

Research Insights

Is there an ideological divide in willingness to get vaccinated?

Australians across the entire political spectrum want the COVID-19 vaccine, but those who are disengaged from politics are much more hesitant.

Is politics at play in driving vaccine hesitancy?

Experts in mass opinion have long emphasised that for a message from political leaders to be effective, people should be listening (Zaller, 1992). It is therefore unsurprising that political ideology is a powerful predictor of peoples' attitudes towards vaccinations. This is especially the case in the UK and the USA where the COVID-19 vaccination has been politicised which seems to have led to people on the right of the political spectrum being more hesitant.¹ For those who are disengaged from politics or do not trust leaders of the major parties, messages from political leaders pay no heed. Vaccine hesitancy among politically disengaged Australians may become an issue since a large part of the push to protect people from contracting COVID-19 has come from governments and politically affiliated institutions. The problem might be especially important for Australia, where political trust has been steadily falling for a decade (Dasonneville & McAllister, 2021).

Australian politics is dominated by two major parties: the Liberal/National Coalition (made up of the centre-right Liberal Party of Australia in coalition with a smaller right-wing National Party of Australia), and a centre-left Australian Labor Party (which is now in Federal opposition but with Premiers elected in several states and territories). In general, both parties have been unified in their communication about the importance of the COVID-19 vaccine. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Leader of the Opposition Anthony Albanese have both encouraged everyone who is eligible to get vaccinated. In general, Australian politicians show widespread support for the COVID-19 vaccine. Because of this, it seems unlikely that political polarisation, when it comes to vaccines, will be an issue in Australia.

Since February 2021, the Taking the Pulse of The Nation (TTPN) survey has asked questions about willingness to get vaccinated and voting intentions. This allows us to explore how political sympathies of Australians changed during this period, as well as the correlation between political affiliation and vaccine hesitancy. Given that the politicians are unified in their support towards the vaccine, what is driving vaccine hesitancy in Australia throughout this pandemic?

1. See, for example, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/covid-vaccine-passports-clubs-b1887825.html>, and <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/17/us/vaccine-hesitancy-politics.html>

Politically uncommitted refers to those who are 'politically uncommitted to any mainstream Australian party,' defined based on answers to the question 'If a Federal election was held today, could you please tell me which party you personally would vote for?'. This question is used as a measure of personal disengagement from mainstream politics. The politically uncommitted groups are those who refused to answer the question; said that they did not know; expressed intent to vote for an independent candidate or for the One Nation party. The TTPN survey does not separate One Nation from other non-mainstream parties, though the results are unlikely to be driven solely by One Nation since the party received only 5.4 per cent of votes in the 2019 Federal Election.

Key Insights

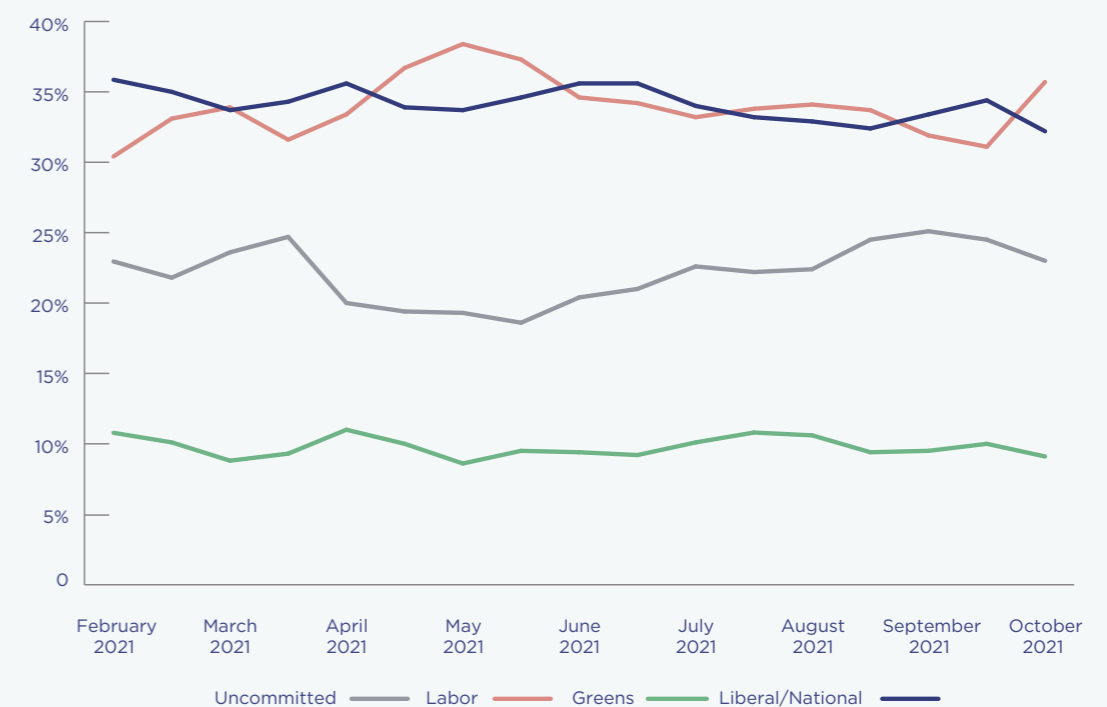
1 The popularity of all major political parties in Australia remains stable

