

How many Singaporeans should there be? How population planning played in the city-state's election

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Singapore's recent election saw a controversy over the unique challenge of population planning: whether the incumbent party would move to increase the city-state's population, straining limited land resources and presenting an urban planning dilemma.

By [Skylar Lindsay](#)

"The government has not proposed, planned nor targeted for Singapore to increase its population to 10 million," the Singaporean government wrote in a [statement](#) in early July.

The idea population is something a government could propose to increase or decrease—that population growth could be intentional—seems bizarre at first. But in Singapore, this month's election has brought intense political [debate](#) around population planning.

In early July, the country held a general election—all voting took place in person, but campaigning in the lead-up to the vote was [entirely online](#).

The People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore since 1959 and never lost an election, won 61% of votes and took 83 out of 93 seats in Parliament. But the win still showed a decline in support for the ruling party compared to previous elections.

During the run-up to the election, two of the opposition parties—the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and People's Voice Party—[claimed](#) that the government was planning to increase the country's population to 10 million, from its current 5.6 million.

The SDP actually included a rejection of the population increase in its campaign slogan: "Four Yes, One No", the "no" being to a population of 10 million. The PAP denied that there was any such plan, saying the population will remain below 6.9 million until at least 2030.

But the opposition's tactic appears to have worked: [surveys](#) by Singaporean media showed that one reason young voters moved to support the opposition was their promises to reduce immigration.

"The [election] results indicate a tentative generational shift," [said](#) Eugene Tan, a former nominated member of Parliament. "Unless the PAP responds with humility and empathy, one-party dominance will wither."

In the densely-packed city-state, population can quickly affect people's

quality of life. Singapore currently has [7,866 people](#) per square kilometer, making it the fourth-densest city in Southeast Asia after Manila, Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City.

With Singapore's limited land and resources, population is a highly political issue—a jump to 10 million people would mean a [30% increase](#) in density. But the city-state's size also means that government efforts to shape population growth are far more effective than elsewhere. As overpopulation poses a host of problems to the rest of the world, Singapore has the unique challenge of shaping its own path forward.

Singapore has a history of population planning



Singapore in the 1960s. Photo: [Daniel Regan](#) / Public domain

Singapore began population control in the 1960s as the city-state was faced with a population boom following World War II. The government pushed family planning and was successful in slowing birth rates—so much so that it reversed course in the 1980s to adopt policies to encourage larger families. The second phase has not been nearly as successful.

Today, the government's National Population and Talent Division [says](#) it tries to balance factors affecting population—birth rate, life expectancy, immigration and other factors—to “ensure a sustainable Singapore with a cohesive society and vibrant economy that improves Singaporeans' lives.”

Government denies plan to expand population, emphasizes planning for density

The idea that Singapore would expand its population to 10 million people dates back to a [statement](#) by former Housing and Development Board (HDB) head Liu Thai Ker in 2013, according to *The Straits Times*. He said that if the city would continue to see economic growth, the population would have to expand. But Liu was discussing a population growth rate of just 1% per year, at most. At that rate, the city would hit 10 million sometime in the 2070s.

Liu was reportedly advocating longer-term city planning, so that government planners could make more informed choices about land use.

In 2018, current HDB chief executive Cheong Koon Hean again discussed the 10 million figure, saying that Singapore could remain a very liveable city even if population density rises as high as 13,700 persons per square kilometer by 2030.

Despite its win at the polls, the PAP is still trying to clear up the misconception left by the opposition's campaigning. Government officials

are coming out again and again to explain that there isn't a "proposal" to expand the population—that this is about urban planning and being prepared for future land use needs and other challenges.

"We monitor our population trends closely, and regularly review our population policies along with infrastructure and social development needs," the government [said](#) amid the recent controversy.

The idea of population planning isn't limited to Singapore. Leaders from East Asia to the US have built family planning policies and programs designed to keep populations in check.

These policies are in part an effort to balance the need for labor with the risk of catastrophe as population growth outpaces food production or maxes out available resources—the idea dates to English theorist Thomas Malthus and others. In Singapore's case, the resource in short supply is land, as well as budgets for government-supported education and health care.

US economist Julian Simon, on the other hand, built a theory that may be more applicable to Singapore's trajectory, demonstrating that high population density is tied to specialization of labor and technological progress. This is the crux for Singapore—to balance the gains of a highly-skilled workforce and high-value industries with the threats that come from overpopulation.