

Singapore's 2011 General Elections and Beyond

Beating the PAP at Its Own Game

ABSTRACT

We introduce the concept of a “credibility gap” to explain why the Workers’ Party has been more successful than other opposition political parties in recent elections in Singapore. We argue that opposition parties need to overcome a credible commitment problem with the electorate in order to win against hegemonic parties.

KEYWORDS: electoral authoritarianism, hegemonic party regimes, credible commitment, democratization, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

Singapore has been “one of the most outstandingly stubborn cases of authoritarianism”¹ in East Asia, and is a classical case of electoral authoritarianism.² Its enduring brand of “soft authoritarianism”³ amid rapid economic development has consistently puzzled modernization theorists who argue that economic development results in democratization. In the Singapore general

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1. Soek-Fang Sim, “Hegemonic Authoritarianism and Singapore: Economics, Ideology, and the Asian Economic Crisis,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 36:2 (2006), pp. 143–59.

2. Electoral authoritarian regimes are autocratic regimes that hold nominally democratic elections. See Andreas Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

3. Soft authoritarian regimes are autocratic regimes that eschew overt coercive repression and maintain political power through hegemonic ideologies and control of the press. See Gordon P. Means, “Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore,” *Journal of Democracy* 7:4 (1996), pp. 103–17; Denny Roy, “Singapore, China, and the ‘Soft Authoritarian’ Challenge,” *Asian Survey* 34:3 (1994), pp. 231–42.

Asian Survey, Vol. 54, Number 4, pp. 749–772. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2014 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/AS.2014.54.4.749.

elections of May 2011 (henceforth, GE 2011), the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) displayed its worst electoral performance since the general elections of 1968: it garnered only 60.14% of the popular vote. In the most symbolic of results, the main opposition Workers' Party (WP) defeated the PAP in the five-seat Aljunied Group Representative Constituency (GRC), an unprecedented occurrence since the GRC system was instituted in 1988.⁴ In the end, the WP garnered a total of eight seats in Parliament, retaining its Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC) seat, and including two non-constituency members of parliament (NCMPs), seated as "best losers"⁵ in GE 2011. This was the largest number of seats for any opposition political party in Parliament since the 1968 general elections.

Social scientists have interpreted the electoral results as a critical juncture in Singapore's political development. They have noted the emergence of a "new normal"—a new political climate where the dominant and authoritarian PAP must face more frequent and robust challenges to its policies from the citizenry and opposition parties.⁶ Moreover, a well of optimism has also emerged among some observers of Singaporean politics, who have suggested that Singapore is on the path toward political liberalization, or even democratization. Political scientist Lam Peng Er has suggested that GE 2011 and the associated "new normal" politics signaled Singapore's "evolution towards a normal democracy."⁷ Stephan Ortmann argued that Singapore has shifted from being a purely authoritarian regime to a competitive authoritarian regime, with prospects for future democratization.⁸ Larry Diamond suggests that Singapore (along with Malaysia) "show[s] signs of entering a period of democratic transition."⁹

4. In the GRC scheme, candidates contest as a group under the banner of a political party and are voted into Parliament as a group. At least one of the candidates in the group must be a member of a minority ethnic community in Singapore, such as Malay, Indian, or others. See Hussin Mutalib, "Constitutional-Electoral Reforms and Politics in Singapore," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 27:4 (2002), pp. 659–72; Tsun Hang Tey, "Singapore's Electoral System: Government by the People?" *Legal Studies* 28:4 (2008), pp. 610–28.

5. Ibid. The NCMP scheme was introduced in 1984 to allow for candidates from opposition political parties who have the highest percentage of votes among the losers to be elected as an NCMP.

6. "The New Normal in Politics," *Straits Times*, July 30, 2011.

7. "WP Gearing Up to Form Govt," Channelnewsasia, July 9, 2011, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1139857/1/.html>>.

8. Stephan Ortmann, "Singapore: Authoritarian but Newly Competitive," *Journal of Democracy* 22:4 (2011), pp. 153–64.

9. Larry Diamond, "The Coming Wave," *ibid.*, 23:1 (2012), pp. 5–13.

Although we generally agree with the “optimistic” interpretation of the results of GE 2011, the election is also where we seek our point of departure. In this article, we carefully analyze the campaign and results of GE 2011 in order to cautiously discuss its implications for future elections and democratization in the country. To be sure, close observers of Singaporean politics will find none of the incidents we highlight to support our claims to be controversial. Many of the developments that occurred in the rough and tumble of the GE 2011 campaign have been detailed in a variety of impressive essays.¹⁰ This article builds on those works by distilling the most important lessons to be learned from the WP’s victories in Hougang SMC and Aljunied GRC (and, in parallel, the failure of other opposition parties). We discuss cautiously the implications of those lessons for Singapore’s future elections, the country’s democratization, and the theory of democratization through elections.

We argue that the lessons of GE 2011 suggest that the trajectory of future elections in Singapore will pivot on whether opposition political parties can learn from the WP’s success, and whether the PAP can reform itself to mitigate its various policy failures. This trajectory only serves as a minor, albeit important, contribution to the larger process of democratic transformation insofar as it nudges Singaporeans to be more open to political contests and debate while encouraging greater public participation in opposition political parties. It will not generate any momentum toward dismantling the formal institutions that entrench authoritarianism.¹¹

This argument rests on two distinct analyses of the campaign and results of GE 2011. First, we submit that the PAP’s lowest-ever vote share of 60.14% was a reflection of popular anger at its numerous policy failures over the past five years. Many people were frustrated that the government failed to deal

10. For example, see Derek da Cunha, *Breakthrough: Roadmap for Singapore’s Political Future* (Singapore: Straits Times Press and Institute of Policy Studies [IPS], 2012); Catherine Lim, *A Watershed Election: Singapore’s GE 2011* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011); Jee Say Tan, ed., *A Nation Awakes: Frontline Reflections* (Singapore: Ethos, 2011); Kevin L. Tan and Terence Lee, eds., *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore’s 2011 General Election* (Singapore: Ethos, 2011).

