

RESEARCH NOTE

Political representation of racial minorities in the parliament of Singapore

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Abstract

This research note studies the political representation of racial minorities in Singapore. Specifically, it analyzes whether racial minority members of parliament (MPs) are more likely than Chinese MPs to represent the interests of racial minorities in the Parliament. I answer this question through conducting content analyses of the parliamentary questions raised during the plenary meetings of the 10th–12th Parliament of Singapore (2002–2015). In total, 6,678 questions were asked. Our results show that racial minority MPs were significantly more likely (21.79 times) than Chinese MPs to ask questions related to racial minorities. While this study shows that racial minority MPs were significantly more likely than Chinese MPs to ask questions related to racial minorities, it also highlights the inadequacy of representation of racial minority interests in the Parliament of Singapore. During our period of study, only 1.2% of the total number of parliamentary questions focused on racial minorities. Besides MPs' race, this study finds that partisan affiliation crucially influenced the likelihood of MPs to represent racial minority interests. Political parties played an important role in shaping MPs' representational behavior. Compared to the People's Action Party (PAP) MPs, opposition MPs were significantly more likely to raise racial minority-related questions. One possible explanation could be that opposition MPs used parliamentary questions as an important tool to challenge and criticize the governing party's policies on racial minorities. Another explanation could be that PAP racial minority MPs' first loyalty has to be to the party and government rather than their co-ethnics, given that they are beholden to party elites for their seats.

Keywords: Legislator behavior; parliamentary questions; political representation; racial minorities; Singapore's parliamentary politics

Singapore is a racially diverse country. According to Singapore's General Household Survey 2015 (table 44), Singapore consisted of ethnic Chinese (77%), Malays (12%), Indians (8%), and others including Eurasians (3%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015). Who represents the interests of racial minorities in the Parliament of Singapore, where the majority of the members of parliament (MPs) are ethnic Chinese? This research note studies the political representation of racial minorities in Singapore. Specifically, the research note examines the impact of legislators' race on their representational behavior in the Parliament of Singapore. It analyzes whether racial minority MPs are more likely than Chinese MPs to represent the interests of racial minorities in the Parliament. I answer this question through conducting content analyses of the parliamentary questions raised during the plenary meetings of the 10th–12th Parliament of Singapore (2002–2015).

This article makes two important arguments. First, an MP's race is a crucial variable in affecting the substantive representation of racial minorities in the Parliament of Singapore. The vast majority of racial minority-related parliamentary questions (65 out of a total of 77) during the period of study were asked by racial minority MPs. Second, partisan affiliation of MPs crucially shaped their representation behavior. Compared to the People's Action Party (PAP) MPs, opposition MPs were significantly

more likely to raise racial minority-related questions. Specifically, the candidate selection process within the ruling party – the PAP – makes its MPs beholden to party elites for their seats. Racial minority PAP MPs' first loyalty, therefore, has to be to the party and government, rather than their co-ethnics. By contrast, opposition MPs have a strong partisan motivation to use racial minority-related questions to challenge and criticize the governing party's policies on racial minorities. Thus, we see a very different representational behavior between PAP MPs and opposition MPs concerning racial minorities.

This study makes two contributions to the scholarship on race and political representation and Singapore's parliamentary politics. Most research on race and political representation of racial minorities focuses on Western democracies such as the USA (e.g., Minta, 2009; Gamble, 2011) and the UK (e.g., Saalfeld, 2011), which have two major features concerning racial/religious affairs. First, these Western democratic states adopt a liberal approach to managing racial/religious affairs. Second, these countries have majority–minority electoral districts. However, not every multi-racial country shares these two features. Singapore is a case in point. As will be elaborated below, the Singapore state has actively and high-handedly intervened in the racial/religious domains through various policies. The implementation of the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in public housing in 1989, for example, eliminated the majority–minority electoral districts in Singapore. Accordingly, it is important for researchers to investigate whether the existing findings on the impact of legislators' race on the political representation of the racial minorities can be applied to non-Western contexts like Singapore – a hybrid regime. For instance, has the absence of racial minority-dominated electoral districts in Singapore weakened the motivation of racial minority MPs to ask parliamentary questions related to the interests of racial minorities? Second, this study offers new insights into an important yet under-researched topic in Singapore's parliamentary politics – the representational behavior in a single-party dominated parliament. Existing literature on Singapore's parliamentary politics tends to focus on elections and overlook the actual behavior of MPs after they are elected.

It should be noted that while this study focuses on the political representation of racial minorities in Singapore, namely Malays, Indians, and Eurasians, it also examines the political representation of Muslims and Hindus – two religious minorities in the city-state. This is because in Singapore almost all Malays (99%) are Muslims and 60% of Indians are Hindus (table 44, Singapore Department of Statistics 2015). In other words, there is a high level of intersectionality between Malays and Muslims, and Indians and Hindus. Issues related to Muslims and Hindus are very likely to affect the interests of Malays and Indians, respectively.¹

The remainder of this research note proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the political representation of racial minorities in Western democracies, the Singapore state's management of racial minorities/religious affairs, and Singapore's parliamentary politics. Third, it outlines the Parliament of Singapore, highlighting its single-party dominated nature and racial composition. The fourth section discusses the data and methods of this research. Fifth, it presents the major findings of this research and their implications. The final section concludes.

