

Taxes versus government spending: attender attitudes

Funding the future

Federal budgets are important moral documents. They are fought over, analysed and dissected by politicians and commentators alike. For many other Australians, a quick glance at “what’s in it for me?” may be all the attention these documents receive. Nevertheless, how Government policy is funded and how the appropriate balance between taxation and spending is arrived at remain potent questions. In 2011 the National Church Life Survey was able to test church attenders’ views on this contentious issue. In late 2011, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders was asked:

If the government had a choice between reducing personal income taxes or increasing social spending on services like health and education which do you think it should do?

- Strongly favour reducing taxes
- Mildly favour reducing taxes
- Depends
- Mildly favour increasing social spending
- Strongly favour increasing social spending
- Can't choose

Overall responses

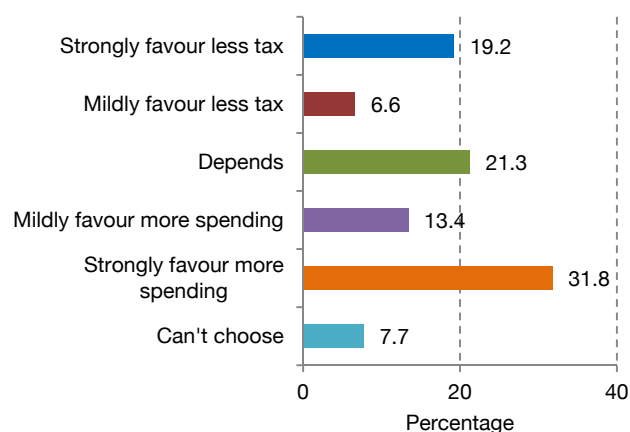
A total of 45% of attenders favoured further government spending rather than reducing personal taxes. The largest group of responses to the question was those who strongly favoured further spending (32%). The next largest group (21%) were those who responded ‘depends’. Those favouring less tax amounted to 26% of attenders. A small group (8%) could not choose. The survey reveals a strong base for social spending on services like health and education and a significant group of people willing to be persuaded by the merits of the case.

Gender and education

Women were more decisive and held stronger opinions about this issue than men. Over a third of women (36%) strongly favoured further spending, compared with 27% of men. A fifth (20%) of women and 17% of men

strongly favoured less tax. A quarter (25%) of men responded ‘depends’, compared with 19% of women.

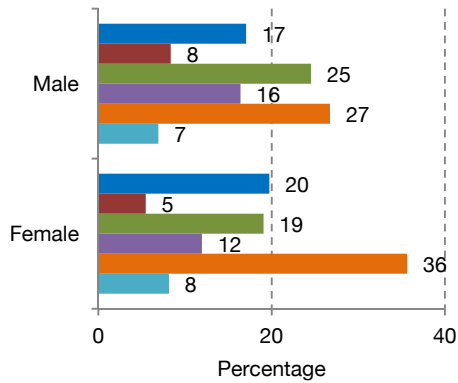
Figure 1: Reducing taxes versus increasing government social spending



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N (n=1,427).

In terms of education, church attenders with a degree were more likely than those without to strongly favour increasing social spending (44% versus 26%). Those with a trade certificate or diploma were the most likely (32%) to respond ‘depends’, compared with 18% of people whose highest level of formal education was school or a tertiary degree.

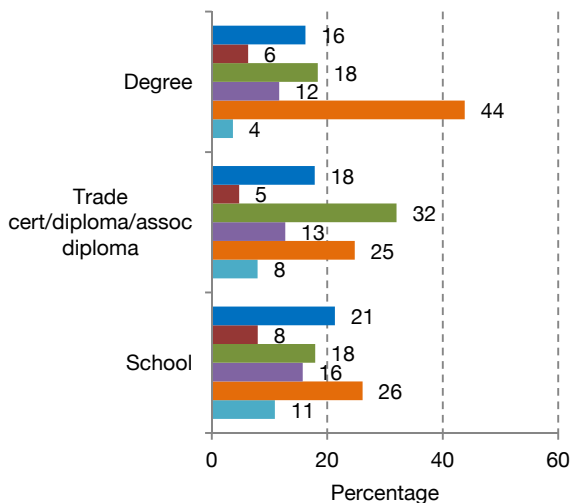
Figure 2: Taxes versus social spending by gender



■ Strongly favour less tax ■ Mildly favour less tax
■ Depends ■ Mildly favour more spending
■ Strongly favour more spending ■ Can't choose

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N (n=1,313).

Figure 3: Taxes versus social spending by education



■ Strongly favour less tax ■ Mildly favour less tax
■ Depends ■ Mildly favour more spending
■ Strongly favour more spending ■ Can't choose

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N (n=1,322).

Denominational differences

Strong denominational differences are apparent. Anglicans had the largest proportion of attenders who strongly favoured further spending (49%). While Catholic and Pentecostal attenders were still more likely to support increased spending than decreased tax, they had the lowest proportions who chose this option (28% and 27% respectively). Attenders from Catholic parishes (24%) and Pentecostal churches (22%) were most likely to be strongly in favour of less tax.

Table 1: Taxes versus social spending by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
Category	Percentage						
Strongly favour less tax	11	10	24	10	22	16	19
Mildly favour less tax	5	9	7	5	6	7	8
Depends	20	21	22	26	22	18	17
Mildly favour more spending	13	15	11	16	16	18	15
Strongly favour more spending	49	32	28	35	27	35	30
Can't choose	4	12	8	9	6	7	11

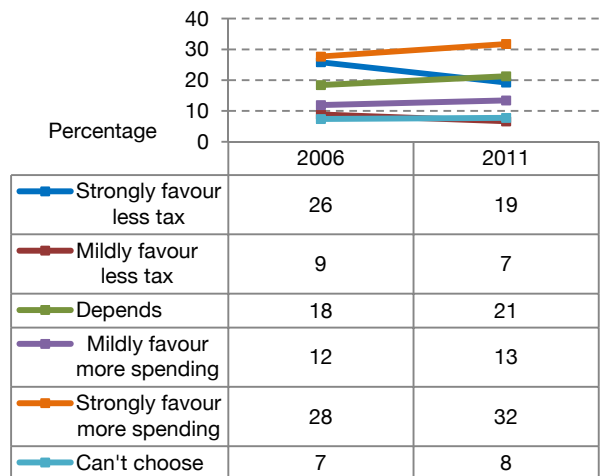
Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N (n=1,340).

Differences can also be noted based on church attendance background, with 50% of those who have attended for five or more years in favour of further social spending on services.

Change over time

A comparison with results from the 2006 NCLS suggest that views have shifted away from favouring less tax (35% of attenders in 2006, versus 26% in 2011).

Figure 4: Taxes versus social spending over time



Source: 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey J (n=2,653), 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N (n=1,340).

Summary

When faced with a choice concerning sharing of the pie of government finances and expenditure, church attenders are more likely to prioritize social spending than personal tax cuts. The issue is not clear-cut, there is room for debate and a significant body of attenders is unconvinced about the merits of either case.

References

Castle, K., (2006) [computer file], 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey J, NCLS Research, Sydney.

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

Citation

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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.