

## IPS Post-Election Conference 2015

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On 4 November 2015, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) convened a conference to provide in-depth analysis of the 11 September 2015 General Election (GE2015). IPS researchers presented and discussed findings from three surveys on different aspects of GE2015, while other academics who had closely tracked the polls analysed the performance of the political parties, the extent and content of policy discussions and the psychology of voters, as well as media use and its impact. The conference ended with a dialogue session with representatives from four political parties — People’s Action Party (PAP), Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Singapore People’s Party (SPP), and National Solidarity Party (NSP) who reflected on the outcome of the election and how it will shape their plans for the future. The videos of the conference sessions are available [online](#).

### **SESSION ONE: THE IPS GE2015 SURVEYS**

The first session of the conference chaired by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Mathew Mathews, discussed the findings of two IPS surveys on voter attitudes and Singaporeans’ assessment of the government’s performance since the election of 2011.

#### ***IPS Post-Election Survey 2015***

Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Senior Research Fellow and lead researcher of the IPS Post-Election Survey 2015 presented key insights on the factors that shaped voters’ decisions in GE2015. The third post-GE survey since the 2006 and 2011 GEs, it collected the views of 2,015 Singapore citizens after Polling Day, randomly selected from a register of all land phone lines in the country. The sample and findings were weighted to ensure accurate representation of the citizen population by age, gender and ethnicity based on the breakdown published in *Population in Brief 2015* by the National Population and Talent Division.

The survey found that key segments that had shifted away from supporting the PAP and the political status quo in 2011 had shifted back in 2015. These were the 21–29 age group; the 65-and-above age group; four-room flat dwellers; those in the “Intermediate” occupational class defined in the study as clerical and service workers; and those in the Upper-Middle

Income groups defined as those with average monthly household income that is \$7,000 and above.

A cluster analysis of five variables measuring respondents' propensity towards political change and supporting diversity of views and representation in Parliament was carried out.<sup>1</sup> Three clusters emerged in the process — the “Conservatives”, supportive of the political status quo; the “Pluralists”, supportive of greater political competition and pluralism; and the “Swing” voters who have an eclectic mix of views. Findings indicate that even those who in relative terms seemed more supportive of the political status quo, that is, the Conservative, appeared to better appreciate the need for opposition and diverse voices in Parliament and for checks and balances in the political system than as those categorised as Conservatives in the 2006 and 2011 surveys.

The cluster analysis reinforced a previous finding, that support for political pluralism was greater with each step up the rung in the socio-economic class ladder, indicated by educational attainment, occupation, housing type and household income. Support for political pluralism also appeared to be conditional rather than purely ideological, evidenced by how the absolute percentage of respondents in the Pluralist category fell in the 2015 survey. Singaporeans' appetite for pluralism could hinge on other factors like the government's policies and performance.

In terms of the policy issues that mattered in GE2015, the survey found that similar to previous years, the need for efficient government topped the list. On a comparative basis, other materialist issues like the amount of government help to the needy and the cost of living outranked some political ideals like the need for checks and balances and diverse views in Parliament. Nonetheless, on an absolute basis, there was an increase in the proportion of those who agreed with these ideals. What saw little change from previous post-GE surveys were the traits of candidates that mattered, namely, honesty, fair-mindedness, empathy and efficiency.

In terms of the ranking of communication channels based on how important they were in shaping voting decision, the respondents' answers suggested that the Internet had not displaced mainstream media.

Finally, the survey asked respondents to indicate how credible they thought each of the top six parties (listed based on the number of candidates they fielded) was in GE2015. By the ranking of the average mean scores derived from the responses, the PAP emerged as the most credible political party, followed by the Workers' Party (WP) and the SDP. Although the average mean score for WP remained the same, there was an increase, compared to the

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<sup>1</sup> These five variables measured the need for checks and balances in Parliament; the need for different views in Parliament; whether the whole election system was fair to all political parties; if there was no need to change the election system; and whether it was important to have elected opposition party members in Parliament.

data from the 2011 survey, in the percentage of respondents who agreed and strongly agreed that WP is a credible party.

### ***Perceptions of Governance Survey***

Associate Professor (A/P) Tan Ern Ser presented insights from the Perceptions of Governance Survey that polled 3,000 Singaporeans through a survey that was conducted on the Internet. The sample was selected from a register maintained by the survey firm YouGov to match the distribution of citizens by gender, ethnicity and age according to *Population Trends 2014* from the Department of Statistics, Singapore. Respondents were asked about their views in three stages — before Nomination Day, after Nomination Day, and after Polling Day — with 1,000 different people at each stage. Questions ranged from government performance, policy issues that mattered to them, their satisfaction with life and the electoral system.

