Singapore

Ethnicity in Singapore

Group selection

Singapore has three main ethnic groups based on the origins of this society of immigrants: **Chinese** make up about three quarters of citizens, **Malays** between 13 and 17 percent and **Indians** between seven and nine percent. Additionally, there is small segment that does not fall into any of these three categories and is mostly of Eurasian descent, therefore labeled **Eurasians and Others** ([4586], 52; [4587], 913; [4588], 147; [4589], 20; [4590], 824; [4591], 99; [4592], 73; [4593], 635; [4594], 1). The group sizes were calculated out of the total resident population reported for the year 1970 by the Singapore Department of Statistics ([4595]).

This classification of ethnicity is based on the official division of the population - made visible for example in the ethnic group categories on the country's identity cards ([4596], 824). While in most cases reflecting the politicized (and, under the People's Action Party's rule, politicizable) identity categories, it betrays the underlying cultural heterogeneity of each group. The (to a certain extent) artificial nature of this division of the population by the state is rooted in the different criteria employed for the groups in question: Originally, Chinese language was employed as an ethnic marker of the ethnic Chinese population (Huaren), Islamic religion as the one of the ethnic Malay population, and South Asian geographical descent for the ethnic Indian population ([4597], 913). Thus, the "groups" were not homogenous to begin with and have also changed partially since the country's inception.

According to the census conducted in 2010, the proportions of the different groups shifted partly ([4598]). Therefore, a new period is added from 2011 onwards. Group sizes are calculated including the large share of about 35% of non-citizens residing in the city state.

[4586] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4587] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4588] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4589] [Hill & Kwen Fee, 1995]
[4590] [Marranci, 2011]
[4591] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4592] [Poh-Seng, 1976]
[4593] [Tan, 2013]
[4594] [Velayutham, 2007]
[4595] [Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010]
[4596] [Marranci, 2011]
[4597] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4598] [Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010]

Chinese:

Within this ethnic group, the sharpest cleavage is between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated Chinese. This division has its roots in the time when Singapore was a British colony. During the time of state formation, this division was reinforced by diverging cultural practices and political tendencies, with the former subgroup leaning more towards Chinese values and norms and towards leftist and even communist political orientations, and the

latter more towards Western-European individualist values and anti-communist political orientations. While both subgroups were of approximately equal size, it is the latter that throughout Singapore's history has dominated the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) power apparatus ([4599], 99; [4600], 74). While the language division is the most politically salient, another, albeit weaker, dividing line runs through the ethnic Chinese population in terms of religion, with the split between Buddhists, Taoists and Confucianists on the one hand and Catholics on the other being the strongest ([4601]). While the latter division only seems to have political significance in peripheral political issues (for example in the debate on abortion), the former has been stronger historically. It has, however, weakened gradually over time ([4602], 916; [4603], 99) and rarely found expression in explicit, large-scale and group-based political demands. For these reasons, the Chinese, despite their internal heterogeneity, were consistently coded as a singular group.

[4599] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4600] [Poh-Seng, 1976]
[4601] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]
[4602] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4603] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]

Malay:

The ethnic Malay group is marked by significant internal diversity likewise, with the label essentially serving as an umbrella term for different, mostly Islamic, ethnic subgroups ([4604], 56; [4605], 99). These subgroups are, among others, Malays, Javanese, Bugis, Indian Muslims (who were, at times, also counted to be Indians), Minangkabau, Baewanese, Acehnese and Arabs ([4606], 824). As no evidence was found for any politically important mobilization along the lines of these subgroups, a unitary codification was employed in the case of Malays as well.

[4604] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4605] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4606] [Marranci, 2011]

Indians:

Language- and religion-based subdivisions exist in the case of ethnic Indians as well. While the largest group under the term Indian are the Tamils, it includes other language groups originating from the Indian subcontinent, such as Bengalis and Punjabis. In terms of religion, it includes Muslims (Malayalam), Hindus and Sikhs ([4607], 99; [4608]). While there was some early agitation around which "Indian" languages should be available in school ([4609], 56), successful government accommodation seems to have prevented the emergence of politically salient subgroup identities. Thus, a unitary codification was employed in the case of Indians.

