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DIFFERENT BUT NOT THAT DIFFERENT: NEW MEDIA'S IMPACT ON YOUNG VOTERS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

To examine the impact of new media and youth on the 2011 Singapore General Election, this post-election national telephone survey interviewed 447 young Singaporeans aged 21 to 35. Young Singaporeans, on the one hand, engaged more in this election due to the prevalent use of new media; on the other hand, with higher dissatisfaction over media control and cynical attitude towards the government, almost 50% of them still trusted old media and a higher percentage of them supported the ruling party instead of the opposition. The results show that the youth who were aware of media content control still spent more time on mainstream media than new media, and perceived the former as more important and trustworthy sources of election information. Data analysis reveals that media use was significantly correlated to youth's perceived importance of media on voting decisions. Mass media still had more influence on youth's voting decisions, but the impact of new media on young citizens' votes was greater than on older counterparts. The study also finds that more mature, less-educated, and female respondents tended to support the ruling party more.

The 2011 Singapore General Election (GE2011) has been regarded as a watershed in Singapore's election history by various political parties, as well as by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. He attributed the 6 percentage point swing against the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and its loss of the five-seat Aljunied constituency to

two main factors: the increasing number of critical and outspoken young voters and the prevalent use of new media (Leong, 2011). One quarter of the 2.21 million voters in GE2011 were youth, which we define as those aged between 21 and 34 (Singapore Elections Department, 2011). New media, especially the Internet, provide crucial channels for Singaporeans to express and read political opinions not found in mainstream media due to censorship (Lin and Lim, 2010). Young Singaporeans tend to be more tech savvy than older citizens, which leads to the question of the impact of new media on youth's political participation and voting behaviour.

There are two dominant models of perceived youth engagement in politics: active and engaged, or passive and disengaged (Bennett, 2008; Delli Carpini, 2000). The engaged youth model postulates that the young generation becomes more connected via virtual communities and social media, which empowers them to express ideas and opinions across platforms. In contrast, the disengaged youth model argues that online political participation is sporadic, and parallels the decline in offline political participation and voting. To examine if the youth were more or less engaged politically in GE2011, our study analyses the data from a nation-wide survey carried out after the election. The 2,000 voters surveyed by telephone include 447 youth aged between 21 to 34 years old. Our study aims to uncover the political participation, attitudes, voting behaviour, and media communication patterns among youth in this election. It also investigates how young citizens' use of and attitudes towards media are correlated with their voting behaviour and political traits.

Digital Youth Political Participation and Elections

Advocates of the engaged youth model emphasise that despite declining trust in public discourses, new media empower the young generation to express socio-political perspectives and to participate in online civic action via peer networks or virtual communities (Bennett *et al.*, 2006). Many studies have shown that the new media had critical impact on the youth since the 2008 United States (U.S.) Presidential Election. New media was American youth's first choice

for seeking or sharing election information (Wu, 2009) and for keenly creating political content (Stelter, 2008). The Pew Survey showed young voters were crucial in helping propel Obama's 2012 re-election (Pew Research Center, 2012). However, some argue that although new media offer possibilities for civic participation and online political debates, they lead to fragmentation of socio-political views (Bennett, 2008). Proponents of the disengaged youth model see declining political participation and voting, distrust of the press, and indifference in political discussions even before the rise of the Internet. In their view, young people's "zealotic" new media engagement is not necessarily translated into civic engagement (Bennett *et al.*, 2006).

According to Coleman (2008), there is a cross-national generational shift in the post-industrial democracies, with people transitioning from engaged *dutiful citizens* (DC) to disengaged *actualising citizens* (AC). Dutiful citizens who are more engaged in democracies feel obliged to participate in politics and to vote, to be informed via the media, and to be part of civil society. Actualising citizens who are more disengaged in democracies feel less need for government intervention and less meaning in voting, mistrust the media, as well as favour loosely networked activism to address political issues. In many nations, youth are among those most excluded from the public discourses of government, policy arenas and elections, and hence are AC (Bennett, 2008). They feel that politics is distant, irrelevant, and inauthentic, and tend not to participate or vote.

The evidence is mixed on whether information and communication technology (ICT) savvy Singapore youth can be regarded as engaged DC or disengaged AC in politics and elections. On the one hand, Singapore's political parties have seen a healthy increase in youth involvement before the country prepared for the GE2011 (Lim, 2010). Compared with older counterparts, the youth engage in politics more actively and consume more political content primarily through online channels (Tan, Chung and Zhang, 2011). On the other hand, before GE2011, a *New Paper* survey found that about 40% of Singapore young respondents would not vote in the election if it was not compulsory by law (Tay, 2011a). It also found that the

younger the respondents, the more likely they were to say they would not vote.

