

## Behind-the-Scenes of 'That IPS Survey'



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A month after General Elections (GE) 2006 were held, IPS announced the results of its first 'Post-Election Survey' of voter attitudes. Some of its results seemed counter-intuitive. This led to interesting public discussion whether the methodology used was sound, whether the conclusions were statistically significant and valid, and, how representative the findings were of the general population. Some insightful comments were found in postings in cyberspace which our researchers in New Media at the Institute have been systematically tracking. Public statements by the Government were, on the other hand, limited to a set of comments by Minister for National Development, Mr Mah Bow Tan, about how he found the results surprising and did not tally with views gathered from interacting with his constituents. The Straits Times felt it worth its while to devote a feature to the survey, focused primarily on understanding the methodology behind the survey and hence, assessing the credibility of its findings.

### **Behind the Scenes**

The IPS survey was planned at the beginning of 2006, to be conducted soon after Polling Day. The analysis had to be ready for a Forum on GE2006 a month after that.

Our intention was to probe eligible voters only after they had reflected on all the themes, issues and events that had surfaced in the course of the election. Eligible voters, both those who voted and those who did not perhaps because their constituencies were not contested were involved in the survey. The share of those who voted matched the national percentage of about 52%.

Due to the constraints of time and resources, the research team designed a hybrid sampling method we could call a modified stratified sampling method, where there is a combination of both probability and non-probability sampling. We used the formula of

quota sampling to ensure that we achieved a good level of representation especially with respect to what we felt were the two most critical categories of age and monthly household income, where the latter is used as a proxy for socio-economic class. After having ascertained the numbers that were required to achieve representation approximating to the profile of Singapore voters based on 2000 Census data, we then used probability sampling method to achieve the quotas that were set.

The trade-off in using this form of sampling was that the findings could be taken to be 'indicative' of the general population though not 'representative' of it. It would also mean that questions of margins of errors which were later raised by bloggers, while usually applied to random sample, were non-issues in this limited form of quota sampling, because it is not completely random. It would nevertheless provide reliable data from which to explore the issues at hand.

In crafting the items in the survey, the challenge was to make sure that we included what is normally postulated about the psyche of the average Singaporean voter, the 'young, liberal voter', also how we ourselves read that voters might have responded to the very real issues and events of GE2006. It had to cover the spectrum of possibilities. It also had to achieve some level of 'abstraction' to principles so that our instrument could be the basis for longitudinal study. Finally, we were all too aware that Singapore voters were unlikely to feel comfortable enough to reveal details of where they lived, much less how they actually voted. The survey instrument was confirmed and implemented on 8 May.

The other details of the methodology and the numbers we achieved as well as the structural limitation of finding a certain profile of voters can all be found on this IPS website.

### **Reading the Survey**

As it is a 'post-election survey' it is necessary to feed in the specific socio-political conditions surrounding GE2006 to make sense of it. That was how it was designed.

Our reflections on the most counter-intuitive of the findings – that issues of 'fairness of government policy', 'need for checks and balances', and 'need for alternative views in Parliament' ranked higher on the basis of average mean scores, than 'job situation', 'cost of living' and 'upgrading' are first, that the economic conditions of GE2006 were portrayed as buoyant, and that job growth was

strong. Among those who had not felt they had benefited from these improved conditions, the Workfare Bonus scheme, the Progress Package, and other forms of targeted assistance would have helped to assuage some of their concerns about income security. In the months prior to the election, the Government had spelt out long-term plans to help low-wage, older workers and the elderly and a revision of policy to make medical costs more affordable. Our results indicate that those with views that would be most supportive of the political status quo and the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) Government were among in the lower socio-economic classes, and the older people for whom these schemes and policy initiatives would have meant the most.

It is especially interesting that in the detailed analysis of the results by Occupational Class and Monthly Household Income, the 'cost of living' issue is more salient with the higher occupational classes, with statistical significance. The Intermediate Class is more concerned about 'upgrading' than the other two classes, while it is of little though increasing salience with the lower income classes, all with statistical significance. In other words, 'upgrading' concerns much fewer respondents and even then, only certain groups. They are either keenly concerned about 'asset enhancement' as they are possibly in the groups that view housing as a key asset for upward or downward shift, or they are people who are not of means who would be concerned whether they could afford the co-payment involved in upgrading?

