

Hwa Chong Institution - Project Work 2021
Group 2A-27

The Growing Demand for Alternative Voices in Politics and the PAP's decline

Lin Zongkai (4O114)

Xu Hanming (4O130)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
 - 1.1. Historical Background
 - 1.2. Research Questions
 - 1.3. Thesis Statement
 - 1.4. Definitions
2. Literature Review
 - 2.1. Theories on dominant states
 - 2.2. Existing research on “alternative voices”
 - 2.3. The factors affecting Singapore voting trends
3. Methodology
 - 3.1. Research-based
 - 3.2. Qualitative interviews
4. Findings
 - 4.1. Does the theory of “alternative voices” stand? Do people care?
 - 4.2. Evaluation of the factors behind PAP’s falling vote share
 - 4.3. Answering Thesis
5. Conclusion
6. Bibliography

1: Introduction

1.1 Historical Background

On 10 July 2020, the 13th general election since Singapore's independence in 1965 was held, and as had occurred each of the previous twelve, the People's Action Party was returned to power with a vast majority of seats. However, despite its seat total of 83 out of 93 being an outstanding result for any party in a democratic system, it was not viewed with enthusiasm by the PAP government. Conversely, by losing two Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) to the Opposition Workers' Party, which was one more than in 2011 and 2015, the result of Singapore's latest election was seen as a triumph for the Opposition parties of Singapore.

There are a myriad of factors that contribute to the fall in the PAP's vote share, but Singapore's dominant party system - unique in the sense it is the last one still standing in Southeast Asia - defies conventional logic and established trends in an elective democracy. The usual reasons an incumbent party may suffer from diminishing popularity, such as fatigue with ideology and corruption and mismanagement at the highest levels, do not seem to adequately explain the PAP's situation, as will be explained later.

In Singapore politics, there has been a growing and more prominent demand for more "alternative voices" in the nation's politics. This seemed to be addressed by the most eminent politicians in the land; after the general election, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that "Singaporeans want the PAP to form the government....also want to see more opposition presence in Parliament" (Sim, 2020). The Workers' Party's stalwart of that election James Lim, who was elected in Sengkang GRC, "the PAP is not afraid of an open contest of ideas. We do so in real life during campaigns, we do so online and we do it in Parliament" (Rei, 2020).

One key result of this mindset of wanting more alternative voices in politics is the apparent trend that some voters vote for the Opposition parties of Singapore not to oust the incumbent government, but simply to want more MPs checking on the executive such that it does its job better. In a sense, this is akin to voting against a government to keep it in power (George & Low, 2020). This would be a unique occurrence, as in usual senses casting a vote for the Opposition invariably means a desire to remove the incumbents from office. If this is not the case, we will need to examine what are the mindsets that have contributed to such a peculiar voting trend in Singapore.

This will be a key aspect of Singaporean politics in the near future, as the links between desiring alternative voices and a dominant-party state would be slowly diminished as long as this mindset produces an increasingly competitive political scene in this country. As Singapore's political system evolves, it is important to examine how large a role the desire of alternative voices has propagated its evolution, for us to better understand and even predict how the nation will move in the future.

But to fully do so, one must also have a clear understanding of the various other factors that come into play during a general election campaign, and affect the PAP's grip on power. Pragmatic concerns, such as on employment, education among others, continue to shape how people vote and view politicians. So how does the desire for alternative voices in politics fit in? There is obviously the claim that this desire has led to more interest in public discourse on these pragmatic issues, which should be considered, but one must also consider if the demand for alternative views in Parliament is a product on its own. Could it be that the Singaporean political landscape was so monotonous and dominant that voters, with fresh ideas, simply wanted alternative voices inside politics? This is a question that needs to be answered.