11. These formal institutions that entrench the PAP’s authoritarian rule include, among others, press controls and restrictions on the freedom of assembly. See, for example, Tsun Hang Tey, “Confining the Freedom of the Press in Singapore: A ‘Pragmatic’ Press for ‘Nation-Building?’” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30:4 (2008), pp. 876–905; Cherian George, *Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS [National University of Singapore] Press, 2012). For the broader political science literature that discusses the formal institutions of authoritarianism, see, for example, Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

adequately with issues of deep concern to voters, notably its liberal pro-immigration policy, which in turn was blamed for troubles ranging from rising income inequality and health care costs to a housing bubble and a crippled public transport infrastructure.

Second, popular anger at the PAP's various failures was a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain why the WP managed both to retain Hougang SMC and win Aljunied GRC when all other opposition political parties failed to win in their respective contests against the PAP. We introduce the concept of a "credibility gap" to explain why the WP was successful. A credibility gap exists between the Singaporean electorate and all *other* opposition parties because the electorate cannot credibly trust that opposition candidates—if elected to Parliament—will somehow effectively nurture their local constituency while legislatively challenging the ruling government on national issues. These dual responsibilities of opposition MPs are uniquely Singaporean. They derive from the PAP's historical hegemonic promise to voters to manage the welfare of citizens at both the national and local constituency levels. We argue that the WP succeeded where all the other opposition political parties failed precisely because the WP managed to bridge the credibility gap through three mechanisms: (1) having a consistent and recognized party brand with a disciplined campaign message; (2) running a long-term grassroots outreach campaign; and (3) most importantly, fielding a well-educated, credible team of candidates.¹²

Recent developments have served to buttress our arguments. A by-election was called for Hougang in 2012 after WP incumbent Yaw Shin Leong was expelled from the party because of allegations of an extramarital affair. The replacement WP candidate, Png Eng Huat, prevailed against the PAP's Desmond Choo, garnering 62.08% of the votes, only 2.72 percentage points less than Yaw had in GE 2011. This result was due partly to the strong endorsement that Png received from Low Thia Khiang, Hougang's former MP and the WP's secretary-general; it testifies to how strongly Hougang has developed a partisan loyalty to the WP and Low.

12. While we were finalizing this paper for publication, it came to our attention that this particular part of our analysis is similar to, but not the same as, the conclusions reached by Alex Au in two blog posts written in 2011. We thought it important to acknowledge this and to provide readers with links to Au's insights. See <<http://yawningbread.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/groundwork-good-candidates-and-consistent-branding/>> and <<http://yawningbread.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/groundwork-good-candidates-and-consistent-branding-part-2/>>, accessed May 28, 2014.

In addition, in the Punggol East by-election of 2013, called after PAP incumbent Michael Palmer resigned (also in the wake of an extramarital affair), the WP's candidate, Lee Li Lian (54.50% of votes), won in a four-cornered fight. Lee's rivals were the PAP's Dr. Koh Poh Koon (43.73%), the Reform Party's (RP) Kenneth Jeyaretnam (1.20%), and the Singapore Democratic Alliance's (SDA) Desmond Lim (0.57%). In the process, Lee Li Lian became the first female opposition member to win an SMC since Singapore's independence. We further discuss these two by-elections near the end of our paper, below.

Before we explicate our arguments in detail, it is useful to discuss the theoretical contributions of this article. First, our concept of the credibility gap represents a theoretical problem of credible commitment between the voters and opposition political parties in authoritarian elections. While the electorate may wish to vote for the opposition political party against the incumbent hegemonic party, voters need to believe that the opposition party, if voted in, can suitably represent, protect, and advance the constituency's interests *against* the incumbent hegemonic party. Such credibility is especially important, particularly in hegemonic party regimes, because voters who opt for the opposition have a legitimate fear that the regime will undertake future measures that harm the constituency's interest if the opposition party is too weak and reneges on its electoral promises.¹³ As we note below, the residents of Aljunied GRC received veiled threats from the PAP during GE 2011, among others, that estate upgrading could be delayed, and property prices could fall compared to those in PAP-held constituencies. Such hints were in line with threats aimed at the opposition-held Hougang and Potong Pasir SMCs in previous years. Simply put, this article explains how the WP raised its credibility in the eyes of the voters to overcome this credible commitment problem, while other opposition political parties failed to do so.

Moreover, this case study of Singapore's GE 2011 contributes to the growing literature on democratization by elections,¹⁴ insofar as it draws our attention to

13. Some scholars have termed the threats of the authoritarian regime as the "tragic brilliance" of a "punishment regime." See Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Beatriz Magaloni, and Barry R. Weingast, "Tragic Brilliance: Equilibrium Party Hegemony in Mexico," <<https://www.stanford.edu/group/mcnollgast/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/tragicbrillianceQJPS.submission.07.0317.pdf>>, accessed May 26, 2014.

14. Staffan I. Lindberg, ed., *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism*.

the enduring and vexing debate between area studies and the discipline of political science. Our initial focus on the PAP's historical hegemonic persuasion of voters at the ballot box (i.e., the local context) has subsequent implications for explaining why opposition political parties may or may not successfully challenge the authoritarian incumbent. This suggests that studying and theorizing about the democratization potential of elections must be first rooted in contextualizing elections. Rather than viewing elections as just a game for the acquisition of political power, we need also to view elections and their associated electoral rules as institutions that are embedded in networks of power in the first place. This line of thought parallels Richard Snyder's articulation that we "should not overstate the importance of elections" and that we should first pay attention to the four extra-electoral contextual factors: who rules, how do rulers rule, why do rulers rule, and how much do rulers rule.¹⁵ Our case study suggests that the question of "How do rulers rule?" warrants the greatest attention of all.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: First, we describe the PAP's historical claim for the electorate's votes at the ballot box. While we do acknowledge that the PAP exercises authoritarian control through a host of other strategies,¹⁶ we focus on its ability to persuade voters during elections. Second, we discuss the various policy failures of the PAP government, which served as fodder for the opposition parties to attack the PAP during the GE 2011 campaign. These mistakes were widely acknowledged to have led to popular dissatisfaction against the PAP government, which was a strong factor contributing to its lowest-ever vote share. Third, we analyze the various opposition political parties comparatively. As mentioned, only the WP managed to bridge the credibility gap. Fourth and finally, we tentatively discuss this study's implications for future elections and democratization in Singapore, and for the theory of democratization by elections.

