

Moral politics, social permissiveness, and voting in Australia

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Abstract

Despite the increasing salience of political issues such as same sex marriage, abortion rights, and drug liberalisation in Australian political debate, little is known about the structure and limits of Australian voters' social conservatism or permissiveness. This study explores the effects of voters' morality, conservatism, and liberalism on their vote choice at the 2016 Australian federal election, as mediated by religious affiliation, age, education, and partisan identification. To take a multi-dimensional approach to this question, the paper uses principal components analysis to explore how individual issue stances coexist and to identify patterns of morality and permissiveness. The effects of morality and permissiveness on vote choice are modelled as a multinomial logistic regression. It is hypothesised that, although there are both positive lifecycle and generational effects on the social permissiveness of Australian voters, with younger voters expressing greater acceptance of liberal social policies, that a majority of Australian voters express more morally conservative values than political elites. The findings of this study will have implications for substantive representation and the likely future of socially permissiveness policies in Australia.

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Introduction

Shifting attitudes towards issues of social permissiveness, such as drug liberalisation, abortion law, homosexuality and same sex marriage, represent a substantial but understudied change in post-war Australian society. Whether framed as part of an international trend towards postmaterialism (Inglehart 2015), sexual liberation (Twenge, Sherman, and Wells 2015), or an artefact of secularisation (Scott 1998), these changes have implications for how we measure and understand political cleavages. Comparatively, examining the Australian case will provide insights into how peculiarities of the country's political system – including compulsory voting, instant run-off or alternative voting, and high rates of party identification – shape the both distribution of moral attitudes and the effects of those attitudes on vote choice at the 2016 election.

This study analyses data from the 2016 Australian Election Study, a national population based survey of Australian voters conducted between July and November 2016. First, I use principal components analysis (PCA) to examine the underlying structure of moral attitudes among Australian citizens. Specifically, those moral attitudes include attitudes towards availability of abortion, same-sex marriage, imposition of the death penalty for those found guilty of murder, the legalisation of marijuana smoking, and the decriminalisation of medically assisted suicide for terminally ill patients. Ordered logit regressions will explore the determinants of these attitudes, either as individual or combined measures, depending on the results of the PCA. Finally, multinomial logit analyses will examine the effects of the measured attitudes on respondents' vote choice at the 2016 election, and whether these effects can be explained by respondents' religious affiliation, age, education, and partisan identification.

Data and methods

The 2016 Australian Election Study (AES) was conducted in the aftermath of the 2016 Australian federal election. The AES is a mail-back questionnaire,

completed by respondents at a time and place of their choice. The sample for the 2016 AES was drawn from two address-based sampling frames: the federal electoral roll (50%) and from the national geo-coded national address frame (50%). The combination of the two sampling frames is designed to maximise coverage of the national adult population. The electoral roll provides coverage of 95% of the population of citizens aged 18 and over, with names attached to residential addresses. The geo-coded address frame, known as G-NAF, has similarly expansive population coverage, but requires the receiving household to decide on the respondent within the household. A total of 2,818 respondents completed the AES between July and October 2016, with an effective response rate of 22.5 per cent. The data are weighted to reflect population benchmarks on educational qualification, age, and population coverage errors (on the G-NAF subsample).

The analyses throughout this paper are conducted in R using RStudio (RStudio Team 2015), and the 'psych' (Revelle 2016), 'pcaMethods' (Stacklies et al. 2007), and 'Zelig' (Venables and Ripley 2011; Yee 2007) packages for R. Principal components analysis is used to establish the latent structure of the five moral attitudes being measured. The Cronbach's alpha measure of internal reliability is used as an additional robustness measure of latent structure. Ordered logit regression analyses are used to model socio-demographic predictors of each of the five attitudes, and multinomial logit analyses model vote choice as a factor of moral attitudes and socio-demographic controls.

