

Polling - Whistleblowers

November 2021

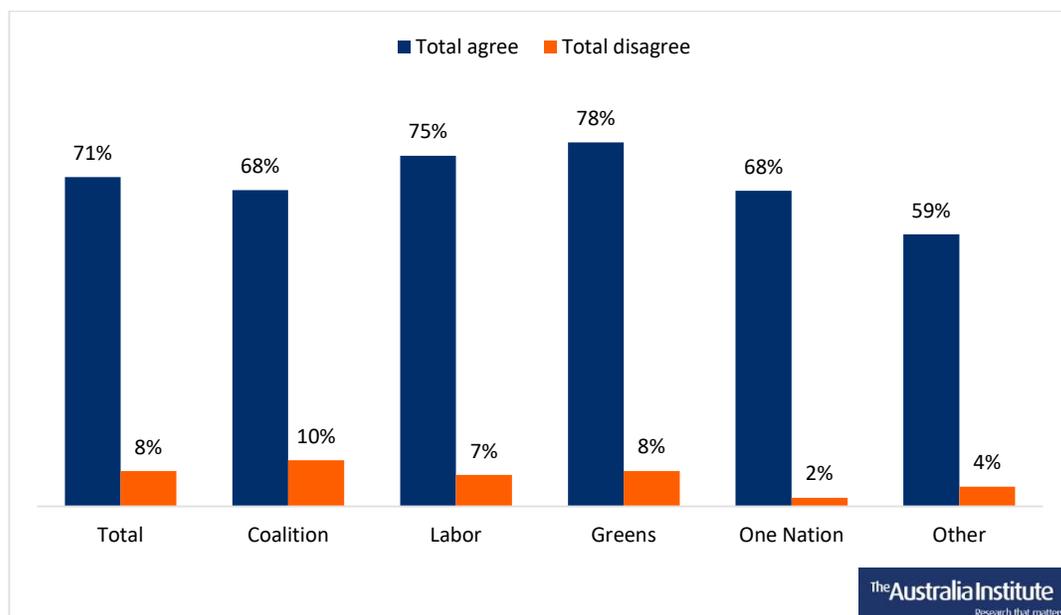
Key results

The Australia Institute surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,004 Australians about their views on whistleblowers and government secrecy. The survey was developed in collaboration with the Human Rights Law Centre.

The results show:

- Seven in 10 Australians (71%) agree that whistleblower protections for public servants should be strengthened, including 34% who strongly agree.
- Three in four (75%) Australians say that whistleblowers make Australia a better place.
- Three in five (61%) people say that whistleblowing strengthens national security and our system of government.
- Two in five (43%) people say that too many whistleblowers are being prosecuted, with one in five (18%) saying that the number of prosecutions is about right, and one in 10 (10%) saying not enough are being prosecuted.

Figure 1: Whistleblower protections should be strengthened, by voting intention



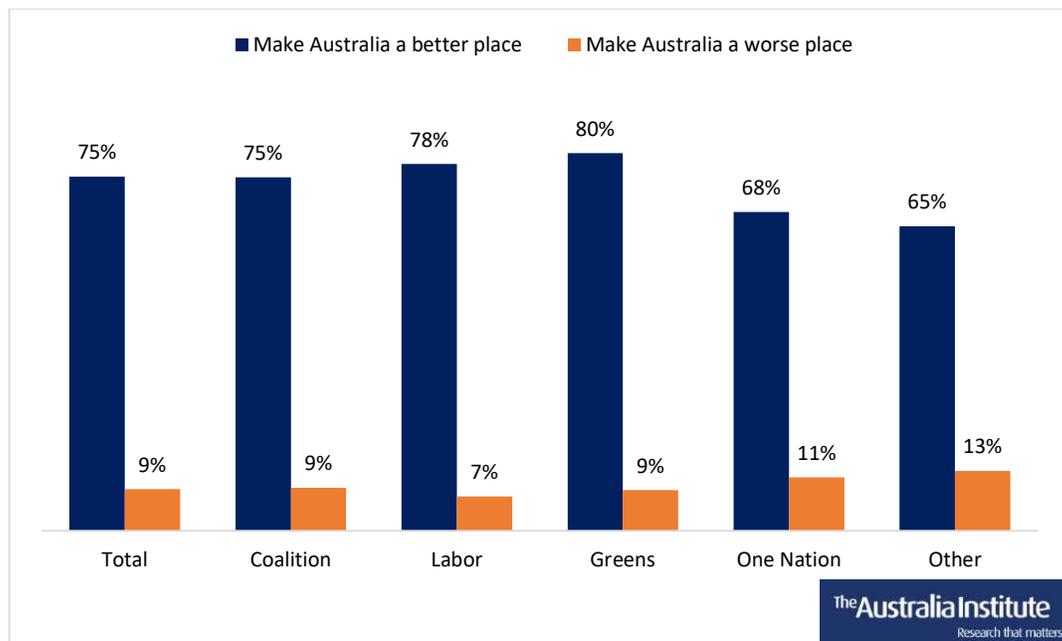
Attitudes to whistleblowing

Respondents were provided with the following definition:

“A whistleblower is someone who reports potential wrongdoing that isn’t already being addressed.” They were then asked whether, in general, whistleblowers make Australia a better place or a worse place.

