



IPSOS

CLIMATE CHANGE REPORT

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Social Research Institute
Understanding Society

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BACKGROUND

Now in its eighth year, this report presents the findings of the annual climate change research conducted by the Ipsos Social Research Institute. The research is conducted among a nationally representative sample of more than 1,000 Australians¹.

Climate change as an issue in Australia

Environmental issues are never far from the top of the political agenda in Australia, and in recent years this has especially been the case. Often a deeply polarising issue in the domain of public discourse, particularly with regards to proposed responses to tackling climate change, recent political careers have been made and broken in the arena of environmental politics, at the very highest level.

The high-profile political wrangling over climate change policy to which Australia has been subjected in recent years has come in the context of the country's resource-focused economy. Australia is one of the biggest exporters globally of coal and other minerals, and in the top 10 countries with regards to energy production² and CO₂ emissions per capita³.

Climate change is already affecting Australia with more intense and more frequent droughts and heatwaves, rising sea levels and changing rainfall; these changes have resulted in increasing pressure on water supplies and agricultural production⁴.

So what do Australians think of the issue?



What are the priorities for action?

Before delving into the more politically charged topic of climate change, we asked Australians which environmental issues they would take action on if they were in charge of making political decisions in Australia.

Figure 1 shows the top environmental issues in terms of perceived need for action since 2007. Renewable energy has topped the list of issues for the last five years (in the most recent study 56% identify this as an issue to address). Along with sustainability (41%), it has also proved one of the most stable measures over time. The importance of renewable energy amongst the Australian public chimes with other existing environmental attitude research⁵, where increased government investment in renewable energy sources was the most popular of a possible range of initiatives responding to the threat of climate change.

Do all sections of the Australian population feel as strongly about the importance of renewables? Two factors stand out: politics and age.

With regard to politics, a significantly smaller proportion (49%) of supporters of the Liberal National coalition selected renewable energy as a topic to address, compared to Labor (61%) and Greens supporters (75%).

Age is also a factor in the emphasis people put on renewables, although not in a way that some may expect: in 2014 (the most recent wave of this study) two thirds (66%) of respondents aged 50 or over selected renewable energy as an issue for action, compared to fewer than half (43%) of those aged 18-29. A similar trend has been observed since 2010. And it's not just renewable energy: across the board in 2014 respondents over 50 years of age selected a higher number of issues to address on average (10) than those under 30 (7).

And generally the proportion of respondents selecting any given issue has been steadily decreasing since 2007, as well as the average number of issues selected in total (from 15 in 2007 to 8 in 2014). The top five (downward) movers across the years are displayed in Figure 2. The trend is relatively straightforward: the top three environmental issues for action in 2007 were all connected with the severe drought Australia had been experiencing since the mid-1990s. Public concern about water-related issues lessened across 2007 to 2011, unsurprisingly given the worst of the drought came to an end during 2009 and 2010. Despite this, as the world's driest inhabited continent, water security is never far from our minds and therefore two of these water-related topics remain in the top five environmental issues for action.

