

Do politicians deserve to go to heaven?

Public attitudes to prominent Australians

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1. Introduction

The perceived moral standards of our political leaders are crucial to their electoral fortunes. Politicians can make calamitous policy blunders and survive, but if they are caught dodging their taxes or rorting their travel allowances they are denounced by the public and the media.

Many societies judge public figures according to their presumed moral character. Revelations of past misdeeds can (and often do) ruin political careers, while ‘good works’ – like volunteering for a charity – attract media attention and positive exposure for political leaders. In the United States, where religious issues are never far from the surface, politicians are often judged more on their putative moral standing than the merit of their policies.

Community attitudes towards the moral standing of prominent people are not easy to gauge, since views tend to be mixed and contradictory. In this paper we propose a summary measure of the Australian public’s assessment of the personal morality of their political leaders - whether they deserve to go to heaven or not.

Across the world, there is a widespread view that people who behave in a more moral way improve their chances of going to heaven when they die. Even among non-believers many would say that those who lead a more moral life would certainly *deserve* to go to heaven if it existed.

Heaven is conceived of as a place of eternal peace, even bliss, where ever-lasting souls reside. According to Christian myth, on the Day of Judgement we stand at the Pearly Gates to give an account of our lives. Saint Peter weighs up our good deeds and our bad ones and decides whether we should be allowed in or sent to the other place.

In Catholic doctrine, after death we may enter an intermediate place called purgatory where we are cleansed of our remaining sins. Venial sins may be expiated by confession while mortal sins require some punishment, after which we may pass into heaven.

Catholicism is more generous than some forms of Protestantism: not only do sinners get a chance to redeem themselves, but non-believers can make it to heaven if they are morally upstanding. Protestant churches preach that salvation follows not from good moral character but from the grace of God, although it goes without saying that part of being a good Christian is living a righteous life.

Other religions also believe that good people go to heaven. Traditional Judaism describes a final judgement where virtue is rewarded and wickedness punished. Heaven and hell feature prominently in Islam and represent the reward or punishment for one's life on judgement day, although it is only believers who can enter heaven. For Hindus the accumulation of good karma is rewarded in an after-life or a better reincarnation. Buddhists see heaven as a transitional stage between one earthly existence and the next; too much bad karma results in suffering in one or more hells, but the fully enlightened being can escape the cycle of rebirth and retire to the bliss of nirvana.

Whatever their religion, there is little doubt that many Australians believe that God is somehow keeping track of their good deeds and bad.

So what do Australians think of the moral worth of our politicians? How do they judge them? This paper explores attitudes to the personal morality of six well-known politicians through a survey of ordinary Australians.

2. Research method

To gauge public perceptions, the Australia Institute commissioned the polling company Pollinate to conduct an online survey of the general population. Respondents were asked three questions.

1. Do you believe in heaven or some form of life after death?
2. Do you believe that people who live a more moral life are more likely to go to heaven?
3. Here are some names of well-known Australians. Please indicate whether you think they **deserve** to go to heaven.¹
 - The Prime Minister John Howard
 - Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd
 - Health Minister Tony Abbott
 - Greens leader Bob Brown
 - Former One Nation Leader Pauline Hanson
 - Politician and rock singer Peter Garrett.

¹ This wording was deliberately chosen to allow people who don't believe in heaven or an afterlife to answer the question meaningfully. The order in which each politician appeared on the list was rotated so as to eliminate any ordering effects on respondents' answers.

There were 928 respondents aged 18-64 years. Respondents were all members of an online research panel, with quotas for age, gender and location established to ensure a representative sample of the broader Australian population.²

3. General attitudes to heaven and morality

Overall, 63 per cent of respondents said they believe in heaven or some form of life after death. Twenty-three per cent said they did not, while 13 per cent chose the ‘don’t know’ option. Women (74 per cent) were much more likely than men (52 per cent) to believe in heaven or an afterlife.