Due to inconclusive evidence about young Singaporeans' political engagement and disengagement, we raise the following research questions:

Q1. To what extent did young voters participate in politics during GE2011?

Young AC trust the government less and show a more cynical attitude towards the current administration. According to Hong (2009), politically cynical people tend to show distrust of the political system, including officials and institutions. To find out how youth perceive government control and the extent of their trust in politicians, this study also asks:

Q2. To what extent were young voters politically cynical?

Old and New Media in Singapore Politics and Elections

Since the election in 2001, Singapore has introduced a series of regulations concerning new media, politics, and elections. Under the class license, political websites are automatically licensed, but are also required to be registered with the regulator, the Media Development Authority (MDA), if asked to do so. Several websites, like the now-defunct Sintercom, were asked to register by the MDA and identify the editorial team to ensure that they provided "responsible" online political information.

The 2006 election was the first to see extensive use of the Internet on politics due to the proliferation of online political and election content (Rahim, 2006; Gomez, 2008). Political party websites incorporated interactive features and multimedia content. Opposition politicians used online media to bypass mass media to reach out to the public. Blogging emerged as a critical medium for alternative voices on election issues (Lin and Lim, 2010). Some well-known political blogs even influenced the way mainstream media reported the election (Gomez, 2008).

Just before GE2011, more changes were made to regulations governing new media use in elections. In 2010, online election advertising laws were liberalised, including legalising non-political websites to engage in political discussions (Shanmugam, 2010). In 2011, regulations were amended to allow new forms of online election campaigning (George, 2011).

Singapore politicians have become more Internet-savvy. Some political parties extensively used social media as a campaign tool. Since April 2011, politicians also used social media to humanise themselves and established Facebook pages to express issues and respond to people's queries (Lai, 2011). GE2011 has been marked by an increasing amount of political participation on Facebook, the third favourite online source for GE2011 information (Wee, 2011). Even Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong used the PAP's Facebook account to participate in an interactive online chat and discussed election-related issues with voters before GE2011. More than half of the Members of Parliament (MP) had Facebook accounts to interact with citizens (Hussain, 2011). The opposition parties in GE2011 used the new media to increase their visibility online (Lim, 2010). Netizens actively posted election-related writings and videos, clearly showing that the online platform with looser content regulation had become a popular virtual space for free exchange and sharing of political information.

Recently, highly vocal youth have become active in using new media to engage in political debates (Tay, 2011a). *The New Paper's* survey finds that youth still regarded traditional media as reliable sources of political information, but used online information as supplementary sources (Tay, 2011b). The frequency of media use and perceived media importance are key factors which affect political attitudes of youth (Pinkleton and Austin, 2002). Whether traditional or new media are perceived to be credible by youth is also worth investigating. In order to examine the usage and perceptions of media communication in relation to youth's political behaviour and voting, this study asks:

Q3. How often did young voters use old and new media in GE2011?

- Q4. How important did young voters perceive old and new media as information sources about GE2011?
- Q5. How trustworthy did young voters perceive old and new media as information sources about GE2011?
- Q6. Were the perceptions of new media (i.e. perceived importance, perceived credibility) correlated to youth voting behaviour?

Research finds that when individuals are biased against traditional media, they turn to the Internet for alternative information aligned to their beliefs (Weeks and Southwell, 2010). The Singapore government tailors media laws to maintain national security or social harmony (Rodan, 2003), which leads to criticisms of biased traditional media controlled by content regulation and licensing (Gomez, 2008). With looser content regulation, new media provide a free virtual space for Singaporeans to express alternative voices and read political information usually neglected by mainstream media (Lin and Lim, 2010). It has been argued that content control over mainstream media served as a stimulus for Singaporeans to rely more on political websites and blogs. Indeed, Singaporeans who value alternative perspectives and freedom of speech actively use online political information or engage in discussions (Hong, Lin, and Ang, 2010). Prior studies have found that demographic variables, such as age, socioeconomic status, and educational background, affected individual political inclination and attitudes (Pinkleton and Austin, 2002). This study aims to investigate the relation between youth perceptions of government's media control and voting behaviour. Hence, we propose the following research questions:

- Q7. How did young voters perceive government control of old and new media? How did that relate to youth voting behaviour in GE2011?
- Q8. Did demographic variables (age, gender and education) affect youth voting behaviour in GE2011?

