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The Changing Role of Local Government In Australia: National Survey Findings

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February 2023

In collaboration with



Australian
National
University



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The authors acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung, Bunurong Boon Wurrung, Ngannawal and Ngambri peoples, Traditional Custodians of the land on which the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne) and the Australian National University are located, and pay respects to their Elders past and present.

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TO CITE THIS REPORT

Chou, M., Busbridge, R., & Rutledge-Prior, S. (2023). *The Changing Role of Local Government in Australia: National Survey Findings*. Melbourne: ACU Research Centre for Social and Political Change. DOI: 10.24268/acu.8yqz3

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Contents

1.	Project overview: The changing role of local government in Australia.....	3
2.	Executive summary	5
3.	Methodology and demographics	6
4.	Local community governance.....	7
5.	The role of local government.....	8
6.	Service provision	9
7.	Local government and contentious issues	11
7.1.	Climate change	11
7.2.	Indigenous issues	12
7.3.	LGBTQIA+ issues	13

1. Project overview: The Changing Role of Local Government in Australia

This research project investigates how Australians view the changing nature and roles of local government in Australia. Traditionally sitting at the bottom of Australia's federal hierarchy, the roles played by Australian local governments have typically been restricted to the administration of a relatively select number of services to property, which accounts for local government's association with the 'Three Rs' (Roads, Rates, and Rubbish). As a result of this, local government has frequently been viewed in Australian politics as the mere administrative arm of higher tiers of government rather than as a sphere of important political debate and decision-making in its own right.

But in recent decades, a growing number of local councils across Australia have begun to see their roles in a different light. While some have embraced new roles as shapers of local identity and political interests, others have gone further – wading explicitly into nationally divisive issues like same-sex marriage, climate change, affordable housing, pill testing, Indigenous reconciliation, and even national identity and history. Although true that Australian local governments have a long history of championing certain progressive political causes, from women's political franchise to the anti-uranium and nuclear power movement, never before have so many local councils engaged and shifted national debate by tackling issues well beyond their traditional remit as in recent years. Together, these functions now point to a decidedly more political and ideational role in Australian local government.

Despite this, there remains a trenchant perception in public debate that when local councils do more than provide the narrow range of local services to property they are overreaching. As recent headlines like *The Guardian's* 'Council of war: how much should local government stray from roads, rates and rubbish?' and the *Courier Mail's* 'Stick to collecting rubbish – not spreading it' suggest, when local councils engage in activities and initiatives that fall under the 'services to people' category, they are often met with public and media criticism that they are exceeding their remit and neglecting their 'core purpose...to collect rubbish, fix local roads and keep rates down.'¹ But to what extent are these views actually reflective of Australian public opinion? Do Australians believe that local governments should stick to the Three Rs or should they be empowered to tackle a broader range of local social and political issues as well?

The aim of this report is to analyse public perceptions on the changing role of local government in Australia. Exploring how the Australian public views and understands the expansion of local

¹ Gideon Rozner. (2020). Poll: Local Councils Should Stick to Roads, Rates and Rubbish. *Institute of Public Affairs* 19 February. <https://ipa.org.au/publications-ipa/poll-local-councils-should-stick-to-roads-rates-and-rubbish>.

government activity, from the Three Rs to a more expansive if still limited tier of government, offers crucial insights about the sector's current state and future direction. This report presents the findings from a new national survey of 1,350 respondents who were asked what they saw the role local government to be, what services the sector should deliver, and whether acting on controversial issues to do with national identity, refugee support, and climate change, for example, should be within local government's remit.

2. Executive summary

(1) There is an important role for local government in Australia's governance structure

- Two-thirds of Australians think local government is best placed to make decisions that impact on people's daily lives, relative to other levels of government.

(2) A focus on basic services is important, but the role of local government should extend beyond this

- 7 in 10 suggest that local government should focus solely on basic services, such as maintaining roads and providing rubbish removal.
- Nevertheless, over 8 in 10 suggest that local government should be involved in shaping local identity and culture as well as providing a forum for the discussion of national issues.

(3) The kinds of services that local governments should provide go beyond the Three Rs (roads, rates, and rubbish)

- A clear majority of Australians think that services like planning for the future, health, and community development are important for local governments to provide.