1. Literature review

The literature review discusses important works on three major themes: (1) political representation of racial minorities in Western democracies focusing on whether racial minority legislators are more likely than non-minority legislators to advance racial minority interests; (2) the Singapore state's regulation of racial minorities/religious affairs; and (3) parliamentary politics in Singapore.

¹Readers unfamiliar with Singapore may be puzzled to see Muslim/Hindu and Malay/Chinese/Indian cleavages portrayed as 'racial' rather than ethnic and religious. As argued by Reddy (2016), post-colonial multiculturalism in Singapore took the form of multiracialism. The PAP government used multiracialism and racial categorization to promote nation building. This helps to explain why the discourse of race prevails in Singapore.

1.1 Different representational behavior between racial minority and non-minority legislators

A vast body of studies has shown that the identities and life experiences of legislators significantly influence their representational behavior. Burden's research on the US Congress (2007), for example, contends that the personal traits and backgrounds of legislators shape their representational behavior. Among these personal traits is the race of a legislator. It is assumed that group consciousness or shared group experiences among racial minorities (e.g., shared experience of being discriminated in daily life) contribute to the differences in representational behavior between racial minority and white legislators. Compared to their white colleagues, racial minority legislators are more likely to advance the interests of racial minorities. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate this claim and they are briefly reviewed below.

In her analysis of committee participation in three US House Committees in the 107th Congress (2001–2002), Gamble (2007) finds a positive and significant relationship between committee participation and race. Black members participated more during committee markups on black interest bills than do white members, after controlling for the percent of black population in their electoral districts. Gamble (2011) also highlights that black legislators put a greater effort to bring the voices and concerns of the African-American community to Congress. During committee deliberations, black legislators were more likely than whites to adopt liberal policy frames for black interest bills and they often took a more active role. Minta (2009) also argues that minority legislators were more likely to engage in the substantive representation of racial minorities. Minta's investigation of the transcripts of legislative oversight hearings from the 107th US Congress reveals that black and Latino legislators participated at a higher rate than whites in oversight hearings on minority interest policies, such as the enforcement of civil rights, fair housing laws, and racial profiling.

Apart from participation in committee deliberation and oversight hearings, racial minority legislators are also found to be more likely to introduce bills related to the minority interests than their white colleagues. In his research on race and the representational behavior in the US House of Representatives, Canon (1999) finds that African-American legislators from black majority districts were more likely than white legislators to introduce black interest bills. Additionally, Wilson's (2010) study of the 109th US Congress (2005–2006) shows that Latino representatives were more likely to promote Latino interests in Congress, as Latino representatives more actively sponsored Latino interest bills than non-Latino representatives.

Contrary to the aforementioned research, a few studies have found that legislators' race has little impact on the political representation of racial minorities. Hero and Tolbert's (1995) examination of the voting records in the US House of Representatives during 1987–1988, for example, only find modest differences between Latino and non-Latino legislators in their support for issues of concern to Latino leaders. Through studying the pattern of issue representation by black members of the 104th US Congress and the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES), Tate (2003) also demonstrates that black members are not more likely than their white counterparts to sponsor bills related to the interests of African-Americans, even though she finds some benefits of descriptive representation by the blacks. For example, African-Americans held a more favorable view of black representatives than white representatives, even those who belong to their own political party.

Moving beyond the USA, students of political representation have also examined the implications of the growing descriptive representation of racial minority legislators on the substantive representation of racial minorities in countries like the UK and Canada. Saalfeld's (2011) and Saalfeld and Bischof's (2013) research on the UK House of Commons during 2005–2011, for example, finds that both minority and non-minority MPs raised more parliamentary questions on minority concerns, if they came from constituencies with a high share of non-white residents. After controlling for the effect of racial composition of the electoral districts, however, racial minority MPs tended to raise significantly more parliamentary questions about racial diversity and equality. Bird's (2011) research on Canada's House of Commons from 2006 to 2007 also finds that racial minority MPs were much more

likely to highlight racial minority-related issues during parliamentary debates than non-minority MPs, regardless of the proportion of racial minority populations within their constituencies.

Taken together, there are significant differences between racial minority and non-minority legislators in promoting substantive representation of racial minorities. While providing useful insights into the relationship between the descriptive and substantive representation of racial minorities, the existing literature has a limitation. It primarily focuses on Western democracies and overlooks legislator behavior in undemocratic states. These Western democratic states have two major features concerning racial/religious affairs. First, they adopt a liberal approach to managing racial/religious affairs. The states largely maintain a non-interventionist and laissez-faire attitude toward racial/religious affairs. Second, these Western democratic states have majority–minority electoral districts (Griffin, 2014). However, not every multi-racial country shares these two features. Singapore is a case in point. As will be discussed in the literature review below, the Singapore state has actively and high-handedly intervened in the racial/religious domains through various policies. The adoption of the EIP in public housing in 1989, for example, eliminated the majority–minority electoral districts in Singapore. Accordingly, researchers have to investigate whether the existing findings on the impact of legislators’ race on the political representation of the racial minorities can be applied to non-Western undemocratic contexts like Singapore. For instance, has the absence of racial minority-dominated electoral districts in Singapore weakened the motivation of racial minority MPs to represent the interests of racial minorities?

