

International Social Survey Programme

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) involves leading academic institutions in 40 countries in an annual survey of economic and social policy issues. New Zealand is represented in the ISSP by Massey University. Each year the ISSP member countries carry out a 30-minute survey using the same questionnaire. The data from these surveys are deposited in central archives in Cologne and Madrid where they are freely available to all members. This collection of data enables researchers to examine similarities and differences between countries, and to monitor changes over time.

The ISSP addresses a different topic each year in a roughly seven-year cycle. Previous topics have included the roles of men and women in society, social networks, social equality, citizenship, work orientation, the environment, national identity and religion. In 2006, the fifteenth year New Zealand has been involved in the ISSP, the topic was The Role of Government, a replication of a similar survey concluded in 1997.

Survey Details

Between August and October 2006, a nationwide mail survey was conducted of 2250 people aged 18 and over, randomly selected from the New Zealand Electoral Roll. The survey produced 1200 valid responses, an effective response rate of 60%. A sample of this size has a maximum error margin at the 95% confidence level of approximately plus or minus 3%. The survey data were weighted so that the age-sex distribution of the sample matched that of the New Zealand population.

The Role of Government

More than 90% of New Zealanders believe it should be the government's responsibility to provide health care for the sick, to provide a decent standard of living for the old and to impose strict laws to make industry do less damage to the environment (see Figure 1).

A large majority of New Zealanders also think the government should provide industry with the help it needs to grow (85%), give financial help to university students from low income families (80%), keep prices under control (75%) and provide decent housing for those who cannot afford it (70%). However, while 50% of respondents believe the government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed and reduce income differences between the rich and the poor, only 40% think it is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one.

Compared to 1997, the main difference in New Zealanders' attitudes to the role of government

is a sharp decline in the proportion who think the government should provide a job for everyone who wants one. This almost certainly reflects the fact that the unemployment rate was at a historically low level in 2006. Apart from this, perceptions of the role of government have changed relatively little over the last ten years.

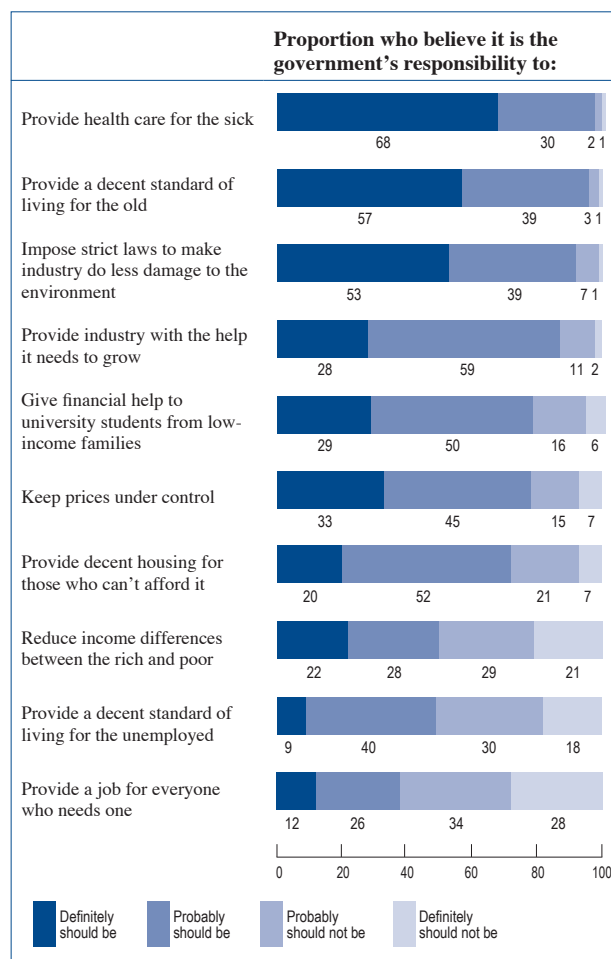


Figure 1 – The Role of Government

About half of those surveyed believe the government has been successful in protecting the environment, fighting unemployment and dealing with threats to New Zealand's security; 40% have the same view of the government's performance in providing a decent standard of living for the old and providing health care for the sick, but only 25% consider the government has been successful in controlling crime. In all of these areas around 35% of respondents were noncommittal, but 30% rated the government's performance in providing health care for the sick as unsuccessful, and more than 40% felt the same about its performance in fighting crime (see Figure 2).

