The small constituency effect and WP factor

What statistical analysis says about PAP performance at the polls

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Now that the Elections Department has published the results of General Election 2020, what factors can voters and the political parties learn from the numbers? Before the election, the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee had downsized the megamember GRCs (group representation constituencies) in favour of smaller GRCs with four or five members. With the growth of population and downsizing of GRCs, the number of constituencies up for contest has risen steadily over the years from 36 in 2006 to 31 in 2020. For GE2020, Singapore was divided into 84 GRCs and 34 single-member constituencies (SMCs).

In GE2020, the popular vote shifted against the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) down to 62.4 per cent from 67.6 per cent in 2015. The Workers’ Party contested the megamember GRC - Sengkang - and retained Aljunied GRC with a majority of over 199 per cent.

Refocusing on the electoral map, another obvious change was the erosion of PAP support in the far west, thanks to the new Progress Singapore Party, led by Mr Tan Cheng Bock, a former PAP backbencher from the area. Besides sentiment and satisfaction with policies, other factors, including quality of the opposition, geography, constituency size, and timing, affect election results. A scientific analysis of election results must consider all of these factors.

Multiple regression is a statistical method that precisely states that, importantly, multiple regression allows the analyst to focus on the contribution of each individual factor, holding all other factors constant. From multiple regression estimates of the PAP vote share in the last four general elections - 2006, 2011, 2015 and 2020. Three clear patterns (to be precise, statistically significant results) emerged from the last two elections: First, the PAP did relatively better in single-member constituencies than GRCs. In GE2020, the PAP vote share in the six-member GRC was 55.8 percentage points lower than in SMCs. This is certainly a good news for the Government to defend the megamember GRCs.

But, now the focus is on five-member GRCs. In GE2020, the PAP vote share in five-member GRCs was 10.0 percentage points lower than SMCs. From the PAP’s standpoint, bigger does not mean better. However, I should qualify that correlation is not causation. The PAP may have fielded stronger candidates in single-member constituencies in kept long-standing popular MPs (for instance, Minister Grace Fu won a fourth term as MP for Yuhua SMC, with 70.5 per cent, and Mr Lim Boon Hwan, a little more as MP for Mountbatten SMC, with 73.0 per cent and assigned weaker candidates to do on the coat tails of big-name ministers in the GRCs. So, apparently weaker performance in the GRCs might just be the result of PAP strategy.

Second, among GRCs, the PAP tended to do better in those with larger populations. Other things being equal (in particular, controlling for GRC member sizes), a constituency with one per cent larger population, the PAP vote share was 6 percentage points higher. In GRCs with larger populations like Ang Mo Kio (71.7 per cent and with 198,039 votes cast) and Sembawang (67.3 per cent and 142,742 votes cast), the PAP beat its national vote share of 62.2 per cent. Here, it is again important to stress that correlation is not causation. Multiple regression reveals correlation, not causation. The stronger PAP support in more populated constituencies might just be the result of constituency boundaries being drawn as such. Third, the Workers’ Party has institutionalised itself as the party of opposition. In GE2015, the PAP vote share was 7 percentage points lower in contests against the Workers’ Party. In GE2020, this deficit widened to 16 percentage points. However, the change was in large part due to the general shift against the PAP towards the opposition.

And again qualify that correlation is not causation. The improved showing of the Workers’ Party might be due to its focusing limited talent on a smaller number of contests (down from 10 in GE2015 to 6 in GE2020).

By compiling the GE2020 results with demographic data, researchers and political party strategists could do a lot more to appreciate the underlying patterns and trends. For instance, they could investigate whether GRCs are necessary to maintain minority representation in Parliament, and whether support for the PAP is stronger among older and wealthier people.

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