

Sample counts of how votes are cast to be released; They will provide early indication of possible results to discourage speculation

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SINGAPORE — To discourage unnecessary speculation and prevent people from relying on hearsay, sample counts of votes cast will be taken at the start of the counting process, and — for the first time — announced to the public within two hours of the polls closing at 8pm on Sept 11.

These counts, which will provide an early indication of the possible election results, will be put up on the Elections Department's (ELD) website and disseminated to the media.

In past elections, ELD officers conducted sample counts for internal use, as a check against the final outcome. During the 2011 Presidential Election, candidates observed the sample counting process and were provided with the counts on request.

There will be 833 polling stations island wide. After voting closes, the ballot papers will be put in boxes that will be sealed and transported to 163 counting centres.

At these counting centres, the ELD's counting assistants will, in front of candidates and their counting agents, randomly pick a bundle of 100 ballot papers from each polling station and count the number of votes for each candidate, or each group of candidates in the case of a Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

The votes will be tallied, weighted according to the number of votes cast at each polling station. The sample count will be shown as a percentage of valid votes garnered by each candidate or group of candidates.

Returning Officer Ng Wai Choong said the new practice will help prevent unnecessary speculation and reliance on unofficial sources of information on Polling Night, while vote counting is still under way and before results are formally announced by him.

These indicative figures are likely to be released at around 10pm or earlier. Since they are sample counts, they could still differ from the final results, which are usually announced later in the night, but sample counts have a confidence level of 95 per cent, plus or minus four percentage points.

Some 2.46 million voters will head to the polls on Sept 11. Political watchers noted how unofficial early results were circulated after polls closed during the 2011 General Election, and felt that the new initiative was a response to the changing times. However, they added that it could lead to undesirable outcomes.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "We have become more impatient for news, we are more networked and able to mobilise sentiments and crowds quickly." She noted that conflicting rumours could fire up emotions among rival supporters.

Nevertheless, she felt that announcing the sample counts may not avert such situations. "Taking the less optimistic view, the sample count could fuel even more discussion and

debate than necessary; it may still get emotions fired up. If the split is very close, the groups of people involved will be on tenterhooks, having been given the heads-up about the close call from official sources," she said.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said that the move addresses the increase in the number of political parties participating in elections.

"You have the potential of a massive amount of rumours, speculation and misinformation being generated. And I think the ELD has probably come to the assessment that that would not be healthy," he said.

Associate Professor Alan Chong from the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies was sceptical about the accuracy of sample counts. Also, such figures could give rise to unhealthy expectations. "It might create more frustration and speculation, and all the kinds of negative emotions arising from this belief after they've been psychologically prepared for a certain outcome," he said.

Political parties contacted were also divided over the move.

Welcoming the initiative, the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) noted that as long as the counting is done "in front of witnesses and in the public eye", then there is transparency. "SDA feels it is beneficial as it gives (an) insight into how the counting process takes place and unfolds," the party said. Otherwise, the counting would be prone to "speculation and hearsay", it added.

People's Power Party chief Goh Meng Seng said sample counts could be misleading. "In some places the counting might be faster, and in other places it might be slower. I think if we are talking about a fair and transparent voting system, exit polls would be a better idea," he said.