

YOUNG VOTERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

30/6/2010 – Kathleen Morris

PURPOSE OF REPORT

At the last Federal election, young voters were considered the key target by the “Kevin 07” campaign and the major players in determining the election outcome (Deborah Cornwall, “Poll shows youth voter critical in election”, *Lateline*, October 2007). It had been suggested that the environment, particularly climate change policy, was considered to be a “deal breaker” for young voters, who therefore overwhelmingly voted for the ALP due to its claims of being environmentally-minded. Once again, young voters are being heralded as the deciders of who will win the imminent 2010 federal election (Paula Kruger, “Campaign launched to encourage young people to vote”, *PM*, June 2010; “Young voters will decide Kevin Rudd’s fate”, *The Daily Telegraph*, March 2010). However, the question remains as to what policy area will be the “deal breaker” for young voters this time around and whether the environment still ranks highly in determining their decision. This report aims to address this question, in examining the degree of significance that first-time voters place on the environment and their satisfaction with present party’s environmental policy, and therefore concluding whether environmental policy is determinative or influential in their final decision for whom to vote. Focusing on a survey conducted by the Left Right Think Tank that encompassed the views of 121 young Australians, this report endeavours to inform Australian political parties and policy-makers of:

- The importance of, and interest in, environmental issues and policy for young voters;
- Young Australians’ opinions on and awareness of the Emissions Trading Scheme; and
- Their satisfaction with the government’s and opposition’s current environmental policy stance

SURVEY QUESTIONS

The Left Right Think Tank conducted a survey that included the following questions:

1. Interest towards environmental issues and policy, and importance placed on environmental policy
2. Awareness of the ETS and what the ETS and CPRS stood for, as well as awareness of whether it had been implemented or not and why
3. Do you think an ETS is an adequate course of action to address climate change?
4. Have you or your family utilised any of the government subsidies for solar energy/home insulation?
5. How important are various environmental policy areas?
6. Would you be prepared to pay more for environmental policy to be implemented?
7. How satisfied are you with the current government’s environmental policy stance?
8. How satisfied are you with the opposition’s environmental policy stance?

OVERVIEW OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

This survey was conducted nationally from the 30th May to the 20th June 2010, open to Australian citizens currently eligible to vote and who had not previously voted in a federal election. Of the 121 respondents, 31% were aged 18 years, 30% aged 19, 14% were aged 20, and the remaining 25% were aged 21. There were 48 male responses and 73 female responses. Almost all respondents were students (93%), most of whom were employed in part time/casual work, with the remaining 7% of respondents engaged solely in full time or part time/casual employment.

CONCLUSION 1: There is a moderate level of political identification and engagement among young Australians.

The survey returned findings of a significant level of interest in Australian domestic politics with 50% of respondents indicating either high or very high level of interest. Notably, 35% of respondents had a medium level of interest, with only 2% having a very low interest and 22% having very high interest. Self-identification with political parties demonstrated no clear political inclination with responses roughly split between the Greens (26%), the Australian Labor Party (25%) and the Liberal Party (21%). There were also a substantial number of respondents who were unsure as to who they would vote for in the next election (21%) and some respondents who identified with Family First (2%) and the Democrats (5%).

CONCLUSION 2: There is a high level of interest and perception of the importance of environmental policy.

In order to identify the significance of environmental policy in determining the eventual vote being cast by young voters, two questions were posed.

The respondents were firstly asked to state their level of interest towards environmental issues and policy in particular. The survey results indicated that 90% of respondents had a “medium” (27%), “high” (41%) or “very high” (22%) level of interest. Only 1% of respondents had a “very low” level of interest in environmental policy. These results suggest that young Australian voters have a specifically higher interest in environmental issues than they have in other areas of Australian domestic politics as a whole.

The respondents were secondly requested to indicate how important they perceived environmental policy to be. As the graph below (Figure 1) indicates, a total of 91% of respondents ranked environmental policy as either “very important” or “important.” This signifies that even those voters who do not have a high personal level of interest in environmental policy nevertheless recognise that the environment is an important policy area.

Overall, environmental policy is clearly an area of great interest *and* importance to young voters

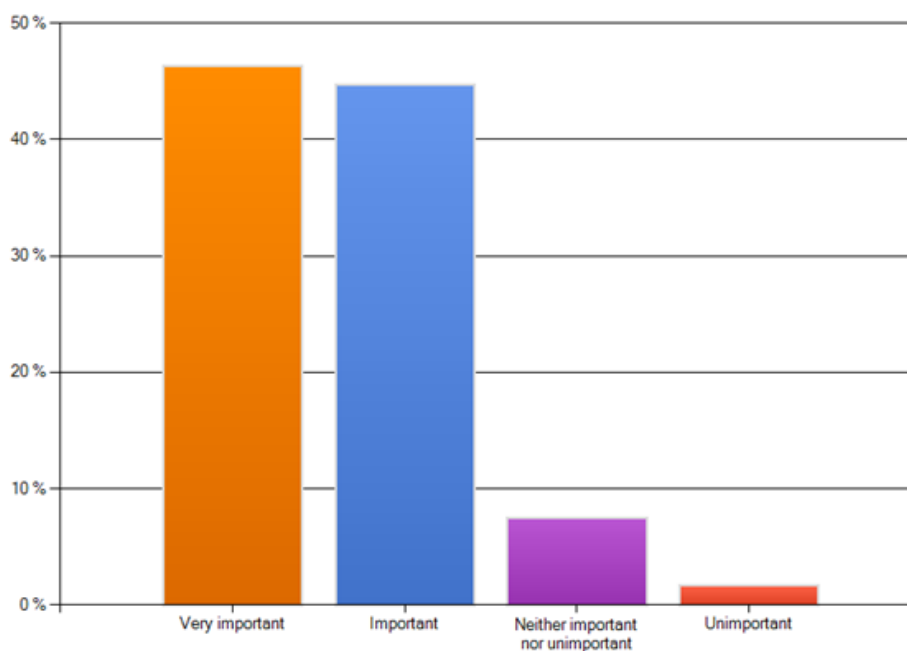


Figure 1 Importance placed on environmental policy

CONCLUSION 3: There is uneven awareness of the Emissions Trading Scheme and Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme

When asked what the abbreviations “ETS” and “CPRS” stood for, 17% of the respondents did not know either one or both responses. The majority of these (90%) did not know that CPRS stood for carbon pollution reduction scheme.

When asked whether the ETS had been implemented, 87% of respondents replied “no” while the rest were unsure about its current implementation status. Of the 87% of respondents who were aware that the ETS had not been implemented, roughly the same percentage of this group of respondents were also aware that it had been blocked in the Senate due to a lack of political support, and further, that the scheme had been shelved by the government until after the next election. The results therefore suggest that, on the whole, young voters have knowledge of the recently proposed major environmental policies, as well as their current stance. However, the significant number of respondents who were unaware of the details of this major environmental policy initiative suggests that there may either be political apathy with regard to this policy area, or that there was little information circulated by the government to the public on this issue.

CONCLUSION 4: There is a widespread belief that the ETS is an inappropriate scheme to comprehensively tackle environmental problems

The results of the survey illustrate that there is a significant degree of division with regard to the appropriateness of the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) as the central framework to address climate change and other environmental issues.

While there is some general economic support for the principles embodied by the ETS amongst 30% of respondents they did not support the currently proposed scheme, citing that it should re-structured without debilitating exceptions and accompanied with a target that will actually encourage investment in alternate forms of energy and reduce emissions. The theoretical support of an ETS stemmed from arguments that the market would be the most economically efficient method of internalising the cost of pollution so that these costs would be included in economic decision making. However, many respondents in this survey were concerned that such a scheme would simply allow big businesses to buy carbon credits and do nothing to address their pollution levels, particularly if the economic costs are not significant and if there is little encouragement of or incentive to consider energy alternatives.

