

## **Bread and butter issues, need for different views in Parliament-both mattered to voters in GE2020: IPS survey**

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Amid a pandemic election, voters were focused on the COVID-19 crisis and the issue of livelihoods. But they also expressed the need for diverse views in Parliament.

These were among the findings of a post-election survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released on Thursday (Oct 1), which said that the Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore was among the top issues that mattered to voters in the 2020 General Election, while jobs, the cost of living and the need for different views in Parliament jumped in importance.

The Perception of Policies in Singapore survey, which was conducted from Jul 11 to Aug 21, found that the need for a good and efficient government was the top concern for voters in GE2020, just as it had been for the past two elections.

Due to the 2020 election being held amid the COVID-19 outbreak, a new item on the handling of the crisis was added to the study, which analysed the views of 4,027 citizens. It found that 89 per cent of all respondents said that the "Government's handling of the COVID situation" was "important" or "very important" to them.

Compared to the findings in 2015, three issues loomed larger in voters' minds, with a larger proportion saying that they were "very important" to them; these were the job situation, the cost of living and the need for different views in Parliament.

The issue of jobs and the cost of living were "particularly salient" for those aged 30 to 54, and those of low-middle and middle income, according to the study.

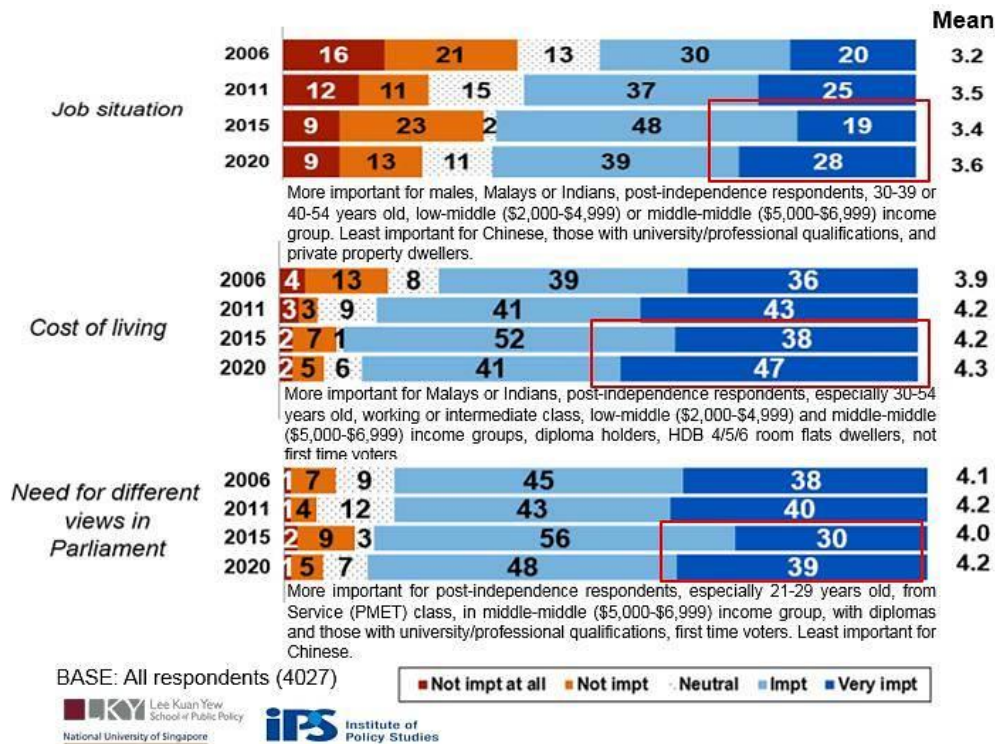
This suggests that the question of sustainable livelihoods affected the vote for respondents of working age and in low- to middle-income households, according to the research team led by Dr Gillian Koh, IPS' deputy director of research.

"They are the ones in danger of losing their jobs ... they feel a sense of income and job insecurity and that may have impacted the way they voted in this election," said Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, who is among the research team.

The need for different views in Parliament mattered to younger respondents aged 21 to 29 years old, the middle-class, PMETs and diploma and degree holders. This suggests that political ideals were important, particularly to the young and educated, said the research team.

"Both sets of considerations played out in GE2020 but among different groups of voters."

The other members of the team are Dr Teo Kay Key, a postdoctoral fellow at the IPS Social Lab as well as research associate Mr Damien Huang.



## MORE LOWER-INCOME VOTERS SEE NEED FOR CHECKS AND BALANCES

In contrast to previous years, the survey found a rise in support for more diverse voices in politics among those from the lowest household income band and those with post-secondary education.