[4607] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4608] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]
[4609] [Beng-Huat, 1996]

Eurasians and Others:

Probably the most heterogeneity exists in the "Eurasians and Others" category, which includes any group that does not fit into the three categories mentioned above. It is frequently described as "Westernized" and Catholic ([4610], 74). As this category is employed by the government itself to reflect on the ethnic distribution of power (and is thus politically salient as a key to government inclusion), it

[4610] [Poh-Seng, 1976]

was included and coded as one single group despite its extremely small size and strong heterogeneity.

Power relations

Singapore achieved self-rule from the British in 1959, culminating in a brief merger with Malaysia in 1963. However, disputes between the two administrative entities' ruling parties and worries about Malaysia's ethnic composition quickly led to Singapore's peaceful secession from Malaysia in 1965 ([4611], 52; [4612], 633). Despite the brief interlude in the years 1959 to 1963, Singapore can thus be said to have achieved independence only in 1965, with the coding of the EPR period consequently starting from then on.

[4611] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4612] [Tan, 2013]

The People's Action Party and Singapore's political system:

Since achieving colonial self-rule in 1959, Singapore has been ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has since established a de-facto (electoral) one-party state ([4613], 138). This political system has been described as a "hybrid regime" ([4614], 632), a "dominant one-party system" ([4615], 425), as a "soft authoritarian state" ([4616], 32) and even as a "facade electoral regime" ([4617], 440). PAP dominance has its roots in the boycott of Singapore's first general election by the main opposition party, the mostly Malay-supported Barisan Sosialis, in 1968. This led to the PAP's seizing of all seats in parliament in a virtually uncontested manner ([4618], 148). While an average of seven parties has competed in each of the subsequent general elections, and while 27 parties in total were registered as of 2013 ([4619]), the PAP has consistently faced little actual competition and has consequently maintained a supermajority in parliament throughout the country's existence.

[4613] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4614] [Tan, 2013]
[4615] [Heng Chee, 1976]
[4616] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4617] [Rodan, 2009]
[4618] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4619] [Tan, 2013]

Among the measures by which the PAP has achieved this virtual dominance in terms of electoral outcomes are coercion and intimidation which are employed against the opposition leadership, censorship of local as well as international media, severe limits on the length of the electoral campaign, thus impeding the opposition's ability to compete, strict fund-raising rules as well as the random (re-)drawing of electoral districts (often on short-notice before the elections) ([4620], 144; [4621], 635). However, the PAP's electoral successes certainly also owe much to the output legitimacy it has attained based on its successful economic policies that have rendered Singapore one of the wealthiest states in Asia ([4622], 53; [4623], 425). In sum, while opposition parties are allowed to compete in elections, Singapore can hardly be called a multiparty system. Also, while elections in general seem to proceed in a free manner, constant tinkering with electoral rules, that are at the same time also highly disadvantageous to the opposition, strip the process of most fairness ([4624]).

[4620] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4621] [Tan, 2013]
[4622] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4623] [Heng Chee, 1976]
[4624] [Tan, 2013]

All in all, the coding of Singapore's ethnic power relations thus comes down to how the dominant PAP treats and politically includes (or excludes) the country's various ethnic groups. Three points on

this matter shall be made, which underly the coding decisions taken: The PAP's doctrine of multiracialism and its purported equal treatment of ethnicities, the social ramifications of this doctrine, and its political manifestation in terms of government power sharing.

The doctrine of multiracialism:

Upon taking over control of Singapore after independence, the PAP's task was to build and manage a multiethnic state, which incurred several potential pitfalls. One was open ethnic conflict, made tangible in a set of deadly riots in July and September 1964 between ethnic Chinese and Malays, which left 40 people dead ([4625], 916; [4626]). Partly to prevent the re-occurrence of inter-ethnic tensions, partly owing to the impossibility to appeal to an indigenous tradition in a country of immigrants ([4627]; [4628]), the PAP chose a secular, meritocratic state ideology which it called "multiracialism."

