Why Are Gender Reforms Adopted in Singapore? Party Pragmatism and Electoral Incentives*

Netina Tan

Abstract

In Singapore, the percentage of elected female politicians rose from 3.8 percent in 1984 to 22.5 percent after the 2015 general election. After years of exclusion, why were gender reforms adopted and how did they lead to more women in political office? Unlike South Korea and Taiwan, this paper shows that in Singapore party pragmatism rather than international diffusion of gender equality norms, feminist lobbying, or rival party pressures drove gender reforms. It is argued that the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) strategic and electoral calculations to maintain hegemonic rule drove its policy u-turn to nominate an average of about 17.6 percent female candidates in the last three elections. Similar to the PAP's bid to capture women voters in the 1959 elections, it had to alter its patriarchal, conservative image to appeal to the younger, progressive electorate in the 2000s. Additionally, Singapore's electoral system that includes multi-member constituencies based on plurality party bloc vote rule also makes it easier to include women and diversify the party slate. But despite the strategic and electoral incentives, a gender gap remains. Drawing from a range of public opinion data, this paper explains why traditional gender stereotypes, biased social norms, and unequal family responsibilities may hold women back from full political participation.

Keywords: gender reforms, party pragmatism, plurality party bloc vote, multi-member constituencies, ethnic quotas, PAP, Singapore

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Introduction

In Singapore, no woman stood in Parliament for 14 years after the sole female parliamentarian retired in 1970. However, in the last two decades, the percentage of female candidates has grown, and reached a high of 18.8 percent in the 2011 general election. Subsequently, the number of elected female officials has risen from 3.8 percent in 1984 to 22.5 percent after the recent 2015 general election (see figure 1). Yet, despite this modest progress, the average number of elected female politicians in Singapore remains below the critical mass of 30 percent, far below Taiwan's 34 percent in this issue.

After years of exclusion, why did more women get nominated and elected into politics in Singapore? Why were gender reforms finally adopted to accommodate women's interests in the early 2000s? And why, despite the efforts, are few women seen in higher political office? Contrary to traditional theories of gender reforms, this paper contends that it was not the international diffusion of gender equality norms, feminist lobbying, or contagion pressure from rival parties that led to the gradual rise of female politicians in Singapore. Rather, it is party pragmatism—the strategic and electoral calculations to maintain hegemonic rule—that drove the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) policy u-turn to nominally include more female candidates in their last three general elections.

Present studies do not place enough attention on the political parties at the centre of analysis, which allow us to link the question of gender reforms to the motivations of parties to change their positions.[1] Given Singapore's hegemonic party system under the PAP for the last five decades and as the Parliament's primary gatekeeper, this paper will focus on the contextual factors that affect the PAP's decision to accommodate women's interests.[2] It is argued that the selective gender reforms in the early 2000s were driven by the PAP's strategic calculations to show its "softer side" and to appeal to the younger and more demanding electorate.[3] Additionally, it is also argued that Singapore's unique electoral system that combines single-member and multi-member constituencies based on plurality party bloc vote rule makes it easier

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[1]   For exceptions see Lenore Lyons, "A Politics of Accommodation," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no. 2 (2005): 233–57, doi:10.1080/14616740500065139.

[2]   Sheri Kunovich and Pamela Paxton, "Pathways to Power: The Role of Political Parties in Women's National Political Representation," *American Journal of Sociology*, 111, no. 2 (September 2005): 507; Wilma Rule, "Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies," *The Western Political Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 1987): 477–98, doi:10.2307/448386.

[3]   Rainbow Murray, Mona Lena Krook, and Katherine AR Opello, "Why Are Gender Quotas Adopted? Party Pragmatism and Parity in France," *Political Research Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2012): 529–43; Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, "When Do Governments Promote Women's Rights? A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Sex Equality Policy," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (March 2010): 207–16, doi:10.1017/S1537592709992787.

Figure 1
Total Elected Female Members of Parliament and Female Candidates in Singapore (1968–2015)
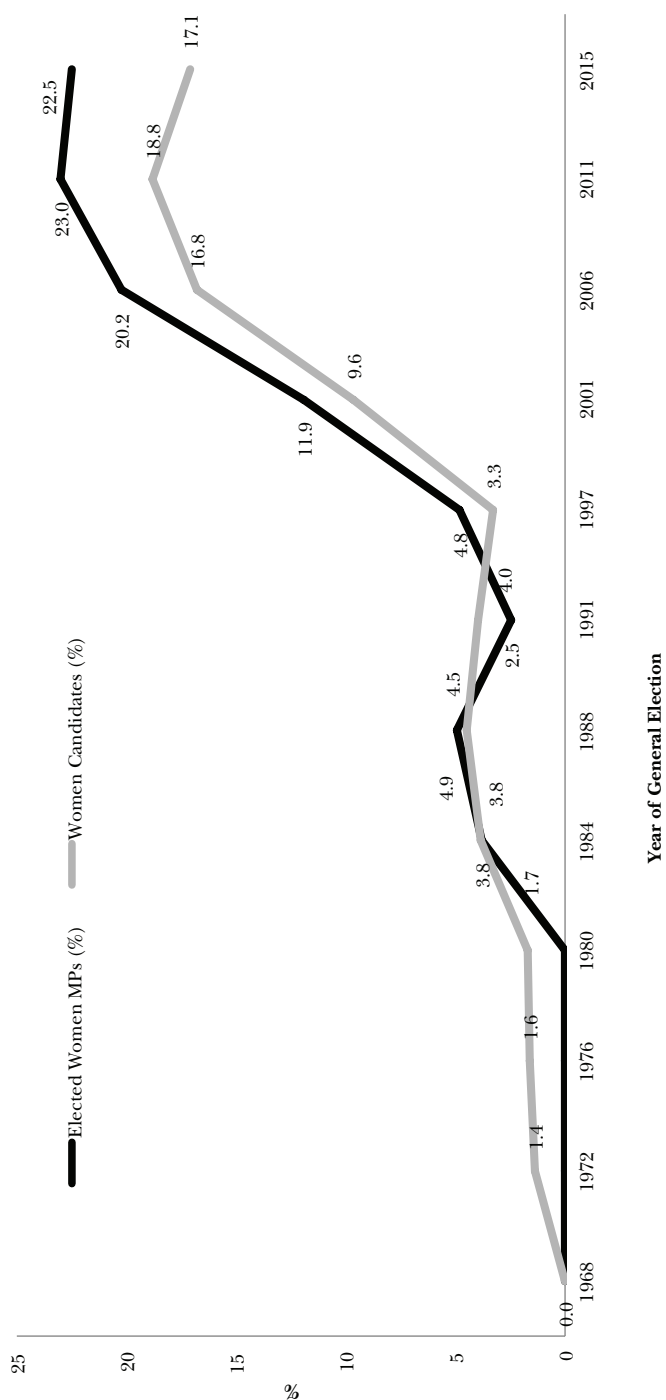
Source: Compiled based on data from Singapore Elections website, http://www.eld.gov.sg/, accessed on 18 February 2016.

to nominate women in the multi-member constituencies.[4] The introduction of ethnic quotas via the multi-member or Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) scheme not only forces parties to include ethnic minorities but also incentivizes parties to include women in the larger GRCs to balance their ticket and broaden their appeal. However, despite the strategic and electoral incentives to include more women in politics, a gender gap remains in the higher echelon of politics. Drawing from a range of public opinion data, this paper suggests reasons why Singaporean women refrain from participating in politics, despite their ability to do so.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section surveys the key approaches towards women's political participation, before introducing the concept of party pragmatism in relation to Singapore's PAP. The second section highlights the PAP's vote-seeking behaviour by tracing its history of strategically mobilizing women and ethnic minorities for electoral gains. It demonstrates the ruling party's ideological inconsistencies and electoral motivations by focusing on the politics behind ethnic quota adoption in the 1980s, demographic changes in the 2000s, and token efforts to nominate women. To explain the limited supply of female candidates, the final section draws on survey data to examine why traditional stereotypes, biased social norms, and unequal family responsibilities may hold women back from participating in politics.

