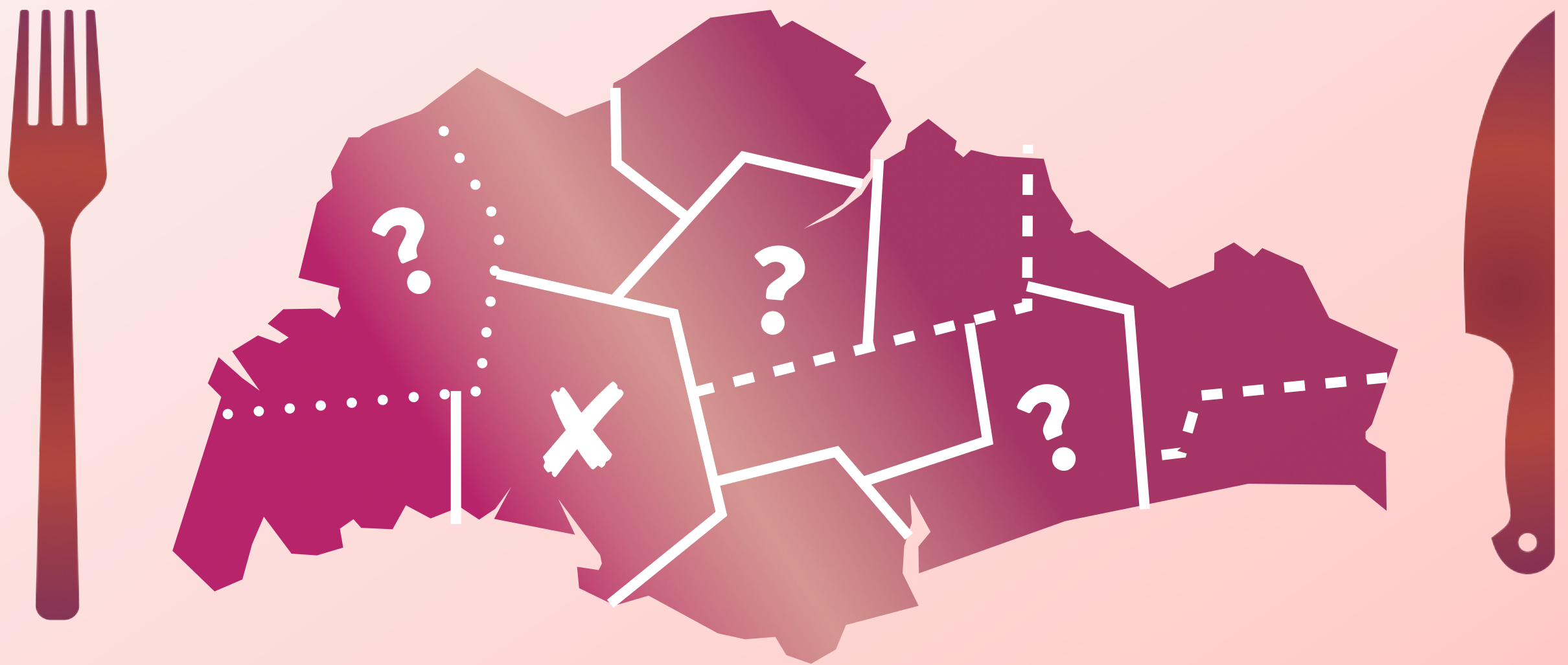
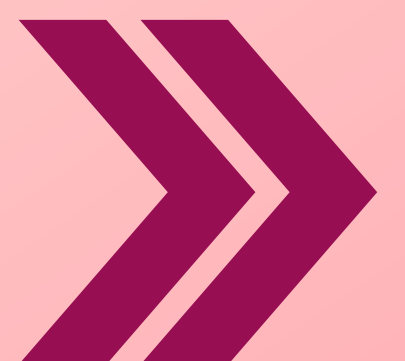


# THE ART OF CARVING ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES



A CAPE explainer on Singapore's **Electoral  
Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC)**



