

PUNGGOL EAST BY-ELECTION; Analysts surprised by wide margin of WP's win

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In the end, it was not the close fight that many had expected.

Analysts and political observers yesterday confessed to being stunned by the wide margin of victory that the Workers' Party (WP) scored in the Punggol East by-election, when it pulled ahead by 11 percentage points.

They credited the WP's handsome score to Singaporeans' desire for more political competition and the "by-election effect".

Singapore Management University (SMU) law lecturer Eugene Tan said this effect - referring to voters turning to the opposition knowing that the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is already in power - has "accentuated over the years" as Singaporeans increasingly yearn for an alternative to the one-party dominant rule of the past decades.

"People want checks and balances and while WP is not ready to form a government, it is the closest we've had in a long while," he said.

WP's Ms Lee Li Lian won 54.5 per cent of the votes, compared with PAP's Dr Koh Poh Koon who received 43.7 per cent.

Political observers say that while they had not ruled out a WP victory, they were taken aback by the margin.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "This battle was too close to call, hence the margin surprised me."

Political scientist Hussin Mutalib said he had expected a close call favouring the PAP given the four-cornered fight.

But Ms Lee's personality and perseverance - given that she had contested in the ward in the 2011 General Election - are key reasons for WP's good showing, say observers.

Punggol East's proximity to opposition stronghold Hougang would also have some spillover effect, and the profile of the ward's young, middle-class voters who value an opposition presence contributed to the strong victory.

Political scientist Reuben Wong said: "WP stuck to a clear, simple campaign message about keeping the PAP on its toes."

Former nominated MP Siew Kum Hong said the latest results - an improvement of Ms Lee's 41 per cent vote in 2011 - will be seen by WP as a "validation of the party".

Conversely, it could be read that voters "continue to be very unhappy with the PAP", he added.

"It is quite telling that when PM (Lee Hsien Loong) personally got involved in campaigning, something that he didn't do in Hougang, he wasn't able to change the outcome," he said, referring to last year's Hougang by-election where WP also won.

But others cautioned against reading it as a reflection of national sentiment. SMU's Mr Tan said the results of the by-election cannot simply be extrapolated across the whole nation.

"While ground sentiments are unsettled, and people can quibble about whether enough is done, most can see that things are being done," he said.

He admitted that the by-election results could "portend what may come" in future elections, however.

The younger, middle-class voter profile of Punggol East suggests that WP's messaging and voters' expectations on what it means to be a democracy are gaining traction.

"These are the voters that will increasingly matter," he said.

Mr Siew added: "The PAP has to ask itself whether it wants to continue to wait for the long-term policies - such as those on housing and transport - introduced after the general election to bear fruit, or to roll out more policies to address the voters' concerns."