

Encik Tikam won't talk about voting (but the numbers will)

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TRY asking community leader Encik Tikam Wang about his own voting preferences in the General Elections (GE), and like many Singaporeans, you will see how evasive he gets. The venerable octogenarian might even dismiss you with a huff! But don't worry, a look into the newly released Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey, which polled over 2,000 voting-age Singaporeans allows us to peer into the unique concerns Encik Tikam and the Malay community may have.

Like his friends from other races, an efficient G was a top concern for Encik Tikam. However, this does not necessarily mean he prefers a one-party parliament. The need for checks and balances in parliament is also important to him, although not as much as it is to his Indian friends. So... diversity in parliament is important but not to the extent where it impedes efficient government?

"Efficient government" is still a top concern like in 2011. "Need for checks and balances" ranked second in 2011 and now fifth by mean score, but increased from 84% in 2011 to 89% in 2015... agreeing that it was important, especially for the 30-39 age group and for Malays and Indians.

What about the candidates themselves? Unlike his Chinese counterparts, who valued honesty the most, it mattered more to Encik Tikam that the candidate was understanding. It seems hard work and commitment are particularly important as well. More so than the candidate's party itself or how well the person spoke or credentials. So, to win Encik Tikam over, your party affiliations, or academic pedigree are not as valued as your commitment and empathy. You can almost imagine Encik Tikam exhorting: "I don't care how much you know... until I know how much you care."

Being "hardworking/committed" was important especially to Malays and Indians.

Speaking of parties, the credibility of Workers' Party (WP) increased the most from GE 2011 to GE 2015 among the Malays. Unlike the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) which saw larger increases from the Chinese community. The other prominent party is the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). It saw the greatest increase in credibility amongst Malays and Indians.

Changes to party credibility

PAP: rose across the board. Larger increases were seen among: PSLE and below, Secondary, Diploma, University, education, Intermediate (non-PMET white collar) and Service (PMET) classes, 21-29, 30-39, 55-64 age groups, and the Chinese.

WP: increased the most among 21-29 years old and Malays.

SDP: greatest increase among these groups: 21-29, 30-39 age groups, Malays, Indians, post-secondary, university education, service (PMET) class. Larger dips seen among 40-54, 65 years and above age-groups.

The minorities

The Chinese were clearly in the PAP camp. The Opposition parties found favour with the Malays and Indians. It's also interesting that the minorities had slightly different priorities. They placed a greater premium on the ability of candidates who can "understand us" and who are "hardworking/committed".

Where does Encik Tikam get his news though? Well, it seems local TV coverage and the Internet are the most influential communication channels in the Malay community. This is unlike the Chinese who seem to prefer newspapers over the Internet (local TV is still tops though). Also, it's reasonable to think that Encik Tikam and peers of his age prefer the TV over the Internet while the younger generations of Malays prefer the Internet given that the lower the age, the more influential the internet is. Having said that, it is clear that overall, the Internet had greater influence on a higher proportion of Malay Singaporeans than the proportion of Chinese or Indian Singaporeans. Could the difference be due to differences in age demographics within each community?

Internet more important to the same group as 2011: For post-independence voters and service (PMET) class; the lower the age, the more influential, the higher the occupational class, the more influential.

However, the tantalising question remains: Is Encik Tikam and the Malay community, pro G, pro Opposition or swing voters?

To that end IPS analysed five different variables that dealt with questions of checks and balance in parliament, fairness of electoral process and whether the election system should be changed. IPS then classified survey respondents into three categories: conservative, pluralist and swing.

All categories are of course relative. Conservatives are those who tend to prefer the status quo. Pluralists are those who prefer change and swing respondents are those who have a mix of views – and thus may go either way.

Interestingly, the Malay community has had the most consistent proportion of swing voters in the last three elections (2006, 2011 and 2015). It has ranged respectively from 52.4 per cent to 53.1 per cent to 52.7 per cent. This is unlike the Chinese whose swing vote share steadily dropped from 42.2 per cent in 2006 to 33.2 per cent in 2015. Or the Indians who consistently increased from 42.9 per cent in 2006 to 48.8 per cent in 2015. As such, the greatest fluctuation within the Malay community are those in the conservative and pluralist categories. From 2011 to 2015 the proportion of conservative Malay voters increased from 19.4 per cent to 31.0 per cent while the number of pluralists dropped from 27.5 per cent to 16.3 per cent.

This would perhaps explain why Malay voters were "late decision makers" – it's harder to make a decision when you hold eclectic views. Unlike the other races, more than half of Malays were late decision voters. As defined by IPS, late decision makers are those who only make a voting decision only after Nomination Day itself.

So how does the Malay community vote? What would nudge the swing voters towards the conservative side or to the pluralist side? Interesting questions that are yet to be answered... it's no wonder venerable octogenarian Encik Tikam Wang always looks so thoughtful!