Figure 1: Top issues for action 2014, over time

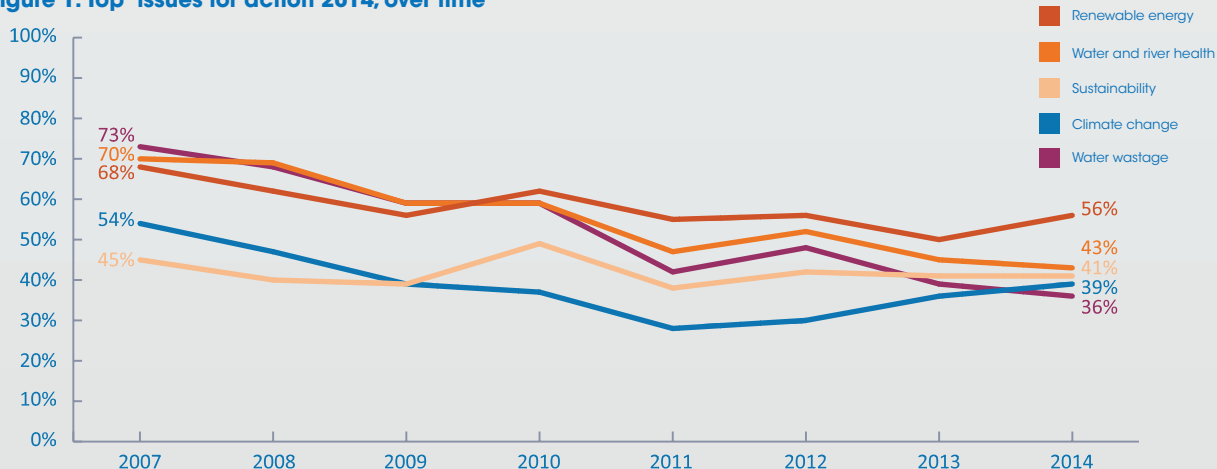
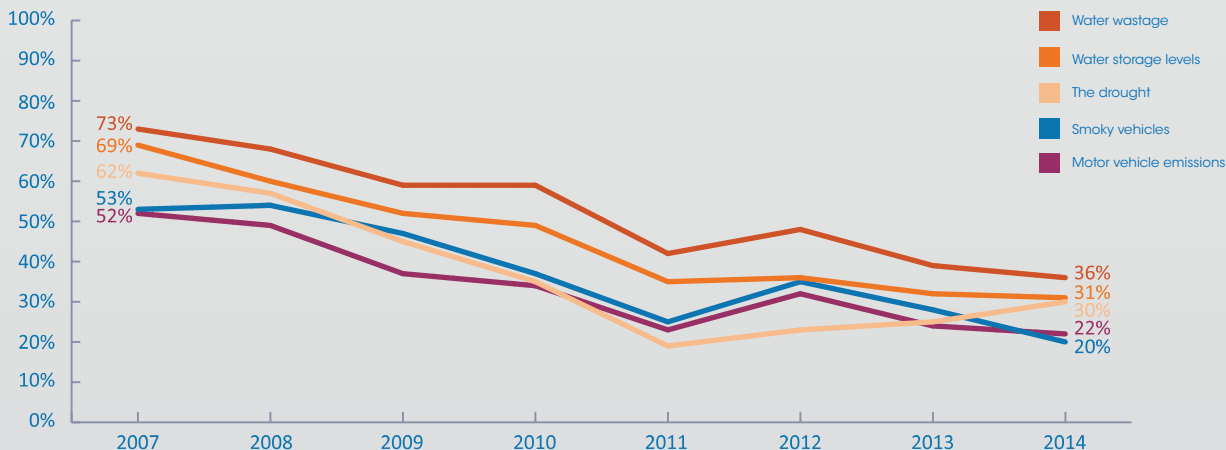


Figure 2: Top 5 mover issues for action over time



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey 2007-2014
 Base: All respondents
 Q1. If you were in charge of making decisions for Australia, select the issues below that you would address or take action on

How well do we understand the causes of climate change?

What do Australians believe is behind climate change, and has this changed over the years? Figure 3 charts the top five perceived causes of climate change over time.

Industry emissions of greenhouse gases and the burning of fossil fuels are the most commonly identified causes of climate change, with about three in five selecting these activities (59% and 58% respectively). Deforestation, the third most commonly identified cause was selected by just more than a half (53%). Perceptions of the causes of climate change have remained very stable since the research began in 2007.

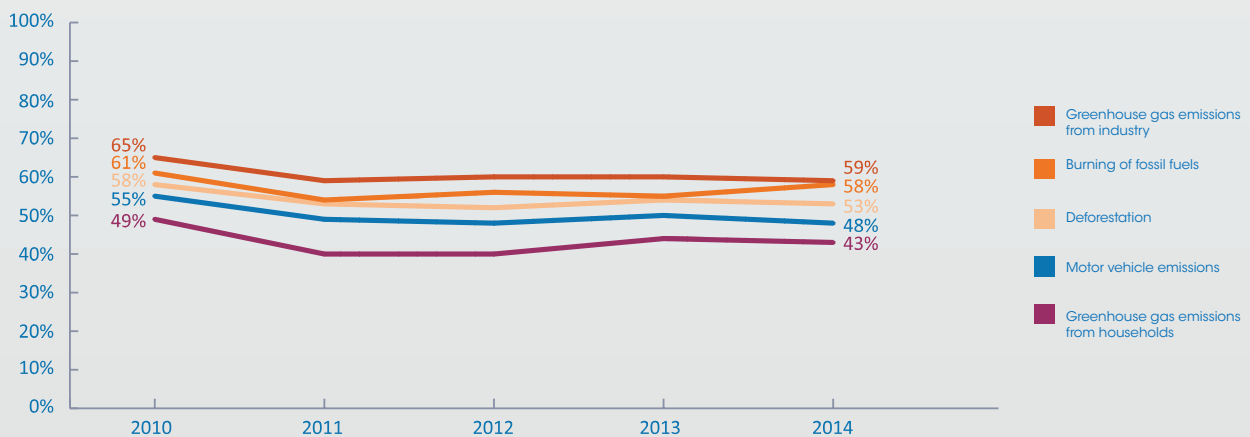
The vast majority of Australians believe that climate change is real phenomenon. Only 3% in 2014 believe "there is no such thing as climate change". There has been little change in these numbers over time (see Figure 4).

When asked about the respective roles of human activity and natural processes in climate change in 2014, just under half (43%) believe that both are contributing to climate change. Those who believe climate change is mostly or entirely caused by human activity (40%) outnumber those who believe it is mostly or entirely caused by natural processes (14%) by about three to one.