A/P Tan of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore (NUS) said that the data showed that the hot-button issues of the GE2011 — cost of living, housing and healthcare affordability, retirement adequacy — remained the key issues in GE2015.

This underlined the notion that “bread and butter” issues relating to “survival” had trumped the ideals of political pluralism, which he said was understandable given the economic uncertainty and income insecurity people faced in recent years. As suggested by scholars on democracy, Chu, Nathan, Diamond and Shin (2013), issues of social stability and economic development, if well attended to through good governance, would undermine the need for democracy. A/P Tan argued that the “survival ideology” in its current incarnation in Singapore saw a higher material baseline than in the early days of Singapore, but what is different from the previous incarnation of the 1960s at Independence is that Singaporeans now had to contend with the pressures of global competition and living in a more complex world.

This was also borne out by respondents’ answers in the final wave of the survey. The majority of respondents suggested that it was their confidence in a party and its reputation that shaped their votes most, in a list of possible factors. The need for opposition presence in Parliament was not as important compared to those two.

The survey also revealed a notable difference between the mean scores of PAP and non-PAP voters on many issues, pointing to a polarisation of views between the two groups. Out of a 1,000 respondents in the final wave of the survey, 557 indicated which party they had voted for. Among them, PAP voters were nearly always more satisfied with issues of governance and the electoral system, and with life in general. The items that non-PAP voters scored higher on were the need for an opposition presence and political diversity in Parliament.



(From left): Speaker A/P Tan Ern Ser, Chairperson of the first session Dr Mathew Mathews and Speaker Dr Gillian Koh

### **Discussion**

The first set of questions focused on the methodology of surveys. One participant said it was important that conclusions be drawn not only on the basis of mean scores but also on the percentages of the precise responses of respondents. Dr Koh agreed and described the nuances in the conclusions about respondents rating and ranking of the credibility of the parties. For instance, looking at the mean scores, SDP ranked third but it is the party that saw the largest increase in the percentage of respondents that said agreed and strongly agreed that it was a credible party – from 24% in the 2011 survey to 46% in the 2015 survey. She also clarified in response to other questions that the margin of error for the data is +/- 2.2% with a 95% confidence interval, and that the post-GE questionnaire had been translated for Mandarin- and Malay-speaking respondents. She also said that the data was weighted for the shortfall of people in the 55-and-above age category and the over-sampling of those in the 40–54 age category. When compared to the most recent and available national data, the weighted sample faced a shortfall in the representation of people in the “Working” occupation class comprising semi- and un-skilled workers, those with PSLE or lower education attainment, and households that earned \$7,000 and above, compared to the resident population. There was over-representation in the “Service” occupational class comprising senior executives, professionals technicians and supervisors, those in the \$2,000–\$6,999 household income category, and those who fell in three educational

categories – those with secondary school education; diploma holders and university degree holders.

A/P Tan said that survey-based research is not a perfect science, and it usually required a balance between statistical ideals and the practical realities of carrying out the research. What matters at the end of the day is, he said, is whether the statistics told a logical and plausible story. If given a choice without any constraints, he would have preferred a perfectly random sample selected right out of the national Department of Statistics' register of all citizens.

Next, a participant asked why the surveys did not contain a question on the impact of Singapore's Jubilee year on votes. Dr Koh and A/P Tan replied that the approach taken in the surveys is to get an indirect feel of the issues through proxy questions, which in the case of the first survey was done by asking respondents how much the "LKY legacy" mattered in shaping their vote.

Another participant asked for the indicator with the best predictive value of the outcome in a GE in both surveys. A/P Tan said this would be the question on the confidence in the party in the second survey. Dr Koh said that the IPS survey on Internet and Media Use (featured in session three of the conference) revealed that 47.3% of respondents had decided on their vote before Nomination Day, which by implication meant that it was what was done before then that would have had the most impact on voters. She added that the findings of the previous surveys are publicly available, so that all political parties could decide how to develop their strategies for the next election.

A participant noted that while the surveys suggested that support for pluralism was associated with those of higher socio-economic status, many of the opposition's policy platforms would in fact harm the privileged status of that group. Many of those with higher socio-economic status did support the PAP. In response, Dr Koh said that the governing party had indeed endeavoured to cut the ground from under the opposition through its policies. Nonetheless, the opposition did receive support from the better-off, as shown in all three stages of the survey on Perceptions of Governance. A/P Tan suggested that Singaporeans sought diversity and pluralism but not necessarily a new government.