- Three in four (75%) Australians say that whistleblowers make Australia a better place, with 9% saying whistleblowers make Australia a worse place.
- Three in four (75%) Coalition, 78% of Labor, 80% of Greens, 68% of One Nation and 65% of Independent/Other voters say that whistleblowers make Australia a better place.

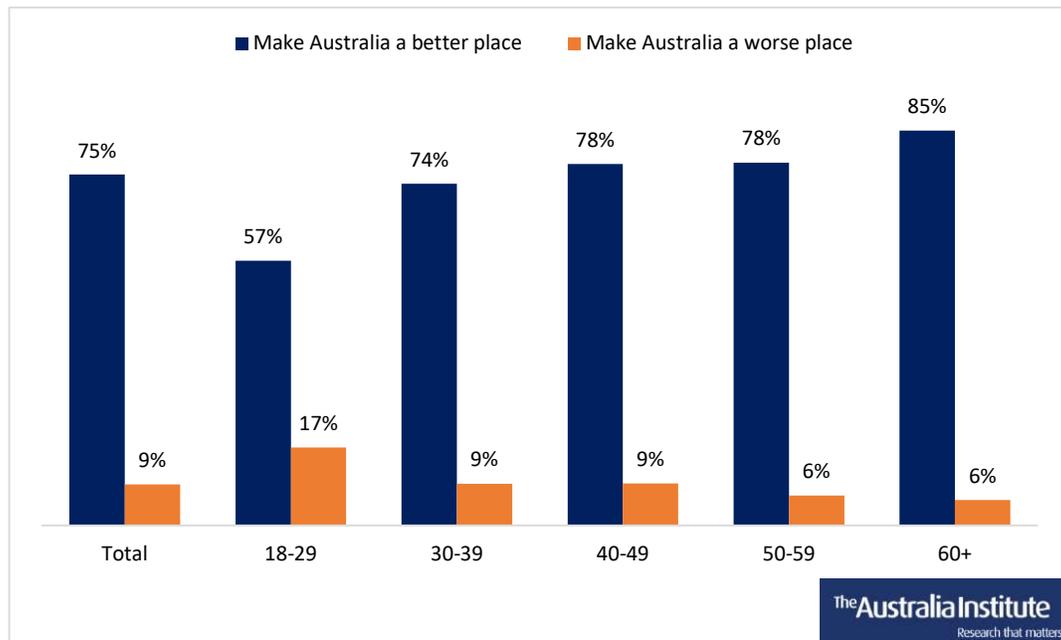
Figure 2: Whistleblowers make Australia a better or worse place, by voting intention



Belief that whistleblowers make Australia a better place was higher among older Australians.

- 85% of people aged over 60 say that whistleblowers make Australia a better place, along with 78% of people aged between 40 and 59 and 74% of people aged 30-39.
- 57% of people aged 18-29 say that whistleblowers make Australia a better place, with 17% saying that they make Australia a worse place.

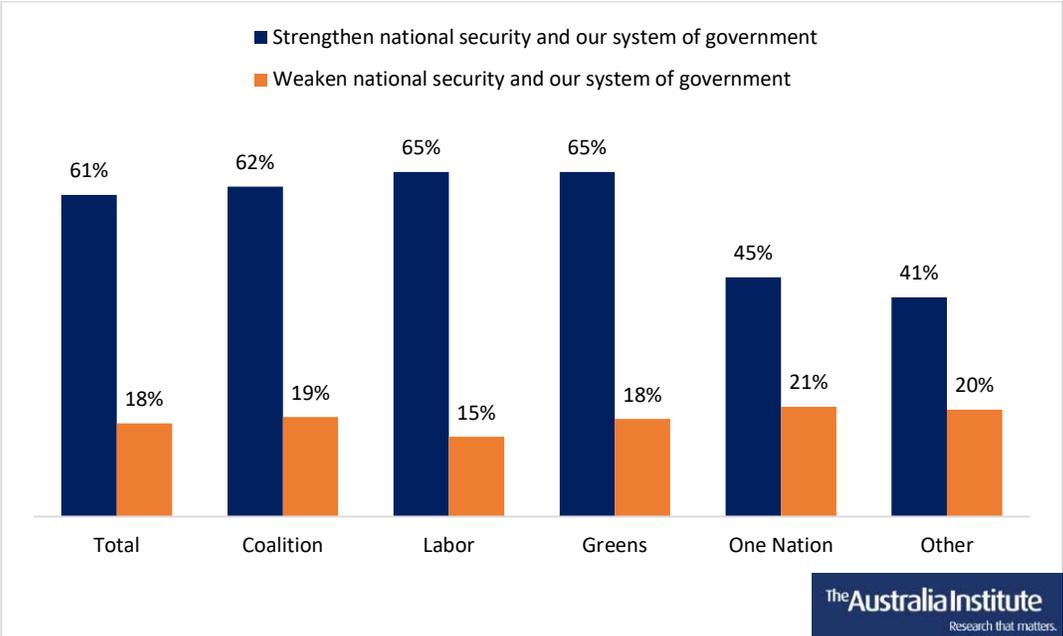
Figure 3: Whistleblowers make Australia a better or worse place, by age group



Respondents were asked whether national security and Australia’s system of government is strengthened or weakened when someone goes public with information of potential wrongdoing within government.

