

Report: IPS Forum on Singaporeans' Political Attitudes

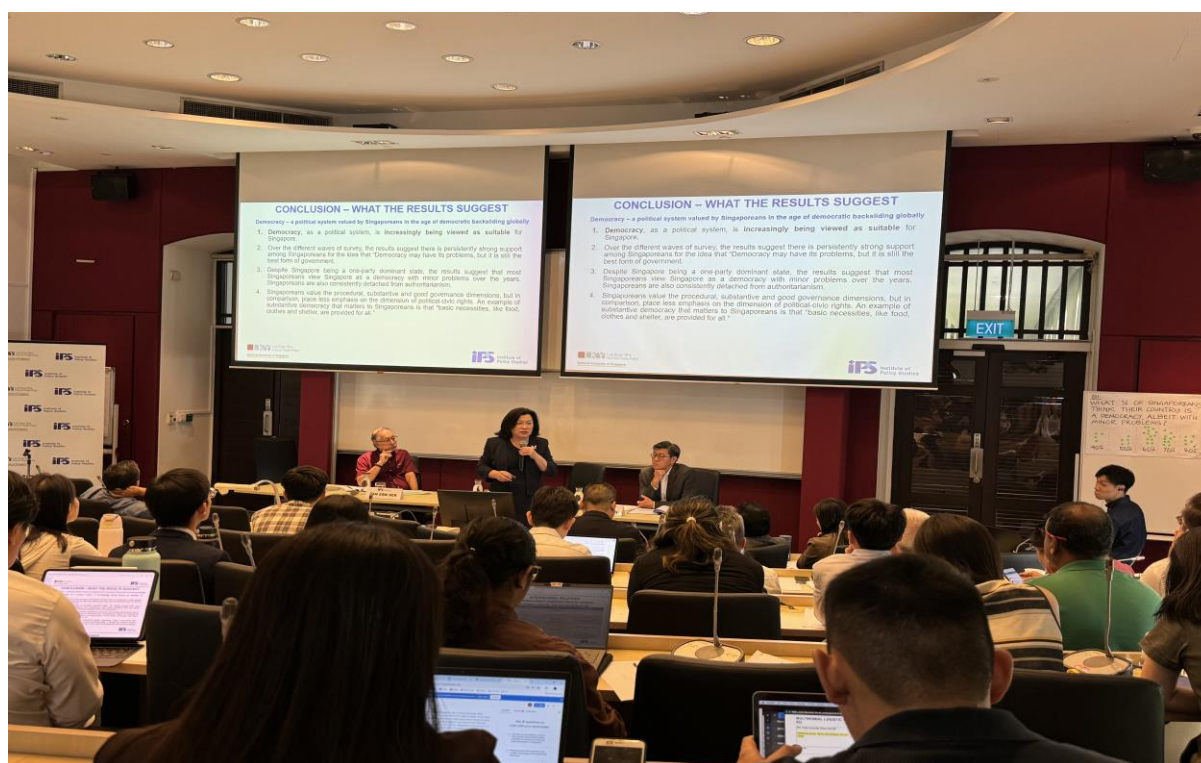
By Gabriel Lim and Cheow Jin Jie

INTRODUCTION

On 27 September 2024, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held a forum on Singaporeans' political attitudes. It was attended by 73 participants comprising academics, researchers from think tanks, university students and representatives of foreign embassies. The objective of the event was to respond to the following questions, among others: What do Singaporeans understand by the concept of democracy, how do they rate Singapore's political system and government? What shapes these political attitudes and how have they changed over time?

There were two sessions at the forum. The first examined key data trends on Singaporeans' political attitudes collected through Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), a cross-national time-series study IPS has participated in since 2010. This was presented by Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow of IPS and discussed by Associate Professor (A/P) Eugene Tan, Yong Pung How School of Law, Singapore Management University. The session was moderated by Dr Tan Ern Ser, Adjunct Principal Research Fellow of IPS Social Lab.