As reflected in previous waves of this study, younger respondents (52% of those aged 18-29 vs. 37% of those aged 30+), wealthier (50% of those with a gross household income of \$100,000 or more vs. 37% earning below this amount) and more highly educated respondents (50% of those with a university degree vs. 34% of those without one) are more likely to believe climate change is entirely or mainly caused by human activity.

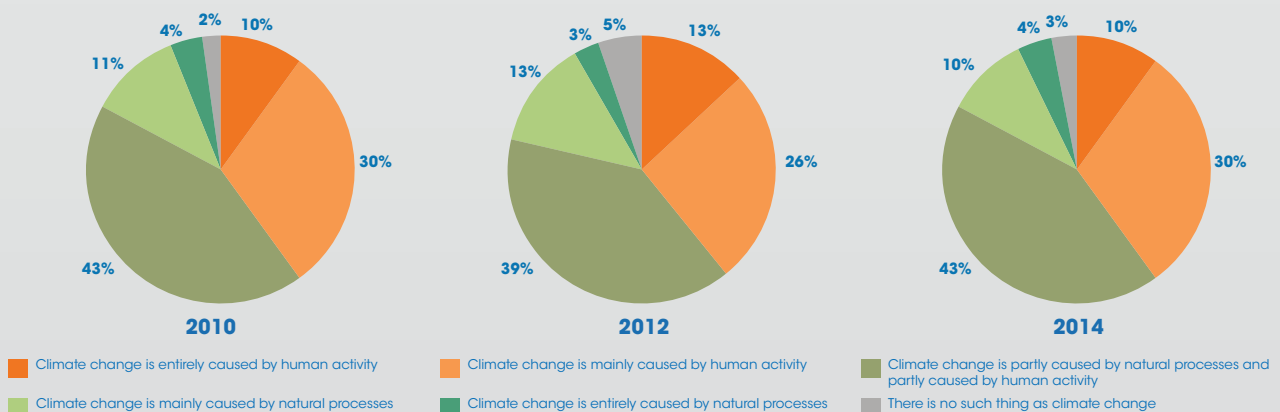
Despite 3% believing there is no such thing as climate change, responses to other questions in the survey indicate that the issues are not black and white in the mind of many Australians. Almost a third (30%) agree with the statement **"The seriousness of climate change is exaggerated"** and 22% agree that **"I have serious doubts about whether climate change is occurring."** This demonstrates that, while many may 'believe' in climate change when asked directly, their minds are not absolutely made up on the issue.

Figure 3: Top factors Australians believe cause climate change



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey 2007-2014
Base: All respondents
Q2. What would you say are the specific activities or things that cause climate change?

Figure 4: Human activity/natural processes as cause of climate change (2010, 2012, 2014)



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey
Base: All respondents (excluding "Don't know")
Q3. Which best describes your opinion about the causes of climate change?

How well do we understand the causes of climate change?

How well do we understand the issue?

Around half of Australians agree with the statement **"I believe I understand the causes and likely impacts of climate change"** (52% strongly or somewhat agree, 12% strongly or somewhat disagree).



52% agree that "There are too many conflicting opinions for the public to be confident about claims made around climate change."



50% of those who say they understand the causes and impacts agree that there are too many conflicting opinions, indicating that even those who are confident about the causes of climate change believe that the question of evidence can be a minefield.

However, the data suggests that there is still a substantial level of confusion and a number of misconceptions about climate change in Australia. Even those of us who believe we understand the causes and impacts of climate change may not be as well informed as we think.

The list of possible causes of climate change shown to respondents included two 'red herrings':



32% The hole in the ozone layer



23% Rubbish/litter

Almost a third (32%) of Australians believe that the hole in the ozone layer contributes to climate change and almost a quarter (23%) believe that litter is a cause. Neither the ozone hole nor litter cause climate change⁶.

Those who agree (strongly or somewhat) that they understand the causes and likely impacts of climate change are just as likely to identify rubbish as one of the causes as those who disagree that they understand the causes and likely impacts. And in fact, those who agree that they understand the causes and likely impacts of climate change are more likely to select the hole in the ozone layer as one of the causes (and more likely to choose the actual causes of climate change too).

Recent work from the Ipsos Mind & Mood Report uncovers a similar pattern, with many participants openly professing their lack of knowledge about the causes of climate change.

I want facts. I want to see the research that says, 'yes, this is the cause of global warming.' It's like vaccination. There's too much emotion about it. I want the facts.

I think the climate is changing but it isn't because of anything that we've done. We've only been recording the weather for 100 years. If you can change the weather in just 100 years' time we must be doing something phenomenal.

When will climate change start to bite?

Two thirds (66%) of Australians agree that climate change poses a serious threat to our way of life over the next 100 years, and although fewer are as sure about the more short-term future, more than half (58%) still agree that climate change poses a serious threat to our way of life over the next 25 years. But what does this threat look like and when is it likely to happen?