- Six in ten (61%) people say that whistleblowing strengthens national security and our system of government, with 18% saying that it weakens national security and our system of government.
- 62% of Coalition, 65% of Labor, 65% of Greens, 45% of One Nation and 41% of Independent/Other voters say that whistleblowing strengthens national security and our system of government.

Figure 4: Whistleblowing’s effect on national security, by voting intention



Whistleblower prosecutions

Respondents were given background information on the prosecution of Witness K and Bernard Collaery:

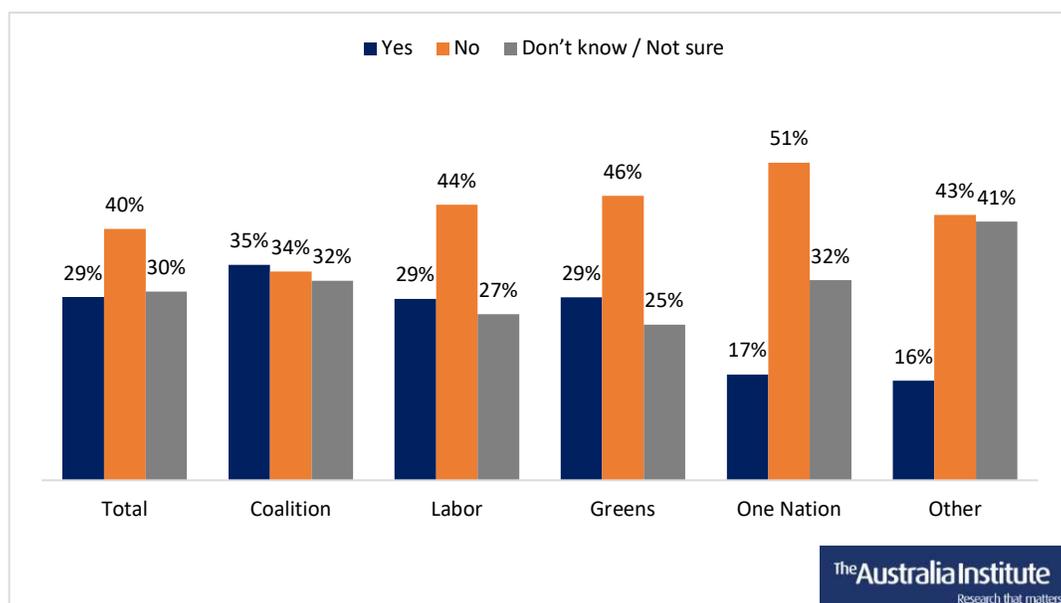
In 2004, Australian spies bugged the offices of the Timor-Leste (East Timor) government and learned about Timor-Leste’s budget, negotiating tactics and competing views among cabinet members. Australia used that information to get a better deal on oil and gas resources at the expense of Timor-Leste.

One Australian spy, Witness K, reported this to the intelligence watchdog and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery. Collaery tried to help Timor-Leste get a better deal for the oil and gas resources. Witness K was recently convicted and sentenced to three months' imprisonment (suspended sentence) for “conspiring to reveal classified information”.

Respondents were then asked whether they think Witness K should have been punished.

- One in four (40%) think that Witness K should not have been punished, 29% think that he should have, and 30% are not sure.
- Coalition voters are about as likely to think that Witness K should not have been punished (34%) as to think that he should have been punished (35%).
- Across all other voting intentions, a plurality think that Witness K should not have been punished: Labor (44%), Greens (46%), One Nation (51%), Independent/Other (43%).

