



## Research article

## Health voices shaping the climate agenda: how health advocacy influenced Australia's 'climate election'

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## Introduction

Health professionals and health sector organisations are emerging as a significant influence on the climate policy agenda in Australia, with health stakeholder engagement during the country's 2022 federal election a case in point.

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), a national coalition of health stakeholders established in 2010, has led the development of a powerful health sector movement for climate action in Australia. Its model of a stakeholder alliance as an advocacy coalition has been replicated in Ireland, Germany, the United States, as well as through a Global Alliance.

There has been growing public concern on climate change across the Australian population, compared to previous years [1], and consecutive climate-fuelled disasters have hit Australia at an increasing rate [2].

The 2022 election saw significant electoral swings towards political parties and candidates with stronger climate policies. This led to the election of a new labour government, along with a larger representation of the Australian Greens and the election of several pro-climate Independents [3]. This is the most significant shift in climate politics in Australia in the past decade.

These election results were influenced by a range of factors, including a broad grassroots movement from over 50 climate advocacy organisations, calls from the Australian business community, and a coordinated and evidence-informed effort by the health community.

In the 12 months ahead of the Australian federal election, held on 21 May 2022, CAHA contributed to these efforts by building political support for climate and health policies while working within select communities across the country.

So how did this major health alliance contribute to Australia's "climate election"?

CAHA's election campaign consisted of a two-pronged approach; on the one hand, an 'inside-track' around policy engagement, with the goal

of securing political support for ambitious climate and health policy, and, on the other hand, a public campaign on climate and health, with the goal of ensuring that climate change was a visible election issue and had a perceived impact on the outcome of the election.

## A health check of policy commitments

As part of its policy engagement, CAHA evaluated the policies and commitments of major political parties against 17 key climate and health policy questions, by developing a 2022 Federal Election Scorecard.

The questions were based on the policy framework for a national strategy on climate, health and wellbeing for Australia, *Healthy, Regenerative and Just* – a sector-backed comprehensive policy roadmap developed by CAHA in consultation with hundreds of health stakeholders and interdisciplinary experts [4]. It offers one of the most comprehensive roadmaps to action on climate change and health yet produced, and highlights the strong support across the health community for more ambitious climate policies [5].

The policy framework includes 175 policy recommendations across eight critical areas of policy action, spanning multiple portfolios, and outlines actions for federal, state and local governments, business, community, and the health sector [4]. The CAHA Federal Election Scorecard assessed the performance of the political parties across 17 of these recommendations.

Communication materials were produced to highlight some of the results, representing the positions of the Liberal Party of Australia, the Australian labour Party, and the Australian Greens on whether they would commit to:

- A National Strategy on Climate, Health and Wellbeing for Australia;
- Science-based emissions targets of 75% reduction on 2005 levels by 2030;
- Supporting communities to build resilience to climate threats;
- Planning for a decarbonised health sector by 2035;

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- The Uluru Statement from the Heart, the largest ever consensus of Australia's First Nations peoples on a proposal for substantive recognition.

The CAHA Federal Election Scorecard was used as a tool to facilitate direct engagement with political parties and candidates. In February 2022, each political party and candidate was sent a copy of CAHA's *Healthy Regenerative and Just* policy framework, along with a survey on the selected 17 policy recommendations. CAHA analysed survey responses, along with formal public statements, press releases, official website content, or other commitments in writing which were approved by the party or signed by the portfolio holder [6].

The scorecard classified the commitments from each political party on the key policy questions as:

- Committed (green) i.e. an explicit statement of commitment;
- Partly committed (orange) i.e. the party has made an indicative commitment but has no detailed plans or policies;
- Not committed (red) i.e. the party has no related policies or statements that demonstrate their commitment.

The scorecard was distributed to all respondents, all Members of Parliament (MPs), CAHA's network of members and supporters, and to Australian media.

The scorecard supported Australian voters to make informed decisions. Voters could determine which party had the most ambitious climate and health policies, without taking away voters' sense of agency by telling them who to vote for. It also served as a useful tool for direct engagement with political parties, allowing CAHA to repeatedly convey the message to decision-makers that the health community cares about climate action – and that many are likely to vote accordingly.

### Grassroots community organising

As part of its public campaign on climate and health, CAHA coordinated its election efforts with Climate Action Network Australia (CANA), a collaborative network of over 100 climate-focused organisations.

From within CANA sprang a contingent of community-based organisations and citizen groups that worked together in the year preceding the federal election, colloquially known as the 'awesome grassroots' campaign. While CAHA and other health groups in this cohort maintained a focus on the climate and health nexus, other groups had different climate change frames and agendas, and various geographic scopes. The campaign allowed for increased coordination, strategic decision-making, and political engagement on climate policy, including for small-scale community groups with no prior experience in climate campaigning.

