# Trust in Australian public services survey methodology 2023-2024

## Survey history and wave frequency

The Survey was trialled in two pilot waves (of 2,500 people) in November 2018 and February 2019. Findings from these pilot waves were used to test and refine the Survey, and the first full wave of the Survey was held in March 2019. The sample size of the March 2019 wave was doubled to 5,000 people, and this wave is used as a baseline. The sample size then reverted to 2,500 respondents.

Following the baseline, survey waves were held approximately every four months, with eight waves (and over 30,000 responses) collected between March 2019 and June 2021. Commencing November 2020, the sample size was doubled to 5,000 people per wave, to allow for more detailed insights in citizen experience.

From July 2021, the Survey has been undertaken monthly with a sample size of approximately 1000 per wave. This enables ‘pulse’ checks of overall citizen satisfaction with, and trust in services, and provides more timely and nuanced data on the impact of any significant events on satisfaction with and trust in services.

**Wave details for 2023-2024 financial year\***

| **Wave** | **Soft Launch** | **Full Launch** | **Survey Close** | **Final responses** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **July 2023** | 3-Jul-23 | 4-Jul-23 | 31-Jul-23 | 1,054 |
| **August 2023** | 2-Aug-23 | 3-Aug-23 | 29-Aug-23 | 1,070 |
| **September 2023** | 1-Sep-23 | 5-Sep-23 | 29-Sep-23 | 1,021 |
| **November 2023** | 15-Nov-23 | 16-Nov-23 | 30-Nov-23 | 985 |
| **December 2023** | 1-Dec-23 | 1-Dec-23 | 21-Dec-23 | 1,010 |
| **January 2024** | 2-Jan-24 | 2-Jan-24 | 22-Jan-24 | 1,014 |
| **February 2024** | 1-Feb-24 | 2-Feb-24 | 19-Feb-24 | 1,018 |
| **March 2024** | 1-Mar-24 | 2-Mar-24 | 13-Mar-24 | 1,025 |
| **April 2024** | 2-Apr-24 | 3-Apr-24 | 18-Apr-24 | 1,025 |
| **May 2024** | 6-May-24 | 7-May-24 | 21-May-24 | 1,008 |
| **June 2024** | 3-Jun-24 | 4-Jun-24 | 24-Jun-24 | 1,025 |

\*Please note data from the October 2023 wave was not used due to errors in the data collection. The 12-month exclusion period on repeat participation was mistakenly not applied.

## Survey respondents

The Survey targets adults (aged 18 years or older) who may access Australian public services. The majority of survey participants are Australian citizen residents, but it also captures permanent residents, citizens living abroad (including special visas), and visitors to Australia.

The design of the Survey ensures Australians reflect on their experiences with Australian public services (also known as Commonwealth, federal or national public services) and not state, territory or local public services. Respondents do not need to have accessed Australian public services; those who have not are still asked for their general opinions of Australian public services.

The Survey uses an established online panel, consisting of people who answer surveys in exchange for minor rewards (e.g. gift cards, airline miles). Panellists are recruited to the panel via online marketing and direct email. Respondents are subject to a number of guidelines to ensure that the responses are of a high quality. These guidelines include age restrictions, quality expectations and communication standards. In addition, the Survey has a 12-month exclusion period – people who complete it cannot answer another survey wave until at least a year has passed. The Survey is currently delivered in English only.

## Sampling methodology

Panel participants are asked to complete the Survey via email, with an attached survey link, and they may commence the Survey directly from the link or by logging into their accounts. Participants are able to complete the Survey via desktop, mobile or tablet devices. Responses are confidential, and the Survey does not collect information that could reasonably be used to identify a participant by people who are permitted access to the data.

The Survey waves are ‘soft launched’ (tested on a small number of people) prior to full launch. Three key areas of testing are undertaken as part of the soft launch:

1. Ensuring there are no errors in the Survey programming (e.g. misrouting, errors in survey logic).
	1. Screen outs are working as intended for those who:
		1. Are under the age of 18
		2. Are not within the targeted scope of Australian citizenship, residency or visa status.
	2. Respondents who have qualified for the Survey are correctly flowing through to the end of the Survey.
	3. Respondents who are meant to skip survey questions or sections based on their responses do so and are not shown questions they are not meant to be shown.
2. Ensuring the Survey is yielding quality responses.
	1. Median survey length (time to complete) is reasonable.
	2. Respondents are able to complete longer questions without dropping out.
3. Checking incidence rates from which to update assumptions relating to total targeted sample.
	1. Review all screen outs to conclude they are legitimate.

Once the review of the data from the soft launch has concluded, and any required updates to the Survey have been made, the Survey is full launched targeting the full number of respondents.

## Quotas

When collecting responses, quotas are placed on the proportions by age, gender, state/territory location, and metro/regional location (based on 2016 ABS Census results). These quotas were updated in September 2022 on the basis of the 2021 ABS Census results. External expert advice recommended that data did not need to be weighted, as using quotas, the demographics of respondents reflect those of the general Australian population.