Analysis

While the attitudinal measures being studied here are theoretically related, in as much as they pertain to issues of moral judgment (Lakoff 2010), they are not necessarily statistically related. Further, such measures are not associated with partisan cues in Australia; that is to say, the major parties do not currently have unanimous and/or public policy positions on any of these issues (c.f. policies on the processing and settlement of asylum seekers who reach Australian waters by boat). Therefore, we might expect Australians' positions on these issues to

cut across partisan lines (see for example McAllister 2001). To examine the extent to which there is one or more latent measures of ‘moral politics’ in these individual measures, I conduct a principal components analysis (PCA) on respondents’ answers to five questions to identify any underlying dimensions within the data. The questions included in this analysis are listed at Table 1. PCA is used to transform the five manifest measures to any number of latent measures less than five.

Table 1: measures of moral attitudes in the 2016 AES

Measure	Question wording	Response frame and valid frequencies
Abortion	Which one of these statements comes closest to how you feel about abortion in Australia?	Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one (68.8%); Abortion should only be allowed in special circumstances (27.4%); Abortion should not be allowed under any circumstances (3.8%)
Marriage	Do you personally favour or oppose same sex couples being given the same rights to marry as couples consisting of a man and a woman?	Strongly favour (43%); Favour (27.6%); Oppose (13%); Strongly oppose (16.4%)
Death	Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement? The death penalty should be reintroduced for murder	Strongly agree (19%); Agree (20.9%); Neither agree nor disagree (17.3%); Disagree (19.7%); Strongly disagree (23.1%)
Marijuana	Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement? The smoking of marijuana should NOT be a criminal offence	Strongly agree (15.4%); Agree (27.5%); Neither agree nor disagree (25.4%); Disagree (19.8%); Strongly disagree (11.9%)
Euthanasia	Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement? Terminally ill patients should be able to end their own lives with medical assistance	Strongly agree (43.5%); Agree (34%); Neither agree nor disagree (13.1%); Disagree (5%); Strongly disagree (4.5%)

Source: 2016 Australian Election Study

Note: in subsequent analyses in this paper, the ‘death’ measure coding is inverted so that agreement represents a liberal position, in line with other measures.

Where these questions have been asked in previous AES surveys (or in the Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys conducted between 1967 and 1979), there is a notable trend towards more liberal attitudes (see Figure 1). The apparent covariance suggests a temporal element: that over time, Australians (either through intergenerational replacement or through value changes within the lifecycle) are becoming more supportive of women’s access to abortion and the legalisation of marijuana, and less supportive of reinstating the death penalty for convicted murderers. In the case of marijuana decriminalisation particularly, this liberalisation is particularly evident between 2001 and 2016.

