

Survey on Political Traits and Media Use

Singaporean Youth: Different, but not that different

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There are two diametrically opposite claims about the difference between Singaporean youth and the older generation. Are those in their twenties and thirties – the so called “Generation Y” – politically apathetic, individualistic, and uncaring about the world? Or are they more engaged politically, more interested in political news?

A national telephone survey with a representative sample of 1,090 Singaporeans aged 21 and above has found that the youth of Singapore are indeed different. The IPS survey, carried out from August to October 2010, seeks to determine the political traits of citizens and their use of and their attitudes towards media.

One of our major findings concerns the differences between younger Singaporeans (those from 21 years to 39 years old) and the older Singaporeans.

a) Youth are less authoritarian than older people

We asked people about their “political orientation”, that is, whether they are more liberal/democratic or conservative/authoritarian. Nearly three in every four people (73.2 per cent) agree or strongly agree that “Singapore should have a powerful leader who can run the Government as he thinks fit”. Seven in ten people (70.1 per cent) feel the same for the statement “It is more important to have good economic growth than freedom of speech”. At the same time, nearly six out of ten people (59.6 per cent) agree or strongly agree that “There are too many rules against participating in political activities in Singapore”.

Among those who want a strong leader, over six in ten (62 per cent) also think that there are too many rules against political participation. And among those who say there are too many rules, 76 per cent want a strong leader. Hence, this survey shows, somewhat surprisingly, that Singaporeans show a desire not only for strong leadership and economic growth but also for more freedom to take part in politics.

When analyzed by age, however, youth tend to be slightly less conservative/authoritarian than older people. They are slightly less in support of a strong leader, slightly less in support of growth over freedom, and slightly more in support of freedom for political participation.

For instance, 75.9 percent of those aged 40 to 59 and 81.5 percent of those aged 60 and above agree or strongly agree on the strong leader statement. However, only 66.7 per cent of youth do so. Also, 13.3 per cent of those aged 40 to 59 and 8.6 per cent of those aged 60 and above disagree or strongly agree with the strong leader statement. This is in contrast with the 19.0 percent of youth who did so. We can conclude that, yes, youth are less authoritarian than older people, but only marginally less. (The detailed data for the whole study can be found at IPS’ website.)

b) Youth participate more in politics than older people

Young people are also less apathetic about politics. This is measured by political participation. "Political participation" is used here in the academic rather than popular sense, and is measured in this survey by asking whether the interviewees sign petitions, write to the newspapers or to Members of Parliament, attend discussions held by grassroots groups or by the government, write or read online political content, or forward such content to others. Political participation is generally low among all Singaporeans: About eight in ten don't take part in each of these activities. Nevertheless, youth tend to participate more online, and are also to be more likely to sign petitions online and offline. While 16.8 per cent in the study take part politically online, 25.5 per cent of youth do so.

c) Youth consume more political content than older people

Youth are also engaged by another measure: they are more slightly likely than older people to read about politics. This is true for both traditional media such as print newspapers and television and new media such as the Internet. Not surprisingly, as the "Net Generation", youth also make greater use of the Internet for reading about politics compared to older people. They consume more political news by reading mainstream media sources such as the online Straits Times, foreign news websites or alternative Singapore online-only websites such as The Online Citizen, Temasek Review or Yawning Bread. More than older people, they also rate the Internet and print newspapers as important sources of political news. They also trust the Internet as a source of political news a little more than older people.

d) Youth more likely to see government control of media and bias in media than older people

Youth are also slightly more likely than older people to say there is too much government control of mainstream media. Six in ten among the youth (62.2) agree or strongly agree that there is too much control, compared to five in ten for those aged 40 to 59 (52.8 per cent) and five in six for those aged 60 and above (51.1 per cent). Youth are also more slightly likely to think that "Newspapers and television are biased when they report on Singapore politics, political parties and elections."

e) Youth less likely to say they voted for the PAP

The survey also asked people how they voted in the last election in 2006. (This is the first time we know of that such a question has been asked in Singapore.). 25.1 per cent of the interviewees refused to answer the question. But youth are less likely to refuse to answer, with only one in ten (10.3 per cent) refusing to answer compared to over one in four (27.4 per cent) for the rest. Of those in the survey who said they voted, 28.2 per cent said they voted for the PAP while 3.5 per cent said they voted Opposition. This can be compared with the actual votes in the 2006 election, where 66.6 per cent of the votes went to the PAP.

The survey also asked about such traits as interest in politics, knowledge of politics and belief in one's capability to understand or change politics. In none of these measures are youth different from the rest of the Singaporeans.

What can we conclude about youth from this survey? First, although youth are not radically different, they are not as the same as their parents or grandparents in a number of significant ways. A generation gap does exist: but one not a big one. Secondly, while it is no surprise that youth are less conservative or authoritarian, we can stop speculating that youth are more apathetic or disengaged than the older generation. Those who continue to do so are plain wrong.

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