

Presidential candidate's stance on checking Govt more important to voters: Survey

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A survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) after the 2011 Presidential Elections reveals a dissonance between the official roles of the President and perception of the importance these roles for the elections.

Presented by Dr Gillian Koh on Tuesday, the findings indicate that respondents voted for the President based on the candidates' stances on checking the government, not how well they believed the candidate would carry out the official roles of the President.

The survey asked respondents to assess a series of statements about the roles of the President. They were then asked to explain whether a particular role was important in deciding their vote. Out of 11 statements, just 42% of the respondents correctly cited 6 or more, with a mean score of 5.4.

The top three roles cited by respondents were to represent Singapore to foreign leaders, being the head of state and ensuring that the government 'manages the economy wisely'. The top three roles that shaped the vote were to ensure that the government manages the economy wisely, ensure that the government keeps to its GE2011 campaign promises, and to check government spending of the national reserves.

These results also raise the question of whether there were too many candidates in the election, with three out of four positioning themselves as being able to check the government.

During the panel discussion following the presentation, this was addressed by Mr Goh Sin Teck, editor of Chinese daily *Lianhe Zaobao*. Mr Goh asked two what-if questions: What if Mr Tan Jee Say did not compete in the elections? What if most of Mr Tan Jee Say's vote share went to Dr Tan Cheng Bock?

"Mr Tan Kin Lian would have gotten the most votes," Mr Goh said. Mr Goh felt that Mr Tan Kin Lian had positioned himself as the most independent candidate, and Mr Tan Jee Say's

entry made Mr Tan Kin Lian's position "somewhat ambiguous". However, near the end of the campaign, Mr Goh sensed there was a "ground shift" amongst voters that "a confrontational President would not be good for Singapore".

Had most of Mr Tan Jee Say's votes gone to Dr Tan Cheng Bock, the final election results "could be anyone's guess". Mr Goh felt that the dynamics between the candidates would have been different, and it would be hard to predict how voters would vote.

Characteristics of the candidates

However, the survey results do not seem to agree with Mr Goh's assessment that Mr Tan Kin Lian would benefit from his independence. Respondents were asked to rate personal qualities of a candidate on a five-point scale. Independence from political parties was the least important, followed by resonance with personal political views. On the other hand, the most important characteristics were honesty, fairness, and 'the ability to represent the country well'.

Two kinds of people – those in the working class and those with a PSLE education or lower – placed greater importance on the independence of a candidate than other demographic groups. Dr Koh opined that this could be because "the others took a realistic view that candidates would tend to have some association with political parties."

These results suggest a nuanced approach to voting. Dr Eugene Tan, Professor of Law at Singapore Management University, felt that the GE2011 and PE2011 results should not be seen in isolation. He felt that the outcome of GE2011 was "a finely calibrated message" to give the People's Action Party (PAP) a strong mandate, while expressing voter unhappiness. The outcome of PE2011 "exemplifies a desire for greater checks and balance" without "throwing caution to the wind."

"Singaporeans value stability," Dr Eugene Tan said. "Singaporeans may be uncomfortable with the President being an alternative power centre." He felt that Singaporeans believed it was important for the elected President to work with the elected government.

The Power of the Press

Like GE2011, the mainstream media played a significant role in influencing voters' decisions. Survey respondents were asked to rate the significance of different communication channels on a five-point scale. Newspapers were deemed the most important, followed by local free-to-air television and the Internet.

Respondents who felt that the use of the Internet and mobile phones were important were also asked to "name three websites, blogs, Twitter or Facebook accounts" that helped them decide how to vote. The results indicated that Facebook was the most important website, followed by Yahoo!. No specific blogs and Twitter or Facebook accounts were cited in the presentation.

IPS determined that newspapers were of lesser importance to first time voters who were in the service class and between the ages of 21 to 39. Conversely, these groups felt that the Internet was an important channel, and had more influence over their decisions.

"The role of traditional media has not changed," Mr Goh said. He said that newspaper sales increased during the elections, especially the Chinese papers. While he did not think that social media "was a decisive factor" in the elections, Mr Goh said it has become "a force to be reckoned with". He said that the candidates made extensive use of social media during the elections. Mr Goh also mentioned that the candidates accepted an invitation by a "non-traditional media website" to "participate in a forum", referencing The Online Citizen's Face-

to-Face (F2F) forum. Mr Goh felt there was “no turning back”: no candidate can now afford to turn down such an invitation. He also believed that the PAP would send a candidate to another event similar to F2F, and the outcome could potentially influence the outcome of the next GE.

Political legitimacy, institutional independence, and political reform

The last set of data sought to understand voters’ perceptions of the legitimacy of the election, and their opinions on the independence of the office of the President. Older respondents and respondents in lower socio-economic groups were more likely to believe that both the election system and the outcome were legitimate. Younger and wealthier respondents felt that the office should be independent of other centres of authority. IPS also determined that politically knowledgeable voters tended to prefer greater institutional independence and less likely to see the election as legitimate.

“People want an election,” Dr Koh said. 91% of respondents agreed that the President should be elected by the people. She said that the people “value a measure of independence.” She added that one cannot “remove politics from the equation when there is an election.”

Dr Kevin Tan, law professor at the National University of Singapore, said that the “original concept” of having an elected President was to have “someone with the mandate to say no to the government.” In his opinion, a run-off election between Dr Tony Tan and Dr Tan Cheng Bock was “a good idea” as holding a majority of the vote would give a candidate legitimacy. Whether a run-off election would be acceptable to the government was a different story.

Blogger Alex Au said, “Just because one-third of the people voted for Tony Tan doesn’t mean the rest don’t approve of him.” Dr Koh also pointed out that both the Prime Minister and the President were both elected on the same first-past-the-post basis. In the event of a confrontation between the two, “they would not argue with each other based on the vote share”.

Dr Kevin Tan believed that it was time to reform the political system altogether. “It’s time to rethink the question. Is an elected President the best institution to do what we want from the President?” he asked.

He mooted the idea of appointing an Upper House of Parliament, arguing that many government institutions currently perform many of the tasks traditionally delegated to upper houses of the legislature elsewhere in the world. Dr Kevin Tan said that many of the President’s official functions may also be folded into this Upper House, as a group of people who deliberate amongst themselves may reach a better decision than one individual. He further proposed returning the Presidency to its traditional ceremonial role, and rotating the office amongst different ethnic groups.

“We have lost the symbolism of the office, and it is time to reclaim it,” he said.



The panel following the presentation. From left to right: Dr Eugene Tan, Gillian Koh, Janadas Devan, Goh Sin Teck, Dr Kevin Tan.