

CLIMATE ADAPTATION PROJECT

Research paper 7

Climate change and social collapse

Clive Hamilton¹

This research paper is the seventh in a series reporting the results of a new public opinion survey exploring what Australians think and how they feel about life on a warmer planet, and how to prepare for it. Carried out by Roy Morgan Research for Clive Hamilton, Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University in Canberra, the survey sampled the views of almost 2,000 adults, chosen to be representative of the Australian population. An overview of the survey method can be found at the end of this paper, with full details available in a separate technical report.

Summary

Climate change has transcended its boundaries as an environmental issue and become embedded in wider public concerns about social stability, immigration, food supplies and military conflict. In short, Australians are worried about what kind of society we will have in coming decades as climate change bites more deeply.

Our survey reveals that nearly a third of Australians are ‘very or extremely concerned’ about social and economic collapse occurring in the next 25 years, with three in five Australians (60%) at least moderately concerned. Women are more worried than men. Greens and One Nation voters are much more worried about social collapse than other voters.

The survey also explores public concerns about climate change leading to: food shortages, too many climate refugees, supply chain disruptions, and military conflict. The results paint a disturbing picture.

Nearly a third of Australians say they are very or extremely concerned about food shortages emerging in the next 25 years, with women substantially more worried than men. Older Australians are particularly worried about military conflict breaking out in our region under

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the pressure of climate change, with 45% of those 60 and over saying they are very or extremely concerned compared to only 30% of those under 40. There is widespread concern about large numbers of climate refugees arriving in Australia by the middle of the century as the climate warms, with over half of the population (54%) at least moderately concerned and 30% very or extremely concerned.

On these big questions about Australia's future in a warming world, the differences across voting preference are less pronounced than differences over climate change itself. On some issues, conservatives are more worried than progressives. Although conservative voters are much less concerned than progressive voters about climate change in general, they are substantially more concerned about the prospect of large numbers of climate refugees arriving in Australia. One Nation voters are much more worried than Liberal and National Party voters about social collapse and climate refugees.

Climate impacts

Previous papers in this series have explored the concerns of Australians about how they will fare in a warming world and what they can do to prepare. Research Paper 2 showed that Australian parents are anxious about the well-being and life chances of their children as the planet warms. Research Paper 5 found that, for a minority of Australians, the decision to move home is influenced by expected climate change and exposure to extreme weather events. Research Paper 6 asked where in Australia it will be safest to live. In this paper we investigate the community's worries about the larger potential impacts on Australia of global warming.

Although geographically isolated in the southern hemisphere, Australia cannot insulate itself from the wider world. Our survey asked respondents about external shocks to the nation coming from the effects of warming and extreme weather events in the world. Table 1 shows responses to five questions that bear on some of the more profound threats to Australian society that climate change may bring—running out of food, ability to cope with climate refugees, supply chain disruptions, military conflict and, ultimately, the collapse of our society.

The results paint a disturbing picture. On all five questions, a majority of Australian are moderately, very, or extremely concerned about each of these coming to pass in the next 25 years. A third say they are very or extremely concerned. Military conflict exacerbated by

climate change is of greatest concern, with 37% saying they are very or extremely concerned, just ahead of disruption to global trade and supply chains, with 35% saying they are very or extremely concerned.

Although the figures are not shown, age makes little difference in responses to these questions, except for the prospect of military conflict. Older people are substantially more concerned, with 45% of those 60 and over saying they are very or extremely concerned while only 30% of those under 40 have the same view. For those aged 40-59, the figure is 38%. City dwellers are for the most part as concerned as those who live in the regions about all the issues explored.

Table 1 (Q11) Looking to the year 2050 as the world becomes warmer and extreme weather events increase around the world, how concerned are you about ... (n = 1955) %

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
food supplies becoming short in Australia?	15.9	25.1	28.1	18.7	12.0
large numbers of climate refugees arriving in Australia?	21.5	24.1	24.0	16.7	13.7
disruption to global trade and supply chains?	11.2	20.2	33.4	24.6	10.5
military conflict in the Asia-Pacific region?	9.6	22.2	31.1	23.5	13.6
social and economic collapse in Australia?	14.7	25.7	28.1	19.5	11.9

Notes: In the survey, a climate refugee was defined as ‘a person forced to leave their home because climate change has made it very difficult or impossible to stay.’

