people held this view.

*“Even if there isn’t a problem with climate change, it can’t hurt to try and do something about it.”*

Melbourne focus group participant, 25+ year olds

# What is your priority issue?

The prevailing attitude held by three quarters of Australians is that ignoring climate change is simply not an option, because to do so increases the risk of the situation getting worse.

Yet, for the general population, climate change is not as immediate a concern as more “hip pocket” issues such as the cost of living, the economy, jobs, tax reform, health and education. Individuals who feel engaged with the issue of climate change, on the other hand, consider it a very important concern. Regardless of their personal level of engagement with the issue of climate change itself, however, people are generally concerned about its possible consequences.



FIGURE 2

This graphic is made up of priority topics as listed by participants in focus groups for *Climate of the Nation 2016* research, held in Brisbane, Melbourne and Newcastle in August. The size of the words indicates how frequently they were mentioned.



# Concerns

## ACTION, INACTION AND CONSEQUENCES

The first half of 2016 has already delivered major extreme weather events that can be attributed to climate change. At the beginning of the year, fires burned in the ancient World Heritage highlands of Tasmania, we have witnessed the worst coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef in recorded history and, in June, an east coast low wreaked destruction on the NSW coast, most spectacularly in the beachside suburb of Collaroy in Sydney.

It seems the priority people place on climate is a function of a number of things, including their concern about potential impacts, as well as the closeness to their day to day lives. In focus groups around the country, discussion revealed that, for the general population, climate change was not as immediate a concern as more “hip pocket” issues such as the cost of living, the economy, jobs, tax reform, health and education. Individuals who feel engaged with the issue of climate change, on the other hand, considered it a very important concern.

Nevertheless it was clear that, regardless of their personal level of engagement with the issue of climate change itself, people were generally concerned about its possible consequences. These consequences tended to manifest as things that could have major effects on our quality of life, such as increases in severe weather, destruction of natural resources and the flow-on effects to Australia’s economy. There tended to be a recognition and concern that present inaction on climate change had long-term consequences that would be most acutely borne by future generations.

*“I look at it like a relay race. I’m on my last stretch and I’m getting ready to hand over the baton to someone else. My fear is that the baton I’m handing over isn’t the baton I received 60 years ago. Things have changed. We haven’t done a great deal to address it.”*

Newcastle focus group participant, 55+ year olds

Another prevailing, though lesser concern relates to the relative importance placed upon the issue by government, particularly at the federal level. When asked about the top three issues that the federal government should be focusing on, there was a general feeling in focus groups that their main concerns were the things that should be prioritised by the federal government – the afore-mentioned more immediate and often, “hip pocket” concerns.

This was particularly the case for people who are less concerned about climate change and more focused on the issues that affect them directly. They take their cues from the federal government and assume that they will take action as necessary. If the federal government is not seen to be acting on the issue, they assume it is not a priority. However, those who consider action on climate change and the environment to be a federal government priority were frustrated by the lack of priority and current action.

*“The federal government. As the leaders of the country, they should be proactive about encouraging everyone else and putting in place plans and actions.”*

Melbourne focus group participant, 25 + year olds

*“Australians conform. If the federal government takes action, people will follow.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 25+ year olds

FIGURE 3  
LEVEL OF CONCERN ABOUT  
IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

- Very concerned
- Fairly concerned
- Not very concerned
- Not at all concerned

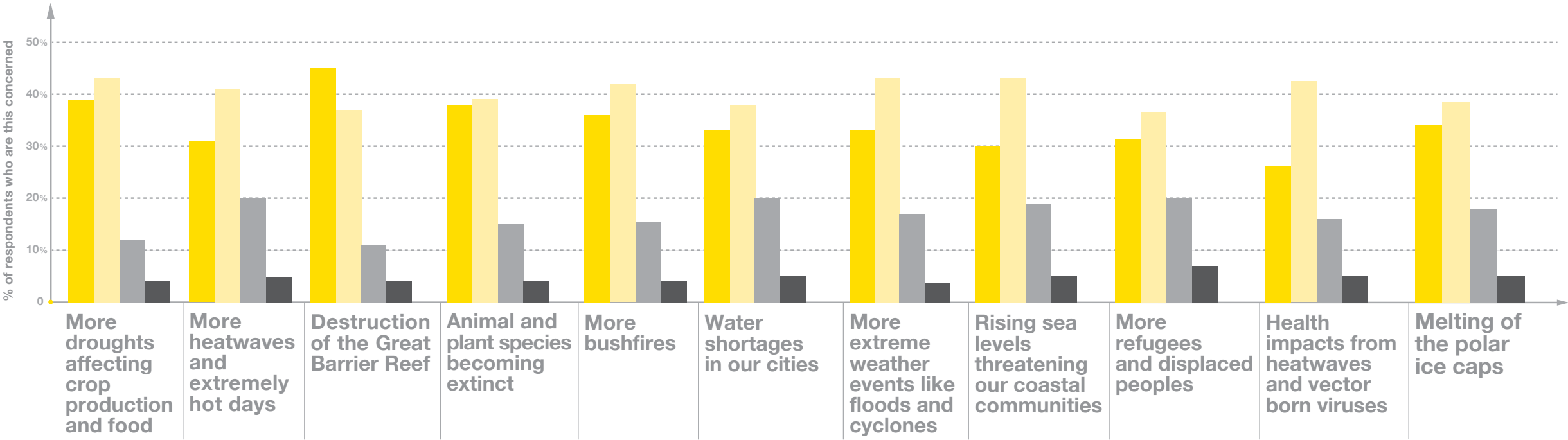






Image: AAP

The impacts of climate change that Australians are most concerned about are more droughts and flooding affecting food security (82 per cent), destruction of the Great Barrier Reef (82), more bushfires (78), increased extinctions of animal and plant species (77), extreme weather (76), impacts on coastal communities and beaches (76) and impacts on health, such as water issues, heatwaves and mosquito-borne viruses (76). In each of these cases, 10 to 14 per cent more women tend to be concerned than men. Though rating less highly (68), the issue of climate change resulting in increasing refugees and displaced peoples continues to worry many.

