

The 2011 general and presidential elections in Singapore



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ABSTRACT

For the first time in Singapore's history, two elections were held in a year. In 2011, Singaporeans voted in a general election on 7 May and in another competitive presidential election on 27 August. Faced with a stronger opposition force and an emboldened electorate, the ruling People's Action Party won the elections but achieved the worst results since the country's independence.

1. Background

The People's Action Party (PAP) has ruled Singapore uninterruptedly since the country attained self-rule in 1959. As a result of an opposition boycott, the PAP won all seats in the country's first General Election in 1968 and for the next three elections until a by-election in 1981 broke its hegemony. For the last five decades of rule, the PAP maintained an average of 98 percent seat shares despite earning an average of 65 percent vote shares. Like most former British colonies, Singapore adopted a simple plurality in single-member constituencies (SMCs) electoral system from 1959 to 1987. But by the late 1980s, a series of constitutional amendments introduced schemes such as the Group Representative Constituencies (GRC, 1988); Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP, 1984); Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP, 1990) and Elected Presidency (EP) which transformed the electoral arena. Most significantly, the GRC scheme introduced an unique party slate plurality bloc voting system that turned a majority of SMCs into multimember constituencies, where a voter casts her vote for the entire team which must have a minimum of one ethnic minority candidate on their ticket. Non-elected MPs were also brought into the House. While the NCMP scheme admits up to nine best losing opposition candidates to become non-elected MPs, the NMP scheme allows nine more based on appointment. By 1991, the government changed its former symbolic, non-executive presidency to a directly elected one to ostensibly grant the President more powers over government expenditures and public sector appointments. However, disputes between the first-elected President Ong Teng Cheong and the government over information access and responsibilities over the safeguard of the country's vast national reserves resulted in tighter presidential candidacy rules. Strict presidential eligibility, decided by the Presidential Elections

Committee under the Prime Minister's (PM) office led to two uncontested PEs in 1999 and 2005. In 2011, for the first time in the country's history, two contested elections were held in a year: a General Election on 7 May and a Presidential Election on 27 August. See [Tables 1 and 2](#).

2. Pre-electoral changes

Weeks before election, and for the 2011 General Election, redistricting and electoral boundary changes affected nearly 30 percent of the nation's 2.3 million voters. Electoral reforms saw an expansion of the parliamentary seats from 84 to 87 while the number of SMCs was raised from nine to 12 and the multimember constituencies, from 14 to 15. As Singapore does not have an independent election commission, the arbitrary electoral reforms invited criticisms of gerrymandering and malapportionment to the ruling party's advantage ([Tan, 2013](#)). However, to the opposition parties' relief, the ban on political films, podcasts and vodcasts during elections was lifted. To prevent "emotional voting" and "risk of public disorder", a "cooling-off day" was imposed to prevent mass rallies, door-to-door visits or display or party symbols, a day before the polls ([Saad, 2009](#)). [Fig. 1](#)

3. 2011 Landmark election

The 2011 General Election was the PAP's biggest electoral challenge since independence. Apart from a substantial rise in Singapore's eligible voters by 8.8 percent, a total of seven opposition parties contested for an unprecedented 82 out of 87 seats. The opposition would have contested all the seats if not for the disqualification of an opposition team from the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) for being 35 seconds late in submitting the nomination form. Despite an increase in electoral deposit for each candidate from S\$13,500 (US\$10,600) to S\$16,000 (US\$12,565), a total of 83 opposition candidates contested, nearly double of the 47 candidates from the last election. In this big slate,

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Table 1

Singapore 2011 general election results.

| Contesting parties | Seats contested | Seats won | Popular vote [overseas vote] | Share of valid votes in constituencies contested (%) |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------------------|--|
| People's Action Party (PAP) | 82 | 76 | 1,212,154 (1537) | 60.1 |
| Workers' Party (WP) | 23 | 6 | 258,510 (369) | 46.6 |
| National Solidarity Party (NSP) | 24 | 0 | 242,682 (313) | 39.3 |
| Singapore People's Party (SPP) | 7 | 0 | 62,639 (135) | 41.4 |
| Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) | 11 | 0 | 97,369 (130) | 36.8 |
| Reform Party (RP) | 11 | 0 | 86,294 (120) | 31.8 |
| Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) | 7 | 0 | 55,988 (56) | 30.1 |
| Total | 165 | 87 | | |
| Total votes cast | | | 2,015,636 | 97.8 |
| Spoilt votes | | | 44,737 (23) | 2.2 |
| 'Walkover' voters | | | 139,771 (222) | 5.9 |
| Total eligible voters | | | 2,211,102 (3453) | 94.1 |
| Overall turnout | | | 2,060,373 (2683) | 93.2 |

Source: Data from Singapore Elections website (www.singapore-elections.com) N/B: The SDA was formed in 2001. NSP and SPP contested under the SDA banner in 2001 and 2006. NSP left the alliance in 2007 while SPP left in 2011. The RP was formed in 2009.