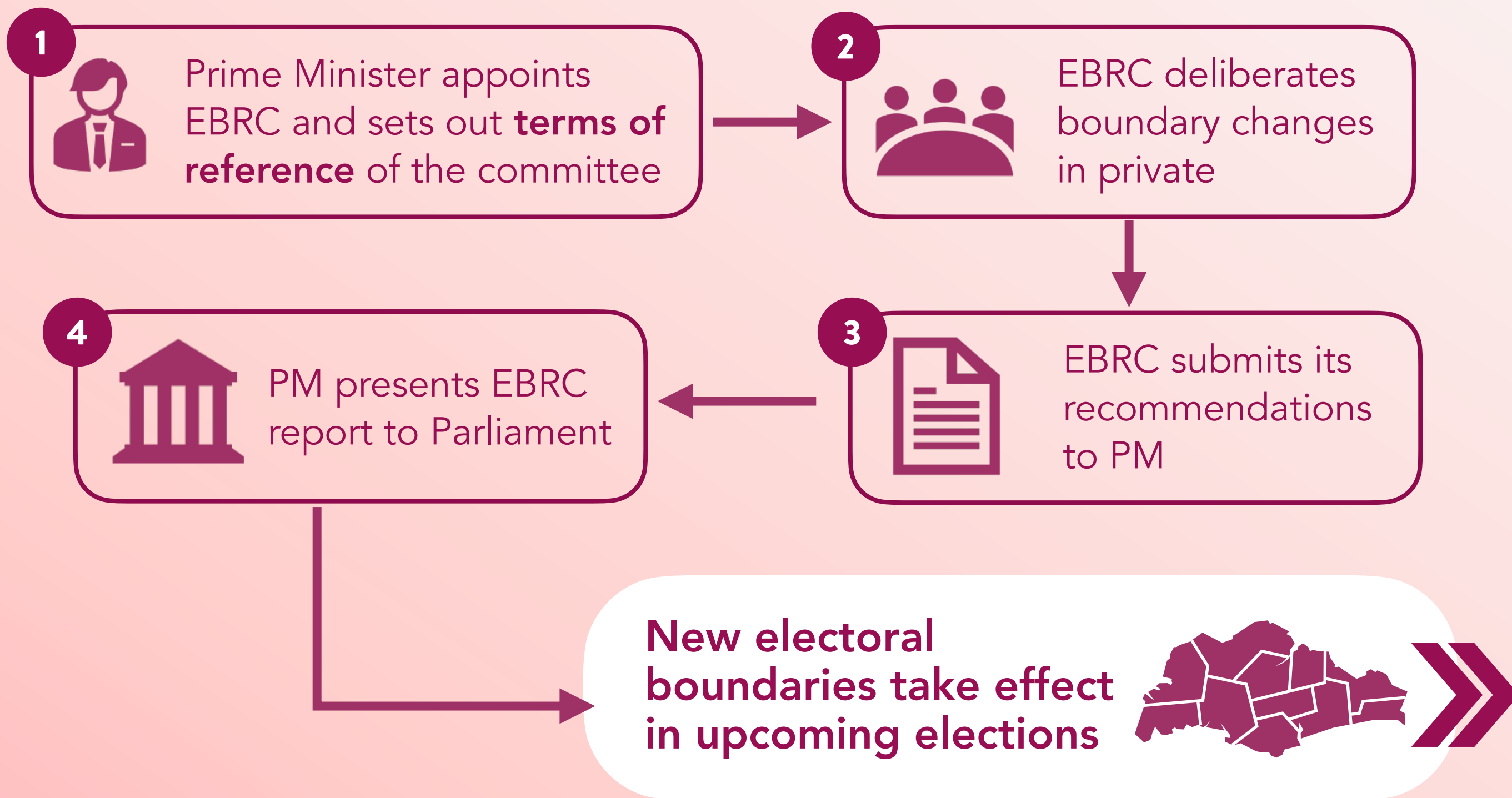
# 1

## How does the EBRC work?



The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) is a team of civil servants that recommend:

