

## Facebook, CNA and YouTube were channels voters turned to in 2020 'online' General Election: IPS survey

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The Internet was key in providing information to Singapore voters that shaped their vote in the 2020 General Election, a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found, and among the online sources, Facebook, CNA online platforms and YouTube were the channels mentioned by most survey respondents.

The survey on voter attitudes, conducted between Jul 11 and Aug 21, found that compared to past surveys, the Internet ranked the highest in importance out of the 11 media channels this year. Television, newspapers and online rallies followed in that order.

This was an unsurprising finding given that mass gatherings were not allowed and walkabouts restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Online e-rallies, often hosted on Facebook, and Constituency Political Broadcasts replaced physical rallies, and candidates pulled out all the stops to engage voters online.

The study found that the Internet was especially important to younger voters and PMETs, much like in 2015. The youngest voters, PMETs, those with post-secondary education and the middle class were also the segments that tuned in to online rallies, said the research team led by Dr Gillian Koh, deputy research director of IPS.

"The lower the age and the higher the occupational class, the more influential (the) Internet was. Meanwhile, TV and print newspapers were important for people who were older, less educated or had less income," said Dr Teo Kay Key, a postdoctoral fellow at the IPS Social Lab who was part of the research team.

The researchers conducted the survey via the Internet and by calling people on their mobile phones this year, on top of calling them on their landlines, which was how the respondents were contacted in previous surveys. They found some differences in the responses of the people who did the survey online versus answering it over the phone.

"We really wanted to repeat this survey across the different modes because first, there is a sense that maybe it's a different group of people who are found online, who take in their views online," said Dr Koh. "Is it that they go online because they have alternative views? Or is it because having gone online, they have alternative views to mainstream society."

She added it is also possible that people doing the online surveys felt that they could be "more authentic" to their views due to anonymity.

Compared to other respondents, online survey respondents were less likely to say that the PAP Government had governed the country well or that their lives had improved since GE2015. They were also more likely to feel the need for checks and balances in Parliament, among other indicators said to display a "pluralist" bent.

Said Dr Koh: "We found that there is the confluence of certain categories of people that were getting their information online and those categories coincided with those who supported political pluralism."

Specific platforms cited by respondents who said 'Internet' was cited as an 'important' or 'very important' channel (named up to three):

	Landlines		Mixed
	2015 (%)	2020 (%)	2020 (%)
<b>Facebook</b>	68.5	69.4	74.1
<b>CNA platforms (website, Facebook etc)</b>	22.4	33.3	29.7
<b>YouTube</b>	29.5	29.9	29.8
<b>Instagram</b>	7.0	22.3	25.3
<b>Straits Times website</b>	12.1	18.9	16.9
<b>Total number of respondents who answered this question</b>	1335	1409	2821

Note: In 2015, Twitter (12.9%) was ranked fourth. However, Twitter dropped out of top 5 in 2020. Instead, Instagram was ranked fourth in 2020.

## VOTERS TURN TO FACEBOOK FOR INFORMATION

The team also asked the survey respondents who said that the Internet was “important” or “very important” to them, which Internet channels they turned to. There were differences in the results depending on how the respondents were contacted.

Facebook was the channel they mentioned most often, similar to 2015, but while 69.4 per cent of those surveyed by landlines mentioned Facebook, the proportion was higher (74.1 per cent) when mobile phone and Internet survey respondents were added.

“What was surprising was that mainstream media - CNA, which is available online, followed with the second highest number of mentions,” said the researchers, who also include research associate Damien Huang and Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore.

This was according to the landline survey results, which placed YouTube third and Instagram fourth. Twitter, the fourth most cited channel in 2015, dropped out of the top five. The Straits Times website came in fifth.

When the responses via mobile phone and Internet were included, CNA platforms and YouTube were neck and neck at second place, and the proportion that mentioned Instagram went up slightly.

Social media plays an increasingly important role, and lets people find others "on the same wavelength", said Professor Chu Yun-han, director of the Asian Barometer Survey. But there are problems that also come with it, he said, such as the formation of echo chambers that reinforce biases and undermines the traditional media's "gatekeeping role".

"Don't think that social media can play magic," he said, in answer to a question posed to panellists at an IPS forum on Thursday where the survey results were shared with the public via Facebook live.

Noting that a mainstream media channel - CNA Digital - was one of the most popular sources among Singaporeans who used the Internet for information in GE2020, Dr Koh said: "That's quite interesting - it's mass media but online. To (Prof Chu's) point, it's a call to balance up the role of social media with the best of journalistic qualities to reinforce a strong and healthy democracy."

Dr Teo added those who turned to the Internet also looked at offline sources like print media or TV.

"We see that this group of people, they consolidate their ideas, or they take information from a large range of sources, as compared to people who are maybe doing it in the other two modes, they maybe don't collect their information from such a wide range," said Dr Teo.

"People who use Internet sometimes are slightly more savvy, especially with technology, whether it's because of age or resource constraints."

The Perception of Policies in Singapore survey has been conducted here after each General Election since 2006. This year, 4,207 people were surveyed.

The survey also polled people on the issues that mattered to them most in the election and which political parties they found the most reliable.

GE2020 was won by the People's Action Party with 83 parliamentary seats and 61.2 per cent of the popular vote. The Workers' Party won a second Group Representation Constituency - Sengkang, while holding on to its wards of Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC for a total of 10 seats.