Over half of the population (54%) say they are at least moderately concerned about large numbers of climate refugees arriving in Australia by the middle of the century as the climate warms, with 30% very or extremely concerned. Unexpectedly, there is little difference in levels of concern across each of these issues by level of education, except in the case of climate refugees. A quarter (25%) of those with university degrees say they are very or extremely worried about the arrival of large numbers of climate refugees, while around 37% of those without degrees take the same view. This may reflect political differences, which are considered later.

Food supplies

Focussing our attention on food supplies, almost a third of Australians (31%) say they are very or extremely concerned about food shortages by 2050. This anxiety aligns with the results of climate models that forecast falling crop yields and declining livestock productivity due to more frequent and intense weather events (droughts, heatwaves, floods) in many of Australia’s agricultural regions. The government’s recent National Climate Risk Assessment report noted that ‘domestic food security is a vulnerability.’²

As we would expect, those who are more worried about climate change and have more frequent feelings of insecurity about it (explored in Research Paper 1) are much more concerned about food shortages emerging. Table 2 shows this starkly. Among those who are not at all concerned about climate change, only one tenth express high anxiety about food shortages. Among those very concerned about climate change (accounting for almost a quarter of the population), a third (34%) say they are very or extremely concerned about food shortages, a figure that leaps to 57% for those who are extremely concerned about climate change. They also represent close to a quarter of the population.

Table 2 (Q11) Looking to the year 2050 as the world becomes warmer and extreme weather events increase around the world, how concerned are you about food supplies becoming short in Australia? (n = 1955) %

<i>Concern about food shortages</i>	Average	Level of concern about climate change				
		Not at all (15%)	Slightly (13%)	Moderately (25%)	Very (24%)	Extremely (23%)
Not at all concerned	15.9	<u>48.5</u>	<u>21.3</u>	<u>12.8</u>	<u>7.6</u>	<u>5.5</u>
Very or extremely concerned	30.7	<u>10.7</u>	<u>13.0</u>	<u>22.3</u>	<u>35.5</u>	<u>57.3</u>

Notes: Percentages under each level of concern is the share of the population taking this view.

Collapse

In the context of climate change, social collapse refers to the breakdown of a society’s essential systems—such as governance, economy, law and order, and social cohesion—due to severe and sustained climate impacts. Although there are several popular books and an

² Australian Climate Service, *Australia’s National Climate Risk Assessment*, Australian Climate Service, 2025, p. 211.

extensive academic literature on the possibility of social collapse due to global warming, no one seems to have asked the public how concerned they are about it.³ Related questions have been asked elsewhere. A 2022 YouGov survey in the United States revealed that 57% of American adults believe that climate change is somewhat likely or very likely to cause serious damage to the global economy, and 35% believe climate change is somewhat likely or very likely to cause Earth to become uninhabitable for all life.⁴

Our survey reveals that 31% say they are very or extremely concerned about climate change pressures resulting in social and economic collapse by 2050, with only 15% of Australians saying they are not at all concerned (Table 1). It is surprising that there is no significant change in levels of concern across age groups. While fewer under 40s are not at all concerned (12%) compared to over 60s (16%), the percentages who are very or extremely concerned are virtually the same (33% versus 32%).

Some other factors do make a difference. Mothers are more worried than fathers about social collapse, with 38% of mothers very or extremely concerned compared to 25% of fathers. Similarly, 40% of grandmothers are very or extremely concerned compared to 25% of grandfathers.

Those who live through extreme weather events often see how fragile supply systems and essential services can be. Our data show that exposure to extreme weather events increases the worry about social collapse. Using the metric we developed as a measure of the number of extreme weather events experienced by respondents since 2019 (explained in Research Paper 1), we found that only 22% of those with no exposure to extreme weather events say they are very or extremely concerned about social collapse while 38% of those with high exposure say the same—see Table 3.

