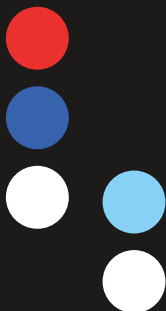


# VOTING IN A TIME OF CHANGE

SINGAPORE'S 2020  
GENERAL ELECTION

EDITED BY  
KEVIN YL TAN  
TERENCE LEE



FEATURING  
SELECTED PHOTOS AND FACTS,  
FIGURES & STATISTICS OF GE2020

# **VOTING IN A TIME OF CHANGE**

**SINGAPORE'S 2020  
GENERAL ELECTION**

Voting in a Time of Change: Singapore's 2020 General Election

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*At the ballot box.*



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*Low Thia Kiang's last campaign.*

# INTRODUCTION

## THE SHIFT CONTINUES AMIDST A PANDEMIC: SINGAPORE'S 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS

*Kevin YL Tan & Terence Lee*

Back in 2011, we argued that a major political shift had occurred in Singapore.<sup>1</sup> The Workers' Party (WP) had done the unthinkable. In addition to winning the Hougang single member constituency (SMC), they conquered a long-thought impregnable citadel by winning a Group Representation Constituency (GRC) in Aljunied. That turned out to be an actual watershed election. We argued that several factors had brought about this shift. The first was the generational shift in leaders and voters, with an attendant change in outlooks, styles and values which required the forging of a new zeitgeist. Second, grave unhappiness on the ground over the Government's immigration policy and malfunctioning and overstretching of essential public amenities, like the MRT system. Third, an ideological shift towards the centre of the political spectrum and the emergence of a core set of values Singaporean voters crave. And finally, a growing desire among voters for greater accountability and checks and balances in government.

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1 Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee, 'Political Shift: Singapore's 2011 General Election,' in *Voting in Change: The Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election*, ed. Kevin YL Tan and Terence Lee (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 6–21.

The 2015 general election results appear to have put paid to the validity and currency of this prognosis. The People's Action Party (PAP) scored its best results since 2001, capturing all the seats in Parliament except for Aljunied GRC and Hougang SMC, winning 69.68% of the popular vote, which was an increase of 9.72% from 2011. It also recaptured Punggol East SMC, which the WP won in a by-election in 2013, and almost recaptured Aljunied GRC, which the WP won with a bare 50.96% majority. Did the PAP's hard work in assiduously working the ground and making good on their election promises turn the tide? Some thought so, but we were less sanguine.

While the PAP certainly redeemed itself by listening harder, responding better and generally connecting more seriously with the ground, several key factors acted in the PAP's favour to turn GE2015 into an outlier election. First, the Government made a big fuss about celebrating Singapore's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, or SG50, and spent extensive resources on drumming up nationalist fervour and sentiment. Second, the Government rolled out the S\$9 billion Pioneer Generation Package in 2014 to help Singaporeans born before 1 January, 1950 cope with their retirement needs. Finally, the death of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew galvanised the nation in an unprecedented outpouring of national grief that deeply and palpably intertwined Lee's life with that of Singapore and the PAP's accomplishments. These factors conspired to make 2015 an exceptional election, especially for the PAP, for the shift that had begun in 2011 could not be rolled back forever.<sup>2</sup>

In GE2020, the PAP returned to power with only 61.23% of the popular vote and the loss of two GRCs and one SMC. In the interim five years, from Polling Day 2015 to Polling Day 2020, there had been an 8.63% swing away from the PAP. More significantly,

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2 Terence Lee, 'The Pragmatics of Change: Singapore's 2015 General Election,' in *Change in Voting: Singapore's 2015 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), 9–25.

the opposition WP made a significant gain by winning the newly constituted Sengkang GRC.

So, what does GE2020 mean for Singapore politics and political parties? Why did the PAP fare so badly in a ‘crisis election’—an electoral circumstance which normally favours the incumbent government? How significant was the fact that the GE2020 campaign became, by dint of Covid-19 safe distancing measures, Singapore’s first digital electoral campaign?