To complement the foregoing literature review that mainly focuses on the representation of racial minorities in the USA, several important comparative works on ethnic minority representation will be discussed here. Based on in-depth analysis of over 80 democratic countries around the globe between 1990 and 2012, Lublin’s *Minority Rules* (2014) argues that electoral rules play a dominant role in explaining the performance of ethnoregional parties in multi-ethnic democratic countries. However, not every multi-ethnic country has ethnic parties. Singapore is a good example. What are the impacts of the absence of ethnic parties on racial minority representation in Singapore? Lublin and Wright (2013) look at whether reserved seats and lower thresholds have actually enhanced the descriptive representation of minorities within legislatures in about a dozen free democracies. They find that both measures, and especially reserved seats, are effective. The Singapore government also introduced reserved seats in 1988 to ensure legislative representation of racial minority groups. Although Singapore’s electoral laws have protected the descriptive representation of racial minorities, the ruling party’s tight control over its racial minority MPs through the candidate selection process has undermined the translation of descriptive representation into substantive representation. We will come back to this issue later.

Finally, Lublin and Bowler (2018) outline how different measures of electoral system design like boundary delimitation and reserved seats can help to promote representation of ethnic minority groups. The effectiveness of these measures, however, can be diluted by contextual factors. For example, the effectiveness of boundary delimitation in securing the electoral success of ethnic minority groups in the USA has been compromised by a low level of residential segregation and large group differences within a district (Lublin and Bowler, 2018: 164). As will be elaborated in the discussion section, the unique contexts in Singapore such as the state-led construction of a civic rather than ethnic national identity and a history of racialized conflicts have undermined MPs’ incentives, especially those of PAP MPs, to raise racial minority-related parliamentary questions.

1.2 Singapore state’s regulation of racial minorities/religious affairs

Singapore’s ruling party, the PAP, has held that racial relationship must be closely supervised by the state and cannot be allowed to develop on its own since the independence of Singapore in 1965 (Mutalib, 2011: 1167). The PAP has long taken a suspicious attitude toward the largest minority group – Malays/Muslims, especially after the crackdown of the homegrown terrorist Jemaah Islamiyah members in 2001 (Sin, 2003: 536–7; Mutalib, 2011; Abdullah, 2013: 1201). Abdullah (2013)

argues that the Singapore state has used ‘muscular secularism’ – a direct, interventionist approach characterized by draconian measures, harsh laws, and formal co-optation – in its regulation of the racial/religious affairs. The ultimate goal is to make racial/religious minority groups submit to the single-party dominated state and maintain its hegemony.

As highlighted by scholarships on Singapore’s racial politics, many measures of muscular secularism are in conflict with the economic interests and religious belief of the racial minorities especially Malays/Muslims. This in turn has strained the relationship between the PAP government and racial minorities. Two examples are discussed here. The first concerns the EIP in public housing. To prevent the formation of racial enclaves, in 1989 the PAP launched the EIP which imposes a cap on the percentages of Chinese, Malay, and Indian/Others living in each neighborhood and block in every public housing estate. When a block or a neighborhood has reached or exceeded its quota limit for a particular ethnic group, housing transactions must not worsen the ethnic imbalance and owners can only resell their apartments to buyers of the same ethnic group (Sin, 2003). EIP, however, has adversely affected the racial minorities living in public housing estates. Wong’s (2014) analysis has shown that EIP has brought positive price effects for Chinese-constrained apartments (i.e., only Chinese buyers are eligible) but negative price effects for Malay and Indian-constrained apartments. In other words, apartments owned by Chinese are more likely to sell at a price over government valuation, whereas those owned by Malays or Indians are more likely to sell at below government valuation. More importantly, EIP has effectively eliminated any racial minority–majority electoral districts in Singapore (Sin, 2003).

Another measure of muscular secularism, which has caused dissatisfaction among Malays/Muslims, concerns the ban on wearing of *tudung* (Islamic headscarf worn by Muslim women) in national schools and uniformed services of the government. The Singapore government has consistently rejected Muslim parents’ request to allow their daughters to don *tudung* while attending national schools, arguing that the wearing of *tudung* in national schools represents a symbol of exclusiveness and undermines racial integration. In 2002, a few Muslim parents challenged the government by sending their daughters to national schools wearing *tudung* (Tan, 2011). Senior PAP members condemned those involved, which in turn provoked rebuttal from Muslim organizations like the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers’ Association (Abdullah, 2013).

The discussion in the preceding paragraphs raises two issues relevant to this study. First, as noted by Fieldhouse and Sobolewska (2013), the geographical distribution of minorities can have an important impact on the political representation of racial minorities in the parliament. Has the absence of racial minority-dominated electoral districts in Singapore affected the motivation of racial minority MPs to represent the interests of racial minorities? Second, has the strained relationship between the PAP government and racial minorities (particularly Malays) influenced the representation of racial minorities’ interests in the Parliament? One possibility could be that opposition MPs are more likely than PAP MPs to raise parliamentary questions related to racial minorities, given that parliamentary questions are an important tool of the opposition parties to challenge and criticize the governing party’s policies (Martin, 2011). Alternatively, PAP MPs are more likely to ask parliamentary questions on racial minorities, so as to compensate for the unpopular measures of muscular secularism. These issues will be addressed in the next section.

