

Character matters more than credentials for younger voters: Post-GE2020 survey

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The character of candidates, and whether they were considered honest and fair-minded, mattered more to younger voters than their academic or work credentials, according to one of the key findings of a wide-ranging survey on the results of the 2020 General Election (GE2020).

“What struck me is that it seems like credentials and contribution seems to matter much less now, as compared to character. So, when the candidates present themselves, if they talk too much about their credentials, that may not really help,” said Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser of the National University of Singapore, one of four members of the research team that helmed the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) post-election survey.

Prof Tan was alluding to the responses to a series of questions about a candidate’s traits – including ‘honesty’ and being a ‘fair person’ – and which quality mattered most to respondents. Being a ‘fair person’ saw the largest increase of 9 per cent in the ‘very important’ rating compared to 2015, among all traits, especially in the 21-29 age group and among diploma holders.

During an IPS online forum to discuss the survey results on Thursday (2 October), Dr Lam Peng Er of the East Asian Institute predicted that the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) would likely remain the “perennial party in power” for the foreseeable future.

However, with a younger, better educated and more demanding electorate that has both material (job security, housing, transportation and more) and post-material concerns (values, citizens having a greater voice in parliament, fairness and more), the PAP would have to contend with a lower vote share and fewer seats in Parliament, possibly even losing its two-thirds majority.

“The opposition is here to stay... it is not inconceivable that the Workers’ Party (WP) wins another SMC (Single Member Constituency) or GRC (Group Representation Constituency) in the next general election,” said Dr Lam.

At the 10 July General Election (GE), the WP won an unprecedented 10 seats in Parliament, including a [stunning victory in the newly-created Sengkang GRC](#). The [PAP’s vote share also fell sharply](#) from 69.9 per cent in 2015 to 61.24 per cent.

Key survey findings

Known as POPS (10), the poll took in the views of 4,027 Singaporeans aged 21 and above via landlines, mobile phones and the Internet. It was the fourth time that IPS has conducted a post-election survey. Besides Prof Tan, the other members of the team are Dr Gillian Koh, Dr Teo Kay Key and Damien Huang, all from the IPS.

While the top issue for respondents remained ‘the need for good and efficient government’, ‘government’s handling of the COVID situation’ was also ranked as a top priority. Meanwhile, compared with 2015, there were three key issues where the proportion of respondents choosing the ‘very important’ rating increased markedly:

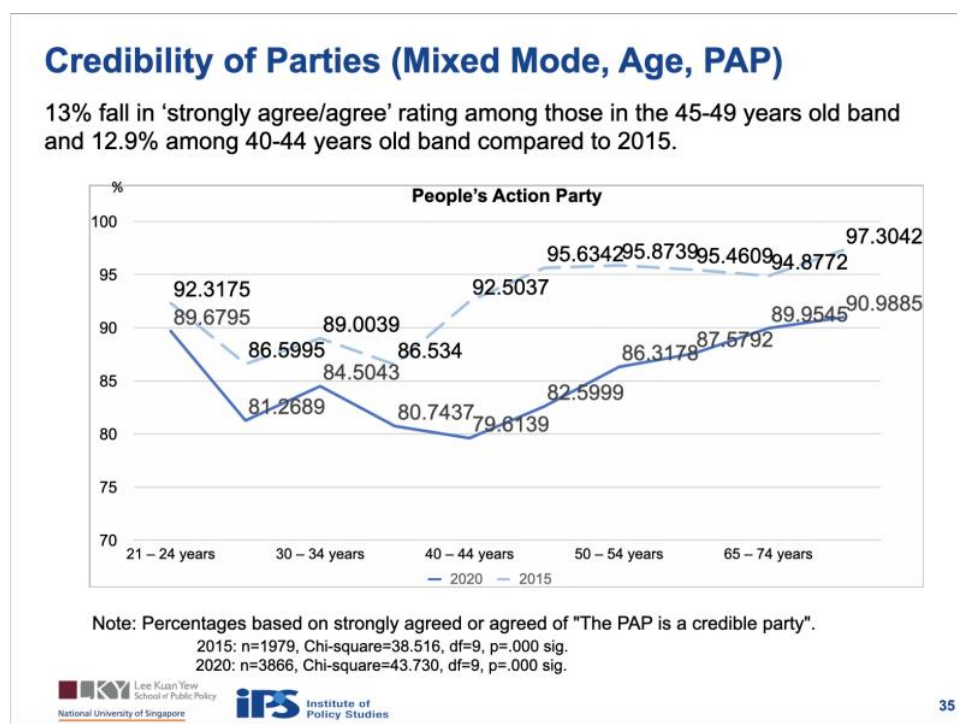
- Job situation, particularly salient for those aged 30-54 and those whose household monthly income ranged from \$2,000 to \$6,999, Malays and Indians, and men
- Cost of living, particularly salient for those in the same age group and income band as the first issue, as well as those in the working and intermediate occupational classes and for diploma holders
- Need for different views, particularly salient for those aged 21-29, those with a household monthly income of \$5,000 to \$6,999, PMETs and diploma and university degree holders.