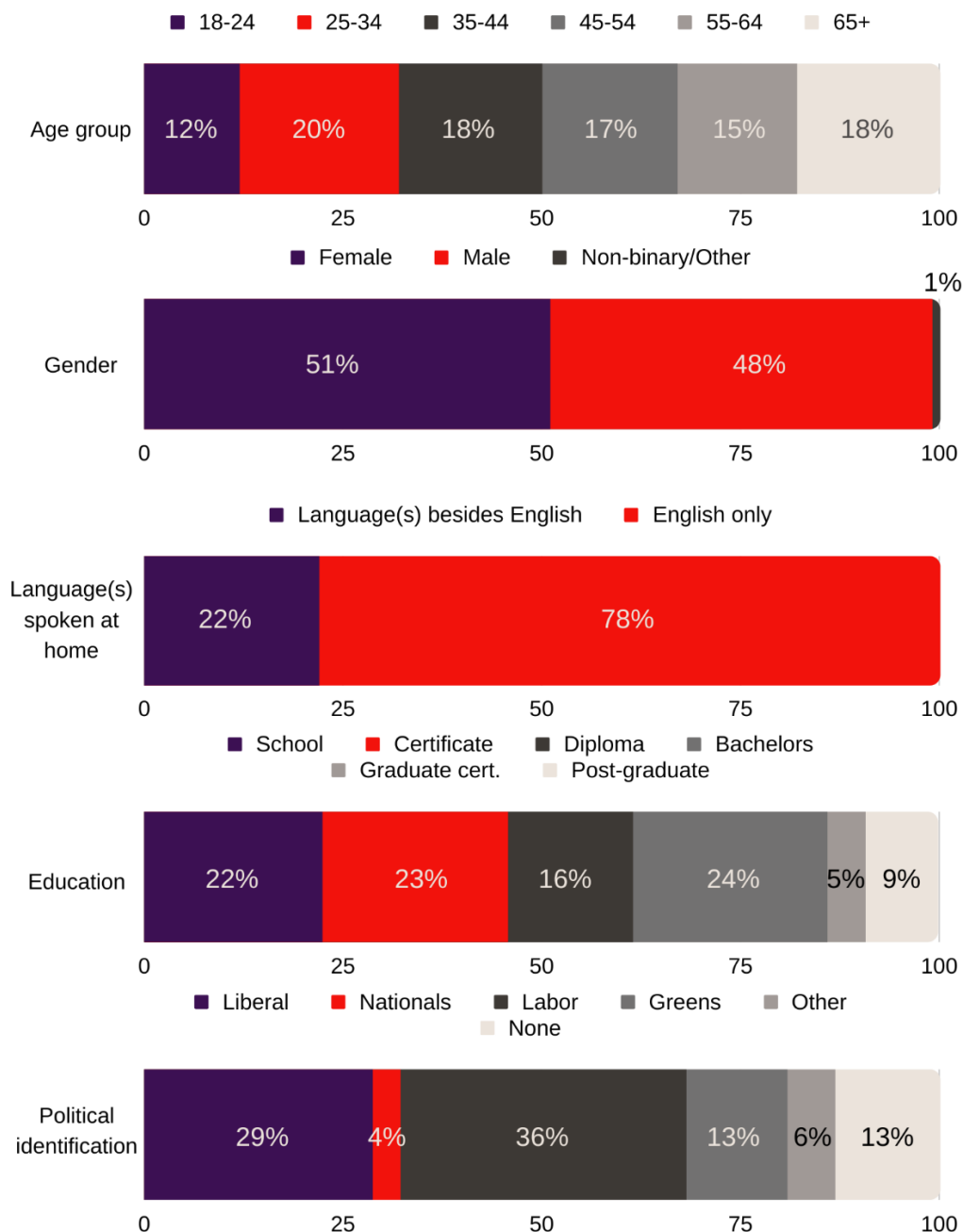
(4) There is a place for local government to engage with contentious issues, such as climate change, Indigenous issues, and LGBTQIA+ issues

- In all but one of the twelve issues we put to respondents (i.e. changing the date of Australia Day from January 26), a majority felt that local governments should be engaging with these issues.

