

Will being a 'son of Punggol' help PAP's Dr Koh?

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When People's Action Party (PAP) candidate Koh Poh Koon was officially unveiled on Thursday, he made a point of highlighting his hometown connections.

He told a story of a toddler growing up in a farmhouse, playing in pig sties and chicken coops, then running to a nearby rubber plantation, then picking up rubber seeds and throwing them into huge spider webs that grew between the trees.

Even when he left his birthplace at three, he returned as a teenager on Saturdays for canoeing at Punggol Point, rounded off by a meal at Choon Seng restaurant there which he recalls for its chill crab and mee goreng.

He made mention too of a grand-aunt he would visit in a little fishing enclave called Wa Gang in Teochew (Many Teochews live in Punggol and, he hastens to add, he's one of the kin too).

Even his bus driver dad had a connection to the ward: Service 82 that elder Koh drove terminated at Punggol Point.

"Punggol has always occupied a very special place in my heart and with special memories," he said. "Coming back to Punggol East is a bit like coming home to me."

It's a message that every candidate contesting in his or her hometown is sure to trot out at some point: I know you, I am one of you.

But does that message resonate in Singapore, where the sense of identity in any one estate is rarely very strong? Is there such a thing as homeground advantage?

A look at elections and candidates in years past turns up little evidence.

In the 2011 general election, numerous candidates proudly trotted out their home-ground credentials.

They include Joo Chiat resident Yee Jenn Jong from WP; National Solidarity Party's Jeanette Chong-Aruldoss who grew up in Mountbatten; and two Sengkang West natives WP's Koh Choong Yong and private tutor Ooi Boon Ewe.

None of them prevailed in the polls although Mr Yee came within a whisker of beating PAP's Charles Chong in Joo Chiat. He won 48.98 per cent of the votes. Mr Ooi even failed to leverage on his roots to secure enough assenters for his candidacy.

If there is any advantage to be gained, observers say, it may be that a hometown boy can claim to have current local knowledge and a network of neighbours and friends, on top of fond memories.

But this advantage is marginal and even less significant if a candidate, as is the case of Dr Koh, has long moved away from the estate.

Political science professor Reuben Wong also notes that unlike, say, an old housing estate such as Hougang, the old Punggol that Dr Koh grew up in is no longer there.

Indeed, most MPs, PAP or opposition, do not and have not lived in the wards they contested in and won, including the previous Punggol East MP Michael Palmer.

The two longest-serving opposition MPs in Singapore, WP's Low Thia Kiang and Singapore People's Party's Chiam See Tong both thrived and developed a real connection with the constituencies they contested in without having ever lived there.

Inevitably, it will be other factors that make the difference. **Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies says at first look, having some history with the constituency helps. But being able to move the ground to connect to the people "in this age when voters are so demanding" is important too.**

Also, "what he says, what he stands for, his party branding and its past performance will also be important", she notes.

All that said, it is clear that if a candidate has some hometown credentials, no one will advise him to keep it under wraps.

Ultimately, even if being a son of Punggol might not help swing an election decisively in your favour, it certainly doesn't hurt.