

## **GENERAL ELECTION 2011; Who are the voters?**

**Much of the spotlight has been on the new candidates being unveiled by the various political parties. But who are the people who will vote for or against them in the coming polls? Based on Census 2010, 2,417,885 Singaporeans will be 21 and above as of June. Insight crunches the data to give a breakdown of the electorate in the various demographic segments and discusses the voting implications.**

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Retirement, for 61-year-old Madam Tan Kwee Hua, means an idyllic life unfettered by bothersome issues like politics. She meets her friends every morning at a Yishun coffee shop for breakfast where they enjoy one another's light-hearted banter and gossip.

But ask them who they will support in the coming election, and the answer is unanimous: the ruling People's Action Party (PAP).

'They have managed things well and helped out with estate issues,' says Madam Tan, a former electronics assembler who has lived in Nee Soon all her life and raised three children now in their 20s and 30s.

She falls within what sociologists consider the 'baby boomer' generation, a bumper crop of babies born between 1945 and 1964 who came of age in the nation-building years of independent Singapore.

The baby boomers grew up with Mr Lee Kuan Yew as their prime minister, and participated in the transformation of Singapore from Third World to First. Election after election, a majority consistently voted for Mr Lee's PAP.

Madam Tan fits various categories of the average voter: Chinese, married with grown-up children, and squarely middle-class. She lives in a four-room flat with her husband and two unmarried children. Her elder daughter is married and lives in a nearby five-room flat.

With few issues irking her and content with her living environment, Madam Tan and other voters like her are likely to form the vanguard of the PAP's ground support.

As political observer and former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin sees it: 'There is no question that the baby boomers will support the PAP. They have gone through a number of crises with them, and will be concerned if the Government becomes too adventurous and changes the rules of the game too much.'

'They've seen how Singapore had progressed quite well under a steady government, and want to place emphasis on the calibre, quality and maturity of candidates.'

### **Watch out for post-75ers**

Yet a perceptible shift in the demographics is taking place as the latest census results show, and the new trends will pose some voting implications.

The numbers of those born before the war, known as the 'pre-war' generation, have dwindled from 446,000 or one in five voters to 325,000 or one in seven voters within a decade.

They are the pioneering generation who voted the PAP to power by a landslide in the 1959 General Election and who again threw their support behind the party in its do-or-die battle with Barisan Sosialis in the 1963 polls.

The number of baby boomers, or those born after the war and before Singapore's independence, has stayed at around one million.

The number of those born after independence, known as the 'Post-65' voters, has increased by half a million to 1.1 million. This group forms almost one in two voters in the coming elections, compared to one in three in the 2001 elections.

But analysts say they represent a wide diversity of people ranging from the student to the middle-aged executive and it is difficult to figure out how they will vote.

Political observer Eugene Tan, an assistant law professor at the Singapore Management University, says this group might be 'less enamoured of the PAP' and its 'Third to First World narrative', but their concerns are not much different from those of their parents.

'Material concerns matter a lot to them; where they differ is the accent they place on post-material issues such as the state of democracy in Singapore and quality of life,' he says.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser suggests that out of this group, a subset known as 'Post-75' can be useful for analysing how voters aged between 21 and 35 will behave.

'They would have been starting and building their careers when Singapore was experiencing shorter economic cycles, with more frequent occurrences of recession and rapid globalisation, while holding tightly to an upgrading mentality,' he says.

These voters would have experienced the downturns following the Sept 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the Sars crisis in 2003. They would have been battered by the global financial crisis of 2009 and felt squeezed by the influx of foreigners.

Significantly, this group has grown from 196,000 or less than one in 10 voters in the 2001 elections, to 634,000 or more than one in four today.

The PAP is acutely aware of these demographic changes which explains its urgency in party renewal and connecting to these younger voters.

As he introduced the first slate of candidates on Monday last week, PAP second assistant secretary-general Teo Chee Hean said that young new candidates are brought in 'to renew the leadership to make sure that we continue to have ideas and energy, and that we also continue to keep in touch with the younger voters'.

He also said the new crop of PAP candidates will be the youngest since the 1991 elections, with half of them in their 20s and 30s.