*“Once the damage is done, it’s done. When you look at the Great Barrier Reef – you can’t do anything to undo the damage.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

*“Extreme weather conditions, whether it be droughts and storms, and food security for the future. It’s worrying about food security for the future.”*

Newcastle focus group participant, 18-34 year olds

*“Fiji are losing their islands and people are going to be displaced because of global warming.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

A large majority of people (69 per cent) are concerned that further extreme weather events caused by climate change will cause cost of living rises in Australia, such as increased food prices and higher home insurance premiums, and cause economic impacts for Australia.



# Taking climate action

## WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

When it comes to tackling climate change, Australians are increasingly embracing the idea of investing now for a better future. In focus groups across the country, people outlined an appreciation that, over the immediate short to medium term, there will be costs involved in taking action on climate change and the transition to renewables. Given a choice between action and inaction, people are generally prepared for the wider community to pay slightly more in the short term to deliver long term economic viability and benefits. The potential costs of inaction are seen as far more devastating.

*“I think it will be cheaper for people to take action. As resources become depleted, the price will go up.”*

Melbourne focus group participant, 25+ year olds

*“Definitely in terms of cost, you need to fund the research, fund the infrastructure. But I think the rewards outweigh that.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

Though people do not necessarily think about climate action as being linked with energy production, for much of the population, this action is tied up with making it easier for our nation to transition to renewable energy. There is a general frustration that the federal government is not being more proactive in encouraging growth in this sector, as well as at its ongoing high profile support of coal and, to a lesser extent, gas.

When it comes to both climate action and the implementation of strong energy policy, the majority of people do not support delays or half measures. Sixty-one per cent think this will mean a point in time will come where urgent action becomes necessary, increasing the likelihood of shocks and sudden negative adjustments to jobs, electricity prices and energy security. This view is strongly held across voting lines by 69 per cent of ALP voters, 77 Green and 53 Liberal. Only 8 per cent of people disagree that this will be the case.

The general population tends to believe that the responsibility for action on climate change sits first and foremost with the federal government. Ninety per cent of people believe this to be the case, made up of 67 per cent believing the federal government should take the leading role in action on climate change and a further 23 per cent believing they should play a contributing role. This is a majority view held across gender, age, location and voting preference.

The federal government is by far the sector people consider most responsible for taking a leading role in action on climate change. Expectations for this level of leadership from state and territory governments (47 per cent), global alliances and groups such as the UN (44 per cent) and Australian business and industry (32 per cent) are significantly less. Slightly more people aged 18 to 34 hold this view on State and territory governments and global alliances and the UN than other age groups (both, 51 per cent). These views are consistently held across state lines.

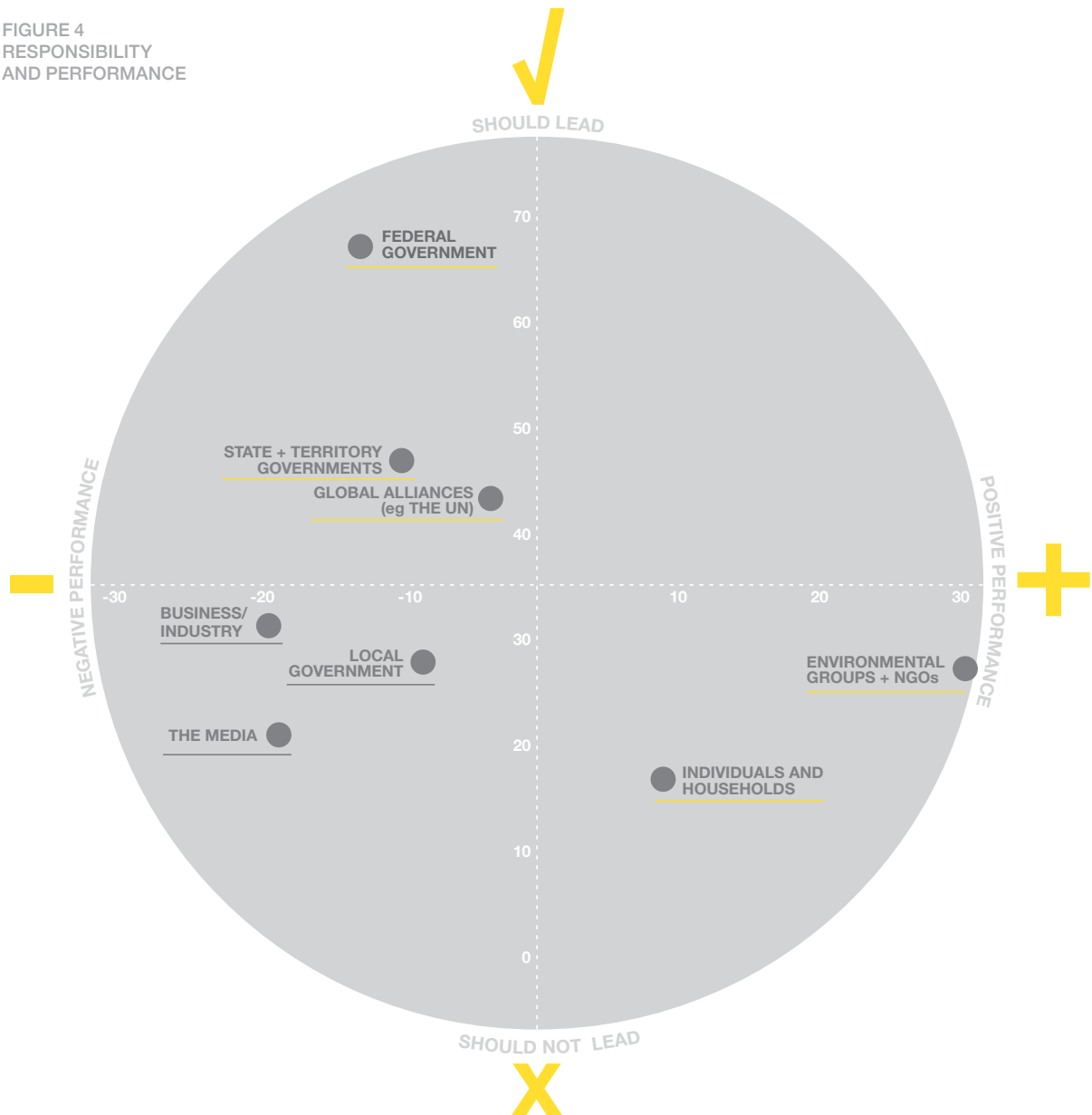
Only 3 per cent of people think the federal government should not be taking action on climate change, a view held to the same or similar degree in relation to state and territory governments, Australian business and industry, local governments, global alliances and groups such as the UN, and individuals and households.

