

## Elections Have Consequences in Singapore Too

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Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong waves as he arrives at a People's Action Party branch office, as ballots are being counted during the general election, in Singapore on July 11, 2020.

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As anticipated, the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) won Singapore's July 10 general election, held amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Even Singapore's leading opposition party, the Workers' Party (WP), which boosted its share of seats in parliament from seven to ten, had denied seeking to deny the PAP a "mandate"—it vowed merely not to allow the long-ruling party a "blank check." And so the WP, one of multiple opposition parties that contested the election, but the only one to win seats, did. (The Progress Singapore Party will send another two opposition politicians to parliament, but without having won any constituencies, a uniquely Singaporean consolation prize for the "best losers" nationally.)

Following the July 10 election, the PAP still holds 89.2 percent of parliamentary seats (eighty-three of ninety-three), a fairly marginal decrease from the 93.3 percent share of seats (eighty-three of eighty-nine) it secured in 2015. Yet at 61.2 percent, the PAP's share of the popular vote fell below the 65 percent for which it had hoped—a level that would be on par with its usual results, though less impressive than the 69.9 percent it garnered in 2015, in the wake of Lee Kuan Yew's passing and Singapore's fiftieth anniversary bonanza.

The general election result is really a win for both sides: the opposition parties, and especially the WP, can rest assured that a decent share of voters finds them credible, even in times that call for especially competent leadership, whereas the PAP still knows the electorate loves it best. At the same time, the election has obliged introspection on the part of the PAP, and does suggest ways in which the PAP, or governance broadly in Singapore, will likely recalibrate.

First, there is the question of leadership. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in 2018 that he would retire by age seventy (he is sixty-eight now), but his designated successor, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat, failed to thrive in the general election. The group representation constituency (GRC) team Heng led won its district, but barely. Granted, the PAP faced a stiff WP challenge in that GRC, and the party "parachuted" Heng in to lead the

team at the last minute—invariably a liability—but his standing as prime-minister-in-waiting seems more tenuous now. Lee has suggested that, in light of the pandemic, he might delay his departure as prime minister, but Heng’s colleagues insist they remain united in favor of his succeeding Lee, whenever the transition happens.

Indeed, the PAP chose not Heng or another fellow PAP fourth-generation, or “4G,” leader to represent the party in the one English-language televised debate of the campaign but the more seasoned foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan (who later insisted he’s the same age as Heng, even if not generally considered to be in the same 4G political cohort). Lee’s new cabinet, which he announced July 25, rotates its 4G members but leaves Heng seemingly secure as heir-apparent, retains several seasoned “3G” ministers among a handful of new faces, and maintains “a greater degree of continuity” than usual, as Lee explained, given the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the WP successfully navigated its own first election under new leadership: former Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang passed the reins to successor (and now Singapore’s first recognized Leader of the Opposition) Pritam Singh in 2018. Low, as well as party veterans Chen Show Mao and Png Eng Huat, then stood down from contesting this general election in favor of younger party members. That the party still maintained and expanded its foothold—with a team of younger members’ securing a first-ever second GRC—suggests the transition was a success.

Moreover, the strong strides made by newcomer opposition party Progress Singapore Party (PSP) suggests a life-after-PAP path for defectors from Singapore’s dominant party. Eighty year old ex-PAP MP Tan Cheng Bock launched PSP only in January 2019, together with other former PAP members and, as elections approached, PM Lee’s estranged brother Lee Hsien Yang. PSP benefited the most from voters defecting from the PAP.

The role of younger voters in Singapore is the second key dimension to watch going forward. The electoral impact of young voters is easily overstated, but their interests did help to set the tone in this election. Voters aged twenty-five to thirty-five were the biggest population “bulge” in 2020, and they were inclined, per Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, toward “personal narratives and ‘I feel your pain’ connectivity, approachability and authenticity.” She finds the WP well attuned to these “Zoomers.” Even so, first-time voters (aged twenty-one to twenty-four) comprised less than 10 percent of the electorate; only one-third of the electorate was people in their twenties and thirties. While concrete data are unfortunately scarce, a Blackbox Research survey found the highest support for the WP among that twenty-one to twenty-four year old segment—but that share of voters alone could not turn the tide. Rather, economically pinched voters in their forties through early sixties who switched from the PAP to opposition

parties, suggests the PAP's Lawrence Wong, incumbent minister for national development, likely had more impact in reducing the PAP's share of the popular vote this time around.

That said, PAP and opposition postmortems, and what messages seemed to stick during the campaign itself, indicate there will now likely be a change in the PAP's tone and focus, our third factor. Wong notes the need for the PAP to step up its game with young voters. He suggests that while the party "tried [its] best" to reach younger voters with online content, including on Instagram and Telegram, "not all of this connected with netizens." Pundits emphasized that younger voters in particular seemed to prefer a less paternalistic tone, more open discussion of sensitive issues of race and religion (a flashpoint especially in light of police investigation of first-time WP candidate Raeesah Khan's previous social media posts alleging racial and religious discrimination in Singapore), and new voices in parliament. As popular PAP Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam put it post-election, the party's smaller popular vote share "is leading the party to review its own game so as to win the hearts, and not just the minds, of a changing electorate."

The parties emphasized different themes, too: the PAP aimed to keep the focus on jobs, whereas opposition parties hammered home the call for new voices in Parliament. Blackbox Research found the electorate nearly evenly split on these themes, with 53 percent favoring the PAP's economic focus over the opposition's diverse-voices narrative. But the PAP did a sometimes-ham-fisted job of delivering its message. PAP activists, for instance, noted that when the Singapore Democratic Party's (SDP) Chee Soon Juan claimed the PAP had once supported a highly unpopular population target of ten million—resistance to an onslaught of foreigners, taking good jobs from Singaporeans, was a prominent opposition-campaign theme—the PAP spent more effort working to impugn his credibility and integrity than in addressing the immigration issue. Or as one PAP activist said, the party has "to do more to convince (people of) why PAP is good, and not why the opposition is bad."

Fourth and finally, that change in tone might translate to shifts in the policy process and in policy outcomes. For one thing, there will be more opposition MPs than in the previous parliament: ten from the WP, supplemented by two non-constituency MPs from the PSP who intend to work as part of a WP-led "alternative front." The PAP has signaled that it expects the WP to contribute ideas to policymaking in parliament; the WP's Pritam Singh has countered that PAP must be more forthcoming with information if it seeks "realistic policy alternatives." But it seems conceivable that some of the WP's policies, which tend slightly to the left of the PAP's, could make it onto the parliamentary agenda. Ian Chong, a political scientist, explains that the leading opposition parties (WP, PSP, and SDP) all campaigned on a "more systematically [economically] redistributive approach" than the PAP, which "kept to its

traditional emphasis on the efforts of individuals and families, with minimalist state support supplemented by one-off transfers.” On the table now could be strengthened social safety nets in particular: for instance, a minimum wage (Singapore currently has no minimum wage), unemployment insurance, and measures to support the value of the Housing Development Board flats in which over 80 percent of Singaporeans live, overwhelmingly as homeowners, but with ninety-nine-year leases.

Probably less likely to change are those features of the system that protect incumbents in Singapore. Among them are the much-critiqued Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), the PAP’s monopolization of the parastatal “grassroots” People’s Association, and the mix of GRCs and single-member constituencies (SMC)—though now that the PAP has lost two of the former, each wiping out a full slate of candidates, perhaps a return to full-SMC could be in the cards.

These elections are not earth-shattering in their ramifications for Singapore governance or policy directions. Yet they are meaningful nonetheless, in the short term and in signaling possible longer-term trends.