Of those who believe in heaven or an afterlife, only half (50 per cent) said that people who lead a moral life are more likely to go to heaven, while a third (34 per cent) said they are not more likely (16 per cent remained uncommitted on this question). Thirty-seven per cent of all female respondents indicated that people who lead a more moral life are more likely to go to heaven, compared with only 27 per cent of males.

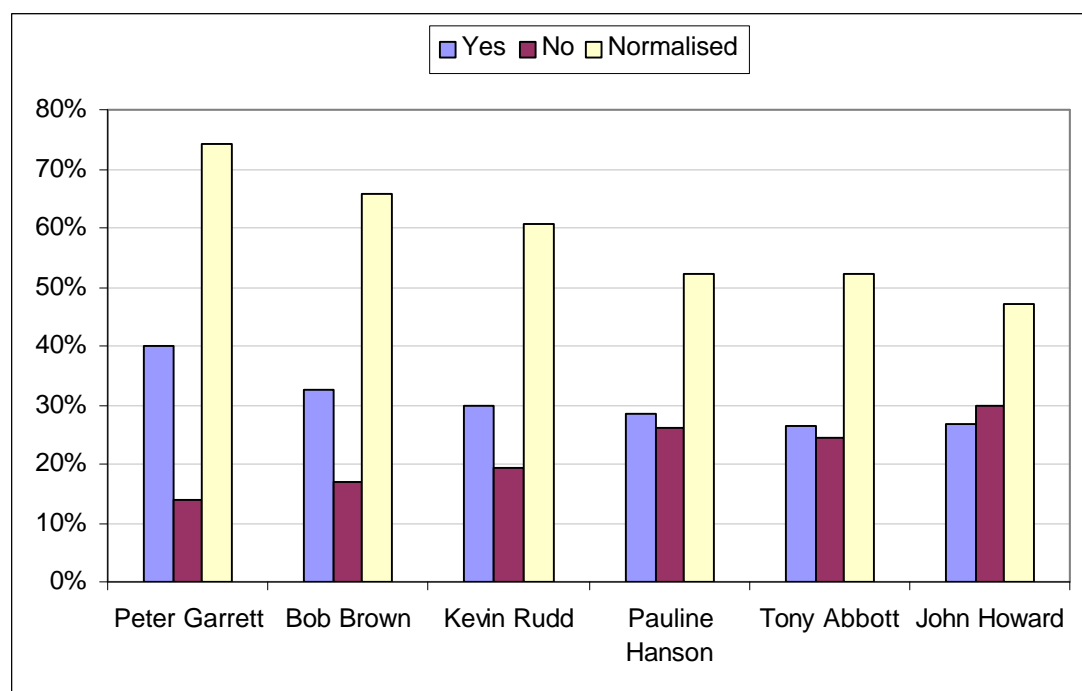
4. Overall results for each politician

Many Australians are unsure or reluctant to say whether their political leaders deserve to go to heaven. A very high proportion of survey respondents answered ‘don’t know’ when asked whether each politician deserved to go to heaven – in fact, between 44 per cent and 51 per cent in each case. This may be due to hesitation in making judgements about these individuals’ private lives, or it may have to do with the way the question was presented (i.e. in an online format). In any case, a ‘normalised’ score has been calculated by considering only those respondents who answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each question. These normalised figures have been used below.

Among those politicians included in the survey, Australians believe Peter Garrett most deserves to go to heaven, with 74 per cent indicating that he deserves that fate and 26 per cent saying otherwise. (These correspond to 40 per cent and 14 per cent if we include those who said they do not know.)

Greens leader Bob Brown scored next highest, with a normalised score of 66 per cent, followed by Kevin Rudd on 61 per cent. Both Pauline Hanson and Tony Abbott had a scored 52 per cent, while Prime Minister John Howard attracted the lowest figure, with 47 per cent saying he deserves to go to heaven and 53 per cent saying he does not.