1.3 Singapore’s parliamentary politics

The Singapore government introduced the electoral system of Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) in 1988, so as to guarantee legislative representation of racial minorities. Under the GRCs system, voters cast their ballots for a whole team consisting of four to six candidates, with at least one of them from a racial minority group (Tan, 2014). Table 1 outlines the racial composition of the 10th–13th Parliament of Singapore. Racial minority MPs (Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and other minority MPs) accounted for around one-fourth of the total number of MPs between the 10th and 12th Parliament. The figure slightly increases to 29% for the 13th Parliament. Thus, descriptive

Table 1. Racial composition of the Parliament of Singapore (2002–present)

	Chinese MPs	Malay MPs	Indian MPs	Eurasian MPs	Others MPs	% of racial minority MPs as total number of MPs	Total number of MPs
10th parliament (2002–06)	77	12	13	1	0	25.2	103
11th parliament (2006–11)	75	12	12	3	0	26.5	102
12th parliament (2011–15)	81	14	12	1	0	25	108
13th parliament (2016–present)	71	13	13	2	1	29	100

Source: Calculation based on information from <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/history/list-of-mps-by-parliament>.

representation of racial minorities is guaranteed under the Singapore electoral law. However, it is not clear whether this descriptive representation has improved substantive representation. The present study addresses this question.

The existing literature on Singapore's parliamentary politics focuses on parliamentary elections, such as the electoral systems, campaign strategies, and factors affecting the electoral results (e.g., Mutalib, 2002; Ortmann, 2011; Tan, 2013; Singh, 2016).² While offering useful insights into the dynamics of parliamentary elections in Singapore, the existing literature has two limitations. First, it has seldom studied the actual behavior of MPs after they are elected to the Parliament. Indeed, scholars of legislative studies have demonstrated the significance of examining the actual behavior of legislators after they are elected (Martin *et al.*, 2014). Second, existing research has not analyzed the behavior of Singapore MPs from the perspective of MP's race. Specifically, are racial minority MPs more likely than Chinese MPs to represent racial minority interests? This research note addresses this important yet under-studied issue.

2. Data and methods

This study covers the 10th (2002–2006), 11th (2006–2011), and 12th (2011–2015) Parliament of Singapore. The dependent variable is MPs' level of attentiveness to racial minority interests, which is measured by the number of racial minority-related questions (both oral and written) raised by each MP at the plenary meetings. The parliamentary Question Time typically lasts for one and a half hours and each MP can raise up to five questions at any plenary meeting and not more than three shall be for oral answer. Questions should be sent to the Clerk not later than 7 days before the meeting at which the answer is required. The Speaker of the Parliament, however, can allow a question to be raised without notice if it concerns a matter of public importance.³

This study uses the parliamentary questions asked by MPs to evaluate their policy preferences (their level of attentiveness to racial minority interests). Parliamentary questions are an especially good indicator of MPs' concerns about various issues. The questions have to be planned in advance, given that they are presented in writing and placed in the official records. Scholarship on legislative politics in both democratic and authoritarian countries has shown that the study of the contents of parliamentary questions is an important method for exploring the policy preferences of individual legislators. In their research on legislators' responsiveness in Vietnam, Malesky and Schuler (2010), for example, analyze the contents of all questions asked during the 12th session of the Vietnamese National Assembly. In

²An exception is Abdullah (2016), which examines how nominated members of parliament have advanced democratic representation by actively raising and deliberating issues affecting the marginalized groups in Singapore like the LGBT community.

³Clause 20 of the Standing Orders of the Parliament of Singapore. Accessed 27 September 2018. <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/standing-orders-of-the-parliament-of-singapore.pdf>.

their studies of the policy preferences of minority MPs in the UK House of Commons, Saalfeld (2011) and Kolpinskaya (2017) also rely on content analyses of the parliamentary questions.

The data for this study were mainly based on the official website of the Parliament of Singapore, which provides details about the operation of the Parliament (see <https://www.parliament.gov.sg>). The *Singapore Hansard* records verbatim the proceedings of every plenary meeting. Information about the questions asked by MPs at the plenary meetings came from the *Singapore Hansard*. Information about MPs like their demographic backgrounds came from the websites of Parliament and the Singapore government. Finally, the two major newspapers in Singapore – *Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao* – served as supplementary sources of information.

One coder read the proceedings of every plenary meeting during the 10th–12th Parliament of Singapore and coded all the parliamentary questions asked. For each question, the coder decided whether the question was related to Singapore's racial minorities. Two examples are provided here to demonstrate how the questions were coded. In the parliamentary meeting on 13 May 2013, MP Intan Azura Mokhtar asked the government for an update on the schemes managed by MUIS and MENDAKI to assist low-income Malay/Muslim families in Singapore.⁴ Since this question is concerned with the welfare of Malay/Muslim families, it was coded as a 'racial minority-related question'. The second example refers to the question asked by MP Lee Bee Wah on 17 August 2015. Lee asked the Minister for Transport about the number of cases in which taxi passengers refused to pay their fares and assaulted taxi drivers in the past 3 years, and whether the government would consider raising the penalties against such offenders to serve as a deterrence.⁵ Since this question focused on the problem of fare evasion by taxi passengers and was not related to racial minorities, it was coded as a 'non-racial minority-related question'. 20% of the parliamentary questions (out of a total of 6,678) were randomly chosen for coding by a second coder. The inter-rater agreement was 94.74% (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$).

This research has three independent variables: race, partisan affiliation, and gender of an MP. The demographic variables of MPs including their age, tenure (the number of years that had served as an MP at the beginning of each Parliament), and the education level were controlled in the data analysis. The data set was organized with one observation per MP per Parliament. Our data analysis excluded the Speaker of the Parliament because the Speaker is responsible for chairing the parliamentary meeting and does not ask questions. MPs with ministerial positions were excluded as well because they do not ask questions.

