

## 'Shift towards PAP among the better-off'

**Chong Zi Liang, Lim Yan Liang**  
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Survey finds vote swing in GE2015 likely due to middle- and higher-income earners backing political status quo

The nationwide vote swing of 9.8 percentage points to the People's Action Party (PAP) in the Sept 11 General Election (GE) was likely due to middle- as well as higher- income earners backing the political status quo, a shift from GE2011 when these groups showed a strong desire for political pluralism.

This was among the key findings of a survey of 2,015 voters by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) which was discussed at its post-GE conference yesterday.

GE2011 saw the PAP's share of the popular vote fall to 60.1 per cent from 66.6 per cent in GE2006.

In GE2015, its share rose to 69.9 per cent, to the surprise of many.

The biggest shift towards the PAP came from those aged 21 to 29, and those aged 65 and older. This could have been a result of policies making it easier for young couples to buy a home and the \$8 billion Pioneer Generation Package launched last year, said IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh, who led the survey team.

The survey by IPS, which conducted similar surveys after GE2006 and GE2011, shows that while there was a general drop in support for political diversity this time, the steepest fall was among those with at least post-secondary education, lower- middle to high-income households, and four-room flat dwellers.

"Need for efficient government" was the top priority on a list of 18 issues, with 98.5 per cent rating it as "important" or "very important".

Also, at least 90 per cent deemed "government help for the needy", "fairness of government policy" and "cost of living" as "important" or "very important".

Still, the need for checks and balances and different views in Parliament was increasingly acknowledged, even among those grouped as conservative, compared with the GE2006 and GE2011 surveys.

But factors like the Government addressing 2011 hot-button issues, such as high housing prices, may have trumped the desire for political diversity at the ballot box, said Dr Koh. For some voters, support for pluralism is "actually conditional to whether they feel the incumbent has performed well... in terms of its policies and what it was able to deliver", she added.

The IPS survey found that some factors thought to have improved the PAP's performance, like the legacy of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who died in March, may not have mattered as much. Mr Lee's legacy ranked low on voters' minds relative to other issues, although it was more important to those born before 1965 and the lower income.

The controversy over the Workers' Party (WP)-run town council, which had come under fire from PAP leaders since two years before the election, was second-last on the list of issues in the survey.

The WP's credibility remained high, with 71 per cent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was a credible party. About 56 per cent of respondents thought the same way in 2011.

A separate IPS survey found that hot-button issues like the cost of living, which headlined the 2011 polls, continued to dominate GE2015.

But policy changes in the interim have reduced the temperature of such issues.

Still, this Perceptions of Governance Survey found people were least satisfied with government performance in the areas of cost of living, rich-poor gap, housing affordability and immigration policy.

These issues almost matched the list of factors Singaporeans said influenced their vote the most: cost of living, affordability of housing and healthcare as well as meeting retirement needs.

The areas where the Government did well were largely security-related, such as law and order, defence and crisis management.

The online survey of 3,000 voters was conducted in three waves, from before Nomination Day until a week after Polling Day.

A co-leader of the research team, National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser, said the vote swing was due to greater risk and uncertainty in the world today. It led to a flight to security and bread-and-butter issues, although Singaporeans still embraced democracy as an abstract idea.

"People have become more concerned about security because they can sense there's more global competition, more talk about trade-offs and how you can't have your cake and eat it all the time," he said.

"In my view, that's the X-factor that can account for why voters swung back to the PAP."

The survey also found a stark difference between PAP and non-PAP voters on some issues. For instance, when asked to rate the statement, "The Government does what is right for Singapore", on a scale of one to nine, PAP voters' average score was 6.72, against non-PAP voters' 4.04.

"There is some amount of polarisation," Dr Tan noted.