

Majority of Singaporeans prioritise environmental protection over economic growth: IPS study

Nabilah Awang

TODAY, 03 Feb 2021

SINGAPORE — More than three in five Singaporean respondents in a study released on Wednesday (Feb 3) believe that protecting the environment should be prioritised over economic growth. Younger, more educated and more affluent respondents were more likely to feel this way.

The Institute of Policy Studies study, entitled “Our Singaporean Values”, sought the views of 2,012 Singaporeans as part of the latest instalment of the World Values Survey, which is conducted once every several years.

The latest iteration asked people from 80 countries about their thoughts on a wide range of issues, including politics, attitudes towards work and family, and gender equality.

The findings were divided into seven key areas, which include individual priorities, family and gender, and economy and employment.

TODAY looks at some of the key findings.

ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT

- Regarding economic issues, respondents were asked questions on matters of foreign labour, income distribution, the degree of government interference in business as well as whether environmental protection should be compromised for economic growth.
- Respondents had a strong regard for market competition but also preferred some elements of government protection
- Singaporeans have become more environmentally conscious. A majority, or 60.8 per cent of those surveyed, felt that protecting the environment should be prioritised even if it results in slower economic growth and some loss of jobs
- This is a jump from previous studies conducted in 2012 and 2002, where 43.3 per cent and 30.8 per cent of respondents respectively expressed that view
- Sentiments on the issue here were similar to those in Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom while respondents in China, Australia, Switzerland and Sweden placed even more emphasis on environmental protection
- Younger Singaporean respondents, particularly those aged between 21 and 35, showed a greater awareness of environmental protection
- Respondents with higher education qualifications were also more likely to prioritise environmental protection
- Respondents were more likely to prefer incentivising individual efforts as opposed to ensuring more equal incomes for all

- But they were also more likely to prefer that the Government, rather than individuals, be responsible for ensuring that all people are provided for
- Close to 80 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they should be prioritised over immigrants when jobs are scarce
- Attitudes on this issue have bounced around – in 2012, 69.5 per cent agreed with the statement, while the figure was 87.4 per cent in 2002

INDIVIDUAL PRIORITIES

- Singaporeans were asked to indicate how much they value areas such as family, friends, leisure time, work, religion and politics in their lives.
- Respondents were most likely to consider family as “very important” compared to other social groups with whom they interact
- The perceived importance of work has declined from 2002 to 2020
- The levels of importance of work, wealth and politics among respondents were found to be correlated with one another
- Less affluent respondents were also more likely to prioritise wealth over leisure, while their more privileged counterparts prioritised leisure over wealth
- Most Singaporean respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that one of their main goals in life is to make their parents proud, among the highest levels of support for this proposition among the countries surveyed
- Youth and single respondents are most likely to see leisure time as “very important” in their lives though these perceptions erode substantially with marriage and age

FAMILY AND GENDER

- The study surveyed Singaporeans’ views on traditional gender roles and stereotypes. It sought to understand what values Singaporeans want to instil in the younger generation, especially in areas of family structure and gender equality.
- Just under half of Singapore respondents felt that having children is a societal duty
- This proportion places Singapore in the middle of the pack relative to a number of other Asian societies
- In China, the figure was 73.8 per cent while in Japan it was just 28.5 per cent
- Fewer than 20 per cent of respondents from countries outside Asia, such as Australia, the United States and the UK, felt having children is a societal duty
- Four out of five Singapore respondents agreed that it is the duty of adult children to care for their parents over the long-term — this proportion was among the highest among the Asian countries
- Just under two-thirds of Singapore respondents disagreed with the notion that children will suffer if their mothers are working or employed
- Over a quarter of Singapore respondents agreed or strongly agreed that homosexual parents are just as good as other couples — but this proportion was low compared to most other societies globally

- The majority of respondents disagreed that men are better leaders in politics or business, or that university education is more important for men; but agreed that being a housewife is just as fulfilling as salaried work
- Similarly, over half of respondents disagreed that men should be prioritised over women for hiring in a jobs-scarce climate, and that problems would arise if wives earn more than husbands

STATE AND SOCIETY

- The study also polled Singaporeans on a broad range of societal issues, such as national priorities, law and justice, values of freedom, equality and security, and opinions on social change and revolution. This was done to understand what the current population values in society.
- Respondents were most likely to feel that pursuing high economic growth and ensuring strong national defence forces are top priorities, when compared to encouraging more citizen participation and beautifying the environment
- Maintaining order emerged as the clear priority for most respondents, while giving people more say in policy making and fighting rising prices were the next most important priorities
- Though most indicated a stable economy as a top priority, with over 80 per cent choosing it as either their first or second choice, a significant proportion here viewed a “less impersonal and more humane society” as important
- The economy was deemed to be important across societies such as Malaysia, China and the US
- The fight against crime was the lowest priority by Singapore respondents compared with a stable economy, a less impersonal and more humane society and progress towards a society in which ideas count more than money
- Younger, more educated and more affluent respondents were more likely to prefer a justice system where the law is obeyed, albeit with concessions for special cases
- However, fewer than half of the respondents above 65 took that view
- Singapore respondents were somewhat more likely to prioritise equality over freedom, although responses here were more divided than those in other countries
- Over three-quarters of Singapore respondents valued security over freedom, in tandem with most Asian societies
- Most respondents viewed technological change as positive but were equally divided on whether placing less importance on work is a good or bad thing
- Respondents who were younger, had higher income, higher educational qualifications, or lived in larger housing types were more likely to see making their lives being less centred on work as a good thing