In terms of performance in this regard, people are not impressed with the federal government. Only 19 per cent consider them to be doing a fairly good to excellent job, with 33 per cent considering the performance to be fairly poor or terrible and 36 per cent judging it to be just average. Results are similar for state and territory governments and local government. The performance of Australian business and industry is viewed a little more harshly, with just 16 per cent viewing their performance as fairly good to excellent and 36 per cent viewing their performance as poor or terrible.

*“In terms of climate change, we’re not doing enough. As a government, we’re questioning whether it’s real or not and we’re not actually doing anything to look at contingencies for it.”*


Brisbane focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

FIGURE 4  
RESPONSIBILITY  
AND PERFORMANCE



This perceptual map diagrammatically illustrates how each of the sectors in the Australian community are positioned in relation to one another in terms of the extent to which the Australian population thinks they should lead on the issue of climate change (Y axis) against the public's assessment of how they are performing (X axis).



A close-up, low-angle shot of the underside of a dark-colored vehicle. A prominent, rusty exhaust pipe runs horizontally across the frame. Below it, a tire with a visible tread pattern is partially shown. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall tone is gritty and industrial.

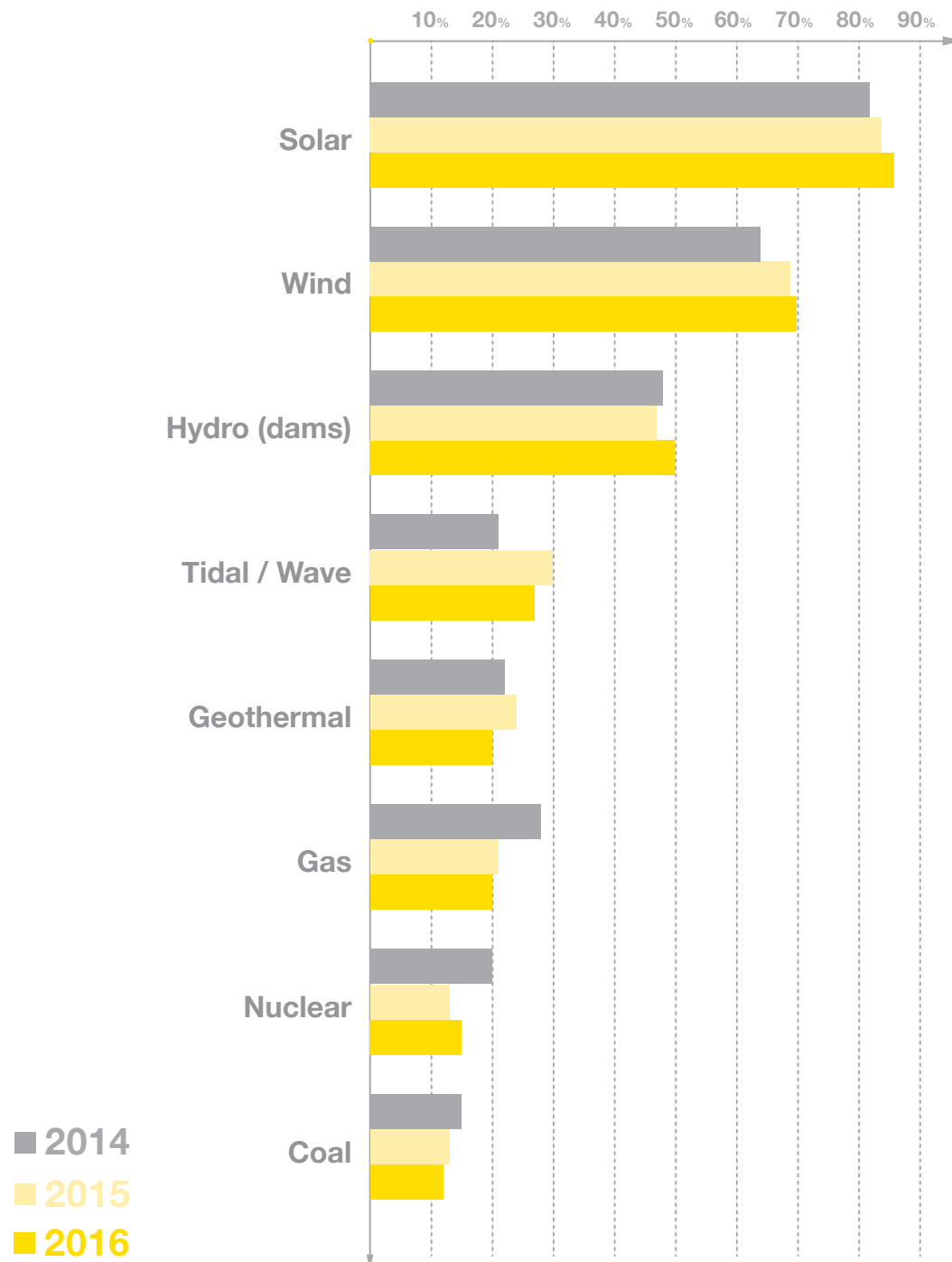
**When it comes to both climate action and the implementation of strong energy policy, the majority of Australians do not support delays or half measures.**

**The general population tends to believe that the responsibility for action on climate change sits first and foremost with the federal government.**

# Powering Australia

## OUR ENERGY MIX

FIGURE 5  
TOP THREE MOST  
PREFERRED SOURCES OF  
ENERGY FOR AUSTRALIA



Despite its historical dominance in our energy mix, and strong support from major political parties in the past, support by Australians for coal is in decline. Focus group participants generally regarded it as being dirty, vastly preferring renewable energy – particularly solar – as the alternative and primary power source. This preference is reflected in the national polling. Largely, it is held regardless of whether or not people believe climate change is caused by human activity. However, there is also a certain level of pragmatism attached to this viewpoint. In focus groups, some people also believed that coal is either here to stay, or is likely to remain a significant part of Australia's energy mix for some time to come – at least until renewable technology is developed enough to enable its replacement.