The discussion turned to the issue of older and younger voters. A participant commented that from his point of view, older voters would not score high on a happiness index, but appeared to have supported the political status quo in the surveys. Dr Koh highlighted the slew of policies that had been introduced since GE2011 to deal with concerns of this group, which probably provided the PAP with the political bounce among this segment as seen in cluster analysis of the 2015 survey.

Another participant pointed out that many of those aged between 21–29 years might hold views that reflect the socialisation they had received through the National Education curriculum introduced in 1996, with its emphasis on incorruptibility, meritocracy, racial harmony and the thinking that "no one owes Singapore a living" and that "we have to defend

ourselves". Dr Koh said that based on the study, voters aged 21–29 saw a huge swing up in the Pluralist category from 34.7% in 2006 to 50.5% in 2011, but that tapered significantly to only 25.8% in 2015. This suggested that those aged 21–29 did not benefit from National Education, although this requires further study. A/P Tan emphasised it is important to take more than just one demographic dimension into account in trying to understand political attitudes.

## SESSION TWO: PARTIES, POLICIES AND PEOPLE

The second session, chaired by IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Gillian Koh, featured three prominent public intellectuals who discussed the factors that had shaped the outcome of GE2015 as well as the implications for the country's political development. They were A/P Eugene Tan, Prof. David Chan, both from the Singapore Management University, and A/P Randolph Tan from the SIM University.



(From left): Panellists Prof. David Chan, A/P Randolph Tan, Dr Gillian Koh (Chairperson), and A/P Eugene Tan

### ***A Flight to Safety***

While many expected the opposition parties to make electoral gains in GE2015, the opposition ended up driving voters back into the arms of the PAP in what A/P Eugene Tan called a “flight to safety”. He said “the attempt by the opposition to outflank the PAP resulted in their outflanking themselves.”

A/P E. Tan characterised the PAP’s resilience, demonstrated by its actions after the GE2011, as the three Rs which were: Its “responsiveness” to public concerns; its “resourcefulness” in policies that salved voter dissatisfaction in GE2011 even if not fully successful; and its “resoluteness” in its desire to maintain its political dominance. He believed Singaporean voters responded to the PAP’s efforts as they were pragmatic, preferring an instrumental approach to governance despite a measured interest in post-material values like social justice and fairness.

As for the opposition parties, A/P E. Tan believed they had misread the electorate because their attempt to recreate the angst of GE2011 backfired. They had tried to pitch more populist policy proposals to voters, but Singaporeans were well socialised in fiscal conservatism over the years of PAP rule and were therefore not entirely convinced that the opposition parties would be capable of addressing the public's concerns satisfactorily and sustainably.

A/P E. Tan thought there were three key implications from the results of GE2015. The first was that opposition parties could not continue to be “cesspools of political discontent” because a discerning electorate would want to hear viable policy alternatives from them before they support those parties. Second, the PAP would have to decide how to balance its instinct for dominance with the electorate's general desire for political competition. Third, with rising political consciousness, Singaporeans have become hard task masters in retail politics and expect greater engagement with them by the parties. A/P E. Tan ended by questioning if the PAP's success might lead it to introduce electoral reforms, realising that its success was really a question of competent governance rather than the size of its political machinery and other systemic political advantages it has created.

### ***Manifestos and Messaging***

While most pundits focus on the political parties' use of social media, A/P Randolph Tan said he wanted to offer a textual analysis of the parties' manifestos, the staple of how they campaign, given that these documents should ideally seek to convey to voters the top and bottom line of what they can expect from each party.

A/P R. Tan found that party manifestos were used in three ways in GE2015. The first was as a conversation starter, something that gets a reaction out of voters to promote two-way communication. The second way was to treat it as simple set of informative statements in one direction — from the party to the people. This seemed to be the case with parties that lacked sizeable party machinery. The third was to send a subtle message of understanding; that they knew what the voters were thinking and believed that voters knew that of the party.

Looking at the word clouds generated from the parties' manifestos (by a computer technology that represents graphically, the frequency words appear in a given text), he noted that the NSP word cloud did not feature many verbs, which he took to mean that it did not seem to want to compete with the bigger parties in saying what it wanted to achieve. It merely highlighted a small number of public policy issues it wanted to raise compared to the other parties. The PAP manifesto word cloud gave the overall impression that it would work hard for the people. The word cloud from the SDP manifesto — which was in fact a series of documents addressing different issues — suggested that it had the intention to form the government in the future. The SPP manifesto focused on the parliamentary experience of its members. The WP manifesto emphasised the verb “propose” and conveyed the sense that it was building itself up as a reliable alternative to govern the country in the years to come.