We asked Australians to provide an estimate of the number of years it will take for climate change to cause a range of different natural phenomena in Australia. Respondents could either state that climate change was already causing something, tell us in how many years' time they thought it would happen or state either that climate change will not cause it or that they are unsure. Figure 5 shows that many Australians consider that climate change is already causing a range of environmental issues.

Australians are most likely to identify extreme weather events and other natural phenomena as being on the rise due to climate change. Around three-in-five believe that more frequent and/or extreme droughts, storms, bushfires and floods are already occurring due to climate change. Similar proportions think that the Great Barrier Reef is already being negatively impacted (58%) and sea level rise is taking place due to climate change (57%).

Findings from the Ipsos Mind & Mood Report show that there is a clear belief among some Australians that the weather is changing in an observable way.

Woman 1: "Climate change is honestly something that I have no idea about if it's happening or if it's not happening"

Woman 2: "I relate to the seasons now. They're changing. That's about all I can see."

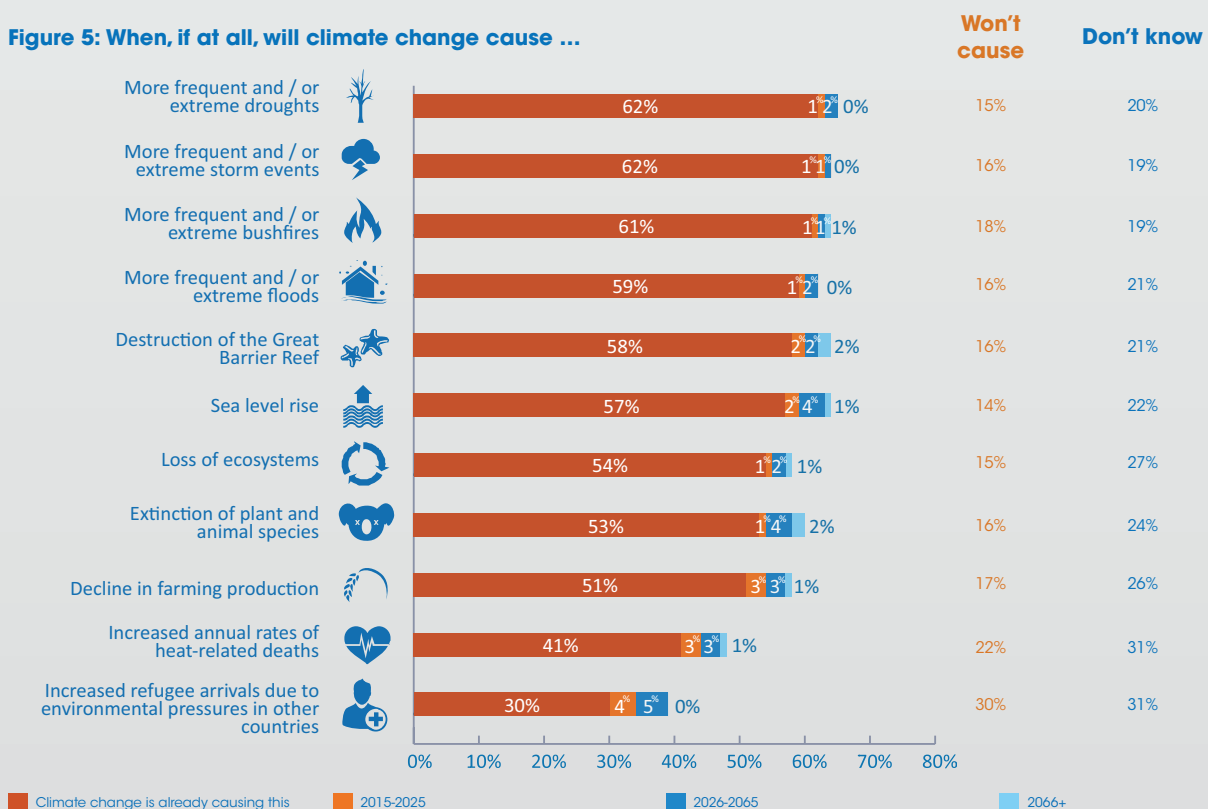
Man 1: "I'm still not sold on climate change ... I'm still out on all that stuff."

Man 2: "Until we get flooded then I'll believe it."

Man 3: "Well the height of summer last year the hottest week was 20 degrees - how does that fit into climate change?"

Fewer people believe that climate change is already directly impacting health and behaviour. Increased refugee arrivals and increased annual rates of heat-related deaths are the events that people are most unsure about with regards to climate change. Almost a third (31%) said 'don't know' when asked if and when climate change would cause these events. These two phenomena also had the highest proportions of people indicating that climate change will not cause these things (30% and 22% respectively).