3. Methodology and demographics

The survey ran for ten days (24 June to 3 July, 2022) and was distributed online via the survey company, Lucid (which has now become part of Cint). It included quotas for gender, age, and state/territory of residence to ensure that the survey was representative of the Australian public (see Figure 1 for survey sample demographics). The resulting survey sample was 1350 participants.

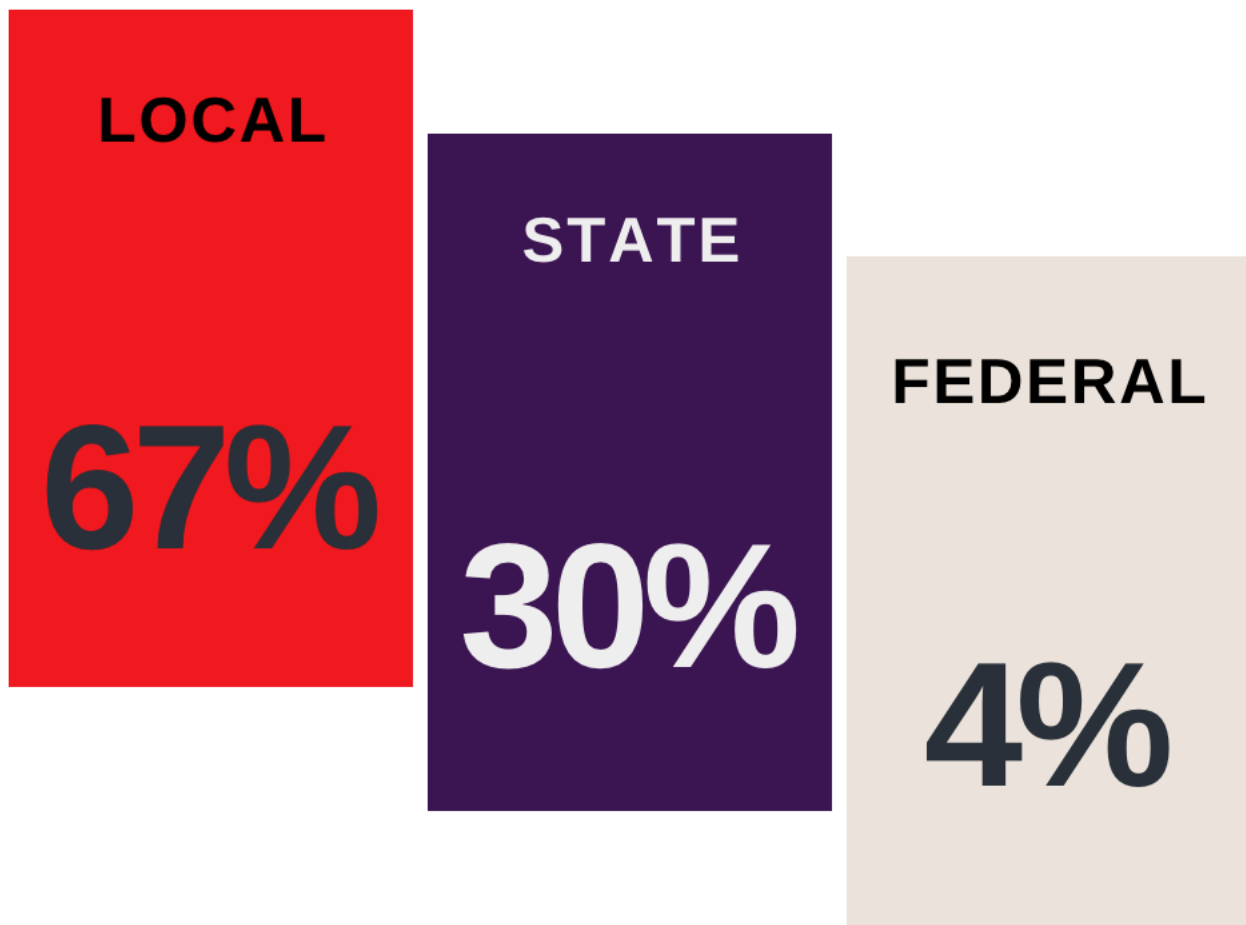
Figure 1. Survey demographics



4. Local community governance

Respondents felt that the closer the level of government was to their local area, the better placed it was to make decisions about their local area, with two-thirds of respondents indicating that local governments are best able to make decisions about local issues.

