

Changes made to polling districts

What usually follows is review of boundaries

By SUE-ANN CHIA & LI XUEYING

A DAY after announcing that the register of voters will be updated, the Elections Department revealed that changes have also been made to the boundaries of polling districts.

The changes – to ensure that no polling station handles too many or too few voters – were set out yesterday in a 144-page notification in the electronic version of the Government Gazette.

While Tuesday's announcement about the voters' register was viewed as a routine matter, yesterday's news surprised three MPs and two political watchers contacted last night and will add to speculation about a possible early general election.

This is because the polling district changes usually come before the Government sets up a committee to review and draw up the boundaries of constituencies.

The release of the committee's Electoral Boundaries Report – which details the number and size of single-member and group representation constituencies – is closely-watched. If past elections are anything to go by, the report signals an election around the corner.

But those contacted last night did not think a snap poll was likely anytime soon.

The last general election was held in May 2006 and the next is due by February 2012.

Hong Kah GRC MP Ang Mong Seng felt that the polling district changes might indicate polls sooner than expected.

"Going by past experience, when this happens, an election would come quite soon," he said.

In the last three polls, the time-lag between the polling district changes and the release of the boundaries report ranged from just 19 days in 2001 to three months in 2006 and six months in 1997.

Each time, the general election followed fairly soon after the boundaries report – the January 1997 General Election was held one month and 12 days later; the snap poll of 2001, just 17 days later; and the 2006 General Election, two months and

helping workers and companies. Where is there energy for a general election?"

Mr Ong, who has not set up his election committee, added that the Government was mindful of the widespread impact of the recession, including on many middle- and upper-middle-income Singaporeans.

So he felt the Government would "consider very carefully" and wait for signs of a recovery before calling an election.

Agreeing, political analyst Eugene Tan said holding the polls now would be a distraction. Besides, people had yet to see the impact of measures passed in the Budget.

Sociologist Terence Chong, like Joo Chiat MP Chan Soo Sen, argued that the Government is getting processes ready in order to call an election at any time.

"The best you can say is that they are putting the pieces in place so that there is an option, and if the (economic) forecast is very gloomy, they may call one before things get worse," Mr Chong said.

Preparations began last November when public servants selected to be election officers were sent letters informing them of training they will receive. Schools have also been designated as polling centres.

The Elections Department said on Tuesday that changes to the voters' rolls would be done by April 30.

Each polling district has between 3,000 and 5,000 voters. With the changes, some Singaporeans will cast their votes in the next election at a polling station different from the one they went to in the previous polls.

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Key steps to GE

1997 GE

■ Changes to polling districts: May 3, 1996

■ Electoral Boundaries Report: Nov 21, 1996

■ Election: Jan 2, 1997

2001 GE

■ Changes to polling districts:

Sept 28

■ Electoral Boundaries Report: Oct 17

■ Election: Nov 3

2006 GE

■ Changes to polling districts: Jan 10

■ Electoral Boundaries Report: March 3

■ Election: May 6

three days later.

Still, Nee Soon Central MP Ong Ah Heng saw yesterday's announcement as a "normal procedure" and thought a snap election highly unlikely.

"The earliest will be next year. But it depends very much on the economy and when we can overcome the recession," he said.

"The Government is now concentrating its energy on