

Report on Forum on the IPS Post-Election Survey on GE2020 1 October 2020

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Dr Koh introduces the panellists for the IPS Online Forum

On 1 October, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted an online forum, streamed on Facebook Live, to discuss the findings of the IPS Post-Election Survey 2020. The Post-Election Survey examined voter attitudes relating to the 10 July 2020 general election (GE2020), drawing comparisons to surveys on previous elections and setting those findings within the broader Asian experience.

The panel comprised Dr Teo Kay Key, Postdoctoral Fellow at the IPS Social Lab; Dr Derek da Cunha, independent scholar and specialist on Singapore society and politics; Dr Lam Peng Er, Senior Research Fellow at the NUS East Asian Institute; and Professor Chu Yun-han, Director of the Asian Barometer Survey and Professor of Political Science at National Taiwan University. The forum was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director of Research and Senior Research Fellow at IPS. The forum drew a total audience of 4,007 by the end of the event.

The forum opened with a presentation of the Post-Election Survey results by Dr Teo, followed by remarks from the panellists and a question-and-answer session with the online audience on Facebook Live.

Post-Election Survey Results

The Post-Election Survey gathered the views of 2,001 Singapore citizens aged 21 years and above that were selected randomly through landline calls, 1,002 citizens through mobile phones, and 1,024 citizens through an internet survey via the commissioned survey firm, Degree Census' sampling panel. The data was reweighted based on official statistics in *Population in Brief 2019* to match the proportions of citizens in areas of age, gender and ethnicity.

Dr Teo highlighted the following findings from the survey. First, on issues that shaped their voting decisions, while the top concern among respondents was “the need for good and efficient government” which was consistent with past surveys, the new item of the “government’s handling of the COVID-19 situation” was considered an “important” or “very important” issue to 89 per cent of respondents. Three issues in GE2020 with the largest increase in salience from the 2015 survey were “cost of living”, “job situation” and the “need for different views in Parliament” – each with a 9 percentage point increase in the “very important” rating. This indicates that both bread-and-butter issues as well as political ideals mattered.

Second, “honesty” was rated most highly as a valued trait of political candidates, with a rise in rating of the trait of being a “fair person” from the 2015 survey.

Third, the internet became the most influential channel of communication, with Facebook as the top platform within this category. Instagram was ranked fourth, replacing Twitter which was in that spot in the 2015 survey. Dr Teo explained that this was due to political parties using Instagram as a key outreach tool in GE2020.

Fourth, Dr Teo noted that credibility rankings of political parties in the survey data corresponded to the ranking based on the number of votes each party received in GE2020. Overall, the People’s Action Party (PAP) was perceived to be the most credible, especially among respondents 55 years and above, whose highest level of education was PSLE or below, and females. Meanwhile, the Workers’ Party (WP) and the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) were credible especially among those 39 years and below, in the Service (PMET) class, new voters, with at least a secondary education, and males.

Fifth, in a cluster analysis that categorised respondents into Conservatives, Pluralists and Swing voters,¹ there were shifts in proportions belonging to each category as indicated in the diagram below. A higher proportion of Pluralists were those in youngest age band and the highest socio-economic segments.

¹ The cluster analysis respondents were grouped into three categories based on responses to five statements. Pluralists indicated a desire for a diversity of views, election opposition in Parliament and checks and balances in the political system, with changes in the election system, while Conservatives generally disagreed with these views. Meanwhile, the Swing category respondents held an “eclectic mix of views”.

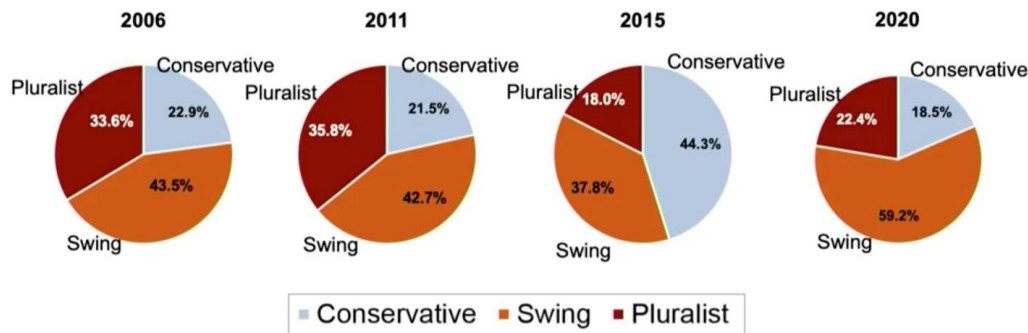
Cluster Analysis



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



Slide from Dr Teo's presentation highlighting the changes in political pluralism in Singapore from GE2006 to GE2020.