Expectations of the economic intervention role of the government have also remained relatively stable over the last decade. Most of those surveyed (90%) were in

favour of government support for industry to develop new products and technology, 75% were in favour of government financing of projects to create new jobs and 60% endorsed less government regulation of business. By contrast, only 45% of respondents were in favour of government support for declining industries to protect jobs, and only 25% were in favour of reducing the working week to create more jobs.

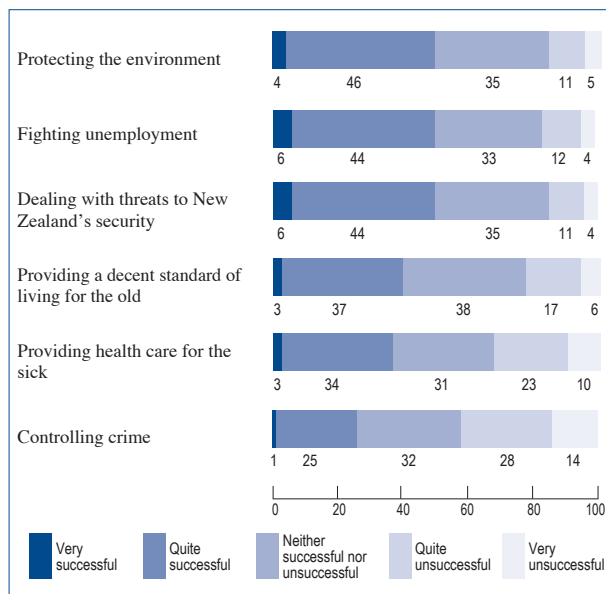


Figure 2 – The Government's Performance

Government Spending and Taxes

In general, most New Zealanders (60%) are in favour of cuts in government spending, but in specific areas there are marked differences in support for more or less government spending. Areas in which most respondents would like to see more government spending are health (85%), education (70%), the police and law enforcement (65%) and old age pensions (55%); a significant proportion (40%) were also in favour of more government spending on the environment. Conversely, around 60% of those surveyed would like to see less government spending on unemployment benefits, and 45% were in favour of less government spending on culture and the arts. Opinions on more or less government spending on the military and defence were equally balanced, with half of respondents agreeing that expenditure should remain the same as it is now (see Figure 3).

Compared to 1997, the proportion of respondents in favour of cuts in government spending is lower (60% vs 70%), but the pattern of support for increases or decreases in government expenditure in different areas is similar. Health, education and the police and law enforcement are still the three main areas in which most New Zealanders would like to see increases in government spending; the military and defence, culture and the arts and unemployment benefits are still the areas in which most New Zealanders would either like less government expenditure or for the expenditure to remain at current levels. The biggest change in opinion since 1997 has been in the area of

unemployment benefits, with a majority now in favour of less government expenditure in this area.

There is a strong perception among New Zealanders that low income and middle-income earners are over-taxed (taking into account all taxes, including income and GST). Around 35% of respondents consider taxes for those with low income are about right, but 65% believe they are too high. Less than 30% of those surveyed believe taxes for those with middle incomes are about right; while 70% regard them as too high. For high-income earners, 35% of respondents believe taxes are about right, 50% that they are too high and 15% that they are too low. Since 1997 there has been an increase in the proportion of New Zealanders describing taxes as too high, regardless of the income level concerned. However, this perception that income earners are over-taxed has increased most sharply for middle-income earners. This reflects the “bracket creep” many middle income earners have experienced as inflation has pushed their salaries and wages into high tax brackets.

