



GE 2015 Analysis: Why No One Predicted That Result

By David Black, Managing Director | 14 September 2015

PAP Bounce Less of a Surprise than Size of the Swing

Sometimes the stars align. They certainly did for the PAP on Saturday night. Even the most optimistic PAP supporter would have bet against them being able to achieve 70% of the election vote.

The fact, however, that the Government performed better than it did in 2011 is actually less of a **surprise**. Many pundits pointed to the fact that the PAP's decision to steer left helped it to take the sting out of the anger that was obvious amongst voters last time round. Others noted that **the PAP's efforts to lecture less and listen more** was also being acknowledged by voters. Our own pre-election survey for MediaCorp showed that nearly three in four of Singaporeans believed that the PAP had done a good job listening to the concerns of average Singaporeans since the last election.

But neither of these factors really explains why the PAP succeeded in generating such a massive swing this time round. From the disaster of the population white paper to the public transport breakdowns beginning at the end of 2011 and the debate over CPF in 2014, it was not difficult to make a case that the PAP would again find themselves confronting disgruntled voters.

But there were clear signs that the PAP had succeeded in turning things around well before the election was called even though issues such as cost of living, population and housing affordability still carried possible downside for the Government.

While the Government's position was never seriously threatened, Blackbox polling began to see a steady upturn in fortunes from about May 2014. This was a couple of months after a well-received Budget and around the time households began to receive information about the Pioneer package benefits which had been first announced back in February. From May 2014 onwards, satisfaction with the Government followed an upward trajectory and the PAP made gains in some key areas which proved important on Election Day.

The following chart shows some of the gains made by PAP between January 2014 and August 2015:

Metrics Trending Upwards Since January 2014

Issue	Satisfaction with government	Change since January 2014
Overall Government Satisfaction Index	74.5	+1
Government accountability	89	+12
Gap between rich and poor	76	+10
Public transport	60	+7
Care for the Elderly	84	+5
Health insurance/protection	86	+4

The fact that these were all areas where the Government expended resources and upped its communications reflects the level of effort that went into addressing perceived weaknesses.

Following the passing of Lee Kuan Yew in April 2015, Blackbox survey findings showed that the Government benefited further from the outpouring of grief and while the LKY 'dividend' did subside after June it was clear that the Government was in such a strong position that it would likely look to call an early election to capitalize on its gains.

Indeed, Blackbox published a chart a few months ago showing that an increasing number of Singaporeans expected the PAP vote to go up at the next general election. This was criticized by some online media outlets as simply being PAP propaganda but the truth was Blackbox has always looked at this measure as a useful gauge of community mood in the absence of publicly available political polls.

So given the signs that the PAP position was undoubtedly looking more comfortable in 2015, **why didn't anyone (including us) predict the PAP rout that occurred on Saturday evening?**

GE 2011 Was Thought To Have Changed Things Forever

The simple answer is that no one believed such a result was possible. Following the election result in 2011, it became common wisdom that the PAP would never again enjoy the same level of success that it had in the past. The argument went that the Singapore electorate had changed too much, social media could not be manipulated in the same way mainstream media had been in the past and the opposition had also grown wiser and better equipped to compete with the PAP.

Even we felt that overall support gains for the PAP would be tempered by weaker sentiment for the Government in the East. Over the last two years, Blackbox polling consistently showed that voters living in east coast electorates were less happy with Government policies. Also, our latest polling in August (just before the election) showed that 68% of those living in the east thought it was possible that the Opposition would win another GRC compared to only 51% across the rest of Singapore.

We took these results as an indication that the Workers Party (WP) was well placed to tap into underlying disaffection across these areas and build on its 2011 result. This feeling was supported by anecdotal feedback during the campaign. Even the bookmakers late last week were publishing odds favouring WP wins in East Coast GRC and Fengshan SMC.

Indeed, looking at the 2015 election campaign, the Opposition parties generally performed maturely and looked well prepared and competitive. As campaigns go, it was easy to believe that Opposition parties had lifted their game and fielded a much better array of candidates than had been seen at previous elections.

In retrospect, however, it would appear that the PAP had sealed the deal with the electorate well before the campaign. For all the noise, colour and activity of the hustings, eight days is really too short a timeframe to sway an electorate that had already committed itself to the PAP months ago. The shift to the left first road tested during the 2014 Budget was critical – it sent a signal to PAP doubters that the Government was prepared to soften its line and offer relief to those it felt most deserved it. Time and again we heard people express their pleasure with this change in mindset during focus groups – **the Government is 'more generous' now, many would say.**

Other Factors: Demographics and Opposition Alternatives

There were other pre-campaign factors that also need to be taken into account. Firstly, the average age of the electorate in 2015 was the oldest it has ever been and this favours the PAP. Furthermore, the Blackbox-Mediacorp survey carried out just before the election showed strong support for the Government amongst first time voters and new citizens. In voting terms, this segment represented just under 10% in 2015.