- The **number** and **boundaries** of electoral divisions
- The number of Group Representation Constituencies (**GRCs**) and Single Member Constituencies (**SMCs**)



Past TOR included instructions to (i) consider population changes and new housing developments, (ii) change the average size of GRCs, and (iii) change the number of SMCs. During this process, the Prime Minister must act according to the Parliamentary Elections Act: they may specify the number, names, and boundaries of electoral divisions in Singapore, and must ensure that there are at least 8 divisions that are not GRCs at all times.

## 2

# Why does the EBRC matter?

While the EBRC's work might seem technical, understanding its role is crucial for citizens to comprehend the factors shaping their vote and representation.



## 1. REPRESENTATION

By determining the size and composition of constituencies, the EBRC influences how different communities are represented in Parliament.



## 2. ELECTORAL FAIRNESS

Changes in boundaries can affect the electoral chances of both ruling and opposition parties. For example, dissolving a constituency where an opposition party has been gaining ground can potentially impact that party's electoral prospects.



## 3. GRC SYSTEM

The committee's decisions on the number and size of GRCs directly impact how the GRC system functions, such as whether one is represented by a minority MP.



## 4. VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Frequent boundary changes can make it challenging for voters to build long-term relationships with their representatives and for opposition parties to build support bases.



# 3

## The Evolution of Boundaries From Westminster to Uniquely Singapore

**1954**

Rendel Constitutional Commission lays out principles for delimiting electoral districts

**1959**

Singapore gains self-rule, **inheriting Westminster system** with SMCs

**1965**

Full Independence

**1966-87**

Regular redrawing of electoral boundaries to reflect population changes

**1988**

Introduction of **Group Representative Constituency (GRC)** scheme

**1989**

Introduction of **ethnic quotas** for public housing

**1990s onwards**

Expansion of GRC sizes, some growing to include up to six members

Recent years

**Trend towards reducing GRC sizes and increasing number of SMCs**



**In 2025:** we have a peak of 15 SMCs since 1997 and GRC sizes are no larger than 5 members

# 4

## How Singapore's Electoral Boundaries Compares to Other Democracies



United Kingdom



New Zealand



Malaysia



Singapore

Electoral design	Westminster system	Mixed-member proportional and dual-ballot system	Plurality party vote system	Plurality party vote system
<b>Commission's independence</b>	<b>Yes</b> (4 independent Boundary Commissions)	<b>Yes</b> (Representation Commission)	<b>Debatable</b> (under Prime Minister's Department)	<b>Debatable</b> (under Prime Minister's Office)
<b>Regular reviews</b>	<b>Yes</b> (every 8-12 years)	<b>Yes</b> (every 5 years after census)	<b>Yes</b> (not less than eight years)	<b>Yes</b> (generally reviewed just before GE)
<b>Review required by law</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b> (By convention)
<b>Public consultation</b>	<b>Yes</b> (multiple stages, including public hearings)	<b>Yes</b> (public submissions and hearings)	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Minority representation</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b> (Maori representation)	<b>No</b> (rural weightage for Malay majority areas)	<b>Yes</b> (GRC system)
<b>Transparency</b>	<b>Public process</b>	<b>Public process</b>	<b>Public process</b>	Only final recommendations public
<b>Fixed Rules</b>	<b>Yes</b> (650 constituencies, proportional allocation)	<b>Yes</b> (MMP system rules)	Some constitutional basis	Limited guidelines in Parliamentary Elections Act
<b>Quota System</b>	<b>Yes</b> (within 5% of electoral quota)	<b>Yes</b> (may vary by no more than 5% of the average population size)	<b>No</b> (initially had 15% size discrepancy limit, since removed)	<b>No</b> (EBRC last used 30% variation without justification)

## 5

# Implications on Independence, Rule of Law and Transparency

While Singapore's approach might facilitate **swift decision-making**, political observers have **raised questions** on independence, rule of law, and transparency:

Tan observed that the Prime Minister is granted with broad powers that **might violate fundamental principles of the rule of law**, missing key guidelines under the Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA). For example, there are no limits on the number of GRCs the Minister creates, and no indication of how to name and draw electoral boundaries. Without clear guidelines, the Minister is left to exercise discretion. Such discretion goes against the rule of law, which requires that everyone, including the state, is under the law, and that the law applies to everyone equally.