Looking into the word webs generated (by text mining computer technology to look at how words link to one another) from the policy headings from the manifestos, A/P R. Tan analysed the main areas of concern in the parties' policy platforms. The NSP concentrated

on issues of inequality, dissatisfaction with the CPF minimum sum and the lack of a representative in Parliament. The PAP manifesto concentrated on the population issue, but also gave a subtle reassurance that they are the party that would respond actively to voter feedback. The SDP concentrated on the issues of cost of living, population, foreign manpower and especially healthcare. Significantly, the SDP also proposed reforming National Service.

Moving on to key policy issues, A/P R. Tan observed that the PAP devoted much effort to explaining how it handled the cost of living issue, seeking to convince voters that it is the only party with the experience to handle economic policy. He also observed that while every opposition party supported having a national minimum wage in their rallies, some of them did not include it in their manifestos. As for the issue of foreign manpower, A/P R. Tan opined that it was too often conflated with public policy on population and immigration, which are longer-term issues. He suggested that GE2015 was a missed opportunity for head-to-head contestation among the parties on their policy platforms. He ended with an appeal for “a policy climate that allows more discerning, in-depth discussion of policy, more back and forth so that more interesting ideas can be taken on board.”

### ***Psychological Capital and People-Centricity***

Prof. David Chan’s presentation centred on the psychology of voters and its repercussions on how public policy is both designed and received. He began by explaining that while human beings bear many seemingly contradictory pairs of psychological aspects, these had to be understood well. He explained that “they coexist and they are complementary”. These were, first, that people are both rational and emotional; second, that people are both principled and pragmatic. While Singaporeans tended to view themselves as pragmatic, Prof. Chan identified three basic principles he believed are valued by all: integrity, fairness and social harmony. Third, people are both preventive- and promotion-focused. Fourth, people are both present- and future-oriented, so while they may have voted for the PAP in force, the desire for more opposition still remains. Fifth, people are also both concrete and abstract in their thinking. And finally, people are both conditional and committed. While they might act according to contingent circumstances, Prof. Chan said people would continue to “vote for what they think and feel is right”.

In terms of voter psychology, and after GE2015, Prof. Chan suggested that the following trends could emerge: First, people could become more interested and involved in politics. Second, people could be more preventive and pragmatic — not wanting to be surprised again by election results. Third, people could choose candidates based more strongly on their competence and character rather than their credentials and charisma. Fourth, that voters are likely to care about how the whole of society might be affected by policy initiatives care about how their own bottom line would be affected. Fifth, policies are likely to become more interconnected and integrative. Sixth, political analysis would have to become more open and objective. Seventh, voting behaviour could become more complex and voters would take into consideration things that might not affect them directly. And finally, that as a result of all of the above, voting patterns would become more varied and volatile.

Prof. Chan ended his presentation with the eight “PCs” that needed attention, if Singapore were to have people-centred politics and governance. These include populist concerns; political correctness; public concerns; political context; policy content; policy communication; problem-solving competence; and psychological capital. He said that seemingly abstract issues such as fairness and subjective well-being had to be better understood by the government, and urged all to pay equal attention to the three aspects of “how people feel, think and act” to better understand voter behaviour.

### **Discussion**

One participant asked A/P E. Tan for empirical evidence backing his claim that the PAP’s electoral success was due to its policies rather than its dominance and mobilisation of state machinery like the People’s Association (PA) and the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee. A second participant expressed concern that the session’s speakers did not take into account the PAP government’s engagement of the public through PA and the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) as well as efforts like Our Singapore Conversation (OSC). These reached significant vote banks and the opposition on the other hand, opted not to be part of the OSC. He added that these helped the government and people come to a consensus on what citizens wanted and a conclusion about which party could best deliver on those areas of concern.

In reply, A/P E. Tan accepted the point that the PAP was used to relying on parastatal organisations like the PA and NTUC, which was what he had suggested in his opening remarks, and said these should be reformed especially in light of rising voter concern about fair play. Also, Singaporeans would be more resilient if they were strong and independent rather than if they were dependent on the fortunes and competence of the PAP. He added that Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam had said that the political opposition was a welcome part of the system as it can offer its ideas to shaping policy, but perhaps those parties would not wish to be seen as having been co-opted by the PAP government.

A/P R. Tan’s response to the second participant was that while the reach of the OSC was widespread, voter beliefs were dynamic and were moving to the left. He was of the opinion that the differences among the political parties in their party platforms were minor.

