

Explaining Elections in Singapore: Dominant Party Resilience and Valence Politics

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This Preprint: 9 February 2018

Please see and cite published version:

Oliver, Steven and Kai Ostwald. 2018. “Explaining Elections in Singapore: Party Resilience and Valence Politics.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18 (2): 129-156.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2018.15>

Abstract

The People’s Action Party (PAP) of Singapore is one of the world’s longest ruling dominant parties, having won every general election since the country’s independence in 1965. Why do Singaporeans consistently vote for the PAP, contrary to the expectations of theories of democratization? We argue that valence considerations—specifically, perceptions of party credibility—are the dominant factor in the voting behavior of Singapore’s electorate and a critical piece to the puzzle of the PAP’s resilience. Furthermore, we argue that the primacy of valence politics arose in part by design, as the PAP has used its control of Singapore’s high-capacity state to reshape society and thereby reshape voter preferences towards its comparative advantages. We use a multi-methods approach to demonstrate evidence in support of our argument through a within-case, historical analysis; a qualitative analysis of contemporary party competition and voter behavior; and a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the 2011 and 2015 general elections. Ultimately, our findings suggest that a focus on valence politics can increase the resilience of dominant parties, but that such a strategy also faces natural limits to the advantages it confers.

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[‡] Thanks to Shane Barter, Soo Yeon Kim, Elvin Ong, Ja Ian Chong, Edgar Liao, Isabel Chew, and Gillian Koh for helpful discussion and feedback. Thanks also to participants at Yale-NUS College Social Sciences Brown Bag and NUS Political Science Department Seminar series for constructive criticism and feedback. Kenneth Yun provided excellent research assistance. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2016 American Political Science Association conference under the title, “Explaining Elections in Singapore: Party Credibility and Valence Politics”. All errors are our own.

With each successive victory, the dominant party gains increased resources with which to reshape the country's politics and society. Used wisely, these resources allow the dominant party to remake the country in its own image and likeness, in ways designed to benefit its supporters and weaken its opponents.

—T.J. Pempel (1990, 334)

In new countries, democracy has worked and produced results only when there is an honest and effective government, which means a people smart enough to elect such a government. Remember, elected governments are only as good as the people who choose them.

—Lee Kuan Yew, *Eve of National Day Broadcast* (1988)

1 Introduction

Why do Singaporeans vote for the People's Action Party (PAP)? From Singapore's achievement of independence in 1965 to the present, the PAP has won each of the country's twelve post-independence general elections with at least 60% of the popular vote.¹ Each of these elections has been open to challengers and free of the electoral fraud and threats of violence that commonly buttress dominant party regimes across East and Southeast Asia. The PAP's dominance over Singapore's politics and society has, in short, been secured and continuously renewed through the votes of Singaporeans. The resilience of the PAP thus constitutes a genuine puzzle, as "Southeast Asia's miracle city-state" is "the only among the world's richest [and open] countries never to have changed its ruling party" (The Economist 2015, 1), thereby contradicting the claims and predictions of numerous theories of democratization.

We argue that valence considerations are the dominant factor in explaining why Singaporeans vote for the PAP and a critical piece to the puzzle of the PAP's resilience.

¹The PAP also won the pre-independence 1959 and 1963 Legislative Assembly elections.

Specifically, we claim that assessments of party “credibility”—what Au (2010, 105) describes as the sense of “trustworthiness, competence, and professional qualification that has become the touchstone of local electibility”—are the primary drivers of voting behavior in Singapore, and thus that they affect outcomes more substantially than do either positional considerations like ideological and policy alignment between voters and the PAP, or a ‘climate of fear’ regarding the potential consequences of supporting the opposition.

Furthermore, we argue the primacy of valence politics is at least partially by design. Since independence, the PAP has done as Pempel (1990, 334) suggests: it has used its control of Singapore’s high-capacity state to reshape politics and society “...in its own image and likeness” through an ensemble of policy initiatives and institutional reforms. Voters, as a result, increasingly have focused on valence considerations, which contributes to the resilience of the PAP in two ways: First, when voters focus on valence considerations, the PAP maximizes the dividends it draws from its control of the state and from Singapore’s successful record of development. Second, a strong focus on valence considerations crowds out ideological alternatives that are incompatible with the PAP’s platform. Electoral competition on valence considerations, in short, allows the PAP to effectively maximize its advantages and minimize its vulnerabilities; this explains a substantial portion of the puzzle of the PAP’s resilience.

By showing that a large portion of Singaporean voters “sincerely” support the PAP on valence considerations, our argument stands in contrast with alternative explanations that emphasize ideological or policy alignment (e.g. Singh 2012), as well as those that highlight a ‘climate of fear’ to explain PAP support (e.g. Ortmann 2011; Amnesty International 2009). In terms of the broader literature on dominant party regimes, our argument builds on Magaloni’s (2006) influential work on voting behavior under dominant party rule in two ways. First, we show that voters “sincerely” support dominant parties for reasons beyond

just expected macro-economic performance; rather, broader concerns ranging from social stability to the efficient and responsive delivery of local services likewise motivate vote choice. Second, we show that voter preferences in dominant party regimes are endogenous to the dominant party’s preferences over the long term. This contrasts with implicit assumptions in the literature that voter preferences are fixed. The time distinction is critical: in the short term, dominant parties respond to the sticky preferences of voters through incentives designed to maximize their vote share *given those preferences*. In the long term, as the Singaporean case demonstrates, dominant parties can use their control of the state to reshape voter preferences themselves. When this is done strategically, voter preferences can be made to align with the strengths of the dominant party, thereby reinforcing the equilibrium that perpetuates its dominance.

We use a multi-methods approach that leverages novel data and a unique feature of elections in Singapore to produce evidence in support of our argument. We begin with a within-case, historical analysis in Section 3 to demonstrate that the centrality of valence considerations is at least partially by design. After a period of political pluralism in the years before and immediately after the achievement of self-rule in 1959, serious ideological alternatives to the PAP were eliminated in the early 1960s. The PAP faced virtually no challengers until the 1980s, paving the way for dominant party rule. During this period, the PAP used its control of Singapore’s high-capacity state to reshape politics and society through an ensemble of policy initiatives and institutional reforms that entrenched the PAP’s paradigm of effective governance. By the time the opposition first mounted comprehensive challenges in the mid-2000s, the primacy of valence considerations—described in the local political vernacular in terms of “credibility”—was widely internalized by Singapore’s electorate.

We then substantiate the endpoint of this claim by conducting a qualitative analysis of

contemporary party competition and voter behavior during recent general elections (GEs) in Section 4. First, we show that opposition parties generally do not attempt to differentiate themselves from the PAP in positional terms when making appeals to voters. By contrast, there is significant variation between the PAP and opposition parties in terms of voter assessments of party credibility, with the PAP being broadly viewed as more competent and capable than opposition challengers. Second, we review survey evidence that suggests voters overwhelmingly cued on valence considerations in GE 2015: factors like the quality of party leadership, parties, and candidates were more frequently identified as important for voters' decisions than were positional issues, government benefits, or fear of consequences from voting against the government (Welsh 2016b).

Next, we conduct a comprehensive quantitative analysis of Singapore's 2011 and 2015 GEs, in which we leverage a unique feature of elections in Singapore to demonstrate the effect of party credibility on PAP support. The PAP competes in a series of two-cornered fights (i.e. pair-wise contests) against a range of opposition parties. This pattern of competition allows us to use historic survey data on party credibility to estimate its marginal effects on PAP support. We leverage novel data from a variety of other sources, which we describe in detail in Section 5, to generate covariates that engage the work of numerous scholars of Singaporean politics and control for alternative explanations. These include candidate incumbency and challenger quality (Mutalib 2003); party and state grassroots infrastructure (Slater 2012; Welsh 2016a; Weiss, Loke, and Choa 2016); the demographic composition of electoral divisions (Fetzer 2008; Rodan 1993); key features of the electoral system including district magnitude, malapportionment, and redistricting (Tan 2013; Tan and Grofman 2016); and policy positions.² We present the results of this analysis in

²In addition to describing data and estimation techniques used to generate these covariates, we also provide an extensive set of supplementary appendices with lengthy discussions of data, estimation, and the results of cross-validation exercises.

Section 6 and find strong support for our argument even after controlling for alternative explanations.

Last, we clarify scope conditions and examine the implications of our findings for politics in Singapore, as well as in dominant party regimes more broadly, in Section 7. Ultimately, the dominance of valence politics in Singapore creates a fundamental dilemma for opposition parties looking to challenge the PAP. They face significant disadvantages in competition on valence considerations, given the PAP’s control of the state and its record at the helm of Singapore’s successful development. Campaigning on ideological or policy alternatives is similarly fraught, however, as positional appeals do not resonate with a sufficiently large proportion of the electorate to secure victory at the ballot box. This catch-22, we argue, explains a substantial but previously overlooked portion of the PAP’s enduring resilience, and provides insights into the resilience of other dominant party regimes.