Legal scholar Kevin YL Tan

Suggesting that the current system **leaves room for electoral manipulation**, Tan & Grofman say "[Without] an independent Election Commission, opposition check in the Parliament or appeal process, the unilateral boundary changes can have **partisan effects**."

Political scientists Netina Tan and Bernard Grofman



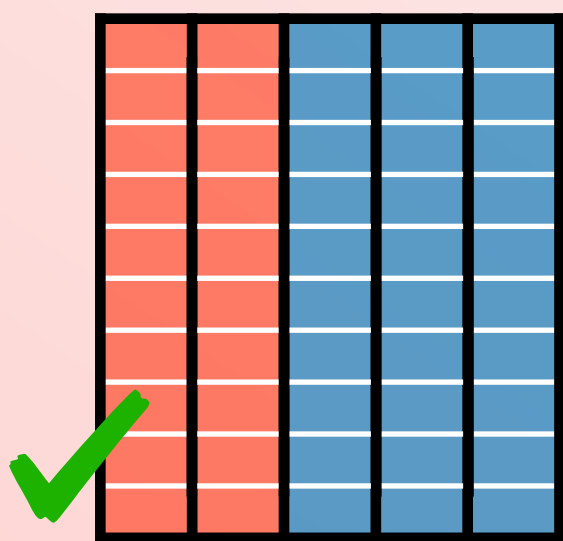
## 6

# Is gerrymandering a risk?

the manipulation of electoral boundaries to favour a political party

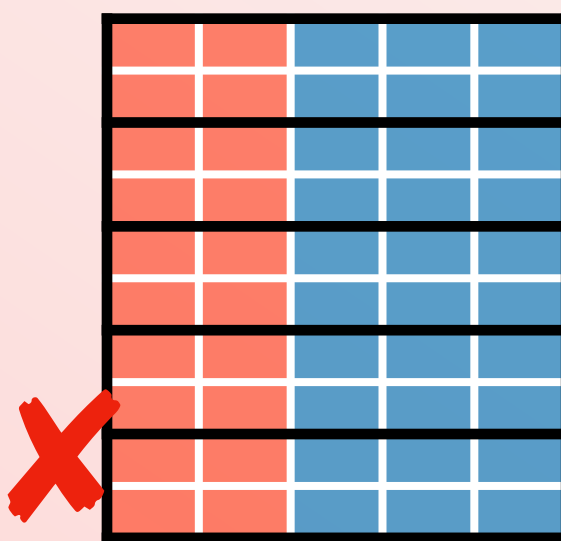
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Two examples of gerrymandered boundaries:



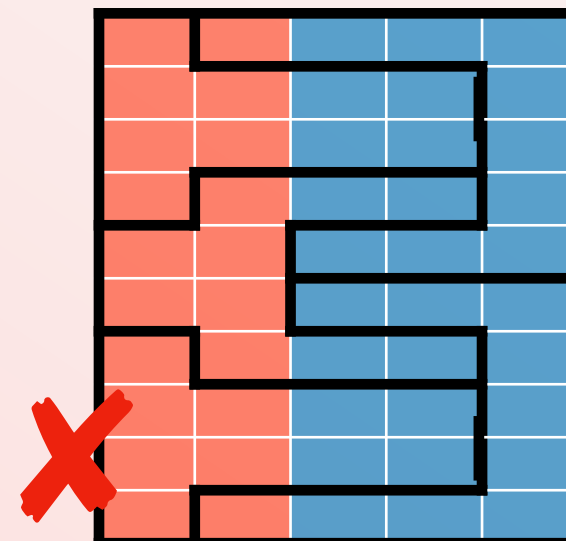
Proportionate districting:  
60% blue voters  
40% red voters