A hard interlocking quota was used for the intersection of age and gender, with an individual hard quota for state/territory and a soft (varies by +/- 30% per wave) quota for metro/regional location in the 2023-2024 financial year.

*Quota used July and August 2022*

| **n** | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **18-24 years** | 60 | 58 | **118** |
| **25-34 year** | 91 | 93 | **184** |
| **35-44 years** | 85 | 88 | **173** |
| **45-54 years** | 83 | 86 | **169** |
| **55-64 years** | 74 | 78 | **152** |
| **65+ years** | 94 | 110 | **204** |
| **TOTAL** | **487** | **513** | **1000** |
| **NSW** | 320 |  |  |
| **Vic** | 255 |  |  |
| **Qld** | 200 |  |  |
| **SA** | 71 |  |  |
| **WA** | 106 |  |  |
| **Tas** | 21 |  |  |
| **NT** | 10 |  |  |
| **ACT** | 17 |  |  |
| **TOTAL** | **1000** |  |  |

*Quota used since September 2022*

| **n** | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **18-24 years** | 56 | 53 | **109** |
| **25-34 year** | 92 | 92 | **184** |
| **35-44 years** | 87 | 89 | **176** |
| **45-54 years** | 80 | 82 | **162** |
| **55-64 years** | 73 | 77 | **150** |
| **65+ years** | 102 | 116 | **218** |
| **TOTAL** | **491** | **509** | **1000** |
| **NSW** | 314 |  |  |
| **VIC** | 256 |  |  |
| **Qld** | 203 |  |  |
| **SA** | 71 |  |  |
| **WA** | 106 |  |  |
| **TAS** | 23 |  |  |
| **NT** | 9 |  |  |
| **ACT** | 18 |  |  |
| **TOTAL** | **1000** |  |  |

## Data Quality and limitations

The survey panel used is a non-probability panel. Because respondents must have signed up to complete the Survey, and need internet access to complete it, it is not as representative as randomly selecting participants from the whole population. However, from testing via the phone survey and benchmarking against other surveys, the Commission has not detected any major bias in the results. The Survey is delivered in English only, and participants need an internet connection to complete the Survey on their device.

All sample surveys are subject to sampling and non-sampling error. Non-sampling error may occur in any data collection. Possible sources of non-sampling error include errors in reporting or recording of information, occasional errors in coding and processing data, and errors introduced by linkage processes.

The data is not weighted, and uses quotas to ensure the sample is representative on national Australian demographics by age, gender and location.

Note, due to methodological differences between surveys, findings regarding trust-in and satisfaction-with public services obtained through this survey are not directly comparable to other surveys.

## Service numbers

For individual service reporting, we do not report on any service where less than 50 people answered questions about that service in a financial year. The number of people who answered questions about each service in each financial year since 2018-2019 is in the table below.

*Individual service numbers*

| **Service** | **2019** | **2020** | **2021** | **2022** | **2023** | **2024** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Australian Competition and Consumer Commission  | 239 | 293 | 271 | 156 | 173 | 429 |
| Australian Electoral Commission | < 50 | < 50 | 98 | 84 | 70 | 1953 |
| Australian Taxation Office  | 1995 | 1932 | 3401 | 2889 | 2723 | 4354 |
| Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry  | 103 | 120 | 113 | 79 | 101 | 329 |
| Department of Education, Skills and Employment | 317 | 365 | 718 | 460 |  |  |
| Department of Education |  |  |  |  | 195 | 540 |
| Department of Employment and Workplace Relations  |  |  |  |  | 198 | 471 |
| Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)  | 350 | 346 | 323 | 216 | 372 | 420 |
| Department of Home Affairs  | 270 | 299 | 393 | 220 | 337 | 281 |
| Department of Veterans' Affairs  | 123 | 169 | 274 | 190 | 285 | 187 |
| Fair Work Ombudsman  | 122 | 144 | 295 | 171 | 204 | 308 |
| My Aged Care | 252 | 334 | 601 | 414 | 524 | 641 |
| National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)  | 211 | 222 | 465 | 359 | 424 | 455 |
| Pharmaceuticals Benefits Scheme  | 343 | 290 | 581 | 412 | 535 | 593 |
| Services Australia - Centrelink | 2094 | 1971 | 3719 | 3317 | 3350 | 3917 |
| Services Australia - Child Support | 311 | 284 | 571 | 404 | 541 | 566 |
| Services Australia - Medicare | 1781 | 1584 | 2758 | 2720 | 2723 | 3789 |

## Changes to the questionnaire in the 2023-24 Financial year

In 2023, we implemented changes to the questionnaire based on recommendations by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and a previous independent review by The Australian National University’s Centre for Social Research. Both questionnaires, prior to these changes as well as after these changes, are available as supplementary materials to the 2024 Annual Report.