Some have remarked that the top issues of 'efficient government' and 'fairness of government policy' are 'motherhood statements'. Responses from those in the higher socio-economic groups suggest that they are less desirous of the political status quo and also more critical of the 'votes-for-upgrading' policy. In other words, they are 'critical'. One could expect them to feel that 'having an efficient government' is less of something they would need to depend on, yet, this issue increases in salience with the higher socio-economic classes. It is not an unthinking choice. We also suspect that since respondents generally 'politely disagreed' that 'votes-for-upgrading policy is fair' (average mean scores of 2.32 to 2.94 where 1 is 'strongly disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree'), and also given other issues raised and the events of GE2006, it is quite understandable that the value of 'fairness of government policy' would seem to be of salience to the respondents. Think how, going into the election, there was a lot of live and 'virtual' discussion, not about upgrading per se, but 'votes-for-upgrading', and about whether this was appropriate use of public money to fund what was perceived as a

party-based programme. Think how the James Gomez affair might have been read on the ground. In further analysis, those who felt that upgrading was an important electoral issue also agreed that the 'votes for upgrading' policy was a fair one.

Finally, on the salience of 'checks and balances' and 'alternative views', we recall how the PAP presented a good many of its new candidates as people with 'alternative views'. This theme was also played up by the main Opposition Parties especially after they saw how the heavyweight from the PAP side, Mr Goh Chok Tong, had been asked to make it his personal crusade to break the opposition strongholds of Potong Pasir and Hougang. 'You Have a Choice', 'Deny PAP a Clean Sweep' and 'No Pseudo-Opposition' were the common refrains of the day.

It is not, therefore, entirely surprising that the 'need for checks and balances' and 'alternative views' would have resonated as it did, on the ground. In the detailed analysis by class, it is clear that apart from those in the Working class and the lowest income categories, all the rest of the groups gave these items mean scores of *more than 4* points – 'very important'. It was this fairly consistent pattern of responses that pulled these top four issues well above the others. This is indicative of the possibility that a significant majority of Singaporean voters do care about these non-pocketbook issues. After all, many understand the PAP regime, with its twin pillars of meritocracy and multiculturalism, ideationally, to be associated with the notion of 'fair play'. This may indicate that voters may be applying those same standards to electoral politics.

Some ask: why did it not translate to, say, a greater percentage of votes for the Opposition parties. Well, we have to remember that the PAP did suffer a dip in the final tally of votes vis-à-vis the results of 2001. Our survey also indicates that voters are also extremely conscious about which party is 'credible' and which is 'not'. On top of this, if party branding is pitched against other individual qualities of election candidates, those other qualities matter even more. Hence while broader issues of principle matter, voters will also take into serious account the sort of choice among candidates that they have at hand, if there is a contest at all. The real question is what sort of profile of people supported the Opposition parties, and this has been explored in the Straits Times op-ed piece, 'GE2006: The other answers to what voters care about'. (3 June 2006)

### **Going Forward**

Now, there is even more work to be done. If the results of this survey had confirmed former notions of what the Singaporean voter was like, we could have sat down and said that it was all as had been predicted, and rested at that.

The survey now behoves us to search further to make sense of it; to find further indications and confirmation of what has been surfaced about voter attitudes in Singapore. There will always be structural or enduring political issues that will weigh on the voters' minds and historical specificities that finally come to shape attitudes and responses to an instrument like that. Longitudinal studies should help us identify the effect of these two kinds of factors. If the PAP and the key Opposition parties are as predictable in how they run their elections campaigns as they have been (save for the Worker's Party in GE2006) next time round, this first study will give us real clues as to what those structural issues are. And, of course, we hope that this has proven that a study like this deserves the sort of time and resources we lacked this time round.

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