As in our previous volumes, this book offers a snapshot analysis of the immediate aftermath of the 2020 general election. In addition, we have also included a selection of longer-range analyses and accounts of political issues that appeared potentially significant—such as the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) litigation by Jason Lim (Chapter 4), and the saga concerning 38 Oxley Rise by Stephan Ortmann (Chapter 7)—but ended up being marginal. Before the election, we fully expected that the PAP would exploit the litigation between the former AHPETC against its former town councillors—most notably WP Chairman Sylvia Lim, former WP Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang and WP Secretary-General Pritam Singh—for dereliction of duty and negligence to its advantage. We had also expected that the Progress Singapore Party (PSP), whose members include Lee Hsien Yang, the Prime Minister’s estranged brother, might also make political capital of the sordid family feud over Lee Kuan Yew’s former residence at Oxley Rise. Again, that did not happen. Lee Hsien Yang did not contest the election even though he visibly campaigned for his PSP colleagues. While the AHPETC and Lee family saga did not feature directly this time, they remain in the minds of many Singaporeans and, depending on the political mood of the day, may be reinvoked at a later time to gain political mileage by the PAP, or even by the opposition parties.

## THE COVID-19 ELECTION

It was a nervous Singapore that went to the polls on 10 July, 2020 as the 14<sup>th</sup> general election had been called in the midst of Singapore's worst pandemic. The first case of Covid-19 was reported in late January, and by March, the situation had become so serious that a lockdown—euphemistically called the 'Circuit Breaker'—was ordered from 7 April. For almost two months, all offices, schools and shops were closed, save for those providing essential services, and WFH, or 'work from home' became the latest abbreviation to enter the Singapore lexicon. Lockdown measures were eased on 1 June with schools being reopened and, on 19 June, Phase 2 of the reopening was announced. Dining out was permitted and households could receive up to five visitors. While many observers pointed out that Singapore had not faced such a major public health crisis since the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003, it was clear by April that the Covid-19 pandemic would prove much bigger than SARS. Things got so serious that the Government announced three supplementary budgets—the Resilience Budget, the Solidarity Budget and the Fortitude Budget—totaling some S\$93 billion to help Singaporeans cope with the economic fallout from the pandemic. To facilitate this, a sum of S\$53 billion had to be drawn from Singapore's accumulated reserves, which required the President's assent.

Under article 65(4) of the Constitution, the life of Singapore's Parliament is five years from the date of its first sitting. As Singapore's 13<sup>th</sup> Parliament first sat on 15 January, 2016, the latest date on which a general election could be called would be 14 January, 2021. This led many to wonder why the Government decided to call the elections so soon after Phase 2 of the reopening was announced. Would it not have been safer to wait a few months and allow the situation to stabilise before calling Singaporeans to the polls? Would not the public health risk of large gatherings of people in confined spaces

simply be magnified when Singaporeans thronged the polling stations to cast their ballots?

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained that the Government felt it better to call the election sooner rather than later, “when things are relatively stable”, so that the decks could be cleared to give the new government a fresh five-year mandate.<sup>3</sup> There was, after all, no guarantee that the pandemic would be over before Parliament had to be dissolved by law. Lee explained how campaigning and voting would be carried out and assured voters that precautions would be taken to ensure that voting was safe:

We are still in the midst of Covid-19, so it will not be a normal election campaign. Before deciding to proceed, I had to be certain of two things. First, that voters can vote safely. Second, that political parties can campaign effectively. After studying the issues, I am satisfied that both of these can be done.

On voter safety, the Elections Department will be implementing additional precautions on Polling Day. We are setting up more polling stations than in previous elections, to reduce crowding. There will be safe distancing measures practiced at the polling stations. Voters will be allocated specific time slots to vote, and seniors will be given priority to vote before others.

On effective campaigning, the Elections Department has also made arrangements and issued guidelines. Candidates can still go house-to-house campaigning in person, provided they observe the safe distancing precautions. Unfortunately, physical election rallies will not be possible, but we will make up with more opportunities for candidates to speak directly to voters on television, and of course online, for example via live streaming.

