

Explaining Singapore's

PARLIAMENTARY SUPERMAJORITY

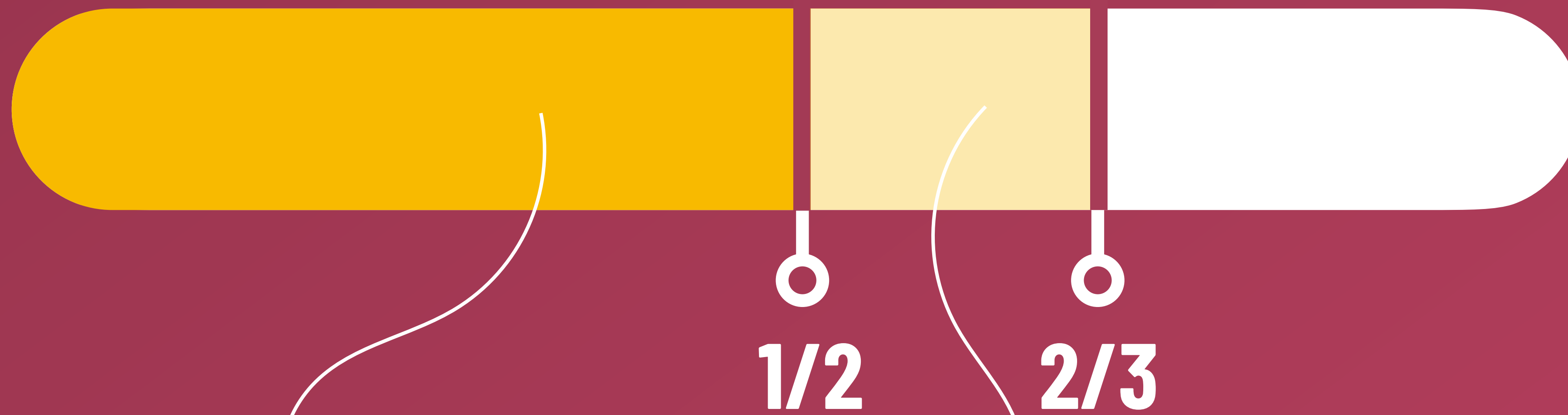
What is it & Why does it matter?



1

WHAT IS A SUPERMAJORITY?

Of all seats in Parliament – the Legislative body of government



1/2 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 2/3 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 government thus has the ability to amend the Constitution with few other barriers.**
- This is even if the amendment is controversial or hotly contested by Opposition MPs such as POFMA and the 2017 Reserved Presidency.



Many democracies require a supermajority support for changing special or protected rights and laws, such as the Constitution. One key reason is to ensure that simple majorities do not erode fundamental rights of minorities that are guaranteed by law.

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

In GE2020, the PAP maintained an overwhelming 90% supermajority

(Winning 83/93 elected seats, despite a 61.23% vote-share)

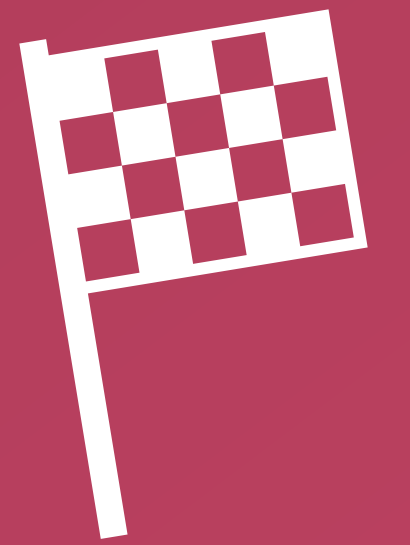
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THE SUPERMAJORITY IS WORSENERD BY SINGAPORE'S ELECTORAL QUIRKS

Political scientist Assoc. Prof. Netina Tan argues in her research that Singapore's electoral laws are "manipulated" in order to "manufacture" this Parliamentary supermajority amid a declining electoral vote share.¹ She points to the following quirks:

1

First-Past-The-Post Voting System: FPTP voting has been criticised and reformed in many democracies for creating a winner-takes-all effect, e.g. a candidate can win a slim 51% majority but wins the election, if many candidates from the same party win such slim majorities, you can have a lopsided representation in Parliament of the winning Party despite a small vote share.



2

The GRC System disadvantages small parties by creating higher resource and candidate barriers to entry, while also boosting incumbency advantage by boosting weaker candidates via grouping them with "anchor" candidates.