Despite the Federal Government facing sharp criticism of the vaccine rollout in Australia, the popularity of the major parties (Liberal/National Coalition, Labor and Greens) remained virtually unchanged in the last six months. Labor gained an advantage over the Coalition in mid-April but lost this lead by the start of July when each of the parties were appealing to approximately 30 per cent of the survey respondents. The broad appeal of the major Australian political parties hints at strong party identification, which is typical for

developed democracies. However, it could also result in political polarisation and sharpen divides in attitudes, including towards vaccines—see, for example, Gadarian (2020) or Milosh et al. (2020).

Importantly, between 20 and 25 per cent of Australians are politically uncommitted, a share that has also remained stable since January 2021.

Figure 1: Popularity of major political parties in Australia



Source: Data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation survey, representative of the Australian population aged 18 and over. This figure depicts the responses to the question "If a FEDERAL election was held today, could you please tell me which party you personally would vote for?" Supporters of Australian Democrats are excluded. Uncommitted included those who refused to answer, answered "I do not know", or answered "One Nation/Independent/Other." Percentages are moving averages for the two consecutive waves.

2 Vaccine hesitancy is highest among those who are politically uncommitted

There is no left or right political divide in the willingness to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Around 80–90 per cent of the supporters of each major political party want to get a COVID-19 vaccine or have already received it.

The situation is different for people who are politically uncommitted with a quarter (25%) indicating that they do not want to get the vaccine or are unsure about it – a pattern that is consistent across all age groups. In addition, the TTPN data also shows that politically uncommitted Australians are lagging in vaccination rates across all age groups.

These findings can be interpreted in at least two ways. The first one is optimistically: politically uncommitted Australians are just less attentive and thus slower to pick up messages about vaccine efficacy and safety. Therefore, perhaps in time they will come around to getting vaccinated. The second interpretation is more pessimistic: politically uncommitted people are so disengaged that none of the messages around vaccines are likely to reach them. While the rates of vaccine hesitancy remain high for the politically uncommitted, it has reduced from 51 per cent in June to 25 per cent in October which supports the more optimistic scenario.

Figure 2: Vaccine hesitancy by political preferences



Source: Data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation survey, representative of the Australian population aged 18 and over. This figure depicts the responses to the question 'Are you willing to have the covid-19 vaccine?'. Persons who responded 'no' or 'I do not know' are counted as hesitant. Supporters of Australian Democrats are excluded. Uncommitted included those who refused to answer, answered "I do not know", or answered "One Nation/Independent". Percentages are moving averages for the two consecutive waves.