3 Lee Hsien Loong, ‘Speech on General Election 2020’, 23 Jun 2020, available at: <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Speech-on-GE2020-by-PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

Singapore is not the first to hold an election during Covid-19. Others have done so too: South Korea, Taiwan and several European countries. With our arrangements and precautions in place, I am confident we can hold a proper and safe election.<sup>4</sup>

Many Singaporeans were puzzled by the haste of this decision, even those who had expected that general elections would be held sometime in the latter half of the year. PSP leader Tan Cheng Bock called this decision “wrong and irresponsible” in putting Singaporeans’ lives at risk.<sup>5</sup> Other political pundits speculated that the timing of the election favoured the incumbent as “there might be a flight to safety to a proven government.”<sup>6</sup> It was also thought that the inability to hold physical rallies unfairly disadvantaged the opposition parties.<sup>7</sup>

So prevalent was the view that the calling of a pandemic election would hurt the opposition that pundits like Bilveer Singh even suggested that an “opposition wipeout” in a PAP landslide win could happen. Even the WP suggested that the PAP might win a clean sweep and completely obliterate the opposition. This was dismissed by the PAP as a “tactic” in reverse psychology.<sup>8</sup> Quite clearly, the results told a different story. There was no wipe out. On the contrary, the WP won 10 seats—the most any opposition party has ever won since 1963—and the ‘flight to safety’ theory was convincingly debunked. And while everyone missed the raucous, adrenaline-infused election rallies, the online digital campaign

4 Ibid.

5 Kelly Ng, ‘GE2020: ‘Wrong and irresponsible’ of PAP govt to call elections now, says Tan Cheng Bock’, *Business Times*, 5 Jul 2020, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/ge2020-wrong-and-irresponsible-of-pap-govt-to-call-elections-now-says-tan-cheng> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

6 See ‘GE2020: The Pros and Cons of a Crisis Election’, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/ge2020-the-pros-and-cons-of-a-crisis-election> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

7 Yvette Tan, ‘Coronavirus in Singapore Election campaigning without the handshakes’, *BBC News*, 5 Jul 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53216390> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

8 Grace Ho, ‘WP line that opposition could be wiped out is a ‘tactic’: PM’, *Straits Times*, 30 Jun 2020, at A6; and Linette Lai, ‘WP using fear of opposition wipe-out to win seats: DPM’ *Straits Times*, 6 Jul 2020, A1.

proved far more effective in reaching and mobilising voters who mattered. In Chapter 1, Bridget Welsh offers some compelling reasons why the calling of the election during the Covid-19 pandemic actually backfired on the PAP.

## IMPLICATIONS OF LOSING ONE MORE GRC

The biggest surprise of GE2020, even for the WP, was its victory in Sengkang GRC. This was a new GRC made up of the former Sengkang Central (carved out of the Pasir Ris–Punggol GRC), Sengkang West, and Punggol East SMCs. A close fight was anticipated from the get-go. When it was revealed that the WP were fielding their ‘B’ team, comprising lawyer He Ting Ru, economist Jamus Lim, financial analyst Louis Chua and social entrepreneur Raeesah Khan, all eyes were trained on how they would fare against the all-male ‘formidable on paper’ PAP team of labour chief Ng Chee Meng, Lam Pin Min, Amrin Amin and Raymond Lye.

Several explanations as to why the PAP lost Sengkang GRC have been proffered: younger voters who identified better with the WP’s team and profile; a lack of engagement by the PAP team with the constituency in the lead up to polling day; adverse reactions to the PAP’s attack on Raeesah Khan; and a general national swing away from the PAP.<sup>9</sup> While these may well have been relevant, we wish to make two further observations. The first relates to the nature of electoral contests in GRCs, long thought to be unconquerable bastions of the ruling party, while the second concerns the role played by individual members in a given GRC team, the aggregate quality of each team, and how these impact voter choices.

Right up till GE2011, everyone—including opposition politicians—took the view that GRCs were ‘fixed deposit’ seats for the incumbent

9 Audrey Tan and Toh Wen Li, ‘How WP won over Sengkang’, *Straits Times*, 12 Jul 2020, A6–A7.



party. But with the PAP's loss of Aljunied GRC in 2011 and again in 2015, this myth has been debunked. In GE2020, further dents were made on this theory. Not only had the WP won two of the 17 GRCs up for grabs, it also secured a very respectable 46.61% of the votes cast in East Coast GRC, while the PSP narrowly lost West Coast GRC, securing 48.32% of the total votes cast in that constituency.

