

Christmas waste polling 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Gift giving is a long-standing Christmas tradition. Yet Australia Institute research shows that three in 10 (30%), or approximately 6.1 million adult Australians, expect to receive Christmas presents this year that they will never use or wear. The estimated value of this waste is \$921 million.¹

Unwanted and unused Christmas gifts and food ultimately end up in landfill, increasing the greenhouse gas emissions that drive the climate crisis. But this research shows nearly half of Australians (48%) would prefer it if people did not buy them Christmas presents. Less than one in two Australians (46%) consider how the gifts they purchase will eventually be disposed of.

These results suggest that it could be time for a change in consumer habits. Buying fewer unwanted Christmas presents would be a positive outcome for the environment and for consumers. Fewer items would be wasted and sent to landfill, and millions of Australians would save money at Christmas time.

In contrast to gift waste, of the 61% of Australians who had a Christmas tree last year, 85% plan to reuse it again this year.

This level of reuse is good news. However, it has been reported that a two-metre artificial tree has a carbon footprint of about 40kg,² which, according to the Carbon

¹ See Discussion section for calculation.

² Soil Association (n.d.) What is the best choice when looking to buy a sustainable Christmas tree, https://www.soilassociation.org/take-action/organic-living/christmas/eco-friendly-christmas-trees-real-vs-fake/

Trust, is more than ten times that of a real tree that is burned after Christmas.³ Most artificial trees are made of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) and are not recyclable. These trees are used for an average of four times before ending up in landfill.⁴

Ultimately, Christmas is a time of giving, and Australians love to give – an overwhelming 78% agree or strongly agree that they like buying Christmas presents. There is a distinct possibility that their desire to 'buy' presents might be the same as the desire to 'give' presents. Meaning it might not be about the act of the financial transaction to acquire a gift, but rather the act of giving the gift itself that is the source of joy.

If giving, not purchasing, is the enjoyable experience, that would reinforce the desirability of moving towards a more environmentally sustainable Christmas, where people would be more open to giving the gift of their presence (quality time) to family and friends in place of unwanted presents. Previous Australia Institute research shows that, instead of unwanted material things, Australians are keen to gift charity donations, experiences, gift cards and meaningful handmade gifts.

³ Carbon trust (2021) *The Carbon Trust's tips for a more sustainable Christmas*, https://www.carbontrust.com/news-and-insights/news/the-carbon-trusts-tips-for-a-more-sustainable-christmas

⁴ Carbon trust (2021) *The Carbon Trust's tips for a more sustainable Christmas*, https://www.carbontrust.com/news-and-insights/news/the-carbon-trusts-tips-for-a-more-sustainable-christmas

POLLING

Key results

The Australia Institute surveyed 1,379 Australians about their attitudes towards the buying and disposing of gifts and their tree at Christmas time.

The results show that three in 10 (30%), or approximately 6.1 million adult Australians expect to get Christmas presents this year that they will never use or wear. The estimated value of this waste is \$921 million.⁵

- Over three in four Australians (78%) like buying gifts for people at Christmas, but almost half of Australians (48%) would prefer it if people did not buy them gifts at Christmas.
- Nine in 10 Australians (89%) receive Christmas presents. Three in 10 Australians (30%) expect to receive Christmas presents that they will never use or wear.
- When purchasing gifts for others, almost half of Australians (46%) don't think about how those gifts will eventually be disposed of. Three in five Australians (59%) agree that it is better for the economy when people buy fewer things that don't get used.
- Three in five Australians (61%) said they had a Christmas tree last year; 39% did not:
 - Those aged 50 years or older were the least likely to say they had a Christmas tree last year.
 - Of the three in five Australians (61%) that had a Christmas tree last year,
 69% had a fake plastic tree, 22% had a fake non-plastic tree, and 9% had a real tree.
 - 85% of those who had a tree kept it to use again this year (6% disposed of it).

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⁵ See Discussion section for calculation.

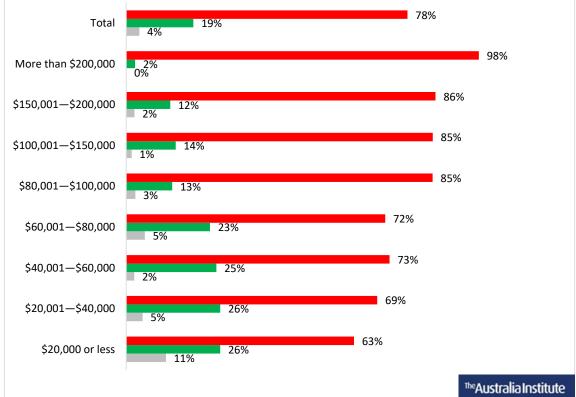
Gift giving

Respondents were asked to what extent they agree or disagree that they like buying gifts for people at Christmas.

