

S'poreans have limited understanding of Elected Presidency: survey

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SINGAPORE: A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that Singaporeans appear to have a limited understanding of the Elected Presidency.

The survey was conducted within two months of the August presidential election, Singapore's second since 1991 when the Elected Presidency was created.

The first was in 1993, when former Accountant-General Chua Kim Yeow and former Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong contested.

The IPS survey sought to understand the factors behind voters' choices.

The 2,025 respondents were asked which of 11 statements described the roles of the President.

Of these 11 statements, only five were aligned with the government's interpretation of the office.

Forty-two per cent got six or more correct and only one per cent was able to identify all "correct" and "incorrect" statements.

Representing Singapore in foreign relations was the most recognised role, with 94 per cent answering correctly, but respondents were unclear over whether the President is allowed to speak publicly on national issues.

Fifty-seven per cent agreed with the official view that the Elected President could not speak unless advised by the government.

Seventy-five per cent said 'yes' when asked if the Elected President could speak on issues he thinks are important.

The survey found that among the top three roles that shaped a voter's choice, the top two did not fall within the official interpretation. These were, "to ensure that the government manages the economy wisely" and "to ensure that the government does what it promised in the general election".

The third most important role was the President's veto powers over the reserves. This, IPS said, reflects the level of opinion and expectation the public has over the office.

Presenting the results on Tuesday, Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said the gap in understanding corresponded with statements made by candidates in the presidential election during campaigning period.

The senior research fellow said more education is needed.

She said: "I think the level of opinion in our findings can be due to a couple of things. First, [that] the institution of the Elected Presidency is very young, is extremely complex. And second, it is put to the vote. So people feel that with a mandate that is from the ground, it should actually allow the President to do much more than what is actually stipulated."

As for characteristics of candidates, respondents valued honesty, fairness and the ability to represent the country well, with a score of 4.5 and above out of five points.

Independence from political parties mattered less, scoring 3.5 points. The majority of those who said it was important were from low-income groups and the lower occupational classes.

Respondents were also less concerned about picking a candidate whose views on national issues ran parallel to theirs.

The survey found that in general, the higher the income and education levels of respondents, the more knowledgeable they were.

This same group also tended to be more critical of the system, and more likely to support change. For instance, they were more likely to agree that political parties and social organisations and unions should not be allowed to endorse candidates.

As with the May general election, the Internet played a significant role as a medium of communication, particularly among younger respondents earning higher incomes.

However, newspapers and television remained the top two sources of information across respondents and also had a bigger influence over voting decisions.

Among websites cited, Facebook was the most commonly read while Channel NewsAsia website was rated highest among respondents aged 21-29, those who were most highly educated and who were most knowledgeable about the Elected Presidency.

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