Regarding an MP's race, Chinese MPs were coded '1' and racial minority MPs '2'.⁶ Given the group consciousness or shared group experiences between racial minority MPs and the racial minorities (e.g., shared experience of being discriminated in daily life) and the finding of existing research demonstrating that legislators are much more likely to advocate the interests of those who share their personal characteristics such as race, gender, and class (Whitby, 1997; Burden, 2007), we make the first hypothesis of this study:

H1: Compared to their Chinese colleagues, racial minority MPs in Singapore are much more likely to represent the interests of racial minorities through asking more racial minority-related parliamentary questions.

This research includes partisan affiliation of an MP as an independent variable. Extant research on political representation in Western democracies like Catalano (2009) and Osborn and Mendez (2010) examine whether partisan affiliation by itself has shaped MPs' representational behavior.

⁴See the *Singapore Hansard*, 13 May 2013, oral question 18. MUIS and MENDAKI are two prominent Malay/Muslim organizations in Singapore. Accessed 27 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=13-5-2013>.

⁵See the *Singapore Hansard*, 17 August 2015, written question 21. Accessed 8 January 2019. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=17-8-2015>.

⁶Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and other minority MPs were grouped together as racial minority MPs in the data analysis.

As highlighted in the literature review above, PAP's policy of muscular secularism has strained its relationship with racial minorities (particularly Malays/Muslims). This in turn may influence the representational politics in the Parliament. One possibility could be that opposition MPs are more likely to raise parliamentary questions related to racial minorities, given that parliamentary questions are an important tool of the opposition parties to challenge and criticize the governing party's policies. Thus, the second hypothesis of this study is as follows:

H2: Compared to PAP MPs, opposition MPs are more likely to ask racial minority-related questions.⁷

In our data analysis, PAP MPs were coded '1', opposition MPs '2', and nominated MPs '3'.⁸

Concerning the gender of an MP, this study hypothesizes that female MPs are more likely than male MPs to ask parliamentary questions on racial minorities. Since both racial minorities and women are politically minority groups in Singapore (and many countries)⁹, it is likely that female MPs may be more sympathetic to racial minority interests than male MPs. Accordingly, this study tests the third hypothesis.

H3: Female MPs are more likely to ask racial minority-related questions than male MPs.

A growing body of research on political representation in multi-racial countries like the USA has investigated how the race and gender of MPs have intertwined to influence political outcomes. Orey *et al.* (2006), for example, find that African-American female legislators were more likely to introduce progressive legislative bills, when compared to other race-sex groups in the Mississippi state legislature. In the case of Singapore, are MPs with dual minority identity (based on race and gender) more likely to represent racial minority interests? Inspired by Orey *et al.* (2006), this study proposes the fourth hypothesis:

H4: MPs with dual minority identity, specifically female racial minority MPs are more likely to raise parliamentary questions on racial minorities than female Chinese MPs, male racial minority MPs, and male Chinese MPs.

Previous research on the legislative representation of racial minorities in Western democracies has included the share of minority residents within an electoral district as an independent variable (Gamble, 2007; Minta, 2009; Casellas and Leal, 2011; Saalfeld, 2011). It is assumed that legislators regardless of their racial status would be more responsive to the minority interests if they represent majority-minority districts. Singapore, however, does not have any racial minority-dominated electoral district due to the implementation of EIP in public housing estates. The variations in the proportion of racial minority population among electoral districts in Singapore are very small (Tan, 2014: 34). Thus, our analyses did not include the share of minority residents within an electoral district as an independent variable.

⁷MPs from the parliamentary opposition parties – Workers' Party, Singapore Democratic Alliance, and Singapore People's Party – were grouped together in the data analysis.

⁸In 1990, the Singapore government introduced the nominated member of parliament (NMP) scheme under which up to nine NMPs will be seated in the parliament. NMPs must not be members of any political party. They serve a two-and-a-half-year term and may be reappointed for another term only. The general public and seven functional groups can nominate names of individuals for consideration to become NMPs. An eight-member Special Select Committee, dominated by PAP MPs, makes the decision (Tan 2014).

⁹The share of female MPs as a percentage of the total number of MPs in the 10th, 11th, and 12th Parliament of Singapore was 17.5, 26.5, and 25.9%, respectively. Author's calculation based on information from <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/history/list-of-mps-by-parliament>.

3. Findings

I first report descriptive data on the questions asked by MPs. In total, 6,678 questions were asked between the 10th and 12th Parliament and they were included in the analysis. Several salient findings are highlighted here. First, there were only 77 questions on racial minorities, which accounted for 1.2% of the total number of parliamentary questions asked during our period of study. From the perspective of parliamentary questions, this number may suggest that racial minority concerns and needs have not received sufficient attention in the Parliament of Singapore. We will come back to this issue in the Discussion section. Second, while the absolute number of racial minority-related questions was small, the vast majority of them – 65 out of a total of 77 – were raised by racial minority MPs. The data provide preliminary evidence that racial minority MPs in Singapore were more likely than Chinese MPs to represent the interests of racial minorities.

