

Cost of living still a hot button issue

The need for good and efficient government and fairness of policies were also top issues young voters are concerned with

Tay Shi'an

The New Paper, 31 March 2011

What are the issues that young voters consider important?

Which comes first - party or candidate?

These are two important questions not just because of the looming general election here.

They also offer an insight into how one in four of the 2.35 million eligible voters think, as voters aged 21 to 35 are estimated to number about 600,000 at this election.

In a survey of 1,003 Singaporeans of that exact age group commissioned by The New Paper, young voters ranked the top issue as cost of living.

Close to 90 per cent of them said it was an important or very important factor influencing their vote.

Following closely are other bread-and-butter issues like their housing situation (No. 3) and job situation (No. 5).

Big picture important too

But young voters do consider the big picture too.

They rated such concerns highly: Need for good and efficient government (No. 2), fairness of policies (No. 4), and checks and balances in Parliament (No. 6).

In comparison, about 60 per cent of young voters felt the candidate's party is important or very important.

While the personality and qualifications of a candidate is important or very important to a slightly higher 67 per cent of young voters.

So what do the results say about the decision-making process of young Singaporean voters, and how political parties should go about wooing them? First, while both factors are not ranked highly, young Singapore voters seem to put person before party.

But the long-held belief for the People's Action Party (PAP) is that voters choose the party first, and by default the candidate, rather than choose between the candidates on their own merit.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University said the survey results seem to challenge this belief.

He added: "This suggests that for the young voters, party labels are not good enough. Voters want to judge for themselves the candidates.

"This does not mean that the party label is not important. But young voters are not going to just vote for anyone whom the PAP presents, just because he or she is dressed in all-white.

"In that regard, personalities and qualifications and genuineness of desire to serve will be attributes that young voters are looking out for."

And what of the mix of bread-and-butter and "big picture" factors being the top influences on the young voter?

Assistant Prof Tan said it points towards a "discerning decision-making process", in which young voters recognise the importance and inter-connectedness of both sets of concerns.

He said: "Because of this, the various political parties and candidates need to ensure a good balance of attention to material concerns (jobs, cost of living, housing etc.) and post-material concerns of voters, and not to address them in isolation, or be pre-occupied with just one portion."

National University of Singapore sociologist and Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) faculty associate Tan Ern Ser added:

"The PAP would need to remind voters that it has a track record of being consultative, responsive, inclusive, and accountable, on the one hand, while delivering stability, security, economic development, jobs and economic benefits, on the other hand.

"Opposition parties would need to assure voters that they are not here to rock the boat, but to deliver good services at constituency level, while voicing voters' concerns and asking difficult questions."

In a 2006 IPS post-election survey, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser and Dr Gillian Koh asked a similar question among voters of all ages in Singapore.

They found that bread-and-butter issues like cost of living and jobs rated lower among voters, while "big picture" concerns like need for good and efficient government came up tops.

Associate Professor Tan said that this reflects the global upheaval since the last election.

He said: "We are living in an increasingly risky world, which would render bread-and-butter, safety and security issues more dominant."

The young voters were also asked separately in The New Paper survey to rank issues that matter most to them on a daily basis.

Not surprisingly, jobs, cost of living, housing and education were ranked among the Top 5 for the most number of respondents.

One surprise inclusion among the Top 5 was work-life balance, which was ranked a Top 5 issue by 50 per cent of respondents.

Placed in a bigger spectrum of daily concerns, the need for opposition voices in Parliament dropped in lower down in the priority of young Singaporeans.

Assistant Professor Tan said this reflects the material concerns of young adult Singaporeans on a daily basis, as they are seeking to establish their careers, settle down and start their own families.

Foreigners a real issue?

There was a lot of "noise" over immigration policies and overcrowding.

But are foreign workers a real issue here?

Concern over foreign workers (low-skilled) and foreign talent (high-skilled) was last among the 15 issues young Singaporeans ranked as being important in their daily lives.

More than half the respondents agreed that there is a need for foreign workers to do the jobs that Singaporeans don't want to do.

About half felt the Government is right to accept more foreign workers if the economy needs it.

Yet the survey revealed that 66 per cent of respondents felt there's "too much foreign talent" in Singapore, while 65 per cent felt there are "too many foreign workers" in Singapore.

About 60 per cent felt that more foreign talent will weaken the Singapore spirit, but 64 per cent felt that the Government still puts citizens first.

One-third felt that foreign workers in their neighbourhood made them feel unsafe.

NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "I would argue that Singaporeans understand the need for foreign talent and workers, but they do not like the competition for jobs, housing and amenities, nor having them in their own backyard, nor the perception that they are disadvantaged or not more advantaged than the latter."