

## **IPS post-GE2020 forum: Older voters catch up on digital use, parties missed crucial online signals**

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- Older voters are catching up on digital platforms, especially instant messaging
- Political parties missed signals that voters were sending online
- Voters who switched from the PAP to the Opposition were more likely to be male
- Trust in mass media increased overall, but popularity of traditional media fell

Regardless of age, Singaporean voters mostly relied on online sources for news and views during the most recent General Election (GE), a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found.

At the same time, a separate analysis of Facebook posts during the election found that the victory by the Workers' Party (WP) in Sengkang Group Representation Constituency (GRC) would not have come as such a shock if political parties had paid more attention to the signals voters were sending online.

These research findings were presented at the IPS Online Forum on Thursday (Oct 8) that was livestreamed on Facebook.

The survey polled some 2,000 citizens from July 13 to 21, to look at the link between media use and political traits, participation and voting behaviour. Data collected was weighted based on the proportions of gender, race and age groups of the citizen demographic.

IPS conducted similar surveys studying internet and media use during each of the past two GEs in 2011 and 2015.

During the forum, Mr Chua Chin Hon, chief data analyst at Analytix Labs, presented an analysis of social media data that his artificial intelligence services firm had collected.

### **GENERATIONAL DIVIDE**

Traditional mass media such as television, print and radio, as well as digital platforms were most popular among older voters, but digital platforms were frequently used by all age groups.

The study looked at the media consumption habits of four age groups:

- First-time voters, aged 21 to 26
- Other youths, aged 27 to 35
- "Sandwiched" generation, aged 36 to 55
- Boomers, aged 56 and above

# TOP THREE MEDIA PLATFORMS BY GENERATION IN GE 2020

## FIRST-TIME VOTERS

21 to 26 years old

- 1 Social networking sites
- 2 SG online-only news and information websites
- 3 Online websites of SG mass media

## OTHER YOUTHS

27 to 35 years old

- 1 Social networking sites
- 2 SG online-only news and information websites
- 3 Online websites of SG mass media

## SANDWICHED GENERATION

36 to 55 years old

- 1 Online websites of SG mass media
- 2 SG online-only news and information websites
- 3 Television

## BOOMERS

56 years old and above

- 1 Television
- 2 Online websites of SG mass media
- 3 Instant messaging platforms

Source: Institute of Policy Studies

Infographic: Samuel Woo/TODAY

Dr Carol Soon, head of the society and culture department at IPS, said at a media briefing on Wednesday: “What was interesting is the importance of instant messaging as a source of news for boomers.”

The group’s use of media had changed the most from 2015, she added.

This year, they used instant messaging as much as other generations to seek information on the election.

The study also found that the younger the voter, the less likely they were to vote for the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP).

Slightly more than half of the 2,018 respondents reported which party got their vote and of these, the proportion that voted for PAP were:

- 72.1 per cent boomers
- 64.6 per cent the sandwiched generation
- 60.1 per cent other youths
- 56.6 per cent first-time voters

Across all age groups, the most popular media sources were the online websites of Singapore mass media, such as The Straits Times, TODAY and CNA. Television took second place, followed by online-only news and information sites such as Rice Media and Mothership.

Traditional forms of media — television, print newspapers and radio — all fell in importance this GE for all age groups.

Other key findings:

- Websites of Singapore mass media mattered more to PAP voters, while opposition voters cared more about engaging with candidates on social networking sites and party websites
- How voters used the internet had some influence on the party for which they voted. However, the strongest predictor for how they voted was their response to a question about their primary reasons for voting for a particular party, such as the party’s track record or to have alternative views in Parliament.

Dr Soon said: “While we are seeing equalisation of access (to information across generations), we need to scrutinise the nature of engagement.”

She added that instant messaging is still mostly used in a broadcast model, and political parties can do more to improve two-way communication with citizens.