Approaches to Women's Political Role in Singapore

The literature on Singapore's gender inequality in politics tends to adopt structuralist or culturalist approaches to highlight the socio-economic barriers that deter women's access to elected office. Indeed, much has been written on Singapore's patriarchal state and the discriminatory social norms and policies under the PAP that accentuate the traditional gender stereotypes of men as the head of the household and women as soft, nurturing family caregivers. These stereotypes limit the supply of women aspirants and affect their political ambitions.[5] This literature has been useful in explaining why, despite achieving near gender parity in health, education, and workforce participation, women were absent in Singapore politics.

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[4]   Richard Matland, "Enhancing Women's Political Participation: Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems," in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers,* IDEA Handbook Series (IDEA Publications, 2005), 101–118; Ian McAllister and Donley T. Studlar, "Electoral Systems and Women's Representation: A Long-Term Perspective," *Representation* 39, no. 1 (2002): 3–14, doi:10.1080/00344890208523209; Wilma Rule, "Women's Underrepresentation and Electoral Systems," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 27, no. 4 (December 1994): 689–92, doi:10.2307/420369.

[5]   Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew, "Political Women in Singapore: A Socio-Linguistic Analysis," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24, no. 6 (2001): 727–736; M. Shamsul Haque, "Representation of Women in Governance in Singapore: Trends and Problems," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 2 (2000): 59–87, doi:10.1080/02185370008434170; Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew, "No Fire in the Belly: Women's Political Role in Singapore," in *Gender Politics in Asia: Women Manoeuvring Within Dominant Gender Orders* (Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008), 185–216; Aline K. Wong, "Women in Singapore: A Report," *Signs* 2, no. 1 (October 1976): 213–218, doi:10.2307/3173430.

Additionally, studies have also examined the role of feminist organizations and women's resistance to the intrusive state over the last three decades.[6] Specifically, some scholars have attributed the recent gender reforms in Singapore to feminist leaders and organizations.[7] For instance, Lyons accredits the PAP's reversal of gendered citizenship laws to the lobbying by the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE).[8] Singam also suggests that the changes were a result of "calls by women both inside and outside of Parliament for a change in policies that disadvantaged women."[9] However, these explanations do not account for the timing of gender reforms and the causal link between feminist actions and policy outcomes. For years, especially under Lee Kuan Yew (1959–1990) and Goh Chok Tong's early rule (1990–2004), the PAP has maintained patriarchal policies and dismissed interventions by feminist groups.[10] It is thus unclear why, if international diffusion norms and feminist groups were key in initiating reforms, the discriminatory laws were only redressed in the early 2000s and not earlier, despite AWARE's campaigning since 1985.

Unlike Taiwan and South Korea in this special section, international gender norms and feminists embedded in transnational networks have little impact on Singapore's domestic gender policies.[11] Singapore's feminist movement is small and dominated by middle-class Chinese women. As such, it lacks the solidarity of the working class and non-Chinese women's interests to effectively shape social policies.[12] More importantly, the PAP government's tight control over civil society and prohibition of interference by transnational and non-governmental organizations also makes it challenging for feminist

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6   Christine Doran and Jim Jose, "Globalization, the Patriarchal State and Women's Resistance in Singapore," *Gender, Technology and Development* 6, no. 2 (July 2002): 215–232, doi:10.1177/097185240200600203; Aline Kan Wong and Wai Kum Leong, *Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change* (Times Academic Press, 1993).

7   Constance Singam, "Women in the Goh Era: Chartering Empowerment," in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years,* eds. Bridget Welsh et.al. (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and National University Press, 2009), 387–98; Lenore Lyons, "Transnational Networks and Localized Campaigns: The Women's Movement in Singapore," in *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminism and Transnational Activism,* eds. Mina Roces and Louise Edwards (London: Routledge, 2010), 75-89.

8   "After twenty years of constant campaigning, the law was finally changed." Lenore Lyons, "The Limits of Feminist Political Intervention in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia,* 30, no. 1 (January 2000): 84.

9   Singam, "Women in the Goh Era: Chartering Empowerment," 397.

10   Constance Singam, "Civic Traditions in Singapore: A Feminist Perspective," in *State-Society Relations in Singapore,* eds. Gillian Koh and Ling Giok Ooi (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 2000), 28–37; Lyons, "The Limits of Feminist Political Intervention in Singapore."

11   Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, "Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming," *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2001): 27–57, doi:10.1111/0020–8833.00181; Lyons, "Transnational Networks and Localized Campaigns: The Women's Movement in Singapore."

12   PuruShotam Nirmala, "Between Compliance and Resistance: Women and the Middle Class Way of Life in Singapore," in *Gender and Power in Affluent Asia,* eds. Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens (London: Routledge, 1998); Lenore Lyons, "A State of Ambivalence: Feminism in a Singaporean Women's Organisation," *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 1 (March 2000): 1–23, doi:10.1080/10357820008713257.

groups to mobilize without being censored.[13] Hence, while feminist leaders and AWARE played a role in highlighting the discriminatory social policies, they do not explain the timing of the PAP's policy concession and nomination of female candidates in the early 2000s.

Contagion theory—which suggests that parties feel more pressure to nominate women if one of their political rivals begins to promote women's political representation—also does not account for the PAP's decision to engage in gender reforms.[14] Unlike more competitive party systems in Taiwan and South Korea, Singapore has a semi-competitive, hegemonic party system where the PAP has ruled uninterruptedly since 1959.[15] Behaving as what Sartori terms a "pragmatic-hegemonic party," the PAP outdistances the opposition parties in both vote and seat shares in the last five decades.[16] With only an average of 5 percent seat shares, the opposition parties cannot pressure the PAP in a significant way. In fact, it was the PAP that unilaterally fielded more female candidates than all the opposition parties combined in the last three general elections in 2006, 2011, and 2015. In 2009, the PAP voluntarily adopted a party quota of 30 percent women in Parliament after years of rejecting affirmative action for women.[17] Unlike the adoption of gender quotas in Taiwan and South Korea, this paper contends that gender reforms were driven by the PAP's pragmatism and electoral exigency to appear progressive and benevolent to women, so as to capture the young voters and to maintain its hegemonic rule.

Party Pragmatism and Singapore's PAP

Party pragmatism refers to strategic calculations by party elites to engage in gender reforms as part of the party's balancing act in response to electoral, ideological, or strategic incentives.[18] This concept draws from party politics

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[13]   Feminist groups are limited by self-censorship, fear of closure, and being labelled as radical. State-imposed restrictions on the registrations of NGOs also limit transnational engagement between feminist groups and international feminist organizations. Lyons, "Transnational Networks and Localized Campaigns: The Women's Movement in Singapore," 80–1.

[14]   Richard E. Matland and Donley T. Studlar, "The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-Member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems: Canada and Norway," *The Journal of Politics* 58, no. 3 (August 1996): 707–33, doi:10.2307/2960439.

[15]   A hegemonic party system has a two-level party system where the opposition are "second class, licensed parties" and not permitted to compete with the ruling party in equal terms. Giovani Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2005), 204.

[16]   Sartori distinguishes between a pragmatic and an ideological hegemonic party where the former is more inclusive and less repressive than the latter. *Parties and Party Systems*, 205.

[17]   Voluntary party candidate quotas for women are targets set by political parties to include a certain percentage of women as election candidates. They are not mandated by law and not legally binding. For more, see Mona Lena Krook, *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Drude Dahlerup, *Women, Quotas and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006).