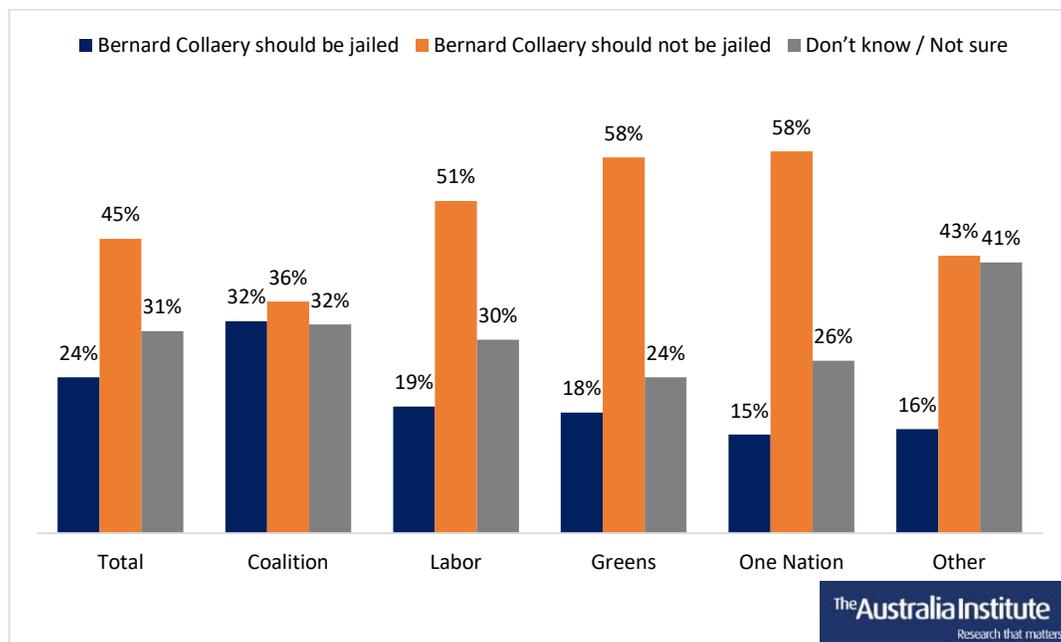
Figure 5: Do you think Witness K should have been punished, by voting intention



Respondents were then told that Witness K’s lawyer, Bernard Collaery is facing jail time for allegedly disclosing Australia’s wrongdoing to the media. They were then asked whether they believe Bernard Collaery should be jailed or not.

- 45% of people say that Bernard Collaery should not be jailed, with 24% saying that he should be, and 31% unsure.
- More people say that Bernard Collaery should not be jailed, regardless of voting intention, with 36% of Coalition, 51% of Labor, 58% of Greens, 58% of One Nation and 43% of Independent/Other voters stating that he should not be jailed.

Figure 6: Do you think Bernard Collaery should be jailed or not, by voting intention

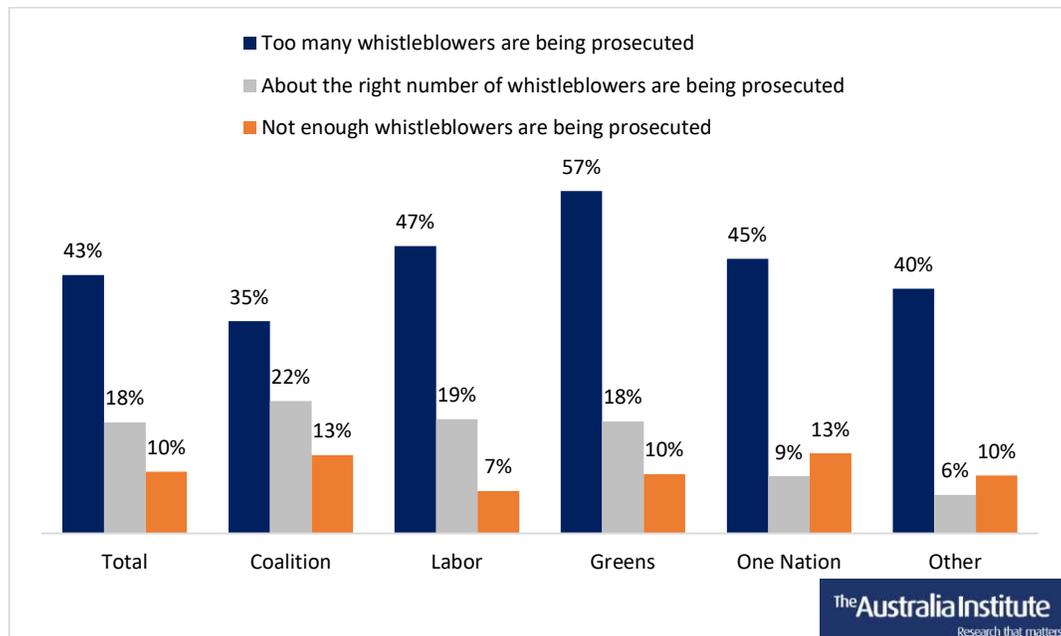


It is worth noting the high rate of “Don’t know/Not sure” responses to these two questions. These results suggest that many Australians are not following these cases closely and may not have strong opinions about them.

Respondents were told that in addition to the Collaery and Witness K cases, the Australian Government is currently prosecuting David McBride, who blew the whistle on alleged war crimes in Afghanistan, and Richard Boyle, who blew the whistle about unethical debt recovery practices by the Tax Office.

- Four in ten (43%) Australians say that too many whistleblowers are being prosecuted, 18% say that the number of prosecutions is about right, and 10% say not enough are being prosecuted.
- 35% of Coalition, 47% of Labor, 57% of Greens, 45% of One Nation and 40% of Independent/Other voters say that too many whistleblowers are being prosecuted.

