

Trust

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Singapore's next big thing is increasing trust—the oxygen of a thriving society. Trust in their fellow Singaporean enables individual citizens to securely extend reciprocal relationships from their family to the broader community. Trust in institutions assures Singaporeans that abiding by the laws and norms of the state are in their best interests. Trust in leaders inspires Singaporeans to vest public representatives with the authority to guide and change the nation's institutions in service to citizens' personal needs, communities' interests, and the greater good.

Singapore has forged a strong foundation of trust over the past 50 years. Singaporeans now pride themselves on a common societal identity based on broad racial and religious harmony that bridges traditional societal fault-lines. The 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer showed that Singaporeans reported a region-leading 72% trust level in our institutions, due to high public regard for institutionalised meritocracy, competence and integrity. Furthermore, the generation of Singaporeans born between 1969 and 1978 benefited from high intergenerational income mobility due to high economic growth and a focus on education, as noted in a 2016 study by Yip Chun Seng.

However, Singapore has also seen the growing divide between haves and have-nots over the past decade. Despite slowing national economic growth relative to past decades, Singapore's educated, connected and wealthy have continued to benefit in today's age of globalisation. Those not similarly equipped, due to circumstance, choice or lack of privilege, continue to fall behind. The Gini index of income inequality rose during this time period even after accounting for government transfers and local measurement factors, as seen in several studies including one by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation in 2015. This trend is mirrored in other rich developed nations also facing continued slow growth and rising income inequality, as economist Thomas Piketty observed in his 2013 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

In parallel, the Trusting and Trust-Nots have emerged along this fault-line. In Quad.sg polling research that I co-authored in 2015, we found that higher household income was strongly correlated with stronger trust in Singapore's future and agreement that Singapore is meritocratic. The Trusting are generally those who have benefited over the past decade and have both faith and confidence in Singapore's current leadership. Conversely, the Trust-Nots tend to have been treading water economically. They are cynical of the current political establishment, and instead trust in themselves and their community leaders. Similarly, the Trusting broadly

believe that the increased free flow of people and capital across borders is both inevitable and positive for Singapore, while the Trust-Nots disagree.

Singaporeans divided by this fault-line are trapped in an "us vs. them" mentality. The Trusting are bewildered by the Trust-Nots, seeing them as having either insufficient information or judgment to make good decisions in their own best, long-term interests. Alternatively, their concerns can be delegitimised by casting the opinions as being driven by envy, racism or xenophobia. In return, the Trust-Nots are frustrated by the Trusting, perceiving them as naive citizens either unfamiliar with working class issues or manipulated by mainstream media. Furthermore, Quad.sg polling found that the current political establishment was often viewed as an out-of-touch elite that primarily served the well-off but not the broader community. This divide is echoed in Britain's "Brexit" referendum, where votes for remaining or leaving the European Union were not only highly correlated with socioeconomic factors, but both sides were also bewildered and frustrated by their opponents' convictions.

The decentralisation of information distribution in the Internet age is positive but also drives increasing polarisation. Across the 2011 and 2015 General Elections, citizens increasingly influenced each other and consumed information on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, while traditional broadcast media diminished in relevance. Yet, research by economist Yosh Halberstam has shown that social media is a strong driver of the "echo chamber" effect, where citizens' political beliefs are reinforced by their chosen community. As a result, the Trusting and Trust-Nots are simultaneously exposed to less objective information and more peer group opinions that reinforce their currently-held dogmas.

Although Singapore's high aggregate trust level is comforting, the entrenchment of simmering distrust within low-income and blue-collar communities is the true cause for alarm. Cynicism about the objectivity of mainstream media is increasingly coupled with long-standing doubts about electoral fairness, which in turn reduces some citizens' belief that Members of Parliament (MPs) genuinely represent their interests. Overly partisan advocacy that is unable to stretch past dogmatic ideology weakens meaningful engagement over public policies, communications and results. Political and societal decisions are also increasingly viewed as zero sum games between communities, leaving little room for compromise.

Across the next 50 years, Singapore must focus on rebuilding trust in underserved communities. Prioritising income equality and intergenerational mobility is key as citizens do not only judge progress by how they have individually gained, but also how their community has fared. Articulating fair and transparent rationales for electoral rules and boundaries strengthens the citizens' trust in their local MPs and the winning party. Opening up common spaces for grassroots discussion enables the rise of a diverse range of authentic community leaders, influencers and academia that will build bridges across these fault-lines.

By growing Singaporeans' firm faith in the reliability, truth and ability of their fellow citizens, institutions and leaders, Singapore will continue to thrive as a nation.

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