*"It has to be staggered. You can't just turn it off and say we aren't going to have coal anymore. [The] economy is already fragile, so would have to be staggered. There needs to be some incentives for people to take it up. The government has to do something."*

Melbourne focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

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

More than half (59 per cent) say solar is their most preferred source of energy, five times as many who nominate wind (11 per cent), which is the next most popular choice. Only 3 per cent nominate coal, which is half the number that nominate nuclear. These results are consistent across gender, age, income and voter preference.

Solar is even more popular in Queensland (66 per cent), where nuclear remains as unpopular as coal (4 per cent), and is slightly less favoured by people in households on less than \$40,000 per year (53 per cent). In South Australia, following the Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission conducted during 2015 and 2016, nuclear is two to three times more popular than it is in the three eastern seaboard mainland states (SA 14, Vic 7, NSW 8 and Qld 4 per cent). In the focus groups, a common conversation point was that, from a pragmatic point of view, people felt nuclear was cleaner than coal and could supply base load power in its place, if needed.

*"We have heaps of sun, it's renewable. Once you've got the infrastructure in, it wouldn't be that hard to harvest it."*

Newcastle focus group participant, 18-54 year olds

*"I think solar would be ideal. Solar is the safest."*

Melbourne focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

A great majority, 72 per cent, of people think it is inevitable that Australia's current coal-fired generation will need to be replaced with renewable energy, a view consistently strongly held across all demographic groups – though less people aged 18 to 34 (65 per cent) hold this view than those aged 55 and over (78 per cent). When it comes to putting replacement into action, at 46 per cent, there is strong disagreement that the market and energy companies should be the ones to decide when the old coal plants should be closed down. This is up significantly from the 35 per cent who held this view in 2015. It is also a slightly more favoured position in regional areas (48 per cent) than in capital cities (44 per cent).

*"Coal is carbon. Carbon is dirty. There is no way of getting around that. In the absence of that, I don't think you can take any position on global warming and maintain the coal industry in its current form."*

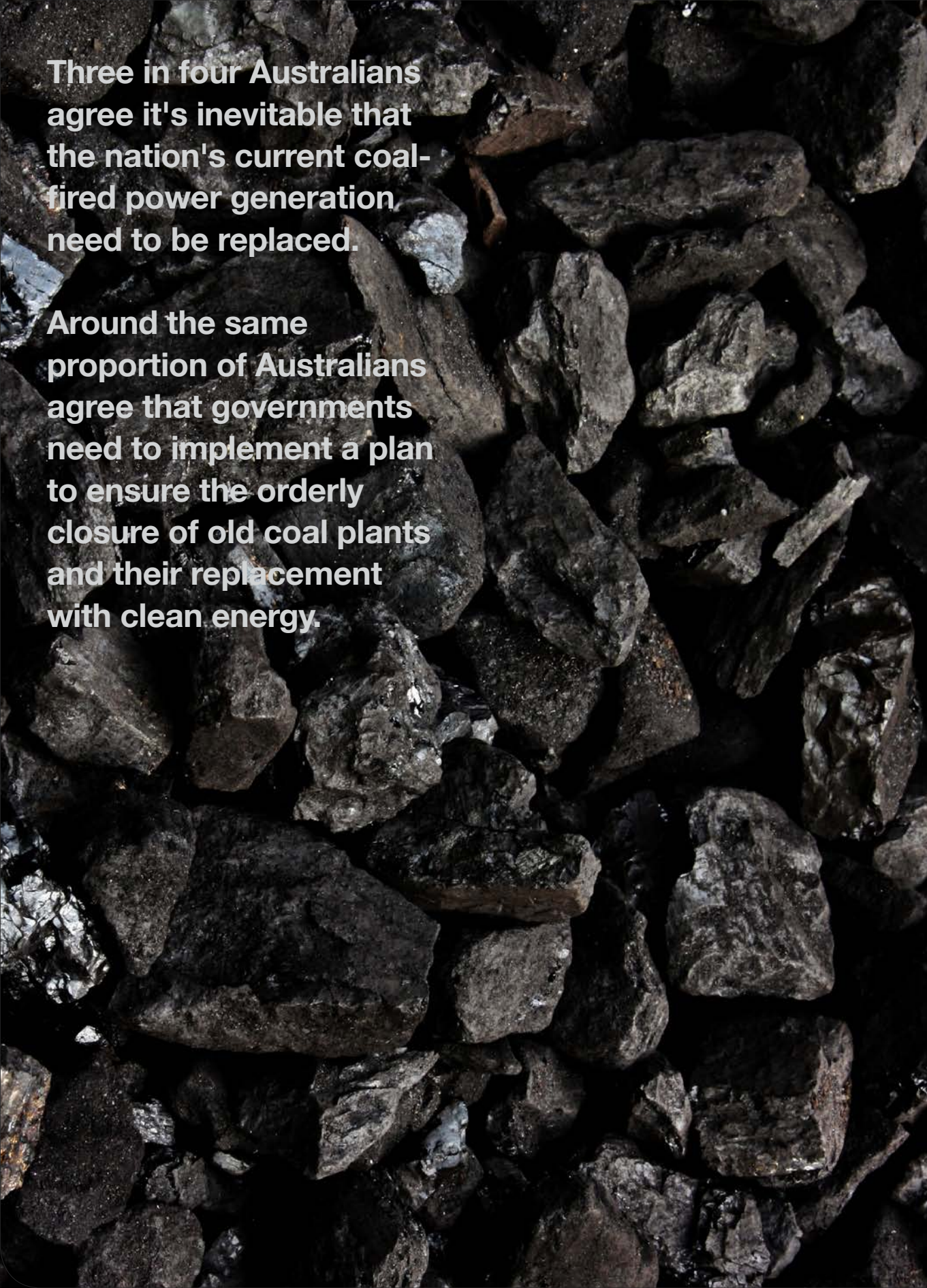
Newcastle focus group participant, 55+ year olds

At 75 per cent, a vast and consistently held majority consider that governments need to implement a plan to ensure the orderly closure of old coal plants and replace them with clean energy. Unusually, this is a view equally held by men and women.