15. Richard Snyder, "Beyond Electoral Authoritarianism: The Spectrum of Nondemocratic Regimes," in *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, ed. by Andreas Schedler (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

16. See, for example, Garry Rodan and Kanishka Jayasuriya, "The Technocratic Politics of Administrative Participation: Case Studies of Singapore and Vietnam," *Democratization* 14:5 (2007), pp. 795–815; Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (New York: St. Martin's Press; Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, in association with St Antony's College, 1994); Cho-Oon Khong, "Singapore: Political Legitimacy Through Managing Conformity," in *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority*, ed. by Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 108–35.

THE PAP'S HISTORICAL HEGEMONIC PERSUASION AT THE BALLOT BOX

The PAP's claim to voter loyalty during general elections has been primarily based on its ability to foster rapid economic growth and development. Since independence in 1965, the PAP, fronted by Lee Kuan Yew and other strong leaders such as the late Dr. Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam, has overseen Singapore's meteoric rise from being one of Britain's crown colonies to becoming a global city at the heart of international finance. The cliché, as Lee Kuan Yew puts it, is that the PAP steered Singapore's economic development from "Third World to First."¹⁷ Not only was economic growth rapid, it was also fairly equitable, with the government investing heavily in Housing Development Board (HDB) public housing for the masses, and in education, from primary schools to universities. Today, slightly more than 80% of Singaporeans live in HDB apartments, one of the highest proportions of the population living in public housing in the world.

The great expansion of material wealth within a little more than four decades was undertaken in a climate of domestic peace and international security. Using strong-arm legislation and public policies, the PAP government was able to clamp down on ethnic violence in the multi-racial and multi-religious country, and to rapidly develop a highly regarded professional army and foreign service to safeguard its international interests.¹⁸

The PAP's eagerness to take credit for Singapore's equitable economic development has been repeatedly repaid at the ballot box. Some scholars have argued that security and prosperity are provided by the regime *in exchange for* political acquiescence and PAP loyalty during elections.¹⁹ In every general election up to 1980, the PAP won every seat in Parliament. Only in 1981 was the first opposition MP elected, when the WP's J. B. Jeyaratnam won the Anson by-election. Opposition parties made further inroads during GE 1984, winning two seats after the PAP suffered a voter backlash against its highly

17. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (Singapore: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

18. For a thorough discussion of authoritarian legislation, see Jothie Rajah, *Authoritarian Rule of Law: Legislation, Discourse, and Legitimacy in Singapore* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19. Benjamin Wong and Xunming Huang, "Political Legitimacy in Singapore," *Politics and Policy* 38:3 (2010), pp. 523–43.

unpopular “Graduate Mothers Scheme.”²⁰ Since then, opposition parties have obtained a maximum of four seats, for that reason never threatening the PAP’s parliamentary dominance.

As with any longstanding commercial trading arrangement, the exchange relationship between the PAP government and the electorate is bounded by a high level of trust accumulated over the decades. One may even go so far as to say that the PAP government genuinely believes in the nurturing of this degree of trust as one of the foundations of this exchange relationship. On numerous occasions, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has reiterated that the PAP government functions as a trustee, a “guardian” or “custodian” of the people’s welfare.²¹ This trustee role allows the government to make public policy decisions based on long-term perspectives for the future, rather than tending to short-term populism.

To be sure, the PAP’s claim of superior macroeconomic management in exchange for authoritarian political rule is not a purely instrumental exchange. The bargain between the PAP and the electorate is very much augmented by a network of ideologies, of which two are prominent. First, pragmatism. The PAP reiterates that the acid test of the implementation of any public policy is whether it works pragmatically to achieve policy goals. The government is not a slave to any specific ideology, in the conventional sense of the term, from the Left or the Right; it is willing to experiment and evolve to figure out what works for the people. The “administrative state” is depoliticized and de-ideologized, so that rational pragmatism serves as the guiding principle for effective governance.²² “Governance that works” is the usual mantra.²³

20. The “Graduate Mother’s Scheme” was introduced in 1984 to give preferential registration and placement in primary schools for children of mothers who were university graduates. This was scrapped in 1985.

21. See the three occasions mentioned and cited in Bilahari Kausikan, “Governance That Works,” *Journal of Democracy* 8:2 (1997), pp. 24–34, as well as, more recently, Goh Chok Tong, “Singapore: Global City of Buzz, Home for Us,” speech at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Students’ Union Ministerial Forum, October 29, 2010, <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre/speechesinterviews/seniorminister/2010/October/speech_by_seniorminister_gohchoktongatthentustudentsunionminister.html>.

22. Heng Chee Chan, “Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has the Politics Gone?” in *Trends in Singapore: Proceedings and Background Paper*, ed. by Chee Meow Seah (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975), pp. 51–68.

23. Kausikan, “Governance That Works.”

Eschewing this non-ideological view of pragmatism, some academics claim that pragmatism is nothing short of an ideology, on its own. Beng Huat Chua notes that the “overriding goal of PAP pragmatism is to ensure continuous economic growth,” which is “the singular criterion for initiating and assessing all government activities.”²⁴ All manners of social and economic life are thus subject to state regulation, ensuring consistency of purpose toward economic development. State intervention is pragmatically necessary because it is rational to intervene to achieve the state’s aims. Extending Chua’s analysis, Kenneth Tan examines how the PAP’s ideology of pragmatism is closely tied to the silent workings of neoliberal globalization, and how this pragmatism is opposed to idealism, utopianism, and intangible values. At the same time, it exhibits both adaptive and technical characteristics to achieve policy objectives.²⁵ Ultimately, pragmatism contributes to the PAP’s claim to voter loyalty during elections through its role as an “ideological rhetoric that unproblematically frames economic growth as a pre-eminent national goal, the achievement of which can be secured only by maintaining the one-party dominant state led by the PAP government.”²⁶

Yet, the ideology of pragmatism contributes only in part to the electorate’s confidence that the PAP will deliver on its promises for prosperity. Voters might reasonably be skeptical of the PAP’s claims of pragmatism if the party were to recruit its politicians and civil servants on the basis of loyalty. Therefore, meritocracy emerges as the second important ideology buttressing the exchange relationship between the government and the people. In Singapore, political meritocracy is implemented not through inter-party democratic competition but through the PAP’s identification of private- and public-sector individuals who fit its definition of merit “almost exclusively in terms of educational and professional qualifications and commercial success.”²⁷

These individuals, once identified, are then persuaded to join politics and run for election as PAP candidates. Further, many new parliamentarians

24. Beng Huat Chua, “Pragmatism of the People’s Action Party Government in Singapore: A Critical Assessment,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 13:1 (1985), pp. 29–46.