Third, partisan affiliation of MPs crucially affected their likelihood to represent the interests of racial minorities. Opposition MPs raised 35% (27 out of 77) of racial minority-related questions, although they held a very small share (about 5%) of the parliamentary seats during the period of study. By contrast, PAP MPs only asked 56% (43 out of 77) of racial minority-related questions, despite the fact that they controlled 79% of the parliamentary seats.¹⁰ Fourth, as shown in Table 2, most of the racial minority-related questions focused on Malays/Muslims. This may indicate that compared to the Indian or Eurasian community, the Malay community in Singapore is facing more problems which require attention and assistance from MPs.¹¹

Finally, we classified all the racial minority-related questions into different topics and Table 3 reports the result. ‘Education’¹² and ‘religious life and practice’¹³ stood out as the top concerns. Apart from these two concerns, MPs’ minority-related questions covered a variety of topics, such as ‘preservation and promotion of minority culture, heritage, and language’¹⁴, ‘minority catering needs’¹⁵, and ‘social welfare’.

To examine the impact of race, partisan affiliation, and gender of MPs, I conducted a series of Poisson regression analyses, controlling for the effects of the age, tenure, and education level of MPs. Table 4 reports the results. Our results show that MPs’ race and partisan affiliation significantly predicted the number of questions on racial minorities asked during the plenary meetings. Racial minority MPs were 21.79 times more likely than Chinese MPs to raise questions on racial minorities. This result supports H1. Our results also demonstrate that opposition MPs were 11.11 times and 16.67 times, respectively, more likely than PAP MPs and NMPs to raise questions related to racial minorities, while there was no significant difference in the number of questions raised related to racial minorities

¹⁰NMPs raised the remaining 9% (seven out of 77) racial minority-related questions.

¹¹Mutalib (2011, 1157) also argues that Singapore’s Malays are progressing slower than Indians in education and the economy.

¹²In the parliamentary meeting on 22 February 2010, for example, MP Zaqy Mohamad asked the Minister for Education for the government’s assessment of the progress of Malay students at the major public examinations over the past decade, especially for Mathematics and Sciences, and the measures to help Malay students progress at the same rate, if not better, compared to their peers from the other race groups. See the *Singapore Hansard*, 22 February 2010, written question 20. Accessed 21 January 2019. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=22-2-2010>.

¹³In the parliamentary meeting on 12 November 2012, for instance, MP Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap asked whether the government will consider the possibility of allowing sheep supply from Malaysia and Indonesia in case Australia is unable to supply sheep for the observance of *korban* in Singapore, and the government’s criteria for the accreditation of a sheep supplier. See the *Singapore Hansard*, 12 November 2012, written question 39. Accessed 21 January 2019. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/fullreport?sittingdate=12-11-2012>.

¹⁴In the parliamentary meeting on 13 August 2012, for example, MP Fatimah Lateef asked the government for an update on the progress of the redevelopment of the Malay Heritage Centre. See the *Singapore Hansard*, 13 August 2012, written question 6. Accessed 21 January 2019. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=13-8-2012>.

¹⁵An example of question on minority catering needs was raised by MP Sitoh Yih Pin on 21 November 2011. He asked what initiatives the government will undertake so as to facilitate the operation of adequate Indian and Muslim food stalls in hawker centers. See the *Singapore Hansard*, 21 November 2011, written question 25. Accessed 21 January 2019. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=21-11-2011>.

Table 2. Focus of racial minority-related questions (2002–2015)

	Number of questions
Malay only	68
Indian only	3
Eurasian only	1
Malay and Indian	4
Racial minority in general	1
Total	77

Source: Compiled from <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/home>

between PAP MPs and NMPs, $P = 0.39$. Our results support H2, since opposition MPs were found to be more likely than PAP MPs to represent racial minority interests through asking minority-related parliamentary questions. Our results also reject H3, as there was no significant difference in the number of racial minority-related questions raised between female and male MPs.

To further investigate whether there was any interaction effect of race \times gender (H4), a series of 2×2 analyses of variance were conducted, with race (racial minority, Chinese) and gender (female, male) as independent variables and the number of racial minority-related questions raised as dependent variables. Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of the number of racial minority-related questions raised categorized by the race and gender of MPs.

There was a significant main effect of race, $F(1, 254) = 14.95$, $P < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$, while the main effect of gender, $F(1, 254) = 0.10$, $P = 0.75$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.000$, and the interaction effect of race \times gender, $F(1, 254) = 0.01$, $P = 0.94$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.000$, were non-significant. Male MPs who were racial minorities raised more questions related to racial minority than both female and male MPs who were Chinese ($P_s < 0.01$). Female racial minority MPs also tended to raise more questions about racial minorities than male Chinese MPs, but the statistical significance was marginal ($P = 0.06$). Female and male MPs who were Chinese did not differ in the number of questions raised about racial minorities ($P = 0.99$). Summing up, our results did not support H4, because female racial minority MPs were *not* more likely to raise parliamentary questions on racial minorities than female Chinese MPs, male racial minority MPs, and male Chinese MPs.

4. Discussion

This study examines the impact of MPs' race on their representational behavior in the Parliament of Singapore. It analyzes whether racial minority MPs are more likely than Chinese MPs to represent the interests of racial minorities in the Parliament. Our results show that racial minority MPs were significantly more likely (21.79 times) than Chinese MPs to ask questions related to racial minorities. One possible factor of this finding may be the racial group consciousness or shared group experiences of both racial minority MPs and the racial minorities. Belonging to the same racial group and having similar life experiences, racial minority MPs may be more likely than Chinese MPs to feel a special responsibility to represent racial minority interests. In other words, Singapore's racial minority MPs were likely to perceive themselves as surrogate representatives of racial minorities nationally (Mansbridge, 1999, 2003). For example, in his parliamentary question on how the government would assist racial minority owners of public housing flats who encountered difficulty in selling their flats due to the restrictions under the EIP, NMP Viswa Sadasivan (a Singaporean Indian) mentioned that: "The reason I raised this question is because quite a few of my friends and their friends have highlighted that they have had difficulties selling their flats at market rates because of their ethnic background, especially because they are in the minority groups."¹⁶

¹⁶The *Singapore Hansard*, 16 September 2010, oral question 7. Accessed 30 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=16-9-2010>.

