



Voters' guide to national security: Evaluation criteria

Australian voters consistently identify national security issues in the top five matters of importance. Consequently, a significant factor in voters' decisions in the upcoming election will be the consideration "which party can better handle national security challenges?".

This is complex as it involves many factors such as which threats each political party considers as the most pressing, and what policies it would introduce to reduce these threats and to make the nation safer.

This *National Security Practice Note* is designed to provide voters with a framework to evaluate each political party's promised policies on national security. It does not provide a guide to each party's policies nor recommendations on which party would better handle national security – this is the domain of interest and advocacy groups.

Voters need to ask themselves four key questions, for each political party:

1. does their description and ordering of national security threats reflect my view of the threats, and their relative importance?
2. will their promises actually reduce national security threats and increase security?
3. will they actually implement their policies?
4. how will they respond to unexpected and new national security threats?

To assist in answering these questions, background information and sub-questions to consider are provided below.

There are many different perspectives on these questions, and different groups in society will perceive the threats and promised policies differently. Some will put more emphasis on combating terrorism and the war in Iraq, others the need for managing a balance between US engagement and other priorities. Others

will be more concerned about the threat of people movement due to climate change, while others about the need to stabilise fragile states.

Much of the differences in voters' perceptions arise due to how they conceive the term *national security*. National security used to focus predominately on military and diplomatic actions to maintain the survival of Australia and to preserve the state's capacity for independent decision-making in order to pursue its national objectives.

Today a much broader definition of national security has evolved. It now consists of ensuring Australia has freedom from military attack or coercion, freedom from internal subversion, and freedom from the erosion of political, economic and social values which are essential to the quality of life in Australia.

This national security definition encompasses responses to prevent military and coercion threats such as state-based attacks, terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as to non-military threats such as fraud, financial institutions, economic collapse, illegal migration, illicit drugs, transnational crime, pandemics and environmental collapse.

Questions and background information

Does the political party description and ordering of the national security threats reflect my view of the threats, and their relative importance?

Background: National security threats come in many forms. Some are very prominent and others not. Each political party identifies those threats about which it is most concerned. Governments also have limited resources or power and will consequently focus on key issues. Consequently, they will prioritise certain areas.

Questions voters need to consider in answering the question above are:

- Do the threats that the party identifies reflect my views of the threats?
- Is the party correct in its order of threat priority?
- Is the party selecting threats for political purposes and if so, does this matter?
- Are there other threats which the party does not address but should?

For each political party, will the promised policies actually reduce national security threats and increase security?

Background: National security threats are numerous and often highly inter-related, such as the threat of terrorism which led to the war in Afghanistan which in turn led to the threat of people smuggling of refugees from the conflict. There are often many actions that governments can take to address the threat with the main ones grouped into the following categories:

- Government response – eg legislation, investment in intelligence, border security, transport security, whole of nation coordination and strategy
- Military response – eg international defence partnerships, operations, force structure, capabilities, generation and sustainment
- International relations response – eg governmental multi-lateral engagements, international engagement by non-government organisations and businesses, regional and global focus, international promotion of democracy and market-based economics



The Australian Homeland Security Research Centre undertakes independent, evidence-based analysis of domestic security issues.

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- Law enforcement response – eg increasing police presence and combating of terrorism, illicit drug importation, fraud, people smuggling and exploitation of women and children
- Social and human response – eg community cohesion and intervention, anti-radicalisation, public health, migration, education, public information, personal freedom
- Environmental response – eg actions to reduce climate change, food shortages and natural resource destruction which may lead to international crises and refugees

Questions voters need to consider in answering the question above are:

- Has each political party correctly identified the causes and effects of each security threat?
- For each threat, how do they propose to reduce it?
- Do the promised policies reinforce one-another, or do they conflict with each other?
- Do the promised policies give you sufficient understanding of what their consequences will be?
- Will the promised policies actually enhance national security in the long-term or are they short-term focused and undermine long-term national security?
- Are the promised policies practical or are they symbolic, and if so, does this matter?
- Are the promised policies designed for election purposes and if so, will they enhance or undermine national security?
- Do the promised policies engage the necessary elements of Australia (Commonwealth, State and local government agencies, non-government organisations, businesses and the community) which are needed to actually address the threat?

For each political party, will they actually implement their policies?

Background: Political promises during an election are usually implemented by elected governments. However some are not and others are significantly modified due to other priorities.

Questions voters need to consider in answering the question above are:

- Will the promised policies be implemented?
- Will the intent of the promised policies be maintained?

For each political party, how will they respond to unexpected and new national security threats?

Background: New national security challenges, such as a worldwide deadly influenza outbreak or a territorial conflict between two Asian countries, can arise at any time. Consequently, governments will be faced with unexpected or new threats continually during their term in government.

Questions voters need to consider in answering the question above are:

- Will the response to new national security threats be handled competently?
- Will the response to new national security threats be in the best interests of Australia, its citizens and its interests?
- Do the promised policies provide an indication of how the government of the day will respond to new security challenges and does it align with my values?