25. Kenneth Paul Tan, “The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42:1 (2012), pp. 67–92.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

27. Kenneth Paul Tan, “Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City: Ideological Shifts in Singapore,” *International Political Science Review* 29:7 (2008), pp. 7–27.

are co-opted from the elite echelons of the civil service—the Administrative Service—or from the top brass of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). Almost all of them have received prestigious, fully funded government scholarships for their overseas undergraduate education, and are generally called “government scholars.” In the most recent GE 2011, Chan Chun Sing and Tan Chuan Jin were the most prominent candidates, both having received SAF Overseas Scholarships, with the former having the added prestige of being a President’s Scholar. Chan eventually rose to the position of Chief of Army, while Tan rose to become the head of the Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). Other notables who ran in the GE 2011 included Lawrence Wong, the former chief executive of the Energy Market Authority, and Sim Ann, a former President’s Scholar and director of the National Population Secretariat. Kenneth Tan notes, alongside Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, that meritocracy has been the ideological and pragmatic sieve through which elites are identified and elite governance is perpetuated.²⁸ As an incentive, and in justification of the meritocratic selection of these academically bright individuals, the government pays its cabinet ministers some of the highest salaries in the world. The pay for the prime minister begins at S\$ 2.2 million (US\$1.75 million) a year, while other cabinet ministers start from S\$ 1.1 million (US\$877,000).²⁹ High salaries tend to legitimize these meritocratic individuals while keeping corruption at bay.

At the same time as the PAP argues that its provision of national security and prosperity is a legitimate national claim for votes, it is also attendant to the needs of local constituencies in HDB public housing estates. Constituencies that returned the PAP to power during elections would get to enjoy estate upgrading, with significant improvements to their living environments with new lifts (elevators), better street lighting, covered walkways, and repainted exteriors. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself has confessed, constituencies that elected opposition parties would be left at the back of the

28. Ibid.; Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity, and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008).

29. In contrast, President Obama’s salary is about US\$400,000. “Singapore PM Faces 36pct Pay Cut, Still World’s Best Paid,” Reuters, January 4, 2012, <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/01/04/singapore-politics-pay-idINDEE80303X20120104>>; “Singapore May Cut Lee’s Pay to \$1.7 million as Minister Salaries Reduced,” *Bloomberg*, January 4, 2012, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-01-04/singapore-to-cut-ministers-pay-on-panel-recommendations-after-2011-polls.html>>.

queue for such upgrading at best, or left out altogether at worst.³⁰ In a desperate bid to win back Hougang constituency from the WP in GE 2006, the PAP announced a S\$ 100 million (US\$80 million) estate upgrading plan for Hougang in support of its candidate, Eric Low.³¹ Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong suggested that Hougang could become a “slum” if voters continued to vote for the WP’s Low Thia Khiang.³² In GE 2011, when asked about the prospect of Aljunied GRC voters possibly voting for the WP instead of the PAP, Lee Kuan Yew said, “If Aljunied decides to go that way, well, Aljunied has five years to live and repent.”³³

This deliberate attempt by the PAP to focus on the maintenance and upgrading of local constituency amenities as an electoral tactic means that opposition political parties must be able to effectively address both local concerns and national issues if they are to rebut the PAP convincingly and attract votes. Indeed, as we shall discuss subsequently in this article, only the WP, among all opposition parties, was able to convince voters that it was capable of dealing with both local and national concerns. Before that discussion, we ask why the electorate was upset with the PAP prior to GE 2011.

THE CONFLUENCE OF MULTIPLE POLICY FAILURES

We concur with various academics and commentators that the PAP government uncharacteristically committed several policy mistakes that fed considerable voter anger and resentment against the incumbent PAP government. We submit that these multiple policy failures had directly impinged upon the PAP’s historical reputation among voters at the ballot box, as elaborated in the previous section. This likely led to voters who had previously voted for the PAP but who were sympathetic to the opposition to finally cast their votes for opposition parties instead. In the rest of this section, we detail three of these policy failures.

30. “Huge Uproar over PM Lee’s Comments,” *Yahoo News Singapore—Singapore Scene*, April 6, 2011, <<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/pm-lee-don-t-upgrading-pay-less-tax-20110405-231901-526.html>>.

31. “PAP Unveils \$100m Hougang Upgrading Plan,” *Business Times*, May 4, 2006.

32. “Hougang ‘May Become a Slum,’” *Straits Times*, May 2, 2006.

33. “Aljunied Has Five Years to ‘Repent’ if It Chooses WP: MM,” *Yahoo News Singapore—Singapore Scene*, April 30, 2011, <<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/pap-loses-aljunied-voters-5-years-repent-mm-155825423.html>>.

Unequal Development

First and foremost, there was considerable concern that Singapore's economic development was no longer equitable.³⁴ The Gini coefficient, the standard measure of income inequality, among citizen-headed employed households rose from 0.425 in 2000 to 0.446 in 2010, even after accounting for government transfers and taxes. The household income per household member in the 90th percentile was 9.22 times that of the tenth percentile in 2010, up from 7.52 times in 2000.³⁵ Most worrying, the real income of the bottom 20th percentile of workers was completely stagnant throughout the decade. These developments occurred despite the government's best efforts to ameliorate the problem through the implementation of Workfare in 2007, an income supplement scheme for low-wage workers.

According to a post-GE 2011 election survey by the IPS, the growing inequality worried the electorate insofar as it meant declining affordability when faced with the rising cost of living.³⁶ In particular, this meant that much attention was centered upon the affordability of new HDB public housing and medical services.

Tampines GRC was helmed by Mah Bow Tan, who was minister for national development from 1999–2011. Mah was responsible for overseeing land use in the country and for providing affordable HDB public housing. During the elections, however, he was roundly criticized by political opponents and social commentators alike for his apparent failure to rein in rising property prices and provide sufficient public housing for new families. The Resale Price Index, which tracks the overall price movement of the public residential market through resale transactions, showed a sustained increase in public housing prices since early 2005, with prices increasing sharply beginning in early 2007. The index stood at 174.8 in the first quarter of 2011, which

34. "Inequality and the Need for a New Social Compact," *Singapore Perspectives*, 2012, background paper, at <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/SP2012_Bkgd-Pa.pdf>, accessed August 13, 2013.

