

## **People's Perceptions of Governance and the Implications for Regional Australia**

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## **Introduction**

Australia's federal system is constantly under strain, most obviously in terms of Commonwealth-State financial relations, but also in terms of the popular legitimacy of its elements. Forces for change have been working on the federal system over generations for, as Blainey (2004) has argued, it has failed in one sense: while the Federal government has looked after matters of national concern, the states are too big to look after the varied interests of all regions. The problem rose to prominence in the later years of the Howard Government as the capacities of states to deliver services were questioned, and the rights and wrongs of federal intervention were debated vigorously. Local government, always the minor player, remains minor but has grown in significance and sometimes in influence through a strengthening relationship with the Commonwealth. All this has tightened the focus of public attention on the federal system, as occurred prominently at the recent 20/20 Summit where the possibility of regional government was debated as it has been before, despite the stability of the formal structure of the Federation since 1901 (Brown, 2007a).

The nature of the federal system, in terms of its basic components of localities, states and the nation, has been debated from time to time since Federation. Through this debate, the potential significance of regions has often been raised. Regions have been given significance by central governments which see regions as convenient avenues for administration and service delivery. But there is also an undercurrent of popular awareness of regions and regionalist thinking in Australian cultural tradition. In this paper we look for evidence of such thinking and consider it alongside analysis of public perception and evaluation of the federal system. We conclude with some discussion about attitudes to reform.

## **The question of regionalism**

The term 'regionalism' describes an idea about governance: that people who live in identifiable regions should have some influence over what government does in their region (Gray, 2004). The idea of regionalism presupposes the fallibility of a federal system, in that it may be a response to dissatisfaction with the system maintaining federal and state levels of government. It might be argued that a fourth, or regional, tier of government has been emerging in Australia during the last ten years with the growth of regional organisations like catchment management authorities and regional organisations of local government councils. However, even local government which is said to be the third tier is administratively weak and constitutionally unrecognised. While varying greatly in its strength and influence among the states, it is very much a creation of the states and operates under state legislation. Administrative regions which are neither expansions of local government nor merely administrative tools of the states appeared in the 1970s, under Commonwealth influence, as a plank in economic development policies. Although having ups and downs since, they have reappeared in another form in the field of natural resource management, or more specifically, catchment management. Catchment Management Authorities have significant powers and responsibilities, though it would certainly be stretching their capacities to describe them as another level of government. The idea of a region has always been problematic, other than to conceptualise regions as smaller than states but larger than local government areas. Catchment management, as an administrative arena, is relatively easy to conceptualise because river catchments can be mapped at a

larger-than-local but smaller-than-state level. As Brown (2007b) argues, the need for new models for regional governance is now on the agenda for public debate.

There have been many attempts to regionalise government administration, most notably by the Whitlam government but also by the states as was considered by the New South Wales government in 1977. For economic development purposes, a great deal of effort has gone into defining and mapping regions. Sometimes regions appear to define themselves, as can occur when an area in which people share an economic interest find that interest threatened if not destroyed. As Gibson (2001) relates, in the case of the Latrobe Valley, severe economic downturn effectively defined a region for its inhabitants.

Brunckhorst, et al. (2004) have arguably delineated regions most clearly and thoroughly, despite criticism by Dollery and Crase (2004), by using a quantitative technique which plots people's economic and social ties to central places, towns or cities, and maps the socio-economic catchments of those places as a basis for regionalisation. This method is based on local social catchments and their aggregation. Social catchments can be mapped at the local or higher level. Hugo et al. (2001: 1) define social catchments as: 'the territory occupied by a group of households and individuals who are in some form of regular interaction and which the inhabitants identify as 'their' community or region. This definition points to objective elements, eg interaction by way of shopping, and more subjective factors, like self-identification and a sense of attachment.

In many countries, people have identified themselves as members of regional populations and hence identified with regional spaces from ancient cultural tradition. In such circumstances, there can be an 'identity effect' creating impetus toward the regionalisation of governance (Marks, et al., 2008) Australia does not have a strong cultural tradition of regionalism based on historical social/spatial relations as is apparent at the sub-national level at a relatively small spatial scale in Europe, for example (Marks, et al., 2008). Where it could be expected that ethnic identity in Europe and even in parts of North America could give rise to strong regionalism, there is unlikely to be significant counterparts in Australia due to its history of settlement, though regionalism has been apparent and can be seen to make the state boundaries appear as historical quirks (see Blainey, 2004). It is generally accepted that people are more likely to identify with their local area than their region, perhaps because of the relative absence of regional identity in Australian culture where, as a popular cultural example, sport teams tend to be formed at local, state and national levels. Regions provide administrative bases for competitions rather than catchment areas and objectives of loyalties for teams. Nevertheless, sport regions, such as that of the Riverina Football League in southern New South Wales are identifiable entities.

Relatively little research has been conducted on this more subjective side of regionalism other than that like Marks et al. (2008) which is examining the relationship between regionalism and nationalism. This contrasts with localism, perhaps because, in addition to the relative strength of local cultural attachment, local social systems have been institutionalised in local government, and policy makers have used locality as a basis for organising and delivering government programmes (for discussion see for example Connelly, et al., 2006).

From the perspective of national governance, what matters is whether or not there is a sufficient popular identification with regions and the concept of regions, and how any such identification might be associated with perceptions of the federal system and the performance of its elements. The idea of a sub-state level of government, other than local government, has certainly had currency in the past. It has been manifest in ‘new state movements’: popular expressions of regionalism in the form of agitation to create new states in identified regional areas. Creation of new states is permitted under the Australian Constitution and is the most established option available to regionalists (Blainey, 2004). The creation of a sub-state regional system of governance outside the trend toward expanding the spatial size of local councils would be a more complex matter. Previous research by the authors in New South Wales and Queensland (see Gray and Brown, 2007) has suggested that, in those states at least, the idea of changing the federal system, possibly involving the development of new states or regional governments, has some currency in popular views. Against a background of assessing the popular possession of a concept of region, the research to be described below was conducted recently to examine Australians’ views of their federal system and their desired futures for it.

### **Survey research**

In order to explore the relationship between public perceptions of regions, governance and the federal system, a national telephone survey was conducted by Newspoll during May 2008. In summary, the research to be reported below draws on:

- A national random sample survey conducted in Australia among 1,201 respondents aged 18 years and over.
- Respondents were selected via a stratified random sample process which involved
  - a quota being set for each capital city and non-capital city area, and within each of these areas, a quota being set for groups of statistical divisions or subdivisions;
  - random selection of household telephone numbers using random digit dialling;
  - random selection of an individual in each household by a "last birthday" screening question.
- Interviewing was conducted by telephone over the period of 1-8 May 2008 by fully trained and personally briefed interviewers.
- To ensure the sample included those people who tend to spend a lot of time away from home, a system of call backs and appointments was incorporated.
- For purposes of estimating population characteristics, to reflect the population distribution, results were post-weighted to:
  - Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, and sex;
  - area, using ABS statistical divisions grouped as 68 areas;
  - federal voting intention (using the previous two Newspoll voting intention surveys).
  - Findings presented below are weighted, unless it is more meaningful to leave them unweighted as when comparing sample average characteristics.
- The interview schedule was designed following focus groups held in Albury/Wodonga, Wagga Wagga and Western Sydney and pilot tested by Newspoll.

## Regional identity – some survey findings<sup>1</sup>

The primary objective of the survey research is to ascertain the popular view of the federal system. As regionalism emerged in earlier research (Gray and Brown, 2007) as a potentially significant element in people's perceptions of options for the future structure of the federal system, it is important that it be accommodated in the national survey. It is also important that respondents to the survey, as far as possible, give regions and regionalism a clear and consistent meaning so that they can decide how much significance to give it. To maximise the consistency of responses, a sequence of questions was posed, with a view to tapping subjective perceptions of regions. The first question asked about sense of belonging without referring to regions (Table 1).

Table 1

'... I'd like to know if you feel you have a "sense of belonging" to different locations or communities in Australia. Firstly, do you feel you have a "sense of belonging" ...?'

	% yes (weighted)
To your local area	83.6
To (your state / territory)	89.1
To Australia as a nation	94.6
To some other country apart from Australia	28.9
None \ don't know	0.8

As expected, almost everyone indicated a sense of belonging to Australia as a nation, the most frequently mentioned level of government as an object of belonging, followed by state and locality.

The concept of region was introduced with a question asking if people saw themselves as living in a region. A small majority said yes (Table 2).

Table 2

'Now thinking about the idea of a region - by that I mean an area in Australia that is bigger than your local area, but smaller than the whole of (your state/territory). Do you see yourself as living in a particular region of Australia like that?'

	% yes (weighted)
Yes \ do	58.7
No \ not \ don't know	41.3
	100.0

The strength of the sense of belonging to nation, state, region and locality was then questioned, measured on a three point scale from 'not that strong' through 'quite strong' to 'very strong' (Table 3). While sense of belonging to Australia is the

<sup>1</sup> The research is funded by the Australian Research Council, Discovery Project DP0666833, led by Griffith University, with Charles Sturt University, University of New England and the University of Melbourne

strongest allegiance indicated, it is noticeable that, among those who saw themselves living in a region, the sense of belonging to their region was just as strong as the whole sample's sense of belonging to their local area and slightly stronger than sense of belonging to states. Those who indicated that they saw themselves living in a region were no more or less likely to indicate a strong/weak sense of belonging to their state.

Table 3

For each of the following areas, please say how strong your sense of belonging is - do you feel a very strong "sense of belonging" to that area, quite strong, or is your "sense of belonging" not that strong?

	Mean score (unweighted)	Standard error
To your local area	2.38	.02
To (state / territory)	2.34	.02
To the region of Australia you said you have a sense of belonging to	2.38 among those who see themselves in a region (Table 2)	.02
To Australia as a nation	2.68	.02
To (other country)	1.90	.04

Comparing mean scores across the States, the only significant differences appear to be where means are higher on sense of belonging to state in Tasmania and Western Australia, and slightly higher in Queensland, than in the other states/territories (using one-way between groups ANOVA: F probability .00). Mean scores on sense of belonging to locality, state, nation and 'other country' are very similar in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, other than a relatively high score for 'other country' in metropolitan areas, reflecting the larger immigrant populations in the biggest cities.

### **Perception of regional governance?**

Awareness of regions or possessing a sense of belonging to a region is quite different to being aware of possibilities for regions as elements in governance. Partly to help respondents work out and express their views on these issues, the survey asked if they had heard of the ideas of creating more states and creating regional government. Each of these questions was preceded by some explanation. The question about regional government was introduced with: 'Although Australia currently has federal, state and local governments, in the future, it might be possible to have other types of government [pause]. For example, one idea is to have regional governments which would be responsible for an area larger than a local government area, but probably smaller than a whole state [pause]...' The question about new states was preceded by: 'Another idea is to have more state governments, which would mean dividing up big states into smaller areas, with the smaller areas becoming their own new state [pause]'. The idea of creating new states has a long history in Australia, and the Constitution explicitly allows for it. There have been several attempts to create new states, even within existing ones. The last, seeking a state of New England within New South Wales, ended in a failed though potentially successful referendum in 1967.

Table 4

‘...Have you heard of the idea of having more states before now?’

	% yes (weighted)
Yes \ have heard	20.7
No \ not \ don't know	79.3
	100.0

Table 5

‘...Have you heard of the idea of having regional governments before now?’

