In 2006-7 the Flinders Social Monitor is using the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) to monitor changes in social life and examine their impact on everyday lives in South Australia. AuSSA is a biennial mail survey that gathers opinions from approximately 4,000 Australians aged 18 or above who are selected randomly from the Electoral Roll. It is managed by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU (http://aussa.anu.edu.au/). In 2005, the Flinders Social Monitoring and Policy Futures Network commissioned a special sample of South Australians resulting in 1,019 SA respondents. Details about this survey can be found in the Social Monitor ‘About AuSSA’.

Community Activism on Social, Political and Environmental Issues

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In a world of increased awareness of global issues such as terrorism, climate change and natural disasters, it could be expected that citizens are likely to become more involved in, or vocal about, social and environmental concerns. However, the major social issues of concern to the Australian public appear to be Health Care and Taxes, with environmental issues being ranked as the first or second most important issue by only around 15% of respondents to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) undertaken in 2005. There is, however, some evidence that citizens are making their views heard, albeit by more indirect than direct means. The findings show that the type and level activism in South Australia is not significantly different to national levels.

Community Involvement

When discussing what it means to be a good citizen, most South Australians consider the most important components to be complying with laws but also rank highly keeping watch on the government (56% ranking it as very important) and understanding other opinions (45% very important) and helping the less privileged in our country (39% very important). In terms of any form of ‘activism’, being involved in social or political associations was ranked quite highly (4 or above on a scale of 1 to 7) by around 70% of respondents when asked what it meant to be a good citizen. However, only around 10% of respondents belong to an environmental, aid or lobby group of any kind. Community confidence in charities was rated as being high, with 60% reporting they have a lot or a great deal of confidence in these organisations.

Activism, however, can be classified as a continuum from fairly indirect methods of attempting to influence others (be it Government policy, business and corporations, or community groups) to direct forms, and includes support for NGOs or charities that undertake the ‘activism’ on behalf of their members.
**Indirect Activism**

Indirect forms of activism include signing petitions, fundraising for a particular cause or changing buying patterns of a particular product. Over 40% of the SA sample had signed a petition in the past 12 months and another 41% had done so in the more distant past. Similarly, 34% had boycotted products for political, environmental or ethical reasons in the past 12 months, with another 19% doing so some time before then. Interestingly, 27% said they might do so even though they have not done so in the past. Almost 70% said they have or might raise funds/donate money for a social or political activity. More direct forms of activism are less apparent.

**Direct Activism**

Direct activism might include taking part in organised demonstrations or rallies, contacting politicians, contacting the media about social issues, or joining an internet forum or discussion group set up around a social or political issue.

The inclination to take part in a demonstration or political rally is consistent between the SA sample and the national sample, and remained around the same in 2005 as it did in 2003 with only about 10% admitting to have taken part in a march, protest or rally in the last two years. Over a third (41%) of the respondents stated they would never take part in a demonstration, and 34% considered that they might, but so far never have. Similar statistics were shown for attending a political meeting or political rally. Table 1 below shows the relative responses to engaging in these types of direct activities for South Australians in 2005. The table also shows the responses for the national sample (in brackets), indicating that South Australians are no more or less inclined towards direct activism than the rest of the country.

**Table 1: Participation in Direct Activism (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have done in the past year</th>
<th>Attended a demonstration</th>
<th>4.0 (5.1)</th>
<th>Contacted a politician about an issue</th>
<th>13.8 (13.8)</th>
<th>Contacted the media about an issue</th>
<th>3.3 (5.0)</th>
<th>Joined an internet forum</th>
<th>1.6 (1.7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have done in the more distant past</td>
<td>18.8 (16.2)</td>
<td>18.2 (17.4)</td>
<td>20.4 (19.8)</td>
<td>10.6 (9.6)</td>
<td>1.2 (1.7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not done but might</td>
<td>34.3 (39.1)</td>
<td>34.8 (37.8)</td>
<td>45.3 (44.7)</td>
<td>42.9 (42.4)</td>
<td>24.3 (27.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not done and would never</td>
<td>41.4 (38.1)</td>
<td>40.9 (38.1)</td>
<td>19.6 (20.5)</td>
<td>42.1 (41.6)</td>
<td>70.6 (66.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can’t Choose</td>
<td>2.2 (1.8)</td>
<td>2.0 (1.7)</td>
<td>0.8 (1.3)</td>
<td>1.2 (1.5)</td>
<td>2.2 (2.7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some analysis of the survey results showed that women are more likely to engage in indirect action than men, but that gender makes no difference in their likelihood to engage in direct action. This is not surprising given that the indirect form of action includes consumer boycotts and women are more likely to be undertaking general shopping duties than men. The most marked difference appears between social class, with middle class being more likely to undertake all forms of action than other classes.

The results of the survey indicate that most people prefer indirect methods of activism, whether that activism is aimed at governments or private enterprises. Methods used most include donations, petitions or changing consumption patterns. Such a preference for indirect action is supported by the fact that over 10% of respondents have never belonged to any voluntary association, and only 22% are actively involved in one. Around 90% have never belonged to a political party, compared with 88% in the national sample. These findings are consistent with research on environmental activist groups undertaken in 1994 and again in 2004, which found that even organised ‘activists’ favour an indirect approach when attempting to influence the behaviour of corporations (Tilt 1994; 2004). The least likely type of activism to be used is an internet forum, which is surprising given that over 54% of the sample used the internet more than once a week, with 54% using it once a day or more.

**Political Involvement**

As mentioned above, around 90% of the survey respondents have never belonged to a political party. When asked about preferences for political parties in the next election, the Australian Greens were selected by only around 5 to 9% (depending on whether the vote was for the House of Representative or the Senate). The majority of respondents chose the two major parties (ALP and Liberal Party) representing around two thirds to three quarters of the responses. These figures are similar to those found in the national survey in both 2005 and earlier in 2003.

It appears that many actions undertaken by citizens are aimed at influencing or changing the behaviour of private enterprises, such as large corporations. This infers a certain mistrust of those organisations which will be the subject of a future Flinders Social Monitor.

**References**


All data from this publication is sourced from: