Politicians on the campaign trail know it is pointless preaching to the party faithful or trying to win over those fervently opposed to them. Their choice target: the voters who have yet to make up their minds. Who are the swing voters? Do they really matter? How did their votes affect the results in previous polls?

Audrey Tan discusses this voting phenomenon while Lynn Kan profiles three typical voters in this General Election.

IT’S THEIR CALL: Residents at a PAP rally in Nee Soon East where incumbent PAP MP Ho Peng Kee is up against WP’s Dr Poh Lee Guan.
BANK executive P.H. Pan is a registered voter of Ang Mo Kio GRC. Until last week, he had no idea who the opposition candidates were.

Despite the media blitz and flurry of campaign pitches, the French-educated bachelor in his early 30s had not thought about how he would vote in the polls tomorrow.

But as one who holds strong views on human rights and civil liberties, he also believes that an opposition is needed to provide more diverse voices in Parliament and alternative lifestyles.

None of the parties here, he contended, fully reflected his liberal views on freedom, democracy and alternative lifestyles.

Unable to identify with, let alone pledge allegiance to, any party, Mr Pan is typical of the electoral phenomenon dubbed swing voters.

Swing voters have caused significant shifts in Singapore's election results over the past few decades, making them a force to be reckoned with, according to political watchers.

In the 1970s, the PAP, riding high on its leadership in rallying the people after the Separation in 1965 and its record of socio-economic achievements, could consider itself counting on at least 70 per cent of the popular vote.

But the pendulum began to swing in the 1980s, when the ruling party's share of votes fell to 64.8 per cent in 1984 and 63.2 per cent in 1988.

The drop was attributed to unpopular policies such as the scheme to give school priority to children of graduate mothers, as well as the greater desire for an opposition in Parliament.

The decline of PAP votes culminated in the 1991 elections when PAP lost an unprecedented four seats in Parliament and won just 61 per cent of the vote.

In the elections that followed, however, the pendulum swung back towards the PAP. Its share of votes rose to 65 per cent in 1997 and to a stupendous 75.3 per cent in 2001.

As supporters of the ruling party, the committed core would range from 40 per cent in an opposition ward to 60 per cent in a PAP ward.

This would mean that another 20 to 40 per cent are likely to be swing voters: They are the ones who are being wooed assiduously by all parties in this General Election, as they know there is little point in choosing a platform to convert or trying to win over the undecided voters of the other side.

Younger swing voters would appear that the parties have identified lower-income workers and older voters as "possible swingers".

But he qualified that swing voters are more likely to be swing voters as they are less inclined to hold entrenched opinions on the political parties.

In Singapore's context, this means the post-1965 generation. Referring to social science studies, Dr Rappa said that as people grow older and stayed longer in a place, they would have made a greater commitment in terms of time, energy and resources.

"This causes them to think very seriously about how they vote as they cannot afford to be flip-flop about their choice," he said.

Dr Suzanna Kadir, an assistant professor of political science at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, noted that the members of the older generation have grown up with the PAP, so their political inclinations, either pro-PAP or against PAP, are entrenched.

But younger voters may have concerns which are not represented by any of the political parties, she said.

"Based on what you see on their blogs, they do come from a different perspective as their set of issues may be different from what the opposition and PAP are addressing."

Younger swing voters could in fluence enough voters to give the PAP at least 70 per cent of the vote, he said.

Younger voters also want credible candidates who have respectable jobs, speak well and are presentable, he said.

And there is the James Gomez affair.

Some voters could be influenced by the PAP's emphasis on accountability and transparency, but others might see the ruling party's reaction as heavy-handed and aggressive.

"It looks like this is an issue the PAP has now targeted. But it is not clear how it will swing votes. I think it's a close call," said Dr Suza nna.

Mr Pan admitted he has not spent enough time evaluating the issues and candidates. "It's quite late now in the campaign process. I'm not 100 per cent pro any of the parties, but I've made up my mind."

Dr Kho How San, a part-time political science lecturer at NUS, said that this time round, voters might be swayed by the idea that the new Prime Minister needed a strong mandate. "This could influence enough voters to give the PAP at least 70 per cent of the vote," he said.

Going by the issues raised in the hustings this week, he said, it would appear that the parties have identified lower-income workers and older voters as "possible swingers".

Younger swing voters may be worried about job security and feel they have not benefited from economic growth. Older voters will also have ageing concerns such as health-care costs and lift upgrading.