When we focus attention on the half of the population who more often have feelings of insecurity because of climate change, worry about social collapse increases sharply. This is also shown in Table 3. Well over half of those who often or very often have feeling of

³ Popular books include Pablo Servigne and Raphael Stevens, *How Everything Can Collapse* (Polity Press, 2020) and Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *The Ministry for the Future* (Orbit Books, 2020).

⁴ Jamie Ballard, 'Nearly two in five Americans say it's likely climate change will make the Earth uninhabitable,' YouGov online, 23 April 2022. Also, 56% said that climate change is somewhat or very likely to lead to mass displacement of people from some parts of the world to others.

insecurity due to climate anxiety are very or extremely concerned about social collapse, compared to less than a quarter of those who never or rarely feel insecure.

Table 3 (Q11) Looking to the year 2050 as the world becomes warmer and extreme weather events increase around the world, how concerned are you about social and economic collapse in Australia? (n = 1955) %

<i>Concern about social collapse</i>	Average	Exposure to extreme weather events				
		None (17%)	Low (32%)	Medium (23%)	High (28%)	
Not at all concerned	14.7	<u>19.7</u>	14.2	13.9	12.9	
Very or extremely concerned	31.4	<u>22.2</u>	30.9	31.9	37.7	
		Frequency of feelings of climate change-induced insecurity				
		Never (25%)	Rarely (23%)	Sometimes (31%)	Often (12%)	Very often (8%)
Not at all concerned	14.7	<u>30.4</u>	17.6	<u>7.1</u>	<u>5.9</u>	<u>2.7</u>
Very or extremely concerned	31.4	<u>22.7</u>	<u>22.0</u>	28.2	<u>52.9</u>	<u>63.6</u>

Notes: Percentages under each level of exposure and concern are the shares of the respondents taking this view.

The gender gap

Research Paper 1 showed that women are more concerned than men about climate change and Research Paper 2 showed that mothers are more worried than fathers about how their children will fare in a warming world, although fathers too are concerned. Table 4 below shows that, on two of our five questions about the potential impacts of climate change in 2050, gender differences are considerable. The results are illustrated in Chart 1. Women are substantially more worried than men about food shortages and about the possibility of social and economic collapse. On the other issues, while overall concern is high, the gender gap is small or insignificant, except perhaps for disruption to global trade and supply chains.

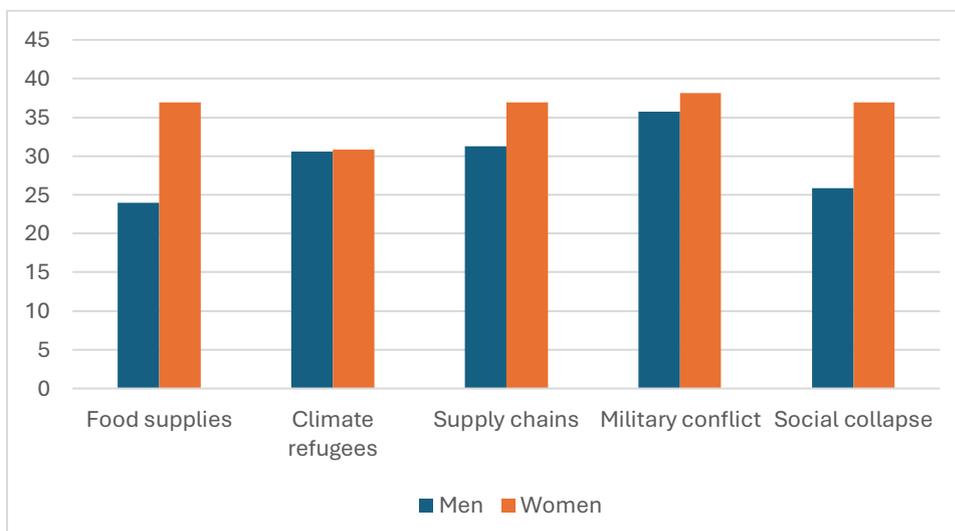
The greater concern among women about food shortages and social collapse cannot be explained by women's higher level of concern about climate change in general because women do not differ from men on two of the five questions. It is not clear what explains the gender gap on the questions of food security and social collapse.

