

Freak elections

Elites underestimate the sophistication of the electorate.

There was something quite poetic about holding the 2015 general election during the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. In traditional Taoist belief, the Hungry Ghost Festival is a time to appease wandering souls. You are supposed to make offerings and stage performances so that the satiated spirits will return to the netherworld.

This bears an uncanny resemblance to how the People's Action Party views elections. It's a time when the unpredictable masses pour out from their homes, instigated by mischief-making opposition politicians. This is not what the serious business of government is supposed to be all about, but the PAP has to play along with the wayang for a couple of weeks, making promises and selling sound bites. Perform these rituals, and the malcontents will skulk away for another five years.

In the real world, Singaporeans have again and again used the ballot to reward the PAP's competence with uninterrupted power. That hasn't allayed the ruling party's fear of elections as capricious events. One type of irrational outcome that the PAP warns of is the

so-called “freak” election result. The term is prone to misuse, so it’s worth clarifying what it is, and what it isn’t. If the outcome differs from the preferences of the losing party and its supporters, that’s not a freak election. That’s just an election. Nor is it necessarily freakish if the result isn’t what pundits and pollsters predicted. Conversely, if the outcome can be guaranteed by any one party and there’s absolutely no risk of surprises, that’s not a non-freak election—it’s probably fixed. It isn’t even a freak election if people vote against what all experts agree is in the public’s enlightened self-interest. It is precisely because we have no mechanism to second-guess the electorate, and because no group of wise men should pick rulers on behalf of everyone else, that we need to go through the cumbersome process of elections in the first place.

To be worthy of the name, a freak result is one that the majority of voters didn’t want. This outcome is possible because voting is susceptible to coordination errors. People vote based partly on imperfect knowledge of how others will use their ballot. Those expectations may not be accurate.

For example, let’s say you want the PAP in charge but also want a larger opposition. If you believe that the national tide is strongly in the PAP’s favour and you live in one of the few hot seats, you would probably feel that voting for the opposition in your constituency would help achieve your goal of a PAP government plus a more robust opposition. On the other hand, if you believe the opposition is already going to do very well nationally, you might vote for the PAP in your ward because it’s offering you the better candidate.

In either case, if you and others like you assess the mood wrongly, you might end up using your vote in a way that goes against your own wishes. You all overestimate the PAP’s strength, vote opposition, and contribute to ousting the PAP—to your horror. That’s a freak election. It could also work the other way: you overestimate the opposition tide, give your vote to the ruling party, and end up with a decimated opposition, which isn’t what you wanted.

Such coordination problems can be solved by having more data

about where the parties stand. So, there is actually a simple solution to banish the spectre of freak elections: lift the prohibition on opinion polling during the campaign. Of course, after Donald Trump's victory in the United States, we know how wrong pollsters can be. Tiny Singapore, however, is much easier to poll reliably. Arm voters with enough quality information about their fellow Singaporeans' sentiments, and they won't get election outcomes that they do not intend. Most countries allow such polls, which is why the term "freak election" seems to be used more in Singapore than anywhere else.

From a PAP perspective, voters may look irrational when they pick parties and candidates that are plainly inferior. Too many voters are focussing on what, in its view, are the wrong questions. They are asking, "Do we have enough opposition?" Or, "Should we send a signal to the government that we're not happy?" The ruling party believes people should only ask, "Who is fit to govern?" But one of the hard truths about democratic elections is that it's not just the answers that are in the hands of voters—it's also the questions. Candidates can try to influence voters' priorities, but cannot dictate them. Besides, there is nothing outlandish about registering a protest vote or voting opposition for opposition's sake. These are rational responses to a one-sided political system with an overwhelmingly dominant party.

Do the maths and you can see why many voters are frustrated. In the elections since 2000, 25 to 40 per cent voted for the opposition. Yet, the opposition's share of directly elected seats has never reached even 10 per cent. This is due to Singapore's first-past-the-post election system, which does not allocate seats in proportion to the popular vote. Britain, Canada, Australia and India have similar systems. It is not unusual for their winning parties to get an outright majority of seats in the legislature despite securing less than half of the popular vote. The first-past-the-post system is geared to produce stable governments, at the expense of a legislature that more accurately reflects the way votes were divided, which is what a proportional representation system achieves.

However, even compared with other countries that have the same system, Singapore's election outcomes are oddly distorted. Looking at recent election results in the aforementioned Commonwealth countries, back-of-the-envelope calculations would show that a 40 per cent vote share typically translates into a majority in parliament of about 55 per cent of seats. In other words, the winning party gets something like a 15-point boost in its number of seats, compared with what it would have won in a pure proportional representation system. In Singapore, however, the boost can be twice as much. In 2011, the PAP's 60 per cent vote share translated to a 93 per cent seat share—a 33-point gap between votes and seats. The electoral system doesn't reward the winning party with merely a working majority, it grants it a stifling monopoly.

There's nothing underhanded about this. It's the result of Singapore having much less variation in its political map compared with, say, the United Kingdom, where different regions vote very differently. In the UK, losing parties can count on some parts of the country giving them much higher votes than their national average, assuring them seats in the House. For example, when the Conservatives do well nationally, Labour still captures the big cities.

In contrast, if every constituency were a perfect microcosm of the nation, you could in theory have a party narrowly claiming each seat with just 51 per cent of the vote, but as a result sweeping 100 per cent of the seats. Singapore's political map is closer to that homogeneous extreme than to the UK pattern: most constituencies' results don't deviate much from the national average.