It should be noted that a small (but significant) majority of respondents (38%) were against the scheme entirely, emphasising that environmental problems cannot be solved by a purely economic or political mechanism. They argued that such problems required a radical change in how our society operates, both at an individual level and a societal level.

Those respondents unsure about the scheme (32%) were concerned about the lack of research into alternative policy ideas and expressed doubts as to whether the ETS was really designed to make a real and effective impact on the environment. They also preferred a more integrated and multifaceted approach to tackling environmental problems.

CONCLUSION 5: There is a widespread belief that other policy schemes, particularly focusing on the development and investment in renewable energy sources, should be considered.

The survey results indicate that young Australians were desirous of alternative policy schemes.

Firstly, there was general discontent, even amongst those in favour of the principle of an ETS, of the proposed ETS and the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS). Most respondents considered that the CRPS set too low a target and involved too many exceptions.

With regard to other major government initiative of subsidies for solar panel and insulation installation, the fact that only 19% of respondents currently participated in such schemes should not be taken as indicating a lack of support. Rather, these results may more reflect the fact that as students they are either renting or living at home and therefore are without the authority or financial capacity to make the decision to take part in these schemes. Indeed, the respondents' willingness to pay more if appropriate environmental policies are implemented (see below) suggests that were they able to participate in these schemes they would.

Secondly, respondents considered that it was essential that there be particular research and investment into alternative green fuel sources to provide viable alternatives to fuel derived from coal. When asked about the importance of various environmental policy areas, respondents revealed a preference for investment and research into green technology with "government action to replace coal with renewable energy" receiving the most support. This preference indicates that green technology should be a key area of environmental policy and that voters desire government action as opposed to action at the household level. Additionally, in their comments surrounding the appropriateness of an ETS, several respondents against or unsure about an ETS emphasised that higher priority should be placed on renewable energy sources as this will have a greater long term effect on carbon emissions.

Respondents were particularly concerned that the political impetus for action must be found soon in order to avoid irreversible damage to the environment.

CONCLUSION 6: Young Australians are willing to pay more for environmental action to be taken by the government.

A surprisingly significant majority of respondents (59%) were willing to pay more for environmental policy to be implemented. The comments of the respondents were centred around a theme of responsible citizenship, that is, a recognition that we as a nation need to take responsibility for the environment, that environmental degradation is currently an externality that when included in market transactions will necessarily increase costs, and that the "costs of inaction will in the end be greater than the costs of acting" (Kevin Rudd, *Address to the Lowy Institute*, November 6 2009). Respondents emphasised the need to think long-term and were persistent and united in encouraging more efficient, sustainable use of our resources in order to protect future generations.

This willingness to 'pay more' in monetary terms for government action on environmental problems was tempered by concern, particularly amongst those who were unsure about the rise in costs (24%), about how reasonable any increases in costs would be. Respondents stated that they would be content with higher costs only if the revenue was effectively invested in sound environmental policy and schemes, rather than wasted on poor political decisions or inadequately managed projects. These opinions were similarly expressed by those who were against the rise in prices (17%), who felt that the Federal budget already expends enough taxpayer's dollars on "useless projects" and that current revenue levels in the Federal coffers should be

sufficient to provide for environmental projects. There were also widespread concerns about the higher costs of living, particularly reflecting the demographic of the respondents, being mostly students (therefore typically, cash-strapped).

Thus, overall, young voters acknowledge that environmental action will involve additional financial costs, but they also desire that any spending will be transparent, properly managed and actually address environmental policy objectives and concerns.

CONCLUSION 7: There is a low level of satisfaction with the government’s current environmental policy stance

The majority of respondents (44%) were unsatisfied with the government’s current environmental policy stance, particularly with regard to:

- a) The low targets set in the government’s ETS
- b) The ETS being shelved until after the next election
- c) Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s backflip on climate change, which appeared to demonstrate his, and his party’s, lack of commitment to their convictions.

