

## **High proportion of neutral responses in poll shows S'poreans' mixed views on foreigners here: Experts**

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A new poll finding that 49 per cent of Singaporeans are neutral about foreigners here suggests that many people here have mixed views on the matter, said observers.

Just 14 per cent of respondents in the telephone poll of 2,100 Singaporeans had negative views about foreigners, while 35 per cent had positive views.

"(The proportion of neutrals) is usually quite small in other surveys I am familiar with," said National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser. "It suggests that people are either ambivalent, just unwilling to commit, or basically lukewarm."

The proportion of those unhappy with foreigners creeps up among the unemployed, with 26 per cent of them expressing negative views, compared with 14 per cent of those who are employed.

The poll was carried out amid poorer economic conditions caused by the coronavirus as well as sentiments arising from a general election and parliamentary debates that highlighted potentially discriminatory hiring practices among firms recruiting professionals, managers, executives and technicians.

Associate Professor Tan said the results suggested a significant number of unemployed people feel they have been discriminated against, and that they are in competition with foreigners.

"Singaporeans want to be fairly treated with regard to jobs which they desire and for which they are suitably qualified. I don't think they are anti-foreigner; they are just unhappy about hiring and promotion practices that seem unfair to them."

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews said the big proportion of neutrals suggested people's conflicting feelings.

While most Singaporeans recognise foreigners' importance to the country's economy and society, he said, they may not be overly positive about their presence here during economic downturns.

At the same time, the results suggest that xenophobic online vitriol is not reflective of how the majority of Singaporeans feel.

He said: "It is expected that there will be a small portion of Singaporeans who are really upset about the foreigners' presence here. The reality, though, is that this group is much smaller.

"Even if (most Singaporeans) may not always be happy with immigrants, they accept that, on balance, there is a real need for them here."

Singapore University of Social Sciences associate professor of economics Walter Theseira said there is a natural tendency to be biased against immigrants, and that people who are more biased tend to have more direct interaction with immigrants, especially lower-income, less educated workers.

He said what is more helpful than asking for sentiments about immigrants is to highlight facts, such as the number of them here and the percentage who are unemployed.

"This allows for comparing perceptions of facts with the actual truth... People (also) tend to respect hard work and feel better about migrants if they are reminded migrants do work and have aspirations for their future like everyone else."