- Over three in four Australians (78%) agree that they like buying gifts for people at Christmas.
 - o This is a slight increase from the 74% who agreed when this question was asked in November 2019.
- Higher income earners are the most likely to say they like buying Christmas gifts for people (98% of those earning more than \$200k), which perhaps reflects the fact they have the means to purchase gifts more easily. But a majority of those on lower incomes also like buying gifts for people (63% of those earning \$20,000 or less)

■ Total agree ■ Total disagree ■ Don't know / Not sure 78% Total 98% More than \$200,000

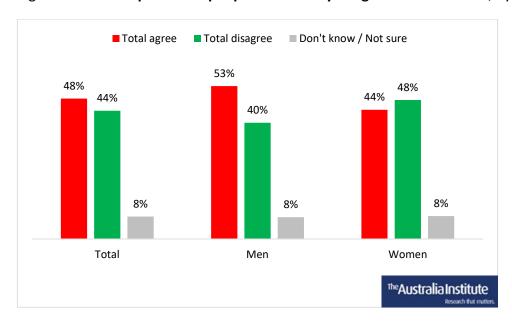
Figure 1: I like buying Christmas gifts for people, by income



Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree that they would prefer it if people did not buy them gifts at Christmas.

- Almost half of Australians (48%) agree that they would prefer it people did not buy them gifts at Christmas (44% disagree).
- Over half of those aged 60 or older (55%) agree that they would prefer it people did not buy them gifts at Christmas, the only age group with majority agreement.
 - o Ages 18–29 = 46%; 30–39 = 46%; 40–49 = 45%; 50–59 = 44%.
- More than half of men (53%) agree that they would prefer it if people did not buy them gifts at Christmas (44% of women agree).

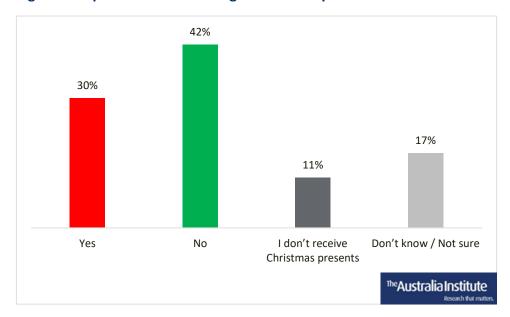
Figure 2: "I would prefer it if people did not buy me gifts at Christmas.", by gender



Respondents were asked if they expected to get Christmas presents this year that they will never use or wear.

- Nine in 10 Australians (89%) receive Christmas presents.
- Three in 10 Australians (30%) expect to get Christmas presents that they will never use or wear.

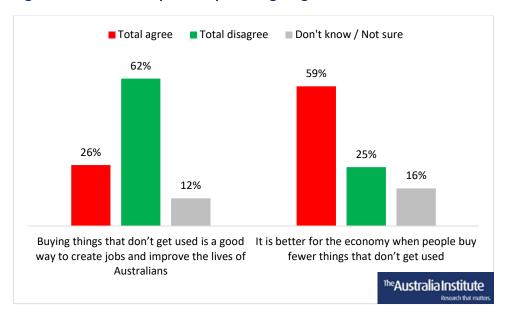
Figure 3: Expectation of receiving a Christmas present I will not use or wear



Respondents were asked about the economic impacts of present giving.

- Three in five Australians (62%) disagree with the statement that 'buying things that don't get used is a good way to create jobs and improve the lives of Australians' (26% agree).
- Three in five Australians (59%) agree that it is better for the economy when people buy fewer things that don't get used (25% disagree).