The fact that first time voters opted for the PAP is an interesting phenomenon and possibly reflects the aspirations of younger Singapore Millennials who enjoy a high standard of living (without having to pay for it themselves yet) and are more cynical and circumspect about what they read on social media. The PAP appear to be aware of this and the Prime Minister was quick to thank young voters immediately after the election.

Another more important factor, however, is the fact that voters were not necessarily presented with clear alternatives during the 2015 campaign. In 2011, the narrative was clear – use your vote to protest against undesirable policies and PAP arrogance. This message rang loudly across social media last time and proved to be impactful.

This time round, social media has matured and is just another channel for politicians of all **stripes. It's lost its novelty** and much of its punch. But in many ways, the Opposition parties simply tried to build on the anger that there was there in 2011 by running variations of the message that Opposition representation in Parliament is vital if you want to control the worse excesses of the PAP.

There is of course, nothing **especially wrong with this message. Prima facie, it's a strong** argument if you genuinely believe that voters in 2011 had decided that it was time for Singapore to have more diverse political representation. All you need to do is tell voters they need more Opposition MPs in order to provide greater balance and a counter weight to the PAP. The problem with this approach is that voters in 2011 appeared to have acted more out of anger and protest against PAP policies than any genuine desire for greater political representation.

Consistently, our surveys since 2011 have shown that voters are by and large satisfied with the level of civil rights, free speech etc. in Singapore. Although Singaporeans indicate (when asked) that they support an Opposition **presence in Parliament they don't necessarily feel that** wider political representation is commensurate with better Government.

Moreover, the rejuvenated political landscape following the 2011 election resulted in nine parties contesting in 2015 across all electorates (for the very first time). Such competition and the lack of true coalitions and cross party co-ordination undoubtedly led to some message fragmentation and dilution.

Given the similarity of the messaging from the Opposition, Singaporeans may have decided that there was little to compel them to move away from the tried and tested.

The Workers Party, in particular, seemed to have been cornered during the campaign. The Government was able to keep them on the back foot by making them deal with a constant **barrage of AHPETC accusations while at the same time managing to suffocate the WP's populist messaging** with its own shift to the left.

Apart from the promise of even greater checks and balance, what exactly were the opposition promising the electorate? It would seem very little. Hopefully, exit surveys currently being fielded by the likes of IPS will help to shed some light on this.

The fact that the PAP ran a fairly uninspiring election campaign (reflecting their own argument that policy formulation is far more important than fancy words and well attended rallies) ultimately did not matter. All the hard work had been done in advance. All the PAP had to do was keep a lid on any potential nasties for eight days and they would be home and dry.

Conclusions

The 2015 election result probably tells us much more about the Singaporean psyche than the 2011 result did. For those who thought that the Singapore electorate had been transformed in 2011 and had embraced wider political representation forever, the real truth is maybe tough to accept. Singaporeans remain pragmatic and unconvinced by the idea of representation simply **for the sake of representation. They've been blessed by 50 years of sound (and sometimes even outstanding) Government** and are not prepared, at this point in their history, to sacrifice this for a few more personal freedoms or the possibility of a lower standard of living.

For the Opposition, while they will have learned a very hard lesson in the art of retail politics last Saturday, there is still much to be optimistic about. Singaporeans appear to be more interested in politics and ideas, as witnessed by the many thousands who attended political rallies and who commented online. Singaporeans also support the idea of an active Opposition and want real debate on key issues such as population, CPF and housing.

But there is little to be gained by simply arguing the need for more Opposition to serve as a check on the Government. Singaporeans want to know the details. Opposition parties will need to take more specific stands on key issues and look to fight campaigns on issue agendas that run more in their favour. And they will need to do the ground work well before the election campaign begins.

More broadly, they will also need to craft out an alternative vision for Singapore that is not only attractive but feels fiscally safe.

David Black is the owner and Managing Director of Blackbox Research. David has lived in Singapore for over fifteen years and manages research for both Government and private sector clients. He has carried out projects in more than twenty countries across Asia and the rest of the world.

Blackbox Research is an award winning agency that provides advanced research, analytics and digital research services. The company specialises in communications and content development research ranging from corporate and political messaging to global advertising campaigns.

Should you be interested in learning more about the findings discussed in this white paper or about other Blackbox services, please contact our communications manager at dyana@blackbox.com.sg.