Table 1: Past General Election Results in Singapore

Year	Total Seats	PAP Result	Opposition Result	Prime Minister
1959	51	54.0% 43 seats	46.0% 8 seats	Lee Kuan Yew
1963	51	46.9% (-7.1pp) 37 seats	53.1% (+7.1pp) 14 seats	
1968	58	86.7% (+39.8pp) 58 seats	13.3% (-39.8pp) 0 seats	
1972	65	70.4% (-16.3pp) 65 seats	29.6% (+16.3pp) 0 seats	
1976	69	74.1% (+3.7pp) 69 seats	25.9% (-3.7pp) 0 seats	
1980	75	77.7% (+3.6pp) 75 seats	22.3% (-3.6pp) 0 seats	
1984	79	64.8% (-12.8pp) 77 seats	35.2% (+12.8pp) 2 seats	
1988	81	63.2% (-1.6pp) 80 seats	36.8% (+1.6pp) 1 seat	
1991	81	61.0% (-2.2pp) 77 seats	39.0% (+2.2pp) 4 seats	
1997	83	65.0% (+4.0pp) 81 seats	35.0% (-4.0pp) 2 seats	
2001	84	75.3% (+10.3pp) 82 seats	24.7% (-10.3pp) 2 seats	Goh Chok Tong
2006	84	66.6% (-8.7pp) 82 seats	33.4% (+8.7pp) 2 seats	
2011	87	60.1% (-6.5pp) 81 seats	39.9% (+6.5pp) 6 seats	
2015	89	69.9% (+9.8pp) 83 seats	30.1% (-9.8pp) 6 seats	
2020	93	61.1% (-8.8pp) 83 seats	38.9% (+8.8pp) 10 seats	Lee Hsien Loong

Note: The 1968 general election was largely boycotted by Opposition parties. Counting only elected seats.

1.2 Research questions:

1. What is the chief reason for the PAP's declining popularity?
2. How has the concept of alternative voices affected voting and public discourse in Singapore?
3. Can trends of other democracies be used to explain Singapore's recent voting trends?

The first question seeks to get to the bottom of the causes for the PAP's decline in vote share in recent years. Whether it is simply due to the pragmatic concerns of Singaporean voters, or really because of the growing need for more diverse views in parliament among younger generations. The second then attempts to dissect the concept of alternative voices itself, to see how it has shaped Singapore politics. Last but not least, the last question seeks to find out more about the nature of Singapore's situation, to try to find examples in other countries and identify if Singapore is truly an anomaly in the world of politics.

The research paper will overall aim to reach one of two conclusions, firstly, that the desire for alternative voices and more diverse views in the Singaporean parliament is indeed the most important factor in the PAP's declining vote share; or secondly, that more opposing party members are being voted into Parliament primarily for other reasons, such as due to opinions on certain policies or other pragmatic reasons.

1.3 Thesis statement

Desiring alternative voices in politics is the primary cause for the PAP's declining vote share in recent years.

1.4 Definitions

'Alternative voices' --- Refers to checks and balances on ideas in Parliament, and critiques on government policies whenever necessary. It can also be used to refer to ideas and solutions made by members of parliament outside the majority party, the PAP.

'Dominant party' --- Refers to the party that currently holds the most votes given by the population in democratic elections, particularly for an extended period of time In Singapore's case, this is the People's Action Party.

'Opposition' --- Refers to political parties that are different from the dominant party and may therefore suggest policies and ideas that oppose those of the dominant party's.

2: Literature Review

2.1 Theories on the Dominant Party

Table 2: Democracies with Dominant Parties

Nation	Dominant Party	Political Positions (if applicable)	Tenure	No. of Elections Won*
Sweden	Social Democratic Party	Social democracy	1932-1976; 1982-1991; 1994-2002; 2014-present	20
Malaysia	Barisan Nasional	National conservatism, populism	1959-2018	14
Italy	Christian Democracy	Christian democracy, social conservatism	1944-1994	11
Japan	Liberal Democratic Party	Conservatism, Japanese nationalism	1954-1993; 1994-2009; 2012-present	19
India	Indian National Congress	Catch-all, secularism	1947-1977; 1980-1989; 2004-2014	9
Mexico	National Revolutionary Party	Revolutionary nationalism; catch-all party (at peak)	1928-2000; 2012-2018	14
Singapore	People's Action Party	Conservatism, secularism	1959-present	15

*Counting elections that decide the Head of State or Head of Government, whichever is recognised as the highest political office.

The idea of a dominant party despite a democratic structure in place is far from being exclusive to Singapore. Nations such as Italy, Japan, Sweden and Malaysia have all had, at some point in their history, been governed by a dominant party that was consistently returned in elections. But in Southeast Asia, following the end of the Barisan National dominant party rule in Malaysia in its 2018 general election, Singapore now stands as the last dominant party state in the region (Singh, 2019).