The second session featured a panel of Singaporean scholars. Dr Lam Peng Er, Principal Research Fellow of East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, provided a comparative analysis of the political attitudes of East Asians vis-à-vis Singaporeans, based on ABS data. A/P Walid Jumblatt Abdullah of Public Policy and Global Affairs Program, Nanyang Technological University discussed possible hot button issues for Singaporeans in the run up to the next general election; and A/P Natalie Pang, Department Head of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore, discussed how social media affects political attitudes and behaviour of Singaporeans. The session was moderated by Dr Teo Kay Key, Research Fellow of IPS Social Lab.

SESSION ONE: THE IPS SURVEYS — TRENDS IN THE DATA

Dr Koh presenting the findings of ABS 6.

Based on the findings from wave 6 of ABS that was conducted in 2023, as well as previous waves of the survey, Dr Koh shared that democracy is a political system that has been consistently valued by a majority of Singaporean respondents.

A part of the research tracked changes in democratic value orientation of people across the Asia-Pacific region using a standard survey instrument, and ABS wave 6 indicated that Singaporeans associated the system of “democracy” with procedural, substantive and good governance dimensions far more than with civic-political rights.

The belief that democracy was still “the best form of government despite minor flaws” and satisfaction with the way democracy works in Singapore, remained strong and stable through four waves of data since 2010, at a mean score of 3 out of a maximum of 4 points where 4 represents the highest level of assent. Singaporean respondents’ disapproval of the authoritarian scenarios of one-party rule, strong-man rule or technocratic governance remained stable too.

Cluster analysis based on responses to the 2023 survey — on whether respondents supported democracy as an ideal, believed that democracy is suitable for Singapore, and thought the current system of government worked well — threw up three archetypes of the “Singaporean voter”.

They were, at 22.1 per cent of the sample, what the IPS team called “Contented Democrats” (who were most satisfied with democracy in Singapore and the current system of government, and were likely to rate democracy as the best form of government overall); 53.9 per cent were termed “Contingent Democrats” (who had a lower average rating in their support for democracy and how the current system of government worked compared to the first group), and 24.1 per cent, “Ambivalent Democrats” (who rated lower than the first two groups the compatibility of democracy for Singapore, their support for the ideal of democracy and their belief that the current system of government worked well; but not so low as to fall into scores denoting an outright disapproval of these).

ABS also included a section that explored the level of affinity citizens had with the major powers of the world and analysed whether these were determined by respondents' political values. It was found that Singapore respondents rated China's influence on Singapore slightly more positively than that of the United States in the 2023 survey.

Comparing these views with those of respondents in the Philippines and Taiwan, which were considered full democracies, and Vietnam, a one-party state, where age, education, political attitudes were found to shape values about these two global powers using this wave 6 data, household income was the only variable linked to those outcomes in the case of Singapore. Even then, it suggested that those in the higher income brackets were likely to rate the two powers in the same way.

Dr Koh cited the limitations of ABS wave 6. It was the first time Singapore respondents could complete the survey by themselves, using a digital tablet. Close to 90 per cent of the sample of 1,003 people chose to do so. There was a clear, statistically significant relationship between how likely respondents selected the “Don't understand/Don't know/Can't choose/Decline to answer” (DK) option with this process of self-administration in the International Relations section of the survey. This was not the case for other sections that were of interest to the research team.

Discussing the findings, A/P Tan noted that democracy was the system that many Singaporeans wanted through the various waves of ABS. There was broad middle ground consensus, which was important. Otherwise, politics would be more contested and arriving at a decision on what ought to be done would be more challenging, he added.

A/P Tan argued that political socialisation had been highly successful in Singapore, which was not surprising given its one-party dominant system of six decades since independence. This enabled the People's Action Party (PAP) government to shape views on what democracy was or ought to be, what its desired outcomes should be, and how politics ought to be practised.