3

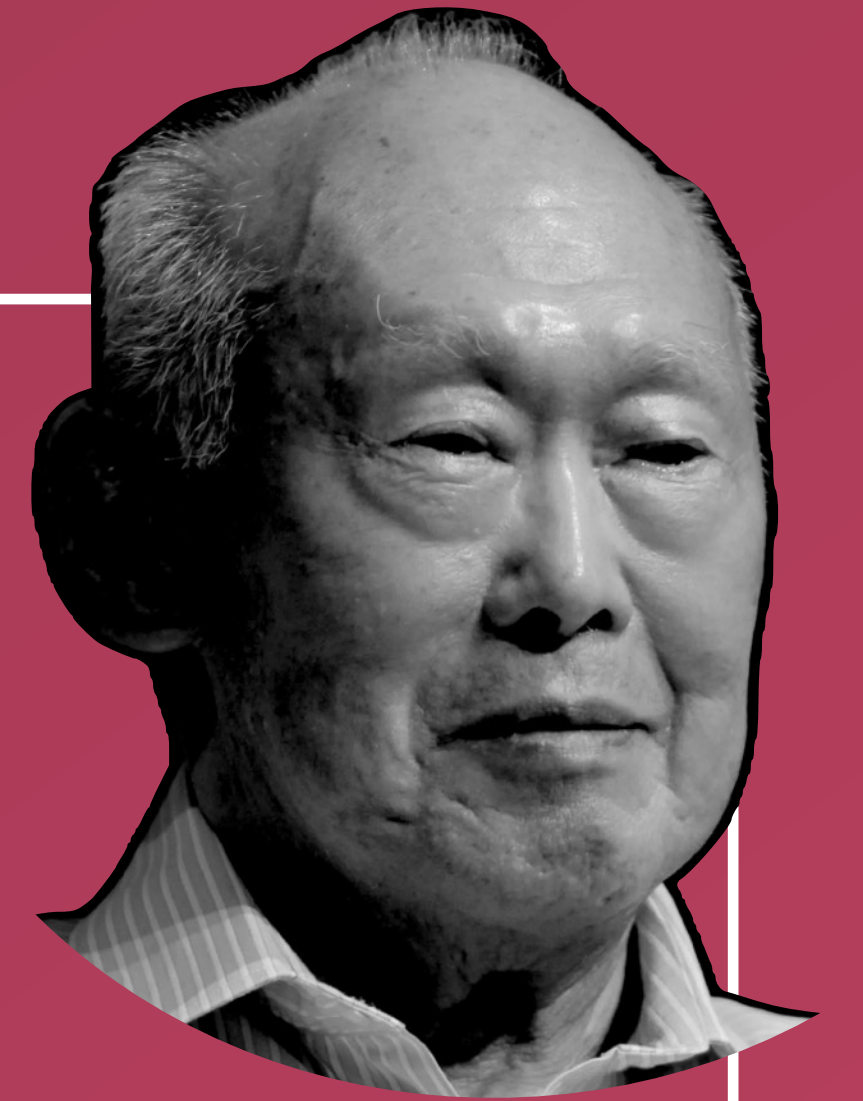
Lack of an independent EBRC and secrecy of boundary change timings also impact incumbency advantages. This has led many criticisms of perceived "gerrymandering".



Prof. Chua Beng Huat, however, contends that the performance legitimacy of the PAP also contributes to its electoral showing, beyond just electoral quirks.²

4

EVEN LEE KUAN YEW SAW A NEED TO BALANCE PAP'S SUPERMAJORITY



1984: Introducing the Non-Constituency Member-of-Parliament (NCMP) scheme

Recognising the critical lack of Opposition voices in Parliament, the then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew introduced the scheme to appoint the best-performing losers in a GE to Parliament.

In a 2016 speech by then-PM Lee Hsien Loong, he reiterated that the NCMP scheme was “good for the Government, good for Singapore” by benefiting from a better “**contest of ideas in the House**”.³



The **Nominated MP (NMP) scheme** was also introduced in 1990 to bring more independent voices into Parliament to further counter the supermajority. Fear of a “freak election” where a non-PAP government inherits the overriding power of the state (with or without the supermajority) also led Lee Kuan Yew to create the **Elected Presidency** as an additional check-and-balance.

5

LIDDAT GOOD OR BAD?

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

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

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

But as long as the government 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!

Some more with supermajority, government can suka suka change laws that should not be changed so easily and even when it is controversial, like the 2017 Reserved Presidency!

Okay but our government has been fairly responsible with its power, compared to so many other countries with poor governance!

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.
3. PM Lee Hsien Loong at the debate on President's Address on 27 January 2016, www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loong-debate-presidents-address-27-january-2016



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