The result is a stark disequilibrium between demand and supply. Singaporeans' 30–40 per cent support for the opposition would, under pure proportional representation, translate into 26–36 seats in an 89-member House. In a more normal first-past-the-post environment like the UK's, you might expect opposition votes to translate into 13–22 seats—much lower than under proportional representation, but two or three times more than what Singapore's unresponsive electoral market generates.

As long as the PAP's parliamentary dominance is so out of whack

with its popular vote, we'll continue to see the electorate practise a kind of affirmative action in favour of the opposition. Voters will grant opposition candidates a generous benefit of the doubt while punishing PAP candidates for the slightest slip. The PAP may think this extremely unfair, but it's an understandable response to a distorted political marketplace.

We needn't fear that the double standard will result in a low-quality opposition party ultimately winning power. Singaporeans will be sensible enough to recalibrate their expectations when the opposition grows larger. Assuming its size and quality remains at current levels, I'd expect an equilibrium to be reached when the opposition secures around 20 seats.

That's when voters will stop granting opposition candidates a handicap and start assessing the PAP and the opposition against similar yardsticks. Then, most voters will be guided by the PAP's preferred question—who can actually govern—rather than asking whether Singapore needs more opposition.

On the whole, I credit Singaporeans with more sophistication and common sense than elite rhetoric grants them. There is simply no evidence that the Singapore electorate is prone to impulsive, flighty or fickle behaviour. Look at the way it votes and you'll see an impressively level-headed public that knows what it wants.

First, it wants the PAP running Singapore. This message from the popular vote is clear enough: the PAP has never received less than 60 per cent of the vote. Opinion polls reveal even stronger support, with seven or eight out of every ten Singaporeans expressing confidence in and approval of the PAP government's overall performance. Opposition politicians don't like admitting that the majority wants the PAP to remain in power, but they are practical enough to work this reality into their campaign strategies. In 1991, opposition leaders even resorted to contesting fewer than half the seats to assure the electorate that it could treat the general election like a by-election—no matter how many of the contested seats went to the opposition, the government wouldn't be toppled. More recent elections have been all-out battles, but the Workers' Party went out

of its way to assure Singaporeans that it wasn't aiming to take over government, which would remain in the PAP's hands.

Second, however, the majority does not want the PAP to monopolise power. Singaporeans know that the PAP has a tendency to take their support for granted. They feel ministers are too impressed by their own technocratic brilliance and too insulated from the real world by their fat salaries, making them brush aside the people's genuine grievances. The public has come to believe that the threat of opposition gains is ultimately the most effective way to get the best out of a PAP government.

Third—and most reassuringly for PAP supporters fearing a freak result—the Singapore public is neither impatient nor desperate for multi-party democracy. It is prepared to wait for the opposition to improve before voting more of them in. It will grant opposition candidates a handicap, but never a free pass. Past elections show that candidates need to clear a pretty high credibility threshold before earning more than 45 per cent of the vote.

Voters' level of discernment often takes pundits by surprise. Before the 2013 by-election in Punggol East, opposition supporters bemoaned the fact that the anti-PAP vote would be split three ways. Lee Li Lian of the Workers' Party—who had unsuccessfully contested the seat in 2011—would now have to share opposition votes with Kenneth Jeyaretnam and Desmond Lim, the leaders of the Reform Party and the Singapore Democratic Alliance respectively. What was most striking about the by-election result was not the PAP's defeat, but the laserlike focus of the 56 per cent who voted for the opposition. They virtually ignored Jeyaretnam and Lim (so much so that "Rejected Votes" outperformed both men) and single-mindedly backed the Workers' Party candidate.

And that's not new. We tend to forget that when the PAP's absolute monopoly of parliamentary seats was finally broken in 1981, it was also a three-cornered fight. That time, Jeyaretnam Senior was the beneficiary of voters' acumen. They tossed the spoiler—the colourful Harbans Singh of the United People's Front—a desultory 131 votes, presenting the Anson seat to JBJ.

A public that took 32 years to grow the number of elected opposition MPs from one to seven can hardly be described as cavalier risk-takers. But it serves the ruling party's interests to convince Singaporeans that they cannot trust their fellow citizens to vote in a sober manner. The myth of the irrational voter continues to be rehashed before every election.

In the 2015 campaign, these anxieties were amplified by disinformation—who was behind it is anyone's guess—purporting to show bookies' predictions of major upsets in PAP strongholds, such that the opposition would claim as many as 24 seats. In the absence of proper polling, it is quite plausible that these widely circulated WhatsApp messages influenced some Singaporeans to vote conservatively. Former PAP backbencher Inderjit Singh observed this effect first hand. "I live in Marine Parade GRC and my neighbour came running to my house on the last day of campaigning to share that she 'heard' that PAP will likely lose Marine Parade to the WP. They were worried and said they will call all their friends and relatives to be careful with their vote," Singh wrote on Facebook. The so-called bookie forecasts, coupled with big turnouts at opposition rallies, might have given some Singaporeans cold feet on polling day, he said.

My point is not that this underground campaign made a material difference to the result of the 2015 election. There were other reasons why the PAP did as well as it did (Chapter 8). But what's remarkable is that there have been no reports of the authorities investigating what looks suspiciously like an attempt to sway the electorate with made-up data. Yet, they found time to take action against a website, *The Middle Ground*, for publishing an insignificant street poll of 50 voters.

Trying to gauge actual voter sentiment during an election campaign? Off limits. Spreading fake news about freak elections? Carry on.