Table 3. Categorization of racial minority-related questions (2002–2015)

	Number of questions
Education	21 (27%)
Religious life and practice	20 (26%)
Preservation and promotion of Malay/Indian culture, heritage, or language	5 (6%)
Catering need of Muslim/Hindu	4 (5%)
Governance of the Malay/Muslim community	4 (5%)
Family	4 (5%)
Social welfare	4 (5%)
Health care	2 (3%)
Housing	2 (3%)
Others	11 (14%)
Total	77 (100%)

Table 4. Determinants of Singapore MPs' level of attentiveness to racial minority interests (as measured by the number of racial minority-related questions raised) during 2002–2015

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)
Racial minority-related questions				
Gender				
Female	0.55	0.29	3.55	1.73
Partisan affiliation				
PAP	-2.41	0.29	71.04***	0.09
NMP	-2.78	0.47	34.77***	0.06
Race				
Minority	3.08	0.35	79.61***	21.79
Age	-0.00	0.02	0.01	1.00
Tenure	-0.07	0.04	3.95*	0.93
Education level				
Undergraduate or below	-0.24	0.23	1.09	0.79

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$.

Indeed, the results of Broockman's (2013) field experiment illustrate that black legislators in the USA are more *intrinsically* (emphasis added) motivated to promote blacks' interests than their white counterparts, even when doing so promised little political reward. Broockman's study lends further credence to the possibility that racial group consciousness may explain why racial minority MPs were much more likely to represent racial minority interests in Singapore. Further research is required to better understand why racial minority MPs in Singapore stood out from their Chinese colleagues in representing racial minority interests.¹⁷

While this study shows that racial minority MPs in Singapore were significantly more likely than Chinese MPs to ask questions related to racial minorities, it also highlights the inadequacy of representation of racial minority interests in the Parliament of Singapore. During our period of study (2002–2015), only 1.2% of the total number of parliamentary questions focused on racial minorities. As argued by Mutalib (2011: 1164), throughout the decade of the 2000s, more Malay issues and concerns came to the fore, including dissatisfaction with the government's refusal to accommodate some of their Islamic aspirations. Accordingly, one should expect to see more parliamentary questions on racial

¹⁷One possible line of future inquiry is to administer survey questionnaires to both racial minority and Chinese MPs and investigate their roles and representational orientations. Specifically, we hope to understand whether and the extent to which MPs prioritize the needs of their co-ethnics above those of citizens of other races. Examples of open questions in the survey include: (1) How would you describe the job of being an MP? (2) What are the most important things an MP should do? (3) How should an MP allocate his limited time, resources, and attention? (4) Do you agree that an MP should put more emphasis on serving his co-ethnics than citizens of other races? (5) If so, under what circumstances?

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the number of racial minority-related questions raised categorized by race and gender of MPs during 2002–2015

		Female		Male	
		Racial minority (N = 13)	Chinese (N = 58)	Racial minority (N = 52)	Chinese (N = 135)
Racial minority related questions	Mean	1.08	0.10	0.98	0.04
	S.D.	1.61	0.31	3.04	0.21
	Min.	0	0	0	0
	Max.	4	1	20	1

minorities to be asked. Yet, this is not the case.¹⁸ The small number of parliamentary questions on racial minorities may be explained by three reasons. The first concerns the absence of racial minority-dominated electoral districts in Singapore. Given that Chinese citizens account for the majority of electorates in every electoral districts, racial minority MPs have to carefully balance the competing interests and needs of different racial groups. In promoting the interests of racial minority community, racial minority MPs cannot alienate Chinese electorates and without being perceived as only representing racial minority interests. This concern may in turn weaken the incentives of racial minority MPs to raise minority-related questions. More research has to be conducted to evaluate this argument.¹⁹

The second reason lies in the PAP-constructed civic national identity. Ortmann (2009) highlights that the existence of multi-ethnic groups in Singapore prompted the PAP government to construct a civic rather than an ethnic national identity. In a multi-ethnic country like Singapore, the construction of an ethnic national identity may favor one group over another and cause ethnic tension. Accordingly, the PAP government has sought to construct a civic national identity that is based on civic symbols such as the constitution, an oath of allegiance and the national flag. Downplaying of the salience of ethnicity under civic national identity in Singapore may explain the small number of racial minority-related questions asked by MPs, especially PAP MPs. Finally, Singapore has a history of racialized conflicts that make any kind of race talk touchy if not outright taboo. This also helps to explain why MPs did not frequently raise parliamentary questions along racial lines.

Besides MPs' race, this study finds that partisan affiliation crucially influenced the likelihood of MPs to represent racial minority interests. Political parties played an important role in shaping MPs' representational behavior. Our results illustrate that compared to PAP MPs (and NMPs), opposition MPs were significantly more likely to raise racial minority-related questions. Although the PAP controlled the vast majority of the parliamentary seats, its MPs were less active than opposition MPs in representing racial minority interests through parliamentary questions. Additionally, as will be highlighted in the paragraphs below, sensitive racial minority-related questions were mainly raised by opposition MPs rather than PAP MPs. Here we can see that political party is a crucial intervening variable in affecting the effectiveness of racial minority representation. Rather than holding primary elections to select its candidates for parliamentary elections, the PAP leadership dominates the candidate selection process. The party leader and a committee of senior party members who are also cabinet members have the sole jurisdiction to determine the candidate list (Tan, 2015: 199). Given that PAP MPs, including its racial minority MPs, are beholden to party elites for their seats, their first loyalty has to be to the party and government rather than their co-ethnics.

