

Involvement by churches in public policy

Churches and public issues

Christianity has a long history of social and political engagement. While various ecclesial and theological traditions have at times been in conflict with public sentiment, and at other times in quiet agreement with it, in recent decades there has been well-publicised engagement with mainstream politics and matters of public importance by many churches and Christian leaders. A minority have continued to take an approach that avoids all explicit public engagement. The past decade has seen churches and individual Christians engage in public debates over issues as broad as global poverty and the climate, and as intimate as human reproduction and marriage. What were the views of attenders on the validity of advocacy and public comment by churches and Christians in the 2011 National Church Life Survey?

In late 2011, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders was asked:

In your opinion, should Christians be involved in public policy issues in the following ways?

Advocacy or lobbying of governments

Public comment

Attenders were then asked these same questions in relation to whether churches should be involved.

Overall findings

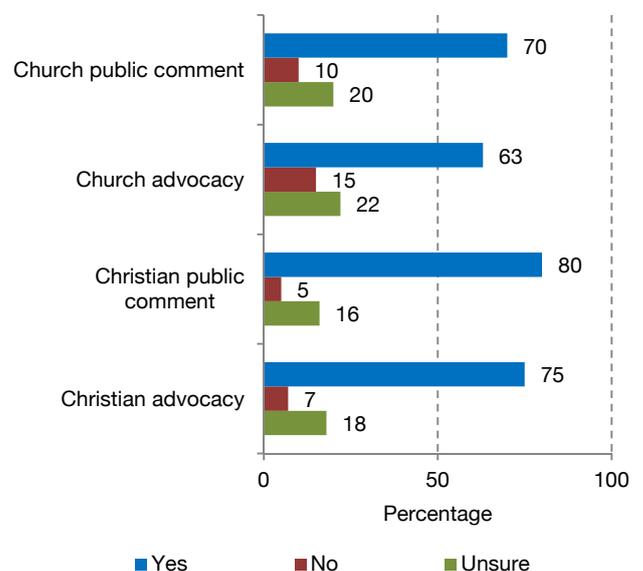
The 2011 National Church Life Survey shows there was strong support from church attenders for both advocacy and public comment with 80% support for Christian public comment and 75% support for Christian advocacy.

By comparison, support for church institutional engagement in advocacy fell to 63%, and 70% for public comment.

Though these are still strong majorities, the fact that support for these forms of public engagement is lower for churches as institutions than for individuals perhaps reflects a conservatism in the minds of some attenders

who may wish to allow for the freedom of conscience of other Christians to speak their mind or advocate for political and social change, while being less certain that churches as a whole should engage in such activity.

Figure 1: Christian and church involvement in advocacy and public comment



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O (n=1,409).

Demographics

Across both domains of public comment and advocacy, for both churches and Christians, youth aged 15-19 were consistently much more likely than other attenders to be uncertain in their views, with the "unsure" response ranging from 51% to 66% of youth, compared with 13 to 19% of attenders 20 years and older. These results were mirrored by smaller proportions of youths agreeing with Christian and church activity in advocacy and public comment.

Women were also more likely than men to be uncertain, although the gap between them (in the order of 10%) was much smaller than was the case for age groups. This pattern was also repeated for education, with those whose highest level of formal education was secondary schooling more unsure than other people.

Table 1: Breakdown by age, gender and education

	Age		Gender		Education	
	15- 19 years	20+ years	Women	Men	School education	Higher education
	Percentage					
Christian advocacy						
Yes	34	78	72	79	67	82
No	6	7	6	8	6	7
Unsure	60	15	21	12	27	11
Christian comment						
Yes	47	82	77	82	72	85
No	3	5	4	5	3	5
Unsure	51	13	18	12	25	10
Church advocacy						
Yes	25	66	60	69	55	69
No	9	15	13	16	13	15
Unsure	66	19	27	15	32	15
Church comment						
Yes	34	73	67	75	62	75
No	6	11	9	11	10	11
Unsure	61	17	24	14	28	15

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O (n=1,286).

Denominational differences

Anglican and Baptist/Churches of Christ had the largest proportion of attenders who agreed with Christian advocacy (85%/86%) and Christian public comment (88%/87%) as well as church comment (both 76%). In terms of church (rather than attender) activity, Anglicans, Baptist/Church of Christ and Uniting Church attenders demonstrated the strongest levels of agreement (~71% agreeing with church advocacy, and ~77% agreeing with public comment).

Table 2: Breakdown by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
		Percentage					
Christian advocacy							
Yes	85	86	72	73	74	71	74
No	5	2	10	6	5	8	5
Unsure	10	12	19	21	21	22	21
Christian comment							
Yes	88	87	76	76	79	81	77
No	4	1	7	6	2	4	4
Unsure	8	12	17	18	20	15	19
Church advocacy							
Yes	71	71	59	60	63	72	61
No	9	9	20	15	10	11	11
Unsure	19	21	21	25	27	17	28
Church comment							
Yes	76	76	69	68	65	78	61
No	7	7	14	10	3	7	15
Unsure	17	17	17	22	32	15	24

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O (n=1,280).

Newcomers to church life in the last five years were least likely to think that Christians and churches should

be active with regard to advocacy and comment, and the group most likely to be unsure.

Table 3: Breakdown by attender type

	Visitor	Newcomer	Switcher	Transfer	Attended > 5 years
		Percentage			
Christian advocacy					
Yes	82	58	82	76	76
No	0	8	2	9	8
Unsure	18	34	16	15	16
Christian comment					
Yes	81	67	81	85	80
No	1	5	5	6	5
Unsure	19	28	14	9	15
Church advocacy					
Yes	80	55	68	65	63
No	10	13	9	19	15
Unsure	10	32	22	16	22
Church comment					
Yes	82	62	67	71	71
No	7	11	7	15	10
Unsure	11	27	25	14	19

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O (n=1,236).

Summary

Attenders appear to be strongly supportive of both engagement in public comment and the more targeted and long-term activity of advocating for political policy change. While there remains obvious and often strong disagreement over prioritization and the conclusions drawn about many issues of public debate among attenders, there is nevertheless strong support for the validity of Christian faith, and the individuals and institutions that represent that faith, to proactively shape the society in which attenders live their lives. The 2011 National Church Life Survey shows attenders are committed to speaking out.

Reference

Powell, R., (2011) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O, NCLS Research, Sydney.

Citation

Pepper, M., Bevis, S., Powell, R., & Hancock, N. (2013) Involvement by churches in public policy, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 13003. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.

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About NCLS: The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is a quantitative survey of 260,000-450,000 church attenders, 6,000-10,000 church leaders and 3,000-7,000 churches in more than 20 Australian denominations every census year since 1991.