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Citizen Engagement and Collective Action in Singapore: Key Findings and Implications for Public Engagement

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RECOMMENDATION

This policy brief lays out design principles for efforts encouraging participation in civic engagements, based on a nationally representative survey of 1,981 Singapore residents in late 2024. The study introduces the concept of *civic outlook*, capturing how citizens think about cooperation across government, business, and society, and whether they believe collective action can meaningfully shape outcomes. The recommended design principles are:

1. Segment citizens by civic outlook, not demographics.
2. Match engagement formats to efficacy beliefs – whether participation makes a difference.
3. Do not over-rely on government-led consultation and include non-governmental entry points.
4. Treat scepticism as informed constraint and selectiveness, not disengagement.
5. Use diversity of civic outlook as a design asset by having different approaches to participation to sustain legitimacy over time.

CONTEXT & ANALYSIS

Why civic engagement outcomes vary despite high institutional confidence

Singapore's engagement challenge is not participation per se, but alignment. While opportunities for consultation and co-creation have expanded, citizens respond unevenly to these efforts. Some engage readily, some selectively and a minority remain sceptical of participatory processes altogether. These differences are not explained by age, income or education alone.

This study introduces the concept of **civic outlook** to explain these divergent responses. Civic outlook captures how citizens think about cooperation across government, business and society, and whether they believe collective action can meaningfully shape outcomes. These beliefs shape not only whether people participate, but also how and under what conditions they are willing to do so.

Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 1,981 Singapore residents in late 2024, the analysis identified two dimensions of civic outlook and five distinct

citizen profiles. Two findings are particularly salient for policymakers. First, civic outlook cuts across traditional demographic categories, limiting the effectiveness of demographic targeting alone. Second, confidence in government, business, society and individual action varies systematically across citizen groups, with direct implications for how engagement strategies should be designed and sequenced.

Civic outlook captures how citizens view cooperation and influence

To make sense of how citizens approach engagement, the study introduces the concept of civic outlook. Civic outlook captures two related but distinct orientations: how citizens view cooperation across government, business and society, and whether they believe collective action can meaningfully shape outcomes. These orientations matter because **engagement initiatives implicitly assume both a willingness to work across differences and a belief that participation has impact**. Where these assumptions do not hold, engagement efforts are less likely to resonate.

Civic outlook comprises two independent dimensions. **Pluralistic Coexistence** reflects support for multi-stakeholder coordination and the accommodation of diverse interests, while **Collective Agency** reflects beliefs about citizens' capacity to influence national outcomes through collective action. Importantly, these dimensions do not always move in lockstep. Citizens may value pluralism but doubt their influence, or feel efficacious while preferring more bounded, localised forms of cooperation. Treating civic outlook as multidimensional therefore reveals patterns that are obscured when

engagement attitudes are assessed as a single continuum.

Five civic outlooks shape how Singaporeans approach engagement

Analysis of civic outlook reveals five distinct citizen clusters, each defined by a different configuration of Pluralistic Coexistence and Collective Agency. Together, these profiles illustrate why engagement initiatives resonate unevenly across the population.

Grounded Traditionalists (25.5%) score highest on both dimensions. This group skews older, with respondents aged 65 and above and retirees overrepresented. Their strong endorsement of pluralistic cooperation, coupled with high confidence in collective action, reflects alignment with existing institutional arrangements shaped by lived experience.

Cautious Optimists (23.4%) occupy the attitudinal centre, with moderate scores on both dimensions. This cluster closely mirrors the demographic composition of Singapore's adult population and shows no distinctive demographic signature. Their positioning suggests neither disengagement nor uncritical endorsement, but a measured and evaluative stance towards cooperation and participation.

Steady Strivers (23.0%) combine high support for pluralistic coordination with low confidence in collective agency. While they value multi-stakeholder frameworks, they express doubts about whether individual participation meaningfully shapes outcomes. This configuration points to endorsement of pluralism in principle alongside scepticism about personal influence.

Heartland Caretakers (10.3%), the smallest cluster, score lowest on Pluralistic Coexistence but moderately on Collective Agency. They display the most distinctive demographic profile, with higher Malay representation, lower educational attainment, concentration in middle-income brackets and overrepresentation of homemakers. Their civic outlook appears grounded in local, relational and community-based concerns rather than broad, multi-stakeholder engagement.

Sceptical Realists (17.9%) score below average on Pluralistic Coexistence and lowest on Collective Agency. This group is younger and more highly educated than average, with elevated unemployment. Their configuration suggests scepticism towards collective arrangements and participatory impact, reflecting doubt rather than apathy.

