

Public opinion

Public opinion in Australia has been moving in a strong pro-choice direction since the 1970s. Rigorous studies conducted in the twenty first century have consistently shown that about 80% of Australians support the statement that ‘A woman should have the right to choose whether or not she has an abortion’.¹ Most people have been surprised to find that abortion is still defined in the criminal law.

- Differences of sex, age, location, or political party affiliation make little impact on attitudes toward abortion.²
- While religion is associated with a significant difference in attitudes toward abortion, no religious group falls below 80% in support of allowing abortion in some circumstances, nor rises above 10% in opposition to it in all circumstances. People not identifying with any religion have the highest rate of support for access to abortion in any circumstance (78%), a position supported by a majority of respondents belonging to the Church of England (60%), Uniting Church (57%), and Presbyterian churches (53%). 45% of Catholic respondents support the availability of abortion in any circumstances, and only 7% believe it should not be available at all.³
- In a 2013 Newspoll surveying 600 Victorian women about that state’s abortion laws, 78% of women with a religious affiliation and 95% of women without agreed that the law should provide women with the right to decide whether or not to have an abortion.⁴
- The most recent major report on Australian public opinion of abortion was conducted by Lonergan Research in 2015, and surveyed 1015 NSW residents. The overwhelming majority—some 87% of respondents—believed that women should be able to have an abortion, with over half agreeing that women should be able to obtain one at any time under any circumstances. A mere 6% indicated opposition to abortion regardless of circumstances.⁵
- More than 78% of people believed medical practitioners should be required to provide unbiased and independent information on options for unplanned pregnancies, including abortion, regardless of their personal views on the matter.⁶
- 76% of respondents were unaware that abortion was still a crime in NSW, and 73% supported the removal of abortion from the NSW Crimes Act. 81% supported the creation of safe access zones around healthcare locations providing abortion services and advice. There was majority support for abortion access, decriminalisation, and safe access zones across geographic, demographic, and political boundaries.

- Australian surveys have rarely investigated public opinion about abortion with respect to gestational stage. The results of a Victorian survey conducted by Crosby Textor in 2008 challenged the belief that Australians strongly oppose women accessing abortion in the second and third trimesters. The survey demonstrated that individuals have nuanced views depending on the reasons for which women seek abortion. 69% indicated that abortion should be lawful in at least some circumstances for the second trimester and 48% for the third. A majority of respondents indicated that in a wide range of clinical and social circumstances doctors should not face professional sanctions for terminating a pregnancy after 24 weeks' gestation.⁷

1 Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2008, *Law of Abortion Final Report*, Melbourne: VLRC.

2 Betts K, 2009, 'Attitudes to abortion: Australia and Queensland in the twenty-first century,' *People and Place*, 17:3, 25–39.

3 *ibid.*

4 O'Rourke A, 2016, 'The discourse of abortion law debate in Australia,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 56, 37–44.

5 O'Brien N, 2015, 'Make it legal and accessible: poll on women's right to choose in NSW', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 27 2015.
<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/polling-shows-overwhelming-support-for-a-womans-right-to-choose-20150925-gjvfyu>

6 *ibid.*

7 De Crespigny L. et al, 2010 'Australian attitudes to early and late abortion', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 193:1, 9–12.