Method

Besides investigating the research questions, this study also examines whether new media communication (perceived media

importance, credibility, and control) and the demographic variables are correlated to the voting behaviour of youth. Our independent variables include old and new media use, perceived media importance, perceived media credibility, media control, and demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, educational level), while dependent variables are political participation, cynical attitude towards the government, and voting behaviour (i.e. who the respondents voted for and which channels influenced them most). This study further compares the results of the youth respondents with the results of the total sample in this GE2011 survey in order to find how the young citizens differ from average Singaporeans in their media use and political participation in this election.

Findings

Q1: To What Extent did Young Voters Participate in Politics, Election, and Voting in GE2011?

The results show that 21 to 34 year old respondents were not keen in participating in offline political activities. Even though 30% of them attended one or more political rallies in GE2011, only 3.6% volunteered to help political parties and 7.5% wrote to newspapers, the government, or an MP in the past six months (Figure 1). In terms of online political participation, we find 28.2% of them wrote on blogs, Facebook or Twitter about the election, and 20.2% forwarded or shared online election content by e-mails, Facebook or Twitter.

Asked which party they voted for, 15.9% of respondents answered "opposition parties"; 26.2% of them answered "PAP"; 14.3% reported "not voting"; and a high percentage of respondents (43.6%) refused to answer (Figure 2).

Q2: To What Extent did Young Voters Hold Cynical Attitudes Towards the Government?

The study shows that young Singaporeans tend to be politically cynical as more than half the respondents (50.2%) agreed that there were too many rules against political participation in Singapore, and