[4625] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4626] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]
[4627] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4628] [Velayutham, 2007]

Multiracialism as the party's chosen basis for the new, multinational state was based on the PAP's perception of race as an unchanging, ontological feature of its population and as a liability in the starting state-building project. Despite Singapore's vast majority of ethnic Chinese, the PAP thus sought to project of itself the image of a neutral arbiter between the country's ethnic groups and as politically treating all these groups equally ([4629], 915; [4630], 825). Two stages of multiracialism can be observed, although the temporal borders between them are blurred in practice: In the beginning, it was hoped that integrative policies could function as a "melting pot," leading to the emergence of a distinctive national Singaporean identity that would transcend ethnic boundaries. This led to the emergence of policies aimed at breaking down ethnic barriers, such as the bilingual education system and ethnic housing quotas. Second, the ostentatious failure of this aim, coupled with regional ethnic turbulences and the expressed fears by the PAP leadership that Singapore was losing its Asian roots and becoming too "westernized," led to a modification of multiracialism ([4631]). This second stage, starting in the late 1970s and culminating in the 1990s, found its expression in policies aimed at the preservation of the various ethnic groups' cultural and social heritage, such as the encouragement of schooling in native languages and of ethnicity-based self-help groups ([4632]; [4633]).

[4629] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4630] [Marranci, 2011]
[4631] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4632] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4633] [Mutalib, 2012]

Overall, multiracialism as an ideology, despite undergoing a significant shift, never seems to have been aimed at the assimilation of one of the two (or three) minorities, with activities in the first stage seeking to overcome boundaries of all groups, and activities in the second stage aimed at strengthening the cultural "ballast" of all groups as well.

Socio-cultural outcomes:

The socio-cultural policies of the PAP broadly reflect the promise of treating all ethnic groups equally under the chosen multiracialist

ideology.

A bilingual education policy was adopted shortly after Singaporean independence in 1966 and has remained in place with only minor changes throughout the country's existence. Under this policy, every student has to learn English (as a "neutral," non-Asian language) in addition to his or her ethnic group's "mother tongue" ([4634], 76). Among the languages permitted for the latter are Chinese (defined exclusively as the Mandarin dialect; for the ethnic Chinese), Malay (for the ethnic Malays), and a number of Indian languages, such as Tamil, Bengali and Hindi (for the ethnic Indians) ([4635], 56; [4636]). Since the abolishment of the Chinese-language Nanyang University in 1980, tertiary education has been available in "race-neutral" English as well ([4637], 101). Mirroring this multilingual education policy, the state also adopted four official languages (Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil), which are formally treated equally ([4638], 39). In practice, however, Mandarin seems to be "slightly more privileged" due to its more frequent usage by the predominantly ethnic Chinese administration ([4639]).

[4634] [Poh-Seng, 1976]
[4635] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4636] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4637] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4638] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4639] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

In the year following the adoption of the bilingual schooling system (1967), the PAP created a compulsory three years military service for all Singaporean youth "irrespective of ethnicity", also aimed at increasing the integrative contact between the ethnic groups ([4640], 39, 42; [4641], 76). However, despite formal equality, higher positions in the officer corps seem to be restricted to members of the Chinese ethnic group ([4642]), thus raising questions on the degree of ethnic impartiality by the military.

[4640] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4641] [Poh-Seng, 1976]
[4642] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

In the 1980s, the PAP reacted to a tendency of large parts of the population to live in homogeneous ethnic enclaves and enacted another integrative policy: Ethnic housing quotas, which placed limits on the maximum proportions of each ethnic group in a housing district, to counterbalance these tendencies ([4643], 101; [4644], 41; [4645], 633).