"It's a very mixed bag of voters and membership in this swing voters group is very fluid," said Dr Tan.

With no clear profile of swing voters to work with, political watchers can only guess at how their votes could swing in this election.

Dr Ho subscribed to the view that the outcome of all elections — win or lose — depended on swing votes.

"But we have no idea who these voters are or how many they are because no studies have been done on swing voters."

In the absence of any comprehensive surveys on voting patterns, estimates vary widely on the makeup of voters in the pro-PAP, pro-opposition and undecided groups.

Many political analysts say that based on previous election results, their best guess is that at least 20 per cent of all voters will vote for the opposition come what may. They will vote for whatever name is on the ballot paper as long as it is not PAP.

One oft-cited example was that an MP with the initials R.R. from the obscure Democratic Progressive Party who wore flip-flops called Mr Tan Lead Shake. He managed to pull in 25 per cent of the vote in Kampong Glam in 1997.

As for supporters of the ruling party, the committed core would range from 40 per cent in an opposition ward to 60 per cent in a PAP ward.

He is indecisive and makes last-minute decisions when he is forced to vote.

He is impulsive and allows his mood swings to decide which way he will vote.

His decisions are not rational because he lacks knowledge about the political parties and their platforms. He is also not motivated enough to find out more.

He feels disenfranchised by the Government, sometimes because of a single policy issue. This also means he can blame the Government for everything else.

He tends to be in the 25 to 35 age group, building up his career and burdened by financial responsibilities.

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In the view of Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan, issues of freedom, civil liberties and a multi-party parliament matter more to the post-65ers.

"Bread-and-butter issues are still important, but they also have post-material concerns," he said.

Political observers agree that...
The wait-and-see voter

MR BOON Yadi Rosdi (right), 69, moved to the Workers’ Party-held Hougang ward last year.

The retired school teacher and father of four, who lives on Hougang Avenue 6, regards Mr Low Thia Khiang as a good incumbent MP and the PAP, which is fielding Mr Eric Low, as a good party.

He said: “I will wait and see who is the better candidate first before I decide.”

What matters to him is the appeal and calibre of the candidate, not the party’s overall achievements.

In the eyes of political watchers, Mr Boon is seen as the swing voter, one who holds no particular allegiance to any party.

Since 1968, he had voted in all general elections except one.

In most of the polls, his vote had gone to the PAP. But there were some elections when he swung over to the other side.

For example, in 1984, when he was living in Toa Payoh, he voted for Barisan Sosialis because he felt that its candidate, Mr Ng Ho, could provide a strong opposition voice in Parliament.

The ever-faithful PAP supporter

THE voters of Potong Pasir have returned Mr Chiam See Tong as their opposition MP in the last five general elections.

But Mr Andrew Koh (right), who bought his four-room flat in Potong Pasir Avenue 2 decades ago, is certainly not one of them. He had always voted against the Singapore Democratic Alliance chairman and would continue to do so tomorrow.

Call the 50-year-old engineer, who is married to a manager and has a daughter, the committed People’s Action Party (PAP) voter who is not swayed by electoral fireworks and rally speeches. His vote is based on the track record of the ruling party.

Yes, he admitted he has his grouses but he has been impressed by how the PAP Government has improved the lives of Singaporeans.

Citing security as one of the most noteworthy PAP achievements, he said: “Overall, our quality of life has got better and it’s still getting better. At least we don’t live in a country where we’re running back to our homes at 7pm in fear.

“The PAP has always done very well. If we have leaders who only talk and don’t know what to do, we’ll be in big trouble.”

The opposition diehard

IT’S a no-brainer. When Mr Erasmus Pereira (right) goes to the polling station tomorrow, he will cast his vote for Workers’ Party Ms Sylvia Lim and company.

The 67-year-old resident of Aljunied GRC makes no secret of the fact that he has always voted against the ruling party.

What made him an opposition diehard? The part-time salesman blamed it on the People’s Action Party (PAP) Government’s attempts to silence the opposition and on PAP leaders’ libel suits against their political opponents.

“The PAP is very high-handed. It does not set fair ground rules for the opposition,” said the highly opinionated man who lives in his five-room HDB flat in Serangoon Avenue 4 with his wife and two children.

Every night, he sets out for an opposition rally to lend his vocal support. Armed with a rucksack and umbrella, he sits on a make-shift stool made up of an empty tin and cushion wrapped with a plastic bag.