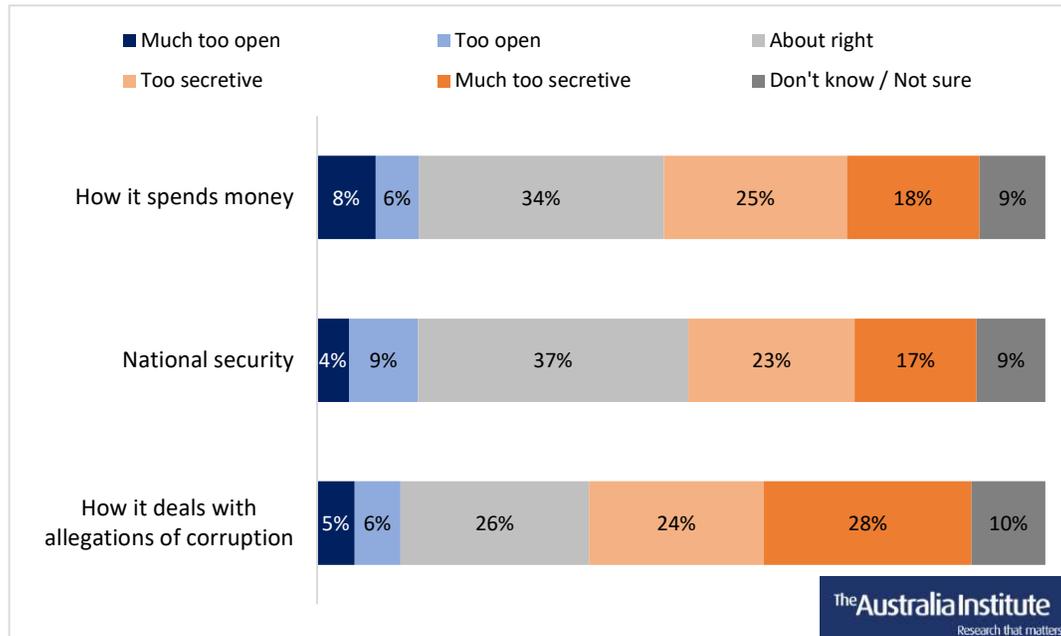
Figure 7: Attitudes towards whistleblower prosecutions, by voting intention



Government secrecy

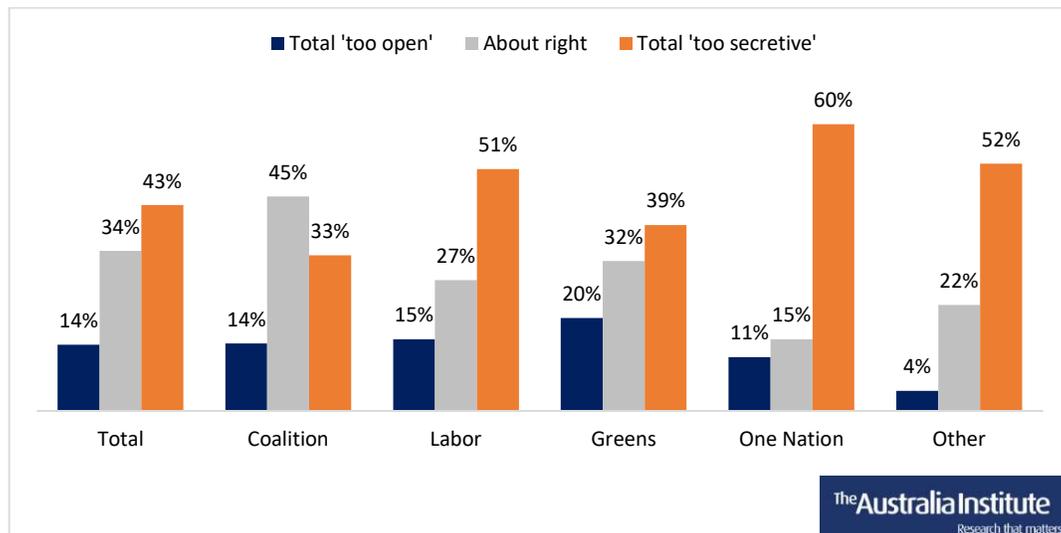
Respondents were asked a series of questions about government secrecy relating to three subjects: how the government spends money, national security, and how the government deals with allegations of corruption.