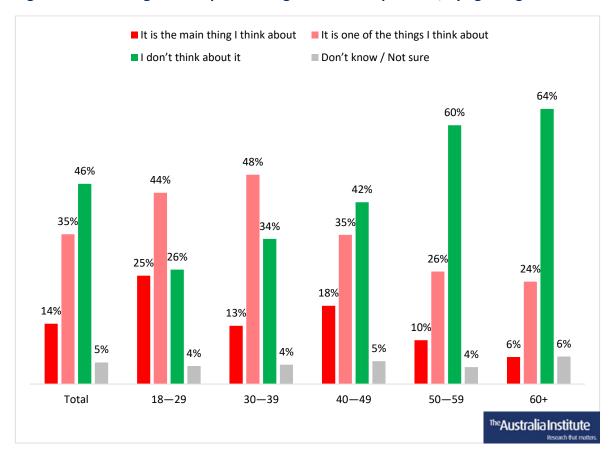
Figure 4: Economic impacts of present giving



Respondents were asked if, when purchasing gifts for others, how much they account for how those gifts would eventually be disposed of?

- Almost half of Australians (46%) don't think about how the gifts they purchase will eventually be disposed of.
 - One in three Australians (35%) say it is one of the things they think about.
 - o 14% say it is the main thing they think about.
- The level of not accounting for disposal when purchasing gifts decreases with age, with one in four (26%) of those aged 18–29 not thinking about disposal, compared to two in three (64%) of those aged sixty or older.
 - Ages 30–39 = 34%; 40–49 = 42%; 50–59 = 60%.

Figure 5: Accounting for how purchased gifts will be disposed of, by age range

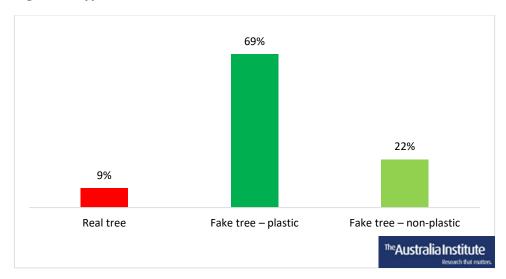


Christmas Trees

Respondents were asked about whether they had a Christmas tree last year and what they did with it after Christmas.

- Three in five Australians (61%) said they had a Christmas tree last year (39% did not have a tree)
- Of those who said they had a Christmas tree last year, seven in 10 (69%) said they had a fake tree made of plastic.
 - o 22% said they had a fake tree made of non-plastic material(s).
 - o 9% said they had a real tree.

Figure 6: Types of Christmas tree



- Of those who said they had a Christmas tree last year, over eight in 10 (85%) said they kept their tree to use next year.
 - 9% said they found a new use for it (gifted or sold, composted, recycled).
 - o 6% said they disposed of their tree after Christmas.

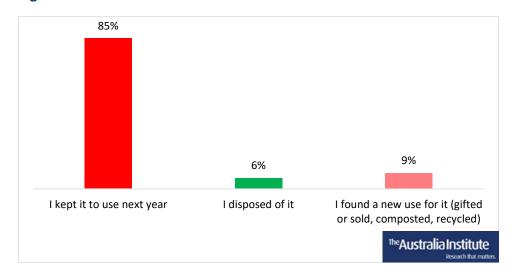


Figure 7: Action taken with Christmas tree after Christmas

Calculations

These polling results show that almost half of Australians (48%) agree that they would prefer it people did not buy them gifts at Christmas.

To calculate the estimated value of unused and unwanted Christmas gifts presented in the Key Results, we assumed that:

- Adults each spend \$388 on presents.⁶
- Of the people who have indicated that they expect to get gifts they would not use or would not wear, not all the gifts are unused, and that 70% (by value) of the gifts they get are used and 30% (by value) are gifts they would not use or would not wear.
- Half of those who were unsure if they would get gifts they would not use or would not wear will get unused gifts, and that the other half do not get unused gifts.
- The adult Australian population is taken from Australian Bureau of Statistics data (child population is excluded as they were not surveyed).
- We have used "receiving presents" as shorthand for "people buy[ing] me gifts at Christmas". However, it is possible that some of the people who receive Christmas gifts receive handmade or otherwise free gifts.

⁶ The Research Society (2023) *Australia's festive cutback: concerns about extra financial demands this Christmas mean curtailed spending*, https://www.researchsociety.com.au/news-item/14070/australias-festive-cutback-concerns-about-extra-financial-demands-this-christmas-mean-curtailed-spending

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to quantify the amount of Christmas waste produced each year, but research from the United Kingdom offers a basis of comparison. With a population of 67 million people, the UK produces over 688,000 tonnes of Christmas waste every year⁷ - and this does not include unwanted or unused gifts. This is 15 times the amount of any other holiday celebration, making Christmas the most wasteful national holiday. Given that Australia has a population is just over 26 million people (or about 25% of the UK's population), it is reasonable to assume that Australia would produce over 275,000 tonnes of Christmas waste a year. With a significant number of countries in the world celebrating Christmas, there is a reason why some environmentalists deem Christmas to be the greatest annual environmental disaster.⁸

Christmas is a special time of year in Australia that sees family and friends come together to celebrate and share in each other's company. Giving gifts remains an important part of our shared cultural traditions. However, putting a little more thought into the gift-giving process will ensure that Christmas giving continues as a sustainable and joyful practice for generations to come.