35. "Singaporeans in the Workforce," Occasional Paper, Manpower Research and Statistics Department and Singapore Department of Statistics, pp. 10–11, at <http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd_singaporeans_in_the_workforce.pdf>, accessed August 13, 2013.

36. "IPS Post-Election Survey 2011," IPS report, at <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/POPS-4_May11_report.pdf>, accessed August 13, 2013.

meant that public housing was 74.8% more expensive than in the fourth quarter of 1998, the base quarter for the index.³⁷

Opposition candidates also took issue with other failings of Mah's housing policies. Lee Li Lian of the WP, for example, chastised Mah for being insensitive to the extended length of time needed to repay housing loans.³⁸ Glenda Han, also of the WP, called for tighter restrictions on apartment ownership by permanent residents in order to give Singaporeans priority for public housing.³⁹ *The Online Citizen*, a sociopolitical blog, published an article examining the distortion of public housing prices, and suggested that Mah's housing policies were irresponsible.⁴⁰ Prime Minister Lee acknowledged the gravity of the issue, including it in the list of shortcomings that he apologized for at an election rally.⁴¹

Another district, Sembawang GRC, was led by Minister for Health Khaw Boon Wan. The cost of healthcare was brought up regularly throughout the election campaign, with many opposition politicians criticizing the current healthcare system as inadequate for helping Singaporeans cope with rising medical expenses. The WP called for universal healthcare insurance to be introduced. It also urged the lifting of restrictions on withdrawals from Medisave, the national medical savings account, by elderly persons seeking outpatient treatment. The opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) argued that the long waits at community clinics to get a medical referral letter to public hospitals, where specialist treatment is subsidized, were unacceptable.⁴²

Public Transport Problems

Second, the emerging inefficiency of the public transport system was also a key election issue. Many Singaporeans expressed frustration over the

37. HDB Resale Price Index, <<http://www.hdb.gov.sg/f110/f110321p.nsf/w/BuyResaleFlatResaleIndex>>, accessed February 2, 2013.

38. "GE: WP's Lee Li Lian Questions Mah Bow Tan over Cost of Public Housing," *Channelnewsasia*, May 1, 2011, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1126110/1/.html>>.

39. "GE: Income Gap, Housing, Foreign Talent Par for Course at Opposition Rallies," *ibid.*, May 2, 2011, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1126339/1/.html>>.

40. "Are Mah Bow Tan's Housing Policies Responsible?" *Online Citizen*, April 15, 2011, <<http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/04/are-mah-bow-tan%E2%80%99s-housing-policies-responsible/>>.

41. "GE 2011: PM Says Sorry," *Straits Times*, May 4, 2012.

42. "GE: Income Gap, Housing, Foreign Talent Par for Course at Opposition Rallies."

growing crowding of roads, buses, and trains. Their target was frequently Raymond Lim (East Coast GRC), minister for transport from 2006–11, who was responsible for developing and regulating air, land, and sea transport within Singapore, including the public transport network. Even in the years preceding the elections, there had been a groundswell of sentiment among residents that the public transport network could not cope with Singapore's burgeoning foreign resident population. One of the first signs of this dissatisfaction emerged in the results of a transport survey published in 2009, with only 59% of respondents saying they used public transport, down from 63% in 2004. Brian Collins, chief scientific advisor to the U.K. Department of Transport, suggested shortcomings in punctuality, frequency, and comfort as possible reasons behind this reluctance to use public transport.⁴³ Prime Minister Lee himself acknowledged the deficiencies in Singapore's public transport network that had led to overcrowding, especially on trains, and apologized for that failing in his rally speech.

It was clear to most of the electorate that these twin issues—rising inequality and frustration with public transport—derived from the government's liberal foreign worker immigration policies. In the course of a decade, the number of foreign workers in Singapore blossomed by 76.8%, from 615,700 in 2000 to 1.09 million in 2010, eventually making up 34.7% of the total labor force.⁴⁴

Public Security Issues

Third and finally, the long-treasured claim of impregnable internal and external security was breached when an alleged regional terrorist leader, Mas Selamat bin Kastari, managed to escape from the high security Whitley Road Detention Centre on February 27, 2008. He was able to make his way to neighboring Malaysia, where he evaded capture for more than a year before being arrested in April 2009. As the minister for home affairs from 1994 to 2010, Wong Kan Seng was tasked with maintaining Singapore's internal security. The apparent ease with which a dangerous terrorist escaped from

43. "Drop in Public Transport Share in Singapore: Transport Survey," *ibid.*, October 26, 2009, <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1013808/1/.html>>.

44. Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Weiqiang Lin, "Rapid Growth in Singapore's Immigrant Population Brings Policy Challenges," *Migration Information Source*, <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=887>>, accessed November 19, 2012.

a high security detention center during a toilet break sparked a series of online posts lampooning the Singapore government.⁴⁵ Wong's opponents in GE 2011 capitalized on the question of his competence and his loss of stature in office. The secretary-general of the Singapore People's Party (SPP), Chiam See Tong, left Potong Pasir SMC, where he had been MP for the past 27 years, to field a team challenging Wong in Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC. Chiam repeatedly raised the Mas Selamat issue throughout his campaign, charging that Wong had failed in his office and was escaping responsibility too easily by issuing a simple apology. Local media noted Chiam's doggedness in pursuing the issue; the *Today* daily, for example, ran an article covering Chiam's campaign titled "Chiam Won't Let Go of Mas Selamat Issue."⁴⁶ Chiam eventually lost, though his team narrowed the majority vote share that Wong received in the constituency.

Because of space constraints, we will not discuss the many other issues that were linked to specific ministers in different GRCs. What is important is that the various "bread-and-butter" issues discussed above appear to have seriously impinged upon the PAP's historical claim of equitable growth and internal and external security. It is no surprise that the PAP's campaign slogan of "Securing Our Future Together" rang hollow to the vast majority of the electorate. There was also some criticism that the manifesto lacked details.⁴⁷ What is surprising is that the technocratic and pragmatic PAP government failed to address the many problems *before* they became debate topics during the election period.⁴⁸

Consequently, in view of the multiple failures of the PAP, we must then ask: why was this not enough to decisively tip the electorate to vote for opposition parties in the many other GRCs and SMCs beyond Aljunied and Hougang? For instance, although WP Secretary-General Low Thia Khian succeeded in moving out of his old constituency in Hougang to win over Aljunied, why was the SPP's Chiam See Tong not successful in his bid to win

45. "Singapore Gov't Butt of Jokes after Prison Escape," Agence France-Presse, March 3, 2008.