Figure 5: When, if at all, will climate change cause ...



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey 2014
 Base: All respondents
 Q7. In how many years, if at all, do you think climate change will cause the following in Australia?

Who is responsible for taking action?

Since 2010 we have asked Australians who they think should be predominantly responsible for taking action on climate change.

The trend is clear – the Federal Government has been identified as the body most responsible for taking actions since Ipsos started putting the question to the public. The proportion selecting the Federal Government has been rising since 2011, such that 41% now believe the burden falls mainly on the Commonwealth's shoulders. Just under one-in-five Australians (18%) believe the international community is most responsible.

Only 7% of Australians identify individuals and their families as having the main responsibility for action. Recent research from the Ipsos Mind and Mood Report⁷ shows that many individuals feel that they are doing their part by purchasing green or reducing their resource use.

"Oh I'm conscious with recycling and all the day to day normal stuff that we do in the household. I'm energy conscious, so I turn lights off."

"I vote Green and I give money to Greenpeace and things like that. And I'm aware of global warming because I try and see it on a larger scale. But it's a difficult thing when you discuss it in a smaller context... I've travelled so I've seen all these things first hand and think, 'Well, we've got to do something about it, the planet is in trouble'."

"I think it's a personal thing and you have to think to yourself, 'Is this doing us any good or not?'"

There is an apparent inconsistency in terms of cause and responsibility when it comes to industry; the most commonly identified cause of climate change is greenhouse gas emissions from industry, and yet only 7% of Australians believe that business and industry should be mainly responsible for action.

Qualitative findings from the Mind and Mood Report suggest that one of the key reasons Australians feel that the Federal Government is responsible for tackling climate change is that they are best placed to provide the conditions to ensure uptake of measures to tackle climate change by industry and individuals. Climate change is seen (by some) as a big problem in need of a big, coordinated response.

"The public don't see it. The government needs to make it law."

"Big corporations are producing stuff that we buy, so if those companies are forced to improve, they have the bigger influence. You have to start at the top."

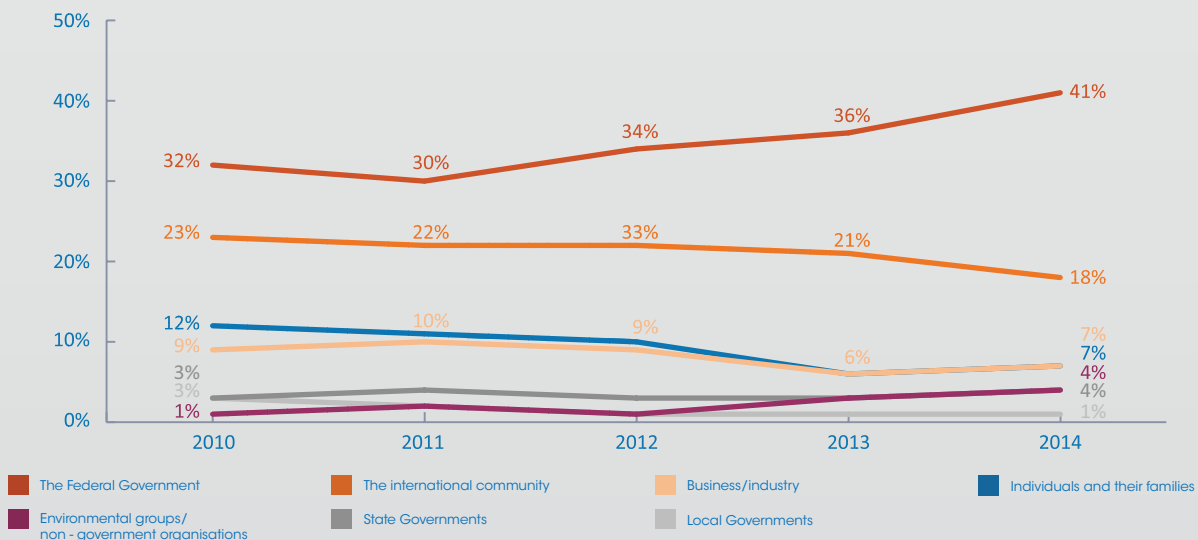
"I'd like to see government have give subsidies to businesses who are having a fair crack at something legitimately".

Politics plays a part in the attribution of responsibility: 32% of Coalition supporters think that the Federal Government should be mainly responsible for action, compared to 50% of Labor supporters and 57% of Greens supporters.

Those with a university education (47%) are more likely than who are not university-educated (38%) to believe the Federal Government should be mainly responsible for action.

Those aged 18-29 (31%) are less likely than those aged 30 and above (44%) to believe the Federal Government should be mainly responsible for action.

Figure 6: Responsibility for action on Climate Change



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey 2007-2014
 Base: All respondents
 Q8. Who should be mainly responsible for action on climate change?