The factors that made, and continue to make, GRCs such difficult constituencies for opposition political parties to win are the size of GRC teams and the ease with which electoral boundaries in Singapore are redrawn. In the two elections following the introduction of the GRC scheme in 1988, the size of GRCs was increased from three to four candidates in 1991 and then from four to between four and six candidates in 1997. The increase in the size of GRCS initially made it very difficult for opposition parties to cobble together large enough teams with the necessary ethnic minority members to compete against the PAP, which had held every single seat in Parliament between 1968 and 1981. Indeed, in GE2001 and GE2006, there were no four-member GRCs, only five- and six-member GRCs. Arguably, the problem of size would eventually be overcome as opposition parties gained in popularity and membership numbers; that said, the ability of the opposition to field a sufficient number of candidates in each GRC could be negated if boundaries of GRCs can be redrawn at will by the incumbent party. This issue is considered in depth by Kevin Tan in Chapter 3.

The constant shifting of electoral boundaries benefits no one except the incumbent party. Opposition parties live in perpetual fear that their strongholds will be eliminated with each boundary redrawing exercise. This concern is not actuated by paranoia but by the fact that the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee has shown an uncanny knack for eliminating those single-member seats that the PAP won but fared poorly. When the electoral boundaries are finally

announced, opposition parties are thus often caught off guard. The frequency with which boundaries have been redrawn since 1968 has to be studied to be believed. Indeed, in the run up to GE2020, *The Straits Times* created an online interactive map that allows voters to see how often their electoral boundaries have changed.<sup>10</sup> Using this interactive map, we punched in some addresses which we surmised might be ‘borderline’ areas where boundary changes often took place. Most voters would have seen an average of four electoral boundary changes since 1968. One extreme case is if one resided at Essex Road. This boundary was redrawn eight times.

What seems clear after GE2011 is that mega-GRCs, i.e., those with six members, are no longer seen by the PAP as being particularly advantageous. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has explained the downscaling of GRC sizes to the need to balance efficiency and economies of scale (enjoyed by larger GRCs) with the greater connection and ties forged between Members of Parliament (MPs) and their wards (more evident in smaller GRCs). It is also true that with strong anchor candidates—like the Prime Minister himself—it is possible to introduce and elect into office more new or lesser-known candidates as the anchor candidate will have longer coattails for them to hang onto. At the same time, there was always the risk that if the PAP lost a mega-GRC, it would lose six seats rather than four. In GE2020, the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee was instructed to further reduce the average size of each GRC. It did so and eliminated all six-member GRCs.

The role played by anchor members in a GRC—be they ministers or ‘star candidates’—continues to count, whether positively or negatively. As we argued in our 2011 volume, the personal popularity of the GRC’s anchor members invariably affects the vote for the

10 See <https://www.straitstimes.com/multimedia/graphics/2020/06/singapore-general-election-ge2020-constituency-changes/index.html> (accessed 1 Nov 2020).

entire team. Popular ministers like Prime Minister Lee and Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam led their respective teams to significant victories in their respective GRCs in GE2020, winning 71.91% and 74.61% of the popular votes cast, respectively. However, the pattern with regard to the other GRCs is less clear. The percentage of popular votes garnered is as much a function of the popularity of the anchor member as the strength of the opposition in any particular GRC. S Iswaran and Desmond Lee, generally considered amiable and likeable ministers, struggled to win West Coast GRC, with 51.68% of the votes against the PSP's 'Team A', consisting of Tan Cheng Bock, Hazel Poa, Leong Mun Wai, N Loganathan and Jeffrey Khoo. On the other hand, the PAP's team at Jalan Besar GRC—helmed by erstwhile Manpower Minister Josephine Teo who was much maligned for her handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in the workers' dormitories—won quite handsomely (65.36%) against the Peoples Voice's 'Team A', comprising Lim Tean, Leong Sze Hian, Nor Azlan Sulaiman and Michael Fang Amin.

Among the GRCs anchored by so-called fourth generation (4G) leaders, Ong Ye Kung (leading the team in Sembawang GRC) fared the best, winning 67.29% of the popular vote. He was followed by Josephine Teo (Jalan Besar GRC) with 65.36%; Lawrence Wong (Marsiling–Yew Tee GRC) with 63.18% and Chan Chun Sing (Tanjong Pagar GRC) with 63.10%. Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's was one of the worst performances, with East Coast GRC scoring only 53.39%. Only Ng Chee Ming (who helmed the PAP's Sengkang GRC team) did worse, with 47.88% of the popular vote. This begs the question: How will a 4G leader's performance in GE2020 impact his or her chances of becoming Prime Minister? This question is explored to some extent by Terence Lee in Chapter 11.