[18]   Miki Caul Kittilson, *Challenging Parties, Changing Parliaments: Women and Elected Office in Contemporary Western Europe* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 46; Murray, Krook, and Opello, "Why Are Gender Quotas Adopted?"

and gender quota literature to show why pragmatism, rather than ideology, shapes party elites' decisions to address women's issues. It highlights the trade-offs that parties face when devising electoral strategies and in balancing vote-seeking objectives. In the study by Murray, Krook, and Opello, they demonstrate how party pragmatism guides behaviour as the elites balance three types of conflicting incentives—strategic, ideological, and electoral—before supporting gender quotas. Their approach helps to direct attention to the role of political parties in enforcing pragmatic solutions to improve gender equality despite competing demands.[19] Unlike ideological parties, pragmatic parties such as the PAP pay attention to what works or serves to achieve selective gains. Parties with a high degree of pragmatism are thus more flexible and open to women's demands than ideological ones.[20]

Pragmatism is the hallmark of Singapore's PAP government.[21] Even back in the 1970s, Singapore's government was described as a depoliticized "administrative state," where rational and scientific calculations of public administration trumped ideology.[22] Indeed, as former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew once said, the secret to Singapore's economic success is being "ideology free." When considering an approach to an issue, the key question is: "Does it work? If it works, let's try it. If it's fine, let's continue it. If it doesn't work, toss it out, try another one."[23] It is debatable whether the PAP is completely ideology-free. Some of its past social policies towards marriage, heterosexuality, and the role of women were clearly driven by social conservatism and aimed at preserving the traditional, patriarchal family unit. However, as this paper shows, the PAP is willing to compromise its ideological beliefs when its strategic or electoral goals are at stake. Similar to earlier critical work by Chua, this paper contends that the PAP will rely on the rhetoric of pragmatism in an ad-hoc and paternalistic way to rationalize the party's hegemonic rule.[24] As Tan has also argued, it is the rhetoric of pragmatism that allowed the PAP to link the country's fragile economic success to the attraction of global capital and domination by an experienced, meritocratic, and technocratic government.[25] Building on these insights, this

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[19]   Murray, Krook, and Opello, "Why Are Gender Quotas Adopted?"

[20]   Kittilson, *Challenging Parties, Changing Parliaments*, 47.

[21]   "Practical survival" has been described as the PAP's governing ideology, where concerns with internal and external threats structure its reasoning and rationalization of socio-economic policies since independence. See Beng-Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 48; Heng Chee Chan, *Singapore: The Politics of Survival, 1965–1967* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[22]   Heng Chee Chan, *Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has the Politics Gone?* (Singapore: University of Singapore, Department of Political Science, 1975).

[23]   Seth Mydans and Wayne Arnold, "Modern Singapore's Creator Is Alert to Perils," *The New York Times*, 2 September 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/world/asia/02singapore.html.

[24]   Chua Beng-Huat, "Pragmatism of the People's Action Party Government in Singapore: A Critical Assessment," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 13, no. 1 (January 1985): 29–46, doi:10.1163/080382485X00138.

[25]   Kenneth Paul Tan, "The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-Liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012): 67–92, doi:10.1080/00472336.2012.634644.

paper will explain why pragmatism best explains the PAP's oscillating position towards women and drives its motivations to initiate gender reforms in the early 2000s.

The PAP's Pragmatism and Inconsistencies Towards Women

1959 Elections

Since its early formative years, the PAP has been guided by pragmatism to include women's rights in its election manifesto for electoral gains. Most notably, the PAP included "one man, one wife" in its 1959 election manifesto to court female voters. As Chew remarked, "Calculating the women's votes would play a crucial part in the 1959 elections, the PAP decided to include the principle of 'one-man, one-wife' in their election manifesto."[26] Singaporean women, whose suffrage was only recognized on July 18, 1947, were initially politically inactive. Voting was not compulsory in the 1948 and 1951 Legislative Assembly elections. Accordingly, most parties ignored women's interests in the early tumultuous period.[27]

However, as voting was made compulsory by 1959, the PAP realized it could gain an extra edge and capture the support of incoming women voters by including women's civil rights in their platform. After the Singapore Council of Women's (SCW) active campaigning, the PAP took the strongest position out of all the parties and advocated to end polygamy. As expected, women came out in force to vote in 1959. The electorate jumped from 158,075 in 1955 to 527,919 in the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections, a 70 percent increase in turnout, with women representing about half of those voters (see figure 2).

The PAP's strategy paid off, as it won a landslide victory in the 1959 elections, winning 43 out of 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly. As Lee Kuan Yew later remarked in his memoirs, the inclusion of women's emancipation in the election manifesto and inclusion of five female candidates in the landmark election was a strategy to distinguish the PAP from other parties.[28] The PAP's vote-seeking intent was reflected in the selection of Lee's wife to speak in a radio election broadcast, so as to mark the PAP from the rest, she said: "Let us show them [the other parties] that Singapore women are tired of their pantomime and buffoonery. I appeal to women to vote for the PAP. It is the only party with idealism, the honesty and ability to carry out its election programme."[29] The PAP succeeded in capturing the female vote

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[26] Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew, "The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25, no. 1 (March 1994): 134, doi:10.2307/20071620.

[27] Chew, "The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement," 132.

[28] The PAP was strategic in including more Malay and Indian candidates as it "thought it good for the morale of the minorities." Kuan Yew Lee, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Pub, 1998), 295 and 325. Lee, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, 295.

[29] Lee, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, 325.

Figure 2
Voter Turnout for Legislative Assembly Elections (1948–1963)
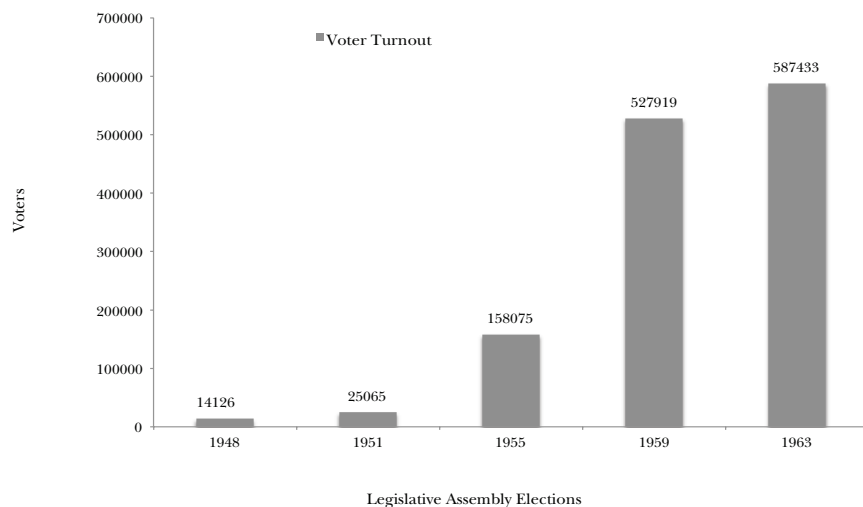
and five women were propelled into the Legislature, with four from the PAP.

After assuming government, the PAP legislated the Women's Charter Bill in 1961, and established monogamy as the only legal condition that allows women to sue for adultery and bigamy.[30] However, the legislation of the Women's Charter was, according to Lee, one of "several easy, popular points to be scored that required no planning."[31] After the PAP's electoral success, the design of patriarchal social policies showed that the earlier efforts to emancipate women were not rooted in any ideological commitment to gender equity. In fact, no wives—not even Lee Kuan Yew's wife, who campaigned hard for the PAP and drafted the Women's Charter—were allowed to attend the party's swearing-in ceremony.[32] By the 1963 elections, the number of female parliamentarians dwindled to three, and then down to one by 1968.[33] Such manoeuvres foreshadow the PAP's pragmatic approach towards women in the following years.

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[30]   The Women's Charter provides protection against family violence and a penalty for offences against women and girls. The charter applies to all Singaporeans except those married under the Muslim law. For more, see Theresa W. Devasahayam, *Singapore Women's Charter: Roles, Responsibilities, and Rights in Marriage* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011).

[31]   Lee, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew,* 326.

[32]   Lee, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew,* 315 and 325.

[33]   Chan Choy Siong was one of the pioneering politicians behind the Women's Charter. Chew, "Political Women in Singapore," 134.