This suggests that the question of sustainable livelihoods amid the pandemic affected the vote for respondents of working age and in the low to middle income households, or those most vulnerable to threats to job and income security. Political ideals were also important, particularly to the young and better-educated.

“The majority of Singaporeans are, to varying degrees, socially and politically conservative by nature,” said independent scholar Dr Derek da Cunha at the online forum. He asserted that only the WP, being the only moderate alternative to the PAP that is not too confrontational in nature, will be able to take seats from the PAP.

Dismissing the hardcore anti-PAP elements that are infected with the “virus of delusion” and dwell in social media “echo chambers”, he noted, “Workers’ Party has no radical agenda, and quite right too.”

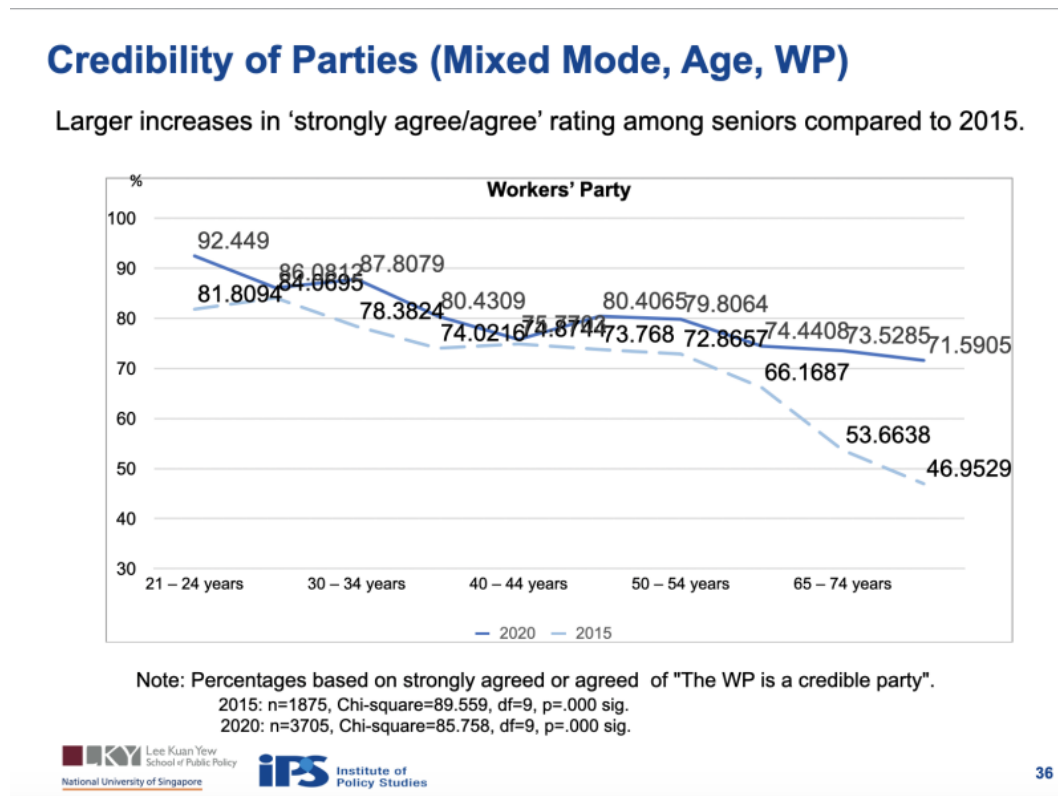
Credibility of parties



Respondents were also asked to indicate, from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', whether each of the top six political parties in GE2020 was 'credible'. Based on the number of votes they received overall, they were: PAP, WP, the Progress Singapore Party, the Singapore Democratic Party, the National Solidarity Party and Peoples Voice.