Though there is a clear preference for the federal government to show leadership on this issue, people have a reasonable level of comfort with the idea of state and territory governments beating them to it. When presented with the statement, "State governments shouldn't act ahead of the federal government on", both renewable energy and phasing out coal-fired power generation, only 28 and 29 per cent, respectively, agreed. More men are in favour of state and territory governments acting ahead of the federal government on renewable energy (43 per cent) than women (34 per cent).

Additionally, 77 per cent of people agree that state governments should put in place incentives for more renewable energy, including wind. This view is most strongly held by people in Western Australia, at 87 per cent. It is held by slightly less people in South Australia and Victoria, both 73 per cent, compared to New South Wales, at 78 per cent, and Queensland, at 79 per cent.





Three in four Australians agree it's inevitable that the nation's current coal-fired power generation need to be replaced.

Around the same proportion of Australians agree that governments need to implement a plan to ensure the orderly closure of old coal plants and their replacement with clean energy.

Almost nine in ten Australians place solar in their top three choices of energy for Australia.

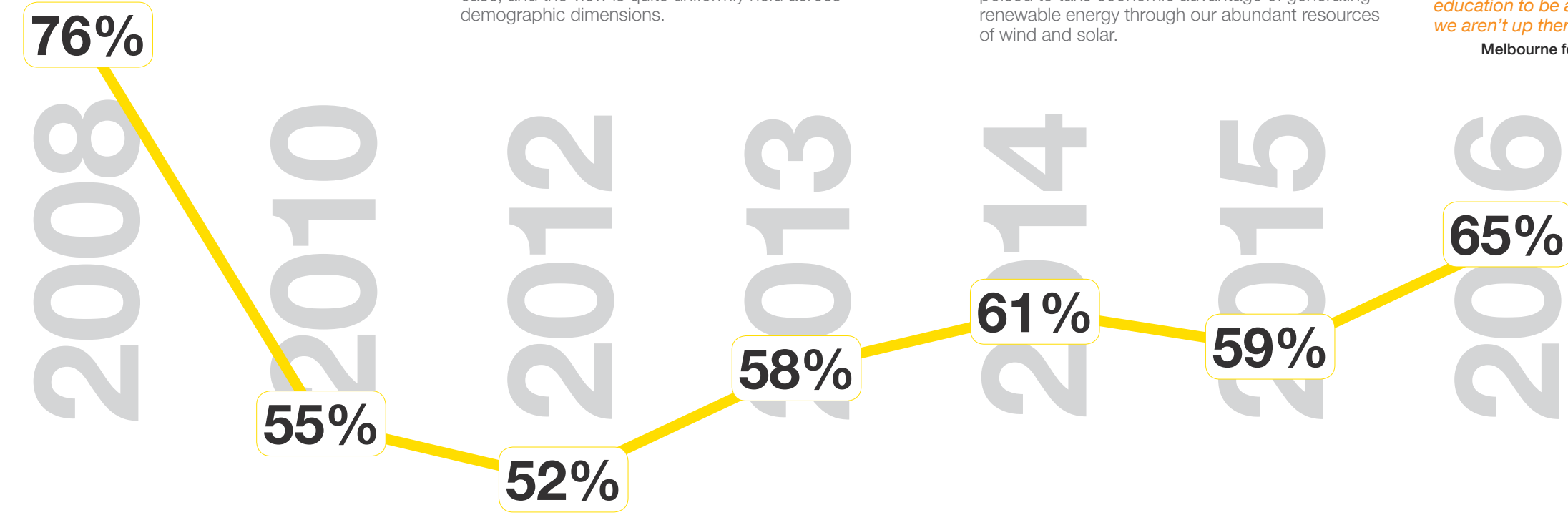


# International arena

## SHOULD AUSTRALIA BE A MOVER AND LEADER?

Australia is a signatory to the agreement struck at the December 2015 UN International Conference on Climate Change in Paris. More than 190 countries have agreed to implement domestic policies that will assist the world to limit global warming to “well below” 2°C above pre-industrial revolution levels, also agreeing to pursue action to limit warming to 1.5°C. At present, warming is already at 1°C above pre-industrial levels. The Agreement also recognised the need for net zero emissions. In The Climate Institute’s opinion, this is an objective that will need to be met, globally, before 2050 if we are to achieve the 1.5°C goal. The federal government is seeking to ratify the Agreement, noting it “is in our national interest”, by the end of the year.

Australians generally have an average awareness of the Paris conference having taken place. In focus group discussions, if people did have an awareness of the conference or the agreement, their knowledge of the outcomes and objectives was usually quite limited. In the national polling, 50 per cent of people say they were aware that it took place.



However, this level of awareness is not uniform across age groups. Among people aged 55 and over, awareness is at 67 per cent, rising to 72 per cent among those aged 65 and over. Whereas awareness is at 43 per cent for people aged 35 to 54 and 39 per cent for those aged 18 to 34. More men are aware of it than women (57 vs 42 per cent). Awareness is consistent across voting preferences.

*“Our current government’s goals are just in-line with the trends, so it’s not actually forcing a change. They really need to be making proactive goals.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

This level of awareness tends to indicate that Australians do not generally associate current actions being taken and driven domestically by the federal government as having a relationship to a UN agreement. That said, the overall lack of enthusiasm people have for the federal government’s approach to domestic leadership on climate action and energy policy reform is underscored by their clear view that economic benefits, such as new jobs and investment in clean energy – will flow from doing so. Three quarters – 73 per cent – see this as the case, and the view is quite uniformly held across demographic dimensions.

“THE PARIS AGREEMENT REPRESENTS A TURNING POINT IN THE GLOBAL TRANSITION TO A LOWER EMISSION FUTURE WITH MORE THAN 190 COUNTRIES COMING TOGETHER TO CREATE THIS HISTORIC AGREEMENT ... THE AGREEMENT IS IN OUR NATIONAL INTEREST.”