Figure 2. Level of government best able to make decisions about local area

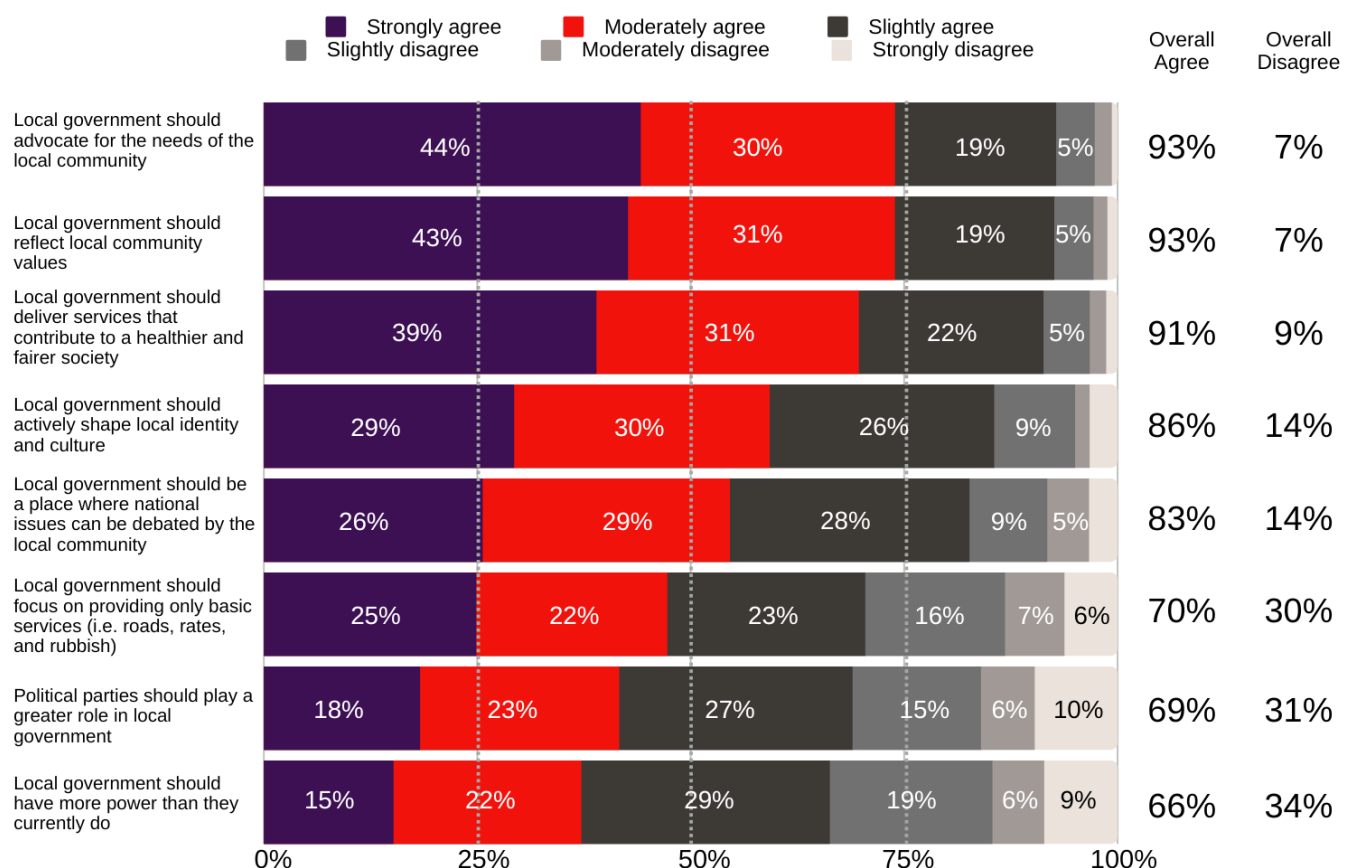


Survey question: "Thinking about where you live, which level of government is best able to make decisions about your local area?"