Table 4 (Q11) Looking to the year 2050 as the world becomes warmer and extreme weather events increase around the world, how concerned are you about ... (n = 1955) %

	Not at all concerned		Very or extremely concerned	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
food supplies becoming short in Australia?	<u>22.1</u>	<u>10.0</u>	<u>24.0</u>	<u>36.9</u>
large numbers of climate refugees arriving in Australia?	22.0	20.5	30.6	30.8
disruption to global trade and supply chains?	<u>14.4</u>	<u>8.4</u>	31.3	36.9
military conflict in the Asia-Pacific region?	9.7	9.6	35.7	38.1
social and economic collapse in Australia?	<u>19.4</u>	<u>10.5</u>	25.9	36.9

Notes: Underlined numbers differ from the average at a 95% significance level. As ‘very or extremely concerned’ is an aggregate, percentages are underlined only if both are significantly different from the average.

Chart 1 Percentage very or extremely concerned about the five issues, by gender %



Political divisions

We have said little so far about the potentially combustible issue of climate refugees.

Although the difference is not great, overall concern about the possibility of large numbers arriving in future is a bit lower than the other potential impacts—30% are very or extremely

concerned and 22% not at all concerned. Men and women do not differ on this question. Australians aged 70 and over are substantially more worried than those under 40.

People with university degrees express much higher concern about the effects of climate change than those without degrees, but they are less worried about climate refugees. This difference is probably explained by the fact that ‘refugees’ has become a powerful litmus test of political values in Australia. Here we consider how political orientation influences concerns about Australia in 2050. Levels of concern about the five impacts by political preferences are shown in Table 5 and Chart 2.

Table 5 (Q11) Looking to the year 2050 as the world becomes warmer and extreme weather events increase around the world, how concerned are you about ... (by party voted for) (n = 1955) %