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop MP and Minister for The Environment and Energy, The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP

When the Paris agreement is explained, there is also strong agreement (67 per cent agree) that Australia should enact a serious policy plan to deliver the commitment made in Paris to achieving net zero emissions, with 66 per cent also believing it should include targets. Slightly more people in regional areas (69 per cent) believe in setting targets than in capital cities (64 per cent). Further, 57 per cent do not agree with the idea that Australia should wait for other countries before we strengthen our post-2020 emissions reduction targets, and 59 per cent do agree that we should wait for other major emitting countries such as China and the US before we move.

*“Australia has the opportunity to be a global leader in terms of renewable energy. We could have wind farms, solar farms and find a way to export it and make money off it, because not every country in the world is going to have solar power or wind power. If we invest in the power now, it could be so beneficial in the long-run.”*

Brisbane focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

Focus group discussions reinforced the notion that, regardless of whether you believe the science of climate change or not, Australia is perfectly poised to take economic advantage of generating renewable energy through our abundant resources of wind and solar.

Not only should it be assertive in embracing these opportunities, participants felt strongly that Australia should be a world leader in generating and exporting renewable energy, as well as finding solutions on climate change.

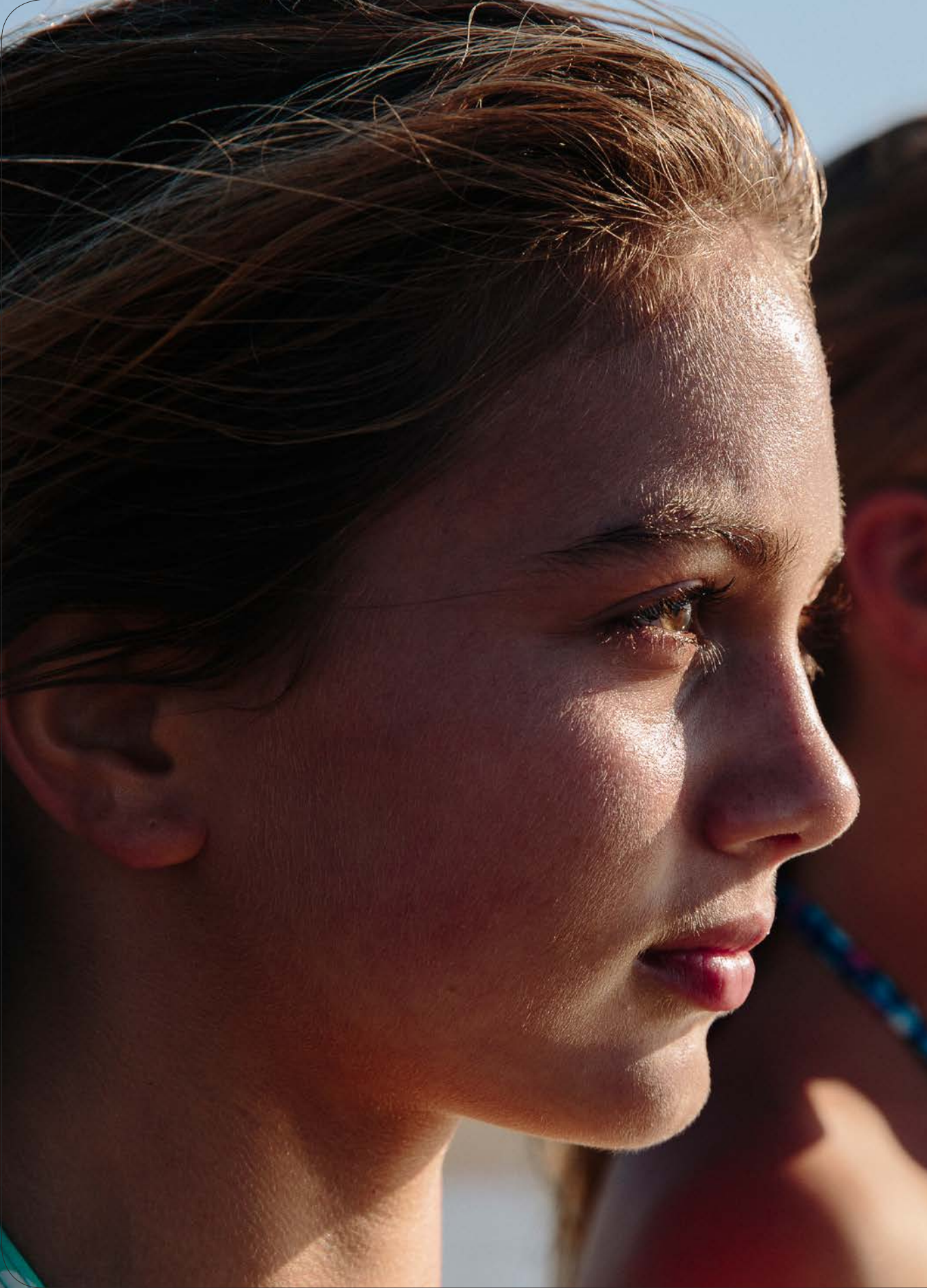
Sixty-five per cent feel our country Australia should be a world leader in finding solutions to climate change, with a further 17 per cent saying they neither agree nor disagree with the idea. Fifty-nine per cent of people disagree with the statement, “Australia should not act on climate change until other major emitters like the US and China do so”. This view has continued to rise from 55 per cent in 2014 and 49 per cent in 2013.

Extending this notion of leadership further, 71 per cent think Australia should implement policies to protect vulnerable people and natural systems from unavoidable climate change, with only 6 per cent in disagreement. Also, 55 per cent hold the view that Australia needs to help developing countries decrease their carbon emissions and adapt for the impacts of climate change.