Two changes had an unanticipated substantial impact:

1. *A change to the response scale*: Trust and satisfaction moved from a 7-point Likert scale to a 5-point Likert scale, with the removal of ‘somewhat’ agree and disagree. This change was made to further optimise the survey experience, including the presentation of response options on mobile devices.
2. *A change to the primary list of services*: The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) moved from a drop-down list of approximately 250 services to a shorter list of frequently accessed services. This change was made because AEC was frequently selected relative to other services within the drop-down list, with the change making it easier for respondents to now see and select AEC.

Both changes are described in greater detail below. We also describe corrections that have been made to our estimates of trust and satisfaction outcomes, which account for the systematic bias introduced by the changes in response scale.

### The change in response scale

The updated questionnaire asks respondents to rate their trust and satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale, with a 7-point Likert scale used previously (see Figure 1). The removal of two points on the scale (‘somewhat agree’ and ‘somewhat disagree’) resulted in a greater proportion of respondents rating their trust and satisfaction as neutral (i.e. ‘neither agree nor disagree’).



Figure 1: the old (7-point) and new (5-point) Likert scales

To allow for historical comparisons to be made on an equivalent basis, we have corrected the results from previous years. The method used is described below and has been quality assured by ABS.

These adjustments mean that results in this report are not directly comparable to previous annual reports. The [online interactive dashboard](https://www.apsreform.gov.au/research/trust-in-australian-public-services/dashboard-of-survey-results) can be used to further explore changes over time.

#### Backcasting method and impact

In previously published results for the survey, ‘somewhat agree’ or ‘somewhat disagree’ responses on the 7-point Likert scale counted towards the percentage of respondents who trusted or distrusted services, respectively. However, these points were removed in the change to the 5-point Likert scale, resulting in a greater proportion of respondents selecting ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (i.e. neutral).

For the Trust in Australian public services 2024 Annual Report, we have modelled what the results from the 7-point Likert scale questionnaire would have been if a 5-point scale had been used instead so that previous results can be compared on an equivalent basis.

A proportion of the ‘somewhat agree' responses have been allocated to ‘neutral’ responses, with the remainder allocated to ‘agree’ responses. Similarly the ‘somewhat disagree’ responses have been allocated to either ‘disagree’ or ‘neutral’.

The same approach has been applied to convert the satisfaction results from a 7-point Likert scale to a 5-point scale.

##### Key Assumptions

This method assumes no change in real world trust or satisfaction between the old and new questionnaires. We are confident that this is a reasonable assumption given that both trust and distrust simultaneously decreased by approximately three percentage points. Normally, an increase in trust is associated with a decrease in distrust and vice versa. Without the correction applied, trust is also stable before and after the questionnaire change (see Figure 2)

Figure 2: Uncorrected trust before and after the change in Likert scale

The method also assumes that if past respondents who answered they ‘somewhat’ trusted had instead been asked to rate trust on a 5-point scale, then a constant proportion would have continued to report positive trust and the remainder would have reported neutral trust. The same assumption applies to the proportion of distrusting, satisfied, and dissatisfied respondents.

##### Calculation of factors

The above assumptions can be framed as the following equality for the proportion of trust over the periods July 2022 – September 2023 and November 2023 – June 2024:



Where

*w* is the wave number (June 2022 is wave 23, July 2022 is wave 24, etc.)

*sw* is the sample for wave *w*

*i* is the *i*th respondent is the sample

*1r,I* is an indicator variable that is 1 if respondent *i* gave a trust rating of *r*, and otherwise 0

The correction factor for the trust rating before November 2023 is then given by:



Similarly for distrust, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction.

The October 2023 data (wave 38) has been excluded from all reporting due to problems with data collection.

### The addition of AEC to the shortlist of services

From July 2023 onwards AEC was moved from a dropdown list of approximately 250 small agencies that deliver services to the shortlist of frequently accessed services because it was frequently selected relative to others within the dropdown list. This change resulted in 1953 respondents in the 2023-2024 financial year indicating that they had accessed services from AEC in the past 12 months, compared with an average of 84 respondents per financial year under the previous version of the questionnaire. The increase in respondents is unlikely to be caused by the October 2023 referendum, as previous financial years have included federal elections without seeing any significant change in number of respondents selecting AEC. We assume the increased visibility of the service prompted a much higher proportion of respondents to recall they have accessed AEC services and therefore to select it.

Associated with this, there was an approximate 10 percentage point decline in the proportion of respondents reporting trust and satisfaction with the AEC, and an approximate 5 percentage point increase in the proportion of respondents reporting distrust and dissatisfaction. We hypothesise that this change is likely attributable to a selection bias, in that respondents who had overcome the friction of selecting the AEC from the dropdown list were motivated to do so because they held more memorable or stronger opinions towards the AEC.