

Singaporeans have high level of confidence in government but politically uninterested

The Business Times, 24 Mar 2021

[SINGAPORE] While Singaporeans have a high level of confidence in state institutions and the government, younger and locally-born citizens and permanent residents are less likely to feel this way, a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Social Lab has found.

Almost two-thirds are also uninterested in politics, the researchers learnt in examining Singaporean's attitudes towards institutions, politics and policies.

Announcing the results on Wednesday (March 24), IPS said the key findings also showed that while Singaporeans are supportive of government surveillance in public areas, they do not think it should be carried out in private situations or without their prior knowledge.

Conducted by IPS Social Lab Head Mathew Mathews, postdoctoral fellow Teo Kay Key, and research associates Melvin Tay and Alicia Wang, the study is part of the World Values Survey (WVS), a global research project monitoring changing public beliefs and their socio-political impact over time across 80 societies.

The researchers had conducted face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 2,012 adult Singaporeans and permanent residents from November 2019 to March 2020.

Their responses covered four areas: public confidence or trust in Singapore's institutions; political attitudes; attitudes towards government surveillance; and attitudes towards immigration.

These are the findings: High levels of confidence in state institutions Singaporeans were most confident of their state institutions - including the government, Parliament, courts, Singapore Police Force, Singapore Armed Forces and civil service - relative to electoral institutions, the civil society, and the media.

At least 70 per cent of respondents had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence across all state institutions.

Naturalised citizens and PRs were more likely to be confident in state and electoral institutions compared to locally-born citizens. Older respondents were also more likely to have high levels of confidence.

The researchers found that 62.1 per cent of respondents also felt there are low levels of corruption in Singapore.

When asked how confident they were in political parties, the respondents indicated less confidence (54.7 per cent) compared to those surveyed in 2012 (68.5 per cent). "This trend may reflect opposing views of a more diverse local political scene, comprising several newly-formed parties between 2012 and 2020," said the study.

In contrast, confidence in economic and academic institutions rose from 2012 to 2020.

For example, while 68.8 per cent of respondents in 2012 had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in local banks, this proportion had increased to 79.4 per cent in 2020.

The study found that 83.7 per cent were confident in local universities.

However, public confidence in civil society organisations was mixed.

Organisations focusing on the environment and women - issues which have gained traction in recent years - experienced a slight growth in public confidence.

While 69.2 per cent and 65.9 per cent of those surveyed in 2012 had confidence in environmental and women's organisations respectively, this rose to 72.1 per cent and 67.1 per cent respectively in 2020.

In contrast, Singaporeans were less confident in religious organisations (60 per cent) and labour unions (54 per cent) compared to 2012.

Most Singaporeans had confidence in the government, with 21.1 per cent indicating "a great deal of confidence" and 60.4 per cent indicating "quite a lot of confidence".

Compared to 12 other societies which provided data for this indicator, only mainland China had a higher confidence rate, with 94.9 per cent of Chinese indicating confidence in their government.

But younger Singaporeans and locally-born citizens were less likely to be confident.

A lower proportion of respondents (15 per cent) from the youngest cohort aged 21 to 35 compared with those in the oldest cohort aged above 65 (28.5 per cent) indicated "a great deal of confidence" in the government.

Only 18 per cent of locally-born citizens said they had "a great deal of confidence" unlike the 35.6 per cent of naturalised citizens and PRs who chose the same option.

Also, 20.2 per cent of locally-born citizens indicated "not very much confidence" or "none at all" in government, compared to just 9.7 per cent of naturalised citizens and PRs.

The study surveyed Singaporeans' political attitudes including: their level of interest in politics; perception of democracy in Singapore; perception of respect for human rights; and satisfaction with the functioning of the political system.

Just under two-thirds of respondents were uninterested in politics.

Those who had higher levels of interest were male, and had higher educational qualifications and income. "When basic or materialist needs, such as economic and physical security are met, individuals now seek to pursue post-materialist values, such as quality of life and self-expression," the study noted.

Compared to other selected societies, Singaporeans expressed one of the lowest levels of political interest (37.2 per cent), above only Hong Kong (30.4 per cent) and Taiwan (31.6 per cent).

In countries such as China, Australia, Sweden and Switzerland, more than 40 per cent of respondents indicated they were very interested or somewhat interested in politics.

Over nine in 10 Singaporeans believed their country is "somewhat democratic" or "democratic", with older respondents more likely to believe that it is democratically governed.

The study found that 87.6 per cent believed that human rights are respected in Singapore, coming in second behind China (88.5 per cent).

Over nine in 10 were "somewhat satisfied" or "satisfied" with the functioning of the political system here, among the highest globally.

Support for government surveillance but not in private situations The study noted that confidence in state institutions, and the belief in Singapore being corruption-free, are positively correlated with support for government surveillance.

This support, however, is nuanced.

While Singaporeans support having some form of surveillance in public areas, they disapprove of monitoring people in private situations and without their prior knowledge.

Close to two-thirds felt the government has the right to keep people under video surveillance in public areas.

Older people were more likely to hold the view that the government "definitely" has the right to do so.

But only slightly more than a quarter felt the government has the right to monitor people's online activities, with older and less affluent respondents more likely to feel this way.

More than three-quarters were against giving the government the right to collect information about individuals living here, without their prior knowledge.

The study concluded that older Singaporeans are generally more accepting of government surveillance, be it in public or private, informed or uninformed.

This could be due to the digital divide between the older and younger generations, it said, adding that younger Singaporeans would be more aware of the dangers of privacy attacks and phishing, making them more sceptical of surveillance. "In an age of massive data harvesting, there is a greater need for state surveillance to be transparent and for the government to tread with caution when collecting and using citizen's data," said the study. "Successful surveillance policy execution can additionally only be realised with a healthy baseline level of public confidence in state institutions, and satisfaction with the prevailing political system."