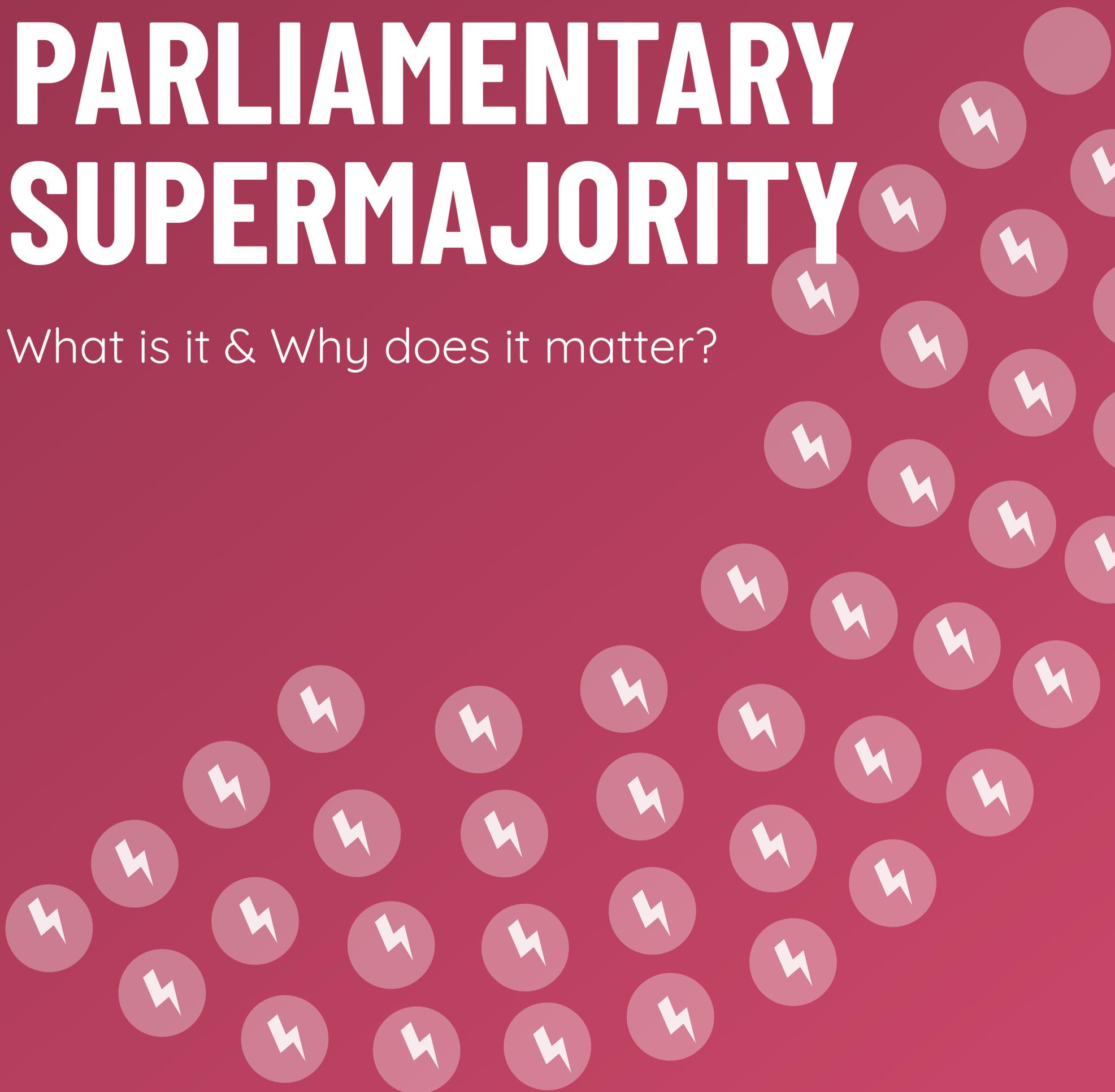Explaining Singapore's

PARLIAMENTARY SUPERMAJORITY
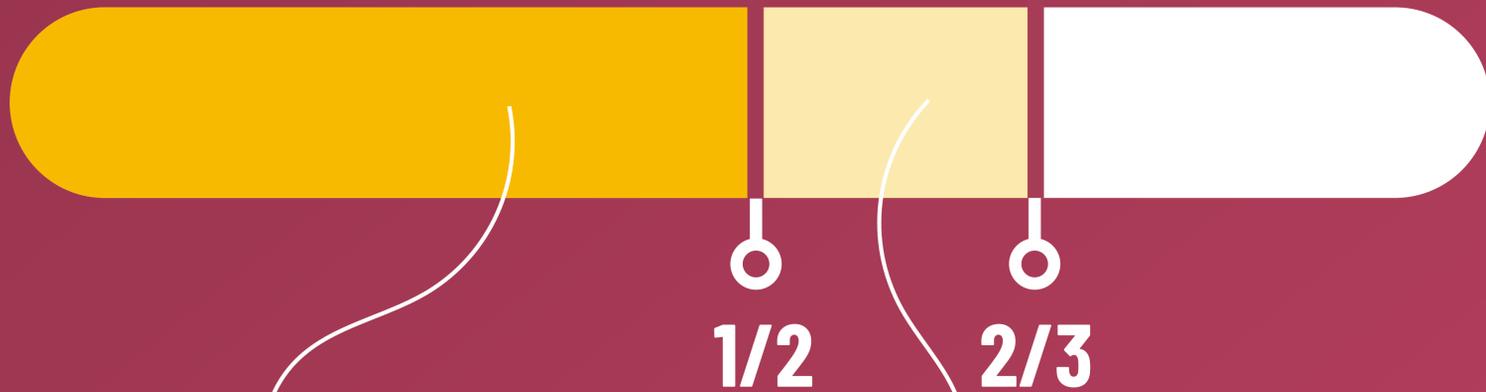
What is it & Why does it matter?

① WHAT IS A SUPERMAJORITY?

Of all seats in Parliament – the Legislative body of government

1/2   2/3

1/2 of the seats is a **simple majority**

- Ordinary Bills can be passed into law by a simple majority of MPs in Parliament

2/3 of the seats is a **supermajority**

- A two-thirds majority is needed to amend most articles in the Constitution.
- As the supreme law of Singapore, amendments require a more rigid standard of 2/3 majority

- With the PAP controlling a supermajority of seats, and presence of the Party whip to enforce party discipline, the **ruling party thus has the ability to amend the Constitution with few other barriers.**

- This is even if the amendment is controversial or contested by Opposition MPs such as the GRC scheme and the 2017 Reserved Presidency.

i Over 50 amendments have been made to the Constitution since Independence in 1965. While the political context is vastly different, the US Constitution, in comparison, has had only 27 ratified amendments in its 232 year history.

CAPE

2 A HISTORY OF THE SUPERMAJORITY

Our Parliament has been dominated by a PAP supermajority since pre-Independence…

1959
The PAP sweeps to power, taking 43 out of 51 seats of the Legislative Assembly. The left wing faction of the PAP broke away following disagreements on merger, and formed the Barisan Sosialis.

1963
The PAP wins 37 out of 51 seats despite garnering just 46.9% of votes. This also came after Operation Coldstore in the same year, which paralysed Barisan with detentions of its leaders and cadres

1968
Barisan boycotted the GE thus allowing the PAP to win all seats

1981
J.B. Jeyaratnam becomes the first Opposition MP since 1968

2011
In the PAP's worst electoral showing, the Workers' Party wins the first GRC in our history, but PAP still retains the supermajority

i
This often leads critics to call Singapore a one-party state. Prof. Netina Tan argues in her research that electoral laws are "manipulated" in order to "manufacture" this Parliamentary supermajority despite a declining vote share.[1] She cites the creation of the GRC scheme, changing electoral boundaries, and nomination regulations as examples. Prof. Chua Beng Huat, however, contends that the performance legitimacy of the PAP also contributes to its electoral showing.[2]

