# Construction of Political Society and Political Interest in Secondary Students in Singapore*

## A Report from the Panel 6 Life Pathways Longitudinal Study

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### Abstract

*This article discusses initial findings from the Panel 6 Life Pathways Study of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education-Nanyang Technological University. Particular focus is aimed at measuring initial results using Mixed Model Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of the longitudinal panel studies conducted on a stratified random sample of Secondary School students in Singapore. Three constructs are analyzed, namely: Existential Aspirations, Construction of Political Society and Political Interest. Implications on policy and practice are outlined in the article.*

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> It is Politics that produces happiness in a state, and happiness is the highest of all practical goods, the one thing that we choose to have for its own sake and not for the sake of anything beyond it. (Burnet, 1967, p. 5)

## Politics and Happiness – Control and Resistance

Burnet's translation of selected extracts from some of the works of Aristotle depicting the primacy of Politics defined as that which produces "happiness…and the highest of all practical goods" offers a critical starting point in reflecting upon the nature of political culture manifested in the Singapore education system. Politics in Singapore has been typically described as "paternalistic" (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 38), one that laments voicing political commentary as "practically impossible" (Ho, 2000, p. 443) or in a perpetual state of "total absence" (Zolo, 2004).

The Singapore government itself represented by the People's Action Party (PAP) for most of the nation's modern history is unapologetic about its exclusive and "legitimate right to represent the whole nation" (Vasil, 1984, p. 117) its self-mandated role of maintaining the party's interests and gaining "control" (Rodan, 2004, p. 81) and its purposeful characteristic of leaving "nothing to chance" (Mutalib, 2004, p. 58). The Ministry of Education (MOE) as a key component of the nation-building project of the government is not exempt from the bureaucratic oversight and has become a venue where control was and still is "bitterly resisted" (Gopinathan, 2001, p. 7).

The pendulum of control and resistance essential in approximating the extent of political ethos is the subject matter of this inquiry. Using data generated from an ongoing longitudinal study on a stratified random sample of students belonging to the secondary level of the Singapore education system, this paper will attempt to elaborate on the nature of political culture in Singapore schools.

## Singapore: Economic Success and Depoliticization

Singapore has been able to amass significant amounts of capital both economic and human, to merit for the nation consistently top rankings as one of the world's most competitive nations (Garelli, 2007). Its decades of successful growth is testament to the nation's faithful adherence the tenets of human capital theory. The state underscored a "key strategy" of pursuing the "implementation of policies in education and training designed to boost stocks of human capital" (Gopinathan, 2007, p. 57). Despite this impressive achievement though, one of the pervasive challenges that the multiracial nation confronts is its contentious record of civic and political participation characterised "by the prevalence of elite dominance, bureaucratic omnipotence and political indifference in the society" (Ho, 2000, p. 15). Moreover, political activities and its consequent freedoms are treated as "dysfunctional" and "unproductive" which therefore do "not deserve to be encouraged" (Vasil, 1984, p. 88). Consequently, the state of civic and political participation in Singapore is a far cry from Putnam's idea of relations of "mutual trust and not of control and subjection" (R. Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994, p. 88).

The history and vulnerabilities of Singapore are the chief causes for its current situation of an “administrative state” (Bellows, 1985, p. 56; Chan, 1997; Ho, 2000, p. 15) or what other commentators describe as a “developmental state” (Huff, 1999; Leftwich, 1995). Its genesis as a nation was “traumatic” as it experienced separation from Malaysia (Wilmott, 1989, p. 587). Early in its turbulent past, the fledgling nation realized that social cohesion among its diverse races was critical in order to accomplish nation-building (Khong, Chew, & Goh, 2004; Quah, 2000). It can be convincingly argued that Singapore’s development trajectory – particularly its strategies in education and the economy – have been both deliberate and successful. Notwithstanding ongoing debates on the apparently inconclusive linkages of education to macro-economic growth (Barro, 2001; Gundlach, 1999; Helliwell, 2001), Singapore has consistently used education pragmatically – through intentional and calculated exercise of control -- as a strategic instrument to accomplish not only economic goals but social cohesion and nation-building objectives as well (Low, Toh, & Soon, 1991, p. 202).