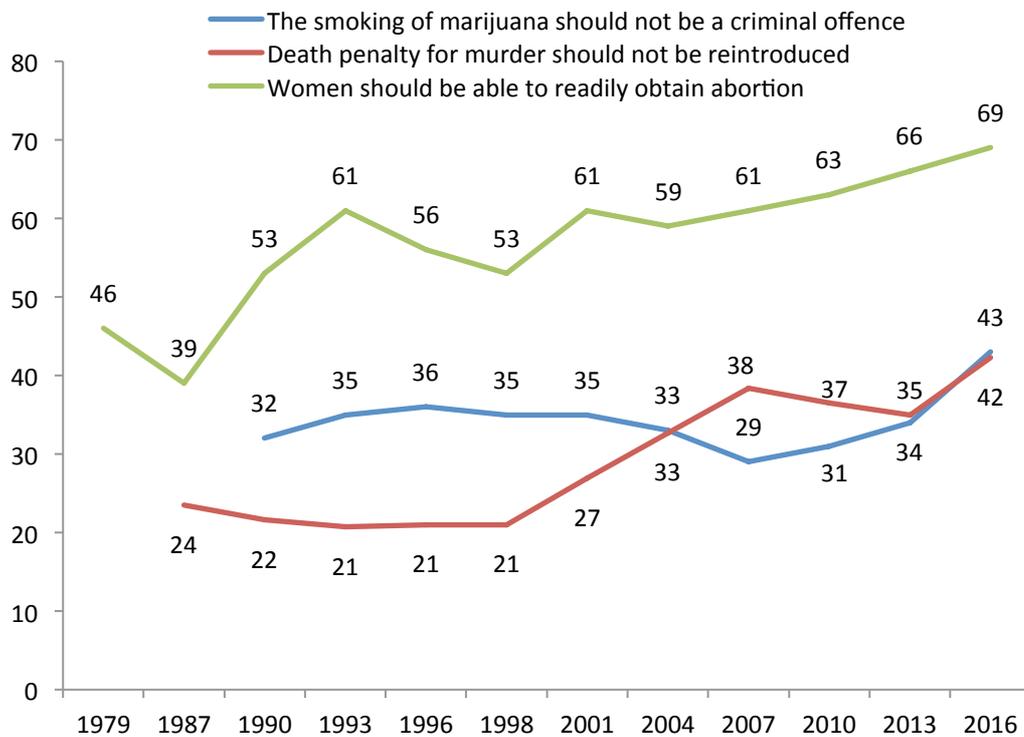


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents supporting liberal positions on moral issues, 1979 to 2016

Question wording: “Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement? The smoking of marijuana should NOT be a criminal offence; The death penalty should NOT be reintroduced for murder” (percentage who ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’); “Which one of these statements comes closest to how you feel about abortion in Australia?” (percentage who respond “women should be able to readily obtain abortion”)

Source: Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study, 1987-2016 (Cameron and McAllister 2016)

However, analysis suggests that the apparent covariance of these moral attitudes is largely incidental. Conducting a PCA on the five measures reveals that two latent components (with eigenvalues > 1) largely underpin these manifest measures.¹ A third component (with an eigenvalue > 0.95) explains an additional 16 per cent of variance in the model (compared with 38 per cent explained by the first component, and 33 per cent by the second component). Including the third dimension in the PCA model (Table 2) indicates a clear latent structure to these attitudes. With the third component included, the model fit has an R-squared value of 0.87. The first component appears to measure socially progressive attitudes: both support for same sex marriage and marijuana legalisation load strongly onto this latent component, but opposition to reintroducing the death penalty loads the most strongly onto this component. Notably, attitudes to abortion access have very little bearing on this (or any) latent component here; this is perhaps due to lower variance on responses to that measure.

Table 2: principal components analysis of five moral attitudes in the 2016 AES

	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Abortion	.143	.134	.161
Marriage	.516	.237	.433
Death	.661	-.688	.050
Marijuana	.484	.425	-.763
Euthanasia	.203	.524	.448

Source: 2016 Australian Election Study

The second component in this analysis represents a surprisingly complex approach to moral issues. Support for the reintroduction of the death penalty for convicted murderers loads strongly onto this component, as does support for the legalisation of euthanasia and marijuana. Again, support for women’s access to abortion has little relationship with this latent component, and support for

¹ Variables were scaled and centred prior to conducting the PCA. The analysis uses the ‘pcaMethods’ package for R (Stacklies et al. 2007). Replication code is available on request to the author.

same sex marriage has a small but positive loading. In all, this component is difficult to parse; the combination of attitudes bears little resemblance to international studies of moral politics and the distribution of values (see for example Inglehart 2015; Inglehart and Baker 2000). Likewise, the third component, with an eigenvalue of 0.98, shows an unexpected combination of support for same sex marriage and euthanasia legalisation, but opposition to the legalisation of marijuana.

The results of this analysis suggest there is little statistical advantage in reducing the five measures to a lesser number of latent components, at least for the purpose of this analysis. However, the composition of those components is worthy of further study. For instance, the coincidence of support for the reintroduction of the death penalty, marijuana liberalisation, and euthanasia legalisation in the second component is unexpected, and the existing literature presents no obvious explanation. More generally, the low contributions of support for abortion access to all three components suggest that attitudes towards abortion are statistically distinct. We may be erring when we conceptualise abortion as being 'like' the other moral attitudes measured here. Triangulating the results of the PCA with a reliability check of the single dimensional scale of the five items² indicates a reasonably robust Cronbach's alpha of 0.61 (standardised), which falls to 0.48 with the abortion measure excluded. Only excluding the death penalty measure increases the alpha (to 0.69).

Consequently, ordered logit regressions to examine the socio-demographic predictors of the five attitudes model each attitude as an individual dependent variable (Table 3). These results provide further evidence that the moral attitudes measured here are conceptually diverse. For instance, females are much more likely than men to support access to abortion, same-sex marriage,

² Using the 'alpha' function in the 'psych' package for R (Revelle 2016).