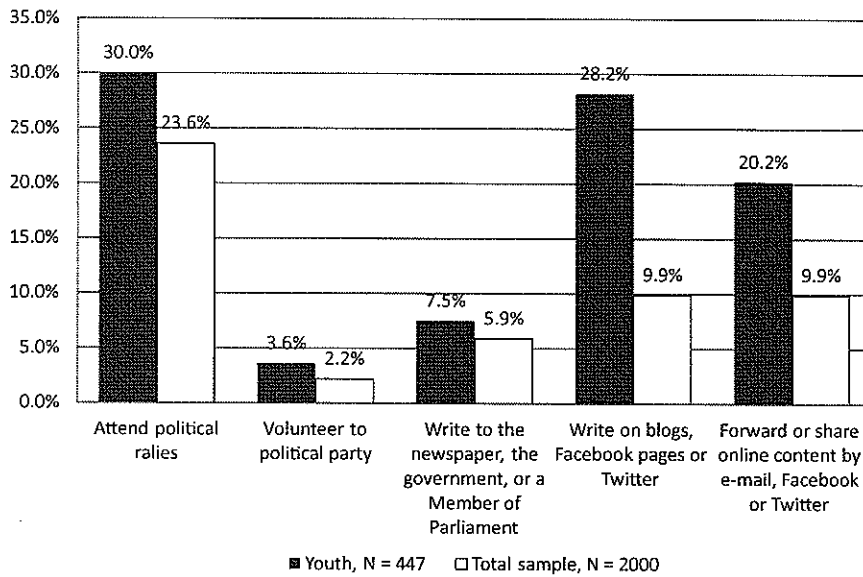


Figure 1: Young citizens' political participation in GE2011

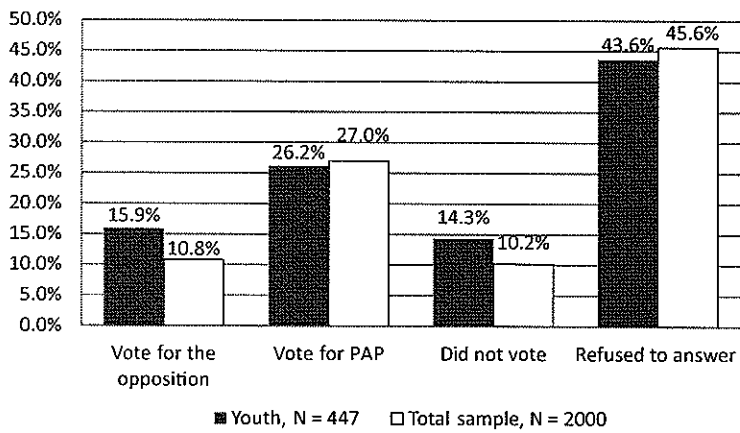


Figure 2: Young citizens' self-reported voting behaviour

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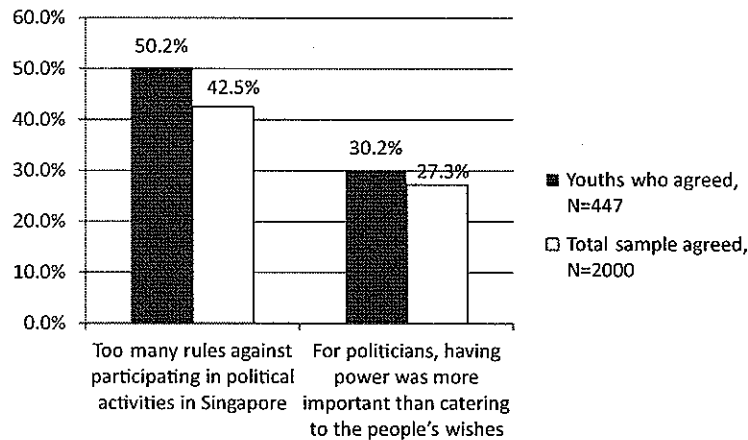


Figure 3: Young citizens' cynical attitude towards the government

30.2% believed that politicians were more interested in power than in serving the public (Figure 3).

Q3: How Often did the Young Voters Use the New Media and Old Media in the 2011 Singapore General Election?

Asked how long they usually used various media to read, listen, or watch GE2011 news, TV, mainstream media-affiliated websites, and newspapers appeared as their top three choices (Figure 4). The study finds that 30.6% of young respondents spent 30 minutes and 9.6% spent 60 minutes a day watching election news on TV; 14.1% spent 30 minutes and 8.5% spent 60 minutes daily reading online websites of Singapore's mainstream media, and 18.8% spent 30 minutes and 6.5% spent 60 minutes a day reading election news on newspapers. Also, 7.6% of them spent 30 minutes reading election news on Facebook, while 7.8% spent 60 minutes daily. In addition, 7.2% spent 30 minutes and 4.5% spent 60 minutes a day reading Internet-only alternative online media (local blogs or news sites such as The Online Citizen, Yawning Bread and Temasek Review). Only 4.3% of youth spent 30 minutes and 2.7% spent 60 minutes daily listening to election news on radio.

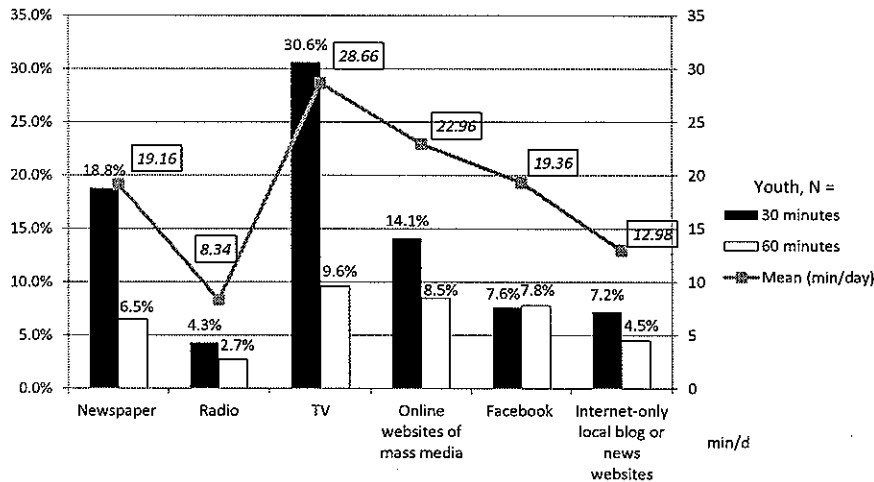


Figure 4: Young citizens' use of old and new media

We find on average that young people spent the most amount of time watching TV to obtain election news during the period of the general election (28.66 min/day), followed by reading mass media affiliated websites (22.96 min/day), reading newspapers (19.16 min/day), learning about election information on Facebook (18.36 min/day), reading Internet-only local blogs or news websites (12.98 min/day), and listening to radio (8.34 min/day). In short, young citizens tend to spend more time using online media than all traditional media except watching TV.

Q4: How Important did Youth Perceive New and Old Media as Information Sources About GE2011?