As a result, a strong elite-driven technocratic leadership steered the nation to economic progress and in the process managed to achieve a unique form of social cohesion (evidenced by the absence of racial and ethnic riots that once besieged it) that has effectively “depoliticized” the citizenry (Ho, 2000, p. 448).

> In the ideal state, no doubt, the education that produces the best citizen is also the education that produces the best man; but the ideal state has nowhere yet been realized. As things are, it is the business of the educator to produce the type of citizens which the statesman requires for the constitution it is his business to preserve. (Burnet, 1967, p. 6)

Singapore has gained for itself world renown and success not only in achieving economic growth and high standards of living but more importantly highly impressive results in conventional educational outcomes. Has the government, or specifically, the education system been successful in producing “the best citizen” who would aspire for happiness or the “highest practical good”?

## Framing Interests: Which is most important to your happiness?

As highlighted earlier, this inquiry is part of a larger effort derived from the work undertaken in the Life Pathways Longitudinal Survey (Panel 6) of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP). Participants, selected through stratified random sampling belonging to the Secondary cohort (used for this particular paper) completed online questionnaires estimated to last between 40 to 45 minutes (for the Secondary One (S1)– First Wave -2005, Secondary 2 (S2) -Second Wave-2006 and Secondary 3 (S3)- Third Wave-2007).

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Framing Interests (Secondary students 3rd Wave)

| | Frequency | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Being able to choose the kind of life you want to live | 2951 | 25.0 | 25.0 |
| Having a strong sense of achievement in your life | 1848 | 15.6 | 40.6 |
| Supporting your parents | 1321 | 11.2 | 51.8 |
| Working in a job that really interests you | 1274 | 10.8 | 62.6 |
| Getting married and having children | 1090 | 9.2 | 71.8 |
| To be treated fairly by other | 979 | 8.3 | 80.1 |
| Having really good friends | 954 | 8.1 | 88.2 |
| To work in a job that in | 620 | 5.2 | 93.4 |
| Getting along with other people | 376 | 3.2 | 96.6 |
| Being more successful than your peers | 178 | 1.5 | 98.1 |
| A politically stable and economically prosperous Singapore | 178 | 1.5 | 99.6 |
| Being an active member of community & social groups | 53 | .4 | 100.0 |
| Total | 11822 | 100.0 | **100** |

Table 1 which outlines a frequency distribution of what our Secondary 3 students identified as the item which would make them "most happy" rates a "politically stable and economically prosperous Singapore" with a very low count (1.5%). It may not be far-fetched to imagine that young Singaporean adolescents see no "intrinsically rewarding" aspect in politics and may even consider it a "burdensome obligation or duty". It must also be pointed out that these young people are recipients of a regular and sustained stimulus through the National Education (NE) program fostering nationalism and "nation-building" (Chew, 1998; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002) and constantly receiving inputs to embrace notions that "an active citizen is indeed the highest life available to us" (Kymlicka, 1991, p. 294). Notwithstanding, "Politics" represented by a politically stable nation in the survey question, and described by Aristotle as the "highest of all practical goods" appears to be a sentiment not shared by young people in Singapore.

### *Confirmatory Factor Analysis*

Interestingly enough, the first two items that received the highest count typified choices that highlighted the importance of "framing and living a meaningful and purposeful life of their own choosing" (David. Hogan, 2006, p. 7). Echoing the findings of the same Panel 6 CRPP longitudinal study (which focused on the post-secondary cohort) and highlighting the prominence of the desire of young adolescents for self-determination, referred to in the Panel 6 report as "existential aspirations" (David. Hogan, 2006, p. 7) it has been found that the Secondary 3 students share very similar reports to the slightly more mature post-secondary cohort. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using principle components analysis followed by an oblique rotation (Direct Oblimin) not constraining extracted factors to be non-correlated was done on this scale. One factor was extracted with eigenvalue greater than 1, accounting for 75.929% of the total variance. Preliminary Bartlett's Test of Sphericity produced a meritorious KMO value of .916 ($p < .05$).