2 Why Do Voters Support Dominant Parties?

Why do voters support dominant parties? Popular discourse as well as some scholarship emphasizes ideological or policy alignment. From this perspective, voters support dominant parties because they take positions on salient issues that align with voter preferences. Greene (2007) notes that control of the state confers dominant parties with some advantages in such “positional” contests, as they are often able to lay claim to positions that align with the preferences of the median voter, thereby forcing opposition parties to take extreme positions to differentiate themselves. This advantage, however, has natural limits: it depends upon the shape of the underlying distribution of voter preferences and it requires a political environment in which ideological incoherence is tolerated by voters.

Other explanations note that parties outside of Europe and North America are rarely programmatic, thereby de-emphasizing positional appeals in electoral contests. In such

contexts “valence issues”, which Stokes (1963) defines as those over which there is general agreement among voters (e.g. the desirability of economic growth, social stability, and national defense), dominate campaigns. Electoral competition then involves attempts to demonstrate competence on the valence issues, making elections not about *what* should be delivered, but rather about *which candidate or party* is most capable of delivering the generally desired outcomes. Examples of this have been documented in numerous contexts, including Africa (Bleck and Walle 2013) and Taiwan (Ho et al. 2013).

While not explicitly framed in terms of valence politics, Magaloni’s (2006) influential theory of why voters support dominant parties nevertheless contains elements that suggest the importance of valence issues. In her theory, Magaloni differentiates between “strategic” and “sincere” motivations for supporting dominant parties. Strategic motivations relate to direct transfers that voters receive for supporting the dominant party, whereas sincere motivations relate to the expected economic performance of dominant parties relative to challengers.³ Where dominant parties possess a record of strong long-term growth and exercise control over an efficacious “punishment regime” that can identify and sanction opposition voters, dominant parties can create a “self-reinforcing authoritarian equilibrium” in which voters themselves feel they are better off under the dominant party. This equilibrium obviates the need for dominant parties to fall back on electoral fraud and violence in order to win elections.

Magaloni (2006) considers Singapore under the PAP to be an instance of such an equilibrium. We offer two advancements on her theory, driven by the Singaporean case. First, we argue that the motivations for sincerely supporting dominant parties extend well beyond just economic growth, which is Magaloni’s sole focus: In the context of Singapore, the desirability of social stability, national sovereignty, and the ability to efficiently deliver

³Magaloni allows that some voters may support dominant parties based on ideological or policy alignment. However, she largely discounts this as an important basis for “sincere” voting.

a range of services at the grassroots level all motivate sincere PAP votes. Second and in contrast to Magaloni's treatment of voter preferences as exogenous, we argue that voter preferences can be treated as endogenous to the preferences of dominant parties over the long term. To be clear, voter preferences are indeed sticky in the short term, which imposes constraints on all parties. Given a sufficiently long time horizon, however, we contend that control of a high-capacity state provides dominant parties with the ability to strategically reshape society. In doing so, voter preferences can be brought into alignment with the dominant parties' comparative advantages, thus maximizing their chances of retaining power. In short, the long-term reshaping of voter preferences constitutes an additional channel through which to entrench this "self-reinforcing authoritarian equilibrium".

The resilience of dominant parties is at least partially a function of voter preferences and motivations. We contend that electoral competition on *valence issues* allows dominant parties to maximize the advantages conferred by control of a high-capacity state. This is because, *ceteris paribus*, they are better positioned than opposition parties to attract and groom high-quality candidates; to leverage the state to efficiently deliver local services; and to effectively claim credit for past developmental gains. Being situated outside of the state relegates opposition parties to making appeals based on hypotheticals, and impedes their ability to attract high-quality candidates, putting them at a distinct disadvantage on valence considerations. By contrast, when competition occurs primarily on *positional issues*, dominant parties are vulnerable to challenges on ideological or policy alternatives, which even a start-up party without a proven record can launch provided that its platform resonates with the electorate and is incompatible with the dominant party's agenda. We substantiate this distinction below.

Specifically, dominant parties are able to leverage their close relationship with the bureaucracy and other state organs to recruit performance-proven individuals into the

party.⁴ The pool available to opposition parties is far smaller, especially in the presence of a (real or perceived) stigma against publicly opposing dominant parties (Greene 2007; Mutalib 2003). Asymmetric access to resources also grants dominant parties advantages in training and managing their ranks, as well as in cultivating a more professional interface with the electorate.

The ability to coordinate activities across levels of government as well as greater access to resources confers dominant parties with advantages in delivering local services. As this is the immediate point of contact with the state for much of the electorate, differences in grassroots level efficacy easily translate into an electoral advantage when competence and the ability to deliver are the main criteria for electoral decisions (Weiss 2016). Furthermore, dominant parties are able to leverage past developmental successes as evidence for competence in strong-state countries like Singapore that have experienced dramatic improvements in living conditions. The conflation of state and party for the purposes of assessing past performance becomes the basis of the “performance legitimacy” that has benefited the PAP (Chua 1995).

3 Reshaping Politics and Society in Singapore

This section provides a within-case, historical analysis to support our claim that the centrality of valence considerations in Singapore is at least partially by design. We show that politics in the run-up to self-rule were marked by heated ideological competition: the dominance of valence considerations, in short, was not the natural state of Singapore’s political landscape around the time of transition. Rather, the centrality of valence considerations took root after the emergence of dominant party rule, when the PAP used its control of Singapore’s high-capacity state to reshape politics *and* society through an ensemble of

⁴The prevalence of former civil servants at all levels of the PAP’s organizational structure underscores the magnitude of this advantage.

policy initiatives and institutional reforms.

3.1 Political Pluralism in Pre-Independence Singapore

While Singapore’s formal political institutions—being mostly a carryover from the British colonial period—have retained their core form from the achievement of internal self-rule in 1959 to the present, the nature of politics in the small and multi-ethnic country has changed substantially.⁵ Indeed, its sometimes sterile contemporary politics bear little resemblance to what what Mary Turnbull (2009, 259) calls the “lusty [and] vociferous” political awakening in the decade-long run-up to self-rule.⁶

During this early period, political competition was pluralistic in nature, the result of a “stormy and acrimonious battle” between political factions with widely differing ideological convictions and visions for the future. Carnell (1955) describes the climate as one in which parties with clearly defined ideological and policy positions—right and left, communalist and non-communalist—appealed for support from Singapore’s newly enfranchised population. The most visible of these factions was a grassroots leftist movement that grew substantially in size during the 1950s, spawning radical student and labor associations that engaged in regular strikes and boycotts. The movement later coalesced into a broad coalition of anti-colonial groups, trade unions, student associations, and political parties that called itself the “United Front”.

The PAP’s roots also lie in this period. The party was formed around an English-educated core that Turnbull (2009, 273) describes as “...pragmatists, [who] attracted men of similar ilk to their ranks: economists, bankers, architects, and town planners. [They] took

⁵Singapore has a unicameral Westminster-style parliament. Elections follow first-past-the-post rules and must be held at least every five years. Voting is compulsory for resident Singaporeans aged 21 and above. Singapore’s 2015 population of roughly 5.5 million is comprised of a majority Chinese community (75%) and minority Malay (13%) and Indian (9%) communities.

⁶For overviews of Singapore’s history, see Hong and Huang (2008); Trocki (2006); Loh et al. (2012).

Table 1: Legislative Assembly and Parliamentary General Election Results

	Year	Vote Share	Seat Share
Legislative Assembly Elections (Pre-Independence)	1955	8.7	12.0
	1959	54.1	84.3
	1963	46.9	75.0
Parliamentary Elections (Post-Independence)	1968	86.7	100.0
	1972	70.4	100.0
	1976	74.1	100.0
	1980	77.7	100.0
	1984	64.8	97.5
	1988	63.2	98.8
	1991	61.0	95.1
	1997	65.0	97.6
	2001	75.3	97.6
	2006	66.6	97.6
	2011	60.1	93.1
2015	69.9	93.3	

Note: Singapore Elections Department (Source)

pride in rejecting not merely communism but ideologies in general, in the belief that people wanted good government in the solid shape of jobs, housing, schools, and healthcare.” For reasons of political expediency, the nascent PAP merged into the United Front and led elements of the coalition—now under the PAP banner—to victory in the 1959 legislative assembly elections over a range of alternative parties. Table 1 displays results from this election to the present.

This expanded version of the PAP was inherently unstable due to fundamental ideological disagreements between its pragmatist core and its left-wing members. The resultant tensions ultimately caused the left-wing of the party to split off and form the *Barisan Sosialis* (BS - Socialist Front) in 1961. As an independent party with a strong grassroots following, the BS represented a substantial electoral threat to the PAP, which itself lacked

a mass base. In fact, the PAP lost two by-elections in 1961 and secured only 46.9% of the popular vote in 1963, relative to 33.2% for the BS.

Against the backdrop of the anti-Communist Emergency in Malaya, the conflict between these two parties came to a head through Operation Coldstore in 1963. This joint security exercise by British, Malayan, and Singaporean forces detained 130 leftist political figures, including many from the BS leadership. There is substantial contemporary debate among historians over the interpretation of this action.⁷ Several historians—as well as the PAP itself—maintain that the detainees were overwhelmingly Communists or Communist sympathizers who threatened to undermine Singapore’s nascent electoral democracy through extra-institutional mobilization and agitation. Others contest this view and argue that the arrests were pursued out of political expediency, with the aim of consolidating the PAP’s grip on power through elimination of political opponents (Thum 2013).

