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With an informed electorate, voting system can cater to young and old

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For The Straits Times



Singapore should redouble its effort to cultivate an informed electorate that is critical for the election of virtuous representatives capable of exercising reasoned judgment to the benefit all Singaporeans. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

As developed countries the world over grapple with their rapidly ageing societies, there is a rising call for a fundamental rethink of the tenets and systems of political representation.

The concerns about the political impact of that demographic trend are well-founded. A recent Lord Ashcroft Poll following Britain's referendum about its place in the European Union revealed that nearly 60 per cent of voters aged 65 and above voted to leave it while in contrast, 73 per cent of youth aged 18 to 24 chose to remain.

The question is whether such a political divide exists or may arise in ageing Singapore too.

Findings in a post-General Election survey last year by the Institute of Policy Studies may hint at it if we zoom in on the same topics at the heart of the British referendum – jobs and immigration.

Respondents aged 65 and above were the least concerned about the issues of "foreigners and immigration policy" and overall "job situation" but these were most important to new and first-time voters.

Is this enough to warrant changing our electoral system in anticipation of the demographic shift?

Recently, National University of Singapore (NUS) economist Sng Tuan Hwee and fresh graduate Tan Jia Yi argued in The Straits Times for that. They noted that in a majority-rule voting system, the median voter theorem predicts that the preferences of the median voter or "middle" voter in an electorate, will prevail. Politicians and their proposed policies will ultimately cater to the median voter to garner the majority of votes.

As society starts ageing as it has in Singapore – the number of those aged 65 and above is expected to double to 900,000 by 2030 – so too the characteristics of the median voter, they argue. The concern, therefore, is about preventing the theoretical possibility of a "systemic discrimination of youth". Politicians pander to the older voters, leaving younger ones unable to defend their collective interests.

An analysis of current government policies in Singapore suggests that the authors' concerns about the privileging of the seniors may be overstated.

Consider education, an area with an outsized impact on our youth. The Government's commitment to them is unwavering.

In Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat's first Budget this year, investment in education is set to rise to over $12.8 billion, accounting for over 17 per cent of government spending, making it second only to Defence as an area of national investment.

This ties in with the introduction of schemes such as the SkillsFuture Earn and Learn programme that provides polytechnic and ITE students the chance to learn on the job in industry while registered as students, to improve their employability.

The launch of the publicly funded Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), and the introduction of subsidies to students at UniSIM over the recent years provide more diverse pathways to higher learning.

At this juncture, critics may single out the considerable increase in spending on seniors in the same period as irrefutable evidence of politicians pandering to senior voters.

However, while initiatives like the Silver Support Scheme and the Pioneer Generation Package (PGP) recognise the contributions of the early generation of Singaporeans to our country's success, these also alleviate the pressure on the middle-aged "sandwich generation" that has to raise kids and care for elderly parents.

The authors proposed two changes to the electoral system to address the impact of our ageing population on politics.

The first, Demeny voting, named after the demographer Paul Demeny, suggests giving parents a personal vote and a second vote to be exercised on their children's behalf. It assumes that parents will use this proxy vote in the interest of their children.

But its efficacy hinges on a wobbly assumption that parents are capable of acting dispassionately, with prudence and foresight, for posterity's sake.

It also assumes that parents can sufficiently differentiate between what they perceive as beneficial for their children at the public policy level, and the more immediate threats to their own well-being; that in principle, they will vote one way for themselves and another for their kids – the point of the scheme in the first place.

In reality, humans, when left to their own devices, perform poorly at this.

Time after time, people have been documented to be more sensitive towards immediate losses than uncertain future gains. This unique phenomenon, termed "Prospect Theory" by behavioural economists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, may deter older voters from acting in the interests of younger voters given their natural inclination towards minimising immediate risk over maximising long-term benefits.

If true, then under Demeny voting, parents are more likely to support a candidate who promises to preserve the current status quo over one who promises short-term sacrifice for greater rewards in the long run.

This would be the opposite effect to what Sng and Tan say they wish to achieve and doubles the political heft of the middle-aged and seniors.

The authors' second recommendation of lowering the voting age to include more youth in political representation has had more traction in ageing countries.

Japan for example, lowered its minimum voting age from 20 to 18 in time for last month's Upper House elections. Yet, as the Japanese did that, critics highlighted that it is the quality of votes that matters more than mere quantity. Now, Japanese youth must take the responsibility to become well-informed about political matters.

Perhaps some old wisdom can help us keep divisive demographic-based politics at bay.

In 1774, Sir Edmund Burke, a British MP, cautioned politicians to not simply pander to the will of the electorate and the tyranny of the majority, but instead exercise their "unbiased" and "mature judgment" so as not to sacrifice voters to what sometimes can be their own poor decisions.

Likewise, what should matter is that we redouble our effort to cultivate an informed electorate that is critical for the election of virtuous representatives capable of exercising reasoned judgment to the benefit all Singaporeans, young and old.

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