*“We have the ability ... we have the money and education to be a lot bigger at it. It’s disappointing we aren’t up there with other European countries.”*

Melbourne focus group participant, 18-35 year olds

FIGURE 6  
PERCENTAGE OF AUSTRALIANS  
WHO WANT THEIR NATION TO BE  
A LEADER IN CLIMATE SOLUTIONS



# Bringing action home

## INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

No matter how engaged with climate change Australians are, there seems to be common ground on the issue of taking personal action to live responsibly, curbing waste and pollution. The average Australian wants to do what they can, such as recycling and saving electricity. Though, the thinking in regard to the outcome is about reducing costs and helping the environment, rather than reducing carbon emissions. In many cases, people feel they are simply not given enough clarity about what they could be doing about climate change.

There is also a certain aspect of “you can’t be what you can’t see” to taking action on climate change. Some focus group participants said that, as the federal government is not discussing and modelling the behaviour and actions that need to be taken, it is therefore either not top of mind for people or the issue is confusing and mired in wearying controversy. Without this leadership, the view is also that other sectors are less likely to take action and model accordingly.

Sixty-eight per cent think individuals and households should be contributing to action on climate change. A further 16 per cent think individuals and households should be the leading player. This “contributing” view is held slightly more in Queensland (74 per cent) and slightly more in regional areas (71 per cent) than in capital cities (67 per cent).

Additionally, though the term “climate change” can be a turn-off in some quarters, focus group discussions suggested that couching climate change action in terms of reducing pollution, and thereby expanding that to carbon pollution, may provide the pathway through which people can become more engaged. Many people are looking for links between climate change and their everyday lives, in order to be able to feel empowered to take action.

*“Perhaps what needs to be promoted is the action that we can take. I hear lots of news that is all about fear mongering. Tell me something that we can actually take action on. We hear about recycling and low-energy bulbs, but surely there’s more that we can do.”*

Melbourne focus group participant, 25+ year olds

In their day to day lives, across the board, the practices people are employing to take personal action are those that are easiest and least costly: 73 per cent are taking greater action on recycling and 72 per cent are using energy efficient devices in their homes. The next most common practice, at 48 per cent, is buying products that are labelled as sustainable or environmentally friendly.

*“I put a solar system on my property. Ten years ago, I wouldn’t have thought that I could balance my own electricity bill. When my batteries come in, I’ve effectively negated my power bills. I think if I can do it, it would have a really big impact nation-wide.”*

Newcastle focus group participant, 55+ year olds

More people aged 55 and over are recycling (80 per cent) and using energy efficient devices (87 per cent) and comparatively less are doing so in the 18 to 34 year old age group, at 62 and 56 per cent, respectively. More women (77 per cent) are recycling than men (68 per cent).

In terms of being an important consideration, a product being environmentally friendly in terms of production, packaging and recyclability has equivalent status to price. Eighty-five per cent see these factors as quite or very important, only beaten by being Australian made or owned, at 89 per cent. However, this ranking changes when restricted to the attribute to which people afford the highest purchasing consideration (i.e. very important): price (48 per cent), Australian made or owned (44), locally produced in your area (33) and environmentally friendly (30). The importance of carbon neutral or climate friendly labelling or certification, and fair trade or other key certifications, are of lesser importance, with a quarter to a third viewing them as not at all important (28 and 26 per cent respectively).

*“It’s everyone’s responsibility. But there are people who aren’t sure. So it needs to start with educators getting the ball rolling and making sure that everyone has the knowledge to take action.”*

Melbourne focus group participant, 18-35 year olds



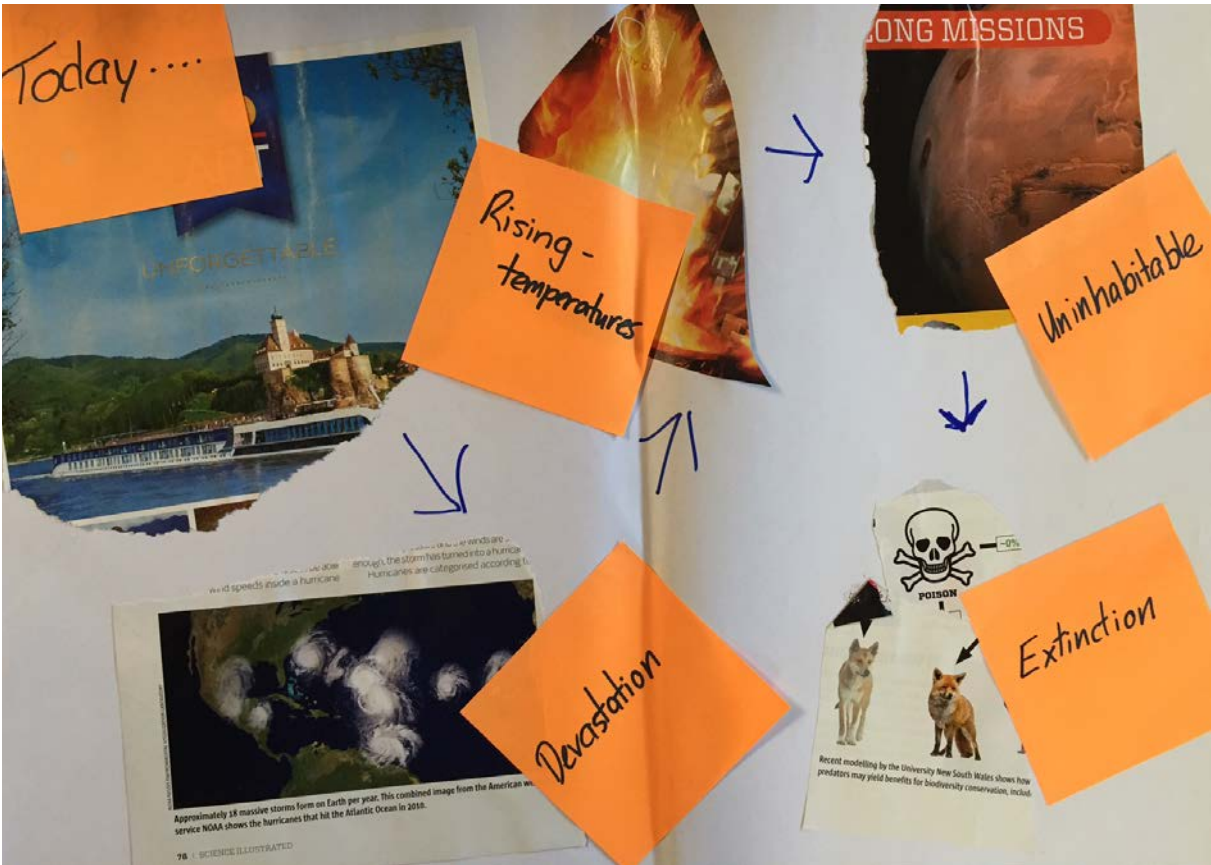
# Picture it

Collages constructed by focus group participants depicting what Australia's future will look like if we:

work towards and achieve a net zero emission world



vs if we do nothing to address climate change.






