

IPS SURVEY ON POLITICAL TRAITS AND MEDIA USE

Apathetic? Not Singaporean youth

By Tan Tarn How , Chung Siyoung & Zhang Weiyu

THERE are two diametrically opposite claims about the difference between Singaporean youth and the older generation. One is that those in their 20s and 30s - the so called 'Generation Y' - are politically apathetic, individualistic and uncaring about the world.

The other is that they are more engaged politically and more interested in political news.

A national telephone survey with a representative sample of 1,090 Singaporeans aged 21 and above has found that the youth of Singapore are indeed different. The Institute of Policy Studies survey, conducted from August to October last year, sought to determine the political traits of citizens and their use of and attitudes towards the media.

One of our major findings concerns the differences between younger Singaporeans - those from 21 to 39 years old - and older Singaporeans.

- Youth are less authoritarian than older people

We asked people about their 'political orientation' - that is, whether they considered themselves to be more liberal/democratic or conservative/authoritarian.

Nearly three in four (73.2 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that 'Singapore should have a powerful leader who can run the government as he thinks fit'.

Seven in 10 (70.1 per cent) felt that 'it is more important to have good economic growth than freedom of speech'.

At the same time, nearly six out of 10 people (59.6 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that 'there are too many rules against participating in political activities in Singapore'.

Among those who wanted a strong leader, more than six in 10 (62 per cent) also thought that there were too many rules against political participation. And among those who said there are too many rules, 76 per cent wanted a strong leader.

Hence, this survey showed, somewhat surprisingly, that Singaporeans showed a desire for both strong leadership and economic growth as well as more freedom to take part in politics.

When analysed by age, however, youth tend to be slightly less conservative/authoritarian than older people. They are slightly less in support of a strong leader, slightly less in support of growth over freedom, and slightly more in support of freedom in political participation.

For instance, 75.9 per cent of those aged 40 to 59 and 81.5 per cent of those aged 60 and above agreed or strongly agreed that Singapore should have a powerful leader. However, only 66.7 per cent of youth did so.

Also, 13.3 per cent of those aged 40 to 59 and 8.6 per cent of those aged 60 and above disagreed or strongly disagreed with the strong leader statement. This is in contrast with the 19 per cent of youth who felt that way.

We can conclude that, yes, youth are less authoritarian in their preferences than older people, but only marginally so.

(The detailed data for the whole study can be found at the IPS website.)

- Youth participate more in politics than older people

Young people are also less apathetic about politics. This is measured by political participation.

'Political participation' is used here in the academic rather than popular sense, and was measured in this survey by asking whether the interviewees signed petitions, wrote to newspapers or Members of Parliament, attended discussions held by grassroots groups or by the government, wrote or read online political content, or forwarded such content to others.

Political participation is generally low among all Singaporeans: About eight in 10 of those surveyed did not take part in these activities.

Nevertheless, youth tended to participate more online, and were also more likely to sign petitions online and offline. While 16.8 per cent of all those surveyed participated in politics online, 25.5 per cent of youth did so.

- Youth consume more political content than older people

Youth were found to be more engaged by another measure: They were slightly more likely than older people to read about politics. This was true for both traditional media such as print newspapers and television and new media such as the Internet.

Not surprisingly, youth also made greater use of the Internet for reading about politics compared to older people. They consumed more political news by reading mainstream media sources such as the online Straits Times, foreign news websites or alternative Singapore online websites such as The Online Citizen, Temasek Review or Yawning Bread.

More than older people, they rated the Internet and print newspapers as important sources of political news. They also trusted the Internet as a source of political news a little more than older people.

- Youth more likely to see government control of media and bias in media than older people

Youth were also slightly more likely than older people to say there is too much government control of mainstream media. Six in 10 (62.2 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that there was too much control, compared to 52.8 per cent of those aged 40 to 59 and 51.1 per cent of those aged 60 and above.

Youth are also slightly more likely to think that 'newspapers and television are biased when they report on Singapore politics, political parties and elections'.

- Youth less likely to say they voted for the PAP

The survey asked people how they voted in the last election, in 2006. One in four (25.1 per cent) refused to answer the question. But youth were less likely to refuse to answer: 10.3 per cent compared to 27.4 per cent of the rest.

The survey also looked at such traits as interest in politics, knowledge of politics, and belief in one's capability to understand or change politics. In none of these measures were youth different from the rest of Singaporeans.

What can we conclude about youth from this survey? First, although youth are not radically different, they are not the same as their parents or grandparents in a number of significant ways. A generation gap does exist - but it is not a big one.

Secondly, while it is no surprise that youth are less conservative or authoritarian than their elders, we can stop speculating that youth are more apathetic or disengaged than the older generation. That is simply not the case.

Tan Tarn How is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Chung Siyoung is a visiting fellow at the Institute, and Zhang Weiyu is an assistant professor in the communications and new media programme at NUS.