

GE2015: Thumbs up for making sample count public

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'Flash estimate' will add certainty during vote count but could raise tensions in tight races

The move to make public the sample count results for the coming general election was generally welcomed by political watchers yesterday.

But some were concerned that it would fuel speculation and emotions, keeping candidates and supporters on tenterhooks, particularly in contests which are too close to call.

Most experts said yesterday that the move will introduce an element of greater certainty during the counting of votes. They noted that during the 2011 General Election, rumours had swirled on unofficial channels even before the final results were announced.

Said Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies: "The move must have been precipitated by our changing media landscape and the culture of political engagement that has been created. We have become more impatient for news, we are more networked and able to mobilise sentiments and crowds quickly."

The Elections Department yesterday said it will make public the results of a sample count - an official indication of how votes were cast at each of the 16 GRCs and 13 SMCs - soon after voting ends at 8pm on Polling Day next week.

Doing so, said National University of Singapore (NUS) economics professor Davin Chor, provides a "flash estimate" that can go some way towards quelling rumour-mongering.

The PAP candidate for Hong Kah North SMC, Dr Amy Khor, agreed. She said it will prevent "sending people into a frenzy, whether you're on the winning side or on the losing side".

But the move could add to tension in close-run contests, some said. Dr Chor urged Singaporeans to interpret the sample count results with caution to account for the statistical margin of error.

NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: "There is also the danger that an 'early' winner in a closely fought contest may turn out to be a loser in the final count, thereby leading to rumours and insinuations about the manipulation of results."

Singaporeans First chief Tan Jee Say simply said: "Speculation is part of the game."

To tackle this, Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan, a former Nominated MP, proposed that the Elections Department give updates at "regular intervals" beyond the initial sample count.

He added: "If the sample count reveals a cliffhanger, the lack of authoritative information on the state of play between the sample count and the official announcement may just fuel speculation and misinformation."

Economist Walter Theseira said: "Basically, this move gives winners more time to prepare their victory speeches and losers more time to draft their concession speeches."

He noted that losing candidates in many countries publicly concede defeat once it is statistically certain that they will lose.

And political analyst Derek da Cunha said: "Some of the lower-profile candidates and minor parties that secure a vote share of under 40 per cent in the sample count can call it an early night instead of continuing to live in hope which, in the first place, was never there."