Table 1: Cluster Sizes and Construct Scores

Cluster	n (%)	Pluralistic Coexistence M (SD)	Collective Agency M (SD)
1	505 (25.5)	5.41 (.442)	5.00 (.458)
2	463 (23.4)	4.13 (.417)	4.35 (.399)
3	456 (23.0)	5.17 (.420)	3.48 (.609)
4	203 (10.3)	2.36 (.630)	4.14 (.887)
5	354 (17.9)	3.71 (.588)	3.10 (.511)

N = 1981

Civic outlook cuts across demographics

A central finding is the weak relationship between demographic characteristics and civic outlook. While statistically significant associations are observed between cluster membership and variables such ethnicity, age, education, income and employment status, effect sizes are consistently small (Cramér’s $V = .04-.09$), indicating negligible to weak associations by conventional benchmarks.

This has direct implications for engagement practice. Demographic targeting alone is unlikely to reach specific civic outlook profiles. A tertiary-educated professional in their thirties is nearly as likely to be a Grounded Traditionalist as a Sceptical Realist. Engagement strategies premised primarily on age, income, or education risk overlooking substantial

attitudinal diversity within demographic groups. More effective engagement design should therefore focus on citizens’ substantive concerns and beliefs about efficacy, regardless of who holds them.

Analyses of the two constructs separately reinforce this conclusion. For Pluralistic Coexistence, only age and income showed statistically significant associations, both with small effect sizes ($\eta^2 = .004$ and $.010$, respectively). For Collective Agency, several demographic variables reached statistical significance, including ethnicity, age, education, income and employment status, yet even the largest effect (employment status, $\eta^2 = .011$) remained small. Individuals with similar demographic backgrounds can nonetheless hold markedly different configurations of pluralistic orientation and efficacy beliefs. Table 2 summarises the associations

between demographic variables and cluster membership.

Table 2: Chi-Square Tests of Association Between Demographic Variables and Cluster Membership

Variable	χ^2	df	p	Cramér's V
Ethnicity	24.0	8	.002	.08
Age	33.5	12	< .001	.08
Gender	5.6	4	.235	.05
Education	30.6	8	< .001	.09
Income	34.3	8	< .001	.09
Employment status	57.0	24	< .001	.09
Housing	6.8	8	.554	.04

N = 1,981

High trust is widespread, but unevenly distributed across citizen groups

The survey assessed confidence in four sectors’ capacity to address future challenges: government, business, civil society and individual action. A consistent hierarchy emerged: government commands the highest confidence (M = 4.47 on a 6-point scale), followed by individual action (M = 4.37), with business and society statistically indistinguishable (both M = 4.20). This pattern holds across nearly all 14 trend areas examined.

Sectoral confidence varies substantially by civic outlook. Cluster membership explains between 14 and 18 per cent of variance across the four domains, with the largest differentiation observed for confidence in government ($\eta p^2 = .177$). Grounded Traditionalists express the highest confidence across all sectors, including a mean government confidence of 4.88. At the other end of the spectrum, Sceptical Realists report the lowest confidence, with mean government confidence of 3.76 — more than a full point lower on the six-point scale.

A particularly salient distinction concerns the relative positioning of confidence in government and individual action. For most clusters, confidence in government significantly exceeds confidence in individual action. Among Sceptical Realists, however, confidence in government and individual action is statistically equivalent. This pattern suggests that for this group, government-led engagement is not viewed as inherently more legitimate or effective than individual action.

Across four of the five clusters — Grounded Traditionalists, Cautious Optimists, Steady Strivers and Heartland Caretakers — approximately 80 per cent of respondents expressed moderate-to-high confidence in government, business and societal institutions. Substantially lower confidence was concentrated in the educated Sceptical Realists cluster. This distribution highlights a core challenge for participatory governance: engagement strategies must simultaneously serve a trusting majority receptive to sustained participation and a more sceptical minority

unlikely to respond to conventional consultation formats. Table 3 presents mean confidence scores by sector and cluster.

Table 3: Means of Sectoral Confidence by Cluster

Comparison	Grounded Tradn'ts	Cautious Optimists	Steady Strivers	Heartland Caretakers	Sceptical Realists
Government	4.88 (0.03)	4.47 (0.03)	4.54 (0.04)	4.55 (0.06)	3.76 (0.05)
Business	4.62 (0.03)	4.17 (0.03)	4.24 (0.04)	4.36 (0.06)	3.48 (0.05)
Society	4.61 (0.03)	4.16 (0.03)	4.23 (0.04)	4.38 (0.06)	3.54 (0.05)
Individual	4.76 (0.03)	4.36 (0.03)	4.39 (0.04)	4.45 (0.06)	3.76 (0.05)

Standard errors in parentheses

Engagement works best when matched to citizens' civic outlook

The findings suggest that effective public engagement depends on aligning participation formats with citizens' outlooks, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach. Two dimensions are particularly salient: *engagement depth* (ranging from service delivery and transactions, through consultation and

involvement, to co-creation of policies and programmes) and *topic scale* (from individual concerns, through community and interest-based concerns, to national and cross-sectoral challenges). Crossing these dimensions yields an engagement-scale matrix within which different participation formats and citizen clusters can be situated.