What's the preferred course of action to tackle climate change?

What can the Government do?

So if the Federal Government is deemed by many to be most responsible for action, what can it do?

There are two competing overarching climate change policy positions in Australia. One involves putting a punitive price on carbon emissions and the other offering financial incentives for their reduction. Respondents were asked about their opinions regarding the effectiveness and their level of support of each policy⁸; as presented in the table below.

Overall, there is more support for Direct Action and this policy approach is considered more effective than a Carbon Tax approach.

Figure 7 shows both the level of support and perceived effectiveness attributed to the Direct Action and Carbon Tax climate change policies.

For Direct Action, around half of respondents (55%) indicate they would support this policy (strongly or somewhat); older respondents are slightly more likely to oppose this (14% of those under 30 vs. 21% of those aged 30 and above, as are Labor supporters (25% vs. 16% of supporters).

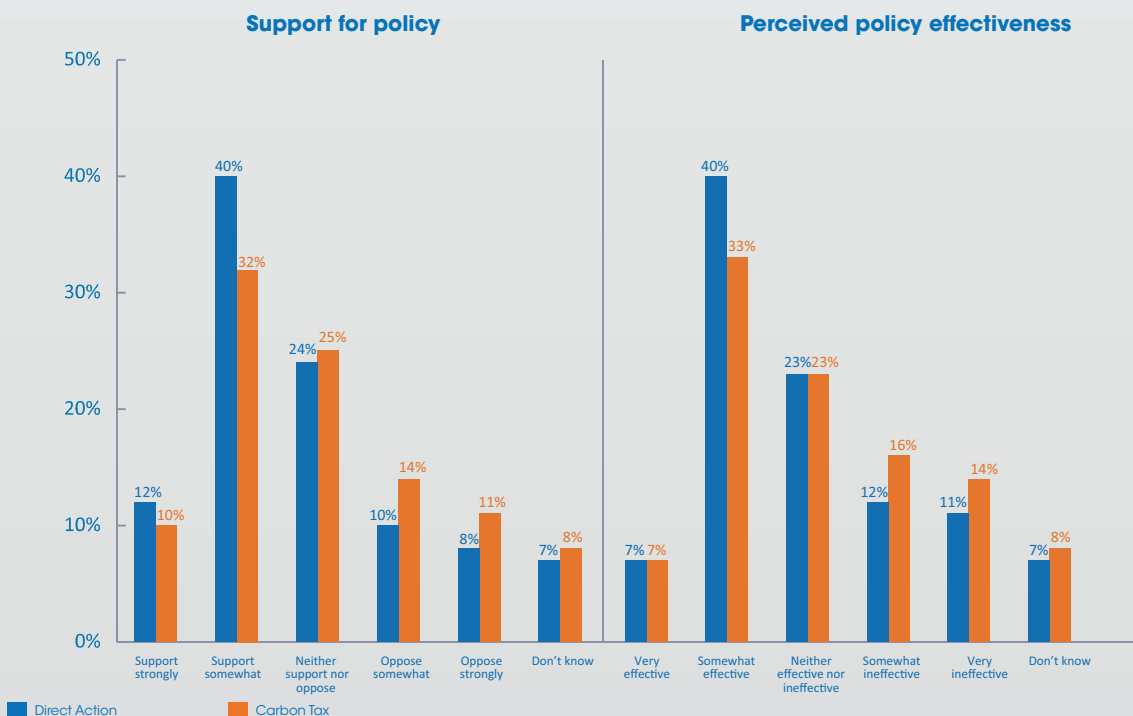
A similar proportion believe this approach would be effective (51%), though a greater proportion of male respondents believe it would be somewhat or very ineffective (29% of males vs. 20% of females), and likewise for respondents over 50 (26% of those aged 50 and older vs. 18% of those younger than 50).

Fewer people support a Carbon Tax policy approach (around two in five (45%) said they supported this approach), with female respondents more likely to support it than male respondents (50% and 41% respectively) and older respondents more likely to oppose the approach (29% of those aged 30 and older opposed this compared with 20% of those less than 30). Again, perceived effectiveness was similar to level of support with 43% indicating that they think this approach would be effective.

Climate change policy descriptions

Direct Action	Carbon Tax
One potential Australian Government policy approach to tackling climate change is to establish a fund to pay businesses for emission reduction projects, as well as create a workforce of 15,000 17-24 year olds paid a training allowance to conduct conservation work.	One potential Australian Government policy approach to tackling climate change is to require businesses (excluding the transport or agriculture sectors) that emit above a certain amount of carbon dioxide every year to obtain emissions permits. Permits are either purchased by businesses or issued free as part of industry assistance measures.

Figure 7: Climate change policy support and perceived effectiveness



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey 2014
 Base: All respondents
 Q5a/6a. How much would you support or oppose such a policy to tackle climate change?
 Q5b/6b. How effective would you say such a policy to tackle climate change would be?