The implications of these were threefold. First, incremental political change was preferred, but it had to keep up with citizens' expectations. Part of the reason for the PAP's longevity as the ruling party was its ability to manage that pace of political change.

Second, Singaporeans had a relatively nuanced understanding of democracy, he said. They did not ape “Western notions” of democracy, for which he argued analysts and the foreign

media often did not give Singaporeans enough credit. The survey data pointed to the obvious understanding of the procedural dimensions of democracy, the importance of checks and balances in the system, and the need for government responsiveness to issues and concerns of the people.

Singapore should continue to develop an autochthonous system of democracy that fit Singaporeans' circumstances, needs and aspirations, while also drawing on suitable practices in established democracies across the world, said A/P Tan. The positive direction of democratic development in Singapore was not in doubt.

Third, based on the survey data, A/P Tan said it appeared that Singaporeans saw democracy as both a means to an end (i.e., a process by which they elect those who will form the government), and as an end in itself (i.e., the attainment of basic necessities, law and order, long-term planning and clean government). He emphasised that performance legitimacy — what outcomes the government delivered — was important. Singaporeans believed the system was capable of solving problems and they wanted it to deliver not just economic growth but equitable growth. If the government failed to do so, not only would this discredit the ruling party, it would also discredit the system of government.

Is Singapore an illiberal democracy then? There was some appreciation of civic-political rights although it lagged other dimensions. A/P Tan said that a growing emphasis on such rights was inevitable, and authoritarian detachment would consequently strengthen over time too.

A/P Tan noted that the system had bolstered its legitimacy with constitutional protections despite it being a one-party dominant system. Multiracialism was important, which was why the Group Representation Constituency system was introduced in 1988. The government had placed constraints on its power through the custodial powers of the Elected Presidency. He asked participants to imagine how different governance would be if such constraints did not exist. For instance, the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament scheme addressed the need for Parliament to have opposition representation, which also helped to manage the pace of political change. The findings of the Edelman Trust Barometer also corroborated the healthy level of trust in government among Singaporeans found in the ABS, said A/P Tan.

In his closing, A/P Tan said Singaporean democracy was by no means static. Although Singapore was constrained by the fact of limited policy options a small city-state faced, its political dynamics would continue to evolve as Singaporeans desired political diversity and competition. It was up to both state and society to nurture the democratic system, to counter any apathy, and to maintain support for and legitimacy of the political system among citizens.

Session One Q & A

Participants raised concerns about the survey design, especially in how the instrument appeared to merge procedural and performative aspects of democracy. They were concerned this would lead to a mischaracterisation of the political views of Singaporeans. In some survey approaches, for instance, respondents would be asked to rank or weight the aspects of democracy instead. Dr Koh clarified that the survey questions were workshopped by an

international band of scholars on democracy in the ABS group who recognised the limitations to the method. In 2020, the set of questions they referred to was abandoned in consideration of the limitations but then brought back into the 2023 instrument. It continued to be one way to disaggregate the different dimensions of democracy to understand, in some detail, what Singaporeans believe it is.

One of the participants highlighted the non-ideological nature of Singaporean politics, where there are no clear nor polar views as a result. The PAP has succeeded for so long, the participant argued, because it is a party for all seasons and it can implement anything that seems like a good idea from any source. This did not feature in the analysis. Countering that there were ideals and ideology at play, Dr Koh provided examples of social justice statements in the choices that were presented to survey respondents in the section on what democracy meant to them. A/P Tan agreed with the participant's view that politics here was non-ideological and that this was in large part because Singapore had limited policy options as a small city-state.

A participant noted that the number one political issue among citizens now is "wealth" as manifested in the large sums of foreign money that was thought to flow into Singapore, the anxiety about access to housing, and the emerging psychology of disparity and envy. The question was whether the wealth issue represented a significant shift in Singaporeans' political attitudes, and whether it would affect their approach to democracy.