[4643] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4644] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4645] [Tan, 2013]

The PAP administration has also posited itself as neutral with regards to religious festivals, allocating public holidays proportionally to the relative group size of each ethnic group ([4646], 56; [4647], 915; [4648]; [4649], 77).

[4646] [Beng-Huat, 1996]
[4647] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4648] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]
[4649] [Poh-Seng, 1976]

A major socio-economic issue has been the inequality between ethnic groups in terms of educational and economic outcomes, with the ethnic Chinese consistently achieving higher outcomes (for example in terms of living standards) than the ethnic Indians and, especially, ethnic Malays ([4650]; [4651]). The answer by the PAP government to these issues has been twofold: On the one hand, it has instituted free tertiary education for ethnic Malays. On the other hand, it has allowed the country's welfare system to be split between ethnic groups, with the 1981-established Mendaki organization providing services for Malays, the 1989-founded Sinda taking care of ethnic Indians, and the 1992-created Chinese Development Assistance Council set up for ethnic Chinese ([4652], 58). The aim of this policy was to strengthen the "self-help" capacity and solidarity

[4650] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4651] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4652] [Beng-Huat, 1996]

of the different groups. The smaller population size and the lower socio-economic standing of Malays and Indians has meant, however, that their capacity to provide the necessary welfare services has been similarly limited ([4653]).

[4653] [Beng-Huat, 2007]

While some issues remain, such as the inaccessibility of higher military positions for minority groups and the socioeconomic lower standing of Malays and Indians, no large-scale active discrimination seems to take place in the social, economic and cultural realms, and the PAP mostly seems to live up to its promise of ethnic impartiality under multiracialism.

Political outcomes:

Throughout Singapore's history, the PAP has included virtually all minorities in its party apparatus as well as in the country's legislative and executive ([4654], 100). In the country's unicameral legislative, ethnic minority members of parliament made up between 19 to 27.6 percent in the period until 1988 ([4655], 152), thus broadly reflecting the country's ethnic composition ([4656], 429).

[4654] [Mauzy & Milne 2002]
[4655] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4656] [Heng Chee, 1976]

Two further mechanisms have contributed to the further persistence of a balanced ethnic composition of the legislative: First, in 1988, the group representation constituency (GRC) was introduced, which transformed the large part of electoral districts into multi-member districts, where candidates participate as a team on a list that includes at least one member of an ethnic minority. This has effectively calibrated the seat share of Malay, Indian and Eurasian ethnic groups in parliament to hover around 25 percent. At the same time, however, the GRC scheme also ensures a vast Chinese majority and further restricts the opposition's ability to compete due to the difficulty of fielding capable teams of candidates in the fast-changing geography of electoral districts ([4657]; [4658]; [4659]; [4660]).

[4657] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4658] [Fetzer, 2008]
[4659] [Marranci, 2011]
[4660] [Tan, 2013]

Second, the nominated members of parliament (NMP) scheme of 1990, whereby personalities from various professional and ethnic backgrounds are appointed by the president for short terms, has also contributed to a larger and more balanced minority group presence in the legislative. This has allowed the PAP to "include ethnic Indians, Malays and Eurasians" and to "project an inclusive attitude towards minority ethnic communities" ([4661], 451). However, by assuring broad presence by minority and select opposition groups, this scheme can also be argued to at the same time further marginalize the electorally organized opposition.

[4661] [Rodan, 2009]

Similar to the legislative, a broadly proportional appointment of cabinet ministers is also practiced ([4662], 77), with the cabinet in 1972 for example including 10 Chinese members, one Malay, two Indians and others ([4663], 429). One of the elected Malay Ministers additionally holds the position of the Minister for Malay and Muslim Affairs. However, despite nearly achieving proportionality, minorities are excluded from the most important cabinet posts: For example, the country's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has openly re-

[4662] [Poh-Seng, 1976]
[4663] [Heng Chee, 1976]

marked that the country "was not ready for an Indian-Singaporean prime minister" ([4664], 916). The same holds true for the Malays, for whom it is "unconceivable" to be awarded the most important posts ([4665]; [4666], 45). Additionally, there have been debates on how well the Malay PAP members represent their ethnic group's views, resulting in heavy criticism of the Minister for Malay and Muslim affairs ([4667], 45), in the formation of (powerless) opposition forums and in, at times, heavy (although ineffective) opposition voting ([4668], 151).

