

Age and education key factors that affect one's sensitivity towards divisive social issues: IPS study

Lamont Mark Smith

Business Insider, 30 October 2019

Younger and more educated Singaporeans are more sensitive towards social fallout that may arise from mismanagement of issues compared to their older and less-educated counterparts, a study has found.

Issues like race, religion, class, immigration, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights were identified by researchers at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to be the five key fault lines in Singapore

Released on Tuesday (Oct 29), the findings were from a study of public opinion on fault lines in Singapore, based on a survey of 4,015 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents from August last year to January this year.

According to its findings, LGBT and racial issues were the most likely to cause polarisation in society, and there was a clear difference in view between older and younger Singaporeans on the implications of mismanaging LGBT issues.

Half of respondents aged 18 to 25 indicated that an angry and polarised society would be the most probable outcome if LGBT issues were mismanaged – compared to only a third of older respondents aged above 65.

More than one in four of these younger respondents also indicated falls in trust of the government if LGBT issues were mismanaged.

The responses could mean that LGBT issues were, in general, viewed as more relevant and crucial among younger individuals, who tend to have more “liberal” views on sexuality, the researchers said.

Additionally, education levels also exerted a “considerable impact” on respondents perceptions, the researchers said.

More than 50 per cent of higher-educated respondents were more likely to indicate that polarisation and anger would result from the mismanagement of LGBT issues.

In comparison, only a third of their lower-educated counterparts felt the same way.

According to the researchers, this indicates that higher-educated Singaporeans who are more exposed to viewpoints originating outside of Singapore, may possibly have higher personal and emotional investment in LGBT issues.

Younger Singaporeans have more ominous view on mismanagement of race and religion issues

Similarly, the study found that younger and better-educated Singaporeans perceive the consequences of mismanaging race and religion to be more “ominous”, compared to older cohorts.

Almost 60 per cent of respondents aged between 18 and 25 said that anger against communities would occur if race issues were mismanaged. However, only 36.8 per cent of older respondents aged above 65 felt the same way.

Similarly, those in the 18–25 age category were more likely to indicate some consequence for the mismanaging religious issues compared to those 65 years and above. In fact, intermediate age cohorts progressively became “less concerned” with mismanagement of religious issues the older they were, the report said.

Additionally, the report indicated that education played a part in how respondents viewed race issues. Over 60 per cent of degree-holding participants indicated that anger against particular communities would likely result if race was mismanaged, compared to just 40 per cent of participants with ITE or lower qualifications.

The authors said that younger respondents could be more cognizant of the importance of sustaining a harmonious multi-racial society due to having more internalised narratives that sensitise the issues of race and religion.

Views on class split among age groups, Chinese more worried about immigration issues

Views on the consequences of mismanaging class division was also split across age groups.

Younger respondents (44 per cent) indicated a potential fall in trust of the government if class differences were not properly managed, but only 29 per cent of respondents aged 65 and above felt the same way.

In addition, Chinese respondents in particular felt that mismanagement of immigration issues could impact their national identity and sense of belonging the most, with over 44 per cent feeling this way.

The authors of the study said that this could be due to the possibility that Chinese respondents want to maintain a distinctly Singaporean-Chinese identity, and fear that immigration might change that.

More public discussion or more state involvement? It depends.

The study looked at two ways – greater state involvement and public discussion – to mitigate fault lines, and found that respondents had varying preferred approaches.

In general, respondents felt that there is sufficient government involvement across the five faultlines, and fewer than half felt that more state involvement was necessary.

For LGBT issues, the study found that millennials were the most likely to be in favour of both state involvement and public dialogue. This could be due to millennials generally holding more liberal views, the researchers said.

Regarding race and religion, most respondents indicated that there was sufficient state involvement and public discussion. However, older respondents felt the need for greater state action, while minority race respondents wanted more public dialogue.

Across the five faultlines, the largest proportion of respondents – especially among the younger cohorts – wanted the state to do more in mitigating immigration and class issues, as well as more public discussions on related topics.

Similarly, higher-educated respondents also desired more public discussions on class and immigration.

Amidst “novel and evermore intractable challenges” such as increased flows of information, the report said that “policy and people prerogatives will always require constant appraising and revising to ensure Singapore continues to maintain its coveted social harmony”.

“Consultative governance, apart from leveraging state-driven dialogues with stakeholders and ordinary citizens, will now have to account for opinions and views promulgated on a range of community platforms too,” it added.