

S'poreans aged 21 to 29, those above 65 key in GE swing towards PAP: Survey

Kelly Ng

TODAY, 4 November 2015

SINGAPORE — Some two months after the results of the General Election (GE) after the PAP turned in a surprisingly strong showing at the polls, a two-week survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has sought to shed some light on the factors behind the ruling party's landslide victory.

Among other findings, the survey showed that Singaporeans aged 21 to 29, and those above 65 are among the voter groups that accounted for the national vote swing towards the People's Action Party (PAP), which reversed its performance in the 2011 GE by winning 83 out of 89 parliamentary seats.

The PAP garnered 69.9 per cent of the vote share — its highest since 2001 — compared to 60.1 per cent achieved four years ago.

Across all age groups, four-room flat dwellers, Singaporeans in the clerical and service industries, semi-skilled/unskilled workers or those working as operators, as well as those with post-secondary and above education, were also found to have swung their support to the PAP.

The survey, which involved phone interviews with 2,015 voting age Singapore citizens, was conducted between Sept 12 - a day after Polling Day - and 26. It was led by IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh, who presented the findings today at the institute's Post-Election Conference.

Dr Koh noted that there was a dip in the proportion of "pluralists" — those who support greater political pluralism and changes in the electoral system, relative to other respondents — among the youngest group of voters, and a spike in the proportion of "conservatives" — who support the political status quo — within the oldest group.

While the survey did not draw clear causes for the voting patterns, policy changes founded on "the ideal of Singapore as a continuous meritocracy" — such as SkillsFuture, the fair consideration framework and tightening of foreigner inflow — may have found favour among the voters in their 20s, Dr Koh said at a pre-conference briefing on Tuesday.

As for those aged 65 and above, schemes such as MediShield Life, the Special Employment Credit - which provide incentives for companies to retain or hire workers aged 65 and above - and Central Provident Fund reforms may be among the "big bang" measures that saw them throw their support behind the PAP, she said.

The survey also sought to analyse the appeal of each political party to the respondents. It found that 93 per cent of them found the PAP a credible party, followed by the Workers' Party (WP) with 71 per cent, and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) at 46 per cent. Among these three parties, SDP saw the largest increase in the proportion of respondents who found it to be credible — up from 24 per cent in 2011.

Voters who felt that the PAP is a credible party tended to be among respondents aged 55 and above who were born before Independence, females, and those with Primary School Leaving Examination educational qualification and below.

The study did not offer statistically significant findings on whether citizens not born in Singapore were more likely to deem the PAP credible, said Dr Koh.

Nevertheless, a separate analysis by IPS research associate Debbie Soon published a week after the polls showed that those who became citizens after the 2011 GE did not account for a large part of the national vote swing.

The study led by Dr Koh found that those who saw the WP and SDP as credible parties tended to be respondents aged 39 and below, males, have diploma or university education qualification, and work as senior executives, professionals, technicians or supervisors. Voters in the low-income group, and those living in smaller HDB flats, were least likely to find these two opposition parties credible.

Apart from WP and SDP, the other opposition parties tended to score higher in terms of credibility among respondents aged between 21 to 29, and those from the low- to middle-income groups.

Political analyst Eugene Tan, who was a speaker at the conference, noted that recent GE had the makings of a watershed election but turned up to be a “flight to safety”. “In seeking to outflank the PAP, the Opposition ended up aggressively outflanking themselves... driving conservative and middle-ground voters back into the arms of the tried-and-tested PAP,” said Associate Professor Tan, a Singapore Management University law don.

The PAP’s strong victory this year despite the fact that some bugbears from the 2011 GE — such as those related to transport, immigration and housing — still persist is “reassuring”, he added, as it showed that the electorate recognised the ruling party’s hard work between the last two elections.

He added that rife speculation on social media that the PAP was “in for one of their worst performances” also worked in its favour.

Opposition parties, on the other hand, misread the electorate by seeking to “re-create the angst, anxiety and anger that we saw in 2011”. “In the process, they overreached,” said Assoc Prof Tan. Astute voters may also have perceived their populist proposals as undermining Singapore, he said, noting that “post-material” issues such as social justice have grown in resonance among the voters.

Much as the electorate desire political diversity, Assoc Prof Tan said the election results showed that the Opposition parties, individually and collectively, did not provide any viable alternative. “Opposition parties cannot continue to remain cesspools of political discontentment. They need to get votes for themselves, rather than relying on the anti-PAP vote,” he said.

Still, SMU Professor of Psychology David Chan, who also spoke at the conference, felt that the respective parties’ performances in the recent GE have little bearing on future poll results.

“(Elections) are volatile...It doesn't mean (support for) WP will continue going down. Whether trust in a party goes up or down, or remains constant, is completely dependent on how you earn trust or erode trust. You don't do a trend analysis on trust,” he said.