

30 per cent of Singaporeans are 'cynics': study

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A new study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found that some three in 10 Singaporeans are cynical toward the country's political leaders.

And while the figure is not huge – liberal democracies such as the U.S. see between 47 to 75 per cent of their populations to be cynics – researchers said there is still cause for concern for the ruling People's Action Party.

Since the study did not find any significant relation between a cynic and demographic factors such as race, education and income, it means that cynics here cut across the entire cross-section of society.

The party needs to find new ways to convey their messages to Singaporeans convincingly, said researchers.

The study, conducted in July and August last year, surveyed 1,092 participants, representative of Singapore's population.

The definition of cynics included people who think that politicians often manipulate them; that politicians forget their election promises and that politicians think having power is more important than catering to people's wishes.

The study did not differentiate whether the politician belongs to a ruling or opposition party, however, as researchers were unable to anticipate the impact of opposition leaders in the months leading up to the general election this year.

Pointing to recent dissatisfaction with transportation and housing, for instance, IPS deputy director Arun Mahizhnan said, "So to what extent are these permanent features? To what extent are these immediate reactions? This is yet to be determined.

"But this survey suggests that there is a significant minority who are cynical and there are ways in which the cynicism could be addressed," he said.

National University of Singapore's assistant professor of communications & new media Zhang Weiyu suggested that the government not only tap on new media but also place more emphasis on interpersonal communication, for instance, through the Meet-the-People sessions.

The government should have more consultation panels with citizens, to hear directly from them, she added.

"We need to encourage interpersonal discussions directly between politicians and citizens. So it's not just politicians trying to send their message through mass media to the citizens because we find that interpersonal talk has a big influence," she said.

The study found that cynics have lower trust in mass media, compared to those who are less cynical.

“People who are cynical may tactically turn to the Internet for alternative information and viewpoints, or it could be that political cynicism is increased by exposure to these online channels,” she added.

While the study did not account for any changes the recent general and presidential election may have brought, IPS senior researcher Tan Tarn How said the results provided a “snapshot of the way things were in 2010” which would “eventually link to help form a bigger picture”.

The team of researchers has since repeated similar studies on a larger sample size between the months of May and July this year. They will be releasing the results of this new study in early October.