**BLUE MAJORITY**



Manipulated districting:  
5 blue wins  
0 red wins

**BLUE SUPERMAJORITY**



Manipulated districting:  
2 blue wins  
3 red wins

**RED WINS**

Adapted from Steven Nass

Without clear independence, some political observers caution that EBRC decisions **could risk being seen as gerrymandering**

*Political scientists Netina Tan and Bernard Grofman argue that:*

If a party can control the electoral boundary drawing process, they can dissolve certain districts while redrawing other districts to change district magnitude, fragment opposition strength, or pack the opposition into certain SMCs, and improve their chances of winning. Hence, the **redrawing of electoral boundaries can sometimes be perceived as an attempt to gain political advantage.**

Tan, Netina, and Bernard Grofman. "Electoral rules and manufacturing legislative supermajority: evidence from Singapore." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 56.3 (2018): 273-297

## 7

# Is there gerrymandering?

Some cases of changes in electoral boundaries have raised questions in Parliament about potential gerrymandering

A

1991 General Election

**Braddell Heights SMC:** Opposition candidate Sin Kek Tong obtains 47.73% of votes



1997 General Election

**Braddell Heights SMC dissolved** and incorporated into Marine Parade GRC

B

2011 General Election

**Joo Chiat SMC:** WP Candidate Yee Jenn Jong obtains 49.0% of the vote



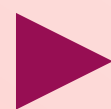
2015 General Election

**Joo Chiat SMC dissolved** and incorporated into Marine Parade GRC

C

2015 General Election

**Sengkang West, Punggol East, Fengshan SMCs:** Strong competition between PAP and WP



2020 General Election

**Sengkang West, Punggol East, Fengshan SMCs dissolved** and incorporated into new Sengkang GRC which WP subsequently won

"Group Representation Constituencies," Motion (Singapore: Parliament of Singapore, July 5, 2023), <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/sprs3topic?reportid=motion-2209>.

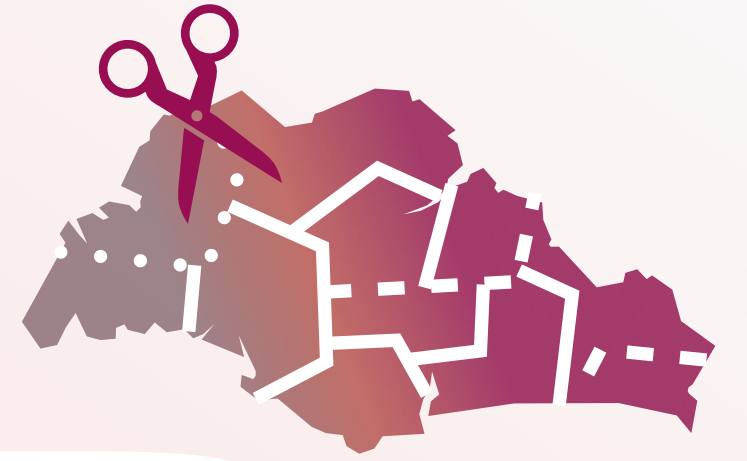
However, the EBRC and government maintained that shifts in electoral boundaries were necessary to reflect population changes, and the electoral boundary drawing process is fair.

See next page!