This high level of dissatisfaction can be attributed to unfulfilled expectations held by many young voters of the Rudd government. Some of the respondents expressed anger that this government had so far done little to act on the promises it had promoted to strengthen the party’s environmental credentials at the last Federal election. These sentiments were echoed in a recent article, which stated that “Rudd has made the calculation that the greatest moral challenge of our generation (his words) is not as important as guaranteeing his own re-election.” (Peter van Onselen, “Politics Trumps a Moral Challenge,” *The Australian*, April 2010). Respondents also felt that since delaying debate and implementation of the ETS, the government lacked further impetus to find a solution or an alternate way of addressing environmental concerns. Overall, respondents were unsatisfied with the fact that there had been no concrete or coherent efforts made to address environmental concerns by the government and that economic growth, and other short-term, politically convenient or non-controversial goals, continued to be promoted over environmental goals.

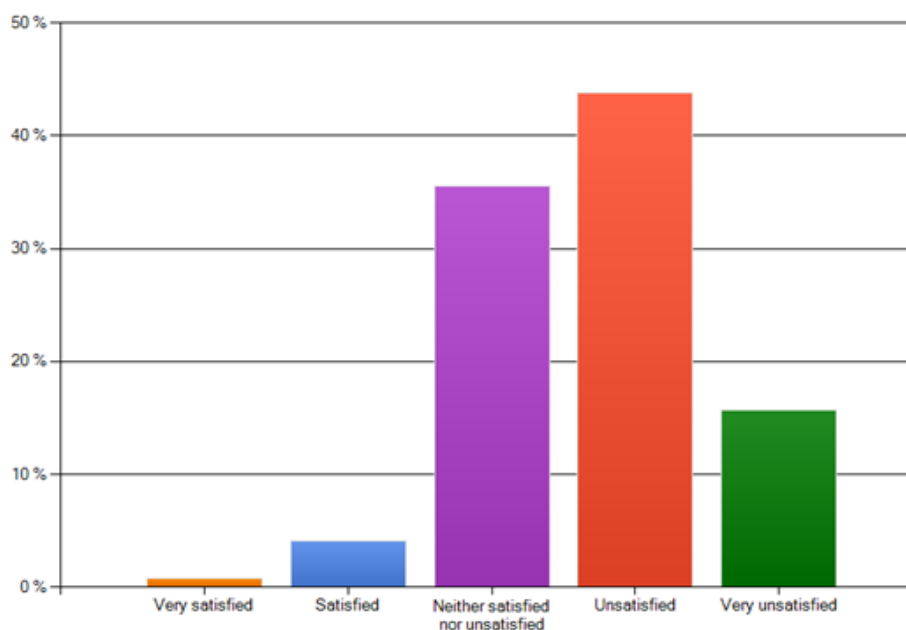


Figure 2 Satisfaction with the government's current environmental policy stance

Hard Heads, Soft Hearts & Young Minds...

CONCLUSION 8: There is an ambivalent level of satisfaction with the Opposition’s environmental policy stance

With regards to the Opposition’s environmental stance responses were far more varied, with 45% of respondents being “neither satisfied nor unsatisfied”, but 33% also feeling “very unsatisfied”. Thus, interestingly, this survey reveals that there is a higher level of “very unsatisfied” voters with regards to the Opposition (33%) in comparison to the same level of dissatisfaction against the government (16%). The reasons given by respondents who were “very unsatisfied” with the Opposition were that they believed the leaders of the Liberal Party to be largely climate change sceptics. The same respondents were also unhappy that the Liberal Party had not, in their opinion, expressed any viable alternatives to the ETS.

Those respondents who were ambivalent about the Opposition’s stance were predominantly of the opinion that the Opposition did not appear to have any environmental policy of its own, and seemed to be instead focused on critiquing the government. Many respondents were particularly unhappy with Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott’s personal stance, and expressed that they were more supportive of former Liberal Party leader, Malcolm Turnbull’s efforts in attempting to negotiate and pass a modified ETS. At present, the respondents did not believe that the environment was high on the Opposition’s political agenda and doubted that if the Liberal Party was elected to government, that they would actually take action on this policy issue. This unhappiness of respondents with regards to the lack of an articulate environmental policy by the Opposition again emphasises the importance of environmental policy to young voters and that the lack of commitment to act on environmental concerns is a major factor against a political party.