Prof. Chan said that while the OSC was the most representative feedback event in our history, it was not representative of the entire population because it was a self-selected group of participants. This self-selection was also true of participation in the PA. Still, Prof. Chan believed the quality of parliamentary deliberation was an important and distinct issue from the representativeness of policy feedback. He also warned against trivialising the relevance of the WP or the SDP. Just because they had setbacks did not mean that voter trust in them would only continue to erode. Levels of voter trust are dynamic and contextual and cannot be projected into the future.

A third participant wanted to know whether the speakers felt that there was any hope for the “liberal cause” in Singapore. A/P E. Tan said that the result of GE2015 suggested that Singaporeans preferred a centrist approach to political issues, but also that the range of policy options that were open to Singapore was very limited. He illustrated that by explaining

why he had abstained when a division was called at the parliamentary debate on the government's Population White Paper in 2013 when he was a Nominated Member of Parliament — Singapore faced limited choices but he wanted to suspend his judgment until the policy had a chance to be evaluated years after implementation.

A/P R. Tan on the other hand, said “there is great hope for the liberal cause”. For him, the question was “when” and not “if” a liberal party would triumph at the polls. This is, in part, because the ruling PAP party has itself been moving to the left.

Prof. Chan had mixed feelings about this. If the majority of Singaporeans wanted more opposition in Parliament, it would be a marker for liberalism; but there were liberal voters who might also vote for the PAP since some of its policies were very liberal.

Dr Koh closed the session by noting that the speakers had made the plea for more in-depth and nuanced discussions on key policy issues but also in the analysis of voter attitudes. She also noted that there was a desire for electoral and institutional reforms. Finally, she said it would be important for the opposition parties to show up in processes of public engagement and political deliberations to add rigour and diversity to those processes and benefit from them as well.

### **SESSION THREE: MEDIA USE AND ITS IMPACT**

Voter use of media and its impact was the subject of the third panel at the conference. Chairing the session was Associate Professor Kwok Kian-Woon from the Division of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University. A/P Kwok is also member of the Academic Panel at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The panellists were Dr Carol Soon, Research Fellow at IPS; Associate Professor Zhang Weiyu from National University of Singapore; and Tan Tarn How, Senior Research Fellow at IPS. A/P Kwok explained that the following presentations were based on an online survey carried out after the election. There were 2,000 Singaporean respondents, drawn from a register of 30,000 people by the polling firm YouGov, to reflect the voting population in age, gender and ethnicity. Respondents could take the survey in English, Malay and Chinese. A/P Kwok said that the presentations were not “exhaustive in any way”, but provided a “good glimpse of the data”. IPS will hold more seminars to look at other findings of the survey not covered by these presentations.

#### ***Internet and Media Use in GE2015***

Dr Soon’s presentation aimed to answer two questions: What role did media play in the GE2015, and whether social media made a difference during the election.

Media can be categorised into “mainstream media” and “social media”. Mainstream media are official or formal sources of news and information such as newspapers, TV, radio and their respective websites, offline political party communication and their social networking sites. Social media include blogs or YouTube sites, forums, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook Messenger.

The survey found that during the election, mainstream media exceeded social media in use and trust for election information and news. Among the respondents, 88.8% of them watched TV, 80.2% read print newspapers, 76.1% accessed websites of Singapore mass media, 69.6% used social networking sites, and 62.7% used instant messaging platforms. Voters also trusted mainstream media and their online counterparts more than social media.

Social media users also turned to mainstream media for election news. The survey showed that 98.5% of social media users used mainstream media. Interestingly, they also trusted mainstream media for election news more than social media. The finding suggested that social media users were “more critical and discerning than they were thought to be”.

Compared to non-users, social media users were also more interested in election issues; they were more likely to discuss the election with others and were more likely to have higher sense of political collective efficacy (that is, more of them believed that collective action can effect change in politics).

Dr Soon said that just as GE2011 was not an Internet election, neither was GE2015 a social media election. As the findings show, mainstream media played a more important role than social media. Furthermore, the survey found that 47.4% of social media users had already

decided on their vote before Nomination Day. Hence, high expectations that social media would make an impact on the election were not met.

Although the study cannot establish causation, the findings show that social media had some impact as its use was linked to political interest, political talk, offline participation and decision-making on voting. Dr Soon concluded by saying that social media did not exist in a vacuum, but was part of the larger media ecology. What was important was what people did online, rather than the number of people who went online.

### ***Late Decision Makers: Who They Are, What They Believe and How They Use Media***

A/P Zhang used the results of the survey to paint a profile of late decision makers, defined as those who had decided on their vote after Nomination Day. Amongst the respondents who revealed when they had decided on their votes, 46.2% decided after Nomination Day.

