General elections are not merely about which party has a "better manifesto, roster of candidates, and track record".

It is also about strategy. This encompasses the parties’ battle plans on how to appeal to the voters at large, as well as the different "vote banks" such as those under 40 years of age (the so-called post-65ers), the lower income workers, the minorities, and the senior citizens.

What's been interesting in this general election in terms of strategy is how the People's Action Party (PAP) has been sensitive to the feedback and criticism that many of its candidates have been elected on the back of heavyweight Ministers in GRCs.

Another observation is how the PAP has shuffled its candidates in response to the line-ups of their opponents.

In a departure from not fielding potential Ministers in single-member constituencies (SMC), the PAP has assigned Gan Kim Yong (who was a Minister of State prior to Parliament's dissolution) to Chua Chu Kang to contest against SDA's Steve Chia.

Is this PAP's new way of "blooding" their junior Ministers? Since the 1991 GE, we have not had a full Minister contest a SMC.

The short answer is no.

The PAP sees a need for someone like Gan; in terms of calibre, temperament, and potential; to be in Chua Chu Kang. A new PAP candidate will have the odds stacked heavily against him/her with Steve Chia as the opponent.

The Ministers are needed to helm the GRCs.

Although the PAP has cast doubts on Steve Chia, it is nonetheless taking the challenge posed by Steve Chia fairly seriously.

This is not surprising since Steve Chia was the "best loser" (winning 1 of every 3 votes cast) in the 2001 general election, landing him the sole non-constituency MP seat.

Steve Chia has a fairly high and approachable profile. And he has been in CCK for the last five years and so he would be a fairly familiar figure among the local voters there.

I believe the PAP looked at its available slate of candidates and figured that Gan is the best bet. A full Minister to take on Steve Chia would be an over-kill and might give the latter more attention than they would like to.

But why did the PAP choose Gan Kim Yong since they stand to lose a potential Minister if Steve Chia emerges victorious?

When Gan was a PAP backbencher, he was an effective and participated actively in parliamentary debates. He was not averse to making strong and independent points.

Gan comes from a humble background and would be a good poster-boy for the type of governance and system in Singapore. Gan was also CEO of NatSteel before becoming a junior Minister.

He can be classified as "bicultural" – effectively bilingual and able to reach out to the English-speakers and Mandarin/dialect speakers.
Gan's humble background and the bilingual ability would enable him to connect with the heartlanders. The strategy is to match like for like with the PAP putting forth that Gan has more to offer, including the potential to a full Minister.

Of course, if Gan wins, the PAP might be more amenable to fielding junior Ministers in SMCs in subsequent GE. Ultimately, the PAP's strategy is pragmatic - who is the best person for the job at hand.

Overall, having Gan in CCK should have a positive effect on the voters there. It sends the signal that the PAP takes CCK voters seriously and that it takes the municipal issues seriously. (To be fair, the former MP Low Seow Chay had not fared too badly - he improved his winning margin from 62% to 65% between the 1997 (4-cornered fight) and 2001 GE.

The PAP will, of course, remind CCK voters that if Chia wins, then Singapore loses a potential Minister or a MP who could hold higher political office.

They used a similar strategy with Ho Peng Kee in Nee Soon East in 2001 and Matthias Yao in MacPherson (against Chee Soon Juan) in 1997.

Incidentally, both Ho and Yao were promoted to Senior Minister of State and Minister of State after their electoral victories in 2001 and 1997 respectively.

Of course, pitting Gan against Chia has its risks. But I'm sure the PAP has thought through it carefully and are confident that Gan will emerge triumphant.

A victory in CCK by Gan will also help deflect criticisms that the potential Ministers shy away from a SMC. Further, a victory should also see Gan being promoted to higher political office.

Similarly, the PAP in moving Ms Lim Hwee Hua (Minister of State prior to this election) from Marine Parade GRC to Aljunied GRC reflects the seriousness with which it takes the challenge from the Workers' Party much-touted 'A-team'.

In my view, Lim Hwee Hua is assigned to counter the appeal of the Workers' Party charismatic chairperson Ms Sylvia Lim.

Moving Lim Hwee Hua helps to shore up the PAP's team headed by Foreign Minister George Yeo in a constituency that has seen keen contests in several recent general elections.

Like deploying Gan in Chua Chu Kang, the PAP has adopted a like-for-like approach in Aljunied GRC.

Eugene Tan is Assistant Professor of Law at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University.