Experts have been baffled by the existence of dominant parties such as the People's Action Party; T. J. Pempel, for instance, believes that “they should not exist”. He points to the fact that in established democracies, incumbent governments perceived to be incompetent are thrown out from power on a regular basis.

The vast majority of democratic dominant parties have progressively been defeated at elections in the late 20th to early 21st centuries. In fact, the PAP’s tenure in power has surpassed most of such parties - for reference, the Swedish Social Democratic Party was only able to retain power from 1932 to 1976, a

period of 44 years, while Malaysia's Barisan Nasional retained power for close to sixty years after the nation's independence before also being swept from office in the 2018 Malaysian general election - the PAP has lasted 62 years and counting since its first election in 1959 and has done so through democratic elections.

There have been many explanations given to why parties like the PAP in general can stay in power for so long. It has been said that "no political party can remain in power unless it proves itself and gains performance legitimacy" (Dix, 1982). Simply put, if the dominant party ceased to be functional, the electorate is likely to vote them out the same way other democracies would for an incumbent government. This seems to explain at least some of the cases mentioned above, such as in Malaysia, where popular anger over the 1MDB corruption case seemed to have been a major contributing factor in the BN's electoral defeat (Pakiam, 2019).

When it comes to a transition of power or an incumbent losing power, conflict in ideology is a quintessential element. This is almost universally the case in competitive democracies worldwide, where there are often a left-wing and right-wing party. But in Singapore this is rarely applicable, as the PAP government aims to be a catch-all political party, and its long tenure means "it has become more difficult to distinguish the PAP as a political party and the PAP as the government" (Singh, 2012). This means that the PAP's electoral fortunes are invariably tied to its performance as government, and clashes of ideology often have a muted impact.

By such logic, the dominance of the PAP, regarded as one of the most effective governments in the world, should have come as no surprise. But the PAP's decline in vote share recently seems to fit within the narrative that after a prolonged stay in power, something inevitably goes wrong and costs the dominant party its support (Pempel, 1990).

This therefore begs the question if the PAP had not fallen into the classic issues that tend to cost dominant parties their power, what had been the real reasons behind its declining vote share?

2.2 Existing Research on "Alternative Voices"

In *Unmasking Singapore's 2020 General Elections*, the authors dedicated a particular section to address the "desire for diversity in Parliament". They argued that "PAP faults" were major contributing factors to the greater desire for alternative voices in our politics. The simple point here is that the electorate simply did not feel the PAP still possessed the policy and ideological acumen to represent their views anymore (Singh, et al, 2020). In addition, in *PAP v PAP*, it was argued that the party had been trying to adapt themselves to modern Singaporean voters, but had done so merely through materialistic means such as offering more benefits to Singaporeans. At the same time, the inertia that had led the PAP to become increasingly out of touch with the ordinary Singaporean voter persisted, and the party remained stagnant when it comes to "real change" (George & Low, 2020).

While the above can be considered the driving force behind the demand for greater alternative voices in Parliament, one of the essential ingredients in its proliferation is the credibility of the alternatives themselves. Opposition candidates in recent years have had more and more prolific origins, with the standout opposition candidate in the 2020 general election being the Workers' Party's Dr Jamus Lim, an Associate Professor of Economics at the ESSEC Business School (Li & Sin, 2020). Other such candidates included the WP's Chen Show Mao, who had qualifications from Stanford, Harvard and Oxford (Wong, 2011), and served nine years as an MP in Aljunied GRC, and Dr Paul Tambyah, a globally-recognised disease expert who ran for the Singapore Democratic Party in the 2020 election (Yeo,

2020). These candidates possessed credentials typically associated with a PAP candidate, having attended prestigious schools and being high-fliers in academic or business fields (Singh et al, 2020).

Another factor propagating the rising demand of alternative voices in Parliament is the PAP's perceived assault on such a trend. The PAP's "actions" against the WP candidate Raeesah Khan in the 2020 general election, alleging she had made racist remarks, resulted in the WP winning the Sengkang GRC she contested in a major upset. And previously in 2011, with the battle for Aljunied GRC raging, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew made the remark that voters in the constituency had five years to "repent" if they voted in the WP; the WP's team won with 54% of the vote. The overarching point of this trend is that a generation of Singaporean voters have come to view the PAP as synonymous with the Singaporean government, and were repulsed by the idea that an all-powerful regime would supposedly resort to such measures against opposition parties (Balji, 2020; Berna, 2013). When these factors are put side by side, voters inevitably consider the possibility of the PAP's tactics wiping out the alternative viewpoints in Singaporean politics, and at least some voters opted to do their part in preventing this possibility at the ballot box (H. Lee, 2020 as cited in Tan & Lee, 2020).