With respect to perceived media importance, 62.9% of young respondents in this study reported "important" or "very important" when considering using TV and their websites as sources of information about GE2011 (Figure 5). A marginally lower percentage, 51%, considered Singapore newspapers and their websites as important information sources, while 40.3% of them viewed political party websites as "important" or "very important" to them. Facebook

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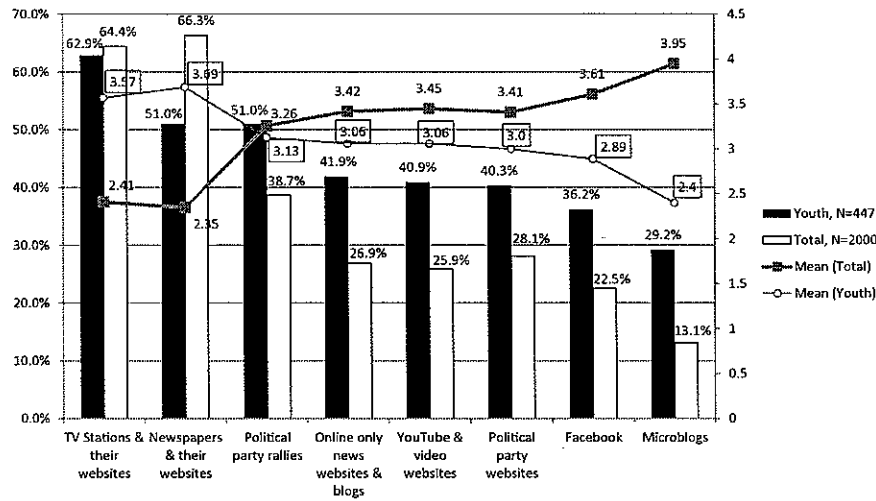


Figure 5: Young citizens' perceived importance of media

and microblogs (i.e. Twitter, Weibo and Plurk) were perceived as important media by 36.2% and 29.2% respondents respectively.

Mean scores show that newspapers and their websites were perceived by youth as the most important information source about GE2011, and this is closely followed by TV and their websites. Other information sources such as attending political party election rallies, online-only news websites and blogs, YouTube and other video websites, and political party websites were perceived as more important than Facebook and microblogs.

Q5: How Trustworthy did Youth Perceive Old and New Media as Information Sources About GE2011?

When respondents were asked how trustworthy TV stations and their websites were perceived as sources of information about the election, 47.2% of them answered "trustworthy" or "very trustworthy", and 47% of them considered newspapers and their websites as credible. Almost a third (30.4%) reported that political party websites were trustworthy, while 17.7% and 10.5% of the respondents trusted Facebook and microblogs respectively (Figure 6).

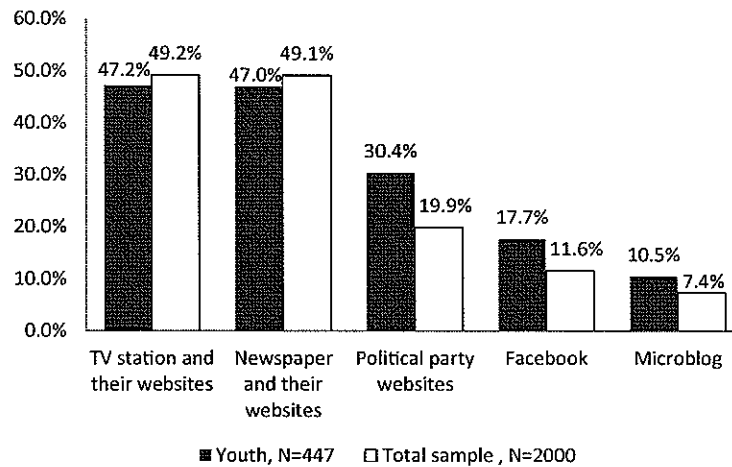


Figure 6: Youth citizens' perceptions of media credibility

Q6: Were the Perceptions of New Media (i.e. Perceived Importance, Perceived Credibility) Correlated to Youth's Voting Behaviour?

Among the respondents who reported voting for the opposition party, 54.8% of them perceived new media (for example Facebook, microblogs, YouTube, online-only news websites and blogs, mobile phone SMSs) as important sources of information about GE2011, and 52.5% of them believed that new media were trustworthy information sources about GE2011 (Figure 7). More than half of the respondents who reported voting for opposition parties considered new media to be important (54.8%) and trustworthy (52.5%). Among those who reported voting for the PAP, only 39.8% of them believed new media were important and 38.6% believed new media were trustworthy.

Q7: How did Young Voters Perceive Government's Control on Old and New Media? How was Perceived Government Media Control Related to Youth's Self-Reported Voting Behaviour in GE2011?