46. "Chiam Won't Let Go of Mas Selamat Issue," *Today*, April 28, 2011.

47. "GE: PAP's Manifesto Emphasizes Inclusiveness, Say Observers," Channelnewsasia, April 17, 2011, <http://www.smu.edu.sg/sites/default/files/smu/news_room/smu_in_the_news/2011/sources/CNA_20110417_1.pdf>.

48. For an insider's explanation of PAP's failures, see Donald Low, "What Went Wrong for the PAP in 2011?" in *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus*, Donald Low and Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), pp. 168–77.

over Bishan-Toa Payoh after moving out of Potong Pasir, as noted above?⁴⁹ Furthermore, why were the other opposition parties such as the RP, the National Solidarity Party (NSP), and the SDP unable to make headway in their respective contests?

THE WP BRIDGES THE CREDIBILITY GAP

We define a credibility gap as the gap in trust between the electorate and an opposition political party that arises because voters doubt that the potential opposition can represent, protect, and advance their interests against a hegemonic party in authoritarian elections. In Singapore, this gap exists because of the PAP's historical claims that it provides a pragmatic, meritocratic government that can both lead the country at the national level and manage the constituency well at the local level. Moreover, the PAP has a propensity to retaliate against opposition constituencies.

We submit that the WP retained Hougang SMC and won Aljunied GRC because it managed to bridge the credibility gap with three elements in its favor: (1) it had a consistent party brand augmented by a disciplined campaign message, (2) it conducted grassroots outreach for many years prior to the elections, and (3) the WP's team at Aljunied was made up of well educated and credible candidates. All three elements needed to be aligned before enough voters had the confidence to vote for the opposition party, even if they were upset at the numerous policy failures of the PAP. In the rest of this section, we compare and contrast the strongest opposition teams that contended in their respective GRCs, to highlight the importance of all three elements.

By all accounts, the WP was the "epitome of discipline"⁵⁰ among all the opposition political parties; some observers argued that it was even more disciplined than the PAP, which was uncharacteristically disorganized.⁵¹ Backed by the quiet and steady leadership of Low Thia Kiang, who was

49. In using the term "moving out," we simply mean the electoral strategy of choosing to contest in another electoral constituency. There is no residency requirement for candidates.

50. Alex Au, "Parties and Personalities: Staying Together (or Not) under Fire," in *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election*, eds. Kevin Y. L. Tan and Terence Lee (Singapore: Ethos, 2011), p. 68.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70; Derek da Cunha, "The WP's Prospects Hinge on Dominating the Middle Ground," in *Breakthrough: Roadmap for Singapore's Political Future* (Singapore: Straits Times Press and IPS, 2012), pp. 202–35.

MP for Hougang SMC for 20 years, the party's campaign slogan "Towards a First World Parliament"⁵² resonated with voters who wanted to see more-aggressive checks on the PAP's parliamentary dominance. Low's rally speeches drew much laughter when he depicted the WP acting as the PAP's "co-driver" who would slap the PAP driver awake if he fell asleep at the wheel. The metaphor drove home its key message.⁵³ Moreover, Low did not hesitate to withdraw from the limelight and allow his new charges to face the media to gain familiarity with the electorate. Da Cunha noted how Low sat at the back row when the WP launched its manifesto on April 9, 2012, allowing Sylvia Lim, Yaw Shin Leong, Pritam Singh, Gerald Giam, Muhamad Faisal bin Abdul Manap, and Png Eng Huat to front the launch.⁵⁴

The discipline was also indirectly translated into a grassroots outreach effort. The party steadily increased the frequency of its walkabouts⁵⁵ in the second half of 2010 and the first quarter of 2011, while keeping the media at bay.⁵⁶ Sylvia Lim mentioned how she conducted "door-to-door visits in Aljunied once a week, almost every week, for about eight years."⁵⁷ Derek da Cunha terms this face-to-face contact with voters "retail politics," and argues that it is one of the key factors in persuading voters of the WP's long-term commitment to their welfare. He further noted that the WP was the opposition party that best leveraged this patient strategy for the long-term.⁵⁸

Perhaps most important, the WP was able to bridge the credibility gap between the voters and itself in Aljunied because of its impressive slate of candidates, rivaling the PAP's team led by Foreign Minister George Yeo. In addition to Secretary-General Low Thia Khiang and Chairman Sylvia Lim in the WP's "A" team contesting in Aljunied, Chen Show Mao was another celebrity, boasting impressive scholarly and private sector credentials. Chen

52. A "First World Parliament" is ostensibly a parliament where the opposition provides effective checks on the ruling government. In order to do this, the opposition needed more candidates to be voted in.

53. Eugene Tan, "Election Issues," in *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election*, eds. Tan and Lee, p. 68.

54. da Cunha, *Breakthrough*, p. 155.

55. Opposition political parties in Singapore typically reach out to voters by conducting walkabouts—visiting neighborhood centers and coffee shops to meet local residents and sell their party newsletters.

56. Au, "Parties and Personalities," p. 70.

57. da Cunha, *Breakthrough*, p. 157.

58. Idem, "Moving the Vote: Retail Politics, the Internet, and the Culture of Looks," in *ibid.*, pp. 154–79.

holds degrees from Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford, and was a highly successful corporate lawyer in an international law firm. Pritam Singh was a noted orator during the election rallies, gradually becoming a “crowd favorite” by making his serious points in an amusing way. Muhamad Faisal was perceived to be an empathetic and dedicated former social worker.

In sum, one may go so far as to say that the WP’s strategy beat the PAP at its own game. The WP’s clear and disciplined campaign message rivaled the pragmatism of PAP rhetoric; its grassroots outreach assured voters of the importance of local constituency presence and management; and its more than credible candidates were as deserving or more so than the PAP’s team in Aljunied.

To be sure, some observers would contend that it was certainly expected that the WP would win Aljunied because a historical precedent existed. In GE 2006, the WP team in Aljunied polled 43.91% of the votes, the best among opposition political parties at that time. Sections of Aljunied were also parts of Cheng San GRC, the constituency that in GE 1997 saw the fiercest contest between the WP and the PAP. The WP polled 45.18% of the votes at that time. Yet, attention to this historical trajectory only goes to further buttress our point about long-term grassroots outreach to signal commitment to the local constituency. The WP persistently put their faith in Aljunied GRC for the long term—a constituency that is also adjacent to Low Thia Kiang’s Hougang SMC.