Table 2. Factor loadings of items for Existential Aspirations (Secondary 3, 3rd wave)

| Constructs / Items | Loadings |
|---|---|
| To have a sense of meaning and purpose in life | .91 |
| To have a sense of achievement | .89 |
| To figure out who I am | .89 |
| To make my own choices | .88 |
| To respect myself | .85 |
| To set my own goals | .79 |

Cronbach's alpha = .93

***Mixed Model ANOVA***

General Linear Model (GLM) repeated measures design tests (to account for the 3 waves of the administration of the survey) were undertaken on the existential aspirations scale across gender, race, secondary school streams[1] and residence types (used here as a proxy for socioeconomic standing). Using a critical α of .05 There were small significant main effects of the between-subjects variable: Gender ($F(1,4473)$= 98.69, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .022), thus overall reported mean scores between males and females across the three waves were similar. The between subjects variable of Ethnicity reported significant but small effects ($F(3,4442)$= 32.37, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .021), thus overall reported mean scores between the different ethnic groups across the three waves were similar. The between subjects variable of Stream reported significant but small effects ($F(3,4775)$= 21.27, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .013), thus overall reported mean scores between the different streams across the three waves were similar. The between subjects variable of Residence also reported significant but small effects ($F(3,4775)$= 3.91, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .002), thus overall reported mean scores between the different groups according to residences across the three waves were similar. The within-subject factor of Year by Stream and Year by Residence reported significant but small effect respectively: ($F(3, 4775)$= 8.12, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .002) and ($F(3, 4775)$=3.91, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .002). Within-subject factors of Year by Gender, and Ethnicity were not significant. There were no interaction effects reported for gender, ethnicity, school streams and residence. It can therefore be concluded that for the Secondary 3 cohort, existential aspirations are independent of social demographic

[1] In Singapore schools, students are streamed into four types: Special/Gifted, Express, Normal Academic (NA) and Normal Technical (NT).

background as well as academic ability categorizations and that the Secondary 3 respondents view existential aspirations in a similar fashion.

The CFA and the results of Mixed Model ANOVA conclusively reveal that the secondary adolescents highly value self-centring conceptions of identity and self-determination in their interpretations of happiness. How can this finding be reconciled with conventional definitions of political culture and citizenship that prescribe going "beyond one's individual self-interest and to be committed to the well-being of some larger group" (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002)? How can this be interpreted vis-à-vis the Aristotelian argument of "Politics that produces happiness in a state, and happiness is the highest of all practical goods"? Does this mean that Singaporean adolescents have no inclination towards the Aristotelian notion of the highest of all practical goods? What are the implications of these to a Singapore education system which has identified its own brand of political socialisation and nation-building through education (Doraisamy, 1969; Hill & Lian, 1995; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002)?

### *Current Paradigms on Education and Political Culture*

Education and training and its relation to human capital formation have led individuals and societies to invest heavily in its acquisition with the hope of reaping expected higher returns (Mincer, 1958). The linkages between education and training on the one hand and notions of income equality and inequality have been investigated quite extensively internationally (Becker, 1962) and in Singapore (Liu & Wong, 1981). More importantly, an area that has similarly been studied quite thoroughly would be the linkages between education and citizenship and civic participation (Bourdieu, 1991; R. Putnam, 1995; R. Putnam et al., 1994; White, 1999). Verba, Schlozman and Brady explicitly state this relationship:

> Education enhances participation more or less directly by developing skills that are relevant to politics – the ability to speak and write, the knowledge of how to cope in an organizational setting. Education also affects participation by imparting information about government and politics, and by encouraging attitudes such as a sense of civic responsibility or political efficacy that predispose an individual to political involvement. In addition, education affects activity indirectly: those who have high levels of education are more likely to command jobs that are lucrative and…to have opportunities to exercise leadership and to develop politically relevant skills at work, in church and in voluntary associations. (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995)

Numerous studies on the association between education and the acquisition of civic skills have been made in the disciplines of political science, sociology and educational psychology to name a few. Some studies have even attempted to carefully delineate the nuances between civic and political engagement versus political participation and have taken this analysis to the levels of cognitive and agentic skills (Keeter Scott, Krista, Cliff, & Molly, 2003). One school of thought adheres to the importance of "cultivating democratic civic virtues" and in the process "maintaining a robust civil society" in order "to forestall concentrations of power at the top or at the core" (Eishtan, 2001, p. 264). This perspective is consistent with the intellectual movement promoting the acquisition of "values and habits that lead to civic engagement" among the youth, in a word "civic orientation" (Crystal & DeBell, 2002, p. 114).