	% yes (weighted)
Yes \ have heard	27.6
No \ not \ don't know	72.4
	100.0

Tables 4 and 5 indicate that only a minority had heard of each possibility. It is notable that a larger proportion had heard of the idea of regional governments than had heard of creating new states. This may not be surprising, given that a very large proportion of the population was born since the last serious attempt to create a new state. It may be more surprising that over a quarter have heard of the idea of regional government when there has been very little serious public debate about the concept, despite it having had currency in intellectual and political circles for a long time (see Brown, 2007a).

When considered with the findings on regions and belonging, there is evidence emerging of a latent regional culture which could become relevant to public debate over the future of federalism. This does not indicate a movement toward either option for change. There is a fairly strong and statistically significant correlation (Pearson's  $R = .37$ , significance  $.00$ ) between responses to both these questions. Of those who had heard of having more states, 64 per cent had heard of the idea of regional government. However, only 13.9 per cent had heard of both and 60.7 per cent had heard of neither. Level of education may have a small affect, with 63.4 per cent of those having completed only year 9 of high school or lower having heard of neither, and 49.9 per cent of those with degrees or diplomas having heard of neither.

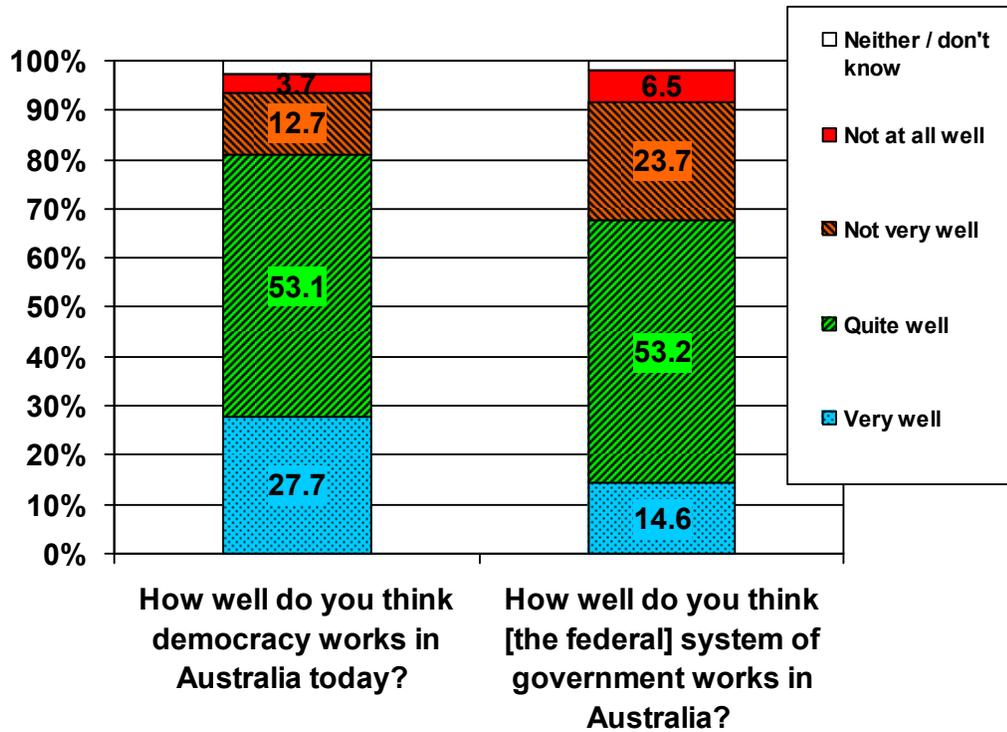
### **Australians' satisfaction with democracy and federalism**

What prospect is there for a regional level of government to emerge? There being a proportion of the population who have heard of regional government is not enough to even raise the possibility that it may one day become a popular idea. As a first step towards considering this prospect at the national level, the survey asked for assessments of the performance of Australian democracy and the federal system. The results are presented in Figure 1. The main point emerging is that, while a substantial majority of people appear happy with both, rather fewer see the federal system working well than see democracy working well. This finding is similar to our

previous research conducted in New South Wales and Queensland (Gray and Brown, 2007) and has been reported in Brown (2008). There is a very slight tendency for men to be more critical of the federal system than women; demographic factors are not strong predictors.