With respect to media control, 64.9% of respondents agreed that there was too much government control over mass media content

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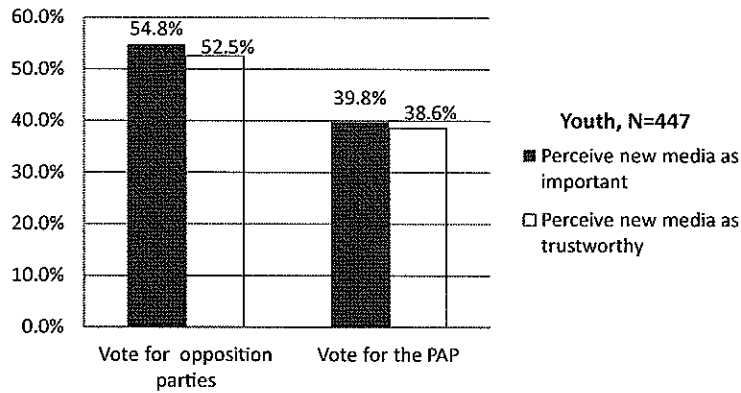


Figure 7: Young citizens' media perceptions and voting

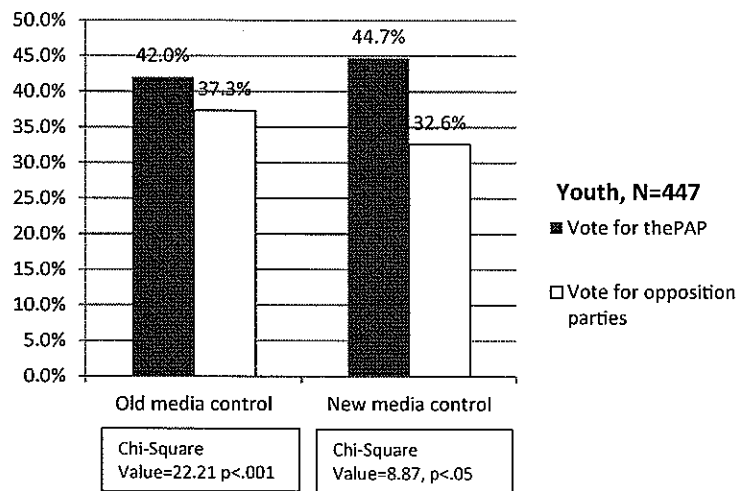


Figure 8: Perceived media control and voting

and 49.9% believed that there were too many restrictions on writing about politics and government on blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Of those who agreed that there was too much government control over mainstream media, 37.3% of them reported voting for the opposition and 42% reported voting for the PAP (Figure 8). Among the respondents who agreed that there were too many restrictions

on online political discussions, 32.6% of them reported voting for the opposition parties and 44.7% reported voting for the PAP.

Q8: Did Demographic Variables (Age, Gender and Education) Have any Connection with Youth's Self-Reported Voting Behaviour in GE2011?

We also find significant relationships between age, gender, and education and self-reported voting behaviour. Young males were less likely to say they voted for the PAP (20.2%) than for the opposition parties (28.6%). On the other hand, young females were more likely to say they voted for the PAP (23.1%) than for the opposition parties (10.3%) (Figure 9). In the 21 to 24 age group, 25.7% of respondents said they voted for the PAP and 18.8% for the opposition parties. In the age group of 25 to 29, 23.1% said they voted for the PAP and 17.5% voted for opposition parties, while 31% of the respondents aged between 30 to 34 said they voted for the PAP and 8.8% of them voted for opposition parties.

The education level is significantly correlated to the reported voting behaviour. Of those with a university degree or higher