² Pollinate drew its sample from Lightspeed Research’s consumer panel, whose membership is recruited solely for research purposes. Survey questions were administered as part of Pollinate’s ‘omnibus’ survey – that is, a longer survey with a range of (largely unrelated) questions commissioned by various clients.

Figure 1 Do these politicians deserve to go to heaven?

Base = 928. Question wording: "Here are some names of well-known Australians. Please indicate whether you think they deserve to go to heaven."

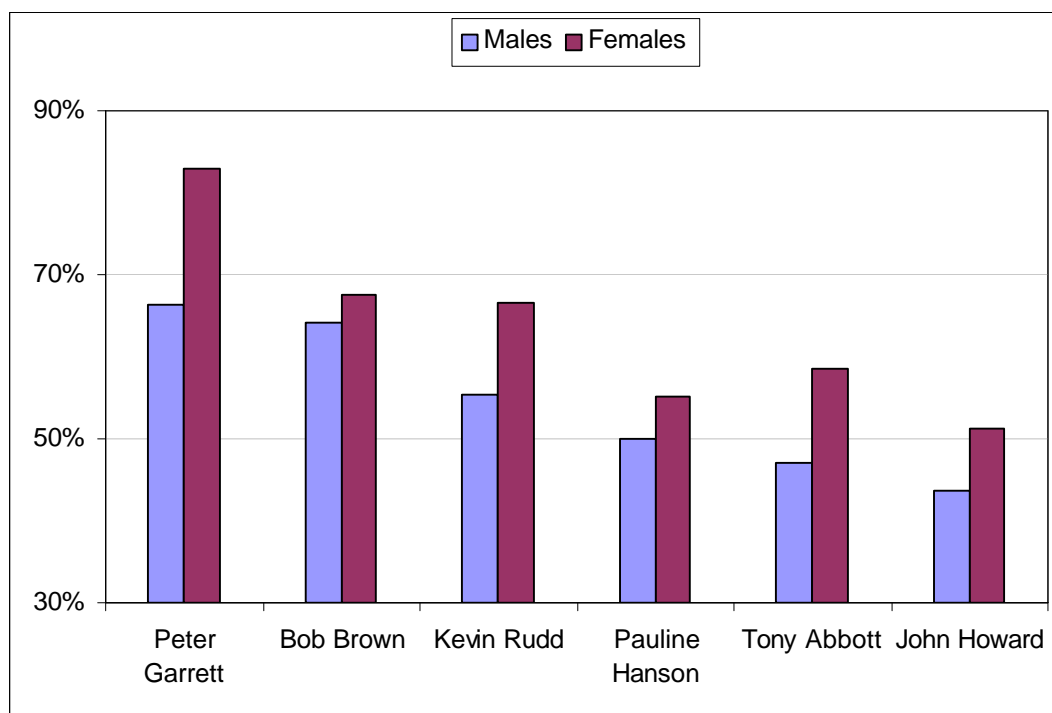
5. Gender differences

Generally speaking, women were much more positive than men when asked whether leading politicians deserved to go to heaven. Figure 2 (below) compares the normalised scores for each politician by gender.

Gender differences were most apparent in the case of Peter Garrett, whose normalised score was 83 per cent for female respondents but only 66 per cent for male respondents. Gender disparities were also notable for Kevin Rudd (67 per cent for females, 55 per cent for males) and Tony Abbott (58 per cent for females, 47 per cent for males).

The gender gap was smallest for Bob Brown; 68 per cent of females and 64 per cent of males say he deserves to go to heaven. Gender differences are also quite small for Pauline Hanson (55 per cent for females, 50 per cent for males). Meanwhile, 51 per cent of females who indicated a firm preference said that John Howard deserves to go to heaven, compared to 44 per cent of male respondents. On this measure, the Prime Minister appears to be viewed least favourably by both men and women.

Figure 2 Do these politicians deserve to go to heaven? (Normalised scores by gender)



Base = 928. Question wording: “Here are some names of well-known Australians. Please indicate whether you think they deserve to go to heaven.”