The opposition played a similar game, stacking their most well-known and popular anchor candidates in what they perceived to

be their strongest constituencies. It thus came as no surprise that the PSP's Tan Cheng Bock, who had for many years been the PAP's stalwart MP in West Coast SMC, chose to contest in West Coast GRC with his strongest team. The WP shored up their Aljunied team by bringing in Leon Pereira and Gerald Giam, two candidates who had previously enjoyed stints as Non-Constituency MPs. The WP's 'Team B' fielded in Sengkang GRC, was helmed by lawyer He Ting Ru, who had previously contested in GE2015 in Marine Parade GRC. It also featured economist Jamus Lim, who shot to prominence in the first televised debate of the election. And while the opposition parties could boast of no candidate with ministerial experience, they played up the depth of each team they presented, forcing voters to examine all of the PAP's team members more carefully and not just focus on the anchor candidate. Having two smaller star candidates in a team seems to work better than having just one superstar to anchor the team.

The PAP's edge in attracting the best candidates has, since 2011, been severely blunted. Over the last three general elections, the leading opposition parties—the WP, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and, most recently, the PSP—have been fielding more and more credible candidates, many of whom could easily have stood on the PAP's ticket. With the evening out of candidate quality in the various parties, voters are now forced to take a more serious look at the manifestos and policies of the different parties.

## THE NARROWING OF VOTER CONSENSUS

It has been argued that the PAP's greatest political accomplishment in its 60-year rule of Singapore is to condition Singaporeans to want a government like the PAP. If this were true, then it must surely translate into an automatic and overwhelming vote for the PAP. The result of GE2020 tells us that is not necessarily the case.

The PAP that the voting public wants is not necessarily the party as it is constituted in 2020, but an ‘idealised PAP’ which embodies certain values that the first-generation leaders of Singapore espoused: austerity, self-sacrifice and public service, patriotism, financial prudence and a no-nonsense attitude towards corruption and cronyism. All the political parties understood this in GE2020. It thus comes as no surprise to hear every party, including all the opposition parties, quoting the words or philosophies of Lee Kuan Yew, as founder sage of Singapore. PSP’s Tan Cheng Bock, as a former PAP MP for many years, was most outspoken in doing so. Shortly after news that Lee Hsien Yang had joined PSP as a member, Dr Tan told the media that the younger Lee’s presence in the party was a “clear indication” that PM Lee has not followed what his father had wanted for the country. He was quoted as saying, “I worked with Lee Kuan Yew, and I know his very principles, of accountability, independence and transparency,”<sup>11</sup> implying that his own agenda was to bring back the values of Lee Kuan Yew. The extent of PSP’s success in channelling Lee Kuan Yew is discussed in greater detail by Elvin Ong and Terence Lee in Chapter 10.

Beyond this idealised PAP vision, voters, especially the younger ones, were also demanding that elections and governance be imbued with millennial virtues like fairness and fair play, anti-bullying/victimisation of individuals, accountability and non-abuse of power. This was seen in the incidents involving the PAP’s Ivan Lim—who must go down in history as the first candidate to have been ‘cancelled’ by public opprobrium over his alleged personal behaviour—and the WP’s Raeesah Khan, who the public felt had been unfairly victimised by the PAP and authorities on account of her race and gender, an

11 Wong Pei Ting, Louisa Tang and Justin Ong, “I believe Tan Cheng Bock’s vision will build a better S’pore’: Lee Hsien Yang on why he joined PSP”, *Today*, 25 Jun 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/i-believe-tan-cheng-bocks-vision-will-build-better-spore-lee-hsien-yang-why-he-joined-psp> (accessed: 30 Dec 2020). See also: ‘Dr Tan Cheng Bock pays tribute to Mr Lee Kuan Yew as ‘true son of the soil’’, *Straits Times*, 28 Mar 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/dr-tan-cheng-bock-pays-tribute-to-mr-lee-kuan-yew-as-true-son-of-the-soil>.

issue Netina Tan discusses in Chapter 9. In the light of fairness and fair play, Priscilla Chia in Chapter 5 considers whether the Sengkang GRC would be subject to a by-election should Raeesah be charged, convicted and removed from office.

