GE 2006: The other answers to what voters care about *

IPS survey shows personal 'pocketbook' issues not even among top 5 issues of concern

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The Straits Times, 3 June 2006

AFTER Singapore's general election of May 6, the Institute of Policy Studies commissioned a survey to find answers to some of the burning questions we usually have around election time.

Which issues shape voters' decisions on who they will support? What do they look for in candidates? What channels of knowledge and information do they tap? Are there differences between the opinions of the post-independence generation and that of the pre-independence generation? What about the different socio-economic classes and ethnic groups?

The survey, conducted between May 8 and May 20, polled 985 Singapore citizens aged 21 and above. Polling was done by telephone. Quotas for the sample were set to reflect the demographic profile of the voting population, based on the 2000 Census.

Voters and non-voters were polled in almost equal numbers, in line with the fact that only 52 per cent of the voting population actually got to vote on May 6.

The survey results help to refine certain notions we have about the Singaporean voter.

Key issues

THE cost of living, the job situation and upgrading were found not to be issues of primary concern. Personal 'pocketbook' issues were not even among the top five issues of concern.

Perhaps this was because GE 2006 was held on the back of strong economic and job growth, and there were only certain segments of the population that faced real job and income insecurity.

The top concerns were the need for an efficient government, fairness of government policy, the need for checks and balances in Parliament, the need for different views in Parliament and the specific personality of candidates.

The first issue - efficient government - mattered to virtually everyone surveyed, while the other four were ranked especially by those in the 30- to 39-year-old age bracket, the middle-middle income bracket ($5,000-$6,999) and those in what we called the service occupational class,

comprising senior executives, professionals, technicians and supervisors.

On what voters looked for in candidates, credentials, experience in grassroots and community work, and a candidate's party were not the most critical considerations. What mattered most were the candidate's honesty, efficiency, commitment, ability to treat everyone fairly, sense of empathy and other people skills.

The virtue of being a 'fair person', like the other qualities, was of universal appeal, but especially so among the 30- to 39-year-olds.

Empathy was especially important to the Malays and Indians.

The Chinese, and young voters, were least concerned about credentials and party affiliations compared to other groups.

Newspapers and local television were, not surprisingly, the primary means by which people obtained information to form their opinions.

However, what was surprising was that election rallies, and door-to-door visits by candidates and their grassroots workers, came a close second.

Singaporean voters value the personal contacts that candidates and party workers seek to establish with them and want to listen to candidates explain what they have to offer, and see how they argue or defend their platforms.

Print media and TV were important especially to the 21- to 39-year-olds, and less so for those aged 65 and over.

Post-independence respondents ranked the rallies, door-to-door visits, and visits by grassroots workers more highly than pre-independence respondents. Likewise, those in the higher socio-economic classes ranked these higher than did those in the lower socio-economic classes. Malays, especially, felt that the personal visits were important.

The post-independence respondents placed more emphasis on party literature, word of mouth and the Internet.

These informal and social channels also mattered more to the Indians when compared with the Chinese.

Since the theme of 'fairness' seemed to be important during the campaigning period, the survey sought to find out if voters felt that the election system was a fair and legitimate one, and thus accepted the outcome and the resulting political system.

One question in the survey described the 'votes for upgrading' strategy as one in which the ruling party sought to reward those who supported it, and asked respondents how they felt about this. Also, did respondents think that there was a need for electoral reform?

Respondents generally agreed that the 'whole election system is fair to all political parties'.

Those in the post-independence band, the high service class and the highest household income category were more likely to disagree with this statement.

Overall, respondents were less agreeable to the statement that the 'votes for upgrading' policy was fair.

This sentiment was more pronounced among the 40- to 54-year-olds, those in the service class and the highest household income bands.

There was general agreement that there was no need to change the election system. However, those in the 21- to 54-year-old bands and those in the higher socio-economic classes were more likely to disagree with this.

While there was agreement that there was no need to change the election system, there was universal support for the statement that it was important to have elected opposition party members in Parliament.

There was also fair support for the role of Nominated Members of Parliament, indicating that alternative views and voices are seen to be valuable in our political system.

Desire for pluralism

HOWEVER, while it was clear from the survey that a good many feel that the status quo suits them, there was also an unmistakable desire for more political pluralism in Singapore.

It is often assumed that this sentiment is prevalent among the post-independence generation and the 'Western-educated'. We decided to delve deeper. We clustered the respondents according to how they rated six statements: More checks and balances, more alternative views, need for reform of the electoral system, need for elected opposition members in Parliament, fairness of the electoral system, and the 'votes for upgrading' policy.

We labelled those who preferred the status quo Conservatives, those who preferred change and diversity Pluralists, and those in-between as belonging to a Swing category.

Our findings indicate that the difference between the pre- and post-independence voters is not as stark as thought. In fact, a significant proportion of the 40- to 54-year-olds and a marginally higher percentage of the pre-independence respondents are in the Pluralist category.

The largest proportion of both pre- and post-independence respondents is in the Swing category. Between the two groups, there are more among the post-independence respondents who do not indicate a preference

either towards greater pluralism or preserving the status quo. They probably take other factors not incorporated in our model into greater account or are simply not consistent in the way that we expect them to be in this model.

Finally, support for the status quo increases as we move up the age bands from 55 onwards. These are the Conservatives. It is the smallest proportion of both the pre- and post-independence respondents.

Our survey shows that Singaporean voters value good governance. However, good governance is seen as encompassing not only efficiency, but also accountability and fairness.

They vote to secure such a government, and would protest against those who do not practise this more holistic set of virtues in governance.

Hence, the paradox that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong referred to in his swearing-in speech this week, that even those who voted for the opposition want the PAP in Government.

Singaporeans wish for their representatives to be honest and efficient, fair in their treatment of constituents, and have a good sense of empathy. Credentials are either truly less important or taken for granted.

Given that our survey found 44.4 per cent of our post-independence and 35.7 per cent of our pre-independence respondents in the Swing category, change in the political system may well depend on how they vote.

However, with 32.4 per cent among the post-independence group and 34.6 per cent among the pre-independence respondents valuing the need for greater political pluralism, and given that this proclivity increases with educational achievement and socio-economic status, the trend is clear.

Moving forward, the governing party has to demonstrate its commitment to an 'open and inclusive' Singapore if it wishes to retain its political primacy. That is the paradox it faces as it so effectively delivers the goods of social development to Singaporeans in the coming years.

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. The full survey results can be found at http://www.ips.org.sg

* The highlighted portions have been revised to reflect what it should have been and not as published in the newspaper.