A/P Tan said the common denominator to the three trends was the contentious issue of immigration. In 2013, as a Nominated Member of Parliament, A/P Tan had abstained in a vote on the government's White Paper on Population. While he had deep reservations about the White Paper's approach, he felt Singapore was always going to need immigration. Moreover, the prime minister had addressed these concerns. In abstaining, A/P Tan wished to signal that he would keep an open mind on the government's plans in the White Paper and that the government would be held accountable for ability to address the concerns of Singaporeans. A worry A/P Tan had was about the growing politics of envy in Singapore, particularly the notion that people were well-off because they were able to take advantage of the system rather than through hard work. Dr Koh noted that the question of whether there was the perception of equality in the distribution of power and resources — a composite variable the researchers created — was indeed relevant in shaping people's views about democracy as well their support for the specific regime of the day.

A/P Tan was asked for his own assessment of the nature of Singapore's democracy. Was it an illiberal democracy or a system of competitive authoritarianism? He said he would use either descriptor but added that he generally avoided using adjectives to describe democracy in Singapore as they were too limiting and failed to capture the many other aspects of how democracy was practised here.

Concern was raised over how the survey captured the state of democracy instead of political attitudes or sentiment, and that there may have been a conflation between these. A/P Tan agreed that there may have been such a conflation, but that respondents would also find it

difficult to distinguish clearly between “government” and “governance”. Dr Koh added that the survey distinguished between support for the political system and support for the government, and researchers then tried to analyse these separately. It was for this reason — that people do not make those distinctions — that the archetypes were built upon indicators of both diffuse and specific regime support.

A question was raised about the proportion of DK responses throughout the survey, and if further analysis had been conducted. Dr Tan Ern Ser, the moderator who is also a member of the research team, acknowledged the high number of DK responses in this round of survey and assured the audience that the team will try to improve on the survey methodology in the future to reduce the proportion of DK responses.

A participant asked the panellists whether democracy regressed or progressed in recent years. A/P Tan revisited the issue of immigration and the politics of envy as phenomena that were shaping politics in Singapore. It was a reminder of the need to engage Singaporeans on those issues and to reinforce the nexus between hard work and fair rewards. This would ensure that society remained egalitarian, stable and secure.

SESSION TWO: OTHER VIEWS ON SINGAPOREAN VOTERS



A/P Pang explaining the role of the Internet in understanding the political attitudes of Singaporeans.

Dr Lam described the political systems in East Asia, where Japan and Singapore are one-party dominant systems, whereas Taiwan and South Korea have presidential systems. Taiwan and South Korea are in the situation of split government today where the president belongs to

one party and parliament is controlled by an opposition party. Therefore, the state of play is different when the framework is different. These four economies are relatively affluent, they escaped the “middle income trap” and are underpinned by strong economic bases. If economic conditions were to change, responses to surveys like ABS would also change from time to time as a result of that, but the overall trend in political attitudes over time may be stable. Dr Lam then discussed the latest developments in politics in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Despite all these, the support for democracy and their current system of government was high, with Singaporeans' support being relatively higher than the rest.

Dr Lam noted that it was the substantive dimension of democracy as adopted by ABS that dominated in East Asia. When asked which they prioritised — economic development or democracy — respondents in South Korea and Taiwan prioritised the former; Japan, the latter; and the largest proportion of those who said that economic development and democracy were equally important was found in Singapore. Have Singaporeans been conditioned to be pragmatic, he asked? Dr Lam argued that the PAP *is* ideological and exercises “cultural hegemony” over Singaporeans, conditioning them to prioritise certain political norms and accept that as just common sense.

Next, A/P Walid talked about the limitations of surveys in general. He speculated that the inordinate number of DK responses to questions in ABS wave 6 were indicative of respondent fatigue, also known as the random response bias. Another limitation is the social desirability bias, as there is always an under-reporting of conservative views. The personal desirability bias will shape how people feel they ought to respond. Surveys measure sentiment rather than conviction, he added.

A/P Walid then discussed five possible concerns that voters might have in the run-up to Singapore's next general election. All voters are rational even if their cost-benefit analysis may not be material.