# Is there gerrymandering? (con't)



"[Amongst] the SMCs where opposition scored below 40% of the votes, on average 58% were retained as SMCs. In comparison, where opposition scored between 40% and 50% of the votes, only 33% were retained on average. [...] Without clear justification, **it is difficult to tell whether the EBRC has changed the boundaries simply because of population shifts and housing developments or for other reasons.** **Suspicious of gerrymandering naturally surface and erode public trust.**"

Progress Singapore Party (PSP) Non-  
Constituency Member of Parliament Hazel Poa



"First, the EBRC does not have access to voting information and hence, does not make its recommendations based on voting patterns. **The EBRC does not consult the PAP or any other political party.** Party politics do not come into this exercise. The EBRC comprises senior civil servants with no party allegiance. Therefore, unlike other countries where political parties are involved in the boundary-drawing process, **the EBRC's compositions and processes are insulated from party politics.**"

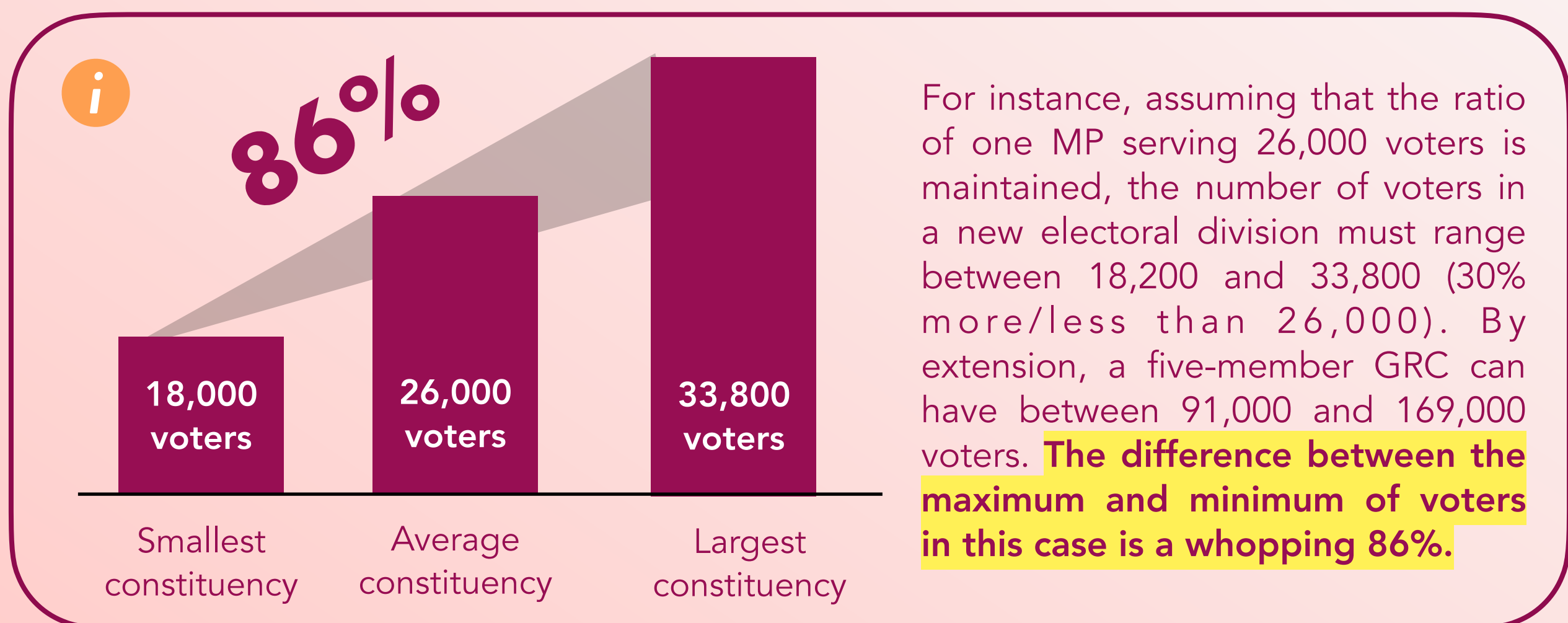
Minister-in-charge of the Public Service Chan Chun Sing



# 9

## Some votes are more equal than others

Another point of contention is the **difference in constituency sizes**. When redrawing electoral boundaries, EBRC uses a 30% deviation rule to determine the minimum and maximum number of voters in an electoral division.



