

## **GE2020 results less surprising if parties paid attention to Facebook interactions, says researcher**

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The COVID-19 “flight to safety” instinct, if it existed, likely dissipated towards the tail end of the elections, according to a post-2020 General Election survey.

“I think it’s safe to say that the biggest assumption going into GE2020 is that there’s going to be a flight to safety effect among voters, so much so that the opposition parties, in the early days of the campaign, they would generally fear a wipeout,” said Analytix Labs chief data analyst Chua Chin Hon.

But a closer look at the Facebook data would have raised “serious questions” about this assumption, he added.

Daily user interactions with COVID-19 Facebook posts had fallen “very sharply” from peaks in April, said Mr Chua. By Nomination Day and Polling Day, public interest in COVID-19 on Facebook had “dipped to levels not seen since the beginning of the year”.

The results, which were presented on Thursday (Oct 8) at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) forum conducted via Facebook Live, were derived from more than 32,000 COVID-19-related Facebook posts from seven local media outlets between Jan 1 and Jul 12.

The news portals are CNA, the Straits Times, Mothership, TODAY, Zaobao, Wanbao and Shin Min.

The study also sourced data from more than 8,000 General Election-related Facebook posts from 15 public pages between Jun 22 and Jul 11.

The pages include those belonging to People’s Action Party (PAP), Workers’ Party (WP), Progress Singapore Party (PSP), Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Mr Pritam Singh, Dr Tan Cheng Bock and Mr Lee Hsien Yang.

The study used only Facebook data, as it is the biggest social media platform in Singapore and the most efficient in driving news and news-related traffic to websites, said Mr Chua. According to another IPS survey, Facebook was also ranked “well-ahead” of other platforms among respondents, he added.

However, he cautioned that Facebook data “does not establish any link” between eventual voting behaviour, and Facebook is only a “limited proxy” for public opinion.

“But the data from Facebook itself do suggest that Singaporeans were sending a lot of interesting signals on Facebook before and during GE, signals which I think were missed by the parties and many of us observing the election,” he said.

**ELECTION “SURPRISES”**

The study cited “surprises” such as the controversy over former prospective PAP candidate Ivan Lim, as well as the WP’s Sengkang win and the vote swing towards the opposition.

Mr Lim had withdrawn from contesting in the election, after online criticism emerged about his conduct during his time in National Service, among other allegations.

Mr Lim announced his decision on Jun 27, the same day the PAP launched its manifesto. Facebook posts on Mr Lim received 8.65 times more total interaction than the launch of the PAP manifesto, according to the data.

This was the “first major sign” that voters were “paying attention to a bunch of other issues”, said Mr Chua.

While he acknowledged “fair points” that online users could be drawn to drama and controversy and that social media reaction for election manifestos would be low, Mr Chua said that an interaction gap “of this size” should have “rung some alarm bells for the PAP that its message on jobs just wasn’t registering with voters as well as they thought it might have”.

Signals on Facebook were clear “from the early stages” of the election pointing towards WP’s win in Sengkang, said Mr Chua, noting that the PAP team “failed to register much public interest” on Facebook during the campaign period.

“On average, the WP Sengkang team had about 32,700 Facebook interactions per day throughout the campaign period, whereas the PAP team only managed an average about 4,200 Facebook interactions a day,” he added. That is nearly an eight-fold gap.

While Mr Chua cautioned that those who reacted to the Facebook posts were not necessarily Sengkang voters or even Singaporeans, the significant gap showed that the Sengkang team “garnered far greater mindshare and name recognition” than their PAP rivals, he said.

Overall, there was an “enthusiasm gap” between the PAP’s and the opposition’s campaigning messages, Mr Chua said.

“Facebook interactions with posts related to the PAP’s jobs message peaked very early and lost steam by the time it ended,” he added.

“But in contrast, the interaction for the opposition’s message peaked at the end of the campaign, just before Cooling Off and Polling Day.”

### **“FIRE-AND-FORGET” ATTITUDE**

Political parties are getting better at producing content for social media, said Mr Chua, but most of them were still “scratching the surface” of what modern electoral campaigns do in analysing data and social media targeting.

“For the next GE and beyond, I think they really have to go beyond just thinking about content creation and distribution. To do well, they just need to better analyse the data that they themselves generate and that’s being generated in the media as well,” he added.

“Clearly there’s a lot of questions about the authenticity of social media data, and I think we should indeed be very sceptical. Social media data can indeed be manipulated or misleading,

but it is something else altogether to say that you're sceptical and then ignore the signals coming from tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of users."

Given that Singapore is a "low signal" environment due to a lack of public polls and a "fairly passive media environment", those who can "accurately pick out the correct signal from the noise on social media" will have a huge competitive advantage at the polls in the future," he said.