

Left or right? IPS survey finds almost half of Singaporeans ‘undecided’ on political stance

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SINGAPORE, Feb 3 — While almost half of Singaporeans were somewhat undecided on their political position, nearly a third leaned towards the left, outnumbering the one-fifth who preferred right-wing politics, a survey has found.

By contrast, Singapore’s Southeast Asian neighbours, including Malaysia and Thailand, had larger shares of their population leaning towards the right. The survey, led by researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), describes those identifying with the left as typically supporting social equality, liberty, progress and reform, while those preferring right-wing politics tend to support a social hierarchy, order and tradition.

It should be noted, however, that different societies have varying ideas of what constitutes “conservative” and “liberal” policies. Therefore, such comparisons should be used only to see how sure respondents are of their own political stances, based on local understandings of the left and right, the researchers noted. Overall, Singaporeans rated politics the least important of their priorities among the options presented in the survey, which included friends, family, religion and wealth.

The survey, titled “Our Singaporean Values”, is part of the 2020 instalment of the global World Values Survey, which takes in 80 countries and studies the changing values of individuals and their impact on social and political life.

The survey asks people in the various countries about their thoughts on a range of issues, including politics, their attitudes towards work, family and gender equality. Singapore had previously participated in the 2012 and 2002 iterations of the survey.

The latest survey includes responses from 2,012 Singaporeans in a nationally-representative sample. Interviews were conducted face-to-face from November 2019 to March last year.

Younger Singaporeans identify more with left-wing politics

Overall, the survey found that 20.8 per cent of respondents identified themselves with right-wing politics, 30.6 per cent with the left and the remaining “somewhat undecided”.

In contrast, neighbouring Malaysia and Thailand had a higher percentage (around 30 per cent) of respondents identifying with right-wing politics.

The survey also found that younger Singaporeans identified more with left-wing politics than older Singaporeans, in line with general trends across the globe.

While 42.7 per cent of respondents aged between 21 and 35 said they identified with more left-wing politics, only 22.7 per cent of those aged above 65 did so. Some 15 per cent of respondents aged between 21 and 35 said they identified with the right, well below the 31.8

per cent of those aged above 65 who did so. Outside of these preferences, a large proportion of each age cohort indicated that they were undecided, or preferred not to associate themselves with a particular political stance. Dr Teo Kay Key, one of the survey researchers from IPS, told TODAY that this could be due Singaporeans not understanding what “left-wing” and “right-wing” politics mean, or a desire to adopt a centrist stance rather than choosing sides.

When comparing across education levels, the survey found that lower-educated respondents were less likely to support left-leaning political stances compared with the rest of the respondents.

For instance, one-quarter of those with qualifications from the Institute of Technical Education or lower indicated a left-leaning orientation. Conversely, one-third or more of respondents with a diploma and higher qualifications indicated the same.

Other findings

The survey also asked respondents for their views on democracy, the importance of honest elections and their views on other modes of governance.

Perceptions of democracy

No definition of a democratic system was provided to respondents when they were asked for their views.

- Over 90 per cent of respondents indicated that a democratic political system is fairly good or very good
- This proportion was similar to responses provided in previous iterations of the survey
- It was also similar to other countries such as Japan, China and Sweden
- Those with higher education levels, higher income and who lived in larger housing types indicated a greater preference for a democratic system

Importance of honest elections

- There was overwhelming consensus among respondents (95.4 per cent) on the importance of honest elections
- Education and age were positively correlated with perceptions of the importance of honest elections
- 76.2 per cent of those aged between 51 and 65 rated honest elections as “very important” compared to 60.4 per cent of those aged between 21 and 35 who did so

- 73.2 per cent of those with a bachelor's degree and above said honest elections are very important, compared to between 65 and 70 per cent of those with lower educational qualifications

Essential characteristics of a democracy

The survey asked respondents to indicate whether certain practices, such as choosing leaders in free elections, and men and women having the same rights, are essential characteristics for democracy.

- The top five essential characteristics among Singaporean respondents (from highest to lowest) were: 1. Women having the same rights as men; 2. Choosing leaders in free elections; 3. Civil rights and protection from state oppression; 4. Taxing the rich and subsidising the poor and 5. Receiving state aid for unemployment.
- Respondents who had higher educational qualifications or income, or lived in larger housing types, were more likely to indicate civil rights as an essential characteristic of democracy
- Respondents who were more educated, affluent and older were more likely to feel that free elections are essential in a democracy
- Older respondents were more likely to indicate that taxing the rich and subsidising the poor are essential to democracy, with 63.3 per cent of those aged above 65 indicating so, compared to 53.8 per cent of those aged 21 to 35
- Overall, the study said the results show that Singaporeans' understanding of democracy did not deviate from a conventional understanding of democracy

Obedience to political leaders

- 35.2 per cent of respondents felt that people obeying their rulers is essential to democracy, a similar proportion to those who were undecided on the question
- Older respondents were more likely to indicate obedience as essential to democracy, with 46.7 per cent of those aged above 65 doing so, compared with 24.7 per cent of those aged between 21 and 35
- Those with higher education levels were less likely to regard obedience as essential to democracy. About 30 per cent of those with a bachelor's degree or higher indicated it is essential, compared to about 45 per cent of those with secondary school education and below

Alternative modes of governance

- Technocracy, where experts rather than government leaders are decision-makers, was the second-most positively viewed mode of governance after democracy among Singaporean respondents
- Just under one-third of respondents indicated positive perceptions of autocratic governance, such as having a strong leader who does not bother with government and elections. This is a relatively higher proportion compared to other polities globally