What's the preferred course of action to tackle climate change?

Are Australians willing to change their behaviour?

Despite the clear support for the Federal Government to bear responsibility for action on climate change, Australians do feel a personal duty to play a part in tackling climate change, 62% agree that **"it is my responsibility to help to do something about climate change"** (see Figure 8).

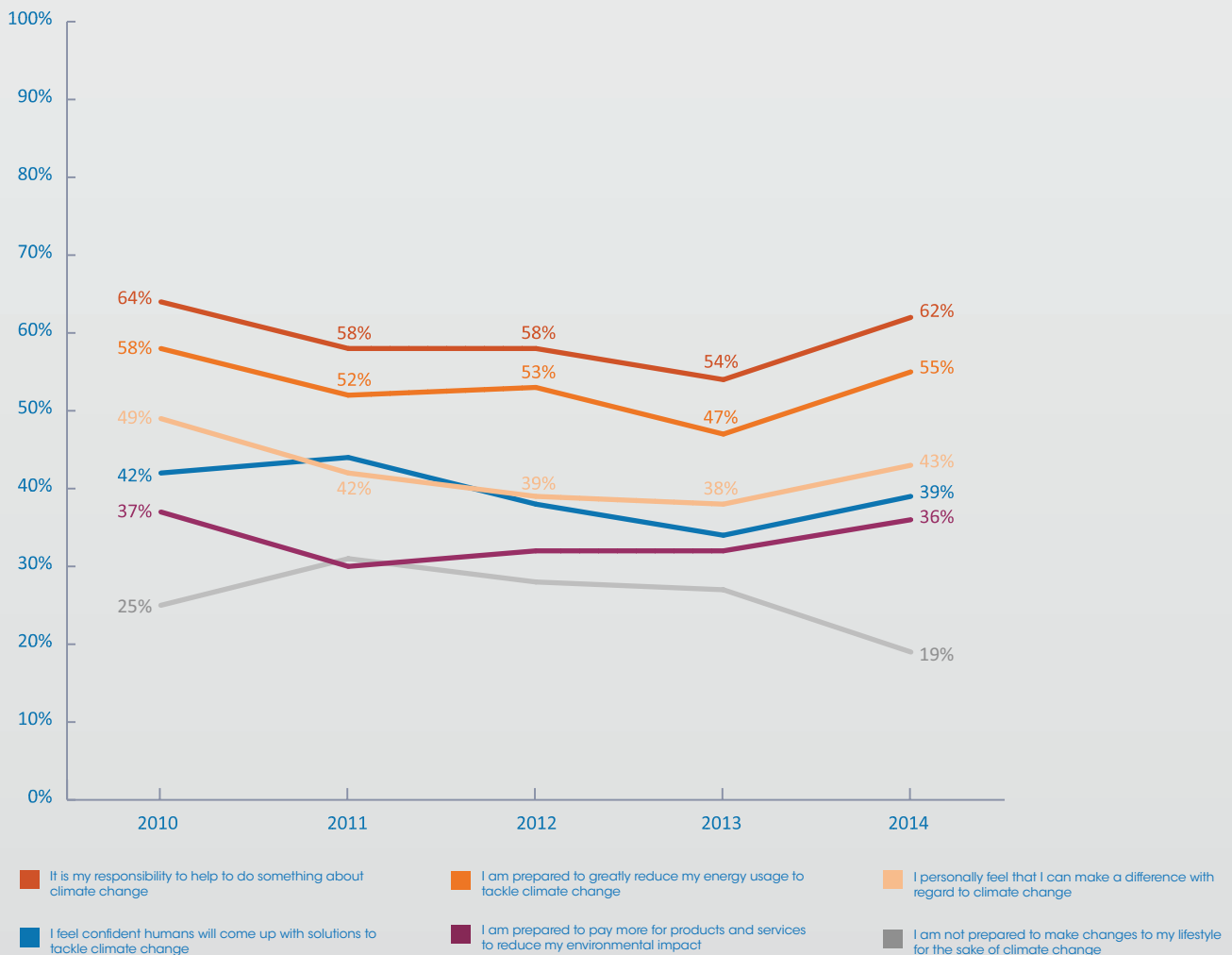
For around half, this involves potentially reducing the energy they use (55% agree) and for more than a third, paying more for products and services with reduced environmental impact is an option (36% agree).

One in five (19%) say they would not be prepared to make changes to their lifestyle for the sake of climate change, this is the lowest proportion agreeing with this statement since we started collecting the data.

Australians are divided as to whether humans will be able to address climate change (39% strongly or somewhat agree with **"I feel confident humans will come up with solutions to tackle climate change"**, 39% neither agree nor disagree and 22% disagree).

There is some optimism when it comes to feeling like we can personally make a difference, 43% agree with the statement **"I personally feel that I can make a difference with regard to climate change"** (34% neither agree nor disagree and 24% disagree).