Table 3: ordered logit regression analyses predicting moral attitudes

	Abortion	Marriage	Death	Marijuana	Euthanasia
Female	.50 (.10)	.94 (.08)	.49 (.08)	-.05 (.08)	.13 (.08)
Age	-.01 (.00)	-.03 (.00)	.01 (.00)	-.01 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Education (reference category = 'no post-school qualification')					
Postgrad. qualification	.56 (.17)	.46 (.13)	.99 (.13)	.07 (.12)	.04 (.13)
Bachelor degree	.41 (.17)	.23 (.13)	.99 (.12)	.05 (.12)	-.12 (.13)
Undergrad. diploma	1.38 (.29)	.34 (.20)	.84 (.18)	.05 (.18)	-.06 (.20)
Associate diploma	.28 (.17)	.11 (.15)	.36 (.14)	.04 (.14)	-.05 (.15)
Trade qualification	.25 (.15)	-.11 (.12)	-.14 (.12)	-.08 (.12)	.10 (.13)
Non-trade qualification	.22 (.18)	.03 (.14)	.14 (.13)	-.16 (.14)	.08 (.15)
Household income	.05 (.01)	.02 (.01)	.04 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Religion (reference category = 'no religion')					
Roman Catholic	-.79 (.16)	-.28 (.12)	-.43 (.11)	-.28 (.11)	-.20 (.11)
Anglican / Church of England	-.69 (.16)	-.68 (.12)	-.76 (.11)	-.68 (.11)	-.19 (.12)
Uniting Church / Methodist	-.61 (.22)	-.75 (.16)	-.57 (.16)	-.81 (.16)	-.24 (.17)
Orthodox Church	-.47 (.35)	-.96 (.28)	-1.17 (.26)	-.78 (.26)	-.44 (.27)
Presbyterian	-.95 (.25)	-.85 (.19)	-.79 (.18)	-.78 (.18)	-.18 (.20)
Other	-1.44 (.19)	-1.05 (.15)	-.75 (.14)	-.71 (.14)	-.79 (.15)
Frequency of church attendance	-.50 (.03)	-.32 (.03)	.09 (.02)	-.15 (.02)	-.44 (.03)
<i>Intercepts</i>					
1/2	-4.79 (.31)	-3.94 (.23)	-.36 (.20)	-3.57 (.22)	-4.83 (.25)
2/3	-1.56 (.28)	-2.92 (.23)	.81 (.20)	-2.19 (.21)	-3.90 (.23)
3/4	<i>n/a</i>	-1.33 (.22)	1.58 (.20)	-1.09 (.20)	-2.74 (.22)
4/5	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	2.64 (.21)	.48 (.20)	-.09 (.22)
AIC	2832.24	5724.58	7471.54	7403.17	5752.73
N	2323	2445	2436	2425	2434

Cells show coefficient values, with standard errors in parentheses.

All measures have been coded so that coefficients can be interpreted as support for the moral position or policy (or, in the case of 'death', being against the reintroduction of the death penalty). Missing values are excluded listwise.

Analysis uses the 'ologit' function from the 'Zelig' package for R (Venables and Ripley 2011)

Source: 2016 Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 2016)

and oppose the reintroduction of the death penalty. However, men are more likely to support the liberalisation of marijuana laws. Age plays only a very small role in explaining these attitudes, net of other factors. Younger respondents are slightly more likely to support same-sex marriage and marijuana liberalisation. Perhaps surprisingly, it has no real effect on support for euthanasia; to the extent that there is some directional effect, support is associated with youth.

The effects of educational attainment on each of these attitudes further highlight the diversity of the measures. Support for abortion access has a non-monotonic relationship with age: the most supportive subgroup are those respondents with an undergraduate diploma, while postgraduate qualified respondents are the next most supportive. All forms of religious affiliation measured in the AES have strong negative effects on respondents' support for abortion access, same-sex marriage, as does respondents' self-reported frequency of church attendance. The pattern with regards to same-sex marriage attitudes is similar, with the notable exception of trade-qualified respondents, who do not support same-sex marriage in the mean. Otherwise, being female and having a postgraduate qualification are the strongest predictors of same-sex marriage support, while measures of religious affiliation and frequency of church attendance have negative effects.