## GENERATIONAL TRANSITION

The PAP has always used general elections as the key means to renew its leadership and rank and file. GE2020 was no different. Twenty-seven PAP MPs retired from politics—including senior former ministers, Goh Chok Tong,<sup>12</sup> Yaacob Ibrahim,<sup>13</sup> Lim Swee Say, and Khaw Boon Wan<sup>14</sup>—to make way for new faces. It was also expected that GE2020 would throw up Singapore's next Prime Minister. But with Heng Swee Keat's less than stellar performance in East Coast GRC and his 'East Coast plan' flub on Nomination Day, it looks as if Lee Hsien Loong will need to serve yet another term as Prime Minister. As Terence Lee argues in Chapter 11, the PAP's generational renewal is unlikely to come from its third-generation leaders (3G) like Lee Hsien Loong or even the identified 4G leadership, but from a group in between—the 3.5G.

Party renewal also took place in the WP, with the retirement of long-time Secretary-General Low Thia Kiang, who spent 29 years in Parliament as Singapore's longest serving opposition politician. A good two years earlier, Low had stepped down as Party Chief and was replaced by the much younger Pritam Singh. Other WP stalwarts, Png Eng Huat and Chen Show Mao, also retired from politics. In this round of party renewal, the WP accomplished something the PAP had for years been trying to do. There was party renewal at the very

12 Royston Sim and Joyce Lim, 'Day of renewal, as Goh retires as MP', *Straits Times*, 26 Jun 2020, A1; Grace Ho, 'ESM Goh exits politics after 44 years', *Straits Times*, 26 Jun 2020, A4–A5.

13 Olivia Ho, 'Yaacob Ibrahim bids farewell to politics after 23 years as MP', *Straits Times*, 24 Jun 2020, A10.

14 Yuen Sin, 'Lee Bee Way, Chia Shi-Lu and Sam Tan among MPs making way for 27 new faces', *Straits Times*, 30 Jun 2020, A7.

top of the party leadership, and by a man who is (a) only in his early forties; and (b) a Sikh, a member of a very small ethnic minority. And while the PAP continues to ponder the question of whether Singapore is ready for a non-Chinese Prime Minister, Parliament now has its first non-Chinese Leader of the Opposition.

There was little generational transition in the SDP, although there has been some moving of musical chairs. Tan Jee Say, a former SDP member, folded his Singaporeans First (SingFirst) Party and rejoined the SDP. The PSP, the newest political party, did well in its first outing, but must now manage a smooth leadership transition from the 80-year-old Tan Cheng Bock to younger leaders within the party. Whether it will succeed and continue to be a major force in Singapore politics remains to be seen, but its rise, vis-à-vis that of other new parties (such as the Reform Party, Red Dot United, Peoples Voice and others) is documented and discussed in Elvin Ong and Terence Lee's chapter in this volume (Chapter 10).

## A DIGITAL ELECTION

The Internet has been a feature of elections in Singapore since the start of the millennium, with each GE in Singapore being labelled an Internet election in one form or another since GE1996 as it was the first election following the advent of public Internet access. But it was by no means universal. It was only from GE2001—a snap election held just three months after the September 11 terrorist attacks on America—that the Internet began to feature in the form of party websites. That year, the Government sought to take any sting out of online political campaigning as it moved to ban phone messaging and digital forms of electioneering. In 2006, this was extended to include the use of blogs that “persistently discussed politics”, mandating that all political parties could only put up static and staid content.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Terence Lee, *The Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 134.

This directive backfired spectacularly as it became apparent that blogs would be a highlight of the 2006 campaign—probably best remembered for the satirical ‘Bak Chor Mee Man’ podcast by Lee Kin Mun, better known as the blogfather of Singapore, *mrbrown*. GE2006 became the first election to demonstrate the power of the Internet in fact-checking and sidestepping the mainstream media to many Singaporeans. This was reaffirmed when Alex Au defiantly published a photo of thronging crowds at an opposition rally in Hougang, contradicting reports in the printed press. GE2006 also brought to the fore two alternative news sites, The Online Citizen (TOC) and Temasek Review, the latter subsequently being renamed Temasek Review Emeritus (TRE) following a legal dispute with Temasek Holdings over its name.