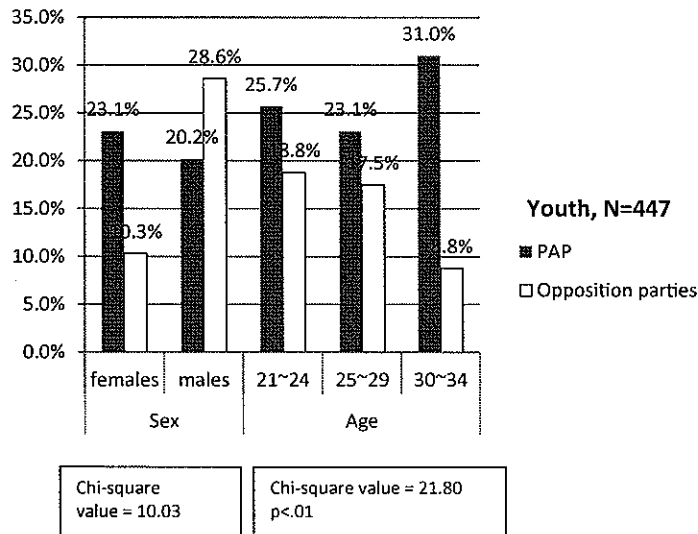


Figure 9: Sex, age and voting

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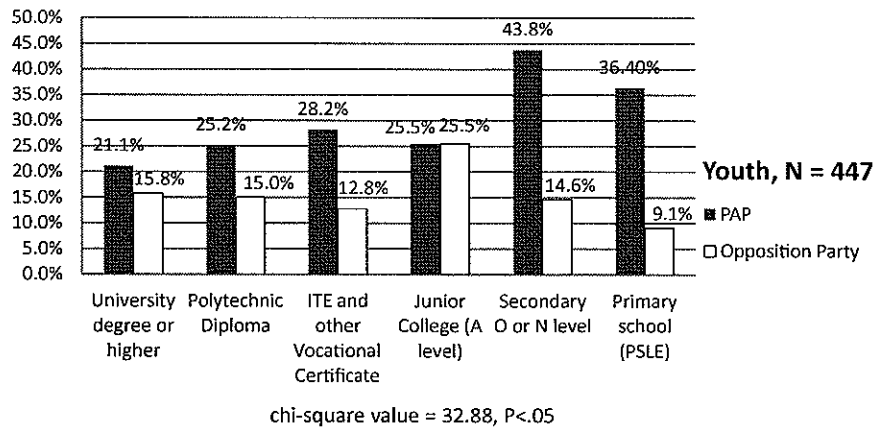


Figure 10: Education and voting

qualification, 21.1% said they voted for the PAP and 15.8% of them said they voted for opposition parties (Figure 10). Besides, 43.8% of the young people whose education level was Secondary O or N level reported they voted for the PAP and 14.6% of them reported they voted for the opposition parties. Respondents with junior college (A level) qualifications show strongest reported support for opposition parties.

Discussion

Similar to findings in most countries, Singapore’s young voters did not participate in traditional offline political activities as actively as they engaged online. Some 30% of them attended one or more political rallies in GE2011, an increase over the previous elections in 2006 and 6.4 percentage points higher than the results of the whole sample population shown in the overall GE2011 survey. Only 3.6% of them volunteered to assist political parties and 7.5% wrote to media or the government about the election and politics. The youth did not show significant differences in offline political participation when compared to the whole population. In contrast to the results of the total sample in the GE2011 survey, youth engaged more in online political participation: 28.2% of the respondents wrote on their blogs,

Facebook or Twitter about this election (much higher than 9.3% for the whole sample), and 20.2% forwarded or shared online election content via e-mails, Facebook or tweets (much higher than 9.9% of the whole sample).

Young citizens showed themselves to be more cynical than the average Singapore voter: compared with the total sample, 7.7% more young respondents viewed political participation in Singapore as over-regulated and 2.9% more young respondents distrusted politicians. On their voting decisions, 14.3% said they did not vote, slightly higher than 10.8% of the whole sample. Among the 42.1% of youth who revealed they voted for PAP or the opposition, 37.8% said they voted for the opposition (much higher than 26.8% of the total sample who indicated voting for the opposition). That is, young citizens were more likely to say they voted for the opposition than the whole population even though the results showed 10.3 percentage points more of the youth who said they voted for the PAP than the opposition parties. Their voting behaviour reflected the degree of their political cynicism and distrust in government and politics.

Surprisingly, this study shows that young respondents aged 21–34 still spent more time on TV (29 min/day) and newspapers (19 min/day) to obtain news about GE2011 and perceived these media as more important and credible information sources, similar to the general Singapore public. In contrast to their use of traditional media, young citizens spent less time reading Facebook (18 min/day) or Internet-only local blogs or news websites (13 min/day) to obtain election information. The analysis indicates that media use was significantly correlated to people's perceived importance of media on voting decisions. As the youth used mass media more often, they tended to think they had greater impact on their voting decisions in GE2011 than new media. However, when compared with the whole population, as the young generation spent more than double the amount of time on Facebook, Internet-only blogs/websites, as well as consumed considerably more political and election news online, youths' voting behaviour was more affected by new media compared to the total population.