5. The role of local government

When asked about the role of local government in providing basic services (such as roads, rates, and rubbish), 7 in 10 respondents agreed to some extent that such services should be local government's sole focus (see Figure 3). However, this finding is somewhat belied by respondents' other views on the role of local government in Australia. Even greater proportions of respondents suggested that local governments should advocate for the needs of the local community (93%), reflect local community values (93%), deliver services that contribute to a healthier and fairer society (91%), reflect local community values (93%), deliver services that contribute to a healthier and fairer society (91%), actively shape local community identity and culture (86%), and be a place where national issues can be debated by the local community (83%). Less accord was found in relation to whether political parties should play a role in local government (69% agree) and whether local governments should have more power than they currently do (66% agree).

Figure 3. Views on the role of local government in Australia



Survey question: "Thinking the role of local government in Australia, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

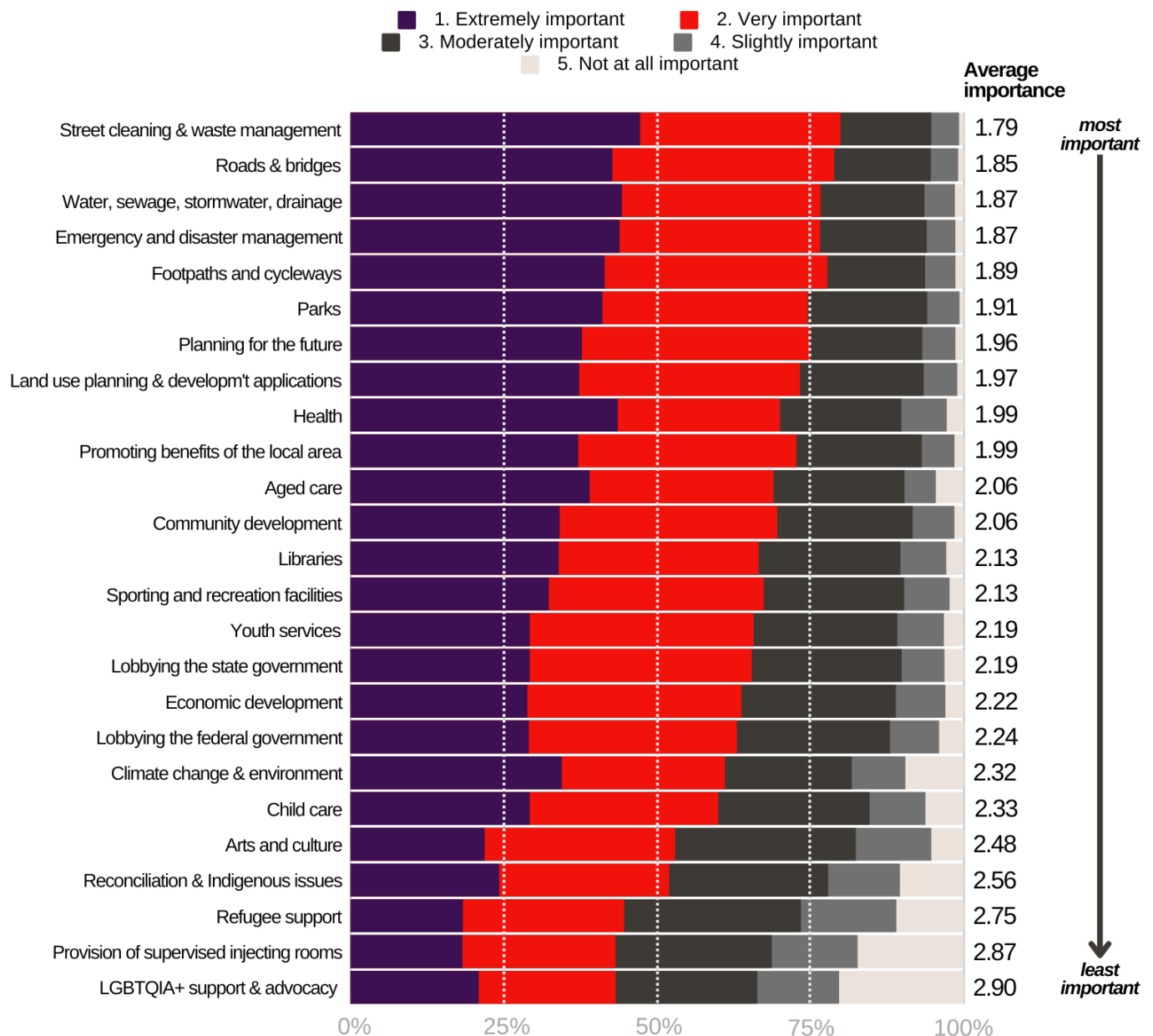
6. Service provision

Out of a list of 25 services (see Figure 4), the top three that were identified as most important, on average, for local governments to provide all fall within the category of ‘services to property’: street cleaning and waste management (average importance of 1.79, where 