Figure 1

‘How well do you think (1) democracy and (2) the federal system work in Australia?’



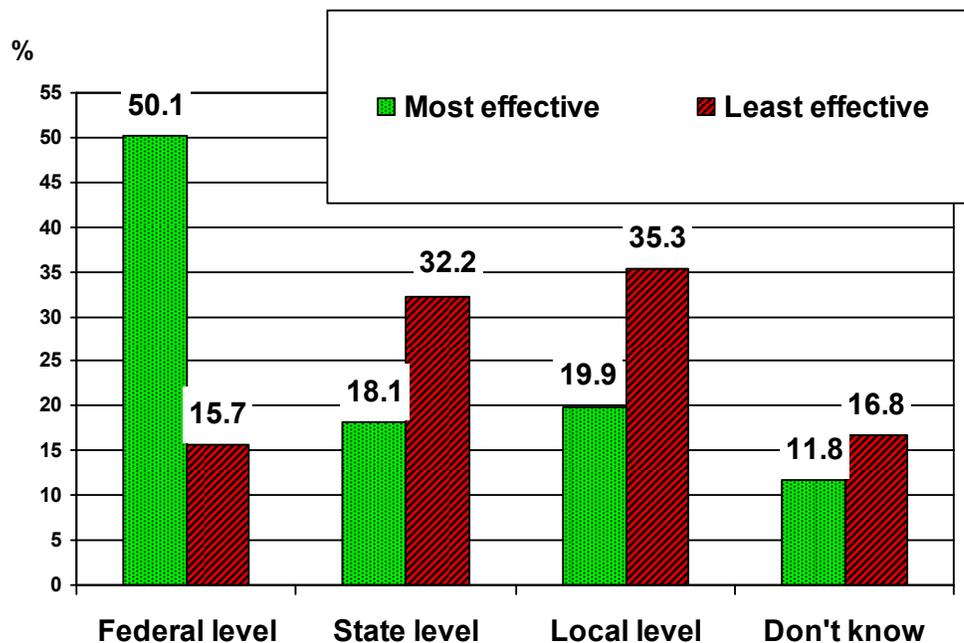
There is a similarly slight correlation (Pearson's  $R = .08$ , significance  $.00$ ) between reporting that the federal system does not work very well and having heard of the idea of regional government. Of those who replied 'not at all well' to the question about the federal system, 47.7 per cent had heard of the idea of regional government compared with 29.2 per cent of those who replied 'very well'.

### Effectiveness of government

Satisfaction with each level of government was also measured. Respondents were asked to nominate the level which they felt to be most effective and least effective. State and local government fared worse than the federal level with more 'least effective' nominations than 'most effective' for state and local (Figure 2).

Figure 2

'...Which level do you think does its job most/least effectively?'



There is some noticeable variation among the states in propensity to nominate levels of government as most effective (Table 6). The Federal level is popular in all states, though less so in Queensland. The state level is least often popular in New South Wales and not surprisingly in the ACT. Local government appears most popular in Queensland and Tasmania, although the sample in the latter is quite small and level of statistical significance consequently diminished.

Table 6  
State by State variation in level of government nominated as most effective (per cent weighted)

	Australia	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT
Federal	50.1	57.7	51.3	37.3	47.0	43.4	49.3	84.2	64.1
State	18.1	9.2	23.0	23.8	18.9	27.2	13.8	2.4	13.8
Local	19.9	19.4	15.8	29.0	19.8	15.1	29.2	9.1	14.5
n =	1201	311	241	220	160	180	50	19	20

### How many levels of government do Australians want?

Given that the state/local levels are nowhere as popular as the federal and that the idea of regional government is at least as widely-known as that of new states, if a stronger formal governance role for regions is to happen, it is likely to occur in the context of a reconsideration of the entire structure of the Federation. In order to ascertain popular views on the number of levels of government we should have, respondents were asked a series of questions starting with:

‘Now thinking about Australia’s system of government in the future – say 20 years from now [pause] if Australia currently has three levels of government, how many levels of government do you think Australia should have in the future?’

