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# ***DEMOCRACY IS MORE THAN JUST ELECTIONS***

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How we can build a democratic society based on justice and equality. And why this is important for Singapore.

# SIMI DEMOCRACY?

A system where the preferences, interests, and **will of the people are represented** in policymaking and governance.<sup>1</sup>

**Elections** are a common system in democracies which “selects” and legitimises gov’t leadership

*But elections are not enough!  
Democracy is more than just a transaction between the people and the government.*



*a.k.a. active citizenry*

*a functional democracy also requires ongoing **civic processes** that serve the purposes of:*

1. **checks & balances on authority**
2. **effective participation of citizens**

<sup>1</sup> – This is adapted from a classical Rousseauian definition of democracy

# WHAT EXACTLY ARE THESE CIVIC PROCESSES?<sup>2</sup>

## 1. checks & balances on authority

Checks & balances are important in holding the government **accountable to preferences of people** in between elections, whilst also protecting against a potential tyranny of the majority.

rule of law

constitutional rights

press freedoms

strong civil society

## 2. effective participation

This includes **avenues of participation and consultation** where citizens can organise and advocate for their interests, participate in policy-making, and engage in social change. This also requires **political literacy** where a well-informed and critical-thinking citizenry has the capacity to participate in this democratic society.

vibrant civil society

civic education

freedom of info

press freedoms

collaborative norms

*this also requires norms of an open and collaborative government as opposed to elite, top-down paternalism*

<sup>2</sup> – Adapted from Robert Dahl's On democracy (1998).

# WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

By allowing all citizens (and not just a select few) to engage and participate in shared governance, we are better able to:

1

Strengthen our social compact by ensuring our policies work for all, that no groups are excluded from the system and thus all citizens have a committed stake in our society.

2

Ensure our governance and policies remains enriched and agile through a committed process of a civil contestation of ideas instead of risk-averse groupthink.

A true democratic society reinforces our social **adaptability** and political **resilience** against crises and change.

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Singapore has rising challenges on the horizon – from climate change to an unstable international system. Our society too is also becoming increasingly diverse: old ways of governance may not effectively represent the growing diversity of interests and needs, nor satiate preferences from an increasingly educated middle class. Societies in the past that could not adapt to new challenges or effectively build consensus across interests of various groups invariably collapse.



***WE EACH HAVE A STAKE  
AND A PART TO PLAY IN  
BUILDING SINGAPORE'S  
DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY  
AND OUR FUTURE***

Our momentum and energies  
cannot stop after election day

*Read on to find out the different ways  
that we can do our part as citizens!*



# 1. SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY

do not take civil society or the great gains it has made for our society for granted!

Civil society is the **lifeblood of democracy**. It comprises a huge spectrum of independent organisations in society, such as community groups, NGOs, charities, trade unions, faith-based groups.<sup>3</sup> These groups provide avenues for organised and collective advocacy efforts, and they play an important role in consultative and collaborative policymaking, ensuring that governance remains representative and in touch with society.



*Volunteer your time and skills at civic groups and causes that you care about! Stand up for issues you hold deeply in your hearts! Partake in the civic process as an individual too: talk to your MPs, write in to REACH, sign petitions, write in opinions to the newspapers!*

<sup>3</sup> – Carol, S., & Gillian, K. (Eds.). (2017). *Civil society and the state in Singapore*.

## 2. KEEP YOURSELF INFORMED

even if there's  
no election!

Political literacy, critical thinking, and good faith, open-minded civil disagreements are important elements of a functioning democracy. It is also important for the civil exchange of ideas and opinions – even those you disagree with – and for fair critical evaluations of policies and governance. We must also guard against misinformation and propaganda by both state and non-state actors!



*Read up on Singaporean issues beyond just your Social Studies textbooks or the newspapers! Explore the world of local literature! Keep up to date with Parliamentary debates, civic affairs, ongoing social movements, global issues, criticisms of policies and systemic issues! Read up on our history, read up on academic research and theories of Singaporean civic affairs!*



### 3. **GOTONG ROYONG AND BUILD COMMUNITY**

A democratic society is also strengthened by **strong ties of community** and **civic values of mutual aid, justice, solidarity, and equality**. It is also important to be charitable and civil in discussions with fellow citizens whose views you disagree with.



*Don't just keep your knowledge to yourselves, keep conversations on society and politics going! Raise consciousness of issues amongst your friends and family! Be a caring neighbour, help out at a community garden, learn Singaporean sign language, volunteer your time with the disabled, with old folks, with migrant workers, and less privileged in our midst – whilst also educating yourself of the greater systemic issues at play.*





***IF YOU BELIEVE IN  
DEMOCRACY, YOU  
MUST BELIEVE IN IT  
UNCONDITIONALLY***

*- Lee Kuan Yew, 1955*

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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.

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