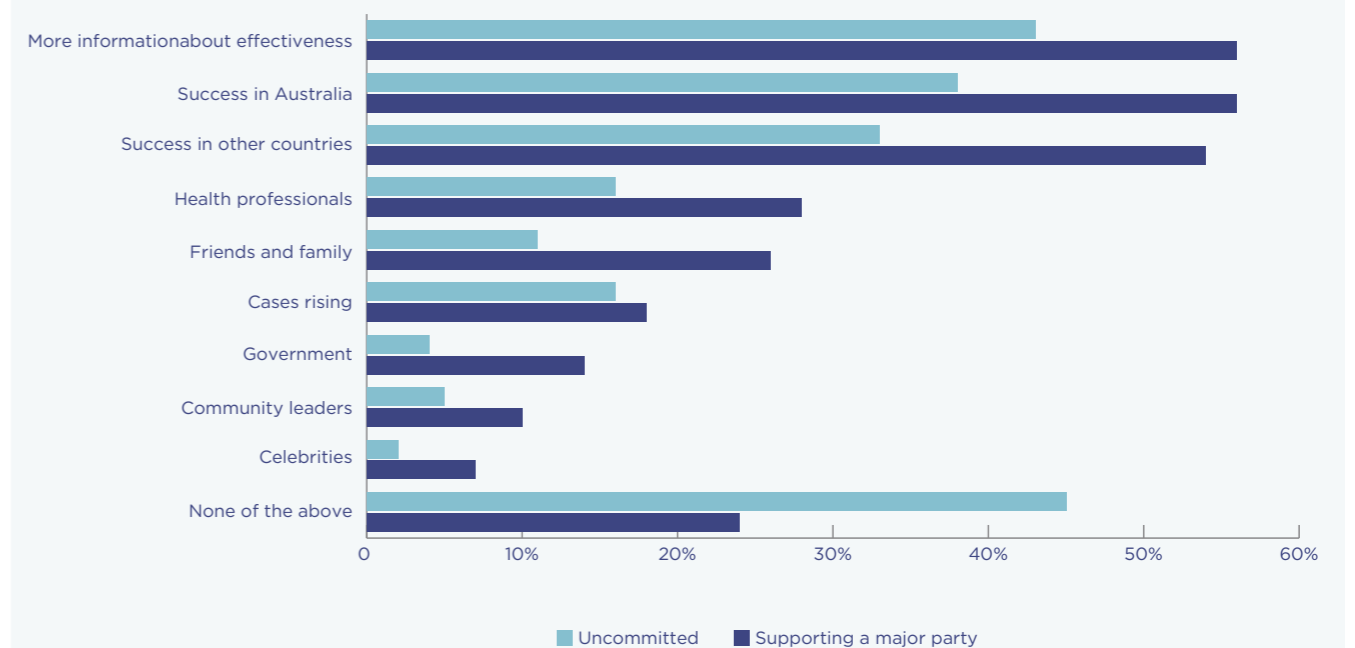
3 Those who are politically uncommitted and unvaccinated can not be convinced otherwise

To compound this issue, politically uncommitted Australians who are hesitant to get vaccinated are less likely to be convinced by pro-vaccine messages or evidence. Politically engaged people who are vaccine hesitant could be persuaded to get the vaccine by more information about its effectiveness and by vaccine success in Australia and abroad. For politically uncommitted people who are hesitant, these messages are far less convincing. Most alarmingly,

almost half (45%) are unlikely to be convinced, not even by health professionals, their friends and family, or by new information about vaccine effectiveness.

This suggests a deep distrust for the authorities, especially the politically affiliated ones such as the government. Messages around vaccination delivered by the government are unlikely to reach these group, let alone convince them to get vaccinated.

Figure 3: Who/what can persuade you to get the COVID-19 vaccine?



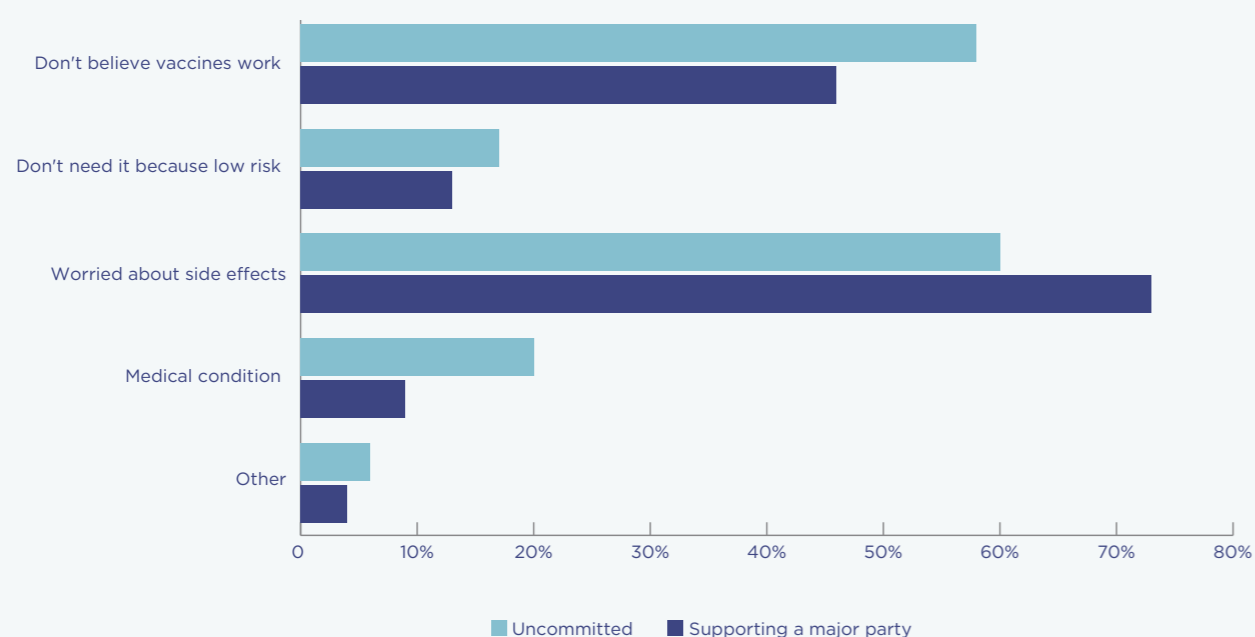
Source: Data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation survey, representative of the Australian population aged 18 and over. This figure depicts the responses to the question "For each category, which of the following would persuade you to get vaccinated? Supporters of Australian Democrats are excluded. Uncommitted included those who refused to answer, answered "I do not know", or answered "One Nation/Independent/Other". The survey was conducted on the week of March 15, 2021.