When JB Jeyeretnam became the first Opposition MP in thirteen years in 1981, it generated substantial public discourse on how more alternative voices can be heard in Singaporean politics, with proposals ranging from a new upper house utilising the proportional representation system, to the Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMP) scheme which was ultimately chosen (Lee, 1984). This public discourse has sustained until today, with frequent popular discussions on if having more alternatives in Singapore's political viewpoints is the right way. We will, however, need to better understand the relation between this rise of demand for alternative voices in Singapore's politics and the more concrete, observable voting trends at general elections.

2.3 Other Reasons for the PAP's falling vote share

But as opposed to the desire for more alternative voices in Singapore politics, what are other reasons for the decline in the PAP's vote share? One could argue that as with most democracies, the voters in Singapore have actually been voting based on pragmatic, bread-and-butter issues. The Institute of Policy Studies has conducted a post-election survey since 2006, and in the four general elections held in that period, all except 2015 witnessed a decline in the PAP's vote share. In the survey conducted after the 2020 general election, voters ranked the COVID-19 pandemic as their greatest concern (IPS, 2020). Indeed, even Professor Bilveer Singh reckoned in The Straits Times that holding an election in such a context will hand an advantage to the PAP. But ultimately, when the polls yielded a weak showing for the PAP, it was attributed to the public feeling that the PAP was not handling the pandemic well. Back in 2011, voters also considered immigration and cost of living their greatest concerns, but this did not cause an upswell of support for the credible PAP to solve the issue, but instead led to a rebuke for the ruling party at the polls (Torrijos, 2011; Eng & Mou, 2011). It would therefore appear that in the 2011 and 2020 elections, the swing towards the Opposition had arisen from purely pragmatic voter concerns, and a general disappointment with the PAP's governance, rather than an ideological wish for more Opposition MPs.

But there have also been years where the PAP have scored excellent election results - most notably, 1997, 2001 and 2015 - they have generally succeeded in highlighting their track record in government, and relate it to issues that affect voters on the ground. In the 1997 election, for instance, the PAP had been predicted to lose as many as ten seats (which ironically did occur 23 years later), but surprisingly overcame this forecast to snatch two seats away from the Opposition. In the 1997 election, the Opposition

was riding on a wave of momentum, having scored a major triumph in the 1991 election by winning four SMCs, and having come close to capturing Eunos GRC in both 1988 and 1991. They emphasised their campaign on the ideas of diversifying the Singaporean political landscape, and electing more opposition MPs to check on the PAP government. The PAP's response was to promise voters more infrastructural upgrades, such as refurbishing ageing Housing & Development Board (HDB) residential estates (Chin, 1997). The 1997 general election can serve as one key counter-argument that while Singaporean voters are keen on greater diversity and more alternative voices in Parliament, the pragmatic, materialistic promises continue to strike a chord. It is on these issues that the PAP's sixty-odd years of experience in nation-building present an advantage for it. The trend was observed again four years later in 2001, when in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the PAP received 75.1% of the vote, their highest since 1980 and a figure that has yet to be surpassed thereafter.

In conclusion, all these aforementioned sources are in a combined view that regardless of whether the swing is towards the PAP or against them, Singaporeans vote primarily on very pragmatic issues, and these issues often become critical in the election cycles. But in recent years, it just happens that there have been more issues that affect voters on a day-to-day basis that have worked against the ruling party. Should we therefore view this as the definitive cause for the PAP's falling vote share? One would need to, however, consider the possibility that propagating this falling vote share is a growing desire for greater diversity in our politics, with our citizens more keen to challenge the ruling party on issues that have typically favoured it. That would be the subject for our investigation.

3: Methodology

3.1 Research-based & Quantitative Information

To gain an understanding of Singaporean voters, we relied extensively on the IPS Post-Election Surveys, conducted every year since 2006 where there was a general election. The surveys provided key quantitative data, with a sample size of 2000. We also consulted works from Dr Bilveer Singh as a key source of information regarding Singapore elections in history, as well as further information on the voting trends in more recent years.