Finally, with regard to modality differences, respondents of the online survey were more likely to be Pluralists and feel strongly about fairness in policy, and were less likely to agree that Singapore had been well governed since GE2015 than the other respondents.

Dr Teo's presentation slides and the executive summary of the findings are on the [IPS website](#).

The Future for Opposition in Singapore

Addressing a different aspect of GE2020, Dr da Cunha assessed the election strategy of the political parties and discussed their future. He said that while GE2020 was a successful run for the WP, it was by no means a disaster for the PAP with its popular vote still above 60 per cent.

He argued that the result demonstrated that only moderate alternatives to the PAP could make headway. Singaporeans, he said, were generally politically conservative. He said that the WP was rational, responsible and respectable as it had set out to be, without a fourth "R" — radical. Parties like the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) that were viewed as radical would make less headway.

Looking ahead, Dr da Cunha said the PAP had to address squarely the reasons why voters moved away from the ruling party, which include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job security, the rising costs of living, the issue of decaying leases on HDB flats, citizens' access to their Central Provident Fund savings, among others. However, even if the PAP fought back at the "national level" through policy reforms, the WP's local strategy of retail politics and building a coalition of voters (rather than parties) would prevent WP from being too adversely

affected. When discussing the future of other opposition parties, such as the SDP, he said that such parties would be denied “the oxygen of publicity” which was reserved for parties with seats in Parliament.

The text from Dr da Cunha’s presentation can be [found on the IPS website](#).

A “New Normal Election”

Dr Lam described the results of the IPS Post-Election Survey as a “goldmine of information” forming a time series on voter attitudes. With hindsight, GE2020 should be understood as part of a trend in popular support for the PAP between GE2006 and GE2011, with its strongest showing in GE2015 being an anomaly.

More specifically, Dr Lam said GE2020 was part of the “new normal election” in three ways. First, the opposition was here to stay given the trend in support for political pluralism, he said. He disagreed with Dr da Cunha’s view on SDP. It enjoyed an improved showing in the single-member seat of Bukit Batok and also did well in Bukit Panjang. The party appealed to some and could not be dismissed so easily.

Second, he noted how social media had risen to become the most important channel of political communication over the years, which means the ruling party would no longer have a monopoly on the provision of information through mainstream media channels. It had to master the use of Internet-based platforms to engage the young and more demanding voters to maintain its majority hold in Parliament.

Third, he argued that in such “new normal elections”, parties needed to straddle both material concerns, such as job security and housing, as well as post-material aspirations and interests in order to secure support.

Noting that the theme of fairness in government policy and candidates’ traits ranked highly in the survey responses, Dr Lam suggested that the hold that candidates Ivan Lim and Raeesah Khan had on the electorate in GE2020 reflected this. It was therefore imperative for all parts of the Singapore governance system to be seen upholding this value of fairness too.

The Likelihood of a One-and-a-Half Party System

Dr Lam also addressed a common question of whether Singapore would arrive at a two-party system with a rotation of ruling parties in the near future. While this seemed unlikely, it was similarly unlikely for the PAP to have a monopoly in the House, he said. It was more likely that a “one-and-a-half party system” would emerge, similar to Japan from 1955 to 1993 where the key opposition party always held half the seats that the dominant Liberal Democratic Party did, which was no less democratic a situation. Dr Lam said it would be a “goldilocks” outcome for all: the PAP would remain the ruling party, providing stability in governance, while the WP would have sufficient representation to effectively provide a check and balance on the dominant PAP in Parliament. He also noted that this system would not preclude members of non-WP opposition parties from taking seats too.

How Asians View Democracy: Reflections from the Asian Barometer Survey

Professor Chu shared results and reflections from the [Asian Barometer Survey](#), a large-scale survey comprising five waves that focused on attitudes towards democracy in Asian countries. As data collection from Singapore from the most recent wave had been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Prof. Chu described longer trends using past data.

Prof. Chu stated that democracy was largely embraced by the majority of East Asian citizens, but there were some “puzzles” to resolve. First, citizens in Asian democracies had “mixed feelings about democracy, more so than citizens living under authoritarian and hybrid regimes”. While large proportions of respondents saw democracy as the best form of government, fewer thought it suited their countries.

Second, the data indicated that respondents from different countries used different benchmarks for democracy. When asked to rate their country’s level of democracy on a scale of 1 to 10, those living under democratic regimes tended to rate their own countries lower than citizens living in non-democratic regimes.