Figure 1. Engagement-Scale Matrix

Engagement Depth	Individual	Community / Interest	National / Cross-sectoral
Co-creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal action plans • SkillsFuture training roadmaps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community gardens • Interest-based networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen juries • Alliances for Action • Our SG Conversation
Consultation & Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal feedback • Service suggestions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town halls • Community dialogues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public consultations • REACH sessions
Service Delivery & Transactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital services usage • Information access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community facilities • Grassroots programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National infrastructure • Cross-agency services

Note. Adapted from Yip (2024). Topic scale increases left to right; engagement depth increases bottom to top.

Full-spectrum engagement → *Invest*: Grounded Traditionalists and to a lesser extent, Cautious Optimists span the full matrix. Their combination of pluralistic orientations, efficacy beliefs and sectoral confidence makes them receptive to engagement at multiple scales and depths. Open-ended exercises like Forward Singapore and intensive deliberative formats including citizen juries, align well with their orientations. For Cautious Optimists, participation is more likely when engagement objectives and expected outcomes are clearly articulated.

Community-focused engagement → *Anchor locally*: Heartland Caretakers are most responsive to engagement anchored in local, practical concerns. Their civic orientation favours neighbourhood-level issues, service delivery and community-based initiatives over abstract national policy discussions. Engagement that connects directly to everyday caregiving and community needs is likely to resonate more strongly than cross-sectoral consultations.

Conditional engagement → *Demonstrate impact*: Steady Strivers endorse pluralistic frameworks but doubt their own influence within them. They are more likely to participate when engagement formats make individual contributions visible and consequential. Targeted deliberation mechanisms with clear links to concrete decisions — such as topical citizen juries tied to specific policy outcomes — may be particularly effective for this group.

Transactional engagement → *Lower the cost of participation*: Sceptical Realists show the weakest orientation towards sustained participation. Their equivalent confidence in government and individual action suggests that government-led consultation does not automatically confer legitimacy. Engagement with this group is most likely when issues are personally salient and when participation demonstrably produces tangible outcomes.

Finally, engagement need not be led by government alone. As policy challenges grow more complex, other sectors can play leading roles in convening, service delivery and issue-based mobilisation, with government acting as funder, enabler and coordinator. Models such as Alliances for Action illustrate how a diversified engagement ecosystem can create multiple entry points for participation, allowing citizens to engage at scales and depths aligned with their civic outlooks rather than predetermined formats.

CONCLUSION

Civic outlook matters more than who citizens are

This study shows that citizen diversity in Singapore is better understood through civic outlook than through demographic categories. The configuration of Pluralistic Coexistence and Collective Agency captures meaningful attitudinal variation that age, income and education alone do not explain. The five clusters identified represent distinct orientations towards participation, each carrying different implications for how engagement should be designed.

The overall picture is optimistic. Most clusters express openness to participation and confidence in collective problem-solving. At the same time, the concentration of scepticism among younger, educated respondents signals a potential faultline. Effective participatory governance must therefore accommodate both a trusting majority receptive to sustained engagement and an influential sceptical minority unlikely to respond to conventional formats.

Singapore's expanding repertoire of participatory mechanisms — from community dialogues and service-level feedback to citizen juries and cross-sectoral alliances — offers multiple points of alignment between civic outlook and engagement opportunity. The diversity of civic outlooks identified here should be treated not as a constraint, but as a strategic resource: one that can be

harnessed through engagement approaches calibrated to how citizens think about cooperation, agency and impact as the nation confronts future challenges.

What this means for policymakers

1. Segment by civic outlook, not demographics.

Age, income and education explain little about how citizens orient towards participation. Engagement strategies based solely on demographic targeting will miss substantial attitudinal variation. **Designing for beliefs about cooperation and agency is more predictive than designing for who citizens are.**

2. Match engagement formats to efficacy beliefs. Citizens differ less in what they care about than in whether they believe participation makes a difference.

High-efficacy clusters respond to deliberative and co-creation formats. Low-efficacy clusters engage only when impact is visible and immediate. Making outcomes explicit matters as much as inviting participation.

3. Do not over-rely on government-led consultation.

For a sizeable minority, government does not command greater legitimacy than individual action. Engagement ecosystems should therefore include non-governmental entry points — community groups, interest networks and cross-sector partnerships — with government playing a facilitative rather than the leading role.

4. Treat scepticism as informed constraint, not disengagement.

Younger, educated sceptics are not apathetic; they are selective. They engage transactionally or when issues are personally salient. Over-promising participation without clear impact risks erosion of trust.

5. Use diversity of civic outlook as a design asset.

Singapore's mix of trusting, cautious, conditional and sceptical citizens enables different engagement modes to run in parallel. A multi-modal approach to participation, rather than a single flagship exercise, is more likely to sustain legitimacy over time.

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