[4664] [Beng-Huat, 2007]
[4665] [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]
[4666] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4667] [Mutalib, 2012]
[4668] [Fetzer, 2008]

Coding decisions 1965-2021:

The Chinese are coded as Senior Partner for usually holding the most important posts in government and due to their assured numerical majority in the parliament (out of which the cabinet is formed). While the main minorities are guaranteed representation in the cabinet, they do not have equal access but seem to get more than just token representation. Important posts such as the foreign ministry have been awarded to them before. No widespread ethnicity-based opposition was mobilized against the system in the past. Moreover, no large-scale social, economic or political discrimination seems to take place. The three minority groups are thus all coded as Junior Partners. As Singapore is a unitary city-state, no regional autonomy exists for any group.

In recent years, concerns have been voiced that the Malays are underrepresented and some social and economic discrimination is reported against this group, but as it does not concern the political sphere, it is not accounted for in the coding. The Indians, on the other hand, seem to be rather over-represented in government while being concerned about the government's favoritism of the Mandarin language ([4669]).

[4669] [Minority Rights Group International, 2015]

In 2017, a new "special presidential election" was created that allowed minority candidates to run, asserting that there was a need to have greater minority representation. Accordingly, it was decided that the candidate should be Malay. However, the new procedure has reportedly sustained the PAP's rule and only allowed a token member of the Malay group to become president in a move to curb active opposition against the PAP's dominance. Therefore, no actual change in minority representation can be coded. Moreover, the PAP's politics are described as "strongly determined by Chinese interests," due to the ethnic dominance of the Chinese population. "The most powerful positions are controlled by ethnic Chinese with similar socioeconomic backgrounds" ([4670]). Therefore, the Chinese's Senior Partner status is retained and the previous coding period extended until 2021.

[4670] [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Si

From 1965 until 2010

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Chinese	0.713	SENIOR PARTNER
Malays	0.128	JUNIOR PARTNER
Indians	0.054	JUNIOR PARTNER
Eurasians and Others	0.009	JUNIOR PARTNER

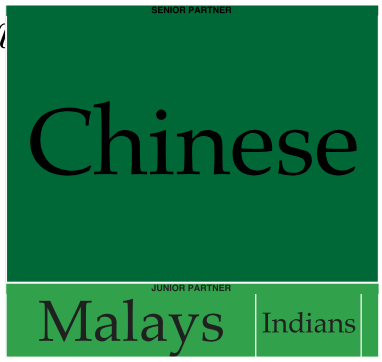

Figure 917: Political status of ethnic groups in Singapore during 1965-2010.

From 2011 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Chinese	0.48	SENIOR PARTNER
Malays	0.095	JUNIOR PARTNER
Indians	0.046	JUNIOR PARTNER
Eurasians and Others	0.009	JUNIOR PARTNER

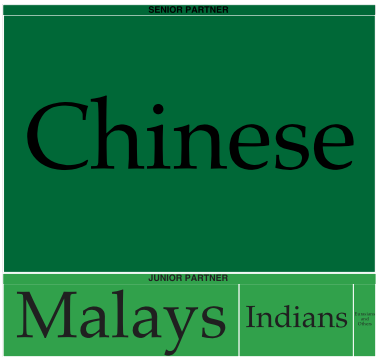

Figure 918: Political status of ethnic groups in Singapore during 2011-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Singapore

From 1965 until 2021

Figure 919: Map of ethnic groups in Singapore during 1965-2021.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
	Chinese	0	Urban
	Malays	0	Urban
	Indians	0	Urban
	Eurasians and Others	0	Urban

Table 341: List of ethnic groups in Singapore during 1965-2021.