Figure 8: Responses to levels of government secrecy on selected issues



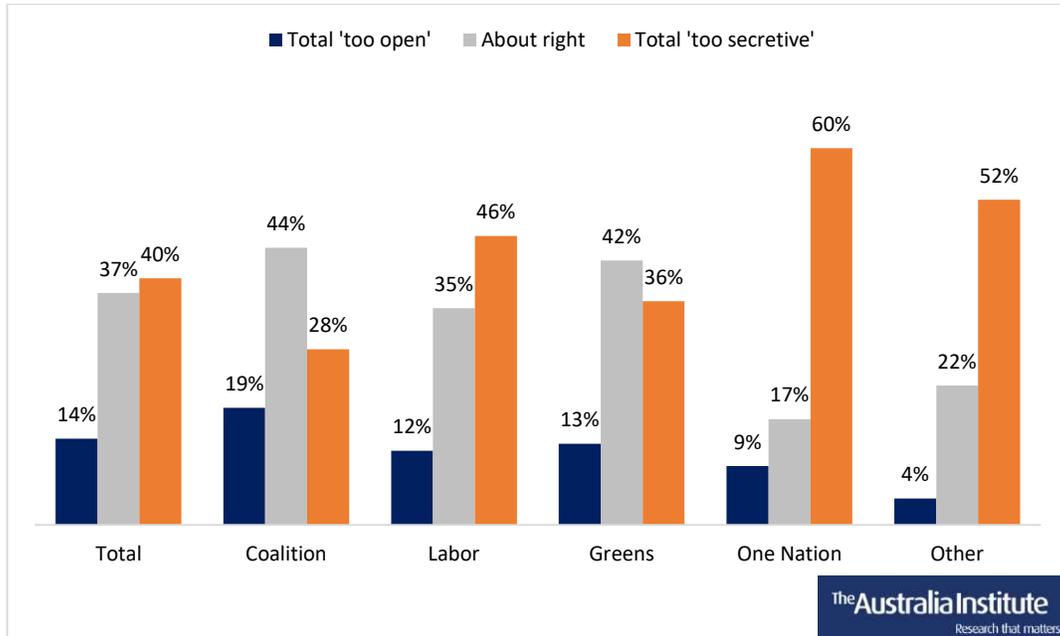
- 43% of people would describe the Australian government as too secretive about how it spends money, with 14% describing it as too open, and 34% describing it as about right.

Figure 9: Australian government about how it spends money, by voting intention



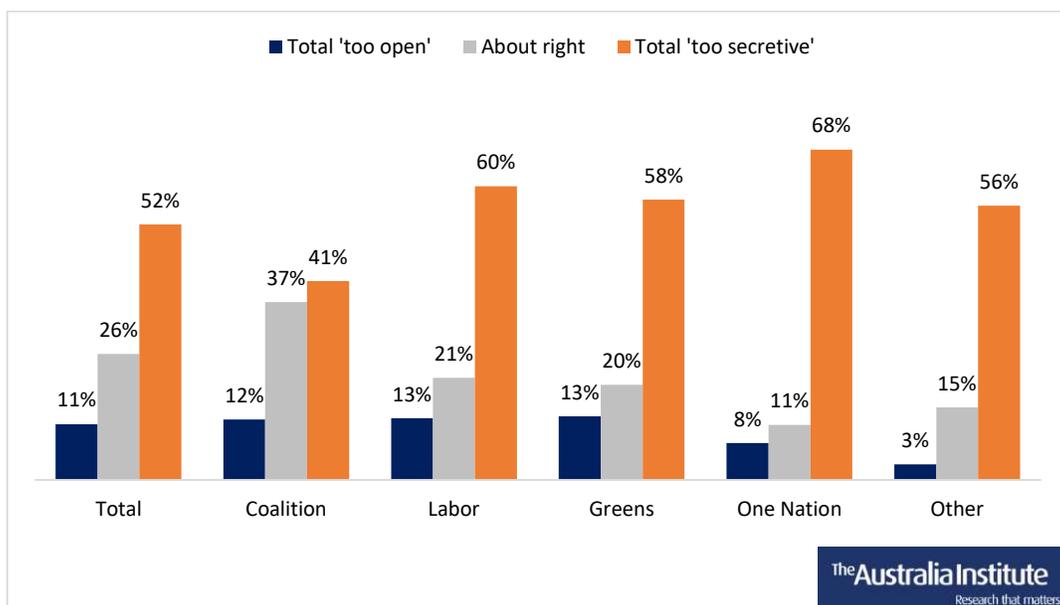
- 40% of people would describe the Australian government as too secretive about national security, with 14% describing it as too open, and 37% describing it as about right.

Figure 10: Australian government about national security, by voting intention



- 52% of people would describe the Australian government as too secretive about how it deals with allegations of corruption, with 11% describing it as too open, and 26% describing it as about right.

Figure 11: Australian government about allegations of corruption, by voting intention