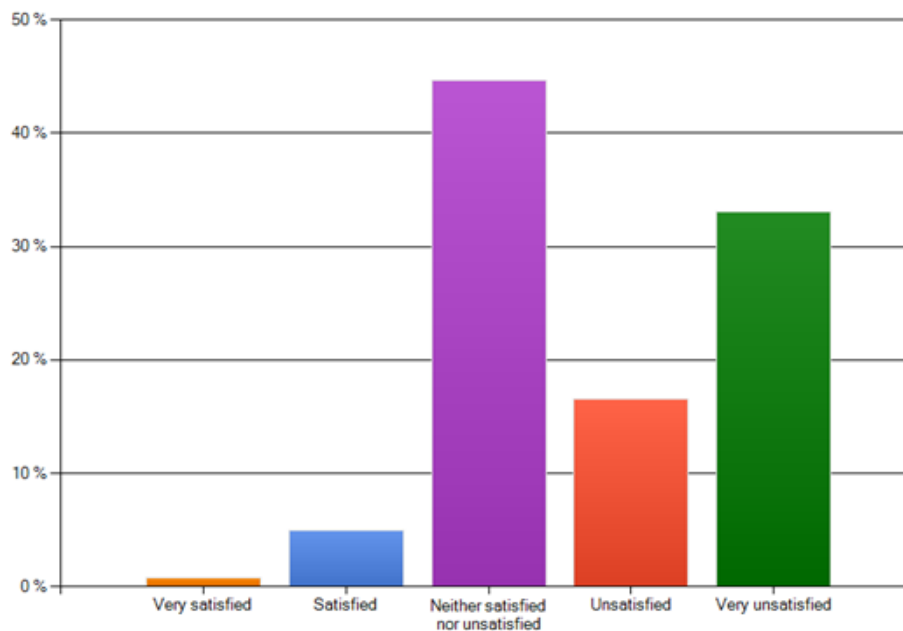


Figure 3 Satisfaction with the opposition’s current environmental policy stance

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

After emphasising in 2007 that action on climate change was “urgent” and that as Prime Minister he would work on emissions control commitments (Cynthia Banham, “I can unit world on climate, says Rudd”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 2007), Kevin Rudd has failed to implement a consistent and comprehensive major climate change policy. Despite stating that it was “the greatest moral, economic and environmental challenge of our generation” and that “to delay [implementing the CPRS] any longer would be reckless and irresponsible for our economy and our environment” (Peter van Onselen, “Politics trumps a moral challenge”, *The Australian*, April 2010) he decided to shelve its implementation to 2013 or beyond. These backflips on

environmental policy have contributed to widespread dissatisfaction in the government's environmental policy stance, as reinforced by the results of a survey conducted by the Left Right Think Tank on young Australian and analysed in this Report.

Left Right Think Tank's survey has revealed the following conclusions:

- a) There is a high level of interest and perception of the importance of environmental policy.
- b) There is uneven awareness of the ETS and CPRS.
- c) There is a widespread belief that the ETS proposed by the government is an inappropriate scheme to comprehensively tackle environmental problems
- d) There is a widespread belief that other more multi-faceted policy schemes, particularly focusing on the development and investment in renewable energy sources should be considered.
- e) Young Australians are willing to pay more for environmental action to be taken by the government, provided that it is subject to adequate frameworks of transparency and management
- f) There is a low level of satisfaction with the government's current environmental policy stance
- g) There is an ambivalent level of satisfaction with the Opposition's environmental policy stance

This Report has revealed that among young Australians, there is a clear consensus that action needs to be taken now, rather than delayed any more, and that this needs to be an efficient, targeted, multifaceted, sustainable approach that will protect the needs of future generations and avoid irreparable environmental damage.