We leave the matter of interpretation to historians of Singapore. The outcome, in any case, is clear: Operation Coldstore and the subsequent arrests of additional BS leaders and cadres effectively incapacitated the party, removing the only significant ideological alternative to the PAP from electoral competition. This left the PAP firmly in control of Singapore’s high-capacity state and paved the way for the emergence of dominant party rule after the dissolution of the short-lived 1963-1965 merger with Malaysia.

3.2 Dominance and the Reshaping of Politics and Society

With largely uncontested control of fully independent Singapore, the PAP quickly moved to reshape politics and society by establishing a practice of pragmatic and development-oriented policy making that was unconstrained by ideological paradigms (Mauzy and Milne 2002; Morgenbesser 2016). The PAP initiated numerous public campaigns, a fundamental

⁷See Ramakrishna (2015) for an overview of the debate.

reform of the education system, and intrusive programs including mandatory National Service and the Housing Development Board (HDB) public housing scheme, all of which were intended to orient the electorate’s preferences and priorities towards development and national cohesion. They are notable for their penetration into society: a large majority—currently over 80%—of the population lives in HDB units; all males are required to serve approximately 2 years of national service; and with few exceptions, attendance in public schools is mandatory for all Singaporeans. Other practices, like weekly Meet-the-People Sessions through which members of parliament face their constituents to address grievances (Ong 2015), can be seen as valence politics in action at the grassroots level. In aggregate, these initiatives brought a vast majority of the population into close contact with the state, and by extension, with the PAP’s developmental agenda.

The initiatives were complemented by a state-sanctioned “survival narrative” that held Singapore to be uniquely vulnerable to a range of potentially catastrophic threats, against which the only protection was perpetual growth and the steady hand of a capable, uncompromising, and farsighted government. The widespread propagation of this narrative in politics facilitated its internalization by large segments of the population (Abdullah 2017b). The messaging was eventually reinforced through the National Education program, which was launched in 1997 to “inculcate an understanding of the challenges and vulnerabilities that are unique to Singapore” (Ministry of Education 1997; Koh 2005). Ultimately, with the need for consistent performance framed as the only viable response to the country’s systemic vulnerabilities, little space remained for engagement with ideological alternatives, which were dismissed as a luxury that Singapore’s precarity disallowed.⁸

Writing ten years after the emergence of dominant party rule, Chan (1975, 1) describes the effects of these early initiatives in reshaping politics and society:

⁸See George (2007) for how discussion of controls on the mass media further served to dampen broader engagement with ideological alternatives.

One of the most significant developments in Singapore politics in the last decade has been the steady and systematic depoliticisation of a politically active and aggressive citizenry....the People's Action Party Government has argued that rapid development of newly independent countries is contingent upon the shift of emphasis from politics to economics.

Reinforced by the remarkable strides in development and with a fragmented opposition, the PAP faced no serious opposition challenges for nearly two decades. By the time the PAP conceded control of a seat in Parliament in a narrow 1981 by-election loss to the Worker's Party (WP) and a second seat to the newly-formed Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) in GE 1984, the PAP's pragmatic and performance-oriented model of politics, which eschewed competition through ideological and policy appeals, was firmly entrenched. Nevertheless, the loss of two seats to the opposition and the slide in vote share during GE 1984 shook the PAP's leaders, who had become accustomed to receiving 70% or more of the popular vote since independence. In response, they initiated a series of institutional reforms, including the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) and Town Council schemes.⁹

The GRC scheme, implemented in 1988, transformed a number of single-member districts into party-centric, multi-member districts decided by party block vote. Depending on the magnitude of these multi-member GRCs, parties nominate teams of between 3 and 6 candidates. Voters cast a party ballot. Whichever party receives a plurality of votes then receives all of the seats within the district.¹⁰

The Town Council scheme, likewise implemented in 1988, decentralized the manage-

⁹Two additional schemes intended to ensure some opposition representation in parliament require brief explanation: The Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) scheme, introduced in 1984, has three (as of 2010, up to nine) of the "best losers" from among the opposition candidates receive a seat in parliament, albeit with circumscribed powers. The Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme, introduced in 1991, invites distinguished non-partisan citizens to hold a parliamentary seat for a period of 2.5 years, again with circumscribed powers.

¹⁰The GRC scheme was introduced with the stated purpose of ensuring ethnic minority representation in parliament, since at minimum one candidate per GRC team must be an ethnic minority. The party block vote rule also results in significant disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats in favor of the PAP. See Tan (2013) for a comprehensive account of the GRCs and their effects.

ment and administration of HDB public housing estates—in which the majority of Singaporeans reside—from HDB to newly-formed town councils headed by elected MPs. The reform itself was explicitly framed to voters in terms of valence considerations—specifically, the competence and integrity of MPs—and how this might impact the delivery of local services. In the words of then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew during his national broadcast on the Eve of National Day 1988:

[The Town Council Act] will put the MP in charge of his constituency's town council. The honesty and competence of your MP will then directly affect you because he will be in charge of the maintenance and administration of your housing estate... If your MP is not honest, or not competent, you will know it soon enough... So you had better take a careful look at the persons... who seek to represent you. Your personal well-being will be at stake when you choose your MP. This change will make for careful and better selection of MPs by you and by political parties, and will be good for Singapore.

These measures all served to deepen the transformation of Singaporean politics. The GRC scheme amplified the importance of the party label and party credibility. Furthermore, it enabled the PAP to “anchor” each GRC team with a cabinet minister, thereby creating potentially serious national-level implications for supporting the opposition, which further dissuaded cautious voters from casting an opposition ballot. Both of these entailed entrenchment of valence considerations. The Town Council reforms reinforced this at the candidate level by directly linking the quality of local service provision to the quality of the candidate.

The electorate had become so responsive to the PAP and its model of politics by the 1990s, that the opposition was compelled to adapt a radical strategy: from 1991 to 2006, it pursued a “by-election” strategy of contesting fewer than 50% of seats, following the logic that if *ex ante* assured of a PAP victory before polling began, the country’s cautious voters would be more inclined to cast an opposition vote. During this time, opposition campaigns

focused predominantly on the practical need for more balance in parliament, rather than on offering ideological or policy alternatives to the PAP.

The 2011 and 2015 GEs diverged from earlier elections in several important ways. Notably, the opposition abandoned its “by-election” strategy such that the PAP faced challengers in every electoral division for the first time since 1963.¹¹ They were also the first elections in which the opposition managed to secure a GRC, which had previously seemed impenetrable. The more competitive nature of GE 2011, in which the opposition secured nearly 40% of the popular vote, saw observers characterize it as a “watershed” moment in Singaporean politics (Tan and Lee 2011; Chong 2012; Tan 2014) and led to suggestions that Singapore had transitioned into a more competitive phase (Ortmann 2011).

GE 2015 saw the tide shift back somewhat: two momentous events in the months before the election—the death of “founding father” Lee Kuan Yew and the celebration of Singapore’s 50th anniversary of independence—produced a wave of nostalgia that strengthened the hand of the PAP (Chin 2016; Tan and Lee 2016; Weiss, Loke, and Choa 2016). Furthermore, squabbles between opposition parties during the campaign period revealed disunity and harmed their credibility in the eyes of some voters (Ong 2016). While a PAP victory in GE 2015 was almost universally anticipated, the substantial margin of victory took many observers by surprise against the backdrop of the generally more competitive political climate in Singapore.

4 Party Competition and Voter Behavior

This section provides a qualitative analysis of contemporary party competition and voter behavior, which further substantiates the claim that valence politics has largely displaced other forms of electoral competition. First, we examine contemporary party competition

¹¹Technically, one opposition challenger was disqualified in the 2011 GE, leaving one “walkover”.

and show that—following the PAP’s model—opposition parties generally focus on convincing voters of their ability to deliver results, largely eschewing ideological or policy appeals in the process. Second, we review the results of a 2015 post-election survey, which supports the notion that the PAP’s model of pragmatic politics has been internalized by a large portion of Singapore’s voters, who prioritize considerations of party and candidate quality over positional appeals.

4.1 Parties and Party Competition

Opposition parties have a rich history in Singapore, with around 20 typically registered at any time.¹² Eight opposition parties contested seats in GE 2015 alone. This is a remarkable number for a country that uses a majoritarian electoral formula and has only twenty-nine electoral divisions with roughly 2.4 million eligible voters in total. Table 2 displays the results of GE 2015 by party, as well as the cumulative number of seats won by each party since independence.

The oldest and most visible of the opposition parties is the Worker’s Party (WP), founded in 1957 by Singapore’s first Chief Minister. It was the first opposition party to send a member to parliament and has captured more seats than any other since independence. The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), National Solidarity Party (NSP), and Singapore People’s Party (SPP) have all regularly contested elections since at least the 1990s, holding a cumulative total of five, zero, and two seats respectively. The Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) was conceived as an opposition coalition in 2001, but infighting caused several of its component parties (including the SPP and NSP) to abandon formal cooperation, leaving the SDA to contest independently. The Reform Party (RP), Singaporeans First (SGF), and People’s Power Party (PPP) are fringe parties without substantial

¹²See Mutalib (2003) for an extensive study of opposition parties in Singapore.