CAPE

But it's still democratic what! Singaporeans, like myself, were not forced to vote for the PAP! Elections are legitimate!

Is it really? Every time in between elections, they say that the PAP "fix" the Opposition parties!

Even still, one-party better lah. I think Singapore, as a small country, cannot afford a "hung" parliament and messy politics.

But as long as the garment has a simple majority, you will not have a hung parliament! And as long as our Parliament remains a civil first-world Parliament, it is a small risk for better democratic governance!

Like the controversial GRC scheme and 2017 Reserved Preisdency

Some more with supermajority, garment can suka suka change laws that should not be changed so easily and even when it is controversial

i

The First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) System also distorts Parliamentary representation where even with a 60% vote share in 2011, the PAP controlled 93% of Parliament seats. This is a similar criticism faced by FPTP electoral systems around the world, such as in Canada.

4 FINAL THOUGHTS?

- Does a Parliamentary supermajority help or hinder governance in Singapore?

- Has it been sustainable and robust enough to effectively represent our society's growing interests and needs? Will it continue to do so?

- Do you agree with the view that increased Parliamentary diversity of parties will lead to a messier and less effective Parliament?

References:
1. Tan, Netina. "Manipulating electoral laws in Singapore." Electoral Studies 32.4 (2013): 632-643.
2. Chua Beng Huat. Liberalism disavowed: Communitarianism and state capitalism in Singapore. NUS Press, 2017.

CAPE, or the Community for Advocacy & Political Education – a student organisation based in Yale-NUS College – was founded in 2017 by students from Yale-NUS College and the Law Faculty of the National University of Singapore (NUS). An independent and non-partisan community, we aim to build capacity for political literacy and constructive participation in Singapore's civic democracy.

GE2020 Voter Education portal: **bit.ly/capeGE2020**
cape.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg

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