Professor T. J. Pempel's 1990 work *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes* was an important source for comparisons to other nations with political systems that had similarities to that of Singapore. We relied on Pempel's work to establish if the trends we discovered in Singapore could be applied elsewhere, and to further understand if our findings accommodate the trends in other countries, thereby establishing how unique or common is Singapore's political situation.

3.2 Qualitative Interviews

A set of interview questions were created, with the purpose of finding out the views of the average Singaporean citizen on the topic of alternative voices in parliament, as well as politics in Singapore, as a whole. At the start of the interview, the participant is asked if they are comfortable sharing which parties they voted for in the past general elections. The interview then proceeds in three parts, first asking about questions on the need for alternative voices, then questions on the PAP government, and lastly questions on the citizenry.

Questions on the need for alternative voices

1. Do you think there should be more or less opposition MPs in parliament? Why do you think so?
2. Do you think that there is enough discourse / discussion on policy in Singapore?
3. Would you say that your views are well-represented by the PAP government?
4. What is your opinion on the nominated MPs? Do you think they serve as another voice in Parliament?
5. Do you think that a change in government would be good for Singapore?

Questions on the PAP government

1. Do you think that the PAP government can claim to be representative of the voice of the people?
2. How do you think there should be a check and balance against the PAP?
3. What would you consider to be a strong mandate for the PAP in election terms?

Questions on Singaporeans' political awareness

1. Do you think Singaporeans are sufficiently active in politics?
2. What are your main concerns when casting your vote?
3. If you think voting PAP is a pragmatic choice, but your vote would cause an Opposition MP to lose a seat, would you still do it?

We will be specifically referring to three individuals we had interviewed during our interviews:

Table 3: Interviewees for Qualitative Interviews

Name*	Age	Elections voted in	2020 Vote
Mr Lim	55	2001, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2020	PAP
Ms Han	23	2020	WP
Mr Soh	45	1997, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2020	SDP

**As several respondents requested anonymity, the names stated are for easy reference in the paper.*

4: Findings

4.1 Theory on Alternative Voices

As we have shown earlier, the concept of voting for opposition parties to essentially ask for more alternative voices in Parliament, and as a warning shot to the government, is an exceptional occurrence. Not only is such a case rarely seen outside of Singapore, it was not the main impetus for voters casting their vote for the Opposition prior to the early 21st century. Even more exceptional was the idea that while voting for the Opposition in Singapore, many do not actually want the PAP to lose power, but instead simply wanted a change in direction.

Understanding why alternative voices have become such a potent force in Singapore politics recently requires an understanding of the changing nation that is Singapore. In its early years, many of the country's citizens lived below the poverty line, and bread-and-butter issues were of utmost importance. There was frankly little energy among Singaporeans at the time to consider the idea of electing Opposition MPs for the sake of "alternative voices". Mr Soh, who has voted since the 1997 election, said that in earlier years he voted mainly on "who can give me the best deal". He specifically referred to issues such as employment, education for his children, and cost of living.

Critically, as Singapore has grown to be more prosperous, its voting citizens became more educated and politically aware. And as Singapore's status as a sovereign nation stabilised, the awareness of the nation's vulnerabilities began to be diluted (George & Low, 2020). The younger voters of Singapore became more vocal in their demands - which were not necessarily those for political change, but even modern-day "bread-and-butter" issues such as healthcare and employment. We can compare Mr Lin, a PAP voter most of the time, who said that he voted PAP because they "give me a good country" and "[provides] Singaporeans [with] good infrastructure." However, Ms Han, who voted the WP in 2020, believed that the PAP was "too arrogant" on issues such as infrastructure and social issues. Ms Han disagreed with the idea that the PAP was best-placed to solve the pragmatic problems, even if they have "the most experience".

In the presence of such a fiery electorate, the idea of voting for "more alternative voices" was born, but why was this the result? Why would the voters of Singapore not embrace an alternative flag, that of the Opposition, and simply campaign for the PAP to be voted out?

Firstly, in the 1990s and 2000s, Singapore was very much still a fast-growing country. The nation's young workforce had a future full of opportunities, and foreign investments were still flowing into the island. There was no pragmatic impetus for Singaporeans to desire a change in government, especially considering that when one is forced to evaluate the PAP and the Opposition as contrasting options for the government, the more experienced and tested PAP inevitably stands out. But while Singaporeans may accept this, and may not necessarily want a change in government, they are not content with simply providing the PAP with an overwhelming majority at every election. By voting Opposition, these voters of Singapore are making a bold and clear statement to the PAP that, while they were still letting the PAP stay in power, this permission can be withdrawn if things went horribly awry.