Political observers have argued\* that a 30% deviation is far too wide as it leads to an uneven distribution of voters, which implicates voter equality. For example, in GE 2006, Potong Pasir SMC had just 15,888 voters, while Bukit Panjang SMC had 30,452 voters. **This means it took twice as many voters in Bukit Panjang to send an MP to Parliament than voters in Potong Pasir.**

## Should your postal code determine how much your vote counts?

\*Eugene Tan, "A 30-per-Cent Deviation Is Too Wide," Today, November 1, 2010, <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5750>



Malapportionment refers to the creation of electoral districts with **divergent ratios of voters to representatives**, **providing unfair advantages to political parties contesting certain districts.**

10

## Malapportionment: Myth or Reality?

Although the 30% deviation rule could be seen as an act of malapportionment for partisan gains, some scholars note that **there is NO clear evidence to support this claim.** Tan and Grofman found that while constituency sizes vary, there is no consistent pattern of population changes that favour the ruling party. However, Tan cautions:

“If not all voters are treated alike, this may violate Article 12 of the Constitution which guarantees to all persons, “equal protection of the law”. Furthermore, the exercise of discretion with regard to constituency sizes and demographics bears no relation to the object of Section 8 of the PEA, which is to provide for free and fair elections on the basis of voter equality. This may therefore lead to a potential legal challenge on grounds of administrative illegality or irrationality.”

*Netina Tan, Academia SG. “How the Drawing of Electoral Boundaries Challenges the Principle of Equality.”*

In short, the wide variation in constituency sizes raises important questions about **voter equality** and the **fairness of the electoral system.**



# Debated Recommendations

Recently, PSP Secretary-General Hazel Poa proposed several revisions to the EBRC:

(\*This list is not exhaustive)

## 1. Establish an independent EBRC



The PSP's Hazel Poa proposed that the High Court judge chairs the EBRC, instead of the Secretary to the Prime Minister.

However, Minister Chan Chun Sing pointed out that having a High Court judge chair the EBRC would not remove suspicions about the independence of the EBRC, as other jurisdictions that have done so have faced questions about who appoints the judge, and whether the judge has a political bias. As Chan notes, "the judiciary ends up getting drawn into the political debate, and the judiciary is politicised."



i

The debate reflects the different perspectives on maintaining the separation of powers, and ensuring that the judiciary is not politicised. **Who and what institutions do you think are suitable candidates to chair the EBRC?**

*Fabian Koh, CNA "Govt Rejects Opposition MPs' Electoral Boundary Suggestions, Says EBRC Is Free from Political Intervention."*

## 2. Reducing the margin of deviation

The PSP also proposed revising the margin of deviation to 10%, citing examples of the UK and Australia, to ensure fair distribution of duties among MPs, and fairer voting weightage.



However, Minister Chan Chun Sing explained that due to Singapore's smaller population and higher population mobility, a narrower margin of deviation could lead to several unintended consequences:

1. **More frequent boundary changes:** With a smaller population base, even minor population shifts could trigger boundary adjustments if the margin is too narrow.
2. **More disruptive redrawing:** Smaller constituencies are more sensitive to population changes, potentially requiring more extensive redrawing to meet a tighter deviation standard.
3. **Potential loss of community continuity:** Frequent changes could disrupt the formation and maintenance of community ties within constituencies.
4. **Impact on MP-constituent relationships:** Constant redrawing could affect the ability of MPs to serve their constituencies effectively over time.