Another school of thought argues about the weakening of civic-mindedness and an "overall lack of citizen virtue" (Pratte, 1988, p. 303). This observation resonates with the claim that civic "virtues are in decline" and that a marked tendency could be noted towards "greater apathy, passivity and withdrawal into the private sphere of family, career and personal projects" (Kymlicka, 1991, p. 293). A careful review of two constructs used extensively in the study: construction of political society and political interest provides analytical illumination in relation to the question of high existential aspirations and its impact on political culture.

## Construction of Political Society (CPS)

The notion of construction of political society could arguably trace its lineage from an ongoing spirited debate on an aspect of political philosophy. One perspective looks at the task of creating political constructs as a complementary process requiring an "acceptance of our common culture" and also of openness of beliefs that may "transcend the diversity endemic to our culture" (Raz, 1990, p. 8). Similarly another viewpoint allows us to explore the central issue of political theory as "not the constitution of the self but the connection of constituted selves, the pattern of social relations" (Walzer, 1990, p. 21). Another posits that the construction of political norms underscore the need for young adolescents to appreciate that the "boundaries between public and private spheres" where they find themselves are "historically in the flux " (Habermas, 1995, p. 851). Acceptance, complementary processes, transcendence of self and connections with social relations seem to be salient parts of constructing political society. The Panel 6 Longitudinal study interrogated various clusters of "capitals" that could arguably be arranged to fall into constructs that are related to notions of a political society and political interest. Both these constructs reveal interesting insights about young Singaporean adolescents.

### *Confirmatory Factor Analysis on CPS*

The dataset from the Panel 6 Longitudinal Study contained a scale described as Constructions of Political Society. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using principle components analysis followed by an oblique rotation (Direct Oblimin) not constraining extracted factors to be non-correlated was done on this scale. One factor was extracted with eigenvalue greater than 1, accounting for 55.14% of the total variance.

Table 3. Factor loadings of items for Constructions of Political Society (Secondary 3, 3rd wave)

| Constructs / Items | Loadings |
|---|---|
| Greater access to information and ideas not approved by the government | .79 |
| More opposition parties in the government | .75 |
| Greater opportunity to discuss government policies | .74 |
| More rights for individuals to do things they want | .72 |
| Greater restrictions on the powers of government | .69 |