Response options started with ‘more than three, less than three or do you think three is about right?’ A second question, put to those who replied less than three, asked if they thought there should be one or two levels. At this point, the options of regional governments and new states were mentioned and questions asked as described above. A majority of respondents did not want to reduce the number but many sought change nevertheless. In summary (see also Figure 3 and Brown, 2008), these questions revealed that:

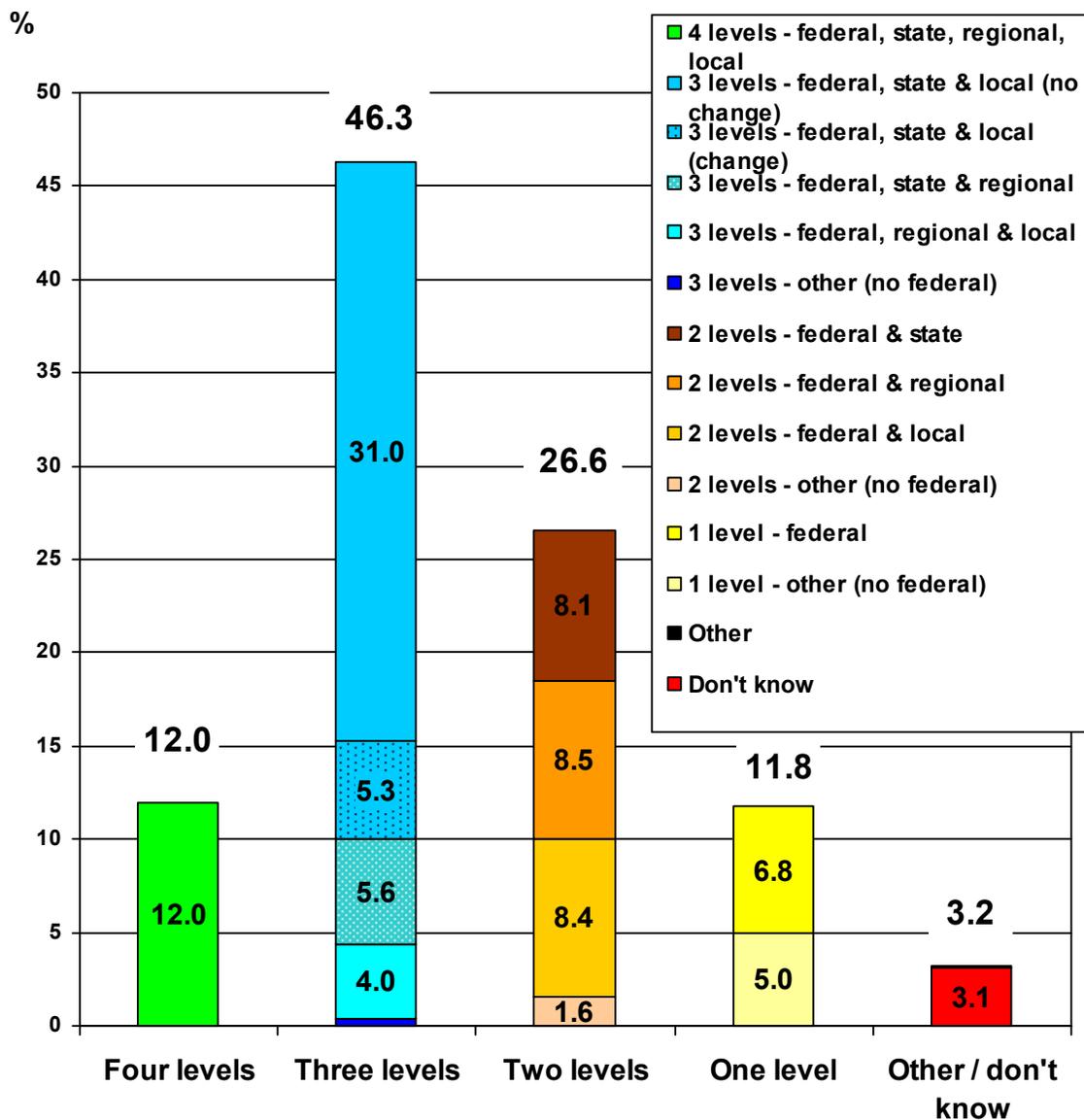
- Contrary to some interpretations and despite the relative unpopularity of the state and local levels, a small majority of Australians would not prefer a system of government with fewer levels than today.
- Almost half of all Australians would like to keep a **three-levelled** system of government. However a third of those would have a different three-levelled system than the one they have today. *Only 31% of Australians want to keep the current three-levelled system unchanged.*
- A significant group of Australians would like a **four-tiered system** with regional governments as well as state and local governments.