In addition, even though they were aware of the government's content control on mainstream media, a higher percentage of youth still considered offline media and their affiliated websites as more important and trustworthy than alternative online media, similar to the responses from the total sample. In contrast with the total sample, youth placed much more significance on new media, especially online only news websites and blogs (41.9%) as important or very important sources of election information followed by YouTube and video sites (40.9%) and party websites (40.3%). Also, 13.7% and 16.1% more young respondents considered Facebook and microblogs as important media for GE2011 than the total sample. Youth showed the highest trust in TV, newspapers and their affiliated websites as well as political party websites, consistent with the results from the total sample's responses. However, their trust in Facebook (17.7%) and microblogs (10.5%) were 6.1% and 3.1% percentage points higher than the whole population. These figures indicate that the cynical youth perceived more importance and trustworthiness in new media's political functions than their older counterparts, even though they were not dramatically different in their media use and their trust in government controlled mass media's political information.

More young respondents (64.9%) believed there was too much government control over mass media content than over new media (i.e. blogs, Facebook, and Twitter) (49.9%). Moreover, those who said they voted for the opposition were more likely to consider new media as important and trustworthy compared to those who said they voted for the ruling party. Among youth, 54.8% of self-reported opposition voters perceived new media (i.e. Facebook, microblogs, YouTube, alternative news websites, blogs, and SMSs) as crucial channels for disseminating election information. Furthermore, 52.5% regarded political information from new media as trustworthy, compared to slightly less than 40% for the self-reported PAP supporters.

Both perceptions about control of new and old media control influenced youth's voting decisions. Of the youth who saw too much government control over mainstream media, 37.3% said they voted

for opposition parties and 42% for the PAP. Among the youth who said there were too many restrictions on new media, 32.6% voted for opposition parties and 44.7% for the PAP.

Moreover, the survey finds that the older and less-educated tended to support the ruling party. Among the youth who revealed their voting decisions, young males voted for the opposition party 18.3% more than young females, while female voters supported the PAP by just 2.9% more than young males.

Conclusion

In Singapore, public discussions of politics are considered a sensitive matter and political participation is less encouraged and less active than in other countries. This study finds young Singaporeans are more engaged politically in GE2011, especially online, than their older counterparts. Compared to older voters, they perceived new media as more important and trustworthy and tended to express their preference for voting opposition. However, despite their dissatisfaction over media control and a cynical attitude towards the government, almost half of young citizens still trusted the mass media and said they voted for the ruling party. In terms of political participation in GE2011, young citizens' media use for politics and election was different from their older counterparts, but not revolutionarily distinctive.

The seemingly conflicting findings reflect the contradictory mindsets of Singaporean youth's attitudes towards politics and mass media. Like the majority of Singaporeans, they agree that the ruling party brings Singapore stability and prosperity, but they long for more freedom. On the one hand, being aware of content control in mass media, the youth trust traditional media for its gatekeeping mechanism, information credibility, and journalistic professionalism. On the other hand, they, more than other populations, value the importance of new media for providing unfiltered and alternative political information and perspectives. Nevertheless, Singaporean youth tended to be less willing to vote if voting were not compulsory (Tay, 2011a), to show less trust in government, politicians, and

mainstream media, and to prefer to use online platforms to address their political concerns. However, as the young voters became actively participatory in GE2011, particularly online, they cannot be categorised as the typical disengaged AC. More importantly, the youth appeared to be more AC-typed in GE2011 than Singaporean voters as a whole. Therefore, Singapore's case fits Coleman's (2008) cross-national generational shift from DC to AC, but the youth with some characteristics of AC used online media to engage in GE2011 actively. The dyadic model of AC and DC requires contextualised adjustments.

In this wired society, new media are expected to gain momentum in political communication, as the growing digital-savvy population will increasingly seek political information and engage in politics across platforms. It is more difficult to reach the youth generation by mass media (Bennett, 2008). Their increasing new media consumption and engagement do not translate directly into engaged political participation. Improved civil curriculum which incorporates the appropriate use of new technologies and social media for political purposes will boost youth's interest and trust in politics and teach them to behave responsibly in the virtual world. Besides, the government should make good use of social media and mobile platforms as effective tools to reconnect with youth-built networks and improve communication with empowered digital natives. It is crucial for the politicians and political parties to develop sophisticated new media strategies for open dialogue with young citizens and assign specialists to facilitate their political discussions and activities on alternative media.

Due to the high non-response rate, this election survey cannot reflect the silent majority's perceptions. Future investigations of relevant issues will further clarify the relationships between youth's media use and political participation and voting.

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