

Many S'poreans unsure of president's role: survey It also finds higher income voters to be more critical

Lee U-wen

The Business Times, 2 November 2011

A new survey conducted by a prominent local think-tank has found that many Singaporeans appear to have only a limited understanding of the official interpretation of the elected president's role.

The detailed study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) randomly polled 2,025 people who voted at the Aug 27 presidential election, an exercise that saw them score an average of just 5.4 points out of a possible 11.

This, after they were asked to respond to 11 statements that were specifically crafted to test their understanding of the role of the president, as defined by the Constitution.

Just 42 per cent answered six or more correctly and just one per cent managed a perfect score.

IPS said that it embarked on this survey - which was conducted by a third-party firm via telephone over a two-week period from Sept 20 to Oct 5 - to better understand the factors that shaped voters' decision-making and preferences at the election.

The presidential polls, only the second in Singapore's history and the first since 1993, saw former deputy prime minister Tony Tan Keng Yam defeat three other hopefuls in a closely fought battle to become the Republic's new head of state.

The IPS survey found that most Singaporeans recognised that the president was someone who represented Singapore in meeting and visiting foreign leaders; is the country's head of state; and has the power to block the government's intention to spend the national reserves if he disagrees with the plan.

Nearly 80 per cent, however, had the impression that one of the many roles of the president was to ensure that the government managed the economy wisely. However, this function does not come under the president's official job scope.

Two in three voters also thought that the president had to ensure that the government carried out what it promised in the general election, while about 75 per cent of them thought that he was free to speak publicly on national issues that he deemed important. These are also not part of the president's roles.

According to IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh, who follows the local political scene closely, the survey findings showed that more political education was required in future on the role of the elected president because 'we cannot have a debate if it's not an informed debate'.

'The starting point of an informed debate is to at least understand what the official interpretation is and then take it from there,' said Ms Koh, who was part of the four-member research team for the study. She also said that the findings 'reinforced the idea' that those in the higher socio-economic groups tend to be the more critical voters.

'The more knowledgeable the voter is, the more likely the voter will be a critical one - someone who will question whether the election system or the outcome will really be the best one for Singapore,' she said.

'It doesn't mean that they will come to the conclusion that it isn't, but they will certainly think about it and chew on that question.'

As far as the characteristics for candidates were concerned, the survey respondents said honesty, fairness, and the ability to represent Singapore well were their top three choices. All three scored at least 4.5 points out of a maximum of five.

Having a complete lack of formal ties to a political party did not seem to matter as much to the voters, as this particular characteristic scored just 3.5 points.

The survey did find that the majority of those who said that this was crucial to them were mainly from the lower-educated and lower occupational groups.