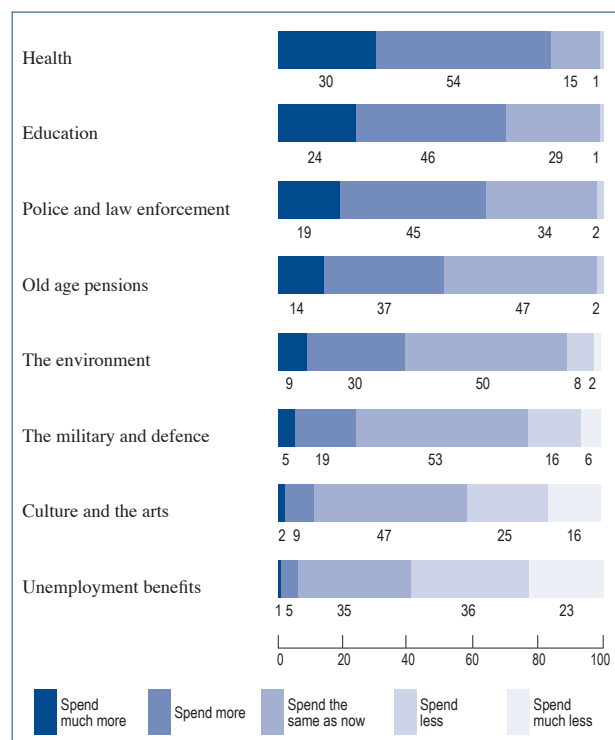


Figure 3 – Government Spending

The Political System

There is some evidence that a decade of MMP elections has increased New Zealanders' satisfaction with the country's political system (or, more correctly, reduced their dissatisfaction). Forty five percent of those surveyed disagree that people we elect as MPs try to keep the promises they have made during the elections, and 35% disagree that most public servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country. But these levels of disagreement are between 5% and 10% lower than they were in 1997. Similarly, the proportion of New Zealanders who believe they don't have a say about what the government does has fallen from 60% to 50% in the last ten years, and the

proportion who believe the average citizen has little influence on politics has fallen by around the same amount (from 65% to 58%). Nevertheless, perceptions of disenfranchisement remain relatively high.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the widespread feeling that ordinary people have little influence over the way the government works, New Zealanders generally have liberal views on actions designed to challenge the government. The large majority of respondents (95%) believe organising public meetings to protest against the government should be allowed, 85% also believe protest marches and demonstrations against the government should be permitted, and 45% would condone a nationwide strike against the government (though 55% do not believe it should be allowed). Even when people with extreme views want to overthrow the government by revolution, 75% of New Zealanders believe such people should be allowed to publish books expressing their views, and 65% believe they should be able to hold public meetings to express their views.

Concerns about terrorism are reflected in widespread support for measures that might be employed if the government suspected a terrorist act was about to happen. Three quarters of those surveyed thought the authorities should have the right to tap people's telephone conversations in these circumstances, 60% thought the authorities should be able to detain people for as long as they want without putting them on trial and 55% considered that stopping and searching people in the street at random should be allowed.

New Zealand is generally regarded as free from the sorts of corruption that characterise a number of other countries. This view is supported by the finding that 70% of respondents had never come across a public official who hinted they wanted, or asked for, a bribe or favour in return for a service. However, there is an equally strong perception that the treatment people get from public officials in New Zealand probably depends on who they know, and around 15% of those surveyed believe that quite a lot of politicians and public officials are involved in corruption.

The Government and Health Issues

Concerns about the effects of smoking, binge drinking and the consumption of unhealthy foods have led to calls for more government intervention in all these areas. The Smoke-free Environments Act already bans smoking in bars, restaurants, offices and other public places; however, nearly half of respondents supported the banning of smoking in all public places, including parks, sports fields and in the streets (see Figure 4). Most of those surveyed also supported more funding for campaigns encouraging smokers to quit (65%) and raising the tobacco tax so the price of cigarettes would increase by \$1.50 a packet (55%), but only 40% supported a complete ban on the production, manufacture and sale of cigarettes and tobacco in New Zealand or allowing smokeless

tobacco (Swedish oral snuff) to be sold alongside cigarettes (30% support).

