

Hougang voters value honesty, integrity most in candidates

Being scandal-free ranked low in poll

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For undergraduate Edwin Lim, 25, honesty and integrity are must-have qualities in political candidates.

Said Mr Lim, who is a Hougang resident: "Admitting when they are wrong or have made mistakes shows strong moral character.

"Capability will bring a good politician to the stage, but it is honesty and integrity that will carry him through."

His view is echoed by many Hougang residents polled by my paper recently. In the street poll of 60 Singaporeans who are eligible to vote in the Hougang by-election on May 26, 31 respondents or 52 per cent chose honesty and integrity as the most important quality that political candidates should possess. This was consistent across all respondents, aged from 24 to 70.

People's Action Party candidate Desmond Choo is up against Workers' Party (WP) candidate Png Eng Huat in the by-election.

"Obviously if a candidate wants to run in the election, he has to be honest and have integrity because he would be serving the people," said a 51-year-old wharf clerk, who wanted to be known only as Mr Harun.

In the poll, respondents were asked to rank six qualities that they value in candidates, in order of importance, from one to six (see graphic above). They were polled over two days, in blocks located at Hougang Central and at bus stops in Hougang Avenue 5.

Following closely behind honesty and integrity were the candidates' ability to deliver on their promises to residents. A total of 11 respondents ranked this as the most important quality.

One respondent who chose this over the top-ranked quality was housewife Tan Guat Mui, 45, who felt that it was an "obvious" choice.

"They need to do whatever they promise us they would do," said Madam Tan, who strongly believes that candidates should not make empty promises.

Madam Tan and 28 others in the poll ranked low the quality that candidates must not be involved in any scandal, be it extramarital affairs or criminal records.

Madam Tan said that "it is a personal thing" and should not take precedence in dictating one's decision to vote for them.

Echoing her sentiments was Madam Jeannie Koh, 45, who felt that "everyone should be given a chance".

Of all respondents, only four ranked this as the most important quality they look for in candidates, which makes it the second-lowest-ranked quality.

The only quality ranked lower was the credentials of candidates – whether they have high education qualifications and hold an important position in a company. Only three respondents ranked this top.

A candidate's sincerity and being a familiar face on the ground were ranked third and fourth respectively, garnering six and five votes.

Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "I think, generally, we have been socialised to recognise that (honesty and integrity) are important qualities in MPs. We had a reminder from the WP last night (last Saturday) that some of its leaders have been found wanting."

"They held it up as one of the most important qualities. In fact, it's the same anywhere else in the world."

Dr Terence Chong, regional social and cultural studies coordinator at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said he did not think "people are very disturbed (by scandals) as long as the person involved is removed, or he resigns".

"I think people are forgiving in that sense," he said.

He pointed out that honesty and integrity are "basic qualities" which candidates should have.

Dr Chong added: "The candidates should not be corrupt."

Additional reporting by Chan Choong Han and Lisa Oon