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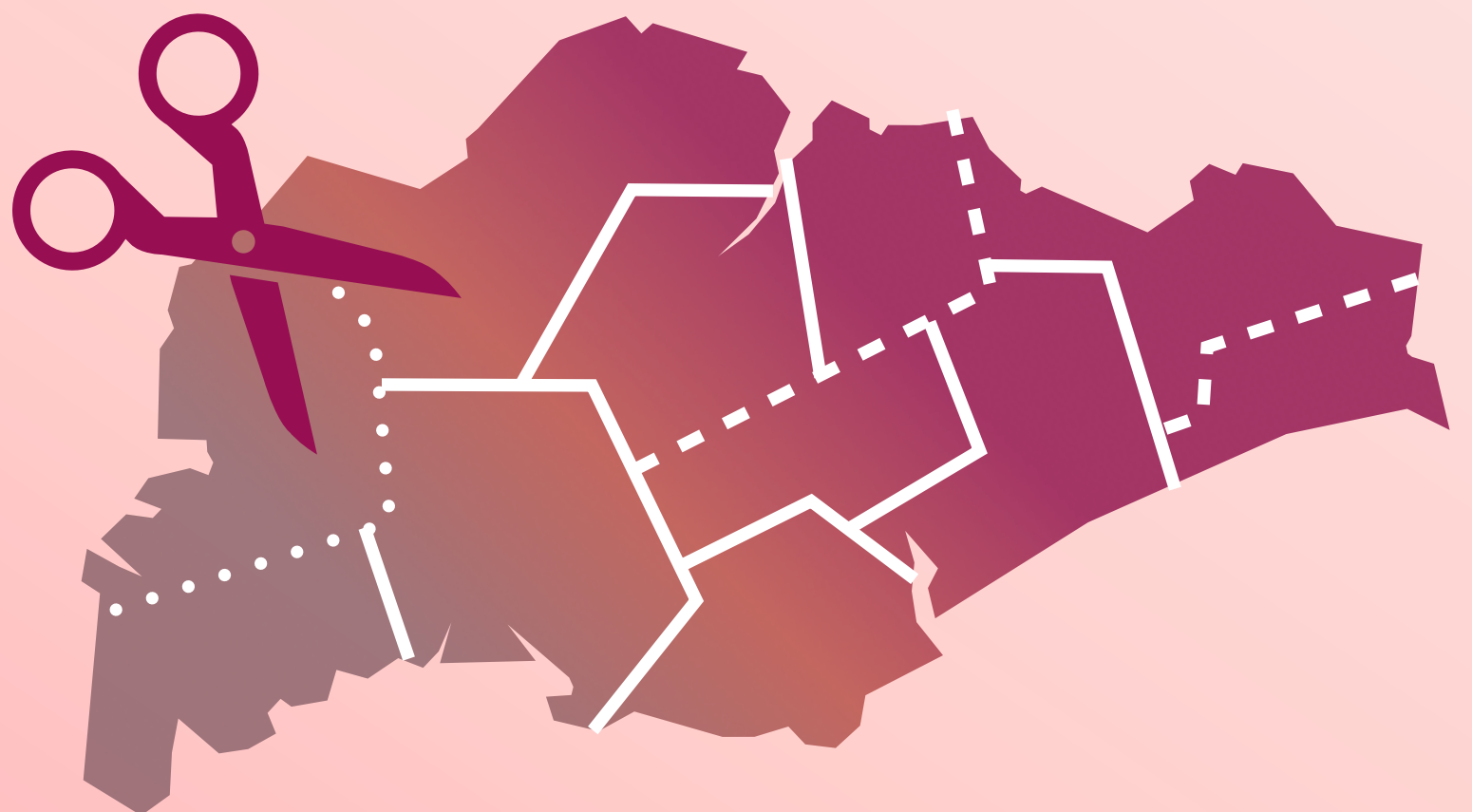
That said, it appears that some of these issues are already a result of the current electoral boundary design: dissolving SMCs, renaming electoral divisions, and changing the composition of constituencies. **How can we ensure fairer voter weightage and distribution of MP duties without exacerbating the issues associated with boundary changes?**



# 13

## Food for Thought

1. Does the current electoral system prioritise efficiency over independence?
2. What are the trade-offs involved in different approaches to managing electoral boundaries?
3. How can we balance the need for electoral boundaries to reflect population changes and ensure minority representation, as well as the desire for constituency stability?
4. Who and what institutions would be suitable candidates to chair the EBRC?





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