

2 in 5 won't vote

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How much do young Singaporeans really care about elections? If voting were not compulsory, would they even bother to vote?

With the General Election (GE) looming, The New Paper decided to find out by commissioning a survey of 1,003 Singaporeans aged 21 to 35. This age group is estimated to make up over 600,00 of the 2.35 million - or about one in four - eligible voters this coming GE.

They are viewed by some as potential swing voters. The main finding: A significant proportion of young Singaporeans simply don't care about exercising their vote.

Thirty-nine per cent of those polled said they would not bother to vote if voting were not compulsory. Voting here is compulsory.

The survey also showed that about one in four of young voters polled feel that they want to, but have little say in government policies and decision-making. Engineer Toh Qingyao, 30, a first-time voter from the Pasir-Ris Punggol ward who missed voting in the last GE in 2006 as he was overseas on holiday, said: "If I've already made plans, like meeting friends, I won't change the meeting and make the effort specially to go and vote if it's not compulsory.

"But if I don't have anything on that day, I'll go.

"I think PAP will probably still win, so my one vote won't make much of a difference."

Our survey showed that the younger the voters, the lower the proportion of those who would vote if it were not compulsory. Voting rate was lowest among those aged 21 to 25 - just 56 per cent. When asked how much they care about the GE, only 26 per cent of the 1,003 polled, or just one in four, said it was of concern or of great concern to them.

Again, the younger the voter, the less concerned.

Not aware

At the time the survey was conducted, between last December and January this year, 33 per cent of the respondents said they were not aware that election has to be conducted by February 2012. This, despite the increase in political activity and news coverage over the past several months.

With the GE widely anticipated to take place by June - and with some even betting on end-April as a possible date - should we be concerned that a number of young voters don't seem concerned and don't seem to view their vote as sacred?

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said she was "not particularly disappointed" with this outcome. She said that in other democracies where voting is not compulsory, the participation rate is often lower than 60 per cent.

She added: "As there have been efforts over the years to encourage youth to be more engaged in their community, society and country, I think that this is already better than what it might have been previously."

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University said politics is not naturally high on the agenda for most Singaporeans between 21 and 35. Those in that age group have a variety of concerns, including studies, career, marriage and family. So, politics tends to be further down on their list of priorities, he said.

He added: "It may also reflect a top-down view of politics, where it's seen as being something for politicians, and that they (the voters) have little...to contribute."

But he was confident that the awareness will increase in the days ahead as election fever heightens. Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, a faculty associate with IPS and Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore's Department of Sociology noted the greater interest in elections among those aged 31 to 35 (31 per cent).

Growing up

He said: "Once young people enter the workforce and leave adolescence, they eventually become adults, and with the transition, their participation propensity increases substantially."

Agreeing, Dr Koh said that as young people mature, enter the workforce and think about settling down, they will begin to appreciate how government policies impact their lives, and what the elections mean.

She said: "Some people are caught up in their daily routine or with the big questions of what they want to do with their lives. If they see how governance and politics shapes these, they will care more."

"It's important that the elders in the community, the newspapers and the politicians themselves help them and all voters see how important the elections are..."

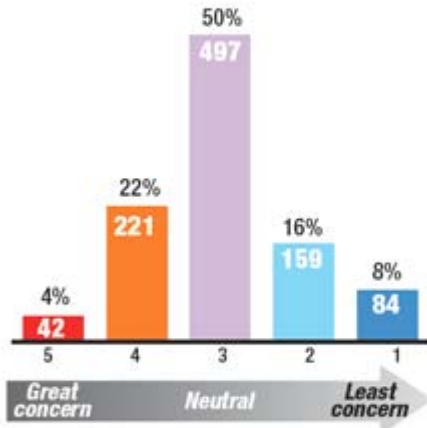
"That is the basis of a democracy - informed and engaged citizens."

The survey

The New Paper Young Voters 2011 survey was conducted by market research agency agri opus PProBa from December 2010 to January 2011. A total of 1,003 Singaporeans aged 21 to 35 were interviewed face to face.

The interviews were conducted outside shopping malls, MRT stations, libraries and at bus interchanges and town hubs in 15 housing estates across Singapore, covering the west, north, north-east, east and central regions, on weekdays and weekends.

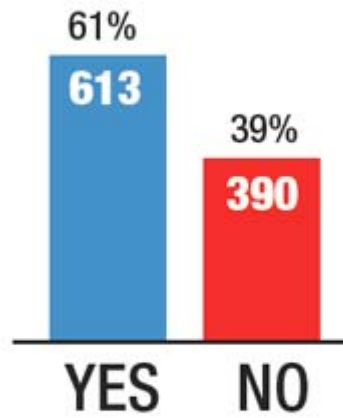
On a scale of 1-5 where 5 is "It is of great concern to you" and 1 means "It is of least concern to you", how much do you care about the General Election?



Percentage who are concerned or very concerned, by age:

- 21-25: **25%**
- 26-30: **24%**
- 31-35: **31%**

If voting was not compulsory, would you vote?



Percentage of those who voted yes, by age

- 21-25: **56%**
- 26-30: **61%**
- 31-35: **68%**

Total respondents: 1,003