On paper, the other opposition party with equally impressive academic and work credentials was the SDP, whose “A” team was competing in GE 2011 in Holland-Bukit Timah GRC against PAP’s team fronted by Minister for Community, Youth, and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan. Tan Jee Say, who was part of the SDP “A” team, was notable for being the principal private secretary to former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for five years (1985–90), and was therefore extremely close to the PAP establishment. Another notable member, Vincent Wijesingha, also gained much attention for his effective rally speeches and his good performance in a televised political debate in April 2011.⁵⁹

Yet, despite excelling in the third factor of having credible candidates, SDP was found wanting in the first two elements. According to IPS’s “Post-Election Survey 2011,” although the party’s credibility improved significantly

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

from 2006, it still lagged behind the WP, the SPP, and the NSP.⁶⁰ The mainstream media's negative portrayals of the continued presence of SDP Secretary-General Dr. Chee Soon Juan and his party were still prevalent.⁶¹ In addition, the SDP relied overly on the use of new media and social media during the campaign.⁶² Despite attempts to soften its image by using a man wearing a bear suit as a mascot, "Danny the Democracy Bear," during its walkabouts, it was not enough to convince the electorate that the SDP was serious about the welfare of the local constituency.

Mirroring Low Thia Khian, as mentioned above, SPP leader Chiam See Tong left his Potong Pasir SMC to contest in the Bishan Toa-Payoh GRC. Despite having an equal if not better reputation than Low for his work as an MP for more than two decades, why were Chiam and the SPP unable to emulate the success of Low and the WP? It appears that Chiam and his party fell short in all three aspects in bridging the credibility gap. First, excepting notable former civil servants who were government scholars such as Benjamin Pwee and Jimmy Lee Yong Wee, the other candidates, Wilfred Leung and Mohamad Hamim Aliyas, had no attention-grabbing credentials. Second, the SPP was plagued with infighting in late 2010 and early 2011 over the decision to form an alliance with the RP headed by Kenneth Jeyaretnam and over who should represent the SPP as a candidate in Potong Pasir.⁶³ In the end, the SPP withdrew as a component party of the SDA in March 2011, giving it less organizational power to work the ground during the campaign. Third, despite the electorate's embrace of Chiam's moderate ways and his achievements in Potong Pasir, they were probably concerned by his frail health and inaudible voice: he had suffered two strokes, the last in 2008. Fourth and finally, the public was also less than impressed with Chiam's replacement candidate in Potong Pasir SMC, his wife, Lina Chiam. She had come across

60. See slides 35–36, "IPS Post-Election Survey 2011," data on slides by IPS, <http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/POPS-4_May-11_slides.pdf>, accessed August 14, 2013.

61. The state-controlled media has consistently portrayed Dr. Chee as a troublemaker, with his public protests along with fellow party members outside Parliament or at the Istana, Singapore President Tony Tan Keng Yam's official residence. Chee has also been the subject of defamation suits by cabinet members, leading him to be jailed multiple times and declared a bankrupt in 2006. See also da Cunha, *Breakthrough*, pp. 84–92.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

63. Au, "Parties and Personalities," pp. 69–70.

as “little more than a housewife” in a televised debate on April 2, 2011.⁶⁴ Therefore, she was not a credible candidate, and the PAP subsequently retook Potong Pasir.

Lacking a track record like that of the WP’s Low Thia Kiang or the SPP’s Chiam See Tong, the other opposition parties—the NSP and the RP—unsurprisingly fared less well. Although the NSP had former government scholars in Hazel Poa and her husband Tony Tan on their “A” team in Choa Chu Kang, the rest of the NSP’s candidates were virtually unknown to the greater Singapore public. The NSP also committed the strategic error of competing in both the East (Marine Parade and Tampines GRCs) and West (Choa Chu Kang and Jurong GRCs) regions of Singapore, curbing its ability to coordinate logistics and grassroots outreach. Although the comeliness and overwhelming popularity of the NSP’s Nicole Seah on its Marine Parade team outshone the shallowness of the PAP’s Tin Pei Ling, they could not paper over the NSP’s inadequacies such as its undefined party brand and dispersed grassroots outreach.

Finally, there was the RP, founded by the late prominent early opposition leader and MP J. B. Jeyaretnam in 2008. The RP was severely let down by the questionable leadership of his son, Kenneth Jeyaretnam. Although the party initially managed to attract some high-profile members, they resigned en masse in the run-up to the elections, citing differences of opinion with the way the party was being run. Kenneth Jeyaretnam was not charismatic at all, appearing stoic and unprepared at times, in addition to his perceived difficulty in connecting with the common voter.⁶⁵ The RP was clearly the party least prepared for the elections, having to “borrow” candidates from other parties, and its grassroots outreach efforts, if any, were lackluster.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The PAP was able to command voter loyalty at the ballot box for a long period of time because of three factors: (1) its ability to pursue rapid and equitable economic growth, augmented by (2) the ideological perception of having successfully created a pragmatic, meritocratic government, combined with (3) close attention to the local needs of specific constituencies. In GE

64. da Cunha, *Breakthrough*, p. 140.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–17.

2011, a confluence of policy failures generated widespread voter frustration with the ruling party. This was a necessary but not sufficient condition for opposition victory. The WP managed both to retain Hougang SMC and capture Aljunied GRC because it was able to bridge the credibility gap through a consistent party brand backed by a disciplined campaign message, long-term grassroots outreach, and well-educated credible candidates. Other opposition parties failed because they were lacking in at least one of the three crucial elements.

To be sure, a number of alternative explanations may account for why PAP's vote share declined to such historically low levels. One account privileges the great increase in voters, especially young voters, in GE 2011. The turnout of just over two million voters in GE 2011 was the largest ever in the history of modern Singapore, nearly double that of the 1.12 million in GE 2006. The new crop of young voters, questing for greater political pluralism, may have inclined toward the opposition parties, according to the IPS survey.⁶⁶ Yet, in the absence of accurate polling data, we cannot test this claim empirically.