Next, the growing demand for alternative voices can also be seen as a desire to have checks and balances on the PAP government, something voters ranked as their third-most important consideration in the 2020 IPS Post-Election Survey. In a classical Westminster system, the government serves as the executive branch, and the Opposition has the task of posing inquiries to ensure the government did not run away with its own agenda. This is where Ms Han states her dissatisfaction with Singapore's political system - she believes that "you must have enough Opposition in Parliament" to act as a check on the

government. We see correlation between this trend and the famous Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as in older Singapore, many citizens were more concerned about pragmatic issues ranging from healthcare to infrastructure (as will be explained below), whereas today, less Singaporeans are content with a dominant party featuring in their system, and per the Hierarchy, will be more interested than ever to demand a more ideal system, now that their essential desires have been fulfilled. We also see the Opposition attempting the play this to their advantage, as in the 2020 general election leading opposition figures such as Pritam Singh warned of a potential "opposition wipeout".

And thus is born the final reason why "alternative voices" has become such a potent force in Singapore politics. Ironically, the PAP's dominance at the polls may have created such a factor to be at play during elections. When the PAP holds more than eighty of the 93 total seats in Parliament, it is difficult to envisage any scenario where it loses power and the keys to government are handed over to the Opposition. Voters that simply wanted to express their feelings that the government were going slightly off track, rather than vote for a genuine change in government, would have been more comfortable doing so with the knowledge that enough people will vote PAP anyway to return them to government. In fact, in the 1991 general elections, the Opposition sought to exploit this feeling by fielding so few candidates the PAP attained a majority at Nomination Day; the election then produced the Opposition's best showing since 1963.

Furthermore, as the PAP has been consistently winning most if not all parliamentary seats, the definition of a "clear mandate" has also changed in Singapore. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, where PAP winning all seats in Parliament would have been the norm, the 2020 election would have been seen as a total disaster for the ruling party by ceding ten seats to the Opposition. When the PAP won the 2015 general election with 69.9% of the vote, it was hailed as a great victory for them, when in fact such a margin would still have been seen as rather catastrophic when compared to PAP results in the 1980s and even the 1990s. Voters nowadays are likely to view the mammoth PAP majorities in the early years of nationhood as unimaginable (perhaps unacceptable), and this has borne fruit for voters who believe that by voting for the PAP to lose one or two GRCs will not cost them their mandate. Ms Han points out that even if that were to happen, it "will not stop" the PAP from passing its bills, while Mr Soh admitted that the PAP going out of power would be "bad", even when he voted SDP in 2020. So, voting Opposition is a perfect solution for the voters who want the PAP to stay in power, but also wanted to teach it a lesson.

4.2 Factors Affecting the PAP's Vote Share

In the aftermath of the 2011 Singapore general election, where the PAP won its lowest-ever share of the popular vote since independence at 60.1%, pundits and commentators staked their claim that the voters no longer felt a connection to the ruling PAP, and that the PAP had neglected views on the ground in the 2000s. Mr Lin, a supporter of the PAP at large, revealed he voted Opposition for the only time in his life in 2011, and justified it by saying that that year, "the PAP [was] not listening." Singapore became likened to a "playground" for the middle- to upper-class (Tan Kelvin, 2020), and basic social issues such as the MRT system's efficiency and hospital queue lines had been ignored by the government (Tan KP, 2012).

Such voter concerns have always been significant in Singaporean elections. When one looks back to the 1990s, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's promise to focus on infrastructural development for more run-down districts was considered a key factor in the PAP's unexpectedly strong performance in the 1997 general election (Chin, 1997). Simultaneously, in the 2020 general election, COVID-19 and its impact was recognised as the most significant factor in voters' minds (IPS, 2020), and that election did not yield

a result that was too positive for the PAP. It is thus important to recognise that pragmatic voter concerns could work both ways, in favour or against the PAP government. We reason that pragmatic concerns of the common voter is a permanent factor in Singaporean elections, but should not be generalised as an issue which is particularly advantageous to any party.