Likewise, having a trade qualification negatively predicts the opinion against reintroducing the death penalty for convicted murderers; in other words, trade-qualified Australians are among the most likely to support the death penalty. University qualifications strongly predict support for the status quo position (i.e. no death penalty). Again, all forms of religious affiliation negatively predict the liberal position on this issue: self-reported religious Australians are more likely to support the reintroduction of the death penalty than those who describe as having 'no religion'. However, frequency of church attendance predicts the more

liberal position against the death penalty, suggesting some discord between self-reports of religious identity and actual religious behaviour. Religious affiliation also negatively predicts support for marijuana liberalisation and euthanasia decriminalisation, while educational attainment largely predicts support for marijuana liberalisation but not euthanasia.

With some understanding of how moral attitudes are distributed through the Australian population, Table 4 shows results of a multinomial regression analysis using those attitudes, alongside measures of age, gender, education, household income, religious affiliation, and church attendance, to predict vote choice in the House of Representatives at the 2016 Australian federal election. In this model, the Liberal Party of Australia and Nationals votes are combined to represent the parties' formal coalition ('the Coalition'), and their votes are used as the reference category in the multinomial model. One immediate feature of those results is the high standard errors on many of the effects coefficients; many of those coefficients appear strong, but are not statistically significant (at $p < .05$). However, the results also reveal the substantial role of moral attitudes in predicting vote choice.

Looking first at support for access to abortion reveals that the liberal position positively predicts support for the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Australian Greens, *vis a vis* the more conservative Coalition, in 2016. Abortion support also positively predicts the choice of a minor party over the Coalition. Support for same-sex marriage has a much different effect on vote choice in the House of Representatives. Here, the liberal position has a negative effect on the ALP vote, compared with the Coalition; this result seems to withstand the Coalition's pledge to conduct a national, non-binding plebiscite before legislating on same-sex marriage compared to the ALP's position to legislate to allow same-sex marriage regardless of public opinion. Support for same-sex marriage also negatively predicts informal voting in 2016, suggesting that a strong disposition towards same-sex marriage makes voters more inclined to cast a valid vote. Support for the status quo policy of no death penalty positively predicts all vote

Table 4: multinomial logit regression analysis predicting moral attitudes

	ALP	Greens	Other	Informal
Abortion	.27 (.34)	.25 (.34)	.50 (.40)	.01 (.35)
Marriage	-.41 (.19)	.02 (.20)	.23 (.23)	-.29 (.20)
Death	.21 (.13)	.26 (.13)	.58 (.14)	.17 (.13)
Marijuana	-.14 (.14)	.08 (.14)	.28 (.15)	.04 (.14)
Euthanasia	-.02 (.20)	-.09 (.22)	.09 (.22)	-.10 (.20)
Female	-.15 (.34)	.03 (.34)	.13 (.37)	-.11 (.35)
Age	.05 (.01)	.03 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.02 (.01)
Education (reference category = 'no post-school qualification)				
Postgrad. qualification	.27 (.58)	.48 (.58)	1.23 (.61)	.48 (.60)
Bachelor degree	.25 (.52)	.18 (.52)	.73 (.56)	.32 (.54)
Associate diploma	-.65 (.51)	-.67 (.52)	-.14 (.58)	-.15 (.54)
Trade qualification	.26 (.53)	.22 (.53)	-.10 (.62)	.50 (.55)
Non-trade qualification	-.20 (.56)	-.17 (.56)	.34 (.63)	.27 (.58)
Household income	.06 (.03)	.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)
Religion (reference category = 'no religion)				
Roman Catholic	.15 (.46)	.10 (.46)	-.71 (.50)	-.14 (.48)
Anglican / Church of England	.68 (.52)	.42 (.52)	-.37 (.57)	.36 (.54)
Uniting Church / Methodist	1.40 (1.07)	.96 (1.07)	.23 (1.14)	.78 (1.09)
Orthodox Church	-.55 (.85)	-.14 (.84)	-1.10 (1.02)	1.85 (1.08)
Presbyterian	.90 (1.06)	.81 (1.07)	-.30 (1.21)	.87 (1.08)
Other	-.23 (.55)	-.52 (.56)	-.92 (.62)	-.15 (.57)
Frequency of church attendance	-.08 (.12)	-.06 (.12)	.02 (.13)	-.01 (.13)
<i>Intercept</i>	<i>.41 (1.39)</i>	<i>-.30 (1.40)</i>	<i>-4.12 (1.59)</i>	<i>1.37 (1.44)</i>
<i>Log likelihood</i>				<i>-2619.29</i>
<i>N</i>				<i>2246</i>

