



## Representative Views:

Mass and elite opinion on Australian security

### Executive summary

Voter and candidate surveys since the 2004 federal election shed light on changing Australian attitudes to defence, national security, foreign policy and trade. On some issues, Australians are more divided than at any time since the Vietnam War, and opinions are more strongly held. A gap exists between the concerns and views of the political elite and those of the public.

#### Defence as a political issue

Defence and national security were mentioned as the first priority for about one in 10 voters in the 2004 election, a similar figure to 2001. A similar proportion of candidates in those elections mentioned defence and national security as their first priority, more so among Coalition candidates than among candidates of the Australian Labor Party, the Australian Democrats or the Greens.

#### Security threats

Voters are significantly more likely to identify a potential security threat to Australia from another country than are candidates.

In 2004, 14% of candidates identified a threat, compared to more than twice that proportion of voters.

Among voters, Indonesia remains by far the most frequently mentioned potential threat to Australia's security and is mentioned by 29% of voters. Just one in 10 candidates identifies Indonesia as a threat, a substantial decline since the mid-1990s.

Almost one-quarter of Democrat candidates and four in 10 Green candidates identify the US as a potential threat, demonstrating the antipathy of the minor parties towards the US.

#### Terrorism and Iraq

A majority of voters in 2004 supported Australia providing military assistance for the 'War on Terror', but there was a decline of 10 percentage points since 2001. The level of support among the political elite is similar. However, there are substantial party differences, with Coalition candidates showing support, ALP candidates showing divided opinions, and Democrats and Greens showing opposition.

The Iraq War polarised both public and elite opinion in 2004. While voter opinion was evenly divided, opponents of the war held their views more strongly than supporters. Three-quarters of Coalition candidates strongly approved of the war, while nine out of 10 Labor and Democrat candidates strongly disapproved of it, as did almost all Green candidates.

## Defence and the US

There's strong voter and elite support for the ANZUS Treaty. Minor parties, especially the Greens, generally see the treaty as unimportant. Within the political elite, support for the treaty and trust in the US to come to Australia's defence increased between 2001 and 2004.

While the Iraq War polarised the public and the elite, it appears to have had only a minor impact on public support for Australia's defence link with the US.

## Globalisation and engagement with Asia

There's strong public and elite support for the economic and non-economic benefits of globalisation. However, the elite is divided, with Coalition candidates most in favour, Labor candidates split, and Democrat and Green candidates opposed.

On closer engagement with Asia, the public is divided between those who believe that more should be done and those who believe that the current situation is satisfactory. The political elite generally wants to see closer engagement with Asia than does the public, with ALP, Democrat and Green candidates being more likely to take this view than Coalition candidates.

The current levels of support for closer engagement with Asia are similar to those recorded at the end of the Keating Labor Government in the mid-1990s, when the issue had greater prominence.



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