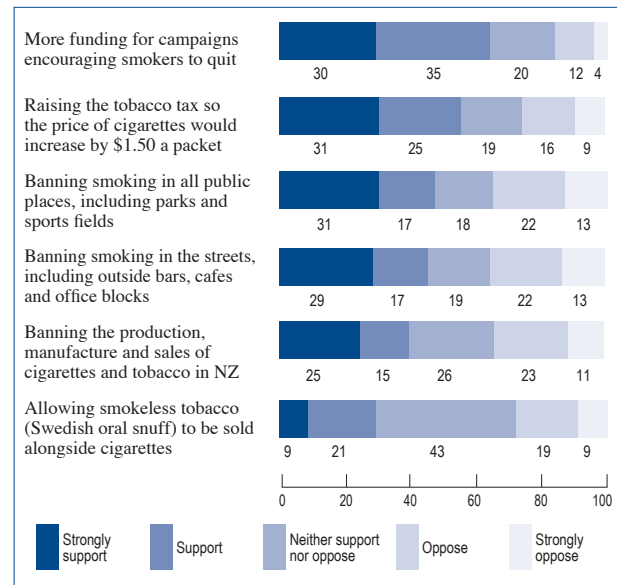


Figure 4 – Measures to Reduce Tobacco Consumption

In general, New Zealanders are less supportive of bans involving alcohol than they are of bans involving tobacco. Between 35% and 45% of respondents supported the banning of alcohol advertising on television, alcohol sponsorship of sporting events, and the sale of cheap 'alcopop' drinks favoured by young drinkers (see Figure 5).

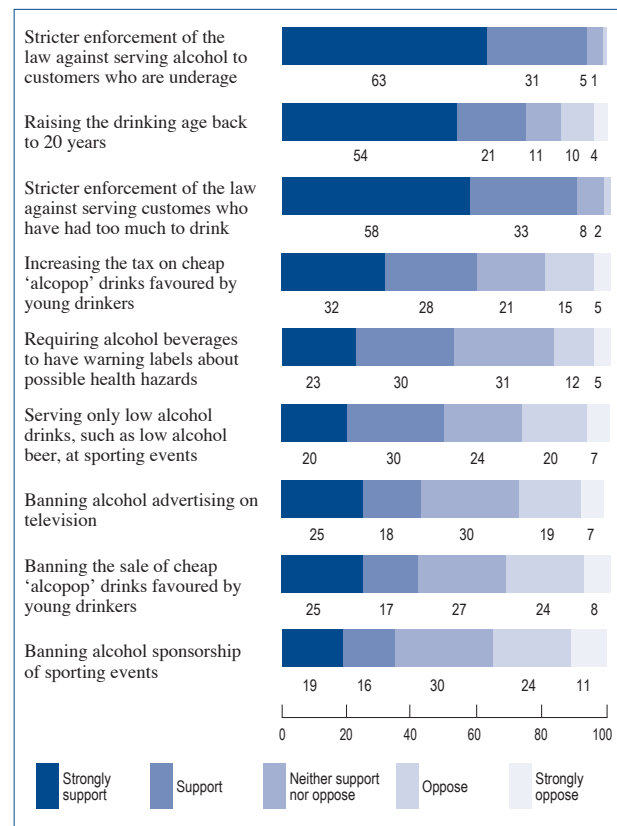


Figure 5 – Measures to Reduce Alcohol Use

By contrast, stricter enforcement of the laws against serving alcohol to underage customers or to customers

who have had too much to drink were supported by over 90% of those surveyed, and 75% supported raising the drinking age back to 20 years. Support for other measures to reduce alcohol consumption ranged from 60% support for increasing the tax on cheap ‘alcopops’ favoured by young drinkers, to 55% for requiring alcoholic beverages to have warning labels about possible health hazards, to 50% support for serving low alcohol drinks only, such as low alcohol beer, at sporting events.

Major concerns about the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ are reflected in New Zealanders’ willingness to support a variety of measures designed to reduce the consumption of unhealthy foods - food high in fat, sugar and salt - and increase the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. Among those surveyed there were very high levels of support (around 85%) for removing GST on fruit and vegetables and for providing free fruit to primary school children; and 75% were in favour of banning the sale of food high in fat, salt and sugar in school tuck shops, cafeterias and vending machines (see Figure 6).

