Attitudes to abortion

Reliable opinion polling consistently shows that around 80% of Australian adults support a woman’s right to choose.

Public opinion

The 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) found that 81% of those surveyed believed a woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion. The 2003 AuSSA also found that religious belief and support for legal abortion are not mutually exclusive, with 77% of those who identify as religious also supporting a woman’s right to choose [1].

A survey conducted by Auspoll in 2009 of over 1000 Queenslanders found that almost 4 out of 5 voters wanted the law changed so abortion is no longer a crime [2].

A review of over 20 years of data on attitudes to abortion published in October 2009 found that

“more than half the electorate in Australia and in Queensland support freedom of choice, and a further third support the availability of abortion in special circumstances... As far as attitudes are concerned, Queensland is no different from the rest of Australia.” [3]

On average, only approximately 4% of the Australian community are opposed to abortion in every circumstance [3]; Betts states that "Such opposition as there is is concentrated among a few religious groups and among people aged 75 and over." [3]

A poll of 1200 Queenslanders commissioned by national campaign group Fair Agenda in February 2017 found that 82% agreed it should be legal for a woman, in consultation with a medical professional, to terminate her pregnancy [4].

Expert groups

The Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists [5], the Public Health Association of Australia [6], and Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia [7] (now called the Family Planning Alliance Australia), all advocate for the decriminalisation of abortion and equity of access to abortion services.

A 2010 survey published in the Medical Journal of Australia found that 85% of practicing obstetricians and gynaecologists are not opposed to abortion, and 90% of these doctors agree that abortion should be available through the public health system in all states and territories [8].
The Australian Medical Association Queensland said in 2009 that current abortion laws are unclear and do not provide certainty for doctors or for women. The AMAQ stated that Queensland’s “abortion laws are a barrier to a doctor's first duty - best patient care” [9].

In late 2011, United Nations Special Rapporteur for Health Anand Grover released a report examining the interaction between the right to health and criminal laws relating to sexual and reproductive health. In it, he stated that the right to sexual and reproductive health is a fundamental part of the right to health. He also stated that criminal and other legal restrictions on abortion violate the right to health, and that the application of such restrictions as a means to achieving public health outcomes is ‘often ineffective and disproportionate’. The report urged all UN member states to decriminalise abortion [10].

Do people vote for pro-choice politicians?

The Queensland experience

The polling commissioned by Fair Agenda in February 2017 found that 60% of Queenslanders would be less likely to vote for an MP who opposed decriminalisation [4]. The majority of voters across almost all parties were of this position, including 48% of LNP voters, 56% of One Nation voters, 68% of Labor voters and 77% of Greens voters.

When pro-choice ALP member for Aspley Bonny Barry lost her seat at the 2009 Queensland election, it was claimed by the anti-choice lobby that it was due to the electorate being informed of her intention to introduce a bill to decriminalise abortion. A group who later emerged calling themselves Voters for Life claimed that their “humble education campaign” consisting of leafleting the Aspley electorate “had contributed to her defeat” [11].

In reality, the swing against Bonny Barry in Aspley was due to a campaign against the State Government’s plan to close a nearby children’s hospital, and surrounding seats also suffered similar swings due to the same issue. Election analyst Antony Green, in his examination of Aspley in the lead up to the election stated that

“The Bligh government is planning to close the Royal Children's Hospital at Herston on the northern edge of the Brisbane CBD and replace with a new facility in South Brisbane. This has been raising ire on Brisbane's northside, anger not placated by a promise to upgrade pediatric facilities at Prince Charles Hospital just outside the electorate in Chermside. The LNP is promising to upgrade both the southside facility and the Royal Children's Hospital...A part of Brisbane that was Liberal held until the 2001 debacle and on past election results, [Aspley is] one of the first seats that should return to the non-Labor fold if there is any swing against the Bligh government.” [12]

Statewide, the ALP suffered a 4.7% swing against them on polling day.

While the swing against Barry was larger, at 7%, it was not disproportionate to the swings suffered by other sitting Labor MPs on Brisbane’s northside, and indeed was smaller than many whose electorates were also affected by the Children’s Hospital debate.

Ferny Grove (-7.1%), Brisbane Central (-7.7%), and Everton (-8.4%) all suffered bigger negative swings than Aspley, while Stafford (-5.9%) and Nudgee (-5.4%) also experienced negative swings larger than the statewide average [13].

Nationally
Women’s Health Victoria recently analysed over 25 years of Australian election data to ascertain the effect on voting patterns when candidate’s views on abortion were known to the electorate. They found that

“Despite anti-choice activity, the last 25+ years demonstrate that pro-choice candidates do not suffer at the ballot box. In fact, their stance on a woman’s right to choose is rewarded by the electorate.” [14]

In the Australian Capital Territory

Following a 1994 NSW court decision regarding common law rulings on abortion, ACT MLA Wayne Berry drafted a Bill to decriminalise abortion in the ACT. He was heavily targeted by anti-choice campaigners, which intensified during the 1995 election campaign, including an anti-choice aerial banner on election day. Wayne Berry retained his seat and increased his margin. Wayne Berry successfully led a Bill in 2001/02 to fully decriminalise abortion in the ACT and held his seat until retirement in 2008, saying later that

"While anti-abortion campaigners are loud and well organised, they are out of step with the rest of the community. It is a mistake to view their loudness and organisational ability as a reflection of how the rest of the community will vote on the issue of abortion.” [15]

References:


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