Table 2: Results by Party in GE 2015 and Earlier

Party	Label	Established	Seat Results (GE 2015)			Seat Results (1965-2015)		
			Contested	Elected	NCMP	Contested	Elected	NCMP
People's Action Party	PAP	1954	89	83	-	969	941	-
Worker's Party	WP	1957	28	6	3	211	20	8
Singapore Democratic Party	SDP	1980	11	-	-	80	5	-
National Solidarity Party	NSP	1987	12	-	-	63	-	-
Singapore People's Party	SPP	1994	8	-	-	29	1	1
Singapore Democratic Alliance	SDA	2001	6	-	-	47	2	1
Reform Party	RP	2008	11	-	-	23	-	-
Singaporeans First	SGF	2014	10	-	-	10	-	-
People's Power Party	PPP	2015	4	-	-	4	-	-

Note: Singapore Elections Department (Source)

mass followings.

4.1.1 Ideological and Policy Appeals

How do parties appeal to voters? Spatial models assume that parties compete by making positional appeals, thereby offering voters different sets of policies. These policy programs are typically structured by contrasting ideological convictions situated along the left-right spectrum (or some version thereof). Singapore’s parties have occasionally been described in these terms. Singh (2012, 47), for example, describes the PAP as centre-right, while “most opposition parties occupy the centre-left”. More frequently, however, the PAP and most opposition parties are described as unbound by clear ideological commitments. We unpack and develop this further through two arguments: first, the PAP’s policy positions are not consistently structured within a recognized ideological framework, making the left-right spectrum unsuitable for describing its positions. Second, most opposition parties do not adopt or campaign on policy positions that differ markedly from those of the PAP.

In contrast to characterizations that paint the PAP as ‘centre-right’ in its orientation, Mauzy and Milne (2002, 52) note that the party “prides itself on not having any [ideological] ‘sacred cows’ to prejudice freedom of action...” and bases its decision making on the litmus test of “does it work?”. A review of the PAP’s major policy positions illustrates this commitment. The strong orientation towards fostering competition and economic growth, coupled with low tax burdens and an absence of extensive protectionist measures, has elements of a ‘rightist’ or pro-market orientation. Simultaneously, the PAP maintains a strong and highly interventionist state that uses welfare-like mechanisms to shape citizen behavior; these are more reminiscent of a “leftist” or statist orientation. The tightly controlled public housing program, which provides apartments to over 80% of Singapore’s population, is a clear example of this.

On issues that featured prominently in the GE 2011 and 2015 campaigns—including cost of living, job security, housing, public transportation, and inward migration—the PAP’s policy positions did not cluster into an ideologically coherent program, but rather reflected fluidity in response to evolving conditions.¹³ While arguments have been made that the PAP adheres to an ideology—for example, dedication to economic growth (Chua 1985) or pragmatism as a response to global neoliberalism (Tan 2012)—these are not ideological convictions that require coherent policy programs as assumed by positional theories.

The more established opposition parties, having determined that the PAP’s model of pragmatism resonates strongly with voters, generally eschew substantial departures from the PAP’s policy positions. This is particularly the case for the WP, the oldest and strongest of the opposition, which Abdullah (2017a, 495) argues “largely propagates and supports the PAP’s key [positions] and does not propose alternatives.” The possible exception to this among the more established opposition is the SDP, whose proposals reflect a focus on social welfare policies and a stronger orientation towards the ideals of constitutional liberalism. The younger and least established parties—including the RP, SGF, and PPP—differentiate themselves primarily through antagonistic stances against the PAP; policy positions are generally vague and do not articulate clear plans for implementation.

Campaigning during GE 2015 strongly reflected this picture. Both sides overwhelmingly focused their campaign rhetoric on promising results in areas like cost of living, job security, public transportation, and housing affordability. The PAP adopted a strategy of referring to its past performance to argue that it was the most capable of delivering positive outcomes on salient issues. The opposition, by contrast, focused most of its efforts

¹³The PAP’s stance on economic migration is illustrative: it maintained a principled dedication to the inflow of skilled labour through the 2011 GE, but altered its position prior to the 2015 GE to show responsiveness to public sentiments, which favored tighter controls (Yew 2016).

on attacking the PAP’s performance and arguing that it could “do better”, or at least that increased opposition presence in parliament would improve outcomes on the same set of issues. Notably absent across the opposition parties were concerted efforts to establish clear policy alternatives replete with trade-offs and shortcomings of their own.

4.1.2 Party Credibility

In stark contrast to the meagre attempts at positional differentiation among parties, there is substantial variation in their perceived ability to govern. From independence through roughly a decade ago, a “credibility gap”—which describes the gap in perceived trustworthiness, competence, and professionalism between the PAP and the opposition—clearly distinguished the PAP from its competition in the eyes of most voters.¹⁴ This was a function both of the PAP’s efficacy in leading Singapore’s economic development, as well as the significant infighting, coordination failures, and personal blunders that hampered the opposition (Mutalib 2003; Singh 2012).

While the credibility gap between the PAP and opposition parties is still substantial, modest changes became apparent in the years prior to GE 2011. The PAP made several blunders for which it offered unprecedented public apologies, giving the appearance of cracks in the exceptionalism of the party (Barr 2016). Simultaneously, some opposition parties managed to successfully recruit and field numerous high-quality candidates from the upper echelons of the private sector, civil service, and academia, several of whom ostensibly matched the credentials of their PAP counterparts. Only the WP, however, was able to capitalize on this effectively, as the SDP, SPP, and NSP continued to be plagued by

¹⁴Ong and Tim (2014, 752) introduce the concept of a “credibility gap” to describe the mistrust that Singaporean voters have towards non-WP opposition candidates, who are deemed unlikely to effectively “nurture their local constituencies while legislatively challenging the ruling government on national issues.” Au (2010, 105) refers to a similar concept of “credibility” at the level of candidates, which he defines as the sense of “trustworthiness, competence, and professional qualification that has become the touchstone of local electability.”

infighting and poor organization. Ong and Tim (2014), in fact, argue that in the run-up to the 2011 GE, the WP managed what no other opposition party could: they created a clear party brand, coupled with effective grassroots outreach and a slate of credible candidates, which drew them nearer to the PAP in terms of credibility on valence considerations.

This has created a *de facto* three-tiered hierarchy among Singapore’s parties. The 2011 and 2015 Post-Election Surveys from the Institute of Policy Studies support this notion. The PAP clearly retains the top tier, with 93% of respondents viewing it as a credible party and only 4% disagreeing in the 2015 wave. The moderate WP, while still trailing at 71% and 19% respectively, is closer to the PAP than to the next opposition party, the SDP (46%/43%). The remaining parties fare even more poorly: NSP (26%/61%); RP (22%/64%); SGF (29%/58%).

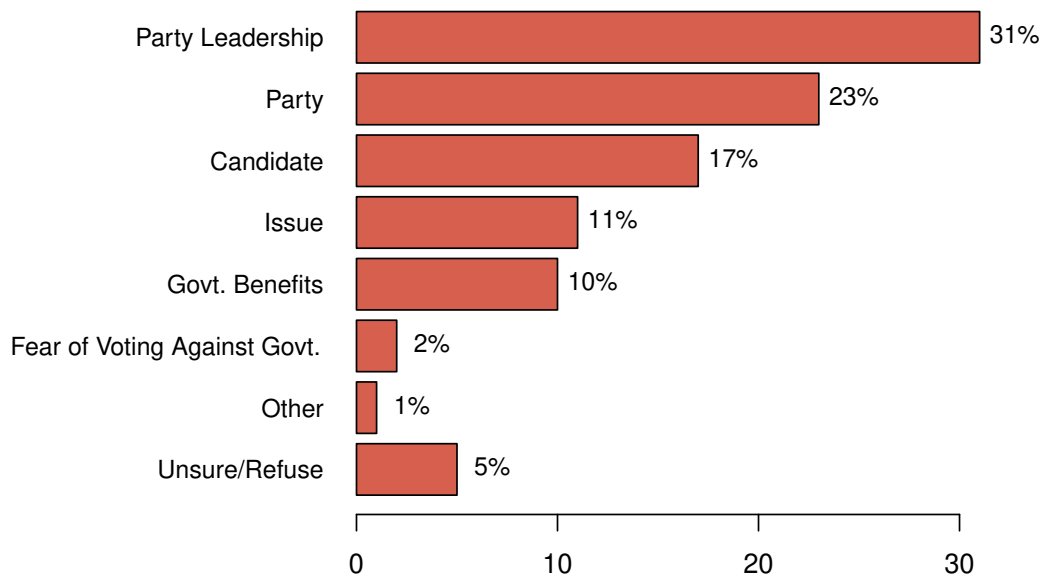
4.2 Voters and Voting Behavior

What motivates the voting decisions of Singaporeans in recent elections? Results from a GE 2015 survey conducted by Bridget Welsh (2016b) with technical assistance from the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research are particularly revealing in this regard. The survey involved asking a random sample of Singaporeans the following question: *In this election, what would you say was your main consideration in voting?*

Figure 1 displays the results. Collectively, 71% of respondents indicated that either *Party Leadership*, *Party*, or *Candidate* were their main considerations. Only 11%, 10%, and 2% respectively indicated that *Issues*, *Government Benefits*, or *Fear of Voting Against Government* were most important. The importance of considerations related to parties is consistent with our portrayal of Singapore’s elections being strongly party-centric.