62 were first-timers – the biggest number of new candidates in two decades. The increased electoral competition stemmed Singapore's trend of 'walkovers,' which is the rewarding of victory to the sole contestant because of disqualification or no contest.¹ For example in 2001 General Election, Singapore's high number of 'walkovers' deprived more than 65 percent of voters the opportunity to vote. A combination of institutional barriers such as high electoral deposit, gerrymandering, difficulty in attracting ethnic minority candidates to the multimember teams, biased media and flawed opposition electoral strategies have contributed to an uncompetitive electoral environment.

There was a surge of well-qualified opposition candidates for 2011 General Election. Unlike the past, many high-powered professionals, businessmen and former civil servants with impressive academic credentials stood under the opposition flags.² In contrast, the new PAP candidates were uninspiring and cost the PAP party votes. For example, a young PAP candidate Tin Pei Ling irked voters after

¹ The disqualification of the opposition resulted in a "walkover" of a five-member team led by Lee Kuan Yew in Tanjong Pagar group constituency.

² The National Solidarity Party (NSP) fielded two Cambridge trained government scholars Tony Tan and Hazel Poa while the WP had Chen Show Mao, a lawyer with impressive academic records. On the other hand, the Reform Party chief Kenneth Jeyaretnam has a double-first class honours from Cambridge. The 'defection' of senior civil servants such as Benjamin Pwee and Tan See Jay, a former secretary to the PM also embarrassed the ruling party.

Table 2

Singapore 2011 presidential election results.

| Presidential candidates | Total valid votes (overseas voters) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam | 745,693 | 35.2 |
| Dr. Tan Cheng Bock | 738,311 | 34.9 |
| Tan Jee Say | 530,441 | 25.0 |
| Tan Kin Lian | 104,095 | 4.9 |
| Total votes cast | 2,118,540 | 98.2 |
| Spoilt votes | 37,849 (23) | 1.8 |
| Total electorate | 2,274,773 (5504) | 100 |
| Overall TURNOUT | 2,156,389 (3375) | 94.8 |

Source: Data from Singapore Elections Department website, available here: <http://www.eld.gov.sg/>

pictures of her flaunting a luxury bag and a video of her childish behaviour in an interview went viral. Her marriage to the PM's principal secretary also incited criticisms of nepotism. Later, a Facebook page petitioning to remove her as a Member of Parliament received 59,000 'likes' ([AsiaOne](http://www.asiaone.com), 2011). In response to the government's liberal immigration policies, voters were upset with the standing of two foreign-born PAP candidates, fuelling debates on patriotism and perceived unfair advantages to foreigners. The election of an unknown PAP candidate, Dr. Chia Shi Lu, as a result of a 'walkover' also exposed flaws in the country's party slate plurality bloc voting system that offers 'safe seats' to rookie candidates in the group constituencies. Dr. Chia's political rise shows how inexperienced candidates can ride on the coattails of senior ministers to win campaigns and deprive voters of the rights to choose their MPs in the multi-member team.

Unlike the past, the opposition parties displayed better coordination. The opposition parties such as the Worker's Party (WP), National Solidarity Party (NSP), Singapore People's Party (SPP) and Reform Party (RP) met to strategize where to stand in the election. Significantly, they abandoned their flawed "by-election strategy," where the opposition parties deliberately contest in less than 50 percent of seats to ensure that the PAP is returned to power on nomination day. This strategy was devised based on the assumption that Singaporeans want a PAP government and would avoid voting for the opposition for fear of a party-alternation. By returning the

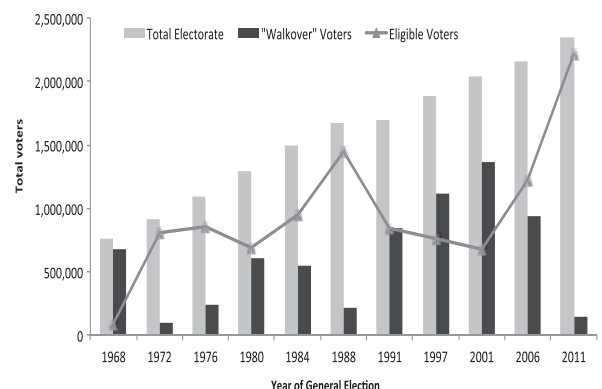


Fig. 1. Total electorate, "walkover" and eligible voters in Singapore. Source: Compiled based on data from Singapore Elections website available here: www.singapore-elections.com. N.B: "Walkover voters" refer to voters who cannot vote because of no contestation or candidate disqualification.

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