

What's the proof that "80 percent of indigenous people" support the Voice to Australian parliament?

Oscar Grenfell
8 October 2023

Less than a week out from the October 14 referendum, the campaign to enshrine an indigenous Voice in the Constitution is in a deepening crisis, with all opinion polls showing it is on track for defeat. Proponents of the Yes campaign have responded with increasingly hysterical denunciations of the population, which they accuse of mass racism.

One of the main arguments of the Yes camp in favour of the Voice is its assertion that 80 percent or more of Aboriginal people support the establishment of the indigenous advisory body to parliament. Yes campaign groups and representatives of the Labor government that initiated the referendum continuously cite that figure, not as an estimation, but as an unassailable fact.

But what is their evidence? Very little. In reality, there is no reliable data indicating the level of indigenous support for the Voice.

The assertion of over 80 percent backing for the initiative among Aboriginal people is based on two surveys in January and March.

The first, conducted by Ipsos, found that 80 percent of indigenous respondents indicated they would vote yes. The sample size was small, being just 300 people, with an effective sample size of 181 after weighting used to improve representation.

The second poll, by Yougov, was conducted in March. It had a larger sample at 738 people identifying as indigenous, 83 percent of whom said they would vote yes, with 14 percent indicating a no vote.

There are obvious issues with asserting that these polls constitute irrefutable evidence of mass indigenous support for the Voice. The first is that an opinion poll is not a lifetime contract, locking a respondent into a position they can never alter.

Both surveys were conducted when polling indicated majority support for the Voice across the entire population. Many polls at the time indicated that support to be as high as 65 percent. The Yougov poll found 60 percent support for the Voice when undecided voters were excluded.

All recent polling indicates a massive fall in those levels.

National polls now place support for the Voice at anywhere between 33 percent and 45 percent. The claim that 80 percent of indigenous people support the Voice, based on polling from the beginning of the year, assumes that the drop in support has occurred across all demographics, except for Aboriginal people. Without any supporting evidence, that is a highly dubious contention.

There is also the nature of the polling itself. Both the January and March polls were conducted online. The respondents were "selected from existing panels of people agreeing to take part in surveys."

How likely is it that the most oppressed layers of the indigenous population are on the databases of the major polling corporations and frequently respond to online surveys? Not very. A 2021 report found that in the Northern Territory, which has the highest per capita Aboriginal population in the country, 10 percent of households have no regular access to mobile phones or the internet. Similar issues, though less extreme, exist in remote and regional indigenous communities across the country.

The exclusive reliance of the Yes campaign on two small polls conducted at the beginning of the year also raises suspicions. The Yes campaign has been showered with multi-million dollar donations from major banks, corporations and philanthropic institutions. Surely, with those resources, the Yes campaign could have funded more recent, large scale and representative polling.

A possible answer was provided by the remarks of GetUp! CEO Larissa Baldwin-Roberts to a Yes campaign webinar in early June. Her comments were leaked to the *Australian*, which claimed Baldwin-Roberts told the gathering: "Over 45 percent [of Indigenous Australians] are saying they have heard very little or know nothing about the referendum [and] 25 percent have said they're a No in terms of where they are sitting on the campaign."

Those remarks were made months after the polls which the Yes campaign cites. If accurate, they indicate that up to 70 percent of indigenous people were reporting they knew little or nothing about the referendum, or were planning to vote no.

That is a far cry from the 80 percent in support figure the Yes campaign continually touts.

One aspect of the media coverage of the referendum campaign is a dearth of interviews with broader layers of the indigenous population, especially the most impoverished.

The little that has emerged has painted a far more complicated picture than the Yes campaign presents. Unsurprisingly, when indigenous people have actually been asked by the mainstream media what they think about the Voice, different opinions have emerged. The conception that all indigenous people would have an identical position on a political issue, merely by virtue of their racial background, itself smacks of a paternalistic racialism.

An Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) report last month, for instance, cited “Uncle Frank Doolan, a Wiradjuri elder based in Dubbo,” who indicated he was voting no. Commenting on the official material for the Yes and No camps distributed by the electoral authorities, he stated: “The pamphlets are informative in a sort of white, middle-class way. I know they will mean little or nothing to indigenous people at a grassroots level in regional Australia, let alone in isolated communities out in the desert.”

Another ABC article featured interviews with four indigenous young people from Tasmania. One indicated he would not be supporting yes or no. “A republic where we can have a clean slate ... we don’t need associations to the horribly racist 1901 White Australia policies and the many policies that existed in that colonial era,” he said. Another was voting no, a third was voting yes but said that “the Voice is flawed, very flawed.” The only one of the four indicating a hard yes vote was herself part of the Yes campaign.

On the weekend, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a feature with comments on the Voice from residents of Wilcannia, one of the most impoverished Aboriginal towns in New South Wales. The article was headlined: “Would a Voice help Wilcannia? Elders deliver a resounding yeah, nah,” i.e., no.

Lee Hynch, the chair of the Wilcannia Community Working Party and a member of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, told the *Herald*: “They [the Voice] can’t speak for us, not in a million years.” Hynch stated: “I have seen programs come in, worked, and then they shut it down. Why? Because the government pulled funding. As for the Voice, I don’t see the point in it. What difference is it going to make?” He said: “I just think it is stupid. It is going to divide us again.”

Most strikingly, the article featured the comments of William Murray, a local elder who was Wilcannia’s sole representative at the Uluru Dialogue. That 2017 gathering of handpicked and government-endorsed indigenous leaders issued a statement that became the basis for the Voice.

Murray has disavowed the Dialogue entirely. “Would the Voice mob listen to what us locals want to tell them fellas?” Murray asked. “That is what they have got to get through their

heads. They say they will do this. When they get there they will change their minds and go on to something else.”

Murray added: “Have a look at Wilcannia. F--- all here, is there? If the government was going to do something, they would have done it years ago. I know we Aboriginals have been fighting for our rights and that, but does the Voice say that? The Voice says yeah, we want this, we want that. That is all it is saying. There is no action with the Voice, the way I see it.”

When ordinary Aboriginal people have told the press that they will vote yes, it has invariably been connected to hopes that the establishment of the Voice will improve social conditions. But Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has explicitly stated that one of the key aims of the advisory body, if it is formed, will be to help slash spending on indigenous programs, not increase it.

The responses, limited as they are, underscore the fact that the Voice is a top-down initiative. It was birthed in the corridors of power. To the extent that a layer of indigenous people were involved, they were representatives of a privileged elite, a million miles from the social hardships and grinding poverty afflicting the majority of Aboriginal people, who constitute the most oppressed section of the working class.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, the way forward is not the pro-business racialism represented by the Yes campaign, or the thinly-veiled racist dog-whistling of the official No campaign. Instead, through its campaign for an active boycott of the entire referendum, the SEP is fighting to build an independent movement of the whole working class against poverty, government austerity, war and their source, the capitalist profit system.

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

Authorised by Cheryl Crisp for the Socialist Equality Party, Suite 906, 185 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact