

SURVEY OF YOUNG VOTERS

Cost of living is top concern of GEN

They believe opposition is stronger now, but do not wish for more

By RACHEL CHANG

LIKE generations of Singaporeans past, young voters rank the cost of living as the issue most likely to sway their vote in the coming polls.

These voters, aged 21 to 34, also prize bread-and-butter issues such as jobs and housing over and above intangibles like "freedom of expression", according to a new Straits Times survey.

But unlike the older generations, they are less attached to the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and display a more favourable impression of opposition parties.

These findings, from face-to-face interviews with 402 voters last month, may point to what will dominate and define the coming election, say some political observers, as this age group accounts for more than one in four of the 2.4 million voters who will head for the polls soon.

An estimated 200,000 of them will be voting for the first time and are keenly courted by political parties of all stripes.

One implication of the survey findings is that this group will be concerned with how politicians plan to tame inflation, which hit 5.5 per cent in recent months.

The concern coming in a distant sec-

ond is the quality and personality of electoral candidates, with only 13.2 per cent saying it is the most influential factor for ballot box decisions. Even fewer (10 per cent) prize a party's track record.

As for the state of opposition parties, almost half the respondents say they are "stronger now" compared to five years ago.

Around 7 per cent see them as weaker now while 24 per cent feel nothing has changed.

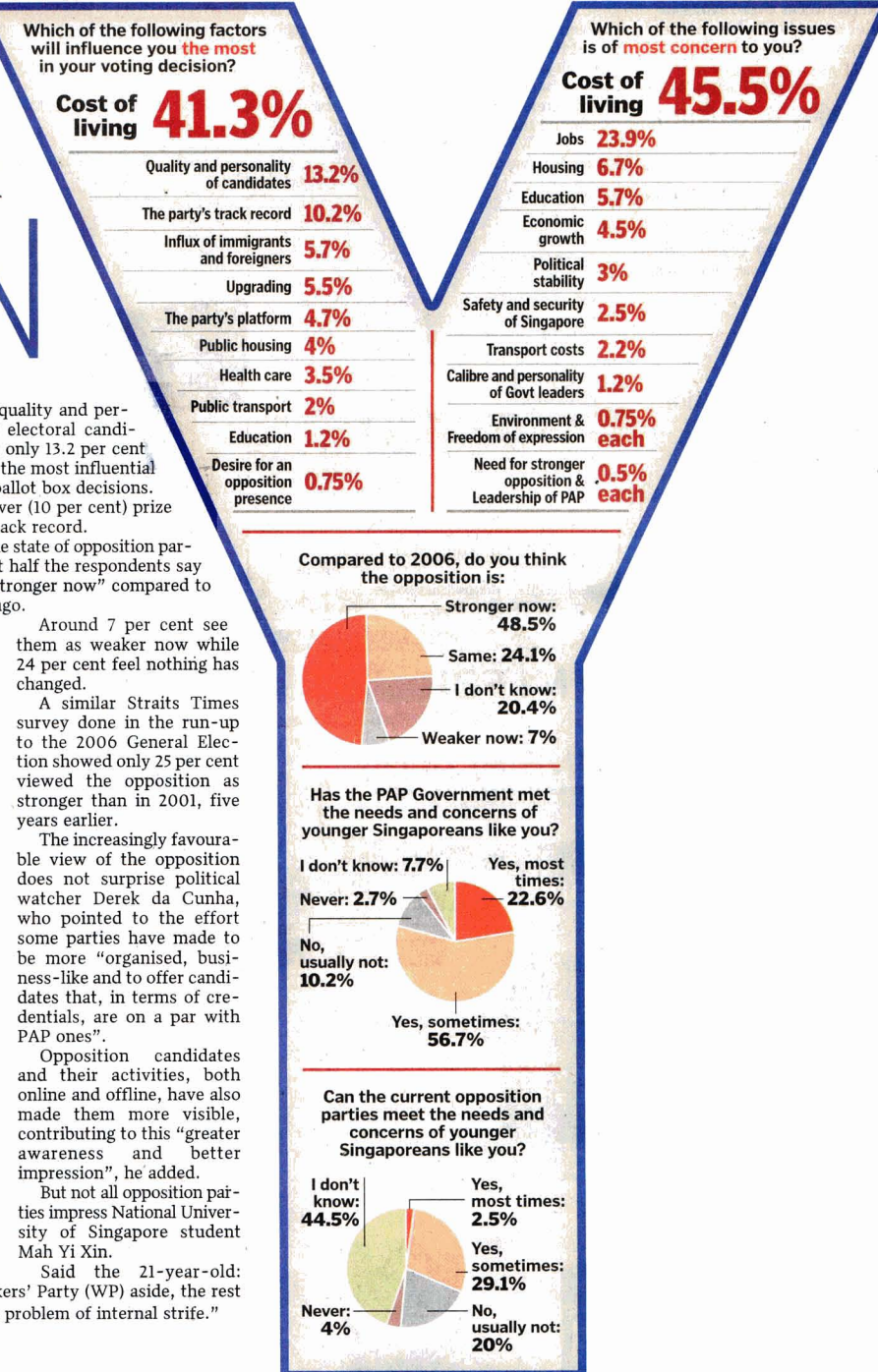
A similar Straits Times survey done in the run-up to the 2006 General Election showed only 25 per cent viewed the opposition as stronger than in 2001, five years earlier.

The increasingly favourable view of the opposition does not surprise political watcher Derek da Cunha, who pointed to the effort some parties have made to be more "organised, business-like and to offer candidates that, in terms of credentials, are on a par with PAP ones".

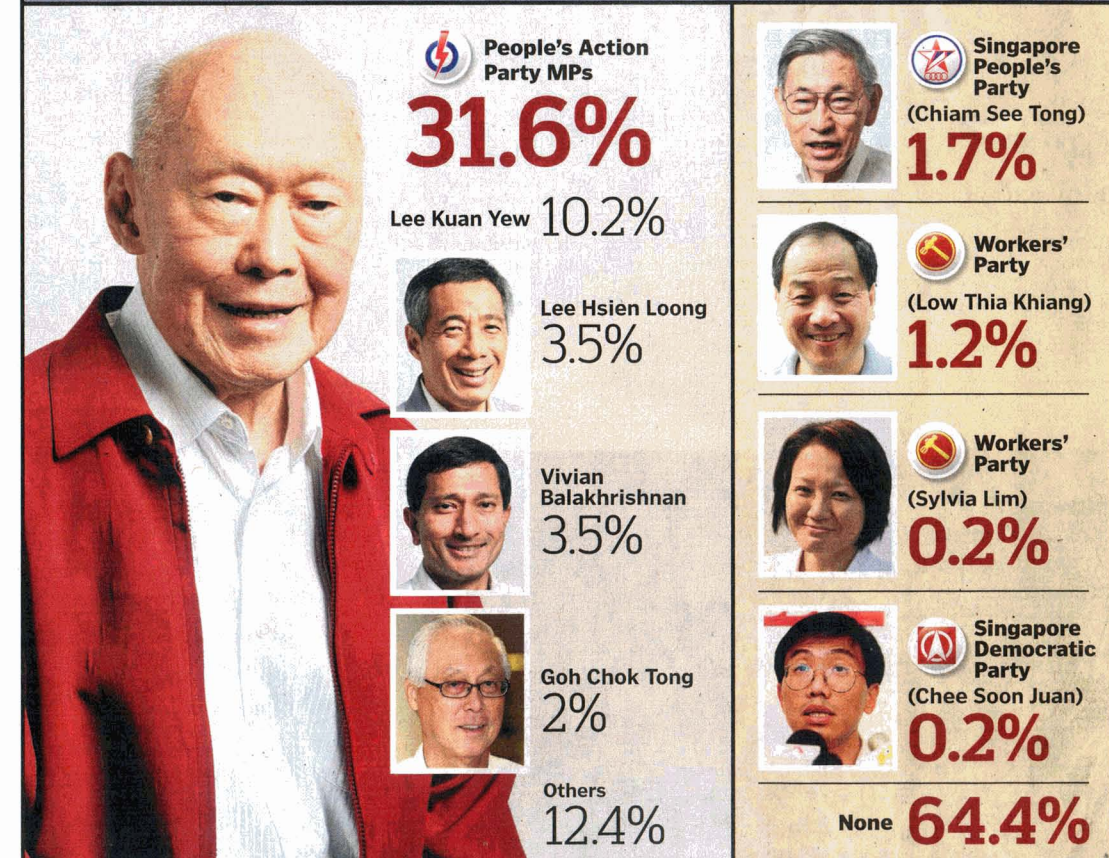
Opposition candidates and their activities, both online and offline, have also made them more visible, contributing to this "greater awareness and better impression", he added.

But not all opposition parties impress National University of Singapore student Mah Yi Xin.

Said the 21-year-old: "The Workers' Party (WP) aside, the rest still have a problem of internal strife."



Which party's politicians most strike a chord with you?



Upgrading carrot gets only a nibble

The upgrading promises that many see as a major campaign carrot of the PAP are likely to be shrugged off by these young voters.

Only 5.5 per cent picked upgrading as an influencing force, fewer than those who consider the influx of foreigners as a top concern (5.7 per cent).

"Upgrading has lost its effectiveness as an electoral carrot," says Singapore Management University assistant professor Eugene Tan. "In fact, among young voters, the concern with fair play strikes a deeper chord."

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) student Lim Zi Rui is one young voter for whom the foreign influx is an important concern. The 25-year-old made waves last November for telling Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at a forum that "we don't really feel comforta-

ble in our country any more".

Although his belief that the Government "brushed off" concerns of the young led him to join the opposition Reform Party shortly after the forum, he is convinced most young people do not view having an opposition for the sake of it as a priority.

This is borne out in the survey, with only 0.75 per cent saying a "desire for an opposition presence" is the issue most likely to sway their vote.

Said Mr Lim: "We are brought up in Singapore to believe the community is larger than the individual."

Hence, the reflex attitude is not to rock the boat, he added.

One area where this year's survey differs from that in 2006 is how these young voters keep track of local political events and issues.

The Internet is the top source for 36.3 per cent while 35.3 per cent head first for newspapers.

But in 2006, the survey allowed voters to tick more than one source, thus making a direct comparison between the two surveys impossible.

The Internet, however, has made enormous strides in the five years since 2006.

Then, 88 per cent said they relied on newspapers, 87 per cent on TV, and only 12 per cent on news websites and 5 per cent on blogs and forums.

But it would be premature to conclude that newspapers have lost their influence, said NTU associate professor Cherian George.

Even those who do not read newspapers are "indirectly influenced" by professional political journalists, he noted.

Mainstream newspapers, he added, often "set the agenda" for broadcasters and independent online media and cited an example: "It was the press that first highlighted (new WP candidate) Chen Show Mao, and the question of whether (WP chief) Low Thia Khiong will move to a GRC."

But one thing is clear, he said. The growing dominance of the online space among the young means that no one party can now dictate "what the nation should be talking about, when and for how long".

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