The survey found that late decision makers differed significantly from early decision makers in their age groups, race, education level and housing type. Compared to early decision makers, late decision makers were more likely to be between the ages of 21–29 years and 80–84 years; Malay; have a lower secondary education or a polytechnic diploma; and live in HDB 1- or 2-room flats.

They were also more interested in election issues, but there was no difference in their level of political knowledge. Existing research about voters in other countries has shown that late decision makers do not care about politics and have low political knowledge, but the results of the survey showed otherwise in the context of Singapore.

Compared to early decision makers, in terms of media usage and trust, late decision makers spent more time reading blogs and watching YouTube, reading social networking sites, and reading party sources for election information. There was no difference in their use of mainstream media, but late deciders were less likely to trust print newspapers.

Late decision makers also participated more in offline political activities such as attending rallies, but talked less about politics, and participated less in online activities such as writing about or sharing news about the election.

In conclusion, A/P Zhang said that the late decision makers were the “silent observers online”. They were reading more, and were more concerned about substantial election issues, but did not actively “do much”, compared to others.

### ***Political Party Social Media Campaign: Better but....***

Mr Tan presented a study carried out together with IPS Research Assistants, Tng Ying Hui and Andrew Yeo, that looked at political parties’ social media campaign. Although parties made better use of social media in GE 2015, the conclusion remained largely the same as that of a study of GE 2011 by Natalie Pang and Debbie Goh: Parties were not tapping the full potential of social media.

The current study focused on the five parties with the most candidates: PAP, WP, NSP, SDP and Reform Party (RP). It looked at the social media platforms the political parties used; the

features they employed in their websites and Facebook pages; how much they used these platforms; how well they used them; and the impact in terms of popularity of content.

The platforms studied were websites, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, mobile applications, Instagram and Google+. The study concluded that PAP was the best in using social media during and also leading up to the election. WP and NSP tied at second, RP was fourth and NSP was fifth. The PAP was an “all-rounder” in its use of the different social media platforms. It also had the most number of likes on Facebook, was updated frequently and even released a mobile app.

The survey revealed 60% of the respondents visited parties’ and candidates’ websites, Facebook pages and other platforms during the election, and 26% used it at least once a day. Compared to those who did not visit party social media platforms, they were slightly more likely to be male and younger, were more educated and had higher household incomes. They were also more interested in election issues, more engaged and more likely to be late decision makers. Interestingly, they trusted newspapers, television and their respective websites more than political party platforms. However, compared to non-users of party platforms, they trusted party channels more.

To better use social media, parties will have to be more engaged with voters and to do so even between elections. The engagement also needs to be sustained, personalised and responsive.



Panellists (from left: Chairperson A/P Kwok Kian-Woo, A/P Zhang Weiyu, Mr Tan Tarn How, and Dr Carol Soon) of the third session engaged in a dialogue with the audience

**Discussion**

During the open dialogue, a participant suggested that there would never be a social media election in Singapore as mandatory voting means that a “huge segment” of voters who have no interest to vote, are made to vote anyway. In countries such as the United States, where voting is not mandatory, elections are won by parties getting voters to turn up to vote. Social media is key to boosting such turnouts, and hence a social media election is possible.

Dr Soon said that while voting in Singapore is mandatory, this does not mean that Singaporeans are not interested in election issues. The survey found that 52.7% of the respondents were interested, 39.4% somewhat interested, and only 7.8% were not interested at all in election issues. Dr Soon also reiterated the findings presented earlier, which showed that there was a correlation between social media users and their interest in election issues, how often they engaged in “political talk” and their collective political efficacy.

Mr Tan added that the Internet allows people to find communities and create a groundswell, but it is “a slow burn” that happens over a much longer period than the brief election period.

A participant suggested that the Internet is critical for the late decision makers who want more information, and their vote could be “critical to the outcome”. Another participant asked whether it was meaningful to study late decision makers.

Dr Zhang said there were many swing voters in this group (late decision makers), and hence finding out about them might help one understand the swing towards the PAP in GE2015. For this group, what the political parties put online also mattered although whether the influence was decisive remains an open question.

## SESSION FOUR: THE POLICY AND POLITICAL AGENDA OF THE PARTIES

The fourth session of the conference was chaired by IPS Special Research Adviser Arun Mahizhnan. The speakers were representatives from four political parties: Ong Ye Kung for the PAP; Dr Chee Soon Juan for the SDP; Lina Chiam for SPP; and Lim Tean for the NSP.