By 2011, the Internet was already an entrenched aspect of everyday life for most Singaporeans, with a sizeable number of active users of social media, especially Facebook. The arrival of social media and the ubiquity of smartphones were significant as these became the key means of sharing information and ideas. Recognising the inevitability of digital forms of media and communication, the Government lifted most online restrictions ahead of GE2011, enabling Singaporeans to access the various features of online media freely. While the mainstream media continued to attract the majority audience share during GE2011, the public were also drawn to electoral contests nationally and in their own constituencies via Youtube videos and social media content that were largely shareable via Facebook and other platforms. Perhaps one of the funniest, and most memorable, internet experiences was the audio-visual mash-up of the deadpan voice of Returning Officer Yam Ah Mee, who delivered the official declaration of each constituency’s polling results at GE2011.<sup>16</sup>

16 See, for example, Fallen SuperheroSG, ‘Yam Ah Mee Election Club Mix (GE 2011)’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzzYzqKNJRw> (uploaded 8 May 2011).



There was, however, an electoral innovation that came into being in 2011: a ‘Cooling-off Day’ that outlawed campaigning and election advertising on the eve of Polling Day. This amendment to the Parliamentary Elections Act made it illegal for ‘unlicensed’ news media—which encompasses most if not all Internet-only news sites and blogs—to post news and opinions about the election on the eve of Polling Day. As media scholar Cherian George wrote in his chapter for our GE2011 book: “The Internet emerged as one of the stars of GE2011, intensifying the competition between the parties and heightening the experience for the public”.<sup>17</sup> This heightened experience sparked renewed interest in traditional offline forms of campaign activity, most prominently captured in election rallies which were cemented in 2011 as sites of political performances where dissent could be expressed and (new) personalities introduced to the public.<sup>18</sup>

GE2015 was the year the PAP got its act together in terms of digital engagement, becoming one of the leading users of social media at the election. Taking PM Lee’s lead, many PAP MPs created their own Facebook pages and Twitter accounts in time for GE2015, and scored the highest number of ‘likes’ on their pages compared to opposition pages.<sup>19</sup> Election rallies remained well patronised overall, especially at opposition rallies, but there was a distinct absence of anger and bitterness in 2015 compared to 2011.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, having a strong digital presence did not matter much in 2015. Voters had already decided through the course of 2015 that the PAP would be returned to power with a strong mandate, persuaded by a confluence

17 Cherian George, ‘Internet Politics: Shouting Down the PAP’, in *Voting in Change: The Politics of Singapore’s 2011 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 145–159.

18 Terence Chong, ‘Election Rallies: Performances in Dissent, Identity, Personalities and Power’, in *Voting in Change: The Politics of Singapore’s 2011 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011), 115–130.

19 Weiyu Zhang and Natalie Pang, ‘The Internet and Social Media’, in *Change in Voting: Singapore’s 2015 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), 232–245.

20 Terence Chong, ‘At the Rallies in 2015’, in *Change in Voting: Singapore’s 2015 General Election*, ed. Terence Lee and Kevin YL Tan (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), 220–231.

of events—mainly the aforementioned SG50 celebrations and the ‘LKY effect’ brought about by national grief—that culminated in a resurgence of patriotism and national pride.

The many ‘Internet elections’ since 2001 have led to a palpable increase in broader interest in electoral politics in Singapore. Along with the uptrend in social media use and participation has been a swelling of crowds at election rallies, especially those of the opposition parties. But, as Terence Chong has reminded us, “size doesn’t matter” at the rallies as such numbers may not necessarily reflect support at the polls.<sup>21</sup> We contend that the same is true for social media engagement where the number of ‘likes’ and application of emojis do not often translate to actual votes.

With such precedence in place, we pose the question: Was GE2020, like GE2011, an Internet or digital election? Given that it was a pandemic election that relied heavily on digital modes of campaigning and did not feature any physical election rallies, surely the answer would be obvious. Alvin Tan addresses the question head-on by looking at Singapore’s digital context during the Covid-19 pandemic, paying attention to the ways the key political parties—namely the PAP, WP, SDP and PSP—took to online campaigning and their resulting hits and misses (Chapter 2). As Singapore’s reliance on digital media, communication and economic platforms increased substantially in response to Covid-19, as was the case in most places around the world, it was to be expected that political and electoral engagement would follow suit. Using this yardstick, GE2020 qualifies as a digital election as all political parties had to use a range of social media and digital platforms to connect with voters. Still, it was not yet fully digital, as these were largely substitutionary in that they replaced traditional forms of communication and were not truly novel applications of digital

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21 Ibid.

communications. The absence of electronic voting, for instance, stands out as an anomaly for a society that seeks to promote itself as a digitally connected ‘Smart Nation’.