The first issue was that voters would approach the election as a referendum on the fourth-generation leaders, new prime minister Lawrence Wong, and his policy agenda. A/P Walid argued that the perception of PAP as the “flight to safety” option did not materialise in the last general election that was held in the midst of the pandemic in 2020. The key question voters would consider was whether the fourth-generation leaders were the safe option. He also highlighted how there tended to be a dip into vote share for the PAP in a new prime minister's first election.

Just as important were the bread-and-butter issues and immigration policy. The cost of living seemed to be rising as were housing prices. A/P Walid acknowledged that the government had limited solutions for many inherited or legacy issues in this area of public policy. Short of revamping the entire public housing system, which would anger a significant segment of the electorate who owned the public housing flats, the current system had to strike the balance across the interests of various stakeholder groups, he said.

Another issue was the Israel-Palestine conflict. He noted that Singapore maintained relationships with both sides but there had been discernible shifts more recently in its response to the ongoing conflict as evidenced by its airdropping of supplies into Gaza, as well as strong statements its ministers had issued on the conflict. Although he recognised that it was not necessarily a major issue for most Singaporeans, it was so for a significant minority. A recent ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey indicated that most felt Israel's attack on Gaza had gone too far. The question then was how this would affect younger voters, he said. It would certainly be of interest to more than just the Muslim community that comprised close to 15 per cent of the citizen population.

On the issue of fairness, in the day after the 2020 general election, A/P Wahid recalled that a PAP minister said the ruling party had some soul-searching to do, recognising that this question of fair-play had been an issue among others, for voters.

Another issue was how people would react to the way the electoral boundaries might shift and whether this specific and procedural issue of fair play might arise.

Elections were about timing. If there were to be a breakdown in the MRT system just before an election, it could affect the support for the PAP. The general election that was held once every five years was the one "survey" that really mattered, said A/P Walid.

A/P Pang had been analysing the role of the internet in shaping elections since 2011. What did political participation mean for the citizen? Some might say it was voting; others, volunteering for political parties and funding them. Increasingly, however, protests and writing petitions were also becoming a significant mode of political participation.

In that respect, there were the two concepts of allegiant and assertive citizenship, explained A/P Pang. The former was where there was high trust in authority and limited protest potential so that citizens adopted more traditional means of participation. Youths were more inclined towards the latter as it emphasised expression and participation. They were more sceptical of institutions and were more likely to participate in protests.

How should we characterise the use of the Internet for general elections then? A/P Pang suggested two significant drivers of its use: how pervasive the internet is, and the emergence of social media and smartphone devices.

In the context of Singapore, A/P Pang's studies of the 2015 and 2020 general elections using a pooled dataset from surveys indicated that the internet played a significant role in shaping various outcomes as the key political parties did rely on online campaigns and facilitated discussions on political issues through social media. There was a pandemic in the 2020 election, which resulted in the extensive use of social media sites like Instagram, Facebook and so on.

She acknowledged the importance of memes, or the meme culture, as this made expression more informal and accessible and enabled the shaping of political views. Through memes, political issues and viewpoints were conveyed through humour and satire. What was also

significant was that youths were creating content to raise political awareness amongst other youths. In addition, artificial intelligence was already and would continue to play a role in shaping politics.

A/P Pang said she found that the most significant rise in the role of social media was in its use to share information and for users to express their views— informational and expressive uses, but there was not as close a link to what is called relational use where users engage with each other directly and meaningfully.

Session Two Q & A

To what extent did memes reflect issues that were important to voters, asked one participant. If one recalled the 2020 election, many memes were created around the PAP candidate Ivan Lim, for instance. They did reflect issues that voters were thinking about, and could shape how these issues were deliberated on, said A/P Pang.

