

GE2015: 7 takeaways from the IPS post-election conference that explain PAP's performance

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A Post-Election conference by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) brought together top academics and researchers on Singapore politics. Different surveys and studies were presented at the meeting to explain the results of the Sept 11 General Election. Here are the highlights of the day's proceedings that shed some light on why the People's Action Party (PAP) performed much better in 2015 than in 2011.

1) Greater desire for political diversity did not translate into votes

Both the Post-Election Survey and Perceptions Of Governance Survey initiated by IPS show Singaporeans increasingly believe there is a need for checks and balances, differing views and opposition members in Parliament.

But why did this not translate into higher votes for the opposition? Dr Gillian Koh of the IPS suggested that even though political pluralism had become more important in voters' minds, other issues - like the ruling party's performance since the 2011 polls - still took precedence. Similarly, National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser explained that it was an issue of "rating and ranking". Even though checks and balances may be rated higher now, its ranking was still below other considerations such as efficient government and government help for the needy.

2) Middle- and higher-income swing to the pap

Much of the 9.8 percentage point swing to the PAP was due to middle- and higher-income earners backing the political status quo, a shift from the 2011 election when these groups showed a greater desire for political pluralism.

While there was a general fall in support for political diversity this time round, the sharpest drop was seen among those with at least post-secondary education, lower-middle to high-income households, and four-room flat dwellers.

This finding dovetails with reports from the ground. For instance, the WP noticed that support in private housing areas and blocks with larger HDB units waned considerably this time round when compared with 2011.

In addition, the IPS survey confirmed the common understanding that those with higher socio-economic status were likelier to desire political pluralism. With even this voter bloc - which is usually more prone to vote for the opposition - swinging to the PAP so decisively, it is little wonder the ruling party scored 69.9 per cent of the popular vote.

3) Social media's influence still muted

Social media and alternative sites on the internet - which started off as hotbeds for expressing dissatisfaction - may be expanding its influence over time, but television and newspapers have not slipped into irrelevance. Instead, mainstream media is still the most trusted source of election-related information, according to three separate surveys, including the Study On Internet And Media Use During GE2015.

Almost all social media users also use mainstream media, and more than 70 per cent found that television, newspapers, radio stations and their affiliated websites were "moderately trustworthy to very trustworthy".

This means social media does not exist in a vacuum and users view it as part of the palette of information that can be relied on.

4) Who is social media king? The PAP

Conventional wisdom holds that social media is the great communication leveller that has allowed the opposition to get its message out and spread non-Establishment information. But since 2011, the PAP's Facebook page has grown its number of followers by four times to 164,000, the highest number among all political parties. Even the WP, which by most accounts ran a slick social media campaign in GE2015, comes in at a distant second, with 93,000.

The PAP stepped up its social media engagement tremendously after the Punggol East by-election in January 2013. In the last two years, it consistently posted between 200 and 450 times a month on its Facebook page, reaching peak levels during events such as National Day and the death and mourning of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The WP rarely hit 100 posts a month during the same period.

5) Town council controversy not top on voters' minds, but split public opinion

The Workers' Party-run town council has been under fire from PAP leaders for about two years over financial governance, but the survey findings show it was second-last on a list of 18 issues. It seemed the opposition party's reputation was also not affected, with 71 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was a credible party, an improvement from 56 per cent in 2011.

But a closer look at the numbers show voters were split on the issue of the financial governance of the former Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council. About 47 per cent thought it to be "not important at all" or "not important" while 44 per cent said it was "important" or "very important", with 9 per cent staying neutral. For the WP, which barely clung to its crown jewel Aljunied GRC with 50.9 per cent of the vote, these numbers are no doubt too close for comfort.

6) Government still strong on fundamentals, but polarisation seen on issues such as fairness and policy effectiveness

That the PAP and opposition voters do not agree on the issues of the day is no surprise. But delving into specifics show where the divergences are most stark.

To illustrate, some explanation is needed of the survey methodology of the Perceptions Of Governance Survey. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to nine, their satisfaction level.

For issues that are the long-term strong suits of the PAP Government such as law and order, defence and national security, prevention of corruption, crisis management, and relations between races, the difference between the PAP and opposition voters was between 1.06 and 1.86.

Even opposition voters gave government performance in these areas scores of between 5.6 and 6.21.

But for questions on fairness of election laws and the electoral system, and the objectivity of the mainstream media, there was a variance of 2.54 to 2.99. On whether policies are beneficial and whether the Government understands Singaporeans' concerns, there was a difference of 2.50 and 2.54.

This hints at a polarisation of views on bread-and-butter issues as well as fairness of the electoral system, a concern that should be noted by the ruling party.

7) More late decision makers backed the PAP

About 46 per cent of Singaporeans made their decision on who to vote for on Nomination Day or after, according to a survey on late decision makers.

Out of this significant chunk of voters, 73.5 per cent ended up voting for the PAP while 26.5 per cent backed the opposition. This closely mirrors those who made up their minds early: 73.2 per cent for the PAP and 26.8 per cent for the opposition.

This contrasts with 2011, when 66 per cent of late decision makers voted for the PAP while 34 per cent voted for the opposition. For those who decided before Nomination Day, it was 76.4 per cent for the PAP and 23.6 per cent for the opposition.

The data suggests that the opposition was much less effective in persuading Singaporeans to vote for them during the campaign period this time round. Many more late decision makers voted for the opposition than early decision makers in 2011, but it was not the case this year.

Confluence of factors delivered strong mandate

The PAP won back a broad swath of voters in the latest polls. But the effect was doubly felt because the middle- to higher-income voters, those who usually placed greater emphasis on political diversity than the rest of the population, swung strongly to the incumbents.

The ruling party also moved in the last two years to stake their ground online and on social media, which were associated more often with the opposition before the latest general election.

Changes in government policies to address Singaporeans' concerns about issues such as public transport and housing prices also helped negate the rise in desire for political diversity.

The campaign period also did not work to the opposition's favour this year as it did in 2011.

These combined to deliver a sharp recovery for the PAP from its lowest vote share since independence of 60.1 per cent in 2011.