Third, Prof. Chu described how normative political theories typically predicted democratic regimes to be more legitimate than authoritarian ones, as “democracy is built on the consent of the ruled and universal suffrage”. However, in East Asia, hybrid and non-democratic governments had a higher level of popular legitimacy than democratic ones.

Prof. Chu also said that the term “democracy” meant different things to different people, and that in Asia, the substantive aspects of delivering good governance and social equity mattered more than the procedural aspects of democracy in their concept of the system. He added, “If democracy no longer delivers, then people would withdraw their support for the system.”

The slides from Prof. Chu’s presentation are [available for viewing on the IPS website](#).

Fairness in the Election System

During the Q&A session, the panellists were asked what reforms they would recommend to ensure a fairer election.

Dr da Cunha described the Singapore elections as “free but not necessarily fair”, noting that the Elections Department and the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) were under the purview of the Prime Minister’s Office. He said one change could be for new boundaries to be announced at least a year before the election is called, giving all parties the opportunity to cultivate the ground in new constituencies. However, Dr da Cunha also stated that the understanding of “fairness” was quite subjective. While he believed opposition parties did not have the same “set of cards to play in the election”, he said he would not focus too much on whether the system was unfair because the WP had been able to convert the game into “a winning hand in some respects”. He also mentioned alternative electoral systems to the first-past-the-post system in his remarks.

Dr Lam voiced his support for having an independent electoral commission. He said the system had been criticised for gerrymandering although it had become less “blatantly unfair”. He reiterated that effort should be made to ensure the system was perceived as being fair.

Prof. Chu agreed with Dr da Cunha that caution was needed in reforming the system. The first-past-the-post system often led to a strong mandate that favoured mainstream candidates. He also believed it was possible to improve the system “on the margins”, by ensuring opposition candidates and parties received more subsidies for what they did, for instance.

Another question was whether the Group Representation Constituencies (GRC) system should be replaced fully by Single Member Constituencies (SMC). Dr Lam said it was better to fine-tune the system to ensure more effective representation of the one-fourth proportion of Singapore citizens who were minorities, meaning that GRCs would comprise only three or four members with one being a minority. He also said it was important to promote female representation in Parliament. Dr Koh noted there had not been any six-member GRCs in GE2020, in line with the Prime Minister’s call to the EBRC to reduce the average size of GRCs over the years.

Feedback System

Another question centred on how to improve the responsiveness of parties and the government to the ground. Dr da Cunha said that the government could replace government parliamentary committees, which were PAP-organised committees, with select committees led by members drawn across Parliament who would hold public hearings of views from experts and stakeholders across Singapore. This would facilitate greater participatory democracy in between elections.

Dr Lam seconded Dr da Cunha’s suggestion, describing how the Japanese government had various subcommittees for different issues in which opposition politicians made representation and contributed to fierce policy debates. Dr Koh noted that that Leader of the Opposition Pritam Singh of WP had stated he would like to see greater use of such select committees.

Prof. Chu said that governments could now proactively use big data methods to grasp sentiment and concerns on the ground, and that such data should be made publicly available and freely accessible.

Materialism and Post-Materialism

The panellists were asked how the government and political parties should strike the balance between addressing material and post-material issues. Dr Lam said that materialist concerns such as job security, transportation, housing and the like, were a priority to all, while post-materialist issues including those to do with identity were of special interest to younger, well-educated, better travelled Singaporeans.

Dr da Cunha also stated that materialist issues in Singapore were still very important and were brought into sharper relief by the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Dr Teo pointed out that the pandemic accentuated the divide between materialist and post-materialist individuals, where an individual’s status and level of comfort would certainly shape his or her political views. Policies were needed to ameliorate social divides in society.

The Role of Media

When Prof. Chu was asked how media use in Singapore elections compared with experiences elsewhere, he reminded the audience that social media was important not just as a source for information, but also a place where people could connect with like-minded individuals. They provided a platform for minority and fringe political groups to broadcast information. He also pointed out the downsides to it, such as the problem of echo chambers and digital tribalism.

Prof. Chu explained that traditionally, mainstream media would take on more of a gatekeeping role, promoting basic values and standards in its delivery of information. Moving forward, he believed mainstream media should be more balanced and professional, and that everyone should be reminded that social media cannot “play magic”.

Dr Koh referred to the survey results, which showed that while Facebook was seen as the most important internet communication platform shaping the vote, mass and mainstream media was also important, with Channel NewsAsia ranking second after Facebook. Dr Lam believed mainstream media platforms would still be important but less effective in shaping the audience’s views in a specific direction, as they tend to appeal to diverse audiences with a wide range of perspectives.

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