Another account suggests that the advent of new media and social media as platforms for the opposition parties to engage the public and bypass the traditional PAP-controlled mainstream media boosted support for the opposition and curtailed it for the PAP. After all, the same IPS post-election survey noted a substantive increase in the influence of the Internet in shaping voter decision in 2011, compared to 2006. Yet, while we do acknowledge this growing role, we concur with Cherian George's assessment that "the internet's biggest impact on the elections was probably more long term and less direct."⁶⁷ We are cautious about identifying the Internet as a direct causal factor for the PAP's low vote share because the online network is primarily a tool and platform to spread information and opinions that already exist in the offline world. Its primary impact has been to intensify existing opinions and expose candidates for who they are. In an interview with the *Straits Times* published on November 1, 2012, former Foreign Minister George Yeo, who lost in Aljunied GRC, suggested that the overall lesson for PAP (and any other) candidates is that the advent of new media and social media means

66. "Post-Election Survey 2011," IPS report.

67. C. George, "Internet Politics: Shouting Down the PAP," in *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election*, ed. by Tan and Lee, pp. 146–59.

they can no longer hide behind a veil of perceived superiority. They can no longer simply hop aboard the PAP brand, or hide behind the coattails of a minister who leads the team in a GRC.⁶⁸

The persistent public frustration with the PAP's economic and social policies, alongside the growing credibility of the WP, is most readily observed in the recently concluded 2012 Hougang and the 2013 Punggol East by-elections. Campaign highlights included the disgrace of the WP's Yaw Shin Leong, who fled the country after allegations of an extramarital affair to escape the intense media speculation, and attempts by the PAP to tar the reputation of the WP and its candidate Png Eng Huat.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, voters in Hougang continued to exhibit partisan loyalty to the WP, with Png securing 62.08% of the votes, only 2.72 percentage points less than Yaw had in GE 2011.

In Punggol East, the swing was even more stark. Dr. Koh Poh Koon was the PAP's candidate to replace Michael Palmer, who resigned as Speaker of Parliament after admitting to an extramarital affair. Koh garnered only 43.73% of the votes, 10.81 percentage points less than Palmer. The WP's Lee Li Lian triumphed with 54.50% of the votes, far outstripping the RP's Kenneth Jeyaretnam with 1.20% and the SDA's Desmond Lim with 0.57% of total valid votes, a margin of victory that some described as "devastating" for the PAP.⁷⁰

It is worthwhile to highlight briefly the poor showing of Jeyaretnam and Lim. Neither party staged an effective grassroots outreach effort nor featured a consistent party brand backed by a disciplined campaign. Journalists described the campaign team of Jeyaretnam as a "motley crew" that attempted to canvass by leveraging the fact that Kenneth was the son of J. B. Jeyaretnam.⁷¹ The SDA's Lim was roundly criticized for his poor performance in his "online rally," a series of video clips uploaded onto YouTube.⁷² Clearly, the other opposition political parties still have some way to go in order to bridge their credibility gaps.

68. "It's Nice, Says George Yeo of His New Job," *Straits Times*, November 1, 2012.

69. "DPM Teo Questions Honesty of Workers' Party, Png Eng Huat," Channelnewsasia, May 22, 2012, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/specialreport/news/1202931_179/1/.html>.

70. "WP's Margin of Victory 'Devastating' for PAP: Analysts," *Yahoo News Singapore*, January 27, 2013, <<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/analysts—wp%E2%80%99s-large-margin-win-%E2%80%98devastating%E2%80%99-for-pap—171253913.html>>.

71. "No Typical Day for RP's Kenneth Jeyaretnam as Schedule Stays Fluid," *Straits Times*, January 23, 2013.

72. "Message to Voters Most Important: Desmond Lim," *Today*, online, January 22, 2013, <<http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/message-voters-most-important-desmond-lim>>.

What does our narrative suggest about the broader process of democratization in Singapore? We posit that reinvigorating the masses to be open to genuine political contests and debates is an important, but minor, contributor to democratization. GE 2011 should not only be noted for the WP's electoral gains and the PAP's lowest ever vote share; it also merits attention because opposition political parties coordinated to contest for seats in all constituencies except Tanjong Pagar GRC, then led by Lee Kuan Yew. This effort spurred the city-state's largest ever voter turnout. Much debate about the relative merits of the PAP and the other parties was generated online in social media.

Yet, these developments lack implications for the other substantive aspects of democratization beyond elections. Liberal political rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press did not feature as election issues at all during campaigning. Even the ostensibly most radical of parties, the SDP, shied away, focusing instead on needed economic reforms. While dissenting voices are growing in online new media and social media with regard to these freedoms, their absence in GE 2011 suggests that the majority of the electorate is still conservative, valuing incremental political development over radical change toward full liberal democratization.

Our conservative prognosis of Singapore's prospects for democratization is aligned with Michael Barr's opinion that elections are unlikely to herald any short-term or medium-term prospects for liberal democratic reforms.⁷³ The electorate remains concerned with "bread-and-butter" issues rather than clamoring for any liberal political rights. In particular, we concur with Dan Slater's analysis that Singapore's strong state institutions facilitate stable transitions to democracy, as in Taiwan or South Korea, but they also permit authoritarian leaders to impede democratization and entrench themselves in the status quo.⁷⁴ Singapore's path toward democracy will very much depend on the enlightenment of its existing political leaders who monopolize power and control the island's strong state institutions.

Finally, this case study about Singapore's GE 2011 also offers us some lessons for the theories of democratization by election in hegemonic party regimes. First, our concept of the credibility gap can travel to other hegemonic party

73. Michael Barr, "The Bonsai under the Banyan Tree: Democracy and Democratization in Singapore," *Democratization* 21:1 (2014), pp. 29–48.

74. Dan Slater, "Strong-State Democratization in Malaysia and Singapore," *Journal of Democracy* 23:2 (2012), pp. 19–33.

regimes, to the extent that there exists a credible commitment problem between voters and opposition political parties. Even if voters prefer voting for the opposition to signal their dissatisfaction with an authoritarian government, those parties must also demonstrate that they can credibly commit to represent, protect, and advance the constituency *against* the government, especially when the ruling party retains power. Second, the exact way the credibility gap functions in each country depends on how the authoritarian regime rules. Different regimes employ different methods of suppression and various rhetorical weapons against opposition political parties. Therefore, opposition parties need to employ a panoply of tactics and strategies to bridge this credibility gap.