The chairperson explained that the parties initially selected to be represented were the top five based on the percentage of votes polled in the constituencies they had contested in GE2015. The party that was placed second — WP — declined to attend and was replaced by the NSP, which was placed sixth. The party that placed fifth, the Singapore Democratic Alliance was invited but no formal reply had been received right up to the day of the Conference.



Representatives from four political parties spoke at the IPS Post-Election Conference 2015

The panellists were invited to take five minutes to share about their parties' policy and political agenda, looking beyond GE2015.

Mr Ong said that given the significant reforms his party had introduced in government and the special circumstances of Singapore's Golden Jubilee that in effect celebrated its 50-year track record, the outcome of GE2015 was no reason for jubilation as the swing in vote share in the most hotly contested constituencies was a mere 5%, and not the near 10% average vote swing across the country and the WP held six seats in Parliament. The PAP recognises it has to maintain its traditional values, yet keep up with new developments by strengthening its engagement with the ground; Mr Ong mentioned how PAP MPs had returned to walk the ground the day after the election. It recognises that voters want a genuine contestation of

ideas; that many of the policy ideas they wish to explore have been tried in other countries. Those comparative experiences should be examined as part of the policy discussions that are to come.

Dr Chee spoke next, lamenting the predictability of the election's outcome; as well as analysts and the media's reluctance to state that the PAP wins elections because "the election system is neither free nor fair". He said that mainstream media were state-controlled, and state bodies were used for "partisan political purposes". He mentioned that the independence of the Elections Department (ELD) was questionable as it falls within the Prime Minister's Office. Topics such as immigration, retirement and household debt were "screaming out for debate", but academic organisations and newspapers refuse to organise debates or publish his op-eds, "stemming the information flow". He warned that without debate on these topics, Singapore would be headed for "ruin, in which all of us would be complicit," a future that even the PAP would be "unable to escape".

Mrs Chiam said that GE2015 was a difficult battle for the opposition. In her view, the PAP had taken special means, through policy, to provide for every segment of Singaporean society. The swing between the 2011 and 2015 elections was a "swing of the pendulum"; voters had moved against the PAP but returned to support it as they had several times before. While the SPP respected the voters' decisions, she argued that the opposition in Singapore still had a fundamental role as a check on the government; while the PAP had "shifted to the left" there was little to stop it from moving back to the right. She appealed for a more level playing field in campaigning, arguing for example for better access to private condominiums to be granted to political parties during general elections. She also wanted electoral boundaries to be locked in rather than changed before an election. In terms of public policy, the SPP would continue to be a party focused on bread-and-butter issues as well as a champion for disadvantaged individuals and families that have slipped through the cracks of society, she said.

Mr Lim acknowledged his party's defeat, taking a different outlook from the other party leaders. He viewed the results of the GE2015 as an opportunity to change the opposition's approach. It should no longer be content, in campaigning, to say it wanted to be a check on the government. The opposition parties should be prepared to campaign on policy platforms of their own; they need to drive their own "policy car" and not to "hitch a ride with the government's policy car", trying to modify it "while it was in motion". The NSP's watchword in the future is "relevance". It was Mr Lim's worry that without an opposition to speak up against the government, Singapore would develop into an "M-shaped society", with the squeezing-out of the middle-class, in part the results of an overly liberal foreign worker policy affecting the Singaporean professional class. The NSP saw a need an intellectual flowering of his party to attract new members and volunteers but also recognised the role of intellectuals and academics in doing the same in the country to bring new ideas to policy-making.

## **Discussion**

The dialogue between participants and speakers focused on a few themes: The role of mainstream and social media, the fairness of the electoral system, the future of the opposition in Singapore, and the way forward for Singapore policy and government.

The first two themes intersected each other regularly. For example, several participants asked about the parties' social media strategies. Some asked how the political parties aimed to use social media and the Internet to spread their message, especially when they had argued that the mainstream media was not a level playing field.

Dr Chee articulated a response that was echoed by both Mrs Chiam and Mr Lim. In his opinion, the mainstream media in Singapore was completely dominated by the government's agenda and had not given the opposition parties a fair amount of coverage. Both he and Mrs Chiam said that the parties had done all they could to gain as many viewers as possible, even through online platforms and also develop their policy agenda, but two things had prevented them from greater reach and impact.

First, over the past 50 years, society at large had grown used to turning to mainstream media in print newspapers and television, which were heavily directed by the governing party. So, it was not practical to expect certain segments of Singaporean society to turn to alternative media. Dr Chee gave the example of a neighbour who worked long hours and like many Singaporeans would not go online to hunt for credible information online after being mentally exhausted from a long day's work.

