

Highlights from the IPS Forum on the Presidential Election, 1 November 2011

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The Institute of Policy Studies conducted its fifth POPS survey on voter attitudes in the Presidential Election and launched its main findings at its Forum on the Presidential Election on 1 November 2011 at the Orchard Hotel, Singapore.

The presidential election was held on 27 August 2011 and was only the second since 28 August 1993. In the run-up to Polling Day, there seemed to be confusion over the role of the Elected President (EP) and debate about whether candidates over-promised in their campaign for the Office.

For this reason, the survey set out to check how voters viewed the role of the EP as its first target and found that the understanding of this role as on the official government interpretation of it, was limited. The 2025 respondents, who were citizens of voting age randomly selected out of the residential phone book were taken through a list of statements and were to respond if each was indeed a role of the EP or not. 42% of the sample was able to label at least six or more statements out of eleven correctly as either being a role or not a role according to that official interpretation of it, as shown by charts 1 to 3.

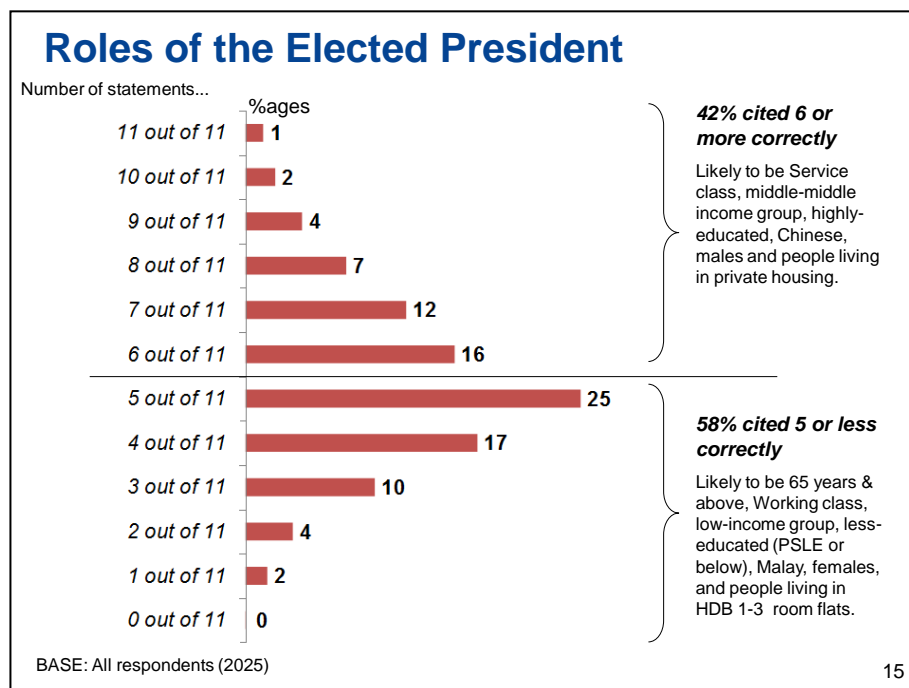


Chart 1

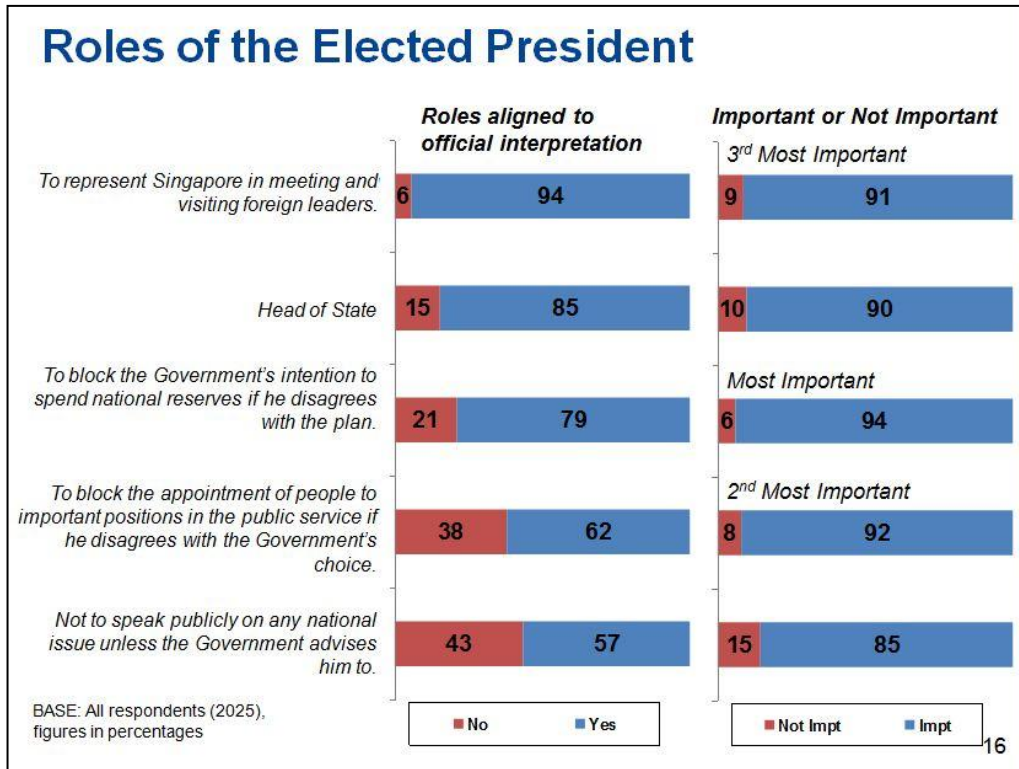


Chart 2

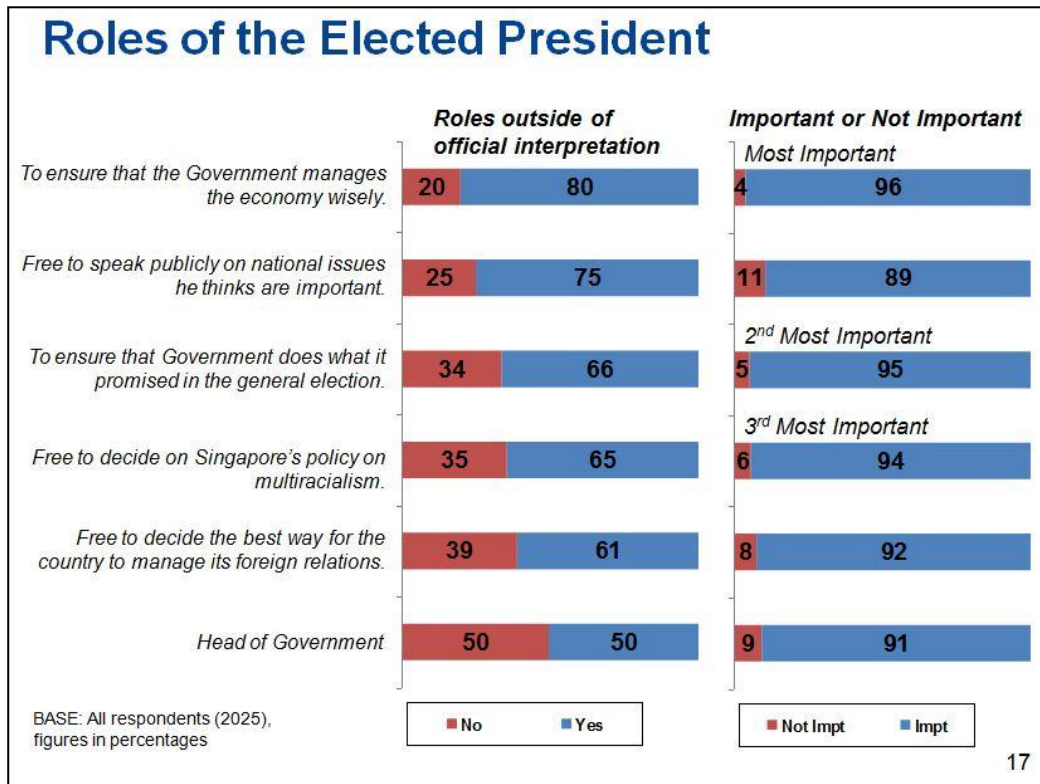


Chart 3

Source: IPS POPS (5) Presidential Election Survey 2011 Research Team. Note: These charts are part of the survey findings.