GE2020 was a showcase of the effect of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) that took effect less than a year prior to the election. POFMA was intended to quell fake news and other forms of online falsehoods prior to and during the campaign period. In Chapter 6, Howard Lee undertakes an in-depth analysis of the use of POFMA in the months leading to GE2020, as well as during the campaign period. Although the use of POFMA was deemed intense during the GE—with 17 correction notices issued over a 10-day campaign period—none of the issues had a direct impact on the outcome of the election. Indeed, all the correction directions were issued to defend government policies, such as Singapore’s population projection of 10 million that was made early in the campaign by SDP’s Dr Chee Soon Juan, turning POFMA into a tool to minimise dissent rather than to protect Singaporeans from the harms of fake news.

In Chapter 8, Terence Chong recounts some of the missed opportunities that ensued during the digital campaign of GE2020 and observes how the humble television (which is really a form of traditional media) managed to provide democratising impacts somewhat unexpectedly. Chong’s fieldwork at the election rallies in 2011 and 2015 was disrupted in 2020 as the nation took to campaigning via pre-recorded televised speeches known as Constituency Political Broadcasts (CPBs). These broadcasts were intended as substitutes for election rallies and while they did not have the same feel as physical rallies, they proved beneficial to opposition candidates who were able to bypass intermediaries who could distort their messages.

## CONCLUSION: IN A TIME OF CHANGE

As we noted in our analyses of GE2011 and GE2015, the PAP won the battle for ideology a long time ago. With pragmatism as the overriding national ideology, the battle for votes is not a battle between two extremes, but rather between gradations in the centre. To be electable, political parties must squeeze themselves within that very narrow band of political acceptability in voters' minds. Parties espousing extreme views, racist or even jingoistic agendas stand no chance of being elected. Thus, if a pendulum were used to signal shifts in voter behaviour, that pendulum would swing very gently between a very narrow band, not far from its equilibrium point.

This is borne out once again by the election results. In GE2020, the WP fared best among the opposition parties, winning 10 seats. In terms of ideology, it is probably the closest to the PAP, even though there are fundamental differences in economic, labour and fiscal policies. The same could be said of the PSP, the party who secured the most gains in this election. And while there are differences, their respective platforms do in fact overlap, as Loke Hoe Yeong suggests in Chapter 12. Political contests in Singapore remain highly influenced by personalities, but as party platforms become increasingly important—especially if the long-term plan is to form an alternative government in Singapore—then the ideological differences between the leading parties are quite small. For the opposition, they no longer need to prove that they are much more capable or competent than their PAP counterparts, they need only push themselves to the point where the choice for the voter becomes 'either is fine' or 'anyone will do'.

This edited volume, following our books on GE2011 and GE2015, completes our GE trilogy. Just like our previous two, this book seeks to provide a broad perspective on what took place in GE2020, Singapore's first pandemic election. It is worth noting that all

the authors who have contributed to the volume are scholars and specialists in their respective fields, and are passionate observers of Singapore. The inclusion of the 2020 General Elections Snapshot, compiled by Krystal Tan, speaks to the fact that this book is also intended as a resource for observers and researchers of Singapore politics now and into the future.

This volume is by no means exhaustive, nor is it intended to be. We did not try, for instance, to delve into sectoral political issues such as education, transport or health, just to name a few prominent areas. Instead, we sought to address deeper issues, such as those pertaining to fairness, equality, accountability and democracy. The election results suggest that these values are no less pragmatic than bread-and-butter issues, and are therefore worth considering and pitching for.

All readers, especially those who have perused our previous volumes, will be able to observe that the major political shift in Singapore that started in 2011 is marching on, even amidst a Covid-19 pandemic that was to have been a great disrupter. Whether we call this a 'New Normal'—as many did back in 2011—or otherwise is not as important as the momentum for change that has built up since then. Covid-19 thus became a political backdrop to a social and political shift that was merely searching for a catalyst. As Lam Peng Er poses in Chapter 13, could the 'New Normal' for Singapore be a one-and-a-half party political system? Such contemplations are no longer out of the realms of possibility when it comes to electoral politics in Singapore.

