

Singaporeans want greater say, latest poll shows **But few actually make known their views on public policy to Govt**

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Singaporeans want to have a greater say and be more involved in the political process and policymaking compared to 12 years ago, according to a new study.

Yet, the study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that when it came to actually making their views on public policy issues known to the Government, just 8 per cent actually did so.

The survey, done over a year ago, found that 85 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'voting gave citizens the most meaningful way in which to tell the Government how the country should be run'.

This compared to 72 per cent who felt this was the case in 1998, when the same question was posed in a survey.

Political observer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University (SMU), contacted for his views on the findings, said the trend pointed to a more active citizenry and suggested that Singaporeans increasingly expect to be consulted on major policy matters.

'It means that the 'we know more than thou' approach in policymaking is out of sync with (their) aspirations. Singaporeans want to be 'talked with' not 'talked to' by the Government.'

The survey involved face-to-face interviews with 2,016 citizens aged between 21 and 64, among whom 12 per cent were new citizens.

Conducted between February and May last year to study the emotional bonds of Singaporeans to the nation, this National Orientations of Singaporeans (NOS) survey has been done roughly every five years since 1993.

Aside from the value respondents saw in the vote, 95 per cent of them felt there should be other channels for citizens to express views on policies - significantly higher than the 79 per cent in 1998.

On whether citizens, regardless of education and income levels, should have equal freedom to express views on policies, 97 per cent agreed - up from 87 per cent in 1998.

And even when it came to the need for the Government to make quick decisions, 97 per cent of the respondents said there should be consultation.

But explaining why just 8 per cent made their views on policy issues known to the Government, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the Sociology Department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) - one of the researchers behind the study - said a possible reason was the high percentage, 68 per cent, who said they had 'no strong views'.

The SMU's Mr Tan, on the other hand, said the findings could indicate the 'limited faith in the effectiveness of the other channels of engagement'.

'It would appear that Singaporeans feel the ballot box is the only effective way of engaging the Government and that all other modes of engagement are lacking in efficacy,' he said.

The top three main channels to express political views remained the Meet-the-People sessions held by MPs, direct communication with government agencies and writing to the forum pages of newspapers.

The findings on political participation aside, the survey also found that the level of national loyalty and pride inched up and was at a 'healthy and stable' level.

But the sense of loyalty and pride was weaker among the more educated, higher-income groups, the young and the politically alienated.

The study's authors - IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh was the other - suggested that this was because those who were more highly educated and better off were likely to be widely travelled, and so more exposed to the cultures of other countries.

'So, although they are proud of Singapore, they find it hard to support a statement that it is the absolute best and that it holds a monopoly on positive qualities,' Prof Tan explained.

IPS research fellow Leong Chan Hoong - who was not involved in the study - said the finding that this group scored lower on loyalty and pride could be due to their having fewer opportunities to socialize with people here. This could make their ties to the country weaker.

On the other hand, there was a possibility that having travelled abroad, such Singaporeans would opt to settle down here and in the process develop a greater appreciation for the country, and hence end up having a stronger national identity.

Some of the questions respondents were asked on pride included whether they felt people should support the country even if it were in the wrong, and whether they thought the world would be a better place if people from elsewhere were more like Singapore citizens.

People in 40 other countries were polled in a similar international study in 2006 to gauge their national pride. Singapore's score would have put it in fifth place in that field, after the United States, Venezuela, Australia and Austria.

National loyalty, on the other hand, was measured using an index to give an indication of how strongly Singaporeans identified with the country and their willingness to sacrifice for the nation.

The SMU's Mr Tan said the more educated and affluent Singaporeans were more likely to 'jump ship' if the economy faltered, given that Singaporeans' national loyalty and pride were anchored in the nation's economic achievements.

But this did not necessarily mean that groups which scored lower on pride and loyalty were more likely to migrate, as leaving a country for good was 'the most extreme manifestation of a relatively lower sense of loyalty and pride'.

One way to enhance this was to promote active citizenship through involvement here. This could help buttress a sense of belonging and develop a more nuanced understanding of loyalty to and identification with the country.

'Ultimately, it is about getting the more educated and affluent Singaporeans to stop 'navel gazing' and to go beyond the 'me-my-and-mine' mindset, and to embrace the notion that they can contribute more with their talents and abilities,' said SMU's Mr Tan.