1 = “extremely important” and 5 = “not at all important”); roads and bridges (1.85); and water, sewage, stormwater, drainage (1.87). The three identified as least important can be classed as arguably controversial social ‘services to people’: LGBTQIA+ support and advocacy (2.90); provision of supervised injecting rooms (2.87); and refugee support (2.75).

While these findings accord with the Three Rs model of local government, it is important to emphasise that over 80% of the services listed were all viewed, on average, as “very important” for local governments to provide (i.e. those services with an average importance rating of between 1.5 and 2.5). This includes services such as health, planning for the future, community development, youth services, climate change and the environment, and childcare. The remaining four services were viewed, on average, as “moderately important”.

The high levels of importance placed on the wide range of services listed is also reflected in the fact that across all 25 services, a clear majority of respondents viewed these services as either “extremely”, “very”, or “moderately” important, from street cleaning and waste management (95% of respondents) to provision of supervised injecting rooms (69%).

Figure 4. Views on which services it is important for local government to provide



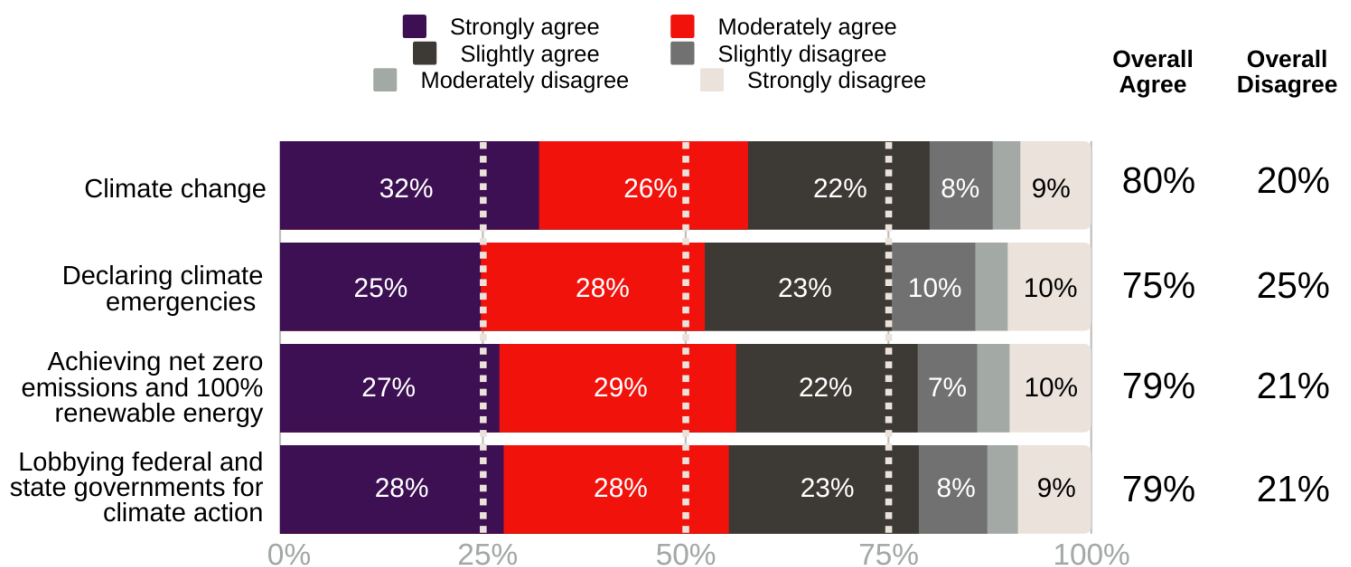
Survey question: "The following is a list of different services and activities that Australian local governments can engage in. How important it is to you that local government engage in each of these things?"

