Should Australia solve all its issues with postal surveys now?

Author: Vening.jack@gmail.com

In a post-Australian marriage law postal survey world, here is what we know: 61.6% of voters are in favour of legalising same sex marriage, the outcome is nonbinding and it cost taxpayers $122 million.

So when will we start to see see more results like these? Crikey talked to five experts about whether Parliament should start making based on the results of non-binding postal campaigns. Isn't it just a waste of money?

Doctor Peter Chen, a social researcher at the University of Sydney says he is “offended” the government would even spend so much money to collect so little data.

“What we could know about Australia and Australian social attitudes with $100 million put into the social sciences would be phenomenal,” he says.

“It would be the biggest endowment to social sciences we’ve ever seen in the history of Australia. Why spend $100 million to settle a minor log-jam within the coalition? It’s just crazy.”

What about when politicians reach a stalemate?

ANU professor of political science Ian McAllister says it isn’t an uncommon tactic for political elites to subcontract moral issues (such as same sex marriage, abortion or euthanasia) to plebiscites in order to avoid making a decision they’re not prepared to cop the blowback for.

“When you have a two party system, its most beneficial to the major parties to have economic conflict as the basis for politics because that’s essentially bargainable,” he says.

“You can argue about state intervention and social welfare but it can be bargained over.

“When you’ve got an issue which is essentially moral in nature it’s zero sum. It’s non-bargainable and it typically divides supporters of the major political parties.”

Graeme Orr, Professor of Law at the University of Queensland says national political surveys are one way to overcome such “non-bargainable” issues.

“For example, in Queensland abortion remains formally illegal despite a
clear liberal majority,” he says. However he warns voters should “be wary” as the fairness of the process is dependent on how it is set up. The process is expensive, non-binding and Australians must be aware of who is proposing the issue and wording the question.
“Most of all, government needs to be holistic. Climate change policy is stalemated and it is an issue with moral and broad public interest but it can’t be addressed by one word votes.”

What about other models for consultation?
ANU demographer and social researcher Doctor Liz Allen says she believes evidence gathering via public surveys is essential to “truly democratic governance”, but that “a sample survey is best”

“As much as I like analysing data from surveys, it is not ideal to run a large scale survey that asks one question, or a series of simple questions, to gauge everybody’s opinion,” she says.

“As we’ve seen with the same sex marriage survey, it’s divisive, it’s costly and it may not get us anywhere. And so you’ve gone through a process for what?
“We have enough evidence using small scale sample surveys that are nationally representative or representative of the population’s interests. They are cost effective and are a valid scientific approach to collecting data to inform decision making at a national level.”

Other alternatives suggested by experts include more deliberative forms of public engagement, such as citizens’ juries and assemblies.
According to Carolyn Hendriks, associate professor of public policy and governance at ANU, they are “far better at engaging citizens in the complexities of policy issues”.

“Evidence in Australia and all around the world demonstrate that when small groups of randomly selected citizens come together to deliberate on complex policy issues, they develop innovative common sense recommendations,” she says.

“Any effective mechanism for engaging the public in policy decisions should tap into the creative problem solving skills of our citizens, and not just ask them whether they agree or not with an elite proposal.”

So it seems there are a number of cost-effective ways to accurately gauge
public opinion in order to draft public policy after all. And for what it’s worth, Professor Ian McAllister says he was ready to help all along. “They could have come to me and I would have done it for nothing basically because I already had the data set.”