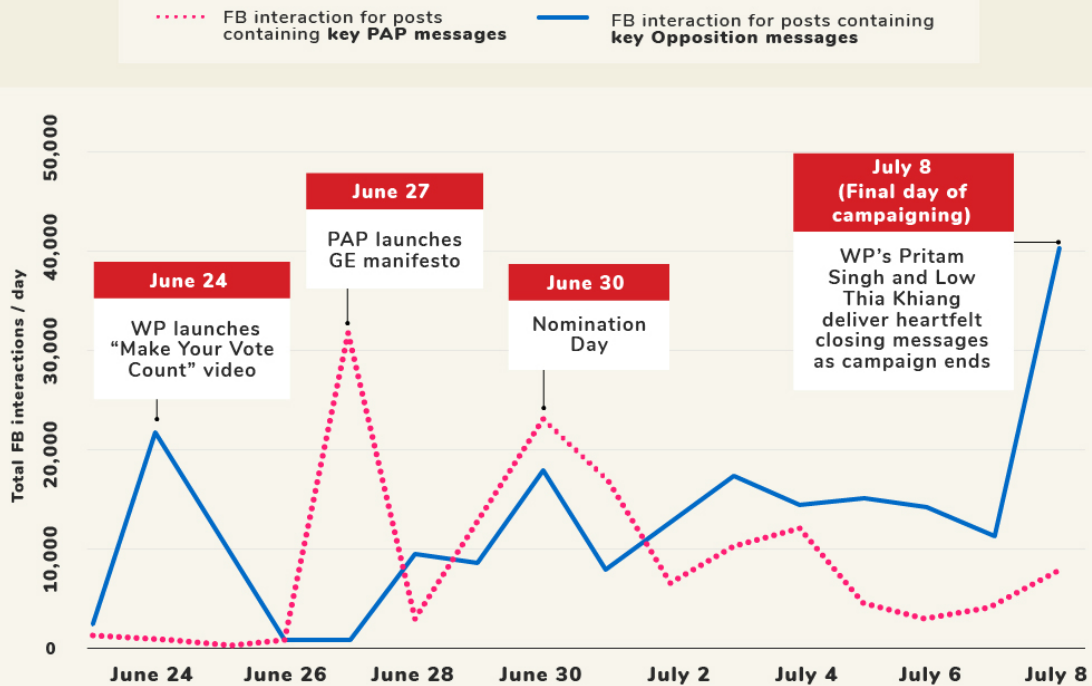
## **MISSED SIGNALS**

What was also noticeable was that political parties are getting better at producing social media content, but they mostly used these platforms as distribution channels — or what Mr Chua, a former journalist, called a “fire-and-forget” attitude.

If the parties had analysed more deeply the user interaction data on Facebook posts, the overall swing towards the Opposition and the surprise win by the Workers' Party (WP) in Sengkang GRC would have been far less of a shock, Mr Chua said.

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## MISSED SIGNAL: THE 'ENTHUSIASM GAP'



Source: Analytix Labs

Infographic: Samuel Woo/TODAY

Mr Chua studied the number of likes, shares, comments and reactions of more than 8,000 GE-related posts from 15 Facebook pages.

These pages included those of four political parties, news organisations and key public figures such as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his brother Lee Hsien Yang who, during the election, announced that he had joined the newly formed Progress Singapore Party (PSP).

“Clearly there are a lot of questions about the authenticity of social media data and I think we indeed should be very sceptical,” Mr Chua said.

Yet parties should not ignore the data entirely, he added, especially in Singapore “where the lack of regular polls and a fairly passive media environment combines to create this low-signal environment”.

Mr Chua picked out four signals that he thought political parties had missed:

- Covid de-sensitisation – By Nomination Day on June 30, user interactions with Covid-19-related Facebook posts had fallen sharply from the peaks in April. This signalled that the typical trend of voters flocking to the ruling party in times of crises would not have materialised in the latest GE.
- The Ivan Lim incident – The controversy over the PAP candidate who was dropped in the middle of the hustings had more than eight times as many interactions than the launch of the PAP’s manifesto. This was the first major sign that the party’s core message on jobs was not resonating strongly with voters.
- “Enthusiasm gap” – Interaction with posts related to PAP’s “jobs, jobs, jobs” message peaked well before Polling Day on July 10, while the Opposition’s message to deny PAP a “blank cheque” peaked just in time for the polls.
- “Sengkang surprise” – Interactions with posts related to Sengkang GRC candidates were far higher for WP’s posts than for PAP’s posts, which pointed to a “massive gap” in popularity between the two teams at the constituency.

Mr Chua noted that political parties pumped an unprecedented amount of content on Facebook, mostly in the form of videos. PAP was the most active with 12 daily posts on average during the campaign, while PSP was the least with 9.1 posts a day.

## **VOTERS WHO SWITCHED**

The IPS survey asked respondents whether they voted for a different party this year when compared with GE2015.

It found that about 64 per cent voters who switched from PAP to the Opposition this year were men, whereas in the last GE, it was mostly women, at 70 per cent, who had made that switch.

In 2015, 33 per cent of voters living in one- and two-room flats switched from PAP to the Opposition but this year, none of the respondents in this group reported such a swing.

The group of voters who switched from the Opposition to the PAP were also the least interested in elections and attended e-rallies the least. This group was most concerned about the quality of candidates, the study found.

Those who switched from PAP to the Opposition were most likely to have signed a petition in the last six months and attended opposition e-rallies. They trusted newspapers and radio the least and were most concerned about having alternative views in Parliament.

The study also found that voters who switched did not differ from other voters in their media use.

One of the researchers for the IPS study was Associate Professor Zhang Weiyu from the communications and new media department at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She said: "In 2015, those that swung from PAP to the Opposition used online party sources more, but this is no longer the case."

What influenced their switch had more to do with wanting alternative views in Parliament and little to do with social media, she added.

## **ONLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

Trust in mass media increased overall in this GE, with the think tank's findings showing that younger voters were more likely to turn to social media to express opinions when they did not trust what was reported in the mass media.

IPS also tested respondents on their political knowledge and found that those who were less informed were more likely to express opinions on social media.

Boomers had significantly higher political knowledge overall, but second-time voters showed the biggest gains in political knowledge between 2015 and 2020.

Dr Natalie Pang, senior lecturer at NUS' communications and new media department, said: "I think what this means is that it's important to not just encourage active citizenry, but also informed citizenry."