- 26.6% of Australians would prefer a **two-tiered** system, including 1.6% who want a two-tiered system without any federal government.
- 11.8% of Australians would prefer a **single** tier of government – 6.8% who want the national government to run all government in Australia, and 5% who would like no national government and instead only state (2.4%), regional (1.1%) or local (1.5%) government.

These findings are broadly consistent with previous surveys conducted in Queensland and New South Wales (Gray and Brown, 2007). As well as being national and based on a much larger sample, they are arguably more reliable due to the graduated approach taken to posing the relevant questions. This was done to ensure the widest possible range of opinions could be expressed following some preliminary questions to maximise understanding of the issues and indicate the level of acquaintance people had with the issues.

Figure 3

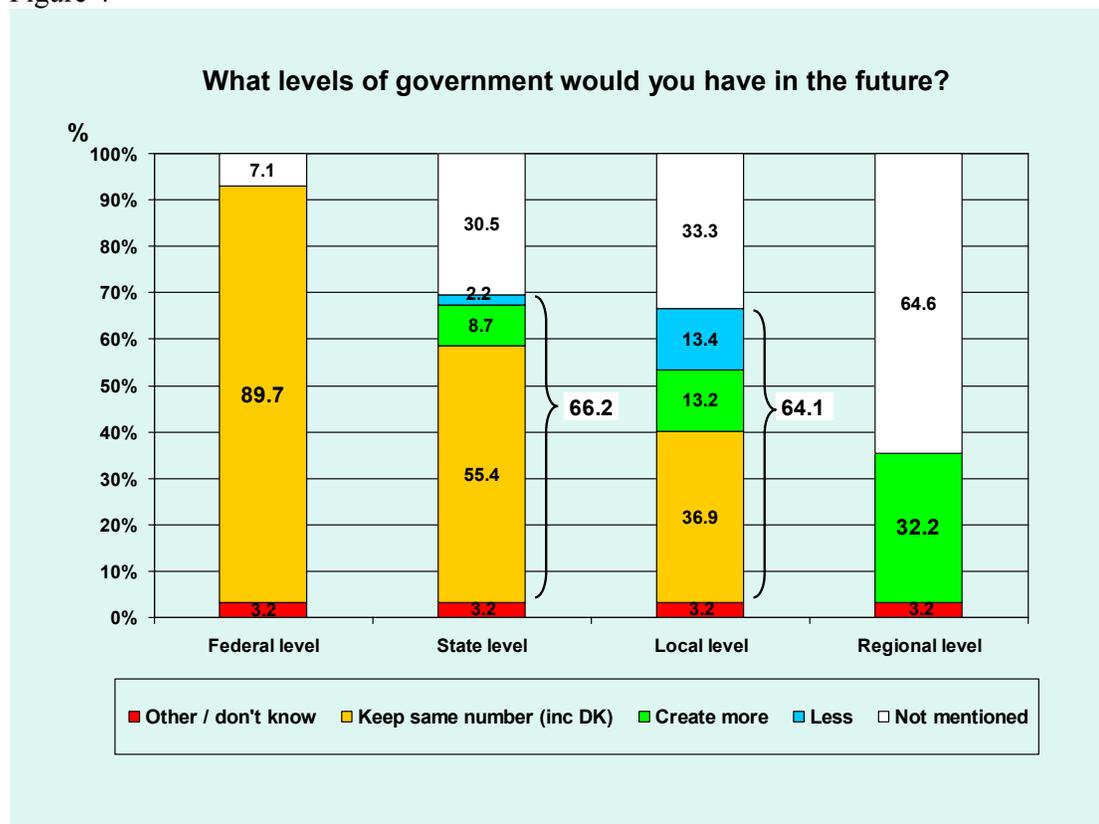
Australians' preferred federal system – number of levels