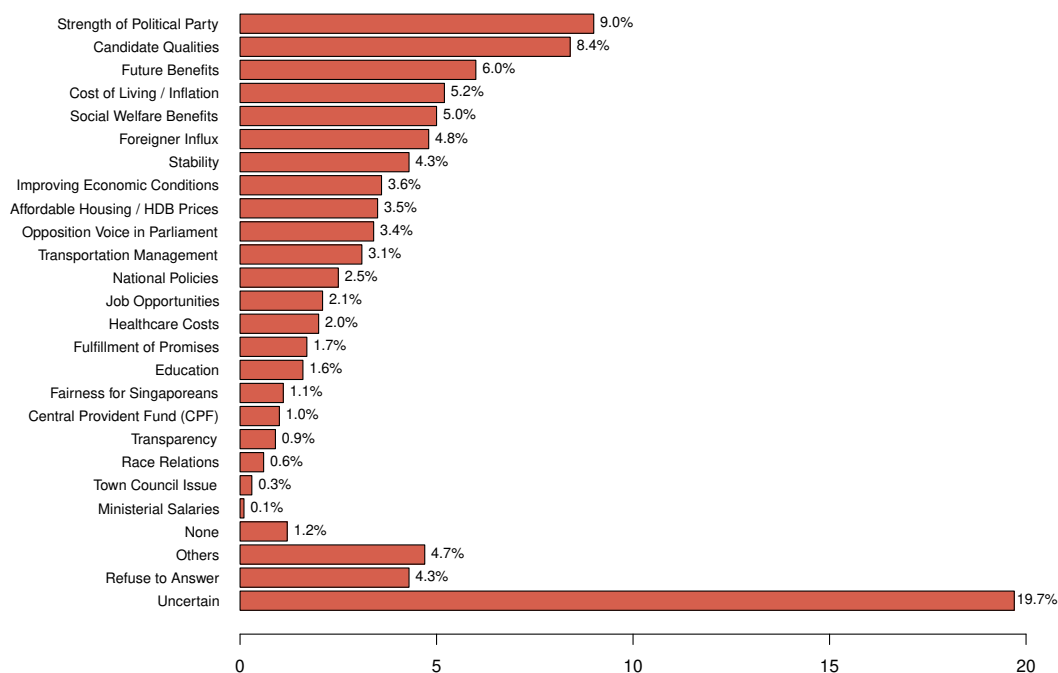
Results from follow-up questions on the survey regarding campaign issues provide further evidence for our argument. Survey respondents were asked the following question: *In*

Figure 1: Main Consideration when Voting in GE 2015



Note: Figure 1 based on data reported in Welsh (2016b)

Figure 2: Most Important Campaign Issues in GE 2015



Note: Figure 2 based on data reported in Welsh (2016b)

the recent election campaign, was there a particular issue that was most important to you?

Figure 2 displays the results. While the modal respondent was unable to identify a specific issue, the two most widely cited “issues”—*Strength of Political Party* and *Candidate Qualities*—underscore the extent to which perceptions of party or candidate qualities dominate the considerations of voters. With the possible exception of *Social Welfare Benefits* and *Foreigner Influx*, the positions of parties do not substantially diverge on the next seven most cited issues.¹⁵

¹⁵It is notable that the PAP significantly adjusted its positions on both of those issues between the 2011 and 2015 GEs, bringing it more closely in line with the typical voter as well as its opposition challengers. The

5 Data

We conduct a comprehensive quantitative analysis of Singapore’s 2011 and 2015 GEs to further demonstrate evidence in support of our claim that valence considerations like party credibility play a key role in why Singaporeans vote for the PAP.¹⁶ Since the PAP competes in a series of two-cornered fights against a range of opposition parties, we are able to estimate the marginal effects of party credibility on PAP support while controlling for a range of alternative explanations. In short, we assess the relative influence of valence considerations against the myriad alternative explanations proposed to explain why Singaporeans vote for the PAP.

5.1 Party Credibility and PAP Support

The key observable implication of our argument in the Singaporean context is that voters’ relative assessments of PAP and opposition party credibility should correlate with PAP support during elections: When facing an opposition party that is perceived as relatively more credible, the PAP will *ceteris paribus* receive less support than when it faces one that is perceived as relatively less credible.

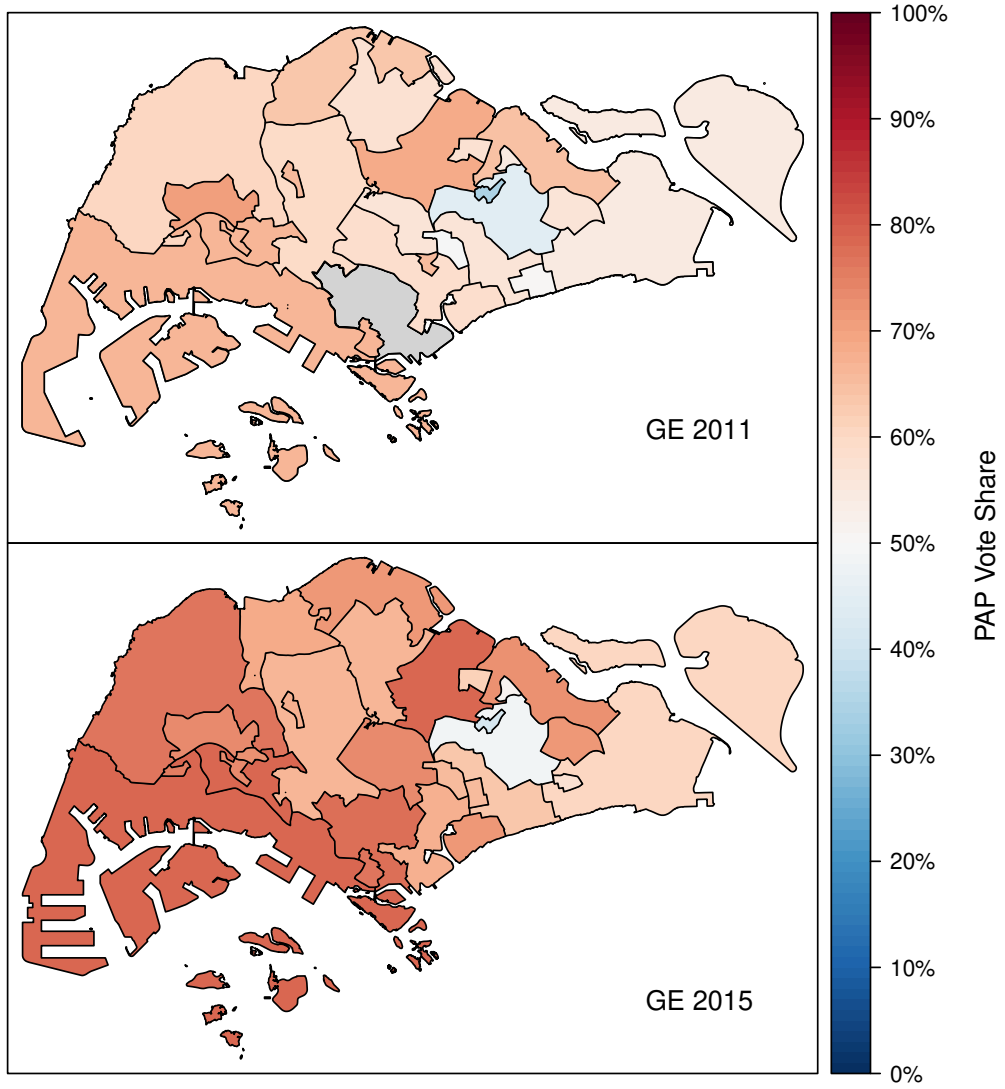
We operationalize PAP support using vote share. We collect data on vote returns from the Singapore Elections Department (ELD) and generate our dependent variable—*PAP Vote Share*—by dividing the number of votes cast for the PAP by the total number of valid votes cast in each electoral division. Figure 3 displays the geographic distribution of resulting *PAP Vote Share* for GE 2011 and 2015.

We operationalize relative assessments of party credibility using data collected through

PAP and some opposition parties do clearly differ in their positions on several issues, notably *Transparency* and *Ministerial Salaries*. Yet only 1% of respondents collectively cited those issues as most important during GE 2015.

¹⁶Substantial limitations on quality data, as well as the large number of uncontested seats, make it unfeasible to include earlier elections into the analysis.

Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of PAP Vote Share



Note: Figure 3 based on Author's calculations using data reported by Singapore Elections Department. The grey shaded areas indicate uncontested electoral divisions.

a series of post-election surveys conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (2006, 2011, 2015). We generate our independent variable—*Difference in Party Credibility*—by calculating the difference between the percentage of respondents that either agree or strongly agree that the PAP is a credible party, and the percentage that either agree or strongly agree that a given opposition party is a credible party. In order to address potential concerns regarding post-treatment bias, we use data from preceding survey waves to calculate *Difference in Party Credibility* in a given election. We then assign the resulting values to electoral divisions based on the opposition party that contested the division in a given election.¹⁷ We expect a positive relationship between *Difference in Party Credibility* and *PAP Vote Share*.