Second, Dr Chee said that it is fine to expect political parties to develop their policy agenda or "solid plans" and allow voters to decide what is on offer but that would work only in a system where there was an equitable distribution of resources for parties; access to media; a level-playing field. He asked what more he or his party could do given that today, "every opportunity we get, every avenue we explore and we make progress in is then cut off by the PAP." One of his party members shared from the floor earlier that the SDP was the first to use podcasts in the run up to GE2006 but that form of media was banned until it would seem, the PAP had caught up the technologies and allowed the use of these alternative forms, presenting these as "liberalisation" of the rules.

Mr Lim, on the other hand, said that that opposition parties would have to depend on the Internet and on social media for over the next five years. He also felt that the latest technologies in relation to electioneering and campaigning on social media had not reached Singapore's shores, but would have an important role to play. Certainly, the NSP intends to make full use of social media and the Internet in next GE and in the run-up to it, he said. Mr Lim also said that as these technologies became more prominent, it would be up to mainstream media to decide whether it would be more balanced in its views or risk irrelevance.

Several participants said that if the PAP had won the election based on sound policy, could the government not make the Elections Department (ELD) an independent body? Mr Ong said he had no reason to doubt the impartiality of either the ELD or any civil servant. He did

not consider media as overly restrictive in Singapore, saying that the government's chief requirement for media outlets based in Singapore was the right of reply. Dr Chee responded that while the government demanded a right of reply, that right was notably not extended to opposition parties by the mainstream media.

Taking a longer-term view, Mr Ong said that in the future, there would not be mainstream or alternative social media, there would only be media as there were interaction effects between the two – one affected the other. It was up to political parties to learn how to use that media to reach the electorate and convince them to vote for them. In addition, the current crop of mainstream media outlets already understand that they have to be careful in their reporting so as to maintain their credibility. If they were to be overly biased, their readership would fall away, making an already challenging commercial environment even worse for themselves.

Another theme of the dialogue session was the fate of the smaller opposition parties in Singapore given WP's lead in that space. Dr Chee stated that the swing in vote share against the SDP was the smallest of the opposition parties, and, citing the survey data released earlier in the day, that SDP had made the largest gain in credibility since the last election compared to all the other parties. Mr Lim also disputed the idea that there was no future for the smaller opposition parties. He noted the WP had a winning margin of less than 1% in Aljunied GRC and said it was presumptuous for people to think that WP was the preeminent opposition party. The future would depend on how well the opposition parties perform over the next five years, and the WP's strength could be further diminished. Any party would cease to be viewed as a minor party as soon as it could gain a seat at the next election.

Mrs Chiam added that was always hope for the political opposition since there was no telling where a new leader in the opposition movement might emerge, so people should not write them off. She regretted the opposition's lack of resources and said that it was particularly difficult to raise funds and grow because benefactors could not be assured of their anonymity.

Two questions about specific policies — minimum wage and Section 377A — were raised. A participant raised the latter and asked Mr Ong whether the governing party, with its comfortable lead, would expend some of its political capital to repeal 377A. Mr Ong said that it was not quite the way in which his party thought about things — expending political capital because it had it. On the specific issue, he said that the PAP “might be the largest animal in the jungle”, but it was “not the jungle”; that the PAP might be the “government of today”, but it was not “larger than society”. Some issues were for “society to evolve and move to a new position”, and it was not for the PAP to “rush it or expend political capital in order to pursue it”.

A participant used the example of the minimum wage policy, which all parties seemed to propound, to ask if despite having nine parties running for elections, whether the choices presented to voters were sufficiently diverse. All parties had some form of minimum wage proposal with little effective variation between them, although he noted that the RP diverged most significantly in a narrow field. This left him with little choice as he personally did not

support the minimum wage policy in any incarnation, and therefore felt that the options open to him were lacking. All four speakers replied by justifying their parties' reasoning for the version of the minimum wage they supported. Mr Lim said a minimum wage was the best option to limit income inequality. On the other hand, Mr Ong said that the governing party's alternative Progressive Wage Model offered many people a wage and career ladder.

A final comment was made by Mr Ong, who said that while it is important to discuss the pros and cons of any policy proposal, there is a temptation to look at every issue with a political lens. He argued that Singapore is too small and the world too dangerous for the nation to dissipate its energy through internal political friction. It would be much better for Singapore to harness this energy towards dealing with its future together.

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*If you have comments or feedback, please email [ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg](mailto:ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg)*



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