Among the 12 candidates introduced so far are fresh faces like unionist Desmond Choo, 33; Temasek Holdings' in-house counsel Desmond Lee, 34; lawyer Vikram Nair, 32; and business consultant Tin Pei Ling, 27, the youngest woman candidate in recent history.

Political parties will do well to appeal to the needs of these voters as many of them will be voting for their first time, says SMU's Mr Tan.

'They are likely to be keenly following electoral news and development. Many will be eager to cast their ballots, and we can expect them to do their homework to determine who should get their vote.

'They will be voters for many more GEs to come and so leaving a solid first impression might result in their being more predisposed towards the party they first voted for, all things being equal.'

But while parties redouble their efforts to woo the young, they cannot afford to ignore the elderly.

The census figures show voters having fewer children across generations. Prof Tan from NUS points out that the declining fertility rates have resulted in an increasingly ageing population that might lead to 'more pressure on the state to take care of dependent elderly couples'.

The grey vote and the singles vote will matter, according to analysts. The seniors will clamour for cheaper health care and facilities like retirement homes. The singles will press for affordable public housing and benefits which now go to their married counterparts.

As scholar Derek da Cunha notes, the 651,000 single voters today, or more than one in four, could mean that more are inclined to vote for the opposition especially if they are from the lower-middle or working class.

However, married voters will continue to hold sway as they number 1.5 million, and the implication is that it is vital that all political parties campaign on family-friendly policies, says Mr Tan.

'With two- and three-child families being the norm, issues such as education will be important for these families,' he says.

### **Who will vote opposition?**

Not surprisingly, census numbers show that more voters are getting better-educated.

Insight estimates that two elections ago, those with secondary and below education formed around 70 per cent of the voting population.

Today, the number has dropped to 55 per cent. Conversely, the number of voters who are university graduates has doubled, now forming 20 per cent of the voting population, up from 11 per cent.

Analysts believe that among better-educated voters, issues of democracy and governance, freedom and the desire for more opposition will come to the fore.

It is this category of socio-economic class that is the one to watch, they say, instead of other categories like race and gender.

As blogger Alex Au puts it: 'Each dimension has some effect, but no dimension explains everything. My guess, however, is that educational level, age group and income status are the three most sensitive factors.'

He points to an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey conducted just after the 2006 elections, in which 985 Singaporean voters were polled on their personal background and voting disposition.

It found, among other things, that what determined whether voters were likely to vote opposition was not so much when they were born - contrary to traditional thinking - but whether they were professionals or working class, degree-holders or had only primary school education.

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at IPS who was involved in the survey, says: 'It is the education, occupational class and educational levels that seem to be associated with a stronger disposition towards the need for or the desire for political pluralism.'

Mr Zulkifli suggests that age groups might not matter that much, saying he comes across parents who worry about the same political issues their children are facing on immigrants and the cost of living.

'Parents might vote in tandem with what their son or daughter thinks about life. Singaporean parents worry more about kids than they should,' he says.

Sociologist Terence Chong from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies takes an issues-centric view.

'I'm not convinced that age, race or class are definitive factors that influence voting patterns. Issues that would more likely divide a PAP-voter from an opposition-voter would be questions like 'Do we need a strong opposition in Parliament to act as a check and balance?', 'Is a one-party state healthy for the country in the long run?', 'Will my views on immigration and transportation be championed by the opposition?', 'Has the incumbent party delivered the good life?'

'How you answer these questions would be a better determinant of how you vote, and this runs across age, racial and class lines.'

Even the effect of pro-PAP new citizens, which some conspiracy theorists dubbed as the PAP's ultimate strategy to increase its vote share, could be limited. Dr Koh notes that they are unlikely to form a voting bloc as they 'are dispersed across the country with possibly only one or two spots where there is a greater number of new Indian citizens'.

Although each constituency is more or less a microcosm of Singapore's multiracial and socioeconomic mix, the voter spread is not always representative. For example, some GRCs, like Tampines, have a higher proportion of HDB flats than others like Tanjong Pagar.

What this means, Mr Tan says, is that ultimately, 'a party that can show that it is inclusive will do well'.

The votes of baby boomers like Madam Tan have kept the PAP in power, but its success in subsequent polls is assured only by staying relevant to Singaporeans of all generations.