5.2 Alternative Explanations

Although our focus is the relationship between party credibility and PAP support, we also address alternative explanations. Slater and Wong (2013, 719) argue that three dimensions of party strength underpin the ‘victory confidence’ of dominant parties in developmental Asia: The cultivation of *experienced electoral candidates*; the construction of a *territorially encompassing infrastructure*; and the development of *cross-cutting constituencies*. Dominant parties also have at least some ability to shape the *electoral system* within which they face electoral challenges in ways that may advantage them. Furthermore, some popular accounts attribute the success of dominant parties to take *policy positions* that align with voter preferences. We explore each set of alternative explanations below.

¹⁷For example, we use data collected after GE 2006 to calculate the values for *Difference in Party Credibility* in GE 2011. See Appendix A for further discussion of our independent variable including an evaluation of post-treatment bias, the reliability of the data collected through IPS surveys, and additional analysis using data collected through a single-shot, pre-election survey conducted by the independent and non-partisan, Malaysia-based Merdeka Center for Public Opinion Research.

5.2.1 Experienced Electoral Candidates

Dominant parties benefit strongly from their ability to cultivate *experienced electoral candidates* that have the personal attributes necessary to successfully contest and win elections. This includes incumbent candidates with a personal connection to voters as well as prior campaign experience, and new candidates with prior experience and a reputation that can inspire the trust of voters. The magnitude of this advantage, however, is conditional on the quality of the opposition’s candidates.

Candidate quality has long been identified as a strength of the PAP and a corresponding weakness of opposition parties in Singapore (Mutalib 2003). Although opposition parties that voters perceive to be more credible are presumably more likely to attract and field high-quality candidates, it is important to disentangle the potential effects of candidate incumbency and challenger quality from party credibility. To this end, we emulate the empirical strategy used to estimate the effects of candidate incumbency and challenger quality in US congressional contests. We collect candidate-level data from *singapore-elections.com* in order to generate two covariates: *Candidate Incumbency* and *Challenger Quality*.

Candidate Incumbency assumes a value between one and negative one. It equals one if a PAP incumbent or a team of PAP incumbents runs for reelection in their former constituencies. Conversely, it equals negative one if an opposition incumbent or team of opposition incumbents runs for reelection. If no incumbents run, then *Candidate Incumbency* equals zero.

When incumbents slated to retire occupy constituencies located in multi-member GRCs or in those that are later merged into GRCs during the redelineation process, the subsequent teams of candidates will be comprised of a mix of incumbents and new candidates. Under these circumstances, *Candidate Incumbency* equals the percentage of GRC team members that are incumbents.

Challenger Quality captures the effect of high-quality challengers. We adopt the simple measure of candidate quality proposed by Jacobson (1990)—whether the candidate has ever held elective public office of any kind—to capture challenger quality. Operationalizing challenger quality as prior experience in Singapore’s parliament is both transparent and easy to verify from public sources. While we recognize that there are alternative ways to conceptualize and operationalize quality, the operative assumption of our coding scheme is that prior experience indicates a candidate has been previously deemed by voters to have the qualities required of an office holder. This type of experience is widely perceived in Singapore as an indicator of quality.¹⁸

Challenger Quality equals one if there is a high-quality opposition challenger or team of challengers in the race, excluding the incumbent. Conversely, it equals negative one if there is a high-quality PAP challenger or team of challengers in the race. Mixed teams are coded as a percentage following the logic of the *Challenger Quality* coding. We expect a negative relationship between *Challenger Quality* and *PAP Vote Share*.

5.2.2 Territorially Encompassing Infrastructure

A *territorially encompassing infrastructure* of local branches and cells enhances dominant party rule by allowing dominant parties to directly engage with voters at the grassroots level. Through this infrastructure, dominant parties can provide selective incentives for voters to support them during elections.

Since coming to power, the PAP has carefully built and maintained such an infrastructure that encompasses the entire country, penetrates to the grassroots, and plays an important role in securing mass support between and during elections. Yet rather than

¹⁸For example, the WP and SPP “A Teams” that contested the Aljunied and Bishan-Toa Payoh GRCs during the 2011 GE, for example, were both stacked with the elected MPs and NCMPs from their respective parties. See Appendix B for further discussion of the logic behind this coding.

operate through local party branches and cells, this infrastructure instead largely operates through the People’s Association (PA)—itself a state-funded, statutory board—and its dense network of para-state grassroots organizations (GROs). Within each electoral constituency, the PA organizes a Citizens’ Consultative Committee (CCC) that in turn oversees and coordinates the activities of the network of subordinate GROs. These include Community Center Management Committees (CCMCs), Resident’s Committees (RCs), and Neighbourhood Committees (NCs). Kenneth Paul Tan (2003, 5) suggests that although GROs are apolitical organizations, the overlapping membership of GROs with local party branches makes this distinction “a purely technical one”. Moreover, Tan (2003, 6-10) suggests that GROs ultimately serve a range of political functions by providing a platform to co-opt community leaders; conducting surveillance and helping exercise local control; providing a feedback channel between elections; and acting as a reservoir of manpower, organizational, and logistical support during elections.

Accounting for this infrastructure and the local density of the organizational networks is no simple task: Despite the PA being state-funded, disaggregated information on GROs such as budgets or the number of ‘grassroots leaders’ per constituency is unavailable. We therefore collect information on the number of CCCs, CCMCs, RCs, and NCs located within each electoral division from a range of official sources to generate a proxy for GRO density. We generate the covariate *PA-GRO Density* by dividing the number of GROs by the number of electors within each division. We expect a positive relationship between *PA-GRO Density* and *PAP Vote Share*.¹⁹

We use information on PAP Community Foundation (PCF) kindergartens to create an additional covariate for infrastructure. In order to counter its rival *Barisan Sosialis* in the early 1960s, the PAP began to provide subsidized kindergarten education through its local

¹⁹See Appendix C for a detailed description of data collection and estimation.

branches and soon became the dominant provider of kindergarten education in Singapore. Indeed, Chan (1976) argues that the provision of kindergarten education was one of the two key functions of local party branches that helped the PAP to crowd-out its rivals at the grassroots following independence.

The PAP established the PCF in 1986 and transferred responsibility for administering its kindergartens from its local party branches to the newly-established entity. Today, PCF kindergartens account for approximately 60% of all kindergartens registered with Singapore’s Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) and offer working families the lowest-cost option for early childhood education and childcare. We collect data from the ECDA to determine the number of PCF and non-PCF kindergartens in each electoral division. We generate the covariate *PCF Kindergarten Share* by dividing the number of PCF kindergartens by the total number of kindergartens in each division. We expect a positive relationship between *PCF Kindergarten Share* and *PAP Vote Share*.

We recognize these covariates imperfectly capture the grassroots infrastructure that underpins dominant party strength and might fail to capture residual sources of PAP support. To that end, we estimate *Previous PAP Vote Share* using a weighted average of vote shares received by the PAP in electoral divisions used during the previous GE. We collect data on previous vote returns from the ELD as well as on transfers of electors between electoral divisions during the reapportionment and redistricting process from Electoral Boundaries Review Commission (EBRC) reports. We then construct the weighted average of PAP vote share per division in the previous GE and weight according to the proportion of electors these divisions contribute to the redrawn divisions used in the present GE. The covariate’s value is thus an *estimate* of the vote share for the division during the previous GE.²⁰ We expect a positive relationship between *Previous PAP Vote Share* and *PAP Vote Share*.

²⁰See Appendix C for a detailed description of data collection and estimation.

Despite lacking access to state resources with which to build up a competing infrastructure, opposition parties dig in where they do win seats and attempt to build a localized infrastructure, creating ‘opposition strongholds’ like Potong Pasir SMC and Hougang SMC. Within these electoral divisions, opposition parties actively engage at the grassroots level and cultivate a close relationship with constituents, undercutting local PAP support. We generate the covariate *Opposition Stronghold* to capture this localized effect, which equals one if a division has been held by the same opposition party during the two previous GEs, and otherwise equals zero. We expect a negative relationship between *Opposition Stronghold* and *PAP Vote Share*.

5.2.3 Cross-cutting Constituencies

Dominant parties that develop *cross-cutting constituencies* which span potentially salient social cleavages also enjoy higher ‘victory confidence’. The PAP has long endeavored to develop such constituencies by positioning itself as a multi-ethnic party capable of incorporating Singapore’s sizable ethnic Malay and Indian minority communities, thereby bridging visible ethnic cleavages. The PAP has further sought to span emerging class cleavages resulting from rapid development since independence.

The PAP’s success in developing such constituencies and mobilizing their support during elections, however, is not entirely clear. Although Singapore has not experienced a recurrence of interethnic violence seen in the 1950s and 1960s, Fetzer (2008) and Rahim (2008) suggest that the PAP has nevertheless struggled at times to secure and mobilize electoral support from Singapore’s ethnic Malay minority. Barr and Skrbiš (2008, 261) further suggest that Singapore has been strongly Sinicized under the PAP during the last three decades, reducing space for ethnic minorities and contributing to a “subdued sense of alienation among Malays and Indians”.