6. Voting intentions

Some of the most interesting differences in survey responses are associated with voting intention.³ Figure 3 compares the normalised scores for each politician, broken down by Coalition, Labor and Greens voters.

Interestingly, John Howard divides Australians more than any other figure, with 79 per cent of Coalition voters believing the Prime Minister deserves to go to heaven (on a normalised basis), compared to just 29 per cent of Labor voters and 20 per cent of Greens voters. For Coalition voters, John Howard deserves to go to heaven more than any of the other politicians, while for Labor and Greens voters he is the least deserving.

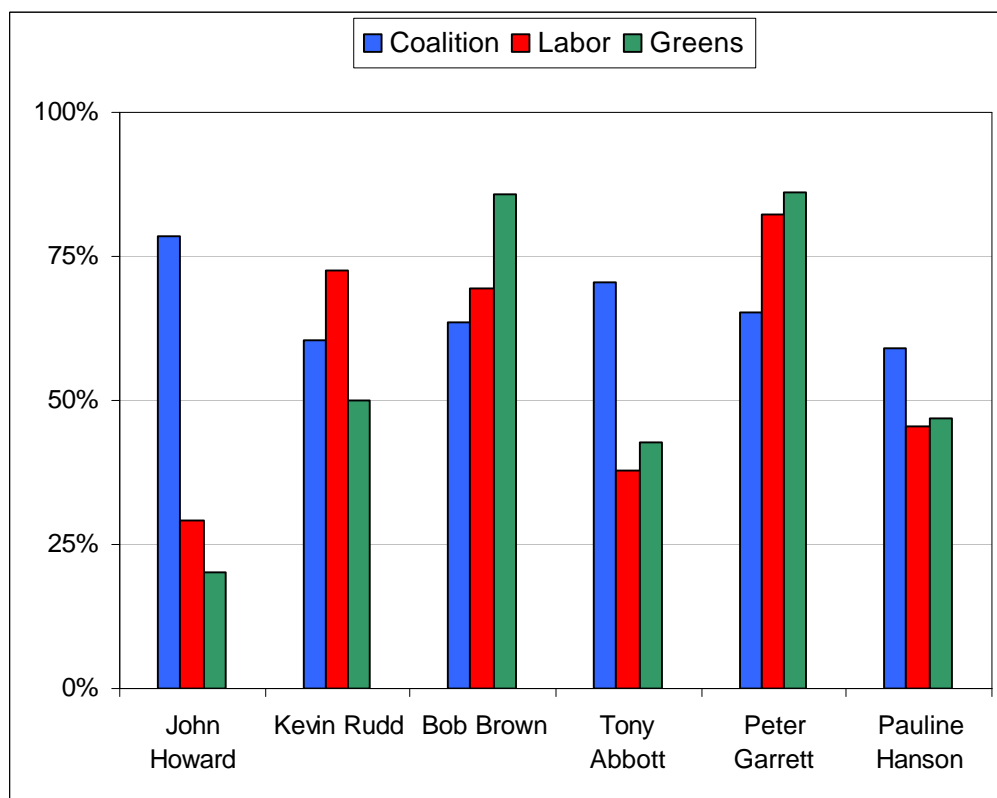
Tony Abbott also divided opinion, with 71 per cent of Coalition voters, but only 38 per cent of Labor voters and 43 per cent of Greens voters, indicating that the Health Minister deserves to go to heaven.

Pauline Hanson likewise fared better with Coalition voters, 59 per cent of whom said she deserved to go to heaven, as against 45 per cent of Labor voters and 47 per cent of Greens voters.

³ Respondents were asked to indicate their likely voting intention as part of the standard set of demographic questions associated with the larger omnibus survey. For the purposes of this analysis, only results for the 580 Coalition, Labor and Greens voters are reported. Respondents intending to vote for other political parties or independents have been removed due to low sample size (less than 30 in each case). Undecideds and those who refused to answer the question have also been excluded.