Cronbach's alpha = .70

### *Mixed Model ANOVA*

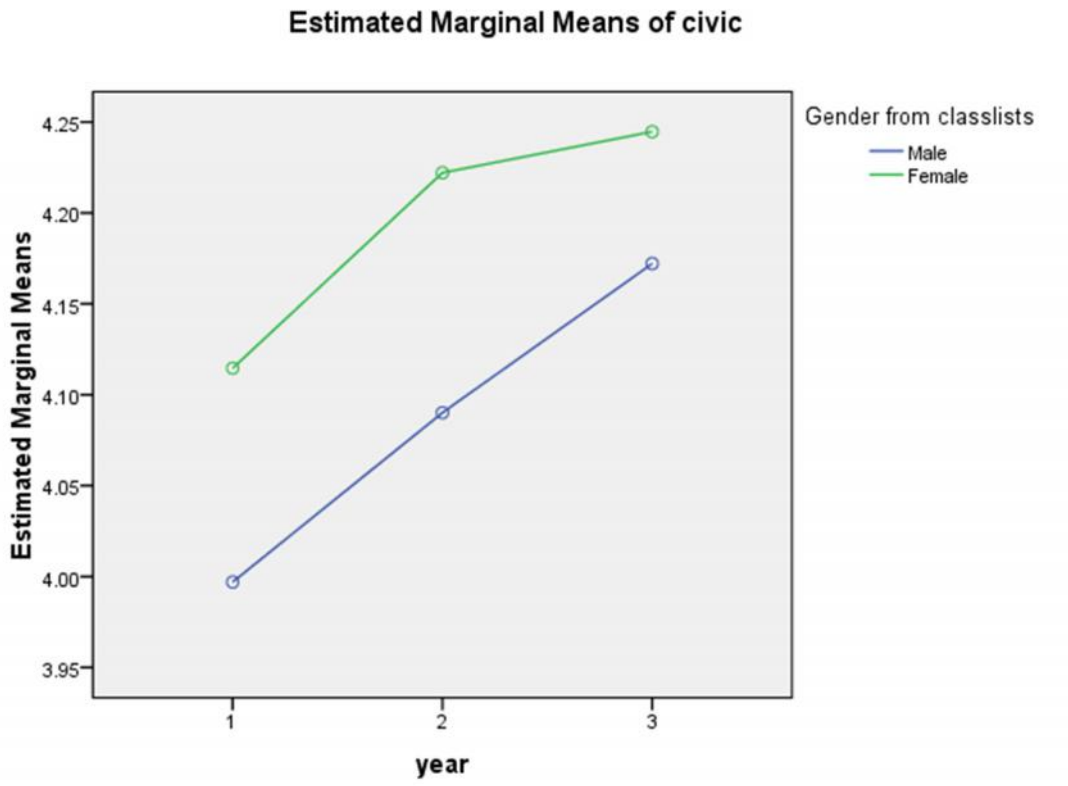
General Linear Model (GLM) repeated measures design tests (reporting for the three waves of the administration of the survey) were undertaken on the constructions of political society scale across gender, ethnicity, secondary school streams and residence type. Using a critical α of .05 There were small significant main effects of the between-subjects variable: Gender ($F(1,2397)$= 20.49, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .008), thus overall reported mean scores between males and females across the three waves were similar. The between subjects variable of Streams reported significant but small effects ($F(3, 2531)$= 16.48, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .019), allowing us to state that reported mean scores between the different streams across the three waves were analogous. The between subjects variable of Residence similarly reported significant but small effects ($F(3, 2397)$= 27.69, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .011), thus overall reported mean scores between the different streams across the three waves were similar. The between subjects variable of Ethnicity was not significant. The within-subject factor of Year by Gender reported a significant but small effect: ($F(1, 2397)$= 64.23, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .026) . While the within-subject factor of Year by Streams also registered significant but small effect size ($F(3, 2531)$= 44.69, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .017). Within-subject factor of Year by Ethnicity and Residence reported significant but small effect sizes respectively: ($F(3, 2377)$= 12.06, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .005) and ($F(3, 2531)$= 51.77, $p <.05$, $\eta^2$ = .020).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Construction of Political Society

| | Gender from classlists | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conceptions of Political Society Scale (full, 6 items) Year 1 | Male | 4.00 | .84 | 1154 |
| | Female | 4.11 | .68 | 1245 |
| | Total | 4.06 | .77 | 2399 |
| Conceptions of Political Society Scale (full, 7 items) Year 2 | Male | 4.09 | .91 | 1154 |
| | Female | 4.22 | .67 | 1245 |
| | Total | 4.16 | .80 | 2399 |
| Construction of Political Society Scale (full, 7items) Year 3 | Male | 4.17 | .87 | 1154 |
| | Female | 4.24 | .67 | 1245 |
| | Total | 4.21 | .77 | 2399 |

There were no interaction effects reported for gender, race and school streams. It can therefore be concluded that for the Secondary 3 cohort, constructions of political society are independent of social demographic background as well as academic ability categorizations. It can be argued that the Secondary 3 respondents view the cluster of constructions in a similar fashion. The interesting finding about this scale is that the mean scores have consistently gone up for each of the three waves. Figure 1 depicts a graphic representation of the upward trajectory of secondary students' notions of construction of political society represented by estimated marginal means.

Figure 1: Estimated Marginal Means-Constructions of Political Society




**Political Interest (PI)**

A possible evidence of the existence and prevalence of political interest could be the presence of political discourse – a conversation which revolves around politics. Persons engaged in "public discourses" and who necessarily "must be temporally, socially, and materially specified in relation to political opinion" are manifesting political interest (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p. 773). It can even be argued that the absence of active political discourse, or to be more precise, the prevention of an individual from freely engaging on discussion regarding politics does not contradict a situation where an individual can manifest political interest. An example of this in the Singapore context would be "interest group politics, as well as less organized individual and collective political expressions outside party politics" who are engaged and possess capabilities of mobilization but who decide not to take action since doing so could be "highly problematic" and could make individuals "vulnerable to prosecution" (Rodan, 2004, p. 84). Although not participating in mainstream and overt political discourse, individuals such as these could arguably be described as manifesting political interest. The Political Interest (PI) scale from the Panel 6 Longitudinal Data provides interesting insights. Confirmatory Factor Analysis as well as GLM for repeated measures design were conducted on this scale