At the Forum, speakers and participants mulled over why these results were so, their implications and what can be done about the level of understanding that was reflected in the data. One of the speakers, Dr Kevin Tan, a constitutional lawyer, reminded participants of the claims that candidates had made about what they would do if they were in office, and said that several of these claims had seemed to fall in a large grey area of things that had not been specifically disallowed. There was indeed confusion among voters partly as a result of this. There was also a disjuncture between the large expectation placed on the institution that had been naturally built up through the election process and the actual role as specified and strictly interpreted by government leaders.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University added that a spillover of the political mood from the May General Election in which there was an electoral breakthrough by the political opposition made it conducive for candidates not associated with the People's Action Party (PAP) to emerge and believe they had a fighting chance of taking the office in the Presidential Election. He said that a good part of the electorate was in no mood for 'constitutional niceties'. Attempts by government leaders to explain the role of the EP might have succeeded with some but not with those who were skeptical and preferred not to accept some notion of a heavily circumscribed president. What the latter group of voters was looking for in the political ecosystem was a stronger check and balance between the government and the presidency to make governance more robust. Singaporeans had reinterpreted 'good governance' earlier discussed by the PAP as a strong mandate, with the idea that having a system or a situation where there is a check on power and greater public accountability of state institutions and leaders is more desirable.

Another speaker, Mr Goh Sin Teck of Lianhe Zaobao indicated that the readership level of his newspaper and that of The Straits Times -- two examples of traditional media -- increased significantly during the presidential election. Even with the emergence of Internet-based new media, these facts suggested that the rise of one form of media did not mean the demise of another. As Editor of Lianhe Zaobao, Mr Goh was glad that the paper invested the effort in designing and putting out attractive and accessible full page spreads on the role of the elected presidency and other important information relating to the institution and the election. Not many people would go and seek out such information on the Internet, but when they referred to a hard copy of the newspaper, this information would find its way to them. The traditional hard copy newspaper still presents a great deal of potential as a public education channel.

How can citizens' understanding of the role of the EP be improved upon? Different methods would be needed to reach different audiences. One suggestion was to produce a compelling drama series on Channel 8 that revolves around the relationship between the President and the government -- something in the realm of popular culture. This would certainly address the profile of citizens who scored lower on the measure of knowledge in the data. Another would be for the President to take up the idea in some manner of putting out annual reports documenting his activities. Members of the audience said they were struck by how many times the reserves had been used under the former president, S.R Nathan's presidency, with little publicly available information to understand how these presidential approvals took place. Instances such as these would be ideal opportunities to improve public understanding of the

Office. However, who or what provides such educational messages must enjoy high levels of trust from the general public or targeted audiences for them to be receptive to those messages. The level of trust is higher for those channels or sources of information that have no direct interest in the outcome of a campaign or the running of the Office. In that regard, public intellectuals, academic institutions and organisations like IPS must do their part in promoting the development of an informed citizenry even as the country witnesses an increased desire for political pluralism and competition.

Many other issues were examined in the survey and discussed at the Forum. A report of the Forum will be published in the next IPS e-Newsletter along with audio-clips of the presentations by the speakers at the Forum.

The POPS(5) survey data is available now at: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/Forum_Presidential_Election_011111.aspx. It is based on a sample that has been weighted according to the distribution of the resident population of Singapore on the basis of age, gender and ethnicity. Another version of the data will be released shortly based on data that is weighted according to the distribution of the citizen population.

Readers are invited to look up these resources on the website and send us your feedback.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



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