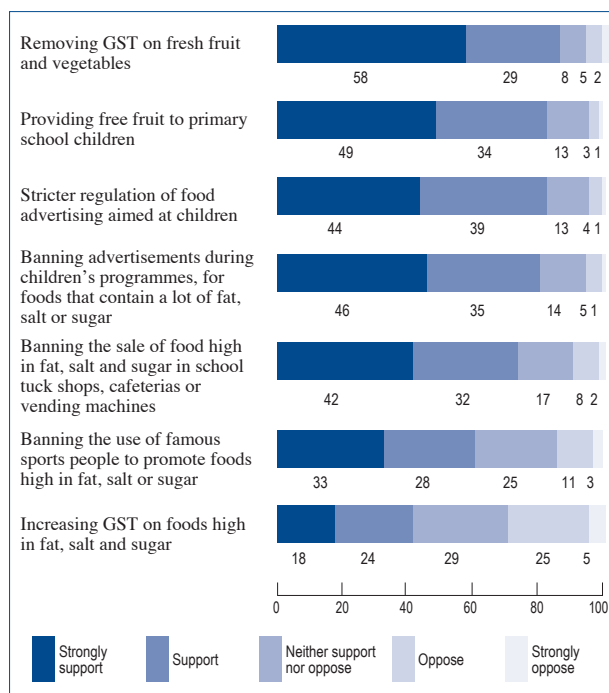


Figure 6 – Measures to Reduce Obesity

Most New Zealanders (65%) believe food advertising needs more regulating; 25% believe there is no need for more regulations and 10% are undecided. However, support for stricter regulation of food advertising aimed at children and banning advertisements during children’s programmes, for foods that contain a lot of fat, salt and sugar, is over 80%. Banning the use of famous sports people (who may be role models to children) was supported by 60% of respondents. If food advertising were to be more regulated, most people (70%) believe this should be the responsibility of the Ministry of Health; 20% believe the advertising industry should be responsible and 10% believe it should be the government’s responsibility.

Conclusions

Perceptions of the role of government have changed relatively little over the last ten years, except for a sharp decline in the expectation that the government should provide a job for everyone who wants one. While most people are in favour of cuts in government spending, there is strong support for increased government spending in health, education, the police and law enforcement. These priorities reflect relatively low ratings of the current government’s performance in providing health care and fighting crime compared to its performance in protecting the environment, fighting unemployment and ensuring New Zealand’s security. The other major source of dissatisfaction with government policy is taxation. The belief that low-income and middle income earners pay too much tax is widespread among New Zealanders and has increased since 1997, particularly for those earning middle incomes.

The introduction of MMP appears to have reduced New Zealanders’ dissatisfaction with the country’s political system; though the feeling that ordinary people have little influence over the government remains widespread. New Zealanders are tolerant of demonstrations of dissent against the government, but support the use of measures that might infringe individual rights if this is a price that has to be paid to prevent terrorism.

Concerns about smoking, drinking and obesity are manifested in support for a range of interventions designed to reduce the undesirable effects of cigarettes, alcohol and unhealthy food. There is support for extending the ban on smoking to include all public places, for stricter enforcement of existing liquor laws and for raising the drinking age back to 20, for removing GST on fruit and vegetables, and for more regulation of food advertising, particularly of advertising to children. However, if food advertising is to be regulated, this is regarded as something the Ministry of Health rather than the government should be responsible for.

About the Authors

Members of the University Department of Marketing involved in this survey were: Professor Philip Gendall (Professor of Marketing), Vivien Michaels and Catherine Pegg (Research Assistants).

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Access to data from previous ISSP surveys conducted in New Zealand: Religion, 1991 and 1998; Social Inequality, 1992 and 1999; The Environment, 1993 and 2000; The Roles of Men and Women in Society, 1994 and 2002; National Identity, 1996 and 2003; The Role of Government and Work Orientation, 1997; Social Networks, 2001; Citizenship, 2004; Work Orientation, 2005; is available through the Department of Marketing, Massey University.