

## Why Punggol East voters went with WP

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**Today**, 27 January 2013

She was happy with how the People's Action Party (PAP) Government tackled housing concerns by aggressively ramping up the supply of new flats. She also understood the need for foreign labour, and did not hold it against the Government for the growing number of foreign workers who are doing jobs that Singaporeans shun.

But the recent train disruptions and the rising cost of living — which she felt did not correspond to a higher standard of living — have led Punggol East resident Felicia Ong, 28, to reaffirm her clamour for a stronger Opposition presence in Parliament.

The Opposition will push the Government to “think harder and better”, said Ms Ong, who is a pastor. She also had this impression that compared to their PAP counterparts, Workers' Party (WP) Members of Parliament (MPs) and candidates are closer to the ground and are able to “better present the real challenges of the people”.

Which was why she had no qualms casting her vote for WP candidate Lee Li Lian at the ballot box on Saturday — just like how she had voted for the Opposition in the General Elections in 2006 and 2011 when she was a resident in Potong Pasir.

“Greater diversity in Government is important to me, for checks and balances, and idea generation ... (but) I don't vote for the Opposition for the sake of having an Opposition. The quality of the candidate is a factor. The MP must also be able to relate to issues the residents face,” said Ms Ong, who moved to Punggol East last year after she got married.

In interviews with Punggol East constituents the day after Polling Day, reasons like Ms Ong's cropped up as residents shared why they thought the WP emerged victorious.

Ms Candy Ng, 25, a graphic designer, was another who supports a bigger Opposition presence in Parliament as she believes there is value in having alternative voices. “Singaporeans now ... are not concerned about simple things like getting the flat re-painted,” she said.

In the aftermath of the by-election, some political pundits felt that the outcome could be a harbinger of things to come — given the younger, middle class profile of the constituency. This group, the analysts said, tend to value the presence of Opposition to keep the ruling party in check.

A common source of unhappiness among the 30 residents TODAY spoke to is the lack of tangible results from the PAP Government's efforts to address long-term national issues including housing prices, healthcare costs, transport woes and the inflow of foreigners.

And a majority of them believe a stronger Opposition presence will make the Government move even faster on these issues.

Sales manager Abdul Aziz, 54, said some residents felt that the policies were not “effective enough” and that the PAP was “out of touch”.

Older residents also cite dissatisfaction with employment woes and rising healthcare costs.

Mr Jimmy Foong, 58, a cook, said: “(The Government) say they want to improve jobs, create jobs but what do people like me who are 55 and above get? Can we even get a job that pays enough to cover our expenses?”

Mdm Anna Kheng, 80, griped about healthcare costs and the fact that she cannot use Medisave to offset occasional visits to the polyclinics which can cost about S\$40 to S\$50 each time.

While some, including childcare helper, Mdm S L, 42, felt that the fact that PAP candidate Koh Poh Koon was a new face to the residents counted against him, a handful also cited their frustrations with municipal issues such as the lack of amenities, the stalled upgrading works at Rivervale Plaza and inadequate public transportation.

Three residents said former PAP MP Michael Palmer’s indiscretion directly influenced their decision on which party to vote for.

The mix of voter dissatisfaction over Government efforts to address long-term issues and teething problems plaguing the young estate meant that the likelihood of protest votes was always high.

Yet for some residents, the relatively short time-frame until the next General Election, due by 2016, meant they could take a chance on the WP. A resident who wished to be known as Mdm Lim, 39, said: “There are only three years left and if (WP is) not good enough, we can vote someone else.”

Former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Siew Kum Hong noted that the WP successfully managed to “tap into the unhappiness of the people... and ride the wave of discontent”. He also noted how Punggol East’s transport woes were municipal issues that are “manifestations” of national ones.

Institute of Policy Studies Senior Research Fellow Gillian Koh noted that the recent policy announcements to tackle national issues “needed more time to be filtered down”. She said the Government has done “quite a lot” in this regard but the question is whether these measures were communicated effectively, did it require time for people to see their effects or perhaps Punggol East voters, for instance, had not benefited because of the design of the policies. Or was it because the measures were just not enough, Dr Koh said.

Nevertheless, she pointed out that “WP campaigned quite well on the point of asking people to think about admitting more Opposition to be a check on Government”.

Mr Siew said the PAP will need to address the voter unhappiness towards it. He added: "The PAP needs to break the 'unhappy' trend by showing results of its policies... If the PAP wants to be able to win Punggol East back, it will need to reverse this trend."