In the 'agree' category, the PAP scored 57 per cent, compared to 63 per cent in 2015. In particular, there was a drop of 13 percentage points in the combined 'strongly agree'/'agree' responses in the 40-49 age group. There were similar drops among those in the low to middle-income bands (monthly income of \$0 to \$4,999), HDB 1-3 room flat dwellers and men.

Overall, there was a drop in the PAP's perceived credibility across all age groups.



By comparison, the WP scored 20 per cent in the 'strongly agree' category, compared with 8 per cent in 2015. There were rises in the 'strongly agree'/'agree' responses in the 30-34 age band and among seniors, while there were also rises among PMETs, as well as those with only post-secondary educational qualifications, HDB 1-3 room flat dwellers and women.

Overall, compared to five years ago, the WP saw an increase in its perceived credibility, particularly among senior voters. Nevertheless, the PAP had the highest mean score and the highest percentage of those who strongly agreed it was a credible party.

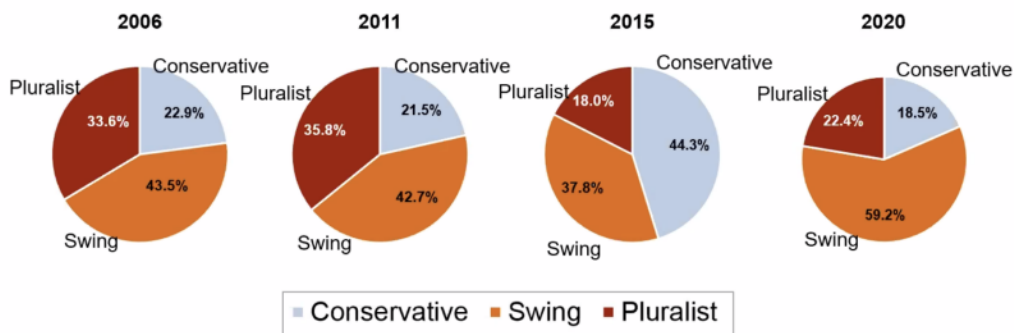
The results mean that there were proportions of respondents on both ends of the socio-economic spectrum that found the WP credible, while the issue of livelihoods influenced support for both the PAP and WP.

Political pluralism

Conservative (light blue) : Sharp increase in 2015, sharp dip in 2020

Swing (orange) : Drop in 2015, sharp increase in 2020

Pluralist (red) : Sharp drop in 2015, small increase in 2020



Respondents were also placed in three categories: Conservative, or those who disagreed that there is value in political pluralism and a need for any change in the electoral system; Pluralist, or those who agreed there is value in political pluralism and a need for change in the electoral system to enable that to happen; and Swing, or those with an eclectic mix of views.

Compared with 2015, the proportion of respondents in the Swing category increased from 37.8 to 59.2 per cent, while the Pluralist category also rose from 18 to 22.4 per cent. The Conservative category saw a sharp drop from 44.3 to 18.5 per cent.

The highest proportion of pluralists was among respondents in the youngest age band and the highest socio-economic groups. But the Pluralist category also saw rises among residents in the low household income band (\$0 to \$1,999) and those with only post-secondary qualifications.

There were therefore two effects taking place: the consistent trend of those in the higher socio-economic class supporting political pluralism, and the effects of bread and butter issues at the other end of the socio-economic spectrum being so that such respondents felt there was a need for political opposition in Parliament.

Prof Tan noted that while younger voters favoured pluralist views, many in the 40-49 age group – the sandwich generation – also shared these views. “(They are) the people who have to look after the elderly and look after the younger generation. So, during this COVID time, they are the ones in danger of losing their jobs... maybe quite easily replaceable. So, I think that is where they feel a sense of income and job insecurity. And that may have impacted the way they voted in this election.”