The joy of gift giving can be experienced in ways that extend beyond consumerism. For those who enjoy giving gifts to friends and family, shifting to a mindset of 'materialism, not consumerism' will go a long way to achieving a more sustainable waste economy during the holiday season. Some suggestions for more sustainable gift-giving include:

- Buying a more substantial gift for one person rather than buying small gifts for everyone.
- Asking people what they want for Christmas to help avoid giving unwanted gifts that are more likely to end up as waste.
- Forgo, or use sustainable alternatives for wrapping paper, such as tote bags or tea towels (which can be reused).

⁷ Challenge Packaging (2021) *Revealed: UK holiday waste statistics (plus top tips to reduce your waste footprint),* https://www.challengepackaging.co.uk/blog/REVEALED-UK-Holiday-Waste-Statistics-Plus-Top-Tips-To-Reduce-Your-Waste-Footprint/

⁸ Haq, Owen, Dawkins & Barrett (2007) The Carbon Cost of Christmas, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263969440_The_Carbon_Cost_of_Christmas; Schaart (2019) How Christmas is ruining the planet, https://www.politico.eu/article/how-christmas-is-ruining-the-planet/

 Buying experiences such as trips to the day spa, tickets to a concert, or taking someone out for dinner.⁹

When it comes to Christmas trees, the most sustainable approach is to have a potted tree in your garden which you can bring indoors during the holiday period. ¹⁰ Real Christmas trees also have the benefits of being biodegradable and having a lower carbon footprint because they aren't transported as far. ¹¹ If you must use a fake tree, try to either buy one second hand, or ensure that you buy a high-quality tree that will last at least 10 years. ¹² Following these suggestions will lead to less waste ending up in landfill, while not precluding you from enjoying the joy of gift giving around the tree come Christmas time.

⁹ Lewin (2022) *'Start with your gift choice': How to have a sustainable Christmas*, https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/start-with-your-gift-choice-how-to-have-a-sustainable-christmas-20221205-p5c3uo.html

¹⁰ Lewin (2022) 'Start with your gift choice': How to have a sustainable Christmas

¹¹ Jessop (2022) *Christmas Pollution: Why is it important to have an eco-friendly Christmas?*, https://commercialwaste.trade/the-true-cost-of-christmas/

¹² Lewin (2022) 'Start with your gift choice': How to have a sustainable Christmas

APPENDIX

Method

Between 31 October and 3 November 2023, The Australia Institute surveyed 1,002 adults living in Australia, online through Dynata's panel, with nationally representative samples by gender, age group and state/territory. A further 377 South Australians were sampled to produce more precise results, but weighting was used to ensure that people from this state were not over-represented in national results.

Voting crosstabs show voting intentions for the House of Representatives. Those who were undecided were asked which way they were leaning; these leanings are included in voting intention crosstabs.

The research is compliant with the Australian Polling Council Quality Mark standards. The long methodology disclosure statement follows.

Long disclosure statement

The results were weighted by three variables (gender, age group and state or territory) based on Australian Bureau of Statistics "National, state and territory population" data, using the raking method. Those who answered the gender identity question as "Non-binary", "I use a different term", or "Prefer not to answer" had their responses included with females for the purpose of reporting, due to constraints from weighting data availability. This resulted in an effective sample size of 1,059.

The margin of error (95% confidence level) for the national results is $\pm 3\%$.

Results are shown only for larger states.

Voting intention questions appeared just after the initial demographic questions, before policy questions. Lower house voting intention was asked first, followed by upper house voting intention. Respondents who answered "Don't know / Not sure" for voting intention were then asked a leaning question; these leanings are included in voting intention crosstabs. "Coalition" includes separate responses for Liberal and National. "Other" refers to Independent/Other, and minor parties in cases where they were included in the voting intention but represent too small a sample to be reported separately in the crosstabs.



Detailed results

No preceding questions in the poll are expected to have influenced the results of the questions published here.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?

"I like buying gifts for people at Christmas."

