

WHAT WE REALLY THINK



Politicians may pronounce global warming the greatest moral dilemma of our time, but ask everyday Aussies what they really think is important and the answers may surprise.

A study from the Anatomy of Civil Societies Research Project at UTS has shown Australians value local issues over global concerns, and that Australian society is significantly more conservative than many of us may be willing to admit.

Led by UTS Business School's Professor of Strategy Timothy Devinney, the study, titled 'What Matters to Australians: Our Social, Political and Economic Values', is funded by the Australian Research Council. It studied over 1500 Australians in 2007 and 2011 and their reaction to issues of salience, or importance, in their everyday lives.

The top three concerns of Australian people were food and health, local crime and public safety, and rights to basic services. Global issues like environmental sustainability and international security appeared only as middling importance on the list of issues about which respondents felt concern.

The outcomes of the study provide a fascinating snapshot of Australian society which, despite a reputation for being a fun-loving, laid back nation, is actually a fairly conservative society with an eye for issues that are close to home.

"It's conservative in the sense that the things that matter are closer to the individual. The saying goes all politics are local and that is seen in these results – most of the issues people are concerned with are local issues," explains Devinney.

The study uses a unique variant of best/worst scaling, a choice measurement method. It asks participants to make simple choices amongst groups of options, allowing for better estimation of trade-offs. It has significant advantages when compared to traditional polling or surveying methods, particularly in the case of emotive social issues.

"When we were testing the study methodology, one of the things we did was to ask a panel of 400 people to use our best/worst instrument to answer a series of questions, and then to complete some surveys based on rankings and ratings," says Devinney.

What the team found was that typical polling methods were uninformative – respondents claimed all the listed issues mattered to them, without being able to effectively determine which mattered more than the others.

"With a traditional polling method, if I came to you and said, 'Do you care about the environment?' you'd say, 'Of course I care about the environment'. But if I then came to you and said, 'You have a choice – the choice is that we can cut back a bit on your children's schooling, say \$50 a child, and we can put that money into a subsidy for solar

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energy, or we can forget about the subsidy and keep the money in schools. What do you think?'; you are now forced to think about which of the two options you value more; and that's when we begin to see where people's priorities really lie."

The participants in the study were a representative sample of Australians over the age of 18. The study sought to capture information about their voting and political activities, religious beliefs and practices, and donating and volunteering practices, as well as information about their general and life satisfaction.

"What we found was that there was very little variety in preference across the demographic spectrum in terms of the issues people identified as being salient to them. Where people are normally expecting to see a difference in the attitudes of rich and poor, male and female, and young and old people, there was actually very little variation," says Devinney.

"It was interesting to note Australians, as a whole, are probably much more like-minded than they might think when it comes to identifying issues they see as being critical to their lives and wellbeing."

The findings were also consistent across international samples in Germany, the UK and the USA that were examined as part of the same study.

"The consistency across countries is pretty high. What's at the top, what's at the bottom of the list of salient issues is pretty similar across countries."

The research outcomes hold particular relevance for politicians and policy makers who are regularly swayed by public opinion polls that may not provide accurate information.

"Every politician in any country where there is even moderately thriving democracy is poll-paranoid. What they want to know is what really matters to their constituents," Devinney says.

"So the use of polling instruments that are inaccurate in some ways creates a serious problem in terms of making policy based on those poll results. You want to give the policy makers valuable, legitimate information.

"For example, one of the most critical outcomes from this study was the Australian attitude towards environmental issues. Despite numerous public opinion polls showing strong support, our study showed these issues have actually taken a significant fall in terms of how highly they are valued.

"This is important because as a politician, you want to create a portfolio of things in which the government should be active because the population is interested in these things."

The study was launched in Melbourne at the State Library of Victoria on 3 May, and at the UTS Aerial Function Centre on 4 May. International results will be released later in the year.

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