Legal protections for whistleblowers

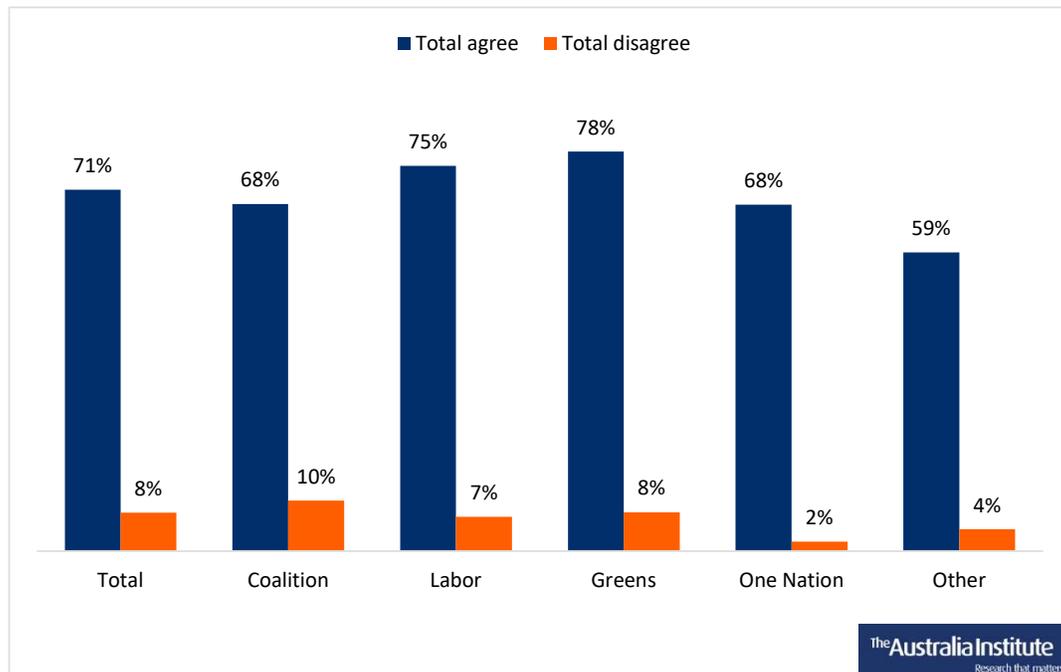
Respondents were told:

In 2016, the Federal Government was told by an independent review that Australia's whistleblowers laws for public servants “undermine the pro-disclosure culture [they seek] to create” and should be reformed. The Morrison Government has not yet amended the laws.

They were then asked if whistleblower protections for public servants should be strengthened “before the end of the year”. Respondents were asked in July, when there was more than five months left in the year.

- Seven in 10 Australians (71%) agree that whistleblower protections for public servants should be strengthened, including 34% who strongly agree.
- Agreement is highest among Greens voters (78%), but across all voting intentions a majority agree that whistleblower protections for public servants should be strengthened.

Figure 12: Whistleblower protections for public servants should be strengthened, by voting intention



Method

The Australia Institute surveyed 1,004 people between 14 and 16 July 2021, online through Dynata's Rapid Results polling, with nationally representative samples by gender, age and region.

The margin of error (95% confidence level) for the national results is 3%.

Results are shown only for larger states.

Voting crosstabs show voting intentions for the House of Representatives. Those who were undecided were asked which way they were leaning; these leanings are included in voting intention crosstabs. "Coalition" includes separate responses for Liberal and National. "Other" refers to Independent/Other.

Detailed results

For each of the following topics, would you describe the Australian government as too secretive or too open?

How it spends money

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Much too open	8%	11%	5%	15%	9%	14%	2%	1%
Too open	6%	5%	6%	18%	7%	7%	1%	0%
About right	34%	36%	32%	26%	38%	33%	31%	38%
Too secretive	25%	21%	29%	20%	24%	21%	29%	31%
Much too secretive	18%	20%	17%	9%	13%	16%	25%	26%
Don't know / Not sure	9%	7%	11%	11%	10%	9%	11%	5%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Much too open	8%	10%	7%	9%	6%	3%
Too open	6%	4%	8%	11%	6%	1%
About right	34%	45%	27%	32%	15%	22%
Too secretive	25%	24%	27%	26%	21%	26%
Much too secretive	18%	9%	24%	13%	40%	27%
Don't know / Not sure	9%	8%	6%	10%	13%	21%

National security

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Much too open	4%	6%	3%	9%	4%	5%	4%	2%
Too open	9%	11%	8%	11%	12%	14%	5%	4%
About right	37%	39%	36%	36%	39%	35%	33%	43%
Too secretive	23%	18%	27%	23%	24%	21%	20%	26%
Much too secretive	17%	19%	15%	8%	13%	16%	25%	20%
Don't know / Not sure	9%	7%	11%	12%	8%	9%	12%	7%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Much too open	4%	6%	4%	4%	2%	1%
Too open	9%	13%	8%	9%	8%	3%
About right	37%	44%	35%	42%	17%	22%
Too secretive	23%	20%	25%	23%	25%	27%
Much too secretive	17%	8%	22%	13%	36%	26%
Don't know / Not sure	9%	9%	7%	9%	13%	21%

How it deals with allegations of corruption

	Total	Male	Female	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
Much too open	5%	6%	4%	10%	5%	8%	1%	2%
Too open	6%	7%	6%	12%	8%	9%	2%	0%
About right	26%	27%	25%	25%	32%	27%	24%	20%
Too secretive	24%	22%	26%	20%	26%	20%	22%	31%
Much too secretive	28%	30%	27%	19%	20%	26%	36%	41%
Don't know / Not sure	10%	8%	12%	13%	9%	9%	13%	7%

	Total	Coalition	Labor	Greens	One Nation	Other
Much too open	5%	6%	5%	7%	2%	1%
Too open	6%	6%	8%	7%	6%	2%
About right	26%	37%	21%	20%	11%	15%
Too secretive	24%	25%	25%	24%	23%	18%
Much too secretive	28%	16%	36%	34%	45%	38%
Don't know / Not sure	10%	10%	6%	10%	13%	26%