Contradictory Remedies For Ethnic Minorities and Women

The PAP's legislation of ethnic quotas for ethnic minorities and the denial of similar affirmative action for women is another example of the PAP's pragmatism. In light of women's political absence, the feminist group AWARE argued in 1996 for a "special mechanism," similar to the French parity law, to increase women's representation in publicly funded commissions and councils.[34] In 2002, AWARE again urged the government to appoint at least one female minister and achieve at least 30 percent representation of women by 2006.[35] However, these calls and other public letters failed to galvanize support from the government.

The PAP government rejects gender quotas on the basis that gender-blindness promotes meritocracy.[36] For instance, the PAP's first female minister said: "Gender quotas can be self-defeating and detract from the true basis of merit."[37] Similarly, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also declared:

> [W]e have no affirmative action or quota system here in any field of endeavour... . So, Singaporeans know that women who occupy senior positions are there on their own merits and they can become role models for younger ones and spur them on to do their best.[38]

Yet, the way meritocracy is practiced contains inherent contradictions.[39] The assumption that women have equality of opportunity to win office based on their own merit overlooks structural inequalities and patriarchal gender norms that place unfair housework on women.[40] Guided by instrumental rationality, the PAP's use of high ministerial salaries and government scholarships to attract the brightest to become leaders has in fact accentuated elitism, inequality, and biases against women and the poor.[41]

More importantly, the principle of meritocracy also does not extend to ethnic minorities. In 1988 and 1989, the government introduced two ethnic quotas. The first ethnic quota, applied via the Group Representative

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[34] Kanwaljit Soin, "The Missing Half: Bringing Women Into Singapore Politics," *AsiaWeek,* 13 December 1996, http://www-cgi.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/96/1213/feat8.html.

[35] AWARE, "Remaking Singapore: Views of Half the Nation," *AWARE,* 2002, 2, http://www.aware.org.sg/research-advocacy/aware-publications-reports/.

[36] Meritocracy is a core principle of governance in Singapore, used in the civil service and political system to reward qualified individuals based on abilities and talent.

[37] Hwee Hua Lim, "No Double Standard, Says Lim Hwee Hua," *Straits Times,* 18 June 2009, http://singapurakini0906.blogspot.ca/2009/06/no-double-standard-says-lim-hwee-hua.html.

[38] Hsien Loong Lee, "Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Speech at the 14th APEC Women Leaders (WLN) Meeting," 4 August 2009, http://www.apecwln.org/2009/08/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-speech-at-the-14th-apec-women-leaders-netwrok-wln-meeting/.

[39] Tan, "The Ideology of Pragmatism."

[40] As Soin notes: "Meritocracy, without gender-sensitivity, falls short of its stated goal. How can we ignore the effects of decades of discrimination and expect the principle of meritocracy, like a magic wand, to wipe the slate clean and create a level playing field?" Soin, "The Missing Half: Bringing Women Into Singapore Politics."

[41] Michael Barr and Ziatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008).

Constituency (GRC) scheme, changed Singapore's electoral system from all single-member constituencies based on simple plurality to a mix of single-member and group constituencies. To contest in a GRC, a party fields a team of four to six candidates with at least one ethnic minority member.[42] A voter casts her vote for an entire team, and a winning team with a plurality of votes takes all the seats in the GRC. With a total 87 legislative seats, the quota of one ethnic minority in each GRC will secure 16 percent Malay, Indian, or other non-Chinese representation in Parliament. The ethnic quota was introduced despite the fact that minorities already enjoyed a legislative presence of on average 23 percent from 1968 to 1988. Ethnic legislative representation was much higher than that of women, who made up less than 5 percent of the legislature over the same period.[43] In 1989, a second ethnic quota (Ethnic Integration Policy) was imposed on all public housing to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves.[44] With more than 85 percent of Singaporeans living in public housing, the housing quota affects nearly 85 percent of the electorate and ensures that ethnic voters will not constitute more than 30 percent in each constituency. With ethnic minorities always a minority in each constituency, the result is shallow support for smaller ethnic-based, opposition parties across all constituencies. Together, both ethnic quotas work in favour of larger parties such as the PAP, with more resources and concentrated support.[45]

The adoption of ethnic quotas rather than gender quotas shows that the PAP's group representation policies are not rooted in the idea of equity. Like the inclusion of women's rights in their 1959 election manifesto, the design of group representation policies was driven out of pragmatism rather than ideological commitments. In Singapore's multi-ethnic society, with a history of racial riots, ethnicity is a more salient cleavage than gender, as it can be mobilized for electoral support.[46] As Htun reminds us, ethnicity tends to coincide with party lines and is more likely to define voting behaviour and party alignments. On the other hand, gender tends to crosscut partisan and other ideological cleavages and has less mobilization strength.[47]

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[42]   The GRC scheme first began with thirteen GRCs, with three members in each team.

[43]   At the lowest point of minority legislative representation from 1984 to 1988, the Parliament had 11.4 percent Malays and 6.3 percent Indians, higher than women (4.4 percent) for the same time.

[44]   The Ethnic Integration Policy sets a quota of 84 percent Chinese, 22 percent Malays and 10 percent Indians or other non-Chinese in each housing flat and estate. See Hoong Sin Chih, "The Quest for a Balanced Ethnic Mix: Singapore's Ethnic Quota Policy Examined," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 8 (July 2002): 1347–1374; Loo Lee Sim, Shi Ming Yu, and Sun Sheng Han, "Public Housing and Ethnic Integration in Singapore," *Habitat International* 27, no. 2 (June 2003): 293–307.

[45]   The GRC scheme generated higher electoral disproportionality, concentrated the party system and was more disadvantageous to minor parties, than in the former plurality system in single-seat districts. See Netina Tan, "Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore," *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 4 (December 2013): 632–643, doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2013.07.014.

[46]   For more on the racial riots, see Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).

[47]   Mala Htun, "Is Gender like Ethnicity? The Political Representation of Identity Groups," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 3 (2004): 439–458, doi:10.1017/S1537592704040241.

The PAP's use of ethnic quotas in 1988 and 1989 suggests partisanship to repress growing support for opposition minority candidates.[48] In the 1980s, the support for opposition ethnic minority candidates was growing.[49] Accordingly, the vote shares of the PAP minority candidates were declining, from a high of 83 percent in 1968 to a low of 66 percent by 1988. The PAP ethnic minority candidates were losing support as they were viewed as the government mouthpieces rather than representatives of their communities.[50] As an opposition Social Democratic Party leader remarked: "This [GRC] policy was introduced basically to cope with the loss of support among Malays and there was real danger they [PAP] might lose in constituencies where Malays make up 35 percent."[51] Studies on the effects of Singapore's electoral system also found the GRC scheme to have generated higher electoral disproportionality and a concentrated party system, and to be more disadvantageous to minor parties than the former system.[52]

The PAP's Policy-U Turn Towards Women

The PAP's prejudicial attitudes towards women changed in the 2000s as part of the party's rebranding efforts to appear more progressive and inclusive. It was an attempt to rehabilitate its paternalistic image and polices implemented since the 1980s. For example, some of the past discriminatory policies included the "Graduate Mother Scheme," introduced in 1985 as a set of pro-natalist policies that sought to promote fertility amongst well-educated mothers and encourage sterilization amongst the less-educated women, through financial incentives and school enrollment privileges.[53] Besides, the PAP also maintained a university admissions quota that restricted the number of female medical students to one-third of every cohort in the national medical school from 1979 to 2004; denied women equal citizenship rights to men; and upheld unequal medical benefits for female and male civil servants.[54] These policies were justified based on the government's belief

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[48]   Netina Tan, "Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore," *Electoral Studies, Special Symposium: The new research agenda on electoral integrity,* 32, no. 4 (December 2013): 632–643, doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2013.07.014.

[49]   In 1981, the PAP lost a seat in a 1981 by-election to an opposition Worker's Party leader, J.B. Jeyaratnam, a lawyer of Sri Lankan heritage. In the 1984 elections, nine minority candidates from the Workers' Party and Malay-based Pertubohan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura won over 35 percent of votes.

[50]   Hussin Mutalib, *Parties And Politics: A Study Of Opposition Parties and The PAP In Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), 210 and 215.

[51]   Mutalib, *Parties And Politics*, 215.