# Demographics







# Focus on: gender

On certain issues, there is a statistically significant difference between the number of women and men who hold a certain attitude. These differences include:

- + More men than women disagree that climate change is occurring (11 vs 6 per cent).
- + More women are concerned about climate change: 76 compared to 68 per cent of men. Also, more women think we are experiencing “a lot” of the impacts of climate change (37 per cent) than men (29 per cent).
- + More men agree that the seriousness of climate change is exaggerated (32 compared to 22 per cent of women).
- + 77 per cent of women think that it is inevitable that Australia's current coal-fired generation will need to be replaced, compared to 68 per cent of men.
- + More men (57 per cent) are aware of the December 2015 UN International Conference on Climate Change in Paris than women (42 per cent).
- + More men disagree with the statement, “State governments shouldn’t act ahead of the federal government on renewable energy” (43 per cent) than women (34 per cent).
- + Women are more concerned about various impacts of climate change than men, including:
  - + More water shortages (77 vs 65 per cent)
  - + More droughts and flooding affecting crop production and food supply (87 vs 76 per cent)
  - + Destruction of the Great Barrier Reef (88 vs 76 per cent)
  - + Rising sea level threats to coastal communities (80 vs 65 per cent)
  - + More bushfires (85 vs 71 per cent)
  - + Impacts on health, e.g. heatwaves, mosquito born viruses (82 vs 70 per cent).



# Focus on: urban / rural

## City dwellers:

- + More think climate change is occurring (79 per cent) than people living in regional areas (74 per cent).
- + More think that the main cause of climate change is human activity: 40 per cent compared to 35 per cent of regional residents.
- + More trust the science which suggests that the climate is changing due to human activities, with 62 per cent of this view compared to 57 per cent of regional Australia.



## Regional and rural Australians:

- + Among people who think climate change is occurring, more think climate change is due to a mixture of human causes and natural cycles (54 per cent) than city residents (49 per cent).
- + While solar, wind and hydro are rated as top three preferred energy sources nationally, regional and rural Australians rate each higher than their city neighbours. Solar is equally rated, Wind is 74 vs 68 per cent, and dams 52 vs 48 per cent.
- + More agree that Australia should set targets and implement domestic action to help limit global warming to 1.5-2°C and achieve net zero emissions (69 per cent vs 64 per cent of city residents).
- + More think that installing solar panels is an effective personal action in reducing emissions (65 per cent vs 60 per cent of city residents).
- + More look for locally produced products when shopping for household items (83 per cent vs 77 per cent of city residents).

# Focus on: age

## Younger Australians aged 18 to 34:

- + More agree that climate change is occurring (83 vs 76 per cent of 35 to 54 year olds and 73 per cent of people 55 and over).
- + More are concerned about climate change (78 per cent of 18 to 34 year olds compared to 72 per cent of 35 to 54 year olds and 68 per cent of people aged 55 and over).
- + More think that climate change is caused by human activity, with 41 per cent holding this view compared to only 31 per cent of people aged 35 to 54 and 23 per cent of people over aged 55 and over.
- + More trust the science that suggests the climate is changing due to human activities, with 69 per cent saying this vs 60 per cent of 35 to 54 year olds and 51 per cent of those aged 55 and over.
- + Less (65 per cent) think it is inevitable that Australia's current coal-fired generation will need to be replaced with renewable energy, than those aged 55 and over (78 per cent).

## Australians aged 55 and over:

- + Of the people who agree that climate change is occurring, more think that climate change is due to a mixture of human causes and natural cycles: 58 per cent of those aged 55 and over holding this view compared to 50 per cent of Australians aged between 35 and 54, and 46 per cent of those aged between 18 and 34.
- + More agree that governments need to implement a plan to ensure the orderly closure of old coal-fired power plants and replace them with clean energy: 79 per cent of those aged 55 and over hold this view, compared to 74 per cent those aged 35 to 54 and 71 per cent of those aged 18 to 34.
- + More are aware of the Paris climate change conference (67 per cent), rising to 72 per cent among those aged 65 and over, than people aged 35 to 54 (43 per cent) and those aged 18 to 34 (39 per cent).
- + More think Australia should implement policies that protect vulnerable people and natural systems from unavoidable climate change (75 per cent) than people aged 18 to 34 (66 per cent).

# Focus on: the states

## Preferred energy source

- + More people in Queensland choose solar as their most preferred energy source that does that nation as a whole (Qld 66, Nation 59 per cent).
- + More Western Australians choose tidal/wave energy as their most preferred (WA 10, Nation 3 per cent).
- + More South Australians choose nuclear as their most preferred energy source (SA 14, Nation 7 per cent).

## Coal closure

- + More South Australians agree that Australia should start phasing coal power stations out gradually so that we can manage the costs over time (SA 76, Nation 70 per cent).
- + More Western Australians want to phase them out as soon as possible (WA 33, Nation 21 per cent).

## Responsibility and leadership

- + More Western Australians think state governments should take a leading role in driving action on climate change (WA 60, Nation 47 per cent) and disagree with the statement that "State governments shouldn't act ahead of the federal government on renewable energy (WA 50 per cent, Nation 39 per cent).
- + Less people in Queensland (48 per cent) hold the view that Australia needs to help developing countries decrease their carbon emissions and adapt for the impacts of climate change (Qld 48 per cent, Nation 55 per cent).

## Cause of climate change

- + More South Australians think that the main cause of climate change is due to a mixture of human activity and natural cycles (SA 33 per cent, Nation 39 per cent).



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**Stephen Whately, donor to Climate of the Nation 2015 & 2016**

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