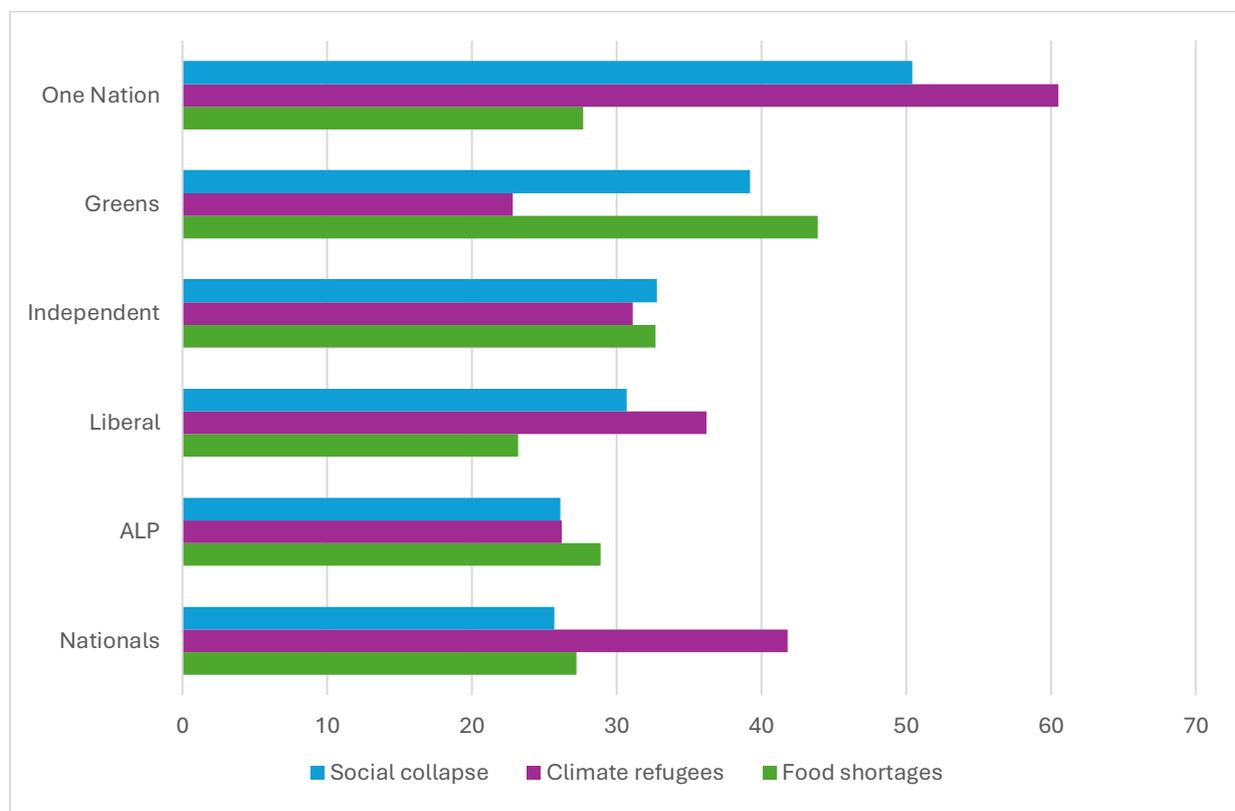
	Average	Party voted for in 2025					
		ALP	Liberal	National	Greens	One Nation	Independent
<i>food supplies becoming short in Australia?</i>							
Not at all concerned	15.9	<u>11.3</u>	<u>24.2</u>	20.7	<u>8.4</u>	<u>32.9</u>	18.3
Very or extremely concerned	30.7	28.9	23.2	27.2	<u>43.9</u>	27.7	32.7
<i>large numbers of climate refugees arriving in Australia?</i>							
Not at all concerned	21.5	20.9	21.4	14.9	23.7	19.0	22.3
Very or extremely concerned	30.4	26.2	36.2	41.8	22.8	<u>60.5</u>	31.1
<i>social and economic collapse in Australia?</i>							
Not at all concerned	14.7	14.6	<u>23.6</u>	14.6	<u>6.7</u>	18.0	10.5
Very or extremely concerned	31.4	<u>26.1</u>	30.7	25.7	39.2	<u>50.4</u>	32.8

Note: Because ‘Very or extremely concerned’ is an aggregate, significant differences from the average are indicated (underlined) only if both very concerned and extremely concerned are significantly different from the average.

The first thing to notice is that the differences across voting preference on these questions are much less pronounced than differences in concern about climate change in general. For example, 60% of ALP voters say they are very or extremely concerned about climate change

while the figure for Liberal voters is 15%. Yet the profile of concerns about food shortages, climate refugees, and social collapse diverge much less. On the question of climate refugees (the middle panel of Table 5), conservative voters hold greater concerns than progressive voters. Worries about large numbers of climate refugees arriving reflect two factors: concern about how large the numbers might be, and concern about the negative effects a large influx may have. Greens, for instance, might expect large numbers but not be too worried about the effects, while One Nation voters may expect large numbers and be very anxious about their effects. One Nation’s strong stance against immigration, especially uncontrolled immigration, probably explains its voters’ very high level of expressed concern.

Chart 2 Percentage very or extremely concerned about social collapse, climate refugees, and food shortages by 2050, by party voted for (%)



Several other interesting differences are apparent from the results shown in the table and the chart.

One Nation and Greens voters show the highest levels of concern about social and economic collapse, with 50% and 39% respectively very or extremely concerned. Labor, Liberal, and National Party voters all fall in the 26-31% range, with Independents on 33%. One Nation voters are much more concerned than Liberal and National Party voters.

One Nation voters' very high level of concern about social collapse may be based less on science (the risks of crossing climatic tipping points) and more on crisis sentiment arising from stronger feelings of fear and vulnerability (the risks of crossing societal tipping points). One Nation's base, which overlaps with the 'Freedom Movement', is often motivated by a deep sense of cultural threat and a fear that Australian society is heading towards breakdown.⁵ Although not shown, One Nation voters are less concerned than other conservative voters about global warming causing trade disruption and military conflict in the Asia-Pacific.