Peter Garrett and Bob Brown generate the highest level of agreement across the political divide, suggesting that their moral standing transcends political differences. Surprisingly, around two-thirds of Coalition voters who expressed a firm view said that Peter Garrett (65 per cent) and Bob Brown (64 per cent) deserve to go to heaven, with scores predictably higher for both Labor and Greens voters. Meanwhile, three-fifths of Coalition voters (60 per cent) said that Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd deserves to go to heaven.

Figure 3 Do these politicians deserve to go to heaven? (Normalised scores by voting intention)



Base = 580. Question wording: “Here are some names of well-known Australians. Please indicate whether you think they deserve to go to heaven.”

7. Commentary

According to our survey results, around two-thirds of Australians believe in heaven or an afterlife, with women much more likely to hold such beliefs. However, only half of these people also believed that people who lead a moral life are more likely to go to heaven. To put it another way: although many Australians believe in an afterlife, they do not necessarily feel that their behaviour on earth determines whether they get a ticket into heaven.

These results may reflect a strong current of Protestantism in respondents’ thinking about morality – that is, that entry to heaven is subject to the grace of God rather than individual morality and behaviour. Alternatively, it could be that many Australians simply do not feel confident enough in their understanding of the afterlife to assert that actions in the here and now can affect one’s eternal destiny.

Putting such speculations to one side, our survey findings give us some interesting insights into how Australians regard the morality of our leading politicians.

Of the six prominent politicians about whom respondents were asked, the current Prime Minister scored lowest of all. While many Australians voted for John Howard at the last election, they don't necessarily think of him as 'Honest John'. In fact, only a quarter of survey respondents said that John Howard deserves to go to heaven; more people said they he did not. The PM's political longevity may be a factor – the longer a politician has been around, the more chance people have to find fault.

Indeed, John Howard divided survey respondents along party lines more than any other. Four in five Coalition voters who expressed a firm opinion believe that Mr Howard deserves to go to heaven, compared to just one in three Labor voters and one in five Greens voters.

The current Health Minister did not fare much better with our survey sample – although, unlike Mr Howard, slightly more people said he *did* than *did not* deserve to go to heaven. Neither Tony Abbott's conspicuous Catholicism, nor his background as a former priest-in-training, appear to have convinced people of his superior moral rectitude. Although female respondents generally expressed more positive views than males about every politician, the gender difference was unusually sharp in Tony Abbott's case, with women much more likely to say he deserves to go to heaven.

When compared to Tony Abbott, a similar proportion of respondents said One Nation founder Pauline Hanson deserves to go to heaven. However, in her case there is very little difference in results by gender or political affiliation.

At the other end of the spectrum, Peter Garrett attracted the most positive responses from our survey sample. Indeed, among those who expressed a firm opinion, three-quarters said that Labor's environment spokesman deserves to go to heaven; this rises to more than four-fifths for people who say they believe in an afterlife. Only modest differences were apparent by voting intention; in fact, around two-thirds of Coalition voters said Peter Garrett deserves to go to heaven.

However, views on Peter Garrett's morality diverged along gender lines, with women much more likely than men to think that he deserves to go to heaven. Perhaps a lifetime of political activism on issues like the environment, corporate greed and reconciliation have resonated more with women in the electorate.

Bob Brown's personal moral standing is also viewed very favourably by a large proportion of the survey sample. Women and men are quite closely aligned here, as are voters of various political persuasions. Taken with Peter Garrett's strong results, it would seem that environmental issues have a distinct moral dimension for many Australians, and that campaigning on environmental causes boosts one's chances of going to heaven.

Last, results for Kevin Rudd - sometimes known as 'Saint Kevin' - were very much middle-of-the-road, with around three-fifths of respondents who expressed a firm opinion believing that he deserves to go to heaven. Maybe people do not yet know enough about the Opposition Leader to have firm views on his personal morality. In

any event, our survey results suggest that voters are much more positive about the alternative Prime Minister's moral standing than the current Prime Minister's.