Figure 8: Agreement with statements relating to action on climate change



Source: Ipsos Climate Change Survey
 Base: All respondents
 Q4. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 'Agree strongly' / 'Agree'

Who's who when it comes to climate change attitudes?

Respondents were categorised into three segments based on how much they agreed and disagreed with a range of climate change related statements. The three segments are shown in Figure 9 below.

In the middle of the spectrum, the largest segment of respondents (42%) is 'Engaged moderates'. Members of this group largely believe that climate change is a grave and urgent challenge, but place relatively more faith in mankind's ability to come up with solutions than other groups. 'Engaged moderates' are also more likely to be confused by the often conflicting messages they receive about the climate change debate, be it to do with solutions or, indeed, its existence in the first place.

A segment that suffers none of this confusion is the one dubbed the 'Active believers'. Although at 27% of the population this is proportionally the smallest group, these people are strong believers in climate change and the need for urgent action, and are more than willing to make sacrifices in their daily lives in order to tackle the issue. This group's politics lie towards the left of the political spectrum; its members are also older and more highly educated.

The final group consists of the 'Passive doubters': comprising 31% of respondents, this group is suspicious of the climate change phenomenon, and a small proportion are incredulous as to its existence and the agenda surrounding its management. Accordingly, they are more prone to inertia on the issue. The 'Passive doubters' have on average the lowest level of education, and are the most conservative in terms of their political support and outlook.

Figure 9: Climate change segments



In summary...

Overall, the majority of Australians believe climate change is a real phenomenon that is likely to have a serious impact on our environment, if not our way of life, in the future. Furthermore, many believe we are already experiencing many of the detrimental impacts of climate change. Despite this, we have seen limited changes to public opinion over the seven years that Ipsos has collected data about Australians' attitudes towards climate change.

Confusion reigns in some areas. Although there are high levels of acceptance of the existence and impacts of climate change, there is still much confusion around the specific details. A large proportion of those who think they understand the likely causes and impacts of climate change are still likely to indicate that it is hard to be sure about claims made about climate change and are not necessarily able to correctly identify the causes of climate change.

While only 3% of Australians believe that there is no such thing as climate change, there is still a notable proportion who have doubts or suspect that the seriousness of climate change is exaggerated in the public discourse.

There is a substantial willingness from some Australians to act and make changes, but recent findings from the Ipsos Mind and Mood Report⁹ show that there is a degree of frustration among the public regarding what can be done to tackle climate change.

This frustration is related to a feeling (accurate or otherwise) that people have already done everything in their power to 'do their bit' and lessen their impact on the environment. They have changed to energy efficient light bulbs, taken into consideration the energy efficiency of appliances and recycle their waste, yet they feel that the issue of climate change will not be solved by changes on this scale.

This attitude in part explains why most Australians believe the Federal Government should be mostly responsible for action on climate change – the magnitude of the problem demands attention from our highest level of government.

Where does this leave us?

Despite Australians' acknowledgement of the impacts of climate change, there is clearly a need for consistent, clear and simple information about climate change, especially the causes. In the eyes of the public, the Federal Government is best-placed to lead action on climate change, yet personal willingness to contribute means that the Government should be able to harness this inclination. Providing simple messages about the causes of climate change accompanied with more information about what individuals and communities can do to mitigate and ameliorate climate change will slowly help to empower Australians.

For more information

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Endnotes

¹ Participants were recruited from Ipsos' online 'MyView' panel. Quotas were set on the age and gender of respondents, and post-weighted to ensure an exact match of the Australian population. In total n=1,063 respondents were surveyed. Fieldwork took place in December 2014.

² <http://data.worldbank.org>

³ <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html>

⁴ Reisinger, A., R.L. Kitching, F. Chiew, L. Hughes, P.C.D. Newton, S.S. Schuster, A. Tait, and P. Whetton, 2014: Australasia. In: Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part B: Regional Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Barros, V.R., C.B. Field, D.J. Dokken, M.D. Mastrandrea, K.J. Mach, T.E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K.L. Ebi, Y.O. Estrada, R.C. Genova, B. Girma, E.S. Kissel, A.N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P.R. Mastrandrea, and L.L. White (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 1371-1438

⁵ <http://www.csiro.au/Outcomes/Climate/Adapting/Annual-Survey-of-Australian-Attitudes-to-Climate-Change.aspx>

⁶ http://ozone.unep.org/Assessment_Panels/SAP/Scientific_Assessment_2010/SAP-2010-FAQs-update.pdf

⁷ Ipsos Mind & Mood Report 2015

⁸ The policy order was randomised so as not to bias overall results, in order to avoid an association with the names of the policies as frequently aired in public discourse, the policies were presented in the form of a brief description of their core contents.

⁹ Ipsos Mind & Mood Report 2015