Implications

What do these results tell us about the ways Australian society and politics may evolve? Together, they suggest that climate change has morphed in the public mind from an environmental issue into a multidimensional societal challenge—one that intersects with gender divisions, national security, immigration politics, and social stability.

Climate anxiety has long since shifted out of the activist niche and into the everyday psychology of mainstream life. The fact that 60% of respondents express at least moderate concern about social collapse—a possibility at the extreme end of climate impacts—signals that climate-related fear is now part of the collective consciousness. This surprisingly high level of worry in the community means that future public debates, party platforms, and election campaigns will likely have to address climate anxieties and national preparedness as core voter concerns, regardless of traditional left-right alignments.

On the vital questions of social collapse and climate refugees, the survey shows some stark contrasts between the kinds of concerns expressed by progressive voters and conservative voters. These divergent threat frames may push parties to craft distinct narratives—progressives emphasizing systemic adaptation and resilience, conservatives foregrounding border security and immigration control. Policy proposals framed around food security, health, and community stability may resonate more with women than with men, while defence and regional stability measures could find stronger support among seniors.

⁵ Benjamin Moffitt and Kurt Sengul, 'The populist radical right in Australia : Pauline Hanson's One Nation. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 2023, 22(3): 306-323; Kurt Sengul, "'Swamped": the populist construction of fear, crisis and dangerous others in Pauline Hanson's senate speeches,' *Communication Research and Practice*, 2020.

Perceived climate threats are expected to have greater influence on the migration discourse. Even among conservative voters—who typically downplay climate urgency—the prospect of large numbers of climate refugees is a salient worry. This paradox may be explained by the influence of a cohort of climate sceptics who, underneath it all, are genuinely worried about climate change. Or some respondents may have ignored the climate change framing of the question. Whatever the case, the data suggest that climate-induced migration will move from a speculative scenario into a concrete political talking point. As climate impacts intensify, it seems certain that Australia will face heightened pressure to develop migration, asylum, and integration policies for new and increasingly stressful times.

Overall, with climate change now seen by Australians as intertwined with social stability, economic security, migration, and even conflict, the community seems imbued with a growing ‘climate anxiety’ where environmental threats are reframed as existential social risks. Although there’s clear evidence from the survey of collective insecurity about the future on a warming world, this sense of a precarious future in which social order and stability are no longer guaranteed is not yet part of mainstream public discussion. Yet this shift in assumptions about social continuity carries important implications for how citizens attribute responsibility, demand political action, and envision the future stability of their communities. And as previous papers in this series have shown, they are making their own preparations—modifying their homes, shifting to safer locations and, in some cases, deciding against having children.

Survey method summary

The survey, carried out by Roy Morgan Research, had an overall target of 2,000 completes, aiming for a mix of 1,700 completes broadly representative of the Australian population by age, gender, and region, and 300 additional completes from Australians living in areas affected by one or more extreme weather events since 2019 (see below). Non-interlocked quotas were set for the sample based on the distribution of the adult Australian population for each of age, gender, and region.

Participants were invited to participate in the survey online via e-mail and SMS with a personalised link. A total of 2,099 respondents completed the survey, reduced to 1,955 after cleaning the data set to exclude poor-quality responses. The survey was carried out between 22 May and 22 June 2025.

To better assess the effects of direct exposure to extreme weather events, additional respondents were sought from Australians living in postcodes that had been affected by extreme weather events since 2019 (before the Black Summer Bushfires). The National Emergency Management Agency database, which lists severe events (floods and bushfires only), was used to define the areas so affected.

The average interview length for the survey was just under 10 minutes. Participants were given an incentive to complete the survey through a combination of 'panel points' redeemable in gift-vouchers and entry to a quarterly prize draw.

Full details of the survey methodology and the questionnaire can be found in the technical report posted on this website.

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