On how the political parties used social media, a participant asked A/P Pang what she thought of the expansion of the “Friends of PAP” initiative that had been announced in June 2024 — an outreach programme to connect the party with like-minded individuals including media influencers. Was this just another way of putting out “sponsored content”? A/P Pang said it cut both ways. The biggest issue was transparency about content — was the content sponsored or not? But there would be implications for the party regarding their association with celebrities and micro-celebrities. If gaffes or scandals were to happen with influencers, there could be political and reputational implications for the party too.

A participant asked A/P Walid for his thoughts on how the Israel-Palestine conflict might affect Singapore's upcoming elections, given how Muslims in other parts of the world had responded to the crisis. The participant cited the unprecedented nature of electoral victories of four independent Muslim candidates in the general elections of the United Kingdom this year, which seemed to be a direct consequence of the conflict in Gaza. Although A/P Walid suggested that “enough had been done” so that it was not likely to be a very consequential electoral issue for Singapore, the participant had a different opinion. A/P Walid noted that there was a depth of hurt and anguish among Muslims across the world, and in Singapore that was not well understood by people outside of the community. The problems did not start on 7 October. Also, it was more than just the Muslims who cared about the conflict, he said. A participant suggested that this was of greater concern to Muslims than the conflicts elsewhere in the world involving Muslims. A/P Walid explained that the reason for that was because Palestine was viewed as the holy land to Muslims; that it had not yet been resolved over decades and brought a sense of despair; and that to many, it represented the double standards and hypocrisy of Western powers.

Another question was whether the ABS survey effectively reflected the undercurrent of sentiment about contemporary political issues in Singapore, and whether these eroded the trust in the democratic system that was discussed earlier. Moderator Dr Teo Kay Key, who was a co-investigator on ABS Singapore, stated that the survey successfully represented the

overall undercurrent of voters desiring a greater measure of political pluralism in Singapore. She also said that the nuances of their views could be seen through their responses to the questions in ABS wave 6, even if the ultimate test would come in the next general election.

Dr Koh added that the archetypes were built on ABS wave 6 data, zooming in on the profile of the Ambivalent Democrats. They were disproportionately from the lower income brackets, tended to be critical of the level of distributive justice in Singapore's system of government, and were more inclined to allow for compromises to democratic processes. These suggested that the substantive aspects of distributive justice and voters' socio-economic status were critical to the support for the democratic system of government in Singapore, and captured the nuances of political attitudes among Singaporeans.

A participant asked how the speakers defined "democracy" in Singapore's context. This would provide a handle on the trends in democratisation and autocratisation.

A/P Pang said that in the context of social media, it would be that one could use these platforms to make one's voice heard and challenge state-driven narratives. It was about voice, expression and participation, by both individuals and political parties, she said.

A/P Walid said that there were two aspects to democracy — the procedural and the substantive but defined differently from the ABS survey. The former involved free, fair, regular non-fraudulent elections, but they were not completely fair in Singapore. He said no political scientist considered Singapore a liberal democracy. He also said he had a "gentle quarrel" with A/P Tan in describing the current political system as "Singapore democracy" when there was no reference to what the model was, how it compared against it, and that it was justified it as a system in its own right. His view was that Singapore was an "illiberal democracy".

Dr Lam said that Singapore was an "elite democracy" where the PAP had cultural hegemony such that the public internalised the values and norms of the ruling elites. The essence of democracy for him was the acceptance of differences and pluralism. Singapore was becoming more pluralist especially with the influence of younger citizens, he said.

Dr Teo cited Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way's judgment that Singapore was a "competitive authoritarian" regime, where there were free and regular elections, but the playing field may not be fair.

A participant argued that there was evidence of "structural hegemony" in Singapore and not just the cultural hegemony Dr Lam had referred to. Voting was compulsory but it was impossible for so many people to all be interested in politics. The actual level of apathy, the participant suspected, could be very high. Indeed, content circulated during elections such as memes could sometimes reflect this apathy. However, the use of digital platforms during elections should be understood beyond whether or not it changed how people voted, but also how people deliberated or thought about issues.

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