7. Local government and contentious issues

7.1. CLIMATE CHANGE

The survey asked respondents about their views on whether local government should engage in the following climate-related issues: climate change; declaring climate emergencies; achieving net zero emissions and 100% renewable energy; and lobbying federal and state governments for climate action. Across all four issues, at least three-quarters of respondents agreed to some extent that local government should be engaged, and at least one-quarter “strongly” agreed (see Figure 5). The greatest level of disagreement was found in relation to declaring climate emergencies, where a quarter of respondents indicated some degree of disagreement that local governments should be involved.

Figure 5. Views on how important it is for local government to engage climate change issues

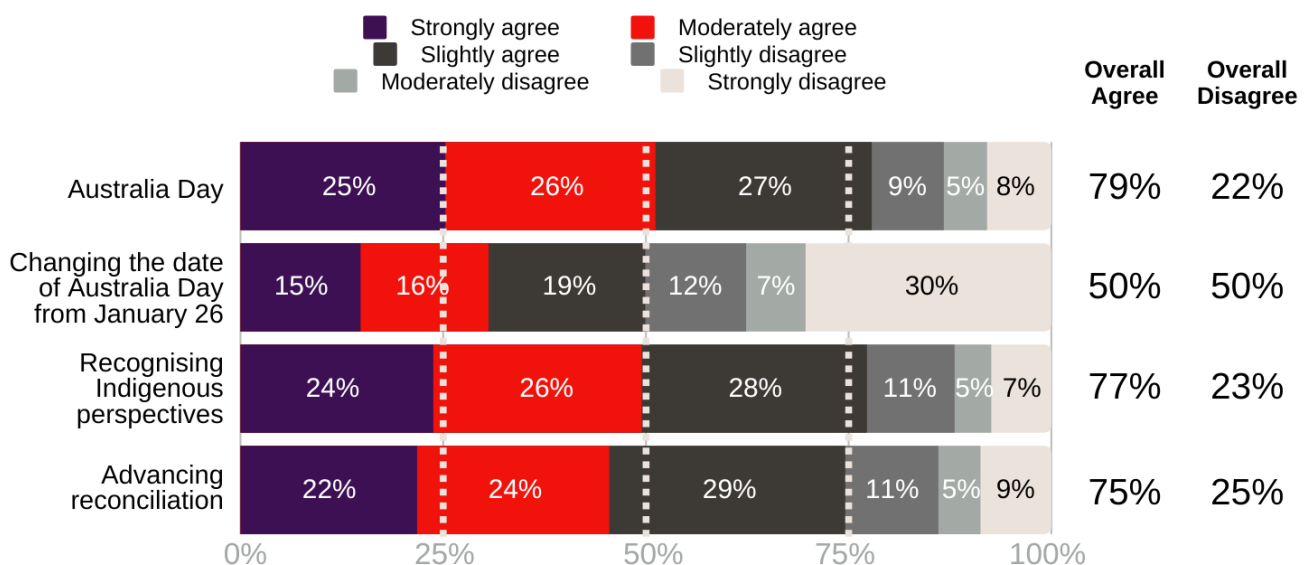


Survey question: “In recent years, Australian local governments have often made news for the roles they played in some of the country’s most contentious political issues. To what extent do you think local government should be engaging in these issues, in particular in relation to:”

7.2. INDIGENOUS ISSUES

The survey asked respondents about their views on whether local government should engage in the following Indigenous-related issues: Australia Day; changing the date of Australia Day from January 26; recognising Indigenous perspectives; and advancing reconciliation. Across three of these issues, there was relatively high level of agreement that local governments should be involved: 79% agreement in relation to Australia Day; 77% agreement in relation to recognising Indigenous perspectives; and 75% agreement in relation to advancing reconciliation (see Figure 6). The most polarising topic (relative to the other three Indigenous issues, and relative to all the contentious issues included in the survey) was that of changing the date of Australia Day from January 26, with half of respondents indicating agreement and half indicating disagreement. In relation to this issue, nearly one-third (30%) of respondents “strongly” disagreed that local government should engage in the issue.