Cells show coefficient values, with standard errors in parentheses.

All measures have been coded so that coefficients can be interpreted as support for the moral position or policy (or, in the case of 'death', being against the reintroduction of the death penalty). Missing values are excluded listwise.

'Associate diploma' category of educational attainment has been excluded from analysis due to very high standard errors.

Source: 2016 Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 2016)

choices against the Coalition, perhaps reflecting the Coalition's conservative policies and a voter base relatively concerned with issues of law and order.

Support for liberalisation of marijuana laws negatively predicts ALP vote choice compared with the Coalition, but strongly predicts 'other' vote choice. This 'other' category includes parties such as the Australian Sex Party, which actively campaigns on drug liberalisation platforms. Finally, support for euthanasia decriminalisation has no effect on vote choice across any of the options presented to respondents. This is not particularly surprising, as currently none of the major parties have very visible or cohesive policies on euthanasia; this may change, however, if recent moves by the Victorian Government to legalise medically assisted suicide for terminally ill Victorians are replicated by other state governments in Australia.

Conclusion

This paper has taken an exploratory approach to moral attitudes among Australian citizens. First, it examined the latent components of attitudes towards abortion access, same-sex marriage, reintroduction of the death penalty for convicted murderers, liberalisation of marijuana, and decriminalisation of medically assisted euthanasia. Principal components analysis suggested that there are diverse and theoretically unintuitive dimensions to the five measures; accordingly, the measures were not combined into scales or otherwise reduced for subsequent analysis. The latent structure of the measures studied here is worthy of further examination, and should inform future understanding of how we conceive of 'moral politics': what can we reasonably describe as 'moral issues' in the absence of an underlying conceptual structure? Is a theoretical overarching concept of 'morality with regard to social issues' enough to justify thinking of and analysing these measures as related?

Second, ordered logit regression analyses further supported the diverse nature of these attitudes. While religious affiliation and church attendance both had strong effects against the liberal position on all five issues (with the one exception of church attendance's small positive effect on support for the status quo policy on the death penalty), socio-demographic factors such as educational attainment and age had differential effects across issues. Especially notable is

the non-monotonic effects of education on moral attitudes: Australians with trade qualifications particularly expressed contrary positions to groups with similar levels of educational attainment. These results suggest further avenues for research on the socialising effects of trade qualifications and employment on Australians' social and political attitudes.

Finally, multinomial logit regression analyses modelling the effects of moral attitudes on vote choice (controlling for religious affiliation, church attendance, and socio-demographic variables) again found differential results. Support for liberal positions on abortion access and the death penalty predicted voting for the ALP and Greens, compared to the Coalition. On the contrary, support for marijuana liberalisation and same-sex marriage supported voting for the Coalition *vis a vis* the ALP, with negligible effect on the Greens' vote. Liberal positions on both abortion and the death penalty had strong positive effects on 'other' party voting, suggesting that both issue domains have the capacity to move Australians' votes away from the major parties and toward minor parties or independent candidates.

In all, these results present a complex and complicated role for moral attitudes in Australian society. Australians appear able and willing to take diverse positions depending on the specific issue, rather than taking uniform positions across the range of issues. Consequently, there is little uniformity in how moral attitudes affect Australian electoral politics. These results can inform how we conceive of and measure moral attitudes in Australia, and how we expect them to influence elections and voting. They are particularly timely in the context of a (possibly) imminent plebiscite on same-sex marriage, legislation introduced in the Parliament of Victoria to legalise euthanasia, and international trends towards drug liberalisation.

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