This consensus is felt not just by these young Australians, but also by the broader population as indicated by a recent Climate Institute poll conducted between the 9th and 10th of June 2010 and published on the 28th of June. More than half the respondents in that survey were found to have lost confidence in the ability of the ALP to deal with climate change and two-thirds did not have confidence in either major party ('Gillard to fight for carbon tax', *ABC News*, June 2010). The Climate Institute Poll mirrors the findings of Left Right Think Tank that voters are unsatisfied with the government's inaction and the failure of the Opposition to develop or promote a particular environmental policy stance. Furthermore, this Climate Institute Poll supports the conclusions of Left Right Think Tank that action, or the lack of action, in relation to the environment is a significant vote decider.

Recently-installed Prime Minister Julia Gillard has spoken lately of the need for "lasting and deep community consensus" before she takes action on the environment (Peter Hartcher, 'How Abbott found an unexpected climate change ally in the Gang of Four', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2010). As indicated by the Left Right Think Tank's survey on young Australians' attitudes towards environmental policy, that consensus is already clearly present. Left Right Think Tank believes that the time has come for the government to act on its mandate of representative governance. The consequence of not doing so would be potentially politically disastrous. Young voters in particular, who played a deciding role in the 2007 election and who will ultimately do so again in the 2010 election, believe that the environment is a crucial issue. Without evidence from the major parties that they are committed to environment protection, young Australians may switch their support to minority parties who have a stronger and more articulate stance on the environment and who are more willing or open to representing interests and ideas of young Australians.

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SURVEY- ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Directions given to respondents

Before completing this survey please be aware that this research is focusing on young Australian citizens who will be voting for the first time in a Federal Election this year. If you are not eligible to vote in Australia, voted in the last Federal Election or are over 25 please do not complete this survey. Thank you.

1. Age
 - a. 18
 - b. 19
 - c. 20
 - d. 21+
2. Gender
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other
3. Occupation
 - a. Student
 - b. Student and full time work
 - c. Student and part time/casual work
 - d. Full time work
 - e. Part time/casual work
4. Please identify your level of interest in Australian politics
 - a. Very high
 - b. High
 - c. Medium
 - d. Low
 - e. Very low
5. Which Australian political party do you most strongly identify with and/or expect to vote for in the next election?
 - a. Liberals
 - b. Greens
 - c. Labor
 - d. Nationals
 - e. Family First

- f. Democrats
 - g. Don't know
 - h. Other (please specify)
6. How would you rate your level of interest towards environmental issues and policy?
- a. Very high
 - b. High
 - c. Medium
 - d. Low
 - e. Very low
7. How important do you think environmental policy is?
- a. Very important
 - b. Important
 - c. Neither important nor unimportant
 - d. Unimportant
 - e. Very unimportant
8. Are you aware of the ETS? If no please skip to question 12
- a. Yes
 - b. No
9. What do ETS and CPRS stand for?
10. Has the ETS been implemented? Please elaborate on its current stance
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
11. Do you think an ETS is an adequate course of action to address climate change? Why/Why not?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
12. Have you or your family utilised any of the Australian government subsidies for solar energy/insulation?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure

13. Please rank the following environmental policy areas from 1 to 7 in terms of how important you believe they should be in Australian politics (1 being most important 7 being least important)
- Green technology investment
 - Environmental refugees
 - Government action to replace coal with renewable energy
 - Encouraging households to switch to renewable energy sources
 - Species and habitat protection
 - Climate change policy
 - Other (please specify)
14. Would you be prepared to pay more (in energy prices or government taxes, for example) for environmental policy to be implemented? Why/Why not?
- Yes
 - No
 - Unsure
15. How satisfied are you with the current government's environmental policy stance? Why/why not?
- Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied
 - Unsatisfied
 - Very unsatisfied
16. How satisfied are you with the opposition's environmental policy stance? Why/why not?
- Very satisfied
 - Satisfied
 - Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied
 - Unsatisfied
 - Very unsatisfied