[52]   See Tan, "Manipulating Electoral Laws in Singapore."

[53]   L. Lyons-Lee, "The 'Graduate Woman' Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 309–310.

[54]   Lyons-Lee, "The 'Graduate Woman' Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore"; Eugene Tan, "A Union of Gender Equality and Pragmatic Patriarchy: International Marriages and Citizenship Laws in Singapore," *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 1 (February 2008): 73–89, doi:10.1080/13621020701794190.

Table 1
Selected Pro-Women Reform Policies Under the PAP Government

Date	Pro-Women Reform Policies
1961	Passed Women's Charter Bill to protect the rights of women and girls
1999	Women allowed to sponsor their foreign spouses for citizenship
2003	Lifted quota on women's admission to the medical faculty at the National University of Singapore
2004	Equalized citizenship rights for women and men
2005	Equalized medical benefits for female and male civil servants and acknowledged that women and men play equal roles as "heads of household"
2009	Voluntary imposition of 30 percent quota of female candidates
2011	Amended Women's Charter to strengthen the enforcement of maintenance orders for parties affected by divorces
2013	Introduced shared parental leave

Source: AWARE, "History & Achievements," *AWARE,* 2015, http://www.aware.org.sg/about/history-achievements/; Remaking Singapore Committee, "Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relations," (Government of Singapore, 2002); Walter Sim, "Singaporean Women Have Made Great Strides, but More Can Still Be Done: PAP Women's Wing," 18 April 2015, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-women-have-made-great-strides-but-more-can-still-be-done-pap-womens-wing

that the husband is the "head of household" and responsible for providing for the family while a woman's role is in the home as a mother and caretaker. For a summary of the pro-women reform policies, see table 1.

Under Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's later rule, the PAP became more accommodating towards women's interests.[55] By extension, this signalled an increased recognition of women's rights. For instance, the PAP redressed gendered social policies as part of Goh's "Remaking Singapore" initiative in 2002.[56] The "Remaking Singapore" Committee was formed to solicit recommendations from the ground up to improve the social, cultural, and political issues facing the third generation of Singaporeans. It was part of the government's broader efforts to respond to the non-economic needs of Singaporeans. While the feminist group, AWARE, submitted ten recommendations to the committee in 2002, only three were included in

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[55]   Singam argues that Goh's more consensual leadership style and women's movement raised the profile of women's issues. Constance Singam, "Women in the Goh Era: Chartering Empowerment," in *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years,* ed. Bridget Welsh (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and National University Press, 2009), 389.

[56]   See Remaking Singapore Committee, "Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relations," (Singapore, 2002), 64–65, https://vivianbalakrishnan.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/remaking_singapore_2003.pdf.

the final report.[57] Following the recommendations submitted in the "Remaking Singapore" report, the medical school admissions quota for women was lifted in 2003 and the constitution was amended to accord the children of Singaporean women the same citizenship rights as the children of men the next year. In 2005, the medical benefits for male and female civil servants were equalized.[58]

As the party prepares for a leadership transition in 2004, this feedback exercise was an opportunity for the PAP to shed its patriarchal model of family and to craft a new party image with the new leadership. Indeed, after Lee Hsien Loong assumed government leadership in 2004, he marked his tenure by relaxing the rules governing freedom of expression and assembly in 2008. Unlike his father Lee Kuan Yew, Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged that both men and women play equal roles as joint heads of household. Describing women as "forward-looking," he promised to "bring in more women so that they can participate and play their full part" as they "give a different perspective as they have children and think for their children into the next generation."[59]

Lee's speech was followed by the appointment of the first woman into Cabinet in 2009. Subsequently, the PAP fielded a record number of seventeen female candidates in 2006, six more than in 2001. In 2009, the chairwoman of the PAP's Women's Wing suggested a 30 percent quota of women candidates: "We can aim for a 30 percent share, or around 25 MPs in today's terms."[60] This declaration meant that Singapore is now part of the list of fifty countries in the world with party quotas whereby parties aim to have a certain proportion of women candidates in each election.[61] However, as party quotas are not legally binding, the announcement was more a symbolic gesture to signify the PAP's attitudinal change towards women.

Strategic and Electoral Incentives

Demographic Changes

The timing and selective accommodation of women's interests reflects strategic calculations by the PAP to keep up with electoral demographic changes and anticipated demands for political pluralism. The selective inclusion of gender equity issues in the "Remaking Singapore" initiative and limited political liberalization in the 2000s show the party's rebranding efforts

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[57]   AWARE, "Remaking Singapore: Views of Half the Nation."

[58]   Remaking Singapore Committee, "Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relations," 65.

[59]   Lee, "Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Speech at the 14th APEC Women Leaders (WLN) Meeting," Singapore, 4 August 2008.

[60]   Kian Beng, Kor, "PM Lee Honours PAP Women's Wing Veterans," *Straits Times,* 6 July 2009, http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOnepercent2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20090706-153096.html.

[61]   QuotaProject, "Voluntary Political Party Quotas," *QuotaProject 2015*, http://www.quotaproject.org/systemParty.cfm, last accessed 26 January 2016.

to be more progressive and appealing to the younger electorate. With an increasing number of first-time voters and an expanding electorate from 1.7 million in 1988 to 2.46 million by 2015, the PAP realized the importance of staying in touch with the rise of the younger electorate. As a senior PAP leader said: "These younger Singaporeans, born after Independence, now form the majority of our population. The political leadership must, therefore rejuvenate itself with the infusion of younger men and women who are able to connect and empathise with them."[62] In 2006, voters under 35 years old only made up about 20 percent of the total 2.2 million electorate. By 2011, this number jumped to 30 percent of 2.3 million voters and exceeded 50 percent in the recent 2015 elections (see figure 3).[63]

Similar to what the PAP did before the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections to appeal to female voters, changes in electoral demography in the 2000s required the party to adapt strategically to stay relevant. While the support for the PAP remained strong from the older voters (aged 65 and above), the younger voters (those born after 1965) are found to be sympathetic towards the opposition as they lack the collective experience with the PAP during the struggles towards independence.[64] Public opinion surveys show that the younger voters are a diverse, internet-savvy group who are more sympathetic toward opposition parties and more concerned with equality and social justice.[65] With the government's access to census data, one would expect the PAP to respond pragmatically to the electoral demographic changes.[66]

Increase in the Number and Size of GRCs

Aside from demographic changes, electoral institutions also incentivized parties to include women in the party platform. As discussed, the introduction of an ethnic quota via the Group Representative Constituencies (GRC) scheme changed the single-member seats elected based on simple plurality to a mix of single and multi-member constituencies in 1988. Over time, the PAP government also increased the size and number of the group constituencies from three initially in 1988, to five- and six-member seats in

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62   Kan Seng Wong, "Speech By Mr Wong Kan Seng, Minister for Home Affairs and Member of Parliament for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC" (Bishan-Toa Payoh, Singapore, 7 August 2004), http://www. nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=2004080791.htm.

63   Imelda Saad, "First Time Voters a Force to Be Reckoned With," *Today Online,* 11 November, 2010; Channel NewsAsia, "Singapore's Ruling Party Contends with New Voting Majority," *Channel NewsAsia,* 28 July 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-politics-idUSKCN0Q126820150727

64   A post-2006 survey by the Institute of Policy Studies found an estimated 44 percent of those undecided of their party affiliations are younger voters. See Gillian Koh, "IPS Post-Election Survey Report," *Institute of Policy Studies,* 26 June 2006, http://www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/Survey_Report_ postelection.aspx.

65   Imelda Saad, "Younger S'poreans 'More Likely to Back Opposition,'" *Channel News Asia,* 4 October 2011, http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/06/CNA_Younger- Sporeans-more-likely-to-back-opposition_041011.pdf.

66   Singapore's Election Department and National Population and Talent Division fall under the Prime Minister's office. See http://www.pmo.gov.sg/about-prime-ministers-office.