¹⁸To be sure, studying the contents of parliamentary questions is just one way to assess an MP's effort to represent the interests of racial minorities. Researchers can also address this question through other perspectives such as the legislative voting patterns, initiation and participation in motion debate, and parliamentary committee work by MPs.

¹⁹To evaluate this argument, researchers can study the Facebook pages (or other social media) of racial minority MPs and look at the messages, activities, and photos that have been posted. The objective is to examine the extent to which they focused on racial minority constituents. If the materials on these Facebook pages by and large covered *both* racial minority and Chinese constituents, then it indicates that this argument is tenable.

Regarding opposition MPs, they were significantly more likely than PAP MPs to ask racial minority-related questions. One possible explanation could be that opposition MPs used parliamentary questions as an important tool to challenge and criticize the governing party's policies on racial minorities. To evaluate this explanation, we conducted a qualitative analysis of all racial minority-related questions. Mutalib (2011) and Abdullah (2013) point out that EIP, the wearing of *tudung*, and the PAP's dominance of the leadership of Malay/Muslim organizations are sensitive minority issues that have strained the relationship between the PAP and racial minorities. Our qualitative analysis found that the few questions that touched on the aforementioned sensitive minority issues tended to be raised by opposition MPs. They are discussed in the next paragraph.

Among the 77 parliamentary questions on racial minorities, only two focused on EIP. They were asked by Workers' Party MP Pritam Singh and outspoken NMP Viswa Sadasivan.²⁰ MP Pritam Singh asked the Minister for National Development whether the government has plans to increase the ethnic limit of 25% for the Malay ethnic group at the block level in all government rental flats and whether the government will consider allocating rental flats on a strict needs basis only.²¹ In short, Pritam Singh sought to prompt the government to modify the EIP so as to lessen its negative impacts on the racial minorities. There was only one parliamentary question on the wearing of *tudung* during the period of this study and it was again raised by MP Pritam Singh. He asked the Prime Minister if the government will study the feasibility of accommodating the wearing of the *tudung* by Muslim staff with the heads of the uniformed services in their organizations subject to considerations such as operational exigencies.²² Although the PAP had consistently rejected demands for donning *tudung* in national schools and uniformed services of the government, MP Singh still used the parliamentary query session to pursue this controversial minority rights. Finally, Workers' Party MP Muhamad Faisal bin Abdul Manap also used parliamentary questions to criticize the PAP's control over the leadership of Malay/Muslim organizations. Through his oral question to the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs on 9 July 2013, for example, MP Muhamad Faisal questioned whether the inclusion of PAP's Malay MPs as resource persons for the Community Leaders Forum has infused in this community initiative a partisan element.²³ In another parliamentary query session, MP Muhamad Faisal asked whether the government will consider involving community leaders on the Community Leaders Forum's Steering Committee.²⁴

Summing up, our results have shown that partisan affiliation of MPs affected both the quantity and contents of the parliamentary questions related to racial minorities. Specifically, opposition MPs were much more likely than PAP MPs to raise parliamentary questions related to racial minorities. Moreover, sensitive minority issues tended to be raised by opposition MPs. One important implication is that racial minority groups in Singapore would be better represented if opposition parties hold more parliamentary seats.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that racial minority MPs were much more likely than Chinese MPs to provide substantive representation for racial minorities in Singapore. However, this study also highlights the

²⁰MP Viswa Sadasivan asked his question on EIP on 16 September 2010. See the *Singapore Hansard*, 16 September 2010, oral question 7. Accessed 30 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=16-9-2010>.

²¹See the *Singapore Hansard*, 14 November 2012, oral question 3. Accessed 30 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=14-11-2012>.

²²The *Singapore Hansard*, 21 January 2014, oral question 26. Accessed 30 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=21-1-2014>.

²³The Community Leaders Forum was established in 2003 to address issues affecting the Malay/Muslim community. See the *Singapore Hansard*, 9 July 2013, oral question 20. Accessed 30 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=9-7-2013>.

²⁴See the *Singapore Hansard*, 9 July 2012, written question 50. Accessed 30 September 2018. <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/report?sittingdate=9-7-2012>.

inadequacy of representation of racial minority interests in the Parliament of Singapore. Between 2002 and 2015, only 1.2% of the total number of parliamentary questions focused on racial minorities. Finally, apart from an MP's race, partisan affiliation of an MP mattered to the representation of racial minority interests. Opposition MPs were much more likely than PAP MPs to ask racial minority-related questions.

This research provides the first step to examining the political representation of racial minorities in Singapore. Many important questions related to the political impacts of racial minority MPs in Singapore remain unexplored. First, does the presence of racial minority MPs affect the political participation of racial minorities? Second, do racial minority MPs enhance political empowerment among racial minorities? Third, does the presence of racial minority candidates influence voter decision making? Finally, do racial minority MPs shape the formulation of public policy in Singapore? More broadly, researchers may extend the question addressed in this study to other racially diverse hybrid regimes in Asia like Malaysia.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/T2ZVKG>.

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