Similarly, Rodan (1993) suggests that a sense of alienation among members of Singapore’s educated and wealthy middle class also holds the potential to erode support for the PAP. Singapore’s middle class is itself a product of changes in class structure resulting from rapid development, and the middle class has been one of the major beneficiaries of PAP rule. Nevertheless, Rodan argues that changes in the preferences of the middle class for greater autonomy from the PAP-dominated state during the 1980s and 1990s explains their potential to act as a force for *qualified* rather than fundamental political change. For example, Rodan and others interpret the negative electoral shock to the PAP during GE 1984 and the PAP’s subsequent loss of the predominantly middle class Potong Pasir SMC to the rejection of the PAP government’s Graduate Mothers Scheme by disaffected middle class voters.

One way to evaluate the PAP’s degree of success in developing and mobilizing cross-cutting constituencies that span these social cleavages is to control for the demographic composition of electoral divisions. The Singaporean government, however, does not currently report population data according to electoral divisions. We address this issue by estimating the demographic composition of electoral divisions using official population data from the Census of Population 2010 and General Household Survey 2015. Specifically, we use GIS software and high-resolution, satellite-based population distribution data from the WorldPop Project to map official population data—reported according to Urban Redevelopment Agency administrative boundaries—to electoral division boundaries. We conduct a number of cross-validation exercises to evaluate the reliability of our estimates against alternative sources and the results suggest our strategy produces reliable estimates.²¹

We generate three covariates to evaluate the effect of ethnic cleavages on PAP support. *Percent Malay*, *Percent Indian*, and *Percent Other* is the estimated percentage of the

²¹See Appendix D for a description of data collection, estimation, and cross-validation results.

population in the electoral division that are members of Singapore’s ethnic Malay, Indian, or Other minority communities, respectively. We generate an additional covariate to evaluate the effect of class cleavages. *Percent High-Middle Income* is the estimated percentage of households in the division with a gross monthly income of SGD 7,000 or above.²² To the degree that the PAP struggles to develop and mobilize constituencies that span potentially salient ethnic and class cleavages, we expect a negative relationship between these covariates and *PAP Vote Share*.

In addition, we use the same data and estimation strategy to generate the covariate *Percent HDB* to reflect the percentage of households that reside in HDB public housing estates. Controlling for housing-type is important in Singapore, as over 80% of the population resides in HDB public housing estates, and residence has implications for vote choice. It is widely presumed that access to services in these estates, such as government-sponsored upgrading programs, is contingent on levels of PAP support. Chua (2000) argues that near universal public housing and the limited availability of private housing in Singapore thereby makes the residents of these estates effectively “clients of the state” with strong material incentives to demonstrate support for the PAP during elections. We therefore expect a positive relationship between *Percent HDB* and *PAP Vote Share*.

5.2.4 Electoral System

Dominance also gives dominant parties the ability to select and manipulate the *electoral system* within which they face challenges to their rule. To be clear, neither this ability nor its exercise necessarily implies intent on the part of dominant parties to undermine the democratic process. Nevertheless, the choice of systems by dominant parties historically tends to benefit those parties at the expense of challengers, and often creates opportunities

²²We code *Percent High-Middle Income* based upon thresholds used in the IPS surveys.

to manipulate elections through ancillary strategies like malapportionment and partisan gerrymandering.

Singapore’s electoral system is not unique in this regard. Netina Tan (2013) notes that Singapore’s mixed single-member district-plurality and multi-member district-party block vote plurality system—similar to other electoral systems that use majoritarian formulae—exhibits ‘mechanical’ effects that create disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats, and ultimately favors the larger PAP over smaller opposition parties.

The electoral system also exhibits ‘strategic’ effects for opposition parties and voters. Opposition parties typically face substantial resource constraints relative to the PAP. Consequently, they are less likely to field candidates in the high-magnitude, multi-member GRCs that require greater investments to be competitive. They instead tend to focus their attention on the low-magnitude GRCs or single-member constituencies (SMCs), where limited resources are more likely to have an impact. Strategic voters presumably respond by being less likely to vote for the opposition in high-magnitude electoral divisions. We generate the covariate *District Magnitude* to capture evidence of such strategic effects on opposition parties and voters. We expect a positive relationship between *District Magnitude* and *PAP Vote Share*.

Majoritarian electoral formulae combined with geographically-defined electoral divisions also create opportunities to manipulate elections through malapportionment and partisan gerrymandering. With respect to malapportionment, Tan and Grofman (2016) point out that the logic of malapportionment implies that if used to manipulate elections, then divisions which contain fewer voters than expected if boundaries were drawn based on equal numbers of voters should exhibit greater PAP support. Conversely, divisions that contain more voters than expected if boundaries were drawn equitably in terms of numbers of voters should exhibit lesser PAP support. With respect to partisan gerrymandering, Tan

and Grofman (2016, 14) further point to a “suspicious” pattern of the EBRC creating new SMCs inside or at the edges of GRC strongholds prior to both the 2011 and 2015 GEs.

We generate three covariates to test for evidence of malapportionment and partisan gerrymandering. *Deviation from Electoral Quotient* captures malapportionment and is defined as the percentage deviation in number of eligible voters above or below the electoral quotient.²³ In line with the observations of Tan and Grofman (2016), we test for evidence of partisan gerrymandering through the inclusion of two additional covariates: *New GRC* and *New SMC*. If the EBRC recommends and the government creates a new GRC, then the value of *New GRC* equals one. If not, then *New GRC* equals zero. The same holds for *New SMC*. We expect a negative relationship between *Deviation from Electoral Quotient* and *PAP Vote Share*, and a positive relationship between *New SMC* or *New GRC* and *PAP Vote Share*.

5.2.5 Policy Positions

Lastly, the *policy positions* adopted by dominant parties and their opposition are popularly posited to affect voter behavior. In order to assess this possibility, we use data on the policy positions of parties during GE 2015 generated by the *Electionaire* project to test whether policy positions affected electoral outcomes. *Electionaire* is a Voting Advice Application created at Yale-NUS College in Singapore to match voters with parties according to their policy preferences. The team coded policy positions for each party that contested GE 2015 based on information from party manifestos and public statements.²⁴

²³The electoral quotient is the number of voters that would be contained in the division if boundaries of all districts were drawn to contain equal number of voters.

²⁴We commend the efforts of the *Electionaire* team. Given the established focus on valence appeals by nearly all parties in Singapore, together with the ideologically incoherent nature of many of their policy pronouncements, the *Electionaire* project likely overstates the *effective* positional differences between parties. As this biases *towards* positive findings, however, the data function as an effective control for positional explanations.

We use these data in the following way: we divide the coded positions into four policy or issue domains—*Social Welfare*, *Immigration*, *Central Provident Fund (CPF) Issues*, and *Civil Liberties*—and conduct a principal component analysis on positions within each domain. We take party-specific scores for the first component of each of the four domains and rescale them to range between zero and one. We then calculate *Difference in Policy Positions*—the square of the difference between the PAP’s position and the positions of each of the eight opposition parties—to capture relative differences in the positions taken by the PAP and opposition parties within each domain.²⁵

6 Results

In order to test our claim that valence considerations like party credibility play a key role in why Singaporeans vote for the PAP, we estimate a series of pooled OLS models in which we regress *PAP Vote Share* on *Difference in Party Credibility* while controlling for the aforementioned range of alternative explanations. We report the results in Table 3. Model 1 is the baseline regression. Models 2 through 6 include covariates to control for *experienced electoral candidates*, *territorially encompassing infrastructure*, *cross-cutting constituencies*, and key features of the *electoral system*. We include opposition party and election fixed effects in all models.

The key result is that relative assessments of PAP and opposition credibility do indeed correlate with PAP support: *Difference in Party Credibility* exhibits a positive and significant relationship with *PAP Vote Share* in all models. This result is consistent with our argument and implies that the PAP receives more support when facing an opposition party that is perceived as less credible, and less support when facing an opposition party that is perceived as more credible. Estimated coefficient values as well as standard errors

²⁵See Appendix Section F for a detailed description of this process and how to interpret the covariate. Further information is also available at the *Electionaire* website.

Table 3: Difference in Party Credibility and PAP Vote Share

	PAP Vote Share					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Difference in Party Credibility	0.178** (0.071)	0.182*** (0.060)	0.191*** (0.055)	0.187*** (0.049)	0.184*** (0.051)	0.178*** (0.062)
Candidate Incumbency		0.101*** (0.011)	0.065*** (0.010)	0.071*** (0.010)	0.070*** (0.010)	0.076*** (0.008)
Challenger Quality		-0.066*** (0.016)	-0.065*** (0.016)	-0.062*** (0.019)	-0.060*** (0.019)	-0.061*** (0.020)
PA-GRO Density			0.015** (0.006)	0.008 (0.008)	0.004 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.009)
PCF Kindergarten Share			0.039** (0.019)	0.017 (0.021)	0.009 (0.023)	0.035 (0.026)
Previous PAP Vote Share			0.081* (0.045)	0.079* (0.041)	0.072 (0.044)	0.073 (0.047)
Opposition Stronghold			-0.085*** (0.028)	-0.067*** (0.025)	-0.071*** (0.025)	-0.070*** (0.022)
Percent Malay				0.103 (0.077)	0.052 (0.102)	0.034 (0.105)
Percent Indian				0.538* (0.319)	0.533 (0.386)	0.584 (0.387)
Percent Other				-1.004* (0.525)	-0.679 (0.737)	-1.186* (0.708)
Percent High-Middle Income					-0.067 (0.132)	-0.031 (0.124)
Percent HDB					0.035 (0.050)	0.012 (0.048)
District Magnitude						0.005 (0.003)
Deviation from Electoral Quotient						-0.075* (0.039)
New GRC						0.014 (0.016)
New SMC						0.013 (0.014)
Constant	0.473*** (0.026)	0.424*** (0.019)	0.325*** (0.041)	0.332*** (0.056)	0.347*** (0.083)	0.358*** (0.072)
Party Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Election Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	55	55	55	55	55	55
R ²	0.691	0.863	0.912	0.925	0.925	0.934
Adjusted R ²	0.629	0.828	0.878	0.887	0.881	0.881

Note: Models estimated with robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

are stable across models and do not appear sensitive to the addition of covariates. Substantively, model estimates suggest that a one standard deviation increase in *Difference in Party Credibility* translates into somewhere between a 3.04% and 3.26% increase in *PAP Vote Share*.