Figure 6. Views on how important it is for local government to engage in Indigenous issues

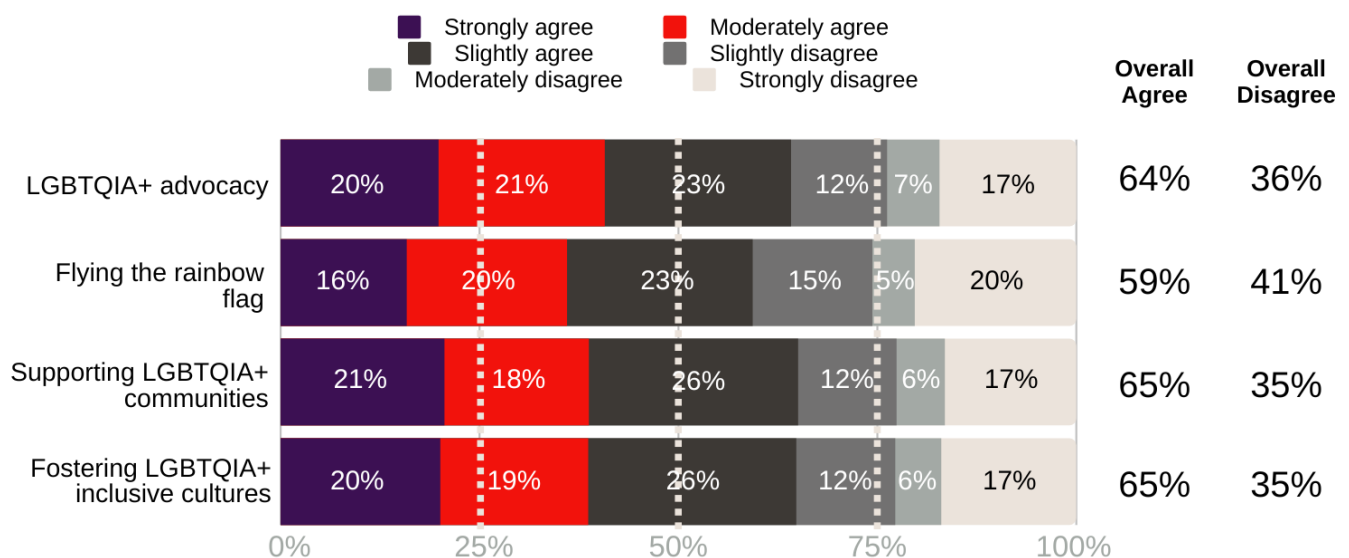


Survey question: “In recent years, Australian local governments have often made news for the roles they played in some of the country’s most contentious political issues. To what extent do you think local government should be engaging in these issues, in particular in relation to:”

7.3. LGBTQIA+ ISSUES

The survey asked respondents about their views on whether local government should engage in the following LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) related issues: LGBTQIA+ advocacy; flying the rainbow flag; supporting LGBTQIA+ communities; and fostering LGBTQIA+ inclusive cultures. Across each of the four topics, majorities of respondents agreed to some extent that local governments should be involved (see Figure 7). However, relative to the other two categories of contentious issues, this was the most polarising overall. Just under two-thirds of respondents agreed that local governments should engage in LGBTQIA+ advocacy (64%), supporting LGBTQIA+ communities (65%) and fostering LGBTQIA+ inclusive cultures (65%), while around 6 in 10 agreed in relation to flying the rainbow flag (59%).

Figure 7. Views on how important it is for local government to engage in LGBTQIA+ issues



Survey question: "In recent years, Australian local governments have often made news for the roles they played in some of the country's most contentious political issues. To what extent do you think local government should be engaging in these issues, in particular in relation to:"

THE CHANGING ROLE OF LOCAL
GOVERNMENT IN AUSTRALIA:
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