The extent of interest in regional government, and retention of the other levels, was gauged with a question which asked:

‘Thinking again about how our system of government could be in 20 years, in particular, about four possible levels of government – federal, state, regional and local [pause]. Which of those four levels of government would you have in the future? You can have as many or as few as you like.’ This question was followed by others, asking of respondents who had indicated they would include state and/or local government, if they would want more or fewer state and local governments than currently exist (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Perhaps the most encouraging figure is the very small proportion of respondents who either said that they did not know or offered only a meaningless response. Not surprisingly, the Federal level of government looks secure in public opinion. State and local government do not look so secure, with only around two-thirds of respondents putting them among their choices of levels for their ideal system in 20 years.

Regional government figures prominently and similarly to its relative popularity in earlier surveys (Gray and Brown, 2007). Almost one third of respondents included it in their ideal structure for the future. Of those who had heard of the idea of regional government, 42.3 per cent nominated regional among their choice of future levels of government. While a minority of that group, fewer of those who had not heard of the

idea nominated it (28.8 per cent). Some people were apparently willing to nominate a regional level of government without having heard of it before, but the relative popularity of regional government among those who had heard of it is encouraging for its advocates. Were state and regional seen as alternatives, or were many people not wanting either? 20.1 per cent didn't indicate either, and 18.7 per cent indicated both. Of those who want to retain the states, only 28.5 per cent also wanted regional, while of those who didn't mention states, 41.8 per cent nominated regional, suggesting they may see it as an alternative. Variation was found among the states in the frequency of choice of regional government, though the idea found support even in the ACT, remembering that the smaller sample sizes reduce the likelihood of statistical significance and hence reliability of findings in the smaller states (Table 7). No significant difference was found between metropolitan and non-metropolitan dwellers in the popularity of a regional level of government.

Table 7  
State by State variation in choice of regional level government

	Australia	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT
Per cent who would create regional government	32.2	32.8	37.4	27.7	30.8	28.3	37.8	20.0	21.3
n =	1201	311	241	220	160	180	50	19	20

There was no attempt to offer any particular spatial model of either regional government, new states or local government. This research only goes as far as finding whether these ideas have popular currency in broad principle. The evidence suggests, however, that further consideration including spatial models based on socio-economic and environmental factors would help to lubricate that debate.

## Conclusion

Very many Australians see an imbalance in effectiveness among our levels of government, with the federal level being the only one to be consistently perceived positively. A substantial proportion of Australians, around one-third of those sampled, have indicated an interest in fundamental change to our Federal system. There is no clear direction as to what such change might entail, except that a regionalised form of governance would gain significant popular support. While certainly not enough to carry a referendum were one ever to occur, there is a strong suggestion that regional governance should be on the agenda for public debate.

A substantial proportion of Australians, over half the population as estimated by sample survey findings, perceive themselves as living in a region. Among those people, a sense of belonging to a region is just as strong as their sense of belonging to locality. A similar proportion would apparently consider the creation of a regional level of government, without necessarily eliminating either the state or local level, though there is some support for reducing government to two levels. It can be

concluded that the federation issue has currency and it may be driven in part by regionalism.

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