Figure 3
Total Electorate and Voter Turnout for General Elections (1988–2015)
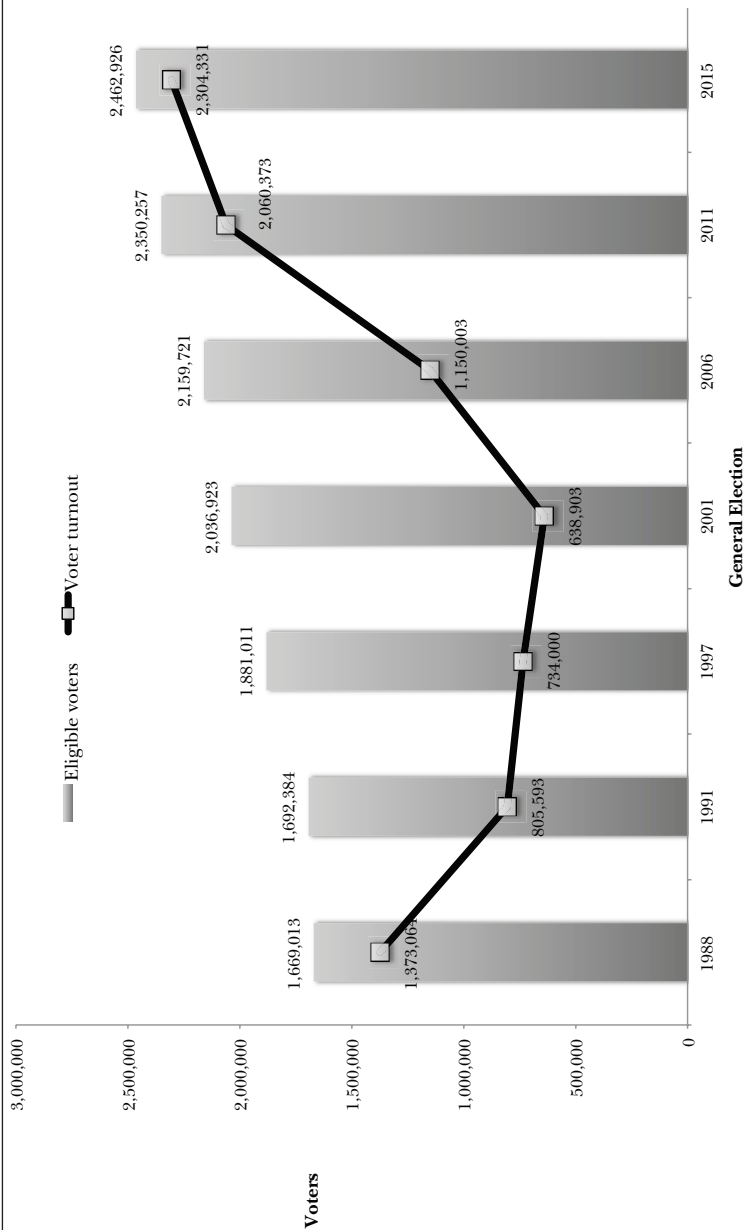
Source: Compiled based on data from Singapore Elections website, http://www.eld.gov.sg/, accessed on 18 February 2016.

Figure 4
Ethnic Minority and Total Female Candidates (1968–2015)
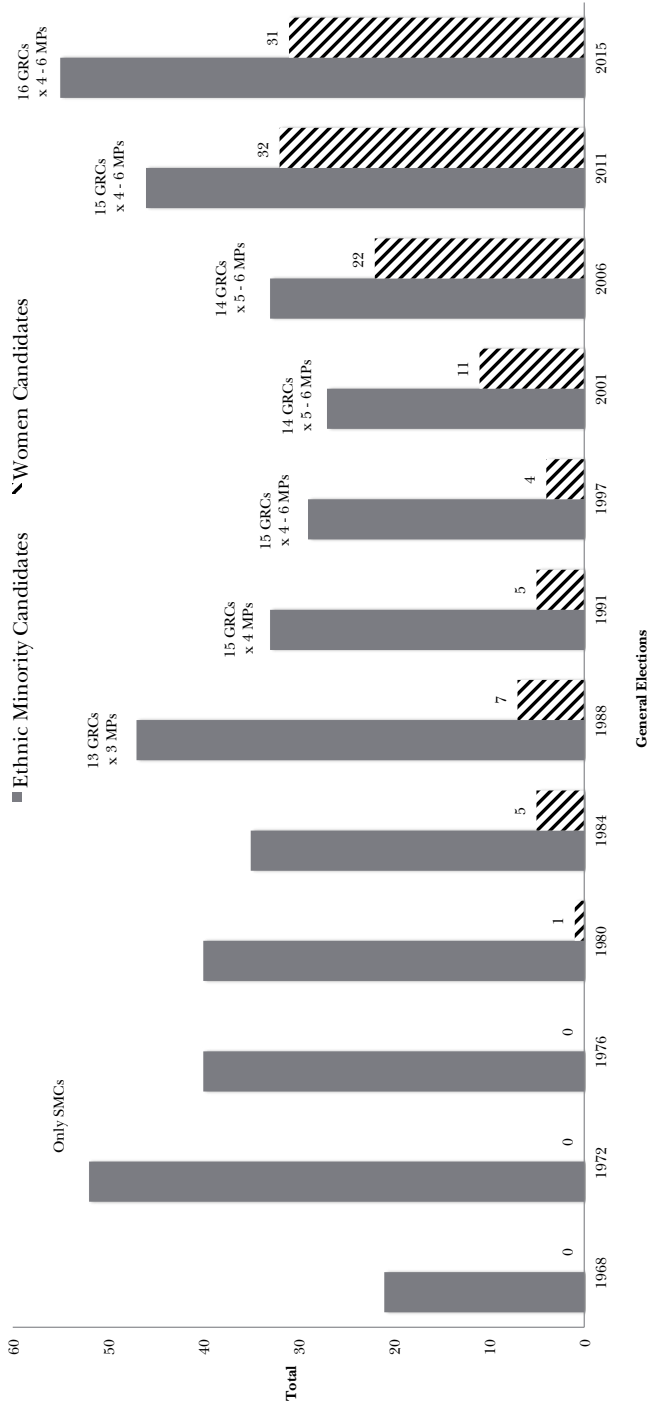
Source: Compiled based on data from Singapore Elections website, http://www.eld.gov.sg/, accessed on 18 February 2016.

1997. Additionally, the number of GRCs also rose, from zero to 85 percent by 2015 (see figure 4).

It is argued that the increased number and size of GRCs has had the unintended consequence of raising the number of "safe seats" and encouraging parties to nominate women. First, the GRCs are electorally "safer" seats for the PAP as no GRC has been lost to the opposition since its inception from 1988 until the 2011 elections.[67] On the other hand, the loss of a single-member seat by a woman in the 1991 elections shocked the PAP leaders so much that they stopped fielding any women in single-member constituencies (SMCs) for 15 years, until 2011. Given this history, increasing the size and number of GRCs was a less risky means of including women to balance the ticket. The bigger GRCs are "safer" than SMCs as they can mediate candidate-based voting behaviour based on plurality bloc-vote rule. As figure 4 shows, the number of PAP women candidates nominated rose after 2001, at the same time as the larger GRCs (five to six multi-member teams) were formed. Some of the larger GRCs allow the PAP to stand more than one woman in a GRC. For example, two PAP women stood in each of the Tanjong Pagar, Marine Parade, and Aljunied five-member GRCs in the 2011 elections. Similarly, two PAP women were fielded in Tanjong Pagar and Jalan Besar GRCs in the 2015 elections.

Second, the larger GRCs are also typically led by senior, heavyweight politicians, which allows young, inexperienced, or female candidates to ride on their coattails, to get elected as part of the slate. The larger district magnitudes in the GRCs allow parties to include women to appeal to a wider range of voters.[68] As figure 4 shows, the rise in the number of Singapore female candidates supports the dominant finding in the electoral studies that the chances for women's nomination are higher in constituencies with larger district magnitudes.[69] For Singapore, parties can stand ethnic minority women to fulfill both the ethnic quota requirement and to gender balance the party slate. In the 2011 elections, the PAP fielded ethnic minority women in Ang Mo Kio, Jurong, Marine Parade, and Tanjong Pagar GRCs. And again in the 2015 elections, six ethnic minority PAP women were fielded in Ang Mo Kio, Jurong, Tanjong Pagar, and Marsiling Yew-Tee GRCs.