### *Confirmatory Factor Analysis on PI*

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using principle components analysis followed by an oblique rotation (Direct Oblimin) not constraining extracted factors to be non-correlated was done on this scale. One factor was extracted with eigenvalue greater than 1, accounting for 77.49% of the total variance. A preliminary Bartlett's Test of Sphericity produced a meritorious KMO value of .717 ($p < .05$).

Table 5. Factor loadings of items for Political Interest (Secondary 3, 3rd wave)

| Constructs / Items | Loadings |
|---|---|
| Discuss government policies with friends | .908 |
| Discuss politics (government policies) with family members | .875 |
| Discuss government policies with teachers | .857 |

Cronbach's alpha = .85

### *Mixed Model ANOVA*

General Linear Model (GLM) repeated measures design tests (to account for the 3 waves of the administration of the survey) were undertaken on the political interest scale across gender, ethnicity, secondary school streams and residence. Using a critical α of .05 There were small significant main effects of the between-subjects variable: Ethnicity ($F(3,2375)$= 2.83 $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .004), thus overall reported mean scores between ethnic groups across the three waves were similar. The between subjects variable of Streams and Residence reported significant but small effects respectively ($F(3, 2529)$= 37.98, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .043) and ($F(3, 2529)$= 5.32, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .006), thus overall reported mean scores between the different streams and residence types across the three waves were similar. The within-subject factor of Year by Stream reported significant and modest effect: ($F(3, 2529)$= 73.57, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .028), which could be interpreted as: the mean scores of Stream by year were significantly different. The within-subject factor of Year by Ethnicity registered significant but small effect sizes: ($F(3, 2375)$= 18.34, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .008). Meanwhile, the within-subject factor of Year by Residence registered significant and modest effect size: ($F(3, 2529)$= 130.62, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .049). Within-subject factor of Year by Gender was not significant. There was a significant but small interaction effect reported for Streams ($F(3, 2529)$= 12.39, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .014). Similarly, a significant but small interaction effect was also reported by Residence ($F(3, 2529)$= 2.88, $p < .05$, $\eta^2$ = .003). These findings allow us to assert that for the Secondary student cohort, the scale of political interest is independent of social demographic background – except for Residence grouping. It could also be argued that based on initial findings, the pattern of change for political interest among the three waves of the study was implicated by the academic ability grouping of the respondents. Possible explanations to the significant but small interaction effects would be discussed in the succeeding section. Similar to the Construction of Political Society scale earlier, Political Interest has also shown mean scores that have consistently gone up for each of the three waves

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Political Interest

| | Gender from classlists | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political Interest / Civic Engagement Scale (full, 3 items) Year 1 | Male | 2.64 | 1.60 | 1153 |
| | Female | 2.60 | 1.39 | 1244 |
| | Total | 2.62 | 1.49 | 2397 |
| Political interest / civic engagment Scale (full, 3 items) Year 2 | Male | 2.91 | 1.64 | 1153 |
| | Female | 2.78 | 1.41 | 1244 |
| | Total | 2.84 | 1.53 | 2397 |
| Political Interest Scale (full, 3 items) Year 3 | Male | 3.22 | 1.65 | 1153 |
| | Female | 3.16 | 1.44 | 1244 |
| | Total | 3.19 | 1.55 | 2397 |

**Paradox: Increasing political interest and construction of political society amidst depoliticization**

Earlier in this paper, it was argued that “Politics” in Singapore has been labelled as “paternalistic” (Hill & Lian, 1995, p. 38), and where the environment views political commentary as “practically impossible” (Ho, 2000, p. 443) or simply stated in a permanent condition of “total absence” (Zolo, 2004). The apparent depoliticization in Singapore could arguably be much more tepid on the part of young people. Studies on American youth civic engagement have indicated a decline (R. Putnam, 1995; Robert. Putnam, 2000). Some have underscored how lack of civic engagement is more acute among students in marginalized and minority groups (Jankowski, 1992, 2002).