To measure this, respondents were asked questions such as whether they saw the need for checks and balances in Parliament, whether it was important to have elected opposition politicians in Parliament and if the election system was fair to all political parties. “Pluralists”, who tend to agree with such statements, have typically been younger and hailed from the higher-income groups and the tertiary-educated.

Researchers said they sought to answer the question of whether support for political pluralism would revert to its upward trend after a dip in 2015. The People’s Action Party (PAP) won GE2020 with a vote share of 61.2 per cent, a nearly 9-point swing from 69.9 per cent in 2015, but it was a better showing than the all-time low of 60.1 per cent in the 2011 election.

Party leaders have attributed the dip in support to the economic challenges of COVID-19 as well as to a desire for more diverse voices – pluralism - among the electorate.

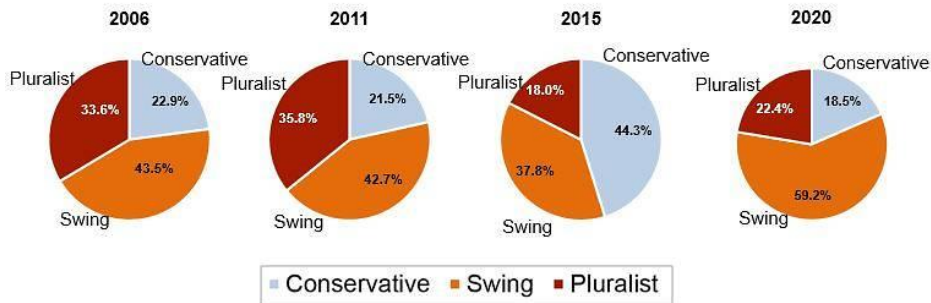
The IPS survey found that there was a large fall in the proportion of those in the “Conservative” category, who do not see value in political pluralism, from 44.3 per cent to 18.5 per cent. The increase in the proportion of those in the “Pluralist” category went from 18 per cent to 22.4 per cent.

The majority of the respondents, or 59.2 per cent, fell into the “Swing” category – these are voters with a mix of views. In contrast, there were fewer “Swing” voters in 2015, at 37.8 per cent.

Conservative (light blue) : Sharp increase in 2015, sharp dip in 2020

Swing (orange) : Drop in 2015, sharp increase in 2020

Pluralist (red) : Sharp drop in 2015, small increase in 2020



“What is a surprising finding, for me, is probably, after all the talk about representation and more opposition voices, we actually had a much larger proportion, more than half of the respondents who were in the ‘Swing’ cluster compared to the ‘Pluralist’ cluster,” said Dr Teo in a media briefing held earlier.

What was also different this year was the 7.2 per cent rise in the number of people in the S\$0 to S\$1,999 income band who identified as “Pluralists” and an 8.2 per cent rise in those with post-secondary (JC/ITE) education. The effects of “bread and butter issues” at this end of the socio-economic spectrum were specific to the difficult economic conditions surrounding GE2020, said the research team.

Said Dr Koh: “Somewhere within the low to low-middle income band, you will find that the respondents ... felt that the job situation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic really was a challenge to their sense of security. Some will have responded by feeling that they may, want to support, you know, checks and balances and diverse voices in Parliament, and may have, therefore, accounted for the shift away from support to the PAP and to the political opposition.”

Dr Lam Peng Er, who was one of the panellists at an IPS online forum held on Thursday, said that the ruling party was caught between “two pincers” - voters with material concerns such as job security and rising inequality, and voters with post-material aspirations such as citizens having a greater say in governance, and gender and minority rights.

## CHARACTER MATTERS MORE THAN CREDENTIALS

The study also looked at how credible voters thought the parties were, the importance of online campaigning in this election and what traits they valued in candidates.

For candidates, honesty came up on top, while being a “fair person” and being “hardworking or committed” were also important.

“It seems like credentials and contributions seem to matter much less now, as compared to character,” said Associate Professor Tan. “I think that what seems to matter more is ... whether they’re seen as honest and as fair-minded.”

Researchers also highlighted that this year's survey was done via three different channels – landline phone, mobile phone and Internet - while past surveys were conducted by landline only.

Compared to other respondents, online survey respondents were more likely to be pluralists and less likely to say that the PAP Government had governed the country well or that their lives had improved since GE2015.

“They felt that fairness in government policy is a priority and they also turned to a larger range of communication channels,” said Dr Teo.

There were no differences in the credibility of the parties' ratings among the respondents reached through different methods.