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Strongly agree	32%	26%	38%	32%	27%	30%	34%
Agree	46%	48%	44%	46%	52%	48%	36%
Disagree	13%	16%	10%	13%	13%	14%	15%
Strongly disagree	5%	6%	5%	5%	5%	3%	10%
Don't know / Not sure	4%	4%	3%	4%	2%	5%	5%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Strongly agree	32%	36%	33%	30%	34%	15%
Agree	46%	47%	44%	51%	40%	44%
Disagree	13%	10%	17%	10%	10%	17%
Strongly disagree	5%	5%	4%	5%	14%	10%
Don't know / Not sure	4%	2%	3%	3%	2%	13%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50-59	60+
Strongly agree	32%	46%	41%	33%	29%	17%
Agree	46%	42%	38%	46%	52%	50%
Disagree	13%	5%	9%	13%	13%	21%
Strongly disagree	5%	4%	7%	7%	3%	6%
Don't know / Not sure	4%	3%	4%	1%	2%	6%

	Total	\$20k or less	\$20k– \$40k	\$40k- \$60k	\$60k- \$80k	\$80k- \$100k	\$100k- \$150k	\$150k- \$200k	More than \$200k
Strongly	32%	24%	23%	25%	30%	38%	39%	34%	57%
agree									
Agree	46%	39%	46%	47%	42%	47%	45%	52%	40%
Disagree	13%	18%	19%	15%	15%	9%	9%	12%	2%
Strongly	5%	8%	7%	10%	8%	3%	5%	0%	0%
disagree									
Don't	4%	11%	5%	2%	5%	3%	1%	2%	0%
know /									
Not sure									

" I would prefer it if people did not buy me gifts at Christmas."

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Strongly agree	19%	21%	17%	18%	16%	19%	21%
Agree	29%	31%	27%	29%	27%	31%	28%
Disagree	30%	28%	33%	29%	35%	31%	27%
Strongly disagree	14%	12%	15%	12%	15%	13%	17%
Don't know / Not sure	8%	8%	8%	11%	6%	6%	7%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Strongly agree	19%	21%	17%	20%	16%	22%
Agree	29%	28%	31%	26%	29%	28%
Disagree	30%	32%	31%	29%	32%	23%
Strongly disagree	14%	12%	14%	19%	19%	12%
Don't know / Not sure	8%	7%	8%	7%	5%	15%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Strongly agree	19%	25%	21%	16%	13%	20%
Agree	29%	21%	25%	29%	31%	36%
Disagree	30%	28%	31%	36%	30%	29%
Strongly disagree	14%	20%	16%	12%	16%	8%
Don't know / Not sure	8%	7%	7%	7%	10%	8%

This year do you expect to get Christmas presents that you will never use or wear?

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Yes	30%	32%	27%	29%	29%	27%	28%
No	42%	39%	44%	38%	42%	46%	50%
I don't receive	11%	12%	11%	12%	10%	10%	13%
Christmas presents							
Don't know / Not sure	17%	16%	18%	20%	19%	17%	10%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Yes	30%	34%	31%	27%	18%	18%
No	42%	39%	43%	48%	50%	35%
I don't receive	11%	10%	10%	13%	17%	18%
Christmas presents						
Don't know / Not sure	17%	17%	17%	11%	14%	29%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Yes	30%	41%	37%	35%	25%	17%
No	42%	40%	39%	40%	39%	47%
I don't receive Christmas	11%	7%	11%	8%	13%	16%
presents						
Don't know / Not sure	17%	12%	14%	17%	22%	20%

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?

"Buying things that don't get used is a good way to create jobs and improve the lives of Australians."

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Strongly agree	8%	11%	6%	6%	6%	7%	10%
Agree	17%	20%	15%	20%	19%	19%	10%
Disagree	35%	37%	33%	33%	40%	36%	37%
Strongly disagree	27%	22%	32%	27%	26%	30%	28%
Don't know / Not sure	12%	9%	14%	14%	9%	9%	16%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Strongly agree	8%	10%	8%	9%	4%	6%
Agree	17%	20%	16%	22%	8%	12%
Disagree	35%	33%	41%	27%	43%	28%
Strongly disagree	27%	26%	25%	34%	27%	34%
Don't know / Not sure	12%	11%	11%	8%	18%	20%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50-59	60+
Strongly agree	8%	19%	11%	9%	5%	1%
Agree	17%	28%	19%	22%	13%	9%
Disagree	35%	29%	33%	27%	31%	48%
Strongly disagree	27%	15%	23%	28%	35%	34%
Don't know / Not sure	12%	9%	14%	13%	16%	9%

"It is better for the economy when people buy fewer things that don't get used."

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Strongly agree	23%	22%	25%	22%	19%	26%	17%
Agree	36%	35%	37%	38%	39%	31%	44%
Disagree	19%	20%	17%	19%	19%	20%	19%
Strongly disagree	6%	6%	7%	7%	6%	6%	6%
Don't know / Not sure	16%	16%	15%	15%	17%	17%	15%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Strongly agree	23%	26%	21%	27%	12%	19%
Agree	36%	36%	36%	37%	33%	35%
Disagree	19%	19%	21%	12%	25%	14%
Strongly disagree	6%	5%	6%	7%	14%	8%
Don't know / Not sure	16%	14%	15%	17%	16%	24%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Strongly agree	23%	31%	24%	22%	26%	17%
Agree	36%	37%	37%	35%	34%	36%
Disagree	19%	19%	15%	20%	17%	20%
Strongly disagree	6%	5%	7%	5%	5%	8%
Don't know / Not sure	16%	8%	17%	18%	17%	19%

When purchasing gifts for others, how much do you account for how those gifts will eventually be disposed of?

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
It is the main thing I think about	14%	16%	12%	15%	12%	10%	14%
It is one of the things I think about	35%	31%	38%	37%	39%	28%	35%
I don't think about it	46%	48%	45%	44%	44%	56%	47%
Don't know / Not sure	5%	5%	6%	5%	5%	6%	5%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
It is the main thing I	14%	16%	15%	13%	12%	8%
think about	250/	250/	210/	F.00/	200/	2.40/
It is one of the things I think about	35%	35%	31%	50%	20%	34%
	4.00/	450/	E40/	2.40/	600/	4.00/
I don't think about it	46%	45%	51%	34%	60%	46%
Don't know / Not sure	5%	4%	4%	3%	8%	13%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
It is the main thing I think	14%	25%	13%	18%	10%	6%
about						
It is one of the things I	35%	44%	48%	35%	26%	24%
think about						
I don't think about it	46%	26%	34%	42%	60%	64%
Don't know / Not sure	5%	4%	4%	5%	4%	6%

Did you have a Christmas tree last year?

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Yes	61%	59%	63%	64%	58%	61%	57%
No	39%	40%	37%	35%	42%	39%	43%
Don't know / Not sure	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Yes	61%	61%	66%	60%	54%	50%
No	39%	38%	34%	40%	46%	50%
Don't know / Not sure	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Yes	61%	74%	64%	67%	59%	48%
No	39%	26%	36%	32%	40%	52%
Don't know / Not sure	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%

Was your Christmas tree a real tree or a fake tree?

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
Real tree	9%	11%	6%	8%	8%	5%	17%
Fake tree – plastic	69%	67%	71%	62%	70%	76%	76%
Fake tree – non-plastic	22%	22%	22%	28%	22%	18%	7%
Don't know / Not sure	1%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
Real tree	9%	10%	7%	11%	11%	4%
Fake tree – plastic	69%	66%	68%	69%	82%	84%
Fake tree – non-plastic	22%	24%	24%	20%	7%	7%
Don't know / Not sure	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
Real tree	9%	15%	14%	7%	6%	2%
Fake tree – plastic	69%	57%	71%	78%	75%	69%
Fake tree – non-plastic	22%	27%	16%	15%	19%	27%
Don't know / Not sure	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	2%

What did you do with your tree after last Christmas?

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA
I kept it to use next	85%	82%	87%	87%	86%	83%	81%
year							
I disposed of it	6%	7%	5%	4%	6%	6%	7%
I found a new use for	9%	11%	7%	8%	8%	11%	12%
it (gifted or sold,							
composted, recycled)							
Don't know / Not sure	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%

	Total	Labor	Coalition	Greens	One Nation	Other
I kept it to use next	85%	83%	87%	83%	89%	83%
year						
I disposed of it	6%	7%	6%	3%	4%	4%
I found a new use for it	9%	9%	7%	14%	7%	8%
(gifted or sold,						
composted, recycled)						
Don't know / Not sure	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%

	Total	18–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+
I kept it to use next year	85%	78%	77%	87%	87%	96%
I disposed of it	6%	5%	7%	9%	8%	2%
I found a new use for it	9%	17%	16%	4%	4%	1%
(gifted or sold,						
composted, recycled)						
Don't know / Not sure	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%