To varying degrees, community engagement occurred in suburbs and towns across 120 of Australia's 151 electorates. Efforts of the grassroots campaign were focused on a subsection of 20 electorates, which were selected based on the following criteria:

- Active community groups existed within the electorate (based on a semi-structured mapping exercise).
- The winning candidate for the electorate has won their seat in parliament by a margin of six per cent of the votes or less at the last election (based on data from the Australian Electoral Commission).
- There is high climate sentiment among residents (based on a national survey conducted by YouGov).

The national survey was conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Australian Conservation Foundation on a nationally representative sample ( $n = 15,000$ ) of Australian residents aged 18 years or older [1].

Survey results were analysed using multilevel regression with post-stratification, a statistical technique that combines survey data with electorate-level information from government agencies – such as population density and the proportion of the population with a university degree – along with previous election results [7]. This technique allowed for a more granular understanding of voter sentiment around climate action – according to electorates as well as demographics – and made it possible to organise more targeted campaigns.

The grassroots activities of this broad and diverse group of actors were supported through: approximately 7,110 local and national media stories featuring climate solutions; the distribution of approximately 126,183 unbranded signs calling for "Climate Action Now"; the organisation of approximately 625 community climate events; 198 candidate private meetings; and 38 climate candidate public forums.

CAHA, in partnership with other health groups, primarily focused its climate and health campaigning efforts on a subset of four of the 20 electorates, which were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- The number of health professionals and organisations in CAHA's membership database in each electorate that had indicated a willingness to engage in policy and advocacy efforts (based on CAHA membership data).
- The percentage of voters in each electorate that had indicated through official public opinion polls that climate change and health were voting priorities for them (based on a national survey conducted by YouGov).
- The number and quality of existing policy commitments around climate and health that had been made by political candidates (based on policy analysis conducted by CAHA).

For the four key electorates, CAHA provided 'Meet Your MP' training to health professionals, along with phone coaching and resources to support them in conducting an effective meeting. Working alongside other groups – such as Doctors for the Environment Australia – CAHA co-organised a series of public events in which health was raised as a climate issue. These included: a pop-up 'Climate-Health Clinic' in a public park, where health professionals practised their climate-health communication skills; a health and economy forum; and a mental health and climate change forum.

Other community and climate groups targeted the remaining 16 electorates, while CAHA provided more general support for these electorates through social media campaigning and media publications on the importance of climate change and health in the 2022 federal election.

By deliberately engaging health voices in political advocacy, and by working in close collaboration with other groups, CAHA effectively engaged new and diverse members of the Australian community on the issue of climate change. These campaigning tactics ensured that action on climate change was a visible election issue, and would require a proportionate political response from whoever was elected to govern.

By working together, climate and health groups in Australia made it clear to all political parties that the large majority of people want more ambitious and effective climate policies.

The results of this collaboration were astounding: 18 of the 20 key electorates of the grassroots campaign saw a swing of votes, and elected the more climate friendly candidates and parties. In each of the four electorates where CAHA elevated health voices in the context of climate change, a more climate-friendly party was elected.

### The outcome

Across the country, the Australian Greens gained a record number of parliamentarians and senators, nine independent candidates were

elected on strong climate action platforms, and the Australian labour Party was elected to govern with a majority of lower house seats on a platform which includes various climate commitments.

The Australian labour Party, Australian Greens, and four independent MPs also endorsed CAHA's *Healthy Regenerative and Just* policy framework, and committed to implement a national strategy on climate, health and well-being if elected.

This election campaign - featuring policy engagement, analysis and community organising - gave health organisations and individuals the opportunity to demonstrate why they care about climate action and what solutions they want elected representatives to deliver.

People across Australia responded, and demanded climate solutions for a safe and healthy future. The 2022 federal election turned out to be Australia's "climate election". Official polling of 97,159 respondents indicated climate change as the most important issue in the 2022 federal election (29% of respondents), followed by cost of living (13%) and the economy (13%) [8].

However, it is not possible to directly attribute the results of the 2022 federal election to this election campaign centred around climate action, nor to the health-specific actions undertaken by CAHA and other health groups. It is likely that many other factors have played a role in the final election results. Nonetheless, this coordinated campaign did make a substantial difference in voting outcomes - as evidenced by the fact that 18 of the 20 targeted electorates saw a significant swing of votes towards more climate friendly candidates and parties.

As a coalition of health organisations, CAHA learned some valuable lessons from the 2022 election campaign; the health community can improve its impact on climate action by collaborating with a broad coalition of allied climate organisations, while it can also strengthen political engagement by strategically presenting evidence-based communications to decision-makers.

CAHA will continue to activate and mobilise health groups on climate action, and work with the health community and other sectors to support the federal government to deliver Australia's first ever national strategy on climate, health and wellbeing.

### Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: The Climate and Health Alliance reports a relationship with the

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CAHA recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work and acknowledge that sovereignty of the land we call Australia has never been ceded. We commit to listening to and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about how we can better reflect Indigenous ways of being and knowing in our work.

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### Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:[10.1016/j.joclim.2022.100175](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2022.100175).

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