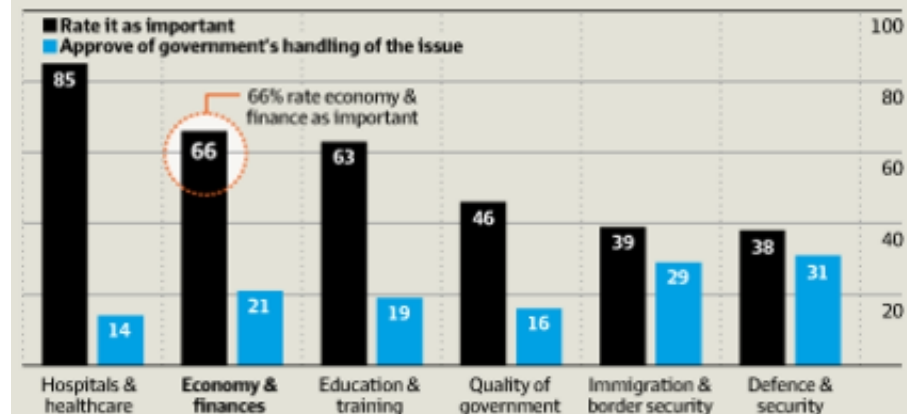


## Forget the debt, it's the cost of living that bothers voters

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### Not getting through

#### Voter attitudes on core issues



#### Breakdown of priorities for those who rate economy & finance as important



Joe Hockey

SOURCE: JWS RESEARCH "TRUE ISSUES" SURVEY. SAMPLE 1005 VOTERS, JUL 24-28, 2014

#### Budget reaction

##### Phillip Coorey Chief political correspondent

Voter concern over the cost of living vastly outweighs that for either fixing debt or deficit, suggesting the government has failed to sell the key aim of its May budget, comprehensive new polling shows.

The six-month True Issues analysis by JWS research found that on the top areas of concern for voters, the government rated poorly in terms of how it was performing. These areas – healthcare and hospitals, the economy, and education and training – have been targeted by contentious budget measures.

The survey canvassed the views of 1005 voters from July 24 to July 28. It asked them what areas of policy they considered most important, whether they approved of the government's handling of these areas, and then broke down each area into specific categories.

The biggest move since the budget came in education and training. Following budget measures that will drive up the cost of a tertiary education, concerns over cost of education and funding were now at the top of this category.

As Treasurer Joe Hockey apologised on Friday for mangling the budget message with his comments about petrol tax and poor people, the poll found that 66 per cent of voters rated economy and finances as one of the most important issues, yet just 21 per cent said the government was doing a good job in this regard. Within this category, 66 per cent listed

#### Key points

- Rather than fixing the debt or balancing the budget, voters are worried about everyday living costs.
- There's rising concern over tertiary education charges.

the cost of living as the most important issue, followed by wages and employment on 31 per cent.

National debt and the budget surplus rated seventh and eight, respectively, and ranked behind petrol prices and housing affordability.

Concern for the surplus was 17 per cent, a level virtually unchanged over past three True Issues surveys stretching back two years.

JWS managing director John Scales said the polling suggested the budget, with its many cuts and tax increases, had only served to ensure cost of living remained a key concern, as it had in previous polls, rather than raise awareness of the need to pay down debt and return to surplus.

“Crucially, ratings of government performance on the economy and finances have not moved since March. Just one in five Australians rate government performance on the economy as good or very good,” Mr Scales said.

“The government has positioned itself as an economic manager and set itself a very clear target to fix the economy, but Australians seem yet to be convinced of the government’s economic management credentials.”

Voters’ views on their own financial outlook was stuck at a low 14 per cent, the same as before the election.

As with the previous True Issues survey, hospitals and healthcare remained the key issue of concern but those who rated the government’s performance as good in this area had slipped from 17 per cent before the budget to 14 per cent, a possible consequence of the budget cuts to health and a planned Medicare co-payment.

The biggest post-budget shifts came in education and training, which at 63 per cent, ranks third as an issue of importance. The percentage of voters who rated the government’s performance as good in this area was 19 per cent. Both these numbers are unchanged since March, but when the category is broken down into specific issues of concern, these is a direct reaction to budget proposals to deregulate universities, cut government funding to the sector and increase the interest rate that applies to student loans. All these will drive up the cost of a degree.

The poll found that within education and training, concern for higher education funding since March jumped from 30 to 38 per cent and concern for the cost of education leapt to the top issue, rising from 33 to 42 per cent.

Of concern to the Coalition, the poll also found the fourth-highest area of importance was quality of government; just 16 per cent rated the government as good in providing this.

The Australian Financial Review

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