

Does AUKUS have public support?

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December 4 2024

Note: This article appeared in *Crikey* on December 4 2024.

One of the most recent events to raise serious questions about AUKUS was an online webinar last week titled ‘[Subs & Secrets: AUKUS or Sovereignty](#)’. Two of the panellists — Rex Patrick, former independent senator and former submariner, and Andrew Fowler, author of *[Naked: The Submarine Fiasco that Sank Australia's Sovereignty](#)* — both made the point that the AUKUS deal was made in secret, with the Australian public having been mostly kept in the dark.

Not surprisingly, once the deal was made and announced with great fanfare, politicians and policymakers wanted to know if AUKUS had public support.

Quite a few polls over the past few years have tried to answer this question. But using polls to gauge public opinion on a complex foreign policy issue is seldom straightforward. Australia’s commitment to AUKUS is bipartisan, but many Australians, while they may have heard the acronym bandied about in the media and among public commentators, may not have a clear idea about what AUKUS is, let alone about what to make of it. After all, as [James Curran](#) observes in a recent article in *Australian Foreign Affairs*, the broader Australian community is ‘largely uninterested in foreign and defence policy outside of times of war’.

This means that many Australians cannot be expected to have fully formed — or informed — views when asked a question about AUKUS, as compared to when they’re asked whether they support government funding for public schools or Medicare.

There are myriad ways of framing questions about AUKUS, and the framing often shapes, if not pre-determines, the outcome. For example, if a question about AUKUS is asked along the lines of national security or personal safety, you are likely to get a set of answers in support of AUKUS.

For three years, Lowy has asked Australians the following question about submarines that are powered by nuclear energy but which do not have nuclear weapons: ‘Are you in favour of or against Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines?’

The [report](#) tells us that almost two-thirds of Australians (65 percent) remain either ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ in favour. This is similar to last year, though five points below 2022 (70 percent), shortly after the deal was announced.

Similarly, in a recent ACRI/BIDA [poll](#), Australians were asked if they agreed with the statement: ‘The Australian government’s plan to acquire nuclear submarines under the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral security

partnership will help keep Australia secure from a military threat from China'. Nearly half of Australians (48 percent) agreed.

So far, so good. After all, AUKUS is about partnering with allies to deter the use of military force by hostile nations, most notably China. And given that 71 percent of Australians said in the Lowy poll that China is 'likely to become a military threat to Australia', it seems to make sense that Australians would want to support a defence policy that delivers national security for Australia, especially since the submarines, though powered by nuclear energy, do not carry nuclear weapons. What's not to like?

But what happens if Australians participating in the poll are reminded that it is they, as taxpayers, who will foot the AUKUS bill? *Guardian Australia's Essential poll* in March 2023 revealed that only one-quarter of Australians were 'happy to pay the price tag of up to \$368 billion to acquire nuclear submarines'.

Recent polls by the US Studies Centre (USSC) are equally revealing. When Australians were [asked in 2023](#) if they believed the AUKUS submarines warrant their price tag, only 21 percent of voters thought they were worth it. The figure in [this year's USSC poll](#) has gone up to 25 percent, but still, according to this survey, the majority of Australian voters either do not believe it's worth their hard-earned money (39 percent), or are at least unsure (37 percent).

This means that when Australians are given a fuller picture of AUKUS and asked if they think the government's idea of national security is worth the trade-off in taxpayers' dollars, their response is far from supportive. As [Sian Troath](#), a postdoctoral research fellow in international relations at the Australian National University, observes:

The Australian public may be easily wooed by the idea of a shiny new defence capability that will, the government tells them, make them safer. They are less easily convinced by the proposition of spending somewhere between \$268-\$368 billion over the next 30 years to acquire nuclear-powered submarines.

Australia comprises nearly 27 million individuals who live in the real world, face ongoing cost of living challenges, and make a plethora of decisions that are acutely relevant to their daily lives. It would be unsurprising if popular approval of AUKUS was even lower if you were to crystallise some of the choices the government is making in deciding to fund the project.

For example, imagine how voters might respond if they were asked:

Would your level of support for AUKUS change if it meant paying higher taxes?

Or perhaps:

If the government has nearly \$400 billion in taxpayers' money to spend, how should they spend it? Rank the following in order of spending priority: public education, healthcare, AUKUS submarines, action on climate change, the housing crisis...

According to the government, Australia will be safer if we have nuclear-powered submarines as our weapons of deterrence. But not every Australian buys into this seemingly unquestionable assumption. In *Guardian Australia's Essential poll* report from July this year, only 37 percent of Australians thought AUKUS would make Australia more secure – down from 45 percent in 2021 – while another 44 percent thought it would make no difference at all, and 19 percent said it would make Australia less secure.

Polling to gauge Australians' support for AUKUS is clearly a fraught exercise, partly because it is a devilishly complex topic that many members of the public – perhaps most of us – know disappointingly little about. To a large extent, it depends on how you frame your questions, what information about AUKUS you include or leave out, and which aspects of public attitudes the questions tap into, and whether Australians are asked to respond on the basis of their short-term self-interest or the purported long-term benefits for the nation.

For this reason, even seasoned [political analysts](#) who have made a career out of polling warn that ‘when analysts, sometimes innocently, use poll numbers as a definitive guide to public opinion even on issues to which most people have given little thought, they are writing fiction more than citing fact’.

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