

Three quarters of Aussies impacted by summer bushfires

February 17 2020, by James Giggacher



Credit: Jamie Kidston, ANU

More than three quarters of Australian adults report that they were affected by the nation's recent unprecedented bushfires, according to a new poll from The Australian National University (ANU).

The latest ANUpoll also found the Government's response to the bushfires had burnt away at Prime Minister Scott Morrison's approval

rating and popularity with voters.

Lead researcher Professor Nicolas Biddle said the poll asked a nationally representative sample of more than 3,000 Australians about their experiences of and exposure to the recent extensive bushfires across the nation. The poll is the largest and most representative study on public perceptions about the bushfires to date.

"Nearly every Australian has been touched by these fires and many of us will be living with the effects for years and years to come," he said.

Professor Biddle said he suspected the impact would be widespread, but even he was "surprised at just how far-reaching they are".

"We found that about three million people—more than 14 percent of adult Australians—reported that they were directly exposed to this year's bushfires.

"This widespread, direct exposure includes property damage, property being threatened and being advised to evacuate.

Indirect exposure was even more widespread. Analysis of the data showed that more than three quarters of Australian adults—more than 15 million Australians—reported some form of indirect exposure.

"This includes having a friend or family member that had property damage; having a friend or family that had property threatened; having their travel or holiday plans affected; being exposed to the physical effects of smoke; or feeling anxious or worried.

"These fires have been unprecedented in scale and global in impact. And now our poll shows just how far and wide and how many Australians have felt the negative and long-lasting effects of this disaster—regardless

of their economic, social or cultural background.

In addition to the impacts of the bushfires, the poll tracked Australians' attitudes about their lives, their political leaders and the environment before and after the fires. It found that Australians were far less satisfied with their lives and the direction of the country than they were before the bushfires.

"We estimate that about 60 percent of adult Australians were either satisfied or very satisfied with the way the country is heading in January 2020—a significant and substantial decline from 65 percent in the October 2019 ANUpoll," Professor Biddle said.

"On a range of 0 to 10, life satisfaction in January 2020 was 6.90. This is a decline since the October 2019 score of 7.05.

"There was a significant decline in the proportion of people who had confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra. Only 27 percent of respondents reported that they were confident or very confident in the Government.

"This is one of the largest declines in confidence I have seen in such a short period of time. Regardless of who you voted for or which party you belong to, our political system works better if people have trust and confidence in their Government."

Politically, there was "quite strong disapproval" of the Federal Government's handling of the bushfires, Professor Biddle said.

"In particular, we found there was disapproval with Prime Minister Scott Morrison," he said.

"When it came to confidence in [party leaders](#), PM Scott Morrison's score

was 3.92 out of 10. This is a net negative review of the Prime Minister and substantial decline in his popularity from 5.25 out of 10 when the same question was asked in June 2019.

"And between October 2019 and January 2020 there was a significant and substantial decline in the percent of people who would vote for the Coalition, if an election was held that day.

"This fell from over 40 percent of people in October 2019 saying they would vote for the Coalition to about 35 percent in January 2020."

Other key findings from the poll include:

- About half of respondents said the environment was the most important or second most important issue for Australia—compared to almost 42 percent in October 2019.
- A large increase in the amount of people who said [global warming](#) or the greenhouse effect would have an effect on them—72 percent in January 2020 compared to 56 percent in 2008.
- The number of Australians who said global warming was a very serious threat increased from 20 percent in 2008 to 33 percent in 2020.

Provided by Australian National University

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