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[67] The PAP lost a five-men GRC in Aljunied for the first time in the 2011 elections.

[68] Rob Salmond, "Proportional Representation and Female Parliamentarians," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2006): 175–204; Donley T. Studlar and Susan Welch, "Does District Magnitude Matter? Women Candidates in London Local Elections," *The Western Political Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 1991): 457–66.

[69] SMC-based plurality/majority electoral systems are typically less favourable to women and ethnic minorities. Larger district magnitudes in multimember systems in proportional representation systems offer a lower threshold for women to cross when seeking nominations. Richard E. Matland and Donley T. Studlar, "The Contagion of Women Candidates in Single-Member District and Proportional Representation Electoral Systems," *The Journal of Politics,* 58, no. 3 (August 1996): 707–733; Wilma Rule, "Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies," *The Western Political Quarterly,* 40, no. 3 (Sept 1987): 477–498.

Over the last three general elections, the PAP has experimented and gradually added female candidates as a result of strategic and electoral incentives. Presently, Singapore's 13th Parliament consists of 89 elected members, with 20 elected female members (19 from the PAP, 1 from the Worker's Party, WP).[70] Despite being a minority, female politicians have made substantive contributions. With only 20 percent female parliamentarians from 2006 to 2009, they were responsible in filing more than 42 percent of all questions asked in the Parliament.[71] Recently, the PAP female politicians have lobbied the government more actively to improve work-life balance, offer training programs and financial support to stay-home mothers, and build up their savings. Electorally, women have performed well. A big win by the PAP's Dr. Amy Khor in the 2011 elections and by the opposition Worker's Party's Lee Lilian in the 2013 Punggol East by-election show that women are electable in single-member constituencies. Encouraged by the performance of female candidates, the PAP once again stood four women (including one rookie) in single-member wards. And all the four women won with a combined average of 68 percent of the total vote share. The achievements of female politicians should thus assure parties that women are not electorally risky but can hold their own in winning elections.

The Higher, the Fewer

Despite this progress, Singapore's 22.5 percent of elected female parliamentarians is still below the critical mass of a 30 percent benchmark as recommended by the United Nations.[72] Even with the PAP's 30 percent party quota in 2009, it has fallen short of its goal and fielded only 19 women (21.3 percent) candidates in the 2015 elections. The PAP is thus dragging its feet in complying with its party quota and including more women in the party slate. At the time of the writing of this analysis, only one woman sits in the cabinet of 18 members. The pattern of "the higher, the fewer"[73] persists as Singapore has the lowest female representation in the cabinet in East Asia (5.5 percent). The PAP remains conservative in the promotion of women as seen in its low female representation in the party's highest executive body.

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[70] The Singapore Constitution provides for up to eighteen non-elected seats in the House: nine seats for Nominated MPs (1990) through appointment and up to another nine seats for Non-Constituency MPs (1984) best opposition loser with highest percentage of vote shares, to enter Parliament. There were a total of five women (four NMPs and one NCMP) out of twelve non-elected members in the last, 12th Parliament. For more on the non-elected MP schemes, see Garry Rodan, "New Modes of Political Participation and Singapore's Nominated Members of Parliament," *Government and Opposition* 44, no. 4 (October 2009): 438–62, doi:10.1111/j.1477–7053.2009.01297.x.

[71] Siew Hua Lee, "PAP Women's Wing Turns 20, Singapore," *Straits Times*, 4 July 2009.

[72] UNDESA, "Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes, with Particular Emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership," *UN Division for the Advancement for Women*, 24 October 2005, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/.

[73] Sylvia Bashevkin, *Toeing the Lines: Women and Party Politics in English Canada, Second Edition* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Table 2
The PAP's Central Executive Committee (1980–2013) (percent)

	Women	Names
1980–1990	0	
1991–2004	1/18 (0.05)	Aline Wong
2005–2008	2/17 (11.8)	Lim Hwee Hua, Halimah Yacob
2009–2012	2/18 (11)	Lim Hwee Hua, Indranee Rajah
2013–2014	3/18 (16.7)	Grace Fu, Indranee Rajah, Denise Phua
2015–2016	2/18 (11)	Grace Fu, Halimah Yacob

Source: Extracted from the PAP's website, PAP, "Central Executive Committee,"
People's Action Party, 26 February 2016, http://news.pap.org.sg/about-pap/whos-who/
central-executive-committee.

From 1980 to 1990, the PAP's Central Executive Committee (CEC), the party's highest governing body, did not include a single woman.[74] Presently, only two women out of eighteen members sit in the CEC (11.1 percent), a decline from a previous three (16.7 percent) (see table 2).

Opposition parties have had a better track record of having women in party leadership positions. For example, the National Solidarity Party was the first party in Singapore to elect a woman as secretary general in 2011.[75] The Worker's Party, the largest opposition party, also has a woman, Sylvia Lim, as chairperson. The Singapore Democratic Party has 23 percent women in its CEC, the highest amongst all the political parties (see table 3). In the 2011 elections, six opposition parties fielded an unprecedented fourteen women, nine more than last. However, in the 2015 elections, the number dropped to eleven. Overall, the opposition's efforts to promote women have failed to rival the PAP because of endemic party switching, leadership infighting, a lack of resources, and weak party institutionalization.[76]

Reasons for the Limited Supply of Women Candidates

In Singapore, party leaders often lament the lack of qualified women as the reason for women's political underrepresentation.[77] My interviews with opposition party leaders also reveal that it is a challenge to recruit women

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[74] Only one, Dr. Aline Wong, was co-opted into the CEC in 1991.

[75] Another woman, Jeannett Chong-Aruldoss, succeeded in 2013, but left the party in February 2015.

[76] Netina Tan, "Institutionalized Hegemonic Party: The Resilience of the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore," in *Party and Party System Institutionalization in Asia,* eds. Erik Kuhonta and Allen Hicken (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 49–73.

[77] Former prime minister Goh Chok Tong said in 1980: "Can you find me a woman who has the same kind of quality as a man, who is as good as a man, and whose husband or potential husband or

Table 3
Women's Legislative Representation and Party Participation, 2014

Party	Number of Women in Parliament	Women's Wing	Central Executive Committee, CEC (percent, year)
People's Action Party (PAP) (https://www.pap.org.sg/home)	18	Yes (1989)	2/18 (11.1, 2015)
Workers' Party (WP) (http://www.wp.sg/)	2	No	2/14 (14.2, 2014)
Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) (http://yoursdp.org/)	0	No	3/13 (23.0, 2013)
Singapore People's Party (SPP) (http://www.spp.org.sg/)	1 (NCMP)	No	2/11 (18.2, 2014)
Reform Party (RP) (http://reform.sg/)	0	Yes (2010)	1/6 (16.1, 2014)

Sources: Extracted from various party websites.

to join parties and contest in elections.[78] As Norris and Lovenduski have found, both demand and supply factors interact to explain women's political underrepresentation.[79] Demand factors imply that even if women apply, they may not be accepted because of discrimination against their background, gender, or qualifications; supply factors may hold women back from joining a party or applying to be a candidate because of resource constraints or a lack of motivation. Potential applicants may be discouraged from coming forward because of the perception of prejudice, low self-perceptions of candidate viability, and a lack of political ambition.[80] After decades of political exclusion, women may stay out of politics because they lack men's ambition or spousal support. Drawing from a range of public opinion data, the following sections consider why the demand and supply of female candidates in Singapore is limited by a perceived preference for male political leaders; women's low level of political interests and efficacy; and unequal family responsibilities.

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boyfriend would allow that woman to carry on a hazardous profession?" Quoted in Chew, "No Fire in the Belly: Women's Political Role in Singapore," 192.