A whistleblower is someone who reports potential wrongdoing that isn't already being addressed. In general, do whistleblowers:

	Total	Male	Female	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
Make Australia a better place	75%	79%	73%	57%	74%	78%	78%	85%
Make Australia a worse place	9%	8%	9%	17%	9%	9%	6%	6%
Don't know / Not sure	16%	13%	18%	26%	17%	13%	15%	10%

	Total	Coalition	Labor	Greens	One Nation	Other
Make Australia a better place	75%	75%	78%	80%	68%	65%
Make Australia a worse place	9%	9%	7%	9%	11%	13%
Don't know / Not sure	16%	15%	15%	11%	21%	22%

In general, when someone goes public with information of potential wrongdoing within government, do they:

	Total	Male	Female	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
Strengthen national security and our system of government	61%	67%	55%	50%	59%	65%	58%	68%
Weaken national security and our system of government	18%	18%	18%	23%	18%	16%	16%	16%
Don't know / Not sure	22%	15%	27%	26%	22%	19%	26%	17%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Strengthen national security and our system of government	61%	62%	65%	65%	45%	41%
Weaken national security and our system of government	18%	19%	15%	18%	21%	20%
Don't know / Not sure	22%	19%	20%	16%	34%	38%

In 2004, Australian spies bugged the offices of the Timor-Leste (East Timor) government and learned about Timor-Leste's budget, negotiating tactics and competing views among cabinet members. Australia used that information to get a better deal on oil and gas resources at the expense of Timor-Leste.

One Australian spy, Witness K, reported this to the intelligence watchdog and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery. Collaery tried to help Timor-Leste get a better deal for the oil and gas resources. Witness K was recently convicted and sentenced to three months' imprisonment (suspended sentence) for "conspiring to reveal classified information".

Do you think Witness K should have been punished?

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Yes	29%	34%	25%	45%	26%	32%	26%	23%
No	40%	42%	39%	29%	38%	37%	43%	52%
Don't know / Not sure	30%	24%	36%	26%	36%	31%	31%	26%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Yes	29%	35%	29%	29%	17%	16%
No	40%	34%	44%	46%	51%	43%
Don't know / Not sure	30%	32%	27%	25%	32%	41%

Witness K's lawyer, Bernard Collaery, faces jail time for allegedly disclosing Australia's wrongdoing to the media. Which best describes your position?

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Bernard Collaery should be jailed	24%	30%	18%	31%	23%	27%	19%	22%
Bernard Collaery should not be jailed	45%	46%	45%	39%	43%	41%	45%	57%
Don't know / Not sure	31%	24%	37%	31%	33%	32%	36%	22%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Bernard Collaery should be jailed	24%	32%	19%	18%	15%	16%
Bernard Collaery should not be jailed	45%	36%	51%	58%	58%	43%
Don't know / Not sure	31%	32%	30%	24%	26%	41%

In addition to the Collaery and Witness K cases, the Australian Government is currently prosecuting David McBride, who blew the whistle on alleged war crimes in Afghanistan, and Richard Boyle, who blew the whistle about unethical debt recovery practices by the Tax Office.

Which best describes your position?

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Too many whistleblowers are being prosecuted	43%	46%	39%	31%	35%	46%	47%	51%
Not enough whistleblowers are being prosecuted	10%	10%	10%	12%	10%	10%	10%	10%
About the right number of whistleblowers are being prosecuted	18%	21%	16%	31%	24%	19%	8%	14%
Don't know / Not sure	29%	23%	34%	26%	30%	26%	35%	26%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Too many whistleblowers are being prosecuted	43%	35%	47%	57%	45%	40%
Not enough whistleblowers are being prosecuted	10%	13%	7%	10%	13%	10%
About the right number of whistleblowers are being prosecuted	18%	22%	19%	18%	9%	6%
Don't know / Not sure	29%	30%	27%	15%	32%	44%

In 2016, the Federal Government was told by an independent review that Australia's whistleblowers laws for public servants “undermine the pro-disclosure culture [they seek] to create” and should be reformed. The Morrison Government has not yet amended the laws.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

“Whistleblower protections for public servants should be strengthened before the end of the year.”

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-49</i>	<i>50-59</i>	<i>60+</i>
Strongly agree	34%	38%	30%	25%	36%	40%	30%	35%
Agree	37%	36%	38%	36%	35%	34%	38%	42%
Disagree	6%	6%	6%	10%	6%	5%	5%	4%
Strongly disagree	2%	2%	1%	1%	0%	2%	1%	4%
Don't know / Not sure	22%	17%	25%	28%	22%	19%	25%	16%

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Coalition</i>	<i>Labor</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>One Nation</i>	<i>Other</i>
Strongly agree	34%	30%	36%	45%	36%	31%
Agree	37%	38%	40%	34%	32%	28%
Disagree	6%	7%	6%	5%	0%	1%
Strongly disagree	2%	3%	1%	2%	2%	3%
Don't know / Not sure	22%	22%	18%	14%	30%	37%