4 Politically uncommitted Australians are much less worried about side effects but more distrustful of the vaccine in general

Why are the politically uncommitted more hesitant? Are they more worried about the side effects? Remarkably, no. Concern about the side effects is indeed the major reason cited by all age groups for refusing to get the vaccine, but it is less prominent

among the politically uncommitted. Instead, they are more likely to distrust vaccines in general, supporting the idea of a deeply seeded mistrust that can be impervious to messaging or information.

Figure 4: Reasons for being not willing to get vaccinated



Source: Data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation survey, representative of the Australian population aged 18 and over. This figure depicts the responses to the question "If no and don't know to Q25, what are the reasons for you not willing to be vaccinated?" Supporters of Australian Democrats are excluded. Uncommitted included those who refused to answer, answered "I do not know", or answered "One Nation/Independent/Other." The survey was conducted on the week of March 15, 2021.

Evidence led non-partisan advice on vaccine efficacy could be the solution to reaching the vaccine hesitant

Almost all Australian major political leaders are united in their message about the importance of getting the COVID-19 vaccination. This is an enviable position for other countries where vaccines have become a political battleground, consequently restricting policy efforts for increasing vaccination rates and jeopardising lives and the economy. This suggests that while political unity might be a strategy for increasing vaccine uptake elsewhere, it is unlikely to be effective in Australia where political leadership is less effective in reaching those who are disengaged and also most hesitant about getting vaccinated. How can this group be reached? This is a difficult question, but it is critical to reaching Australia's ambitious vaccination goals.

The TTPN data suggests that the most persuasive means to convince this group will be clear and informed messaging about vaccine effectiveness and potential side effects based on evidence from Australia and abroad. Unfortunately, the *Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation* (ATAGI)—the institution most Australians look to for non-partisan advice on vaccinations—arguably added to the confusion. On June 27, ATAGI conveyed that the Pfizer vaccine was 'preferred' for people under 40 at a time when that vaccine was largely unavailable and would remain unavailable for many months. This statement likely seeded a lethargy in vaccinations, with many Australians waiting for the 'preferred' vaccine and remaining unprotected all the way up to the most recent outbreaks. When ATAGI's advice was updated on July 13, it was already too late.²

The data shows that politically uncommitted Australians are more vaccine hesitant than the general population and that they are more difficult to convince. It should be noted that, to the extent those individuals can be convinced, the ways of going about it are the same: messages about safety and efficacy delivered by healthcare workers and other non-partisan sources. The unvaccinated might also be swayed if they are restricted from participating in public events and activities afforded only to those who are vaccinated through their vaccine passport. Of course, for many, this might not be enough, and such measures may backfire. If the root of the issue for those who are vaccine hesitant is distrust in the political system and 'the establishment' in general, simple tweaks in messaging will not help. We must be prepared that a public campaign to promote vaccination will be of limited consequence for them. We can find solace, however, in the fact that for this group hesitancy does seem to be decreasing over time and that they represent a much smaller proportion of the population in Australia than in other countries.

Politically uncommitted Australians surveyed – representing a quarter of the population – are more likely to be vaccine hesitant, harder to reach and less likely to trust authorities. These findings underscore the need for engaged non-political leaders and experts to promote vaccination efficacy so that we can get on the road to pandemic recovery.

2. <https://theconversation.com/yes-theres-confusion-about-atagis-astrazeneca-advice-but-its-in-an-extremely-difficult-position-164633>

Further Information

Datasets

The analysis uses data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation – Melbourne Institute’s survey of the impact of COVID-19. The aim of the weekly survey is to track changes in the economic and social wellbeing of Australians living through the effects of the coronavirus pandemic whilst adapting to various changes in federal and state government policies. The survey contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population.

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