[78] Kenneth Jeyaretnam, author's interview with Reform Party Leader Kenneth Jeyaretnam, 5 October 2010, Singapore; Meng Seng Goh, Wolfgang Sachsenroeder's interview with Former National Solidarity Leader Goh Meng Seng, 23 September 2010, Singapore.

[79] Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14–5.

[80] Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Preference for Male Leaders

In Singapore, available survey data shows a preference for male rather than female political leaders. For example, the 2012 World Values Survey shows 45.6 percent of respondents agree with the statement that "[o]n the whole, men make better political leaders."[81] More recently in 2014, another survey by Ketchum Global Research also found Singaporeans to prefer male leaders. In fact, this survey found 83 percent of 500 Singaporeans surveyed agreed that men are best at making tough decisions while 77 percent thought men are better than women at providing a clear overall, long-term vision. A majority of respondents believed that male political leaders are more capable than their female counterparts in leading the country over the next five years.[82]

While these survey data cannot confirm voter hostility or deliberate

Table 4
Gender Breakdown of Political Attitudes in Singapore, Asian Barometer
(2006 and 2012)

		2006 (percent)		2012 (percent)	
Questions	Aggregated Total	Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Women should not be involved in politics as much as men	Agree	-	-	21.6	17.6
	Disagree	-	-	76.6	81.2
2. Interest in politics	Not Interested	70.3	81.7	58.2	69.4
	Interested	29.7	18.3	40.6	29
3. I think I have the ability to participate in politics	Agree	30.1	16.1	38.2	35
	Disagree	69.9	83.9	58.2	60.8
4. Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really under-stand what is going on	Agree	63.8	79.2	57	66
	Disagree	36.1	20.7	41.4	33

Source: Asian Barometer Survey, available at http://www.jdsurvey.net/eab/eab.jsp, accessed on 18 January 2016.
*The total percentages do not include "Can't Choose" or "Decline to answer."

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[81]   World Values Survey, "WVS Database," *World Values Survey Data Analysis Tool,* 2014, http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp.

[82]   Today Online, "Singaporeans Say Men Better Leaders Than Women: Survey," *TODAYonline,* 22 May 2014, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singaporeans-say-men-better-leaders-women-survey.

exclusion of female candidates by political parties, the perceived preference for male leaders can deter potential female candidates from considering a political career. Despite the increased number of women in the Singapore parliament, politics is still viewed as the domain of men. As the 2012 Asian Barometer (AB) survey shows, more men (21.6 percent) than women (17.6 percent) agreed with the statement that: "Women should not be involved in politics as much as men" in the country (see question 1 in table 4). The perception of inegalitarian attitudes and a male-dominant political environment could thus decrease women's confidence in putting themselves up as candidates, even if they were able to do so.[83]

Low Political Interests and Self-perception of Electoral Viability

In Singapore, women enjoy 94.1 percent literacy and constitute more than 55 percent of participants in the labour force. Women are also more likely to graduate from university than men.[84] However, despite women's high educational qualifications, women remain less interested in politics than men. As the 2012 AB survey shows, more men (40.6 percent) than women (29 percent) expressed interest in politics (see question 2 in table 4). Singapore's finding thus dovetails with Lawless and Fox's work on political ambition in the US, which found women of the highest tier of professional achievements also shun politics.[85]

In addition, Singaporean women also perceived themselves to be less electorally viable than men. While the AB survey results in 2006 and 2012 show a narrower gender gap in candidate viability and efficacy over time, women are still lagging behind men. For example, question 3 in table 4 shows that for 2012, more men (38.2 percent) than women (35 percent) agree with the statement that: "I think I have the ability to participate in politics." In contrast, more women (66 percent) than men (57 percent) agree with the statement that: "Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on"[86] (see question 4 in table 3). A candidate's self-perceived abilities are an important aspect of the decision to run for office. Typically, candidates who make the decision to run for political office are confident and believe they have a good chance to win.[87] Women's underestimation of their own abilities to understand politics and their lower self-evaluation of their electoral viability could explain in part why few women are willing to join politics in Singapore.

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[83]   Norris and Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament,* 166.

[84]   Jessica Pan, "The Rise and Rise of Women in Higher Education," *Straits Times,* 7 March 2013, http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Edvantage/Story/A1Story20130307-406966.html.

[85]   Lawless and Fox, *It Takes a Candidate.*

[86]   "Asian Barometer," *Asia Barometer,* 2012, http://www.asianbarometer.org/.

[87]   Richard Fox, "The Future of Women's Political Leadership: Gender and the Decision to Run for Elective Office," in *Women and Leadership: The State of Play and Strategies for Change,* eds. Barbara Kellerman and Deborah L. Rhode (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 264.

Unequal Family Responsibilities

Given the government's history of patriarchal social policies that privilege men as heads of household and women as caregivers, the unequal burden of family duties may also discourage women from pursuing a political career. As Grace Fu, Singapore's only female cabinet minister, says: "Entering politics has always been tougher on women, I think. Not just the criticism but the fact is that it's harder on the spouse of a woman MP. To agree to it, to accept the fact that your wife is going to be out most of the time and you have to assume a big part of the responsibility at home."[88] Her comment highlights the difficulties that women face in reconciling family obligations with a political career. In an informal online survey conducted by the author with 15 women candidates who contested in the 2011 general elections, family and childcare commitments were also singled out as key obstacles that deter women from joining parties and contesting in elections (see question 1 in table 4). This shows that women may have the equality of opportunity to participate in politics but unequal family responsibilities may be holding women back.

Table 5
Online Survey with Eighteen Female Candidates, 2013

What do you think is the biggest obstacle that deters women from joining parties and contesting in elections?

1. Family and childcare commitments	7 (47 percent)
2. Work commitments	1 (7 percent)
3. Lack of social support	2 (13 percent)
4. Lack of time and funding	1 (7 percent)
5. Other	4 (26 percent)

Source: Conducted by author, February 2013.

As Lyons said, "[w]omen's self-selection as political candidates is therefore mediated by the presence of a political system dominated by an authoritarian party-government and a political culture in which women are seen primarily as mothers and wives."[89] The findings here show that inegalitarian attitudes such as a preference for male leaders, women's low political interests, self-perceived low electoral viability, and unequal family responsibilities are obstacles to women's political participation. To encourage more women to join politics, strategic and electoral incentives need to be supported by attitudinal change in society.

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[88] Rachel Chang, "Grace Fu:'It's Harder on the Spouse of a Woman MP,'" *Singapolitics*, 14 September 2013, http://www.singapolitics.sg/supperclub/grace-fu-its-harder-spouse-woman-mp.
[89] Lyons, "A Politics of Accommodation," 18.

Conclusion

This paper argues that party pragmatism in response to the changing demographics and more demanding younger electorate led to the PAP's gender reforms in the early 2000s. The timing of the lifting of discriminatory policies coincides with the PAP's broader reform efforts to appear progressive and in touch with the aspirations of the younger generation of Singaporeans. Additionally, this paper also demonstrates that the addition of female candidates in the mid-2000s was a response to electoral incentives offered by the creation of larger multi-member constituencies. The growth in the proportion and size of the GRCs in the mid-2000s had offered "safe seats" for the PAP to nominate women to balance its ticket. Singapore's case shows how ethnic quotas can have unintended positive effects on women's numerical presence.

Yet, despite the recent progress, women are still missing in the higher political offices. The overall number of female politicians appears to have stagnated. The gender gap reflects both the PAP's weak ideological commitment to promote women and the legacies of inegalitarian political heritage in the country. Despite women's higher educational qualifications and professional achievements, the survey findings suggest that women may be staying out of politics because of the perceived preferences for male leaders, lack of political ambition, self-perceived lower electoral viability than men, and burden of unequal family responsibilities. These findings also imply that more systematic study is needed to establish the causal impact of the cultural and social biases on the party's nomination rules and women's political ambitions. This study has offered a pragmatic and instrumental approach to explain women's political rise, as well as identified the barriers to be overcome. It is hoped that the insights will spur both the ruling PAP and opposition parties to employ more gender-equitable strategies to combat the cultural-social biases and expand women's political role in Singapore.

McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada, September 2015