So how should we interpret voters' more pragmatic considerations? It must be viewed alongside the context of the time of the election. In the case of the 2020 general election, there was considerable concern among the public over the pandemic. Prior to the election, some scholars reasoned that with the PAP's supposedly positive reputation on management of the nation could result in an overwhelming victory for them. But as the results trickled in it became evident that while voters were concerned with the pandemic, they were not so enthusiastic about handing the PAP a massive win. The pandemic had been a far from ideal situation for the PAP; even though electoral trends tend to favour the incumbent in a time of national crisis, various gaffes such as a leaked audiotape of trade & industry minister Chan Chun Sing referring to his citizens as "idiots" (Tee, 2020) as well as disappointment and even anger toward the manpower minister Josephine Teo (George & Low, 2020) have apparently turned the pandemic into a negative for the ruling party. Mr Soh, who has voted since 1997, went as far to say he thought this was "the worst batch of PAP ministers" he had seen, and even claimed his friends shared the view.

This stands in stark contrast to Singapore's early years, as campaign manifestos and founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's campaigning focused on the vulnerabilities of the new nation. In such a situation, the PAP is handed a natural advantage as Lee Kuan Yew had led the nation since 1959, and prior to 1981 there was no real opposition leader, given the leaders of the earlier Barisan Socialis had been implicated in Operation Coldstore and largely left politics. In the absence of elected opposition MPs, opposition parties could scarcely generate for itself the credibility needed to challenge the PAP.

But as many have pointed out, Opposition candidates in recent years have become more credible than before, with many possessing the quintessential attributes of a PAP candidate (Welsh, 2020). And with more opposition candidates being able to boast credentials they can be proud of in recent years, it permits voters to take opposition candidates more seriously. This provides Singaporeans who do want to see more alternative voices in politics the affirmation that there exists such viable alternatives they need. Ms Han, who resides in Sengkang GRC, said she "made up her mind" to vote Opposition after seeing Dr Jamus Lim's performance in a televised debate, where she felt Lim was "credible" and "trustworthy".

4.3 Answering the Thesis

When looking at all these factors, one would realise that the propagation of the desire for more alternative voices in Singapore's politics has benefitted from two factors: (1) the dominance of the PAP, which in itself generates the desire for discourse, and (2) the growing credibility of the Opposition, giving those who would like there to be more alternatives in Parliament the reassurance they need.

As such, it is undeniable that Singapore politics in recent years has fostered an environment that uplifts the desire for alternative voices, but can this be treated as a major driving force behind the voting trends? We believe so, because we reason that as opposed to the early days in Singapore's history, there are more issues today that will cause discussion and discourse among the population. This change is brought about because Singaporeans have become more aware of the possibility of alternative voices in politics, giving them the momentum to question and debate more issues than before. In the absence of a strong desire for alternative voices, there will not be such a strong movement within the citizenry that asserts its right to discourse on so many levels.

What this means is that, thanks to the growing demand for alternative voices in our politics, Singaporeans are now more willing to make their voices heard on pragmatic issues that continue to be the forefront of their voting concerns. This can be an explanation for the decline in the PAP's vote share at recent elections, for the PAP has now been associated with government policy, and the Opposition is content with presenting itself as the face of alternative viewpoints and the challenger to the PAP's more dubious policies. In short, while Singaporeans are still voting based on policy, it is this desire for more alternative viewpoints in politics that has driven them to vote the Opposition at the elections, to show their disapproval or doubt on the official line. In the absence of such a desire, this trend is likely to be much less pronounced.

As such, we conclude that the growing desire for alternative voices in politics has been the driving force behind the growing public discourse in Singapore on policy issues in recent years, directly leading to the successes the Opposition parties have had in the past few election cycles. We believe that Singaporean voters have had their desires on this issue building up over the years, and the policy issues are simply trigger points for them to vote Opposition, expressing their belief that the present amount of diversity in our nation's politics is simply insufficient to make policy decisions that are good enough.

5: Conclusion

Ever since the PAP began losing its votes in the 1980s, one question has etched itself into voters' minds: whether the PAP is an infallible government. Empirical evidence from countries such as Malaysia, Italy, Indonesia and elsewhere points to a grim conclusion for the PAP - that its dominance is vulnerable, and maybe inevitably destined to fail. But our findings have shown that the voting trends in Singapore, particularly those pertaining to the decline in the PAP's vote share, stem from the growing demand for alternative voices in Singapore politics. As we have also shown, this trend - which in a sense involves voting against the ruling party in a bid for them to perform better, rather than to oust them - is almost exclusive to Singapore. Very rarely do voters cast a vote against the government without the intention of removing them from office, but it seems to be the case, and the bedrock, of the voting trend in Singapore.

