

Singapore's PAP sees dip in credibility with voters while opposition Workers' Party makes gains: survey

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- An Institute of Policy Studies survey found more voters want political pluralism after some 60 years of one-party rule
- While the 4,000 respondents were most positive about the PAP compared to other parties, the main opposition Workers' Party narrowed the gap with the ruling party in terms of perceptions of credibility

More voters want political pluralism after some 60 years of one-party rule, according to a survey conducted by a Singapore think tank after the July general election, which saw the highest number of opposition politicians elected since independence.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that respondents who could be described as "Conservative" – those who disagreed that political pluralism was valuable and Singapore's electoral system should change to make that happen – fell to 18.5 per cent from 44.3 per cent seen in a questionnaire conducted after the 2015 election.

The "Pluralist" group – whose views were opposite of "Conservatives" – rose to 22.4 per cent from 18 per cent in 2015. Those in the "Swing" category, with a mix of views, increased sharply from 37.8 per cent to 59.2 per cent.

The survey found that while "Pluralists" tended to be younger and in a higher socio-economic group – in terms of educational attainment, housing type and household income – there was also an increase in such views among those in other socio-economic groups, including those who did not have a university degree and reported a lower household income.

The research team, led by Deputy Director (Research) Gillian Koh, attributed these trends to two reasons, with one being the consistent support of pluralism among those with higher socio-economic status. But the second factor was due to bread-and-butter concerns among groups more vulnerable to the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, they said.

"Such respondents felt there was a need for political opposition in parliament. If indeed so, this second factor will be specific to the difficult economic conditions surrounding [this year's election]," the researchers wrote.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in announcing the election in June, said the vote would "clear the decks" and give the new government a fresh five-year mandate to steward the republic through a turbulent external environment and its worst economic crisis.

The People's Action Party (PAP), which went up against 12 small opposition parties, ended up winning almost 90 per cent – or 83 – of the 93 seats contested on July 10 but secured 61.24 per cent of all votes cast, an almost nine-per cent drop from the 2015 poll.

The main opposition party, the Workers' Party (WP), won another multi-seat constituency, bringing the elected opposition representation in parliament to 10 seats, an all-time high.

WP also improved on its share of the popular vote, with its 60 per cent win in Aljunied – a constituency it had held since 2011 – comparable to, and in some cases, better than the PAP's performance in several areas. Analysts had previously said this reflected a desire by voters for a check on the PAP government.

Some 4,000 respondents completed the IPS survey – its fourth in a series of post-election questionnaires that began after the 2006 election – in July and August via landline phones, mobile phones and the internet. The earlier surveys had 2,000 and fewer respondents contacted by landline phones.

This year, researchers chose to use additional modes of data collection to discern if there were differences in responses.

Teo Kay Key, a postdoctoral fellow at IPS, said online respondents tended to be Pluralists and were “less likely to agree that Singapore has been well-governed since the 2015 general election”.

This group would likely feel “strongly” that fairness in government policy is a priority, she said.

Respondents were also asked about the six top performing parties in the GE and if they were “a credible party”. They were most positive about the PAP. However, the proportion of those who agreed or strongly agreed that the PAP was credible fell by seven percentage points to 86 per cent compared to 2015, while the rating for the WP rose by eight percentage points to 79 per cent, narrowing the gap with the PAP.

Independent political analyst Derek da Cunha said the WP had presented itself as a “rational, responsible and respected” party, while Lam Peng Er, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, said while it was not surprising that the PAP was seen as the most credible, “it really has no room for complacency”.

The reduction in the PAP's credibility rating came from those in the 40-49 age group, lower-income households, those who lived in smaller public housing flats, and men. The groups who felt more positive about the WP than in the previous survey included smaller flat-dwellers, women, and those working as professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs).

As for the new opposition Progress Singapore Party – fronted by former PAP stalwart Tan Cheng Bock and supported by PM Lee's estranged brother Lee Hsien Yang – 60 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it was credible. First-time voters and those with secondary-level education and above were among those more inclined to feel this way.

In terms of influential issues in the election, researchers found that the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, along with concerns arising from job security and cost of living, had featured strongly.

Lam said the election results showed the opposition was here to stay and the 2015 election – where voters backed the PAP in larger-than-usual numbers in a poll held six months after Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew's death – was a true “anomaly”.

While the ruling party could expect to remain in power, it would have to contend with a lower vote share and fewer parliamentary seats, especially if it “does not relate better with [the] younger, better-educated and more demanding electorate”, Lam said.

He pointed to how the Singapore electorate was now more concerned with not only traditional issues, such as immigration, housing and jobs, but matters such as gender and minority rights, the environment, and having a “louder voice” in parliament.

But it was unlikely that Singapore would follow American or Malaysian system of having rotating ruling parties, Lam said.

The city state was more likely to have a “one-and-a-half party system” the way Japan did from 1955 to 1993, when the Liberal Democratic Party was in power and the Japan Socialist Party was the dominant opposition force.