In addition to this result, Table 3 also reports results that support alternative explanations. In particular, results point to the importance of *experienced electoral candidates* in explaining PAP support. We find that *Candidate Incumbency* and *Challenger Quality* both exhibit the expected relationships with *PAP Vote Share*. Substantively, model estimates suggest that incumbent candidates—mostly PAP candidates—enjoy somewhere between a 6.5% and 10.1% increase in *PAP Vote Share*. Yet estimates also suggest that high-quality challengers can substantially narrow the resulting gap by between 6.0% and 6.6%.

Results also point to the importance of a *territorially encompassing infrastructure* and *cross-cutting constituencies*, although the effects of these dimensions of party strength on PAP support are less obvious. While *PA-GRO Density*, *PCF Kindergarten Share*, *Previous PAP Vote Share*, and *Opposition Stronghold* all exhibit the expected relationships with *PAP Vote Share*, only *Opposition Stronghold* reaches standard levels of significance in all models. The absence of any clear effect of ethnicity and social class on PAP support points to the success of the PAP in constructing and maintaining itself as a “catch-all” party capable of developing constituencies that span potentially salient ethnic and class-based cleavages. Lastly, results provide only limited support regarding key features of the *electoral system* for explaining PAP support. Although *District Magnitude*, *Deviation from Electoral Quotient*, *New SMC*, and *New GRC* all exhibit the expected relationships with *PAP Vote Share*, they all fall below standard levels of significance.

The results reported in Table 3 show strong support for our claim that valence considerations like party credibility play a key role in why Singaporeans vote for the PAP. They

do not, however, directly address the related claim that valence considerations overshadow positional considerations based on ideological or policy stances. We therefore estimate another series of pooled OLS models in which we regress *PAP Vote Share* on *Difference in Party Credibility* while controlling for *Difference in Policy Positions*. We report the results in Table 4. Model 1 is the baseline regression. Models 2 through 5 include *Difference in Policy Positions* for each of the four policy domains, respectively. We include opposition party fixed effects in all models.

Table 4: Difference in Party Credibility, Policy Positions, and PAP Vote Share

	PAP Vote Share				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Difference in Party Credibility	0.241*** (0.034)	0.260*** (0.037)	0.203*** (0.045)	0.256*** (0.036)	0.197*** (0.048)
Difference in Policy Positions – Social Welfare		0.061 (0.048)			
Difference in Policy Positions – Immigration			0.072 (0.056)		
Difference in Policy Positions – CPF Issues				0.042 (0.033)	
Difference in Policy Positions – Civil Liberties					0.059 (0.046)
Constant	0.539*** (0.028)	0.485*** (0.051)	0.494*** (0.045)	0.512*** (0.035)	0.528*** (0.029)
Party Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	29	29	29	29	29
R ²	0.711	0.713	0.713	0.713	0.713
Adjusted R ²	0.595	0.577	0.577	0.577	0.577

Note: Models estimated with robust standard errors; *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Once again, relative assessments of PAP and opposition party credibility correlate with

PAP support, as *Difference in Party Credibility* exhibits a positive and significant relationship with *PAP Vote Share*; the inclusion of *Difference in Policy Positions* does not alter this result. Furthermore, *Difference in Policy Positions* fails to reach standard levels of significance across all policy domains, and so provides little traction in explaining PAP support. We stress that the null results do not imply the total irrelevance of positional considerations in Singaporean elections, but rather underscore their secondary nature relative to valence considerations.

7 Discussion

We argue that valence considerations are the dominant factor in explaining the voting behavior of Singaporeans, and thus in explaining the resilience of the PAP itself. While we do not completely dismiss explanations based on positional considerations or a ‘climate of fear’, we argue that these are at best secondary factors. We demonstrate this through a qualitative assessment of party competition and a comprehensive quantitative analysis of recent elections. Furthermore, we argue that the primacy of valence considerations is at least partially by design, which we show through a historical analysis of the PAP’s efforts to reshape society and thus voter preferences in a way that reinforces its dominance. We thus depart from the dominant party regimes literature both in analyzing voter behavior through the lens of valence politics, and more importantly, by treating voter preferences as endogenous to dominant party rule.

Under what conditions does this argument hold? The ability of dominant parties to reshape society in a manner that reinforces their resilience requires control of a high-capacity state, as low-capacity states do not have the necessary penetration into society to affect carefully calibrated, planned social change. A high-capacity state, however, is a necessary rather than sufficient condition: Pempel (1990, 334) notes that even a dominant

party, “is by no means unfettered in its ability to carry out its policies; formal rules and informal norms, combined with the countervailing weight of political and societal constraints, all set limits within which... changes can occur.” Effectively navigating these boundaries requires constant finesse from party leaders, the absence of which decreases their ability to affect social change and introduces electoral vulnerabilities. While the PAP’s leadership has often demonstrated this finesse, occasional missteps have temporarily harmed credibility and reduced the party’s margin of victory at the polls.²⁶

The implications for politics in Singapore are substantial. First, the primacy of valence considerations presents Singapore’s opposition parties with a fundamental dilemma. They face substantial disadvantages in competition on valence considerations, given their inability to build a performance record comparable to the PAP’s and the inherent challenges in recruiting and fielding experienced candidates.²⁷ Simultaneously, they find that ideological or policy-based appeals do not resonate with a sufficiently large portion of voters to bring success at the polls. This catch-22 plays a central though often overlooked role in perpetuating PAP dominance.

The comparison with Malaysia is instructive. Malaysia’s dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) likewise inherited a high-capacity state that has allowed it to dominate politics (Slater 2012). Its grip on power, however, is far more tenuous than the PAP’s. Contrary to the PAP, it has prioritized positional issues, namely the advancement of ethnic Malays and other indigenous *bumiputera* (Abdullah 2017a). While the PAP’s emphasis on valence issues has inhibited credible challenges, UMNO’s emphasis

²⁶The widespread backlash against the eugenics-inspired ‘Graduate Mothers Scheme’, for example, resulted in the electoral shock of the 1980s. Frustration with high rates of inward migration over twenty years later contributed to the PAP’s poor GE 2011 performance and subsequent loss of two by-elections, before prompting a substantial policy revision.

²⁷Among the opposition, only the Worker’s Party has built substantial credibility among the electorate. This highlights a counter-intuitive feature of Singaporean politics: the opposition would secure a higher proportion of votes through *less* coordination, as current efforts to avoid three-cornered fights result in low-credibility parties contesting where a higher credibility opposition party would draw more votes.

on positional issues has left it vulnerable to parties that are able to effectively claim the same policy orientation; this includes Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and more recently Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM), which constitutes a grave threat to UMNO rule. UMNO's coalition, in fact, failed to secure the popular vote in the last general election, maintaining power only through extensive manipulation of the electoral system (Ostwald 2017).

The focus on valence politics in Singapore does not guarantee the PAP's continued dominance. Aforementioned missteps by party leadership temporarily harm credibility and introduce vulnerabilities. More importantly, structural changes make it increasingly difficult for the PAP to maintain its high level of credibility: With ever increasing standards of living, returns to investments on social programs or infrastructure in Singapore are naturally subject to diminishing returns, especially relative to the high-growth years following independence. Simultaneously, aging infrastructure that is tasked with supporting a perpetually growing population has shown signs of strain, and deep penetration of social media places all political actors—including the PAP's—under closer scrutiny, occasionally revealing unflattering visages. This evolving reality makes it ever more difficult to maintain the 'exceptionalism' that has long defined "Southeast Asia's miracle city-state" (The Economist 2015, 1).

Herein lies the PAP's vulnerability, and perhaps, the vulnerability of dominant parties in developmental Asia more broadly. Having oriented the electorate towards assessing parties on the basis of performance, the PAP now rules a wealthy Singapore that cannot possibly maintain earlier rates of social and economic progress. In this sense, the natural limit of dominance via valence politics may well be the achievement of development itself. This does not imply an imminent turnover in power, since—as shown—the PAP remains widely perceived as credible with most opposition parties entirely lacking in credibility. But

as with former dominant party peers throughout developmental Asia, maintaining that gap to be ever more difficult without the steady stream of demonstrable material improvements that defined the party's first half-century of rule.

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