We cannot make a conclusion at this point as to how long the PAP will stay in power - there are far too many factors in such a scenario that warrant an investigation in itself. We can conclude that the Opposition in Singapore is likely to become more popular, with the growing demand for alternative views in Parliament. At this juncture, voters in Singapore seem to associate such views with the Opposition, who is reciprocating by providing more credible candidates. Meanwhile, the PAP will need to convince voters of their capacity to be in charge, to show that while voters may want a more diverse Parliament, it does not necessitate a change in government.

But if and when a day does come that the PAP is to leave its dwelling in government, people would recognise the elections of today as pivotal moments that led to the growth of an anti-PAP force within Singapore politics. In any case, the growing demand for alternative voices in politics today may happen to be the first chapters of a very long story that culminates in the PAP's fall from power. This is all a story for another day, but what we can be sure of is that the demands of Singaporean voters today for a more diverse political stage has already propagated new voter concerns among the more active citizenry, and perhaps one day, these concerns will result in more than just a "warning shot".

6 Bibliography

- Balji, P. N. (2020) The maturing of the Singaporean voter in GE2020. *The AsiaOne*
- Berna, I. B. (2013) The Increasing Competitiveness of Singapore's Political System. *Geopolitics, History and International Relations, Vol 5, No 1.*
- Chan, D. ed. (2018) Public Trust in Singapore.
- Chin, J. (1997) Anti-Christian Chinese chauvinists and HDB upgrades: the 1997 Singapore general election. *South East Asia Research Vol. 5 No. 3*
- Dix, R. H. (1982) The Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes. *The Western Political Quarterly, Vol 35, No 4.*
- George C. & Low D. (2020) PAP v. PAP.
- Han, F. K. (2020) Singapore GE2020: Vote signals a desire for change, but not in a hurry. *The Straits Times*
- Koh, G. (2020) IPS Post-Election Survey 2020. *Institute of Policy Studies.*
- Lee, B. H. (1985) Singapore in 1984: A Time for Reflection and a Time for Change. *Southeast Asian Affairs.*
- Li, N. (2020) A 'New Mandate' for Singapore's Government? *The Diplomat*
- Li, T. W. & Yuen, S. (2020) Singapore GE: PAP, WP line-ups for new Sengkang GRC appear to be taking shape. *The Straits Times.*
- Oliver, S. & Ostwald, K. (2018) Explaining Elections in Singapore: Dominant Party Resilience and Valence Politics. *Cambridge University Press.*
- Ong, E. & Mou, H.T. (2014) Singapore's 2011 General Election and Beyond: Beating the PAP at Its Own Game
- Pakiam, G. K. (2019) Malaysia in 2018: The Year of Voting Dangerously. *ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.*
- Pempel, T. J. ed. (1990) Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes.
- Rei, K. (2020) Singapore GE2020: WP wants to deny PAP a blank cheque, says James Lim. *The Straits Times.*
- Sim, R. (2020) GE2020: Election results a clear mandate for PAP but also reflects desire for more diversity of voices in Parliament, says PM. *The Straits Times.*
- Singh, B. (2011) Politics and Governance in Singapore.

- Singh, B. (2019) Is the People's Action Party Here to Stay?
- Singh, B. et. al. (2020) Unmasking Singapore's 2020 General Elections.
- Tan, K. P. (2012) Singapore in 2011: A "New Normal" in Politics? *Asian Survey*, Vol 52, No 1.
- Tan, K. YL. & Lee T. eds. (2015) Change in Voting.
- Tan, K. YL. & Lee T. eds. (2020) Voting in a Time of Change.
- Tee, Z. (2020) Leak of closed-door Chan Chun Sing meeting 'deeply disappointing' and a 'betrayal', says Singapore Chinese Chamber president. *The Straits Times*.
- Teo, J. H. (2020) Paul Tambyah to become first S'porean to head International Society of Infectious Diseases. *Today*.
- Torrijos, E. (2011) Rising cost of living the hottest issue for voters. *Yahoo News*.
- Wong, A. (2011) Workers' Party's star candidate opens up. *Yahoo! News*.