Compared to four other scales that are related to civic engagement and political socialization (i.e. community participation, sense of membership, and conception of good citizenship) that were used as analytical points for the longitudinal study, “constructions of political society” and “political interest” experienced positive growth during the three waves of the study (D. Hogan et al., 2006). As opposed to the downward trajectory experienced by participation, membership and notions of good citizenship, these two constructs moved upward. What could these seemingly paradoxical results imply? One plausible explanation for this could be attributed to the fact that students at this age receive an intensive and systematic exposure to political socialization: “Adolescence is one of the few periods during the life cycle when there are nearly universal opportunities to collect and absorb political facts and information through coursework in social studies and history” (Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003, p. 15). In the case of Singapore, it may be posited that the National Education programs designed as stimulus for political socialization and citizenship education among its school children must be gaining ground. One way of addressing this paradox is by recalling one of the major debates in citizenship education that demarcates between “knowledge-based” versus a “praxis-based” route to understanding (Haste, 2004). Using this as an analytical basis, and recalling how National Education is an almost ubiquitous subject in schools, it could be argued that the steadily increasing rates of political interest and constructions of political society among Singaporean secondary students is a triumph of the “knowledge-based” route. The decreasing rates of membership, participation and notions of a good citizen can also be argued as the dominant success of the “knowledge-based” route as opposed to “praxis-based” approaches.

Figure 2: Estimated Marginal Means-Political Interest

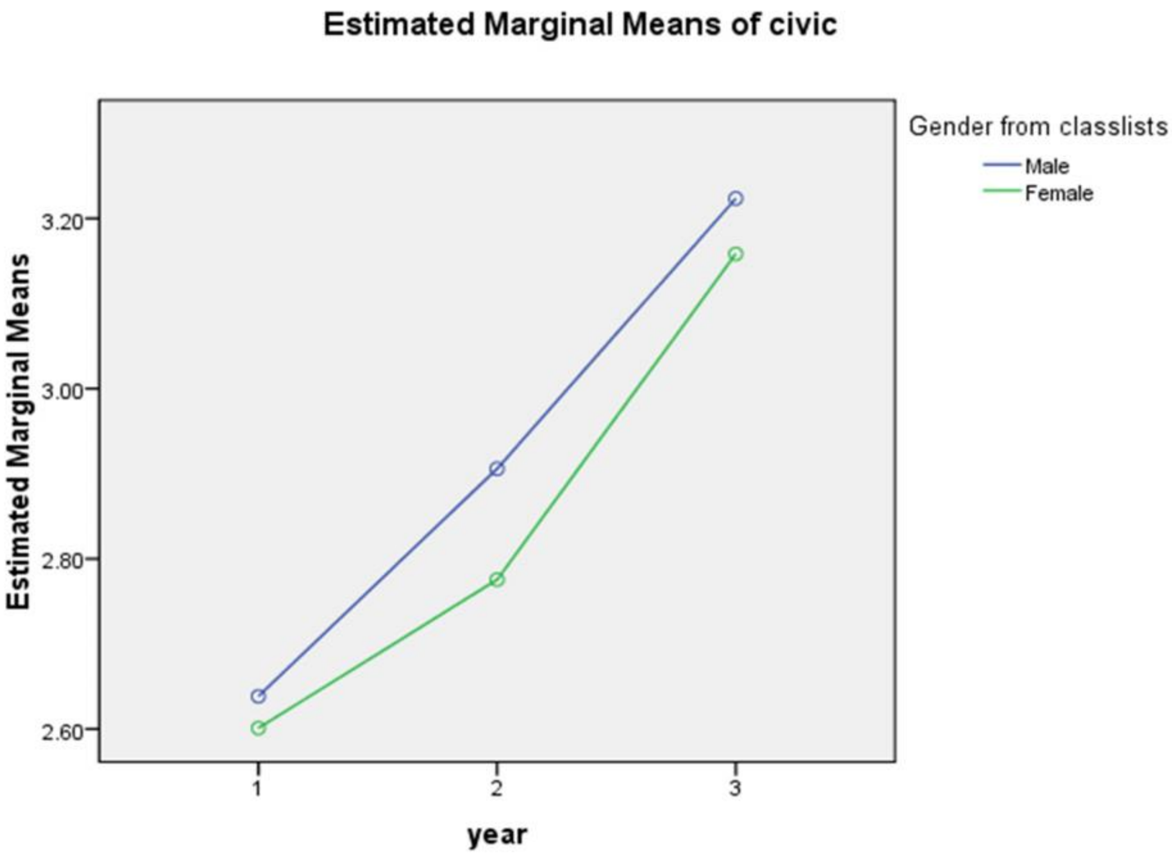



Table 4 and Table 6 indicate a steady increase in the levels of Construction of Political Society as well as increasing levels of Political Interest among Singaporean adolescents. Table 1 reveals that “Being able to choose the kind of life you want to live” emerged as the top choice given a listing where Secondary students identified what they felt would make them most happy. What do these findings tell us about the nature of political culture in Singapore schools? What are the implications of these partial findings?

***“Liberty of the moderns” vs. “Liberty of the ancients”***

> Liberalism and civic republicanism disagree on whether the "liberty of the moderns" or the "liberty of the ancients" should enjoy priority in the order of justification. Which comes first: the individual liberties of the members of the modern market society or the rights of democratic citizens to political participation. (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p. 767)

Habermas and Rehg pose the "liberty of the moderns" or the "liberty of the ancients" in a tone reminiscent of the "immovable force versus irresistible object" quandary. Kymlicka elaborates on the chasm between the two by explaining that "whereas the ancients sacrificed private liberty to promote political life, moderns view politics as a means (and somewhat of a sacrifice) needed to protect their private life" (Kymlicka, 1991, p. 295). The preceding points underscore a perceived clash between two schools of thought representing political life on the one hand and private life on the other.

However, when one reviews the findings generated from this initial report, one may argue that Singaporean secondary students in expressing their desire to choose the "kind of life they want to live" have somehow manifested an analogous "liberty of the moderns" trait. Private liberty seems to be the driving force that propels them towards what they envision as happiness. Similarly, recalling the partial findings on the steadily increasing levels of political interest and construction of political society in the three waves of the study among Singaporean secondary students, one can posit that they have in a limited way revealed a comparable "liberty of the ancients" characteristic. A steadily rising notion of political society seems to be a trait that Singapore secondary students have manifested across social backgrounds and academic abilities. Corollary to this, growing political interest also manifests itself subject to specific group categories of Residence types and Streams in school. Furthermore, the Singaporean students have more importantly provided a response to the quandary presented by Habermas and Rehg: They seem to alternatively perform analogous roles of the "liberty of the moderns" and the "liberty of the ancients".

## Implications

The rising levels of Construction of Political Society and Political Interest is a welcome sign for both policy-makers and practitioners involved in the task of nurturing incipient political culture among Singaporean adolescents. Our students report that from year 1 to year 3 of the test administration, their limited stocks of political culture are growing. Curriculum policy planners and classroom practitioners can interpret these findings as a positive sign of increasing capacities in a limited aspect of political culture. More importantly, the findings reveal a propensity for more increase. Policy interventions in political culture curriculum should be sensitive to this. Classroom practitioners must be cognizant of this as they try to inculcate not only political interest and constructions of political society but political engagement and civic beliefs and dispositions as well.

Civic education is an important aspect of education in Singapore schools. In preparing students for responsible citizenship in society, the school environment plays a vital part in providing opportunities for them to learn about values in the classroom and also translate what is taught into action. One important component of civic education is the Civics and Moral Education (CME) programme in the formal school curriculum. The NE messages have been infused in the CME and Civics syllabuses to give emphasis to nurturing the correct values and attitudes of responsible citizenship (Curriculum Planning & Development Division - Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 29).

Policy makers and classroom practitioners need to closely study linkages between the students' interest and engagement in political interest and construction of political society. Discovery of factors and covariates that account for the increasing levels in the self-reported measures could be extremely helpful in designing interventions to help promote the other civic capital outcomes.

The express interest that most Singaporean secondary students have about “being able to choose the kind of life you want to live” is a measure that warrants closer examination: It may provide possible pathways towards understanding maturity (i.e political) of the students. It is an indicator that would be of great use to policy makers and practitioners to have a “real” appreciation of the bundle of capitals that Singaporean secondary students possess. This would be essential in assisting the students attain “the highest practical good”

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